

He iti hoki te mokoroa:
Māori Contributions to the Sport of Rugby League

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Abstract

The aim of this thesis is to explore the influences and contributions of Māori to the establishment and development of the sport of rugby league in New Zealand. The overarching question of this thesis is how have Māori influenced and contributed to the development of rugby league in New Zealand? This thesis examines the international social history of rugby league from the origins of rugby league as a sport following the split in rugby union in England through to the contemporary status of Māori within the game as an elite sport in New Zealand and overseas. By examining Māori involvement in rugby league it is my intention to place Māori at the centre of the explanation for the establishment and development, past and present, of the sport in New Zealand, and also globally.

While there have been some previous accounts of the affiliation between Māori and rugby league (Coffey and Wood, 2008; Greenwood, 2008; Falcous, 2007) this thesis compiles accounts from disparate sources in order to outline the history of Māori involvement and achievement in the development stages of rugby league.

Key areas of focus for this thesis include the early Māori tours of 1908 and 1909, the development of the New Zealand Māori Rugby League as an independent entity separate from the New Zealand Rugby League and the contemporary influences of Māori on rugby league. This thesis will show that the early Māori tours were crucial to the development of Australian, New Zealand and, to an extent, British rugby league. It will also provide insight in to the inclusive nature of rugby league through the inclusion of Māori initiatives such as the development of a Māori Rugby League. The final section of this thesis will draw on the contemporary influence that Māori have on the sport through an examination of player migration and how Māori have emerged as a 'donor culture' providing high numbers of elite athletes to the world's premier rugby league competitions.

It can be argued that the mobility of Māori, in the form of touring teams and migrant players, has sustained the sport internationally while paradoxically, and simultaneously, depleting the game domestically. In this account Māori emerge, not as an appendix in a history of the game but rather as a crucial donor culture for the establishment and continued success of rugby league.

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Glossary of Terms

AMRL	Aotearoa Māori Rugby League
ANZMRL	Aotearoa New Zealand Māori Rugby League
ARL	Australian Rugby League
Auckland Warriors	See New Zealand Warriors
Āwhina	Support, assistance
Haka	Traditional Māori incantation, chant, war-dance
Karakia	Prayer, incantation, chant
Kīngitanga	Māori monarchy, Māori King Movement
KMT	Kaupapa Māori Theory
Mana	Pride, status, power, authority
Manaakitanga	Nurturing, caring, hosting
Māori	Indigenous peoples of Aotearoa/New Zealand
Māorification	Increased Māori presence
New Zealand Warriors	New Zealand's sole entry into the NRL competition (see NRL or Winfield Cup)
NRL	National Rugby League
NSWRL	New South Wales Rugby League
NSWRU	New South Wales Rugby Union
NU	Northern Union
NZMRL	New Zealand Māori Rugby League
NZRFU	New Zealand Rugby Football Union
NZRU	New Zealand Rugby Union

NZRL	New Zealand Rugby League
QRL	Queensland Rugby League
Pākehā	New Zealander or European descent, foreign or exotic
PNG	Papua New Guinea
Polynesianization	Increased Polynesian presence
Poly-saturation	Increased Polynesian presence
RFU	Rugby Football Union
Tainui	Māori tribe from the Waikato region of New Zealand's North Island
Taniwharau	Rugby League club from the Waikato region
Tapu	Form of Māori spirituality, often equated with sacred however was traditionally of higher importance
Tekoteko	Carved figure head
Toa	Māori Warrior/s
Tūrangawaewae	Rugby League club from the Waikato region
The Kiwis	New Zealand men's national rugby league team
The Kangaroos	Australian men's national rugby league team
Wānanga	Higher learning, education, school
Wero	Challenge
Whakāiro	Carving
Whakāiro ūpoko	Carved head
Whakapapa	Genealogy
Whānau	Family, wider family
Whānaungatanga	The embodiment of family, family-ness

Chapter One: Introduction

1.1 Introduction

The aim of this thesis is to explore the influences and contributions of Māori¹ to the establishment and development of the sport of rugby league in New Zealand. Māori have been a prominent feature of New Zealand rugby league since 1908. The overarching question of this thesis is how have Māori influenced and contributed to the development of rugby league in New Zealand and abroad? This thesis will explore the international social history of rugby league from the origins of rugby league following the split in rugby union in England through to the contemporary status of Māori within the game as an elite sport in New Zealand and overseas. By examining Māori involvement in rugby league from its inception in the antipodes it is my intention to place Māori at the centre of the explanation for the establishment and development, past and present, of the sport in New Zealand, and globally. While there have been some previous accounts of the affiliation between Māori and rugby league (Coffey and Wood, 2008; Greenwood, 2008; Falcous, 2007) it is my intention to draw on existing partial accounts in order to outline the history of Māori involvement and achievement in the development stages of the ‘people’s game’, rugby league.

1.2 Personal Interest in the kaupapa²

My interest in this field of study stems from my keen interest and passion for the sport of rugby league. As an avid player and fan of the sport I have developed an enthusiasm not only for playing the game, but also for the promotion and development of the game at the grass roots level. Rugby league is often referred to as ‘the people’s game’ and I have experienced firsthand the power of ‘the people’ and the wider community in embracing and promoting the game. It is this focus on community and whānau (family) within the game of rugby league that has inspired me to pursue this thesis. As a Māori and as a rugby league player I recognise the importance of role models to our younger generations. By providing insight into the importance of Māori in rugby league’s history I hope to provide a means of uplifting the mana (pride, status) of Māori who play, support and enjoy rugby league. As world champions (2008 until present) it is important that our game is promoted to the world. This thesis may help to do this.

¹ Māori is the most commonly used term to describe the indigenous peoples of New Zealand. The term Māori pre-European contact was used to describe those things deemed normal.

² The term kaupapa is defined as a topic or matter of discussion.

As the indigenous people of Aotearoa, Māori have participated in the development of many of the country's enduring sporting traditions. The haka (war-dance), performed before the Kiwis³, All Blacks⁴, and many other sporting teams play, is one national tradition that is distinctly Māori. Māori designs have been used on sports uniforms and Māori have been used in advertising. While in certain areas of society and in particular sports, Māori appear to be at the forefront of their field, in other areas Māori contributions appear to be forgotten.

Academic contributions to the history of New Zealand rugby league are scarce. Even more so are academic accounts of the important role that Māori played in the establishment and early development of the sport in Australasia.

By placing Māori at the centre of this research it is hoped that this thesis will contribute to not only the history of rugby league in New Zealand but also in opening up discussion around the role Māori have played throughout this history. Research undertaken for this thesis has been informed by, but does not necessarily adhere to, particular aspects and ideas of Kaupapa Māori Theory (KMT). Many of the discussions within this thesis can be related to the analysis of unequal power structures and social inequality, two recurring themes within KMT research (Bishop and Glynn, 1999; Eketone, 2008; Smith, L. 1999).

1.3 Issues to be addressed

1.3.1 An account of rugby league

Rugby union is the national game of New Zealand and is seen by some (McCarthy and Howitt, 1983; Philips, 1986; Mulholland, 2009) as the great equaliser in this country. Rugby league, on the other hand, has been described as a 'poor man's rugby union' and that stereotype appears to have permeated into academia. While there are numerous academic references to New Zealand rugby union (Hokowhitu, 2005, 2006, 2008; Obel, 2001, 2005; Ryan, 1996, 2003, 2005, 2008, 2010; Schaffe, 2008; Vincent, 2005, 2005a; and others) minimal research has been carried out on New Zealand rugby league and in particular Māori rugby league.

One of the goals of this study is to showcase the role of Māori contributions and influence in the development of New Zealand and international rugby league. English and Australian rugby league histories have benefitted from a number of academic articles and theses (Collins, 1998, 2006, 2006, 2009; Fagan, 2004; Little, 2007; Moore, 2000; Moorehouse,

³ The Kiwis are New Zealand's national representative men's rugby league team.

⁴ The All Blacks are New Zealand's national representative men's rugby union team.

1995; Philips, 2004; Spracklen, 2001, 2003, 2007, 2009, 2010) providing insight into the events that formed the sport in those countries, as well as the sport's development into contemporary times. In contrast to the existing literature this thesis will place Māori at the fore and will provide a more thorough history of Māori involvement in the sport, as opposed to the more common mentioning of Māori in a brief excerpt of an overall history.

This thesis will draw on popular histories, biographies, newspaper articles and the limited academic rugby league research to provide an analysis of the Māori relationship to the sport of rugby league in New Zealand, and to an extent Australia and England. Conversations with key rugby league authorities have also helped to shape the direction in which this thesis has been written.⁵

In terms of a critical rugby league analysis, Falcous (2007; 2008) and Greenwood (2008) are members of a minority in New Zealand sports academia. Both are among the few who provide an academic account of rugby league in New Zealand.

Falcous (2007; 2008) provides a rare academic analysis of the socio-historical positioning of rugby league in the New Zealand sporting landscape. He acknowledges the marginalisation of rugby league in New Zealand academic sports histories and provides an examination of the sports establishment and development in New Zealand. One section of Falcous' research focuses on the intersection of ethnicity and rugby league. Here he alludes to the intersections between amateur rugby union and professional rugby league. This section of his paper is of great relevance to this thesis and provides a platform for the further examination of inclusivity and exclusivity in the rugby codes relative to Māori. Falcous (2007), mentions rugby league as being "a Māori enclave"⁶, Falcous' suggestion that Māori are such a strong part of rugby league is worth investigating further.

Greenwood (2008) gives a detailed breakdown of the origins of provincial rugby league in New Zealand. He examines the earliest phases of the sport in New Zealand as well as the features that he determines were attractive for those people who played the game in the initial period of the sports development. Greenwood does make mention of the Māori tour to Australia in 1908, but there is room to elaborate further on this tour and the subsequent Māori involvement in the development of the rugby league code in New Zealand.

⁵ The advice of a number of people in central positions within New Zealand rugby league was sought and such conversations continue to be had with regard to future research.

⁶ Falcous, M (2007), 'Rugby League in the National Imaginary of New Zealand Aotearoa', in *Sport in History*, 27:3, Routledge, England, p. 441.

Popular sport's histories, such as those of Coffey and Wood (2007; 2008), provide a foundation for this research as they are written for the distinct purpose of informing the sports fan. These accounts are often commissioned by the sport or its participants as a means of promoting a particular facet of sporting history, or to highlight a particular career through a biography. Two of the leading rugby league resources in New Zealand are Coffey and Wood's *The Kiwis: 100 Years of International Rugby League* (2007) and *100 Years: Māori Rugby League 1908-2008* (2008). These books provide insight into the role of Māori in rugby league history but lack critical investigation. While they provide accounts of players and teams, there is limited analysis of the social situation and the wider role of Māori to the development of the sport's success. Quintessential reading for any rugby league fan, they have a limited scope with regard to Māori influence on the development of the international game. While it is an exhaustive overview of Māori involvement in the sport, this book fails to examine the wider social context of sports in New Zealand and internationally and the ways in which Māori involvement influenced this context.

Another popular history that has been useful in examining the early development of Māori rugby league is the autobiography of George Nepia which provides an account of his rugby union career. But importantly for this thesis it also provides in-depth insight into Nepia's transition from rugby union player to rugby league player as well as his reasons for doing so. Given the period within which this took place, this becomes important in the wider picture of Māori-rugby union/rugby league relations and provides an opportunity to use his example to examine Māori and rugby league further.

Of particular interest for this thesis is the lack of a combined social history of Māori rugby league. While most accounts of New Zealand's rugby league history contain traces of 'the Māori story' it is apparent that the role and influence of Māori is presented as an addition to the main story and Māori are never attributed with more than a marginal contribution.

1.3.2 Chapter breakdown

This study will provide an in-depth examination of some of the key events in New Zealand rugby league's development and the role that Māori played in these events. By bringing together information found in popular histories, academic accounts and newspaper articles from the period this thesis aims to provide an accessible and thorough history of Māori involvement in the establishment and development of New Zealand, Māori and International rugby league.

The first chapter will explore the origins of rugby league in England and the subsequent arrival of the code in the antipodes. The purpose of this chapter is to provide the context of the game's international origins and the social factors that influenced the development of the game prior to its arrival in New Zealand and Australia. This chapter will focus on the social class split that caused northern clubs to break away from the authority of the Rugby Football Union (RFU) in England and establish the code of rugby league and it will examine how the split affected the development of the Australasian game.

The second chapter will examine the role of Māori in the development of rugby league in New Zealand and Australia. Having examined how rugby league came to New Zealand, this chapter will explore the role that Māori had in the promotion and development of the code in both Australia and New Zealand. By focussing on the 1908 and 1909 Māori tours of Australia this chapter will provide an insight into the importance of touring Māori teams to rugby league's viability in Australasia.

The third chapter will focus predominantly on Māori influence on the sport of rugby league, and also the emergence of a standalone Māori-administered rugby league authority committed to the continued development of rugby league in Māori communities. Established as an entity separate from the national governing body for rugby league (the NZRL), the Aotearoa Māori Rugby League (AMRL) sought to promote and regulate the game in Māori communities out of the reach of the NZRL. This chapter will provide insight into the development of the AMRL and discusses why Māori found it necessary to have their own authority to govern the game in Māori communities.

In the fourth chapter of the thesis contemporary Māori contributions to rugby league will be presented. The period to be examined in this chapter will be the so-called 'professional' era, a period where we can see a monumental rise in the popularity of rugby league. During this period Māori are once again at the forefront of the sport, participating at all levels of the game including the national Kiwis side, Māori representative teams, the Winfield Cup, and subsequently the NRL Telstra Premiership. The purpose of this chapter will be to highlight the continued contribution and influence of Māori in the sport in the contemporary televised era by looking at increased Māori participation, the migration patterns of Māori players and the consequences of Māori seeking rugby league careers outside of New Zealand.

The final chapter will summarise the thesis information and key findings/arguments. In this chapter the underlying themes of the thesis will be brought together to demonstrate the value

and role of Māori to the sport of rugby league through over a century of continued influence and contribution to the development and contemporary success of the sport.

Chapter Two: Origins of Rugby League in New Zealand.

2.1 Introduction

The introduction of rugby league in New Zealand is often attributed to the famous All Golds' tour to England and Australia in 1907. During this tour rugby union players, including All Blacks from the 1905-1906 tour⁷, made the choice to participate in and "embrace a better game."⁸ The names of A.H. Baskerville⁹, H.H. (Daly) Messenger¹⁰, G.W. Smith¹¹ and J.J. Giltinan¹² have become synonymous with the establishment and early development of rugby league in both Australia and New Zealand. But how did rugby league make its way to Australasia? And how and why did people choose to play a new code over an already established 'national' game in New Zealand?

The purpose of this chapter is to examine the origins of rugby league and how it became established in New Zealand. This chapter will look at the establishment and development of rugby league in English clubs which has been attributed to a 'class split' between the northern and southern English rugby clubs. In contrast to the 'split' that occurred in England in the late 19th Century, the development of the rugby league code in New Zealand and Australia was less associated with class divisions. The establishment of rugby league in Australasia had more to do with players' initiatives and the new rules and style of play of the game, as opposed to rival class politics.

2.2 Rugby union

In order to discuss the origins of rugby league it is important to first gain an understanding of the sport from which rugby league was born: rugby union. In more contemporary times rugby union and rugby league both vie for the title of the 'premier' winter code in many English counties. In England the premier winter code is football (soccer), in some Australian states it

⁷ This team is often referred to as the 'originals' and is commonly seen as the first All Black team.

⁸ Phillips, M. (2004), 'Remembering sport history: narrative, social memory and the origins of rugby league in Australia', in *The International Journal of the History of Sport*, 21: 1, Routledge, England, p. 51.

⁹ Albert Baskerville would become the first man to manage a New Zealand rugby league team on tour.

¹⁰ Daly Messenger was an Australian rugby league representative who played a number of games for the 'All Golds' on their inaugural tour of England.

¹¹ Smith, like Baskerville, was involved in the establishment of rugby league in New Zealand and assisted with the first 'All Golds' tour.

¹² Giltinan was a sports administrator, initially involved in Australian cricket, who aided in the development of rugby league in Australia and New Zealand.

is rugby league and in New Zealand: rugby union. Rugby union became regarded as the national game of New Zealand from the early 20th Century and while the popularity of rugby league appears to be increasing it is rugby union that takes centre stage in this country and continues to be used to gauge the success of all other sports in New Zealand. I will here look at the development of rugby union as a sport in England and the subsequent schism between the English Rugby Football Union (RFU) and the Northern Union¹³. This schism, or as a number of historians and social commentators have called a ‘class split’ (Collins, 2006a, 2006b, 2009; Dunning and Sheard, 1979; Greenwood, 2007; Fagan, 2005; Falcous, 2007; Haynes, 1996) was based on the amateur stance that the RFU had re-enforced in 1886. This amateur requirement acted as a gatekeeper with regard to the social accessibility of the sport. The enforcement of amateur requirements saw the exclusion of groups of people from the game and, thus, the ensuing formation of the Northern Union, now the Rugby League, as a separate football code altogether.

2.2.1 Origins of rugby union

In most rugby union popular histories, the origins of rugby union in Britain, as a sport separate from the game of association football (soccer), are attributed to the actions of one William Webb Ellis. It is regularly claimed that Webb Ellis was the first person to pick up a football with his hands and run with it. While the accounts of Webb Ellis are so often attributed to the foundation of rugby union, Collins (2009) argues that “Of the little that is known about William Webb Ellis, we can be certain of one thing: he did not invent the game of rugby football.”¹⁴ Four years after his death in 1872, Webb Ellis’ life was reinvented when he was named as the boy who in 1823 first picked up the ball and ran with it. Something previously never seen, nor contemplated it seems. The accounts of his actions were given by a Matthew Bloxam, a student at Rugby School, who “offered no evidence for his claim. Nor did he provide any in 1880 when he reiterated his view.”¹⁵ Without evidence of the incident, the story of Webb Ellis’ revolutionary feat remains in doubt. Despite criticisms of the account, romanticism of the events has allowed the Webb Ellis tradition to endure.

Rather than the Webb Ellis accounts, Collins (2009) attributes the development of the rugby union game to the writings of Tom Hughes. In 1857, Hughes published a fictional account of

¹³ The Northern Union was the name given to the group of rugby union clubs that would eventually break away from the RFU in 1895 and develop the code of rugby league.

¹⁴ Collins, T. (2009), ‘A Social History of English Rugby Union’, Routledge, England, p. vii.

¹⁵ Collins, (2009), p.vii.

a rugby match in his book 'Tom Brown's Schooldays'. While the match within the book was entirely fictional it did elevate the popularity of Rugby School and the game of rugby football itself. Interestingly Hughes himself was a former pupil of Rugby School and had no recollection of the Webb Ellis 'legend'. Collins (2009) contends that had the Ellis story contained a 'shred of truth' Hughes would have woven it into his Tom Brown stories.¹⁶ While Collins (2009) discounts the validity of the Webb Ellis tradition, it can be said that the widespread recognition of the accounts did impact on the popularity of the game during a time when the development of rugby union itself was at a crossroads.

The 'legend' of William Webb Ellis as a catalyst for increasing the support and popularity of the rugby union game peaked in the 1880's and 1890's. Around the same time a social class-based schism was impacting on the future development of rugby union and the emerging Northern Union game (rugby league). It was during this 'war' between the clubs that it was "decided [that] 'in all probability' ...Ellis was the 'innovator' of running with the ball...[and] 'with a fine disregard of the rules of football as played in his time, first took the ball in his arms and ran with it' in 1823."¹⁷ The Webb Ellis story provided a link to the prestigious Rugby School and, even more importantly, a connection to the middle and upper class character of the school, its teachers, pupils and alumni.

Hobsbawm and Ranger (1983) discuss the role and importance of tradition in creating identity for communities, societies and in this case sporting legacies.¹⁸ One of Hobsbawm and Ranger's claims is that many 'traditions' which claim to be old, such as that of Webb Ellis, are often more recent than previously thought, or are sometimes invented as a means of establishing continuity with a suitable historic past.¹⁹ The Webb Ellis tradition romanticises the spirit of the school embodied in one young man. For instance the Webb Ellis tradition was made most famous almost 60 years after the so-called 'event' took place.

¹⁶ Collins, (2009), p. 3.

¹⁷ Collins, (2009), p. 3.

¹⁸ Nye, R. (1985), Untitled, in *The Journal of Modern History*, Vol. 57, No. 4, University of Chicago Press, p. 720.

¹⁹ Hobsbawm, E. and Ranger, T. (1983), *The Invention of Tradition*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, p.1.

Baker (1981) argues that the Webb Ellis rugby tradition is based on minimal evidence.²⁰ The tradition itself promotes innovation and inventiveness but, as Barker (1981) claims, it is more likely a combination of “a complex social and educational matrix which featured a unique blend of authority and freedom [and] institutional pride”.²¹ An 1885 History of Football contained no evidence of Webb Ellis having even been involved in the invention or development of the rugby game.²² To follow the Hobsbawm and Ranger (1983) theory of inventing tradition, it is possible that the Webb Ellis tradition was used to reinforce the importance of Rugby School in the establishment period of rugby union.

It is likely that the reason for the development of the game as played at Rugby School was an assertion of the school’s social status and power over the developing rules of the game. By taking ownership of the game it could control the rules and development of the sport, and subsequently the participants. As will be discussed further throughout this and following chapters, social status and class would become a valued identifier of who could and who could not participate in the game of rugby union, particularly in late 19th and early 20th century England. As mentioned earlier, Ellis’ ‘disregard of the rules’ alludes to a sense of superiority in that he, a representative of Rugby School, was above the rules of football as they stood and could change the game singlehandedly. The tradition of a young man picking up the ball and running with it allowed for a biographical, as opposed to a social, explanation of the evolution of the sport.²³ The tradition would serve to mask the underlying social divisions, such as amateurism and public school control, occurring in the development of the sport.

2.2.2 Who played?

The Webb Ellis tradition served to position Rugby School as the birthplace and rightful home of rugby union. Developed out of the exclusive school’s moral and religious principles rugby union in Britain was, for the most part, played by the middle and upper classes in England. It was developed as a means of instilling gentlemanly virtues into young public school males, and was the domain of the middle and upper class male. The dominance of the middle and upper classes in the sport of rugby union can be traced back to the school of its origins.

²⁰ Baker, W. (1981), ‘William Webb Ellis and the Origins of Rugby Football: The Life and Death of Victorian Myth’, in *Albion: A Quarterly Journal Concerned with British Studies*, Vol. 13, No. 2, The North American Conference on British Studies, p. 118.

²¹ Baker, (1981), p. 118.

²² Vincent, J. and Shearman, M. (1885), *Football: Its History for Five Centuries*, cited in Baker, (1981), p. 120.

²³ Baker, (1981), p. 126.

“The game’s birthplace, Rugby School, self-consciously expressed and promoted the spirit of mid-Victorian England... While it had attracted some boys from aristocratic families in the late eighteenth century, and continued to do so throughout the nineteenth, the majority of its pupils came from the upper middle classes, especially the clergy and the rural gentry.”²⁴

It was from the Rugby School ethos of ‘righteousness against sin’ that a philosophy based around ‘muscular Christianity’ was formed.²⁵ Muscular Christianity is the philosophy derived from the attributes of the Victorian middle class male public school student. It relied on certain traits such as religious and moral principle, gentlemanly conduct and intellectual ability.²⁶ This ‘muscular Christianity’ would underpin the development of rugby union as a game distant and distinct from the ‘sins’ of the working and lower classes. It was these moral and religious principles that would allow the sport of rugby to develop through the public school system uninhibited by any undesirable elements of working class society who by then had become keen participants in the football codes. These middle and upper class origins of the rugby union game would continue to have an effect on the development of the game and would define the ‘ideal’ participants more markedly after the eventual development of a separate union, the Northern Union, in 1895.

