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REFLECTIONS ON A
LIFE IN RUGBY LEAGUE

John Fahey



12th Annual Tom Brock Lecture

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The Hon. John Fahey AC

12th Annual
Tom Brock Lecture
NSW Leagues Club
Sydney NSW
23 September 2010



Australian Society for Sports History

www.sporthistory.org

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12th Annual Tom Brock Lecture NSW Leagues Club, Sydney, 23 September 2010

Published in 2011 by the Tom Brock Bequest Committee on behalf of the Australian Society for Sports History.

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ISBN 978-0-9804815-4-9

Front cover image of Ron Coote and Tom Raudonikis playing for NSW against Queensland, Lang Park, 1974, courtesy of Jim Fenwick.

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Layout and design: Level Playing Field graphic design
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Printing: On Demand <print@on-demand.com.au>

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 \$5000.
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: <http://www.sporthistory.org>

Tries and Tribulations

JOHN FAHEY, former NSW Premier and Federal Finance Minister, was a player with Canterbury-Bankstown and Camden and Oakdale in the Group 6 Country Rugby League, being captain-coach of the latter two clubs.

He later served in Group 6 administration as club president, group vice-president and member of the Referees Appointment Board. He has also been a patron of the Bulldogs since 1993. After retirement from politics, he has continued to be active in rugby league and since 2002 has served as inaugural patron and director of the Men of League Foundation and chairman of Australian Rugby League Development Limited, the governing arm of junior league development throughout Australia. He was also a member of Rugby League's Centenary Committee. Mr Fahey remains active in the corporate world as a director of three large companies.

He has been the president of the World Anti-Doping Agency since 2008 and has been rated by the London-based SportBusiness International as one of the world's 20 most influential sports administrators.

12th Annual Tom Brock Lecture 2010,

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MYFIRST MEMORIES of football came through the sound of Dad's old wireless which he kept in his shed in the backyard of our home in Wellington, New Zealand.

It wasn't rugby league my Irish immigrant father was listening to, but the national religion of New Zealand: rugby union. As an eight year-old I was allowed to join Dad on those Saturday afternoons. I would listen and learn from him about the speed of Ron Jarden and the kicking prowess of Don Clarke, both of whom were at that time All Blacks. I remember Dad showing me a newspaper clipping he kept in his drawer which depicted a sketch of Don Clarke clearing the ball from behind his own try line and finding touch five metres from the opposing team's try line. Yes, the winds of Wellington gave more than a little assistance to that great kick, but I was still in awe of such skill.

With Dad's encouragement I was hooked on football at an early age. I started playing at Marist Brothers, Thorndon, an inner suburb of Wellington, and couldn't get enough of training or games. It felt pretty good to be growing up and playing rugby in the most powerful rugby country on earth. When I was selected as a breakaway for the Wellington Mighty Midgets representative team to play a curtain raiser to a New Zealand-Australia Test in Wellington in 1955, I thought life couldn't get any better.

On a number of occasions in later life I commented to mutual friends in the company of Sir Nicholas Shehadie that Nick and I shared a day of rugby together in 1955 at Athletic Park Wellington. In due course I would inform our friends that Nick captained the Wallabies that day whilst my game started at 10am.

That season was no sooner over when Mum and Dad informed us children that the family was moving to Australia. My dad, who was one of twelve children, had one brother in Australia, a Catholic priest who talked Dad into moving over the Tasman. Mum, the youngest of thirteen children, six of whom migrated from Ireland to New Zealand, was willing in her typically unselfish way to move away from her family to support Dad's wish.

Discovering Rugby League

Having moved to Australia, I thought my football days were over until Sister Kevin at St Anthony's Convent, Picton, informed us one day that she had to select a football team to play against St Paul's Convent, Camden. Now aged eleven, this was my first introduction to rugby league. Reflecting on that introduction all these years later it was bizarre. Here was an Irish nun in full religious habit, trying to teach a group of boys the fundamentals of league such as playing the ball and



Bob McCarthy had the strength of a front-rower and the speed of a winger.
(PHOTO COURTESY IAN HEADS)

six-man scrums on the concrete playground between the church and the school. It was blessed relief when one of the team's fathers agreed to take over as coach and we moved from the playground to Victoria Park, Picton for training on the ground that remains the town's major rugby league ground today.

