

## 1989 - University Second Grade Premiers

### The Competition setup

The Illawarra District competition had expanded to such an extent that in 1989 there were twelve clubs involved, with all of them fielding three grades. The fact that the competition was under the banner of 'Illawarra' is a bit of a misnomer as there were teams from Camden, Campbelltown, Bowral, Goulburn, Kiama and Shoalhaven taking part in the comp. The area covered by these clubs was enormous and involved a huge amount of travelling which added to the social aspects of rugby, as most clubs incorporated bus trips to some of these places. 'What goes on tour stays on tour!' was the mantra used by many 'tried and emotional' players who suffered severe memory loss after surviving trips to these far away Mecca's of rugby.

The local Wollongong based clubs included the usual suspects in University, Waratahs, Vikings, Tech College, Shamrocks and Weerona but there was also a new kid on the block in South Pacific, which was an islander based club set up in 1988 in the Dapto area.

Unfortunately, they found it quite tough to field teams and dropped out of the competition early in the season. The other team name missing from the list of clubs is Port Kembla who after winning the competition a couple of times in the early eighties dropped out in 1987.

The fact that there were so many teams involved meant that the District decided that there needed to be a split draw devised. This was done by placing teams into two pools, where clubs in the same pool played each other twice and the teams from the other pool just once. The pools were determined by the finishing position in the previous year's competition. This draw was far from perfect as clubs strengths varied from season to season and as a result some clubs received an easier road to the semis than others, but what else could the district do as to play twenty-two games was out of the question?

To cater for the irregularities the semi finals were to be contested by the top five sides, which did ensure that the best teams would all take part in the final games of the year.

The other innovation made by the District was the introduction of an under 19 competition with seven clubs, including University, entering a team and it was quite successful in attracting players into rugby.

### The Coaches

The beginning of the season saw Paul Keating take the reins of the second-grade side, but he was more than happy to take a step back when the very experienced Robin Hugill arrived on the scene.

#### Robin Hugill



Robin is an Englishman who was interested in seeing the world and upon answering the rugby club's advertisement found himself in Wollongong in 1989 working as a casual PE teacher.

Robin was a true gentleman and took on the coaching of the second-grade side and his ability saw the boys secure the Uni's first title defeating Kiama in the grand Final. The next year Robin stepped up to the first-grade position and again found great success

getting the team into the minor semi and very nearly getting them through to the big games.

Robin returned to England in 1991 but only to secure a permanent visa and he returned the following year to again do the first-grade job. The depth of the club was not strong and with injuries the year was a tough one for all involved.

Robin's teaching career then saw him move on to a private school in Sydney and his association with the club became a long distance one where he still is in contact with members of the club and keeps an eye on our development.

## **Paul Keating**



Paul 'Nutz' Keating shares a name with one of the most influential politicians of the 1990's but that is not where the similarities end. Another interesting coincidence is that they were both Treasurers, but I don't think 'Nut's' method of keeping the canteen money under his bed for a week or two would be wise on the Federal scene.

'Nutz' decided to put on the boots when called upon to help in 1982 when numbers were really depleted, and he did a great job especially when you consider that his fitness levels were down a bit. As a matter of fact, 'Nutz' did well just to finish a game at all and the saying "Going down more times than Linda Lovelace" certainly took on a new meaning when Nutz was playing.

This return to the field saw 'Nutz' really work hard on improving his fitness and he established himself as a first-grade hooker in 1986 under Coach Webb. 'Nutz' was also a more than capable prop and despite his size no one enjoyed packing down against him due to his great technique.

When he had enough of playing 'Nutz' took on the role of second grade coach where he was a hard task master and to earn praise players had to put in a real effort.

When not coaching teams 'Nutz' often took on the job of managing teams and was a vital cog in ensuring that everything needed to get the teams on the field was available. 'Nutz' was often ball boy, water boy, linesman, scorer etc, usually all at the same time.

To top it all off 'Nutz was a regular member of the committee for many years acting as Treasurer for a while as well as taking on any tasks needed to keep the club functioning.

