

Trevor R. Delaney, *The Roots of Rugby League*. Published by author, Keighley, 1984. pp.117 [+xviii]. £4.95 + postage £3 airmail, £1 surface).

'The dispute in English rugby which culminated in the formation of the Northern Union in 1895 at the George Hotel, Huddersfield, brought about a new sport in the form of Rugby League'. So Trevor Delaney begins the introduction to his book, which examines rugby football in the north of England in the latter part of the nineteenth century, and the growing antagonism between northern clubs and the game's administrators in the south.

The story has all the ingredients for a rattling good yarn.

For, as Delaney's first sentence indicates, the code began in conflict. The root cause, of course, was money, specifically compensation for players' loss of time at work, known as 'broken-time'. From the early 1890s, the officials of northern clubs, with largely working-class members, attempted to persuade the Rugby Union administration, largely controlled by middle-class southern clubs, to allow reimbursement when players missed work for International, county or mid-week tour games. The northerners argued that this was not professionalism, simply placing the working-class player on an equal footing with the salaried. The only payment for club games would be when travelling caused loss of Saturday morning work.

Opponents held the public school view that 'sport played for its own sake could impart a whole code of moral ethics and make its exponents better people' (p-18). It was not that these moralists believed that the worker should be financially disadvantaged, but 'if he cannot afford the leisure to play the game, he must do without it' (p.20).

The northern (gate-taking) clubs were not motivated simply by consideration for the footballers. Desirable players were already receiving illegal payments, and new, harsher rules on amateurism threatened to outlaw some clubs permanently. Delaney asserts that the southerners' motives were also impure - fear that their teams would be defeated by the professional northerners. In the background was the example of increasingly popular association football (soccer) where outright professionalism had been legalized since 1885.

At a general meeting in September 1893 the northern clubs lost their attempt to modify the rule on professionalism, and in August 1895 senior Yorkshire and Lancashire clubs formed their own league on the principle of payment for bona-fide broken-time only. Spurred on by revolutionary zeal, the rebels experimented with rules and soon introduced so many changes that a new code resulted.

It is a good story, but Delaney (the founder of the *Freedom in Rugby* campaign) does not tell it vividly. The chronology is bafflingly disordered. Cryptic, unexplained asides abound. The George Hotel is pictured splendidly in the wintry gloom on the back cover, but the details of the historic foundation meeting inside it are passed over quickly and confusingly. There are few footnotes. The

author is clearly an enthusiast, and while emotional commitment to one's favourite code is (luckily for me) no crime, Delaney has allowed it such rein that it threatens his whole design.

Still, fascinating insights into northern football are imbedded in this account. The subject encompasses broad conflicts - between the north and south of England, between working class and middle class, and between amateur idealism and pragmatism. Delaney also illuminates the northern enthusiasm for competitions, such as challenge cups. Indeed, he shows that of all the conflicts from which Rugby League emerged, the direct cause of the "split" was an internal northern dispute over promotion and relegation - the strong competition clubs versus the rest. Some issues in football history are universal!

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