

The NRL kicks off, but do you have to lose a final before you win a final?

Written by The Conversation USA

As the 2016 NRL season gets underway, all eyes will be on the North Queensland Cowboys to see if they can repeat their premiership win in last year's grand final.

But winning successive premierships in contact sports is not about merely maintaining your current standard, or expecting that your opposition won't improve from the previous year.

To have a real shot at back-to-back titles, you have to be prepared to get better in all areas of performance.

Let me explain.

There are a couple of rusted-on misconceptions we hear about premiership hangovers, the elusive chase for a "dynasty" and that old pearler: having to lose a grand final to win one.

Crunching the data, it appears that improving your points difference – the difference between total points scored (attack) and the points scored against (defence) – is the most surefire way for a premiership team to climb the podium for a second year in a row.

Back to back wins

The spark that created my interest in this topic was the absence of back-to-back NRL premierships since 1992-93 when the [Brisbane Broncos completed the feat](#) (ignoring the Super League issue in 1997).

That's so long ago that the competition was then known as the New South Wales Rugby League, not even the Australian Rugby League.

It's before Darren Lockyer – the Broncos most-capped player – broke into first grade. The

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ex-skipper's career came and went without ever witnessing a back-to-back win by any NRL team.

But why has no rugby league team been able to achieve this feat in more than 20 years? What I found when I analysed all the rugby league premiers since 1992 was that the winning teams averaged an 8% drop in points scored the following season.

At the same time, their defence suffered even more.

On average, the reigning premiers conceded 12% more points the following year, highlighted by the Melbourne Storm of 2000, who let through 137 points more than the previous season.

When you look at total points difference, we see a very clear red flag. Premiership teams suffer a 43% reduction in points difference on average the following year.

Some premier winners may get marginally better in either attack or defence, but overall they tend to get a lot worse at a combination of the two.

If the Cowboys want to create history and win back-to-back premierships they will need to make sure they don't just improve their attack or defence, they need to get better at both.

Across the codes

While the NRL has been devoid of successive premierships since 1992-93, we've seen a number in other contact leagues such as AFL, Super Rugby and NFL.

We've even witnessed a couple of "three-peats" – where the same team wins three premierships in a row – something that hasn't happened in NRL land since Parramatta's glory years of 1981-1983.

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What I noticed when I analysed the back-to-back champions in AFL, Super Rugby and NFL was that the overwhelming majority of teams improved their overall points difference in order to win a second or third crown.

So across these three codes, a successful premiership defence was marked by an improvement in points difference in 11 of 13 cases.

That old wives' tale

When an athlete is crumpled on the ground after the full-time siren in a losing grand final, it's difficult to know what to say.

If you want to somehow salvage something positive from the experience, there's little doubt you'll refer to [that old chestnut](#) : "You have to lose one to win one."

Personally, I'd like to see what happened to the last person who said that to former coach Brian Smith, a talented tactician who never had much luck when it came to the big dance.

Smith coached grand-final losing teams in 1992, 1993, 2001 and 2010, also losing a Challenge Cup final in England in 1996.

If you look at the NRL over the past 24 years, only six teams have lost a grand final and then made amends within a two-year period (even that could be considered a little generous).

So if the saying only rings true 25% of the time, maybe we should be thinking up another way to console people after they finish runners-up.

Look across the other codes previously mentioned and only six of 24 teams in AFL have lost a grand final and then won one within two years.

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In Super Rugby, the figure is three of 20 champions, and in the NFL it's a stone-cold statistic of one instance from 24 occasions.

The supercoach factor

Aside from whether the Cowboys have the ability to secure successive NRL titles, there's another element to consider.

How will supercoach Wayne Bennett at the Broncos respond after his first loss as head coach in [last year's grand final](#) against the Cowboys?

Bennett is revered for winning titles in 1992, 1993, 1997, 1998, 2000, 2006 and 2010 without being trumped in a grand final during that entire period.

But it's amazing how quickly many have forgotten the old Brisbane Rugby League era, when the northern competition was filled with national and state representatives.

As coach of the Souths Magpies in 1984, Bennett suffered a thumping 42-8 grand final loss to Wynnum Manly.

The following year, against the same star-studded Wynnum team, Bennett turned the tables with a 10-8 win, a moment he has reflected on fondly several times.

So I guess the rule is that losing a grand final won't necessarily win you one, but being Wayne Bennett may change that equation.

The University of Queensland is the official university partner of the Brisbane Broncos. Vincent Kelly is currently co-supervising several undergraduate and postgraduate students at the Brisbane Broncos.

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