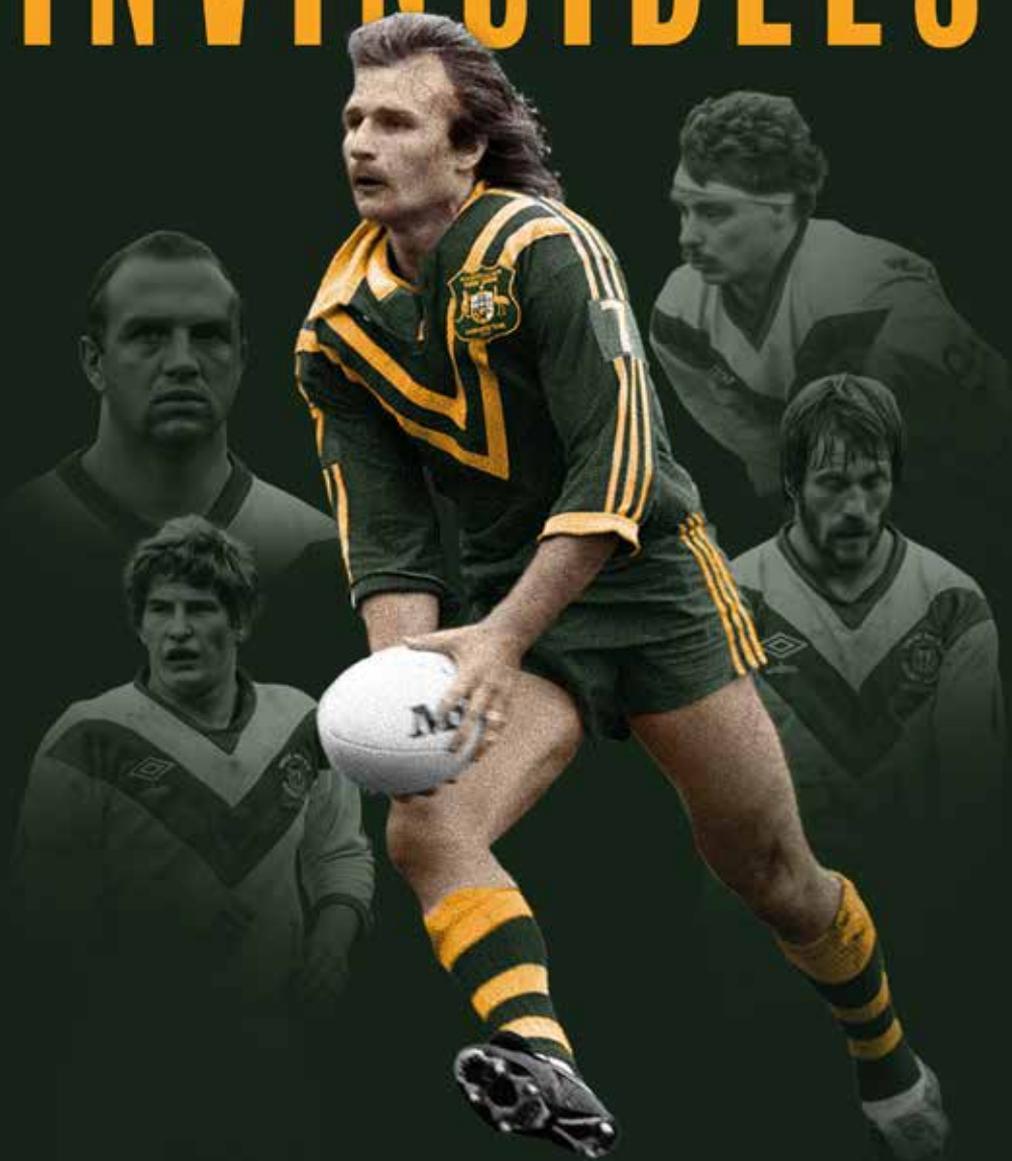


MARK FLANAGAN

THE

INVINCIBLES



THE INSIDE STORY OF

THE 1982 KANGAROOS

THE TEAM THAT CHANGED RUGBY FOREVER

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Chapter One

The Last Hurrah

ON 20 May 1970, a group of 28 men sat in Heathrow Airport as guests of the British Overseas Airways Corporation eating lunch ahead of their 4.15pm departure for Hong Kong (flight BA936). They had already flown down from Manchester, at the start of a long journey that would eventually lead to rugby league immortality.

