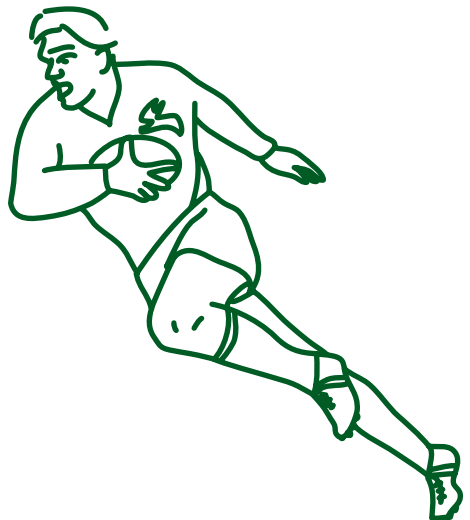


7TH ANNUAL

TOM BROCK LECTURE

NSW LEAGUES' CLUB • 21 September 2005

*'The Great
Fibro versus
Silvertail Wars'*



Mr Roy Masters

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SYDNEY • 21 SEPTEMBER 2005

'The Great Fibro versus Silvertail Wars'



*The svengali of Lidcombe
(courtesy of Moir and the Sydney
Morning Herald, 13 Sept. 1984).*



Mr Roy Masters



Published in 2006 by the
Tom Brock Bequest Committee on behalf of
the Australian Society for Sports History

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TOM BROCK BEQUEST

The Tom Brock Bequest, given to the Australian Society for Sports History (ASSH) in 1997, consists of the Tom Brock Collection supported by an ongoing bequest. The Collection, housed at the University of New South Wales, includes manuscript material, newspaper clippings, books, photographs and videos on rugby league in particular and Australian sport in general. It represents the finest collection of rugby league material in Australia. ASSH has appointed a Committee to oversee the Bequest and to organise appropriate activities to support the Collection from its ongoing funds.

Objectives:

1. To maintain the Tom Brock Collection.
2. To organise an annual scholarly lecture on the history of Australian rugby league.
3. To award an annual Tom Brock Scholarship to the value of \$5,000.
4. To undertake any other activities which may advance the serious study of rugby league.
5. To publicise the above activities.

Activities:

1. The Tom Brock Lecture.
2. The Tom Brock Scholarship.
3. Updating the Collection with new material published on rugby league.
4. Reporting to ASSH on an annual basis.

Illustrations:

Courtesy of Ian Heads and Roy Masters.

Details of the Tom Brock Bequest are located on the website of the Australian Society for Sports History: www.sporthistory.org.

Of all the strange currents and vectors which rule our lives, what mysterious force conspired to have me reveal, after more than a quarter of a century, the story of a war on World Peace Day? Aspects of the bitter Fibro-Silvertail rivalry, which actually began on 18 March 1978 in Melbourne, have been whispered but the truth never told in its entirety.

As coach of the Fibros, I have entered the annals of demonology on Sydney's northern beaches and am proud to say I'm still welcome in Fibroland. But tonight's lecture is not an attempt to justify the past, merely to chronicle it and I do quote my critics.

It's an eyewitness account, in retrospect, without censorship. It's popular history seen through the eyes of what might, today, be called an embedded journalist, without the stamp of approval of the NRL.

A cross between Samuel Pepys's diary of the great fire of London and Patton's blood-and-guts thrust through Europe, a diary account of a participant but with commentary from other eyewitnesses, some critical.

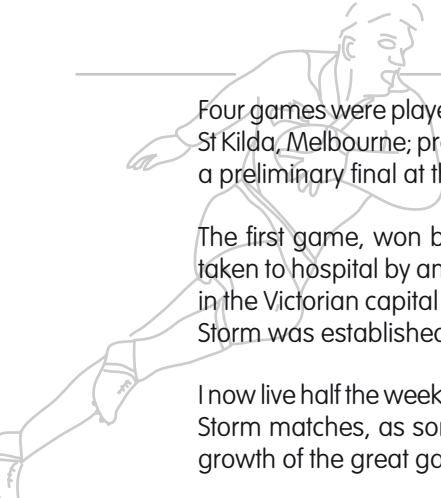
We love rivalries because they force coaches, those creatures of regimentation and habit who would never look past this week's opponent, to acknowledge the truth. Some games are more important than others.

The truth is, nothing in my ten-year coaching career and 18 years in the media thereafter, surpassed the Wests-Manly rivalry, in football terms, the two most bitter rivals since Athens and Sparta.

Melbourne was the genesis of the Fibro-Silvertail war, a divide which persists in loyal Magpie pockets on the northern beaches, a clash which created huge TV audiences, big crowds, a multitude of cut eyes and bloodied noses, but no broken jaws or serious long term injuries.



*A man never short of an idea
(Courtesy of Ian Heads,
Roy Masters and Moir of the
Sydney Morning Herald).*



Four games were played in 1978: a pre-season match at the Junction Oval, St Kilda, Melbourne; premiership matches at Lidcombe and Brookvale and a preliminary final at the SCG.

The first game, won by Manly but a Pyrrhic victory with five Sea Eagles taken to hospital by ambulance, may well have set rugby league's cause in the Victorian capital back 20 years because it wasn't until 1998 that the Storm was established in Melbourne.

I now live half the week in the winter time in Melbourne, regularly attending Storm matches, as some form of redemption for retarding the southern growth of the great game.

I was also the only first grade coach to welcome the Swans when they came to Sydney to stay in 1983 and coach Ricky Quade introduced every one of the 50 in his squad on the stage of the Opera House.

Even then I was probably trying to redeem my behaviour of five years earlier, welcoming a new code to a new city, acting charitably as I should have in 1978 when that game at St Kilda, supposed to be an exhibition of skill, turned into a bloodbath.

