

GANG OF [RUGBY LEAGUE] YOUTHS

Many of the names on this list were unknown to the vast majority of rugby league supporters at the start of the season. Six months on, the latest crop of rookies have made an imprint on their teams and the premiership at large.

Some were destined to play first grade through sheer ability. Others have had to persevere for an opportunity that would have passed by if not for resilience and good fortune.

Some will go on to careers that live forever. Others will be here today and gone tomorrow.

Such is the nature of the NRL.

Here are the leading 2023 Dally M Rookie of the Year contenders, along with the entire class of debutants (to date).

THE CONTENDERS

JAHREAM BULA (TIGERS)

In a team that has borne the brunt of misery on and off the field for the entirety of 2023, Wests Tigers fullback Jahream Bula has been a shining light of hope for the embattled joint venture. Making an immediate impression with multiple match-defining defensive plays just weeks into his career, the 21-year-old has been thrilling in attack to rank as one of the most dazzling rookies seen in recent years.

NRL Debut: Wests Tigers 16 v Manly Sea Eagles 22 - Round 8, 2023 (Fullback, #1)

JACOB PRESTON (BULLDOGS)

As one of nine players to debut for the Bulldogs in first grade this season, second-rower Jacob Preston has been the pick of the litter at Belmore. Making the most of his opportunity after moving across from North Sydney over the off-season, the 21-year-old has appeared in all but one game this season to earn an upgraded four-year deal.

NRL Debut: Canterbury-Bankstown Bulldogs 6 v Manly Sea Eagles 31 - Round 1, 2023 (Interchange, #17)

ISAIYA KATOA (DOLPHINS)

From the moment Isaiya Katoa was handed his NRL debut in the Dolphins' inaugural match, the young playmaker has performed beyond his teenage years. Enjoying a meteoric rise from a Jersey Flegg premiership with Penrith, quarter final appearance with Tonga and first grade debut in the space of a few months, Katoa looks set for a long career if his current trajectory is indicative of things to come.

NRL Debut: Dolphins 28 v Sydney Roosters 18 - Round 1, 2023 (Five-Eighth, #6)

VALYNCE TE WHARE (DOLPHINS)

Developing a cult following among the Redcliffe faithful prior to debuting in first grade, Dolphins centre Valynce Te Whare made the entire league community stand up and take notice with a brace of tries during Magic Round. Evoking memories of Konrad Hurrell with his destructive running style and hulking physique, the Kiwi-born powerhouse is sure to attract plenty of interest from rival clubs come 1 November.

NRL Debut: Dolphins 36 v Cronulla Sharks 16 - Round 10, 2023 (Centre, #21)

ALOFIANA KHAN-PEREIRA (TITANS)

Setting a club record - as a rookie - for tries in a season with 18 four-pointers in as many appearances, Alofiana Khan-Pereira has cemented his standing as a white line specialist. Penning an extension which will see the 21-year-old winger remain on the Gold Coast for a further three seasons, Khan-Pereira has proven to be dynamic in attack with 26 linebreaks and 32 tackle-breaks to date.

NRL Debut: Gold Coast Titans 22 v Wests Tigers 10 - Round 1, 2023 (Wing, #2)

BRENDAN HANDS (EELS)

Taking on enormous responsibility as Parramatta's main hooker through necessity for much of 2023, Brendan Hands has acquitted himself admirably under challenging circumstances. Coming through the lower grades with Penrith before gaining his opportunity with the blue and golds early in the season, the 23-year-old crossed for a crucial try against his former club on debut.

NRL Debut: Parramatta Eels 17 v Penrith Panthers 16 - Round 4, 2023 (Interchange, #15)

KULIKEFU FINEFEUIAKI (COWBOYS)

Kulikefu Finefeuiaki is the latest in a long line of exciting young forwards to emerge out of North Queensland during Todd Payten's tenure. Promoted to a development contract in the early rounds after impressing during his first pre-season, the 19-year-old has made a big impression despite limited game time off the bench.

NRL Debut: North Queensland Cowboys 20 v Sydney Roosters 6 - Round 19, 2023 (Interchange, #17)

WILL WARBRICK (STORM)

Making the most of his rookie season after an injury-interrupted initiation to rugby league last year, New Zealand Rugby 7s star Will Warbrick has made the right wing position his own in 2023. Crossing for 12 tries, including a four-try haul against the Tigers, Warbrick has proven to be yet another example of Melbourne's ability to develop talent from far and wide.

NRL Debut: Melbourne Storm 16 v Parramatta Eels 12 - Round 1, 2023 (Wing, #2)

DANIEL RUSSELL (DRAGONS)

Taking the long road to first grade after years toiling away in the Queensland state league, versatile forward Daniel Russell has finished his rookie year as a starting player, aged 27. Spending time in the North Queensland system and representing Papua New Guinea prior to debuting with the Dragons, Russell has shown promise in four appearances to date.

