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weekender

Friday, March 1, 2024

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Penrith is on a quest to win a fourth straight NRL title and continue an incredible era of success at the club.

Nathan Cleary will lead Penrith's Premiership charge. Digitally altered image.

A SPECIAL 20 PAGE PENRITH PANTHERS SEASON PREVIEW WRAPAROUND

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ANOTHER TITLE DEFENCE KICKS OFF

Rugby league is back! The Penrith Panthers will begin their quest for a fourth straight NRL title when they battle Melbourne at AAMI Park in the opening round of the competition next week.

The eyes of the NRL world will be watching on to see if the Panthers' juggernaut can

continue to roll on after Ivan Cleary's side made the last four Grand Finals.

The NRL itself gets underway this weekend in Las Vegas - with competition matches taken to America for the first time.

"We have so much to look forward to in Season 2024," NRL CEO Andrew Abdo said.

"The Premiership

kicks off a weekend early in Las Vegas giving fans an extra week of football and an enormous opportunity to launch the biggest season of Rugby League. The 2024 Premiership will be 32 weekends of football, packed with themed rounds, rivalries, excitement, and anticipation.

"The opening and closing rounds will have fans on the

edge of their seats with big rivalry derbies and blockbuster match ups throughout."

For the first time ever, the NRL will launch the Telstra Premiership across two continents with a free Rugby League Las Vegas Fan Fest to be held ahead of the historic season-opening double header at Allegiant Stadium.

Today (Friday, March 1), the

Fremont Street Experience in Las Vegas will see players from the Rabbitohs, Broncos, Sea Eagles and Roosters all gather on stage.

Australian band Sheppard and DJs the Stafford Brothers will perform.

At the same time, players from the NRL clubs who will play their Round 1 matches the following weekend will gather in Sydney today to launch the season in a simultaneous event with the teams in Las Vegas.

The NRL this week released its 2024 video campaign, a 60-second film dedicated to the game's fans and the season ahead.

View the launch commercial at www.nrl.com.



The Panthers will look to defend their 2023 crown this year. Photo: NRL Photos.

KEY DATES

- March 3: NRL season kicks off
- March 8: Penrith's first game
- June 5: Origin I
- June 26: Origin II
- July 17: Origin III
- July 25: NRLW season kicks off
- October 6: NRL Grand Final

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SEASON PREVIEW

THREEMENDOUS PANTHERS LOOK TO GO



TROY DODDS

What keeps them hungry? What motivates them? Two questions asked about the Penrith Panthers all off-season.

But true champion teams don't look for answers to those questions. It just comes naturally.

The Chicago Bulls, Manchester United, New York Yankees... champion teams across different eras have always just been able to lift when most challenged.

It's why Panthers coach Ivan Cleary brushed aside talk that a 'theme' similar to the Everest, Top Gun and Undisputed concepts of recent seasons was already in place for 2024.

As he explained at the season launch, those themes are only implemented when a legitimate

Premiership run is detected; not to motivate already champion players before a ball has been kicked.

Penrith has already achieved what no team has done in the NRL era by producing a Premiership three-peat. This team does not need its credentials checked at the door and they are legitimate title favourites.

But challenges this season? There are many.

It would be extremely surprising if Penrith doesn't have a slow start to the season.

There's been a short pre-season, a trip to England for the World Club Challenge and no trial matches on home soil - a preparation that nobody would change for the world given the circumstances that



Sunia Turuva is in for a big season. Photo: NRL Photos.



Iconic moment: Nathan Cleary scores in the 2023 Grand Final. Photo: NRL Photos.

creates it, but a difficult one nonetheless.

It doesn't help that the Panthers face a pretty tough draw over the opening month of the competition, starting with an away trip to Melbourne who are round one specialists, before matches against past Grand Final rivals Parramatta and Brisbane and a visit to Allianz Stadium to tackle the Roosters.

There is an easier run through the middle part of the season where you would expect the Panthers to make up some ground, but it's not going to be a cake walk.

Challenging too this year is the loss of Stephen Crichton.

