



2013 Season Preview GO THE BLUES!

RM1903120

Herb the key ingredient

By Andrew Johnston

RUGBY LEAGUE

Canberra Raiders Cup Round 1

Who: Queanbeyan Blues v Goulburn

Where: Seiffert Oval

When: Saturday, 3pm

OVER the past 18 months, Marc Herbert has spent more time hitting the books than the tackle bags.

But despite returning from more than a year in the footballing wilderness, the former Canberra Raiders halfback is looming as the key piece in the Queanbeyan Blues' premiership puzzle.

This weekend, Herbert will lead the Blues out against Goulburn in his first competitive hit-out since breaking his hand while playing for the Bradford Bulls in August, 2011. It will mark a relatively low-key comeback to the game for a player who just three years ago was tasked with guiding the Canberra Raiders around the paddock in the NRL cauldron.

It's a return however, that until recently was far from assured.

Herbert walked away from the game in 2012, turning down the possibility of extending his stint in the English Super League to instead focus on his university studies.



Queanbeyan Blues recruit Marc Herbert turned down the opportunity to continue his career in the English Super League to instead focus on his university studies.
Photo: Andrew Johnston

"I was in the wilderness there for a bit I guess," Herbert laughed in his first interview with *The Queanbeyan Age* earlier this week. "At the time though, I just wanted a year off to get stuck into my studies and to focus on a career.

"To be honest, the time I was out of the game I didn't really miss it at all. But as I've got back into it I've started enjoying myself a lot more.

"There's obviously a lot less pressure there than playing NRL or Super League so it's good fun just

to be hanging out with the boys and kicking the footy around again."

In the second year of a construction management degree at the University of Canberra, Herbert admitted football was no longer the priority it once was in his life.

But the former Easts Tigers junior was talked into pulling on the boots again after being approached by new Blues coach Simon Woolford.

"Simon got in contact with me and said he was trying to put a really good side together at the Blues

this year and managed to convince me over coffee," Herbert said.

"Having a high profile coach like Simon involved is going to be a good thing for the team and being coached by a top line player as well is obviously a plus."

Expectations high as Blues ready title charge



Queanbeyan Blues coach Simon Woolford.

By Andrew Johnston

RUGBY LEAGUE

QUEANBEYAN Blues coach Simon Woolford is confident the club has assembled a squad capable of breaking the three-year Canberra Raiders Cup dominance of Belconnen and cross-town rivals the Kangaroos.

Between them, Belconnen and the Kangaroos have claimed the past three Canberra Raiders Cup grand finals.

During that time, the Blues have secured a lone grand final appearance with the powerhouse club's premiership drought now stretching back to 2008.

It's no secret the Blues are desperate to rectify that situation this season, opening the chequebook to lure the likes of Woolford and fellow former Raiders Marc Herbert and Trevor Thurling to Seiffert Oval.

"You look at the strong squads over the past couple of years at the Scholars and the Kangaroos and talent-wise, we're on even par with them now," Woolford said in the lead up to his side's first game of the season against Goulburn on Saturday.

"There's no doubt we've got the players, the job for me is to make sure we gel as a unit.

"My expectations are pretty high this year to be honest and the players' are as well so I

couldn't be happier with where we're at heading into the season."

Along with marquee signings Herbert and Thurling, Queanbeyan has been bolstered this season by Canberra Raiders junior Josh Chudleigh and former ACT representative rugby union fullback Tyler Stevens.

Chudleigh, rated as one of the most promising young rakes

in the Canberra competition, will deputise for injured captain Jordan Hammond during the first half of the season.

But while the talent at Woolford's disposal is undeniable, the raft of new signings mean the Blues head into this year's campaign with an almost entirely new-look side to the one that crashed out of last year's semi-finals.

"We're going to be running out there [on Saturday] with new halves, a new fullback, a new hooker, a whole new team basically," Woolford said.

"Obviously we'd like to see our best footy in round one but the reality is with a new squad, we're going to get a lot better as the year goes on."



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