

# Sport

**I**n the first section of a three part look at modern rugby, Mike Bracken claims that the current World Cup in South Africa is only a shopfront for today's talent.....of any code of the game...

The following little anecdote is absolutely true. You may feel that the opening disclaimer is excessive, but if anyone made up this piece of sporting trivia, they would be automatically ejected from the pissed journalists club and be consigned to covering mundane events such as snooker and show jumping (neither of which this magazine recognise as sport).

In the late 1980s, before Wigan RFC had established their total stranglehold of the game that we are now all too familiar with, local rivals St. Helens were pushing them strongly for both cup and league honours. As the battle for honours was increasingly reflected in the battle to sign up the most talented players, both clubs turned their attention to a player on the other side of the planet. Wayne Shelford, a bruising international forward from New Zealand was offered lucrative

transfers from both clubs. Whilst St. Helens claimed to have signed the Kiwi giant, Wigan emphasised that his agent had pledged the player's career to the current league holders.

Whilst this impasse continued over the summer, the player made his way to the north west of England for the first time. As the tension between the two clubs heightened, the battle for Shelford's signature reached the high court. The player, training with Wigan throughout late summer, kept his own counsel, as the hostility between these two famous rivals continued. Eventually the court came to a decision. Shelford was indeed a Wigan player.

St. Helens and Wigan, ten miles apart and with more in common than either would ever admit, are more than perennial rivals, as the pat commentators of the TV age would have us believe. Sharing between them such illustrious names as Murphy, Boston, Vollenhoven, Offiah and Hanley, to say that they have a keen sense of local pride would be similar to claiming that Serbs and Croats are undergoing a little local difficulties. The Shelford case only heightened the tension.



Mal Meninga about to be up-ended by Paul Newlove

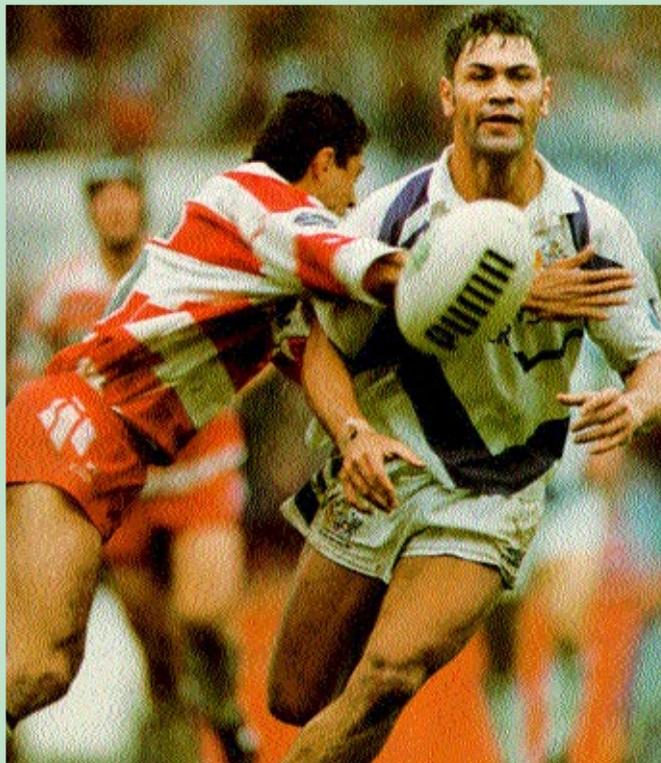
Now Shelford was no academic, and it was widely thought that he would have a great deal of difficulty in spelling his own name, not to mention the phrase contractual agreement. Nevertheless, by the time that the annual Easter match came around, Wigan were about to claim the title of league leaders, and Shelford could look forward to claiming his first championship medal. However, Shelford had performed so poorly for Wigan throughout the season that some cynics wondered if the Central Park club would be better advised in appealing for a repeat hearing in the hope that St. Helens would win this time. Whatever, when 3pm arrived on Good Friday, a packed St. Helens ground was baying for blood. There was no room for neu-



trials. They had all been eaten after the hot dogs ran out.

Midway through the second half, with Wigan on their way to establishing a match winning lead, the unfortunate Shelford rampaged through the St. Helens back line. And it was then that it happened. Spontaneously, the Knowsley Road crowd of over 32,000 began chanting JUDAS. On Good Friday, a man who had had to choose between signing for two almost identical dots on a map 12,000 miles from his home was being derided by both sets of fans for opposite reasons. And the depth of feeling that this sport, whose roots lay in the coal mines and anti-establishment sentiment of the late nineteenth century, engendered in its followers was plain to see. (This, I thought, would never be tolerated at Twickenham.)

