

# Sport

**I**n the second section of a three part look at modern rugby, Mike Bracken gets to say "I told you so"

In the second of a three part review of the state of modern rugby, Mike Bracken argues that the game will inevitably merge into one code, and that all the current hullabaloo over the World Cup is obscuring the real point, that TV is king of rugby.....

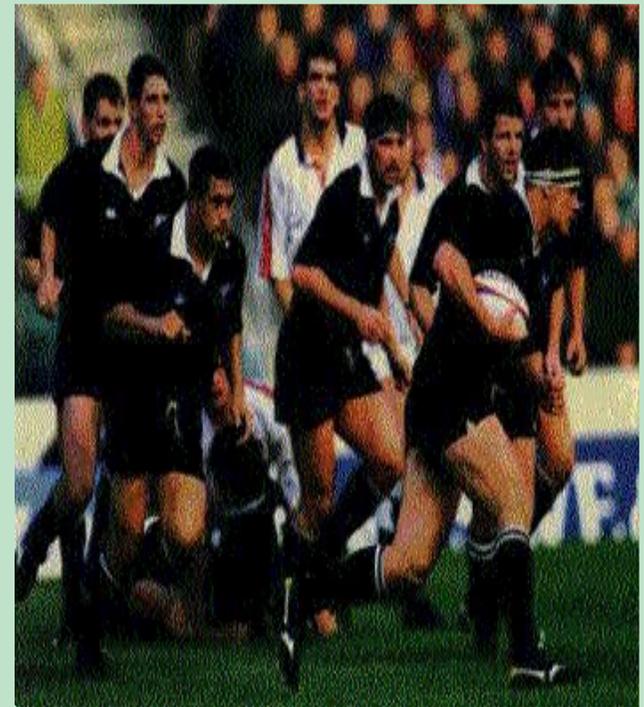
And lo and behold, the mountain came to Murdoch. I had to think before opening this second article on modern rugby with an 'I told you so', but I did, and I'll quite happily give you my opinions before the event again, because the only people unable to spot the deleterious effect that Murdoch's bid for Rugby League would have on the other code were those who are paid to know: the directors of the Rugby Football Union at Twickenham.

That the amateurism issue should still have any credence in the 1990s is due entirely to the prevailing attitudes of the RFU. Continuing a

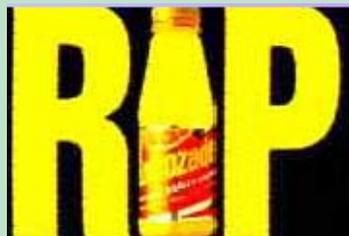
long period of dominance of both the British Union and the world body, the RFU had clung tenaciously to the theory of amateurism. That a player should not be paid to play was a touchstone of the British, and more particularly English, Union.

A century beforehand, the Rugby League had established itself over the same issue, that of broken time reimbursement for miners who had to miss work in order to play the game. In establishing their amateur ethos and sticking to it, Union embraced a notion of gentlemanly conduct that persisted in the professional classes: that to be paid to play was dishonourable and base, and that the spirit of the game transcended monetary values. Emboldened by a network of schools rugby and played at the top level by mostly professional (i.e., those that could afford to play for nothing) classes, the game prospered. Money poured down through county union bodies, and the honour of representing country at Twickenham or even on tour was widely considered to be a reasonable payoff for the time devoted to the game.

Although movements to RL and hints of player discontentment pre-



ailed, it was the late 1970s that ushered in the new direction that Union had to follow. Basically, three factors necessitated change. Firstly, other sports with an amateur ethos turned, lock, stock and barrel, professional. Tennis nearly destroyed itself for a decade in establishing itself as paid for entertainment. Kerry Packer prematurely showed cricket where it was heading, and the fame that television bestowed on Tony Jacklin and Arnold Palmer to name a few, emphasised that golf, the most gentlemanly of sports, was soon to be dominated by the marketing prowess of Mark McCormack and others. More 'common' sports, such as football, had been paying



increasingly high rewards for over a decade, and Rugby League was about to enter a golden phase in its history, having adapted the 6 tackle rule and seen quickly that the game had to cater for a TV audience.

A second factor was television. Gareth Edwards, Phil Bennett and David Duckham, famous union players of the 1970s were now as familiar as Cruyff, Jacklin and Nastase, but they were not getting paid, or so the story goes. Television, as the BBC and ITV are now finding out, has a fickle audience, and the marketing and promotion of sports personalities is a great leveller. It rapidly equates success with fame and fame with money, so clubs took to paying players with a nod and a wink. Boot money appeared, jobs were found for the right player and commercial success soon depended on which team a player played for. Amateurism had become shamateurism, and because, not in spite of, the fact that the game was opened up to a vast audience who could see the farcical state of the situation. And yet the RFU persisted. The system worked for the many who played club rugby, not the few at the top they argued, and they were right. Unfortunately, TV was not interested in seeing the Old Etonians IVths.



