

Laurie Roberts

..... played one Reserve Grade and eight Third Grade games in his debut year of 1928. The following year Laurie made his First Grade debut when he replaced Johnno Rhodes at prop forward in a round eleven match against Balmain. Laurie was a versatile player, as the following week he replaced Neville McNee at lock forward.

Laurie Roberts played with Wests until the beginning of the 1932 season. During his time at Wests he played four First Grade, thirty three Reserve Grade and fifteen Third Grade games. At the start of the 1932 season the effects of the Great Depression had an impact on rugby league. As unemployment was at an all time high, many rugby league players sought release from their Sydney clubs to go to country centres where they could gain paid employment as player/coaches which offered decent pay and often free board and lodging.

A Retention Committee was established in conjunction with the State Selectors to ensure that a number of the top Sydney players remained in Sydney by making supplementary payments. For the majority this was not an option, and Wests, like many other Sydney clubs released a number of its players. One of these players was Laurie Roberts.

Laurie found himself a playing/coach position at the Port Kembla Club at Wollongong, NSW. A report in the South Coast Times on 13 May 1932, noted that; "Mr. L. Roberts was engaged as playing/coach of the Port (Kembla) team. This player has represented Western Suburbs (Sydney) in both the First and Reserve Grade."

By late May 1932 Laurie Roberts was in action with his new team. A report from the Illawarra Mercury on 3 June 1932 Noted; " Those who had witnessed Port Kembla outplay Thirroul the previous week after conceding this sturdy team the usual handicap of ten points, were loud in the praise of the improvement shown in the winner's form. L. Roberts, a City coach, had just taken them over, and under his astute guidance, a marked improvement has been made."

Laurie Roberts took Port Kembla to the finals in 1932, however the employment situation in Wollongong remained dire and Laurie Roberts was without a job at the end of the season. He was given a reluctant send off by the Club, however by the start of 1933, Laurie had found employment and continued his player/coach role with Port Kembla. Laurie Roberts played with Port Kembla until 1936, when he retired and became involved with the administration of rugby league at the club and Group 7 level.

Laurie was considered to be an innovator and was responsible for restructuring the Illawarra Junior Rugby League in 1938. He became President of the Port Kembla Club in 1938 and remained in that position until 1950. He was also a Club Selector but resigned from that position in 1951, ending his association with Port Kembla. He was also a Life Member of the Illawarra Rugby League, a Group 7 Selector and Senior Vice President.

Laurie was described as having a forceful personality, and presented his views in a forthright manner. At the Illawarra Rugby League Annual Presentation Dinner in October 1953, he made an address to the gathering, encouraging the Illawarra League to do all it could to entice young players to remain in the District. He made his remarks when presenting the Alec Jack Memorial Cup to Wollongong footballer Keith Barnes as the most outstanding player in the district under the age of 21 years.

He said that Keith, together with other promising youngsters had and would receive offers from the Sydney Clubs, and the (Illawarra) Leagues Club in its generosity should encourage these boys to remain in the district. Laurie's words were prophetic, in that Keith Barnes, became a Balmain legend and a highly regarded international player.

Today the Wests Tigers joint venture operates within the Holman-Barnes corporate structure. It may have been a different outcome today if Laurie Roberts was able to keep Keith Barnes in the Illawarra. The Illawarra generally became a great source of talented footballers for Wests over the years no doubt to the chagrin of local officials such as Laurie Roberts.

Lawrence "Laurie" Roberts Lived the remainder of his life in the Wollongong District. He died in April 1970 at West Wollongong, NSW. His memorial is at the Wollongong City Memorial Gardens and Crematorium, Unanderra, Wollongong, NSW, Potion Coc Wall O.