

Chocolate Soldier: The Emergence of Pacific Players in the NRL

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15th Annual
Tom Brock Lecture
99 On York
Sydney NSW
18 September 2013



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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/

Chocolate Soldier: The Emergence of Pacific Players in the NRL



BORN IN AUCKLAND, FRANK PULETUA moved to Australia with his family in the early 1990s and settled in the golden west of Sydney. Here he discovered rugby league and both he and his brother Tony featured in the John Paul II College side that won the national schoolboys title in 1996.

From there, they were signed by their local club Penrith and Frank made his first grade debut in 1998. He went on to play over 150 first grade games with the Panthers and South Sydney, as well as appearing for Samoa in seven internationals, including the 2008 World Cup.

While playing he completed a degree in fine arts and another in graphic design before taking on a position at the Casula Powerhouse Arts Centre. There he designed and implemented the successful Body Pacifica and Number One Fan programs. In 2012 he became the inaugural Manager of the Rugby League Museum.

15th Annual Tom Brock Lecture 2013,
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Firstly I would like to acknowledge the traditional custodians of the land on which we meet tonight, and pay my respects to the elders, past and present.

Before I begin I would like to take this time to say thank you to the Tom Brock Bequest Committee. It is certainly an honour to be the speaker of the 15th Annual Tom Brock Lecture. To look back on the speakers that have gone before me provides a level of acknowledgment for which I am most humbled.

Thank you also to David Lakisa for the kind introduction. Thank you to David and Dr Jioji Ravulo for the resource support for this lecture. This is my very first lecture, and I have found it to be a very challenging yet enlightening experience. Unlike my contemporaries I do not consider myself an academic, and nor do I purport to be. I live by a quote that a former principal said to me once: 'The day that you stop learning is the day that you die'. I have made this quote the foundation for the way I approach each day of my life.

'Chocolate Soldier' is the title of my lecture. Even though I consider myself more of a cocoa-butter type guy, I thought the title Chocolate Soldier had a greater level of relevance to the focus of my lecture tonight.

The exact origin of the tag 'chocolate soldier' remains to this day disputed. There are numerous accounts of its use in varying contexts but to state its exact point of derivation, no one can say for certain. What can be attested is that the expression was used to describe the on-field team uniform and office administration attire for the players and staff of the Penrith Panthers Rugby League Football Club.

The jerseys, shorts and blazers were produced featuring a predominantly brown colour. This chocolatey tone would be the colour of choice for the Panthers, unveiling the strip in its inaugural season of 1967. Such examples of how the expression came to be used are explained in the book *Men in Black* by Larry Writer and Garry Lester. Popular radio commentator Frank Hyde was reported in the *Penrith Club Journal* of 1967 as saying 'These chocolate soldiers from out west — they don't melt'.

There is possibly an element of truth in the statement by the great radio broadcaster — as I have personally trained in many pre-seasons at the foot of the mountains — and let me tell you, you have to be made of something very resilient not to melt in a Penrith summer.

In fact, you would have to develop a strong resolve in general to

exist in certain areas of western Sydney. You need to ensure a great support network if you are to elude some of the social trappings of drugs, gangs, violence and crime; elements that are seemingly ingrained in pockets of western Sydney.

I will say from the start that the anecdotes that feature as part of my lecture tonight are not intended in any way, shape or form to endorse the practice of anti-social, reckless and/or criminal behaviour. I do not advocate criminal activity, drug use, and gang violence whatsoever. Nor do I support the idea of a tough and hostile environment being 'cool'. The anecdotes that I share are real. They are aspects of my life that I feel are necessary to share in order for you to obtain a better understanding of what fuels Pacific youths' mindsets and behaviours.

Tonight this lecture will discuss the emergence of Pacific players in the National Rugby League (NRL). I will explore this subject through a personal lens and through my own experiences. I will speak of my younger years and the personal struggles with identity, social acceptance, and a reluctant adherence to follow cultural practises of my traditional homeland, Samoa. Finally I will speak of my personal path to empowerment, and the impact that education and the sport of rugby league has had on me, my family and more broadly, my Pacific peoples.

I will look to frame and contextualise the modern day fusion of traditional Pacific culture and western ideologies. This will be presented in a predominantly Samoan context. I will look at my family's migration to New Zealand and Australia through the Pacific diaspora phenomena and explain the parallels around immigration, social inclusion, and cultural identity.

Whilst this lecture does not look to completely elucidate the issues for Pacific peoples living in western society — nor even the compounding issues that affect young Pacific players in the NRL — I do hope it will provide a better understanding of cultural misconceptions, and the reasons behind increasing social, cultural and economic issues surrounding Pacific people today.

Time of Birth

I was born in the city of Auckland, New Zealand on 8 May 1978. According to my dad, my time of birth was about 3am. The recalling of this is highly questionable coming from my dad, when one considers that the night my younger brother Tui was born, Dad was in the hospital common room watching the All Blacks play in the 1987 Rugby World Cup!

