

The rise and fall of the Rugby League Players' Union: 1979 – 2000

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ABSTRACT

The Rugby League Players' Union has existed for 25 years. However its existence has been marred by internal power struggles, competing organisations that divided the market, no recognition from the ruling body, no blanket support from the professional players' and poor management. The situation in rugby league was in distinct opposition with the happenings in other sports. During the late 1980's right through to the 1990's, the professionalism of athletes highlighted a number of vulnerabilities, associated with a player's ability to negotiate a fair days pay for a fair days work: and as a result players' in various leagues looked towards forming collective bodies to improve their overall working conditions and wages. In the sport of rugby league, however, players' were not looking for a collective organisation to join; they were looking for avenues to end their membership of a collective organisation. Player support for a collective organisation in the sport of rugby league was in decline and it seemed that in 2000 the players' union would no longer have the membership support or an executive in place to continue its original objectives. This paper will discuss the rise and fall of the players' union in the period of 1979 to 2000 and evaluate the reasons why the players' union was marred with negativity during this time.

Introduction

The formation of the Association of Rugby League Professionals, has been argued to have eventuated from a meeting called by Arthur Beetson which was held at the Balmain Leagues club, although the date of the meeting is not clear, the first document was published on the 19th May 1979 relating to a future meeting and the functions of its members. However, on 2 June 2004, a photograph emerged that was taken in 1972, showing the likes of Jack Gibson, (who is argued to be one of the primary founders of modern rugby league in Australia and around the world), in a group photo titled the Rugby League Players' Union. The photo had been in the possession of Jack Gibson, who thought that it should be handed over to the current President of the Association, Tony Butterfield, as a sign that rugby league players' were not only the first players' association in Australia, but are now the only players' association registered as a trade union. This paper argues that from its inception in 1979 to its deregistration in 2001, the Association of Rugby League Professionals, otherwise known as the players' union, has failed to function as a united organisation, established for the sole reason of protecting the working conditions of their membership.

Methodology

When deciding on the most appropriate research methodology to employ, a number of factors need to be considered. Such considerations include, the purpose and significance of the study, the nature of the investigation and the type of information that needs to be acquired in order for the objectives of the research to be reached. In relation to this research, considerations relating to the information required are extended to deal with issues such as the role the researcher has in the sport being examined. As the main objective of this research will be to discuss the rise and fall of the players' union in a particular period of time, the case study methodology will be employed, as it "deals with a full variety of evidence – documents, artefacts, interviews and observations." (Yin, 1989, p.20).

Access to the records of the players' union will be in the form of documentary evidence, interviews, and archival documentation. However, the main source of information will come from participatory observation. This methodology will be in use due to the researchers role in the current players' union: that being the Rugby League Professionals Association (RLPA). The researcher has been involved with the RLPA from December 2000, and the President Mr Anthony Butterfield has given his consent for the use of all documentation that will aid and benefit the research.

Early days of the Players' Union

According to Jack Gibson, the union, in its original format in the early 1970s, met regularly, however it was “more of an informal get together by key players’ and coaches during that time to talk about what was happening. But the era was one on very little professionalism and as a result what players’ wanted was never granted by the governing body” (Interview with Jack Gibson, 14 July 2004). Gibson went to argue that “in the 1970s the public was suspicious of player payments because they thought that with payments came corruption: players’ betting on themselves or the opposition team, but when you think about it was more about the public view that these men were playing for fun with their mates on a Saturday or Sunday afternoon, and because of that any form of payment was inappropriate. The League caught on to this perception and ran with it for years. You know its interesting because until this day the League is so concerned with perception that they lose sight of what’s important...the players’ themselves”(Interview with Jack Gibson, 14 July 2004).

