



painting the town red

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Counting down the weeks:
Paul Roos in the Sydney
Swans' dressing room at
the SCG.

He embraces
meditation and
spirituality so
how did Paul Roos
become coach of
the Sydney Swans?

Neil McMahon
meets an unlikely
footy hero.

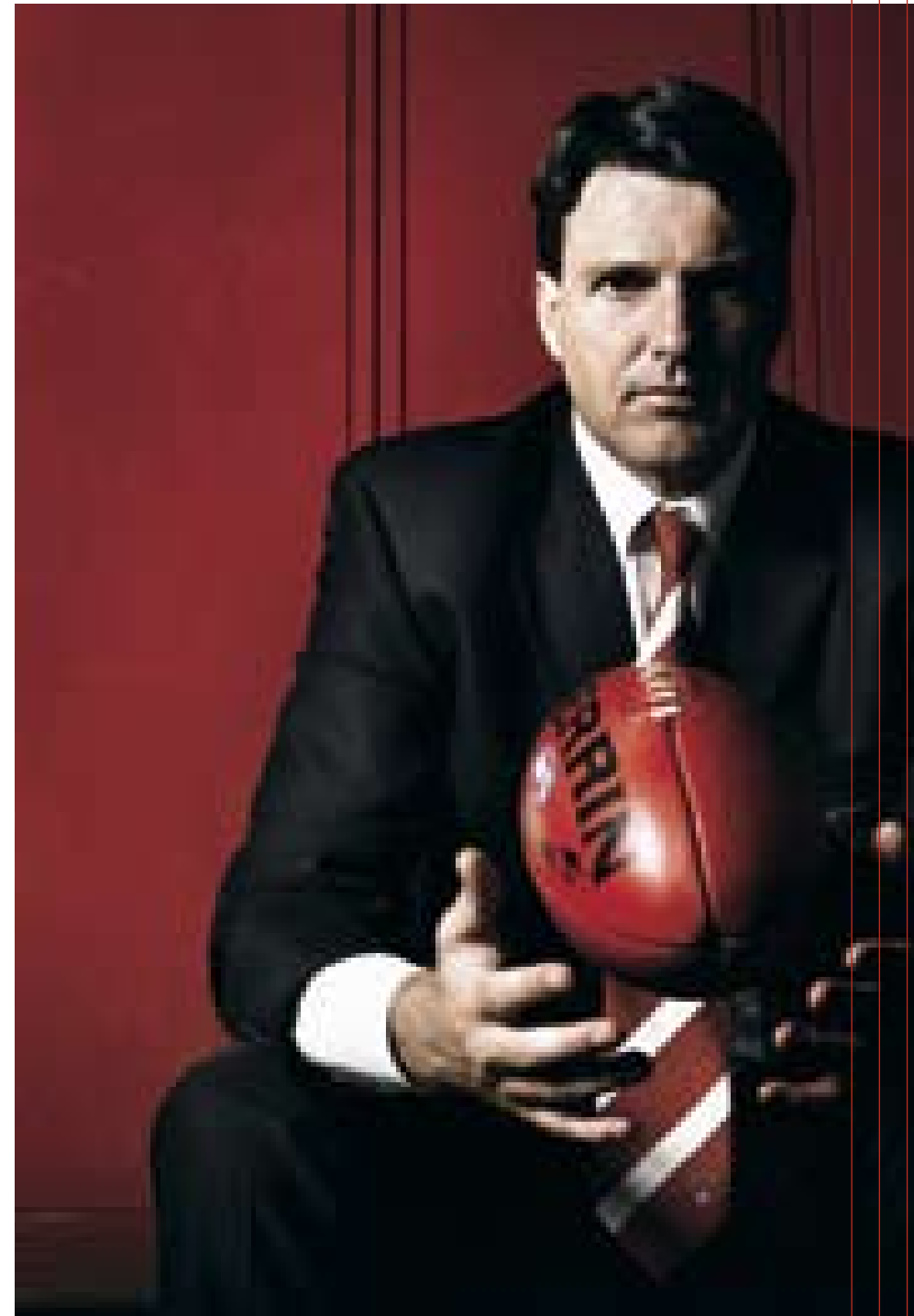
He comes to confound, this Paul Roos bloke, the most unSydney of Sydney heroes. We like brash, flash, biff, boof, sparkle, shine. We want to look like a million dollars. If we'd advertised the job – "Man wanted to coach AFL team in glitzy city with short attention span" – you wonder if Roos's application would have made it past the mail room. Yet here he is, a little bit of Melbourne posted north, winning us things we've never won before and teaching the nation a thing or two about how we now do things in Sin City: modestly; without flash and flair; working hard; shying away from attention.

