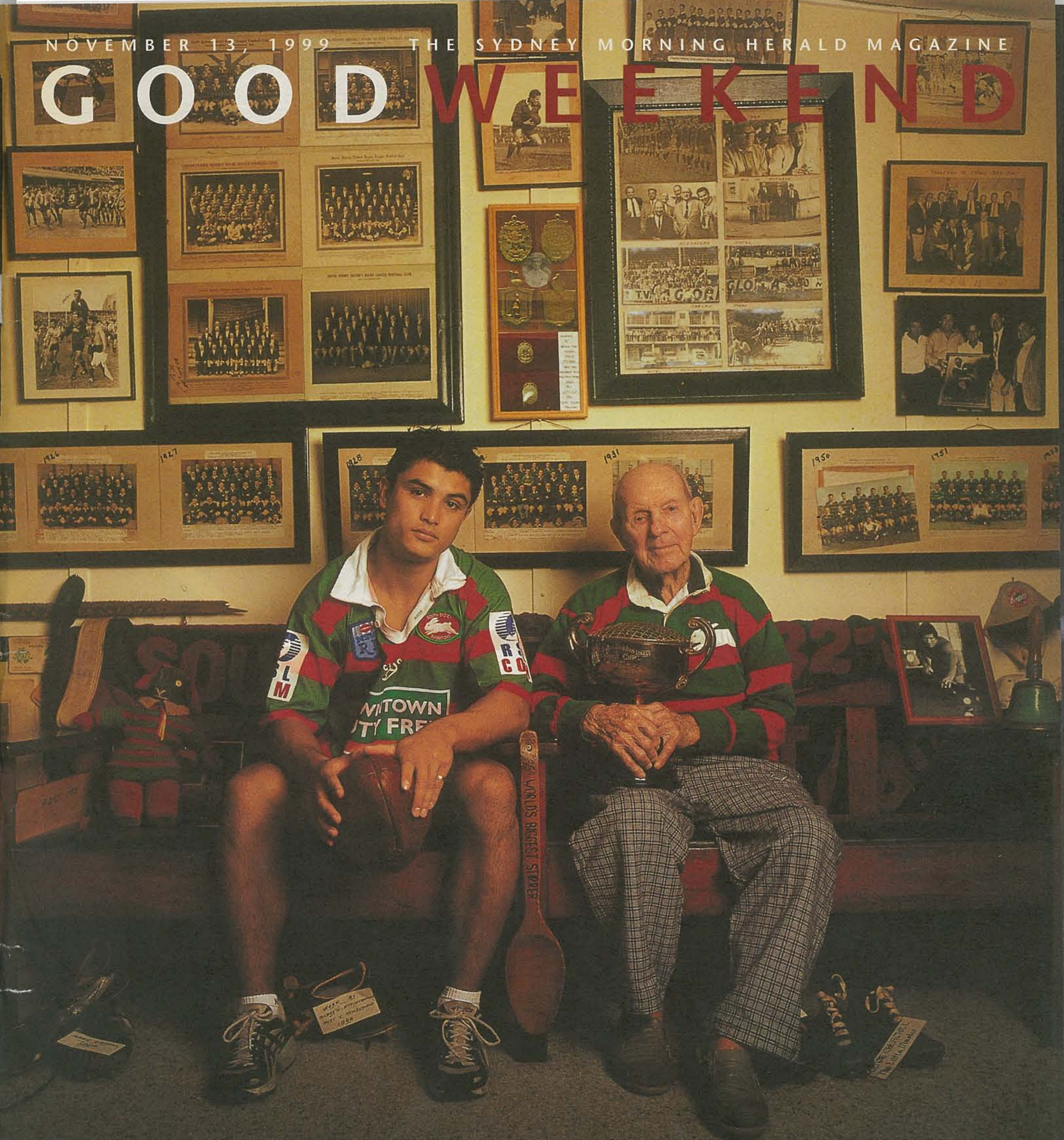


NOVEMBER 13, 1999

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GOOD WEEKEND



The final siren

How corporate politics wiped out
92 years of sporting history

By David Leser

For most of the 20th century, South Sydney played a never-say-die brand of football, giving a loyal, tight-knit community its memories, its stories and its greatest moments of joy and despair. In the end, the club's nemesis wasn't a marauding opposition pack of forwards, but an implacable corporate juggernaut.

Skinned!

LONG BEFORE HE WAS KING OF THE mountain, Rupert Murdoch used to comb the river flats and rolling hills of his parents' sheep station on the Murrumbidgee River looking for rabbits to trap and kill.

