

RUGBY LEAGUE FOOTBALL

The Supreme Code

Almost alone among all other sports, the birth of rugby league has a precise date: Thursday, 29 August 1895. Rich in symbolism and potent in its apparent demonstration of northern distinctiveness and self-assertion, it was on this date that twenty-one of the leading rugby clubs in the north of England met at the George Hotel in Huddersfield to found the Northern Rugby Football Union, better known as the Northern Union. A letter to the 'Yorkshire Post' on 21 September 1895 summed up the feelings of the Northern Union's supporters ' I say with Mark Twain's, bold bad boy, that we glory in the sentence of outlawry pronounced on us, as freeing us from the tyrannical bondage of the English [Rugby] Union, and we breath pure air in being freed from the stifling atmosphere of deceit in which we previously existed'

The Northern Union's heartlands were regions that had been built on the industrial powerhouses of the Victorian era; coal and textiles in Lancashire and West Yorkshire, shipbuilding in Barrow, docks in Hull, chemicals in Widnes and glass manufacture in St Helens and the Wakefield area. It's players, spectators and officials were drawn from these industries and the communities that had grown up around them.

The Northern Union immediately revived the debate on the need to make rugby more attractive and transform the game from purely a professional version of rugby union into a separate and distinct sport with its own rules and playing style. In 1897 scoring values were standardised with all goals valued at 2 points and tries worth 3 points. This placed the emphasis on the scoring of tries, which unlike in the rugby union game were now more valuable than any form of goal. The line out was abolished. In 1906-07 teams were reduced to 13 players and, in order to solve the problem of endless scrummaging, the 'play-the-ball' was introduced as the way of restarting play after a tackle. Now, instead of a scrum being formed, the tackled player was allowed to get to his feet, put the ball down in front of him, and play it with his foot, usually to a team mate standing behind him. The new 'play-the ball' rule meant that the skills of scrummaging, although still important, were now subordinated to those of passing and running with the ball.

In 1907 the Northern Union game embraced international competition as the first tourists arrived from New Zealand, followed a year later by the Australians and the first England versus Wales fixture. In April 1910, a new journey began for the Northern Union when twenty-six players left England for the Union's first ever tour of Australia and New Zealand. Flushed with the self-confidence of a successful new code of rules, firmly established in the southern hemisphere and buoyant in its heartlands, for the Northern Union the Australasian tour was the final piece in the jigsaw that became the pattern of rugby league for almost sixty years. A new era had begun – and although the Northern Union was not to change its name

to the Rugby Football League until 1922, the setting out of the tourists on the high seas marked the beginning of modern rugby league.

The inter war years saw the first Challenge Cup Final at Wembley in 1929 and the establishment of rugby league in France. The outbreak of hostilities in September 1939 led to the New Zealand touring team returning home after only two fixtures but the Challenge Cup and War Emergency League continued under difficult circumstances with many clubs closing down for the duration of the war.

The International Board was formed in 1946 and the tremendous success of the immediate post-war years appeared to all in the game to indicate that a bright future was opening up. Attendances reached record levels, club coffers were overflowing and the sport was playing a significant national role, touring Australia and New Zealand in 1946 with the outward journey on the warship HMS Indomitable.

However, as with all spectator sports, crowds fell steadily throughout the 1960s and 1970s despite a number of initiatives including the introduction of substitutes (1964), professional rugby matches on Sunday (1967), and a six tackle rule (1972) to attempt to stop one team monopolising possession. In 1971 just 13,351 watched the three test matches against the Kiwi tourists, and barely 36,000 had seen the test series against the 1973 Kangaroos. Even rugby league's own supporters thought the game was dying. But the precipitous decline in the number of people watching the game was not unique to rugby league. Soccer crowds fell by 32% between 1949-50 and 1964-65 and cricket crowds were down by over 50%.

