

9TH ANNUAL

TOM BROCK LECTURE

NSW LEAGUES' CLUB • 27 September 2007

'Nothing but a Nine-Day Wonder'

*The founding of rugby league –
Australia's first professional code*



Mr Sean Fagan

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Nine-Day Wonder'*

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Australia's first professional code*



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Published in 2008 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 State Library 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.

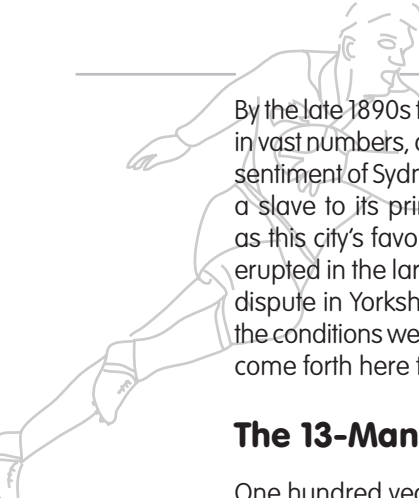
Details of the Tom Brock Bequest are located on the website of the Australian Society for Sports History: www.sporthistory.org.

This Sunday will bring the curtain down on Australian rugby league's 100th footballing-winter, the first having been played in Sydney in 1908. At the NRL Grand Final a crowd of more than 80,000 will no doubt voice their plentiful, colourful and forthright opinions from the stands. Rugby league is this city's football game of the people.

Folk football was played at community festivals in Sydney on public holidays from at least the 1820s. It was a mixture of handling, kicking and running football. By the 1880s, with rugby the preferred codified form of football in the colony, Moore Park became the stage that attracted the multitudes of this city. (It now is that area where cars are parked at the Football Stadium). With little difference to the mood of today's league fans, the surging, and yelling crowds would border along the touchlines, and as one account put it, it was 'as though the battle were one of fisticuffs instead of a friendly game of football'.



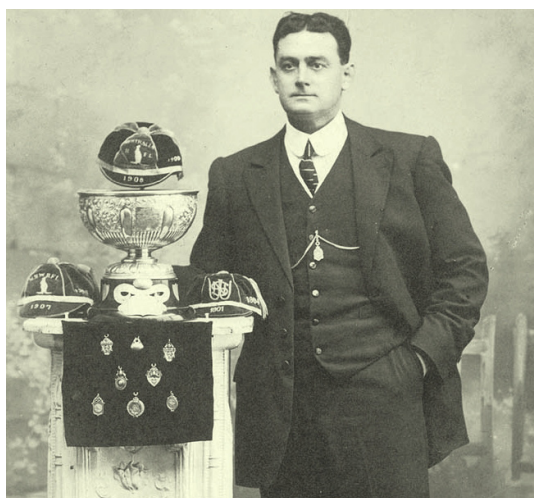
NSW All Blues and NZ All Golds, Sydney Agricultural (Show) Ground, 17 Aug. 1907.



By the late 1890s the working class had moved into Sydney rugby union in vast numbers, as players and supporters. With a practical and simple sentiment of Sydneysiders that winning is all that matters, rugby union, a slave to its principles of amateurism, was never going to survive as this city's favoured football code. Professional soccer had already erupted in the large cities of England, rugby union was increasingly in dispute in Yorkshire and Lancashire over professionalism, and when the conditions were right in Sydney—a professional football code would come forth here too. It was never a question of if, but when.

The 13-Man Game

One hundred years ago this Sunday, the New Zealand All Blacks and Daily Messenger arrived in England. At the same time preliminary meetings had begun in the districts of Sydney to form rugby league clubs. One such meeting took place at the house of Arthur Hennessy—a man who it is claimed called rugby league ‘a game for racehorses’ after his first reading of the rule book.



Arthur Hennessy was a pioneer player and founding official with the South Sydney RLFC.

Arthur Hennessy stated in 1908 that rugby league is ‘a game for racehorses’.

When the Wallaroos ruled

The game from Rugby School had gained worldwide popularity by the late 1850s on the back of *Tom Brown's Schooldays*, a best-selling book which described life at Rugby School including a football match. Matches during the 1860s were played with rules agreed upon by the captains on the day and were a mix of handling and non-handling rules. There were no such creations as referees or umpires, with 'playing the honour' the guiding principle—not that it stopped every argument.

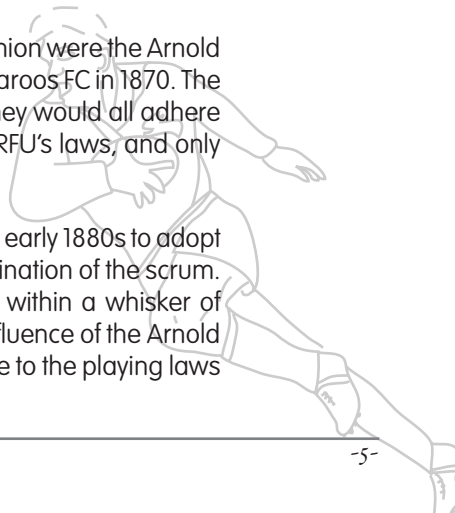
In Australia's largest city at that time, Melbourne, the Melbourne FC was formed in 1859 by rival public school men, who, finding that neither party was strong enough to form a club of its own, compromised by adopting rugby rules with two amendments, one of which was the deletion of the off-side restrictions of rugby. Though the AFL will claim next year as the 150th anniversary of Australian Rules, the first uniquely Australian rule—bouncing the ball after running five to six yards—and a collective group of clubs adopting uniform rules, were only adopted in 1866.

