

Sharks Touch Club 1974 - 1994

On 23 November 1973, a meeting was held between interested parties to form the Toowoomba Touch Association (TTA). At the start of the inaugural 1974 TTA season eight clubs had entered.

One of these clubs was led by former rugby league international Des McGovern. The club was named 'Caltex Stars' as the club was sponsored by the Caltex Service Station at the corner of Ruthven and James Streets Toowoomba. Des McGovern was the first coach and president of the new Club.

After a slow start the club acquired the services of another former rugby league international, John McDonald along with former pro sprinters Terry Arnold, Greg Gabbett and Wayne Durham, a formidable team of experience and obvious speed. The only stipulation to the 1974 season was that a player must be over 25 years of age and must not play Rugby League or Union etc during the season.

The 22nd September came around quickly and saw Caltex Stars and Saints match up in the first A Grade Grand Final ever contested in Toowoomba. After a bruising encounter, Caltex Stars became the first ever A Grade Premiers, beating Saints 7 to 5.

Caltex Stars contested the 1975 and 1976 seasons without success. Eligibility rules were changed in 1975, a player must be 23 years and over to compete in the Toowoomba touch competition, a rule which would stay in place until the 1981 season.

The Club would have its first name change in 1977. Les Toleman, an original member of the Club, was the Car Sales Manager with Austral Motors and was able to secure sponsorship through the company and so the Club's name was changed to 'Austral Stars'. The name change brought luck for the Club, who won the B Grade Premiership (the only grade entered in the competition that year) against Saints 10-3.

Austral Stars competed in the 1978 season in A Grade only, without success.

In 1979, Austral Stars were able to field two teams, but with the threat of expulsion from the TTA, they were forced to enter an A Grade side, a grade clearly out of its league. The pressure began to mount, particularly on the A Grade players. A mass exodus followed and the Club was left with only a handful of players. With only a about 4 A Grade players left, the B Grade side would play their game and then line up again to play the main game (which was legal in those days). Games were 30 mins each way – scorelines were huge.

Hard work in the off season by all of the eleven remaining players, particularly Ron Barrett and President Ken Hill, saw Austral Stars defy the rumours that they would fold. In 1980, the Club fielded B and C Grade sides. The end of season trip saw a change in 1980, President Ken Hill together with Neil Canning and Les Toleman made a special trip to Stradbroke Island... the Club has been going there ever since.

In 1981, Austral Motor's sponsorship would cease and the Club would go into the season without a sponsor. The name 'Austral' was dropped from the name and the Club was known simply as 'Stars'.

If the situation was tough for Austral Stars, it would become even harder for Stars. At the insistence of the TTA all clubs had to field three teams in 1981 – an A, B and C. The only good news was age limit to play had been dropped to 21 that year, Stars were able to field the required three sides, but were

completely outclassed in the top grades. 1981 also saw the forming of the Referees Association, playing fields were reduced to 70 metres by 40 metres and ladies played under the Ladies Association.

Club members called for a new name at the start of the 1982 season. Names like Drayton Devils and Drayton Hawks were suggested, however, commonsense prevailed and as the Club's wateringhole – the Cheyenne Hotel - is situated on the banks of the famous Drayton Harbour, the Club would be renamed Drayton Sharks Touch Club. The Club colours would be changed to predominantly red, green and white.

1982 saw the ladies play as part of Sharks on Saturday afternoons. The ladies played in the B Grade competition and went on to create more Sharks history that season – being the first ladies team to win a Premiership in Sharks colours 1-0. Team members: Trish McDonald, Maree Gerrard (Haak), Steph Harpur (Cary), Sally Lawrence (Neale), Jenny Griffin (Breydon), Lyn Kennedy, Anita Carlaw (Utschink), Robyn Murdoch, Kathy Twydale, Olive (Surname not known).

General consensus by the new committee in 1983 agreed it was time for the Club to take a new direction, particularly where A Grade Mens teams were concerned. Frank Hedge was lured from Lions to coach the A Grade team. His former club mate from the Newtown Rugby League Club, Artie Bougoure would be playing in Sharks colours for the first time, along with John and Jim Ryan. Other members of the team included Ross Stafford, Peter McGown, Paul McDonald, Wally Hanley and Graham Wockner.

