





CONTROVERSY

Ian Heads

In the heady seasons of Rex Mossop's weekly Sunday morning program *Sportsworld* on Channel Seven during the 1970s and '80s, the most awaited moment (apart, perhaps, from the 'Passing competition', which featured a trumpeting elephant and grand prizes such as a litre of orange juice) was the kick-off to 'Controversy corner'. During this regular feature, big, beefy blokes scrummed down around a table, and talked heatedly about the rugby league dramas of the day. Never was there any shortage of spiky subject matter. And right through league's first century there never has been — although in recent times the controversy on which the game has always thrived has tended to be more of the 3.00 am nightclub variety, involving boys behaving badly. 'Controversy corner', featuring the likes of ex-forward stars Mossop, Ferris 'Ferdie' Ashton and Noel Kelly, referee Col Pearce and sports journalist Alan Clarkson was the perfect weekly dialogue for such a game. On the rival Channel Nine network in a parallel time slot, a couple of fiery characters of Irish descent, Ron 'Won' Casey and Frank Hyde, would most likely be going hammer and tongs over this league issue or that ...

It was always the same. Born of adversity and the discontent of players at their treatment by an upper crust rugby union establishment, rugby league has had more controversy than scrums over the seasons. Former Australian Rugby League

chairman Ken 'Arko' Arthurson contemplated the phenomenon of the game's leap-frogging from drama to drama and declared it a 'tough old boot. You couldn't kill it with an axe'. The great dramas and controversies of rugby league punctuated the years with almost mathematic precision. One New South Wales and Australian Rugby League chairman, Kevin Humphreys, was particularly wary of the 'ides of March' each year, owing to the game's inclination to turn feral around that time. Humphreys steeled himself each season — and was rarely disappointed.

It started early, with the beginning of the game itself ... clandestine meetings by lamplight in Vic Trumper's Sports Store in Market Street, Sydney ... the gathering on 8 August 1908 at Bateman's Hotel, George Street, at which the New South Wales League was formed ... the cab ride to Double Bay taken by the game's leaders, on their way to secure the nod from Mrs Annie Messenger that it would be okay for her son Herbert Henry 'Dally' Messenger, the champion of his time, to leap rugby's fence and play the new game of 'Northern Union' (rugby league). All took place in a city seething with rumour and accusation.

The first 'great explosion' came in 1909, a year in which the new game limped through a season that took on an increasingly moribund look, with crowds at times embarrassingly small, counted in hundreds rather than thousands. At the beginning of the season, in a highly questionable move, the New South

Wales Rugby Football League executive had met and kicked out the game's founders: James Giltinan, Victor Trumper and Henry Hoyle. Later that year, bankrolled by a colourful Sydney character James (to become Sir James) Joynton Smith, rugby league pounced on the cream of the Australian representative rugby union side, the Wallabies, who had returned in some triumph from a campaign in Britain. Fourteen Wallabies signed and other rugby (union) players also agreed to play a four-match series against their equivalent league opposition, the Kangaroos, knowing that they would be banned from playing rugby union for life. Before long the Wallaby converts confirmed they would be joining district clubs and playing rugby league in 1910. In a single dramatic sweep, rugby league laid down its playing and financial foundation for the long future. However, on a sour note, the downgrading of the South Sydney–Balmain premiership final to the status of 'curtain-raiser' for the fourth of the Wallabies–'Roos games created ructions that resonated down the seasons. Insulted, Balmain refused to play, its men lining up in silent protest outside the ground. The Tigers never forgave Souths, who kicked off, scored a try against no-one, and won the premiership. Balmain claim to this day that the Rabbitohs 'duddeed' them.

In 1917, a huge blow-up involving a beefy Lambton (Newcastle) miner Dan 'Laddo' Davies shook the game to its foundations in two cities. Deemed to be ineligible when he came to Sydney and played a match for Glebe Club, Davies was suspended

for life. Simmering over that and generally at loggerheads with the New South Wales Rugby Football League, Glebe players went on strike. Fourteen of them, including the famous lock-forward Frank Burge, were suspended until the start of the 1919 season. Meanwhile Davies went back to Newcastle and, when he played a match for Wests there, all hell broke loose. The New South Wales Rugby Football League promptly disqualified the entire Northern Branch of the Newcastle League, at which the competition broke into two factions, known as the 'Lilywhites' and the 'Bolsheviks'. Not until 1920 and the formation of the Newcastle Rugby League was peace restored.



Controversy was not just confined to players and administrators. In the late 1920s a famous fracas broke out during a Balmain–St George match at an old ground at Arncliffe. Spectators ripped palings off the fence to flail players ... and each other. The events of the afternoon of 11 August 1928 made the front pages and subsequently took their place in league folklore as 'The Earl Park Riot'.

To the end of his life, a wonderful character of the game, Joe 'Chimpy' Busch, dined out on the story of how he had been robbed of a try at faraway Swinton, England, on 4 January 1930. This was one of the most famous disputes in league history. At 0–0 in the final minutes of the deciding Test against England, halfback Chimpy dived over the corner for what seemed the Ashes-winning try. But a touch judge had the final say. 'Fair try Australia — but I am overruled,' said referee Bob Robinson. Chimpy Busch never had any doubts. Fifty years later his answer would still be 'I scored for sure' whenever the question was raised.

