

BOOK REVIEW

Never Say Die: The Fight to Save the Rabbitohs

by George Piggins

[Pan Macmillan Australia] \$30.00

For many Australians in the rugby league playing states, and for those on the left, George Piggins has become the symbol of the little man triumphing over international commerce and the interests of the elite. In his fight to save the South Sydney Rugby League Club ('the Rabbitohs'), Piggins seems to stand for all that is right and decent about 'the little bloke', and sheds contrasting light on all that is mean, unwholesome and evil, in the guise of Rupert Murdoch and News Ltd.

I'm not about to disagree. The crimes committed against rugby league, by the likes of News and their fellow-travellers, have left permanent scars on the game of rugby league, and it's unlikely the game will ever fully recover.

But to see Piggins as the bulwark against which News floundered is to misunderstand, as I think Piggins and many of the Souths board have, the nature of the struggle.

'The little Aussie battler' - the working class slogger who triumphs by honesty and hard work, is part of the Australian myth. Unfortunately that's all it is. Australia is a hard, unyielding business environment that has little time for working people who get in its way.

Piggins was born and brought up within the few square miles of Sydney he still lives in today. His emotional, working and business lives are all tied up in a district that means more to him than even his sport. As a child, even before he played football, Piggins rode wild horses along the beaches of Maroubra, and swam at La Perouse. His early working life was spent selling newspapers, working in stables, and toiling as a 'wharfie' (docker) at Port Botany.

He met his wife, the redoubtable Noelene, at school, just down the road from the garden centre he now owns. It was a happy life, and football was a relatively small part. In fact, until he was picked for Souths, Piggins had never been to watch a game of grade rugby league. It says much about the league heritage of his district that Piggins could get to the top of a game he never obsessed over in childhood. It also helps to explain Piggins' attitude to supporters and fans whom he has never really understood.

At the time George joined South Sydney, the club was the cultural as well as sporting centre of the area. Souths were unmatched among Sydney rugby league clubs (16 Premierships by the time Piggins was graded, and five in six years in the early 1950s) Piggins the pride in representing his district was overwhelming - again and again, he comes back to place, and that place is South Sydney.

Piggins says little about his early days in the game and has little of interest to say about the way the game was or indeed is played. We've all read a hundred and one ghosted biographies, and in terms of his playing career, this book is no better or worse than any other. In any case, this is not what Never Say Die is really about.

In his first game he was sent off for fighting with Newtown's Clarrie Jeffries, thereby cementing his legend as a battling, hardheaded hooker. A titanic duel with Malcolm Reilly in a game against Manly also ended in fisticuffs. But a famous try against Wests in 1975, where he "bullocked his way to the try line" also showed he had skill and creativity. It was on his retirement from the scrum, however, that Piggins really made his mark, first as a coach (Coach of the Year 1986 and '89), then as Club President at South Sydney. His hallmark throughout has been determination and single-mindedness.

Inevitably, the most interesting part of the book is Piggins' tale of the behind-the-scenes machinations of leagues club management. By the time Piggins became involved in management, Souths were in a pretty sorry state.

With their leagues club packed tightly into the streets of inner city Redfern (think Salford or in soccer, Millwall), they were no match for the richer clubs of the outer suburbs, particularly those in the growing western areas (Parramatta and Penrith). The ejection of Newtown in 1983 begun the pattern that led to the Super League wars. The game in Australia was at the peak of its appeal in the mid-eighties, and with the improved profile came the marketing men and powerbrokers.

When Illawara and Canberra joined the competition, followed by Brisbane, the moneymen were looking to expand beyond Sydney, and at the expense of older, unfashionable clubs like the South Sydney Rabbitohs. With the richer regional clubs, player payments rose, football clubs started to panic, and the leagues clubs that funded them started to rankle at the grants they had to make.

While it was 1999 before Souths were ejected from the competition, Piggins remembers attending a meeting in 1994 where media mogul Kerry Packer and Easts president Nick Politis suggested a takeover by the Roosters. It was never a secret that Souths, along with Balmain and Wests, were to be targeted for closure by whoever was funding the league.

Piggins knew it only too well, and as a well-connected man, and a consummate businessman, he began to chat up the Souths Juniors Club, and the wealthier supporters, encouraging them to hand over more cash.

But it was never really about money. As Piggins himself has said "We have always paid our players and we have always paid our bills". For the new breed of media people, Souths were just too unfashionable, and too unmanageable. Souths represented an older, poorer Sydney, with large groups of unemployed, of students, of council housing, and the highest inner-city concentration of Aboriginal Australians in the country. To the powerbrokers, South Sydney were an embarrassment.

Piggins therefore, could never manoeuvre his way into the hearts of News Ltd when it came gunning for rugby league. And although, with his rough charm and pragmatic bluster he could have had rugby league fans on his side as soon as the rumours were out, he left it until Souths were ejected before going to the people. Even in their final season, Piggins wheeled out Hollywood stars (Tom Cruise and Russell Crowe) rather

than encourage a boycott of NRL games, or of News Ltd products. And by then it was too late.

What ultimately saved South Sydney was not George Piggins. It was the people of Sydney, rugby league people, trade unionists, the unemployed, the students, the Aboriginal population of Redfern. Piggins was unsurpassed as a figurehead, but without the boycotts, the marches and the money raised by the faithful, there would have been no court appeal, and the Rabbitohs would have followed the Jets, St George, Wests and Balmain, who all gave up the ghost peacefully.

Souths are now back playing in the NRL, but for how long? When the franchises come up in 2005, there is no doubt that Souths will be for the chop. Again. Despite carrying their fans back with them in their first post-ejection season, poor playing staff and marketing meant that crowds were soon back to typical poor South Sydney levels. The club has again failed to understand and nurture the deep love and affection people have for the Rabbitohs.

Still, Piggins was the right man when it came to a fight. He knew he was right, and that News Ltd and the NRL were wrong, and he was not prepared to back down. And at the end of the day, he was better, as a battler and as a man, than anyone that they had on their side.

And if this book proves that Piggins loves his home district of South Sydney (and the South Sydney club as an institution) more than he loves the game itself, there is absolutely nothing wrong with that.

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