2.2.3 Accessibility of rugby union

Due to the class-defined nature and regulations of rugby union, access to the game was restricted to those boys and men who were members of middle and upper-class society. This class mentality persisted from the origins of rugby union until well beyond the split between the RFU and the Northern Union. Prior to the split in 1895, of the 1,088 rugby union players who had represented England at the international level, only 170 (or 15.6 per cent) were “unambiguously not part of the middle classes”.²⁷ This statistic, while of minimal importance in the scheme of the wider game, is telling of the nature of class control in English rugby union during the pre-rugby league era.

The accessibility of the game was restricted predominantly by the unavailability of the game to those in the working and lower classes. Those who did not attend public schools or universities, or did not have an affiliation to either through family or alumni, often did not

²⁴ Collins, (2009), p. 5.

²⁵ Collins, (2009), p. 7.

²⁶ Collins, (2009), p. 5.

²⁷ Collins, (2009), p. 100.

have the opportunity to partake in rugby union. Collins (2009) states that the trend of English rugby players having an affiliation to ‘leading’ public schools was prevalent until as recently as the 1960s, with a decline in the importance of social status beginning to occur around the 1940s.²⁸ The schools would, in turn, feed into clubs as they were established.

2.2.4 Who controlled rugby union?

Other mechanisms that limited the accessibility of rugby union in the late 19th and early 20th centuries emerged from the administration of the sport. The RFU was established on the 26th of January 1871, eight years after the forerunner for the ‘Football Association’, the organisational body for football²⁹, had been established in 1863. The purpose of the RFU was to establish and regulate rules for the game, as well as to maintain the integrity of the public school spirit within which the game was played. The ‘spirit’ of the public school was to be heavily enforced as a means of both a mechanism of integrity, but also as a tool of social exclusion.

The men who formed the RFU were representative of the schools in which rugby union was nurtured and thrived. The original RFU members came from “a very narrow and close-knit stratum of the professional upper middle classes.”³⁰ All members of the original RFU board had attended public schools and all of them lived in the affluent areas of central or south London. While this may seem trivial, the central and south London areas boasted the majority of the public schools and universities and effectively provided the target demographic of the future of rugby union.

One of the ultimate goals of the RFU and the people controlling the developing clubs was to establish and maintain a sport of and for gentlemen. For the RFU leadership there was a sense of purification about their agendas and the way they administered control over the sport and who played it. By enforcing the purity of the ‘principles’ of the game, meaning those things that would aid in the preservation of the ‘public school spirit’, the RFU leadership was able to filter out the different social groups deemed unacceptable according to the union’s standards. As Collins (2006a) argues, the alienated groups included those working class players who were not graduates of the elite public schools and were considered undesirable for the

²⁸ Collins, (2009), p. 102.

²⁹ Here football is used for the sport commonly known as soccer. Football is universally seen as the correct term for soccer and will be used from here on to mean soccer.

³⁰ Collins, (2009), p. 20.

development of rugby union³¹. Due to this idea of purity in rugby union, monetary compensation or what was seen as professionalism would become the largest threat to RFU control and authority over the game, its administration and management. The enforcement of amateurism endorsed the continued application of the so-called ‘purity’ among the unions’ players. The underlying goal of the RFU leadership group was “to establish and maintain an equilibrium upon which its ‘perfect level’ of gentlemanly social and recreational association for the middle-class could flourish.”³² By not having graduated from the proper schools, or having familial ties to the nation’s upper classes, working class athletes in the northern counties did not fit the mould of the desired RFU rugby union player.

As a result of the ideologies of the RFU and its supporting unions, rugby union was able to maintain a sort of social discrimination: inclusive of the public school ‘old boys’, and exclusive of the working class threat that was emerging in the counties north of the London based RFU. The notion of exclusivity was probably the more important of the two at the time, as by this stage the working-classes were beginning to show a stronger influence on the makeup of English rugby union. The continuance of amateur ideals in rugby union allowed for the threat of a working class dominance to be squashed.

When discussing the definition of amateurism in rugby union, Collins (2006a) makes an example of the dynamic, as opposed to static, nature of what exactly amateurism was. The first amateur regulations in rugby union were introduced by the RFU in 1886 banning all payments to players monetary or otherwise. The implementation of these regulations occurred 15 years after RFU’s foundation and was an explicit attempt to curb the influence of working class players, especially in the north, on the game.³³ These regulations also occurred not long before the establishment of the Football Association’s first professional competition, the FA Cup, in 1888 which included for the first time fulltime professional players.³⁴ This is an example not only of the disdain that the RFU felt towards the increasing numbers of working class players in their northern unions, but was also a method of distinguishing themselves from other sporting codes. This also demonstrates the reality of the fears held by the RFU for ‘their’ game. While regulations around amateurism were implemented from

³¹ Collins, T. (2006a), ‘The Ambiguities of Amateurism: English Rugby Union in the Edwardian Era’, in *Sport in History*, 26:3, Routledge, England, p. 390.

³² Collins, (2006a), p. 387.

³³ Collins, (2006a), p. 388.

³⁴ Murray, W. (1996), *The Worlds Game: A History of Soccer*, University of Illinois Press, Illinois, p. 8.

1886, rumours of men being compensated for playing rugby union had been around from as early as 1879.³⁵

Rather than try to define what amateurism or an amateur was, it was easier to define what it was not. Amateurism became less of a principle fixed in concrete than a concept that changed its meaning according to how, said Collins (2006a), the RFU “sought to define the community and ideology of rugby union.”³⁶ The amateur status of rugby union could serve the dual purpose of maintaining the purity of the ‘public school spirit’ as well as lessening the threat of an increased working-class presence in the sport. Without payments for broken time or compensation for days taken to play rugby, amateur rugby union and the RFU had effectively stemmed the flow of working-class access to the game.

The amateur requirements of rugby union became the key distinction between the code and rugby league. Bourdieu (1989) describes distinction as a means of defining invisible relations which create space between social, as well as spatial, groups.³⁷ Interaction, or the lack of it, can be effective in creating a divide between different agents in terms of social and cultural capital, or class division. Thus, amateur requirements became an effective method of distinguishing between the RFU and the ‘unsavoury’ aspects of professionalism associated with rugby league and the working classes. This concept of distinction between the codes will be examined further in chapter four.

Prior to the split between the RFU and the Northern Union in 1895, the RFU had 416 adult rugby clubs. Of these RFU-aligned clubs around 48% were in Yorkshire and Lancashire, two leading northern counties that would later form the base of the Northern Union. Within ten years of the split, the number of RFU aligned clubs had dropped to only 155.³⁸ This is symbolic of the growing influence of the northern union leading to the birth of rugby league in 1895.

³⁵ Collins, T. (2006b), *Rugby League in Twentieth Century Britain: A social and cultural history*, Routledge, England. p. 2.

³⁶ Collins, (2006a), p. 387.

³⁷ Bourdieu, P. (1989), ‘Social Space and Symbolic Power’ in *Sociological Theory*, 7:1, American Sociological Association, USA, p. 16.

³⁸ Collins, (2006a), p. 387.

2.2.5 Rugby union in NZ

Rugby union was introduced in New Zealand by Charles John Monro in 1870. Monro had returned to Nelson from attending Sherborne School in England. Upon his return he suggested that his Nelson Football Club try out the new rugby union code being played in England, which was different to the hybrid codes that had previously been experimented with. Monro is a prime example of the English public school influence on the origins of New Zealand rugby union. As in England, former students of English public schools introduced the rules of the game into the New Zealand school system through secondary schools for boys. The Nelson Football Club was founded two years earlier and at that stage had partaken in soccer and Australian (Victorian) Rules games.³⁹ News of the 'new' game of rugby union spread quickly in the Nelson area with the Nelson Football Club adopting the new rules, quickly followed by the Nelson Collegians and on Tuesday the 14th of May 1870 the first inter-club game of rugby union was played in New Zealand⁴⁰. By September that year the game had spread to Wellington and continued to spread steadily throughout the colony. At this time, most areas with larger concentrations of population were beginning to form teams and, or, clubs and by 1875 the first interprovincial matches took place in Dunedin between Auckland and Dunedin club sides.⁴¹

The social origins of New Zealand rugby union are often attributed, wrongly, to the country's hardworking, agriculturally-minded colonials.⁴² The founders of New Zealand rugby were believed to be men who were hard and strong and a world apart from their lazier more comfortable brothers and sisters back home in the mother land. In stark contrast to these popular beliefs around New Zealand rugby union today, early rugby union in New Zealand was a predominantly urban sport.⁴³

Today there is much discussion about the rural influence on rugby in New Zealand. The common discourse of the New Zealand rugby pioneer is of the strong and rugged, and for the most part white, heartland farmer who is so often used to portray what rugby union means to this country. However the birth and development of the sport in New Zealand was almost

³⁹ McCrystal, J. (2005), *The Originals: 1905 All Black Odyssey*, Random House, Auckland, p. 14.

⁴⁰ McCrystal, (2005), p. 14.

⁴¹ McCrystal, (2005), p. 14.

⁴² McCrystal, (2005), p. 12.

⁴³ Ryan, G. (2005), 'Rural Myth and Urban Actuality: The Anatomy of All Black and New Zealand Rugby 1884-1938', in *Tackling Rugby Myths*, ed. Greg Ryan, Otago University Press, Dunedin, p. 33.

entirely urban and was based on the numbers of people populating a particular area. In heavily populated areas there was more likelihood of success for a burgeoning sports club. Ryan (2005) discusses the ‘myth’ of the rural nature of rugby union in New Zealand and reveals that the majority of early rugby players were “disproportionately urban, educated and occupationally professional.”⁴⁴ The development of this rural ‘myth’ can be credited to a strong desire by the colonials to portray a glorified ‘rural arcadia’ and fondness for recreation as opposed to the negativities associated with the more sedentary ways of city life.⁴⁵

By the 1890s rugby union was by far the dominant sporting code in the country. Phillips (1987, cited in Obel, 2001) notes there were approximately 700 clubs established in the country by 1890.⁴⁶ By this stage provincial areas such as Canterbury and Wellington were beginning to form Unions making the administration of the game more like that of the English example.⁴⁷ In 1892 a national governing body, the New Zealand Rugby Football Union (NZRFU, now the NZRU) was formed as a centralised authority for the control of the game’s development and success. Rugby union had become New Zealand’s national game.

The establishment of the NZRFU in 1892 created a “centralised authority for the control of the game as a means of protecting it as the national game.”⁴⁸ Like the RFU in England, the now centralised NZRFU authority provided an opportunity to control not only the game itself, but also those who played the game in New Zealand. Citing Gallagher and Stead (1906), Obel (2001) discusses the purpose of having a centralised authority to govern the game as designed to protect the game from professionalism.⁴⁹ This amateur status of rugby union in New Zealand maintained a close tie to the power dynamics of the RFU in England. The distinction, based on amateurism, between the two codes was transferred to the New Zealand context because of the close ties between the NZRFU and the RFU.

Rugby Union had been introduced in New Zealand, by people like Charles Monro. Former English public school students brought knowledge of the game with them, and then introduced the sport into New Zealand boys’ schools. Through the boys’ schools “amateur

⁴⁴ Ryan, (2005), p. 33.

⁴⁵ Ryan, (2005), pp. 35-36.

⁴⁶ Obel, C. (2001), *Unions, Leagues and Franchises: The Social Organisation of Rugby Union in New Zealand*, University of Canterbury, Christchurch, p. 34.

⁴⁷ McCrystal, (2005), p. 15.

⁴⁸ Obel, (2001), p. 32.

⁴⁹ Obel, (2001), p. 33.

rugby entrenched the values of the colonial middle classes.”⁵⁰ While a world apart, the NZRFU and the RFU held close ties, and the RFU through the imposed amateur status of the sport was able to maintain a level of control of the game in areas that it spread to. The NZRFU was guided by the RFU. This saw the indoctrination of the developing New Zealand rugby unions with the imperial mentalities of the RFU and the English rugby union clubs.

2.3 Origins of rugby league

While rugby union had become a popular pastime for the middle and upper class men of England, there were issues surrounding accessibility and compensation that ruled a large number of working class men out of the sport, particularly in the northern areas of England. The RFU did however allow, albeit reluctantly, for working class participation in and spectatorship of rugby union, provided participation of any sort was on their terms.⁵¹ Such terms would have included abiding by the amateur status of the game and not accepting payment, monetary or by other means, for playing. Strict restrictions around professionalism allowed the RFU to retain full control of the game they regulated at all levels.

The accessibility of English rugby union became a pressing issue for working class players in a number of regions. As a result several clubs in the northern working class areas of England began to show increased interest in compensation for time taken to play sport or the possibility of playing on a Sunday, a day that for many of those involved was the sole day a week away from work. Such movement towards what was perceived by the RFU as professionalism was seen as a direct threat to the middle and upper class ownership of rugby union and in 1895 the development of a new union was emerging to unsettle the RFU. This emergence of a rival union, and subsequently a rival code, would provide the catalyst for what would become known as the ‘rugby revolution’. According to Coffey and Wood (2008) “The rugby revolution began in England, with 22 of the strongest clubs in Lancashire and Yorkshire breaking away from the London-based Rugby Football Union (RFU) in 1895.”⁵² The split between the RFU and what became known as the Northern Union was a direct result of the working class involvement of the northern counties and the entrepreneurs who established leagues and charged gate takings to pay players and make money.

⁵⁰ Falcous, M (2007), ‘Rugby League in the National Imaginary of New Zealand Aotearoa’, in *Sport in History*, 27:3, Routledge, England, p. 246.

⁵¹ Collins, (2006b), p. 1.

⁵² Coffey, J. and Wood, B. (2008), *100 Years: Maori Rugby League 1908-2008*, Huia Publishers, Wellington, p. 9.

The English northern counties were working class areas in the heart of industrial England. Many players in the northern counties worked six-day weeks and could not justify the loss of earnings for sport, unlike their southern counterparts who were largely professionals or university men. Ideas had been floating for a number of years as to whether players could be compensated for work lost by playing rugby on a Saturday. Interestingly the RFU's rules never provided a clear definition of amateurism, or of what constituted an amateur, and amateurism was often described only as the opposite of professionalism, a point made to an obsessive degree by the RFU rule-makers.⁵³

Distrust and accusations of whether or not players would or should not be paid for playing led to the Northern Union split from the traditional English Rugby Union and both class and regional differences created an inevitable yet acrimonious divorce.⁵⁴ The Northern Union quickly legitimised compensation for players and made alterations to the traditional rugby rules. The earliest alterations to the rules, occurring almost immediately in 1895/1896 included abolishing the lineout, and reducing the number of players on the field to 13. The lineout was seen as overly time-consuming, and having fewer players on the field created for more open running with greater opportunity for entertaining plays. Greater entertainment for spectators led to higher levels of financial success through increased gate takings thus allowing for payments to players. These changes to the rules sought to allow for more freedom in the game creating a more entertaining sport for both player and spectator "giving more life to a new, faster brand of football – rugby league."⁵⁵ From these changes in the rules and the changes in opinions around compensation, or professionalism, rugby league grew into a legitimate means of income for those who played. For those who relied on a full week's wages (Saturdays included), the Northern Union's stance on financial compensation proved more appealing than the loss of a day's earnings playing rugby union. While rugby league was seen by most as the 'other' code, it provided a place of refuge for those who needed to turn a talent for football into a source of revenue. Richards (2007) believes that if rugby league had not come into existence on its own, the rugby union would have had to invent it.⁵⁶ Rugby league gave the rugby union clubs an opposition, promoting the vices of the working class and providing rugby union with a further means of distinguishing their code from the professional codes and reinstating amateurism as a way of excluding the working classes.

⁵³ Collins, (2006a), p. 387.

⁵⁴ Haynes, J. (1996), *From All Blacks to All Gold's: Rugby Leagues Pioneers*, Ryan and Haynes, Christchurch, p. 11.

⁵⁵ Haynes, (1996), p. 11.

⁵⁶ Richards, H. (2007), *A Game for Hooligans: The History of Rugby Union*, Mainstream Publishing Company, Edinburgh, p. 80.

The split between the RFU and the Northern Union would have an immediate effect on the success of rugby union at the national level. Following the split, the England national rugby union team managed only four wins and two draws out of 15 matches in the five years following the withdrawal of a number of clubs who joined the Northern Union. Prior to the 1895 split almost 43% of all players who had played for England between 1890 and 1894 had come from teams now involved in the Northern Union.⁵⁷

The ownership and administration of the Northern Union was different to that of the RFU. Rather than being made up of an ‘old boy clique’ as the RFU appeared to be, the Northern Union comprised 22 clubs that had broken away from the RFU: Batley, Bradford, Brighouse Rovers, Broughton Rangers, Halifax, Huddersfield, Hull, Hunslet, Leeds, Leigh, Liversedge, Manningham, Oldham, Rochdale Hornets, Runcorn, Stockport, St Helens, Tyldesley, Wakefield Trinity, Warrington, Widnes and Wigan.

The Northern Union became known as the people’s game as it was seen to be run ‘by the people for the people’. From the breakaway clubs and their leaders emerged a Northern Union General Committee. This General Committee became the governing body of the Northern Union game.

Of the achievements recorded by the Northern Union during the earliest phases of the game’s development there is one that stands out as the benchmark of success. The 1907 tour of England by the ‘professional All Blacks’ from New Zealand rather cemented the success of the new code and the profit from the tour cemented the future of rugby league in both hemispheres.

2.4 The emergence of rugby league in Australia and New Zealand

Within a decade of rugby league’s establishment, the concept of professional football was beginning to head south to Australia and New Zealand. Coffey and Wood (2008), suggest that the 1905-1906 ‘Originals’ All Black rugby union tour of Britain proved to be the catalyst for spreading the rebellion to the southern colonies⁵⁸ This tour saw the first ‘All Blacks’ team returning victorious over all opposition except the Welsh. There was, however, one concern within the team at the end of the tour. This was the issue of compensation: during the six-month tour the All Blacks had been given a miserly allowance and many returned to New

⁵⁷ Collins, (2006a), p. 391.

⁵⁸ Coffey and Wood, (2008), p. 9.

Zealand penniless and without employment.⁵⁹ Upon return from the 1905-06 tour, Rugby Union was in a strong position financially and large numbers of people wanted to play due to the success of the All Black tour of Great Britain, France and the US. While the code itself was successful, the players were not. Some of the All Blacks that had earned the plaudits of the nation, but little else, were no longer prepared to play for nothing and this led to heightened speculation about the role that professionalism would, or could play in New Zealand's premier winter code. Interestingly, it would be the growth and success of the rugby union code in New Zealand that would kick-start the development of rugby league in Australia.

2.4.1 The All Gold's Tours

According to Haynes (1996), the genesis of professional football in both Australia and New Zealand stemmed from the actions of a group of All Blacks and top New Zealand provincial players.⁶⁰ These players would form somewhat of a 'phantom' All Black team to tour Britain and Australia. The tour was seen as phantom in that they were unknown, the team remained a secretive affair and the players themselves were keeping their involvement hidden until the tour was confirmed. They would become known by many names, such as the 'professional' All Blacks, the 'rebel' All Blacks and the All Golds, the latter name directly aimed at the financial nature of their tour. The All Golds title can be seen as positive professionalism in that it was used to distinguish the professional rugby league team from amateur rugby union.

At the time of the All Golds' tour there was no professional rugby in Australasia. However, the professional "rebellion that had its origins in New Zealand was also about to be exported across the Tasman, deep into the heartland of Australian rugby union."⁶¹

The origin of rugby league in New Zealand was a very secretive affair. It has been suggested that a network of Northern Union enthusiasts had begun to recruit potential players for provincial competitions in New Zealand before the return of the 'rebel' or 'professional' All Blacks from their tour.⁶² The two men leading the rugby revolution in New Zealand were Albert Henry Baskerville and George William Smith. These two men were among the first

⁵⁹ Coffey and Wood, (2008), p. 9.

⁶⁰ Haynes, (1996), inside front cover.

⁶¹ Haynes, (1996), p. 61.

⁶² Haynes, (1996), p. 61.

New Zealanders to develop an interest in, and a following of, the British rugby revolution.⁶³ Baskerville was a post office clerk who had played rugby union at club level and had authored a book titled 'Modern Rugby Football', a guide for beginners and spectators of the game. His interest in the developments in the North of England had stemmed from an article in an English newspaper, the 'Manchester Athletic News', which made a special reference to the 40,000 fans who, combined, paid over 1000 pounds to watch a Northern Union game.⁶⁴ Smith on the other hand was an accomplished All Black Winger. Smith's first taste of the Northern Union games was during the 1905 All Black tour when he heard about the new game and the compensation offered to its players.

Upon the return of the 1905-1906 All Blacks, Baskerville had quickly sought to establish a team to tour England. With the support of Smith, three other 1905 touring All Blacks and the further backing of prominent Australian cricket administrator James J. Giltinan, the possibility of bringing rugby league to New Zealand seemed feasible. Little (2007), acknowledges the All Blacks' tour of Australia as having provided the 'final catalyst' for the birth and development of rugby league in Australia.⁶⁵

2.4.2 Rugby league in New Zealand

A common theme in the development of rugby league in both Australia and New Zealand was the perceived lack of concern for the welfare of rugby union players in both countries.⁶⁶ This lack of concern was not only financial, as had been seen in the divide between the southern and northern clubs in England, but also in terms of the physical welfare of players. One story that has shaped the folklore around the development of rugby league in the antipodes is that of Alec Burdon. Burdon had suffered a broken collarbone touring the Northern Rivers for New South Wales. Burdon was prevented from working for ten weeks and received no compensation for medical expenses or loss of pay.⁶⁷ Burdon had also

⁶³ Coffey, J. (1987), 'Canterbury XIII: A Rugby League History', Printpac Print Group, Christchurch, New Zealand, p. 4.

⁶⁴ Coffey, (1987), p. 4.

⁶⁵ Little, (2007), pp. 368-369.

⁶⁶ Little, C. (2007), 'The Hidden History of the Birth of Rugby League in Australia: The Significance of 'Local' Factors in Sydney's Rugby Split', in *Sport in History*, 27: 3, Routledge, England, p. 365.

⁶⁷ Phillips, M. (2004), p. 53.

witnessed the mistreatment of other players around him and this proved a catalyst for his decision to switch to the professional sport.⁶⁸

Other somewhat different but no less significant incidents occurred in New Zealand.

Localised incidents between players and unions saw the growth of rugby league in towns throughout the country. One example is that of the Southland Rugby League. In Invercargill rugby league's establishment was the result of the Southland Rugby Union suspending senior players from the Britannia and Pirates clubs for refusing to play on a Wednesday. These players appealed the suspensions and while negotiations were underway regarding the suspensions they decided to convert to rugby league.⁶⁹ Incidents similar to this occurred throughout the country. Players resentful of their treatment at the hands of their local unions and the NZRFU consciously made the decision to switch codes.

Stories such as these highlight a player-driven movement away from rugby union in Australia and New Zealand, as opposed to the mass exodus of entire clubs and counties as had been witnessed in England. Yet, the transition of players from rugby union to rugby league cannot be solely attributed to the mistreatment of players. Opportunities within rugby union also presented a challenge.

Options for progress within the Australian and New Zealand rugby unions were limited. Following from the RFU-imposed restrictions on amateurism and the hangover of the RFU's social class mentality certain areas within Australasia were not exposed to the opportunities to participate in the sport. This lack of opportunity has also been credited as a catalyst for the migration of disgruntled rugby union players to rugby league.

