

Source: Inside Sport #139,  
August 2003  
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**The Rogue State Of George Piggins**

George Piggins exercised an iron-fisted rule over South Sydney - and he wasn't afraid to threaten to throw those fists around. The new Nick Pappas-led board has promised a new dawn, but as Inside Sport reveals in this special report, Piggins's cult of personality still holds sway at the club.

All eyes fixed on the television in the middle of courtroom 21A. Justice Heeley was first up. "I would dismiss the appeal, he said. Then he continued: "I am authorised by Justice Moore to say he would allow the appeal." Now the fate of South Sydney rested with one man, Justice Merkel. "I would also allow the appeal." With those words, Souths had won reinstatement to the NRL. It was a spectacular legal and moral victory for the embattled rugby league club after two years on the sidelines.

The man the media and club supporters mobbed that day, July 6, 2001, outside the federal court was then club chairman George Piggins. After the victory, he became - in the words of Piggins ghost writer in his autobiography *Never Say Die*, "an all-Australian hero". Which makes him difficult to criticise? But just as the stickers on the back of utes proclaim "In George we Trust", of George we must now also ask some serious questions.

In April 2003, Piggins ended his 13-year tenure as Souths chairman when he stood aside for Nick Pappas, the prominent Sydney lawyer and unsung hero of the clubs court case, who in late March had launched a ticket to rival the Piggins regime. The compromise that was brokered saw five of Piggins loyalists retained and four from the Pappas ticket installed. Piggins is adamant that he'll have no influence over the new board. Others aren't so sure.

Since readmission, Souths has cleaned out its coaching staff, its first year captain, senior players, quality recruits and lost more games than anyone anticipated. Off the field, blood has been spilled in the boardroom and in the front office. But Piggins, despite stepping aside, remains as strong as ever. To Souths fans, it's frustrating and dispiriting. To everyone else, it looks like to royal mess. Two years after receiving the penalty it'd waited so long to receive, Souths still can't find touch.

At the heart of its problems, many have argued, is a chairman more concerned with holding on to power than doing what is best for the club. Former board members, employees and members who have fallen foul of Piggins paint a bleak portrait of a club culture of paranoia, mistrust, conspiracy and of a chairman working unilaterally to the board.

When Inside Sport put these individuals concerns to Piggins, he was dismissive. "you've been talking to billygoats", he scoffed. However, the people we spoke to, high-profile figures all were initially hesitant to go on the record for this story, mindful of the adverse publicity their comments may bring upon the club. Ultimately, though, they believe that some of the myths surrounding Piggins need to be dispelled.

Certainly, to understand Souths' current malaise and uncertain future, it is necessary in the past. Yes, it's a past that includes a stunning court victory over a media mogul. A triumph against the big end of town. But it's also a past that suggests that the so-called Team of the People has been run like a dictatorship.

It was Souths' 14th man, a high-powered group of media personalities. Politicians and celebrities that banded midway through 1998 to aid their beloved but ailing football team: Ray Martin, Mike Whitney, Mikey Robins, Andrew Denton, John Sattler, Russell Crowe, Laurie Brereton, Nick Greiner, Don Lane and others.

Group 14, as it became known, was a supporters' group that any club would envy. But in Piggins eyes, Group 14 had it in for him from the start. "I know one thing", he told RLW earlier this year. "I've got utter contempt for Group 14". The contempt is puzzling. Group 14 actively re-established links with the cashed-up Souths Juniors, attempted to bring sound business practices to the club, brokered sponsorship deals, conceived the club's bumper sticker campaign and was fundamental in staging the two rallies that captured the public's interest in the Rabbitohs cause.

With sevens members of Group 14 - which was originally conceived by Sydney businessmen Martin and Jerry Lissing and Steve McDermott - took positions on the board in 2000, it provoked behaviour from Piggins that no-one saw coming. It also ensured Souths was fighting two wars: one against News Ltd and the NRL, and one from within.

