

## *Research Essays:*

### **Tommy Raudonikis, Wests Rugby League Team and the Working Class of Campbelltown, New South Wales**

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It is ten years since Western Suburbs Rugby League team moved from Lidcombe Oval to Orana Park, Campbelltown.<sup>1</sup> The distance of forty kilometres was not great but the journey proved momentous. Wests (or the Magpies) were ordered by Rugby League's senior administrators to relocate or die. Ominously, Newtown, one of Sydney's oldest league teams, had been ordered to re-establish itself at Campbelltown in 1985. Within a year the 'Bluebags' had disappeared as a Winfield Cup competitor.<sup>2</sup> By 1987 Wests appeared to face a similar fate. No other alternative was offered. Leaving Lidcombe was heart-breaking. Despite their torrid battles with the Manly 'silvertails' in the 1970's 'the Maggies' had not won a premiership since the controversial 1952 grand final. It was a 22-12 victory over Souths and the last match of Captain McLean for the club. With customary Wests grit, McLean had played throughout the game with a serious shoulder injury.

Whilst this record of non-success barely rivals that of North Sydney,<sup>3</sup> Wests in 1987 appeared to be doomed. The best of Wests juniors were being lost to Canterbury and Balmain. Tim Brasher, a thin speedy centre, selected for the NSW Under 15 School boys who played for Burwood, once a breeding ground for the Magpies, joined Balmain in preference to Wests. Wests League Club at Ashfield was unwilling and unable to continually finance a team that heroically struggled for the wooden spoon.<sup>4</sup>

Throughout the 1970s and 1980s Sydney's western suburbs along the railway line between Stanmore and Lidcombe experienced changes entirely detrimental to the working class character of rugby league. Many small manufacturing firms were closed down. Young working class families moved out to cheaper homes on the urban fringe. The tertiary educated middle class often without children occupied and gentrified formerly proletarian suburbs.<sup>5</sup> Restaurants, the theatre and office work in the city replaced the factory whistle and supporting Wests as forms of community identity.

As young couples with their children left the inner west only the elderly remained largely as a potential working class base of Wests support. The game

itself, like most sports in the market manic 1980s became increasingly commercialised and Americanised. Clubs with the largesse of corporate sponsorship, a large reservoir of supporters, well-organised junior associations or which represented specific growing regional areas were able to succeed, or, at least ensure their survival. Manly and Easts were joined by Canberra and Brisbane as the dominant marketable corporate assets. Penrith and Illawarra because of their geographic location well away from competing clubs secured their existence. Most of the clubs took on a corporate identity which Wests did not and could not. Wests, bereft of any of these apparent attributes struggled to survive. Relocation was almost a reprieve. Wests appeared to be down for the count. To most observers relocation seemed only a delay of the inevitable: the death cry of the Magpies.

Campbelltown was an unwelcoming nest, Located at the end of the southwest electric railway line, fifty kilometres from the city, Campbelltown was a Cough Whitlam dream of regional development turned sour by the two decade long global recession. Manufacturing industries were to have provided the young working class families living in the *private* and Housing Commission estates of Airds, Minto, Claymore, St Andrews, Macquarie Fields and Ambarvale with jobs, Such industries never materialised.<sup>6</sup> With nearly 60 per cent of its population under 30 years of age the Campbelltown region endures high levels of poverty, youth unemployment, broken homes, sole-parent families, welfare dependency and crime.<sup>7</sup> It is a tough colourful, ramshackle place where desperate people are destined to live out the realities of a workless, deregulated market,

Wests arrival at Campbelltown was not welcomed. They were seen as 'blow-ins' sent by Rugby League's bosses to replace the disbanded Newtown.<sup>8</sup> Until the arrival of Tom Rnudsonikis as coach from Logan City in Queensland in 1995, Wests failed utterly to create any sense of identity with the Campbelltown masses. Campbelltown's junior associations resented the assumption of the black and white intruders that they would be Wests catchment area. There was little connection between the newcomers and the junior associations. Jason Taylor, an outstanding half-back, was one of the very few Campbelltown based juniors, who ever played regularly in Wests first team Most Wests players, of all grades, never lived in the area nor were they encouraged to do so. When the junior teams held their presentation days it was rare to see any Wests first graders in attendance. On the junior teams' picnic days or at coaching clinics the absence of Wests players and officials was predictable and almost expected.<sup>9</sup>

