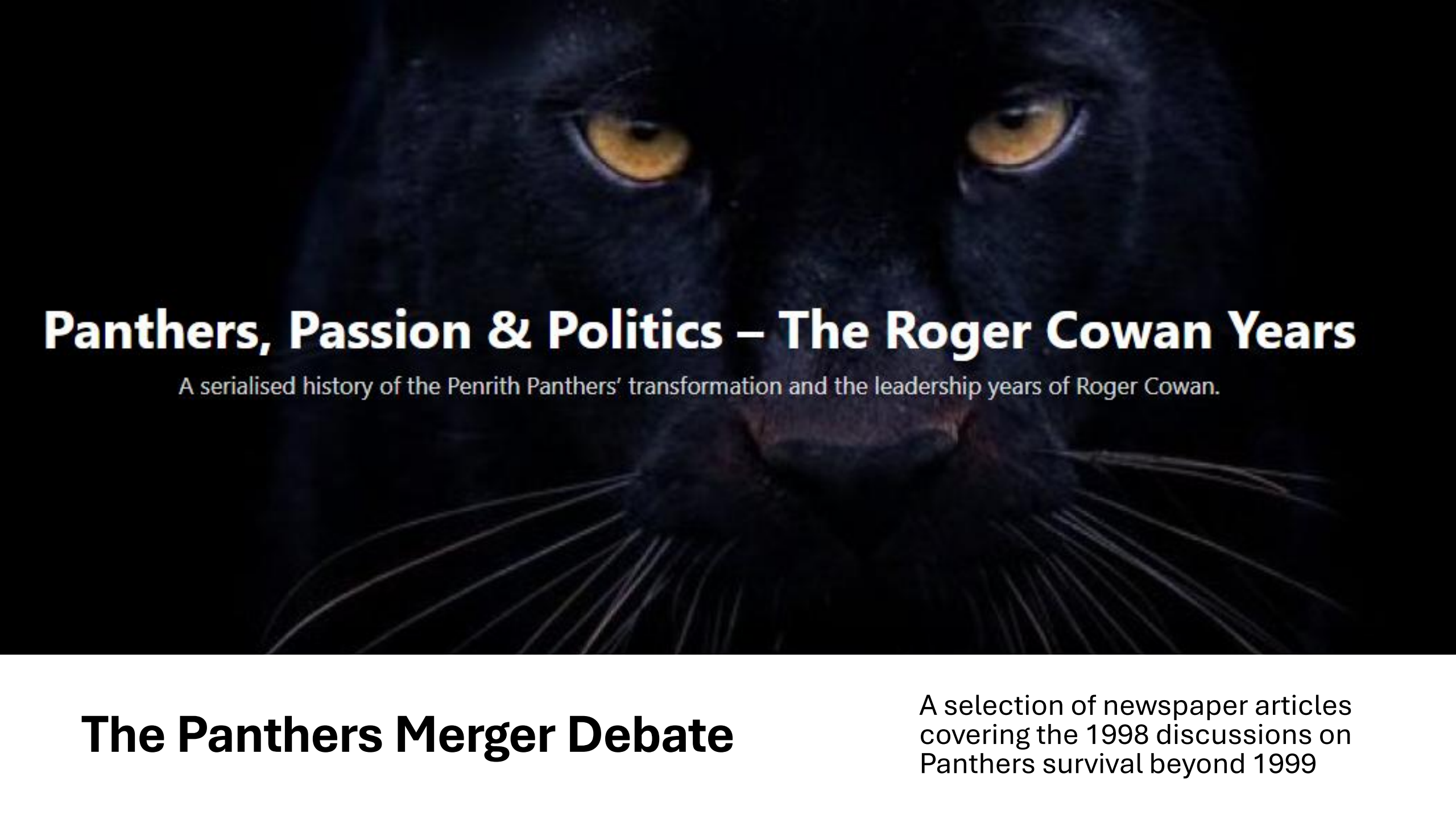




Panthers, Passion & Politics – The Roger Cowan Years

A serialised history of the Penrith Panthers' transformation and the leadership years of Roger Cowan.

