



Rabbitohs chasing a non-existent football market

Crikey.com.au – Jeff Wall writes

Thursday, 10 January 2008

The Sydney Rabbitohs rugby league team are about to join a conga line of Australian sporting teams that have tried to break into the US market, and the result is likely to be the same – a one day, or one night wonder.

On Australia Day, the Rabbitohs will play a trial match against UK club, Leeds, in Jacksonville, Florida. Today's *Daily Telegraph* reveals that 3,500 tickets have been sold, already! Big deal!

The Rabbitohs are a privately owned NRL club, and not the only one as the club's spiel in the US claims. If Russell Crowe and Peter Holmes a Court want to spend hundreds of thousands on a PR exercise in the USA then good luck to them.

But if they are expecting – as the media hype claims – that the exercise will spread the league “gospel” in the world's most lucrative sports market then they should forget it now. That will save time and worry.

Rugby league has spent time, and serious money, trying to break into the US market for 20 years or more. There is not a scintilla of evidence to suggest it has had any substantial impact.

Cricket, the AFL, and rugby union have all tried to get into the US market without much more success than rugby league has achieved.

This is an important year for the Rabbitohs. In 2007 they performed above expectations. But if the club is to match its extraordinary PR hype it will need to be a serious contender this year.

But does anyone think a 20,000km trip to Florida to play a “friendly” against the much better performed UK Super League champions in the depths of mid-winter USA will improve their chances?

It gets worse. Part of the program for the team, and hangers on, is a meet and greet with the Superbowl bound Jacksonville Jaguars, and, can you believe it, a “Craig Wing and John Sutton (Rabbitohs players) surfing clinic”.

Under the ownership of Crowe and Holmes a Court, the Rabbitohs have done well in building community links, and have put a much needed focus on the need to encourage Indigenous sport. Wouldn't a couple of trial matches in rural and regional NSW, and even Queensland, do a lot more good, and cost a lot less, than a useless junket to a country which has no interest in rugby league and never will?

But there is an even more useless junket not far down the track – the World Club Challenge between the Melbourne Storm and Leeds Rhinos in the UK in February!