

Rugby Wars: The Changing Face of Football

Brett Hutchins¹
Centre for Sports Studies
University of Canberra

Mike Colman, *Super League: The Inside Story*. Ironbark Pan Macmillan, Sydney, 1996. Illus. pp. 344.

Peter Fitzsimons, *The Rugby War*. HarperCollins, Sydney, 1996. Illus., pp. 326.

When money talks, everybody else is condemned to listen
(Christopher Lasch).²

The 'wars' which broke out in 1995 for control of rugby league and rugby union worldwide were fought between high power media/communication corporations. These conflicts point towards many of the changing features of increasingly corporatised modern professional (and formerly amateur) elite sport. That transformation is occurring so rapidly within the power structures controlling these sports highlights the pressures of diversification and fragmentation that have come to bear on the rugby codes' traditional loyalties, identities and practices. The two books reviewed, Mike Colman's, *Super League: The Inside Story*, and Peter Fitzsimons's, *The Rugby War*, provide entertaining and insightful case studies of the events that have permanently reshaped league and union both on the domestic front and internationally. Both are compelling reading which are accessible to a diverse audience as they give life to the colour, drama, tension and excitement of the major controversies. Yet they also provide material in which many interdependent social, cultural, political and economic processes are observable. These include the effects of pay television, the shift from public to private ownership models, the industrial relations rights of players, globalisation processes, the cultures of rugby union and rugby league, and political communication clashes.

Colman and Fitzsimons point out that the motivating force behind

the upheavals in union and league has been contestation over pay television rights. The Australian Rugby League (ARL) and the Rugby Football Unions worldwide have been caught in a battle between two powerful corporate forces. The first is the Rupert Murdoch-owned Australian Foxtel pay television network which drove the Super League concept, and is part of his News Corporation (News Corp) global media empire. The second, and Murdoch's foe, is Kerry Packers Publishing and Broadcasting Limited (PBL), which gave muted support to the World Rugby Corporation (WRC); Channel Nine network, the ARL free-to-air television carrier; and more substantially, Packer's five per cent interest, with an option of between 30 and 48 per cent, in the Optus Vision pay television network which holds the ARL pay broadcasting rights.³ The Foxtel-Optus Vision battle for dominance in the fledgling Australian pay TV market has been the most costly ever in the Australian media industry, and possibly any other industry.⁴ The accumulated losses of Foxtel and Optus currently stand at an astonishing \$330.1 million,⁵ having only secured between 100 000 to 115 000 subscribers each.⁶ This level of competition is not simply a programming matter—it is about strategic positioning for profit-generating technologies accessible through pay television hook-ups. Pay technology allows heavy penetration of the lucrative multimedia, long-distance telephony markets, and new interactive services coming on-line.⁷ Colman and Fitzsimons stress the high value of both rugby codes to pay programming in attracting much needed subscribers for these services. Furthermore, the value of sporting commodities on pay television exponentially increases as they can be syndicated and viewed globally on multiple services.

The immense sporting impact of pay television hostilities is apparent from the Super League and WRC 'attacks'. The consequences have redefined both local and global affiliations in rugby league and rugby union, and triggered the death of union amateurism. All this is part of a larger global media battle well above the sporting arena, typified by James Packer's⁸ comment on the Packer and Murdoch rivalry, 'We're in the middle of fights over Super League and horse racing. We don't want any more [disputes over sport coverage rights]' (Fitzsimons p. 248). It is also common knowledge that Rupert Murdoch owns the rights to a virtual international sports smorgasbord including English Premier League soccer, the National Football League in America, and the North American National Hockey League.⁹ Such extensive

accumulation of television sport 'stables' has precipitated a radical shift in the power relationships between media/communication companies and the major rugby code controlling bodies. The relationship has fluctuated from interdependence in which both entities need each other and possess a power base, to one of virtual dependence where rugby union and league administrators answer almost solely to media/communication controllers.¹⁰ As the political economies of both pay television and sport have become progressively intertwined, the rugby codes have had to forego most of their power to accommodate the liaison.

