

PANTHERS UNDER SIEGE

The 1994 premiership was just weeks away. Penrith coach Phil Gould needed Greg Alexander... he needed the playmaker back to his best or the club would face another mediocre year. So what was going on in Alexander's head? Had he recovered from brother Ben's death? Did he want to be great again? Did he care about the Panthers? Or was it too late? The player was told to write down the things he most enjoyed in life. Football was not on the first page of Alexander's list. **DANIEL WILLIAMS** looks at Penrith under Gould and why the club's boss, Don Feltis, is encouraging Alexander to go to Auckland next year.

JOHAN CARTWRIGHT says of all Penrith players, he was the closest to the very private Phil Gould.

Of Gould's replacement, caretaker coach Royce Simmons, he said: "He's probably the best mate I've ever had in my life."

Asked what Simmons might bring to Penrith that Gould could not, Cartwright said: "I think the only possible thing he can bring is change."

"He's not going to bring any more football knowledge or any amount of players that Gus couldn't have got."

Despite Penrith's turbulent decline as a power since the 1991 grand final and his friendship with Simmons, Cartwright feels saddened and unsettled by the departure of Gould, a shrewd and complex man for whom Eastern Suburbs is his fifth club as a player or coach.

Contacted late on Wednesday, 30 hours after Gould told his players he was leaving, Cartwright said: "For me, it's going to be hard to get someone like Gus out of my system."

"I've just sort of been sitting here since it happened, still in shock. I don't know whether it's because he's been here so long. You walk into a shed and you see him there. I just got into a routine of him being there after a game. If I wasn't playing well, I could talk to him."

Penrith will need to establish new routines, winning ones. Gould oversaw the most tumultuous period in the club's history, a 4½-year term which encompassed great hopes and glory, tragedy, sordidness and deterioration.

He will be lauded always for coaching Penrith to their first premiership, though he would struggle — even with his eloquence and powers of persuasion — to argue convincingly the club is in better shape than when he joined.

In late 1990, Gould inherited from Ron Willey a talented, immature side that bombed in the semi-finals. Gould provided finesse, mental strength, strong camaraderie and intricate game plans, and the result was a premiership within two years.

But he has handed Simmons a mid-placed team, with no clearly emerging stars, that is erratic and excessively reliant on a few.

Club chief executive Don Feltis says that, by the end, Gould had had enough of Penrith and Pen-

rith enough of Gould. "This is the best thing for Phil and the best thing for Penrith," Feltis said.

"Phil would have become exasperated. He could not have coped with another year."

Feltis thought it best Gould go immediately rather than finish the year. Apart from believing the coach would have his mind on other matters, Feltis felt for Gould, a friend.

Four of Penrith's final six matches are at Penrith Stadium, and Feltis feared the abuse that would be directed at Gould from supporters should the side lose. He also noted that Penrith play Easts next weekend.

Feltis does not blame Gould for the decline, the catalyst for which was the death of Ben Alexander in a car accident in June 1992. It triggered a disastrous chain reaction that has been thoroughly chronicled, though in the context of Penrith's playing fortunes, its single most important consequence was that Greg Alexander has not been the same player since.

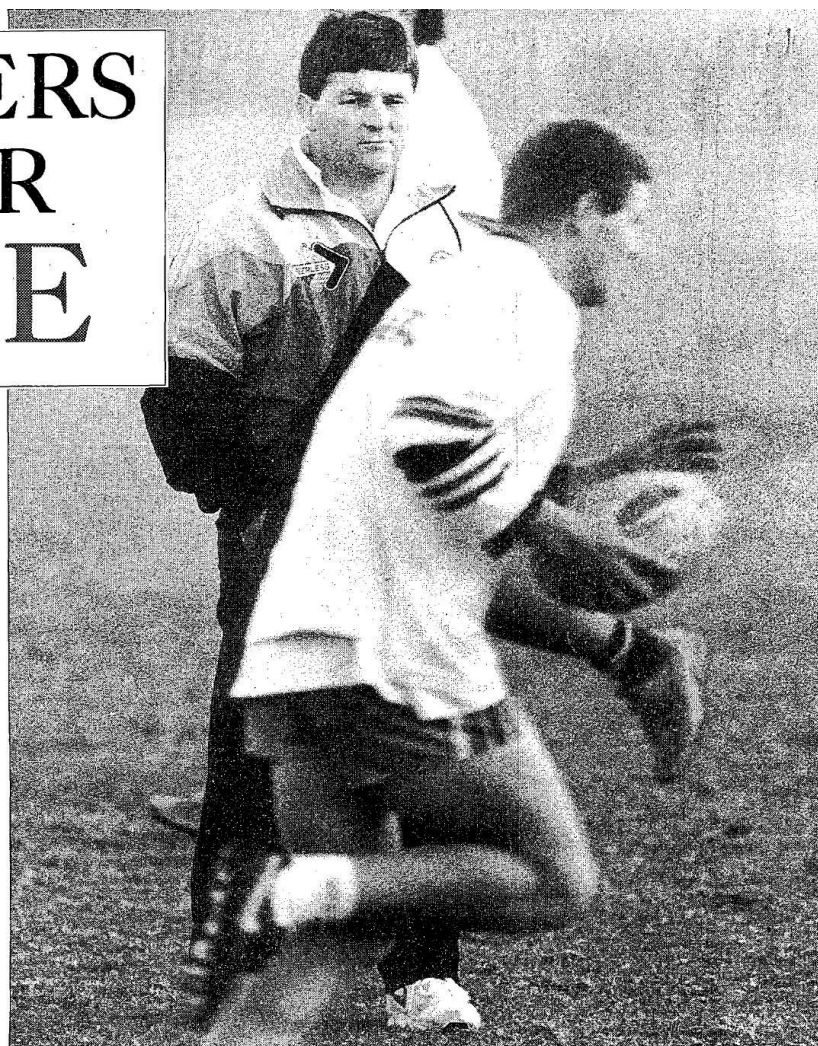
The point has been underplayed. For all Gould's tactical genius, Penrith could not have won in 1991 without Alexander, for a short time the best player in the game. Gould has acknowledged Alexander's irreplaceability, and observed that while some coaches cannot win with excellent players, no coach can win without them.

