



INDIGENOUS ROUND

The childhood bond driving Watson and Hynes

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Nicho Hynes almost ended Connor Watson's career before it had even begun but the Sharks star now helps his Sydney Roosters rival with the Indigenous charity he established to promote suicide prevention.

Watson and Hynes will go head to head in Saturday night's sold out match at PointsBet Stadium but away from the play field the pair are close friends who share a passion for their Indigenous culture.

“I have known him forever and as a person Nicho is a terrific bloke,” Watson said. “He helps out with our charity, so he is a good dude.”



Connor Watson with a group of school children in Townsville

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Yet the reason Watson - a proud can still clearly recall the first time he met Hynes was because the Cronulla playmaker broke his collarbone in an under 8s match on the Central Coast.

After suffering a recurrence of the injury, the Roosters utility missed two seasons and his parents Mark and Jodie, who helped establish the Cultural Choices Association after the death of his teenage cousin Parker in 2017, insisted he strengthen his shoulder before playing again.

“Nicho and I played heaps of footy together and against each other from under 8s,” said Watson, who has a scar on his left shoulder to remind him of the injury.

“Nicho actually broke my collarbone when I was a little kid. I was playing for Terrigal at the time and he tackled me. I can still remember it. I was eight years old and on the green whistle.

“I think I must have landed flush on my shoulder. It was a season ending injury at the age and I had to take the next year off from playing too.

“I was at a ninth birthday party and I had my arm in a sling, I fell over and landed right on it. I rebroke it and moved the bone so I had to get surgery. Dad would get me doing chin-ups and push-ups to try and make sure it was strong before I could play again.”



Sharks star Nicho Hynes is a proud Wiradjuri man who grew up idolising Johnathan Thurston.

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The pair later played together in Central Coast junior representative teams until Hynes went to Manly at the age of 16, before joining the Mackay Cutters in the Queensland Cup and eventually being signed by the Storm.

Watson was granted a scholarship through the Australian Indigenous Education Foundation to attend Knox Grammar School and was signed by the Roosters in 2015.

“It has been so good to see his footy come on the last couple of years,” Watson said. “Versing him as a kid he always had it but sometimes it just takes a bit of luck to get your opportunity and then you have to take it and run with it.

“That is something he has done, and it has been awesome to see how good he has been playing the last couple of years.”

After returning to the Roosters this year following three seasons at the Knights, Watson was asked by the club to help design the Indigenous jersey the team will wear against the Sharks.

The 25-year-old approached the Frank Baxter Juvenile Justice Centre, whose detainees have also painted the boots of NRL players for the Boots for Brighter Futures project to raise funds for the Cultural Choice Association.

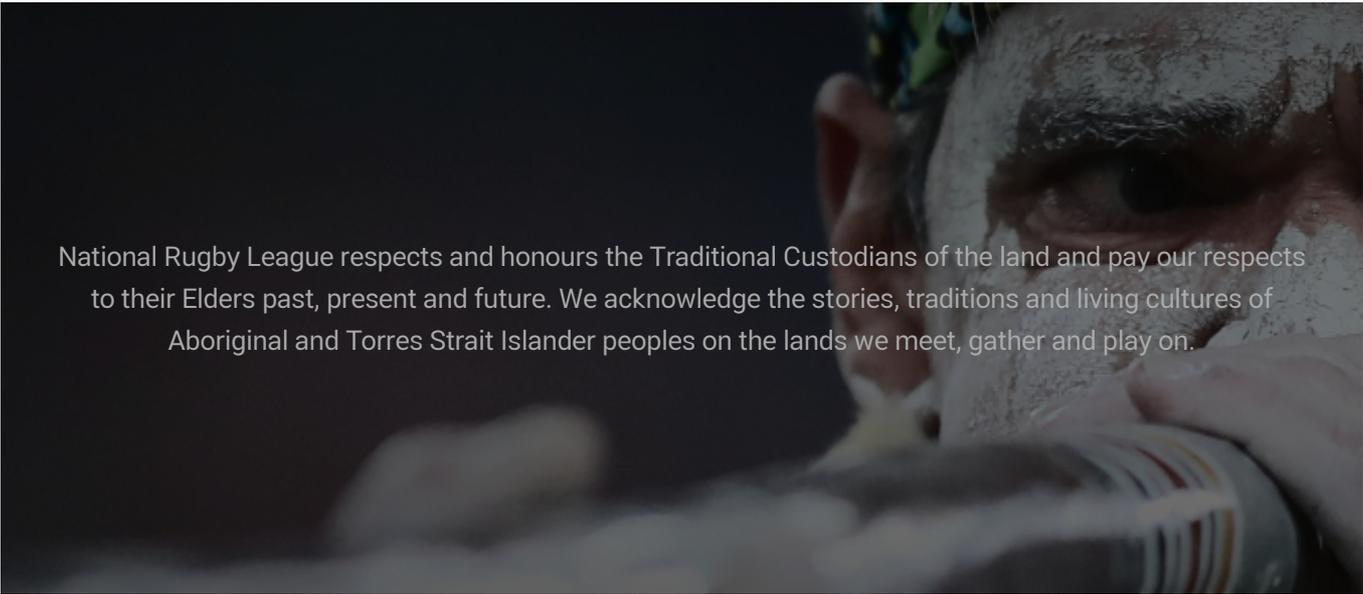
Under Watson’s guidance the detainees have this year collaborated with La Perouse based Indigenous artist Jordan Ardler to design the Roosters’ Indigenous jersey, which is titled, “New Growth, New Hope”.

“We started the Cultural Choice Association in 2018,” Watson said. “The whole idea started when I was at the Roosters in 2017 and my cousin Parker unfortunately took his life that year. That was the moment that I guess inspired us to start it.

“It is all about mental health and suicide prevention for young Indigenous kids because the rates are alarming and there is not really enough being done about it.

“I just thought it was a good opportunity for me to use my profile and my voice, and my connections.

“Nicho is a big part of it as well so we use these people to promote our message because we don’t want other families to go through what ours had to.”



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