



A few drinks with Andrew Denton

Forget about the featherweight physique: Andrew Denton is your definitive utility player. In media terms, he's been heard on Triple M and seen on TV programs such as Live and Sweaty and the ABC's current ratings-puller Enough Rope. But his abilities extend further than the funny guy and master interviewer.

When his beloved South Sydney was punted from the NRL, he stood side-by-side, arms locked, with chairman George Piggins at the forefront of the club's passionate - and eventually successful - fight for reinstatement. Fast forward two years and the relationship had soured. Frustrated at the team's record on and off the field, Denton was part of a rival board headed by Souths lawyer Nick Pappas that challenged Piggins and his regime at the impending AGM. In the end, a compromise was reached with Denton and former deputy chairman Mike Whitney the sacrificial lambs, but on radio a few days before the election, an on-air slanging match ensued when Piggins accused Denton - a former board member - of wanting to merge the club. Denton erupted, calling Piggins a liar. Piggins erupted, threatening to put Denton "on his arse". Denton's response: "I'm not a fighter, George. You could beat me with one hand tied behind your back." Probably. But when it comes to a battle of wits and words, few hold a candle to Denton. That's what Andrew Webster discovered when the pair met at The Yardhouse on Sydney's north shore.

In that well-publicised radio interview with George Piggins, you boldly declared to the world: "I'm not a fighter!" Can we therefore assume you're only a lover?

*[Laughs] You'd have to ask the millions of satisfied women around the world . . . If I'm not a fighter than I'd bloody want to be a lover because there's not much point to me living.*

Any chance of doing a "Mundine" and leaving television to take up a career in the ring?

*[Laughs] Well, I like to keep myself pretty fit. Ready for anything. I do have a one-pack. Well, all I have is the cardboard that holds the six-pack . . . It's highly unlikely. The last time I had a fight I was 17 in college. I was flat on my back very quickly.*

Have you spoken to George since that on-air stoush?

*I saw him at a game shortly afterwards and we shook hands . . . Look, George's cool. We'll always disagree about Souths - but he's a good bloke. I'm sure he thinks I'm a pain in the arse.*

*But in the end he was big enough to shake hands. I called him after it occurred and apologised. He'd just finished an interview and the journalist reckoned he could've beaten me with one arm tied behind my back. George said he could've beat me with two arms and one leg tied behind his back . . . I asked if he'd do me a favour and tie the other leg behind him to give me half a chance.*

Where does your passion for the Cardinal and Myrtles stem from?

*I started supporting them the year they lost the grand final to Balmain. The theory would be that because they were a winning team that's why I started to support them. But it doesn't explain the next 30 years. My recollection is that I loved their colours. I can't tell you why, but their colours still cause my heart to quicken. Just the word "South Sydney" on a page - I can it out in two seconds. It's bizarre. I always thought there was something special about the club. About what it was and how it functioned. When South was kicked out, it was like discovering this Dragon you believed in was real. I discovered in the Oxford Dictionary of Australian Sport that there's an entry which reads: "Souths, spirit." It refers to the 1955 grand final and how they came from last to win it. There's something intangible about the spirit of the place - which is both its brilliance and its problem.*

Is the word "Rupert" in the dictionary as well?

*Yeah, I don't think it's spelt that way. I think it's spelt with less letters.*

What childhood memories do you have of them playing?

*I lived in the Blue Mountains as a kid and I only ever listened to Frank Hyde calling their games on the radio. I still remember walking up and down my bedroom eating my fingernails. That was my entire diet in those days. In one game against St George we were behind by one point and we got a penalty on full-time on halfway. I remember Frank saying that Eric Simms can't make the distance. So there was a guy called Claude Williams, who only played nine games for the club, and he kicked the goal. The first time I went to Redfern Oval, I arrived during the reserve grade game. Bob McCarthy was playing reserves that day; he was coming back from an injury. In the grandstand there were these seats. I thought, "This is great. I'll sit here." I'm sitting there and McCarthy, who was the size of a truck, burst through and set up a try and everyone cheered. Except this kid in front of me who shouted: "McCarthy! You poofster!" Suddenly this hand reached out from behind me and said, "You! Fuck off!" And I turned around and it was Paul Sait. I was sitting in front of the Souths first grade team. I'd never felt more proud in my life than at that moment. I thought, "Yeah. Fuck off."*

I read that you used to dream of playing halfback. What type would you have been: the one unselfishly distributing the ball or hogged it and ran it at every opportunity?

