

# ANDREW ALLEN'S CURIOUS CAMPBELLTOWN PODCAST WITH JOHN SKANDALIS

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**AA** Hello and welcome to our Curious Campbelltown podcast. Now I am sure that most people in the Macarthur area are familiar with my guest today. He is a rugby league legend and one of the West Magpies and West Tigers greats. Let me introduce John Skandalis to the podcast. Good morning John.

**JS** Good morning, thanks for having me today.

**AA** Skandalis, I believe that is a Greek name.

**JS** Yep, Greek heritage yes. My father and mother were born in Greece, I was born in Australia in Lightning Ridge. Greek Mediterranean background, very proud. I get to experience both Mediterranean and the Aussie traditions.

**AA** You played in Greece I believe.

**JS** Yes, I played for three matches or four matches from 2006 to 2009 in Mediterranean Cup. I did go over to Greece to play in one of the first matches over there, unfortunately I didn't get to play because logistically I had to be back in Australia and the game got delayed over there so I missed out on that match. However, I remember the travel was a good experience for me. It was in the early days of trying to kick off their World Cup sort of entry campaign. Then I played a few matches back in Australia Mediterranean Cup and a couple of other matches that they put together.

**AA** I know you are a Tigers and Magpies man through and through. Which team did you support as a child?

**JS** Where's this going I had better be careful. Funny enough as a young kid I was a Dragons supporter. I loved Michael O'Connor and I remember he got poached by Manly, he went over to Manly and I was devastated. When they lost their second grand final in a row against the Broncos in 92/93 I think it was after the 93 season I made juniors at Wests Magpies and because I made the Magpies junior league team I was like a Magpie through and through after that. I don't even know how I started following the Dragons because my parents weren't really rugby league fans. So it must have just been the players. I loved watching obviously Ricky Walford and Mark Mathias come through and maybe that attracted me to it I guess. As a young kid I just loved watching them play. It didn't come from parents or wasn't sort of handed down to me from relatives that followed Dragons.

**AA** So you didn't get to follow Manly after he left the Dragons.

**JS** I didn't no, I had a real hate for Manly after that because they stole one of my players. I was devastated when they took Michael O'Connor.

**AA** So we'll go a fair way back then. You are from Lightning Ridge.

**JS** I was born in Lightning Ridge but I moved out of there when I was four. Our house got burned down in 1980 I think it was, I was born in 76 and we then moved to Ashfield. I spent four young years of my life there. I have a few memories of it.

**AA** Do you remember much about the fire?

**JS** Not at all, I just remember being in my house in Lightning Ridge and the next thing I know we had moved to Ashfield. I don't recall that part of that time. I don't know if I was even there when it happened. You know you have those thoughts when you're young, you don't know if it's a dream or if it's real. So there's little things that I sort of remember but I don't recall if it's a dream or not or bits sub consciously there that I might have experienced, I was pretty young.

**AA** Too young to remember much about Lightning Ridge too isn't it really.

**JS** I have gone back a few times and I went to the house where we lived sort of where the house was situated. I did have relatives living there and I think they still do. When I first met my wife, girlfriend at the time, we went for a drive there and showed her where I was born. So I have been there a couple of times since but it's been a while since I have been there again. The memories I probably I do have is only things like, and it must have terrified me probably why it sticks in my head, the long drop toilet back then in 1980 in Lightning Ridge. The only toilet was the one outside in a big hole in the ground. I remember being terrified that I had to do that. I don't know why that sticks in my head but maybe I saw it somewhere, maybe when I went back I saw it that brought back all these memories.

## **5 mins**

I just don't remember day to day things. I remember a little bit, I think it's through photos that I've seen. My dad was an excavator there, he used to build dams for people on properties and things like that. I've got a few photos of big excavators so that's probably where the memories come from. It was a long time ago.

**AA** Did you spend long in Ashfield?

**JS** We stayed there from 1980 to, sorry 1981 we spent a year at Marrickville just up the road and we moved there in 1981 and then we moved out of there in 1986. Funny enough, ironically it was just down the road from the Wests Ashfield Leagues Club. I went to Ashfield Public, so it was just ironic that I grew up around there 400 metres away from that leagues club and I am playing for a club that is owned by that leagues club.

