Harry Thomson

..... was a big man with a big personality, but he was often confused with South Sydney team mate Hack Thompson. Harry's surname was often spelled as Thompson in the newspapers of the time instead of Thomson, which added to the confusion between him and Hack Thompson.

So who was Hack Thompson? Hack Thompson was born in September 1893 and was registered at birth as Harold Augustine Thompson. According to his marriage record he was born at Redfern NSW. An article in the Sun newspaper in June 1912 reported; "From Second Grade to selection as a rep player on two occasions is a feather in Hack Thompson's cap. Last season this sterling young three-quarter was playing with Redfern in the Second Grade competition."

It is likely that Hack Thompson did play one First Grade game in 1911 as a "young colt" was brought into the Souths team that played Western Suburbs in round five of that season. This player was selected on the wing but was reported in different newspapers as A. Thompson and H. Thompson. Hack Thompson was selected for the NSW v Queensland series and the New Zealand Tour of 1912. He was described in the Touring team list as 18 years old, 170cm tall and 71kgs in weight.

Hack Thompson lived most of his adult life in the southern, beachside Sydney suburb of Cronulla and was a member of the North Cronulla Surf Club. He died in 1968 and on his funeral record it was noted that he was an international rugby league player 1911-1913, although his first representative game was not until 1912. He was also a member of the South Sydney Rugby League Club.

The Rugby League Project lists Hack as "Hash" Thompson and has him playing with Eastern Suburbs in 1908, and South Sydney in 1909 and 1911 onwards. This information is not correct as Hack Thompson would have been fourteen and a half when he supposedly played with Eastern Suburbs in 1908. In fact, he didn't play with South Sydney until 1911. He was an outside back of slight build and any record showing that he was playing in the forwards would have to be considered suspect. There are some matches at the end of 1912 including City Cup games that have also been attributed to Hack Thompson. The Rugby League Project indicates that he was playing in the forwards But these games were also played around the same time that Hack Thompson was in New Zealand with the Australian Rugby League Team.

Wikipedia lists Souths player #29 as "Hash" Thompson, supposedly playing with Souths from 1909 to 1916 and with Eastern Suburbs in 1908. This again is a combination of the careers of Hack Thompson and Harry Thomson. Wikipedia lists Souths player #61 as Harry R. Thompson. The surname is spelled incorrectly and there is no detail other than this player was with Souths in 1913 and 1914. Of course that was only part of Harry Thomson's career.

The Eastern Suburbs past players web site identifies player #16, who played with Easts in 1908, as Hugh Thompson. No record has been found of a Hugh Thompson playing rugby league at this time. Given the accumulation of information from newspapers of the time it is quite evident that this was Harold Reid "Harry" Thomson.

The South Sydney past players site, www.ssralmanac.com gives a good account of the playing history of both Hack Thompson (player #56) and Harry Thomson (player #31), purely from a South Sydney perspective. What is of greater interest is the playing career of Harry Thomson from 1908 until 1914 and his contribution to the three Clubs that he played with, being Eastern Suburbs, South Sydney and Western Suburbs.

To set the record straight, it was necessary to undertake an extensive internet search to source information and establish a profile for Harry Thomson. He has an interesting story to tell, and one which is more colourful than most. He was quite a character with a personality as large as his towering frame. His military record indicates that he was just over 180cms tall and weighing 95kgs. By today's standards that is not exceptional but going back more than a century, when halfbacks were built like jockeys, he was considered to be a big man, physically.

In 1901, Harry Thomson at the age of fourteen appeared before the Bench of the Sobraon. He had been 'wagging' school and wandering the streets and after several cautions, his parents wanted the authorities to intervene, to ensure that he was not falling in with bad characters as they had no control over him. Harry did spend some time on the training ship. The purpose of the Sobraon was to provide discipline to wayward boys and give them the opportunity to undertake training and develop skills which would be beneficial in their adult life. Like many other young boys that went through this program, he obtained trade skills which set him up as an electrician in later life.

Harry Thomson was also commonly known as "Tommo" Thomson. He first came to attention when he was playing as an Eastern Suburbs junior rugby union player. The Eastern Suburbs junior union organised an amateur boxing tournament at the Gaiety Athletic Club, Castlereagh St, Sydney in August 1907. Thom(p)son, of the East Sydney Junior Football Club won the heavy weight final on points against McGee of the Womerah Club.

