

My People, My Game

Dean Widders



18th Annual Tom Brock Lecture

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99 On York
Sydney NSW
20 September 2016



Australian Society for Sports History

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Tom Brock Bequest

The Tom Brock Bequest, given to the Australian Society for Sports History (ASSH) in 1997, consists of the Tom Brock Collection supported by an ongoing bequest. The Collection, housed at the State Library of New South Wales, includes manuscript material, newspaper clippings, books, photographs and videos on rugby league in particular and Australian sport in general. It represents the finest collection of rugby league material in Australia. ASSH has appointed a Committee to oversee the Bequest and to organise appropriate activities to support the Collection from its ongoing funds.

Objectives

1. To maintain the Tom Brock Collection.
2. To organise an annual scholarly lecture on the history of Australian rugby league.
3. To award an annual Tom Brock Scholarship to the value of \$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/

My People, My Game

Dean Widders grew up in Armidale in country NSW where rugby league gave the Indigenous community a chance to make progress provided a strong voice of unity to the Indigenous community. As a player he spent nine years in first grade with the Roosters, Parramatta and South Sydney before finishing his career in England with Castleford.

His passion for the game and for helping the Indigenous community has combined to provide him with great opportunities to learn more about the power of his culture. This power motivated him in his career on the field and still motivates him today in his career off the field where he works as an Indigenous leader in rugby league.

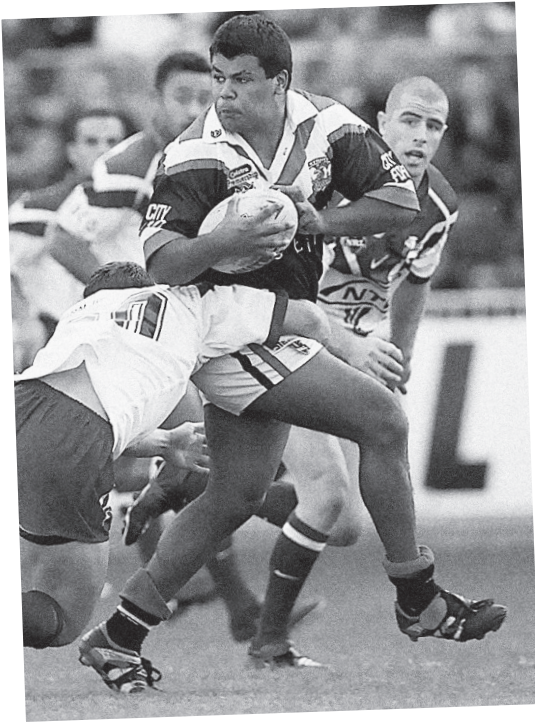
These days he is employed educating Indigenous players about their responsibilities as role models to our communities, but also seeks to ensure they are armed with the skills and knowledge to have a strong positive voice to create a better Australia.

18th Annual Tom Brock Lecture 2016,
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Yugga dunya emberoonga, Yinga oiyutjika Nyawanna
Yinga iwata kata,
NYaka Armidale ngi
NYaka Ingelpahngi
Nyaka Malarindi rata ngi
Nyaka awa Gadigal Eora kyuna nda
Nyaka rugyuna gadigal eora kyuna nda

Translation

My clan is the Himberong, my tribe and language is Anaiwan
My totem is the echidna
I am from Armidale
My family comes from a place called Ingelba
It is the place of beautiful waters
We are on Gadigal land part of the Eora nation
I pay my respects to the Gadigal and ancestors past and elders present.



*Dean Widders in action
for his first NRL club,
Sydney Roosters,
15 July 2001
(Courtesy of the
National Rugby League).*

I would like to start by acknowledging the traditional owners of the land which we gather on today and pay my respects to elders past and present.

