



MAN ON THE HILL

Matt Cleary

BENJI'S BACKYARD

Better than Disneyland? You bet your life. It's Leichhardt on a sunny Sunday

THERE'S A MINUTE LEFT IN the Wests Tigers and Cronulla Sharks game at Leichhardt Oval and the list of the places you would not rather be includes: New York, London, Barcelona, Tahiti, Disneyland, Disney World, Disneyland Paris, the Pyramids of Giza and a roller disco at Pamela Anderson's place. Because Leichhardt Oval is pumping.

Beau Ryan has just done plenty to score in the corner and it's 16-all with a Benji sideline kick to come. It's 30 degrees and hotter than Angelina Jolie in a safari suit, more humid than Sumatra by night. Sweat is squirting from your pores as if from sprinklers. It is solid gold.

Leichhardt and surrounds - Balmain, Lilyfield, Rozelle - was working class when that meant you rode a horse to a factory that made munitions for the Great War. It's old school, Old Sydney Town; an urban forest of tiny lanes, wooden cottages and people who cheered on The Don.

Leichhardt the ground is hot chips and humanity. It's a sausage on a roll. It's wooden bench seats and a big grassy hill. It's a tiny scoreboard and

the Keith Barnes Stand, a quaint little edifice with a corrugated iron roof enveloped by Moreton Bay figs. There is the blood of old Tigers in the soil.

Footy fans love the joint because it's a footy ground. Seating borders a rectangular field. Leichhardt is purpose-built. You can't play polo here, or run a lap, or kick a Sherrin at four sticks. You play rugby league.

Todd Carney plays rugby league, and quite brilliantly. We're watching him warm up behind the posts at the northern end. He looks fast, with short strides and plenty of them. His are jet shoes.

We're looking on with the Tigers die-hards - the tattooed flag-wavers and Tiger-print pyjama wearers, the ones you could assume get all shouty in the Internet forums. Die hards? These people are Bruce Willis being shot up in all four films.

"You're a piss-pot, Carney!" yells one.

"So are you, goose!" yells his mate, and they laugh themselves hoarse.

The Sharks go back in then run

back out, and there is booing. A bloke next to me takes a long draw on his tinnie, exhales beer fumes, and says contentedly, "Jeez it's good to be back at the footy".

He's spot on. For Leichhardt looks a picture. A week of rain and now the blazing sun, and the grass is glowing green like radiated Ireland. It's a fine surface. And on it the Tigers show their potency. Tim Moltzen slings it wide to Marshall who pops it (no-look, naturally) inside to boom fullback James Tedesco. The 19-year-old slices through a hole and into space, and the faithful roars as one: "GOOOO!" no doubt a highlight of the kid's life considering a year ago he was on the wing in SG Ball.

Tedesco finds centre Chris Lawrence who is desperately hauled in and the movement breaks down. But they're dangerous, these jungle cats, and Leichhardt is full to bursting because of it. (Tedesco will later fall as if shot by a dart from afar, breaking knee

ligaments. Heartbreaking for the kid because he looked bloody sharp.)

My, but it's hot. Young kids are pouring water on themselves. The doughnut and cappuccino caravan is doing exactly no business; the line for soft drinks serpentine like the river Thames. I join a long, though moving, queue where I engage an Irishman who's been in the country two days and never seen a game of rugby league. His skin is whiter than a sheet of A4; he is wearing more block-out

than the nuclear test observers at Maralinga.

"Your man in the No.6 is a brilliant player," he says talking of the Tigers five-eighth. "That pass he does where he doesn't look, it's amazing."

I tell him he's seen nothing and advise he get onto YouTube and search for "Benji magic". He leaves a happy man. I am not, however, as this is not the queue for beer.

And so we're up to the back of the hill underneath the trees where people sit on the fence and no-one sits on the fence. People love this, for there is companionship standing in a loose group of mates, watching the game and telling the ref his eyes are painted on. Stand about in a megaplex stadium and a bouncer in a yellow singlet will order you to find your allotted pigeon-hole, or else.

Of course money drives games to the mega-stadia, the ANZ Stadiums, the Etihads. But this grassy hill here at Leichhardt, this is Soul Town. And people vote with their feet each time Leichhardt hosts a game, as 19,762 did today. *Must* corporates and the demands of broadcasting trump what the punters, the rank-and-file footy fan, actually wants?

And while we're having a whinge - for to be a Man On The Hill is to whinge, it is a job lot - do focus groups tell the ground people that you need to "entertain" people with music during breaks in play? As the players take a drink to ward off cramps, there's that song by that guy, the one that goes "Tonight's gonna be a good, good

night". Nice little tune. But I'd prefer they did not play it. It's the footy; there is no dancing. Best have nothing. Or announcements like, "Would the owner of car licence plate KLZ-541 please return to your car as you have left the motor running" (as was heard at Queanbeyan's Seiffert Oval many years ago).

On the field and it's a fine game of footy, the visiting Sharks taking it right up to the premiership favourites. Indeed Cronulla are showing what the Tigers themselves know: their favouritism is "a bookies' thing". And anyone who says the wooden spoon is definitely Cronulla's you could sell the Harbour Bridge.

Because the Sharks have turned up. They're tackling like demons, their sky-blue loyalists enjoying the endeavour, the discomfort of the home fans. Carney steps and steps again, and scores. He converts and his team is ahead 16-12, eight minutes to go.

Marshall tries some razzle-dazzle but it's centre Blake Ayshford and winger Ryan who combine to level the scores. Marshall lines up the kick . . . and misses. We go into golden point. Carney's kick-off hits the cross-bar and the Sharks regather! But they can't land the killer blow. (And yes, apparently there's been some controversy involving a charge-down and Colin Best, but we on the hill know of it not, given we were talking with an Irishman in a bad beer queue.)

And so Marshall launches a pop at field goal that sails long and high and straight through the sticks, and the fans and players leap as one; a small town of 19,000 spawning salmon high on a drug called rugby league. Kids will never forget this. It's better than Disneyland. **ew**

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YOU'VE GOTTA LOVE LEICHHARDT: (Clockwise from top left) View from the hill as the Tigers thank their fans; Benji celebrates; and Todd Carney's dancing feet get moving.

