





# CALLING THE GAME

*Tracey Holmes*

'That's one small step for man, one giant leap for mankind.'

My memories are so clear (perhaps only slightly glazed with age and myth) because that day determined my future. That day I walked on the moon with Neil Armstrong. That day I fell in love with radio.

Those words came seeping through my radio in the dark, early hours of 21 July 1969. I was three at the time, living in South Africa. I remember my mum sitting with me, at the kitchen table. There was a single globe suspended from the ceiling by an old, grey cord. A hazy yellow light emanated from it and in the surrounding streets not a sound could be heard other than the crackling words from the man in the moon bouncing out of my radio and ricocheting off our wooden floor boards. The little bar heater was on and for extra warmth we had blankets over our legs.

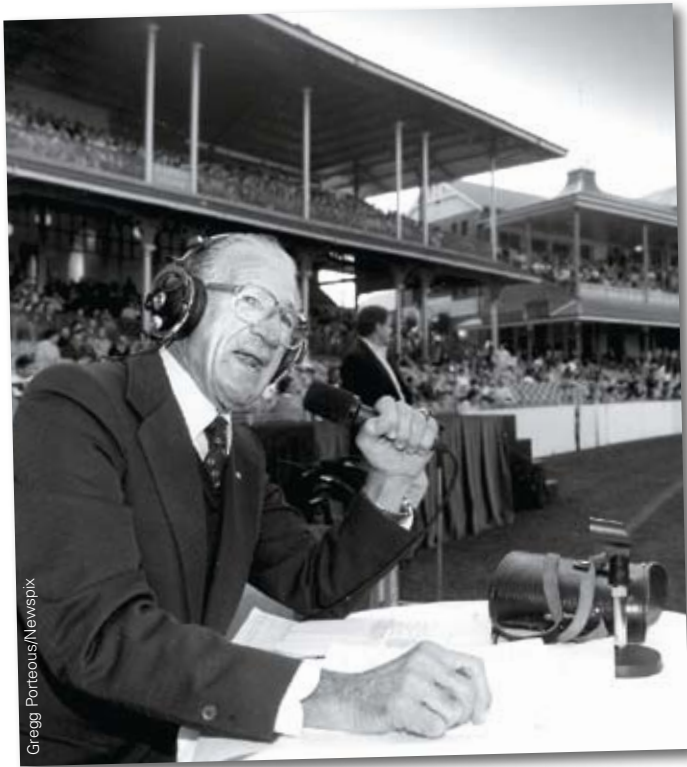
That other great one-liner, 'I have a dream', also seems apt because nothing else in this world enables you to transport yourself to other places with other people from other times quite like the radio. TV shows you what to think. Radio allows you to draw your own pictures — to put yourself in somebody else's shoes, to run someone else's race, to live in someone else's life, even to walk on the moon. Radio doesn't show you black or white, male or female, rich or poor. You can become

anything and everything you hear on the radio. You are limited only by your own imagination.

Radio for me is a field of dreams that lies side by side with that other great field of dreams: the sports field ... the buzz of the crowd in a sold-out State of Origin stadium, the drama of the clash, the Fibros versus the Silvertails, the euphoria of victory, the tragedy of defeat. Unlike newspapers which are always a day late, and TV, which reduces and contains the spectacle, the radio fills your room, surrounds you, puts you in the thick of it.

As I sat at that kitchen table and first came under the spell of radio, I was unaware of another radio broadcast that took place only hours before: Frank Hyde calling Balmain's 30–6 victory over Canterbury as the Tigers continued on their way to that year's premiership. It was still a couple of years before I would return to the land of my birth to hear those other famous radio words, 'It's long enough, it's high enough, it's straight between the posts!'

By the 1960s Frank Hyde was a household name in rugby league circles — the voice of the game. By the 1970s Frank became the master craftsman paving the way for others to follow. There were only two 'musts' in life back then: Frank Hyde all weekend and *Countdown* on Sunday nights. Frank Hyde's legendary radio broadcasts would take you into the middle of



Gregg Porteous/Newspix

the game — attacking, defending, kicking, running — everything but refereeing, to be honest.

He wasn't the only one of course, there were others appealing to different tastes in different markets ... Tiger Black, Col Pearce and Alan Marks all had card tables of their own, neatly placed next to Frank's on the sideline, as the ABC and the dominant commercial stations took each other on, head to head in their efforts to provide the best live coverage of the greatest game ever played. And growing up in a state dominated by Aussie Rules, there was a young boy named Rex Hunt who was also dreaming at the time. He'd sit in his bedroom calling make-believe footy games into an old fruit tin and broadcasting to all his imaginary friends.