It is perhaps the biggest departure of this Premiership era. Crichton is a true athlete, offers plenty of size and strength, and is a prolific try scorer. The Panthers have always covered for losses during this period but nobody can deny 'Critt' is an almost impossible man to replace.

Exactly how Penrith's backline looks in the opening weeks still has some clouds over it, but it's likely Taylan May will get a shot in the centres to replace Crichton with Sunia Turuva maintaining his wing spot.

Turuva is one of the key components to a successful 2024 - if he can grow from what was a stellar breakout season last year, he could become one of the most damaging finishers in the competition.

Key too is obviously the fitness of Nathan Cleary, the code's best player and Penrith's game manager. While new recruit Brad Schneider will likely wear the number seven jersey a few times this season, there's no question keeping Cleary fit and firing is mission critical.

His halves partner in Jarome Luai will surely be up for a huge season, though it may be a delayed start as he continues to recover from shoulder surgery. All of Penrith's big-name departing players in recent years have had strong final seasons with the club and I doubt Luai will be any different as he strives to leave his beloved Panthers on a high.

I'm excited to see how Daine Laurie is used this year, while it's hard to imagine the Geyer family story not beginning a new and important chapter this year via Mav. It has the potential to be one of the year's great storylines when he's finally given his chance to follow in his father's footsteps and play first grade for Penrith.

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ALL THE WAY

That will likely come off the bench initially, where there is a lot of intrigue. The likes of Laurie, Tyrone Peachey, Paul Alamoti, Matt Eisenhuth, Soni Luke and Luke Garner will all be sniffing around for spots, while Lindsay Smith is an obvious lock.

There are many challenges ahead this season, many of them obvious (such as the daunting representative period), many of them unpredictable and likely unexpected.

It must also be mentioned too that this is the final season at the current Penrith Stadium before the bulldozers come in ahead of a major upgrade.

For many players, there will be some added emotion and motivation there.

Certainly, it feels like the move out of the stadium acts as a line under this incredible era.

When all is said and done, it's hard to imagine Penrith not being there when the whips are cracking again, and perhaps that 'May the Fourth Be With You' theme will get a run after all - at the right time, of course.

It all begins against Melbourne at AAMI Park on Friday, March 8.

Bring it on!



Jarome Luai heads into his final season at the Panthers. Photo: NRL Photos.

PENRITH'S BUSY OFF-SEASON

- 10 players selected for Pacific Championship
- Trip to England for World Club Challenge
- Season launch held on February 6
- 'Undisputed' documentary launched on February 12
- Jarome Luai confirms his exit from 2025

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1 **AWAY**  **FRI 8 MAR**
KICK-OFF: 8:05PM
AAMI PARK


2 **HOME**  **FRI 15 MAR**
KICK-OFF: 8:05PM
BLUEBET STADIUM

3 **AWAY**  **THU 21 MAR** *Multicultural Round*
KICK-OFF: 8:00PM
BLUEBET STADIUM

4 **AWAY**  **THU 28 MAR**
KICK-OFF: 8:00PM
ALLIANZ STADIUM

5 **AWAY**  **SAT 6 APR**
KICK-OFF: 5:30PM
4 PINES PARK

6 **Bye**

7 **BATHURST**  **SAT 20 APR** *Royce Simmonds Cup*
KICK-OFF: 3:00PM
CARRINGTON PARK

8 **AWAY**  **SAT 27 APR** *ANZAC ROUND*
KICK-OFF: 7:35PM
QLD COUNTRY BANK STADIUM

9 **AWAY**  **THU 2 MAY**
KICK-OFF: 7:50PM
ACCOR STADIUM

10 **HOME**  **FRI 10 MAY**
KICK-OFF: 6:00PM
BLUEBET STADIUM

11 **AWAY**  **SUN 19 MAY** *Magic Round*
KICK-OFF: 1:50PM
SUNCORP STADIUM

12 **AWAY**  **SAT 25 MAY** *Indigenous Round*
KICK-OFF: 5:30PM
POINTS BET STADIUM