Overseeing the 26-man Great Britain Lions squad were Leigh chairman Jack Harding (manager) and his 'assistant' John Whiteley, who would effectively act as coach, doctor, physio, kitman and press officer. Less than two days later the Lions played the first of 24 matches in Australia and New Zealand having touched down in the sub-tropical northern outpost of Darwin just 18 hours before the first kick-off.

Tired and jet-lagged they started with a 35-12 victory in front of just 3,000 rugby league fans from the Northern Territory. It would be the first of 22 wins on what has become widely regarded as the most successful Lions adventure ever. This is unsurprising, as they are likely to remain the last British rugby league team to beat the Kangaroos in a three-match series, famously coming from one down to beat Australia. They then whitewashed New Zealand 3-0.

The future of British rugby looked bright but those in the know knew differently. One of those men was Whiteley, a renowned thinker who cared passionately for the game. He led his squad in magnificent style but his experience of how rugby league was being managed both home and abroad led to a damning conclusion. On a visit to a rugby training session at a New South Wales primary school in 1970 he was astounded by the seriousness and skill levels on display. Turning to Leeds winger Alan Smith he uttered those prophetic words, 'This lot will thrash us in ten years' time.'

'It was frightening me how much more their game had advanced compared to the last time I had been there [1958],' recalled John, almost half a century later. 'I talked to a lot of people over there so got a pretty good sense of what was happening. Ironically Alan [Smith] was a forerunner in terms of he was always trying to find ways to get fitter. He was a very good athlete. Very committed. One of the easy professionals to be a part of. When you are a coach you deal with all walks of life and Alan was one of the 100 per centers.'

Ironically it was the golden age of British dominance, which John had been part of in the late 50s and early 60s, that provided the impetus for a major rethink of how rugby league should be coached in Australia and in everything else that followed thereafter.

Leading the way in that process was the man they called 'the Bradman of League'.

Dave Brown was one of the first superstars of Australian rugby league and earned that prestigious nickname due to his prolific try-scoring efforts with Eastern Suburbs in the 1930s. In the mid-60s he was part of the Australian Rugby League's National Coaching Panel, which included former stars such as Darrel Chapman, Keith Holman, Kevin Mosman, Alf Gallagher and Frank Johnson. Their job was to co-ordinate the country's

coaching policy, and a collective decision was taken to forget about trying to copy the British model of producing rugby players and instead to build on what made Australian players different. By 1965 a modified coaching qualification was produced with the emphasis on encouraging skill and athleticism. The first person to pass the new course was a young school teacher called Peter Corcoran.

Having recently returned from a stint teaching in Brisbane, Corcoran not only passed but also received a mark of 100 per cent. So impressed were Messers Brown and co that they invited him onto the panel.

Corcoran said, 'I think it was a case that Dave Brown and the others believed for too long we had been looking at the English model and the way England played rugby league and it really hadn't produced the results that we wanted because our DNA, our culture if you like, wasn't totally au fait with the English attitudes. Also, of course, if you look at the background of the great England players, our players did not have that background.

'The panel, and I wholeheartedly agreed with them, wanted to bring a new look to Australian rugby league and one of the first things they wanted to do was improve coaching because obviously if you improve coaching, which is generally at the grassroots, then we automatically started to build that broad base well versed into how to play rugby league which could eventually rise to the apex of the pyramid and prove to be a tremendous influence on interstate and international football.

'I think what I brought to them [the panel] was you had to look holistically at coaching. Not just how to play the ball, how to kick the football, how to run with it ... there was a lot more to it. There was a lot more to proper coaching that would produce the result that we wanted for rugby league. I think at that time we still had that attitude "if you've played rugby league you could be a coach"

and when you became a coach you simply again did what you had done throughout your whole career.’

Corcoran was a blue-sky thinker who had spent most of his twenties immersing himself in the study of coaching across a raft of sports and now, in his early-30s, he was about to start his own revolution.

‘That [studying other sports] was part of my coaching career right back in the 50s. I had seen as a young teacher some of the useless ways people were being coached and with high expectations. I made it my endeavour to find, from wherever I could, those new ways. I joined the Coaches Association of Canada, I subscribed to a number of books on other sports but [which] were entirely on coaching.

