

Sunday Profile Transcript February 26 2006: Peter Holmes a Court

<http://www.abc.net.au/sundayprofile/stories/s1577901.htm>

Presenter: Julia Baird

The former theatre producer and son of one of Australia's wealthiest families is a man on a mission

He's still committed to a takeover of the Souths football club despite this week's threats, he talks about his plans for the club, his friendship with business partner Russell Crowe, why he 'fled' Australia as a young man, his miserable years at boarding school in Melbourne, and his famous father Robert Holmes a Court.

Transcript

Intro:

Hello and welcome to Sunday Profile, I'm Julia Baird and tonight, Peter Holmes a Court, a man on a mission to save the South Sydney Rabbitohs.

He was born into one of Australia's wealthiest families, educated at one of its finest schools and as the eldest son of Robert Holmes a Court stood to inherit an empire that spanned the globe. But at the age of 18, Peter Holmes a Court, family rebel, packed his bags and as he says, "fled" the country in search of something better.

He spent the next sixteen years turning himself into his own man. Running a successful theatre company in New York before returning to these shores in 2000.

But Peter Holmes a Court has moved on from the footlights to the football field and right now he and his mate Russell Crowe are just a step away from buying out the South Sydney Rabbitohs. Not everybody's happy about it as it became clear this week with the news of threats against him.

Peter Holmes a Court:

I knew that the people involved with Souths were some of the most passionate people in sport anywhere in the world and I knew the ones that were negative would be pretty passionate about their negative position but we're prepared for that and we view all of the passion as something we want to turn in the right direction.

Julia Baird:

But you've received some pretty unsavoury personal threats?

Peter Holmes a Court:

They're unsavoury, we don't take them seriously. I've got a hundred e-mails in favour to one against. You know, I want to focus on the 99% of the e-mails that are positive.

Julia Baird:

Now it was Russell Crowe who actually ignited your interest in Souths, wasn't it. He took you along to games and he gave your boys Souths jumpers which I understand were called 'pyjamas' at your place because they were never out of them! Now was it Russell who ignited your interest in investing in the club or was that your idea?

Peter Holmes a Court:

No, I think it's fair to say that the two of us worked together to try and come up with a solution to some of the problems that Souths has had. Factional infighting in this club has really been the main game that they have played since their readmission to the league and we're trying to end to the focus of energy on the board room and turn the focus of energy onto the playing field. So we had to come up with an innovative structure for the club that would see us be able to attract capital, put money into the club but give fans and members the control over the things that we believed that they wanted and needed and deserved to have control over. I really believe when it comes to sporting teams that the fans have a type of moral rights. They have the rights to control the colours, they have the rights to control the name, the logo, the location, whether a club gets merged with another club. They control that because they've put the years in to make the club as successful or to make it survive.

Julia Baird:

Now you said that you'd like to see Souths turn into a consistently winning a club, a club that turns a profit instead of a loss and you want to prevent a move to the central coast, but beyond that as someone with obvious entrepreneurial flair, do you have bigger dreams?

Peter Holmes a Court:

It's a pretty big dream to try and help the team that you're a fan of, to be a winning a team. I'm of a particular view that teams can represent for people in the communities from which the team comes. Teams can represent the best of what that area is about. You know, South Sydney has at various times in its career represented various people from you know a relatively tough environment. Represented to them that the people amongst them can go all the way. It's probably true of my business partner, Russell, you know, Russell's done pretty well. When he fell in love with the Rabbitohs, his father owned a business in Mascot, co-owned a muffler shop in Mascot, Russell got infected with the Rabbitohs virus then and Russell is one of those people just like many other people involved in this club, and in South Sydney who have gone all the way from humble beginnings and I hope that South Sydney will once again in the future be that beacon of how far you can go because I just think that that's a terribly exciting part about sport.

Julia Baird:

But you're a businessmen as well, obviously you must want to make money as well as helping the club, how will this venture help you?