Ernest Hemingway could have been talking about me when he wrote in African Journal Part 2: 'He carried remorse with him as a man might carry a baboon on his shoulder. Remorse is a splendid name for a racehorse but a poor life time companion for a man.'

Wests and Manly had finished just below the two Wills Cup finalists in the official pre-season competition of 1978 and the play off for third place was in Melbourne. Both teams travelled down by plane and the atmosphere was chilly, particularly when the plane was diverted to Essendon airport by fog.

We grouped separately at the small secondary airport, waiting for a bus which was obviously waiting at Tullamarine. Eventually one turned up and the Manly players filed aboard first, consistent with the born-to-rule syndrome which I attached to them. We assumed another bus was to carry us to our hotel and we continued to stand on the concrete until I said to Les Boyd, the fort on feet I'd recruited from Cootamundra, that I sensed both teams were to travel on the same bus.

Les and I entered, sat down and Ray Higgs, who had clearly not seen us board, began making snide remarks about the Wests players standing



(Courtesy, Telegraph. 18 Aug. 1992).

outside. Maybe he didn't like Dallas's ugh boots, or Sloth's Canadian jacket, or Snake's polyester flares but he derided us, perhaps to curry favour with his new Manly team-mates, having left Parramatta at the end of the previous year following a pre grand final dispute with coach Terry Fearnley.

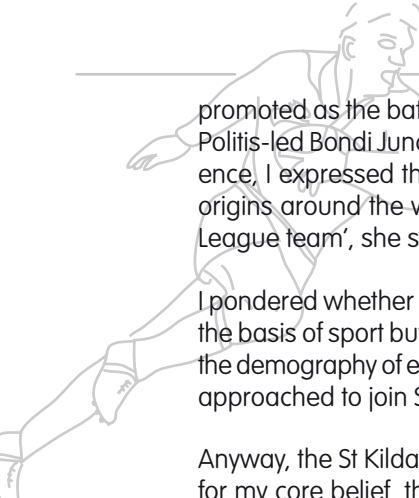
Boyd began to puff up like an angry toad and, with eyes bulging and knuckles whitening, he hissed to me he was getting off the bus.

Eventually a St Kilda official arrived and informed us both teams were travelling on the same bus and staying at the same hotel.

Manly chief executive Ken Arthurson objected to the accommodation arrangements and insisted Wests be dropped at the designated hotel and he would find the Sea Eagles another.

The mood therefore was one crackling with menace and, the truth is, my first big game coaching in the big time. It suited by a bad blood view of rugby league. Confrontation lies at the essence of sport, even cricket. Batter v. bowler, or in baseball, batter versus pitcher. For some, rugby league is still ARL versus Super League.

I sat with a woman at a Wests Tigers lunch before the 2003 Roosters versus Penrith grand final. She was a life-long Balmain supporter and indicated she would be cheering for the Roosters. Insofar as this match was being



promoted as the battlers from the west against 'the new Manly', the Nick Politis-led Bondi Junction team with plenty of money and even more influence, I expressed the view I thought a supporter of a team who had its origins around the waves would support the Panthers. 'They're a Super League team', she said with disgust.

I pondered whether this undermined my view that sociological warfare is the basis of sport but I eventually concluded Rupert's millions can change the demography of entire countries. Interestingly, only two clubs were never approached to join Super League: Souths and Wests.

Anyway, the St Kilda dressing room became a great psychiatrist's couch for my core belief that confrontation is the core of rugby league: attack versus defence, ball carrier against tackler, Wests wives in denim opposed to Manly wives in fur, corporate box versus standing on the hill, hot pies versus cucumber sandwiches.

I knew I didn't have to deconstruct any of the psyches inside that seething dressing room — Raudonikis, who lived for a time in a migrant camp at Cowra, Dallas from Gunnedah's abattoirs, Sloth from the timber town of Oberon, Graeme O'Grady from Liverpool, Ron Gitteau from Blacktown, Joe 'Cool' Dorahy from a Lidcombe butchery and others from the inappropriately named western suburb of Regents Park. There was something universal about that Wests team that I didn't ever see again, a psychological unity born from similar socio-economic backgrounds that meant they were always singing off the same hymn sheet.

They relished the dressing room universe of biting sarcasm and evil tricks, tormenting each other with fervour and affection. Nothing was sacred. No-one ever had to offer a penny for someone else's thoughts.

There was universal, instinctive hatred of the image I painted of Manly's beach culture — handsome half John Gibbs with sunglasses parked in his blond hair climbing out of a Mazda RS7 on the boulevard at Manly.

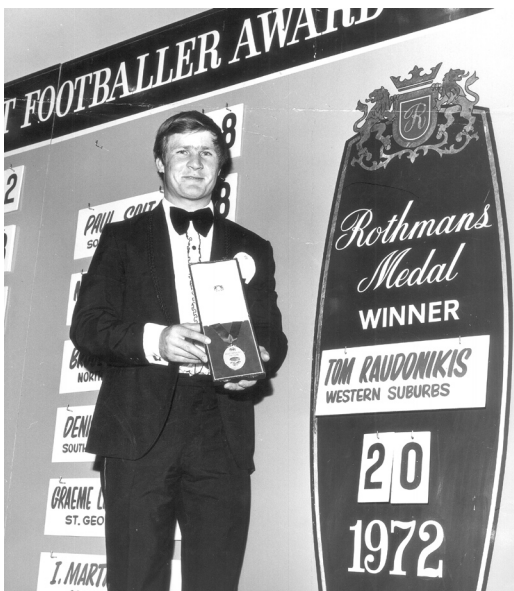
I knew that when it comes to the temperature of their conflict. Manly v. Wests was 20 degrees above the others.

