





RUGBY LEAGUE: A WORK IN PROGRESS

David Middleton

When rugby league cast itself free of an arrogant rugby union 100 years ago, it did so with a sense of re-invention. It was not just about creating better conditions for the players but about striving to produce a *better* game; a more entertaining brand that would appeal to the masses. By the time of rugby league's birth in Australia, many of the fundamental changes had already taken place in the north of England. Line outs, rucks and two players per team were dispensed with and a play-the-ball rule introduced to expedite continuity. The game of rugby league that kicked off in Australia on Easter Monday, 1908, was characterised by a spirit of reinvention that has never disappeared.

THE FOUR-TACKLE RULE

It was never clearer than in 1966 when the game had become obsessed with possession. Under the prevailing rules, a team could take possession of the football from the kick-off and effectively retain it for as long as they liked. Administrators in England at this time were deeply concerned at the trend. And one particular match between two Yorkshire clubs, Huddersfield

and Hull Kingston Rovers was credited as the catalyst for the most significant change in the game's history. In that match, Huddersfield kicked off and then touched the ball only twice in the entire first half. In Australia too, the possession game was creating problems. With little or no finesse, teams were winning matches through pure dominance of possession. The great St George sides were masters of the possession game although they were so strong that they would voluntarily offer their opponents early use of the ball just so they could be 'softened up' by Saints' brutal defence.

To counter such tactics, English Rugby League secretary Bill Fallowfield devised a new rule that would lead to fundamental change. He radically proposed the introduction of a four-tackle rule. In essence, a team would have four opportunities to 'use' the football and, if they couldn't, they would 'lose' it. Despite the negative views of some 'purists', Australian authorities embraced the change wholeheartedly. They saw it not as a means to halt the St George juggernaut that had just won its 11th consecutive premiership, but as a way to improve the flow

and pace of the game. The four-tackle rule came into being in 1967 and after a relatively short period of transition the quality of the football improved, try-scoring rates multiplied and crowds swelled. The old 'grinding' game transformed itself just in time for the start of the game's television era. The movement and drama translated perfectly to the small screen, especially considering that the majority of the action of a rugby league game is centred on the ball itself. The four-tackle rule (adjusted to six tackles in 1971) was right for its time.

SALARY CAPS

Rugby league has always been about modernisation, change and adaption. As long ago as 1935, the New South Wales Rugby League espoused this philosophy for the game:

Fast as the game has shown itself to be, it must be constantly as speedy as human feet and hands can make it. Not two clubs, or three, should be looked upon as the teams to produce that element of excitement which has the onlookers thronging to the grounds and remain on their feet during the whole 80 minutes of the game. Eastern Suburbs and Western Suburbs last Saturday at the Sydney Cricket Ground thrilled a crowd of 25,000 and sent every person in it to their homes with the hope that they could see more and more of such games: that it could be staged for them every match, every Saturday, by each of the teams which constitute the premiership competition. The standard is aimed at until the day is reached when all clubs are of such an equality that nobody can say with any degree of certainty, which is going to beat the other. It is a high ideal, but one which should be attained, for, after all, every player is made of the same flesh and blood and has an even opportunity of becoming as efficient as his fellowmen! This is the kind of game we want!

This was the forerunner to the modern game's philosophy of 'the level playing field', one that was legislated for through

the salary cap (introduced in 1990) and that through bitter experience has become more stringently policed as the years have progressed. The National Rugby League today boasts that of the last eight premiership competitions there have been seven different winners (only the Brisbane Broncos have won twice during this time).