‘I was particularly interested in how we could programme the player mentally to realise there was more to it than just lace up your boots and just go out there and throw a ball around. In those days we had captain/coaches and a lot of players relied on him to take the lead. In my mind every player on the field was a leader. They had to be thinkers and if you are required to be a thinker you have to have knowledge to back that up, to give you the necessary number of options that would allow you, at any one stage, to take the action that was most appropriate rather than something that people had just been doing for ages.’

Corcoran also stressed the need to get scientific and also the importance of dealing with the person and not just the player. That belief was reinforced by spending time with a man regarded by most rugby league aficionados in Australia as ‘the father of modern coaching’.

‘One of the most important people I have ever met was Duncan Thompson up in Toowoomba. His approach was revolutionary and to my mind just what we wanted. He brought in what has commonly become known as “contract football”. He promoted the feeling when you went out on the field and when you went to

training, and, in fact, whenever you were together, [that] there was a binding contract which said, “I will look after you, I will watch your back. I will play my part and together we will have a good team.”

The new way of coaching coincided with a significant growth in schools’ rugby league in the late 60s and early 70s. By 1970 there were 43,000 boys playing the game down under. The prestigious University Shield (U-18s) schools’ competition in New South Wales was just one example of how the sport was taking hold. In 1969 the number of schools taking part was 118. Twelve months later that figure was 147.

In contrast, the introduction of the comprehensive school system in the UK in 1965 marked the start of a serious decline in schools playing rugby league. While the opposite was expected to happen, schools who had previously played rugby league switched instead to union so that they could organise fixtures against former grammar schools. In the 80s the numbers did start to rise again but that talent stream was reduced to a drip for a long time, which in turn affected amateur rugby league. That, together with a complete lack of long-term planning by the Rugby Football League (RFL), proved to be a recipe for disaster.

Corcoran added, ‘The people that I worked with in those early days realised the tremendous significance of having people in a school background playing rugby league. School football was always strong but became a lot stronger in the late 60s and early 70s and from then on as well. But I think as far as the people I worked with were concerned we needed to get the attitude of our coaches and people in rugby league focused on the core skills and attitudes that were absolutely essential if you wanted to build on something to achieve success later on.

‘That was the whole aim in those early days – to get people involved in courses to re-orientate the mindset towards rugby

league not being a game of brawn – and I’m being a little bit careful there – but being a game of skill. Coupled with speed, it would become a powerful game that would get us the results we needed.’

The University Shield became a breeding ground for top players. It was split into 16 geographical regions with divisional winners playing knockout rugby. The final and the third and fourth place play-off took place at the Redfern Oval, the former home of the South Sydney Rabbitohs. The knockout matches attracted comprehensive TV coverage and would often be used as warm-up attractions ahead of more senior matches. On 4 July 1970 the last-16 tie between Tamworth and Riverstone schools was played at the Sydney Cricket Ground (SCG) and used as a taster for the third Ashes Test. Most pundits came away from the SCG that evening convinced that the Poms were set for a period of domination. However, the really significant match was actually the U-18s schools affair that preceded it. That fixture showcased the future while the Great Britain coach’s ability to mould a brilliant team effectively acted as a giant sticking plaster on the game back home. The Lions of 1970 could play in any type of style, although, as it was the only Ashes tour played under the four-tackle rule, there were some frenetic, high-scoring encounters.

Captained by St Helens centre Frank Myler, the tourists scored 33 tries in winning their opening five matches ahead of the first Test at Lang Park, Brisbane on 6 June. However, in that game, their hopes of regaining the Ashes appeared to have taken a near fatal blow with the Kangaroos running out 37-15 victors. It was the first time since 1928 that the opening Test had been played in the Queensland stronghold and the match became synonymous with the brutal nature of the game at that time, producing what was perhaps the most famous headbutt in rugby league. Australian prop Jim Morgan unwisely tried to engage St Helens prop Cliff Watson, who later recalled: ‘Jimmy came up and gave me a nudge

on the nose with his head. So I thought, I'm not going to let him get away with that and hit him correctly and down he went.'

