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The Maroons have a chance to seal their third straight series and the Blues are fighting to stay alive in 2024 as State of Origin arrives at the MCG.



Last Update 26 June 2024, That's because a new-look NSW Blues will be absolutely desperate to square the series after going down 38-10 in a controversial series opener.

“Desperation forces you to the contest earlier than your opposition.” Cronk said on the Matty Johns Podcast.

“... And then once you've got a lot of people thinking that way, that's why it ends up being that desperation that plays a key part.

“And to be fair, mate, like if I'm being completely honest, I'm probably more or less confident about Queensland in this game than any other game under Billy's leadership because of that.”

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The Blues have made five changes to their Game One team and Cronk has identified fullback Dylan Edwards as the danger man for Queensland tonight.

“I feel like he has just been building for this moment. This kid’s been waiting for this opportunity for a long time,” Cronk said.

“... I just feel like he’s gonna make up for lost time.”

#### ENNIS PREDICTS LATE NSW SWITCH

Rugby league legend Michael Ennis has predicted Michael Maguire will pull a big bench switch which could see the Blues’ target a tiring Queensland pack midway through the contest.

After only one game back from a hip injury with the Rabbitohs, Cameron Murray was called into the NSW outfit for Game II in the No.13 jersey, replacing Cameron McInnes.

Panthers star Isaah Yeo is also on the bench, and is one of the game’s elite locks and Ennis believes he will come into the run-on side when teams are finalised an hour before kick-off.

“Still intrigued to see what they do with Cameron Murray named at No.13, there’s no doubt he can do that and he’s obviously one of the elite players in the competition,” Ennis said on NRL Tonight.

“But he’s only one game back with South Sydney, and the form of Isaah Yeo throughout the whole season leads me to think there may be a late change there.”

Ennis believes the combination of Murray and utility debutant Connor Watson could be key to a potential NSW victory.

Both players could provide Maguire’s outfit with a boost of energy, with the Roosters gun likely to come on and take over at dummy-half from Robson.

“In conjunction with the rotation with Connor Watson, you think about Murray’s strength, that part in the middle of the game where (Harry) Grant comes on and he’s relentless with his running,” Ennis said.

“Relentless with his change of speed. It’s a great opportunity for us with someone like Watson and the play-the-ball speed of Murray to target some tired middle forwards in the middle part of the game.”

The initial timeline on his return was for Cleary to miss eight weeks, but it looks like Panthers fans will have to wait a little longer for their home match on July 21 which would also rule him out of a shock comeback for Origin III.

“We’re hopeful (that he’ll be back) after our next bye,” Penrith coach Ivan Cleary said.

“We’ve got a couple of games and then a bye, but that hasn’t been confirmed. He’s steadily going through his rehab and it’s going well. Let’s hope he keeps going well.

“That was a fairly loose target and it hasn’t been confirmed, but his rehab is going well.

“(His return date) has nothing to do with how we’ve been playing. This decision was made from the time he had the second injury.

“The bye is a part of it because if your team’s not here, you miss full team training which actually adds to the length of the rehab. At this stage everything is on track.”

Cleary has resumed training but is weeks away from peak fitness, with the Panthers unwilling to risk their most important player as they chase a fourth title in a row.

“He’s running but he’s a bit off hitting top speed and doing everything with the team. He’s gradually getting there,” his dad said.

“He’s well aware of the plan and everything involved. The last thing we all want is a re-injury.

“We’ve probably done more this time in and around looking into as many things as we could find (to help him) and we’re really comfortable with the approach we’ve taken. We’re very confident he’ll be fine.”

#### CLEARY COMEBACK HOPES SHUT DOWN BY PANTHERS

It doesn’t sound like Nathan Cleary is a chance of making a surprise comeback for the potential State of Origin series decider.

The Panthers are cautiously optimistic that Cleary will make his return from a hamstring injury for their round 20 match against the Dolphins next month, effectively ruling him out of a miracle comeback for the Blues in game three.

Cleary hasn’t played since scans revealed a grade two hamstring tear against the Bulldogs in round 10 in what was just his second game back from a similar injury suffered in the grand final rematch.

The triple premierships winner has been restricted to just five appearances this season after he conjured the greatest grand final comeback last year, but the Panthers have handled his absence well to sit second with the best defensive record.