

# Can Rugby League Survive the 21st Century?

David Hill



14th Annual Tom Brock Lecture

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Tom Brock Lecture  
NSW Leagues Club  
Sydney NSW  
6 September 2012



Australian Society for Sports History

[www.sporthistory.org](http://www.sporthistory.org)

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14th Annual Tom Brock Lecture  
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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/](http://www.tombrock.com.au/)

# Can Rugby League Survive the 21st Century?

DAVID HILL played rugby league for thirteen seasons mainly in the second row but on occasions reluctantly as a prop (back in the days when there was a big difference).

He played three years as a boy with Fairbridge Farm School and Orange High School in the NSW country league (including the Cowra and Forbes Football carnivals) and five with Norths Junior club Crows Nest.

He was selected in Norths Jersey Flegg and Presidents Cup junior representative teams and was graded and played a few games with Norths before moving to play five seasons with Sydney University in the NSW rugby league Second Division.

Hill was President of the North Sydney Bears from 1989 to 1992, where he controversially became involved in the campaign to end tobacco sponsorship of Australian sport and the Winfield Cup. He later became a member of the 'Save the Bears', which unsuccessfully tried to stop the sacrilegious merger of Norths with Manly before the expulsion of the Bears from the League by the Forces of Darkness.

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*14th Annual Tom Brock Lecture 2012,*  
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Australian Society for Sports History, <http://www.sportshistory.org>

I am greatly honoured to have been invited to deliver the 14th Annual Tom Brock Lecture, following many esteemed speakers — some of whom are here tonight — and including my good friend and fellow North Sydney Bears tragic, the late Alex Buzo.

Rugby league football has given me a great deal. It has provided me with many valuable lessons, particularly those of persistence and determination. It gave me an appreciation that in a cooperative life we all have to do our share of the heavy lifting. League has also given me great friendships. My closest friends are still guys I played rugby league with forty years ago, and I am pleased to see some of them here tonight.

Can rugby league survive the 21st century?

This is a big question and covers a very long period of time. We don't even know if the planet Earth will survive the 21st century. It is reasonable to look at how rugby league has been travelling and to speculate on its likely fortunes over the coming decades.

Of course rugby league will continue to be played in future as very few sports actually become extinct. Can league survive as a dominant, mainstream sport, or will it eventually be eclipsed by others?

## The Football Market Place In Australia

Rugby league now confronts a far more competitive market than ever before. Only 20 years ago the four codes of football played in Australia — Australian Rules, rugby union, rugby league and soccer (as it was then known) — were all either part-time professional or amateur. Now all are full-time professional. Australia must be the only country in the world that has four professional codes of football. This raises the question as to whether the Australian market is big enough for all of them to survive this way financially in the long term.

The late Mark McCormack, the American creator of the international sports rights and marketing conglomerate IMG, once said that only the global sports would flourish in the 21st century because of the need to appeal to big TV audiences. I believe McCormack got it wrong in that a number of sports continue to have appeal even where they are played in only one, or a few countries. American football, Gaelic football and sumo wrestling are some obvious examples. However, he was right in saying that sports with broader support bases had the best prospects for long survival.

The potential to expand the current, relatively small rugby league support base onto a larger geographic footprint is limited. The game is the undisputed number one football code in only one





*Laurie Daley (pictured left) playing for the Kangaroos. Rugby league is the undisputed number one football code in only Papua New Guinea. Outside Australia it is played at a professional level in New Zealand and in two counties of northern England.*  
(PHOTO COURTESY Ian Heads)

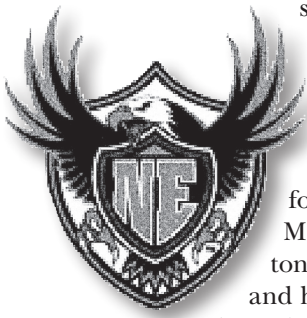
country of the world: Papua New Guinea. Outside Australia it is only played at a serious professional level in New Zealand, where it sits a distant second to rugby union, and in two counties of the north of England where it is otherwise dwarfed by soccer.

In Australia, rugby league is the most dominant football code in only two of Australia's six states. Previous attempts to expand in the others have been a failure, particularly when compared to the phenomenally successful interstate expansion of the Australian Football League (AFL) competition. Although rugby league is played at grassroots level in Western Australia and South Australia, attempts to develop teams in the national competition in the late 1990s were unsuccessful. It could be argued that the relative success of a National Rugby League (NRL) team in Victoria has only been because of the remarkable playing success of the Melbourne Storm.

