



Rugby league: *National Rugby League and Australian Rugby League*

'Ours is a sport that is about working together and not one that tolerates racism or discrimination of any type'.¹

Rugby league is one of the most popular team sports played in Australia. 'League', as it is commonly known, is often seen as a 'working man's sport' and has grown to become one of Australia's pre-eminent sports since stepping out of the shadow of its older brother – rugby union – over a hundred years ago.

The working man's game

Rugby league came into being when clubs in the north of England split from the Rugby Football Union in 1895. A class divide opened up as working-class clubs in the north, consisting mostly of miners, rebelled against the rich 'gentleman clubs' of the south, who thought it vulgar to pay participants to play.

So the north went its own way. Teams were reduced from 15 to 13 players and the play-the-ball rule was introduced to lessen the need for scrums and to replace rugby union's scrappy rucks and mauls (where the ball often disappeared from view for minutes on end).² This new game became known as rugby league.

These and other changes made rugby league the far more popular code in England among spectators and players alike. The increased gate-money allowed rugby league clubs to pay benefits to the footballers who the crowds had come to support.³

Rugby league was first played in Australia in 1908, when existing rugby clubs in New South Wales adopted the rules of England's 'northern union' game. South Sydney played the first game on 21 March, with a selection match of 'Possibles' vs 'Probables' for the coming season. The following month, eight clubs took part in the first round of the premiership: Balmain, Eastern Suburbs, Glebe, Newtown, Newcastle, North Sydney, South Sydney and Western Suburbs. Cumberland debuted in the next round.⁴

Rugby league's star was definitely on the rise. However for a short time, rugby union rode a wave of popularity, brought about by the arrival of the brilliant Dally Messenger. But very soon, men like Messenger started to become disgruntled at union and looked towards joining the professional rugby league (the NSW Rugby League).

The formation of rugby league, and Messenger's decision to join the new code prevented Australian rules from gaining hold of Sydney's vast working-class population and swamping rugby union.⁵

At the end of the 1908 season, both the first Kangaroos (league) and Wallabies (union) toured Great Britain, but shortly after their return to Australia in 1909, more than half the Wallabies accepted contract offers to join rugby league.

From 1910 onwards, rugby league has held its place as the premier winter sport of NSW and Queensland, and maintained a strong following in New Zealand. The NSWRL club competition evolved into a national competition in the 1990s, and became the National Rugby League (NRL) in 1998. The NRL competition spans the traditional league areas of NSW, Queensland and New Zealand, as well as Victoria (following the introduction of the Melbourne Storm).

2007 will mark the 100th season of the premiership, with the following year being the code's centenary as a professional sport in Australia and New Zealand.⁶

National Rugby League (NRL)

The National Rugby League (NRL) was formed in 1998, under a partnership arrangement between the Australian Rugby League (ARL) and News Ltd, to administer the national competition.

The NRL markets the Telstra Premiership on behalf of the clubs, and organizes the competition draw, finals matches and grand final. In association with the ARL, the NRL also promotes representative matches, the World Sevens and Australian internationals. The NRL also provides referees for the matches and ensures judiciary procedures are in place.

The 15 clubs in the Telstra Premiership (16 clubs in 2007 with the inclusion of the Gold Coast Titans) each have their own CEOs and organisational structure, although they are bound to the NRL by club agreements and a common set of rules.

Once the draw is finalised by the NRL, and match days and times are allocated, each of the NRL clubs control all aspects of their individual home games. All game day revenue from these matches is controlled by the individual NRL club.⁷

The sport's national premiership has had a golden run in the last few years; with a 27 per cent rise in crowds between 2003 and 2005. In 2005 crowds rose to an average of 16,466 for each premiership fixture and 187,374 spectators watched the three State of Origin games.⁸

Television ratings are just as strong. In Sydney and Brisbane, the 2005 grand final was each city's most watched program for the year, with ratings of 1.188 million and 778,000 viewers respectively.⁹

Australian Rugby League (ARL)

The Australian Rugby League (ARL) is the sport's governing body in Australia. It is responsible for the national team (the Kangaroos), the annual State of Origin series between Queensland and NSW, other representative matches, all international competition, the Australian Institute of Sport Rugby League Program, the Arrive Alive Cup (the premier competition in schoolboy rugby league) and junior development.

The ARL comprises state associations in Victoria, South Australia, Northern Territory, Western Australia, and Tasmania. However, the largest associations are the NSW Rugby League (which looks after the NSW State of Origin Team, Premier League, Jim Beam Cup,

NSW junior and senior club competitions, NSW development programs and the NSWRL Academy); the NSW Country Rugby League (which administers country and regional competition in NSW); and the Queensland Rugby League (which look after the Queensland State of Origin Team, State Cup, Queensland club and district competitions and Queensland-based development).

