

## EdRugby Online Educational Resource

### LESSON: Mark Ella Rugby legend

LEVEL

Lower secondary

### THEME: Rugby heritage

#### DESCRIPTION:

Students are introduced to the purpose and form of a biographical recount. They read a recount of Mark Ella, list main events and examine and identify metaphors and other language features.

#### OUTCOMES

This lesson contributes to the achievement of the following unit outcomes:

##### English

- With teacher guidance, identifies and discusses how linguistic structures and features work to shape readers' and viewers' understanding of texts.
- Interacts confidently with others in a variety of situations to develop and present familiar ideas, events and information.
- Considers aspects of context, purpose and audience when speaking and listening in familiar situations.

##### Studies of Society and Environment

- Describes how cultural groups, their belief systems and social organisation contribute to the identity of a society.
- Identifies and describes issues that are culturally important to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander societies and groups.

#### SUGGESTED TIME:

50 minutes

#### WHAT YOU NEED:

- photos of famous people
- magazines featuring biographical articles
- a range of biographies or other recounts (eg Nancy Wake by Peter Fitzsimons, Lionheart by Jesse Martin, Ned Kelly by John Molony, The True Story of Eddie Gilbert by Ken Edwards – your librarian may have some helpful suggestions)
- map of Sydney NSW (or street directory featuring the suburb of La Perouse)
- class copies of biography student handout (at the end of this lesson plan)

**PART 1 COLLECTING IDEAS**

a. Work with the whole class to collect a list of names of well known sporting heroes both past and present; for example Don Bradman, Cathy Freeman, Ian Thorpe and John Eales.

Show the class published biographies about some of these people. You may have additional source material such as magazines containing biographical articles or biographical videos. Ask the class some questions about biographies.

Prompt questions may include:

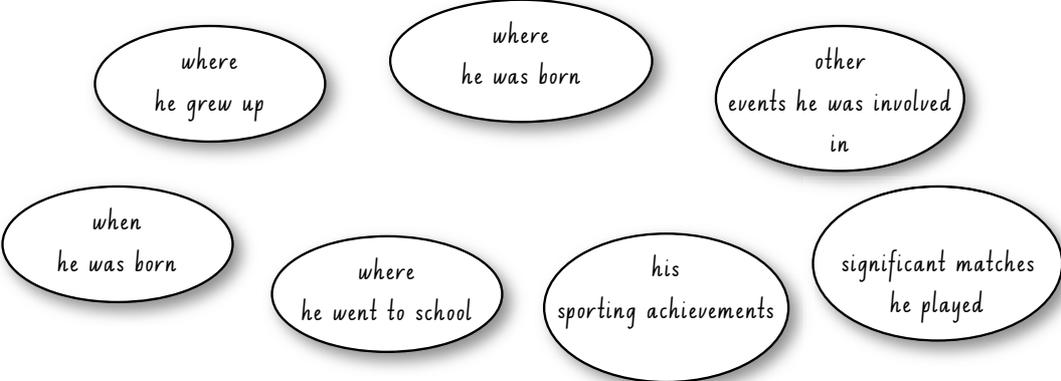
- What is a biography?
- What forms do biographies come in?
- What information do biographies contain?
- What is a biographical recount?

b. Choose a Rugby player the students are likely to know about, for example John Eales or George Gregan.

Ask the class the question:

What information do you find in a biography?

Work with the whole class to collect a list of things that may be found in an article about him.



c. Ask the class the question:

Why do people write biographies?

Possible responses may include:

- to remember people
- to inspire readers to meet challenges in life
- to get a new perspective on a person’s life
- to tell a story
- to reveal the truth.

Discuss why biographers write about people like John Eales and the other sporting heroes listed. Explain that Mark Ella is a significant person in the history of Rugby and that you and the class are going to learn more by reading a biographical recount about him.

## PART 2 MARK ELLA RECOUNT

- a. Show the photograph of Mark Ella and discuss his year of birth 1959. Students may be able to relate this to the age of their own relatives.

Show students a map of Sydney and locate the suburb of La Perouse.

Read out the title of the text and ask students to predict what things they may learn about Mark Ella.

Ask the class some questions about the Mark Ella recount:

What information would you expect to find in a recount?

Why would someone write this recount?

- b. Hand out a copy of the text to each student. Alternatively, show an OHT version of the text using an overhead projector.

Read the first paragraph aloud to the students. Discuss the purpose of this stage of the text, establishing its role as background.

