



RUGBY LEAGUE IN TWENTIETH CENTURY BRITAIN

A Social and Cultural History

TONY COLLINS

Rugby League in Twentieth Century Britain

Called 'the greatest game of all' by its supporters but often overlooked by the cultural mainstream, no sport is more identified with England's northern working class than rugby league. This book traces the story of the sport from the Northern Union of the 1900s to the formation of the Super League in the 1990s, through war, depression, boom and deindustrialisation, into a new economic and social age.

Rugby League in Twentieth Century Britain uses a range of previously unexplored archival sources to investigate the lives of those who played, watched and ran the sport. It considers the impact of two world wars, the significance of the game's expansion to Australasia and the momentous decision to take rugby league to Wembley. It investigates for the first time the history of rugby union's long-running war against league, and the sport's troubled relationship with the national media.

Most importantly, the book sheds new light on broader issues of social class, gender and working-class masculinity, regional identity and the profound impact of the decline of Britain's traditional industries. For those interested in the history of sport and working-class culture, this is essential reading.

Tony Collins is Senior Research Fellow at the International Centre for Sports History and Culture at De Montfort University, Leicester, UK and editor of the journal *Sport in History*. His publications include the award-winning *Rugby's Great Split*.



The principal rugby league towns in Britain.

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First published 2006
by Routledge
2 Park Square, Milton Park,
Abingdon, Oxon, OX14 4RN

Simultaneously published in the USA and Canada
by Routledge
270 Madison Ave, New York, NY 10016

Routledge is an imprint of the Taylor & Francis Group, an informa business

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This edition published in the Taylor & Francis e-Library, 2006.

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British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Collins, Tony, 1961

Rugby League in twentieth century Britain : a social and cultural history / Tony Collins.

p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 0-415-39614-X (hardback) — ISBN 0-415-39615-8 (pbk.)

I. Rugby League football—Social aspects—Great Britain—History.

I. Title.

GV946.C65 2006

796.3330941—dc22

2005029759

ISBN10: 0-415-39614-X (hbk)

ISBN10: 0-415-39615-8 (pbk)

ISBN10: 0-203-08835-2 (ebk)

ISBN13: 978-0-415-39614-1 (hbk)

ISBN13: 978-0-415-39615-8 (pbk)

ISBN13: 0-978-0-203-08835-7 (ebk)

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Preface

In February 1936 George Orwell visited Wigan as part of his research for *The Road to Wigan Pier*. Shocked by the poverty and unemployment in the town, he nonetheless found that his journey confirmed most of his prejudices: the lower classes smelled, 'no genuine working man' was ever truly a socialist, and the English working class did not 'show much capacity for leadership'. On the basis of his two months' trip around Lancashire and Yorkshire he declared that the working man 'does not act, he is acted upon'. Indeed, Orwell made little attempt to engage with the working-class people and families he met or to understand the culture of their daily lives.¹

This book is about one aspect of working-class life in Wigan and the north of England that Orwell chose to ignore completely. Less than half a mile from his lodgings in Wigan stood Central Park rugby league ground. On Orwell's first Saturday in the town over 15,000 working-class Wiganers assembled to watch their team take on Liverpool Stanley. If he had joined them, he would have discovered a vibrant, thrilling spectacle played and watched almost exclusively by working-class men and women.²

Wigan's team featured athletes from around the world at the peak of their powers. Among them were full-back Jim Sullivan, one of rugby league's greatest-ever players; George Bennett, the first black player ever to appear in a league international; Hector Gee, an Australian who had travelled halfway around the world to play for Wigan; and Charlie Seeling, a New Zealander whose father had played for the 1905 All Black tourists but who had made his home in the town. Not only did these players share the working-class origins of those who watched them, but they also shared the same nagging sense of collective injustice. Rugby union's strict amateurism had forced Sullivan to leave Wales as a teenager. Bennett had switched to league to reach sporting heights previously unavailable to him because of the colour of his skin. Players and spectators alike believed that their game was unfairly relegated to the status of a minor sport by the class snobbery and regional bias of a southern-based establishment. In this, it was a metaphor for the position of the industrial working classes in the north of England.

This book aims to tell the story of rugby league in twentieth century Britain, ending with the 'Super League' upheavals of 1995. Like its predecessor, *Rugby's*

Great Split, which took the story up to 1910, its goal is to explore and explain the links between the sport and the society into which it was born, and from which it drew its support and strength. To a large extent, the circumstances of rugby league's birth and life in the industrial north of England mean that this is also a study of the leisure activity of a section of the 'old industrial' working class, which was rooted in the mines, the docks and the mills of the industrial conurbations of Lancashire and Yorkshire. Although that powerhouse of industrial capitalism has been dismantled and destroyed, much of the culture of that class remains, some of which is embodied in rugby league.

It takes the story from the élan of the years before the First World War, through the Depression and the Second World War, to the self-confidence of the immediate post-war period. Then the story changes, as the profound economic and social shifts of the latter half of the twentieth century cause a deep sense of self-doubt and pessimism in the game, which was only relieved in the 1980s. It ends with the acceptance of £87 million from Rupert Murdoch's British Sky Broadcasting, one hundred years after the split from rugby union and the founding of the sport.

