

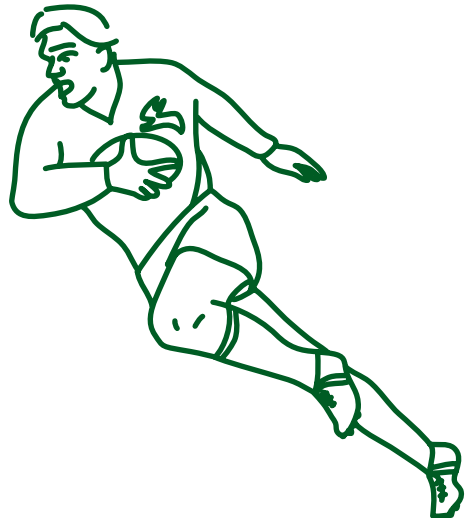
8TH ANNUAL

TOM BROCK LECTURE

NSW LEAGUES' CLUB • 21 September 2006

*The Stuff of Dreams,
or the Dream Stuffed?*

*Rugby League, Media Empires,
Sex Scandals, and Global Plays*



Professor David Rowe

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Published in 2007 by the
Tom Brock Bequest Committee on behalf of
the Australian Society for Sports History

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ISBN: 978-0-7334-2557-8

Design & layout: UNSW Publishing & Printing Services

Printer: Graphitype

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 \$5,000.
4. To undertake any other activities which may advance the serious study of rugby league.
5. To publicise the above activities.

Activities:

1. The Tom Brock Lecture.
2. The Tom Brock Scholarship.
3. Updating the Collection with new material published on rugby league.
4. Reporting to ASSH on an annual basis.

Details of the Tom Brock Bequest are located on the website of the Australian Society for Sports History: www.sporthistory.org.

It is now over a decade since the Super League War confirmed all the worst fears of those who see contemporary sport as a wholly owned subsidiary of corporate commercial media. Rugby league has recovered on the surface, with a unified League, open competition, and respectable crowds, television ratings, and sponsorships in the usual places. The NRL competition is successful in that it does produce a rapid turnover of winners—it rains reigning premiers, with seven different teams having won since 1998 and no team winning consecutive competitions. League loudly asserts that the house rent in twain in the last century is in good order for the current one. But is such optimism justified?

Despite official pronouncements that the Super League cataclysm is a thing of the past, it continues to stalk the code like Banquo's Ghost at a Macbeth family dinner. The scars of the Murdoch-Packer collision are still visible, a constant reminder that the 'people's game' can be turned upside down if media capital with big ego so decrees. Frequent sexual misconduct scandals have required the code to resort to gender re-education, and financial improprieties around salary caps commend similar courses in business ethics. The iconic South Sydney club has been re-instated to the competition, but on public relations rather than firm legal grounds, and is subject to internecine warfare, with few pre-restoration 'big day out' demonstrators now witnessing their frequent losses before crowds that mostly struggle to make five figures.¹ The 'world game' of (association) football once known as soccer is resurgent, with Frank Lowy as a Packer for the new millennium, a ticket to the 2006 World Cup finals and the Asian Football Confederation, and a shiny new (if ill-advisedly restrictive) pay TV contract. Professionalised rugby union, with abundant cash and impeccable city connections, raids the ranks of League's best players (and sometimes gets them back in shop-worn late career), promising serious international competitions that make a mockery of League's claim to be of much significance beyond eastern Australasia, south-west France, and pockets of northern England somehow missed by

'The scars of the Murdoch-Packer collision are still visible.'



Australia World Cup soccer football mad cartoon by Nicholson (courtesy Nicholson of the Australian: www.nicholsoncartoons.com.au).

the football juggernaut. The now genuinely national Australian Rules football, with even less of an international presence than League, successfully brandishes its socialistic draft and massive \$780 million, five-year TV rights contract.²

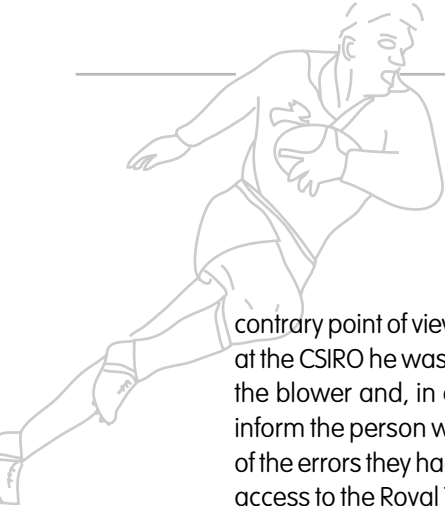
Rugby league in Australia and a small number of places, then, is alive and kicking, but confronting a diminished place in the hierarchy of Australian sport. It is not so much threatened with extinction as sporting subordination. It may seem perverse to be pessimistic as the season reaches its climax, but before the carnivalesque pleasure of the Grand Final, it is advisable to review the state of the game—and reconsider the gifts bestowed by Super League a decade on. Does its trumpeted dream seek to conceal the recurring nightmare of the permanent wooden spoon among the four football codes? In seeking to answer this question, I'm going to address globalisation, the media, and the sports labour market; the legacy of Super League; issues of gender, and the series of sexual scandals that have consistently besmirched the name of rugby league in recent years.