During Warren Ryan's term as Wests' coach, attendances at Campbelltown were always low, big payments were made to players who were either past their prime or expensive 'cast-offs' going through the motions. The club, with mounting debts and dwindling financial support faced bankruptcy and extinction. The Australian Rugby League (ARL) was willing to watch the club

die.<sup>10</sup> Rugby League had become a corporate game played in the boardroom even before Rupert Murdoch and Kerry Packer fought over its fate (but not its soul) in the mid-1990s. Ryan's departure only exacerbated Wests' financial woes. Wests finished the 1994 season owing \$200,000 on top of an accumulated debt of \$650,000. Ryan's payout of his contract was rumoured to be nearly \$250,000. The club lacked a major corporate sponsor and many of its minor sponsors were no longer interested.

The appointment of Raudonikis as coach occurred in January 1995 when the club was saved after its creditors who were Wests supporters agreed to the payment of twenty cents for every dollar they were owed.<sup>11</sup> Raudonikis yearly coaching salary of \$75,000 was to be paid by John Singleton, millionaire advertising executive, Jack Cowin, managing director of Hungry Jacks<sup>12</sup> and the publisher, Kevin Weldon.<sup>13</sup> They were mates of Raudonikis and Wests supporters who, it is rumoured, paid off his gambling debts. Raudonikis was and remains the lowest paid coach in the League.

Tom Raudonikis brought to Wests the steel they were lacking. As a player for Wests, NSW and Australia he was a fiery, feared and skilful halfback. Frank Hyde described Raudonikis as 'one of the greatest competitors in the game's history'.<sup>14</sup> On his 200th first grade game for Wests at Lidcombe Oval, Raudonikis ignored the pain of a broken thumb and sprained ankle to inspire a Magpie victory over the hated Manly.<sup>15</sup> He always played to win and gave everything to his team. His attitude was 'one in, all in'. He explained to a reporter, in 1996 'What we're doing is a test of strength and character. In Rugby League you need to aim up, brother, or you're out. When Wests played Manly in the "fibro days" it was war. Wests tried their utmost to win and we let Manly know too'.<sup>16</sup> A knockabout larrikin, Raudonikis is not a besuited organiser replete with coach speak clip board and a bevy of assistants.<sup>17</sup> Raudonikis is a doer, an inspirer who chain-smokes. His eccentric methods of 'kissing the grass behind the goal posts, nude cricket, buying a raffle ticket for a carton of grog' and after Thursday night training having a drink with the team in a Leumeah pub have created a team spirit never experienced before at Campbelltown.<sup>18</sup>

In a time of perfect performance diets for corporate athletes Raudonikis seems to have revived the worst habits of the past. For Wests he is the vital link with the past. When he first came to Wests as a player he was an Royal Australian Air Force apprentice mechanic who had learnt his football down in the Riverina region of New South Wales.<sup>19</sup> He rubbed shoulders with Noel 'Ned' Kelly, Jim Cody and Peter Dimond, players of the Pratten Park charm school.<sup>20</sup> Under coach Roy Masters (now a leading rugby league journalist) Raudonikis played in a side which never hid or ran dead: 'Dallas' Donnelly, 'Pretty Boy', Boyd,<sup>21</sup> Steve Blyth, Shane Day, 'Sloth' Gibbs, Geoff Foster were Lidcombe stalwards who gave visiting teams their closest attention.

Raudonikis brought this spirit back to Wests at Campbelltown. The game and the team not the money became the Wests credo. As Wests coach he has fulfilled a dream even as he went to Ipswich and Brisbane in following it.<sup>22</sup> Raudonikis forged a team commitment, a fighting spirit and comradeship to which Campbelltown's battlers -- not those imagined by Prime Minister John Howard -- have enthusiastically responded. Wests are Campbelltown's team. Raudonikis has sought out the best local juniors to play at the top level. Each week the best players in the Under 21s sit on the first grade bench. In this way the McGuinness brothers, 'Cherry' Mescia, Ron Jones, Damien Kennedy, Adam Donovan, George Skandalis, Aseri Laing and Darren Capovilla have won a place in the first team.<sup>23</sup>