Writing about his own family, Richard Hoggart noted that 'working-class people have virtually no sense of their own history, except the oral and that is usually scrappy, confused and soon lost as they reach back to those unrecorded years'.³ To some extent this also applies to rugby league. In the sixty-three years of its history before 1958, only one book on the sport, Gus Risman's short *How to Play Rugby League Football* (1938), was published. Even today, the majority of books produced about the game are self-published by their authors. This book aims to tilt the balance back slightly. As well as the normal sources and archives used by the historian, I have also sought to use neglected sources, such as match-day programmes, brochures written to raise money for players' benefits, supporters' club handbooks and other similar ephemera, to understand the culture of the sport. These were more often than not produced by supporters for supporters, and speak the language and address the concerns of those for whom the sport played a significant role in their lives.

In its approach, the book carries with it an implied criticism of those who seek to understand the working classes by using the predominantly literary criteria of middle- and upper-class society, of which perhaps the most notable recent example is Jonathan Rose's 2001 *The Intellectual Life of the British Working Classes*. Although this can offer important insights into the culture of certain sections of the working classes, it ignores the fact that intellectual life in working-class communities was not based primarily on the written word. Discussions about life, society, politics and many other 'abstract' concepts often took place in the context of sport, leisure and even hobbies (as Ross McKibbin has noted). Understandings of class and masculinity, concepts of fairness and reward, and ideas about the workings of society were expressed in the everyday discourse about football, rugby, cricket and many other sports. Sport not only became 'a sort of lingua franca' between working-class men, in Eric Hobsbawm's words, but by the end of the nineteenth century it had also become a language that was used to understand society. In some cases, as Brian

Jackson and Dennis Marsden discovered, 'sport was a critical point of conflict' for working-class boys entering grammar school in the north of England. This is not to claim a privileged position for sport in working-class life above other forms of cultural experience, merely to acknowledge that it was, and remains, an important part of its fabric.⁴

However, this is not only the story of working-class culture. Especially at the professional level, rugby league was also dependent to a large extent on the patronage of the local small businessman. These men occupied the leading committees of clubs and the Rugby Football League, and often devoted considerable amounts of money and time to the sport. Their motivations, perceptions and ideas are also a recurrent theme throughout this book; hopefully it will contribute to our understanding of those at the lower levels of the provincial middle-classes, some of whom had risen from the working-classes yet still retained cultural ties to their origins. Overall the book seeks to examine the ways in which all those involved in the sport have sought to influence and impose their will on the game in the social and economic conditions of industrial and post-industrial capitalism.

There is also an element of 'auto-ethnography', to use currently fashionable jargon. I was first taken to watch Hull Kingston Rovers in 1969 at the age of seven by my father, who had himself been taken by his father at a young age, who likewise was taken by his father. I too took my two daughters to watch rugby league. Much of what I learned about the adult world as a child was gleaned from the folklore and culture of rugby league; what it meant to be a man, the importance of intelligence, why to distrust authority, and many other attitudes that survive primarily as oral, rather than written, traditions. Like countless others, members of my family have thus played a role, albeit peripheral, in some of the events with which this book deals.

When rugby union broke with its century-old customs and traditions in 1995 and abandoned the amateur ethos for professionalism, it became fashionable to say that rugby league now had no reason to exist. The implication – which this book seeks to demonstrate is wholly erroneous – was that there was nothing to the sport but professionalism and the cash nexus. From some rugby union writers this was simply mischievous. Yet for others it represented a genuine failure to understand that there could be a sport with its own structures, culture and traditions that was outside of those 'national' sports, which were controlled by the socially powerful. In this, these commentators echoed something of Orwell, whose failure to comprehend the cultural aspects of working-class life was also typical of almost all middle-class observers of his era. And even if he had attended the match at Central Park in 1936, his mix of pity and condescension would have probably blinded him to its broader significance. He would, however, have witnessed a small piece of history being made. For the first and only time at Central Park, little Liverpool Stanley defeated the mighty Wigan.

Acknowledgements

The act of writing a book is a singular task, yet this one would not have been possible without the help, assistance and support of a legion of people. I would particularly like to thank Richard Holt for reading the manuscript and making many valuable suggestions, Robert Gate for also reading it and for responding to my many queries about the history of the game, my editor Samantha Grant for her exemplary professionalism and support for the book, Ron Bailey, Mary Bushby, Tony Capstick, Andy Carr, Trevor Delaney, Harry Edgar, Sean Fagan, Robert Fassolette, Dave Fox, Mike Gardner, Trevor Gibbons, David Hinchcliffe, Phil Hodgson, Tony Hughes, John Jenkins, Martin Johnes, Terry Kelly, Rob Light, Charles Little, Peter Lush, Greg Mallory, Kate Manson, Phil Melling, Andrew Moore, Graham Morris, Lisa O'Keeffe, Richard Pitchfork, Huw Richards, Dave Russell, Greg Ryan, Alex Service, Adrian Smith, Cliff Spracklen, Karl Spracklen, Matt Taylor, Wray Vamplew, Brian Walker, Gareth Williams, Terry Williams, Neil Young, and Emma Rosewarne, Geoff Keith, John Huxley and Richard Lewis at the Rugby Football League, Jed Smith, Rex King, Ross Hamilton, Laura Stedman, Lindsay Simmons and Phil Mead at the Rugby Football Union, the anonymous staff at numerous libraries and archives around Britain, and my colleagues Neil Carter, Mike Cronin, Margaret Groenveld, Jeff Hill, Pierre Lanfranchi, Kevin Marston, Tony Mason, Dil Porter and Eliza Reidi at the International Centre for Sports History and Culture at De Montfort University. Finally my utmost gratitude goes to Cathy, Rachel and Jodie, without whose support and forbearance this project would not have been completed.

