

RL: Rabbitohs back in crisis

By Brent Read

SYDNEY, June 1 AAP - When South Sydney chairman Nick Pappas swept to power in April last year, he pledged to rid the Rabbitohs of their "club in crisis" tag.

Pappas, the club's lawyer and George Piggins' right-hand man during their fight for reinstatement to the National Rugby League, was sick of Souths dominating the headlines for all the wrong reasons.

The famous club, winner of 20 premierships and home to 62 internationals, had become synonymous with in-fighting and mediocrity.

"As far as vision is concerned for the club, what we want to turn Souths into is a winning club," Pappas said as he campaigned to oust chairman and patriarch Piggins.

"Winning doesn't just mean winning on the field, though obviously that's a large part of it.

"Winning also means winning off the field.

"Unfortunately the club has lurched from crisis to crisis and I don't need to list the events of recent history."

Pappas' sermon had the desired effect, with Piggins standing aside last year on one condition - five of his board members remained on a nine-man board.

Pappas brought with him some big-name players, chief among them media personality Ray Martin and former NSW premier Nick Greiner.

But Piggins' faction remained in the majority.

For the best part of a year things went smoothly, even though Souths won only three games in 2003 and finished the season at the foot of the table.

But the honeymoon is well and truly over.

The Rabbitohs have spent the best part of 2004 battling poor results and speculation about the future of coach Paul Langmack, a man who has another year to run on his contract thanks to Piggins.

The club has won only two games thus far in the face of a mounting injury toll.

Pappas has also had to deal with a racial row between Langmack and one of his players - Owen Craigie.

Even so, the chairman has steadfastly refused to take a public shot at his coach.

When asked last month whether Langmack, whose contract is up at the end of 2005, would be judged on this year's results, Pappas said: "I still stand by that.

"The rider to that that we didn't expect is that we have been savagely hit by injuries. It's almost cruel.

"That has to be taken into account in any assessment of the season."

But it appears things have changed.

Suddenly, Langmack and Pappas are at loggerheads, with suggestions today one would have to go if the other was to stay.

Piggins is backing Langmack and his boardroom power has set up a potential bloodbath.

If Pappas is made the sacrificial lamb, Martin and Greiner are almost certain to follow.

Other high-profile supporters, such as Andrew Denton, could also withdraw their support.

When Piggins handed the reins over to Pappas last year, he issued his replacement a warning.

"It's a hard job. I don't think they're getting a picnic. In three years' time, he'll (Pappas) be a lot greyer than what he is now, I'll tell you that."

Prophetic words indeed.