Rugby league was introduced to New Zealand on Saturday the 13th of June 1908. This first 'official' rugby league match on New Zealand soil was played as a fundraising benefit match at Athletic Park in Wellington. The match was played as a benefit for the mother of Albert Henry Baskerville who had founded the first touring rugby league side out of New Zealand the previous year. He died in Australia of pneumonia on the return leg of the 1907 All Golds' tour. The match was announced as "football played under northern rugby union rules, 'rugby as it is played in England'."⁷⁰ The game was a success and attracted a crowd of between 6000 and 7000. During the months following the initial benefit match, groups of interested men

⁶⁸ Fagan, S. (2005), *The Rugby Rebellion: The Pioneers of Rugby League*, Best Legenz, cited at www.r11908.com

⁶⁹ Greenwood, B. (2007), '1908: The Year Rugby League Came to New Zealand', in *Sport in History*, 27;3, Routledge, England, p. 354.

⁷⁰ Greenwood, (2007), p. 343.

attempted to establish the sport in numerous towns and cities throughout the country. By the end of 1908 there were representative teams formed in Southland, Otago, South Canterbury, Wellington, Taranaki and Auckland. A national league of provincial teams had been formed as a means for these teams to play each other. By this time a Māori team had also been formed and had successfully toured Australia.

The development of rugby league in New Zealand evolved from the leadership of individuals rather than the establishment of a governing authority or the dictation of a dominant social class. As noted by Greenwood (2007), the introduction of rugby league into New Zealand society was ‘very much’ a player-driven initiative. As the players at the time considered themselves amateurs, payment was not the only issue. It appears that a desire to partake in a new and exciting sport was one of the key motivators behind player support, as well as monetary reward.⁷¹

Greenwood (2007) has observed four distinct features in the origins of New Zealand rugby league that make it different to the introduction of the sport in both England and Australia. These are: 1; the desire to participate in the Northern Union game, 2; the development of rugby league in New Zealand as a nationwide phenomenon, 3; the introduction of the game as a player-driven initiative and 4; the introduction of the game through inter-provincial matches rather than club competitions.⁷²

New Zealand athletes were attracted to the new sport because of its speed, openness and freedom under the Northern Union rules. Many of the rules that had slowed down play in rugby union had been abolished, such as the lineout and elements of scrummaging, and the new rules were attractive to people looking to introduce pace and flair into their game. The immediate success of rugby league in New Zealand may have been a result of the sport having already established a separate set of rules to rugby union. During the 1895 schism between rugby league and rugby union in England there were no alternative rules established differentiating the two codes. The issue in England was not that of a separate sport, but of broken time payments and the professional/amateur argument. Thus breakaway clubs continued to play rugby union rules under the name Northern Union until the rules were modified gradually over the following decades.⁷³

⁷¹ Greenwood, (2007), p. 344.

⁷² Greenwood, (2007), p. 350.

⁷³ Greenwood, (2007), p. 350.

When rugby league was introduced into Australia in 1907, the Northern Union game had undergone a series of rule changes; it had developed into rugby league, as opposed to rugby union with a different authority. Unlike the New Zealand situation where players made the personal choice to play rugby league, the division between the New South Wales Rugby Union (NSWRU) and the New South Wales Rugby League (NSWRL) was due to player grievance and treatment of players by the NSWRU. Greenwood (2007) believes the reason that most players in NSW chose to play rugby league was a result of the ways that rugby league addressed player issues and grievances.⁷⁴ It is possible that these players would have continued to play rugby union if it weren't for their personal mistreatment by the NSWRU, such as the situations faced Alec Burden and other players during the period.

Unlike in England and Australia, New Zealand rugby league players made the conscious decision to participate in a new and vibrant sport. This aspiration of a number of players to try the new sport can be seen nationwide as the sport gained a following in all reaches of the country. Rugby league's popularity spread rapidly after the Wellington benefit match in 1908. As mentioned earlier, by the end of the 1908 season there were rugby league clubs established in provinces from Southland to Auckland. In both England and Australia rugby league was very much a regionalised sport. In England it began as a breakaway from the affluent south and the control of the London based RFU, and this restricted its spread to the northern areas of England. In Australia rugby league became most prominent in Sydney, and although it spread to country districts of New South Wales and to Queensland, it appears to have been restricted to these two eastern states. Around the same time people, players and enthusiasts were establishing the game in most cities and towns throughout New Zealand.⁷⁵

As a player-led initiative the accessibility of rugby league in New Zealand initially was not restricted in any way by regulations of a central governing authority. The RFU in England had maintained a level of control over rugby union that had permeated to the newly established unions in New Zealand. The values and stigma attached to these unions saw distinct markers emerge as to who could and could not participate in rugby union. Examples include banning players from rugby union for participating in rugby league matches or tours. One incident saw Canterbury rugby union players told they would be 'at risk' should one of

⁷⁴ Greenwood, (2007), p. 350.

⁷⁵ Greenwood, (2007), p. 351.

their former teammates, alleged to be linked to the professional developments, be reinstated into the team.⁷⁶

It appears from studies of the sport that the exclusion of players was not seen in the development of rugby league in England, Australia or New Zealand. While there were authorities put in place to manage and control the growing game, the accessibility of the sport was not jeopardised.

Another element of similarity between English and Australian rugby league that did not transfer so much to the New Zealand situation, was the impact of an established social class division. It is apparent that in England the RFU had attempted to remove the lower-middle and working classes from their game initially through the separation between themselves and the working classes that developed through the establishment of the Northern Union. This would not last long as the number of clubs registered with the RFU dropped dramatically in the years following the split. In Australia social class played a similar role in the division between rugby union and rugby league, particularly between the NSWRU and the NSWRL.

In Sydney's less affluent suburbs rugby league became attached to working class culture and became regarded as the workers' game. It became a means of asserting a separate working class identity and reinforced the 'tribalism' of local communities.⁷⁷ However, class divisions are not the sole factors to consider when examining the rugby union-rugby league split in Australia. As discussed earlier, players' sense of mistreatment at the hands of the Australian rugby unions also contributed to the rift between the two codes. Nevertheless, class divisions did play a role in the success of rugby league's development. Clubs in Sydney's working class areas embraced the class division as a means of attracting disgruntled rugby union players. One example of this was the South Sydney⁷⁸ club. The founders of the South Sydney club, according to Little (2007), embraced the rhetoric of class in their promotion of the club and the newly developing code. This can be seen in an early newspaper advertisement promoting the club:

“All footballers in this District should join this club,
FOR THESE REASONS-

⁷⁶ Coffey, J. (1987), *Canterbury XIII: A Rugby League History*, PrintPac Group, Christchurch, New Zealand, p. 6.

⁷⁷ Moore, A. (2000), *Opera of the Proletariat: Rugby League, the Labour Movement and Working-Class Culture in New South Wales and Queensland*, in 'Labour History', No. 79, Australian Society for the Study of Labour History Inc., p. 58.

⁷⁸ The South Sydney Rugby League Club is a foundation club of the Australian Rugby League. It was established in 1908.

Play for yourself and your club's advantage,
Or,
Play for the Union to their advantage and no return for yourself."⁷⁹

This sense of social division was, and to an extent remains, prominent in both England and Australia.

While the early stages of English and Australian rugby league were influenced by social class division, early New Zealand rugby league rivalries were dominated by strong provincial allegiances. In New Zealand, despite provincial government having only had a brief existence (1852-1876), provincial rivalries remained strong, no more so than in sport.⁸⁰ In a sense these provincial rivalries took the place of the class rivalries experienced in England and Australia.

2.5 Summary

Rugby league was born in the North of England in 1895. The pressure for a rival code separate from rugby union grew out of the social class division that was inhibiting the accessibility of the sport beyond the upper middle classes. Amateurism played an important part in the development of a sport designed to impart the morals and virtues of the upper middle classes to young Englishmen. Amateurism served the purpose of instilling the ethos of muscular Christianity into those who played and it also denied access to those who were deemed unacceptable by the RFU's elite standards.

Within a decade of its inception news of rugby league was making its way to the antipodes. By 1907 a New Zealand team, known as the All Blacks due to the professional nature of the tour, were en route to England to play the Northern Union clubs at their new game. The success of this tour proved to be the catalyst for the establishment of the game both in New Zealand and in Australia.

New Zealand rugby league developed quickly throughout the country. It did not experience the same level of social class division as had been experienced in England or Australia, and it was assisted by local and provincial allegiances, as well as the opportunity for recognition outside of an imperial RFU.

⁷⁹ Little, (2007), pp. 375-376.

⁸⁰ Greenwood, (2007), p. 351.

The success of rugby league in New Zealand can be aligned with mistrust of the NZRFU, mistreatment by the NZRFU of its players, and also the limited but significant monetary benefit that came from playing professionally.

The development of rugby league in New Zealand had both similarities and striking differences to the development of the code as a unique sport in England. In terms of being a player-led initiative it was very similar to the English and Australian scenarios in that it was embraced by players who developed and nurtured the sport in its earliest phases. One distinct difference between the English and New Zealand models however was the influence of social class. Without the class division, as had been experienced in England, the New Zealand game began as an inclusive sport without restrictions such as amateurism.

While the All Golds 1907 tour can be viewed as the specific catalyst of New Zealand rugby league there are a number of factors that aided in the development of the code in its pioneer phase. Most New Zealand rugby league histories pay little or no attention to the importance of Māori involvement in rugby league from its inception. The following chapter will provide insight into the importance of Māori involvement in the development of rugby league in New Zealand and internationally by examining the early Māori contributors to the game and the roles that Māori played in the development phases of the sport.

Chapter Three: Māori involvement in the development of New Zealand and Australian rugby league

3.1 Introduction

The previous chapter provided an account of the origins of rugby league in New Zealand. Rugby league was born in the North of England in 1895. The push for a rival code separate from rugby union grew out of the social class division that was inhibiting the accessibility of the sport to the middle classes. By 1907 a 'professional' New Zealand team had successfully toured England and ignited a national interest in the sport. This interest saw the sport develop quickly throughout New Zealand and saw an immediate Māori presence in the sport at a national level.

When examining the limited historical accounts of the establishment and early development of rugby league in New Zealand there appears to be a turning point in 1907 that is credited with the birth of the game in this country. For most New Zealand rugby league historians and authors (such as Coffey and Wood, 2007, 2008; Falcous, 2007; Greenwood, 2007; Haynes, 1996; Little, 2007) the establishment of rugby league in New Zealand was a result of the 1907 All Golds' tour to England and Australia. While this tour was certainly the catalyst for the introduction of the new code to these shores it was but one of a number of factors that influenced the development of the sport in New Zealand.

An often overlooked factor in the establishment and growth of rugby league in this country and around the world is the involvement of Māori in the development stages of the sport. In 1908 and 1909 New Zealand Māori rugby league sides toured Australia. These tours generated substantial revenue for the developing Australian state competitions and began what would be an enduring relationship between Māori and the sport of rugby league. At the time, rugby league was a fresh and innovative sport in New Zealand and the sport's success in this country, as well as in Australia, came largely as a result of these two Māori tours. These tours provided financial stability to the Australian leagues as well as providing a style of football that enticed large numbers of spectators through the turnstiles and onto the paddocks.

The aim of this chapter is to provide insight into the role Māori played in the origins and early development of New Zealand and international rugby league. This chapter will examine the impact and influence of Māori in the early period of New Zealand and Australian rugby league by looking at the Māori tours of Australia in 1908 and 1909. What did the tours

achieve? Who was involved? And what impact did Māori have on the expansion of the game both here and abroad? By focussing on the two (1908 and 1909) Māori tours this chapter will look at how important Māori were to the growth of rugby league in New Zealand, Australia and England during the earliest stages of the game's international development.

3.2 The 1888 Native's Tour

Māori had been involved at the national level in rugby union since the first New Zealand team was selected. Joe Warbrick and Jack Taiaroa were both selected in the first ever New Zealand rugby union team, which toured Australia in 1884. Taiaroa was the first Māori to play rugby union for New Zealand, against a Wellington XV in a pre-tour match.⁸¹ The first 'official' Māori rugby union team was not selected until 1910. Although the first 'official' Māori team was not sanctioned until two years after the first Māori rugby league team, Māori had experienced success in the rugby union code.

Joe Warbrick went on to captain a private touring 'Natives' team in 1888, as opposed to the provincial union-sanctioned New Zealand team's tour of 1884. The 'Natives' 14-month tour included Egypt, England, Australia and New Zealand and a total of 108 matches, of which they lost only 23. Though not entirely made up of Māori players (5 non-Māori were included on the 'Natives' tour), the 'Native' team was a successful showcase of Māori athleticism to the world. The tour took place in an era of fascination with indigenous cultures and was centred around the exhibition of sporting ability and culture.

It was hoped that this tour would draw crowds through the exhibition of Māori culture, appearance and customs. However, as Mulholland (2009) acknowledges it would be the athletic ability of the Māori players, as opposed to their exoticism, that would attract the crowds through the gates to watch the tour matches.⁸² Today this tour still instils a great sense of pride within Māori rugby union circles. The success of this particular rugby union tour would add to the demand for Māori athletes in the rival code over a quarter of a century later.

Following the 1888 Natives' success, an 'all-Māori' team formed, seemingly overnight, in 1904 to play against a touring British team at Rotorua. The game was not pre-planned and took place after a group of Māori men, who had been tasked to welcome the British rugby

⁸¹ McCarthy, W. and Howitt, B. (1983), *Haka: The Māori Rugby Story* Rugby Press Ltd. Auckland, New Zealand. p. 62.

⁸² Mulholland, M. (2009), *Beneath the Māori Moon: An Illustrated History of Māori Rugby*, Huia Publishers, Auckland, New Zealand, pp. 6-7.

players, asked for the opportunity to play against them. The independent ‘Māori’ initiative played under the title of Rotorua First XV, but records of the match were not kept as it was deemed not to have official recognition.⁸³

3.3 The 1908 Māori tour

Following the successful All Golds’ tour of 1907 the profile of rugby league in New Zealand began to increase. The first official match played under Northern Union rules had taken place in Wellington on the 13th of June 1908 as a benefit match for the mother of the man credited with bringing rugby league to New Zealand, A.H Baskerville. This benefit match was a success in both spectator numbers and revenue taken. Following this game a number of interested men took the game to the ends of the country in the hope of establishing rugby league as a premier winter code. While the first official rugby league match took place on the 13th of June, by the 2nd of June a Māori touring side was already playing under the Northern Union’s rules in Australia.

Although 20 years apart, the combined success of the All Golds’ tour and the resonating significance of the ‘Natives’ tour in 1888 provided opportunities for Māori to pursue avenues for international sporting exposure. In May of 1908 Albert ‘Opai’ Asher, an All Black winger, began organising a Māori football side to tour Australia following the return of the All Golds team. The Māori team based in Tauranga would tour Australia and participate in a number of 15-a-side games. The idea of specifically announcing a 15-a-side touring team was quite possibly an effort to prevent, as stated by Coffey and Wood (2008), “alarm bells ringing at NZRFU (New Zealand Rugby Football Union) headquarters”⁸⁴ and the possible expulsion of the players who toured. Not only was a new sport a potential threat to the NZRFU, but private tours that had not been sanctioned by the NZRFU were also regarded as dangerous.

Rugby Union was still the prominent sport in New Zealand. It was regarded as the ‘national game’ and was seen as the leisure pursuit of ‘gentlemen’. The concept of the gentleman as player was one that had carried over from the social class dynamics of the English rugby clubs and unions. Rugby league, while rapidly escalating into a popular pastime in New Zealand, was still tarnished by the state of affairs that saw the split between codes in England and Australia. Ideas recreating the social class ethos of rugby union in England maintained an

⁸³ Mulholland, (2009), p. 15.

⁸⁴ Coffey, J. and Wood, B. (2008), *100 Years: Māori Rugby League 1908-2008*, Huia Publishers, Wellington, p. 11.

inherent imperial connection in New Zealand⁸⁵ which in turn created fears around professionalism in the rugby codes. The imperial connection of rugby union was based around the control that the RFU maintained over emerging unions in imperial settler colonies such as New Zealand, and Australia. As colonisation had seen the Crown exercise its authority over the subjects of New Zealand (all deemed British citizens, including Māori, as opposed to New Zealanders) so did the RFU maintain a similar control over the NZRFU. This control was demonstrated through the rules and philosophies of the game, by which the New Zealand unions had to abide.

The NZRFU had adopted explicit rules around the possibility of changing codes to the 'professional' sport of rugby league. Such rules could see life bans imposed on players who chose to switch from rugby union to rugby league. Due to the heightened awareness of, and disdain for, players breaking away from amateur rugby and the NZRFU, rugby league was not deemed a wise choice for athletes who wished to have a future in the union code. Coffey and Wood (2007) reveal that despite knowing the full implications of a code switch, the Opai Asher-led Māori side, upon arrival in Sydney, held a brief team meeting and a unanimous decision was made to switch codes.⁸⁶ It is quite possible that this code-switch was pre-determined and the touring party had always intended to play by rugby league, or Northern Union, rules as opposed to rugby union.

It was declared in New Zealand on the 2nd of June 1908 in a number of local newspapers that the Māori team would now be playing under the rules of the Northern Union game. The Nelson Evening Mail proclaimed that "After witnessing a couple of matches and themselves practising the new game, the [Māori] rugby team took a vote which favoured the new game in place of Rugby."⁸⁷ This player-led vote to choose rugby league over rugby union is significant.

Different from the social division that saw the split between clubs in England, the Māori decision to play rugby league was player-driven. This becomes important when examining the development of New Zealand and Māori rugby league, which will be examined in chapter four.

The 'Māori' were a highly anticipated team in Australia. New Zealand 'Native' Rugby Union teams had successfully toured Australia, Egypt and the United Kingdom in 1888-89 and the

⁸⁵ Falcous, M. (2007), 'Rugby League in the National Imaginary of New Zealand Aotearoa', *Sport in History*, 27: 3, Routledge, England. p. 428.

⁸⁶ Coffey, J. and Wood, B. (2007), 'The Kiwi's: 100 Years of International Rugby League.' Hodder Moea, Auckland, p. 34.

⁸⁷ 'The New Rugby Game', in *Nelson Evening Mail*, vol. XLII, 2 June 1908, p. 3.

‘original All Blacks’ had toured New South Wales in 1903 and Britain in 1905. While markedly different teams, both had included Māori players, and knowledge of the entertaining and flamboyant style of play that Māori brought with them was to prove a huge drawcard for spectators.⁸⁸ Through the budding Sydney competitions Australian audiences were already beginning to see the developments of the new rugby league rules. Newspapers reported that rugby league provided a faster and more entertaining spectacle for viewers. News stories promised that the new 13-man format of the game coupled with stories of Māori flair and desire for adventurous football would provide a sporting event that would be entertaining for spectators and fans of any football code.

Opai Asher was already well known in Australia through his exploits with the 1903 and 1905 All Black tours, and the news that he was leading an ‘All Māori’ rugby league team created an anticipation that spread throughout the regions to be toured.⁸⁹ It became apparent that the Māori team was a team capable of drawing large numbers of fans.

The popularity of the first Māori team meant that their matches were encouraging record numbers of spectators through the gates at all venues. They attracted 30,000 people to their opening fixture, described in the Sydney Morning Herald as a ‘brilliant exhibition of the Northern Counties game.’⁹⁰ The Māori side would play against an Australian representative team as well as the New South Wales and Queensland representative teams, with added fixtures in country centres.⁹¹ Prior to the Māori tour state and national representative teams had played against the All Golds during the return leg of their tour earlier in the year.

The Māori team won 6 of their 11 matches, proving to be a formidable force in their first international tour. The record crowds created substantial profits for the New South Wales Rugby League (NSWRL) and the Queensland Rugby League (QRL) administrations. At this time rugby league had only been played in Australia for approximately a year and was still a developing sport there. Competitions were underway in Sydney and Brisbane yet rugby union was still the dominant force and rugby league struggled to get a foothold on Australia’s East Coast. Rugby league in Australia appears to have been facing the same social class-related issues that had been encountered in England a decade earlier. During a difficult period for the Australian Rugby League (ARL), the 1908 Māori tour provided some financial stability.

⁸⁸ McCrystal, J. (2005), *The Originals: 1905 All Black Rugby Odyssey*. Random House, New Zealand, p. 16.

⁸⁹ Fagan, S. (2005), *The Rugby Rebellion: The Divide of League and Union*. RL1908, Australia, p. 235.

⁹⁰ Coffey and Wood, (2007), p. 34.

⁹¹ Fagan, (2005), p. 215.

The success of the 1908 tour proved to any doubters of the Māori side that they were a competitive representative team. The financial success of the tour meant that a touring Māori team could potentially bankroll the development of the code wherever they played. However, by the end of the tour controversies were arising that threatened to blemish the Māori team's reputation.

Regardless of their on-field popularity, the Māori team became embroiled in a "bitter financial wrangle"⁹² and an injunction was taken against the team and its management group. A promoter named Robert Jack claimed that he had brokered a deal with Opai Asher prior to the tour. The deal, Robert Jack thought, meant that he was entitled to a share of the gate takings from all of the tour matches.⁹³ Asher and his men felt that Jack was being less than truthful about the apparent deal surrounding payments and sought to broker a new deal with the NSWRL. Jack had apparently been in negotiations with Asher prior to the tour and had an agreement that entitled him to 5% of the gate takings from the Māori tour. After Jack had made these claims the NSWRL stepped in to resolve the matter themselves.⁹⁴

After several discussions with his team, management and officials Asher told the head of the NSWRL that the tour was over and the final two matches would be forfeited. Initially the forfeited matches were disguised as the result of poor weather with rain blamed for the postponement of the remaining tour dates. Yet, it did not take long for the press to uncover the conflict behind the abandoned matches and for headlines about the issues to appear, such as this one from the *Marlborough Express*: "The Maori⁹⁵ Team Quarrel with the Rugby League, All Matches Abandoned"⁹⁶.

According to participants in the team the NSWRL withheld money from the Māori players who therefore refused to play. The Māori team believed that funds were being kept by the NSWRL illegally. Asher claimed money was being withheld from men against whom there was no injunction. He had received legal advice that assured him that the NSWRL had broken its contract.⁹⁷ At this point the relationship between the Māori team and the NSWRL

⁹² Coffey and Wood, (2007), p. 34.

⁹³ Coffey and Wood, (2007), p. 34.

⁹⁴ Coffey and Wood, (2008), p. 19.

⁹⁵ Here the word Māori does not contain a macron as when the publication that has been quoted was published macrons were not in use for the spelling of Māori. From here on when quoting sources that did not use macrons, the macron will be omitted.

⁹⁶ 'Football', in *Marlborough Express*, Vol. XLII, Issue 183, 4 August 1908, p. 7.

⁹⁷ Coffey and Wood, (2008), p. 23.

was far from harmonious. Throughout the fiasco the Māori team maintained that all of their dealings had been legitimate and ‘above board’.⁹⁸

A fundraising match, unauthorised by the NSWRL, was held to raise the return fares needed by the Māori. The match was a player-driven initiative that saw rugby union and rugby league players alike combine to support the touring Māori team. The Māori team, determined to take charge of the situation, formed a 15-man team in the style of the 1888-89 New Zealand Natives squad, even adopting the ‘Natives’ title. This fixture was the cause of further controversy within the code. The NSWRL threatened life bans on any players, within the Sydney and New South Wales competitions, who took part in the match. However, there were players of both rugby union and league who found themselves sympathetic to the Māori cause. The popularity of the Māori squad is evident in that several Australian, NSW and local players risked disqualification by declaring their determination to participate in the proposed match. At the same time, the power of the governing authority was imposed and a number of players pulled out of the match at the last minute due to the fear of facing a life ban from the NSWRL. The match ended up being somewhat of a farce as the Metropolis side, which the Māori were to face, contained two Māori players, one of whom did not wear boots. Only around 100 spectators arrived to watch the game.⁹⁹ The so-called ‘fundraiser’ failed to come close to raising the funds required to get the Māori side home.

