

QRL Historypt. VIII (The war years) **by Mike Higginson**

THE 1941 season really suffered under the effects of World War II. Not only were player numbers dwindling and League finances struggling, but two long-serving officials of the game passed away - Jack Stephenson and Bill Stock. Compounding a poor year, the names of former Brisbane players were beginning to appear on death lists in the printed press. It did not prevent more players from enlisting though, with the Souths and Easts clubs in particular suffering immense player shortages. In the case of Souths though, their player shortage was relieved somewhat following a smart initiative by club officials. Before war's end, Souths would have a police team representing them in reserve grade, while a team made up of students from nearby Brisbane State High School played the third grade. In fact, 1944 saw Souths third grade 'students' win the premiership.

1941 saw the first multi-code football day, with a QANFL match staged before a top-class Brothers versus Norths match. The day was an unheralded success and was staged annually with all four codes participating until well after the war. A sidelight to the season was another first for the game when movie producer Ray Norman made a film on rugby league titled "Football – The Maker of Men". The movie screened initially at the city's Tivoli Cinema before the end of the season before being shown in suburban cinemas. But by far the most important event that would shape the game for years to come was the League signing an agreement with the Brisbane City Council for use of Lang Park for the next 12 years.

As the war years rolled on, the League struggled financially and in other areas. The insurance they had held for some years was now not available, printing restrictions and costs cancelled the weekly 'Rugby League News' program, the Warehouse League folded, the Brisbane Cricket Ground and Lang Park were taken for military purposes and clubs struggled financially as the League was not able to provide annual grants with such diminished finances. The QRL also went into recess and the unenclosed Newfarm Park ground was the only headquarters available. In fact, the only income drawn from club matches during this time was by way of donation tins passed around at games.

Fortunately though, the League was able to arrange with the army for use of the second oval at the Exhibition Grounds for its semi-final matches, with Oxenham Park used for the grand final. Of additional concern to the League was the fact that the military sports program did not cater for rugby league, but did so for the other three codes. Time and again the League attempted to have rugby league included but discussions continually broke down. On a positive note though was the army's permission given to many soldiers to play for BRL clubs, while staging a few challenge matches of their own.

Although the BRL premiership was replaced in 1942 and 1943 by the Victory Cup competition, essentially the premiership remained unchanged. Interestingly, these two seasons were dominated by a strong Brothers side. With a strong Irish Catholic following, fewer players and supporters of the club than from other clubs enlisted to fight in what was being regarded by the Irish community as essentially an "English" war. However, like all BRL clubs, Brothers did have days when player numbers were stretched, like one particular Saturday in May 1942. Drawn to play Wests at Newfarm Park, the Brethren took the field with 10 players. By midway during the second half, they had increased their numbers to 12, and went on to record an incredible 20-6 win over the 'Paddo' boys.

Before the end of the 1944 season, one of the game's Queensland pioneers, Jack Fihelly passed away. However, that season also reflected the positive outlook of society as the war effort appeared to be making ground towards peace. The League's revenue was slightly up, the club competition standard was improved across all teams and rugby league continued in schools. A new trophy was instituted that year, to be contested between the two best second round teams. Called the Hickey Cup, it was donated by the Hickey family in honour of former player Peter Hickey who had been killed in action. A well-earned life membership was also awarded to the League's top man, Peter Scott snr. Along with 'Taffy' Welch, Bill Gold, and Mr. Huxham, Scott steered the game through its toughest challenge to date. Every follower of rugby league (particularly in Brisbane) is indebted to these four gentlemen, who through plenty of hard slog and personal sacrifice, maintained administrative stability.

With many servicemen returning to Brisbane in 1945 and the end to world hostilities fast-approaching, the game boomed. And with the QRL back in operation, much of their focus was placed on fostering the re-growth of the code in the country. The BRL was again able to utilise the Brisbane Cricket Ground as its headquarters that year, and from the outset the crowds were back. Big crowds attended the opening club fixtures and record attendances were recorded for Brisbane's two home Bulimba Cup matches against Ipswich and Toowoomba. Another very pleasing aspect to the League administration was the strong press coverage of that year. Even ABC radio was regularly broadcasting live from club matches.

But 1945 will go down in BRL history for another reason. The Souths club became the first to complete the 'grand-slam' in winning the first, reserve and third grade premierships. Icing this incredible achievement was the club's victories in the under-17 and under-16 grades. The Southern Suburbs club had endured torrid times during the previous six years, but led by some formidable players of the calibre of the Pegg brothers, Ron and Len, Bill Tyquin, Alan Thompson and the imposing Harry Bath, they cast aside minor premiers Norths 21-11 in the premiership decider. Norths fielded their own stars like the slippery Hugh Melrose, Jack Bates and the rugged Vic Rudd.

Brisbane newspaper The Courier Mail also instituted an award to the players its sports writers regarded as the best. This award is still given today and is the longest-running press award of its type. Until 1950, this award was won by the top try-scorer and goal-kicker respectively in the BRL competition. From 1951 though it became an award voted for on a weekly basis, with a major prize for the overall season winner. The inaugural 1945 winners were Bob Smith from Valleys as the top try-scorer and a shared win for Souths' Bernie Johnson and Valleys' Danny O'Connor for the goal-kicking. The prize that first year was the princely sum of five £1 war-savings certificate, a far cry from the major rugby league prize awarded today.



A young league legend in the making - Harry Bath