Australia's premier code?

Rugby league is the dominant code of football in two of Australia's most populous states – New South Wales and Queensland. However, the nation-wide participation level of the sport has been trailing Australian rules and soccer in recent years.¹⁰

According to an Australian Sports Commission survey in 2004, a total of 172,000 Australians aged 15 years and over participated in rugby league – an increase on 2002 (151,000) and 2001 (165,000). New South Wales and Queensland account for almost 85% (145,300) of this total; 85,800 from NSW and 59,500 from QLD. The vast majority of participants are male (95% or 164,000).¹¹

An Australian Bureau of Statistics sample survey in 2003 found 76,200 children participated in rugby league, or 5.6 per cent of all children in the country. This represents a decrease of 16,200 child participants from 2000 when this information was previously surveyed.¹² Actual registration numbers indicate that there has been a substantive increase since 2003 – rising from 90,976 in that year to 108,959 in 2005, representing a net increase of 19 per cent.¹³

The ARL does conduct an annual census on participation in rugby league, but these figures do not include the number of Indigenous players or those from a Culturally or Linguistically Diverse (CALD) background. The introduction of LeagueNet in 2007 will provide access to this information.

Game development

ARL Development is a non-profit company formed by the ARL and NRL to develop the grassroots of the sport, from introductory level up to the age of 18 years. It administers a coordinated national development and participation program, with a team of more than 60 National Development Officers engaged in full-time development through schools and coaching clinics around the country.

The development officers are highly trained and qualified in both rugby league coaching and dealing with children, and are committed to working in conjunction with teachers to help promote healthy, active lifestyles amongst school-aged children through rugby league.

The officers work within the development framework established by clubs and state leagues to augment existing programs and establish new development initiatives.

National Development Plan

In 2002, the ARL Foundation designed a National Development Plan for rugby league (2003–05) to increase the status of the game and continue its growth at all levels. The plan aimed to identify all the development needs of the sport in relation to participation growth and quality of services, and the bodies involved in the design and delivery of development

programs. The ARL, the ARL Foundation, all state leagues, all junior competitions organisers and volunteers contributed to the plan.

Some of the development plan initiatives included:

- the development of an online communication system for the game (LeagueNet)
- the introduction of a national Codes of Conduct Scheme for junior clubs
- growth strategy programs and
- the introduction of new educational resources.¹⁴

Many of these plans have been achieved and are now being implemented.

Junior development

Smaller Steps is part of the Australian Sports Commission's (ASC's) Targeted Sports Participation Growth Program, which was developed to give junior competitions across Australia a kick-start. There are four programs under *Smaller Steps*: the flagship *Kids to Kangaroos* program; *Joey League*, run in primary schools as a tackle or tag program; the *Legends of League* program, where gala days are organised with the support and participation of a former or current league player; and *League Sevens*, aimed at high school students.

Telstra Kids to Kangaroos program

Telstra *Kids to Kangaroos* is the successful skills-based rugby league program for boys and girls aged 5 to 12 years. It introduces children and parents to the game and ensures they have a positive experience.

The program is used as a recruitment tool for schools and clubs – over 35,000 children participated in the program from 2003 to 2005, with the ARL Development aiming to draw another 20,000 participants during 2006.¹⁵ It involves three hours of coaching with a qualified coach and developing skills such as: catching, passing, scoring tries, kicking, tagging activities, tackling bags and modified games.

In schools programs

Joey League is a six-week round-robin competition that introduces students aged 9–10 years to the game. It includes skills sessions during the first two rounds. Sevens (boys) and League Tag (girls) are a fun and exciting way of learning how to play the game. The competition is primarily for those students who do not participate in regular rugby league.

Legends of League

The *Legends of League* competition is designed to provide a friendly environment for boys and girls (League Tag) aged 11–13 years. Students represent their school in a structured competition which enables them to demonstrate their skills at a competitive level. The Legends competition culminates in a finals day in each state.

Modified games

Because young players are still relatively unsuited – physically, mentally, emotionally or skillfully – to the full rigors of the international laws of rugby league, the game has been modified by ARL Development to suit young, developing age groups. Modified games provide an ‘interim period’ for the introduction of elementary skills and strategies, and takes the form of ‘Mini’ and ‘Mod’ League.