**AA** What a coincidence. When your mum passed away in your teens it must have been pretty devastating.

**JS** Yes, I was 14 at the time, a big shock to any kid growing up and going through puberty where you need your parents the most. Especially I have three sisters, two of them who lived with me at the time, a mother and daughter relationship is very important at that time so they probably got hit harder than me. It was a tough period in my life, I probably didn't feel the effects of it until a few years after it happened sort of thing. It took a while to sink in what I'd lost if that makes sense. I knew what I had lost but it took a while for it to sort of sink in. I probably didn't handle it in the best way as a teenager. I probably thought I was but I look back at it now and I can see that I could probably have done a better job trying to support myself because of that. That was a tough time and for my father who brought us up as a single parent.

**AA** It would have been hard for him. He's dealing with the grief and also trying to do his best.

**JS** Again you don't understand until you become a parent. At that time, he was my dad and I thought that's what he does I guess. But when you become a parent you realise you have lost your partner and support system when things are tough on your own and have kids to raise and mortgages to pay and put food on the table and that kind of stuff. I probably didn't appreciate it until I became a parent. I appreciated it more when I became a parent I guess, he did what he could at the time and did his best to put food on the table and keep us at school. I didn't help his cause because I rebelled a little bit and again I look back because when I did rebel I think it was because I didn't have that other figure to sort of help me out when I needed it the most. It was lucky I met a couple of guys and their mum who took me through that tough period.

**AA** Would that be Kenny Ken?

**JS** Yes, I first met Kenny Ken when I first moved to the Campbelltown area in Year 5.

**AA** We are talking about the McGuinness family.

**JS** Yes, Kevin McGuinness who I played a lot of football with. I met them when I first moved to Campbelltown which was around the time my mum started getting sick and Kenny's mum really took me in as one of their own instantly. I guess she was the angel waiting for me. When I needed the help she was there. Even when my mum passed, again even though I struggled through that period she was there to help me along and I grew up with the family and the boys. I owe a lot of credit to her for taking me in without any question without any reservations just to treat me like their own and got me through which I felt was a really tough period of my life.

**10 mins**

**AA** She sounds like an amazing person.

**JS** She is

**AA** So where did you go to school?

**JS** I started at Ashfield Public, I was there from Year 1 to Year 4 and then I went to Campbellfield Public in Minto and then Sarah Redfern High School for my high school years. It was funny when we moved from Ashfield to Minto originally I was still in Year 4 and my dad didn't want me to leave half way through Year 4 so he used to drive me from Minto to Ashfield every morning to finish Year 4. I remember that drive because back then there was no M5 no freeways, Hume Highway all the way through and you can imagine peak hour then was the same as it is now, probably not as much but it was still peak hour and only the Hume Highway to get you there and it was a good hour and a half in the morning to get me there for Year 4. I still think why did you do that. I think the other reason was he still worked in the city so he thought well I'm still working there, I've got to go there anyway I will keep him at school for half of that year. So I finished my Year 4 at Ashfield Public but I went to Campbellfield Public from Year 5 on.

**AA** Sarah Redfern, that's a real rugby league school.

**JS** It is and it was when I was coming through. We had some really good players coming out of there. We had a lot of players that came through that could have been and probably should have been playing NRL for whatever reason they weren't. We had a really good group of rugby league players coming through. When I was there, there was myself, Kenny, Kevin I could name a few. We won the CHS Championship five of us were represented in that team that year in 92 I think it was or 93, five of us represented that team from our school. Then were three of us that had played first grade from the school as well. It still is a strong rugby league school.

**AA** It is yeah. Let's go to your first grade career now. So you started with the Magpies, so what year did you make your debut.

**JS** My debut was 96, it was against Penrith Panthers at Campbelltown Stadium. It was an interesting night, there were fireworks a few punch ups. It was back in the day, I sound old when I say back in the day when you were allowed to throw a punch or two. There were still send offs and things like that it's not like it was legal back then. There were a few scuffles that were broken up at the time. It was a fiery debut let's put it that way. It was great I enjoyed it, it was everything that I was expecting. Even better that I got to play at Campbelltown Stadium my home ground because I had played all my junior league football there. I played a few grand finals in junior league on that ground and to be able to play my first NRL game at Campbelltown Stadium in front of my home crowd and all my junior league friends and family and all that kind of stuff, it was a very special moment.

**AA** Your dad was there.

**JS** My dad was there definitely. I made sure I invited everyone to come along especially people that were responsible I guess or helped me on my way to that journey.

