

15 June 2009

Main Committee

GRIEVANCE DEBATE

National Rugby League

Mr BRADBURY (Lindsay) (9:00 PM)—This year has been a testing time for the game of rugby league. Many of the recent revelations regarding the behaviour of individuals associated with the game have been shocking and such conduct must be condemned. There can be no excuses for bad behaviour, especially when it involves criminality, indecency, disrespect or violence. Personally, I have been deeply disturbed by those incidents that have evidenced a lack of respect for women. These incidents have been met with a swift reaction from the community and in the main an equally swift response from the administrators of the game.

For many fans these incidents may have eroded their passion for the game. Some may have stopped attending games and others may have sought to discourage their children from playing or supporting the code. I am not one of those people. In fact, these incidents have had the opposite effect upon me and have made me even more passionate about the game that was once a boyhood obsession. The recent wave of bad press that rugby league has been receiving made me even more determined to head down to CUA Stadium at Penrith last Saturday night with my wife, my three daughters and my son to watch the mighty Panthers take on the Sea Eagles and throw our support behind the game's women in league celebrations.

In celebrating the role of women in league, the night was an opportunity to recognise the efforts of the Panthers Women in League group which was established in 2006 by an enthusiastic group of female panther supporters who saw the opportunity to make a difference in our community. Diane Langmack, Anne McLaren, Jill Hoff, Jenny Matthews and Chris Rhind have committed themselves to this cause for the last few years and have to date raised over \$85,000. Throwing their support behind the women in league celebrations, the Penrith players, dubbed the 'Pink Panthers', donned pink jerseys and encouraged their supporters to wear pink to celebrate the role of women in league. Equal to the task, a number of the Manly players dyed their beards pink. The pink jerseys—and in Jarrod Sammut's case his pink boots—have been signed by the players and are being auctioned online this week. The team also grew beards and had these shaved off on Sunday to raise even more funds. All proceeds from the event will go to the National Breast Cancer Foundation, the Nepean cancer unit and the Cure the Future Foundation.

With over 15,000 fans in attendance, many wearing pink, the events of Saturday evening have confirmed my belief that the game of rugby league is an overwhelmingly positive force in our community. While scandals make good headlines and the stuff that good journalistic careers can be made of, it seems that those consuming news are rarely interested in the good news stories—or at least this is what those who decide what makes the news believe. I am a proud supporter of my local NRL team, the Penrith Panthers. The Panthers are a source of pride for our city. I am also proud to call myself a supporter of the game of rugby league. I remember as a young schoolboy, watching the young rising star Greg Alexander playing for Patrician Brothers' College, Fairfield—which would one day become my school—lead his team to victory in the Commonwealth Bank Cup final, the pinnacle of schoolboy football. I did not know that Greg Alexander would go on to captain the Panthers and represent New South Wales and Australia and, frankly, at the time Greg was already a hero to me as were players like Peter Sterling, Paul Langmack, Mick Cronin and Steve Rogers, role models that a young boy in his formative years could look up to.

I played the game for 13 years from the age of four and refereed the game for about eight years. Rugby league taught me many things and augmented many of the values that I had been taught at home and at school, like discipline, respect for others including those in authority, sportsmanship, the importance of looking after your physical health and it taught me about mateship and teamwork. The lessons that football taught me both on and off the field have shaped the person I am today in a very positive sense.

Rugby league's roots are unashamedly working class, and it is no surprise that the places where it has been the dominant code have been areas like Western Sydney or the outer suburbs of Brisbane. While society has changed, rugby league has provided a pathway to greater social mobility for many kids from socio-economically disadvantaged communities. Most importantly, rugby league has provided many young people with the role models needed to develop a sense of purpose and aspirations for a better life. Far from being the source of our community's problems, I believe that rugby league can be and in many cases already is emerging as a part of the solution to many of our society's problems. This is particularly important in communities such as Western Sydney where many boys are being brought up in single-parent families without male role models.

The last census showed that across the 150 electorates represented in federal parliament, six Western Sydney electorates, including my electorate of Lindsay, are in the top 25 electorates containing one-parent families. In these communities there is an even greater need for strong male role models, inspiring young boys to develop a sense of respect, especially for women, and to work hard and realise their full potential in life. This need is being met by many outstanding individuals involved in rugby league, whose voices and contributions I fear have been drowned out in the static of the latest rugby league scandals.

Last Friday I was honoured to speak at the official launch of the Panthers Bytes Bus. The bus is run by the Penrith Panthers community development foundation, Panthers on the Prowl, and is funded by the Commonwealth with support from corporate sponsors. It is full of notebook computers with wireless internet access and big-screen TVs and is decked out with images of Panthers players. It travels to schools in Western Sydney to teach children about the benefits of a healthy, nutritious lifestyle. The bus is just one of a number of community based programs run by Panthers on the Prowl. They also facilitate adult literacy courses to help and encourage parents to read with their children, run breakfast clubs at some of our most disadvantaged schools, and run special classes held at the Panthers on the Prowl classroom at CUA Stadium, approved by the New South Wales Department of education to target children at risk.

The key to the success of Panthers on the Prowl is the involvement of the players themselves. Many of the players assist as trained teachers' aides. They are important role models to children and adults and their influence can often and has often helped to break the cycle of destructive and antisocial behaviour. Programs such as these are changing the lives of young people in my community every day. In my view, you do not hear enough about these outstanding contributions, nor do you hear much about Panthers CEO Glenn Matthews participating in the St Vincent de Paul Society's CEOs Winter Sleep Out. Nor do we hear enough about the great leadership, on and off the field, demonstrated by Panthers captain, Petero Civoniceva, or the positive contributions of players and former players like Tony Puletua, Preston Campbell, Luke Priddis and Nigel Vagana.

From its humble working-class roots, many aspects of the game have changed massively. With the game becoming more professional, the stakes are higher. The players are paid well. Their faces are on billboards and television and their every action is met with scrutiny that very few other individuals or occupations face. They are also judged by some very strict standards, as they should be. However, I cannot help but think that sometimes these are standards which many of the people commentating on the behaviour of the players would themselves struggle to observe. Indeed, I am certain that the weekend and nocturnal activities of many individuals occupying positions of even greater responsibility in society but facing less scrutiny would not always meet the standards that we expect of league players. I know there are players who fail to live by these standards and their punishments and their attempts at rehabilitation are played out very publicly, and so they should be. But there are many more who not only live up to these standards, but would put the rest of us to shame in their dedication to their work, their families and their communities. My fear is that these days many clubs are afraid to trumpet the good news stories because these stories inevitably make their team more of a target for ridicule if a player from their club ends up letting their club down.

Tonight I hope I have been able to shine a light on some of those positive stories. I just hope that the extraordinary scrutiny and constant adverse publicity directed towards rugby league players does not smother the many great contributions of those players who are outstanding male role models for our young people. Regardless of whether it be in politics, law, sport, rugby league or any other facet of life, generalisations are always very dangerous. In the end, we must work to ensure that adverse generalisations cast upon some of our rugby league players do not impede or restrict those other good players out there from coming forward, making a great contribution and being the role models that we hope they will be.