Less than a decade later, the cream of English rugby league is heading in the opposite direction. Sky TV has effectively bought the English Rugby League, lock, stock and barrel. And it is widely thought that both St. Helens and Wigan will have to merge if they are to compete with the mighty clubs in the southern hemisphere. Rugby League has undergone a revolution. The second best attended sport in this country,



Tea Ropati gets the ball away before being tackled by Wigan's Frano Botica in the 1992 Premiership Final at Old Trafford

celebrating its centenary this year and expanding away from its traditional Lancashire-Yorkshire axis rapidly, has sold its soul to TV.

Now many sports are entering a phase where they are tailoring their requirements around the needs of TV, but as an example of the all pervasive nature of the new power of broadcasters money, Rugby League is perfect. Around Easter this year, the chairmen of the RLFCs met at the Hilton, Huddersfield. What was to be a radical meeting to discuss switching to a summer season was hijacked by an outrageous bid by Sky TV. If the Rugby League

agreed to reform itself into a Super League, with a reduced number of clubs following mergers between local rivals including Featherstone and Castleford, and Warrington and Widnes, then the game would receive £50m over 5 years. The uproar was understandable, but a compromise was eventually hammered out. The figure rose to £77m, lower division clubs would be paid off with £150,000 each, and each of the new premier clubs was set to receive £5.5m over five years. There was only one condition. The clubs had less than three days to agree to the deal.

For Rugby League, constantly attempting to increase gates in towns where the population was falling, and with many clubs nearly bankrupt trying to keep up with Wigan, who themselves had mortgaged their ground to the hilt in order to fund their lengthening wages bill, the money was too much. A Faustian pact was made with Murdoch, one which is still being worked over today. But it was not simply the speed of the deal and the ruthlessness of Sky TV that surprised observers, but the resulting events threw up some revealing situations.

Firstly, Rugby League players found themselves having to renegotiate their contracts all over

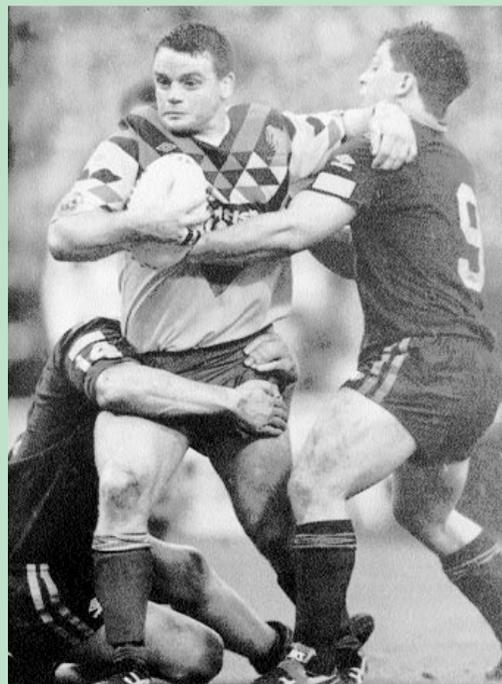


## Andy Platt attempting to burst a tackle in the 1992 World Cup Final

again, but this time it was not a straight deal between club and player, this time the player had to select between League structures. In the UK, the new Super League was the only real choice, but by signing with Murdoch, the British RL had exposed the weaknesses in their relationship with the much more powerful Australian RL. In Australia, and especially Sydney, RL is akin to soccer here, and the game has long been in the charge of the ARL who prosper through their lucrative TV contracts with terrestrial channels such as Channel 9 and, more to the point, Kerry Packer. The longstanding agreements between the RLs in the two hemispheres that had seen transfers between them limited in order that the game should prosper on both sides of the world was now gone. The open market in players that followed meant that some of this country's finest were immediately lured to Australasia, where the game is mushrooming throughout New Zealand and beyond. Hanley, Platt, Clarke and Betts, all stalwarts of the British national team, booked their flights. As a result, the UK clubs new found wealth was being spent merely on tying players to their existing contracts. Gary Connolly received over £100,000, as did Chris Joynt and others. The money had gone in a spiral, from sponsor,

to club to player, without the pass of a ball. Not one fan had been consulted, and the game was now well and truly beholden to TV.