**AA** Was Tommy your coach then?

**JS** Yes, I had Tommy was four years.

**AA** That is Tommy Raudonikis.

**15 mins**

**JS** Yes, Tommy was definitely one of a kind person. I would have hated to play against him he would have been as tough as nails and rough as guts. You read the stories and things like that. The phantom biter he was once nicknamed once because he bit somebody's nose and it took two weeks or three weeks before he came out and said yeah it was me that bit his nose. It was Johnny Gibb's nose that he bit and you see some of the footage and he would have been an absolutely pain in the arse to play against. He was just as tough even playing. I remember when he called me in to play and he said mate we've got a tough game coming up and I'm actually bringing you into this game because I know you will stand up and be tough. I thought I don't know what game you'll be watching but I'll get my shot at NRL. I took that with two hands and grabbed that opportunity and funny enough he must have tipped everyone and off we went and it was a fiery game from the start so I think there must have been some words before it or something. I reckon there was some banter going on because I came into a furnace. Tommy and I had four years from 96 to 99.

**AA** I think people undervalue his football brain too. You would know firsthand how smart a coach he was.

**JS** Remember he was a half back, he was the general for the teams that he played for. So his football brain was definitely smart. I learnt a lot of things, the game, the craft of the game but I also learnt to be tough mentally, not only physically but mentally. When things aren't going right for you on the field or just in the club in general to be able to stick in there, hang in there and fight for something and making sure that you give everything you've got to basically get it right to be successful to win or whatever it is. I definitely got that trait from him I think because he was like that. He had a never give up attitude no matter what, that's definitely something I took from Tommy's coaching. The technical side maybe not so much because he didn't have the time and help that he needed around him to be able to help with that kind of stuff. He was smart in terms of reading the game and being able to give us a game plan of some sort. That toughness I definitely give that credit to Tommy that's something I'll take out of that.

**AA** So the merger comes along, were you sad about the Magpies?

**JS** Definitely, I played all my junior football from 93 to 96 junior football then 96 to 99 NRL and then suddenly someone comes in and makes a decision that we can't exist anymore. Not only myself but other players, fans and supporters and long-time supporters who have been supporting the club from the 30s, 40s, 50s, 60s, parents who have been supporting the club for their whole life and then suddenly a decision comes in that we can't operate as the Wests Magpies anymore and we have to merge with somebody else. Definitely it was sad and it was a nervous time for myself and other players because we had finished last that year, so they were talking about when they merged with Balmain and become the Wests Tigers it was more about we came last and Balmain didn't

travel well either so I'm guessing there will be same feeling in the Balmain team. You've got to remember the Balmain side of it too, we were two clubs that first started in rugby league and ironically we played against each other in the first match as well. So we were going through the same thing and the players and the supporters and the fans were feeling that same emotion I can imagine. But for the players, I am speaking on behalf of the players we didn't travel well, we came last and Balmain weren't that far off either, they are going to pick a West Tigers team how many Balmain players are they going to pick and how many Wests Magpies are they going to pick, are they going to make it even, are they going to make it whatever it is so you were sitting there going well I don't have a contract for next year, I don't know if they are going to pick me or want me and if they don't where do I go after that. I didn't want to leave there I wanted to be part of that club still because it still had the Magpies DNA and I am a bit of a footy buff of history. I love the history of rugby league and knowing that I was merging with Balmain such a proud club it was just natural for me to be able to go yep I'm taking you guys on board and I hope you accept me to come on board as well. So I was excited to be part of it if I got picked and luckily I was one of the players that they said we want you to be part of this history.

**AA** They're a passionate lot aren't they the Magpie supporters. They still are.

**JS** Definitely there's a passionate support base out there that support the Magpies part of it. We have a state cup that is under the Magpies banner and there are long time supporters that support that team.

**20 mins**

**AA** Can you confirm with me that you were the first try scorer for the Wests Tigers? Have I researched that properly?

**JS** You have researched that properly. Even though I've got a few haters out there they reckon I didn't score the try namely Joel Caine who thinks I dropped the ball. In slo mo it may look it but it was a fair try. I give you my word it was a fair try.