However, more importantly was the number of penalties being conceded by the visitors for 'technical offences', which gave the margin of victory a rather lop-sided look. After all, the home side had only outscored their opponents 5-3 in terms of tries. The Great Britain coach more recently conceded that it just took his young side a while to adjust to a different style of officiating.

'When you went to Australia the referees' interpretation was vastly different,' said John. 'I think that in the first game in Darwin the penalty count was 19-1. In the tour we had meetings with the referees and I think we brought one of them down to training to referee us. Obviously you are refereed by local referees and sometimes you don't think you are going to get a fair crack. I don't mean that nastily ... the fervour of the crowd would sway decisions. Also, against those country sides you are that much faster and it sometimes looks like you are cheating. But in Brisbane we were beaten fair and square.'

The first Test defeat proved a wake-up call for the squad, a fact summed up in no uncertain terms by Millward, who laid bare the feeling within the GB camp in an article published in the Australian press.

'I think our poor first performance against you [Australia] in the first Test was due to the easy early matches we had. We made the big mistake of getting complacent. There we were riding along on the crest of a wave, getting easy victories, scoring tries like they were going out of style. Then ... wham! You fooled us into thinking we were the greatest team of unbeatables ever. The truth is that before the first Test we didn't have any idea what Australia's potential was.'

John added, 'By the time we got to Brisbane a lot of the young lads were cock-a-hoop and thought they were seasoned internationals. But I was telling them "you have been sailing

through calm waters so far and a storm is about to hit us”, and we were hit by a storm that day. They came at us like something we had never experienced before ... strength and speed and ferocity. All the ingredients. We never really got into the game.

‘On the Monday after the Brisbane Test we had a meeting at the training ground and discussed it in depth. How our attitude and mentality had been building up to that match. They [the Australian squad] all played in the Sydney Premiership and were playing in the highest standard comp in the world every week. We talked about it and realised we had quality players and were getting fitter. I knew we were quickly getting stronger, and built on that team spirit by building this strength through mindset, because we knew we had players who were capable of playing at that level. But it meant all of us being united. By the time that second Test came we were really firing. If that team had stuck together for two or three years they would have been invincible.’

While many pundits back home feared the worst, what was largely unknown was the huge effort being made to be physically up for the challenge. John had been given just enough time to get his young squad up to scratch. There were good early signs that they were buying into the coach’s ethos.

‘Every morning on that tour I went for a run before breakfast and when I got back one day Malcolm Reilly was leaning over the balustrades and he was asking about the run and he wanted to come with me the next morning. So, true to his word, the next day he joined me and when we got back half a dozen of them were waiting for us. By the end of the week everyone in the squad was running with me.’

The final warm-up encounter ahead of the second Test was against a formidable-looking New South Wales XIII – an unofficial ‘fourth Test’ – and the manner in which the tourists fought back from 15-2 down reflected their improved resolve and fitness. Only

a brilliant tackle by Wests centre John Cootes denied the tourists a victory, the game finishing 17-17. It would be the last time they failed to win.

Seven days later came the second Test in Sydney where John made seven changes from the Brisbane mauling. Castleford full-back Derek Edwards replaced Bradford's Terry Price, Leeds winger Alan Smith was given a go in place of Hull's Clive Sullivan, and centre Syd Hynes took over from his Leeds teammate Mick Shoebottom. At stand-off it was widely considered a huge gamble to allow Roger Millward to collect his third Lions cap as a replacement for Castleford legend Alan Hardisty. In the pack, young buck Dave Chisnall (Leigh) made way for experienced Castleford prop Dennis Hartley, Bradford hooker Tony Fisher got the nod ahead of Hull KR star Peter 'Flash' Flanagan and in the back row Featherstone's dynamic young second-rower Jimmy Thompson came in for Wigan's Dave Robinson.

'Jimmy Thompson was typical of what was happening,' recalls John. 'Jimmy was unknown, nobody had heard of him and he was a quiet and unassuming young man. Once he came into the fold he became a character of the side and improved beyond all recognition. His tackling was unbelievable. His courage ... he was like a silent assassin.'

As a player John had been part of the outstanding 1958 Lions squad and used the team's historic status to motivate his players to keep pushing themselves.