The Panthers Merger Debate

A selection of newspaper articles covering the 1998 discussions on Panthers survival beyond 1999

Following the Panthers Merger Debate

A Collection of Contemporary Newspaper Coverage
July – September 1998

Introduction

The newspaper articles reproduced in this collection have been selected to illustrate the major milestones in the public debate surrounding the future of the Penrith Panthers during 1998.

Presented in chronological order, they allow readers to follow the controversy as it unfolded—through rumours, official statements, community campaigns and the public information meeting—before the benefit of hindsight shaped later interpretations.

This collection complements:

- **The Series:** Parts 29–35 – *A Narrow Escape from Football Oblivion*
- **Beyond the Book:** *Following the Merger Debate*

Why the *Western Weekender*?

The *Western Weekender* has been chosen as the principal source for this collection for two reasons.

- During this period, its owner was also a director of Panthers, providing the newspaper with a unique perspective on events as they unfolded.
- The newspaper itself became an active participant in the wider public debate and later featured prominently in the events described throughout *Panthers, Passion, Politics*.

Readers are encouraged to compare these contemporary reports with the narrative presented in *The Series* and draw their own conclusions.



Western Weekender

Front page & page 2

Friday July 24, 1998

Faye Lo Po'
Member for Penrith
Ph: (02) 4721 8432
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Committed to Penrith

THE WESTERN WEEKENDER
FRIDAY, JULY 24, 1998 - ISSUE 371
PENRITH'S LEADING LOCAL INDEPENDENT PAPER
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his was the message to emerge from the Panthers boardroom last Tuesday evening albeit with a tag.

In what surely speaks volumes for the professionalism of the Directors the decision was taken to instruct chief executive officer Mark Levy to investigate all options, however the board remained focussed and committed to standing alone as an entity in the National Rugby League competition.

Presentations to the board, outlining Panthers strengths and weaknesses, provided a clear picture of how the situation had to be handled according to Panthers media officer Rob Weaver.

"The first priority is to stand alone but given the nature of the equation we would be crazy not to investigate all options, including those involving new joint ventures or mergers."

Logically it would be very difficult to justify standing alone if you hadn't looked at what was on the table, hence the board's decision.

Over the past fortnight media speculation and radio innuendo have told the rugby league



to offer our future is very positive indeed," he added.

Merger talks between St George-Illawarra and Canterbury-Wests has seemingly created a new found urgency in some clubs to get to the discussion table sooner rather than later.

Perhaps reasons behind the sudden rush to find a 'partner' stem from the financial incentive and five year protection currently being offered by the NRL.

These issues aside the Panthers, in any discussions, arguably bring far too many 'ace's to the table to be considered a 'weak link' in an NRL competition of the future.

"We have all the attributes to remain a stand alone club. We have a great ground, arguably the best managed and most financially sound club in the NRL, increasing crowd figures, the biggest junior league in the world, state of the art training facilities and rugby league roots in Hawkesbury, Blacktown and the Blue Mountains and also a farfield as Lithgow and Bathurst," said Mr Bateman emphatically.



world that merger talks between the Panthers and Parramatta are in full cry, but according to Panthers director John Bateman nothing could be further from the truth.

"There has been no talks staged and or planned with Parramatta and the media hype has been a beat up."

"In fact Roger (Cowan) rang Parramatta president Alan Overton earlier this week and had a good laugh at the stones," said Mr Bateman.

Penrith club directors have taken the stance that they have an obligation to all club members to treat the issue on a business level and at the end of the day should the facts support Penrith as being a stand alone club then the might and power of the country's most successful and financially sound club will be firmly thrown behind such a commitment.

"If somebody was to knock on our door we'd be foolish to stick our heads in the sand," said Mr Bateman.