- c. Read the rest of the text aloud. Ask students to signal when a new period of Mark's life starts (childhood, teenage, adulthood), correlating the paragraph, year, Mark's age and the main events that occurred. Make a record of student responses in a summary table similar to that shown below:

Period of life	Paragraph	Year	Age	Main events
<i>birth</i>	2		0	<i>n/a</i>
<i>childhood</i>	12			<i>Matraville High School with brothers Glen and Gary</i>
<i>adult</i>	13	1983	20	<i>awarded Young Australian of the Year</i>

Alternatively, complete this activity by organising students into small groups assigned to a single period of life or paragraph. Regroup and jointly construct the table.

## PART 3 LANGUAGE FEATURES

A key concept in talking about texts is language features. Language features refer to the actual language choices that are made by the author of the text.

### METAPHORS

a. Read out the following sentence:

‘What I’m about to tell you,’ he began, ‘is not meant to degrade your British style of play at all: I just think it is worth it to compare it with my own attitude towards Rugby...’ He was received in awed silence, except for the odd scratching of a pen as a coach scribbled notes. Talk about the infant preaching to the wise men in the temple.

Ask the class the questions:

What is meant by the final sentence ‘Talk about the infant preaching to the wise men in the temple.’?

What is the author trying to say?

Explain that a metaphor is used to emphasise the relationship between people or ideas and is created by referring to something as if it were something else. Since Mark Ella was introducing a group of experienced Rugby men to a few new ideas, he could be compared to an infant preaching to supposedly older and wiser people in a temple.

Continue discussing the basic concept of metaphors and other figures of speech such as symbols, allegories and similes. Discuss some examples that the class may be familiar with, such as ‘go for gold’ or ‘reach for the stars’.

b. Ask students in groups to read through the passage again and circle the words or phrases that use metaphors and other figures of speech. Some examples include ‘I can’t kick for peanuts...’ and ‘scribbling hieroglyphics...’.

As a group, discuss the students’ findings – to determine if the selected words or phrases are figures of speech – and the purpose of these words and phrases.

Prompt questions include:

How important are these words?

What purpose do they serve?

What would happen if these words were not used?

## PART 4 REFLECTION

Reflect on the value of diversity and teamwork in Rugby. Discuss the contributions made by Mark Ella to Aboriginal culture, Rugby, sport and the identity of Australia. Explore the significance of role models in sport and life, highlighting Mark Ella's achievements.

## PART 5 EXTENSION

- Go online and find out more about Australian indigenous culture. Explore [www.abc.net.au/message/](http://www.abc.net.au/message/)
- The flyhalf in a Rugby team is the decision-maker. Examine the Mark Ella text and extract sentences that describe this position and its importance to the game play.
- The flyhalf in a Rugby team is number 10. Construct a list of each team number and position name.
- Compare Mark Ella's contributions with other Rugby heroes such as John Eales and Nick Farr-Jones.
- Ask students to look through magazines and newspapers to find examples of metaphors and other figures of speech.
- Students can begin to complete their own biographical details in a summary table.
- Discuss the features, purpose and audience of this report, noting its origin (a companion book for Rugby fans).
- Explore the language used in this report, noting its origin (a companion book for Rugby fans). Compare to reports and biographies from other sources and with different audiences. How might the writing style change if it was written for a different purpose?
- Examine a range of biographies and read the text on the back cover. Write a short summary to go on the back cover of a biography about Mark Ella.
- Find a copy of *The Australian Rugby Companion 'the game they play in heaven'*, edited by Gordon Bray.
- Find out more about Mark Ella. Use the Internet to search for "Mark Ella". Find out more about his famous brothers Gary and Glen.
- Use the Internet to search for other prominent Aboriginal sporting heroes such as Cathy Freeman, Nova Peris and Evonne Cawley.



‘Improvement makes straight roads; but the crooked roads without improvement are the roads of genius.’

William Blake

Gordon Bray writes: Perhaps once, maybe twice, and, improbably, thrice in a lifetime, a Rugby player arrives from heaven by ‘special delivery’. A player with unique vision, instinctive reaction, a daring spirit and one-of-a-kind talent. A player who makes you, as a follower, feel privileged and fulfilled to have seen him perform first-hand.

For me, Mark Ella was such a player. The spearhead of the historic 1984 Grand Slam tour under Alan Jones, his remarkable style and talents restructured the coaching manual for back-line play. In five eventful seasons of Test Rugby, he always did things his way. Ella had his critics, but in truth his self-effacing approach was actually geared to satisfy appreciative spectators and fuel their continuing enjoyment of the game.

One such ardent fan was Frank Keating, the revered UK sports writer and unashamed Rugby nut. He penned this tribute to Mark Ella in his 1993 book *The Great Number Tens. (The Australian Rugby Companion)*

It is difficult, from this distance, to realise that [Stuart] Barnes' first one-off cap for England before [Rob] Andrew succeeded him was won at Twickenham against Australia on 3 November 1984, in direct confrontation with arguably the most regal and majestic No. 10 of all time. If Barry John was called, with reason, 'the king', then Mark Ella was the very 'prince' of fly-halves. Within a month, Ella's 1984 Wallabies inflicted a glorious whitewash on the four British Isles national teams. It was a voluptuous spasm in which the young Aboriginal – who, uniquely, scored tries in all four Tests – set coruscating new standards for the position.