My mother and father migrated to New Zealand in the late 1960s and early 1970s from the small island nation of Samoa.

My father moved to New Zealand in 1967 in search of work. As with many of the first Pacific migrants, Dad would look to find work to support the extended family back in his native village. Dad was an unassuming man, enigmatic at times but very caring towards his family. He managed to scrimp and scrape money for our family through odd jobs, mainly working in heavy labour or on production lines.

My mother migrated to New Zealand in 1974 from the village of Siufaga, Falelatai, located on the south west coast of Samoa. My mother was one of ten children who lived in a highly impoverished region of the island. In this region of Samoa locals would be required to harvest what was available of the scarce produce in plantations, and rely on deep-water fishing to survive.

My grandmother, whose dark complexion belied her contrasting deep blue eyes, never much spoke about her *Palagi* side. She was one of six half-caste girls fathered by a very tall 'white man' the villagers called Aleni (Allen would be the English translation). He is reported to have been a whaler from a United States fishing vessel who settled on the island at the turn of the 20th century.

Growing up, my grandmother instructed all of our family — young and old — that speaking English was forbidden in her home and there was to be no English spoken around her at any time. She had a good arm for throwing sandals, so as you can imagine my Samoan was conveniently fluent when I was in her company.

Like many migrants from the neighbouring Pacific islands my mother and father arrived in New Zealand unskilled, semi-educated and limited in their ability to speak the English language. Mum and Dad would join a growing number of Pacific island migrants that would travel to the shores of New Zealand — and ultimately Australia — in search of a better life and greater economic gain.

Much like Australia throughout the 19th and 20th centuries, New Zealand's immigration policies in the 1960s and 1970s provided roadblocks for people of ethnicity through intensive screening processing and regulation. For much of the early part of the 19th century, British citizens were afforded free entry into Australia and New Zealand to strengthen the white populations of the then British colonies. From the early periods of the 19th century harsh immigration policies were put in place in order to achieve a utopian ideal of equality. This excluded people from other races, which were considered as 'servile'. By the mid 1960s these policies

would be loosened but only to strengthen the waning labour force struggling to build the countries' growing industries.

My father would be instrumental in the successful processing of permanent residency for many of our family members migrating from Samoa. Dad would gain a greater understanding of these types of immigration processes through the guidance of his family members that had settled successfully in New Zealand and Australia in the early 1960s.

The Samoan Way

Dad came from a prominent family in Afega that was well respected for their ancestral line, high chiefs and powerful orators. Dad was a very passionate person when it came to upholding Samoan traditions and its culture. He made it one of his key objectives in life: to ensure that we as his children would understand what being Samoan was all about. As I was growing up, my dad would continuously reinforce the statement '*Tou te fananau nei i Niu Sila — ae tou te ola i uiga Fa'asamoa*'.

This means 'You may have been born here in New Zealand, but you will be raised in the Samoan way'.

The Samoan cultural and political structure is a decentralised model, with laws governing districts underpinned by cultural traditions, chieftain titles, and ancestral lineages. The Samoan family model — or *aiga* — is one that extends beyond the western idea of a nuclear family and becomes inclusive of all blood relatives. This opens the family network to include not only your immediate family — mother, father, brothers and sisters — but also to all cousins, aunties, uncles, nieces, nephews, in-laws, etc. The *aiga* model is best represented in times of distress or *fa'alavelave*, whereby families' networks will come to the aid of their *aiga* by providing money, food, contra, labour and support.

My dad's father was a *Soga'imiti* whose role traditionally in Samoa is to serve the village. A *Soga'imiti* would be tattooed with the traditional *pe'a* that would cover from the torso to just below the knees. A *Soga'imiti* would also be required to have a comprehensive understanding of traditional cultural practices, chieftain titles, oratorship and family lineages and would serve the village from dusk till dawn.

This would obviously not leave much time for a family connection. My father would (in the manner of how most young people were required to learn) follow his dad to the ceremonies to observe, listen, learn and absorb the traditions of our culture.

This form of oral tradition and kinesthetic learning is the way in

which I was taught growing up. If there were windows to be cleaned, hedges to be cut or rubbish to be removed, my father would show my brothers and I through his actions. The expectation was that we would learn from observing, and execute accordingly. These chores were not run-of-the-mill either. The task of achieving a finely manicured lawn involved me and my brothers on our knees chopping at the edges of our front yard with miniature machetes and steak knives. The large kitchen knife also came in handy when opening tins of corn beef, as my Dad would show by stabbing into the top of a can and carefully working the blade around until the top fell off.

I never really mastered this, though.

My brothers and I loved to play cricket growing up, and would take every opportunity to play it in our backyard. We would break planks of wood off the old shed and use them as our bats and bowl overs using unripened grapefruit until the sun set. I fancied myself a bit like Richard Hadlee in the bowling department but I couldn't get the grapefruit to turn like I wanted to.