"But at the end of the day, the board is totally committed to doing what is best for Penrith and Panthers and when you take a good hard look at what we have

A positive future for Panthers

from front page

An issue of most interest earlier in the year with respect to the NRL's criteria, namely crowd figures, had become one of the Panthers biggest weapons.

"Our crowd figures are up over 25% on last years figures," said Panthers marketing manager Max Cowan, "which compares very favourably with the NRL average of just 1%."

"And the best thing about that is that the fans are continuing to come back in numbers," he added.

Which begs the question why would the NRL, given they are looking to spread the game west, want to have the heartland of rugby league die a death by merging.

Earlier this week Panthers chief executive Mark Levy said merging is always an option.

"Our philosophy at the moment is we will listen if we have to and we'll talk if we have to.

"Like most people would imagine we'd like to stand on our own but it puts pressure on us with other Sydney clubs merging."

Levy suggested the club will not rush into anything while only one merger is on the cards but said the Panthers path will be one looking well beyond the next five years.

"Short term solutions born from emotion will do nobody any good. We've got an openness and a willingness to talk but we've also got a propensity to stay on our own," he said.

Parramatta chief executive Denis Fitzgerald said his Club's preferred position is to stand alone but if they had to merge would ideally join up with Balmain.

While he has yet to discuss the matter with Levy, Fitzgerald said a merger with either Penrith or Wests was also an option.

To date Parramatta have only held unofficial talks with Balmain.

"I would expect we'd be making further progress along those lines in the next fortnight," stated Fitzgerald.

Fitzgerald said there were a number of both limitations and advantages to merging with Penrith but did not want to comment on them.

Given the strengths of Parramatta they would have no real reason to merge other than for financial growth and they too have every right to consider themselves to be a stand alone team in the NRL.

For many Panther supporters the season of 1998 has been scarred with missed opportunities, savage injury tolls and merger misinformation.

Panthers Action Group head Phil Morehead was philosophical about the year and the campaign he passionately leads.

"From a business point of view I can understand the Panthers board's decision and it is sensible to look at all options."

Asked if he felt betrayed or disillusioned by the decision Mr Morehead was quick to state he fully understood it and that it should not be viewed as a sign of 'rolling over'.

"I know that Panthers are 100% behind maintaining a team in the elite competition and I also know that every time I have asked Roger for assistance and an update on the situation he has been up front and open. The bottom line from my position as a businessman I believe Penrith need the Panthers to maximise our identity nationally and internationally."

I am very confident everything possible will be done to ensure a long term positive future for the Penrith Panthers which is ultimately a victory for Penrith."

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Panthers, Passion & Politics - The Roger Cowan Years

Front page
Friday July 31, 1998

War of words

One such comment came from the games leading rugby league caller and ZUE sports editor, Ray Hadley, who stated that Panthers' general manager Roger Cowan had gone to the meeting 'on bended knee'. Hadley was also attributed as saying that Cowan had expressed the view to Fitzgerald that he (Cowan) had no interest in running a rugby league team and that a combination of the two clubs in a joint venture would realise both board's agendas.

comments, so much so that a copy of the interview was requested with a view to possible legal action.

Panther officials deemed there was nothing legally they could do. Criticism of the Panthers in recent weeks has snowballed and Panthers general manager, Roger Cowan in reply to Ray Hadley's comments issued the following open letter -

An Open Letter from Panthers to Ray Hadley

Dear Ray

I am concerned that someone like you, who holds such a strong opinion on stories and the debate about the future of rugby league, should give airtime to stories and rumours which are untrue and damaging to the great game.

Let's take for example something you said on air last Sunday during an interview with Denis Fitzgerald, a chief executive of Paramatta. The subject of your listeners will recall, was a meeting which took place between officials of Paramatta and Penrith last Saturday to see if there was any common ground for a joint venture.

