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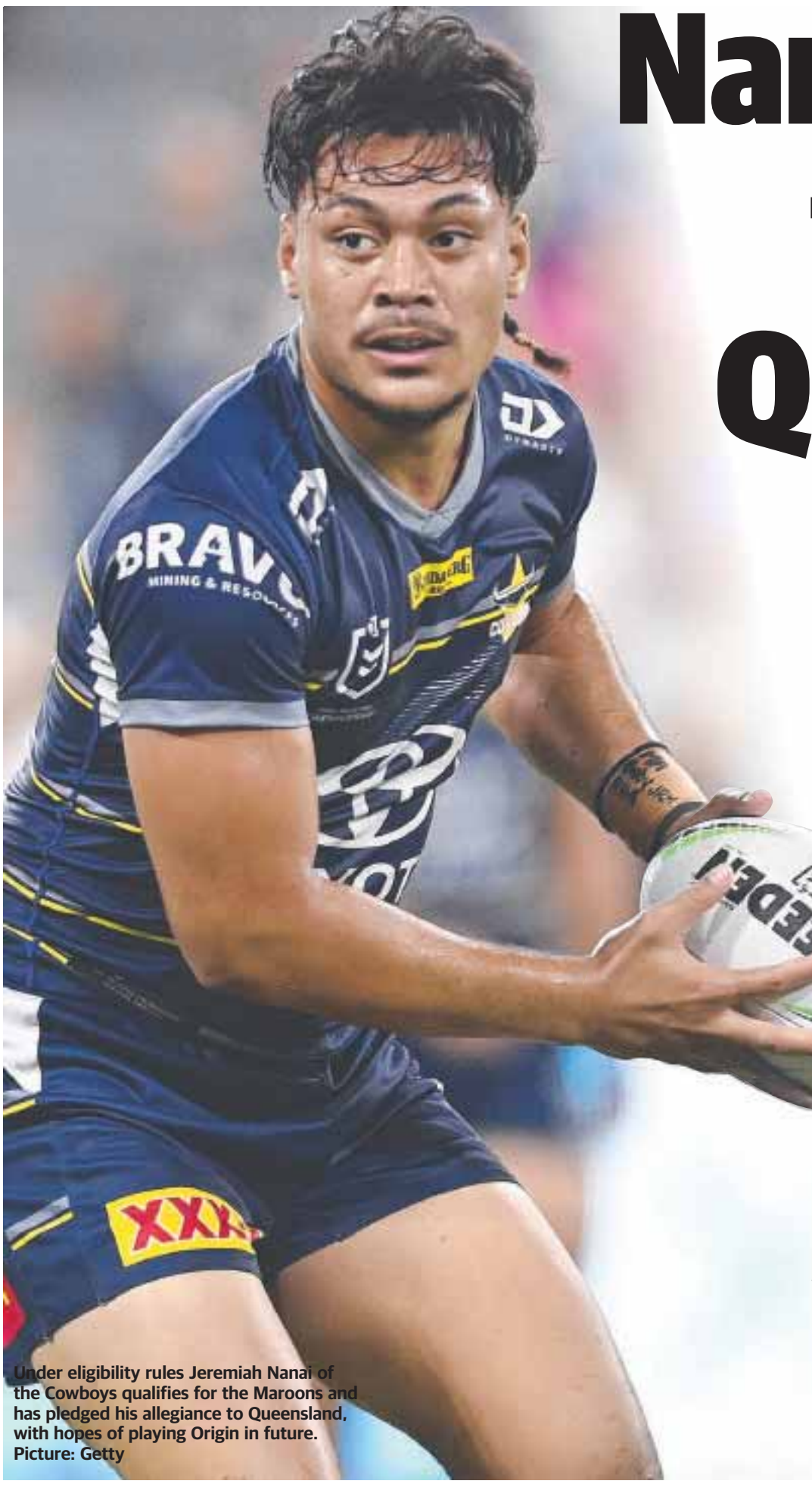
Nanai: I want to play for Queensland



Under eligibility rules Jeremiah Nanai of the Cowboys qualifies for the Maroons and has pledged his allegiance to Queensland, with hopes of playing Origin in future. Picture: Getty

PETER BADEL

THE Maroons struck another representative blow with Cowboys sensation Jeremiah Nanai outlining his dream to emulate Johnathan Thurston by pledging his allegiance to Queensland.

