



photograph by John O'Gready/Fairfaxphotos



# 'WHO'S THAT?' THE GREAT IMAGES OF RUGBY LEAGUE

Geoff Armstrong

If a ballot was taken for the best known photograph in Australian rugby league, there is little doubt that the remarkable image of Norm Provan and Arthur Summons, taken by the *Sun-Herald's* John O'Gready in the immediate aftermath of the 1963 Sydney grand final, would claim the prize. The photo of two mud-clad, exhausted warriors, one tall, one short — caught in a cheerful sporting embrace and lit by a shaft of sunlight that cut through the murky gloom in the moments after an epic battle — would win international awards and famously be cast in bronze as the Winfield Cup. In the process, it helped make Provan and Summons two of the best remembered players of their era.

It seems a little strange then that the day after the grand final, 25 August 1963, the editor of the *Sun-Herald* decided that O'Gready's photograph was not worthy of the front page. Instead, he went for an image to go with the story of a Friday-night train smash at Geurie, near Dubbo in western New South Wales, in which 20 people had been injured. The photograph

that would become known as *The Gladiators* made page 3, alongside the news that the Lord Mayor of Sydney, Harry Jensen, had failed in his bid for preselection for the federal seat of East Sydney. Ask most league fans today the names of the footballers in the photo and they'd know the answer. Back in August 1963, the heading atop the Provan–Summons photo asked, succinctly: 'Who's That?'

Like so many things in sport, the immediate appeal of a rugby league photograph is often in the eye of the beholder. It is hard to imagine too many drenched Wests fans who'd been at the 1963 grand final looking at *The Gladiators* too fondly; especially if they knew that, at the precise moment O'Gready 'hit the button', Summons was actually telling Provan through gritted teeth that Saints were 'lucky to win'. There were whispers about the refereeing that day, reinforced by the decision to allow a controversial try to Saints' Johnny King.



Over time, the magic of *The Gladiators* grew. So it is with many historic league images. One can only wonder what Sid 'Sandy' Pearce's wharfie mates and football adversaries would have made of the studio portrait in which he is proudly wearing his Australian jumper from 1910. Sandy looks almost elegant, hair slicked back, boots polished, a credit to club and country — which he most certainly was, though not in the way the photograph might imply. 'It could be said that football never has had a gamier, tougher, rougher nor more loyal team player', was how his great Australian comrade Frank Burge described him. But at first glance, the photo is too 'spiffy', too nice, to be a boots 'n' all hooker from the game's first decade. But then you notice the proud, almost cheeky smile, and Sandy's roguish spirit shines through. It was not for nothing that Burge also rated his friend the 'greatest personality' the game had ever had.

The glass plate of the Pearce photograph is one of many held in the extraordinary archives of the Melba Studios in Sydney. For almost as long as the game has been played, Melba has been photographing the city's best rugby league footballers. Its action photos from the 1920s provide firm evidence that these early games were tough, fast and dramatic in a way the earliest newsreels often struggled to convey, while their team







(above) The South Sydney team, photographed before the 1955 New South Wales Rugby League Grand Final. Souths beat Newtown 12–11.  
 (below) The St George team, photographed before the 1965 New South Wales Rugby League Grand Final. St George beat South Sydney 12–8.



Queensland representative player Duncan Thompson, 1925.

photos of Test teams and grand final sides have appeared in countless books and magazines, and adorned many a bar down the years.

Many of these shots were taken out the back of the Sydney Cricket Ground Members area. It became a tradition for the two teams to file out of the dressing rooms and take their places: halfbacks and five-eighths in the front row, tall forwards standing, captain in the middle of the front row. An exception was the Easts team of 1975: that photo was quickly snapped in the Roosters' dressing room. As Ron Coote remembers it, coach Jack Gibson didn't want any distractions, even down to the customary team photo. 'Big' Artie Beetson looks like just another player in that photo, but at other times, with other great teams, it is amazing how often a club's foremost personality stands out, almost like a colossus. Look at captain-coach Jack Rayner with the Souths team of 1955, or Norm Provan with the Saints a decade later.

Rayner and Provan were tall, powerful men, but this dominance is not just about size. By all accounts, the great halfback of the 1920s, Duncan Thompson, had a magnetism about him, and this quality is apparent in any team photo he is in. For some reason, it is to Thompson that your eyes are immediately attracted, even though he was usually the smallest bloke in the side. He was not called 'The Fox' for nothing.