## The Rise of the AFL

The AFL has been in existence for a little more than 20 years, having taken over from the highly parochial Victorian Football League. It is now well ahead of rugby league in the race to become Australia's number one national football code. AFL is now a dominant player in all Australian capital cities, including the rugby league citadels of Sydney and Brisbane. The average AFL crowd is more than double that for an NRL league match, and the AFL manages to attract more women and more children to its games than does the NRL. AFL clubs are also financially stronger. According to Business Review Weekly, all of the AFL clubs are wealthier than all of the NRL clubs except for the Brisbane Broncos. The Broncos are marginally ahead of the poorest of the AFL teams.

Even without the challenge of Aussie rules football, there are a number of other factors that threaten rugby league's future. For decades we have been witnessing a corrosion of league's traditional support base, which was historically strongest in the now declining blue-collar workforce.



As part of the decline in the heartland we have seen the disappearance of foundations clubs like Newtown and the axing from the league of the North Sydney Bears by the forces of darkness following the appalling and unworkable merger with Manly. (My 11-year-old son Damian is in the audience tonight. We are trying to bring him up as a good citizen and have told him that there is no place in the world for hatred. But we are all allowed to hate Manly.)

Nowhere has the decline in the traditional League heartland been more apparent than in the Sydney junior leagues, which have historically been the big nursery for the senior clubs. League has been trying to address this problem and boasts a big increase in the numbers of 5- to 12-year-olds playing the game in recent years. However, they have not been able to arrest the long-term decline in the number of teams and clubs for juniors above 12 years of age.

## The Decline of the Juniors

When I became president of the North Sydney Bears in the early nineties, I was struck by the decline in the number of teams in the district since I played North Sydney Juniors. But since then there has been a further drop of about 25 per cent in the number of teams for above 15 year olds. In my playing days there were dozens of teams then playing for such clubs like Mosman Collegians, and my old club

Crows Nest, which have both totally disappeared. Now there is very little junior league played south of Chatswood.

And this trend cannot be dismissed as being simply the result of the gentrification of the formerly working class suburbs of Sydney's lower north shore. There has also been a fall in the number of junior clubs in heartland of the western suburbs. For example, in the 1970s the Penrith district boasted 32 junior rugby league clubs. It now has 22.

The number of rugby league players in Australia is below practically all other team sports, including soccer, basketball, netball, volleyball, Aussie rules and cricket. At least it is higher than rugby union.

Attracting youngsters to the game has always been hard because parents — and particularly mums — think league is too rough for their kids who might get seriously injured. In recent years parents are increasingly worried about their kids becoming part of a culture of anti-social off-field behaviour. League administrators may be sighing with relief that there have not been any screaming front page headlines for over a year about heavily-tattooed league players involved in alcohol-fueled incidents, or being charged with physical or sexual abuse, involved in betting scandals or defecating in hotel corridors.

To many parents the image of league is still tarnished. They do not want their kids to be part of the ugly and dangerous social environment they associate with senior rugby league.

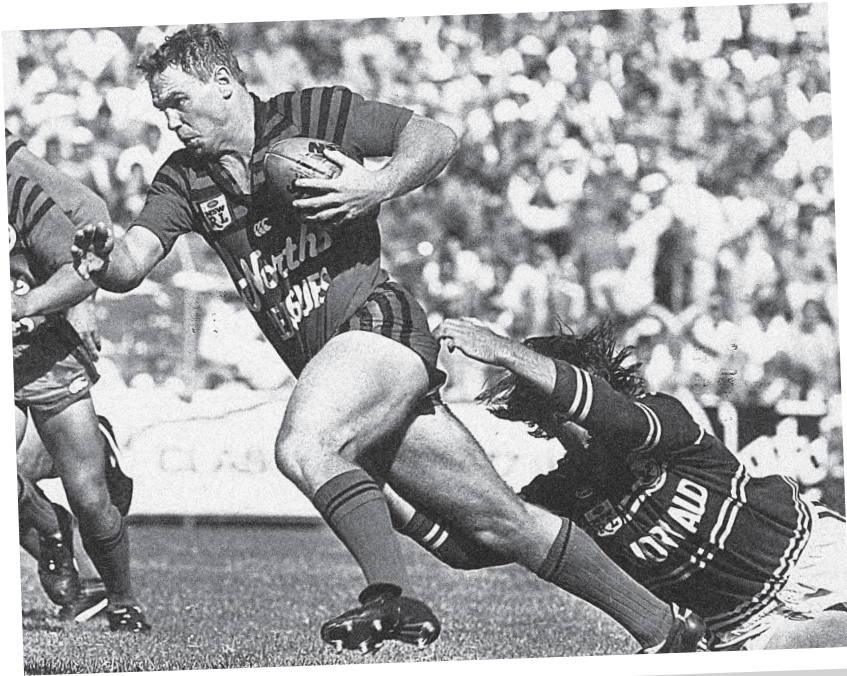
Rugby league clubs will also be facing increased financial pressures in future as the cost of running a competitive full time professional team inevitably continues to increase. (I note for example that the salary cap has increased from \$3.5 million to over \$5 million in the past six years). And the clubs will be doing this as one of the big sources of rugby league money declines: the profits from poker machines.

