

EDGAR BROOKS



Oldham F.C. — 1933 to 1948 to 19??

BENEFIT SOUVENIR 1/-

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The Story of the Football Career of EDGAR BROOKS, or Steps to Rugby League Fame — Moorside (Continuation League), Strinesdale (Intermediate League), Watersheddings (Junior League), Oldham F.C., Lancashire County, England.



REPRESENTATIVE HONOURS

FOR ENGLAND

- v. FRANCE at St. Helens, February 25th, 1939.
- v. WALES at Oldham, November 9th, 1940.
- v. WALES at Bradford, October 18th, 1941.

FOR LANCASHIRE

- v. YORKSHIRE, 1940.

Compiled by C.E.B.
January, 1948.

THIS is the story of the Oldham boy who knew so little about Rugby football that, when volunteers were being sought for the first game, he offered to play centre forward. It is also the story of how he lived down that schoolboy howler by learning so much about the game, and proving so adept at it, that he became an England Rugby League international, despite an injury which very early almost ended his playing career.

If it sounds like something which ought to be included in a sporting supplement to Grimm's Fairy Tales, you can reckon it as just one more proof that truth often beats fiction to the ball. It is a story to which a fitting and richly deserved chapter is now to be added by the playing of a benefit match for Edgar Brooks, Oldham Football Club stalwart of fourteen and a half years service.

Neither all that experience in top-class football, nor his international ranking prevents him from shuddering when he recalls that devastating exposure of his juvenile greenness, but even the slightly better informed nippers who yelled their derision at the time, will now be prepared to admit that he has made ample amends. No doubt there are some of them among his staunchest present-day admirers, for it was at Moorside, only a few forward rushes away from Watersheddings, that those youngsters first felt the rugby urge. They hadn't felt it at school because at that time the village school did not run a team. The formation of a Continuation team gave them their chance, however, and Edgar, who had just started work, was among those who jumped at it.

Maybe the fact that it was Jack Hall to whom he was apprenticed as a painter and decorator was the unwitting impulse to Edgar's rise to sporting stardom. As a former player, Jack found himself roped in to give the young Moorside aspirants an idea of what the game was all about, and a working notion of how it was played. Possibly Jack, who had, in his day, been hooker for Oldham Schoolboys, figured that Edgar might as well understudy him at football too, or perhaps he was trying to spare the boy's blushes by putting him in a position roughly equivalent to the "centre forward" for which he was heretically clamouring. Anyhow, Jack told him, "You'll be hooker."

Assured that this meant he was to be the centre man of the front row of the six forwards, Edgar reckoned that he had got the job for which he had volunteered, and his ears burned a little less fiercely.