Mini league

‘Mini’ League is designed for children aged 6–9 years old. There are 6–8 players on the field and all matches are played over three 10-minute periods.

The ‘mini’ game has its own ‘mini’ ball and is played on a smaller field. Possession is retained for a period of four tackles and when a tackle is being affected no contact is permitted above the armpits.

The use of expletives and/or threatening or denigrating language is not tolerated. Abusive/foul words, sledging and the use of direct or indirect comments which are threatening or belittling to a teammate, an opponent, the referee, an official, or a spectator have no place in any match environment. Any occurrence of this behaviour is regarded as serious misconduct and dealt with accordingly by the referee.¹⁶

All players receive a copy of the ARL Code of Conduct, with game day announcements used as an additional education/awareness strategy.

Mod League

‘Mod’ League is designed to suit 10–12 year olds (with an option for nine year olds). It features a format which acknowledges young players’ movement towards adolescence and helps prepare players for the adult game. The game features:

- 2x20 minute halves
- maximum number of players per team on the field at once is eleven at ages 9, 10, 11 and thirteen at age 12
- six tackles (below armpits)
- Code of Conduct and safe play code enforced and
- nationally accredited coaches, referees and first aid officers.¹⁷

From 2007, each child who enrolls in *Kids to Kangaroos* will be given an ARL ID registration number to use when signing on with a club, so the ARL can track the transfer from this program to club participation.¹⁸

Encouraging recruitment

There are a range of recruitment initiatives undertaken at the national, state, local and club level.

The *Club Recruitment Program* is a 90-minute skills-based program designed to teach beginners the basics of the game. New recruits learn catching, passing, kicking and tackling skills. Club

Recruitment Clinics are run by local Junior Rugby League Associations, so young people can get to meet club coaches and find out about training times, uniforms and how they can join up to play 'Mini' or 'Mod' League.

Active After-school Communities (AASC) is an after school hours sports program developed by the Australian Sports Commission that aims to improve the health and well being of Australia's primary school aged children through structured physical activity. ARL Development supports this national initiative through their *LeagueFun* program. *LeagueFun* is a coaching resource that introduces participants to the basic skills of rugby league in a safe and enjoyable environment.

The ARL and Indigenous players

Indigenous players have been associated with rugby league almost since its inception. The first Indigenous player to play the game was George Green, who played for Eastern Suburbs from 1909–11 and North Sydney from 1912–22, except for a year with Newtown in 1917. Green went on to coach North Sydney. The first Aboriginal footballer to tour overseas was Glen Crouch who played 11 games for Queensland in a New Zealand tour in 1925.¹⁹

Today Indigenous players are part of every NRL club and include household names such as: Greg Inglis, Dean Widders, Daniel Wagon, David Peachey, Sam Thaiday, Milton Thaiday, Justin Hodges, Nathan Merrit, Matt Bowen, Brenton Bowen, Jonathan Thurston, George Rose and Ty Williams to name a few. There was an 11% participation rate of Indigenous players in NRL starting line-ups in 2006.²⁰

The fact that there are so many Indigenous players in the NRL is very satisfying for ARL Indigenous Development Manager and former St George winger Ricky Walford. However, playing at the elite level is just one of the outcomes Walford seeks to achieve through the Indigenous Sport Program.

"The idea is to use league as a way of addressing some of the serious problems that many communities face," said Walford. "We've got to focus on further developing our youth and equipping them with the necessary 'tools of life'.

"Rugby league can be a great source of encouragement. It's all about maintaining our cultural identity through the development of healthy, team-based activities that involve the whole community and help raise our standard of living."²¹

The ARL also continues to work with a number of existing organisations to develop Indigenous participation in the game. These include the various state and territory Departments of Sport and Recreation, NSW Aboriginal Land Councils (both at a state and local level), the Department of Communication, Information, Technology and the Arts (DCITA), as well as other stakeholders throughout the country.

In fact, in May this year the National Rugby League Chief Executives received a presentation from the Minister for Families, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs, Mal Brough, on the role of rugby league in Indigenous communities. The NRL clubs and the federal Government are keen to continue working with Indigenous communities and have agreed to explore further options.

Indigenous Sport Programs

The ARL has developed partnerships with the NSWCRRL, NSWRL, QRL and the other state bodies to deliver Indigenous Sport Programs (ISP). The ISP has allowed rugby league to broaden its base while also bringing many benefits to the Indigenous communities involved.

Following is an overview of the ISPs in each state and territory in the 2004–05 season.

New South Wales

The ISP rugby league development programs in NSW were spread across the state. The success of the Interstate NSW vs QLD Indigenous Youth U/16's concept generated tremendous support from within the Indigenous community and continues to attract interest from all quarters.

