

Cover  
feature

# GAME *Changers*

By Brian Kelly



Members of Northern Suburbs Netball and Butchers Junior Rugby League

It's been covered in cowpats and carnivals and has hosted everything from rained-out shows to royalty, so opening its gates to accommodate a boom in youngsters playing footy would seem no big deal for Bulli Showground.

But for Thirroul's junior rugby league players, the move is a game-changer.

With the young Butchers teams filling Gibson Park to overflowing, finding alternative space to train was becoming a headache for club officials – until a deal was struck late last year.

Club president Ryan White said a breakthrough with Illawarra Rugby League and Greyhounds Racing NSW created a lease so the Butchers juniors could train and play a few home games at the Bulli venue.

“We had a situation where we would have up to seven teams training at the same time on a space 100m in length and 68m wide – it was chaos,” he said. More than 500 junior players and 180 seniors have been sharing the one facility.

Rugby league has been part of Thirroul's community since 1913, and the junior outfit was formed in 1930. At least 4000 players have worn the famous stripes, and the 230 kids representing 120 families who attended the club's season launch on February 6 shows the blue and white bandwagon is not slowing down.

The launch was held at Bulli Showground, allowing players to get a feel of the grass they'll soon tackle and run on.

The advent of competitions for girls and women

has been but one factor behind Thirroul's rising player figures. Another key link to growth has been a partnership formed with Norths Netball Club seven years ago.

Ryan said the affiliation had led to benefits including keeping children playing sport well into their teens and even saving parents money.

"To encourage kids to take up and stay in sport, you need to develop programs on and off the field, which requires funding," he said. "With our partnership with Norths Netball, we have been able to increase our sponsorship revenue dramatically.

"For one sponsorship payment, our sponsors get exposure across both clubs. Also, combining our buying power drives better deals and savings. A prime example is combining our clothing purchases to go to the market with greater volume to get lower prices."

Norths Netball president Katie Rollinson said the "remarkable" growth in her club's player numbers was matching a national trend.

"Our membership is up 36 per cent over the past three years – roughly 10 per cent year on year, which is an outcome we're incredibly proud of, and one that simply wouldn't be possible without the support and enthusiasm of our partners at the Butchers," Katie said.

"Kids are getting more opportunities to play sport and our clubs are stronger because of it.

"Parents regularly tell us they value the sense of community, weekly routine, and inclusive team environment that netball provides. That consistency makes it easy for families to plan around sport, and with many netballers now also playing league tag or junior rugby league, the appeal just keeps broadening.

"The sport's accessibility also makes it a natural fit for busy families. It's inexpensive to play, easy to pick up at a young age, and teams operate in most communities including the northern suburbs."

Ryan said both clubs were great at providing off-the-field experiences for players and families,

regarding it as vital for player inclusiveness.

Officials recognise the value of events such as team dinners, ten-pin bowling and memory-making experiences such as NRL game days.

"In 2025, we took 120 players to the women's State of Origin game in Sydney and also the men's match. Both clubs also hold end-of-season presentation days that are second to none," he said.

"Both club committees are open to players freely moving between the two sports. Having the association enables kids to be able to experience both sports and change with total comfort and confidence. This is seeing kids find their niche and staying involved in sport longer.

"I know I continue to learn from the netball committee on how they run their organisation and have copied their strengths, such as social media. This has led to us being a better club with these improvements and has also made volunteering easier and less time-consuming."

In senior ranks, five Butchers got their 2026 seasons off to a flying start in a different code. Ivy Foster, Keita Shipton, Cleo Monagle, Violet Noonan and Ava McCarthy were part of the University of Wollongong rugby sevens squad that went to Japan in January and became undefeated Asia Pacific champions.

In the men's teams, first grade will be looking to hand off last year's wooden spoon. Reserve grade fared better in Harrigan Plate fixtures, finishing third on the ladder behind Wests and Avondale.

Exciting off-season signings include backline specialist Brent Naden, 29, while former St George Illawarra player Corey Allan will also bolster the backs. Four under-18s Butchers – Max van Loo, Cooper Maroun, Ben Levy and Logan Fenwick – were selected for St George Illawarra for a squad due to face a Newcastle Hunter team in Laurie Daley Cup first round action in January.

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