In May 1908, the North Sydney Club organised a boxing tournament for heavy weight footballers at the Centennial Hall, North Sydney. nearly all of the League Clubs were represented including Thom(p)son (Easts). Thomson was beaten by Harry Pearce of the Glebe Club and sculling repute.

Harry Thomson, at the age of twenty one was big and strong enough to handle himself in the ring as well as on the football field. He found himself in the Eastern Suburbs First Grade team at the start of 1908 and was in the company of some of the game's greats in Dan Frawley, Lou D'Alpuget, Larry O'Malley, Harry Flegg, Horrie Miller, Sandy Pearce and of course Dally Messenger. Harry Thomson made his debut in First Grade for Eastern Suburbs against South Sydney in round three of the 1908 competition. He played five First Grade matches for Easts in that year.

In August 1908 Harry Thomson was selected to play in a "Maoris Benefit Match" against the New Zealand Native team (Maoris) at the Sydney Sports Ground. The match was to be played under rugby union rules, with fifteen a side. The Australian team was comprised mainly of rugby league players with a few New Zealanders making up the numbers. It was said that the match had been arranged by the footballers concerned and that neither the Rugby Union nor the Rugby League had any connection with it.

The benefit match was held on the same weekend as the first semi final of the regular competition and both Harry Thomson and Johnno Stuntz, the Easts representatives in the benefit match were not selected by Easts for the semi final series and therefore were available to play against the Maoris.

Harry Thomson, in 1909, moved from the Eastern Suburbs Club to play with the 1908 premiers South Sydney. He no doubt had enough confidence in himself that he would be successful at Souths and at the start of the season it certainly looked that way. He started in Souths First Grade team playing in the opening two rounds with wins against Balmain and Newcastle. Harry's form was so good that he was selected to play with the NSW team that met the returning Kangaroos on 5 May. However in round three, Harry and the other East's second row forward were replaced by Arthur Hennessey and John Rosewell who had just returned from the Kangaroo tour.

Eastern Suburbs Rugby League Team 1908

Harold Reid Thomson (standing 3rd from left)

The 1909 season for Harry Thomson appeared not to have gone to plan. After starting the season strongly with Souths, he apparently lost form and spent much of the remainder of the season not playing or in Second Grade. Records for lower grade teams in the early years are quite limited. It is evident that Harry had given up on his season as there is a note on the South Sydney past players site dated 23 June 1909, stating that; "Thomson, known to his pals as Tommo, the big South Sydney forward and late Eastern Suburbs, is thinking of working his way home to England to try his luck with the Northern Union clubs. Tommo will be worth a few hundreds to the club that is fortunate enough to secure his valuable services."

This note may have been one of Harry Thomson's early attempts at self promotion. Reading between the lines, the note was indicating that he was available to play and he was worth a considerable amount for the lucky club that gained his services. Harry never followed through with his intended trip to England as he next appeared, three weeks later, playing for the Western Suburbs Club. This was more accidental than intentional.

So how did Harry Thomson play for both South Sydney and Western Suburbs in the one year? The records from the time reveal an interesting story. Harry Thomson and his mate Arthur McCallum, also a South Sydney player, played only one game for Wests in 1909 at that was against North Sydney at the R.A.S Showground in Sydney. Wests and Norths were the early match in a double header with South Sydney and Eastern Suburbs playing the later game.

An article in the Sunday Times on 11 July 1909 reported; "The Western Suburbs - North Sydney match timed to commence at 2 o'clock did not start till 2.23, the former having difficulty in getting a team together."

The delay in the start of the Wests - Norths match would have set back the start of the Souths - Easts game and so they would have been finishing the later game in the dark. Harry Thomson and Arthur McCallum were not selected in the Souths First Grade team that day and so it appears that to get the game under way, both Thomson and McCallum were "loaned" to Wests for that day. The Sydney Morning Herald on 12 July 1909, reporting on the match, noted; "Western Suburbs had the assistance of Thom(p)son and McCallum, who greatly strengthened their pack in the first half. The former eased off for a while in the second term."

