

# POORE IT ON!

New Eels enforcer Justin Poore may have a softer side when not on the field, but on it he's ready to come down hard on his former Dragons team-mates when they meet this weekend. **By JOE BARTON**

**H** E'S known as one of rugby league's toughest players, an uncompromising forward with a hard head who regularly singles out his opposition's toughest prop at the start of each game and makes it his mission to stop them at any cost.

But there's a secret about Justin Poore. "Sometimes he's just a big softie," laughs new best mate Tim Mannah. "Us front-rowers have the stereotype of being the big angry guys of the team, and sometimes he tries to keep his soft side a bit of a secret because he doesn't want people to think he's a soft prop!

"But he's a really nice guy and I think even if he has **a good heart**, he shows on the field that he's not soft. And there's nothing wrong with that."

The reality is that Poore has a head of granite and a heart of gold. A burly front-rower who is brought to tears by social injustices such as the plight of the Rwandan people and who gives to charities far more than he would ever admit.

Poore is beaming as he talks about the seven-year-old girl who he saw for a second time when he went back to Rwanda with Eels CEO Paul Osborne this past off-season to build homes and schools for widows and orphans.

"That was **a big buzz** for me, that was one of the main things I was looking forward to going back this time," Poore tells *Big League*.

"I didn't think she'd remember me, but I saw her again and I actually chased her down to give her a new pair of shoes.

"As soon as she got the shoes on, she sprinted home and I didn't see her for a couple of days after that! They were white when I gave them to her and I reckon they would've been black by the time she got home!"

Poore is coming off a career-best season: he averaged 110 metres per game as part of a dependable St George Illawarra forward pack that won the minor premiership and also made his first foray into State of Origin football during 2009.

And in his career-defining season, Poore made a career-defining decision to leave his beloved Dragons – whom he faces this Friday night in a bell-ringing opener to the 2010 season.

The 25-year-old is

delighted to get the grudge match finished and out of the way early – especially after he wore some heat from Dragons' fans when the two clubs played a trial in Perth last month.

"Yes, definitely happy about that," he admits. "It's good to have it in Round 1

because no-one has really hit their straps yet, and I'm sure I'm in for a lot of taunting.

"I copped a bit in Perth – and that was only the Perth fans, giving me the usual stuff, calling me 'traitor' and that sort of thing.



HOPE: Rwanda is a cause close to his heart.

"It's a massive game for him, he's been looking forward to it for a long time, we'll all be putting our best foot forward and ripping in, but I think Poore has got a bit more to prove against his old club."

Poore says he gets a kick out of all the taunts, explaining: "If you don't laugh at it, you'll cry."

His mature outlook was shaped and reinforced in war-torn Rwanda, where Poore revisited the Kigali Genocide Museum and was again confronted by horrific tales of murder.

"So I can't wait for what the Sydney fans have in store for me!"

Young team-mate Mannah, who also travelled to Rwanda with Poore, says his fellow bookend should not be

worried about any insults coming from the crowd.

"I think he'll cop a bit, because I would be giving him grief if I was (a Dragons fan)," Mannah says.

"He's such a good player and you never like to see good players leave your team, so you can understand why they would feel that way.

"But Justin will have the Parra fans behind him 100 per cent – which is good because it is going to be a huge game.

"You could go through that museum 100 times and still find something different," Poore tells us. "And this time we went to a church where 5,000 people were murdered. You walk in there, and there are clothes hanging off the church, most of the pews are broken... It's a pretty daunting place.

"One of the ministers was telling us what happened in there and it was eerie sitting there and knowing you're sitting in a place where so many people died.

"I like to think I'm a bit of a hard-arse, but you actually get **a bit teary** and quite emotional because you can never comprehend what they go through – that's when you realise how petty football is compared to what these people are going through."

The eye-opening Rwandan trip was also the perfect way to bond with three of his new Eels team-mates – Mannah, Matt Keating and Joel Reddy – after his gut-wrenching decision to leave the Dragons.

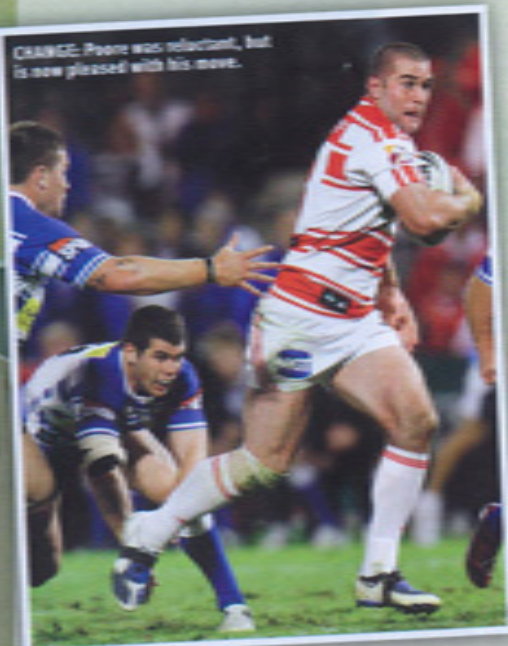
"When I signed, I think they were one from 12! I wasn't too pumped about it and I was thinking 'what have I done?'," he jokes.

"It was a really tough time actually, my decision to go wasn't really based on what the papers were saying.

"A lot was happening behind the scenes and then I had to go and I was very reluctant. But since I've come over here it's worked out really well and I'm really happy."

"Last year, Justin helped raise \$35,000 at a charity function for Hope Rwanda, but the goal for this year's function is to triple that figure. For more information visit [www.hoperwanda.org](http://www.hoperwanda.org)

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CHANGE: Poore was reluctant, but is now pleased with his move.