The Uni club recognized Paul Keating for his commitment to the club when he was made a life member in 1991. This was one of the only life memberships which was not leaked to the recipient, as was the case so often when 'Nutz' couldn't keep a secret.

'Nutz' did attend Uni later in life when he tried the academic life in 2004 but it was not for him and he returned to spending Saturdays watching the 'Legends' carry on the traditions established back in the 80's.

## **The Players**

At the completion of the 1988 season University had embarked on a recruiting drive and had attracted some quality overseas players to the club. This was a major plus for the club as they needed to improve their playing strength and depth so that they could compete with clubs that were importing players of a very high standard. As an example, Tech College had imported three Welsh front rowers, one who was a current International, while Waratahs had players from England who played at under 23 International level.

President Paul Webb was the driving force behind this endeavor, and he secured the services of Dirk Buitendag, who had played for Zimbabwe in the '87 World Cup plus some Kiwi lads who only stayed for a short period of time. To add to the experience factor John Carver, a lecturer at the Uni, also came on board and brought with him a mate, Arthur Bosanquet, who was in Wollongong setting up his surgery as a facial specialist. Both older guys were quality players who had played together at Adelaide Uni.

The club was also able to attract two students from NZ, Jeremy Shearman and Wayne Cotton, to come to study in Wollongong and play Rugby for the club. To add to the playing depth there was an influx of students who were more than capable players and so The Uni was in a stronger position throughout the grades than in previous seasons.

This depth was to play a key part in achieving the success of the second-grade team in securing the premiership. Although many of the new acquisitions played in the first-grade side their ability and experience meant that training was of a higher level of intensity.

Some of these experienced players such as Murray Cleal, Billy Egerton and John Carver having played a significant number of first grade games during the season came into the Seconds team for the semis. Simon Iliffe also came into the team after recovering from a serious injury late in the season. To be qualified for the Second-grade team they would have had to play three of the last five games in that grade. Creative accounting practices were applied by all clubs in this area and many a lower grade team had some very "experienced" players in the semi final teams.

The team resembled a bit of a League of Nations as there were players from all corners of the globe represented in it, with many being international students studying at uni. Erce Phillips was an American student who improved in leaps and bounds as a prop as the season progressed and he was joined in the team by Tevita Coganista (Fiji), Wayne Cotton (New Zealand), Paul Oppenheim (Zimbabwe), Nik Mak (England via Hong Kong) and of course they were coached by an Englishman.

The team also contained a number of opposites when you consider there was, John Carver a lecturer, guiding a bunch of students around in the backline, while Nick Theodore was a family man with a high profile job mixing it with younger guys who had absolutely no responsibilities in the world. Andrew Richards and Paul Bryant never actually studied at Uni they certainly enjoyed the Uni experience provided by the rugby club.

The other significant factor in the makeup of the squad was that there were some very strong friendships between player away from rugby. Bryan Scofield and 'Nutz' Keating grew up together in Goulburn, Cleal and Bultitude were mates at Uni doing PE and Glenn Critcher and Nick Theodore were very good friends who created havoc at smorgasbords.

This mix of individuals melded into a very tight unit that really played for each other and this was vital to their performances throughout the year but particularly in the end of season games.

### **The Season**

The season began with high hopes for all the clubs as they contested the annual Vikings preseason Knock out but little did they realise what was about to put a real dampener on the season. In April, June and July Wollongong received more than 950mls of rain compared to the average of 350mls. In other words, it bucketed down for weeks on end. The result of this deluge was utter confusion on the sporting fields, with women's hockey even cancelling the entire season as the grounds were too wet to play on.

Rugby was not spared with all clubs having to cancel games, with Shamrocks only playing once in the first five weeks of the comp, while Uni were forced to reschedule two games in this period. This back log of matches caused the administrators huge headaches as the season progressed.

However, it was not only game days that were affected as training venues were also out of action for long periods. Uni resorted to training at North Wollongong beach as they had spotlights on the sand and they even trained in car parks, anywhere that had some hard surfaces that were not under water.

It is difficult to find much information regarding the second grades progress throughout the season as scores were not to be found in the Mercury and because Firsts were in a mid table position not a lot was written about the club. What is known is that the second-grade side started the season with three solid wins and by round 13 were in fourth position with nine wins and four losses.