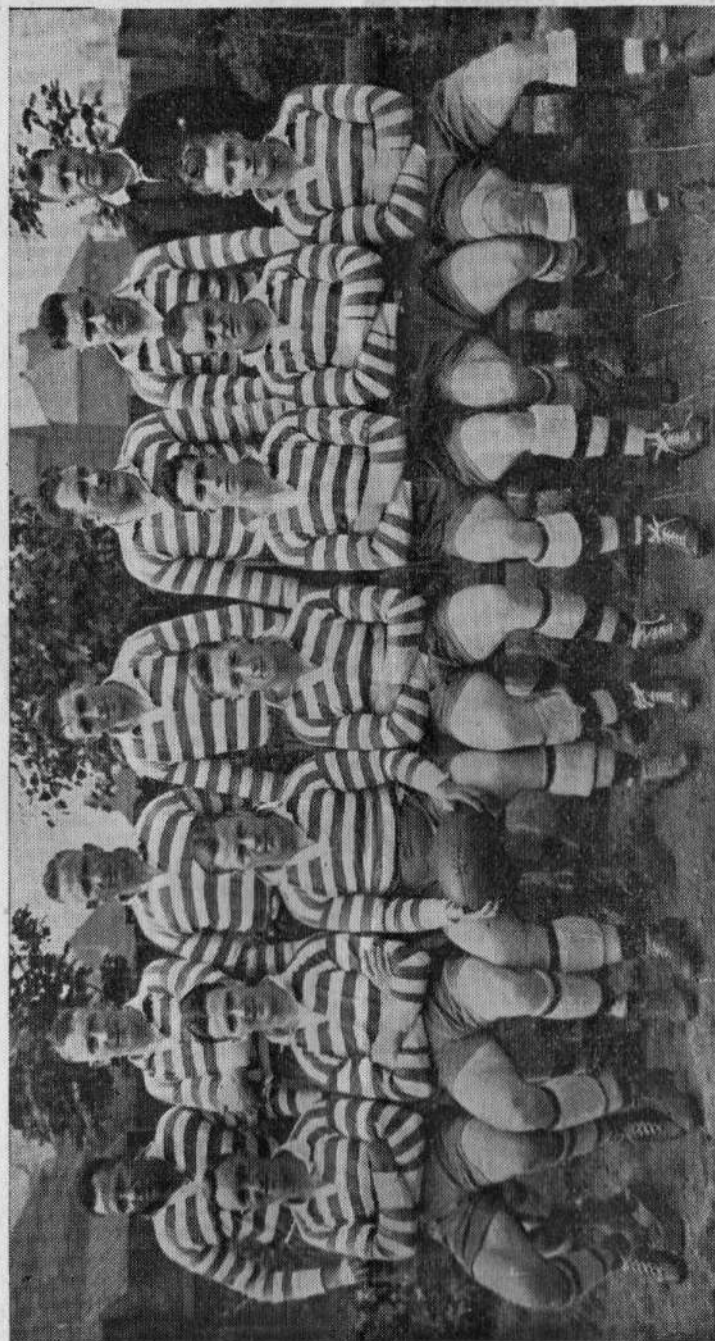
They were burning again after the first game, but this time with pride. The Moorside tyros had beaten the redoubtable Higginshaw on their own ground, and Edgar had dived over for the first try which had set them on the winning way. That was an encouraging start for the team as a whole, and, in particular, for the sturdy lad of fourteen who now began to get the hang of what was required of the wearer of a No. 9 jersey. The following season Edgar stepped up to Intermediate football. He joined Strinesdale, and again had cause to rejoice, for he was in the team that carried off the Howell Cup. Nor is that his only reason for remembering the Strinesdale days.

Trainer James Cronin was keenness itself, and took special measures to ensure that his players were full of pep. Every Friday night he used to give them port wine and eggs—a diet that might well make senior Rugby League stars smack their lips enviously in these austerity days.

Getting too big

Edgar's progress was steady and logical. His next move was into the Oldham Junior Rugby League. He joined the Watersheddings Club when

Oldham F.C. Team 1938-9



OLDHAM CHRONICLE

The Oldham first team during the season when Brooks first played for England.

Back row (from left): ALEC GIVVONS (loose forward), EDGAR BROOKS (hooker), MICK MALONEY (second row), NORMAN PUGH (second row), BILL MOORE (front row), BILL PARR (front row), HARRY TUFNELL (trainer), Front row: DAVE SCHOFIELD (scrum-half), GWYN THOMAS (full back), BILLY STOTT, capt. (left centre), TED KERWICK (out-half), ERNEST LARGE (left wing), JOE TURNER (right wing), VERDUN RHYDDERCH (right centre).

he was eighteen, and it wasn't long before Oldham F.C. officials decided that he was made of the right stuff. They signed him a year later in the summer of 1933, and that restored Edgar's peace of mind at once.

It needed it after the irony of his having been dropped from the Watersheddings team because he was "getting too big." At nineteen Edgar was 5ft. 9in. and 12st. 8lb. (he is now 5ft. 10in. and 14st.) and apparently his junior props were finding the supporting of him something of a strain.

Oldham's approach solved any problem that Edgar's build may have presented for Watersheddings, and gave the young hooker his big chance. He took it with the determination and zest which have characterised his football life. In a season in the "A" team he established himself as the obvious successor to Jack Scaife, who had given such splendid service to Oldham as a member of the celebrated front-row firm of Read, Scaife and Clayton.

A young player's first game in senior football is always a testing occasion. Edgar's was particularly so, for when he stepped up into the first team for the first time, Oldham's opponents were the famous Australians. During that tour of 1933-4 Oldham were lucky enough to play the Aussies twice, and the local boy made his debut in the second game on January 10th, 1934. Though Oldham were overwhelmed by a brilliant side by 38 points to five, the fact that he was retained for the next three league games and made several more appearances that season, is indication enough that Brooks made the right impression. The teams of that 1934 game were:

OLDHAM.—T. E. Rees; W. Whitworth, S. Bardsley, S. J. Stephens, F. E. Marsh; T. Egan, J. Heywood; J. Read, E. Brooks, A. Clayton, F. W. Ashworth, W. T. Thomas, E. H. Sadler.