Introduction: the origins of rugby league

Almost alone among all other sports, the birth of rugby league has a precise date: Thursday, 29 August 1895. Rich in symbolism and potent in its apparent demonstration of northern distinctiveness and self-assertion, it was on this day that twenty-one of the leading rugby clubs in the north of England met at the George Hotel in Huddersfield to found the Northern Rugby Football Union, better known as the Northern Union (NU).¹

The NU's heartlands were regions that had been built on the industrial powerhouses of the Victorian era: coal and textiles in Lancashire and West Yorkshire, ship-building in Barrow, docks in Hull, chemicals in Widnes and glass manufacture in St Helens and the Wakefield area. Its players, spectators and officials were drawn from these industries and the communities that had grown up around them. But, ironically, the NU was born just at the moment when many of those industries were beginning to be eclipsed by foreign competition or had reached the zenith of their success and were soon to begin their long structural decline. In fact, most of the accepted ideas about the north belonged to an age that was disappearing as the NU was being born. The dominant stereotypes of the north – pounds, shillings and pence businessmen like Elizabeth Gaskell's John Thornton in *North and South*, or the dark satanic mills portrayed by Blake – belong to the early and middle decades of the century. Writing just a year after the formation of the NU, Talbot Baines noted that the differences between 'the upper ranks of society in North and South have not survived in any appreciable form the fusing of public school and university education'.² Although members of the northern industrial bourgeoisie and merchant classes had played a central role in founding the first rugby clubs in the region in the 1860s, the number of factory-owners who went on to support the NU could be numbered in single figures. The northernness of rugby league was inextricably bound up with the industrial working class.

From the late 1870s, when rugby had become a mass spectator sport in the industrial towns and villages of Yorkshire, Lancashire and Cumberland, it had begun to fracture along class lines. The influx of working-class players and spectators had been viewed ambiguously by the middle classes who had founded the Rugby Football Union (RFU) in 1871. They had no objections to working men playing what they viewed as their game, provided it was on their terms. But the

working classes who flocked to the game brought with them markedly different cultural traditions to those who had been educated in the public and grammar schools. Traditional working-class sports of the time, such as knur and spell, foot-racing, hare-coursing and pigeon-shooting, were all played for cash or other valuable prizes. To the industrial working classes, it was unthinkable that excellence in sport should go unrewarded.

As early as 1879, in response to rumours of men being paid to play rugby, the Yorkshire Rugby Union had attempted to outlaw payments to players. This soon proved to be ineffectual. As great crowds flocked to matches, especially in the Yorkshire Cup competition that had begun in 1877, it became an open secret that leading players received, at the very least, payments in kind for playing: legs of mutton, suits, watches, bottles of port and offers of employment were regular forms of remuneration. 'Poaching', or offering players inducements to change clubs, became commonplace. In order to build a winning team, the leaders of many northern clubs simply accepted these practices in order to attract the best players.

But others were not so phlegmatic. Some clubs withdrew from the Yorkshire Cup because they felt it to be detrimental to the interests of sport, but the competition's huge popularity meant that a club could not retain credibility as a serious force without taking part. Clubs that did attempt to maintain their middle-class exclusivity, such as the Leeds-based Yorkshire Wanderers and the original Hull, York and St Helens clubs, often found themselves forced into collapse or merger with less socially prestigious clubs. By the mid-1880s, there was a widespread fear that working-class participation was driving out the middle classes, causing the *Yorkshire Post* to ask:

why are so few public schoolmen and clergymen found in our leading fifteens? It is because the associations of the game are now becoming so distasteful to any gentleman of sportsmanlike feeling. They do not care to be hooted and yelled at as part and parcel of a sixpenny show or to meet and associate with men who care nothing for the game other than as a means to an end.³

Such opinions were widespread among those who had learnt the game as part of their public school education. At its October 1886 general meeting, the RFU officially banned all forms of payment and inducement, monetary or otherwise. The aim was explicitly to curtail the influence of the working-class player. Arthur Budd, a future president of the RFU, argued that professionalism would inevitably mean that the middle-class amateur would become subordinated to the working-class professional, as had happened in soccer, and called for 'no mercy but iron rigour' in order to 'throttle the hydra'. Harry Garnett, a leader of the Bradford club, declared that: 'if working men desired to play football, they should pay for it themselves'. Only four clubs voted against the new policy, the Dewsbury representative arguing that many clubs 'were composed of working men and they could not afford to lose time when engaged away from home'.⁴ The reported reaction of one

Yorkshire rugby player to the new laws probably summed up the attitude of many of his fellow players: 'Noa mutton, noa laaking' (no mutton, no playing).⁵