Maintenance and sustainability of the Barwon Darling (Far West) Rugby League Competition continues to have positive ramifications for the townships and surrounding communities of Bourke, Brewarrina, Goodooga, Lightning Ridge, Walgett, Collarenebri and Enngonia.

The NSWRL maintains a strong working relationship with the ARL Development Officers, Country Rugby League Development Officers, the NSW Department of Tourism, Sport and Recreation's Western Region Office to continue sustained development in this region.²²

Queensland

The ISP's focus in Queensland during the 2005 season centred on developing the game and assisting remote and isolated communities, particularly those in the Central West and the Gulf regions of Far-North Queensland.

Communities such as Bedourie, Boulia, Doomadgee, Mornington Island, Normanton, Croydon and Kowanyama received assistance from the QRL-based project, which has created opportunities for people to access rugby league at all levels.²³

Victoria

A change in management has seen Victoria's Indigenous Rugby League Development Program take a new direction. Under the guidance of a new management team, the Victorian Rugby League (VRL) has targeted a number of communities across the state for a series of coaching, skills and training development clinics. These activities will be delivered on a group network basis utilising the expertise of the VRL, ARLD and other key service providers.²⁴

Northern Territory

The ISP Program has been implemented from September 2005 and will continue throughout the 2006 season. The ISP/ARL Indigenous Rugby League Development Program will continue to focus on further development through the NT school system, as well as re-current visits to communities.²⁵

South Australia

Term two in 2005 at Coober Pedy Area School was a rugby league term. As a follow up to 2004's popular coaching clinics, Rugby League SA brought trainees to the school to run more clinics, which were followed by tag and tackle games at the town oval. Rugby League SA also worked with the open rugby league team that travelled to Port Lincoln.²⁶

Western Australia

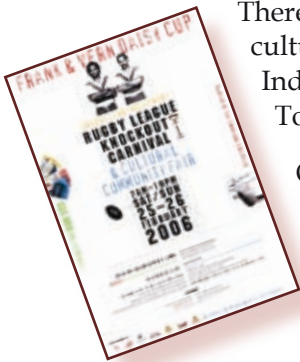
The Western Australian Rugby League (WARL) Indigenous Program for 2005 has continued its focus on developing targeted areas within the Perth metropolitan and regional WA areas.

The WARL Development team was very active within the primary school system during 2005, focussing on areas with a high Indigenous population. Rugby league skills clinics were conducted in a number of schools in these areas, along with rugby league carnivals and gala days.

Rugby league was also accepted as a new sport within several PSSA districts during 2005, following the WARL's primary school program. The Maguire District is one such area, with eight schools being involved in rugby league clinics and carnivals in 2005. The Maguire District has a large Indigenous population in suburbs such as Lockridge, Beechboro, Upper Swan, Midvale and Midland.²⁷

Celebration of Indigenous culture

There are a range of rugby league events held throughout the year to celebrate Indigenous culture. These include the 2006 Frank and Vern Daisy Cup, the first annual Queensland Indigenous Rugby League Knockout Carnival and Cultural Community Fair held in Townsville (Queensland) in February.



Other popular events include the annual NSW Rugby League Knockout - one of the biggest Indigenous gatherings in the country - and the annual David Peachey Foundation Aboriginal Rugby League Carnival held in Dubbo (NSW), between 30 September and 2 October in 2006. The Carnival is sponsored by the Foundation, which was originally set up to help young people in the Dubbo region, and has now grown to support Indigenous communities around Australia. The Foundation also supports talented young Indigenous Australians to achieve their best in their chosen sport by providing support mechanisms and scholarships.

But perhaps the biggest celebration of the contribution of Indigenous players to the game of rugby league is the annual celebration of NAIDOC Week, which many NRL clubs support through a range of activities and events.

Dean Widders – Indigenous role model

“In a way, in rugby league, a lot of the people look at Indigenous players as being unreliable and not hard trainers. So I really make an effort to be really reliable, to be on time all the time, to turn up to things early, put up my hand to do extra things all the time and also to make sure I train harder than anyone else at the club.

“I have seen the perception of Indigenous players at my club change since I have arrived. So I think I am doing a good job there. I find it really important to not fall into the stereotype and to show that we can do things as much as anyone else can.

“It is disappointing that things are this way. But again, if I fold my hands and say it is unfair, I will only be the one going backwards – and so I pull my head in and deal with it. I think if people have got disadvantages you don’t give into it. You rise above it.”²⁸

From the quote above it is easy to see why former Parramatta Eel and current South Sydney player Dean Widders is a high achiever and positive role model for Indigenous players and communities.

