

Book Reviews

Tony Adam, Masters of the Game: Coaches Who Shaped Rugby League. Sydney: Ironbark Press, 1996, 314 pp. A\$19.95.

As Tony Adams claims, the rise in significance of the role and profile of coaches has been one of the most noticeable trends in the recent history of Australian rugby league, and this book marks the first attempt at investigating the phenomenon. *Masters of the Game* is a collection of biographies of fifteen prominent coaches, with each chapter highlighting a particular coach's career. All but one of the selected coaches has coached in the Sydney premiership, and all have been involved in coaching in the modern six-tackle era. As could be expected from a writer for the tabloid *Daily Telegraph*, Adams has a slightly sensationalist focus, and the book thrives on off-field conflicts, especially problems between coaches and the boards of their clubs. The self-contained format of each chapter makes the book an ideal light read, and its punchy style should appeal to many league fans.

Reading a book like this one is prompted to ask the question: what is it that makes a successful coach? Unfortunately Adams does not attempt to provide a definite answer to this question, although he does provide a wealth of ideas for analysis. Ultimately, what is most striking from his profiles of these coaches is their diversity and the vast differences in their styles and personality. Some, like Warren Ryan, seem to have relied on tactical nous, while others possessed the psychological and motivational skills to make a team believe in themselves enough to win, whether by subtly building up the confidence of individual players or through emotional dressing-room histrionics. The playing abilities of the assorted coaches shows similar variation, from the acknowledged genius of Clive Churchill through to undistinguished triers like Roy Masters and Graham Lowe. This also raises the question of why so few great players have gone on to become successful coaches.

Adams attributes the phenomenon of the rise of the coach to the impact of Jack Gibson, whose innovations revolutionised the playing and coaching of the sport from the early 1970s. While it is difficult to disagree with Adams' assessment of Gibson's importance in creating the phenomenon, it does raise the question for historians of how the rise of the coach is linked with wider developments in rugby league, especially commercialisation and the increasing Americanisation of the game. When Gibson brought training ideas from American football to rugby league, it could be argued that this opened the way to import other ideas in fields such as television, marketing and, most far-reaching, the privatisation of the game. Alternatively, the rise of the high profile and highly specialised master coach, as opposed to the more egalitarian player-coach of

previous eras, could be seen as the logical outcome of the game's transformation from working-class inter-suburban rivalry to the multi-million dollar corporatised identity that it is today.

While this book has many commendable aspects, there are also a number serious drawbacks. It continues the unfortunate trend in much rugby league literature of over-looking the game's history, focusing almost exclusively on the modern six-tackle era. While recognising the contributions of Arthur Hennessy in the preface, the book would have been richer if it had included him and other past visionaries such as Chris McKivat, Frank Burge and Duncan Thompson among the coaches covered in detail. Inclusion of coaches from outside of Australia would also have made for a more far-reaching analysis. These criticisms lead on to perhaps the greatest shortcoming of the book, its failure to place each coach within the broader framework of the development of the code and the way in which it is played. Over the last thirty years rugby league, as a sport, has changed dramatically in the way that it is played, and the innovations of the coaches examined here have been at the fore-front of those changes. Given that it was subtitled 'Coaches who shaped Rugby League', *Masters of the Game* gave hope that it would investigate this process, but unfortunately at the end it is unclear exactly how most of the coaches actually shaped and changed the game, and that is ultimately a disappointment.

Despite these criticisms this book remains a good read that will appeal to most fans of rugby league. Well-written and entertaining, it throws new light on some of rugby league's most high-profile personalities. For those who study the code it provides a wealth of new source material and indirectly raises many significant questions about the development of the sport that are worthy of further investigation. However, if the reader is looking for an in-depth analysis of the rise of the 'cult of the coach' or the development of the way the game is played, they may come away disappointed and feeling that this book did not live up to its potential.

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P. Freeman, *Ian Roberts: Finding out*. New South Wales, Random House, 1997, 325 pp. A\$19.95.

The biography based on Ian Roberts' life entitled *Ian Roberts: Finding Our* could have been a groundbreaking piece of literature about the way in which a Rugby League 'icon' came to terms with his sexuality and masculinity in the