



**The Master**

**DAILY MESSENGER**



# THE GAME BEGINS

*Sean Fagan*

Australians have always loved their sport.

A century ago, Sydney was gripped with football fever: in July 1907 a crowd of more than 50,000 packed into the stands and grassed hills of the Sydney Cricket Ground to watch a rugby union match between New South Wales and New Zealand. The only football games anywhere on the globe that drew larger gate-paying attendances at that time were FA Cup Finals in English soccer. The gate receipts for that Sydney Cricket Ground game exceeded £2500 — an enormous sum for one football match. It didn't take long for the footballers who took the field that day to calculate that if they had each taken a share of the gate money, they would have each received over £85 — well over a year's wages for the average working man. It was a tempting thought to the players, many of whom toiled away as low-paid tradesmen and labourers.

Rugby union, however, was a sport built upon the principles of the amateur spirit, and rugby footballers could not earn money from the game. Governed by the Rugby Football Union in England, rugby was to be played merely as a pastime: a means of exercise, recreation and enjoyment for the players. The Rugby Football Union decreed that footballers were neither to be paid to play, nor could they be compensated for lost income caused by time away from work due to football injuries, nor for travelling to 'away' matches or on tours. The Rugby

Football Union also discouraged cup (knockout) and league (points table) competitions, and rejected suggested rule changes that would make rugby more appealing to spectators. The Rugby Football Union reasoned that the game was not created for the benefit of spectators, and that bringing money into clubs would only lead to players demanding a share, club officials being tempted to pay the best footballers for their loyalty, and amateur footballers being driven from the sport (as had already happened in English soccer).

But the Rugby Football Union's stance could not stop the inevitable. In 1895, an uprising among the rugby clubs of working-class Yorkshire and Lancashire culminated in the formation of a rival rugby body: the Northern Rugby Football Union (initially called 'Northern Union' before taking on the name 'rugby league'). The Northern Union established the principle of professional payments to footballers, and made changes to the playing laws to improve rugby as a spectacle (most notably in 1906 when teams were reduced to 13-a-side and the introduction of the 'play-the-ball' rule). The Northern Union soon had as many footballers and clubs as the Rugby Football Union.

The split in English rugby had not passed without notice in Australia. As early as 1902, Sydney footballers, disgruntled at the paltry financial allowances provided by the New South Wales



courtesy Sean Fagan

Rugby Union, were openly threatening to form a professional rugby body and affiliate with the Northern Union in England. It seemed inevitable that if gate takings from interstate and international matches continued to grow, and if it could be demonstrated that a tour to Britain could return a profit, then professional football would break out in Sydney.

In late 1905 the New Zealand All Blacks completed a hugely popular rugby union tour of Great Britain, earning over £12,000 for the New Zealand Rugby Union. In Sydney the 1906 season saw a sudden rise in attendances at rugby union matches, attributable to the emergence of Dally Messenger into club and representative football. A visit to Sydney in July 1906 by George Smith, a member of the 1905 All Blacks, brought news that the Kiwis were planning to send a 'professional All Blacks' team (later dubbed the 'All Golds') to England in 1907 to play against the Northern Union clubs. This triggered the commencement of secret meetings of footballers and their supporters in Sydney and Brisbane, and plans began to be laid towards the founding of professional rugby league in Australia.

While the movement was driven by the footballers, they needed to look to others for the necessary financial backing and organisation. This support came in the shape of James J Giltinan (an entrepreneur), Victor Trumper (a Test cricketer) and Henry 'Harry' Hoyle (a Labor politician and union organiser). By July 1907 plans were in place for the All Golds to visit Sydney for three matches on their way to England, and for rugby union's star footballer Dally Messenger to cross codes and join them. Messenger, the son of a professional rower, felt that it was justified for a man to earn money from his sport if it was generating gate takings.

On 8 August 1907 the year-long planning came to fruition with the formation of the New South Wales Rugby Football League at Bateman's Hotel in George Street, Sydney. 'The League' (as the game quickly became known) announced that it intended forming a district club competition for the 1908 season, and

would be playing rugby under the Northern Union's 13-a-side laws. However, as no one had yet had time to train under the Northern Union's rules, it was decided to play using rugby union laws for the three matches between the League's New South Wales team and the visiting All Golds. The matches received good support from the Sydney public (20,000 attended the opening contest), and the League looked confidently ahead to the 1908 season.

An article in the *Sydney Sportsman* on 14 August 1907 captured the enthusiasm for the new game: 'It is reckoned that professional football will be in full blast in Sydney within a few seasons. The Union has been scooping the great pots of boodle, and the players, who get all the bumps and bruises, are beginning to ask where do they come in.' Others, including New South Wales Rugby Union officials, sought to scare wary footballers from joining the League by predicting its rapid and spectacular demise. They called the New South Wales Rugby Football League 'a nine days' wonder', and suggested that once any gate money was accumulated, it would lead to a squabble over how to divide it up. More reasoned thinkers, however, foresaw that what really would decide the League's fate would be its ability to attract spectators, particularly using the 'new rugby' of 13-a-side teams and play-the-ball rules.