The first reports of organised football matches (as opposed to folk football) in Sydney appear in 1865 and 1866, with teams of 20-a-side from the Sydney Football Club, the Australian Cricket Club, the University of Sydney, and loosely collected 'scratch' sides.

By 1874 Sydney had 17 clubs, and disagreements over playing rules were a constant source of bickering and dispute. Following the example of the formation of the RFU in England (1871), 10 of Sydney's clubs came together in 1874 as the NSWRU (initially called the Southern Rugby Football Union).

The prime movers towards the formation of the Union were the Arnold brothers, Richard and Monty, founders of the Wallaroos FC in 1870. The Union (that is, the member clubs) resolved that they would all adhere to playing rugby football solely according to the RFU's laws, and only play matches against each other.

The NSWRU came under immense pressure in the early 1880s to adopt local rules, with the primary target being the elimination of the scrum. Votes at the NSWRU to outlaw the scrum came within a whisker of passing, and it was only because of the heavy influence of the Arnold brothers, and their continued desire to hold true to the playing laws of the RFU that made the difference.





*Wallaroos RFC
c.1899.*

Rugby developed a strong hold in Sydney, and despite the voices calling for reform, the NSWRU remained in control. There was no attempt to overthrow the NSWRU from within, and Australian Rules and soccer did not have enough support to be serious competitors. Soccer may have been able to grow, but the reluctance of the professional FA clubs in England to waste time on an unprofitable tour of Australia arguably cost the code its chance to gain the ascendancy.

By the late 1890s, particularly following tours from the New Zealand and Great Britain teams, along with the introduction of the Saturday half-day holiday, working-class men had moved into rugby union in great numbers as players and supporters. Club matches though were still being organised by invitations between clubs, with the premiership, awarded by a consensus as to which club had achieved the best results against the best clubs—similar to how college football in the USA still determines which two colleges get to play in the end-of-season Rose Bowl. Such gentlemanly arrangements though could not last in a city where ‘winning is everything’, and it was replaced by the mid-1890s with a ‘league structure’ taken from English soccer and American baseball.

The best players all found their way to the top clubs, and play became competitive and ‘win at all costs’. Premiership winners received silver cups and gold medals (the latter were subsequently often melted down and exchanged for cash)—all indicators of semi-professionalism.

In the rugby world such spirit, practices and a league structure only existed in one other place—in England, in Yorkshire.

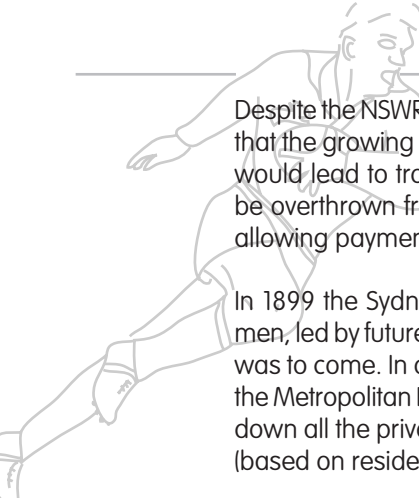
From the George Hotel to George Street

In 1886, the RFU in England, feared that professionalism was about to overtake rugby, and with that, the RFU's leaders feared that the working-class masses would consume the code and take control in the same way that they had overrun the soccer code. The RFU thus introduced rules against professionalism. The office worker or young men of the gentry were no hope against footballers who were from factories, mines and farms—if the working-class men of the northern counties could recover lost wages or earn money at rugby, their playing numbers would rapidly swamp the gentlemen footballers of London and the south. Ultimately, this led to the formation of rugby league, the Northern Rugby Football Union (Northern Union), in August 1895.

The split was far from unknown in the colonies. The NSWRU, NZRU and QRU all sent letters of support to the RFU in its fight against the outbreak of the professionals and the formation of the NU. There was an acute understanding of the issues by the Sydney rugby community. The touring British captain the Reverend Matthew Mullineux remonstrated at a dinner given in the team's honour in 1899 when he took the opportunity to point out to all that every element of professional rugby existed in Sydney, the only thing missing was the outright paying of footballers (something a Sydney newspaper confirmed as true a few days later anyway!). Mullineux pointed out that the playing laws of rugby only worked if the game was played by men with honour—referees and the rule book could be successfully manipulated by players who were hell-bent on gaining advantages by such means, instead of playing the game in the spirit in which it was intended. The Sydney football community would have none of it, with the NSWRU officials telling Mullineux to mind his own business, and if he wanted to start a crusade, he ought to begin with Yorkshire first, rather than Sydney.



*The 1899 British RU team
was captained by the
Rev. Matthew Mullineux
(seated, holding football)*



Despite the NSWRU's disregard for Mullineux's opinion, it did recognise that the growing number of working-class footballers and supporters would lead to trouble, with a very real threat that the NSWRU would be overthrown from within and the tie to the RFU would be severed, allowing payments and on-field rules for Australian conditions.

In 1899 the Sydney club had been formed entirely by working-class men, led by future Kangaroo Bill Hardcastle. This was a portent of what was to come. In an attempt to counter this threat, the NSWRU created the Metropolitan Rugby Union (MRU) to control Sydney football. It closed down all the private clubs, replacing them with a district club scheme (based on residential rules) in 1900.

'Why, as to the matter of paying players, we all know that Yorkshire and Lancashire players are paid.' Monty Arnold, NSWRU president and 'the father of Australian rugby'.

The city was divided into residential zones: Balmain, Norths, Souths, Easts, Wests, Glebe, Newtown, together with the Sydney University (which many objected to as it had no residential basis). The scheme was a compromise, it brought down the gentlemen's clubs and their cliques, gave the working-class players a voice at club and MRU level, and every opportunity to play first grade, but it also prevented them gaining outright control of a club, the MRU and ultimately the NSWRU. In reality, the clubs weren't clubs at all—they more like representative bodies for their allocated division of the city. They had no autonomy.