My older brother Harry started playing rugby league that same year at Picton High School and Dad began again following the Newtown Bluebags. I say again because Dad had spent a year on his way to New Zealand from Ireland working in Sydney. He stayed initially at the Dolphin Hotel in Surry Hills and worked at Tooth's Brewery near Central Station and made friends with Frank 'Bumper' Farrell. This led him to Newtown.

At St Anthony's, dear Sister Kevin saw something of a spark in me and pushed me to study for a college bursary at the end of sixth class. With her extra tuition and no doubt some extra prayers I was successful. In 1958 I commenced my five years of boarding at Chevalier College, Bowral, and reverted to rugby union.

During those five years I learnt more about league than union thanks to my portable radio which introduced me to Tiger Black and



Camden Rams first grade, Group 6, 1964. John Fahey is in the front row, behind the ball boy. His brother, Stephen, is in the back row, second from the right Annandale played in the NSWRL from 1910 to 1920. (PHOTO COURTESY JOHN FAHEY)

Frank Hyde and my close school friends Pat Walsh from Jamberoo, son of a then Australian selector Kevin Walsh, and Ron Buchan from Nowra. Both Pat and Ron played league in the Illawarra/Shoalhaven areas after leaving school. My older brother and younger one Stephen were playing for the Camden club in age teams, so when I was home from boarding school in the winter months there was nothing but football talk in the house and drying football gear hanging on the verandas.

Pork Fat and Bike Pumps

So what are my memories of rugby league during my teenage years? I can still smell the pork fat that mum would get from the butcher so we could rub it into our footballs to condition the leather. The balls contained inner tubes that we inflated with a bike pump, and were laced up with a leather cord. When these balls got wet they became heavy and greasy. On a dry day those balls would float if you tried a long pass but they were great for a torpedo punt kick. The way modern footballs are shaped, you would never see such a kicking display today.

My brothers and I built our own goalposts out of saplings in a

sloping paddock near our farmhouse. We had countless competitions in goal kicking with out-of-shape balls and an uneven crossbar. Our boots covered our ankles, and all boots had hard toes. Sprigs were initially made from leather and nailed onto the sole of the boot. With technological advances, aluminium sprigs were introduced in my late teen years, initially nailed onto the sole of the boot and later screwed in.

Football grounds were not watered as they are today. Most grounds had a concrete cricket pitch with a shallow covering of soil that became rock hard. To keep the skin on our knees we coated them with petroleum jelly. We would slip foam pads into the sides of our shorts to protect our hips. Is it any wonder my generation turned orthopaedic surgeons into wealthy men? And whilst I was growing up with skin missing from my knees and hips the St George Dragons dominated both the domestic competition and the representative sides. There was only Saturday afternoon football in the city and only Sunday football in the country.

On leaving school I had one year in the seminary at Springwood, influenced strongly by my uncle who was our parish priest. Towards the end of that year I approached the rector and informed him I did not believe I was cut out for the priesthood. He responded that it was funny that I had come to that conclusion because so had he. The truth of the matter was I couldn't commit to a life ahead without active sport and women.

The Work-Football Balance

In 1964 I gained employment as an articled law clerk at Bankstown on the princely weekly wage of six pounds a week. I began senior rugby league as a centre with the Camden Rams in the NSW Country Rugby League (CRL) Group 6 first grade competition on £5 a win. The following year I was graded with Canterbury-Bankstown and played two years there, mostly in reserve grade. I also agreed to coach Camden's under-18 side, in which my younger brother and future brother-in-law were playing. I stepped in when their coach quit after they lost their first three games. I would race back from Belmore Oval after training to Camden. They never lost another again and gave me my only career premiership although I subsequently lost two grand finals as a player.

After failing an exam in 1966, I came to the fairly obvious realisation that I was likely to be a lawyer longer than a footballer, and that lectures had to come first. I returned to Camden at the ripe old age of 22 to be the Rams' captain-coach, with team training scheduled to avoid my lecture nights. The club had very little money to

pay players, but at least I got to play with both my brothers. In 1968 the Oakdale Workers Club was promoted to first grade. I had just become engaged to an Oakdale girl, so I agreed to become a paid player with the Workers. After two seasons I took on the role of captain-coach for the next two seasons. In those four years I was paid more playing football each year (as modest as the payments were) than I was paid for my 40 hours each week in a legal office. Such was the pitiful wages structure for articulated law clerks. Where was the trade union movement when I needed one? At Oakdale, my two brothers as well as my brother-in-law played with me. My father-in-law was our trainer.

