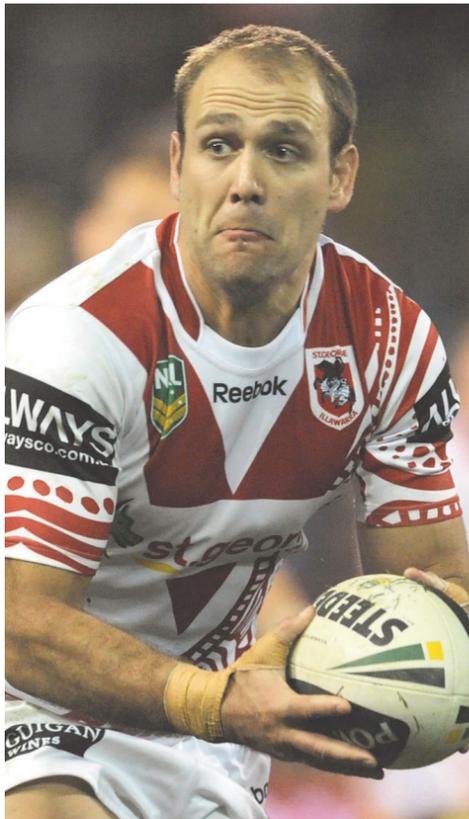


NRL 2014 SEASON PREVIEW



ST GEORGE ILLAWARRA DRAGONS

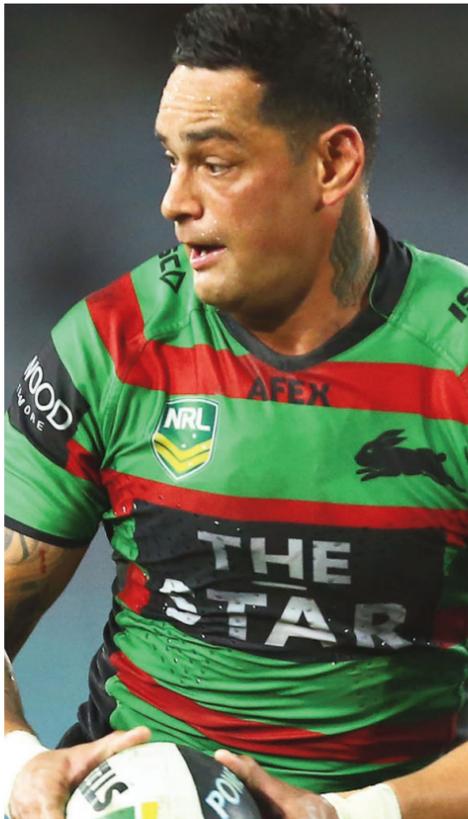
GAINS: Gareth Widdop (Storm), Sam Williams (Raiders), Joel Thompson (Raiders), Mike Cooper (Warrington Wolves), Dylan Farrell (Rabbitohs), Josh Ailaomai (Roosters), Matt Groat (Wests Tigers), Peter Mata'utia (Knights), Michael Witt (London Broncos), Willie Mataka (Illawarra Cutters).
LOSSES: Jamie Soward (Panthers), Michael Weyman (Hull Kingston Rovers), Matt Cooper (retired), Nathan Fien (retired), Chase Stanley (Bulldogs), Cameron King (Cowboys), Matt Prior (Sharks), Kayne Brennan (Bulldogs), Daniel Vidot (Broncos).

OUR VIEW

Strengths: The Dragons have one of the NRL's better strike forces in the outside backs with Brett Morris, Gerard Beale, Jason Nightingale and Josh Dugan.
Weaknesses: With coach Steve Price looking to move Ben Creagh from the back row to prop, the Dragons look light on up front.
Prediction: 12th. All comes down to how well the coach handles the immense pressure and scrutiny he will be under.

THE DETAILS

Key player: Former Storm player Gareth Widdop has come to step out of the shadows of the 'big three' and into the fishbowl that is rugby league in Sydney and the pressures associated with resurrecting the fortunes of one of the proudest clubs in the land.
The coach: Steve Price is very much a man under pressure given the club's performances since the departure of Wayne Bennett. After seeing the club finish ninth in 2012 and 14th in 2013, Red V fans will be demanding an improvement this year.
The x-factor: Origin fullback Josh Dugan could be the difference between a mediocre Dragons side and a truly threatening Dragons side. The 23-year-old bulked up a bit in the off season and if he's put his off-field dramas behind him he should be coming in to the peak of his powers.