Widders has held several significant representative roles connected with his sports career, including Ambassador and Director for the National Aboriginal Sporting Corporation of Australia, Australia Day Ambassador for Parramatta and was recently appointed to the federal Government’s National Indigenous Council (NIC). He was also a driving force behind the Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission’s (HREOC) *‘Voices of Australia’* project, encouraging other NRL stars to share their stories and experiences of diversity.

Widders has been a recipient of rugby league’s Ken Stephen Medal, Father Chris Riley’s Shine Day Award and the Bounce Back Foundation’s Community Ambassador of the Year Award. He has helped to inspire peoples’ sporting ambitions and encourages literacy among Indigenous youth as a patron of the Books in Homes Programme.

Leadership from recognised sporting identities such as Widders can have a very important influence on Indigenous communities where sporting personalities are held in high regard.

The Polynesian expansion

The biggest influence on Australia’s rugby codes in recent times has been the influx of Pacific Islanders, with many NRL teams now dominated by players from Tonga, Fiji, Samoa and New Zealand.

NSWRL statistics suggest Islanders are also dominating the junior Jersey Flegg and SG Ball competitions – the stepping stones to an NRL career.

This represents a fundamental shift in the way these century-old games have been played in Australia. Rugby league and rugby union once attracted players with English, Irish and Aboriginal backgrounds. Later, they attracted players whose parents and grandparents came from Lebanon, Italy, Greece and Malta. Now Islanders are beginning to dominate.²⁹

At a junior level, the ARL has taken this into consideration and has been trialing weight and age (restricted) football competitions to enable players who don’t want to play against larger, heavier players to still participate in the game in a restricted team.

As the ‘Polynesian expansion’ of rugby league continues, the code has an important role to ensure that the wider rugby league community accepts and respects players from different races and cultures. Hopefully, the players will be spared the racist taunts that Olsen Filipaina allegedly suffered when he joined the Balmain Tigers in 1980.

“There were very few Polynesians playing in the Winfield Cup and the way people treated me was unbelievable,” Filipaina said recently. “Racial sledging was on every week. I was called a black bastard, a nigger and had cans thrown at me. It ruined rugby league for me.”³⁰

But with new Codes of Conduct policies firmly entrenched in the game and a no-tolerance policy for any racist behaviour, the experience for players these days should be remarkably different.

Harmony Day and league

The NRL joined the Australian Government's Harmony Day program as an official partner in 2006, promoting the benefits of cultural diversity and sending a clear message against racism.

They dedicated the 17 March clash between the Bulldogs and Wests Tigers at Telstra Stadium as league's Harmony Day game, which was played in front of a near record crowd of 32,578 fans.

The Harmony Day match paid tribute to the 73 different countries represented by first or second generation Australian families in the Telstra Premiership, the Premier League and junior representative teams. In fact, the first 'cultural map' of the competitions shows that more than 40 per cent of players have either a Pacific Islander or Aboriginal and Torres Straight Islander background.³¹

Half-time entertainment at the match celebrated the diversity of these backgrounds, NRL referees wore orange and black uniforms in keeping with Harmony Day colours and ARL development officers conducted educational events in schools during the week.

A special feature was played on the big screens at all games across the weekend with leading players: Andrew Johns, Willie Mason, Dean Widders, Benji Marshall, Scott Prince and Anthony Minichiello all speaking about their backgrounds and what it means to them to live in Australia.

Wests Tigers star Benji Marshall says the great diversity in backgrounds is something to celebrate: "We're a bunch of blokes who've come together and become brothers".³²

His team-mate Robbie Farah, who received a special Australia Day Award from the United Lebanese Association for services on and off the field and was named Australian Lebanese Sportsman of the Year in 2005, says there are many lessons to be learned from the acceptance shown in rugby league for all cultures.

"It helps to hear about other people, other cultures. The only way to tolerate or appreciate other cultures is to learn about them," said Farah.³³

On Harmony Day, 21 March, the NRL also hosted a skills clinic for more than 300 children from different racial backgrounds at Telstra Stadium.

NRL Chief Executive David Gallop said: "From Eric Simms to Dr George Peponis and the likes of Fui Fui Moi Moi, rugby league has a long and proud history of bringing people together from many different backgrounds".