Many people involved in rugby league in Sydney believed that the Māori team deserved support because of the huge financial benefits reaped by the NSWRL, Queensland Rugby League (QRL) and the Australian Rugby League (ARL) from the 1908 tour matches. It was estimated the NSWRL alone benefitted by about 1,200 pounds from the tour.¹⁰⁰ The Māori side and the NSWRL eventually reconciled their differences regarding the payment issues that had threatened to collapse the relationship between the two groups. However, prior to reconciliation, changes at the leadership level of the NSWRL occurred and this saw a new perspective placed on the issue enabling the Māori tourists to return home to New Zealand.

The Māori team arrived home to find they had all been given life bans by the NZRFU. The members of the Māori squad were no longer eligible to play rugby union in New Zealand yet had proven quite adept in their abilities in the 13-man code. Despite the new-found prowess of Māori in rugby league, a “request was received from several members of the Maori

⁹⁸ *Otago Witness*. Issue 2811, 26 August 1908, p. 62.

⁹⁹ Coffey, and Wood, (2008), p. 24.

¹⁰⁰ ‘Māori Footballers’ in *Evening Post*, 12 August 1908, p. 7.

professional team... praying that their disqualification be removed.”¹⁰¹ Māori players from that tour tried several times to be reinstated as amateur rugby union players at all levels of the game from club to national level.¹⁰²

The financial issues and the enforced life-ban controversies aside, nothing can be taken away from the popularity of the team or the achievements of the tour. The Māori side held the Kangaroos¹⁰³ to a ten-point margin in a code in which they had had less than ten games experience. They defeated Queensland twice out of three meetings and beat Sydney Metropolitan twice.¹⁰⁴ Perhaps the biggest achievement of the tour was that the Māori team singlehandedly financed rugby league in Australia. Prior to the 1908 Māori tour rugby league in New South Wales was seen as in a state of ferment.¹⁰⁵ The 1,200 pound profit gained by the NSWRL and the takings of the other matches in Brisbane and the country games provided enough capital to send an Australian national side to tour England and to promote the development of rugby league along the eastern seaboard of Australia. This financial benefit for the code was one of the first major contributions that Māori would make to rugby league over the following one hundred years.

Following the 1908 Māori tour, the ARL formed a national Australian side to tour England and Wales. This tour would not have been financially possible if it weren't for the revenue created by the Māori tour of Australia earlier in the year. What is worthy of note, however, is that the 1908 Australian tour of England and Wales did not contribute anything to the profit of the ARL. The financial results of the tour were seen as 'very unsatisfactory' and any capital acquired during the tour was barely enough to cover the costs of expenses.¹⁰⁶ The English league had to pay for the Australians' return trip home as the tour was a financial disaster. The touring party had hoped to earn similar money to the All Golds on their tour the previous year when the All Golds had earned 200 pounds per player. This was far from the case as the tour captain Dally Messenger noted years later, "We got nothing and were lucky to get home."¹⁰⁷ The tour was that much of a disaster that it left the tour promoter James Giltinan bankrupt only a year after successfully helping in the promotion of the All Golds'

¹⁰¹ 'Football New Zealand Rugby Union' in *Evening Post*, 8 July 1910, p. 4.

¹⁰² 'Football Control' in *Evening Post*, 11 June 1909, p. 4.

¹⁰³ The name 'Kangaroos' is given to the Australian national representative men's rugby league side.

¹⁰⁴ Coffey and Wood, (2008), p. 25.

¹⁰⁵ 'In a State of Ferment' in *Evening Post*, Vol. LXXVII, Issue 64, 17 March 1909, p. 7.

¹⁰⁶ 'In a State of Ferment' in *Evening Post*, Vol. LXXVII, Issue 64, 17 March 1909, p. 7.

¹⁰⁷ Adams, T. (2011), 'Blazing a Trail' in *Rugby League Week*, April 11 2011, p. 45.

tour. While financially unsuccessful, it is likely that the tour would have aided in the popularity of the game in both Australia and the UK.

Following the Australian tour investigations of the financial stability of the NSWRL were undertaken. Much of the 1908 profit had disappeared, including over 1,200 pounds from the Māori tour. Mismanagement within the NSWRL led to the formation of a new league executive, and an invitation was extended for the Māori team to return to Australia for another tour in 1909.

3.4 The 1909 Māori Tour

The popularity and profit-making potential of the 1908 Māori tour saw a Māori team given an opportunity to return to Australia in 1909. This tour would also give the NSWRL the opportunity to re-examine what had led to the financial disaster of the 1908 Australian tour to England and provide another opportunity to capitalise on the uncanny ability of the Māori team to draw spectators through the gates.

The itinerary of the Māori team was to be a tough one mirroring the one followed by the All Golds on their tour, including three games against New South Wales, two against Queensland, one against Newcastle and three tests against Australia. Subsequently a fourth match against Australia was added.¹⁰⁸

The 1909 Māori tour occurred at a time when rugby league in the eastern Australian states, New South Wales and Queensland in particular, was continuing to struggle in terms of development, lacking in fan base and financial security. The NSWRL had established an inter-club premiership in Sydney which in itself was an achievement. Unfortunately the NSWRL did not have the financial security to maintain a sound, competitive tournament. Most of the profit from the, initially, financially successful 1908 Māori tour had gone as a result of the financially crippling tour to England at the end of the 1908 season. In Brisbane a district club competition had been established, but it too was suffering from a lack of finances and supporters.

Coffey and Wood (2008) state that in 1909, Australian and, in particular, New South Wales rugby league needed another New Zealand team and, even more so, another Māori team to tour and provide the boost which would set it firmly on the path to becoming the premier

¹⁰⁸ Coffey and Wood, (2008), p. 41.

winter sporting code.¹⁰⁹ With the election of a new executive the NSWRL had put in place the mechanisms required to maximise their development through another Māori tour. After the spectator success of the 1908 Māori tour it was hoped that the Māori would, once again, prove to be the necessary element for financial security.

The 1909 Māori tour lived up to all of the high financial expectations. By the end of the 1909 Māori tour the New South Wales and Queensland rugby leagues were in a position of prosperity.¹¹⁰ The Māori team had repeated the success of the 1908 tour. Any traces of financial despair were quickly forgotten after the opening two games of the Māori tour in Sydney had drawn a combined attendance of over 50,000 spectators.¹¹¹ The Māori side had proven once again that their brand of fast and elegant play could bring increased numbers of spectators through the turnstiles. The Māori tourists managed to bring more spectators to games than other international teams, such as the English and New Zealand tours. This success of Māori touring sides was instrumental in enhancing the sport in Australasia. These tours provided the financial security that Australian rugby league clubs and competitions needed, and the follow-on effect from this would lead to an increase in international touring that would have a direct impact on the future of New Zealand rugby league.

The popularity of Māori style and flair meant that all on-field expectations of the team were also met. The Māori side opened their tour with consecutive victories over New South Wales and then went on to defeat Australia in the first 'test' in Sydney.¹¹² Based on gate takings from the large attendances at the Māori tour matches these performances were indicative of a popularity unique to the Māori sides of the earliest years. Māori exhibitions of rugby league were a true spectator sport. Thousands of Australians would flock to the grounds to catch a glimpse of the hard running and explosive style of play exhibited by the early Māori sides.

The Māori touring side of 1909 had a profound influence on the way that the game was played. The size of the Māori forward pack allowed them to try and run over the defence as opposed to running around them. These Māori forwards introduced what Fagan (2005) calls the 'unprecedented notion' of ball-carriers dropping their shoulders into defenders to 'bump' off the tackle.¹¹³ This was a new method of attack that saw the bigger stronger forwards laying a platform of momentum for the faster, 'nippier' backs to capitalise on. Such

¹⁰⁹ Coffey and Wood, (2008), p. 39.

¹¹⁰ Fagan, (2005), p. 215.

¹¹¹ Fagan, (2005), p. 215.

¹¹² Coffey and Wood, (2008), p. 41.

¹¹³ Fagan, (2005), p. 235.

techniques have developed into common-place tactics for any contemporary rugby league team.

During the 1909 tour a supporter is recorded to have said “They put every pound of energy into their attacks that they were possessed of... there was no mistaking the determination of the Maoris to make the pace as hot as possible.”¹¹⁴ It was such exhibitions of determination and energy that had the supporters flocking through the gates across the country to witness some of the most entertaining football available worldwide.

The 1909 Māori tour contributed markedly to what would eventuate in the foreseeable future of rugby league. The 1909 tour had thrown a financial lifeline to the Australian, NSWRL and QRL. Fagan (2005) claims that, without the 1908 and 1909 Māori tours rugby league would never have gained its distinction in New South Wales and Queensland so quickly and so permanently.¹¹⁵ The Māori team of 1909 had also changed the style of rugby league play forever. No longer was the evasion of the tackler the main priority. In fact it was reported that “their men made little effort to dodge opponents”¹¹⁶. Instead, they chose to attack the big forwards to wear down defences in an effort to create the necessary space for the quicker backs to score the points.

Māori prowess in the game of rugby league led to the inclusion of two of the 1909 Māori tour party chosen in the 1910 Australasian team to play England. The Australasian team was essentially an Australian team under the authority of the ARL but with the inclusion of two Māori tourists, Albert (Opai) Asher and Riki Papakura¹¹⁷, who were chosen to represent Australasia alongside the finest players from New South Wales and Queensland.¹¹⁸ The brilliance shown by Asher, considered among the best footballers from the southern hemisphere, set a precedent that has been emulated by Māori league players over the past century at home and abroad.

3.5 Impact of the tours on New Zealand rugby league

The 1908 and 1909 tours helped to further establish rugby league in Australia and also raised the profile of the game in New Zealand. But the two tours of Australia were of more benefit

¹¹⁴ Fagan, (2005), p. 235.

¹¹⁵ Fagan, (2005), p. 235.

¹¹⁶ Fagan, (2005), p. 235.

¹¹⁷ Papakura would go on to become the first Māori to play professionally in the English premier rugby league competition.

¹¹⁸ Coffey and Wood, (2008), p. 59.

to the development of Australian rugby league than of rugby league in New Zealand. Financially the tours added little if anything to the provincial and club competitions that were quickly established around this country. Occurring before the establishment of the New Zealand Rugby League (NZRL) in 1910 it appears that the tours were not designed to create revenue for an overarching authority or national league. One of the key successes of the tour was the increased exposure of the game nationwide through the news media. This exposure, in turn, saw an increase in the numbers of players signing up for the code. Importantly these tours not only raised the profile of the game, but also raised the profile of Māori athletes and their achievements.

While not immediately enhancing the financial security of New Zealand rugby league, the 1908 and 1909 Māori tours created optimism that future tours to and from the Southern Hemisphere would be more feasible. The financial rewards reaped by the Australian competitions and authorities would lead to international Australian tours and subsequently tours to New Zealand from both Australian and British teams.

In 1910, following the success of the 1908 and 1909 Māori tours the NZRFU announced that a New Zealand Māori rugby union team would be selected. In the period following the rugby league groundbreaking tours, economically and in terms of raising the sport's profile, the NZRFU and the provincial rugby unions began to make conscious efforts to retain Māori players in their game following an exodus of Māori to rugby league.¹¹⁹ It was arguably the growing involvement and success of Māori in rugby league around this time that saw the establishment of a national Māori rugby union team. The success of the 1908 and 1909 Māori tours had created a genuine fear amongst the NZRFU and the different provinces around the country. Recently the 2009 NZRU Annual Report stated that in regard to the inaugural Māori rugby union team, the "key reasons for proposing the team was to counter the growing involvement of Māori in rugby league."¹²⁰

The popularity of rugby league for Māori escalated from this point on. Rugby league itself was reaping the benefit of the Māori tours with increased numbers of players and spectators, as well as the now real fear of the NZRFU that rugby league would become a sport participated in by all members of society. Māori participation in rugby league became somewhat of a contentious issue for the NZRFU. Over the next decade the NZRFU and its supporters feared the worst with regard to retaining Māori players in rugby union. There was

¹¹⁹ 'Maoris and League', in *Evening Post*, Volume CII, Issue 80, 1 October 1921, p. 16.

¹²⁰ NZRU, (2009), *New Zealand Rugby Union 2009 Annual Report*, p. 67.

a genuine fear that unless the NZRFU fostered and encouraged rugby union amongst Māori that rugby league would secure ‘them’.¹²¹ While this fear was warranted, we can also attribute the increase in development targeting Māori within rugby union to the achievements of the 1908 and 1909 Māori rugby league tours.

3.6 Summary

In 1908 rugby league was beginning to make its presence known in New Zealand and Australia. The New Zealand All Golds had recently returned from a successful tour of England and Australia and Māori touring sides were set to embark on what would become a key event in the financial development, as well as successfully establishing a firm foundation for Australian rugby league.

Following the successful All Golds’ tour and the recurring legend of the 1888 Natives tour, the first team of either of the two rugby codes, union or league, consisting entirely of Māori players was formed. The 1908 Māori rugby league team became pioneers in terms of their pecuniary contributions to the development of rugby league in Sydney and Brisbane. Aside from a financial dispute with the NSWRL and promoter Robert Jack, the tour was a success. Although the Māori team themselves came home with little other than their dignity, the 1908 New Zealand Māori tour had provided the ARL with enough revenue to fund an Australian tour of England and to assist in the establishment and development of an inter-club premiership in Sydney and a district club competition in Brisbane.

The following year the Māori team were called upon again to relieve the monetary strains on the ARL, NSWRL and QRL. This came after a successful fiscal period for Australian rugby league following the 1908 Māori rugby league tour. The Australian leagues had found themselves requiring the services of the Māori after a financially crippling Australian tour of England at the end of the 1908 season. The subsequent 1909 Māori touring side was a success both on and off the field. With spectators numbering in the tens of thousands attending many of the matches, the Māori games raised sufficient revenue to lead Australian rugby league into a time of prosperity.

The two tours also raised the profile of the game in New Zealand. Following these tours increased opportunities for touring and hosting international teams would enhance the development of the sport in New Zealand.

¹²¹ ‘Maoris and League’, in *Evening Post*, Volume CII, Issue 80, 1 October 1921, p. 16.

The 1908 and 1909 tours highlighted the abilities of Māori at the international level and endorsed the possibility of representing not only their country but also their culture. This increased opportunity for Māori offered by rugby league prompted a significant exodus of Māori players from rugby union into the league game. While this was beneficial for New Zealand rugby league, it also served to benefit Māori in rugby union. By instilling a fear of losing more Māori players the NZRFU established a national Māori rugby union team and this enabled Māori to be represented at the international level in both codes. The achievements of the 1908 and 1909 tours, therefore, are not limited only to rugby league, but also to the promotion of Māori athletes across the two codes.

Often overlooked, the Māori tours of 1908 and 1909 set the precedent for touring sides in Australia with regard to spectator numbers and revenue generated. Without the opposition of administrators to ban such tours the Māori teams of 1908 and 1909 paved the way for future touring Māori teams. These tours financed Australian rugby league and promoted Māori athleticism around the world. While these tours were immensely successful, the real achievements of Māori in rugby league, and Māori Rugby League, occurred on home soil. The following chapter will examine how Māori managed to continue to influence the development of rugby league at home after such high achievements abroad in 1908 and 1909. In the decades following these initial tours the Aotearoa Māori Rugby League (AMRL) established itself as an entity separate from the NZRL and one of the greatest athletes to grace either code, George Nepia, provided a further boost to the popularity of the ‘people’s game’ in New Zealand.

Chapter Four: The Origins of a Māori Rugby League

4.1 Introduction

Eleven days before the first rugby league match was played on New Zealand soil (on 13 June 1908), a Māori rugby league team was already embarking on a tour of Australia. As discussed in the previous chapter, Māori have been involved in the sport of rugby league since its introduction to the New Zealand sporting landscape. Over the first two to three decades following rugby league's establishment in New Zealand, Māori became involved in rugby league at local, regional and national levels. As a result it is not surprising that Māori would seek to claim a sense of ownership in a sport which in its early stages they had made a large impact on.

By the mid-1930s many Māori had developed a strong affinity to rugby league after 25 years of association with the sport. Through the successful international tours of 1908 and 1909 and international and domestic games on home soil, Māori had proved integral to the development of the sport in New Zealand and around the world, particularly in Australia. Following a period of reduced Māori involvement at the international level a uniquely Māori authority was sought for the promotion and development of the sport in Māori communities.

The aim of this chapter is to examine the establishment and early years of a separate Aotearoa New Zealand Māori Rugby League (ANZMRL), now known as the Aotearoa Māori Rugby League (AMRL). A central focus for this chapter is the question of why Māori were so drawn to rugby league and why there was a desire to take ownership of the sport within Māori communities by establishing a separate governing authority for Māori communities. The perceived social exclusivity of early 20th Century rugby union will be looked into as a possible precedent for the strong affinity between Māori and rugby league during this period.

4.2 Origins of a separate Māori Rugby League

In 1910, two years after the first rugby league match was played in New Zealand, the New Zealand Rugby League (NZRL) was formed. The NZRL quickly sought to establish provincial leagues, although initially few provinces were represented. Leagues in major areas such as Canterbury and Wellington were not established firmly until 1912 and the West Coast followed three years later in 1915.¹²² While established rugby league clubs and teams, as

¹²² Coffey and Wood, (2008), p. 61.

such, were not firmly rooted in the sporting landscape of New Zealand there was a lot of early interest in the game. Within a year of the first match having been played in Wellington there were representative teams in a number of towns around the country. Teams were organised in Southland, Otago, South Canterbury, Wellington, Taranaki and Auckland, and representative fixtures were played.¹²³ While these teams are indicative of some success for the blossoming sport, it is likely that rugby union at this stage was still the favoured winter code amongst New Zealanders.

Rugby league was still very much in its infancy in 1910. At this time few New Zealanders had witnessed rugby league being played and, due to allegiances with rugby union, carried preconceived judgements of the game. It has been argued that most people were prejudiced against rugby league and the threat it posed to rugby union.¹²⁴ This perceived threat was largely based around the 'professional' nature of the rugby league game and how this would affect the firmly established rugby union code and its underlying amateur ethos. At the time professionalism, as mentioned in previous chapters, was considered the antithesis of the rugby union philosophy. Rugby union had been created on the morals and virtues of the English school system and the physical ideals of muscular Christianity. In New Zealand, threats of a loss of visits by RFU teams influenced the NZRU to take a firm stance against rugby league and suggestions of compensation to players. While not professional in the sense of contemporary sport, that is multi-million dollar contracts and full time training, the offer by rugby league of compensation for work missed and remuneration for touring was considered to breach rugby union's amateur stance. This amateur stance would become the key to rugby union's exclusivity in New Zealand. Anything not considered 'amateur' was not to be associated with the development of rugby union.

Since there were few provincial rugby league sides for any visiting international teams to play, the suggestion surfaced among provincial and Māori officials that a New Zealand Māori side, having already successfully completed two tours, be allocated an international game on home soil. The idea eventuated into the first home match for the New Zealand Māori rugby league team in 1910. It was hoped that the Māori home game would have the same effect on the success of the code in New Zealand as it had had in Australia, where, as explained in the previous chapter, the Māori tours had proved pivotal in the development of the code across the Tasman, both financially and in the promotion of the game as a spectator event.

¹²³ Greenwood, B. (2007), '1908: The Year Rugby League Came to New Zealand', in *Sport in History* 27;3, Routledge, England, p. 344.

¹²⁴ Coffey and Wood, (2008), p. 61.

The NZRL announced that a tour of New Zealand by a British team of Northern Union players would take place and that the tour would be opened by a match against the New Zealand Māori team on the 20th of July 1910¹²⁵. Newspapers contributed to the hype of the match by billing the game as likely to be a “close and interesting one.”¹²⁶ The level of interest in the Māori team was largely based upon the successful Australian tours of 1908 and 1909. The media had played a part in promoting Māori as having played with a particular flair and exuberance that had brought punters through the turnstiles overseas and it was hoped this would be repeated at home. The success of the Māori tours in Australia had given such a boost to the sport that, in the same year that the Māori were having their first home international, the Australian rugby league test against Great Britain outsold an All Blacks test by 28,000 spectators to 8,000.¹²⁷

The turnout on the day of the first Māori rugby league test in New Zealand was disappointing and far from what had been desired. Optimistic predictions of a fast, free flowing ‘native’ style game were overshadowed by less than ideal weather conditions. It was estimated that around 6,000 daring spectators braved the conditions on a day that saw the field flooded by large pools of water.¹²⁸ This number fell well short of the anticipated attendance. However, 6,000 fans in appalling weather could be viewed as relatively successful given an All Blacks rugby union test in the same year had only drawn a crowd of 8,000. Not only did the weather affect the number of spectators, but the conditions also made for a game that fell short of the hype surrounding the excitement and entertaining style of game played by the Māori teams in Australia. The Māori team was confronted with both heavy rain and a heavy defeat that day. As a sign of the conditions the speed and agility of what Coffey and Wood (2008) term the ‘Māori game’ was made redundant on the heavy playing surface. The Great Britain team defeated the Māori team by 29 points to nil in a game where the Māori handling of the ball was strongly criticised by the press.¹²⁹ Given the nature of the conditions it is possible that such criticism may have been somewhat harsh.

Despite a loss to the British the Māori had again made history. The match between the New Zealand Māori and Great British Northern Union team had seen the first try scored in an

¹²⁵ *Evening Post*, Volume LXXX, Issue 5, 6 July 1910, p. 8.

¹²⁶ Coffey and Wood, (2008), p. 62.

¹²⁷ Richards, (2007), p. 97.

¹²⁸ Coffey and Wood, (2008), p. 62.

¹²⁹ Coffey and Wood, (2008), p. 63.

international match held in New Zealand¹³⁰ and was the first match of Great Britain's first rugby league tour of New Zealand.

Māori rugby league had proven it had the physical and competitive competency to compete on the field but its administration remained an unofficial entity. At this stage the NZRL was the governing body for all rugby league organisations in the country. Māori called for the development of a Māori-run authority to administer rugby league in distinctly Māori communities.

A separate body from the NZRL, the Aotearoa New Zealand Māori Rugby League (ANZMRL)¹³¹, was formed in 1934 to administer the game in Māori communities after a hui (meeting) held in Huntly. The ANZMRL board were to oversee the administration and development of Māori rugby league initially in Māori communities, but would be expanded to a national body over time. The body was later renamed the Aotearoa Māori Rugby League (AMRL) and in 1992 was registered as an incorporated society,¹³² to provide a central authority for provincial, waka¹³³, and tribal rugby league organisations, each recognised as affiliate bodies of the AMRL. The AMRL allowed Māori to contribute further to the code that was becoming increasingly popular within Māori communities. With an established organisational structure it was increasingly evident that Māori had developed a strong relationship to the sport of rugby league and had the desire to be part of its development in New Zealand.

Between the inaugural 1908 tour and the 1934 establishment of the AMRL, Māori participation in the code remained high at the provincial and national level. Some individuals at the time also began to have an international impact. Riki Papakura, captain of the 1909 Māori tour, played in England for the Warrington club. Despite playing only one game of first grade for the club, along with several other matches for the 'A' team, his popularity with the English media immediately made headlines and secured his position as a crowd

¹³⁰ Coffey and Wood, (2008), p. 63.

