

# Johns a Kiwi in 2007?

by Marvin France

All-time great Andrew Johns is to play for the Kiwis to commemorate New Zealand's first rugby league tour.

Rugby league commentator Allen McLaughlin says while there is a lot of football to be played before 2007, the prospect of Johns wearing the black and white jersey will lift league's profile immensely and be a defining moment for the game.

"It won't just provide a small boost for the game in this country — this is going to be of interest to everyone."

The man Johns is replicating, Herbert Henry "Dally" Messenger, was the cornerstone on which rugby league was built.

In 1907, Messenger was drawn from rugby union to play for the All Golds, who had stopped in Australia en route to England to play three matches against New South Wales.

It was described as the most significant signing in the history of Australian sport.

Nicknamed the Master for his inventive running style, extreme fitness and exceptional kicking, Messenger helped draw the crowds, which were vital for the professional game's success.

He was then invited to join the All Golds touring party to England where he became a phenomenon.

After the tour, Messenger played in league's new competition and was the code's star attraction until 1913.

Sean Fagan, in his book *The Rugby Rebellion: The Divide of League and Union*, says Messenger's decision to change codes was the catalyst for league

becoming dominant in New South Wales and Queensland.

It drew other players from union and prevented Aussie Rules from entrenching itself in Sydney.

"He's genuinely regarded by rugby league people as one of the greatest of all time," says McLaughlin.

"Dally Messenger was probably the greatest of his era and Andrew Johns is the greatest of the modern era."

This year Johns has been in the best form of his career.

He had only played one game after coming back from a broken jaw when he turned on a match-winning performance for NSW in the second State of Origin in June this year.

Johns was the deciding factor in that series. In the first game, with Johns unavailable, Queensland won 24-20.

The combined score of the second and third games was 64-32 to NSW.

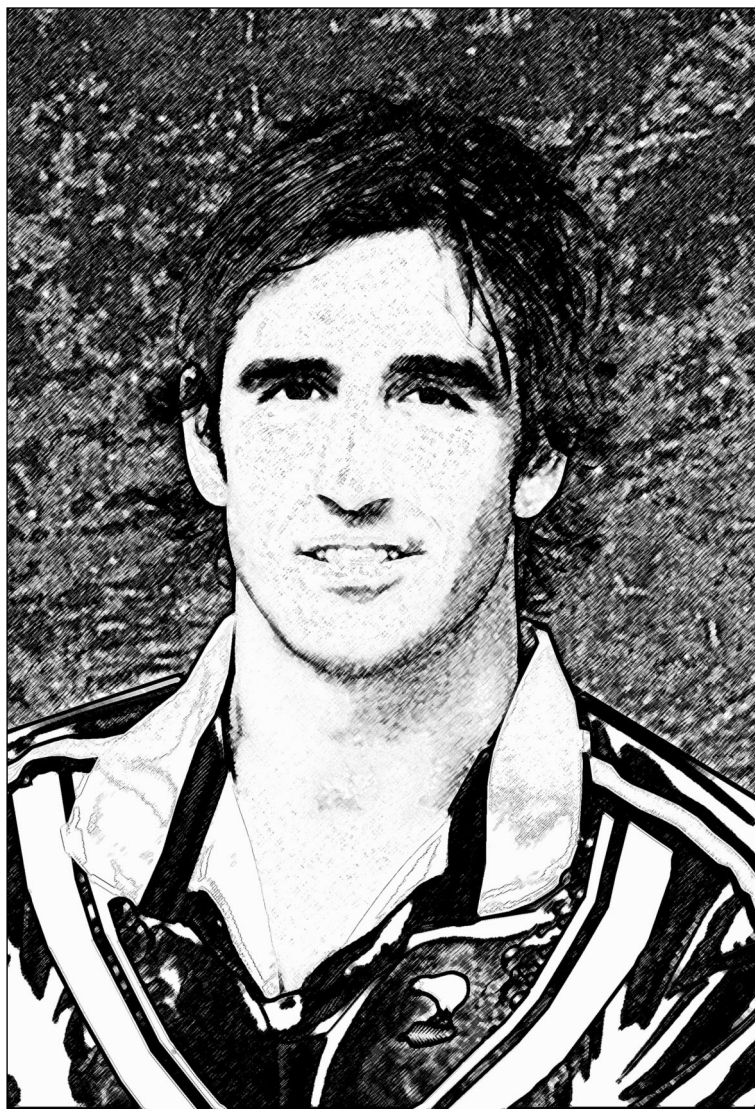
Since returning from injury Johns has turned Newcastle into one of the best clubs in the competition, winning eight out of their last 11 games.