Some things never change. My own sons use the microphones from their karaoke sets to do exactly the same thing ... they can call any rugby league game as long as it features the Rabbitohs.

One of the tricks of the trade for a commentator was to 'become' the ball. That way you would never fall behind the action nor get too far ahead of it. As the game slowed, so would the commentary. If the tempo picked up, the commentator would too. Like a tide ebbing and flowing, the ball would rise and fall, as would your favourite caller.

Then the '80s arrived. Tina Turner, Billy Idol, Duran Duran. It was the era of the sequel. Indiana Jones and Rambo kept on coming back. Even rugby league calls had to happen in twos. Rugby league calling in that decade was dominated by Greg Hartley and Peter Peters. The former player and former referee were known as Hollywood & Zorba for their brash, flashy, afraid-of-nobody broadcasts. It was lights, cameras and action — all in the make-believe world of radio. It was words with fireworks.

Rugby league as a game was changing too. The fans wanted more. Players had to give more. It was modern day warfare and the commentators adjusted accordingly. Accuracy was making way for the colourful, even the absurd. It was less about being the ball and more about being the entire carnival.

Listening from the shadows was the next generation of legendary radio callers, each eager to create their own styles and images. Also listening were two comedians who could see the logical conclusion of the path league was heading down. They were preparing for an assault which would not only bring the league a whole lot of followers it had never had before, but would also offer some of the diehards new life as the world moved into the next decade.

The 1990s were both edgy and ridiculous. Michael Jackson went from disco to horror. ACDC presented their *Razors Edge* album and Madonna went from good Catholic girl to a writhing,

groaning fantasy nobody could comfortably tell their parents about. Then of course came the Spice Girls. Our movies also swung towards ridicule — Austin Powers was the playboy of the future and a talking pig became the world's number one *Babe*. Money, promises and News Limited then ripped through the barrier like a charged-up Phar Lap. It tore rugby league in two ... the Super League war was an all out assault on tradition as the painful birth of modern day celebrity burst through the gates.

Enter, stage left: Roy Slaven and HG Nelson. The great pretenders. In fact, these guys proved once again that fantasy is often better than reality. They invented a past and painted themselves as legends in the game. They arrived with hero status without ever having done the hard yards either on the paddock or in the commentary box. Like all true rugby league champions though, nobody saw the effort they put in behind the scenes. Just as one of our captains of club, state and country, Andrew Johns, practised kicking against the wall of his dad's garage after school each day till the garage collapsed, Roy and HG had been doing the hard yards on their repertoire for some time.

They brought with them all the accuracy and precision of the '70s with an unquestionable knowledge of the game — but they made it more than it ever was. Players' names went out the window; it was image that counted. 'The Brick with Eyes', 'Backdoor Benny', 'The Underpants' and 'The 180B Man' (as in yesterday's man) were the names that players became known by. Ridiculous, far-fetched hilarity (only sometimes based on truth) was the new accurate. Even moves had nicknames — 'the face massage', 'the hospital pass', 'the squirrel grip' — and all of this was apparently broadcast from the 'Triple J card table' in reference to the god of callers, Frank Hyde. In reality they were in a radio studio in Ultimo — not a footy ground in sight — but Roy and HG brought the game to life.

Now that we've reached the noughties, as we celebrate the centenary of rugby league in Australia, we've seen a morphing of the two strands of commentary. Accuracy, precision and speed are mixed with the jocular, the fanciful and the humorous. Today's rugby league callers are sometimes a parody of themselves. Their knowledge is all-encompassing, their voices are like trained opera singers, taking us quietly and deeply into meditative concentration before a conversion ... through to the loud, frenzied, excitement of the final minute field goal that decides a grand final ... and oh, so cleverly, they combine their little idiosyncrasies that have made them popular with their fans.

The beauty of today's commentators is that they are omnipresent and omniscient. While the players of the game are ordinary people striving for extraordinary moments, the commentators are the gods, looking down from their heavenly boxes. With a single word they can anoint or destroy. The faithful masses nod and agree: hell awaits those who think otherwise. The commercial god, Ray Hadley, is always outraged. The non-commercial god, David Morrow, is always 'in the know'. They have always 'just spoken to' the man of the moment; they are the walking, talking record books; they know all the personalities and are involved in backroom discussions that influence the future of the game. They are our eyes and our ears.

Rugby league radio callers from this fabulous century of the game — we stand and applaud you for the hours of entertainment you have given us and continue to give us. Through you we feel the hits, we smell the liniment, we score the tries, we suffer the injuries and we celebrate the victories. You magically bring our dreams to life.

For us, your loyal listeners, you are rugby league.

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*Sports broadcaster Tracey Holmes can be heard regularly on ABC local radio program Grandstand.*