'It is not so much threatened with extinction as sporting subordination.'

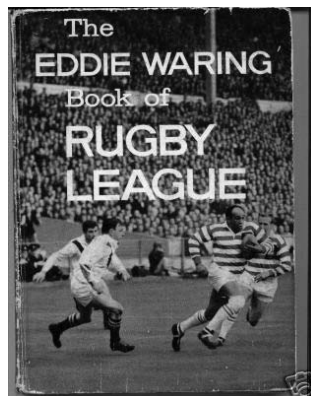
A short rugby league autobiography

I am an unconventional choice to deliver the Tom Brock annual lecture. Previous speakers have been an all-male line up of sports historians, authors, playwrights and journalists, united by their love of League. While not breaking the mould in sex/gender terms, I'm more of an interested observer and ambivalent appreciator of the game than a rusted-on fan. Among the football codes I prefer association football (soccer) and rugby union. I've gone to the odd League game, but I don't regularly attend any sports arena to watch any sport, and I don't even subscribe to pay television. I've been researching and analysing media sports culture, especially in relation to media, for many years, as an almost accidental offshoot of work on popular music and journalism. In my spare moments I'm mostly an armchair spectator, with varied leisure consumption uses for sport—sometimes as premium programming, but often as audio-visual wallpaper. I especially enjoy the unanticipated pleasure of being casually drawn into a screen sports contest in which I have little prior interest, such as an Australian Rules game, caring beyond reason about the outcome, and probably forgetting why by the following morning.

My relationship to rugby league shifts from sharp interest to mild indifference, spikes of partisanship to flashes of irritation and incomprehension. There have been times, though, when I've been as attentive a television spectator of State of Origin and some of the closer Test matches as the best of League supporters, and I have twice found myself going disconcertingly ape in hooning around the streets of Newcastle, my former home town, after Grand Final wins. I'm here, then, as an interested outsider, neither a congenital devotee of the game nor entirely immune to its appeal. Like the television referee asked to adjudicate on a dubious match event, I'll call it as I see it with both sightless eyes, and interrupt the smooth flow of play with seemingly interminable yet somehow deeply flawed decisions. From what I've heard about Tom Brock, he didn't mind a vigorous debate over a



contrary point of view. I'm also told that at the CSIRO he was known to get onto the blower and, in a stentorian voice, inform the person who had answered of the errors they had made. If Tom has access to the Royal Telephone tonight, I'll be expecting his call.



The cover of Eddie Waring's Book of Rugby League.

My earliest memories of rugby league are the grainy black and white television images of the BBC Television's Saturday afternoon Grandstand program, compered by the linguistically eccentric Eddie Waring. Rugby league didn't mean much in the south west of England where I grew up. It was a northern game, characterised by big, burly men made almost indistinguishable by mud, bumping into others with similarly impressive beer guts, their seemingly atavistic activities interpreted by Eddie, whose commentary could have benefited from sub-titles for most people born out of earshot of Coronation Street. I have learnt from Andrew Moore's inaugural Tom Brock lecture that Eddie Waring briefly graced Australian screens in the 1960s through the ABC's broadcast of British games.³ I also understand that Eddie had a stoush with Brisbane game caller George Lovejoy in 1966.⁴ The mind boggles at how Australians received Eddie's weird commentating style, but according to Andrew he made exquisite play with the name of Arthur Beetson during the latter's stint with Hull Kingston Rovers. It can never happen now, but Eddie and Arty as joint commentators on a Great Britain-Australia Test match would have been something to hear—if not to decipher.

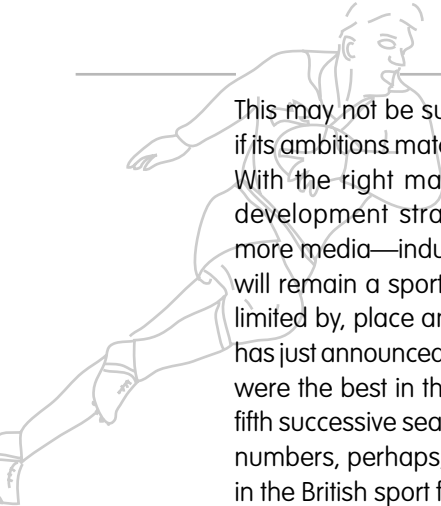
It was many years later that I saw Lindsay Anderson's 1963 film *This Sporting Life*, and although this was British neo-realism rather than Hollywood glitz, the rough-hewn charisma of Richard Harris's Frank Machin had little in common with the specimens of northern English masculinity lionised by Edward Marsden Waring. Even the annual

Challenge Cup Final traditionally held at Wembley, English association football's most sacred site, did little to insert rugby league into the mainstream across the whole nation. The evening news routinely represented it as an affable annual invasion of flat caps from the north who, although seemingly from the same neighbourhoods as the football hooligans of Greater Manchester and Leeds, displayed little interest in threatening and assaulting each other, or the citizens of London and other residents of the 'Soft South'.

