

1997 University u/19 Premiers

The Comp

The Illawarra Competition in 1997 was a ten-club competition with all of the clubs fielding four grades. There had been some coming and goings on the club front but the established clubs in Vikings, Kiama, Shamrocks and Shoalhaven were still very viable, while over the previous seasons some new clubs in Camden, Bowral and Campbelltown had entered the comp. There were changes to some long-standing clubs where, due to a lack of numbers, Waratahs and Tech College had amalgamated to form Tech-Waratahs, University and Teachers College became one when the Educational institutions were merged and Weerona had changed their name to Wollongong.

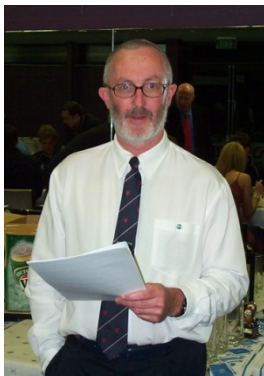
The Under 19 comp was, at this time, a very high quality one with all clubs entering teams and several promising players taking the field every week, which saw the grade recognised by the district as being just behind Firsts in importance. It is also interesting to note that teams were allowed four overage players provided they met weight requirements, which allowed the clubs some leeway to get enough players onto the field.

The other innovation in '97 was the introduction of a bonus point system for awarding points for games. This system was put in place to encourage teams to play attacking rugby with four points being given for a win, two for a draw and none for a loss. The bonus points were earned by scoring four or more tries or being within seven point if you had been defeated.

Coaches

The team was fortunate to have two very experienced coaches to guide them through the season. The two worked well together as they had a similar outlook on how the game should be played and were good mates off the field as well.

Glenn 'Sproggy' McGuinness (as told by John Pemberton)



Glenn is a local Bellambi lad who enrolled at the Old Wollongong Teachers in 1973 and graduated in 1976.

When he entered College, he tried out for the Rugby Club. His first year he described as hopeless – he just couldn't grasp Rugby. Then he came under the influence of John Patterson's coaching and it all came together.

Sproggy played mainly half back – in the 1sts Final in 1975, in the 3rds Grand Final in 1976 and 2nds GF in 1977 – winning the latter two. Teachers also won the Club Championship over this 3-year period – clearly the IDRUs strongest club at that time. His playing career finished in 1978 when injury forced him to retire, actually a birth mark on the brain meant it was too dangerous to play on.

Most people say that's it and give the game away when they can't play. Not our Sproggy. He became assistant coach in first grade 1979 and has coached (or at least helped out in all grades) ever since until 2005 in all grades from 1sts to U19's including two stints as first grade coach, first in 1982 – 84 and then again in 1989.

'Sproggy' also coached three teams in the under 19's into grand Finals where his only success came in 1997 and has also overseen lower grade who made it into the semis on a couple of occasions.

In other rugby circles 'Sproggy' coached Illawarra and Southern Province U19 teams a few years back as well as the NSW Primary Schools rep team for 6 years where some of his protégées included Wallabies Phil Waugh, Peter Betham, and Rob Horne plus NRL stars in Braith Anasta, Reni Matea, Junior Langi, and Jamal Idris.

Brian 'Sprout' McKay

Brian "Sprout" McKay came to Wollongong in 1970 to study Primary school teaching and eventually changed courses to do Physical Education.

A Fairfield Boys High School boy Brian was a no nonsense centre who intimidated many opponents by his hard running and bruising defense.

He played rugby in 1970 and 71 but was vying for a first-grade spot with some outstanding individuals in Markham and Sutherland and played a lot of second grade in this time. Frustrated with a lack of games Sprout played league in Sydney in 1972 but was reinstated in rugby in '73 where he was to make a name for himself not only at club level but also on the rep scene.

Brian was a member of the Illawarra Country Week squad from '74-77, and his ability was recognised by the Country selectors when he was named in the Country seconds team in 1975. Country beat Sydney soundly in both firsts and seconds in the annual fixture, which in those days was a rare feat. He was sitting on the bench to watch the famous 'up the jumper try' being pulled against Sydney. He was later selected to play in the starting lineup and actually played against England in Goulburn that year. It was a strong side containing 11 Wallabies, and he partnered Geoff Shaw in the centres and they won a very physical game, 14-13. Brian was also selected for Country that year to play Tonga in Wagga and Japan in Moree. He was also chosen to trial in Possibles / Probables for the Wallaby tour to England that year but was unsuccessful.

Brian was also selected in Country teams in 1976, including a stint as captain of the Country under 23's, where they must have lost his birth certificate. Games against Combined Services and Australian Universities were the highlights that year.

