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Friday, February 24, 2023

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PENRITH'S #1 NEWSPAPER

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INSIDE

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inside!



SPECIAL EDITION: YOUR 2023 PANTHERS SEASON PREVIEW WRAPAROUND

"They're just mugs the way they carry on after a game."
Paul Kent, NRL 360

"At some point this
year, most likely deep in
September, the bubble will
burst. The Panthers' hopes
of a threepeat will come to
an end"

**Brent Read,
The Daily Telegraph**

"It's clear the success
has gone to their heads."
Paul Suttor, The Roar

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SEASON PREVIEW

FROM GREATS TO GREATEST: WHAT'S



TROY DODDS

When will they fail? When will Nathan Cleary fall back to Earth? How will they cope without Vilame Kikau and Api Koroisau?

The questions asked about Penrith this off-season are as predictable as they are tiresome; many from critics who already have so much egg on their face.

They're the same people who claimed Penrith couldn't go back-to-back. They're the same people who didn't rate Cleary, and now that he's got two Premiership rings, played in three Grand Finals, won a World Cup and bedded down the NSW Origin jersey, still find lame excuses as to why they believe their argument was valid. They're the same people who criticised Penrith's Grand Final celebrations last year, despite being incredibly tame by world standards – and even by NRL standards.

Anybody who knows the current modus operandi of this footy club knows that resting on their laurels is not part of the game plan. There is no question that the hunger remains.

There is always something special or unique to chase – last year it was the rarity of back-to-back titles, but more importantly doing it back in Sydney in front of a full house, after the COVID-impacted 2021 decider. This year, it is the mission to achieve something no club has done in the NRL era: three straight Premier-



Zak Hosking playing for Penrith in the pre-season. Photo: NRL Images.

Not the Melbourne side with Billy Slater, Cameron Smith and Cooper Cronk. Not the star-studded Roosters, either. Yet this Penrith team, full of local juniors and with a bond unrivalled in the NRL, are on the cusp of achieving it. But it is a long, treacherous journey to the first Sunday in October – and nobody knows what may lay ahead.

One thing for sure is that Ivan Cleary should lean in on the whole 'threepeat' mission. At the end of the day, teams play to win – there is no point in hiding from the reality of what winning this year would mean.

The departure of Koroisau is the biggest change the Panthers face as we head into 2023.

Koroisau had 12 try assists last season, made more than 1000 tackles and produced speed and energy out of dummy half better than any other hooker in the competition.

It would be unfair to compare him to his replacement, Mitch Kenny, who is a different kind of hooker who brings an entirely different skillset to the role; but it will certainly make things look a little different out there. Kenny didn't have a great game in his only pre-season hit-out against St Helens but given the awful conditions and his shortened pre-season, it's only fair to wait before judgement is passed.

Kikau's departure is not as problematic. Penrith literally ran the tank dry last season,

pushing the second rower to the limit with 80 minute performances. It paid off – Kikau had one of his best seasons on record, but whether or not he can back it up, especially with another year in the legs, is a huge question mark. New recruit Zak Hosking is a more than adequate replacement, but even then, there's no question Penrith's production line of junior talent will also throw up possible replacements during the year.

There's some players in line for stand-out seasons: Liam Martin is ready to explode this year, and the one-year contract extension he signed means he knows his next long-term deal will be the biggest of his career. He will



Dylan Edwards. Photo: NRL Images.

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DRIVING PENRITH IN '23

have a point to prove, both to Penrith and other potential suitors.

I'm also expecting a big season from Jarome Luai, who I think will benefit from another year of maturing under his belt. Sure, there's a best man speech out there that would suggest maturing might not be the right word – but in a footy sense, Luai would know he can't rely on 'flash' forever; and I have little doubt he's got a few things in his bag of tricks we're yet to see.

As for his halves partner Nathan Cleary, you just know what you're going to get. Perfect game management, clutch moments, a calm head.

Listening to him at a corporate event put on for sponsors this week, there is no question that he has become a legitimate leader, and I dare say he may even get better this year.

The key factor involved in Cleary having a good back end to the season could be the State of Origin series – another defeat could well impact his headspace, while leading the Blues to victory would see him return to Penrith with supreme confidence.

Talking of Origin, Penrith will again have to manage the rep period with care. Last year, Ivan Cleary masterfully directed his side through the Origin series despite the loss of key talent, and such a challenge will exist again. The Panthers will only be without their Origin players for one game (against

the Cowboys in Townsville) but will face questions over backing up players against the Dragons and Dolphins.

And so what of Penrith's draw? The round three bye is curiously placed – I'd suggest the Panthers would rather not halt early season momentum by having the break so early, but it will help prepare them for back-to-back road games in rounds four and five. There's a strong period in

late July and early August where Penrith play three straight home games, which could be important if a top four spot is on the line.

The one thing we know about this Penrith side is that they will approach the 2023 season prepared, professional and with no fear. There's no question they're a slightly weaker side in 2023 than they were in 2022, but write them off at your peril.



James Fisher-Harris playing against St Helens. Photo: NRL Images.



Ivan and Nathan Cleary are ready to go again. Photo: NRL Images.

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WELCOME TO THE 2023 SEASON



**MATT
CAMERON**

**Penrith Panthers
Rugby League CEO**

As we approach the start of another exciting season, I wanted to take a moment to express my gratitude to the Panthers members and fans for your unwavering support. Your passion and dedication to our team have been the driving force behind our success, and we are thrilled to have you as a part of the Panthers family.

2022 was a year that we will never forget, as the Panthers claimed premierships in the top four grades – it was a wonderful achievement for the entire Penrith community.

Panthers prides itself on being a community club, and it's been evident throughout the past couple of seasons. We aim to be a source of inspiration and aspiration in the community.