It was the late 1930s and early '40s and Rupert's mother, Dame Elisabeth Murdoch, believed it was a "manly" thing for Rupert to do – "to learn how to finish a rabbit off and skin it and clean it".

Except Rupert didn't much like the skinning part. He preferred to give the dirty work to his older sister, Helen.

As Murdoch's biographer, William Shawcross, explained, Helen would skin the rabbits and Rupert would sell the skins for sixpence each. Then he'd give Helen a penny a skin and pocket the rest.

A decade earlier, and a world away from such youthful enterprise, working-class men from inner Sydney would trudge through the smoke-cured streets of Redfern, Waterloo and Mascot yelling out, "Rabbitoh! Rabbitoh!" It was the Depression and, unlike young Rupert in the Riverina, they had skinned the rabbits themselves and were selling them off the back of their trolleys, not for pocket money but to stay alive.

Three weeks ago, these polar-opposite worlds collided when the South Sydney Football Club, whose mascot has been the "Rabbitoh" for most of this century, lost its struggle for survival. Rupert Murdoch and his American-born son, Lachlan, trapped and skinned the most famous rabbit of all. They killed off the oldest and



most successful rugby league club in Australia.

And they did so, according to Souths officials and supporters, not because the club was insolvent or without sponsors, facilities, a working administration or a junior competition, but rather because it had failed to meet a set of criteria established by Murdoch's men. It had failed to mesh with the Murdoch vision.

To many people, this is a story as much about how business gets done in Australia today as it is about a rugby league club; about what happens when the global juggernaut rolls through a local community.

On the afternoon it was announced that South Sydney was no longer part of the National Rugby

League (NRL) competition, the famous South Sydney Leagues Club in Redfern resembled a survival scene after a war or natural disaster. Dozens of wreaths had been laid at the door while hundreds of angry, tearful supporters milled around inside, drinking and searching for ways to express the inexpressible.

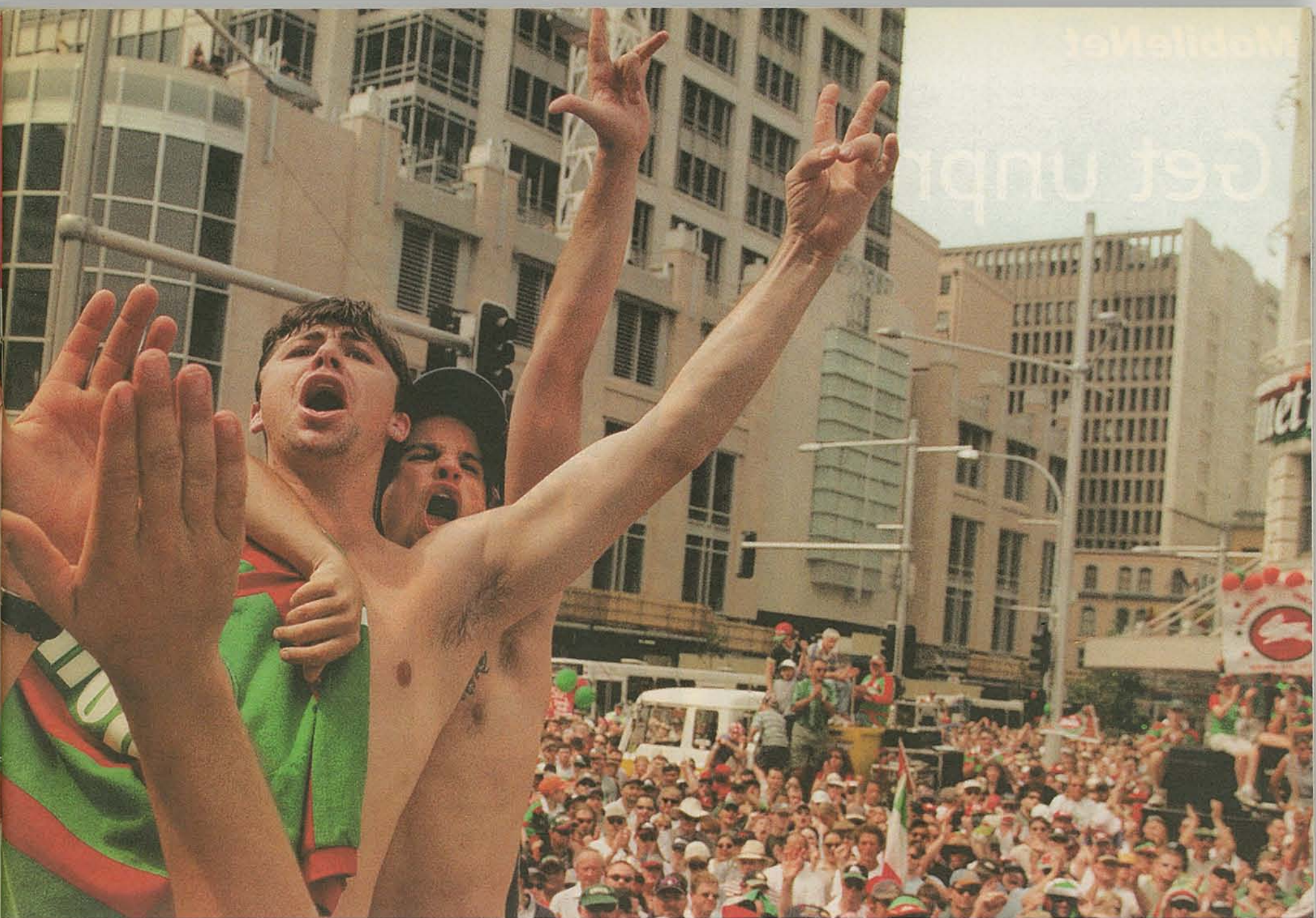
One man literally wailed before the television cameras as he tried to explain that he and his children had now been robbed of their stories, of their memories. In the din of the bar, a woman stood up with her violin and began a haunting rendition of *Glory, Glory*, the club's theme song. The tears flowed unashamedly.