"Ours is a sport that is about working together and not one that tolerates racism or discrimination of any type. The NRL is extremely proud to be a partner in the 'Harmony Day' project as we seek to promote respect and goodwill towards Australians of all backgrounds."³⁴

Voices of Australia

The National Rugby League (NRL) joined forces with the Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission to tackle racism head on through their support for 'Voices of Australia' – a project to celebrate the 30th anniversary of the Racial Discrimination Act.

The aim of 'Voices of Australia' is to encourage greater understanding and friendship between people of different backgrounds through sharing the personal stories.

At the launch of the project, federal Race Discrimination Commissioner Tom Calma said: "It is great to have the support of the NRL and their star players for this project. I'm sure that their stories will inspire fans to share their own stories of celebrating diversity and living together in contemporary Australia.

"The NRL has players from a diverse range of nationalities, cultures and religions. By celebrating what we have in common, and by respecting our differences, we can break down barriers and forge life-long friendships on and off the playing field."³⁵

NRL Chief Executive David Gallop said: "This is an important project for rugby league and something we're very passionate about. We're privileged to have players and supporters from a variety of backgrounds and we'll continue to work on encouraging understanding and acceptance".³⁶

NRL stars from diverse cultural backgrounds including: Dean Widders (Parramatta Eels), Darren Lockyer and Petero Civoniceva (Brisbane Broncos), Steve Price (New Zealand Warriors), Hazem El Masri (Canterbury Bulldogs), Alex Chan (Melbourne Storm), Anthony Minichiello (Sydney City Roosters) and Matt Bowen (North Queensland Cowboys) share their real life stories. (These stories are available at http://www.humanrights.gov.au/voices/#nrl_stories). NRL players were also featured in a Voices of Australia.

HREOC has produced and distributed more than 30,000 copies of the Voices of Australia magazine and audio CD to community groups, libraries, local councils, religious groups, government agencies and other groups around the country.³⁷



El Masri and Price: One Voice

The likelihood of a young Muslim boy growing up in Tripoli, Lebanon crossing paths with a kid running around the footy fields of Toowoomba in country Queensland is fairly remote.

In the case of Bulldogs star Hazem El Masri and Warriors captain Steve Price, not only did this occur, but they have developed a life-long friendship through the most unexpected of circumstances.

"Hazem is one of my best mates," Price said. "He opened up my eyes to many things, from appreciating the traditional Lebanese food prepared by his wife to being able to accept and admire his commitment to the Muslim faith."

Price's openness to the multicultural experiences provided throughout his time at the Bulldogs can be traced to his upbringing in country Toowoomba. Price recalled one of his best mates as a youngster was Greg Suey, an Aboriginal from a large extended family, who was also a talented footballer.

“We used to do everything together,” he said. “His family gave me an appreciation of Aboriginal culture and enabled me to realise at a young age that every community and culture is made up of individuals.”

Price took these values to the Bulldogs and quickly became a favourite with the army of loyal fans who shared his passion for the blue and white jersey.

“In the environment the world is in it could have been difficult but with Hazem our wires have never crossed. I accept and admire his dedication to his faith and the immense discipline he shows at all times,” said Price.

“Ramadan falls during off-season training and Hazem’s vigilance in terms of his fasting and prayer is an example to us all. His abstinence from alcohol even extends to him not passing on gifts he might receive in case it appears he endorses its consumption.”

When El Masri was growing up his parents and his family’s religious beliefs moulded the person whom the fans adore as ‘El Magic’. “My parents taught me to be well-mannered and to respect other people and that I had to earn the respect of others. It is important that you develop a work ethic that people can relate to and respect and then hopefully they will respect your values as well,” he said.

Hazem believes that ignorance is the cause of most forms of racism and that his best response is to let his actions speak for him. “You can’t blame people when they act out of ignorance,” he said. “I try to lead by my actions and example and then slowly people will ask you questions.

“During Ramadan in summer we will train in 30 degree plus heat and I will be fasting as well as continuing my observance of praying five times a day,” he continued. “Slowly people will ask you questions when you can explain your beliefs and reasons,” he said. “Slowly, slowly you break down barriers.”

El Masri believes it is important to build trust in everything you do. “If you are honest and trustworthy then people will respect you,” he concluded. “My religion doesn’t allow me to be racist. We pray that people will unite not divide.”

Price concluded that he was proud, lucky and privileged to have experienced so many diverse cultures through his involvement in rugby league.³⁸

The Widders incident

In 2005, South Sydney Rabbitohs player Bryan Fletcher was stripped of the captancy, suspended, fined \$10,000 and ordered by his club to help Dean Widders work with Aboriginal children following racist comments he directed at Widders during an NRL game.