Within months it became clear that the new rules were not going to stem the tide of professionalism. In Lancashire identical problems had emerged. As the decade drew to a close, virtual civil war had broken out in northern rugby. Between October 1888 and January 1890 six of the leading clubs were suspended for periods of up to fourteen weeks for offering money or jobs to players. In the same period, ten players were put on trial by the Yorkshire committee for violating the amateur code, six of whom were suspended from the game for receiving cash, testimonial gifts and, in one case, an unauthorised wedding present from his club. The RFU's fear of working-class domination of the game was heightened by the growing success of northern teams on the pitch. 'The majority of Yorkshire fifteens are composed of working men who have only adopted football in recent years, and have received no school education in the art,' wrote a London commentator in 1892. 'The majority of members of London clubs have played it all their lives, yet when the two meet there is only one in it – the Yorkshiremen'.⁶ In the first seven years of rugby's county championship, it was won six times by Yorkshire and once by Lancashire. As Arthur Budd and others feared, if the supporters of the RFU could not hold their own against working-class players on the field of play, their control of the game would inevitably come into question – and the greater the success of working-class players, the less likelihood there was of the middle classes continuing to play the game.

Unlike most rugby-playing areas in the south of England, where attendances at matches were low and players came from a narrow social strata, the game in the north had become one where working-class players and crowds dominated. It was now one of the most important forms of mass entertainment in the north, far outstripping soccer in Yorkshire and parts of Lancashire. To purge all forms of payment from the game, as desired by the RFU leadership, would mean alienating a large part of its working-class support in the face of the growing threat of professional soccer. For the game to lose its mass appeal in the north would mean a corresponding loss of standing in the community for the clubs and their officials. The constant witch-hunts of 'veiled professionals' by the RFU's supporters meant that clubs could find their best players, their most attractive opponents or even themselves suspended from the game for long periods. Clubs that relied on regular matches and high attendances for income could not survive on such an unstable basis. Yet increasingly, professionalised soccer had demonstrated that, far from being an unmitigated disaster as had been predicted, professional football could be successful.

It was at this point, forced into opposition to the RFU's drive for pristine amateurism, that the leaders of some of the major Yorkshire clubs began to argue for 'broken-time' payments, the reimbursement of wages lost because of time taken off work to play rugby. The demand for equality for all players, regardless of class, took centre stage in the debate on rugby's future.⁷ *The Yorkshireman* magazine summed up the cause as a 'fight for the creation of a system which shall in the playing of Rugby football place the working men in the North on more equal terms

with those in better circumstances in the South'.⁸ In the volatile industrial climate of the early 1890s such demands could seem inflammatory. The first few years of the decade had seen the areas of Yorkshire, Lancashire and Cheshire record the highest incidence of strike activity throughout the UK.⁹ In the Yorkshire region, Bradford millworkers, Leeds gasmen, Hull dockers and Wakefield miners all engaged in mass strike action in the 1890–93 period, troops being called out in the latter three disputes, leaving two dead and twelve wounded in Featherstone. To many of the middle classes, here was a glimpse into the abyss – and to talk of working-class rights in a sport that the middle classes cherished as their own was beyond the pale.

The response of the RFU to the broken-time proposal was unambiguous. Arthur Budd stated that if 'blind enthusiasts of working men's clubs insist on introducing professionalism, there can be but one result – disunion ... it will be the duty of the Rugby Union to see that the division of classes dates from the dawn of professionalism'.¹⁰ The 1893 annual general meeting of the RFU – which took place on the same day that the government announced the setting up of a Royal Commission to investigate the shooting of the Featherstone miners – proved to be the decisive battleground in the war over broken time. James Miller of the Leeds club and president of the Yorkshire Rugby Union moved the motion, 'That players be allowed compensation for bona-fide loss of time'.¹¹ He argued that the pre-eminence of working-class players was due to the RFU's success in popularising the sport. But:

having introduced the new type of player, the RFU at once did him an injustice. These men were constantly called upon to lose their wages in order to play for their county or their club and at the same time they were debarred from recompense for the loss of time involved. Why should not the working man be able to play the game on level terms with the gentleman?¹²

The debate, however, had no bearing on the outcome of the largely pre-arranged vote, which went against broken-time payments by an unexpectedly large 282 to 136. Now that it held the initiative, the RFU was determined to press home its advantage and the endgame began. In September 1894 the Lancashire Rugby Union charged Leigh with making illegal payments to players. The club was suspended for ten weeks. Three weeks later, Salford were also charged with professionalism and promptly escalated the dispute by counter-charging six other clubs with the same offence. There were now only three Lancashire First Division clubs not involved in the dispute. The contradiction between the RFU anti-professional laws and the day-to-day commercial interests of the clubs was now at breaking point.

