

OBITUARY: Ross Vincent Turnbull

By PETER FITZSIMONS
March 15, 2015, 5 p.m.



Ross Turnbull, the front-rower, goes up for the ball in a lineout during his Newcastle playing days.

ROSS VINCENT TURNBULL,

1941-2015

WITH the death this month of Ross Turnbull – after a seven-year battle with cancer – Australian rugby has lost one of its most colourful, if oft controversial, characters. His love for the game and its people was not always reciprocated, but his impact and contribution were enormous, and he will be remembered.

A big lump of a lad from Newcastle, he learnt his rugby at Knox Grammar School as a rampaging forward in the late 1950s, where he was notable for always having his sleeves rolled up – in the manner of a fellow who always had a job o' work to do – and one other thing in particular.

Somehow he learnt to burrow his way through opposition forwards and, against all odds, emerge on the other side with ball in hand to confront the stunned opposition halfback who never expected anyone could do that – as the home crowd roared.

The impression left was of an exceptionally strong boy who was not one to take a backward step, and kept going, no matter what. The pattern for a life was formed.

He made his representative debut for Newcastle against the All Blacks in 1962 at age 21, refining his craft as the forward anchor of three premiership teams with Newcastle club Wanderers in 1963, 1964 and 1965. Many, and most certainly including Ross, thought the 25-year-old had earned his spurs to make the 1966-1967 Wallabies tour, but the selectors plumped instead for the vast experience of Tony Miller, then aged 37. Nevertheless, in 1967 – and by this time a practising solicitor from Dubbo – he did earn his cap against Ireland. Ah, but Ross' real impact on the game was yet to come. Garrulous, charismatic, still unstoppable, Ross was the original bull in the china shop, the man who put "bull" in "ebullient" and in 1975, aged 34, he became the youngest-ever Wallaby manager when he took the team to the British Isles and US, with David Brockhoff as the coach and John Hipwell as captain. It was in 1978, however, that his first truly famous moment came, when Wallaby coach Daryl Haberecht suffered a heart attack on the eve of the third Test. Manager Turnbull, in the well-loved story, took charge and on the morning of that third Test, at a team meeting, asked the backs to leave the room, so that just he and the Wallabies forwards remained. They were hard men – Greg Cornelsen, Chris Handy, Gary Pearse and the great Garrick Fay.

"Look," Turnbull began, nodding dismissively to the door that the fancy pants backs had just retreated behind, "these Phantom comic-swappers and Minties-eaters, these blond-headed flyweights are one thing, and we will need them after the hard work's done. But the real stuff's got to be done right here by you blokes." He wanted them to keep going, no matter what.

And they did. The result was a famous 30-16 victory, including the legendary four tries to back-rower Cornelsen. In the 1980s, he moved several steps higher than Wallaby prop and manager, becoming one of the most influential figures in the game as chairman of the NSW

Rugby Union and deputy chairman of the ARU, as well as Australian delegate to the IRB. Ross was the prime mover in the not universally hailed – and since abandoned – establishment of Concord Oval as Australia's answer to Twickenham and, along with ARU chairman Sir Nicholas Shehadie, played a key role in the creation of the first Rugby World Cup in 1987. Throughout Alan Jones' hugely successful tenure as Wallaby coach from 1984-1987, Ross was his key supporter in the corridors of rugby power.

It was in 1995, however, that Ross made rugby headlines around the world. With the launch of Super League on April Fools' Day, it was obvious to all that rugby union would be wiped out of its elite players unless the game became professional. The ARU declared that the game was "no longer amateur" and together with the New Zealand and South African rugby unions, formed SANZAR, a corporate collective of their unions that did a deal with Rupert Murdoch's News Corp for \$US565million over 10years, to launch a professional provincial and international Test series, to provide content for his pay television outlets. And the players in all that? Exactly. Their services had been bought and sold with no consultation, and while it was one thing for Murdoch to have binding contracts with the unions, that was as nothing without players.

Using \$4million seed money provided by Kerry Packer, and in the company of Sydney businessman Geoff Levy and Newcastle solicitor Michael Hill, Ross launched the grandly titled World Rugby Corporation. In a feat that only one with his confidence, contacts, animal magnetism and sheer chutzpah could have accomplished, Ross kept going, no matter what, to fly around the world and sign up on the quiet some 500 players to binding contracts – on almost no upfront money.

His vision was for a truly professional global game, based on rugby franchises competing for an annual World Cup championship. It seemed crazy at the time but as the years have gone by, it has become ever more obvious that he was a visionary, for that is more and more what the game looks like. Though Murdoch won that round, with real money, Ross' intervention achieved for the players themselves a far better deal than they ever would have got without him.

When he died this month, his two former wives, Trudy and Susie, and his loving fiancée Caroline Soucek were by his bedside, as were his four children – Sally, Nick, Holly and Jake.

Ross would have liked that.

Vale, Ross. You made your mark, and were one of a kind.