When Manly played an aggressive first half and the Wests players entered the sheds complaining, I released the hounds. Unfortunately, my half-time talk was taped by the earnest president of the St Kilda club who had been invited into the room to learn about rugby league. The rugby league game had actually been preceded by an AFL game and a soccer

match but when they were both over, there was a mass exodus of European Australians and the crowd thinned to a few curious sentinels of history.

I had noticed in the first half that the two touch judges had little idea that a linesman has two responsibilities: to act on incidents in back play and adjudicate where the ball goes into touch. Because they were Melburnians, the two touchies only concentrated on the flight of the ball, as though they were

boundary umpires in AFL. I therefore gave the order that every time a Manly kicker dispatched the ball downfield, the second marker had to fly at him like a missile and put him on his back.



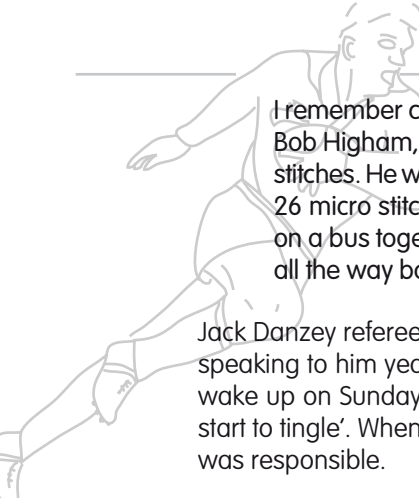
Tom Raudonikis — looked just a clean-cut kid when he won the 1972 Rothman's Medal. He was of course far fiercer than that.

This was the tactic which was basically responsible for John Gray, John Gibbs and others leaving the ground courtesy of St John's ambulance.

I now see a lot of John Gray, having dinner with him at his Lavender Bay unit, following a fall he had from a balcony which makes it difficult for him to walk. Gray and some of the Magpies would occasionally meet at Lui Rose restaurant, Concord for dinner after those bloody battles, so I consider him an honorary Magpie.

I've raised the Melbourne battle in my conversations with Gray and he says, I quote:

It was a bloodbath. They hit me like a missile. I said to Jack Danzey, the referee, 'Hey Jack'. We used to go to the same church. I said, 'This is supposed to be a model demonstration game'. It was a blood fest.



I remember coming away with stitches in my eye and chin, Bob Higham, our club doctor sewed my chin up with loose stitches. He was a gynaecologist. When I got to Sydney I had 26 micro stitches put in my chin. But amazingly, we all got on a bus together after the match and drank beer together all the way back to Sydney.

Jack Danzey refereed quite a few Manly-Wests games and I remember speaking to him years later and he said, with a semi-excited stutter, 'I'd wake up on Sunday morning when I had a Manly-Wests game and I'd start to tingle'. When Jack had a heart attack in the mid-80s, I knew who was responsible.

The man in charge of the next encounter with Manly, Dennis Braybrook, also had a heart attack about the same time and later died.

The media had already anticipated, indeed partly precipitated the fury of the next game in 1978 with headlines such as, 'Battle of Lidcombe Shaping Like a Lulu'. Getting violence and sex into one headline was uncommon then but a Wests fan, noting the hypocrisy of the media salivating at the prospect of an all-in brawl and then condemning it when it happens, wrote a poem:

The media declare it's violence we dread,
You can savour the scenes in our full colour spread.

The fans certainly sensed a brutal battle and Lidcombe sizzled.

I intimidated prop John Donnelly in the dressing room, questioning his preparation because someone had reported him drinking eight schooners at the Railway Hotel the evening before. The limit I imposed in those days was three — enough to get you to sleep — probably not enough for someone who weighed 130kg — but far more than today's players who are so fit, their body fat percentage resembles the interest rate on a current account.

That finger stabbing, personal space invading tirade by me against Dallas in front of the whole team, predicting Manly's Terry Randall would dominate him, ended with him looking at me through refrigerated eyes and saying, 'You'll know how I'm going to go today after one minute'.

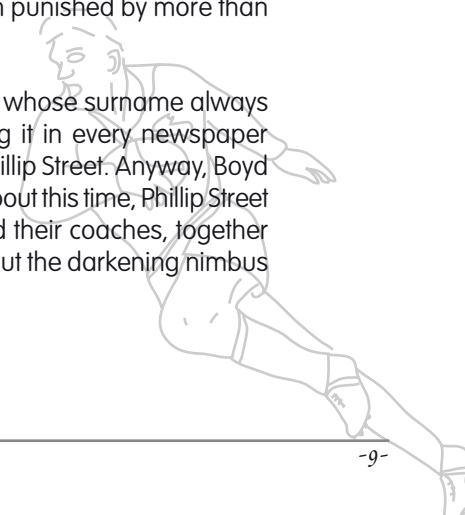
Eight years later, when Dallas drowned in the surf at Byron Bay, I went to his funeral in Gunnedah and later to his parents' home for a small wake while the town and a DC3 full of footballers from Sydney adjourned to a pub. Dallas's father Rocky was grief stricken and only one thing seemed to give him any relief. He invited me to sit with him behind the garage, near the woodheap, and asked me to go through every detail of that pre-game meeting at Lidcombe that May Sunday in 1978. Rocky had seen the match on TV of course, with Dallas confronting Randall in the opening minute and Wests won easily and Rocky seemed pleased, as if the final piece in an ancient jigsaw puzzle had finally been placed.