Gibson’s view was discussed and Adair and Vamplew (1997) who went on to say that “in some quarters it was maintained that it (payment of players’) would lead those who did nothing else but sport into idle and worthless lives”(Adair & Vamplew, 1997, p.30). This argument has continually plagued rugby league. It was evident during the Super League and Australian Rugby League (ARL) war in the 1990’s, as well as during what’s become known as the “funny season”. The funny season refers to contractual negotiations and player signings after the 30 June every season. The public perception of player incomes exceeding player worth is a concept that certain sections of the public as well as the media will never forgo, and players’ have had to come to terms with this. Luke Priddis at a meeting between the Rugby League Professionals Association (which is the current name given to the players’ union) and the National Rugby League held on 13 July 2004 argued that the “days of players’ earning a steak sandwich and a can of coke are long gone, and if people think that guys are going to put their bodies on the line week in week out for that they are kidding themselves”. Mark McLinden reinforced this sentiment when he argued “our salaries today need to look after us and our families for years to come” (Meeting 13 July 2004). These views of players’ have been in existence for over twenty-five years and it was upon these views that a Rugby League Players’ Union was conceived.

Registration and the 1980’s

The first Association of Rugby League Professionals was registered in the NSW state jurisdiction on 28 November 1980 under the Trade Union Act 1881 and 26 February 1985 under the Industrial Arbitration Act 1940. The registration of the association, however, did not automatically imply that it would seek to represent its members under the tribunal system, nor did the total number of members. The association failed to use the tribunal system for approximately ten years. Documentation purporting to the action of the players’ union between its registration in 1980 and 1990 can be regarded as scarce. This lack of documentation can be due to several reasons, including poor record keeping or little to no representation of its membership. Both these views are appropriate as an undated document relating to the Annual General Meeting of the players’ union on 2 February 1990, refers to the failure of the ‘old executive’ in handing over records and funds to the newly elected executive. The document also refers to pending legal action to obtain such documents; however further documentation dealing with such matters has not been unearthed.

During the decade in question player dissatisfaction over their salaries was evident and discussed heavily in the media. In the early 1980’s the League tried to implement a payment system which would limit the payments to star players’ such as Parramatta’s Ray Price and Michael Cronin, Cronulla’s Steve Rodgers, Canterbury’s Greg Brentnall, St George’s Graeme Wynn, and Manly’s Max Krilich and Alan Thompson, to twenty thousand dollars a year. At no time during this matter did the players’ union involve itself in the representation of its membership. Players’ were left to do their own bidding, in terms of their monetary worth. Steve Rodgers (who is now the Chief Executive Officer of the Cronulla Sharks) argued that “the senior players’, without the aid of the union took our case to the New South Wales Rugby League (NSWRL) and our pleas fell on deaf ears. Thinking back the union was pretty hopeless, that is until the draft case happened. From the talk in the sheds at the time, the union then may have helped one or two guys but any

more than that I would doubt it. Some of the boys were really starting to question the motives of the union and that type of talk was common. What some of us ended up doing was meeting in a pub and talking about what we could do, but at the end of the day a group of players' with very little business sense and negotiating sense could do next to nothing. That was the job of the union...but they were hardly ever seen around" (Interview 3 March 2003).

Introduction and defeat of the Player Draft

In 1990 documentation regarding the action of the players' union was heavily centred on the NSWRL's intention to introduce a player draft system. In a letter dated to John Qualye (General Manager of the NSWRL) the President of the Players' Association, Kevin Ryan, argued that "the players' association does not merely have reservations about the internal draft – the association is positively opposed." (Letter dated 12 July 1990). Ryan went on to argue that the NSWRL needed to heed the opposition of the union and its membership. However, Qualye argued that the league was confident that the player draft was not an unreasonable restraint of trade, nor was it in breach of any legislation both at the state and federal level. On 23 July 1993, the NSWRL unanimously endorsed the draft system and was in the process of incorporating the relevant rules into the operations manual of the league.

A Press Release was issued by the players' union, which detailed that a player meeting would be held on 11 August 1990 at the South Sydney Leagues Club, to outline to the players' the legal advice the union had received regarding the implementation of a player draft. The advice received centred around two options: one of which was legal the other being industrial.

It would seem that the introduction of the draft was a catalyst for player unification: but more importantly it was the catalyst for the players' union to represent their players' on a matter that was critical for their membership. The actions of the players' union formed a view among players' that their union was strong and truly representative of their interests. Tony Butterfield, the current President of the Rugby League Professionals Association (RLPA), was playing for the Newcastle Knights at the time of the draft controversy. He argues that the legal challenge showed that the "union was actually in existence. They really stuck with the challenge and at times when the players' seemed to lose sight of why we were doing this, the union was there to set us straight. I remember the words of Kevin Ryan at the time: he kept saying that rugby league is a team game so we should be used to sticking together, and history will show that not only did we stick together, but we won" (Interview 10 August 2003).

