

## **Rankins Springs Dragons: more than just a football team**

Sport is an important part of the fabric of Australian culture, from the beaches to the bush, Australia lives and breathes sport. The effect that sport can have on people's lives and on the communities that support them often extends well beyond the sidelines of the field.

Sport has the ability to bring together groups of people in even the worst of times, and in the wake of the Millennium drought in the early 2000's, it's exactly what the residents of this blink-and-you'll-miss-it farming town needed. Unfortunately for the residents of Rankins Springs, that's exactly when their beloved Dragons folded along with the rest of their competition in 2006.

Rankins Springs is a farming community out in central New South Wales that was founded in 1870 before being relocated to meet a railway line in 1923 with the footy side starting within a few years of its relocation. The side went on to maintain an almost consistent presence in the rugby league community since then up until their competition folded in 2006 before being revived in 2018.

With a population of a little over 100 people and 45 minutes from its nearest regional centre of Griffith NSW, it's an impressive effort from this tiny town. The 20-man squad from this season's grand final win would require almost 20% of their population to lace up their boots and take the field, it's a wonder how a small community has managed to sustain its own sporting side for such a long period of time.

**That is, until you start to dig a little deeper into the club and township that the locals affectionately call "the Springs", then the spirit and strength of this little farming community really starts to shine through.**

The community of the Springs has had plenty of reasons for its residents to look to pack it up and move away throughout its long history and yet here it stands, rapidly approaching a centenary anniversary. Its residents have that resilient Aussie attitude you've come to expect from farmers who have toughed it out through the Millennium Drought in the 2000's and have come out the other side standing tall.

That spirit is on full display whenever the Dragons take the field, with a humble collection of supporters turning up for the side wherever they play to support their strong r.

The sense of unity that sport can bring is especially important in an isolated farming community like the Springs and when the local rugby league competition collapsed, and when the local pub followed suit almost a decade later, the locals found themselves with almost no places to gather socially and feeling more isolated than they ever had.

Dragons Vice President Jamie Parsons is a Rankins Springs local who knows better than most the sense of isolation and depression that developed over this time and was integral in returning the Dragons to their former glory. The return of the Dragons combined with the revival of the Conapaira Pub breathed new life into this rural community, bringing the residents together again around the football team and providing a social setting to help the locals deal with the often lonely life of farming.

The importance of mental health in such a tight knit community is not lost on the Dragons, who raised money for mental health charity BeyondBlue in both 2018 and 2019 by auctioning off their jerseys.

One thing that the Dragons have always done is create connections between its players that last well beyond the final whistle. Jamie Parsons says that if the club hadn't returned, he would have "far less friends in the area".

"As a result [of the return], we are now a close group of mates who hang out together outside of footy whether at the pub or at touch footy during the summer or even at each other's weddings." Parsons said.

This is a township that really gets behind the team at every home game, which is a great sign for a small community to be so vocally behind their team.



"In a town of 100 odd people, we manage to get 30 players and even more supporters and volunteers together to enjoy a game on a Saturday" Parsons said.

"The club is supported by the community. Home games are the biggest community event of the year, nothing else gets as many visitors to the town or support from locals".

It's very clear that the support of this tight knit community plays a huge role in the success of the club and means a lot to the players of the club, and it is a sentiment fourth generation Dragon Billy Vearing agrees with. Billy says that it's a big part about why he gave up his old football club to represent the club that his family has represented for almost a century.

**"The local support, you don't get it anywhere else around." Billy said.**

"I've played group 20 but compared to this they've got nothing. At the grand final this year, for about five kilometers out of the Springs, each reflector pole on the side of the road was covered in red and white balloons and banners. As you get closer, the whole town is just red and white."

"These are people that really live for it. They don't have any immediate connections to the club, but they once did and here they are helping and decorating. It really showcases the sense of pride the community has in the club."

The community is full of long-term residents and the football club has always reflected that, with some players today being third or fourth generation players from their families to play for the Dragons. Looking back through the history books, you start to see how much a family affair this club is, with surnames like Vearing, Parsons and Lamont being regular fixtures almost from the inception of the club.

Take for instance the Vearing family. The Vearing's have had a presence out at Rankins Springs since 1928 and have been involved in the club in some way since that time, with George "Eric" Vearing making an appearance for what was called the "Rankins Springs Rainbows" in 1929. This would start the Vearings long-time affiliation with the club. Fast forward to the 1980's when third generation Dragon Stuart Vearing would pull on the jersey of his beloved family club at under 16's level.

Stuart's love for the game of Rugby League and the Dragons club would continue until he finally decided to hang up the boots at the age of 42 after a broken wrist, with most of his time being played in the red and white. Stuart led the side during some very promising years from a competitive standpoint, being involved in numerous premierships as a player and coach and even won the Country Rugby Leagues Clayton Cup in 1993 for an almost undefeated season.

While his playing days may be over, Stuart still has fond memories of his times representing the Dragons and would do it all over again.

"Now my body aches when I get out of bed, so I might've played a bit long." Stuart said.

"But I loved every minute of it and wouldn't change it one little bit"

This love for the Dragons has led to Stuart still being involved with the club to this day, with Stuart being named a life member. Stuart passed down his love for the club to his son Billy, who also represents the Dragons since their return to competition in 2018 and has gone on to win two grand finals with the side.

Billy has picked up that love for the club for himself and says the Dragons mean more to him than just a football team due to his family connections to the club.



*Three Generations of Dragons players from the Vearing family with Jack (third from the left), Stuart (fourth from the left) and Billy (far right)*

“I think if it wasn’t for my dad or my pop, it would just be another club but since they have a lot to do with the club to this day, it just means so much more.” Billy said.

“Proudest moment was in the 2018 season I got the best and fairest for the club, and then looking down at the trophy and seeing my dad’s name on the same trophy from his win in 2002 was a special moment for me. Looking back my pop was also a best and fairest so that’s three generations that have also won that award so it’s very special to me.”

That is very much a sense of what you get from the players at this club. This means more to the community than just football.