Group 14's first initiative was to obtain funding from Souths Juniors to commission an independent consultant, Complete Marketing, to fast-track the five year business plan required by the NRL. In addition to suggesting the club was insolvent, Complete Marketing's report was also highly critical of a "kitchen table" management style that "started at the top".

When it was tabled before the board, Piggins was so enraged he resigned. As he stormed out of the meeting, the only women on the board, former NSW State Member for Heffron Deirdre Grusovin, blocked Piggins from leaving by leaping in front of the door. "I said, George go back to your chair. You can't resign. Sit down. Please!" she recalls. "He stood there and stared at me before finally going back to his chair. At the end of the meeting he said to me, "You don't know how close I went to hitting you. I could feel the muscles in my neck bulging." I said, I know George. I could see them. But I knew you wouldn't hit me because I was a women.

When asked to compare life at Macquarie St to Souths headquarters at Chalmers St, Redfern, Grusovin laughs. "Politics doesn't equate! Because there were no rules. It's what you could get away with. Real knife-in-the-back stuff."

Another former board member, Federal Shadow Minister for Employment, Education and Training Anthony Albanese, makes a similar comparison. "There was a culture of conflict that wasn't necessary", he says. "if you had a different view to George he somehow took it personally. He was always thinking people were out to undermine him. I would always vote for George as chairman for as long as he wanted the position. We needed a figurehead and he embodied what Souths' spirit was about."

In many respects, that status saved Piggins hide during the years of the fightback. The numbers were certainly there to depose him as chairman. "They had the balance of power on the board so why didn't they get rid of me?" he asks Inside Sport. The simple answer is that losing the man who personified Souths' crusade would have been disastrous - both in terms of PR and in the court.

Other forces tried to topple Piggins during this period. It's been long rumoured in RL circles that had he been ousted, News Limited would have allowed Souths back into the competition - no questions asked. As long as he was there, however, it wasn't going to happen.

"I'm not at liberty to tell you the people who wanted that to happen," says former Test cricketer and TV personality Mike Whitney, Piggins' former deputy chairman. "But if George knew who they were, some who he believes are his best mates, he'd be horrified. One of those people spoke to me about taking him down. This particular person invited me over to his place and told me that News Ltd and the NRL had already said that if I was the new chairman, Souths would immediately be back in the competition and the court cases would be dropped."

Whitney resigned from the board in December 2000 when Piggins wanted to settle a boardroom disagreement - in Piggins words - "out the back or over the road". Piggins was convinced that Whitney wanted his job. In Never Say Die, the fallout is put down to the "stress and tension" of the times - something Whitney denies. "They're (Piggins faction) the biggest conspiracy theorists I've met," he says. Such paranoia was still very much in evidence after Souths had been readmitted to the NRL. The clubs reinstatement meant it was necessary to fill a position on the board that had remained vacant during Souths' time in the wilderness. Piggins wanted local auto-electrician Jim Hatfield (now the clubs deputy chairman) while the rest of the board wanted media identity Andrew Denton, because of his profile and the role he played with Whitney in obtaining the crucial \$1 million-a-year sponsorship from Channel Seven owner Kerry Stokes.

Piggins has repeatedly stated that he "couldn't even get a seconder" for Hatfield. In fact, no vote was taken: Hatfield and Denton were installed on the board after Sean Garlick stood aside because he wanted to apply for the position of first grade football support for Piggins. "I'm here for George," he said. "I thought we were here for South Sydney," retorted a fellow director. At the conclusion of that ill-tempered meeting Piggins singled out Steve McDermott and the Lissing brothers. "You won't be on a board with me after the next election," he said. He was right. In late August 2001, Piggins ran a ticket that ended in the three directors being banished from the club. Despite the fact that only three months earlier the board had won an improbable courtroom victory for the club, the first election in 12 years was called. Piggins says many of those directors had "just sat in on a court case"; although, as he freely admits, with McDermott and the Lissings gone he would have the balance of power on the board again.

