

SOUTH SYDNEY RABBITOHS v ST GEORGE ILLAWARRA DRAGONS

CHARITY SHIELD



SOUTHS COACH CRAIG COLEMAN

Proudest day of my life

FIRSTLY, from the heart and on behalf of the South Sydney club, I want to thank all those people who shared our pain for two long years and never lost faith or hope.

These at the SFS tonight, and also the many who couldn't be here, are the people who stood so solid and supported Souths vocally, emotionally and through their pockets. Now they'll share the good times.

We are disappointed that we just can't fit all those supporters into the SFS, because they deserve front row seats. There are locals and all the folk from the country whose support ensured our survival but they either live too far away or couldn't get tickets because there weren't enough seats.

There were tens of thousands of people who came to the rallies, sent letters and faxes which we have kept at our club. I reckon there would have been 80 or 90 thousand at the game if we had room for them.

Souths are so grateful to Channel 9 and Fox Sports for accommodating them with their coverage of the clash. It's amazing to think here's a trial game that will be seen on live TV in England, Scotland and Wales as well.

Having said that, we all realise that this particular Charity Shield against the Dragons is much more than a trial. It's the rebirth of South Sydney, The Pride of the League.

Thanks also to our fantastic sponsors: Kerry Stokes at Channel 7, the South Sydney Juniors and the NSW Government Accident Authority. We couldn't have survived without them either.

Souths are playing for all of you tonight.

It has been like a grand final week and I never really expected anything less once Souths were back in the NRL. It has meant just so much to so many people. Souths are the Manchester United of rugby league with

our broad popularity.

And when these boys in red and green run through that SFS tunnel, like many in the stands, I won't be beyond shedding a tear. The players have told me just how much this game means to them and they know what responsibility they have in forging a new future for Souths.

I knew I won't experience a prouder moment in my life.

And neither will our chairman, George Piggins.

'It's been like a grand final week and I never really expected anything else once Souths were back in the NRL. It has meant so much to so many people'

Without George Piggins we wouldn't be here. Thanks mate. Please be in our room first, win, lose or draw. You never wavered, you gave everybody else the heart to keep fighting.

Thanks to Phil Gould too. I'm proud to call him one of my best mates.

For two years he was there for me through some tough times, and more importantly for Souths.

I won't ever forget times when I wasn't a football coach and things were looking grim for me and Souths. I was shifting baggage at Ansett, my wife Debbie was seriously ill and 'Gas' (Gould) would be on the phone telling me to keep my chin up. Gas fought as hard for Souths as he did in the trenches for the

AFL during the Super League war.

Largely through Phil Gould, Souths will field a competitive football team. Even though he has since taken up a position with the Roosters, he told me Souths will always be close to the heart.

I also want to thank Andrew Farrar and his Dragons. The Dragons are not enemies tonight, just respected opposition for 80 minutes on a very special occasion. Andrew contacted me and said he and his players would like to come back to our league club after the game, that's a great gesture and makes it just like old times.

I'm proud I was brought up surrounded by the great tradition of South Sydney. I'd go to Redfern Oval after school to watch the Rabbitohs train when Clive Churchill was coach after Bernie Pascoe and my heroes were Bob McCarthy, John Sattler, Ron Coote and all the other Souths champions.

When I was fortunate enough to play first grade, George was coach, Phil Gould was there, and Mario Fenech was captain when we won a minor premiership.

We were all at Bernie's funeral recently, along with Jack Rayner who captained Souths when Bernie and Clive made a Kangaroo tour. Everybody talked about what it would have meant for Bernie to still be around when Souths played lastly again.

One of Bernie's favourite Souths stories is how Churchill played with a broken arm held together with pieces of cardboard from an ice cream container.

Now we're grateful that there will be many more stories in Souths' history.

For two years, Redfern Oval for me seemed awfully empty, it's not any more.

So to all of you Souths supporters, at the game or somewhere else watching the TV or listening to the call, thank you - the South Sydney Rabbitohs will never forget you.

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