AUSTRALIANS.—Smith; Ridley, Brown, C. Pearce, Gardner; Mead, Hey; Madsen, Little, Stehr, Doyle, S. Pearce, Prigg.

His biggest enemies

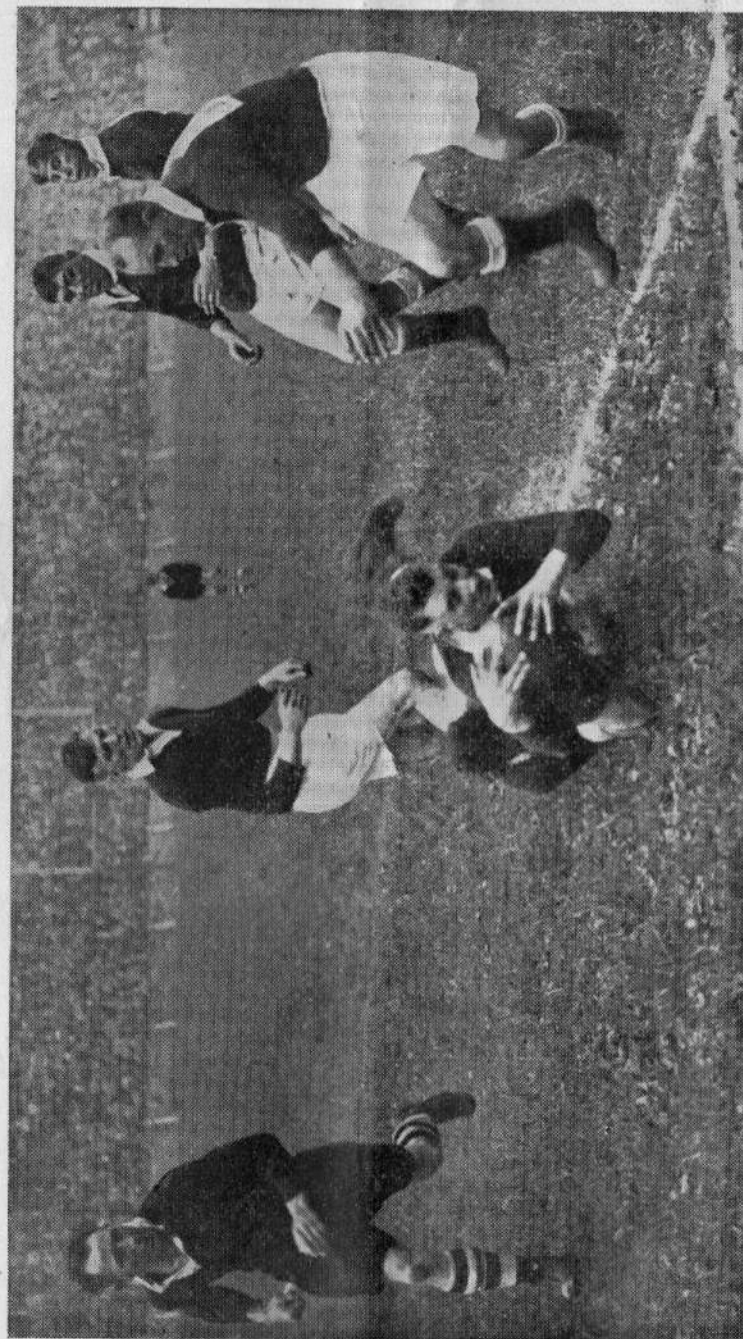
If Edgar were asked to name his biggest enemy he would have to choose, ironically enough, between his own right knee and Hitler. The two share responsibility for the fact that only once since that first game has he played against the Aussies. That was when the Tourists of 1937 played Oldham.

That knee first went back on the Oldham hooker in the game against Wigan on October 5th, 1935. It happened in the simplest way. When he reached for a ball in the loose and fell, nobody thought for a moment that anything serious was amiss. Unable to put foot to the ground, however, Edgar was carried off, and that was the end of his football for that season. Cartilage trouble was the first fear. That it turned out to be torn ligaments behind the knee was no relief.

Indeed there were gloomy prophecies that Edgar's playing days were over. Had they proved true, it would have been a cruelly abrupt end to the career of a young player who was just beginning to make a name for himself, as mark his selection as reserve in the Lancashire County team to Swinton's great international hooker, Tom Armitt.

