

# 'Like the roars of the breakers on a rockbound coast'



Unknown photographer  
*Maori Footballers in Sydney*  
reproduced from *The Sydney Mail and New South Wales Advertiser*, 10 June 1908  
(Sydney: John Fairfax and Sons, 1908)  
Newspapers and Microforms  
Collection  
NX 182

Ian Warden describes how roaring fans welcomed Rugby League to Australia in 1908

Rugby League, the greatest game of all for millions of Australians today and a scintillatingly fast and gladiatorially poetic spectacle, thrilled its first Australian spectators 100 years ago in Sydney.

In 1908's first official season of club competition, the new sport had an evangelistic supporter in 'Scrum', the sportswriter of *The Sydney Sportsman*. His prose was sometimes purple and excited but then for a football-besotted citizen like Scrum there was a lot to be excited about. Here was a novel species of football and one using spectacle-stimulating changes to Rugby Union's rules.

Scrum's bliss knew no bounds when he reported the 1908 season's League-promoting three-match series in Sydney between the visiting All Blacks from New Zealand (a Rugby League team in spite of the modern association of All Blacks with Rugby Union) and the All Blues of New

South Wales. 'The three past matches between All Black and All Blue,' he rejoiced, 'bring home the conclusion with the force of a mule kick that League football has caught on with the public like hot cakes.'

For Scrum all of the 'weary' and 'unattractive and time wasting' things about the Union code had been replaced by League, a game 'that moves with cinematograph swiftness'.

Saturday's match was something worth journeying a long way to witness. The spectators [an estimated 20 000 fans went to the match at the Agricultural Ground] were almost mad with excitement ... the ever recurring cheers and shouts of the crowd sounded like the roars of the breakers on a rockbound coast. League football has come ... it has been seen, and it has conquered.

This same match series was important to the conversion of the 'Sporting Notions' columnist in *The Bulletin*. He'd been for months, as the new code's debut approached, the press's leading scoffer, doomsayer and scourge of the heresy of professionalism. But after attending one of the three All Blacks matches he reported that:

the N.S.W. Rugby League scored a great advertisement on Saturday last in the match against the so-called All Blacks ... A fast, open game, full of reckless dash ... made a spectacle that drove people wild with excitement.

A fine wordsmith, the columnist still struggled, in the way today's tennis writers struggle when reporting the feats of tennis champion Roger Federer, to find words to describe Dally Messenger's fabulous contribution to the home team's victory. Wherever the ball is, 'Messenger will appear suddenly, like the ghost at the banquet ... to snatch the leather', the columnist gushed.

League's inaugural season of 1908 was a bold and swaggering beginning. Lots happened. As well as the first season of club competition beginning with the nine sides of Balmain, Cumberland, Eastern Suburbs, Glebe, Newcastle, Newtown, North Sydney, South Sydney and Western Suburbs, there was the aforementioned All Blacks visit and then a visit by a Maori team. These were followed by the first ever Australian Rugby League touring team, the Kangaroos, adorned by Dally Messenger, sailing to Britain for a long tour.

In Sydney in 1908, after the initial scoffings by *The Bulletin*, the press was either enthusiastic about or intrigued by the infant code. The *Australian Star* saw a commercial opportunity. 'Go to League Football—Watch "The Star";' the paper urged its readers.

Your Face May Be Circled. 'The Star' and the Rugby Football League have hit the popular taste with their great scheme of Photo Awards. Photos are taken of the crowd at every first grade Rugby League Match, and in each



Wednesday's 'Star' they are reproduced. A face in each of four pictures is circled, and the owner of it is entitled to 10 shillings ... Call in at the 'Star' office and ask the Accountant for your 10s. Go To League Football—Watch 'The Star'.

Today these editions of that newspaper (available in the National Library of Australia's collection) provide a priceless gallery of 1908 Sydney sports fans. How poignant that gallery is. For living football fans of 2008, here are our brothers and sisters in popular culture of a century ago. We're sure we've felt the very same things that thrilled them. Like them, we've known the ambience of the winter afternoons at the football on days like the one Scrum described when the third All Blues played the All Blacks. It was, he reported:

a glorious day of blue sky and flashing sunlight with just a cool kiss in the faint breeze, hinting more of the early Spring than Winter.

above:  
Unknown photographer  
*Australian Team (Kangaroos)*  
reproduced from *Australian Tour Souvenir 1908 Et 1909*  
(Manchester: R. Scott & Co., 1908)  
Ephemera Collection

below left:  
Unknown photographer  
*From the Crowd at the Glebe Versus Newtown Match Comes a Lucky Winner of 10 Shillings*  
reproduced from *The Australian Star*, 29 April 1908  
(Sydney: Arthur Edward Smyth, 1908)  
Newspapers and Microforms Collection  
NX 178



All living Australian footie fans have been kissed by this same breeze that kissed our late brothers and sisters in the winter of 1908.

