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BIG LEAGUE

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2020
NRL SEASON PREVIEW

Volume 101. Preview. Feb – Mar 2020
Twitter & Facebook: bigleaguemag



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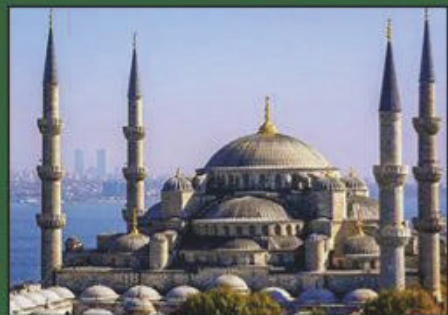
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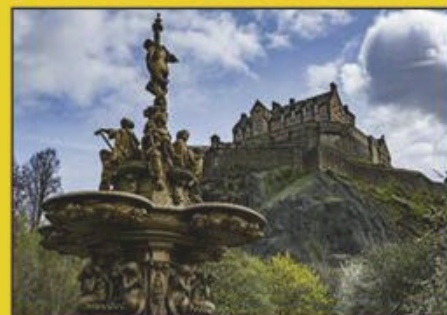
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Britain



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Britain



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*This tour does not include Tour Host
Tommy Raudonikis

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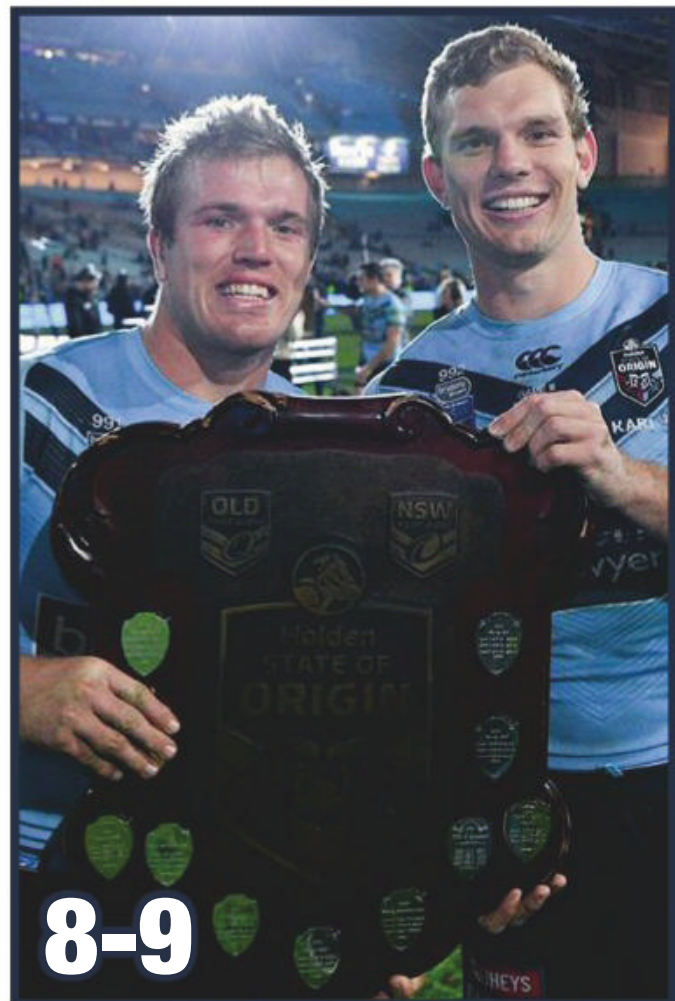
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KICKING OFF



MARIA TSIALIS

WELCOME to a new season of rugby league. It's been a long summer where so many families, businesses and wildlife along the east coast of Australia have suffered through bushfires and drought. It's been heartbreaking to witness. The rugby league community – as always – has been on-hand to help out, and we cover everything your club has or will be doing to raise much-needed funds on pages 18-19.

In the meantime, I hope this NRL Season Preview gets you prepared for the footy action ahead. We've spoken to coaches and key players across all the clubs about their preparation, strengths and weaknesses. We've got every club's personal draw for the season, their squad stats and top 17s.

One of our favourite commentators Andrew Voss has also done some painstaking research to come up with his predicted finishes for all 16 clubs. We also hope you enjoy our bonus extra-large season draw and tipping chart!

We go to print with this issue before the Nines and All Stars are played, so we'll be covering both in our Round 1 issue, on sale March 12. *The Official 2020 NRL Season Guide* will be on sale March 2.

If that's still not enough to tide you over until kick-off, we will be putting out four special editions of the *Big League Podcast* from mid-February. Look us up on Apple Podcasts, Spotify or your favourite app to tune in.

We look forward to sharing some great rugby league yarns with you in 2020!

BIG LEAGUE

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PREDICTIONS

BIG LEAGUE'S FEARLESS PREDICTIONS

Never afraid to go out on a limb, here are the team's predictions for the 2020 season.

Maria Tsialis

Editor

Top 8

Roosters

Rabbitohs

Eels

Sea Eagles

Raiders

Storm

Broncos

Knights

Premiers: Rabbitohs

Wooden spoon: Warriors

Dally M: Mitch Moses

Michael Blok

Staff Writer

Top 8

Roosters

Storm

Eels

Raiders

Rabbitohs

Sea Eagles

Panthers

Broncos

Premiers: Storm

Wooden spoon: Titans

Dally M: Roger Tuivasa-Sheck

Nick Tsolakis

Marketing and Circulation Executive

Top 8

Rabbitohs

Roosters

Raiders

Storm

Sea Eagles

Eels

Knights

Wests Tigers

Premiers: Rabbitohs

Wooden spoon: Titans

Dally M: James Tedesco

David Piepers

Subeditor

Top 8

Storm

Eels

Roosters

Sea Eagles

Rabbitohs

Broncos

Raiders

Knights

Premiers: Eels

Wooden spoon: Warriors

Dally M: Anthony Milford

Martin Gabor

Staff Writer

Top 8

Roosters

Eels

Rabbitohs

Raiders

Storm

Sea Eagles

Broncos

Cowboys

Premiers: Sea Eagles

Wooden spoon: Titans

Dally M: Cameron Smith

Brett Willis

GM – Retail and Circulation

Top 8

Raiders

Sea Eagles

Roosters

Eels

Storm

Rabbitohs

Dragons

Sharks

Premiers: Raiders

Wooden spoon: Bulldogs

Dally M: Payne Haas

Craig Loughlin-Smith

Art Director

Top 8

Raiders

Sea Eagles

Eels

Roosters

Panthers

Storm

Broncos

Titans

Premiers: Sea Eagles

Wooden spoon: Cowboys

Dally M: Tom Trbojevic

Tina Colwell

Designer

Top 8

Roosters

Storm

Raiders

Rabbitohs

Eels

Warriors

Bulldogs

Broncos

Premiers: Storm

Wooden spoon: Titans

Dally M: Kalyn Ponga

Vincent Luu

Retail and Circulation

Top 8

Roosters

Storm

Rabbitohs

Raiders

Manly

Eels

Broncos

Cowboys

Premiers: Storm

Wooden spoon: Titans

Dally M: James Tedesco

ASK THE EXPERTS

Rugby league journalists and commentators rate the Storm as the team to beat this season.



Dally M winner predictions

Mitch Moses	7
Tom Trbojevic	4
James Tedesco	3
Mitchell Pearce	2
Luke Keary	2
Roger Tuivasa-Sheck	2
Cameron Smith	2
Cameron Murray	1
Josh Hodgson	1
Cameron Munster	1
Anthony Milford	1
Payne Haas	1
Kalyn Ponga	1

Phil Rothfield The Daily Telegraph

- Roosters
- Storm
- Raiders
- Sea Eagles
- Broncos
- Eels
- Sharks
- Knights

Premiers: Raiders
Wooden spoon: Titans
Dally M: Mitchell Pearce

Margie McDonald NRL.com

- Rabbitohs
- Raiders
- Storm
- Eels
- Roosters
- Broncos
- Sea Eagles
- Knights

Premiers: Eels
Wooden spoon: Warriors
Dally M: Mitch Moses

Warren Smith Fox League

- Storm
- Raiders
- Roosters
- Sea Eagles
- Eels
- Broncos
- Rabbitohs
- Cowboys

Premiers: Raiders
Wooden spoon: Titans
Dally M: Tom Trbojevic

NRL Physio The Daily Telegraph

- Storm
- Rabbitohs
- Roosters
- Sea Eagles
- Raiders
- Broncos
- Cowboys
- Eels

Premiers: Storm
Wooden spoon: Titans
Dally M: Cameron Smith

PREDICTIONS



30%

predict the Storm will win the 2020 premiership



45%

predict the Knights will return to the top eight

Matt Logue
The Daily Telegraph

Rabbitohs

Roosters

Storm

Raiders

Eels

Knights

Broncos

Sea Eagles

Premiers: Rabbitohs
Wooden spoon: Titans
Dally M: Cameron Murray

Michael Carayannis
The Daily Telegraph

Roosters

Eels

Rabbitohs

Raiders

Storm

Broncos

Knights

Sea Eagles

Premiers: Eels
Wooden spoon: Titans
Dally M: Mitch Moses

James Bracey
Channel Nine

Eels

Raiders

Rabbitohs

Roosters

Storm

Sharks

Broncos

Sea Eagles

Premiers: Raiders
Wooden spoon: Titans
Dally M: Josh Hodgson

Danika Mason
Channel Nine

Rabbitohs

Storm

Roosters

Raiders

Cowboys

Sea Eagles

Eels

Panthers

Premiers: Rabbitohs
Wooden spoon: Titans
Dally M: Tom Trbojevic

Fatima Kdouh
The Daily Telegraph

Roosters

Storm

Rabbitohs

Raiders

Eels

Sea Eagles

Cowboys

Broncos

Premiers: Raiders
Wooden spoon: Titans
Dally M: Mitch Moses

Sam Bremner
Jillaroos

Eels

Rabbitohs

Sea Eagles

Roosters

Storm

Wests Tigers

Knights

Raiders

Premiers: Eels
Wooden spoon: Warriors
Dally M: Tom Trbojevic

Alicia Newton
NRL.com

Sea Eagles

Storm

Roosters

Eels

Raiders

Knights

Panthers

Wests Tigers

Premiers: Roosters
Wooden spoon: Warriors
Dally M: Mitchell Pearce

Zac Bailey
NRL.com

Roosters

Eels

Storm

Raiders

Rabbitohs

Sea Eagles

Panthers

Broncos

Premiers: Roosters
Wooden spoon: Titans
Dally M: Luke Keary

Scott Bailey
AAP

Roosters

Storm

Sea Eagles

Eels

Wests Tigers

Raiders

Rabbitohs

Broncos

Premiers: Storm
Wooden spoon: Titans
Dally M: Luke Keary

Jake Duke
Channel Nine

Storm

Rabbitohs

Roosters

Sea Eagles

Raiders

Cowboys

Eels

Sharks

Premiers: Storm
Wooden spoon: Titans
Dally M: Cameron Munster

Pam Whaley
AAP

Roosters

Eels

Storm

Sea Eagles

Raiders

Knights

Broncos

Rabbitohs

Premiers: Storm
Wooden spoon: Warriors
Dally M: Mitch Moses

Andrew Voss
Fox League

Roosters

Storm

Rabbitohs

Eels

Raiders

Broncos

Sea Eagles

Knights

Premiers: Roosters
Wooden spoon: Titans
Dally M: Mitch Moses & James Tedesco

Joel Caine
Sportsbet

Storm

Eels

Roosters

Broncos

Sea Eagles

Wests Tigers

Raiders

Cowboys

Premiers: Storm
Wooden spoon: Bulldogs
Dally M: Roger Tuivasa-Sheck

Matt Encarnacion
AAP

Roosters

Sea Eagles

Eels

Broncos

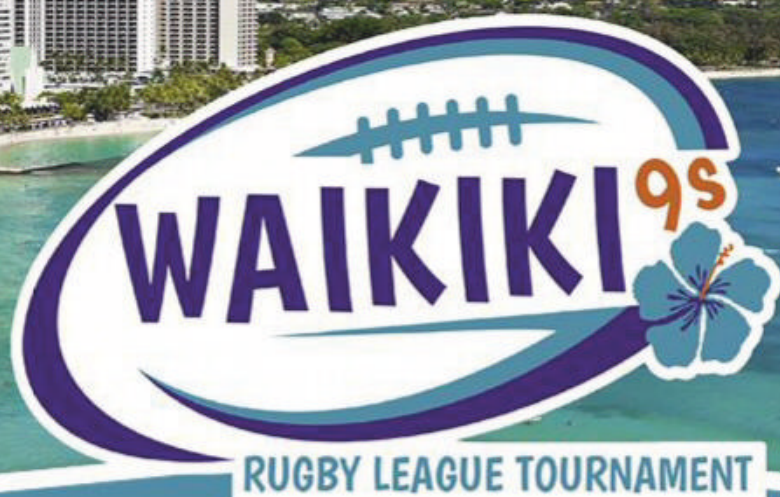
Raiders

Knights

Cowboys

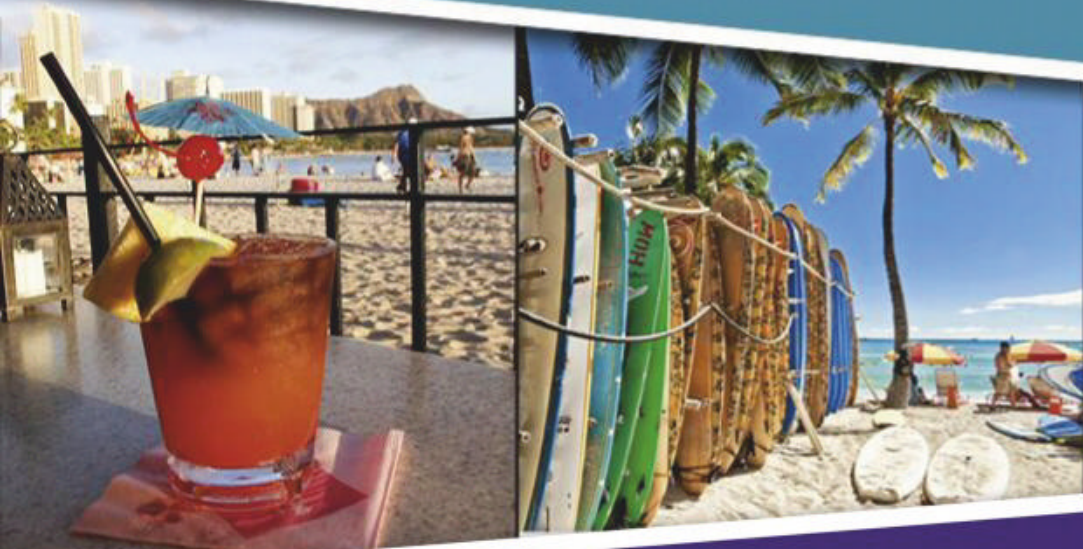
Rabbitohs

Premiers: Eels
Wooden spoon: Warriors
Dally M: Mitch Moses



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FUTURE PLANNING

As we head into one of the most even competitions in many years, here are some of the storylines we expect will dominate the headlines. By the **BIG LEAGUE TEAM**

Coaching rookies

The Titans will be hoping the arrival of Justin Holbrook will help turn their fortunes around after they managed just four wins last season en route to the wooden spoon. Holbrook is well-credentialed both at home and abroad and brings with him a winning culture, having helped steer St Helens to success in the English Super League in 2019. It's a similar scenario in the Hunter as the Knights look to shoot up the ladder following a barren run of outs which has seen them miss out on finals footy since 2013. Incoming coach Adam O'Brien may not have much experience in the top job but that doesn't mean he won't get the job done. O'Brien was Craig Bellamy's right-hand man in Melbourne for a number of years while his move to the Roosters helped turn their attack into the envy of the NRL as they claimed back-to-back titles. He now gets to work with Kalyn Ponga and Mitchell Pearce, enough to make any first-year coach giddy. 2020 will also see the return of former Sharks coach Shane Flanagan as he assists Paul McGregor at St George Illawarra. Flanagan is still banned from being a head coach due to his involvement in the supplement scandal but is making small steps back to the NRL.

Will history three-peat?

Talk about a team going back-to-back seemed to dominate pre-season discussions for the best part of three decades, but thanks to the Roosters' heroics in last year's decider, we can now press the reset button. Unfortunately, their second premiership on the trot now has people talking about them becoming the first team since the Parramatta Eels in 1981, 1982 and 1983 to win three grand finals in a row. With Cooper Cronk (retired) and Latrell Mitchell (Rabbitohs) no longer at the club, the Roosters head into 2020 without two of their key attacking cogs. But considering they've got the world's best player at their disposal, there's no reason why James Tedesco and his team-mates can't make more history.

Will history three-peat (part two)?

It's not just the Roosters who are looking to maintain their reign of dominance, with the Broncos hoping to make it three titles in as many years when the NRLW gets underway later this year. A number of changes to both the playing personnel as well as the coaching staff were meant to bring Brisbane down a few rungs in 2019, but instead they seemingly improved as they slayed the Dragons in the decider a week after they suffered their first loss in competition history.



Bunny-bound

The burning question of the off-season was: where is Latrell Mitchell going to play in 2020? One minute he was going to the Gold Coast, the next he was off to the Wests Tigers, but at the end of the day he landed at South Sydney. It sets up a mouth-watering derby in Round 3 when Latrell and his Rabbitohs clash with their bitter rivals, the Roosters, at ANZ Stadium. The representative star is expected to wear the No.1 jumper, setting up a tasty battle at fullback against former teammate and Dally M medallist James Tedesco.

Adapting to rule changes

Expect a few teething issues in the early rounds as players and referees get used to the latest bout of rule changes from Rugby League HQ. The new scrum option will spice things up from set plays while players should be able to get their heads around not making contact with attacking players in the air. That said, expect hulking wingers like Daniel Tupou and Suliasi Vunivalu to greatly benefit from the new interpretation. The 20/40 rule looms as a double-edged sword for kickers but it will also keep the opposition back three on its toes which will create more room on the edges.

Storm warning

It's the pre-season prediction that has had as much success as the remake of *Cats*, but there remains a group of people who are adamant the Storm are about to hit the wall. No team has maintained dominance quite like the Melbourne Storm, but they enter the 2020 season with a hefty cloud



Is a dynasty about to sprout?

Some feared the State of Origin concept was dead after the Maroons claimed their eighth series in a row in 2013. And while the Blues were able to stem the bleeding the following year, Queensland still reigned supreme in the years following. However, the tide appears to be turning, and NSW fans will be praying that the new decade doesn't halt their momentum. With Brad Fittler at the helm, the Blues have claimed series wins over the past two years, and they'll start heavy favourites to extend that streak in 2020 with the likes of James Tedesco, Tom Trbojevic and Damien Cook running riot against a Maroons team that is still coming to grips with the loss of several of the greatest players the game has ever seen. All eyes will be on the Adelaide Oval when the series kicks off on June 3.

hanging over their heads. With both wingers set to leave at the end of the season, Brodie Croft now at the Broncos and with a lack of depth in the centre position, Craig Bellamy's side looks strangely vulnerable. But with Cameron Smith calling the shots in what could be his final season as well as one of the best packs in the NRL, you're writing the Storm off at your own peril.

Snakes and ladders

Much like those of us who failed in our 2019 resolutions, the unfurling of a new calendar brings new hope for the new year. For the teams that struggled last season, 2020 provides a clean slate as they look to right the wrongs of 12 months ago. The same goes for those at the other end of the spectrum; just because you played finals doesn't mean you're guaranteed anything this year. You only have to look at the Eels and Sea Eagles, who bounced back from bottom-two finishes in 2018 to win a finals game the following year. The Raiders also overcame disappointment to make it through to the grand final, and there are any number of teams who could see similar growth this season.

Royal invasion

It appears as though the English have turned their backs on Bondi and have planted their flag in Canberra after George Williams became the latest player to sign for the Green Machine. The Raiders

rose to prominence in 2019 on the back of English recruits John Bateman, Elliott Whitehead and Josh Hodgson, and their latest acquisition looms as a game-breaker as they look to go one better this season. Williams is an exciting halfback who has excelled at Wigan, but there's no guarantee that will translate to immediate success on Australian shores. While forwards from the northern hemisphere have excelled down south, backs have traditionally struggled. And given how well Jack Wighton performed alongside Aidan Sezer, there'll be pressure on the young man to deliver.

Stand down

The NRL's no-fault stand down policy will come into effect again in 2020, with a number of players facing criminal charges. The rule means players charged with a criminal offence carrying a penalty of at least 11 years will be automatically stood down from playing in the competition. Following a review in early February, the NRL announced Josh Reynolds would be an exemption to the rule after substantial evidence was presented to the integrity unit. Penrith playmaker Tyrone May had been subjected to the policy throughout the entire 2019 season, but after he was sentenced to a three-year community corrections order (300 hours of community service) over a sex tape scandal, the NRL will allow him to return in Round 5 providing he agrees to participate and complete a secondary prevention program.

LOCKER ROOM

Get excited

Big League is here for you as always as we count down to the 2020 season kick-off. *The 2020 Official NRL Season Guide* will be on sale March 2nd, and we will also be previewing each club on the Big League Podcast. The first episode will drop on February 13th and previews will run for four weeks. If you'd like to subscribe to our podcast, head to your favourite app and search for 'Big League podcast'.

Trials and tribulations

There's plenty of footy action to come as clubs rev up for their 2020 campaigns. If you can't wait for the season regular to kick-off, the below trials are on this weekend.

Feb 29: Panthers v Eels, Bega, 4pm/Broncos v Titans, Redcliffe, 7pm/Storm v Cowboys, Casey Fields, 5.30pm/Roosters v Knights, Central Coast, 7pm/Bulldogs v Raiders, Port Macquarie, 7pm/Rabbitohs v Dragons (Charity Shield), Mudgee, 7pm.

March 1: Warriors v Wests Tigers, Rotorua, 2pm/Sharks v Sea Eagles, Netstrata Jubilee, 7pm.

Jumping juniors

Plenty of lower grades have returned to the field already for their 2020 campaigns. In NSW, the Harold Matts (16s), SG Ball (18s), Laurie Daley Cup (18s regional) and Andrew Johns Cup (16s regional) are in full swing, as are the junior women in the Tarsha Gale Cup. In Queensland, the Mal Meninga (18s) players are also in action. We will be bringing more team lists and score updates across both states starting from our Round 1 issue, out March 12.

Trying times

Our thoughts are with Fine Kula and his family after the young Cronulla prop was diagnosed with grade-four medulloblastoma over the summer. The 21-year-old had been training with the Sharks' top squad with a view to earning a top 30 contract and fulfilling his ambition of playing in the NRL. With the news shocking

the rugby league community, a GoFundMe page has been created to support Kula and his family. The youngster has plenty of support around him. Rising Sharks winger Ronaldo Mulitalo and a few of Kula's mates even slept on the hospital floor so they could be with their friend.

British Bulldog 2.0

The Bulldogs have added to their front row stocks for 2021 and beyond, nabbing the signature of Luke Thompson, one of the Super League's premier forwards. The 24-year-old will continue plying his trade for St Helens this season before joining Canterbury at the end of the year. He's played 157 games for the club and scored eight tries.

Martin retires

There was awful news that came out of Townsville in January, with 24-year-old playmaker Te Maire Martin forced into an early retirement. The Keebra Park graduate suffered a bleed in his brain in April last year and was unable to come back to full contact to resume his footy career. He played 62 games for the Panthers and Cowboys and four Tests for New Zealand.

Tribute to a legend

There wasn't a dry eye in the house watching footage from the Leeds Rhinos tribute game for Jamie Jones-Buchanan and Rob Burrow. More than 19,000 showed up on a cold winter's day to support both men, but especially Burrow, who has been diagnosed with motor neuron disease at just 37 years of age. He played 493 games for Leeds and 20 tests for England and Great Britain before retiring two years ago. We wish him the best of luck as he fights the terrible disease.

Bye to the motherland

Speaking of England, Wayne Bennett has split from his international coaching gig. The English Rugby League decided not to renew his contract, signing Shaun Wane, a former Wigan coach, on a two-



Wedding season

The off-season is a busy time for many rugby league players, who finally get some time off to get married. As the season wound down in 2019, Josh Dugan, Shaun Johnson, Nathan Peats, Joey Leilua, Joe Tapine, Ryley Jacks, Mark Nicholls were just some of the players to swap their jerseys for suits and ties. Congrats!

year deal leading into next year's World Cup.

Highest honour

Warriors and Kiwi Ferns NRLW player Honey Hireme-Smiller had a challenging 2019 to say the least, but the 38-year-old women's rugby league pioneer finished the year on a high after being made a Member of the New Zealand Order of Merit for her services to the game. She missed the NRL 9s due to shoulder surgery but was made assistant coach for the team.

Marquee women

The NRL has confirmed the 20 Australian women to be awarded marquee contracts for the 2020 season. Marquee contracts have been awarded based on performance and commitment over the past 12 months as part of the women's elite programs. The players selected will receive access to the national women's elite coaching and performance staff, including tailored training programs, wellbeing and educational support, as well as media and leadership training. The contracted players are: Kezie Apps, Millie Boyle, Annette Brander, Brittany Breayley, Sam Bremner, Ali Briggishaw, Keeley Davis, Kirra Dibb, Tallisha Harden, Isabelle Kelly, Chelsea Lenarduzzi, Corban McGregor, Tiana Penitani,

Julia Robinson, Jessica Sergis, Hannah Southwell, Simaima Taufa, Shakhia Tungai, Botille Vette-Welsh, Holli Wheeler.

High five

Parramatta coach Brad Arthur has named a new five-man leadership group for the upcoming season. The leadership team includes captain Clint Gutherson, Mitch Moses, Junior Paulo, Nathan Brown and new recruit Ryan Matterson.

Returning in 2020

Remember the coach whisperer, Bradley Charles Stubbs, who Kevin Walters brought into the Queensland Origin camp last year? Well, even though he couldn't help the Maroons to a series victory in 2019, Walters has confirmed he'll bring back the coach whisperer this campaign. Although we don't think his appointment will be worrying "the other team".

Participating well

The NRL has launched a new national campaign to get more children and adults playing rugby league. The campaign, developed in-line with recent global research on positive participation habits and environments, is focused on showcasing how playing footy creates strong, confident kids and mateship.

Positive thoughts for Mose

The thoughts of the rugby league community are with Mose Masoe after he was forced into retirement having suffered a serious spinal injury in a trial game for Hull Kingston Rovers. The former NRL prop was hurt while making a tackle and there are fears he may never walk again. The father of three - with another on the way - relayed a message to his fans via his wife, Carissa. "I can't begin to express my love and gratitude to everyone that has been helping me and my family at such a hard time we truly are surrounded by amazing people/family," Masoe said. "Everyone has their own battles that they are fighting themselves and this has become my new battle for now. It's going to be a long road ahead for me and my little family but it makes it easier for us knowing that we are so blessed with all of your support and well wishes."

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Passing the mark

There are old records set to tumble and new benchmarks to be set in 2020. By **DAVID MIDDLETON**

TEAM MILESTONES

Wests Tigers will play their 500th game since joining the premiership in 2000 when they meet the Gold Coast at Cbus Super Stadium in Round 7. **Brisbane** require six wins to reach the milestone of 500 wins since joining the premiership in 1988. **St George Illawarra** require 35 tries to bring up the landmark of 2,000 tries since the formation of the game's first joint venture in 1999. **Penrith** require 53 tries to notch 4,000 tries since entering the premiership in 1967. The **Sydney Roosters** require another 310 points to become the first club in premiership history to score 40,000 points. **Melbourne** play their 600th game since joining the NRL in 1998 when they meet South Sydney at Bankwest Stadium in Round 20. **Newcastle** will bring up 800 games at premiership level when they meet Manly at McDonald Jones Stadium in Round 22.

PLAYER MILESTONES

Canberra Raiders centre **Jarrold Croker** requires four points to become the first player under the age of 30 to score 2,000 points at premiership level. Croker will be 29 and 184 days old when the Raiders play the Titans in the opening round of the 2020 season. Jason Taylor holds the record as the youngest player to reach the 2,000-points milestone. He was 30 and 140 days old when he achieved the mark playing for Parramatta in 2001. Only ix players have scored 2,000 premiership points. Melbourne Storm captain **Cameron Smith** requires seven wins to become the first player in the history of the premiership to win 300 games. Smith will equal Paul Gallen's record for most seasons played (19) when he makes his first appearance of the 2020 premiership. Sydney Roosters utility **Mitchell Aubusson** needs to play 14 games to overtake Anthony Minichiello's record for most appearances for the club. Minichiello holds the mark at 302 games for the Roosters (2000-14). Parramatta centre **Michael Jennings** needs to play 15 games to become the 28th player to appear in 100 games for two premiership clubs. Jennings played 122 games for Penrith (2007-12) and has played 85 games for the Eels since 2016.

COACHING MILESTONES

In Round 1 Melbourne's **Craig Bellamy** will become only the fourth coach to reach the milestone of 450 games and the second to do so at a single club. Only Wayne Bennett (841), Tim Sheens (669) and Brian

Smith (601) have coached more games than Bellamy, while only Bennett (631 games at the Broncos) has been in charge for more games at one club. Canberra's **Ricky Stuart** will reach the milestone of 400 games as NRL coach in the Raiders' Round 5 game against Penrith at Panthers Stadium. He will become the eighth coach to reach the 400 mark. Stuart also requires five wins for 200 wins in the top grade. Manly's **Des Hasler** will achieve his 400th game as coach in the Sea Eagles' Round 13 clash against South Sydney at ANZ Stadium. Hasler will bring up 250 games with Manly in Round 19 (against North Queensland in Townsville). **Trent Robinson** will become the first coach to bring up 200 games at the Sydney Roosters in the Round 16 clash against the Warriors. Wests Tigers' **Michael Maguire** will notch his 200th NRL game as coach in the Round 24 clash against Canterbury at Bankwest Stadium. Maguire requires four wins for 100 victories in the NRL. St George Illawarra coach **Paul McGregor** will bring up 150 games as NRL coach in the Round 13 clash with Canterbury at ANZ Stadium.

PLAYERS WITHIN REACH OF 250 or 300 NRL GAMES

289	Mitch Aubusson
286	Josh Morris
278	Michael Jennings
276	Mitchell Pearce
245	James Tamou
244	Jake Friend
240	Kevin Proctor
240	Chris Lawrence
233	Ben Hunt
229	Wade Graham
229	Jesse Bromwich

PLAYERS WITHIN REACH OF 2,000 NRL POINTS

1996	Jarrold Croker
-------------	----------------

PLAYERS WITHIN REACH OF 1,500 NRL POINTS

1415	Adam Reynolds
-------------	---------------

PLAYERS WITHIN REACH OF 150 NRL TRIES

147	Michael Jennings
138	Josh Morris

PLAYERS WITHIN REACH OF 100 NRL TRIES

92	Corey Oates
91	Daniel Tupou
91	Benji Marshall
89	Joey Leilua

THE FULL LIST OF ALL CLUBS FROM 1908 TO 2019 IS:

Sydney Roosters (1908-2019) 1184 wins at 53.1% (2230 games), **South Sydney (1908-2019)** 1115 wins at 51.7% (2156 games), **Canterbury (1935-2019)** 952 wins at 51.6% (1846 games), **Manly (1947-2019)** 920 wins at 57.1% (1612 games), **St George (1921-1998)** 910 wins at 58.9% (1545 games), **Balmain (1908-1999)** 871 wins at 51.1% (1705 games), **Parramatta (1947-2019)** 757 wins at 45.6% (1660 games), **Wests (1908-1999)** 734 wins at 43.4% (1691 games), **Norths (1908-1999)** 678 wins at 40.7% (1665 games), **Cronulla (1967-2019)** 618 wins at 48.5% (1274 games), **Newtown (1908-1983)** 583 wins at 44.7% (1305 games), **Penrith (1967-2019)** 538 wins at 42.9% (1254 games), **Brisbane (1988-2019)** 494 wins at 61.1% (808 games), **Canberra (1982-2019)** 481 wins at 50.9% (945 games), **Melbourne (1998-2019)** 379 wins at 65.2% (581 games), **Newcastle (1988-2019)** 365 wins at 46.9% (779 games), **Warriors (1995-2019)** 279 wins at 45.7% (611 games), **St George Illawarra (1999-2019)** 271 wins at 50.8% (533 games), **North Queensland (1995-2019)** 262 wins at 42.3% (620 games), **Wests Tigers (2000-2019)** 215 wins at 43.6% (493 games), **Glebe (1908-1929)** 163 wins at 54.9% (297 games), **Illawarra (1982-1998)** 153 wins at 38.6% (396 games), **Gold Coast Titans (2007-2019)** 127 wins at 40.1% (317 games), **Gold Coast (1988-1998)** 53 wins at 21.5% (246 games), **University (1920-1937)** 47 wins at 19.4% (242 games), **Northern Eagles (2000-2002)** 30 wins at 39.5% (76 games), **Annandale (1910-1920)** 25 wins at 16.3% (153 games), **Western Reds (1995-1997)** 24 wins at 39.3% (61 games), **Adelaide (1997-1998)** 13 wins at 31.0% (42 games), **South Queensland (1995-1997)** 13 wins at 20.0% (65 games), **Newcastle (1908-1909)** 9 wins at 45.0% (20 games), **Hunter (1997-1997)** 7 wins at 38.9% (18 games), **Cumberland (1908-1908)** 1 win at 12.5% (8 games)

FEATURE

A few major rule changes were announced by the NRL leading into the season – here's your crash course on how they will work. By the **BIG LEAGUE TEAM**

CHANGES in rugby league rules are not uncommon, but in December last year the ARL Commission approved a raft of additions to the laws of the game unlike anything we've seen in recent seasons.

There's plenty to keep an eye out for while players, coaches and referees figure out how they will work in real-time.

"Like any new rules in the game it's going to take a while for players, refs and everyone to get used to," says Eels captain Clint Gutherson. "It's not something where you know which way it's going to affect your game, but we'll probably have to play up to six weeks before we can see how it goes."

The NRL's Head of Football Graham Annesley says the changes will lead to a more entertaining game for fans, and they're sure to be a talking point over the early weeks of the competition. Here's everything you have to know.

The 20/40

Trialled at last year's World Nines tournament, the 20/40 is exactly what you expect – an inverted 40/20. A team in possession will be able to regain the ball if they kick from inside their 20-metre zone and find touch beyond the opposition's 40-metre line. Any team with a hooker who is also a handy

kicker would benefit from putting some practise in to try and take advantage early in the play.

Scrum

The team with the loose head and feed will have the opportunity to choose where their scrum is set – the nearest 10 or 20-metre infield marking, or in line with the black dot on the crossbar – with five seconds allowed for them to inform the referee. How this works in real time will be interesting to watch unfold, but for teams with set-play options, it will certainly be an appealing prospect.

Mutual infringement

A direct change from events that occurred in last year's grand final – when a ball strikes a trainer who is on the field, instead of the ball going to whichever team is on the 'attack', the referee will be able to repeat the final play-the-ball. The amount of time trainers are on the field will also be closely looked at as the season approaches.

Tackling in mid-air

One that isn't a huge change, but has become more black-and-white – the act of tackling a player in mid-air will be banned completely, whether

the player initiating the contact is attacking or defending.

Captain's challenge

After meeting in early February, the ARLC gave provisional approval for the Captain's Challenge to be trialled during the All Stars and Charity Shield pre-season fixtures. Under the rule change, captains will have the chance to lodge an official challenge with the Bunker for a disputed ruling during a stoppage in play. The NRL is entering further discussion with clubs before a decision is officially made at the ARLC's next board meeting on February 28. Only one incorrect challenge will be permitted per game, and if the referee has ruled 'play on' during an active play, the decision stands.

Lower grades

The New South Wales Rugby League has taken a big step forward in concussion protocols. They announced they would introduce an 18th man concussion substitution plus a mandatory stand-down period of 14 days for any player who suffers a concussion. This will take place across all their competitions, and the NRL will be watching closely to see how this works in action.

Ruling class



Off-season moments

The action may have dried up over the summer months, but as we've quickly learnt, rugby league never sleeps. Here are the biggest stories from what's been another hectic off-season. By **MARTIN GABOR**

David and Goliath headline messy months

Following a shocking off-season in 2018, the last thing the NRL would have wanted to see weeks after the 2019 Grand Final was a video on social media showing one of its biggest stars on the rampage. The clip of Storm prop Nelson Asofa-Solomona involved in a brawl outside a Bali nightclub went viral, although some of the heat went away when it was revealed he was protecting team-mate Suliasi Vunivalu. Given the provocation, the NRL suspended him for three matches as well as a suspended \$15,000 fine.

Soon after, Broncos gun David Fifita found himself locked up in a Balinese jail for allegedly striking a local security guard. The serious nature of the incident could have had serious ramifications, however the man in question withdrew the complaint and signed a peace deal which saw Fifita released following some help from the club.

The Sea Eagles were rocked in November by news hooker Manase Fainu had been arrested for allegedly stabbing a man at a church dance. The No.9 was granted bail but has been stood down from playing under the NRL's no-fault stand down rule.

In a matter that's still ongoing, Wests Tigers playmaker Josh Reynolds was charged by New South Wales police with a domestic violence offence.

And on Australia Day, Joe Ofahengaue and Curtis Scott had serious brushes with law enforcement that are still being dealt with by their clubs and the NRL.

Sam's shock

After playing through the 2014 Grand Final with a broken cheekbone, most people assumed Sam Burgess was immune to pain. But in late October, the South Sydney and England superstar announced his retirement effective immediately due to a chronic left shoulder injury. A champion of the game, Burgess' toughness eventually caught up with him, bringing a premature end to one of the finest careers of the decade.

The club's bid to have him medically retired was cleared by the NRL, freeing up salary cap space for the Rabbitohs to sign Jai Arrow for 2021.

Val jets home

Valentine Holmes' short-lived stint with the New York Jets in the NFL came to an abrupt end, with the former Shark signing a mammoth deal to return home with North Queensland. The Cowboys were always favourites to sign the speedster, and the six-year contract ensures he will earn top billing when the club opens its new stadium in Round 1 against the Broncos.

Winging it

Melbourne's bid to remain a premiership force took a huge hit with wingers Suliasi Vunivalu and Josh Addo-Carr confirming they wouldn't be at the club beyond the 2020 season. Vunivalu will link up with Super Rugby side the Queensland Reds at the end of the year, while Addo-Carr is keen to return to Sydney for family reasons. The Storm are willing to work with the NSW and Australia winger but they want to be compensated should he be released before his contract runs out. In other signing news, the Wests Tigers were stunned by news Ryan Matterson wanted out of the club after just one year. Following a short negotiation period, he signed with the Eels.

New year, new rules

There were always going to be a raft of changes given a season often overshadowed by confusion about key decisions, but few could have predicted what was going to unfold at the announcement in early December. The introduction of a challenge system follows the lead of many sports around the world, while the 20/40 rule is an expansion on the current 40/20 system. Trainers will spend less time on the field and the mutual infringement rule has been changed following controversy in last year's decider, while the act of tackling a player in mid-air is now illegal.

The most intriguing change will see attacking teams given the option to feed the scrum in three locations on the field in a bid to spice up the ensuing play.

New Commissioner cracks the whip

Just days after replacing Peter Beattie as head of the Australian Rugby League Commission, Peter V'landys confirmed he would oversee a number of changes to improve the game. Having turned Racing NSW into the beast it is, footy fans are hoping his experience can have a similar effect on rugby league.

The Latrell saga

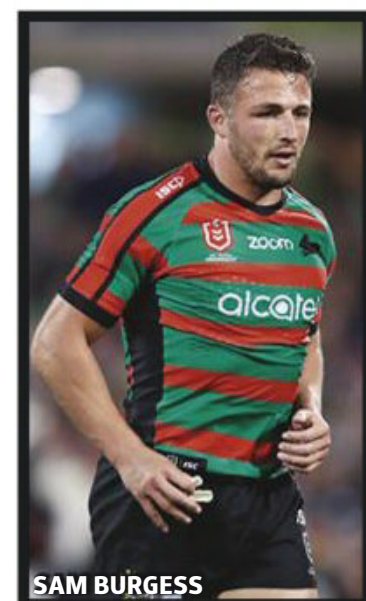
The rugby league world was stunned in early November when the Roosters put out a statement saying they'd withdrawn their contract offer for Latrell Mitchell for the 2021 season and beyond after the superstar centre expressed a desire to explore his options. The following weeks saw the attacking weapon linked with a number of clubs even though he was still under contract for 2020. An interview with NRL.com allowed him to open up on a number of issues, although that wasn't without its own drama as comments about the national anthem during last year's Origin series didn't go down well with the NSWRL. The focus on a young man trying to do the best for his family was ugly at times and went over the top. The club granted him a leave of absence ahead of their return to training on January 6, and he was unveiled as a Rabbitoh just one week later.

Big names

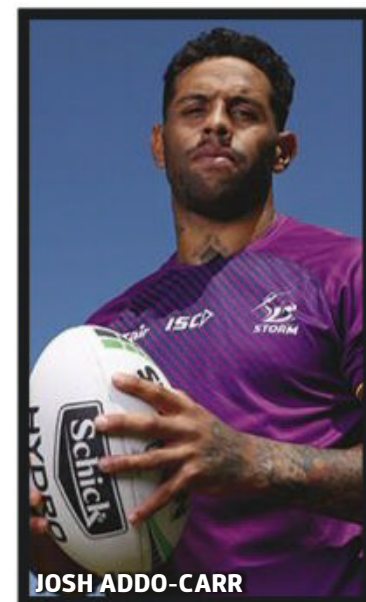
Clubs in the English Super League scored a couple of signing coups. Sonny Bill Williams is officially back playing rugby league after signing a record deal with the Toronto Wolfpack. The dual international returns to the 13-man code on a two-year contract, worth a reported \$10 million – the richest deal in rugby league history. French club Catalans also nabbed the signature of controversial cross-code superstar Israel Folau.



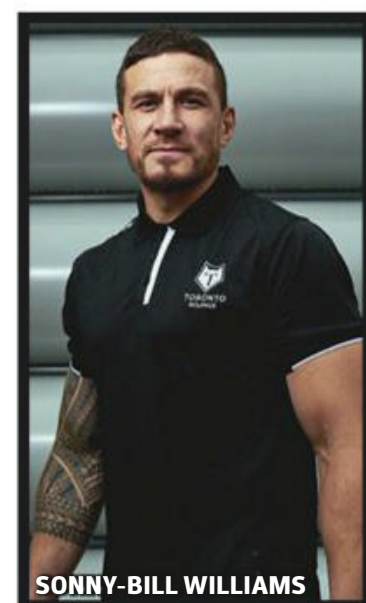
DAVID FIFITA



SAM BURGESS



JOSH ADDO-CARR



SONNY-BILL WILLIAMS

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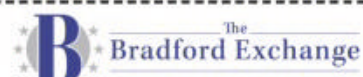
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Purchase power

It wouldn't be an NRL off-season without a number of prolific moves, returning heroes and protracted contract sagas – but who will prove themselves as the buy of the year? By **MARTIN GABOR**

It didn't quite have the same ferocity as the Boxing Day sales, but this year's player market still featured some gargantuan moves that will have serious premiership ramifications. While the likes of Jordan Rapana, Will Chambers and Matt Prior made the move overseas or to other codes, it was the intra-league deals that stole the headlines, especially one that lasted months involving the game's fiercest rivals.

Latrell Mitchell

It seemed nothing could go wrong for the Roosters after they claimed their second title in as many years, but those celebrations were cut short in early November when the club announced it had withdrawn its offer to Mitchell after he made it clear he wanted to explore his options. The gifted centre was linked to a number of clubs including the Tigers and Cowboys, but the Rabbitohs always remained favourites to secure his signature. The prolonged nature of the negotiations made fans restless as they endured daily 'exclusives' purporting that he had signed somewhere. Finally, on January 13, South Sydney got their man, with the rep star set to play fullback in a revamped backline. "He's got x-factor and a lot of confidence. He's one of those players who can turn nothing into something and that's an important asset," Damien Cook says.

Valentine Holmes

The bombshells weren't restricted to Australia, with Sonny Bill Williams signing with the Toronto Wolfpack on a deal that had more zeroes than a digital clock at midnight. However, it was another North American announcement that garnered plenty of interest in Australia when the New York Jets cut Valentine Holmes. It didn't take long for the Cowboys to swoop, locking down the former Shark for the next six seasons. His signing is the boost the Cowboys need and should provide the spark they've missed since Johnathan Thurston retired. "We've got some really good outside backs who can break open a game and I feel like I can add to that. Hopefully I get

back to the form I was playing with at the back end of 2018, if not better," Holmes says.

Brodie Croft

He doesn't boast the same profile as the previous guys on the list, but he looms as a key signing in 2020 in a Broncos side that is in desperate need of a controlling playmaker. Croft was on a hiding to nothing at the Storm once people started to dub him 'Cooper Cronk 2.0', and while he showed flashes of brilliance, he didn't seem to fit into the system. His move to Brisbane could be huge for a club that was forced to use hookers at halfback in 2019, and should give Anthony Milford freedom to play his natural game.

Ryan Matterson

He was the kind of player the Wests Tigers thought they could build their club around, but after just one season in which he excelled on a regular basis, Matterson shocked the rugby league world when he asked for a release to sign with the Eels.



DONE AND DUSTED: The Latrell Mitchell saga finally ended in Redfern.

The move back to his junior club is significant as it bolsters an already star-studded pack and makes up for the loss of Manu Ma'u on the right edge.

Kyle Flanagan

Replacing Cooper Cronk isn't the most enticing prospect for a young halfback, but things could be worse for the former Shark when he runs out for the two-time defending premiers. Flanagan showed plenty of potential in his limited appearances for Cronulla, and he should take his game to the next level alongside Luke Keary, with Cronk also in the background to tutor him. His goal-kicking will also be handy given Latrell Mitchell's departure.

George Williams

It's not often a grand final team replaces its halfback the following year, but the Raiders have made the big call to replace Aidan Sezer. The former Wigan star is the latest Englishman to make the move to Canberra, and his combination with Jack Wighton will be crucial for the Green Machine. "He's a really vocal kid and he knows his football," Josh Hodgson says.

Adam Doueihi & Joey Leilua

The Wests Tigers may have missed out on Latrell Mitchell, but that allowed them to pick up a number of important players to bolster their squad. The addition of the Leilua brothers provides a spark, while Adam Doueihi will reunite with Michael Maguire after time together at South Sydney. "He's a tremendously hard worker who carries himself very well," the coach says.



WHERE THE HEART IS: Valentine Holmes has returned to Townsville.

FEATURE

There have been some high-profile signings so far, but with a number of huge stars coming off-contract at the end of the year, the biggest moves could be yet to come. By **MARTIN GABOR**

IT'S a topic that draws many to the game but leaves others diving for the mute button, but either way you look at it, the NRL marketplace is one of the most significant forces in rugby league. The season hasn't even started, but here are some of the players off-contract at the end of the year who will garner plenty of attention throughout 2020.

Cameron Smith

It's the question that drives the agenda every time he hits the open market, but surely this is the year the most-capped player in NRL history calls time on his illustrious career. The Storm skipper turns 37 in June, and even though his form hasn't waned, retirement has to be the most likely outcome. Smith will not end up at another club, but there is a school of thought the Storm would be keen to keep him around given a stack of players are set to leave the Victorian capital at the end of the year.



David Fifita

A rocky off-season won't knock the value off his next deal, with the young edge forward in line for a huge pay day. The Broncos will be desperate to lock down Fifita as soon as possible, with a number of rival clubs lurking in the shadows. Capable of turning a game on its head with a single carry, Brisbane will do everything in their power to keep him around for as long as possible.

Jarrold Croker

It's hard to picture the headgear-wearing sharp-shooter in anything but lime green, and a contract extension is more than likely for the Canberra skipper once negotiations roll around. Curtis Scott's arrival means there is some competition for spots, but it'd take something drastic for Croker to be squeezed out. With a slew of records on the radar, expect Croker to re-sign and become one of the Raiders' finest servants.

Kieran Foran

Fitness is the number one priority at the moment for Foran, but there will undoubtedly be fierce speculation about his future once he returns to full health. It's still uncertain if he'll make it back on the field for the Bulldogs in 2020, but there is hope going forward given he's yet to turn 30. His shoulder and hamstring issues mean he won't get the big bucks that he's currently on, but there are a number of clubs who could do worse than having the former Kiwi star on their books, with the lure of linking up with Des Hasler at the Sea Eagles always somewhere in the rumour mill.

Ryan James

The Titans skipper missed most of 2019 due to a serious knee injury, and another pre-season recurrence means they'll miss his leadership again this year. With Jai Arrow off to the Rabbitohs, it's imperative the Titans hold onto James as they rebuild under new coach Justin Holbrook. The versatile forward will have plenty of suitors for 2021, but it'd be nice to see him stay at the club he's called home since 2010.

Reed Mahoney

His name can get lost in a Parramatta side featuring some of the most electric players in the NRL, but those who underestimate the Eels rake do so at their own peril. What he lacks in size, Mahoney more than makes up for in effort, and it's that toughness that should see him earn a new deal from Brad Arthur and the powers that be.

James Graham & Jack de Belin

There aren't many players who have put their bodies through the kind of torture Graham does on a weekly basis, and you get the feeling the hard knocks are about to bring his decorated career to an end. The Englishman turns 35 in September and will go down as one of the toughest props in the modern era, regardless of whether he retires or not. Should he call time on his glittering career, the Dragons will likely try to retain the services of de Belin – pending the outcome of his court case – given how important he is to the club's forward stocks.

Aiden Tolman

He's not the biggest name on the market but the Bulldogs veteran will attract interest from home and abroad. With more than 250 NRL caps to his name, the former Storm prop could be on the move after the club signed Englishman Luke Thompson from 2021 onwards. Tolman is one of the most consistent middles going around and his experience will come in handy if he moves on.

Jake Friend

His future seemed crystal clear 12 months ago, but a frustrating year of injuries coupled with the emergence of Sam Verrills has thrown a slight spanner in the works. Friend is the Roosters' co-captain, adored by his team-mates and likely to make his Queensland debut in 2020, but there are no guarantees he'll be at the premiers beyond this season. The smart money says he'll stay, but there will be a stack of clubs keen to lure him across if possible.



Wheeling & dealing

A helping h



WHEN tragedy strikes, the rugby league community is always there to lend a helping hand – and it was no different this summer as the nation was rocked by devastating bushfires.

In addition to a number of individual players helping out by donating their time and raising funds for the relief effort, every NRL club got involved in making a difference.

The game's governing body also announced the expansion of the 'Road to Regions' program, which saw some of the game's leading players visit bushfire-affected and drought-stricken communities across the eastern seaboard.

The Road to Regions program – designed to give rural residents an opportunity to meet players – traditionally spans one week, but it was expanded to five in the wake of the bushfire emergency.

"Many of our players are from rural and regional Australia and still have family in these regions. These areas are the home of grassroots rugby league and we'll never shy away from the responsibility we have to these areas," NRL CEO Todd Greenberg said.

"I've said from the start we want to make a practical difference to these communities. Rugby league is part of the social fabric of rural and regional Australia and our players will be on the ground lending a hand and lifting spirits wherever we can."

The opening week of the 2020 season will be a dedicated 'Bushfire Appeal Round' to raise money for victims and honour emergency services personnel and volunteers.

Some notable players even put themselves on the frontline to battle the flames. South Sydney recruit Latrell Mitchell took time to help his hometown of Taree fight against the fires, while Penrith prop James Tamou helped out in his in-laws and the community Braidwood – a town 60km from Batemans Bay.

The big forward has been involved in some tough battles on the football field, but said playing rugby league will never get close to the battles many Australians faced and are still facing this year.

"It was just that feeling of powerless, like most situations I've been in I've sort of been in control but that was overwhelming. It's nothing like what I've been a part of," Tamou said.

"These people who have gone through months of this type of horror and devastation... I honestly have no words for them.

"We've seen people hunched down like they had nothing left. It was devastating and it makes you realise how lucky you are."

What are the clubs doing?

Broncos

Brisbane fans had the chance to pick-up some prized memorabilia in the club's auction to raise funds for the Salvation Army. Items included Darius Boyd's commemorative 300th game jersey and Jake Turpin's signed boots, as well as a number of signed jerseys. The Broncos also got involved at a Foodbank collection point with players sorting out donations in the warehouse.

Raiders

Air quality in Canberra was ranked as some of the worst in the world, leaving the club with no choice but to move pre-season training away from the nation's capital. They set up camp on the Sunshine Coast for 10 days and were able to make a difference in the community. They hosted an open training session, where donations were collected for the relief campaign. The club also committed to the #WeAreOne campaign along with the rest of Canberra's major sporting teams. Charnze Nicoll-Klokstad and Curtis Scott also raised much-needed donations online. RFS and SES volunteers will gain free entry into Round 1's clash against the Titans.

Bulldogs

The Bulldogs teamed up with Canterbury League Club to rally around the cause. The group have committed \$50,000 to assist with the recovery. They'll also use their pre-season match against the Raiders to raise further funds. A handful of players – including Jack Cogger, Dean Britt, Joe Stimson and Nick Meaney – carried buckets to collect donations at Canterbury Races in January.

Sharks

Sharks players leant a hand in the clean-up effort at Kangaroo Valley. They also raised thousands of dollars for rural southern NSW communities, sporting clubs and facilities through their auction of memorabilia. They had several items, including Andrew Fifita's 100th Cronulla game ring, Mat Rogers' debut jersey and Gavin Miller's 1989 Dally M Second Rower of the Year trophy.

and

Rugby league has rallied to positively impact families and communities that have been impacted by devastating bushfires this summer. By **MICHAEL BLOK**



Titans

A number of players and staff visited the NSW RFS headquarters at Casino as well as a school in Lismore to put smiles on faces during the tough time. They also donated a stack of clothing to their community partner 'Livin', which aims to break the stigma around mental health issues.

Sea Eagles

Manly captain Daly Cherry-Evans auctioned off his Queensland State of Origin jersey to raise funds. A group of Sea Eagles including coach Des Hasler, players Tom Trbojevic, Cade Cust and Lachlan Croker, as well as club legend Brett Stewart visited people affected by the fires. The club also had an auction for an amazing money can't buy experience - re-living the 2008 Grand Final alongside Matt Orford, Steve Menzies, Mark Bryant, David Williams, Matt Ballin and Heath L'Estrange.

Storm

Melbourne launched a GoFundMe page for the Victorian Bushfire Disaster Appeal, and kicked off the campaign with a \$25,000 donation. The Storm have donated \$5 from every membership sold in January, and their Round 3 clash against Penrith will be their 'Bushfire Appeal Round'.

Knights

Newcastle raised around \$20,000 for the Salvation Army by auctioning off a number of items. A game-day experience with new coach Adam O'Brien was picked up for a cool \$5,000,

while fans bought football gear worn by Mitchell Pearce, Kalyn Ponga and David Klemmer.

Cowboys

North Queensland donated items such as a signed 2019 jersey to the 'NRL Creatives' fundraiser for the Red Cross. They've also thrown their support behind NRL's bushfire response. The Cowboys Leagues Club supported communities affected by the nation's devastating bushfires, donating \$1 from every main meal sold in January.

Eels

Parramatta raised more than \$65,000 through their auction of Eels memorabilia and experiences. Items included a round of golf with club legend Peter Sterling. The team will also take part in the 'Festival of Footy' which includes a trial match against Penrith in Bega on February 29.

Panthers

Penrith started a unique auction that featured a range of quirky experiences, including a kicking session with Nathan Cleary and 10-pin bowling with Josh Mansour. Funds went to the NSW Rural Fire Service. They also held a fundraiser at Panthers Stadium which included an open training session, and they moved their trial match from Penrith to Bega to support the affected areas.

Rabbitohs

South Sydney donated 70 jerseys to local kids affected by the bushfires. Prop Ky Rodwell asked team-mates Cody Walker, Kurt Dillon and Bayley Sironen to help out in his hometown of Bombala,

while Cameron Murray and Tom Burgess donated jerseys to the RLPA's online auction.

Dragons

St George Illawarra visited the south coast for a two-day relief tour, visiting towns such as Batemans Bay, Narooma, Ulladulla, Bermagui and Lake Conjola, and locked in visits to Bega, Eden and Tathra. They also joined forces with the Illawarra Hawks and Wollongong Wolves for a combined codes bushfire appeal golf day.

Roosters

The Roosters wore specially designed jerseys at the World Club Challenge against St Helens to raise funds for the NSW Rural Fire Service. Fans now have the chance to purchase the jerseys in an auction.

Warriors

The Warriors 'adopted' the drought-stricken and bushfire-affected NSW town of Tenterfield. The club will work with the town's business chamber to help get local businesses back on their feet with expert mentoring through their sponsorship database.