'But all the players were contributing so well by that point ... we were blowing teams away. It became a thing after each game: I would go into the changing room after and say ... "Yes but you will never be as good as that 1958 team", and every time they would reply with: "Whiteley ... whack that!" It became a war cry.'

In Sydney, the Green and Golds, coached by the relatively-inexperienced Arthur Summons, were without talismanic captain

and full-back Graeme Langlands, who had broken his thumb. Also missing through injury were pack leader Ron Lynch, prop Jim Morgan and hooker Elwyn Walters. Langlands in particular was going to be a big miss and many local pundits were also concerned that the new faces, particularly in the forwards, contributed to an overall sense that the side had lost a great deal of mobility and weight.

The changes contributed to a dramatic turnaround in fortunes as Millward claimed two brilliant tries in inspiring a 28-7 win, achieved despite Hynes being sent off midway through the second half for kicking out.

The Kangaroos had more injury problems for the decider with John Sattler now unavailable. The South Sydney stalwart had captained the side in Langlands' absence, which would mean a third skipper in as many matches. That honour went to St George stand-off Phil Hawthorne.

Meanwhile, John had a big decision to make at full-back with Edwards having picked up a rib injury and a type of whiplash against Riverina in the final warm-up clash before the Sydney showdown. With Ray Dutton out because of a dislocated shoulder the pundits expected Price to return to the position he had filled in the Brisbane opener, but centre Shoebottom was named in the No 1 position instead.

'Mick was a wonderfully versatile player,' said John. 'He was strong and was a big lad. You could play him anywhere. He filled in superbly.'

An interception try from John Atkinson, collecting a wild pass from Arthur Beetson, set the Lions on their way to victory. Even though they scored four more tries to Australia's one, the game was in the balance until the dying moments when Millward was the beneficiary of some excellent work from Dougie Laughton, who jinked past one and passed out of the tackle with perfect timing

enabling the Hull KR stand-off to sprint onto the ball and score in the corner. For the first time in eight years Great Britain had won an Ashes series.

It was fitting that Roger 'the Dodger' should have the final say and ensure that justice was done. Even World Cup hero Bobby Charlton was rugby league-savvy enough to see that his fellow countrymen's dominance was not reflected in the final score (21-17).

'The scoreline looks ridiculous,' said Bobby. 'There was only one side in it as far as football was concerned and that was Britain.'

Manager Harding added, 'We beat the Australians and the referee and the touch-judges, who tried to give them all the penalty goal chances they could.'

The Leigh chairman was also delighted to report back to the RFL that the tour had made \$150,000 with each player receiving a bonus of \$2,001.10 (£984). In a sign of the times, more than half that amount came as a result of a TV commercial for Big Ben Pies.

It was a great moment for British sport and John puts their achievements alongside what the 1982 Invincibles would go on to achieve.

'We went to Australia and only lost one game. Everywhere we went we were commended on the discipline and in that third Test we were clapped off. Aussie fans don't normally clap off opposition sides.'

All of a sudden the British coach was a man in demand. According to former Wakefield player Brian Briggs, who was working for the Sydney club St George, John was offered an annual £4,000 to emigrate and join the St George coaching team, a claim that John later denied. However, Australia had already proved too tempting for the likes of Jim Mills and Tommy Bishop, who both missed out on a place in the Lions squad because they were playing down under.

‘I did get an offer from a club called Dapto, who were a country club near Sydney,’ recalls John. ‘They wanted me to be in charge of all the county around Dapto, all the schools and things, but I had just gone into my own business and was doing well. I declined the offer. I never wanted to leave Hull.’

While the Lions coach was not going to emigrate he was happy to offer his hosts some advice. Speaking to *Big League* journalist Bill Mordey, he said, ‘There is bags of potential in Australia and I feel you will be hard to beat in the World Cup. But Australia’s style of play will have to be changed radically so that tries can be scored and the team don’t rely on goal kicks. On muddy grounds back home goal kicks are no good and only try scoring will win matches. I think Australia’s negative type of football enabled us to regain the Ashes. Once we organised our defence nothing was offered by Australia. A style change in Australia’s play is desperately needed and if this is accomplished any side it fields will be hard to beat in the World Cup.’