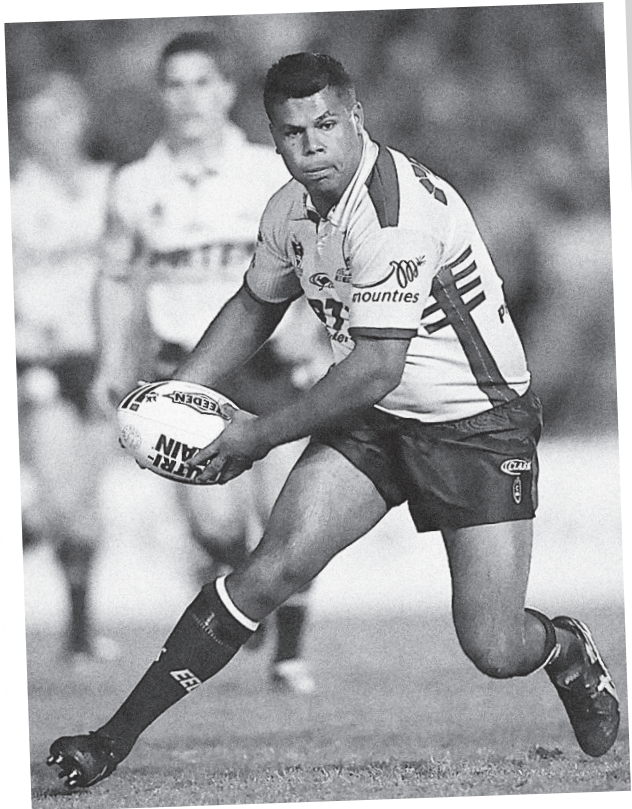
The Gadigal is part of the Eora nation

Before I begin let me thank everyone for turning up today and supporting me, and I would especially like to thank the Tom Brock Bequest Committee for the fantastic opportunity I have been given to present today.

“My People, My Game” is the title of my lecture, and these two most cherished things have been the driving force behind everything that I strive to do in my life and the motivation for the successes that I chase.

*Dean Widders gets
a pass away for the
Parramatta Eels
against the
Cronulla Sharks,
26 March 2005.*

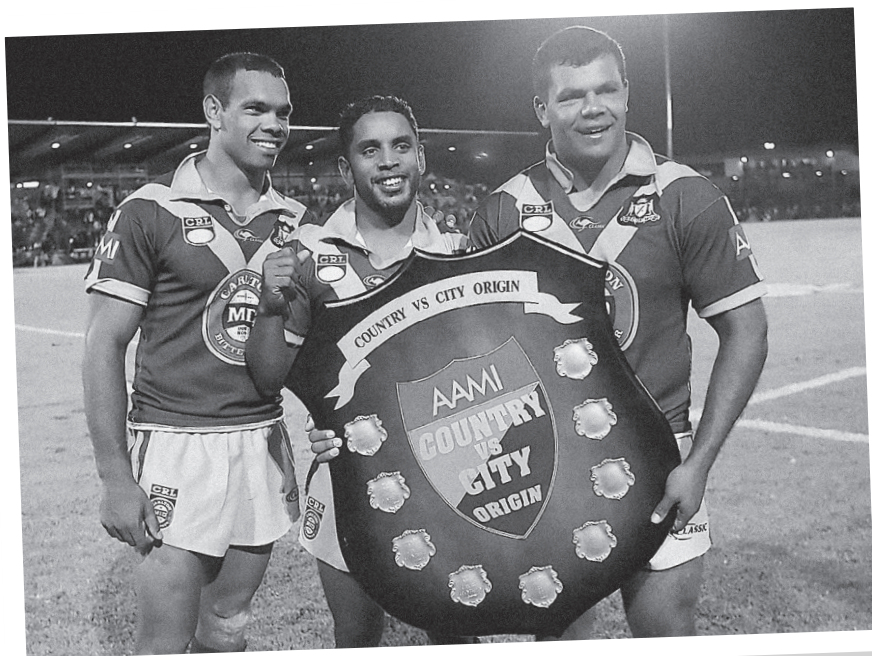
*(Courtesy of the
National Rugby League).*



My people

My people are my family, my daughters and my son, my wife Olivia, my mum and dad; my sisters and brother and all my extended family. The tough life my Nan had as part of the Stolen Generations. My inspirational grandfather who was one of the first Aboriginal men in Armidale to own his house and who worked a record number of years on the local council.

Things were so tough for them living in this country, but they never let that hold them back and they made a real difference for their children and grandkids. They overcame their hardships and taught us as kids to be proud of our past battles, to make us strong today so that we can build a more positive future.