Ultimately, while the scheme was democratic and well intended, it failed. The creation of the MRU meant that the NSWRU controlled NSW and Australian matches. It was at this level where all the gate receipts came into the game.

The newly-formed district clubs had insufficient funds, while the NSWRU's accounts accumulated revenue from representative matches. Over the next six years, player and club dissatisfaction grew.

In 1902, with threats by some players to start up a rival body tied to the NU in England, the MRU granted compensation to players for injuries, something allowed by the RFU.

At the inter-state level though, trouble had been brewing since the late 1890s over the miserly three shillings per day travelling allowance.

The 'three-bob-a-dayers'

Harry 'Seven-Heads' Hammill, a member of the 1905 NSW team in Brisbane, stated that the players had to carry their own bank when on tour because, obviously, they were not earning money from their job. In addition, the NSWRU required each of them to pay for their NSW blazer, boater hat, the state's official hat-band, and pre-tour visit to the doctor to get a medical clearance. Those who couldn't fund it at all, had to, with some embarrassment, decline to play for NSW, simply because of their standing in life.

If caught in a shout at a pub, the 3s a day allowance, if they hadn't already spent it, was not enough to cover their obligations of a man. 'Man can't take a shout if ain't got the means to reciprocate if he wants to remain a man.'

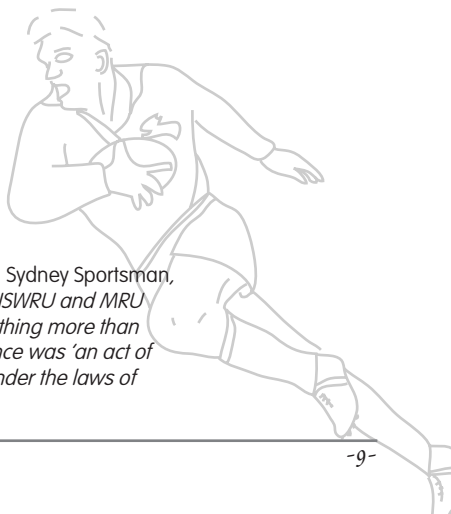


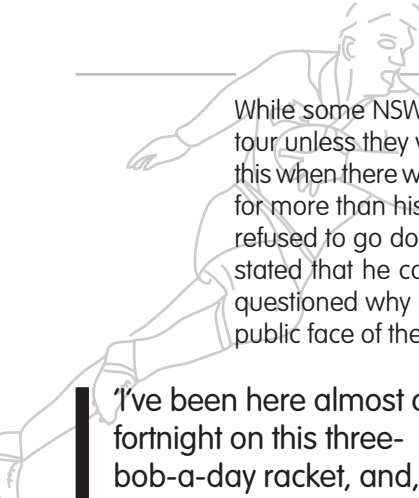
NSW rugby union players in the early 1900s were given an allowance of three shillings per day by the NSWRU.



AN AWFUL THREAT.
The Union (sternly): "The moment you ask for more than three bob a day we will declare you a professional!"

A cartoon from the Sydney Sportsman, August 1907. The NSWRU and MRU confirmed that anything more than 3s per day allowance was 'an act of professionalism' under the laws of England's RFU.





While some NSW players 'put the acid' on the NSWRU by refusing to tour unless they were secretly paid, the NSWRU only accommodated this when there wasn't an alternative player available who wouldn't ask for more than his standard three 'bob'. Others, like Dally Messenger, refused to go down this path anyway, calling it demeaning. He later stated that he could never stomach the 'paid amateur'. Messenger questioned why he should skulk about in secret merely to satisfy the public face of the NSWRU.

'I've been here almost a fortnight on this three-bob-a-day racket, and, after a couple of rum-and-milks in the morning, I'm broke!' Harry Hammill, NSW representative 1906.

Professionalism in Australian sport had existed from as early as the 1840s, and by the late 1800s was rife in boxing, rowing, cricket, cycling and tennis. Australia's first cricket teams to England were all organised by the leading cricketers and their backers. Each player shared in the vast profits of the tour at its conclusion. Sydney's Victor Trumper toured England three times, returning with hundreds

of pounds on each occasion. It seemed incongruous to many that rugby union players should be denied what other sportsmen enjoyed. It was also made clear by the NSWRU that referees could be paid, as could union and club officials.

The ultimate trigger was the 1904 visit to Australia of a British Rugby Union team, followed by the 1905 All Blacks visit to Britain. Players in the 1904 British team revealed that each of them would be out of pocket by more than £100 by the time they returned home. The average working man's wage was £50 a year.

The 1905 All Blacks tour was seen as an experiment, to see how much income a rugby tour could generate. The New Zealanders went away on 3s per day—including not being paid while at sea—and many gave up their job to take part in the tour. By the end of the tour, the NZRU had received a profit of more than £10,000. Some of the All Blacks returned home with no money in their pockets and no job. The NZRU paid the team's manager a £300 bonus for a job well done.

While on the All Blacks tour, New Zealand's George Smith met with officials of the NU. He'd been to England before as a hurdler and had been offered a contract with a NU club. In mid-1906 Smith came to Sydney with the Auckland club team for a week long visit which included matches against Souths, Newtown and the University. The

Auckland team also included promising young back, Lance Todd, who provided the name for the Rugby League Challenge Cup man-of-the-match medal. The visit of the Auckland team coincided with the NSW v. Queensland match at the SCG. Smith had the opportunity of watching Messenger in his first home game for the NSW Blues in front of a crowd of 32,000.

