

Dan "Laddo" Davies and the 1917 Revolt

The 1917 season was the most tumultuous of any season in the history of Rugby League in Newcastle - and it all centred on talented West player "Laddo" Davies. So 1917 deserves its own "slot", and the remarkable year is summed up in the article below by Sean Fagan of RL1908.com. Such is the calibre of the player that "Laddo" Davies was named as a centre in West's "Team of the Century" as selected by George Piggford - quite an achievement from someone who played for West in those very early years.

The 1917 Story.....

Serious and dramatic days in 1917, centred around the NSWRL's suspension of a Newcastle footballer, resulted in the bulk of the Hunter region's clubs forming their own League.

The revolt it caused, in both the 'steel city' and in Sydney, led to serious talk of expanding the rival body state-wide, to directly compete with the NSWRL for control of the game.

The turmoil was triggered by the life-time ban imposed upon Newcastle's Dan Davies.

From the coal mining district of Lambton, the powerfully built young miner was affectionately known to all simply as "Laddo".

Of stocky Welsh heritage, Davies made his first grade debut as a centre/winger in 1915 for the Western Suburbs (West's) club in the Newcastle competition. His first visit to Sydney came later that season when he represented the "Northern Division" team against "Metropolitan" (City) at the Agricultural Ground in Moore Park.

In 1916 Davies was part of the West's team that won the premiership and the "Potter Shield", scoring and converting the winning try in the final match of the season to secure the title.

For his deeds, Davies became a favourite son to the local supporters. As luck would have it, Davies only took his place that day after being 'kidnapped' by club officials from a compulsory military training day. Though Australia did not have conscription during WW1, all young men were required to attend regular training camps. After the match Davies resisted the temptation to celebrate with his team mates, and immediately returned to the barracks.

The 1916 season was not without its own battles, with club's in Newcastle in conflict with the local administrators and the NSWRL over the sharing of gate-receipts. In one match West's players, including Davies, and their opponents from Easts, refused to take to the field until the League officials agreed to split the club shares evenly.



For Davies the discontent quickly became a non-issue as he was courted by Glebe officials, and was enticed to move to Sydney for the 1917 season to continue his rugby league career.

Mindful of how difficult it was for a young man to move from a small country town to the crowded tenements of inner-city Glebe, the "Dirty Reds" officials allowed Davies to settle with his relatives at nearby Annandale.

Though an adjacent suburb to working-class Glebe, Annandale was more of a middle-class single dwelling area, and had its own identity. In 1910, Annandale rugby union footballers had demanded the NSWRL allow them to form their own rugby league club, and refused to join with the already powerful Glebe.

Davies was aware of the NSWRL's requirement that all footballers must reside within their club's district, but the Glebe officials allayed his fears by saying that every club had one or two out-of-district players, and no one would make a fuss of it.

And no one did - until the two neighbouring clubs met for their annual derby.

Davies played in the Glebe team that won the day 26-5, scoring "a brilliant try". However, immediately afterwards, the Annandale club deposited a protest into the unexpectant laps of the NSWRL.

Trying to regularise the breach of the residential rules, Glebe officials prepared a declaration for Davies stating that he was residing within the district area, and an address was provided. "Laddo", having faith in his fellow club men, duly signed the document.

The NSWRL held their inquiry, which would have included statements from Annandale locals giving evidence of Davies' relatives residence and the toing and froing of the young man from the house.

Faced with indisputable evidence of where Davies was living, and that attempts were made to hide the truth rather than come clean, the NSWRL deducted the two competition points from Glebe for the win over Annandale.

However, worse was to come for Davies.

The League's President, James Joynton Smith, announced that Davies was banned for life from all rugby league.

Completely shattered by the scale of the punishment, Davies returned home to Lambton and took up work again in the mines. To a man, everyone in the Newcastle district was dismayed at the treatment meted out to their young star.

His Wests club and the local League officials fired in protests to the NSWRL, seeking the sentence to be lowered as Davies was no longer in Sydney. The NSWRL refused the budge, emphasising that the ban must be enforced, no matter where Davies was.

Meanwhile in Glebe, the entire first grade squad went on strike, including the famed Frank Burge and his brothers. Aiming their actions directly at the NSWRL for the ban placed on

Davies, and other decisions made against Glebe in the ensuing weeks, the "Dirty Reds" senior players refused to turn out against Balmain.

Unfearful of the threats of the Glebe men to stay on strike, the NSWRL suspended the entire first grade team. Three of the Burge brothers, including Frank, were banned until the start of the 1919 season - effectively an eighteen month suspension.

That set a wave of discontent into motion within many of the Sydney rugby league community, and murmurings of forming a rival League began to take shape.

The eruption soon came, but it was in Newcastle, not Sydney, where all the action took place.

Late in the 1917 season, Davies' team mates at Newcastle Wests refused to play against rivals Norths unless the banned footballer was allowed to take his place in the side. Despite the pleadings of the referee, both clubs found agreement and Davies, willingly, took to the field.

The occurrence was quickly reported to the NSWRL, who sent officials to Newcastle to investigate and act on the events. The outcome was that the NSWRL disqualified every club official in the Newcastle area, except those from Easts who remained aloof from the drama.

The result was the immediate formation of a rival League in Newcastle, comprising the Wests, Norths, Souths and Central clubs. Easts stayed under the NSWRL banner, playing matches against loosely formed clubs in Norths and Souths areas from remaining players.

The NSWRL dropped the hammer down again, disqualifying every footballer and official involved in the rebel competition.

Newcastle remained split for the next three seasons, until the bitterness resolved itself in 1920.

"Laddo" Davies continued his career, playing for Newcastle against the touring Englishmen in 1920, before retiring in 1923.

The angst in Hunter against the League officials in Sydney though, took much longer to dissipate.

References:

Bob Power, *The Saga of the Western Men*

Post Script : At West's Centenary Dinner held in 2010, Dan "Laddo" Davies was named as a centre in West's "Team of the Century". This team was selected by respected veteran Newcastle Sports writer, George Piggford