The Federal Court ruled in favour of the rugby league players', as Wilcox J questioned the motives of the league administration. In his decision he asked the following question: "How in a free society can anyone justify a regime which requires a player to submit such intensely personal decisions to determination by others?" (1991: 103 ALR 319). This argument was significant to the players' as their place of residence would be determined by a third party: as Butterfield claimed "if I was an 18 year old single guy looking for a start in rugby league it wouldn't have affected me as much. But if I was a 25-30 year old with a wife and kids, it's a different story. The family would have been uprooted whenever and wherever the league deemed appropriate and that was not on!" (Interview 10 August 2003).

Since the registration of the players' union in 1980, representing its membership has been scarce, however the introduction of the draft seemed to have changed that. The players' were united, and for the first time the union on behalf of its membership argued that the reduction in players' earnings and the coercive nature of the league administration could be challenged and defeated. The union argued that players' needed to be treated like human beings and sportsmen, not like chattels or serfs. This was the central aim of the players' union during the draft challenge: however, one could argue that this should have been the main objective of the players' union in all its operations. One of the major weaknesses of the players' union was that it was reactive rather than proactive, and the draft highlights this weakness. It was the players' who first questioned the actions of the league administration and then took their concerns to the union who then acted on their behalf. This weakness however, was not rectified by the defeat of the player draft: it was a weakness that continued to plague the players' union. Once the decision was handed down, the players' union again went into hibernation, awaiting the next labour market restriction to be introduced by the league administration, so that a challenge could be mounted.

The deficiency of the union from 1980 – 1990 was that it never portrayed itself as a professional organisation that should have intervened in a number of matters that resulted in the introduction of the draft. It can be argued that the draft would have never eventuated as a concept, had the players' union worked effectively and efficiently in the representation of its membership, while at the same time shown itself to be a force that had the ability to challenge the coercive behaviour of rugby league administrators.

Affiliation with the NSW Labour Council

In 1991 the association affiliated with the Labour Council of New South Wales, and as a result changed its name to the Rugby League Players' Union. The union now had a constitution and structure in place. As well this, membership of the union was close to 600. Members comprised from three grades, including first grade, second grade and the under 21's (The Australian, 7 September 1994). Such a move had come at a time when the players' union was victorious over the player draft, and sought to cement a relationship with the NSW Labour Council, who played a key role in the draft case.

With the aid of the NSW Labour Council, the players' union regarded their position as the true representatives of rugby league players' as cemented into the fabric of the game. However, those involved in the game, and key figures that were no longer playing questioned the motives and actions of the players' union in 1992. Arthur Beetson, who aided in the formation of the players' union argued that "our aims were simple enough, we wanted players' to have a say in what was happening in the game – their game. It only seemed fair that players' could give their view on such matters as the promotion and rules of rugby league" (Article on 12 February 2002). Beetson went on to state "there were things we wanted to improve...we wanted better conditions for players' and their wives or girlfriends on match day. In the bad old days it was almost an extra training session for many of the players' to walk to the ground from their car space – sometimes it could be up to a kilometre...after the trek they had to wait as their better half had to queue to pay to get through the turnstiles...We believed that we could improve things under the banner of a players' union, and in many ways we did. But somewhere along the way the plot has been hopelessly lost. The goings on lead to last week's Nissans Sevens was a nightmare. Legal action, talking of aborting the tournament and other demands the players' union thundered out were ludicrous" (Article on 12 February 2002).

Sports branch of the Media Entertainment and Arts Alliance (MEAA)

The Media Entertainment Arts Alliance (MEAA) was registered in May 1992, which eventuated from an amalgamation of the Australian Journalists Association, Actors Equity of Australia, and the Australian Theatrical and Amusement Employees Association (Markey & Tootell, 1994, p.67). Upon its establishment a letter was sent to Kevin Ryan from Christopher Warren, the Joint Federal Secretary of the MEAA, seeking the commencement of discussions for the eventual amalgamation of the players' union with the MEAA. It can be argued that the involvement of the MEAA in rugby league was problematic and brought about player apathy. Although this was not evident during the amalgamation period, it became extremely evident from 1997. The MEAA was convinced that the amalgamation would be effortless, however, the amalgamation process was nothing of the sought. Instead of being dealt with amicably, it was finalised by a decision of the Full Bench of the Australian Industrial Relations Commission on 2 November 1995: three years after discussions had commenced between the two parties. Informal meetings were held between the MEAA and the players' union from September to December 1992, however the first formal meeting took place on Tuesday 19 January 1993.