Following to Denis Fitzgerald:

There is no comment on this - it's not a

You put the following to Denis Fitzgerald:

"Just on Roger Cowan - and I don't know if you can comment on this - it's no secret that the Parramatta club would be a dominant partner, there was suggestion from some areas that Roger Cowan came to Parramatta on bended knee and said he really didn't want to run the team himself well but he needed someone to run the club and here that's why we want a joint venture with you that would appeal to a football team too, that's why we want a joint venture with you that would appeal to you personally and to your club in that you would be the major shareholder in a joint venture." Denis did not seek to take advantage of these comments and

The fact is that nobody went "on bonded knee." And why would Penrith want to Panthers need "someone to run a football team?"

You could easily have checked with me, or our rugby league club chairman Mark Levy, to see if these things were true. But I didn't get a call from you and neither did Mark. You had a reporter at our ground on Sunday and he did not contact us either, though we were both there at the time.

It this was the first time you had given airtime to ridiculous claims about Penrith I would not be going to such lengths to retute this publicly. But you know, Ray, that it isn't the first time. There have been many, many others. I wrote to you after you made ludicrous claims about me and weeks ago I wrote to you another occasion where you didn't

Only a matter of weeks ago I wrote to you after you didn't check with us first). You got into a lengthy discussion about asset ratios and

liabilities and reached absurd conclusions. "Fortunately, our bankers respect our achievements, understand where we are going and agree that our plans make sense."

Let me tell you some things about **the club** and informed people know **the club** is a highly successful rugby league club with an excellent credit rating and one of the most successful companies in Australia - the only club in

- Panthers is a highly successful 300 private companies in Russia
 - Panthers is one of the top 500 companies in Australia for many years
 - Panthers has been the No.1 registered club in Australia for many years
 - **Panthers does and always has wanted to remain in the elite competition**
- It is also true that it would be irresponsible for any club to ignore risks associated with the reduction of six teams to do so. But we will prefer to stand alone and have all the attributes to do so. But we will continue to investigate and analyse the risks and opportunities before making a decision. That means rational, business-like discussions with clubs having similar business sense.
- George I find myself asking: what has Ray Hadley got to do with integrity? Is

In the face of all the evidence, I find myself asking: why does he care about integrity? Is he concerned with the facts?

For someone who claims to love the game of rugby league, sometimes you have a funny way of showing it. The game deserves better. Your listeners deserve better. The management of 2UE deserves better – and you should have known better.



Yours sincerely

Roger Cowan
General Manager - Panthers
30th July 1998



Editor's note

Editor's note
In the interests of fair play I telephoned Radio station 2UE on three occasions last Tuesday to get Mr Hadley's comments but unfortunately at the time of our going to print he had yet to return my calls.
The Western Weekender welcomes any response from Ray Hadley written or otherwise and would be happy to provide similar unbiased editorial space.

Inside back page
Friday July 31, 1998

An Open Letter from Panthers to Ray Hadley

Dear Ray

I am concerned that someone like you, who holds such a privileged position in the debate about the future of rugby league, should give airtime to stories and rumours which are untrue and damaging to this great game.

Let's take for example something you said on air last Sunday during an interview with Denis Fitzgerald, chief executive of Parramatta. The subject, as your listeners will recall, was a meeting which took place between officials of Parramatta and Penrith last Saturday to see if there was any common ground for a joint venture.

You put the following to Denis Fitzgerald:

"Just on Roger Cowan - and I don't know if you can comment on this - it's no secret that the Parramatta club would be a dominant partner, there's a suggestion from some areas that Roger Cowan came to Parramatta on bended knee and said, look we really don't want to run a football team, you know we've got a powerful leagues club out here that's doing tremendously well, but we need someone to run a football team too, that's why we want a joint venture with you that would appeal to you personally and to your club in that you would be the major shareholder or major partner in that joint venture."

To his great credit, Denis did not seek to take advantage of these comments and in fact distanced himself from them.

The fact is that nobody went "on bended knee" to anybody. Neither myself nor Panthers need "someone to run a football team". And why would Penrith want to enter into any one-sided partnership?