Australia’s answer in the short term was a good deal less sophisticated than that. The World Cup final at Headingley in November would become known as the ‘Battle of Leeds’, with the fixture, shown live on the BBC, making headlines for all the wrong reasons. Australia’s victory would prove to be a very sad end to John’s first stint as Great Britain coach. Ahead of the tournament he had told the players that he was going to resign at its conclusion.

Speaking on the subject nearly 50 years later it was obvious his treatment at the hands of the RFL still hurt.

‘I had three kids and a mortgage and got a letter for the remuneration for the 13 weeks [of the tour] for £200. I had to borrow £400 off my dad because I came home and I didn’t have a penny. The week before I went to Australia I got a letter from the RFL saying that Jack Harding was getting £250 and they didn’t think it was fair I got the same as him. So they deducted

me £50. When I got back every player got a £1000 bonus and I never got an extra penny or even one letter of thank you from that office.

‘But I am clever and the World Cup was in England and I knew I would be the boss and the players loved me. Money couldn’t buy that. Then we all meet on a Monday at Headingley and all the players sign a contract because sponsorship had come into the game. I am last to be seen. I am in debt from the tour and I have never been reimbursed and I’m coming back to my car and there is a knock on the window and it is Bill Fallowfield (RFL secretary) and he says: “I want a word with you, John.”

‘I walked back with him towards the offices and he put his hand on my shoulders and said to me, “I will give you £15.”

‘I didn’t remember driving home. I was numb. I got home and Joan [his wife] thought I had had a crash. I felt ill. I told her I was finished in professional rugby league. I couldn’t afford to do it. I used to go and watch all these players and never claim for expenses. No one ever mentioned expenses to me and never in my life did I claim a penny.’

On the Wednesday before the first game John told the players he was seeing out the World Cup and then finishing. His wage structure meant that for the tournament he would be paid the princely sum of £60. By that time he was running West Hull Working Men’s Club so financially he was reasonably secure in the long term. He was also coaching Hull KR, having joined the Craven Park club a couple of weeks after returning from the New Zealand leg of the Lions tour).

Back in Australia the rugby league establishment were still coming to terms with the manner in which they had lost the Ashes, and coach Summons’s parting shot, before he was replaced by Newtown’s Harry Bath, was to suggest that the Kangaroos might not regain the Ashes for another decade.

‘This is unquestionably the best side to come to Australia since 1962 and it may be the start of a cycle for England,’ said Summons. ‘With the young talent they have at their disposal and the quality of players still at home, England could dominate the series for the next ten years.’ His view was echoed by many of the respected writers of the day, not least Allan Clarkson of the *Sydney Morning Herald*, who pointed to the ages of Britain’s stars. Reilly, Millward, Atkinson, Thompson and Lowe were all 23 or younger.

World Cup winners they may have been but the manner in which the Kangaroos lost 24-2 to New Zealand the following June suggested that Summons could have been right – but for an extraordinary meeting of minds in Hawaii which helped to ensure instead that his prediction was way off the mark.

In December 1970, former Eastern Suburbs coach Jack Gibson was on holiday in Honolulu. But for him this was not a trip to enjoy beaches and warm Pacific temperatures. In town that week were all the coaches and general managers of America’s National Football League (NFL), who met annually to discuss rule changes and other ways to improve top-level American football.

Gibson was hoping to gatecrash the party and pick some brains and fell on his feet with a chance meeting with San Francisco 49ers head coach Dick Nolan, who had just been named NFL coach of the year.

Chatting to former player and coach Roy Masters, Gibson explained his reasons for learning everything he could from the NFL: ‘Their game is the same as ours. The only difference is the rules. They’re looking for the same type of individual as we are: 6ft 6in, 17st and can run the 100 yards in 9.6 seconds. We’re looking for people who can run the ball, catch and kick it. So are they. I went there because I was looking to learn something.’

It was in Hawaii that Gibson also took delight in learning of the value their game placed on the coaches themselves.

THE LAST HURRAH

‘I earned the right to be the sole selector. I spent years working with five and six selectors who didn’t know which way the goalposts were pointing. I couldn’t work to my potential until I got my way. If it wasn’t working out they could have sacked me. More often than not you spent more time Tuesday night in selections than you would training the football team on two nights. Often [the meetings] would last one and a half hours – you’d be arguing your point, because in those days, selectors would have a lot to do with buying players and they’d sweetheart their own buys. They’d want them in the team ... very seldom was it a true selection when you had to contend with five or six selectors.’

