



The Challenge

WHEN THEY BEAT WIGAN LAST MONTH, THE SYDNEY ROOSTERS PROVED THEMSELVES THE BEST RUGBY LEAGUE TEAM ON THE PLANET. IF THEY CAN WIN THE NRL PREMIERSHIP AGAIN THIS YEAR, THEY JUST MIGHT GO DOWN AS THE BEST TEAM IN HISTORY.

By **MATT CLEARY**

BACK ROW [l-r]: Daniel Tupou (obscured), Dylan Napa, Remi Casty, Jared Waerea-Hargreaves, Aidan Guerra, Sonny Bill Williams, Trent Robinson (coach). MIDDLE ROW: Mitchell Pearce, Sam Moa, Shaun Kenny-Dowall, James Maloney, Frank-Paul Nu'uausala, Jake Friend. FRONT ROW: Michael Jennings, Boyd Cordner, Daniel Mortimer, Anthony Minichiello (c), Mitchell Aubusson.

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FOR ALL THE fancy-pants pin-heads who win the awards – the scurrying little critters in the halves, at fullback and hooker – it's madmen and meat-axes who win grand finals. Sure, you need backs to plant the pill over the stripe, to *convert* the grunt. But to own those sheep stations you need dogs of war – wild men keen to hit and be hit.

Exhibit A: your National Rugby League premiers, the Sydney Roosters.

Inside Sport is sideline at Allianz Stadium and the World Club Challenge between the Roosters and the Warriors of Wigan. Up this close the man-on-man action is visceral, meaty. It's like Rocky Balboa thumping into slabs of beef in the cool-room. *Whack. Thud. Yow!*

Jared Waerea-Hargreaves walks by, sweating and bristling after 25 minutes of tub-thumping grunt. Six-foot-four and 120kg of hired muscle, he blocks out the very moon. There follows Tongan tank Sam Moa, squat like a sumo, strength of a Bobcat. And Frank-Paul "The Wrecking Ball" Nu'uausala, prison tattoos on Melanesian muscle. These are scary, dangerous dudes.

Their replacements – Dylan Napa, Aidan Guerra and Remi Casty – join boom colt Boyd Cordner and the Ubermensch, Sonny Bill Williams in a defensive dyke that relishes the physicality and attacks in defence. Guerra is the maverick, an odd, angular, hard-boned footballer who makes yards he shouldn't. Napa is a flame-haired 21-year-old likely lad, all raw bones and rip-in. Casty is from France ... They're crazy in France.

This close to the action you can see the intent of these Roosters "middle men". From the ruck they push hard backwards,

find their mark with the ref and immediately sort of slingshot themselves back into the fray, keen to damage the English and hear the lamentations of the women.

It's sweat-jolting stuff, and fierce. It's surprising they don't hurt themselves more.

After 20 minutes the Roosters lead 18-nil, a score they take to half-time. Wigan's odds flash up on the scoreboard. They're 33-1. The Roosters are paying \$1; the bookies won't even give you a cent back on the dollar. They don't want your money, rating the host's chance of winning at 100 per cent. Skinny odds.

The bookies, you see, like many of those who saw the Roosters in 2013, know their defence is the best in the NRL. They gave up the least points and linebreaks and won the competition despite conceding the most penalties. As five-eighth James Maloney says of handing over the ball, "It just meant we had to defend another set. It wasn't the end of the world." The Roosters defend like the state of Israel.

It was this ruthless, brutal, physical aggression that won the Sydney Roosters that epic qualifying final against fellow crazy people the Manly-Warringah Sea Eagles. After 80 minutes of big bash-action, the Roosters had won 4-0. They hadn't made a single linebreak.

"It was probably the best, most intense club game I've ever seen," says former hard-acre Gorden Tallis, today a crack analyst with radio mob Triple M. "You just knew it was special. The intensity of it ...

"TO WIN A PREMIERSHIP YOU NEED THE RIGHT BALANCE IN YOUR FOOTBALL TEAM ... THE ROOSTERS GOT IT RIGHT."

even without a lot of tries, you just knew it was a great game. Outside Origin, I've never seen a better, harder game of rugby league."

Tonight's match at Allianz won't reach those heights. The English have a crack but are missing some stars and are out-classed by the NRL premiers. It's a clunky old game, the Chooks' first dinkum hit-out since October. But they show enough to make their supporters hot to see them go again.