¹³¹ The Aotearoa New Zealand Māori Rugby League has undergone a number of name changes, including Aotearoa Māori Rugby League and New Zealand Māori Rugby League. For the purpose of this thesis the body will be referred to as AMRL the commonly used acronym for the contemporary title of Aotearoa Māori Rugby League.

¹³² Leberman, S. (2005) *Sport Business Management in Aotearoa/New Zealand*, Thomson Learning, Nelson, p. 69.

¹³³ Waka is used here as a reference to the wider tribal affiliations of Māori. Māori iwi/tribes trace their descent to particular waka/canoe regarded as bringing their ancestors to Aotearoa-New Zealand.

favourite.¹³⁴ In 1910 a Māori team played an international match at home for the first time against Great Britain, and tours of Australia in 1922 and Britain in 1926/27 followed.

4.3 Māori Rugby League and the Kīngitanga

In the years leading up to the formation of the AMRL the Tainui¹³⁵ people had developed a strong relationship with the sport of rugby league. From this relationship between the Tainui people and the code came the endorsement by the Kīngitanga (the Māori King Movement).

The Kīngitanga was established as a pan-tribal¹³⁶ Māori monarchy. The Kīngitanga movement emerged out of growing Māori concerns surrounding Treaty of Waitangi related grievances at the hands of the Crown and growing colonial influences¹³⁷. The first Māori King was a Waikato-Tainui¹³⁸ chief by the name of Potatau Te Wherowhero. Although reluctant to accept the mantle of King, Te Wherowhero was encouraged to do so by his Tainui people in 1857, and was ‘crowned’ in 1858. One of the key motivators for the Kīngitanga to be based in the Waikato was the centrality of the Tainui tribe’s location and the vast abundance of resources within the tribal boundaries. The Tainui tribal boundaries were also surrounded by a number of allied tribes, such as those in the Taranaki, Turangi and Bay of Plenty areas, who also supported the Kīngitanga and its Waikato base. Te Wherowhero was succeeded by his son King Tawhiao in 1860 and following Tawhiao, Mahuta, Te Rata and in 1933 the fifth king, King Koroki.

The AMRL was established in 1934 with the added prestige of a royal patron, King Koroki¹³⁹. The mana (pride, strength, authority) of rugby league to Māori can be evidenced by this gesture. The symbolism associated with the Māori royal family becoming the patrons of Māori rugby league shows a deep affiliation between Māori and the sport. The aligning of the Māori royal family and the sport indicates that rugby league was a sport embraced by a broad Māori community in addition to players and fans.

¹³⁴ Coffey and Wood, (2009), p. 64.

¹³⁵ Tainui are a central North Island iwi (tribe) from the Waikato region.

¹³⁶ While the Kīngitanga has throughout history been seen as a pan-tribal movement, it must be acknowledged that not all iwi pledged allegiance to, or recognised the authority of, the Kīngitanga.

¹³⁷ King, M. (2003), *The Penguin History of New Zealand*, Penguin, Auckland, p. 212.

¹³⁸ See Tainui above.

¹³⁹ King Koroki was the 5th Māori monarch. Initially reluctant to accept the title Koroki reigned as King for 33 years.

This patronage that was established over 75 years ago has remained strong and given both mana and prestige to the AMRL.¹⁴⁰ King Koroki's patronage was not the only royal connection to the AMRL in the early days. King Koroki's younger brother, Tonga Mahuta, was an original member of the AMRL board. Mahuta had previously toured Australia as a player in the 1922 New Zealand Māori team and "attracted media attention for his ties with royalty."¹⁴¹

Koroki Te Rata Mahuta Tawhiao Potatau Te Wherowhero (King Koroki) was the fifth Māori monarch. Koroki passed away at the Kīngitanga stronghold of Ngaruawahia on 18 May 1966 after 33 years as Māori King and 32 years as Patron for Māori rugby league. Before his burial on the 23rd of May 1966, Koroki's daughter, Piki, was crowned as Te Arikinui Te Atairangikaahu and accepted the role of leader for the Kīngitanga, becoming the first female Māori monarch.¹⁴² When King Koroki died in 1966 he left not only his place as Māori King to be succeeded but also the role of patron for New Zealand Māori Rugby League. Te Arikinui Te Atairangikaahu, affectionately known as Dame Te Atairangikaahu, followed her father's footsteps and maintained the patron role with the utmost level of mana, and affection for Māori rugby league.

An avid supporter of league throughout her reign as Māori Queen, Te Arikinui Te Atairangikaahu passed away in 2006 after 40 years of service as not only the Māori Queen but also patron of Māori rugby league. So active was Dame Te Atairangikaahu in her support of rugby league in New Zealand that in 2006 when she was buried her coffin was carried on the shoulders of players from the prominent Taniwharau and Tūrangawaewae rugby league clubs from the banks of the Waikato River to her final resting place on Mount Taupiri.¹⁴³ Again, the significance of the Kīngitanga relationship with rugby league cannot be overstated. For a woman of such tremendous mana in the eyes of the entire nation, Māori and non-Māori, to be taken to her final earthly destination by these clubs is hugely symbolic of the love that she and many Māori have for the sport.

Following the path of his mother Te Arikinui Te Atairangikaahu, her son, King Tuheitia has assumed the role of AMRL patron. In 2008 the relationship between the Kīngitanga and

¹⁴⁰ Tamati, H. 'Forward', In Coffey, J. and Wood, B. (2008), *100 Years: Maori Rugby League 1908-2008*, Huia Publishers, Wellington, p. X.

¹⁴¹ Coffey and Wood, (2008), p. 101.

¹⁴² Ballara, Angela. 'Koroki Te Rata Mahuta Tawhiao Potatau Te Wherowhero 1908/1909? - 1966'. *Dictionary of New Zealand Biography*, updated 22 June 2007, URL: <http://www.dnzb.govt.nz/>

¹⁴³ Coffey and Wood, (2008), p. 5.

rugby league was showcased in a national Māori rugby league tournament which represented 100 years of Māori rugby league and 150 years of the Kīngitanga movement.

Today the AMRL has built a strong and lasting relationship with the NZRL. The AMRL is independent of the NZRL and remains self-funded through sponsorship and fundraising. AMRL members sit on the NZRL board and the AMRL is the most proactive of all the NZRL associate bodies, which also include the provincial bodies, and contributes in a number of ways to the governing body. One of the key reasons for the success of Māori rugby league and the AMRL was that rugby league as a sport, and the NZRL as an entity, have never been known, from inception to present day, to discriminate against Māori participation in the code. For the sport to have such a strong support base in the Kīngitanga is indicative of the affiliation Māori had to rugby league. The affiliation that had developed between Māori and rugby league itself was reciprocated by rugby league's acceptance of Māori.

Unlike rugby union where the national board influences the board of the New Zealand Māori Rugby Union (NZMRU), the NZRL does not choose the AMRL board members. The AMRL remains an independent body and maintains self-governance with regard to leadership, funding and working with the NZRL. The board of the NZMRU is decided and allocated funding by the over-arching NZRU and the NZRU has always had members who sit on the NZMRU board acting as a form of watchdog.

The acceptance by the NZRL of the AMRL and the Kīngitanga influence indicate a unique relationship between Māori and rugby league, something that still hasn't been seen in rugby union. In rugby union the majority of decisions were influenced by the overarching control of the RFU in London. The RFU and the desire to maintain the amateur ideals of rugby union did not allow for the same flexibility that rugby league offered with regard to breakaway initiatives and entrepreneurial opportunities. The player-driven tours of 1908 and 1909 and the emergence of the AMRL as a separate entity in 1934 are examples of the inclusive nature and freedom granted by rugby league in New Zealand due to the lack of ties to a global centralised authority such as the RFU. Rugby league in this period has thus embraced different initiatives that have the potential to help grow the game and provide additional player numbers and financial security.

Rugby league's acceptance of Māori initiatives in the growth of the sport has created a sense of social inclusion. Māori were wanted by the sport and in return wanted to play the sport. The following sections will examine the socially exclusive nature of New Zealand rugby

union and the more inclusive nature of rugby league as further examples of how the relationship between Māori and rugby league developed.

4.4 The exclusivity of rugby union

Rugby union scholars and sports authors have for some time debated rugby union's inclusiveness. Some historians and authors (Philips, 1987; Howitt, 1983; Laidlaw, 2010) maintain that rugby union is an inclusive sport that since its establishment in the country has been available to people of all shapes, ethnicities and levels of athletic ability. Others (Ryan, 1995, 2007, 2009; Hokowhitu, 2004, 2005, 2007) argue that early New Zealand rugby union was elitist and restricted to the upper classes and those who attended boys' schools.

Ryan (2005) argues that rugby union's exclusivity in New Zealand began with the initial promotion of the sport in the country. Restricted to the boys' schools and a social élite, rugby was inaccessible, initially, to the working and lower classes and as a consequence to Māori. Local initiatives were blocked because of the desire to maintain ties with the RFU and imperial ties allowed for and maintained control over the sport's participants.

As discussed earlier in the chapter, and also earlier in the thesis, the exclusivity of rugby union is directly related to the amateur status of the sport. Used as a mechanism to keep the lower and working classes out of the game amateurism developed into an ideal that could be used to define the rugby union player. Ryan (2005) suggests that the NZRU and the All Blacks 'brand' until at least the 1920s were made up of a disproportionately large number of urban, educated and occupationally professional men.¹⁴⁴ This highlights that after 50 years of All Black rugby being played in New Zealand, elite level New Zealand rugby union continued to be the domain of the middle and upper classes.

The imperial dominance of the sport was not confined only to participation. While, in theory, anyone could attend a match, the NZRU had very strong ideas about who should, or shouldn't, be present in the crowds of rugby matches.

¹⁴⁴ Ryan, G. (2005), 'Rural Myth and Urban Actuality: The Anatomy of All Black and New Zealand Rugby 1884-1938', in *Tackling Rugby Myths: Rugby and New Zealand Society 1854-2004*, Greg Ryan (Ed), University of Otago Press, New Zealand, p. 33.

4.4.1 Spectatorship

One feature of rugby union that differed greatly from rugby league in the earliest stages of New Zealand competitions was that of spectatorship. As a form of ‘professional’ sport the rules of rugby league were developed to attract spectatorship by large crowds without whom the rugby league clubs would have had little of the revenue required for compensating players. As noted in the *Marlborough Express* in 1912 “The league game has proved itself to be far more spectacular than ordinary rugby, as evidenced by the enormous crowds which regularly attend the matches played in other centres.”¹⁴⁵ It was these ‘enormous’ crowds in attendance that allowed rugby league to prosper, develop and expand in New Zealand.

Rugby league embraced the financial success that came with spectators and made no attempts to disregard the role that the public played in maintaining the sport’s popularity and wealth. Rugby union differed in that the provincial unions, such as the unions of the main centres including Canterbury, Auckland, Otago and Wellington, were less embracing of the large crowds that rugby league invited. English rugby unions and clubs in the mid-to-late 1800s were the exclusive domain of the middle-to-upper social classes. The socially exclusive nature of rugby union that derived out of the upper class dominance in English rugby circles was not unique to the English model; it was evident in New Zealand through links to the English public school model adopted to promote the game. In New Zealand, as has been mentioned in previous chapters, rugby union maintained strong imperial ties and was groomed in the boys’ school domain of the social élite.

The exclusive nature of rugby union was not limited only to those who participated in the code. Spectatorship of the game was also regulated, to a certain degree. While those who participated in rugby union were, for the most part, educated, urban professionals, the spectators were not always from the same demographic. Spectators of most public sporting events were drawn from all classes.¹⁴⁶ The fact that spectators of rugby union were made up of a range of social groups further exemplifies the exclusive nature of rugby union. Those outside of the acceptable rugby union demographic could attend and watch matches but were unable to participate in the sport.

¹⁴⁵ ‘Football’, in *Marlborough Express*, Volume XLVI, Issue 236, 4 October 1912, p. 5.

¹⁴⁶ Vincent, G. (2005a), ‘To Uphold the Honour of the Province: Football in Canterbury c. 1854-c. 1890’, in *Tackling Rugby Myths: Rugby and New Zealand Society 1854-2004*, Greg Ryan (Ed), University of Otago Press, New Zealand, p. 23.

Spectatorship of rugby union, however, was still far from socially inclusive. According to Vincent (2005a), mass spectatorship resulted in the concentration of “openly excited proletarians”¹⁴⁷. This in turn led to alleged drunkenness, gambling and physical violence. While larger crowds brought in more revenue, the different groupings of society that came with the crowds were often less than ideal for the upholding of upper-middle class values and virtues. It appears that a fear of working class involvement in rugby union impacted on the ability for the game to be exhibited to a wider audience.

The fear of attracting the wrong audience also affected grounds upon which rugby league could be played. Understandably, due to the original ‘split’ between Northern and Southern rugby clubs in England rugby union and rugby league were rival codes. The opportunity for a rugby union ground to host a rugby league game would have seen a sizeable boost in gate takings given the numbers of people who were willing to pay to view rugby league during this period. One example of this lack of inclusiveness can be evidenced in 1924 when the Canterbury Rugby Union officials intervened to prohibit the use of Lancaster Park as a ground for rugby league matches between the Canterbury Rugby League and the touring Sydney University and English national teams.¹⁴⁸

Incidents such as this are not isolated to the early 20th Century. As recently as 2010 rugby union faithful have been dubious over the use of ‘hallowed’ rugby union grounds for rugby league. In November 2010, a rugby league ‘double-header’¹⁴⁹ was held at the Auckland Rugby Union stronghold of Eden Park where New Zealand played Australia following a match between Papua New Guinea (PNG) and England. During these games the crowds became ‘unruly’ and their behaviours became disruptive to those playing on the field. The public and media reaction was that this was a rugby league problem and that rugby league should not have been allowed to have been played on Eden Park in the first place.

Rugby union reporter Marc Hinton (2010) wrote an article titled ‘*Unruly Eden Park mob a league problem*’. In his article he suggests that it is a class difference between rugby union and rugby league fans that could be identified in the different crowd behaviours during the double-header event. For Hinton (2010) this example provided sufficient evidence of rugby league spectators as unruly. This article is a perpetuation of the stereotypes of being distinctly

¹⁴⁷ Vincent, G. (2005b), ‘A Tendency to Roughness: Anti-Heroic Representations of New Zealand Rugby Football’, in *Tackling Rugby Myths: Rugby and New Zealand Society 1854-2004*, Greg Ryan (Ed), University of Otago Press, New Zealand, p. 56.

¹⁴⁸ ‘League Football’ in *Evening Post*, Volume CVII, Issue 130, 3 June 1924, p. 10.

¹⁴⁹ A double-header is where two separate matches take place one after another.

working class surrounding rugby league since the inception of the sport. At one point Hinton (2010) suggest that socio-economic differences were a relevant explanation for the incidents of unruly behaviour that occurred. He mentions that “the sort of fan who forks out the extortionate ticket prices demanded for Rugby World Cup admission tends to have a different sort of mentality than the leaguies who paid \$30-\$45 to get in at the weekend.”¹⁵⁰ Hinton’s (2010) argument appears to suggest that rugby league is exclusive due to its perceived working class nature. This statement suggests that that league fans not only cannot afford to attend Rugby World Cup (RWC) matches, thus cannot disrupt it, but they also have a different mentality that somehow affects the way that they behave at sporting events. Hinton’s (2010) article is a contemporary example relevant to the late 19th and early 20th century ‘othering’ of rugby league as different to the ‘normality’ of rugby union.

4.4.2 Māori and exclusivity

During the early 20th Century period discussed above, Māori played a similar role in the fabric of New Zealand society as the working class demographic. On the periphery of society both groups were marginalised away from the mainstream and in terms of rugby union participation both were seemingly supplementary in the wider scheme of the game’s promotion and development. This concern of expendability was a likely catalyst for an exodus of Māori from rugby union to rugby league.

One example of the marginalisation of Māori in rugby union is the lack of a Māori representative team for around 40 years. While there was a one-off unsanctioned ‘Native’ team in 1888, prior to the establishment of the NZRFU, a national New Zealand Māori team was not forthcoming until 1910. By no means should this be seen as an attempt to belittle the achievements of the 1888 Natives tour. The merits of the 1888 tour should be acknowledged as the tour consisted of 108 games and lasted 14 months, often considered the longest rugby, perhaps sporting, tour in modern history.¹⁵¹ This tour alone is an achievement of epic proportions for Māori and international sport and should be given the respect it deserves. However, while this tour was called a ‘native’ tour, the team also consisted of a number of non-Māori ‘native’ New Zealanders (that is people who were born in New Zealand) and should not be mistaken as a ‘Māori’ team.

¹⁵⁰ Hinton, M. (2010), ‘Unruly Eden Park mob a league problem’

¹⁵¹ Author unknown (2010), ‘Rau Tau: A History of Māori Rugby’, in *Kokiri 19, 2010*. Te Puni Kokiri, Wellington

The first 'all Māori' rugby union team was assembled in 1910 two years after a national New Zealand Māori rugby league team had formed and successfully toured Australia. To put this into context, the first Māori rugby union team formed 40 years after the first rugby union match was played in New Zealand; the first Māori rugby league team was formed in 1908, the same year as the first rugby league match was played on New Zealand soil, and actually began touring Australia 11 days before the New Zealand home match was played.

According to the 2009 NZRU Annual Report the formation of a Māori team only emerged as a means of countering the flow of Māori to rugby league.¹⁵² W. T. Parata¹⁵³, manager of the Māori football team in 1910 was quoted in an interview as having said:

"These objects were, firstly, to provide an educative tour for these young Maori fellows; and, secondly, to play rugby as it should be played— a good, fast, open game. We demonstrated in Australia and New Zealand that football could be played differently from the usual way. Open up the game, and a man must play the ball instead of the man. Play rugby that way and professionalism will not get in."¹⁵⁴

Such a statement indicates the perceived threat that rugby league was to rugby union. In order to save their game from the perils of professionalism the NZRU appears to have relied on a Māori team to change the ways in which the sport was promoted to the Māori public. To do so they had to play it in a fashion more akin to the style of rugby league, that is, in the words of Parata 'a good, fast and open game.'

In 1936 George Nepia provided reasons why, in his opinion, he believed rugby union was losing, and would continue to lose, Māori players to rugby league. One of the explanations that he gave was around discrimination in rugby union. Nepia had made the decision to switch from rugby union to play rugby league the previous year. The reasons given by Nepia for his departure from rugby union were a tough financial period for him and his family, and rugby league as a professional sport provided more fiscal opportunities than rugby union.¹⁵⁵

Within a year of playing rugby league Nepia announced that his only regret about playing rugby league was that he had not played it earlier. He would go on to mention that "I am only learning it, but the improvement over Rugby Union is obvious.... Already I can say frankly

¹⁵² NZRU, (2009), *New Zealand Rugby Union 2009 Annual Report*, p. 67.

¹⁵³ Parata is credited with being the first man to bring together a solely Māori rugby union team. As manager he took the first New Zealand Māori team on tour to Australia.

¹⁵⁴ 'FOOTBALL', in *Evening Post*, Volume LXXX, Issue 23, 27 July 1910, p. 4.

¹⁵⁵ 'Nepia and league', in *Evening Post*, Volume CXX, Issue 112, 7 November 1935, p. 17

that I like the Rugby League game best.”¹⁵⁶ Financially rugby league was more beneficial but more importantly it was a more enjoyable game to play. Coffey (1987) notes that players, such as Riki Papakura, were receiving sign-on fees ranging from around 150 pounds to the 500 pounds that George Nepia received.¹⁵⁷ Touring sides would make more money than they had invested, something that cannot always be said of rugby tours of the same period.

Aside from his own personal reasons for making the transition between the codes, Nepia also foresaw a growing exodus of other Māori athletes moving from rugby union to rugby league. Nepia believed discrimination was influencing the selection of representative squads. Nepia (1936) stated that, “among the lovers of the game and among my own people, the Māoris, there was talk of discrimination.”¹⁵⁸ At the time of his comments S.T Reid was the only Māori player in the All Blacks squad. Nepia (1936) felt that there were other Māori players that were superior to those chosen in that particular squad and openly spoke out against discrimination stating that:

“Reid is our only representative. He is worth his place in any international side. But so, is Charlie Smith, the brilliant Maori three-quarter, now playing with me in the Streatham and Mitcham Rugby League Club. He was considered an automatic choice. So was Jack Macdonald, who was vice-captain of the Maori [rugby union] team which toured Australia this year.”¹⁵⁹

With the first national Māori representative side having not formed until 40 years after rugby union was established in New Zealand and with discrimination becoming an issue with national selection it is understandable that Māori would seek to establish themselves in a sport that was more accepting of them. The advent of a Māori national rugby union side can be seen to be tokenistic and a mechanism that was only enacted to disrupt the development of rugby league, not necessarily as a means of benefitting Māori.

A more contemporary indication of the exclusive nature of rugby union in relation to the New Zealand Māori team is the title of the team. According to Mulholland (2009) the preferred term of the NZRU is New Zealand Māori. Sometimes known as the Māori All Blacks, it has

¹⁵⁶ ‘Rugby League may oust Rugby Union: George Nepias opinion’, in *Evening Post*, Volume CXXI, Issue 33, 8 February 1936, p. 6.

¹⁵⁷ Coffey, J. (1987), *Canterbury XIII: A Rugby League History*, Printpac Print Group, Christchurch, New Zealand,

¹⁵⁸ ‘Rugby League may oust Rugby Union: George Nepias opinion’, in *Evening Post*, Volume CXXI, Issue 33, 8 February 1936, p. 6.

¹⁵⁹ ‘Rugby League may oust Rugby Union: George Nepias opinion’, in *Evening Post*, Volume CXXI, Issue 33, 8 February 1936, p. 6.

been made apparent that the NZRU is opposed to the Māori team using the All Black title and states that the usage of Māori All Blacks “detracts from the All Black name and brand”.¹⁶⁰ This saw an apparent determination of the NZRU to maintain the bond between themselves and the apartheid era South African Rugby Union (SARU) as more important than developing and enhancing the opportunities for the New Zealand Māori. Mulholland (2009) asserts that the NZRU have been ‘remiss’ in their responsibilities to protect and develop Māori rugby and that Māori rugby suffered as a result of sporting relationships between New Zealand and apartheid South Africa.¹⁶¹

Much of New Zealand’s early rugby union exclusivity can be attributed to the desire to maintain the amateur ethos as a means to maintain relations with the RFU in London. During the earliest phases of NZRFU authority over the rugby union game the major concerns were gaining national status and maintaining the links to the RFU. Rugby league, not under the same amateur constraints, required funding to survive. Most of the money that was supporting the sport was coming via gate takings and in order to increase the popularity of the sport entrepreneurial and independent avenues were embraced by the code.

4.5 The inclusivity of rugby league

Different to rugby union in many ways, rugby league since its inception has been a sport associated with marginalised communities. From the working class communities of late 19th century northern-England and early 20th century Australia to the indigenous communities of the Pacific Islands, Australia and the Torres Straight Islands, Papua New Guinea and New Zealand, rugby league has been embraced by communities and peoples on the periphery of mainstream society.

This raises the question as to why these communities found themselves attracted to rugby league. Early rugby union in New Zealand was not the most accommodating leisure activity for those outside of the middle and upper classes, or those not belonging to a privileged élite. Lack of opportunity and compensation were among the main reasons for non-participation. Thus the discriminatory nature of rugby union would have forced people who did not fit the social criteria of rugby union to look at the possibilities available through rugby league.

