

NSW's Origin blues

Injuries leave holes in squad

By DEAN RITCHIE

THE NSW squad for State of Origin I this year is starting at eight changes from the side that clinched last year's third match in Sydney.

Injury, retirement and lack of football has placed pressure on the Blues' preparations. And there was confirmation last night Shaun Timmins — the field-goal hero of Origin I last year — has retired from representative football.

Timmins, Mark Gasnier, Matt Cooper, Brad Fittler, Trent Barrett, Danny Buderus, Mark O'Meley and Willie Mason — all part of Origin III in 2004 — will either miss out entirely or struggle for selection.

"What I have learned in Origin over the years is that you can settle on a team a week out but after a round of football there can be plenty of changes," NSW coach Ricky Stuart said.

"There is a lot of football to be played between now and then," he added.

But at the moment the signs are not good.

Gasnier has not played this season through injury, although he will return for the Dragons in this Saturday's match against the Sea Eagles in Wollongong.

Cooper has a fractured cheekbone and could miss another two to three weeks.

NSW star Fittler has retired while Barrett only returned for St George Illawarra from a leg injury last weekend.

O'Meley will not return from a calf injury until round six while last year's captain Danny Buderus has a foot injury and won't be back for Newcastle until round nine, leaving three matches to prove himself.

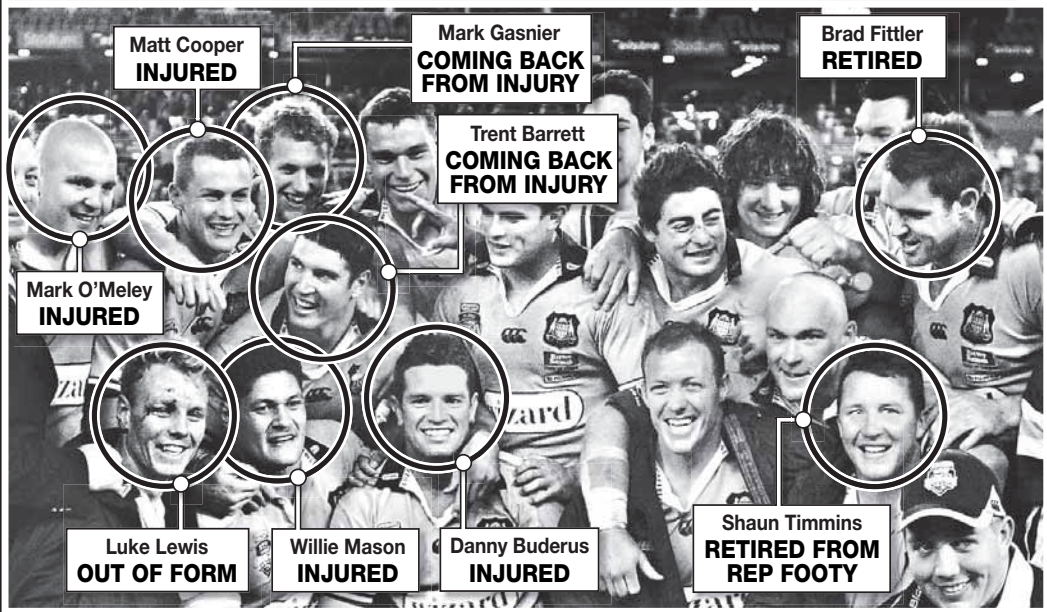
Mason, who came off the bench last year, has a chronic foot injury and will not return until at least round 20.

NSW selector Laurie Daley was not overly concerned but did say: "It's fair to say there are a few holes there at the moment through injury and retirement."

"But NSW has always come up with a strong side — there is always someone ready to step up."

"The guys who are missing at the moment will hopefully be back soon to press their claims. The opening Origin match is still a fair way away."

Origin vacancies



The form players

FULLBACK: Anthony Minichiello was the Roosters' standout back against Wests Tigers and there is no direct threat to his position with Brett Hodgson and David Peachey the next best.

STANDOUT: Minichiello

WING: Lewis is battling and Rooney is injured. Both were in flying form last year and Rooney was outstanding on the Kangaroo tour. On form Melbourne winger Matt Geyer is out in front, the Sharks' Luke Covell, Roosters flyer Amos Roberts and Canberra's Phil Graham are the pick of the rest.

STANDOUT: Geyer

CENTRE: Matt King is the form centre of the competition and should be the left centre in the side this year.

STANDOUT: King

FIVE-EIGHTH: Braith Anasta and Scott Hill offer the challenge to Barrett who has only had one game back from injury.

STANDOUT: Anasta

HALFBACK: Matt Orford is leading the field. His standing as equal leader of the Daily M count reflects the form he has been in. Kimmorley has been in

good touch but he, Gower and Johns are all behind Orford.

