

# **‘What a freak-show they made!’ Women’s Rugby League in 1920s Sydney<sup>1</sup>**

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## **Abstract**

Women seeking to enter the domain of what are considered traditional male sports are often subjected to criticism, ridicule and fierce opposition. This was certainly the case in the early 1920s when a group of Sydney women announced their intention to stage a rugby league match. Utilising contemporary media commentaries, this article critically assesses the reactions and responses to the match, with a particular emphasis on the strong opposition it encountered. While considering all factors that contributed to this reaction, special emphasis will be given to investigating the threat that the match posed to the social construction(s) of (working class) masculinity associated with rugby league. Other themes addressed include gender relations in post-World War One Australia, sporting opportunities for Australian women during this era, and the place of women within the sport and culture of rugby league.

On 17 September 1921 a crowd numbering between 20,000 and 30,000 turned out in Sydney, Australia, to witness the city’s most controversial and perhaps most anticipated sporting event of the year – a rugby league match involving two teams of women. The match created a sensation in the city, which was both reflected in, and fuelled by, extensive media coverage, especially in the popular, sporting and religious press. This article utilises this media coverage to assess the significance of the match and to analyse why it created such controversy. In particular, I consider the role of medical discourses and social mores in fuelling the opposition to the match, while also examining the threat posed to contemporary ideologies of masculinity. By doing this, the analysis will throw new light on the complex interrelationship, and often conflict, between women playing what are traditionally considered male sports and the masculine values that are embedded within those sports. In addition, this case addresses the themes of gender relations in post-World War One Australia, sporting opportunities for Australian women during this era, and the place of women within the sport and culture of rugby league.

Rugby league was a somewhat surprising choice of sport for women to play, given that it had almost no tradition of female involvement, even compared to other football codes in Australia. Some women did attend matches as spectators, but their numbers were not large, and the code lacked the tradition of female spectatorship that was so much a feature of Australian Rules football in Melbourne.<sup>2</sup> Rugby league in Sydney was characterised by its strong working-class masculine roots, and its officials and supporters saw little role

for women within this culture. For the most part, women wishing to become involved in the sport were restricted to the 'Ladies Auxiliary', where they performed traditional domestic tasks like washing and cooking to support men's sporting activities. An attempt to organise a women's competition had been proposed in 1913, but was unsuccessful and virtually no details of the proposal remain.<sup>3</sup>

It was in this context that the efforts to establish a women's rugby league competition in 1921 occurred. It appears, and reports of the initial organisation are somewhat sketchy, that the initial impetus come from two North Sydney women, K. Kane and Nellie Doherty, who wrote to the secretary of the New South Wales Rugby League (NSWRL), Horrie Miller, asking for his assistance in establishing a rugby league competition for women. Miller responded positively, apparently to the pair's surprise, and met with them to discuss their proposal. On his suggestion a public meeting was arranged for interested participants. This meeting was held on 3 July at the NSWRL's headquarters, and attracted at least seventy potential players. A number of NSWRL officials were also present, but displayed a grudging attitude towards the proposal, with a number making demeaning comments towards it. Despite this, Miller himself appeared enthusiastic, helping to chair the meeting, offering to assist in organising training and coaching for the women, and talking of a great future for women's football, even suggesting the possibility of overseas tours.<sup>4</sup>

The enthusiasm of the women at the meeting was quite evident, with many obviously relishing the opportunity to become involved in sport. This was an era when there were still few opportunities for Australian women to participate in sport; in swimming, where the greatest advances had been made, there were still many obstacles, netball (then referred to as women's basketball) and hockey were in their infancy, and even organised track and field for women did not become established until the late 1920s. Many women clearly looked forward to the prospect of serious and competitive sport, with one declaring 'we are going to play football – as men play it'.<sup>5</sup> The seriousness of the women was probably best reflected in their choice of playing attire – sprigged football boots and traditional football uniforms, jerseys and shorts, rather than the more conservative options of skirts or tunics. Although raising the ire of many critics, female sporting apparel being another widely controversial issue of this era, this was the only practical alternative if the women wished to play rugby league with any degree of skill. At the end of the meeting it was proposed to form five teams to compete during the following football season. A second meeting a week later drew an even larger attendance, and the New South Wales Ladies Rugby League was formed and training sessions organised.<sup>6</sup>

What factors lay behind this newly expressed desire by Sydney women to play football? It seems possible that the women had been motivated by events in England, where women's soccer was enjoying tremendous popularity. At the forefront of this movement was the Dick, Kerr Ladies team from

Preston, which was almost a de facto English national team. The popularity of the team was revealed on Boxing Day 1920, when over 53,000 spectators crowded into Goodison Park in Liverpool to watch them play. In 1921 they played 77 matches before a combined crowd of over 900,000. Behind this there was an impressive grass-roots infrastructure, with 151 teams affiliated with the English Ladies Football Association in 1921.<sup>7</sup> These advances may well have inspired the Australian women. It is possible that some of the women behind the Sydney proposal were migrants from Britain who had played some form of football there and now wished to continue in Sydney. At least one of the women at the inaugural meeting, Miss Munro, claimed to have had played soccer in Scotland, while the organiser of a women's football match in Melbourne, played under Australian rules, was a migrant from the north of England who had begun playing football in her homeland and wanted to continue doing so in Australia.<sup>8</sup>

