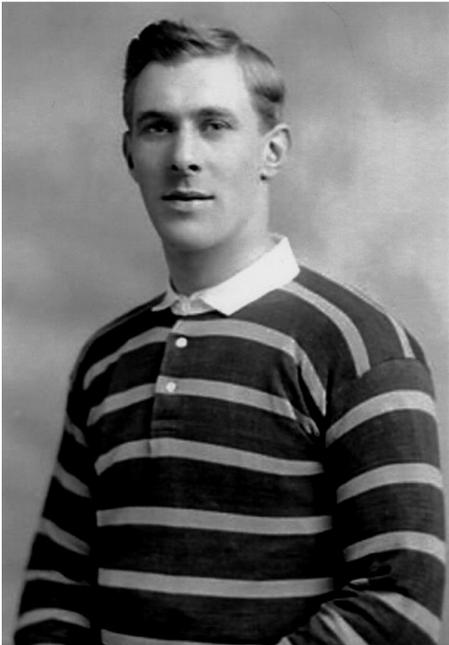


THEME 6

HALL OF FAME

Pupil Resource Sheet 6

Harold Wagstaff



Harold Wagstaff remains one of rugby league's greatest players. The rise of Huddersfield to become one of the best and most successful club teams can be traced to the signing of Harold at the age of just 15 in 1906.

Born in Underbank, close to Holmfirth on 19th May 1891, Harold was rugby-mad.

As a young boy he played for hours with his mates, using a yeast bag stuffed with rags for a ball. They met close to the village water pump at Holmfirth and formed a youth team, Pump Hole Rangers. Harold was aged 13 at the time. They played northern union matches against other lads'

teams from around the district, often in farmer's field without goals or pitch markings. Some of their matches ended when they were chased off by the farmer!

Shortly before his fifteenth birthday, towards the end of the 1905-06 season, Harold achieved his childhood ambition of playing for local amateur team, Underbank Rangers. Underbank often attracted crowds of over 1000 to their matches against teams such as Rastrick, Marsden, Slaithwaite and Brighouse St James. Harold crowned the thrill of playing before such a crowd with two tries on his debut.

The 1906-07 season brought a change that would have a profound effect on Harold's career. The Northern Union, trying to make the game more open by creating more space for passing moves in the backs, changed from 15 to 13 players per side. Having spent almost every waking hour playing small-sided games with his mates, no-one was more gifted and few were more experienced than Harold at exploiting space. It was Harold who scored Underbank's first try under the new rules.

By November 1906, just over six months after his Underbank debut, Harold was approached by Halifax, but he signed for Huddersfield, receiving 5 gold sovereigns as his signing-on fee.

Harold made his Huddersfield debut on 10th November 1906, aged 15 years and 175 days, still the second youngest-ever professional rugby league player. Typically, he scored a try on debut as Huddersfield won 28-10 at Bramley.

Weighing 11 stones, Harold was occasionally out-muscled, but by the age of 17 he had progressed to the Yorkshire team. Less than three months later, in January 1909, he was playing for England against the Australian tourists at Fartown.

Aged 17 years 228 days, Harold helped England to a 14-9 victory. He remains the youngest-ever rugby league international.

The first setback of Harold's career came in 1909. A knee graze from the opening match against Bramley turned septic, causing blood poisoning. Diphtheria followed, probably from the wound, and he was confined to Seacroft Isolation Hospital in Leeds. Harold returned to training in January but missed much of the rest of the season through injury. In his absence, Huddersfield won their first-ever northern union trophy, the Yorkshire Cup, in November 1909.

The supporters were relieved to see 'Ahr Waggy' fully recovered and back to his best in 1909-10. By the end of the season, still only 18 years of age, he was captain.

Brimming with creative instinct, Harold insisted that his team did not kick away possession to gain ground, but passed the ball, seeking space and openings. As rugby league historian Tony Collins notes, Huddersfield's fast, open, attacking play 'moved the game far beyond the static set-pieces of its origins'. It is doubtful whether any other player has so influenced a change in the way that rugby league is played.