Wests Tigers

The Tigers launched an online auction to raise funds for the Red Cross. Five signed and framed 2020 jerseys were up for grabs, as well as game-day experiences including tickets to a fully catered box and private meetings with the coaching staff and players. NSW Women's Premiership captain Botille Vette-Welsh also donated a pair of signed boots and her NSW Origin training shirt to raise funds for the appeal.

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BIG LEAGUE 2020

REMEMBER that time when people were just as obsessed with the six-again ruling as they were with the *Game of Thrones* season finale? Neither do we, and quite frankly, only diehard Raiders fans will be when the new season gets underway.

The NRL world has a funny way of getting caught up in hysteria for a few weeks but has a unique way of moving on just as quickly. That won't change in 2020, especially when the horrific

bushfires during summer help put things in perspective.

During a period in which players can often get caught up in controversy, it has been heartening to see all the clubs support those who have been affected.

The season itself promises to be more unpredictable than ever – though we seem to say that every 12 months – as clubs embrace new rules, players, coaches and the pressure of backing up or bouncing back from 2019.

Fans on Sydney's eastern suburbs head into the season with plenty to crow about as their club looks to make it three premierships on the trot; a feat not achieved since the Parramatta Eels did it in the early 1980s. They'll have to navigate their way through the competition without champion halfback Cooper Cronk and Latrell Mitchell, but one gets the feeling they'll be just fine.

Speaking of Latrell, his move to the Rabbitohs forced the Royal family



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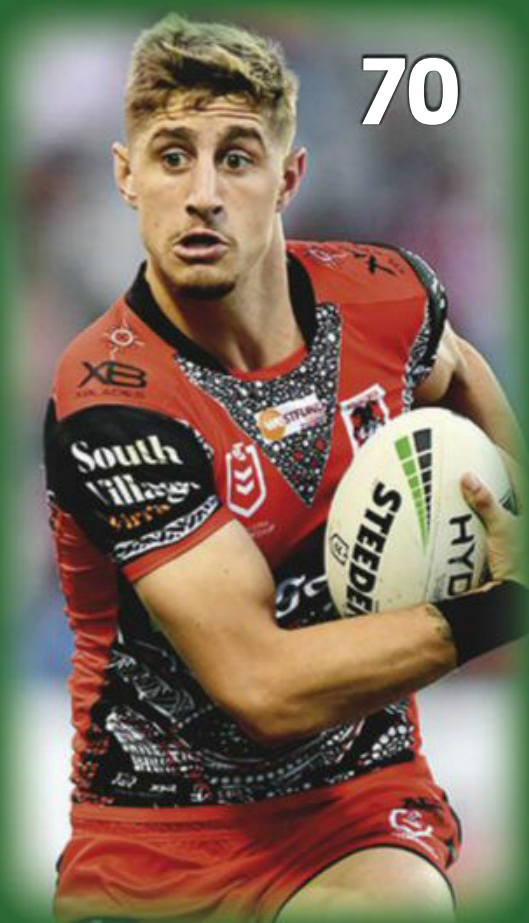
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SEASON PREVIEW

break-up onto page two of Sydney newspapers as journalists scrambled to break the story of where he would end up. His move to South Sydney is sure to add extra spice to the game's fiercest rivalry as the Rabbitohs look to move on in the post-Sam Burgess and John Sutton era.

Canberra's rapid rise in 2019 will count for nothing if they can't back it up, and their quest to go one better will come with one key change after the club replaced Aidan Sezer with Englishman George Williams.

Getting back to the grand final won't be easy, with a host of teams ready to make their move. The Eels have recruited Ryan Matterson and Reagan Campbell-Gillard and loom as genuine dark horses to go all the way, while the Sea Eagles aren't far off and will be hard to beat if the Trbojevic brothers can stay fit.

Then you've got Valentine Holmes, who returns after a short stint in the NFL to help the Cowboys who will be desperate to turn things around, as will the Dragons, Titans

and Warriors, who finished bottom four and will be desperate to make amends.

These are just some of the storylines for the 2020 season, with the rest of this magazine dedicated to breaking down every team's chances and all the big issues in the greatest game of all.

If that's not enough, we'll be with you every step of the way as your social lives give way to non-stop footy, headlined by our blockbuster Round 1 edition which will hit shelves on March 12. Bring it on! **BL**

The waiting game

With the memory of a struggling season and a disastrous exit lingering in their minds for the past five months, the Broncos will be raring to redeem themselves. By **WILL EVANS**

THE Brisbane Broncos and their fervent fanbase could be excused for feeling this off-season has dragged on longer than most, though the scars of their record-shattering 58-0 qualifying final loss at the hands of Parramatta are still fresh.

While the Broncos have vowed to put last season behind them, coach Anthony Seibold is not shying away from the magnitude of that defeat as he prepares his charges for a premiership assault in 2020.

"It's not so much about wiping the slate clean; you have to learn from your failures," Seibold explains to *Big League*.

"I'm not afraid to fail – that's where you get your biggest growth. No one who has achieved anything in life hasn't failed along the way.

"It was a really painful experience for our group, for the club externally, and me personally. There are teams that were put to the sword by 50 or 60 points last year, but they only had six or seven days to wait to get back on the horse.

"We've dealt with it and dwelling on it isn't going to change what happened that day. It was pretty ugly, nowhere near good enough and I take full responsibility for how that week went – but we've moved on."

The humiliating defeat was the icing on Seibold's gruelling first year at the helm, a spluttering campaign punctuated by inconsistency, mid-season departures and a heavy injury toll.

After Seibold and Wayne Bennett belatedly traded places in December 2018, the transition always shaped as a challenging one. This summer has unfolded far more smoothly for the coach and his players.

"It's a lot better planned this year," Seibold says. "It was a pretty chaotic changeover last year,

so this time I had a much better plan and a much better read on the group as far as what we need to do, areas to maintain and areas to improve.

"We do have a lot of players who are new to the NRL, for plenty of them it's just their first or second NRL pre-season. They're developing their footy IQ. It's been positive, but still a work in progress."

Minimal off-season movement would suggest a harmonious group at Red Hill. Forward trio Matt Gillett, Shaun Fensom and Sam Tagataese hung up the boots, while rookie centre Gehamat Shibasaki was the only other first-grader to depart. The arrivals column consists of Jordan Kahu, who returns after a season with the Cowboys, exciting ex-Titans flyer Jesse Arthurs and former Storm halfback Brodie Croft – a key signing that could make or break the Broncos' campaign.

"Brodie's arrival gives us an organiser that we missed for much of last year," Seibold says.

"When Tom Dearden got injured, we missed that type of player in the halves. (Croft's arrival) has allowed us to move 'Milf' (Anthony Milford) back into the No.6 jersey to play his natural game. He likes to play with freedom, not necessarily have that responsibility of getting the team around the park."

There is no conjecture around who will run out in the halves, but the other spine positions remain up for grabs. Jamayne Isaako, Arthurs and Jack Bird – on the comeback trail

INS & OUTS

Ins: Jesse Arthurs (Gold Coast), Brodie Croft (Melbourne), Jordan Kahu (North Queensland)

Outs: Shaun Fensom (retired), Matt Gillett (retired), Gehamat Shibasaki (Newcastle), Sam Tagataese (retired)



TAKING CONTROL:
Brodie Croft.

from another long-term injury layoff and guaranteed a place in the team somewhere – are jostling for the fullback duties.

Meanwhile, Jake Turpin and yet-to-debut 20-year-old Cory Paix (who Seibold likens to Damien Cook) are applying the blowtorch to 258-game stalwart Andrew McCullough in the race for the No.9 jersey.

The overwhelming positive of a difficult 2019 campaign was the astonishing progress made by their least experienced players.

Payne Haas and David Fifita became teenage Origin debutants and are already verging on superstardom. Kotoni Staggs developed into one of the game's most dangerous centres and played for Tonga. Props Thomas Flegler and Patrick Carrigan produced stellar rookie campaigns. Turpin displayed remarkable maturity after being thrust into hooker and then halfback, while 18-year-old Dearden looked every bit NRL material.

"We've got such a talented young group, but we're trying to improve their footy IQ," says Seibold. "I'm confident we can take some steps in the right direction through the season."

With 24-year-olds Tevita Pangai Jr, Matt Lodge and Joe Ofahengaue fleshing out a blockbuster engine room contingent with recently installed captain Alex Glenn, the Broncos have the capacity to steamroll any opponent. Seibold affirms their collective youth only underlines their potential – though he admits they aren't yet the finished article.

"Yes, they are young, but they're building into a strong pack that can create momentum for our halves in attack. The big thing is they have to understand their jobs in defence."

Rival teams who take Brisbane lightly are liable to be in for a rude shock this season. Borrowing from the adage of learning more from defeats than victories, this fledgling squad's footy smarts may soon match their boundless ability under Seibold's guidance.

BL

TALKING POINTS

AGE GAP

There's arguably more raw talent per square roster inch at the Broncos than anywhere else, but they also possess one of youngest squads in recent memory. Darius Boyd, Andrew McCullough (*pictured, right*) and new skipper Alex Glenn are the only Brisbane players older than 25. Experience can't be manufactured, but Seibold is adamant the calibre of his tyros outweighs their birthdates. "I expect our younger players to continue to step up," the coach says. "(They were) our big improvers and most consistent players last year – Payne Haas was our Player of the Year, played for Australia, played State of Origin. Before last year he'd played 60 minutes in the NRL."

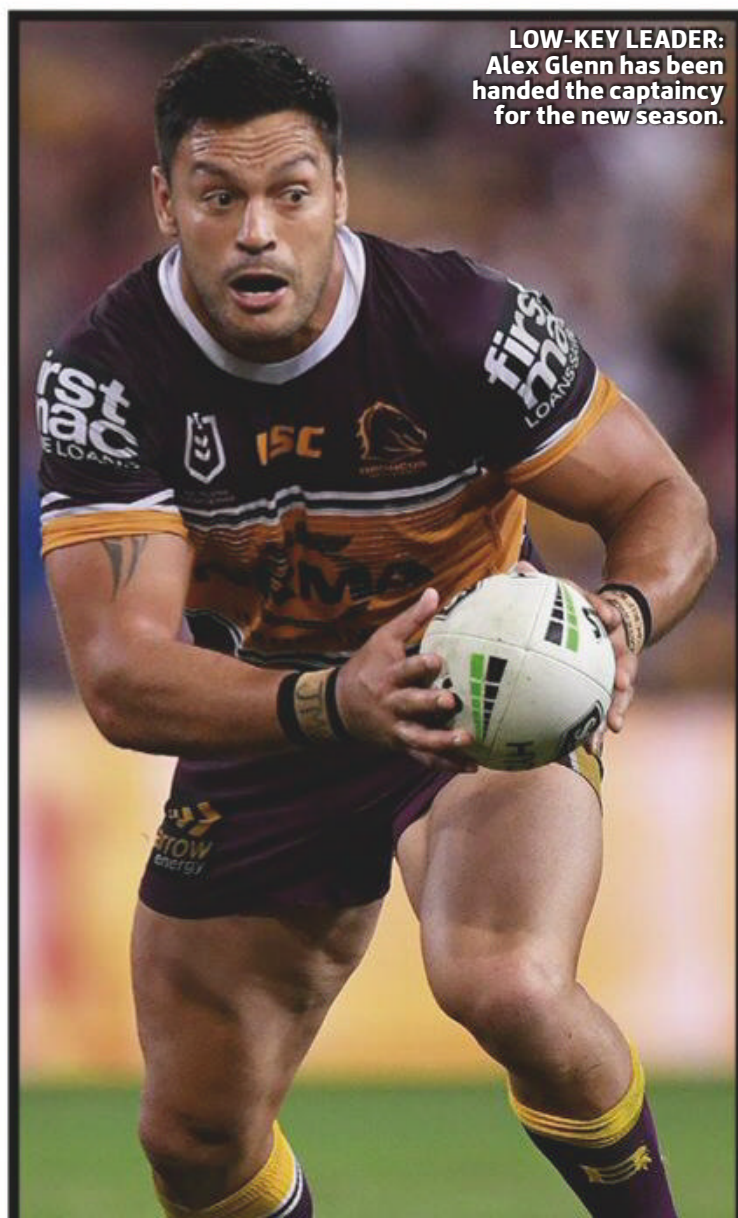


ALF'S SHADOW

Much like the plight of Parramatta's post-Peter Sterling playmakers, the 'next Allan Langer' tag has proved a millstone around many a Brisbane halfback's neck. Brodie Croft has the talent and mentality to make the No.7 jersey his own, but it's a lot to expect of a 22-year-old with fewer than 40 NRL games under his belt to take ownership of a high-profile team lacking direction. "What we thought we were buying is what we've got from Brodie," Seibold asserts. "He's got a tremendous work ethic, he's a really clear communicator on and off the field, and he wants the opportunity to lead a team around the park."

NO.1 CRUSH

A Clive Churchill Medal-winning custodian with almost 250 NRL games at fullback, Darius Boyd is long odds to feature in his preferred position in 2020. But the identity of the Broncos' new No.1 remains clouded. Jamayne Isaako is the early favourite, while Jesse Arthurs has stormed into contention, though both dangerous ball-runners are light in the ball-playing department compared to most NRL fullbacks. Touted as an option by Seibold, Jack Bird – who donned the No.1 three times for Cronulla in 2017 – is the wildcard. Meanwhile, the returning Jordan Kahu has played five Tests for New Zealand at fullback. It's a crucial call for a Broncos side desperately seeking spine stability.



LOW-KEY LEADER:
Alex Glenn has been handed the captaincy for the new season.

TAKING OFFENCE

While Brisbane's defence was ruthlessly exposed on occasion in 2019, the side's alarming attacking drop-off was largely overlooked. The Broncos scored just 18 points per game during the regular season – down from 23.16 in 2018 and the worst average in the club's 32-season history. There's no shortage of firepower in the Broncos' ranks, but creating tries was an issue: Anthony Milford led the team with 13 assists, while Darius Boyd was second with just six. The onus is on the Broncos' playmakers to rectify those statlines in 2020.

CAPTAIN'S CALL

Alex Glenn is undoubtedly the lowest-profile player Brisbane has bestowed the captaincy upon, but few have served the club as diligently or deserve the honour more. Glenn, 31, has played 259 NRL games since debuting for the Broncos in 2009. The back-row leader's trademark consistency will ensure he avoids the same merciless scrutiny that plagued predecessor Boyd.

BRONCOS 2020 DRAW

Rd 1 v Cowboys

Qld Country Bank Stadium, March 13, 8.05pm

Rd 2 v Rabbitohs

Suncorp Stadium, March 20, 8.05pm

Rd 3 v Titans

Cbus Super Stadium, March 29, 6.15pm

Rd 4 v Panthers

Panthers Stadium, April 4, 7.35pm

Rd 5 v Cowboys

Suncorp Stadium, April 10, 7.55pm

Rd 6 v Sharks

Suncorp Stadium, April 17, 7.55pm

Rd 7 v Eels

TIO Stadium, Darwin, April 24, 7.55pm

Rd 8 v Sea Eagles

Suncorp Stadium, May 1, 8.05pm

Rd 9 v Rabbitohs

ANZ Stadium, May 7, 7.50pm

Rd 10 v Dragons

Suncorp Stadium, May 15, 7.55pm

Rd 11 v Bulldogs

Suncorp Stadium, May 21, 7.50pm

Rd 12 v BYE

Rd 13 v Warriors

Mt Smart Stadium, June 5, 6pm

Rd 14 v Roosters

Sydney Cricket Ground, June 11, 7.50pm

Rd 15 v Storm

Suncorp Stadium, June 26, 7.55pm

Rd 16 v Panthers

Suncorp Stadium, July 2, 7.50pm

Rd 17 v Raiders

GIO Stadium, July 11, 5.30pm

Rd 18 v Knights

McDonald Jones Stadium, July 19, 4.05pm

Rd 19 v Warriors

Suncorp Stadium, July 25, 5.30pm

Rd 20 v Eels

Suncorp Stadium, July 31, 7.55pm

Rd 21 v Wests Tigers

Campbelltown Stadium, August 9, 4.05pm

Rd 22 v Titans

Suncorp Stadium, August 16, 2.05pm

Rd 23 v Knights

Suncorp Stadium, August 22, 7.35pm

Rd 24 v Storm

AAMI Park, August 29, 7.35pm

Rd 25 v Roosters

Suncorp Stadium, September 4, 7.55pm



POINT TO PROVE

Talented trio's tough test

WHEN three players take up almost one-third of a club's salary cap, fans expect results – and it's fair to say Broncos supporters' patience with superstar trio **Darius Boyd, Jack Bird** and **Anthony Milford** has worn thin.

Pilloried by the press and fans for his 2019 performances, Boyd was shifted from fullback to five-eighth midway through the season. The 14-year veteran has lost the captaincy and appears certain to spend the year at wing or centre.

"Darius, by nature of him being a really high-profile player, he's come under a lot of scrutiny," Seibold says.

"It's been challenging for him, I put him in the halves because I thought that was going to be best for our team.

I thought he did a really sound job there. Darius has got a real calming presence and brings a great deal of experience to the group, which we don't have a whole heap of."

Bird won a grand final and represented NSW in five Origins at Cronulla but has played only 17 games in two seasons for the Broncos thanks to a horror run of injuries. A campaign-ending knee injury overshadowed a fine start to 2019, however, and Seibold expects the versatile game-breaker to be a key figure this year.

"I thought Jack was one of our best before he did his ACL last year," the coach says. "He was tracking along to play Origin again. He's progressing well, his body composition and fitness levels are very good.

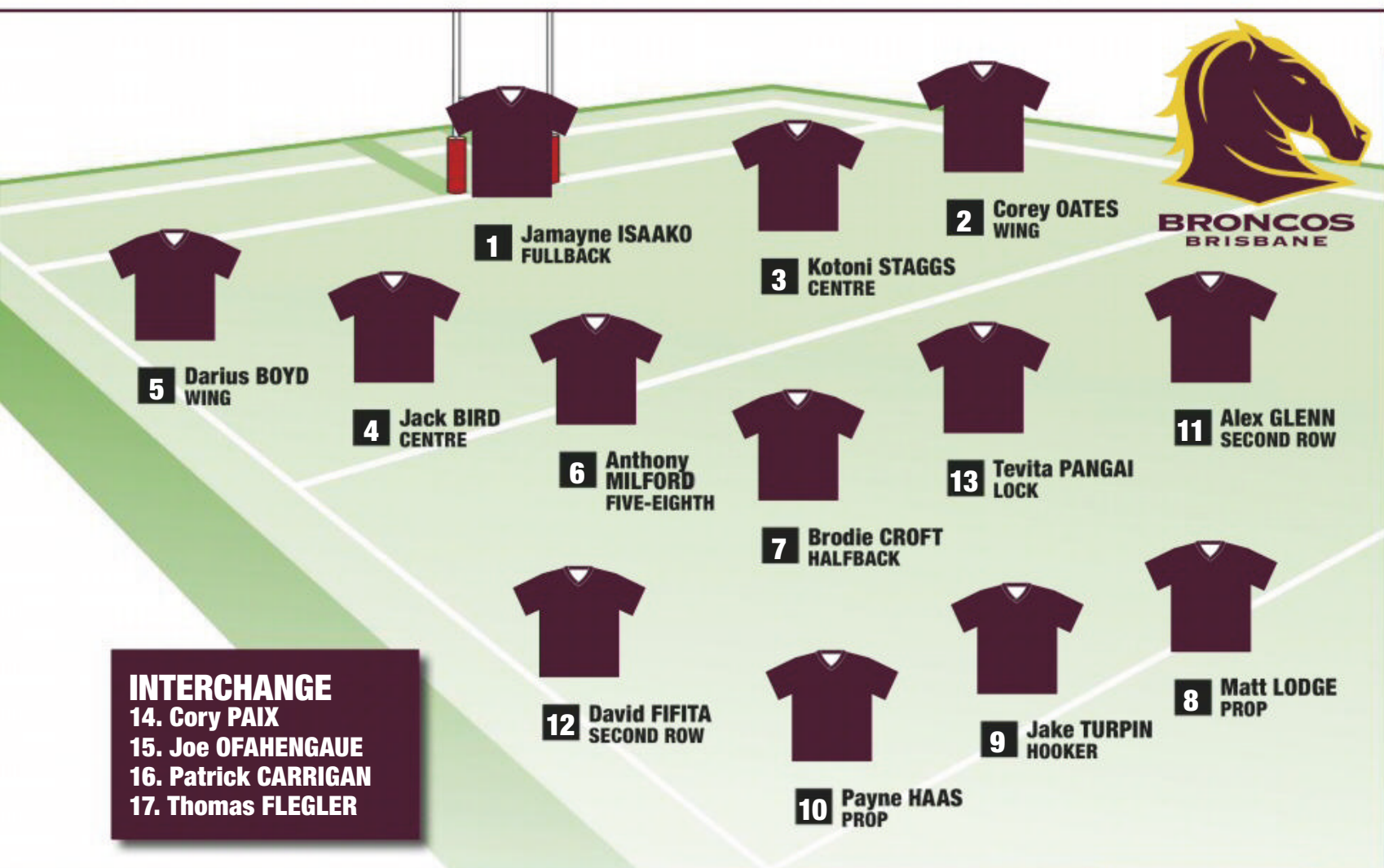
He's worked hard to give himself the best opportunity to play. I've got great belief in him."

Centre seems Bird's most likely position, though he is also in fullback frame.

The electrifying Milford has found it difficult to shake the 'enigmatic' tag as the offensive linchpin in an underperforming team. Switching to fullback failed to fully reignite his attacking fire and he will return to No.6 jersey in 2020. Still only 25, the 167-game veteran should benefit from playing in stable halves combination again with Brodie Croft, whose organisational ability will allow Milford to get back to playing off the cuff.

"When 'Milf' runs the footy, he's one of the best players in the competition," Seibold says.

BIG LEAGUE'S STRONGEST LINE-UP



VOSSY'S VERDICT



A POWERHOUSE club, but without a title since 2006. I can't see them changing that this year, although I do think they'll win more than the 11 matches they posted in 2019. Brodie Croft is a good player and a good pick up, but he'll need to be great to have a significant influence from the outset. The Broncos again boast some of the best young forwards in the game and I look forward to watching their development. I have a feeling that – provided he stays healthy – Jack Bird will have a good season and finally deliver on Broncos fans' expectations. We might learn plenty about them in the first fortnight, with an appearance on the opening night of the Cowboys' new stadium, and then a tough one against Wayne Bennett's Bunnies. **Predicted Finish: 6th**

2020 PLAYING ROSTER

					CAREER STATS						FANTASY
PLAYER	POSITION	D.O.B.	Wgt	Hgt	App	T	G	FG	Pts	Debut	2020 Price
Jesse Arthars	Fullback	08/07/1998	94	189	12	2	0	0	8	2019	\$353,000
Jack Bird	Centre	20/03/1995	91	183	83	19	0	0	76	2015	\$561,000
Darius Boyd	Fullback	17/07/1987	97	184	317	84	0	0	336	2006	\$388,000
Patrick Carrigan	Prop	01/01/1998	106	190	19	0	0	0	0	2019	\$430,000
Xavier Coates	Winger	12/03/2001	104	194	3	1	0	0	4	2019	\$246,000
Brodie Croft	Halfback	14/07/1997	87	177	39	12	9	2	68	2016	\$536,000
Tom Dearden	Halfback	13/03/2001	87	177	5	0	0	0	0	2019	\$365,000
Herbie Farnworth	Winger	23/12/1999	103	190	2	0	0	0	0	2019	\$280,000
David Fifita	2nd Row	25/02/2000	112	186	35	9	0	0	36	2018	\$680,000
Thomas Flegler	Prop	19/08/1999	107	190	23	1	0	0	4	2019	\$379,000
Alex Glenn	2nd Row	31/07/1988	103	182	259	56	0	0	224	2009	\$529,000
Payne Haas	Prop	02/12/1999	116	194	24	4	0	0	16	2018	\$999,000
Jamil Hopoate	2nd Row	08/11/1994	96	180	0	0	0	0	0	–	\$228,000
Jamayne Isaako	Fullback	06/06/1996	98	180	48	15	149	2	360	2017	\$471,000
Jordan Kahu	Winger	28/01/1991	92	192	114	42	185	5	543	2013	\$318,000
Richard Kennar	Winger	10/12/1994	102	185	19	9	0	0	36	2015	\$246,000
Rhys Kennedy	Prop	11/10/1994	112	197	9	0	0	0	0	2019	\$246,000
Matt Lodge	Prop	31/05/1995	116	191	59	4	0	0	16	2014	\$716,000
Andrew McCullough	Hooker	30/01/1990	92	180	258	32	1	1	131	2008	\$647,000
Anthony Milford	Five-Eighth	11/07/1994	88	177	167	67	36	14	354	2013	\$785,000
Corey Oates	Winger	20/10/1994	107	192	142	91	0	0	364	2013	\$456,000
Joe Ofahengaue	Prop	15/09/1995	108	190	90	6	0	0	24	2015	\$578,000
Sean O'Sullivan	Halfback	21/08/1998	86	179	6	1	0	0	4	2018	\$467,000
Cory Paix	Halfback	27/01/2000	87	178	0	0	0	0	0	–	\$228,000
Keenan Palasia	2nd Row	24/01/1997	110	192	2	0	0	0	0	2019	\$246,000
Tevita Pangai	Prop	04/02/1996	115	190	72	9	0	0	36	2016	\$600,000
Izaia Perese	Winger	17/05/1997	93	180	2	0	0	0	0	2019	\$246,000
Kotoni Staggs	Centre	29/10/1998	96	185	33	13	15	0	82	2018	\$477,000
Jake Turpin	Hooker	16/11/1996	86	178	17	3	0	0	12	2018	\$557,000
Ilikena Vudogo	Centre	TBC	99	187	0	0	0	0	0	–	\$228,000

LOWER GRADES

THE Broncos' system of spreading their lower-grade players and juniors across five feeder teams – Ipswich, Norths Devils, Redcliffe, Souths Logan and Wynnum Manly – continues to serve the club well. **Tom Dearden, Richie Kennar** and **Keenan Palasia** are aligned with Wynnum Manly, though only Palasia featured in the club's Intrust Super Cup grand final loss to Burleigh. Redcliffe centre **Izaia Perese** was named in the 2019 ISC Team of the Year, while the Dolphins will gladly accept the services of Cory Paix and Jamil Hopoate if available. Promising three-quarter **Herbie Farnworth** earned an NRL debut in 2019 as well as scored 19 tries and 192 points for Norths Devils, who also have Sean O'Sullivan to call upon. Wynnum Manly also lost the Mal Meninga Cup (under-18s) and Hastings Deering Colts (under-20s) deciders. Meanwhile, Tweed Heads' **Xavier Coates** repeated David Fifita's 2018 achievement last year in winning a Mal Meninga Cup final and earning a Broncos NRL debut in the same season. Both age-group competitions have provided a first-grade pathway for a wealth of Broncos-contracted young guns.



Ready for the next level

The Raiders have taken the long road back to reclaiming their status as an NRL powerhouse, and now they're determined to stay at the top for as long as they possibly can. By **MICHAEL BLOK**

AS the Raiders begin a new decade, they'll be sailing into uncharted waters. For far too long, they've started each campaign as underdogs, given little chance of making an impression, however that's all changed after last year's fairytale run to the decider.

Having re-asserted themselves as an attacking force in 2019, they'll enter the new season as one of the leading premiership threats.

They may have fallen at the final hurdle, but opposing teams will still be coming after them this time around.

"It's going to be a different feel for us this year," co-captain Jarrod Croker says.

"A lot of teams will be coming after us, so we've got to adjust to that and be prepared for it. I've got no doubt we'll be ready."

As much as Croker would prefer to leave last year's controversial heartbreak in the past, he admits the pain still lingers.

The Raiders can be proud of what they achieved in 2019, but it's time to move on if they want to go one step further this time.

"We had a good season but at the end of

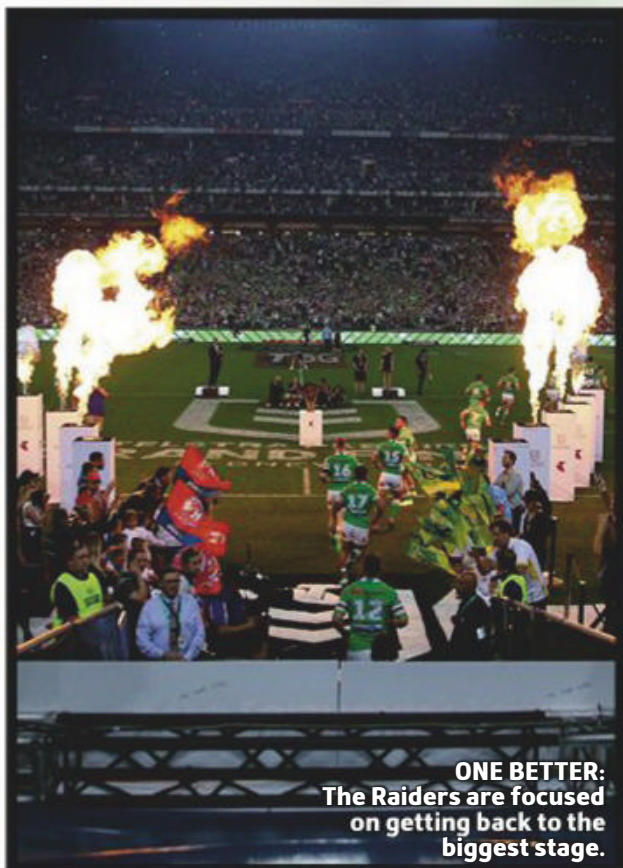
INS & OUTS

Ins: George Williams (Wigan), Curtis Scott (Melbourne)

Outs: Brad Abbey (released), Ata Hingano (released), Royce Hunt (released), Joey Leilua (Wests Tigers), Jordan Rapana (Japanese rugby), Aidan Sezer (Huddersfield)



MAN WITH A PLAN: Coach Ricky Stuart.



ONE BETTER: The Raiders are focused on getting back to the biggest stage.

the day we didn't win the comp, and that's our goal," he says.

"We've got to go one step further this year, and there are 15 other sides wanting the same thing. It all starts again."

With increased expectation comes additional pressure to succeed, but prop Josh Papalii says the Raiders are up for the challenge.

"We know there can be added pressure [with success], but with the playing group we have, we know we'll be all right. We have no big heads and we're all willing to work hard for each other," Papalii tells *Big League*.

It took the Raiders more than two decades to return to a grand final last year, but Papalii is optimistic that the next one won't be so far away.

"Hopefully we can get back to our second grand final in two years. It would be nice to go back and win one," the Queensland representative says.

"We know the hard work that goes into getting to the grand final – that starts now. We're willing to adapt to any conditions we need to try and win the comp. It's not going to be easy, but we're up for the challenge."

The Dally M Prop of the Year says he'll use the heartbreak of last year to motivate him in 2020.

"We're so eager to win it, especially the older boys. The younger boys don't understand, some of them were in their first year and they made it straight to the grand final. That's very nice for them, but some of us had to play eight or nine years to get there," he says.

"We're looking forward to the challenge and we're very hungry at the moment. Hopefully we can play our best footy this year so we can play in the finals again."

When you look at the Raiders squad, you'll see they have no excuses for missing out on a top four finish in 2020.

They've retained the majority of last year's grand final line-up, however have replaced halfback Aidan Sezer with England international George Williams.

The star recruit, who has played 11 Tests for his country, joins the Green Machine following seven seasons at Wigan, where he played in four grand finals.

The signing of Williams is an enormous addition to the squad, however it will change their style of play, according to countryman Josh Hodgson.

"He'll add another running dimension to our game. Last year Aidan [Sezer] was more of an organiser for us, kicking and telling everyone where to go," the hooker says.

"Whereas [now] we've got two blokes who are genuine runners of the ball and both can organise at the same time.

"He's a really vocal kid and he knows his football. I've probably got to have my ears up a little bit more than I usually do because there's probably two of them shouting for the ball."

The Raiders have also secured the signature of Curtis Scott from Melbourne. The young centre played 48 games for the Storm, and pending a court case for a pre-season incident, is expected to slot straight into Canberra's starting side following the departure of Joey Leilua to the Tigers.

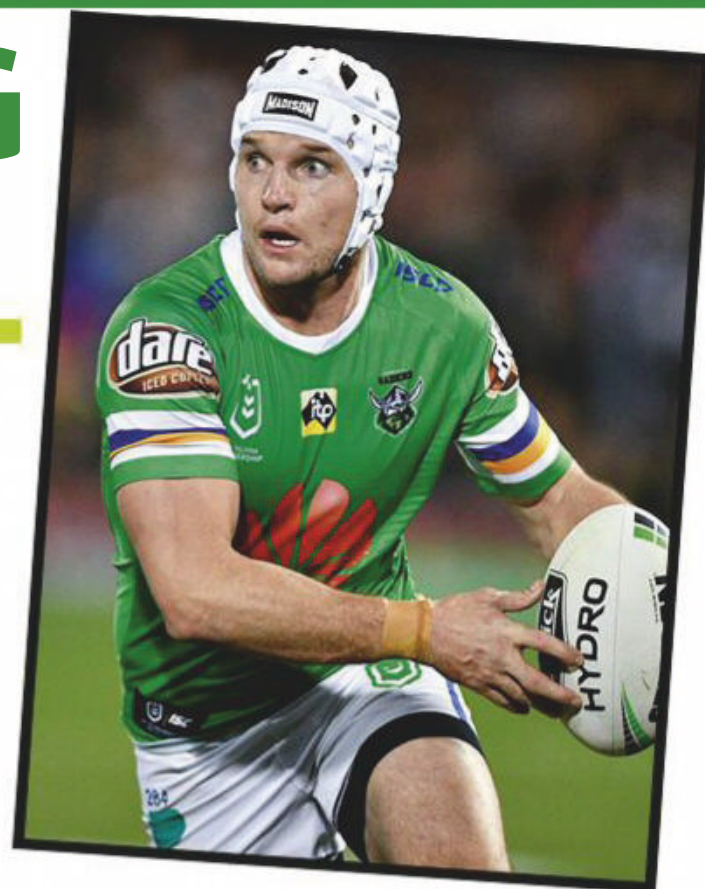
"[Scott] is a great player. We didn't sign him to be a backup," Hodgson says.

Last year may have finished with heartbreak, but it's time to forget the past and take another shot. **BL**

TALKING POINTS

RECORDS AWAIT

Canberra co-captain Jarrod Croker (pictured, right) needs to score just four points to become the seventh player in history to crack 2,000 first-grade points. With a match-up against the Titans in Round 1, you'd expect him to reach the milestone straight away – and the records may not stop there. He needs 39 points to pass Daryl Halligan on the all-time point-scoring list, 112 to eclipse Jason Taylor's tally, 181 for Andrew Johns' mark and 227 to go ahead of Johnathan Thurston. Having scored 228 points last season, it's entirely possible that he'll finish the year as the third-highest pointscorer of all-time.



KICK-START

The Raiders have the perfect opportunity to pick up when they left off with a favourable draw to start the year. Five of their first seven games are at home, with Round 1 at GIO against last year's wooden spooners Gold Coast. In the opening 10 rounds, they'll play bottom eight teams from last season on eight occasions. The only downside to having a favourable start to the season is that they play some of the strong teams in the middle stages, as well as playing at home just twice in the final seven weeks.

HEADING NORTH

With Australia plagued by bushfires throughout the summer, air quality in Canberra was ranked as some of the worst in the world, giving the club no choice but to move pre-season training to Queensland's Sunshine Coast. Instead of kicking stones about being away from family and friends, the players and staff united to make the most of the opportunity. "Some would look at it as a bit of a setback, but we're seeing it as a good opportunity to bond together," Papalii says. "Last year we had some great times on the road, and being away really brings the group together."



BIG 'PAPA'

Last season, Raiders coach Ricky Stuart labelled Josh Papalii the most influential player in the world, with the big bopper having a season to remember. He was able to change the momentum of games with one giant run or big hit, and was a key factor in advancing the Green Machine to the decider. If the Raiders want to replicate last year's success, they'll need Papalii to rise to the occasion again – and he's up for the challenge. "I hope I can have another good season," he says. "I've got to work hard and take one game at a time, but I'm ready for the challenge."

RAIDERS 2020 DRAW

Rd 1 v Titans

GIO Stadium, March 13, 6pm

Rd 2 v Warriors

Eden Park, March 21, 3pm

Rd 3 v Dragons

GIO Stadium, March 26, 8.05pm

Rd 4 v Sea Eagles

GIO Stadium, April 3, 8.05pm

Rd 5 v Panthers

Panthers Stadium, April 12, 4.05pm

Rd 6 v Knights

McDonalds Park, Wagga Wagga, April 18, 3pm

Rd 7 v Rabbitohs

GIO Stadium, April 26, 2.05pm

Rd 8 v Bulldogs

Suncorp Stadium, May 2, 5.30pm

Rd 9 v Wests Tigers

Scully Park, Tamworth, May 9, 5.30pm

Rd 10 v Panthers

GIO Stadium, May 17, 2.05pm

Rd 11 v Roosters

HBF Park, Perth, May 23, 7.35pm

Rd 12 v BYE

Rd 13 v Storm

AAMI Park, June 6, 7.35pm

Rd 14 v Warriors

GIO Stadium, June 14, 2.05pm

Rd 15 v Roosters

GIO Stadium, June 28, 4.05pm

Rd 16 v Sharks

Netstrata Jubilee Stadium, July 5, 4.05pm

Rd 17 v Broncos

GIO Stadium, July 11, 5.30pm

Rd 18 v Eels

GIO Stadium, July 18, 5.30pm

Rd 19 v Dragons

WIN Stadium, July 26, 2.05pm

Rd 20 v Cowboys

North Queensland Stadium, August 1, 7.35pm

Rd 21 v Sea Eagles

Lottoland, August 8, 7.35pm

Rd 22 v Wests Tigers

GIO Stadium, August 16, 4.05pm

Rd 23 v Rabbitohs

Central Coast Stadium, August 22, 5.30pm

Rd 24 v Titans

Cbus Super Stadium, August 30, 2.05pm

Rd 25 v Storm

GIO Stadium, September 5, 7.35pm



POINT TO PROVE

Foreign legion grows in size

ALL eyes will be on star recruit **George Williams** when he pulls on the lime green jersey for the first time this year. Williams' transfer to Australia had been rumoured for more than 12 months and the club were even willing to let go of grand final halfback Aidan Sezer for the Englishman's signature.

"He's fitting in well. He's got five other English boys who are showing him the ropes. He's doing really well. He's training pretty hard and he's

looking really fit," Papalii says. "He's come here to work hard and fight for his spot in the team. 'Sticky' [coach Ricky Stuart] has high praise for 'Georgie' and we feel good. From what I've seen of him, he's got a really nice long-ball pass. I guess he's a big body, which fits in nicely with our other half being Jack Wighton being quick, big and strong as well."

The other player to watch is another Englishman – **John Bateman**. The talented forward had a 2019 to remember in

his first season in the NRL. He was the competition's best second-rower as he competed for absolutely everything. He averaged 116.8 metres and 35.6 tackles per game, to go with five tries and four line-breaks. In his second year in Australia, he'll aim to remain consistent, if not get better.

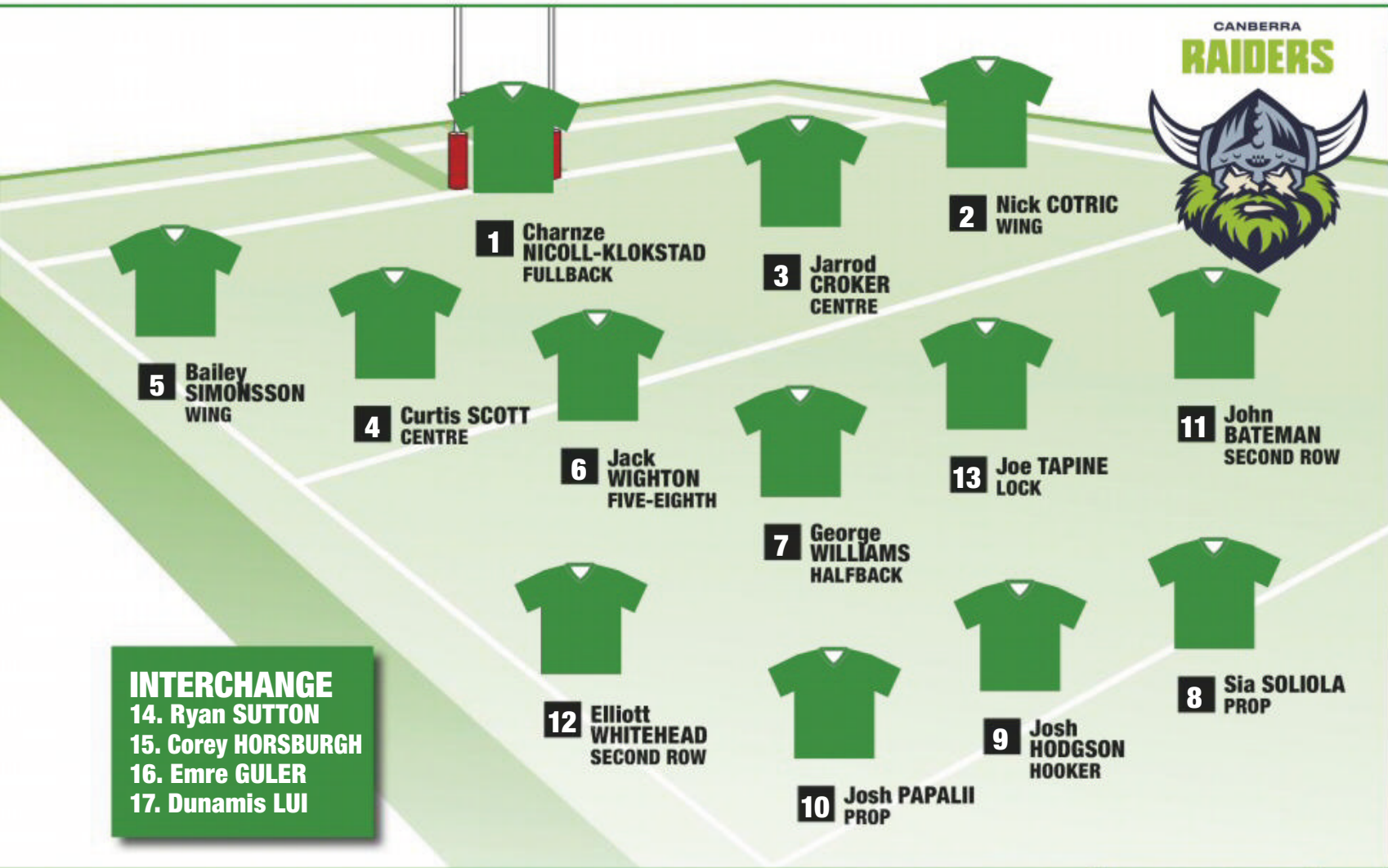
"Johnny was so good for us last year, and we don't want any extra pressures on him, but we'd love him to do that again for us this year," Papalii says.

BIG LEAGUE'S STRONGEST LINE-UP

VOSSY'S VERDICT



I won't offer any apologies for stating I believe the Raiders over-achieved in 2019, but boy were they great to watch. The loss of such prolific players like Jordan Rapana, Joey Leilua and Aidan Sezer surely has to set them back, putting pressure on key English recruit George Williams to be a hit right from the get go. However, I can't see the amount of self belief they would have gained from reaching the grand final dissipating in a hurry. I'm tipping Ricky Stuart's men won't match their stellar deeds of last year, but I reckon their fans will happily cop back-to-back seasons in the playoffs having not achieved that feat as a club since 2004.
Predicted Finish: 5th



2020 PLAYING ROSTER

PLAYER	POSITION	D.O.B.	Wgt	Hgt	CAREER STATS						Debut	2020 Price
					App	T	G	FG	Pts			
John Bateman	2nd Row	30/09/1993	97	187	23	5	0	0	20		2019	\$870,000
Luke Bateman	Lock	25/01/1995	99	182	71	1	0	0	4		2015	\$375,000
JJ Collins	Prop	15/02/1996	105	184	16	0	0	0	0		2016	\$246,000
Nick Cotric	Winger	18/11/1998	102	186	70	32	0	0	128		2017	\$431,000
Jarrod Croker	Centre	11/09/1990	94	183	257	127	744	0	1996		2009	\$507,000
Emre Guler	Prop	19/01/1998	108	191	14	0	0	0	0		2018	\$264,000
Siliva Havili	Hooker	18/02/1993	108	178	70	5	0	0	20		2014	\$373,000
Josh Hodgson	Hooker	31/10/1989	92	180	108	13	0	0	52		2015	\$701,000
Corey Horsburgh	Lock	03/01/1998	104	188	22	0	0	0	0		2019	\$465,000
Sebastian Kris	Centre	19/04/1999	99	182	4	3	0	0	12		2019	\$297,000
Dunamis Lui	Prop	16/02/1990	109	180	138	3	0	0	12		2010	\$416,000
Jack Murchie	2nd Row	26/06/1997	104	189	3	0	0	0	0		2018	\$296,000
Charnze Nicoll-Klokstad	Fullback	02/08/1995	94	182	33	18	0	0	72		2017	\$631,000
Michael Oldfield	Centre	24/11/1990	94	186	48	30	0	0	120		2010	\$377,000
Josh Papalii	Prop	13/05/1992	118	182	197	47	0	0	188		2011	\$742,000
Curtis Scott	Centre	12/10/1997	90	188	48	18	0	0	72		2016	\$432,000
Bailey Simonsson	Winger	18/02/1998	94	187	21	8	0	0	32		2019	\$375,000
Harley Smith-Shields	Centre	12/01/2000	95	183	0	0	0	0	0		–	\$375,000
Sia Soliola	Prop	04/08/1986	103	184	200	38	1	0	154		2005	\$473,000
Tom Starling	Hooker	04/06/1998	82	170	4	0	0	0	0		2018	\$228,000
Ryan Sutton	Prop	02/08/1995	103	185	20	1	0	0	4		2019	\$512,000
Joe Tapine	Lock	04/05/1994	107	189	100	16	0	0	64		2014	\$485,000
Semi Valemei	Winger	20/01/1999	98	182	0	0	0	0	0		–	–
Elliott Whitehead	2nd Row	04/09/1989	105	189	101	24	0	0	96		2016	\$572,000
Jack Wighton	Five-Eighth	04/02/1993	96	190	156	45	0	0	180		2012	\$666,000
George Williams	Halfback	31/10/1994	90	183	0	0	0	0	0		–	\$635,000
Sam Williams	Halfback	18/03/1991	86	180	94	15	25	0	116		2011	\$471,000
Hudson Young	2nd Row	11/06/1998	98	182	12	1	0	0	4		2019	\$478,000

LOWER GRADES

CANBERRA'S lower grades will be aiming to strike back this season after a number of heartbreaking finishes in 2019. Their Jersey Flegg team fell one win short of the premiership, losing the grand final by two points, and will be hoping for better luck in 2020. Their Canterbury Cup team, Mounties, were the team to beat in the early stages of the competition. They were always toward the top of the ladder and at one stage looked to compete for the minor premiership. However they slipped at the back-end of the season to finish sixth and their finals campaign lasted just 80 minutes with a 44-20 loss to Newtown. With a good looking line-up in 2020, the side will have their eyes on a top four finish. Halfback **Sam Williams** will lead the side around again this year, providing there aren't any injuries to the top grade halves. The team is looking healthy with the likes of Luke Bateman, Siliva Havili, Michael Oldfield and Hudson Young set to play some reserve grade during the stage of the year.



Working like Dogs

Poor starts and giant-killing finishes have become a constant for the Bulldogs, but in 2020 consistency is key as Dean Pay's charges continue their climb back to the top. By **MARIA TSIALIS**

PLENTY of inspiration can be taken from the old saying 'slow and steady wins the race'. There is power in knowing if you stick to your processes and perform to a high standard, there's every chance you can finish in first place.

Unfortunately, while the Bulldogs have been steady in the past couple of years, slow starts have regularly made their race to the top eight an unwinnable one.

It's been a tale of two seasons in one, and their players are well aware winning early is key to their 2020 campaign.

"We're conscious of it," explains back-rower Adam Elliott. "It's not like come Round 8 again we're going to say 'oh crap, we're here again'.

"We're going to lean into that first game. It's definitely something that's

going to be spoken about. We're working really hard to make sure it happens. There's no excuse for us to repeat the slow start this year."

In 2019, an incredible run from Round 15 onward had journalists scrambling for their two favourite words – mathematical chance – and though it wasn't to be, they've gained plenty of confidence from victories over finals contenders including the Eels, Rabbitohs, Sharks and Broncos.

Their coach Dean Pay has been adamant their young squad has a way to go – years, even – before they make it back to play-off territory.

"Deano's obviously cautious. Internally it's more important to have that belief among each other," Elliott says.

"I'll take things on board a lot stronger that he says to us as a group. I can see that he has a lot of belief in us. What he says on the outside, we know NRL coaches like to water things down a little bit."

Key players have had longer periods away from training to rest their bodies before starting the gruelling pre-season, and the Dogs have also made minor roster changes to bolster their team.

Hooker Sione Katoa was recruited from Penrith and Joe Stimson (Melbourne) and Dean Britt (South Sydney) join looking to muscle their way into an already-strong back-row rotation.

Stimson has settled well at Belmore and says the youth at the club is a big reason why he made the move north from the Storm.

"When you're young you're hungry for success in a different way," Stimson says. "When you're older you've already proved a lot. There are players in this team who need to prove something, and that leads to a quality of training and games. We've got some great young forwards coming through.

"[Dean Pay] showed me the future plan and I think it's a club that's going to be moving forward

INS & OUTS

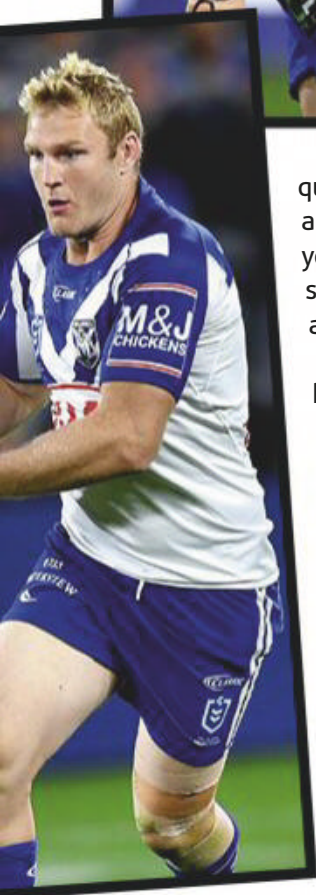
Ins: Dean Britt (South Sydney), Sione Katoa (Penrith), Joe Stimson (Melbourne)

Outs: Fa'amanu Brown (released), Danny Fualalo (released), Michael Lichaa (released)



HIGH HOPES: Kieran Foran's quick recovery from shoulder surgery has been positive.

PHOTOS: NRL Photos.com (Gregg, Porteous, Tolman, Elliott, Jackson), Robb Cox (Hopocate), Brett Hemmings/Getty Images (Hawthorne-McAra), Brett Costello (Pay), Supplied (Foran)



quite quickly. It's a proud club and they won't cop too many low years. It's going to be on the up soon, very soon. I'm really excited about what 2020 has in store."

The Bulldogs have already had their share of adversity to start their campaign, with Kieran Foran out of action for an extended period after suffering a serious shoulder injury while playing for New Zealand in an end-of-year Test.

"It's difficult, you feel for Kieran because he's had an injury-plagued career for four or five years now," says Bulldogs stalwart Aiden Tolman (left).

"He's so tough and resilient and I'm sure he'll be back. The (young halves) here – Lachlan Lewis is coming into his third

year of grade, Jack Cogger did some great things last year and Brandon Wakeham had some great games for Fiji at the end of the year.

"They'll have to stand up and take control without Kieran. Hopefully they can steer the ship for the year and if Kieran comes back it will be a boost."

The Bulldogs were also buoyed by the re-signing of captain Josh Jackson in the off-season after protracted contract negotiations threatened to end his eight-year tenure at the club.

He will be one of the most experienced players in the team alongside Tolman, who at 31 is the oldest member of the squad.

"The past couple of years we've had a younger squad," Tolman says. "I'm probably the most experienced in terms of games. There are a lot of younger guys coming up. It's always a challenge keeping up with them, it's a great challenge to see where you're at. You always want to make yourself better, otherwise there are other guys ready to take your spot."

"For us, we have to take little steps. But we want to make the top eight, we want to win it come September."

B

TALKING POINTS

THERE'S A WILL

One shining light for the Bulldogs who will be counted on to make an impact in attack this season is Will Hopoate, the club's 2019 Player of the Year who re-signed until 2021 back in November. Though he was shifted to the centres from fullback upon Dallin Watene-Zelezniak's mid-season arrival at Belmore, he ran for 3,709 metres (an average of 154.6 per game), a competition-high for centres.

FORAN-20

Fears five-eighth Kieran Foran would miss the whole season – in his final contracted year at the club – were allayed by the 29-year-old half, who declared he won't be retiring and will attempt to make it back to the field in 2020. The veteran has had a shocking run with serious injury. "He's one of my best mates and someone I really care about and I'm super proud of how he has bounced back from a lot of things," says Adam Elliott. "It's a hard one to swallow with 'Foz', I know how much he loves the game and how competitive he is. To see him get back to the peak and play for New Zealand, then get kicked back to the curb... it's hard to swallow. I wish he could be running out with us in Round 1. But there are no excuses now, we know who our options are."

FAMILIAR FACES

The new kids on the block at Belmore already had some strong links to the club. Dean Britt – club legend Darren Britt's son – has previously lived with Joe Stimson when he was contracted by the Storm. Both of them knew Adam Elliott from attending school at St Gregory's Campbelltown and Stimson was also coached by Dean Pay in the 2015 NSW under-20s squad.

STATS PAINFUL

The Bulldogs' first game of the season – against traditional foes the Eels at Bankwest Stadium – is enough of an incentive to start on the right foot, but there's plenty of work to be done to correct the nagging issues in their game. In attack, they scored 326 points in 2019, the fewest they've scored as a club since 1989. In defence, they couldn't stop teams rolling over them, giving up the most metres of any club in the comp.



LOGJAM IN THE BACK

As has been the trend for the Bulldogs over the past few years, their strongest position is the back row, and their recruitment has made the fight for spots even more tense. Stimson and Britt will have to compete with Elliott, Josh Jackson, Corey Harawira-Naera (pictured), Raymond Faitala-Mariner and Chris Smith for a starting position. "I've my work cut out for me but hopefully I can get a starting spot," says Stimson. "I want to play more confidently than I ever have. I'm good enough to play in the NRL, so I've got to make an impact in my games."



BULLDOGS 2020 DRAW

Rd 1 v Eels

Bankwest Stadium, March 12, 8.05pm

Rd 2 v Cowboys

ANZ Stadium, March 19, 8.05pm

Rd 3 v Wests Tigers

Campbelltown Stadium, March 29, 4.05pm

Rd 4 v Sharks

ANZ Stadium, April 4, 5.30pm

Rd 5 v Rabbitohs

ANZ Stadium, April 10, 4.05pm

Rd 6 v Eels

ANZ Stadium, April 18, 7.35pm

Rd 7 v Cowboys

Queensland Bank Stadium, April 25, 6pm

Rd 8 v Raiders

Suncorp Stadium, May 2, 5.30pm

Rd 9 v Warriors

Mt Smart Stadium, May 8, 6pm

Rd 10 v Sea Eagles

Belmore Sports Ground, May 15, 6pm

Rd 11 v Broncos

Suncorp Stadium, May 21, 7.50pm

Rd 12 v Titans

Cbus Super Stadium, May 28, 7.50pm

Rd 13 v Dragons

ANZ Stadium, June 8, 4.05pm

Rd 14 v Sea Eagles

Lottoland, June 13, 3pm

Rd 15 v Rabbitohs

ANZ Stadium, June 27, 5.30pm

Rd 16 v BYE

Rd 17 v Warriors

Bankwest Stadium, July 10, 7.55pm

Rd 18 v Storm

HBF Park, Perth, July 18, 7.35pm

Rd 19 v Roosters

Sydney Cricket Ground, July 25, 3pm

Rd 20 v Knights

Bankwest Stadium, August 1, 5.30pm

Rd 21 v Sharks

Netstrata Jubilee Stadium, August 7, 6pm

Rd 22 v Dragons

WIN Stadium, August 15, 7.35pm

Rd 23 v Bulldogs

Bankwest Stadium, August 23, 4.05pm

Rd 24 v Wests Tigers

Bankwest Stadium, August 29, 3pm

Rd 25 v Knights

McDonald Jones Stadium, September 6, 2.05pm



POINT TO PROVE

Pay's day arrives

COACH **Dean Pay** has had a couple of years to lay his claim on the team, and though he's been unable to make many changes to his young roster due to salary cap restraints, the team's giant-killing wins of 2019 proved they are capable of shaking the competition.

