

League of Legends

League of Legends: 100 years of Rugby League in Australia celebrates the centenary of rugby league in Australia. Starting as a small rebel league established in defiance of NSW Rugby Union, league has grown to be one of the most popular codes of football in Australia. Its popularity has seen it become a major sports business providing entertainment to millions of Australians. Innovative from its inception, league has evolved into a skilful and athletic game. From the local under sevens to the elite teams of the National Rugby League, the game has the passionate support of fans.

The story of the development of *League of Legends* began with the Museum's purchase of the Royal Agricultural Society Challenge Shield in late 2004. This trophy, a beautiful black mahogany shield embossed with silver, was the first premiership shield of the New South Wales Rugby League. It was in competition from 1908 to 1913 when the Agricultural Showground, or 'Agra' as it was known, was the home of rugby league in Sydney. The shield was won by South Sydney in 1908 and 1909; Newtown in 1910; and Eastern Suburbs in 1911, 1912 and 1913. After winning the competition in 1913, Eastern Suburbs presented the shield to their star captain Herbert 'Dally' Messenger. The association



The Royal Agricultural Society Challenge Shield. Photo: Dragi Markovic



Technological objects Conservator Peter Bucke cleans the Goodwill trophy for the 100 years of the NRL Exhibition. Photo: Lannon Harley

of the shield with the genesis of rugby league in Australia and its connection with the game's first great superstar make it one of the most important rugby league objects held in a public collection in Australia.

The acquisition of the Royal Agricultural Society Challenge Shield led to further research into what other material has survived from the early days of rugby league in Australia. Inquiries quickly revealed that the Australian Rugby League headquarters in Phillip Street, Sydney is a treasure house of the game's history. Its corridors are lined with photographs and football ephemera; its display cases are crammed with the trophies won by successful Australian teams. This collection, combined with material from the Queensland Rugby League, private collectors and the families of former players, provided the basis for the *League of Legends* exhibition.

Amongst the many objects on show in the exhibition are some of the great trophies of Australian rugby league. One of the more striking of these is the Courtney Goodwill Trophy. The first trophy ever presented for international rugby league, it was designed and donated by New Zealand businessman R. O. Courtney. Surmounted by a silver globe of the world, the trophy depicts pioneering greats of the code from Europe and Australasia, including James Lomas (England), Jean Gallia (France), Albert Baskerville (New Zealand) and Dally Messenger (Australia). A precursor to the world cup, the Goodwill trophy was awarded to the dominant international side over a four-year period and was in competition from 1936 until 1957. R. O. Courtney also donated the Trans Tasman cup for matches between Australia and New Zealand to help promote what he described as a 'manly and scientific game'. The cup was in competition from 1935 to 1972 and depicts a game of football played beneath the majestic peaks of Mounts Cook and Egmont.

Other significant trophies on display in the exhibition include the Ashes Cup and the *Australie-France Trophée*. Celebrating the golden age of international rugby league, these trophies are reminder of the great test battles between Australia, Great Britain and France in the 1950s. Great Britain – or the Lions – has been Australia's greatest international rival in rugby league. In 124 contests between the Kangaroos and the Lions, Australia has won 65, lost 55 and drawn four. The *Australie-France Trophée* was in competition in matches between Australia and France from 1951–1981. The French sides of 1951 and 1955, featuring the legendary full back Puig Aubert, were both victorious and are often rated as two of the strongest sides to tour Australia, a remarkable achievement given that the Vichy government banned rugby league in France during World War Two.

The exhibition also features some of the most important regional rugby league trophies. The Maher Cup, known as the 'old tin pot', was, for many years, one of the most sought after trophies of rugby league. The focus of passionate rivalry by towns in southern New South Wales, the cup was awarded on a challenge basis between teams. Players and supporters would arrive in a town in blaze of glory intent on wresting the cup from the incumbents. Originally a rugby union cup, the first rugby league Maher Cup match was played in Tumut in 1921. There were literally hundreds of challenges involving teams such as Cootamundra, Wagga, Temora, Grenfell and many others, until the cycle was completed in 1971 when Tumut regained possession of the cup for the final time.

In Far North Queensland the Arch Foley Shield was the symbol of all that was desirable in rugby league. Named



Ashes Cup. Courtesy New South Wales Rugby League. Photo: Lannon Harley



The AMCO Cup. Photo: Lannon Harley

after Arch Foley, a representative player from Townsville in the 1920s, the Arch Foley Shield has been in competition in North Queensland since 1949. The shield has been won by teams from as far afield as Herbert River, Innisfail and Whitsunday. After a break in competition in 1995, Foley Shield football recommenced in 2000 with Townsville, Cairns, Mackay and Mt Isa competing. Today it is one of the oldest rugby league trophies still in competition.