Determined to drive out its opponents, the RFU issued a draft 'manifesto' on amateurism, which announced that any club or player charged with professionalism should be assumed to be guilty unless they could prove their innocence. In a special general meeting in December 1894, former RFU president William Cail announced that the amateur regulations would be redrafted on the lines of the

manifesto for introduction in September 1895. The future was clear to all, as the *Yorkshire Post* pointed out: 'if the obnoxious "class" feeling introduced at last Friday's meeting by men who should know better is allowed to have its full sway, the inevitable result is a split in the Union'.¹³

On 29 January 1895 the Lancashire committee announced that Leigh and Wigan, who had both been placed at the bottom of Lancashire's Division One after being found guilty of professionalism, would be automatically relegated to the Second Division. This had an immediate impact in Yorkshire, and the following day the twenty-two leading teams in Lancashire and Yorkshire formed an alliance. Needless to say, the RFU outlawed it. Finally, having extinguished all possibilities of a compromise with the RFU, representatives of Brighouse Rangers, Halifax, Leeds, Bradford, Hull, Huddersfield, Hunslet, Wakefield Trinity, Manningham, Liversedge, Dewsbury, Batley, Oldham, Broughton Rangers, Leigh, Warrington, Tyldesley, Wigan, St Helens and Widnes met on 29 August and unanimously adopted the resolution 'That the clubs here represented decide to form a Northern Rugby Football Union (NU), and pledge themselves to push forward, without delay, its establishment on the principle of payment for *bona-fide* broken-time only.'

Broken-time payments were set at six shillings per day. As a group, the clubs announced their intention to resign from the RFU, with the exception of Dewsbury, who had suddenly baulked and were shortly to make their peace with the RFU. Stockport were also invited to join, which they did immediately, and Runcorn were drafted in to replace Dewsbury. The following month the rebels were joined by the amateur clubs of the Hull and District Rugby Union. In September the RFU introduced its new anti-professionalism laws. Players and clubs were ordered to break all contact with the new body. Anyone who was in anyway connected with the NU was banned for life by the RFU, regardless of whether they were a professional player, a policy that was to be enforced with 'iron rigour' over the next one hundred years.



Initially, the NU was careful to insist on its fidelity to amateur principles. William Hirst of Huddersfield claimed that the NU was 'as strongly opposed as ever to professionalism' but that 'payment of working men players for loss of wages through playing a match was not professionalism'.¹⁴ But the rule that players could receive only broken-time payments soon became more honoured in the breach than in the observance. In 1898 the NU legalised professionalism, albeit tightly restrained by the fact that all players had to be in 'bona-fide employment' and that any change in employment had to be approved. Based on the paternalism of the northern factory system, the 'work clauses' explicitly excluded 'billiard markers, waiters in licensed houses, or any employment in connection with a club' as acceptable occupations.¹⁵ To control wages, players were not allowed to be paid outside of the season, unlike professional soccer players. Despite the NU's rhetoric about the rights of working-class players, the regulations governing employment

were as strict as the amateur regulations of the RFU. But the complex organisational burden involved in administering the work clauses and the leading clubs' increasing opposition to them, eventually led to their abolition in 1905. Fears that unrestricted professionalism would lead to the bankruptcy of clubs proved unfounded.

Another reason for the abolition of the work clauses was the threat of soccer. In 1903 the Football League had established a beachhead in the rugby heartland of West Yorkshire when Manningham, the inaugural NU champions, had switched to soccer and reinvented themselves as Bradford City. In 1904 the leadership of Holbeck NU side, which played at Elland Road, wound up the club and founded Leeds City, the forerunner of Leeds United. In many previous strongholds of rugby across the north, professional soccer clubs began to challenge the oval ball's dominance. Wherever it was played, soccer attracted huge crowds, which dwarfed those of rugby, and the simplicity of the game made it easier both to watch and play. More than that, it was a truly national sport, giving it an attraction beyond the regional appeal of the NU or the social exclusivity of rugby union.

The very real prospect of being buried under the landslide of soccer's popularity focused the minds of the NU leadership on the long-running debate over the rules of the game. Over the previous decade the game had gradually moved away from rugby union rules. In 1897 the value of all goals was reduced to two points and the line-out was abolished. Various other minor changes were made to move the game away from the rucking and mauling of rugby union and to place a greater emphasis on the scoring of tries. Even before the split, there had been a discussion within rugby union about reducing the number of players to thirteen, and this had been raised again in 1895 but rejected as too radical. But the desire to make rugby a more open and spectacular game was given extra impetus by the events of the 1900s. Eventually, in 1906 the number of players in a team was reduced to thirteen and an orderly play-the-ball, whereby a tackled player had to get to his feet and roll the ball behind him with his foot, was introduced. These two changes completed the break from the playing rules of rugby union and marked the birth of rugby league as a distinct sport with its own unique rules.

Less than a year after these fundamental rule changes, the NU made its most important breakthrough when the game was established in New Zealand and Australia. Led by A. H. Baskerville, a New Zealand touring team dubbed 'the professional All Blacks' came to Britain in September 1907, to be followed the next year by Australia. The success of these tours was crucial in giving the NU a sense of national, and imperial, importance and the subsequent importation of Antipodean star players gave the game a unique cosmopolitan cachet. In 1910 the first British touring team visited Australia and New Zealand, helping to consolidate the sport in those countries and establish a cycle of reciprocal tours that set a template for the sport for the rest of the century.

