

Bright future for Katoa, Dolphins



Isaia Katoa is among a core group of young players who are the future of the Dolphins' NRL side and while he will be sorry to see Head Coach Wayne Bennett leave at the end of this season, he's excited about what he can achieve under Kristian Woolf.

The talented halfback, who has made the position his own this season, has signed a contract extension and will be at the Dolphins until at least the end of the 2028 season.

It follows a breakout debut season with the club last year after which he was named Rookie of the Year.

The 20-year-old, who takes his calm and measured personality into every game, is grateful the Dolphins came knocking and offered him a contract when he was just 18.

He still had a year of schooling to complete at rugby union school Barker College and had been part of the Penrith Panthers' system since juniors.

"Peter O'Sullivan, the (Dolphins) recruitment manager contacted my manager and asked if he had any young talent ... any boys who would like to take an opportunity and come over here to Redcliffe," Katoa explains.

"At first, we were just shocked. In my mind, I was completely set on staying at Penrith ... waiting and biding my time until I got

my opportunity to crack first grade. It all happened so quickly."

It was a big decision to move to Queensland, but there was one factor Katoa could not ignore.

"Just having Wayne here. He's literally one of the best coaches, if not the best, in the NRL. I knew that he has a way to connect with his players on a personal level and that's something that resonates with me," Katoa says.

He knew Bennett would be the coach to 'lead him in the right direction'.

"I saw it as a great opportunity to come over here, go straight into a professional environment, being coached by Wayne.

"I just knew that I couldn't say no to that."

"I knew he would be the best coach for me, especially as a young kid coming straight into the NRL. I knew that he would be the one to keep me cool-headed, keep me grounded, know how to get the best out of me."

Katoa is a natural leader who enjoys playing in the halfback position, guiding his team around the field and solving

problems as they arise.

"Not every decision's going to be correct and the biggest thing I take out of it is ... it's what you do next, he says.

"It's a high-pressure position as well. Some of the decisions, especially in crucial games, you could be 6-6 with five minutes to go ... what's the game plan, what are you going to do, how are you going to get your team in a position where you can either score points or set up for a field goal? It's something that I've loved about the position."

The young gun admits to feeling somewhat intimidated when he first stepped into the role last season for the Dolphins, when then-starting halfback Sean O'Sullivan was injured.

"When you're playing at school, you're playing with your mates. You can tell them what to do, you're the same age ... whereas you come into first grade, you've got myself, a young kid, trying to tell Jesse Bromwich what to do," he says laughing.

"Imagine being that kid. At first, I was very shy ... I told them

what I wanted them to do but I never overstepped, knowing these guys are some of the greats in rugby league and I'm fortunate to even be able to train with them.

"One of the best things was when Jesse and Felise (Kaufusi) came over to me and said: 'we're very confident in you ... don't be afraid to tell us what to do.' As soon as they said that, all the nerves were just settled."

Season 2024 will herald in a new era with Kristian Woolf at the helm, but Katoa doesn't foresee vast change in team culture which Woolf has had a hand in creating.

"If anything, we'll just take it to another level next year. Our team is the type of team to get better as we go on. That won't stop just because Wayne's going to South Sydney," he says.

"Hopefully we can do a lot of great things and bring some success to this club. I know for sure this club means a lot to the players. We're not just here because it's our job, we're here because we love it."