Sprout went to Perth in '78 to study and whilst in the West represented Western Australia against Wales, who were the top nation in rugby at this time with numerous legends such as JPR Williams; JJ Williams and Gareth Edwards in the team. He was awarded a University Blue for Rugby from University of West Australia.

Brian returned to teaching in Griffith in 1979 and after a few games of league got the rugby itch and played two years for Griffith and Riverina at Country Week. He managed to pick up a premiership with the Griffith Blacks before retiring and returning to live in the Illawarra and raising his family. His eldest son, Chris, played for the Uni in the Under 19's in the early parts of the new century.

Manager

Stephen 'Nutsa' Nuttall



'Nutsa' is a bit of a rugby tragic as he has become engrossed with all the traditional aspects of the game, in particular, after match functions.

'Nutsa' was a solid lower grade player with the Teachers College club in the late seventies and really enjoyed the social side of things, especially when he won free beer as the Best and Fairest player.

After graduating 'Nutsa' toured with the Wallabies (as in going to watch as many Tests as possible) and even applied for the Wallaby coaching position but unfortunately lost out to Allan Jones.

Back in the Gong Steve became an interested spectator and took on the managerial role for the Under 19 sides from 1996-98 including the successful team in '97.

'Nutsa' still regularly comes to matches where he sits behind the goal with mates Keeble and others and his son Thomas was even the ball boy in 2006 that won the first grade comp.

The Players

Under 19 Premiers 1997



(Back Row): Dave Jefferies, Mark Placek, Andre Botha, Chris Allen, Nick Carney, James Eke, Andrew Hales, Nick Knowles, Dave Llewelyn, Rob Leslie, Dane Cope, Ben Humphries, Michael Hargraves, Anthony Cook, Satoshi Hozumi, Warren Marshall, Artisoyshi Shikami, Glenn McGuinness (coach), Stephen Nuttall (manager), Brian McKay (coach)
(Front row): Rod Stoddart (capt), Dean Rossitt, Craig Jones, Chris Gregory, Dan Heckendorf, Jason Horne, Ed Taylor, Gareth Hirst, Josh Faulks, Andrew Bilenkij, Andrew Beattie (v-capt)

The playing squad had the luxury of having twenty-eight guys eligible to play but the real plus was that the whole squad were keen trainers who made the effort of making themselves available every week and as a result the holiday period was not such a disadvantage. There was also an interesting mix in the group with players coming from a wide variety of backgrounds, but the key ingredient to the team's success was the close bonds that developed between the players.

Another of the factors in the side's success was the fact that there was an abundance of leaders in the team. South African import Andre Botha, Andrew Beattie, Mark Placek, Dave Llewellyn, Rod Stoddart and others were outstanding in setting a high standard of dedication at training, preparing for games and performing on the field. Also, there were no weak links in the team as all the players were quite adept at playing the game with many able to fill a number of positions.

The Season

The season began with a tough game against Vikings. There was a degree of uncertainty about the team's makeup because the game was in the Easter holidays but the fact that nearly all the players were on deck displayed that the guys meant business. The team scored three tries in the 17-6 victory and the pleasing thing was that it was a real team effort.

Next up the team scored a first for the club when they overcome the very strong Campbelltown team at their home ground, which was a significant achievement.

In the following games Uni had impressive victories over Bowral (44-3), Shamrocks (95-0), Kiama (43-3), Shoalhaven (19-7), Camden (11-5) and Tech-Tahs to turn at the halfway mark undefeated.

It was a bit tougher in the second round of the comp as the team combated the dreaded holiday period, lost players to injury and in Mark Placek's case, to first grade, but the team maintained its high standards and recorded some solid wins. There were some bumps along the way as they suffered defeats against Vikings and Campbelltown, who along with Uni were the teams that were to fight for the Minor Premiership.

The result saw Campbelltown edge out Uni by three points with Vikings only two points further back. These three teams were very evenly matched, and the finals were going to be a real battle.

Points Table

	Games	Wins	Loss	Draw	For	Against	Points	Bonus	Total
Campbelltown	18	16	2	0	390	103	64	11	75
University	18	16	2	0	445	136	64	8	72
Vikings	18	15	2	1	361	95	62	8	70
Shoalhaven	18	10	8	0	306	219	40	10	50
Camden	18	9	8	1	243	182	38	10	48
Tech-Waratahs	18	9	9	0	244	262	36	5	41
Shamrocks	18	7	11	0	148	374	28	6	34
Kiama	18	4	14	0	82	481	16	1	17
Bowral	18	3	15	0	60	400	12	1	13

The Finals

There was a top five final series in operation in '97 which meant that the Uni side had to take on Vikings for the right to play Campbelltown the following week. The game was to be played at Vikings Oval, but the guys were confident of a good showing even though Andre Botha was carrying a shoulder injury and Mark Placek was on first grade duty.