In early 1992, Gould watched Alexander play one of his best games, dismantling Brisbane in Brisbane on a warm Saturday. On the Monday morning, in his first year as NSW coach, Gould called on NSW Rugby League general manager John Quayle in his Phillip Street office with a tape of the match under his arm.

"This is how we'll beat Queensland," Gould told Quayle, "and Greg is the man."

But Alexander badly injured his knee before the first Origin match and missed the entire series. Without him, Penrith were sliding even before Ben Alexander's death. Gould has tried desperately to revive Alexander's career, but with little success. Alexander's problem is one of desire: his enthusiasm for the game has dwindled and, with it, his preparedness to subject his body to battery.

In the pre-season, Gould told Alexander to go home, fetch himself a pen and paper, and list things he enjoyed in life. When



Royce Simmons takes his charges through their paces at training this week.

Photo by TM CLAYTON

Alexander submitted his project, football was not on the first page.

"Greg has played some fine games in the last couple of years, but it used to be every week," Feltis said.

"Phil did everything he could to reach Greg. No coach could have done more."

Alexander has agreed to play for Auckland next year, and Feltis, far from pleading with him to reconsider, has encouraged him to go.

Asked whether it was probable he had seen the best of Alexander, Feltis said: "We will know that only once he plays in new colours. He needs a change. He has told me he will return to Penrith and live here again."

So what of Penrith under Simmons?

Cartwright had a good point. What can he bring besides change? He will not match Gould's technical and tactical expertise, and while he is certainly a decent and popular man, Gould, too, knows the value of spirit.

Despite the cool exterior, self-interest and manipulative tendencies, he is, at times, an emotional coach, one given to spontaneous and demonstrative

celebration of important wins. Simmons will be dedicated and undistracted. He was in the Penrith football office on his first day as caretaker coach, leaning forward in his chair, perusing match videos and scribbling notes.

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DON FELTIS



Phil Gould

Unlike Gould, he will not have to coach the State team nor appear regularly on radio as an analyst.

What effect, if any, Gould's NSW commitments had on Penrith is debatable. Having admitted after his first year as Blues coach "there's no doubt that during my period as NSW coach, my job with Penrith deteriorated", Gould

said before this year's series: "I can't blame State of Origin for what's happened."

Gould has denied sensing resentment in the Penrith community caused by the Panthers' lean trot corresponding with the three-

my blessing, and he had that." It may be to Simmons's advantage that, compared with Gould, he is a simple, transparent man who will preach simple messages.

Peter Kelly, Penrith's reserve-grade coach who intends applying for the main job, conceded Gould, who procured him his present job, was an opaque personality.

Not sounding like a front-runner anymore, Kelly said: "You can't have people with all the same personalities in the coaching ranks. It's handy to have a diverse personality presence so you can approach all types of people."

Cartwright said: "As much as a good friend I am of Gus's, he can be a hard fella to understand. He was a very private sort of person."

"Royce, he'll be different in that he's very well-known around the area. He's in a restaurant so a lot of people know him there; he did a lot of deeds on the field, and he's a more outgoing fella than Gus."

Penrith need new players, but the shelves are nearly empty and what is there is overpriced. Kelly said player depth was the club's major problem, but: "It's a coach's nightmare that you can't attract anyone."