## The Role of Poker Machines

Poker machines have been dominant in shaping the destiny and fortunes of premier rugby league teams over the last three or four decades. For years many of the biggest Sydney clubs have been financially unviable in that the money earned from football has not been enough to cover the cost of their football operations. For many, the money from poker machines has been vital. It has not only kept them financially afloat, but has been their largest single source of revenue, bigger even than gate receipts.







*After years of seeing Norths Sydney Bears' champion players poached by other clubs, particularly Manly, poker machine money allowed us to import new talent. We added them to the likes of Billy Moore, Greg Florimo (pictured), Gary Larson and David Fairleigh. (PHOTO COURTESY Ian Heads)*

When I became president of the Bears, I noticed the rich Sydney clubs tended to do well and the poor clubs badly. The rich clubs were invariably those that had big licensed clubs with lots of money from poker machine profits to spend on football.

North Sydney had a poor football club but a very rich leagues club with big poker machine profits. This was a big factor in how we managed to take North Sydney from the bottom of the league to near the top. After years of seeing all of Norths' champion players being poached by other clubs, particularly Manly, the poker machine money allowed us to hold on to all of our good players and to import new talent. In one year, for example, we brought in Peter Jackson, Mario Fenech, Darryl Halligan and Phil Blake. We added them to the likes of Billy Moore, Greg Florimo, Gary Larson and David Fairleigh to make a pretty special team.

The goose cannot keep laying golden eggs. Already the New South Wales government has significantly increased the tax on what they see as excessive poker machine profits. Hotels, since being granted more poker machines, are now taking many ‘pokie’ players away from leagues clubs. The smoking bans of recent times have also hit hard, as many heavy poker machine players are also heavy smokers. Additionally, there is growing political pressure that I am sure — despite the resistance of the clubs and their supporters at Channel Nine and elsewhere — will result in further restrictions being put on problem gamblers. Poker machines may well still subsidise rugby league, but it will be at lower levels than previously.

With all these challenges it would be reasonable to expect rugby league to be on its knees. However, it isn’t. In many respects the game is flourishing. Above all, it is because rugby league is an attractive and entertaining spectacle that people want to watch. This is more than evidenced by the recent huge new television deal.

Much credit for the increased appeal of rugby league today must go to the code’s administrators. Over more than 40 years, the administrators have radically changed the game with a succession of rule changes aimed at making it a more attractive game to watch. No other football code has changed as radically as rugby league. Nor has any code shown a willingness to keep changing the rules in order to improve the attractiveness of the game.

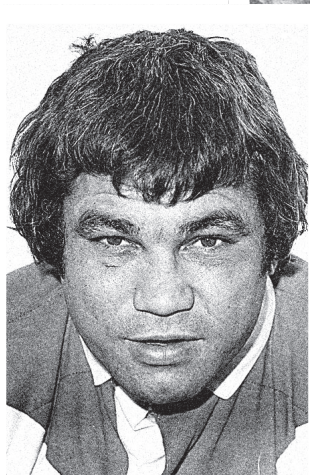
Many of us here would have played in the old days before the six-tackle rule, when the defence was only three yards back. You could keep hitting up into your opponent until you scored, threw a forward pass, knocked on or made some other mistake. How dreary the old game looks now compared with the urgency of today’s game with the defensive team back 10 metres and the attacking side under pressure to deliver something within every set of six tackles.

## **The Rise of ATSI, Maori and Pacific Islands Players**

Much of this improved attractiveness of rugby league has been the result of a huge influx of players from Aboriginal and Torres Strait and Maori backgrounds, and in more recent years from the Pacific islands. We have always had players from these backgrounds in the game. We all remember Bruce (‘Lapa’) Stewart, Eric Simms and Arthur (‘Artie’) Beetson (my personal favourite along with Wally Lewis as all-time best player), Ron Gibbs, Anthony Mundine, Gorden Tallis, Cliff Lyons, Laurie Daley, Matt Sing, Sam Backo, Steve Renouf and Wendell Sailor.

