*Paul McLean, President*

# PRESIDENT'S REPORT

**In January 2006, we commenced the second decade of professional rugby in Australia, and unlike the previous five years, Australia was looking for a new Wallaby coach.**

After a meticulous process, long-time Queensland coach throughout the 1990's, John Connolly, was appointed as National Coach. Michael Foley and Scott Johnson both returned home after coaching appointments overseas to take up positions as assistant coaches. At the time of appointment, the coaching staff had just 19 months to prepare for the 2007 RWC in France.

The new decade also brought the expanded Super 14 competition with the Western Force (WA) and the Cheetahs (South Africa) the two new teams. From an Australian perspective, only the Waratahs made it through to the semi-finals, but were beaten narrowly by the Hurricanes in Wellington. The Brumbies (6th) with eight wins, missed the semi finals on percentage whilst the Reds (12th) and Force (14th) won just five matches between them. The performance of the Force in their inaugural year was much better than the statistics showed, and whilst they only had a single win, their army of fans (31,000 on average) were full of expectations for better times ahead.

In May, at the instigation of the NSWRU and with the support of all other member Unions, a three-day workshop was held to discuss and debate the viability of a national competition. The unanimous results from the 70 delegates (administrators, coaches, players, referees and clubs) was an eight team competition to commence in August 2007. The debate on a national competition has raged for almost 10 years and with a willingness to achieve a result which all thought was to the benefit of Australian Rugby as a whole, an agreement was reached. The competition was later endorsed by the Australian Rugby Union Board, and teams from Queensland (two), NSW (three), ACT (one), Victoria (one) and WA (one) will compete for the inaugural Australian Rugby Championship.

The domestic season opened with victories over England (34-3 and 43-18) securing the Cook Cup's return to Australia. The Irish Test in Perth, whilst a comfortable win on the scoreboard (37-15), was a sign of things to come, as the Irish looked very strong after two very close defeats by the All Blacks in New Zealand. This form carried through in November when they clearly out-pointed the Wallabies at Landsdowne Road (21-6).

In the Bundaberg Rum Rugby Series, we saw eight new caps join the Wallabies ranks. Tai McIsaac, Rodney Blake, Cameron Shepherd and Josh Valentine all debuted against England in Sydney, while Wycliff Palu earned his cap in the second England Test in Melbourne, Guy Shepherdson against Ireland in Perth and Robinson and Sheehan in South Africa.

As always, the Test matches were hard fought with some mixed performances by the Wallabies. However, with two victories over South Africa (one by a record score of 49-0 in Brisbane) and two extremely close losses to New Zealand, it was felt that the Wallabies were laying a good foundation leading into a World Cup year. Whilst the Spring Tour to the northern hemisphere produced wins over Scotland and Italy and a draw against Wales, the Irish turned out to be the best team the Wallabies played in 2006, outside of the All Blacks.

Australian Rugby made a significant additional investment on the Spring Tour by playing mid-week matches in Wales, Ireland and Scotland. There is no substitute for playing matches in unfamiliar surroundings and as part of educating

many of our young players, the matches in Swansea, Limerick and Perth were invaluable.

Outside of the Wallabies, the Australian Under 21s played in the iRB World Championship in France. Australia performed valiantly before being beaten in the semi-finals by the host nation, who subsequently went on to win the tournament. The Women's Rugby World Cup was held in Canada in August and September and Australia performed well without reaching the semi-finals.

The 2006 IRB Under 19 World Championships in Dubai was a resounding success with Australia winning the tournament for the first time in a thrilling final against New Zealand. The team played great attacking rugby and were the top try-scoring team at the tournament. Scrumhalf Josh Holmes was the competitions leading try-scorer and was also named iRB Under 19 Player of the Year as a result of his fine performances in the Middle East. Congratulations to the squad and management team on this historic result for Australian rugby.

The Australian Schoolboys continue to be extremely competitive on every stage, as well as producing some outstanding rugby players in 2006. Australian Schools hosted Tonga in Sydney before embarking on a five match tour of Fiji and New Zealand, where they won the Test in Fiji but narrowly lost to New Zealand Schools in a tough Test in Auckland.

Off the field the South Australian Rugby Union pitched for and won the rights to host a leg of the iRB Sevens World Series for the next five years, beginning in April 2007. The SARU are to be commended for their enthusiasm and hard work in winning this event.

The John Eales Medal Dinner in September saw three new inductees into the Wallaby Hall of Fame. They were Cyril Towers, Sir Nicholas Shehadie AC OBE and John Hipwell OAM, all worthy recipients of this great honour.

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The highlight of the night was the runaway performance of Chris Latham, who capped an outstanding year by winning the John Eales Medal.

On a sad note, we lost three Wallabies in 2006. They were Andrew 'Nicky' Barr who was one of Australia's greatest fighter pilots of WWII; Ken 'Killer' Kearney who later became a great rugby league player and coach; and Herb Baker, a talented sportsmen who not only excelled with the Wallabies but also in basketball and athletics. They will be sorely missed.

The year just passed, whilst not laden with victories and trophies, makes us more appreciative of the famous victories and performances which Australian teams at all levels have achieved over the years. The competition is extremely fierce on and off the field, where we compete in the entertainment market for sponsors and audiences. The year ahead will produce some major issues for resolution, but none more important than that taken in 2006, to start a national competition.