Roosters fans are derided as "latte-sippers" but they're as broad a church as any. Toothless housos mix with boat shoe brigadiers, tubby tattooed 20-somethings yarn with hipsters in sleeve tattoos, Ned Kelly beards and pants that look cool in David Jones but you can't get over your fat man's calves. Heap of kids, mums and dads. All sorts. Indeed, 31,000 have lobbed here at Allianz for a pseudo trial against the Poms, most in good voice for the Chooks. The club has 11,582 paid-up members, many of them famous rich people. Chooks board members include Mark Bouris of Wizard Home Loans, former David Jones bloke Mark McInnes, and club chairman Nick Politis, whose car business has earned him hundreds of millions of dollars. We'll talk more of him.

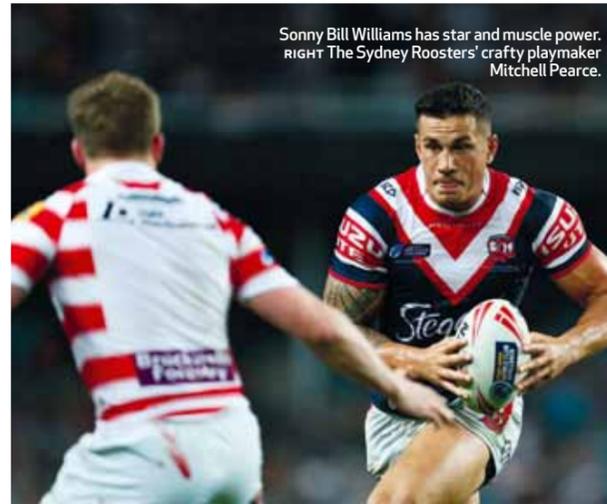
Back to the game and Jake Friend roosts up field, hares after it, makes a desperate tackle. He'll win the gong for best on ground. Few years ago he was making sandwiches in Surry Hills after being



Question time for coach Trent Robinson. LEFT Wigan had no answers for the Bondi brigade. BELOW Smiling assassins Sam Moa (LEFT) and Jared Waerea-Hargreaves.



Sonny Bill Williams has star and muscle power. RIGHT The Sydney Roosters' crafty playmaker Mitchell Pearce.



de-listed following run-ins with police. He copped a two-year good behaviour bond for carrying sleeping pills that weren't his. When McInnes hugs him on the dais there's almost tears. Kid's been through the ringer. People worried. And here he is.

Michael Jennings notches a hat-trick, one a runaway try from 40m; Carl Lewis wouldn't have caught him. The man's pace is blinding and it's clear he's in a happy place. Remember that match-winning try in the grand final, that sprinting, full-length, leap-catch-and-plant? How about that? Would he have run as hard and flown as fearlessly on a Sunday arvo at flinty old Penrith Park? You'd suggest probably not, unhappy as he was. But now, living large in the east, in a winning culture, the once close-to-most-highly-paid-player-in-the-game (true) has the jet shoes a-hummin'.

Sonny Bill Williams? Superman has an ordinary game this evening with a few dropped balls. But he still makes tries with flick passes from his preternatural hands, throwing soft, sympathetic balls like the rugby "second five-eighth" he was and will be. We'll talk more of him, too.

Full-time and Politis strides on to the Allianz grass. He's crusty handsome, "The Godfather", a fair likeness for Al Pacino. He shakes hands with captain Anthony Minichiello and shares a moment. They pose for pics that Politis has asked a snapper to take. There's some showman in him. Minichiello jogs off to find his wife, shoe-celebrity Terry Biviano, and their baby girl. The league's CEO, David Smith, takes photos of the family with his phone. The skipper is this season's "face of the game", once a poisoned chalice. But in Minichiello they couldn't have made a safer choice had Smith made *himself* the face of the game.

And so Wigan heads home to do whatever one does in Wigan while the Roosters roll on, attempting to become the first team since Brisbane in '93 to win back-to-back premierships. There's a super-fine and well-balanced unit of big ones, quick ones and clever ones. They've got Origin halves, piss-fast three-quarters and meat-eating forwards. And they have Sonny Bill, the super man. It's a super-strong squadron. It's the club that Nick built.

GODFATHER

"To win a premiership you need the right balance in your football team, and the Roosters were able to put that together," says Triple M caller and Parramatta Eels legend Peter Sterling. "Sonny Bill had a great season but so did James Maloney. They had some young guys come through, like Roger Tuivasa-Sheck. Sam Moa was a real contributor. Luke O'Donnell. They got it right."

The man behind the hiring and firing they simply call "Nick" or "Uncle Nick" or "The Godfather". Chairman Nick Politis is the Sydney car czar who first put advertising on footy jumpers when "City Ford" adorned the '76 Chooks. There is no more tri-coloured man. His wooing and ultimate signing of Sonny Bill Williams was the icing on the Roosters' beef-cake. "Every bit of that recruitment would've been driven by Nick," says player agent and long-time friend Sam Ayoub. "He takes on board the opinions of those around him and those he trusts. But in the end, everything is driven by him."