*We have always had players from Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander backgrounds in the game, such as Eric Simms (pictured right) playing for South Sydney.*

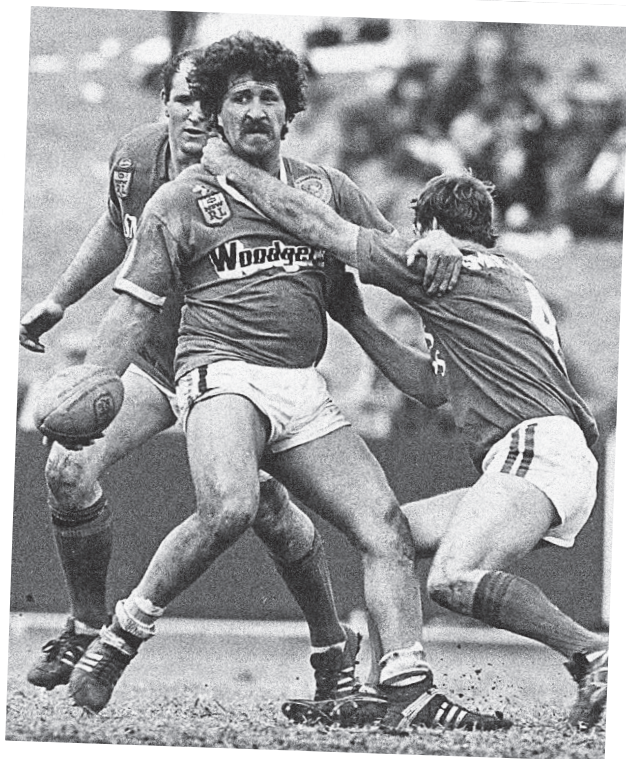
(PHOTO COURTESY Ian Heads)



*Artie Beetson (pictured left) was my personal favourite.* (PHOTO COURTESY Ian Heads)

In the mid-1990s, there was an average of three players from Aboriginal and Torres Strait, Maori and Pacific Islander backgrounds in each club. A decade later it rose to around seven. Today, it approaches a staggering 50 per cent of the NRL. These players have not only made up for the decline in the number of junior players from the traditional sources, but have made a huge contribution to the more attractive football being played. Greg Inglis, Johnathan Thurston, Ben Barba, Jarryd Hayne, Benji Marshall, Fui Fui Moi Moi, Jharal Yow Yeh, Sam Thaiday, Scott Prince, Jamal Idris, Matt Bowen. The mere mention of these names whets the appetite of league fans.





*By the mid-1990s, there was an average of three players from Aboriginal and Torres Strait, Maori and Pacific Islander backgrounds in each club, such as Sam Backo (pictured left) playing for Canberra Raiders.*

*(PHOTO COURTESY Ian Heads)*

## Free-To-Air and Pay TV

This more attractive football has also benefitted from the revolution in the television industry and the struggle between the big free-to-air networks for ratings supremacy. Sport is a big ratings winner in Australia and the Nine Network has taken a big punt on being able to keep League TV audiences growing to justify their recent huge investment in the free-to-air TV rights for rugby league. (Incidentally I hope Channel Nine, which is heavily debt-ridden, has not bitten off more than it can chew with the deal).

The advent of pay TV has also helped. There has not been a significant increase in crowds attending NRL matches now that all games in each round are being televised. League supporters are simply consuming their game a different way: watching matches from home rather than turning up at the ground. The five games each round on pay TV attract an average audience of almost 250,000 viewers.

## The Expansion of Rival Codes

All this does not make the future safe for rugby league. Australian Rules has the wind in its sails and is doing better at expanding the reach of its code than rugby league. Nor can we write off soccer. That game's administration has done wonders by getting Australia into Asia, qualifying for the last two World Cup finals and creating the A-League. The so-called 'sleeping giant' of Australian sport is not quite awake. I believe support for soccer is likely to continue to grow, even if at a slow pace.

Rugby league is in a much stronger position than rugby union, which I believe — in Australia at least — faces far greater problems in the future. Rugby union has fewer juniors than rugby league and its nursery is heavily limited to Sydney's private boys' schools. It has no national competition. Australian teams compete in the Super Rugby competition with teams with names like Stormers, Sharks, Blues, Reds, Hurricanes and Force. Many sports fans don't know what country some of these teams are from. Critically, rugby union has no free-to-air television coverage and is unlikely to attract it in the foreseeable future.

