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Rabbitohs signal big-name shopping spree

By James MacSmith
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The Sun-Herald



South Sydney are prepared to launch a \$2.5 million spending spree in the middle of next year.

Almost 80 per cent of their players will be off-contract at the end of 2005 and have been told to perform or face the axe.

The Rabbitohs have been anchored to the NRL cellar since their return to the competition in 2002 and officials, led by chief executive Shane Richardson and new coach Shaun McRae, are determined to lead the club into a new era.

Richardson said Rabbitohs players would be given every opportunity to prove their worth in the first half of next season but if they didn't the club would open the purse strings to tempt some of the NRL's top players.

Some of the game's biggest drawcards are off-contract at the end of next year, including Willie Mason, Craig Gower and Braith Anasta.

"It's the type of position we want to be in," Richardson said.

"It's a positive situation for the club. We're a club that wants to be supportive but accountable.

"We've got a good bunch of players here and they will be given every opportunity to show what they can do. Their footballing futures will be on the line and that is a big incentive to perform.

"By the middle of next year we should know who has a future here and who doesn't. The players know they need to perform or they will be shown the door."

Richardson was lured to Souths mid-year to help revive the club as he has done at other organisations, most recently with 2003 premiers Penrith.

Richardson said having a majority of players off-contract at the end of the season was a ploy he had used successfully in the past.

"It's something that I did with Cronulla, with Penrith and with Hull," he said.

"It's worked in the past and hopefully it will work here as well.

"The reality of the situation is that we were wooden spooners last year and that's just not good enough.

"We have to look at moving the club forward. We will have nearly \$2.5 million to spend next year after the June 30 deadline.

"So if the players who are there aren't doing the job for us we will have to find players who can."

Souths have strengthened their playing stocks for 2005 with the addition of former Roosters Shannon Hegarty and Peter Cusack, and Richardson said the club would be looking to attract some more big names.

"We want the club to be successful and we're willing to make the hard decisions to achieve that.

"Hegarty and Cusack were important signings for us and we would love to add some more big names if need be."

Mason's manager Greg Keenan said:

"It's still early days but when the time is right Willie will certainly be looking at all offers."

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