

# A change is as good as a Test

It's a new year, so change is in the air. STEVE MASCORD popped home for the holidays and reports on what's afoot

Christmas in summer really isn't that weird. It's a common refrain I hear in the northern hemisphere, that to get sunburnt on Christmas Day, to be outside in shorts and thongs (either meaning of 'thongs' will suffice) is almost Grinch-like. But the pool is every bit as convivial as the fireplace. Prawns, in all honesty, taste better than mince pies. And lager still tastes ... like lager.

As for Boxing Day, where would you rather be? The MCG for the cricket Test, or Mount Pleasant for Batley v Dewsbury?

Actually, I'd rather be at Mount Pleasant, but I'm weird like that. At least you could watch the Boxing Day Test on television if you couldn't get there.

With no actual rugby league being played Down Under right now, there is a smug satisfaction over what is in store from March 7. Big TV deal, Sonny Bill Williams is back, you'll be able to watch games on your iPad, for the first six weeks there'll only be three days where there is NOT an NRL game being played.

Between Christmas and New Year, a story ran about how rugby league players would soon be the highest paid in Australian sport. And it's a World Cup Year...? Well, they ain't talking about that so much in these parts...

Just before everyone donned the board shorts for Christmas Day, the NRL finalised some rule changes. Unlike the RFL, they didn't leave it until Christmas Eve...

The decision to outlaw the shoulder charge was an executive call, and no doubt the concerns - expressed publically - of doctors (and therefore lawyers) played a part. But when it came to how the ban would be worded, the ARL Commission called in the experts - like Wayne Bennett - and it was kind of ... un-banned.

As long as the arm of the defending player is not tucked into the body, it's business as usual. Players will not be cited for shoulder charges the referees miss - the video review committee will not look at them unless there is contact with the head.

Forty-20 understands referees have been told the changes to the rules regarding the shoulder charge will be, in all practicality, negligible.

The benefit of the doubt rule, which doesn't exist anywhere else in the rugby league world and the flaws of which were exposed when Manly eliminated North Queensland from the finals last year, has been ditched by new referees' boss Daniel Anderson.

For those of you who don't watch a lot of NRL, the "benefit of the doubt" has gone to the attacking team where a try sent



**Simplicity:** Former NZ Maori James Tamou plays for Australia versus New Zealand *ActionPhotographics*

upstairs to the video official has been too tough to call. In the majority of cases under the old rule, the referee would say "I have an opinion" when he sent the decision on a try upstairs. As a keen listener to Sportsears (Sean Hampstead once said during a game "don't worry, the only person listening is Steve Mascord"), I can tell you the intonation of the referees often implied very strongly that he knew better than the eye in the sky what had happened.

Sometimes, the man on the

field would 'coach' the video referee over what replays to watch, which always seemed arse-about to me. Now, one of the two men in the middle (we're sticking with that one, thanks) will give his opinion on whether a try has been scored first, then ask for the fellow in the grandstand to double-check if he deems this necessary.

The new system seems sensible. But if a whistler is otherwise having a blinder but keeps getting over-ruled by the man upstairs, will it affect his appointment for



**Shoulder guru:** Wayne Bennett pictured on 2010 Grand Final day in Sydney *ActionPhotographics*