
The Sydney Morning Herald

Something to crow about

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Rugby league will never be the stuff of Hollywood movies, but the two Russells gave South Sydney's win yesterday a touch of feelgood drama, write Steve Mascord and Brad Walter.

As South Sydney rampaged to their biggest victory since returning to top-flight rugby league yesterday, actor Russell Crowe leant over and told coach Paul Langmack he would make him famous.

That was in the Rabbitohs' enclosure on the western side of Aussie Stadium. Forty rows back and a little to the left, Souths' loyal fans were queuing up to hurl abuse at the Melbourne coaching box and trying to catch a glimpse of the expansion team's managing director, Super League architect John Ribot.

As they pointed and shouted, it must have looked like a scene from a particularly aggressive silent movie to Storm coach Craig Bellamy and assistant Greg Brentnall, who were behind sound-proofed glass.

The scoreline, South Sydney 41 Melbourne 14, was of greater concern to them, however.

Langmack said of Crowe: "He thinks he's a supercoach now. He's just said to me, 'You're going to be famous now, all around the world'. I said, 'Really?' and he said, 'I'll make sure I get you in all the magazines'. That's all he said."

Crowe had taken the Rabbitohs to dinner on Thursday night to the W Hotel at Woolloomooloo - his new home. Suspended cricketer Shane Warne had also spoken to the last-placed sentimental favourites in the days after their round-12 flogging by Parramatta.

But much as celebrity-watchers would like Crowe to have evoked his *Gladiator* role in a stirring speech or shown them the gory bits of *Romper Stomper*, the Oscar winner said "not much at all", according to Souths skipper Bryan Fletcher.

"I think it was just us being together, he was just like one of us," said Fletcher after Souths' second win of the season.

"He just sat down and had a yarn to us, told a few stories and we enlightened him on a few of our stories. It wasn't anything big. It was a relaxing week, that was probably it. The pressure wasn't as bad."

And so, despite the star power that contributed to the Rabbitohs' eight-try picnic, it was another Russell who provided a story of more relevance to the result.

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Russell Richardson used to be, in football terms, a star of some magnitude, with three Test appearances and a few *Men Of League* calendar shoots to his name. He was also one of Souths' star recruits in their return to the NRL last year.

But the boy from Dubbo was told by Souths earlier this season he was pretty much washed up at 26 and given the opportunity to find another club.

Melbourne were mentioned. Instead, Richardson stayed where he was and toiled away in park football. His return yesterday would have made an ideal penultimate scene in a Hollywood script.

While the Rabbitohs first-graders were dining at Woolloomooloo, Richardson was on his way back from a schools appearance in Coffs Harbour, to train with Newtown.

He may not have been the superstar that five-eighth Owen Craigie was yesterday, but Langmack said: "It was important for him and when it's important, it's easy. He could have got bailed over the sideline just into the second half. He got up, ran again and we scored again."

Nursing a bit of a limp, Richardson said: "I was happy enough with my game. I did some good things and I didn't make mistakes in defence, which is all you ever want. All I'm worried about at the moment is enjoying my football. When you're around for so long, I think that's the essence of what keeps the good players going.

"Today was hopefully the start for me. I'm here to be a first-grade footballer and hopefully I can stay one."

And while the other Russell - the one who has not suffered such career uncertainty - did his best on Thursday night with tales of rampant hedonism, Fletcher insisted he gave as good as he got, saying: "I had a couple of pearlers."

Richardson looked unlikely to join his teammates in their efforts to create a few new stories on the town last night as he limped towards the members' exit at Aussie Stadium. The final scene of his particular story is yet to be written.

Storm skipper Stephen Kearney became the longest-serving Kiwi in the NRL when he played his 227th game yesterday. The disappointment of the Storm's performance must have been almost too much for him to bear.

But as he passed Richardson in the players' area after the game, he reached out and tapped his rival on the shoulder - just as Crowe had to Langmack.

"Welcome back," he said.

Meanwhile, a long way from the stadium and the spotlight, the driving force behind Souths' emotional readmission to rugby league's main game was soaking up the victory.

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Former president George Piggins spends every long weekend down at his family farm in Lake Conjola, which meant he missed being part of the club's first win in three months and its seventh triumph since beating News Ltd to gain readmission to the NRL in court.

However, he did manage to see the game, courtesy of the same corporation's pay-television coverage.

"I was able to watch it, I thought it was quite good," he said. "The boys showed a lot of commitment."

Piggins said he had spoken with Langmack during the week, and the coach promised him the Rabbitohs would do all right.

Piggins was quick to send his congratulations, saying: "I sent Paul [coach Langmack] a text message just saying good luck to him and the players."