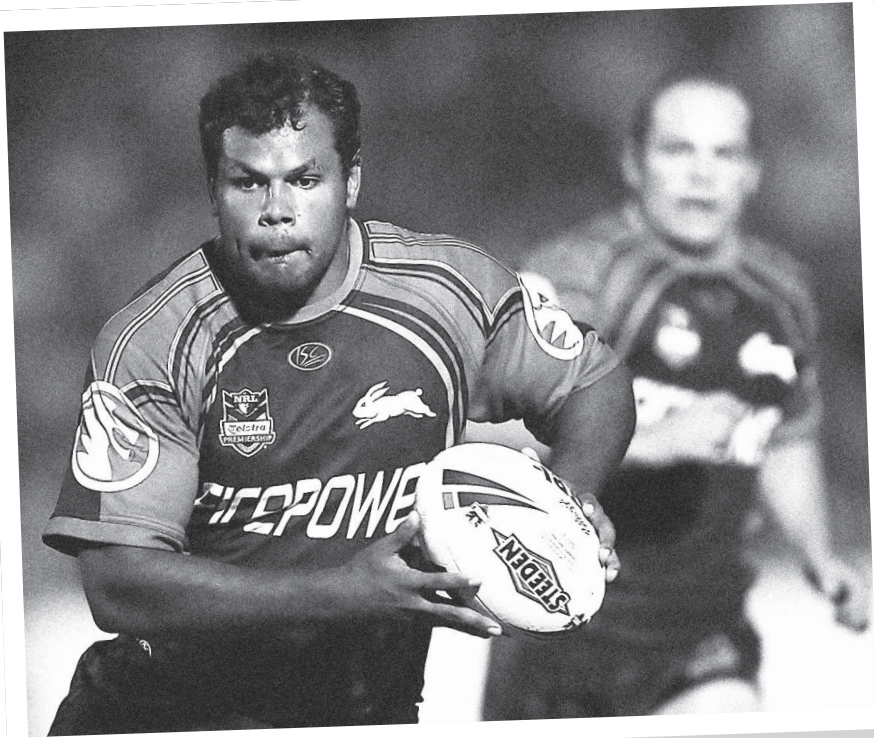


Amos Roberts, Preston Campbell and Dean Widders with the shield after Country's victory in the NSW City v Country Origin match in Dubbo, 12 May 2006
(Courtesy of the National Rugby League).

The longest surviving culture

My people are Indigenous Australians — the Aboriginal people from mainland Australia and Torres Strait Islands who even today are some of the most disadvantaged people in the world, but more proudly for me the longest surviving culture in the world. 60,000 plus years. We talk of ancient people in the world — Ancient Greeks, Romans, the Spartans, Ancient Egypt — they're all newcomers compared to us.

My people are also non-Indigenous Australians, the great people from my communities where I have lived, the fantastic volunteers that have shaped my life and so many others. Some that spring to mind are my junior football coach, Steve Dawson who virtually adopted me as his son. He had red hair and so did all his kids but I was like their Aboriginal brother. He took me everywhere and supported me always. He is a rugby league fan and he would dedicate his nights training teams, and weekends driving us all over the state playing football.



*Dean Widders playing for the South Sydney Rabbitohs against the North Queensland Cowboys at ANZ Stadium, 4 May 2008
(Courtesy of the National Rugby League).*

I also remember my high school coach Pat Turley who coached our team at Duval High School with a high proportion of Aboriginal players. We were known as the Koalas, and he took us all the way to the state final and he taught us all so many valuable lessons in life. My people are the community of Armidale where I grew up and learned to love the game, played the game, and I cannot wait to get back to any chance I get to help young people.

My game is rugby league, the game I love, the game which makes me the person who I am today and which I have played since I was seven years old. I still run around — proudly and/or foolishly — with the Redfern All Blacks in the South Sydney competition because I love it so much.



The Redfern All Blacks celebrate their golden-point win over Newcastle All Blacks in the grand final of the Koori Knockout, 5 October 2015

(Courtesy of Dean Widders).

My game

My game took me to places all over the world, gave me some of the biggest thrills I have had in life, introduced me to some of the people I know and taught me some of the most valuable lessons in life. I remember hearing the saying “The game owes me nothing, I owe the game everything”, said by many legendary rugby league players and as a young man I did not understand the love and pride that went with this message, but now I know and 100 percent agree — I owe the game everything.

Rugby league owes me nothing, I owe the game everything.

I owe it my time, to put back into communities to hopefully inspire the young people to strive harder to achieve their goals and dreams, to teach them how to be a good teammate and friend, to be there when things are getting toughest, to bounce back after a tough loss.



The NRL Indigenous players leadership camp at Stradbroke Island
(Courtesy of Dean Widders).

I owe it my passion to help causes, to give a voice to those in need, to see positive change in the community, to help kids who grow up with tough circumstances have a chance at making something good of their lives.

I owe it my commitment to teach about accepting difference, to understanding disadvantage, to educate people about the differences between talented and gifted, disadvantaged and privileged.

I owe my energy and effort to help my game to continue to do what it has done for many many years, and help people come together; to see our game and what it stands for: Values of the NRL make our teams, our clubs, our communities, our towns, our states and our country great!

Combine these two things and you have my life every day and the change I seek to create. My game, my people is a relationship that started for me in Armidale a long time ago before I was actually

even born. The local Aboriginal community had started to rebuild itself, after dispossession and the Stolen Generations had brought the community to its knees; employment was rare, education was tough and the opportunity to stand up for yourself and get an equal chance at life just didn't exist for our mob.