Up on the third floor, the directors of the board sat grave-faced and shell-shocked. Some looked as though they hadn't slept for weeks. "We are facing monumental decisions here," one said as the stark alternatives began to be canvassed.

Downstairs in the club's Chinese restaurant, Norm Lipson, a former Murdoch journalist now bitterly opposed to the tactics of his old employer, sat fuming at the table with his family and friends. "The one bright spot that many people in South Sydney had in their miserable lives was their football club," he said. "What is their life without that?"

"I would love Lachlan Murdoch to please come to the South Sydney area and talk to the people here and find out what the actions of [his News





Ltd-controlled] NRL have done to this community. Because this is about the rights of people to have a sporting club without it being axed on the whim of businessmen for no good reason."

Jabbing the air and warming to his theme, Lipson then angrily compared the trampling of South Sydney's rights with human rights violations around the world. "If other minority groups can take their situation to the International Human Rights Commission, why not Souths?" he snapped. "People are crying in the streets."

Graeme Cole, lay chaplain for the South Sydney Football Club, says he has witnessed enough grief and despair in the past few months to be convinced the loss of Souths is a paradigm for what is occurring throughout the country.

"The sheer emotion of what is happening in Souths is a microcosm of what is happening in many working-class communities in Australia," he says. "What was held dear and what bonded people in terms of family and loyalty seems to have gone from the workplace and from many institutions. Sport was one of the last vestiges that people held on to ... and if you strip away 100 years of meaning and identity played out through sport, it can really cripple a community."

ON SUNDAY, OCTOBER 10, ON AN UNSEASONABLY warm day in Sydney, as many as 40,000 people marched through the city to Town Hall to express their rage over the imminent abolition of Souths from the National Rugby League competition.

Two days before the rally, Ian Heads, one of the

country's most respected sports journalists, wrote a story for the News Ltd-owned *Sunday Telegraph* to mark the occasion. He believed – correctly as it turned out – that the rally might turn into one of the "largest and most emotional protest events in the history of Australian sport". Almost every country town in NSW was sending buses. Well-known identities such as Andrew Denton, Ray Martin, Laurie Brereton and South Sydney hero John Sattler would be addressing the crowd. It seemed like the perfect story for such a mass-market Sydney paper as *The Sunday Telegraph*. Plenty of emotion. Lots of colour. An otherwise slow news day.

The story was not published. When Heads picked up his paper that morning he decided there was only one course of action. To resign. "I knew it [was] a major story," he told GOOD WEEKEND. "But it wasn't just my story that didn't run. Nothing ran at all, which indicated to me another agenda."

"I was pretty disappointed and I virtually made the decision straight away [to resign]. I have worked in newspapers for 36 years and the papers I have always worked for [believed] news value was the primary part of what we do. This was obviously a very strong story ... and when they didn't run it I felt it was so disrespectful to Souths. They had been so important to rugby league in Australia and they had sold a lot of newspapers, particularly for *The Daily Telegraph*."

The Daily Telegraph has long prided itself on its sports coverage, particularly with respect to rugby league. On the day after the rally – one of

the biggest mass protests seen in recent years – the *Telegraph* ran a rugby league story on page 44, mentioning the demonstration in passing. (It was page one in *The Sydney Morning Herald* and the lead item in most news bulletins the previous night.) Fears about the dangers of a global media empire buying up a sport and then using its own newspapers to promote or bury debate appeared confirmed. "When the right to know rubs up against the commercial stakes of a mogul, you know which cause will win the day," said Richard Ackland from ABC's *Media Watch* soon afterwards.

