

No sweet charity

WHAT started as a good-natured way of raising funds for a good cause evolved into a fierce battle between two great clubs. By PETER BADEL

MARK Coyne didn't know what had hit him. There he stood, a fresh-faced 20-year-old on the flanks in his first match for St George since he was snared from the Brisbane league and indoctrinated in Sydney football. South Sydney style.

The scene was Redfern Oval, February 20, 1988. The occasion was Charity Shield. The memories are unforgettable.

"I'd just arrived in Sydney and the Dragons wanted to see what I could do, so I was picked to play in this Charity Shield," recalls Coyne. "It was meant to be a trial, but it was tougher than anything I'd played in my life."

"I remember standing out on the wing and the Souths supporters were abusing the heck out of me. I thought: 'What am I doing here?'"

"The scary part is that I wasn't even playing first grade that year... I was in the under-21s! When it came to Charity Shield, there was always plenty of feeling, and it never changes."

It has now been 20 years since the concept was born to give players some much-needed match fitness, with proceeds from the annual contest shared between St George hospital and inner-city counterparts.

And it's a wise, almost ironic, choice, because there have been enough blood and thunder clashes to fill the western wing at South Sydney hospital with Charity Shield victims.

Just ask Gary Hambly. In the first encounter at Redfern Oval in 1982, the Souths forward had his contact lens dislodged in an all-in brawl. What was supposed to be an innocuous, regulation trial metamorphosed into a battleground where arguably the code's two greatest clubs

shoved proud traditions, history and an intense rivalry in each other's face.

Colourful Rabbitohs great Mario Fenech sums it up succinctly when he says: "It's a trial... but it's not a trial". And so it seems. In 1999 the Charity Shield — which has traditionally signalled the re-emergence of rugby league after the summer months — attracted a bumper crowd of 28,310 at the SFS, while the following year almost 20,000 turned up.

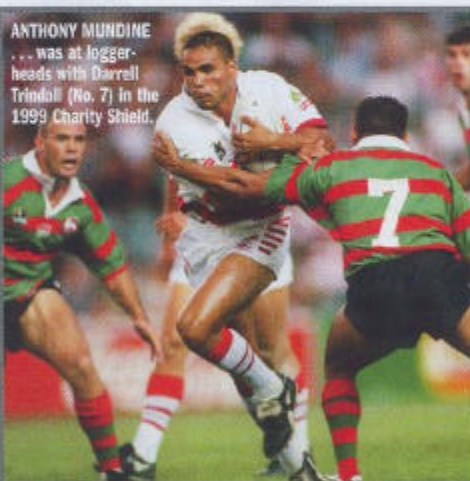
This year, Aussie Stadium (formerly the SFS) will not have a vacant seat for the first time since the 1997 ARL grand final as fans flock to see Souths have their first genuine hit-out since being axed from the NRL two years ago.

The teams will even be playing for a trophy — a remarkable scenario for a match which has no bearing on either club's title prospects.

"The Charity Shield was established for a good cause, but as the concept evolved players no longer saw it as a trial. It became symbolic of the great traditions, respect and rivalry between Souths and St George," explains Fenech.

"In a lot of trials you tend to go through the motions and hope not to get injured, but when it came to Charity Shield, we were always fair dinkum, and we wanted to win."

According to Fenech, the Rabbitohs



ANTHONY MUNDINE... was at loggerheads with Darrell Trindoli (No. 7) in the 1999 Charity Shield.

CHARITY SHIELD RESULTS

1982 - ST GEORGE 9 (Rod Reddy try; George Grant 3 goals) defeated SOUTHS 7 (Mark Ross try; Tony Melrose 2 goals) at Redfern Oval, February 13. Crowd: 10,980.

1983 - ST GEORGE 28 (Steve Casey 2, Steve Gearin 2, Graeme Wynn tries; Gearin 4 goals) defeated SOUTHS 10 (Tony Rampling, Ken Stewart tries; Tony Melrose goal) at Redfern Oval, February 12.

1984 - SOUTHS 24 (Neil Baker 2, Mick Pobjie, George Longbottom

tries; Baker 3, John Kambas goals) defeated ST GEORGE 6 (Steve Morris try; Gearin goal) at Redfern Oval, March 10. Crowd: 8,365.

1985 - ST GEORGE 10 (Graeme Wynn, Brian Johnston tries; Paul Morris goal) defeated SOUTHS 8 (Terry Murphy try; Neil Baker 2 goals) at Redfern Oval, March 10. Crowd: 8,022.

1986 - ST GEORGE 12 (Stephen Funnell try; Michael O'Connor 4 goals) defeated SOUTHS 0 at Redfern Oval, February 15.

1987 - ST GEORGE 28 (Glenn Burgess 2, Ricky Walford, Brian Johnston tries; Walford 6 goals) defeated SOUTHS 14 (Mark Ross, Brad Webb, Phil Blake tries; Neil Baker goal) at Redfern Oval, February 7.

1988 - SOUTHS 30 (Paul Roberts 2, Bruce Longbottom 2, Brett Ross, Ian Roberts tries; Mark Ellison 3 goals) defeated ST GEORGE 6 (Brad Mackay try; Ricky Walford goal) at Redfern Oval, February 20.

1989 - SOUTHS 20 (Graham Lyons,

Paul Roberts, Charlie Saab tries; Mark Ellison 4 goals) defeated ST GEORGE 16 (Michael Beattie, Phillip Duke tries; Ricky Walford 4 goals) at Sydney Football Stadium, February 25. Crowd: 10,491.

1990 - SOUTHS 10 (Ross Harrington, Bruce Longbottom tries; Mark Ellison goal) drew with ST GEORGE 10 (Ricky Walford try; Walford 3 goals) at Sydney Football Stadium, February 17.

1991 - SOUTHS 16 (Bill Noke, Darren Maroon, Craig Coleman tries