The decline in gate money began to be gradually offset somewhat in the 1970's by the growth in commercial sponsorship, particularly from the brewing and tobacco industries. Crowds began to increase and by the late 1980's attendances were at their healthiest since the early 1960s. However, the catastrophe at Bradford City's Valley Parade Ground on 11 May 1985, which saw fifty-six people die in a fire started in an old wooden stand had a devastating effect on rugby league, as it forced clubs to confront the legacy of neglect of their grounds. The situation went from dire to worse in April 1989 following the disaster at Hillsborough when ninety-six Liverpool fans were crushed to death at an FA Cup semi-final. The Taylor Report into the tragedy resulted in yet more cuts to ground capacities, along with the need to install electronic turnstiles, closed circuit television systems and police control centres. Huddersfield, Swinton, Dewsbury and Bramley all sold their grounds in the early 1990s. Small clubs such as Blackpool, Bramley and Huyton and the remaining expansion clubs, with the exception of London and Sheffield, collapsed under the burden of required increased levels of expenditure.

The fortunes of amateur rugby league in the post-war years fluctuated as widely as those of the professional game. By the late 1960s similar doubts were being expressed about the long-term viability of the amateur game. But by 1990 amateur rugby league had not only consolidated and

developed its popularity in the game's heartlands but had established itself as a national sport, played in towns and by people far away from the sport's traditional constituency. The formation of the London Amateur Rugby League in 1965 led the way, followed by the Universities and Colleges Rugby League in 1969 and the British Amateur Rugby League (BARLA) in 1973. After its first two seasons of operation, BARLA claimed 300 member clubs organised in twenty district leagues. 400 clubs were registered by 1985 and over 500 by 1990. By 1995 almost a quarter of the total number of amateur rugby league clubs were drawn either from outside the heartlands or from higher education. In this it differed sharply from the professional game, which, despite strenuous efforts, struggled vainly to expand its horizons.

A juggernaut hit British rugby league in April 1995. The increasingly high profile of rugby league in Australia had made it a valuable commodity for the television networks, especially for Rupert Murdoch and Kerry Packer who were both seeking to establish pay-TV. In August 1994 the Rugby Football League had published its 'Framing the Future' document which called for a soccer style Premier League and club mergers. On 8 April 1995 the British clubs voted unanimously to accept a deal worth an unbelievable £77 million over five years. The storm that greeted the Super League proposals was perhaps unprecedented in British sport. The announcement that clubs would be merged to form new teams for the summer competition was met with supporters' protests and rallies in town centres, at grounds and even on pitches to demonstrate their opposition to the plans. Over the next few days the deal began to unravel. One by one the clubs that had backed mergers began to back away from them. On 30 April 1995, almost 100 years since the birth of the game, the merger proposals were withdrawn and a return to three divisions with a 12 team super League was agreed. To sweeten the deal B SkyB threw in an extra £10 million.

A few weeks after the shock of the Super League proposals, the sporting world seemed to tilt even further over on its axis when rugby union's International Board announced the abandonment of amateurism and its embrace of professionalism. For the first time in 100 years there was free movement between the two sports.

'I am a Northern Union man through and through' wrote Harold Wagstaff, a member of the Rugby League Hall of Fame and captain of Huddersfield and Great Britain before and after the First World War. Modernise Northern Union to rugby league and this is a sentiment shared by tens of thousands of rugby league supporters since Wagstaff wrote those words. Part of the reason why they share this credo – whether they watch the game in Carcassonne or Cairns, Rotorua or Rochdale, – is because of the history of rugby league. Born in the massive expansion of sport in the late 19th century, the game has survived and thrived despite the huge obstacles put in its way over the last 115 years by its opponents.

Today rugby league is played in over fifty countries around the world. The game is enjoyed and played by men, women and children from all walks of

life. There are leagues and cups at club, country and international level. Summer rugby, salary caps, mascots, cheerleaders, squad numbers, and a franchise system for Super League with teams in Wales and France are evidence of the game's ability to evolve and reinvent itself for the twenty-first century.

Yet, despite the tremendous changes in the playing of the game, rugby league still has a culture of its own; a distrust of the 'establishment', whether it be rugby union or the media, and a deep self-identification as a democratic sport.

As Thomas Keneally wrote in his book *A Family Madness*, our game (rugby league) is 'a cosmology, a perfected model of an imperfect world. Rugby league was a game whose laws had been codified by workers in the forlorn north of England who were invaded by that peculiar genius which concerns itself with the serious business of human games, and produced what was to Delaney the supreme code, a cellular structure composed of thirteen players which mimicked life and art and war so exactly that it became them'.

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David Thorpe,

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