

Tedda Courtney

.... had been charged with sleeping in the open air. He had become disobedient and would not go to school. His mother stated that he had become beyond her control. The police stated that they found him sleeping in a tank.

For the previous three weeks Tedda had been seen around the Sydney Fruit Markets with a lot of other boys. The Police knew the other boys and they were now on board the Sobraon.

In 1895, Tedda Courtney was 4 feet 5 inches tall and weighed 71 lbs (32kgs). It seems incredulous that such a young person could be treated in this manner but this was how young offenders were dealt with. The youngest person ever placed in these institutions was only three years old.

The Sobraon was a clipper ship purchased in 1891 by the NSW Government to replace the ship Vernon as a Public Industrial School. It was moored in Sydney Harbour and used for this purpose until 1911.

Residents of the Sobraon were boys whose age did not exceed sixteen years and who had been found lodging, living, residing, or wandering about in the company of disreputable people or who had no fixed address or means of support or had been found begging or loitering or sleeping in the open or committing a crime.

Frederick Neitenstein, the prison reformer, who became the Comptroller General of NSW Prisons and mentor for Tom McCauley's father Samuel McCauley (West's #154), was Superintendent of the Vernon where he introduced principles of discipline, physical drill and a system of grades and privileges. The "school" provided the same education as other public schools, had a gymnasium recreation ground and an entertainment hall.

Physical fitness was predominant with the school having gymnastics, cricket, and football clubs, turning out many well set up athletes. The boys of the Sobraon competed competitively against other Public School teams. James Maxworthy (West's #135) was also a "graduate" of the Sobraon who went on to play with Western Suburbs. Tedda Courtney was discharged from the Sobraon in August 1896.

Perhaps the experience of the Sobraon influenced Tedda Courtney in becoming a Fireman and playing rugby league, both activities requiring a high level of physical fitness and discipline. However, Tedda Courtney didn't stay long with the Fire Brigade. He spent most of his working life as a Waterside Worker, labouring on Sydney's docks.

Tedda Courtney was a total abstainer and non-smoker. His physical fitness kept him durable throughout his playing career and he maintained that fitness throughout his life. Courtney was described as a player that was able to compete for the full 80 minutes, putting in the weight and doing more than his share of tackling. He was about the best long distance diving tackler the game has known.

To understand the commitment that these early players had for the game, an article appeared in The Sun Newspaper written in April 1942 where Tedda Courtney was interviewed. In the article Tedda Courtney was quoted as saying;

"When times were hard, money scarce, and cross country transportation sparse, he had walked many miles to training headquarters, nearly always accompanied by another sterling forward, "Ranji" Joass. Actually, we had done our training before we arrived, said Ted." Ted Courtney and Ranji Joass lived in the suburb of Lakemba, so it would have been about a 16 kilometre return walk to training.

Tedda Courtney played rugby union with the North Sydney and Sydney Clubs and then two years with the St George Club when they entered the competition in 1906. He then switched to rugby league in 1908, playing with the Newtown Club.

He played his initial season with Wests in 1909; however he may have been disappointed with Wests as they struggled to put a team on the field by the end of 1909. This may have encouraged him to go over to North Sydney for the 1910 season, but that flirtation only lasted the one season.

The St George Call newspaper reported on 29 October 1910 that signatures were being sought from players, desirous of forming a St George District Rugby League Football Club. (ie a First Grade Club) for season 1911. Among those present were, E. (Tedda) Courtney and W. Muller from the North Sydney Club and F. Munnery and T. McIntosh from the Newtown Club. Messrs.

Courtney, Muller and Munnery were asked to say a few words in support of the proposed St George Rugby League Club, but being of the rather retiring disposition, said speaking was not in their line, but offered their services as players to the Club.

The application by St George to form a District Club was unsuccessful and so the players that pledged their allegiance to this new Club were now left without a team for 1911. Courtney, Muller and Munnery didn't go back to their former Clubs in 1911 but stuck together. Courtney having previously played with Wests, may have encouraged the others to follow him across.