You could easily have checked with me, or our rugby league chief executive, Mark Levy, to see if these things were true. But I didn't get a call from you and neither did Mark. You had a reporter at our ground on Sunday and he did not contact us either, though we were both there at the time.

Your failure to speak to us before going to air was irresponsible and damaging.

If this were the first time you had given airtime to ridiculous claims about Penrith I would not be going to such lengths to refute this publicly. But you know, Ray, that it isn't the first time. There have been many, many others.

Only a matter of weeks ago I wrote to you after you made ludicrous claims about our club's financial position (that was another occasion where you didn't check with us first). You got into a lengthy discussion about asset ratios and liabilities and reached absurd conclusions. Fortunately, our bankers respect our achievements, understand where we are going and agree that our plans make sense.

Let me tell you some things about Penrith which are true; things that qualified and informed people know:

- Panthers is a highly successful rugby league club with an excellent credit rating
- Panthers is one of the top 300 private companies in Australia – the only club in the top 500
- Panthers has been the No.1 registered club in Australia for many years
- Panthers does and always has wanted to remain in the elite competition

It is also true that it would be irresponsible for any club to ignore risks associated with the reduction of six teams from the competition.

We prefer to stand alone and have all the attributes to do so. But we will continue to investigate and analyse the risks and opportunities before making a decision. That means rational, business-like discussions with clubs having similar business sense.

In the face of all the evidence, I find myself asking: what has Ray Hadley got against Penrith; does he have a secret agenda? Does he care about integrity? Is he concerned with the facts?

For someone who claims to love the game of rugby league, sometimes you have a funny way of showing it. The game deserves better. Your listeners deserve better. The management of 2UE deserves better – and you should have known better.

Yours sincerely

Roger Cowan
Roger Cowan
General Manager – Panther
30th July 1998

Damned if they do ...

...and damned if they don't was the message to come out of last Tuesday evening's board meeting.

The directors of Panthers deferred their decision on the recommendation that the Penrith Panthers merge with Parramatta Eels on the grounds that a great deal more information was required.

General manager Roger Cowan admitted that the club was in a difficult situation trying to predict the future but stressed that the board maintained its commitment to stand alone in an elite competition.

The situation is this, we (the club) face a serious problem. If we survive the initial National Rugby League cull and take our place in the elite 14 team competition in the year 2000, will we still be around in the year 2005 given that other clubs that did merge

will be that much stronger," said Cowan.

"We don't know the answer to that and the decision we will have to eventually make, may in five years prove to have been the wrong one. The board has instructed me to continue the assessment of the risks involved with both a stand alone and merged option."

The proposal to amalgamate with the strongest Sydney based club, Parramatta, the subject of much media speculation over the past month, was tabled by general manager Roger Cowan and chief executive officer Mark Levy at the board meeting.

Rumours of the formal merger talks surfaced some two weeks ago and Cowan confirmed that further talks are to take place with a further recommendation to the board due Tuesday 25th August.

In talks to date with Parramatta officials, Denis Fitzgerald and Greg Mitchell, it is believed information concerning the NRL's

intention to further downsize Sydney franchises surfaced.

Scenarios after the year 2005 were many but apparently officials from both clubs are fearful that come the year 2005 only four Sydney based franchises will remain, with a strong push for the resurrection of a Perth team and a second Brisbane club high on the NRL's list of priorities.

The obvious goal being to make the sport a truly National competition and at the same time give it a competitive balance with the growing AFL.

Offsetting this would be the NRL's reluctance to resurrect a format which could prove difficult to justify on a commercial basis as was found by the failed Western Reds exercise.

continued page 2

Merger decision deferred pending further information

From front page

Officials from both clubs commenced discussions with a view to maximising a position of strength now to ensure that come 2005 both clubs had a source of involvement in the NRL.

According to Levy the Parramatta board convened a meeting last Thursday (30 July) and ratified key elements of the joint venture which to all intents and purposes sees neither party assume a position of superiority.