**AA** Did you run 100 metres or was it at the end of a back line move?

**JS** I'm 47 now I was 24 when I scored it, so I think it's increased 10 metres every year so it's getting to 100 metres. It actually came from a bomb, Craig Field kicked a bomb from the sideline and I chased and lucky to be in the right place at the right time. I came off the bench and we were down four nil at the time or six nil I can't remember the score, and I was just in the right place. I went for the ball jumped the ball like anyone would have it fell in my hands and I went down head first and somehow got the ball down. They had the slo mo and everything and at that time I just really didn't appreciate the enormity of it I guess, scoring the first try for the club. I was too caught up in the game sort of thing. But now I'm glad they gave it to me. Like I said Joel Caine was probably my biggest star enemy with that try, because he scored three tries that game and I just remember my first one. He gives it to me all the time.

**AA** I can imagine Joel Caine doing that too, he's a stirrer.

**JS** He does give it to me a bit but it was a fair try. It's on the record books now so they can't take it off me.

**AA** Exactly, are you a bit of a stats person, do you know how many tries you scored in your career?

**JS** Not at all, 21 exactly or something like that. I haven't scored many, I'm pretty sure it's 21 through my career. I was lucky enough I didn't have to do a nudey run at all through my career. I scored at least one every year which was very pleasant and the boys can thank me that I didn't have to do a nudey run, thank God for that.

**AA** Moving on about five years in the future, the lead up to the 2005 grand finale. Can you describe that to me, what it was like for you and the town?

**JS** The town was awesome. I remember walking through Campbelltown just going to the shops and the buzz was just unbelievable and everybody just wanted to wish me luck and congratulate me for making it. What you see on TV over the years, it's something that I experienced as a kid, the town was painted in whatever colour the team was in the grand final and you go through Campbelltown Queen Street and it would be black, orange and white streamers or the butcher would make black and white sausages and that was all awesome. Just the vibe around it, there was so much excitement. I didn't hide away from it because I really wanted to suck it in, I guess I was lucky I was at an age where I had been through so much in rugby league I had played so many years without too much success in terms of the on field stuff, I sucked it all up and would like to talk to anyone about it. In saying that the week went pretty quick too. It was very quick, one minute we were playing the Dragons on the Sunday to get into the grand final and the next thing you know it's Thursday, Friday getting ready for the grand final.

## **25 mins**

So it went very quick I have to say. You have the breakfast, you do the grand final breakfast, you do the open training session at the ground, there's so much media stuff before Thursday that they try to get in so you can just get it out of the way so you can focus on the game Thursday, Friday and Saturday. I just remember the week being very quick.

**AA** It would have been now that I think about it. It's not long is it really?

**JS** It's not no, you play your semi-finals to get into the grand final and the next day is a recovery session that's the Monday and then Tuesday you are doing breakfast or whatever you are doing, I can't remember what day the breakfast is on and then you are doing media stuff and your open training session and it's one thing after the other. By the time you've finished that, go home sleep and recover and you're back at it again. You blink and you're driving to the game on grand final day. I just remember the atmosphere and the buzz around the Macarthur area it was so pleasing to see.

**AA** Yes, there certainly was a buzz. When are you most nervous, is it the morning of the game? It's a long while to wait isn't it because you are playing in the night time?

**JS** Well not always, sometimes you are playing in the afternoon. Me I was probably nervous from the morning onwards. But there were some days I could just control it. Sometimes you get really nauseous for no reason at all you are worried because it is a big game or you are just worried about if you are going to perform because it is a performance business so if you aren't playing well then you are not going to be where you are. Every game you are getting up in the morning and going well I need to play well I need to perform because if I don't there is a chance I won't be there. Maybe from the morning, I don't remember being nervous too often, I think I controlled it pretty well. I didn't like the night games because it was too long a day. I just wanted to get it over and done with, play the game.

The grand final day if you're talking about that, strangely enough I wasn't too nervous. I had two young kids at the time so they kept me occupied. I remember getting up. My routine for every game wasn't just the grand final, we all try to keep the same. So funny enough people are still amazed that we drove ourselves to the game, which is very unheard of. So every game leading up to the grand final we were driving ourselves, we weren't catching a bus, we weren't going to the headquarters and jumping on a coach and then all driving to the game. A lot of teams do that for a number of reasons, one they're together there's no risk of someone getting into a crash or being late or something. They get to the ground and they don't have to find parking and all that kind of stuff. We were driving ourselves to the game even the semi-finals. I remember coming to the meeting on the Monday and Sheensy said do you want catch a coach, do the bus thing and everyone said no we want to do what we've been doing basically driving ourselves. I remember the drive in because I had my wife, my in laws and another friend who was going to take my car home after the game come with us. I remember I was silent all the way, the morning was fine because I had the kids to keep me occupied, I was playing with the kids in the morning. I did my usual routine, up early play with the kids, have breakfast and then I had a sleep midday and then I get up and get ready and go to the game. I remember driving along the M5 was just for me, I couldn't get into a talkative mode because even the car was talking I couldn't do it. I can't remember if I was thinking about the game or whatever else. Everything was just spinning in my head.