Another name appeared on the Sharks register for the first time that year. This little boy played in the D Grade side and played well enough to win the TTA Best and Fairest Award in that grade. His name? Scott Pierce.

The ladies competition was well and truly underway this season, with no less than 10 clubs fielding A and B Grade sides. Playing fields were altered at the start of 1983 to 70 metres by 50 metres and touch became open (with a minimum age limit).

Former Club President and Foundation Member Ron Barrett had Life Membership of the Club bestowed upon him in 1983, the first to receive such an award.

With Sharks holding most of their A Mens side from the previous season, the team was able to perform even better in 1984 with Frank Hedge again Captain/ Coach, finishing the season in fourth place after a controversial decision cost them the match.

The D Mens side won the Premiership that season, under Coach and former Club President Ross Gollan. Another young player joined the D Grade side that year – Craig Pierce. Opposition players during the year complained bitterly about the size of Scott and Craig Pierce, claiming they were too small and therefore too hard to touch.

Les Toleman, a member of the original side, received Life Membership for his contribution to the Club at the Annual Banquet in 1984.

1985 was yet another successful season, for the third year running, the A Men made it to the finals. Unfortunately, the D Men couldn't repeat the form of the previous year, losing 3-0 to Royals.

Scott and Craig Pierce became Sharks first Queensland Representatives in 1985, both making the Queensland Secondary Schools side, with Craig gaining selection in the Australian Junior Team.

One could not underestimate the efforts of Frank Hedge and Gary Schwenke for their contribution to the Sharks Club. The platform had been set for the beginning of a golden era for Drayton Sharks Touch Club.

Enter Jim Ryan at the beginning of the 1986 season. The Club lured him from Roosters to coach the A Mens side. Sharks played Roosters in the Grand Final, in what some people say was the best final ever. The scores were tied 6 all at full time, and after extra time, Sharks ran out winners 8-6, our first A Grade Mens Premiership under the Sharks banner. In what must be some sort of a record, a total of six brothers played in the Grand Final team, four from one family, Jim, Michael, John and Dan Ryan, and Scott and Craig Pierce.

Our Ladies A Grade were beginning to put it together and played well enough to finish the season in fourth place. To top a good year off, the Ken Murdoch coached B Mens side, won the Premiership 6-4, after being down 4-2 at the break.

Former President Ken Hill was awarded Life Membership to the Club for his contributions during the years the Club was in turmoil.

In 1987, Sharks A Ladies finished in fourth place and the A Men were disappointing in the Grand Final being beaten by Roosters 3-1. One of the highlights of the year was Craig Pierce being selected in the Australian Colts team.

The men headed off yet again for another overseas tour – to Stradbroke Island, while the ladies headed to the Gold Coast for their end of season trip.

1988 proved to be a very successful year for Sharks. The D Mens side won the first Premiership on Grand Final day at Nell Robinson oval. The C Men and A Mens sides would later follow suit. The A and C Mens sides remained undefeated for the year, a rare occurrence these days in any form of sport. To cap off a successful year, Jodie Luck was selected in the 1988 Queensland Mixed side, a reward for an up and coming touch star.

In 1989, Sharks won one premiership, the first of many B Mens titles coached by Wally Hanley. The match was won in extra time in the last minute after Ross Stafford caught a pass that Dave Campbell threw blind over his head. Other team members included Artie Bougoure, Ken Murdoch, Mark Cary and Wayne Sullivan.

The A Ladies won their first Premiership in 1990, the first of five consecutive titles.

Drayton Sharks Touch Club's finest hour had to be in 1991. Another three Premierships – in the top three grades: A and B Men, and A Ladies. Photos took their place on the honour wall at the Cheyenne Hotel. The Ladies Premiership was something special because it was their second in a row and they remained undefeated throughout the season. Most grades were playing well in the 125 strong Club.

Sharks players were again selected as some of the best in the country. CJ Campbell and Daryl "Chip" Fry were selected in the Australian Under 20 side. "Chip" was named player of the carnival preceding his selection.

