

The View from the Ladies Stand

Debbie Spillane



13th Annual Tom Brock Lecture

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NSW Leagues Club
Sydney NSW
15 September 2011



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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 \$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 at www.tombrock.com.au/

The View from the Ladies Stand

DEBBIE SPILLANE is the granddaughter of former first grade and New South Wales second rower Frank Spillane, Debbie was introduced to rugby league from a ridiculously young age, and by the age of eleven she'd seen eleven grand finals: all of them won by St George.

By 1974 she'd acquired an entry level coaching certificate in rugby league, and in 1984 she was hired as the ABC's first fulltime female sports broadcaster. Debbie was introduced to league fans as a sideline commentator/interviewer on ABC TV's Saturday league broadcasts in 1985. She was also part of the regular cast of Andrew Denton's sports comedy show *Live & Sweaty*.

Debbie has worked as a commentator on radio rugby league and as a rugby league writer. She has also been a media manager and website editor for the Bulldogs. Debbie's memoir of her career as a sports journalist, *Where Do You Think You're Going, Lady?*, was published by Allen & Unwin in 2007.

Debbie currently a presenter of Grandstand on ABC Radio.



Western Suburbs 1928 first grade team, with Debbie's grandfather, Frank Spillane (circled) (PHOTO COURTESY Wests Magpies Archives)

A Family Affair

I don't remember discovering rugby league any more than I remember being introduced into this world on Christmas Day 1955. But I do know the two occasions were only a matter of months apart.

Rugby league introduced me to the concept that being a female brought with it very specific limitations. My early experiences in the glorious Ladies Stand at the Sydney Cricket Ground (SCG) led me to absorb that message. Before I expand on that, I will provide a brief picture of my upbringing in and around rugby league.

My family connection with the game stemmed from my grandfather, Frank Spillane. My dad's father played 72 first-grade games, scored ten tries and kicked two goals in a career that spanned eight seasons from 1926 to 1933. He played mostly for Western Suburbs but had two seasons with Sydney University. He also represented New South Wales and used to say he was told by a selector after his retirement that he'd narrowly missed out on Australian selection. During the conversation Pa says he made mention of the fact that J. J. Giltinan was a cousin. The selector allegedly told him that if the selectors had known that, Pa would have played against England.

During my grandfather's career, rugby league first graders were apparently offered membership of the SCG. Pa took up the offer and by the time I came along, as the first of his grandchildren, a family ritual had been established of attending the match of the day at the SCG every Saturday.

In the days prior to regular television coverage of rugby league, the match of the round each weekend was treated as a showpiece and moved to the SCG. That was the game we attended religiously. From the late 1950s through to the late 1960s, St George was far and away the dominant team. We used to see a lot of that great side, but my father and grandfather steadfastly refused to follow any particular club. They were of the belief that we were doing what all serious rugby league fans should do: watching the best game on offer each weekend without the prejudice of supporting anyone.

The fact that we had access to the more formal setting of the Ladies Stand made the environment more suitable for female members of the family to attend. The mainstays were my grandmother, Ada, and my unmarried aunt, Janet. When I was very young my mother used to attend as well, but for reasons that didn't become clear to me until many years later, she dropped off in her attendance and I actually don't have any memory of her being there with the Spillanes in the Ladies Stand.

It was usually a group of around half a dozen: grandfather, grandmother, one or two uncles, Aunt Janet, myself and often my brother and or a cousin or two.

I guess in a sense my grandfather Frank did make it a type of day off for my grandmother. He used to get up early on Saturday mornings, and prepare sandwiches for a picnic-style lunch. There'd be thermoses of tea and coffee packed. Sometimes Ada would have a cake baked for the occasion, or sometimes Janet would pick up a teacake at the shops on Saturday morning. It was all very civilised, very organised and very precise.

We'd arrive at halftime in the reserve grade match each week of the home-and-away season, and earlier for finals. We'd sit in roughly the same area of the stand: upper deck, two or three rows from the back (you didn't sit at the back because men who were in the bar before the game came out and stood behind the back row and were unpleasant to have leaning over your shoulder). Of course, we were as close as possible to being in line with the halfway mark. Naturally we took blankets and cushions to put on the wooden, pew-style seats and there were spare rugs for putting over our knees in cold weather. I've worked with TV outside broadcast vans that have taken less gear to a football game.

The timetable for the day was structured. We'd have sandwiches at the end of the reserve grade, then a cup of tea or coffee and cake at halftime in the main game. Similar discipline was to be observed during the game. My father and Pa were not to be spoken to while the

match was in progress. They liked to sit in total silence and give it their undivided attention. That meant we kids were usually seated as far away from them as possible. Usually the kid wrangler-in-chief ended up being Aunt Janet, and it was to her I put my interminable questions about the game and our surrounds.

One of the things that fascinated me most was that the grandstand to our left was only ever occupied by men. I asked Janet about that and when she explained that the Members Pavilion was 'for men only', I wanted to know why. 'Well, it is for men who don't want sit with women around them.' Why? 'Because they prefer it that way.'

I tried to dream up scenarios where the rule could be tested. 'What if someone's mother needed to see them urgently?' 'Well, they'd have to see one of the attendants and someone would go and get the man'. What if the Queen wanted to go in there?' 'Well, the Queen has a special royal box downstairs in the Ladies Stand.'

The Members Stand ban puzzled me, but really it was only a philosophical problem. The discrimination issue that really riled me as I got older was the fact that my younger brother and my male cousins were all put on the Members Stand waiting list as soon as they were born. Gradually, as they reached the appropriate age, they became junior members. I'd been going to the football for longer than them — and prided myself on knowing as much about it as them — and I couldn't become a member.

Now, this just wasn't a case of objecting on principle. In the Spillane family, providing enough tickets for the women who wanted to attend a match was a genuine problem.

Each senior male member was given one Ladies Stand guest pass which meant my grandfather's pass admitted my grandmother and I used my father's Ladies pass. My uncles sometimes would come without their wives, which meant Janet could use their Ladies passes. That was an unreliable arrangement. My aunt was very devoted to her Saturdays at the football, so Pa had to do some illegal wheeling and dealing.

He used to buy a Ladies pass from someone he knew whose wife wasn't interested in attending the SCG. In my older age I look back on things more cynically, and wonder whether it was perhaps because a gentleman wasn't interested in his having his wife accompany him to the SCG. Whatever the reason, I was always annoyed that Janet and I couldn't become members and we had to rely on a man to get us in.