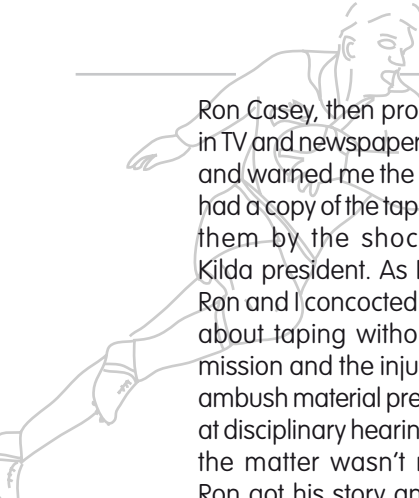
Dallas provided some humorous incidents, in retrospect. John Gray says:

A scrum collapsed and Bruce Gibbs was there as well. His gut was bigger. Dallas flopped on me. He pinned me. My head was on the ground and my eyes were skyward but his gut enveloped my face. I was gurgling and gasping for breath. I couldn't speak. I couldn't turn my head. When I tried to break away, Dallas's gut kept coming into my mouth. I was in a panic. No-one was getting up. Dallas knew he had me. My arms were pinned. Every time I attempted to breath, all I got was a mouthful of fat. I was anticipating getting near his navel and hoped I'd find a little bit of space but couldn't. I tried to bite him but the volume was too much. Eventually, his great gut must have released an air pocket and it created a bit of space near his naval and I finally gulped in some air.

But the ramifications of the match were enormous, with Dallas and Les Boyd cited on TV evidence. Manly's Stephen Knight, a former Wests player, had been sent off but no Wests player had been punished by more than a penalty.

It seemed to us, Arko, the Manly chief executive whose surname always had the mandatory adjective 'astute' preceding it in every newspaper article about him, had lobbied for action from Phillip Street. Anyway, Boyd and Donnelly were both suspended and it was about this time, Phillip Street called in St George and Parramatta players and their coaches, together with those from Manly and Wests, to protest about the darkening nimbus of aggression gathering above the game.





Ron Casey, then prominent in TV and newspapers, rang and warned me the NSWRL had a copy of the tape given them by the shocked St Kilda president. As I recall, Ron and I concocted a story about taping without permission and the injustice of ambush material presented at disciplinary hearings and the matter wasn't raised. Ron got his story and I got off, an early example of how the media and clubs cooperated then, as they occasionally do today.



Ken Arthurson (right) greets Manly's own hard man Mal Reilly. Arko's surname always had the mandatory adjective 'astute' preceding it in every newspaper article.

The fibro and silvertail tags were in widespread use by then, two terms which rolled off the tongue easily. I got the fibro from the houses I saw as I drove to training with Tommy Raudonikis from Blacktown and the silvertail came from a term I saw in a Frank Hardy novel. Wests supporters began to dress down for games and become curiously quiet if they lived in a bluestone house in Strathfield. I knew a pharmacist from Ashfield who left his chemist shop at noon on Saturdays, drove home, took off his coat and tie, wore a boilersuit to Lidcombe and carried two narrow slats on fibro, nailed at the bottom of one end. He stood on the hill, holding the fibro pieces in front of him opening them to a V when we scored a try. Warren Boland, Wests captain in 1980-81, told me recently, 'For a long time I had a piece of fibro, about six inches by two inches. A fan gave it to me. I don't know why I kept it but it seemed to have symbolised something.'

Manly retaliated by trying to expose us for being, as Bob Fulton once accused me, 'Closet Silvertails'. Ken Arthurson was quoted in the papers in 1980, noting our club doctor, Bob McInerney drove a Rolls Royce, our president King Billy Carson owned a Mercedes and the third grade coach, Ken Gentle, a property valuer, had a Saab. Arko also resurrected the Wests era in the late 1950s when the club was known as 'the Millionaires' because the licensed club at Ashfield had bought big name players.

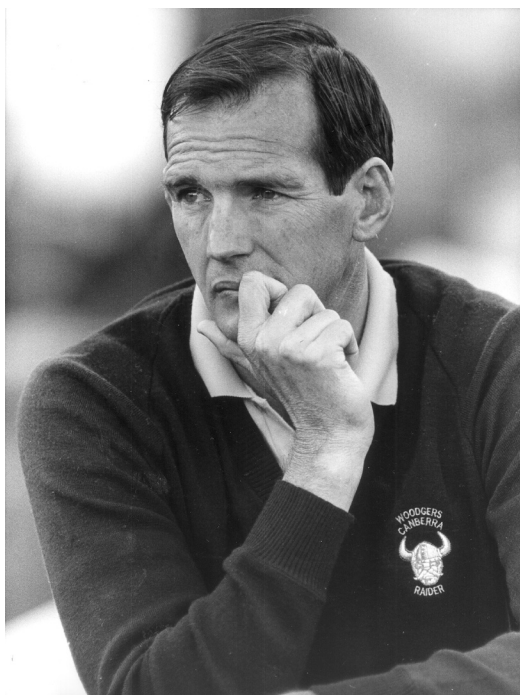
I have often thought that Manly played it wrong, trying to dress down to us.

With the glittering array of talent at the club, they should have proclaimed their riches, daring people to beat them, confident of their superior skill.

Interestingly, after a quarter of a century, Manly have finally woken up to this and a group of local businessmen have a box at Brookvale named 'the Silvertails' and raise money for the club. An unofficial Manly web site is headed 'The Silvertails'.

A confession. I have actually helped them raise money by debating last year's Tom Brock speaker, Tom Keneally, at their invitation. Manly officials now admit, after the rejection of Gosford and the Northern Eagles, they actually prefer to be loathed than loved.

Another admission. The siege mentality, the league is out to get us, view of the universe I preached is, in the long run, essentially self-defeating.



Wayne Bennett was 'the only coach I have seen successfully combine a siege mentality with expansive play'.

It encourages you to look inwards, to play negatively, to feel inferior to the opposition and not to risk take.

The only coach I have seen successfully combine a siege mentality with expansive play, and deserve to be here football on a long-term basis, is Brisbane's Wayne Bennett. His Queensland players forever moan about southern injustice at the judiciary and with referees and Bennett fuels it but they discard the chip when they take the field, playing a loosey, goosey style.