However, 2023 is a new season and we're ready to go again! I can confidently say that we are well-prepared and motivated to take on whatever challenges come our way. We have been working tirelessly in the off-season and look forward to our opening match against the Broncos at BlueBet Stadium.

We are thrilled to welcome our new recruits to the club, with Luke Garner, Jack Cogger, Tyrone Peachey and Zac Hosking joining the Panthers. We have also welcomed Ben Gardiner to join Peter Wallace as assistant coaches to Ivan Cleary. We have a talented coaching staff that is committed to our players' development, and we are all working together to build a culture that our members and fans can be proud of.

Our returning players have been training hard over the past couple of months, and they are eager to return to the field for the 2023 NRL season. With a built from within mantra, Panthers has an exciting crop of young players that will be on display throughout this season.



Panthers CEO Matt Cameron with Head of Motorola Australia and New Zealand, Kurt Bonnici. Motorola extended their agreement with the Panthers over the off-season.

None of our achievements would be possible without the unwavering support of our corporate partners. I'd like to acknowledge our major partners, Oak Plus, Hertz, Allam Property Group, KFC Australia, Bluestone Home Loans, O'Neills Sportswear, BlueBet, Tooheys New, Instyle Solar, Turner Freeman Lawyers, Motorola Australia, Westfund Health Insurance and Ultra Air. I'd also like to thank the *Western Weekender* for their continued support of 13 seasons as a corporate

partner, as they keep the community in touch with the Panthers.

As we embark on this new season, I want to thank all the members and fans once again for your incredible support. Your passion for the Panthers is what drives us, and we will do everything in our power to make you proud. We look forward to seeing you at the games, hearing your cheers, and celebrating our victories together.

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CLEARY FACES HIS TOUGHEST TASK



NATHAN TAYLOR

In just a few weeks' time, Ivan Cleary will notch up 400 games as a coach in the NRL.

During his 17 seasons in the coaches box, he's experienced more highs and lows than many ever will in his same position.

He's taken teams, like the Warriors, to an unlikely Grand Final appearance in 2011.

He's overseen numerous rebuilds at struggling clubs, including Penrith and Wests.

He's been famously sacked by one of the biggest figures in the game for being "too tired".

He's coached his superstar son to Premiership glory on two occasions.

And now he's aiming to become the first rugby league coach since Jack Gibson in the early 1980s to guide his team to three consecutive first grade titles.

Ivan Cleary has well and truly seen and done it all over two decades, but what he's about to embark on in season 2023 could be his greatest challenge yet.

Yes, he has an incredibly special team at his disposal, but getting that group to reach the heights like in previous years will be one mighty task.

Speaking with the *Weekender* on the eve of the new season, Cleary said this year will be no different in terms of motivation.

"I haven't seen anything that's worried me one bit in pre-season in terms of motivation and where we want to be," he said.

"The NRL is such a tough comp and I think something we've done really well in the past few years is staying present with what's in front of us and, at this stage, that's Round 1 against the Broncos next week."

While Cleary has lost a few big names in the off-season like Api Koroisau and Viliame Kikau, he is buoyed by the fact that the several new faces that have joined the club will now give his side the refresh it may need to avoid becoming stale and predictable.

Cleary said losing players to rival clubs is just a fact of life when your side is as successful as the Panthers currently are.

"It seems to happen each year and it's a good

challenge for all the coaches as well, getting players from other clubs and trying to teach them our system and how it all works," he said.

"It's just evolution. It's well-known the more successful you are, it's really hard to keep your team together, so for each season it's a new year with different players and different circumstances and this year is no different.

"I'm really happy with our new recruits – they are all good people and good players. I think it'll take a bit of time to work their way in, but they've all come with the right attitude and that's the first thing."

Following the departures of Cameron Ciraldo and Andrew Webster to head coaching roles at the Bulldogs and Warriors respectively, Cleary will also be joined by two new faces in the coaches box this season. While Peter Wallace has been on the coaching staff for some time, he has been elevated to Cleary's top assistant alongside former Wests Tigers mentor Ben Gardiner.

Cleary said he's excited to see what new ideas his two new right-hand men will offer in season 2023.

"Wal has been there for a bit now and Ben Gardiner, I've worked with him before [at the Tigers]," Cleary said.

"They'll both bring different ideas, different ways of presenting things and I just think it's always nice to have a bit of a change and freshen up and see and hear things a different way."

The Panthers will once again go into another season as favourites to win the competition, but things won't come easy for them.

Already they've lost one of their biggest attacking weapons in winger Taylan May, who

was ruled out earlier this week with an ACL injury.

The 21-year-old flyer was Penrith's top try scorer last year and was even named the club's Rookie of the Year. Cleary said the loss of May before a ball had even been kicked was devastating.

"It's terrible news for anyone but Taylan's definitely had his fair share of setbacks lately. I've got to say, all things considered, he's taking it remarkably well," Cleary said.

"Everyone is rallying around him and trying to keep him busy. He sees a surgeon next week and then it's about ticking off the little milestones of recovery.

"It's a real rocky road, a long time out of the game watching everyone else play, but he's made a good start, which is pleasing."

May suffered the season-ending injury during Penrith's shock World Club Challenge loss to Super League Champions St Helens last Saturday night at BlueBet Stadium.

Cleary said he's taking plenty of lessons out of the Golden Point defeat, which he still can't shake nearly one week on.

