



Panthers, Passion & Politics – The Roger Cowan Years

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

Panther's South African Recruitment Mission - 1972

From the Archives

In Part 41 of *Panthers, Passion & Politics*, Roger Cowan recalls the lengths Penrith was sometimes prepared to go to in its efforts to strengthen the football team. One of the more unusual examples came in 1972, when the search for players extended all the way to South Africa.

The idea originated with legendary rugby league broadcaster Frank Hyde, who suggested South Africa might provide a source of playing talent. In July 1972, a four-man Penrith party — Roger Cowan, Bob Boland, Leo Trevena and Pat Russell — travelled there to investigate.

Boland, Trevena and Russell were charged with assessing the football talent. Cowan's role was to negotiate contracts with any players they believed worth pursuing.

What followed was considerably more complicated than a conventional recruitment trip. The party had been warned to maintain secrecy, amid concerns about the reaction of the South African Rugby Union to approaches to its players. Australian newspapers already knew about the venture before the group had left the country. Roger and Boland would later return to South Africa, with some approaches to prospective players conducted in distinctly clandestine circumstances.

The players Penrith initially hoped to recruit did not ultimately come to Australia. Instead, recommendations made during the trip led to Peter Swanson and Keith Howie joining the Panthers. Swanson went on to play 21 first-grade games over two seasons, while Howie made two first-grade appearances.

The venture did not transform Penrith's fortunes. Its historical interest lies elsewhere. At a time when the young first-grade club was struggling to find the playing strength needed to compete consistently, Panthers were prepared to look well beyond the familiar boundaries of Sydney rugby league for possible answers.

The following two pages reproduce the account of the South African venture published in *Men in Black — The Penrith Panthers Story*.

Source: Larry Writer and Gary Lester, *The Panthers: Men in Black*, Playright Publishing Pty Ltd, 2008, pp. 69–70.

Related Narrative: *Panthers Passion Politics*, Part 41 – A Return to Two CEOs?

The following two pages reproduces the original account of Penrith's 1972 South African recruitment venture.

The year was most notable for Penrith, however, for events outside the playing arena — the trip to South Africa in July, 1972 by a four-man Penrith contingent, Roger Cowan, Bob Boland, Leo Trevena and Pat Russell, who coached the first Penrith third grade team in 1967. The decision to seek the veldt in their next recruitment drive was initiated by a suggestion from Frank Hyde, then the doyen of Rugby League callers.

Boland, Trevena and Russell were there to judge the football talent and to see as many matches as possible; Cowan was there to negotiate the contracts. "We didn't have any lists of players and we were only going to be there a short time, so we felt it necessary to take over those we considered our best judges of footballers," Cowan explained. After two weeks, Trevena and Russell returned home; Boland and Cowan remained.

Some saw the trip as desperation, others innovative. Boland saw it as important enough for him to miss a couple of premiership matches. South African rugby players, confined to their own playing fields because of apartheid bans, were an untapped source of football talent. The South African Rugby Union guarded their players like lionesses do their cubs. Infiltrators from a professional game were to be despised.

When the four-man contingent left, the Panthers were struggling through a series of defeats that would add up to 12 consecutively after they arrived home. Cowan and Boland were not dissuaded by the warnings. They were urged to maintain complete secrecy and were at pains to tell no-one — particularly the media — of their intentions.

The last problem they needed was to alert the South African Rugby Union of their intentions. They imagined all kinds of angry rebuttals at Johannesburg on arrival. Unknown to Cowan, however, the press *did* know of the trip and waited until Cowan and Boland were on board the plane on the way via Perth before releasing the story. Cowan recalled his horror when he got to Perth airport and received a call from the club.

"The story was all over the back pages of the afternoon newspapers. I couldn't believe it. The press had known all along and were just waiting until we left. I discussed with Bob the prospect of turning back. I knew the story would be in South Africa. We decided



The result of Penrith's South African venture — Keith Howie (left) and Peter Swanson.

we had come this far — we had paid for the trip — and the worst thing that could happen to us when we got to the airport was they would send us back."