NRL Debut: St George Illawarra Dragons 26 v Canberra Raiders 36 - Round 19, 2023 (Interchange, #17)

SANDON SMITH (ROOSTERS)

In a year where a lot has gone wrong for the league's longest continuous club, the decision to give Sandon Smith a shot as a playmaker has been undeniably right. Gaining his opportunity midway through the year following injuries and underwhelming form from more acclaimed players, the 20-year-old has performed steadily with four try-assists and a 78% goal kicking record.

NRL Debut: Sydney Roosters 25 v Canterbury-Bankstown Bulldogs 24 - Round 14, 2023 (Interchange, #19)

WESTS TIGERS' FULLBACK JAHREAM BULA
ILLUSTRATION BY THE BIGGEST TIGER

STORY & RESEARCH
BY ROBERT CROSBY



NRL ROOKIE CLASS OF 2023

PANTHERS: Lindsay Smith (RD. 13, 2021), Soni Luke (RD. 7, 2022), Zac Hosking (RD. 17, 2022 - Broncos), Sunia Turuva (RD. 21, 2022), Thomas Jenkins (RD. 25, 2022), Liam Henry (RD. 25, 2022)

BRONCOS: Tyson Smoothy (RD. 1, 2021 - Storm), Xavier Willison (RD. 20, 2021), Brendan Piakura (RD. 24, 2021), Deine Mariner (RD. 20, 2022)

WARRIORS: Taine Tuapiki (RD. 3), Demetric Sifakula (RD. 9), Ali Leiatua (RD. 15); Ronald Volkman (RD. 15, 2022)

STORM: Will Warbrick (RD. 1), Bronson Garlick (RD. 1), Jonah Pezet (RD. 3); Kane Bradley (RD. 19, 2021 - Cowboys)

RAIDERS: Adrian Trevilyan (RD. 2, 2022), Trey Mooney (RD. 13, 2022), Ata Mariota (RD. 21, 2022)

SHARKS: Daniel Atkinson (RD. 25, 2021 - Storm), Thomas Hazelton (RD. 12, 2022), Jesse Colquhoun (RD. 18, 2022)

KNIGHTS: Ryan Rivett (RD. 3), Dylan Lucas (RD. 3), Thomas Cant (RD. 3)

RABBITOHS: Ben Lovett (RD. 4), Tallis Duncan (RD. 13), Tyrone Munro (RD. 18); Dean Hawkins (RD. 5, 2021), Shaq Mitchell (RD. 8, 2022), Izaac Thompson (RD. 21, 2022)

EELS: Brendan Hands (RD. 4), Luca Moretti (RD. 13), Arthur Miller-Stephen (RD. 23); Wiremu Greig (RD. 6, 2021), Sean Russell (RD. 15, 2021)

COWBOYS: Riley Price (RD. 5), Kulikefu Finefeuiaki (RD. 10), Zac Laybutt (RD. 13), Robert Derby (RD. 13); Tom Chester (RD. 18, 2022)

SEA EAGLES: Samuela Fainu (RD. 8), Dean Matterson (RD. 20); Kaeo Weekes (RD. 19, 2022), Raymond Tuaimalo Vaega (RD. 24, 2022)

ROOSTERS: Sandon Smith (RD. 14), Siua Wong (RD. 18); Junior Pauga (RD. 18, 2021 - Tigers), Naufahu Whyte (RD. 22, 2021)

TITANS: Alofiana Khan-Pereira (RD. 1), Iszac Fa'asuamaleaui (RD. 3), Keano Kini (RD. 10), Jacob Alick (RD. 19); Klese Haas (RD. 24, 2022)

DOLPHINS: Isaiya Katoa (RD. 1), Kurt Donoghoe (RD. 1), Mason Teague (RD. 2), Jack Bostock (RD. 5), Valynce Te Whare (RD. 10), Max Plath (RD. 14), Brayden McGrady (RD. 17), Harrison Graham (RD. 17)

BULLDOGS: Paul Alamoti (RD. 1), Jayden Tanner (RD. 1), Jacob Preston (RD. 1), Sam Hughes (RD. 6), Karl Oloapu (RD. 9), Blake Wilson (RD. 11), Khaled Rajab (RD. 14), Ethan Quai-Ward (RD. 19), Jeral Skelton (RD. 19); Franklin Pele (RD. 12, 2021 - Sharks), Kurtis Morrin (RD. 15, 2022), Declan Casey (RD. 16, 2022), Harrison Edwards (RD. 20, 2022)

DRAGONS: Toby Couchman (RD. 2), Daniel Russell (RD. 19), Connor Mulheisen (RD. 22), Ryan Couchman (RD. 23)

TIGERS: Brandon Tumeth (RD. 2), Jahream Bula (RD. 8), Tallyn Da Silva (RD. 16), Aitasi James (RD. 19); Justin Matamua (RD. 17, 2022)

WHO IS ELIGIBLE FOR THE ROOKIE OF THE YEAR?

Players are eligible for the Rookie of the Year in their debut season and the subsequent two NRL seasons. Once a player plays five (5) NRL Premiership matches (or English Super League matches), they become ineligible for the Rookie of the Year in any subsequent seasons.

Source: Dally M Awards FAQs