An article in the Sydney Sportsman also noted on 14 July; "Wests found it hard to raise a two o'clock team and had to press Tommo Thom(p)son (who has been jack on all sides this season) into the service. Tommo is a great success with the hoodlum section of the crowd, and played up to a nicety, and finished up by getting bounced off the field for having a smack."

Wests beat Norths 7-3 but the match was described as; "one of the tamest displays of First Grade football seen on the ground. It was in reality a farce, the capers some of the players cut, and particularly Thom(p)son, a man of immense proportions, who was eventually sent off, being ludicrous." While Wests started the 1909 season with an influx of players, towards the end of the season they had to "borrow" players on at least three occasions.

In September 1909, an article appeared in the Sydney Sportsman newspaper which read; "Tommo Thomson, the late crack Eastern Suburbs forward, has issued a challenge to run any League forward from half a mile to 25 miles, for any amount from 10d. to 10 pounds. He says let them all come, with Johnny Rosewell, Arthur Hennessey, or Joe Regent preferred. The only barred are, policemen and detectives. Tommo also wishes to take on all comers for the backjump championship of the League and has 2 pound (in money) to back himself with."

This appeared to be a brash challenge from a twenty two year old, particularly given that he was open to taking on more senior and experienced players in the game. It does however show something of his self confidence and belief in himself.

He told the reporter that he had; "started surf bathing as a prelim to getting well for the coming events and did a couple of miles in the briny at Manly last Sunday afternoon." He said that; "he would like the race to take place at half time of next Saturday's game as he performs better before a multitude, and also that the theatre girls will be able to attend the event." The reporter noted that Harry had a weakness for actresses!

Harry's challenge was proposed to take place at the R.A.S. Showground at the half time break of the Kangaroos v Wallabies match. The preliminary game was to be the final of the premiership between South Sydney and Balmain. Balmain infamously did not turn up for the match and South Sydney were crowned premiers for 1909. The audacious nature of Harry Thomson's challenge would have to make him one of the earliest characters of the game of rugby league in Australia.

Following up on Harry's exploits, the Sydney Sportsman reported; "Tommo Thom(p)son is very much disgusted that no one has come forward to accept his challenge published in this paper a couple of weeks ago. He says that he thought John Solomon Hargreaves Rosewell would be sure to accept the defi. Tommo has tons of backing, so he says."

In 1910, Harry found himself back at Eastern Suburbs. He was selected in a First Grade trial match at the start of the season but played Second Grade throughout that year. No record has been found of a First Grade appearance in 1910 and so all player data bases which record First Grade games make it appear that he was not playing at all. That of course was not the case.

The Referee newspaper reported on an Easts v Norths Second Grade match played in May 1910. It noted that;

"Thom(p)son, better known to football followers as Tommo, dashed through the opposition, and being a veritable giant amongst dwarfs, knocked player after player over like nine pins. After easily brushing aside the North Sydney fullback, he had a clear run of 30 yards to goal, and to show his contempt for the opposition he turned round whilst running and made fun of them. The incident, fortunately rare in football, created much merriment. But less than a minute later the laugh was against him, as he was laid hors de combat in midfield."

The term "hors de combat" is French for out of fight. It appears that Harry was not in top condition and perhaps that is why he was playing Second Grade in 1910?

At the start of the 1911 season, the NSW Rugby League had a problem. The well established Clubs such as Souths, Easts and Glebe had a multitude of talented players vying for limited places in their First Grade teams, while Clubs such as Wests, Norths and Annandale were in need of experienced players to provide stability and a platform for growth. The League was considering the question of allowing any player who was not selected to represent his own team to play for another club, providing he obtains a permit, and that his club is in favour of such transfer. This suited Harry Thomson as he wasn't holding down a regular First Grade position and so he sought and received a permit from the Eastern Suburbs Club to go and play with Western Suburbs.

Harry Thomson joined Wests in round four of the 1911 competition and arguably had one of his best seasons in rugby league. Harry played nine First Grade games with Wests in 1911 and was regularly reported as one of Wests best players. He no doubt brought size and go forward to the Wests team. Wests had four wins in 1911 which was the same number of wins that they had in the previous three seasons. Wests ended up second last in the competition but were competitive throughout the season. Harry Thomson was the equal highest try scorer with Stanley Wall in 1911 with four tries each.

