

Max Gray

was identified as Maxwell Alan Gradowski as a result of searches through ancestry.com.au, NSW electoral rolls and past newspapers. This information clearly pointed to Maxwell Gradowski as the rugby league player Maxwell Gray.

A search of past newspapers provided definitive information. The Biz newspaper on 12 June 1931 had a report on a recent Southern Districts President's Cup match. It was known that Max Gray played in that match. In the news report he was referred to as M. Gradowski (Gray).

M. Gradowski (Gray)

The Gradowski family lived at William St Granville not far from Merrylands Station, from at least 1926 until late 1932 when the property was sold. The Tisdale family were living a few streets away, and some of the Tisdales played with Max Gray at Fairfield in the early 1930's.

Max Gray was the youngest of eleven children born to Polish immigrant, John Gradowski (also referred to as Gradoskey) and Annie Bate. Prior to the First World War the family was living in the central west of NSW undertaking farm labouring work. Max's brother, Frederick Gradowski enlisted with the AIF, but the authorities made it difficult by requiring numerous references from previous employers and people of standing within the community.

These references give a good account of the family. Comments such as "I have always found the boys straight forward and good workers", "I can with confidence assure anyone of your loyalty to our King", and "I feel sure that he is strictly Australian and that if given the opportunity, he will make a good soldier and do his best for his country."

The comments reflect the difficult situation that immigrant families faced at the time, but also reinforced the good standing the Gradowski family had with those they came in contact with.

Max Gray was an extremely good rugby league player. He was big strong and fast and dominated in the teams he played with. He was first recognised playing in the highly successful Fairfield A Grade team in 1930 and 1931 and was selected in the Southern Districts President's Cup team. In those years, Fairfield played in the Southern Districts Junior Rugby League District, which was one of four junior competitions within the Western Suburbs District Club's catchment. Team mates of Max Gray at Fairfield in 1930 included F W Wheeler, Dave, Vic and Joe Hey, and Harry and Norm Tisdale. Interestingly he played in the President's Cup team under his birth name of Gradowski.

President's Cup Matches
Matches for the Junior Championship of the Rugby League were, as usual, opened up on the first day of the interstate fixtures. Balmain are holders of the title. Last Saturday's matches resulted as follows:—
Western Suburbs 21 (Conley 2, Quayle, Richards and Ezart tries, Banner 2, Dempsey goals) beat Western Districts 8 (Carr, Cameron tries, Teale a goal).
Southern Districts 4 (Gradowski 2 goals, beat St. George 3 (Lay try).

RLN 13 June 1931

The President's Cup match between Wests and Southern Districts in 1931 was won by Wests 6-5. There were a number of very good players in those teams that went on to play First Grade with Wests

including Alan Blake, Lionel Frappell, Don Murray, Vic Hey, Max Gray (Gradowski), Ken Lock and Dave Collis. In addition, players such as Tom Ezart, Fred Banner, Jack Conley, and Frank Lehmann all went on and played lower grades, country football or rugby union.

SYDNEY SPORTS GROUND—1.40 p.m. Saturday, June 13, 1931	
PRESIDENT'S CUP COMPETITION	
SOUTHERN DISTRICTS v. WESTERN SUBURBS	
SOUTHERN DISTRICTS Color—Green	WESTERN SUBURBS Colors—Black and White
FULL-BACK: 13—H. Pierce	FULL-BACK: 13—J. Dempsey (Capt.)
THREE-QUARTERS: 12—S. Hull H. West—10 11—R. Cooper R. Palmer—9	THREE-QUARTERS: 9—F. Banner T. Gilmore—10 11—P. Kenane H. Richards—12
HALVES: 8—V. Hey H. Clancy—14	HALVES: 8—T. Ezart A. Jones—7
FORWARDS: 6—B. J. Devitt 5—P. O'Malley M. Gradowski—4 3—R. Lehman K. Locke—1 2—G. Barnard	FORWARDS: 6—A. Cooper 5—G. Tolley P. Quayle—4 3—A. Blake L. Frappell—1 2—J. Conley
RESERVES: 7—H. Champion R. Kell—16 15—D. Colliss	RESERVES: 14—F. Muncaster D. Murray—15

Southern Districts v Western Suburbs President's Cup 1931

The Biz newspaper on 15 April 1932 reported that a number of Fairfield players were locating to Country centres to play rugby league. One of these was Max Gray who went to Aberdeen in the NSW Hunter Valley. Max had a successful season at Aberdeen, with his team losing narrowly to Scone in the Final. Max did return to Fairfield once his commitments had finished with Aberdeen and was recorded playing for Fairfield in September 1932.