Bulldogs fans demand success and this will put the spotlight on the coach in his third year at the helm.

"[Pay] is a very approachable coach and that's such a good attribute to have and a big reason that I came here," explains recruit Joe Stimson.

"I knew he could get the best out of me. You shouldn't really be playing if you don't want

to make the top eight and top four. We have to think about improving on 2019."

Pay's biggest challenge will be in the halves, where **Lachlan Lewis** and **Jack Cogger** will likely get the nod to start the season. Both young and relatively inexperienced, they did an admirable job in Kieran Foran's absence last year.

Lewis has been linked with the Storm as the Dogs reportedly chase Josh Addo-Carr, but that deal is unlikely to happen in 2020 and the youngster will likely get the first shot at halfback. **Brandon Wakeham** got his opportunity last year with the club and also had some excellent games for Fiji, and

will be knocking on the door for another chance to play in the NRL.

One of last year's big recruits, **Dylan Napa**, had a colourful pre-season in 2019 but a relatively quiet campaign considering he was the marquee signing for the club. Across the competition, the Bulldogs finished 10th in all run metres, 15th in tackle-breaks and 13th in line-break assists, and will need plenty of help from the engine room if they're to turn their slow starts to the year around.

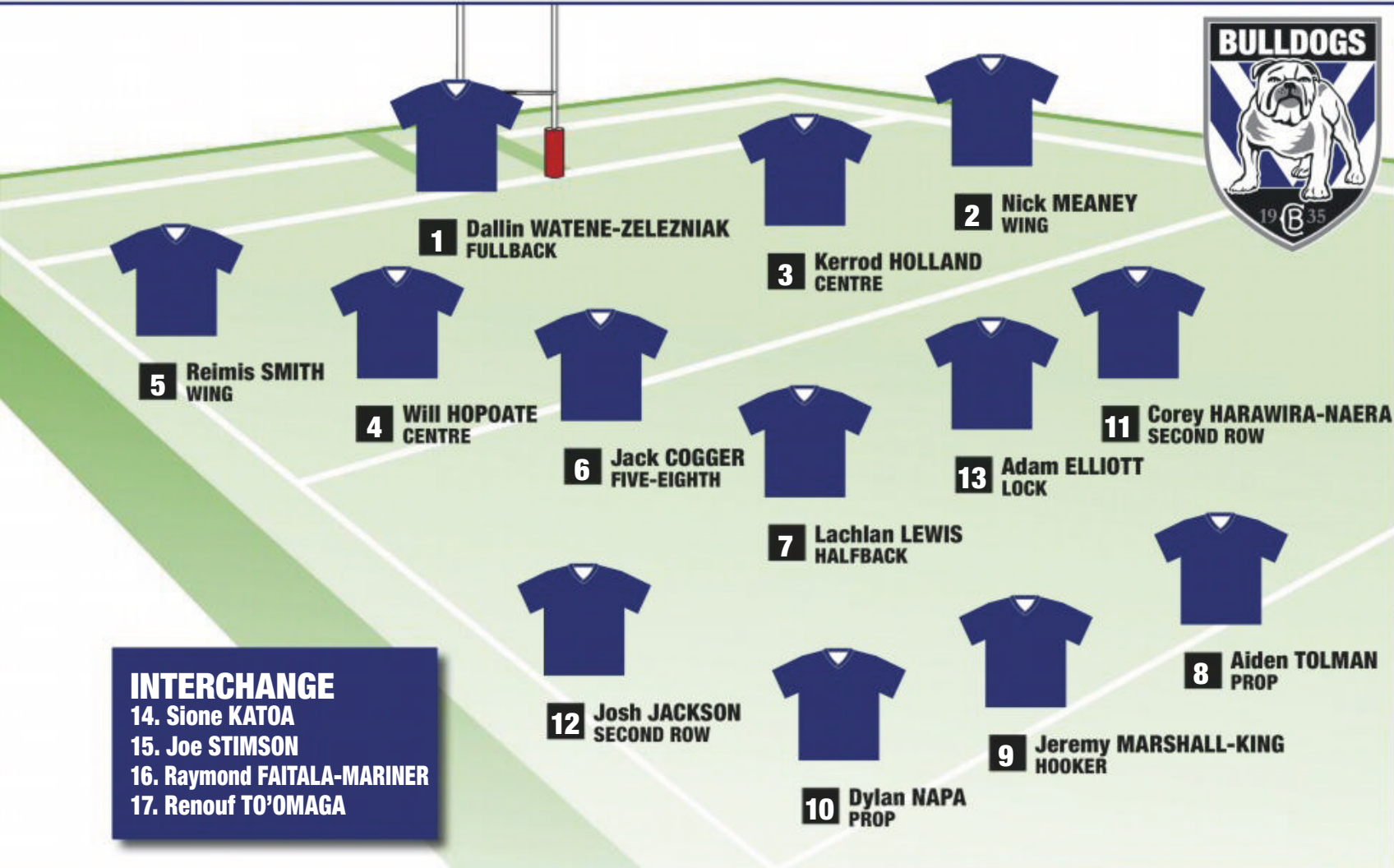
There is added incentive for the 27-year-old to return to the Origin arena after missing the third game of last year's series.

BIG LEAGUE'S STRONGEST LINE-UP

VOSSY'S VERDICT



I LOVE the work ethic Dean Pay has instilled at this club, and plenty of admiration for the way the side finished off 2019 with five wins from their final six games. But even in winning those matches they scored more than 18 points only once. Their season average in attack was under 14. A giant question mark remains over their attacking ability and it's hard to dismiss the fact that no side scored fewer points in the NRL last year. They've acquired a few handy new players but no superstars. One area they will hope to improve is their season start. In 2019, they were on the back-foot early with just one victory from their opening six matches. In the same period this year they play the Eels twice, Cowboys, Tigers, Sharks and Rabbitohs.
Predicted Finish: 15th



2020 PLAYING ROSTER

PLAYER	POSITION	D.O.B.	Wgt	Hgt	CAREER STATS						Debut	2020 Price
					App	T	G	FG	Pts			
Jake Averillo	Centre	11/08/2000	92	183	0	0	0	0	0	–	–	\$228,000
Dean Britt	2nd Row	17/03/1994	98	193	17	1	0	0	4	2017	–	\$495,000
Jack Cogger	Halfback	05/08/1997	83	176	37	4	0	0	16	2016	–	\$571,000
Christian Crichton	Winger	12/07/1996	100	182	25	5	0	0	20	2018	–	\$300,000
Adam Elliott	2nd Row	16/10/1994	103	185	75	8	2	0	36	2016	–	\$532,000
Raymond Faitala-Mariner	2nd Row	26/07/1993	110	190	65	6	0	0	24	2015	–	\$545,000
Kieran Foran	Five-Eighth	13/07/1990	90	180	199	41	8	1	181	2009	–	\$574,000
Corey Harawira-Naera	2nd Row	18/05/1995	96	187	67	18	0	0	72	2017	–	\$601,000
Morgan Harper	Centre	28/08/1998	95	180	1	0	0	0	0	2019	–	\$246,000
Kerrod Holland	Centre	25/09/1992	94	182	60	18	76	0	224	2016	–	\$414,000
Will Hopoate	Fullback	09/05/1992	98	186	147	42	0	0	168	2010	–	\$621,000
Josh Jackson	2nd Row	08/01/1991	99	180	181	23	0	0	92	2012	–	\$692,000
Sione Katoa	Hooker	26/01/1995	93	175	47	0	0	0	0	2015	–	\$342,000
Lachlan Lewis	Halfback	19/08/1996	90	191	24	1	0	1	5	2018	–	\$638,000
Jeremy Marshall-King	Hooker	02/12/1995	83	186	47	3	0	0	12	2017	–	\$544,000
Nick Meaney	Fullback	10/09/1997	90	187	27	8	33	0	98	2018	–	\$461,000
Marcelo Montoya	Centre	17/02/1996	95	189	45	16	0	0	64	2017	–	\$354,000
Dylan Napa	Prop	13/11/1992	113	198	142	4	0	0	16	2013	–	\$450,000
Ofahiki Ogden	Prop	06/06/1996	106	192	22	2	0	0	8	2018	–	\$407,000
Jayden Okunbor	Winger	02/03/1997	108	196	10	5	0	0	20	2019	–	\$493,000
Chris Smith	2nd Row	16/01/1994	104	185	24	0	0	0	0	2015	–	\$350,000
Reimis Smith	Winger	13/05/1997	97	196	35	21	0	0	84	2016	–	\$326,000
Joe Stimson	2nd Row	02/12/1995	104	189	51	9	3	0	42	2017	–	\$390,000
Sauaso Sue	Lock	20/04/1992	105	188	127	11	0	0	44	2013	–	\$397,000
Isaiah Tass	Centre	19/08/1999	94	185	0	0	0	0	0	–	–	\$228,000
Aiden Tolman	Prop	10/11/1988	102	183	258	12	0	0	48	2008	–	\$694,000
Renouf To'omaga	Prop	25/06/1995	110	190	13	0	0	0	0	2018	–	\$300,000
Brandon Wakeham	Halfback	11/01/1999	78	172	3	1	0	0	4	2019	–	\$340,000
Dallin Watene-Zelezniak	Fullback	17/08/1995	97	186	116	42	0	0	168	2014	–	\$405,000

LOWER GRADES

THE Bulldogs were strong in the lower grades in 2019, with the NSW Canterbury Cup team finishing the season in fourth and Jersey Flegg in sixth. Both teams were bundled out in the semi-finals but were happy with their strong campaigns.

A couple of young guns have been elevated to the top 30 this year, including Jake Averillo (who has played SG Ball, Jersey Flegg and Canterbury Cup in two short years), and Isaiah Tass, who played both Jersey Flegg and Canterbury Cup last season. Regulars such as Christian Crichton, Morgan Harper and Ofahiki Ogden are still signed to the club.

The club has also contracted five development players, who will train with the top squad full-time during the pre-season and season regular:

Tui Katoa – the younger brother of Sione, has represented the NSW under-20s. **Matt Doorey** is an Australian Schoolboy and NSW under-20s rep. **James Roumanos** represented Lebanon in 2019. **Tyrone Harding** has played two seasons with the club's SG Ball side, and outside back **Sebastian Winters-Chang** has been recruited from renowned rugby league nursery Keebra Park State High.

Uncharted waters

With a club icon retired, an army of young guns and a renovation forcing them into enemy territory, there are plenty of questions facing the Sharks as they begin a new era.

By **MARTIN GABOR**

THE last time the Sharks had a season that didn't feature Paul Gallen was in the year 2000. Back then, Sydney was gripped by Olympics fever, the GST had just been introduced and legend Andrew Ettingshausen was in his final year at the club.

But after a glittering career in the Shire, the workhorse lock has retired from the NRL, opening the door for the club's next wave of middle forwards to take over after showing plenty of promise in 2019.

"We obviously lost some guys who have had some great careers," new skipper Wade Graham tells *Big League*.

"Gal' is the greatest player to have ever played for the club, Matt Prior won two premierships, but the excitement around the group is because we've got a lot of young guys coming through.

"Guys like Jack Williams, Billy Magoulias, Braden Hamlin-Uele and Toby Rudolf are coming through and I can't wait to see which ones get to take what's there."

While Gallen won't be there to take a carry when the rest of the troops are gassed, he remains an important figure in Cronulla.

"He comes in two days a week and does our contact and wrestling sessions and also helps with some video work with the forwards to make sure they're staying on the right track with their preparation," halfback Chad Townsend explains.

"It's awesome to still have him around because he's the greatest player to have ever played for the Sharks and that rubs off on the young players. When he talks, they listen."

Gallen's departure heralds a potential make-or-break year for a club that is coming off one of the most injury-ravaged seasons in memory, yet still managed to scrape into the eight.

Graham managed just 10 games in 2019, new recruit Shaun Johnson was never able to shake hamstring concerns, Matt Moylan only featured in 11 matches while Aaron Woods suffered a serious foot injury that hampered his campaign.



STILL AROUND: Paul Gallen is still contributing to the club during pre-season training.

"Six players made their debuts last year which is more than the previous three years combined," Townsend says.

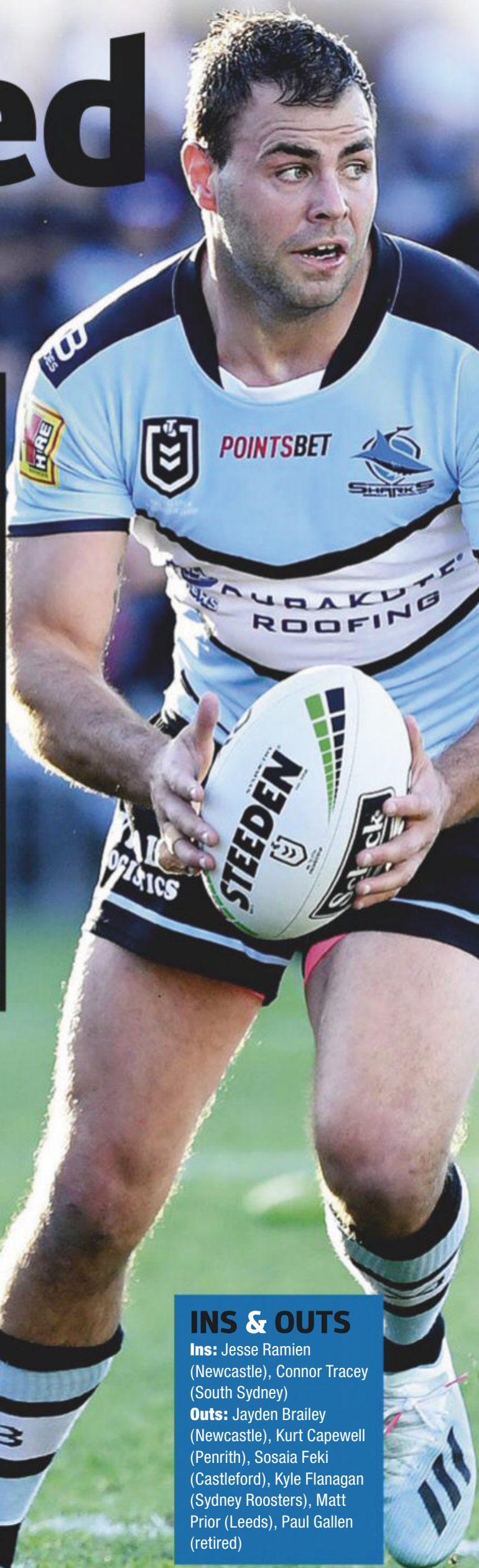
"I haven't seen so many young guys in the team before – especially when you look back at the premiership year – because we were known for having so many senior players. Our roster has changed a great deal, but these young kids have so much potential."

Injuries opened the door for guys like Hamlin-Uele, Briton Nikora and Jack Williams to emerge as serious talents in the forwards, while Ronaldo Mulitalo and Bronson Xerri loom as ones to watch in the outside backs.

But those positives masked an up-and-down season, with goal-kicking and inconsistency proving their undoing.

"A lot of things went against us last year," Graham laments.

"The injuries led to inconsistency so we weren't great even when we were at full-strength. We know we have improvement in us which is why we've been working so hard.

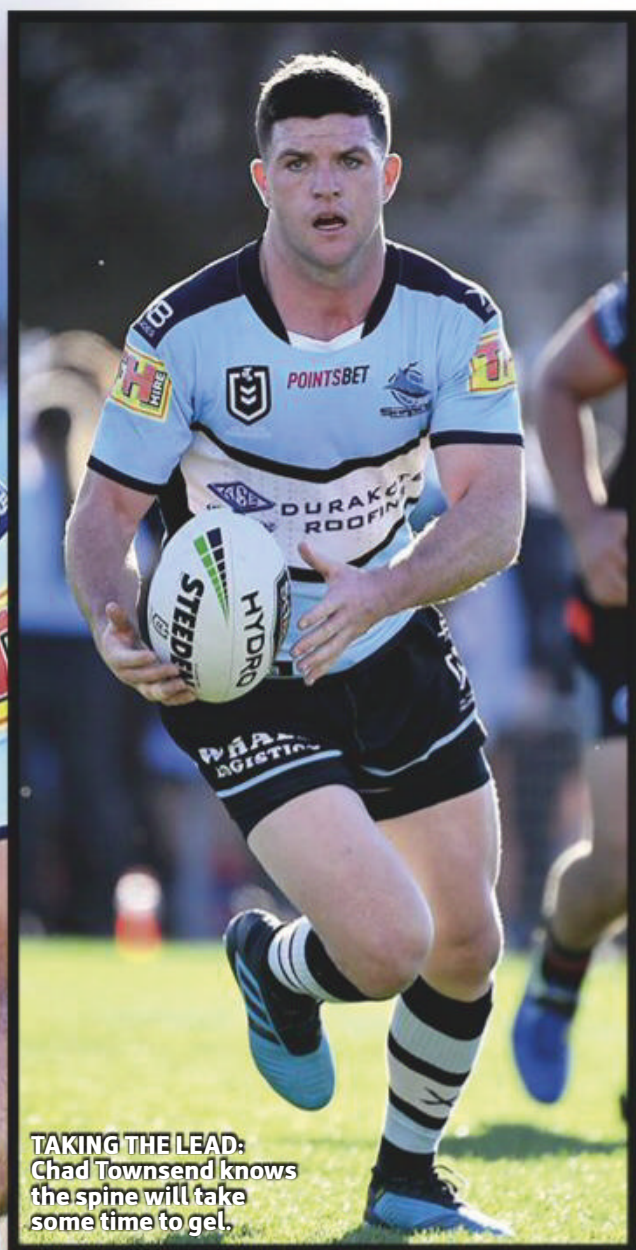


INS & OUTS

Ins: Jesse Ramien (Newcastle), Connor Tracey (South Sydney)

Outs: Jayden Brailey (Newcastle), Kurt Capewell (Penrith), Sosaia Feki (Castleford), Kyle Flanagan (Sydney Roosters), Matt Prior (Leeds), Paul Gallen (retired)

TALKING POINTS



TAKING THE LEAD: Chad Townsend knows the spine will take some time to gel.

"The coaching staff have been doing a great job and they've had the boys ripping in by setting a great standard. We know we have to be a lot better in a number of areas and the signs look good."

Second-year coach John Morris will be hoping the footy gods treat him better in 2020, and the health of his spine will be crucial as they look to feature in the finals for the sixth-straight season.

Jayden Brailey's move to the Hunter has opened the door for his younger brother Blayke to assume the hooking duties, but the bigger issue is the overall fitness of Moylan and Johnson, especially now that Kyle Flanagan is no longer at the club.

Both have the talent to win games with a handful of touches, but that only helps when they're on the park. Townsend knows the core four will need to fire for the Sharks to be successful, but admits it will take time before they can match it with the best combinations in the game.

"For us, combinations are massive, but they don't happen overnight. It takes hours of training and games and scenarios to build those combinations, and you see it through the best in the business where they might not say something, but a simple wink or nod can lead to a clutch play. That's what we're building towards and there's definitely potential for us to get there."

With a stacked side on paper, the Sharks only need a bit of luck to go their way for them to make another deep finals run. And if all else fails, they can just play like Gal.

"We're not the prettiest team, but we're resilient and that shows because we work hard and we play hard," Townsend says. "We're a gritty team that can grind teams down through hard work and effort." **B**

BACKS TO THE FUTURE

While some coaches will have to search far and wide for quality outside backs in Round 1, John Morris is battling a minor headache as he works out how to fit seven into five for the season opener. Should everyone be fit, Matt Moylan is favoured to keep his fullback spot, but Jesse Ramien's return from the Knights means their centre stocks are overflowing, and it's hard to imagine him not in the starting side with Bronson Xerri a good chance to play on the left. That means veterans Josh Morris and Josh Dugan will be shifted to the wing, although youngsters Ronaldo Mulitalo and Sione Katoa have also shown they have what it takes to make it in the NRL. "It's a good position to be in because we've got a number of guys fighting for spots in the backline," Townsend says. "It brings out quality every session because guys are competing against each other, and when John Morris eventually makes the decision, you know the guys he's picked have earned it."



RETURN TRIP: Jesse Ramien.

SECOND-YEAR SYNDROME

It's often an issue for young players, especially halves who have enjoyed a breakout debut season, but expect John Morris to only improve as he gears up for his second year in charge. He'll have learnt plenty after dealing with endless adversity in 2019, and that bodes well for a Sharks side that is brimming with potential. "I think he's more confident because he knows what the head coach role is about," Townsend says. "He's brought in people under him who have a really good work ethic and want to ensure this team wins games. I saw how professional he was as a player and he's really transformed that into his coaching."

HOME AWAY FROM HOME

PointsBet Stadium is one of the most imposing venues for opposition fans, players and coaches, but they can rest easy knowing the ground will be out of commission as the leagues club and the stadium receive facelifts. Instead, the Sharks will play out of Kogarah – the backyard of their local rivals – with the club's first home game against arch-rivals the Storm. The move will be slightly inconvenient, but Graham says you only have to look at Bankwest Stadium and the Eels to see the benefits. "We understand the reasons for it," he says. "We'll play the next two seasons at Netstrata Jubilee – and we're looking forward to that – and after that, the club comes back to a brand new stadium with new facilities. You only have to look at Parramatta; they got to come back to Bankwest Stadium which has been great for them. For us to be successful, we need to win footy games no matter where we play, so that's the way we're looking at it."



SHARKS 2020 DRAW

Rd 1 v Rabbitohs

ANZ, Mar 14, 5.30pm

Rd 2 v Storm

Netstrata, Mar 21, 7.35pm

Rd 3 v Knights

Netstrata, Mar 28, 3pm

Rd 4 v Bulldogs

ANZ, Apr 4, 5.30pm

Rd 5 v Roosters

Netstrata, Apr 11, 7.35pm

Rd 6 v Broncos

Suncorp, Apr 17, 7.55pm

Rd 7 v Sea Eagles

Netstrata, Apr 23, 7.50pm

Rd 8 v Wests Tigers

Suncorp, May 1, 6pm

Rd 9 v Panthers

Carrington, May 10, 2.05pm

Rd 10 v Cowboys

Sunshine Coast, May 16, 5.30pm

Rd 11 v Knights

McDonald Jones, May 24, 2.05pm

Rd 12 v BYE

Rd 13 v Titans

Netstrata, Jun 5, 7.55pm

Rd 14 v Dragons

Netstrata, Jun 14, 4.05pm

Rd 15 v Eels

Bankwest, Jun 27, 7.35pm

Rd 16 v Raiders

Netstrata, July 5, 4.05pm

Rd 17 v Panthers

Netstrata, Jul 10, 6pm

Rd 18 v Sea Eagles

Lottoland, Jul 19, 2.05pm

Rd 19 v Storm

AAMI, Jul 24, 7.55pm

Rd 20 v Wests Tigers

Netstrata, Aug 2, 2.05pm

Rd 21 v Bulldogs

Netstrata, Aug 7, 6pm

Rd 22 v Roosters

SCG, Aug 14, 6pm

Rd 23 v Cowboys

QCB, Aug 20, 7.50pm

Rd 24 v Sharks

Netstrata, Aug 27, 7.50pm

Rd 25 v Warriors

Netstrata, Sep 5, 3pm



POINT TO PROVE

Inherited responsibility

THE Brailey conundrum was always going to come to a head with two brothers competing for one spot, and sadly the battle saw Jayden make the move to the Knights. That means **Blayke** – who played 15 games last season – will get first crack in the No.9 jersey, with huge things tipped for the local junior.

“We’ve almost given the keys to Blayke in terms of wanting him to step up, take that No.9 jersey and make it his own,” Townsend says. “He’s got all the skills to be a consistent first-grader even though he could probably get a little bit bigger. But one thing I know about him is that he’s

tough and he doesn’t mind putting his head in places he might get kicked.”

Following a stunning season on the right edge in 2018, the Knights were hoping **Jesse Ramien** could carry that form when he made the trip north. But things didn’t work out, with Ramien released from his contract. Newcastle’s loss was Cronulla’s gain, and the potential is huge for a team that loves to go to the right.

“We’re excited to have Jesse back,” Graham says. “We’re pumped to have him back because we never wanted him to leave in the first place. He’s trained

well, he’s looking strong and he’s starting to develop a relationship with Shaun and Briton Nikora on the right edge so hopefully they can build a strong combination.”

The other battle will be for the vacant lock jersey, with **Jack Williams** and **Billy Magoulias** set to duke it out. The former has the runs on the board at this level, but the latter proved a match-winner in reserve grade during Newtown’s premierships run.

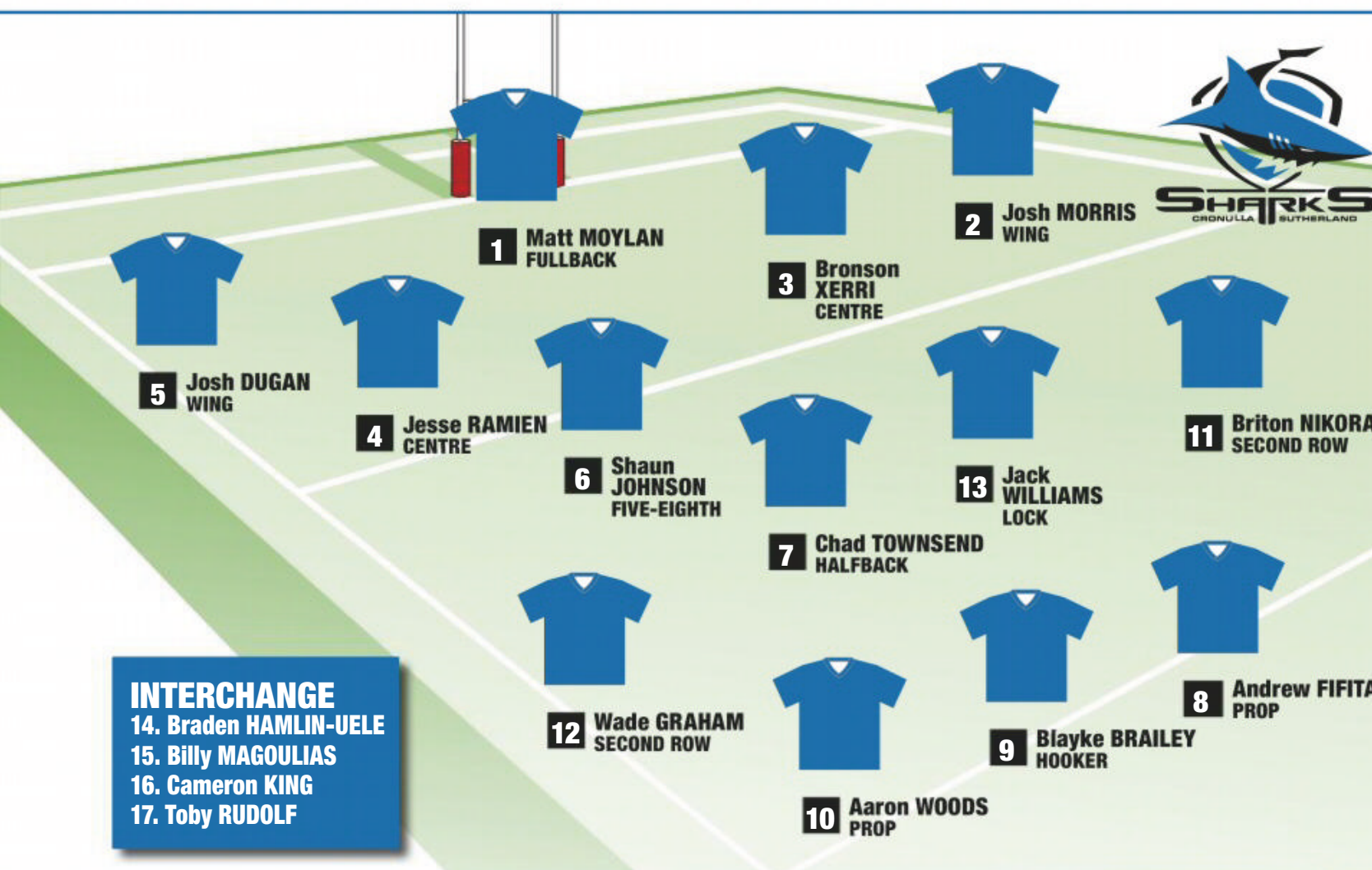
“Those two are fighting it out for the No.13. They’ve spoken to Gal about techniques that can transform their game and we’re excited about what they can do,” Townsend says.

BIG LEAGUE'S STRONGEST LINE-UP

VOSSY'S VERDICT



GAL is gone. Long live Gal. The Sharks are still a club with enough stars in their ranks, but injury clouds over hanging a few have me thinking they might strike more 'snakes than ladders' this year. They failed to achieve more than two wins in a row at any stage in 2019. I'm sure that once again on their day they will click and score plenty of points, but without consistency I fear they may miss the finals for only the second time since 2011. The Sharks had the worst away record of any top eight side in 2019, and this season are forced away from their true home every week. I'm sure John Morris learnt plenty from his debut season as head coach and has his rollercoaster ticket ready for what 2020 has in store. **Predicted Finish: 10th**



INTERCHANGE
14. Braden HAMLIN-UELE
15. Billy MAGOULIAS
16. Cameron KING
17. Toby RUDOLF

2020 PLAYING ROSTER

PLAYER	POSITION	D.O.B.	Wgt	Hgt	CAREER STATS						Debut	2020 Price
					App	T	G	FG	Pts			
Blayke Brailey	Hooker	23/09/1998	86	180	15	2	0	0	8		2019	\$400,000
Jayson Bukuya	2nd Row	21/04/1989	96	180	186	26	0	0	104		2008	\$448,000
Josh Dugan	Centre	10/05/1990	102	189	191	71	24	1	333		2009	\$530,000
Andrew Fifita	Prop	28/06/1989	121	194	211	38	0	0	152		2010	\$782,000
Wade Graham	2nd Row	25/10/1990	99	186	229	43	0	2	174		2008	\$580,000
Braden Hamlin-Uele	Prop	09/01/1995	115	191	23	4	0	0	16		2017	\$561,000
Marwene Hiroti	Wing/Centre	06/03/1999	98	191	5	1	0	0	4		2018	–
Shaun Johnson	Halfback	09/09/1990	90	179	180	66	370	13	1017		2011	\$785,000
Sione Katoa	Winger	21/08/1997	90	180	16	7	0	0	28		2018	\$420,000
William Kennedy	Fullback	18/04/1997	93	183	2	0	0	0	0		2019	\$246,000
Cameron King	Hooker	17/09/1991	89	180	43	0	0	1	1		2010	\$246,000
Billy Magoulias	Lock	23/01/1997	98	179	2	0	0	0	0		2019	\$246,000
Kayleb Milne	2nd Row	27/02/1999	118	193	0	0	0	0	0		–	\$228,000
Josh Morris	Centre	23/08/1986	100	182	286	137	0	0	548		2007	\$492,000
Matt Moylan	Five-Eighth	16/06/1991	91	185	124	28	29	8	178		2013	\$439,000
Ronaldo Mulitalo	Winger	17/11/1999	99	190	8	5	0	0	20		2019	\$459,000
Briton Nikora	2nd Row	07/12/1997	95	185	24	7	0	0	28		2019	\$703,000
Jesse Ramien	Centre	27/04/1997	97	184	38	13	0	0	52		2017	\$526,000
Toby Rudolf	Prop	29/01/1996	107	190	0	0	0	0	0		–	\$228,000
Scott Sorensen	2nd Row	16/03/1993	99	183	25	1	0	0	4		2014	\$411,000
Cruz Topai-Aveai	2nd Row	23/01/1999	114	192	0	0	0	0	0		–	\$228,000
Chad Townsend	Halfback	10/01/1991	88	181	164	32	119	10	376		2011	\$580,000
Connor Tracey	Halfback	17/06/1996	87	183	2	0	0	0	0		2019	\$300,000
Braydon Trindall	Halfback	11/07/1999	88	180	0	0	0	0	0		–	\$228,000
Jack Williams	2nd Row	09/09/1996	101	184	28	3	0	0	12		2018	\$472,000
Teig Wilton	2nd Row	25/09/1999	98	186	0	0	0	0	0		–	\$228,000
Aaron Woods	Prop	13/03/1991	112	194	188	14	0	0	56		2011	\$573,000
Bronson Xerri	Centre	09/09/2000	98	187	22	13	0	0	52		2019	\$587,000



LOWER GRADES

FOOTBALL romantics will be thrilled to hear the Sharks and the iconic Newtown Jets will continue their affiliation this year as part of the deal that is set to continue until 2023. The partnership – entering its fifth year of the current arrangement – has been a roaring success and has turned Henson Park into the place to be on a Saturday afternoon.

You can expect the hill to be overflowing as they celebrate last year's spectacular premierships in both the Canterbury Cup and the State Championship courtesy of last-gasp heroics. While the under-20s squad is expected to be competitive as always, the reserve grade side could be stacked at times with NRL-quality players being squeezed out of the top 17. One man hoping for more game-time in the NRL is **Will Kennedy**. The fullback played two matches in 2019 and looms as a ready-made replacement should Matt Moylan get injured given his immense performances for the Jets during their premeirship run.

Time to climb

It's hard to go much lower than the Titans did in 2019, but the new season and a new coach offers a new opportunity for success in a rugby league heartland. By **WILL EVANS**

JUSTIN Holbrook heads into his maiden NRL campaign as a head coach under less pressure and scrutiny than most rookie mentors.

Taking over the reigning wooden spooners, few are expecting immediate miracles from the former Newcastle, Penrith and Sydney Roosters halfback.

But as predecessor Garth Brennan – axed two months out from the end of his second year in charge at Gold Coast – found out, there's an unforgiving limit to the amount of leeway NRL coaches are afforded.

For now, though, Holbrook is relishing his opportunity after a successful stint at St Helens – and the Titans players are responding to his enthusiasm and passion in kind.

"The players have been terrific right from the start," Holbrook tells *Big League*.

"I didn't have to remind them they didn't have a great year last year, but they want to improve and they've been great to work with.

"We've got new assistants in Jim Dymock, Jim Lenihan and Michael Gordon, so it's not just myself. Obviously things are done differently, but it's all working well so far. We just wanted to give everyone a fresh start and they've responded in a great manner."

Holbrook's apprenticeship included roles at Canterbury, St George Illawarra and Parramatta, before an invaluable period as Trent Robinson's assistant at the Roosters. Handed the reins by St Helens midway through 2017, Holbrook's two-and-a-half seasons in England culminated in Super League grand final glory last year.

The 44-year-old is aiming to follow the example of the likes of Robinson and Michael Maguire, who parlayed outstanding Super League head coach tenures into NRL success.

"I love coaching and I want to bring that sort of excitement to the Gold Coast and our playing group," he says.

"I've been coaching a long time so it's exciting to have the opportunity to be a head coach. I want to bring that hard work and enjoyment to the Titans."

But the straight-shooting Holbrook is no soft touch. No player's spot is guaranteed, and he knows plenty of elbow grease will be required to winch the Titans out of the premiership cellar.

The Titans won just four games in 2019 – their worst-ever return – and finished a on an 11-match losing streak. They conceded 36 points or more in five straight outings at one stage.

"Collectively we've just got to get everyone working hard," Holbrook says.

"When you're not having a good year, you're not enjoying things – but you've got to do something about it, otherwise you're going to get the same result.

"The players are well aware of that, but they've been training **real** well which is great. A number of players aren't happy with how they went (in 2019), but the good thing is they get a fresh start."

While their 2019 performances may not have reflected it, the squad possesses the bones of a strong, well-balanced footy side.

Workhorse forwards Jai Arrow and Moeaki Fotuika were magnificent throughout 2019, AJ Brimson, Phillip Sami and Brian Kelly are among the most exciting young backs in the game, and Jai Whitbread and Keegan Hipgrave are the type of tenacious tyros every team needs.

Arrow has committed to South Sydney from 2021, but after the Titans dug in their heels regarding an early move the club will rely on the 24-year-old Queensland star to be the backbone of their campaign.

"It's where the game is now, a lot of players are going to sign a year in advance," Holbrook says.

"It's a professional game and I've got no doubts Jai is going to give his **absolute** best for us this year."

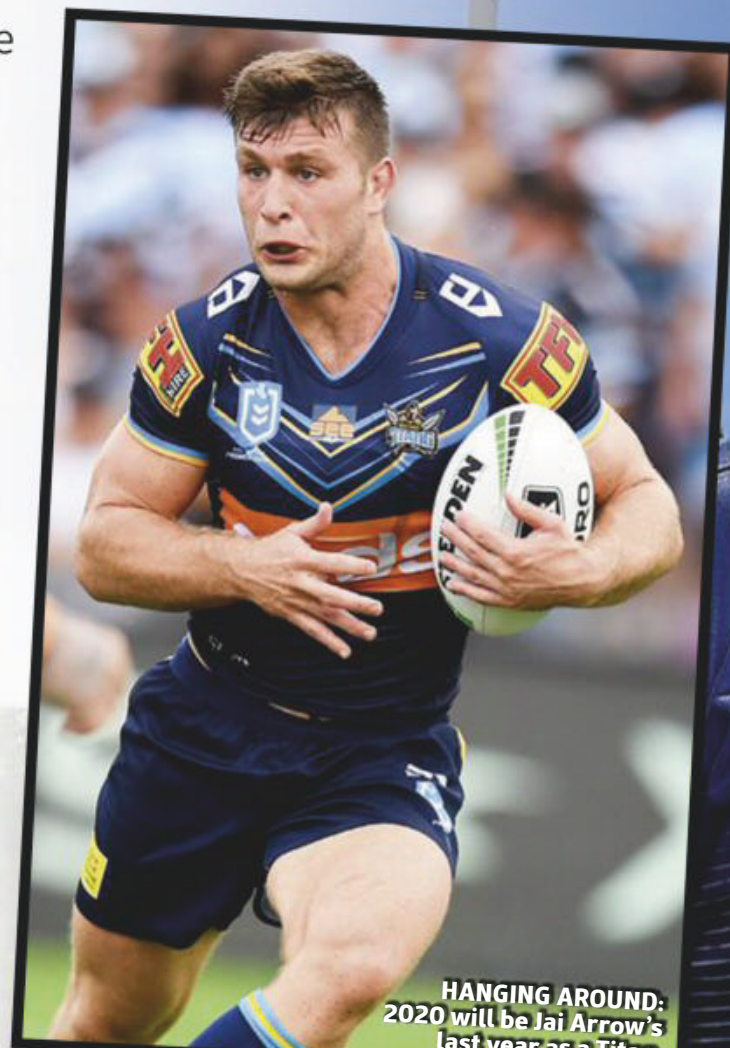
But with skipper Ryan James cruelly ruled out for the year with another knee injury, the key to a Gold Coast turnaround lies in the collective improvement of a group of erstwhile big guns who appeared to be drifting in recent seasons. The best of Ash Taylor, Tyrone Peachey, Bryce Cartwright, Jarrod Wallace, Shannon Boyd, Nathan Peats and Kevin Proctor can transform the Titans into a force. Holbrook's challenge is unlocking that dormant ability.

The halves remain a contentious selection area, with Taylor, Peachey, veteran Tyrone Roberts and teenager Tanah Boyd vying for two spots. Out wide, Sami and Kelly are front-runners for starting positions, but England international Kallum Watkins, experienced duo Anthony Don and Dale Copley, new recruits Jonus Pearson and Greg Leleisiua, and up-and-coming pair Treymain Spry and Ioane Seiyuli are all in the winger and centre mix.

"We're fairly close (to settling on a line-up), that's what our trials are for," Holbrook explains.

"We've got depth which is good for the coaching staff. I wouldn't say we're completely set on the 17 – (there is competition) in a number of positions which is what's needed as well.

"But the players' willingness to want to get better is the most exciting thing for us as coaches."

BL


HANGING AROUND: 2020 will be Jai Arrow's last year as a Titan.

INS & OUTS

Ins: Tanah Boyd (Brisbane), Jonus Pearson (St George Illawarra), Sam Stone (Newcastle)

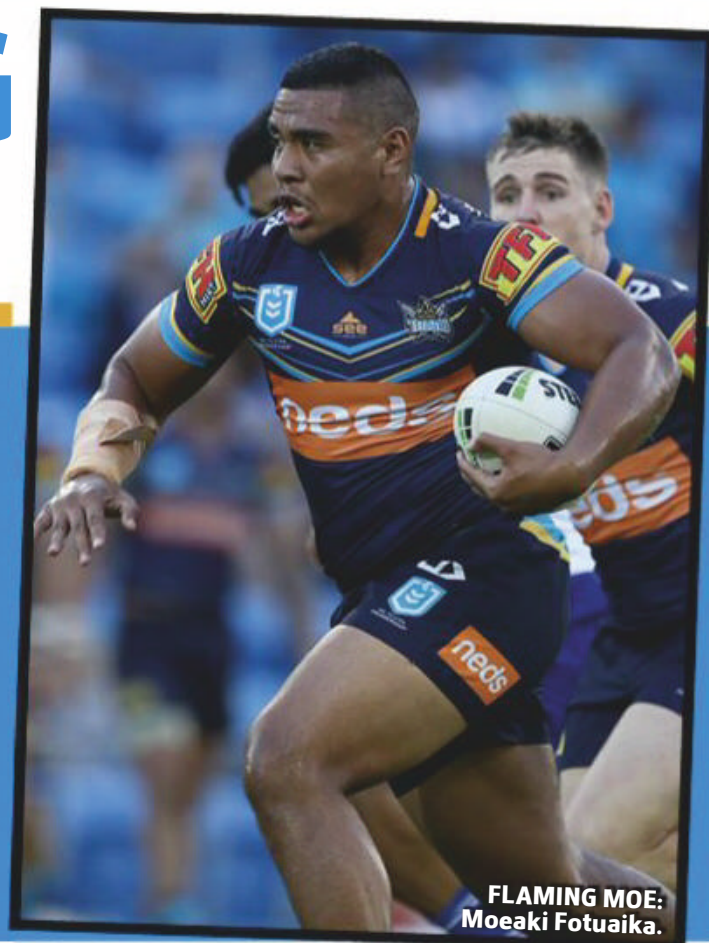
Outs: Jesse Arthurs (Brisbane), Michael Gordon (retired), Ryley Jacks (Melbourne), Will Matthews (retired)



TALKING POINTS

INTO THE BREACH

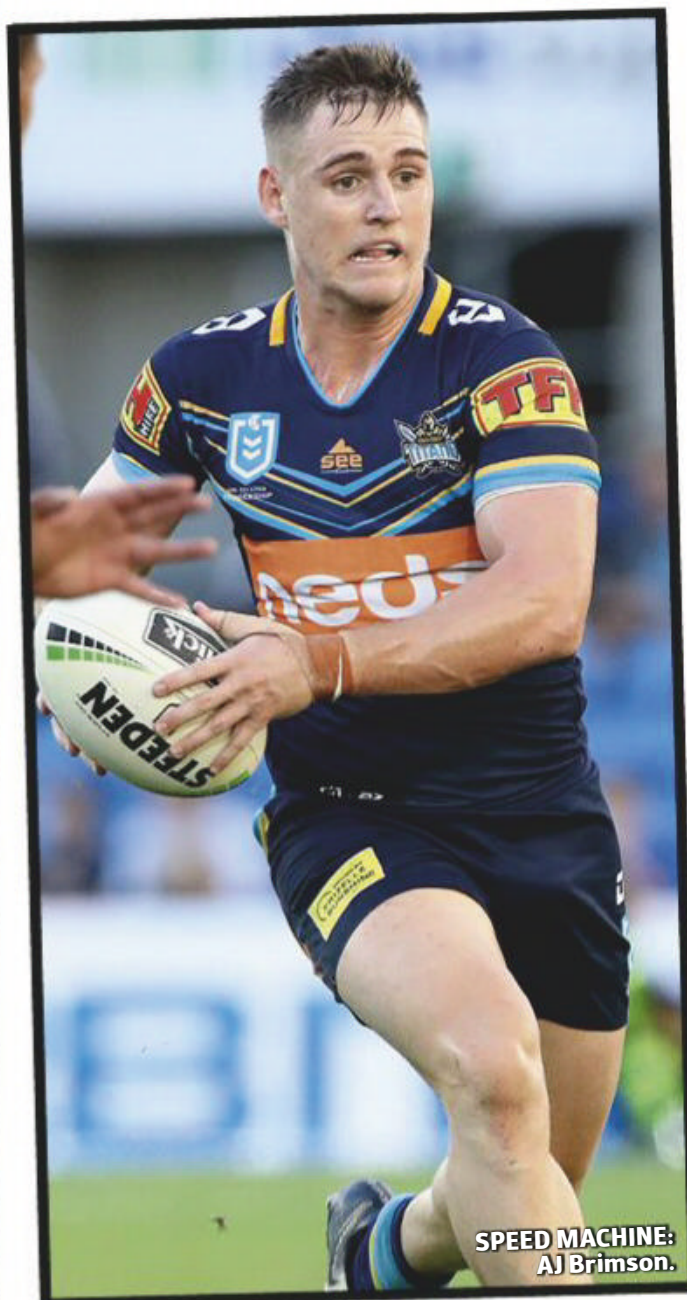
Luckless skipper Ryan James' devastating ACL injury is a bitter blow – and the onus is now on the squad's more experienced forwards to pick up the slack. With James sidelined since April last year, engine room tyros Jai Arrow and Moeaki Fotuaika were widely regarded as the Titans' best players in 2019. But it's the likes of front-row veteran Jarrod Wallace – smarting from his Origin axing during last year's series – as well as 22-Test Kiwi Kevin Proctor and former Kangaroos prop Shannon Boyd, who managed just 13 appearances in an underwhelming first season on the Gold Coast, that need to step up as leaders and consistent week-to-week performers in the pack.



FLAMING MOE: Moeaki Fotuaika.

STEMMING THE FLOW

Gold Coast leaked an NRL-worst 651 points in 2019 – 76 more than their nearest rival. It was also the most points conceded in the Titans' history and the second-most by any club in the past six seasons. Needless to say, defence has been a pre-season focus for the new coaching staff. "We all know the best defensive sides win the comp – and so they should," Holbrook says. "We've got a fair few guys who can attack in the side, which is great, but we've had to work pretty hard with their defence. I have to give the players some credit, they've been really open and understanding about why we've got to fix that up."



SPEED MACHINE: AJ Brimson.

FOUNTAIN OF YOUTH

The Titans may look a few pieces short of a finals-quality roster, but the club boasts some of the most exciting young talent in the game. Fotuaika – who only turned 20 in November – won the Paul Broughton Medal as the Titans' 2019 Player of the Year. AJ Brimson ranks among the NRL's most electrifying ball-runners and will benefit from the opportunity to settle in the fullback role. Winger Phillip Sami, 22, was named alongside Brimson in a Queensland pre-season camp, with a Maroons call-up not beyond either player in 2020. Tanah Boyd, who was blooded in the last two rounds of 2019 a month after his 19th birthday, ensures the Titans have options in the halves, while untested duo Treyman Spry and Ioane Seuli will push hard for backline spots after impressing at Intrust Super Cup level.

KEEPING IT GOLDEN

Relocation rumours and calls for the club to be dumped from the NRL altogether will remain as long as the Titans languish near the foot of the ladder. But the Gold Coast is a rugby league heartland rich in junior numbers, while the presence of Mal Meninga as Head of Culture – who has already become something of a figurehead for the maligned outfit – over the past year has paid dividends. The decision of Brimson and Sami to re-sign with the Titans is a massive coup, while the acquisition of in-demand Melbourne forward Tino Fa'asuamaleaui from 2021 indicates the club's future is healthier than many doomsayers would lead you to believe.

TITANS 2020 DRAW

Rd 1 v Raiders

GIO, Mar 13, 6pm

Rd 2 v Eels

Cbus, Mar 22, 6.15pm

Rd 3 v Broncos

Cbus, Mar 29, 6.15pm

Rd 4 v Roosters

SCG, Apr 5, 6.15pm

Rd 5 v Storm

AAMI, Apr 11, 5.30pm

Rd 6 v Sea Eagles

Lottoland, Apr 17, 6pm

Rd 7 v Wests Tigers

Cbus, Apr 24, 6pm

Rd 8 v Panthers

Suncorp, May 3, 6.25pm

Rd 9 v Cowboys

QCB, May 9, 7.35pm

Rd 10 v Warriors

Cbus, May 16, 3pm

Rd 11 v Dragons

Netstrata, May 22, 6pm

Rd 12 v Bulldogs

Cbus, May 28, 7.50pm

Rd 13 v Sharks

Netstrata, Jun 5, 7.55pm

Rd 14 v Cowboys

Cbus, Jun 12, 6pm

Rd 15 v Knights

McDonald Jones, Jun 28, 2.05pm

Rd 16 v BYE

Rd 17 v Storm

Cbus, Jul 11, 3pm

Rd 18 v Warriors

Mt Smart, Jul 17, 6pm

Rd 19 v Panthers

Panthers, Jul 24, 6pm

Rd 20 v Dragons

Cbus, Aug 1, 3pm

Rd 21 v Rabbitohs

Cbus, Aug 8, 3pm

Rd 22 v Broncos

Suncorp, Aug 16, 2.05pm

Rd 23 v Wests Tigers

Campbelltown, Aug 23, 2.05pm

Rd 24 v Raiders

Cbus, Aug 30, 2.05pm

Rd 25 v Sea Eagles

Cbus, Sep 5, 5.30pm



POINT TO PROVE

Taylor-made for success

ABILITY, potential and reputation does not always translate to performance, but if some of the Titans' highly-paid enigmas can deliver their best on a regular basis there's no reason why the club can't surge up the ladder.

Declining form and a stint away from the game to deal with personal issues dictated marquee halfback **Ash Taylor** only turned out 10 times for the Titans in 2019. But the pieces are in place for a refreshed and rejuvenated Taylor – who recently welcomed the arrival of a son and is relishing Justin Holbrook's guidance – to write one of the season's feelgood stories.

"Right from the start I made it clear that I was here to help him," Holbrook says. "I want to see Ash play well, as does everybody. He's got to help

himself and he's done that. He's been fantastic, got himself in real good shape and he's doing everything as well as he can."

Despite widespread criticism of his form over the past two seasons, Taylor racked up 23 try assists in 30 games. The Titans are desperate for playmaking creativity and the 24-year-old can still be the linchpin the side needs.

Once regarded as one of the most dangerous attacking forwards in the game, **Bryce Cartwright** has endured a difficult time since his shock exit from Penrith at the end of 2017. He spent a stint in the Intrust Super Cup in 2018 but played 22 games for the Titans last season. If Cartwright can reignite his running game – after averaging just 64.4 metres and recording only 16 tackle-breaks in 2019 – his trademark

ball-playing talents should flourish once again. Though still under contract for 2021, this shapes as a pivotal season for the 25-year-old.

Another ex-Panther to go off the boil at the Titans, **Tyrone Peachey** arrived on the Gold Coast last year as a NSW Origin incumbent. The game-breaking utility started 2019 in the centres, before being shuffled back to the bench and then spending a month at five-eighth during the Titans' late-season slide. Mid-year rumours of a move back to Penrith didn't eventuate and Peachey is committed to the Titans' cause until the end of 2021. Though most experienced at centre, the 28-year-old's wide-ranging talents may better serve this team playing closer to the ball, either in the back-row, in the halves or at dummy-half.

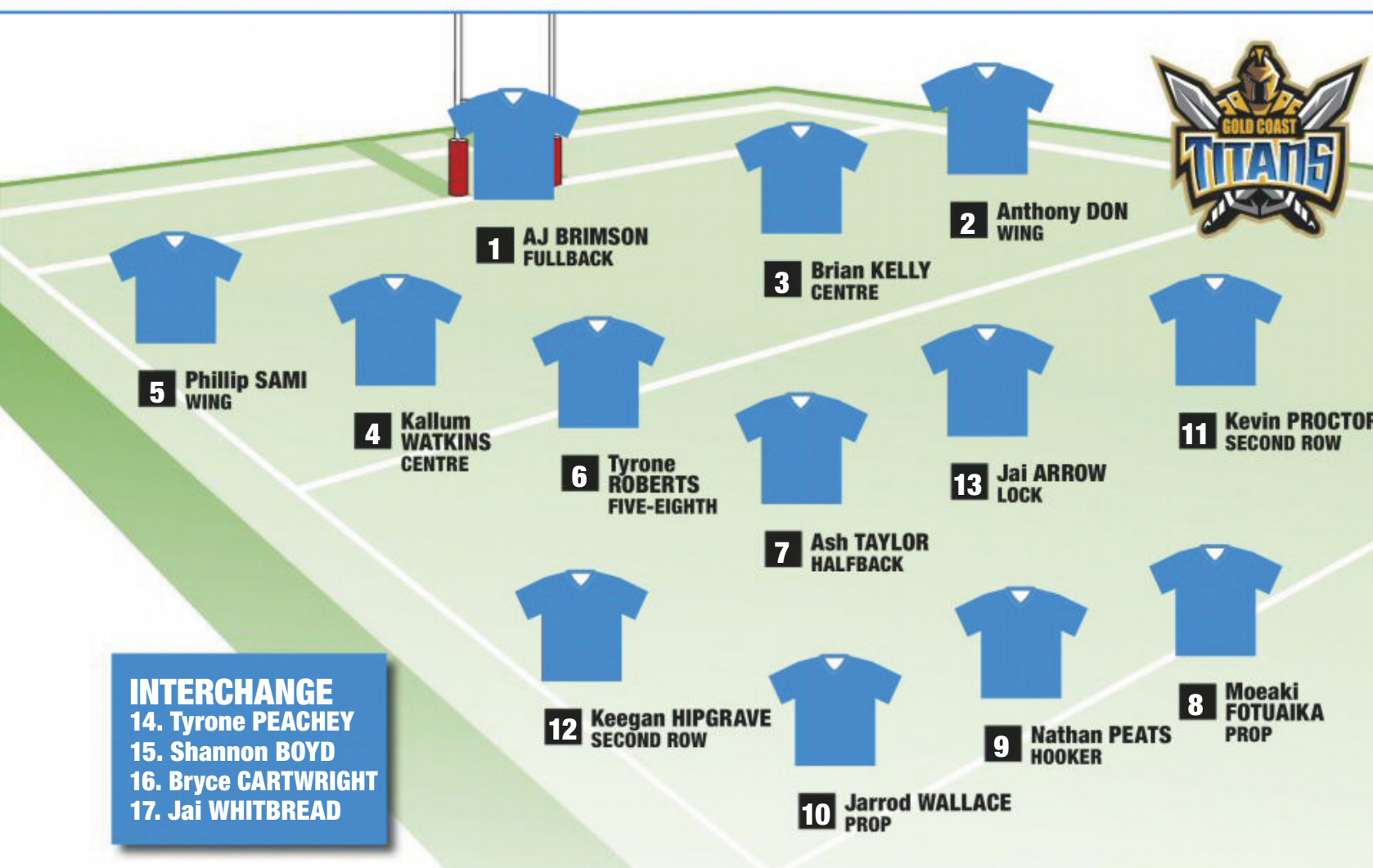
BIG LEAGUE'S STRONGEST LINE-UP

VOSSY'S VERDICT



WELCOME to head coaching in the NRL, Justin Holbrook. What a contrast to where he has come from after an awesome tenure at St Helens in the Super League. Holbrook is an incredibly impressive character, but I believe he'll need to be part magician to greatly turn around where the Titans found themselves at the end of 2019. Will they win more than the four games of last season? Yes they will. But they are starting from a base of zero, having notched the worst defensive record and the second-worst attacking return in their wooden spoon season. Few playmakers under more pressure than young Ash Taylor, and they've already suffered a huge setback with the serious injury to Ryan James. I hope they do well, but that's the best I've got... hope.

