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Why NRL stars may punt on Europe and US

Brad Walter | July 11, 2008

Storm star Greg Inglis has been told he could earn more than \$1 million per season as an NFL punter, amid fears the NRL is set to become a breeding ground for rival codes in other countries.

While Inglis is not interested in playing NFL and insists he would never consider switching to rugby union, the approach highlights the growing threat the NRL faces from cashed-up sports overseas.

News this week that Penrith winger Luke Rooney had signed with French rugby union club Toulon on a two-year deal equivalent to \$1.3 million has sent shockwaves through the game and more players are expected to be targeted. Already Craig Gower and David Vaealiki are playing rugby union in France, and Cowboys utility Sione Faumuina is being touted as the next player to make the move.

St George Illawarra captain Mark Gasnier is also weighing up the switch and has been linked to Stade Francais, where former Waratahs mentor Ewen McKenzie was recently appointed as coach.

Should Gasnier, who has indicated to friends that he is leaning towards leaving but would like to win a premiership with the Dragons before he does, decide to go it would be a massive blow to the NRL.

But of more concern is the game's ability to retain the likes of Inglis, Israel Folau and Krisnan Inu.

"I just can't see how we're going to be able to keep those guys, or someone like a Sonny Bill Williams," said Canberra chief executive Don Furner, whose club was close to snaring Rooney until a French agent alerted the former Test winger's manager Allan Gainey of the interest in France. "If things keep going the way they are, we're going to end up like Australian soccer."

It's not just French rugby union that poses the threat, though. Former Raiders captain Clinton Schifcofske has signed a deal worth about \$600,000 per season to play rugby union in Ireland after spending the past two years with the Queensland Reds, and Kiwis star Shontayne Hape last month quit Bradford after six years in Super League to join Bath.

Even the NFL is an option for players, with Newcastle second-rower Cory Paterson undergoing training in the hope of eventually gaining a contract with a US club and Inglis becoming a target.

"We don't usually contact people but I did give Greg Inglis's manager a call just to see if he would be interested," said Cameron McGillivray, whose Australian Kicking and Punting Academy scouts potential NFL players. "Initially we focused mainly on AFL players but now I think the NRL players are bigger kickers. Greg has got a great kick on him and with the size of him, I think he would go really well as a punter in the NFL. The minimum wage in the NFL is \$US330,000 (\$344,000) but eventually he could make more than \$1 million."

For his part, Inglis said the NFL had no appeal to him and he yesterday ruled out a switch to rugby union when his contract with Melbourne expires at the end of 2010.

"No, not at all. I wouldn't go to union no matter how much money they offer. I don't have the passion for it that I have for league, it's quite simple," Inglis told Fairfax.

Folau, who is heading to Brisbane next season, wasn't as sure.

"Probably some time down the track when my career is almost over, the money that comes in there it will pretty tempting for most players and I think it plays a part in most players' decisions," he said.

"Obviously they don't have a salary cap or anything like that, the money's pretty tempting for players to go overseas to France and that and that's is why players are leaving. I think you'll see a few more NRL players leave down the track because of that reason"

player agent Steve Gillis also predicted more players would head overseas and said he couldn't see how the NRL could stop the exodus.

"When someone like Greg Inglis can earn about \$400,000 per year in the NRL and \$1 million per year playing rugby in Europe, he's got to go," Gillis said. " I think you'll find more and more players will want to at least investigate playing over there and I don't really know if there is a solution because we just can't match the money at the moment.

"I've got a player - a high-profile, experienced player - who is very seriously looking at such a switch. And I'm sure there will be more."

Rooney, who has never played rugby union before and infamously said during the 2004 Kangaroos tour that he hadn't enjoyed a trip to Prague because there weren't enough pubs or TABs, spoke to Gower - his former Penrith and Australian teammate - before making up his mind.

"'Gowie' loves it over there. The lifestyle - everything," Rooney said. "He said playing the game takes a bit of getting used to, but he only had positive things to say about the move. The offer I got was too good to knock back and I hear a few clubs over there might be looking for league players."



Sky's the limit ... Melbourne and Maroons star Israel Folau and plenty of his mates could earn huge sums playing overseas.

Photo: *Craig Golding*

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