BRW magazine says Politis is worth \$360 million. That sort of coin, coupled with the Roosters' success and Politis' ability to (mostly) get his man, creates jealousy and innuendo. Politis might be offended, but he'd know whispers and scuttlebutt about his recruitment techniques are predictable.

His "power" within the game is spoken of in awed tones. He's been doing it forever.

Would this sort of money and influence have made Williams fearful of crossing the man? Or would he have signed because of Politis' revered place in the game? "The latter, absolutely," says Ayoub. "Nick does have a knack of commanding respect. But it's not out of intimidation that he gets his man."

"Sonny isn't my client, so it's not my place to comment, but he wouldn't have honoured the commitment out of 'fear' of Nick. He would've honoured it out of respect for him. And there's no doubt Sonny would not have returned to the NRL if not for Nick Politis."

Ayoub says Politis is the "heart and soul of the club". "I've known Nick for 25 years. And he is undoubtedly one of the most decent human beings I know. He's a genuinely loyal man with 'old school' morals. As a businessman, his success speaks ▶





Sonny Bill Williams to Jimmy Maloney in the 2013 grand final... set up by "The Godfather" and head recruiter Nick Politis.

for itself. He is shrewd and very astute. He has an aura that commands respect."

Certainly the players like and respect him. "He'll do anything for you," says five-eighth James Maloney. "For someone as high up as him, he gets around, talks to all the boys. He's at all the games he can be. He makes sure everything at the club is going how it should. But he's not 'above' anyone. He's very personable and a great bloke to have around."

HISTORY

The Roosters didn't want this piece written, at least not like *this*. Assistance from the club amounted to telling us those we *couldn't* talk to and the access we *couldn't* get. The club's media mob, as at many clubs, is punishing to deal with. Indeed, you'd get more help for an interview with North Korean kook Kim Jong-un. Why so *ronery*? Unlike America's National Basketball Association, where reporters can talk to superstar Kobe Bryant 20 minutes before he runs out for the LA Lakers, you can't get in the Roosters' shed for a pseudo trial against Wigan.

The Sydney Roosters (formerly Eastern Suburbs) didn't like our angle of looking into history. They're about "moving on" and "looking forward", keeping their people focused and "on message". It's a media strategy for a corporate brand, mapped out by PR types. And so we cobbled together this yarn without talking to coach, captain, assistant coach, chairman, recruitment guy, chief operating officer or any of the players bar Jimmy Maloney, who spoke without the Roosters' consent.

But let's not dwell on not talking to the principles about how they built the

premiers. Here's a chronology of the Roosters' decade between premierships, which went down something like this:

Grand finalists '03 and '04; Miss finals '05 and '06; "Supercoach" Wayne Bennett secured on handshake deal by Politis; Ricky Stuart punted; News of Bennett signing leaks; Bennett reneges; Chris Anderson signs; Anderson quits; Brad Fittler made coach; Top-four in '08; Wooden spoon in '09; Brian Smith signed; Fittler punted; Smith clears decks; Grand finalists '10; Miss finals '11; Maloney signed; Miss finals '12; Trent Robinson signed; Smith punted; captain Braith Anasta punted; CEO Grant Mayer punted; Williams, Jennings, O'Donnell signed; Minor premiership; Premiership; World Club Challenge.

And now, given they've kept every one of their grand final XVII apart from retired 34-year-old meat-axe O'Donnell – a man suspended more often than suspended animation – they're favourites to do it all again. Here's how:

METHOD, MADNESS

Watch enough rugby league and you'll see a sameness about much of the attack. From about 35m out, teams will have a play-maker either side of the field and decoy runners heading straight. The halves will generally pick out a runner behind the cattle, often a fullback or power forward like Ryan Hoffman. The ball swings left. The ball swings right. If you can't crack the line in your allotted set, kick. Chase. Earn repeat set. And repeat.

The Roosters, though, are "a little bit different," according to Sterling, whose main focus is always the halves. "Pearce

and Maloney play either side, and they also throw a lot of passes to each other. I really enjoy that; you don't see it a lot. And it works really well.

"They also have a lot of success on the fringe of the ruck. Instead of working second-man, second-man – plays that everybody seems to do – they send a couple of 'decoy' players through on the edge and often as not *hit* them; Boyd Cordner, Aidan Guerra and, of course, Sonny Bill. And these blokes hitting the edges have the ability to pass the ball in traffic. In collisions they can keep the football alive. That's very difficult to handle."