Speculation on the name exists with the 'Parramatta Panthers' being widely touted as the preferred option.

"It was my understanding that during the Super League era one of the main goals was to protect the 'Panther' element in any future name but I now believe there is a strong school of thought that the name Penrith is paramount, and we will need to examine this," said Cowan.

"I must stress that nobody knows exactly what the future holds for any team merged or otherwise and

that we are in a very delicate process of analysing all the risks because if we get it wrong we will look like idiots," he added.

When asked to detail the proposal put to the board last Tuesday Cowan stated that a number of options were under consideration.

With regards the Parramatta/Penrith merger Cowan was adamant there would be no dominant partner and expressed his disappointment that confidential information had been leaked.

Apparently a former Panther employee vented his anger at being released, by providing key elements of the paper to certain sections of the media.

"Yes the document presented to the board detailed a number of scenarios for our future. In the case of a joint venture with Parramatta, home games would be played out of both venues. Penrith and Parramatta Stadium on an equal basis. A position the board have made quite clear is not negotiable, and while I think there would be an initial backlash from dis-

gruntled fans I believe in time the united fan base could reach between 15,000 and 20,000 for home games at either venue."



Roger Cowan "We can not let emotions affect the decision making process because if we get it wrong there'll be no going back"

Cowan believes the new team will create a new support base from both areas which will eventually create a powerful western Sydney following.

Colour scheme and team logo were discussed but details remained under wraps, however a strong push for the inclusion of

the 'Panther' logo would seem logical.

Possibly the most contentious issue will be that of the head coach.

The most loyal and dedicated Panther of all, Royce Simmons, comes off contract at the end of 1999 season while it is believed his Parramatta counterpart, Brian Smith, has a further year.

Mark Levy confirmed that in a joint venture both clubs would be positioning themselves to retain their respective coach however in the cold light of the business day loyalty and commitment stood for nothing, with onfield performances a major factor in the process of selection. Cowan stressed that the decision of selecting the coach would be the responsibility of the 'new board'.

When asked for a comment Simmons declined.

Deadline for registration of any new club is 31st October to be in line for a \$2 million incentive, an amount one club director stated was 'a drop in the bucket' and definitely not a factor in the final decision.

The worth of the \$2 million incentive is questionable as both clubs financial positions are undoubted, with the larger concern being the long term future.

"We can make our decision next year if we need to and the 31 October deadline is not really an issue," said Cowan.

Cowan also said that he believed that the NRL had amended their position on the tenure clause for stand alone clubs making the final 14 team competition.

Apparently all teams alive and well come 1 January 2000 will receive a five year tenure from the NRL, but that tenure expires by the year 2005 and once again all clubs will be under the microscope of the NRL's culling eye.

"I want to assure everyone, sponsors, fans, players and club members alike that we are facing a very difficult decision. We can not let emotions affect the decision making process because if we get it wrong there'll be no going back," said Cowan.

Western Weekender

Front page & page 2

Friday August 7, 1998



Panthers, Passion & Politics - The Roger Cowan Years
A detailed history of the Penrith Panthers' transformation and the leadership years of Roger Cowan.

It's official

Board in unanimous decision on future



The sea of concerned faces left the Panthers board of directors in no doubt that Penrith should 'Stand Alone'

In a historic announcement the Panthers board of directors told the rugby league world that the mighty Penrith Panthers were to compete in the National Rugby League competition as an elite and single identity.

The decision, comes after months of hard work and investigations on the part of the Club's senior management and the directors, in line with, albeit the

everchanging, NRL criteria.

Given the risks before them courtesy of the proposed NRL 14 team structure, the board have shown great strength and a belief in the future of the Penrith Panthers.

There has never been any question that the Club and its directors have wanted what is best for Penrith and an indication of same was witnessed when the directors took turns at identi-

fying themselves to the hundreds on hand at Monday night's information forum, to both assure them no done deal existed and that they would be making their decision based on all the details available.

