



THE RISE OF THE KILLER RABBITS

Russell Crowe's takeover of a down-at-heel rugby league team is causing an outcry in Australia. Out have gone cheerleaders and gambling; in have come marching bands, Armani suits and a meaner-looking bunny logo. The South Sydney Rabbitohs quest for world domination starts here

WORDS NICK SCOTT

I never start something with, "It's impossible." I always start with, "Jeez, wouldn't it be good if...?" Russell Crowe's dissected hippocampus - he famously intends to donate his brain to medical research - may one day tell us much about the human capacity for bravado. His pathological self-confidence has occasionally set him up for falls, both renowned (hurling a phone at a New York hotel concierge in 2005) and forgotten (that teenage stab at rockabilly stardom as the pompadoured Russ Le Roq). But this trait has also propelled his rise as an actor, seeping through, as it does, to on-screen characters - such as *Master and Commander's* Captain Jack Aubrey and, more recently, *American Gangster's* Richie Roberts - to compelling effect.

Nowhere is the 43-year-old's mulishness more evident than in his role as co-owner of South Sydney Rabbitohs - the rugby league team he plans to take to a global stage on 26

January, when they clash with England's Leeds Rhinos in Jacksonville, Florida. By then, it will be almost two years since Crowe and business associate Peter Holmes a Court, an Oxford-educated Australian businessman and theatrical entrepreneur, scraped the 75 per cent of the club members' vote they needed to buy majority ownership of the Rabbitohs for A\$3m. That's about £1.4m. Almost exactly what Wolves paid for Andy Gray in 1979. For outright control of a top-flight team. Welcome to the economic realities of New South Wales's state sport.

Based a mere 10-minute cab ride from the glitz of Circular Quay, the Rabbitohs took their quirky nickname from the 19th-century proletarian opportunists who, unable to get work on the wharfs, would catch rabbits and sell them in Sydney's back alleys. (Could there be a more apt practice after which to name a rugby team than plucking a waywardly moving object from the ground and back-handing it to a third >

GREGG PORTER/REX FEATURES

Russell Crowe watches his South Sydney Rabbitohs from the sidelines in March 2007.



**1908-2006
LIFE BEFORE CROWE**



The Rabbitohs have a record number of titles, but haven't won one since 1972...



...and they were dropped from the league in 2000, leading to huge protests...



...but at least under the old regime they had cheerleaders to brighten the gloom.

party?) Nearly 100 years on – the club's centenary is in March – this remains a part of the world where the battling, blue-collar underdog is feted.

For much of Souths' history, the underdogs have come out on top. They have reached 33 Grand Finals and won 20 – no other club comes near that record – yet have not won the title since 1972. The emergence of full-time professionalism in the Seventies and Eighties ended the practice of training in the evenings after a day on the factory line; although it went against Souths' working-class philosophy, they had to invest more than they could afford in top-grade players in an attempt to survive. (This may be an apposite time to mention that Crowe's English football club of choice are Leeds United.)

In 1995, Rupert Murdoch's News Limited launched what was effectively a takeover of rugby league – an omnipresent sport on Australian pay TV. Many teams merged to survive; Souths held on as they were until 1999 when, 91 years after their formation, they were deregistered from the league for failing to meet the new regime's financial criteria. Forty thousand people congregated in central Sydney to protest; a year later, following a failed injunction and appeal, double that number took to the streets. The club were reinstated in 2002, but still could not rise from the financial mire.

Russell Crowe had been courted by the club's board since the mid-Nineties, when his Hollywood star rose. In late 2005, when the club suffered a A\$100,000 shortfall at the end of the season, he was approached – not for the first time – for financial aid. As he told Jay Leno and his American audience on *The Tonight Show* in March 2006, it had reached the point where, if he was bankrolling the team he had once dreamed of playing for, he would want to have more say. Make that complete control.

The build-up to the members' vote, which took place at Sydney's Telstra Stadium in March 2006, was acrimonious. Crowe and Holmes a Court faced a dogged opposition camp, spearheaded by chairman and former on-field legend George Piggins, whose lieutenant John Sattler captained Souths to a legendary 1970 Grand Final win despite his jaw being broken in three places. Mud was slung across cyberspace and Crowe claims he was 'threatened with sodomy' by one particularly frustrated blogger.

So why the resistance to a buy-out? 'Tradition,' says Ian Spruce, a lifelong Rabbitohs fan and president of supporters' group The Warren. Just steadfast in their ways. The ones who made the most noise were all the ones I have on a poster behind me right now from the 1970 Grand Final victory. They didn't want to lose their club, but if it wasn't for Russ and Pete, there wouldn't be a club to be taken out of our hands, fair dinkum.'

Holmes a Court believes the core of the 'No' philosophy lay in the interplay between class and aspiration. 'Rabbitohs is the team from the toughest part of town that went on to be winners,' he says. 'For working-class fans all over Australia,



Rabbitohs mascot Charlie Gallico sits in the players' tunnel before a game against North Queensland Cowboys.

'THE THING THAT WILL MAKE A DIFFERENCE IS THE LOVE,' CROWE SAYS. 'NOW, PICK SOMEONE AND TELL THEM WHY YOU LOVE THEM'

they offered evidence that they, too, could make it, no matter what they came from. So when a bunch of high-profile guys come in, does that mean they couldn't make it without big money? Does it mean they hadn't held on to the right dream before?'