Maloney says his combination with Pearce is "just the way we're set up. Not so much coming out of our end but as we progress down field and start playing a bit of footy, we can turn up on the same side. We're looking to develop it, take the line on, and push up in support for each other. It makes it hard to defend because it's less predictable when we get together."

It's working: Maloney led the league in try assists (26), Pearce led in linebreak assists (22). Sterling says the pair "mix up their work nicely in a couple of subtle ways. They're playing to their strengths, which indicates excellent coaching. Trent Robinson came with no NRL experience as such. He'd had time at the Roosters [as assistant coach in 2010] before going overseas. The players had a rap on him. And they got the formula right, which was having a balanced team going in the right direction. And that's what Robinson was able to do."

Maloney says Robinson "lets everyone play ▶

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their natural game. He doesn't try and coach-out natural instincts. It's within a set structure. But he encourages blokes to back yourself and have a go.

"He's also easy to deal with. The fact he's quite young, he's still very personable and easy to talk to. He's stern when he needs to get a message across. He's not really about blow-ups, sprays. He's direct, firm and the boys take it on board. And he's got an unbelievable view of the game. There aren't too many coaches like him. When you come off at half-time you can sort've predict what the coach is going to say about where you're going wrong. But Robbo will say something you weren't expecting to hear or thinking of yourself. And when you think about it he's spot on the money."

The Roosters in 2013 were the most penalised team in rugby league. But rather than an indication of looseness or ill-discipline, Gorden Tallis reckons it's because, "They're a very hard pack of forwards and very well drilled. They can follow commands."

Does coach Robinson have his men cynically manipulating the rules? Maloney says the team is aware of its penalty record. "We spoke about it at various times. It gets reported. And at times we felt it was something we should focus on. But at the same time it wasn't a concern."

So confident in their defence are the Roosters, they'll cop the penalties they know they'll cop. "There were penalties that shouldn't be given away, silly ones," says Maloney. "But we looked at others

and said, "These sort of penalties we can wear. You're never going to cut them out, you're always going to be penalised. It's limiting them and responding when you do concede a penalty. And fronting up for six more tackles."

And along with the lamentation of the women, tackling is what the Chooks love most. "Their forward pack is very strong," says Tallis. "Jared Waerea-Hargreaves, obviously. Frank-Paul Nu'uauasala. And last year they got very good value from blokes like Sam Moa and Aidan Guerra. They're a very hard pack."

"The boys in the middle take a lot of pride in defence," says Maloney. "Strong defence puts opponents under pressure. The boys do an amazing job. They don't stop, they're always working for us. Massive year last year and hopefully they can do it again."

The Roosters took a lot from that brutal Manly semi-final. "It took about a week and a half to recover!" says Maloney. "Glad we had the week off. That was the most physical and sore I've pulled up in a long time. Manly were in our face bashing us all night and we had to hang on. Everyone enjoys games when everyone's scoring tries and there's great footy played, but it's nice that people can appreciate a game where defence was the main focus."

Maloney says the Sydney Roosters' defence was building all year. "Early on when we kept some sides to zero, the boys started to build belief that our defence could hold up against anyone. As the season went on it got re-enforced; defences win premierships. And to go

into games knowing your defence will hold up, that gives you confidence."

Helping will be rugby league's dominant X-Factor – old bionic octopus arms, Sonny Bill Williams, a ridiculous freakazoid who does it for the boys. Williams loves the brotherhood of a footy club. It's why he struggled leaving the Chiefs and All Blacks. It's why it'll be hard to leave the Chooks. (Though not impossible, of course.)

Says Maloney: "When he came into the team he fit right in. For such a high-profile, gifted athlete, he's so team-oriented. He doesn't have selfish plays in him. The team's first in everything he does. To have a player with that ability, it's tremendous."

Williams' brilliance is arguably the difference between the Roosters and other top-four toughs like the Bulldogs, Souths, Storm and Manly. Each of these clubs has top players, strong spines, wicked-smart coaches, hard bodies and quicks. But only the Chooks have a man who can invent his own universe. Want to box, Sonny? Knock yourself out (so to speak). Want to spend Fridays in mosque? *Insha'Allah* – God willing it shall be. Want to play for the All Blacks? Fancy Olympic gold? Come back to us when you're done.

So, can these Sydney Roosters defend the honour of Provan-Summons? Odds (\$3.50) are that they'll give it a shake. Sterling says they "go into this year in a better position than anyone in the last few decades."

"They have the same squad. They have only lost veteran Luke O'Donnell from their grand final 17. And they didn't lose him to another team. They're better placed than anyone in recent times to go back-to-back. They've got it right." ■



The Sydney Roosters... the envy of the league.