The two top teams were Kiama and Shoalhaven and they opened a bit of a gap between Campbelltown, University and Bowral. These three teams were very evenly matched and at the end of the eighteen rounds Uni and Campbelltown were equal on 26 points with Bowral one point further back.

### **Final Points Table**

	<i>Games</i>	<i>Wins</i>	<i>Losses</i>	<i>Draws</i>	<i>For</i>	<i>Against</i>	<i>Points</i>
<b>Kiama</b>	18	16	2		240	55	<b>32</b>
<b>Shoalhaven</b>	18	15	2	1	198	57	<b>31</b>
<b>Campbelltown</b>	18	13	5		164	96	<b>26</b>
<b>University</b>	18	13	5		223	104	<b>26</b>
<b>Bowral</b>	18	12	5	1	222	142	<b>25</b>
<b>Waratahs</b>	18	10	7	1	160	160	<b>21</b>
<b>Camden</b>	18	10	8		142	139	<b>20</b>
<b>Vikings</b>	18	8	9	1	115	170	<b>17</b>
<b>Weerona</b>	18	6	9		66	207	<b>12</b>
<b>Shamrocks</b>	18	6	10		84	270	<b>12</b>
<b>Goulburn</b>	18	6	10		92	153	<b>12</b>
<b>Tech</b>	18	4	12		93	244	<b>8</b>

## **The Semis**

The u/19 team also made the semis, which was a great achievement for the club and to have two teams make the final five meant that the season had been a success, even though Firsts finished mid table and Thirds a bit further back. Finishing in fourth spot meant that for Uni to win the comp they had to do the almost impossible by winning four pressure matches.

The final five semis meant that the teams finishing in fourth and fifth spots, Uni and Bowral, had to meet each other in the first in the preliminary minor semi final at Gibson Park, Thirroul. The winner would advance to the next week's games but for the loser the season was over.

The run on team was:

(1) <b>Erce Phillips</b>	(2) <b>Paul Keating</b>	(3) <b>Nick Theodore</b>
(4) <b>Noel Sinclair</b>		(5) <b>Glen Critcher</b>
(6) <b>Bill Egerton</b>	(8) <b>Phil Byrant</b>	(7) <b>Paul Oppenheim</b>
(9) <b>Murray Cleal</b>		(10) <b>John Carver</b>
(12) <b>Scott Bultitude</b>		(13) <b>Mick Collings</b>
(11) <b>Drew Muirhead</b>	(15) <b>Simon Iliffe</b>	(14) <b>Andrew Richards</b>
(16) <b>Mark Rowles</b>	(17) <b>Nick Mak</b>	(18) <b>James Heiler</b>
(19) <b>Marcus Zierman</b>	(20) <b>Wayne Cotton</b>	(21) <b>Tevita Coganista</b>

As shown by the points table there was not a lot of difference between the two sides and this was reflected in the match. In a low scoring encounter University scored a try and a penalty was kicked by Scott 'Bults' Bultitude but Bowral was leading 11 points to 7 with time in their favour. It was then that the never say die attitude that the team became synonymous with came to the fore and 'Bults' made a name for himself by getting across the line. The try was the result of a set piece move orchestrated by John Carver. Tries at this time were worth only four points and so with the scores all tied up 'Bults' lined up the conversion, but it was waved away. Not long after the final whistle sounded, and confusion reigned supreme as the rules were checked to see what was meant to happen. The competition rules were that there was to be no extra time and the team higher on the points table went through to the next week. The Uni boys were delighted as this meant that they were the lucky ones, but one can only imagine what emotions were going through the Bowral camp.

Campbelltown was the next opponent as they had lost to Shoalhaven, 9 nil, the previous week. Much to the relief of the supporters the boys were in fine form and never really allowed their opponent into the game and triumphed by 23-3.