Over the years I've watched rugby league in Britain develop from a highly regionalised sport with little in the way of proper international competition and massively dominated by association football. Following its velvet Super League revolution, League in Britain has emerged in the 21st century as a highly regionalised sport with little in the way of proper international competition and massively dominated by association football—but with Murdoch money. This is one of the principal reasons why rugby league must remain a minor sport in global terms—its lack of multi-regional, let alone multi-national appeal.



Bradford Northern v. Hull KR at Odsal Stadium, 23 Mar. 1968 (courtesy of 'The Bradford Bulls Foundation' and the (Bradford) Telegraph and Argus. The Bradford Bulls Foundation is 'funded' by the Heritage Lottery Fund).



This may not be such a bad thing if its ambitions match its prospects. With the right maintenance and development strategies and no more media—induced carnage, it will remain a sport that draws its strength, and is in equal measure limited by, place and history.⁵ Super League headquarters in the UK has just announced that average weekly crowd attendance this season were the best in the 11 years of the competition, and had risen for a fifth successive season to a new high of 9026.⁶ An encouraging set of numbers, perhaps, but further confirmation of the position of League in the British sport firmament.

‘It will remain a sport that draws its strength, and is in equal measure limited by, place and history.’

In moving over two decades ago to New South Wales after a brief residency in Tasmania, I was impressed with the deep roots that rugby league had sunk on the eastern seaboard of Australia. But even here, my destination of Wagga Wagga was clearly border territory, with a strong Australian Rules football affiliation (who could forget the Ganmain-Grong Grong Matong club?) and, at grass roots level at least, a penchant for association football. Next stop Newcastle was much more promising rugby league territory, but this history was curiously fractured by local disagreements over participation in a Sydney-run competition. When the Knights won the Super League-split ARL Grand Final in 1997 (with the local Super League franchise, the Hunter Mariners, runners up in the World Club Challenge just three weeks later), those caught in the moment with short memories made much of that team’s ‘tradition’ and ‘heritage’, which might have stretched back to 1908–9 were it not

‘When the Knights won the Super League-split ARL Grand Final in 1997 ... those caught in the moment with short memories made much of that team’s “tradition” and “heritage”.’

for the inconvenient eight-decade long hiatus in regular competition outside the Hunter Region.⁷ This supporter of Plymouth Argyle Football Club, founded in 1886, was amusingly bewildered that he’d lived within walking distance of the International Sports Centre (later Marathon and now EnergyAustralia Stadium) for two years before the venerable Newcastle Knights ever took to the pitch there. The Knights did it again in 2001, and this time it wasn’t necessary to sup-

press any loose, disloyal talk of winning a weakened competition. As far as local sports teams went, though, the late lamented association football team Newcastle KB United, which was formed in 1977 and folded in 1984 after winning a national knockout competition against the Melbourne Knights in Melbourne, might still lay claim to the city's most genuine national football code success.

Leaving 'Joey' Johns (the much-lauded player once courted by rugby union but seemingly bonded to league through Channel Nine⁸) behind in Newcastle this year has taken me into new rugby league zones—a home on the border of Souths and 'Tiger country', an office closer to the Parramatta Eels, and regular traversal of the Greater Western Sydney Region, encompassing Canterbury and Penrith, and the Tigers' 'other half' who were once Western Suburbs. Most people I meet have a League team that they care about, but if the 'water cooler' test is a reliable scientific instrument, then League has in 2006 been somewhat obscured in conversational space by other forms of sport, especially of an international nature. This year, the British Empire (now Commonwealth) Games and the FIFA World Cup have hogged the sport talk turf, and even the Tour de France (otherwise known as the Tour de Farce)—for me a blandly scenic late night holiday program marred by men in aesthetically disturbing costumes on permanent suspicion of artificially induced hormonal imbalances—has sometimes consigned League to the chasing chat pack.

'League has in 2006 been somewhat obscured ... by other forms of sport.'

But sports competitions, like all long-form narratives, have their moments of light and shade, quiet passages and moving endings. The 'sudden death' element of finals series matches, and the pageantry of the Grand Final itself, provide the requisite (melo)drama. Rivalries old and new, lavishly primed with media imagery and 'sportuguese', come to the surface at such times as they re-assert the importance of the partisan and the local. Parochialism is a crucial pre-requisite for the continuing success of sport, but it is of itself not enough to secure its place in the pantheon. If capital, culture, media, technology, athletic labour power and audiences are international, and subject to the massification of global spectacle,⁹ where does this leave a sport, like rugby league, that in a hundred years has found it difficult not only to cross national boundaries, but even state lines?