We haven't changed him; he's changing a part of us. Meet the man they call Roosy, the Sydney football coach who reads books – yes, books. Not just ones with pictures of classic goals or stories of inspiration in which a sporting champion uses a ghost writer to tell you that you can be just like him, if you'd only *believe*. He reads those, too, but right now Roos is in deeper territory, reading a book about life after death. In the football world, that concept is commonly known as losing the grand final by a point – and how the hell do you carry on afterwards? In Roos's world, there are things that matter more and he's reading and thinking about them: heaven, reincarnation. Life and death are the only things that are truly a matter of life and death. Not football.

It may be summer but that doesn't mean it's easy to get an audience with a man whose life revolves around a game played in winter. The season never stops and Roos's diary is full. We meet on a hot Wednesday in December; he and the players are just back from a three day flag-flying exercise in Wollongong – an AFL Community Camp, meeting the fans, doing their bit to promote the code and the club – and when he's done with me, there's still an afternoon of Swans business to deal with. But Roos isn't stressed; things have to be done and things like this – sitting down with yet another reporter – are as much a part of the business as draft picks and recovery sessions. He strides into the lounge area in the Swans offices above the SCG and everything is as expected: he's the footballer from Central Casting. Tall, dark, square of jaw, easy smile, firm handshake, a straightforward "G'day".

So let's start at the end. That loss. That heartbreaking, so-close-he-could-smell-victory loss in the 2006 grand final. He muses on it, remembers the day, watching the clock tick away, realising they couldn't make it. Then this: "At the end of the day, it's a game."

Just a game, if you please, a sentiment that might get you lynched south of the border. Roos, 43, knows all about that because he's a Donvale boy, raised in Melbourne's middle-class, eastern-suburban heartland, though it wouldn't matter if he was a working-class kid from the city's west. He'd still know all about it. Down there →



“I believe in an afterlife. I believe there’s a creator. I’ve got a real interest in spiritual things.” Paul Roos



Far left Sporting a mullet for Fitzroy. **Left** Roos with his family, wife Tami and sons Tyler and Dylan, on the eve of the 2005 AFL Grand Final.

they’ve had a citizenship test for decades: who do you barrack for? You must have an answer – make it up if you have to, then bluff or duck – and in Roos’s case it was Carlton. He played for a local football club as a kid and starred at Fitzroy before moving north to play for the Swans in ’95. As a player, he knew everything about playing football but not much about grand finals. Then he turned to coaching and he made one, then another. But remember: it’s just a game.

In particular it’s a game played on the final Saturday in September at the G. There really isn’t much that matches it for sheer city-stopping passion, pride, drama, spectacle and this-is-all-that-matters competition. And that’s just the casual fans watching on the telly. At the ground they’re happily insane, except for one sensible fellow they’ve let in for the past two years. He sits up there, watching events unfold that nearby are making grown men shake with nerves and hope, elation and despair.

Triumph. Disaster. Roos has met both and seen them off with a respectful nod. Then he has gone home to the two boys who mean more to him than anything. Triumph came in 2005. The Swans went down to take on a team from the west. They did what they so often do: grind, grind, grind, look like losing, stop a few thousand hearts, then win. The margin was four points – or less than the reward the West Coast Eagles would have accrued had one of Roos’s soldiers not taken a grab right on the siren. Some said Leo Barry’s leap was the best mark ever but it was also a mark of the man watching it from the stands: the men who serve under Roos show their respect by defying gravity as well as the odds.

A year later, same place and same occasion, his Swans did what they always do: grind, grind, grind, look like losing, stop a few thousand hearts, then ... lose. By one point. They were one off-centre kick from a draw, a straight kick from a win but the clock stopped. Mr Roos, meet Disaster. And what happened? He was proud. He was modest and calm. He treated winning and losing just the same and everyone noticed. His wife, Tami, says she – and we – saw him at his best. “He responded philosophically, very quickly. I was really, really proud of the way he handled himself. It was the yin and yang: they won one year and lost one year. He had a quiet acceptance.” No tears, no tantrums, no sleepless nights. Says Adam Goodes, one of the many shattered Swans who heard the siren roar with that cruel deficit unremedied: “He was proud of us after we won and he was still proud when we lost.”

It’s real, all those things they say about Roos and his players: the mutual respect; their willingness to run themselves to death for their coach; his insistence that they, like he, remember the importance of family and get their priorities right. He doesn’t often yell at them and when he speaks, they listen. When they speak, he listens, too. It’s

a love-in at the SCG, a mutual admiration society between the leader and the led. “He’s a player’s coach,” says John Worsfold, the Eagles coach who has split the last two premierships with Roos and whose team will square off against Sydney again in one of the opening matches of the 2007 season on March 31. “He wants to hear from his players about how things are going.”

