

Rugby reformer, ex-NRMA boss, Ross Turnbull dead at 74

(Enrolled 1st Year NBHS in 1954 – later transferred to Knox Grammar added by Webmaster)

By IAN KIRKWOOD

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LARGER THAN LIFE: The late Ross Turnbull was a rugby star and game reformer, NRMA president and a solicitor.

Picture: Darren Pateman

ROSS TURNBULL

1941-2015

ONE of Newcastle's favourite sporting sons, Ross Turnbull, has died of cancer in Sydney, aged 74.

Mr Turnbull rose to become the chair of NSW Rugby and is credited as one of the driving forces in turning modern rugby union into a professional sport.

He became president of the NRMA in 2003 before being removed by his board in controversial circumstances in 2005.

Mr Turnbull was born on January 6, 1941, the son of a Newcastle newsagent.

He was educated at Knox Grammar School and began as an articled clerk with the Bolton Street, Newcastle, law firm Braye Cragg.

He was admitted as a solicitor in 1968 and co-founded the Turnbull Hill law firm with his good friend Michael Hill, a former NSW Sheffield Shield cricketer who helped form the Newcastle Knights.

Mr Hill said on Sunday that Mr Turnbull rose from humble beginnings and was always determined to succeed.

His entry on the Wallabies web-page describes his response when being dropped from a game with the Wanderers as a 21-year-old.

Speaking to his coach, former Wallaby Ron Meadows, he said: "Don't worry Ron, I will be dropped from better teams than this."

Like his namesake Malcolm Turnbull – whose father was also a Novocastrian, but unrelated – Ross Turnbull is remembered by many as a larger than life character.

"In the 1990s he was intrinsically involved in the World Rugby Corporation, which was set up by Kerry Packer," Mr Hill said.

"I worked with him in that and although we haven't had a lot to do with each other since then, I had lunch with him a while ago and he would come up regularly and lunch with [real estate agent] John Wragge and [former Hunter Water chairman and Knights director] Ron Robson, who he knew from rugby days," Mr Hill said.

The Wallabies' page says Mr Turnbull's playing nickname was "Mad Dog", but the NRMA scandal left him with a new sobriquet – "Sir Lunchalot" – after a series of media stories outlined his spending habits as NRMA president.

Having racked up \$90,000 on his corporate credit card in just five months, Mr Turnbull was sacked as NRMA president in January 2005 and removed from the board entirely in April of that year, when he was declared bankrupt.

It was a major downfall for such a high-flying identity, and subsequent publicity – including photographs of him with a bottle of Viagra visible in the background – did little to help his cause.

But the present chief executive of the NRMA, Tony Stuart, said Mr Turnbull had in fact introduced reforms that helped stabilise the organisation.

Mr Turnbull is survived by former wives Trudy and Suzy, current partner Caroline, and his four children.