I once griped about this issue to my grandmother. She knew of women who'd been attending the match of the day for years with their husbands, but were then left on the outer when their husbands died and their ticketing privileges went with them. Ada said she knew of a couple



My first rugby league mentor, my Aunt Janet Spillane. She believed in upholding a high standard for dress for her Saturday afternoons watching the Match of the Day in the Ladies Stand at the SCG
(PHOTO COURTESY Debbie Spillane)

of women regulars who'd decided when their husbands passed on to never report the death to the SCG Trust, and they kept their tickets by renewing their dead husband's membership every year. When I say rugby league first made me aware of restrictions that could be imposed on you just because you were female, these are good examples.

Oddly enough, the fact I was only watching male players and, to my knowledge at the time it was a game for men only, never bothered me. I packed into a few backyard scrums over the years with the kids from the neighbourhood, but I never really fancied myself as a league player. Thus I didn't harbour any sense of exclusion from the game in that sense.

And fortunately, in my formative years, never was I led to think my gender made it less appropriate for me to love and talk about the game.

A Rugby League Childhood

Aunt Janet was my main educator on match days, teaching me the playing positions, the numbering system — and yes, I go right back to the days when the hooker wore number 12 — and getting me to read aloud from the *Big League* magazine to practice saying the players' names.

Sometimes she'd take me downstairs behind the Ladies Stand to

Me and my brother Brad packed down in a scrum in our Croydon backyard, with our younger sister Donna providing the scrum feed.

(PHOTO COURTESY Debbie Spillane)



the little lolly kiosk there and we'd keep an eagle eye out for players arriving through the members gate. She always had a pen handy, and we'd scramble for autographs if the opportunity arose.

My father was horrified by such crass behaviour — and would disown us if we turned on such a spectacle as we were arriving as a family group — but meeting some of the players of the time, including Ken Thornett (who was a particular favourite), Graeme Langlands and Keith Barnes — who ironically went on to be an obstacle much later in my life — always gave me a real thrill and made me follow those players in action on the field all the more intently.

While Janet was always forthcoming and quite voluble with her opinions on the game, my grandmother was, typically of many women of her generation, more inclined to show deference to the opinion of her husband. I once asked her who the best player she'd ever seen was and she said simply 'I don't know, ask Pa'. I don't remember how old I was when we had that exchange, but I know I was disappointed. I reasoned she must've seen so many players over the years and it was beyond my understanding that she couldn't or wouldn't offer an opinion.

Janet, on the other hand, had plenty of opinions. She liked to express them loudly, and did so with gusto. She was trained as an opera singer and she was the classic diva: big bosom, beehive, plenty of makeup. She used to get really dressed up for a day at the football, believing there was a standard to be upheld in the Ladies Stand.

She'd go decked out in her suits, furs, stockings high heels, pearls and Oroton handbag.

I am glad I used to sit with Janet. Whenever I'd hear her exclaim, 'That was a stupid pass,' or 'What a fabulous tackle' or 'Get it out to Irvine!', I would ask her why she'd said that. If I'd been forced to keep the reverent silence demanded by my father and grandfather, I don't know how much I would have learned.

I should mention Aunt Janet was almost certainly the instigator of my first lash at sports comment. In fact, it's my earliest memory of being at a rugby league game. Apparently it was in 1958, a test between Australia and Great Britain and I clearly remember calling out 'Send that naughty Vince Karalius off!' I don't know what had happened in the game to trigger my outburst, but I'm guessing Janet must have fed me the line. I do remember all the staid Ladies Stand regulars looking around and giggling at me. I sometimes wonder if the seeds of a broadcasting career were sown then and there.

By the time I was in high school, I was full of opinions on rugby league. When the match of the day era ended, oddly enough my father and grandfather pretty much stopped going to live club football week to week. Janet and Bernard, one of my uncles, starting going to Wests games, and my grandmother would sometimes go with them. I decided to start following Canterbury.

This was for two reasons. One was they'd finally provided me with a grand final that wasn't a St George victory — the first of my life — in 1967. By the time I was eleven, I had been to eleven grand finals and St George had won all of them. Canterbury had prevented them from reaching the grand final in 1967. Secondly, they had Les Johns, who was pretty much a twelve-year-old girl's dream. So Canterbury became my team.

Unwilling to give up my winter weekend routine of going to the football, I started roping schoolmates into going to Belmore Oval with me. Later my younger sister Donna would come along. I discovered the method in Aunt Janet's madness: you felt less embarrassed going up to a Gary Dowling or a Brian Lockwood asking for an autograph if you had a small child with you as an alibi!

I went to an all-girls' high school, Bethlehem College at Ashfield, and during my years there I found plenty of excuses to weave my love of rugby league into extra-curricular activities. I used to write reviews of league matches for the school newspaper, and I once organised a rugby league night. When I look back it is surprising that the Sisters of Charity, who ran the school, agreed to such a project. I must have volunteered that proceeds would go to what we used to call 'mission fundraising'.

I contacted the New South Wales Rugby League (NSWRL) and they arranged for us to be loaned a film of a classic grand final or test match — I can't even remember which now — and we invited clubs from surrounding areas to send players to form a panel to answer questions from the girls and their families about rugby league.

I was very proud to be a Canterbury supporter on that occasion, because having written to Canterbury, Wests, Balmain and Souths I only received a reply from one person and that was Peter Moore, then the club secretary at Belmore. He wrote back, thanked us for the invitation and ended up sending along three players: Bernie Lowther, Phil Young, and I can't remember who the third was (I'm not much use for a history night, am I?). None of the other clubs even replied, but Tom Raudonikis, who was then playing for Wests, contacted the school directly and said he'd come.

Freckle-Faced Freaks

The crowning glory of my high school rugby league fandom came as a result of a school talent quest. It came soon after Great Britain had beaten Australia in a test series in Australia. The family attended the match at the SCG and we stood in the Ladies Stand and watched after the match as ugly scenes unfolded on the Hill. There was fighting or rioting and even fires being lit.

For a school talent quest, I put together a band called the Freckle-Faced Freaks. We sang a song called 'The Lament of the Aussie League Fan', with lyrics written by me, and the tune borrowed from 'On Top of Old Smokey':

We ain't got no fullback,
We can't win the scrums,
Our hookers are legless,
Our halfbacks all thumbs.
Johnny Raper's too old now,
Billy Smith's getting on.
And since he got married,
We ain't seen Les Johns.
Phil Hawthorne's from union,
So he can't be any good.
And Johnny King can't run.
Like a test winger should.
No wonder they're brawling
Out there on the Hill,
Out test team is loaded
With flamin' dills.