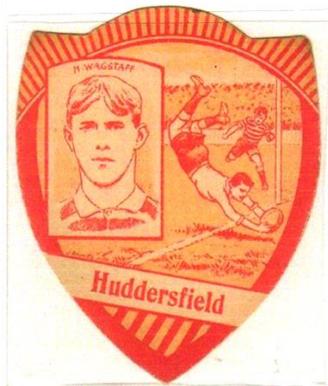
Harold leads out his Huddersfield team

Over the next five years, Huddersfield became the highest scoring and most successful team the game had seen to that time. They had formidable attacking talent down both wings – Harold and winger Stanley Moorhouse on the left and the Australian pair Tommy Gleeson and Albert Rosenfeld on the right.

Harold's brilliant runs and superbly timed passes gave Moorhouse many try-scoring opportunities and during the 1911-12 season, these two players scored 212 points between them.

Harold's first trophy came that season when, on 25th November 1911, Huddersfield beat Hull Kingston Rovers 22-10 in the Yorkshire Cup Final. Seven days later the rugby world took notice when Huddersfield beat the Australian tourists 21-7 at Fartown.

By the end of the season Harold had lifted two more trophies, the Yorkshire League title, followed by the League Championship, Wigan beaten 13-5 in the final.



*Collectable Baines Card of
Huddersfield's captain Harold Wagstaff*

Huddersfield were again on course for three trophies in 1912-13. The Yorkshire League was followed by the League Championship when Wigan were trounced 29-2, leaving just the Challenge Cup Final. Opponents Warrington took an early lead, but Harold rescued his team, making three tries for Stanley Moorhouse as Huddersfield came from behind to win 9-5.

In 1913-14 this great Huddersfield side had to settle for just two trophies – the Yorkshire Cup and the Yorkshire League. League leaders, they were expected to make it three championships in a row, but were surprisingly beaten 5-3 in the final by Salford.

By 1914 Harold was also captain of Great Britain and he led the Lions' tour of Australia that summer.

With the Test series at one game all, the third and deciding match would be the best of Harold's career. It is known as the Rorke's Drift Test, after the famous Boer War battle of 1879 in which 150 British and Commonwealth troops defended their garrison against over 3000 Zulu Warriors.

Harold's Great Britain team was also hopelessly outnumbered. With no substitutes allowed and suffering several injuries in a brutal match, they were reduced from 13 players to ten for long

periods, and to nine in the closing stages. Such odds are almost impossible to overcome in any form of rugby. Yet Harold inspired his team to victory, 14 points to 6.

JC Dean of rugby magazine *The Referee* wrote:

'Wagstaff, always a great player, that day became ... the king of the game ... Here, there and everywhere, all the time he was doing the work of half a dozen men. Wagstaff the Great.'

His Australian opponents agreed. Sid Deane wrote:

'Harold Wagstaff was not only brilliant in attack and wonderful in defence but his leadership was a most important factor in his team's success.'

Dinny Campbell added:

'He was the best tactician I ever played against. His personality was dynamic.'

Something else earned Harold universal respect. He was the first working class man, in sport or any other walk of life, to lead an official party from Britain to a foreign land.

A successful tour ended with victory in New Zealand – but the cloud of war hung over the voyage home.



*Harold in Huddersfield shirt (left)
and Great Britain shirt (right)*

Britain declared war on Germany in August 1914, but the rugby and football seasons went ahead as the war was expected 'to be

over by Christmas'. No-one had any idea how long and dreadful it would be. As casualties began to return from the front, Huddersfield's northern union team helped to keep spirits up in the town, sweeping all before them.

The Yorkshire Cup was retained with a 31-0 defeat of Hull in the final. The Yorkshire League followed. Leeds were the opposition in the Championship Final and claimed to have a plan – man-to-man marking of all the Huddersfield backs, giving them no room. This, however, left much more room for the Huddersfield forwards, who also had pace and handling skills. Within 20 minutes three of them – Gronow, Clark and Longstaff – had all scored tries. As Leeds' plan fell apart, Harold and two other backs also scored as Huddersfield won 35-2.

The Challenge Cup Final against St Helens was equally one-sided. Harold scored two of Huddersfield's eight tries in a 37-3 win, as his team became only the second, after Hunslet in 1908, to win all four trophies in one season. Only Swinton, in 1928, have done so since.