The minutes from the board meeting which preceded the election reveal that Anthony Albanese was concerned about Piggins proposed ticket, fearing it would send a "disastrous message" of disunity to members and the public. A resolution was passed that no proxy voting would be allowed at the election. Albanese also offered to sacrifice his own position if it would ease the intra-board tensions. So did Denton. But Piggins was adamant: if the board in its current form were reinstated, he'd resign. Ignoring the board's resolution, he sent a proxy form to members. Piggins asked members to allow him to use their proxy as "I believe it should be used". Legal opinion sought by the Lissings and McDermott suggests that by ignoring the resolution of the board, Piggins may have misled the membership with his proxy form.

Asked why they didn't take immediate legal action, Martin Lissing says, "for the good of the club we decided to accept what was happening. We'd just got back in the competition and the last thing it needed was to be as a club torn apart and for George Piggins to be seen as he really was."

Fearing for their positions, the Lissing and McDermott made the reluctant step of sending out their own proxy form asking the members to return the board that had won the club's court case, with Piggins remaining as chairman. "We'd always kept quiet about what part we'd played," says Martin Lissing. People needed to know who we were and what we had done (for them)."

During the two day polling period at South Sydney Leagues Club, the Lissing and McDermott contend that Piggins and his supporters manned the polling booth. Says McDermott: "You walked into the leagues club to the right-hand side of the escalators to the polling booth and there were six or eight of George's people standing there. You had less than two metres in which to walk past them. As you did, they were shoving how to vote cards in your hand and saying thinking to you on the way through."

"You walked in behind a glass window and they were watching how you were voting from the other side. Members have told me they were greatly intimidated. I was personally very intimidated. I felt like a criminal in my own club."

At the annual general meeting, the results of the election were announced. The Lissings and McDermott - the three men who had launched Group 14 had been dumped. Piggins had control of his club again.

At a Souths staff meeting in 2002, former chief executive Paul Dunn asked his gathered employees to anonymously write on a piece of paper one aspect of the club they liked and one aspect they didn't like. The results revealed his staff was optimistic about the club's potential. It also revealed it was concerned about the politics. The same thing which ultimately hastened their leader's departure from the club.

Dunn declined Inside Sports invitation to discuss his time at Souths, but a comment from the time of his resignation is telling, "There are certain elements in the club who are like the Japanese soldier 20 years after World War II," he said. "They're still fighting a war that isn't there any more." In a report tabled to the board near the end of his tenure, Dunn complained that "attacks being launched from board members and other influential people associated with the club are nothing less than self-serving and egotistical. The interference in the day-to-day operations by certain people and the willingness to support mediocrity are not acceptable."<sup>2</sup>

A former Dunn staff member, who spoke to Inside Sport on the assurance of anonymity but whom we will call Mr X, says there was unhealthy suspicion, almost paranoia, from Piggins and his coterie about the changes Dunn was attempting to implement. "The more Paul succeeded in improving things, the more he was held back because it wasn't what they understood. They were afraid of change."<sup>2</sup>

Dunn also bemoaned in his report the constant leaking of information stories to the media. In an email dated July 2 2002 titled "We still leak like a bloody sieve", he complained to board members about news of player signing's becoming common knowledge before the club had made an announcement. A common complaint of former club figures interviewed for this story was press reports about Piggins plans to develop Redfern Oval.

When Dunn questioned then media liaison officer Norm Lipson, a close ally of Piggins, about a story that had been leaked, Lipson offered to settle the matter which his chief executive "across the road". Mr X confirms Lipson issued this threat to Dunn.

Inside Sport asked Piggins for his version of events and the following exchange took place.

IS: Are you aware of Norm Lipson's threat to take Paul Dunn "across the road"?

Piggins: Do you think that maybe Paul Dunn speaking down to him may have chained a reaction where he [Lipson] said he wouldn't be stood over? Maybe Norm was out of order but the thing is what chance do you think Norm Lipson had of taking Paul Dunn over the road? It's another fabricated story.