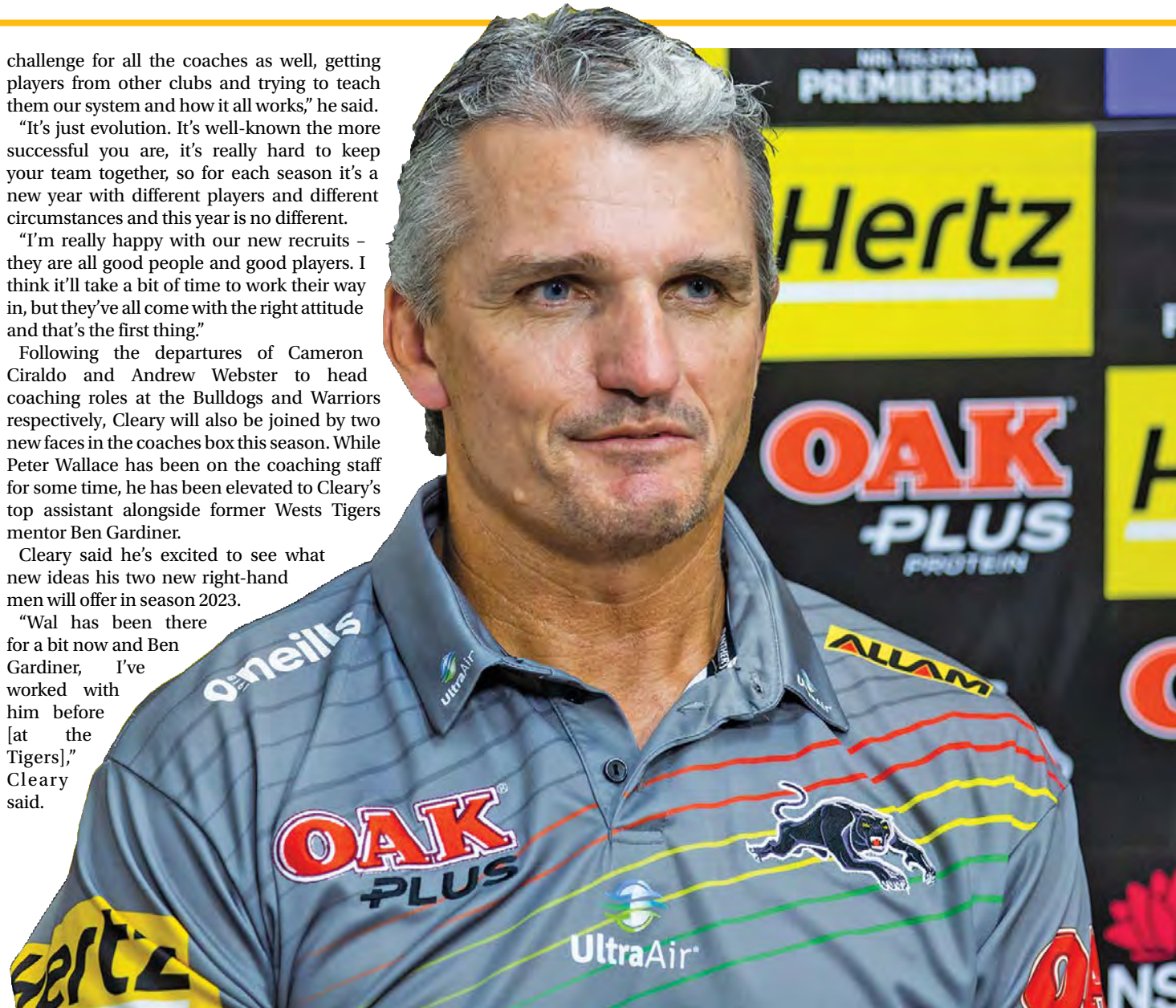
"That loss stung for sure... it stung. We weren't really happy with how we played," he admitted.

"To St Helens' credit, they played well and came with a purpose. It was pretty obvious how much it meant to them.

"It was an extremely tough game for a first hit out, but there were a lot of lessons to take out of that game and into the opening rounds of the year. That's the way we are looking at it, but we can't sugar coat the fact that we were all very disappointed afterwards."

Cleary confirmed that Penrith's injured trio of Dylan Edwards, Liam Martin and Scott Sorensen would be available for selection for Round 1 next week.

"I'm expecting those guys to be fit," he said.



Panthers coach Ivan Cleary is aiming to take his side to the summit again this year. Photo: Megan Dunn.



Nathan and Ivan Cleary celebrate last year's Grand Final success. Photo: NRL Images.

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THE PLAYERS

PANTHERS ARE “FOREVER MOTIVATED”

 **NATHAN TAYLOR**

Panthers star Jarome Luai says no matter how many competitions Penrith win during his time at the club, the motivation will always be there to secure more and more titles.

The NSW Origin five-eighth believes this special group of players – who have already won back-to-back NRL Premierships – will always have a hunger to go out and win footy games because every time they put on that Panthers strip, they are playing for their fans and community.

“Just the group that we have here, the leaders we’ve got, the energy within our side – we’re forever going to be motivated, I think,” Luai told the *Weekender*.

“This is our hometown and we’ve always got something to play for when we put this black jersey on, so it’s always going to be the same for us.”

Penrith will be chasing a third consecutive premiership in 2023 when their long road to glory gets underway next Friday night against the Brisbane Broncos at BlueBet Stadium.

While the term ‘threepeat’ is currently on everyone’s lips when



Panthers five-eighth Jarome Luai chats with the *Weekender*’s Nathan Taylor. Photo: Melinda Jane.

referring to what Penrith are aiming to achieve this year, it’s a word that’s not being uttered much inside the Panthers Rugby League Academy.

“Every year is a huge year and a pretty big point was made not to worry about that (the threepeat), but just take it one year at a time because that’s what’s important,” Luai said.

“You’re only as good as your last

game and, to be frank, we lost our last game, so there’s a lot of improvement in our side to go.”