There was obviously a great groundswell of women who had wanted to play football. After the rugby league proposal became public there were also attempts by women to establish soccer and Australian Rules football competitions in Sydney, neither of which came to fruition, with the local Australian Football body dismissively stating that they did not 'wish to cater for the weaker sex'.<sup>9</sup> A few Australian Rules football matches were held in Melbourne, but they appear to have been *ad hoc* affairs, with few participants and little fanfare, although they did attract some large and inquisitive crowds. The tone of these matches was perhaps best reflected by the fact that the male umpire for a match between the Chorley's and the Fleetwood's played at the St Kilda Cricket Ground wore female attire. A women's soccer match was also staged in Brisbane later in the year, drawing 10,000 spectators, and the round ball game also spread across the Tasman Sea to New Zealand.<sup>10</sup>

The news that women wanted to play rugby league was met with derision and outrage, especially from members of the male-dominated sporting media. J. C. Davis, the doyen of Sydney's football writers, was among the most scathing. He delivered a long condemnation of the proposal, ending it with his view that 'rugby football is for men of fibre, pluck, hardened in sport, and in the pink of condition. It is no women's game, any more than is bare knuckle fighting'.<sup>11</sup> His fellow scribes were in almost unanimous agreement, arguing that rugby league was a totally unsuitable sport for women. One claimed that any women who did succeed in establishing the game would only make 'exhibitions' of themselves. Some suggested that soccer would be a more appropriate choice of sports, but the majority disapproved of women playing any code of football. Claude Corbett, another of Sydney's most famous sporting journalists, was one of the few writers not to completely ridicule the proposal, but even he condescendingly noted that 'shorter playing periods and smaller grounds might be found advisable. Girls could scarcely play for 45 minutes at a stretch and race over 75-yard distances like the star men wing three quarters'.<sup>12</sup> It was not

just men of the press who were disparaging. The boyfriend of one of the two instigators of the proposal claimed that any woman proposing to play football must obviously be a 'goat', completely unaware of his girlfriend's involvement in the scheme.<sup>13</sup>

Sydney's cartoonists also had a field day with the proposal. Almost all were uniform in their ridicule. While it has always been the nature of cartoons to poke fun at contemporary events, the images contained in many of these cartoons go much further than that and the viewer is left with little doubt that the artists saw football as being totally unsuitable for women. Or, perhaps it might be more appropriate to say that they saw women as being totally unsuitable for football, and presumably any other strenuous physical activity for that matter. Among the most common images portrayed were: females likely to be attracted to the game being excessively overweight; a seeming inability of women to take the field without continual readjustment of their make-up and hairstyle; a complete lack of knowledge of the rules; a lack of competitive spirit; a propensity to break into tears at the slightest misfortune; and suggestions that women only wanted to be involved in the hope of attracting male attention – all of which were highly unflattering. Such themes were repeated in different newspapers, in what effectively amounted to co-ordinated and sustained condemnation.<sup>14</sup>

Some of the greatest opposition to women playing rugby league came from medical circles. Much of this criticism was alarmist and without any real scientific base, such as claims by the *Australian Bystander* that 'an injury to the bosom may mean agony later and a lingering death'<sup>15</sup> and from the *Arrow* that '[rugby] is too fierce, too strenuous. No woman could stand the knocking about without suffering severely in the years to come. Men being differently structured scarcely feel knocks that would blast a woman for the rest of her life'.<sup>16</sup> More specific criticisms stemmed from women's reproductive role, and fears that sporting activity could negatively affect this. The *Sun* branded playing rugby as being a 'menace to motherhood', claiming that it could quite likely damage a woman's reproductive organs and render her infertile. Obviously influenced by the prevailing debate surrounding eugenics and the vitality of the British race, the *Sun* declared that such risks were 'a bad thing for the community generally' and urged the women who were considering playing rugby to 'remember quietly that her duty lies with the little babies with whom she may some day be entrusted'.<sup>17</sup> As Patricia Vertinsky and others have noted, such medical opposition was by no means unique to this case, or to Australia, and was often cited as a justification for the exclusion of women from many sporting activities throughout the western world.<sup>18</sup>

While these concerns about motherhood and reproductive capabilities were the most forcefully argued, playing football was also challenged for infringing on another of the expected roles of women, that of attracting a husband and being a dutiful wife. One writer claimed that:

A cynic has said that a women's big object in life is to secure a husband. She is not likely, however, to obtain one on a football ground. An average man would be scared off the premises by a woman who could kick, tackle and fend. A man unwittingly buys trouble – he does not acquire it with his eyes open.<sup>19</sup>

Assertiveness was clearly not regarded as a positive attribute for the women of this era. Such criticisms were also part of a wider belief that sport for women was an intrusion on their domestic duties, and that their time should instead be spent serving the needs of their husbands and families.