PLAYERS GOING AWAY
Fairfield players are in demand this season. Dave Hey has accepted a position at Cootamundra; Max Gray has been engaged at Aberdeen, and George Bowtell at Maitland. Besides, Vic Hey has been selected to play with Western Suburbs third grade.

In 1933, Max Gray played with the Cooma All Blacks. He arrived in April and the local newspaper reported; "Local fans were greatly impressed by the form of Max Gray, the new All Blacks forward, who was in great form."

Cooma had two teams that year, the other being Cooma Greens. Players from these teams formed the basis of the Cooma Massy Cup and Carr Cup representative team. In a Massy Cup game against Queanbeyan in May 1933, it was reported that Max Gray and J. Snowdon "carried" the Cooma team. While Max Gray was selected in the forwards, "the weakness in the backs, frequently sent him into the rear positions." Notwithstanding Max Gray's effort, Cooma lost the Massy up to Queanbeyan. Max Gray, towards the later part of the season captained the Cooma representative team.

In January 1934, it was reported that Max Gray was to be offered the coaching position for the Illawarra District Rugby League. Max had a propensity to explore his options at the start of each season and if a better offer came along, he would take that up. This was one of the early examples of Max "cherry picking" what was on offer. He was always in great demand, and while sometimes leaving those he rejected a little disappointed, he was nearly always welcomed back as he conducted himself

in a professional but likeable manner. The better offer in 1934, was playing with Western Suburbs in Sydney.

The two years that Max spent playing in Country football sharpened up his skills to play Sydney Grade rugby league. He trialled with Wests in 1934 and was immediately selected for the First Grade team. He played fourteen First Grade and one Reserve Grade game in 1934 and another sixteen First Grade games in 1935.

STRAIGHT INTO FIRST GRADE

M. Gray, a forward, making his debut in club football, has been graded in Western Suburbs Rugby League first team for the season.

Gray and Cornwell appear likely to be the second row men in West's pack, though McConnell will make them play to keep their places. Gray is big and fast.

He played most of his matches as a lock forward or in the second row, but to show his versatility he played in the front row in the 1934 premiership winning final against Eastern Suburbs. However, it was not unknown for Max to play in the back line as well, when required. He was selected on the bench in a City Seconds v Country Seconds match in 1935, in his only representative appearance.

Max went on the tour of New Zealand with the victorious Western Suburbs team at the end of 1934, but it was almost his last match with Wests. He had been approached by the West Wyalong Club at the start of 1935 and signed a contract to Coach and play with that Club for the season. However, Wests stepped in and offered Max a "permanent" position to remain in Sydney, and while Max advised West Wyalong that he would honour his commitment, West Wyalong met and decided not to stand in his way in securing permanent work. The contract was cancelled by mutual agreement.

Max played the first two rounds of the 1936 premiership competition with Wests in First Grade, and another two in Reserve Grade before taking up the Player/Coach position with West Wyalong which had been offered to him at the start of the previous season. West Wyalong played in the Maher Cup competition.

He played two Maher Cup matches in 1936, both against a strong Temora team resulting in a 10-10 draw and a narrow 0-3 loss, although a news article in The West Wyalong Advocate on 1 September 1936 reported that; "Since Gray took over the position of playing coach, the Club has not tasted defeat in First Grade matches. Twelve matches have been played, West Wyalong winning eleven and drawing one, the latter being against Temora for the Maher Cup. The reporter must have forgotten the earlier Maher Cup match, but either way Max Gray had a very good season with West Wyalong.

In 1936, the first move was made to establish a Parramatta First Grade Rugby League Club. This push was supported by a number of Wests players that were living in the Parramatta district. Max Gray along with Jim Parsons, Bill McLeod, Henry Hannan and Bob Allison were Wests players named as likely candidates to play with a new Parramatta Club.

Parramatta's entry into the Sydney competition did not happen for a further decade and all of these players had retired by that time, although Jim Parsons did have an ongoing executive role with the new Club when it formed. It is not known whether Max Gray would have joined a Parramatta team if it had been accepted into the Sydney competition. Max however was at the peak of his form and would have been in demand by any of the top teams.

The 1930's saw many city players ply their trade in Country football, and most Country rugby league clubs had a quota of "imported" players. There was a lot of mobility between clubs during this period, so players generally didn't stay more than a season or two. While poaching players from the City was

seen as a problem by Sydney teams, and retention funds had been set up to keep key players in Sydney, it was no less a problem for Country teams.

There was a lot of prestige in having a successful rugby league team and so local Committees endeavoured to bring together the best team that they could afford. Often the financial viability of running these teams was dependant on gate takings which in turn was dependant on the success of the team on the field.

