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Oxford Word of the Month – May: harbour bridge pass

noun: (in Rugby circles) a high looping pass of the ball.

THE STORY BEHIND THE WORD OF THE MONTH

The Sydney Harbour Bridge is an iconic image that shouts ‘Sydney, Australia’ to a worldwide audience. We are proud of the shape of its beautiful arches and its location on the harbour. Shortly after its official opening in 1932, the shape of the bridge gave rise to its occasional nickname, the coathanger. More recently the high arching curves have made another contribution to the Australian lexicon, in the sporting term **harbour bridge pass**.

Evidence for the term dates from the late twentieth century. A report of a Bledisloe Cup match between the Australian Wallabies and the New Zealand All Blacks is one of the earliest references, and describes the nature of the pass in the clumsy efforts of All Blacks Justin Marshall and Andrew Mehrtens:

From a lineout ... Marshall threw an atrocious Harbour Bridge Pass to Mehrtens. It took so long to arrive that flanker David Wilson, perhaps to his and Mehrtens' surprise, was able to menace the All Black. Thus discommoded, Mehrtens threw an even more ghastly high, looping pass to inside centre Daryl Gibson. (The Australian, 2 October 1999)

The high trajectory of the **harbour bridge pass** slows the ball, giving the opposition time to reach the recipient. For this reason it is often described as a bad or incompetent pass, because the ball can easily change hands. A reference to an error of judgement by an English Rugby Union player makes this clear: ‘...in a moment of madness [he] ignored close support to launch a **Harbour Bridge Pass** towards Varndell—only to steer it directly to Tuqiri.’ (*The Australian*, 12 June 2006)

The other negative aspect of the **harbour bridge pass** is the danger it may represent, since it can result in the recipient being heavily tackled. When Rugby League player Ben Ikin ‘lobbed a “Sydney Harbour Bridge” pass’ towards winger Chris Walker, he told reporters it was ‘the kind of “Medicare” ball that can see the recipient off to hospital’. (*Gold Coast Bulletin*, 24 February 2001)

Disparaging references to the pass outweigh the good, with the sporting press often considering it incompetent. This is expressed in one reporter's dislike of the way women play the game: 'It's just that I can't get too carried away at the sight of you rucking and rolling down field, throwing out the odd loopy harbor bridge pass'. (*New Truth & TV Extra*, 3 August 2001)

The harbour bridge pass is sometimes called the Sydney Harbour bridge pass, as in the *Gold Coast Bulletin* quotation above, but the shorter form is more established. As a play it may often be derided, but the term illustrates the iconic nature of the bridge, and its significant place in our national identity.

Harbour bridge pass will be considered for inclusion in the next edition of the *Australian National Dictionary*.

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