*I was actually very good at reading the game. I had a very good sidestep. I just couldn't tackle to save my life - that was the lover part. When I used to play touch at college, the captain of the college rugby league team asked if I'd come and be a halfback. I played one game and just got creamed. As we walked off, the prop said: "That's the bravest thing I've ever seen." To me, the key to being good at sport is that you have to be oblivious to pain; I'm highly aware of pain. I*

*played a charity game of Aussie Rules once. In fact, I sidestepped Ray Price, which was one of the great moments of my life. He was the only one in that game wearing steel sprigs. Everyone else was wearing runners. I remember the ball bobbling around and me thinking, "I'll go in for that." In the corner of my eye, I saw Ray coming. I thought, "I'm not touching that!" On the other hand, do I want to at the age of 40 be able to predict a storm off the Cape of Good Hope off Sydney because my arthritis is that bad? I don't think I do.*

You were very much at the forefront of Souths' fightback. It must have been an enormous feeling to fight for something based on principle . . . and triumph?

*It was one of the great experiences of my life. Even had we not won, it would've been one of the great experiences of my life. It was like a Hollywood script. It was like sport: the team that had been sent off for the second half still managed to win the game. That's how remarkable it was. The two rallies were two of the most powerful events of my life. They were so moving. To see so many people from all over Australia, particularly NSW, who were ordinary, decent Aussies . . . I remember after the first one going home and being very upset thinking: "This is so wrong. This is theirs. They shouldn't have to be marching in the street to get this back. This belongs to them." The keyword you mentioned was principle. For all of us involved, it didn't matter the cost. It was the principle that counted. While it seems strange that that amount of energy went into making a point of principle about football, it actually wasn't about football. And that's what really struck me when Souths got back in. Wherever I went, it could've been a guy in a blue singlet on a building site, or a QC . . . the response was amazing. People understood the principle: the little guy up against overwhelming odds. It really meant a lot in Sydney. Not just here . . . At the height of it all I drove down to Melbourne with my family and we went to the Boxing Day Test. And everywhere we went, people were asking about Souths. My wife [journalist Jennifer Byrne], who's not particularly into football, said "This is amazing. People in Melbourne know about this." We stopped somewhere on the South Coast and I was standing there with Jennifer and Connor and watching some guys who were skindiving. They came up and one of them took off his mask and asked: "Andrew, what's happening with Souths?" I thought: "What's going on here?" Another one of the points I was making to the people running the NRL and News Ltd was that it wasn't in the best interests of their business to be casting us out. "Customers" like this - to use their parlance - who'll buy the product even when it doesn't work are the customers you must keep.*

In the end, do you believe this is what they realised?

*Absolutely. I described them [News Ltd] as the first business in the history of capitalism to tell their customers to get stuffed. I think by halfway through the court cases they were hoping for a way out. If you asked them privately I think you'd find they were relieved when it went the way it did. They were on a hiding to nothing.*

You were also one of several media personalities at the forefront of Souths' fightback, going up against the world's biggest media owner. Did you consider the ramifications for your career?

*Absolutely, and I realised that the ramifications weren't good. But it was a point of principle and I was raised to stick to my principles. There have been ramifications - but I still wouldn't*

*change what I've done. I kept trying to convince everyone that I was Andrew Daddo. I've been mistaken for him more than once. I'm the wimpy Daddo.*

Simply, why put your name to the new ticket that rivalled the board chaired by George?

*Collectively, we felt the club wasn't going to make it to 2005. It needed a new era of professionalism and management and having been on the board and closely involved with the club's return, I felt myself and the others were qualified to move Souths forward. It was that simple. I really laughed at the allegations of being fly-by-nighters [a description made by 2GB personality and Piggins supporter Alan Jones]. That's one thing you couldn't accuse us of. No-one supports Souths for the good of their image.*

Some are claiming that this new board will lack teeth. But you remain hopeful, don't you?