With the home unions still refusing to budge, the third and decisive factor came into force. The foreign unions, the upstart commonwealth nations that we were expected to trounce, began to embrace professionalism, unhindered by

ties to the establishment, a cosy relationship with Auntie Beeb and the stuffy class system still prevalent in male dominated clubs. The shift of power had begun, and whilst the prolonged erosion of this system is interesting, the end result was that the 1995 World Cup was the breaking of shamateurism and the establishment of a new rugby dynasty, led by the southern hemisphere in combination with the giants of TV.

This years World Cup was a vibrant oxymoron. An undoubted commercial and professional success that exposed the obvious

failures of a sport hindered by tradition. For South Africa as a nation, and for the southern hemisphere in general, it was a long awaited catharsis. For the northern nations and the whole structure of the game, an unmitigated disaster. Viewers with preconceived opinions of the merits of one code or another had their ideas smashed. Playing standards, New Zealand apart, were lamentable. If you doubt this, cast your mind back to the stage of the game against New Zealand when the English forwards, unable to play their mauling possession game, attempted to pass the ball to each other.

Watching Johnson, Bayfield and Ubogu try to pass the ball, unchallenged, from only a few metres, was akin to watching a toddler approach a toilet for the first time. Compared with Zinzan Brooke's 40 metre drop goal, to describe the standard of playing skills between the two nations as cavernous is a gross understatement. At one point in the early stages of that match, the ITV commentator suggested that the type of rugby played by the

All Blacks had never been seen before. It was, he opined, almost like.....and then stopped himself. The running rugby championed by the All Blacks was similar to rugby league, and anyone with an ounce of objective



sense knew it. It is no coincidence that Jonah Lomu, Frank Bunce and the Brookes were schooled at an early age in rugby league.

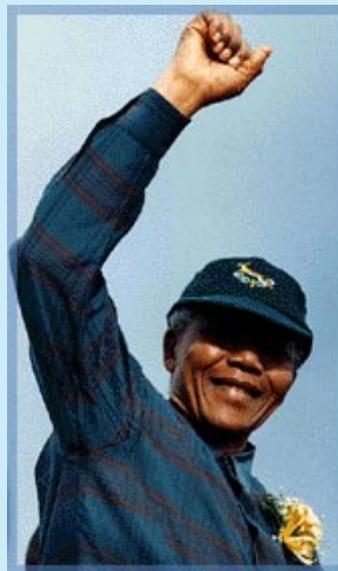
And yet New Zealand lost the tournament to South Africa, a triumph of commitment over flair, and that is entirely the result of the archaic rules of the game. Basically, 15 highly trained sportsmen on one pitch is too many. There is little space for creativity, the dozens of infringement rules mitigate against continuous play, as does the points ratio for tries to kicks. International referees have been quick to point out that rucks and mauls will become ungovernable in a professional game, as the added commercial inducements to players will lead to a recklessness that will be uncontrollable by one official. Many games were non-spectacles, the Ireland vs Wales game being the prime example. No amount of hype, OBEs, improved camera angles and informed discussion can change one basic fact: much of present union matches is unappealing to watch, and that the game must make itself more of a spectacle to command the global audience that is needed to generate the money to keep players within the code. In effect, the 1995

World Cup presented the new governors of Union, from Louis Luyt to Lawrie Mains,

with three stark choices.

Remaining in its current state must seem appealing, especially given the commercial success of the event. But to do this presupposes that audiences will remain loyal to the code. The new wealth of Rugby League, especially in Australasia with the emergence of new clubs such as the Auckland Warriors and Western Reds, will enable them to cherry-pick the best players, as the All Blacks are finding out as Leeds RL tempt Lomu with a reputed £2m deal. Not to change would undoubtedly be the choice of the northern hemisphere, but that would soon change as the transfer markets between clubs spiral, and clubs become dependent on turning turnstiles. In England, only Bath, Leicester and a few other clubs would be confident of commercial success unless the money generated at international level is moved away from youth level and channelled straight to the new system of leagues.

The second, and most unlikely choice, is that Union will go further along the lines of structured play,



Nelson supports the Springboks

and adapt totally for television. Already set plays, possession time and strategic kicking dominate. It only requires a few law changes and modified breaks for commercials before Union becomes the poor relation to American Football. After the performances by the All Blacks and France did so much to enliven a pedestrian tournament, this option would surely be the least popular with supporters, and further highlight the openness of league.

Which leaves the long term option, a unified code. Abhorrent to many in both codes, this was long inconceivable from the games centre at Twickenham. But given that the death of shamateurism in the home unions will inevitably lead to open transfers between codes, and that it is unlikely that TV in the southern nations will relish the regular trouncing of their northern opponents, this option will become increasingly attractive. The number of reasons for its adoption is growing rapidly: open access to both codes for leading players; the shambolic level of competition in both codes that mitigates against a really worthwhile World Cup until the semi-final stages; the crossover of sponsors between codes; the changing aspect of union as it





becomes more like league; and TV.