Col Allan, editor-in-chief of *The Daily Telegraph* and *The Sunday Telegraph*, admitted to an error of news judgment in the papers' coverage of the rally, but rejected any political agenda.

"It's not as if we're afraid of these people criticising News Ltd or the *Telegraph*," he said recently. "There's been plenty of that in the last couple of years and we have reported it."

However, three days after the rally, on October 13, four Federal MPs – Labor's Laurie Brereton, Anthony Albanese and Tanya Plibersek, as well as the Australian Democrats' Aden Ridgeway – held a press conference to decry the way in which "money, power and greed" seemed to be conspiring to rob the South Sydney district of its football club. Twenty members of the Parliament House press gallery attended the conference. Not one News Ltd journalist was among them.

Within 24 hours, a letter landed on the desk of Federal Opposition Leader Kim Beazley. It was from News Ltd chief executive Lachlan Murdoch.

Skinning the Rabbitohs: Souths supporters rally against the NRL in central Sydney last month in a bid to save their club; (opposite) Lachlan Murdoch and Super League mastermind John Ribot leave court after a Super League hearing in 1996.

Murdoch was clearly irritated by Brereton's appearance at the press conference (which he must have read about in *The Sydney Morning Herald*). He wanted to remind Beazley of News Ltd's commitment to rugby league as well as take aim at Brereton and his colleagues for their outspokenness. The letter was interpreted by Labor insiders as an unmistakable flexing of political muscle by an organisation that controls 70 per cent of the country's newspapers.

Andrew Denton, a Souths supporter from the time he was eight, believes News Ltd has done everything it can – through the NRL and its news outlets – to stymie debate and sabotage Souths. “We were so frustrated by our inability to get our side of the story told, if at all, in News Ltd papers that we scraped together \$12,000 for a three-quarter page ad in *The Daily Telegraph* on October 4,” he says.

“Souths wanted to buy the ad space and News Ltd put us through every hoop possible. They said Souths couldn't open an account with News Ltd and that we had to give them a cheque. Then they said they wanted the cheque first thing in the morning. Then they rang back and said they wanted a bank cheque. Then they wanted a credit card. By the end of the day the ad was in ... but not until they had, in effect, humiliated Souths by saying they would not take their money.”

“It hit me so strongly how important that team was in that somewhat deprived community ... the heart and soul of the place.”

IN JUNE THIS YEAR, HELEN GRASSWILL, A producer for ABC's *Australian Story*, went to Alexandria Park to watch the South Sydney team in training. Her intention at the time was to prepare a documentary on the club's highly skilled but most controversial player, Julian O'Neill.

When she arrived she found the team's training session being disrupted by a swarm of young boys, many of them street kids trying to obtain autographs from their heroes. Grasswill was struck by the fact that instead of ordering them from the field, club officials and players decided instead to set up a duplicate training session so that the kids could use their energies more constructively. “When I saw that I thought, ‘I'm doing the wrong story.’ I don't like football of any code, but it hit me so strongly how important that team was in that somewhat deprived community. And as I started to look further into it, I discovered that the football club was the heart and soul of the place.”

Grasswill's moving account of a distinguished but beleaguered football club was aired on the ABC in September. The response was enormous. More than 100,000 people – the highest number for any *Australian Story* – logged on to the program's open forum afterwards to chat on-line with club representatives.

Many of the respondents had nothing to do with Souths. But they seemed to understand that if sport was essentially the story of heroes and legends, triumphs and losses, champions raised aloft and then humbled, then the story of South Sydney was one worth listening to.

Established in 1908 as part of a breakaway movement from the amateur code of rugby union, Souths over the next 91 years produced more international players and won more premierships than any other club in the world. Throughout much of the 1920s, '50s, '60s and early '70s, they

established ascendancy over their rivals with a running game and a never-say-die attitude that thrilled the uninitiated and captured the imagination of generations of mainly working-class families. Not for nothing were the men in red and green called The Pride of the League.

At pubs such as the George Hotel in Waterloo, supporters gathered every weekend to savour the memories; to relive step by step the feats of such Rabbitohs as Clive Churchill, probably the greatest player of all time and known to all and sundry as the Little Master. Churchill could pirouette behind his own goalposts and then run the entire length of the field before linking up with his outside men. He could play – as he did on one memorable occasion in 1955 – almost the entire game with a broken left wrist splinted between the covers of an exercise book. On fulltime, he even kicked a goal from the touchline to give Souths the game.

