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PERSONAL

SCORE

ELLEN VAN NEERVEN

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Author's Note

I am not to scalpel you with details but sing to you in poetry, and that is where these memories will rest.

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander readers are advised that this book contains some names and references to people who are now deceased. References are made out of respect and to honour their memory. This book also discusses race and racism, and as such includes some terms that may cause distress. Reader caution is advised.

Pregame

Kombu-merri Elder Dr Mary Graham explains that at the centre of First Nations beliefs are two things: 'Land is the law' and 'You are not alone in this world'. Put simply, only two relationships matter in the world: relationship with land and relationship with people.

I am asking myself, and in turn I want to ask you, what does it mean to play sport on First Nations land? Land that includes animals, birds, plants, insects, water, sky and everything underground. Country that is rich in story. Do we need to know the truth of land before we can play on it? Indeed, should we do *anything* on Country without knowing the truth? Can we participate in the broad spectrum of sport and fitness while following First Nations protocols? Protocols have an essential role to play in the present and future.

Racism in women's sport rarely gets mentioned, as if it does not happen. The faces of equal pay struggles in sport are white women. The faces of LGBTIQSB+ inclusivity in sport are white people. In the same system, successes are masculinised. Men are lauded for their achievements. The faces of racial equity in sport are Black men.

Are these really the only faces of the civil rights movement in sport? This is precisely why Kimberlé Crenshaw inaugurated the term 'intersectionality' in 1989.

I want sport to return to its origins of inclusion and care for land.

I am an armchair enthusiast of the sport we call 'the world game': football, sometimes called soccer in this country. I used to be an amateur player and spent most of my waking life at football grounds across so-called South East Queensland.

During my formative football years at The Gap (named for the gap between the valley between Mt Coot-tha and Enoggera Hill, but also easily symbolising ‘the gap’ between how the men and women’s game were treated at the time) there was ambition. I was around a lot of motivated people who wanted to take the game to the next level. These people believed football could be the biggest game for female participation. They believed in the power of women’s sport. They believed Australian women’s football could be the best in the world.

During this time, many of the things we now take for granted in our game hadn’t happened yet, but it was like we could see them in the distance. The A-League Women. An international star (Sam Kerr). Equal pay for the national team. Full stadiums. The FIFA Women’s World Cup on home soil. My teammates shared that vision. My parents shared that vision. It was part of the reason we showed up to every game and every training session. We believed we were part of something that was bigger than us, and it would only get bigger.

The leaps and strides our game has taken since then are amazing to see. I spoke to professional players at the hundred-year milestone game at the Gabba to hear what it meant to them. I heard detailed stories of the first A-League Women’s (then the W-League) final, with all the details, through scrapes and scraps and micro-stories, as if I were right there. As someone who struggles to remember what I had for breakfast yesterday but remembers my spectacular-leaning goals without a worry (the venue, the placement, the celebration), this doesn’t surprise me. There’s something about the way we play. We remember the narrative, beyond the stats. Who was there and who wasn’t. The underdog moments. The missed

sitters. The painful substitutions. The elation when a training ground move goes right.

There are many more stories yet to be told, and on the eve of the biggest ever global women's sport event to be held here, the soil is especially potent for story. The historic 2023 Women's World Cup is the first-ever World Cup to feature Indigenous language throughout its branding and designs, created by Kalkadoon artist Chern'ee Sutton and Māori artist Fiona Collis, and it will include dual names for the nine playing locations: Adelaide (Tarntanya), Brisbane (Meaanjin), Melbourne (Naarm), Perth (Boorloo), Sydney (Gadigal), Auckland (Tāmaki Makaurau), Dunedin (Ōtepoti), Hamilton (Kirikiriroa) and Wellington (Te Whanganui-a-Tara).

A football pitch is a hundred metres long. You run this field over and over again across your lifetime. A football pitch is seventy metres wide, and it will break your heart a few times. My own memories of and musings about the Country I've played on circle me.

This is not a beautifully written book about decolonising Australian sport. This is an ugly book that was born of the ugly language I grew up hearing in this country. This book is me scratching my way out of the scrap of the schoolyard, just trying to stay alive. This book is reflective of the fact violence does not exist as a binary and we are all capable of causing harm as well as receiving it.

In this book, I am the parts of me that don't know what I know now. I am becoming and I am belonging.

I have a score to settle.