Harold, coach Albert Bennett, and the four cups
To crown Harold's year, he married Holmfirth girl, Anne Battye, in January 1915.

Wartime changed everything. Many rugby league players, including Harold were

conscripted into the army in 1916. Yet rugby even affected his war service. Along with team mates Ben Gronow, Albert Rosenfeld and Douglas Clark, and several other northern union stars, Harold was assigned to the Army Motor Transport Depot at Grove Park in South London. The depot's commanding officer, Major Stanley was a member of the Rugby Football Union committee. The Grove Park rugby team was magnificent. Harold commented that they just played 'rugby league football under rugby union rules'.

During 1917 and 1918 Harold's unit served in Egypt and Palestine – no picnic, but preferable to the horrors of trench warfare in France and Belgium.

When post-war rugby started in 1919 the great but ageing Huddersfield team still had a little left. They won the first two post-war Yorkshire Cups, and the 1919-20 Yorkshire League and Challenge Cup. Another four trophies looked likely until Hull beat them 3-2 in the Championship Final.

In January 1920 Harold had enjoyed a successful benefit match. Despite poor conditions, almost 16,000 spectators paid receipts of £928, and Huddersfield beat Rochdale 22-8.

Harold missed the defeat against Hull as he and four Huddersfield team mates were sailing to Australia for that summer's tour. Again captaining the team, Harold played in four Test Matches as Great Britain lost to Australia but beat New Zealand. Harold's final Great Britain appearances came in 1921-22 when he captained the side that re-gained the Ashes from Australia.

After suffering stomach problems for many years, Harold had an operation to remove an ulcer in 1922. After that he played in a corset for protection. His last season was 1924-25, and marked the end of a great era at Huddersfield.

He had worked as a driver for much of his career, but on retiring from rugby league Harold became licensee of the Boar's Head in Halifax. Later he moved on to the Swan with Two Necks in Westgate, Huddersfield. He was also briefly coach at Halifax in 1925-26 and at Broughton Rangers in 1935.

Elected to the Huddersfield club's committee in 1937, Harold became vice-chairman in 1938, but his health was again ailing. Already weakened, an attack of influenza in 1939 caused heart problems. Admitted to a Huddersfield Nursing Home, he died two days later on 19th July 1939. He was just 48 years old.

Hundreds lined the Huddersfield streets to pay their respects as the funeral procession headed for Holmfirth. On the coffin lay two wreaths – a cross from his widow and son, and golden lilies and claret carnations in the form of a rugby ball, with the message: 'From the boys of the Fartown football team.'

Eight of Harold's old Huddersfield team mates carried the coffin into Holmfirth Parish Church, where the Reverend TH Cashmore told the congregation:

'Holmfirth was rightly proud of a man who, in his own sphere, had carried her name far beyond the hills and valleys. He had qualities of heart and mind and body that won him the confidence and admiration of thousands.'

Harold's world class contribution to rugby league was recognised in 1988 when he was one of the first nine players inducted to the Rugby League Hall of Fame.

Harold Wagstaff: Playing Record

| Team | Matches | Tries | Goals | Points |
|---------------|------------|------------|-----------|------------|
| Huddersfield | 436 | 176 | 12 | 549 |
| Lions (Tests) | 12 | 2 | 0 | 6 |
| Lions (Tour) | 18 | 21 | 4 | 71 |
| England | 9 | 7 | 3 | 27 |
| Yorkshire | 15 | 4 | 0 | 12 |
| Other | 4 | 0 | 0 | 0 |
| Totals | 494 | 209 | 19 | 665 |



Huddersfield NURFC 1914-15

*Back: A Lee; JW Higson; H Banks; E Jones; E Heyes; F Longstaff; **D Clark**; A Swinden
 Middle: A Bennett (trainer); R Habron; M Holland; **S Moorhouse**; **H Wagstaff (captain)**; T Gleeson; G
 Todd; **B Gronow**; H Bennett (assistant trainer)
 Front: Yorkshire League Cup; WH Ganley; Northern Rugby League Cup; **AA Rosenfeld**;
 Northern Union Challenge Cup; **JH Rogers**; Yorkshire Challenge Cup*