Heroes such as Churchill seem to spring from the soil. Fifteen years after Churchill, it was Souths captain John Sattler who astonished the rugby league world with his courage when he played 70 minutes of the grand final with a broken jaw and without painkillers. His victory speech at the Sydney Cricket Ground after the match is still considered one of the finest.

In 1967, it was Bob McCarthy

Sattler, George Piggins (now the South Sydney club president) and three other players from that premiership-winning team served as pallbearers for their friend and team-mate John O'Neill at his funeral at St Mary's Cathedral.

It was typical of South Sydney-style kinship. “There are very few places or institutions,” says Andrew Denton, “where young boys become young men together, where they reach their prime and succeed together, where they reach adult life together, where they help look after each other's children and then are there when one of them dies.”

RUGBY LEAGUE IS CLEARLY NOT A SPORT for everyone. In fact, apart from Sydney, rural NSW, Brisbane, the north of England, a small corner of France, the North Island of New Zealand and Papua New Guinea, it is hard to think of a place in the world where it even registers in people's consciousness.

Certainly there is no way you could compare support for the code with the kind of mad enthusiasm that awaits a game of gridiron in



who provided football followers with the most abiding image after intercepting a pass and running nearly the length of the field, the last 25 metres with a pulled hamstring, to score the premiership-winning try.

In 1999, it was Craig Wing, the impossibly good-looking five-eighth of Filipino descent who, in a match against Cronulla, weaved and sliced his way around four of the best tacklers in the game to score arguably the best solo try of the year.

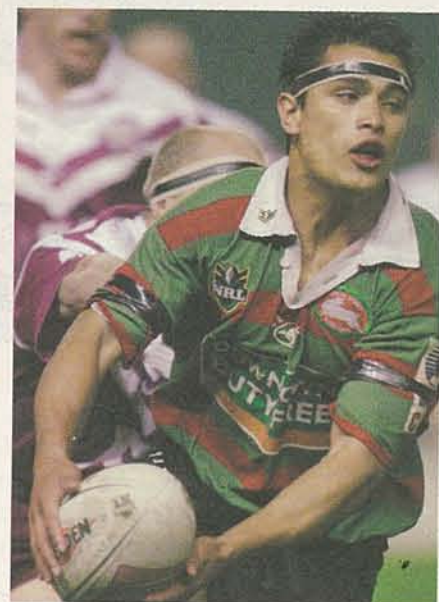
To the families in their tenements and housing commission estates, under aircraft flight paths and surrounded by exhaust fumes; to men like Craig Coleman, the South Sydney coach who freely admits he would have ended up in jail had it not been for the outlet football offered him; to the thousands of kids, Caucasian or Aboriginal, who have knocked around in the junior competition every weekend; to their mothers, who have washed the jumpers and cut the oranges, these were – and are – some of the great stories that have knitted this community together for nearly a century.

A few months ago, and 22 years after the famous 1967 grand final, Bob McCarthy, John

America, soccer in Europe, rugby union in New Zealand or even Australian football here. Rugby league is historically the working man's game, and a Sydney working man's game at that.

For some reason, though – and it is still a deep mystery to many as to why – the Murdoch organisation's management claimed that rugby league could be turned into a global event. They claimed local stars such as Andrew Ettingshausen and Laurie Daley could become household names in Beijing or Houston; that local allegiances to players, jerseys and codes could somehow be supplanted by a new spectacle, a new fealty. They told everyone that this News Ltd “vision” for an elite competition would take the world by storm.

It was a load of “blarney”, according to Ian Heads. Despite the unprecedented success enjoyed the previous year on the back of a marketing campaign featuring Tina Turner, rugby league in Australia had seldom made money. It was largely



The Pride of the League: (clockwise from above) five-eighth Craig Wing ready to off-load; Andrew Denton lends his support to Souths at a protest meeting in September; George Piggins surrounded by fans at last month's rally.

a community-based sport which had paid players on the basis of gate earnings. Even the arrival of poker machines into leagues clubs in the late 1950s and the inflationary trends that set off couldn't disguise the fact that rugby league was never a great money-spinner.

So when all the pretence was swept aside, it became clear that this was a battle, pure and simple, about pay television rights – a battle between Murdoch's News Ltd, which owned 25 per cent of Foxtel, and Kerry Packer, who held the free-to-air rights for league through his ownership of the Nine Network, as well as a share at the time in Optus Vision. Both men needed a "driver" to encourage people to subscribe to pay TV. The obvious driver was sport, particularly a sport such as rugby league.

