

RUGBY

# CHIEFS RUN RIOT AFTER BLUES SEE RED

**WELLINGTON:** The Waikato Chiefs downed a 14-man Auckland Blues 41-26 in Hamilton yesterday to extend six years of Super Rugby dominance over their New Zealand rivals. A relatively even contest turned into a Chiefs romp after Blues flanker Steven Luatua was sent off for a high tackle on the stroke of half-time. The Chiefs scored six tries and always looked comfortable winners, despite conceding three tries themselves as concentration lapsed late in the match. The result was their 11th straight win on the North Island derby against the Blues, a winning streak stretching back to March 2011.

The game opened at a frantic pace, with the

Chiefs looking more threatening on attack but hampered by poor discipline and handling errors. They scored two early tries, the first to Liam Messam from a driving maul and the second when Tim Nanai-Williams' blistering run set up Damian McKenzie. But Ihaia West kicked three penalties to keep the Blues in touch and they looked like they could rally and challenge the Chiefs' formidable defense. That changed when Luatua was shown a red card just before the break for a high tackle on Nanai-Williams. The Chiefs immediately punished the infringement as Hika Elliot scored their third try from a maul.

They had a fourth within two minutes of the restart through Lachlan Boshier and there could have been two more as the shellshocked Blues fell apart on defense. Winger James Lowe brushed aside two half-hearted tackles for the Chiefs' fifth and Anton Lienert-Brown added another at the end of a slick passing move. To their credit, the Blues fought back and scored two tries, one to lock Patrick Tuipulotu and the other coming when prop Charlie Faumuina sidestepped a tackler. It narrowed the gap from 41-9 to 41-26, adding some respectability to the scoreline but the result had been beyond doubt soon after Luatua's departure. — AFP

## NFL FINDING BETTER VALUE IN RUNNING BACK REVIVAL

**INDIANAPOLIS:** As Todd Gurley and Ezekiel Elliott spent the past two years crashing through conventional wisdom, Dalvin Cook saw the NFL's two emerging stars as something bigger. He viewed them as change agents, as role models, as trendsetters, paving the way for college football's next great runners. Now, with a whole group of backs ready to cash in on the success of Gurley and Elliott, Cook is looking to do more than join the cause. He wants to create his own story in the league's running back revival.

"After that draft class with Todd and Melvin (Gordon), and then Ezekiel came after those guys, I've definitely seen it (the value of running backs) go up," Cook said Thursday at the league's annual scouting combine. "If you put us in the right system, we can help teams win ball games." It sounds strange coming from a league that once treated workhorse feature backs with the reverence of today's franchise quarterbacks. But as the rules changed, the passing game opened up and the salary cap became more prohibitive, team officials searched for younger, cheaper answers.

Former Denver Broncos coach Mike Shanahan was so masterful at using late-round draft picks or even undrafted rookies behind his seemingly invincible zone-blocking scheme, everyone thought they could do it. Others tried, with mixed results. Then came the dual-backfield craze. The concept was two solid backs were better than one great one because they could stay healthier and productive. That was followed by the over-30 idea - don't waste money on an over-the-hill back. The stats mostly backed it up.

The result: Each philosophical adaptation made running backs less valuable on draft weekend. From 2012-2016, only four running backs were taken in the first round and none was selected in 2013 or 2014. Things are changing again. After Seattle rode Marshawn Lynch to a Super Bowl title and almost a second, Gurley broke the first-round drought and became the 2015 Offensive Rookie of the Year. Elliott won the 2016 NFL rushing title and led Dallas to the top seed in the NFC, and Atlanta won the NFC championship by using essentially two productive feature backs to give quarterback Matt Ryan more balance on offense.

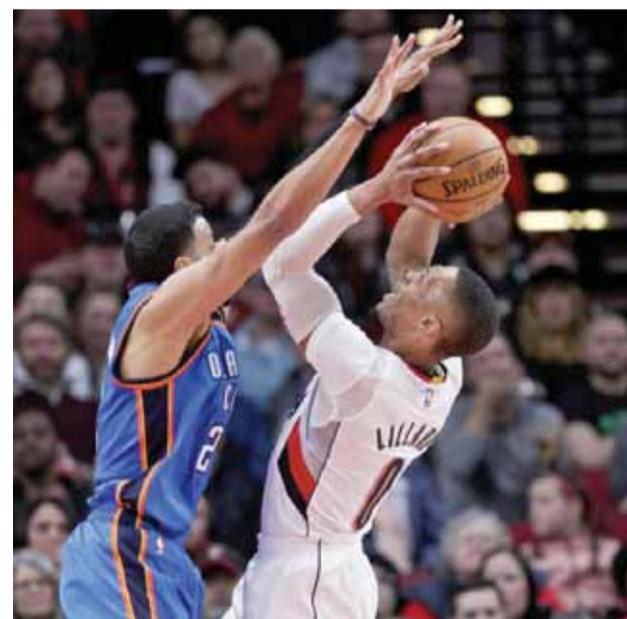
"Running backs went through this period of - we blame that on Denver and Mike Shanahan, where you can always get your running back in the seventh round," said Rams general manager Les Snead, who drafted Gurley. "The year we drafted Todd, and even Melvin Gordon, kind of opposite years, right? He had a freshman slump, Todd had a sophomore slump. They get drafted in the first round, they ended up producing. Ezekiel Elliott, put that guy behind that line and guess what? Defenses have problems. "This year, you have another group of running backs who are pretty good. They're going to go first round and they're going to help teams." With LSU's Leonard Fournette, Cook from Florida State and Stanford's Christian McCaffrey all projected to go in the first round, it could be the deepest running back class in years. Tennessee's Alvin Kamara could move into the first round as well and the class includes two 2,000-yard rushers - Texas' D'Onta Foreman and San Diego State's Donnell "DJ" Pumphrey. The timing couldn't be better. Green Bay, Detroit and Indianapolis went into the offseason looking for backfield help and after releasing longtime stalwarts Adrian Peterson and Jamaal Charles, Minnesota and Kansas City could be in the market, too. — AP