We would also have our family unit continually changing in our household. Growing up we would have at times two to three families living under the one roof. When you consider a home housing six adults and fourteen children, it can get a bit tight.

I would observe over the years different family members staying in our home for various lengths of time. Sometimes I would wonder why so many aunts and uncles would live with us, and questioned my parents why they could not get homes for themselves. I was told that it was the 'Samoan way'.

The Arrival of the *Palagi*

The transient nature of Samoans is inherent in the make-up of all Pacific peoples. Since the early days of world navigation, Polynesian migrations have used the waterways of the Pacific as a path for exploration and discovery. Polynesians are arguably the greatest sea-farers in history, covering over 70 million square miles of the Pacific Ocean. Polynesian voyagers would successfully colonise over 1000 islands in the Pacific travelling in outrigger canoes, mastering navigation techniques passed down through oral traditions.

A significant moment in Samoa's history with regards to European engagement would be the sighting in the village of Sapapali'i, where an expedition led by missionary John Williams took anchor. Representing the London Missionary Society, John Williams arrived in Samoa after the successful settlement of the

church in Tahiti and Society Islands. As Williams approached the shore the locals are believed to have shouted ‘*Papa Lagi! Papa Lagi!*’ Roughly translated, this means ‘Sky burster! Sky burster!’ It is said that the reaction of the locals was due to the common belief that these light skinned visitors had just burst out of the sky, directly from the heavens.

To this day Samoans continue to use the term *Palagi* in reference to white people. Just as I do to my wife, who is *Palagi*.

The ensuing belief by the locals who witnessed these *Palagis* coming ashore and thought that they were indeed from ‘heaven’ would have presented a great opportunity for the missionaries to leverage the message of the Gospel and the colony. The missionaries’ intent would be to establish the church, engage and educate natives, build infrastructure to support the western systems of government, and effectively add to the expansion of the British Empire.

Their arrival would signal the end of many traditions for Samoans including polytheist belief systems, polygamy and ceremonial songs and dance. This would also mark the beginning of Christian values and western ideologies being melded with traditional Samoan culture. The manifestations of this new Samoa to this very day fix Pacific peoples in a pre-colonial Christian context, where one would find it difficult to distinguish where culture begins and religion ends. This blurring of the lines would cause me much confusion growing up when dealing with church, faith and God. I wasn’t even sure what part of our culture existed pre-Christianity. As far as I could make out, by being Christian — or by upholding Christian values and ideals — you were effectively being Samoan.

The education of religious literature and iconography would also play a very big part in the development of a new pre-colonial Christian mindset. Via a local translator, children would be taught verses of the Bible conveying an intrinsic evil in all people with dark-coloured skin, as in the story of Canaan. This was in stark contrast to the evocation of a white skinned, blonde haired, blue-eyed Jesus portrayed as a figure of purity and kindness.

Today over 95per cent of all Pacific islanders in New Zealand and Australia follow a religion of some sort. Most noted are the denominations of the Catholic faith, Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, Samoan Congregational Christian Church, Methodist, Assembly of God, United Church, Jehovah’s Witness and the strong number of Pacific youth now attending the Born Again Christian denominations such as the Hillsong Church.

The psychological impact of this form of colonial exploitation

transcends generations and social, economic and political climates as it becomes ingrained in the makeup of its peoples because of this inherent belief that it is part of their culture.

My mother and father were raised in this post-colonial context and would pass on many of these Christian values that they had been taught to me and my siblings. The fear of God was instilled in the mindset of my mother and father and took precedence over every aspect of our lives.

I recall, growing up, my mother saying to me *‘Aua le faa’la tele le tino, te’i ua uli pako’i lau pa’u ma makaga’*. This means ‘Stay out of the sun, or your skin will go black and you will look ugly’. This is an example of a conditioned mindset that would fix my mother and father in a state of subservience. Now the ideas of good versus evil — and wrong versus right — would be entwined with colour and race.

This early part of my development really shaped my curiosity towards religion, culture and race. The perception — as I would be led to believe — was that people of the white race were inherently more intelligent, witty, clever, honest, and ultimately superior. In turn, this would obviously mean that — being from a coloured or servile race — I would be rendered as being inherently dishonest, unintelligent and inferior.

These sweeping views and cultural misconceptions are still ingrained in many of our people today. This would be a mindset that I would grow to learn and adopt, and that would take many years to uneducate and undo.

Moving to Australia

My family’s decision to move to Australia was decided by one event. My father had gotten himself into a bit of trouble with the law at the beginning of the year 1991. He had been involved in an altercation defending a young Samoan man who was being racially vilified for not knowing how to speak English properly. Dad retaliated, and in a state of panic left for Australia to avoid custody. My dad was familiar with Australia as he had a few family members that had settled in Sydney in the early 60s.

I remember this time clearly.