So we drove to the game and I parked underneath ANZ and said goodbye to them and into the game.

**AA** So we're at the point where Benji Marshall does his flick pass to Pat Richards, what did you think of that?

**JS** I actually saw the footage, it might have been last year someone sent me something and I hadn't seen this before. There was a camera on the bench and I was on the bench at the time and you could just see us watching it and the emotion and the excitement that came out of that was unbelievable. It was raw



footage of me jumping up and down, it amazed just not myself but everyone on the whole stadium and the world that was watching that game. What he did was extraordinary probably more extraordinary than Patty Richards caught the ball and palmed off Rod Jensen and scored the try. My most nervous time I would have to say of the game was always at the beginning about not scoring a try. They scored first and I think I was more worried about that, that we weren't going to score. But once Bryce Gibbs scored that first try I just felt it was a weight off our shoulders and we relaxed. Four weeks or three weeks before that game we played the Cowboys in our first semi-final. We smacked them 54/6 or 54/10, it was a pretty big score line for a semi-final, so knowing that we were playing them again and when you play someone like that your biggest worry is that they are looking for revenge they are going to be up for the game even more than when we smacked them 54 to whatever it was.

### **30 mins**

So my worry was OK of course they are going to be up anyway because it's a grand final, but they are obviously going to be much harder than what they were and they are going to know what we can throw at them. So my biggest fear was we weren't going to score a try. But as soon as we scored that try it just felt like the whole team relaxed, got back to what we were doing all year and then it just rolled after that. We just got into a rhythm which we had been doing all year throughout the year and that's how I felt we got through the game, we just played our natural game not having to chase down a score line. I think it would have been a difficulty for us because we hadn't really done that all year, especially through the semis we were I'm pretty sure and the stats will probably correct me, but I think we led every game that we played in the semi-finals. I don't think we ever chased a score line. Cowboys definitely not, Broncos I don't recall having to chase and the Dragons definitely not so I don't know how we would have handled it if we had to chase. I think the nerves would have kicked in especially a big game like that but who knows. I don't have to worry about that.

**AA** I think everyone thought it was going to be Parramatta and Dragons grand final didn't they?

**JS** They did well the Dragons or Parra one of those blew the minor premiers for the year. The Dragons had I think 14 representative players in their team, definitely favourites and Parra weren't far off either because they didn't lose many games all year. So all the Parra and Dragons fans bought up all the grand final tickets and the semi-finals tickets and all that kind of stuff. But we were obviously two teams ourselves and Cowboys surprised everybody. The biggest surprise was probably Cowboys smacking Parra. From memory I think it was 30/nil or something like that. It was a massive score line, I know they came back to almost win the game Parra but at half time it was 30/nil or something. It was a year of surprises and I guess both teams had the week off as well. I don't know if that was a negative impact on them. We had nothing to lose, no-one backed us, everyone was against us especially going through the semis beating Brisbane, once we got to the Dragons, apart from our own supporters we believed we could

win, we had nothing to lose really, but we threw everything at them I think we played almost the perfect football against the Dragons which we had to do because they were a class side that year. They had some really great players in that team, it was a really good team and we had to be on everything, we had to be on point for everything. We were, I don't recall making too many major errors in that game at all.

**AA** You were the captain weren't you?

**JS** No, Mark O'Neill was our captain for half the year and he got injured, did his elbow in about the sixth game and Scott Prince came in and took over the captaincy and then we just ran through with Scott Prince being the captain for the rest of the year.