*A twelve-year-old girl's dream,
Les Johns, circa 1968*
(PHOTO COURTESY Australian Rugby League)

It may be hard to believe we didn't carry all before us in a girls' high school talent contest with such edgy satire, but we didn't get so much as an honourable mention.

There was, however, a bizarre upshot from the performance of the Freckle-Faced Freaks. My brother Brad, who went to the next door school, De La Salle Ashfield, submitted the lyrics to his school magazine. One of his teachers, Denis Twomey, sent them on to the *Sun* newspaper. Out of the blue Mum got a call from the paper. They wanted to print the lyrics and send out a photographer to get an image to go with the story. What's more, they were going to get a reporter to call and interview me about the song.

That reporter was Peter Peters. That made it all the more galling for me years later, when he told his listeners on 2GB that I was a blow-in to rugby league who just wanted an excuse to get into dressing rooms and see naked men.

At the end of high school, I wrote to the four Sydney newspapers and to the Australian Broadcasting Commission (ABC), enquiring about cadetships in sports journalism. None of the newspapers replied. The ABC replied that they didn't have cadetships specifically in sports journalism. In any case, they wrote, the ABC wasn't offering any cadetships that year.

During high school I had qualified as a cricket umpire. I started umpiring men in the local western suburbs competition that my dad and brother played in. I was encouraged by Dad to do this because

there was a chronic shortage of umpires and, I suspect, he and his team needed to get me and my mathematically-dysfunctional mind away from the scorebook, where I'd regularly make a hellish mess.

Having got a taste for storming male bastions, when I heard my brother's school was desperate for rugby league coaches, I decided I should have a crack at it. I'd seen an ad in *Big League* calling for aspiring coaches to obtain coaching qualifications, so I sent away for the course notes, studied and got my entry-level coaching certificate from the NSWRL. In 1974 I was the coach of the De La Salle, Ashfield under-14s.

This development caused, for the first time, friction in the family. During a typically Irish family drinking session at my grandfather's house in Burwood, Pa expressed disapproval of the NSWRL for allowing me to get a coaching qualification. He said it made a mockery of the system, and that it was impossible for a woman, who'd never played the game, to be allowed to tell others how to play.

My father went in to bat for me. The argument got quite heated. I remember my aunt chipping in at one stage to defend me and Pa replied, 'Shut up, Janet, you know nothing about the game either'. It was an ugly scene. Dad ended up asking Pa how – if you couldn't become an expert on something you'd never done yourself – did so many men become obstetricians? Pa had no answer to that, other than something like, 'Well, that's different'. We actually stormed out and went home that night. It must have been smoothed over eventually, because Pa volunteered to help out at a few training sessions with my boys. He was an enormous assistance: especially with scrummaging, which I thought of as something of a black art on which the coaching books didn't really shed much light.

This was all still nearly ten years away from me getting my chance at entering the sports media. In those intervening years, I finished my Arts degree at the University of Sydney, married and had my first daughter, Jemima. I never drifted far from rugby league in those years. I became a season ticket holder at Belmore when they built the Stewart Stand and, again, going to the footy became a family ritual.

Jemima went to her first game when she was six days old. We got into the habit of going after games to my mother's house for dinner as she was then living at Canterbury. She and my father had divorced. Mum had remarried, and had become quite fond of watching the Sunday night league replay on TV. So we'd have dinner and watch the game with them.

When Mum's second husband died, she decided she'd like to start coming to the games at Belmore with us. We got an extra season ticket, and she gradually developed into the most dedicated Bulldog fan of

the lot of us. This struck me as very odd. All through my childhood it had been my father's family that went to the football, and I found it hard to get my head around what seemed my mother's sudden blossoming, in her late 40s, into a league fanatic.

It was only after she died that I realised that she couldn't have joined us all at the SCG when I was a kid. Not only did she have my younger brother and, later, my sister Donna to look after at home but from the time I was eight, I was using what would have been her Ladies Stand ticket anyway.

I should mention, as a footnote, the SCG Trust decided in 1974 to allow women to become members in their own right. That meant they just had to join the waiting list, which at the time, I believe, meant getting an offer of membership about twelve years later. I never bothered, still seething about my brothers and male cousins getting the inside running.

Entering Journalism

In 1983 I saw a gap in the male defence that had kept me out of sports journalism. In the years since finishing school I'd gone to university, sung in bands, worked in the public service and ended up co-owner of a record shop in North Sydney.

It was in that shop one afternoon, as I read the paper (starting at the back page as usual) that I saw an ad in the sports pages. Radio station 2GB was running a competition to find a sports reporter with, quote, 'something different'. First prize was a full-time job at the station as a sports reporter. Being a woman would be something different, I thought. I entered the *Sportslines* Sports Talent Search without any confidence in my ability. I had my own business and wasn't even sure of the logistics of taking a full-time job in radio. But I thought to myself, this is what I always wanted to do, so why not give it a shot?

I was pretty excited when I got an interview and then a bundle of nerves when I was shortlisted and called in for an audition. Richard Fisk was the man behind the competition, and he told me I was the only woman in the final eight and the only candidate with no journalistic background.

In the end the job went to Jon Harker, who was a cadet at the *Sun* newspaper. But Richard phoned me and admitted I'd puzzled them. I was a 27-year-old woman who owned a record shop. My application was from out of left field, but apparently I'd gone close enough to the main prize to make 2GB want to keep me on the hook. They offered me a spot on their Saturday morning sports show *Sportslines*. One of

its presenters was former Manly-Warringah player Peter Peters (aka Zorba). Zorba seemed quite supportive in my time at 2GB and, of course, I had a chance to remind him of when he interviewed me about 'The Lament of the Aussie League Fan'.

After I'd been at 2GB for six months, ABC Sport advertised a vacancy for a sports broadcaster. David Morrow, who I'd met at a cricket function, told me I should apply because he'd heard the pressure was on from within the ABC for Sport to hire a woman. It was at the time the only ABC department not to have a woman broadcaster. I applied and got the job.

For most of the first year I had no special brief to work on rugby league. In fact, I used to be dispatched to all the Sydney Swans press conferences because I was last in the queue: my male colleagues preferred to focus on the rugby codes or soccer. I remember telling my grandmother, Ada, that I was being sent to cover Australian Rules. Quite sincerely, she replied. 'Oh dear, how awful!'