That evening, a 'great reunion' of footballers took place at a dinner in the city. By this time James Giltinan was mixing with rugby footballers. Smith revealed his plans to trusted confidants, and the move towards rugby league began in earnest in New Zealand, Sydney and Brisbane.

Messenger and Co.

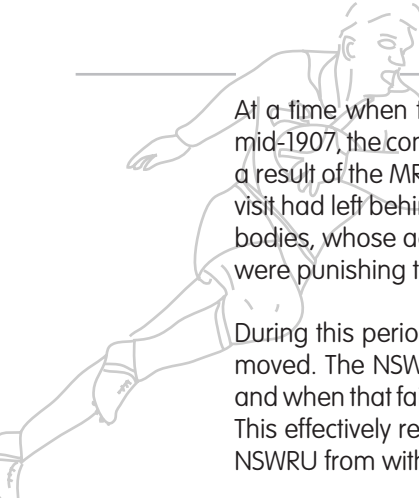
By 1906 the interest in rugby union in Sydney was soaring. Over 25,000 packed the Sydney Sports Ground to watch the young upstarts of Easts, namely Dally Messenger and Albert Rosenfeld, take on the powerful men of South Sydney. I don't think a club rugby union match in Sydney, apart from perhaps a grand final, has ever reached those heights again. By July 1907 a NSW v. New Zealand match, with Messenger as the star, attracted over 52,000 to the SCG. No football matches (that charged an entry price) anywhere in the world drew crowds of this size, with the exception of the English FA Cup Final.

The size of the crowd and the gate money weren't lost on Messenger and his contemporaries, many of whom were working-class men. Their hands were their professional tools so that a football injury could cost them their employment and their future prospects. The profits from football labour could offer them financial security.



Dally Messenger

'Messrs Messenger and Co. are now Senior players, with the limelight of public attention and the stimulus of public interest and admiration upon them. The past is gone.'
The Referee, May 1906.



At a time when the coffers of the union were bulging, from 1906 to mid-1907, the conditions enjoyed by the players deteriorated rapidly as a result of the MRU and NSWRU actions. It seems that George Smith's visit had left behind something that changed the attitude of these two bodies, whose actions appear particularly heavy-handed—as if they were punishing the players and the clubs.

During this period the insurance scheme for injured players was removed. The NSWRU tried to take out a loan from the MRU reserves, and when that failed the MRU spent all the money buying Harold Park. This effectively removed any incentive for overthrowing the MRU and NSWRU from within—which I believe was the original intention.

The MRU and the NSWRU suspected that an uprising was imminent, or even the formation of a rival organisation. Strong support for an equitable alternative to the MRU and NSWRU now existed amongst the rugby players of Sydney, particularly from the working class.

A Sydney reporter reflected on the mood of the city's working class: 'The Labor cauldron appears to be constantly seething'. He wrote of strikes in the collieries, tobacco workers, and the Government tram drivers, and added that 'The Arbitration Court apparently is all but useless'. Rugby was one area in which working-class men could take direct action.

The Bulletin was prepared to name the men fuelling the discontent in rugby, saying Giltinan and Trumper were behind the revolt, and making all sorts of promises to the footballers. They were soon joined by Henry 'Harry' Hoyle, a 54-year-old former Labor politician. Hoyle had



Victor Trumper's sports store, Market St., Sydney (courtesy of Peter Sharpham).

spent much of his working life in the trade union movement and his fiery speeches often invoked workers to rise up and challenge their employers through strikes and other activities.

With Hoyle providing the necessary 'call to arms' speeches, Giltinan organising the finances, and Trumper encouraging the players, they were ready to galvanise the dissatisfied elements of NSW and Queensland rugby into action. Their connection to the footballers came primarily through Glebe's Peter Moir 'who was in the habit of visiting Victor Trumper's sports depot' in Market Street.

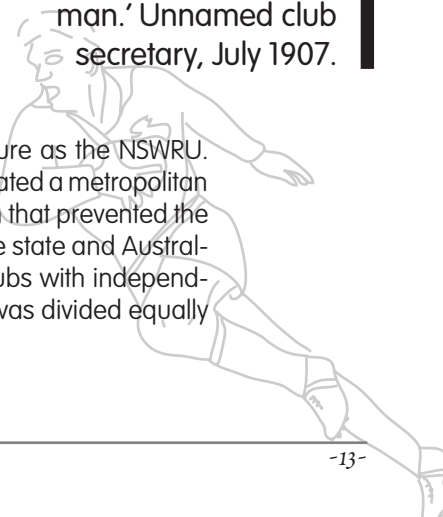
Lunch-time meetings took place at Trumper's store of footballers and other sports. They often lasted for two hours (which was the custom at that time). Negotiations began with Baskerville and Smith in New Zealand. Either Trumper or Giltinan, or maybe both, gave the Kiwis an Australian cricket-style contract, which included Messenger's name, two months before the All Golds arrived in Sydney.

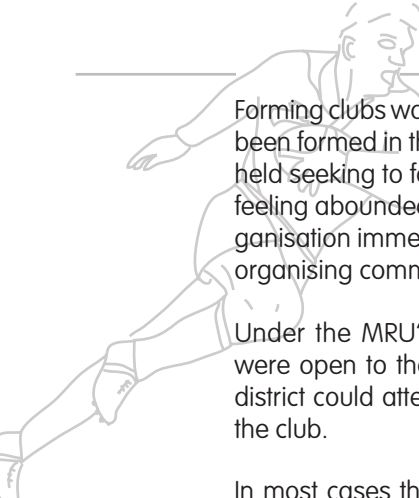
It is spoken of as 'rugby league'

The NSWRL did not secure initially every player that it sought for season 1908. In fact, they obtained about half, with mostly senior players joining. Albert Baskerville revealed that many players, fearing black-banning by the NSWRL as professionals and the consequences of the NSWRL going under, 'were sitting on the fence', living in hope that the NSWRL would either cave-in to the players' demands, or be overthrown from within. In all likelihood, there would be a stampede to the league ranks once it had proven its stability and/or the NSWRL made it clear it would not cut the ties to England and the RFU.