In what was a shock to most rugby league fans watching on, the Panthers did lose their last game in front of a packed house at BlueBet Stadium last weekend.

While Penrith were heavy favourites to knock off St Helens on home

turf and claim their first ever World Club Challenge trophy, the Super League Champions had other ideas.

With the Penrith weather on Saturday giving off tropical North Queensland vibes, St Helens came to play and arguably won one of their biggest matches in the history of the historic club.

Luai, who praised St Helens for

travelling to other side of the world and getting the job done, said losing an important game in front of the Panthers’ faithful was really tough to stomach.

“Every game means a lot to us, especially playing at home. It hits different when we lose at home,” he said.

“We’ve built a fortress at Penrith and we hate losing at home. It hurts us, but we weren’t expecting to play the perfect game for our first game of the year. We have a lot of work to do now leading into Round 1 and we’re going to work hard.”

Penrith are expected to field a much stronger line-up in the season opener against the Broncos on March 3, with the likes of 2022 Clive Churchill Medallist Dylan Edwards and internationals Liam Martin and Scott Sorensen set to return to the side.

Luai said he also needs to step his game up this year if Penrith are to create some more history come October.

“I’ve got to step up... I have more experience under my belt now and I need to take a lot of pressure of Mitch [Kennedy] and Nath [Cleary],” the 26-year-old said.

“I need to get my hands on the ball and run the footy more because that’s my strength.”



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THE PLAYERS

KENNY'S CHANCE TO SILENCE THE DOUBTERS

 **NATHAN TAYLOR**

Following his three-year apprenticeship under one of the best hookers in the game, Panthers dummy-half Mitch Kenny believes he's more than ready to wear the club's famous number nine jumper on a permanent basis.

With Api Koroisau donning different colours this season, Kenny has been given first shot by Penrith coach Ivan Cleary to fill one of the most important positions in the team.

After picking the brain of the new Wests Tigers skipper over the past few seasons, the 25-year-old said he's more than ready to step up and take his game to a whole new level this season.

"I'm feeling good... in terms of timing, my age and where I'm at in my career, I feel like I'm ready to dive into the deep end now," Kenny told the *Weekender*.

"My teammates and my coaches have instilled a lot of faith in me, so I'm just looking forward to getting into

games, ripping in and repaying the faith. We've had a good pre-season, I'm pretty fit and have been working on a lot things. It's now time for footy and go ride that rollercoaster."

2022 was a huge year for Kenny. Not only did he amass 24 first grade games – the most in his career – but he also wrapped the season with an NRL Premiership.

Kenny said Penrith's Grand Final triumph over the Eels last October would be up there with one of the best days of his life.

"It was pretty phenomenal," he admitted.

"It is a long time ago now but it's something that doesn't leave you quickly or at all, perhaps. I've still got really fond memories; I can remember that night vividly.

"It's something you work so hard to achieve and, to finally get it, is pretty amazing. But, as soon as you get back to training, you put it all on the back-burner because you can't live off that feeling forever. But once you know how good it is, you want it again."

With just 60 first grade games to his name, Kenny is now the most

senior dummy half at the club. With Soni Luke and up and comers like Luke Sommerton, Connor Mason and Ryley Smith chasing his tail in the grades below, Kenny knows he's going to have to perform in 2023 to keep his spot.

Kenny praised the youth coming through the system and said he was still learning every single day from people at the club as well as his from competitors.

"You've got some really good hookers around this club, like Royce Simmons, Peter Wallace and Kevin Kingston, so there's plenty of people to go to still for advice," Kenny said.

"I'm also training with plenty of great hookers as well – Soni Luke, Luke Sommerton, Connor Mason, Ryley Smith – all those guys are super talented and hard-working, so we're all able to bounce off each other a little bit.


"And then just watching other hookers ply their trade in the game as well. There's people you can learn from all the time and your competition, just everywhere I look to try and gain something I will."



Mitch Kenny during the World Club Challenge. Photo: Megan Dunn.





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THE KEY MATCHES

FIVE GAMES YOU CAN'T MISS IN 2023

 **TROY DODDS**

Penrith's draw looks full of highlights and key games, but we've singled out five matches we believe are the not-to-be-missed showdowns in 2023.

Opening day: Panthers v Broncos
There is nothing quite like the first game of the new season and for Penrith fans it comes against Brisbane at BlueBet Stadium on Friday, March 3 at 8.05pm.

Tell your boss you're knocking off early so you've got plenty of time to soak up the atmosphere at the club before heading across to the game.

The two clubs have met 40 times since the NRL was formed in 1998 with Brisbane winning 23 of those encounters, Penrith 16 and one draw being thrown in. But Penrith have held the wood over the Broncos in recent times - in fact you have to go all the way back to August 2019 to find the last time Brisbane got the chocolates.

With the Broncos desperate to get their season underway with a win given last year's spectacular fall from the top eight before the Finals, and the Panthers keen to put the World Club Challenge loss behind them, this promises to be a blockbuster Friday night showdown.

Parra seeks revenge: Panthers v Eels
All eyes will be on CommBank Stadium in Parramatta on Thursday, March 23 when 2022

Grand Finalists Penrith and Parramatta meet for the first time since last year's Grand Final (excluding a pre-season trial).

These matches are always billed as Grand Final re-matches, a chance for the losing side to get one over the team that claimed the trophy on the biggest day.

This western Sydney rivalry has only grown in recent years, reaching fever pitch when the two sides clashed at Accor Stadium in October last year.

The Panthers, fresh from a round three bye, will be keen to rub salt into Parramatta's wounds.

