

LOCAL SPORTS

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Searching for rugby's spot in sport

The Rabbitohs' co-owner will bring his team to Jacksonville.

By Garry Smits, The Times-Union

It's not easy to reverse almost four decades of losing.

But Australian businessman Peter Holmes a Court and Academy Award-winning actor Russell Crowe are trying to do just that with the South Sydney Rabbitohs, once the flagship team of Australia's National Rugby League as the winner of 20 "First-grade Premierships," or the equivalent to the NFL's Super Bowl.

The Rabbitohs play in the working-class section of Sydney, and generations of people whose lives were spent in poverty or tedious physical labor found an escape in the Rugby League version of the Pittsburgh Steelers or Green Bay Packers.

After the Rabbitohs fell on hard times, they were purchased two years ago by Court and Crowe, who supervised changes, from coaching to fan comforts. Last year, the team made the NRL playoffs for the first time since 1989.

In the 100th year of the team's existence, Court and Crowe are bringing the Rabbitohs to Jacksonville to play one of the top British teams, the Leeds Rhinos, on Jan. 26 at the University of North Florida. During a recent visit to Jacksonville to line up corporate support for the game, Court spoke with the Times-Union on the similarities and differences between U.S. football and the Rugby League and his quest to once again make the Rabbitohs "the most successful team in Australian sports history."

Question: How did you fall in love with rugby?

It's a good question, because I pretty much grew up with no sports in my life. My father was an immigrant from Zimbabwe, and the only sport he ever competed in was boxing. He never followed a team. I began playing rugby in Australia, then went to [Middlebury] college in Vermont and played there. Then I went with the New England All-Stars and played all over America. I wasn't terribly fast and not terribly strong, but I figured I could outlast them. I was more of a stayer, not a sprinter. I figured I'd get them in the end.

Q: How did you get the idea to buy the Rabbitohs?

It wasn't until I started taking my kids to Rabbitohs games and saw them falling in love with the team. You have to understand that, historically, this is the most loved team in Australian sport. They've been located in the toughest part of Sydney, but they are the people's team of Australia. In the first 65 years, they dominated the game. In the last 35 years, it's been pretty much downhill. They had gotten so bad and were so mismanaged that they were kicked out of the competition in 2000. Then, 80,000 people marched through the streets of Sydney, demanding that they be put back in. They were, but things didn't get better. For seven seasons, they finished absolute, stone-motherless last, except for one season when another team cheated and lost all their points. Two years ago, it became clear that if someone didn't step in and save the team, it was going to go out of business.

Q: How did Russell Crowe become involved?

We had been friends for seven years, and he was from the same part of Sydney that the Rabbitohs were. He was from a very humble background, from a very tough part of Sydney, and when he was growing up, the team won the premiership a couple of times. It helped him because when your team wins, it helps your potential and expectations. He set his sights really high because he fell in love with a team that went all the way. He was a kid who had no right to dream that he'd be one of the best actors in the world. It wasn't meant for a kid from that part of town. But the core of what this club stands for in that community is that no matter where you're from, you can go all the way to the top. That's a very powerful way to connect with a generation of kids.

Q: Where did they get the name 'Rabbitohs?'

They received the name because many of the players in the early days were guys who would sell rabbit meat. They went around with long poles with the rabbits hanging down, and they called those guys 'Rabbitohs.' I believe that our team and the Green Bay Packers are the only teams in sports whose names come from meat-packing districts.

Q: What did you have to do to get the team winning and making money?

There's no single thing. You have to do everything right. You can drop the best quarterback in the NFL on the worst team, but nothing will happen without the right system, plays, coaching and training. We did everything, changed everything and improved everything. It came in three main parts. The players, [we] had to make them feel they were with a fantastic club. We had to rebuild a winning culture, make it clear we had expectations, but would give them whatever they need for training and support so there would be no excuses. For our fans, we had to reconnect with



Peter Holmes a Court (above) talks about the South Sydney Rabbitohs, the Rugby League team he co-owns with award-winning actor Russell Crowe.

them. Most have suffered through 35 years of not seeing their team win anything. We had to deliver for them. They marched to get us back. We exist because of them. We took the team into the community, interacted with them, did a bunch of things. Third, we had to fix the business. Fans aren't very interested in the business of sport. They're very interested in buying a season ticket, then having things run well. They don't want to see inefficiency. They don't want to see you messing up the business and getting in the way of the team performing.

Q: What had to be done from a talent standpoint?

We had some core talent. We didn't make a big turnover in players. We brought in a couple of older heads and worked on our young guys. We had oodles of talent. We didn't need to go buying it.

Q: Are you and Russell hands-on owners?

Russell and I are the only owners of a rugby team in Australia, which is a bizarre concept. Australian teams tend to be club-based, where the members own the team. We're the only business people buying a team and turning it around. There's no model in Australia for what we're doing. We're very hands-on in the business of it and very hands-off when it comes to the competition. We're about backing great people. We have a view of that we should always be fans and should be screaming blue murder if they [coaches] pick one guy instead of another guy. But we're only screaming as fans. We'll scream, but the coach has to pick the player.

Q: Can rugby be popular in America?

What you've seen in America is that there is room in this very, very big market for niche sports to have a following, for people to develop a fan base around niche sports. Jacksonville has its own rugby team, they played in the American league final, and Jacksonville can have a little place in the world of rugby. Sports is really changing, the internationalization of sports. The NFL has played a game in London, and on Jan. 26 - Australia Day - we're going to bring the best rugby team from England against the team that wants to be the best in Australia.

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