Peter Holmes a Court:

You say a businessman as if that's sort of a separate class of human. You know, I'm a human who loves to see the success of the people around him, loves to see in the eyes of these young Juniors that are coming through our competition, their excitement at the prospect of playing for Souths and get a reward out of doing that. And, you know, I've been very lucky in my last two businesses Back Row, with Tap Dogs and The Australian Agricultural Company where I've been financially very lucky and I don't have to make every investment to get the strictest financial return.

Julia Baird:

And you and Russell Crowe are of course good friends and you met when you were living in the States, I believe it was Los Angeles, how did that meeting come about?

Peter Holmes a Court:

We met in Los Angeles at the Academy Awards in 1999, we did talk that night, didn't go that well until we worked out that we both stayed in the same motel in Fitzroy Crossing, 700km inland from the coast in WA, the same motel and we both were sharing stories about that, that's probably where we hit it off. Beyond that he's a mate and a friend and a business partner.

Julia Baird:

So a friendship naturally developed from that point?

Peter Holmes a Court:

Yes, you know I guess I would say that I am fortunate to be friends with Russell, he's an incredibly smart person, an absolutely passionate person, I get to see the best side of him, other people don't get to see all the sides of Russell and I'm very fortunate to see the best sides of Russell.

Julia Baird:

Well let's talk about some of your early years in Australia. You left the country pretty much as soon as you finished school.?

Peter Holmes a Court:

It felt like it, yes. I wasn't, I don't think I left...I think I fled.

Julia Baird:

What were you fleeing?

Peter Holmes a Court:

What I felt was an un-fun place to be, what I felt was a place where I wasn't comfortable, to be fleeing regular teenaged discomfort with yourself and your environment and I might have had, like a lot of kids, a tougher schooling experience than you'd like kids to have. It breaks my heart that kids are still bullied at school. It breaks my heart that kids are still exposed to strongly negative input from their peers and I was on the receiving end of some of that but I also had the same teenage stuff. Maybe I didn't handle it as well as I could have handled it but I found my schooling years and having a high profile Dad and people forming a negative opinion about me as a result of that, I found that pretty hard to take and so when I got the opportunity to flee, I fled.

Julia Baird:

I'd like to talk about your school days in a moment but were you actually craving anonymity when you fled.

Peter Holmes a Court

I don't think I knew why I was leaving I just I felt there's got to be a better place. You know, I have got to be frank, I thought there must, if I went to America, you know, went away and I had no idea, I just was getting away. I got an offer to go to University in America in Vermont and I remember going up to my room and looking on the map and seeing Western Australia on the map which was marked in the colour red, which all the hot places of the planet were marked as it was big red, giant red shape and I had to go to America and find Vermont. It's a tiny state, it's one of fifty states, it is absolutely minute. It took me half an hour to scrawl around that map trying to find Vermont. You can never find what you're looking for, of course I found it in the end and it's a tiny green triangle in the top corner of America and I just remember thinking, "Good. Red, large Australia...Small, green America, that sounds like a place for me."

Julia Baird:

And how did your family feel about you leaving then?

Peter Holmes a Court:

I think as a teenager sometimes you have a pretty poor perspective on your family and their feelings, you know you're focused on yourself, why the world isn't behaving the way you think the world should behave.

Julia Baird:

Always unfair.

Peter Holmes a Court:

Always unfair. I think my father in one of his rare acts of naiveté thought that after a year at College in America, because I was meant to go there for a year as a gap year before coming to university in Australia. I think in one of my father's rare moments of naiveté he thought that I would go there for a year and then come back to university in Australia but I think he had no idea how great it would be over there. He had no idea how much opportunity America presented to me, but also, obviously how free I was to make mistakes like any kid, to achieve my own things.

Julia Baird:

Be your own person.

Peter Holmes a Court:

Be my own person, yes.

Julia Baird:

However, you were away sixteen years, surely you must not have expected to away that long?