In the short term, both codes are likely to undergo an internal examination. League in England is still adapting to a short season and the crossover to a summer season, while in Australasia the split between the ARL and the Super League has yet to be resolved. England RFU is still licking its wounds, as the old farts say goodbye to Dudley Wood and a new era of professionalism is creeping in. The South African RFU have already had one walkout over money, even persuading Louis Luyt to cough up some more and. New Zealand are desperately trying to keep hold of their All Blacks by throwing money all over the place, and Australia have confirmed the degree of professionalism in their ranks by dropping their highest paid player, David Campese, who by his own account was a millionaire at 23, and that in an amateur game.

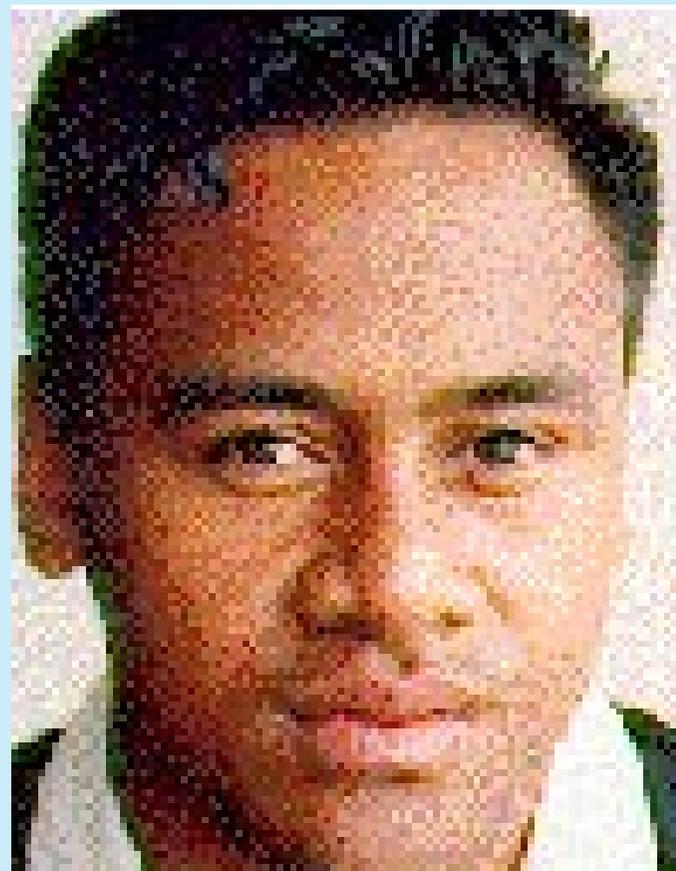
But when this period of dislocation is over, the scene will be ripe for unification. Players as mercenary as today's soccer stars will compete for ludicrous contracts. Club rugby league will be the highest paid code, and the

movement to summer seasons will see the end of traditional fixtures including Lions tours and State of Origin matches. No-one will be playing or viewing without paying, and as the audience is global and probably on a pay per view basis, the amount they pay will be significant. Both codes will be governed by new organisations, the Super League in League and a southern based authority in Union. Both of these have already signed with Murdoch.

So the spark for this chain of events stems from television and money. During the last Kangaroo tour to the UK, Australia ARL boss Ken Arthurson had to fly back to Sydney because two clubs there needed to merge because the pot of sponsorship from which they both drank was running dry, and Murdoch had shown some interest. Following this, the meeting at the Huddersfield Hilton saw League take £77m in return for the game, and how the RFU laughed. Six months later, and with the World Cup having exposed the deficiencies of the organisation and playing of Union in the northern hemisphere, the RFU stands exposed as the southern unions have already signed a deal worth five times more. Television and money is the start and finish point for the

Guess Who ?? Here's a clue it's not Rupert Murdoch.

unification



of rugby, and for every 'Judas' collecting his silver coins, there is a prospective punter with a satellite dish.