Another factor was that some elements in society viewed the very idea of women playing football, and especially rugby, as being nothing short of indecent. The *Australian Christian World* led the charge, with its editorial writer getting rather over-excited by the possible 'spectacle of feminine scrambles for the ball, the phenomena of hard tacking, the possibility, nay, probability of . . . rough and tumble tactics'. He, and it was almost certainly a he, expressed concern about both 'the young women who are . . . inoculated with the virus of desire for publicity and popularity with a shouting crowd' and the 'ribald male' who he expected to make up the bulk of that crowd. He concluded that such a match would be 'degrading to womanhood' and 'so vigorous a contest must inevitably lead to a cheapening of womanhood which is already too much in evidence in the theatre and picture show'.<sup>20</sup> Such attitudes held sway during this era.<sup>21</sup> In 1912 the issue of whether Australian female swimmers could compete in front of male audiences at the Olympic Games had been controversial. Opponents of sending women to the Games used similar arguments about ribald male spectators being cited by opponents of mixed audiences. While having some part to play in the opposition to the rugby league matches, it does appear that this viewpoint was supported by only a minority of the proposal's detractors, with even the NSWRL's own publication, the *Rugby League News*, lampooning and ridiculing what it portrayed as a 'wowser' element.<sup>22</sup>

Alethea Melling claims that a large part of the opposition to women's soccer in England sprang from wider social tensions related to the increased number and prominence of women in the workforce after World War One, and especially attempts by men to restore the pre-war gender balance. She sees the debate over women's football as 'a struggle between men trying to reassert their hegemony and a new independent feminist consciousness, intent on maintaining the status that women had achieved during the war'.<sup>23</sup> Women's soccer then, can be seen as both an extension and a symbol of this new female role, and the reaction against it was also symbolic of the backlash against this new female assertiveness. Such an explanation would not seem to fit the events in Australia, however, due to the simple fact that the war had not seen an influx of Australian women into the workforce like it had done in Britain. Despite

this, Michael McKernan does note that the years after the war were marked by increased gender tensions within Australia, as both men and women struggled to return to their old roles after experiencing very different conditions during the war years, and the opposition to the playing of rugby league by women might have been a manifestation of this.<sup>24</sup>

Probably the most significant reason for the opposition, however, was that the notion of women playing rugby league threatened the masculine underpinnings of the game. This is particularly critical given the significant role that sport had come to play in defining masculinity and masculine values by the early twentieth century. Robert Connell argues that 'in historically recent times, sport has come to be the leading definer of masculinity in mass culture',<sup>25</sup> and this argument is echoed in the work of David Whitson and others.<sup>26</sup> Football can be seen as being particularly important in this regard, with Richard Giulianotti and Gary Armstrong claiming that '[t]he acts of both playing football and spectating provide in many cultures the most important collective source of male imagery and masculine ideals'.<sup>27</sup> As the dominant code of football in Sydney, rugby league was definitely regarded as a vehicle for making masculine men and was thought to embody almost all the desirable attributes of working-class masculinity. These values included the celebration of 'mateship' (male group solidarity and loyalty), but were primarily focused on physical attributes – strength, stamina, courage, persistence and especially the ability to endure pain and physical hardship.<sup>28</sup>

If women began to play the game, however, all these masculine assumptions would be threatened. The challenge that female participation would bring is perhaps best expressed in the statement that '[t]his is a death defying activity — men are taking a great gamble to prove their courage. What would be the point if everyone saw that a woman could do the same?' by a male diver at the Acapulco cliff-diving championships in 1978.<sup>29</sup> Here appears to be the crux of the concern, for women playing rugby league would threaten, perhaps fatally, the masculine values expressed through the game.

The attitude of rugby league officialdom on this issue is summed up in the title of a 1958 *Rugby League News* feature on the physicality of the game, which was simply called 'No Game for Girls'.<sup>30</sup> Not only were women to be excluded, women's sporting abilities were represented as being the antithesis of masculine sporting values, and the ridicule of women has been a common trait in rugby league. When the South Sydney club was accused of over-vigorous play in the 1970s one supporter suggested that '[t]hose hypocrites who scream about brutality in the game should go and watch ladies basketball [netball] if it sickens them'.<sup>31</sup> This ridicule of women's sporting abilities could also be turned into a form of abuse of male athletes. Thus, detractors of 1960s South Sydney winger Michael Cleary, a double international in both rugby union and rugby league who was also one of the first footballers to work as a male model, taunted him by twisting his name to 'Michelle'. This seemingly minor and

childish act appeared to have a strong effect on Cleary, who claimed 'It got me down for a long time . . . [t]he only inference that you could put on that nickname was the inference that I was effeminate – some sort of pansy'.<sup>32</sup> Such comments only had meaning when playing rugby league remained an exclusively male activity. If women could play, its meanings would be irreversibly altered. Most significantly, the sport's place in the construction of masculinity, and perhaps even the very underpinnings of masculinity in society, would be severely, and perhaps fatally, compromised. It was for this reason that rugby league's officials, and those who supported the game and its objectives, fought so hard to prevent the women's competition from proceeding.<sup>33</sup>