My father and sister Margaret made the move to Sydney in early 1991 and stayed with family until Dad could find work. Mum was left behind with me and my three brothers, Villi, Tony and the baby — Tui — to pack up the house and all of our belongings. I thought we were going on a holiday but the penny dropped when our entire congregation turned up to the airport.

I had never really travelled overseas other than as a fourteen-month-old to Samoa with my Godmother, though that trip is a little hard to recall. I never travelled anywhere in New Zealand for that matter, other than to our local corner shop to play *Street Fighter* and eat milk biscuits.

Moving to Australia was an exciting prospect, but a very daunting one all the same. I had lived in New Zealand for the first twelve years of my life and I was now going to a place where I knew only my cousins and my annoying siblings.

One event that would leave an everlasting imprint on my family's story — especially for me and my younger brother Tony — would be the 1991 New South Wales Rugby League grand final between Penrith Panthers and the Canberra Raiders which was televised in New Zealand. Being born in New Zealand conscripts you by default to follow the All Blacks.

I grew up with the same patriotism as the next Kiwi, and loved to watch the All Blacks pummelling oppositions from all over the world. But on a warm Sunday afternoon in New Zealand, Tony and I found ourselves watching this strange game of rugby league. 'What a weird version of rugby,' I thought: stop, start, stop, play the ball through the legs, tackle. Man, what a weird game! This would be the very first game of rugby league that Tony and I would ever watch. Unfortunately for Tony, he opted to back the green team.

We made the move over to Australia not long after and moved into my aunty's home in Tregear, Mount Druitt. My aunty had a family of six people and here were the Puletuas arriving — all seven of us — moving in for an indefinite period of time. Great memories were had in this small home, and even though I slept on the floor for two years with a cheap blanket and a cushion, I wouldn't have changed a thing.

Mount Druitt

For those of you unfamiliar with this area of western Sydney, Mount Druitt is one of the lowest socio-economic areas in an Australian metropolitan region. The high level of unemployment, school truancy, fluctuating criminal activity and run-down housing all contribute to a fairly volatile existence.

It was not unusual to see a nice car randomly parked along our street: possibly a Mercedes-Benz or BMW from the other side of town. You could be guaranteed that the next morning it would be stripped, placed on bricks, torched and left as a charcoaled shell to be inspected by the schoolkids in the morning.

The underpasses of Tregear, Whalan and Bidwill, etc., provide direct thoroughfares to different points within the suburbs. These underpasses are obscured to the passing traffic and provide great havens for exchanges of drugs and late night drinking.

I recall walking to Tregear shops through our local underpass early each morning to buy snacks before boarding the school bus. Every day without fail the same four blokes would be positioned just outside the bottle shop with their plastic cups waiting for the first local to purchase a case and give them the first fill of the day. The nice old white man who regularly said 'Good morning' would not be there by the time I reached Year 10.

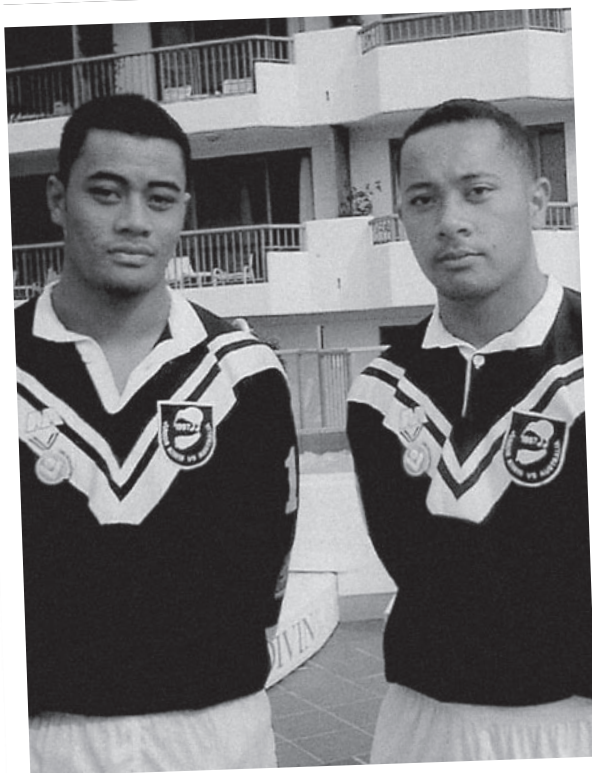
My interpretation of Mount Druitt was viewed through a naïve young man's eyes that — due to my lack of life experiences, social development and limited business nous or street cred — would see the environment around me as fitting, in many ways applicable to a person of my social standing.

The truth of the matter was that I had always considered myself to be fairly intelligent, much more so than the groups of guys that I would hang with on the weekends. This was evident in how I would deal with the various circumstances I would find myself in.

