

## **QRL History .... (The re-birth of a golden age) by Mike Higginson**

THE dawning of the 1950s saw the League facing many of the same problems as previous years. A new trend though, was the country leagues actively signing big name Brisbane players for captain-coach roles for their representative teams. In many cases, the country league refused to release these players for the representative season which was mainly staged in Brisbane. This caused much angst between the QRL and the country leagues, with the League threatening to ban players should they not be available for representative duty. A growing concern for the BRL as well, was the non-affiliated Sunday Shiftworkers League (which did not charge admission) drawing bigger crowds than club matches. Sunday was obviously becoming a favourite for family day at the football, and with big money on offer from the horse-racing bookies present at matches, it was proving a very attractive weekly event for the public.

One of the biggest developments that would affect the game long-term also occurred in 1950 when the Queensland Amateur Athletics Association handed their lease over Lang Park back to the Brisbane City Council. The QRL and BRL immediately approached the Council with an offer to take up a 10-year lease, with a plan to develop the ground into that state's top sporting facility. However, the Council inexplicably balked at the offer. A positive start to the new decade was the selection of three young Brisbane stars to make their test debuts - Harold 'Mick' Crocker and Alan Thompson from Souths and Brian Davies from Brothers. Other stars to emerge, included Duncan Hall, Alec Watson, Alan Hornery, Tom Tyquin, Joe Baker, Keith Brown, Ken McCrohon, the Mulgrew brothers, and Mick Shannon. The league world was also saddened by the passing of J.J. Giltinan, one of the game's founders in Australia.

The season also unearthed a player who would go on to re-write many BRL records during his career. An 18-year-old fullback called Norm Pope was signed by the Valleys club from the Balmain junior competition at the start of 1950, in the hope he might replace the aging prolific points-scorer Dan O'Connor as a goalkicking fullback. After starring in the Brisbane side that lost to Great Britain, Pope began developing his own 'uncompromising' defensive style as Valleys and Brisbane fullback. History shows that Pope played over 200 games for Valleys and topped the BRL points-scoring in only his second season. However, this would become a feat he would repeat on a record five occasions. He became the first player to score 200 points in premiership matches during the 1957 club season, and scored over 300 points in all games played during the 1953 and 1957 seasons. These records still stand today, as well as a record haul of 41 points in one game from a try and 19 goals from 21 attempts against Wynnum-Manly in 1953. He also set an accuracy record in 1955 when he successfully landed 12 goals from as many attempts against Brothers at the Gabba and holds the all-time points scoring record in Brisbane. Pope became a fixture in representative sides for a number of years, culminating in his only Test appearance against the Kiwis in 1956.

A watershed year for Brisbane football then arrived in 1951. For the first time, the exciting French side would be touring, Queensland won the interstate series for the first time in over a decade, Sunday football would be trialled in Brisbane, a junior division was formed and a new club would affiliate in the premiership competition. New district boundaries were established early in the year by the League, following the acceptance of the Wynnum-Manly club into the premiership. The Wynnum Manly competition which once comprised 10 teams from the bayside and Redlands area never recovered after WWII and the remaining clubs formed a single entity to apply for BRL affiliation. It was a difficult first year for the bayside club though, suffering some humiliating losses with the season low point being a forfeit to Wests in August. The Sunday football experiment proved inconclusive with a number of games played. But even with no admission and the use of collection boxes inside the grounds, League officials were not fully convinced. Harry Sunderland also returned to Australia, looking for business partners and sponsors to attempt to sell rugby league to the USA. The passing of former Wests international and Brisbane coach Norm Potter was a sad loss in 1951.

The arrival of the Brisbane Rugby League's second golden era coincided with the arrival of one of the game's true visionaries. As delegate for the Valleys club in 1952, Ron McAuliffe created history when elevated to the position of chairman in his first year at the League. He went on to become joint secretary of the QRL and BRL, chairman of the QRL, deputy chairman of the ARL, and was chairman of the Lang Park Trust until the time of his death in 1988. Two of his major achievements were the introduction of State Origin football in 1980, and the State League in 1982. Away from rugby league, McAuliffe had served in the A.I.F. in the Middle-East and New Guinea and was elected to the Senate from 1971 to 1981.

During his first year at the League, a number of changes occurred at the BRL. Firstly, South Coast was affiliated as a premiership club in its own right, and the Shiftworkers League was also affiliated to the BRL, giving the BRL full control of all rugby league in Brisbane. The BRL commenced a program for improving facilities at all grounds the League utilised. However, the burning issue for more than a decade was the League's and club's desire to each have their own permanent home. This desire was made even stronger when the Council continued its refusal to issue a lease over Lang Park to the League. On the club scene, the new South Coast team struggled to only three victories all season, while Wests became only the second side to clean-sweep every trophy on offer in 1952.

The 1953 season brought further change to the game's leadership. Cyril Connell became QRL president while Peter Scott presided over the BRL. With a decision to merge the secretary position of both the QRL and BRL, Bill Gold resigned, and McAuliffe took up the reins. League officials Frank Burke and Ernie Keefer were also on a new committee whose job it was to find the League a permanent home ground. The year also saw the first floodlit interstate match in Brisbane, with over 30,000 fans flocking to the Exhibition Grounds.