I had some moments in representative football, and enjoyed playing for Southern Division in 1968 with players like Tony Branson, John Monie and Peter Louis; all of whom joined Sydney clubs the next year. That representative season was snuffed out for me when I dislocated my shoulder in a tackle by Illawarra and future Australian second rower Ron Costello. Ron still boasts about this tackle today. He claims to be the only voter to break a premier's bones, making him the envy of thousands of other voters. During my time at Oakdale I coached and arranged for Garry Dowling to transfer to the Bulldogs. Sadly, I delivered a eulogy at his funeral a few years later. He was as gifted a player as I have seen.

I gave away football to finish my study, but remained in the game as an official. Over the next few years I held such positions as Group 6 vice-president under a wonderful mentor in the late Hilton Middleton, the long-serving president. I was also on the Group 6 referees' appointment board and the Camden Rams club president.

In the latter role I was a major participant in developing the new ground and clubhouse for the Rams at Camden East. It is still the premier ground in Group 6 and it happened because a half a dozen committee members gave personal guarantees to the bank for a loan. Such is the way of sport in country areas. The clubhouse, change rooms and spectator facilities were built with little money and many volunteers including tradesmen. Over one weekend about thirty of us laid the turf over the entire ground. Such is the generosity and spirit of country people.

I had a great joy in February this year attending a centenary celebration and reunion of the Camden Rams. It's hard to believe that two years after the game commenced in Sydney it had spread to the country. In Camden's case, the club started because the boys' choir at St John's Anglican Church wanted to add some excitement to the otherwise passive experience of choir practice.

At the Rams reunion former player Jack Dunn told the story of



My father's friendship with Frank 'Bumper' Farrell, pictured here in action for New South Wales, led him to support the Newtown Bluebags.
(PHOTO COURTESY TERRY WILLIAMS)

attending the meeting back in 1945 to get the club going again after the break caused by the Second World War. Jack was only fifteen at the time. Two others that attended the 1945 meeting were also at the reunion, namely Dave Kerrigan — who also played with the Berries — and John Williams, who was one of the guarantors for the bank loan in 1983. I could only marvel that people like Jack, Dave and John — all of whom had maintained an unbroken interest in the Rams — have the historical knowledge of 65 of the Rams' 100 years. This is another example of the lasting bonds in country sport and in country communities. It was also a satisfying and rewarding experience to see present eleven members of that 1964 team that I played with in my first year in senior football.

As I look back over my playing days it was clear the game was changing. I don't know what prompted administrators to change the unlimited-tackle rule to the four-tackle rule, and then to the current six-tackle rule a short time later. I've always thought it was designed to break the stranglehold St George had on the club competition during those eleven premierships seasons. The Dragons had the ability to hold possession for what at times seemed like forever. When their opponents got the ball they were usually playing catch-up on the scoreboard which invariably led to mistakes which gave the ball



John Fahey, Andy Patmore and Terry Lamb at the Canterbury Bulldogs' season launch, 1993. (PHOTO COURTESY JOHN FAHEY)

back to the Dragons. Whatever the reason, rugby league players had to achieve new levels of fitness and endurance because it was years before interchange was allowed and for the first time league players had to learn to kick. This was league's most successful era of recruiting players from union. Players like Phil Hawthorne, John Brass, Phil Smith and Michael Cleary brought speed, passing and evasive skills. Others like Kevin Ryan and Dick Thornett brought endurance and toughness to a game that was now fast and furious.

The transition from unlimited tackles to the six-tackle rule has been the most significant rule change in the game in my lifetime. But the player in my view that changed the game more than anyone else in this era was Bob McCarthy. Bob had the strength of a front-rower and the speed of a winger. When Bob took the ball out wide, he demonstrated that the stereotypical body description for league positions was no longer relevant. Soon centres were interchanging with second-rowers, locks with five-eighths and hookers with half-backs. The latter came about when scrums ceased to be a contest for possession, because referees ignored the straight feed rule for the scrum. The primary responsibility for a hooker became not to win

scrums but to make ground from dummy-half for his team. With the six-tackle rule, the emphasis shifted from defence to attack and the game became much faster.