¹⁶⁰ Mulholland, (2009), p. xii.

¹⁶¹ Mulholland, (2009), p. xiii.

Rugby union is commonly portrayed by its supporters as a sport that anyone can play, watch and support. They say that it is inclusive in that regardless of a person's skill level or size or, more commonly today, ethnicity there are no set limits to accessibility. While the inclusive nature of the game is often emphasised by its advocates, the amateur status of rugby union in the late 19th and early 20th centuries effectively excluded those who could not afford to participate due to work commitments or financial pressures. This amateur ethos ruled out the majority of the working classes in England, and once in New Zealand continued to influence the societal make up of rugby union.

Bourdieu's (1989) discussion around distinction (see chapter two) is relevant here. By upholding the amateur ethos of the English rugby union model, rugby union in New Zealand continued to distinguish itself as separate from any other professional football codes. This distinction would serve to highlight the division between the two codes and maintain the concept of amateur 'purity' among the rugby union faithful.

By contrast rugby league could be seen as popular due to an allegiance with the working classes, particularly in the English model, and this popularity and working class affiliation meant that it did not appeal to the middle and upper classes. However the New Zealand situation differed. As discussed in previous chapters the development of rugby league in New Zealand was not founded upon social class divisions as in England. However rugby union's exclusivity in New Zealand could be identified in divisions associated with ethnicity, another distinguishing factor between the two codes. Education, employment and other areas of New Zealand society were heavily impacted by ethnic relations, and ethnicity was connected with social status. According to Lillie-Blanton and Laveist (1996) ethnicity is directly correlated with social status¹⁶². Without a strong social class structure in place at the turn of the 20th century in New Zealand ethnicity was a common means of division and distinction. Sutton (2011) notes that without such a class structure in New Zealand "an individual's class or social position was often determined by categorical beliefs about the superiority or conversely, inferiority of race [ethnicity]."¹⁶³

One of the more desirable features of rugby league was the opportunity to participate in a sport free of prejudice and constriction. The sport itself was seen by some commentators at the time as a faster more free-flowing game, a factor which also appealed to those who took

¹⁶² Lillie-Blanton, M. and Laveist, T. (1996), 'Race/ethnicity, the social environment and health', *Soc. Sci. Med.*, Vol. 43, No. 1, Elsevier Science, Great Britain, p. 84.

¹⁶³ Sutton, A. (2011), *Ahua: Māori in Film*, University of Canterbury, Christchurch, New Zealand, p. 134.

part during the developing years. Another enticing facet of rugby league was the fact that the sport was governed by the people who played it, people who, like the sport itself, harboured no prejudices. Initially rugby union benefitted from the same sense of player participation in the management and direction of the game, but as governing bodies exercised more power through a national centralised structure this sense of player ownership diminished.

4.5.1 Ownership of the game

Rugby league was controlled initially by the players who founded it. Bill Greenwood (2007) discusses the role of the players as paramount to the success of rugby league in New Zealand. While the amateur rugby unions had a central authority in the NZRFU, rugby league did not have such a central body until 1910. Thus, it was the players, nearly all of whom had previously played rugby for clubs, provinces and the country, who facilitated and developed the game of rugby league in New Zealand.¹⁶⁴ When the NZRL was established as a governing authority in 1910 it had the dual purpose of administering the new sport but also hosting the first touring team from Britain.¹⁶⁵

The idea of players managing their own game was seen as a threat to the NZRFU, as well as the politicians of the time (who believed they had the answers regarding the assimilation of Māori into a British New Zealand) and the colonial elitists who believed that amateur sport was a perfectly satisfactory method of civilising unruly Māori, while instilling all the necessary morals and virtues of the empire. Yet, Māori involvement in rugby union had been limited to a privileged élite.¹⁶⁶

Rugby league bucked the trend when it came to power relationships. The power was in the hands of those who played. This was in stark contrast to the power balance in rugby union. Rugby union maintained an imperial power imbalance through the NZRFU that continues to this day. Rugby union became the national game through its early establishment and popularity, efforts to curb the spread of rugby league, and through its early success on the 1905 Northern Hemisphere tour. While initially popular, the exclusive nature of the rugby union code would aid in increasing the popularity of rugby league.

¹⁶⁴ Greenwood, B. (2007), '1908: The Year Rugby League Came to New Zealand', in *Sport in History*, 27: 3, p. 346.

¹⁶⁵ Coffey and Wood, (2008), p. 61.

¹⁶⁶ Ryan, G. (2005), p. 94.

By 1934 Māori had taken a form of ownership over rugby league within their communities. In establishing their own authority, designed to oversee the development of rugby league in Māori communities, independent of the NZRL, Māori were reinventing the early days of New Zealand rugby league where those who played the sport also participated actively in the development, administration and management of the game.

4.5.2 Māori participation

The inclusive nature of rugby league is one of a number of aspects that enticed and engaged Māori. While the game was accepting of anyone who wanted to play, it was also a faster more open game that even rugby union diehards could see. Māori involvement in rugby union presented a challenge to the Pākehā¹⁶⁷ colonising group for whom the amateur game was a source of cementing their elite status.¹⁶⁸ Rugby league was different; it embraced the marginalised and did not control every facet of the game. At the time of the 1908-9 Māori tours, the game itself was still directed and run by those participating in the sport. This proved of exponential benefit in the recruitment of players to the code, particularly Māori.

Falcous (2007) discusses the nature of the rugby unions and their struggle to assimilate Māori within the amateur games, both within and beyond Māoridom, and how this led to ‘secessionist initiatives by Māori to play rugby league’.¹⁶⁹ Rugby league offered more incentives to Māori at the time than rugby union; compensation for time, fair remuneration on tours and the opportunity to represent one’s country, ethnic group, province or club without the restrictions of the amateur requirement.

Earlier in the chapter the topic of the expendability of Māori in early New Zealand rugby was discussed. Ryan (1993) and Falcous (2007) both acknowledge that the role of the 1888 ‘Native’ Team goes largely unaddressed in the popular histories of New Zealand rugby union; instead it is the 1905-6 ‘Originals’ tour that is celebrated as the foundational success of the sport. This is a further example of the lack of recognition Māori were given by the rugby union code. Falcous (2007) even states:

¹⁶⁷ Pākehā is used to define New Zealanders of European descent. The term Pākehā was used pre-European contact to define that which was foreign, exotic or different.

¹⁶⁸ Falcous, M. (2007), ‘Rugby League in the National Imaginary of New Zealand Aotearoa’, *Sport in History*, 27: 3, p. 439.

¹⁶⁹ Falcous, (2007), p. 439.

“Indeed, the 1888-9 ‘Native’ tour selectively ‘forgotten’ within the dominant rugby-nation narrative is an exemplar of the separatist and entrepreneurial dimensions of Māori rugby that were formative in the New Zealand game (and hence ultimately the national consciousness). This separatism also indicates resistance from some Māori towards the amateur ideal promulgated by the NZRFU.”¹⁷⁰

Writing in 1898, for example, Rangiwahia ‘Tom’ Ellison¹⁷¹, an 1888-9 tourist, was a prominent critic of the structures of amateurism, advocating more generous payment of expenses for inter-provincial and overseas tours.¹⁷² According to Falcous (2007) it is of little surprise, then, that Māori were prominent in the early development of rugby league in New Zealand.¹⁷³

While Māori were a strong presence in the development phases of rugby league in New Zealand, they also featured in a large number of New Zealand representative teams and touring squads. Māori had a more visible presence in rugby league at the national and first class levels than was evidenced in rugby union teams at similar levels. While many Māori made national teams, there was one man in particular who single-handedly reinvigorated Māori passions and connection to the sport of rugby league, George Nepia¹⁷⁴.

4.6 George Nepia and rugby league

Between the two World Wars there was one man who, over a brief period, contributed more to New Zealand and Māori rugby league than could have been imagined at the time. George Nepia was, and still is, regarded as one of New Zealand’s finest footballers, but for the most part he is considered a rugby union legend. At the age of 19 Nepia played every game at fullback for the 1924-25 ‘Invincibles’ tour of England, Wales, Ireland and France.¹⁷⁵ Nepia, through such achievements, was set to take both the rugby union and league worlds by storm while carving out a place for Māori worldwide.

¹⁷⁰ Falcous, (2007), p. 439.

¹⁷¹ Tom Ellison was the captain of the first official New Zealand rugby team in 1893. He led the team on tour to Australia that year, and also toured as a ‘Native’ in the 1888-1889 tours. He was born in Otago but was of Te Ati Awa (a West Coast and lower North Island tribe) heritage.

¹⁷² Falcous, (2007), p. 439.

¹⁷³ Falcous, (2007), p. 439.

¹⁷⁴ George Nepia was descendant of Nūhaka on the East Coast of the North Island.

¹⁷⁵ Nepia, G. and Mclean, T. (2002), *I, George Nepia: The Autobiography of a Rugby Legend*. London League Publications Ltd, London, p. 245.

In 1935, during a tough financial period, Nepia's decision to switch to rugby league was a difficult, yet necessary, one. Nepia originally laughed off ideas about joining the rugby league revolt in England. However, during the depression the offer of 500 pounds to play the Northern Union game was no laughing matter. After careful deliberation with his wife, Huinga, Nepia accepted the offer to go to London and play rugby league for the Streatham and Mitcham club, a move that today is still seen in rugby circles as a controversial one.

Regardless of controversy, Nepia held strong to the commitment he had made to his new code. In his autobiography George Nepia states:

“Let me say, simply, that out of his abilities at Rugby League many a young man has established a livelihood, if not a fortune, which he would never have got in any other way. If a man had the instincts of a great writer, it would surely be wrong to put him to pick and shovel all his days. So in this hard, unsentimental place which is what the world really is, it is surely right for a young man – if he so wishes – to make the most of his talent. After all, when anyone still accuses me of desertion, I must remind him that the £500 saved me and my family. Would my accusers have stood to me if I had not taken the step?”¹⁷⁶

Through his own words it is apparent that Nepia's motives for the code switch were initially financial. 500 pounds to the Rangitukia farmer was to him the equivalent of a million dollar contract in a modern context. It was enough money to pay off the family's debts and establish a future for the family and the farm.¹⁷⁷

While compensation had been the catalyst for Nepia's rugby league career, he soon found a passion for the rugby league code.¹⁷⁸ Nepia did not regret switching codes, although he was sorry to be leaving his family. In his two years playing rugby league in England, Nepia made large in-roads for Māori footballers both on the field and in administration. After less than a month at the Streatham and Mitcham club he was appointed both captain and manager of the team. Nepia maintained the dual role of player/manager for a little under a year. He stood down from his managerial position when he felt that “the additional responsibility was having a detrimental effect on his play.”¹⁷⁹ Nepia's role as manager of a U.K team has established him as one of Māori rugby league history's pioneer international administrators.

¹⁷⁶ Nepia and Mclean, (2002), pp. 126-127.

¹⁷⁷ 'Nepia and league', in *Evening Post*, Volume CXX, Issue 112, 7 November 1935, p. 17.

¹⁷⁸ Nepia and Mclean, (2002), p. 207.

¹⁷⁹ 'NEPIA AS MANAGER', in *Evening Post*, Volume CXXII, Issue 69, 19 September 1936, p. 10.

Nepia's two-year career in the U.K was a success. As well as assuming the roles of team captain and manager of the Streatham and Mitcham club, Nepia proved so popular to the fans of the Northern Union that his club would ask for 25% of the oppositions' gate takings to ensure that he would play.¹⁸⁰ Another of his successes was being selected for a Dominions XIII and a London team to tour France. He also played a season for Halifax in 1937. His popularity was evident through the 16,500 spectators who had attended his debut against Leeds.¹⁸¹ Furthermore, the English newspapers praised Nepia and his abilities. In November 1935 an English article was featured in the Evening Post stating that "even if the big Maori only plays for a couple of seasons he is certain to earn his signing fee. I cannot think of a better box-office pull in the game."¹⁸²

Nepia made his mark on the northern game as a New Zealander and particularly as a Māori. In the local English newspapers Nepia was often labelled 'the Māori', an example being an article in the Yorkshire Observer by George M. Thompson that stated, "...*the Māori excelled with some second half tackling*"¹⁸³. Nepia took pride in his Māori heritage and held rugby league in a high regard due to the relationship between the sport and Māori.

Many rugby union faithful tend to forget, dismiss or chastise George Nepia's time in rugby league. Nepia was heavily criticised for crossing the divide between rugby union and rugby league, although according to Nepia, the one group who wholeheartedly supported his moves were the Māori people. When discussing his move to league, Nepia states:

"The news raised a second furore in the New Zealand Press. Rugby Union Officials, old friends of the 1924 side and hosts of others protested against my decision, but the Māori people...were all in my support."¹⁸⁴

The support of the Māori people towards George Nepia's decision to switch codes was likely as much in support of rugby league as it was of George Nepia. Māori had supported rugby league from its inception, and now rugby league was beginning to emerge as a means to support Māori. Nepia saw potential in the sport for Māori believing it had "great possibilities among the Māori people."¹⁸⁵ Nepia, in many ways, foresaw the potential for Māori to

¹⁸⁰ Coffey and Wood, (2008), p. 104.

¹⁸¹ Nepia and Mclean, (2002), p. 217.

¹⁸² 'LEAGUE DRAW-CARD', in *Evening Post*, Volume CXX, Issue 132, 30 November 1935, p. 25

¹⁸³ Nepia and Mclean, (2002), p. 217.

¹⁸⁴ Nepia and Mclean, (2002), p. 207.

¹⁸⁵ Coffey and Wood, (2008), p. 103.

establish a well-paying career that would allow them to shake off the restrictions of a, then, typical Māori existence.

Nepia returned to New Zealand after his two-year stint in the U.K in time to help lead the New Zealand Māori Rugby League team to what would become their most famous victory. The New Zealand Māori Rugby League team of 1937 defeated the touring Australian Kangaroos side by 16 points to 5. Nepia also played a pivotal role in the New Zealand Kiwis' second 1937 test defeat of the Kangaroos to square the series at a game apiece. While Nepia's achievements on the field in these games are remarkable, it is what his presence on the field did for both the Kiwis and the Māori teams that is the true measure of success for rugby league.

Nepia provided rugby league in New Zealand with what no other player at the time could offer. Even at the age of 32, George Nepia carried a presence that has been attributed with instilling a sense of confidence that had been missing in rugby league sides (both the Kiwis and Māori) when playing against international opponents.¹⁸⁶ Nepia 'the Māori' reinvigorated rugby league in New Zealand. This can be seen by the mid-week record 10,000 spectators that turned out to see him play his first rugby league international on home soil at Carlaw Park (the future home of rugby league in New Zealand) in Auckland.¹⁸⁷

The success of George Nepia as a player in both codes was instrumental in promoting Māori ability and athleticism, as well as the Māori affinity to rugby league. Nepia's switch to rugby league was something more important for Māoridom; Nepia's code switch was a demonstration of Māori support for rugby league. During this period rugby union had a favourable perception among the New Zealand population. Many fans of the New Zealand Rugby Football Union were against professionalism which was broadly regarded as turning games into exclusive working class games, and this led to many people discrediting Nepia after his decision to convert to rugby league. Despite the criticisms, George Nepia remained rugby league's biggest drawcard. Nepia had an international reputation and the sport of rugby league was quick to capitalise on this. In Australia, the UK or New Zealand, playing at either club level or at international level, Nepia would attract flocks of people through the turnstiles. George Nepia would not be the only Māori, or New Zealander, to seek out a better living through the paid 'professional' opportunities provided by English rugby league. Rather than the exception to the rule Nepia was one of number of athletes who saw rugby league as

¹⁸⁶ Coffey and Wood, (2007), p. 97.

¹⁸⁷ Coffey and Wood, (2008), p. 108.

providing opportunities not available in rugby union. Riki Papakura appears to have been the first Māori to play for an English club team in 1911 for a fee of £20.¹⁸⁸

4.7 Summary

The Māori desire to participate in rugby league can be attributed to several key things. The style of the game is one: a faster, more open and more spectator friendly version of rugby football was intriguing not only to Māori but, as the discussion has shown, to many a spectator who paid money to marvel at the fine features of the new sport. Rugby league, however, was more than just an exciting new brand of football for Māori: it provided opportunities that rugby union was reluctant to offer. While rugby union took 40 years to establish a national ‘all’ Māori team, rugby league had a Māori side touring Australia before a match had been played on New Zealand soil. This is indicative of the forward-thinking mentality and the inclusive nature of the code.

Opportunities were abundant in the new game. It was free of the restrictive requirements of rugby union and it was not reserved for the higher echelons of society in the way that the socially exclusive rugby union game was. Rugby league embraced all people and was in return embraced by the people. Characterised by working class northern-English roots, rugby league became a vehicle for the advancement of marginalised communities in the sporting world. Rugby league as a sport embraced opportunity. Opportunities presented themselves in many ways; entrepreneurial player-led initiatives and separate organisations, such as the AMRL, succeeded because of the necessity of funding and national popularity.

For Māori, the ability to participate and manage the code at the highest level was an incentive to nurture and develop the code in New Zealand. With the mana of the Kīngitanga endorsing the sport as a game for Māori, as early as 1934, there has been a strong connection between Māori and the sport ever since.

Players such as George Nepia further cemented the Māori passion for the sport. His success in rugby union was further boosted in the eyes of the Māori community once he switched codes to rugby league. For Māori it was another display of the opportunities given by the sport. Despite being barred from All Blacks selection for the 1935 tour, Nepia was able to play for New Zealand and for the Māori in a code where his only regret was not taking the game up earlier.

¹⁸⁸ Coffey and Wood, (2008), p. 65.

The themes covered in this chapter provide an example of the inclusive nature of rugby league and how that influenced Māori attraction to the sport in the earliest phases of its development in this country. The Kīngitanga, George Nepia and the opportunity to represent one's people and one's country all contributed to a love of rugby league for Māori. This bond would endure and is continued today with Māori largely overrepresented¹⁸⁹ in the adult and youth rugby league-playing population. The continuation of links between Māori and rugby league will be examined in the following chapter by relating the discussed development phases of rugby league to the contemporary 'professional era'.

¹⁸⁹ The term 'overrepresented' is used here to describe the numbers of Māori who participate in the sport. As will be highlighted in the following chapter recent statistics indicate that 42% of adult rugby league players are of Māori decent. This statistic is disproportionate to the 15% of the nation's population that Māori constitute.

Chapter Five: Contemporary Māori influence in rugby league

5.1 Introduction

As evidenced in previous chapters, the influence of Māori on the sport of rugby league has been apparent since the establishment of the game in New Zealand in 1908. Early tours and success in 1908 and 1909 cemented a place for Māori within the sport. Succeeding achievements, such as the establishment of a New Zealand Māori Rugby League as an entity separate to the NZRL, would allow for a continuation of Māori influence in New Zealand rugby league until the present day.

The AMRL is an associate body to the NZRL and contributes to the development of New Zealand rugby league in nurturing players and promoting the game. Today the influence Māori have on the sport is visible at all levels of the game. From the grassroots club level to the pinnacle of international achievement, such as the Rugby League World Cup, test matches or the prestigious NRL (the Australian National Rugby League) competition, Māori influences on the sport can be seen throughout. The NRL competition has a burgeoning population of Māori talent participating at the elite level as well as at the New South Wales Cup (second tier competition), the under-20s and the under-18 levels. Gould (2011), who combines Māori and Pacific athletes as a single group, says they comprise 35% of top grade players in the Australian NRL competition.¹⁹⁰

The aim of this chapter is to examine the continuing influence of Māori on contemporary rugby league. By examining the contemporary Māori presence, influence, and to an extent, dominance, in the sport of rugby league this chapter will aim to outline the importance of Māori to rugby league as a result of over 100 years of participation, administration and management in one of the world's premier winter football codes.

5.2 Contemporary Māori teams

In the early years of rugby league in New Zealand Māori were instrumental in the establishment and development of the code in the country. Māori tours, a uniquely Māori governance entity (separate from the NZRL) and royal support from the Māori King Movement had provided Māori rugby league with a distinct culture and a sense of identity for the future of the code. However, as noted by Coffey and Wood (2009) much of the

¹⁹⁰ Gould, P. (2011), 'Crunch Time for Juniors', in *Sydney Morning Herald*, March 20, 2011.

momentum that had been gained by Māori rugby league and Māori in rugby league was heavily impacted by World War II.¹⁹¹

Despite casualties from the war and a reduced international playing schedule post-war, Māori continued to participate in the sport for clubs and provinces, and Māori teams played in international matches against Britain in 1946 and 1974, Australia in 1949, 1956 and 1961, and France in 1955, 1960 and 1964. Auckland Māori and North Island Māori teams also played against touring international sides in matches during tours by Great Britain, Australia and France between the 1940s and 1970s. However, the ascendancy that Māori had achieved in the sport through the 1908/09 tours and the strength of the AMRL had waned during the period leading into the 1970s.

One concern for the New Zealand Māori teams and management was the consistency, and frequency, of matches against top quality opponents. The reason for this concern was due to the desire of the AMRL to develop their players to national and international levels as well as offering ‘opportunities and lifestyle through Māori rugby league.’¹⁹² Following a period of irregular matches against international sides, as well as internal tours, an opportunity followed with the proposal of a biennial tournament for teams in the Pacific region. This opportunity for regular matches against quality opposition was quickly embraced.

5.2.1 The Pacific Cup Tournament

In 1975, as noted by Coffey and Wood (2009), “Māori rugby league received a major boost when coach Tom Newton and manager Bob Tukiri¹⁹³ took a team to Papua New Guinea (PNG) for the inaugural Pacific Cup tournament.”¹⁹⁴ The New Zealand Māori went through the tournament unbeaten having played matches against PNG, Victoria and Western Australia. The Māori team would go on to retain their title while hosting the tournament in New Zealand in 1977. The 1977 tournament also had an additional team, Australia’s Northern Territory, and the Māori side was again unbeaten.

One of the issues faced by the New Zealand Māori teams during the Pacific Cup tournaments was the uneven power relationship between the NZRL and the AMRL. The national Kiwis team and management were in a position to choose the best players from around the country

¹⁹¹ Coffey and Wood, (2009), p. 119.

¹⁹² ‘New era for Māori rugby league’ in *Te Māori News*, Vol. 4, No. 11, June 1995, p. 21.

¹⁹³ Bob Tukiri was the first Māori Commissioner of the NZRL and has been involved with New Zealand Māori Rugby League for more than 30 years. Tukiri is of the Tainui tribe.

¹⁹⁴ Coffey and Wood, (2009), p. 191.

and other clubs in overseas competitions, whereas the Māori selectors were limited predominantly to local provincial teams or the pool of players left at the elite level after the Kiwis selections had been made. During the inaugural Pacific Cup competition the Kiwis selected 7 players who were also eligible for the Māori team.¹⁹⁵

Another issue faced by the Māori management and administration was a lack of attendance at Pacific Cup matches during the New Zealand-hosted 1977 tournament. Due to weather and the fact that the PNG team was not given ‘test’ status¹⁹⁶, and the fact that the other teams were Australian state teams, public interest in the tournament was not high and it ran at a considerable financial loss.¹⁹⁷ Following the poor public response to the 1977 tournament the Pacific Cup was shelved until 1986.

In 1986 the Pacific Cup was brought back from obscurity and the Australian state teams were replaced with Pacific Island national teams. The new teams included in the tournament were Cook Islands, Niue, Tokelau, Tonga and Western Samoa. As in 1975 and 1977, the Māori team went through the tournament unbeaten. The Māori team also went on to win the 1988 tournament and it was not until 1990, when the Māori team lost the final to Western Samoa, that their dominance as the best Pacific team was challenged.