Global appeal

The scale of the problem for any rugby league imperialists wishing to establish it as a major international sport is striking if the 2003 Rugby World Cup in Australia or the 2006 World Cup of association football in Germany is compared with the fiasco of the last rugby league World Cup in 2000, with its often indifferent crowds, frequently uneven matches, and over-stretched inclusion of such international League powers as Russia, Lebanon, and the Cook Islands. The 13th World Cup, to be held in Australia in 2008 and marking the centenary of the game in the southern hemisphere, must certainly pale by comparison with these events, and even leading annual individual international sports tournaments like the Australian Open Tennis Championships. League is seemingly caught between its internationalist aspirations and the sporting socialism in one country position of Australian Rules football (the annual International Rules encounter with Ireland offering only an eccentric diversion). Super League was supposed to fix this problem, claiming, in its epic rhetorical tussle with the Australian Rugby League, that its grand 'global vision' was to use the media apparatus of News Corporation and the umbrella arrangements with Britain and France to make League a leading international sport rather than what News saw as an antipodean backwater presided over by its myopic administrators and big-fish-in-a-small-national-pond media proprietor, the late Kerry Packer.¹⁰

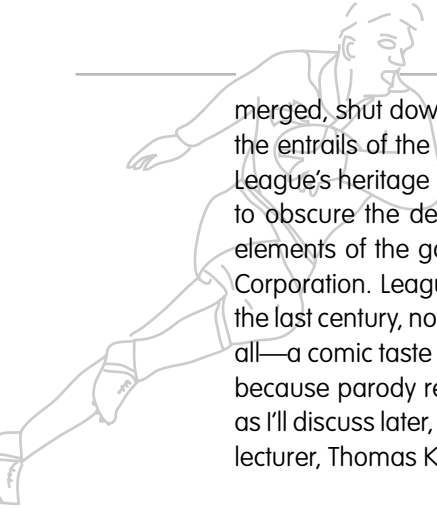
Murdoch and Packer did come to their rapprochement after the expensive, ego-laden Super League dispute, but as in all wars the cost of reconstruction has been high.¹¹ The last ten years have involved healing wounds and rebuilding trust with clubs and fans. If it is believed that I am over-emphasising the damaging legacy of Super League, then I can turn for support to last year's Tom Brock lecturer, Roy Masters, a dyed-in-the-wool League man who is no friend of academics who write critically about sport. According to Masters 'Confrontation lies at the essence of sport, even cricket. Batter v. bowler, or in baseball, batter

versus pitcher. For some, rugby league is still ARL versus Super League.’¹² Four years earlier, Alex Buzo, a man who could anticipate a tautology from a footy commentator’s mouth before the speaker’s brain had even sent the signal to it, and who sadly died in August this year, exclaimed ‘What a wedge those hectic days of the 1995 pay-television war have driven!’¹³ The problem in all sport is that cleavages are easily created because fans are by definition immoderate. Patient bridge building is much harder, and soothing technocratic talk of ‘strategic synergies’ and marketing clichés about ‘going forward’ likely to be resisted, as any Newtown Jets fan will attest.

At the height of the Super League war, I recall attending a ‘Stop Murdoch Committee’ campaign rally organised by ‘Aussies for the ARL’ in the main auditorium of what was then the Newcastle Workers Club (now called, with considerable historical irony, Newcastle Panthers, and part of the Panthers World at the heart of which is former Super League club the Penrith Panthers). Large screens carried images of Kerry Packer, as the noble media baron with the interests of the game at heart, and of Rupert Murdoch as the malevolently Machiavellian manipulator interested only in turning a buck at any cost. Kerry was cheered and Rupert booed and hissed in true Christmas pantomime style, and only a foolhardy dissenter would have seized the microphone and declaimed ‘a pox on both their houses!’ But the House of Packer did sell out the ARL (few if any of Packer Senior’s obituarists who routinely celebrated his contribution to cricket extended their praise to his role in League), and Murdoch secured a major stake in the Australian game. The confused foot soldiers of ‘Aussies for the ARL’ must have wondered why their generals had used them as cannon fodder only to make a dishonourable, balance sheet shaped peace settlement.

‘Kerry was cheered and Rupert booed and hissed in true Christmas pantomime style, and only a foolhardy dissenter would have seized the microphone and declaimed “a pox on both their houses!”’

The passions aroused by Super League cannot be doused by Prozac and incantations of ‘putting it all behind us’. It is still hard to repress the recurrent images of the sons of sons of media moguls barnstorming the country, signing up everything in shoulder pads; of clubs opened,



merged, shut down, ejected and re-instated; of lawyers picking over the entrails of the 'Working Man's Game'. The NRL has emphasised League's heritage in its short life as a classic rhetorical move seeking to obscure the defeat of the more traditional, perhaps reactionary elements of the game at the hands of the modernisers from News Corporation. League may have become anachronistic at the end of the last century, not only in its meat pie ethos (if Reg Reagan is funny at all—a comic taste I seem mercifully doomed not to acquire—it is only because parody requires the prior recognition of its object) but also, as I'll discuss later, because of its gender politics.¹⁴ Another Tom Brock lecturer, Thomas Kenedaly, remarked in his address that:

I believe rugby league has too little a sense of its history, and too little appreciation of the struggle people have made to play it.¹⁵