Predicted Finish: 16th



2020 PLAYING ROSTER

PLAYER	POSITION	D.O.B.	Wgt	Hgt	CAREER STATS						Debut	2020 Price
					App	T	G	FG	Pts			
Jai Arrow	Lock	12/07/1995	101	189	62	5	0	0	20		2016	\$788,000
Shannon Boyd	Prop	09/09/1992	122	194	124	9	0	0	36		2014	\$430,000
Tanah Boyd	Halfback	28/07/2000	86	176	2	0	0	0	0		2019	\$246,000
Alexander Brimson	Halfback	09/09/1998	89	181	36	11	0	0	44		2018	\$462,000
Bryce Cartwright	2nd Row	15/11/1994	107	193	105	19	0	0	76		2014	\$479,000
Erin Clark	Halfback	06/09/1997	98	180	1	0	0	0	0		2017	\$246,000
Dale Copley	Centre	29/07/1991	93	184	133	55	0	0	220		2009	\$408,000
Anthony Don	Winger	21/09/1987	100	188	127	75	1	0	302		2013	\$368,000
Darius Farmer	2nd Row	22/04/1999	104	191	0	0	0	0	0		–	\$228,000
Beau Fermor	2nd Row	15/08/1998	189	99	0	0	0	0	0		–	\$228,000
Moeaki Fotuauika	Prop	16/11/1999	107	185	37	2	0	0	8		2018	\$578,000
Keegan Hipgrave	Lock	01/01/1997	102	183	27	0	0	0	0		2017	\$298,000
Ryan James	Prop	20/07/1991	106	193	144	30	0	0	120		2010	\$578,000
Brian Kelly	Centre	20/05/1996	94	181	70	23	0	0	92		2017	\$509,000
Greg Leleisiua	Winger	04/04/1997	104	177	0	0	0	0	0		–	\$228,000
Tyrone Peachey	Centre	08/08/1991	93	183	137	43	6	0	184		2013	\$446,000
Jonus Pearson	Winger	28/05/1995	93	185	21	6	0	0	24		2016	\$263,000
Nathan Peats	Hooker	05/10/1990	91	181	151	16	0	0	64		2011	\$612,000
Kevin Proctor	2nd Row	28/02/1989	107	189	240	36	1	0	146		2008	\$641,000
Mitch Rein	Hooker	26/04/1990	88	176	179	28	0	0	112		2011	\$678,000
Tyrone Roberts	Halfback	01/06/1991	89	175	153	35	241	0	622		2011	\$673,000
Phillip Sami	Centre	02/08/1997	97	186	42	21	0	0	84		2017	\$501,000
Treymain Spry	Centre	29/08/1999	98	187	0	0	0	0	0		–	\$228,000
Sam Stone	2nd Row	04/08/1997	102	194	26	2	0	0	8		2017	\$475,000
Ash Taylor	Halfback	17/03/1995	94	181	80	13	94	3	243		2015	\$495,000
Jarrold Wallace	Prop	23/07/1991	109	188	135	10	0	0	40		2012	\$604,000
Kallum Watkins	Centre	12/03/1991	98	185	6	0	0	0	0		2019	\$316,000
Jai Whitbread	Prop	16/01/1998	107	186	19	0	0	0	0		2018	\$508,000

LOWER GRADES

FEEDER clubs Burleigh Bears and Tweed Heads Seagulls are both coming off strong 2019 campaigns. The Jim Lenihan-coached Bears – featuring Gold Coast stalwart Anthony Don and several ex-Titans first-graders – toppled Wynnum Manly in the Intrust Super Cup Grand Final, before losing the State Championship to Newtown on the buzzer on NRL grand final day. Tanah Boyd, Phillip Sami and Jai Whitbread also turned out for the club during 2019.

Lenihan has joined Justin Holbrook's staff, which sees former Newcastle NRL coach Rick Stone return to Burleigh. Stone and Tweed Heads coach Ben Woolfe will spend two days a week working with the Titans' coaching staff – part of the terms of a three-year extension to the affiliate agreement.

Sixth in the ISC, the Seagulls had the services of Ash Taylor towards the back-end of the season and Titans-contracted young guns **Treymain Spry** and **Ioane Seiyuli** were backline mainstays. Both clubs reached the Hastings Deering Colts (under-20s) finals last year, while the Seagulls took out the Mal Meninga Cup (under-18s) title.



Flying high

Des Hasler's return to Manly launched a stunning single-season turnaround, but according to their captain, that was just the beginning for the new-look Sea Eagles. By **MARTIN GABOR**

AFTER finishing second-last in a disastrous 2018 campaign that saw coach Trent Barrett leave the club, only someone with 20-20 vision could have predicted such a drastic change in fortunes for the Sea Eagles last season.

Manly fought through adversity to finish sixth after 25 rounds, and had Jake Trbojevic not been sin-binned in the second week of the finals, who knows how far they could have gone?

So who was this person with 20-20 vision? Des Hasler, of course. A man more synonymous with the northern beaches than the B1 double-decker and Instagram-worthy sunrises combined.

He may have sat out a season after he parted ways with the Bulldogs, but there was no rust whatsoever as his patented 'us against the world' mentality had the Sea Eagles defending like their lives depended on it, while they were also able to throw in some scintillating football on the back of enterprising play around the ruck.

But even though they rocketed up the table last year, they know their job has only just begun.

"We obviously have belief that we'll be able to improve as a team," skipper Daly Cherry-Evans tells *Big League*.

"We feel as though last year was a step in the right direction, but it wasn't a success so we've certainly got that desire and hunger to get better and that's been shown over the pre-season.

"Whatever motivation you need to get through this year is going to be different for everyone, and (the semi-final defeat) might be a driving factor for some of the other guys.

"But it's important we take confidence out of parts of last year and the way we developed because no one else cares about last year. At the end of the day, it comes down to us getting results and that's what our fans want to see."

The biggest difference in 2019 was their resolute defence, which saw them concede almost 200 fewer points compared to the previous year. That's something Cherry-Evans believes will only get better now they've had another pre-season under Hasler.

"I don't think there was any one moment; it was an accumulation of training and getting game experience together," he explains.

"When you're out there after a couple of weeks, you really start to see what people are about and who is willing to work hard and buy into team structures.

"Over the first month of last season we started to build that, and winning games also started to build confidence among the team and individually. That should grow this year."



PLENTY OF MOMENTUM: Addin Fonua-Blake asserted himself as one of the NRL's best props last season.

Fans north of the Harbour Bridge should be quietly optimistic about the new campaign, with the Sea Eagles boasting some of the best players in the NRL. With Cherry-Evans playing behind Addin-Fonua-Blake, Martin Taupau and Jake Trbojevic, and with Tom Trbojevic always sniffing around the back, there's no reason why they can't finish in the top four should they stay injury free.

For them to succeed, Fonua-Blake and Taupau will need to replicate their form from 2019, which saw them become the most damaging front-row pairing in the competition.

Their influence was crucial in a pack that also featured veterans Curtis Sironen and Joel Thompson as well as plenty of young guys who needed guidance from the big boppers.

"I was extremely grateful for the way our forward pack played last



INS & OUTS

Ins: Danny Levi

(Newcastle), Brayden Musgrove (Newcastle)

Outs: Kane Elgey (retired), Trent Hodgkinson (retired), Apisai Koroisau (Penrith)

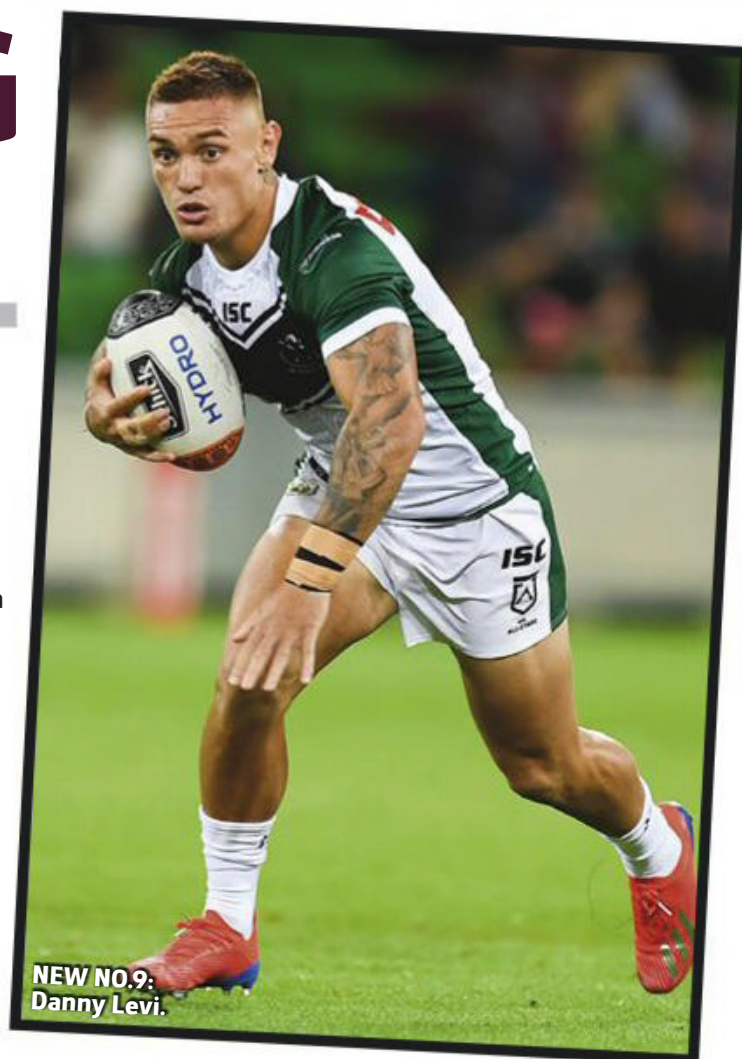
TALKING POINTS



ROOKIE REVELATION:
Reuben Garrick.

NINE LIVES

When Api Koroisau left, the Sea Eagles put all their eggs into the Manase Fainu basket given his brilliant combination with his forwards. But a troubled off-season threw those plans out the window and it's unclear whether the gifted hooker will play this year. However, the acquisition of Levi from Newcastle has softened the blow, with the former international keen for a fresh start. "We're not sure what's going to happen with Manase so it's great to have Danny here," Cherry-Evans says. "If Manase is available at some stage then that'll be a bonus, but Danny has worked really hard since he got here so I'm looking forward to getting more reps with him to get used to his style. We'll spend as much time as possible together at training to open up our communication lines so we can best understand where the other guy is coming from."



NEW NO.9:
Danny Levi.

SAFE BETS

There's no such thing as a sure thing in gambling, but the Sea Eagles are hoping to turn Lottoland into the fortress it once was back in the Brookvale days. After managing just three wins at the venue in 2018 (and another home victory at Suncorp Stadium) they turned things around with seven wins at Lottoland during the regular season plus a stirring finals victory against the Sharks when asbestos threatened to have the game moved. "It's great to play there and I love that place a lot because it holds a lot of sentimental value to me," the No.7 says. "Last year was really special with how the Manly faithful got out there and supported us. Hopefully we can reward them with good footy, and hopefully they can turn up from the start of the season and create a bit of a fortress feel."

year because it made my job much easier when they were marching downfield," the halfback says.

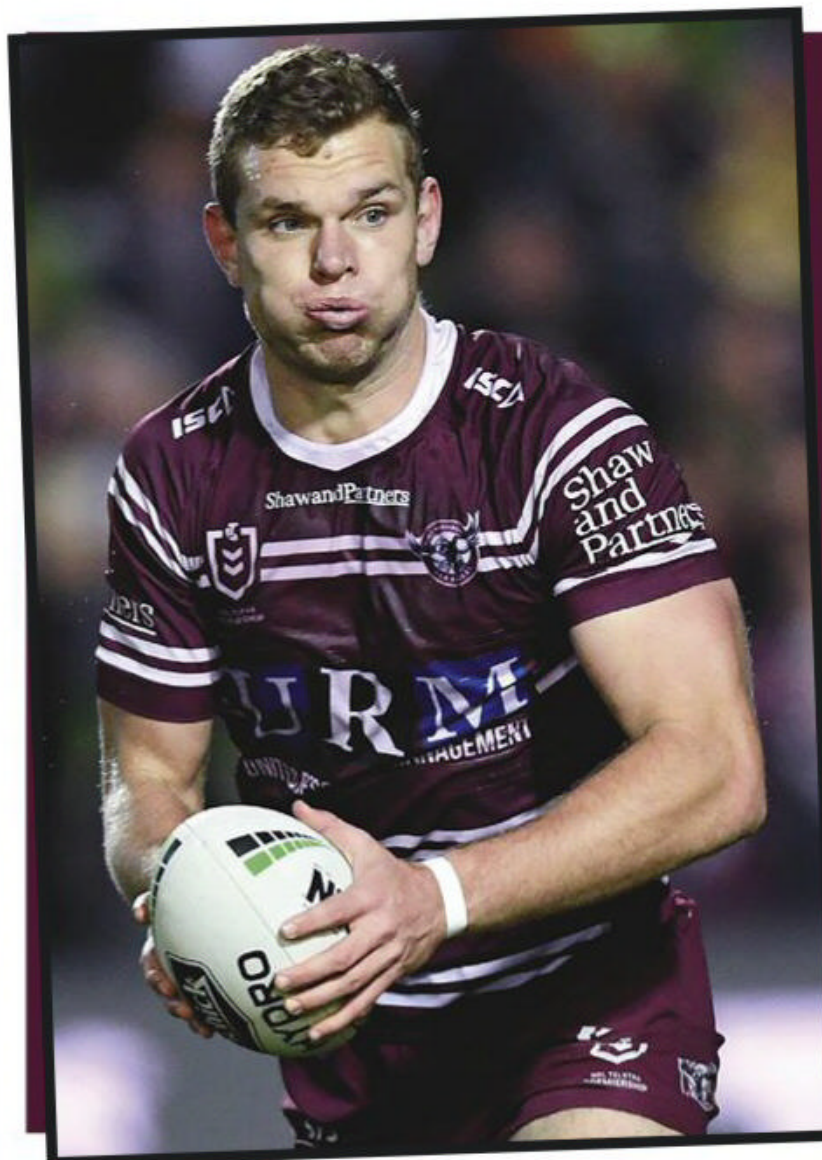
"I'm going to challenge them to be better again this season because there's a new wave of front-rowers coming through the NRL. I'd like to see Marty and Addin take that challenge on and cement themselves as some of the premier front-rowers in the game. Judging by some of the conversations I've had, coupled with the way they're training, they believe they can do that this year."

Another thing working in their favour is the fact they've managed to retain most of their squad. The only issue is their hooking stocks after Api Koroisau moved to the Panthers, something exacerbated when Manase Fainu first suffered a serious shoulder injury and then got in trouble off the field during the off-season.

However, the club has picked up Danny Levi from the Knights, and his experience should see him slot right in.

"His résumé is starting to look really good at this level so we're very excited to have him at the club. He's played quite a bit of NRL and he's also represented the Kiwis so he's no slouch in the role," Cherry-Evans says.

With a bit of luck, the Sea Eagles shape as serious contenders in 2020 and will do more than just ruffle a few feathers. Who saw that coming? **BL**



TOM'S RIDDLE

Given Manly's success last season, it would be safe to assume that Tom Trbojevic played 20 games and scored just as many tries. Instead, the superstar fullback was restricted to just 12 appearances and crossed five times in an injury-plagued year that should have derailed their quest for a finals return. If he can stay fit then he'll surely go close to the Dally M given his influence on the side. Yet as important as he is, Cherry-Evans shoots down any suggestions that his side can't win without 'Turbo'. "It's important that our whole squad stays healthy. We all love Tom and we hope he's out there for every game, but we also have a lot of belief that we can win without him," he stresses. "We'd much rather him be out there, but there's a high amount of self-belief that we can win without certain people out there. But make no mistake, we're a much better team with him out there."

SEA EAGLES 2020 DRAW

Rd 1 v Storm

Lottoland, Mar 15, 4.05pm

Rd 2 v Roosters

Central Coast, Mar 21, 5.30pm

Rd 3 v Warriors

Lottoland, Mar 27, 6pm

Rd 4 v Raiders

GIO Stadium, Apr 3, 8.05pm

Rd 5 v Knights

Lottoland, Apr 9, 7.50pm

Rd 6 v Titans

Lottoland, Apr 17, 6pm

Rd 7 v Sharks

Netstrata, Apr 23, 7.50pm

Rd 8 v Broncos

Suncorp, May 1, 8.05pm

Rd 9 v Eels

Lottoland, May 10, 4.05pm

Rd 10 v Bulldogs

Belmore, May 15, 6pm

Rd 11 v Wests Tigers

Central Coast, May 23, 5.30pm

Rd 12 v Dragons

WIN, May 31, 4.05pm

Rd 13 v Rabbitohs

ANZ, Jun 6, 5.30pm

Rd 14 v Bulldogs

Lottoland, Jun 13, 3pm

Rd 15 v Panthers

Panthers, June 26, 6pm

Rd 16 v BYE

Rd 17 v Eels

Bankwest, Jul 12, 4.05pm

Rd 18 v Sharks

Lottoland, Jul 19, 2.05pm

Rd 19 v Cowboys

QCB, Jul 25, 7.35pm

Rd 20 v Roosters

Lottoland, Aug 2, 4.05pm

Rd 21 v Raiders

Lottoland, Aug 8, 7.35pm

Rd 22 v Knights

McDonald Jones, Aug 15, 5.30pm

Rd 23 v Warriors

Mt Smart, Aug 21, 6pm

Rd 24 v Panthers

Lottoland, Aug 30, 4.05pm

Rd 25 v Titans

Cbus, Sep 5, 5.30pm



POINT TO PROVE

Strolling into the No.6

CONTINUITY in the halves was an issue for the Sea Eagles but it looks a lot more settled in 2020, with **Dylan Walker** set to be handed the No.6 jersey. The livewire has split his career between centre and five-eighth but will get first crack in the playmaking role alongside Daly Cherry-Evans.

After several pairings were tested early in the year, Walker finally made the move to the halves in Round 18 and stayed there as the Sea Eagles went into the second week of the finals. With a full pre-season, his combination with Manly's most important player will only get better.

"The more games you can accumulate with the same person, the more it helps you throughout the season," the skipper says.

"We found Dylan to be really good in that role last year and we played some really good football together. We've been working all pre-season together and we'll be trying to make sure that we improve."

Cade Cust will be keen to prove he wasn't a one-hit wonder after impressing in 2019 with four tries from seven appearances. Should anything happen to the halves, he'll make the move from bench utility to the starting side.

The man who was under most scrutiny last year was **Moses Suli**, but the burly centre justified the hype of a few seasons ago as he got himself into shape and became the game-changer we all hoped he would become.

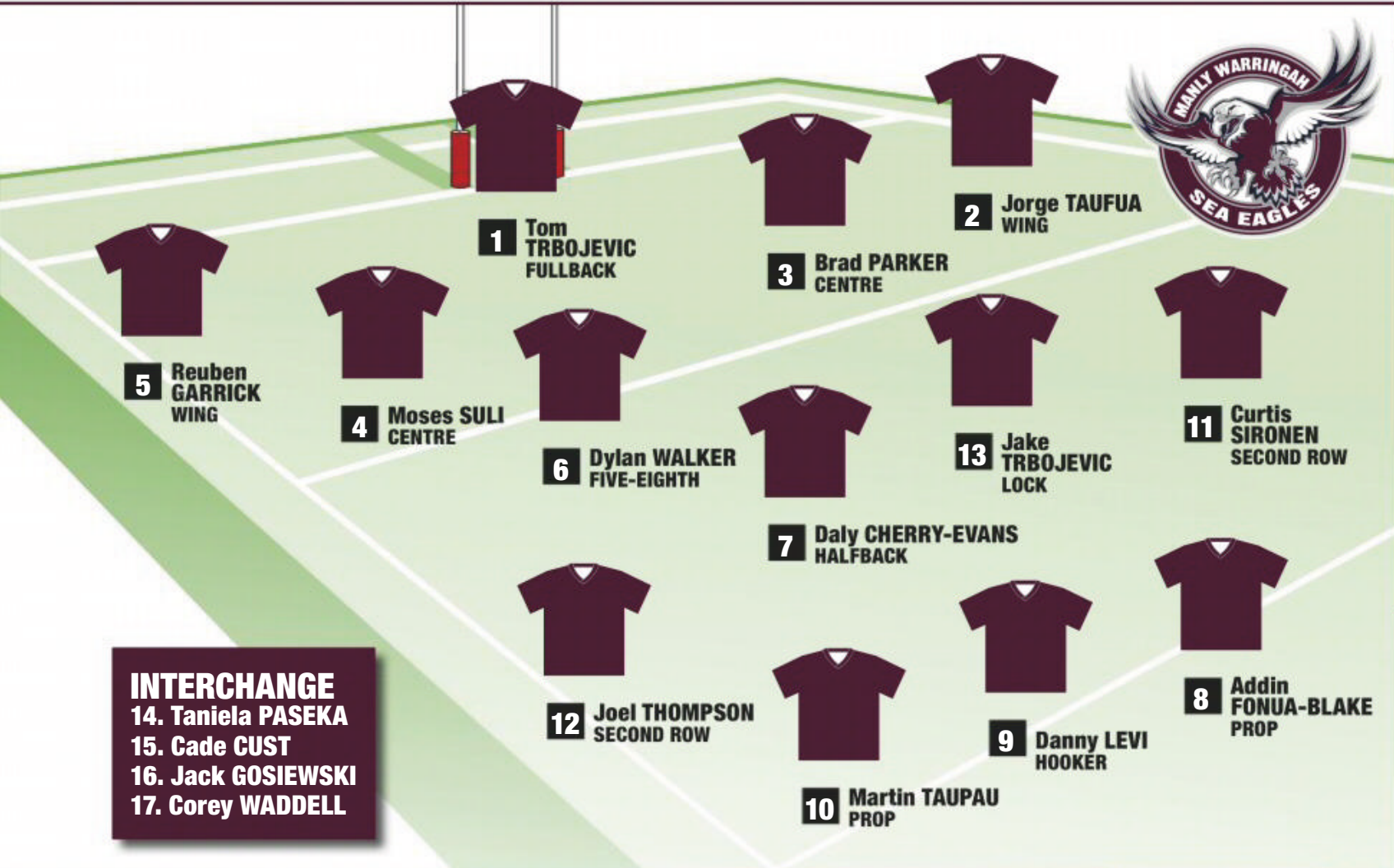
His form at the back-end of the season was incredible and the sky is the limit if he can maintain the discipline he's showed under Hasler. While his numbers weren't as astronomical as other players in his position, those guys don't have the brute force and surprising speed to embarrass props and outside backs in a single carry.

BIG LEAGUE'S STRONGEST LINE-UP

VOSSY'S VERDICT



THIS team put so much egg on my face last year with their bold showings week after week that I overdosed on omelettes! To rack up 15 wins in 2019 was an incredible achievement by Des Hasler and his players considering the challenges they were constantly faced with – and that was after kicking off the year with back-to-back losses. Throw in the fact that their superstar fullback Tom Trbojevic only appeared in 12 games and it adds even more merit to their semi-final finish. This time last year I tipped the Sea Eagles for bottom four. In 2020 I think they can play finals footy again. Not much to report on the player gains and losses front, but I believe former Knights hooker Danny Levi will be strong for them following the departure of Api Koroisau. **Predicted Finish:** 7th



2020 PLAYING ROSTER

PLAYER	POSITION	D.O.B.	Wgt	Hgt	CAREER STATS						Debut	2020 Price
					App	T	G	FG	Pts			
Jade Anderson	Winger	29/01/1997	83	180	0	0	0	0	0	–	–	\$228,000
Morgan Boyle	Prop	17/07/1996	111	194	38	1	0	0	4	2017	–	\$246,000
Daly Cherry-Evans	Halfback	20/02/1989	85	183	216	56	123	20	490	2011	–	\$823,000
Lachlan Croker	Halfback	12/12/1996	92	180	13	3	0	0	12	2016	–	\$246,000
Cade Cust	Halfback	14/09/1998	87	180	7	4	0	0	16	2019	–	\$543,000
Brendan Elliot	Winger	01/01/1994	94	186	58	21	0	0	84	2014	–	\$424,000
Manase Fainu	Hooker	17/10/1998	95	185	34	8	0	0	32	2018	–	–
Addin Fonua-Blake	Prop	06/11/1995	118	189	82	10	0	0	40	2016	–	\$738,000
Tevita Funa	Winger	03/01/1998	93	186	0	0	0	0	0	–	–	\$228,000
Reuben Garrick	Winger	30/06/1997	98	188	26	16	65	0	194	2019	–	\$500,000
Jack Gosiewski	2nd Row	29/05/1994	95	190	33	5	0	0	20	2016	–	\$334,000
Albert Hopoate	Fullback	25/02/2001	98	183	0	0	0	0	0	–	–	\$228,000
Sean Keppie	Prop	20/05/1998	110	193	3	0	0	0	0	2019	–	\$246,000
Danny Levi	Hooker	05/12/1995	90	177	83	5	0	0	20	2015	–	\$518,000
Luke Metcalf	Halfback	01/03/1999	84	183	0	0	0	0	0	–	–	–
Abbas Miski	Winger	25/07/1995	100	182	3	0	0	0	0	2019	–	\$276,000
Brayden Musgrove	Centre	06/03/1998	102	189	0	0	0	0	0	–	–	\$228,000
Haumole Olakau'atu	2nd Row	01/10/1998	113	196	2	0	0	0	0	2019	–	\$246,000
Brad Parker	Centre	19/02/1997	100	193	44	11	0	0	44	2016	–	\$345,000
Taniela Paseka	Prop	08/10/1997	120	197	26	1	0	0	4	2018	–	\$374,000
Toafofoa Sipley	Prop	05/01/1995	120	190	16	0	0	0	0	2016	–	\$291,000
Curtis Sironen	2nd Row	31/07/1993	109	195	107	21	4	0	92	2012	–	\$639,000
Moses Suli	Centre	09/06/1998	109	189	53	9	0	0	36	2017	–	\$388,000
Jorge Taufua	Winger	23/10/1991	105	184	148	80	0	0	320	2012	–	\$338,000
Martin Taupau	Lock	03/02/1990	112	190	157	14	0	0	56	2010	–	\$788,000
Joel Thompson	2nd Row	24/08/1988	103	190	220	60	0	0	240	2008	–	\$576,000
Jake Trbojevic	Lock	18/02/1994	107	185	119	25	0	0	100	2013	–	\$800,000
Tom Trbojevic	Fullback	02/10/1996	102	194	89	44	0	0	176	2015	–	\$687,000
Corey Waddell	2nd Row	02/10/1996	104	190	23	1	0	0	4	2019	–	\$447,000
Dylan Walker	Centre	27/09/1994	98	181	136	59	42	0	320	2013	–	\$446,000

LOWER GRADES

IT was a brutal year on the northern beaches last season with Manly finishing in last place in the Jersey Flegg competition, a feat matched by the Blacktown Workers Sea Eagles, who showed promising signs at stages but rarely matched it with the rest of the Canterbury Cup. It's why there aren't many rookies in contention to be the next Reuben Garrick or Corey Waddell, who both grabbed their opportunities and blossomed into regular first-graders. **Albert Hopoate** will be one to watch if he can remain fit after suffering his second serious knee injury in 2019, but it'll take a string of impressive outings to displace the men who got the job done 12 months ago.

"I think a lot of people from last year are going to get first crack," Cherry-Evans says. "The thing that I'm most excited about is seeing people in their second year of first grade repeating their performances from last year and improving. We don't want anyone resting on their laurels but instead testing themselves to be better this year. I think if the guys in their second year can improve then that will greatly benefit the team."



Judgement day

Every year they're written off, and every year the Storm machine keeps on rolling. Though the distant future is still unknown, it looks like another year of success down south. By **MARTIN GABOR**

If you were to look back at recent season previews, you would have seen plenty of people ready to write the Storm off. Whether it was due to roster overhauls, retirements or perhaps a touch of jealousy, the easy pick over the past few years has been to forecast their demise following their lengthy reign of dominance.

However, that slide has yet to happen, and while the naysayers are still predicting their doom, 2020 won't be the year. With Craig Bellamy calling the shots and Cameron Smith dominating the ruck, the Storm will always be competitive, and that's why they'll most likely be there come the business end of the season.

In recent years they've lost club legends Cooper Cronk and Billy Slater, and things haven't gotten any easier with a host of stars set to depart at the end of the season. But like the Terminator, they simply can't be killed and their new models are ready to strike.

When asked if the impending departures of Josh Addo-Carr, Suliasi Vunivalu and Tino Fa'asuamaleaui had affected morale, Storm assistant coach Jason Ryles is blunt in his assessment: "Not at all."

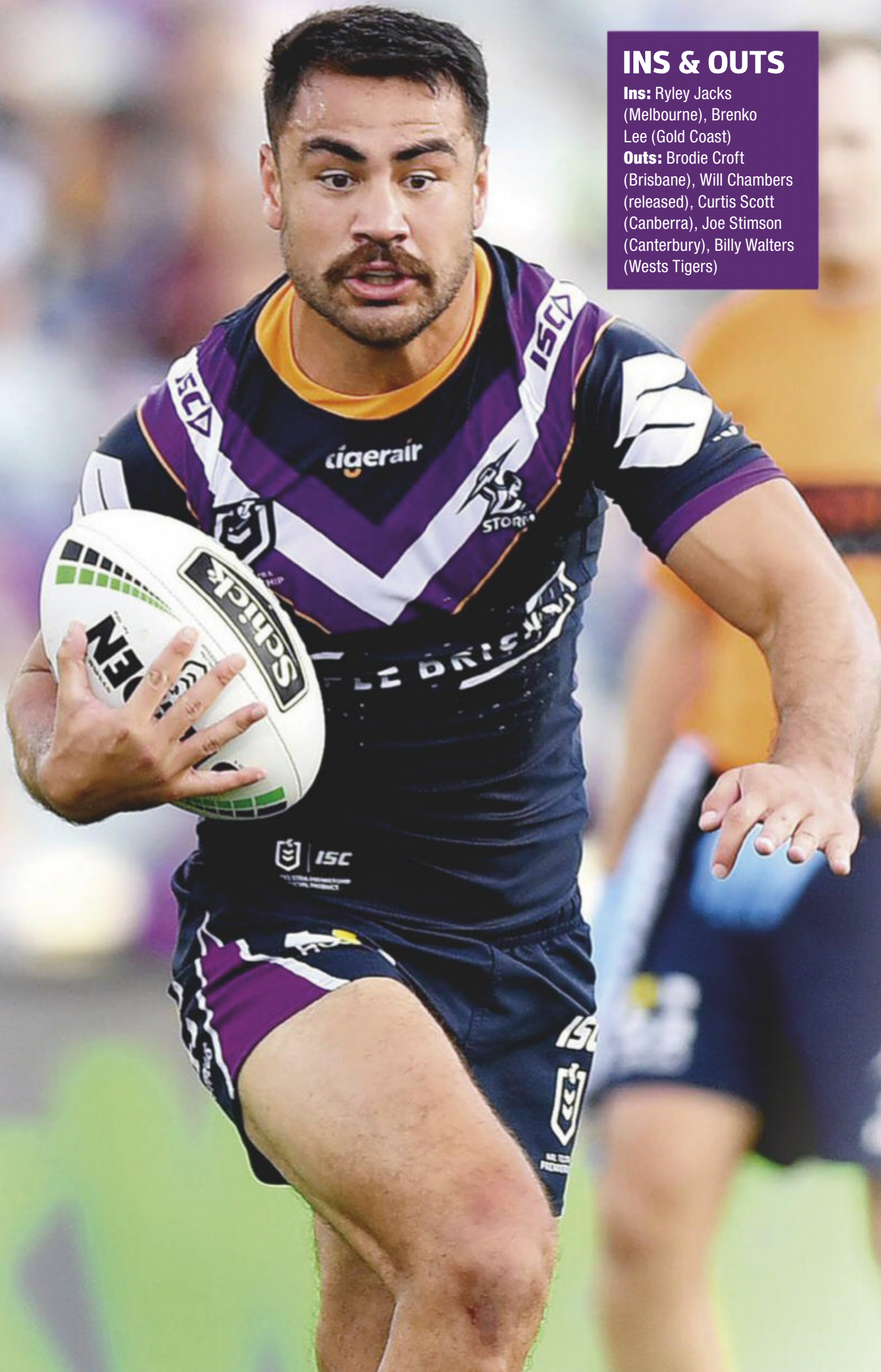
"If anything, the guys on the fringe see an opportunity which has made them hungrier. With someone's departure comes an opportunity for someone else, so that's the way we've looked at it and the way the players have approached it."

The upcoming season will be the end of an era for a core squad that made three consecutive grand

INS & OUTS

Ins: Ryley Jacks (Melbourne), Brenko Lee (Gold Coast)

Outs: Brodie Croft (Brisbane), Will Chambers (released), Curtis Scott (Canberra), Joe Stimson (Canterbury), Billy Walters (Wests Tigers)



FAREWELL FOXX: Josh Addo-Carr will leave Melbourne at season's end.

PHOTOS: NRLPhotos.com: Gregg Porteous (Hughes, B Smith, C Smith), Jason O'Brien (Munster, Addo-Carr), Nathan Hopkins (Olan); Supplied (Ryles)

finals before falling one game short to eventual premiers the Roosters in 2019.

With Vunivalu headed to Super Rugby, Fa'asuamaleaui to the Titans and Addo-Carr back to Sydney, 2020 could be the final year of their premiership window, especially if Cameron Smith calls time on his unrivalled career.

But confidence remains high in the Victorian capital following the club's third minor premiership in four years, given several youngsters have shown they have what it takes to succeed in the not too distant future.

Jahrome Hughes (*pictured, main*) is set to play halfback following Brodie Croft's move to Brisbane. Smith and Munster are superstars, but it's Ryan Papenhuyzen who could hold the key in 2020.

Few had heard of the diminutive fullback before last season, but after impressing in limited opportunities, the coaching staff couldn't ignore him anymore and handed him a starting role.

His numbers were astronomical, and should he develop a stronger passing game to go with his speed, big things should be expected of Melbourne's new-look spine.

"We've always been competitive," lock Dale Finucane says.

"The fact our spine is going to have a whole pre-season together is going to be huge. I think we were the number one team in terms of completions last year, and that put us in a good position to score points, so having combinations that have been there all pre-season will certainly help with our execution."

While those four will likely start in the spine – Smith and Munster are unlikely to be shafted barring injury – the Storm have options should their attack fail to fire, and Ryles is confident they have the depth to make moves if required.

"A lot of teams that finish in the top half of the competition tend to have settled spines with experience in those key positions," he says.

"We're no different and it's important for 'Paps' (Papenhuyzen) to spend a full pre-season at fullback. Nicho Hynes is also competing for that position and we saw what he could do last year.

"Jahrome and Cameron Munster have done a lot of work in the halves, but we also have Ryley Jacks waiting for his opportunity. The healthy competition is there to see at training and that will only bring the best out of them."

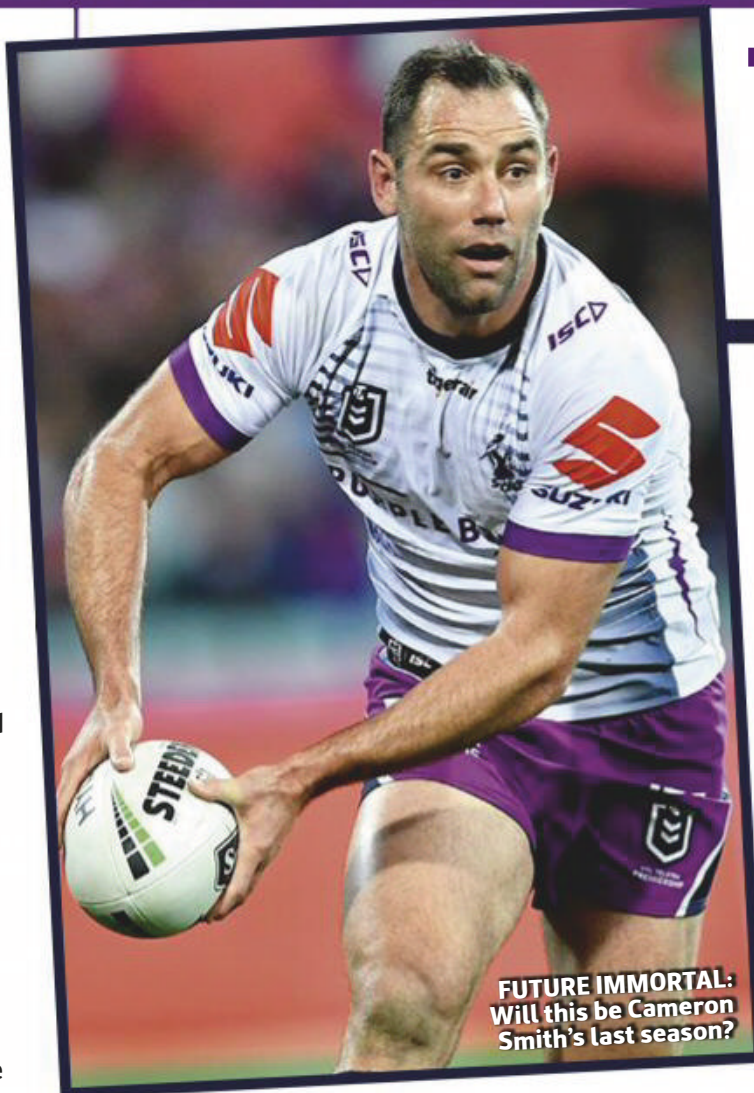
The club has struggled at times to handle Cronk's departure, with Smith often having to pick up some of the creative slack. But with a forward pack full of representative players who can also ball-play, the Storm have the ingredients to remain at the top in 2020.

"Nothing changes for me, and it never did has," Finucane says.

"Anything that I need to do during the week to get myself ready for game day – whether that's extra skill components or off-field stuff – that's the biggest thing a player can do to prepare well."

The winds of change are sweeping over Melbourne, but to write them off would be foolish. While their backline isn't as settled as it has been in the past, they still have the best hooker in the world, one of the NRL's fiercest packs and players who can create something out of nothing.

Throw in a coach who can exploit every advantage and you suddenly realise that they'll remain nestled near the top for at least the next 12 months.



FUTURE IMMORTAL: Will this be Cameron Smith's last season?

TALKING POINTS

HE'LL BE BACK?

Cameron Smith's future will be discussed on a daily basis once the season rolls around, and while he's proven everyone wrong in the past, you'd have to think retirement is on the cards. With nothing left to prove or records left to break, a premiership in 2020 would be the perfect parting gift for one of the greatest the game has ever seen. "We don't mention contract negotiations at the club so his future hasn't come up," Ryles says. "Cameron is at the stage of his career where he has to decide whether he's going to keep playing or finish up. At the moment he's training as well as he ever has. He's leading the way in regards to doing all the extra work and he's driven that at training. If anything, he's an extra coach given his immense experience. He knows more about the game than we do so we help facilitate him with that. He's an enormous resource for our club."

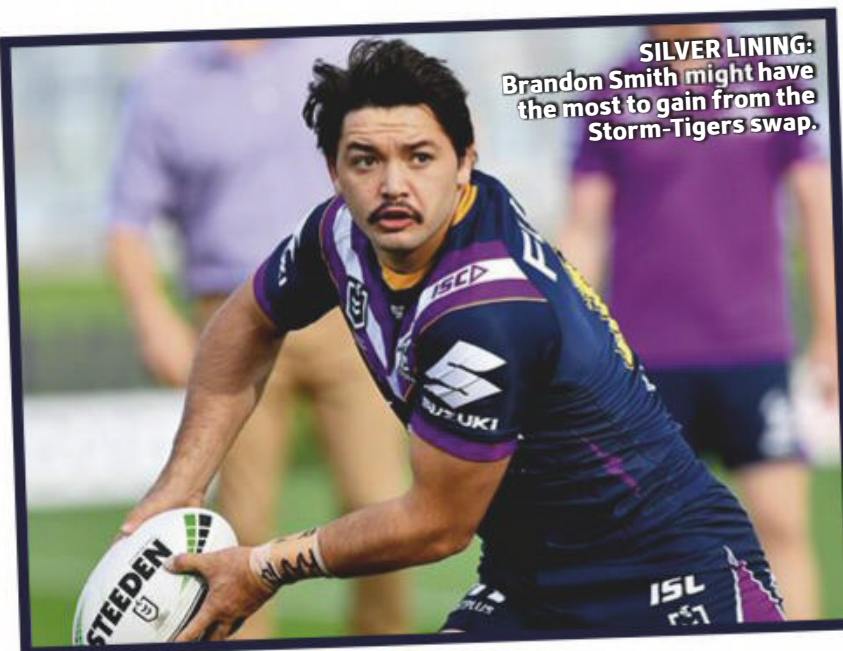
UNIONISATION

He was tipped to be the man to one day replace Craig Bellamy, but those plans have been scuttled with Jason Ryles (*right*) to link up with the English rugby union side next year as their skills coach. He'll be a big loss, but he conceded it was a position he couldn't turn down. "I worked with them four or five times already, so it basically came about due to my relationship with Eddie Jones. They asked if I'd be interested back in November, and after some thinking, I decided to make the move at the end of the season."



FULL NELSON

The Storm rarely find themselves involved in off-season controversy, but that changed last year when footage emerged of Nelson Asofa-Solomona in a brawl outside a club in Bali. The giant prop was handed a ban but was largely applauded for supporting team-mate Suliasi Vunivalu that night. The incident hasn't affected him, with Finucane tipping much of the same from the enforcer up front. "Nelson will have another big year for us," the lock predicts. "He came back to pre-season and has trained really hard to get in the best shape he can be for 2020. I expect him to have a huge impact for us up front, and hopefully we can take advantage of that."



SILVER LINING: Brandon Smith might have the most to gain from the Storm-Tigers swap.

HOME A-LOAN

It's a system often used in overseas football but fairly foreign in the NRL, however the Storm and Wests Tigers have proposed a deal that could see Harry Grant head to Sydney for 2020 while Melbourne get Paul Momirovski in return. It's an arrangement that will suit both parties, but it could backfire should Cameron Smith get injured. Brandon Smith could easily fill the void, but Grant's arrival, pending NRL approval, would allow Brandon to run riot in the middle as he did last year.

STORM 2020 DRAW

Rd 1 v Sea Eagles

Lottoland, Mar 15, 4.05pm

Rd 2 v Sharks

Netstrata, Mar 21, 7.35pm

Rd 3 v Panthers

AAMI, Mar 28, 5.30pm

Rd 4 v Rabbitohs

AAMI, Apr 2, 8.05pm

Rd 5 v Titans

AAMI, Apr 11, 5.30pm

Rd 6 v Cowboys

QCB, Apr 16, 7.50pm

Rd 7 v Warriors

AAMI, Apr 25, 8pm

Rd 8 v Dragons

Suncorp, May 3, 4.05pm

Rd 9 v Roosters

SCG, May 8, 7.55pm

Rd 10 v Eels

AAMI, May 16, 7.35pm

Rd 11 v Warriors

Mt Smart, May 23, 3pm

Rd 12 v BYE

Rd 13 v Raiders

AAMI, Jun 6, 7.35pm

Rd 14 v Knights

McDonald Jones, Jun 13, 5.30pm

Rd 15 v Broncos

Suncorp, Jun 26, 7.55pm

Rd 16 v Wests Tigers

AAMI, Jul 3, 7.55pm

Rd 17 v Titans

Cbus, July 11, 3pm

Rd 18 v Bulldogs

HBF, Perth, July 18, 7.35pm

Rd 19 v Sharks

AAMI, Jul 24, 7.55pm

Rd 20 v Rabbitohs

Bankwest, Jul 30, 7.50pm

Rd 21 v Cowboys

AAMI, Aug 6, 7.50pm

Rd 22 v Eels

Bankwest, Aug 14, 7.55pm

Rd 23 v Roosters

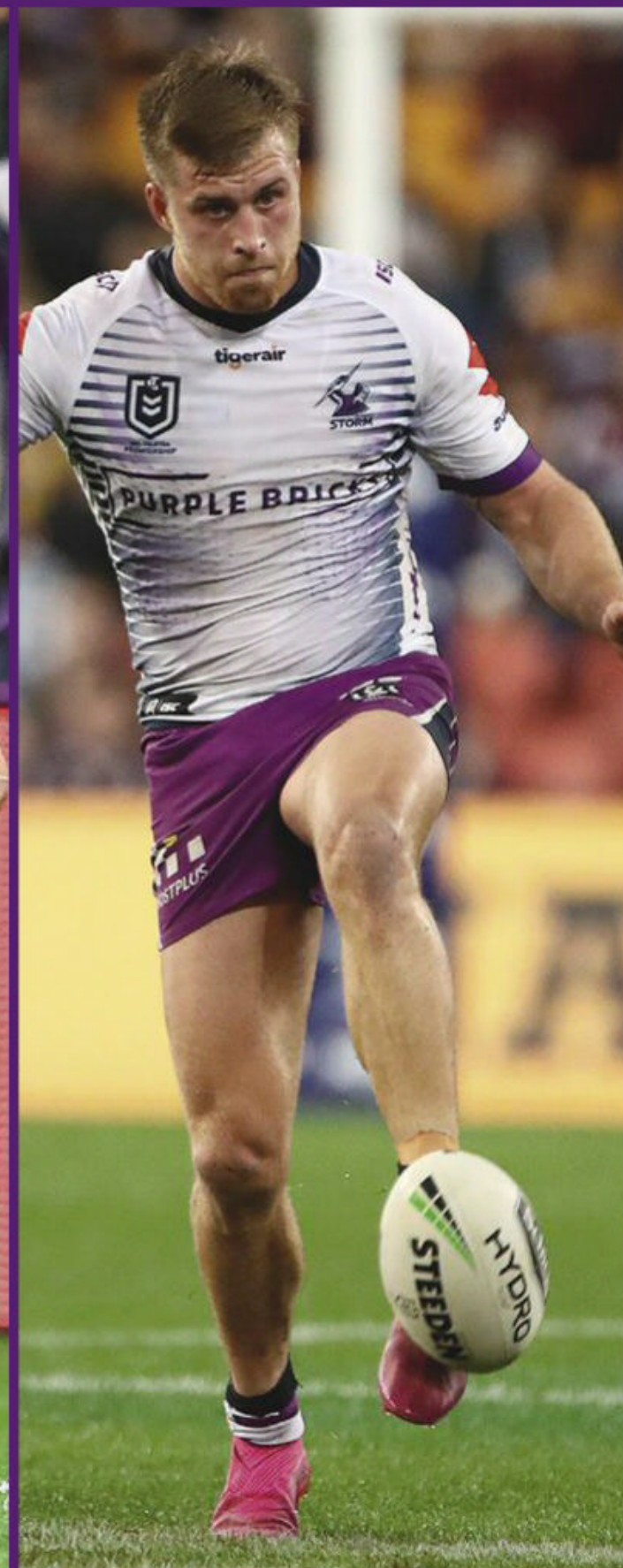
AAMI, Aug 21, 7.55pm

Rd 24 v Broncos

AAMI, Aug 29, 7.35pm

Rd 25 v Raiders

GIO, Sep 5, 7.35pm



POINT TO PROVE

Spotlight on centre stage

WITH Will Chambers (Japanese rugby) and Curtis Scott (Raiders) no longer at the club, the Storm head into the new campaign needing to revamp their three-quarter line.

Chambers has been a mainstay in the backline and the club will miss his defensive reads, while Scott was touted as the next big thing and showed some potential during his time down south.

But now an opportunity beckons for a number of centres who have the class to get the job done. **Justin Olam** scored seven tries from 14 appearances last season and is the favourite to play on

the left, while **Marion Seve** also looked promising.

But the club has options, with Brenko Lee making the move from the Titans, while Paul Momirovski will be keen to impress while on loan. It's an important position given the men responsible get to combine with two of the game's best wingers.

"There's a lot of competition, and Justin and Marion have put their best foot forward in the pre-season," Ryles says.

"Brenko has also trained with the group, and **Sandor Earl** has also trained in the centres. The trials will be important for Craig (Bellamy) as he settles on his pairing for Round 1."

The wingers will also want to finish their time in Melbourne on a high, with Addo-Carr set to return to Sydney in 2021 after requesting a move home on compassionate grounds, while Vunivalu will link up with the Queensland Reds. The new rule changes should benefit the flying Fijian who will relish the extra freedom in the air.

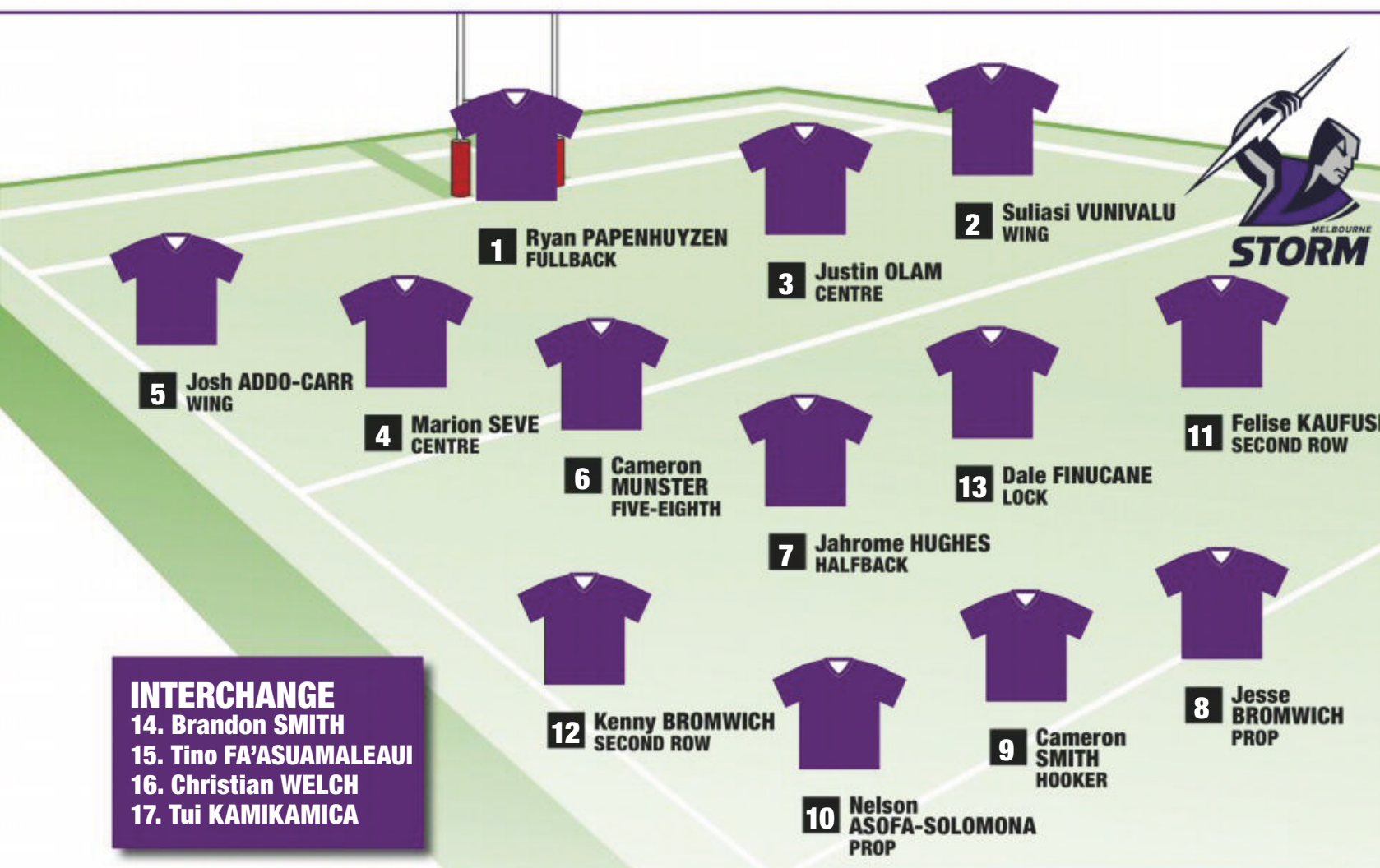
As always, there'll also be plenty of attention on **Cameron Munster** as he continues to develop, but equally the focus should be on halves partner **Jahrome Hughes**, who will need to work on his kicking and his decision-making when the Storm are in the red zone.

BIG LEAGUE'S STRONGEST LINE-UP

VOSSY'S VERDICT



IF the Melbourne Storm are a club in decline in terms of achievements, it's certainly not at a rapid rate. Admittedly they have only won one title in the past seven years, but I'm not prepared to say they won't be thereabouts again at the pointy end of this season. In Cameron Smith they trust, and he has plenty of experience around him to guide the Storm toward another serious premiership tilt. Again they have lost a few players with grand final experience, but my expectation of another solid defensive effort no matter what 17 players they send out is sure to take them a long way. By the way, dismiss their attack at your peril with the likes of 'The Foxx', Papenhuyzen, Munster and Vunivalu still on board. Not to mention that huge forward pack. **Predicted Finish: 2nd**



2020 PLAYING ROSTER

PLAYER	POSITION	D.O.B.	Wgt	Hgt	CAREER STATS						Debut	2020 Price
					App	T	G	FG	Pts			
Josh Addo-Carr	Winger	28/07/1995	88	183	84	63	0	0	252		2016	\$531,000
Nelson Asofa-Solomona	Prop	29/02/1996	115	200	104	15	0	0	60		2015	\$596,000
Jesse Bromwich	Prop	03/05/1989	114	194	229	28	0	0	112		2010	\$537,000
Kenneath Bromwich	2nd Row	22/09/1991	105	183	150	18	0	0	72		2013	\$702,000
Sandor Earl	Winger	21/09/1989	99	190	54	25	0	0	100		2009	\$355,000
Tom Eisenhuth	Centre	17/07/1992	100	192	5	0	0	0	0		2012	\$246,000
Tino Fa'asuamaleaui	2nd Row	16/02/2000	107	197	5	0	0	0	0		2019	\$300,000
Dale Finucane	Lock	07/09/1991	102	188	186	13	1	0	54		2012	\$638,000
Harry Grant	Hooker	17/02/1998	87	177	2	0	0	0	0		2018	\$246,000
Jahrome Hughes	Fullback	08/10/1994	90	183	41	15	0	0	60		2013	\$561,000
Nicho Hynes	Halfback	18/06/1996	90	188	1	0	0	0	0		2019	\$246,000
Ryley Jacks	Halfback	02/06/1992	94	185	38	10	0	0	40		2017	\$471,000
Cooper Johns	Halfback	14/07/1999	77	185	0	0	0	0	0		–	\$228,000
Tui Kamikamica	Prop	18/05/1994	110	195	28	2	0	0	8		2017	\$382,000
Felise Kaufusi	2nd Row	19/05/1992	109	189	111	21	0	0	84		2015	\$558,000
Max King	Prop	04/05/1997	105	188	44	2	0	0	8		2017	\$320,000
Brenko Lee	Centre	10/10/1995	104	190	53	20	0	0	80		2014	\$375,000
Isaac Lumelume	Wing/Centre	16/04/1998	98	187	0	0	0	0	0		–	–
Cameron Munster	Five-Eighth	13/09/1994	89	185	113	24	16	2	130		2014	\$768,000
Justin Olam	Centre	23/12/1993	92	178	17	7	0	0	28		2018	\$473,000
Ryan Papenhuyzen	Fullback	10/06/1998	80	181	22	9	2	0	40		2019	\$600,000
Aaron Pene	Prop/2nd Row	26/09/1995	107	190	0	0	0	0	0		–	\$228,000
Darryn Schonig	Prop	20/03/1996	112	185	0	0	0	0	0		–	\$228,000
Marion Seve	Centre	27/05/1995	88	195	12	4	0	0	16		2019	\$422,000
Brandon Smith	Hooker	31/05/1996	94	180	44	5	0	0	20		2017	\$510,000
Cameron Smith	Hooker	18/06/1983	90	185	411	45	1209	4	2602		2002	\$907,000
Suliasi Vunivalu	Winger	27/11/1995	99	192	94	72	0	0	288		2016	\$424,000
Albert Vete	Prop	21/01/1993	115	188	48	4	0	0	16		2015	–
Christian Welch	Prop	19/07/1994	110	195	77	3	0	0	12		2015	\$505,000

LOWER GRADES

AN unsettled backline should be music to the ears of Melbourne's feeder clubs, with several NRL-calibre centres set to run out for the Falcons and Easts Tigers in 2020. That will only strengthen an already powerful allegiance which saw the Sunshine Coast claim the minor premiership in 2019, only to be bundled out in the preliminary final having knocked out the Tigers week earlier. The potential of no Harry Grant will hurt their chances, but you can expect both teams to be up there again this season given the strength of the club's pathways program.

One player to keep an eye on this year is **Cooper Johns**. The young half comes from good pedigree and is following in the footsteps of his famous father Matthew Johns in the No.6 jersey. Cooper had 19 try assists in as many games last season for the Falcons and has led the way in pre-season in opposed sessions. Look for him to get a crack during the Origin period as cover for Cameron Munster.

Power of positive thinking

A high level of squad retention is an advantage ahead of a new season, but the Knights have still undergone plenty of changes in their quest for a finals return. By **WILL EVANS**

MOST rookie NRL coaches are afforded a grace period to get the best out of their team. But the controversial way the Newcastle Knights ended Nathan Brown's four-season tenure and secured their new head coach – falling somewhere between clumsy and clandestine – dictates Adam O'Brien will be under heavy scrutiny from Round 1.

O'Brien's peerless coaching education, spending more than a decade at the Storm before joining the Roosters last season, and the dizzying array of talent at his disposal also heightens expectations of immediate success.