13 **HOME**  **SAT 1 JUN**
KICK-OFF: 5:30PM
BLUEBET STADIUM

14 **HOME**  **SUN 9 JUN**
KICK-OFF: 4:05PM
BLUEBET STADIUM

15 **AWAY**  **SUN 16 JUN**
KICK-OFF: 4:05PM
MCDONALD JONES STADIUM

16 **Bye**

17 **HOME**  **SUN 30 JUN**
KICK-OFF: 4:05PM
BLUEBET STADIUM

18 **AWAY**  **FRI 5 JUL**
KICK-OFF: 8:00PM
SUNCORP STADIUM

19 **Bye**

20 **HOME**  **SUN 21 JUL**
KICK-OFF: 2:00 PM
BLUEBET STADIUM

21 **AWAY**  **SUN 28 JUL**
KICK-OFF: 2:00PM
WIN STADIUM

22 **HOME**  **SUN 4 AUG**
KICK-OFF: 2:00PM
BLUEBET STADIUM

23 **AWAY**  **FRI 9 AUG**
KICK-OFF: 8:00PM
COMMBANK STADIUM

24 **HOME**  **THU 15 AUG**
KICK-OFF: 7:50PM
BLUEBET STADIUM

25 **AWAY**  **SAT 24 AUG**
KICK-OFF: 3:00PM
GIO STADIUM

26 **HOME**  **FRI 30 AUG**
KICK-OFF: 8:00PM
BLUEBET STADIUM

27 **HOME**  **SAT 7 SEP**
KICK-OFF: 7:35PM
BLUEBET STADIUM

WED 5 JUNE
KICK-OFF: 8:05PM
ACCOR STADIUM

WED 26 JUNE
KICK-OFF: 8:10PM
MELBOURNE CRICKET GROUND

WED 17 JUL
KICK-OFF: 8:10PM
SUNCORP STADIUM



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PANTHERS GO DOWN IN PRE-SEASON GAME

The World Club Challenge has been marred in controversy with several key refereeing decisions in the spotlight after Wigan's 16-12 win over Penrith.

The Warriors' victory will forever be remembered for a number of howlers that left fans bewildered.

In the 52nd minute, the referee and video referee awarded what would ultimately be the winning try to Wigan's Jake Wardle.

But replays showed that not only did Wardle promote the ball after being tackled, he never made it to the line.

Then, Liam Martin was penal-

ised for a one-on-one strip that would have put Penrith right on the attack at a crucial stage of the game.

It was an extraordinary decision with replays showing it was an age between other defenders dropping off the tackle and Martin taking the ball.

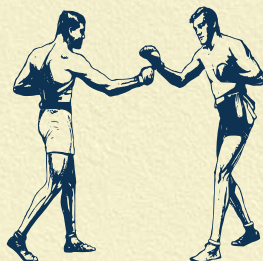
The icing on the controversy cake came in the final play of the game when Taylan May appeared to cross in the corner to level the match at the death.

But the on-field referee sent it up as 'no try' and the video referee couldn't find conclusive evidence to overturn the decision.

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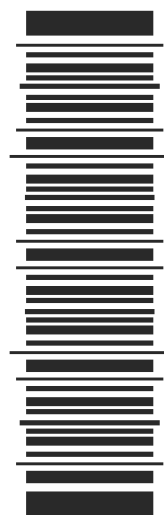
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WHAT YOU NEED TO KNOW ABOUT 2024

Here's everything you need to know about the season ahead...

Rule changes

There's only one significant change to the rules this season.

If a team kicks the ball out on the full over the touch line, or the ball fails to travel at least 10 metres forward in an attempt to contest a restart from the goal-line, 20m line, or half-way line, play will now restart with a play-the-ball 10 metres out from the line of the kick and 10 metres in from touch, rather than with a penalty kick.

The change will give more incentive for teams to attempt short kick-offs or drop-outs.

Broadcast

Channel Nine will continue to broadcast matches live on Thursday night, Friday night and Sunday afternoon during the season, with additional games from time-to-time and Saturday evening broadcasts over the last few weeks of the season. Nine is the exclusive home of State of Origin and the Grand Final.

