

A Short history of the sporting significance of Davies Park, West End, Brisbane

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The six-hectare area of ground known as Davies Park is nestled in between Montague Road, Jane Street and Riverside Drive at West End, Brisbane. Apart from the sporting infrastructure the ground's other major physical attributes are the impressive Weeping Fig trees with their giant canopies that stand at the Montague Road and riverside ends of the park.

Along with the Exhibition Ground, Lang Park and the Brisbane Cricket Ground, the park ranks as one of the most significant sporting sites in Brisbane. This significance stems not only from the breadth of sports played there but also from the significance of events played there as turning points in the evolution of these sports.

The South Brisbane area developed with the growth in the city after separation from New South Wales. In 1888 South Brisbane was declared a municipality. In the 1880's, a business man, Phillip Hardgrave owned riverfront land at West End, which was later acquired by the municipality, and in 1901 it was developed into what we know as Davies Park. It would appear that prior to this the area was known as "The Dairy" and from some time in the 1890s soccer was at least played there.

This is one of the last remaining examples of the old-style timber dressing sheds that graced Brisbane sporting facilities. This one is situated near the soccer field that was the Davies Park number two oval it is still used by the West End Football Club.



Sports Played at Davies Park

The breadth of sports played in the park precinct is quite extensive with the following having been previously or currently played:

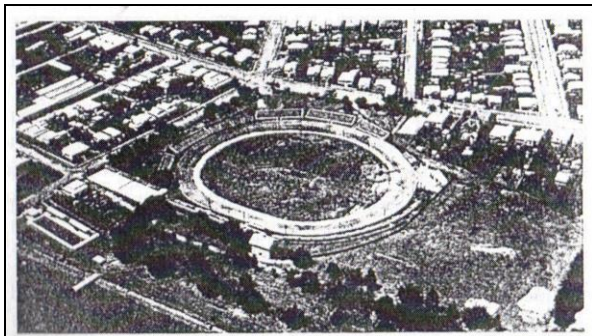
Australian Rules
Cricket
Basketball

Rugby League
Speedway
Swimming

Soccer
Hockey
Rowing

Touch Football
Beach Volleyball
Rugby Union

Road Running
Baseball



An aerial view of Davies Park taken in 1929 ⁽¹⁾. The speedway track can be seen in the centre.

The ferry jetty and river can be seen in the lower left of the photo.

As noted previously the sporting use of the park has been quite diverse. A brief history of several the key sports played at the ground is included below.

Rugby League ⁽³⁾

Rugby League has had a particularly long association with the ground possibly as far back as 1908 when the game commenced in Queensland.



The Souths Rugby League Club timber dressing shed at Davies circa 1950. The shed has since been replaced ⁽²⁾.

In 1922 the Brisbane Rugby League (BRL) competition was formed as a breakaway from the Queensland Rugby League (QRL). The BRL used Davies Park and called it home (albeit unofficially) from 1925 to 1934. The QRL also utilised the ground from 1919 to 1921.

In 1933 the Brisbane Rugby League moved to a district competition format with Southern Suburbs (Souths) being formed from the former occupants of the ground the Carltons club. Other clubs to use the ground were West End, Wattles and South Brisbane. Some of these names show the Souths club's strong link with the local community.

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When Lang Park became the headquarters for Rugby League in 1959, Davies Park remained a significant ground for the local BRL competition. In 1981 the Brisbane Second Division Rugby League commenced using Davies Park as its headquarters also playing their finals games there.

The curriculum vitae for the ground is very impressive and includes being the venue for 10 Brisbane Rugby League grand finals. The ground has also hosted numerous interstate games involving Queensland teams. In August 2004 a women's Australia v New Zealand Rugby League test match was played at the ground.

The ground record crowd is 15,000 for a rugby league match between Queensland and New Zealand in 1919. The present brick club house was erected in 1971 and previously two wooden grandstands have graced the ground.

In 2008 for the centenary celebration of Rugby League in Australia, Davies Park was recognised as a site of great Rugby League significance by the Australian Rugby League and a commemorative plaque erected at the ground.

Australian Rules Football

The Queensland Football League (Australian Rules) played some of their premiership games at Davies Park in the 1911, 1913 and 1914 seasons. These games included several finals games. The further link to the community can be seen in a team named West End that played QFL games at Davies Park in the 1913 season.

Cricket

Davies Park was the home ground for South Brisbane (Souths) District Cricket Club for many years probably extending back to prior to the First World War. Cricket continued to be played there until the South Brisbane club moved to Fehlbeg Park in the 1970's. Some of Queensland's best cricketers have played with the Souths club; these include Bill Brown, Ian Seib, Ron Archer, Peter Allen and Greg Chappell.