My chance to earn my rugby league stripes came in the 1984 grand final. In those days the ABC shared broadcasting rights with Channel 10, and we showed the grand final live. The commentators were Alan Marks and Reg Gasnier. I was asked if I'd play the role of roving interviewer down on the ground.

This job didn't involve what would eventually become known as the sideline eye duties. I only got on the field during the pre-match entertainment and, in a triumph of timing, Alan crossed to me just as Rose Tattoo cranked up. I had no idea what I was being asked about and just blithered on about whatever came into my head.

It was out the back of the Ladies Stand that I came into my own. From years of experience with Janet, I knew where to stand to catch the celebrities as they came in the members' entrance. All my years of watching the game meant I recognised ex-players, coaches and officials that even the all-male crew working with me didn't know. The fact that Canterbury had reached the grand final made it even more of a cakewalk for me. I regretted the fact that dear old Janet wasn't there to see me putting all her tutelage to use. Sadly she had died of cancer at the age of just 44, three years earlier.

To make the occasion even more memorable for me, the Bulldogs won the grand final. I had covered many sports for both radio and TV in my first year at the ABC — everything from Australian Rules football and ice-skating to diving at the Los Angeles Olympics — but working on that rugby league grand final was the first time I had felt really comfortable. There were murmurs about me being included on the TV rugby league team for 1985 but, as that season

approached, those murmurs faded away.

Then something unexpected happened. Channel 10 — still the NSWRL's commercial broadcaster — announced it was adding a woman to the commentary team for its new innovation, *Monday Night Football*. The tabloid media went nuts about Robyn Preston in the lead-up to her TV debut. She was described as a suburban housewife, mother and rugby league fanatic. And she was presumably going to make the game more accessible to other suburban housewives and mothers. She was part of a brilliant new lineup especially for Monday nights that featured a squad of cheerleaders called the Fruit and Veggie Rockettes, and some poor sod in an emu costume who wandered aimlessly around the sidelines for no apparent reason.

Sadly, Robyn Preston and the Emu both seemed as out of place as each other. I never met Robyn, and don't doubt she had a real passion for the game, but she wasn't given much of a role to play — except perhaps as a novelty — and she struggled to find anything worthwhile to say.

I heard on the grapevine that the male commentators didn't want her on the team and they deliberately hung her out to dry. Given the experiences of so many women since, I don't find that too hard to believe. She didn't last more than a handful of games and was outlived by both the Fruit and Veggie Rockettes and the Emu.

The Sideline Eye

The Channel 10 experiment indirectly worked wonders for me. The ABC doesn't like to be beaten on the equal opportunity playing field and, despite the 1985 season having started without me on the commentary team, I got a late call-up. One of the producers told me that the feeling within the ABC was we had a woman who could do the job, and we should show them it could be done. I became ABC TV's sideline eye for the Saturday match of the day. My original brief was to check on any injuries. The commentators would cross to me as the teams ran back on at halftime, and I was to report any team changes.

Rather than focus purely on injuries, I decided to seek out information on what the coaches had said at halftime, and perhaps to provide an insight into what was in store for the second half. Bear in mind, in those days no-one on TV in any code had a sideline reporter, so the role was there to be shaped. I never went into the dressing rooms at halftime. I usually lined up someone who was going to be in there — a trainer, injured player, club official or the like — to come out just before the second half began, to give me the gist of what had been said. Most clubs were usually very co-operative

and the halftime report turned out to be a great success. In those days ABC broadcasted the Saturday game live to regional New South Wales, but in Sydney the coverage was delayed and cut into a one-hour highlights package. Fortunately for me our producer, Col Rodgers, was supportive. Although the Sydney package was always squeezed for time, he made sure my halftime reports made the Sydney replay. I became a minor celebrity.

To me, my role didn't appear anything special. Talking rugby league had been second nature to me for so long it hadn't occurred to me viewers would think it extraordinary. However, they did.

I received lots of fan mail, and felt very chuffed. Then I received a letter, scrawled in untidy handwriting, from some creep telling me how he often fantasised about me in the dressing rooms with the players at halftime. He claimed he could often see a glint in my eye as I did my halftime report, giving just a hint of what I'd seen. Jim Maxwell — who was at the time the ABC league commentator — often used to cross to me saying 'Debbie's been to the dressing rooms at halftime, so let's hear what's been said'. I didn't think that meant I'd been IN the dressing rooms. Then, when I thought about it, I realised the players wouldn't have been undressed at halftime anyway, so the sicko who had written that letter was having himself on.

Working in television, I generally had no access problems. I didn't need to go into dressing rooms often and if I did I had a floor manager with me who dealt with any objections. Most of my post-match interviews took place on the field, a few in the players' tunnel and rarely in the dressing sheds. The women I had the real respect for were the women who were working for newspapers. There were only a couple of them at the time: Jacqueline Magnay who was at the *Sydney Morning Herald* and Jenny Cooke, who was at the *Sun*.

None of us were the true pioneers of rugby league reporting by women. Dorothy Goodwin had written about rugby league for the *Sydney Morning Herald* and the *Sun-Herald* for some years before I started in the media. A league writer called Julia Sheppard had worked for the *Mirror*. Both writers had gone before I got my break in the media, and colleagues always spoke highly of them. Whenever I get billed as the first woman to go into the dressing rooms I always feel a bit embarrassed, because that simply isn't true. I received more attention because I was on TV and that is the nature of the TV beast. When I saw what Jacqueline and Jenny were up against — and later when I joined them as a member of the press — I realised how much bigger a challenge their job was. They needed to attend post-match press conferences which, in those days, were held inside the dressing



On the sidelines at Brookvale Oval for a pre-season trial in 1986
(PHOTO COURTESY Debbie Spillane)

room. Dressing rooms were more basic than those at most grounds these days. They were typically single rooms with concrete floors, where players were showering, changing and getting treated all around you while the coach stood in the middle, taking reporters' questions. They were neither attractive, romantic nor seductive. In my ABC TV days, I counted myself lucky that I wasn't required to ply my trade there on a weekly basis.

Brazen As You Like

I then heard from all sorts of people that Peter Peters on 2GB was declaring I wasn't really interested in rugby league, I just wanted an excuse to get into dressing rooms and check out naked men. Peters and Greg Hartley had the top rating radio call of the game back in the mid-1980s, so it was a pretty big megaphone to spread the allegation. It annoyed me because Peters, of all people, knew how long-term my interest in the game had been. It also irritated me because so many men seemed to believe it, and, my sister Donna who was then married to a first-grade player, told me some of the players' wives believed it

too. It was really the total opposite of my attitude and the attitude of the women I knew whose job took them into the dressing room.