Yet there was curious comfort at Lidcombe about being the league's despised club.

When I was attempting to find a very inspirational pre-match speech for the team before the next encounter against the Silver-tails in 1978, I unashamedly mined the speeches of Winston Churchill to find an appropriate one. 'Hitler has said he will wring the neck of England like the neck of a chicken.' Some chicken, some neck, seemed relevant.



Did Kevin Humphreys really say that he would wring the neck of the Magpie?

So I recounted the recent history of discrimination by the NSWRL against Wests:

the suspensions on video evidence, the first players in premiership history to be cited, not on what the ref saw but what he didn't, and other perceived, imagined, injustices. Finally, I said in reference to Kevin Humphreys, the then president of the NSWRL, 'Humphreys has said he will wring the neck of the Magpie. Some magpie. Some neck.' Dr McInerney, who never missed a diatribe, pulled me aside and asked, 'Did Humphreys really say that?' 'No', I whispered. 'It's bullshit'. Dr McInerney replied, 'It doesn't matter. It's the type of thing he would have said, anyway.'

Les Boyd, a life-long capitalist who now owns half Cootamundra and has only ever voted Liberal, was never comfortable with the oppression of the working-class view I expressed via rugby league and Wests.

'I don't believe that bullshit you tell us', he volunteered after a tempestuous game, an hour after his eyes had retracted into his head. 'But I make myself believe it.'

Wests identification with fibro didn't help us when we went in search of a sponsor. One of our well-meaning committee men, John Cochrane,



Les Boyd, life-long capitalist. 'The Fort on Feet' was lured to Manly by the big money.

once walked into the offices of James Hardie and explained how we were known as the Fibros, a material they produced. The manager abused him, pointing out fibro was excellent building material and there were fibro homes in salubrious suburbs and how dare he associate it with a working-class team. Cochrane scurried away and not so long afterwards, James Hardie announced a sponsorship with Parramatta. Given the company's record with respiratory problems, I'm relieved we never carried its name on our chests.

Victa Motor Mowers sponsored us and we had the name on the jerseys when the Brookvale game was played in 1978. Afterwards, I remarked to a representative of the sponsor, a serious-minded chap, that he should sell plenty of lawnmowers based on the game. 'Yes, but none over here', he muttered.

A story circulated, which former Manly international prop, Ian Thomson, confirms occurred, that Manly coach Frank Stanton, in an attempt to match the crazy motivational tactics of the Lidcombe Svengali, recruited a Vietnam war hero to address his troops. Manly thought we were mad, whereas, we knew we were not just a good team but a good team that was mad. The army major arrived by helicopter at Brookvale Oval, flouting air regulations, according to our spies. He spoke of team work, sacrifice, physical and mental courage, survival and even ripped open his battle dress to reveal bullet holes.

He jutted out his square, militaristic jaw and said, 'Any questions?'

Ian Martin, Manly's much under-rated five eighth, nicknamed 'Ima' from the popular TV series, 'I'm A Martian', put up his hand. 'Ima' was consid-



Rival (Manly) coach Frank Stanton (centre) in a happier 1978 moment — on the Kangaroo tour.

ered the least of the Manly players to be impressed by rhetoric and his interest was interpreted as a huge victory for the strategy of importing the major. 'Yes', said the major, inviting Ima to speak. 'Can I have a ride in your helicopter?' Ima asked.

The truth is, Wests prime tactic was to ignite a brawl early and then revert to football while the opposition spent 80 minutes seeking to get square.

We always believed, in the hysteria of the publicity, our football talents were grossly undervalued and actually hoped the opposition would think of us only as brawlers.

Manly won the only really important match that year — the final at the SCG refereed by Greg Hartley who was promoted from reserve grade towards the end of the premiership rounds. We found our match in him with his intimidation, threatening us with, 'I'll get you black bastards under the posts'. If only referees were wired then.

Scrum penalties allowing kicks at goal then existed, the drawn grand final the year before resulting in three of the five goals kicked coming from scrums. Hartley disallowed two Wests tries and went away as travelling referee with the Kangaroos. It turned into the start of a brand new bray.

Hartley and Arko were mates and, let's face it, if you have the richest team, you've got to win. It's like Chelsea, owned by the Russian oil baron and Real Madrid. You don't go to watch them play as much as you go to see them pay off. Anyway, all we got from the loss was more ammunition for our psyches — more bullets to fire about injustice.

*A smiling Greg Hartley:
'I'll get you black bastards
under the posts'.*



The following year, 1979, Manly had a poor season and missed the play offs. To us, that was like Bill Gates walking down the road with a petrol can, or Paris Hilton staying at the Peoples Palace. But Arko retaliated by targeting three Wests players: John Dorahy, Ray Brown and Boyd.

The plan was to ruin our future semi-final prospects and fortify their own.

One night at training, during the '79 semis, as the Wests players ran their lap of Lidcombe, I noticed the three hang back at the rear of the pelaton.

I asked Tom Raudonikis, the captain, what was up and he told me they were discussing a big offer by Manly.

Players being destabilised by big offers mid season is a challenge but in the late 70s it tended to happen at season end. Despite the NRL's anti-tampering 30 June deadline, this 40-year-old problem can only effectively be countered with a draft.

The infamous Sixty Minutes footage, showing Wests players face slapping, was shot in the Lidcombe dressing room before a match against Manly in 1979. Ray Martin was the reporter on the story and in his initial approach to the club, raised the suggestion that the energy Wests players expended was fuelled by pharmaceuticals. We were incensed and offered him entry to everything at the club for a six-week period. All he found was face slapping and a fiery exchange by Boyd and Brown, replayed four times in the quarter hour segment.