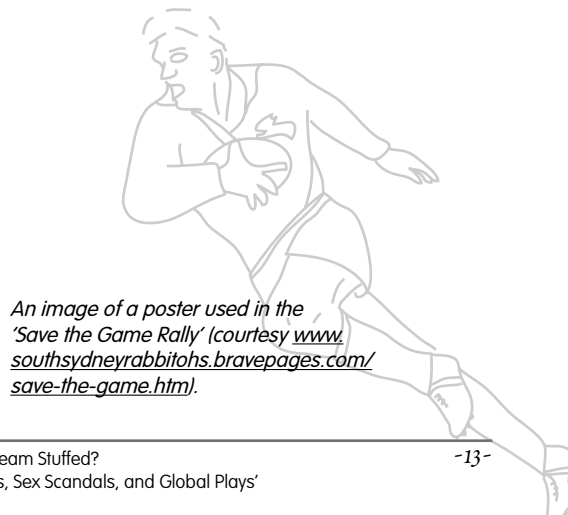
Tom might have added references to the struggles of men and women to sustain it at various levels with voluntary labour, and of supporters and spectators to watch it in the stadium, club, pub and home. These stories of everyday politics make up the history of rugby league, and the airbrushed historical portraits that tend to be offered from within the

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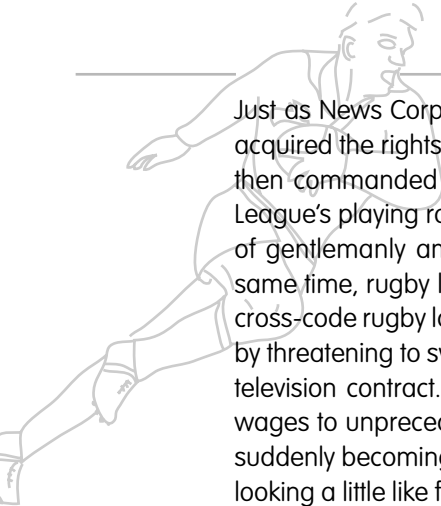
formal organisations of the game (see, for example, the 'History of Rugby League' section of the NRL website)¹⁶ are more about soothing amnesia than the integrity of the historical record.

Some of the 'battlers' have now morphed into Howard-voting 'aspirational', and battalions of cosmopolitans, bohemians and metrosexuals have begun to gentrify the meaner streets of inner-city League territory. In other words, heroic celebrations of League's proletariat are beginning to take on the status of unreliable memoirs. When histories of rugby league are told, they must be of the warts-and-all variety, the sepia tones of nostalgia offset by the stark resolution of auto-critical analysis. But in the calculus of loss and gain from this period of turmoil in the game, the notion stubbornly persists that the people's hold on it is tenuous, and that, should the next media giant stir, a newly invented tradition will flow from the first press release.

It might be countered that we should not be too squeamish about upheavals and change, and that Super League achieved a rapid modernisation of an anachronistic game that justified its pain through establishing long-term viability. League still means a good deal on the eastern seaboard of Australia (and parts of Oceania), as the State of Origin decider 2.4 million viewer peak on 5 July 2006 reveals, as does its popularity among sports on pay television. But it is not yet a national sport, having failed to establish itself in Western and South Australia, and with the Melbourne Storm still resembling West Berlin surrounded by the Rules bloc. Indeed, the last decade represents something of a retrenchment and retreat from League's forays into central and western regions. Neither has the process of consolidation been a stunning success. Take, for example, round 22 of the NRL in early August 2006, chosen only because it coincided with the writing of this section of the paper. In its seven matches the aggregate crowd figure was less than 100,000 (97,341), with average ground attendance of less than 14,000 (13,906). In the same weekend, by contrast, round 18 of the Australian Football League saw almost 250,000 spectators (249,639) attend its eight matches, an average ground attendance of over 30,000 (31,205). Perhaps, as the Super League proponents claim, the game has been saved from going down the plug hole. It is clear, though, that its jacuzzi is not exactly overflowing, and that it remains vulnerable to rival codes with a superior national and international reach.



An image of a poster used in the 'Save the Game Rally' (courtesy www.southsydneyrabbitohs.bravepages.com/save-the-game.htm).



Just as News Corporation was trying to vacuum up rugby league, it acquired the rights to the SANZAR competition in rugby union, which then commanded the capital to perpetrate the disruptive raids on League's playing ranks that League once made on it during the days of gentlemanly amateurism and perfidious shamateurism. At the same time, rugby league players and their agents began to use the cross-code rugby labour market to broker better deals for themselves by threatening to switch unless they got more money and a personal television contract. The Super League War had pushed up players' wages to unprecedented levels, with old stagers close to retirement suddenly becoming saleable again, their last pay days making them looking a little like fading pop stars on farewell tours.

'The Super League War had pushed up players' wages to unprecedented levels, with old stagers close to retirement suddenly becoming saleable again, their last pay days making them looking a little like fading pop stars on farewell tours.'

But as financial discipline and a more rigorously enforced salary cap were restored, and with fewer clubs providing good paid work places,

coaches and 'seasoned' players found Britain, with its Super League funds in strong pounds sterling and a weaker competition, attractive once more. This might have been good news for rugby league if it had led to a resurgence of the northern hemisphere game, but, despite increased player registrations, its standards are resolutely

refusing to match that of Australia and New Zealand on a consistent basis. Australian rugby league followers have, therefore, found themselves in a similar position to cricket fans before the 2005 Ashes tour, secretly hoping that the Poms would make a proper contest of it—though they would no doubt similarly hate the experience if they actually lost. It took the England cricket team 19 years to regain the Ashes, but Great Britain last won a League Ashes series in 1970 and England the League World Cup in 1972—almost twice the time 'between drinks' in both cases. The 2008 Rugby League World Cup, therefore, needs to manufacture more than a trans-Tasman contest, and the game would benefit from—unpalatable though it may be to Australians sacrificed for the greater good—a northern hemisphere win.

