

NRL 2018: Matt Lodge to resume career but victims still unpaid, says lawyer

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The lawyer representing the victims of Matt Lodge's New York rampage in 2015 has expressed outrage that the Brisbane Broncos forward is set to resume his NRL career without having handed over a cent of the \$US1.234 million (\$1.6 million) damages bill he was ordered to pay them by an American judge.

Lodge, 22, is listed to make his first appearance for the Broncos in their trial match against Gold Coast Titans at Toowoomba on Saturday night in what will be his first top-grade outing in nearly three years.

Controversy: Matt Lodge is set to resume his NRL career this season.

The front-rower's impending return comes, however, with the four victims of his night of rage in the US yet to receive compensation.

"Our clients haven't been paid," said Renan Varghese, a senior associate at law firm Wigdor LLP. "We are in the process of looking into avenues to collect against him for his conduct.

"The fact of the matter is he has not taken responsibility for those actions. We believe that he should be required to take such responsibility and a court has already found he should have to take responsibility."

Lodge escaped a prison sentence in December 2016 when a New York judge granted him a conditional discharge after he performed community service and had treatment for anger and alcohol abuse.

However, at the conclusion of a subsequent civil case last year brought against him by the victims - German tourist Carolin Dekeyser, New York couple Joseph Cartright and Ruth Fowler and their then nine-year-old son - [he was ordered to pay them a total of \\$1.6 million](#).

The Broncos, who signed him to a one-year deal last November, have previously defended their acquisition of the prop, with coach Wayne Bennett speaking about how Lodge had served his time out of the game and turned his life around, quitting alcohol and enrolling in university. Lodge spent last season in the Broncos feeder system with Intrust Super Cup side Redcliffe before winning a place in Brisbane's top-30 squad and having his contract registered by the NRL.

Lodge told News Corp last November the US incident was "a wake-up call in my life". "Everyone has a past and I can only apologise for what I did," he said.

Broncos chief executive Paul White said on Thursday that "Matt has done a mountain of work to get to a place where he now deserves a second chance".

Varghese said the victims did not want Lodge to be unable to play again but were unhappy there had been no commitment to pay damages set by a US District Court judge. Lodge in 2016 had offered to settle for a "small amount" of the claim, Varghese said during the civil proceedings.

"Our clients aren't vindictive people," Varghese said on Thursday. "They're not looking to leave Mr Lodge unable to work. But it's been clear by his actions in this case that he thinks he's above the law and above taking any responsibility for his actions and we can't abide by that.

"They're not happy about the fact that someone could behave the way that he did and treat innocent

individuals in the way that he did and can essentially resume his life as if nothing had happened. They don't think it's appropriate and they're disappointed in his behaviour even since the incident.

"He never appeared in the civil case. We had contact with a lawyer purporting to represent him and ... our discussions were unsatisfactory.

"We would hope that Mr Lodge can't escape his judgment just by fleeing back to Australia."

Lodge was signed by Brisbane to a minimum-wage contract of \$100,000 but his earning capacity has the potential to balloon well beyond that in coming years, if he delivers on the talent that the Broncos believe he has. Bennett and Brisbane officials have been very impressed by him.

"He has satisfied the fit-and-proper person test as set down by the NRL, who have ratified his return to the top level of the game," White said.

"He has been alcohol-free for more than two years, he is completing university study, and he is doing regular work with young men on the dangers of alcohol and taking personal responsibility for their actions. Matt has also recently become a father, and is a far more mature and responsible person who has learnt from his mistakes, and is sorry for what he did.

"The Broncos believe he is now on the right path and will continue to support him in every way going forward."

Lodge's manager, Isaac Moses, declined to comment when contacted on Thursday.

Varghese declined to detail how he planned to recoup the damages if they remained unpaid but Chris Kintis, a partner in commercial dispute resolution at ClarkeKann Lawyers, said there were options available.

"US civil judgments can be enforced in Australia. However, there is a process," Kintis said. "Fresh proceedings would have to be first commenced in Australia to recognise the US judgment. It would then likely become enforceable just as any Australian judgment would."

The incident in New York occurred from about 4am on October 16, 2015 when Lodge, then at Wests Tigers, followed Ms Dekeyser to an apartment building, grabbing her and saying: "Do you think you're going to die? This is the night you're going to die."

The court was told he then forced his way into an apartment resided in by Mr Cartright, Ms Fowler and their son, grabbing Cartright and making death threats. The terrified family ended up moving as a result and took the young boy to a child therapist after he suffered night terrors.

"It's the kind of situation that a normal person can't really imagine being put into," Varghese said.

"The effects of it are probably going to stay with them for a long time, if not the rest of their lives. Especially when you're dealing with a young child and his parents. It's not something you can wave away."