



Captain of the Canberra Raiders Mal Meninga holding up the Winfield Cup to proud fans after the team won the club's first premiership against Balmain, 1989.



# THE TROPHY CABINET

*Guy Hansen*

Rugby league is a game that teaches you lessons. My big lesson came in 1976 when the mighty Parramatta Eels were moving in a seemingly unstoppable march towards premiership glory. As a 12-year-old, the transformation of Parramatta from perennial cellar-dwellers was a formative event. I had paid my dues with fortnightly visits to Cumberland Oval and was confident that a Parramatta premiership victory was just around the corner. In the week before the grand final I found myself sitting on a railway bridge above Church Street, Parramatta, watching Ray Higgs, the legendary tackling machine and Parramatta captain, lead the first-grade team on a parade through the city. I remember with absolute clarity my sense that the Eels would prevail in the coming match against the Manly–Warringah Sea Eagles. Banners adorned the shopfronts and blue-and-gold crepe streamers fluttered from every car aerial. Even the doughnuts were iced with blue-and-gold icing. The Eels were the minor premiers; then they won the major semifinal. All that was left was grand final victory.

But the following Sunday at the Sydney Cricket Ground, in an action-packed game, Parramatta went down to Manly, 10 points to 13. It would be another five years before my team would finally take its rightful position in the winners' circle by defeating Newtown in the 1981 grand final.

Looking back to those days I realise that football was very much part of the fabric of the Sydney in which I grew up. The possibility of grand final glory provided an opportunity for communities to take pride in the achievements of the local warriors who went into battle each weekend. Winning the premiership for the first time signalled the coming of age for a locality and caused scenes of wild celebration. Parramatta's victory over Newtown in 1981 saw residents of Sydney's western city spill onto the streets in a spontaneous outpouring of joy. Children waved flags from the family car while Dad honked the horn. Some over-exuberant fans set fire to Cumberland Oval. Whether the burning was a wanton act of vandalism by an unruly mob, or a defiant gesture rejecting years of defeat, it was a potent symbol of the end of an era for Parramatta fans. Super-coach Jack Gibson captured the relief of Eels supporters with his famous words at the post-match celebration, 'Ding Dong, the witch is dead'. Similar scenes have been acted out across the country as other teams have brought home the trophy for the first time. Manly, Penrith, Canberra, Brisbane, Newcastle and Campbelltown have all erupted in the ecstasy of sporting triumph.

This pride in sporting achievement, manifest in the Sydney premiership competition, holds true for rugby league communities across Australia. For the towns of southern New



South Wales, the sought-after prize in earlier years was the Maher Cup. In Far North Queensland, the Arch Foley Shield was the symbol of rugby league supremacy. Toowoomba, Ipswich and Brisbane ferociously competed for the Bulimba Cup. Each of these competitions has its own histories, its famous victories, defeats, heroes and villains. Together they form the larger story of the history of rugby league in Australia, which celebrates its centenary in 2008.

## DISPLAY CASES AND TROPHY CABINETS

*League of Legends: 100 Years of Rugby League in Australia* celebrates the history of this great game. Starting as a breakaway football competition established in defiance of the New South Wales Rugby Union, league has grown to become one of the most popular of Australian sports, a skilful fast-moving game that has the passionate support of its fans. From the local under-sevens to the elite teams of the National Rugby League, its popularity has seen it become a major sports business providing entertainment to millions of Australians. And yet, for a game that occupies such a central place in Australian sporting life, its early history is surprisingly unknown to its legion of fans.

In this centenary year of rugby league, how should we remember and celebrate the game's history? If you visit rugby leagues clubs around Australia you will invariably find reminders of the game's past. In a corner of the foyer there will be a display case filled with photographs, trophies and mementos of former greats. Often ignored in the contest of the current season, these cabinets provide a tangible link with the players and officials of the past. *League of Legends* brings to light these sometimes forgotten trophy cabinets and the treasures held within. The objects on show are material evidence of the code's history and bear testament not only to the changing fortunes of the game, but also to the changing nature of Australia.