Frank Keating, Matthew Engel and other commentators who should know better were quick to condemn the RL, but where the voices of the establishment were slow to spot the repercussions of the deal was in its effect on rugby union. Whilst I aim to examine this in more detail in the next issue, the one striking point regarding the current RU World Cup in South Africa has been the lack of any interest by the authorities in defections to Rugby League. Over 40 players have been approached by the RL, and some Welsh players including Mike Hall and Robert Jones have been actively looking for offers. As the tournament continues, the players will have little talk of defections, but with agents including Mike Burton and representatives of the ARL on vacation in the Cape, the summer looks set to bring a rash of approaches to players. Even Sheffield, one of the newer and less wealthy RL clubs



has had the temerity to approach Jonah Lomu, the undisputed star of the tournament so far. What is for sure, is that Murdochs bid for League has sounded the death knell for amateurism in British Rugby Union, and upped the ante in financial terms in global Rugby League, thus making any Union player in the world a possible target.

Finally though, the deal has revealed the fickle and conservative nature of the British Rugby League fan. For decades they have endured sub standard stadia, disorganised administration and parochial planning. Only in the 1980s did the game come to life. Rule changes and an influx of foreign players made the game more attractive, and the traditional fierce but friendly crowds proved more welcoming than those at many soccer games. And whilst this expansion and increased entertainment was down to many aspects, it was symbolised by one man. Maurice Lindsey had turned Wigan from a demoralised division two outfit with a proud tradition into the undisputed world club champions.





Pioneering an expansive style of attractive Rugby, they more than anyone emphasised the new breed of Rugby League star: professional, supremely fit and talented. And Lindsey did not stop there. He took the game away from its traditional heartland, and did it successfully, as Sheffield are proof of. The marketing of the game means that top stars are now recognised globally, and Lindseys shrewd negotiations with the ARL did much to counter the imbalance between the hemispheric authorities. But even Lindsey could not solve the enduring problem facing the game. Many of the traditional clubs are located in towns that are shrinking. The aggregate weekly attendance stubbornly refused to rise over 80,000. The game was increasing in stature but the new fans were coming via TV, and they did not turn tumstiles. When Lindsey, a bookie by trade, was approached by Sky, he knew he had little choice. The man that formed modern Rugby League was seen by many to be doing the work of the devil, whilst precious few praised him with taking the game into the next millenia. Visionary or fool, the fans rarely considered the dilemma. They had just found their new Judas.

## European Superleague - The Clubs

Following a meeting on the 30th April, 1995 the RFL put the following structure before the 35 (includes Nottingham, Blackpool and Chorley) club chairmen.

### Superleague

Bradford Northern, Castleford, Halifax, Leeds, London, Oldham, Paris, St.Helens, Sheffield, Warrington, Wigan, W arkington Town

### Division One

Batley, Dewsbury, Featherstone Rovers, Huddersfield, Hull, Keighley Cougars, Rochdale Hornets, Salford, Wakefield Trinity, Whitehaven, Widnes

### Division Two

Barrow, Bramley, Carlisle, Chorley Borough, Highfield, Hull KR, Hunslet, Leigh, Ryedale-York, Swinton

£10.8 million will be divided between the Superleague clubs (£900,000 each) with 5 million going to the Division One clubs (£500,000 each) and £1.5 million going to Division Two clubs (£100,000 each). These figures relate to the annual expenditure and are part of a total £97 million investment by News International Corp. over five years.

A mini-season will be played from October 1995 through to the following January with all the clubs except Paris taking part. The Superleague begins fully on March 28th, 1996.



# Sport Trivia

## PROGRAMME NOTES

Each month, we will be taking a quick look through the programme for a selected sports event, and asking penetrating questions such as... Are you Sure???

