

SEARCHING FOR UNCUT GEMS

Robert Crosby on why the Wests Tigers are the 'Adam Sandler of rugby league'

It brings me no pleasure to add to the dumpster fire of media coverage that ensues every time the Wests Tigers lose.

Where once the joint venture held a dubious reputation as 9th-placed specialists, the tone from afar during the pandemic has turned outright mean-spirited with expert commentators lining up to lay the boot into the side on a routine basis.

The coach has lost the dressing room. Players aren't putting in. Five captains equals no leadership. Too many home grounds. Embarrassing. Weak. Soft.

I imagine the producers at NRL360 had Ben Elias on speed dial, locking in segments for the week ahead, mere seconds after the side found a new way to lose to the Warriors on Friday night.

It's only Round 4 and already the skies are getting grey at Tiger Town.

So instead, let's talk about Adam Sandler.

I have few memories of a time without Billy Madison and Happy Gilmore being a part of my life.

From a young age I adored Sandler's best comedic work and as an adult I continue to be delighted by the nostalgia that comes with each rewatch.

I will always hold a place in my heart for him, but having sat through so many of his offerings over the past two decades - both theatrically and on Netflix - I doubt I'll be breaking new ground by saying that many of them are quite bad.

Plenty of people have made similar observations; his first Netflix feature *The Ridiculous Six* earned an ignominious 0% on Rotten Tomatoes (by comparison *Jack and Jill* was a critical rave at 3%).

Movies like *Grown Ups 2*, *Pixels* and *The Cobbler* are not beyond critique - let me say it again, they are quite bad - but the disdain with which they are discussed quickly descends to a mean-spirited place where deriders salivate with glee at the opportunity to take a dump on an easy target.

If you've made it this far and are wondering, 'why is this being discussed in a magazine called *The Front Row*?', rest assured, there is a point.

Put simply: the Wests Tigers are the Adam Sandler of rugby league.

Like Sandler, the Tigers achieved a rare form of success early on that has only grown in fondness over time.

Like Sandler, the Tigers have become magnets for negative takes due to years of declining performances, culminating in a situation where critics relish the opportunity to unload negative opinions. Why? Because it gets views.

If you're unconvinced then I urge you to tune in following a Tigers loss to NRL360, Sunday Triple M or The Daily Telegraph.

Embarrassing. Weak. Soft. Rinse. Repeat.

Even the less incendiary coverage over at Channel 9 can't resist when it comes to the Tigers.

Among the most asinine coverage to stem in the wake of the "disrespect shown by players towards coach Michael Maguire" (aka Daine Laurie and James Roberts playing poker machines 18 hours before kick-off in Newcastle), *Six Tackles* with Gus podcast host Mat Thompson broached discussion of the incident with a comical level of faux concern.



ILLUSTRATION BY THEBIGGESTTIGER

Thompson sounded noticeably worried at the very thought of players hypothetically gambling away \$2,000 the night before a game. That same concern was oddly absent minutes later whilst spruiking the betting odds offered by the show's sponsor.

All this is not to suggest the Tigers should be free from criticism.

For all the talk of costly refereeing decisions in the wrap-up of the Warriors loss, David Nofoaluma almost certainly would have scored had Jock Madden passed the ball to his support man, while Laurie was left to rue an error of his own by botching a try over the line.

The shortcomings of the club have been laid out extensively and without a radical shift in direction on-field performances and off-field criticism will worsen.

The Wests Tigers are the Adam Sandler of rugby league, but within that label exists an answer for the struggling club.

In 2019, Sandler took a chance with directors Josh and Bennie Safdie for a film in complete contrast to the comedies that made him a star. What followed was *Uncut Gems*, a masterpiece likened to a two-hour plus panic attack that saw him honoured as Best Actor at the Independent Spirit Awards.

Sandler proved he could change and achieve something greater than the success that came early on in his career by daring to make himself uncomfortable and trusting in the thoroughly-crafted vision of his directors.

Perhaps there is a similar lesson for the Tigers to heed.

Or maybe what you've just read is one of the most insanely idiotic things you've ever heard. Where at no point in my rambling, incoherent response was I even close to anything that could be considered a rational thought. Perhaps everyone who read this article is now dumber for having read it. Perhaps I'm awarded no points, and may God have mercy on my soul.