The MEAA was adamant in progressing the amalgamation and to have the process finalised by mid-1993. Meetings continued to take place in February 1993 to resolve the outstanding issues and to formalise the relationship between the two parties. During this period there was no evidence that the players' union was dissatisfied with the process, or more importantly angered over the conduct of the MEAA. Kevin Ryan was attending meetings and even forwarding the finances of the players' union to the MEAA. On 10 June 1993 a cheque for the amount of \$55 000 was forwarded to the MEAA from Kevin Ryan. The reason for this payment was specified in a letter dated 18 May 1993 to Kevin Ryan from Christopher Warren, which stated: "I propose that...\$55

000 be transferred to the name of the Rugby League Players' Union Branch of the Alliance. This would enable us to guarantee the employment of a liaison officer for a period of 12 months and assist us in meeting other costs. Long-term employment, however, will depend on the ability to extract membership fees from players'." (Letter from Christopher Warren, dated 18 May 1993) On 14 June 1993, an article appeared in *The Daily Telegraph Mirror* titled "Players' in Search of Muscle". The article referred to the player unions' decision to merge with the MEAA. The Australian Rugby League Chairman, Ken Arthurson, and the NSWRL General Manger, John Qualye, expressed their bewilderment at the merger. Ryan claimed that the decision was made to guarantee players' access to the use of industrial player: a comment, which Arthurson refuted to the point where he alleged that the membership did "not back the move"(14 June 1993, *The Daily Telegraph Mirror*). Arthurson went on to warn the players' in the article by stating: "I want to sound a note of caution to all players' and the union: don't kill the goose that laid the golden egg...all these things look and sound very rosy but the clubs are not bottomless pits of wealth and the money has to come from somewhere.... very few players' are part of the players' union anyway and they are negotiating their own deals these days and doing very well"(14 June 1993, *The Daily Telegraph Mirror*).

Upon reviewing the comments made by Arthurson, it could be perceived that the governing body of rugby league in Australia were anxious over the new industrial power the players' union would have with the amalgamation with the MEAA. This would have been brought about by the unions previous success in the draft case, as well as their ability to seek payment for players' participating in the sevens tournament. However, what was to proceed in the following months demonstrated that the assumption made by Arthurson was in fact correct.

Dismissal of Peter Moscatt

In November 1993 the relationship between the MEAA and the players' union showed signs of discontent. This was highlighted between the relationship between the President Kevin Ryan and the Liaison Officer Peter Moscatt. Moscatt was originally employed as the liaison officer for the players' union prior to the involvement of the MEAA, and once the amalgamation took place his employment was transferred to be administered by the Alliance. From October 1993 Ryan became aware that Moscatt was holding meetings with Club CEO's to discuss the standard playing contract. Letters sent between Moscatt and CEO's began to surface in late November 1993, as Ryan was asked to comment on the discussions taking place. In a letter between Geoff Carr, the CEO of the St George Rugby League Football Club and Peter Moscatt, it was evident through the detail of changes to contract clauses that the discussions had been taking place for sometime. Although Moscatt viewed this as part of his role, Ryan did not. On 2 December 1993 Ryan advised Moscatt that his conduct had been in breach of the job description that he had been issued with when he agreed to be employed as a liaison officer, in which the key aspects of the role centred upon the "stimulation of recruitment with the goal of making membership an automatic, widely accepted practice upon joining a club...and the promotion of the role of the union and its place in, and adaptability to, the changing environment of professional sports people" (Rugby League Players' Association Liaison Officer Job Description).