On April Fool's Day in 1995, News Ltd attempted to start a new competition called Super League by employing a twofold strategy: first, by legally challenging the validity of loyalty agreements which clubs had signed with the Australian Rugby League; second, by trying to lure away – in secret and at lightning speed – many of these clubs, players, coaches and officials.

There was nothing new about sporting clubs becoming the plaything of wealthy families or organisations. But this was different. This was not a takeover bid for a club. It was an attempt to buy an entire code.

Even now, 4½ years after what became known

club; friend turned against friend; and subterfuge and deceit were elevated to a new art form. In a desperate attempt to match the amounts being thrown around by News Ltd, the Australian Rugby League, backed by Packer and Optus, spent \$30 million in five days trying to retain players. Their headquarters at Phillip Street in Sydney became known as the "Lolly Shop".

"There were deals done of such magnitude," wrote Ray Chesterton, "by both Super League and the Australian Rugby League, that players who had retired as long as three years earlier, were doing stretch exercises and looking for their boots."

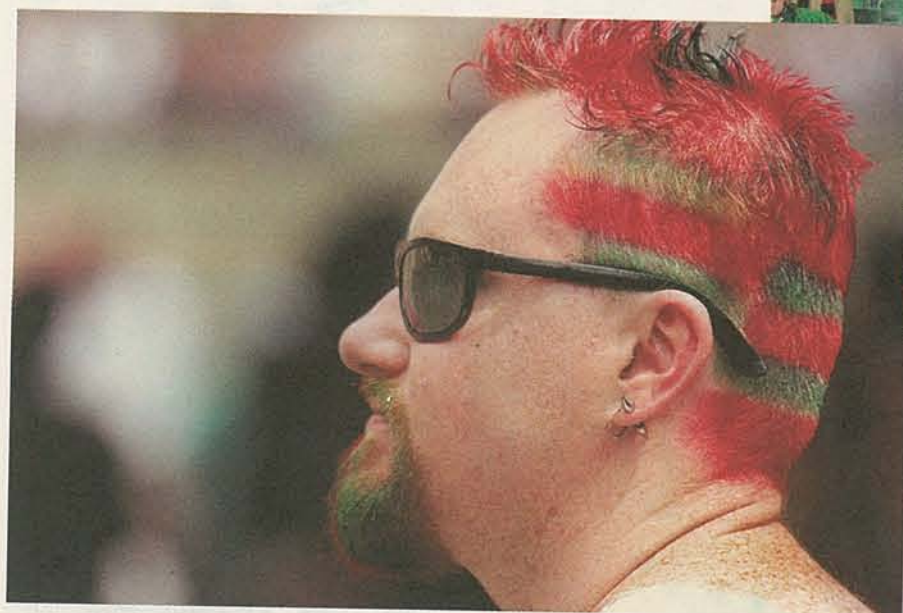
By February 1996, a Federal court judge found that News Ltd and its Super League companies had acted with "dishonesty" in trying to induce rebel clubs to breach their contracts. He called their tactics "infiltration by the back door", an assault on the league establishment "well outside the

league supporters were given two competitions that year, one run by the ARL, the other by Super League. Crowd numbers plummeted, particularly for the much-vaunted Super League games, sponsorships dried up, coaches and chief executives departed. The game was virtually on its knees.

By the end of 1997, the two sides agreed finally to a historic peace plan, in which a 20-team competition run by a new National Rugby League would kick off the 1998 season and scale down to 14 teams by 2000.

Only two teams refused to sign, Balmain and Souths. Balmain eventually capitulated. Which left South Sydney on its own.

IF ANY MAN IN SYDNEY WAS GOING TO OFFER resistance to Murdoch's plans for rugby league, it was probably going to be George Piggins, president of the South Sydney Football



Red and green may never be seen... For almost a century Rabbitoh fans have followed their side with dedication and devotion.

as the Super League War erupted, it still boggles the mind to recall what went on.

News Ltd agents with open chequebooks were dispatched throughout the country to make their pitch to players. Lear jets were re-routed at short notice. Frantic late-night phone calls were made. Death threats were received. Meetings were held in service stations, car parks and hotel rooms in a bid to sign up players. Young working-class men found themselves suddenly being offered unheard-of amounts of money, sometimes as much as eight times their previous salary.

In the course of one negotiation, Ian Roberts, the Manly international, saw his salary go up \$1 million in the space of 20 minutes. Canberra's prize lock forward, Bradley Clyde, was offered \$4.3 million over seven years. Penrith's John Cartwright, 34 years of age and on the verge of retirement, was given \$75,000 sign-on and \$450,000 to play two more years. These were just three of the hundreds of surreal offers being made. There was a kind of hyperinflationary madness in the air and few could believe their luck.

