

# **Rosellas Rise to the Occasion**

**By Peter Sterling**

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I've been to many rugby league functions but few as enjoyable as last weekend's Western Suburbs anniversary.

In a celebration of 100 years as a foundation member of the Newcastle competition, the Rosellas gave an insight as to why they have developed into the most successful of organizations.

Despite 500 being in attendance it still managed to be a somewhat intimate evening, reflecting how close and tight the club continues to be. The warm relationship between past and present players and with officials was particularly obvious.

For someone who played his first game of rugby league as a six year old second rower just up the road at Raymond Terrace, I found the whole night to be a nostalgia trip.

It reminded me of a childhood that was spent heading to No 1 Sportsground for the weekend match of the day and listening Noel Harrison calling games on NBN at night.

That was also a time when, even though many of my heroes were running around for Manly in Sydney (sad. I know), most of them were part of the Newcastle comp – plenty were there in person on Saturday night.

Now I wasn't a West faithful – I was more a supporter of the Terrace Magpies on the local scene – however, I was a big fan of the likes of Peter Howlett, Mick Trypas, John Barber, John Hobby, Allan Dagwell and, of course, Father John Cootes.

When it came to other clubs there was plenty of admiration for Maitland, who were a formidable outfit at that time and won premierships titles in 1969 and 71.

I remember how excited I was to find out that my dad was doing some dental work for the great Terry Pannowitz and that we actually got to go around to his house one school night.

It has been very disappointing to watch the Pumpkin Pickers struggle for their existence after these heady days.

As part of the festivities respected league reporter George Piggford was given the unenviable task of sorting through the multitude of players who have worn the red, white and green jersey to determine a Team of the Century.

There were a criterion of number of games played but most important, it was a 17 man squad chosen on value given to the club.

Somehow George must have got the mix right, because it was received enthusiastically. It spanned Dan "Laddo" Davies, who began his career at West in 1915, through to Brett Cullen, who finished up in 2004.

The highest profile member was Johnny Raper, league Immortal and perhaps the greatest player to ever lace a boot. He was captain coach for three seasons after heading up from Sydney to continue the most illustrious of careers.

I told the story of how I'd been to Chook's 50<sup>th</sup> birthday at which his wife, Carol, had told of a near death experience. She said that she had nearly drowned one day and along the lines of what many believe her whole life flashed before her eyes. During this life threatening experience her whole life did pass before her and with tongue firmly planted in cheek she lamented that "John wasn't in it".

He continues to be the life of the party but I wouldn't surprise if he was seen around the streets of Newcastle early on Sunday morning "running out" the night before.

Raper's 1970 World Cup teammate John Cootes was as dapper as ever and still looks fit enough to pull on a boot. Along with Allan Buman and Dennis Ward, Cootes played Test football while representing the Rosellas. He was a superb athlete and an inspiration to plenty of us young players in our formative years.

So too Dennis Ward, who like Raper, came to Newcastle after enjoying plenty of success in the big smoke.

As a former Sea Eagle he was a particular favourite of mine and was part of one of rugby league's most infamous and controversial referring decisions.

In the 1972 World Cup the Australians took on France, and in a set move Ward chipped the ball back to the blind side where, in one of the most incredible efforts, Graeme Langlands dived full length to regather and "score" in the corner.

The French referee disallowed the try solely because he couldn't believe that anyone could physically achieve what Langlands had done, and possibly be on side. Instead of being duded by such a shocking call it would now be regarded as one of the greatest tries.

Possibly the biggest ovation of the night was afforded to hooker Allan Dagwell, the only man to play more than 300 first grade games for the club. He was the last player read out, cut the cake and given the distinction of being acknowledged as West's most valuable player in their history.

I recall what a big deal it was for him to be named for NSW for the 2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> games against Queensland in 1975.

In doing so he was given the nod in front of the lights of George Piggins and Elwin Walters. After meeting the man for the 1<sup>st</sup> time I decided that next time I was in his company, I would make sure Wendell Sailor was with me, to learn the meaning of the word humility.

It was quite surreal to leave the function on Saturday night to the strains of John Cootes on stage playing his guitar and singing the club song.

The last time I'd heard him sing was on my vinyl 45 titled "The Man in Black".

Now that's nostalgia.