Peter Holmes a Court:

No, no I didn't, in fact I never expected to move back to Australia. After 2000 we'd sold our business in the US, my wife and I we had our first set of twins, George and Robert and we took off to travel for three months to work out where in the world we should live and the night before I left for New York I said, "There's about a ten percent chance we'll end up in Australia." I really didn't think I'd move to Australia, I had a low opinion of it, that's a broad statement. I had a lower opinion of it than I should have based on my early experience. I hadn't lived there, you know, the curse of an ex-pat is that you leave with a snapshot in your mind and you talk about that for the next you know 'x' number of years and you don't realise your country has moved on. So I came back and pretty quickly formed an opinion that we reckoned this was the best place in the world to live and moved here shortly afterwards.

Julia Baird:

Sure, no but just when you probably just a couple of years after you left, you were back home I think when your father Robert Holmes a Court died, you were just 21 and you left behind an empire which was heavily in debt and you were only young at the time and as you've said, there was a lot of appeal to you in the United States and overseas. Did you feel any obligation to stay in Australia and help your mother out?

Peter Holmes a Court:

Yes, I had said that at the time even before that when my father was rebuilding his company after the setbacks of the crash of 87. I said, "I'll come back. I won't continue at University, I'll come and work." And you know while he was in, still the hospital room 'warm' as they say, a number of people did approach me and say, "Well now, it's up to you." I was fortunate that I had a mother of enormous integrity, she was smart enough to say, "Hang on a second", it was a month before I started Oxford, she said, "You've got all of that to do, why would you stop and do this?" And she took over the running of the family business so my pressure to stay lasted about half an hour and the rest is history. My mother ran the company for ten years, my brother now runs the business and it was great outcome out of obviously what was a tragic event for me.

Julia Baird:

It must have been, I mean apart from the grieving it must have been a very bizarre time as well. I mean you said, I think in 2001, "When your family is thrown together at 5 in the morning when your father has a heart attack and your all looking at each other around the board table, it becomes very easy to see that people have different agendas." I mean was this what happened? It sounds very confronting.

Peter Holmes a Court:

It was confronting, I don't think I was saying that about my family members by the way, a number of people from the outside approached me. Who's to say who's right, who's wrong in that, all I know is that my mother did the thing that was right for her to do in the end, so it worked out fine.

Julia Baird:

And your relationship with your father, what sort of things did you do together when you were a child?

Peter Holmes a Court:

Oh I had an incredibly fortunate upbringing to have had the combination of the personalities of my mother and my father in the same household which were both hardworking, high achieving but very progressive socially as individuals was really, I was incredibly fortunate for that. As far as what we did as kids, as young adults, that would be terribly boring because it would be similar sorts of things that other people did.

Julia Baird:

But what did you love most of all? I mean did you kick around a ball together; did he take you out to see films?

Peter Holmes a Court:

The final years that my father was alive, I was at College in America and I had, I hadn't played

sport in High School in Australia and I went to America and I started playing rugby. My father had played rugby when he was a kid and at that time I guess I was most proud that we were able to make a connection through sport. That's Rugby Union. I was able to bond with him you know and I remember some of the moments that we were able to bond about that subject and my involvement in Rugby Union over there and what I was doing and playing and yes, I mean that's the moment that I think about when you ask me this question but of course there's hundreds of things that we did and I think about.

Julia Baird:

Was there any piece of advice that he gave you when, over these years that has always stuck with you?

Peter Holmes a Court:

I think the central thing that I was fortunate to get from my parents, both of my parents was that I should do what I wish to do, there was a bit of pressure perhaps to do it well but that wasn't really overt pressure it was just you know, if you're going to do it, you may as well do it well. And so, yes, I was very fortunate that I was able to grow up with that sort of freedom.

Julia Baird:

Growing up with such a successful father, was money important to you as a young man?

Peter Holmes a Court:

I think money is important for everyone and understanding money and making money and saving money becomes important to everyone but it wasn't I don't think any more or less important to me, it was just something that you had to watch carefully.

Julia Baird:

You've said before that your mother limited your pocket money, were you spoilt or were those kinds of things closely monitored?