The National Museum of Australia's active involvement in the history of rugby league began when it purchased 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 awarded from 1908 to 1913 when the Agricultural Showground — the 'Ag', or 'Agra', as it was known — was the home of rugby league in Sydney. South Sydney won the shield 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 shield's association with the genesis of rugby league in Australia, and its connection to 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 about what other material had 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. 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, has provided the basis for the *League of Legends* exhibition.

## INTERNATIONAL PRIZES

Among the many objects on show are some of the great trophies of Australian rugby league. The Courtney Goodwill Trophy was donated in 1936 by New Zealand wool and sheep exporter, Roy Courtney, for competition in international rugby league. The trophy, which stands 1.76 metres high on a base 1.37 metres square, was remodelled in 1937 to include France, which by then had joined Great Britain, Australia and New Zealand in the league 'family'. Surmounted by a winged woman holding a torch standing on a silver globe of the world, the lavish trophy depicts pioneering greats of the code: James Lomas (England), Jean Galia (France), Albert Baskerville (New Zealand) and Dally



Messenger (Australia). Great Britain was the initial recipient in 1936, and from then to the late 1950s the Goodwill Trophy was at stake whenever the current holders did battle with one of the other three countries. Into the 1960s the system was changed. The trophy was played for on a four-year cycle, going to the country with the highest winning percentage in Test matches during that period. Australia's increasing dominance from the 1980s, and the ongoing difficulty of transporting Courtney's trophy because of its size, saw it fade from view in the game. But it remains the most stunning trophy in rugby league — and surely one of the most striking in world sport.

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'. This cup, which depicts a game of football played beneath the majestic peaks of Mount Cook and Mount Taranaki (Mount Egmont), was awarded from 1935 to 1972.

Other significant trophies include the Ashes Cup (pictured p. 22) and the Australie–France Trophée. Celebrating the golden age of international rugby league, these trophies are reminders of the great Test battles between Australia, Great Britain and France in the 1950s. The British Lions have always 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 awarded for matches between Australia and France from 1951 to 1981. The French sides of 1951 (featuring legendary fullback Puig-Aubert) and 1955 are rated as two of the strongest sides ever to tour Australia. Both touring teams were victorious — a remarkable achievement given that the Vichy Government banned rugby league in France during the Second World War.







Arch Foley Shield, 1948 – present, Queensland Rugby League Northern Division.

## REGIONAL COMPETITION

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 contested prizes of rugby league. The focus of passionate rivalry by towns in southern New South Wales, the cup was awarded on a challenge basis: neighbouring towns would challenge whoever happened to hold the cup at the time. Players and supporters would arrive in a town in a blaze of glory, intent on wresting the cup from the incumbents. Originally a rugby union cup, it was first played for as a rugby league trophy in Tumut in 1921. Over the seasons there were hundreds of challenges involving teams such as Cootamundra, Wagga, Temora, Grenfell and many others. 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 symbolised all that was desirable in rugby league. Named after a leading player from Townsville in the 1920s, the Arch Foley Shield has been in competition in North Queensland since 1948. 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 Mount 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 and, like the Arch Foley Shield and Maher Cup competitions, was the training ground for some of Australia's greatest footballers. 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 winning 16 times and Ipswich, 11.



## BIG LEAGUE

At the same time as regional competitions have thrived in New South Wales and Queensland, Sydney and Brisbane have exercised a magnetic pull on players. Queensland's Winfield Cup was established as a statewide 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 (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.

The competition that eventually came to be recognised as Australia's elite rugby league competition was the New South Wales Rugby League premiership. Introduced in 1951 to recognise one of Australian rugby league's founders, the JJ Giltinan Shield was presented to the winners of the New South Wales Rugby League first grade competition. In 1997, following the establishment of the Optus Cup, the status of the shield changed and it became a prize for the minor premiers (the team that completes the regular season at the top of the competition table). Still a sought-after prize, the shield is a link between the former New South Wales Rugby League and today's National Rugby League premiership.

