

Steve McNamara shares what he has learned Down Under.

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Tim Hartley caught up with one national coach on a very public scouting mission Down Under.

It's often said that the best way to learn is to learn from the best, so when in the aftermath of last year's Rugby League World Cup England coach Steve McNamara packed his bags and went Down Under, it was clear that when it came to this sport, Aussie rules... and England's man was going to study them.

In a campaign full of controversy and action, McNamara's side had come within seconds of making the world cup final on home soil, losing out with just seconds to go to a New Zealand try.

So, typical of a man with a great thirst for knowledge, McNamara wanted to learn from the experience, add to his coaching armoury, and become better for future encounters, whether they be at international level, in Super League or even in rugby union – as he has often been linked with a switch of codes.

The Hull-born coach retained the national job on a part-time basis, and in what may be a surprise to many observers of the sport, took a step down to become 'only' an assistant coach at NRL champions Sydney Roosters.

'I've always wanted to coach in the NRL, it's the biggest league in the world. Super League is outstanding but this is the highest level, and this was never about my ego, about me coming here as a head coach. It was the right move for me at the right time,' McNamara told Coaching Edge.

'After the World Cup I was looking for the next challenge. I had a few options and it was certainly an interesting time. I had to make some big decisions, and I believe I made the right one. For me it's certainly been a good move, the timing was right, coming as it did after the world cup. I needed it – I loved every minute of the world cup, the experience was invaluable. It was a full-time role then, it needed to be, but we needed to make a change for what came next, and to help England progress.

'The whole environment down here is very different,' he said. 'As a player I came here first when I was just 19, playing for St George (Illawarra), and I loved it, so I knew even then that I wanted to come back at some stage.

'It may be a surprise to some, but I'm very much enjoying being in the assistant coach role to Trent (Robinson). It's similar for (New Zealand coach) Stephen Kearney at Brisbane Broncos, in that being assistant coach allows you to really concentrate on the game itself and working with the players, away from all the other issues.

'This job allows you to actually coach, which is great, as when you are head coach you are that little bit removed and also have so many other distractions and calls on your time. As I know from having been a head coach and also in the full-time national role, there is so much else that goes with the job and you lose some of that day-to-day contact. What this job in Sydney allows me to do very well is combine the role with the England position.'

'It's intriguing, it's interesting, and we'll see how things progress. Whether everything is "better" depends on your view. Certainly in England the game is slightly more open, with more passing, and of course we have several English players over here and they are making a big impact in the NRL. For

example James Graham has brought his many strengths and added a slightly different dimension, which can only be good for him. He's brought the best of his "English" game, and improved.'

As McNamara says, his time in Australia will help him improve as a coach, seeing the intensity of the Aussie game at close hand, but also act as a scouting mission, one which many of his England players will share. However, he is determined not to lose touch with the game back in the UK.

'A big advantage I have is that the wealth of information I collect over here will be passed on to England's players. The game is very healthy over here. Every week in the NRL it's a ferocious contest and that sort of thing can only improve you as a player and as a coach.'

'Of course, there are several of "my" England players over here, and I get to see them at close quarters, plus I get video of every Super League game sent to me so I can see exactly what's happening back home. But for me and those English lads, all our opponents are here. So this is a great opportunity.'

What McNamara says he has discovered is that the 'secret' of Aussie success is that there is no secret, it's just hard work and competition at all levels, as the technical skills are very similar.

'Why do Australia do so well? There really isn't a magic formula. It's down to sheer weight of numbers of people who play the game. If you have 100,000 rather than 10,000 playing then the odds are so much greater, the ratio is better,' he says.

'We do very well to develop the talented players that we do, lads such as Sam Tomkins, the Burgess brothers, James Graham but there are other factors, with participation level being one of those.'

'My son is in school over here and you soon realise what a sporting culture they have everyone seems to play sport. The climate is a reason, a factor – it's easier to have that outdoor lifestyle when the climate is nicer, plus over here the pre-season gives you longer to be the best prepared you can be.'

'Then, as I say, there's that sheer quantity of players... which has another impact too. It's rarer to see young players come through so quickly in Australia.'

They don't get pushed through too quickly, they get longer in the development phase – perhaps an extra two or three years – because there is so much competition for places and no need to push players on as quickly as perhaps we would in Britain.

The numbers game has another advantage in that however good or talented an individual, they are better when there is real competition for places. If no one is breathing down your neck, trying to take your place, or if there's no one in front that you are trying to push past, then players, anyone – whatever walk of life they are in – are just doing the job, that's human nature.

'Every day here the players have to be at their best.'

The England coach says the fact that rugby league is so popular Down Under means that it doesn't have to play second or third fiddle to sports such as football, which is often the case in the UK.

'The club here is well resourced in terms of staff. People have their specific roles in the club, and although back in England the coach may have other responsibilities too, in most respects it's very similar coaching here as there.'

'The actual technical coaching here is very similar to back home. It's the same game, the style of the NRL differs slightly from the Super League, which I don't think is necessarily better to watch, just different. It's a great environment, very positive and I'm learning so much every day – which I know will benefit me.'

Of course, I believe the players here are also benefitting from working with me. I'd like to think I'm a better coach for my experience here, and hope it puts me in a better position to be prepared for the challenges England face next.'

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