

## **The 1950s (A new decade arrives) by Mike Higgison**

WITH works progressing well on the new Lang Park headquarters, record crowds attending matches again and the QRL obtaining a Principal Sporting Club Licence, the future appeared rosy for rugby league in Brisbane. However, of concern to both the QRL and BRL was the embarrassing hammerings that NSW had given the state side during the interstate series. Focus of this concern centred around whether the poker machines in Sydney were the direct cause of the increased professionalism and higher skill levels of the NSW players.

The Brisbane Rugby League moved its operations wholly to Lang Park in 1958. The new-look headquarters of rugby league was really taking shape and finally confirmed rugby league's unofficial standing as the number one sport in the state. The season commenced with the admission of the Redcliffe club into the BRL reserve grade. A stronghold of the game for many years, the vote to admit the first club based outside of Brisbane city limits was not a unanimous result. Of the seven clubs to vote, Wynnum-Manly and Easts were against the move. Interestingly, all the northside clubs whose district would be affected most of all supported the idea, in particular Norths who are district neighbours. The season also saw for the first time, fixtures operating as all three grades together on game day, pleasing club supporters. Brothers swiped the Brisbane premiership in most emphatic fashion that year when their "Terrible Six" forward pack of Barry O'Connor, Brian O'Connor, Vince Nicholas, Phil Coman, Peter Gallagher and skipper Brian Davies, bashed and barged their way to victory over premiership co-favourites Wests and Valleys in the preliminary and grand finals. The season finished on somewhat of a high note, when the then president of the Australian Rugby League Harold 'Jersey' Flegg opened the new premises for the Rugby League Club at Lang Park on October 8, 1958.

An amusing sidelight to the first fixture match staged at Lang Park in 1958 was the failed attempt by Lang Park ground staff to have Valleys fullback Norm Pope banned from playing there again. The League thought it would be a great promotional exercise to open the season with a replay of the previous year's grand final. Valleys won the match comfortably that day, but Norm Pope's goalkicking divots left around the new pristine ground at headquarters did not impress the stewards or ground staff at all!

As with numerous other years, 1959 saw various League officials changed executive roles. Ron McAuliffe resigned as joint QRL/BRL secretary, with Peter Scott Jnr taking over the role. Meanwhile, long-serving official Frank Burke was elected to QRL president, a role he would occupy until 1966. Discussions surrounding the next phase of the Lang Park re-development concerned the construction of the ground's first grandstand. Planned to seat 5000, other improvements to facilities included a press and radio building, bar and canteen in the outer area, and two more toilet facilities. At Davies Park, the ground received its first turnstiles. With more players currently in the state side than Brisbane, the North Queensland league demanded a match against Brisbane. The QRL granted the match, and the northerners backed up their claim by hammering Brisbane mercilessly 36-17.

The Norths club pulled off the signing coup of the season when Clive Churchill moved to Nundah as captain/coach. His impact on the club who had a number of potential young stars was enormous. He moulded them into a premiership force that finished clear minor premiers and won every trophy on offer except the Presidents Cup. That honour, and a popular victory, went to Wynnum-Manly when they downed Churchill's side 12-10 in a spectacular match at Lang Park. It was the club's first-ever senior grade trophy. Another popular result was the Redcliffe club's first BRL premiership when they downed Souths for the reserve grade premiership. Brisbane only provided one international for the 1959 season, that being Wests brilliant halfback Barry Muir. Muir played in all three Tests against the Kiwis and was rewarded with selection on the Kangaroo tour. It was a remarkable feat given his club finished second last in the premiership.

The League also instituted a new second-round trophy during the season. With the death of Mr. John Pike a year earlier, the Pike 'Ambulance' Cup was replaced with the impressive shield-like Peter Scott Memorial trophy. Fittingly, at the last awarding of the trophy to Redcliffe in 1981, the overall count saw Peter Scott's club Valleys had won it on more occasions than any other club. It is interesting to note that the current location of the original trophy is unknown, and one of the biggest mysteries in rugby league circles.

However, it was the long overdue premiership for Norths that highlighted the 1959 season. The Nundah boys had waited 19 long years to taste premiership glory, with only three unsuccessful tilts at the title during the war years to look back on. Strangely, the man who took them there, the "Little Master" Clive Churchill, was not present at that memorable grand final as he was on his way to England as coach of the Kangaroos. His place was taken on the day by skipper Jack Coyne. History would show in years to come that this was indeed a very special premiership as Norths would go on to re-write the record books by notching up six consecutive premierships – an unbettered record to this day. It's easy to assume that Norths simply had all the best players at the time, but a quick look at their team line-ups shows otherwise. New coach Bob Bax, who would go on to break a number of coaching records of his own, took over the decimated Norths first-grade side and won the club's first back-to-back premiership. Only three of the 1959 side played in the 1960 team, then nine from 1960 were in the 1961 side. Only the 1963 side with 12 of the previous year's premiership players fully resembled a previous year's side. It is a credit to the Norths club, and Bax particularly, that Norths enjoyed this incredible golden era.

With the arrival of the 1960's came another exciting chapter in Brisbane rugby league history when the Redcliffe club was granted first-grade status, and all clubs being able to stage matches at their home grounds for the first time. Notwithstanding that most games were still played at Lang Park and Davies Park, BRL matches were also played at Wynnum Manly's quality Kitchener Park ground, Crosby Park and the Redcliffe Showgrounds. In the case of Wynnum Manly's Kitchener Park, the League's decision was justified when the ground record of over 6,000 patrons turned up to see the match against local rivals Easts. Brothers and Easts were now the only clubs still to find a permanent 'home', with both finding it difficult financially to stay afloat. However, after years of failing to obtain a lease over Thompson Estate, a deal was eventually signed for Easts to lease the cricket ground at Langlands Park. In an era of unprecedented growth, player numbers at clubs also called for the League to reintroduce a fourth BRL grade. The League also put the construction of a new 5,000-seat grandstand at Lang Park out to tender. A highlight of the 1960 season occurred when the Brisbane team continued to add to its giant-killer reputation with a rugged 15-12 victory over the French at a packed Exhibition Grounds. And among the greats to emerge in Brisbane at the time were unknowns Barry Muir, Lionel Morgan and Fonda Metassa.