A common element to both the Super League and WRC rugby plans is a proposed shift from publicly-owned, community-based football clubs to privately-owned and administered franchises. WRCs blueprint visualised a truly international competition 'which would be set up on the American model of professional sporting franchises' (Fitzsimons p. 8). In turn, Super League viewed privately run teams as ensuring 'there would be no traditional rivalries to impede the game's growth' (Colman p. 63). The entire rationale of running a sporting 'franchise', rather than a 'club', allows administrative decisions to be based on commercial and media potential and profitability rather than historical tradition, loyalty, and protection of 'establishment' interests. Colman's chapter (pp. 45-58) on the evolution of the privately-owned Brisbane Broncos, and their many disagreements with the ARL, is particularly insightful. It strikes at the conflict between public versus private ownership models and their respective operating rationales. Such clashes of sporting management structures are occurring across many Australian sports,¹¹ and the overt emphasis on economic rationalism in privately run sport management provides a formidable challenge to operators of publicly-owned sport. How do they incorporate the need for profitability to successfully compete in contemporary professional elite sport and, at the same time, seek to maintain and foster traditional loyalties and identities? Both books are fascinating accounts of how the 'establishments' in union and league attempt to maintain these loyalties and identities while making necessary concessions to deal with the commercial threat of WRC and Super League.

The 'rebels' needed political leverage in order to seriously threaten the control of the ARL and the Rugby Football Unions. Much of it came from the many players in both codes who felt underpaid, saw

administrators giving them little say in the management of their sports, and provided few industrial relations rights and workplace benefits, particularly superannuation and post-career employment opportunity.¹² This ill-feeling gave Super League and WRC the opportunity to harness player disaffection by offering improved conditions in all these respects. Selected high profile players then responded by serving as faithful messengers of the 'vision' rhetoric. The hyperbole reached ever spiralling heights with Laurie Daley, former Australian rugby league captain, threatening to play Australian Rules rather than play in the exploitative ARL competition! Meanwhile, many union players were justifiably infuriated that their services were sold to News Corp, for the Tri-Nations and Super Twelve series by the South African, New Zealand and Australian Rugby Unions (SANZAR), with no attempt made to consult them (Fitzsimons p. 214). Not surprisingly, player rights featured heavily in the peace brokered in union between WRC and the SANZAR Unions (Fitzsimons pp. 314-6). If peace eventuates in league, a similar scenario is likely. Kerry Packer gave sports administrators a portentous, but oft ignored, lesson in 1977 when he hired the world's best cricketers and instigated World Series Cricket for his Nine network.¹³ The lesson informs us that the industrial relations conditions and rights for those who create the sporting product—professional players—provides an axis for control of a sport which may be appropriated by any organisation with the resources and motivation to do so. Those in control must vigilantly look after the concerns of those who make their sport possible.

The circumstances surrounding the WRC and Super League wrangles are symptomatic of accelerating sporting cultural flows and globalisation processes, particularly within 'mediascapes'.¹⁴ Such processes have, and are, transpiring across a vast array of sports including soccer, basketball, ice-hockey, American football, golf and tennis.¹⁵ Colman and Fitzsimons detail that the Super League and WRC 'visions' were directed at significantly expanding the geographical scope of their sports. Super League hoped to turn rugby league into a genuinely international game, instead of one played at a high standard only in New South Wales, Queensland, and pockets of New Zealand and England. Colman informs that intrinsic to this objective is the immense pay television market that News Corp has at its disposal, with Asia to be the key geopolitical region for league's expanded exposure. In fact, Murdoch's 'Star TV' network reaches 150 million people daily across

approximately fifty-three countries from Turkey to Japan (Colman pp. 34-5). Such coverage would pit rugby league, with its relatively small following, against any number of team sports already popular with large international audiences including basketball, baseball, ice-hockey, cricket, and the aptly dubbed 'world game', soccer. This raises the possibility that, despite statements to the contrary, News Corp did not envisage rugby league establishing itself as a serious competitor to these sports in terms of cosmopolitan audience appeal. More probably, league was considered to be another sporting commodity to simply fill a slot on seven-day a week, twenty-four hours a day, sports pay channels globally. On the other side, Fitzsimons obviously takes great pride that the game he once played, rugby union, has a more international flavour (Fitzsimons p. 9), played at varying levels in around 116 countries (Fitzsimons p. 39). WRC was intent on increasing the game's global impact even further with a coordinated worldwide weekly competition. High quality professional players would form elite standard franchises in established rugby centres, in numerous weaker rugby nations such as Japan, as well as new frontiers like America.