One such instance occurred when I was sixteen years of age and riding the school bus home in Mount Druitt with a close friend, also of Samoan heritage. He explained to me that he had been invited to join a group of 'runners' in town and was looking to see if I was interested in coming along. 'Runner' is a term used for young people that distribute drugs of all kinds to various dealers, establishments and businesses. The term derives from the young people — predominantly young men — working and navigating around town — mainly on foot — under the strict guidance of a 'collector'.

I had noticed over the weeks leading into this exchange, that most of my friends were sporting new Nike Air Max shoes and expensive National Basketball Association (NBA) and National Football League (NFL) merchandise. By comparison I was wearing Jordache sneakers with a hand-drawn flight logo and a Nike symbol cut from white plastic which I had super-glued on.

I found myself asking why I shouldn't take the opportunity to earn this money and get some real Nike Air Max shoes. \$400 a pop was more than Mum and Dad were bringing home and this would surely help out with our bills and contributions to the church. I considered my mate's offer quickly and then told him I was in. That Thursday I was scheduled to meet with my mates at Mount Druitt station to catch the train into town.



*My brother Tony
and I played together
for the Junior Kiwis
in 1997.*

(PHOTO COURTESY
Frank Puletua)

I didn't turn up.

To this day I look at that event as a pivotal moment in my life. I am not totally convinced it was my dad's strict discipline that deterred me from going on that train, but I believe that it had something to do with it. I am also not totally convinced that it was my better judgment, but it proved to be that day. Whatever it was I would be eternally grateful, because it would not turn out well for my mates who boarded the train that day.

Sporting Brothers

From this point on I would find myself immersed in sport — most notably the game of basketball which was highly popular at this time in Sydney due to the rise of NBA stars and the Michael Jordan phenomenon. Rugby league was also a sport that was now well entrenched in our household. Due to my brother Tony excelling at



Tony Puletua on the charge against the Roosters, 2003. Tony would be the central figure for my introduction into the sport of rugby league. The confidence gained from playing with him eventually saw me picked up by recruitment scouts to join him at the Penrith Panthers. (PHOTO COURTESY National Rugby League)

all junior levels, our family would follow and support his growth right from his first game with the St Marys under-14s.

Tony would also be the central figure for my introduction into the sport of rugby league. I never considered playing a contact sport growing up — due to a mild form of haemophilia as a child — but that would not deter me. One day I found myself thrust in front of our school during a key match against Bidwill High. Tony had convinced me to play due to one of the guys pulling out at the last minute. As I had never played the game I entered the field looking a little out of place with long grey basketball shorts and oversized boots I had borrowed from a friend. We would unfortunately lose that match but I would end up with two tries to my name.

The confidence gained from this unusual first experience

would carry me towards committing to play for the club St Marys in the local competition, and eventually seeing me picked up by recruitment scouts to join Tony at the Penrith Panthers.

Tony would also be the main catalyst for our move to the prominent senior high school, John Paul II in Marayong. Tony had been aggressively scouted by the school to join its elite rugby league program to which he was reluctant to commit.

The opportunity of this new school offered a whole new level of education for us, and Tony refused to commit unless I agreed to join him. I initially rejected the offer stating that I was happy where I was, declaring 'I am not a footy player'.

The fact was that Tony had an amazing natural ability as a rugby league footballer. He was a mixture of flamboyance, size and raw strength which made him an absolute nightmare to contain when playing backyard footy. These attributes would be transferred to the first grade stage and serve him well over his many years in the top grade.

I, on the other hand, did not possess the natural attributes that were bestowed on my brother. I would struggle to put my head in the right place when tackling and invariably find myself on the ground with flashing bulbs. I would also require a lot of work in trying to learn the simple fundamentals of the game. I would work tirelessly to improve my game along with Tony's encouragement and guidance.

An amazing trajectory occurred in my final year of school which saw Tony and I selected in the Metro Catholic Schoolboys team, the New South Wales Catholic Schoolboys and the Australian Schoolboys to tour Papua New Guinea. We would also win the prestigious Commonwealth Bank Cup. Ironically, we would play for the Junior Kiwis the following year.

This run of schoolboy success would pave the way for me to transition into the senior grades of the Penrith Panthers with a heightened confidence and a new found appreciation of the game. I now worked closely with Tony in improving my game, spending hours and hours on simple passing drills, sprints and tackle drills.

This would also be a defining moment for our family as we would move from the small three-bedroom Housing Commission home in Mount Druitt to a six-bedroom home in neighbouring St Marys.

Family Fortunes

This would be one of many opportunities presented to my family through rugby league. So many aspects of our lives would change from this point on: being able to replace our run-down Kingswood

with two well-serviced brand new vehicles; a large screen TV that would replace the black and white box and a coat hanger; video game consoles and new sofas; contributions to the church being doubled; and the most memorable acquisition: a pair of brand new Nike Air Max shoes.