The squad that played was:

(1) Rod Stoddart	(2) Ed Taylor	(3) Dave Jefferies
(4) Dave Llewellyn		(5) Nick Knowles
(6) Dean Rossitt	(8) Andre Botha	(7) Josh Faulks
(9) Dan Heckendorf		(10) Andrew Beattie
(12) Chris Allen		(13) Gareth Hirst
(11) Jason Horne	(15) Chris Gregory	(14) Craig Jones
(16) Andrew Hales	(17) Andrew Bilenkij	(18) Warren Marshall
(19) Nick Carney		(20) Artisoynshi Shikami

In a game that reflected the quality of the two teams Uni were always in control and scored three tries through slick backline play. The try scorers were Chris Allen, Andrew Beattie and Craig Jones, who also kicked a penalty goal. The team's defense was also difficult to breach and only allowed one converted try to be scored. Vikings kicked a penalty and a drop goal but were never really in the game even though Uni only won by 18 to 13.

The next assignment was Campbelltown at Ziems Park, Corrimal. Uni were fortunate to have the same squad take the field with the only change being Mark Placek coming into the full back spot as first grade had been eliminated from the semis the previous week.

Again, the outside backs were to shine in this game as they raced over for three tries, one each to Chris Gregory, Craig Jones and Jason Horn. Mark Placek also had his kicking boots on, and he landed two conversions and two penalties to complete the scoring. The fact that our pack dominated the opposition allowed us to take control of the game and even though the 'Quins' scored 13 points they were well beaten on the day.

The only real concern from the game was a few injuries, including a head wound to Gareth Hirst, but the additional players who took the field, Rob Leslie, James Eke and Anthony Cook, were more than capable replacements.

This win meant that the Uni team were in the Grand Final where they were to take on Vikings who defeated Campbelltown in the Final.

The Grand Final

The Grand Final was set down for Dapto Showground and the Uni team was fortunate that they were able to get what was close to their best team on the paddock. The weather on the day was quite poor with rain and a stiff breeze to contend and while Vikings were better suited to these conditions the Uni team was confident that they could achieve the task of winning the club's first u/19 title.

There was a lot of feeling going into the match and it must be said that the players didn't get on well with the opposition after some incidents during the season. Training had been good leading into the game, and all was set for real test of character for the entire squad.

The players that represented the club were:

(1) Rod Stoddart	(2) Ed Taylor	(3) Dave Jefferies
(4) Dave Llewellyn		(5) Nick Knowles
(6) Dean Rossitt	(8) Andre Botha	(7) Josh Faulks
(9) Dan Heckendorf		(10) Andrew Beattie
(12) Chris Allen		(13) Gareth Hirst
(11) Jason Horne	(15) Chris Gregory	(14) Craig Jones
(16) Nick Carney	(17) Andrew Bilenkij	(18) Warren Marshall
		(19) Artisoysshi Shikami

Even from the kick-off things started disastrously for the Mallee Bulls and mistakes saw Vikings cross for a try in the first minutes of the game. To their credit the Uni boys clawed their way back into the match and after a series of rolling mauls halfback Dan Heckendorf forced his way over in the corner.

The game continued to be a tit for tat affair as both teams traded penalty goals. The first one was kicked by Mark Placek who, not long after, suffered a broken collar bone and was replaced by Chris Gregory. Craig Jones then stepped up to take over the goal kicking duties and the teams were locked up after he kicked a penalty goal.

At eleven points all extra time looked a distinct possibility when a misdirected clearing kick from Vikings found Chris Gregory on his own, forty metres out from goal. He coolly collected the ball and then snapped one of the great drop goals sending the ball flying between the posts.

Funnily enough the last thing at training on the Thursday night involved Chris doing the exact same thing and so it was no surprise to the team that he was able to replicate the kick under so much pressure.

The kick seemed to deflate the Vikings players and with time running out Craig Jones scooted over in the corner to seal the match 19-11 and also the Title for the University club. The champagne corks were popping, and the celebrations lasted well into the night and even continued well into the next week.

Conclusion

A real plus for the club was the fact that so many of these players actually ended up playing in the first-grade side over the coming seasons with 12 of them achieving this feat. Mark Placek and Gareth Hirst played in the 2006 First Grade Premiership winning team.