It was an occasion for surgery and football to team up, and right well they did it. The specialist saw one chance in a hundred of his patient being able to play again, told him so and operated. Perhaps he knew his man. Certainly he could not have said anything better calculated to get Brooks back on to the field. The very length of the odds was a challenge to a player of his temperament.

No Stopping Him



Though Dai Davies (Salford) was wrapped round his legs, it did not stop Brooks from scoring for the Probables against the 1936 Tourists in the Red Cross game at Salford on February 10th, 1940. The other players on the spot, reading from the left, are Glyn Jones (Broughton), Alan Edwards (Salford), Tom Armitt (Swinton), Martin Hodgson (Swinton) and Trevor Foster (Bradford Northern).

KEMSLEY NEWSPAPERS, MANCHESTER

Once he was out of hospital, he soon became a familiar figure again at all Oldham's matches. True, it was as a spectator now, and it was an effort for him to get along even with the aid of a couple of sticks, but gradually the damaged ligaments healed, while Edgar impatiently made known to all inquirers his determination to play again. The inquirers patted him encouragingly on the back. Their doubts they thought it kinder to keep to themselves. They need not have worried.

Big ambition realised

Less than twelve months after it had seemed a reasonable assumption that he was out of the game for keeps, Edgar was hooking for Oldham again and throwing himself about as if he had never seen a stick in his life. His recovery of fitness was complete, and his confidence had obviously not been affected by his long absence from the game. He showed that he was more than a fine hooker. He also proved himself a first-class asset in the loose by his handling ability, dash and his eye for a try-scoring chance—qualities which were frequently commented on in the Press (see "Wanted him at out-half.").

Form such as this, maintained for three seasons, seemed a clear build-up to international honours, though it did begin to look as though "Forever Armitt" was to be the England selectors' answer to Brooks's hopes. Even the Swinton maestro eventually had to give way, however, to the Oldham boy who had stepped out of junior football less than six years before. Brooks's big ambition was realised when he was picked to play for England against France at St. Helens on February 25th, 1939.

Though England suffered a shock defeat by twelve points to nine, it was no fault of the Oldham player. Critics who had expressed surprise at his selection in preference to Armitt or McKeating (Barrow), were generous in their praise, and one wrote, "Brooks outhooked Durand monotonously. Adams could hardly have had a better service during the whole of his career." Another declared, "Brooks had a good game in his first international, and, in the first half, particularly, had it mainly his own way."

Twice more the Oldham hooker has played for England, each time during the war, each time against Wales, and he has special reason for remembering both games. The first, which England won 8—5, was played at Watersheddings on November 9th, 1940, and five days later Edgar joined the Army.

The second, which was played to a 9—9 draw at Odsal, Bradford, on October 18th, 1941, had its thrill for Bombardier Brooks, of the Royal Artillery, days before the teams stepped on to the field. The selectors, picking the teams at a meeting in Manchester, had just got round to considering who would be England's hooker, when a message was brought into the room that Mr. G. F. Hutchins, the Oldham representative, was urgently wanted on the phone. The man at the other end of the line was that fellow personification of Rugby League' enthusiasm, Mr. Jimmy Parkinson, and the message he rattled off at top speed, so that it should not be too late, was that Brooks had just finished an Army course, was on weekend leave and so was available to play in the international if required. Back dashed Mr. Hutchins into the room. The selectors heaved a sigh of relief when they heard what he had to say, and into the England side went Brooks, a case of winning a cap with only seconds to spare.

Just missed tour

Thus the war did not prevent Brooks from adding to his international honours. It did, however, put paid once more to his chances of attaining Test rank. That knee injury had prevented him from being considered as a possible for the team that toured Australia in 1936.

Now the tour which should have taken place in 1940 was ruled out by the bigger and grimmer tussle of knocking out Hitler, and the best the Rugby League could do was to award shadow honours to the players who would probably have been in the touring party. Among those thus recognised were Edgar Brooks and Alec Givvons, who has just returned to Oldham after a spell with Huddersfield.

