

MAUL AND ALL

theherald.com.au/sport | email: james.gardiner@fairfaxmedia.com.au



JAMES GARDINER

@JamesGardiner42



IN FORM: Breakaway Michael Howell has become a leader in the NSW Country pack. Picture: Josh Brightman / Balanced Image Studio

Country stint brings out beast in Howell

THERE is something about playing for NSW Country that fuels Michael Howell.

"It's hard to explain," the Maitland back-rower said. "There is something special about getting in there with the boys from different zones and mixing it up."

Whatever the allure, it has bought out the best in the 24-year-old from Hawks Nest.

"He has been sensational," NSW Country coach Matt Thomas said. "He is playing better here than he is at club rugby."

"To be honest, he was shocked to be picked. His confidence was down after

returning from overseas. He was playing quality rugby in France but wasn't enjoying it. We had a long chat.

"All I want him to do is play his own game. At this level the other players do their job, let's concentrate on you for a second and be a bit selfish in your own game. He is getting his hands on the ball, and just his work rate. He has been the leader of the pack."

Howell played with SAXV Charente in the Federale 2 competition in France last season, which followed a stint in New Zealand.

"In France I lost the enjoyment aspect of the game," Howell said. "It was the

full-time nature of it. For 46 weeks of the year you are at the footy club five to six days a week. It goes from being your hobby to being a chore. You get home and get a few different aspects in life back."

Initially, Howell joined the Myall Coast Mudcrabs, but after playing in a sevens tournament with the Blacks he returned to Marcellin.

"It is good to play alongside blokes you grew up with and played juniors alongside," he said. "Having my brother there as well has added to the enjoyment."

The Cockatoos complete their season with the annual representative clash against

Queensland Country in Toowoomba on Saturday.

Howell injured his right knee in the 31-17 win over Sydney Suburban last weekend. He is awaiting results from an MRI scan but is confident of being fit.

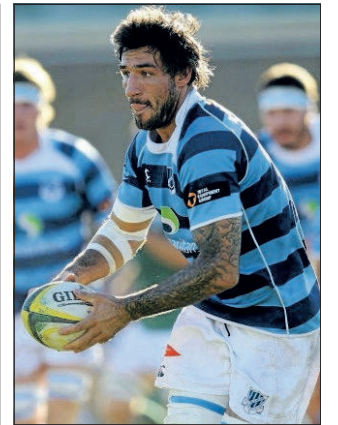
"It was a run-of-the-mill tackle and I got caught in an awkward spot," he said. "At first it was quite painful, but the last couple of days it has settled down."

Victory over the Blue Heelers would round out a successful campaign that started with a 61-0 loss against the Australian under-20s before wins over ACT (48-5) and Subbies.

"The best learning curve was getting flogged by the Aussie 20s," Thomas said.

"The boys remember that game more than the games they won. Since then our attention to detail, the accuracy at the breakdown and the speed of the game has lifted. The boys have just been blowing teams off the park with the speed they are playing at."

Apart from Howell, Alain Miriallakis, Steve Lamont, Joe Akkersdyk and Sireli Bainivalu are in the starting side on Saturday. Ben Cristensen, Harry Veitch, Jason Keelan and Rapine Mason are on the bench.



SUSPENDED: Dan Kevill will not be available for Wanderers until round 15.

Kevill outed for four weeks

WANDERERS back-rower Dan Kevill will miss four games after he pleaded guilty to striking on Wednesday night.

Playing his fourth game back from a 12-week suspension for eye-gouging, Kevill lashed out at Singleton No.8 Guy O'Loughlin in the sixth minute of the Two Blues' 71-5 win over Singleton.

Referee Max Collier missed the incident. A touch judge made a report, which resulted in Wanderers back-rower Nick Brady being sent to the sin bin.

However, Singleton coach Bob Harris cited the back-rower on video evidence. Citing commissioner Jason Wagstaffe forwarded the matter to the judiciary.

Wanderers were successful in having the charge down graded from high to medium.

Kevill will miss matches against Lake Macquarie (away), Waratahs (home), Southern Beaches (a) and Maitland (h).

* Newcastle has missed out on hosting a NSW Country Eagles home match in the 2016 National Rugby Championships.

Roos have double the reason to celebrate

NHRU POINTS TABLE						
	P	W	D	L	PD	PTS
WANDERERS	10	9	0	1	319	46
HAMILTON	10	9	0	1	270	45
MEREWETHER	10	7	0	3	207	36
MAITLAND	10	7	0	3	77	33
THE WARATAHS	10	6	0	4	68	32
STHN BEACHES	10	5	0	5	-72	24
LAKE MACQUARIE	10	4	0	6	-33	20
UNIVERSITY	10	2	0	8	-214	13
NELSON BAY	10	1	0	9	-324	6
SINGLETON	10	0	0	10	-298	1

ROUND 11: Maitland v Nelson Bay, Merewether v Singleton, Southern Beaches v University, Lake Macquarie v Wanderers, Waratahs v Hamilton

LAKE Macquarie earned more than credibility with their stirring 17-15 win over premiers Hamilton.

The Roos also took hold of the Hawthorne Cup for the first time since 2013.

The Hawthorne Club suspended the cup midway through last season amid concerns it was being dominated by Hamilton and Wanderers. Contested since 2000, each defence of the cup was worth \$300 and a successful

challenge \$500. The Hawthorne Club then distributed \$200 to each club for the rounds not contested.

However, Hawthorne Club chairman said Bruce Cook said they had "seen the error of our ways" and reinstated the Cup. Hamilton held it for the opening nine rounds before handing it over the Roos on Saturday.

** The NHRU are in the process of remodelling the player points system for next

year. Clubs made a series of submissions at an information meeting on Monday night. They voted unanimously to publish each player's points total, to limit the cap to the top two grades and to keep the cap uniformed across all teams. There was also strong support for the cap to remain 24 points next season and for players switching NHRU clubs to be worth four points.

** Sam Rouse's five-try ef-

fort against Nelson Bay is not a club record at Merewether. A Greens stalwart informed *Maul and All* that Peter Withers scored 10 tries against Coalfields in 1978. His first-grade haul followed a hat-trick in second grade on the same day.

** The NSW Country Corellas, which featured 16 Hunter players, won the Plate Shield at the national women's championships last weekend.