What the Pacific Cup had done for the Māori teams, and Māori rugby league, was to provide an opportunity for Māori to seek representative honours on a regular basis as well as providing exposure of the players to the Australian and English competitions, and to the Kiwis selectors.

5.2.2 Māori touring sides and feeding the Kiwis

The Māori team has failed to win a Pacific Cup tournament since the 1988 tournament. However their dominance in the first four Pacific Cup tournaments meant that a number of Māori players caught the eye of the Kiwis selectors. While not winning the tournament the Māori team managed to be runner up in 1990, 1997 and 2004. Māori representatives who would go on to play for New Zealand as a result of the 1970s and 1980s Pacific Cup tournaments included household names such as: Kevin and Howie Tamati, Tāwera Nīkau, Mark Horo, Fred Ah Kuoī, Morvin Edwards and Dane Sorensen. Numerous other Māori

¹⁹⁵ Coffey and Wood, (2009), p. 191.

¹⁹⁶ Test status is determined by the Rugby League International Federation (RLIF)

¹⁹⁷ Coffey and Wood, (2009), p. 198.

players, who played for the Māori team but not during Pacific Cup tournaments, would also don the Kiwis test jersey.

Throughout the 1980s and 1990s Māori began to dominate the New Zealand Kiwis international squad. Increased Māori tours, such as the Pacific Cup tournaments, the 1983 tour of Great Britain and a number of matches against international teams touring New Zealand provided the New Zealand Māori team with the necessary game time to develop young players. During this period players were graduating from the Māori team to the Kiwis on a regular basis. While providing a means for Māori to seek inclusion in the national team, this also created a problem in retaining top level athletes for the Māori teams. International players such as Sean Hoppe, Ruben Wiki, Syd Eru, Frano Botica (who had already played rugby union for the All Blacks), Richie Blackmore and the Paul brothers had all played for the Māori team before playing for the Kiwis.

In 1980 the New Zealand Māori team held the Australian touring team to a 10-all draw, soon after the Australians had comprehensively defeated the New Zealand Kiwis team 27-6.¹⁹⁸ Three years later a national Māori side toured Great Britain in what has been heralded “a trail blazing tour”¹⁹⁹, during which the Māori team defeated all eight of their opponents. While the teams they faced were deemed amateur, the success of the Māori team provided credibility for the side in the securing of future fixtures. The key victory of the tour came in beating a Great Britain representative team 23-14.²⁰⁰ Several prominent Kiwi internationals represented the Māori on this tour including Hugh McGahan and Dean Bell, both of whom went on to captain the Kiwis.

5.2.3 Māori at the World Cup

As a culture, as opposed to a nation, a measure of success for the New Zealand Māori team is that it is the only indigenous rugby league team to participate in a rugby league world cup alongside a national counterpart from the same country. In 2000 both the New Zealand Kiwis and the New Zealand Māori were qualified contestants in the Rugby League World Cup for the first, and only, time. In 2008 the New Zealand Māori team also played a role in an exhibition game against an Australian Indigenous ‘Dreamtime’ team in opening proceedings for that year’s Rugby League World Cup.

¹⁹⁸ Coffey and Wood, (2009), p. 210.

¹⁹⁹ Andrews, M. (2006), *The ABC of Rugby League*, ABC Books, Sydney, Australia, p. 461.

²⁰⁰ Andrews, M. (1995), *The A-Z of Rugby League*, Hodder Moa Beckett, Auckland, New Zealand, p. 427.

The 2000 'Millennium' World Cup saw the first and last opportunity for a Māori side to participate in the World Cup format as a 'national' team, that's to say having equal status with other national teams. There was significant interest in the Māori team as most of the squad had professional experience in either Australia or England, and a number of players had also represented the Kiwis, such as Sean Hoppe, Gene Ngamu, Tawera Nikau and David Kidwell. It was suggested that the Māori team could be the team to follow throughout the tournament and that they could progress as far as the semi finals.²⁰¹ The Māori team managed to win their first game against Scotland, but losses to Samoa and Ireland meant that they were eliminated during the pool stage of competition. Despite being knocked out of the tournament in the first round the Māori team's presence at the Rugby League World Cup is a significant achievement, indicating the influence Māori have had on the sport. Not only was there a Māori side representing Māori people, but also 12 Māori players were members of the New Zealand Kiwis side as well as several Māori players who were in the Cook Island team, including Kevin Iro and Karl Temata (both of whom had represented, or would go on to represent New Zealand Māori).

The 2008 Rugby League World Cup was arguably the largest in the history of the tournament. It featured established international superstars and the leading teams (Australia, New Zealand, England, France and PNG) all had genuine game-breakers within their ranks. Although not included as competition participants the New Zealand Māori team was called upon, along with an Indigenous Australian (Dreamtime) team to open the tournament with an exhibition match. Like the Millennium World Cup Māori team, the 2008 squad featured a host of rising New Zealand players searching for the higher honours (such as Sam McKendry and Shaun Kenny Dowell). The match itself was entertaining and showcased the talents of two indigenous cultures for whom rugby league is an integral part of community and society. From the outset both sides displayed their culture, through haka and tribal war dance, and talent, through football skills of a quality typical of the national representative level. The Māori team lost the match 34-26; however like the 2000 World Cup there was a sense of purpose about the side and what they had achieved. Through the match against the Dreamtime team, an Indigenous All Stars exhibition match was established to play against an NRL All Star team in 2010 and again in 2011. There have also been discussions about including a Polynesian All Stars team consisting of Māori and Pacific players from the NRL competition.

²⁰¹ Coffey and Wood, (2009), p. 320.

Nine of the 24-strong 2008 champion New Zealand Rugby League World Cup squad were of Māori descent. In the 2008 Rugby League World Cup Final, the New Zealand Kiwis fielded 17 players during the match, 16 of whom were of Maori or Pacific Island descent.²⁰² This means that the best possible team that could have been fielded by the New Zealand Rugby League (NZRL) consisted of 94% Māori or Pacific Island athletes, of whom half were of Māori descent.

With statistics such as these it becomes apparent that over the past century of rugby league in this country, Māori players have both excelled within Māori teams and are having a direct impact on the New Zealand national team as well as NRL premiership teams, as will be discussed further in this chapter.

5.3 An increase in rugby league's popularity

5.3.1 Live on screen

In 1980 live television coverage of international rugby league began in New Zealand with the broadcast of a test match involving the New Zealand Kiwis and Great Britain. The match was screened in New Zealand at 4am and fans across the country watched the first live telecast of a Kiwis match from England.²⁰³ Live telecasts would provide the opportunity for rugby league to gain popularity across the country. With larger viewing audiences creating a wider demographic of supports, rugby league in New Zealand found itself in a period of renaissance.

During the 1980s rugby league enjoyed increased exposure. Televised matches and a busy decade for New Zealand at the international level provided an opportunity for the sport to become established outside of its already-developed communities. This decade saw an increased number of New Zealand players heading offshore to play professionally for either English (the majority) or Australian clubs. One reason for the exodus of players offshore was the high test match exposure that the Kiwis had gained during the decade. Annual tours of Australia, Great Britain and France, and the subsequent tours of New Zealand provided the necessary exposure for New Zealand players to succeed in securing overseas contracts. Of approximately 20 key players who formed the core of New Zealand test teams during the

²⁰² http://www.nzrl.co.nz/page/2008_world_cup.html

²⁰³ Coffey and Wood, (2008), p. 274.

1980s only three did not pursue fulltime professional contracts with overseas clubs by the end of the decade.²⁰⁴

During this period, and continuing today, Māori have formed an elite playing group based outside of New Zealand. With the introduction in 1995 of a New Zealand-based NRL team, the Warriors (discussed in more detail later in this chapter), there have been increased professional opportunities in New Zealand, but the majority of professional contracts can be found in Australia and England. While there are a number of Māori in the junior ranks in New Zealand and several included in the Warriors' top tier playing roster, Māori have emerged in rugby league as somewhat of a 'donor culture'. Similar to donor countries in Major League Baseball (MLB), in the United States, and Football (soccer) in Europe, Māori continue to be targeted by rugby league clubs. Takahashi and Horne (2006) discuss the growing trend in sports migration labour and the effect that it has on donor countries.²⁰⁵ However, Māori are not seen as an independent nation or a country unto themselves. Therefore Māori can be considered a donor culture as opposed to a donor country. As a donor culture the influence Māori have had on rugby league has contributed significantly to the successes that the sport has had in recent history. This role of a donor culture will be discussed further later in the chapter.

5.3.2 The Winfield Cup

According to Coffey (1991), rugby league was "the orphan of New Zealand sport."²⁰⁶ It struggled to engage audiences in the way that rugby union had, it was considered a 'blue-collar' game, and it did not have the same power that rugby union had maintained in New Zealand. There were periods of enthusiasm in New Zealand rugby league, such as the Kiwis' defeats of Australia in 1971 and 1983 and the successful Māori tours of 1908 and 1909, but for the most part recognition came from within the sport's own community.

As noted by Mirams (2001), "rugby league's real turning point in New Zealand came in September 1989, when Australia's Winfield Cup grand final was telecast live into the country for the first time."²⁰⁷ The Winfield Cup was the national Australian Rugby League

²⁰⁴ Coffey and Wood, (2008), p. 311.

²⁰⁵ Takahashi, Y. and Horne, J. (2006), 'Moving with the bat and the ball: Preliminary Reflections on the Migration of Japanese Baseball Labour', in *International Review for the Sociology of Sport*, 41: 79, Sage Publications, p. 79.

²⁰⁶ Coffey, J. (1991), *Modern Rugby League Greats*, Mōa Publishers, Auckland, New Zealand, p. 9.

²⁰⁷ Mirams, C. (2001), *Beleaguered: The Warriors from Dream to Nightmare*, Hodder Mōa Beckett Publishers Ltd, Auckland, New Zealand, pp. 34-35.

premiership club competition from 1982-1995 (before it was renamed ‘The Telstra Premiership’ after it became illegal in Australia to use tobacco company endorsements). It had derived from the original Sydney Rugby League Premiership that began in 1908 and had grown to include teams from clubs outside of Sydney including Newcastle, Canberra and Brisbane. Over time, it would continue to grow to include two more Queensland teams, a Melbourne team and a New Zealand team, as well as Western and South Australian teams²⁰⁸. With live telecasts of the Australian competition now broadcast into New Zealand a shift in opinion began to occur amongst the New Zealand public about what had largely been regarded as a ‘blue-collar’ game. New Zealanders were now participating frequently in the Winfield Cup. Previously unknown to the wider society these players became household names acknowledged for their skill and entertainment.²⁰⁹ Players such as Dean Bell, Gary Freeman, Brent Todd, Olsen Filipaina and Fred Ah Kuoi became influential names as a result of a renewed interest in rugby league in the early 1990s.

As more New Zealand players were becoming involved in the Australian competition, and regular television exposure became available, the popularity of the code in New Zealand was increasing. Additionally, amplified national exposure via television audiences helped interest in the Winfield Cup to take hold in New Zealand.²¹⁰ The Winfield Cup provided the catalyst for a shift in opinion about rugby league. Rugby league was proving vibrant against a rugby union code that by comparison was beginning to appear stale and boring.²¹¹

As early as 1989 there were discussions beginning to take place around a New-Zealand based team entering the Winfield Cup competition. Brian Elliston, president of Auckland’s Mount Albert rugby league club, began conversations with the Australian Rugby League boss Ken Arthurson asking for a place in the competition.²¹² From here Auckland Rugby League boss Peter Mcleod became involved. Despite little support from the NZRL it was announced in 1992 that an Auckland franchise would be joining an expanded Winfield Cup competition.²¹³ This entity was not an existing Auckland club but a new franchise created specifically to enter the Australian competition.

²⁰⁸ The Western and South Australian teams have since been withdrawn from the competition at the top level.

²⁰⁹ Coffey, (1991), p. 9.

²¹⁰ Matheson, J. (2010) *Warrior Nation: A celebration of 15 years of the Warriors*, HarperSports, New Zealand, p. 8.

²¹¹ Mirams, (2001), p. 35.

²¹² Matheson, (2010), p. 8.

²¹³ Matheson, (2010), p. 8.

5.4 The New Zealand Warriors

Prior to 1989, Australian rugby league competitions had not interested wider New Zealand audiences. After the screening of the 1989 Winfield Cup grand final New Zealanders became fascinated with rugby league.²¹⁴ The Winfield Cup was a successful competition in Australia and became fashionable with the New Zealand public once regularly televised. Rugby league was now a weekly television event and its popularity was heightened by former All Blacks, the likes of Matthew Ridge, Inga ‘The Winger’ Tuigamala, and Craig Innes converting to the sport and appearing on New Zealand screens every week. This ability to attract top rugby union players is also indicative of the success and wealth of the Australian clubs. With an increase in New Zealand participation in the Winfield Cup (New Zealand players and coaches were making their mark in the competition), a New Zealand team became a viable option for the competition’s expansion.

5.4.1 A New Zealand franchise

As a result of the success of the Winfield Cup in Australia expansion of the competition was becoming necessary to reach wider audiences nationally and internationally. In May 1992 it was announced that a New Zealand team would be a part of the Winfield Cup’s expansion that would include four new teams. In 1995 the first New Zealand team was entered into the Australian national competition. Known as the Auckland Warriors, the New Zealand team would be representative of the growing numbers of New Zealanders in the premier Australasian rugby league tournament. The name of the franchise was the result of a nationwide naming competition. The name ‘Warriors’ was the winning submission from over 25,000 entries.²¹⁵

At the time the Auckland Warriors carried the hope of a nation on their backs. Rugby league had developed a strong following through the televising of the Winfield Cup and the Warriors were New Zealand’s first team to enter the competition²¹⁶. In the lead-up to their inaugural season the Warriors had developed a cult following among the New Zealand rugby league fan base. Before the 1995 season began the Warriors supporters club had already exceeded 5,000 members including a ‘large following’ from outside Auckland.²¹⁷ As stated by Kilgallon

²¹⁴ Matheson, (2010), p. 7.

²¹⁵ Andrews, (2006), p. 526.

²¹⁶ Mirams, (2001), p. 34.

²¹⁷ ‘Warriors Supporters clubs a hit with fans’, in *Te Māori News*, Vol. 3, No. 19. October 1994, p. 6.

(2010) “It was cool to like rugby league in New Zealand in 1995. They packed Mt Smart Stadium when the Warriors first arrived, and playing numbers skyrocketed so high they couldn't find enough fields to play on... The allure faded and league again became the outsiders' sport in a nation where everyone is an All Blacks fan.”²¹⁸ This ‘fading’ of interest is most likely related to the lack of immediate success of the Warriors.

5.4.2 Māori symbolism

One of the first things that indicated a Māori influence at the new Auckland-based franchise was the name of the team. The name ‘Warriors’ has links to the New Zealand, and distinctly Māori association with traditional toa Māori (often used generally to depict Māori ‘warriors’) and the mana and symbolism that they hold in New Zealand culture. This could be perceived as representative of the acknowledgement of Māori culture in New Zealand society. This could also be suggestive of the link between rugby league and warfare. Hokowhitu (2008) alludes to this link between Māori culture, sports, particularly contact sports such as rugby league, and warfare as a commonly stereotyped symbol of Māori opportunity in post-colonial New Zealand.²¹⁹

After the name ‘Warriors’ was chosen the team logo was designed. The franchise logo features a carved tekoteko or figure head, unambiguously Māori in its nature and symbolism. In Māori whakairo (carving) the head is the most important part of the body and, as such, is carved disproportionately large in comparison to the rest of the body.²²⁰ One aspect of the carving of the head that has a notable importance is the tongue. As an oral culture Māori placed great emphasis on the head as containing all knowledge, hence its importance and the tapu²²¹ attached to it. Likewise the tongue was given similar respect as it was considered to be the transmitter of knowledge.

The tongue has been described as the vehicle of oral tradition through which whakapapa (genealogy), wānanga (higher learning), karakia (prayer) and other methods of continuing

²¹⁸Kilgallon, S. (2010), ‘With Big Manu firing Warriors are winning the battle for respect’, in Sydney Morning Herald, 10-09-10, <http://www.smh.com.au/rugby-league/league-match-preview/with-big-manu-firing-warriors-are-winning-the-battle-for-respect-20100909-153cj.html#ixzz1WSvUgc8T>

²¹⁹ Hokowhitu, B. et al. (2008) ‘Rugby culture, ethnicity and concussion’, in MAI Review 2008, Vol. 1, No. 4, p. 6.

²²⁰ Harrison, P. et al. (2004), ‘Ngā Mahi Toi: The Arts’, in *Ki te Whaiao: An Introduction to Māori Culture and Society*, (ed) Ka’ai et al., Pearson Education New Zealand, Auckland, New Zealand, p. 119.

²²¹ Tapu is most commonly associated with the English term ‘sacred’. However tapu is far more than sacred, tapu in pre-contact society regulated all actions and all facets of Māori life. While reduced to sacred today, tapu is more than just sacred and the pinnacle of Māori spiritual belief and not to be trifled with.

oral traditions were transmitted. According to Harrison et al. (2004), different variations of the carved tongue have different meanings and implications; the retracted tongue implies secrecy, a thrust out tongue implies a wero (challenge).²²² The initial logo of the Warriors contained a thrust out tongue that curved to the left (of the figure head, right to the viewer), implying a wero to other teams in the competition.

Because the tongue was curved to the left, tensions arose between the Warriors franchise and certain parts of the Māori community. As early as 1994, Māori had protested against the team's logo. According to demonstrators the tongue should have been straight; a curved tongue, according to the protestors, was a sign of femininity and the logo needed to be changed.²²³ While not changed before the inaugural season the logo has since been altered to feature a straight tongue when the team was re-branded as the New Zealand Warriors in 2000. This is again indicative of the importance of Māori and culture regarding the Warriors and rugby league developments.

The debate about the logo of the Warriors franchise is symptomatic of the influence that Māori have had on rugby league. As discussed in previous chapters, Māori maintain a long association with the code. Māori also feature as a unique cultural point of difference between New Zealand and the rest of the world. Hokowhitu (2008) articulates that the team logo of the whakairo upoko (carved head) compounds the link between Māori symbolism and the New Zealand NRL franchise²²⁴. By utilizing a symbolic Māori logo the Warriors demonstrate a bond between the sport and Māori culture.

5.4.3 Influence of Māori in initial team and current teams

The influence of Māori culture and players on the first 16 years of the franchise is monumental. From the name and logo of the club to the number of influential Māori players, coaches and administrators, the Warriors have maintained a Māori identity, as well as being representative of the identity of rugby league in New Zealand.

Despite the New Zealand location the early teams were made up of a mix of nationalities. The first Auckland Warriors team was made up of New Zealand and Australian players most of whom had had first grade experience, either in the Winfield Cup or in the premier English competition. Of the 28 players used in the inaugural season 13 were of Māori descent, 10

²²² Harrison et al., (2004), p. 119.

²²³ Mirams, (2001), p. 32.

²²⁴ Hokowhitu, (2008), p. 6.

were of Pacific descent, 2 were Englishmen who had come from the English competition, 2 were Australian European and 1 was former All Black John Kirwan. Just under half of the squad of players who played in the 1995 season were of Māori descent.

In the current 2011 full-time wider training squad, 13 of the 36 players are of Māori heritage and a further 15 are of Pacific heritage (predominantly Samoan or Tongan). The other players listed on the full-time roster are of either New Zealand European (Pākehā) (1), Australian European (6) or Indigenous Australian (1) decent. With a third of the current player roster being Māori, a continued Māori influence in the team is evident. Although there are more Pacific players than Māori overall, when this Pacific group is split into ethnic grouping, i.e. Samoan, Tongan, Fijian etc., Māori again top the list.

5.5 Increased Māori presence in the NRL

In the current NRL competition it is not difficult to find Māori surnames or the names of prominent Māori families in all of the 16 NRL first grade teams. Māori are now a permanent fixture in the competition. As mentioned in the introduction to this chapter, around 35% of the first grade player population in the NRL is made up of Māori or Pacific Island athletes. In the lower grades, including the NSW Cup (reserve grade), the under-20s and the under-18s, the numbers of Māori and Pacific Islanders are even higher. In the under-20 competition the proportion is closer to 45%.²²⁵ Gould (2011) believes that in the younger age groups the numbers would be even higher in grades between 10 years and under-18s, suggesting that it could be as high as 80-90% in certain regions of Australia.²²⁶

5.5.1 The Poly-saturation of Australian rugby league

One potential reason for the increased Polynesian presence in the sport has been attributed to the size difference between Māori and Pacific juniors in comparison the Anglo-Saxon youth. It has been argued (Cadigan, 2008; Cottle and Keys, 2010; Gould, 2011) that Polynesian junior players are playing with an 'unfair' advantage due to their larger size and that this is limiting the participation of non-Polynesian children. In addition, there is a growing trend to nurture and grow potential talent within the ranks of Māori and Pacific Island players.²²⁷

²²⁵ Gould, P. (2011), 'Crunch Time for Juniors', in *Sydney Morning Herald*, March 20, 2011.

²²⁶ Ibid.

²²⁷ Cottle, D. and Keys, A. (2010), 'The Blindside Flick: Race and Rugby League', in *Cosmopolitan Civil Societies: An Inter-disciplinary Journal*, Vol. 2, No. 2, Australia, p. 8.

One way that the ARL has attempted to deal with the growing population of Polynesian players in the junior ranks has been to experiment with weight-based classifications instead of age. In 2008, over 100 first grade NRL players were of Māori or Pacific Island heritage.²²⁸ It is possible that many people would associate the increase in number of Māori and Polynesian players with the rise of the New Zealand Warriors²²⁹ in the NRL. However, in 2008, of the 15 Australian clubs (not including the Warriors) 22.5 percent (or over 1 in 5) of the competition's player roster had Māori or Pacific backgrounds (86 players) with 46 players born in either New Zealand or the Pacific.²³⁰ This is a trend that is growing and it has been suggested that within the next five to ten years that 50 percent of the NRL competition will be of either Māori or Polynesian heritage.

Māori and Pacific Island athletes are 'overrepresented' in today's NRL statistics. To put this into perspective, coming from a group that has a 1 in 200 representation in the Australian population, Māori and Pacific island athletes have a 1 in 4 presence in the country's premier winter sports competition. It is a similar, if less striking, picture in New Zealand. Māori and Pacific people make up fewer than 20 percent of the nation's population, yet recently have made up more than half the players in the country's five provincial rugby teams.

5.5.2 The New Zealand Situation

There has been significant growth in the number of Māori players participating at the elite level of the Australian competition. It could be suggested as a topic of future research that the English Super League competition is likely to have also benefitted from the affiliation between Māori and rugby league, given the number of ex-pat New Zealanders that play in this elite competition. While other international rugby league competitions appear to be reaping the rewards of a high participation rate of Māori, it must also be acknowledged that the New Zealand competitions are the proverbial breeding ground for the majority of Māori who look to venture abroad in the pursuit of a career. However, the success and influence of Māori at the international level is not necessarily filtered directly back to grass-root competitions. There is an inherent paradox between Māori influence and achievement which will be discussed later in the chapter.

²²⁸ Cadigan, N. (2008), 'NRL's Island Talent', *The Daily Telegraph*, Sydney.

²³⁰ Cadigan, N. (2008), 'NRL's Island Talent', *The Daily Telegraph*, Sydney.

