

Viewpoint

The Death of the Magpies: Wests Rugby League Team, Club, Coach, Supporters and Community in Their 1999 Season of Extinction

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The social death of Western Suburbs Rugby League Football Club can be seen as a logical outcome of the battle between Rupert Murdoch's News Limited 'Super League' and the Australian Rugby League (ARL) for ultimate control of the game. From 1995 until the beginning of 1998 this battle raged. Murdoch's so-called 'Pearl Harbour raid' on Australian rugby league created two rival competitions. The Super League teams were either breakaways from the ARL (Brisbane Broncos, Canterbury Bulldogs) or new regional teams (Adelaide Rams, Perth Western Reds) formed from players who defected from the ARL competition for the lucrative contracts offered by News Limited.

The Murdoch raid had little to do with football. It was a corporate take-over, a grab for the market monopoly of a game that from the mid 1970s was steadily growing more commercialised and losing its community identity. The Super League – ARL war ended in 1997 with the corporate media empires of Rupert Murdoch and Kerry Packer's Consolidated Press (the major ally of the ARL) sharing exclusive television rights to the game that had been transformed into a multi-million dollar operation).¹ Wests, a struggling club located on the southwestern fringe of Sydney representing a depressed working class area, had stood loyal to the ARL throughout the corporate war. In the new National Rugby League (NRL) dispensation, where major corporate funding was elemental to a club's existence, Wests' playing days were numbered. As the poor man's team Wests were barely tolerated by corporate rugby league's new administrative arm while the media empires viewed them with scorn.

In the 1998 season Wests not only held the wooden spoon, but recorded the highest number of points scored against them in their ninety year history. The absence of Tom Raudonikis, Wests' coach, when serving as the NSW coach during the State of Origin matches, was blamed for the Magpies running last.² The failure of Raudonikis to achieve success with NSW and Wests were seen as his inadequacies as a coach. It was rumoured that Raudonikis was given the NSW coaching job because of his loyalty to the ARL during the battle to protect the code from its rival Rupert Murdoch's Super League.³

As the ARL Super League war of attrition wound down, a truce, then a corporate compromise was achieved. A new competition, the National Rugby League (NRL), was established. The NRL executive wanted a fourteen team competition by 2000. Mergers and amalgamations were demanded of clubs that were wealthy enough to 'stand alone'. Clubs were expected to become corporate NRL franchises. These arrangements were to be finalised by the end of September 1999⁴ with cash reserves of each club set at A\$8 million. Even those clubs presumed to have 'regional identities' like North Queensland, Newcastle, Illawarra and Canberra were not exempt. During the 1998-99 summer St George merged with Illawarra, and North Sydney, despite the grumbling of its faithful, sought a 'Central Coast identity' at Gosford and a new ground, on which no football was played in season 1999 despite earlier promises.⁵

Wests, like other foundation clubs, South Sydney, Balmain and Norths, have engaged in futile merger discussions with Canterbury, Penrith and Balmain.⁶ For Wests its merger with Balmain will be its social death. Locality and community had become touchstones of the club's identity during Radounikis's period as coach.⁷ In its enforced 'discussions' with Canterbury, Wests officials were told by their Canterbury counterparts that control of junior rugby league associations in the Macarthur region would be the basis of any merger. Canterbury had no interest in Radounikis as a coach, the Wests players or adopting Campbelltown Stadium as their home ground. Penrith saw no reason to merge with Wests as Wests could not offer, anything that Penrith did not already have. The Wests-Penrith merger talks were even less promising. The Wests-Balmain merger was only finalised in the last weeks of the 1999 season,⁸ in the team's final games as Wests had scores resembling cricket ones piled up against them. The players, the coach and the supporters were actors or witnesses of the death of a football club. No one believed that the Magpies could be reborn as Wests Tigers in 2000.⁹ It was a merger of mutual convenience.

