

Past Great Footballer and Fancier

By Paul Gibbs

Harry Wells, one of Australia's greatest rugby league players of all time, one who played during the 1950's, 60's and 70's in an era of what many rugby league followers would say was the games greatest period – "pure rugby league" as it should be played, not that which we have to watch today. (I'm not a fan as you can see of the modern game).

A little more of Harry's exploits on the football field later. Apart from pigeon fanciers many sports fans would not be aware of Harry's love of racing pigeons, one that Harry, due to continuous attacks on his birds from Peregrines and Goshawks made him decide to give the sport away several years ago. Although Harry is still an avid bird fancier maintaining many aviaries of parrots.

Harry's current residential location occupies a few acres of land which is located about 20 minutes north of Port Macquarie in NSW lending itself to attack from birds of prey, even today while the peregrine is not a problem, goshawks still tend to terrify his parrots as they continually swoop and land on the aviaries.

Harry told me that in the latter years before deciding to give racing his birds away he found it heart breaking, as he would breed around 130 birds each year only to end up with 60 or so before the season commenced and so decided enough was enough.

Long before Harry began to race his pigeons in the Port Macquarie region Harry raced with his father in the old Wollongong Club during the period 1944-45 at the age of 12. Then after a few years break commenced again between the years 1958-63 competing in the old Burwood and Lugarno Clubs. Due to football commitments over ensuing years saw Harry compete in regional clubs, one being Goulburn and finally in Port Macquarie. Harry informed me that his family of birds over much of this time were birds obtained from the well-known fanciers Roy Gabb, Bill Fletcher and Eric Rathbone.

Before retiring from racing Harry was rewarded for his tireless work for the pigeon fancy in the Port Macquarie district by being made a "Life Member" of the club. One of only many awards that have been bestowed on Harry, (albeit a minor one compared to those that are listed later on in this article).

Harry was also one of the foundation members of the Mid North-Coast Pigeon Federation and was at the time the President on the Port Macquarie Club. Harry has been a tireless worker for all of his sporting interests and is currently heavily involved with the NRL (National Rugby League) via the "Men of Rugby League" that visits and assists ex league players that may not be doing all that well these days along with visiting and promoting the game in schools and attending promotional

activities. Harry was recently nominated as the Patron of the Men of League for the north-coast region of NSW a position that Harry is very proud to fill.

When I first payed Harry a visit I was surprised to see many of his pigeon trophies on display that still held pride of place among many of his other sporting memorabilia. His “games room” containing a large snooker table surrounded by many of his rugby league mementoes that highlighted his great career, many photos of some of the greatest league players of years gone by. The display I liked most was his framed 1959-60 Kangaroo Test Jersey that was signed by all his test teammates.

To complete this story I will have to outline two of Harry’s greatest achievements, one his football achievements, the other the awards that Harry has received, especially over the last few years.

Harry was born in 1932 in Wollongong and came from a long line of boxing athletes, with both his father and grandfather fighting under the name of “Dealer” Wills, so competitive sports was in his blood from his early days.

Harry’s first taste of representative football came when he was a 14 yr old representing NSW School Boys against Qld. in Brisbane. He commenced playing top grade football in Wollongong in 1950, playing as a centre where his physical size, speed and toughness shone through. Harry was loured to the South Sydney “Rabbits” in 1951 where he won a premiership in his debut year playing on the wing against Many Warringah. He then returned to Wollongong where he played from 1952 to 1955 before once more returning to Sydney to play this time for the Western Suburbs “Magpies” between 1956-61.

Harry’s international representative career included 29 Test Matches in total, against New Zealand in 1953 and 1959, Great Britain in 1952, 1954, 1958, 1959 and 1960. Against France in 1953, 1955, 1959 and 1960 along with being selected in three World Cup campaigns – 1954, 1957, and 1960. This included two Kangaroo Tours where the players were away from home three months at a time. Along with his international career Harry represented NSW on 35 occasions.

When his first grade career in Sydney finished Harry continued to play in regional areas of both NSW and Qld. as Captain Coach playing for the Goulburn Workers (1966), Young RL (1967-68) where he coached Young to a Premiership against Canberra, Longreach in Qld (1969) and finally in Port Macquarie (1970-72) hanging up his boots at the age of 40 due to an ongoing knee injury.

In recent years Harry has been recognised for his life long contribution to sport having been awarded several awards at both National and Local level, these being itemised below.

In 2000 Harry was awarded the Australian Sports Medal for his contribution to Australia’s international standing in rugby league.

In 2001 he was awarded the Centenary Medal for services to sport.

In 2004 he was named at centre in the Western Suburbs Magpies Team of the Century.

In 2007 Harry was inducted into the Australian Rugby League Hall of Fame. Also that year he was selected by a panel of experts at centre in an Australian Team of the 50's.

In 2008 Harry was listed as one of the Greatest 100 Players (1908-2007) commissioned by the NRL and ARL to celebrate the code's centenary year in Australia.

In 2011 he was named at centre in the Illawarra Rugby League Team of the Century. Finally, in 2016 Harry was inducted as an Athlete Member in the Sport Australia Hall of Fame. ***Not bad for a "pigeon fancier" from Wollongong.***

There's no doubting Harry's justification in being honoured by the granting of these awards, he has been a great ambassador for his chosen sport and has certainly "put back" into not only sport, but to the community.

I have only had the pleasure of being in Harry's company on a few occasions and come away with the opinion that he is an unassuming and caring man and I along with many league supporters only wish him well as he continues with those things that he is passionate about.

The sport of pigeon racing has several people of notoriety, many of whom I am not aware of, but many that I do know of, like former Test Cricket Player Bill Lawry, Bob Giltinan Jnr. former Davis Cup tennis player and his father Bob Snr. Bob Jnr. Was a member of the winning 1973 and 1977 Davis Cup Squad. He was awarded the Australian Sports Medal for service as a previous player, coach and manager for elite players and has been a NSW state coach and national selector.

The late, great Lew Hoad famous champion tennis player of the 50's who won 5 Wimbledon titles also raced pigeons in Balmain prior to relocating to Spain where he set up a tennis camp but unfortunately passed away due to a heart attack aged only 59.

Prominent children of pigeon fanciers i.e. Jennifer Hawkins (former Miss Universe) who's father races pigeons in the Newcastle Federation and Kane Linnett, current first grade centre playing for the North Queensland Cowboys who's father races pigeons (guess where) the SCF in Wollongong and Gary Portelli, race horse trainer, successful trainer of many Group 1 race horses including "Rebel Dane" and the recent winner of the Golden Slipper – "She Will Reign" who races his pigeons in the Liverpool Club in Sydney.

It's sad that pigeon racing has such a low profile in the community, when many people of prominence have an affiliation with pigeons in one way or another. But, we can only do what we can with what we have, and hopefully we can all do our best to promote this wonderful sport.

I would like to close with the following quote (can't remember from who) but it is inline with this article:

“Winners do what they have to do, losers do what they want to do”.