



Panthers, Passion & Politics – The Roger Cowan Years

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

The Membership Media Release

The Art of Brinkmanship

27th July 2002



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The story behind a media release prepared for distribution at Penrith Stadium on 27 July 2002 — but never released.

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ARCHIVE NOTE

The following three-page media release was prepared for release on 27 July 2002 but was never distributed. The pages are reproduced from the surviving original document.

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INTRODUCTION

On Saturday 27th July 2002, the Penrith Panthers were scheduled to play the Melbourne Storm at Penrith Stadium. It was Round 20 and Melbourne were positioned 8th on the premiership table, Penrith 15th (last).

A Melbourne victory was the popular prediction.

A small crowd of some 7,500 was relaxed in the dry, coolish conditions — a bit warmer than you'd expect midwinter — the perfect afternoon for a game of football.

None of these people would have been aware of the behind-the-scenes drama and tension being experienced by the Panthers management and Board of Directors.

It had nothing to do with football — at least not directly.

The tension had been brewing for months due to failed attempts to find agreement on a membership pricing structure for the thirteen clubs making up the Panthers Group.

The drama started on the Tuesday leading up to the game, when a regular Board meeting again rejected management's recommendation on membership pricing.

This rejection triggered a meeting of the management team to discuss “where to from here”. Membership renewals were due to commence on 1st August and failing to have a clear membership offering had already proved problematic.

After some discussion, the other members of the management team left the room, leaving Roger and Rob Weaver to finalise what would happen next

Rob prepared the media release. Roger scheduled a special Board meeting before the home game — convenient timing, as Board members rarely missed a Panthers home game.

Rob was normally at the ground early preparing the Media Box. This time he also carried copies of the release in his bag, awaiting Roger's instructions.

At the Board meeting, Roger showed the directors the release without allowing them to read it. He outlined its contents and told them that, unless the membership issue was resolved, he would instruct Rob to distribute it to the journalists attending the game.

Roger's call to Rob meant the copies stayed in Rob's bag.

The release has been read by very few people — until now.

The Panthers won the game 36-26 with Ryan Girdler scoring 20 points from 2 tries and 6 goals.

Everyone went home happy — though perhaps some happier than others.

This document is reproduced as part of the Panthers, Passion & Politics Digital Archive to provide readers with access to contemporary source material relevant to the events described in [*Why Cutting the Membership Fee Wasn't So Simple*](#) and Part 51 of The Series, [*A Simple Change, Made So Difficult*](#).



27 July 2002 — Media Release (never released)

Pages 1 & 2

MEDIA RELEASE

'Directors put themselves ahead of members' – Cowan

Penrith, July 27 – The Board of Panthers has knocked back a management recommendation to cut membership fees from the existing \$22 to less than nine dollars, general manager Roger Cowan said today.

"At a time of increased competition for the entertainment dollar and changes in the law that are seriously hurting our business, this Board has taken a cynical decision based on self-interest," Mr Cowan said.

"Five out of the nine directors have shown they care more about their seats on the Board than they do about our members and the future of our organisation. It brings a new meaning to the phrase 'putting bums on seats'," Mr. Cowan said.

"I will not stand by and watch them destroy what previous boards and managers have built, which is why I am going public to let members know what is going on.

"To continue to be financially stable, Panthers needs to be competitive and to promote the business – and all directors should understand this.

"We are constantly improving what we have to offer our members and guests but that is not enough. We are competing against pubs and other clubs that do not have the kind of overheads we do. Some of our competitors are offering full membership for under six dollars compared to our current membership rate of \$22.

"It is not fair to ask our members to pay \$22 when so many other club competitors charge much lower fees."

The proposal for an \$8.80 membership fee was put to the Board as a means of increasing membership not only at Penrith but at all 13 clubs in the Panthers Group, Mr Cowan said.

The Board rejected it on Tuesday night.

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The reason behind its decision was that the new membership fee would have applied to members of all Panther clubs and would have given those members the right to vote at a meeting to be called on September 15th to approve a Constitutional change.

"That Constitutional change is designed to ensure that all nine directors of Penrith will be elected to a 14-member Group Board. Currently, Penrith members are guaranteed a minimum of five places on a nine member Board," Mr. Cowan said.

"Some of our directors made it quite clear on Tuesday night that they want to manipulate things so that members from other clubs in the group cannot vote or attend such meetings.

"In doing so, they also want to deny 25,000 long term members of Port Macquarie Panthers and ClubNova Panthers the right to vote for directors. They are declaring that these people are social members rather than ordinary members as was promised them. Treating our members in this way is not in the interests of the business."

Mr Cowan said some members of the Board had argued that allowing more voting memberships at the amalgamated clubs would result in a loss of control over the group by Penrith. "If having a guaranteed representation of five out of nine is not sufficient control I don't know what is.

"The Board has to realise that is now responsible for managing a business spread over 13 sites with about 120,000 members. Those members have rights and they have expectations.

"Their clubs are essential to our future wellbeing as an organisation.

"By their action, the Board is jeopardising our entire business strategy and assets of \$240M.

"This strategy was approved by our Board and by our Penrith members. Now the Board claims they didn't know the whole story – but the evidence is there for all to see that they did know.

"They claim that they are defending Penrith and our rugby league operation but they should be aware that the only way to defend rugby league is by protecting this business.

"We need all of our amalgamated clubs to be accepted as part of an important strategy to protect our future. Breaking promises made to members at other sites, and then trying to exclude them from participation, is not the way to build a successful organisation.

27 July 2002 — Media Release (never released)

Page 3 (phone numbers redacted)

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"Revenues in Penrith are down and have been for some months," Mr Cowan said.

"This is partly because of increased competition and partly because of recent legislation which forces us to close for three hours a day.

"Next year that closing time will be increased to six hours. Without an increased membership and greater revenues from other streams and areas we are looking at a difficult future.

"The Board knows this but prefers to focus on voting rights rather than on the needs of the business in an intensely competitive industry bound by difficult legislative restrictions," Mr. Cowan said.

"In 37 years as CEO of Panthers I have never before publicly criticised a decision made by our Board.

"Unfortunately I can now see no alternative."

Further information from Rob Weaver on 4 00 20 47 or 04 94 18 6

