

Matthew Lodge free to play as footage surfaces of US rampage

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March 2, 2018

Matthew Lodge remains free to make his NRL comeback despite the emergence of shocking CCTV footage of his drunken New York rampage yesterday.

Lodge is expected to make his debut for Brisbane in the NRL's season-opening game against St George Illawarra at Jubilee Oval on Thursday night. It will be his first appearance in the top grade since June 28, 2016.

Footage of the incidents, released to television outlets on Friday, shows Lodge attacking New York resident Joseph Cartright, who had come to the assistance of two women the former Wests Tigers prop accosted. Lodge is seen bearhugging Cartright before punching him in the head with a vicious right hook. Lodge follows up with a series of wild haymakers.

The Broncos are standing by their previous statements on Lodge and a club spokesman said they were limited by the fact there was an ongoing civil matter, which could yet end up before an Australian court.

It is believed club officials are under the impression he had reached out to his victims via correspondence two years ago to apologise. The couple's lawyer Renan Varghese said neither he nor the victims had seen anything of the sort.

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Speaking to Fairfax Media in August of 2016, Lodge said: "I've written a letter and apologised. What happened wasn't really me and I assured them that nothing like that will ever happen again, from my part to them or anyone else. I've learned a lot from it and if there's anything I can do to help [I will]."

Broncos chief executive Paul White has maintained that Lodge "has done a mountain of work to get to a place where he deserves a second chance. 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.

Speaking for the first time, Cartright and his partner Ruth Fowler said they were "infuriated" to see Lodge welcomed back into professional rugby league by Broncos despite not paying a cent of damages over the home invasion.

Upset at the criminal court outcome, the couple and another victim, German tourist Caroline Dekeyser, pursued civil action and were awarded \$US1.2 million (\$1.6 million).

"It's pretty heartbreaking to think that this man might become a role model for Australian children given what he did to us," said Fowler, whose son Henry cowered in a bathroom as Lodge destroyed their Upper West Side unit in the early hours of October 16, 2015.

Those close to Lodge believe he doesn't have the means to start repaying the money and that his best chance of doing so is continuing his league career. It's understood he spent a period living in his car after he returned to Australia.

The 22-year-old is an undeniable talent, with good judges predicting he would transition from junior to senior representative ranks when he first burst onto the scene. However, questions remain about the appropriateness of him resuming his career given the a long rap sheet that includes domestic violence charges.

Cartright said he was "disappointed ... but not surprised" to see Lodge had been awarded an NRL contract and that the Broncos and club sponsor NRMA had publicly backed him.

"There is no remorse, there's no sense of guilt, there is no sense of responsibility," he said. "That's something that the league should be really concerned about. That's the message they're putting forward."

Speaking before the CCTV footage emerged, Melbourne skipper Cameron Smith - a former teammate of Lodge's at the Storm - said the forward was on his last chance.

"I think he has been given a couple of chances now to come back into our game and play," Smith said. "He probably is on his last chance. I would say if he is not, he would be pretty close."

"[But] I am hearing that he has put in a lot of hard work to get his life sorted away from football. I think that is the most important thing. I think sometimes we get a bit caught up in the player and not the person. I know he has had some troubles and issues in the past but I think he is a good kid."

"He has made some mistakes but as long as he can make up for those mistakes and show everyone he is willing to do the right thing now, and be a good person and help our game grow when he is involved in that, I hope he achieves that."

Lodge trialled strongly for the Broncos in the pre-season and was a standout forward in the Queensland Cup last year.

"The Broncos players I have spoken to have big raps on him," Smith said. "They reckon he trains hard, works hard and is a fantastic player. He has great skills for a big man. I have seen that as a young guy. He came down to us at 17 or 18. He was only a baby then. He could be [an x-factor]. There is no doubt he is a quality footballer."

An NRL spokesman said the league based its sanction on the police charges which had seen Lodge out of the game for more than two years.

