

ROB WATSON

FIGHTING FOR SURVIVAL

A MANIFESTO FOR THE
FUTURE OF RUGBY LEAGUE



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The Perennial Existential Crisis

A HUNDRED and thirty years is a long time to be in survival mode. Rugby league in the UK is facing an existential crisis. For balance, it should be noted that such a crisis is far from a new phenomenon for the sport. The origins of rugby league can be traced back to an August day in 1895, when 22 northern rugby teams took the bold decision to break away from the Rugby Football Union and form their own competition. It could be argued that the existential crisis has been permanent ever since. As if they were the youngest sibling leaving the family home to live alone when they formed that breakaway league, with the voices of their rich family ringing in their ears that they would never make it on their own. It is also fair to say that both the inferiority complex and the chip on their shoulder have never deserted them in all that time either.

In modern times at least, the administrators of the game have been constantly trying to find the balance between attracting new fans, whilst keeping the existing ones happy. Even if we only go as far back as the formation of Super League in 1996, the difficulty of that balancing act has proved the saying that 'you can't please all of the people all of the time'. Most 'exciting new ideas' might generate a few new fans, but also tend to infuriate Bob from Featherstone, Keith from Batley and Sandra from Oldham. Whilst if they keep doing what they've always

done, the sport will keep being what it has always been; that is a minority sport in the UK, except in a few pockets of the country, all of which are within about ten miles of the M62 motorway.

Rugby league is often referred to as a 'northern game'. Whilst it is true to suggest that it has barely taken root anywhere south of Warrington, the idea that its popularity is widespread across the whole of the north of England would be misleading. Liverpool, Manchester, Carlisle, Preston, Lancaster, Newcastle and Sunderland are just some examples of major towns and cities in the north that have never been a hotbed of rugby league; whilst big Yorkshire cities like York and Sheffield do have some history in the game but are far from being thought of as strongholds for the sport.

Threats to its popularity are always plentiful. In 2025 the most common threats are still there, including football - the dominant monster of a sport in the UK, rugby union - the much richer sibling that they ran away from back in 1895, and the limited media and press exposure, largely because of the deep-rooted upper-class bias in those industries.

That upper-class bias is even clearer when it comes to the government; not much rugby league gets played at Eton and Harrow. One way of demonstrating that bias would be to mention that it was this year that Billy Boston became the first person from rugby league to ever be knighted. For balance, we can say that 21 people from rugby union have been knighted, as have 30 cricketers and 12 people from yachting. Sometimes as rugby league fans we are perhaps guilty of paranoia about being treated unfairly because of the game's working-class background.

Looking at those knighthood statistics, are we being paranoid if it is true?

In Australia, their equivalent of Super League is the NRL and over the last ten years or so that league has become an example of excellent sport marketing. They have raised the profile of the sport and the players out of sight compared to where it previously was and it shows no signs of stopping. The success of the sport in Australia could be seen as another threat to the game over here, but it could equally become its greatest ally. If rugby league in the UK can learn from and maybe even be run by the people responsible for that marketing success, then this year could be looked back on as a positive turning point for the sport.

My journey following rugby league in 2025 has included watching a match in every round of the Challenge Cup. It has also taken me to Las Vegas, I went to the Super League Grand Final at Old Trafford and I was back at Wembley for the first Test in the Ashes series. I also watched a couple of academy games, as well as watching some amateur teams in the Challenge Cup. When you are watching a prop forward who looks to be a good four stone overweight but has decent handling skills, on a field somewhere in St Helens, you know you are a long way from Las Vegas.

In the UK every sport is at best a distant second to football. What can rugby league do to breach that gap even just a little bit and have at least a few years where they are not feeling like they are in that existential crisis? That can include what they are already doing well, as well as what they need to do better. As is often the case with sports teams, when it comes to the biggest leagues and competitions in sport, over the last few years it feels

like the best are getting better. Leagues like the NFL in American football and the NRL are both excellent examples of marketing success, yet neither of them rests on their laurels. They are always looking for ways to innovate, improve and to stretch the reach of their sport and build on their fan base.

I believe that if you could merge the on-the-field product of rugby league with the marketing machine of rugby union in the UK, we would have one sport that would be much bigger than either of them is now. Often, rugby union feels to me like the sporting equivalent of the emperor's new clothes. The BBC and ITV are telling us how big the Six Nations is every year, as if everyone is talking about it and sat watching every game, hooked by the latest scrum or kick to touch. In over 20 years of working in England, I have never had an office conversation with anyone about the Six Nations. I have never seen a packed-out pub or a fan zone with a giant screen for a game, or masses of beer being thrown everywhere to celebrate an England try. When every fourth year there is a British & Irish Lions tour, then the emperor's new clothes get a makeover, as if he is about to go down a Parisian catwalk. If you listen and watch the build-up on BBC and Sky, you would think it was every British person's favourite sporting occasion. Spoiler alert, it's not. You can't blame rugby union though for using their power in the media to sell the thing they love and trying to convince people to care as passionately about it as Tarquin and Cuthbert do, who never miss a game at Twickers. I must admit, I am impressed by whoever is involved in marketing rugby union, especially the international game. By contrast, many times over the years, the people responsible for marketing

rugby league in the UK have left me thinking that they couldn't sell a prostitute on a submarine.

Had I been writing this book in the early years of this millennium, the biggest threat would have been a merger with rugby union. Merger would not have been quite the right word; takeover would have been more accurate. Union had been professional for over five years by then, and all the money and promotion of the sport was threatening to dwarf rugby league to such an extent that people were thinking that in a couple of years there would only be one rugby. To some it seemed inevitable that because union was professional, league no longer needed to exist, as if it was still 1895 and we were paying broken-time payments to factory workers. It is a sign of rugby league's great resilience that the merger never happened and has not even been talked about for years.

As a sport we have long complained about our lack of exposure in the national press and media. Yet from the outside looking in, there seems to be little being done about it. We cannot wait for other people to spread the word of our game for us. I am often drawn to comparisons with American sports, and the NRL down under. One of the differences I see is the sheer enthusiasm with which sports are presented in America and rugby league is in Australia. The way they present every televised match is as if it is the most important thing in the world at that moment, that they are delighted to be there and that there is nowhere else they would rather be. It is also clear that they have done a great amount of research before the game. That enthusiasm is there in all their programmes about the sport in between matches too. If the people and organisations televising our sport aren't excited about it then how can they ever expect

anyone else to be? All too often, rugby league coverage in the UK can feel like an afterthought, something to fill some airtime before the bigger sports or regular scheduled programmes are back on screen.