To prove their commitment to the fans, members, players and the Penrith community as a whole the directors voted to end all joint venture negotiations confirming statements that gen-

eral manager Roger Cowan had been saying for some time.

"The stand alone option was always the Board's preference and senior management's preferred option," said Roger Cowan.

And in fairness to Cowan and the Board that commitment has been publicly declared on countless occasions, yet unfortunately clouded with media innuendo and comments from

other interested parties, possibly with a view to destabilizing the unity that has for many years seen the Panthers board achieve remarkable goals for its members and the community.

Club patron, Ron Mulock, was inspirational in his address to the hundreds on hand at Monday evening's information forum (see Michael Kelly's story, next page).

continued page 3

The passion



Panther's Club Patron Ron Mulock expression said it all last Monday - this is more than just business, this is about Penrith, this is about was is right.

The Panther's Board of directors this week killed off the possibility of any future merger talks with Parramatta, or for that matter any other team following a sometimes emotional meeting last Monday night in the club's Evan Theatre.

Despite pleas from General Manager, Roger Cowan, to allow the head to rule rather than the heart, those supporters present (and reports range from 300-600 fans on deck) found it downright impossible to distinguish between the two when discussing something that the NRL and the powers that be just don't understand.

You take the heart out of the game and what do you have left?

Nothing. Fans are getting sick and tired of that old war horse "it must be a business decision" and down the track they will vote with their feet and the rest of

their body is sure to follow. Have a close look at the AFL and tell me that there is no heart or emotion with any of those clubs and the administration involved with each.

The game of rugby league is on its knees with the residue from the battle for control of the game still evident, and the haste to cull those clubs that were once the soul of the sport has everyone worried. That, and the fact that the NRL's selection criteria is flawed and discriminatory against Sydney based clubs begs the question has anything changed.

Talk about living in interesting times!

I have always been proud of being an old ex-player and have always been proud of the district I have come to live in. I've seen some of the greater moments in Penrith's history and was fairly close to it when tragedy tore a group of great blokes apart along with the hope that any success on the football field would continue.

number of issues that either met with strong applause from the crowd or a silent hush that whispered "I don't believe what I have just heard".

Roger and the board have to be congratulated for their efforts and desire to put on such an "information sharing" night albeit it probably was a little late in coming.

They were on a hiding to nothing but it was done and it takes guts to sit up there and cop it on the chin.

To those supporters who bravely stood up and voiced their opinion or who nervously asked a question a big well done too. It ain't easy and they again typified what rugby league is all about.

It is tribal. It is family.

It is about turning up to cheer your club on no matter what the circumstances or weather. It is about loyalty. And while on loyalty of the

future, the argument that was offered explaining that down the track the kids of the nation will boost any flagging support once the elite competition is up and running well, that seems to be putting your bets on through the use of a crystal ball (real business stuff here).

But it also takes guts in this day and age to drop your guard, to show all in the audience your heart and the raw emotions that make you what you are, while at the same time, telling it straight.

I have known Ron Mulock since I was a nineteen year old kid with pimples and a funny haircut. He has always been a man of the highest integrity and a battler for the people of western Sydney. And when he raises his voice and states that the power that counts is still nested where it always has been - with the high and mighty, you have to listen.

When I asked him the simple but sincere question

"why?" immediately following the 11:35pm closure of the meeting, he stated the words that some of today's politicians find so difficult to voice.

"It needed to be done. This is not the only issue," he said.

When I asked him yes but at what cost, his reply reflected the strength and those values that made him club patron in the first place.

"I've little doubt that I'll be patron in exile from here on in but I only ever was a fringe dweller and now I'm probably a cave dweller."

"So be it" he concluded. Following the board's unanimous decision to wipe the phrase 'joint venture' from their vocabulary I spoke with Ron.

"I welcome the decision of the Panthers board to cease merger talks and it is an important decision, but the fight is now to stand alone 2000 onwards. To date efforts have been skewed towards a merger as proposed by senior management, Roger Cowan and Mark Levy," said Ron.