This opposition failed to stem the enthusiasm of the bulk of the potential players, and in early September it was announced that the women would play their first public match on 17 September. The Agricultural Society Ground at Moore Park, a regular football venue, had been secured by a private promoter, who obviously realised that the controversy surrounding the event should ensure a large and curious crowd. The promoter agreed to spend at least £300 on advertising, with the players to receive ten per cent of the gate takings. Not all of the women agreed with the decision to stage a public match at this time and a split, seemingly encouraged by the NSWRL's Miller, led to a number of them, including Kane, one of the two original organisers, withdrawing. These dissenters appear to have been in the minority, however, and at least forty women continued to train in preparation for the upcoming match.<sup>34</sup>

When news of the match broke the NSWRL immediately broadcast its opposition. Although the League had maintained a dismissive approach from the outset, Miller himself had been an apparent supporter and had assisted with some organisation and coaching. His support ceased following the announcement of the match, and he led the NSWRL's opposition. The public justification for this opposition was that the match was being organised by a private promoter, which violated the League's constitution as the sport's sanctioning body, and that it would also clash with a NSWRL-sanctioned charity match to be held on the same day. Such claims were misleading as opposition stemmed solely from the League's opposition to women playing the sport. This is confirmed by the fact that Miller had allegedly encouraged the women to sign with the promoter, and urged them to secure the best possible financial terms for themselves. The issue of the charity match also seems contrived, with the women claiming that it had not been organised until after they had made their own arrangements, and that Miller was well aware of their plans. The League also argued that the women had not made enough progress in their play to be ready to face the public, a curious claim given later events.<sup>35</sup>

Not content with just criticising the upcoming match, the NSWRL actively tried to undermine it. The promoters of the match had arranged a number of curtain raisers to the women's match, including the final of the City Houses rugby league competition. The City Houses, a self-governing body,

although affiliated to the NSWRL, organised a competition between teams from various businesses around Sydney. Three days before the match, the League declared that it would disqualify any association, team or individual who played in matches associated with the women's match forcing the City Houses to withdraw. Such a draconian approach by the League was met with strong public disapproval, especially since it also threatened to apply the ban to the great H.H. 'Dally' Messenger, who was scheduled to perform an exhibition of goal kicking prior to the match. Messenger was an icon of rugby league in Australia; his signing from rugby union in 1907 had been a major coup for the new code, and he is remembered as the game's first superstar. The threat to take such a drastic action against such a revered figure is an indication of the depth of the NSWRL's opposition to the women's match.<sup>36</sup>

In spite of these strenuous efforts by the NSWRL to prevent it, and in the face of the widespread criticism in the media, the women forged ahead and staged their match. On 17 September 1921 a crowd numbering between 20,000 and 30,000, extremely large by the standards of the era, packed into the Agricultural Ground to watch two teams, dubbed Sydney and Metropolitan, battle it out. Metropolitan triumphed by 21-11, scoring seven tries in the process. The large crowd revealed that there was obviously widespread interest and curiosity in the idea of women playing football, as well as helping to create a tidy profit for the private promoters of the venture.<sup>37</sup>

The undoubted star of the match was young winger Maggie Maloney. Playing for the Metropolitan team, Maloney scored four tries in the match, and also won a 110-yard sprint race held for the players before the game. Aged only fifteen, Maloney was employed in the tailoring department of David Jones and lived with her parents in the inner-city suburb of Surry Hills. Her play was seized on by the media as the main focus of their match reports, and she received favourable treatment. *Smith's Weekly* referred to the game as 'Maggie Maloney's Party',<sup>38</sup> while other papers were equally enthusiastic, hailing her as 'a female Horder or Van Heerden',<sup>39</sup> and declaring that her play had been the most enjoyable feature of the afternoon. Maloney's older brother had played two first grade rugby league games for South Sydney, but it is fair to claim that it was his sister who was the more gifted athlete.

Surprisingly, in the face of the enormous pre-match opposition, much of the media coverage of the match was generally positive. *Smith's Weekly* reported that 'their football was scientific in every department except goal-kicking' and that 'the girls played genuine Northern Union [rugby league] football, kicked seldom, and turned defence into attack from every conceivable position'.<sup>40</sup> The sports correspondent of the *Catholic Press* was another sceptic who changed his mind upon viewing the match, noting 'the huge crowd that went to the Agricultural Ground to laugh at the novel spectacle of a ladies' football match was astonished at the skill with which the game was played'.<sup>41</sup> Again, after a second match between the same two teams, the writer enthused

that ‘the ladies again played first-class football and delighted the spectators’,<sup>42</sup> while the *Daily Telegraph* and the *Sunday News* were among the other papers to comment favourably on the matches.<sup>43</sup>

