

## Tape 'offered' to Crowe, court told

Author: Ellen Connolly

Date: 20/06/2002

Nightclub owner Philip Cropper said it was a business deal an "offer" to help Hollywood actor Russell Crowe.

But the Crown prosecutor, Mr Colin McPherson, says it was extortion.

Yesterday the events surrounding the attempted "transaction", which centres on a video of Crowe in a drunken fight outside a nightclub, were reignited, three years on, and this time in the District Court in Coffs Harbour.

Crowe was nowhere to be found yesterday. Nor was Brett Martin, the man involved in the brawl outside the Saloon Bar in Coffs Harbour in 1999.

However Mr Cropper, 38, and Malcolm Mercer, part-owner of the Saloon Bar at the time, were there in the dock. They have pleaded not guilty to attempting to make an unwarranted demand of Russell Ira Crowe that unless he paid an amount of money, the video tape would be released to the international media.

The tape, which has not been shown to the jury, depicts Crowe, the "instigator of at least the physical activity that took place", manhandling a male who was "remonstrating fairly heavily" with a woman, the court was told.

Crowe's minders become involved in the fracas before he left in a stretch limousine. When police arrived, Mr Martin had a cut to his lip and claimed he had been bitten on the neck.

In the following weeks, Mr Cropper and Mr Mercer tried to get Crowe to pay up to \$200,000 for the tape to stop it being made public.

"They seized the opportunity," Mr McPherson said. "They were in it to make a quick quid. They were in it to extort some money from him."

Phone intercepts recorded the pair during negotiations, including their approach to South Sydney Rugby League coach Craig Coleman.

In that conversation Mr Cropper asked Coleman to inform his friend Crowe about the tape of "him whacking a sheila".

"If Russell Crowe wants it, he better put his hand in his pocket and buy it," Mr Cropper tells Coleman.

"You don't want to see it f---ing up his career," he continues to Coleman.

## The Sydney Morning Herald

Coleman is heard to reply: "Righto mate, I will contact him."

Coleman said yesterday he telephoned Crowe but could not recall accurately the conversation.

In another phone intercept, Mercer states to Cropper: "Remind Crowe that it's even got him on the bar ripping some girl's top."

The tape does not contain such an incident.

The tape was sold to Channel 9's A Current Affair for an undisclosed amount and The Daily Telegraph bought four photos from it for \$6000.

Mr Paul King, counsel for Mr Cropper, told the jury his client had a product to sell and this was "a business deal" with Crowe.

Mr Peter Davies, counsel for Mr Mercer, said the tape belonged to his client and he could "do with it as he wished".

His client's intention was not to issue a "pay up or else" threat to Crowe, but to get the best price for the tape.

The trial continues.