One of ours, Ray Brown (right, with Geoff Gerard to the left) also took the bait at Manly.

The reaction in Phillip Street to the show was furious. Delegate after delegate stood and said how they were appalled, including Manly.

When Wests and Manly met at a Brookvale match in 1980, the Sea Eagles ran onto the field with blood pouring from Randall's nose, the victim of a fierce dressing room slap up with Boyd.

After having been reviled for introducing it and witnessing St George Illawarra coach Nathan Brown do it to three players on the sideline at WIN Stadium, now, when I hear a coach slaps, I reckon I should get a royalty.

There was mass exodus of Wests players in 1979 — three for Manly and Tom Raudonikis and Graham O'Grady to Newtown and John Singleton's riches. Of course our enemies blamed the face slapping. To them, the once stable club was looking more and more like a bizarre Survivor cast, as if getting off the island was the only goal. But we knew money was our problem and Wests recruited far and wide. Rich clubs think the most important thing in football is spirit. Poor clubs know it is money.

We identified Terry Lamb in the Canterbury junior league, Jim Leis in Tamworth, John Ribot at Newtown, Ted Goodwin from Newtown, Paul Merlo from Penrith and Ross Conlon from teachers' college. All quickly identified with the Wests ethos, Goodwin reporting for training at Lidcombe in a torn black T shirt and ragged shorts, he later confessing to me he thought old clothes would impress me. Leis played for Australia that year, as did Ribot in his new position of wing, Merlo played for NSW and, of course, Lamb became an icon of the game and Conlon later represented Australia.

But we had to change our tactics. Only Dallas was really interested in a punch up. We became movers of the ball, spreading it quickly, tiring the bigger teams, the same approach as today's Wests Tigers. Interestingly, the opposition sought to match us, just as our opponents in the late '70s wanted to brawl. So the big teams tried to play our style of touch football and again weren't suited for it.

The history and heartache of the two year Fibro v. Silvertail battle came to an unusual head-to-head denouement in the opening match of the 1980 season. In a brilliant piece of scheduling, the NSWRL, allegedly anxious to avoid Manly-Wests bloodbaths, drew the two teams to meet at Lidcombe on 20 April, aware three former Magpies had switched clubs. The distilling process would guarantee this much: one team would come away with a new reason to dislike the other.

The Wests players were so pumped up they needed drool buckets.

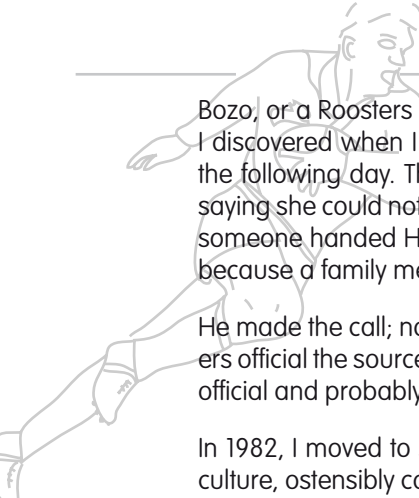
A tremendous wall of sound rose up when Wests ran out, the kind of roar that comes not just from the throat but from the soul. The muscular chorus of boos seemed fuelled more by bile than beer. Dallas stood on the sideline and reviled the Silvertails with evil words, basically saying what Wests team with two internationals (himself and Goodwin) would do to Manly's ten.

It worked. The game was played in a gathering rage and when Ray Brown walked over in a conciliatory, caring way, sticking his head into a posse of Wests players examining our prone halfback, Alan Neil, Dallas told Brown to piss off. Wests won 19-4 and when the Wests faithful belched and farted and leered at Manly as they left the field, Arko had the hide to call us ungracious.

But the year was played with a patented formula of individual opportunism, selflessness, innovative game planning and emotion fuelled by perceived disrespect, rather than a feeling of socio-economic disadvantage.

Bozo Fulton, a former Manly player and later Manly coach, then was in charge of the Roosters.

He was convinced our almost invincible record at Lidcombe was the result of listening bugs I had placed in the visitor's dressing room. So he arranged for all his players to dress at the home of halfback Kevin Hastings who, bizarrely, lived at Lidcombe. The players arrived by furniture truck and beat us, fortifying the myth of a bugged dressing room.



Bozo, or a Roosters official, even played an evil motivational trick, which I discovered when I arrived for work at a western suburbs high school the following day. The school clerk, an aunt of Hastings, lacerated me, saying she could not believe I would be capable of such evil. It transpired someone handed Hastings a note requesting he ring a nearby hospital because a family member was seriously injured in an accident.

He made the call; no-one was injured and when he inquired of a Roosters official the source of the note, was told it was handed over by a Wests official and probably something that Masters cooked up.

In 1982, I moved to St George and Terry Fearnley tried to change Wests culture, ostensibly consistent with the 'turn the other cheek' ethos he had established at Parramatta. Boland once said of the difference between Fearnley and myself: 'If a heavy squall of rain came, Terry would quietly open an umbrella. Roy would stand out in the rain, defying lightning to strike him.'

Boland also recalls us travelling to a trial game at Young and again, there was no bus to meet us. 'There was a copper on the plane and the paddy waggon met him at the airport', Boland recalls. 'We all piled in the back and were driven to the cop shop in the main street. We all climbed out, a Saturday morning, and I remember thinking how appropriate the Wests boys have arrived by paddy waggon.'

Fearnley stayed at Wests one year and took seven players with him, committing the same sin as Ray Brown. The Magpies never mind anyone leaving, but you can't use the joint. Sadly, maybe god thinks the same way.

Steve 'Pee Wee' Anderson, a brilliant young centre, was one of the players Fearnley signed. 'Pee Wee' didn't grow up to be a Magpie, or even play with the Sharks, being killed in a car accident in the off season of 1982.

