



Ensuring News scoops on league

Roy Masters looked at the fine print in the Super League contracts and found a clause which would have delivered exclusive stories to News Corp media

Now that we can enjoy some respite from the Super League war, it is timely to examine a little publicised reason for News Ltd's assault on rugby league.

Under the Star League contracts which each Super League player was asked to sign, there was significant potential for News Ltd to monopolise exclusive product for its media outlets. It wasn't a simple matter of using rugby league to sell subscriptions to Foxtel, 50 per cent owned by News Ltd.

If a fan wanted to read the inside story on Ricky Stuart's groin, it could have only been seen in the *Daily Telegraph* or one of Pacific Publications magazines.

Clause 4.4 of the Star League contracts refers to 'negative promotional obligations.' It says '...the Super League player shall not: ... (b) (i) Make or issue any statement, give or allow any person any recorded or other interview of film footage for broadcast or write (or ghost write) any article relating to rugby league football ... for publication (in or on any medium)'.

But, realistically it would not have been in News Ltd's interest to keep all non-Murdoch-owned media in the dark. Denying *The Sydney Morning Herald* access to games would diminish the market for a product owned by News Ltd.

Sure, there would be some readers who switched to *The Daily Telegraph* because they couldn't read any league in the *Herald*. But a total

shut out of Fairfax publications would result in a greater number of potential rugby league supporters losing all interest in the game.

Presumably, this would have included possible subscribers to Foxtel.

Furthermore, because the Super

(News Ltd) photographer remained.

I was not invited to the Super League media launch, despite the fact I am rugby league editor at *The Sydney Morning Herald*. When one of my colleagues rang to challenge this, a member of Super League's media unit said: 'As for Ray Hadley (of radio 2UE) and Roy Masters, when they start writing fair and balanced reports, they will be welcomed back.'

'Fair and balanced' by whose definition?

There are also the editorial implications of News Ltd's equity in some Super League clubs. News effectively owns the Broncos and holds 50 per cent equity in the Western Reds, Canberra Raiders

and North Queensland Cowboys.

News and its sports interests share some directors and managers. On January 3 this year, the editorial staff of the *Townsville Bulletin/Advertiser* wrote to Bob Muscat, News Ltd chief operating officer.

The letter began: 'Editorial staff of the *Townsville Bulletin* and the *Advertiser* are concerned about a recent decision by management of the North Queensland Newspapers to pull the front page of the *Advertiser* because it might reflect badly on the North Queensland Cowboys or adversely affect ticket sales to Cowboy matches.'

The episode illustrates the conflicts of interest that media ownership of other businesses can so readily create.

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League business plan meant News Ltd owned the game until all its investment was recouped, a shrinking market would have meant fewer ticket sales, reduced sponsorship and lower merchandising sales.

However, there was considerable potential, under the Star League contracts for News Ltd to control the exclusives on important stories while permitting non-News Ltd media only limited access.

During the Super League war, we saw ample indication of News Ltd behaving proprietorially towards certain stories. When a *Sun-Herald* (Fairfax) photographer sought to take pictures of a meeting of Super League players one Saturday, he was asked: 'What paper are you from?' He was ordered away when he identified himself, yet the *Sunday Telegraph*