



Theme 5

The Birth of Rugby League

Pupil Resource Sheet 3b

What Happened Next

After the Rugby Football Union had won the vote to ban broken time payments to players, they made their rules even stricter.

They decided that:

- only clubs made up totally of amateurs could be members
- no money, medal or reward of any kind could go to a player unless they had said it could
- if any accusation was made about rewards, the club and player would be found guilty unless they could prove they were innocent.

This last rule went against the 'burden of proof' on which the law of the land is based – of being innocent until proved guilty. It was a recipe for trouble. By the end of 1894 Huddersfield, Leigh, Salford and Wigan had all been suspended for breaking the laws on professionalism.

In December 1894 clubs from Yorkshire and Lancashire met at Huddersfield and agreed that the Rugby Football Union's rules on professional players were not fair and 'cannot be accepted by us'.

In January 1895 these clubs asked for a Northern Rugby League of Lancashire and Yorkshire clubs to be set up. In May 1895 the Rugby Football Union turned down this idea.

The unrest came to a head on 29 August 1895. All 12 clubs from the Yorkshire Senior Competition and eight leading clubs from Lancashire met at the George Hotel, Huddersfield. They decided that 'the Clubs ... form a Northern Rugby Football Union and ... push forward without delay ... on ... the payment for ... 'broken time' only'. One of these clubs was Huddersfield.

This moment, the break of Northern Union from the Rugby Football Union, is regarded as the birth of rugby league. In 1922 the name 'Northern Union' was replaced by the name 'Rugby League', copied from Australia.

The Northern Union fixed broken time pay at 6 shillings (30p) per day for all players, close to the average wage at the time. A Northern Union league of 22 clubs was set up and Huddersfield was one of the clubs that played in the first matches on 7 September 1895.

At first, professionalism was illegal in the Northern Union. No money or other rewards were to be given except broken time pay and expenses.

The Rugby Football Union quickly cut the Northern Union adrift, passing a rule that no matches would be allowed between 'clubs belonging to our union' and 'any club ... of the Northern Union'.

Those who predicted that broken time payments would lead to players being paid for playing were right. In 1898 the Northern Union allowed professionalism for players, providing that they had other employment and had worked the last three working days before they played.

The Northern Union grew quickly. In Yorkshire, Rugby Union's membership went down from 150 clubs in 1895 to 14 by 1907. Nationally, Rugby Union membership went down from 481 clubs in 1895 to 244 by 1903, nearly all of the lost clubs joining the Northern Union.

Another prediction, that big clubs would do well and small ones would struggle, also proved right. Liversedge, the smallest of the Yorkshire Senior Competition clubs who founded the Northern Union in 1895, could no longer compete with the best after payments to players were allowed in 1898.

Gradually rules were altered to make the game faster and more exciting.

Many clubs changed to the Northern Union, not to play a more exciting game or to pay broken time, but because they had hardly any local rugby union clubs left to play.

The very small Northern Union clubs had to work hard just to raise the money for broken time payments. Some went bankrupt and most agreed not to pay their players anything. Today there are fewer than 50 professional and semi-professional rugby league clubs and hundreds of amateur rugby league clubs.

The Rugby Football Union eventually allowed players to be paid – in 1995, one hundred years after the game split in two and saw the birth of rugby league.