Fox League and Kayo will broadcast every game of the 2024 season, including the Finals. The only games Fox won't show are the three State of Origin matches and the Grand Final. 'NRL 360' is already back on air.



Adam Gee will go into 2024 as the game's leading referee. Photo: NRL Photos.

Radio coverage will continue across 2GB, ABC Radio, Triple M and SEN.

Print coverage

The *Western Weekender* will

commence its weekly NRL lift-out, *Extra Time*, from next week (Friday, March 8) with dedicated Penrith Panthers coverage.

All your favourites are back -

including The Masked Panther, who has an entire off-season of rumours and scoops to get through. Peter Lang returns with *Lang on League*, Troy Dodds has the weekly preview,

and we will now print weekly team lists bigger and clearer.

We're the paper the players love to talk to - so don't miss Nathan Taylor's exclusive chats with the team throughout the year, while you can follow Penrith's brightest footy minds in our celebrity tipping competition.

Head to www.westernweekender.com.au/getpaper to find out more.

The betting

The TAB has the Penrith Panthers as Premiership favourites yet again, sitting at \$4.00 to win the Grand Final and \$2.10 to make the big one. Brisbane is next at \$4.50 followed by the Roosters at \$9.00.

If you think the Panthers will miss the Finals, you'll get \$7.00 with the TAB. The Panthers are also Minor Premiership favourites at \$3.25.

Tickets

Hoping to attend a game at BlueBet Stadium this year? Ticketing is extremely limited, with tickets released for batches of games through the year at www.penrithpanthers.com.au.

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NATHAN TAYLOR

He was one of Penrith's more well-known signings to start the 2023 season, however Luke Garner didn't quite hit the heights many fans were expecting of him.

Tipped to replace Viliame Kikau in the back row, the former Tiger only notched up a dozen NRL games in Panthers colours last season due to several factors including injury and form.

It may have only been 12 games, but incredibly three of them were in the NRL Finals.

Despite being low on confidence due to lack of game time throughout the year, Garner was there when his coach needed him most - Grand Final Day.

"I was having a bit of a rocky year but finished it off with a ring," he told the *Weekender*.

"It was a bit tough during the year not playing first grade, but I just kept staying positive, working hard and it paid off in the end.

"It was pretty surreal to win a premiership after getting the wooden spoon the year before arriving at Penrith."

Garner's demotion to NSW Cup

level after 75 first grade games with the Tigers was a shot to the ego for the 28-year-old, but being one of the senior players in the group allowed him to grow from the decision, which ultimately put him on a path to play in the most important games of the

NRL season.

"It was hard to stay positive. Coming in week in, week out and not playing, it was hard to stay positive but there was nothing I could do about that," Garner said.

"I could only control

what I could control and that was training hard."

After a rollercoaster first season at the Panthers, Garner will approach 2024 with a slightly different mindset - to be ready for anything at any moment.

His goal is to win another ring, and you can't blame him for wanting that feeling again.

"That's the goal, to get back and play in a Grand Final again. Whether I'm starting or on the bench, just pushing to win each week," he said.

Meanwhile, fellow backrower Liam Martin is hoping to secure his fourth premiership ring when Penrith kick off their season against the Storm down in Melbourne next Friday, March 8.

With an 81 per cent career win percentage to his name, the 26-year-old said winning can be very addictive.

"I definitely want to feel that winning feeling again," Martin declared.

"It's a new year, we can't keep dwelling on last year. We've got to start again."

Season 2024 will also be the final year the Panthers play at BlueBet Stadium before the bulldozers rumble in at the conclusion of the season. While the club is always farewelling players at year's end, it's not often you say goodbye to a beloved stadium too.

"It's been our stronghold and such a great ground for us over the last few years, and we want to make this year - our final year there - special for our fans," Martin said.



Luke Garner after winning the 2023 NRL Grand Final with Penrith last year. Photo: NRL Images.

Cheers for a successful Season Penrith Panthers 2024



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WW53276

FEATURE

WHY LIFE IS A LITTLE DIFFERENT FOR TO'O



NATHAN TAYLOR

He's seen countless teammates do it over the years and now Brian To'o will get his turn in season 2024.