One of my favourite memories is of being with Jacqui Magnay in the Penrith dressing room in 1987 when I was doing around-the-grounds for radio and she was doing the match report for the *Herald*. Tim Sheens was Panthers coach and, as he started his post-match chat with the media, he was standing in front of a row of open showers. No screens, no shower curtains and all cubicles were fully occupied. As Sheens started answering the first question, Jacqui actually reached out, put her hands on his shoulders and turned him around, effectively swapping places with him. As she did so she said she wanted to be able to look at him without a backdrop of naked, showering men.

I loved that moment so much because it illustrated how women felt exactly the opposite about being in dressing rooms to how men imagined they felt. I've spoken to many women since about how it is for them in football dressing rooms. Not one of them has ever talked about it being anything other than an awkward and unenjoyable experience. For me it always seemed like a part of the job I wanted to prove I could cope with, not something I was getting a kick out of.

Overlooked in all the hubbub, of course, was the fact that some clubs had women physiotherapists or doctors in the dressing rooms. The Bulldogs have done so for years. Those women were seen as professionals with a job to do, and it always beat me why women reporters couldn't be regarded in the same way.

My worst ever dressing room experience came in 1986 when ABC Radio sent me to Newcastle to cover the New Zealand team playing a tour match against NSW Country at Newcastle. I had to file a report at the end of the match that was going to be sent to Radio New Zealand, so I was told I needed to focus on anything coming out of the match that related to the likely makeup of the New Zealand team. During the match the Kiwi halfback was carried off on a stretcher and I realised that was going to mean going down to the dressing room after the game to get some news on his condition.

When I knocked on the door of the dressing room a nice looking young man in a blazer —clearly one of the touring party— opened the door and seemed amused to see me there. I told him I was covering the game for the Australian Broadcasting Corporation and I needed to find out how the halfback who'd been stretchered off was. This seemed to amuse him even more. He grinned broadly and said 'Well, you'll have to come in then'. As he ushered me, in I asked him to point out the team doctor, and he directed me to the opposite side of the room.

Now bear in mind, as I'd been working on the NSWRL beat for maybe a season and a half, everyone on the local scene had gotten used to seeing me around. What I hadn't banked on was that the concept of a woman in the dressing sheds was quite new to the tourists.

As I started purposefully across the room, all hell broke loose. Players in various states of undress scattered in all directions, clutching towels and covering their private parts. But one player actually came running towards me, starkers, doing something that, I think, resembled the Maori haka. I tried as always to act unflustered and focused on the group fully-dressed men on the other side of the room. I could feel myself going bright, burning red with embarrassment. I wanted to turn and run. The only thing that prevented me taking that course of action was the knowledge that would provoke even more hilarity in the room which was by now bubbling with laughter. I found the team doctor, got the injury update on the halfback and beat what I hoped was a swift, but dignified retreat. When I calmed down I realised that I'd come to take for granted the lack of reaction my presence in a dressing room created in the NSWRL and so eventually rationalised it as a sign of progress.

Progress was slow taking hold at two particular clubs, though. Eastern Suburbs and Balmain both had a ban on women reporters being admitted to their dressing rooms in the mid-to-late 1980s. In each case, I heard from club insiders that the ban was a directive from their conservative CEOs, Ron Jones at the Roosters and Keith Barnes at the Tigers. For one reason or another I didn't often have occasion to cover Roosters games and I can only assume I worked around the problem when I encountered it because I don't have any stories to relate about dramas there, and I know they dropped their ban well before Balmain did.

Balmain was a nightmare for a woman reporter. Coach Bill Anderson was a very progressive type who'd done a lot of commentary work with Channel 10, and he was very sympathetic to female reporters. He would move his post-match press conferences out into the corridor if there were women covering the game. Regardless of how sympathetic or otherwise any given Balmain coach was, the first obstacle at Leichhardt Oval was the ancient doorman who guarded the entrance to the players' tunnel at the back of the grandstand. This man was on a personal mission to protect all players — not just Balmain players — from the dreadful lechery of the female reporter.

In 1987, after I'd left ABC and gone back to 2GB, I was sent out on Wednesday nights to cover the midweek competition, then known as the National Panasonic Cup. Leichhardt Oval was the home of the

Panasonic Cup, no matter who was playing. As far as the crusty old doorman was concerned, it didn't matter who was playing or what their policy was, no women reporters were getting near them on his watch. After games I would head downstairs with the rest of the press box crowd, and the male reporters were usually great, trying to surround me on all sides to get past the doorman. But he'd reach in, pluck me out of their midst and say 'Where do you think you're going, lady?' It was such a defining phrase I ended up using it as the title of my book about being a female sports reporter. Showing my media pass failed to alleviate the situation. His response was always along the lines of 'I don't care who you say you work for or what your job is, there are men getting dressed in there and you're not going in'.

Usually one of the male reporters would send out an official of one of the clubs involved to rein in the doorman and explain that I was allowed in. Then, as I'd walk down the corridor towards the dressing room he'd holler out after me things like, 'There she goes! Look at her, brazen as you like, going to see the naked men. Wouldn't let my daughter do it!'

Incredibly, when I was media manager for the Bulldogs in the mid-1990s a woman reporter from a local Bankstown paper got bailed up by the same old guy and had to send for help to get admitted to the dressing room. I couldn't believe he was still alive, let alone still doing the troll-at-the-bridge routine.

By the early 1990s my rugby league-related media roles were confined to writing a column for the *Sun-Herald* and working on Andrew Denton's *Live and Sweaty*. While I had no need for dressing room access, I kept hearing the situation had not improved at the Tigers. In fact, it had become worse, given coach Alan Jones's enthusiasm for enforcing the 'no women reporters in the dressing room' meme. By this stage it was Jacqui Magnay who was bearing the brunt of the exclusion rule. She and the *Sydney Morning Herald* tried to chip away at the ban. She used to seek access to the post-match press conference regularly, and be left stranded outside while her male colleagues were let in. One day, at an away game in Newcastle, she knocked on the door and tried reasoning with the doorman. Jones yelled out at her to stop acting like a silly schoolgirl. That was the last straw. Jacqueline and the *Herald* took Balmain to court and had the ban removed in 1993.

