



Sydney's game - simply the best?

The scoreboard shows the law beat them in the end, but in truth, it was Sydney that brought Rupert Murdoch's Super League undone.

Australia's biggest city had spent decades taking its favourite game to its outer edges (Cronulla, Penrith), to its near neighbours (Wollongong, Canberra and Newcastle), interstate (Brisbane, then Perth) and finally, last year, across the Tasman.

Super League was largely these clubs, the one-team towns, whose recruiting and sponsorship bases far exceeded those of Sydney's gentrifying inner suburbs which had provided the game's Australian cradle - Newtown, Redfern, Balmain, Glebe. The newcomers railed against the power of Sydney's rugby league establishment. The big game got bigger, much bigger through the 1980s, but control of it stayed very firmly at Sydney's Phillip Street - ARL headquarters.

The new teams saw themselves as important factors in the resurgence in interest in league in the 1980s and 1990s. Canberra, Brisbane and Penrith won every premiership from 1989 to 1994. Brisbane's average crowd at home games became the highest of any football club in Australia, exceeding even AFL clubs.

Phillip Street knew how important they were, but it saw it differently. The new clubs had been given the chance to play in Sydney's competition - the best in the world. They had a lot to be grateful for.

Sydney not only had its game, it had its own media mogul, Kerry Packer, controlling television rights to it. Packer and his father were veterans of the harbour city, its afternoon paper wars and its TV. Father Frank got the first TV licence in the town, TCN 9. Packer money was also important in sustaining inner city

rugby league clubs like Easts and Souths, and Australian Rugby League Chairman Ken Arthurson's Manly.

In Sydney's media wars, the Packers had skirmished often with outsiders. Rupert Murdoch and his father Keith were also veterans of Sydney's newspaper and TV battles, but they came from somewhere else - Melbourne, originally, although by 1996, the father's son was from everywhere: New York, Los Angeles, Hong Kong, London.

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A curious mix of establishment power and anti-establishment crusading, Rupert Murdoch had blasted his way into newspapers and subsequently television in the UK, and into newspapers, film and television in the US. He was, at the outset, an impostor on Fleet Street (he closed it down), in Hollywood, in American network television. He was a logical partner for distant Australian rugby league clubs feeling themselves frustrated by rules and decision-making structures which they thought had been built for another era.

Footballers from Brisbane and Canberra, particularly, were winners, winners in the toughest competition in the world, just as Murdoch seemed to be the winner in the wild race to build a manageable global media empire. They wanted to be treated like winners - to be paid what they thought they were worth, to have

control of the game they played, to get their hands on rights to broadcast the big games which would be so crucial to commercial victory in the new television main game of pay TV.

Footballers from overseas - the UK and New Zealand particularly - were also logical soul mates for a new idea from an outsider. They'd been smashed up on the field by Australians for decades and their administrators had been correspondingly smashed up in the administration of the game internationally.

As they say, winners are grinders, and Sydney seemed to win, always.

Sydney is so used to winning that it came as quite a shock to have to fight for it this time around. Packer is alleged to have rebuffed Murdoch's early suggestions for a sharing of pay and free-to-air rights to the rugby league. They were his, and had been since anyone could remember. Packer told clubs to be wary of letting a media proprietor run their game.

But once it realised the potential consequences - *They might get hold of our Game!* - Sydney fought Super League with passion and skill and steel. Blow-in pundits dismiss the Emerald City for its glitz but the place didn't get to the top on lunches at Doyle's alone. Super League's John Ribot is said to have inquired at one point, in exasperation, why they wouldn't just lie down.

When it needed to find it, Sydney, as so often, found another gear and a rich friend - this time a foreign telecommunications and pay TV company, Optus Vision - to pay for it.

They smashed up the visitors, again. Of course, it's not over yet. There's an appeal pending. The law sometimes gives you a second chance.

Sydney would never be mug enough to give you one of them. □

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