Through the efforts of Michael Knight, the absentee resident, state Labor member for Campbelltown and NSW State Minister for the Olympics, Wests ground at Leumeah was converted into an Olympic standard football stadium at a cost of \$22 million.¹⁰ Unlike Norths, Wests played half their home games in 1999 at the refurbished ground. The construction of new stands and a new playing surface was seen as a way of convincing the NRL chieftains of Wests' 'worthiness' of remaining in the projected fourteen team competition even if the club could not raise the necessary \$8 million for its corporate franchise.¹¹

Despite the social success of its first game on the new ground which the Magpies won against Balmain before a crowd of 16,000, the NRL remained unmoved. Marching bands, sky divers, a parade by local junior teams, and community singing led by a combined high school choir from the region¹² made no impression on the NRL. The reconstructed ground did not contain 5000 undercover seats, one of the NRL's criteria to host games in 2000.¹³

In the 1999 season Wests, with their young inexperienced squad primarily of local juniors and several journeymen forwards, sustained punishing defeats. Two wins and the points from two byes ensured their anchorage at the bottom of the table. Earlier in the season Laurie Daley, a highly paid back for Canberra, New South Wales and the national team, the Kangaroos, beloved by the media, urged Wests to quit the competition to avoid embarrassment to themselves and the NRL.¹⁴

A constant undercurrent in the Sydney media, and the Murdoch press in particular, was Wests's inability to be competitive, to modernise or to 'reinvent' themselves. Raudonikis is seen to epitomise these failings. His larrikin earthiness, his belief in Wests and the community the team represents that were attributes in 'the war' between the ARL and the Murdoch empire, are no longer marketable. They failed to attract a permanent corporate brand name. Wests and Campbelltown could not be sold to corporate sponsors. Wests's sole corporate sponsor, Signature Security Systems supported the club only for the 1999 season. If paraphernalia is a measure of Wests popularity it too must be seen as a failure. Sales of Wests jerseys, flags, keyrings, t-shirts, bomber jackets or stubbie holders were restricted to the diehards in Campbelltown's suburbs.¹⁵

The core of Wests sponsors, apart from the Wests Leagues Clubs at Leumeah and inner-city Ashfield, had been struggling small businesses in the depressed Macarthur region. Many of these companies failed to renew their sponsorship at the end of the 1998 season. The team's performances in 1999 resulted in sponsors (Magpie Motors; Georges River Timber Company Campbelltown, Henny Penny) ending their association with Wests even before mid-season.¹⁶ Wests were on the road to extinction. A concern for the game's working class traditions, for a team representing local or regional communities which Wests led by Raudonikis embodied -had no place in the NRL franchised future. The poetic fallacy touted by the NRL 'to win back the fans' after the Super League war saw writer Thomas Keneally (a former Wests supporter) offer his ode to Rugby League over Channel 9.¹⁷ This sop to League's lost legions to return to the game made no sense to Jack Gibson, a former coach of Easts and Parramatta and a defender of the game's traditions. Keneally's message was lost on Gibson who likened the beanie Manly bard to the central character from Gilligan's Island, an American TV comedy from the 1960s.¹⁸

The personality of Raudonikis had represented all that the ARL stood for when it attempted to prevent rugby league becoming a part of Rupert Murdoch's entertainment empire. If Raudonikis was 'the rough diamond' and Wests were local heroes of struggling Campbelltown in 1997, by 1999 Raudonikis was presented as the clueless coach of Wests, a worthless team. 'Tom Terrific' was no more. Wests was another word for 'losers'.

The 1999 winter was Wests' oblivion. It is exceedingly difficult to analyse the responses of Wests supporters to the fate that befell the team.

Knowing who the supporters are presents the first of the difficulties. Ben Norman, Wests Community Relations Officer (a position created in November, 1998) argues that the club's 'support base' in south-western Sydney was 4,000. According to Norman, 'Wests support base is the highest in Sydney and bettered only by Newcastle and Illawarra'. This conclusion is based on 'intensive market research undertaken by independent consultants on behalf of the club in September-October, 1998'.¹⁹ Even if the support base is highly exaggerated the research emphasised that 'Wests were seen as a traditional working class team'. Most of the respondents in this research project were males between eighteen and sixty years of age. Most of those 4,000 supporters 'were life-long members of Wests' League Clubs, were middle aged, had played football (many for Wests lower grades) and were still associated with the game either as juniors coaches or administrators.²⁰

Before Campbelltown Stadium was simply Campbelltown Sports Ground, the only grandstand on the western side of the field was the place where most of these life-long Wests supporters once sat. Their knowledge of the club's history and traditions was unsurpassed as informal conversations with them over several seasons have proven. A characteristic in the football background of these fans was a Christian Brothers schooling. From discussions with other middle aged supporters of Balmain, Canterbury-Bankstown and Souths it was re-inforced that their attendance at Christian Brothers led to their love of rugby league, firstly as players and later as followers.