Breaking his silence on his representative future, Nanai said he has formally committed to Queensland in a huge coup for the Maroons in the lead-up to this year's State of Origin series.

New Queensland coach Billy Slater is certain to watch Nanai closely when the Cowboys young gun goes head-to-head with Maroons back-row hulk David Fifita in Saturday's clash against the Titans in Townsville.

Rated the Cowboys' best young forward prospect since Jason Taumalolo, the 19-year-old Nanai has started the season with a bang, scoring five tries from six games, including a hat-trick against the Broncos.

Such was Nanai's sizzling form, the Auckland-born whiz-kid received an approach from New Zealand coach Michael Maguire with a view to picking him for the World Cup later this year. But Nanai politely declined the interest from the Kiwis as he sets his sights on following in the footsteps of Cowboys champion Thurston by pulling on the Queensland jumper in the code's toughest arena.

Under Origin eligibility rules, Nanai arrived in Queensland from New Zealand in the nick of time, moving to Cairns with his family just before his 13th birthday.

"I have made my decision. I want to play for the Maroons, 100 per cent," Nanai said.

"I'm glad I moved to Cairns when I was young enough (to be eligible for Queensland). Hopefully I do get the opportunity one day to play Origin for Queensland.

"There was interest from the Kiwis but I loved watching the big stars like JT (Thurston), Cooper Cronk, Billy Slater and Cameron Smith.

"When they were in the Queensland team, it was great seeing them win year after year and knowing Thurston is a Cowboys legend, I want to follow in his footsteps and pull on that Queensland jumper. JT comes to training and I just take any tips from him I can because he is a legend of the game.

"My favourite Origin player was Greg Inglis (former Maroons captain and centre). He was just a freak, so strong and talented. I was always in awe of how good he was in big games.

"I would love to run onto Suncorp Stadium and give it to the Blues fellas."

Nanai has showcased a sublime array of ball skills just 10 games into his NRL career and he attributes it to many years spent copying NRL and All Blacks legend Sonny Bill Williams in the backyard.

"My idol was Sonny Bill Williams, he is still my hero now," he said.

"I loved the way he played. I liked his running game, his offloads, his flick passes. He had a step on him and he was the hit man in defence, so he had everything you would want as a football player.

"As a kid, I loved watching his game. I have five brothers and we would play backyard footy. We had a massive backyard and I would try to be like Sonny Bill with his passes.

"My skills really come from all the years playing in the backyard with my brothers. I was always outside passing and running and playing touch.

"When we moved to Cairns, my dad didn't want me playing rugby league for any club teams. My cousin told my dad let's put him into a club and let him have a game. So we signed up and I loved it from the start. I'm glad I was allowed to play the game because it's taken me all the way to the NRL."

Barrier-breaking international golf event to be held at FNQ

HARRY MURTOUGH

A sport breaking the barrier of blindness will make its first foray on an international level at the Half Moon Bay Golf Course this month.

World Blind Golf, founded by Neil Heregen and Dr Brad Carver, will host a tournament at the course, to help raise the profile of blind golf.

"It's a mental health issue if anything – people think they can't join their mates on the golf course," Heregen said.

"The aim is to get those who are blind or have low vision to come out and be part of their local club to participate in the community.

"Instead of sitting at home wondering what they can do, they're out playing golf with their friends."

Both Heregen and Dr Carver have conditions that affect their sight, but both have stood toe-to-toe with their well-sighted friends on a level playing field that ensures no handicap advantage to either side.

"I play at my local golf club every week with sighted people – I'm the only blind person there," Dr Carver said.

"But they all know it, it's not an issue anymore. They don't complain, especially if I beat them."

The competition will start on April 26 with a 'come and try' day at Half Moon Bay, before formally commencing the next day.

Thanks to technology, anyone around the world can participate in the tourney, with their local courses calculated for in the final tally.

"The idea being a person can come along and play, but if they can't come along, they can play at a golf course around the world," Heregen said.

"Using the magic of computers and golf handicaps and the grading, we'll level things out.

"We played the Canadian open six months ago, but we did it virtually – it was a real hoot.

"The other night we were talking to golf clubs in Ireland who are promoting it."

World Blind Golf founders Neil Heregen and Dr Brad Carver, with Half Moon Bay Golf member Helen McCarthy.