It is more likely, though, that the inevitable efflorescence of patriotism that accompanies any international sports event will not disguise the limitations of the Rugby League World Cup. Its main matches will pick up good crowds and audiences in various places, and it will make the game seem more cosmopolitan. But the League 'world' will surely on reflection look small and idiosyncratic, and so the event may be counterproductive in gifting ammunition to rival sports (including pretty much anything played at the Olympics) with stronger international credentials.

Contemporary sport involves a lot of hard, unglamorous work to operate successfully (by any measure) in an environment where leisure and exercise provision offers myriad competing claims on time, energy and income. The sports labour market is a complex, shifting entity that is much larger than its playing contingent—it includes administrators, trainers, journalists, marketers, advertisers, educators and fans, the latter performing much of the unpaid emotional work that melds a series of disparate functions into a sport. Keeping the machine going, season after season, requires a popular fan base and constant renewal, meaning that the management of image is crucial—a quick cultural turn can make a soberly traditional sport seem ludicrous, or a rising new one mere hype-driven faddism.¹⁷ Sporting traditions must be re-invented, and reputations defended. For this reason, sports hate scandal. Why, then, have rugby league and scandal become so consistently coupled in Australia in the 21st century?

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Seasons of scandal

Every year, in a dispiritingly predictable ritual, I receive calls from newspaper opinion page editors and talkback radio producers to comment on the latest scandal involving the misconduct of sportsmen. Alleged sexual harassment and assault, drunkenness, racist and homophobic sledging, ingestion of performance-enhancing and illegal ‘social’

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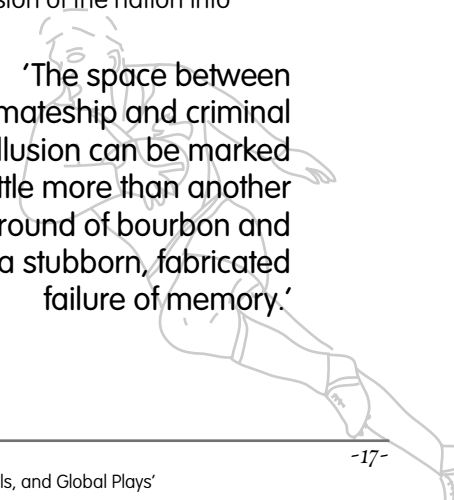
drugs, and sundry other crimes and misdemeanours by high-profile professional sportsmen, generate frenzied media interest well beyond the sports pages and news bulletins.¹⁸ Sportsmen are not the only social and occupa-

tional group who engage in such behaviour (although there is some evidence, mostly in the USA, that athletes are over-represented in legal cases involving sexual assault,¹⁹) and among the ranks of professional athletes rugby league players by no means have a monopoly on it.²⁰ But it is fair to say that League in Australia has in recent years gained more media coverage for all the wrong reasons than any other code.

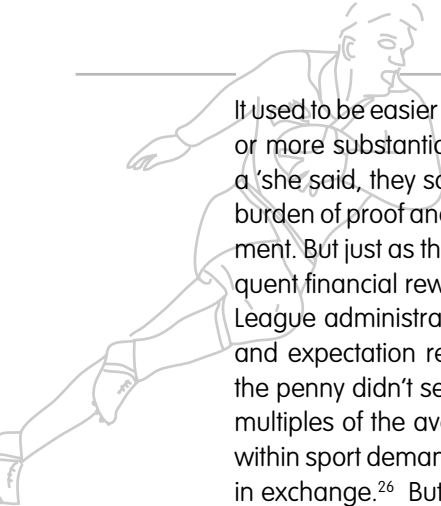
We now enter into dangerous territory, because the intensity of media coverage is related to prior assumptions and conventions of newsworthiness as much as to the seriousness of the matter. Prominent sportsmen are by definition news,²¹ although it is not only high-profile groups who may be linked to patterns of transgression—witness, for example, the ways in which ethnicity and religion were linked in the press to the Sydney pack rape court cases of recent years.²² It is also easy for social class prejudices to be rehearsed in such debates, the working-class masculinity celebrated in League lore, and in every single previous Tom Brock lecture to date,²³ turned against itself as signifying a brutish propensity for sexual violence and reactionary gender values.

It is apparent, though, that rugby league as an institution has been slow in coming to terms with the demands placed on contemporary sport by its affluence and visibility. Part of the game's charm has been its folksiness,²⁴ but the more money that has come washing in from television, the greater the distance between local heroes and grass-roots fans. The fan base has not been static either, with major changes in social and working lives, not least the decline of manual and manufacturing labour; the rise of the service and information sectors; the progressive integration of women into the full-time workforce, and the increased provision of, and demand for, tertiary education. There has, then, been a limited 'bourgeoisification' and 'feminisation' of contemporary sport, not least because these processes open up rich new revenue streams for it.