The NSWRL adopted the same district club structure as the NSWRL. However, it made two significant changes. It eliminated a metropolitan body (the MRU in rugby), the so-called middleman that prevented the clubs and players from controlling the game at the state and Australian level. The other change was to provide the clubs with independent income. The gate-money from club matches was divided equally between the two clubs and the NSWRL.

'Why shouldn't they get something out of the game besides kicks? You take it from me, if the right men start this professional movement in Sydney, they will get nearly every man.' Unnamed club secretary, July 1907.





Forming clubs was no difficult challenge. Since the first rugby clubs had been formed in the 1870s, at the start of each season, a meeting was held seeking to form each club for the coming season. A democratic feeling abounded in the early 1900s in that anything that required organisation immediately meant a meeting would be called to form an organising committee and to elect a president and secretary.

Under the MRU's district club scheme, the annual club meetings were open to the public. Any member of the public residing in the district could attend and vote, even without becoming a member of the club.

In most cases there was a 50/50 mix of active players and others. The committees generally reflected this ratio, with senior and recently retired players taking a very active role, alongside publicans, business leaders and politicians—all of whom stood to gain by their financial support of a club, many taking on the role of 'club patron', a position which brought with it an obligation to contribute financially to the club. Two of Australia's first Labor Prime Ministers took on these roles: Billy Hughes at Glebe and Chris Watson at Souths.

The income of the first rugby league clubs was provided from a mix of money generated by those watching the game, supported by private financiers. Surprisingly, this was not too far removed from the arrangements at Souths and Manly today. The difference though was that the members of the club, most of whom were active and recently-retired players, held the power to elect the committee members.

At a founding meeting in 1908 to form the Newcastle rugby league club, the gathering voted in favour of not forming a club. Giltinan overcame that difficulty by later organising a meeting of 15 footballers in private.

In Balmain, a week or so after the rugby league club was formed, when the local rugby union club held its annual meeting, the League-ites attended in force and had the numbers. They voted against every motion seeking to elect committee members and form a club for the 1908 season. The meeting had to be terminated, and there were brawls and scuffles outside the hall, with one man reportedly taken to hospital with a knife wound. The MRU ensured the next club meeting was held at the same time as the next Balmain rugby league club meeting. They didn't call them the 'Balmainiacs' for nothing!

To attract the players, the League paid for jerseys, training halls, and compensated players for time off work caused by injuries and tours, giving them up to £1 per week. This furthered their first objective, which was to get the rank-and-file club players. However, they also offered the carrot of a Kangaroo tour to England, along cricket lines with the profits to be shared. There was also the chance to attract an offer from a NU club, which many players later secured, including Albert Rosenfeld.

Jersey Flegg said of the League's intention: 'When the League was founded its first principle was that the players must come first. If a player can better himself (financially) going overseas, then he must be allowed to do so.' To add further appeal, Giltinan did not ask any of the selected Kangaroos to put in £50 each to fund the tour. The best rugby league players, unlike the All Golds and earlier cricket tourists, could not have afforded to take part. Instead, Giltinan borrowed £2000 and ultimately went bankrupt as a result of poor gates for the Kangaroo tour due to labour strikes and horrendously poor weather. While Giltinan must have hoped for a profit from the tour, he took all the risk on himself.

'Nothing but a nine-day wonder'

As soon as the NSWRL was formed, the newspapers and the NSWRL officials began an earnest campaign to scare and intimidate the footballers, particularly the younger ones.

The NSWRL All Blues team selected to play against the Professional All Blacks (Sydney, 1907) –

Back Row: Charlie Hedley, G Brackenreg, Arthur Hennessy, Bill Farnsworth, 'Tedda' Courtney, George Boss, Alf Dobbs.

Third Row: Henry Hoyle, Bob Graves, Peter Moir, Harry Hammill, Harry Glanville, Sid 'Sandy' Pearce, Alec Burdon, H Cleeve.

Second Row: John Stuntz, Billy Cann, 'Son' Fry, James Giltinan, Dally Messenger, Herb Brackenreg, Bob Mable.

Front Row: Lou D'Alpuget, Frank Cheadle, Albert Rosenfeld, John 'Darb' Hickey.





Two players dropped out of the NSW 'All Blues' team after appearing in the team photo: Glebe's John Hickey and Newtown's Billy Farnsworth. Both though would join the League two years later during the Wallabies exodus. Despite signing to play rugby league, and being in the team photo, both players escaped any sanction by the NSWRL.

'Professional football cannot live here unless a miracle happens—and miracles do not enter into the football world. If any player be so foolish to join he will merely commit football suicide.'
The Arrow, 3 August 1907.

In England though, during the Wallabies 1908 tour, the photo surfaced in the press, and Hickey had some explaining to do. He told the press and the RFU that the man in the photo was his brother. This excuse worked!

Most critics questioned the stability of the NSWRL, how long it would last, and the real intentions of Giltinan, Trumper and Hoyle. Many predicted the League

would be ripped apart by internal arguments over money, once any profit was made. Any player who had gone to the League was informed that he would be banned for life, and could not return to rugby union. Much of the press carried on about the so-called evils of professionalism—where young men living off their football earnings would have too much free time, too much money, and this would lead to nothing but decadence, and ultimately, leave the man unfit for any useful life once the football ended and his money ran out. This argument was aimed at players who were simply being compensated for lost earnings, so it was really a nonsense argument. Even Messenger had to keep working in the family boatshed. Why such an argument didn't apply to professionals in other sports could never be explained.