IS: Are you aware of other threats Lipson made to staff he perceived to be troublemakers?

Piggins: He's that big [makes gesture suggesting Lipson is a short man]. What's he going to do to you?

IS: His size doesn't prevent him from threatening people.

Piggins: It never stopped people from saying things neither.

IS: Was the issue of Lipson's behaviour ever raised in the boardroom?

Piggins: They raised issues of getting rid of Norm Lipson. They had the numbers. Add it up and what does that tell you? They could have sacked him. How weak were they?

But these incidents were spot fires. The real catalyst for Dunn's resignation was a lunch attended with Martin and Jerry Lissing at Sydney's Automobile Club at the end of the 2002 season. When Piggins learned of the meeting, he accused Dunn of supporting an alleged coup against him. Fed up, Dunn walked away from the club.

Piggins insisted he never wanted Dunn as chief executive. While this was initially so (he wanted long-time employee Brandon Punter), former board members contend that Piggins had voted unanimously with them in appointing Dunn and that Piggins was in fact chairman of the interview committee that recommended him to the board.

Dunn's bailout signalled to Anthony Albanese, Deirdre Grusovin and Randwick Mayor Dominic Sullivan - all of who believed Dunn was doing a good job - that it was also time for them to go. They'd met with Dunn for lunch the week prior to his resignation and pleaded with him to persevere in the job despite his frustration's. "When Paul went, it gave us an opportunity to go," says Grusovin. "There was no point in staying because no-one was listening to us."

The group's letter of resignation was scathing of Piggins and his wife Nolene. Their concluding statement read: "Perhaps it's time to realise that the game and business of rugby league has moved on, that it requires a talented team of professionals and experts to take us forward, and that most of us would like to see the club looking forty years into the future rather than forty years in the past."

Does South Sydney have a future? As the 2003 annual general meeting Nick Pappas assured the members that there would be no merger, as Piggins had suggested during the bitter campaign before their truce.

He also assured them that there would be no relocation from the South Sydney district, scotching at rumours that Souths may find itself on the Central Coast. Still, Souths' outlook is cloudy. All NRL clubs will be required to meet benchmarks if they to granted a licence beyond the 2005 season. Inside Sport understands that the NRL board has an application before it from businessman John Singleton to field team out of Gosford. Souths, like all teams, may well e competing against new forces for a place in the competition. But not all of them are as vulnerable as Souths.

Pappas believes one of Souths biggest challenges is changing its mindset. "One of the changes I propose to bring about is to get rid of the battle mentality," he says. "The self-inflicted battler's tag that produces feelings of paranoia, insecurity, but that was a function of the club that it was forced to endure.

Pappas says that the new board has been working cohesively and actively in attempting to reconnect Souths with the corporate world. This is the reason why Piggins stood aside for Pappas and assumed the chairmanship of the Leagues club only - even though the former chairman believes his ticket would have prevailed based on the number of proxy votes he'd obtained. "What they said they could do in the big end of town, I couldn't," says Piggins of the rival ticket. "I'd been there for 13 years. I raised as much money as I could. If they can do better, if they can get this winning culture into the club, well, I'll be the first to congratulate them. But it's a harder game than they think. So far the big end of town hasn't come in. So far they haven't done a thing."

Will he have any influence over the new board?

"The blokes on the board are decent people," he says, "and they'll vote with their conscience. There'll be no influence from me whatsoever."

Mike Whitney, who along with Andrew Denton was sacrificed in the compromise, is not so sure. "I'm hoping things will turn around but I honestly believe that while George is chairman of the Leagues Club, he's still pulling the strings," he says. "I hate to say that because I respect Nick Pappas but he's going to have to stand up and be tough."

And what if the new Pappas-led board doesn't achieve what it has promised? Would Piggins consider nominating himself for the chairmanship of the football club next year?

"Mate, the big end of town's going to look after this," the big man himself grins. "I'm just going to become a spectator."