

## Feedback on “Proposal to Re-Constitute Otago Rugby League”

*(Original proposal follows)*

I am unable to attend the meeting scheduled for Thursday 25 February but offer for consideration the following feedback on the proposal to be tabled at that meeting:

### Para 1: Management Committee

A capable governing body is essential, and should be the top priority. Careful consideration needs to be given to how these officials are to be recruited, retained and how succession will be accomplished in a way that provides consistently high levels of governance over time. The failure to do so is the primary reason for the current state of the game in Otago.

### Para 2: Otago Touch

Sharing an administration position with Otago Touch is a useful means of support and should be appreciated. The extent of any ‘synergy’ is less clear, with the bulk of Rugby League administrative workload occurring in the off-season. This is not “Touch’s quiet period” according to the proposal.

With the recognised overlap in player and official membership between the two sports it would be worthwhile exploring a strategic collaboration for the future.

### Para 3: Senior Competition

The proposal to conduct an open trial and directly affiliate teams to the District body has been explored in the past. It brings with it a number of practical complications around the allocation of players, equitable resourcing, and perceptions of bias. It is likely to lack the sense of identity and loyalty that is integral to the ongoing sustainability of teams. Most importantly it offers little benefit.

If there is sufficient player interest to sustain a further three teams, and the support personnel necessary for those teams, then an independently affiliated incorporated society is a more effective vehicle for future growth. If the District body is willing to centralise administrative tasks, the number of support people (a Coach and a Manager for example) are the same. Alternatively, or in addition, the viability of existing clubs would be enhanced if they were prepared to run second teams.

The fact this has not occurred for some time raises doubts about the actual level of player interest. It has been many years since the local competition sustained more than four competitive teams (though sometimes with a fifth or even sixth that was lagging far behind and rarely winning games). It is unlikely this has changed while in recess. Four teams seems the most likely number in the first season out of recess.

A pre-season tournament might be a useful means to test player numbers. In attempting to re-establish weekly competition there is always doubt in the minds of participants that everyone is ready and the competition is going to proceed. This could alleviate some of those concerns. It could also provide an opportunity to recruit players who might otherwise play rugby. This should happen in the pre-season of both codes, and be open to all.

## Para 4: Format

Repeated round robin, with a final seems reasonable – irrespective of actual numbers – though three rounds might be better if there is fewer than six teams

## Para 5: Subsidiary Competition

Secondary school age competition is notoriously difficult to establish but is a vital age group. Considerable resource and effort will be required if it is to happen through secondary schools. Under 18's within a club structure is more likely to succeed and contributes more to the sustainability of the game but this is not the preferred strategy of NZRL.

As an alternative an Under-20's club grade might be more achievable and provide more immediate benefits, while still capturing some older, or more capable, secondary school age players.

## Para 6: Representative Programme

Some representative football is essential to attract players to club competition. If there is a Development team it needs to be restricted to emerging players – not a 'b' side of players who once would have made the Premier side. An under-20 side would then be largely redundant, unless there is a parallel under-20 competition as above. All representative teams need to be selected exclusively from Rugby League players eligible through participation in weekly competition.

## Para 7: Participation Model

The reintroduction of primary and intermediate school Rugby League (last conducted with 18 teams about 10 years ago) would be welcomed as part of a long term strategy.

## Para 8: Grounds / Venue

A central venue for school competition would be preferable, subject to scheduling and availability. It is easier to coordinate at a single venue and it places less pressure on officials, referees and the like.

## Para 9: Timing

It is not correct to say that Saturday games contributed to the demise of the game.

It is correct to say that Sunday games have had a negative impact on playing numbers when used in other Districts. It has typically opened the door to a steady ebb of players away from rugby league to rugby union.

There is value in needing players to make a personal commitment to rugby league by choosing it ahead of rugby union on a Saturday.

Sunday games will not increase player base.