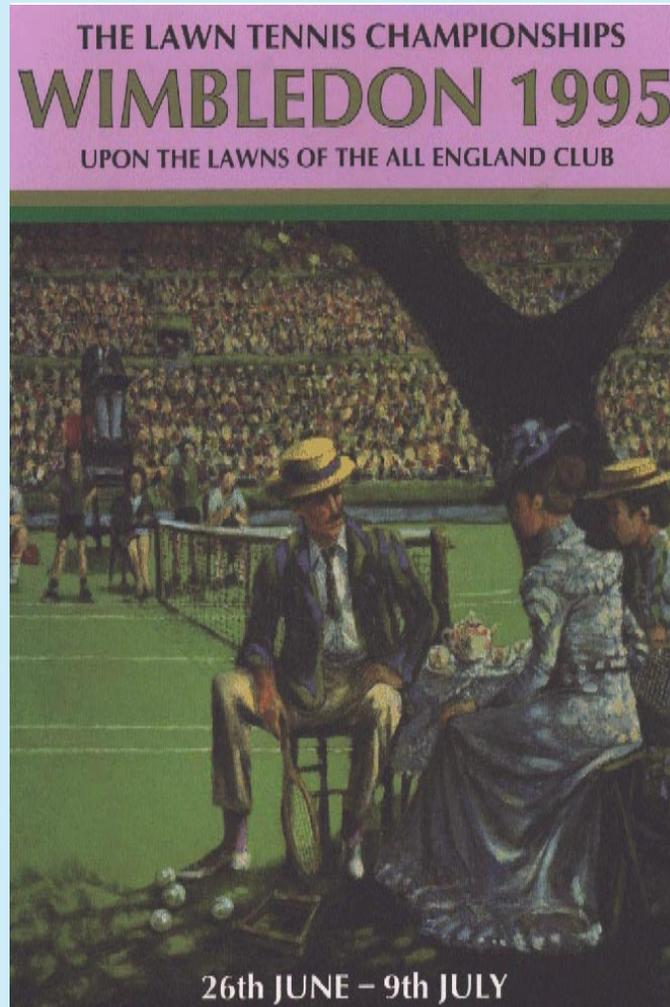


# Sport Trivia

Programmes - Number Two  
Wimbledon 1995  
Price £4.00

As a nation of tennis fans, our hypocrisy is only outdone by our ignorance. This year, hundreds of thousands of tennis watchers flowed through London's leafiest suburb, bringing with them money, enthusiasm and a timely sense of amnesia. This is not a chip-on-the-shoulder little piece about tennis snobs, just an observation of the sporting madness that constitutes 'the season', that two months of the year when England get a pasting at cricket and the only football being played is for the benefit of Eastern European pools companies (The Intertoto Cup). If you don't believe me, try this little test on anyone who claims to be a British tennis fan: Ask them the name of the most successful male tennis player in the past twelve months. (answer at bottom)

It's not that we don't like tennis, it's just that we can't be bothered with it until it gets hot, and only then do we grumble



about our lack of talent. Our players are invariably beaten out of sight before the first Saturday, so

then the tournament dissolves into two periods. Firstly, we have 'peoples day', the Saturday that the hoi polloi make it through the gate, and tennis officials, sycophantic commentators and bemused foreign players patronise a loud if stupid crowd. This year's fiasco was made all the more laughable because our Canadian import Greg Rusedski clutched a Union Jack as soon to be champion (again) graciously allowed him to watch as Sampras practised his 'how to win without breaking a sweat' routine. These Saturdays serve only one purpose, to delude us into a previous era of gamesmanship and sport for sports sake. Its like end of empire Vs end of umpire. at least Jeff reminded us that we'd all been Tarango'd.

The second, and even less appealing period, is the media build up to the men's final, as the tabloids vainly attempt to instil some passion and rumour into proceedings, and the lobotomised masses help out by vehemently choosing between one or other American with a deformed forearm whose first name they barely knew a week previously. All this is carried on a 'sporting' manner, whilst away from the camera producers and frontmen wish for a MacEnroe, Nastase or anyone vaguely interesting. he whole thing is ended by a smirking



Des Lynam and the yearly wrist roll by the Duchess of Kent, who otherwise is not seen at a tennis event



The Boy Sampras

for the next 50 weeks.

Thank god for the programme though. At 120 pages its got all last years results and analysis, although little mention of the years international tennis that has taken place meantime, intelligent if a little idolatrous articles concerning the major players, and handy information, such as where to write to if you want to wait on a shortlist before not getting any tickets for next years event. Even the advertising is for those opulent 'tennis' goods such as Rolex watches, but there's plenty of content and not a mention of Virginia bloody Wade, which is a merciful relief.

(The answer was Thomas Muster, the clay court specialist who couldn't be bothered to come to Wimbledon because he says "it's not really tennis." Interestingly, David Lloyd, he of Chris Evert and 'not being all that good fame' has suggested that we dig up Wimbledon and replace it with clay in order for us to take tennis seriously. But doesn't he realise, this is the season, and this is not Rugby Union. The management aren't old farts, a la Carling, they're Old Fartonians, now play up, and play the game.....see you at Henley....)

**Overall Rating \*\*\*\***

### Programme Rating system:

(All Dan Mascall comments)

\*\*\*\*\* Oh I say!!

\*\*\*\* A peach of a shot

\*\*\* Well played, well played indeed!!

\*\* He's looking pensive as he chews on his banana

\* And the court was naked