Of course, such warnings would have served a useful purpose to football administrators of the mid-1990s, when all of Australia's football codes turned professional. However, none of our contemporary media commentators showed such foresight.

The motor car v. the bullock wagon

What made rugby league so instantly popular with the Sydney crowds and footballers? It wasn't the 'play-the-ball' and the 'held' rule. The play-the-ball was in fact a loosely formed scrum, involving all the forwards. While it has been stated that the play-the-ball was introduced to rugby league in Britain in 1906, it was actually a return to an existing

rugby union rule. The NU had earlier replaced the play-the-ball with a scrum, and in 1906 reverted to the old rugby union play-the-ball rule. Together with the held rule, the play-the-ball had been in place since the 1870s. They were considered necessary to ensure no mauls occurred, the game was safe, and, importantly, gentlemen were not seen to be scruffing about on their hands and knees on the ground in an unseemly and scrappy mess.

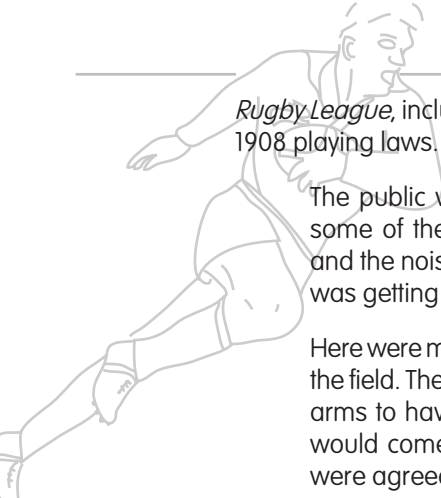


The visits in 1908 and 1909 of 'The New Zealand Maoris' rugby league team was a spectacular success in NSW and Queensland. This photograph was taken during a match against NSW in Sydney in 1908.

By the early 1900s, both in rugby union and rugby league in England, referees simply blew their whistle after each tackle, and ordered a scrum, avoiding the play-the-ball. In Sydney, the NSWRL, under pressure to speed up the game, allowed rucks and mauls to enter the game though a number of writers complained that this was not rugby at all. In all the articles in 1908 discussing the introduction of rugby league, none referred to the play-the-ball or held rules.

— 'The general feeling is that the crowd will go where the best football is to be seen.' *Sydney Morning Herald*, August 1907.

The major differences that they were highlighted were that teams were 13-a-side, the absence of line-outs and outlawing of kicking into touch on the full. The re-issued version of *The Rugby Rebellion*, *The Pioneers of*



Rugby League, includes some of these articles as well as a copy of the 1908 playing laws. Here are some typical comments from the time.

The public were puzzled for a time, they probably expected some of the old-fashioned wrestlings and tussles of Rugby, and the noise. The noise? [At first I had no idea what the writer was getting at].

Here were men flitting about silently—hardly a sound came from the field. The players were too busy with their eyes and legs and arms to have much energy to spare for talking. Occasionally would come a cry ‘Throw it about!’, but otherwise the tactics were agreeably free from uproar [sledging].

After the spectators had recovered from their first surprise, they must have felt that common-sense had a good deal to say in the Northern Union scheme of things.

A scrum had ‘replaced the wearisome throw-in’ from touch—at that time the rugby union laws allowed play to restart with a line-out or a scrum.

Neither side showed any fondness for finding the line. The forwards, knowing that if they let the ball go out they would have to rush up and bend their backs for a scrum, used their feet judiciously and did not indulge in wild-booting.

Forwards now had to not only use their feet on the ball carefully, but had to use their hands (passing) and their heads (thinking). To see a back artfully bounce a ball into touch would have been criminal—not that anyone had mastered the art anyway!

Forwards moved about in a pack, and a scrum or play-the-ball that involved every forward and the two half-backs—the fullbacks were more akin to goal-keepers—compared to today, that all adds up to eight players not being in the defence line!

In addition, both back-lines were ready to attack from each scrum or play-the-ball, creating even further space between the teams. This vast open space allowed the attacking team’s five-eighth, centres and wingers, to run and pass in space equivalent to what we would see in seven-a-side rugby league. We didn’t see an avalanche of point scoring as the players didn’t have the training, fitness, tactics and acquired skills of today’s players to better exploit that space.

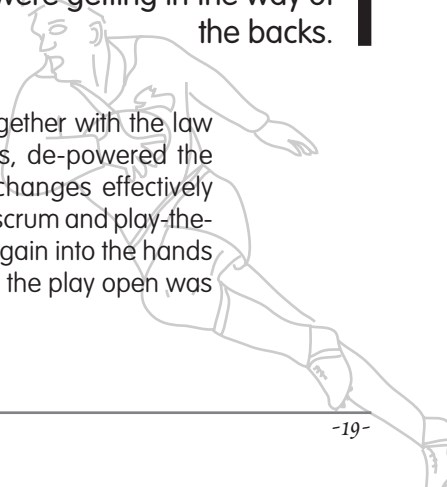
The first step towards changing the play-the-ball from a loose 12-man scrum came into being in the 1920s, when the play-the-ball itself, was restricted to just two players from each team. All the other forwards were required to remain within five yards of the play-the-ball, and were free to join in the contest for possession if the ball hadn't quickly cleared the ruck.