Finishing 11th in 2018-19, the Knights' finals-ready roster was unable to find consistency under Brown – a trait O'Brien is well-equipped to instil.

"The main quality that sticks out about Adam is – being under Craig (Bellamy) and under 'Robbo' (Trent Robinson) – his work ethic," assistant coach David Furner explains to *Big League*.

Former Canberra coach Furner, who had assistant stints at North Queensland and South Sydney before spending last year in charge of Leeds, is part of an all-new Knights first-grade staff alongside Willie Peters, Rory Kostjassyn and Eric Smith. Their input will be vital for O'Brien, whose head coaching experience is limited.

"With all head coaches going into a season for the first time, there are things you can't prepare for," Furner says.

"You've got to rely on your philosophies and the people around you. The apprenticeship is over for Adam – he's had a very good one with a lot of success. There will be something thrown at him that he probably hasn't prepared for, so having the right people around you is important because you've just got to deal with it."

Furner reveals the transitional pre-season has gone as smoothly as the new coaching setup could have hoped.

"The best way to describe it is Adam and the staff are putting their experience and philosophies into the team. The thing that's been enjoyable is the way the players have responded.

"First and foremost, without looking too far ahead, it's about developing a team in the style Adam and the coaches have put in place. The first hurdle is Round 1 and being able to execute those philosophies."



REFRESHED: Connor Watson has praised Adam O'Brien's approach to pre-season.



INS & OUTS

Ins: Jayden Brailey (Cronulla), Gehamat Shibusaki (Brisbane), Enari Tuala (North Queensland)
Outs: Jamie Buhner (released), James Gavet (Huddersfield), Slade Griffin (retired), Danny Levi (Manly), Shaun Kenny-Dowall (Hull KR), Jesse Ramien (Cronulla), Nathan Ross (retired), Sam Stone (Gold Coast)

Utility Connor Watson says the coaching turnover has had a refreshing effect on the playing group – as well as pushing the Knights to their physical and mental limits.

“It’s a breath of fresh air, Adam’s been really good,” Watson says. “It’s very similar to how we trained at the Roosters, very intense. It’s the hardest pre-season I’ve done.”

“He’s been involved in sides that have made the finals every single year. He knows what it takes to win. He’s come in with different views and it’s been a good change.”

Newcastle’s line-up is built around Mitchell Pearce, Kalyn Ponga (pictured) and a wonderfully balanced forward pack led by David Klemmer. The overhaul of the roster that collected three-straight wooden spoons has been extraordinary, with just six of the Knights’ current squad having played first grade for the club prior to 2018.

This summer has been far more settled in the player movement department. Jesse Ramien never settled in the Hunter and has returned to Cronulla, while Shaun Kenny-Dowall, Danny Levi, Jamie Buhrer, James Gavet, Slade Griffin and Nathan Ross are also off the Knights’ books. Sharks hooker Jayden Brailey is the club’s only major signing, with 21-year-olds Enari Tuala (Cowboys) and Gehamat Shibasaki (Broncos) coming on board to add outside-back depth.

Crucially, Brailey looks set to be the only newcomer to a full-strength team sheet. Stability shapes as an unfamiliar trump card for the Knights in 2020.

“The first two years I was here we had a lot of roster changes,” says Watson.

“‘Brownny’ did a great job building a really strong squad, which showed when Adam got here – he pretty much kept the same personnel. It definitely helps, you know how guys play and you don’t have to build new combinations. Hopefully that will take our game to the next level.”

O’Brien needs to choose from a host of contenders for the five-eighth role, while there’s a furious battle on for the centre and wing spots. But with an otherwise settled spine, and rep forwards Klemmer, Daniel Saifiti, Tim Glasby and Herman Ese’ese laying the platform in the middle, the Knights have a tremendous base to work off.

One of the best back-rowers of the 1990s, Furner is particularly enthusiastic about the ongoing development of Mitch Barnett and Lachlan Fitzgibbon. Meanwhile, 21-year-old superstar Ponga’s attitude and maturity has earned special praise.

“We can’t forget Kalyn’s age, but everyone knows how talented he is,” says Furner, who spent time with Ponga at the Cowboys. “The coaching staff have been impressed with his application. That’s something that has stood out – his daily routine, trying to improve as a player.”

“I don’t think anyone signs up to just make up the numbers. We’ve got to be really strict on our philosophies, being able to adapt and keeping the same mentality every week.” **BL**

TALKING POINTS

CLOUD NINE

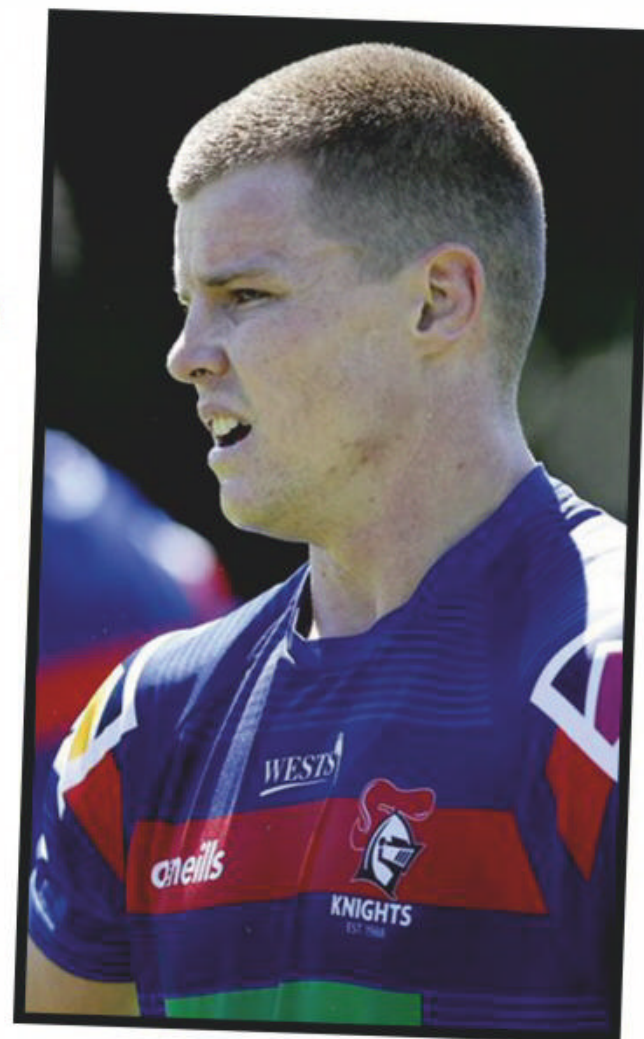
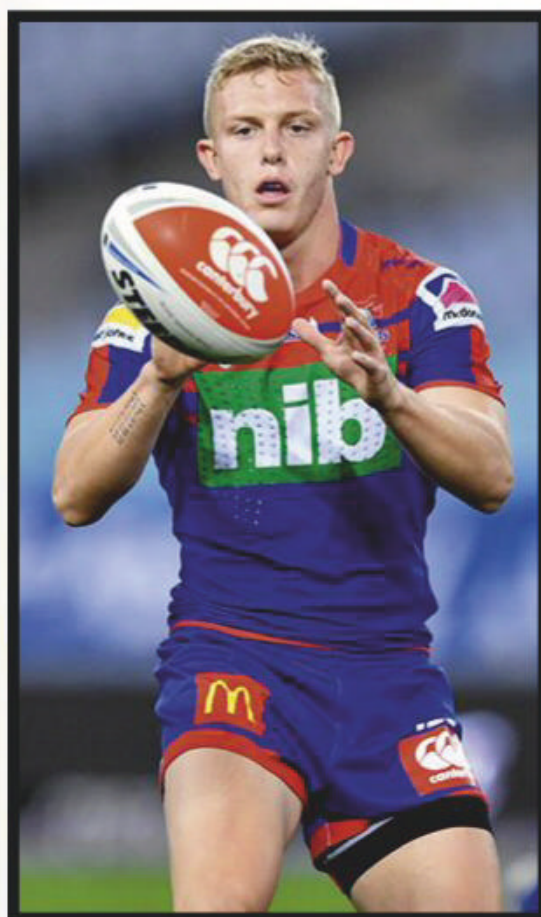
The Knights have been waiting for a player to nail down the No.9 jumper since club legend Danny Buderus hung up the boots in 2013. Jayden Brailey – comfortably the Knights’ biggest off-season acquisition – effectively has a free run at the position in 2020. “He’s been training really well, he’s got a lot of talent so it’s good to add players like that to the team,” new team-mate Connor Watson says. “He’ll definitely help us win some more games this year, and it’s been good having him around – he’s a good guy as well.” While not the flashiest hooker, the industrious 23-year-old plays big minutes and missed just two games in the past two seasons for Cronulla. With Danny Levi joining Manly, the luckless Slade Griffin retiring and Zac Woolford released, Brailey’s durability will be a vital as he aims to give the Knights a permanent presence at dummy-half.

FINALS DROUGHT

The club has not played finals footy since 2013, with only Wests Tigers (2011) enduring a longer absence. Meanwhile, the Knights haven’t finished higher than seventh since 2006, Andrew Johns’ last full season. Few clubs boast a fanbase more patient or passionate, but the Knights faithful’s tolerance will be tested by another year in the bottom half given the assortment of blue-chip talent on their roster.

WIDE OPEN

The exit of Jesse Ramien and Shaun Kenny-Dowall has created a fair bit of uncertainty around the make-up of Newcastle’s 2020 three-quarter-line – but the club is not short of options. Hymel Hunt, the only Knight to play every game last year, and Edrick Lee, who suffered a season-ending injury in June, would appear to have the inside running. The experienced but injury-prone Tautau Moga is vying for a centre berth with 21-year-old recruits Enari Tuala and Gehamat Shibasaki, while versatile pair Kurt Mann and Sione Mata’utia remain options. Bradman Best and Star To’a made eye-catching late-2019 debuts and it wouldn’t surprise to see both teenagers cement backline roles in first grade.



SET OF SIXES

The Knights jersey creating most debate is the No.6. Kalyn Ponga’s five-eighth experiment was abandoned after just three games last year, with Nathan Brown switching between Mason Lino, Connor Watson and Kurt Mann as Mitchell Pearce’s halves partner for the remainder of the season. It shapes as a three-horse race again this year between steady playmaker Lino, unpredictable utility Mann and 19-year-old prospect Phoenix Crossland, who made one NRL appearance off the bench in 2019. Good judges rate Crossland as a potential long-term Newcastle linchpin. The Knights have not had a settled combination since Jarrod Mullen and Tyrone Roberts steered the club to a preliminary final in 2013, and halves stability shapes as a key component in the club’s quest for its first playoffs appearance since.

ROAD WORRIERS

Regularly playing in front of 20,000-plus crowds at McDonald Jones Stadium is a major advantage for the Knights – but they need to find the key to winning away from Newcastle. The Knights have collected two competition points on just 17 of their 72 road trips over the past six seasons. They went 4-8 away in 2019, with two of those victories coming at neutral venues.

KNIGHTS 2020 DRAW

Rd 1 v Warriors

McDonald Jones, Mar 14, 3pm

Rd 2 v Wests Tigers

Leichhardt, Mar 22, 4.05pm

Rd 3 v Sharks

Netstrata, Mar 28, 3pm

Rd 4 v Cowboys

McDonald Jones, Apr 3, 6pm

Rd 5 v Sea Eagles

Lottoland, Apr 9, 7.50pm

Rd 6 v Raiders

McDonalds Park, Wagga, Apr 18, 3pm

Rd 7 v Panthers

McDonald Jones, Apr 26, 4.05pm

Rd 8 v Rabbitohs

Suncorp, May 2, 3pm

Rd 9 v Dragons

McDonald Jones, May 9, 3pm

Rd 10 v Roosters

SCG, May 14, 7.50pm

Rd 11 v Sharks

McDonald Jones, May 24, 2.05pm

Rd 12 v Rabbitohs

McDonald Jones, May 30, 7.35pm

Rd 13 v Panthers

Panthers, Jun 7, 2.05pm

Rd 14 v Storm

McDonald Jones, Jun 13, 5.30pm

Rd 15 v Titans

McDonald Jones, Jun 28, 2.05pm

Rd 16 v BYE

Rd 17 v Cowboys

QCB, Jul 12, 6.15pm

Rd 18 v Broncos

McDonald Jones, Jul 19, 4.05pm

Rd 19 v Wests Tigers

McDonald Jones, Jul 26, 4.05pm

Rd 20 v Bulldogs

Bankwest, Aug 1, 5.30pm

Rd 21 v Warriors

Mt Smart, Aug 9, 2.05pm

Rd 22 v Sea Eagles

McDonald Jones, Aug 15, 5.30pm

Rd 23 v Broncos

Suncorp, Aug 22, 7.35pm

Rd 24 v Eels

Bankwest, Aug 28, 6pm

Rd 25 v Bulldogs

McDonald Jones, Sep 6, 2.05pm



POINT TO PROVE

Pearce planning for finals

AFTER controversially being muscled out of the Roosters at the end of 2017, **Mitchell Pearce** has watched his former club win back-to-back grand finals while steering the Knights to consecutive 11th-place finishes. But the skipper was a model of dependability throughout 2019, earning a top-10 Dally M finish. He also rectified arguably the most tortured individual narrative in State of Origin history by featuring in NSW's epic Game Three triumph. Retaining the Blues' No.7 jumper will be on Pearce's to-do list, but leading the Knights to the NRL finals would be a crowning achievement in the 30-year-old's career.

Connor Watson struggled to find a groove in 2019 as he was shuffled between fullback, five-eighth, hooker and the bench on a weekly basis. But this year Watson is set to get the opportunity to settle as a roving lock while also providing dummy-half relief, as Victor Radley has done at the Roosters in recent seasons. "I'm capable of playing most positions, so I've trained all over the shop but I've spent most of my time at lock and nine," the 23-year-old says. "If all goes to plan that's where I'll end up playing the majority of my footy this year." If Watson's form and consistency matches his utility value and game-breaking potential, a NSW call-up could be on the cards.

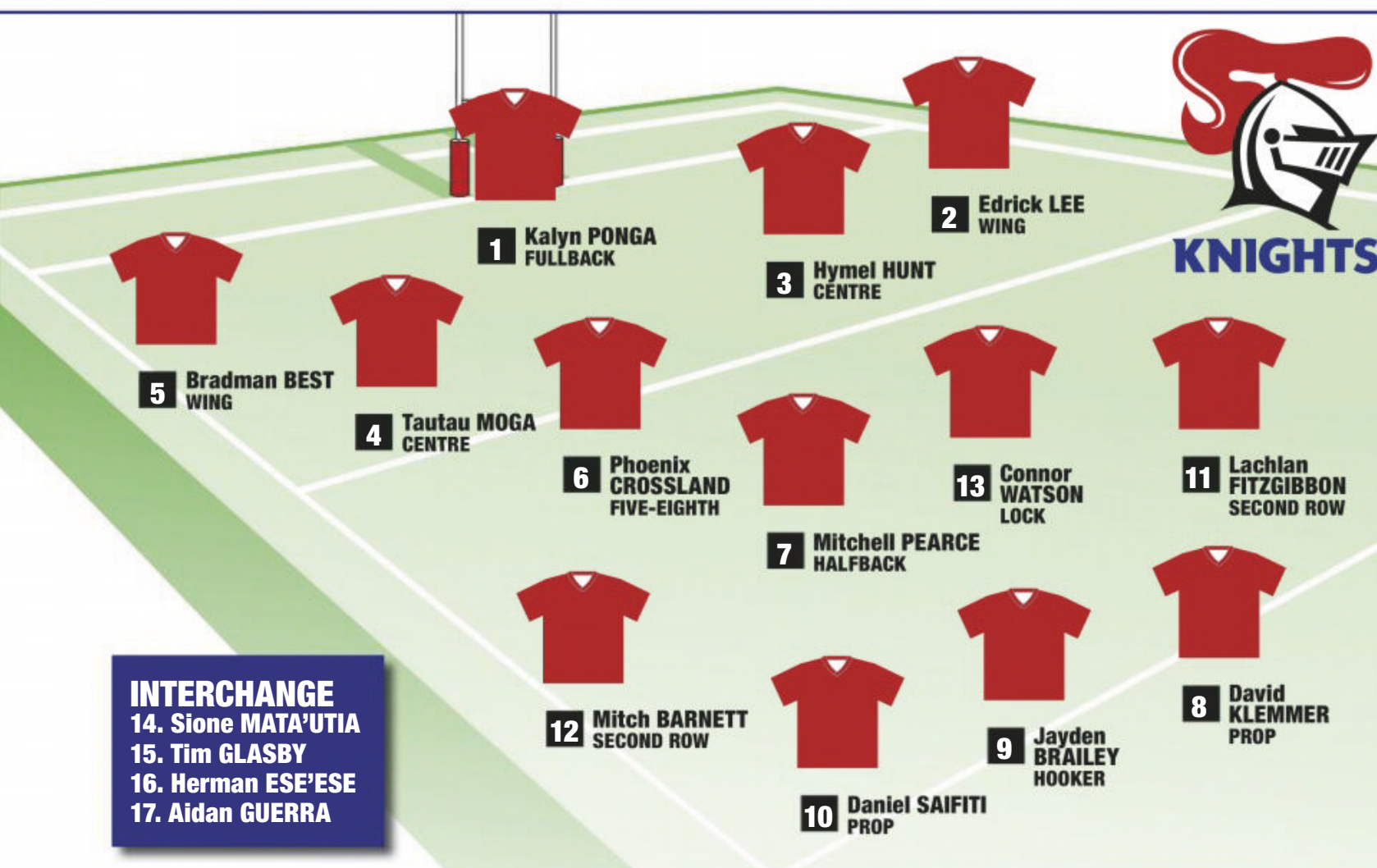
Yet another member of the ex-Roosters contingent in Newcastle, **Aidan Guerra** was usurped by Tim Glasby and tyros Mitch Barnett and Lachlan Fitzgibbon as a back-row starter during an injury-hit 2019. He was restricted to 12 NRL appearances (all but one off the bench) after suffering a shocking early-season ankle injury. But the 31-year-old will be eager to prove he still has plenty to offer in the last year of his current contract. Experience is not one of the Knights' strong suits, which means Guerra – a veteran of 190 NRL games, 10 Origins for Queensland and one Test for Australia – should prove a valuable asset for coach Adam O'Brien in 2020.

BIG LEAGUE'S STRONGEST LINE-UP

VOSSY'S VERDICT



THE Knights are one of a number of sides that I just don't know about in 2020. They had so many new recruits with NRL experience lining up this time last year yet their season was all over the shop. These are the streaks rookie coach Adam O'Brien has to address. In 2019, the Knights lost five of their first six; then won seven of their next eight; before losing eight of their final 10. Among O'Brien's wishlist (I'm sure) is to make Newcastle a tough place for visiting teams to come to once again. They won only four games at home in 2018 and weren't a great deal better last season in front of their passionate fans with six. Give me a minimum eight victories at home and I can see Newcastle playing finals football. But the two 'Ps', Pearce and Ponga, will need to be very good.
Predicted Finish: 8th



2020 PLAYING ROSTER

PLAYER	POSITION	D.O.B.	Wgt	Hgt	CAREER STATS						Debut	2020 Price
					App	T	G	FG	Pts			
Mitch Barnett	Lock	15/04/1994	104	187	77	15	3	0	66		2015	\$608,000
Bradman Best	Centre	09/08/2001	103	182	3	1	0	0	4		2019	\$325,000
Jayden Brailey	Hooker	09/04/1996	88	179	69	9	0	0	36		2017	\$585,000
Mat Croker	Prop	11/09/1999	108	191	0	0	0	0	0		–	–
Phoenix Crossland	Halfback	07/07/2000	86	183	1	0	0	0	0		2019	\$246,000
Herman Ese'ese	Prop	07/09/1994	107	186	72	5	0	0	20		2015	\$524,000
Lachlan Fitzgibbon	2nd Row	05/01/1994	107	192	62	23	0	0	92		2015	\$575,000
Tim Glasby	Prop	27/04/1989	106	188	131	12	0	0	48		2013	\$543,000
Aidan Guerra	2nd Row	25/02/1988	104	191	190	47	0	0	188		2010	\$498,000
Tex Hoy	Fullback	04/11/1999	91	184	0	0	0	0	0		–	–
Hymel Hunt	Centre	14/11/1993	99	191	71	21	0	0	84		2013	\$388,000
Luke Huth	Hooker	19/06/1999	85	178	0	0	0	0	0		–	–
Brodie Jones	2nd Row	07/05/1998	103	183	0	0	0	0	0		–	\$228,000
Josh King	Prop	12/02/1995	105	187	53	0	0	0	0		2016	\$312,000
David Klemmer	Prop	22/12/1993	116	198	134	3	0	0	12		2013	\$773,000
Edrick Lee	Winger	19/09/1992	100	196	105	53	1	0	214		2012	\$407,000
Mason Lino	Halfback	04/02/1994	84	175	29	5	49	0	118		2015	\$522,000
Kurt Mann	Fullback	01/03/1993	88	184	107	31	0	0	124		2014	\$350,000
Sione Mata'utia	2nd Row	25/06/1996	99	183	112	30	0	0	120		2014	\$426,000
Tautau Moga	Centre	06/12/1993	109	194	69	23	0	0	92		2012	\$285,000
Jirah Momoisea	Prop	02/09/1998	109	193	0	0	0	0	0		–	–
Mitchell Pearce	Halfback	07/04/1989	91	182	276	71	0	9	293		2007	\$647,000
Kalyn Ponga	Fullback	30/03/1998	92	184	49	20	75	0	230		2016	\$737,000
Daniel Saifiti	Prop	01/05/1996	121	195	85	6	0	0	24		2016	\$465,000
Jacob Saifiti	Prop	01/05/1996	114	195	54	3	0	0	12		2016	\$246,000
Simi Sasagi	Five-Eighth	24/04/2001	94	185	0	0	0	0	0		–	–
Pasami Saulo	Prop	01/08/1998	103	190	6	0	0	0	0		2018	\$246,000
Gehamat Shibasaki	Centre	18/02/1998	97	184	13	0	0	0	0		2018	\$324,000
Starford To'a	Fullback	23/06/2000	97	183	1	1	0	0	4		2019	\$228,000
Enari Tuala	Centre	19/10/1998	96	188	18	2	0	0	8		2017	\$300,000
Connor Watson	Five-Eighth	31/05/1996	87	174	74	20	0	0	80		2016	\$654,000

LOWER GRADES

AFTER a disappointing second-last finish in 2019, the Knights should field a formidable Canterbury Cup line-up with the experienced likes of Josh King, Jacob Saifiti and Mason Lino, and boom youngsters **Pasami Saulo** and **Starford To'a** behind the eight-ball for a spot in a full-strength NRL 17. Injuries notwithstanding, the club's excellent depth will have a positive flow-on effect to the reserve grade side, which will be coached by Tony Gleeson following Rory Kostjasyn's promotion to O'Brien's first grade staff. Newcastle's Jersey Flegg side finished seventh with a 12-8 record last year under Scott Dureau, who will instead manage the club's Player Development Program in 2020. Adam Betteridge returns to the Knights as under-20s coach after four seasons in charge of Macquarie Scorpions that included a drought-breaking Newcastle Rugby League premiership in 2017. The Knights will be chasing a second straight Harold Matthews Cup title under Scott Robinson after a dominant 2019 campaign, while Joel McCafferty remains in charge of the SG Ball Cup side, which should benefit from the Harold Matts stars moving up a grade.



Back on the horse

After two years in the wilderness, shrewd recruitment and a new approach have the Cowboys primed for a finals return. By **MICHAEL BLOK**

IT'S not often you would associate enjoyment with pre-season training. It's a gruelling time of the year, full of vigorous workouts like beach sprints, army-style boot camps, beep tests and even more running.

It's usually a dreaded period, but according to skipper Michael Morgan that's all changed at the Cowboys in 2020. He says the players are 'having fun' in a bid to bond together and turn their fortunes around following two years out of the top eight.

"It's actually been enjoyable," Morgan tells *Big League*.

"The schedule has changed a bit from previous years and we're doing a couple of things differently. It's been pretty fun – it's been hard, but it's been enjoyable."

Since making the grand final in 2017, Paul Green's men have failed to return to the NRL finals.

They had a number of distractions last campaign, starting with Ben Barba's sacking before a single game was played and continuing with a number of serious and unique injuries and suspensions to star players, including Morgan, Jason Taumalolo, Te Maire Martin, Josh McGuire and Justin O'Neill.

After a rough 24 months, Morgan says it's time for the club to press reset.

"There are a few new faces, which is nice after the year we had. Everyone's in good spirits. We spoke about starting fresh," Morgan says.

"We spoke about wanting to make sure we weren't wasting any time or anything like that.

"Among the group everyone is getting along pretty well. I know every club will tell you that at this time of the year, but this year just feels different."

Morgan says the key to turning things around in 2020 is consistency – something they've lacked recently.

"The past two years, and last year in particular, have been pretty frustrating at times with where we've ended up finishing and how we were playing," he says.

"We weren't consistent in anything we did, partially in games but also during the week.

"This pre-season we've been better, more consistent. We haven't had one good session one day and a bad one the next. The focus has been on having more consistency with what we do. Hopefully that can translate to games."

The Cowboys will receive an enormous boost in 2020 with the signing of former Shark Valentine Holmes, who returns to Australia after spending time with the New York Jets in the NFL.

INS & OUTS

Ins: Valentine Holmes (NFL), Esan Marsters (Wests Tigers), Reece Robson (St George Illawarra)

Outs: Kurt Baptiste (released), Scott Bolton (retired), Javid Bowen (released), Jordan Kahu (Brisbane), Gideon Gela-Mosby (released), Matt Scott (retired), Enari Tuala (Newcastle)

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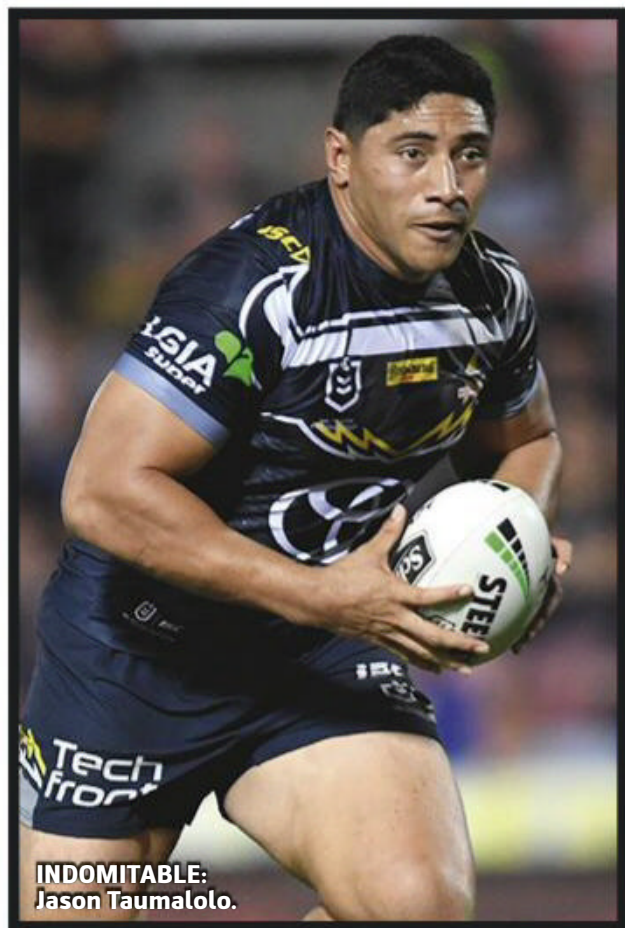
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INDOMITABLE:
Jason Taumalolo.

Cowboys coach Paul Green had wanted Holmes on his roster for quite some time. He even left a top 30 spot open after Barba's sacking last year, but the fullback stayed at the NFL franchise for a further six months.

Now the Cowboys finally have their man. "It's been nice having him back. He's an exciting player. He brings a lot of speed and power to our backline," Morgan says.

The Cowboys struggled with their attack in 2019 – scoring the third-fewest points in the competition – but they'll be hoping for a drastic turnaround with Holmes at the back.

"We've got some really good outside backs who can break open a game and I feel I can add to that. Hopefully I get back to the form I was playing with at the back end of 2018, if not better," Holmes says.

"I'm really confident in the back five that we have and everyone already knows how good our forward pack is."

Despite spending a year away from the game, Holmes is confident in picking up where he left off, and although he's played more games on the wing than at fullback, he only has eyes on the No.1 jersey.

"I feel really comfortable at the back which is something I probably lacked a little bit at the Sharks as I was younger and still learning," he says.

"Having that main year in 2018 playing there, I feel like I know what it takes to be a fullback.

"I haven't had to tweak it too much. At the Sharks we had edge back-rowers who like to play a lot but we are getting some good combinations with the edge back-rowers here."

Green has options when it comes finalising the side's spine, with the biggest questions being who will partner Morgan in the halves and who will play dummy-half.

"It's good to have options. We have Jake [Granville], Reece Robson and Reuben Cotter who can all play hooker and play it well," Morgan says.

"Then there's myself, Val [Holmes], Scott Drinkwater and Clifford who can fill the spine.

"We've been mixing it up a bit throughout the pre-season, trying out a few combinations and seeing what works best. Hopefully it's a bit steadier than last year."

BL

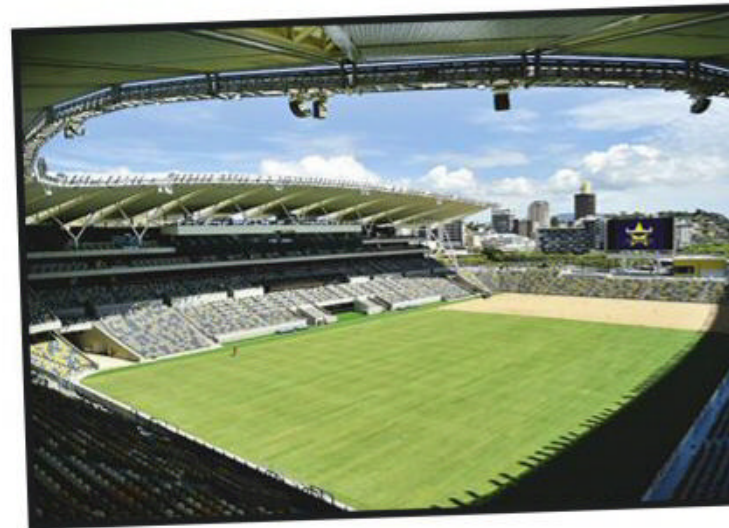
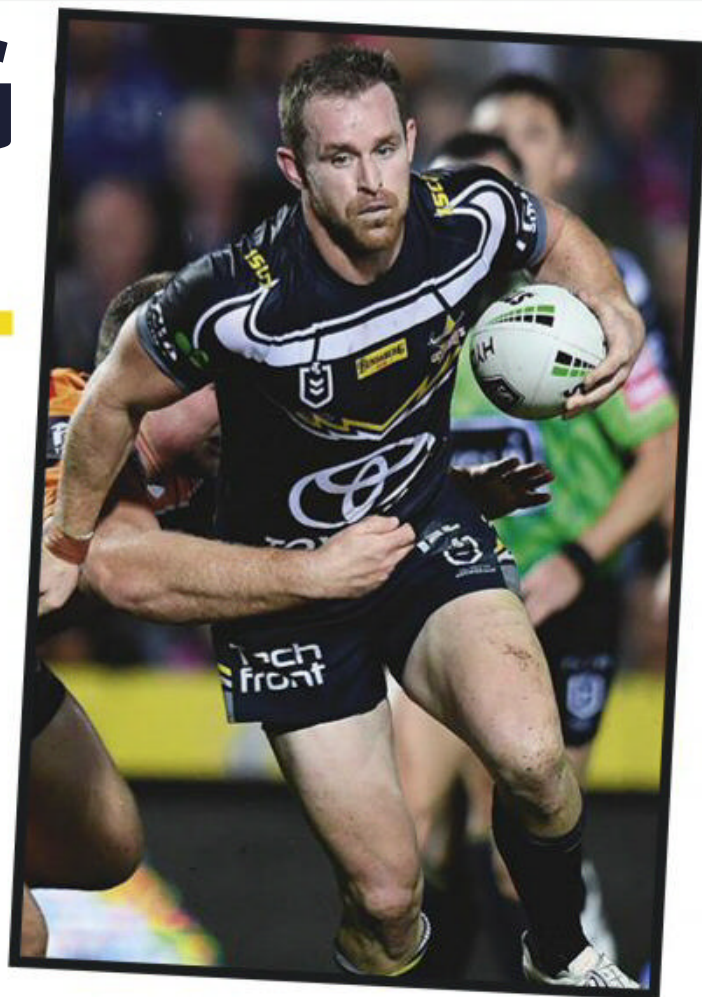
TALKING POINTS

MIND OVER MORGAN

Cowboys fans will be praying Michael Morgan can stay fit and healthy in 2020 following a number of concussions over the past couple of years. There were concerns last season when Morgan was forced to sit out several games due to concussion protocols. He's had no issues so far this year, but one more concussion would sound alarm bells for the Cowboys. "I'm feeling fine at the moment. Since the second head knock [last year], I've had no issues. I feel completely normal which is good," he says. "It's hard to be careful. We play a contact sport and I play a position where you may get hit after you pass it and get into an awkward spot. I've got to try not to get my head in the wrong spot when I make tackles and try not to get elbowed in the head by Josh McGuire."

HOME ADVANTAGE

The Cowboys will have a new home in 2020 with the opening of Queensland Country Bank Stadium – Townsville's new 25,000-seat, multi-purpose venue. With a sea change in 2020, it gives the Cowboys a chance for a fresh beginning to start the decade. "We'd like to make it a fortress. It would be great if we can make it a tough place for teams to come and play," Morgan declares. "It's an exciting time for the group. This current side is going to be the first team to play on that field and after the past two seasons we've had, a fresh start is exactly what we need. We've had few changes within the squad, so it's a great opportunity for a fresh start and to build something new." They'll open their campaign at the new stadium against the Broncos on Friday, March 13.



CHANGE AT THE TOP

It's never easy replacing a player of Matt Scott's calibre; that's why several Cowboys forwards are going to have to stand up this season. With the retirement of the Queensland great at the end of last season, it leaves a giant hole in North Queensland's front row. Michael Morgan expects Jason Taumalolo to continue his impressive form and has called on a number of other forwards to rise in 2020. "There's no one person who is going to do it for us. There's Jason [Taumalolo], who's done so well the past few years, so hopefully he can keep doing that," Morgan says. "Josh McGuire missed a bit of last year due to injury and suspension, but he has plenty of experience and we're going to need him at his best this year. A young guy who's going well is Peter Hola, so is Francis Molo. They're a lot fitter than they were when they got their start in first grade."

COWBOYS 2020 DRAW

Rd 1 v Broncos

Queensland Country Bank, March 13, 8.05pm

Rd 2 v Bulldogs

ANZ Stadium, March 19, 8.05pm

Rd 3 v Eels

Queensland Country Bank, March 28, 7.35pm

Rd 4 v Knights

McDonald Jones Stadium, April 3, 6pm

Rd 5 v Broncos

Suncorp Stadium, April 10, 7.55pm

Rd 6 v Storm

Queensland Country Bank, April 16, 7.50pm

Rd 7 v Bulldogs

Queensland Country Bank, April 25, 6pm

Rd 8 v Roosters

Suncorp Stadium, May 2, 7.45pm

Rd 9 v Titans

Queensland Country Bank, May 9, 7.35pm

Rd 10 v Sharks

Sunshine Coast Stadium, May 16, 5.30pm

Rd 11 v Rabbitohs

Queensland Country Bank, May 22, 7.55pm

Rd 12 v Eels

Bankwest Stadium, May 29, 7.55pm

Rd 13 v Roosters

Queensland Country Bank, June 6, 3pm

Rd 14 v Titans

Cbus Super Stadium, June 12, 6pm

Rd 15 v Warriors

Sky Stadium, Wellington, June 27, 3pm

Rd 16 v BYE

Rd 17 v Knights

Queensland Country Bank, July 12, 6.15pm

Rd 18 v Dragons

Netstrata Jubilee Stadium, July 18, 3pm

Rd 19 v Sea Eagles

Queensland Country Bank, July 25, 7.35pm

Rd 20 v Raiders

Queensland Country Bank, August 1, 7.35pm

Rd 21 v Storm

AAMI Park, August 6, 7.50pm

Rd 22 v Panthers

Panthers Stadium, August 13, 7.50pm

Rd 23 v Sharks

Queensland Country Bank, August 20, 7.50pm

Rd 24 v Warriors

Queensland Country Bank, August 29, 5.30pm

Rd 25 v Wests Tigers

Leichhardt Oval, September 4, 6pm



POINT TO PROVE

Coen in the right direction

YOUNG forward **Coen Hess** has a point to prove in 2020 – and he's ready to silence his critics. When he arrived on the scene at the Cowboys in 2015, he was tipped to be the next big thing and early career form saw him debut for Queensland as a 21-year-old. However he struggled with form last season, which saw him relegated to North Queensland's interchange and out of the Maroons' squad.

Hess wants to return to his best in 2020 and he's on

a mission to regain form and return to State of Origin – and Michael Morgan has already noticed a difference.

"Coen has been great this year. He's having an awesome pre-season. He's trimmed right down, is doing all the right things," Morgan says. "He's really looking after himself, which I hadn't seen before. This year, he's really knuckled down and you can tell he wants to make it a good year. Hopefully he can have a good season for us."

Morgan also has high hopes for young prop **Tom Gilbert**, who is hoping to crack the first grade squad following a stunning season with Townsville last year. He averaged 139 metres per game and totalled 707 tackles from 24 games.

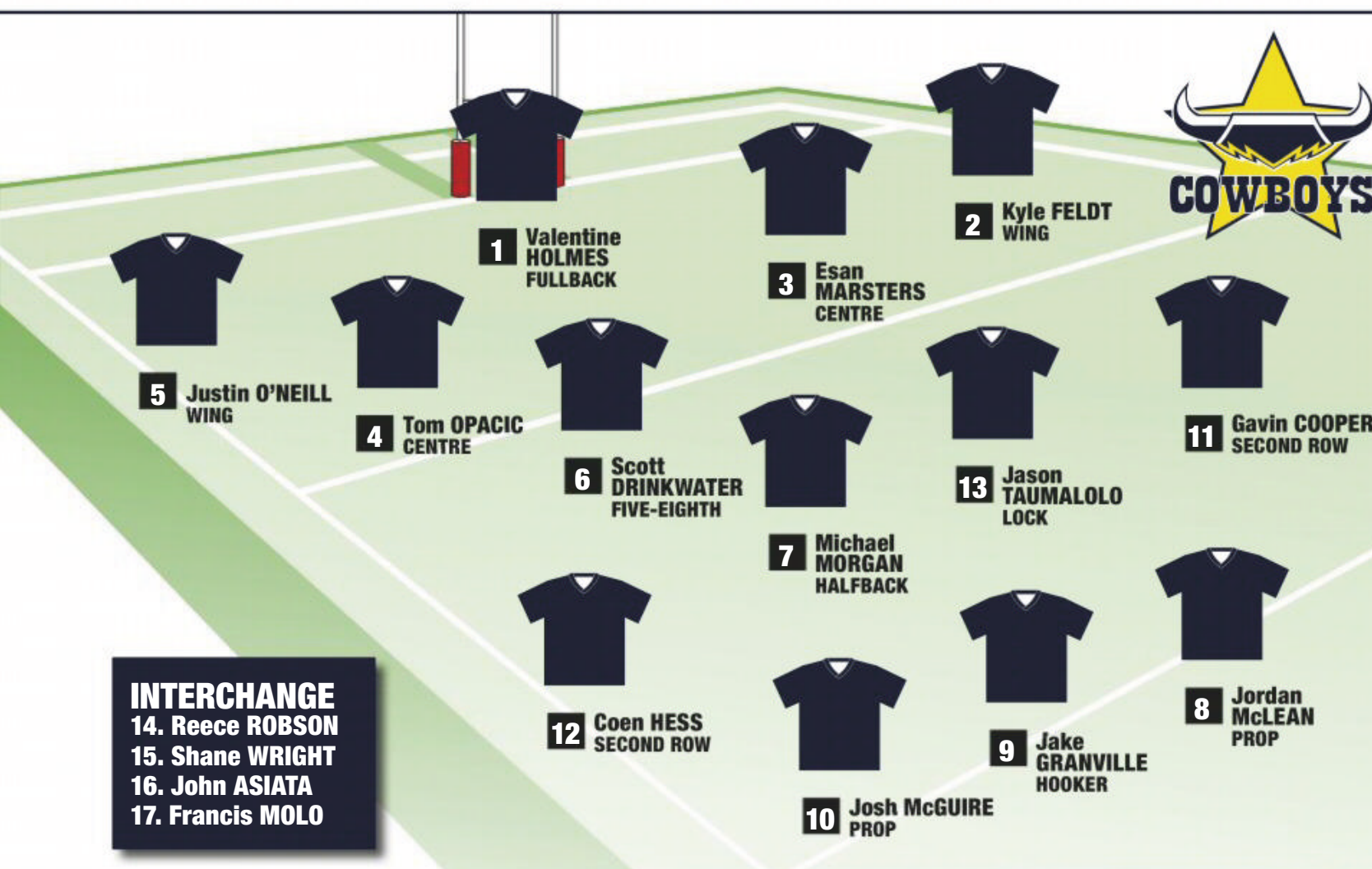
"Tom Gilbert was the Rookie of the Year in the Q Cup last year, and he's been going well against our middle forwards as he tries to work for a spot," Morgan says. "He's been really impressive and he might get his chance this year."

BIG LEAGUE'S STRONGEST LINE-UP

VOSSY'S VERDICT



DID I just say I was confused about the Knights' chances this year? Well add attempting to confidently predicting what will happen with the Cowboys is perhaps even more baffling. Is a magnificent new stadium worth points? I suppose you could look at the Eels at Bankwest last year and say yes. There is also a superstar recruit on board in Valentine Holmes, and they still have an awesome JT in their side with Jason Taumalolo. However, two disappointing seasons where the Cowboys have finished in the bottom four have my faith tested. Paul Green's team managed nine victories last season. I believe they can possibly notch a few more in 2020, but not enough for a finals return.
Predicted Finish: 12th



2020 PLAYING ROSTER

PLAYER	POSITION	D.O.B.	Wgt	Hgt	CAREER STATS							2020 Price
					App	T	G	FG	Pts	Debut		
John Asiata	Prop	19/04/1993	104	183	117	4	0	0	16	2014		\$408,000
Jake Clifford	Halfback	02/01/1998	95	184	21	3	18	1	49	2018		\$540,000
Gavin Cooper	2nd Row	19/08/1985	108	197	308	78	2	0	316	2006		\$589,000
Reuben Cotter	Hooker	28/12/1998	97	180	5	0	0	0	0	2019		\$246,000
Scott Drinkwater	Fullback	15/05/1997	87	181	11	4	0	0	16	2018		\$405,000
Mitchell Dunn	2nd Row	03/02/1997	99	190	11	0	0	0	0	2018		\$290,000
Kyle Feldt	Winger	09/02/1992	103	191	114	73	21	0	334	2013		\$502,000
Tom Gilbert	Prop	05/08/2000	96	185	0	0	0	0	0	—		\$228,000
Jake Granville	Hooker	07/02/1989	87	172	135	20	0	0	80	2013		\$540,000
Ben Hampton	Five-Eighth	29/02/1992	89	179	91	17	0	0	68	2013		\$282,000
Coen Hess	2nd Row	14/08/1996	114	190	81	26	0	0	104	2015		\$471,000
Peter Hola	Prop	27/04/1999	110	192	5	0	0	0	0	2019		\$246,000
Valentine Holmes	Winger	24/07/1995	90	185	105	66	51	3	369	2014		\$600,000
Corey Jensen	Prop	08/01/1994	107	188	41	1	0	0	4	2017		\$246,000
Connelly Lemuelu	Centre	07/07/1998	106	190	0	0	0	0	0	—		\$228,000
Esan Marsters	Centre	17/08/1996	102	185	61	17	96	0	260	2017		\$558,000
Josh McGuire	Prop	02/03/1990	104	180	211	11	0	0	44	2009		\$638,000
Jordan McLean	Prop	10/08/1991	118	196	118	7	0	0	28	2013		\$646,000
Francis Molo	Prop	03/09/1994	112	183	37	2	0	0	8	2014		\$375,000
Michael Morgan	Five-Eighth	27/12/1991	94	185	160	56	0	4	228	2010		\$639,000
Justin O'Neill	Centre	04/04/1991	96	190	167	70	0	0	280	2010		\$477,000
Tom Opacic	Centre	07/09/1994	100	183	38	12	0	0	48	2016		\$471,000
Emry Pere	Prop	08/09/1998	106	193	0	0	0	0	0	—		\$228,000
Reece Robson	Hooker	18/06/1998	93	180	9	0	0	0	0	2018		\$523,000
Dan Russell	Centre	05/12/1995	96	193	0	0	0	0	0	—		\$228,000
Tukimihia Simpkins	2nd Row	24/12/2001	105	192	0	0	0	0	0	—		\$228,000
Murray Taulagi	Winger	12/03/1999	93	189	6	2	0	0	8	2019		\$272,000
Jason Taumalolo	Lock	31/05/1993	117	191	180	34	0	0	136	2010		\$874,000
Shane Wright	2nd Row	13/03/1996	104	188	17	2	0	0	8	2017		\$538,000



LOWER GRADES

THE Cowboys will continue their partnership with regional feeder clubs Mackay Cutters, Northern Pride (Cairns) and Townsville Blackhawks in 2020, with all three clubs competing in both the Intrust Super Cup and Hastings Deering Colts (under-20s) competitions. Townsville were the Cowboys' lone feeder club to qualify for the Intrust Super Cup's finals last year but will be aiming higher than the preliminary finals this time around. One player to watch out for at the Blackhawks is young lock **Tom Gilbert**, who had a stunning season last year. He played for Queensland at the under-20s level and went on to win the ISC's player of the year award. Cutters hooker **Reuben Cotter** is another player to keep an eye on. After years of struggling with serious injuries, Cotter got his chance to play a bit of NRL in 2019, however with the recruitment of Reece Robson to the club, he will be the third-string rake at the Cowboys. He'll get his chance to prove a point for the Cutters, and may earn a first grader recall. For the Pride, **Hamiso Tabuai-Fidow** is the man to watch out for. A Cairns local, he's big and strong – and still only a teenager. He has the potential to be a weapon in the NRL.

Preparing to strike

With key squad retention, some handy additions and youngsters on the grow, the stars are aligning for something special from Parramatta this season – but it's up to them. By **DAVID PIEPERS**

FEW teams understand just how quickly things can change in the space of 12 months more than the Parramatta Eels.

This time last year they were carrying the wooden spoon and without a home. The team, and their coach, were under significant scrutiny and with a number of untested players in key positions, it was shaping up as a make-or-break year for the blue and gold.

And make it they did. The Eels defied expectations and silenced critics to become one of the most entertaining teams in the league on their way to a fifth-place finish. Mitch Moses asserted himself as one of the game's best halfbacks, Maika Sivo finished his rookie season as the NRL's top try scorer, and the likes of Dylan Brown and Reed Mahoney showed ability and composure beyond their years as Parramatta returned to their new-look home at Bankwest Stadium, where they piled on a record winning margin in a finals game before ultimately falling at the hands of the Storm.

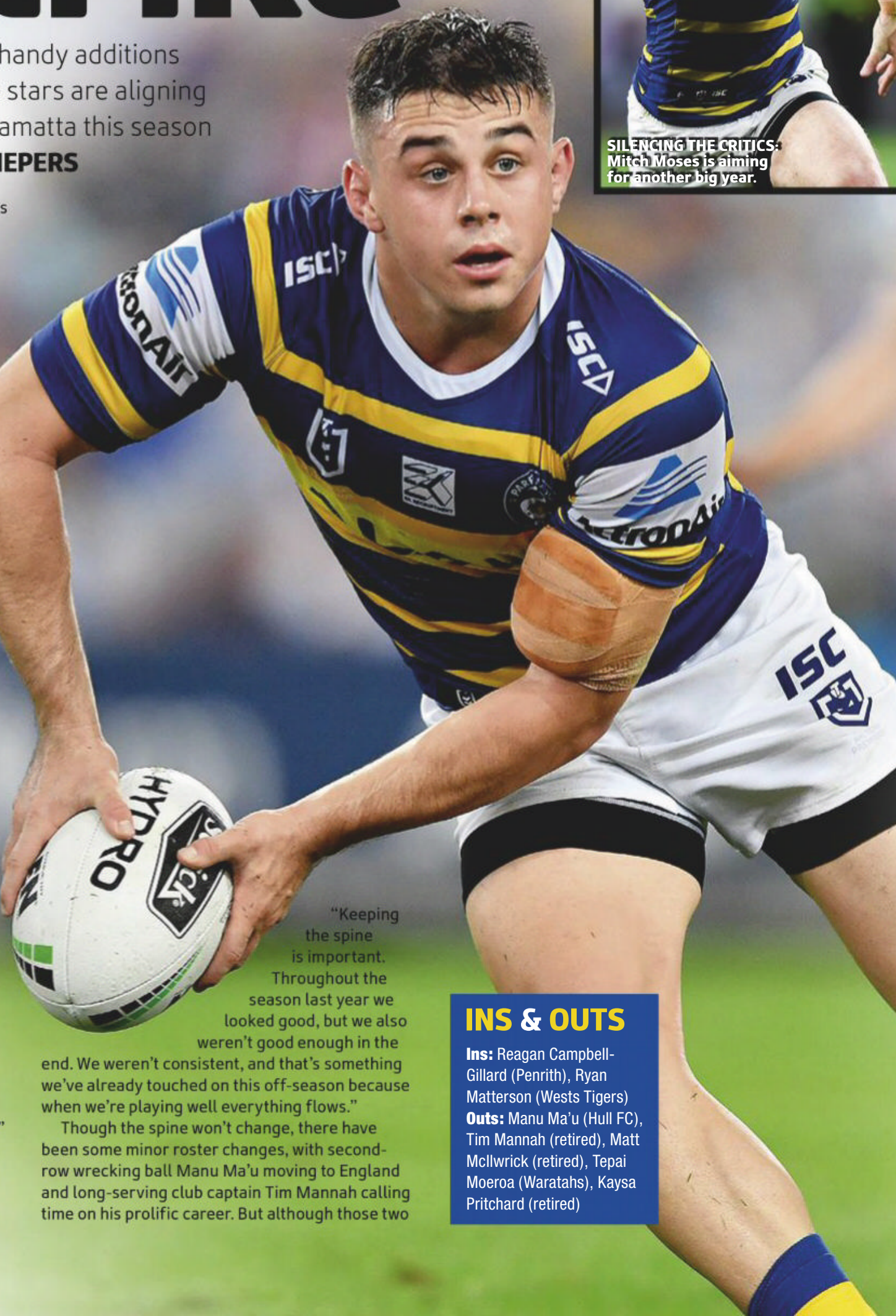
It was a successful campaign to say the least, but after falling from the top tier so rapidly just a year before, the players know they can't afford any complacency if they want to go further in 2020.

"We have to start again every year, we learned that the hard way," says captain Clint Gutherson. "It's motivated us to work harder, knowing how quickly it can all go downhill."

While the majority of last year's top teams have undergone significant roster changes in the off-season, the Eels have the luxury of retaining their spine, and that retention of talented youth stands the side in good stead ahead of the new campaign and in the long-term.

"It helps. Dylan and Reed are still young, and myself and Mitch (Moses) are only 25, so we've got youth on our side," says Gutherson. "We're getting better every session, but it's hard to tell what's really starting to gel until you're out there."

Young hooker Reed Mahoney (*pictured, main*), who topped the league in total tackles during his first full campaign as starting No.9, shares his captain's cautious optimism.



SILENCING THE CRITICS: Mitch Moses is aiming for another big year.

"Keeping the spine is important.

Throughout the season last year we looked good, but we also weren't good enough in the

end. We weren't consistent, and that's something we've already touched on this off-season because when we're playing well everything flows."

Though the spine won't change, there have been some minor roster changes, with second-row wrecking ball Manu Ma'u moving to England and long-serving club captain Tim Mannah calling time on his prolific career. But although those two

INS & OUTS

Ins: Reagan Campbell-Gillard (Penrith), Ryan Matterson (Wests Tigers)
Outs: Manu Ma'u (Hull FC), Tim Mannah (retired), Matt McIlwrick (retired), Tepai Moeroa (Waratahs), Kaysa Pritchard (retired)



MASTER MENTORS:
Andrew Johns and Brad Arthur.

have been replaced with proven talent in the form of Ryan Matterson and Reagan Campbell-Gillard respectively, perhaps the biggest addition to the club in the off-season has been rugby league icon Andrew Johns, who joins as a halves and kicking mentor.

"Joey's been great for me," says Mahoney. "Having him around has helped me a lot with my ball-playing and kicking game. We're going to really pick his brain."

"How he's been coaching us and teaching us how to play has been great," adds Mitch Moses.

"He's really stripped down how to play halfback and I've taken a lot out of that. I've never had a halves coach before, so to be coached by one of the best to ever play the game is special. He's been working with the whole spine."

"Last year was good for me. It should have come a bit earlier but (the journey) has made me the player I am today. I want to go even further this year and take my game to the next level."

It's a description that can be applied to most at the club, including coach Brad Arthur. He was under as much pressure as anyone at the start of the last campaign, and though he had to make some tough decisions and show faith in some untested talent, his ability to turn the team back around so quickly earned him a contract extension, and his players couldn't be happier.

"Brad's been really helpful around training, and a lot calmer too," says Moses. "We've got full confidence in Brad. He's grown as a person and a coach, now we have to perform for him."

Mahoney is equally appreciative of the man who has backed him during his rapid rise to prominence.

"Brad deserves a lot of credit for what he's done, and not just last season. He's been great for me the whole time I've been here. He's a great coach and he backs our ability to play. He believes in us and we believe in him."

The past few years have been a rollercoaster for Eels fans and players alike, and according to their star half, there's only one way to stop it.

"Consistency. We came off big wins last year and the next week we'd fail to show up. We have to be consistent as a team this year. If we can do that, then we'll have a good season."

BL

TALKING POINTS

OLDER AND WISER

The likes of Dylan Brown and Maika Sivo were revelations in their first NRL campaign, key ingredients in the club's charge to the second week of the finals. Now they'll face a new kind of pressure from expectant fans and team-mates – avoiding the dreaded second-year syndrome to continue their rise to NRL stardom. "The experience of last year will help those guys," says Moses. "But now it's all about backing that up. I've been there before, we've just got to keep them level-headed at training. They've got simple jobs to do."

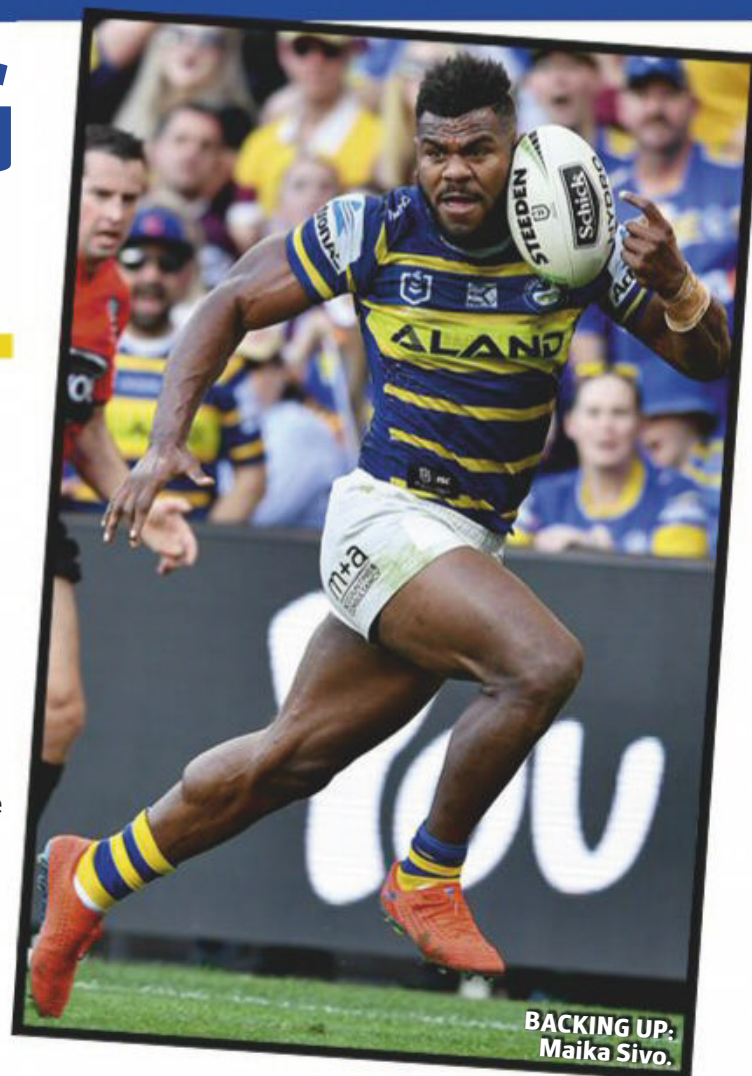
STARTING STRONG

One of the keys to the club's success last season was the foundation laid by a strong start. The Eels won three of their first four games which gave them a good base and the self-belief to overcome the slumps that reared their head throughout the season.