Without doubt, representing your country in any sport would be the highest level anyone could achieve. Craig Pierce was to go one better in 1991, after representing Australia in the World Cup, he was named in the Honorary World Team.

By 1992, the A Grade Ladies were the team to beat. With experienced players like Karen Vorpapel, Cathy Rookas, Jane Kelleher, Di Neale and Jodie Luck, to name but a few, they again won the Premiership, a treble in that grade and another first for the Club. This Premiership win was to be the only one for Sharks that year.

The Mens A team ran a distant third, by now becoming frustrated at not being able to win back to back Premierships. Both Daryl Fry and CJ Campbell were again selected in the Australian Under 20s side.

Two more Premierships in 1993 at the top level, a true showing of where Sharks strength lay. The A Men were dominant and the A Women equalled the record for the most Premierships in a row by a Women's A Grade touch team, a record held by former club 'Teachers'.

For the third year running CJ Campbell was selected in the Australian Under 20 Team.

1993 also saw the fifth Life Membership in the Club's history awarded to Len Hedge whose dedication to the Club remains unchallenged. He was Club Treasurer in from 1987-1989 and Senior Vice-President 1991-1992, as well as serving on the Committee.

Twenty-one years of touch arrived in 1994, not only for the Toowoomba Touch Association, but also for the Drayton Sharks Touch Club, originally known as 'Caltex Stars'.

By the time the 1994 season began, Sharks fielded eleven teams and some 156 playing members along with a few social members. A record for the Club on all accounts. Finals time late August, and no less than eight of the eleven sides participated. A Men, A Women and D Women progressed immediately to the Grand Final.

Drayton Sharks eventually had six teams playing on Grand Final day. The E and B Mens teams, and the Ladies D2 team had won the playoffs the previous week.

The Club won three Premierships in 1994. Early in the day, the E Grade Mens team lost to University 1-0. Full credit must go to their coach Ken Jackson, who nurtured these young men along during the year, with some of the players showing definite potential for higher grade honours with Sharks in years to come.

At the same time, Sharks D1 Ladies (Old Girls) and D2 Ladies (Sharkettes) played out the Grand Final. The D2 Ladies stole the show by beating their more fancied opponents 5-1. Sharkettes was made up entirely of Centenary Heights students and was ably coached by Karen Vorpapel.

The D1 Ladies showed their value to the Club by being Runners Up. They took the field that year with nothing in mind but to have a game of touch. The 'Old Girls', as in previous years, did not require a coach due to their expertise, knowledge, brilliance and sheer speed. Some of the players would admit to being 21+, and at a time when some men were retiring from touch, the ladies just kept going. From the 1982 Ladies team, six players again played in that Grand Final: Trish McDonald, Maree Haak (Gerrard), Steph Cary (Harpur), Sally Neale (Lawrence), Jenny Breydon (Griffin), Ruth Hanley (Anderson).

The Wally Hanley coached B Mens side won the Grand Final 2-1. They began the day as outsiders, but to everyone's surprise except themselves, came away with the title. Wally, now a stalwart within Sharks has a very impressive coaching record, particularly with the B Mens side. Since retiring from the A

Mens side, he played mainly B Grade and what he accomplished with the team is to be envied. The A Grade Ladies went down fighting to a very committed Roosters outfit 3-2.

At 4:20pm on the 10th of September 1994, the mens A Grade side played Roosters for Premiership honours. By the time 5:30 arrived, history was repeated. Some 21 years previously the same Club, but under a different name, won the A Grade title. After the scores weretied 2 all at full time, a drop-off situation occurred. Sharks were the ultimate victors 3-2. It only seemed fitting that Sharks greatest ever player, Craig Pierce scored the winning touchdown.

Representative honours were again high on Sharks list with Diane Pierce, Jodie Luck, Craig and Scott Pierce achieving representative status. Maree Roberts was also a shadow player. Mick Hunter had made the Australian Elite Train On Squad in this year and the previous year. Natalie Hedge represented Queensland Secondary Schools with a tour to New Zealand. Michelle Wolski made the Queensland Under 20 side and Natalie was a shadow player in the same team.