In a match at Henson Park in 1945, St George front-rower Bill McRitchie had part of his right ear nearly torn off in a scrum fracas. The finger of suspicion, in what would become known as 'The Ear Bite Incident', was soon pointed at Newtown hard man Frank 'Bumper' Farrell, a famous Sydney policeman. The outcome was 22 weeks in hospital for McRitchie and investigations that stretched for six months. Farrell was eventually cleared, having famously told a Police Department enquiry into the incident that he was incapable of biting McRitchie: 'I couldn't have ... my teeth were up in my pocket [in the dressing room]!'

For reasons never fully explained, the Australian selection panel perpetrated in 1948 the greatest injustice in the game's 100 years. Somehow, in picking the Kangaroos team for England and France, they left out Test captain Len Smith, one of the most admired men in football. Dark forces — perhaps linked to personal ambition (of one of the selectors), perhaps to the sectarianism that then existed within the game — were behind



the decision. No-one ever really explained what motivated the selectors that year, and the mystery, a huge controversy at the time, remains to this day.

Rugby league's association with juicy drama persisted through all the years that followed, as the game continued its journey through the post-war years, and well into the 'modern era', marked by the arrival of the game-changing four-tackle rule in 1967. In 1954 referee Aub Oxford watched in growing horror the players fighting around him like street-brawlers in a New South Wales versus England match at the Sydney Cricket Ground,



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before turning his back and walking from the field. Oxford never refereed again — and the match remains the only top-level game ever abandoned in the game's 100 years.

In 1967, when the Kangaroos toured England, a captivating story emerged of an Australian player walking through the icy winter streets of the Yorkshire township of Ilkley, wearing nothing but a tie and a bowler hat. The story is perhaps a little exaggerated, but contains elements of truth. There was a bowler hat doing the rounds on tour and there were shenanigans during that campaign including, famously, some thoughtful deconstruction work done by team members on the fading Ilkley Moor Hotel, the Kangaroos' home base. Just as with Chimpy Busch and his 'no try', the great and colourful lock-forward Johnny 'Chook' Raper has enjoyed substantial mileage with the 'bowler hat' story over the years.

Year by year, outbreaks of colour and drama and controversy punctuated the robust passing parade of the game. In 1978

plague and pestilence seemed certain to rain down from the skies, so intense was the uproar over the refereeing of Greg 'Hollywood' Hartley in the finals series. The drama was in line with a much-loved league tradition. In 1952 South Sydney reckoned referee George Bishop robbed them in the grand final against Wests, and in 1963 Wests 'had no doubt' that Darcy Lawler had done the wrong thing in a famous, muddy match against St George. Years later, in 1990, Balmain's large economy-sized front rower Steve 'Blocker' Roach earned himself a four-week 'holiday' and huge headlines following a brush with a referee. His crime? He patted Eddie Ward on the head as the referee pointed him towards the dressing room at Brookvale one day.

Progressively though, as full-time professionalism has taken over the game, some of the fun and theatrics have gone out of it, and especially so since the greatest controversy and crash tackle in the 100 years — the Super League war. The 1995 raid on the game by forces backed by Rupert Murdoch's News Limited corporation triggered rampant inflation, hatred, greed

(left) Wearing their 1997 Super League jumpers are Ricky Stuart (Canberra), Simon Gillies (Canterbury), Andrew Ettingshausen (Cronulla), Ian Roberts (North Queensland), Wendell Sailor (Brisbane), Laurie Daley (Canberra), Jason Donnelly (Adelaide), Robbie McCormack (Hunter Mariners), Awen Guttenbeil (Auckland), Dale Fritz (Perth) and Greg Alexander (Penrith) at the launch of Super League at Fox Studios, Sydney Showground.

(right) Australian Rugby League chief executive John Quayle (left) and chairman Ken Arthurson arrive at the Federal Court to hear the verdict on Australian Rugby League versus Super League, 23 February 1996.



Action Photographics



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and tears — no more so than when the most famous club in the premiership, the South Sydney Rabbitohs, were booted out during a drive to rationalise the competition in 1999. Led by an unlikely hero in never-say-die campaign leader George Piggins, Souths won their biggest match of all — in court — and re-entered the competition in 2002. Throughout the Super League versus Australian Rugby League period the media attention was staggering in its volume, day by day.

Since those years there have been salary cap rorts, a digital examination issue, boozy nightclub incidents (various), drug revelations (various), media feuds and mobile phone scandals. The game's penchant for a lively headline lives on robustly. But will the angst-ridden time of the mid-1990s be deemed by history as 'the day the music died' in rugby league? Has the fun gone now that all is big business and win-at-all-costs? I for one hope not ... and time will be the judge. But one certainty remains: there will be drama. It just wouldn't be rugby league without it.

Journalist Ian Heads is Australia's foremost rugby league historian.

(left) Following South Sydney's expulsion from the National Rugby League competition in 1999, more than 50,000 fans marched through the streets of Sydney calling for the Rabbitohs to be reinstated.

(right) Bulldogs supporters show their support when the Canterbury side was stripped of its premiership points after being found to have breached the National Rugby League's salary cap, 2002.