Political Football

In 1984 I entered New South Wales Parliament as the Liberal member for Camden. My original ambition was to become the minister for sport, but when government was achieved in 1988 I found myself wrestling with labour laws and employment programs rather than with bookies at Randwick and fans demanding improved sporting venues. Despite the pressures of executive government, and they are significant, perhaps the best 'trapping' of office was not the white car with driver but the invitations from various sports to attend sporting events as a guest. The Sydney Cricket Ground Trust, New South Wales Cricket Association, New South Wales Rugby Union and New South Wales Rugby League were always generous. My diary secretary was under strict instructions to insert the major events such as Tests, State of Origin and grand finals into the diary before anything else. It allowed me to enjoy some memorable sporting moments.

When I became premier in 1992, I realised that I was in a position to give rugby league some benefits it deserved in some of the communities that had sustained the game. I had the privilege of presenting the Country Player of the Year award at the annual dinner of the CRL as, I believe, the only premier ever to attend this function. It was an opportunity for me to acknowledge the role of rugby league throughout the length and breadth of country New South Wales, and the massive social contribution the game makes in these often remote communities.

I also presented the then Rothmans Medal on three occasions, as well as two premierships trophies. My own club, the Bulldogs, appointed me as a patron in 1993. I still have this honour today, but it was not the easiest of decisions for the Bulldogs at that time. The other patrons were then prime minister Paul Keating and his speaker in the House of Representatives, Leo McLeay, both Labor of course. As former player and New South Wales Labor minister Kevin Stewart once said, when my name was fed into the Bulldogs' computer, the green light went on at Irish, again at Catholic and at being a former Canterbury-Bankstown player. It then went into meltdown when the word Liberal flashed up instead of Labor.

Throughout my political career, Barry Nelson and Peter Moore were the first to buy tickets for my fundraisers. While I never asked them their political preferences, they always turned up. They saw me

as one of their extended Bulldogs family first and foremost, and to them that was really all that was important.

As surprising as it might sound, one of my favourite mementos from my association with rugby league is a large framed colour photo of the victorious Newcastle Knights taken on the ground minutes after they secured their first premierships victory in 1997. The caption at the bottom says 'We wouldn't have been here today without your help'. The photo was sent to me by my friend and former Knights president Terry Lawler and the caption referred to the State Government debt of over \$3 million that I wrote off in 1994. The Knights had borrowed money from the State on more than one occasion to improve their home ground, then known as the Newcastle International Sports Centre.

They had no leagues club backing, and were behind in the repayments with little chance of finding the money. I reasoned that no government had asked Parramatta to borrow the money to turn Cumberland Oval into the Parramatta Stadium, and no government had asked Eastern Suburbs or South Sydney to borrow the money to transform the Sydney Sports Ground into the Sydney Football Stadium. Why therefore, should Newcastle be lumbered with crippling debt for far less as facilities go than these other clubs?

I enjoyed that grand final very much, watching it on television in my hotel room in Melbourne with two New South Wales-based bankers. It was a weekend set aside to settle the price of the first Telstra share offer. We assembled in the Melbourne office of one of the investment bankers on the Friday evening. The expectation was that the necessary number-crunching would conclude on Sunday afternoon. We would adjourn on Saturday afternoon and all attend the Australian Football League (AFL) grand final between Adelaide and St Kilda.

The Melbourne bankers, lawyers and accountants were far from impressed when I, as the federal finance minister, informed the gathering that we should expect to work into Sunday evening as we would also be adjourning on Sunday afternoon to allow one or two of us to watch the Australian Rugby League (ARL) grand final.

In 1994 I had a similar opportunity to give a huge boost to the Illawarra community, especially to those who supported the Illawarra Steelers and the National Basketball League (NBL) team the Illawarra Hawks. The Hawks were given an ultimatum by the NBL that unless they could provide a stadium twice the size of their Beaton Park facility — which held about 1200 fans — they would be expelled from the competition. The rescue plan involved redeveloping the

northern stand of the then-named Wollongong Showground to provide a modern rugby league stand with boxes and a dining facility on top and an exhibition space that would convert into a basketball stadium with 3500 seats below.