It would have been no surprise to see Max Gray move across to Cowra in 1937. He was joined by Edgar Newham who went on to play with Canterbury Bankstown and Bill Maizey, a former Balmain player. Max Gray had an exceptional season in Maher Cup football. He was the Captain/Coach of the Cowra team which played ten matches, resulting in seven wins, two draws and a narrow 5-7 loss in the first game of the season.



Cowra Rugby League - Maher Cup 1937

Back L to R: S Lillyman (ex Sec), J Reilly, J Ellery, E (Yank) Smith, P J Slattery, R Cameron, R Marshall, W Gaudry, C Byrne (Sec)
Sitting: W Barnes, L Lay, E Newham, M Gray (Captain/Coach), P (Blah) Smith, W Maizey, A Anderson

It was reported in the Gundagai Independent on 26 August 1937 that Max Gray was to retire at the end of the present season and would go into business. As such, the Cowra Club would have known that Max Gray was not going to be with that Club in the 1938 season but was unlikely to have known that Max hadn't quite finished with rugby league.

By January 1938, the Cowra Club appeared to be resigned to the fact that Max would not be playing with them. A news article in the West Wyalong advocate noted that.

"It will be a severe loss to the Maher Cup team if Max Gray decides to seek fresh fields, for it was largely through his efforts as leader and Coach of the team that it has thrived so well. Cowra Rugby League Club was in a bad position financially when Max Gray took over leadership of the team, and it was his initiative and the manner in which he coached the players that was responsible for the team

winning the Maher Cup. Since then, the Club has flourished into perhaps one of the most financial in the west. Gray was widely respected for his clean if hard tactics on the field and his behaviour off it."

Max Gray again had kept his options open with the Cowra Club, and probably lead them on to some extent, as a news item in the West Wyalong Advocate on 1 March 1938 reported that.

"Although he has been mentioned as West Wyalong's appointee as Coach this season, Max Gray is apparently loath in leaving Cowra. He is now in Sydney, and in a letter to the 'Lachlan Leader' (newspaper) advises that he is withdrawing his application for position as Coach at Cowra this season. He adds that he would have liked very much to Coach Cowra again in 1938, but circumstances prevent it. Max wishes the Cowra Club every success this season.

The 'Leader' feels it can, in return, on behalf of all footballers and followers of the sport in Cowra, wish Max the very best of luck wherever he may play this year. It is doubtful whether any footballer has left this town carrying greater public esteem than has Max Gray."

It is not known what the circumstances were that prevented Max Gray coaching Cowra in 1938, but it was immediately known that he would be making a return to the West Wyalong Club as Player/Coach. The West Wyalong Advocate welcomed Max back to West Wyalong in March 1938, noting.

"Max Gray is undoubtedly the best Coach that West Wyalong has had since the days of "Dutchy Anderson, Cec Fifield, Dick Vest and Bill Brogan, all former internationals who played their early football with West Wyalong. A gentleman on and off the field, Gray earned the commendation of the players and public when he coached the team here two years ago."

West Wyalong won its first Maher Cup match of the season but had three losses all against Young during the remainder of the year. It no doubt had success in non-Maher Cup matches that year and like all of the teams Max Gray had previously coached, West Wyalong had no former or future star players other than perhaps the centre Len Cooper. There were certainly no Fifields, Vests or Brogans in his team.

The players that Max Gray had were competent rugby league players, but Max Gray had a knack of developing good teams with teamwork as a priority, and getting the best out of the players that were under his charge, leading by example and playing a hard, non-compromising game.

While Max played it hard on the field, he apparently could handle himself quite well in other arenas as well, as the article in the West Wyalong Advocate from 13 September 1938 noted.

"A welcome feature at the West Wyalong Show was the reappearance of Jimmy Sharman and his boxing and wrestling stars, that both thrilled and amused packed houses. Local football coach, Max Gray, was seen to advantage against a Condobolin challenger, in Hallam, who was spreadeagled for the full count with a heavy right punch to the chin early in the second round.

Gray's fighting ability both surprised and pleased his football supporters, who offer to back him against Temora footballer 'Bluey' Lynch, whom Gray would like to settle a grievance with from the Temora Show and has backing for 10 pounds that he can beat Lynch."



