

QRL Historypt. VII (Into the 1940s under the shadows of war)

by Mike Higginson

ALTHOUGH the game at club level flourished in Brisbane during the mid-1930s, the strength of the game in the south of the state now lied in Ipswich, who took out the Bulimba Cup competition six times in seven years between 1933 and 1939. Additionally, interstate supremacy lived with NSW, who dominated for all but one year between 1933 and 1941 before the series was shelved for three seasons from 1942. Besides the 1940 series victory, Queensland's biggest thrill on the football field was its two victories against New Zealand in 1938. So dire was the standing of the Queensland situation, the Blues twice surpassed fifty points in the 1939 series.

In Brisbane club football, the 1930s saw Valleys win an unprecedented seven consecutive club championships between 1935 and 1941, taking overall club dominance away from Wests, while Northern Suburbs kick-started an era where they quickly earned the nickname of "Nundah Wonders", qualifying for the semi-finals every year from 1934 to 1947. The highlight for Norths during this time was the premiership of 1938 when they pulled off the coup of the decade in ousting the unbackable and undefeated Valleys 16-10 in the grand final at the Gabba. Norths and Valleys contested the grand final in all three grades that year, with the lower grade honours shared. However, skippered by Col Webster, Norths had a supremely classy side that included Ron Cooper, Hugh Melrose, Jack Stapleton, Edward 'Babe' Collins and the hard-as-nails Vic Rudd, outplaying 'Firpo' Neumann's Valleys side in the one match that counted. The "Nundah Wonders" also set a new League record that year when they embarrassed Easts 74-0 at Oxenham Park, scoring a record 16 tries in the match.

With rugby league dominance clearly taken away from Brisbane during the 1930s, the BRL introduced an annual challenge between the Brisbane representative side and various Sydney clubs who had made the NSWRL finals. Played during the weeks after the Brisbane grand final, these matches drew huge crowds of success-starved fans to both the 'Gabba and Exhibition Grounds. It proved a major success, with the Brisbane side often defeating Sydney champions full of representative stars.

Under the increasing dark clouds of war, the Brisbane Rugby League brought about some major changes to its competition format in 1938. Firstly, the district qualification system which had been used since 1933 was shelved for an anticipated two years. Additionally, a club membership scheme similar to what was in operation in England soccer was trialled by the clubs in hope that it would raise much-needed funds in lieu of falling gate takings at club matches. Meeting with mixed success, the League encouraged all clubs to continue the scheme, fully aware that if successful it would take much financial burden off the League, and ensure crowd figures remained at acceptable levels in ensuing seasons. An over-ambitious League expected each club to attract a minimum 1000 members, a far cry from what was actually achieved.

Even though the country was declared at war during the season, 1939 surprisingly turned around a number of trends positively for the League. Overall, it was the best financial year for a decade, with club match receipts and representative match returns the best for a number of years. Interest in the Sunday 'Warehouse' competition increased and juniors continued with steady growth. Nundah Oval, home of Norths and one of three main grounds the League utilised for first grade fixtures, underwent a name change when the Norths Cricket Club redesignated it Oxenham Park after one of the state's finest cricketers, Ron Oxenham. The League also adopted new premises for its offices, shifting from Griffiths House to King House in Queen Street. A big loss to the game in Brisbane was the retirement of international referee Frank Moynihan, whose departure left a gaping hole in the refereeing ranks.

In conjunction with the BRL, the QRL continued its scheme of contracting some of its star players to remain in the state. One such player was Norths star centre Jack Reardon, who was being courted by a number of Sydney clubs and had interest from England. After some discussion, Reardon agreed to a £400 agreement with both Leagues, where he would remain in Brisbane for the next three years. This scheme came with great risk as a dangerous precedent was set.

The 1940s commenced with mixed fortunes for rugby league, with a number of former BRL stars returning from Sydney and England. Eric Harris, Arthur 'Spragg' Hunt and Gordon 'Scotty' Macrae were three such former players. Although overall gate receipts and crowd figures were up, representative football that the public craved was all but put on hold. Bulimba Cup and interstate matches were staged until 1941, but even they were eventually cancelled from 1942. Although the Commonwealth Government had issued a formal edict stating that sport may continue, the QANFL Australian rules competition folded in 1942, followed by the local soccer competition. Unlike during WWI though, the Queensland Rugby Union elected to continue, albeit with plenty of bloodshed at administrative level.

A bright spot in 1940 though was the sparkling form of Norths international lock-forward, Edward 'Babe' Collins. Collins was another player to benefit from the League's player retention fund after strong interest from Sydney clubs, Wests and Balmain. He dominated the 1940 season with silky skills, brutal strength in defence and an incredible turn of pace in attack. He captained Norths to the premiership that year and broke the try-scoring record with 39 for the season in all matches. He also scored magnificent tries in three of the four interstate games, including the crucial series-winning match at the SCG. Interestingly, the one game in which he didn't score, Queensland lost! Although a 1938 Kangaroo tourist, Collins would unfortunately go on to be remembered as another great player whose best playing years would become a casualty of the war.