Peter Holmes a Court:

Well the opening statement would always have to be if you grew up in this company you're spoilt compared to the rest of the world, few of us really realise how lucky we are. I was always upset that I never had a cricket bat that I wanted, I was always upset that I never got a grey Nicholls cricket bat but in the end you've got to say my parents were bloody smart for doing that. My parents were absolutely correct to instil in me some of the values which are more easily obtained out of scarcity than abundance.

Julia Baird:

Talking about that abundance, you know being surrounded by that when you grow up, when you get older does it affect your attitude to money?

Peter Holmes a Court:

I don't know, I mean I watched, the thing about our family is we watched our father make everything, you know he was an immigrant from South Africa, he got a law degree, he ran a law practice, he bought a little business, he grew that, he bought another business grew that. You grow up as a kid pretty much only knowing what happens on your side of the fence and that's what we knew, work hard you'll get a reward, spend time with your family, you'll get on and you don't view it as any different than anything else.

Julia Baird:

You were talking before about being sent to boarding school which I think was Geelong Grammar in Melbourne where you had a bit of a rough time, I mean you were probably more of a target because of who you are?

Peter Holmes a Court:

Yes if my parents had thought about a more hostile place to send me, I don't know what it would have been. My father made a career out of torturing Victorian companies whose directors sent their kids to Geelong Grammar. You know, my father was the person who went around and said, "There's a lot of old management practices here, there's a lot of reform that could happen if people could think differently." Unfortunately they all sent their rather large children to Geelong Grammar, certainly it didn't help, as I've told the school, I didn't think there were protections in place. I needed protection and that wasn't provided.

Julia Baird:

So you were badly beaten up or.....?

Peter Holmes a Court:

Oh, you know look, my experience is going to be much less than other people's and I'm not going to you know make a big deal out of the fact that I had some tough times, so...

Julia Baird:

I think your brother's spoken about being whipped with the end of a rubber tyre?

Peter Holmes a Court:

Yes, there was some bad stuff that happened.

Julia Baird:

Right.

Peter Holmes a Court:

And I don't think that's, I don't think that's acceptable. I have done work since then to help organisations and support organisations that help children. That's the focus of my wife's full time energy in harm prevention to children and I think that you know, it shaped me as a person and hopefully I can take some positive energy out of it.

Julia Baird:

Did your parents think of taking you out of the school if it was that bad?

Peter Holmes a Court:

I don't think that I ever thought that was an option. People have asked me that and I think that's a pretty modern idea, find the right school for the right kid. I just stuck it out, had to find some sort of defence mechanism, I had to sort of run away to you know, that was the whole thing about not playing sport. You know, I created my own little world that involved a slightly fictitious back injury to get away from the organised sports structure, and yes, I did my best to sort of run away.

Julia Baird:

But you did tell your parents what was happening?

Peter Holmes a Court:

I'm not sure I did, I don't know. When you're a young male and someone else is making you feel very small, it's a very hard thing to say to your parents, "You know, I'm scared of this guy", or this or that. You know and you have very complex emotions, you don't know whether it's appropriate, should you be resolving the issue or should they be. I didn't know how to react.

Julia Baird:

Well as we've said, after school you left Australia with great haste. You studied Economics and Theatre in Vermont and then Law at Oxford I believe. So you chopped and changed a little bit but in fact I understand you trod the boards appearing at the Edinburgh Festival in 1992 in one performance as a naked Messiah! Was that just for fun or did you have some serious acting ambitions?

Peter Holmes a Court:

I did it for fun there at Oxford, we took the show, we did another show we did there we took on the festival circuit to Singapore Festival and most of my friends that I acted with are professional, but I wasn't, you know, it was a tough tough business and it was quite clear that I

wasn't going to really make it.

Julia Baird:

So in 1993 you took your interest in business and theatre and rolled them together setting up the theatre production business, Back Row Productions in New York. How tough was it breaking into what was probably the toughest market place in the world especially as an outsider?

Peter Holmes a Court:

You know when you start a business, you really know nothing about running a business, you have to learn on your feet as you go along and New York's a tough place to learn but it's a great place to learn, it goes at an incredible pace. It's like speed-reading everyday for years and drinking from a fire hydrant, it's an incredible experience.