Recent statistics reveal that 42% of the nation's rugby league-playing adults are of Māori descent²³¹; this is a massive overrepresentation of Māori compared with the number of those who play rugby union. By comparison 11% of New Zealand men play rugby union, yet only 13% of these are Māori.²³² While only 3% of the nation's males play rugby league²³³, close to half of them are of Māori descent. An interesting note to be made here is that rugby league in New Zealand has consistently maintained large numbers of Māori since its founding years in this country. Māori can be traced through the national rugby league sides (not just native sides) as early as 1907.²³⁴ In New Zealand rugby union, Māori were less prevalent in the early national teams.

Both rugby league and rugby union, as well as netball, softball and basketball have experienced what is regarded as an apparent 'Polynesianisation' in terms of the disproportionate contribution of Māori and Pacific players to representative teams since the mid 1980s.²³⁵ Although both rugby union and rugby league have experienced this 'Polynesianisation', it is clear that rugby league is the preferred contact sport of Māori men. Pacific Islanders are also more highly represented in rugby league than in rugby union. Of the total rugby union playing males, 18% were of Pacific Island heritage²³⁶; in rugby league over 25% of all males playing the sport are of Pacific heritage²³⁷.

5.6 Māori as a Donor Culture for Rugby League

As a significant presence in New Zealand, Australian and increasingly English rugby league, Māori have been a donor culture for the continued development of the sport at the international level. With increased commercial pressures and opportunities, elite sports teams have drawn from outside their own geographic areas for elite athletes as a means of enhancing their chances of success. According to Maguire and Pearton (2000), contemporary sport labour migration has become interwoven with "the commodification of sports within the capitalist world economy"²³⁸. With the growing interest and popularity of rugby league

²³¹ SPARC facts – Rugby League (2006), p.1.

²³² SPARC facts – Rugby Union, (2006), p. 12.

²³³ SPARC facts – Rugby League (2006), p.1.

²³⁴ Coffey and Wood, (2008), p. 3.

²³⁵ Ryan, (2007), p. 78.

²³⁶ SPARC facts – Rugby Union, (2006), p. 12.

²³⁷ SPARC facts – Rugby League, (2006), p.1.

²³⁸ Maguire, J. and Pearton, R. (2000), 'Global Sport and the migration patterns of France '98 World Cup finals players: Some preliminary observations', in *Soccer and Society*, 1:1, p. 175.

around the world, the number of Māori participating at the elite level in premier rugby league competitions globally has also steadily risen.

The phenomenon of increased commercialisation and capital accumulation in sport, in particular English rugby league, is discussed by Falcous and Rose (2005) who argue that recent shifts in ‘corporate-media-sport alignment’ have resulted in commercial sport being increasingly impacted by capital accumulation.²³⁹ Such impacts include corporate ownership, media, brand marketing and other methods of increasing revenue. As a result increased professional opportunities and the increased global migration of players and athletes over a number of different sporting codes has become common.

Maguire and Pearton (2000) describe sports labour migration as occurring between nation-states located within the same continent and between nation-states from different continents.²⁴⁰ These different ‘nations’ are also described by Takahashi and Horne (2006) as being either host countries or donor countries.²⁴¹ Host countries can be seen as having competitions that are desirable for the pursuing of professional athletic careers. Donor countries are the countries with limited access to, or saturated, professional competitions or countries having competitions ranked lower than those of the host countries. Put simply, donor countries supply professional athletes to the host countries’ premier competitions.

The example used by Takahashi and Horne (2006) is of Japan as a donor nation for American Major League Baseball (MLB) and European soccer.²⁴² For Maguire and Pearton (2000) the key focus is migration from North America to Europe in sports such as basketball, football and ice-hockey.²⁴³ These two studies of the sports labour migration phenomenon place emphasis on the flow of athletes from either less affluent to more economically powerful nations, or migration out of countries where the opportunities for advancement are more difficult to attain. These studies can be drawn on to examine Māori migration flows.

While there are similarities between athlete migration in other sports to the flow of Māori, and more recently Pacific, rugby league players to the Australian and English rugby league competition it is important to mention that Māori are not a country unto themselves. As an

²³⁹ Falcous, M. and Rose, C. (2005), ‘Cultural Identities in Transition: Hypercommodification and Fandom in English Rugby League’, in *Football Studies*, Vol. 8, No. 1, p. 6.

²⁴⁰ Maguire and Pearton, (2000), p. 176.

²⁴¹ Takahashi, Y. and Horne, J. (2006), ‘Moving with the bat and the ball: Preliminary Reflections on the Migration of Japanese Baseball Labour’, in *International Review for the Sociology of Sport*, 41: 79, p. 79.

²⁴² Takahashi and Horne, (2006), pp. 80-81.

²⁴³ Maguire and Pearton, (2000), p. 177.

indigenous people Māori are a marginalised minority in New Zealand. Māori make up less than 15% of the total New Zealand population yet are significant contributors to Australian and English rugby league competitions. Two examples of the level at which Māori participate in these competitions can be evidenced in two particular players: Benji Marshall, New Zealand captain and Daly M Medal²⁴⁴ runner up 2011, and Rangi Chase who was awarded the Super League Man of Steel Award²⁴⁵ for the 2011 season, and now English national rugby league representative. Rangi Chase's English representative honours also provide evidence of Māori being a donor culture to international rugby league.

The increase in global migration for rugby league has seen an increase in international opportunities for Māori seeking a career in the sports world. As revealed earlier in the chapter, 42% of rugby league playing adults in New Zealand are of Māori descent. While the proportion of Māori playing is exceptionally high, the opportunities for advancement to play at the elite level or to develop a career in the sport in New Zealand are not. New Zealand has only one team in the NRL competition whereas Australia has 15; the same situation applies in the NRLs under-20 competition. Australia also has abundant opportunities via the Queensland Cup, Jim Beam Cup, NSWRL Competition and other lower grade tournaments that offer semi-professional careers in rugby league. By contrast, in New Zealand professional opportunities are limited to contracts in the Warriors first grade or development teams.

England also has 14 teams in their elite competition with a number of other lower grade competitions that offer semi-professional opportunities or the chance to aspire to play top grade. According to the 2011 player rosters of the 14 UK super league teams (one of which did not have a working site so could not be searched), 7 of the 13 accessible team rosters included a Māori player in the first grade side.²⁴⁶ While not staggering numbers in comparison to the NRL, this is still an interesting trend given each super league team is limited to three foreign, or imported, players. Conversely the NRL has an average of 2.2 Māori per team.²⁴⁷

In areas where rugby league is not a dominant sport, such as Melbourne, Māori have participated with local clubs in efforts to enhance the sport's presence. An example of this,

²⁴⁴ The Daly M Medal is awarded to the best player across the NRL competition every season.

²⁴⁵ The Man of Steel Award, like the Daly M, is awarded to the best player across the Super League competition at the end of each season.

²⁴⁶ Based on the UK Super League top team rosters for 2012.

²⁴⁷ Based on the NRL top team rosters for 2012.

according to Bergin (2002) was the Kia Toa and St Kilda rugby league clubs in Melbourne. Both were made up of predominantly Māori players in a city that heavily favors Australian Rules Football (AFL).²⁴⁸

Although not recognised as a country, Māori have been considered a representative team at the 2000 Rugby League World Cup, and have been granted test status on occasions against international test sides. The importance of Māori to rugby league can be seen through these gestures as well as the visible impact Māori have on the game itself, through cultural symbolism and the increasing Māori presence. In Australia there are now a number of Māori rugby league initiatives, such as NSW Māori Rugby league, Queensland Māori Rugby League and other blossoming ventures in South Australia and Western Australia, each of which host and participate in annual Māori rugby league tournaments. Bergin (2002) acknowledges that Māori have been instrumental in the promotion of rugby league, and to an extent rugby union in Australia.

5.7 Summary

The influence that Māori have had on the sport of rugby league has continued from the first Māori teams of the early 20th Century through to the elite levels of contemporary rugby league in the Australian NRL and the New Zealand national squad. Having participated at the top levels of the sport since its establishment in New Zealand Māori players quickly began to contribute to the game beyond their own ethnicity-based teams.

Prior to live rugby league telecasts in New Zealand rugby league remained a minor sport for fans as well as players. Marginalised from the mainstream in a rugby union-loving nation it was not until the excitement of the Australian Winfield Cup was broadcast into New Zealand homes, sports bars and other venues, that rugby league began to make inroads in the New Zealand sporting landscape.

Māori were at the forefront of the new era of rugby league popularity. Success at the Pacific Cup tournaments and within the ranks of the New Zealand Kiwis enabled talented Māori athletes to showcase their abilities to the rugby league world; and with the advent of televised matches, the Māori was being broadcast weekly into New Zealand living rooms.

²⁴⁸ Bergin, P. (2002), 'Maori Sport and Cultural Identity in Australia', in *The Australian Journal of Anthropology*, 13:3, p. 261

With the increased popularity of rugby league in the New Zealand, the country's first 'professional' rugby league franchise entered the Australian premier competition under the scrutiny of the nation. Yet to win an elusive premiership in the Australian NRL the Warriors represent not only a country, but also a culture. Infused with Māori culture the Warriors' logo and club name embody the influence that Māori have had on the sport in New Zealand rugby league history.

Māori continue to contribute to the development of rugby league internationally. Providing over-proportionate numbers of players to the elite Australian competition as well as a growing number to the English competition, and contributing to World Cup winning teams as well as participating in World Cups as a distinctive entity, Māori have left their mark on the sport since 1908. As a unique 'donor culture' Māori continue to contribute to the development of the sport globally, and will also have a significant contribution to the future development of the sport. Today Māori continue to influence rugby league at the international and elite levels through the supply of top level athletes to the leading global competitions, although a potential impediment of international success is the lack of development at club level in New Zealand.

Chapter Six: Conclusion

The purpose of this thesis has been to examine the limited literature around Māori and rugby league. In doing so this thesis has analysed the contributions and influences of Māori to the sport in a single complete document. Previously accounts of Māori and rugby league have been limited to popular histories and brief overviews in other historical pieces about the sports history.

From the first Māori tour of 1908 through to the current international rugby league environment it is evident that Māori have been significant contributors to the development and continued popularity of rugby league. Rugby league proved popular with Māori quickly. Within two years of rugby league being in New Zealand the increased numbers of Māori participating became cause enough to examine the merits of having a Māori rugby union team to counter the exodus of Māori players to the burgeoning code.

This thesis has provided an in-depth analysis of the contributions and influence that Māori have made to the sport of rugby league for over one hundred years. Dating back earlier than the first game played on New Zealand soil Māori have been, and continue to be, heavily involved with the sport. While many of the conclusions of this thesis are not new, a precedent has been set by gathering them into a single document, as opposed to previously being fragmented throughout other rugby league histories. Following the 2008 centenary of Māori involvement with rugby league there is still a lack of a thorough historical examination of the contributions that Māori have made to the sport. This thesis differs from previous attempts to provide a history of Māori in rugby league by focusing on the contributions Māori have made to the sport and the influence that Māori, as a distinct culture within the sport and as a demographic that has such strong connections to the sport, have had on the development of the game in New Zealand, Australia and England. With very little academic text in the area of Māori in rugby league I hope that this thesis may contribute to a continued discourse around rugby league in New Zealand sports histories and the social sciences.

6.1 The Early Tours

Māori contributions to the sport of rugby league began before the sport had been played on New Zealand soil. The success of the 1907 All Golds tour had led to an increased curiosity about the sport of rugby league in both New Zealand and Australia. The 1908 Māori rugby league team became pioneers in terms of touring within the sport and as New Zealand

representatives. The 1908 Māori team's tour had provided the ARL with enough revenue to fund an Australian tour of England and to assist in the establishment and development of an inter-club premiership in Sydney and a district club competition in Brisbane.

After a successful fiscal period following the 1908 Māori tour the Australian leagues found themselves requiring the services of the Māori team following a financially crippling Australian tour of England. The return of a 1909 Māori touring side was a success both on and off the field. With spectator numbers in the tens of thousands for many of their games the Māori helped raise the required revenue to lead rugby league into a time of prosperity in Australia.

The two tours also raised the profile of the game in New Zealand. The tours highlighted the abilities of the Māori team at the national level and endorsed the possibility of representing not only their country but also their culture. This increased opportunity for Māori saw an exodus of Māori players from rugby union into the rugby league game. While this was beneficial for New Zealand rugby league, it also served to benefit Māori rugby union. By instilling a fear of a large scale player migration into the NZRFU, a national Māori rugby union team was selected in 1910. This team was instigated as a means to retain Māori athletes and would become monumental in the future of Māori participation in rugby union.

The 1910 decision to form a Māori rugby union team also allowed for Māori to be represented at the international level in both codes. The achievements of the 1908 and 1909 tours, therefore, are not limited only to rugby league, but also to the promotion of Māori athletes across the code boundary.

Often overlooked in rugby league literature, the Māori teams' tours of 1908 and 1909 set the precedent for touring sides in Australia with regard to spectator numbers and revenue generated. These tours financed Australian rugby league and promoted Māori athleticism around the world. Had it not been for these tours it could be argued that rugby league as a popular sport in New Zealand and Australia would not have developed as quickly as it did.

Māori success in the sport also provided opportunities for participation at the elite level and national recognition without prejudice. These tours opened the doors for Māori participation in the international arena, something that rugby union had failed to capitalise on, especially considering the success of the 1888 Natives Tour. Through the success of these tours in showcasing Māori athletic ability to the world the opportunity emerged for Māori to seek a future in professional sport.

The success of the tours, while instrumental to the foundations of Australian rugby league, did not serve to enhance the financial position of the regional New Zealand competitions. The tours served to benefit the international game more directly than the development of the national game. Rugby league was firmly established in England and was more highly developed in New South Wales and Queensland than it was in New Zealand. Through the 1908 and 1909 tours Australian rugby league received the advantage of promotional success and financial profit. English clubs would benefit from the increased exposure of the game to Māori players as the opportunity for early player migration emerged. The tours were also recognised by the English league clubs who sought the playing capital of several Māori players, such as Riki Papakura and later George Nepia. It can be said that the mobility of Māori, in the form of touring teams and migrant players, aided in the establishment and early development of the sport internationally.

6.2 Māori ownership of the game

Rugby league was more than just a new type of football for Māori. It provided opportunities that rugby union had previously been reluctant to offer. While rugby union took 40 years to establish a national all-Māori team, rugby league had a Māori side in the first year of the sport's existence in New Zealand. This was indicative of the forward thinking mentality, acceptance of entrepreneurial initiative and the socially inclusive nature of the code.

Rugby league was free of the restrictive administrations and management of rugby union and it was not reserved for the higher echelons of society in the way that the socially exclusive rugby union game was. Rugby league embraced all people and was in return embraced by the people through participation and spectatorship. Characterised by working class northern-English roots, rugby league became a vehicle for the advancement of marginalised communities in the sporting world.

For Māori, the ability to participate in and manage the game at the highest level was an incentive to nurture and develop the code in New Zealand. With the mana of the Kīngitanga endorsing the sport as early as 1934, there has been a strong connection between Māori and the sport ever since.

Players such as George Nepia contributed to the growing Māori passion for the sport. Nepia's status was enhanced within Māori communities after his move from rugby union to rugby league. Nepia provided Māori communities with a tangible example of the opportunities given by the sport. While others had played in professional English club teams before he did,

his popularity and celebrity ensured that Māori were now looked to for fulfilling roles in clubs on the other side of the world. Nepia, it can be said, helped to provide a catalyst for the contemporary donor culture scenario that has become a part of contemporary rugby league.

The administration and development of rugby league was fundamentally different to that of rugby union. Rugby league in New Zealand was not aligned to an international governing body, as rugby union was. The amateur ethos that had controlled rugby union internationally was not applied during the development of rugby league and thus there were fewer restrictions on who could play and how the game would be administered. The inclusive nature of rugby league had also allowed for increased participation from Māori. This increased participation rate in turn would see the involvement of the Kīngitanga and the NZMRL in administering the development of the sport in Māori communities.

The acceptance of Māori-led initiatives in the administering of the sport at the time was unique to rugby league. Maintaining links with the centralised control of the English model and the amateur status of the game was seen as imperative. The acceptance of such initiatives would prove beneficial in the future development of the sport with Māori currently forming the majority of adult rugby league players in New Zealand, and contributing significant numbers of athletes in international competitions.

6.3 Contemporary Māori Influence

The influence that Māori have had on the sport of rugby league has continued from the first Māori teams of the early 20th Century through to the elite levels of contemporary rugby league in the Australian NRL, English Super League and the New Zealand club levels, regional representative teams and the world cup-winning national Kiwis team. Having participated at the top levels of the sport since its establishment in New Zealand Māori players now contribute to the game beyond their own ethnically selected teams.

Rugby league in New Zealand was, during the post-war period, the exclusive domain of those communities and families that had continued the legacies of family rugby league tradition, or who had aligned with the alienated and marginalised segments of society that the sport had found favour with in other countries. Marginalised from the mainstream in a rugby union-loving nation it was not until the excitement of the Australian Winfield Cup was broadcast into New Zealand homes that rugby league began to make inroads into the New Zealand sporting landscape.

As had been evidenced during the development stages of rugby league in New Zealand and Australia, Māori were at the forefront of the new era of rugby league popularity. Success in the Pacific Cup and Winfield Cup tournaments and within the ranks of the New Zealand Kiwis allowed talented Māori athletes to showcase their abilities to the rugby league world; and with the advent of televised matches, Māori were being broadcast weekly into New Zealand living rooms.

With the increased popularity of rugby league in New Zealand, the country's first 'professional' rugby league franchise emerged with high expectations. Yet to win an elusive premiership in the Australian NRL the Warriors represent not only a country, but also a culture. Infused with Māori culture the Warriors logo and club name embody the influence that Māori have had on the sport in New Zealand rugby league history.

Māori continue to contribute to the development of rugby league internationally. Providing high numbers of players to the elite Australian competition and contributing to World Cup winning teams as well as participating in the 2000 Rugby League World Cup as a unique team representing a culture as opposed to a nation, Māori have left their mark on the sport since 1908.

Throughout 100 years of contribution and service to the game of rugby league Māori have aided the development of the sport to the position that it is in now. The sport has benefitted significantly from the migration of Māori players. It is not to say that rugby league as a sport could not have developed without Māori; merely an acknowledgement of the influence that Māori have had on the sport in New Zealand and Internationally.

6.4 Māori as a donor culture

Māori have contributed significantly to the sport of rugby league. One way in which Māori have contributed to the sport has been through the export of talented Māori athletes into international competitions. On average the NRL competition has 2.2 Māori players in each of the 16 teams' first team rosters in the competition. There are likely to be a considerable number more in the extended squads and junior squads. There has been somewhat of a 'Māorification' of the sport of rugby league. Not restricted only to the numbers of Māori players participating but also the apparent infusion of Māori culture into the sport.

Like a number of other international sports a global migration of rugby league athletes has developed in recent times. Athletes will often pursue elite sporting careers by migrating to

other countries that offer the opportunity for athletic advancement in the chosen sport. Contemporary tournaments provide greater opportunities for career advancement and financial success. For rugby league this involves seeking opportunity in a more lucrative competition such as the NRL in Australia or the Super League in England. Opportunities can be the result of either migrating to a more affluent competition that has advanced economic prosperity or seeking opportunities in a nation with a smaller player pool, thus increasing the likelihood of success.

The concept of Māori as a donor culture while previously not discussed has been occurring since the 1908 tour of Australia. Māori have consistently contributed significantly to the international rugby league field, whereas the impact of the team on the national landscape has been less monumental. Today significant numbers of Māori seek careers in international competitions such as the NRL and Super League. While New Zealand has had an ability to provide a pool of players to the elite competitions in Australia and England, as a country there has not been enough development into local and national competitions to provide a professional rugby league career outside the Warriors franchise. In contrast to the New Zealand situation, Australian and English leagues have professional and semi-professional competitions at various levels that can provide athletes with opportunities to align with larger clubs in the elite competitions. An example of this is the Australian Jim Beam Cup and Queensland Cup tournaments that host teams aligned with clubs from the NRL premiership, often referred to as feeder clubs. Due to a lack of opportunity in New Zealand young athletes in pursuit of professional careers are forced offshore. This has led to increased Māori presence at the elite level internationally; this scenario has also led to cult-like followings of Māori athletes, such as George Nepia, Benji Marshall, Rangi Chase and the Paul brothers, in Australia and the UK.

There is an opportunity for this concept to be researched further. Another issue to be considered for future research is whether there are any negative outcomes of Māori success in other countries. It is possible that Māori achievement abroad has led to a stronger desire to pursue rugby league careers in either Australia or England than to further develop the sport in New Zealand.

6.5 Areas for future research

This thesis has focused solely on the contributions and influences of Māori to the sport of rugby league. Areas that could be considered for future research include the role of other

ethnicities in the shaping of the rugby league code in New Zealand and Australia. The final chapter touched on how a large number of NRL players are of both Māori and Pacific heritage. It would be interesting to examine the numbers of Pacific rugby league players in New Zealand and the contributions they make to the game. SPARC have statistics for the numbers of Pacific athletes who play rugby league but analysis of their influence on the game is important in order to understand the dynamics of the game from grass roots to elite levels.

As well as other ethnicities, it is important to acknowledge that this thesis is restricted to examining the role of Māori men and does not provide analysis of the roles of women in the sport. Women play an integral role in the continued development of the sport in New Zealand and around the world and this is indeed an area that should be examined.

Another focus that could be considered for future analysis is the impact of Māoritanga on the sport. With such an increase in the numbers of young Māori participating in Australian junior rugby league competitions there are a number of questions that may arise as to how successful they become. One aspect that I find particularly fascinating is the role of whānau on success. One particular question is how have uniquely Māori social practices such as manaakitanga (hospitality), whānaungatanga (sense of family) and āwhina (support) affected the likelihood of success for Māori rangatahi (youth) who move to Australia in an effort to live out their dreams of playing in the NRL?

One particular area of research to come out of this thesis that I intend to continue to examine is the argument of Māori as a donor culture to international rugby league. As a concept donor countries have been discussed at length in academic literature in other sporting areas. The potential to open up a new discourse around donor cultures as opposed to countries is an avenue that I intend to pursue. One particular issue is the role of balance within sports labour migration. How are donor countries' own sports developments hindered or benefitted by increased player migration? Do countries suffer as a result of exporting talent? Is this an issue in New Zealand? Is this, therefore, a paradox of Māori sporting success?

6.6 Closing sentiments

The bond between Māori and the sport of rugby league has continued for over 100 years. This bond has developed over time to see the popularity of rugby league, arguably, now comparable to rugby union.

Without the contributions and influences of Māori it is possible that the sport may not have developed to the extent that it has in New Zealand and perhaps in Australia, where Māori provided financial stability to the game when it was needed most. Fast forward 100 years and Māori continue to make important contributions to the sport. By contributing superstars of the game such as Benji Marshall and Stacey Jones Māori are still bringing spectators through the gates to watch rugby league. As the statistics have shown it is more likely than not that this trend will continue as the numbers of Māori (and Pasifika) athletes participating in elite rugby league competitions continues to rise. However, this success of individual Māori players is not matched by a strong AMRL structure, as the AMRL is still very much self sufficient, or a strong competitive structure in New Zealand capable of offering professional careers without leaving the country. Māori, and Pacific, players ply their trade/talents outside of their home countries and in so doing boost the success of elite competitions in Australia and England. The success of Māori at the sport has helped to boost the sport internationally; but it appears that the paradox of Māori rugby league success is that the contributions Māori make to the sport provide more benefit to the competitions in Australia and England than to the development of the sport in New Zealand.

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