*Not hopeful - and I'm not saying this to be political - but it's my genuine belief. I think this new board is going to work really well. When we were discussing this some months ago, we talked about a compromise and which members of George's board would we like to still be there - and they're the ones who are still there. I think we're glad to have that crap behind us so we can move on. There's one thing this board won't lack and that's teeth. At their first meeting on Tuesday night they were there until 11.30. Fly-by-nighters like Nick Greiner and Ray Martin were there until 11.30pm. They're going to work hard. The fact is, most of that hard work is going to occur behind closed doors. Fans aren't going to see the results of it for some time. There's a lot of mending to do. I think you'll find that Nick Pappas is much like [Sydney Roosters chairman] Nick Politis - very effective but not obvious. On a recent episode of Enough Rope, you interviewed three jockeys. Given your size, did you ever consider taking up the whip? It depends on what you're talking about! No, I only choose to ride something larger and wilder than me for recreational purposes.*

You are you sports-obsessed, though, aren't you?

*I adore it. But more particularly, I love playing sport. I'm so unfit - I can barely say this without wheezing - but what I do play when I can is racquetball. If I was fit, I'd still be playing touch football. I love basketball. It's hard at this stage of my life to find other people to play sport with. I used to play a lot of indoor cricket. I captained two trophy-winning indoor cricket teams - very lower grades mind you. I play in the Sandman's cricket team occasionally. I took 2/12 off five tidy overs the last time I played.*

What were your best figures as Andrew The Boy Genius From Indoor Cricket on The Doug Mulray Morning Show?

*I was actually a pretty nifty bowler in those days. I could send down a decent bouncer - which you weren't supposed to in indoor cricket. I was surprisingly whippy for my size. Sort of like Wayne Holdsworth - but a little more accurate.*

You've featured a few sportspeople on your show. Has the Australian sportsperson reached the same level of celebrity as its counterpart in America?

*It has, and Live and Sweaty can take a lot of responsibility for it. At the time, it was hard getting sportspeople on the show to talk. They saw themselves as cliché-machines. Two years later and the show had gone through the roof. It's not surprising: sport is Shakespeare on steroids.*

In many ways, Live and Sweaty was a pioneer in terms of how we talked about sport on TV. Do you look at The Footy Show and The Fat and think, "You thievin' bastards"?

*No, not at all. I thought Channel Nine did very well to borrow what Live and Sweaty had created - but I don't think its got it completely right. I went to Nine before The Fat came into existence and suggested a sports panel show but they said they had enough sport. There's no such thing as an original idea in television although some parts of Live and Sweaty were very original . . . It's probably best that it stays that way.*

You picked the perfect day to carry the drinks for the Australian Test team this summer. [Denton had bought the opportunity at a charity auction to carry the drinks during the second day of the final Ashes Test; the day Steve Waugh scored his memorable last-ball century]. Do you recall what you slipped the captain that day?

*Someone else gave it to me - I don't know what was in it. I think that was Shane Warne's excuse too if I recall . . . I remember standing in the middle of the SCG, in front of this huge crowd, and I said to Steve, "How're you going?" He said, "I'm enjoying myself." I was thinking, "Okay. What the hell do I say now?" All I could come up with was, "Don't be home before six." I was the last one to see him alive before he became a God.*

It must have been astonishing being in the Australian rooms the moment he cracked his century.

*It was intense. To be a part of the Australian cricket team, standing with them applauding Waugh's ton . . . it was just extraordinary. Afterwards, I was having a beer with Brett Lee and Adam Gilchrist and for the briefest moment I thought: "I've been a member of this team all my life." The Prime Minister was there too. I think he may have been hiding in Steve Waugh's kitbag because he turned up very quickly. [Laughs] No, I didn't. But I said to Steve afterwards that it was worth the price of admission. That morning I was asked to give a speech to the team and felt really nervous. I talked about what I paid and why I'd paid the money. I said: "Look, the great teams come along very rarely and this is a great team and today, going for 5-0, you have a shot at greatness. That's why I wanted to be here."*

Last one: in July 1993, Elle McFeast was Inside Sport's covergirl daubed in bodypaint in the form of a Collingwood jumper. Would you do the same wearing the red and green of South Sydney?

*[Laughs] There's only so far I'd go for comedy - and I know you'll back away because no editor in his right mind would publish that . . . But of course I'd do it. Absolutely.*

Anything for publicity?

*Anything for South Sydney!*