By comparison they won just two of their first 10 games in 2018 and were stuck playing catch-up. "All the pressure is on the start of the year," says Moses. "If we start well we can put ourselves in a good position to play at the back-end of the year, so that's our biggest focus."

MORE NEW PRESENTS

We saw the impact a new home ground can have on a team, with the Eels asserting themselves as the genuine home side at Bankwest, despite sharing the state of the art arena with the Tigers and Bulldogs. The club has since spent the off-season moving into their \$40 million base in Kellyville, in Sydney's north-west. Though the facility is still being constructed in phases, it's already having a positive effect on the club at training. "It's good to have new facilities," says Clint Gutherson. "We actually have lockers now and some good showers. Everyone really enjoys coming here and we all hang out together afterwards instead of rushing to get out. It makes a difference – there's a really good vibe at training, and everyone plays their best footy when they're having fun."



BACKING UP:
Maika Sivo.



TOWERS OF TERROR

While many clubs have one or two towering threats out wide, the Eels are stacked with verticality in the outside backs and back row positions. Blake Ferguson, Shaun Lane, Ryan Matterson and Waqa Blake are all 190cm or taller, while Maika Sivo isn't far off at 186cm. With the new rules likely to even up aerial contests out wide and a stack of kicking threats in the middle, expect the Eels to be finishing plenty of sets with a bomb towards the edges and making every centimetre count.

EELS 2020 DRAW

Rd 1 v Bulldogs

Bankwest, Mar 12, 8.05pm

Rd 2 v Titans

Cbus, Mar 22, 6.15pm

Rd 3 v Cowboys

QCB, Mar 28, 7.35pm

Rd 4 v Dragons

Bankwest, Apr 5, 4.05pm

Rd 5 v Wests Tigers

Bankwest, Apr 13, 4.05pm

Rd 6 v Bulldogs

ANZ, Apr 18, 7.35pm

Rd 7 v Broncos

TIO, Apr 24, 7.55pm

Rd 8 v Warriors

Suncorp, May 3, 1.50pm

Rd 9 v Sea Eagles

Lottoland, May 10, 4.05pm

Rd 10 v Storm

AAMI, May 16, 7.35pm

Rd 11 v Panthers

Bankwest, May 24, 4.05pm

Rd 12 v Cowboys

Bankwest, May 29, 7.55pm

Rd 13 v Wests Tigers

Bankwest, Jun 7, 4.05pm

Rd 14 v Rabbitohs

ANZ, Jun 13, 7.35pm

Rd 15 v Sharks

Bankwest, Jun 27, 7.35pm

Rd 16 v BYE

Rd 17 v Sea Eagles

Bankwest, Jul 12, 4.05pm

Rd 18 v Raiders

GIO, Jul 18, 5.30pm

Rd 19 v Rabbitohs

Bankwest, Jul 23, 7.50pm

Rd 20 v Broncos

Suncorp, Jul 31, 7.55pm

Rd 21 v Roosters

Bankwest, Aug 8, 5.30pm

Rd 22 v Storm

Bankwest, Aug 14, 7.55pm

Rd 23 v Dragons

Netstrata, Aug 22, 3pm

Rd 24 v Knights

Bankwest, Aug 28, 6pm

Rd 25 v Panthers

Panthers, Sep 6, 4.05pm

POINT TO PROVE

Nothing else Matters(on)

HE was somewhat fortunate the Latrell Mitchell saga dragged on for so long, but there was plenty of heat directed at **Ryan Matterson** when it was announced he'd decided to move to the club he represented at under-20s level after just one year of a three-year contract with Wests Tigers. While his reasons and the morality of the move have been hotly-debated, there's no arguing the talent he possesses after a season that brought him to the cusp of State of Origin selection. He'll need to remind everyone what he's capable of early given he's replacing one of the club's best in 2019 – Manu Ma'u.

"I don't sign contracts to purposely want to leave,"

Matterson said. "Something happened at the Tigers and I'm sorry it did, but I want to stay here long-term and enjoy my football," he said.

"The club has grown massively and there's a big opportunity for myself and all of the players here to create history."

Just two years ago **Daniel Alvaro** was awarded the Ken Thornett Medal as the club's Player of the Year, securing his place in the Eels' starting pack. After just 11 rounds of 2019, and following a three-game slump, he and veteran prop Tim Mannah found themselves playing for Wentworthville in the Canterbury Cup. After eight weeks in the wilderness he earned his way back

into Brad Arthur's side, but with the arrival of **Reagan Campbell-Gillard**, who has a point to prove himself after falling out of favour at Penrith, Alvaro is facing some stiff competition to return to the starting side on a regular basis. But just like the team's fortunes, a lot can change in the space of 12 months, and Alvaro will be champing at the bit to remind everyone just what he's capable of.

Another prop with a point to prove will be **Nathan Brown**, who has been plagued by injury since asserting himself as one of the best big men in the game. After playing just 28 games in the past two seasons, expect him to come out firing in 2020.

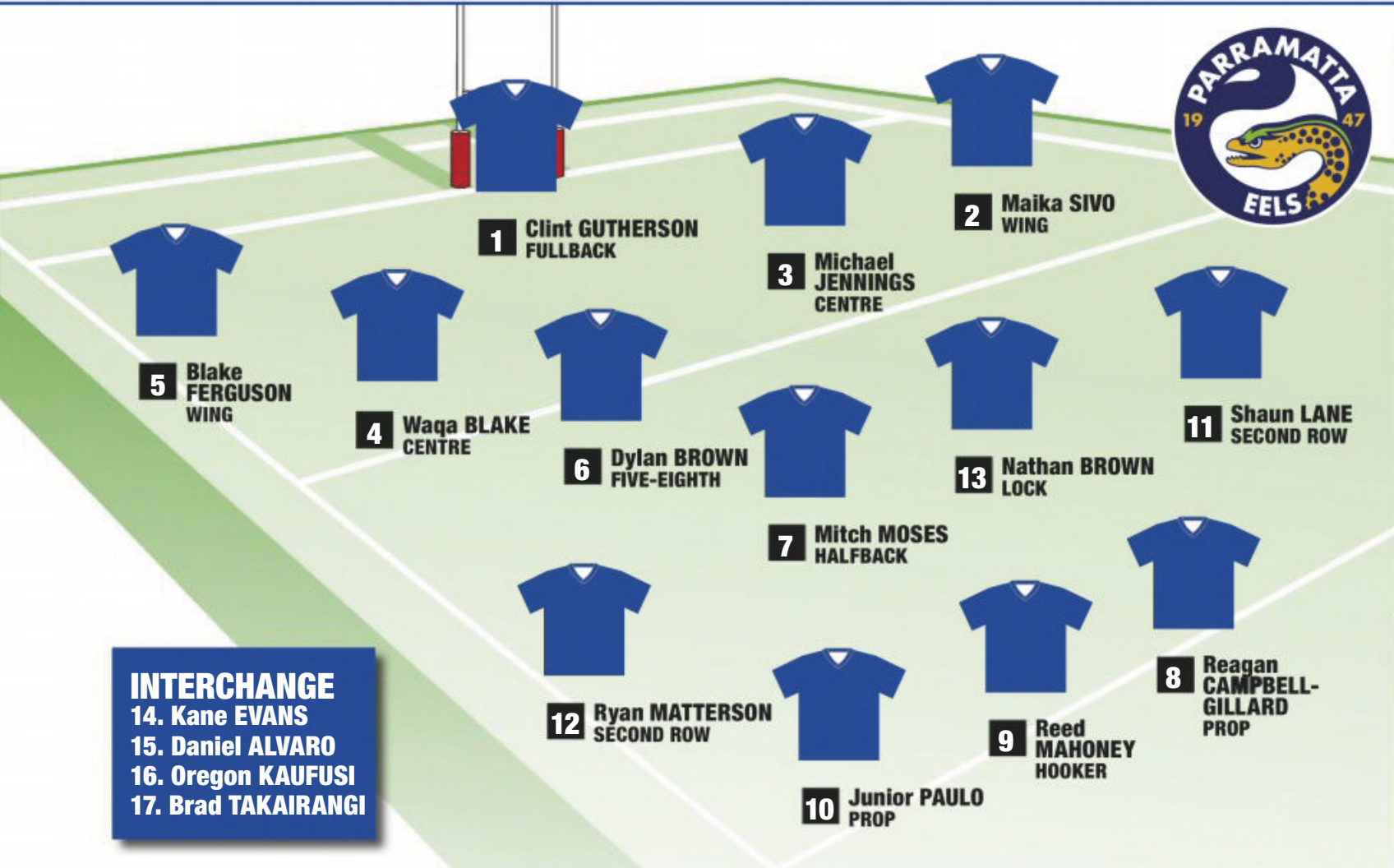
BIG LEAGUE'S STRONGEST LINE-UP

VOSSY'S VERDICT



THERE were plenty of good times for Eels fans last year and I see no reason why their team can't build on their semi-final finish. The likes of top 17 regulars Manu Ma'u and Tepai Moeroa are significant losses from their squad but the acquisition of Ryan Matterson and Reagan Campbell-Gillard loom as decent replacements. I'm expecting Dylan Brown to have an even bigger impact, so much so that I reckon we'll be talking about him as a key man when we get down to the final four. However, their record away from home has to be addressed if they are to emerge as a heavyweight. From zero wins on the road in 2018, they grabbed five in 2019. For the record, Melbourne was the benchmark with 11 during the regular season. Over to you Parramatta. What have you got?

Predicted Finish: 4th



2020 PLAYING ROSTER

PLAYER	POSITION	D.O.B.	Wgt	Hgt	CAREER STATS							2020 Price
					App	T	G	FG	Pts	Debut		
Daniel Alvaro	Prop	28/05/1993	115	190	87	5	0	0	20	2015		\$513,000
Waqa Blake	Centre	26/10/1994	98	190	97	37	0	0	148	2015		\$446,000
Dylan Brown	Five-Eighth	21/06/2000	85	183	15	4	0	0	16	2019		\$508,000
Nathan Brown	Lock	01/03/1993	104	185	82	4	0	0	16	2013		\$701,000
Reagan Campbell-Gillard	Prop	27/07/1993	115	193	114	9	0	0	36	2015		\$547,000
Andrew Davey	2nd Row	29/11/1991	106	195	0	0	0	0	0	–		\$228,000
Rhys Davies	Halfback	29/07/1996	83	180	0	0	0	0	0	–		–
Kane Evans	Prop	09/01/1992	110	199	101	4	0	0	16	2014		\$432,000
Blake Ferguson	Winger	20/03/1990	102	191	211	112	22	0	492	2009		\$532,000
David Gower	2nd Row	30/09/1985	105	190	118	6	0	0	24	2009		\$470,000
Clint Gutherson	Fullback	09/09/1994	96	190	92	34	60	0	256	2013		\$473,000
George Jennings	Winger	09/06/1993	100	185	27	10	0	0	40	2015		\$280,000
Michael Jennings	Centre	20/04/1988	96	180	278	147	0	0	588	2007		\$468,000
Oregon Kaufusi	Prop	20/08/1999	114	188	10	1	0	0	4	2018		\$325,000
Shaun Lane	2nd Row	29/11/1994	110	198	73	20	0	0	80	2015		\$626,000
Reed Mahoney	Hooker	22/04/1998	86	175	35	5	0	0	20	2018		\$717,000
Ryan Matterson	2nd Row	13/10/1994	107	194	84	15	0	0	60	2016		\$772,000
Mitchell Moses	Halfback	16/09/1994	85	182	131	22	246	5	585	2014		\$760,000
Marata Niukore	2nd Row	29/07/1996	106	188	39	3	0	0	12	2018		\$517,000
Ethan Parry	Centre	20/03/1999	97	191	2	2	0	0	8	2019		\$325,000
Junior Paulo	Prop	20/11/1993	123	188	132	9	0	0	36	2013		\$561,000
Jaeman Salmon	Five-Eighth	14/01/1999	96	187	17	1	0	0	4	2018		\$246,000
Maika Sivo	Winger	03/10/1993	105	186	25	22	0	0	88	2019		\$556,000
Will Smith	Fullback	03/07/1992	88	178	53	9	3	0	42	2014		\$275,000
Ray Stone	Lock	06/06/1997	95	180	7	0	0	0	0	2018		\$246,000
Brad Takairangi	Centre	14/06/1989	108	194	168	31	0	0	124	2010		\$407,000
Peni Terepo	Prop	21/11/1991	108	186	117	5	0	0	20	2013		\$494,000
Stefano Utoikamanu	Prop	15/05/2000	115	191	0	0	0	0	0	–		\$228,000

LOWER GRADES

2020 signals the dawn of a new era for the Eels, who have ended their decade-long association with feeder club Wentworthville as they shift their focus to becoming a strong development club. The Magpies have long been successful at reserve grade and Ron Massey Cup levels, and it's hoped those standards can be maintained after the switch.

Rhys Davies is one to watch in the Canterbury Cup this season. The young half has been added to the Eels' top 30 as a back-up for Mitch Moses and Dylan Brown, but is expected to take the attacking reins in reserve grade, boasting an impressive goal-kicking record and contributing 15 try assists in just 20 appearances as the club made their way to the grand final from eighth place.

Haze Dunster is also likely to have to bide his time after making his way up through the club's SG Ball and Jersey Flegg teams. He scored seven tries last season, has a reputation for pace and was also part of the club's victorious 2017 State Championship side with current NRL five-eighth Dylan Brown.



All clear to take charge

There are questions hanging over the Panthers, but there's no doubt who'll be key to their hopes of a return to finals football. By **MICHAEL BLOK**

MAY I have your attention, please? Will the real Nathan Cleary please stand up?

Although we've seen the brilliance of the young player since his debut four years ago, 2020 is the year he's expected to stand up and take control of the Panthers.

Veteran James Maloney has said au revoir to the NRL, jetting off to France to leave Cleary in charge of the side.

"This is Nathan's team now – he's obviously going to take control this year," Penrith forward Isaah Yeo tells *Big League*.

"Jimmy Maloney did a lot of the playmaking for us over the past two seasons, but now that he's gone, it's time for Nath to step up."

Despite Maloney and Cleary being the NSW Origin halves over the past two years, their combination never seemed to fully click at club level, making it obvious the side is better with just one dominant playmaker.

There's no doubt the Mountain Men will miss the experience and character of Maloney throughout the campaign, but it will give Cleary a chance to enter his own element.

Having played with majority of the side in the lower grades, the classy No.7 will no doubt feel comfortable taking up an advanced leadership role.

"He's a very level-headed guy and a great game-manager. I'm really looking forward to seeing how he goes there – he's going to be outstanding," Yeo says.

"He's been talking a bit more on the training paddock, yelling out which plays to run and where we should be on the field."

Cleary understands added pressure will be extra weight on his shoulder, but he's up for the challenge.

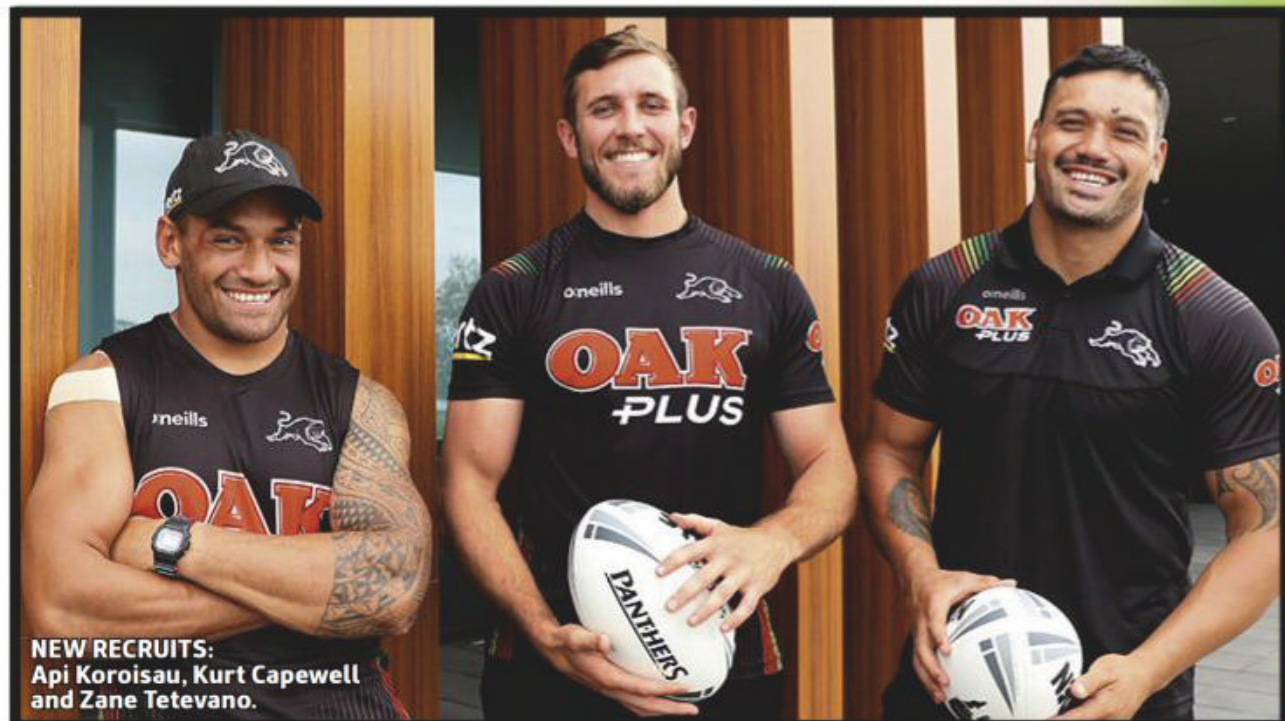
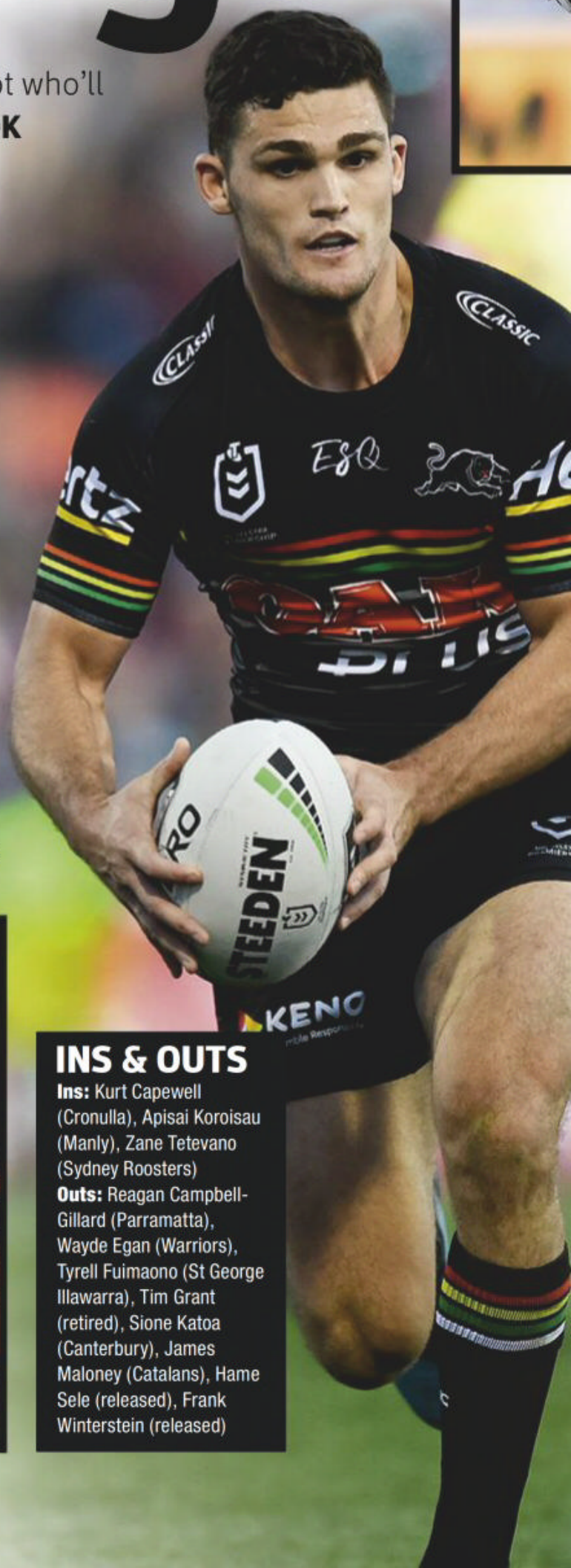
"Anyone who wears the No.7 jersey has to stand up," Cleary tells *Big League*.

"I've definitely got to step forward, especially with so many young boys. I'm excited to take on more of a leadership role, I'm looking forward to that."

The next big question: who will partner Cleary in the halves this year? Samoa representative Jarome Luai is tipped to win first shot at the five-eighth role, although he has young Matt Burton on his heels.

"It's creating a big opportunity for Jarome Luai and Matt Burton for the No.6 jersey. They've been competing really well for that spot and they're both very capable of doing the job for us," Yeo says.

Luai has played 17 NRL games for the Panthers (nine games from the interchange and eight

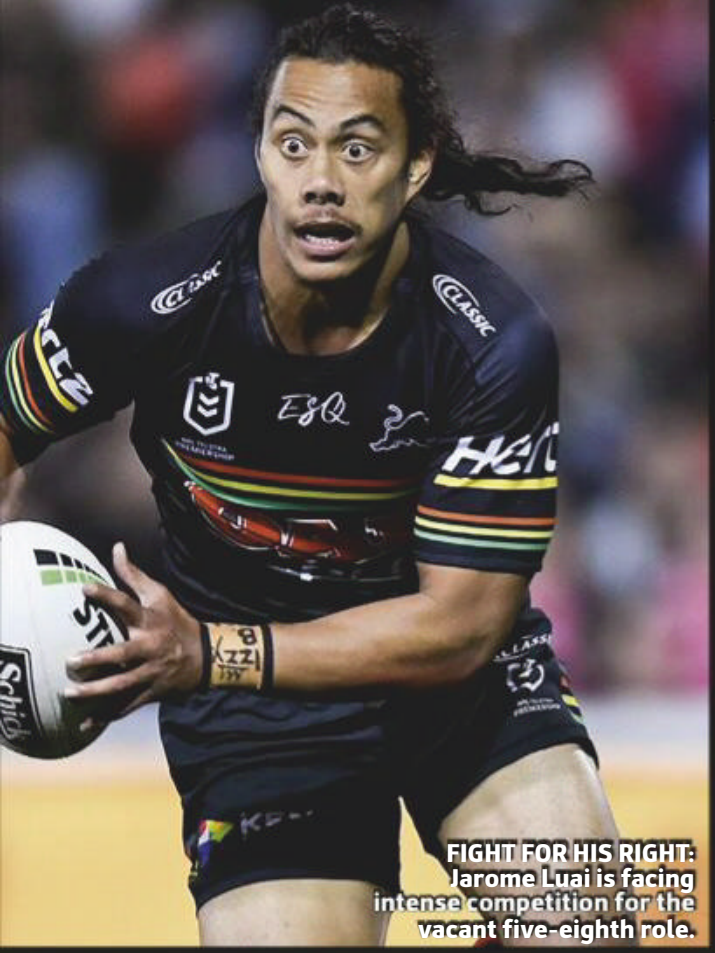


NEW RECRUITS: Api Koroisau, Kurt Capewell and Zane Tetevano.

INS & OUTS

Ins: Kurt Capewell (Cronulla), Apisai Koroisau (Manly), Zane Tetevano (Sydney Roosters)

Outs: Reagan Campbell-Gillard (Parramatta), Wayde Egan (Warriors), Tyrell Fuimaono (St George Illawarra), Tim Grant (retired), Sione Katoa (Canterbury), James Maloney (Catalans), Hame Sele (released), Frank Winterstein (released)



FIGHT FOR HIS RIGHT: Jarome Luai is facing intense competition for the vacant five-eighth role.

starts), while Burton excelled in his lone first grade appearance last season.

"It's still a battle [for the five-eighth role]," Luai says.

"It's one of my goals to lock down that position. 'Burto' is a very good half and he's got a lot of talent. We're battling it out, but hopefully I get my chance."

As always, the Panthers team will feature a number of talented locals, however they've source a trio of experienced players from far and wide for season 2020.

Api Koroisau returns to the west to wear the No.9 jersey following his departure from Manly, Kurt Capewell has moved over from Cronulla, while former Roosters prop Zane Teteveno will add plenty of impact in the front row.

"We've had some key buys... I think they've been great additions for us," Yeo says.

"I'm really excited to see how they go at the trials and into the new season. They've built really good relationships with the other guys and they have the ability to do really good things for us this year. They're training really well, they're going to be outstanding for us."

Another positive for the Panthers has been an off-season without off-field controversy. This time last year their season was all but over before a single ball had been kicked after a scandal engulfed the team following the release of a number of lewd videos on social media.

At the time of print, there have been no incidents to worry about at the Panthers.

"There haven't been any distractions this time around which has been a big positive," Yeo says.

"Ivan [coach Cleary] came out and said that he didn't really understand how much of an effect it had on the group last year. It wasn't an ideal time for the club and I think going into this season without any of those headlines is a relief and a big boost for us."

"It's time for us to bounce back. It's no secret we weren't happy with how we went last season.

"It's the old cliché – we're training well and confident for a big season ahead – but it's the truth. It's been a tough pre-season out here with the heat, but the boys have really enjoyed themselves and we're just about ready to go for the new season."

BL

TALKING POINTS

BEST FOOT FORWARD

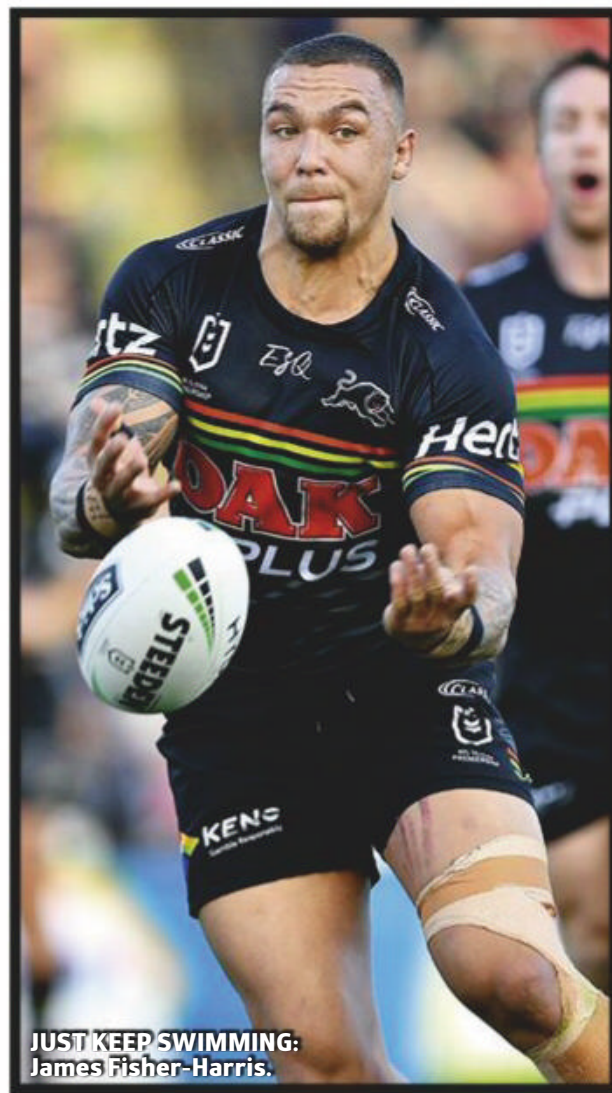
Penrith will have a team discussion about starting the season on a high after gaining a reputation for starting campaigns slowly. After all the off-field drama at the start of 2019, they slipped all the way down the ladder in the early stages and it was too late to catch up. This year they'll be keen for a winning start, however they have a tough test to open the season when they face Roosters in Round 1. They'll travel to Kogarah to play the Dragons in Round 2 before a tough trip to Melbourne.

GONE FISHING

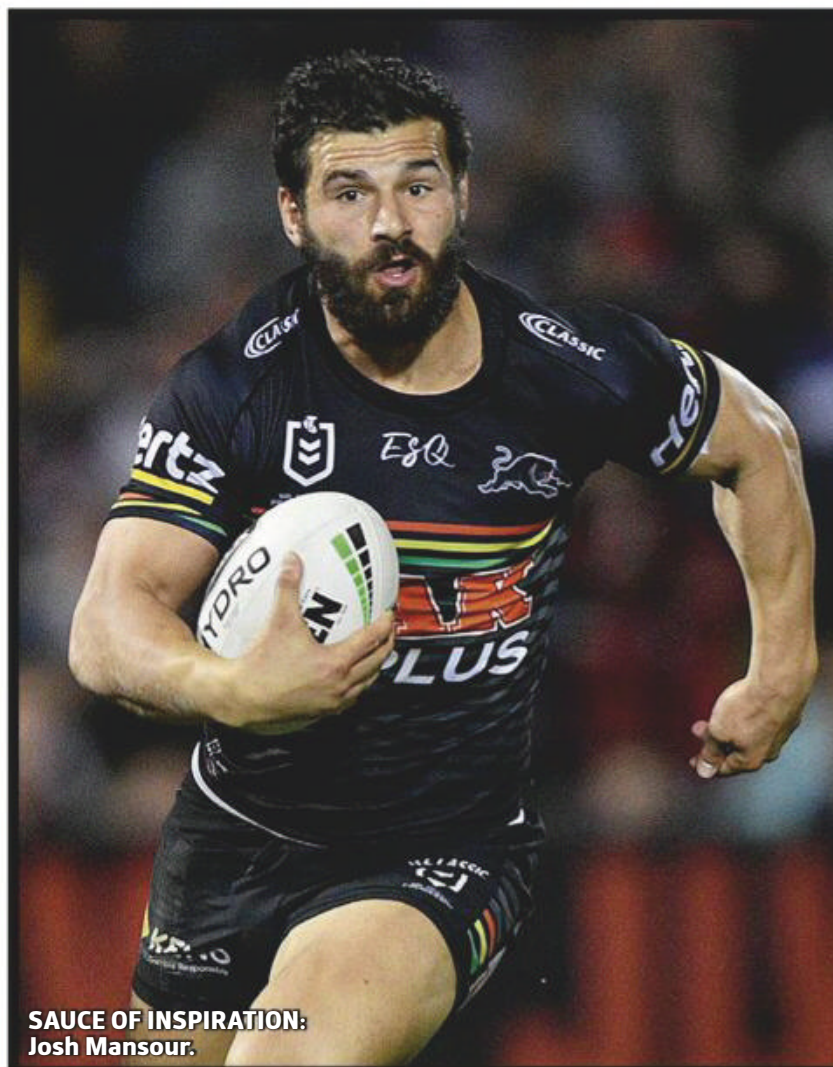
James Fisher-Harris was without a doubt the best player at the Panthers last season, and he'll be eager for a similar season in 2020. The Kiwi lock played all 24 matches in 2019 – averaging 132 metres and 43 tackles per game. 'The Fish' will be aiming to replicate his performances this time around and he'll be hoping recruit Zane Teteveno can match him in the middle all season.

MAY DAY

The Panthers will regain the services of Tyrone May in 2020 after the playmaker missed the entire 2019 season under the NRL's no-fault stand-down policy. His ban came to an end in January after he narrowly avoided jail over a sex tape scandal. He was sentenced to a three-year community corrections order, and will undertake 300 hours of community service, as well as psychological intervention. He hasn't played professional rugby league since 2018 but is eligible to return in Round 5 as long as he participates in a Secondary Prevention Program. With Nathan Cleary expected to play Origin again this year, May should get his chance to return to the NRL in the middle of the season – if not before.



JUST KEEP SWIMMING: James Fisher-Harris.



SAUCE OF INSPIRATION: Josh Mansour.

BOUNCING BACK

Winger Josh Mansour has declared he'll bounce back from last year's form slump to secure his position on the Panthers' wing. He admits he wasn't at his best in 2019, and he even had a stint in reserve grade. "I want to say very confidently – not arrogantly – that I'll be better than last year," Mansour told NRL.com during pre-season. "Last year was rock bottom for me, I didn't have any balance in my life. It got to the point I wasn't even happy. We live the dream here but I was coming into work and struggling to see the light and see the positives. I felt like a victim, didn't reach out to anyone and then the toughest conversation I had was when Ivan put me in reserve grade which hurt the ego, but it was needed. I was in a hole but managed to get out of it."

PANTHERS 2020 DRAW

Rd 1 v Roosters

Panthers, Mar 14, 7.35pm

Rd 2 v Dragons

Netstrata, Mar 20, 6pm

Rd 3 v Storm

AAMI, Mar 28, 5.30pm

Rd 4 v Broncos

Panthers, Apr 4, 7.35pm

Rd 5 v Raiders

Panthers, Apr 12, 4.05pm

Rd 6 v Wests Tigers

Panthers, Apr 19, 4.05pm

Rd 7 v Knights

McDonald Jones, Apr 26, 4.05pm

Rd 8 v Titans

Suncorp, May 3, 6.25pm

Rd 9 v Sharks

Carrington, May 10, 2.05pm

Rd 10 v Raiders

GIO, May 17, 2.05pm

Rd 11 v Eels

Bankwest, May 24, 4.05pm

Rd 12 v BYE

Rd 13 v Knights

Panthers, Jun 7, 2.05pm

Rd 14 v Wests Tigers

Bankwest, Jun 12, 7.55pm

Rd 15 v Sea Eagles

Panthers, Jun 26, 6pm

Rd 16 v Broncos

Suncorp, Jul 2, 7.50pm

Rd 17 v Sharks

Netstrata, Jul 10, 6pm

Rd 18 v Rabbitohs

Panthers, Jul 16, 7.50pm

Rd 19 v Titans

Panthers, Jul 24, 6pm

Rd 20 v Warriors

Mt Smart, Jul 31, 6pm

Rd 21 v Dragons

Panthers, Aug 7, 7.55pm

Rd 22 v Cowboys

Panthers, Aug 13, 7.50pm

Rd 23 v Bulldogs

Bankwest, Aug 23, 4.05pm

Rd 24 v Sea Eagles

Lottoland, Aug 30, 4.05pm

Rd 25 v Eels

Panthers, Sep 6, 4.05pm

POINT TO PROVE

Happy Api back in black

THE hooker role was the area the Panthers struggled in the most last season – and that's why **Api Koroisau** has been recruited to the club. Wayde Egan has crossed the ditch to the Warriors, Sione Katoa is now a Bulldog and Mitch Kenny is playing for an interchange position, leaving the former Manly hooker as the top rake. Not only will he provide exceptional service from dummy-half, he also has the ability to take off up the ruck to get his team on the front-foot.

With Koroisau at the club, it will also benefit the likes

of Cleary and Luai as there's now an extra threat in the spine. The west is familiar to Koroisau, considering he played with the club in 2015.

"It's good to be back in Penrith. I'm really enjoying it," Koroisau tells *Big League*.

"Everything's so different. There's a cultural difference, there's the Academy, and only a few players here from 2015. There have been so many things that have changed. The club is going in a great direction."

Penrith fans were shocked but also rejoiced when news broke that the classy hooker

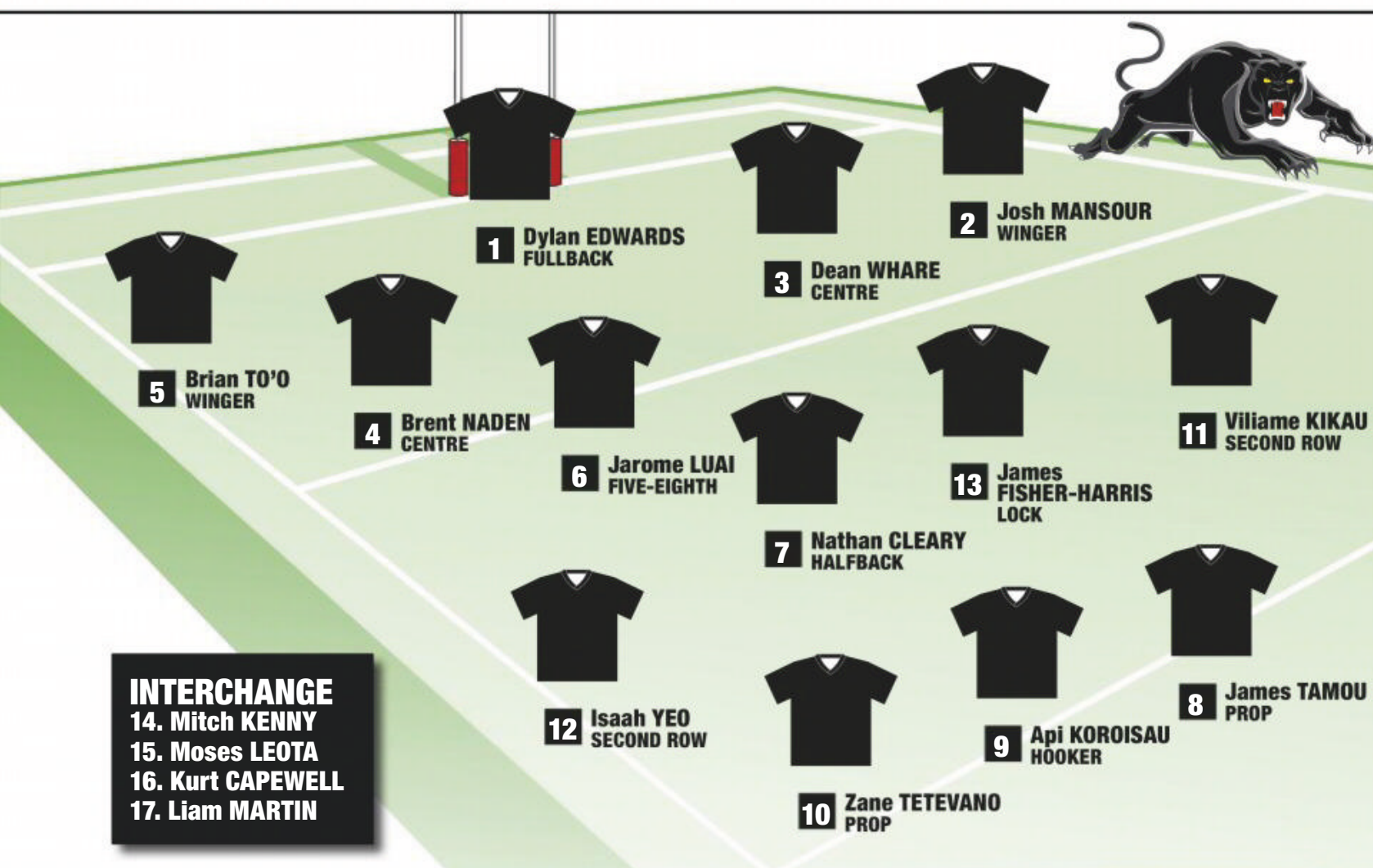
would be joining the club, as it had been reported he was joining the Bulldogs. Even Koroisau thought he was joining the Belmore club at one stage.

"The deal was nearly done. I had the meeting with the Dogs and I didn't have a meeting with Penrith for two weeks later. I wasn't going to rush any decision but there was a time I thought I'd be playing with them," he says.

"I didn't think I'd be at Penrith at all. I wasn't even thinking about leaving Manly but things happen for a reason. I decided after just a couple of days to join the club."



BIG LEAGUE'S STRONGEST LINE-UP



VOSSY'S VERDICT

I'm sure the Panthers frustrated their fans in 2019, a bit like in the manner of the Knights. To win only two of their first 10 had most of us writing them off. Then seven-straight wins and we were all saying "giddy up". Alas, the result was a 10th-placed finish. New recruits Api Koroisau, Kurt Capewell and Zane Tetevano all have something to offer, but they did lose a few too with my expectation of James Maloney being possibly the player exit to have the biggest impact at a club. Having highlighted their poor start last year, this season they have drawn the Roosters, Dragons, Storm, Broncos and Raiders in the first five weeks. While three of those matches are at home, I don't want my hard-earned on a Panthers winning blitz being a certainty.

Predicted finish: 14th

2020 PLAYING ROSTER

PLAYER	POSITION	D.O.B.	Wgt	Hgt	CAREER STATS						Debut	2020 Price
					App	T	G	FG	Pts			
Caleb Aekins	Fullback	21/11/1997	91	183	4	0	0	0	0	0	2018	\$335,000
Dean Blore	Five-Eighth	29/09/1998	90	185	0	0	0	0	0	0	—	\$228,000
Shawn Blore	2nd Row	01/08/2000	108	190	0	0	0	0	0	0	—	\$228,000
Billy Burns	2nd Row	20/11/1998	103	191	2	2	0	0	8	8	2019	\$228,000
Matt Burton	Halfback	14/03/2000	88	190	1	0	0	0	0	0	2019	\$246,000
Kurt Capewell	2nd Row	12/07/1993	98	189	64	6	0	0	24	24	2016	\$434,000
Jed Cartwright	Centre	21/10/1996	104	194	1	0	0	0	0	0	2019	\$246,000
Nathan Cleary	Halfback	14/11/1997	92	182	79	28	243	3	601	601	2016	\$785,000
Stephen Crichton	Centre	22/09/2000	99	193	4	0	0	0	0	0	2019	\$268,000
Dylan Edwards	Fullback	10/01/1996	93	183	45	11	0	0	44	44	2016	\$535,000
Kaide Ellis	Lock	04/08/1996	106	191	8	0	0	0	0	0	2018	\$246,000
James Fisher-Harris	2nd Row	05/01/1996	103	187	87	7	0	0	28	28	2016	\$778,000
Jack Hetherington	Prop	08/06/1996	107	190	15	0	0	0	0	0	2018	\$246,000
Mitch Kenny	Hooker	15/01/1998	88	183	12	0	0	0	0	0	2019	\$532,000
Viliame Kikau	Prop	05/04/1995	119	195	52	13	0	0	52	52	2017	\$642,000
Api Koroisau	Hooker	07/11/1992	88	172	107	13	6	0	64	64	2014	\$493,000
Spencer Leniu	Prop	08/09/2000	109	183	5	0	0	0	0	0	2019	\$246,000
Moses Leota	Prop	20/07/1995	111	182	58	5	0	0	20	20	2016	\$411,000
Jarome Luai	Five-Eighth	16/01/1997	88	185	17	2	8	0	24	24	2018	\$249,000
Josh Mansour	Winger	17/06/1990	98	183	136	62	0	0	248	248	2012	\$439,000
Liam Martin	Lock	05/03/1997	98	183	16	2	0	0	8	8	2019	\$542,000
Tyrone May	Five-Eighth	21/06/1996	95	189	19	6	0	0	24	24	2017	—
Brayden McGrady	Centre	13/12/1996	91	198	0	0	0	0	0	0	—	\$228,000
Brent Naden	Centre	30/12/1995	96	188	12	8	0	0	32	32	2019	\$360,000
James Tamou	Prop	13/12/1988	114	195	245	21	0	0	84	84	2009	\$699,000
Zane Tetevano	Prop	04/11/1990	111	187	102	3	0	0	12	12	2011	\$400,000
Brian To'o	Winger	18/08/1998	84	182	15	9	0	0	36	36	2019	\$600,000
M. Watene-Zelezniak	Winger	27/08/1991	94	186	30	9	0	0	36	36	2017	\$249,000
Dean Whare	Centre	22/01/1990	93	181	147	39	0	0	156	156	2010	\$320,000
Isaah Yeo	2nd Row	06/11/1994	105	195	126	17	0	0	68	68	2014	\$544,000



LOWER GRADES

THE Panthers have always been competitive in the lower grades and there's no reason it can't be the same in 2020. Last season, a number of youngsters had the chance to play a bit of first grade, giving them valuable experience to take back into the Canterbury Cup this year.

Jed Cartwright made his emotional debut last season when he faced his cousin Bryce's Titans, and he'll be eager to return to the top grade. He has the ability to play in the back row or at centre and is a handy goal-kicker.

Malakai Watene-Zelezniak will be eyeing off Josh Mansour's wing position in 2020, however he's tipped to start the year in reserve grade, alongside **Stephen Crichton**, who had a taste of NRL at the back-end of last season.

Another player to keep an eye out for is forward **Kaide Ellis**, who has played eight games in the top grade. A Dubbo boy, he's a natural lead and with stand up in the middle when needed.



New look, same drive

It's been an off-season of significant change in Redfern, but despite the departures, the Rabbitohs are confident they can go one better.

By **MARTIN GABOR**

WITH nearly 1,000 games of first-grade experience gone, the naysayers will tell you South Sydney will struggle in 2020. But the moment the club ended months of speculation by landing the signature of Latrell Mitchell, everything changed.

Not having Greg Inglis, John Sutton, Sam Burgess, George Burgess or Adam Doueihi on the field hurts in many ways, but the addition of a rejuvenated Mitchell softens the blow for a team that boasts one of the best spines ever assembled.

"He's enjoying his footy and he's got a smile on his face every day," hooker Damien Cook tells *Big League*.

"Watching him out the back – he's training mostly at fullback but also at centre – when we do drills and he's catching the ball and flying from the back, that's exciting to see.

"You don't see people his age with so much experience so it's great for us to have him here because it closes the gap on losing the senior players we did last year."

Mitchell's shock decision to explore his future caught many off guard, with the drawn out negotiations dominating the media landscape for several months before he was finally unveiled.

How he handles the extra kilometres at fullback will be something to keep an eye on, but questions over his fitness are offset by a freakish ability to singlehandedly win a game.

"He's got x-factor and a lot of confidence. He's one of those players who can turn nothing into something and that's an important asset," Cook says.

"Because he's such a big body, you know he'll return the ball coming out of yardage which will allow our outside backs to get on the back of him. Everyone has seen his ball skills playing in the centres for the Roosters so we're excited to see him make those hard passes when we're in shape."

The new year offers plenty of potential for a squad that will benefit from another pre-season under coach Wayne Bennett, and the pain of back-to-back preliminary final losses will spur them on to go even better in 2020.

With only one loss in the opening 11 rounds last year, the Rabbitohs were a popular pick for the premiership, only for injuries to derail their campaign.

"It's something we need to look back on to see where we can improve because we've fallen one game short of

a spot in the grand final for the past two years," star lock Cameron Murray concedes.

"I don't think it's a matter of trying to time how well you're playing at a certain time of the year; it's more of a consistency thing. You never want to start a season with the idea that you don't want to peak too early because that can mess with your preparation and style.

"You want to do your best from the outset. I'm not a fan of holding anything back, and I believe you've always got to give your best to put yourself in a position to compete at the end of the season.

"From there it comes down to sacrifice from the players, while the coaching staff can focus on managing workloads and stuff like that. The playing group then need to turn up and play their best footy."

For Cook, the 2018 preliminary final loss to the Roosters and last year's heartbreak against the Raiders provided valuable lessons the team must learn from.

"We learnt from when we lost to the Roosters that we need to have backup plans and be able to adapt when things aren't working," he explains.

"We didn't execute against Canberra, and that was something that plagued us a lot in 2019. There were a lot of games we won where we probably didn't play our best footy, and that's an area we need to work on moving forward.

"We've got to make sure that we keep on top of those things at training, and our execution has definitely improved at training in the pre-season. We have to be hard on ourselves during wins because that will develop

a ruthless attitude and ensure we're always improving."

One man who will always give his all is Murray. The tireless lock made his debut for the Blues in 2019 and claimed Dally M Lock of the Year honours for an incredible season. With Sam and George Burgess, as well as John Sutton, gone, Murray knows he'll have to lift his game to even greater heights if the Bunnies want to go all the way.

"A couple of years ago I was focused on proving that I was worthy of playing first grade and that I was good enough to be there alongside the older guys," he reflects.

"Now I've got to prove to myself more than anyone that I'm still able to tick the boxes that I want and remain a consistent first-grader and train at the level that I need to stay grounded."



READY TO RISE:
Cameron Murray.

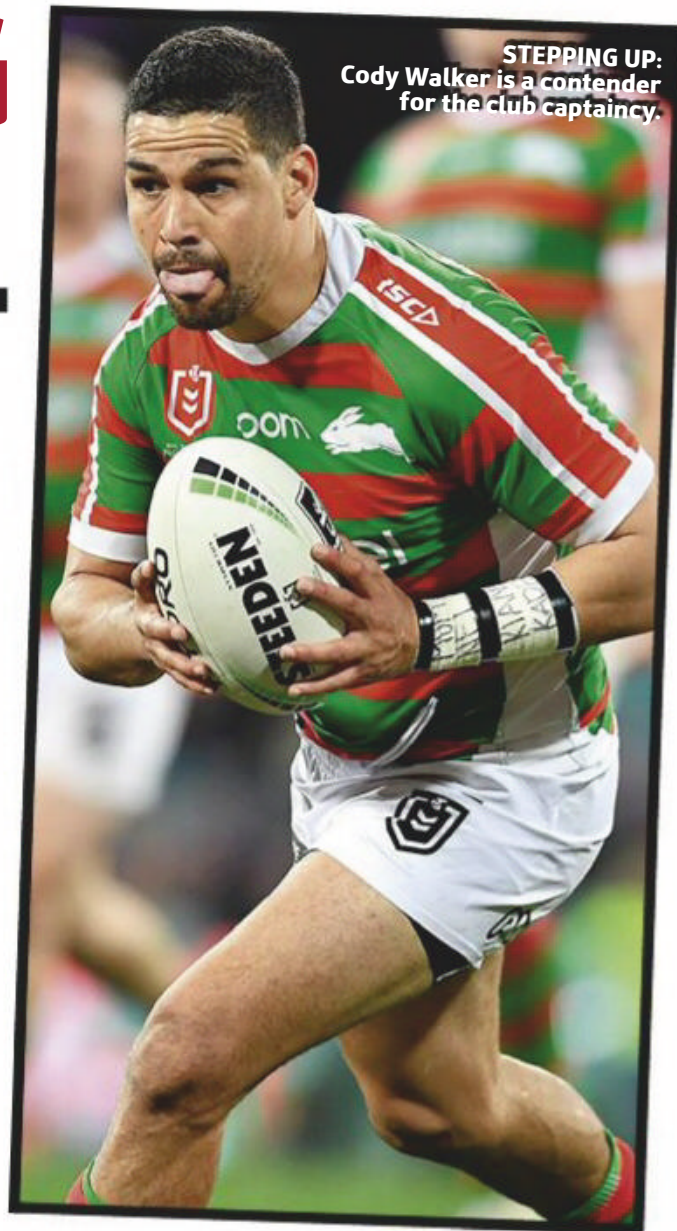




TALKING POINTS

CAPTAIN COOK

It'd make for an easy headline, but it appears as though Damien Cook will miss out on the captaincy in the post-Burgess-Inglis-Sutton era. While Cameron Murray is a logical choice down the track, the Australian hooker believes it'll come down to halves Adam Reynolds and Cody Walker. "Wayne hasn't said anything yet," Cook says. "We've got some really good leaders here. Cody stepped up last year and did a great job while Sam was out, and then you've got 'Reyno' who would do an equally amazing job. Reyno has been here a long time so it would be nice to see him with the 'C' next to his name, but whoever gets it, we'll all help out. It's going to take all three of us in the leadership group to point these guys in the right direction because we've lost so many games of experience." Murray hasn't even contemplated the role but admits he'll have to step up as one of the forward leaders. "There's definitely more responsibility on me to lead by example and I know I have to step it up and work on the back of the experience we have in the spine. I'll need to have a louder voice in the middle now that Sam has gone," he says.



STEPPING UP: Cody Walker is a contender for the club captaincy.

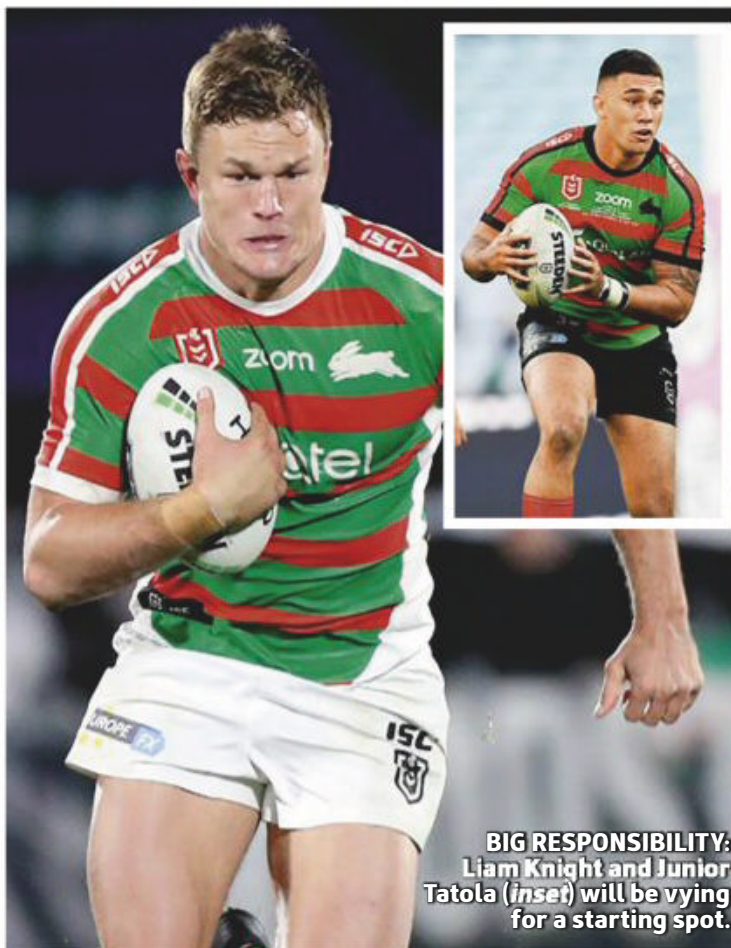
GONE BUT NOT FORGOTTEN

Losing three of their most important players could have crippled the Rabbitohs, but just because they're retired it doesn't mean that the club legends are gone, with Sutton and Inglis playing a key role at training. "For these young guys to have those two on the coaching staff sharing advice is incredible," Cook says. "We had the opportunity to play and train with them every day, and now those young boys get the same experience to have them look over the group and help out when they can. They're looking at my game from another point of view so they've had some great advice for me too. To have a couple of fresh pairs of eyes that have just come out of the game is going to be great for the coaching staff."

INS & OUTS

Ins: Edene Gebbie (Wynnum), Bryson Goodwin (Warrington), Steven Marsters (St George Illawarra), Latrell Mitchell (Sydney Roosters)

Outs: Dean Britt (Canterbury), Billy Brittain (released), George Burgess (Wigan), Sam Burgess (retired), Jacob Gagan (released), Marwene Hiroti (released), John Sutton (retired), Connor Tracey (Cronulla), Kyle Turner (released)



BIG RESPONSIBILITY: Liam Knight and Junior Tatola (inset) will be vying for a starting spot.

FORWARD THINKING

The arrival of Latrell Mitchell has helped cover for the loss of Greg Inglis, but there are some concerns over how the club will replace the Burgess brothers and John Sutton. Murray is confident they have the depth to get the job done, especially with Jai Arrow joining the squad in 2021. "We've got a really young squad, and a lot of the guys who went all the way in the under-20s have really stepped up in the pre-season," he says. "There are a lot of fit guys with plenty of talent so there's plenty of healthy competition for spots. No one is going to be the player that Sam was, but I think we have a couple of guys who can fill in who bring that same approach. It's going to be a different style of player we see on the edge, but there are some worthy candidates in the squad."