Even on the sporting field there were great injustices done to the Aboriginal players who had been exceptionally talented in rugby league. The story goes they would be the best players all season and get the teams into the final, but would be dropped as soon as the big games came around at the pinnacle point of the season.

"Not good enough, not tough enough" they would say, so in 1978 the Aboriginal community came together and hatched a plan. We will make our own team for all our men, and we will show everyone around here we are good enough. Armidale All Blacks was the name they came up with but one of the founding members, Uncle Mitch Morris sought the help of my great grandfather and asked what traditional name we could give to the team.

Narwan Eels

This is the Anaiwan tribe's land, so they called the team Narwan. Parramatta were one of the favourite teams in the competition at this time so blue and gold colours were attached, and the Narwan Eels were born.

Now I know when I introduce myself I say that I am from the toughest and best looking tribe in NSW, but when you look at the results on the field for our team and the values behind that team you will see it's not far from the truth. Five premierships in a row from 1980–1985, five times NSW Aboriginal champions, and winners of the prestigious Clayton Cup as the best team in country NSW in 1980. It is a wonderful, proud record.

This team changed Armidale. Their attractive style of football and never say die attitude drew as many non-Indigenous supporters as it did Aboriginal people to their games. Armidale had seen the positive in the Aboriginal community and the potential our people had.

Many years later, when I was a kid growing up, our community had come together. The Armidale Colts was our junior club and there were 50 percent Aboriginal players in our club. We all got along so well, and one of the reasons we had a lot of success was because most of the teams and towns we played had either all Indigenous teams or all non-Indigenous teams, and our mixture of everyone working together and accepting difference gave us the edge on the other sides.



Dean Widders and Greg Inglis at the Welcome to Country ceremony from the Noonuccal people of Stradbroke Island (Courtesy of Dean Widders).

It was a great place to grow up.

Historically my game has done so much for my people. From the time Arthur Beetson became the first national sporting captain for any Indigenous sportsman, to the last twelve months, with record numbers in any national sporting team in both men's and women's rugby league.

Great achievements

Having six players chosen for the Anzac Tests and, remarkably, the winning captains of all grand final teams last year being Indigenous, it gives people like me who work in the game an opportunity to capitalise on the great achievements by our players.

I see it as my responsibility. I have a great job in the game where I get to work with the best people in sports administration to use rugby league as a vehicle to drive positive change into our Indigenous communities.

Indigenous communities love rugby league, it is something you will see this week and next when over 250 rugby league teams of all ages will play in the Murri Carnival and Koori Knockout in NSW. They call these events the modern day corroboree, and for as long as I can remember they have been a highlight on any of our mob's calendar.

Over 45 000 people attended the Koori Knockout over four days in Dubbo last year, and the passion of the men, women and children that play and support has to be seen to be believed. If it's football they will come.

The power of rugby league

I have been in towns where they have struggled getting our people in for health checks at the local medical centres. We usually don't do anything about our health until it's too late, but this year I visited communities with the *One Deadly Step*, program which saw over 300 people get their medical checks at each community because it was attached to rugby league and NRL players.

The Murri Carnival requires all players to undertake a medical test to play in the event, and has attendance programs where kids have to attend school 90 percent of the time to participate. They all do it. They make sure they fulfil those requirements so they can play football.

There was one small town I visited as part of the *Titans for Tomorrow* program, where we took some of the stars of the team to country areas. The players did an appearance at the medical centre and part of the deal was if you got a check up you took part in the visit. Now this town had a population of less than 300 people but on the day they did over 400 medical tests, again showing the power of rugby league in my community.

“Our People, Our Game”

“My People My Game” was the title of my speech, but after hearing from me tonight I hope we can all embrace this passion for the game and realise what it can do for Aboriginal people — and for us as a country, as Australia moves closer and closer to reconciliation. I hope we can all share a bit in that ownership of rugby league and embrace what it does and what it can do.

Then we can all see it as “Our People, Our Game”.



Indigenous All Stars, coached by Dean Widders, celebrate their victory over World in the Women's All Stars match in Newcastle, 10 February 2017
(Courtesy of Dean Widders).



SUBSCRIPTIONS

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THE 18TH ANNUAL TOM BROCK LECTURE
was delivered by Dean Widders. This lecture was
entitled *My People, My Game*.

Indigenous footballers have contributed more to
rugby league than perhaps to any other Australian sport,
and the game is a huge part of Indigenous communities.

Participation in rugby league has brought many
positive outcomes for Indigenous communities but
there have also been some challenges along the way.

Dean Widders will examine the place of rugby league
in those communities through his own experience and
look at the ways the game can affect a positive change.



Tom Brock

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