For southern Queenslanders Bulimba Cup football evokes many fond memories. Sponsored by Queensland Brewery, the Bulimba Cup was a triangular series contested by Brisbane, Ipswich and Toowoomba. From 1925 until 1972 the Cup was the focus of fierce local rivalry and produced passionate and exciting football. Brisbane dominated in the competition winning the Cup 19 times, with Toowoomba 16 and Ipswich 11. The Bulimbah Cup, as with the Arch Foley Shield and the Maher Cup, was the training ground of many of Australia's greatest footballers.

While regional competitions have thrived in New South Wales and Queensland, Sydney and Brisbane have had a magnetic pull on players. The exhibition features Queensland's Winfield Cup which was established as a state-wide competition in 1982, and provided an opportunity for country teams to test themselves against the best of Brisbane. In its first year the competition included the eight Brisbane metropolitan clubs (Wynnum-Manly, Easts, Norths, Wests, Souths, Valleys, Brothers and Redcliffe) and six representative country teams including North Queensland, Central Queensland, Wide Bay, Toowoomba, Ipswich and the Gold Coast. The competition continued until 1995 when it was replaced by the Queensland Cup.

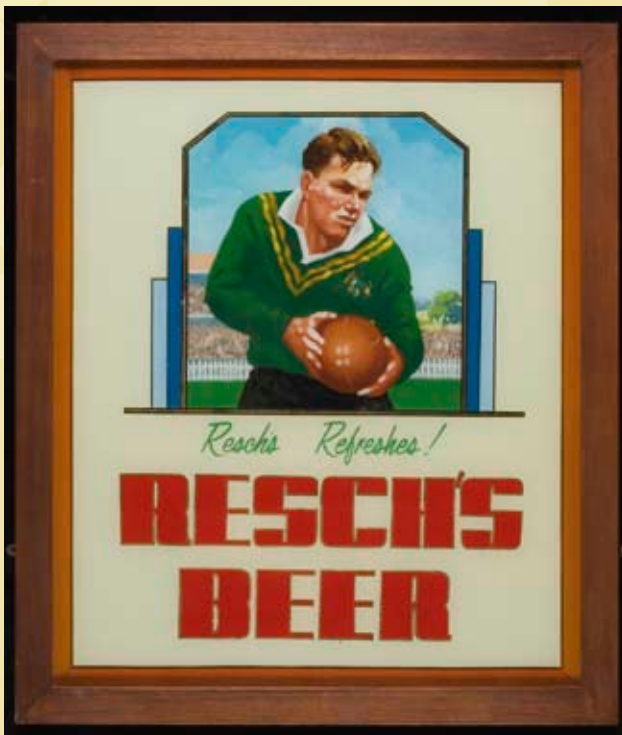
One of the most recognisable league trophies is the New South Wales version of the Winfield Cup, which was the

premiership trophy for the New South Wales Rugby League from 1982 until 1994 and then the Australian Rugby League for 1995. The trophy's design draws its inspiration from the classic rugby league image of Arthur Summons and Norm Provan immediately after the 1963 grand final between Western Suburbs and St George. Taken by the *Sun Herald's* John O'Gready, the image of post-match embrace of the two rugby league warriors has become a symbol of rugby league and has also been used as a source of inspiration for the two subsequent premiership trophies, the Optus Cup and the Telstra Premiership trophy.

As well as these great trophies of the game, *League of Legends* also features many memorable film clips and photographs of players and the fans. These images provide glimpses of how our cities and suburbs have changed. The photos bear testament to the great teams and personalities of the past, and the triumphs and despair at the heart of sporting contests. The uniforms, hairstyles, and streetscapes reveal a changing Australia. They speak to tribal loyalties of suburbs and to the changing nature of sport. That which remains constant, however, is the passion, skill and athleticism which have been at the heart of rugby league since its inception in 1908. Looking at the photographs of teams assembled over the years you get a sense of what it meant to be a man in a sports-mad country like Australia. Taken together, the visual record of rugby league, both moving and still, provides a wonderful record of football and Australian life.

Guy Hansen

Curator, *League of Legends: 100 Years of Rugby League in Australia*



Beer and rugby league have long been associated in the minds of Australians, and beer companies tapped into local loyalties by picturing team members on their advertising posters outside pubs. Photo: Lannon Harley





Winfield Cup