Moscatt responded to Ryan's letter by stating "Dear Kevin, I received your letter on the 7 December 1993 concerning my responsibilities. I will be on leave from Christmas to January 7 1994" (Letter 8 December 1993). Not only did the reply fail to address the concerns of Ryan but also it infuriated the President of the players' union to the point where a meeting of the players' union executive was convened on Thursday 16 December 1993 to discuss the nature of Peter Moscatt's employment. A letter was forwarded to Moscatt on 13 December 1993 requiring his attendance at the meeting, and further advised him that he was entitled to bring a legal representative or Chris Warren from the MEAA.

Moscatt sought legal advice from Craddock, Murray and Neumann Solicitors who forwarded a letter to Ryan on the afternoon of the hearing. The letter argued that Ryan had refused Moscatt an adjournment, which would have enabled him to seek full and proper legal advice, and as a result Ryan was offending the principles of natural justice (Letter dated 16 December 1993). On 16 December 1993, the executive resolved to terminate Peter Moscatt's services as liaison officer, despite the reservations expressed on behalf of Moscatt.

The executive believed that they have proper and unarguable grounds for summary dismissal for the dereliction of duty and the decision to terminate Peter's services was taken accordingly (Letter dated 16 December 1993). Ryan informed the MEAA of the dismissal and further advised that Moscatt no longer had any authority to act as the player's liaison officer. This included liaising with players' or representing players' in negotiations with clubs or the league. Ryan went on further to state that all materials and information pertaining to the office of Peter Moscatt should be returned immediately. However, the issue that was of more significance to the players' union was request by the executive seeking the return of \$30 000 from the \$55 000 that was originally forwarded to the MEAA. The executive argued that due to the dismissal of Moscatt the unused funds should no longer be in the possession of the MEAA.

The MEAA however, did not view the situation as the players' union did. In a letter dated 21 December 1993 from Turner Freeman Solicitors to the players' union, it stated that as there was now an arrangement between the two parties where "all income from fees or otherwise will become income of the Alliance, unless existing arrangements require income to be paid to the players' union. If income is paid to the union, it will be transferred to the Alliance. All existing assets and liabilities of the players' union will be transferred to the Alliance" (Letter dated 21 December 1993). The letter, however, was not concerned over the conduct of the union in their dealing with Moscatt, nor did it question the players' unions' authority in the matter, their only concern was of assets. The letter went on further to state that the MEAA had become aware that the financial takings of the union was approximately \$115 000, and as the union had only forwarded \$55 000, the MEAA was considering legal action over the remaining \$60 000. It became evident in further correspondence between the MEAA and the players' union that the MEAA were in no way obliged to follow the instructions of the players' union and therefore not only refused to accept the dismissal of Moscatt, but sought to take away the autonomy it had allowed the players' union in the formation of their relationship. "Among the policies adopted by the Federal Executive is a national staff agreement. Peter Moscatt is employed under that agreement. That agreement provides that no termination shall be harsh, unjust or unreasonable. Accordingly I direct you to take no actions, which terminate or purport to terminate Peter Moscatt's employment." (Undated Letter Kevin Ryan).

Terminating Relationship with MEAA

Upon these actions Ryan took it upon himself to not only continue with the termination process, but to begin proceedings to terminate the relationship between the MEAA and the players' union. A letter was sent to the membership of the players' union from Ryan on 22 December 1993, which stated: "The players' union had terminated the services of the players' liaison officer, Peter Moscatt, as he has failed to carry out his duties. In addition, it now appears that Peter has been attempting to enrol players' directly into the Media Alliance Group which now turns out to be a rival union attempting to take over the players' union and gobble up the player unions funds. I must let you know as members that it has been strongly rumoured in legal circles that the Media Alliance is in severe financial trouble and yesterday an attempt was made to force the Players' Union to transfer all funds and all players' membership fees top the Alliance" (Letter to players' dated 22 December 1993).

It was upon this matter that the Ryan sought to terminate the relationship with the MEAA, which eventuated in the establishment of two rival unions. This course of action, by Ryan, was reinforced in a letters sent to delegates 29 December 1993, outlining the existence of two unions. Ryan encouraged delegates to speak to players' at their respective clubs to advise them that it was imperative for them to remain with the Ryan run players' union and not to pay fees top the MEAA.