RABBITHOHS 2020 DRAW

Rd 1 v Sharks

ANZ, Mar 14, 5.30pm

Rd 2 v Broncos

Suncorp, Mar 20, 8.05pm

Rd 3 v Roosters

ANZ, Mar 27, 8.05pm

Rd 4 v Storm

AAMI, Apr 2, 8.05pm

Rd 5 v Bulldogs

ANZ, Apr 10, 4.05pm

Rd 6 v Dragons

ANZ, Apr 19, 2.05pm

Rd 7 v Raiders

GIO, Apr 26, 2.05pm

Rd 8 v Knights

Suncorp, May 2, 3pm

Rd 9 v Broncos

ANZ, May 7, 7.50pm

Rd 10 v Wests Tigers

Leichhardt, May 17, 4.05pm

Rd 11 v Cowboys

QCB, May 22, 7.55pm

Rd 12 v Knights

McDonald Jones, May 30, 7.35pm

Rd 13 v Sea Eagles

ANZ, Jun 6, 5.30pm

Rd 14 v Eels

ANZ, Jun 13, 7.35pm

Rd 15 v Bulldogs

ANZ, Jun 27, 5.30pm

Rd 16 v BYE

Rd 17 v Wests Tigers

Bankwest, Jul 11, 7.35pm

Rd 18 v Panthers

Panthers, Jul 16, 7.50pm

Rd 19 v Eels

Bankwest, Jul 23, 7.50pm

Rd 20 v Storm

Bankwest, Jul 30, 7.50pm

Rd 21 v Titans

Cbus, Aug 8, 3pm

Rd 22 v Warriors

Sunshine Coast, Aug 15, 3pm

Rd 23 v Raiders

Central Coast, Aug 22, 5.30pm

Rd 24 v Roosters

SCG, Aug 28, 7.55pm

Rd 25 v Dragons

WIN, Sep 3, 7.50pm



POINT TO PROVE

All eyes on Gagai

HE'S the representative star coming off his most prolific try-scoring campaign, and word on the street is **Dane Gagai** is looking better than ever. There were whispers throughout 2019 that he was going to switch clubs, but that never eventuated, with the speedster set to line up on the right wing this season.

"If you asked him last year then he would have said that he believed he was a centre. He's played a bit of fullback as well and he's played on the wing," Cook explains.

"Speaking to him this year, he understands his role for

the team and he knows he'll be on the wing. He's loving that and says he's going to go out and be the best winger he can be for South Sydney and the competition. He's doing whatever it takes to do his part for the team."

It'll be interesting to see how Tom Burgess performs without his brothers in the team, and his partnership with Liam Knight will be crucial given they don't have great depth up front.

While Jaydn Su'A and Ethan Lowe are the early favourites to start in the back row, don't be surprised to see **Keaon**

Koloamatangi get a crack in Round 1. The young gun has impressed in the lower grades, and his silky skills and work ethic haven't gone unnoticed in the pre-season.

"He's a great young back-rower," Cook beams.

"He showed really good signs last year in pre-season and he impressed a lot of the senior guys who are now retired. He's trained really well alongside Jaydn Su'A and it wouldn't surprise me at all if he was in the 17 for Round 1. We've lost some big names, but we have confidence in these guys to get the job done."

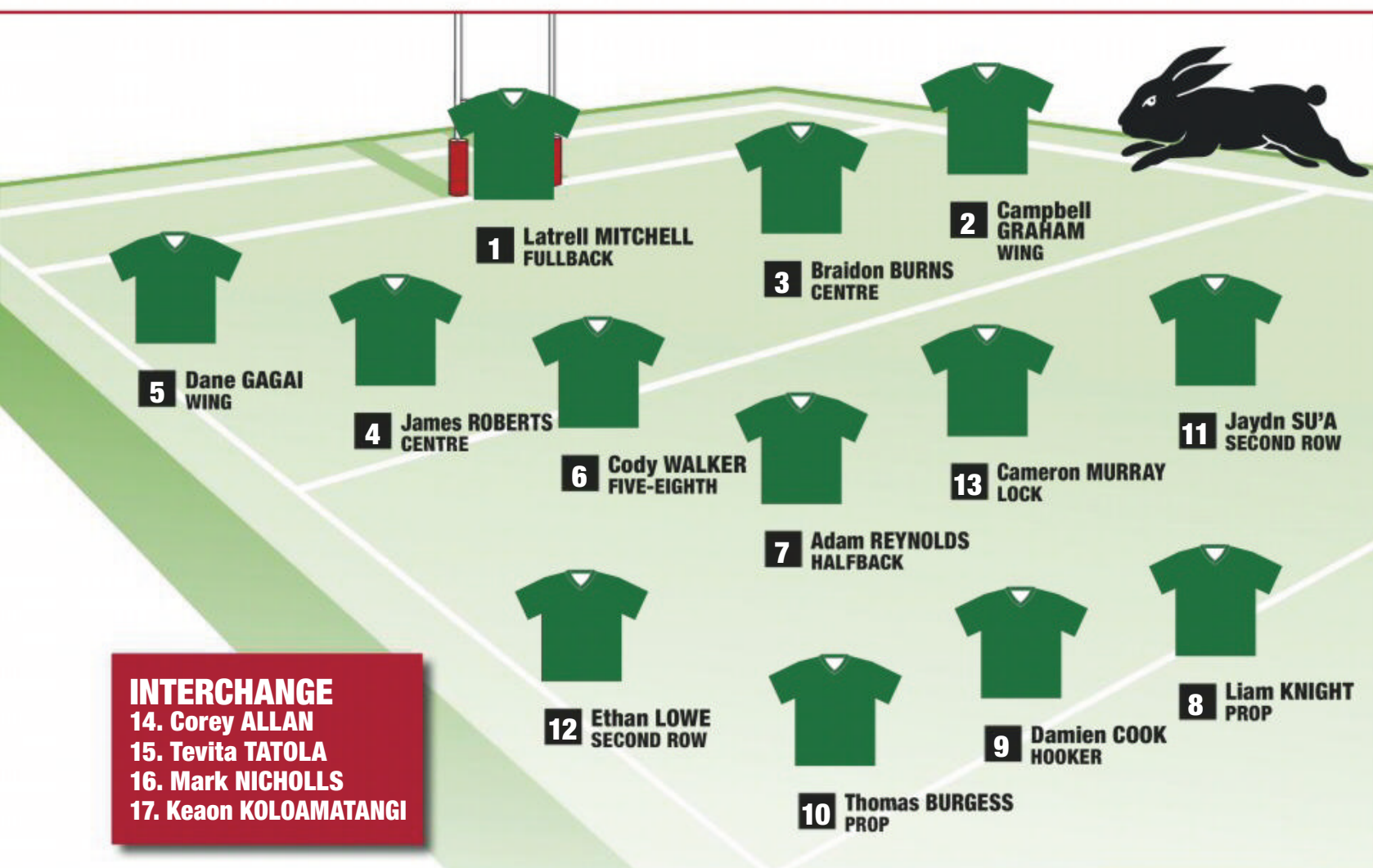
BIG LEAGUE'S STRONGEST LINE-UP

VOSSY'S VERDICT



IT could have been a grand final year for the Rabbitohs in 2019 had everything gone according to plan. The post-mortem reached the conclusion it was a very good year; just not a great one – and my feeling is we'll see a similar story unfold again in 2020. To lose an enforcer like Sam Burgess, well, those aren't easy boots to fill. The signing of Latrell Mitchell at least evens the ledger on superstar gain and loss. Playmakers Adam Reynolds, Cody Walker and Damien Cook are still in their prime. If Mitchell makes a success out of his return to fullback, that becomes one hell of a spine. A 70-year-old coach with a side in the NRL grand final? It could happen.

Predicted Finish: 3rd



2020 PLAYING ROSTER

PLAYER	POSITION	D.O.B.	Wgt	Hgt	CAREER STATS							2020 Price
					App	T	G	FG	Pts	Debut		
Corey Allan	Fullback	19/04/1998	90	186	19	3	0	0	12	2019		\$270,000
Tom Amone	Prop	19/12/1996	110	181	5	0	0	0	0	2019		\$246,000
Thomas Burgess	Prop	21/04/1992	120	196	139	9	0	0	36	2013		\$490,000
Braidon Burns	Winger	08/07/1996	98	185	24	6	0	0	24	2017		\$500,000
Damien Cook	Hooker	23/06/1991	88	180	100	13	7	0	66	2013		\$938,000
Josh Cook	Hooker	21/06/1999	85	183	0	0	0	0	0	–		\$228,000
Troy Dargan	Halfback	15/10/1997	87	174	0	0	0	0	0	–		\$246,000
Cory Denniss	Centre	18/06/1997	99	193	18	4	0	0	16	2016		\$246,000
Kurt Dillon	Prop	08/08/1994	107	190	4	0	0	0	0	2018		\$246,000
Dane Gagai	Centre	03/01/1991	92	182	184	47	10	0	208	2011		\$504,000
Bryson Goodwin	Centre	30/12/1985	98	186	176	70	136	0	552	2007		\$375,000
Campbell Graham	Winger	02/06/1999	95	197	48	21	0	0	84	2017		\$442,000
Dean Hawkins	Halfback	10/03/1999	78	180	0	0	0	0	0	–		\$228,000
Alex Johnston	Winger	14/01/1995	95	185	122	82	0	0	328	2014		\$453,000
Liam Knight	Prop	15/01/1995	106	194	33	3	0	0	12	2016		\$570,000
Keaon Koloamatangi	Prop	23/05/1998	106	191	0	0	0	0	0	–		\$228,000
Ethan Lowe	2nd Row	20/03/1991	105	194	133	23	69	0	230	2013		\$430,000
Steven Marsters	Fullback	19/10/1999	99	183	0	0	0	0	0	–		\$228,000
Latrell Mitchell	Centre	16/06/1997	102	193	96	65	209	1	679	2016		\$661,000
Cameron Murray	Lock	16/01/1998	90	184	60	15	0	0	60	2017		\$801,000
Mark Nicholls	Prop	05/01/1990	104	194	64	1	0	0	4	2012		\$391,000
Adam Reynolds	Halfback	10/07/1990	85	173	183	27	642	19	1411	2012		\$739,000
James Roberts	Centre	03/03/1993	90	183	143	73	1	0	294	2011		\$503,000
Ky Rodwell	Prop	21/06/1999	102	186	0	0	0	0	0	–		\$228,000
Bayley Sironen	2nd Row	23/12/1996	95	186	5	0	0	0	0	2017		\$246,000
Jaydn Su'A	2nd Row	23/10/1997	100	188	39	1	0	0	4	2016		\$412,000
Tevita Tatola	Prop	11/10/1996	114	183	51	2	0	0	8	2018		\$528,000
Cody Walker	Five-Eighth	10/01/1990	90	179	96	42	10	0	188	2016		\$625,000

LOWER GRADES

THINGS couldn't have gone much better for the Rabbitohs in 2019 as their Jersey Flegg side went all the way while the Canterbury Cup squad finished the regular season in second spot only to fall to Wentworthville in the preliminary final.

Yet there could be more to cheer about this season with a glut of quality outside backs set to trot out in reserve grade. The likes of **Corey Allan** and **Edene Gebbie** will tear it up, while a big name like Alex Johnston could also find himself in NSW Cup alongside some of the young guys who graduated from the under-20s.

"The stronger your reserve grade side is, the better it's going to be for the NRL team," Cook says.

"It means you're going to get strong sessions against quality opposition, and that creates healthy competition at the club. Those guys in reserve grade are then going to put pressure on the players in first grade and that's what we want at the club."

The club could also unearth some talent in the key positions, with the first-grade spine regularly staying back after training to do extras with their understudies.

The only way is up

Coming off a year to forget, the Red V are choosing to focus on the positives as they look to return to the top half of the table as quickly as they fell out of it. By **MARTIN GABOR**

DRAGONS fans need to ask themselves one simple question ahead of the new season: is the glass half-full or half-empty?

The sad reality is St George Illawarra hasn't finished in the top four since their premiership back in 2010. They've played finals footy once in the past four seasons and they are coming off a disastrous campaign that saw them finish ahead of only the Titans and resulted in an extensive review of the football department.

Jack de Belin's ongoing legal proceedings provided an unwanted distraction in 2019 as they limped to just eight wins, while Gareth Widdop's shoulder issues meant their spine seemingly changed on a weekly basis.

"You want to push it to the side, but at the same time you want to learn from it because there were a lot of things we weren't doing right," halfback Ben Hunt tells *Big League*.

"There are things we have to look at and improve upon. We need to fix them and then move on from the past."

Meanwhile for the optimists, there are a few reasons to be hopeful. While Widdop's return to England leaves a gaping hole in their playmaking stocks, it does mean their spine can go into each game knowing who'll be in the key positions each week. With Hunt and Corey Norman calling the shots in the halves, Cameron McInnes at dummy-half and young gun Zac Lomax (pictured, main) getting his shot in the No.1 jersey, the Red V have the core they need to work off their gifted forward pack.

"It gives you more confidence each week knowing who you're going out there with," Hunt says.

"It's a massive loss not having Gareth, but if you want to look at the benefits, each week we'll probably have the same spine barring injuries. It gives you confidence and allows you to build relationships throughout the year."

While nothing is set in stone, it appears Lomax will win the race for the fullback position ahead of Matt Dufty.

"I believe [Lomax] is the fittest at the club because he's been winning all of our tests throughout pre-season," Hunt reveals.

"He's very hungry and eager to learn the role, and you can see that because he's always doing extra video with the coaches. He comes

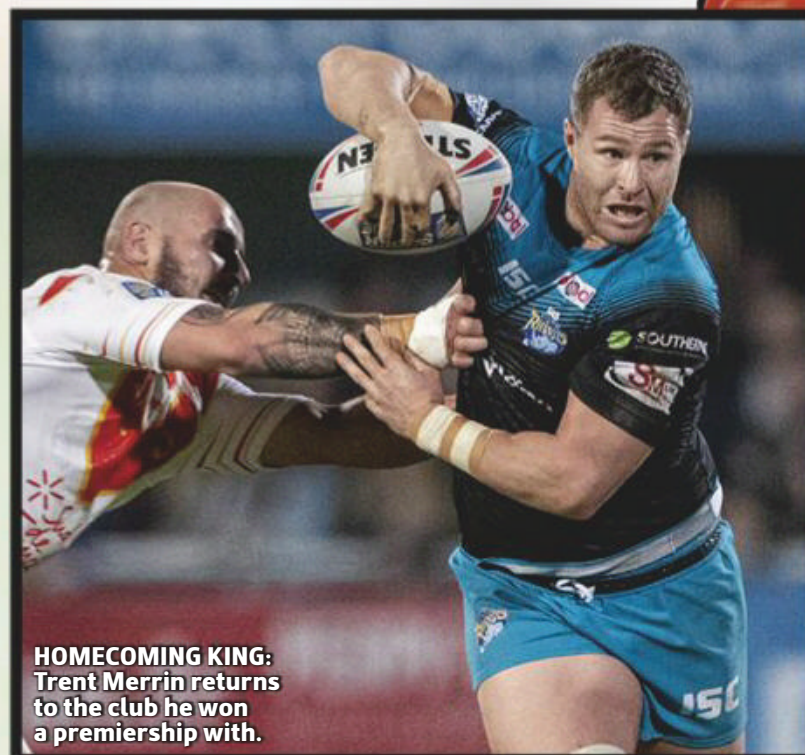
up to me and Corey Norman all the time asking for advice and where we want him to be in attack. He's still got a bit to learn in the position, but he's definitely taking the right steps."

Lomax is one of a host of local juniors who will don the Red V in 2020, something returning lock Trent Merrin believes is crucial for the region. The former rep forward made his NRL debut for the Dragons but spent the past few seasons playing for Penrith and Leeds before his homecoming.

"It's not just about talent, it's about passion," Merrin says. "When you come through the grades and you come through the local area, this place becomes your home and it's where you're most comfortable."

"I know when I was a junior, all I wanted was play for the club. To get the chance to put the Red V on for the first time meant the world to me, and that's the passion you get from local juniors that go through the same journey."

A fast start is imperative for a club that needs confidence from the outset, and their cause will be helped by back-to-back home games against teams that finished outside the top eight. If the wins dry up early then the pressure could mount on coach Paul McGregor, who is no stranger to scrutiny.



HOME COMING KING: Trent Merrin returns to the club he won a premiership with.



TALKING POINTS



SECURE AT SIX: Corey Norman will take over the No.6 role permanently.

INS & OUTS

Ins: Tyrell Fuimaono (Penrith), Issac Luke (Warriors), Trent Merrin (Leeds), Brayden Willame (Catalans)

Outs: Mitchell Allgood (released), Patrick Kaufusi (released), Jeremy Latimore (retired), Luciano Leilua (Wests Tigers), Steven Marsters (South Sydney), Jonus Pearson (Gold Coast), Reece Robson (North Qld), Gareth Widdop (Warrington)

"I've seen a lot of change in 'Mary' since I was last here," Merrin says.

"He's calmed down and it's great to see that he's trusting the coaches around him because that stuff seeps through the team. He's got a playing group here who believe in him.

"A lot of things happened here last year that you couldn't control – injuries and off-field stuff – but you can see that he trusts everyone and we're reaping the rewards from that. He's definitely grown over the years."

While a premiership seems unlikely, Dragons fans only have to look at the 2018 ladder for inspiration. The Eels and Sea Eagles finished in the bottom two but bounced back to play finals football the following season, and a stat that both optimists and pessimists alike can enjoy.

"The great thing about our competition is that it's pretty fair. You've always got your top teams who are consistent, but it can change year to year because of the salary cap," Hunt says.

"If you put in the work and get a bit of luck with injuries then things can turn around; hopefully that's what happens with us."

BL

CAPTAIN CAM

The biggest question following Widdop's departure was who would replace him as skipper. But ask anyone at the club and they'll tell you the decision was easy, with McInnes announced in mid-January as the team's new captain. "It's a massive honour for Cam and one a few of us thought was coming," Hunt says. "Once 'Gaz' announced he was leaving, it was down to Cam and 'Friz' (Tyson Frizell) for the role and I think we knew that Cam would get it. He's been a great leader for the club and I'm looking forward to playing under him because he's a passionate guy who leads from the front."



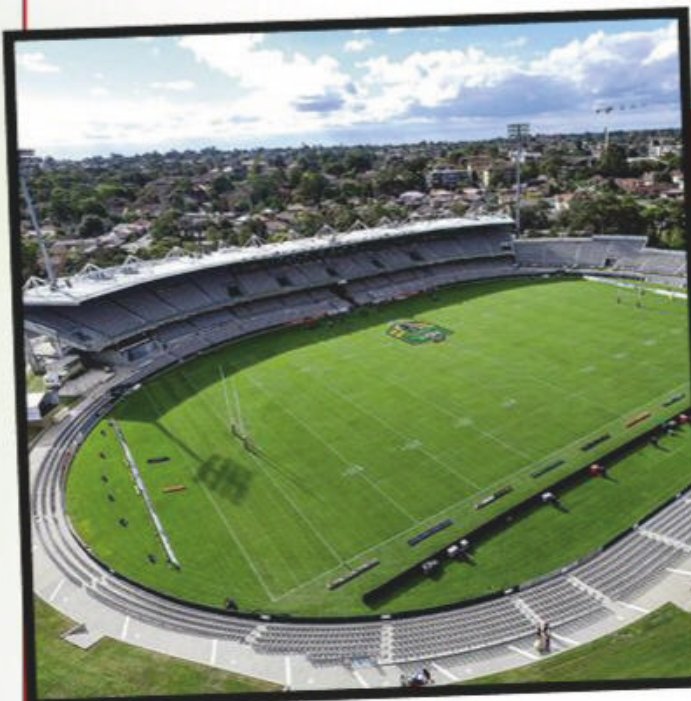
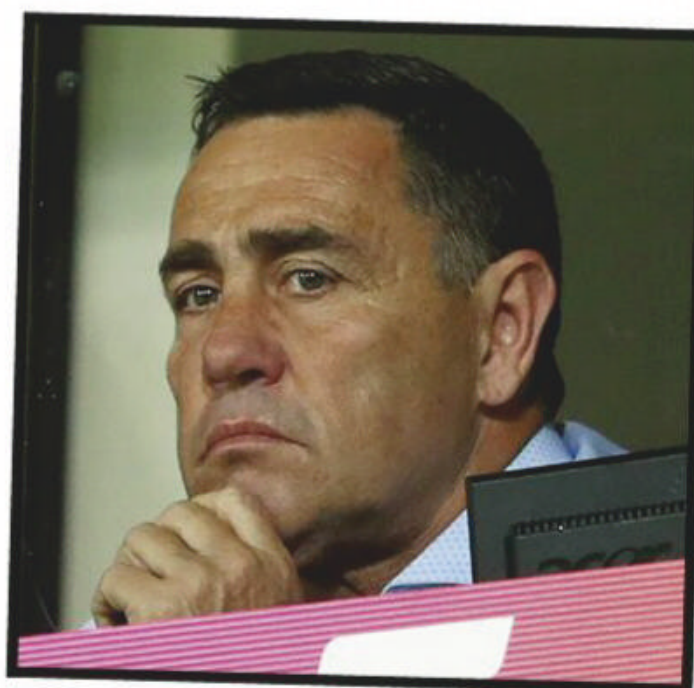
LEADING THE WAY: Cameron McInnes.

BETWEEN A LOCK AND A HARD PLACE

At the time of this story going to print, Jack de Belin's case was still ongoing, making his playing future clouded. However, if he manages to beat the serious charges laid against him then the Dragons suddenly go up a few rungs in betting. The gifted lock is a key cog in their attacking structures and provides a ball-playing option to go with his defence. The former NSW representative has been training and his return would provide a huge boost both on the field. "The guy who has impressed me the most over the pre-season – and I know it's controversial – is Jack de Belin," Hunt reveals. "He's our fittest forward. He's winning fitness drills and he's so silky with everything he does. We're a better team with him in the side. You need forwards who can ball-play and he's easily the best in our group. The way he can pass and create things is very handy for us halves because he can drive the forwards around."

IF THE 'FLANNO' FITS

He may be a polarising figure in the game, but few can argue against Shane Flanagan's coaching credentials. The former premiership-winning mentor (right) returns to the NRL following a lengthy ban and is part of the Dragons' new-look coaching staff, including his former assistant at the Sharks, James Shepherd. His experience will be a huge asset for McGregor, and he'll stiffen up a defence that leaked 575 points last season. "He's only been back since the break but he's been really good, as has 'Shep'," Hunt says. "Shep has been running our shapes in attack and I'm trying to learn as much as I can from him. Having 'Flanno' here has been great because it means we have two experienced coaches who know what it takes to cut it in the NRL."



HOME TRUTHS

When you've got a supporter base that spans most of southern Sydney through to the Illawarra region, big things are expected when you play at home. But for whatever reason, the Dragons failed to breathe fire at WIN and Netstrata, with the club managing just four wins; their worst return since the 2013 season. As a result, attendances were well below average – something not helped by time slots – but an area they would want to address nevertheless. With the Sharks set to share Kogarah with them this season, 2020 shapes as the year they can make their home grounds a fortress again as they look to plant their flag as the kings of the south.

DRAGONS 2020 DRAW

Rd 1 v Wests Tigers

WIN Stadium, March 15, 6.15pm

Rd 2 v Panthers

Netstrata Jubilee Stadium, March 20, 6pm

Rd 3 v Raiders

GIO Stadium, March 26, 8.05pm

Rd 4 v Eels

Bankwest Stadium, April 5, 4.05pm

Rd 5 v Warriors

WIN Stadium, April 12, 6.15pm

Rd 6 v Rabbitohs

ANZ Stadium, April 19, 2.05pm

Rd 7 v Roosters

Sydney Cricket Ground, April 25, 4pm

Rd 8 v Storm

Suncorp Stadium, May 3, 4.05pm

Rd 9 v Knights

McDonald Jones Stadium, May 9, 3pm

Rd 10 v Broncos

Suncorp Stadium, May 15, 7.55pm

Rd 11 v Titans

Netstrata Jubilee Stadium, May 22, 6pm

Rd 12 v Sea Eagles

WIN Stadium, May 31, 4.05pm

Rd 13 v Bulldogs

ANZ Stadium, June 8, 4.05pm

Rd 14 v Sharks

Netstrata Jubilee Stadium, June 14, 4.05pm

Rd 15 v Wests Tigers

Bankwest Stadium, June 25, 7.50pm

Rd 16 v BYE

Rd 17 v Roosters

Sydney Cricket Ground, July 12, 2.05pm

Rd 18 v Cowboys

Netstrata Jubilee Stadium, July 18, 3pm

Rd 19 v Raiders

WIN Stadium, July 26, 2.05pm

Rd 20 v Titans

Cbus Super Stadium, August 1, 3pm

Rd 21 v Panthers

Panthers Stadium, August 7, 7.55pm

Rd 22 v Bulldogs

Netstrata Jubilee Stadium, August 15, 7.35pm

Rd 23 v Eels

Netstrata Jubilee Stadium, August 22, 3pm

Rd 24 v Sharks

Netstrata Jubilee Stadium, August 27, 7.50pm

Rd 25 v Rabbitohs

WIN Stadium, September 3, 7.50pm



POINT TO PROVE

Hunting for consistency

NO matter how he performs, the spotlight will always focus on **Ben Hunt**. The Maroons and Kangaroos representative is coming off a solid campaign in which he kicked his first career field goal, but he'll be keen to build on the 12 try assists he had in 2019. While no one can question his want to take on the line or his support play, there's no denying he can still work on his short kicking game as well as his ability to build pressure and then take advantage of it. Having Corey Norman in the No.6 jersey

on a weekly basis will do a world of good for both players.

One man who'll be desperate to prove his doubters wrong is new recruit **Issac Luke**. The former Rabbitoh and Warrior was an odd recruitment choice given McInnes is an 80-minute player, but with Reece Robson now at the Cowboys, the club needed to find a back-up hooker. Given his experience, Luke will most likely come off the bench and act as a roving lock like Melbourne's Brandon Smith, but that could depend on the outcome of the de Belin

case and whether there'll be room for him on the bench.

The other players who will be keen for a big year are centres **Tim Lafai** and **Euan Aitken**. Both are capable of creating something out of nothing, but that form was only sporadic at best last season and that needs to be addressed given they're playing inside young wingers who need their help. With eight tries between them in 2019, pressure could mount from within as hungry rookies snap at their heels looking for a crack in the NRL.

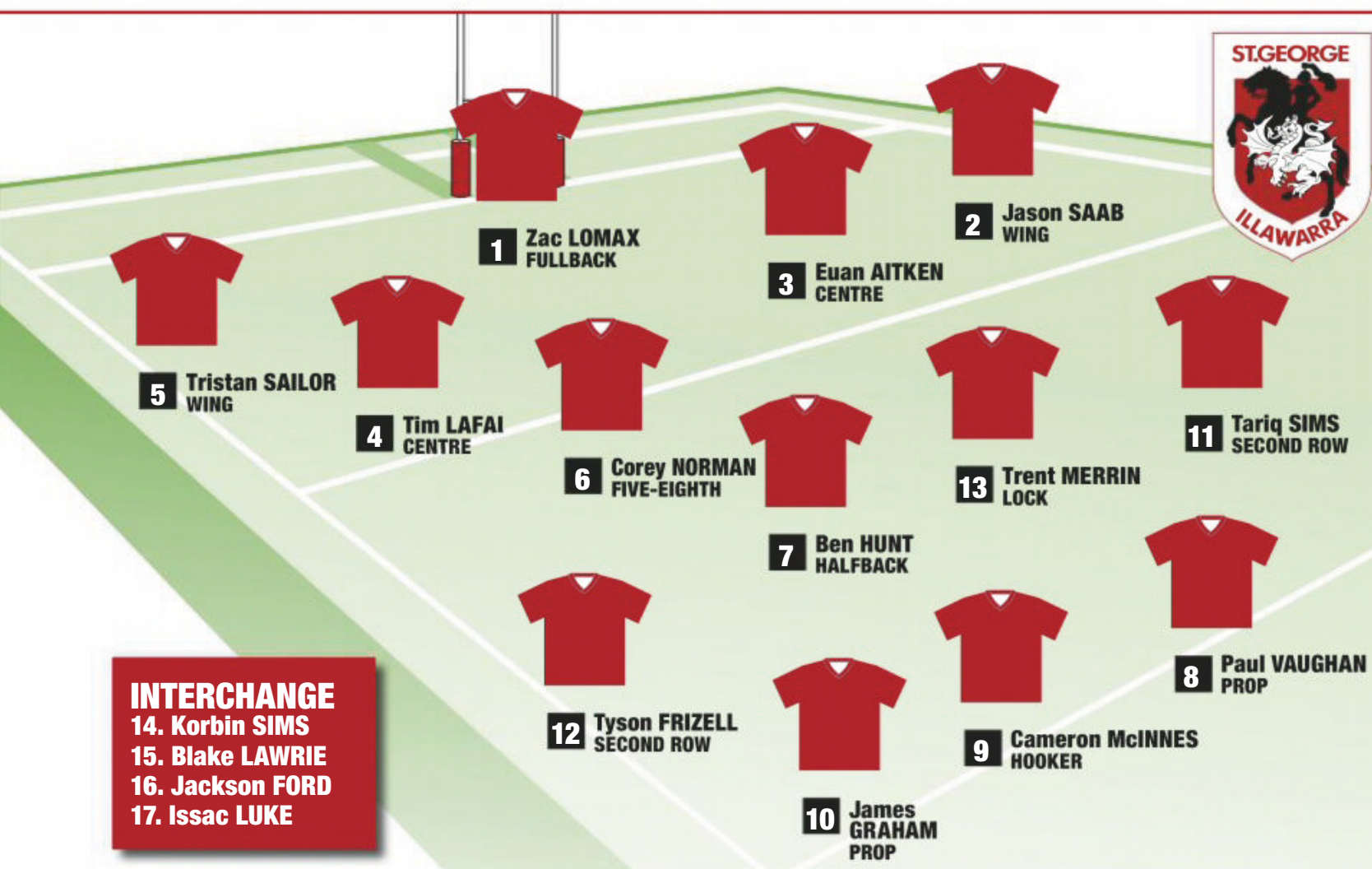
BIG LEAGUE'S STRONGEST LINE-UP

VOSSY'S VERDICT



I RECKON Dragons fans have been left with plenty of scars from a disastrous 2019. You have to digest the facts that they finished 15th on the ladder – their worst finish since the start of the joint venture – managed just eight wins, and had only the bottom-placed Gold Coast Titans concede more points in defence. They've had a comprehensive review, but that's a hell of a lot to work on for Paul McGregor and his players. I'm predicting they will improve but it could be more a rebuilding year, than one where they are a finals contender. On the good news front, lock me in for the prediction that towering winger Jason Saab will go close to winning Rookie of the Year.

Predicted Finish: 13th



2020 PLAYING ROSTER

PLAYER	POSITION	D.O.B.	Wgt	Hgt	CAREER STATS						Debut	2020 Price
Euan Aitken	Centre	16/06/1995	93	182	104	35	0	0	140	2015		\$546,000
Eddie Blacker	Prop	15/12/1999	116	195	0	0	0	0	0	–		\$228,000
Jack de Belin	Lock	17/03/1991	106	188	154	9	0	0	36	2011		–
Matt Dufty	Fullback	10/01/1996	83	179	49	21	0	0	84	2017		\$429,000
Jackson Ford	2nd Row	17/02/1998	95	187	5	1	0	0	4	2019		\$392,000
Tyson Frizell	2nd Row	09/10/1991	108	183	157	22	0	0	88	2011		\$582,000
Tyrell Fuimaono	2nd Row/Centre	06/03/1996	99	186	26	2	0	0	8	2017		–
James Graham	Prop	10/09/1985	107	187	180	10	0	0	40	2012		\$650,000
Jacob Host	2nd Row	03/09/1996	104	190	41	3	0	0	12	2016		\$379,000
Ben Hunt	Halfback	27/03/1990	88	178	233	60	25	1	291	2009		\$762,000
Josh Kerr	Prop	11/02/1996	112	197	7	1	0	0	4	2019		\$278,000
Tim Lafai	Centre	27/05/1991	98	184	163	48	25	0	242	2011		\$428,000
Blake Lawrie	Prop	10/01/1997	106	185	38	0	0	0	0	2017		\$578,000
Zac Lomax	Centre	24/09/1999	94	190	17	5	26	0	72	2018		\$389,000
Joe Lovodua	Hooker	18/03/1998	94	180	0	0	0	0	0	–		\$228,000
Issac Luke	Hooker	29/05/1987	93	175	271	50	203	0	606	2007		\$605,000
Cameron McInnes	Hooker	01/02/1994	91	177	112	16	0	0	64	2014		\$900,000
Corey Norman	Five-Eighth	03/02/1991	91	185	188	29	14	3	147	2010		\$635,000
Jordan Pereira	Winger	06/04/1993	97	182	20	8	0	0	32	2018		\$565,000
Mikaele Ravalawa	Winger	09/11/1997	93	184	19	11	0	0	44	2019		\$401,000
Jason Saab	Winger	08/10/2000	101	199	3	3	0	0	12	2019		\$249,000
Tristan Sailor	Five-Eighth	23/06/1998	80	177	3	1	0	0	4	2019		\$286,000
Korbin Sims	Prop	02/01/1992	108	189	136	18	0	0	72	2013		\$433,000
Tariq Sims	2nd Row	09/02/1990	106	193	174	38	0	0	152	2011		\$589,000
Lachlan Timm	Prop	26/06/1996	111	186	0	0	0	0	0	–		–
Paul Vaughan	Prop	23/04/1991	110	193	150	28	0	0	112	2013		\$674,000
Brayden Wiliame	Centre	17/12/1992	89	188	29	10	0	0	40	2013		\$246,000

LOWER GRADES

WHILE the first grade side failed to fire last year, it was a different story for the Canterbury Cup team as they claimed the minor premiership and finished one game away from the grand final after falling to eventual premiers the Jets. **Tristan Sailor** – who is set to be a mainstay in the NRL this year – was a breakout star in reserve grade under the tutelage of coach Mat Head, who will return for his fourth year in the state cup in 2020. While some clubs struggle to field competitive teams in the lower grades, the Red V take great pride in sending out sides who can compete for titles. That ethos won't change this year, with the ultimate goal to develop the players into first-grade prospects. One of those young men on the radar is back-rower **Luke Gale** after he impressed in Jersey Flegg and was then promoted to Canterbury Cup in 2019. Gale spent the entire pre-season training with the first-grade squad and is an outside chance of getting a run this year given the club has lost a few edge forwards.

Rulers of the roost

They've ended one of modern rugby league's longest-standing hoodoos, but despite losing some prolific strike weapons, the premiers are pushing themselves to be even better – and that's a scary thought.
By **DAVID PIEPERS**

FOR more than 25 years there has been a seemingly unattainable holy grail in rugby league. A premiership is a glorious achievement that many clubs have celebrated – some on multiple occasions – since the early 90s, but no-one had claimed consecutive titles since 1993, and every year speculation would run rife almost immediately after the full-time whistle of the grand final – until last year.

Finally, Trent Robinson's Sydney Roosters outfit had successfully defended the NRL premiership, ending the speculation and iconic drought. Though the media has been considerably more subdued over the question of the first 'three-peat' since the early 80s, the Tri-colours aren't resting on their laurels.

"There was a lot of talk about going back-to-back (last year)," co-captain Boyd Cordner tells *Big League*. "But we haven't heard too much noise this year yet. The only thing we're worried about is proving to ourselves that we're better than we have been the previous two years."

Though squad retention has again been high in Sydney's Eastern Suburbs, the off-season did see the departure of two of the club's most prolific attacking weapons.

For the past two years Latrell Mitchell has finished as the NRL's top pointscorer, and despite facing regular criticism over his consistency in 2019, his ability to break defensive lines with ease or release a stunning offload can change a game on a dime. His protracted contract saga with the club and eventual move to the Rabbitohs dominated headlines for months, but the Roosters have been too busy preparing for the year ahead to linger on the fallout.

"It obviously wasn't ideal for our preparation, the way it happened at the start of the year, but the pre-season is so busy that we didn't have time to think about it too much," says Cordner. "We've got a lot of work to do and we've got to move on."

Though the club is comfortable covering Mitchell's departure, they were dealt a blow when his promising replacement, 20-year-old Billy Smith, suffered an ACL injury that ended his hopes of securing the starting centre role for Round 1. The club has since been linked to the likes of Josh Addo-Carr and Josh Morris, but Cordner believes the squad is already deep enough to successfully cover the role.

"We've got a lot of great depth here, and plenty of players who can fill that role including Matt Ikuvalu, Ryan Hall, even Brett Morris can go over that side. We've got options, I'm sure 'Robbo' [Robinson] and the coaching staff have a plan."

The other big departure was now-retired Cooper Cronk, who was a linchpin during both premiership runs for the Bondi club. Though he'll no longer take the field, he's still heavily involved with the club and the development of his replacement, former Sharks gun Kyle Flanagan.

With Cronk in charge and some healthy competition to motivate him, Flanagan has impressed during his first pre-season at the club. Though he has just nine NRL appearances to his name and some of the game's biggest shoes to fill, his team-mates have no doubt in his abilities and are confident he'll hit the ground running.

"He's been really good, training hard and working hard with the coaching staff, including Cooper, who's come on as a mentor for him," says Cordner. "They've been working together, doing little bits and pieces. I've seen him working a lot on his goal-kicking too. The overall standard of training in the halves has really lifted. The likes of Drew Hutchison and Lachlan Lam have been working really hard too, they both got their shot last year and did a really good job."

Cronk's departure paves the way for Luke Keary to officially take control of the team as lead playmaker, a role he has grown increasingly comfortable with. Though he was afforded time away from the game last year after suffering



WORLD-CLASS:
James Tedesco.

multiple concussions, he was dominant upon his return, finishing second in the NRL for try assists and first in line-break assists, despite ending the year with fewer appearances than most of his competitors.

"Luke's at that stage in his career where he's able to step up and take on the job of leading the boys around and really owning the team," says Cordner. "He proved when Cooper was out last year that he can do that, and he's more experienced now. He's definitely got the right temperament for the lead half role. He's been absolutely outstanding this pre-season around the boys and I know that whatever he needs from the team, they'll do it for him."

With high squad retention, significant depth in all positions and arguably the world's best player in the No.1 jersey, there's little doubt the Roosters once again enter a new campaign as genuine contenders. But despite the speculation that will surround them all year, as Cordner says: "The only people we have to prove something to is ourselves." **BL**



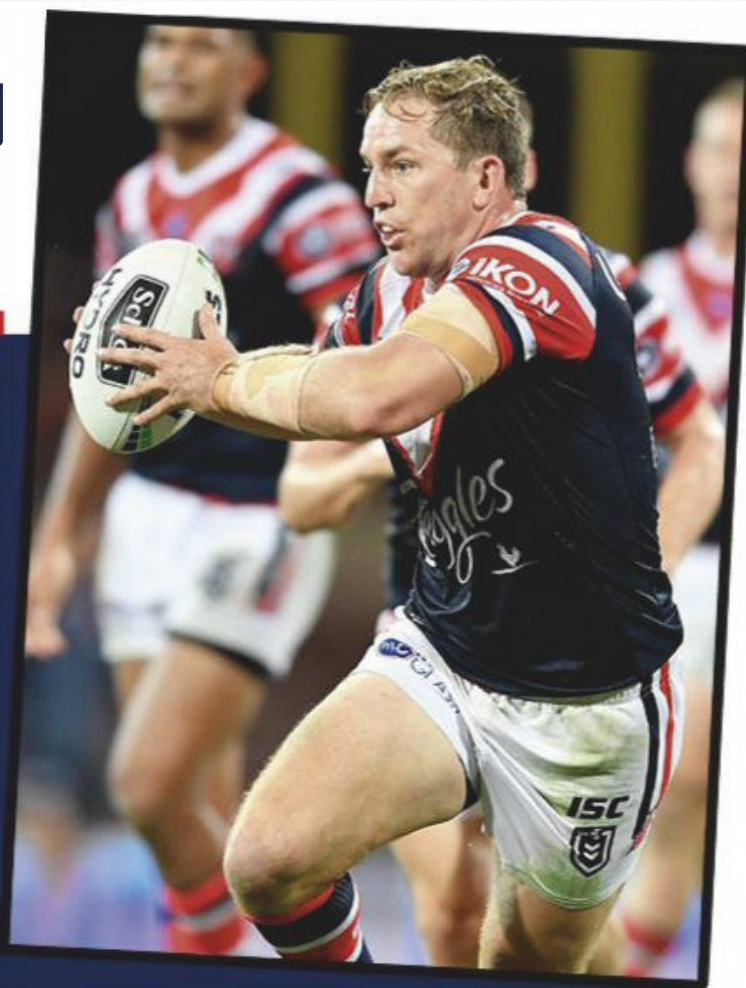
STEPPING UP:
Kyle Flanagan has big shoes to fill as the new starting halfback.



TALKING POINTS

ALL FOR 'AUBO'

He's not the biggest name on the Roosters' star-studded roster, but quiet achiever Mitchell Aubusson is on the cusp of legendary status himself. The one-club utility has played 289 games for the Tri-colours since making his debut in 2007, and provided he can stay fit he's set to become the most-capped Rooster of all time in 2020, surpassing the current record of 302 appearances held by club legend Anthony Minichiello. "You can't beat his experience and leadership," Cordner tells *Big League*. "Being around the young guys, he's the perfect model for them to look up to. He's done it all before, he's been playing at a high level for nearly 300 games and he's held himself incredibly through that time. We're so lucky to have him."



TEDDY-RIFFIC

The Dally M Medal, the Wally Lewis Medal, the Brad Fittler Medal, a premiership, a personal best for tries in a season, the match-winning four-pointers in the Origin decider and the Grand Final – it seems almost impossible to conceive that James Tedesco still has improvement left in him, and it's a thought that should terrify opponents. The 27-year-old is at the peak of his powers as the best custodian in the game (sorry 'Tom Turbo', RTS and Kalyn Ponga), and his influence is unmistakable in the well-oiled Roosters attack. If his scintillating play and upward trajectory continue, the only question left at the end of the year will be where he fits in the pantheon of all-time greats.



PACKED WITH POTENTIAL:
Sitili Tupouniua.

GOING DEEP

The Roosters boast remarkable depth for a club that has been previously criticised for a lack of local talent in the squad. While many young stars have had to bide their time behind the star-studded starting line-up, their small tastes of NRL action throughout recent years has them on the verge of bigger and better things if given the opportunity in 2020. "Egan Butcher is a really good young player," says Cordner. "He had some injuries which stopped him progressing as quickly as he wanted, but he's been involved in nearly all the pre-season sessions and he's going really well and putting on size. Then you've got Sitili (Tupouniua) who was outstanding last year, and that experience and confidence he's got is going to be handy for us. Lindsay Collins has had a great pre-season, you'll see some good things out of him this year too. We've got some great young players who've had a taste of NRL, and they'll all take that next step for us this year."

CHEIKA COUP

Many teams have bolstered their coaching stocks this year and the Roosters are no different, with former Wallabies coach Michael Cheika joining Trent Robinson for the pre-season. "He's worked a lot on our skills sessions," says Cordner. "There's been a lot of working under pressure, and a lot of catch-passing, especially through the middles. He's overseeing a lot of areas in our game and having his say, there are a lot of similarities (with rugby union). He's been really good for us."

INS & OUTS

Ins: Kyle Flanagan (Cronulla)
Outs: Cooper Cronk (retired), Latrell Mitchell (South Sydney), Zane Tetevano (Penrith)

ROOSTERS 2020 DRAW

Rd 1 v Panthers

Panthers, Mar 14, 7.35pm

Rd 2 v Sea Eagles

Central Coast, Mar 21, 5.30pm

Rd 3 v Rabbitohs

ANZ, Mar 27, 8.05pm

Rd 4 v Titans

SCG, Apr 5, 6.15pm

Rd 5 v Sharks

Netstrata, Apr 11, 7.35pm

Rd 6 v Warriors

Mt Smart, Apr 18, 5.30pm

Rd 7 v Dragons

SCG, Apr 25, 4pm

Rd 8 v Cowboys

Suncorp, May 2, 7.45pm

Rd 9 v Storm

SCG, May 8, 7.55pm

Rd 10 v Knights

SCG, May 14, 7.50pm

Rd 11 v Raiders

HBF, May 23, 7.35pm

Rd 12 v BYE

Rd 13 v Cowboys

QCB, Jun 6, 3pm

Rd 14 v Broncos

SCG, Jun 11, 7.50pm

Rd 15 v Raiders

GIO, Jun 28, 4.05pm

Rd 16 v Warriors

TBA, Jul 4, 7.35pm

Rd 17 v Dragons

SCG, Jul 12, 2.05pm

Rd 18 v Wests Tigers

Bankwest, Jul 17, 7.55pm

Rd 19 v Bulldogs

SCG, Jul 25, 3pm

Rd 20 v Sea Eagles

Lottoland, Aug 2, 4.05pm

Rd 21 v Eels

Bankwest, Aug 8, 5.30pm

Rd 22 v Sharks

SCG, Aug 14, 6pm

Rd 23 v Storm

AAMI, Aug 21, 7.55pm

Rd 24 v Rabbitohs

SCG, Aug 28, 7.55pm

Rd 25 v Broncos

Suncorp, Sep 4, 7.55pm



POINT TO PROVE

Return of a Friend indeed

CO-CAPTAIN **Jake Friend** had been a model of consistency for the Tri-colours, playing 19 or more games for all but two seasons of his 12-year tenure as the Roosters' dummy-half. He was seemingly a natural replacement, in terms of both experience and ability, to take the reins from Cameron Smith in the Queensland Origin squad in 2019 – before disaster struck.

After being forced out for 10 weeks early in the season with a biceps injury that required surgery, his return in the later stages of the year lasted all of two weeks, before a small fracture around the screw that had been inserted sent him straight back to hospital and under the knife.

Though he returned off the bench to take part in the club's grand final success, and his absence presented an opportunity for 20-year-old Sam Verrills to emerge as a future star in the making, a player of Friend's stature and experience will be determined to reclaim his place as one of the game's foremost hookers from the first minute of the new campaign.

"'Friendly' is fully fit now, he's healthy and he's had a full pre-season," says fellow co-captain Cordner. "He's a captain of our team, so he's going to be hungry to get back out there and do his best."

Few players benefitted more from Latrell Mitchell's presence than **Daniel Tupou**. There will be plenty of interest in how he fares without his partner-in-crime by his side feeding him try-scoring opportunities. His CV speaks for itself, but the sudden change in supply, as well as the NRL's new rules about aerial contests, both present challenges that will keep the 196cm winger on his toes – or in the air – in the new season.

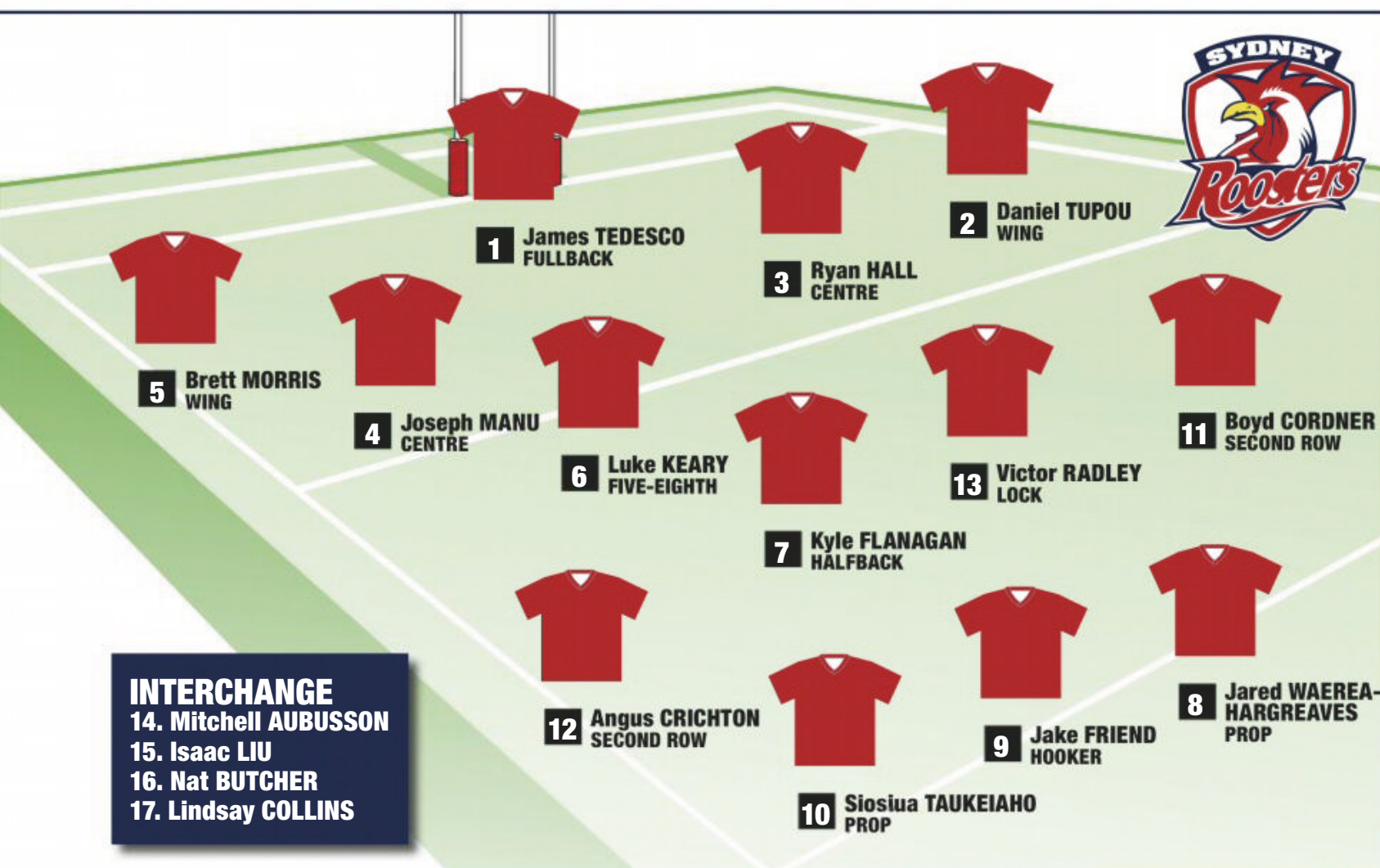
He has certainly proven himself in the Super League, but after suffering an ACL injury last year and being forced to bide his time, **Ryan Hall** will want to take the opportunity afforded to him by Latrell Mitchell's departure and Billy Smith's untimely injury with both hands. He played just six games for no reward in 2019, so the six-time Super League winner will be determined to showcase his talents every chance he gets and become a mainstay in the starting side.

BIG LEAGUE'S STRONGEST LINE-UP

VOSSY'S VERDICT



WIN back-to-back titles? Check. How about win three in a row? Why not, I ask? I can't see the Roosters being a better side in 2020, particularly with Cooper Cronk and Latrell Mitchell among their personnel absentees, but I can't say they will fall away a great deal either. My key focus will be on the fitness of Luke Keary. He is now the man running the show. Keary's concussion history may be a reason for some concern, but let's remain positive. Like Melbourne, I'm backing the Roosters' defence to carry them a long way. Trent Robinson is constantly looking for an edge for his team. Loved commenting on their games on Fox League last season. The Roosters will be a star attraction again in 2020. **Predicted finish: 1st**



2020 PLAYING ROSTER

PLAYER	POSITION	D.O.B.	Wgt	Hgt	CAREER STATS						2020 Price
					App	T	G	FG	Pts	Debut	
Mitchell Aubusson	2nd Row	01/10/1987	96	185	289	63	0	0	252	2007	\$501,000
Fletcher Baker	2nd Row	26/12/1999	109	194	0	0	0	0	0	—	\$228,000
Egan Butcher	2nd Row	05/08/2000	96	187	0	0	0	0	0	—	\$228,000
Nat Butcher	Lock	25/07/1997	97	184	39	3	0	0	12	2016	\$674,000
Lindsay Collins	Prop	17/04/1996	110	194	24	1	0	0	4	2017	\$275,000
Boyd Cordner	2nd Row	09/06/1992	102	188	168	48	1	0	194	2011	\$613,000
Angus Crichton	2nd Row	05/02/1996	102	187	81	13	0	0	52	2016	\$695,000
Poasa Faamausili	Prop	14/02/1996	109	188	13	1	0	0	4	2018	\$246,000
Kyle Flanagan	Halfback	15/09/1998	85	183	9	1	19	0	42	2018	\$246,000
Jake Friend	Hooker	01/02/1990	92	175	244	26	0	1	105	2008	\$612,000
Ryan Hall	Winger	27/11/1987	110	184	6	0	0	0	0	2019	\$450,000
Drew Hutchison	Halfback	26/04/1995	97	187	8	2	1	0	10	2015	\$417,000
Matt Ikuvalu	Centre	09/11/1993	100	184	13	4	0	0	16	2018	\$392,000
Luke Keary	Five-Eighth	03/02/1992	85	179	134	27	0	2	110	2013	\$589,000
Asu Kepaoa	Winger	02/02/2000	94	189	0	0	0	0	0	—	\$228,000
Lachlan Lam	Five-Eighth	25/03/1998	88	178	4	0	0	0	0	2019	\$246,000
Isaac Liu	Lock	26/04/1991	108	187	158	13	0	0	52	2013	\$524,000
Joseph Manu	Centre	29/06/1996	98	192	70	21	0	0	84	2016	\$503,000
Brett Morris	Winger	23/08/1986	95	183	252	153	0	0	612	2006	\$464,000
Victor Radley	Hooker	14/03/1998	95	182	55	9	0	0	36	2017	\$546,000
Billy Smith	Centre	07/11/1999	99	191	2	2	0	0	8	2019	\$425,000
Siosua Taukeiaho	Lock	03/01/1992	108	186	110	10	38	0	116	2013	\$677,000
James Tedesco	Fullback	08/01/1993	95	184	139	77	0	0	308	2012	\$870,000
Daniel Tupou	Winger	17/06/1991	105	196	160	91	0	0	364	2012	\$496,000
Sitili Tupouniua	2nd Row	30/05/1997	107	197	17	1	0	0	4	2018	\$356,000
Sam Verrills	Hooker	13/01/1999	86	183	14	3	0	0	12	2019	\$479,000
Jared Waerea-Hargreaves	Prop	20/01/1989	108	193	219	11	0	0	44	2009	\$607,000

LOWER GRADES

THE Roosters enter the second year of their partnership with the North Sydney Bears full of confidence. With Cooper Cronk's departure from the NRL resulting in a direct switch for Kyle Flanagan, **Drew Hutchison** and **Lachlan Lam** provide the Bears with one of the Canterbury Cup's most exciting halves combinations.

Destined for an NRL start before suffering a heartbreaking injury, Hutchison knows what it takes to win after steering Illawarra to the 2016 NSW Cup title. He also claimed the Bears' Players Player award last season. Lam, meanwhile, though lacking in NRL experience, is also a proven talent. The 20-year-old who has come all the way up through the Roosters' system has already played Test football for Papua New Guinea and featured at the World Cup Nines. Another to keep an eye on will be lock **Tom Freebairn**. The defensive workhorse averaged over 30 tackles per game and won the club's Player of the Year and Coaches Awards. Coach Jason Taylor has secured club leaders Freebairn, Max Bailey and Brad Deitz for the new year – a huge boost for a side on the grow.

The hard sell

The Warriors have paid the price for taking a big backward step in 2019, but according to their coach, that's just hardened their resolve ahead of the new season. By **WILL EVANS**

AS pundits gaze into their 2020 NRL crystal balls, the Warriors are featuring in more wooden spoon predictions than top eight forecasts after their substantial regression last year.

But coach Stephen Kearney – whose job security will be under the media microscope – remains bullish about the club's current position and any external noise.

"We haven't been thinking about the pressure – it's about putting a plan in place," Kearney tells *Big League*.

"We've made some adjustments to our game and our program. We haven't really highlighted any pressure – my focus is preparing as best we can to give us an opportunity when Round 1 ticks over."

The club's desire to avoid a fourth bottom-four finish in six seasons has been hampered by an inability to lure talent across the Tasman – despite boasting revered recruitment guru Peter O'Sullivan. With the Warriors in need of replenishment and impact, reported approaches to Matt Lodge, David Fifita, Braden Hamlin-Uele, Sitili Tupouniua, Kurt Capewell, Zane Tetavano and Tino Fa'asuamaleaui were each rebuffed.

While striking out in the player market is less than ideal, Kearney emphasises the club is content to retain a deep war-chest rather than making kneejerk signings or paying overs.

"We're always looking to improve our list," Kearney explains.