Both sets of strategies sought to intensify the sport/media/capital nexus and are a working example of attempted cultural diffusion of the sporting form and international commodification.¹⁶ Grand plans perhaps, but these have little, if anything, to do the 'hearts and minds' of supporters, or rugby code officials. Undoubtedly, much of the rhetoric on 'vision' and 'necessary future directions' for these sports gives the impression that proposed change is unambiguously 'for the good of the game'. More accurately however, this was a process whereby supporters and officials were about to be completely bypassed as the sport/media/capital nexus directed the global future of league and union. Those who make and, more crucially, finance the decisions—media/communication companies—do so with an eye on programming and associated media revenues, not on the welfare of those comprising the sporting cultures involved.

The Rugby Football Unions worldwide managing to retain control of rugby (if only just), and Super League's defeat in its initial Federal court case against the ARL, supplies Fitzsimons and Colman with much of the dramatic grist that drives both volumes. Fitzsimons views WRC as an unwelcome invader challenging the traditional and rightful proprietors of rugby, while Colman frames the confrontation in terms of the ARL

taking on the might of a powerful media empire and succeeding. Either situation is an intriguing illustration of local sports receiving negotiating, and resisting global corporate forces. It is ironic that SANZAR, in trying to resist one prospective multinational company — WRC —merely signed to another, News Corp. In the negotiation process, SANZAR developed its ‘perfect rugby product’ (Fitzsimons p. 29), being the Super Twelve and Tri-Nations competitions, solely for the benefit of Foxtel/News Corp pay programming. In league’s case, the ARL fought News Corp and Super League, maintaining full control of the twenty-team competition (pending a court appeal). In doing so the ARL became internationally isolated as a league controlling body, ended up with a divided and sometimes hostile club competition, and accepted approximately \$200 million from Channel Nine and Optus Vision (Colman p. 337) to fight the News Corp challenge. Once again, it is ironic that to fight one transnational media company, the ARL turned to two other media/communication organisations for financial salvation. These deals demonstrate a common reaction of established sporting bodies when challenged by outside commercial forces intent on instituting an accelerated ‘national and global marketization’¹⁷ of a sport. The ‘establishments’ are willing to see a sport undergo a similar ‘marketization’— the very force they are fighting—to maintain control of their competitions. The conclusion to be drawn, as discussed earlier, is that a new order has been established in which media companies dominate the power relations in their dealings with the rugby codes like no other time in the games’ histories.

Fitzsimons and Colman argue that the key to the Rugby Football Union’s and ARL victories is the remarkably resilient local cultures of the respective sports. Such arguments implicate issues of community and place, and interdependencies between the global and local in cultural circulation of the sporting form.¹⁸ In the rugby codes we see sporting culture serving as a significant site of resistance to unwelcome multinational companies and commodifying processes. As Rowe, Lawrence, Miller and McKay explain, such influences ‘must negotiate the specific local histories and conditions within which sports are fashioned’ in order to establish themselves.¹⁹ The best rugby league example of this put forward by Colman is the city of Newcastle, and the significance and role league plays within this community. In two pivotal chapters (Colman pp. 162-195) Newcastle support for the ARL is

positioned as the key to victory over Super League. The city and its supporters are viewed as representing the essential culture of league:

But what they did have was some brilliant young players poised to reach their potential, and a fanatical following. Fans who, in proportion to population, were the passionate equal of those of the Broncos or any of the other competition high-flyers. Newcastle was a rugby league town—many would say THE rugby league town (Colman p. 163).