Julia Baird:

Did you have some moments when you thought, "I'm not going to be able to pull this off", because it wasn't until 1997 that it really took off with Tap Dogs, was it?

Peter Holmes a Court:

I don't make any bones about the fact that I made some 'stonkingly' bad decisions, I made some big mistakes, you know I did shows that were terrible. We were also very lucky with things. I mean, you know I often think that executives over attribute their successes to good thinking and hard work and good values. So much of success of anyone in life is just being in the right place and at the right time, just good luck.

Julia Baird:

So the other great thing and of course this may be luck as well, when you were in New York, you met your wife Divonne, now I gather that she was a sophisticated Manhattan lawyer...

Peter Holmes a Court:

Yes.

Julia Baird:

You were still a student?

Peter Holmes a Court:

Yes.

Julia Baird:

So how did you meet her and woo her?

Peter Holmes a Court:

I met her on a blind date in Manhattan which is a crazy place to meet someone, a famously bad first date, we went to the theatre and after the theatre she walked out of the theatre and hailed a taxicab. And I said, "Is there any, you know, opportunity here to have dinner or discussion?" And I'll love her forever for her line when I asked her to have dinner where she said, "Sorry I don't eat dinner." So it took a few more bad dates before we were able to have a good conversation.

Julia Baird:

You sold out of Back Row in 1999, what, you know by that stage you were married and you had two kids, twins as you've said, what were your options at that point?

Peter Holmes a Court:

I got a lot of offers to go and do things for people around the world and I was really excited by the prospect of travelling around the world, it's quite glamorous and work out what job I was going to take. You know, big American company in Europe needs this, a guy in London needs this done, another job in Los Angeles needs this done, it was really exciting until I realised that my values were completely upside down and I should have been working out where we as a family would live first and then what I was going to do. It was a fabulous process, we worked out we should live in Sydney.

Julia Baird:

Was it a culture shock coming back?

Peter Holmes a Court:

The ironic thing is I arrived at 6 o'clock in the morning of November of 2000 and got into the office in Sydney at 9 o'clock in the morning because I was given the opportunity to run the Australian Agricultural Company and take it public which we did in seven months after I got there and everyday was, for the next six months was in the office.

Julia Baird:

But the other thing of course that happened in 2000 was that you sold out of your family company Heytesbury, you were negotiating with your mother over it with which I think you had a bit of a falling out at the time, it looked as though you were still trying to cut the family ties, even though you'd been away?

Peter Holmes a Court:

No, I mean that's probably a view that people take from the outside. Do people in families sometimes have falling-outs over businesses? Yes. Were we able to resolve it? Yes. We had a great structure, I was able to sell out, I was able to go my own way and my family other members were able to go the way they wanted to go.

Julia Baird:

You're often told that your, how much like your father you are, you just have to pick up a profile and they'll say that you look like him, you think like him, you sign your name the same way he did.

Peter Holmes a Court:

Absolute rubbish.

Julia Baird:

That has been written, but you yourself have said that you want to be a different and in fact you said that you wanted to be a better man and I think that you've said his premature death at 53 from a heart attack has encouraged you to seek a better life balance. Is this right and how are you achieving that?

Peter Holmes a Court:

I think it's the obligation of all offspring to learn from the lessons of their parents and improve, otherwise there wouldn't be such a thing called evolution. So of course you want to learn. You know, my father lived an incredible life, it was too short, I'd also like to have a great life and I'd like it to be longer and I'd like to have more time with my kids at this really important age then he had when I was at this age, but I didn't suffer because of that. I had a fantastic childhood, I just am choosing to do it differently and of course I'm trying to do it better, every child should.

Conclusion:

And that was Peter Holmes a Court, entrepreneur and football fan. And that's Sunday Profile for this week, thanks for listening and thanks to our producer Jennifer Feller and our technical producer Dan Driscoll. If you'd like to ipod this programme or read a transcript or send us an e-mail, just go to www.abc.net.au/sundayprofile

I'm Julia Baird and we'll back again same time next week, hope you can join us then. Up next, Karen Dorante.