League has been unsettled by these developments. Its larrikinism runs deep, and so is resistant to the concerns of the disparaged 'trendies' and 'pseudos' (among whom I am sure to be counted by some) who want to talk about racism, sexism, homophobia and other serious subjects concerned with equity and power. In this denial they have been aided and abetted by most sports journalists, whose visceral loathing of social critics of sport is matched only by their passionate identification (sometimes to the point of idolatry) with the objects of their gaze. Just as domestic violence used to be regarded as the dirty secret of individual households, League clubs have tended to keep things in-house. The dynamics of these homo-social organisations emphasise solidarity and in-group norms. Mateship is a much celebrated value within Australian culture, but its proponents rarely recognise that it both excludes and includes; panders to the division of the nation into sex and gender-based camps, and can be used to excuse and cover up some very unsavoury behaviour, including alcohol-fuelled violence to non-consensual sex.²⁵ The space between mateship and criminal collusion can be marked by little more than another round of bourbon and a stubborn, fabricated failure of memory.



'The space between mateship and criminal collusion can be marked by little more than another round of bourbon and a stubborn, fabricated failure of memory.'



It used to be easier when things 'got out of hand'—a quiet word, token or more substantial compensation, and the profound deterrence of a 'she said, they said' criminal trial with a beyond reasonable doubt burden of proof and a residual blame-the-victim strain of public sentiment. But just as the commercial development of sport and its consequent financial rewards dispensed with the need for second jobs for League administrators and players, it also meant more surveillance and expectation regarding attitudes and behaviour. For some time the penny didn't seem to drop that the cost of greater adulation and multiples of the average weekly wage was a micro-cultural change within sport demanding more mental, physical and political discipline in exchange.²⁶ But it was something of a one-way trade for a while, and when things went wrong the specialist sports press preferred to cultivate its sources and stay on the drip feed than go for the front-page scoop that would queer the pitch for future 'exclusives'.²⁷

Sport, though, spread out well beyond the back page and the just-before-the-weather segment of broadcast news bulletins in the formation of what I call the 'media sports cultural complex',²⁸ and in the process the clannish relationship between sports and media organisations

'The cost of greater adulation and multiples of the average weekly wage was a micro-cultural change within sport demanding more mental, physical and political discipline in exchange.'

began to break down. Certainly, they had a lot more to do with each other than in earlier epochs, and the former were happy to accept handsome broadcast rights money and the profile that went with it in exchange for

greater media power over sport. But the media are much more than their sports wing, and the forces that took sport beyond it created common property and fair game.²⁹ Enormous cultural visibility, rich rewards, powerful fan passions and media hunger for copy inevitably bring the searchlight into sport's hidden places. Sponsors needed to look after the integrity of their brands in an era of assiduous image manufacture and maintenance, and governments at all levels demanded accountability regarding their grants and subsidies. This means that negative headlines can be instantly produced, allegations made, suspicions canvassed and judgements pronounced in continuous, rolling news cycles. Presumptions of innocence can be set aside and 'no smoke

without fire' suspicions held. League, more than most sports, was ill-prepared for this new media-saturated environment. Although the NRL and clubs like Souths, Penrith and Parramatta have for some time done admirable community work, there has been a considerable and continued disconnection between this kind of grounded, pro-social activity and the arrogant and sometimes dangerous excesses of a boozed-up team on the razz.

The moves taken by NRL Chief Executive David Gallop (himself a rather atypical rugby league figure in terms of masculine self-presentation) to counter the problem, including a \$1million investment in gender research and education programs recommended in the *Playing By*

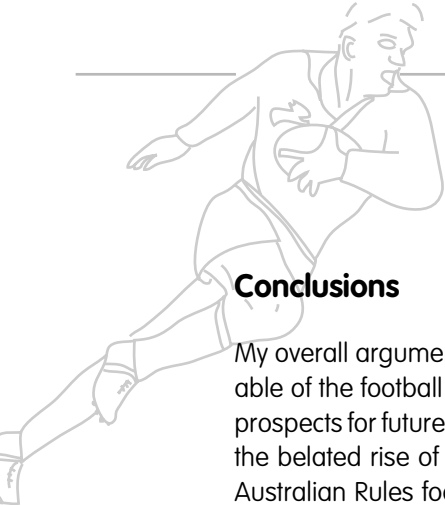
The Rules: On And Off The

Field report produced just before Christmas 2004,³⁰

are laudable. But how deeply has the message permeated rugby league culture? If the official NRL website is any guide, not

much at all. A search of this key interface of League and the wider world in the week of this lecture provided no results at all for the report, its authors, the Education and Welfare Committee, or gender politics education. The previous public pronouncements of the Canterbury Bulldogs' Malcolm Noad and Steve Folkes, and the bad behaviour of the Newcastle Knights within weeks of the release of *Playing By The Rules* and the introduction of workshops for young players about managing encounters with women, have not been promising indicators of cultural change in the game. The unfolding program to educate players about their social and sexual conduct, promote responsible consumption of alcohol, and to involve clubs in the improvement of the position and treatment of women in rugby league, may produce beneficial results. But Groundhog Day tales of boozing and allegations of assault suggest that substantial elements of League are still to realise, fully, that the old days have gone—and, in this respect, good riddance.