I agreed to give the project \$11 million and BlueScope Steel and Cleary Brothers Concrete offered steel and concrete to the value of about \$6 million. Within two years WIN Stadium was transformed and the Illawarra region had a facility that will continue to serve it for a long time to come.

Neither the Newcastle nor the Wollongong projects brought any joy to my advisors or my coalition colleagues. The fact was that the Liberal Party was extremely unlikely to win a parliamentary seat in either region any time soon. My mob thought the money should have been more strategically placed where it might provide a political dividend. I believe I understood politics as well as most, but despite the politics I could never ignore a genuine need.

Communities revolve around common interests and pride in their achievements. They need to believe they are as good as any other part of our great country. To have a team competing in a national competition gives a community something to discuss at work. They look forward to their team's next game. They blame the referee or anyone else when they lose and they brag about the result when they win. Communities — not governments of any particular persuasion — make Australia the great nation it is.

My third 'stadium' project was at Gosford: the transformation of Grahame Park, where I had lost some of that skin in my playing days when Group 6 took on Group 12. The Howard government established a \$100 million Federation Fund to celebrate our Centenary of Federation. I was appointed, with my Finance Ministry hat on, to chair the project assessment committee.

Surviving Politics ... and Cancer

The North Sydney Bears believed then, and still do today, that their future revolved around a relocation of their team to the Central Coast. Club president Ray Beattie, with plenty of support from my former adviser and federal member for North Sydney Joe Hockey, wanted a slice of the Federation Fund. I was delighted to get cabinet approval with strong backing from genuine rugby league supporter John Howard for an \$11 million dollar grant which set the ball rolling for what today is Bluetongue Stadium. I hope one day North Sydney or some other team in the National Rugby League (NRL) is based at this stadium.

*Kangaroo legend Ron Coote
helped me establish the
Men of League Foundation.*
(PHOTO courtesy Ian Heads)



I retired from politics at the end of 2001 on medical advice, after an eighteen-year career. In February of that year I had a lung removed after cancer was diagnosed. The prognosis was not good. I was given a one-in-four chance of making Christmas 2001. Although only five percent of lung cancer victims survive five years, I could never accept that I should take it easy.

Early the next year I accepted an invitation from the ARL to chair the ARL Development (ARLD) board, a position I still hold. This body has the responsibility for the implementation of the National Development Plan. It employs around 70 development officers around Australia and has a dedicated and professional management team under national director Bill Palmer. The national development officers of the ARLD have grown rugby league exponentially over the past decade. In 2009 over 6200 schools and 1.2 million children participated in ARLD's ball-in-hand rugby league experiences. So we are doing some things right. In fact, I'm always pleased to remind AFL supporters who boast of taking over Sydney's west that there are more rugby league players in Melbourne than Australian Rules players in western Sydney.

Later in 2001 I was asked by a team mate from my Bulldogs days, Jim Hall and my good friend, Ron Coote to assist with the

establishment of the Men of League Foundation. I became, at inception, the patron of Men of League and later a director. It was an admirable and unique concept that has blossomed into an extraordinary success. It has reached out to thousands of league supporters and provided a link to reconnect them to the game. Those former players and officials who need financial help due to illness or other misfortune have found practical and financial support through a network of 25 committees in New South Wales and Queensland. No other sport in this country has demonstrated the same level of care and thoughtfulness for its extended family that rugby league gives through this foundation. In nine years, Men of League has raised over \$2.5 million and helped countless individuals that have rugby league in their veins. Few organisations that I have been associated with have given me the same level of personal satisfaction as Men of League.

Making the Greatest Game Greater

In the game of rugby league, the ultimate reward is to win, but a team rarely wins without scoring tries. It is the try that gives us the most joy and the lasting memories. Like other aspects of our lives, rugby league is also punctuated with certain frustrations which in the title of this essay, I described as tribulations.

It seems to me that from time to time rugby league embarks on a course of self-destruction. It has a propensity to self-harm, and even its most ardent supporters wonder why they should keep their faith in the game or buy another season ticket.

In the past decade we have witnessed the Bulldogs' salary cap scandal, the Coffs Harbour alleged sexual assault involving the same club (which proved to have little substance in the end), the aberrant behaviour of Andrew and Matthew Johns and the Storm salary cap rorting uncovered this year, to name some of the major incidents. Each one of them attracted massive adverse publicity and threatened to bring the game to its knees. However, it is worth reminding ourselves again of the resilience of rugby league.