Raudonikis is the first Wests coach to live in the area. Steve Georgallis, a first team utility player and the club's schools liaison officer, is amazed at Raudonikis popularity, 'when Tommy visits schools he sets a good example although he smokes 60 cigarettes a day, he restrains himself from lighting up in front of the kids! The people see him in the streets and come up to talk to him, The kids just love him'.<sup>24</sup> Raudonikis sees Wests as part of Campbelltown in its failures, disappointments, victories and future. 'We are starting to make the people of Macarthur believe that we are their football team. Whatever happens, we are going to survive. We are going to be a premiership threat in the next few years'.<sup>25</sup> Raudonikis remembered after a 1996 home game against Manly,

We lost but we were never beaten and when the game was over the crowd stood for what seemed like ten minutes and just clapped all the players and yelled out, 'Maggies! Maggies! Maggies!' It was my proudest moment. It has taken ten years and sometimes Wests have finished in the playoffs, but they have never been accepted before because they've always had coaches and players who didn't really like the place. They came in and took the money and went back to silver-tail country as soon as they could get out of the place. That's not the case anymore.<sup>26</sup>

While the working class of Campbelltown have now made Wests under Raudonikis their team, the political and economic conditions in which this has occurred suggest this may be the last victory of a traditional rugby league team and its ethos. Wests' rescue and recovery came at a time when Rupert Murdoch's Super League venture has begun to corporatise and globalise the very nature of rugby league. Wests have only been able to establish a local identity at a time when corporate capital and the League's mandarins sought to reduce the football teams to marketable, professional entertainment commodities.

Fortuitously, the larrikin image of Raudonikis was used by the ARL in its struggle against the Super League juggernaut. Raudonikis, was presented as the ARL's symbol of the game's tradition. He was courted by the ARL to speak publicly on its behalf. In 1996, he was appointed the coach of the New South Wales Country squad. In the past his abilities were not required by the ARL when he twice applied for the job of New South Wales coach.

The turmoil to the competition wrought by the attempted Super League take-over also proved to be beneficial to Wests in the short term, however. The competing millionaire contracts offered to the glamour teams and star players by both the ARL and the Super League entirely bypassed the 'poor man's team' from Campbelltown. As all of the leading clubs and players plotted and betrayed each other in their pursuit of money unwanted Wests concentrated on the game. Tommy Raudonikis, his charges and his people of Campbelltown may have heard the defiant cry of the Magpie. It may be its last. Corporate football may have no place in its plans for those who call Campbelltown home and the Maggies their team.

*Editor's note: This paper was produced before the recent peace agreement between the Super League and Australian Rugby League to reunite in one competition for the 1998 season. With twenty clubs in the new competition, poorer clubs like Western Suburbs remain under threat, however, as the number of clubs is to be reduced in future.*

## NOTES:

- 1 Gary Lester, *Clouds of Dust, Buckets of Blood: The story of the Western Suburbs Rugby League Magpies* (Caringbah: Playwright Publishing, 1995), p. 248. Sadly the day Wests shut Lidcombe's gates for the last time, Tommy Raudonikis was told by doctors that he had cancer.
- 2 Lester, *Clouds of Dust*, p. 250.
- 3 See Andrew Moore, *The Mighty Bears! A Social History of North Sydney Rugby League* (Sydney: Macmillan, 1996), pp. 104-7.
- 4 Lester, *Clouds of Dust*, pp. 251-2. Wests President, Bill Carson in 1981. stated that the directors of the Leagues Club felt 'no great concern for our desperate plight' and 'now rate us as a burden they could well do without', Lester, *Clouds of Dust*, p. 212.
- 5 Peter Spearritt, *Sydney Since the Twenties* (Sydney: Hale and Iremonger, 1978). anticipates many of these changes to the inner western suburbs. See Chapters 5,6 and 9. Roy Masters, briefly mentions Sydney's geography of class in. 'And I awake and found me here on the cold hill side: Rugby League and the Decline of Working Class Culture', *Meanjin*, 3, 1995, pp. 400-402. A broader and more contemporary analysis