Fearnley cost King Billy Carson the presidency because the rest of the committee wanted Laurie Freier, who had coached Wests to a reserve grade premiership in my final year, as first grade coach. Freier did eventually get the job but by then he had been coach at Easts and tarted up his attire. He made the infamous error of coming to games at Campbelltown dressed in a light tan leather suit, with a zipper at the rear.

Laurie also supervised training, riding around on a horse, ostensibly because his bad knees prevented him from jogging. Warren Ryan, who coached Wests in the mid-90s, also made the mistake of arriving at Campbelltown by helicopter from his appearances on Channel Seven.



When the great Bob 'Bozo' Fulton became a coach he was convinced our almost invincible record at Lidcombe was the result of listening bugs placed in the visitor's dressing room.

Wests fans don't like their coaches dressing up or travelling in style.

Tom Raudonikis, who understood this, bought a home in Campbelltown when he succeeded Ryan and travelled around the shopping centre in the back of a utility, exhorting the crowd via a loudspeaker to 'come to the game'.

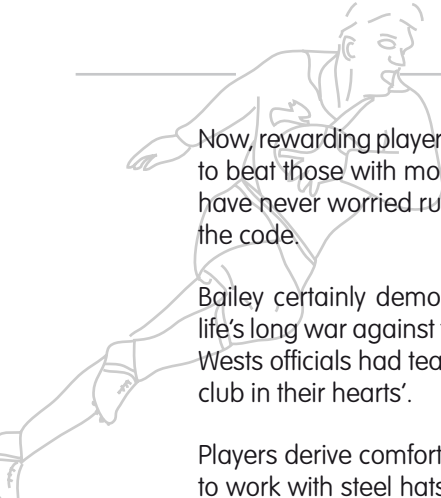
John Bailey, my former assistant coach at the Dragons for six years, also understood the fibro ethos when he succeeded Freier, sacked mid-season. On 7 August 1988 when the new coach assembled his team at Orana Park, Campbelltown, the *SMH* reported Bailey's pre-match address.

It concentrated on what he called, the Claymore Kids:

These are the kids who live in the Housing Commission area at the back of Campbelltown. Nobody drives slow through Claymore because they'll rip your hubcaps off.

I told the Wests players the Claymore Kids didn't come to Orana to watch Manly players like the Haslers, the O'Connors and the Cleals. They came to watch the Blairs, Holcrofts and Troncs. Every Claymore kid aged three to 16 was at Orana to see us beat the moneyed men from Manly.

As soon as I finished my talk, the club came in and promised every player \$500 if we won.



Now, rewarding players with money while simultaneously motivating them to beat those with money may sound hypocritical but double standards have never worried rugby league. Moral dilemmas have rarely troubled the code.

Bailey certainly demonstrated he was the new bearer of the flame in life's long war against the unspeakable Silvertails, telling the *Herald*, 'The Wests officials had tears in their eyes and the players had the love of the club in their hearts'.

Players derive comfort from being thought of as hard hats, men who go to work with steel hats. Calling a player rich and famous would be akin to accusing an iron and steel worker of cross-dressing. It's consistent with the underdog ethos: most teams try and establish themselves as underdogs, drawing comfort from the fact they have nothing to lose and everything to gain.

I'm told by a former Eastern Suburbs player that coach Bob Fulton turned this psychology upside down on the eve of the 1980 final against Wests, a humiliation for the Magpies. In a single moment of rare, raw honesty, Fulton impressed the Roosters when he said, 'Roy Masters harps on about fibro houses. Would any of you really want to live in a fibro house? I'm happy with my home at Fairy Bower.'

Yet when Bozo was coach of Manly in the mid-1990s, he beseeched me to write a story in the *SMH* describing the fabulously-talented Sea Eagles as a team of lunch pail men, players who go to work with a cut sandwiches, men who roll their sleeves up and get their hands dirty.

Most teams enjoy underdog status and it's the first thought expressed after a win over a star-studded team.

When Parramatta beat Manly 22–20 in March 1989, coach John Monie said, 'We haven't the brilliant individuals of Manly. We have to graft for everything we do.' Monie admitted his half-time talk was devoted to the club's supporters: 'We've been in the wilderness too long', he said. 'I told my players there were 18,000 people in the stands who wanted to be back in the big time.'

And Manly was unhappy with the tactics. Manly chief executive Doug Daley, pointing a prostrate Cliff Lyons with ice bags on his groin, said, 'They got him with a Christmas hold. I hope like hell it comes up on the video.'

Parramatta winger Eric Grothe, commenting on a fight he had with Lyons which resulted in a Parramatta try being disallowed, admitted, 'I started the fight. I wouldn't admit it if we lost.' The crowd was highly energised by the game, as they were in the first weekend of the semi-finals when they played Manly and I wrote in the *SMH*:

Even before the confrontation, the differences between the supporters were apparent. Parramatta fans arrived in twos, because that is all they can fit on a motor bike. Manly fans just arrived late. Parramatta fans have nice tattoos. So do their husbands. The Silvertails from the north like to sneak in a nice bottle of red. The Fibros from the west just like to sneak in. Supporters of both clubs like their wine, but Parramatta fans spell it with an 'h'.

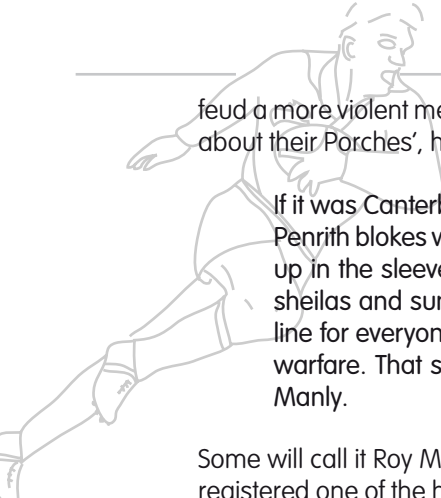
Well, the reaction from Parramatta supporters was hostile, one asking whether he should pour all his red wine down a sink and buy a Harley.