Last year NRL crowds reached an all time record and season 2010 crowds have surpassed last year's. This speaks volumes for the product. Rugby league is the excitement game like no other football code and no other team sport. It continues to attract and retain the fans, despite the bad behaviour of high profile players, despite the administrative structures, despite some puzzling administrative decisions, despite the standard of referees, despite some strange rule changes and despite the lack of support for struggling country clubs. Imagine how much better our great game would be if we could tidy up some of

these areas. I know it is easy to criticise shortcomings but harder to find solutions. So, in the ideal world what would I like to see happen?

Let me start with an administrative decision. I support the salary cap principle, but it isn't working under the current supervision. This year it was the Melbourne Storm, but most fans believe rightly or wrongly that all clubs are cheating or will cheat if they believe they can get away with it. After all, the Melbourne Storm was only exposed because of a whistleblower. Even then the NRL's audit was way short of the total salary breach subsequently revealed by private auditors.

To make it work, the NRL must contract forensic accountants to supervise and audit clubs' books and players' personal records. Players' contracts must contain provisions for such inspections as must club licences granted by the NRL. The penalties for deceit and rorting must be imposed on players where there is proof they are aware of the breach and it is not just the clubs that are cheating.

The penalties must include periods of suspension that are known in advance by all parties and proportionate to the offence. Penalties should not be prospective like this year when the Melbourne Storm was asked to continue playing as an illegal team. Whilst the Storm could not earn points for winning matches, 'legal' teams were unable to earn points by defeating the Storm. This affected the entire legitimacy of this year's competition.

Surely, the club could have been forced to bring its payments into line within a month, by each player being given the opportunity to take a pay cut. If, in this time, player payments didn't come under the cap, the club should have been suspended until the rorting was rectified. Two other steps need to happen with player payments. Firstly, the number of marquee players in each club should be increased, and the maximum amount of payment to marquee players must be increased. It is surely a basic right in our system of fair play for marquee players to earn whatever sponsors are prepared to pay in every case.

The second step is to grant increased and generous concessions within the cap for those players who graduate as club juniors to play for their senior NRL clubs. Other concessions on the cap should be based on long service to a single club, such as six, eight and ten years with the same club. Such rules will lead to player loyalty, club loyalty to their own juniors and loyalty of fans to their clubs. Fans struggle with the nomadic nature of playing staff from one season to the next. They applaud the development of juniors and keeping the family together wherever possible.

The talking point in rugby league for the past two seasons has

been the establishment of a peak body or commission to run the game. Is the new commission the answer for better administration? In theory at least, it makes sense to reduce the number of boards but it is the quality of the administration rather than the number of boards that is more important.

My major concern is that giving the NRL clubs the dominant or controlling role may lead to abandonment of grass roots development. Many NRL clubs care little for junior development. They prefer to buy players rather than nurture them through junior ranks.

This was very apparent during the Super League war when the players and lawyers got all the money and the grass roots area suffered. There must be an elite competition, but tomorrow's elite players are today's schoolboys and junior players. Any commission or governing body that doesn't have grass roots representation runs the risk of reducing the emphasis and resources essential to the game's future. Talk on the commission has reached the stage where it has become a major distraction. The sooner it is resolved, the sooner the focus returns to the game's real issues.

How should we deal with players who bring the game into disrepute? The answer is with a consistent approach. I struggle with the mixed messages that are constantly being given by administrators. Last year without a hearing, Paul Gallen was fined \$10,000 on a Tuesday morning for a foul racial slur on a black St George player two days earlier. That afternoon he was handed his State's jumper by being picked for the New South Wales State of Origin team.

This year Johnathan Thurston was let off by the judiciary after he released a tirade of expletives on a referee that every kid watching that game on television must have heard. The judiciary decided that the referee erred in not sending Thurston from the field, and the judiciary refused to do the referee's job. The referee and the judiciary were both wrong. The NRL should have moved in and suspended Thurston for bringing the game into disrepute.

These two cases are classic examples of mixed messages. If they need a body to adjudicate on 'game disrepute' then appoint one, but above all protect the reputation of the game for the benefit of our most important stakeholders: the mothers, wives and girlfriends of players. It is the women who ultimately decide whether young Johnny, teenage Johnny or adult Johnny play our game. The game's values, standards and reputation influence their decision.