In the scramble for filthy lucre, managers appeared from nowhere; club rattled on fellow



Murdoch predicted 1997 would see the "finest rugby league competition created"... Crowd numbers plummeted, sponsorships dried up.

norms of proper and acceptable commercial conduct".

Eight months later, a full bench of the Federal Court set aside that judgment, freeing the players to join the company. "Our company has a history of successfully challenging entrenched monopolies and shaking up complacent competitors," enthused Rupert Murdoch after the decision. "Discontent with the previous administration of the game provided the very circumstances in which Super League could be created."

Murdoch was right about that. There were a number of clubs that regarded the Australian Rugby League as too Sydney-focused, too hidebound, too much of a closed shop for their liking. They preferred the News Ltd vision. They liked the sound of their clubs becoming partners in a company with the most powerful media empire in the world, of being paid \$2 million a year by News and then being guaranteed another \$2.5 million through sponsorship. If that meant accepting that only four clubs in Sydney could remain and that traditional ties had to be severed for the sake of bringing the game to the world, then so be it.

But when Murdoch predicted that 1997 would see the "finest rugby league competition ever created", he couldn't have been more wrong. Rugby

Club and chairman of the board. Piggins had many of the qualities that people from the South Sydney district found admirable: he was honest, single-minded, self-made and as tough as an old toreador. In a match against Western Suburbs, he once scored a try from 20 metres out by bumping players out of the way and carrying others on his back across the line. In another match, against Manly, he became involved in one of the most vicious brawls seen at the Sydney Cricket Ground. In front of nearly 60,000 people, Piggins traded blows, head butts and gouges with the feared Englishman Malcolm Reilly until Reilly was heard screaming, "Get this maniac off me."

Born in Mascot in 1944, George was one of seven children raised by Wally and Minnie Piggins. At the age of 13, he left school because he preferred to ride horses or, better still, place bets on them. At 15, he began working on a bone wagon, travelling the countryside picking up the remains of animal carcasses from slaughter yards. At 17, he married his first wife and took to delivering soft drink from a truck. Eventually he bought his own truck, the first of many, and in due course owned a whole fleet.

In 1964, at the age of 20, he joined Souths and was chosen to play hooker. In the second game of the season, he broke five vertebrae in his spine.

When he returned the following year he found himself denied a permanent first-grade position. It had been taken by Elwyn Walters, the man who would eventually serve as South Sydney and Australian hooker for the better part of a decade.

It is a remarkable testament to Piggins's loyalty to Souths that, despite numerous offers from other clubs, he chose to stay and play second grade. Only in 1975, after Walters had departed, did he become hooker for the club as well as for Australia. But even then, he got so homesick on the tour of England that when another player injured himself, he volunteered to accompany him home.

From 1986 to 1990, Piggins coached the first-grade team, often for little or no money at all. In late 1989, he was made chairman of the leagues club and the following year, football club chairman.

South Sydney had not won a premiership since 1971, although they'd made the semi-finals five times in the 1980s. The leagues club was in debt. The football club was only just managing to stay afloat with grants from the highly successful South Sydney Juniors. The club had not been well managed for many years. But George Piggins remained the hometown hero – and he was regarded as the perfect person to take on Murdoch.

Nearly 18 months after most clubs had agreed to a rationalised competition, a set of criteria was distributed to determine which 14 of the 20 clubs would make the cut. The criteria looked at a club's playing facilities, administration, solvency and its contribution to the development of the game. It also established an arcane ranking system which assessed clubs on the basis of home and away crowd figures, competition points earned and gate receipts.

Eventually, when the criteria was applied, it

resulted in the merging of some clubs and the exclusion of Souths, which had steadfastly refused to consider an alliance with another district. "We would prefer to die on our feet than grovel," said Piggins. "I am not going to run a side for Murdoch."

A number of Piggins's fellow board members have since publicly criticised the folly of this stance, but it is one Ian Heads sees merit in. "I can understand why they resisted a merger," he says. "The red and green [jersey] belonged to that district and they wouldn't have wanted to get into a loveless embrace with another club."

"Besides, Souths have had good and bad years throughout their history. In the 1940s they won one match in two years. By 1950 they were champions and the most dominant side in world rugby league. That's what happens in sport."

Malcolm Noad, chairman of the NRL, says he can understand the emotionalism of Souths' predicament, but that the same difficult choices were faced by other clubs as well. Souths, he says, were not unfairly treated.

"If the inference is 'was Souths targeted?', then the answer is unquestionably no. They had the same opportunity that every other club had to participate in the competition. Almost every other club has had to adjust the way they ran their club in order to be part of the 14-team competition."

"And the reason there was a criteria was so that no one individual or organisation could influence which club made the 14."

