





INTRODUCTION

Craddock Morton

As a child growing up in Wagga Wagga during the 1950s, it would have been hard to over-exaggerate the importance of rugby league in the community. And this was league at the local level — there was not the focus on the national competition that there is today.

For me, football was centred on the Wagga Kangaroos, and most Sunday afternoons would find me at the Eric Weissel Oval, either barracking for the Kangaroos against other teams in the regional Group 20 competition or barracking for those same teams — Wamoon or Yenda or Leeton or Narrandera — if they happened to be playing against the Kangaroos' traditional enemy, the Wagga Magpies (at that time a much more successful club than the Kangaroos). The highlights of the year were the local derbies, where quarter was neither sought nor given.

We also followed the Group 20 representative matches against other groups from around New South Wales. The highlight of the year was the annual City versus Country match, where the wealth of the city generally prevailed over country decency and

hard work. I do not recall having any interest in supporting a Sydney club, although we followed with interest the exploits of those local stars who had gone to the big smoke (and, unlike today, not all of them did).

In national terms I think that cricket was the only game where we followed closely the highs and lows of the Australian team, although when the Poms occasionally toured at a time when their rugby league team was genuinely competitive, we would listen to the tests on radio and look forward to their match against the Group 20 representative team. But, in league, local was predominant.

How everything has changed. Now we have a national competition, with teams from New South Wales, Queensland, Victoria and even New Zealand. We have Anzac Tests, Tri-Nations, World Championships (with teams representing Lebanon and Russia playing each other!) the World Club championship and the like.

A hundred years has passed and a game has become a multimillion dollar industry.

For the National Museum of Australia the 100th birthday of rugby league is an ideal opportunity to pause and consider the history of the game. Rugby league, as with Australian Rules football and rugby union, is deeply woven into the fabric of Australian society. The *League of Legends* exhibition, developed in collaboration with the Australian Rugby League, reviews some of the great moments in that history. And it is a history that is worth remembering. The exhibition reminds us of the great teams and personalities of the past, and the triumphs and despair that are at the heart of sporting contests. The memorabilia and photographs on show 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 that have been at the heart of rugby league since its inception in 1908. Looking back at images of teams from the past 100 years you get a sense of what it meant to live 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.

There will always be a debate, in some form, between the good old days and the direction the sport is taking. This exhibition will give both sides plenty of ammunition, but also reason to pause and consider all sides of the debate. For myself, I celebrate a game that is much faster, much cleaner and much more evenly matched. I welcome the advances that have been made in player welfare, both during and after their time in the sport. I welcome the growth in numbers of prodigiously talented Indigenous and Pacific Islander players. I welcome the communications revolution and what it has done for the game, and I welcome professional administration.

I'm less certain about some of football skills that seem to be disappearing. And I'm afraid that I'm a firm supporter of Sunday afternoon games. I worry about the future of viable competition in the bush, and whether it can ever be as strong again as when I was growing up. And I think the cost of a pie at the footy is outrageous.

But ultimately, I'm an optimist when it comes to the future of rugby league. I believe that this exhibition points the way for such optimism. Enjoy it and ponder on its history. If the second century is as good as the first we will be fortunate indeed.

Craddock Morton is the director of the National Museum of Australia.



A dominant City side defeats Country 28–14 in 1934, the year of the establishment of the Country Rugby League. The annual City versus Country game became one of the highlights of the year, especially for fans living in country New South Wales.



State Library of New South Wales