STANDOUT: Orford

LOCK: Ben Kennedy is the standout. At the Sharks Paul Gallen has been going well, Trent Waterhouse has been trying hard but seems a little way off his best.

STANDOUT: Kennedy

SECOND ROW: The unheralded pair of Melbourne's Ryan Hoffman and Manly's Anthony Watmough have been the best of the backrowers although Nathan Hindmarsh and Glenn Morrison have

been giving the Eels plenty of drive. Craig Fitzgibbon always works hard.

STANDOUT: Watmough

PROPS: Luke Bailey has been impressive in a losing side with Joel Clinton and Jason Ryles also in the mix.

STANDOUT: Bailey

HOOKER: Craig Wing wants to be considered a hooker but has been playing 6, 7 and dummy half for the Roosters. His form has been good and is probably a nose in front of Luke Pridis and Mark Riddell.

STANDOUT: Wing

Hooker Ben Elias, who played 19 Origin games, admitted the preparation was a worry for new coach Stuart.

Elias said the number of players out and struggling was "frightening".

"It's a concerning thought," Elias said. "I can assure you Ricky would have started preparations and he'll know how many spots are open."

"He is a great coach but would still be worried. "There are a lot of holes

open in the squad because of different circumstances."

The injury problems will enable selectors to consider elevating some of the game's new breed into the squad, which plays matches on May 25 (Brisbane), June 15 (Sydney) and July 6 (Brisbane).

Manly's Anthony Watmough is pressing for a spot in the squad, as is Melbourne centre Matt King.

Watmough is current co-leader of the Daily M Medal

with Melbourne halfback Matt Orford.

King has been superb form for the Storm this season.

Gasnier, 23, returns from a wrist injury to face Manly.

"I am really excited about getting out and playing. It has been a while," said Gasnier.

Timmins quit rep football due to an on-going knee problem, to enable him to play more for the Dragons.

"The decision was purely based on Shaun's injuries," said his manager George Mimis.

Queensland and Cowboys winger Matt Sing also announced his retirement yesterday from rep football.

Meanwhile the board of the Parramatta Leagues Club has been returned for a further two-year term. The Leagues Club board also controls the Parramatta NRL club.

PARRAMATTA lock Daniel Wagon will miss Sunday's match against Brisbane at Suncorp Stadium after entering an early guilty plea to a

grade one dangerous throw change yesterday.

He was outed for one match for a tackle on Penrith prop Joel Clinton during the Eels' 26-16 victory at Parramatta Stadium on Friday night.

Bulldogs hooker Corey Hughes escaped suspension after also submitting an early guilty plea to a grade one careless high-tackle charge.

Hughes was cited for a high shot on Sharks lock Paul Gallen in the Bulldogs' 26-12 loss at Toyota Park on Sunday.

Teen gets 30-year ban for hitting ref

From Back Page

"That's when I asked the ground official to get his identification card.

"He then swore at me and threw water on me and a water bottle at me, which dropped at my feet.

"Then he launched at me and hit me three times with a closed fist to my left cheekbone. "As he hit me I back-pedalled and tripped over a chair.

"That's when I smashed my

knee. Then he proceeded to kick me a few times and then the ground official tackled him."

Liverpool police were called and took statements from witnesses and players.

El Zamtar fronted a judiciary hearing on Monday night where the Berala player, who held aspirations of a professional football career, was suspended until December 31, 2005.

The Daily Telegraph under-

stands there will be a recommendation to the NSW Rugby League for the ban to be enforced worldwide.

Paul Tycehurst, the head of the Canterbury Junior League, expressed disappointment at the savage incident.

"I totally support the decision of the judiciary panel," Tycehurst said.

"The lengthy suspension shows that any abuse of referees or touch judges — or any

match official — is something that simply will not be tolerated. The message is clear — any such behaviour in the future will ensure a similar ban."

The Berala Bears coach is set to appear before a special committee to answer questions regarding the incident.

El Zamtar and a Berala club official appeared before the junior league judiciary panel.

Senior Bulldogs officials were kept informed about the violent incident and its aftermath.

Sharks in the clear

CRONULLA breathed a sigh of relief last night after all their players were cleared of the mumps. After concerns of possible exposure to Sonny Bill Williams and Willie Tonga on Sunday, Sharks officials yesterday had all the side — plus two trainers — give blood for testing at Cronulla headquarters.

Following the analysis of the samples at a nearby hospital, Sharks doctor Peter Malouf gave the club the all-clear in the early evening.

The tests revealed most players were inoculated against the mumps, although several were not and will be advised to get a vaccination against the illness that the Bulldogs believe has now struck down three key players.

— IAIN PAYTEN

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