I made my first-grade debut in round 5 on 25 April 1998 against the Melbourne Storm. I received the call up via my reserve grade coach, noted hard man Peter Kelly. I was nervous as hell but very excited at the same time, and ready to test my wares against Glenn Lazarus and Tawera Nikau in the world's toughest rugby league competition.

For the next thirteen years, rugby league would be my life. I would provide my services to the Panthers for eleven seasons, as well as two very lean years at the South Sydney Rabbitohs.

I would also have the privilege of playing alongside Tony for ten of those years: sharing great memories together, building great friendships along the way and — as fate would have it — playing alongside a few of those players that we watched from that famous 1991 grand final.

The Pacific Wave

Tony and I would be part of a second wave of Pacific players to enter the professional system of the NRL from the late 1990s. We would join the likes of Nigel and Joe Vagana, John Hopoate, Solomon Haumono, Tyran Smith, Monty Betham, David Solomona and Lote Tuqiri in opening the pathways for Pacific players into the NRL. Those players before us, such as Manoa Thompson, Olsen Filipaina, Kurt and Dane Sorenson and John Schuster, had provided a platform from which we would emerge.

The number of Pacific and Māori players within the NRL today currently sits at approximately 35per cent. In the National Youth Cup Competition, this number is around 45per cent. These numbers are astounding considering that Pacific communities only make up 1.2per cent of the overall population of New South Wales and 2.2per cent of the Queensland population respectively.

Currently in the Penrith Panthers District Junior Rugby League — covering an area stretching from the lower Blue Mountains to Blacktown City and one of the largest junior rugby league nurseries in the world — over 50per cent of juniors competing in the competition are of Pacific and/or Māori heritage.

The phenomenon taking place in western Sydney and the southern Queensland is like that of New Zealand almost 40 years ago,



AUSTRALIAN SCHOOLBOYS RUGBY LEAGUE TEAM TOUR OF PAPUA NEW GUINEA – 1996



BACK ROW: (1 to 7) Ben Rauter, Brian McLanden, Trent Burns, Nathan Cayless, Chris Smith (Manager), Ben Galea, Chris Smith (Manager).
MIDDLE ROW: John Douglas (Trainer), Rhyss Wesser, Ray Herberich, Todd Payton, Christopher Walker, David Hicks.
FRONT ROW: Adam Perry, Ted Simpson, Trent Burns, Nathan Cayless, Chris Smith (Manager), Ben Galea, Chris Smith (Manager).

The Australian Secondary Schools Rugby League Council carried out a full programme of events this year, including Australian Championships at Under 18 and 15 levels with teams from NSW Combined High Schools, NSW Combined Catholic Colleges, Queensland Secondary Schools, ACT, Victorian, South Australian, Western Australian and Northern Territory Schools taking part. Unfortunately, industrial action by teachers in the ACT prevented their Under 15s from competing this year. We look forward to including teams from the NSW Independent Schools from 1997.

Sadly, 1996 saw the termination of our long-time sponsorship with the Commonwealth Bank and we are currently gearing for a new major sponsor for 1997.

A superbly run U/15 Championship in Perth was conducted as a joint venture between School Sport WA and the WARRL by Greg Bowdell, Michael Price, Ian McMahon, Ian Dignon and Graeme Hadley.

Two merit teams, Australian Under 18 and Australian Under 15 Developing States, were named. Because of the withdrawal of the ACT, the latter team had the opportunity to play against Queensland.

Congratulations to the NSW Combined High Schools who came from behind to take out the Australian Championship from NSW Combined Catholic Colleges at the WACA.

Championship Results:

Monday July 1 NT 28 - SA 4; WA 20 - VIC 10; QSS 18 - NSWCHS 10
Tuesday July 2 WA 16 - SA 10; NT 20 - VIC 4; NSWCCC 36 - QSS 16
Wednesday July 3 NT 22 - WA 16; VIC 26 - SA 14; NSWCHS 22 - NSWCCC 10

Thursday July 4 VIC 18 - WA 4; NSWCHS 23 - QSS 18; NSWCCC 28 - NT 0
Friday July 5 QSS 50 - Developing States Merit Team 4
NSWCHS 16 - NSWCCC 10

It was extremely gratifying to note the improving skills and performance of teams from the developing states.

Our Under 18 Championship, conducted in Adelaide was a joint venture between the SA Schools RL and the SARL. It was a proud moment to play the final at the beautiful Adelaide Oval. A very professional championship was conducted by Dave Cohen and Garry Gulliver. NSWCCC were the outstanding team and deserved Australian Champions.

The Australian Schoolboys touring team to Papua New Guinea was named together with an Australian Developing States Merit team.