There remained some scribes, however, who refused to concede that women were capable of playing football. This attitude was exemplified by the Sun’s correspondent, who bitterly related that:

the women who played Rugby League football on Saturday should not be deceived by the attendance. The 20,000 odd frankly went along to see a novelty, just the same as they would go if someone advertised that an elephant would fight three lions and a tiger thrown in for luck. Their play in the future will have to stand on its merits, and it was of such a character that it is obvious that they still have a long way to go before their showing will draw a crowd regularly.<sup>44</sup>

The *Australian Bystander* went so far as to print a ten-stanza poem on the match, which ended with the following snide remarks:

When shall their memory fade?  
What a freak-show they made!  
Until the whistle blew  
What if they only knew  
How the multitude  
Giggled and wondered.<sup>45</sup>

The match has also failed to receive its due historical recognition, something that it undoubtedly deserves because of its pioneering status and the controversy it generated. Marion Stell does briefly touch on the proposal in her history of women’s sport in Australia, but does not mention the match and instead makes the erroneous claim that a five-team competition was established in the following year.<sup>46</sup> The only acknowledgement of the match comes in Gary Lester’s *The Story of Australian Rugby League*, which noted the large attendance at the game, but was seemingly unable to give the female pioneers their rightful place in the history of rugby league in Australia. Instead, Lester attributes the size of the crowd to the appearance of ‘Dally’ Messenger.<sup>47</sup> However, the evidence suggests that it was more likely that it was the crowds that drew Messenger, rather than the other way around. Despite his pioneering role in rugby league, Messenger had never made a great deal of money out of the game and lived in near poverty. He was able to earn some money by trading on his name to endorse a new football produced by Mick Simmons Limited, a leading Sydney sports retailer, and his goal-kicking exhibition at the match was intended to showcase the new ball. The huge public interest in women’s

football had therefore created a favourable environment for promoting this product, a fact obviously recognised by Messenger and the manufacturers.<sup>48</sup>

The NSWRL had made one final desperate attempt to undermine the women's match: it staged its own! Realising that neither its criticism nor its threats were capable of stemming the public's interest in the women's match, it decided to hastily schedule its own as part of the charity carnival – a mixed programme of football matches and track and field events held to raise funds for the Royal Hospital for Women – at the Sydney Sports Ground, in direct competition with the other match. Two teams of young schoolgirls, representing the suburbs of Paddington and Surry Hills, fought out a scoreless draw. The match proved to have little success at the box office, with the carnival, which also included a match between the University and Eastern Suburbs senior teams, drawing only 2,000 spectators, less than one-tenth of the number present at the Agricultural Ground.<sup>49</sup>

This NSWRL-organised match received an equally unenthusiastic response from the press, who were quite scathing in their reports. The *Sunday Times* reported that the 'players knew nothing about the rules, the ball was thrown all over the place, forward or anywhere. One team boasted three full-backs'. The tone of this and other reports shows that rather than being a serious sporting contest, this match was designed to be nothing more than an amusing sideshow for the benefit of the audience. Indeed, the *Referee's* only comment on the match was that it was 'most amusing'.<sup>50</sup> More critical was the *Daily Telegraph*, which stated that 'the players, some of whom had barely entered their teens, appeared to be entirely ignorant of the rudiments of the game, and their motley appearance, arrayed as they were in dresses of weird and diverse colours, combined to make the contest a burlesque'.<sup>51</sup>

Although this officially sanctioned match was, in itself, of little consequence, it is valuable in highlighting some of the wider issues involved with women's football. Firstly, it exposes the NSWRL's abject hypocrisy over the issue, given its original criticism of women playing the game. This was magnified when it is remembered that one of the League's stated objections to the original women's match was that it felt that the players were insufficiently prepared to play in public. This criticism fails to measure up in light of the almost total lack of preparation and practice by the girls involved in the League's own match. On the other hand, the women in the unsanctioned match had been practising for three months, long enough for the quality of their play to be commended by most reporters.

While this contradiction might stem from the League's general hypocrisy in dealing with the issue, there is perhaps another explanation. This would argue that the League's objection emerged not from the lack of preparedness of the women players, but rather from the very fact that they were too well prepared. That is, women's sport could be tolerated if the players did not take their participation seriously or play competitively. A match under such

restrictions would neither undermine the masculine values of the sport nor challenge gender roles in society as a whole. Such light-hearted novelty events could even provide humorous entertainment for male spectators. It was when the women involved took their participation seriously that it was regarded as a threat to the established order. The earlier boast that 'we are going to play football – as men play it' was what worried the men in the NSWRL. Women 'playing like girls' could be tolerated, women playing like men could not.

