



An Early History of the Australian Rugby Choir

13 September 2025

Royals Rugby Choir (1987-1995)

The Royals Rugby Choir was formed in 1987 following a successful tour by Canberra's Royals Rugby Union Club's team to England, Ireland and Wales. While their performances on the field were excellent, they were somewhat overshadowed in the after-match festivities, especially in the singing department. After such humiliation at the hands of the Welsh, it was decided to form the Royals Choir to see that such shame would never be visited on them again!

Dougal Whitton, Geoff Didier and Colin Perman of Royals Rugby Union Club were the prime movers in getting the choir idea off the ground in the autumn of 1987. Colin Slater, a prominent singer in Canberra who had formed his own company – Sing Australia Pty Ltd – was invited to visit the club one evening, essentially to teach the choir the National Anthem. Fortuitously, Colin was at the time looking for opportunities to implement his company's goal of encouraging more people to sing, and teaching Australian songs. After a very successful first session with a choir of around twenty-five blokes, Colin asked if they would be interested in continuing to learn more songs – beginning with 'A brown slouch hat'.

This eventually led to performances at rugby dinners and other special occasions, as well as singing in a number of high profile productions of Sing Australia, including singing at a 1987 Christmas Concert at the Canberra Theatre with the Woden Valley Youth Choir, the Brisbane EXPO 88 Concert and Australia Day festivities from 1988 to 1991. The Royals Choir was made up of members from all grades within the Club as well as a number of officials and coaches. While the choir stayed together for around eight years, it was difficult at times to keep it going because of the players' commitments to training and matches. John Hillier was one of the stalwarts of Royals and of the choir, and played a prominent part in keeping it going, while Colin Slater continued to work with them and find the occasional gig. The Royals Choir finally wound up in 1995; it had been a great experience and a great group of blokes.

Canberra Rugby Choir

The Australian Rugby Choir (ARC) had its immediate genesis in a discussion between Colin Slater, John Hillier and Bill Salter (also of Royals), during which it was suggested that Colin's company, Sing Australia, should submit a proposal to the ACT Rugby Union for a choir to provide half time entertainment for the ACT Brumbies games in the newly formed 'Super 12' competition. Brumbies CEO Mark Sinderberry was interested in the idea but did not want a choir drawn from just one ACT rugby club. Hence others were recruited into an 'ACT Rugby Choir'.

A proposal was duly submitted by Sing Australia to the ACTRU, envisaging the formation of a choir of men to sing at the Brumbies home games. The proposal was that the choir be managed by Sing Australia and be independent of any rugby club, so that its members could be drawn from rugby supported from all over Canberra. The proposal was accepted and the task of getting a choir started was begun with Colin's placement of an advertisement in the Canberra Times. Around seven men turned up at St Jude's Primary School, Holder, in response to this advertisement, and were given the challenge of bringing at least two more members each the following week! Basically, this was achieved, and the new choir was under way.

The choir, known then simply as the Canberra Rugby Choir or the Brumbies Choir, was launched publicly at Bruce Stadium on Tuesday 5 March 1996 – the first home game of the ACT Brumbies. Around thirty members were present and the choir sang the John Williamson song 'True Blue' accompanied by the Canberra City Band. Further performances at Bruce Stadium followed on the 9th and 15th of May. These performances were 'live', sung to backing tapes, but the sound system left much to be desired with faulty or erratic mikes and speakers.

During this first season, the game that really put the spotlight on the choir was a game against Wales on Sunday 2nd June 1996. The Choir sang both the Australian and the Welsh national anthems with great distinction. The large crowd gave a roar of approval for both anthems but the choir was particularly proud to have performed the Welsh anthem in four-part harmony and in Welsh.

Following the end of the 1996 Super 12 season the choir performed at a number of Canberra Kookaburras' rugby matches at Manuka Oval, but the unavailability of an amplification system made this difficult to maintain. The choir continued to rehearse and to perform at a range of community events, sometimes associated with members of the choir, such as school fetes and business functions. The choir's accompanist for 1996 was Paul Myers, a student at the Canberra School of Music. Paul was followed by thirteen-year-old Catriona Ironside, the daughter of a choir member. Catriona was involved with the choir for around five years, and was recognized by the members as an extremely talented accompanist.

Australian Rugby Choir

Lessons were taken from the initial Super 12 season. A uniform was adopted which consisted of a blue shirt, blue jeans, blue tie, with brown shoes or boots. In order to facilitate ambitions for a wider role and recognition, the name 'Australian Rugby Choir' was registered and adopted. It was hoped that the choir might be able to gain recognition from the Australian Rugby Union (ARU), which might lead to involvement in international matches involving the Wallabies. This remains an aspiration. It was decided that, in order to overcome the deficiencies of the sound system at the stadium, the choir would pre-record its songs and mime them in performance. This enabled the choir to perform on the ground without the need to hold music, permitting some experimentation with simple movements. Colin Slater took on the additional role of encouraging the crowd to sing along with some of the songs, with mixed success, not assisted by erratic microphones. Rehearsals moved to St Colomba's Church Hall, Braddon, where it became possible to have a refreshment break and to divide the choir up for part singing practice. Subsequently, further membership increases necessitated moving the practice venue to Merici College in Braddon.

There were a number of highlights during the ACT Brumbies 1997 season – combining with the RSL Men's Choir from Dunedin (NZ), singing at the semi-final in front of a crowd of 25,000, the David Campese 'Legends Dinner' at the Australian Institute of Sport, singing at the France-Brumbies game with the children's choir from Telopea Park Primary School, and an appearance on the ABC TV's '7.30 Report'. After the end of the Super 12 season in May, the choir continued from strength to strength with membership growing on almost a weekly basis.

On 25th September 1997, an Incorporated Association was established to manage the choir's membership matters and social program. The inaugural President was Denis Blight, one of the choir's great enthusiasts. Denis was followed in this role at the beginning of 2000 by Wal Cooper, who was President until he resigned from the position in 2003.

The main role of the choir committee was conceived to be supporting Sing Australia in its vision for the choir and for the promotion of singing in the community. However, at the end of 2000 as a result of differences arising between the Committee and Colin Slater on how the group should be run, it was mutually agreed that there would be a parting of ways.

Colin Slater's hard work on behalf of the choir continued right up to his departure in early 2001. It took his persistence and enthusiasm to maintain the ARC's profile with the Brumbies and in the wider community. The success and constant growth of his Sing Australia organisation in the years since is testimony to his musical talents and vision for community singing.