The Roos philosophy can be traced back to 1998, when he ended his playing career and contemplated life on the other side. He didn’t want to forget what it was like to be a player so he made a list, “what I liked about coaches and what I didn’t like”. The List is now an integral part of the Roos legend; he’s even been asked to turn it into a book, which is remarkable considering hardly anybody knows what’s on it. Roos doesn’t share it, only pulling it out occasionally to remind himself of those dos and don’ts. “It’s not rocket science,” he says but that doesn’t mean he’ll let us in on it. “At this stage it’s something I tend to keep to myself.”

The sporting world would surely lap it up – and he’d no doubt be well-rewarded – but it would also seem to be at odds with an innately humble man. Roos is no showboat; you get the feeling he gives the outside world just enough but not too much because he has to keep the best of himself for those who matter most: Tami and the boys, Dylan, 12, and Tyler, 10. If he couldn’t put them first, if the club insisted that he be married to it as well as Tami, he knows who he’d divorce. “I’d walk away and go and do something else.” Tami, the Californian woman Roos wooed on an end-of-season trip to San Diego with Fitzroy in 1988, says there has never been a question about his priorities or hers. “We’ve really made a conscious effort to put the family first. You’ve got to have balance in everything you do and Paul comes home to find the balance.”

They live a relatively normal life in North Randwick. The boys play footy in winter for the Eastern Suburbs Bulldogs; Dad’s there to watch whenever the Swans schedule allows and last year he even stepped in to coach Dylan’s team in their grand final (they won, naturally). Dylan’s off to Cranbrook next year; Tyler has a year to go at Woollahra Public School. Their dad has always been famous and they take it in their stride. “It’s just normal for them,” he shrugs. “They’re used to singing the club song with the players after the game and throwing ice at Barry Hall and having him throw it back at them.”

Away from the footy, they do family things. You might find them at Bronte Beach, riding bikes in the park or grabbing a meal or a movie at the Entertainment Quarter. They get recognised but rarely bothered and they give thanks for this blessing. In Melbourne, coaches and players are treated like gods but the heat from the media and the fans is less intense in Sydney. Then there’s the real climate – the sunny days that →



believe they have died and come back – gone part of the way to the other side. “If somebody suggests a book, I’m happy to read it. There are some fascinating books to read that put footy and life in perspective. It does give you some really good balance, particularly when you’re getting beaten.”

It’s easy to be a graceful winner; tough to shine as a loser. Roos’s heroes are the class acts: Pete Sampras, who Roos knew well when he lived in the US in 1998 (the year he retired and kept his promise to Tami that they would spend some time in her homeland); basketball legend Michael Jordan; and Pat Rafter – “a great person first, a great tennis player second”. Roos says he learned from Rafter’s demeanour after heartbreaking losses in two Wimbledon finals. “The people who inspire me are the ones who go about it with dignity, grace and calm.”

Calm. It sits there alongside perspective as part of the Roos DNA. Tami, who was so entranced by him at first meeting that she rang her parents and said she’d found her future husband, says it’s always been there. “He does not come home and stress. His friends are quite astounded; they say he hasn’t changed at all.” Adam Goodes, who has won two Brownlows with Roos as coach, concurs. “It’s empowering to see that calmness in every situation.”

Roos says he has to work at it; it’s not easy to be placid when his team is getting thumped or on the verge of a grand final loss. “It’s not always easy and there’s a feeling of helplessness when you’re a coach because you can’t go out and kick a goal or take a mark. The hardest time is when you’ve lost a game and you hope you’ve got enough time from leaving the coaches’ box to when you’re addressing the players to get some perspective on the way down.”

Goodes reckons that if Roosy yells, you know he really means it – so take notice. But the coach hates doing it; it must be on The List as a no-no. “There have been a few occasions when players deserved better than the way I treated them. They’re the things you’ve got to be really careful of, not letting emotions cloud your judgement. I’ve been disappointed in myself and said things I shouldn’t have.” So he says sorry. “I think you’ve got to. The players are held up to a certain standard and the coaches have got to be held up to a certain standard, too.”

This is not the language of the game of old. You don’t expect a player like Goodes to proffer sentences such as: “We’ve got the ‘no dickheads’ policy and when you leave the football club we want you to be a better person.” Says Roos: “A lot of people talk about empowerment but there’s a big difference between talking about it and enacting it, giving the players an opportunity to shape their football club.” He always refers to the team, the club, the coaches – he’s just one of several. He wants them all to take credit for the transformation of a club

that had battled over 25 years for respect and results after the old South Melbourne club was sent north.

