

ALI FRAZIER  
LOUIS SCHMELING  
HARDING KERRIGAN  
BRADMAN JARDINE  
AUCKLAND CANTERBURY  
WALLABIES ALL BLACKS  
ALL BLACKS SPRINGBOKS  
BORG McENROE  
PROST SENNA  
COE OVETT  
FISCHER SPASSKY

# SPORT'S GREATEST BATTLES

RANGERS CELTIC  
DURAN LEONARD  
PALMER NICKLAUS  
QUEENSLAND NSW ORIGIN  
CONNER TEAM NEW ZEALAND  
CLOUGH REVIE  
COOPER McCAW  
FORD HOLDEN

## PHIL GIFFORD

# RIVALS

**SPORT'S  
GREATEST  
BATTLES**



**PHIL  
GIFFORD**

 HarperCollins *Publishers*

## **HarperCollinsPublishers**

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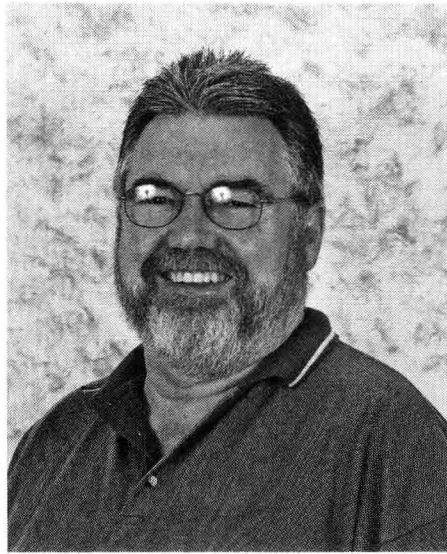
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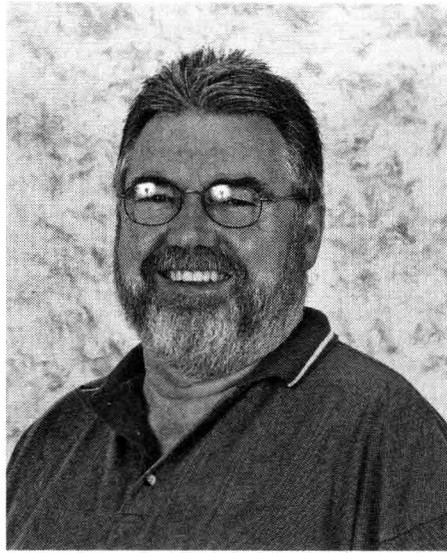


Phil Gifford is an award-winning broadcaster, sports journalist, speaker and author. Creator of satirical rugby character Loosehead Len, Phil has hosted No. 1 radio shows and won 14 radio awards over three decades in New Zealand and Australia, and is the author of 17 bestselling sports books.

*This book is dedicated to two wonderful teachers  
at Waihi College in the early 1960s, the late  
Margaret Cleary, and Charlie Dowdle, who  
showed me the power of telling a good story.*

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# Introduction

'Defeat is worse than death,' the great American football coach Vince Lombardi once said. 'You have to live with defeat.'

You don't have to take sport as seriously as Lombardi did to enjoy the drama it provides. And sport as competition is drama, not in some vague way, but as defined by the historical, five-act definition of a classic Greek or Shakespearean play.

Great sporting rivalries fit the mould perfectly. The reality in sport is often so astounding a scriptwriter would dial back the melodrama, or risk being mocked for wild exaggeration. Let me illustrate the theory with stories you're about to read.

First, in classical drama, comes the introduction, the background to the conflict that follows. Who in the theatre would dare to set a thundering, rainswept scene in which a golfer, Arnold Palmer, hits ball after ball into the teeth of the storm, while an unknown kid who would become his greatest rival, Jack Nicklaus, watches, fascinated? It really happened.

Next comes rising action, as the central character faces setbacks on his or her way to a goal. Try a brilliant young boxer, who plans to take up a university scholarship, and turn his back on fighting, until he finds his girlfriend is pregnant, and he has to turn professional to support her and their baby. It really happened to Sugar Ray Leonard.

The turning point, or third act, is the most dramatic, when things either go well, or very badly, for the hero. In the first State of Origin league game a rotund 35-year-old in the twilight of his career showed the rank underdogs in the Queensland side the way by belting the daylights out of New South Wales players who were his club team-mates. That's exactly what Arthur Beetson did.

In the fourth act, the falling action, there is often a moment of suspense, when it seems the story may take another turn, but eventually the final outcome is decided. The hot favourite in the 800 metres at the Moscow Olympic Games is beaten by his most intense rival, and told by his father, who coaches him, he has run like an idiot. The runner returns to the track in the 1500 metres, and thrashes the man who had beaten him in the 800 final. That was what happened when Sebastian Coe recovered from a humiliating loss to beat Steve Ovett in Moscow.

Finally, the resolution, when the drama is over, and, for better or worse, the character's story is resolved. In tragedy the result is catastrophic. Consider Joe Frazier in the years after he fought Muhammad Ali, so bitter he ignored pleas from his own son to forgive and forget. Or Ali himself, too proud to run from Frazier, and paying a terrible physical cost for the blows he took.

In a classic comedy the central character is better off than when he started. Richie McCaw, hounded by Quade Cooper in the lead-up to the 2011 Rugby World Cup, erased all the bad World Cup memories for New Zealand rugby fans when he held the Webb Ellis Cup above his head at Eden Park. A grateful nation lined the streets for victory parades, and McCaw was offered a knighthood.

As sports fans we can live vicariously through other people's struggles and achievements. In this book are some of the most extraordinary people and athletes in sport, and their amazing battles are living proof that truth is so often stranger, and more exciting, than fiction.

Phil Gifford  
Auckland, 2012



## Origin: NSW v. Queensland

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'If somebody from his family was in the New South Wales side, I reckon he would have beaten the shit out of them too.'

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*State of Origin league was born out of Queensland desperation in 1980. Sick of always being whipped by New South Wales, the Queenslanders dreamed up a scheme that has become an Aussie institution up there with the Melbourne Cup and the Ashes.*