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 for the Australian Rugby League in 1995. The trophy's design was inspired by John O'Gready's classic photograph of Arthur Summons and Norm Provan taken immediately after the 1963 grand final between Western Suburbs and St George. The post-match embrace of the two football warriors has become a symbol of the rugby league code and has also inspired the design of the two subsequent premiership trophies, the



Optus Cup and the Telstra Premiership Trophy. The Winfield Cup was replaced following legislation outlawing tobacco sponsorship of sport.

## A DIVIDED COMPETITION

*League of Legends* also reviews some of the controversies that have been integral to the game's history. Player behaviour, referee decisions and salary cap breaches have fuelled a seemingly endless series of headlines. The controversy that stands out above all others, however, is the Super League war





(left) Super League Cup, 1997, Brisbane Broncos Rugby League Club.  
(right) Optus Cup, 1997, Australian Rugby League.



that erupted in 1995, in which media empires battled for control of the broadcast rights of the game. The Australian Rugby League, backed by media giant Kerry Packer, owned the rights until 2000. In order to bypass this, Rupert Murdoch's rival media organisation, News Limited, signed individual coaches and players to compete in a rebel competition — Super League. The war reached a climax in 1997 when, in what now seems a bizarre turn of

events, 22 teams played for premiership glory in two separate competitions. Teams aligned with the Australian Rugby League competed for the Optus Cup, while the Super League aligned teams competed for the Super League Cup. The trophies are reminders of how close the code came to self-destructing.

## STATE OF ORIGIN

For many fans the most significant trophy of all is the first State of Origin shield (pictured p. 26). The commencement of State of Origin football in 1980 ushered in a new era in rugby league history. After years of dominance over Queensland by New South Wales, new life was injected into interstate football when, as an experiment in the third match of the 1980 series, it was decided that players would represent their state of origin, rather than the state where they happened to be playing at the time. The result was a sensational Queensland victory, and interstate football has since become the pinnacle of the game. This trophy, sponsored by Winfield, was in competition 'for rugby league supremacy between New South Wales and Queensland' from 1980 to 1991. It depicts two legends of the game, Brett Kenny (New South Wales) and Wally Lewis (Queensland), locked in a fierce arm wrestle.

## A TIME TO CELEBRATE

The Telstra Premiership Trophy has been awarded since the commencement of the National Rugby League in 1998. Like its predecessors, the Optus and Winfield cups, it recreates John O'Gready's photograph from the 1963 grand final, *The Gladiators*.

From a difficult birth at the beginning of the twentieth century, rugby league has grown to assume a central place in Australian life at the start of the twenty-first century. As the celebrations marking the centenary of rugby league unfold throughout 2008, fans will have a great opportunity to review the history of Australian rugby league and witness some of its treasures. Arrayed together, these trophies reflect changing styles and tastes, from the classic shields and cups of the first decades of the century, the ornate and highly wrought trophies of the 1930s, to the more modern designs of recent decades. But all represent the pinnacle of achievement in their various competitions; they are symbols of the passion, skill and athleticism that have been at the heart of rugby league since its inception in 1908.

The past 100 years reveal a great drive for adaptation and change, reflected in changing rules, the move from an amateur to a professional code, and the development of the game as a form of mass sports entertainment. While it has changed significantly, rugby league has remained, at its base, a 'grass roots' game. For me, the lesson to be learned from the game's history is that rugby league provides a field on which our most elemental emotions find expression. There is pride in community, ecstasy in victory and despair at defeat. There is aggression and ambition as well as sacrifice and courage. Next time you visit a leagues club and hear the sound of distant poker machines amid the interruptions of the restaurant public address system — 'number 10, your schnitzel is ready' — pause for a moment and take a look at the trophy cabinet. There is history there.

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Telstra Premiership Trophy, 1998 – present, National Rugby League.