From Souths' point of view, however, the criteria assessment worked against the club because it was based, not on the previous 92 years, but on the

previous three to four years when the team had performed badly, notwithstanding a vastly improved performance in 1999.

Moreover, the clubs that seemed to have the best chance of surviving were those that had had large grants from their wealthy leagues clubs or were heavily funded by News Ltd.

Souths couldn't rely on either. What they did offer was a new management, a modestly solvent

Prayer for the dying: George Piggins mourns Souths' demise last month.



football club, agreed sponsorship for the next five years and a junior competition that was the envy of every rugby league district in the country.

By comparison, Melbourne Storm, a composite team of players drawn from around the country, was 70 per cent owned by News Ltd. Despite winning the premiership this year, its second year in the competition, it had accumulated losses estimated at about \$14 million. It had virtually no junior league and was now selling off some of its players because it could no longer afford them.

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OBSESSIVE-COMPULSIVE BUBBLY.

Yet, under the criteria, it was assured of a place.

Says *Sydney Morning Herald* writer Malcolm Knox: "Melbourne could have come last this year under the competition points criteria and they would have got 10 more points than Manly got for being minor premiers in 1995. That's because the system was calculated on a four-year basis with increasing weight given to the last two years."

Brisbane, North Queensland and Canberra, all part-owned by News Ltd, were also in. They had a combined history in the league of 32 years. Another club, Cronulla, which had joined the Australian Rugby League competition in 1967, was assured of

THIS SORRY SAGA WAS NEVER ABOUT SPORT, but about hard-boiled business. By any commercial reckoning, it has proved a disaster for all concerned. At the beginning of the Super League War, the Australian Rugby League had reserves of about \$22 million. There is now almost nothing in its coffers.

In 1997, rugby league clubs lost \$114 million trying to put their increasingly expensive players on the field. Last year, the losses were about \$85 million. The clubs are now heavily in debt to News Ltd. Of the 12 teams that played in the ARL competition in 1997, only three remain in their original form. That's a

"We would prefer to die on our feet than grovel," said Souths president George Piggins. "I am not going to run a side for Murdoch."

survival after having agreed to merge in the new competition. It had recently been put on the News Ltd drip-feed to the tune of \$8 million.

When the Super League War began in 1995, Souths were the only team not asked to join the new competition. Without any injection of large sums of money they were, therefore, never able to match the extraordinary amounts of money other clubs were regularly offering players.

They are still the only club in the league awaiting the \$500,000 owed them by News Ltd under a formula agreed during the peace talks. News Ltd has refused to hand over the money until Souths withdraws its threat of legal action. At the time of writing, Souths seemed determined to pursue every option available.

combined 530 years of discarded tradition.

In three years, News Ltd has spent nearly half a billion dollars trying to capture a major sports code for pay television. Instead, it has become captive to this supposed brave new world. Unless Murdoch injects even more money into the game, the funds he has invested will be worthless.

As Ivor Ries wrote in *The Australian Financial Review* recently: "News Corp's continuing need to pump new cash into the NRL serves as a lesson to media moguls all over the world about the dangers of trying to 'own' a sport in order to obtain the media rights."

The Super League War and the elimination of Souths from the competition has been a public relations disaster for News Ltd. The response

to the club's demise has reportedly resulted in the cancellation of hundreds, if not thousands, of subscriptions to Foxtel, *The Daily Telegraph* and *The Sunday Telegraph*. (Foxtel insists only 50 people have cancelled their subscriptions because of the Souths issue.) Unions have declared their support for the club, Sydney radio station 2SM has taken up the cause and the Commonwealth Bank has agreed to waive all fees on deposits made into a special account designed to help Souths in any legal action against News Ltd and the NRL.

Many of the most touching gestures, however, have come from individuals. One milkman in the NSW Southern Highlands has offered the club two cents for every litre he sells. Another man has decided to forgo \$5,000 worth of curtains for his family home and give it to the club instead. He and his wife decided the curtains could wait, the club couldn't.

The issue has even found its way to the pulpit. Catholic priest Brian Rayner recently delivered three Sunday sermons in the South Sydney district deploring what he claimed was the lack of moral responsibility underpinning the NRL's decision to cut the competition to 14 teams next year.

"The scriptures, of course, don't mention football mergers and the like," he told his congregation, "but they do speak about greed and the preoccupation of some people to accumulate wealth to the detriment of others. They speak of our obligation to be mindful of the needs of the poor and the disadvantaged."

It was a powerful sermon and it got Father Rayner on the television news that night. It is doubtful, however, that his words held much sway with that old rabbit skinner from the Riverina, Rupert Murdoch.

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