Players are unlikely to play heavy contact sport regularly on both a Saturday and Sunday, and it is the (rugby league) second game they will most likely avoid. Increased injury and extended recovery periods will also be likely, further reducing the pool of available players.

Players are unlikely to train effectively for both codes (four nights a week?). The greater competition for places in rugby will see them drop their league training before they will compromise their position in a rugby team.

Players are unlikely to be willing or able to pay two sets of player subscriptions. They are more likely to choose to pay fees to rugby union where they will get more value.

Rugby League has a substantial Pacific Island membership, at times in excess of 25%. Over the years, there has typically been an entire team primarily made up of Pacific Island players, with more scattered through the other clubs. Sunday games are particularly problematic for these players who are unlikely to put rugby league ahead of their church and family obligations week after week, especially when Saturday remains available via rugby.

Indeed many players and officials of all backgrounds reserve Sunday as a time to be with family or rest and recover before the week ahead.

Social opportunities are part of a players motivation, are a factor when choosing to take part in sport, and affect fundraising, sponsorship support and the like. Players are unlikely to sacrifice participation in social activities on a Saturday night, and can not enjoy similar opportunities on a Sunday.

Players juggling work commitments will always be an issue, given the characteristics of our player base. Moving to Sunday does not correct this. Some players are on rostered shifts, or must work on demand. This is as much a problem on a Sunday as it is on a Saturday. Many players also work late nights in the hospitality sector on a Saturday. Sunday games would be a disadvantage for them. This issue has never been more problematic than you would expect and does not justify change.

It is accepted that there is pressure on playing venues in Dunedin and has been for some time. Room has always been found in the past and this is a matter for personnel at the Dunedin City Council who are obliged to accommodate sports equitably. It might be a case of taking what is available, a situation of our own making. A note also that ground markings are unique for rugby league and some people would suggest it is not as simple as sharing a ground marked for and used by rugby union. Ground availability should not be the basis of a move that will have a negative impact on our sport.

For the reasons given, Sunday games in fact demand much greater commitment from individual players than when they choose one code over another. This is a recruitment barrier.

Moving to Sunday games will result in a net loss of player numbers and is not supported nor justified.

These issues have been discussed with players since receiving the proposal document. They have been adamant they would not play on Sunday, and agree with the position as set out above.

## **Part 10: Funding**

Further detail on this aspect would be helpful.

## Para 11: Referees

This is an area that requires considerable development in parallel with the rest of the code in Otago.

## Para 12: Window of Competition

It is not feasible to re-establish weekly competition 5 weeks from now. These initiatives need to be implemented in a considered and professional fashion. The window of competition in general seems appropriate, but 2011 would be the earliest opportunity for an effective reintroduction of regular competition. Work towards that goal needs to begin now.

## Additional Comments

The proposal paints a picture that is generally appealing, but is far too light on practical detail to inspire confidence. How will these things be achieved in real terms?

Much of what is described is simply an image of times gone by with no compelling explanation of what will have changed to enable sustainability and growth over time. We had large and successful junior competitions, now we do not. We had regular club football, now we do not. We had Otago Premier Mens, Development, Maori, Women, Under 18's and Under 16's representative programmes. Now we do not.

The priority must be to address why this has occurred. Until we do, nothing has changed.

The most perceptive part of the proposal is the very first paragraph which identified a lack of capable volunteers and key personnel as an issue. This is the reason the game has not enjoyed sustained growth and instead has experienced a rollercoaster of success and failure. It has nothing to do with football and everything to do with administration. Recruit, retain and sustain a healthy and capable administration at District level and everything else follows.

This needs to be the primary focus of any meaningful proposal to re-establish rugby league in Otago.

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# PROPOSAL TO RE-CONSTITUTE OTAGO RUGBY LEAGUE

## Background

Due to a variety of factors, involving funding availability of key personnel and lack of volunteers and coaches to sustain a local competition, Otago Rugby League has been in recess for the past two years. This has resulted in no organised competition at club level and effectively the demise of the game within the region.