Following the birth of his baby boy last October, the 25-year-old will get to live out a lifelong dream by bringing his new son, Atreus Goharome-Stephenny, onto the famous BlueBet Stadium turf after a match.

It'll be a special moment for the pair, who have been inseparable since To'o's wife, Moesha, gave birth late last year.

"The first two weeks of him being born were challenging and new, but big ups to my wife - she's definitely a team player, leads from the front and has been looking after baby very well," To'o proudly told the *Weekender*.

"She stays up at night with him, just doing all the little things. My little man's growing every day."

While taking his son to a footy game is on To'o's bucket list this year,

he also admits he can't wait to come home to his little family after putting in the hard yards on the field.

"It's something I'm looking forward to," the three-time premiership winner said.

"It's always been a goal of mine to have a child of my own and finishing a game - whether we win or lose - coming home to my children and my wife... nothing will beat that!"

Since making his NRL debut midway through 2019, To'o has been one of the most successful players in the competition. Not only has he played in four Grand Finals and won three titles, but he's also often first picked in State of Origin for NSW and played in a Rugby League World Cup Final for Samoa.

It's certainly been a remarkable five seasons in the top grade for To'o and, to make things more unbelievable, he hasn't even played his 100th game yet.

But while season 2024 is still to kick off, To'o can't stop thinking about losing another one of his best friends at the conclusion of the year.

Jarome Luai, one of To'o's best men

at his 2022 wedding, will play his final season at Penrith after signing a monster deal with the Wests Tigers in January.

After farewelling Stephen Crichton and Spencer Leniu at the end of last year, To'o is starting to think he may be the reason so many of his mates are leaving.

"I don't know if they're leaving because of me because I'm too annoying, but I know I'll miss Romey the most," he said.

"I definitely want to send him off on a high note. He's done a lot for this club and for all the beautiful fans of the Penrith Panthers as well. To send him off on a high note, I wish him all the best for that."

And it's not like the pair will be strangers once Luai departs, To'o is expecting his Samoan brothers to be around his place regularly.

"They can all come over to baby sit and let me have some sleep," To'o said about Luai, Crichton and Leniu.

"It's been good having the boys over and to check in on the baby as well. It's not really a goodbye, it's more of a see you again soon."



Brian To'o, his wife Moesha and their son Atreus. Photo: JTPT Media.



Best friends: Brian To'o and Jarome Luai. Photo: NRL Images.

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PHOTO SPECIAL

GLITZ, GLAMOUR AND FOOTBALL AS A

Penrith officially launched the 2024 season in early February with a glittering event at the Western Sydney Conference Centre. Thanks to the wonderful photographers from Panthers, here's some of the highlights...



Liam Martin with his partner Chelsea.



Panthers legend Royce Simmons conducts the player partner draw.



Lea Hicks from Hix Group with James Fisher-Harris after the player partner draw.



Panthers coach Ivan Cleary enjoys the night.