The rivalry between the two groups heightened in March 1994 when there were letters exchanged between the NSWRL, the MEAA and "Ryan's union" on the matter of representation. On 11 March 1994 Ryan responded to a number of assertions, made to John Qualye of the NSWRL, which had been made by Peter Moscatt, who was now the Secretary of the Rugby League Players' Union Section of the MEAA. Ryan argued vehemently that there was no amalgamation between the Media Alliance and the Association of Rugby League Professionals, and that the players' union was the only organisation registered Federally or in New South Wales that represented rugby league players' exclusively. Ryan also emphasised that the players' union, namely himself,

have been most concerned for player's rights and would continue to be. During this time Ryan focussed his attention on convincing the governing body that it was his organisation that was the sole representative of players', and that any issues relating to the welfare of the players' should only be discussed with his organisation.

Coinciding with Ryan's efforts was a plethora of player discontent with his actions and dismissal of Peter Moscatt, which was led by Simon Gillies, who was playing for the Canterbury Bulldogs in the 1994 playing season. Gillies argued that Ryan "acted harshly and heartlessly in dismissing" Moscatt "particularly in the week before Christmas" (Letter dated 20 March 1994). Gillies also advised Ryan that he believed that at all times Moscatt acted for the benefit of all players', and as a result should be reinstated. Should this not occur the players' would unite and challenge the authority of both Ryan and the union he managed. Ryan seemed to ignore the views and concerns of a number of players' and as a result, members began to resign from the Ryan run players' union and were seeking membership with the Moscatt organised MEAA.

Such actions by Ryan began to impact on the membership negatively. Players' who were members of the union were questioning the continuance of their membership, and those who were not members did not feel compelled to join. It was evident that player apathy was a direct result of the executive of the players' union poorly managing and poorly addressing the concerns of the players'. Ryan's inability to accept the amalgamation of the players' union with the MEAA, allowed the governing body to move forward on its own agenda, in particular in changing the standard playing contract. That is, the internal tensions between the MEAA and Ryan did not allow either party to fully and functionally represent the needs of their membership. The matter of coverage eventuated into a war of propaganda. Ryan continuously argued that should the NSWRL deal with the MEAA, then they should ready themselves for a confrontationist relationship..."perhaps the most serious reason for clubs to hesitate before taking a short step into a long maze is the fact that the MEAA is polyglot – a hydra-headed body fighting on many political and industrial fronts. For example in one of its many current disputes the MEAA is engaged in a major mega-buck confrontation with the Media Barons and the Federal Government in respect of copyright. – An intricate issue that could have serious consequences for Rugby League Club promotion (remember every promotion involves the written or broadcast word of an MEAA or potential MEAA member)" (Letter dated 22 March 1993).

This approach by Ryan showed that, as an individual, he was concerned more with his position of power, than the needs of his membership. He demonstrated to the governing body, the clubs and the players' that he was unsuitable for the position of President of the players' union, and more importantly was unsuitable in dealing with the major issues that concerned his membership: the changes to the standard playing contract. On 4 March 1994 the MEAA sought assistance from the Australian Industrial Relations Commission, so that a decision could be made about which organisation was the true representative of rugby league players'. Senior Deputy President Polites handed down the decision on 26 July 1995 [Print M3828], which rejected arguments put forward by Ryan's player union that the MEAA rules only covered sport support staff rather than the athletes. This battle was both long running as well as damaging to the image of the players' union: whether it be the Ryan run organisation or the MEAA. However, the decision did not deter Ryan from appealing the decision.

The Full Bench of the Australian Industrial Relations Commission heard the appeal, and the decision was handed down on 2 November 1995. Vice President Ross, Deputy President Drake and Commissioner Larkin argued that in reaching their decision, they had taken into account the material submitted in the original proceedings, as well as new material submitted in the appeal proceedings.

The decision had concluded the public tension between the two rival unions, and there was a great deal of work done to conceal the non-public feud that continued. In saying that the Commission had ruled in favour of the MEAA, and that Ryan would have surrendered his position, was far from the truth. The MEAA Sports Branch under Moscatt was operating, and due to their official consent was moving forward with discussions with the governing body over the negotiation of an Award. Ryan, however, was still functioning as the president of the rival players' union: however his success in maintaining member interest through the protection of working conditions was non-existent.