Despite this, interest in Rugby League remains strong within Otago and indications are that there would be sufficient players interested in being part of an organised competition if this could be established. Further, in 2009 despite no club competition and in response to a request from Southland Rugby League to play a representative fixture, an Otago trial was held that resulted in an Under 20 and a Senior Men's premier representative squad being selected. The subsequent games against Southland were won convincingly by Otago, reinforcing the talent and depth that exists within the region. Following from these games the Under 20 team has sought to retain its members and play further games. A fixture is currently being sought with the West Coast.

## Observations

It is evident that sufficient interest exists to re-establish a Rugby League competition within Otago and provide impetus to grow the game.

The introduction of 'KiwiSport' provides an opportunity to target primary schools with a modified form of the game and lead to the establishment of a primary schools inter-school competition. The reality that coaches and administrators for such a competition are likely to come from parental and family involvement should not be overlooked. What is needed to support this possible pool of volunteers is a coaching and training structure ideally provided through Regional Development Officers of the Southern Zone Rugby League.

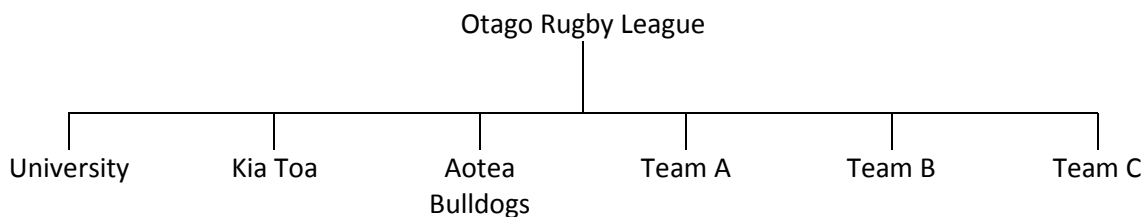
The establishment of Rugby League within primary schools will foster growth of the game through increased participation of school-aged children both male and female at intermediate school and then on to secondary school, with the possible establishment of a secondary school competition.

The lack of a club competition within Otago since 2007 has resulted in a dissipation of the club structure and resources. The only clubs that may reasonably be able to reform and function to a reasonable level are Otago University, Kia Toa Tigers, and the Bulldogs. It is therefore necessary to look at forming a new vehicle to deliver a senior club competition that does not solely rely on the formation of specific clubs, which in the past have often been reliant on one or two key personnel to run and coach what were single team clubs.

## The Proposal

1. It is proposed that Otago Rugby League be re-constituted with the formation of a Management Committee that would assume responsibility for the development of the game and provide general oversight and local area governance.
2. Day to day operational matters would be vested to Otago Touch through a Management Agreement with the Southern Zone Board of New Zealand Rugby League (NZRL). The Otago Touch Association has the systems and structure to provide administration for Otago Rugby League. There is synergy between Touch (a largely summer sport) and those playing Rugby League. In the winter, Touch's quiet period, the capability exists for administration of League to occur.
3. A senior competition would be instigated with initially an 'expression of interest' being advertised to assess how many 'clubs' could be formed. As previously indicated it is possible that at least three clubs may be capable of re-forming being University, Kia Toa Tigers and the Bulldogs. If one further club can be formed this would allow for a four team senior competition.

Aside from the clubs mentioned, it is proposed that an 'open trial' is called and dependent on numbers, further teams formed from those attending and committing. These 'teams' would be affiliated direct to Otago Rugby League who would appoint coaches and support staff. This potentially may provide for a six team senior competition.



4. Format  
The competition would be a round robin over two rounds played over a 12 week period with the top two teams playing off in the final.
5. Subsidiary Competition  
Subject to numbers and level of interest, it is proposed that a junior (Under 18) competition also be instituted that can be run either as a schools (secondary schools) competition or as a club (affiliated) competition. Discussion with the Otago Secondary Schools Sports Association will take place to explore the potential support for such a competition.  
  