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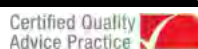
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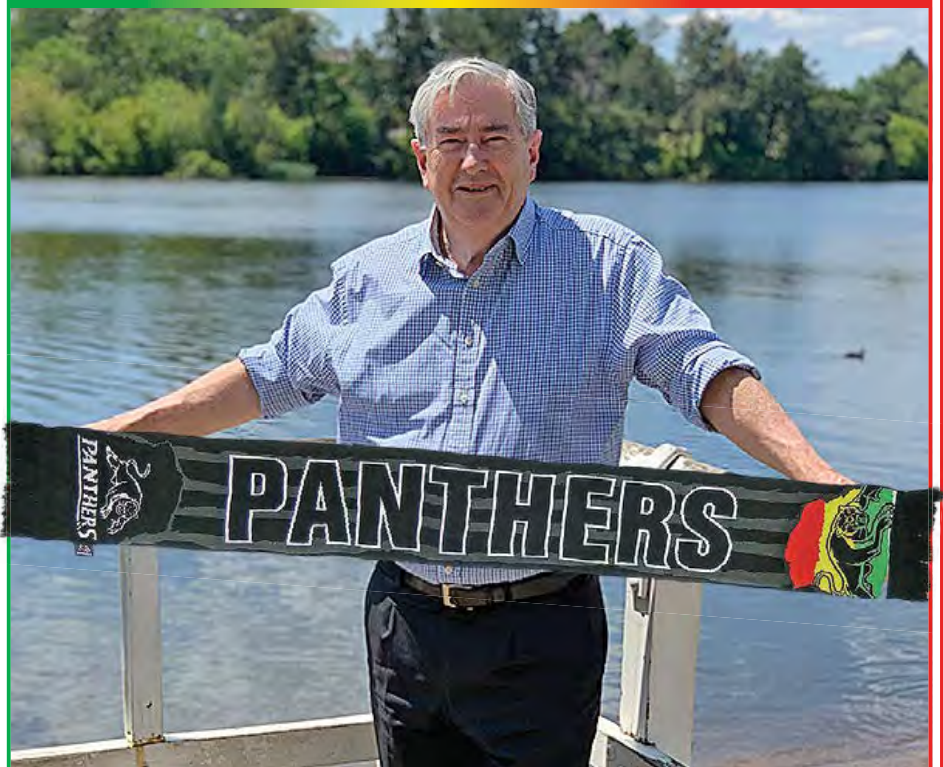
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Ivan Cleary with guests.



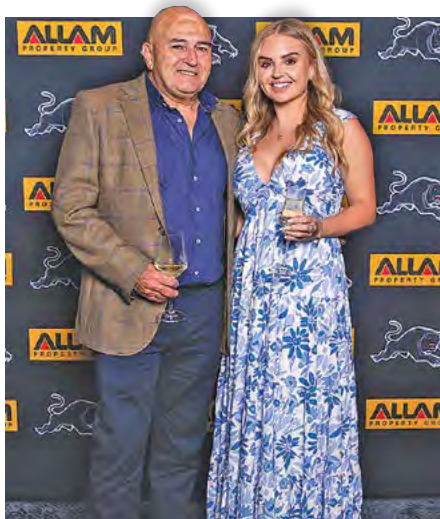
James Fisher-Harris, Nathan Cleary and Brian To'o.



Isaah Yeo and his partner Ashley.



Brian To'o and Jarome Luai.



Jim Hill and Meghan Hill.



Moses Leota and James Fisher-Harris hit the photo wall.

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FOURTH MAY BE HARDEST OF ALL



LANG ON LEAGUE

with Peter Lang

As a new season begins with the Penrith Panthers chasing a fifth straight Grand Final appearance and a fourth straight premiership, I've been asked many times, do I think they can do it again in 2024?

I'll answer that later. "We were told that we couldn't even win one (premiership)," Panthers coach Ivan Cleary told SEN 1170 Breakfast recently.

"We were then told we couldn't win two in a row or even three in a row.

"We have the talent to (win a fourth), we certainly have the experience and we have created that belief with the way we play."

More wise words were said by Ivan prior to the Preliminary Final last year in the *Sydney Morning Herald*.

"The only way we can fail is by not facing our fears and taking them head on," he said, "Face (your fears) head on - you can't fail if you do that."

That's the mindset of a winner folks. Penrith go into every game believing they can win the contest.

Whether they do or not is another story, but that belief is indoctrinated into every player's mindset until it becomes part of their DNA.

For example, co-captain Nathan Cleary believed, even when the team was down 24-8 in last year's Grand Final, that if they stuck to their systems, their core beliefs and values, they would win.



Ivan Cleary protecting the NRL trophy. Photo: NRL Photos.

And win they did. While the Panthers will be minus three of their Grand Final stars from last season in Stephen Crichton, Spencer Leniu and Jack Cogger, the belief that they can win a fourth consecutive title without them, is still the main focus of the team.

Another strong motivating factor is that their five-eighth and long-time teammate Jarome Luai, is in his final season with the club.