By 1910 the NU had not only evolved into a separate and distinct sport but it had also developed a culture based on the perceived virtues of the industrial north of England. Its values had originally been drawn from those of Gladstonian

Liberalism, with its supposed preference for the 'masses' against the 'classes', and had merged in the early 1900s with a non-political social democratic worldview, in much the same way as Labourism was derived from the earlier liberalism. The NU was overtly egalitarian, based on its birth in opposition to the exclusivity of the RFU. It was intensely parochial, a significant factor in its failed attempts at expansion in Wales, the South West, the Midlands and the North East. And it staked out its territory in the nation's life by laying claim to be a representative of the democratic 'true' England of the overlooked and ignored ordinary people. This was demonstrated in the common northern saying of the time, 't' best in t' Northern Union', a phrase that carried with it the implication that the best in the Northern Union was the best that existed anywhere, regardless of what those in the Southern establishment thought. Although the root cause of its split with rugby union had been class, the NU's restricted geography meant that it would always be seen as 'the northern game' and inevitably identified with the mines, mills and manufacturing industries of the region, by both the majority of its own supporters and the world at large.

As the First World War approached, the gulf between the two forms of rugby had never been wider. Played and watched overwhelmingly by members of different classes, rugby had become a microcosm of the social divisions between the classes in British society. Rugby union's purity as a middle-class amateur game was symbolised in 1909 by the opening of its new headquarters at Twickenham, situated in the leafy professional suburbs of southwest London where its very inaccessibility seemed to underline its exclusivity. In contrast, and no less emblematically, it seemed appropriate that the NU's greatest team of the age belonged to the town that had given birth to the game. Led by Harold Wagstaff, Huddersfield assembled a side that combined native northern talent, Welsh imports and Antipodean stars. Hailed as 'the Empire Team of All Talents', in the four years up to 1915 Huddersfield finished top of the Championship table every season, won the Challenge Cup twice and the Yorkshire Cup three times. They played the game in a fast, open style that made the fullest use of the opportunities provided by the NU's rules, developing new tactics – such as 'scientific obstruction', whereby the passer of the ball continued his run after releasing the ball in order to attract defenders, and a reliance on the power of the pass rather than the kick – which moved the game far beyond the static set-pieces of its origins. It was no accident that the metaphors and adjectives most commonly used to describe the team were those of science and industry, as exemplified by a 1924 description of the side:

There was an absolute understanding between all parts of a perfectly working machine which resulted in the most audacious and unexpected movements being carried out with a precision that left the opposing defence aghast. Fast and clever three-quarters were served by halves whose brains were ever working at high pressure behind forwards who, as occasion demanded, could play the traditional scrummaging game or convert themselves into temporary three-quarters and handle the ball.¹⁶

For spectators whose day-to-day lives were based on synchronised, collective labour of the town's textile mills, the Huddersfield side was the embodiment of working-class industrial collectivity at play.

There was also something almost totemic about Wagstaff himself, in his achievements, his reputation, and the respect in which he was universally held. Even his name was quintessentially northern, seemingly designed to emphasise the flat vowel sounds of Yorkshire and Lancashire. And of course the aitch was rarely sounded – he was 'Arold, not Harold. 'I am a Northern Union man all the way through', he declared in the opening sentence of a series of autobiographical articles published in 1934, 'and I was suckled in the Northern Union game.' Born in 1891 in Holmfirth, he made his debut for the local amateur side, Underbank Rangers, aged fourteen and the following season scored their first try under the new thirteen-a-side rules in September 1906. Two months later he signed as a professional for Huddersfield, aged fifteen years and 175 days, then the youngest ever. Two years later he made his debut in representative football for Yorkshire. A few weeks after, he made his England debut against the 1908 Kangaroos. Eighteen months later, at the age of just nineteen, he was appointed captain of Huddersfield, a post he was to hold for the next fifteen years. Aged twenty-two, he was made captain of the national side.

These leadership qualities were nowhere more apparent than on the 1914 England tour to Australia and New Zealand. The tour repeated the huge promotional and financial success of the 1910 tour but it also acquired a mythic status in rugby league because of one game: the third and deciding test match at Sydney on 4 July 1914. It had originally been scheduled for Melbourne in August but the New South Wales Rugby League had unilaterally changed the date and venue to maximise its profits. The English management protested that it would be their third test match in seven days and that five first-team players were injured, but to no avail. From home, the NU's Emergency Committee simply instructed the tourists to play. 'More honour if you win', read the telegram.¹⁷ As the kick-off approached, tour manager John Clifford addressed the players:

You are playing in a game of football this afternoon, but more than that, you are playing for Right versus Wrong. You will win because you have to win. Don't forget that message from home: England expects every one of you to do his duty.

