

QRL History pt. III (1914-1919) by Mike Higginson

The onset of the First World War and Australia's entry into it saw many sporting associations and other social groups go into recess. It didn't take long for a war of words in the newspapers to emerge, with the rugby league executive at loggerheads with their rugby union counterparts over the very real issue of continuation during wartime. The stance of the conservative rugby union side was that people should not be at home enjoying football while our troops were dying in the trenches, and that these able-bodied young men should be defending. The rugby league fraternity (with their ties to the ALP) argued young men back home should be playing rugby league to stay fit, while also providing a distraction for families to the ever-increasing death lists being printed in the papers.

At the forefront of this very public spat was the entrepreneurial Harry Sunderland, a former press editor and journalist who had joined the rugby league executive in 1913, and was now the League's Secretary. Sunderland knew how to manipulate the press to suit a certain argument, and he was in his element affecting public opinion on anything from the league-union stance to that of conscription and political support for the war effort. He was also a ruthless businessman who knew how to position himself well in any business action. During the next 25 years, Sunderland's power would influence the game like no other, polarising football supporters on every aspect of the game.

Eventually, the rugby union made the decision to go into recess in 1916 - rugby league did not. It was not an unforced decision though, with numbers in rugby union playing ranks dwindling, few enclosed Brisbane sporting grounds, and a general lack of public support. The folding of rugby union was the catalyst for mass affiliations of rugby union clubs like Past Grammars and University, the formation of the Merthyr's club from Brothers rugby club players, and regional competitions to the League from all around the state. These defections had been occurring ad-hoc for some two years by this stage, with regional centres realising representative opportunities only lied with the League game. By 1919, district rugby union bodies in north and central Queensland had switched, thus making the takeover complete. This one moment in time is almost singularly responsible for rugby league gaining ascendancy over its once bitter rival, a position it has never relinquished. In 1917 though, there was some discussion of amalgamation between the two football codes, but again neither party would relent.

On the Brisbane club scene, the game's headquarters varied between the Gabba and the Exhibition Grounds, with the Valley football club becoming the benchmark side in the competition. The royal blues attacking style of play while still managing to field some of the biggest players in the game was unrivalled, not to mention the shrewd management of the club itself. This dominance manifested itself into seven premierships during the first 11 years of competition. However, the first true rivalry of the game arrived six days before the Gallipoli landing in 1915 when a meeting of officials and other interested parties at the Carlton Club Hotel saw the Toowong and North Brisbane clubs merge into a new club called Western Suburbs. From the outset, the dominance and fierce rivalry of the Wests and Valleys clubs was unparalleled in Brisbane sporting circles, the Diehards nudging out the Paddington boys 10-9 in a spectacular 1915 grand final, before Wests took the honours 4-2 a year later. .

By war's end, the League had clearly become the largest sporting body of its type in Queensland. With the rugby union now also declared broke, and the other football codes playing strictly as amateurs, rugby league had no opposition sporting-wise, and enjoyed massive public support. However, stormy times were brewing with regional leagues wanting more voting rights on issues within the League, proposed changes to the player qualification to an electorate system, and questions over the League's financial statement.

It all came to a head during a tumultuous 1918 season, with record crowds flocking to club matches in Brisbane and representative matches staged in country centres. However, with powerhouse clubs Valleys and Wests at continual loggerheads with local League officials over the game's management, and discontent at voting rights from both club and regional league levels, frustration and mistrust brewed. Then in September 1918, a single incident referred to as the "Ricketty Johnson Affair" caused ripples that would eventually change the rugby league landscape in Queensland forever. Essentially, the Wests club imported two Sydney club players leading up to the 1918 semi-finals - Albert 'Ricketty' Johnson from Balmain and C. Baker from Eastern Suburbs. Winning a crunch top-of-the-table clash with Merthyr's 5-0 at the Exhibition Grounds, an appeal by Merthyr's saw the League then strip the competition points from Wests, citing that Johnson was ineligible to participate in a QRL competition.