In late 1986 I had quit the ABC and returned to 2GB. It was of course, a shockingly naive move. One of the motivating factors was that I had been told by the then head of ABC TV Sport, Kevin Berry, that the ABC was unlikely to have the television rights to rugby league

again in 1987 and I was keen to stay involved. What I really wanted to do was actual commentary, and I felt I was being held back at ABC. I had become the sideline reporter for everything, from polo to hockey and athletics and, with stunning stupidity, I thought I should go back to the network that gave me my first break in the media.

2GB was then the top rating radio station in Sydney and broadcasted rugby league matches live every weekend. Despite the fact that Zorba and Hollywood had been paying out on me for a few years, I thought that, basically, it was all just them being stirrers for ratings purposes and that, if I was on their team, everything would be cool. How wrong I was.

When I was hired Peters and Hartley were in England covering an Ashes tour. David Morrow, who was there for the ABC, told me they were ropeable when they found out I'd been signed and promised a role in rugby league coverage. He says they openly declared they'd stamp out that crazy idea when they returned to Sydney. They were good to their word.

I started at 2GB in December 1986 with a promise of a meaningful role on the league coverage. In early 1987, I was told I'd be given the marvellous opportunity of interviewing a player's wife or girlfriend for use in the lead-up to each weekend's feature match. I rejected that outright as a patronising, trivial role for someone who'd just spent two years doing sideline reporting on television.

I said that at the very least, I wanted to be an around-the-grounds reporter and the general manager, Geoff Duncan, clearly feeling guilty about the promise he'd made to me, told the program director Charlie Cox, that he thought that a reasonable request. He told Cox he should inform Hartley and Peters I was to be added to the around-the-grounds team, and Cox said, 'Sure, I'll tell them. But preferably from a moving car.'

Later I was informed Hartley and Peters had already promised around-the-grounds gigs to several people and that we'd all have to share the opportunities. Some weeks I was on the team, and on other weeks I was in the studio reading sports bulletins on weekend afternoons. It was a miserable, hostile situation. Zorba had a sports editorial spot with Mike Carlton on the 2GB breakfast show each morning, and quite often took that opportunity to berate me or to bitch generally about women sports reporters. After six months I was a mental wreck. I walked out one afternoon fifteen minutes before I was due to read a sports bulletin and ended up in a hospital psychiatric ward being treated for depression.

I always hated doing publicity shots with footballs, but I was talked into it for this photo for ABC TV's Live & Sweaty.

(PHOTO COURTESY Debbie Spillane)



Bouncing Back

I was very lucky that there were people in the sports media prepared to give me another chance. I did some part-time work for SBS, was hired to work on the 1987 grand final with Channel 10 and earned a place on its commentary team for the Seoul Olympics in 1988. In early 1988 I was hired as the sports reporter on 2DAY-FM breakfast.

To an extent, I'd drifted away from rugby league after that. Eventually I decided I wanted to be an FM radio rock jock and started pursuing that crazy ambition in Newcastle on a station called NEW-FM. Then, in a weird twist of fate, rugby league re-appeared on my radar and I had the chance to do what I'd given up on a few years before. NEW-FM decided to broadcast all Newcastle Knights games in 1991. I was the midnight-to-dawn and weekend music presenter at the station, but unlike the other jocks, I had rugby league form on the board. NEW-FM poached Leigh Maughan, the rugby league caller from radio station 2HD, and suddenly I became his co-commentator. We had a ball that season, despite the fact it wasn't pretty for the Newcastle team.

Leigh was also the marketing manager for the Knights, so we had a good connection with the club. We decided to have fun with the game rather than spend the whole afternoon being critical of the game, the referees and the players. We thought of it as rock'n'roll rugby league, despite the fact that Leigh was clearly more Buddy Holly than Kurt Cobain.

At the end of season 1991, NEW-FM decided that although covering rugby league was popular, it was far more expensive than 40 minutes of non-stop rock. The station abandoned the idea of rock'n'roll rugby league. It was over as unexpectedly as it had started.

My time doing commentary in Newcastle was marked by one telling listener comment that reminded me what I was up against. During that 1991 season, coach Allan McMahon was sacked. The axe fell after a shocking performance at Parramatta where the Eels, who weren't having a good season either, thrashed the Knights 30-0. Not surprisingly, both Leigh Maughan and I were critical of Newcastle in describing and summarising that game. On Monday at the radio station I was shown a comment logged by our switchboard operator from a male listener saying: 'I don't care how badly my team plays, I'm not going to listen to a woman bagging them'.

I travelled from the frying pan into the fire. Leaving NEW-FM, I returned to Sydney and focused on my burgeoning career as Rex Mossop's arch-rival on ABC TV's *Live and Sweaty*. Rex and I didn't so much disagree on rugby league, as disagree on everything in sport, life and the universe. Having grown up watching *Sportsworld* on Sunday mornings with Rex Mossop, Ferris Ashton, Alan Clarkson and Noel Kelly discussing pertinent league matters and their most recent Viking saunas, I thought it was fun locking horns with Rex in the reborn 'Controversy Corner' on *Live and Sweaty*. Rex didn't see it that way. Via the executive producer, I discovered that Rex thought my attitude unnecessarily aggressive. Being a gentleman, he felt he was fighting with his hands tied behind his back. Perhaps I am putting too fine a point on it, but my reading of this was that being a boofhead, he couldn't handle being taken on by a woman.

Apart from being the thorn in the Moose's side on *Live and Sweaty*, my other role each Friday night was to preview the weekend's round of Australian Rugby League (ARL) fixtures and there were wonderful spinoffs from that. The *Sun-Herald* expanded my weekly column — from an afterthought tucked away near the sports classified to a back-page spread — and suggested I specialise in rugby league during the winter months. ABC TV asked me to return to the sideline eye gig I'd abandoned eight years previously. It wasn't the ABC so much as a

member of the ABC sisterhood that got me back treading the sidelines on Saturday. Geraldine, or Gerry, O'Leary had been the producer's assistant on the ABC Saturday rugby league coverage in the mid-1980s when I'd first worked on the team. She had worked her way around the traps at ABC TV — *Playschool*, *ABC News* and so on — and returned to ABC TV Sport as a producer.

