

Court told of Crowe blackmail plot

By STEPHEN GIBBS

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A part-owner of Darlinghurst night club Rogues allegedly conspired to extort up to \$200,000 from Russell Crowe to stop a tape showing the actor in a bar brawl being given to police and media.

Phillip Antony Cropper, 35, and another man tried to enlist South Sydney rugby league coach Craig Coleman and player-manager Sam Ayoub to make the demand of Crowe, a court heard yesterday.

Crowe, star of *LA Confidential* and *The Insider*, was involved in a scuffle at the Saloon Bar in Coffs Harbour about 3.30am on November 18. After the fight, police made five unsuccessful attempts to obtain security video footage of the incident.

According to a statement tendered to Central Local Court, the owners of the Saloon Bar, Malcolm Mercer, 37, and Mark Potts, 42, deliberately withheld the tape.

Instead, Mercer allegedly contacted Cropper to discuss approaching Crowe with a demand for money.

At the time, Cropper had been the subject of a separate police inquiry, and his mobile telephone was being tapped.

In one recorded conversation, Mercer allegedly told Cropper he intended asking Crowe for \$200,000 to dispose of the tape.

On November 22, according to the statement, Mercer was recorded telling Cropper they should ask Coleman to contact Rabbitoh fanatic Crowe about the tape.

The same night Cropper had left a message on the answering machine of Ayoub, whom he had known for 10 years. Cropper said he wanted to contact Crowe, "as Crowe has some dramas, and a mate has a video he might want to purchase".

In another conversation, Cropper had told Mercer that Crowe had enough money to pay \$45,000 for a bell at an auction to raise money for Souths.

On November 24, Mercer had called Cropper and again stated he wanted to sell the tape to American media. "It'll certainly ruin his f---in' credibility," Mercer said. "I should ring CNN, shouldn't I?"

The same morning Cropper had left another message for Ayoub suggesting Crowe should "put his hand in his pocket and f---in' buy it". "If he can pay 40 grand for a f---in' bell ... he'll be wanting to pay 40 grand for a tape of him biting someone's face and f---in' punching a sheila."

The Sydney Morning Herald

In a return call, Ayoub had given Cropper the mobile number of Coleman. Cropper had immediately called Coleman and told him to contact Crowe. Coleman was reticent. "The last thing a bloke wants to do is f---in' end up with CNN buying the c--- or something like that, you know what I mean?" Cropper said.

That day Mercer had called Ben Fordham, a producer with Channel Nine's A Current Affair, and Andy Byrne, chief of staff of The Daily Telegraph.

According to the statement, Fordham gave Mercer a sum of money for exclusive use of the tape, and a Telegraph reporter handed over \$6,000 for four stills. The next day the Telegraph ran the pictures and a story quoting Mercer saying: "The tape shows that Russell was completely in the wrong ... and he won't be welcome here anymore."

Cropper, who has a \$250,000 interest in Rogues, is charged with conspiring to extort, conspiring to pervert justice and conspiring to hinder an investigation.

Cropper's barrister, Mr Robert Somosi, said his client would deny attempting to do anything criminal.

The magistrate, Mr Derek Price, granted bail on several conditions, including that \$100,000 be deposited as security and that Cropper live at his Surfers Paradise apartment.

Mercer has been charged with the same offences as Cropper, and Potts with conspiring to pervert justice and conspiring to hinder an investigation. They will appear in Coffs Harbour Local Court on February 14.