The social meaning of rugby league and Christian Brothers prior to the Vatican Council in 1967 is affirmed in Tom Keneally's *Homebush Boy*.

At St Pat's – we played rugby-à-treize thirteen-a-side Rugby League, which in Eastern Australia was the chief game which was largely our map of heroism and the universe. . . . The Brothers taught us to play splendidly; lightning backline movements, determined forwards. St Pat's teams were always bringing back State Championships from the August knock-out competitions at the Sydney Cricket Ground. I had participated in one such victory the year before, in a team coached by Brother Markwell, a lean Queenslander who tended to admire the industrial groupers.²¹

Keneally believes that the teams that split away from rugby union to form rugby league, became the most popular crowd-pullers close to their communities. 'Rugby League remained a working class Christian Brothers sort of game' while Sydney grammar schools and the Jesuit schools played 'the gentleman's and dilettante's game' of rugby union.²²

That enclosed world has vanished. A separate Catholic identity partly fostered by rugby league is irrelevant to contemporary multicultural Christian

brothers schools. But, as Keneally emphasised, it did shape the identity of generations of Sydney's Catholic working men educated in Christian Brothers schools before the mid-1960s. With the opportunity, (if one can afford it) to play a variety of different winter sports, both group and individual, rugby league for many boys and young men attending Catholic schools in Sydney's south west no longer holds a sacred purpose.²³ Unlike the committed Wests men found in the grandstand at Campbelltown Stadium, rugby league, adapted by television, has become just another spectator sport for many of those under forty even if they are 'Christian Brothers old boys'. Similarly, an attachment to a local community, working class values and a football team that was seen to represent these qualities now competes with globalisation and market values. 'Winners and winning' for commercial success have become the sole criteria in the franchised parameters of corporate televised football.

The corporate box view of rugby league had no place for the battling Magpies or the community they represented. The old hands in Wests main stand never have the financial resources to buy 'star players' like many other clubs. The vanglorious attempt of ex-Workers Party proto-fascist, advertising millionaire and money lender to Raudonikis's gambling, John Singleton, along with Roy Ingham, Sydney's chicken king, in amassing a war chest, tried to finance Wests efforts to either stand alone or amalgamate. As worthy as their effort was, it never saved Wests as a team representing a working class community.²⁴

The NRL viewed such concerns as irrelevant to their corporate future. Wests were seen 'losers', as, one suspects, the people of Campbelltown area were seen. Whether rugby league in the Macarthur region is lost to Australian rules football or rugby union with Wests' disappearance may be of no consequence in the marketing calculations of the NRL. The death of the Magpies like the best working class traditions of rugby league may have no place in the modern corporate game. An element in these fading traditions is perhaps unconsciously captured in a comment by Rosey Gold:

The grammar of Rugby League is about making your way up the field while fighting off seemingly insurmountable obstacles, That's why its so incredibly moving and exciting when a player does finally manage to escape a tackle and break free from his opponents. In the end, the culture of rugby league celebrates the poetry of disappointment. It respects a winner, but sanctifies the runner-up.²⁵

Wests epitomised this disappearing element in their worst of winters. Season 1999 for Western Suburbs R.L.F.C. and the game of rugby league represented an ending, a finality. Spectators, as part of the 'market share' of franchised clubs, may abound under the new dispensation in 2000. But what of

the supporters? Who will remember Dallas Donnelly, Noel Kelly, Peter Diamond and eventually Tommy Raudonikis? Their ghosts will never be heard at Pratten Park, Lidcombe Oval or Campbelltown Sports Ground. Wests like Newtown will have gone to earth. Their Wests days will not be on the lips of living men.²⁶

Editor's Note: For the 2000 NRL season, foundation rugby league clubs, South Sydney, North Sydney, Balmain and Western Suburbs had all been forced into mergers or in case of Souths were eliminated from the competition altogether. At the same time it was revealed that millions of dollars had been spent by Murdoch's News Corporation to support former Super League clubs such as North Queensland, Melbourne and Auckland. Without such support some of the old Super League clubs would have been carrying more debt than these old Sydney clubs that remained loyal to the establishment competition.