In 1967, his first full season coaching Easts, they won nine games in a row to make the play-offs and he was remunerated to the tune of \$1,000. The following year they finished a place higher but he only received \$800.

‘I was thinking it was lucky I didn’t run second or I might have got \$600,’ Gibson reportedly said. ‘If I won the comp I might have just got a handshake. So I was very peeved about that and I just picked up my kit bag and left. I never told them why. If they didn’t know why, well that was tough luck.’

Thereafter Gibson vowed that he would be the highest paid employee of any other club he coached; however, his lasting legacy was his commitment to defence and how his attention to detail gave him the edge over his opponents.

Speaking after he retired, he said, ‘Now the modern coach is really conscious of his defence. In those days, selectors were only worried whether a player could run the ball. It didn’t matter if he could tackle as long as he could advance it. But with our defence the boy who could run the football wasn’t so successful because week after week we would jam our defence. We made that our number one priority. We gave recognition to players who went well in defence. I’d read out: “He made 17 tackles. He made three

in a row.” We drilled it in because in the old days, if you went to football training, there was no such thing as spending one minute on defence. They would spend one and a half hours running the football but on Sunday you are lucky to have the ball 50 per cent of the time. In reality, as training, the coach should spend 50 per cent of time on defence and 50 per cent on attack. That’s what happens on game day.’

In 1971 Gibson took over St George and took them all the way to the Grand Final where the star-laden South Sydney Rabbitohs awaited. There would be no fairytale finish for the underdogs – they lost 16-10 – but Gibson had once again reminded everyone he was a coaching force to be reckoned with, although it is doubtful that even the man himself could imagine what he would achieve during the next decade.

That was the year that Malcolm Reilly joined Manly, and other top British performers – Cliff Watson, Phil Lowe and Dewsbury’s star hooker Mike Stephenson – would soon join him in the Sydney Premiership.

And there was something of a shock introduction to training for the former Castleford loose forward.

‘The natural advantages of a good climate and an abundance of good food became apparent in my early days in Australia after I made the big move,’ said Reilly in his autobiography. ‘I remember an informal training run in Manly which gave me quite a jolt on the subject of fitness. Manly coach Ron Willey arrived on the morning of the second day after my arrival to take me for a gallop. We had a run with Ken Arthurson (Manly club secretary) and some other guys around the front and around the harbour side of Manly. I was 23 at the time and considered myself fairly fit, having come from straight out of the English season.

‘Some of the guys I was running with must have been in their late fifties or early sixties and I thought to myself, “I’m going to

be waiting around for these old fellas.” Anyhow we took off and they finished up waiting for me. I was one of those people who try very hard to compete but back then did not have the aerobic fitness level that they had. It really got me thinking. I mean, some of these blokes were 40 years older than me, yet they left me behind. And when we got there – I think the run was about five miles – we went through 15 minutes of callisthenics, sit-ups, push-ups and various other exercises. Then they said, “C’mon, we’re going to run back now.”

‘I reckon my team-mates in Manly were 25 per cent fitter than me. People like Bobby Fulton were already training every day.’

While Reilly was gasping for breath many smaller clubs were holding theirs as the long-running battle for freedom of movement, forced by Balmain loose forward Dennis Tutty, came to a head at the end of the year. It reached a dramatic conclusion on 13 December 1971 when Australia’s High Court upheld a previous judgement that essentially made the transfer system redundant and left players free to switch clubs once their contracts expired. For the likes of Newtown, who survived by selling their best players to the Sydney powerhouses, the decision would ultimately cost them their existence.

On the flip side, outfits like St George, who rebuilt their clubhouse at a cost of A\$2m in 1970, had a plethora of revenue streams on a dizzying scale. While attendances were dropping, TV money and sponsorship were replacing gate receipts. On top of that, leading clubs held nightly shows, entertained hundreds of diners and welcomed punters into their own slot-machine arcades. This funded the drive towards professionalism as we know it today in the National Rugby League (NRL), and with Gibson and the other leading coaches in tune with the philosophies and ideas of Corcoran and his colleagues on the coaching panel, the Australian game was taking even bigger steps towards leaving its British counterpart behind.