The Final saw Uni take on Shoalhaven at Vikings. Uni were forced to make a couple of changes with Wayne Cotton coming into the pack, Mark Rowles taking over from Nick Theodore and Tevita Coganista replacing the injured Mick Collings. Shoals had been one of the leading teams in the comp and were the favored team coming into the game. The game was a typical arm wrestle style of game with Shoalhaven getting to the front and attempting to keep their advantage. 'Bults' accurate boot kept the Mallee Bulls in the frame as he converted three penalty goals to see Shoalhaven in front by 10 points to nine. Time was again an issue and the spectators were becoming worried when 'Bults' weaved some more magic as he crossed for the winning try, which he converted for good measure, for the final score of 15-10. The boys were off to the Grand Final to take on Minor Premier, Kiama.

The team was:

- |                      |                   |                       |
|----------------------|-------------------|-----------------------|
| (1) Erce Phillips    | (2) Paul Keating  | (3) Mark Rowles       |
| (4) Wayne Cotton     |                   | (5) Glen Critcher     |
| (6) Bill Egerton     | (8) Phil Byrant   | (7) Paul Oppenheim    |
| (9) Murray Cleal     |                   | (10) John Carver      |
| (12) Scott Bultitude |                   | (13) Tevita Coganista |
| (11) Drew Muirhead   | (15) Simon Iliffe | (14) Andrew Richards  |
| (16) Noel Sinclair   | (17) Nick Mak     | (18) James Heiler     |
| (19) Marcus Zierman  | (20) Mal Chambers | (21) Ken Wright       |

The Mercury report of the game follows:

“University saved their greatest escape trick for last on Saturday, when they defeated Minor Premier Kiama 10-9 to claim the Illawarra rugby union second grade premiership at Wollongong Showground. Known as the Harry Houdini’s of the competition because of a couple of last-minute victories during their run to the grand final, Uni’s fightback on Saturday was the best of all. Trailing 9-6 with less than ten minutes remaining replacement centre James Heiler made a break and beat several Kiama defenders in a dash down the left flank to score the winning try.

Scott Bultitude kicked two penalties for Uni, while Mick Mulligan scored all of his team’s points with three penalties.”

At last the university club could lay their hands on a Premiership trophy for the first time and there was a great deal of celebrating to be done by all as it had been a long time coming.

### Second Grade Premiers



*l to r:* Robin Hugill, Murray Cleal, Tevita Coganista, Paul Keating, Andrew Muirhead, Bill Egerton, Bryan Schofield, Erce Phillips, Glenn Critcher, Paul Oppenheim, Paul Bryant, Wayne Cotton, Mal Chambers



## **The Characters**

James Heiler was perhaps one of the most brilliant individual players in the club, but consistency and application were sometimes missing. He had played rep rugby as a junior at a high level and also had the distinction of being the equal highest try scorer in the District which emphasizes his great ability. Later James decided to spread his wings and ended up playing for Shamrocks. The less said about this the better.

## **Mark Rowles**

Mark Rowles is not your typical front row forward as he enjoys reading about history, listening to opera, eating fine food and a good drop of red wine. A deep thinker Rowlesy found the challenge of being a prop one to be relished and went to a great deal of trouble to develop his skills at any opportunity.

In order to learn more about forward play Mark moved to Weerona club who played a very forward orientated game. Rowlesy was an excellent student and when he returned to Uni in 1988, he was a much-improved player and he was ready for the top grade.

In 1991 Mark was part of the team that had the potential to win the comp but the team in the way just happened to be Weerona. In a tight Final many still remember as the one that got away Uni lost to the Wombats in a classic encounter.

Rowlesy also took on the coaching job in thirds during this time but his best memory was being a part of the first Uni team to win a competition when Seconds won a close Grand Final in 1989.

Unfortunately, Mark was struck down by the dreaded Parkinson's Disease and spent many years battling this horrible disease. In the end it all became too much and in 2016 Mark's many rugby mates from Uni and Weerona farewelled one of the true gentlemen on the rugby scene.

## **Phil 'Bugsy' Byrant**

Bugsy was an honest lower grade player who loved watching first grade with a beer in hand whilst wearing his drinking glove. Some of the funniest comments made during games could be attributed to this loveable rogue. Bugsy also coached a second-grade side into the semis.