Grand Final preview: Panthers v Roosters
If you follow the betting markets and believe the experts, the Panthers and Roosters are every chance of clashing in this year's Grand Final. Many believe it is the Roosters who hold the key to dismantling the success Penrith has built in previous years.

That makes the Round 11 clash between the two sides at BlueBet Stadium on Friday, May 12 one of the most anticipated matches of the season.

The corresponding game last year wasn't without controversy, adding a bit of extra spite to the Trent Robinson v Ivan Cleary rivalry.

If all has gone as planned in the opening few months of the season, there's every chance this will be a top of the table clash - just as the weather starts to get a touch colder.

First time meeting: Panthers v Dolphins
By the time the Panthers and Dolphins



Moses Leota taking the ball up against the Eels in the 2022 Grand Final. Photo: NRL Images.

meet on Sunday, July 16 in Redcliffe we'll know how the NRL newcomers have performed this year under Wayne Bennett, but it won't take anything away from the interest surrounding this one.

It'll be the first meeting between Penrith and the Dolphins, a slice of history in its own right.

And it'll reignite the battle between Panthers coach Ivan Cleary and Bennett, which reached new heights during the 2021 season and leading up to the Grand Final.

Grudge match: Panthers v Bulldogs
Fans will have to wait until Sunday, July 23 for

the Panthers to tackle Canterbury at BlueBet Stadium - and what a reception it'll be for Gus Gould's new team.

While Penrith fans adore Viliame Kikau, there's no doubt he'll be shown very little love on this Sunday afternoon in the depths of winter.

Penrith fans have a newfound hatred for Canterbury, driven by Gould's big-time recruitment of Penrith talent, including assistant coach Cameron Ciraldo and centre Stephen Crichton, who will join the club next year.

Get ready for a good old fashioned grudge match as the NRL's newest rivalry goes off.

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WORDS THAT WILL DEFINE 2023



LANG ON LEAGUE

with Peter Lang

My first column of 2023 is going to be a little different. I'm going to start by talking about God. Stay with me.

When God created the Heavens and the Earth, he did so by speaking. God literally spoke the world into existence.

You see words are powerful. Words can do many things. They can inspire, they can discourage and they can make you believe things... both positive and negative.

For months now, the media, opposition fans, even Panthers supporters have been speaking four words which form two names. Api Koroisau and Viliame Kikau.

The answers have been different, but the question has been the same. Can the Panthers three-peat in 2023 without these two talented players in their side?

"No way" say most journos, "the loss of these two players is just too big". There's no doubt Penrith will miss Api's creativity around the ruck while out wide the team will miss Kikau's monster runs and bone jarring defence.

League supporters and media commentators have mostly agreed with the journos.

Of course, it was all just a theory until the World Club Challenge game against St Helens last weekend.



Can the Panthers win it again without Api Koroisau and Viliame Kikau? Photo: NRL Images.

Now let me make something clear, St Helens won the match, fair and square, they were the better side on the night.

Now let me make another thing clear. The Panthers did not lose the match because they didn't have Koroisau and Kikau in the side.

Of course it didn't stop the journos in the press conference asking the question we all knew was coming.

Was Api and Kiks absence a big reason behind the loss?

Coach Ivan Cleary answered with these words; "With respect to those guys, we loved them and they were a big part of what we did but they're not here anymore... we've just to work our way through it.

"At the end of the day, it's one game and... we got a lot out of it. How we can get better and evolve (as a team) for example."

Now I'd like to finish with a few words from the wonderful 2023 Panthers season launch video.

"It's a new year... we're still on top... and we're here to stay!"

But they're just words, aren't they? Yes, they are. Powerful, inspirational words... spoken into existence.

See you in *Extra Time* next week.

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2023

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 RD 3 <i>BYE</i>	 RD 12 THU 18 MAY 7.50PM SUNCORP STADIUM	 RD 21 SUN 23 JUL 2.00PM BLUEBET STADIUM
 RD 4 THU 23 MAR 7.50PM COMMBANK STADIUM	 RD 13 <i>BYE</i>	 RD 22 SAT 29 JUL 7.35PM BLUEBET STADIUM
 RD 5 FRI 31 MAR 6.00PM GIO STADIUM	 RD 14 SUN 4 JUN 6.15PM BLUEBET STADIUM	 RD 23 FRI 4 AUG 8.00PM BLUEBET STADIUM
 RD 6 SAT 8 APR 5.30PM BLUEBET STADIUM	 RD 15 SAT 10 JUN 7.35PM ALLIANZ STADIUM	 RD 24 THU 10 AUG 7.50PM 4 PINES PARK
 RD 7 SAT 15 APR 5.30PM McDONALD JONES STADIUM	 RD 16 FRI 16 JUN 8.00PM QLD COUNTRY BANK STADIUM	 RD 25 SAT 19 AUG 5.30PM CBUS SUPER STADIUM
 RD 8 <i>ANZAC ROUND</i> THU 20 APR 7.50PM ACCOR STADIUM	 RD 17 SAT 24 JUN 5.30PM BLUEBET STADIUM	 RD 26 THU 24 AUG 7.50PM BLUEBET STADIUM
 RD 9 SAT 29 APR 7.35PM CARRINGTON PARK	 RD 18 FRI 30 JUN 8.00PM STADIUM TBC	 RD 27 SAT 2 SEP 5.30PM BLUEBET STADIUM

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STATE OF ORIGIN

 GAME I WED 31 MAY ADELAIDE OVAL	 GAME II WED 21 JUN SUNCORP STADIUM	 GAME III WED 12 JUL ACCOR STADIUM
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CHRIS SMITH

DYLAN EDWARDS

EDDIE BLACKER

ISAAH YEO

IZACK TAGO

JACK COGGER

JAMES FISHER-HARRIS

JAROME LUAI

JACK COLE

JESSE MCLEAN

LIAM HENRY

LIAM MARTIN

LINDSAY SMITH

LUKE GARNER

MATT EISENHUTH

MITCH KENNY

MAVRIK GEYER

MOSES LEOTA

NATHAN CLEARY

SCOTT SORESENSEN

SONI LUKE

SPENCER LENIU

STEPHEN CRICHTON

SUNIA TURUVA

TAYLAN MAY

TOM JENKINS

TYRONE PEACHEY

ZAC HOSKING

IVAN CLEARY (COACH)

INJURY REPORT

Penrith have been dealt a pre-season blow with winger Taylan May ruled out for 2023. May, who was due to miss the opening two games of the season through suspension, will now sit out the entire season after sustaining an ACL injury during the World Club Challenge last Saturday.