The majority of the Newcastle community and media vehemently opposed the Super League franchise set up in Newcastle, the Hunter Mariners. The passion of the situation being such that one group believed that the tension and animosity generated rivalled that of community response to the Vietnam War (Colman p. 189). These events represent a marvellous micro-level study of local culture interpreting and then contending with what are perceived to be powerful non-indigenous corrupting forces, in this case, the Super League Mariners. The story of Newcastle and its culture extends to the macro-level of the Super League dispute. Ex-Federal Minister and former Labor politician, Graham Richardson, believed Super League's approach failed to appreciate the character of the rugby league community:

There is a culture to rugby league and if Super League wanted to get their 10 or 12 clubs they needed to get the culture right . . . Clubs like Balmain, Illawarra and St George would have been a million times better off financially under Super League but you can't send someone in a three-piece suit into a rugby league boardroom and expect them to win over rugby league people. Rugby league people trust people they've seen at the footy. To speak to rugby league people you have to understand rugby league. It's horses for courses (Colman p. 227).

That a global corporate force such as News Corp should experience difficulties in gaining access to localised rugby league sporting culture undoubtedly strikes at how competing cultural flows—local, regional and global—interrelate. It also shows how such a process produces a discernible (and not altogether predictable) result, and that this result is the product of active and heterogeneous processes.²⁰

With regard to union, Fitzsimons provides a different, but no less interesting, example of sporting cultural resistance. He states clearly

why he believes that the WRC failed:

Every sport has its own culture and, of course, the two—sport and culture—feed off each other. While the World Rugby Corporation to this point had been amazingly successful in getting the top players around the world to sign contracts—the culture as a whole simply refused to be lassoed.

The question remains whether the culture had already been lassoed when SANZAR accepted \$550 million over ten years from News Corp for coverage rights (Fitzsimons pp. 95-6). Nevertheless, nostalgic representations and appeals in the media for loyalty, from former amateur Wallabies and All Blacks to the current professional internationals, gives the impression that traditional rugby culture pre-Murdoch) still had influential resonance. A letter, published in the *Sydney Morning Herald*,²¹ written by thirteen former Wallabies calling for current Australian players to remain loyal to the Australian Rugby Union (ARU), and to respect the game's traditions, met with this response from one player:

As soon as I read that, it set me to thinking what rugby was meant to be all about in the first place, why I'd started playing it, and by the end of the day I'd decided to sign with the ARU first thing Monday morning (Fitzsimons p. 252).

That such an appeal should be launched, and meet with success, in response to the threat of possible structural change to rugby administration signifies the primary role nostalgia—'the longing for a happier and simpler past'²²—can perform in sporting culture. Chris Rojek explains that '... it is hardly surprising that a common psychological response to these conditions [change] is the idealization of the past and the concomitant longing for stability and security'.²³

John Nauright further enforces the role nostalgia plays in Australian and New Zealand culture, believing it to be a primary tool adopted by groups to resist rapid social change, and to promote cultural security.²⁴ The WRC players' controversy provides a strong example of the cultural mobilisation of nostalgia. Such mobilisation served as an effective barrier for rugby union to deflect exterior forces threatening the game's organisational status quo.

The above example of a Sydney newspaper carrying such a letter emphasises that the media became the key agent in a sporting 'political

communication'²⁵ confrontation between all groups. Such a process is most commonly observed in political elections with combatants attempting to influence public perception through the media and win popular support for their cause. Rugby league especially became the epicentre of a print media tug-of-war, a struggle in which Murdoch's News Limited (News Corps publishing arm) newspapers, in Sydney and Brisbane in particular, were often accused of editorial bias against the ARL. Colman describes a thought-provoking ABC television *Media Watch* episode in which host, Stuart Littlemore, in a typically acerbic manner, referred to *Telegraph Mirror* journalist Peter Frilingos as 'New's Limited's chief toady (Colman p. 269) for his articles supporting Super League. Journalistic bias is a feature of the entire Super League versus ARL dispute with Packer PBL publications such as the *Bulletin* and *Rugby League Week* often running opposing editorial lines to that of News Limited publications such as the *Australian*, *Courier-Mail* and the aforementioned *Telegraph-Minor*. Colman's chapter on this issue, 'Reading Between the Lines', is also a revealing insight into the view journalists hold of their own position, their identities, professional practices, and how they respond to the constituency they write for.²⁶ Graham Richardson provides perspective on the political communication battle when he says that the ARL was 'out-propaganda'd (sic)' by Super League (Colman p. 185), and that the whole saga 'was a lot more like politics than football' (Colman p. 219). It is also noteworthy that effective 'communication' is considered central to Super League's official philosophy (Colman p. 293), while the ARL is reputed to have a 'communication problem' in general (Colman p. 296). This was a full-blown political media fight played out through the sporting arena, which debilitated perceptions of editorial integrity of many publications, and caused acrimonious confrontation between both newspaper and television journalists (Colman pp. 251-79). Such events hint at the great extent to which rugby league is looked upon, and acts as, a media product.