In July 1911, the Sun newspaper reported that Harry who was playing with Wests under permit from Eastern Suburbs, in a spirit of banter told the Easts players that he would "stir them up." The remark was the joke of the Easts dressing room before the match. When Harry broke away with the ball early in the first half, the Easts players seemed to be touched with an electric spark, and raced after him as one man, but Harry had very fair pace for his weight and got to the line first. The decisive manner in which he banged the ball down with one hand, brought down the house, and he was good with the crowd for the rest of the day.

At the end of the 1911 season the Sydney Sportsman reported on Wests club picnic event and noted; "Handsome Harold Thom(p)son and Tin Ace Tommy Phelan were sighted coupled together for the three legged race, but their middle legs seemed out of proportion, and besides, Tommo squeezed all the wind out of 'the little dog trainer.' Must have thought he had his arm around the actress." Harry was a strong, burly fellow but clearly had a sense of fun. Tom Phelan was Secretary of the NSWRL in 1909 and Secretary of Wests in 1911.

In 1912 Harry Thomson went back to South Sydney and was not prominent until the later part of the season. He appeared to have become a regular Second Grade player, playing ten matches in that Grade, but South Sydney had a number of representatives in the 1912 New Zealand Tour conducted in August/September of that year. This provided the opportunity for a number of Second Grade players to play the last few competition and City Cup matches in First Grade.

On August 18, 1912, the Sunday times reported on a match between South Sydney and Annandale and noted that; "South Sydney elevated three forwards - R. Almond, T. McCann and H. Thom(p)son coming from the Second team." A report in the Arrow newspaper on that match referred to Harry as J. Thompson and recorded that he; "is a big man, and the crowd found some amusement in watching him trying to plough ahead through the ruck whenever he got the ball."

Harry Thomson played two First Grade competition and three City up matches at the end of 1912. The Rugby League Project has credited these games to Hack Thompson, but that is not correct as Hack was on the New Zealand Tour, and Hack did not play in the forwards. The SSR Almanac of South Sydney Rabbitohs First Grade Players has the playing record of these players correct.

Harry Thomson was back to his best form in 1913 with South Sydney. He played ten of the fourteen competition rounds and two City Cup games including a semi final. He finished the season without fading but could be erratic at times.

South Sydney Rugby League Team 1913

Back row: John Rosewell, Harold Horder, Howard Hallett, Os Brown, Tom Peters, William Hilliard, Harry Nicholls, Harry R. Thomson, Billy Redwood
Second row: S.G. Ball (Sec), A.Smith, Harry Butler, Billy Cann(vice-capt), Arthur Butler (capt), Roy Almond, Jack Leveson, J McGrath (Treas).
Front row: Clarrie Horder, Hack Thompson, Arthur McCabe, Bill Spence.

While playing for South Sydney, in July 1913, against Newtown, the Sydney Sportsman wrote; "the pick of the forwards was big Tommo, who gave those not in the know a shock with the space he served up on several occasions. It was a junior action by the Newtown player who tore him down from behind when he was going for the ball across the line and the penalty try was given. It turned an uncertainty into a certainty as there was a big chance of Tommo knocking on with the pace he had up." No doubt Harry Thomson had a lot of talent but could be erratic with his play at times.

South Sydney was playing North Sydney in a City Cup semi final in August 1913, and the Sydney Sportsman recorded Harry Thomson's demeanour in that game. It noted that he had been kicked in the shin by one of the North's players and throughout the game showed no inclination to handle the ball. It appears that when Harry was up for it he could be a great player, but on an off day he could go missing in action. That would pose a real dilemma for the selectors.

Harry Thomson was dropped from the South Sydney squad at the start of the 1914 season along with a number of other highly regarded Souths players. This caused a great deal of dissention in the

Souths camp and it was not long before the Selection Committee was reconstituted and the dropped players, including Harry Thomson were reinstated in the First Grade squad.