## **Nick Theodore**



Nick Theodore became a rugby player quite by chance as he was recruited into the playing ranks in 1985 when we were doing it really tough. Even though he was new to the game Nick took on the position of prop like he was made for it, which was precisely the case. Nick learned a lot in that first season as he often had to play two games each week.

Nick loved the physical aspects of the game and was also keen on the social part of rugby. He formed a close friendship with his prop partner in Glenn Critcher and the smorgasbord was no place to be behind these two

gentlemen who became known as the 'Bookends'.

While many found the challenge of playing rugby for Uni in those days too demanding, especially in the front row, Nick kept playing until 1992. He did get the chance to play first grade on some occasions, but it was mainly in the lower grades that Nick plied his trade and his efforts were appreciated by those around him.

Nick had two stints on the committee, the first being 1986/87 and again in 2009. This last time saw Nick looking after the cheque book as Treasurer where he was responsible for getting the committee to change its structure to a board setup which spread the workload more equitably.

It came as a huge shock when Nick passed away suddenly in 2011 and his loss was devastating to his many mates. The fact that he had contributed much to the fabric of Uni Rugby meant that his memory would live on in the history of the club.

### **Wayne 'Kiwi' Cotton.**

Wayne made a name for himself at Uni on and off the field after coming from NZ in 1989 as a fresh faced 17-year-old. On the field Wayne represented at Country Under 19 level and played first grade for a couple of seasons before he got the wanders and moved all around the place. Off the field the young 'Kiwi' created havoc and his exploits reached legendary status until he finally settled down and even earned himself a Doctorate. Wonders will never cease.

### **Bill Egerton.**

Bill was part of the Egerton clan who played several seasons for the Mallee Bulls. Along with brother Tom, Bill, who was an excellent loose forward, played several seasons for the club. It was through this family connection that Wallaby World Cup winner, Bob, made a guest appearance for the club in third grade, although under another name.

### **Life Members**

The other factor to the playing side of things were that so many of the players were really great club men who had served Uni through some tough times and so it was great to see their loyalty rewarded with a premiership. As a matter of fact, there five of these loyal servants to the club in Paul Keating, Murray Cleal, Glenn Critcher, Simon Iliffe and Ken Wright were made life members in following years.

### **Murray Cleal**

When Murray arrived in the 'Gong' in 1982 to do PE he spent a good deal of his free time at the North Gong Pub. Realising that there was more to life Murray came to watch the Uni boys run round on Saturday afternoons and in 1984, after badgering from Paul Kipp, Muzza pulled on a jumper. He did so well in fact that he won the Third-Grade best and Fairest award and was hooked on rugby once again.

Muzza's first grade career began in 1985 and continued till he gave the game away in 1997, a period of twelve glorious years in the top grade for the Mallee Bulls.

The playing highlight for Murray came in 1989 when he captained our second-grade side to our first premiership. Admittedly a lot of first graders were in the team but no one could take away the feeling enjoyed by all involved in this great win.

On the rep scene Muzza also made a name for himself by being a member of the Illawarra squads in 1991 and '94 that both won the Caldwell Cup and so were crowned Country Champions.

Murray was rewarded for his efforts on and off the field as a player, committee member and club captain when he was made a life member in 1992.

When he retired Muzza started a family that saw him develop into a great netball coach as he and wife Jenna had four daughters who were all fine athletes and they became his number one priority. We did manage to coax Muzza to get involved as a coach in 2005-06 for our Colts and his input was greatly appreciated by the coaches and players,

### **Glenn Critcher**



Glenn Critcher became involved with Uni Rugby when he came down to watch a work mate have a game and was convinced to have a run himself. This was in 1986 and he has stayed involved for many years.

Critch was never a fitness fanatic but his huge heart meant that he always finished games when others were looking for somewhere to lie down and he never took a backward step. It was a good thing that Glenn took on the role of Canteen Manager for many years as his ability to consume food and drink are legendary and it was no place for the faint hearted when Critch and his mate Nick 'The Fridge' Theodore lined up at the food on Presentation night.

