

When the Bunnies Infringed

Perspective | Then & Now



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The Trademark Infringement Story You Didn't Expect

Last week, I shared a post about a possible trademark issue with the word “Chiefs” - PNG Rugby League’s new NRL franchise name.

As it turns out, New Zealand Rugby Union, who own the “Chiefs” trademark in Australia (complete with an Indigenous Chief logo), weren’t too thrilled about it. The Sydney Morning Herald ran a story on this.

That got me thinking back to one of the earliest, and arguably funniest, trademark disputes in the country (before independence) that I've come across. And believe it or not... it wasn't

over rugby league at all.

It was Playboy Enterprises - yes, the Playboy - versus Bunnies.

Here's how it happened.

Back in September 1971, the Post-Courier published a photo of two women dressed in "Bunny" outfits at a charity fundraiser for the PNG Red Cross.

That image somehow made its way across the Pacific - all the way to Chicago - and soon, a cease-and-desist letter landed on the newspaper's desk.

Playboy's lawyers wrote:

"As you may be aware, Bunny and Bunny Costume are registered trademarks and service marks owned by Playboy Enterprises Inc.... Any unauthorised use constitutes infringement."

The Post-Courier ran the letter in full and here's the best part in the follow-up story. Every mention of Bunny or Bunnies was replaced with dots (.....). A clever way to avoid another letter from Mr Hefner's legal team!

The event organiser took it in stride, saying:

"If we decide to run a similar function in the future, I suppose we'll have to call them something else. Female rabbits might be a little insulting, so I suppose they'll have to be Bonnies."

Keep in mind - the country's trademark laws were still in their early days, and very few people had actually flipped through them. To be fair, most folks were far more familiar with the Playboy brand than the pages of the Trademarks Act.

What's truly surprising is how quickly the story travelled from Port Moresby to Chicago - long before the age of email, social media, or instant news. But as one of the fundraiser's participants said at the time and was quoted in the paper:

"If some clown hadn't written to the magazine, there never would've been this trouble."

Trademark infringement - it's not always as serious as it sounds... sometimes, it's just a good story with a few laughs (and a few dots).

Round 1, NRL 2028 bring on the Chiefs vs Bunnies

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