On 17 September 1996 a letter from Tony Butterfield (who is now the President of the Rugby League Professionals Association) to Kevin Ryan stated the following: “due to the lack of enthusiasm from the rank and file, communication and enterprise from your paid officer and a virtually directionless future, I regrettably hereby give due notice of my intention to withdraw from my Honorary position of Senior Vice President of the Players’ Union along with my current membership. As Newcastle Knights Player representative it is my expressed responsibility to see that our players’ have a voice in the most forward thinking professional representative organisation available. At this stage this entity does not appear to be the Players’ Union.”(Letter dated 17 September 1996).

Ryan began to receive resignation of memberships consistently from November 1995 to November 1997. His role as the President of the Players’ Union was now one of insignificance, however, it was evident that his actions were solely responsible for his demise.

The end of the Players’ Union (MEAA)

On September 25 1997 the Industrial Relations Commission of New South Wales (IRC), issued a statement that Rugby League players’ would be governed by an award titled *The Rugby League Players’ Award*, which would set minimum standards for players’, which need to be complied with by both Super League and the Australian Rugby League (ARL).

Although the award came into affect from 1998 it had been anticipated for some time, as formal discussions had commenced in April 1992. However, as discussed earlier in this paper, the players’ union seemed more concerned with issues of coverage, the taking of membership fees, and the individual struggles of power, rather than establishing minimum wages and conditions for their membership, which were athletes participating in the sport of rugby league. The finalisation of an Award was one that the ARL and Super League, as well as the MEAA expected, as the AIRC would have taken action, due to the increase in the number of players’ challenging the validity of their employment contracts during the ARL / Super league War. The parties were given no choice but to negotiate an Award, which was seen to be fair and reasonable.

The MEAA regarded the players’ award as a victory, however since it came into affect in 1998, the MEAA failed to deal with clubs who were breaching the provisions that had been set down. Nor did the MEAA vary the Award, as various clubs no longer existed after the settlement of the Super League and ARL war. Due to their inability to deal with the concerns of their membership, as well as remain public in the eyes of their membership, players’ started to become disgruntled with the inactivity of the MEAA, and even though the players’ union continued to exist it was continuously losing members as well as failing to collect subscription monies from the various clubs. The union continued to be registered as a trade union, however on the 10 August 2001 the Commission deregistered the Rugby League Players’ Union.(AIRC discussions, 28 August 2002).

The MEAA was no longer interested in the representation of rugby league players’, through their sports branch, and as a result failed to comply with their reporting responsibilities under the Industrial Relations Act 1996 NSW. The Industrial Registrar had no choice but to deregister the union, an operation that was not challenged by the MEAA. A number of clubs agreed to the Award in order appease some players’ and eventually limit the role the MEAA would play in rugby league. From 1999 and through to September 2000 the vast majority of players’ had decided that they would no longer support the MEAA run players’ association. “The union guy would come in tell us what they can do for us, take our money and we would never see them again until more money was due. Guys just got sick and tired of them and we decided that we didn’t want to be apart of it anymore”. These sentiments were shared by the majority of players’, who believed that they would have a better chance of seeing tangible benefits if they “put their membership money on a horse to win at Randwick” (Player meetings January - March 2001).

Conclusion

This paper has shown that from 1979 the Rugby League Players' Union has failed to function as a united organisation, established for the sole reason of protecting the working conditions of their membership. The membership from 1979-2000 has never been stable, and this was due to the inability of the union to respond effectively to the concerns and needs of their membership, instead dealing with the hierarchies struggle for power. Although it has been argued that player apathy has always been present in the sport, this paper has shown that the player apathy was result of poor management by the players' union. Although they had a victory with the player draft in 1991, they were never truly representative, and at times worked against the wants of their members.

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 Letter to Club Chief Executives and John Qualye, dated 22 March 1993.
 Letter from Tony Butterfield to Kevin Ryan, dated 17 September 1996.

Intetviews

- Interview with Tony Butterfield, 10 August 2003.
 Interview with Tony Butterfield, 10 August 2003.
 Interview with Jack Gibson, 14 July 2004.
 Interview Steve Rodgers, Chief Executive Officer of the Cronulla Sharks: 3 March 2003.