The three-time Dally M medallist missed out on a fourth this week by just one point — a remarkable feat considering he has played only 16 games.

"I've always held the opinion that Wally Lewis was the best player I've ever seen in terms of winning football matches — but now Johns has supplanted him," says McLaughlin.

"He has the greatest range of skills I've ever seen. His passing off his left side is equally as good as off his right side.

"He can kick brilliantly off either foot and he has a physical



JOHNS IN BLACK: An artist's impression of Johns as a Kiwi.

presence like no other halfback.

"That's what sets him apart. He could easily knock over the biggest prop in the competition front on."

The Johns road show is set to hit England this week and is being met with huge anticipation.

League received unprecedented coverage in England when news broke that Johns had signed a short-term contract to play for Warrington in their final Super League games.

It was the lead story in all major media outlets, including the BBC.

## Frazier still smokin' after all these years

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"Sometimes you've got to do the hard graft that needs to be done. I think it's the things you don't do that leave a person with regrets."

Sheridan says it is Frazier's heart and unconquerable self-belief that made him special.

"He fought on adrenalin, he fought on desire, he fought on pathos. He fought on that intangible quality you call heart and that is what makes Joe Frazier, his heart.

"I knew Joe Frazier before he won the world title and I have known him since he left the game of boxing. He is a true gentleman and his heart continues to lead the way in his life," says Sheridan.

Since retirement Frazier has continued to battle obstacles. He has developed diabetes, and his kidneys and high blood pressure still trouble him.

In 1999 Frazier was hit by a truck and, among other serious injuries, split his spine.

His manager, Les Wolff, laughingly says: "100 fights for Joe, no problem, articulated truck, bit more of a problem".

Frazier, who has a metal plate in his neck from the accident, calls himself the "bionic man".

He makes light of his troubles and at 61 bears little sign of his battles with health other than a shuffling limp.

Frazier sums himself up rather simply: "I never was a quitter. I'm proud to say I always gave it all. I still do and I guess that's something."

# Journos 'uppity' about Halbergs

by Duncan Greive

A member of the Halberg Awards Academy has strongly criticised recent changes to its make-up.

Veteran sports broadcaster Brendan Telfer believes the Halberg Trust's move to have sports people rather than journalists dominate the decision making will have a negative effect on the quality of future awards.

"We found that when they started bringing these [sports] people on to the panel that they would know *nothing* about sport.

"We would be having these quite complex discussions about say, the 470 sailors, who won a world title. We were trying to determine how significant that title was. And some of the sports people on the panel didn't even know what a 470 yacht was."

Telfer says one of the great strengths of the Awards Academy — which decides the Halberg Awards winners — in the past was its disregard for public opinion.

"We were never the slightest bit concerned about what the public felt about us. We basically said to the public, 'Go jump in the lake'.

"It's not a beauty contest. It's not a popularity contest. It's about rewarding excellence in sport. It's the only thing we're interested in."

Following the inaugural People's Choice Awards last year, which are decided by public vote, the trust felt the Halberg Awards would be more credible if they had more current sports people on the panel.

"Journalists aren't terribly well liked, I suppose. There was this feeling that these uppity sports journalists, who'd never played any sport themselves, were making these weird decisions, and there was this really

simplistic attitude that 'shouldn't sports people be judging sports people?'"

The 2004 panel was evenly split between journalists and sports people, but the balance has been tipped further against journalists, leading *Listener* sports columnist Joseph Romanos to quit the panel in protest.

Telfer had also resigned but was persuaded to rejoin for a further year.

He believes sports people who are currently active are biased towards their own sports and thus unlikely to be aware of the magnitude of achievements out-

side their own areas of expertise.

"On one occasion we were discussing the Canterbury Crusaders, who had won the Super 12 that year. And the chairman asked this very famous New Zealand sports-woman, who'd been very quiet up to this stage, 'well what do you think X?' And she just said 'oh, I hate rugby. I don't care'."

The awards were inaugurated in 1949, and the winner of the overall Halberg Award is generally recognised to have been New Zealand sport's greatest achiever in any given calendar year.

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