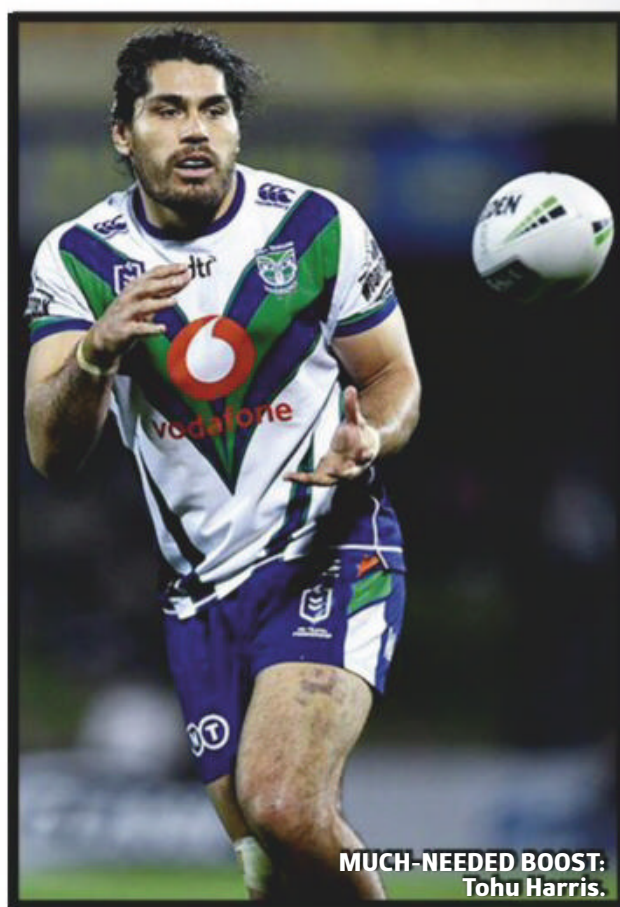
"We've been active in the market, but we don't want to be guilty of mistakes we've made in the past. We're very conscious of how we go about that and anyone we look to recruit, we believe is going to help our squad get better."

The only roster addition is a key one – ex-Penrith hooker Wayde Egan arrives as a replacement for unwanted veteran Issac Luke. The 22-year-old was surplus to requirements at the Panthers but looms as a quality pick-up.

"Wayde's settled in well, he's a really smart footballer," Kearney says. "I've got no doubt that when he's fit and healthy he'll be a real positive asset for our club."

Arguably the most significant personnel change, however, is the acquisition of long-serving Wallabies conditioner Craig Twentyman, who replaces Alex Corvo as Head of Performance. Corvo was apportioned a large chunk of the credit for the Warriors' stunning 2018 resurgence, but many players appeared stale last year. Whether Corvo's return to Australia was by mutual agreement remains a mystery, but the early indications are the Warriors squad is responding positively to the new program.

Roger Tuivasa-Sheck and Chanel Harris-Tavita have publicly praised Twentyman's regime, which centres around execution under fatigue.



MUCH-NEEDED BOOST:
Tohu Harris.

"Alex set a wonderful standard for our footy group," Kearney says. "Craig's come in and done a really good job, it's been a little bit different to how we've done things the past couple of years but I'm confident with where the group is at."

A crucial call still needs to be made on whether Chanel Harris-Tavita, the club's 2019 Rookie of the Year, or experienced utility Kodi Nikorima will partner veteran Blake Green in the halves. Other contentious selection areas – such as a centre and back-row – will largely depend on form.

Captain Tuivasa-Sheck and hulking winger Ken Maumalo lapped their team-mates in terms of performance and consistency last season – but the Warriors' back-three can't be expected to carry the side.

Peta Hiku, Leeson Ah Mau, Jazz Tevaga and Lachlan Burr also enhanced their reputations in 2019, but the likes of Adam Blair, Isaiah Papali'i and David Fusitu'a may come under pressure for their spots without a marked improvement.

Meanwhile, after being sidelined since June with a foot injury, the return of Tohu Harris is a desperately needed boost for a hard-working pack that lacks variety.

"Tohu's an integral part of our group. He's experienced, he's got great football intelligence and is always a real help on the field," Kearney enthuses. "He was a significant loss last year in that department. It's been great to have him back with us."

The 13th-placed Warriors struggled to adapt to Shaun Johnson's controversial exit and Simon Mannering's retirement, losing seven games last year by 20-plus margins. Defence largely comes down to attitude, but improving a stagnant attack will require a tweak in strategy.

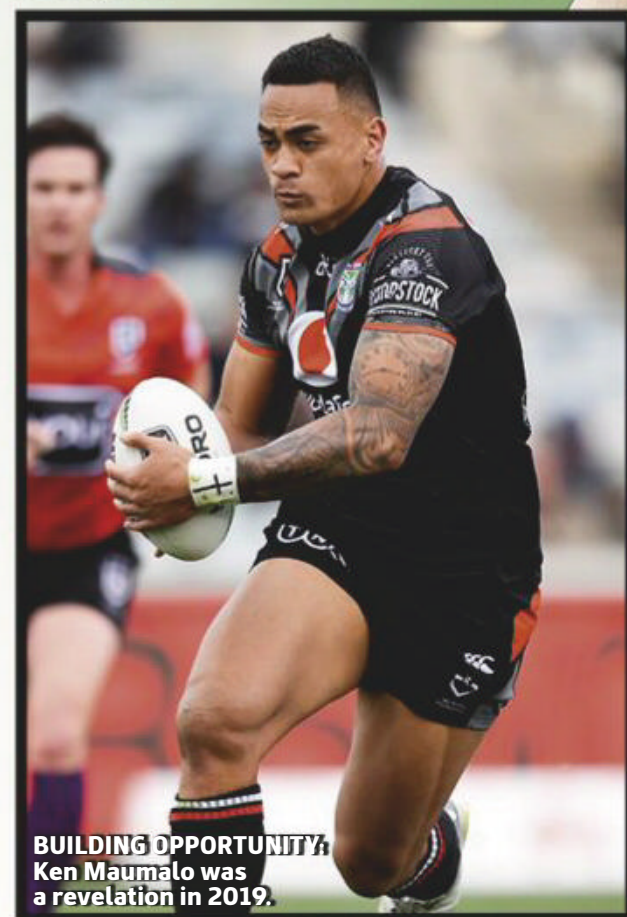
"It's about getting the balance right," says Kearney. "We've got an understanding of what our strengths are, so it's about playing to those – and playing football with skill is part of what makes our team unique."

"Sometimes that's not going to work when it's pouring rain on a breezy Friday night at Mt Smart. So we've taken all of that into account, but we've prepared with a strong emphasis on fundamental skill."

If the players display as much desire on the field as the Warriors' brass do off it, they are sure to be a surprise finals contender in 2020.

In a video published on the club's website, CEO Cameron George delivered a stirring, if expletive-laden call to arms to the playing group about proving the doomsayers wrong.

"The focus for us always is about improving every day," Kearney reiterates. "That's the message in what Cameron was saying. The way the boys have been training, I've got no doubt that's been the response."



BUILDING OPPORTUNITY:
Ken Maumalo was a revelation in 2019.



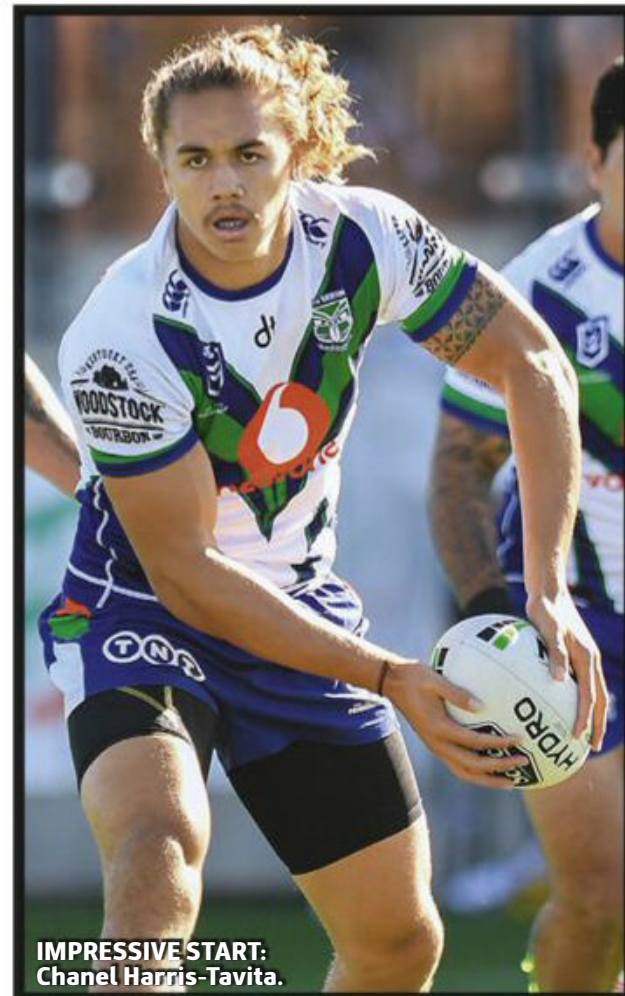
INS & OUTS

Ins: Wayde Egan (Penrith)
Outs: Blake Ayshford (retired), Issac Luke (St George Illawarra), Ligi Sao (Hull FC), Chris Satae (Hull FC)

TALKING POINTS

GLASS HALF-FULL

Kodi or Chanel? It's one of the NRL's most intriguing selection battles and could shape the trajectory of the Warriors' season. Harris-Tavita electrified the Warriors' fanbase during his intermittent appearances in 2019, impressing with his calmness, instincts and penchant for putting his body on the line. He seemingly cannot be denied a permanent first-grade start much longer. Meanwhile, Nikorima and Green pairing up in the halves for nine-straight games coincided with the Warriors' best form last year, netting five wins and a draw – but Nikorima is also a viable dummy-half option. Coach Kearney indicated the trials will have a major bearing on who runs out in Round 1: "If you asked me last week, I'd say Kodi's got the nod, but the week before it would have been Chanel. It's a real positive for the group – you've got to compete for your spot."



IMPRESSIVE START:
Chanel Harris-Tavita.

TRY, TRY AGAIN

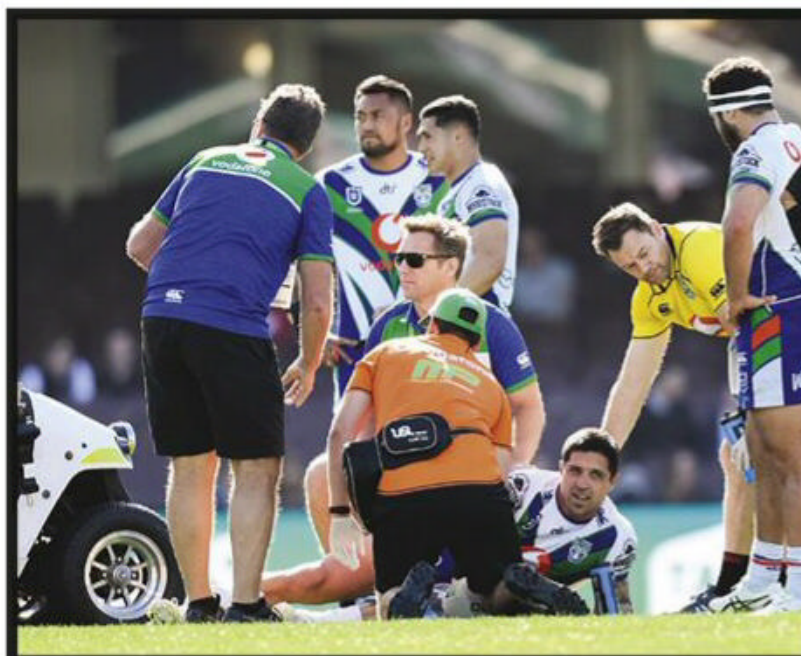
Crossing the stripe just 72 times last year, the Warriors produced their second-worst scoring rate since 2000. But it's been a feature of Stephen Kearney's tenure as coach – his side scored only 78 tries in 2017 and 80 in 2018, ranking bottom-five among the club's past 20 seasons. The Warriors don't have the cattle to grind teams into submission physically, so releasing the attacking shackles to capitalise on their natural flair and adopting a more offensively-minded selection strategy would seem an obvious direction to head in 2020.

SLOW OUT OF THE BLOCKS

Tardy starts to the season have left the Warriors with too much ground to make up time and again since their 2011 Grand Final appearance. It's no coincidence that their 5-0 start in 2018 led to the end of the club's lengthy playoffs absence – or that they finished 13th last year after winning only two of their first eight games. With three of their first five 2020 assignments coming against teams that missed the top 8 in 2019, getting early wins is imperative for the Warriors.

SMART FORTIFICATION

Mt Smart Stadium's reputation as an unwelcoming venue for visiting teams took a severe hit during 2019. The Warriors won just three games at their home base, while their attempts to build mid-season momentum were hamstrung by a record-equalling six-match Mt Smart losing streak. Though the Warriors enjoyed some notable results on the road, no team can hope to contend for the finals without winning at least an even share of their home fixtures.



HEALTH IS WEALTH

Given the club's light off-season recruitment and the apparent dearth of reserve-graders and young guns beating down the door for an NRL opportunity, depth could be an issue in 2020. Injuries disrupted the Warriors more than most last year and a kinder run in that department is crucial. With a stack of players recovering from surgery and Jazz Tevaga, Karl Lawton, Gerard Beale and Nathaniel Roache unavailable for the early rounds, they can ill afford new additions to their casualty ward.

WARRIORS 2020 DRAW

Rd 1 v Knights

McDonald Jones, Mar 14, 3pm

Rd 2 v Raiders

Eden Park, Mar 21, 3pm

Rd 3 v Sea Eagles

Lottoland, Mar 27, 6pm

Rd 4 v Wests Tigers

Mt Smart, Apr 4, 3pm

Rd 5 v Dragons

WIN, Apr 12, 6.15pm

Rd 6 v Roosters

Mt Smart, Apr 18, 5.30pm

Rd 7 v Storm

AAMI, Apr 25, 8pm

Rd 8 v Eels

Suncorp, May 3, 1.50pm

Rd 9 v Bulldogs

Mt Smart, May 8, 6pm

Rd 10 v Titans

Cbus Super, May 16, 3pm

Rd 11 v Storm

Mt Smart, May 23, 3pm

Rd 12 v BYE

Rd 13 v Broncos

Mt Smart, Jun 5, 6pm

Rd 14 v Raiders

GIO, Jun 14, 2.05pm

Rd 15 v Cowboys

Sky, Wellington, Jun 27, 3pm

Rd 16 v Roosters

TBA, July 4, 7.35pm

Rd 17 v Bulldogs

Bankwest, Jul 10, 7.55pm

Rd 18 v Titans

Mt Smart, Jul 17, 6pm

Rd 19 v Broncos

Suncorp, Jul 25, 5.30pm

Rd 20 v Panthers

Mt Smart, Jul 31, 6pm

Rd 21 v Knights

Mt Smart, Aug 9, 2.05pm

Rd 22 v Rabbitohs

Sunshine Coast, Aug 15, 3pm

Rd 23 v Sea Eagles

Mt Smart, Aug 21, 6pm

Rd 24 v Cowboys

QCB, Aug 29, 5.30pm

Rd 25 v Sharks

Netstrata, Sep 5, 3pm



POINT TO PROVE

Greener pastures for halves

WHILE many contend **Kodi Nikorima** is better suited to dummy-half, the livewire is determined to fend off the challenge of boom ball-player Chanel Harris-Tavita and retain the Warriors' No.6 jersey. After arriving mid-season from Brisbane, he showed flashes of his trademark attacking spark but was generally underwhelming. Nikorima's habit of drifting out of games and reluctance to ease the load on Blake Green has mobilised the CHT Fan Club – it's up to the 15-Test Kiwi to prove he is of best value to the Warriors in the halves and not as a bench utility.

Warriors fans are braying for Fiji international **Taane Milne's** inclusion somewhere in the 17 after his eye-catching club debut in last year's final-round upset

of Canberra. The ex-Dragons three-quarter was punted by the Tigers in 2018 before playing a game thanks to a second illicit drugs strike, but was thrown a lifeline by the Warriors. "We've all seen what Taane's capable of, the challenge for him is replicating that consistently," Kearney explains. "He's had an OK pre-season – let me put it this way, he doesn't stand out – but he's started to pick things up. If he applies himself, I've got no doubt he'll force an issue somewhere because he is a very capable footballer."

Auckland-born Milne is the type of game-breaker the Warriors line-up is crying out for, while he shapes as a possible bench option after spending much of 2019 in the Canterbury Cup team's second row.

Blake Green became one of the NRL's most respected halves after playing the right-hand man role alongside dominant No.7s Cooper Cronk, Daly Cherry-Evans and Shaun Johnson. But Johnson's shock exit thrust Green into the hot-seat – and a mixed 2019 campaign. No one in the team tried harder than the veteran and he played some fine match-winning hands, but Green was overburdened with the bulk of the playmaking and kicking duties. A revolving cast of five-eighths and a forward pack that rarely got over the top of their opponents did not aid his cause. The 33-year-old is off-contract at the end of the year and knows a solid season is imperative if he is to extend his NRL career, or if the Warriors are to return to the playoffs.

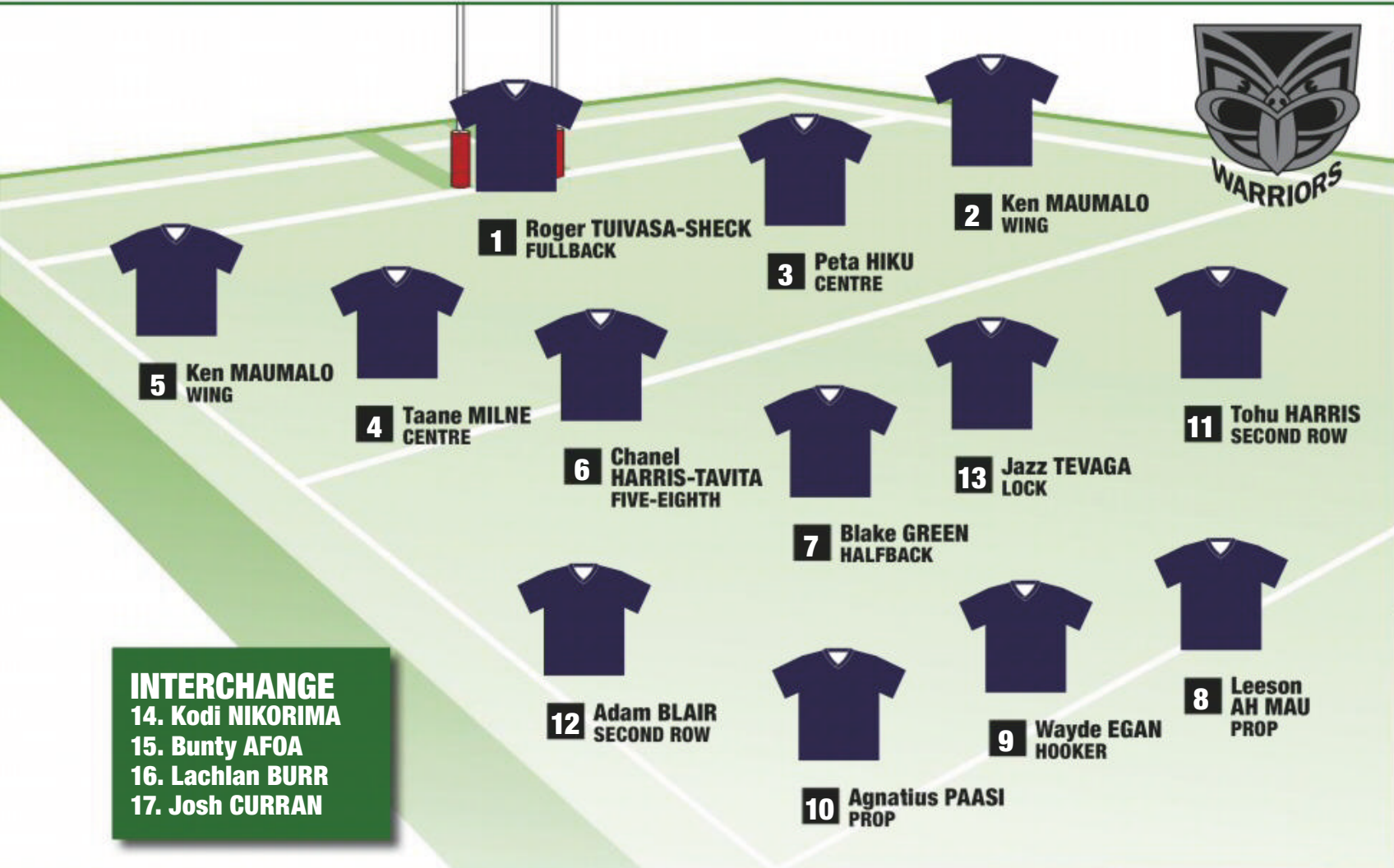
BIG LEAGUE'S STRONGEST LINE-UP

VOSSY'S VERDICT



THE Warriors are a side that didn't live up to my expectations in 2019, which was a huge disappointment given they had made their long-awaited return to finals football the previous season. Two wins in a row was the best victory streak they could manage last year. Where you think they would be one club with a distinct home ground advantage, they managed only five wins on home soil, and that's just not good enough. The Warriors were linked to a few big name recruitment chases, but no result. So long as Roger Tuivasa-Sheck stays on the field, they will be a side capable of upsets. It ain't the key to a winning team, but their back three of RTS, David Fusitu'a and Ken Maumalo is up there with the best in the competition.

Predicted Finish: 9th



2020 PLAYING ROSTER

PLAYER	POSITION	D.O.B.	Wgt	Hgt	CAREER STATS						Debut	2020 Price
					App	T	G	FG	Pts			
Bunty Afoa	Prop	20/08/1996	117	183	64	4	0	0	16		2016	\$518,000
Leeson Ah Mau	Prop	20/12/1989	111	185	203	6	1	0	26		2009	\$650,000
Gerard Beale	Centre	18/07/1990	97	181	187	48	0	0	192		2009	\$289,000
Adam Blair	2nd Row	20/03/1986	109	188	311	14	0	0	56		2006	\$554,000
Lachlan Burr	Prop	27/09/1992	103	188	47	2	0	0	8		2013	\$620,000
Josh Curran	Lock	10/06/1999	103	185	3	0	0	0	0		2019	\$246,000
Wayde Egan	Hooker	20/03/1997	91	185	29	3	0	0	12		2018	\$384,000
Jackson Frei	Prop	27/01/1998	105	195	0	0	0	0	0		–	\$228,000
David Fusitu'a	Winger	16/10/1994	106	189	96	60	0	0	240		2014	\$347,000
Blake Green	Five-Eighth	19/09/1986	97	179	160	20	0	1	81		2007	\$551,000
Tohu Harris	2nd Row	07/01/1992	112	195	147	22	8	0	104		2013	\$681,000
Chanel Harris-Tavita	Halfback	03/04/1999	88	183	13	2	24	0	56		2019	\$447,000
Patrick Herbert	Centre	10/01/1997	94	181	8	3	15	0	42		2019	\$424,000
Peta Hiku	Centre	04/12/1992	101	181	125	44	3	0	182		2013	\$529,000
Eliesa Katoa	2nd Row	03/01/2000	110	193	0	0	0	0	0		–	\$228,000
Adam Keighran	Five-Eighth	24/04/1997	91	183	6	1	9	0	22		2019	\$330,000
Karl Lawton	Hooker	29/11/1995	93	185	27	6	0	0	24		2016	\$394,000
Sam Lisone	Prop	19/02/1994	110	184	85	3	0	0	12		2015	\$334,000
Ken Maumalo	Winger	16/07/1994	111	191	87	31	0	0	124		2015	\$540,000
Taane Milne	Centre	19/05/1995	99	183	19	1	0	0	4		2016	\$246,000
Kodi Nikorima	Halfback	03/04/1994	83	174	100	25	1	0	102		2015	\$478,000
Agnatius Paasi	Prop	30/11/1991	114	182	101	12	0	0	48		2014	\$574,000
Isaiah Papali'i	Lock	20/09/1998	108	182	48	6	0	0	24		2017	\$643,000
Hayze Perham	Five-Eighth	02/07/1999	91	184	2	0	0	0	0		2019	\$246,000
Adam Pompey	Centre	22/08/1998	98	190	5	2	0	0	8		2019	\$246,000
Leivaha Pulu	2nd Row	27/03/1990	110	192	58	6	0	0	24		2016	\$246,000
Nathaniel Roache	Hooker	15/04/1996	94	180	26	2	0	0	8		2016	\$458,000
Jazz Tevaga	Lock	04/09/1995	94	178	57	4	0	0	16		2016	\$727,000
Roger Tuivasa-Sheck	Fullback	05/06/1993	97	182	160	49	0	0	196		2012	\$738,000

LOWER GRADES

THE Warriors' Canterbury Cup team missed the playoffs for the first time since 2012 last year, while coach Nathan Cayless has gone back to Australia, with Justin Morgan returning to the club as his replacement. Morgan should have the services of 2019 NRL debutants Hayze Perham, Adam Keighran and Adam Pompey, up-and-comers **Setu Tu** (who scored 15 tries in 15 games for the side last year), **Paul Turner**, **Rocco Berry** and **Selesitino Ravutaumada**, as well as long-serving props Sam Lisone and Leivaha Pulu for the most part. The Warriors are likely to be one of the competition's lighter teams in terms of first-grade experience, however. Meanwhile, the club has pulled its Jersey Flegg team in favour of fielding an SG Ball side. The Warriors were the dominant force during the NYC's decade-long existence but have fallen away in the under-20s age-group in recent seasons. The ploy is designed to ward off Australian clubs cherry-picking New Zealand's most talented juniors. But with the future of a mooted Auckland under-19s competition now clouded, players too old for SG Ball may be forced to turn out for clubs in the local senior grades.



With the longest active finals drought in the NRL and a record number of ninth-place finishes, the Wests Tigers are pulling out all the stops to play finals footy.
By **MICHAEL BLOK**

INS & OUTS

Ins: Adam Doueihi (South Sydney), Joey Leilua (Canberra), Luciano Leilua (St George Illawarra), Zane Musgrove (South Sydney), Billy Walters (Melbourne)

Outs: Robbie Farah (retired), Esan Marsters (North Qld), Ryan Matterson (Parramatta), Ben Matulino (retired), Robbie Rochow (retired)



Out of the wilderness

AS much as the Wests Tigers love the jungle, they'd rather leave the wilderness behind in 2020. For too long they've been in finals exile, missing the top eight for eight-consecutive seasons – the longest current drought in the NRL.

And despite bookmakers giving them little chance of making it again in 2020, coach Michael Maguire has other plans.

"We're all about getting to the success in October. That's the major goal and something we want to achieve," Maguire tells *Big League*.

Last season was another case of déjà vu for the Concord-based club – the second year straight they'd missed the finals by one position, and the sixth time in 16 years they'd finished ninth. The nightmare of how their season ended is still replaying in their minds.

"2019 didn't end with us being where we'd predicted ourselves to be, so that will put fire in the belly for this year," the coach says.

"We weren't satisfied with where we finished, but it's in our hands to change that and that's what we're trying to. At the moment it's about how we come together and build the team – the combinations are definitely growing," he says.

"We've trained well, but the key is to be good from Round 1. We've worked hard all pre-season to make sure we're ready for when the journey begins.

"The boys have definitely gone about what's required in a pre-season to improve as a team."

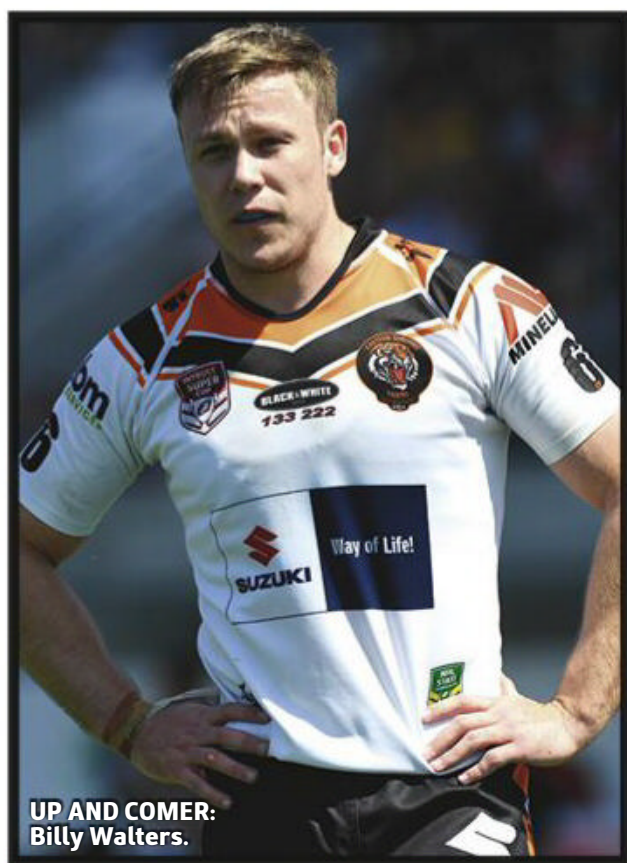
Maguire has noticed growing maturity among the playing squad.

"We're building on what we did last year. There's a handful of players who got their chance

last season and they'll be better for it this time around. Guys like Thomas Mikaele, Oliver Clark, Matt Eisenhuth, Alex Seyfarth and Luke Garner have gone to a new level and I'm expecting a lot from them this year," the mentor says.

"One thing those boys have done is mature. I see them as stronger characters and leaders. It's been pleasing watching these young men grow into what we want them to become, and there's a lot of passion around the organisation."

The new decade didn't start as the Tigers had hoped. They were on the verge of signing superstar centre Latrell Mitchell but lost his signature to South Sydney at the last minute. Despite missing out on their marquee man, Maguire is pleased with their latest signings, and Tigers fans believe they won the off-season signing market.



UP AND COMER:
Billy Walters.

Their big coup was the signing of Adam Doueihi (pictured, left) from South Sydney, who joins the club on a four-year deal and is tipped to wear the No.1 jersey.

Douihi was a breakout star of the 2017 Rugby League World Cup with Lebanon — scoring two tries in four Tests at centre for the Cedars.

“I’m very pleased we’ve been able to secure Adam on a long-term deal,” Maguire says.

“He is a fine young man off the field and is an excellent addition to our squad with his talent and versatility across a number of positions. He’s a tremendously hard worker who carries himself very well, and we’re all excited to see him take the next steps in his career at this club.”

The Tigers also picked up the Leilua brothers — Joey from Canberra and Luciano from the Dragons.

“‘Luc’ was in my ear talking up the club and telling me to come,” Joey says.

“I needed a change, and I wanted to come to a historic club. The Tigers have a lot of history [with the foundation clubs] and I wanted to be a part of something special here.”

They also nabbed Melbourne youngster Billy Walters, who is the son of Queensland coach Kevin.

“Billy has been a big addition to the squad,” Maguire says.

“I’m looking forward to seeing him grow with the players around him as well. There are a few there who have come in and are adding a lot to our team.”

Walters is one of the contenders to wear the No.9 jumper in 2020, after regular rake Jacob Little suffered a heartbreaking ACL injury.

“[Filling the hooker role] is obviously a work in progress at the moment but we have a few options,” Maguire admits.

“Someone like Billy could fill the role.

He’s a quality five-eighth and he’s doing some great things in the No.9 position as well. We’ve had Moses Mbye training there, Josh Reynolds too. I have a number of players who can fill that space at the moment.

“It will also come down to the trials and seeing the boys perform. That’s going to play a part in the decision moving forward. There’s some great competition.”

BL

TALKING POINTS

BIG YEAR FOR BROOKS

2020 shapes as a crucial year for halfback Luke Brooks, who enters his seventh year as the Tigers’ playmaker. Having won the Dally M Rookie of the Year in 2014 and Dally M Halfback of the Year in 2018, Brooks has been one of the most reliable players at the club, without taking them to the next level. As the man responsible for leading the side, he now has the opportunity to have the best season of his career. He’s worked tirelessly on his defence and we all know his capabilities with ball in hand. If Brooks can have an impressive year, expect the Tigers to be competing for a top eight finish.

FAR AND WIDE

The Wests Tigers have taken their love for roaming to a new level this year, with the club playing ‘home’ games at five unique venues in addition to their Concord-based training facilities. They’ll split majority of their home games at Campbelltown, Leichhardt and Bankwest Stadium, as well as hosting one game in Tamworth and Magic Round in Brisbane. They’ll play at nine unique venues in the opening nine rounds, but will settle down at Bankwest Stadium for five of six games in the middle of the season.



WALL OF LEILUA

When Joey and Luciano (below) joined the club, they both had the same chat with coach Michael Maguire — about working on their defence. We all know how damaging both players can be with ball in hand, but they have struggled defensively in the past. “Big ‘Luc’ brings a bit of a different style. I can see how hard he’s working which is really pleasing. It’s something he spoke to me about. He wants to be really strong in that department because when we have the ball, he has a lot of capability,” Maguire says. “Joey will bring a different dynamic as well. One of the first things he spoke about was defence, which was very pleasing because we know what he can do with the ball.”



MORE TO COME

Wests Tigers have snared the signature of one of the brightest young talents in rugby league with Stefano Utoikamanu (above) to join the club from season 2021. The 19-year-old has signed a three-year contract, but will play the remainder of this year with Parramatta. The 191cm and 115kg forward will add another dimension to a dynamic Wests Tigers forward pack next season. “Stefano is a real up-and-coming talent and, as such, we’re all extremely excited to have him join,” CEO Justin Pascoe says. “His commitment to the future of this club is a strong show of intent in what we’re building here, and I have no doubt that he will continue his development in the next 12 months.”

WESTS TIGERS 2020 DRAW

Rd 1 v Dragons

WIN, Mar 15, 6.15pm

Rd 2 v Knights

Leichhardt, Mar 22, 4.05pm

Rd 3 v Bulldogs

Campbelltown, Mar 29, 4.05pm

Rd 4 v Warriors

Mt Smart, Apr 4, 3pm

Rd 5 v Eels

Bankwest, Apr 13, 4.05pm

Rd 6 v Panthers

Panthers, Apr 19, 4.05pm

Rd 7 v Titans

Cbus Super, Apr 24, 6pm

Rd 8 v Sharks

Suncorp, May 1, 6pm

Rd 9 v Raiders

Scully Park, Tamworth, May 9, 5.30pm

Rd 10 v Rabbitohs

Leichhardt, May 17, 4.05pm

Rd 11 v Sea Eagles

Central Coast, May 23, 5.30pm

Rd 12 v BYE

Rd 13 v Eels

Bankwest, Jun 7, 4.05pm

Rd 14 v Panthers

Bankwest, Jun 12, 7.55pm

Rd 15 v Dragons

Bankwest, Jun 25, 7.50pm

Rd 16 v Storm

AAMI, Jul 3, 7.55pm

Rd 17 v Rabbitohs

Bankwest, Jul 11, 7.35pm

Rd 18 v Roosters

Bankwest, Jul 17, 7.55pm

Rd 19 v Knights

McDonald Jones, Jul 26, 4.05pm

Rd 20 v Sharks

Netstrata, Aug 2, 2.05pm

Rd 21 v Broncos

Campbelltown, Aug 9, 4.05pm

Rd 22 v Raiders

GIO, Aug 16, 4.05pm

Rd 23 v Titans

Campbelltown, Aug 23, 2.05pm

Rd 24 v Bulldogs

Bankwest, Aug 29, 3pm

Rd 25 v Cowboys

Leichhardt, Sep 4, 6pm



POINT TO PROVE

Going out on a high note

IT'S on for young and old in season 2020. On one end of the scale, there's **Benji Marshall**, who is turning 35 this year and will call time on his glittering career at season's end. And then there's **Tommy Talau**, who is just starting out his career.

With Marshall playing his final season in the NRL, his team-mates will be eager to send him out on a high. He's been named co-captain, alongside Moses Mbye.

"From my debut through to now, Wests Tigers has always been such a big part of my life and it's pretty special for me to be able to finish my playing career with this club," Marshall says. "I've been really impressed with the direction we're heading in. As a playing group and a club, we're in a really strong position and I'm looking forward to being able to play a part in us achieving the success our fans deserve."

Keep an eye out for Talau, if he gets his chance in the NRL.

The 19-year-old is the son of former Bulldogs centre Willie Talau and the club has high hopes for him. Last year he became the first player born in the 2000s to play first-grade for the club.

"I've had an unreal experience so far and I'm excited to continue my journey," the youngster said. "This club is really building a strong foundation and has helped me grow a lot, so I'm looking forward to the next few years."

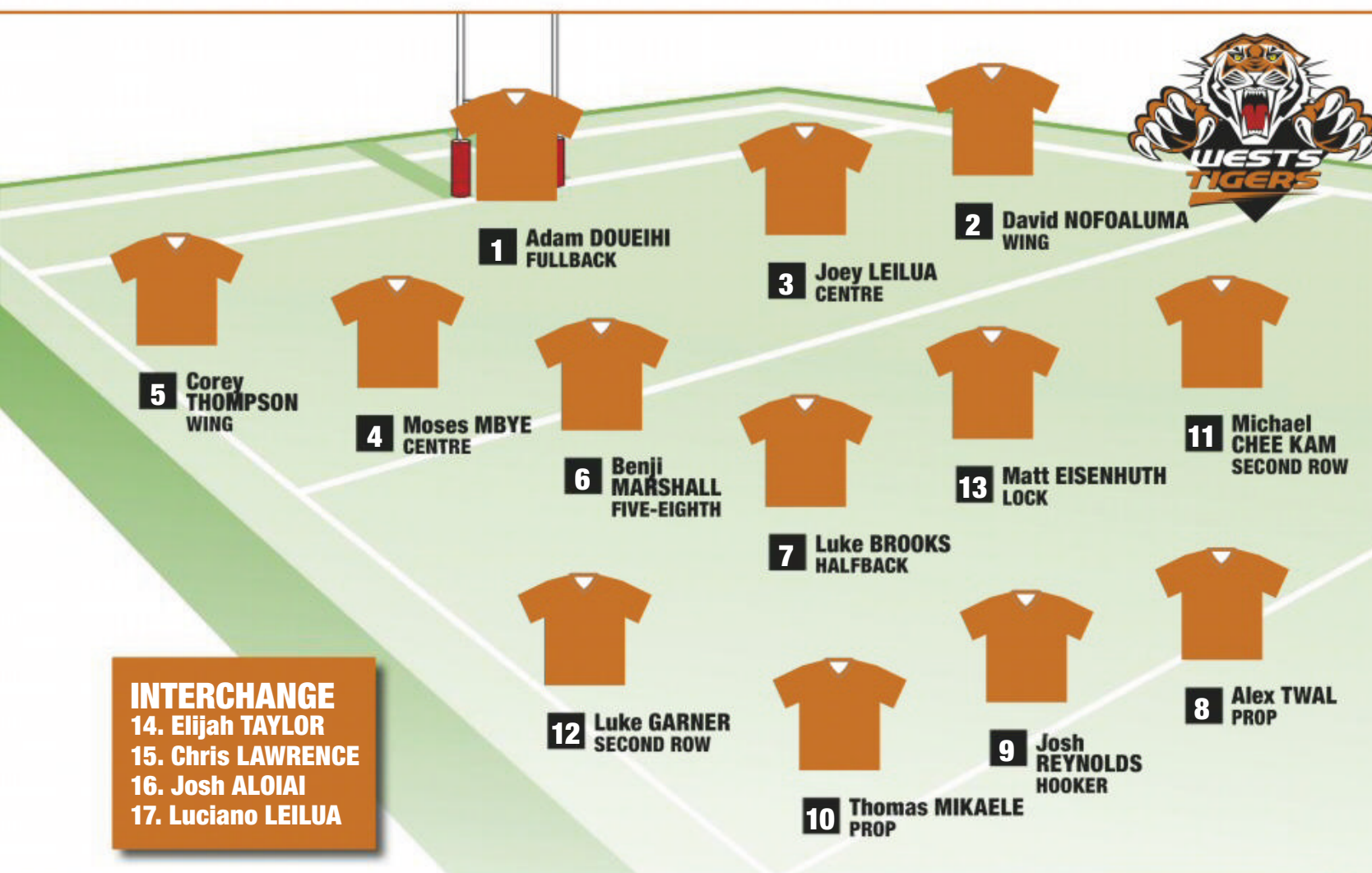
BIG LEAGUE'S STRONGEST LINE-UP

VOSSY'S VERDICT



THE Wests Tigers' lack of finals football has officially been declared a drought. Eight-straight seasons of finishing early, and frustratingly, three ninth-placed finishes in the past four years. Their recruitment has come late in the off-season which doesn't overly fill me with confidence. Can Benji wind back the clock in his position as co-captain? Eleven wins from 24 games was their return last season. That would have been good enough for the top eight with a better points-differential. I believe the same tally of wins is achievable in 2020, so on that basis they have a chance. But Tigers fans' patience has been sorely tested. They have tired of just being a "chance".

Predicted Finish: 11th



2020 PLAYING ROSTER

PLAYER	POSITION	D.O.B.	Wgt	Hgt	CAREER STATS						Debut	2020 Price
					App	T	G	FG	Pts			
Josh Aloiai	2nd Row	11/11/1995	111	189	72	7	0	0	28		2016	\$563,000
Luke Brooks	Halfback	21/12/1994	90	180	131	34	0	4	140		2013	\$747,000
Michael Chee Kam	2nd Row	26/02/1992	101	191	76	10	0	0	40		2014	\$431,000
Oliver Clark	Prop	17/08/1996	109	191	9	0	0	0	0		2019	\$361,000
Adam Doueihi	Fullback	08/05/1998	94	190	30	2	10	0	28		2018	\$457,000
Matt Eisenhuth	Lock	20/08/1992	110	196	56	3	0	0	12		2017	\$621,000
Luke Garner	2nd Row	06/09/1995	99	191	20	7	0	0	28		2018	\$685,000
Robert Jennings	Centre	02/01/1996	105	191	57	31	0	0	124		2015	\$383,000
Chris Lawrence	2nd Row	19/10/1988	100	187	240	84	3	0	342		2006	\$515,000
Joey Leilua	Centre	12/12/1991	112	187	204	89	0	0	356		2010	\$500,000
Luciano Leilua	2nd Row	08/06/1996	110	186	43	8	0	0	32		2016	\$503,000
Jacob Liddle	Hooker	27/10/1996	90	184	37	5	0	0	20		2016	\$320,000
Benji Marshall	Five-Eighth	25/02/1985	92	183	308	91	402	15	1183		2003	\$572,000
Moses Mbye	Fullback	13/08/1993	89	181	120	21	111	2	308		2014	\$508,000
Sam McIntyre	2nd Row	20/03/1998	103	191	0	0	0	0	0		–	\$228,000
Chris McQueen	2nd Row	03/08/1987	105	189	163	35	0	0	140		2009	\$328,000
Thomas Mikaele	Prop	11/01/1998	113	191	23	0	0	0	0		2019	\$384,000
Paul Momirovski	Centre	13/07/1996	97	191	13	10	21	0	82		2018	\$602,000
Zane Musgrove	Prop	26/03/1996	113	194	27	0	0	0	0		2016	\$246,000
David Nofoaluma	Winger	28/11/1993	95	181	119	57	0	0	228		2013	\$682,000
Russell Packer	Prop	09/10/1989	111	189	176	8	0	0	32		2008	\$407,000
Josh Reynolds	Five-Eighth	13/04/1989	89	181	150	43	0	5	177		2011	–
Alex Seyfarth	2nd Row	20/01/1999	103	194	0	0	0	0	0		–	\$228,000
Dylan Smith	Fullback	23/04/1999	90	186	0	0	0	0	0		–	\$228,000
Tommy Talau	Centre	03/04/2000	97	189	1	0	0	0	0		2019	\$246,000
Elijah Taylor	Lock	27/02/1990	101	190	175	25	0	0	100		2011	\$523,000
Corey Thompson	Winger	15/05/1990	86	177	77	33	0	0	132		2014	\$513,000
Alex Twal	Prop	03/07/1996	106	190	54	0	0	0	0		2017	\$683,000
Billy Walters	Five-Eighth	09/02/1994	90	178	2	0	0	0	0		2019	\$246,000

LOWER GRADES

WESTERN Suburbs will act as Wests Tigers' reserve grade side again in 2020. If the NRL squad can keep their star players healthy throughout the year, the Magpies will benefit with some quality players in the line-up. At some stages throughout the season, they're expected to gain the services of several emerging guns and experienced veterans. Former Test internationals Chris McQueen and Russell Packer played just a handful of games in the top grade in 2019 and will line up for the Magpies again. With two experienced big men leading the way, expect the pack to dominate. Young prop **Oliver Clark** had a taste of first grade in 2019 and will be eager to stay there, however he's tipped to play some games for the Magpies and will need to perform well to stay in favour with NRL coach Michael Maguire. Some other players to keep an eye on are **Alex Seyfarth**, **Dylan Smith**, **Tommy Talau** and **Billy Walters**, who will play a mix of both grades this campaign. The Wests Tigers' Jersey Flegg team will also be seeking improvement following their ninth-placed finish last year.

Fantasy

Pride (and prizes) are on the line again in NRL Fantasy for 2020, so fire up your laptop

HAVE you ever thought you could navigate your way through a salary cap to run a successful NRL team? If you answered yes or maybe then NRL Fantasy is the game for you. With prizes up for grabs, as well as a chance to earn eternal bragging rights over your mates, here are your keys to the game in 2020.

Nail the one-percenters

There is no foolproof way to win the \$5,000 plus a VIP trip for two to the 2021 NRL Nines, but there are a few steps to make your job easier. For starters, make sure you have a couple of out-and-out guns in your team from Round 1. We'll delve deeper into the gun category later,

but in a nutshell, buy Payne Haas and Damien Cook from the outset and watch your points pile up.

For draft players, money isn't an issue as you're simply looking to score as many points as possible with the players you managed to jag in the pre-season. But for those playing classic Fantasy, investing in cash-cows is good business that will ensure success in the long-run. It'll be tempting to load up on the best players in the game, but that strategy will only get you so far if you don't plan ahead when it comes to making money to allow big moves later in the season.

A big trap for players – especially rookie Fantasy coaches – is getting sucked in by mid-range players. There's a reason why certain players are always around the \$400,000 mark – they don't score heavily enough to be relevant in a game like this. If you must buy someone in this price range,

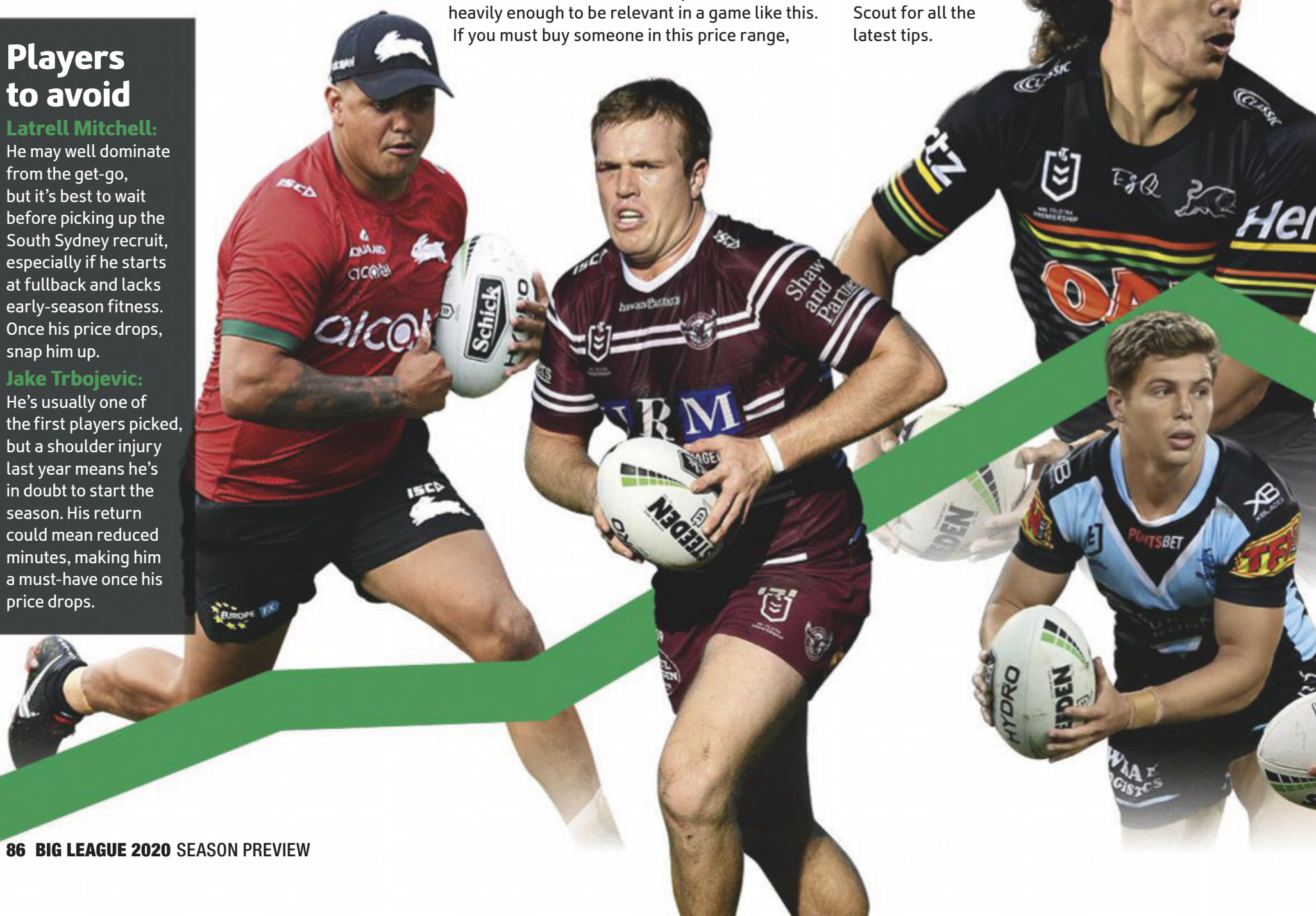
look for guys with a low breakeven who will play big minutes because they're your best bet to make money. However, beware of back-rowers who get shifted to the centres or bench players who don't get big minutes as their scores won't be great and their prices will steadily fall.

Finally, don't panic trade. There's nothing wrong with making big moves early in the season if they'll benefit you down the track, but don't make changes for the sake of it, especially if you're chasing cash on a player who has already maxed out. For more information, make sure you check out NRL.com and Lone Scout for all the latest tips.

Players to avoid

Latrell Mitchell: He may well dominate from the get-go, but it's best to wait before picking up the South Sydney recruit, especially if he starts at fullback and lacks early-season fitness. Once his price drops, snap him up.

Jake Trbojevic: He's usually one of the first players picked, but a shoulder injury last year means he's in doubt to start the season. His return could mean reduced minutes, making him a must-have once his price drops.



land

and get to studying. By **MARTIN GABOR**

Cheapies

Harry Grant: He wouldn't have been an option had he stayed at the Storm, but Grant's potential swap deal to the Tigers for 2020 makes him one to watch. With Robbie Farah retired, Jacob Liddle recovering from a horrific knee injury and Josh Reynolds's immediate playing future unclear, Grant should be in your 21 if he gets the starting role.

Jarome Luai: He may not be a base-stats beast, but the Panthers five-eighth has the attacking game to accumulate points at a rapid rate. He's a risky proposition given he won't always score heavily, but sometimes gambles are necessary in Fantasy.

Blayke Brailey: Coaches would have loved to have seen him a little bit cheaper, but \$400,000 is still a bargain for a starting hooker. The young Shark will get the start in 2020 and his price should skyrocket.

Guns

Payne Haas: No-one averaged more points than the Broncos sensation in 2019, and while he's just shy of a million dollars, he's a must have and should probably be your captain just about every week given his huge output.

Damien Cook: The Rabbitohs rake was narrowly pipped by Cameron Smith and Cameron McInnes in terms of weekly average last year, but his attacking numbers make him the best pick given he can go huge if he sets up or scores tries.

Jason Taumaloto: He was pipped by Cameron Murray as the Dally M Lock of the Year in 2019, but the Cowboys machine was five points better per game when it came to Fantasy. His meterage and ability to break tackles make him an easy choice.



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Super dooper

The Super League has kicked off, and with a number of star players joining the competition this season has the potential to be one of the best yet.

Big League takes a look at each club's chances, as well as the players to keep an eye out for.

By **MICHAEL BLOK**

Castleford

Player to watch: Jake Trueman. After playing for England at the Nines last year, the halfback is primed for an exciting season.

NRL expats: Jordan Rankin, Peter Mata'utia, Sosaia Feki, Jesse Sene-Lefao, Cheyse Blair, Junior Moors.

Verdict: They scraped into the finals on for and against last season, and we have them finishing 5th again in 2020.

Catalans

Player to watch: James Maloney. He's one of the most successful players in rugby league history and he'll want to carry his legacy over to Europe this year.

NRL expats: David Mead, James Maloney, Samisoni Langi, Josh Drinkwater, Remi Casty, Sam Moa, Sam Kasiano, Sam Tomkins, Israel Folau.

Verdict: With Maloney and Folau at the club, anything is possible. Predicted finish is 7th.

Huddersfield

Player to watch: Jermaine McGillvary. Having played over 300 games and scoring more than 200 tries, he's arguably the most successful England winger of all time.

NRL expats: James Gavet, Aidan Sezer, Akuila Uate, Suaia Matagi, Kenny Edwards.

Verdict: The signing of Sezer will help them in 2020, however we have them finishing 9th.

Hull F.C.

Player to watch: Jamie Shaul. Wearing No.1 on his back, he's as safe as they come with his settled composure.

NRL expats: Albert Kelly, Manu Ma'u, Sika Manu, Mickey Paea, Mahe Fonua, Gareth Ellis, Tevita Satae, Carlos Tuimavave.

Verdict: They missed the finals on for-and-against last year but should compete for a top four position in 2020. Predicted finish 4th.

Hull K.R.

Player to watch: Weller Hauraki. The ball-handling No.13 is an elusive threat when making his way to the line.



NRL expats: Adam Quinlan, Shaun Kenny-Dowall, Kane Linnett, Matt Parcell.

Verdict: They'll be attempting to shock teams this season but we see them finishing 10th.

Leeds

Player to watch: Luke Gale. He was named the 2017 Man of Steel but has struggled with injuries over the past two years. Eager for a big season.

NRL expats: Konrad Hurrell, Robert Lui, Ava Seumanufagai, Matt Prior, Rhyse Martin, Adam Cuthbertson.

Verdict: One of the biggest clubs in the game, they've struggled of late and we have them 6th.

Salford

Player to watch: Mark Flanagan. You may remember him from his time at the Wests Tigers. He's now set to play his 200th Super League game this season.

NRL expats: Tuimoala Lolohea, Joey Lussick, Ken Sio, Pauli Pauli, Krisnan Inu, Mark Flanagan.

Verdict: With a bunch of likeable players, they're easy to support. Predicted to finish 8th.

St Helens

Player to watch: Luke Thompson. Having signed with the Bulldogs for 2021, the prolific prop will

be hoping to leave the Super League with a bang.

NRL expats: Kevin Naiqama, Zeb Taia, Joseph Paulo.

Verdict: They won the competition last season and they're tipped to finish 1st again in 2020.

Toronto

Player to watch: Sonny Bill Williams.

He's signed the largest contract in rugby league history and will be under pressure.

NRL expats: Chase Stanley, Ricky Leutele, Josh McCrone, Bodene Thompson, Darcy Lussick, Sonny Bill Williams.

Verdict: Entering the Super League is already a massive achievement and their goal is to consolidate their position. We see them finishing 11th.

Wakefield

Player to watch: Danny Brough. He's as experienced as they come, having

debuted back in 2002. At the age of 37, his glittering career is coming to an end.

NRL expats: David Fifita, Kelepi Tanginoa, Bill Tupou.

Verdict: We've tipped them for the wooden spoon (12th) but they have the talent to prove us wrong.

Warrington

Player to watch: Daryl Clark. He scored Warrington's final try of the Challenge Cup and became the third hooker to win the Lance Todd Trophy (man of the match).

NRL expats: Blake Austin, Gareth Widdop, Ben Murdoch-Masila, Jason Clark, Jake Mamo, Sitaleki Akauola.

Verdict: They'll be there at the business end of the year – we have them 3rd at the end of the regular season.

Wigan

Player to watch: Zak Hardaker. The former Man of Steel winner is primed for a big season, as long as he can stay out of trouble.

NRL expats: Bevan French, Thomas Leulaui, George Burgess, Jackson Hastings.

Verdict: One of the biggest clubs in England, they'll be aiming for top spot and we've got them down for 2nd.

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COMMERCIAL INVESTMENT

- 🔑 Purchase Price = \$405,000
- 🔑 Income Per Year = \$29,000 per annum + tenant pays 100% of the outgoings
- 🔑 Lease = 3+3 years with 3% increases each year
- 🔑 Area = 15km away from the Brisbane CBD
- 🔑 Off-market purchase



RESIDENTIAL INVESTMENT

- 🔑 Purchase Price = \$375,000
- 🔑 Income Per Year = \$21,320 per annum
- 🔑 Bought it \$35,000 below market value
- 🔑 Off-market purchase
- 🔑 Bought in high growth market

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