There are too many rule changes from one season to the next. That the regular rule changes each season often confuse the fans and there is too much use of technology to apply those rules. The third referee

should be used only for tries and there should be limited time for the decision to be made. If it is unclear, reject it or make it the referee's call and do that in 45 seconds. The third referee should not decide illegal play. This only encourages players to stay down in the hope of milking a penalty. The post-match review gives ample opportunity to pick up problems if match officials miss them in live time.

The one rule I would change is to abandon the stripping rule altogether. Referees get it wrong on several occasions in every game, and it infuriates the fans. Surely a basic skill of our game is to hold onto possession. If a player doesn't protect the ball, he deserves to lose it.

I have real concerns about the future of the game in country regions, and particularly in country New South Wales. A few years ago, the then CRL boss David Barnhill told me that 45 percent of NRL players came from country New South Wales. It is significantly less today and many clubs and groups in the bush are struggling. The biggest single blow to Sunday afternoon crowds in the bush was the live or slightly delayed telecast of an NRL fixture. The fans abandoned the local team for the comfort of their lounge rooms. I suppose this was inevitable as the quality on the screen was superior to that on display at the local showground but no strategy seems to have been developed to counter the dwindling local support that flowed.

NRL clubs should be linked not just to their immediate geographical area, but to country regions with an obligation to develop annual plans that foster and develop the designated region. This may include coaching and promotional support from an NRL club and its players. A master plan accompanied by appropriate funding should be developed to capture and develop indigenous players in the regions. These gifted young men are naturals for rugby league, and we need far greater effort and significantly more resources to entice them to our game. This is one area that I believe the AFL does so much better and the dividend to their code is obvious to all who watch Aussie Rules.

So what do I think is the greatest threat to the future prosperity and progress of our game? It has been clear to me for a long time that the taxation regime on poker machines in licensed clubs in New South Wales is slowly but surely bleeding to death the most important source of financial support to our club structure. The ban on smoking in clubs compounds the problem. I'm not suggesting that either losing money on poker machines or smoking is in the community interest, but to more than double the tax on the machines in one hit has crippled the economic viability of licensed clubs, including most that support our game.

Sport has never understood how powerful it really is when it comes to influencing our elected representatives. Politicians are petrified of adverse publicity in the sport segment of print and electronic media. There is an election in New South Wales in six months' time. Our game should be demanding a clear and unequivocal statement on what both sides of politics intends to deliver that will assist our game's future. We are the dominant sport in this state with the capacity to influence the decision of a massive proportion of the state's voters. We should not be afraid to bring this to the notice of our political masters.

Rising from the Ashes

I posed this question in the invitation to tonight's lecture: is our game indestructible? Nothing is indestructible but the resilience of rugby league, particularly in the face of adversity, never ceases to amaze me. Roy Masters, in my view one of the finest sports writers of the last 20 years and a previous Tom Brock lecturer, once expressed the view that rugby league regularly goes into meltdown but phoenix-like it emerges each time from the ashes stronger and more successful than ever. Recent history would suggest that Roy is right.

Like other sports, rugby league must not ignore contemporary threats to its well-being such as drug use and bribery and corruption that are frequently linked with gambling. But rugby league produces an excitement that few, if any, other sports can replicate. No matter where your team finishes on the ladder, there will be moments of excitement in every season that sustain us and embed our ongoing support of the game. Each of us has indelible memories etched in our mind of the game's great moments and great players. Our game produces in each one of us an exhilaration like no other. We the fans are addicted to it. It is an inseparable part of our lives that goes back for most to our earliest memories and will remain with us throughout our lives.

The impact and influence of rugby league on my life shared with you in these thoughts is but one story in the many millions that could be told by the legion of fans that love our game.



THE 12TH ANNUAL TOM BROCK LECTURE was delivered by the Hon. John Fahey AC on 23 September 2010. The lecture was entitled *Tries and Tribulations*.

John Fahey has had a 50-year association with rugby league. In this publication, Mr Fahey reflects on how a magnificent game regularly attempts self-destruction, but survives and grows to new levels of excitement with each passing season.

Rugby league, he suggests, is often exasperating but is always exhilarating. But is it indestructible?

Tom Brock

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



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