Critch continued to play games for a long period and was often called on to help when props were scarce and always did a great job. In the end he is credited with playing over 300 games for the Mallee Bulls and every one of them was a pleasure to watch.

Critch's efforts were rewarded by Life membership in 1992 and what can't be denied is the fact that the 'big fella' was there during all the tough times as well as the good and I'm sure that his blood has white and blue mixed in with the red.

### **Simon Iliffe**

It was at Caringbah High School where Simon gained selection in CHS teams which lead him to make the Australian Schoolboy Tour to the British Isles in 1981.

Simon played in the three Test matches against Ireland, Welsh Youth and Scotland and the team was undefeated. Simon had to overcome a leg injury that required 25 stitches incurred in the second game on tour to take his place in the test team but was pretty determined not to miss out on this once in a lifetime opportunity.

Returning to Sydney Simon played 2<sup>nd</sup> grade at Port Hacking in '80 & and firsts in '81 before going on exchange to Germany for a year where he worked on a farm and played rugby for the Irish Rangers, a locally based military team.

Simon again played for two years at Port Hacking with some great players in John Lambie and Gary Pearce and against some of the toughest players of the time amongst whom he rates John Maxwell (Randwick) as the most ruthless. However, the team was struggling and was relegated to second division so in 1986 Simon decided to play for Uni as he was a post graduate student at that time.

Simon played for the club from 1986 until 1995 mainly in first grade but he also did give very valuable assistance to younger players in the lower grades including the second-grade premierships winning side in 1989.

Simon also represented Illawarra in Country Week for several years but failed to crack Country mainly due to some very ill-timed injuries, although he did make the Southern Province side on one occasion.

When injuries made it too tough to continue playing Simon took on the coaching job, starting with the third graders in 1996 who he steered into the semis. He then moved up to the second-grade job and took the team to the semis once again but couldn't repeat the feat the following year which was followed by Simon taking a year off from coaching.

Things were desperate for the club in 2000 and Simon stepped up with mate Paul Kipp to take on the thankless task of coaching a very inexperienced first grade squad. It was tough for everyone and wins were few and far between, but Simon's goal was to turn the players into better skilled individuals who were able to make decisions under pressure.

Simon stood down in 2004 when, with the birth of his son, family came first and he decided to spend more time at home, pursuing other interests. Simon had laid a platform for others to follow and his time and effort had a lot to do with us becoming a force in the competition.

### **Ken Wright**

Ken's attended WIE in 1976 to study PE. Ken was a champion Soccer player who represented NSW at U16 level and continued to travel back to Nowra on weekends to play Soccer for the first 2 years of his WIE degree and during this time represented NSW Colleges.

Ken became sick of travelling and so took up rugby. His first training session (1978) was auspicious – he broke his toe when Big Roy Dunworth fell on his foot and missed the first 8 weeks of the season.

Ken made his debut on the wing at Wiseman Park vs Weerona in 2nds and scored the winning try. He took out the 2nds Best & Fairest that year. In 1979 he graduated to the 1sts on the wing again and played the next 3 years in 1sts. His highlight (or is it lowlight) – losing the 1981 Grand Final.

In 1982 he wanted a position change and became 2nds half back. In 1983 he played in 3rds in the centre (Dapto played as Uni 2nds that season). They lost the GF that year. Back to 2nds halfback the following year where Ken remained until he retired in 1994 – after 16 years playing for his beloved Mallee Bulls and some 400 + games later. He did win a comp in 1989 with the Mallee Bulls 2nds captained by a youthful Murray Cleal, although he was on the bench for the Grand Final.

Ken scored many tries (no club records of how many) and was the fine goal kicker. He's been awarded Club Man in the past and remembers one year when he won clubman, 2nds Best & Fairest, Players Player, Presidents Award and top points scorer. But Kenny Wright is not about awards and you certainly would never meet a better Clubman.

Ken was also instrumental in setting up the junior arm of the club and his whole family were wonderful supporters of the youngsters. Ken worked tirelessly on the organisational side of things and kept the club functioning when many others would've given up.

Ken was awarded Life Membership many years ago and in fact could have been given this honour many times over.