Soccer

The Alloways soccer club was probably one of the first to use the area for organised sport. In more recent times the West End Football Club have used the number two oval for their games.

In the late 1920's there was a split between the Brisbane and Ipswich Soccer Associations that paralleled a similar split in New South Wales between the Sydney and Newcastle clubs. In 1930 Davies Park was used by the breakaway association to play two interstate soccer games against their New South Wales rebel colleagues.

Speedway (Motorcycle Racing)

Speedway entrepreneur Albert J. Hunting shifted his Brisbane operations from the Exhibition Grounds to Davies Park for the 1927/28 season. The venue was known as the Davies Park Speedway and was floodlit for night events. The first meeting staged on this quarter-mile dirt track took place on the evening of 6th August, 1927.

Speedway was a boom sport in this period with Hunting building the world's first professional quarter mile speedway track at the venue. In the 1927-28 season the first Australian speedway championships across two divisions were held at Davies Park. These events were won by Queensland riders Frank Pearce and Max Grosskruetz.

In 1928 crowds of up to 8000 spectators were reported to have attended speedway racing events at Davies Park. They were able to arrive at the ground via the ferry jetty located at the nearby river.

These speedway events saw the appearance of female riders such as the globe travelling Irishwoman, Fay Tylour. In an era when male and female competitors did not generally compete together, Fay Tylour spent two seasons racing against male riders.



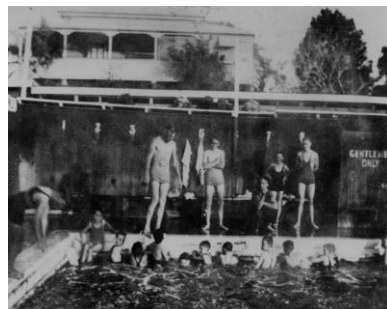
Two of the stars of the Davies Park speedway were Queenslanders, Frank Arthur and Vic Huxley who pioneered the sport in England.

These riders were among the international sports stars of the 1930's and their status was demonstrated by their appearance in cigarette card sets of the era.

Swimming

It appears that the original swimming pool may have been an enclosure built in the river. Later around 1925 a small, 50 yards six lane pool was built in the area where the mango trees are currently located. This was the first pool in Brisbane to allow mixed bathing in 1924. It was home to the City Past-time Swimming Club.

The pool was owned by the Brisbane City Council and was operated by lessees, it was closed in 1967 when the nearby revamped Musgrave Park pool was opened.



Swimmers at the Davies Park pool ⁽⁴⁾ circa 1930's. The pool was originally constructed by the South Brisbane City Council.

While most pools reduce in depth down the length of the pool. The Davies Park pool was unusual in that it sloped and reduced in depth across the width of the pool.



Memorial fountain to James 'Monty' Montgomery at the Montague Road end of the park. James was a stalwart of the Souths Rugby League Football Club and at one stage he also managed the Davies Park swimming pool which was located near the river side of the park.

His daughter Lyra Lister was also a stalwart of the Souths club and a life member of Water Polo Queensland.

Summary

In a period of more than a century the Davies Park precinct moved from being a rural block of land within the South Brisbane Municipality to become one of the major sporting grounds in Brisbane. The park has contributed to the social history of Brisbane through the provision of sporting and recreational activities for a very diverse group of sports.

Acknowledgements:

1. The aerial photo of Davies Park was provided by Tony Webb from his book *Speedway Tonight*.
2. Image of the Davies Park dressing shed from the State Library of Queensland, collection image # 203641.
3. Much of the information in the Rugby League section was provided by Rugby League historian Michael Higgison.
4. The image of the Davies Park pool was obtained from the State Library of Queensland collection image # 60753.

Other Sources of Information:

Rory Crowe (editor), *100 Years of Queensland Soccer*, Sportslead, 1984.

Jim Shepherd, *Encyclopaedia of Australian Sport*, Rigby Ltd, Adelaide, 1980.

Tony Webb, *Speedway Tonight, The Story of Davies Park Speedway*, Boolarong Press, Brisbane, 2009.

Information has also been obtained from the following site:

Brisbane's Love affair with Swimming <https://www.secretbrisbane.com.au/home/2017/6/29/brisbanes-love-affair-with-swimming> (accessed 25 November, 2018)

This brief history was originally prepared in 2007 for a public meeting held to discuss the future uses of Davies Park. This version has been updated to reflect changes to use of the ground and the availability of additional information.

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