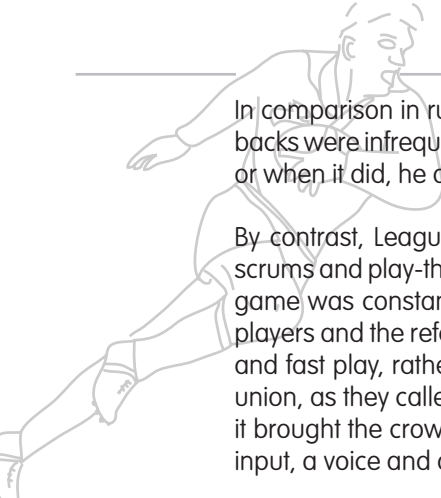
These wide open spaces at every play-the-ball or scrum were signature features of rugby league's first 50 years, and the explanation why old-timers from the 1960s onwards constantly bemoaned that forwards were getting in the way of the backs. By the early 1960s the play-the-ball was streamlined to just four players, and everyone else had to be back set ruck distances, ultimately the five-metre rule. In the early 1960s the practice began of allowing the tackled player to invariably keep possession. The effect of both changes meant that attacking backlines now had to confront seven extra defenders, cover defence, and 'spotting'—no wonder, despite the warnings from the 1908'ers, that the game ended up with bash-and-barge football!

The saviour was the limited tackle football in 1967, but today, 40 years later, under the 10 metre rule, inter-change and full-time training, the play-the-ball has become the game itself, instead of being, as it was in 1908, simply a means to re-start the game. In 1908, when attackers were confronted with a situation where there was every likelihood of being tackled with the ball, they erred on the side of off-loading or kicking the ball, rather than chancing a play-the-ball. The rules ensured there was no certainty of winning the play-the-ball—the effect, compared to today, was more speculative play.

The elimination of rugby union's breakaways, together with the law requiring half-backs to retire behind their packs, de-powered the scrummaging compared to rugby union. The changes effectively guaranteed that the ball would come out of every scrum and play-the-ball would proceed quickly setting the ball once again into the hands of the backs. 'The tendency of the rules is to keep the play open was noted in one account.

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In comparison in rugby union, attacking and passing movements by backs were infrequent, as the ball would not often reach the half-back, or when it did, he already had defenders pouncing on him.

By contrast, League featured rapid passing movements, and quick scrums and play-the-ball and with no line-outs or kicking for touch, the game was constantly on the move and visible to the spectators, the players and the referee. Many of the players preferred the more open and fast play, rather than the scrummaging and bullocking of rugby union, as they called it. With the ball always visible to the spectators, it brought the crowd into the game, giving them a say, an emotional input, a voice and an opinion.

The verdict of the 50,000 people who witnessed the matches on Saturday and Monday was that the difference between the new rugby and the old rugby is as a motor car compared to the bullock wagon.'

The *Herald* noted that 'the verdict of the 50,000 people who witnessed the matches on Saturday and Monday was that the difference between the new rugby and the old rugby is as a motor car compared to the bullock wagon.'

Another aspect was the prompt actions of the NSWRL and their referees. When teams tried to pack more than three men in the front row and return a focus upon

scrummaging, the NSWRL considered the problem on the following Monday night. It then immediately amended the playing laws to fix the number in the front row as three. This rule was implemented on the following Saturday. This was a telling example of the differences between League and Union, and the ability of the former to implement changes to benefit the game. The NSWRL, tied to England, could not introduce reforms until the RFU and IRB adopted them. Rugby Union in Australia today is still suffering the same difficulty.

While the NSWRL had adopted the laws of the NU, it had no compunction to change them if need be to suit local priorities and to ensure that the code stayed ahead of its competitors. Wanting a set of international rules to fit every country was desirable, but of little value if the code's flagship competition suffered in the mean time—something not lost on subsequent League administrators right through the 20th century.

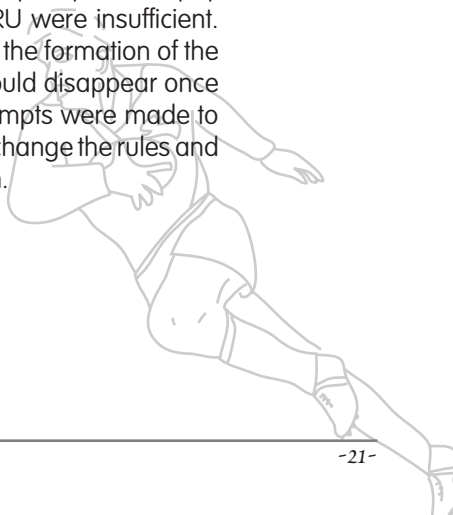
Dead to the world

Ironically, the success of the League at the representative level in 1908, and the money it brought in, produced the very in-fighting that the doomsayers had predicted. Built on a principle of democracy—where the club members elected the club committee, who then elected their club representative on the NSWRL committee—rapid and substantial profits were made from the visit of the Kiwis and then the Maoris. This new wealth posed further questions.

Giltinan had said that control of the League would eventually be given to the committee, but it didn't come quickly enough. Even before the 1908 Kangaroos had left Sydney, it was apparent that Giltinan, Hoyle and Trumper would be fortunate to see out the League's second season. When a secret account was uncovered in early 1909—which from this distance seems to have been intended to fund the Kangaroos v. Wallabies matches—the three founders were overthrown.

Through the first half of the 1909 season the NSWRL got by on the earnings from Balmain matches at Birchgrove Oval. So dependent had the League become on this income, that it scheduled a Balmain game at the ground every Saturday. When the representative matches came along, primarily the second tour of the Maoris, the League was suddenly in boom times again, and all its financial woes disappeared in the space of a week, with 30,000 strong crowds at the Agricultural Ground.