**AA** Right, celebrations afterwards do you remember much about the celebrations?

**35 mins**

**JS** Bits and pieces, I remember the bus trip to Wests Ashfield was big. We got to Wests Ashfield and the people in the streets were just crazy, there were just so many people, the line up to get in the club was even worse. We got into Wests Ashfield and had a few beers. Straight after the game we stayed in the sheds for a fair bit and had a few beers with people coming in and doing their usual. We spent time on our own and tried to suck it all up and things like that. Going back to the two clubs we had at that time Wests Ashfield and Balmain Leagues Club, we went to Wests Ashfield first and we were on the stage. I don't think there was too much speaking, just lots of chanting and drinking on the stage. I think we threw Sheensy into the crowd and he did a bit of crowd surfing, I remember that, that was quite entertaining. Then we all jumped on the bus and went back to Balmain Leagues Club which was even more packed than what Wests Ashfield was and it took us I reckon a good half hour just to get through the crowd and into the building. They put us in our own room to sort of relax and had food and drink and things like that. If anyone remembers Balmain Leagues Club there was like a little balcony that faced Victoria Road and I looked out at Victoria Road and no word of a lie, they closed off Victoria Road there was like 10,000 people there just cheering us on. We were on this balcony for half an hour really not saying anything just cheering and spraying drinks and waving and all that kind of stuff. Then we made our way inside and drank to all hours in the morning and then Steve Noyce our CEO at the time called us up and said everybody has to be ready at 8.00am, we had to drive from Balmain Leagues Club on a bus taking us out to Campbelltown Stadium to welcome and thank the fans out there. We weren't allowed to drink, so basically he said it's the fans turn and we have to appreciate that, so drinking needs to stop now until we do what we need to do and say thank you to everyone. Everyone was feeling like crap because we had been drinking all night, there were a couple of guys who hadn't been asleep so we pulled up stumps in terms of the drink side of things around the 8 o'clock mark or something. It was the longest bus drive in the world going from Balmain Leagues Club all the way to Campbelltown Stadium when you are hung over and no beers or anything, hair of the dog sort of thing. That was a long trip there, but

once we got there it was awesome. This is probably one bit I remember the most where I got to walk the trophy into Campbelltown Stadium with the crowd. That was very special for me because we go back and I made my debut there and everything I had done in terms of my football career was there, my junior league with Minto Cobras. Everything was there and I get to walk into Campbelltown Stadium holding this trophy that we had been dreaming of for so long and personally as a player that's what you strive for. That was a very special surreal moment for myself and when I say 5,000 people there were probably more, it was huge, it was a great day. It was a long day because there were a lot of guys with hangovers and I remember it being so hot. They poured water all over us and the crowd was fantastic. Again I could have stayed there really but we had to go from there, get back on the bus and drive to Leichhardt Oval and do the same thing at Leichhardt Oval. No alcohol just to make sure that we were in the right frame of mind to be able to thank the fans and the supporters and things like that. But once all those were done we partied for about two or three weeks and we made the most of our time together, it was really good it was great.

**AA** It is quite a unique situation isn't it with the Wests Tigers, you've got three clubs, three geographical areas that you are part of. It is quite unusual. Did you ever play State of Origin?

**JS** No, I came close. I was called into a training squad but I didn't get to play. I played City/Country. At that time, New South Wales were winning at the time, they weren't really changing their team too much and the players that were playing for them were doing their job so there was no real reason apart for me playing good football, which I was, I thought I was playing good football at that time in my career but it was just one of those things where you just can't pick everyone unfortunately. You can go through the years and talk about players that don't get picked because the same situation as someone like Dylan Edwards now for Penrith. He is probably the in form fullback at the moment but James Tedesco has been playing over the years in sensational form and still is. I don't understand the criticism he gets for it because unless he scores ten tries he has a bad game. But that's the situation I was in, I was playing OK football for my position and any other time maybe I would have got picked but just at that time in my time of playing there were players that were playing well, that had been there doing the job before me. I didn't get to play.

**AA** Do you worry about that now? You don't have any regrets.

**JS** No not at all, that side of things is out of your control, you can't control that. Being selected for Australia or New South Wales or any representative teams is out of your control. All you can control is what you do in club football, how good you play, what you do there is hopefully good enough or the selectors see it and they say OK we want his style of play. It's not always that you are playing well, sometimes it could just be your style of play will suit our team, it might suit the half back that we have picked, it might suit the five eighth that we have picked. That could be a Dylan Edwards situation I'm not sure I'm just throwing that up. It could be my style of play front rower doesn't suit because we've got someone

who's playing that style already. We need someone a little bit different. So it doesn't always have to be because he's playing bad, he just might not be suited to the team structure. But no, no regrets at all, that was out of my control.

