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Top league talent calls Perth home

GLEN QUARTERMAIN

IT takes a special talent to catch the eye of legendary NRL coach Des Hasler.

But that's just what Curtis Rona has done.

The New Zealand-born, WA-raised Rona impressed Hasler so much in stints at Sydney Roosters and North Queensland Cowboys that he lured him to Canterbury Bulldogs.

The 22-year-old has repaid Hasler's faith with an explosive start to the year from a wing in the Bulldogs' first-grade lineup, scoring five tries from the opening four games, including two in Friday night's 25-24 golden point win over Wests Tigers at ANZ Stadium.

It's further proof that the pathway from the NRL WA works.

Rona said he was still coming to terms with the fact he was playing first-grade with a side rated an $8 chance to win the premiership.

"When you see the players around you, like Tony Williams, Josh Morris, a quality forward pack and these all-round performers, you have to pinch yourself," Rona said.

"You are sitting in the video room with superstars like James Graham, who has captained his country (England), it is mind blowing. They are great players on the field and even better blokes off it."

Rona moved to Perth from New Zealand at age five, played league until he was nine and then had a stint in union.

But he saw a better pathway to league and signed up with WA club Joondalup Giants, progressed to the state under-18s and eventually the WA Reds team in the SG Ball Cup (NSW under-18s competition).

Five NRL clubs were chasing him, but he landed at the Roosters, where he played two seasons of Toyota Cup (under 20s). He joined the Cowboys in 2012 and made his debut last year against Manly in Gosford, scoring a try.

"I couldn't believe it. It was an overwhelming feeling. To run out with some of the best players in the world like Johnathan Thurston, I was pretty pumped and excited," he said.

"The whole time I was out there I was running on adrenaline and very eager to give it my best. It was the fastest game I had played. Your first game of NRL is a whole other level. You realise how fast and quick it is. Just being up against quality players. It was a dream come true to debut."

Rona said he'd already had an insight into the Hasler model of work ethic before extravagance, building a champion team rather than a team of champions.

And the million dollar question, should Perth win an NRL franchise to coincide with the next round of TV rights in 2018? "If they did have a team I would have to seriously think about it," he said.

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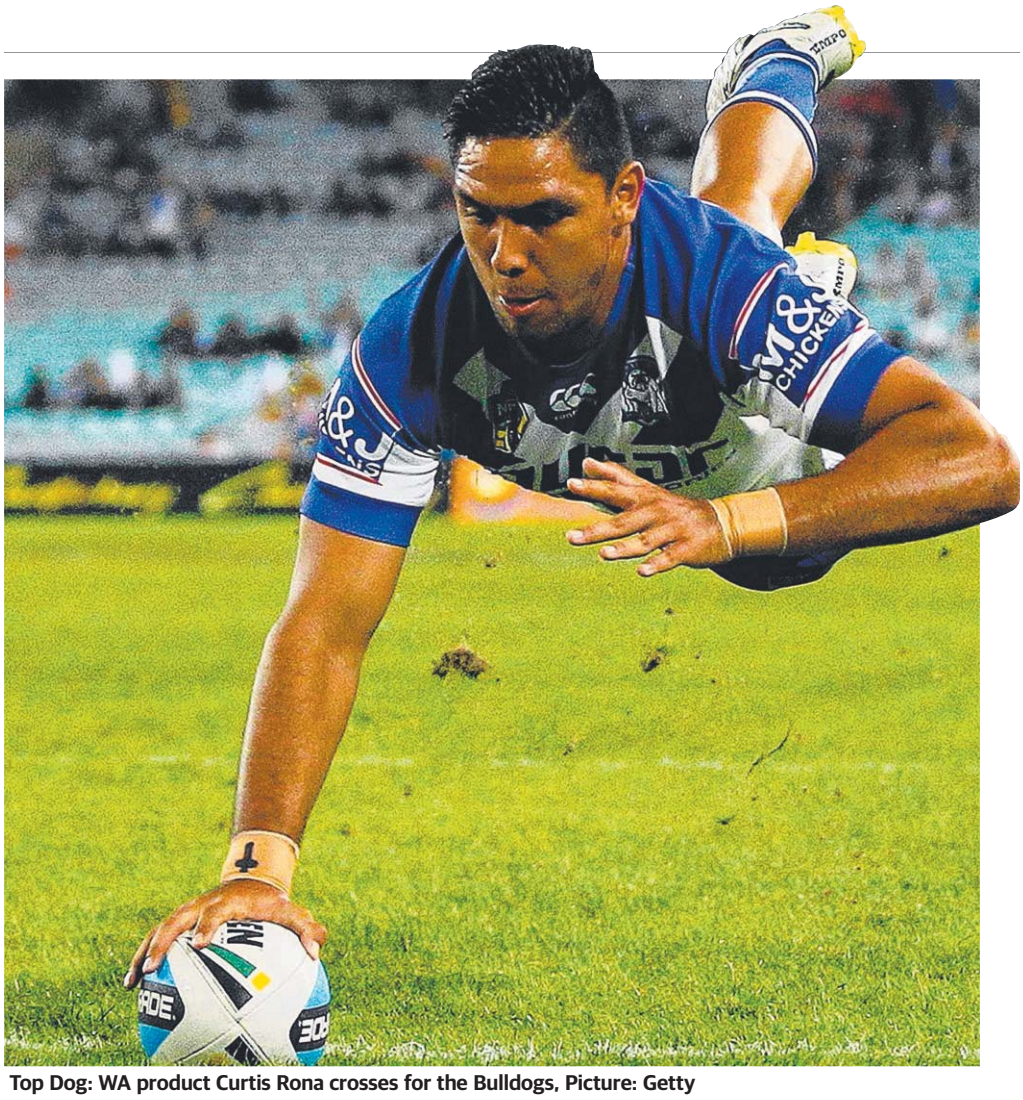

Top Dog: WA product Curtis Rona crosses for the Bulldogs, Picture: Getty