

Perry Wandin

Legend of the Healesville Football Club

by Charles Richards

Many years ago in the seventies Healesville had a very strong Little Athletics Association that would meet on summer weekends at the old soccer ground opposite Bates dairy (later the Newbury's) on Don Road. Under the blazing hot summer sun every Sunday, the local talent would do their darnedest to try and win a little slip of coloured paper with a first, second, third stamped on it to put into their Little Athletics book.

It was there that I witnessed up close and for the first time what an elite athlete looked like. It was in an 800-metre race which was run over two laps of the athletics track. I was lined up waiting for my age group's turn and ahead of us was a group a couple of years above ours that were readying themselves. Off went the gun and off shot the field, immediately to the front went a young local lad leaving the field in his wake, round the first bend, two hundred metres into the race and he was 50 metres in front. Round the second bend at the half way mark and he was in front by the length of the straight. Round the third bend and into the home straight and the field was nowhere to be seen, it felt like time had stood still for everyone on earth except for this little boy of outstanding ability. On he strode, legs pumping, perfectly balanced, running with a grace seldom seen, he crossed the line and had won by 200 metres. You hear me correctly; he won by 200 metres in an 800-metre race. I couldn't believe what I had witnessed. That was the first of many times I witnessed the sublime athlete that was Perry Wandin.



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But I should not have been surprised. Look closely at his heritage and there are no surprises. He was a Wandin for god's sake. Not being old enough to have seen his famous father play, but I was old

enough to recall the stories told by the locals of his dad Jim's feats. My father who was a good judge of footballers spoke in revered tones about Perry's dad.

Perry and his brother Brendan were great boys living in the shadow of a Yarra Valley legend. In fact, I have to say that Perry's brother Brendan is an amazing character. He is one of the great people I have had the privilege of growing up with. A good honest footballer and an even better human being, Brendan is held in high esteem by locals far and wide.

And so it was, here was this teenage lad of proud Aboriginal heritage, who could run like the wind. He could run at a sustained pace, mile after mile, making it look like the easiest of things to do. When we would go on pre-season training runs, there was Perry out in front, there was space, and then the rest of us. That's just how it was, when you have an elite athlete in your midst then you resign yourself to measuring your improvement by how far he beat you by.

That athleticism transferred so beautifully to the football field. Just park Perry out on a wing, one on one against an opponent, and watch him towel up his opponent. Throw him on the ball and see what roving craftsmanship looked like.

Now I don't know how much you all know about ruckman and rovers and how they operate, but you can make it as easy or as complicated as you like. I was blessed, as was Michael Fisher, and in later years big Glen Gibson, in that we had a plethora of talented rovers and on ballers that we had the privilege of playing with. People like Colin Young, Maurie Watson, Mark and Greg Hay, Perry, Graeme Mills, Gary Adams and Dave Irwin.

When you play on the ball you spend a great deal of time practising strategies to clear the ball from ball ups. With a talent like Perry in the middle we had a distinct advantage. At a centre bounce or ball up we would divide the centre circle into a watch face. Imagine that the ruckman stands at 12 o'clock and tells the on ballers where he is going to hit it, hopefully. So the on ballers would gather together before a bounce, the ruckman would nominate where on the watch face he intended to hit the ball. If you said 2 o'clock, Perry would line up anywhere else, he would watch your hand and just as your palm was about to connect with the ball he would motor and as the ball sailed towards 2 o'clock he would intercept it. I would land on the ground just in time to see Perry streaming away from the ball up, ball in hand, striding away from the perplexed opposition, steady himself and hit Gary Lofts on the chest with a stab pass, lace out.

Then we would do it again, he would almost confuse his opponents by strolling around as the bounce rose into the air, looking like he wasn't involved, then going from a standstill to a sprint in the blink of an eye, hit the ball and stream off down the ground again. Every now and again he would jog past and say, "rhubarb". This meant punch the ball long. And so it would be, up goes the ball, whack goes the ruckman, Perry rockets off gathers the ball and streams down the ground.

So he was an elite athlete, he also had sublime football smarts, but I don't need to tell you that, you already know it! Smart on ballers like Perry and Mark Hay made the rest of us look good. And he was cheeky bugger on the ground, he would fire quips off in the direction of umpires and opposition alike. Playing in the seventies and eighties, Perry was fortunate to play with some great players. He is held in high regard by Healesville folk who, over a long period, saw some of the best strut their stuff. He was a Healesville star in teams that had Rocky Larkin right through into the eighties when Colin Young evolved into a great of the Bloods. And so it was, sustained excellence across a long period of time in very strong Healesville teams, Perry's record stands the test of time.

Perry was a great footballer, and at the risk down playing his football ability, which I am not, he was also a beautiful athlete. To see him run was something to behold, he looked like he was loping along, but he would actually be flying, such was his running style. When he ran he looked elegant, economical and just cruising along. Usain Bolte has that trait, flying along but looks like he is in second gear.

Let's not forget that Perry coached the Healesville reserves to a Premiership in 1986, partnered by Peter Mathieson as captain in a year where the great Tojo Nolan won the Best and Fairest and the legendary Bill Gordon kicked a league best 91 goals. What a great memory.

I think it very important to recognise Perry's heritage and that of his Aboriginal 'brothers'. Healesville has been indeed blessed to have had such a long lineage of wonderful Aboriginal players, to not recognise all of them is a crime, names like Smith, Swindle, Wandin, Peters and a long list of other greats. And held in the highest regard in that proud lineage is one Perry Wandin. I am searching for words to describe Perry the athlete and Perry the footballer, and bouncing around in my brain are words like sublime, smooth, silky and selfless.

We see it all the time, the children of well-known identities embarking on their own lives, all the time trying create their own identity. Unfortunately, they often fail. But Perry achieved the hardest thing to do, he stepped out of his famous father's shadow and created some legendary history of his own.