**40 mins**

**AA** What are your proudest achievements on the field?

**JS** Proudest achievements, if I was just going to name a couple it definitely be my NRL debut. You work so hard towards that, you're competing against a lot of people to get there. You've got your juniors and so many people underneath you trying to get to where you are and then to be able to play first grade is such an achievement for anyone that gets to do it. The satisfaction I can't put into words but definitely my NRL debut I am proud of that and obviously the grand final. I had a long time between drinks in terms of semi-finals, I played semi-finals in 96 with the then Wests Magpies in my first year of first grade. I played semi-finals and didn't play again until 2005. So I had a very big drought in terms of playing semi-final football. Throughout that time I had some really great games and great times with the boys and we came close a few times just not close enough so to be able to hang in there and get through the tough times. Like I said Tommy built that into me not to just only get to a grand final but to win it that's amazing. I feel privileged that I got to do that.

**AA** Did you know it was time to retire? Did you have any doubts or was it clear?

**JS** You never know the time to retire. I think your body tells you a little bit. The mind is there, the mind tells you it wants to keep going. Funny enough though I technically retired three times. I left Wests Tigers in 2006 then played two years in England. I retired from England, I busted my knee in England so I thought I will go back I can't play anymore. I was 32 at the time and there was no interest anyway. So I came back and worked for the club. I stayed fit and I started playing a bit of park football with the Wests Magpies reserve grade just to get out. As a footballer or professional sportsperson you've just got that competitiveness in you, it just doesn't leave you. I still have it now with my kids. So I just started playing park football and because I was playing park football I don't know maybe the mind and body freshened up a bit and I felt like I could do it again because I just felt like I could still do it and I kept playing. I was lucky enough to get two more years out of my career. But in 2010 in my head I thought even if I wanted to play and if I did get an offer I don't think I could do an off season again because it is a grind. For me the off season, it's training. It's not like in the competition stage you are playing on the weekend but you are recovering Monday basically Tuesday and Wednesday just getting ready for the weekend. Whereas in the off season training you are getting back on the Monday, you are getting back on the Tuesday, you have a little bit of recovery on the Wednesday, you get back on the Thursday, you're back on the Friday and possibly get back on the Saturday and you do that for 16 weeks, anywhere between 14 and 18 weeks all up. That's what takes the toll out of you. So once you've done that you've got to go and play a whole season. In my mind at that time I was 34, almost 35 I just thought no I can't do it. The body had enough, the mind had enough. It sort of tells you, it is a hard

decision to make because once you have retired you're retired, you can't go back and experience that again. I was lucky enough I left the game satisfied with what I had done. Lucky I wasn't a player that you see sometimes that leave or retire because of injury or it was out of their control they've had to retire and they haven't fulfilled or they thought they could give more. That would be tough. So I was satisfied when I retired.

#### **45 mins**

**AA** Just one more question before we steer away from footie. Your thoughts about the Wests Tigers currently. How optimistic are you about the future for them?

**JS** I'm very optimistic. We've got a really young pathway coming through. Funny enough I heard the other day the Schoolboy Championship got played the other day there was between the two teams about 13 rep players that are currently signed with the Wests Tigers. So 13 players that played in that game that are currently signed with the Wests Tigers. So for us the future is looking bright. This year definitely I think we underachieved. I thought we had a team that could go further, I didn't really expect to be last. If you had asked me where we would have finished in January or February this year I would have said we are going to be just in the top eight or maybe just miss out. But I thought we were more a top eight team. So I think we underachieved for whatever reason we did. Injuries cruelled us a little bit, we lost Adam Doueihi early in the year with knee reco, Brooksie got injured same time so did Appy. We didn't have them for six weeks of the year so that hurt us. It took us a little bit of time to find our feet as well, so early in the year remember this was a whole new team. If you think of our round one team I reckon only three or four players had played with each other. If you go back and watch those early games you can see that, we just weren't gelling together but when we found our feet when Tigers were happy with our new dummy half and the players had to learn to play his game and fit in with his style of play and that takes time, you can't do that in one off season if just doesn't happen that way. So it took us a little bit longer than I think everybody thought it would take to gel but then once we did start gelling we lost Appy and Brooksie. So we lost our main players. No excuses, in some games we just didn't play well we got beaten by the Broncos pretty convincingly it wasn't just because we played bad, they beat us. There were a few other games like that too. But I still believe the future is great for us, we've got a lot of young kids coming through. The players that played this year are going to learn, it was a big lesson learnt I think. They are all young, Jerome Bulla who won our Player of the Year last night, he's only 21 and he won Player of the Year and he played from round nine so it just shows you how good he was because everyone was just giving him points and we'll build a team around him and we'll built a team around Appy and the young fellow that's coming from the Dragons. It's an exciting time, we just need to make sure that we keep building moving forward and not let the outside noise get to us. There is a lot of outside noise and I understand the frustration the supporters, sponsors and media and all that because we haven't been successful for a lot of years but we have to make sure that we don't listen to that outside noise and focus on what our job is and what our goal is.