- is offered in R.W. Connell and T.H. Irving, *Class Structure in Australian History*, 2nd ed. (Melbourne: Longman Cheshire, Melbourne, 1990).
- 6 Carol Liston, Campbelltown: *The Bicentennial History* (Sydney: Allen and Unwin, 1988). pp. 200-25.
- 7 Barry Maley, 'The rise of Australia's urban underclass', *The Australian*, 23 October 1995, p. 13.
- 8 Lester, *Clouds of Dust*, pp. 249-51.
- 9 *Rugby League Week*, November Special, 1996, p. 13.
- 10 Wests apparent intractable financial, administrative, coaching and morale problems during their relocation to Campbelltown are explored in Lester, *Clouds of Dust*, Chapters 22-24. Such difficulties reached a crisis point in 1994 the last Season Warren Ryan coached Wests.
- 11 Paul Kent, 'Wests saved from financial disaster', *Sun Herald* (Sydney), 22 January 1995, p. 55.
- 12 Hungry Jacks is the trading name of the multinational fast food chain Burger King in Australia.
- 13 Roy Masters, 'A man who gave his all'. *Sydney Morning Herald*, 8 February 1997. p. 55.
- 14 Hyde used this description of Raudonikis when naming him in his team of the 1970s. See Ian Heads, *True Blue: The Story of the NSWRL* (Sydney: Ironbark, 1992). p. 378.
- 15 Despite his Iron-hearted service to Wests where he played 201 first grade games (second only to Keith Hulman's 203 game club record), Raudonikis, in the twilight of his footballing life, left to join Newtown for higher match payments.
- 16 *Rugby League Week*, 12 July 1995, p. 18. In a pre-season interview Raudonikis stated. 'I would have liked to have coached a player like me. I was self-motivated. wanted to win and I busted my arse every week'. *Rugby League Week*, 8 February 1995, p. 17.
- 17 Roy Masters, a close personal friend and a former coach of Raudonikis in Wests 'glory days' during the mid-1970s has, as a journalist, created the Raudonikis Legend'. Damir Govorcin's 'Affair of the heart', *Rugby League Week*, 26 April 1995. p. 15, not only adds to it but also explains how Raudonikis regenerated Wests as a football team.
- 18 *Rugby League Week*, 26 April 1995, p. 10; 12 July 1995, pp. 5-6; *Sydney Morning Herald*, 28 August 1995, p. 48.
- 19 Raudonikis brought to Wests his own experiences which has allowed the working class of Campbelltown to see Raudonikis as one of them. His life has had a whirligig of cherished moments and tragedies. These ranged from being conceived under the Matterhorn in the Swiss Alps, born in a migrant hospital in Bathurst; his rebellious Lithuanian father; a loving Swiss mother; growing up in the Riverina; being taught

by the Brigidine nuns; playing for Wests in 'fibro' days; captaining the Kangaroos in the final test against England in 1973; going broke; his divorce; losing one testicle to cancer; the Order of Australia; coaching Ipswich, Brothers and Logan City and the death of Dallas see Donclly. Tony Stephens, 'Even when Tommy goes to uni. there's a blue', *Sydney Morning Herald*, 29 March 1996, p. 3. The Riverina is a region of southern New South Wales between Sydney and Melbourne and has produced many leading Australian sports figures in cricket, Australian Rules football, rugby league and rugby union. The largest town in the region is Wagga Wagga.

- 20 Noel Kelly apprenticed Raudonikis: 'He was the loveliest little bloke in those days. I told him the way he played he had better go out and get a nice colour photo of himself so he could remember what he looked like - and you know, he did . . . came back with the photo. But I tell you, he learned fast. He got to know what it meant to put on a Wests' jumper. That's what changed him. He had durability, a will to win', Lester, *Clouds of Dust*, pp. 181-2.
- 21 A frank assessment of Les Boyd's calibre as a forward is offered in Roy Masters *Inside League* (Sydney: Pan Australia, 1995).
- 22 *Rugby League Week*, 15 March 1995, p. 22.
- 23 Roy Masters, 'Tom's note of thanks', *Sydney Morning Herald*, 28 August 1995, p. 43.
- 24 *Rugby League Week*, 26 April 1995. p. 11.
- 25 *Rugby League Week*, November Special, 1996. p. 13.
- 26 Roy Masters, 'Tom's note of thanks'. At the start of the 1995 season Raudonikis pointed out to a journalist, 'I've always been associated with clubs that struggle here and in Brisbane. We'll cop some hidings this year. But that won't worry me. What I want from the players is their best. I want the people of Campbelltown to be able to say, "Geez, these guys have a go"', *Rugby League Week*, 8 February 1995. p. 8.