NOTES:

1. Mike Colman, *Super League, The Inside Story* (Sydney: Ironbark 1996); Andrew Moore, 'Super League and the Decline of the Working Class Culture', *Overland*, 149 (Summer, 1997): 69-73.
2. 'Follow your team through the season' (lift-out) *The Australian*, 1 March 1999, 28; 'Frilingo's Forecast: Western Suburbs – The obvious choice for the wooden spoon', *The Daily Telegraph* NRL Guide to 1999, *The Daily Telegraph*, 2 February 1999.
3. Tony Adams, 'Tommy's through with Blues', *The Daily Telegraph*, 5 February 1999, 121; Roy Masters, 'Tom quits Origin to save endangered species', *The Sydney Morning Herald*, 5 February 1999, 38.
4. Colin Love, 'When Push Comes to Shove', *The Australian*, 2 March 1999, 31.
5. Paul Kent, 'Newcastle slip Norths amid ref. – inspired confusion', *The Sydney Morning Herald*, 10 May 1999, 27.
6. Roy Masters, 'Wests, Panthers in talks as merger deadline draws near', *The Sydney Morning Herald*, 6 April 1999, 32.
7. See Drew Cottle, 'Tommy Raudonikis, Western Suburbs Rugby League team and the working class of Campbelltown', *Occasional Papers in Football Studies*, 1:1 (January, 1998): 69-75.
8. Masters, 'Wests, Panthers', p.32; Peter Frilingos, 'Wests of Time – Battling Wests facing the axe', *The Daily Telegraph*, 23 February 1999, 42.
9. 'League's Ministry of Truth can't fool the game's Little Brothers', *The Sydney Morning Herald*, 28 April 1999, 48.
10. Tony Adams, 'Wests say they're sitting pretty', *The Daily Telegraph*, 7 June 1999, 42.
11. Tony Adams, 'Sun shines again out west', *The Daily Telegraph*, 7 June 1999, 40-41.

12. Eric Kontos, 'Gala Day for Magpies new Nest', *The Macarthur Advertiser*, 9 June 1999, 1-3.
13. Adams, 'West's say', 42.
14. Paul Kent, 'Knightly exercise as Raudonikis ignores jibes', *The Sydney Morning Herald*, 5 April 1999, 22.
15. This conclusion is based on information given to the author after telephoning Sydney's leading sports stores and the single sports store in Campbelltown.
16. Interview with Ben Norman, Wests Community Relations Officer (and a former Wests junior) Wests Leagues Club, Ashfield, 10 June 1999.
17. See Tim Prentice, 'Keneally defends the ode to his code', *The Daily Telegraph*, 5 March 1999, 124.
18. Prentice, 'Keneally defends', 124. Keneally comments on his football roots made 'off camera' were more significant than his televised ode. He told Prentice, 'When I was a youngster the area in which I lived had two kinds of heroes. One were the footballers from Wests who played nearby, the other type were war heroes. Out at Pratten Park, I would stand near the gate and hear the hard sprigs clatter down the concrete walk towards the playing arena. You just knew that these men were on the way to do some serious business'.
19. Interview with Ben Norman, Wests Leagues Club, Leumeah, 16 January 1999.
20. Interview with Ben Norman,
21. Thomas Keneally, *Homebush Boy* (Port Melbourne: William Heinemann Australia, 1995), 93.
22. Keneally, *Homebush Boy*, 95.
23. Philip Derriman, 'Game plan from armchair to extreme', *The Sydney Morning Herald*, 26 March 1999, 15.
24. Steve Mascord, '\$1m incentive plan may hatch Western magpies', *The Sydney Morning Herald*, 10 May 1999, 27.
25. Rosey Gold, 'Will good taste wreck the game', *Eureka Street*, March 1999, 10.
26. Gold, 'Will good taste wreck the game', 14-15. Bob Ellis laments that as a nation, Australians habitually erase and destroy all that was memorable and unique. This process has intensified in the present where money is the measure and value of everything. If destroyed Wests will become part of an unremembered past as 'We rush on, hurried and venal into a featureless, baseless, ever-more-vacant future'. See Bob Ellis, 'How little we do to hold onto the past', *The Sydney Morning Herald*, January 1999, 16.