**AA** That's very similar to the team that I follow. I follow Canterbury so they're in a very similar situation.

**JS** When you're not doing well it's easy for people to kick you while you're down. I guess that's unfortunately human nature sometimes isn't it. We're an easy target when you're not going well because there's so many things to pick at. This is not going well because of this person and this is not going well because of that person. Dragons are the same, Bulldogs, Dragons and us have been copping it all year and look where we are on the table, the bottom three teams. We are just easy pickings sort of thing, it's easy to put us down and because we are where we are, people jump on their bandwagon and say yeah it must be true sort of thing. I try not to listen to the outside noise as much as possible. I try not to read it. All I listen to is the people who want to support us, that want to stick by us and help us through these tough times. Because they're the people that I want with us when we are successful. I don't want the people who have been bagging us all year and suddenly going to jump on the back of us when we become successful and say oh yeah I was by your side. No you weren't I don't want that. Again I understand the frustration, I'm just as frustrated as everybody because it's been a long time since we've played semis. It would be nice to taste that again.

**50 mins**

**AA** Just a little bit of a change of pace John. I know today you are involved in the Macquarie Fields Finding Jobs/Changing Lives. I've got that right have I?

**JS** That was many years ago, that's when I was playing. There was a campaign where we worked the Police to go and help. We would go to schools and help kids that were sort of a bit off the rails and just talk about a better way I guess a better outcome in life if you go out and find a job or have a goal in life. Just try to lead them on the right path. That was a few years ago and I enjoyed that because I remember being one of those kids where I just really didn't know where I was heading in terms of when I was at school. I wasn't really an academic sort of student, school wasn't my thing, my behaviour wasn't really good because of that reason I would say. So I sort of understood where these kids were coming from a little bit. I just put my hand up and said yeah I would love to help and see what we can do. For some reason it's a talking point when you come from a professional club Wests Tigers, it's easy to communicate with these kids sometimes and they love sports. They got a bit of success but I haven't done that for many years.

**AA** So what are you involved with at the moment? You're working with the club.

**JS** I work in the corporate base. I spent about four years in the football area from 2011, (I retired basically in 2010), to 2014 I was working with Tim Sheens in the football area as a strength conditioner. I got moved on when the coaching structure changed and they offered me a job in the corporate space which I had been doing anyway as a player. We encourage players to do that even now, come out and meet sponsors. You do that anyway. For some reason I clicked

when I did that, I love talking to people. If it's rugby league I can talk all day, if it's business whatever it is I seem to be able to talk and I love meeting new people so when they offered me the corporate job I said yeah I will give it a go. I didn't want to leave the club, I didn't want to look for a job in another club, I really wanted to stay at Wests Tigers and help build success. So I accepted that. Corporate is my main role where I find businesses, sponsors to come on board and support the club financially but also help them to promote their business as well. Some do it for branding, some do it for networking, some do it for hospitality and some do it because they love the club. So there are many variables in that area. I'm also an ambassador for the club. So I'll do any community work where I can help out. I will put up my hand for anything, if I can help in any way I am happy to help out with the club. Corporate is my main job.

**AA** It sounds like you have the ideal life. Ideal job, ideal life.

**JS** I love it, I love my job, I love being part of the club. I'm happy to stay there as long as I possibly can. I take the same mentality in my job as I did when I was playing. As long as I am contributing to the team on the field or off the field I want to be there. The day that doesn't happen and they feel that I'm not then I'm more than happy to step aside and let someone else do it. But they are going to find it hard to kick me out.

**AA** Ok well I've had a really good time talking to you. I am talking about something that I am passionate about rugby league as well. So I found it a pleasure to have a chat with you John. Thanks very much for your time and thank you for being part of Curious Campbelltown.

**JS** No worries, thank you for having me it's been great.