And, in doing so, he preached what he practised. I was privileged to follow him throughout the tour. From Twickenham the Wallabies went to Belfast to prepare for the Dublin international. The touring team came in from practice at Ulster's ancient old club, Malone. It was bucketing down. The others returned, pronto, to the team hotel. Mark Ella stayed – to conduct a seminar. It was quite, quite memorable, and one recalls it like it was the day before yesterday.

He looks out at the rain, and shrugs and smiles: 'Sure, at home we only play in the rain two or three times a year. But we have to continue telling ourselves that our running game is suited to all conditions. Okay, it's wet – so you play your natural game and we'll play ours. Of course. We'll keep running the ball and, you'll see, it can be done. You have to make an effort to play good Rugby. So often in Britain, I guess, three-quarters trot out and say: 'Oh, its raining so let's just leave it to the forwards to slurp around.'

'If backs don't try anything what are they out there for?'

There are more things in the philosophy of young Mark Ella than are dreamed of by the majority of greybearded, clipboard-screaming coaches in Britain. For almost an hour he sat on a table in the Malone RFC clubroom and talked without a note to an entranced group of 60 or so of Ulster's leading coaches, schoolmasters and players.

'What I'm about to tell you,' he began, 'is not meant to degrade your British style of play at all: I just think it is worth it to compare it with my own attitude towards Rugby. . .' He was received in awed silence, except for the odd scratching of a pen as a coach scribbled notes. Talk about the infant preaching to the wise men in the temple.

His arms were folded across his green national sweater as he extemporised, with insight and no little wit, his brown leather lace-up shoes gently rocking from the table. Behind him the usual clubhouse plaques in signwriter's gilt named the captains and the cups and the caps. The legendary Ernie Crawford played for Malone in the '20s, Jimmy Nelson in the '40s ... those old-timers would have been awestruck at the aplomb of this young man – even more so by the content of his tutorial.

The dark-skinned handsome native boy from the Aboriginal mission station was himself that missionary now. He was born into poverty in La Perouse, which the rich whites of Sydney scornfully call 'Larpa – our Soweto'. They don't look down

from the aircraft window for shame when they fly into Sydney airport over Botany Bay. It has been an Aborigine compound since Captain Cook hit land.

May and Gordon Ella brought up their 12 children in a shanty hut, with a nailed-up plyboard partition turned into a two-roomed job. They daily slept on shared mattresses on the floor; no privacy, no sewerage; there was one cold tap; a bath and a communal trough in the yard; a shower was when it rained, for the roof was a sieve.

Yet it was, the boy will tell you, a home with a lot of love and laughter. May was the adored, feared matriarch; Gordon, whose white grandfather had married an Aboriginal girl, was the romantic who loved to catch mullet off the cliffs when he had time away from the factory night shift.

But at least – as ghettos go – the compensation was the sea down the lane and the sun on their backs. And ‘La Pa’ had a junior Rugby and cricket team, so the children knew more than the rudiments when they were admitted to Matraville High School – since when Mark with his brothers, Glen and Gary, first inspired the Australian Schoolboys XV to a thrilling walkabout round the world before graduating, each one, to the full national side.

Mark won his first cap for Australia in 1980. He was 20. The torch he carried became brighter with every appearance. In 1983 he was elected Young Australian of the Year.

I sat there in Belfast, listening to him, and musing ... I had seen the languid, outside-body swerve of Richard Sharp; the carefree, waiflike insouciance of Barry John; the hopscotch of Phill Bennet; the vim, dash and control of young [Mike] Gibson; the dozy skill and awareness of Hugol Porta ... this boy here is in that classic line. But he is a revolutionary within it.

He scarcely fits into the canon. An original. It is worth rereading the description of the old-time Australian player and visionary coach Cyril Towers. He had written in the Twickenham program a week before: ‘Ella runs from the shoulders down, with the fingers, hand and arms completely relaxed; he takes the ball on one side and passes before the foot comes down again; his concept of the fly-half position is that it is semi-restricted – the attack must begin further out; he is very difficult to think against – if you think ahead of him, he will slip inside, and it’s no good thinking four or five moves ahead, because he hasn’t invented them yet.’