# BULLS HAND WARRIORS 2ND STRAIGHT DEFEAT

## LILLARD SCORES 33 AS TRAIL BLAZERS BEAT THUNDER

**LOS ANGELES:** Golden State, adjusting to life without injured Kevin Durant, fell to the Chicago Bulls on Thursday, just the second time in nearly two years the Warriors have suffered back-to-back NBA regular-season defeats. Jimmy Butler scored 22 points to lead four Bulls players in double-figures in the 94-87 triumph. The Warriors' points total was their season low, and they lost a second straight regular-season contest for the first time since April of 2015.

The Warriors had fallen 112-108 to the Washington Wizards on Tuesday, when Durant limped out of the game in the first quarter with what was later diagnosed as a left knee ligament sprain and bone bruise. The former NBA Most Valuable Player will be sidelined indefinitely, although the Warriors, who have already secured a playoff berth, have not ruled out a return before the end of the regular season. "Obviously, you feel for him and want him to get healthy as fast as possible but not



**PORTLAND:** Portland Trail Blazers guard Damian Lillard (right) shoots over Oklahoma City Thunder forward Andre Roberson during the first half of an NBA basketball game on Thursday, March 2, 2017. — AP

rush it because we have a long journey ahead of us going into the playoffs," two-time NBA MVP Stephen Curry said. "Next man up mentality, but obviously it will be tough to replace a guy like KD."

Curry led the Warriors with 23 points, but he and "Splash Brother" teammate Klay Thompson combined to make just three of 22 three-point attempts. Overall, the Warriors were six-for-30 from three-point range in the defeat. Thompson added 13 points and Draymond Green contributed a dozen in the defeat. The Warriors had led 51-47 at halftime, and erased a five-point deficit with 9:09 to play thanks to three baskets from Curry and a driving layup from David West that gave Golden State an 85-84 lead with 5:43 to go.

### 'Part of the game'

But Golden State couldn't maintain the momentum. "A couple of shots we normally make did not fall," said Curry, who was 10 of 27 from the field. "That's not the reason we lost." Warriors coach Steve Kerr said his team didn't play with enough urgency to make up for their cold shooting. "You are not always going to shoot well," Kerr said. "When that happens, the ball is gold. You have to value each possession. Our intensity and focus was not there." Veteran Dwyane Wade scored 12 points for Chicago, putting the Bulls up 88-85 with 2:16 remaining. Bulls reserve Paul Zipser closed out a 7-0 scoring run with three-pointer that stretched Chicago's lead to six points with 1:41 to play. — AFP

## NBA results/standings

Portland 114, Oklahoma City 109; Phoenix 120, Charlotte 103; Chicago 94, Golden State 87.

	W	L	PCT	GB
<b>Eastern Conference</b>				
<b>Atlantic Division</b>				
Boston	39	22	.639	-
Toronto	36	25	.590	3
NY Knicks	25	36	.410	14
Philadelphia	22	38	.367	16.5
Brooklyn	10	49	.169	28
<b>Central Division</b>				
Cleveland	41	18	.695	-
Chicago	31	30	.508	11
Indiana	31	30	.508	11
Detroit	29	32	.475	13
Milwaukee	26	33	.441	15
<b>Southeast Division</b>				
Washington	36	23	.610	-
Atlanta	34	26	.567	2.5
Miami	28	33	.459	9
Charlotte	26	35	.426	11
Orlando	22	39	.361	15
<b>Western Conference</b>				
<b>Northwest Division</b>				
Utah	37	24	.607	-
Oklahoma City	35	26	.574	2
Denver	28	33	.459	9
Portland	25	35	.417	11.5
Minnesota	25	36	.410	12
<b>Pacific Division</b>				
Golden State	50	11	.820	-
LA Clippers	36	24	.600	13.5
Sacramento	25	36	.410	25
Phoenix	19	42	.311	31
LA Lakers	19	42	.311	31
<b>Southwest Division</b>				
San Antonio	46	13	.780	-
Houston	43	19	.694	4.5
Memphis	36	25	.590	11
Dallas	24	36	.400	22.5
New Orleans	24	37	.393	23