Worst of all, rugby union fans aren't as excited about their game. Three years ago the Australian Rugby Union (ARU) commissioned research into what it called the Brand Health Index of rugby union, which found support and passion for the game was waning among its followers. And rugby union can be tedious, even at the international level where it should be the most scintillating. In the recent series between Wales and the Australian Wallabies, more than 60 per cent of the points scored in the three matches came from 23 successful penalty kicks rather than from attractive rugby.

Periodically we read speculation that at some time in the future rugby league and rugby union should merge their two games into one. This is wishful thinking, and I believe it could never happen. There would not be enough in it for rugby league. Besides, the cultural chasm is too great. It would be like expecting the merger between North Sydney Bears and Manly to work!

Rugby league is unlikely ever to be a global sport, and it is unlikely to become a genuinely national mainstream sport in Australia in the way that Australian Rules football has done. But if it continues to evolve as an attractive and entertaining spectacle as it has done to date, it should be safe. Enough people feel it is 'the greatest game of all'.



# SECOND DIVISION

Saturday, April 17, 1971

40 minutes each way. Time off for injuries. Copyright DAVID PHILLIPS FIELD

## UNI. OF N.S.W.

(Black and Gold with University Crest)  
Coach: WALLY WATSFORD

Fullback: 1—J. WILKINSON  
Threequarters: 2—J. BAND, 3—R. MCCANN, 4—R. STOREY, 5—J. CAVANAGH  
Halves: 6—T. BROWN, 7—J. AUSTIN  
Forwards: 8—G. JONES, 9—J. MANNIX, 10—N. FRAZER, 11—C. M. WATERHOUSE, 12—M. McGILL, 13—J. TIERNEY

Referee: L. BUCKLEY 3.00 p.m.

## SYDNEY UNI.

(Royal Blue, Univ. raly Crest)  
Coach: MAX GARBLER

Fullback: 1—J. STONE  
Threequarters: 2—G. DWYER, 3—P. PINKERTON, 4—P. BYRNE, 5—J. PINKERTON  
Halves: 6—R. CLARKE, 7—J. WAIDE  
Forwards: 8—S. NORRISH, 9—M. KING, 10—K. MEY, 11—D. CADWICK, 12—G. HODGEMAN, 13—D. HILL

Touch Judges: K. Gray (red), I. McCall (blue)

40 minutes each way. Time off for injuries. Sun., April 18, 1971 BANKSTOWN OVAL

## LIVERPOOL

(Red, White and Blue)  
Coach: E. COOPER

Fullback: 1—M. WRIGHT  
Threequarters: 2—T. VINCENT, 3—G. GOSSI, 4—G. BOURE, 5—L. SMITH  
Halves: 6—S. BEKERIS, 7—S. KARI  
Forwards: 8—P. BELL, 9—S. PAGE, 10—R. DOVE, 11—S. RATTRAY, 12—P. ARMSTRONG, 13—D. MULLEY

## BANKSTOWN

(Green, White Hoops)  
Coach: BARRY HARRIS

Fullback: 1—L. McDONALD  
Threequarters: 2—R. ROSS, 3—E. PENDER, 4—S. WRIGHT, 5—K. SWEENEY  
Halves: 6—G. CARDIFF, 7—P. SHARPE  
Forwards: 8—W. WALSH, 9—D. BERNELL, 10—D. GUMMER, 11—C. PEGG, 12—G. BROWNING, 13—P. CRETAN

Referee: D. BRAYBROOK 3.00 p.m.

Touch Judges: A. Collins (Red), R. Lawless (Blue)

Reserve Grade — 1.30 p.m. — 35 minutes each way. Time off for injuries

## UNIVERSITY OF N.S.W.

(Black and Gold with University Crest)  
Coach: JOE GRIFFITHS

Fullback: 14—R. BELL (C)  
Threequarters: 15—K. DUNNE, 16—J. GRUBA, 17—R. CONDRON, 18—N. CONSTANTINE  
Halves: 19—R. DELANEY, 20—J. BEGNELL  
Forwards: 21—K. WYLLIE, 22—S. BURTON, 23—W. MALONE, 24—P. HAVRALANT, 25—G. JONES, 26—P. MESSER, 27—P. KWOK, 28—R. CULLEN (One to be omitted)

Referee: W. GRONO 1.30 p.m.

