



ST. GEORGE v

M-W

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GRASS ROOTS: ON BEING A RUGBY LEAGUE FAN

Debbie Spillane

I was a rugby league fan from so early in my life that, in the delivery room, when the doctor slapped me on the back I wailed 'Get 'em inside ref!'

I never had a chance. I came from a long line of committed rugby league fans.

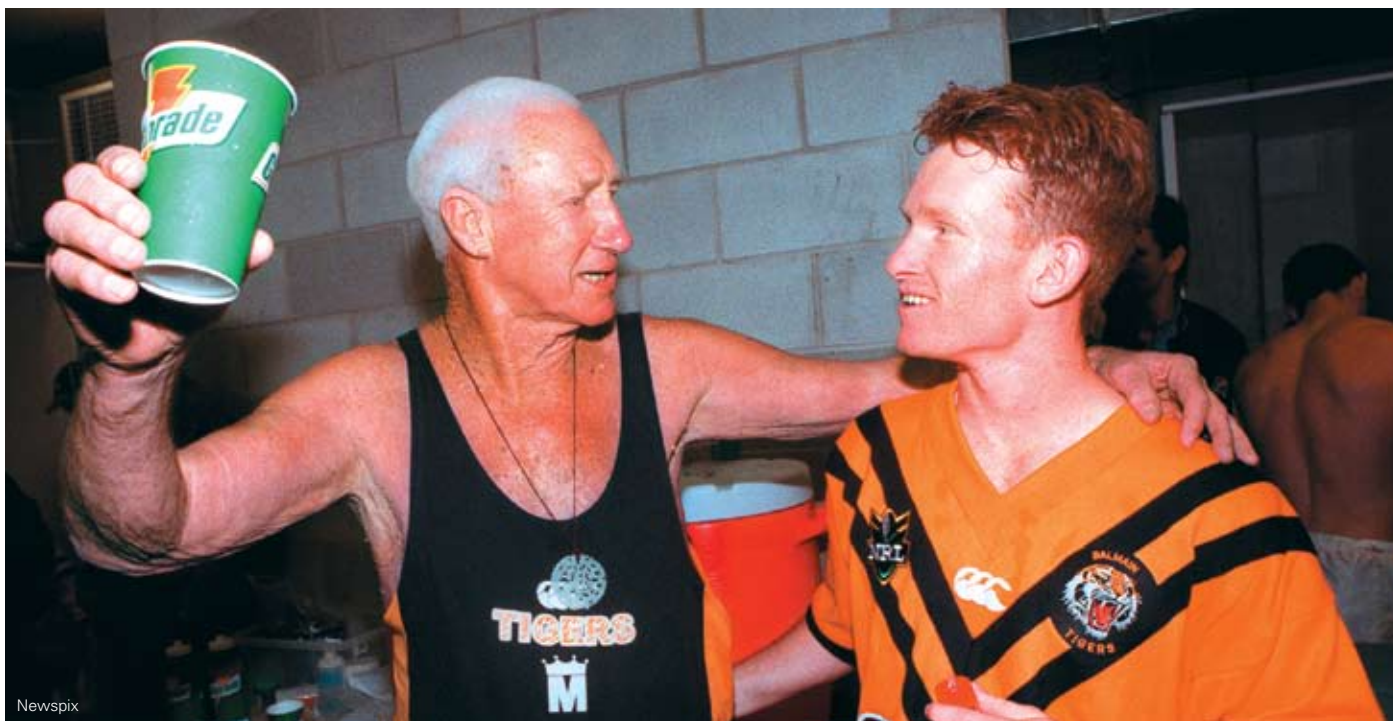
My grandfather Frank Spillane played 72 first grade games for Wests and Sydney University between 1926 and 1932 and, after retiring, made rugby league watching a serious pursuit. In all honesty, the word 'fan' doesn't quite do the job when describing Pa's relationship with the game. It sounds like it involves a little too much frippery, hero-worship and barracking for it to be totally apt. Pa was devoted to rugby league watching but practised it more like a ritual than a hobby or a pastime.

Every Saturday of the first 12 football seasons of my life, he would marshal the family and head to the Sydney Cricket Ground (SCG) to watch the 'match of the round'. In the days before matches were shown on television, the top match each week was transferred to the SCG and Pa believed the only sensible thing for a league fan to do was to watch the best on offer,

so that's where we went, to see whoever was playing. With military precision we would arrive at half-time in reserve grade, take up our seats in the same area of the Ladies Stand, top deck, directly above the halfway line, about two or three rows from the back. We would lay out our blankets and cushions on the long wooden seats that resembled church pews and settle in to pay attention in the same way we would in church.

Pa believed in watching rugby league in respectful, contemplative silence. Even though he would, if pressed, admit to a partiality for his old club, Western Suburbs, you could have watched him week in, week out, surveying the action without ever giving the slightest hint of emotional reaction to anything that happened on the field. Imagine Bjorn Borg after Botox treatment and you have some idea of the range of facial movement shown by my grandfather at a rugby league game. Yet there is no doubt, it was one of the great passions of his life.