STATE OF ORIGIN FOOTBALL

Although, to many Queenslanders, fundamental change was long overdue, new life was breathed into interstate football in 1980 with the arrival of State of Origin football. Although interstate football had been part of the league calendar since 1908, the New South Wales teams had become so dominant that the public (especially in New South Wales) viewed interstate football as little more than a waste of time. The game had been shunted away from the main arenas to grounds such as the decidedly suburban Leichhardt Oval where a pitifully small

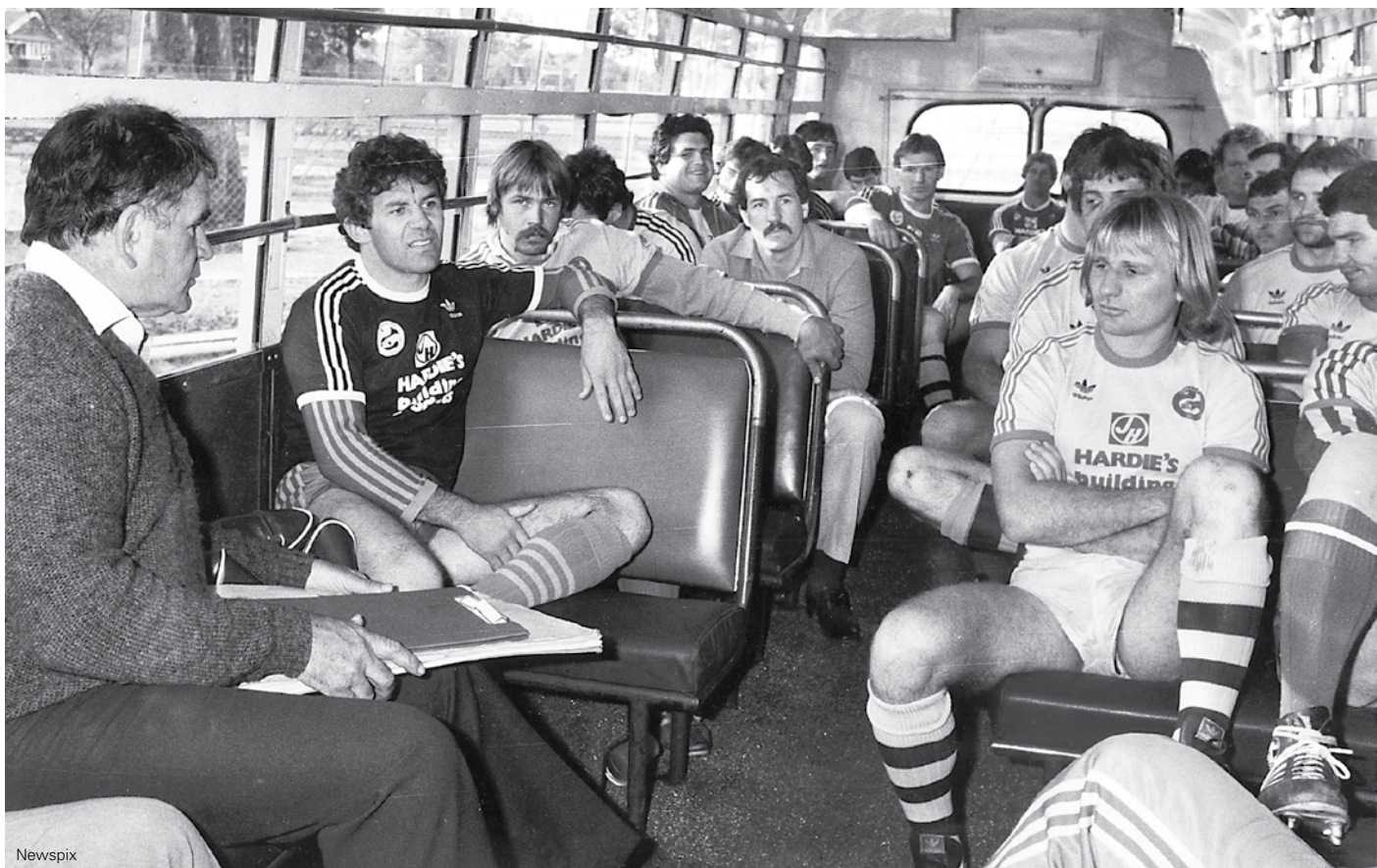




Gregg Porteous/Newspix

crowd would be less obtrusive than in the cavernous surrounds of the Sydney Cricket Ground. Queensland's energetic president Ron McAuliffe had been obsessed for years with restoring his state's football pride and became increasingly dismayed at the endless migration of talented Queensland players to the poker machine-funded New South Wales clubs. What was most galling, however, was that many of these players not only drained Queensland's playing stocks but because the state teams were chosen according to where the footballers were playing at the time, they often returned to Lang Park wearing the sky blue jersey of New South Wales to inflict another level of misery on the Maroons.

McAuliffe instigated live-in boot camps; he went to the law courts in an effort to stem the tide of talent and he even tried to woo leading New South Wales players to Queensland in a vain attempt to reverse the trend. In the end it was an idea that had been floating around for almost 20 years, a rule that players would play for their state of origin, that led to the Queensland renaissance. Within five years of the introduction of State of Origin football in 1980 it became the pinnacle of rugby league, drawing capacity crowds in Sydney and Brisbane (and later in Melbourne) and television audiences that were measured in millions. Once again the game was rewarded for its preparedness to change.



Newspix

A NATIONAL LEAGUE

In the early 1980s the New South Wales Rugby League decided to expand the premiership beyond its traditional suburban boundaries. If they had chosen to confine the competition to Sydney-based teams, the game would almost certainly have been swallowed up by the Australian Football League, which had already foreshadowed its expansionary intentions by relocating the South Melbourne club to Sydney. The Sydney premiership

opened its doors, first to regional areas of New South Wales and the Australian Capital Territory, and then into other states (Victoria, South Australia, Western Australia) and even New Zealand. Not all of these teams have survived, but the expanded competition certainly has. In 2007 one team each from Victoria, the ACT and New Zealand, three Queensland teams and ten teams from Sydney and New South Wales competed in the National Rugby League.