As a mad keen league fan in the lead-up to the 1995 season, she kept badgering the head of ABC TV Sport for a chance to be in charge of the Saturday league telecast. Eventually one day she went into his office with a football in each hand, put both of them in front of her groin and said 'Look, I've got the balls to do it'. She got the gig and became ABC TV's first female producer of the live Saturday game. She called me and asked if I wanted to go back to my old sideline job, and I did. Our team then was Warren Boland the caller, Peter Jackson the co-commentator with John Peard and myself on the sidelines. For me, working with a woman producer was much more fun.

Gerry wasn't the sort to bark instructions like some of the male producers I'd worked with. Mostly what we heard in our headphones from out in the van was her cackling at some joke Jacko or Peardy had made, cheering on some bullocking run or making some slightly blue observation about something we were looking at on the field. Of course she made decisions and gave directions, but mainly she kept spirits high and the tempo up because she was so clearly having fun rather than being a boss.

1995 was a wild year. I was hosting drive-time on Triple J with Ian Rogerson, writing a column for the *Sun-Herald*, getting all *Live and Sweaty* on Friday nights and working on the rugby league match of the day on Saturdays. The year took a sour turn when my mother was diagnosed with terminal cancer. She didn't live to see the Bulldogs win the grand final that year, in what turned out to be the end of the ABC era of live rugby league telecasts.

Bulldog Days

Super League was on the horizon at that stage, and the Bulldogs had gone with the breakaway organisation. I was contacted by another woman steeped in a family rugby league tradition: Lynne Anderson, daughter of the just-retired Bulldogs boss, Peter 'Bullfrog' Moore. We had met only a few times, but we instinctively got on. We had a lot in common. Born only weeks apart, our childhoods were full of the same football memories from hanging around the SCG and Belmore Oval. Bullfrog had taken me under his wing very early in my career: as soon as he realised I was a season-ticket carrying Bulldogs

fan. He was a great believer in women's ability to read the game. Moore told me many times that his wife, Marie, used to watch the VHS videotapes that players from all around the place would send to him. Marie made recommendations about which players were worth further investigation. He said he had the utmost faith in her knowing a good young player when she saw one. Through Peter Moore I met Lynne when she became the marketing manager at the Bulldogs, and through Lynne I ended up their media manager at the end of 1995.

In those days most clubs didn't have media managers, but one of Super League's requirements was that all clubs appoint one. Lynne also told me that, as her father had traditionally done all media liaison at the club anyway, there was a big gap in that area since he'd retired. It started off with Lynne asking me to create a list of job specifications so they had some idea of what to look for. Having been media manager for National Basketball League team the Sydney Kings for a couple of seasons in the late 1980s, I had a rough idea and I wrote them a job description.

Lynne invited me for coffee to talk about the job. Unannounced, Bullfrog showed up before her and said he didn't want to miss our chat. Together they talked me into taking on the job myself. Bullfrog pulled out the trump card while I was mulling it over, saying 'Imagine how proud your Mum would be'. Boom! He really knew how to deliver the match-winner.

There were a lot of not-so-fun aspects of being involved with a club that had gone to Super League. The lead-up to the 1996 season was a string of legal battles, court hearings, acrimony from the media, fans and players. Confusion abounded.

Of course, I wasn't the only woman at the club. Lynne was marketing manager; both the CEO — then Bob Hagan — and the football manager, Garry Hughes, had secretaries; Lynne had a female marketing assistant, and the receptionist was a woman too. As I'd been dealing with Bulldogs players and management for some years by that stage, what problems could there possibly be?

It only took me a few days to find out. One morning that first week I started getting phone calls from various media types wanting to arrange interviews with our former All Black, John Timu. By the time the third or fourth journo had called asking me about contacting Timu I asked why he was suddenly so popular. 'Don't you know?' said the caller. 'He's just been named in the New Zealand team for the ANZAC Test.' I felt a bit stupid, so I asked Lynne whether she knew about this Kiwi team selection. She didn't, but she suggested the football manager would probably have been advised and I should ask the football department to copy me in on such announcements.

I discovered that the New Zealand Rugby League had notified Garry Hughes's secretary about Timu's selection. When I asked her if she could send me a copy of such announcements in future, she refused. She explained that only the football department was authorised to receive information like that. When I asked Garry Hughes whether an exception could be made for me, he wanted to know why. I told him that I needed to know what the media were talking about when they called me. He shook his head solemnly and said he didn't want me talking to the media about football.

In that case, what did Garry Hughes expect me to be talking to the media about? He said he had no idea, adding that he'd been at the club for nearly 30 years. The club had never needed a media manager before, and he had no idea why it needed one now.

This all snowballed into a management crisis meeting with Lynne, Bob Hagan, Garry and myself. I asked them to explain how I could possibly do my job if I wasn't allowed to talk football to the media. Garry said as I was hired by the marketing department, I was free to talk about marketing matters to the media and I told him the media didn't give a rat's cruciate ligament about marketing stories. Bob Hagan's brother, Michael Hagan had just been appointed media manager at the Hunter Mariners. I asked Bob if he could check whether Michael was allowed to talk about football to the media. Garry jumped straight in and said 'That's different. He's played the game, you haven't.'

So there it was. More than eleven years after I'd worked on my first grand final; after presenting, interviewing and writing about rugby league I was being told I wasn't competent to talk about it, from someone thought to be on my side. I resigned, intending to finish up at the end of the week. At the end of that day, coach Chris Anderson — Lynne's husband — called me into his office and said he'd heard I'd had a bit of trouble. I asked him how he knew. In typically droll Chris Anderson style, he told me he'd married the marketing manager so that he would always know what was going on in the office. Anderson told me he wanted a media manager — even if Gary didn't — because 'I don't want newspaper blokes ringing me every second day about Matt Ryan's hamstring. I'd rather they rang you'. I asked how I would know the status of Matt Ryan's hamstring if Garry Hughes wouldn't tell me, and he said 'I'll tell you what's going on'. The deal was, if anyone asked for the football manager they were to be put through to him. If anyone wanted the players or the coach, they were to be put through to me and Chris would personally keep me up to date with the secret men's football business.

To be truthful, I don't know whether Garry's problems with me were because I was a woman, or because I'd come from the media. I expect in his mind woman plus media equals the ultimate combination of ignorance and poisonous intent. As you can imagine, there was always tension on that front throughout my three-and-a-bit years in the role at Belmore.

The tension, to be fair, was partly political. There had been friction between the Hughes and Moore factions at the club before I started at Belmore. I suspect that having come in effectively as a Moore appointment, I probably had the wrong connections.