They wanted to be thought of as underdogs, but not too far down the social ladder.

There were some contradictory aspects about Lidcombe worth recalling: Wests was the first club to allocate a dry area for families, inconsistent with the view we had a keg in the dressing room. Wests was also the first club to feed journalists, offering tea and scones with cream and strawberry jam, a practice I tolerated because I hoped it would deliver sympathetic copy. We also sent plastic buckets into the crowd, seeking funds when an international rugby union player from Drummoyne was dying with leukaemia.

It's interesting to reflect on the influence the Fibro-Silvertail war had on those Magpie players who represented Wests in the years before 1978, such as Noel Kelly, Chow Hayes, Pat Thomas and co. They are part of a group of 28 former first graders now living on the peninsular and call themselves Fibros. At Wests reunion last month, much was made of the fact they couldn't get down to their local water hole quickly enough the Sunday night after Cronulla had thrashed Manly by a record score.

In preparing this speech, I asked Boland what he recalled of the Fibro years and he reaffirmed my suspicion that I approached all football games as life's best chance to exact revenge. Confrontation was the essence of my view of the universe but sociological differences gave the Fibro-Silvertail



feud a more violent meeting point. 'When we played Manly, you were on about their Porches', he said.

If it was Canterbury, it was the hypocrisy of the family club. Penrith blokes walked around with a cigarette packet rolled up in the sleeve of their T shirt, tight shorts to impress the sheilas and sun glasses hooked into their hair. You had a line for everyone. It was more about motivation than class warfare. That said, it was more pointed when we played Manly.

Some will call it Roy Masters puppet theatre of dunderheads but Boland registered one of the highest scores in the HSC in his year. If a successful coach is one who 'can get into your head', I suppose I was living in a three-bedroom fibro between Wests collective cerebrum and cerebral cortex.

For Boland to recall all this a quarter-century later, it's probably worth reflecting on the effect those Fibro-Silvertail days had in all our lives.

I met up with the son of a NSW deputy Premier recently and he enthused about those games, offering a window into his family life where his mother would have toasted sandwiches and cups of cocoa all on trays, ready at 6.30 pm so the entire family could watch Rex Mossop hosting the Fibros against the Silvertails. To be a fan back then was an act of faith and fantasy and sports were ironically far more interactive than anything Bill Gates contrives for us now.

Because I live some of the week in Melbourne and read about American sports, I get the feeling Herculean efforts, such as Plugger's goal tally a few years back, or Sammy Sosa's home run record, or Brett Hodgson's record points tally become quickly shop-worn, a show we've seen once too often, diminished somehow by TV's over familiar intrusions and its endless repetitions.

As we stare into this century, forever fingering the remote, goggle eyed and numb, our greatest act of imagination will be to remember the time, now long ago, when we sat together at sporting events, sharing personal thoughts and glorious moments. Ground records being broken each week indicate more people are going to games but are they relating?

I walked to work with my son the day following a St George v. Parramatta game. Sean is a Dragon's supporter, having been too young to appreciate the Fibro days, and he handed me his mobile when a name came up on his speed dial. I spoke to the guy, a Parramatta supporter who had been at the game. Afterwards, I asked Sean who the guy was and he said, 'Some bloke I met over the phone. I've never actually seen him. We just talk every Monday about how our teams are going. He would have got a buzz out of talking to you.'

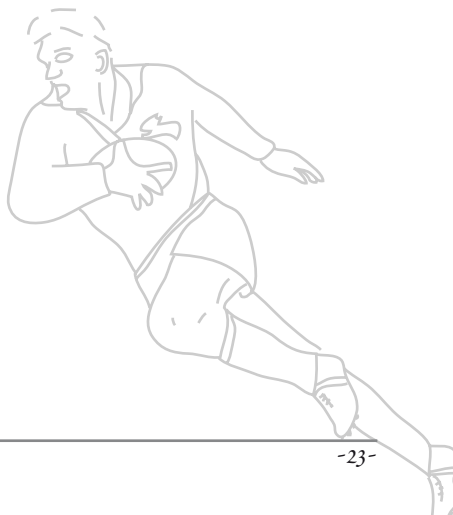
All three of us were at the same game but did not connect physically.

When you are at a game with fellow tribesmen, it's like pulling a blanket over your head when you're a kid — suddenly the bad world goes away and nothing outside that little space even exists.

It's a delicious feeling and Wests-Manly games were delicious, even for those being stitched afterwards.

Today, with Wests merged with Balmain, supporters of the joint venture live in terraces, Strathfield mansions, Lidcombe weatherboard and Campbelltown brick veneer. A Manly supporter actually faxed me a map, published in the *SMH* last year, showing more fibro houses on the northern beaches than in the rest of Sydney, with the bilious triumphant scribble, 'Exposed by your own newspaper'.

If I were still coaching Wests and Arko came up with that, I'd say all those fibro homes were relics of the 1960s, holiday homes built by wealthy doctors and lawyers who thought they were too good for the decent folk of the western suburbs.





Roy Masters

Following careers as a schoolteacher and coach of leading rugby league teams, Wests and St George, Roy Masters became a journalist with the *Sydney Morning Herald* and a television and radio commentator. He was the first coach of the Australian Schoolboys' team, which was undefeated on its 1972 tour of England. Masters is also an inaugural member of the Board of the Australian Sports Commission.



The svengali of Lidcombe (courtesy of Moir and the Sydney Morning Herald, 13 Sept. 1984).