Touch Judges: K. Gray (red), I. McCall (blue)

Sunday, April 18, 1971

## ST. MARYS

(Bottle green, with Tangerine bars)  
Coach: G. ROGERS

Fullback: 1—A. SOBOLWESKY  
Threequarters: 2—G. CLOUT, 3—D. FALCONER, 4—T. TRASK, 5—L. BARWICK  
Halves: 6—N. KITCHENER, 7—D. SERCOMBE  
Forwards: 8—G. CEALEY, 9—R. KNELLAR, 10—G. DELANOU, 11—S. SNELL, 12—G. BREADSELL, 13—G. ROGERS

Referee: J. GOCHER 3.00 p.m.

Touch Judges: R. Freeman (Red), K. Joffe (Blue)

## WENTWORTHVILLE

(All Black)  
Coach: LEWIS JONES

Fullback: 1—J. DELANEY  
Threequarters: 2—N. GILLIGAN, 3—K. DAVIS, 4—W. BALDOCK, 5—B. BERGAN  
Halves: 6—B. BEER, 7—R. YULE  
Forwards: 8—W. MELVILLE, 9—G. OLLING, 10—T. HEILER, 11—J. COLLINS, 12—G. BAYLY, 13—D. ROOTS, 14—G. BAYLY (One to be omitted)

## WENTWORTHVILLE

(All Black)  
Coach: NOEL CORNWALL

Fullback: 14—G. NEWTON  
Threequarters: 18—K. FOORD, 19—C. BAKER, 20—K. KENDALL, 21—VAN STRATTON  
Halves: 22—K. HEILER, 23—R. LUDKIN, 24—R. STIFF  
Forwards: 25—G. SIMMONS, 26—J. ROE, 27—T. BALDACHHINO, 28—G. CAFE, 29—G. WORTHINGTON, 30—D. CHIRCO, 31—P. MCCABE (One to be omitted)

W. Alterator (17), M. Douglas (29), G. Woods (32), R. Perks (34), D. Murphy (33), G. Beasley (24), D. Boyd (28)

Referee: J. BISSETT 1.30 p.m.

Touch Judges: R. Freeman (Red), K. Joffe (Blue)

Reserve Grade — 1.30 p.m.

35 minutes each way. Time off for injuries.

## LIVERPOOL

(Red, White and Blue)  
Coach: K. BROOKS

Fullback: 1—R. KENNEDY  
Threequarters: 2—G. DRUMMOND, 3—J. WUNDERGER, 4—T. MOCHALSKI, 5—D. MORGAN  
Halves: 6—J. COOPER, 7—S. COOPER (one to be omitted)  
Forwards: 8—G. CLANCY, 9—G. CUMMINS, 10—N. DAZOS, 11—M. JODNER, 12—P. FITZPATRICK, 13—J. SHERRER, 14—M. WALKER, 15—G. DAWSON

Referee: C. Rattray, J. Noble

## BANKSTOWN

(Green, White Hoops)  
Coach: LES ADAMS

Fullback: 14—P. GORDON  
Threequarters: 15—T. GARDINER, 16—R. HASLER, 17—R. TUCKER, 18—L. BENTLEY  
Halves: 19—G. HANNAH, 20—B. BULL  
Forwards: 21—R. HOPKITT, 22—R. LAWSON, 23—T. SILVA, 24—G. HANNA, 25—G. PARKER (C), 26—T. SHAKESPEARE

Referee: T. DELAUNEY 1.30 p.m.

Touch Judges: A. Collins (Red), R. Lawless (Blue)

David Hill played rugby league for thirteen seasons, listed here (circled) as number 13 for Sydney University in a 1971 edition of Rugby League News. (PHOTO COURTESY New South Wales Rugby League)





## SUBSCRIPTIONS

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THE 14TH ANNUAL TOM BROCK LECTURE  
was delivered by David Hill. This lecture was  
entitled *Can Rugby League Survive the 21st Century?*

Over the past few decades, league has been  
confronted with a number of adverse trends and  
damaging events, some of which include:

- the demise of a number of traditional or  
heartland clubs
- a decline in junior clubs and players and the  
loss of top players overseas
- the relatively small ground attendances
- the narrower base of league (with fewer  
families than that of other codes)
- the dependence of league clubs on poker  
machine profits for survival.

Despite the success of rival codes — AFL,  
Super rugby and A-League football — league has  
survived and even flourished as a dominant sport  
and might even have a great future.

But can it survive the 21st century?



*Tom Brock*

Published by the Tom Brock Bequest Committee  
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