This leads to a point that I often make to women who ask me for tips about dealing with a career in a male-dominated field: don't assume all the opposition you encounter can be attributed to sexism. Unavoidably there are people who just don't strike a rapport with you and there can be many, many reasons for that. Crying sexism at every setback harms not just you, but gender relations in general.

Looking back upon my time at the Bulldogs, I remember that most of the players were easy-going and fun people to deal with. I honestly believe that most had respect for women, especially guys like Hazem El Masri, Steve Price and Darryl Halligan. Some of the older officials had an out-of-date attitude. A big wheel from the Leagues Club expected any female on staff to make him a cup of tea whenever he visited the football office and insisted on calling all female staff 'Pet'. A former player on staff told me footballers in his day had always played up with women. He said the only thing that had changed was that the media had started listening to the women's lies after they got what they were asking for.

I believe that in the years after I left the Bulldogs, this attitude seeped down and resulted in the debacles at Coffs Harbour in the preseason of 2004. Regardless of what actually happened there, club management acted like it was everyone else's fault: the media, the women, the police, whoever. The unrepentant image that management projected had an impact. My eldest daughter for instance, the one who'd be going to games since before she was a week old, said she'd never follow the Bulldogs again. She was good to her word. Jemima now takes no interest in the sport whatsoever, preferring basketball and tennis. This is a kid who, when she was at preschool, got upset when I mentioned she was going to Queensland for holidays. When I asked what was wrong, she said she didn't like Queensland. I said 'You've never been there', but, she sobbed, 'I've seen them in the football'.

My two daughters always had differing attitudes to rugby league.

The younger one, Eleanor, never really took to the game nor to sport in general. She was very much into dancing, and when I was working for the Bulldogs she joined the cheer squad. I supported this as a way of combining our interests. Jemima, more stridently feminist, always disapproved strongly of that. She insisted that being a cheerleader was a totally inappropriate way for females to be involved in rugby league. There's a whole debate there that we don't have time for, but I understand her point of view.

I believe women are more valuable to rugby league when they're not a decorative accessory or a novelty. There has been considerable progress in involving women over the last couple of decades. That women are working in football clubs and in the rugby league media sends a message to other women that the game is something they can understand and contribute to. They can help clubs to understand women as supporters, and crucially as mothers of junior players. It's not just other women who benefit.

As the 'life-in-a-bubble' aspect of professional footballers' existence increases, it's good for them to be dealing with women in positions of responsibility and authority, and to learn to treat women as colleagues. A predominantly male culture, in which women are dealt with merely as office underlings, cheerleaders and groupies is not healthy and not reflective of the real world. It's good that there are women media managers and marketing managers. I would like to see more female football managers, operations managers, CEOs and board members.

In the rugby league media, there has been a healthy increase in female numbers. Last month I attended a lunch hosted by David Gallop for women working in the league media. There were at least eighteen of us there, and several others sent apologies because they were out of Sydney or couldn't get the time off work on that day. As John Brady mentioned in his welcome, if the lunch had been held 20 years ago, there would have been perhaps two or three women at the table. It was great to see David Gallop quoted a few days later describing us as one of the most knowledgeable packs he'd faced. Perhaps that was his way of saying we were smarter than a bunch of forwards, but I am sure it was no backhanded compliment.

There is still a glass ceiling for women in rugby league media. We don't have any women calling the game. There aren't even any women sideline reporters anymore, as every media outlet seems fixated with signing former players. Almost every show that has a panel discussing the game is full of men and hosted by men.

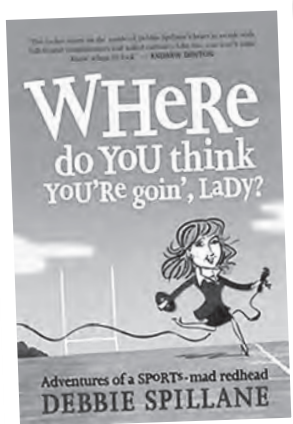
Where is the rugby league equivalent of Caroline Wilson, the chief AFL writer for the *Age* in Melbourne, or Mel McLaughlin, who does

such a great job hosting soccer programs on Fox and working as a sideline reporter on A-League and Socceroos games?

I refuse to end on a negative note. One thing that has thrilled me in the last twelve months or so is seeing women finding new outlets to express their rugby league passion and knowledge. My sister Donna, who these days watches more rugby league than I do, has branched out into writing romance novels set in and around rugby league. That is certainly a genre I never saw coming. Donna has put me onto some brilliant ladies on Twitter who know and love their rugby league. A bunch of us often exchange comments during games and it has confirmed one of my theories: women actually enjoy rugby league more than men because they don't take it as seriously as men. Not because they understand it less.

Let me warn you, gentlemen: networking has made us more powerful. It has even led to some of those women being here tonight; like Melinda Farrell, who produces features at FoxSports, and some of the girls who run the Oh Errol website. These are people I wouldn't know except for Twitter. If you don't follow @oherrol on Twitter you're missing out on the female equivalents to Roy Slaven and H. G. Nelson. With comments like 'Every time Johnathan Thurston has a tanty, a small child kicks a puppy', and 'Almost an exciting game, but not quite. Like when you think someone's hot in a dark bar and it turns out to be just good hair', Oh Errol makes rugby league watching so much more fun.

These are not the kind of views I had while sitting next to Ada or Janet in the Ladies Stand, but they give me optimism. These days in rugby league, there are more ladies ready to take a stand rather than just sit in one. It gives me great pleasure to know that rugby league has evolved enough that Peter Peters can no longer belittle a female rugby league reporter and get away with it.



Debbie Spillane expands upon her life and career in her autobiography, Where Do You Think You're Goin', Lady?: Adventures of a Sports-Mad Redhead (Allen & Unwin, Sydney, 2007).

THE 13TH ANNUAL TOM BROCK LECTURE was delivered by Debbie Spillane. This lecture was entitled *The View from the Ladies Stand*.

In the past 50 years, the place of women in rugby league has changed. Debbie Spillane draws on her own experiences, describing how the women in her family introduced her to rugby league.

She tells of her search for a gap in the male defences that blocked her path to involvement in the sport that had dominated her childhood. In a career that has included newspaper reporting, songwriting, coaching and ultimately journalism, rugby league has been a common thread.

Reporting on rugby league and working for a football club have given Debbie a unique vantage point from which to view the collective behavior of rugby league towards women.

Debbie also observes the behaviour of women in and around the sport. How have the ways in which women participate in, affect and influence rugby league have changed over the years? What lies ahead on those fronts, and for the game in general?



Tom Brock

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