The rugby union political communication race, at least in Australia and New Zealand, was far less contentious. WRC rarely utilised the media in disseminating its 'vision', while the ARU and New Zealand Rugby Union (NZRU) were widely and sometimes vigorously supported. Certainly, Packer's PBL backing for WRC met with an emotive response in Auckland's *Sunday News* with the headline, 'PACKER BASTARDS!'

(Fitzsimons p. 196). In spite of any merit the WRC proposal contained, Fitzsimons reports that the great weight of editorial policy devalued it immediately, and players associated with it were placed in a volatile predicament:

The pressure that was brought to bear upon other players was extraordinary, although at least most of them were spared the hassles of being publicly associated with it. Being named in the newspapers as having even the slightest association with the World Rugby Corporation inevitably brought both public wrath and enormous media pressure (Fitzsimons pp. 264-5).

Both the league and union 'rebellions' are ideal instances of sporting political communication at work in the media. After all, the effect of any organisation's official statement is largely dependent on how it is received, interpreted and reported by the media. It is this process that dictates the dynamics and power of a message in its delivery to an audience. Thus it is often media communication processes that dictate public perceptions and opinions, and not the actual policies and strategies of sporting bodies.

The books themselves, Colman's, *Super League: The Inside Story*, and Fitzsimons's, *The Rugby War*, are well-written and provide the 'charge' the sports fan is looking for. Stylistically, they closely resemble Gideon Haigh's enjoyable and informative, *The Cricket War*. They are fastidiously compiled accounts of the respective 'wars' and, as hopefully demonstrated by this article, are useful source material to the sports sociologist and historian. Furthermore, they are welcome additions to the popular body of sporting literature. Their usefulness extends far beyond that of the numerous woeful sports volumes on enlightening activities such as 'puzzling pythons', what sports people get up to on overseas tours, and the often mundane life stories of semi-successful football stars. Fitzsimons is an engaging author and his intuitive descriptions of the personalities involved sets the tone well. Eclectic touches are supplied throughout with reference to figures such as Henry Kissinger, J F Kennedy, Sam Pizar, and Duran Duran lead singer, Simon Le Bon. Thankfully, his ardent belief that WRC was not the direction for world rugby to head only occasionally taints his story. Colman provides a book that unerringly provides intricate description of Super League events. The colour and variety of Fitzsimons's piece are not always

present, but it is nevertheless a fine volume.

On the down side, neither book provides a detailed critique or in-depth analysis of events, although Fitzsimons does make an effort. of course such criticism must be tempered by the objectives of the authors not extending to academic analysis. A definite blind spot in both is the lack of attention to the numerous possibilities for the future of the two rugby codes with the involvement of Murdoch's media organisations and their attitudes to sporting 'product'. Did Murdoch buy into rugby union intending to simply kill off rugby league, or to facilitate a merger of the codes, creating a 'super code'? Can merger be ruled out completely? What are the advantages and disadvantages of such a merger? Many more questions could be posed. Considering both books discuss the plight of each others code in detail, discussion of some of these inquiries is warranted.

In conclusion, *The Rugby War* and *Super League: The Inside Story*, should be considered two inseparable volumes to the one essential set. Both 'wars' frequently intersect with a similar set of characters featuring in a sequence of events instigated and driven by the same interrelated corporate, media, and globalising agencies. Extending this commonality, rugby league and rugby union are two pieces in a much larger sporting pay television rights jigsaw being put together competitively by media/communication companies on the international stage. It is apparent that off-field business and administrative networks, and the events generated by these, in many respects have become the important spectacle. The actual sporting spectacle appears to have skulked into the background. When money talks, sport is increasingly a product that does what it is told.