The Samoa international suffered the knee injury during the first half of Saturday night's match. Scans revealed May will require surgery on the ACL injury, ruling him out for the entire season. It's a huge blow for May who also missed last year's Grand

Final through an injury he suffered in the opening weekend of the Finals. Sunia Turuva is likely to come into the side to start on the wing, though Jesse McLean also remains an option. Outside of May, Penrith will go into the opening round of the season fully fit.

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PRE-SEASON IN PICTURES

ANTICIPATION IN THE AIR AT LAUNCH

The Panthers held their official season launch at the EVAN Theatre in early February. Here's some of the colour from a spectacular night in Penrith...



Matt Cameron with Kurt Bonnici.



Action from the red carpet arrivals at the season launch.



Dylan Edwards and his partner Nadine.



The 2023 first grade squad gathered on stage after being presented to the crowd at the season launch.

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Isaiah Yeo at the season launch.



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Taylan May networking with sponsors.




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THE CHEERLEADERS

CHEERING FOR A PANTHER THREE-PEAT

 **CASSIDY PEARCE**

There's no doubt that the 2022 NRL season was a massive one for the Penrith Panthers. According to choreographer Kati Manning, it was equally as monumental for the Pantherettes.

"Last year was absolutely fantastic. We had an incredible season, topped off with a back-to-back Grand Final win," she said.

"The NRL was taken to Queensland in 2021, so no one got to live it. To be physically there at the Grand Final in 2022 and have that entire stadium roaring and screaming for the Panthers was absolutely sensational. The girls and I had an absolute ball."

One of the cheerleaders who performed in last year's Grand Final is 24-year-old Emma Bayliss, who said that the atmosphere was "something else".

"Being in the Finals and being able to be there in person was so different and so exciting, because we definitely missed out on quite a lot over the past two years," she said.

"We think about being there in person every season, but to actually experience it was insane."

Bayliss will be returning for her sixth season with the Pantherettes



Kati Manning (left) with this year's Pantherettes squad.

this year, joined by 15 fresh faces, welcomed to the squad after their auditions in January. One of this year's rookies is Jasmine Salas, who, having been unsuccessful in her

audition in 2022, was ecstatic to hear her name announced as part of this year's team.

"I wasn't expecting to get in, so when they called my name, I was

completely surprised," she said.

"Last time I got to exactly where they pick the team, and that's where I got cut, so this year, making it in was a total shock, but I'm so grateful."

Just a few weeks into pre-season training, the 20-year-old said she's already loving being a Pantherette, and can't wait to be out on the field for the first time.

"I'm so glad I came back, because I love it so much," she said.

"It's such a good team to be a part of, and the girls are lovely. It's a really nice environment to be in to be dancing again."

In addition to some new faces on the team, the Pantherettes also have a new sponsor this year, in Atmosphere Fitness.

"Atmosphere Fitness is such a great gym and club in the Penrith area, which offers such amazing facilities," Manning said.

"To have a fitness company come on board to support the Pantherettes is absolutely fantastic, because the girls do need to be fit and athletic to keep up with game day routines and keep up with training, and look after themselves physically, mentally and nutritionally."

And it seems there might be even more surprises from the Pantherettes this year as the Panthers work to achieve a historic hat-trick of NRL premierships, said Manning.

"I don't want to give away too much, but there's lots of new things for the Pantherettes in 2023," she told the *Weekender*.

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THE BROADCASTERS

HOW TO WATCH THE NRL THIS SEASON

Rugby league is about to be back, dominating our television screens, newspapers and radio stations in the weeks ahead. And there is plenty to be intrigued about this year: can the Penrith Panthers make it a threepeat with another Grand Final win? What will the Dolphins bring to the competition under the legendary Wayne Bennett? Can the Bulldogs start to regain their status as an NRL powerhouse? Here's what you can expect from footy coverage in 2023:

Television
Fox Sports and Channel Nine remain the two broadcasters of the NRL this season. Fox Sports will show every single game of the NRL Telstra Premiership, including the Finals, on its 24-hour footy channel, Fox League. The likes of Andrew Voss, Dan Ginnane and Warren Smith will be back in the commentary box for another big year of calling matches, alongside the likes of Cooper Cronk, Michael Ennis and Greg Alexander. Fox has exclusive rights to the Friday 6pm game, all Super Saturday matches and Sunday 2pm games, or Sunday night games when applicable. Its flagship magazine show 'NRL 360' will air Monday to Wednesday at 6.30pm. Channel Nine will be back as the game's free-to-air broadcaster, showing matches on Thursday night, Friday night and Sunday afternoon. Nine also has exclusive rights to the NRL Grand Final and State of Origin series. Mat Thompson will lead Nine's coverage in the commentary box this season.



Ray Hadley will call State of Origin and the Grand Final on 2GB. Photo: NRL Images.