Leading 9–3 at half-time, the English were reduced to just ten men within minutes of the re-start. Amazingly, in a second half that lasted fifty-four minutes owing to stoppages for injuries, they scored a further try and held on to win 14–6.¹⁸

Dutifully aware of imperial precedent, the Australian sporting press dubbed the match the 'Rorke's Drift Test', in favourable comparison to the rearguard action fought by a hundred British troops in South Africa against King Cetshwayo's Zulu armies in January 1879.¹⁹ From Sydney, *The Referee's* football correspondent J. C. Davis wrote that 'Wagstaff, always a great player, that day became *the ubiquitous*,

and the King of the game ... Here, there and everywhere, all the time he was doing the work of half-a-dozen men. Wagstaff the Great.' Wagstaff's Huddersfield and England team-mate Douglas Clark, who was forced to leave the field through injury, noted simply that 'Harold was the man'.²⁰

But by the time the team arrived back in England on 26 September its feats had all but been forgotten. On 4 August Britain had declared war on Germany. Warfare was no longer a metaphor for sporting endeavour but a bloody reality. As the tourists disembarked from their ship at Plymouth, three players who were Army reservists rushed off to join their regiments. As they left, Leeds full-back Billy Jarman spoke for all three when he told the press, 'I am hoping to gain as good honours [on the battlefield] as we have done in Australia and my prayer is that I may come safely back to my wife and children and to take part again in a sport I dearly love.'²¹

Like those of millions of other young men whose lives were swept away in the ensuing slaughter, Billy Jarman's prayer was ignored.

Chapter I

Rugby league and the First World War

Like the authorities of all sports, it took the NU General Committee some time to respond to the outbreak of war. When it met on 11 August it provisionally decided to continue with the season. This initial response to continue with the season was taken before militarist hysteria had fully gripped the country. But by September, professional football of whatever code was under severe pressure to suspend its activities while the nation was at war. The Football Association became a favourite target of the anti-football campaigners, despite the fact that the War Office had declared itself 'favourable to the continuation of football'.¹ In London, the *Evening News* stopped the publication of its football edition and newspapers were full of letters condemning those who continued to play. 'A Soldier's Mother' writing to the *Yorkshire Post* captured the spirit of those who called for an end to football: 'If a Zeppelin were to hover over football grounds in England and drop a few bombs amongst the idle loafers gathered there, then perhaps, and I feel not until then, would those shirkers wake up to a sense of their duty to their King and their country.'² Regardless of the propaganda of the national and local newspapers, there were many who thought the continuation of football would be good for morale: an editorial in *Athletic News* argued that sport

will assist to keep the body fit and the mind calm until such time as right is vindicated. Courage, determination and patience are demanded of non-combatants, and sport tends to the development of these virtues. Let us not hastily give up that which has served a free people so well.³

Such arguments did not stop those who clamoured for an end to football from claiming the moral high ground, with RFU spokesmen occupying its most elevated reaches. RFU secretary Rowland Hill claimed that the FA Council 'had allowed one of the greatest sports in the world to be solely and entirely governed by commercial principles.'⁴ Yorkshire Rugby Union official James Miller felt that 'playing fields were being desecrated at the present time' and that 'it was necessary to compel those who idled around the streets – those shirkers and bullet-funkers – to join the ranks.'⁵ The references to shirkers indicated the underlying class prejudice at the heart of much of this criticism and Miller had little hesitation in pointing an accusing finger, regretting

that members of other football bodies had not responded in a like manner. It seems to me that a hot blush of crimson must come into the faces of those footballers who remained at play when others went abroad to fight their battles for them.⁶

In fact, the NU was no less patriotic than the RFU. Joseph Platt, the NU secretary, had declared that it was 'the bounden duty of every player as well as every football enthusiast of suitable age and capacity to give his best service to the nation' but its decision-making machinery lagged behind events. It was not until 8 September that its governing General Committee met in Manchester to discuss the clamour for the football codes to suspend operations. Taking a lead from the FA, the meeting unanimously passed a resolution stating that

matches be played as usual, as it is impossible for all men to take up active war service, and it is thought unwise to have no relaxation from the more serious objects of life. ...

all clubs be asked to encourage their players to join the army for active service, unless their employment is such that by not doing so they equally serve the country's welfare.

The committee also recommended that clubs provide facilities for enlistment at matches and that they should not sign new players from outside of their immediate districts.⁷ In fact, the decision to continue playing did nothing to deter its players from enlisting in droves.⁸ The Manchester district league was decimated after only three weeks of the war owing to a huge loss of players. In early September the St Helens league suspended activity for the duration after losing virtually all of its players to the forces; over 70 per cent of eligible men had joined up following Lord Derby's personal recruitment drive in the town. In Bradford, the local league was reduced to just four sides and numerous other amateur NU sides simply stopped playing. At a professional level, every club lost men to the army. Runcorn shed almost all of its playing staff as twenty-three players volunteered. At Oldham, the club doctor re-enlisted as a colonel in the 10th Manchester Regiment and was allowed to address the players on their patriotic duty; nearly all enlisted, including the club secretary A. J. Swann. Swinton and Broughton Rangers both offered their grounds to the military and Wigan reserved one stand for free admission to men who had signed up. The NU appears to have escaped the criticism directed at soccer clubs that they were insufficiently supportive of attempts to recruit at matches, although there are few records of any recruitment actually taking place at NU grounds. By April 1915, Joe Platt could announce that 1,418 amateur and professional NU players had enlisted.⁹

Nevertheless, the pattern of volunteering did differ markedly between the NU and the RFU. In general, men in white-collar occupations and the professions enlisted earlier and more enthusiastically than the working classes. Recruitment of workers in textiles areas, which were severely affected by the sudden interruption to international trade, was particularly low, although miners, the NU's other

major industrial constituency, had a higher percentage of volunteers than most working-class occupations. The low levels of family allowances paid to soldiers and the well-known delays in making the payments were also a disincentive to working men enlisting. As *Athletic News* pointed out, unlike the usually single and often financially independent young men of rugby union, many working-class footballers could 'not afford to throw their wives and families on the fickle charities of the public by enlisting'.¹⁰

But even if the NU had wanted to follow rugby union and abandon the season there were other factors to take into consideration. As Hunslet president Joe Lewthwaite explained, 'It must be borne in mind too that football is a business concern in many cases. What would be said if works were closed down? Football is run largely on commercial lines. If the grounds are closed, will the landlord forego rent, and the authorities their rates?'¹¹ Although the builder of Hunslet's new stand publicly offered to forego his £2,500 payment until the end of the war in response to Lewthwaite's rhetorical question, the reality was that the fortunes of the game at the professional level were almost entirely tied to its commercial success.