'Romey' has already begun labeling 2024 as the "The Last Ride" and he's determined to leave the club as a four-time premiership winner.

It's safe to assume that if Penrith are to defy history and win a fourth title, Luai will be a key component.

So many other things also need to go right, you need to minimise injuries, get a fair rub of the green with refereeing decisions (cough cough), the list goes on.

OK enough babbling. I know the coaching staff and players think they can win a fourth straight title and... I do too. I think they do it.

There's no doubt that Penrith's dominance will end one day.

I mean nothing lasts forever.

Especially with the team losing star players after every successful season. I think we all know this premiership winning run will end one day.

One day maybe, but not today!



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IS STADIUM RETURN IN DOUBT?

Stadium homecoming could take two years: The thought Penrith will only be away from BlueBet Stadium for one season while the venue undergoes a major upgrade is best put in the 'wishful thinking' category. It is more likely the Panthers will return to the venue mid-way through the 2026 season, which means more time on the road and, with any luck, a heavy home schedule at the back end of that season. But it's important to note that construction delays, particularly around weather, could ultimately see this blow out and it's not beyond the realm of possibility Penrith is away for two years.

Spotted: Jarome Luai diving into some strawberries like they were going out of fashion at the Panthers season launch in February.

Surprise wedding: A huge congratulations to Penrith Pantherettes choreographer and former cheerleader Kati Manning, who married her partner Justin in a surprise wedding over the off-season.

Off-season engagement: Luke Garner is not the only one in his household with a ring on his finger. The 2023 Grand Final winner popped the question to his partner Ash during the off-season – and she said yes!



Merch move questioned: I had a lot of feedback over the off-season about the new way merchandise packs for members happened this year. In short, there's no longer a set pack and instead members are provided a value and can pick from a whole range of items, including personalised products. I liked the concept – The Masked Panther does not need another hat to add to his collection – but the website was atrocious and therefore the end user experience felt poor.

Early exit: We noticed a couple of high profile Panthers players exited the premiere



An artist's impression of the new stadium.

of the 'Undisputed' documentary at the EVAN Theatre well before it ended. Only the first episode was shown and it was less than an hour – it's surprising they didn't stay.

Cullen cringe: There's some moments you just wish you could take back and I reckon Alex Cullen had one of those at the Panthers season launch. Cullen, who works at Channel Nine and was MC for the evening, asked Nathan Cleary about his relationship with Mary Fowler. Cleary played a straight bat but it's well known he's doing this best to keep the relationship out of the public eye. The Penrith captain would expect to be asked such questions by jourmos out and about – but it was pretty rough to be asked about it on his home turf.

Priority signings: I'd be very surprised if Penrith didn't announce new deals for Mitch Kenny and Sunia Turuva (pictured right) in the early part of the season. Both are off-contract at the end of 2024 but there's no real fear either will leave the club. With Jarome Luai's hefty salary now off the books for 2025 and beyond, Penrith can start to shore up other talent. Tylan May is the one with a question mark over his head – a unique character, it's hard to know exactly where his future lies for 2025.

The good – and bad – old days: It was intriguing to listen to podcasts over the summer

featuring Max Cowan and Glenn Matthews, who were both big figures at Panthers through the 1990s and 2000s. They both had some intriguing things to say about the past, present and future. In both cases it's still clear they have Panthers in the blood, even if there were some rough times. You can search *Western Weekender* wherever you listen to podcasts to hear both episodes of 'On The Record'.

Player of the Year: I can reveal a new Panthers award will be handed out this year with *The Western Weekender* running an unofficial Player of the Year concept through the season. 2003 Clive Churchill Medal winner Luke Priddis along with *Weekender* contributor Peter Lang, NRL journalist Nathan Taylor and Managing Editor Troy Dodds will vote on a 3, 2 and 1 basis each week – meaning 12 points is available in each Penrith game. A ladder and latest scoring will be available in the paper each week.

Got some gossip? As always, I don't keep secrets but I do protect

my sources. If you've heard a rumour, want to share a secret or you've spotted a player out and about, tell me about it at maskedpanther@westernweekender.com.au.



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