Both were selected for what was the equivalent of a Test trial. On one side were the men who had toured Australia in 1936 and were candidates for another trip, and on the other were those who would almost certainly have been in the party had the 1940 tour taken place. Brooks and Givvons were picked for the Probables, but, as it happened, Givvons was not able to turn out. The game was played at Salford on February 10th, 1940, and the Probables beat the 1936 team 29-21. Hooking against the man who had been one of his biggest obstacles to gaining international honours, Brooks gave very little away. According to one record, he won the ball from the scrum only nine times fewer than Armitt, and in the loose he gave a characteristic display, which he rounded off with a try.

The match, which was in aid of the Red Cross, raised £371, and the only regret Edgar and the other players had about it was the perfectly natural one that it could not book their tickets for a trip Down Under. That was one of the lesser misfortunes of war. The Oldham hooker and the rest had to try to find consolation in the thought that they had been as near to touring Australia as was possible without actually going.

This second dashing of his hopes was the worst of luck for Edgar, but he isn't the type to give himself up to vain regrets. He enthusiastically took every footballing chance that Services life offered, and managed one or two games for Oldham when he was on leave.

In the Army he would have gained international honours in another sphere, but that hoodoo bobbed up again. He was selected to play for England against Wales at Swansea in the Rugby Union Services international, but, when the selectors got into touch with Oldham F.C. to find out where he was stationed, the answer was that he was in hospital in Scotland with a groin injury.

Consequently Sub-Lieutenant Evington, of the Royal Navy, was brought in as hooker, and Brooks missed a distinction possible only in wartime—that of a Rugby League man playing for his country at Rugby Union.

That knee again

Demobbed in May, 1946, after five and a half years in the Royal Artillery (he had been a sergeant-instructor since 1942, and after the war had been in Germany with the Occupation Forces) Edgar jumped eagerly back into the game, but it was not long before he was again in the wars—the sporting wars. In the match against Workington in November, 1946, his nose was broken, and he was out of action for three weeks. That was a bad start to his first post-war season, but there was worse to follow. In the following February his right knee again gave out in the first leg of the Challenge Cup tie against Belle Vue Rangers. This time a cartilage really had gone, and Edgar once more had to resign himself to a spell in hospital, an operation and a long absence from the game.

That absence still continues, but the same old Brooks determination is at work and Edgar has started light training. As part of that training, he has borrowed a sculling machine from the club, and, during the last month or two, he has put in so much rowing time that, had the craft been seagoing, he might well have qualified for a tour—a one-man tour—of Australia after all. The damaged knee is steadily strengthening, and the Oldham hooker's one ambition now is to have another crack at the game he has served so well, despite the hard knocks it has dealt him.

In Dock Again



But the cartilage operation following his injury in the Challenge Cup tie against Belle Vue Rangers in February, 1947, was over, and, cheered by a visit from his club mates, Norman Harris (standing), Les Thomas (left), and Ray Smith, Edgar was once more looking on the bright side.

He is particularly keen to be fit in time for his benefit game. With ordinary luck he would have had this benefit last season, but, as you will have gathered by now, he is accustomed to battling along against something less than ordinary luck. At the time of writing, the details of the match, which is to be played at the end of the season, still have to be settled, but sufficient is known to assure that there will be a cluster of stars taking part, and that it will provide a highly attractive display of Rugby League football.

The teams will include both internationals and county men—a fact which may well remind Edgar of an irony of his rugby career. He played for

his country before his county, for it was not until nearly a year after his appearance for England against France that he managed to get into the Lancashire team instead of being reserve (to Armitt, of course).

What's In a Trade?



OLDHAM CHRONICLE

Well, in Edgar's case it was being apprenticed to a painter and decorator who had himself been a schoolboy hooker, that led to him first wearing a No. 9 jersey. Now Edgar is in business on his own account.

Edgar Brooks has been with the Oldham F.C. fourteen and a half seasons, and has played close on three hundred games for them. But for his war service and the injury bogey, the total would have been much bigger. Edgar is among those local boys who have indeed made good, but the fact has never altered him in the least. He is still the same unassuming fellow he was when he first reported at Watersheddings in 1933, and his loyalty to his home-town club has remained constant.

He does not forget that he rose from the local junior ranks. On the contrary, he is proud of the fact, and is always ready to give a helping hand to the present-day juniors. His career is a defiance of a most

formidable sequence of setbacks, and is an inspiration to any youngster who cherishes hopes of getting to the top. It can be done, provided the youngster has skill and grit mixed according to the Brooks recipe.

