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Opinion

Richard Marles: Spirit of modern Australia seen in our sporting stars

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Australian tennis star Nick Kyrgios has parents from Epirus, Greece and Gombak in Malaysia. Picture: Julian Finney/Getty Images

AS a golfing tragic, I found myself spellbound by the TV a week ago as Jason Day produced one of the most remarkable rounds in the history of Australian golf.

Battling benign vertigo, a condition that the previous day led to his collapse on the golf course, Day struggled to walk around 18 holes and yet still managed to shoot five birdies on the back nine and finish the day leading the US Open.

In relishing his gutsy performance it was a moment when I felt a deep pride in being Australian.

Last Monday we were treated to another remarkable (and probably the most understated) moment in Australian sport when the Matildas beat Brazil to advance to the World Cup quarter-finals.



Richard Marles.

Thanks to the boot of an indigenous Australian, Kyah Simon, the Matildas were the first senior Australian soccer team to win a knockout stage match in a World Cup. And their bravery yesterday against Japan had us minutes from a chance of a semi-final.

As the significance of football grows in our nation's sporting culture, the Matildas have put Australia firmly on the world stage.

It's no surprise that feelings of patriotism and national pride are evoked by our national sports stars. They literally carry our flag abroad in an endeavour that is central to our national soul. Australia is a sporting country. Watching Australians take on the world of sport speaks to our national identity.

Yet in the midst of weeks dominated by a political debate about citizenship and immigration, what is remarkable about this sporting success is the face of Australia that is being shown to the world. Jason Day, who hails from Beaudesert in Queensland, is the son of a Filipino immigrant. His mother, Dening, migrated to Australia in the early 1980s. One look at the Matildas team list and you are immediately presented with a diverse sprinkling of ethnic heritage, from Turkey to Holland, from Assyria to Italy.

Long gone is a sense that Australia is represented by a narrow set of Anglo Celtic names and faces. The identity of sporting Australia abroad is a colourful display of global humanity befitting a nation of immigrants.

And watching all Australians — from indigenous Australians, to those whose heritage emanates from the British Isles, to those whose roots are in Africa or Latin America — barrack and cheer for our myriad nation of sports stars is wonderful. This is the spirit of modern Australia.

And in the next fortnight we can delight in it once more. Thanasi Kokkinakis has just enjoyed success at the Queen's tournament: the traditional lead up to Wimbledon. Thanasi is the son of Greek immigrants from Kalamata and Tripoli.

And he will take his place at Wimbledon alongside Australia's newest tennis sensation Nick Kyrgios. A native of Canberra, Kyrgios is the exotic combination of immigrants from Epirus in Greece and the small town of Gombak in Selangor, Malaysia.

Our citizens come in all forms. The roots of our heritage are tremendously important to who we are as people and the stories that have led to our existence. These stories and places create personal identity, they sometimes define communities, and they make us who we are.

It is a multiculturalism to be celebrated.

But in another sense, as one Australian standing next to another, these differences are irrelevant.

In the words of the wonderful song by Bruce Woodley and Dobe Newton: "We are one, but we are many ... I am, you are, we are Australian."

Richard Marles is the federal Labor member for Corio.