SOUTH SYDNEY RABBITOHS

GAINS: Joel Reddy (Wests Tigers), Joe Picker (Raiders), Chris Grevsmuhl (Cowboys), Kirisome Auva'a (Storm), Lote Tuqiri (Leinster, Irish rugby union).
LOSSES: Nathan Peats (Eels), Roy Asotasi (Warrington Wolves), Matt King (retired), Michael Crocker (retired), Andrew Everingham (Japanese rugby), Justin Hunt (Eels), Dylan Farrell (Dragons), Josh Starling (Sea Eagles), Jeff Lima (Catalans Dragons).

OUR VIEW

Strengths: Incredible talent right across the park from Inglis through to Reynolds and on to the four Burgess brothers.
Weaknesses: The only weakness the Bunnies showed last year was to buckle under pressure in the finals.
Prediction: 2nd. Excellent pre-season trial form has the Rabbitohs fired up for a good start to the season.

THE DETAILS

Key player: Big season coming up for Souths' halfback Adam Reynolds. A standout season would see Reynolds replace Mitchell Pearce as the Blues number seven.
The coach: The only pressure Michael Maguire is under is the weight of expectation from one of the NRL's largest and most desperate supporter bases. 'Madge' recently signed a three-year contract extension keeping him at the club until the end of 2017 so in terms of job security, he has it in bucketloads.
The x-factor: Tom Burgess was a destructive revelation in 2013 as he repeatedly carried piles of defenders downfield on his hulking shoulders, his tree trunk legs pumping him ever forward towards the opposition tryline. Time and again last year the Bunnies scored on the play after one of his massive carries, as scattered defensive lines scrambled back into position.



SYDNEY ROOSTERS

GAINS: Remi Casty (Catalan Dragons), Jackson Hastings (Dragons), Jonathon Reuben (Raiders), Sio Siua Taukeiaho (Warriors), Heath L'Estrange (Bradford), Curtis Naughton (Bradford), Kem Seru (Dragons).
LOSSES: Josh Ailaomai (Dragons), Martin Kennedy (Broncos), Adam Henry (Bradford Bulls), Henare Wells (Burleigh Bears), John Asiata (Cowboys), Tinirau Arona (Sharks), Michael Oldfield (Catalans Dragons), Luke O'Donnell (retired).

OUR VIEW

Strengths: With the best player in the world and an abundance of representative stars, there's a good chance the Roosters could go back to back in 2014.
Weaknesses: Hard to spot a chink in the Roosters armour. The pressure of repeating last year's glory could be their only hurdle.
Prediction: 1st. Hungry Rabbits will be the only thing stopping the Roosters finishing on top two years in a row.

THE DETAILS

Key player: Jame Maloney's value both in terms of his individual form and his partnership with Mitchell Pearce will again be the foundation on which the Roosters build their campaign in 2014.
The coach: Ice cool Roosters' mentor Trent Robinson has the red-hot Roosters well-placed to repeat their incredible 2013 success. A solid win over Wigan in the World Club Challenge points to Robinson being far from a one-hit wonder.
The x-factor: Any team boasting the best player in the world is bound to be a feared entity - that's the crown Sonny Bill Williams wears heading into season 2014 after being named the International Player of the Year by the Rugby League International Federation (RLIF) following his dominant contribution to the Tricolours' successful 2013 premiership campaign.



WESTS TIGERS

GAINS: Pat Richards (Wigan Warriors), Dene Halatau (Bulldogs), Cory Paterson (Hull Kingston Rovers), Martin Taupau (Bulldogs), Blake Austin (Panthers), Keith Lulia (Bradford Bulls).
LOSSES: Benji Marshall (rugby union), Blake Ayshford (Sharks), Lote Tuqiri (rugby union), Joel Reddy (Rabbitohs), Eddy Pettybourne (Wigan Warriors), Matt Groat (Dragons).

OUR VIEW

Strengths: Veterans Robbie Farah and Braith Anasta between them have a massive amount of club, Origin and Test experience to call on.
Weaknesses: There are still vulnerabilities in the Tigers forward pack if they suffer a couple of injuries, and inexperience is an issue.
Prediction: 16th. It will be a long year for coach Mick Potter with the spoon waiting.

THE DETAILS

Key player: Luke Brooks. Dubbed the next Andrew Johns, the rookie No. 7 isn't expected to take long to adjust to the big time. A rookie hasn't been met with so much anticipation and expectation ahead of a season since Brad Fittler debuted as a 17-year-old.
The coach: The knives came out early and often for the patient Michael Potter last year. Potter survived the death knell late in the season but another poor start and it will not take long for the critics to be calling for his head again.
The x-factor: In addition to Brooks, the Tigers boast some of the finest emerging talent in the NRL. There's fullback James Tedesco and his glorious Nines and World Cup campaign; the aerial prowess of David Nofoluma; the raw power of Marika Koroibete; the speed and skill of Tim Simona; and then expected breakout seasons from maturing forwards Martin Taupau, Curtis Sironen and Jack Buchanan.

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