"And it will be Roger's on field performance that I and thousands of Panther supporters will be watching.

Roger Cowan is still very much a major player in our fight to stand alone," Ron added.

As for the other Clubs rushing around attempting to swallow up weaker clubs bending their principles to ensure existence in a competition that could have little or no support from those that count, let them gander with the devil.

In fairness to Panthers the 'what ifs', the blatant bias of the NRL criteria and the lack of information on three of six criteria components made it virtually impossible to provide any



by Mick Kelly

...the practical

by Bernard Bratusa

from front page

And while in his own words, 'many personal bridges were burned', it is an absolute must that the passion of Ron Mulock, and thousands like him, and the commitment of the Panthers board of directors now be united as one, and a full blooded drive towards having the Penrith Panthers as an integral player in the NRL's elite year 2000 competition be achieved.

A position supported by Roger Cowan.

"What we - what all Penrith supporters, what all of Penrith - have to do now is work together to give Penrith Panthers the best possible chance to survive," said Cowan.

And let there be no mistake it will be a case of the survival the fittest, both on and off the field, as by his own admission (Neil Whittaker) the NRL criteria is biased.

NRL CEO, Neil Whittaker, present at last Monday evening's meeting, was asked numerous questions on the criteria.

And on one occasion clearly stated that although there would be one set of criteria it would be applied to two groups, those deemed to be Sydney teams and those Regional.

This smacks of double standards before the starter has even said go.

At Monday night's meeting information was provided to members painting a very serious picture as to where club management estimated Penrith's current positioning (16th) in line with known data and the NRL's criteria.

Further discussions with Panthers marketing manager Max Cowan revealed his calculations, to contain a lot of 'what ifs'.

In fairness to Panthers the 'what ifs', the blatant bias of the NRL criteria and the lack of information on three of six criteria components made it virtually impossible to provide any

Weightings on categories, free rides for three clubs for the next six years, retrospective use of inauditable data, exemptions for Clubs exceeding salary cap limits, no value added component for the important strength of junior development, no balance for area demographics, a flawed competition structure that favours one, city teams (regional), get out free goal cards for Manly and Norths, the list goes on and on.

Panthers CEO Mark Levy has been under extreme pressure since news broke of the merger talks with Parramatta, and comments printed in The Daily Telegraph stating that merger talks would continue were made prior to the board's announcement.

"People have said we've done nothing in the fight to stand alone and that is simply not true. Roger and I have collectively written submissions to the NRL suggesting that as the criteria was retrospective it was both unfair and inauditable, and at the same time recommended that an independent body be appointed. That was early this year and I'm still waiting on a response. We were the ones that mounted a photo campaign highlighting the inaccuracies of some club's supposed crowd figures, again showing the criteria to be flawed. We complained about our scheduling of Saturday matches and had a victory, and I believe we spent something in the vicinity of \$500,000 marketing the game this year," said Levy.

"The decision by the directors is very welcome, and Royce and I can now set about the business making 1999 a successful season," he added.

Roger Cowan outlined the first of many steps that needed to be taken to ensure survival.

"This season our crowds increased 22% but we will have to do significantly better next season as



Roger Cowan -

"What we - what all Penrith supporters, what all of Penrith - have to do now is work together to give Penrith Panthers the best possible chance to survive"



home crowds, together with gate takings and sponsorship are among the most important of the NRL criteria. We'll be approaching local businesses to boost sponsorship support and we will be asking Penrith City Council how they can help with improvements to Penrith stadium.

Of course on-field performance is important too."

"We have been told by a firm of consultants, commissioned by us, that the dollar value of the publicity generated by the team is around \$20 million a year, and none of us want to lose that for Panthers or for Penrith," concluded Cowan.

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Note:
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from the front page.



Panthers, Passion & Politics - The Roger Cowan Years
A visual history of the Penrith Panthers' transformation and the leadership of Roger Cowan