What was this League football? League had its origins in the industrial north of England in the early 1890s. Rugby Union had begun in England's south in 1871 and was soon adopted in the north and yet the sorts of chaps (posh and inflexibly sure



above:  
Unknown photographer  
James J. Giltinan, Promotor and  
Manager  
reproduced from *Australian  
Tour Souvenir 1908 Et 1909*  
(Manchester: R. Scott & Co.,  
1908)  
Ephemera Collection

below:  
'ZIF'  
*An Awful Threat*  
reproduced from *The Sydney  
Sportsman*, 1 April 1908  
(Sydney: John Norton, 1908)  
Newspapers and Microforms  
Collection  
mfm NX 689

that to be paid to play sport was unEnglish) who played and watched the sport in the south were a class apart from the working-class northern lads. For the southern toffs the loss of a Saturday morning's income while being away from work travelling to a match was of no consequence. But in the north the men were poorer and needed their Saturday morning work, often down a coal mine.

The Northern Union began to agitate for the right to pay its players, not something so outrageous as wages but just some compensation for the loss of pay when they couldn't work on a Saturday morning. The ruling body, the English Rugby Union, refused to agree to this wickedness. Frustrated northern clubs met in November 1894 and, 10 months later, the first games of the new Northern Rugby Football Union were played with players paid six shillings a day for genuine losses of work time.

By 1906, lots of the best players in the north were openly paid and were playing an amended, more crowd-pleasing version of the game. This was what we know now as Rugby League. It used only 13 players instead of Rugby Union's 15 and

dispensed with flow-interrupting Rugby Union paraphernalia like line outs and kicking into touch on the full and endless scrimmaging. In the 1906-1907 season of this new and distinct code of Northern Union football in England, over 800 points were scored in the first two weeks of the competition. All this spectator-tickling eventfulness vindicated what the northern rebels had done.

Sydney and New South Wales soon

followed suit and for some of the same reasons. In August 1907 in Sydney when James Giltinan (who has some claim to be 'the father' of Rugby League in Australia) and former cricketing great Victor Trumper went to see Dally Messenger's formidable mother to urge her to allow her iconic son to abandon Rugby Union for the proposed League, they took with them some harrowing stories of the pitilessness of Rugby Union's officialdom. Nothing was being done to assist players who'd been unable to work and had lost wages because of injuries suffered playing Rugby Union. The two men told Mrs Annie Messenger that the new, professional code they were daring to dream of would compensate men for hardships like these. Mrs Messenger is said to have discussed these things with them for two hours before agreeing that, yes, her fabled boy would play League. Did Giltinan and Trumper break into a jig of joy at that moment? Without Dally Messenger the new League code might have struggled but with him it had a gorgeous credibility.

By the time that the first League competition got underway in April 20 1908 (with Dally Messenger playing for Eastern Suburbs), every first grade player in the seven-team competition was paid something and Scrum delighted in saying in *The Sydney Sportsman* that the rivalry between the League and Union forces was 'The Pros [professionals] versus the Prigs'.

Cartoonists had a lot of fun at the expense of the 'Prigs' and, on 1 April 1908, *The Sydney Sportsman* published a suite of cartoons in which the fat, cigar-smoking, champagne-swilling prigs running Union treated their impoverished amateur players like scum.

Late in this inaugural season (well before the Grand Final of August 29, 1908) the 34-member Kangaroos team steamed for Britain on the SS *Macedonia*. One of the National Library of Australia's delights is a flimsy souvenir program published in England for sale at matches during the tour. Its elaborate cover features a kangaroo and an emu flanking a portrait, uncaptioned, of a big-chinned man whose face needed no caption because this was the revered Dally 'The Master' Messenger.

The same program contains, inside, a photograph of the Australians, taken just before the kick-off at one of the tour





Did the players rehearse this performance during the long sea voyage? We can't be sure but something we do know about the voyage, because the Sydney sporting newspaper *The Referee* had a correspondent on board who reported it, is that tour manager James Giltinan, worried about his athletes becoming plump during the inactive weeks at sea, hit upon the brilliant idea of making these professionals take turns to shovel coal into the furnaces of the *Macedonia*.

Today, in this the code's centenary year, the footballing successors of those sweating shovellers of 1908 are pampered, revered celebrities and no-one would dare ask them to do anything so menial and working-class.

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left:  
Cover, featuring Dally Messenger, of *Australian Tour Souvenir 1908 & 1909* (Manchester: R. Scott & Co., 1908)  
Ephemera Collection

below left:  
Unknown photographer  
*War Cry—Taken at Salford Ground*  
reproduced from *Australian Tour Souvenir 1908 & 1909* (Manchester: R. Scott & Co., 1908)  
Ephemera Collection

matches, showing them doing the dance that accompanied their intimidating war cry. It was allegedly based on the blood-curdling chant of a ferocious Aboriginal tribe from Stradbroke Island in Queensland. The souvenir program published a phonetic version of what it was the Australians chanted in an Aboriginal tongue. A translation into English followed, revealing it to be full of menace and rage and sentiments like 'The kangaroo is dangerous when at bay. Come on, come on, to death!'

Visit the exhibition, *League of Legends: 100 years of Rugby League in Australia*, at the National Museum of Australia. Explore the history of the game, see iconic trophies and treasures, learn about changes in technology and hear from players and fans of the game.

**8 March 2008 – 11 May 2008**  
**Temporary Exhibition Gallery**  
**National Museum of Australia**