Rather than a hostile reception at Johannesburg, Cowan received his first surprise — all quiet! It was as if no-one cared. When they reached their hotel, the Panther contingent was inundated with calls from journalists, some of whom even helped them locate the players they were seeking. Although barred from training sessions, Cowan and Boland did watch a number of games — and were dazzled by some of the best players they had ever seen.

However, Cowan related that the players the club went after did not want to play rugby league in Australia. They had too much to lose if playing league did not work out — they would have been left without anywhere to play. Cowan was quick to point out, particularly to the media back in Australia that the club had not sought to buy Peter Swanson and Keith Howie, the two players who eventually joined the club.

"We had never heard of them," he recalled. "They were offered to us as we were leaving. They cost virtually nothing and we were prepared to give them a chance — that's all," Cowan said. "It has always been written that our trip was a failure and that we signed players who were not up to standard. The main player

we wanted was Kevin de Klerk, a second-rower who was around 17-18 stone and could run like a back. It was buy him — by hook or by crook.

"I went back a second time — this time no-one found out. I wanted de Klerk and tried again. He didn't want to leave South Africa. It was all fairly clandestine. I spoke to another player — a front-rower. I had to wait in a car until he drove past and then I was to follow him. We went through bushes and to an out-of-the-way place.

"A few sportswriters suggested that Swanson, a centre, with quite a reputation in South Africa and who had played with the Springboks, wanted to play in Australia. On their recommendation, I gave him a chance. Peter turned out to be a fair player and played a number of first grade games.

"On the second trip, I was at the airport ready to return home when another writer claimed that Howie was willing to come to Australia to play — for nothing. All we had to do was provide an airfare. Howie had captained the Transvaal Under-21s and the recommendation again was good. We had no intention of buying anyone other than the players we had originally sought. I can tell you — they were absolutely sensational players."

Swanson played 21 first grade matches in two seasons — at centre and on the wing, but Howie, a front-rower, was unable to bridge the gap between the two codes and played a single first grade game in each of his two seasons. Howie's lack of success remains a bone of discontent with Boland, the coach at the time. Said Boland: "Howie was big and fast. To this day I believe he never got a go. I taught him a few things and I thought he was worth persisting with, but after I left, there was no-one to teach him. He could have been a good player. He was only 22 when we got him."

As for Swanson, Boland added: "Swanson was already experienced and he was a centre ... not as much difference for a centre between rugby union and rugby league. You get a bit more ball in league and there is more to do in defence." The trips, if nothing else, kept the Panthers in the news.

The Panthers lost talented fullback Mick Leary to Parramatta at the end of '72. He was a victim of Penrith's win-only bonus system which guaranteed

large match fees — if the team won. "When they brought the new system in, my contract was up and I wanted a sign-on fee to guarantee the mortgage payments [on my house]," Leary recalled. "Rugby league is a game where injuries can put you out of the game and put a great deal of pressure on you. If I'd been offered the same amount of money I'd been receiving for the [previous] five years, I would have stayed."

Season 1973 got underway with Manly as premiers, for the first time, and Penrith back in their vertical striped jerseys, replacing the white saddle and brown design they had used for the one year, in 1972. Trevena remained reserve grade coach and the NSW Rugby League followed the English rule and allowed trainers on the field to treat injured players without stopping the game.

Other changes were far more wide-sweeping. The New South Wales Rugby League introduced five-team semi-finals; a controversial \$2000 (sign-on fee) — \$200 (match fee) ceiling payments and changed third grade to an Under-23 competition. The year also brought new problems for the Panthers, the sacking of their first grade coach.

The decision to turn third grade from an open-age grade, as it had been since its inception in 1908, to players under 23 years, was a benefit to clubs such as the Panthers, who boosted a strong and growing junior league. It gave more opportunities to the younger players and rid the grade of the ageing first grade on his way to retirement, yet capable of ensuring a young player's introduction to grade football could be a miserable one.

For all that, the club ached for success and after the dismal 1972 season, saw a similar pattern emerging in '73. After three matches (a win and two losses), Cowan called Boland to a meeting. The football club wanted an explanation for the lacklustre performances of the first grade team.

Boland gave only one excuse — lack of class players. There had also been some rumblings of discontent among the players, minor perhaps, but rumblings just the same, and the mounting losses fuelled such feelings. Neither Cowan nor the players would disclose the reasons for their concern.