PLAYING WITH THE RULES

Over the years there have been countless ‘adjustments’, minor changes that have led to improvements in the game but that have sometimes drawn criticism from those who accuse administrators of too much ‘tinkering’. But change has allowed rugby league to evolve into the appealing sport that it has become today. The play-the-ball area has seen constant adjustments over the years, from the five-yard rule, to the three-yard rule, and there was a time when the defensive team was not required to retreat any further than from behind where the ball was played. The 10-metre rule, whereby the defensive team is required to retreat 10 metres from where the ball is played, opened up the game in 1993, allowed quality attacking players more room in which to work their magic. The result was a surge in the number of tries scored.

The number of points awarded for tries and goals has also changed — tries went from three points to four in 1983, field goals from two points to one in 1971. It has introduced the sin bin for minor incidents of foul play (1981), video citing (1978) for incidents of foul play that are not detected on the field, video referees (1997) and countless other innovations.

INDIVIDUAL EFFORTS

Change has also come about through the innovation of individual players and coaches. Jack Gibson, who coached Easts to two first grade premierships (1978–79) and Parramatta to three (1981–83), is regarded as the master of modern coaching, and his field trips to the United States, where he studied the operations of gridiron franchises, led to significant changes in the areas of weight training, professionalism and video analysis. Individual players, too, have brought about change; notably the ‘little master’, Clive Churchill, who is credited with changing the way that the role of fullback was perceived in the 1950s. Once

considered a defensive position, through Churchill’s flair and charisma, the role became the domain of great attacking players. Modern day players such as Ricky Stuart, whose ability to throw long spiral passes to both sides of the field; Andrew Johns, who added a new dimension to kicking in general play; and the freakish sidestepping ability of players such as Karmichael Hunt and Benji Marshall have been imitated and adopted by a new generation of young hopefuls.

The dynamism of rugby league has been one of its enduring strengths for 100 years. It is a constant work in progress but if that progress means improvement, then the grand old game can only continue to broaden its appeal.

David Middleton is a leading rugby league historian and statistician.

