



# SPORTSDAY

## League must do better

Paul Malone



RUGBY league as a sport had an opportunity to make a stand for protecting the right of its people to have different views without being ridiculed for them.

But after Canterbury's Mormon prop Ben Hannant was sledged several times in references to his faith in Friday's game, it was once again all too convenient to hide behind the shop-worn adage "what happens on the field, stays on the field".

No sport, no workplace in Australia, can permit so easily this sort of abuse in 2010.

Australia being the more secular society that it is, a man gets little respect for being well known for his religious beliefs. If you want popularity, it's better to lobby government for free pies at the footy or devote your life to the preservation of a tree frog.

Wests Tigers prop Bryce Gibbs was not charged yesterday for the alleged religious comments he made to Hannant.

The Bulldogs made no formal complaint under the NRL's anti-vilification code after Hannant insisted several times he did not want to make a complaint against Gibbs.

For the conclusion of the dispute to be yesterday's public warning by NRL chief executive David Gallop to all clubs and players that it "will continue to investigate allegations of vilification" was not satisfactory.

The NRL's match review committee yesterday listened to referees' audio of the incident and interviewed the two referees. The committee also

studied video of the dispute to see if there were any clues to who said what.

Ultimately, this NRL process works best if a player makes a complaint. Clubs must help make would-be complainants more comfortable in standing up for their rights.

"Ben Hannant and the Bulldogs have declined to... provide any other information which would allow the NRL to act under its code of conduct," Gallop said.

"It is unacceptable to suggest that everything that happens on the field stays on the field."

A radio interview Canterbury chief executive Todd Greenberg did with Ray Hadley on Saturday, relayed into Brisbane by 4BC, was instructive.

Greenberg said he had supported Hannant in a long conversation on Friday night and even asked him if he wanted to "sleep on" a decision on whether he wanted to lodge a complaint.

The interview ended with Greenberg agreeing with Hadley that it was best sometimes that what happens on the field should stay on the field.

Gibbs was adamant on Saturday that he had nothing to apologise for. Tigers chief executive Stephen Humphreys told Sydney's *Daily Telegraph* on Sunday that he had reminded Gibbs of his on-field responsibilities.

"We have counselled the players about where the lines are and what should and shouldn't be crossed," Humphreys said.

League provides opportunity every year to players of many ethnicities and religions to improve their lives. It also has a chequered history with how it treats race and religion and needs to do more if it is to be widely regarded

as an inclusive sport.

Hazem El Masri was rightly smothered in love in his retirement year. But when El Masri and his wife previously did a television interview, it led to the first hate mail of his career, leading him to conclude "a lot of people are hostile towards Muslim people because of their ignorance... they don't want to learn".