Ella sits on the clubhouse table. No side, no swank. Only his soft voice, and the coaches’ pencils frantically scratching at their notebooks. Many of them must have been coaching Rugby for over 20 years. They were not going to miss these revelations from the 25-year-old prophet: ‘You Irish have particularly impressed me that you are trying at least. But it’s still dull football. You have got out of the habit of entertaining and running with the ball – it’s an attitude which has evolved over the years. In Australia, we have been playing running football for a long time. I grew up playing that way. But here, the natural ability has been coached out of the players. You are playing too basic a game, concentrating on the physical aspect rather than moving the ball. Everybody says Britain has potentially the

best backs but they only turn it on for five minutes in an entire match. That's no good. We have already lost count of the number of occasions teams started to run the ball against us when we are out of sight and the match won. Only then would you Brits move it.'

Above the scrape of the scribbling hieroglyphics, the packed room of Rugby elders were murmuring enthused murmurs which seemed to mean a mixture of mea culpas and eureka.

'Fly-half play,' Ella went on, 'was more speed of thought than foot. Look at little me. I'm not fast. I'm not a stepper. I can run a bit, but I've no idea of a jink either off left or right. And you know I can't kick for peanuts. At set pieces, no, I never run up in defence – simply because no one runs the ball at me; and in Britain they nearly always simply kick. A breakaway wing-forward has honestly never touched me in years – and I think that might be something to do with the secret ...

'The crucial thing must be the speed of the ball through the hand. The quicker you get it, the quicker you can pass it on. The nearer you play on the opposition and the straighter you run, the better. It's common sense. Then, the shorter the pass, the quicker you can decide your options. Then, you can think of carrying the length of your passes.'

It was stunning stuff. No note, no prompt. Out of the mouths of babes ... I wished Percy Bush could have been listening from heaven; or Adrian Stoop. Perhaps they were. Or Carwyn James, the coaching genius and old fly-half, who had, alas, died the year before, mourned by the game. How proud Carwyn would have been of this Aboriginal boy's clean mind and logic. On he went:

'British coaches must let young players read the game themselves and think for themselves on the field. That is non-existent in British Rugby at this time. You are overcoached and the emphasis is far too much on winning – in any way. Your teams would rather defend than attack because it has become natural to them. As much as they are trying to say it's changing, I don't see it. Your teams have no imagination. They have been taught the same old moves with the same old patterns. They continually keep on calling the set moves.'

Nor was he finished, and I hugged myself again for being the only journalist who had bothered to turn up. And all taking place on Dr Jack Kyle's patch and parish. The British fly-half disease, said young Ella, was reliance on the boot. 'Kicking away possession is absolutely crazy. To score a try you have to have the ball in your hands. I say to my scrum-half: 'I'm calling the shots – give me the ball however bad it is!' All this British business of kicking for 20 minutes to size up the opposition!

'If in the first 20 minutes my scrum-half puts up one kick himself, then okay, I suppose; if he puts up two, I'll go over and hit him. His job is to get the ball to me any way he can. I call the moves, I distribute to those outside me and then, with the ball in their hands, they can put the pace on it. I know a lot of our fancy moves cause us Wallabies to make mistakes; we try everything and aren't quite getting the points on the board, but at least we try and we'll keep on trying.

If not, isn't the whole thing totally boring for everyone concerned? How can you go out there and have the feeling: If I try something and it works, then we're going to win?'

It was still bucketing down outside; no matter, Ella was smiling – and so was every utterly refreshed fellow in the room as they turned another page in their notebooks and queued, to a man, for Mark Ella's autograph. There is, in fact, not much more one needs to log about Ella's fly-half play. Simply, as he talked that day, so he played.

On the following Saturday, Ireland were well beaten in Dublin – Ella dropping two goals and dapping down a blinding, 'loop-the-loop' try at the corner flag. Within the next three weeks, Wales and Scotland were both comprehensively smothered by the Australians by an aggregate score of 65-21. Both times, Ella was an inspiration and a joy.

Then, just like that – still 25, and two years younger even than Barry John had been – he retired. Rugby League, understandably, offered him a fortune; he declined it firmly and positively, with a gracious smile – and became a businessman and an unofficial, worldwide diplomat and distinguished human-rights activist for the cause of Aboriginals. I was next to meet him four years later, in 1988, when he was the enchanting manager of the commemorative centenary cricket tour of England by a team of Australian Aboriginals. He remembered how he had preached his gospel to the Rugby elders of Ulster.

'That was an apocalyptic rainstorm, wasn't it?' he recalled. 'Apocalyptic' in more ways than one, said I.

Frank Keating has won a barrowload of Fleet Street awards in his capacity as feature sportswriter for the Guardian. His autobiography, *Half-time Whistle*, was runner-up in the William Hill Sports Book of the Year award. He is also a columnist for the internationally renowned UK monthly magazine *Rugby World*.

Extract from '*The Great Number Tens*' by Frank Keating published by Corgi. Used by permission of Transworld Publishers, a division of The Random House Group Limited.

[www.randomhouse.co.uk](http://www.randomhouse.co.uk)