Despite the fact that my father would have preferred all the family to show their appreciation for rugby league in the same way as his father, there were many variations on fan style even



within my own family. My grandmother, who took an interest in the game to keep her husband company, would sit almost as quietly as he did during games, but would occasionally emit a little 'oh dear' or 'my goodness' in response to the action. My Uncle Bernie was a 'heart on sleeve' supporter, alternating between exultant and sulky depending on the fortunes of his beloved Wests, while my aunt embraced the weekly football outing as a social excursion, liked to dress up, chat to other fans and take me autograph hunting.

Over my formative years I was exposed to all sorts of fans, albeit from the somewhat removed upper reaches of the Ladies Stand. One you couldn't miss, even if he was a football field away, was the unique Laurie Nichols. In his gold and black

singlet, regardless of how wintry the weather, Laurie would create such a hubbub when Balmain was playing at the SCG that I could follow his antics even if he was on 'The Hill', on the furthest side of the ground from me. Often he would make his entrance along the front of the old Brewongle Stand, right next to the Ladies Stand, and I could clearly hear him barking out his war cry 'Tigers! Tigers!'

Laurie created a buzz of amusement among the members and stirred the fans in the outer, who parted to make way for him and watch his frenetic shadow-boxing routine. Although he was the antithesis of everything my father and grandfather expected from a respectable fan, they looked on him with genuine affection. With my Aunt Janet's binoculars I would follow his



progress around the ground, fascinated by his performance and by the rollicking, good-humoured reaction he got from fans of all stripes. I remember asking Dad once if Laurie was 'crazy' and my father replied that no, he was a wool classer by trade and that meant he was no dummy.

When it comes to fan determination and dedication the other example that always comes to my mind is not a person, but an event. The 1965 grand final between St George and South Sydney set an attendance record at the SCG that will never be broken. A crowd of 78,056 people crammed into the ground and I was lucky enough to be one of them. In most instances the expression 'packed to the rafters' is just that, an expression.

On that day it was an understatement. The ground was packed to above the rafters. I remember being amazed, and alarmed, by the sight of fans sitting on top of the grandstand roofs, clinging to flagpoles to help them stay aloft on those green peaks. Being only nine at the time, I think I might've spent more time looking at the fans perched on top of the old Brewongle Stand than at the game itself, although I do recall vividly the air of anticipation surrounding an exciting Rabbitohs line-up that included Bobby McCarthy, Eric Simms and Mike Cleary.

It was clear then that Souths were on the cusp of a golden era and, some 30 years later, fans inspired by many of the very players I watched on that day pooled their influence and passion



photographs by Ian Waldie

to save the club from extinction. In 100 years of rugby league, it's hard to beat that as an example of fan power.

I cheered for Souths that day because, despite having been at every grand final since 1956, I'd never seen any team except St George win the premiership. Going to the match of the round every week meant I watched St George play far more than any other team and thrived on seeing them beaten. One of the main reasons I eventually became a Canterbury–Bankstown supporter was because they defeated St George in the semifinals in 1967, ensuring I would, for the first time in my life, see a team other than St George win the grand final. Oddly enough, my brother reacted in the opposite way to constant exposure to the red and whites, and went on to become a life-long Dragons fan.

When television coverage replaced the SCG as the vehicle for the match of the round I became a regular at Belmore Sports Ground and then, as I got old enough to travel further afield, I started attending games all over Sydney following the Bulldogs. My father and grandfather pined for the SCG days and became stay-at-home armchair fans. But I revelled in the opportunity to mix with the more rabid supporters. And after years of watching the game from a detached distance, I loved that I could sit near the fence at Belmore. Given the new rectangular ground design, we were so close to the action that I could hear the opposition players calling out warnings when my favourite player, Garry Dowling, came charging into the attack from full-back.

When I think of those days, for some reason, an abiding memory is of a middle-aged man who would sit a couple of rows in front of us at Belmore. A Bulldogs fan, he dressed quite conservatively, except for a pair of striking blue socks. I never spoke to him, but I figured they were his lucky Bulldogs socks and I discreetly checked every week to see if he had them on.

Of course, in those days, if you weren't inclined to wear a scarf or a beanie, quite often hand-knitted, you didn't have many options in the fan-wear department. The rosette, made of coloured ribbon,

was the only semi-sophisticated piece of fan paraphernalia you could sometimes buy at a ground. Occasionally, for a big game, you'd go the newsagent and buy coloured crepe paper to cut into strips for do-it-yourself pom poms. Now everything from bomber jackets to baseball caps, from boxer shorts to collared shirts is available for fans to show their allegiance, albeit under the unromantic heading of 'merchandise'. It's one of the things about being a rugby league fan that's changed most.

Pay television and the internet are two other major changes affecting fans. Some devotees watch every game, every weekend and I like to think they're the ones who've got most in common with my dear old grandfather Frank. Being a fan for him was about totally immersing himself in the game, rather than a club. But, for the vast majority, being a fan is all about a bond with a team and fellow fans, the memories it holds and the hopes for the future it embodies. It's about emotion and shared experience and loyalty. The only other connection most of us have which compares in any way is ... well, here we are back at the starting point of this story ... family.

Debbie Spillane is one of Australia's most successful female sports broadcasters and can be currently heard on ABC News Radio.