At the same time, the NSWRU was beginning to haemorrhage from the costs of the war with the League because it had begun to match the League in regard to player allowances, free jerseys and injury compensation. The belated actions of the NSWRU were insufficient. Most regarded it as duplicitous and a reaction to the formation of the League. Many had no doubt that the benefits would disappear once they had brought the League down. Further attempts were made to overthrow the NSWRU from within, to make them change the rules and cut their ties to the RFU but the Arnolds stood firm.





The 1909 'New Zealand Maoris' rugby league team and touring party.

'What has so far saved the League from itself, is that the game it controls is spectacular, and therefore popular.'

The Referee, June 1909

Given this setting, the seemingly sudden decision of half the 1908 Wallabies to agree to play in rugby league matches against the Kangaroos, was hardly surprising. The Wallabies though drove a hard bargain for their services, with Chris McKivat leading the charge and obtaining over £150. The Wallabies received money that none of the men who formed the League in

August 1907 received. The Wallabies could have jumped solely for the plum—but none did. Their contracts were only for the matches against the Kangaroos. They gained confidence from the rapidly growing rugby league around them, and the news that Jimmy Lomas's British Lions rugby league team would be touring in 1910. The Wallabies' defection was not the cause of rugby league's revival, it was evidence of how rugby league was well on the way to winning.

Matches against Lomas's team were immensely popular and the standard of play between the teams created unprecedented interest in rugby league. The NSWRL was buoyant at the gate-takings: almost 100,000 patrons witnessed the three opening games of the tour. The NSW v. New Zealand rugby union match, on the adjacent SCG, which had attracted 52,000 in 1907, drew only 16,000 because of the competition from League. With no income, the NSWRL retreated into full amateurism to ensure its survival. The war was over.

Kamgaroosters

I'll conclude here with the words of Tom Peters, secretary of the South Sydney Rabbitohs, written after the first Wallabies v. Kangaroos match in August 1909:

At last, the day of emancipation has arrived—and all honour to the gallant little band of twenty-two who started the League movement a little over two years ago. This little forlorn hope party were the recipients of threats, sneers and verbal abuse from all the snob followers of so-called amateurism in NSW. But they bore it all smilingly and battled quietly onwards—ever onwards, up till today.

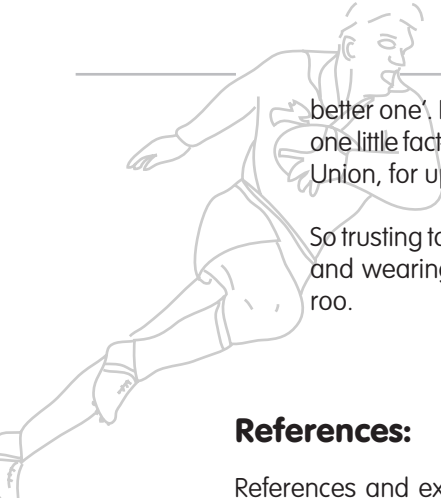
And what a sudden change. Hosts of players in NSW, New Zealand and Queensland under NU rules, to mention nothing of wires of congratulations to the League from inland country districts and coastal towns as well, asking for affiliation. Secessions wholesale of junior [third grade] teams from the Union ranks, and dozens of prominent players from the Union already looking for places in the League ranks for next season.

'So trusting to see you, one and all, in League teams next season, and wearing the insignia of your country, that is, The Kangaroo!'

It is very pleasing, brethren, to us all—men who have fought day and night for this movement. For we all had one ambition and one beacon light ever before us: 'To make the lot of the player a



South Sydney RLFC's Billy Cann, who played for the Australian rugby league team in the Third Test against New Zealand in 1908. The kangaroo insignia was adapted by official RL bodies across all levels of the code.



better one'. No inspired scribe can prejudice our cause, for this one little fact—the public are the sole arbiters of either League or Union, for upon their patronage we both either stand or fall.

So trusting to see you one and all in League teams next season, and wearing the insignia of your country, that is, The Kangaroo.

References:

References and extensive footnotes for this lecture can be found in *The Rugby Rebellion: Pioneers of Rugby League* by Sean Fagan (ISBN 978-0-9757563-0-0).

Sean Fagan

Sean is a sports historian and writer, specialising in rugby league and 19th century rugby union. Since 2000 he has produced comprehensive rugby league (RL1908.com) and rugby union (ColonialRugby.com.au) history web sites, and in 2005 published the seminal work, *The Rugby Rebellion: The Divide of League and Union*, which explored the initial split between the rugby codes in Australia a century ago. This book was re-issued in 2007 as *The Rugby Rebellion: The Pioneers of Rugby League*. He is also a member of the Rugby League Centenary Historians Committee. His most recent book is *The Master: The Life and Times of Dally Messenger* is a biography on Australia's first rugby star (in both codes). He is also a frequent writer of articles for national newspapers, sports magazines and on-line media, and provider of comments and interviews for radio and newspapers. Sean provided historical consultancy and additional script writing and editing for the 2008 released rugby league documentaries *The Spirit of Australian Rugby League* (Graham McNeice Productions for Foxtel's History Channel) and *A Century of Rugby League* (four-episode series by Chief Entertainment production for the NRL/Centenary of RL), and appeared in the latter.



AN AWFUL THREAT.

The Union (sternly): "The moment you ask for more than three bob a day we will declare you a professional!"

NO NEWS - FOOTBALL DAYS GONE BY.

A cartoon from the Sydney Sportsman, August 1907. The NSWRU and MRU confirmed that anything more than 3s per day allowance was 'an act of professionalism' under the laws of England's RFU.