'Moves taken to counter the problem are laudable but how deeply has the message permeated rugby league culture? ... Substantial elements of League are still to realise, fully, that the old days have gone.'



Conclusions

My overall argument, clearly, is that rugby league is the most vulnerable of the football codes in Australia, and the one with the slightest prospects for future prosperity. The professionalisation of rugby union, the belated rise of association football, and the enduring appeal of Australian Rules football are pressures from without. The unedifying legacy of Super League, and recurring sexual violence and club financial scandals, are disintegrating factors from within. Yet, if League's medium-to-long-term prospects are not bright, they are not condemned to darkness. But what can a League for the 21st century look like? Its 'project' is somewhat contradictory. It must take from its past the best of its working-class heritage, the cohesiveness that makes playing for and supporting a team meaningful. Yet some of this baggage must be jettisoned, not least the unreconstructed attitudes to gender and sexuality that speak of a time when male class solidarity could hide a multitude of other oppressions.³¹

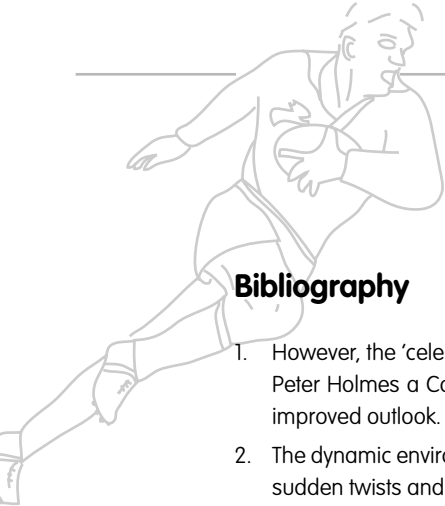
The NRL has played to its traditions through its 'that's/what's my team/dream?' retro campaigns, but these have been compromised somewhat by the still-fresh memory of media mogul disruptions that jeopardised the sense of place and collective identity on which all sports rely. Sports history has to be carefully handled and it is easy for feet to be tangled. Association football's new de-ethnicised, city-based A-League is on the up from a low base, but its attempted erasure of the memory of the deep contribution of ethnically-based groups to the sport in Australia smacks more than a little of historical denial.³² Successful though the 2006 World Cup finals in Germany no doubt were for advancing the game in Australia, the exclusive seven-year television deal with Foxtel is hardly conducive to the building of the broad popular foundation it demonstrably needs. The same can be said of rugby union's Super 14 competition which, like the sport in Australia more generally, seems to be forgetting that sport is above all a form of

popular culture. League's combined free-to-air and pay TV presence is, then, still a big advantage in a sports world where ready visibility confers major benefits.

Rugby league does have the kind of deep history³³ that is a platform for survival in a crowded sports market—the case of basketball in 1990s Australia is a salient instance of how fashionability and cultural buzz can provide a misleading sense of unstoppable momentum. League is expanding again within its zonal limits on the Gold Coast, and its toehold in Melbourne is secure for the moment. The openness of the NRL competition, despite the relatively small number of professional clubs, compares favourably with larger and more glamorous competitions, such as English Premier League football, where the lack of a salary cap enables Russian resource billionaires and American stock market raiders to buy success. The Super League fantasy of globalising the game can be safely discarded, but rugby league at least does have some international presence. The Australian specificity of Rules is both gift and curse. It is the truly unique Australian game—and so must remain in a home gift by sea.

'It is the truly unique Australian game—and so must remain in a home gift by sea.'

I began this lecture with some gloomy reflections on League, but at the other end things look a little more hopeful. It is difficult to be too pessimistic in such a place and time—League HQ a short walk from Sydney Harbour, with the season's apogee and the summer beckoning. Much of what I have talked about—the jostling for position in the sport and media markets; the re-drawing of histories and loyalties; the corporate manoeuvres and shenanigans; the perilous position of young women in the twilight hours surrounded by a pack of drunken footballers—might already have begun to recede from view. If sport is a 'prison of measured time',³⁴ we are all prone to be frozen in the moment. But time is the eternal escapee, and future historians of sport will judge at leisure the analytical stake claimed here in crossing the open ground towards the high fence and the razor wire, urged on by the receding cries of imagined commentators.

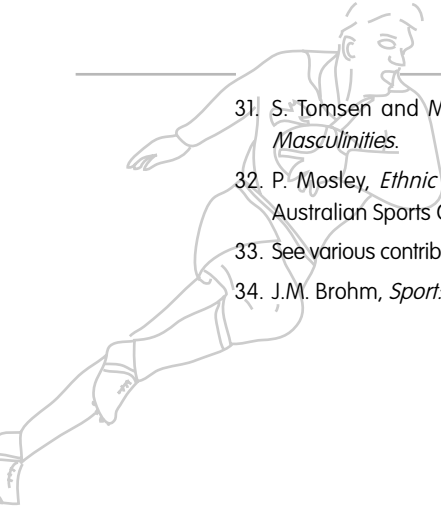


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