

## **QRL History .... (The 2<sup>nd</sup> golden age) by Mike Higginson**

THE 1954 season saw a pivotal event in the game's history in Queensland. Following the League's procurement of a long-term 21 year lease over Lang Park from the Council, development of the facility became a primary focus. The deal created history, being the only example of a rugby league body in the world to have its own playing headquarters. A combined initial investment of £15,000 from both the QRL and BRL for development was immediately established. With plans already drawn up for a potential world-class 60,000 seat stadium, Lang Park was now underway to become the state's flagship sporting venue. A plan for a further £40,000 for improvements was then also put into action. The QRL also took out a liquor licence at the ground. A change to the League executive occurred when Fred Harrold became treasurer. The issue of such a heavy representative schedule began to cause ripples between the QRL and BRL yet again, however the BRL still managed to record its second-highest club match revenue for a season.

Norths and Wests set the pace in the club competition during the season, but it was Wests who shone in the finals. With their two stars Duncan Hall and Alec Watson in superb form, Wests took the season's major honours, with Hall and Watson subsequently rewarded with selection in the World Cup squad for France. Such was the following for club football, the League registered a record crowd for the semi-final. Night representative games at the Exhibition Grounds proved extremely popular, with big crowds at the intercity matches and over 20,000 turning out to see Brisbane take on the touring Great Britain side. The season however was laced with sadness as two more pioneers of the game in Queensland passed away – Siney Boland and 'Buck' Buchanan.

With the establishment of a Grounds Development Committee in 1955, work commenced on the League's future headquarters. The QRL and BRL, along with other interested parties, took less than 12 months to surpass the initial 21-year plan of £40,000 in development works at Lang Park. In fact, by 1960 more than £100,000 had been injected into the project. Meanwhile, the League, with three years still remaining on its lease at the Cricket Ground, continued its club matches there until the end of the 1957 season.

1955 again saw a record club match revenue received by the BRL; a surprising result given the popularity of the Shiftworkers League operating in direct competition to the BRL premiership on Sundays. The League was forced however to intervene when it became apparent numerous players were participating in both competitions on the same day. A ban was then placed on BRL players from playing in the rival competition should they be playing in a Sunday BRL fixture. Night representative matches continued at the Exhibition Grounds, while Wests and Brothers played the first-ever night finals match there in September. The result did not matter in the end though, as the season highlight was clearly the boys in royal blue finishing the season as undefeated premiers. The only match Valleys failed to win that year was the Presidents Cup final against Wests. However, the 3-0 loss did not carry premiership points.

The rugby league fraternity was in shock at the news that the "Grand Old Man Of Rugby League" – Peter Scott snr – had passed away soon after season's end. He was 92 years old at his death and was still the highly active BRL president he had always been. Scott had been the rock which the game had been built around in Brisbane, and some actually believed it inconceivable that the game would continue to flourish without his influence.

The passionate following of the BRL competition exploded during the mid-1950s, with fierce rivalries both on and off the field. There were sporadic incidents at matches where mounted police were forced to break up brawls involving both players and spectators. Thankfully they weren't a regular occurrence, but this highlighted the passion which district football evoked. The crowds flocked to club matches in record numbers for seasons on end. Over the next three years, the League even awarded testimonials to a number of their star players for service to the game. Those to receive them were Duncan Hall and Alec Watson in 1955, Brian Davies and Norm Pope in 1956, and Joe Baker and Keith Brown in 1957. The League continued its program of assisting the Norths and Souths clubs during the late-1950s in improving facilities at both Oxenham Park and Davies Park. The Valleys club also finally obtained a home, with a lease over part of Crosby Park in 1956.

The 1956 finals series was highlighted by sensation when skipper Duncan Hall led his Wests team in a walk-off, protesting against referee Col Wright. A string of refereeing decisions against Wests culminated in Alec Watson being sent off for apparently "passing a remark" at Wright. When Watson refused to leave the field, Hall came to his defence arguing that Wright had the wrong player. After a heated exchange, Hall was ordered off as well, whereby Hall directed his team to follow. Wright waited four minutes for Wests to return before blowing a premature end to the match. After lengthy deliberations, the League decided that as Brothers led at the time, the result would stand. Incensed club officials then decided Wests would not play under Wright's control again for perceived unfair decisions. As Wright was appointed the next week's semi-final, Wests refused to take the field. Eventually, common sense was restored and the match was played on the Wednesday night at the Exhibition Grounds.

Lang Park was first used for regular club fixtures in 1957, however the grand final that year was still staged at the Cricket Ground. It was a fitting send-off for the League's former headquarters dating back some 25 years, with Valleys triumphing in spectacular fashion on the accuracy of Norm Pope's boot by the slenderest of margins 18-17. It was a terrific season for Brisbane's oldest club as they had recently been granted a lease over part of Crosby Park at Albion for the club to build its own headquarters.