



Johnathan Thurston on the attack for the North Queensland Cowboys, and (below left) his mother PLO Debbie Saunders.

Photo by David Kapernick, courtesy of The Courier-Mail



# League of their own

By Simon Kelly, Media and Public Affairs Branch

**D**ebbie Saunders, Roy Hodges and Malcolm Doyle might not be household sporting names, but their sons are.

One is mother to reigning National Rugby League (NRL) player of the year Johnathan Thurston while the others are fathers of State of Origin representatives Justin Hodges and John Doyle.

Also forging the Queensland Police Service (QPS) link between the

Indigenous community and elite rugby league is PLO Willie Morganson and former PLO and current police recruit John Buttigieg.

Sitting in the Brisbane City Police Beat, PLO Saunders is a world away from her son – a rising star with last season’s grand finalists the North Queensland Cowboys and three-time Queensland State of Origin representative.

She is proud of her work with the QPS, particularly an initiative to

divert youths away from chroming in the city.

But her eyes light up even more when talk turns to Thurston’s 2005 Dally M Medal, awarded to the NRL’s best player each year.

“I was very humbled to be honest,” she said.

“I was just over the moon when he won it – I couldn’t believe it. He deserves it ... he gives 110% when he’s on the football field.”

PLO Saunders has worked

predominantly in Brisbane City since taking on the role in 1995.

“Most of the kids I deal with (through patrols and diversion away from chroming) have found a healthy respect for police,” she said.

“Building bridges and knocking down walls – I like to think I’ve done that through my role.”

PLO Hodges has also noticed a significant improvement in the



Photo by David Kapernick, courtesy of The Courier-Mail

It took PLO Hodges two years to win his trust, but the boy eventually turned his life around and later approached him for a job reference. The boy won the position and went on to successfully complete his apprenticeship.

PLO Hodges moved from Cairns to Brisbane in 1999 to help his son adjust to life with the Brisbane Broncos.

Having played rugby league in Cairns for 33 years, he also coached Justin from a young age.

“Our family units are very close-knit. When someone has to leave it’s very hard,” PLO Hodges said.

Justin is now a regular with the Broncos and has played three State of Origin games for Queensland.

“It’s a great feeling to be part of the QPS and to have so many people in the job who support me and my young bloke,” PLO Hodges said.

“There could be no father prouder than I am now.”

PLO Doyle has gone from coaching his son to watching his career develop from afar.

His son John is playing for the Sydney Roosters this year after a three-year break from the NRL.

John started his career with the Cowboys in 1996 and played three State of Origin games for Queensland in 2001-02 before being forced out with injury. He has also played for the Australian Aboriginal side.

“I sat him on the bench a couple of times because he didn’t turn up to training,” PLO Doyle said of coaching John’s North Rockhampton State High School side.



Justin Hodges breaking a tackle while playing for the Brisbane Broncos, and (left) his father PLO Roy Hodges.

relationship between the QPS and Queensland’s Indigenous community since he joined the Service in 1993.

Now stationed at the Cherside Police Beat in Brisbane’s north, he began his career as a PLO in Cairns.

“In that time police liaison work has made quite a difference,” he said. “It has made a difference, getting out in the community.”

One of his success stories was a young offender he tried to help avoid a life of crime.



Above: John Buttigieg charges into attack for the North Queensland Cowboys before starting a career with the QPS.  
Below: Former Cowboy John Doyle, son of PLO Malcolm Doyle.

"The other kids weren't happy because he was the main man but it was a matter of principle."

While PLO Doyle no longer coaches, he still does a lot of work with local children, particularly during school visits.

He expected becoming a PLO would not be a popular decision. "But kids have started coming up to me and saying they want to be PLOs so that's a positive," he said.

PLO Morganson particularly enjoys interacting with children as part of QPS visits to schools in an around Ingham where he is stationed.

He became a PLO in 1999 after returning from a stint in the English Super League. Plenty of people still remember him from his playing days with the Broncos from 1991-94 and the Cowboys in 1995-96.



Photo by Cameron Laird, courtesy of The Courier-Mail



Photo courtesy of The Courier-Mail

PLO Willie Morganson in his playing days.

PLO Morganson is planning to hang up the boots this year after one last season in the Townsville district competition with the Herbert River Crushers.

Following nearly two years as a PLO in Townsville, John Buttigieg entered the Police Academy in Townsville as a recruit in February this year.

The former Cowboy, who played three State of Origin games for Queensland in 2001-02, said football was his biggest icebreaker when interacting with the community.

"A lot of the Indigenous community really relate to rugby league," he said.

Recruit Buttigieg, whose class is due to graduate from the academy in September, said school visits to Palm Island were among his highlights as a PLO.

"I enjoyed my time as a PLO and learnt a lot of new things but after seeing what police officers do I decided to take that next step."

Photo by Cameron Laird, courtesy of The Courier-Mail