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Why Fittler must make brutal call and turn to Mitchell Pearce to save Origin series



NSW need to make a tough selection call to pull themselves back in the series. Source: Getty Images

June 6, 2019 10:54am, JAMES HOOPER @jimmyhooper Source: FOX SPORTS

The NSW Blues need to make a brutally tough decision and bring back one of the most maligned players in [State of Origin history to save the series](#).

Yep, Brad Fittler needs to put his faith in Mitchell Pearce.

When Luke Keary got injured 48 hours before the NSW side for State of Origin I was announced, Fittler walked into the Newcastle Knights winning dressing room and made a beeline for Pearce.

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The Knights had just beat premiers the Sydney Roosters and Pearce had won a fifth straight man of the match award.

When Fittler asked Pearce how he was feeling, the Knights star immediately pointed to his groin.

The conspiracy theorists reckoned Pearce didn't want the undue heat of stepping back into the cauldron of Origin football.

But make no mistake, Fittler is a huge Pearce fan and was genuinely entertaining picking him to play five-eighth on the Blues left side with Nathan Cleary on the right.

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With Pearce ruling himself out, Fittler was more than comfortable picking one of the other form players of the NRL — Cody Walker — as his five-eighth.

After what unfolded at the spiritual home of Queensland rugby league on Wednesday night, the Blues brains trust have the toughest decision of Fittler's tenure to make.

Do they push all-in on Walker for game two in Perth or deviate and bring Pearce back into the fold to try and level the series.

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Cody Walker had a tough debut for the Blues.

Source: AAP

Walker was hooked in the second half of the Origin I loss after the Blues' left edge had been repeatedly ripped open, with the Bunnies five-eighth unable to transfer his electric NRL form into rugby league's toughest arena.

Latrell Mitchell was also uncharacteristically off his game, meaning with the exception of winger Josh Addo-Carr the NSW left edge failed to fire.

Which brings us back to Pearce.

In one of the classic sliding doors moments of rugby league, Pearce's Newcastle Knights meet Walker's South Sydney Rabbitohs at ANZ Stadium on Friday night.



Deadly Maroons down Blues 3:20

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This game alone may well decide who wears the NSW No.6 jumper in Perth.

The Knights then play the Melbourne Storm — including Maroons superstar Cameron Munster — in round 13 before the NSW team for State of Origin II is announced.

If Pearce continues to carve-up the way he has over the last five weeks, the Knights playmaker will demand his inclusion.

In the aftermath of the Origin I loss, Blues centre Mitchell admitted the NSW game management had gone awry.

“It’s hard to win up here. We come up here and all of Queensland are very passionate for their rugby league,” Mitchell said.

“We showed a lot of passion tonight, the boys really defended really well but game management didn’t go our way.



Asked where the Blues needed to get better in terms of game management, Mitchell said: “Just tying-in in defence. We defended really well on the line but there was some lapses between myself not being square and Cherry-Evans obviously getting that option outside me. There’s a lot of things we need to work on but we’ll be right.”

On his combination with Walker, Mitchell said: “It’s a new combination. I’m trying to get used to how Cody defends and how we like to work. But there’s something building there.”

The Blues appeared to have the upper hand for the opening 50 minutes as Damien Cook and James Tedesco cut Queensland to pieces through the middle.

While the Maroons bombed two certain tries and had another held-up in the opening half, the Blues should have been ahead by more than 8-0 at halftime.





Mitchell Pearce could be the tonic for NSW after a brutal loss in game one.

Source: AAP

In the second half, big moment errors and field position killed NSW.

As much as he had a mixed night, Mitchell did produce a phenomenal try-saving tackle on Dane Gagai with the Blues clinging to an 8-6 lead.

It was a similar story for James Tedesco, who was one of NSW best.

But mixed in amongst some brilliant moments including when Michael Morgan was held-up over the line in the second half, Tedesco came up with one very costly error.

Rookie Blues bench player Jack Wighton had already produced the intercept pass for Dane Gagai to set the Maroons on course for game one glory.

Then Tedesco lost the ball cold bringing it out of the NSW goal-line with ten minutes remaining.

Game, set, match.



Maroons press conference 9:29

Maroons winger Gagai then scored off a sublime Ponga pass from the following set and the game was gone with Queensland leading 18-8.

Trailing 8-6 midway through the second half, Queensland turned the game in classic Maroons-fashion with a rushing defensive set which reasserted dominance.

The Maroon line speed was phenomenal and NSW simply had no answer.

One minute later, Blues centre Mitchell was sin-binned and the Origin series had been tipped on its head.

There was a view from within the Maroons camp afterwards that they should have won by more than the four-point margin.



Fittler said after the loss he felt Blues debutant Walker was “struggling to get into the game”, hence the decision to hook him and inject Wighton on at five-eighth.

When the Blues sent Wighton on in the second half, he was told to “own his edge”.

His early touches were strong, but there was one clutch play that backfired when Maroons winger Gagai raced 95m to score.

“I tried to do my best,” Wighton said.

“I had that big play that I made where I was just backing my instincts but that’s something I’ve got to live with now.

“It’s pretty gut-wrenching what happened tonight but that’s just how the game turns out.

“I seen Foxy there and we all know what Foxy can do if you get him the ball.”

The Blues have some major calls to make. If Queensland can have Daly Cherry-Evans as captain, then surely Mitchell Pearce can be given another crack for NSW.

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