Fletcher was contrite and apologised unreservedly to his former team-mate after the incident. Widders accepted his apology.

In describing the incident Widders said: “Some people have said that I over-reacted to the situation and what is said on the field in the heat of the moment should stay on the field. I reject this because there is no situation where we should accept racial vilification. My anger and hurt would be the same no matter what the circumstance.

“I remember being at a function where two players who had played in the same team for over 10 years were part of a general discussion. The non-Aboriginal player turned to the Aboriginal player and said: ‘...it’s like when I used to call you a black so and so. You knew it was a joke’.

“The Aboriginal player, who has accepted this for years, finally had the courage to say ‘No, I didn’t’.

“They were friends, but that night was the first step in them reaching a better understanding of each other. All Australians from all backgrounds need to get to know each other better. Making a stand against racial comments is only one step in the process.”³⁹

Racism in the NRL

The NRL used the Widders incident to underline the message that racial vilification will not be accepted as a part of rugby league.

NRL Chief Executive David Gallop said: “The game drew a line in the sand on this issue years ago and players have supported that stance. Indeed it is an encouraging sign for the game that the club has got in and taken action and that the player has accepted that, rather than the NRL having to reinforce the need for action”.⁴⁰

Under NRL guidelines, if the two parties are unable to reach an amicable outcome, the league appoints a conciliator. If that fails, the dispute goes to the NRL’s appeals tribunal. The NRL sought conciliation with the federal Race Discrimination Commissioner following a case involving North Sydney’s Chris Caruana and Newcastle’s Owen Craigie in 1997, which led to Caruana being fined and dropped from first grade.

In another case in 2004, Craigie also reported his then South Sydney coach Paul Langmack on a similar charge. The player and former coach resolved their differences at a club mediation hearing. In the same year, North Queensland coach Graham Murray and fullback Matt Bowen also resolved a supposed racial issue behind closed doors.

In the eight years the NRL has had this process in place it has worked very effectively, with conciliation and consultation usually being sufficient to resolve the issue. Only one dispute has progressed to the NRL judiciary tribunal for determination. This was in 1998, when former Dragons five-eighth Anthony Mundine accused Bulldogs forward Barry Ward of calling him a “black c . . .”. Ward was fined \$10,000, which was later reduced to \$5000 on appeal.⁴¹

The extent of the problem

The Widders incident came at a bad time for the NRL – it happened during rugby league’s National Aboriginal and Islander Day of Celebration (NAIDOC) week game, where several high-profile former and current Indigenous sportsmen including Anthony Mundine, Sam Backo, Gary Ella and Kyle Van der Kuyp were in attendance.

Following the game, Widders said: “I have never encountered racism in the NRL before, but I know it still exists in sport, as it does in all parts of society”.⁴² However, other leading NRL players claimed that this was not an isolated incident.

Penrith forward Tony Puletua said: "Racism is still present in rugby league and it's time the NRL cracked down to wipe it out of the game for good".⁴³ His team-mate Rhys Wesser added: "The rugby league field is our workplace and we shouldn't have to put up with it at any level".⁴⁴

Melbourne Storm's David Kidwell said racial abuse was more prevalent in the lower grades, fuelled partly by the lack of profile in the Premier League and other junior representative competitions. "If I had a dollar for every time I've been called a black so-and-so, I'd be a rich man," Kidwell said.⁴⁵

Broncos and Test Frontrower Petro Civoniceva came to Australia from Fiji as a one year old and grew up in Redcliffe (Queensland). "I was one of the few dark kids in the area so I copped my share of name-calling. I also copped a bit of sledging in my junior career, but have never experienced any form of racism in my senior career. Over time people's attitudes have changed for the better," he said.⁴⁶

NRL Chief Operations Officer Graham Annesley insists that racial taunting is no more widespread in rugby league than other sports. "It hasn't been an ongoing issue for us. But in saying that, we have education programs in place. We aren't leaving the issue with the clubs. We take any case of racial abuse extremely seriously," Annesley said.⁷

NRL cross cultural awareness training

The NRL have been proactive in encouraging players and clubs to undertake the Australian Sports Commission's Cross Cultural Awareness training - *Understanding and Tolerance* - to learn more about Indigenous people and different cultures. All NRL clubs have undertaken this training and, in fact, they are the only professional sport where all elite teams have been required to participate.

Indigenous Sport Development Officer Billy Williams has delivered these popular courses to rugby league clubs for the past three years.

