

QRL Historypt. IX (A time for re-building)

by Mike Higginson

With the war finally over, 1946 saw a return to major representative football, with a planned Great Britain tour of Australia. The Brisbane rugby league fraternity was abuzz with the thought that a number of big games were scheduled for Brisbane. Over sixteen thousand packed the Gabba for Brisbane's opening Bulimba Cup match, the season's first representative match. Brisbane prevailed over Ipswich in a crackerjack tussle that day, with a number of Brisbane players staking claims for maroon jerseys. The Brisbane side went on to win the Bulimba Cup that year after Toowoomba had dominated the two contested since recommencement of competition.

By the time the English arrived, Brisbane fans were at fever-pitch. The Queensland side, having been drubbed by New South Wales in the interstate series, wrestled a great victory from the English. A fortnight later though, the Brisbane side was unable to repeat the performance, narrowly defeated 21-15 at the Gabba in front of over 15,000 patrons. There was the passing of yet another long-serving BRL official during the season when former League secretary from 1927-1929, Stan Phillips died. The club competition standard was very strong that year, with competition favourites Easts leading the competition all year, but losing the premiership decider to Valleys.

The increased popularity of Brisbane football began to waver during the late 1940s. There was a steady decline in club match attendances, yet the QRL representative program still drew well. Press coverage of the game exploded during this time, with up to five radio stations covering matches, as well as newspapers. However, Peter Scott was clearly concerned at the effects he perceived press coverage was having on revenue. This issue would come to a head in 1948 when the radio stations collectively decided to discontinue the annual 'donation' they had been giving the League in return for broadcasting access. After heated debate, the BRL issued the ultimatum of either the fees were to be paid, or radio coverage would cease. As the radio stations stood by their decision, so did Scott, and radio was locked out of the rugby league for the season. However, a year later the League would begrudgingly accept a deal whereby the stations would allow rugby league advertising in lieu of the donation. It was a burning issue with the League, as they perceived this was one of the reasons for decreasing gate receipts.

Of additional concern, was the representative player drain which was fast-becoming more than a trickle. Bringing the issue to a head were players Len Kenny and Ted Verrenkamp both being signed to English clubs. Peter Scott also identified the impact representative matches were having on club competition. A decreasing playing standard in club football was of particular concern as it was directly linked to reduced attendances. The refereeing standard was also being openly criticised, especially in the policing of blatant illegalities around the ruck. The QRL and BRL's response, was to introduce annual post-season challenge matches for the Brisbane side against big-name Sydney clubs. The move was a success, with impressive victories over St. George, Balmain, Easts, Wests and Canterbury-Bankstown during this time, witnessed by sellout crowds at the Gabba and Exhibition Grounds.

Transfer fees and the threat of bans altogether were a hot topic of the League in 1947. However, there were a number of issues which were having a negative effect on the game. The League desperately sought a permanent home, and it was thought the lease over Lang Park taken out in 1941 may be the answer. However, even though it had been six years, the condition of the ground was still unplayable following the army occupation during the war. Peter Scott also raised the idea of a Rugby League Club similar to what was in operation in Sydney, but without a permanent headquarters, this remained a moot point.

Easts emerged as the glamour side of the 1947 season, becoming the first team to make a clean-sweep of every trophy on offer. Skipped by Jack Ryrie, the side contained his brother Nev, try-scoring whiz Jack Schatz, Ron McLennan and Tom Drysdale. The side only lost one game during the premiership and walked away with the premiership cup, presidents cup, Pike cup, Hickey cup and Easter cup. To cap off the season, the club also won the club championship. The club made also made the grand final for the third year running in 1948, but they were unable to contain Wests stars Col McAllister, 'Spragg' Hunt, and Viv Irwin. However, it really was a golden period for the club that struggled so hard during the war years, as they qualified for the grand final for six consecutive years leading up to 1951, winning the coveted BRL premiership twice.

Although dominating the Bulimba Cup for three years, Brisbane's contingent of five in the Kangaroo squad following a losing interstate series was somewhat of a high note. Len Pegg, Jack Horrigan, Bill Tyquin, Eddie Brosnan and young Duncan Hall were all highly deserving of the honour. Of note in the state's north, was the formalising of the annual North Queensland Premiership (*Carlton Cup*), into the Foley Shield competition in 1948. Named in honour of tireless former representative player and long-serving north Queensland official Arch Foley, this annual inter-league competition in the north would grow to become as passionately and toughly-contested as the Bulimba Cup in the state's south. The inaugural winners were defending north Queensland champions Babinda, and although with vastly less northern leagues, the Foley Shield competition is still contested today.

With club match gate-takings still down during 1949, League officials began thinking outside the square. A major coal strike and new government liquor restrictions also did not help the League's position. Sunday football was again discussed at board level, but enquiries indicated the church was still firmly lobbying against it. A motion proposed to the League by 'Spragg' Hunt to fully merge the QRL and BRL caused plenty of spirited debate, but it was defeated by the country leagues in a vote. The Norths club introduced a new system of their own, that being to issue season tickets to games staged at Oxenham Park.

A change in focus by the league saw a number of individual awards inaugurated during this period. Besides the Courier Mail award in 1945, the W. "Gunner" McCook trophy was instituted by the league for the BRL's best and fairest player, Wests' flying centre/winger Hugh Melrose the first recipient in 1947. The following year saw the QRL introduce the J.G. Stephenson trophy for the player judged to be the "most serviceable" during the interstate series; Souths' centre Len Pegg becoming the first to earn this honour.