NOTES:

- 1 Many thanks to Frank Hicks, Janine Mikosza and Murray Phillips for their helpful comments on drafts of this article.
- 2 C Lasch, *The Revolt of the Elites and the Betrayal of Democracy*, W W Norton, New York, 1995, p. 22.
- 3 I Ries, 'A \$796m black hole in pay-TV', *Australian Financial Review*, 27 Sept. 1996.
- 4 Ries, 'A \$796m black hole in pay-TV'.
- 5 Ries, 'A \$796m black hole in pay-TV'.
- 6 M Kidman, 'Pay TV battle is Over and Won says Optus Chief as He Quits', *Sydney Morning Herald*, 20 Sept. 1996.
- 7 K Morgan, 'Telstra sell off Outfoxed by Murdoch', *Australian Rationalist*, no. 39, Nov. 1995-Feb. 1996, pp. 17-24.
- 8 Kerry Packer's son and head of PBL.
- 9 C P Pierce, 'Master Of The Universe', *GQ Magazine*, vol. 65, no. 4, Apr. 1995, pp. 180-7.

- 10 M Phillips and B Hutchins, 'Issues in the Technicolour Sports Process: A Brief History of Rugby League and Television in Australia', unpub. paper, 1995, pp. 18-23.
- 11 J Nauright and M Phillips, 'A Fair Go For the Fans?: Super Leagues, Sports Ownership and Fans In Australia', *Sports Marketing Quarterly*, (forthcoming), 1996.
- 12 For discussion of the industrial relations dimensions of rugby league: B Dabscheck, 'Rugby League and the Union Game', *Industrial Relations*, vol. 35, no. 2, 1993, pp. 242-73.
- 13 See G Haigh, *The Cricket War*, Text Publishing, Melbourne, 1993.
- 14 See J Maguire, 'Globalization, Sport Development, and the Media/Sport Production Complex', *Sport Science Review*, vol. 2, no. 1, 1993, pp. 29-47; S Cunningham and E Jacka, *Australian Television and International Mediascapes*, CUP, Melbourne, 1996, pp. 3-24..
- 15 J Bale and J Maguire, *The Global Sports Arena: Athletic Talent Migration in an Interdependent World*, Frank Cass, London, 1994.
- 16 D Rowe and G Lawrence, 'Beyond National Sport: Sociology, History and Postmodernity', *Sporting Traditions*, vol. 12, no. 2, 1996, p. 2.
- 17 D Rowe, G Lawrence, T Miller and J McKay, 'Global Sport? Core Concern and Peripheral Vision', *Media, Culture and Society*, vol. 16, no. 4, 1994, p. 663.
- 18 See G Jarvie and J Maguire, *Sport and Leisure in Social Thought*, Routledge, London, pp. 230-63.
- 19 Rowe, Lawrence, Miller, and McKay., 'Global Sport?'; p. 663.
- 20 Maguire, 'Globalization', pp. 42-3.
- 21 A similar letter appeared in the *Sydney Morning Herald* written by four ARL loyal ex-rugby league internationals, known as 'The Immortals', condemning recently retired Australian rugby league captain, Mal Meninga, for siding with Super League and his ensuing public comments.
- 22 J Nauright, 'Nostalgia and the Use of the Sporting Past in Periods of Hegemonic Crisis', unpub. paper, NASSH Conference, Long Beach, 26-29 May 1995, p. 2.
- 23 C Rojek, *Decentring Leisure: Rethinking Leisure Theory*, Sage, London, 1995, p. 118.
- 24 J Nauright, 'Reclaiming Old and Forgotten Heroes: Nostalgia, Rugby and Identity in New Zealand', *Sporting Traditions*, vol. 10, no. 2, 1994, p. 138.
- 25 Political communication 'refers to any exchange of symbols or messages that to a significant extent have been shaped by, or have consequences for, the functioning of political systems'. R G Meadow, *Politics as Communication*, Ablex, New Jersey, 1980, p. 4.
- 26 See D Rowe, 'That Misery of Stringer's Cliches': Sports Writing', *Cultural Studies*, vol. 5, no. 1, 1991) pp. 77-90.