To the Oldham Club, its followers and to the Rugby League game as a whole, Edgar Brooks has always given of his best. He deserves well. May his benefit be a bumper, and may he come back to colour many a game with his masterly hooking, daring dashes in the loose and the spectacular flying tackles which have always been a Brooks speciality.

Wanted him at half-back

(Press tributes to Brooks's ability in the loose, all taken from published match reports).

"If the your-turn-next scrummaging continues Brooks is going to be wasted in the front row. On Saturday I should have put him stand-off half.

"I cannot imagine a hooker playing such an important part in the construction of attacks as Brooks did in this game. His two tries only partly indicate the judgment and energy he used in the loose." (v. Barrow, October, 1939).

It was left to Brooks, the hooker, to play a grand second-row forward game in the open. He did forge ahead with the ball and make some attempt to distribute it usefully." (v. Barrow, February, 1939).

"Well might Oldham have ignored overtures for the transfer of Brooks. He was hero No. 1 because he not only denied Haley possession of the ball forty times in the 72 scrums, but he also played his part in the open and scored one of the tries." (v. Castleford, 1940).

"The try scored by Brooks in wing-three style was the climax to a movement begun and carried through by the forwards." (v. Hunslet, 1940).

But being handy in the loose could have its penalties as well as its praises, as you shall see.

Aces from the pack

Only twice has Edgar played for Oldham in any position other than hooker. Once he played prop forward, and once in the second row. With his showing as a second-row man he felt quite bucked—and with some justification, for he had done well for the club in an emergency—but the following morning it was impressed upon him that his feeling was not shared by his wife.

Missing the usual dish for breakfast, he quizzed, "What? no porridge?", and quick as one of his own flying tackles came the reply, "I make no porridge for second-row forwards."

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Like many a footballer, Edgar has, in his wife, one of the keenest critics of his play, and as the daughter of the late Joe Ferguson, giant of Oldham F.C.'s palmy days, Mrs. Jean Brooks is entitled to say, "Proper thing too."

Edgar's signing by Oldham was the lead-up to a romance as well as to an international football career, for it was at Watersheddings, where the Fergusons were in charge of the Pavilion, that he met his wife.

Though being contemporary with Tom Armitt has undoubtedly limited the number of Edgar's international honours, the Oldhamer has nothing but praise for his former Swinton rival. "I think Armitt was the cleanest hooker I have ever played against," he says, "and he was a master at winning the ball."

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Neither Edgar nor any other of the home pack understood the flood of French which came from an opposing forward as he suddenly straightened up from that second scrum in the England-France match at St. Helens in 1939, but they gathered his general meaning when he was violently sick. That over, he barged into the pack again and carried on exactly as if nothing had happened.

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There are eighty minutes of his football career of which Edgar can't remember a thing. The blackout is accounted by the fact that twice he has played throughout the second half suffering from concussion, and the only reason he didn't have to look in the paper to find out how Oldham had fared was that the other players put him wise in the dressing room after the games.

"Sundy" disappointed

If Harry Sunderland had had his way, Edgar Brooks would not have been with Oldham fourteen and a half years, or anything like it. Not that Harry has ever had anything but the best of feeling for the Oldham Club, but just when the Oldham boy was beginning to make a name for himself, Harry was in charge at Central Park and was looking for a hooker capable of stoking the furnace of the Colliers' back talent with a plentiful supply of the ball.

A particularly fine display by Brooks against Wigan at Watersheddings confirmed the famous Australian in his opinion that this was the player he wanted. Combining business with a "How-are-you?" call on his old friend, Mr. J. S. Parkinson, who was then ill in bed, Harry tried all his spell-binding and said "What about it? We should go a long way with a hooker like that," but it was no use.

Said "Parky," then Oldham F.C. president, "Our committee consider Brooks the best hooker in the game, and we are not thinking of selling," and with that "Sundy" had to be satisfied—or dissatisfied.

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Edgar rates his best-ever display as that at Barrow in February, 1939, in which he outhooked McKeating two to one and so put out of the reckoning one of his keenest rivals and clinched his own claims to a place in the England team against France.

He vividly remembers his worst game too. It was one in which he was repeatedly penalised for feet up, and he felt hopping mad because he was convinced that the opposing half-back was often dummied when he ought to have put the ball into the tunnel.

He felt madder still after the game when he heard the opposition scrum-half and hooker congratulating each other on the success of their pre-arranged plan for getting plenty of the ball.