In 1914, both Harry Thomson and Hack Thompson were playing with South Sydney. In the pre season it was reported in the Sydney Sportsman newspaper that; "the pair of dashing darlings, the idols of the South Sydney lady barrackers, Harold Horder and Hack Thompson, secured first and second in the final of Jack Rowan's big 100 yards handicap." Meanwhile; "Five prominent leaguers are in the Olympia 1,000 pound tournament, and the bunch have survived the first round, either by winning or by forfeit. The names of the five are, 'Sailor' Jeff McMurtrie (Balmain), Tony Redmond and Fritz Thiering (Glebe), Tommo Thom(p)son (South Sydney), and McPhee (North Sydney).

The Olympia professional tournament was a boxing contest promoted by the Olympia Athletic Club, Newtown. The contest commenced in March 2014 and continued with weekly knock out rounds for about three months until there was a winner. Harry Thomson made it to the 3rd round (35th night) of the heavy weight division, against Albert Pooley on 3 June. It was a six round contest and at the end the referee was unable to decide the winner, so a seventh round was contested, which Pooley won. It was reported that a large section of the house disapproved of the decision. Pooley went on and won the Olympia heavy weight division.

Harry Thomson was no doubt a bit of a lad. In July, a few weeks after the Olympia boxing contest had concluded, the South Sydney Second Grade team went to the NSW South Coast to play a local selection. The Sydney Sportsman wrote;

"The reason why all the team could not be torn away from the Salvation Army and did nothing but sing hymns at the pub all day, was that they were smitten with the charms of a Salvation Army lass. Big Tommo repented, and went so far as to get saved, and was very much annoyed that the pretty charmer or in fact any of the girls in the town, did not recognise in him the hero of the Olympia heavy weight tournament, who got robbed by the decision in the Albert Pooley go. Thomson had many knock-ons on the field, but they were nothing to the 'knock-backs' he got off the field. He said, 'Nil Desperado' was the family's motto, and he tried again."

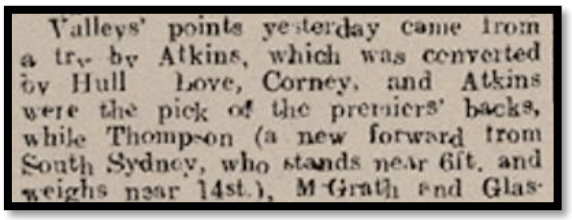
South Sydney DRLFC First Grade Premiers 1914

Back: D Brown Ass Train, W Redwood Train, H R Thomson, J J McGrath Treas, S G Ball Sec
3rd Row: F Haron VP, J Brown VP, C White VP, E Hilleard, H Nicholls, H Hallett, W Martin VP, J Cusack VP, R Norman, H Thompson
2nd Row: E Fry VP, J Davis, G Wells, O McCarthy, Hon J J Smith MLC VP, A Butler (C), Hon F Flowers MLC Patron, W A Cann VC, E R Riley MHR VP, R Almond, H Butler
Front: A J McCabe, W Dymant, O Brown, G Reynolds, W Spence, **Inset:** H Horder

Harry Thomson made is way back to First Grade by August 1914, and the Sydney Sportsman noted; "Big Tommo signalled his re-entry into First Grade by passing one on to Bob Williams, for which the little joke gave Easts (his former Club) two points by way of a penalty." Harry played two First Grade games in 1914. Souths won the premiership that year and Harry Thomson is included in the First grade team photo. There is no record of him playing First Grade league in Sydney beyond 1914.

Harold Reid Thomson enlisted with the AIF in May 1916 and was posted to the 1st Battalion Pioneers. His military file had a note stating that he was unlikely to be an efficient soldier and he was discharged from service in June 1916. It would appear that Harry's big personality and his big frame were too much for the Army.

By 1918 Harry had moved to Brisbane and played with the Valleys club in 1918.


Valleys' points yesterday came from a try by Atkins, which was converted by Hull Love, Corney, and Atkins were the pick of the premiers' backs, while Thompson (a new forward from South Sydney, who stands near 6ft. and weighs near 14st.), M'Grath and Glas-

Sun 12 May 1918

He remained in Brisbane except for a brief period around the Second World War when he returned to Sydney and then went to Newcastle. He eventually returned to Brisbane where he died in October 1951.