This became clear almost as soon as the season started. By the first week of October there was already concern that attendances at matches had fallen to half those of 1913. Similarly dramatic decreases at soccer matches had already led to the Football League proposing a cut in players' wages for the duration. On 8 October NU official John Houghton wrote to clubs noting that 'the past five weeks shows a marked falling off in gate receipts and members' subscriptions, the average income being reduced by as much as 50 per cent', and recommending that each club discuss with its players the need to reduce wages and costs. Houghton feared that the game's poorer sides could not survive the fall in gate receipts and that 'the loss of four or five clubs would so materially cripple the League that it is felt that the continued existence of the League would be in serious jeopardy'.¹²

Although there were some positive responses to what was a non-binding request – Keighley players agreed to a 50 per cent pay cut 'until better days arrive' – commercial reality dictated that the bigger clubs simply continued to pay their players at pre-war levels while the weaker clubs continued to struggle. Faced with an impending financial crisis and a desire to demonstrate that professional NU players were making sacrifices for the war effort, a special meeting of clubs was called for 20 October. The attendees heard that only one club, Halifax, had not seen a decline in gate receipts. Crowds at both Leeds and Hunslet had fallen by a half, Wigan season-ticket holders had fallen by two-thirds, Hull's turnover had fallen by almost £700 compared to the previous season and St Helens season-ticket sales had collapsed from £420 in 1913 to just £19. By sixteen votes to five, the meeting imposed a wage cut of 25 per cent, made similar cuts to referees' fees and ordered all clubs to report players' wages levels and the savings made from the cuts.¹³

The decision was met with uproar from players with the leading clubs. Within days Wigan, Halifax and Huddersfield players declared themselves 'keenly opposed'

to the wage cut and in response the Wigan committee appealed for a delay in its introduction. But the General Committee was unbending: 'it is, though with the utmost regret, thought better that unwilling players should be sacrificed' rather than concessions be made. In response, players at Wigan, Halifax, Huddersfield, Rochdale and Oldham went on strike on Saturday 7 November, while those at Bradford and York turned out under protest. The following Friday players' representatives from thirteen clubs met in Manchester to discuss the situation. They decided to play that Saturday's matches under protest and elected a four-man deputation to meet with League officials the following week.¹⁴

The four men elected represented the very cream of the Northern Union. As well as Harold Wagstaff there was Gwyn Thomas, who chaired the players' meeting; Thomas was a twenty-one-year-old full-back from Treherbert who had joined Wigan after captaining London Welsh while barely out of his teens. Charlie Seeling was a veteran Wigan forward from New Zealand who had toured Britain with both the 1905 union and the 1907 league All Blacks, while Leeds' Australian centre-threequarter Dinny Campbell was to prove one of his club's greatest players. On 17 November they met officials to outline their case. In fact, the clubs' resolve was already crumbling by the time the meeting took place. Earlier that week referees from Lancashire and Yorkshire had met and resolved to strike if the cuts to their fees were implemented, while fourteen clubs had called for an end to the arbitrary imposition of wage cuts on the grounds that it represented interference in their own business affairs.¹⁵ Some, such as York, were even supporting the players' demands. The following week yet another special general meeting of the clubs voted to rescind the wage cuts both for players and referees, deciding that 'any deduction in a player's wages shall be by mutual arrangement only between individual clubs and players'. It was also resolved to set up a relief fund for clubs in financial difficulty which would be funded by a levy on gate money and donations from clubs and players. Although the threat of a complete strike by players was now averted, the next fortnight saw strikes by Salford and Wakefield players against their clubs' attempts to cut wages.¹⁶

The season continued but enthusiasm drained away as war casualties mounted and it became clear that the conflict would not be over quickly. Increasing numbers of spectators and players joined up – Gwyn Thomas enlisted just before Christmas 1914 and, along with Wigan's Lance Todd, became one of a handful of NU players to receive a commission – while the longer working hours caused by the needs of war production in industrial areas meant that the opportunities to watch sport were drastically reduced. The season also became increasingly uncompetitive as Huddersfield simply destroyed the rest of the league, winning every competition open to them, scoring 103 points against 5 in the three finals they contested and losing only two games during the entire season. There was a palpable sense of relief when the season finally came to an end with Huddersfield's anticipated demolition of St Helens in the Challenge Cup final. The following month the NU voted to suspend operations for the duration, except for schoolboy and under-eighteen competitions. Widnes's John Smith proposed the suspension, asking if there was