Roos insists he’s not the innovator; the club is. And the club can convert the unlikeliest of recruits. Barry Hall was once a troublemaker; now he’s a city icon. They’ve just signed Peter “Spida” Everitt, a superstar from Melbourne who some observers fear might violate that “no dickheads” policy. Roos isn’t worried; Spida’s on board and fitting in. “We think he’s going to be a very valuable player for us.” Can we expect anything new or different this season? Not on the field. Roos and the Swans have their ways, which have proven to be winning ones. He had a three-year plan when he took over, stuck to it and in year three, he held the trophy aloft. It was no miracle, he says, just hard work. “A premiership is something you build towards. You don’t win it overnight.”

Worsfold reckons Roos’s rivals admire him almost as much as his own players. The Eagles coach listens to Roos’s press conferences, believing there are lessons to be taken “from the way he conducts himself”. It’s easier to cop a loss to a man like that, he says. “I don’t go into games against Sydney hoping to beat them to stick it up Roosy.”

If Roos has enemies, they’re well-hidden. He’s always commanded respect, right back through his playing career when he became accustomed to wearing the captain’s cap. He’s still best mates with team-mates from those days and has also healed a rift with his former Fitzroy coach, Robert Walls, now a commentator. Walls bagged Roos’s coaching style in early 2005 and said they’d never win the flag playing like that. Roos took offence and then got the best revenge that September – but it still hurt. Walls had been a mentor and a mate. Then, this past July, the older man’s wife died of lung cancer. The two men exchanged phone calls; the rift was instantly history.

No one seems to begrudge him his success or the thrill the 2005 premiership provided the old Bloods fans – the South Melbourne supporters who hadn’t seen a flag since 1933. He’s staying on, he hopes until at least the end of the 2009 season, but whenever he goes it will be without regret. “I’m not going to go biting and scratching. The club has been so good to me. If at some point they said, ‘Look, Roosy, you need to move on,’ I’ll go. And whatever happens will be interesting and exciting.”

And that would be? Well, it could be anything, he says, and it might have nothing to do with football. “Something will hit me on the head or fall from the sky and that’s what I’ll do.” It will be hard to leave Sydney, though, and hard for Sydney if he leaves. He didn’t need to make us look a million dollars, not when he came bearing the rewards of that one day in September, transforming the Swans story into a quiet meditation on grace and courage. No million dollars required; that was priceless. **(s)**

(roosy’ssydney)

Cafe	Beach	Park	Weekend
Parc Cafe, 30 Clovelly Road, Randwick North. Phone: 9398 9222. “Good coffee, good food. This is a regular haunt.”	“Bronte Beach is great for mucking around with the boys plus it’s where we swim. Then we have a bite at a cafe.”	“Queens Park and Centennial Park are great for activities. We take the bikes out or kick the footy with the boys.”	Entertainment Quarter, 122 Lang Road, Moore Park. “The kids love it. The market, bowling, movies, food.”

beg to be spent outdoors – and it’s this that has turned him into a convert. When Roos turned 40, he even bought a bit of Sydney flash – a Porsche, which he loved but didn’t drive often. He’s sold it now, replaced it with a Mercedes-Benz convertible. It’s his new “fun car”, though he reckons Tami’s having more fun with it than he is.

He’s kidding. In truth, they are together a lot and he’s a hands-on dad. “A lot of what we do involves the kids,” he says, and Sydney is a great place to raise them. “It’s that lifestyle,” he says, with parks a skip away and beautiful beaches a hop and a jump. He’s no surfer – they’re hard to find in Donvale – but a swim at Bronte, followed by a kick of the footy with his boys, then coffee at one of the cafes is enough to remind him that this is where he wants to be. Sydney has been kind to him. It allows him the space and time to think – and Roos is a thinker. The football code responsible for Warwick Capper and Sam Newman has also given us a man who meditates, does yoga and ponders the meaning of life.

He and Tami discovered meditation in 1999 when they went on a course run by guru Deepak Chopra. “It’s an extension of who we are as a family,” says Roos. “It’s about trying to get some balance in your life. It’s about spending time with yourself, clearing your thoughts and putting things in perspective.”

He meditates five days a week, typically in the morning, for about half an hour. It’s a personal thing and a spiritual one. Is he religious? “Nobody’s ever asked me that before,” he replies, a reminder that he’s more accustomed to questions about goals that come off a player’s boot than the personal ones that swim around his head. He and Tami are both Catholics but that doesn’t define them. “I believe in an afterlife,” he says. “I believe there’s a creator. I’d be interested to read the Bible, to be honest. I’ve got a real interest in spiritual things but we’re not as a family locked into any particular belief system.”

That book he’s reading on the afterlife is about the experiences of people who