Radio
You'll continue to hear games broadcast live across 2GB, ABC 702, Triple M and SEN. All stations will also present regular magazine programming to complement their NRL coverage. The biggest change for the year is over at 2GB, where former Jillaroo Allana Ferguson joins the long-running Continuous Call Team. She joins Mark Levy, Darryl Brohman, Mark Riddell, David Morrow and Paul Gallen, as well as Boyd Cordner and Josh Morris. Ray Hadley will headline the commentary box during the State of Origin series, and NRL Finals.

Print
The *Western Weekender* will continue its long-standing tradition of being the newspaper of record for the Penrith Panthers, presenting its *Extra Time* pull-out from March 3. Troy Dodds will write the weekly Panthers match preview, while Nathan Taylor will speak to the biggest names at the club throughout the season. Peter Lang will provide his weekly views with 'Lang On League', while The Masked Panther returns with 'Panther Rumbblings'. *Extra Time* will also feature the

Weekender's Celebrity Tipsters, Cheerleader of the Week, Face in the Crowd and so much more, including coverage of the lower grades. It'll be out inside the *Weekender* each week, and available as a stand-alone Digital Edition.

Online
The official NRL app continues to be the place to go get all your live scores when you're out and about and can't catch the game. League Live is another option, providing up-to-the-minute scoring across each match. The official NRL website, www.nrl.com, is first with team line-ups every Tuesday at 4pm.



Andrew Voss will call games on Fox League, and be heard on SEN's breakfast show in Sydney.

Wishing the Panthers the best of luck in the 2023 NRL season!

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THE RULE CHANGES

WHAT'S NEW IN 2023?

There's no dramatic rule changes for the 2023 NRL season, in what can only be described as a win for fans.

However, there's been a number of amendments to interpretations that have been locked in for the new footy year.

The changes are designed to enhance the existing laws and interpretations which have led to a faster, more free-flowing and unpredictable game.

Here's some of the changes you may notice in 2023...

Grounding the ball

Tries will now be awarded if the ball rotates from the hand to the wrist or forearm provided there is no obvious separation between the ball and the hand or arm. The new interpretation will allow further clarity for officials when adjudicating grounding.

Operation of the 18th player rule

The number of failed head injury assessments will be reduced from three to two to trigger the activation of the 18th player. This will allow greater flexibility for clubs which lose multiple players to head injuries in a match.

Intervention of Bunker in foul play

The Bunker may only intervene for acts of foul play which it deems to be

reportable. The change will ensure fewer needless stoppages while also confirming a firmer process around foul play intervention.

Captain's Challenge

A challenge may be initiated after the referee blows his whistle to stop play, rather than only after a decision resulting in a structured restart. Decisions which cannot be challenged will continue to include forward passes, roll balls and discretionary penalties including 10m offside, ruck infringements relating to play-the-ball speed, tackled into touch after held call and dissent. A Challenge can be made following the final play in each half provided the referee has not already called half or full-time. The changes will add further clarity for fans, broadcasters, clubs and players around when a Captain's Challenge can and cannot be initiated.

Off-side infringements at scrums

A full penalty will be awarded (rather than a set restart), for off-side scrum infringements by the defensive team anywhere on the field. The non-infringing team will retain the option of repacking the scrum or taking the awarded penalty. Any team which deliberately locks the ball in the scrum to trap defenders in an off-side position will also be penalised.

10m compliance in general play

Active defenders must have both feet in line or behind the referee when setting the 10-metre defensive line. Referees will have the option of awarding a full penalty for multiple 10m breaches without requiring the mandatory use of the sin bin. Referees can still use the sin bin if they consider breaches to be deliberate or cynical. The changes will give further clarity to officials and teams around what constitutes a breach of the rules.

Adjudication of completed tackles

Referees will issue a single call of "held/release" when a tackle is complete, rather than the separate calls of "held" and "release". The change will address unnecessary slowing of the play-the-ball and improve game continuity.

"While relatively minor, these changes will improve three elements of the game - player safety, the game presentation for fans and off-side compliance," NRL Executive General Manager - Elite Football Graham Annesley said during the pre-season.

"These changes will allow clubs and players clarity on certain issues while also giving fans more entertainment and transparency as the game evolves in 2023."



Referees will likely be in the spotlight again this season.

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PRE-SEASON IN PICTURES

THE WORLD COMES TO PENRITH PARK

In a slice of history, BlueBet Stadium hosted the World Club Challenge for the first time last Saturday night. In wet conditions, St Helens prevailed 13-12 over Penrith in golden point extra time. Here's some of the big moments...



Jarome Luai deals with the tough conditions. Photo: NRL Images.



Champions: St Helens. Photo: NRL Images.



Panthers fans at the World Club Challenge. Photo: Megan Dunn.



St Helens fans enjoying the atmosphere. Photo: Megan Dunn.



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Isaiah Yeo in action. Photo: Megan Dunn.



Stephen Crichton. Photo: Megan Dunn.



Fans brave the conditions at BlueBet Stadium. Photo: Megan Dunn.



Nathan Cleary in the shocking conditions at BlueBet Stadium. Photo: NRL Images.

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THE TRIALS

NO WORLD DOMINATION FOR PANTHERS



TROY DODDS

It was a mixed pre-season for Penrith on the field, with a trial win over Parramatta to kick-off the NRL Pre-Season Challenge, and a heartbreaking loss to St Helens in the World Club Challenge.

The victory over Parramatta in front of 3,525 fans at BlueBet Stadium was an important one given the opportunity it afforded to so many of the team's rising stars.

With the majority of the first grade side sitting out the encounter, the likes of hooker Luke Sommerton and exciting winger Jesse McLean were stand-outs in the 22-16 win.

