

Tom's touch comp

FIVE years ago, Tom Longworth started a Sunday game of touch footy with his mates in inner-city Toowong. Little did he know the weekly fixture would become more than just a social activity – it would take over his life and lead him to change careers.

TAKING PUNT

WORDS: MATT JOHNSTON

LIKE most young Queenslanders, Tom Longworth spent his childhood playing backyard footy.

Fast forward 20 years and rugby league still plays a big role in the mad-keen South Sydney Rabbitoh fan's life – albeit in a different capacity.

The 25-year-old's story begins in the streets of Toowong, where he and his mates would gather every Sunday afternoon for a game of touch football, which also served as a weekly catch-up.

The game was played under a set of hybrid rules they had come up with, which were based on regular touch football, but allowed the dummy half to be tagged and also permitted players to kick the ball.

In fact players were encouraged to kick the ball.

"I was a big exponent of the kicking (in those games). There were some people . . . who said you can't kick and there was a big group of us that used to advocate that you could kick," he says.

"So over time we started playing and the rules started to develop and we used that backyard style (where you could kick)."

The group named their game touch rugby league and soon the matches became so popular they were forced to organise weekly fixtures just to accommodate the huge numbers they were attracting.

Longworth, who was at that time studying law and commerce at the University of Queensland, soon realised the potential to develop the hybrid game into a fully fledged competition and along with one of his friends he started TRL – Touch Rugby League.

"Before we actually launched (TRL as a business) we had that many guys, I was running fixtures every week for no money," he says.

"So the rules were quite established. It wasn't like a penny dropped and we said, 'let's come up with some rules' – the game was already there and we already had five or six teams."

The code's maiden competition at the University of Queensland in 2005 attracted 12 teams, largely made up of Longworth's friends and their friends, and it stayed at the same number for a few seasons before

the young entrepreneur decided to get serious about the business.

He took a punt and quit his job as an accountant at PricewaterhouseCoopers to run the competitions full time.

Five years down the track and the gamble has reaped good dividends, with the game played at five venues across Brisbane and Ipswich by 138 teams, half men's and half mixed.

"My family was pretty cautious of me making the move because my sisters had all done really well at uni and gone on to fairly successful professions and I had done OK at uni and I was at PwC, which is a really big firm," he says.

"So from a career perspective it was a big move to basically say no to that, but I believed that TRL, if given the time, would grow quite quickly and I needed to give it the time.

"People used to say, 'Can't you do both for a bit longer?', and I'd say, 'Well, you could . . .'

"But I wasn't doing TRL as well as it could be done – and now I've thrown 100 per cent of my weight behind it, it's going from strength to strength."

The Brisbane Boys' College old boy knows the game like the back of his hand, as he should, and still plays and referees for both his personal enjoyment and as part of his role in the business.

"I'm in a position now where I have looked at every possible situation that can come up in the game," he says.

"And while I enjoy playing it, it also helps that I play because it keeps me up to date with how the referees are doing."

One division that has exploded since its inclusion in August 2008 is the mixed competition, which requires a team to have at least three girls on the field at any time.

"More and more people see TRL as their sport for the week and the girls are the ones that take it the most seriously," he says.

"I think the growth has been awesome but it's also given me the ability to have multiple divisions – so you can allocate teams to their appropriate division, in their appropriate standard."

Despite the growth, Longworth has not allowed himself to become complacent in his role as the game's creator and chief administrator.

And he welcomes input from the players as he strives to keep his business evolving.

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ON BALL: Tom Longworth is building a touch football empire. **Picture:** Ric Frearson
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"I think it would be foolish for me to stick my head in the sand and say I'm doing it all right and there's no need to improve," he says.

"Halfway through each season I make an effort to try to contact every captain to ask them how they've found the season and if there's anything that can be improved – the game, the refereeing or the scheduling.

"As the old adage goes – don't fix it if it ain't broken, and people are enjoying it (the way the rules are) so there's probably not a lot of benefit in tinkering with it."

With no prior experience in running a business, the gutsy Longworth has also been faced with some tough situations during the

past five years. But he says he and his business are only better for the experience.

"I have had some hiccups and I think the biggest thing I've tried to do is think with my head and not my heart," he says.

"There have been some things which weren't ideal and you have to take a step back and evaluate whether the issue that has come up is something which is really going to impact the business.

"Sometimes it's not going to have a big impact on the business but it hurts your ego or what you're trying to achieve.

"But there's no place in business for that." He knows these setbacks are part and parcel with running a business and his