The NRL conducts the cross cultural awareness presentations as part of their annual 'Rookie Camp' and the training has also been presented to all ARL Development Officers.⁴⁸

Providing a positive sporting experience

The ARL, NRL, the state leagues and all their affiliated bodies recognise the right of each individual to participate in and enjoy their sport, and are committed to providing an environment which is free from harassment and abuse, and promotes respectful and positive behaviour and values.

The ARL also aims to provide an environment where no-one is treated unfairly, discriminated against or harassed because of their sex, marital status, pregnancy, parental status, race, age, disability, homosexuality, sexuality, transgender, religion, political belief and/or industrial activity.⁴⁹

The ARL prohibits all forms of harassment and discrimination, not only because it is against the law, but because it is extremely distressing, offensive, humiliating and/or threatening and creates an uncomfortable and unpleasant environment.⁵⁰

National Code of Conduct

ARL Development designed a National Code of Conduct in 2006 which covers all participants in the game including, players, coaches, match officials, parents/guardians and spectators.

The Code of Conduct has three general principles. They state that every participant should:

- Discourage all instances of unsportsmanlike behavior, foul or illegal play, or acts of violence, both on and off the field.
- Respect the rights, dignity and worth of every person regardless of their gender, ability/disability, sexual orientation, cultural background or religion.
- Condemn the use of recreational and performance-enhancing drugs and doping practices; their use endangers the health of players and is contrary to the concept of fair play.⁵¹



The code also states that no person attending a rugby league match shall:

- use offensive or obscene language to any player, coach, referee, touch judge, official or other spectator; and
- act in such a way as to exhibit racial intolerance, by language or other conduct, to any other person/s.⁵²

The player's code states that participants should:

- never engage in disrespectful conduct of any sort including profanity, sledging, obscene gestures, offensive remarks, trash-talking, taunting or other actions that are demeaning to other players, officials or supporters; and
- recognise that many officials, coaches and referees are volunteers who give up their time to provide their services. Treat them with the utmost respect.⁵³

Coaches are required to actively discourage foul play and/or unsportsmanlike behaviour by players. And referees and officials must: condemn all and every instance of unsportsmanlike, foul or unfair play.

Under the code, parents and spectators are required to:

- respect the referee's decisions – don't complain or argue about calls or decisions during or after a game; and
- behave! Unsportsmanlike language, harassment or aggressive behaviour will not be tolerated.⁵⁴

Every person bound by the Code of Conduct must also comply with the provisions of the NRL Anti Vilification Code, which states that they must not 'speak or otherwise act in a manner which is likely to offend, insult, humiliate, intimidate, threaten, disparage or vilify another person on the basis of that person's race, religion, colour, descent, nationality, ethnic origin, gender, sexuality, marital status, status as a parent, disability or HIV/AIDS status'.⁵⁵

The NRL also has a Code of Conduct which covers NRL matches, and the ARL Referees' Association has adopted a uniform Code of Behaviour that applies to all affiliate refereeing associations.

NSW Rugby League racial and religious vilification policy

In 1997, the NSW Rugby League (NSWRL) requested assistance from HREOC in the NSWRL's review of their racial and religious vilification policy, which HREOC's Race Discrimination Unit helped to draft.

In 2001, the HREOC President and the Operational Manager of the NSWRL signed a Memorandum of Understanding which outlined procedures for the referral to HREOC's Complaint Handling Section of complaints under the NSWRL racial and religious vilification code of conduct. This MUO continues to operate.

Disseminating information

An ARL Development initiative, Club Admin Centre, is an online site designed as a 'one-stop shop' for club administrators around Australia. It contains contact and links information and a download section containing a range of ARL policies and rules.

Complaints procedure

The ARL provides a step-by-step complaints procedure that people may use at any stage.

As a first step the complainant should try to sort out the problem with the person or people involved. If it can't be resolved, the person should talk to a Member Protection Officer who may be able to help resolve the situation. If the person decides to make a formal complaint, the Member Protection Officer will decide whether they are the most appropriate person to receive and handle the complaint; if not they will refer to the appropriate tribunal or authority or an informal or formal mediation session.

If the internal complaints processes do not achieve a satisfactory resolution/outcome, or if the complainant believes it would be impossible to get an impartial resolution within the rugby league organisation, they may choose to approach an external agency such as an equal opportunity commission to assist with a resolution.⁵⁶

Endnotes

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- ³⁰ 'Islanders in junior leagues, it's a really big issue' by Daniel Lane in the *Sydney Morning Herald* July 16 2006.
- ³¹ <http://www.nrl.com.au/Clubs/Sharks/SharksNewsArticle/tabid/102/newsid/1350/Default.aspx>.
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