All eyes however were on the World Club Challenge, where Penrith were short-

priced favourites to claim another trophy over English champions St Helens, who had won four straight Premierships.

It was a game that had everything: torrential rain, a lightning delay, golden point extra time and a field goal to win it. But in the end, World Club Challenge glory eluded Penrith for a third time.

St Helens produced an upset for the ages, winning 13-12 at BlueBet Stadium in front of close to 14,000 fans despite being given barely a hope of claiming victory in the lead-up to the game.

All the talk pre-game was about the predicted scorching heat but it was instead a massive downpour that greeted the players at kick-off.

It favoured St Helens, who dominated the first half with superior line speed and high energy.

The Saints didn't score a try in the second half but when the second stanza did eventually get underway after a delay due to lightning, they remained in control.

Penrith scored two second half tries from kicks including a Brian To'o stunner on the stroke of full-time that sent the game to extra time, but there is no question St Helens were the better side throughout.

Stephen Crichton capped off a game he'd rather forget at fullback with a dropped ball in golden point that opened the door for St Helens to land the winner through a Lewis Dodd field goal.

St Helens players and officials stormed the field after Dodd's field goal, the upset victory clearly meaning plenty to a side that has dominated English rugby league for the last four years.

The matches against St Helens and Parramatta formed part of the NRL's Pre-season Challenge concept, which was won by Manly.

Penrith finished sixth on 19 of a possible 30 points, the golden point loss to the Saints proving exceptionally costly.

Canberra finished the Challenge in last spot.

Wet conditions greeted the players at BlueBet Stadium for the World Club Challenge.

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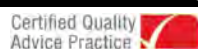
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YEO TO BECOME PANTHER FOR LIFE

Yeo may be a Panther for life: Penrith is working on a mega deal for co-captain Isaah Yeo that could make him a one-club NRL player and shore up his future at the back-to-back Premiers. Yeo is off-contract at the end of the 2024 season, so the Panthers have plenty of time to work out a new deal before he'd hit the open market. But I'm told they want to sign him to an extended deal that would take him through to the end of the 2027 season ASAP. Yeo would turn 33 at the end of that deal, and would be odds-on to play out any remaining years of his career at Penrith. While negotiations will go back and forth and we're a fair way off anything being made formal, don't be surprised if a major new deal is announced well before the end of the current season.

Extra time confusion: Plenty of Penrith fans have mentioned to me that they were left bewildered when St Helens players ran onto the field when Lewis Dodd landed the winning field goal in the World Club Challenge. While Golden Point was always the plan to sort out a winner if scores were tied, no announcement was made to the crowd at the conclusion of regulation time as to what would unfold – except that there would be “extra time”. Lots of fans thought it was a 10 minute extra time period.

Spotted: Tigers legend Paul Sironen escaping the atrocious weather conditions to watch his son Curtis go around for St Helens in the World Club Challenge on the big screen from underneath the western grandstand.

Spotted: St Helens brought a giant fan along to BlueBet Stadium to tackle the predicted scorching temperatures last Saturday night. Not surprisingly, it didn't get turned on.



Spotted: Panthers legend Tony Puletua, with beer in hand, greeting fans at his old stomping ground of BlueBet Stadium last Saturday night. It was a special match for the fit-looking Puletua, who not only played more than 200 first grade games with Penrith but also had a long stint with St Helens in the Super League.

Isaah Yeo after last year's Grand Final. Photo: NRL Images.



NRL effort in question: The NRL's handling of the World Club Challenge has been questioned by plenty. The severe lack of promotion frustrated many, including some Penrith officials, though the ongoing dispute between the players and the NRL was a likely stumbling block. There were also complaints about the high cost of corporate ticketing for the game. Chairman's Club tickets were \$420 per person, quite an ask for what's essentially a pre-season trial match.

Ticketing trouble: Loyal Panthers members were again spread around BlueBet Stadium on Saturday night because they couldn't buy their usual seat for the game. It is ridiculous to suggest the technology doesn't exist in 2023 to allow season ticket holders to purchase their regular seat. It's a frustration at Finals time too, and if the NRL is going to continue to control such matches, it needs to provide what would be considered a pretty simple and basic service to its most loyal fans.

Coach's blitz: Ivan Cleary has been putting his hand up for plenty of corporate speaking engagements lately. He was a special guest a businessman's lunch in Penrith last Friday, and delivered an impressive speech to sponsors at an event on Tuesday night.



School visit: Panthers players Jarome Luai, Jack Cogger and Isaiah Longi went back to school this week – paying a visit to Sacred Heart Primary School in Mount Druitt on Monday. The remainder of the Panthers squad visited other schools around the area.

Season launch off: The NRL won't be holding a formal season launch this year, given the ongoing dispute with players.

Leniu undecided: Despite all the talk about a deal with Canterbury being done, I'm assured that Spencer Leniu has not decided on his future beyond this season. Rumours linking the 22-year-old to the Bulldogs have been around for months now but Penrith

firmly believe they are still in the hunt to re-sign the forward. A couple of other clubs are also believed to be in the mix. Speaking to *The Sporting News* over the weekend, Leniu (pictured below) himself said: “I haven't heard about any offers just yet”.



Extra Time returns: A reminder that the *Weekender's Extra Time* pull-out returns next week, offering the best coverage of the Panthers. It's a must-read, and not just because I'm in it. First edition is out next Thursday/Friday in print and digital.

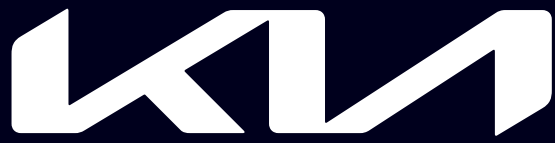
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