West Wyalong Rugby League - Maher Cup 1938

Back L to R: Charlie Withers (Pres), Geoff Farrer, Frank Templeman, Tod Prest, Dudley Templeman, Stan Templeman, Bill Woods,
Middle: Bob Farrer, Bob Navin, Max Gray (Captain/Coach), Len Cooper, Arthur North, Mick Curry
Front: Baden Broad, Mick Navin

1939 brought about another direction and a new challenge for Max Gray. He departed the Central West of NSW and played in the trial matches with Wests (Sydney). He was injured in a match against Canterbury Bankstown and taken to hospital with what appeared to be a damaged knee cartilage.

There was no apparent injury of a serious nature and in another twist, Max decided to return to the Hunter Valley where he was appointed as Player/Coach with the Kurri Kurri Rugby League Club. Kurri Kurri was playing in the strong Newcastle-Lower Hunter rugby league competition, but in recent years had been struggling. The season had started when Max arrived, and Kurri Kurri had a young team that lost its first five matches and desperately

needed a proven player like Max Gray who could provide leadership.

Coming to Kurri Kurri after the season had started, and the team was in a minor position, Gray had a difficult task, but his work as playing coach helped the Coalfields team to become much more prominent. In

Under Max Gray's leadership, Kurri Kurri started to win games and build confidence. The team finished second in the minor premiership and were narrowly beaten in the final by the strong Central-Newcastle team.

At the start of 1940 season, Max Gray had left the Hunter Valley and was working in the Wollongong area. It was mooted that he was going to play with the Mount Kembla Club, but as usual there was another change of plan for Max. His former club, Cowra, wanted to engage him once more, and he also applied for the coaching position at Bathurst but withdrew

Max Gray came to Wests in 1940 as the First Grade Coach and a member of the Selection Committee. He was considered to be a great asset for the Club given his success in Country football. However, Wests had not done well in the Sydney rugby league competition since 1935, the year that Max Gray left Wests. During that period Wests had a number of high profile former players coaching the First Grade team including, Frank McMillan, Jerry Brien, Cec Fifield and Jim Craig. Each of them failed to

There was certainly optimism at the start of the season with Jim Sharman being quoted; "Max Gray's coaching will prove a tremendous help and will improve the morale of the younger members of the side. He is one reason why Wests will at least reach the semi-finals."

By May there were rumblings that there was dissention in the Club over the selection of players and differences in views with the Coach. However this settled and no further concern was reported. On paper Wests had the players to challenge for a finals position, and while there was some bright spots during the season, it didn't come together and Wests took out the wooden spoon with three wins and eleven losses. While Max Gray was lauded for his personal contribution to the team throughout the year, it would be his biggest coaching disappointment.

In 1941 it was reported that Max Gray had been offered the Player/Coach position at the Cessnock Rugby League Club in the NSW Hunter Valley and that he had taken up residence there. A number of announcements were made that Max had been appointed and selected in the trial matches, but Max didn't arrive. The Secretary of the Cessnock Club became increasingly frustrated and by late March, told Max not to come to Cessnock.

It is not known what the basis of these negotiations were, but it is evident that Max was also talking to the Tamworth Rugby League Club in northern NSW, as a clearance was granted by Wests in April 1941, enabling him to play with Tamworth that season. Max had another good season at Tamworth, playing

No record has been found of Max Gray playing rugby league after 1941. He was recorded training with Eastern Suburbs at the start of the 1945 season but appeared not to have taken this any further.

Max could best be described as an enigma, that is a person who is mysterious or difficult to understand. He came into rugby league as young man with playing skills that would belie his

after he was offered the position of Coach at Wests (Sydney).

M. Gray, who coached Kurri Kurri Rugby League team last season, is working at Wollongong, and will probably play for Mount Kembla this year.

lift Wests very far from the bottom of the competition table. The challenge for Max Gray was significant, but not beyond him.

Max Gray, a former Western Suburbs forward, has been appointed player-coach of the Western Suburbs Rugby League club for the season. He will also captain the team, and be a member of the selection committee.

mainly in the centres outside future Wests player, Stan Eisenhuth (Wests #382).

M. Gray and D. Colless, of Western Suburbs, were granted clearances to Tamworth and Singleton, respectively.

experience and he showed leadership beyond his years. He had a propensity to keep his plans only to himself, which kept those seeking his services on their toes, and sometimes guessing what he might do next.

Once he did commit, it was total and he gave his all to the task at hand and to his team. He made a significant contribution to Country rugby league in particular, changing the fortunes of the towns that hosted him and leaving a legacy of pride and achievement in their football teams. In nearly every case he was revered after completing his assignment and would have been welcomed back in an instant.

Max Gray lived his later days in the NSW north coast town of Nambucca Heads. He died there in March 1989 and he is buried in the Nambucca Heads Cemetery, Anglican Section, Row N, Plot 11.