In the summer evening heat of the first months of 1908, public meetings were held in Sydney and Newcastle to form the League's new clubs: Glebe, Newtown, Western Suburbs, South Sydney, North Sydney, Balmain, Eastern Suburbs, Newcastle and Cumberland. The New South Wales Rugby League's inaugural club competition — playing for the Royal Agricultural Society's 'Challenge Shield' — kicked off on 20 April with 'double-header' matches at Birchgrove Oval (Balmain) and Wentworth



courtesy Sean Fagan

Park (Glebe). Rugby league was estimated to have gained the support of about half of Sydney's first-grade footballers at that time, particularly the older stars. Fearing what would happen if the New South Wales Rugby League collapsed, most of the younger players chose to stay with rugby union rather than risk being punished with a lifetime ban.

The focus, however, for the New South Wales Rugby Football League in its first seasons was on representative matches, for it was at this level that football contests attracted their biggest crowds (and therefore gate takings). With this in mind, despite not yet having any clubs, the Queensland Rugby League formed in Brisbane on 28 March to organise the selection of Queensland and Brisbane teams for the season's representative matches.

From its first outing in a major match in Sydney, the new code of rugby proved to be an instant hit with the public — and shook rugby union officials from their haughty belief that rugby league would quickly fade away. As one union official admitted in the *Sunday Sun* on 3 May 1908:

*I am now bound to say that it is my humble and honest opinion that their game, certainly from a spectators point of view as well as a player's, is preferable, and outclasses the game of rugby under which our Union [New South Wales Rugby Union] have to play. In fact, I go even further, and predict that unless our Union breaks away from the Mother Union [Rugby Football Union], and adopts the same rules in the immediate future our Union will be as dead as 'Julius Caesar', as far as the public interest is concerned.*

Tours by the New Zealanders and an 'All Maori' team in 1908 and 1909 provided the much needed initial finances for the New South Wales and Queensland rugby leagues. Despite the seemingly good start, the New South Wales Rugby Football League in particular suffered a number of 'growing pains'. Giltinan, bankrupted after financing the first Kangaroos' tour to Britain (a tour ravaged by bad weather and labour strikes), returned home in March 1909 to find that he, along with Trumper and Hoyle, had been overthrown from power. The New South Wales Rugby Football League was on the brink of bankruptcy through much of 1909, and there was every possibility that it could collapse.

However, two games in the space of four days against the visiting Maori team (on its second tour) attracted over 50,000 fans, and all of a sudden the League's financial woes vanished. The remainder of the Maoris' tour provided further funds, and the resurgent position of the New South Wales Rugby Football League triggered half the 1908 Wallabies team to rush to join

rugby league late in the 1909 season for a series of matches between the Kangaroos and the Wallabies.

The defection of the Wallabies was encouraged by secret cash payments (up to £200 per man) financed by Sydney entrepreneur James Joynton Smith, and for a short time the League came under substantial public criticism for using money to inflict a seemingly fatal blow upon the New South Wales Rugby Union. Indeed, the 1910 season saw the New South Wales Rugby Football League gain the ascendancy over rugby union in New South Wales and Queensland. Thousands of players, clubs and fans followed the Wallabies across to rugby league. From the opening round of the New South Wales Rugby Football League club competition there was a dramatic increase in big-name players turning out, and attendances pushed towards 20,000.

The visit of the first British Lions rugby league team to New South Wales and Queensland later that season proved to be enormously popular, and ensured the financial security of both the New South Wales and Queensland rugby leagues. Crowds of over 42,000 crushed into the Sydney Showground to watch the Lions play against New South Wales, Australia and Australasia.

Meanwhile, the deciding third Test in the rugby union series between Australia and New Zealand drew less than 15,000 spectators. In 1911 the New South Wales Rugby Football League was finally able to use the Sydney Cricket Ground (it had previously been denied access due to the exclusive lease held by the New South Wales Rugby Union) for a match between New South Wales and New Zealand.





The crowd of 50,000 matched that of the record rugby union attendance four years earlier.

Though it had not been without drama, controversy, and a bitter fight to sway public sentiment, the establishment of rugby league in Australia is a remarkable success story. In just over three seasons it usurped amateur rugby union for the favour of the public and footballers alike, giving birth to Australia's first professional football code. In a truism that would hold through the trials and tribulations of the coming century, the code had

demonstrated not only a propensity to inflict off-field self-injury, but to endure and rise above it. In the end, rugby league's greatest asset was, and continues to be, the game itself. In 1908, and today, when played and managed properly, rugby league is a spectacular sport that is immensely popular with multitudes of Australians.

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Skipper Chris McKivat (far right) leads the Australians in their war cry before the first match of the 1911–12 Kangaroos tour of Great Britain. The team won the series with a resounding 33–8 win in the third Test. It would be another 50 years before an Australian side would defeat England in a series at home.