The Sydney Sun Newspaper on 2 April 1911 reported; "several other new men showed promise for Western Suburbs, whose team included Courtney (captain), Muller, and Munnery from North Sydney and Newtown Clubs." This was the start of a long association between Tedda Courtney and Wests.

Tedda Courtney was made Wests Life Member No.1, was selected in 2004 in Wests Team of the Century and was inductee No.2 in the NRL Australian Hall of Fame in 2008. His Citation reads as follows;

" Another legendary pioneer, 'Tedda' Courtney took part in the rebel games against the New Zealand 'All Golds' while playing rugby union for St George. The stocky forward joined North Sydney in 1908 but moved to Newtown after just one match and toured England with the 1908 Kangaroos. Courtney played in all three Tests in England and went on to appear in two further Tests against New Zealand the following year when he switched to Wests. After a season with Norths in 1910, in which Courtney played in the Ashes series against England, the durable prop returned to Wests.

Courtney played in 25 matches on the 1911-12 Kangaroo Tour, including the Test victories that secured the Ashes for the first time. His final Test series was in 1914 when he again took on the Englishmen, but he went on to outlast all the pioneers of 1908 and played over 300 grade matches (161 First Grade games with Wests), before retiring. (Courtney played along-side his son Edward, at Wests in 1924)."

Claude Corbett wrote an article in The Sun newspaper on 6 August 1926 and gave a good overview of Tedda Courtney's career. He wrote;

"The lid is on the argument as to which League footballer played the greatest number of First Grade matches. Last week it looked as if 'Chook' Fraser, of Balmain 'walked in' with a score of 215. Ted Courtney has figured in nearly 100 more games than Fraser, though all have not been played with the one club. Added to his league record, Courtney played in the Union before the League came into existence. Courtney appeared altogether in 304 League First Grade fixtures, dating from 1907 to 1925,

and with the exception of the 1910 season with North Sydney, he played the whole of them with Western Suburbs.

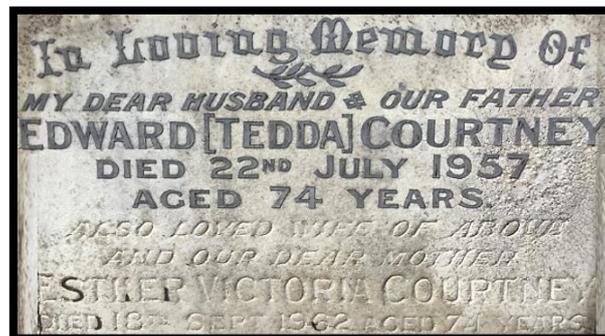
The most remarkable thing about Courtney's career as a dashing forward in all positions of the scrum, was that he was only once injured. That was when his wrist was dislocated and he had to stand down for two weeks only!

I first knew him when I played with him in the old Rockdale Borough team in 1902. Courtney went on from that time until last season without cessation, and there is no doubt he could still give a display equal to that of many of the First Grade players. His Union First Grade matches were played with Sydney in 1905 and St George in 1906. He twice went to England with League teams, in 1908 and 1911, and even though he is out of the active side of the game, he still takes a keen interest in the doings of Western Suburbs. Courtney's is a truly remarkable record."



Tedda Courtney (L) and Ed Courtney jnr. (R) - May 1923

Tedda Courtney lived most of his adult life in the Sydney suburb of Lakemba and died there in July 1957. Tedda Courtney is buried in the Rookwood General Cemetery, Zone C, Section 12, Grave 3095.



In September 2024 Tony Lewis from Pratten Park Magpies and his mates rejuvenated the grave of Tedda Courtney in honour of the Wests legend. Tony and his team have now repaired the graves of a number of former Wests greats to ensure that they are always remembered.



Before Tony and the team commenced



The Team at Work



The Finished Product – A Worthy Tribute to Tedda Courtney