Championship Results:

Monday July 8 VIC 18 - NT 16; WA 20 - SA 4; NSWCCC 42 - NSWCHS 4; ACT 48 - QSS 8
Tuesday July 9 SA 34 - VIC 4; NSWCCC 40 - QSS 4
Wednesday July 10 WA 16 - NT 10; NSWCHS 16 - ACT 10
Thursday July 11 NSWCHS 18 - QSS 16; NSWCCC 18 - ACT 4; WA 18 - SA 0 (Developing States Final)
Friday July 12 NT 40 - VIC 0; QSS 36 - SA 8; ACT 28 - WA 12; NSWCCC 22 - NSWCHS 0 (In the Championship Final)

The Australian Schoolboys wish to thank the Commonwealth Bank for many years of sponsorship and the ARL for their continued assistance and support.

Plans for 1997 include hosting BARLA's Under 18 Young Lions and playing the Under 15s Championship in Queensland and Under 18s in NSW.



My run of schoolboy successes included the Australian Schoolboys tour to Papua New Guinea. (PHOTO COURTESY Frank Puletua)

with the growth of Pacific communities following huge migrations of peoples from the islands settling in the major cities of Auckland, Wellington and to a lesser extent Dunedin and Christchurch. Today we see the current All Black team featuring no less than eleven players of Pacific and/or Māori heritage.

When we look at certain NRL clubs comparatively over the last 20 years — from the selected years of 1993, 2003 and 2013 — the numbers show a huge increase of Pacific and Māori players entering the full time system of the NRL.

The Canterbury Bulldogs in season 1993 had one sole player of Māori heritage in Jason Williams. Jump to 2003, and the number of Pacific players increased to five including names such as Roy Asotasi and Nigel Vagana. Today's squad consists of ten players in the Bulldogs top 25 squad including the likes of Frank Pritchard, Krisnan Inu, Sam Perrett and Tony Williams.

The Sydney Roosters, the current minor premiers, had only one player of Pacific heritage in 1993 in Kiwi hard man Jason Lowrie. The 2003 squad showed a fair increase, with seven Pacific players representing the tri-colours including Jason Cayless, Andrew Lomu and Lopini Paea. The current 2013 squad comprises one of the largest contingents that are of Pacific heritage with an amazing eighteen players in the first grade squad — an increase of nearly 65 per cent in the space of 20 years. These players include the likes of Frank Paul-Nu'uauasala, Tinarau Arona, Michael Jennings, Jared Waerea-Hargreaves, Daniel Tupou, Roger Tuivasa-Sheck and Sonny Bill Williams.

We now see the changing demographics of western Sydney Pacific peoples inadvertently affect the landscape of rugby league in Australia, as it has done to most sports in New Zealand. This influx coincides with migrations and settlements of Pacific peoples in New Zealand, and now emerging in Australia.

The Changing Wallabies

The Wallabies are another example of a changing landscape in an Australian sport. The playing rosters throughout the history of the Wallabies show a strong Anglo-Australian representation. This is not surprising due to the lifeblood of the code coming through a private schooling and middle-class network. It would be incorrect to say that this would be exclusive of working-class talent streams, as shown in the rise of players from a Tongan heritage such as Willie Ofahegaue and Daniel Manu representing the Wallabies throughout the late 1980s to mid-1990s.

The changing face of the Wallabies can be no more evident than in the current squad which consists of players such as the Faaingaa twins, Matt Toomua, Christian Leali'ifano, Albert Anae, Sekope Kepu and Israel Folau.

The significant shift in player personnel for team contact sports such as rugby league and rugby union I will attribute to three key factors: demographic changes, affordability and suitability. The changes of demographic in western Sydney alone has seen the growth of Pacific communities to a level where there are now over 90,000 people residing in New South Wales and over 100,000 in the state of Queensland. By comparison, New Zealand's Pacific population exceeds a quarter of a million people.

The sport of rugby league draws many of its players from the lower socio-economic working class areas of New South Wales and Queensland. Most grassroots clubs are run off very modest budgets

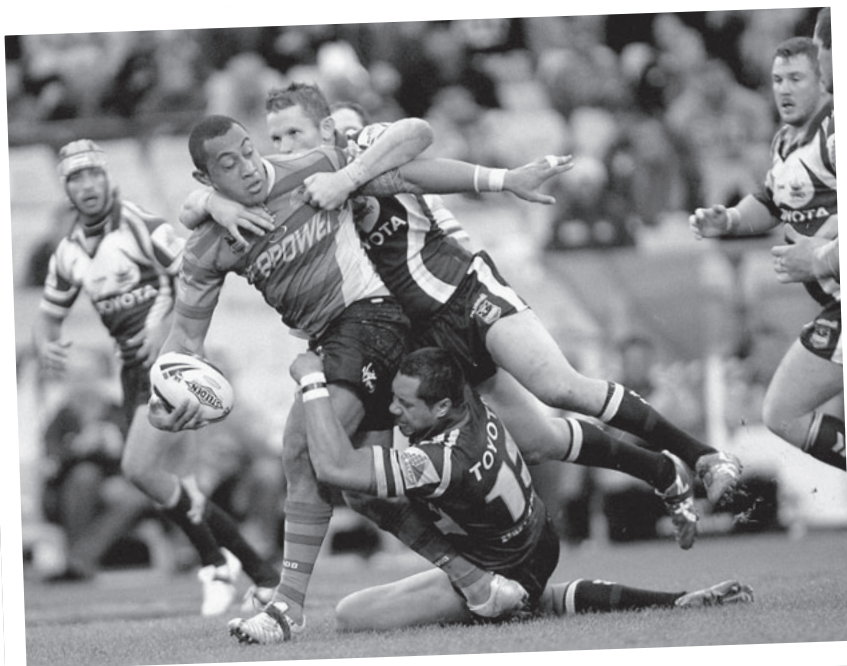
and run their yearly operations by underpaid administration staff, parents and the support of community volunteers. The fact that registration fees are affordable creates an entry point into the sport of rugby league for many people. The fees are justifiable within a Pacific family context when placed against sports such as basketball, soccer and cricket. Registration fees for footy can range from \$50 and \$100, where by comparison a sport such as basketball incurs registration fees starting from \$150 and \$15 court fee per match; not to mention the costs of a uniform and the newest Nike Air Max shoes!