Perhaps part of the appeal of the team photograph lies in the fact that every year, every team — from the kids in the park to the Test XIII, in the city, the bush and on tour overseas — gets its photo taken. We're all playing the same great game. The little halfback in the front row of the under-sevens might not be Andrew Johns ... yet. The State Library of Queensland holds some wonderful early photographs, dating from 1911 to 1913, of sides from 'outposts' such as Sapphire, Palen Creek and the Burrum District and featuring tough footballers, young and old, of various origins.





State Library of Queensland



State Library of Queensland





State Library of Queensland





courtesy Sean Fagan



The Australian War Memorial has among its archives a group shot from 1916 of the 'Mudlarks', a rugby league team made up of members of the 4th Machine Gun Company. There's a certain pride about all these photos — the men (and boys) are happy to be as one, ready to fight for a common cause.

Photographers were working the sidelines from the very earliest days of rugby league. In 1907 weekly magazines such as the *Sydney Mail* and the *Town & Country Journal* invariably

featured images of major sporting occasions, and the first New South Wales versus All Golds match of 1907 was no exception. On 21 August the *Town & Country Journal* devoted a full page of photographs to the landmark event, which included the two teams in a group photo taken immediately after the contest, and also shots of Dally Messenger scooping up a loose ball, the healthy crowd at the Agricultural Ground and one of the Kiwis, clad in a wide-brimmed cloth hat, making a dash during the match.





The photographers were also present for the first Test match ever played, in May 1908, the first New South Wales–Queensland game, which was staged three months later, and the Kangaroos–Wallabies encounters of 1909, which were so crucial in assuring rugby league’s survival. The images that were subsequently published might not have been as vibrant as Phil Hillyard’s shot of Greg Inglis diving over for a try in the 2007 grand final, but they still give a clue to the athleticism of the early champions. This is especially true of Messenger: an image that adorned the cover of the *Town & Country Journal* in 1912, of Dally supporting a break made by Dan Frawley, suggests he possessed rare speed off the mark and that innate ability to be in the right place at the right time. A photograph of the 1910 New South Wales team, with Messenger sitting in the front row, shows how muscular his legs were — perhaps a result of many hours in a single scull on Sydney Harbour. Little wonder he could kick goals from great distances.

Unfortunately, when photos were reproduced on the newsprint of the 1920s and 1930s, they failed to reflect the quality of the original negative. The excellent pre-war magazine pages produced on high-quality paper were a thing of the past and, as

a consequence, published images from these times rarely do justice to the champion players who were the focus of them. Fortunately, in some cases, the negatives of these photographs survive and today are gloriously revealing. For example, readers of the sporting weekly, the *Referee*, in June 1932, who saw a grainy, deep-etched photograph of the Australian second-rower ‘Joe’ Pearce (Sandy’s son) tangling with England’s Stanley Brogden, might have wondered why it was deemed worthy of the front page. It has no context, and could only mean something to the readers who were at the game and could recall the particular incident.

The actual photograph, however, is razor sharp. It is part of the Sam Hood collection of the State Library of New South Wales and captures not just two great footballers grimly fighting for possession near the western sideline, but also the massive crowd in the Sheridan Stand that came along that day for their first look at the touring Englishmen. In the same collection are on-field and off-field images, taken by Hood and other photographers, of legendary figures such as Dave Brown, Vic Hey and Frank McMillan, and of City–Country, interstate and Test battles. In toto, they bring the code and its players to life and provide ample evidence of why rugby league was Sydney’s biggest show in town every winter between the wars. One of the joys of rugby league’s centenary year, and the events and publications that will mark it, is that many of these photographs will be on show for the league fans of today.

Often, at half-time and even in breaks in play, the photographers would swing around and ‘snap’ the crowd, in the process giving us a feel for the times and reminding us that the great appeal of rugby league goes well beyond the sideline. The photographers of today — between dashes from one in-goal to the other — do likewise, as do the Channel Nine and Fox TV cameras. There is still a genuine cheerfulness to most rugby league crowds, and while the dress sense of league fans might have changed dramatically over the first 100 years, their love of the game and its confrontations has not.



The great sporting images reinforce the bond between the game, its participants and its fans, and they reinforce the value of history, too. We should never forget the players who, in the words of Harry Bath, 'dug the well', and the surviving images of rugby league at all levels help us do this. Throughout the code's first 100 years, there has been a succession of photographers perched along the sidelines or organising the players in front

and back rows; waiting for the moment to show again why their sport is a special one. Even if John O'Gready couldn't make the front page back in August 1963, he is now the best remembered of this troop. But he is not alone. The game is lucky to have had them all.

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