What ultimately became of women's rugby league in Sydney? Despite originally planning to play only one match in 1921, a second match was hastily organised one week after their triumphant debut. This seems to have been designed to capitalise on the continuing curiosity and publicity surrounding the women's game, and it drew a reasonable crowd of around 5,000. The match also gave the Sydney team the opportunity to reverse the previous week's defeat and they won by 9-3. The *Australian Bystander* then reported that the women 'will probably meet again in Newcastle, where they will hear some rude remarks'.<sup>52</sup> The last comment seemed to indicate that the men of the working-class steel city, a stronghold of rugby league, would have even less tolerance for women playing 'their' game than their Sydney counterparts. The Newcastle visit does not appear to have eventuated, however, possibly because the late finish of the local rugby league and soccer seasons would have occupied all the suitable venues.<sup>53</sup>

Despite intentions by the newly formed women's league to play a full season in 1922 there are no records that indicate it happened, meaning that Maloney and the other female players had no opportunity to continue their football careers. Just why the competition failed to become fully established is uncertain, for like so many other events that are born in a blaze of publicity, its demise was unrecorded by the press. Perhaps the women involved simply tired of the idea after the initial novelty wore off, although this seems unlikely. A more probable explanation is that the women's game died because of the pressure brought to bear by conservative elements in the NSWRL and the media, in a similar way to the contemporary situation in England where the Football Association was able to use its virtual monopoly over grounds to curtail the then enormous popularity of women's soccer. While the Sydney women were initially able to overcome such problems by finding a private promoter, it is quite likely that these interests were only concerned with the profit that could be generated from the public's initial curiosity about women's football and that they had no real interest in the long-term development of the game. Whatever the exact causes, there is no doubting the outcome, and the bold attempt to establish women's rugby league in Sydney ultimately failed.<sup>54</sup>

The failure of this attempt effectively spelled the end for female participation in rugby league. There were a few sporadic matches in later years, but they seem to have been conceived as only one-off novelties. Once again, women were confined to the sidelines or the Ladies' Auxiliaries. It was not

until 1990 that a women's rugby league competition was successfully established in Sydney. This passage of time, however, did nothing to soften the attitudes of the NSWRL towards women playing the sport. In 1993 John Quayle, the general manager of the League, rejected a proposal to grant affiliation to the women's competition, claiming 'we support women coaching and refereeing, but it is not in our charter to support them playing'. Old prejudices, it seems, die hard, and the guardians of rugby league seemed determined to maintain it as 'no game for girls'.<sup>55</sup>

## NOTES:

1. The author was the Tom Brock Scholar for the year 2000 and he wishes to express his gratitude to the Brock family and the Tom Brock Bequest Committee for their support and assistance.
2. Robert Hess, 'Women and Australian Rules Football in Colonial Melbourne', *International Journal of the History of Sport*, 13 (3) (1996), 356-72.
3. A thorough examination of women and rugby league in Sydney is contained in, Charles Little, 'Sport, Communities and Identities: A Case Study of Race, Gender and Ethnicity in South Sydney Sport' (Ph.D. thesis, University of New South Wales, 2000), 319-70.
4. *Daily Telegraph*, 4 June 1921, p. 12; *Sunday Times*, 29 May 1921, p. 17; *Sydney Morning Herald*, 1 June 1921, p. 13; 11 June 1921, p. 2.
5. *Daily Telegraph*, 4 June 1921, p. 12.
6. *Daily Telegraph*, 11 June 1921, p. 9; *Evening News*, 11 June 1921, p. 2, *Daily Telegraph*, 11 June 1921, p. 9; Marion Stell, *Half the Race: A History of Australian Women in Sport* (Sydney: Angus & Robertson), 155-170; Richard Cashman and Amanda Weaver, *Wicket Women: Cricket and Women in Australia* (Sydney: University of New South Wales Press, 1991), 51-69.
7. Gail J. Newsham, *In a League of their Own!: The Dick, Kerr Ladies' Football Club* (London: Scarlet Press, 1997), 40-54; Derek Birley, *Playing the Game: Sport and British Society, 1910-1945* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1995), 204; John Williams and Jackie Woodhouse, 'Can play, will play? Women and football in Britain', in John Williams and Steven Wagg, eds., *British Football and Social Change: Getting into Europe* (Leicester: Leicester University Press, 1991), 91-3.
8. *Daily Telegraph*, 11 June 1921, p. 9; *Sunday News*, 17 July 1921, p. 2.
9. *Arrow*, 10 June 1921, p. 11.