The development of this junior competition is seen as crucial for the establishment of a pathway and as a vehicle for younger players to move into the senior competition over time.
6. Representative Programme  
With the establishment of a club competition within the region, the conclusion of the senior competition will flow on to 'trials' to select Otago representative squads at Premier, Development, and Under 20 age group. A representative fixture list will be developed re-introducing representative games against Southland, West Coast, and Canterbury. This will assist in growing the game, raising the profile of Rugby League and providing higher level opportunities for the players.

7. Participation Model

Key to the growth of Rugby League in the Otago region is the targeting of primary school-aged children. It is proposed that a modified form of the game is introduced to the primary schools to encourage greater participation in sport and provide both female and male children the opportunity to choose to be involved in a different sport, whilst also developing fundamental skills. Such an initiative lends itself to sourcing some funding contribution through KiwiSport.

Such an initiative will be reliant on the support of Southern Zone League Development Officers to provide guidance to schools, run skills sessions, and train the teachers in how to run the modified form of the game. This will lead to inter-class, inter-school tournaments and competitions and with secondary schools possibly embracing Rugby League, create a pathway for youth to progress within the game through to senior level.

Assistance in the training/teaching of volunteers to officiate and carry out administrative roles at this 'primary' level will also be necessary. This has the benefit that many of those exposed to coach/volunteer training will follow their children through therefore providing a base of volunteers through to senior level over time.

8. Grounds/Venue

Grounds for the senior competition will be determined in conjunction with the Dunedin City Council. It is envisaged that the junior competition would be played on school grounds or at a centrally located sports ground. Primary schools would utilise their own school grounds. Representative fixtures are likely to be focussed on Tahuna Park.

9. Timing

One of the factors leading to the demise of a Rugby League competition in Otago was the playing of League on Saturdays. The competition from other codes and work commitments drew potential players away from the code.

A return to Rugby League being played on Sunday would likely attract greater support both in terms of players' base and public involvement. It will also make ground availability easier. It will also address the reality that at both senior and junior (secondary school) a large number of potential League players are involved with Rugby Union. A move back to Sunday will provide those players with a choice as to what code to play, and the option of playing both Rugby and League. It will certainly provide greater flexibility than previously existed.

10. Funding

Core funding to support the basic infrastructure in re-developing the game will be sought from the Otago Community Trust, with other Trusts being approached to provide specific support, i.e. playing strips etc.

A player levy will also be introduced to assist with offsetting costs and to build up funds to partly meet representative expenses.

11. Referees/Officials

Otago Rugby League in conjunction with Otago Touch will need to ascertain how many referees are available within the region that are capable of officiating at senior level. Certainly we see the need for the Southern Zone to conduct a series of referee refresher courses and courses for beginning referees who could then officiate at junior level.

In order for the senior competition to proceed we estimate that a minimum of six senior referees will be required. We will make contact with personnel who were involved two years ago and enquire as to their availability and what level of updating of their knowledge of the rules may be required.

The establishment of a pool of six referees will provide for a match referee for up to three senior games each Sunday and two touch judges for each game. A roster of Otago League committee members will be established to provide assistance in setting out flags, post pads and any game day administrative requirements. In the absence of a full roster of League referees, we will work with the Otago Touch Association to utilise and further train Touch referees to fulfil these roles.

12. Window of Competition

The Rugby League competition would likely run concurrent with the local club Rugby season which is 3 April – 17/24 July 2010. Rugby League would commence in earnest May through to July (12 weeks) followed by a range of representative fixtures from August through to October.

13. Process

- i) This proposal is placed before the Southern Zone Board to facilitate discussion over the proposed re-establishment of a competitive club structure within Otago and develop initiatives to grow the game across the region.
- ii) Otago Rugby league therefore seeks the Southern Zone Board's approval of the proposal and then its forwarding to the NZRL for discussion and sanctioning.

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Chief Executive, Sport Otago  
(Southern Zone Board Member)