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Though he has played for both England and Lancashire, club honours have persistently sidestepped Edgar. Several times he has been on the

winning side in the annual Infirmarys' Cup games against Rochdale Hornets, and he was in the Oldham team that won the seven-a-side competition at Belle Vue, Manchester, on Coronation Day, 1937.

Otherwise he has not an award of any kind to show for his long service with Oldham. Not that he complains, for he has enjoyed every minute of his football with the club. It just happens that it has not been a vintage period for Oldham. Here's hoping there is still time for Edgar to hook a Challenge Cup or championship medal.

Hardest—earned honour

In any case he has one medal of which he is extremely proud, though, had he known before he qualified for it what he knows now . . . well, maybe he wouldn't. He calls it his hardest-earned honour. He didn't win it at football either.

It happened in the Army during his rookie days. An inter-regimental boxing competition was being held at Carlisle, and, though he makes no claim to fistic skill, Edgar was persuaded by the P.T.I. instructor to have a go in the novices heavyweight event. "Oh, they're all novices," the instructor said. "You'll be all right," and so, in due course, Edgar climbed into the ring.

When his opponent ducked between the ropes plus broken nose, cauliflower ear and all the assurance of the regular battler, Edgar would probably have given up a week's leave to get at that P.T.I., but the bell rang and the fight was on. He doesn't go into detail about what happened, but he does admit that he never achieved his ambition to land on his opponent's jaw just one haymaking right which might pay for all. He also admits that he had no regrets when the three rounds were up, and it says much for his grit that he went the distance. His reward was a medal from the Brigadier for being the best loser.

Afterwards he discovered that "novices" covered anyone who had been in the Army less than three months, and that his opponent included among the men he had fought, Jock McAvoy, British middleweight champion. What Edgar said then about the P.T.I. is not for publication.

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Another Army trophy which Edgar prizes is a cup for putting the shot. In an Area Command tournament he beat the field—and, he confesses, surprised himself—by putting a 16lb. shot 35 feet and a few inches.

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Army sports memory No. 3 is of his one and only soccer game. A rugby match was down to be played, but the opposition turned up with only eleven men. It wasn't that they were short-handed. A mistake had been made, and the soccer team had been sent, so soccer it had to be.

Though this looked like his big chance to catch up on that schoolboy howler at last, Edgar didn't play centre forward. He played outside right, and he was almost guilty of another howler the first time the ball was swung out to him. Hands outstretched he went for it, and only the warning bellow of a more soccer-minded colleague prevented him from catching the ball, tucking it under his arm and having a go for the line.

It was all very funny, says Edgar. Funniest of all was the result. The rugby lads won 3-2.

Fred Ashworth's Tribute

To be a sportsman and a gentleman both on and off the field is to be a credit to any game, and it is to this category that Edgar Brooks belongs. During my association with the Oldham Club I formed a friendship with him which I have valued ever since.

Edgar has achieved something which, to my mind, is the ambition of every sporting youngster—that is, firstly, to play for his own town, secondly to play for his native county, and, thirdly, to play for his country. I played for many years with Edgar, both with him in the front row and behind him in the second, and I don't hesitate to say that he is one of the finest hookers the game has produced. He believes that the secret of good hooking depends on something more than individual skill—and that something is the full co-operation of the remaining forwards. Many is the time I have seen the ball in the opponents' second row, and then, at a signal from Edgar, an extra effort has been made and the ball recovered and heeled out to the Oldham scrum-half.

Apart from his outstanding qualities as a hooker, he is a great forward in the loose and a full eighty-minutes player. Edgar has not had the best of luck during his playing career, his chief misfortune being the knee injury which kept him out of many representative matches. The war also bit out five and a half years, but Rugby League football is in his blood and several times while he was in the Army he travelled hundreds of miles for a game.

I feel that I am expressing the sentiments of all followers of the code, and particularly of the people of Oldham, in wishing Edgar all the best in the future. Here's jolly good hunting to a jolly good fellow, and let's all help him to hook a bumper benefit.

F. W. Ashworth.

Edgar's Thanks

My gratitude goes to the officials of Oldham F.C. and of the Supporters' Club, to fellow players present and past, to the Press, to you who have bought this souvenir, and to the Rugby League public of Oldham in general. The success of a benefit depends upon the help of the many, and I have had that help in full.

Thank you all.

Yours Sincerely,

Edgar Brooks