10. These games in Melbourne are interesting in that they were played publicly two months before the Sydney matches, but after the Sydney proposal had been publicised. *Bulletin*, 23 June 1921, p. 38; *Sun*, 25 September 1921, p. 5; *Sunday News*, 17 July 1921, p. 2; 14 August 1921, p. 5; *Sunday Times*, 17 July 1921; Sandra Coney, *Standing in the Sunshine: A History of New Zealand Women Since They Won The Vote* (Auckland: Viking, 1993) 247.
11. *Arrow*, 10 June 1921, p. 9.
12. Such proposals were not unique to this situation, and it has been a common feature of women's sporting experiences that they have been expected to play games that are modified versions of those that men play. In 1918 the Committee on Women's Athletics in the United States devised specific rules for women's soccer, including a shorter playing period and players being restricted to certain areas of the field to prevent them being able to run too much, while other derivations of male sports specifically intended for women include netball (basketball), vigoro (cricket) and ringuette (ice hockey). Richard Cashman, 'Defining 'Real Sport': The Question of Modified Games for Women', in *Method and Methodology in Sport and Cultural History*, ed. Kevin Wamsley (Dubuque: Times Mirror, 1995), 88-101; Elise Pettus, 'Soccer: From the Suburbs to the Sports Arenas', in *Nike is a Goddess: The History of Women in Sports*, ed. Lissa Smith (New York: Atlantic Monthly Press, 1998), 247; *Daily Telegraph*, 4 June 1921, p. 12; *Sun*, 20 September 1921, p. 5; *Sydney Mail*, 15 June 1921, pp. 5, 7.
13. *Sunday Times*, 29 May 1921, p. 17.
14. There was evidently an attempt by some women to play rugby league in 1913, but little detail remains of the proposal. The only reference to the proposal I have come across was a cartoon in the *Sydney Sportsman* that satirised the idea, and which featured many of the same images as the cartoons of 1921. *Smith's Weekly*, 4 June 1921, p. 2; 24 September 1921, p. 8; *Sydney Sportsman*, 13 March 1912, p. 3; 22 June 1921, p. 9; *Referee*, 28 September 1921, p. 12; *Rugby League News*, 6 June 1921, p. 12; *Bulletin*, 16 June 1921, p. 13.
15. *Australian Bystander*, 22 September 1921, p. 20.
16. *Arrow*, 10 June 1921, p. 9.
17. *Sun*, 18 September 1921, p. 20.
18. For an wider examination of the role of the medical profession in restricting sporting opportunities for women see: Patricia Vertinsky, *The Eternally Wounded Woman: Woman, Doctors and Exercise in the Late Nineteenth Century* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1990); Jennifer Hargreaves, *Sporting Females: Critical Issues in the History and Sociology of Women's Sports* (London: Routledge, 1994), 42-62; Stell, *Half the Race*, 171-7; Helen Lenskyj, *Out of Bounds: Women, Sport and Sexuality* (Toronto: The Women's Press, 1986).
19. *Sun*, 20 September 1921, p. 5.

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20. *Australian Christian World*, 17 June 1921, p. 9.
21. For a historical overview and analysis of attitudes towards women and sports participation in Australia, see Angela Burroughs, and John Nauright, 'Women, Sport and Embodiment in Australia and New Zealand', *International Journal of the History of Sport*, 17 (2/3) (2000), 188-205.
22. Veronica Raszeja, *A Decent and Proper Exertion: The Rise of Women's Competitive Swimming in Sydney to 1912* (Sydney: Australian Society for Sports History, 1992), 58, 62, 66-76; *Rugby League News*, 18 June 1921, p. 12.
23. Alethea. Melling, "'Ray of the Rovers': The Working-Class Heroine in Popular Football Fiction, 1915-25". *International Journal of the History of Sport*, 15 (1) (1998), 98-109.
24. It is also important to recognise that, although Australia did not see shifts in the labour force to the same extent as Britain, the USA and some European countries, the ideas and ideologies of women's work were spread internationally through a range of media, including films, magazines and newspapers, and this may have had some impact in shaping the discourse regarding gender roles in post-war Australia. Jennifer Crew, 'Women's Wages in Britain and Australia During the First World War', *Labour History*, 57 (1989), 27-30; Anne Summers, *Damned Whores and God's Police*, 2nd. ed. (Melbourne: Penguin, 1994), 380; Michael McKernan, *The Australian People and the Great War* (Melbourne: Nelson, 1980), 222-23.
25. Robert Connell, *Masculinities* (Sydney: Allen & Unwin, 1995), 3-54.
26. David Whitson, 'Sport in the Social Construction of Masculinity', in *Sport, Men and the Gender Order: Critical Feminist Perspectives*, eds. Michael Messner and Don Sabo (Champaign: Human Kinetics 1990), 19-29.
27. Although Giulianotti and Armstrong are referring here specifically to association football, their argument is equally valid when considering the dominant football code or codes in any geographic or cultural setting. Richard Giulianotti and Gary Armstrong, 'Introduction: Reclaiming the Game – An Introduction to the Anthropology of Football', in *Entering the Field: New Perspectives on World Football*, eds. Gary Armstrong and Richard Giulianotti (Oxford: Berg, 1997), 7.
28. For an investigation of working-class masculinity and rugby league see, Little, Sport, Communities and Identities', 239-79. Richard Holt, 'Heroes of the North: Sport and the Shaping of Regional Identity', in *Sport and Identity in the North of England*, eds. Jeff Hill and Jack Williams (Keele: Keele University Press, 1996), 137-62; Joseph Maguire, 'Images of Manliness and Competing Ways of Living in Late Victorian and Edwardian Britain', *British Journal of Sports History*, 3 (3) (1986), 265-74.
29. Lois Bryson, 'Challenges to Male Hegemony in Sport', in *Sport, Men, and the Gender Order*, eds. Messner and Sabo, 176.
30. *Rugby League News*, October 1958, p. 3.