The last factor mentioned is one that is commonly spoken about when discussing Pacific players. The general view that all Pacific players are big, strong and athletic has been perpetuated over time by visions of larger than life players such as Kevin Iro, Leslie Vainikolo, Frank Pritchard, Tony Williams, Sonny Bill Williams and even Tony Puletua.

These Pacific players that make it become walking advertisements for the sport of rugby league within their respective communities. They inadvertently project the idea of success through souped-up cars, brand new homes and exorbitant contributions to the church and family *faalavelaves*. This is coupled with the marketing of players, social media, promotional and engagement schedules and the coverage by media and radio on and off the field providing a surreal existence that becomes self-absorbing and in many ways untenable.

In turn, the corresponding pressures applied from within the family unit to support the church, the family network, and everything else that comes with a new lifestyle puts players in a volatile position due to its unsustainability. The current insular environment in which first grade footballers exist continues a dangerous paradigm that in my opinion creates real problems, especially for young Pacific players. Due to the insularity of Pacific communities and the displacement of Pacific youth growing up caught between traditional Pacific culture and western society, Pacific players that enter the football environment are ill-equipped to take on the world of rugby league and all it offers.

The unfortunate predicament that confronts many of our Pacific players is that due to inferior education, limited social and effective communication skills — overlaid with an ingrained subservient mentality — the opportunities presented through the game cannot be accessed. This places many Pacific players in the precarious position of leaving the game no better off than when they first entered.



Roy Asotasi in action for South Sydney, 2007. The Canterbury Bulldogs in season 1993 had one sole player of Māori heritage. In 2003 the number of Pacific players increased to five, including Roy, pictured here playing for the Rabbitohs.

(PHOTO COURTESY National Rugby League)

My view is that education will always be the vital ingredient for all players — Pacific or not — with regards to harnessing the opportunities in the game. I advocate this even more so directly to players of Pacific and/or Māori heritage due to my understanding of culture, knowledge of community and learned experience in my time in football. I studied for eight years of the thirteen that I played, completing degrees in fine arts and graphic design. I also managed to fit a post-production diploma in during the 2005 and 2006 seasons.

The Lifelong Journey

What is of importance at this time of change in the game is that players from Pacific and/or Māori heritage gain a better understanding of what they contribute — on and off the field — and in effect what the game can provide for them by way of education,

network and resource. The game now offers more opportunity than ever before. In order to access that opportunity, players will need to allocate time to explore away from the football environment and — more importantly — to educate and equip themselves with the requisite knowledge and skill set to do so.

Education is the key to achieving all of what you want and more. My view is that education does not begin and end when you go to university, TAFE or school. Education is in everything that you do and requires a steely work ethic during a lifelong journey.

For me, even football has been a long and rewarding education.

As it is for all players that are fortunate to play in the great sport of rugby league, it has also been an amazing experience. I am proud to have experienced and be a part of the inner sanctum of the team and the special fraternity of first grade footballers.

Football will always be a part of my life and will forever be etched in the history of my family.

Football evokes many emotions and feelings and when I think of rugby league, the journey it has afforded me and what it has done for me and my family, I gain a greater understanding of why it is referred to as ‘the greatest game of all’.





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THE 15TH ANNUAL TOM BROCK LECTURE was delivered by Frank Puletua. This lecture was entitled *Chocolate Soldier: The Emergence of Pacific Players in the NRL*.

Sydney's outer western suburbs have been a prolific nursery for rugby league but the changing nature of the population has brought its own challenges.

The rising Polynesian presence in this part of Sydney and in rugby league has had a huge impact on the modern game.

Who better to examine and analyse this phenomenon than a Samoan front rower from Mount Druitt who has defied stereotypes to combine a distinguished career on field with two university degrees?

How does his personal story reveal wider social issues that are shaping the game in the 21st century?



Tom Brock

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