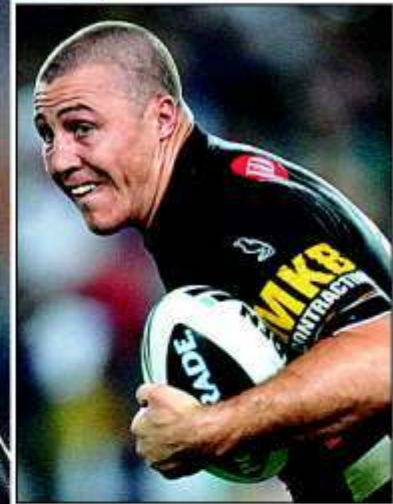
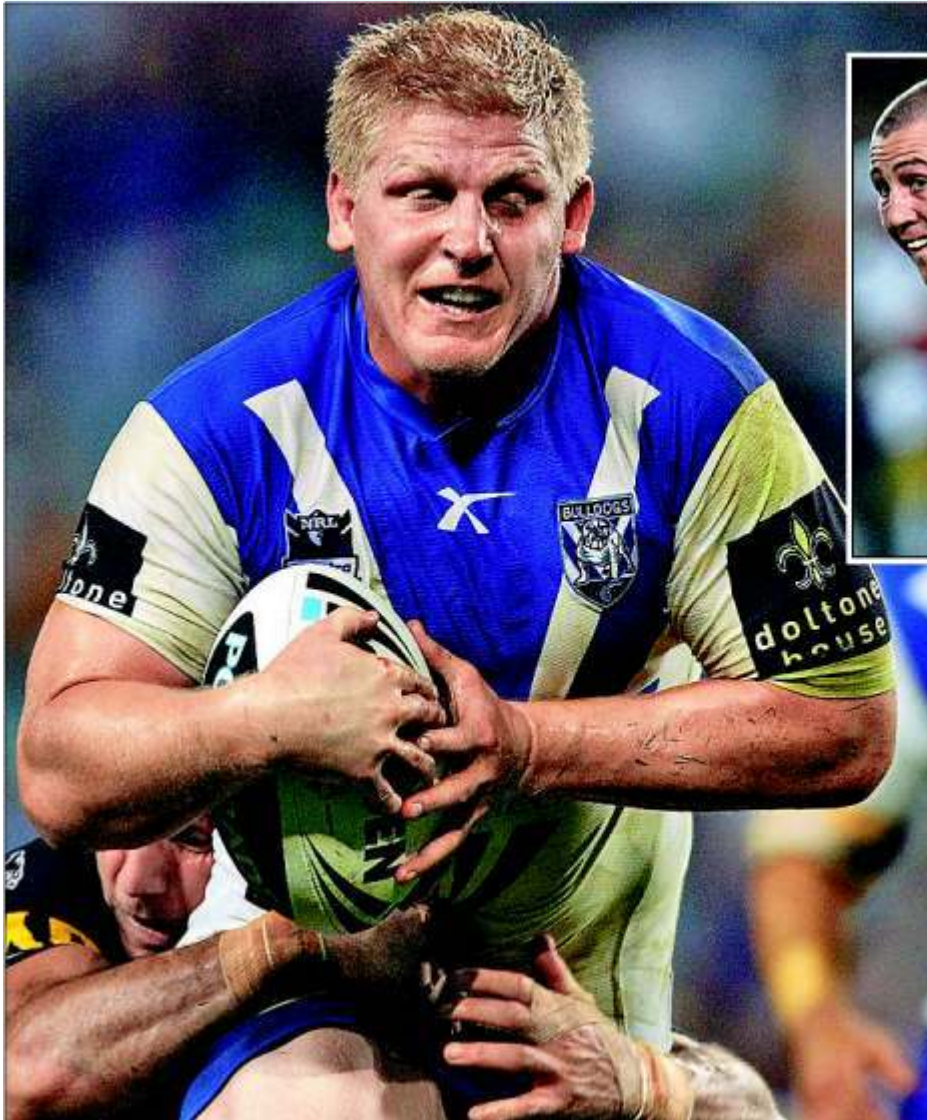
The NRL was able to act against a racial slur made by Cronulla's Paul Gallen against Dragons player Mickey Paea last year, even though Paea declined to make an official complaint. Gallen was fined \$10,000 because the response by Paea, recorded on the match audio, effectively provided evidence.

Sixty-two years on, the treatment of Len Smith still stinks. Smith did his best to maintain a dignified silence when he was left out of the 1948 Kangaroo tour despite being the incumbent captain and coach. Many felt some league officials wanted him left at home because of his Catholic faith.

League historian Sean Fagan says he asked Smith in 1998 if he thought his omission was based on religion. "He reluctantly said 'Yes,'" Fagan wrote on rl1908.com.

Gallop said over the past few days there was an "element of frustration" at NRL headquarters. "If nothing else, this matter should serve as a reminder that there are limits to what can be said on the field and that we all have to acknowledge society standards," he added.

It was also a reminder to players that in the NRL, you can say virtually whatever you like to an opponent, provided you are willing to take the risk that the nature of the complaint process will save you.



**UNSATISFACTORY:**  
Wests Tigers prop Bryce Gibbs (above) escaped penalty for an alleged religious slur against Canterbury prop Ben Hannant.

**Pictures:**  
Getty Images,  
Mark Evans