UEFA CUP WINNERS CUP FINAL  
1994 20 may 1995  
Parc des Princes, Paris.  
Arsenal vs Real Zaragoza  
Price: £3.50

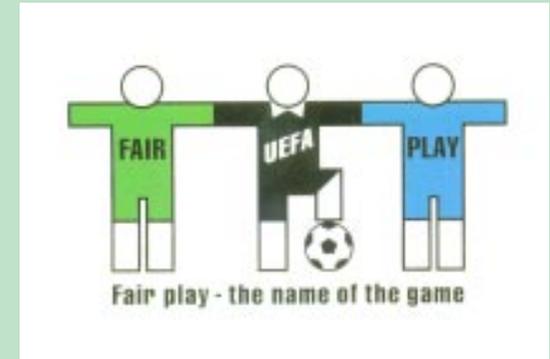
This year UEFA completed one of the more astonishing U-turns since Joe Royle went to Everton. Having set up a complicated structure to ensure that all the big money teams in countries that generate huge TV revenues were seeded in the European Cup, they promptly changed the whole thing around once the foolish clubs had gone and spoiled it all by losing. As a result, Blackburn, who are loaded but awful in Europe, were seeded whilst Ajax had to qualify through the preliminary rounds. Fortunately for the Dutch, they won the European Cup, leaving AC Milan out of it for the first time



in ages, which did not best please UEFA nor AC boss, TV magnate and fascistic nutcase Silvio Berlusconi one little bit. Nevertheless, with the whole shebang quickly redrawn along some lines of expediency,.... ch, sorry fairness, it was quickly off to Paris for another celebration of the beautiful game. And who do we have inside the cover other than that old smiling assassin Lennart Johanssen, President of UEFA.

There is no need for satire, just peruse the following... Our wish is to see sportsmanship become a key work (sic) in football...not only on the field, but also in the stands, and within the associations and their clubs. For us, the term fair play is not just another trendy expression. UEFA award its member associates for particularly sportsmanlike conduct in Europe s

international team and club competitions. Enough said.



For what it s worth, and it isn t very much, the program is 34 pages, written in 3 languages and has 4 pages of ads. The content is minimal and it incorrectly identifies Arsenal's path through the competition. If this is worth its money, then I ll lob this ball in from 50 yards.....oh...emmr.

### Programme Rating system:

- \*\*\*\*\* War and Peace
- \*\*\*\*\* Actually worth reading
- \*\*\*\* Fills that gap between finishing your tea and smoking a fag at half time
- \*\*\* Good for wobbly tables, emergency hats, etc
- \* Tear it up and use as confetti
- \* Just tear it up



## JUST IN CASE YOU DIDN'T KNOW



### FOOTBALL • MAN CITY

With football managers changing clubs more often than Sandy Lyle, it is of little surprise that many are now building in pay-off agreements into these long term contracts that often turn out to be a one way ticket to the DSS after a home defeat by Bamsley. Graeme Souness and Mike Walker both received huge pay-offs from the respective Mersey giants following their sackings, and Trevor Francis is currently seeking legal advice following his long predicted sacking at Hillsborough. Most clubs ultimately pay-off their contractual agreements, but for sheer generosity of spirit, Rage would like to recommend Manchester City. Not content with sacking more managers than Nat West, ex City supremo and all round slaphead

Peter Swales was so profligate with his sackings that new club chairman Francis Lee, already plagued by huge operating debts, is now paying no less than four managers. Peter Reid, Howard Kendall and newly sacked Brian Horton are still drawing their two-pennorth from the dwindling club funds, but even experienced Swales watchers were amazed to find out that City are still paying ex-boss and all round has-been, Jimmy Frizzell. After a successful spell at Notts County, old leather face couldn't stand the pace at



City, and his spell in charge proved meekly brief. However, since City neglected to pay up his contract, he is now in the unusual position of working back at City as a coach

and yet being paid as a manager. Alas, City are in a more traditional state: they are advertising for a manager, and Howard Kendall is reported to be on the wanted list.

## HOW TO CONFUSE A COMMENTATOR:

#1 in an occasional series  
At a recent recording of A Question of Sport, arch snob and would-be man of the people David Coleman was flummoxed upon meeting Bolton midfielder and ace piss-taker, Jason McAteer. Coleman, who has a series of introductions drafted for him (ie, ..and on Alans team this week is Nick Faldo. Nick twice winner of... etc, etc) was informed shortly before recording that McAteers uncles, Pat and Mick, were noted amateur boxers. As part of his fawning obsequiousness and pretence at super knowledgeability, Coleman brought up this fact, as if trawled from a superior memory, after his introduction of McAteer. However, he failed to consider McAteers response and specifically his scouse phrases. After Coleman had asked him a leading question as to one of his uncles, McAteer replied, Oh yer, he s a dead top scall. Coleman, open mouthed and speechless, ordered a retake. So much for live sport on TV.....

