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Players to Watch ahead of round one of the AIC First XV rugby season

AIC First XV rugby: Who will be the Players to Watch this season as the countdown starts toward rivalry round kick starting the season on Saturday? All is revealed here.

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News Corp Australia Sports Newsroom

The AIC rugby competition returns this Saturday.

The AIC First XV rugby season is set to start with a bang when four arch rivals clash in round 1.

The opening round will feature old foes Marist v Villanova, a south western derby between St Peters v St Edmund's, a battle of northside neighbours Padua and St Patrick's while St Laurence's will host old adversaries Iona.

Iona College players AIC First XV rugby between Iona College and Padua College. Saturday May 20, 2023. Picture, John Gass

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Watch for our coverage via **www.couiermail.com.au** each Saturday evening. Also look out for regular Team of the Week stories.

Villanova College crowd AIC First XV rugby union between Villanova College and Marist College Ashgrove Saturday April 29, 2023. Picture, John Gass

PLAYERS TO WATCH

IONA COLLEGE

Hopo Leota

Iona College's Lehopa Leota running out to play AIC First XV rugby early last year.

Is he the best player in the competition? Possibly. And Leota will be someone looking to make up for lost time after the Reds under-19s prop missed most of the last AIC season with a knee injury. Often compared to Wallabies prop Taniela Tupou because of his sheer size, set-piece prowess and playing style, Leota is fighting fit in 2024 and determined to have a big year.

Adam Kelly

Adam Kelly in action last season.

The diminutive, but powerful Kelly is a genuine on-ball flanker in the David Pocock mould. Kelly won multiple Doubles Daley Medals for best-on-ground performances for Iona's First XV in 2023 and is expected to provide plenty of turnover ball for his backline to exploit this season.

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Ned Dore

AIC First XV rugby: Villanova College v Iona College Saturday June 3, 2023. Picture, John Gass

The Iona skipper had a breakout year in 2023 and, from relative obscurity, became recognised at AIC First XV level for his exceptional workrate and lineout skill. Equally at home in the back row or at lock, Dore will lead from the front and will run Iona's set piece.

Campbell Rolfe

Campbell Rolfe.

Rolfe is primed and ready for a huge 2024. Having cut his teeth in 2023 as a centre, Rolfe will play a different role for Iona's First XV this year when his huge kick and impressive ball skills come into play. Rolfe will be a key figure in running Iona's attack this season, and will be sharp from the get go following a Meninga Cup campaign with the Wynnum Manly Seagulls.

St Laurence's College

Finn Mackay

Finn Mackay. Picture: Tom Primmer/QRU.

Queensland's finest flyhalf in his age group, Mackay is a more mature, well-rounded No.10 this season after steering his side to their third successive outright premiership last year.

After defeating Padua in the unofficial grand final, Mackay went on to represent the Reds under-16s and Australia Under-16s, where his goal kicking and booming kick impressed.

Ben Davis

Padua Vs St Laurence. AIC First XV rugby grand final. Saturday June 10, 2023. Picture, John Gass

Talented sporting all-rounder Davis was top notch last season at No.8 and will have his hands full again this season when he challenges the breakdown and carries his team forward.

A mobile big man, Davis will be a key player with more responsibility this season as a senior.

Xavier Santos

Ballymore Cup rugby action at the Albany Creek Brumbies Junior Rugby Union Club on Friday, April 12, 2024.

High achieving sportsman Santos was a staple of consistency last season for the premiers and will instil confidence in his teammates as fullback this year.

His safe hands and accurate kicking game will provide comfort to St Laurence's when the going gets tough.

Villanova College

Jackson Connor

Villanova's captain and No.8, Connor is returning for his third year of First XV rugby.

Signed by the Bulldogs, Connor has shifted from the centres to No.8 where he can get his hands on the ball more and make an impact with his carries.

He has been training for months with the Brisbane Tigers Meninga Cup squad so he should be in good touch.

Nate Wallin

A Connell Cup player for local club Wynnum Manly Seagulls, Wallin will play inside centre where his strong defence and sharp footwork will be noticeable.

The Year 12 student got a taste last year but gets his shot here as a starter.

Ned Godwin

To get the fast paced Godwin closer to the action he has been shifted from the wing into the centres where his turn of speed could do damage for Villanova.

His older brother Gus is a fine Colts 1 player for Easts and Ned was following his footsteps making a mark on the Andrew Slack Oval turf.

Also watch for Villanova fullback **Max Rakatosky**, a Year 10 student who is being blooded in the First XV this weekend after impressing with his defence and ballrunning.

Padua College

Damon Humphrys

AIC First XV rugby between Iona College and Padua College. Saturday May 20, 2023. Picture, John Gass

Padua Year 11 student Damon Humphrys is a highly skilled flyhalf of fullback who represents the school's Australian football, rugby union, rugby league and track and field team.

Signed by the Bulldogs, Humphrys impressed as a Year 10 last season and his run, kick, pass package will be one of Padua's attacking weapons in season 2024.

William Ross

An Australian Under-16s selection last year, Ross is a big body who will give the Padua pack size, experience and a lineout target.

He will be better for the run last season, which culminated in Queensland and Australia under-16s selection.

St Edmund's College

Will Tatt

A Year 11 player, Tatt will be a second season First XV player who brings an uncompromising style of play to the table on both sides of the ball. He will start at open side breakaway and will look to build a strong foundation for his side. He is also a noted leader.

Tiger Campbell

Ballymore Cup rugby action at the Albany Creek Brumbies Junior Rugby Union Club on Friday, April 12, 2024.

After a strong Cyril Connell Cup rugby league campaign when he was one of the Jets best, Campbell now switches gear to play in the 15 man game. A versatile type who can play anywhere in the backline, the clever Campbell will look to control the side from No.10. After making his debut last year as a Year 10 student, Campbell is looking to build on the confidence gained from last season's campaign.

Impressively he also made his Meninga Cup under-19 debut this season after shining in his age group.

Conrad Browne

Conrad Browne. Picture credit: Ipswich Jets Media.

Browne is another coming off a strong rugby league season for the Jets in the Connell Cup where he made News Corp's Team of the Season. The captain of the 2024 St Edmund's First XV side, Browne will look to control the side from fullback. He is another second year player who should welcome the room to move from fullback. He has fast feet and a controlled kicking game and will look to use these attributes to lead his team around the park.

Marist College Ashgrove

Tom Howard

Tom Howard. Picture: Arnold Crayford/ QRU.

It has taken three seasons, but we will finally be seeing Tom Howard in his best position at fullback. As a Year 10 student he played wing in 2022, outside centre last year and is set to be unleashed in the No.15 jersey on Saturday. Howard is an elusive runner, but also a real competitor who has a huge appetite for work. His father Pat, the former Wallaby and Super Rugby ace, was also a decorated First XV old boy.

Jasper Barry

Marist College Ashgrove player Jasper Barry AIC First XV rugby union between Villanova College and Marist College Ashgrove Saturday April 29, 2023. Picture, John Gass

The Marist community will see the best of Barry this season. A raw, rough and tumble type in 2023, he will be playing his second season in the First XV after learning on the job last year. Barry is coming off an exceptional pre-season and will be a strong ball carrier for Ashgrove.

Joel Drew

Joel Drew (left) with his Ashgrove track and field mates.

Marist College Ashgrove has a real speedster here. A second season First XV player, Drew is a national hurdles champion who brings rare athletic talent to the table. An excellent worker off the ball, Drew was constantly improving.

St Patrick's College

Manaaki Bateman

Manaaki Bateman Picture: Julian Andrews

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