The takeover was anything but assured. 'Getting 75 per cent of people to agree on anything in Australia is a massive ask,' says Crowe in a six-part documentary about the club, *South Side Story*. "The sky is blue" – that's probably about 60/40 [who would disagree on that]. Piggins points out that he had to compete against a trained actor at the hustings and Crowe was on top form, ending his air-punching speech: 'Vote yes. Let's get in bed together, I hope you still respect me in the morning.' The votes came in at 75.8 per cent in favour.

The two years since have been the most colourful in the club's kaleidoscopic history. The first headline-grabbing decision was to scrap the pre-match cheerleaders and dump 160 poker machines as part of the refurbishment of the Souths' Leagues Club – a cavernous watering hole for fans in down-at-heel Redfern. 'We just listened to what people said and they said it's

not appropriate,' Holmes a Court says. 'There are too many people who will say, "Someone in my family's got a gambling problem. I don't want us to be in that environment because Uncle Fred will go and spend more money than he should." High, family-based ideals are solid blue-collar Australian values. I'm not against half-naked people dancing in spandex – it's just the wrong thing before a football show.'

In a tight corporate outfit, with an executive chairman (Holmes a Court) and a CEO (until recently Shane Richardson), Crowe – who filmed three movies back-to-back to create time to devote to the club – is the boardroom equivalent of a loose-forward: chief pedant, media manipulator, master motivator. Director of Crowehesion, if you will. One of his first actions was to redesign the team's white rabbit crest to make it meaner ('It's not a little white bunny, it's a black rabbit, and black rabbits eat people...') In *South Side Story*, while Holmes a Court draws up 'brand universe' Venn diagrams on a whiteboard, Crowe, sporting a doorman-style leather jacket encrusted with Rabbitohs badges, marshals the team around film premieres, prize fights and dinners, pointing out photo opportunities and briefing his charges on probable lines of media questioning.

Believing that confidence and style are inextricably linked, Crowe had the team kitted out in Armani suits. An online TV channel, SSFC, has been launched, presented by flamboyant second-row Dean Widders. Crowe has strengthened his team with several star signings, and spent the whole of last season wielding his celebrity clout relentlessly. February: Snoop Dogg performs at the Good Vibrations festival draped in a Rabbitohs top Crowe gave him at the MTV awards. August: the stars of top-rated cable reality-TV

show *American Chopper* train with the team as part of the Australian leg of their tour. October: Crowe unveils a Souths jersey before 11 million US television viewers in another appearance on Leno's show.

For Crowe and co, just as essential as sharp appearance and mass exposure is inter-player bonding. 'The thing that will make a difference is The Love,' he is seen telling his brooding mob of bruisers in *South Side Story*. 'Accepting the family environment, the brotherhood.' He then professes his own love for Widders, 'because when I shake your hand I somehow feel that I'm touched by your heart. Now, stand up, pick someone and tell them why you love them.'

An even more eccentric motivational tool is *The Book of Feuds*. Commissioned from author and Souths supporter Mark Courtney, it details every piece of controversy, bitterness and hatred between Souths and their NRL rivals. Crowe reads to his team from this oversized volume, having theatrically blown fake dust from its pages, before each game. Elsewhere, adding some light relief, trainers have created a synchronised swimming challenge, during which giggling players perform dolphin arches, judged by a local female lifeguard.

Capricious stuff, yes, but the ladder doesn't lie. At the end of last season, Rabbitohs reached the play-offs for the first time since 1989. All involved cite a new sense of fire-in-the-belly belonging among the players as the core reason behind the achievement. Prop Scott Geddes says: 'You see the passion in Russell's eyes and it just rubs off on you. We just sort of sit there in awe of him.' Mario Fenech, a star hooker and now the club's membership ar... Before [the takeover], no one wanted to touch Souths with a 20-foot pole. The daggie side in the league. Now we're cool, and it's happened just like that.'

'Ultimately,' Crowe says in reciprocation, 'whatever I feel in terms of pressure, I look in the faces of those players when they're playing a game; I see how they get damaged, I see the blood... I see how deeply they have to breathe to get the next lung full of oxygen. Whatever I'm doing – it's got nothing on that.'

The game against Leeds is ostensibly a warm-up before the first ball of the NRL season is kicked in March. Souths fans, unsurprisingly, have a universal belief that the title will be theirs by the end of next season. Impartial observers, such as Ray Chesterton, a veteran rugby league journalist at Sydney's *Daily Telegraph* tabloid, are more circumspect. 'Crowe and co were blow-ins who have yet to prove their credibility,' he says. 'So far all they've done is spent a fortune on new players, changed the culture of the club, dressed the players like male models and ostracised club legends. The only return has been a lucky seventh-place finish.'

Shane Richardson, now the director of football operations, disagrees, even suggesting that the Florida game in January could signify the existence of global long-term aspirations. 'Russell and Peter put no boundaries on what we can achieve,' he says. 'I'm not sure they can take rugby league to the world, but I do think they can take the Rabbitohs brand to the world.' **OSM**

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THE NEW REGIME**



Under their new management, the team have played with revived passion...



...thanks to an influx of celebrity, including a visit from Tom Cruise...



...while the cheerleaders have made way for a more PC drumming band.

Nick Scott is deputy editor of *GQ Australia*. This is his first article for *OSM*

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