

## **QRL History ..... pt. II (1909-1913) by Mike Higginson**

1909 was a watershed year for rugby league in Queensland. Firstly, the QRA changed its name to the Qld Amateur Rugby League (QARL) in January, before Brisbane staged the first club competition in the state. This was a four team competition, mostly comprised of former rugby union teams and players keen to join the new 'professional' game. The teams for this inaugural club rugby league season were Valley, Toombul, North Brisbane and South Brisbane, with district extents based on electoral boundaries. With the rugby union body securing sole leasing rights to the Exhibition Grounds, QARL then secured a lease of their own to utilise the Brisbane Cricket Grounds as their playing headquarters.

A modest crowd of about 800 turned up to see the first round of fixtures of the Brisbane club competition on May 8, 1909. The early match saw North Brisbane defeat Toombul by 8-0, with W. Evans scoring the first-ever try and P. Dwyer kicking the first-ever goal. The second match saw South Brisbane defeat eventual premiers Valley 12-2. The Brisbane Concert Band played throughout the afternoon, as was a common occurrence at sporting events during this time. The continuous trickle of rugby union defectors to the professional ranks of rugby league was not limited to representative players either. Many highly-regarded club rugby players soon joined the new Brisbane competition, not solely for the 'professional' aspect, but also for the revitalised open-style and running aspect the new code offered. By season's end, the powerful Valley Football Club dominated the club competition, culminating in their inaugural 23-4 grand final win over South Brisbane. The formation of a number of junior clubs around Brisbane, was also an important feature of this inaugural season.

With the establishment of regular club competition, interest in the game soared. Fihelly recognised though, that there was still some resistance in the newspapers against promoting the new code, with a number of newspaper executives firmly entrenched in rugby union circles. Therefore, top-flight representative rugby league was a must for the new code's survival. Queensland sides that included not only players from the Brisbane competition, but from other centres around the state, again took on visiting teams from across the Tasman. Crowds of between 5,000 and 7,000 flocked to the 'Gabba to see the visiting New Zealand and Maori sides take on Australia and Queensland. Mixed results were tempered with free-flowing attacking football thrilling the big crowds. Conversely, dour rugby union contests were being shown up by the new code, and interest in rugby league throughout Queensland exploded.

There was a downside though. Harsh economic times, public ridicule from rugby union purists, and the age of a number of inaugural representative players, saw many of the 1908 pioneers unfortunately disappear from the rugby league landscape by the end of 1909. However, Fihelly and Dore stood fast, and continued their plight to establish the game off the playing field.

Following the conclusion of club competition in 1909, a Brisbane representative side visited numerous country centres around the state. And with Ipswich, Bundaberg, Townsville, Toowoomba and Charters Towers all providing quality players to the state representative side, it augured well for the future expansion of the code. Ipswich in particular was the first regional centre to take up the code fully. With a number of players participating in Brisbane already, it wasn't surprising to see a fully-fledged Ipswich side enter the 1910 Brisbane competition. In fact, by 1911, Ipswich supplied two teams to the Brisbane competition. However, the rigours of work and injuries in a long season saw the sides merge by season's end. Interest in the game around the mining town also saw the emergence of a number of local teams, and the Ipswich competition quickly emerged under the auspices of their own QARL executive. The Starlights team won the first Ipswich premiership in 1910.

The visit by the first Great Britain side to Australian shores in 1910, also added a truly international flavour to an already popular game. But it was during these formative five years, rugby league established itself as the number one football code in Queensland. Brisbane and Ipswich were now firmly entrenched in their own local rugby league competitions, while the long-established rugby union and Australian football codes floundered. A number of towns around the state were also sourcing public interest and the playing logistics of rugby league. With the emergence of new clubs South United, Kurilpa, Woolloongabba, Railways, West End and Natives during the next four years, it was inevitable that the first strong junior base in any sport was also now forming. The senior club competition also swelled to six inner-city teams, with Valleys becoming the benchmark club in Brisbane. The representative scene was now also highly anticipated with an annual interstate series, intercity challenge matches, tours by local and interstate representative teams and international tours, as the game flourished. However, the shadows of war were growing increasingly closer ....

*Next week - The impact of the Great War on the game*