31. *Southern News*, 22 June 1971, p. 7.
32. *Rugby League World*, April 1969, p. 19.
33. *Rugby League Week*, 25 February 1978, p. 8.
34. *Daily Telegraph*, 1 September 1921, p. 3; 9 September 1921, p. 6.
35. *Arrow*, 17 June 1921, p. 16; *Australian Bystander*, 22 September 1921, p. 20; *Daily Telegraph*, 9 September 1921, p. 6; *Evening News*, 17 September 1921, p. 6; *Sydney Morning Herald*, 14 September 1921, p. 13.
36. Despite the threat, the League does not appear to have ever applied the ban to Messenger. *Evening News*, 15 September 1921, p. 3; *Sun*, 15 September 1921, p. 3; 16 September 1921, p. 3.
37. The novelty factor of the match obviously played a significant part in the large attendance, and a similar pattern was evident when women's cricket was first played in the 1880s. Crowds of up to 3,500 attended some of the first matches, but the crowds rapidly declined after the initial novelty had worn off. Given that no official gate figures were released, the size of the crowd can only be estimated from the guesses of the journalists present. A comparison of the wildly varying estimates provided reveals just how imprecise this method was, but taking a rough average gives us a probably crowd size of somewhere between 20,000 and 30,000, a large crowd by the standards of the era. The estimates provided by the various publications which covered the match are as follows; 15,000 (*Evening News*, 17 September 1921, p. 5), 20,000 (*Sydney Mail*, 21 September 1921, p. 15), '20,000 odd' (*Sun*, 20 September 1921, p. 5), 'about 20,000' (*Sydney Morning Herald*, 19 September 1921, p. 4). 'over 20,000' (*Referee*, 21 September 1921, p. 12), 'over 20,000' (*Sunday Times*, 18 September 1921, p. 9), 'quite 30,000' (*Australian Bystander*, 22 September 1921, p. 20), 30,000 (*Sunday News*, 18 September 1921, p. 2), 32,000 (*Sydney Sportsman*, 21 September 1921, p. 10); 34,000 (*Daily Telegraph*, 19 September 1921, p. 5); Cashman and Weaver, *Wicket Women*, 1-9.
38. *Smith's Weekly*, 24 September 1921, p. 8.
39. North Sydney winger Harold Horder was one of the stars of Sydney rugby league in the early 1920s and Attie van Heerden was a South African Olympian and winger on the 1921 Springbok rugby union team then touring Australia and New Zealand. *Sun*, 19 September 1921, p. 1; 25 September 1921, p. 5; *Sunday Times*, 18 September 1921, p. 9; *Bulletin*, 22 September 1921, p. 38; *Australian Bystander*, 22 September 1921, p. 20.
40. *Smith's Weekly*, 24 September 1921, p. 8.
41. *Catholic Press*, 22 September 1921, p. 14.
42. *Catholic Press*, 29 September 1921, p. 14.

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43. *Daily Telegraph*, 19 September 1921, p. 5; *Sunday News*, 18 September 1921, p. 2; *Sydney Morning Herald*, 17 September 1921, p. 16.
44. *Sun*, 15 September 1921, p. 3; 20 September 1921.
45. *Australian Bystander*, 22 September 1921, p. 20.
46. Stell, *Half the Race*, p. 57.
47. Gary Lester, *The Story of Australian Rugby League* (Sydney: Lester-Townsend, 1988), 104.
48. *Dally Messenger*, *The Master: The Story of H. H. 'Dally' Messenger and the Beginning of Australian Rugby League* (Sydney: Angus & Robertson, 1982), 88-94; *Referee*, 21 September 1921, p. 12.
49. *Australian Bystander*, 22 September 1921, p. 20; *Daily Telegraph*, 17 September 1921, p. 12; *Referee*, 21 September 1921, p. 12.
50. *Referee*, 21 September 1921, p. 12.
51. *Daily Telegraph*, 19 September 1921, p. 7; *Sun*, 17 September 1921, p. 5; *Sunday Times*, 18 September 1921, p. 9.
52. *Australian Bystander*, 29 September 1921, p. 20.
53. *Arrow*, 23 September 1921, p. 10; *Sun*, 25 September 1921, p. 5; *Sunday News*, 25 September 1921, p. 5.
54. Anne Coddington, *One of the Lads: Women Who Follow Football* (London: Harper Collins, 1997), 38-9; Birley, *Playing the Game*, p. 204.
55. Jacquelin Magnay, 'Hitting the Wall', in *League of a Nation*, eds. David Headon and Lex Marinos (Sydney: ABC Books, 1996), pp. 149-50; *Sydney Morning Herald*, 14 August 1993, p. 76; *Sunday Telegraph*, 24 May 1998, pp. 72, 129; *Loosehead Magazine*, Winter 1988, pp. 18-19.