

## **QRL History ....pt. IV (The 1920s – the first golden era ) by Mike Higginson**

THE catalyst that brought a multitude of simmering issues to the fore was the 1918 'Ricketty Johnston Affair'. After being stripped of competition points for playing former Balmain player Albert 'Ricketty' Johnston, the Western Suburbs club forfeited the remainder of the Brisbane premierships season. The club cited double-standards by the League over player eligibility. This event set in motion a series of incidents, repercussions from 1918, eventually resulting in the formation of the Brisbane Rugby League in 1922. Of course Sunderland was able to put his own slant on events printed in the daily press!

Under QRL control, voting rights were a major issue among the various leagues. Brisbane, being the largest, strongest and most professionally run, was often outvoted on important issues. Even with many of the state's stars gravitating to Brisbane, weight of numbers at the voting table continually frustrated officials.

Under the threat of breaking away from QRL affiliation, and after even speaking to former officials of the now-defunct rugby union about possible affiliation, the entire structure of the game's administration was revamped. However, heavyweights in the debate – Harry Sunderland and Peter Scott – both realised that the state and Brisbane bodies must be aligned together for the good of the game. Some of the changes that were implemented at the time was the junior competition and various representative matches in Brisbane being placed under the auspices of the newly-formed BRL. On field, a major change was the creation of a three-grade senior competition, with the establishment of a BRL referees appointment committee. Additionally, with no rival rugby union competition in Brisbane, the Exhibition Grounds were leased as the League's headquarters.

In the years leading up to this momentous event, the QRL had enjoyed a massive upsurge in player numbers and popularity of the game. An influx of former Sydney stars, combined with a regular representative match program, provided the opportunity for the public to witness first-class football. Additionally, a number of home-grown stars were fast-becoming household names for the first time. One such player was international prop Norm Potter, who led the Wests club to the League's first undefeated premierships in 1920. Along with fellow international Bill Richards, the club incredibly repeated the feat only two years later, in the inaugural Brisbane Rugby League season.

The impact on the game of forming the BRL was instantaneous. With the League now able to reward representative players at its own accord, crowds flocked to see interstate and international stars gracing the playing field. The establishment of the BRL in 1922 saw an end to many of the grievances the Brisbane clubs had long held towards the state body. Under the control of the inaugural committee that included Peter Scott snr and Fred Cumberland, rugby league entered its first golden age in the early-1920s.

A re-structured club competition that included six clubs playing in three grades, had the crowds attending in record numbers. The stronger established clubs of Valleys (est 1909), Western Suburbs (est 1915), Coorparoo (est 1917) and Carltons (est 1919) were admitted first, followed by two other clubs, Past Christian Brothers (est 1917 as Merthyr), University (joined 1920) and Past Grammars who were admitted in 1924. It was a master stroke by the BRL to include these two former rugby union clubs, who both enjoyed massive support from their heritage and success in the still-defunct rugby union competition. The 'Varsity side then became the first club to win back-to-back titles in 1928 and 1929.

Initially utilizing both the Exhibition Grounds and Davies Park, interest in the BRL exploded with all seven clubs winning the premierships in the first seven years of the new Brisbane league. The institution of numerous mid-season competitions and trophies also ensured public interest did not wane during the long season. Some of these include the Old Buffers Cup (later renamed the Presidents Cup), the charity fundraiser Pike 'Ambulance' Cup (later replaced by the Peter Scott Memorial Trophy in 1959), and the BRL Special Knockout Competition played as curtain-raisers with spectator-friendly rule changes, during the representative program.

A formal structure for annual representative match competition was also established, with the Bulimba Cup competition designed to foster the development of the game between the three rugby league strongholds of Brisbane, Ipswich and Toowoomba. Except for 1931 when Lismore participated in the competition, the fiercely contested Bulimba Cup was the primary selection match series for state representation.

The strength and profile of the BRL competition was also now drawing the game's biggest names to Brisbane. Players such as international Harold Horder joined Coorparoo in 1925, while Toowoomba's favourite son Tom Gorman joined Brothers in 1926, becoming the club's first paid player, and captaining the side to its first-ever premierships. In 1927, the BRL persuaded the Queensland Referees Association to affiliate to its league. As the Brisbane Referees Association, a mid-season dispute over QRL bonus payments to representative match referees led to a threat of strike action by BRA members. As talks broke down between the League and the BRA, the BRL formed a new referees body directly under its control. After advertising for new members, the Brisbane Rugby League Referees Association was soon formed.

Their commitment and deeds too many to list, the 1920's introduced some of the biggest names in the game's administration, such as Jack Roche, Mick Scott, 'Taffy' Welch, Frank Fullerton, Ernie Keefer, Vic Jensen, and Frank Burke. However, the contribution of Peter Scott snr can never be overstated. Switching codes to rugby league with his playing son in 1916, he joined the club executive and became president, eventually joining the QRL as a Wests club delegate. His lifelong commitment to the game also earned him life membership at both the BRL and QRL.