

Sports

Stakes high as Crusaders, Hurricanes face off in Super Rugby blockbuster

Whiteley blow for Boks as comeback put on hold

WELLINGTON: There was no hiding the eagerness of Wellington Hurricanes coach Chris Boyd in the leadup to today's Super Rugby blockbuster against the champion Canterbury Crusaders, a clash that could do plenty to shape the Super Rugby playoffs.

The match in Christchurch not only pits the two best sides in the competition but resumes a rivalry that has become intense in recent seasons. "Some games you get a bit more excited about than others ... that's just human nature," Boyd said this week.

The eight-time champion Crusaders lead the Super Rugby standings on 46 points, one ahead of the Hurricanes who have a game in hand. While the Hurricanes have won eight of their last 11 matches against the Crusaders, Boyd and his captain Brad Shields are mindful that playing in a wet and cold Christchurch produces major hurdles against an All Blacks-laden home pack.

In the corresponding match last year, the Crusaders attacked the Hurricanes in the contact areas and strangled the supply of clean, quick ball to TJ Perenara and Beauden Barrett, preventing them from unleashing the tournament's most explosive backline.

The home side will be without captain Sam Whiteley (concussion) and suspended props Joe

Moody and Owen Franks but Shields felt the Crusaders would not veer far from their usual game-plan today. "Winning those small, brutal battles," Shields said yesterday when asked what would be the key to the game. "They're going to be niggly at the rucks, they're going to try and turn our ball over, they're going to try and smack us."

Finishing top of the dominant New Zealand conference is likely to mean home advantage all the way through to the Aug. 4 title-decider, given the third-placed team, South Africa's leading Lions, are well off the pace and with less games to play over the final weeks of the regular season.

"We are expecting everything," Crusaders coach Scott Robertson said. "They are tough, physical. This is what we play for. We enjoy it. I love these weeks."

In Johannesburg, an expected comeback for Warren Whiteley this weekend has been put on hold, effectively ending his chances of an international return when South Africa play Wales and England next month and opening up the Springbok captaincy.

Whiteley, 30, participated in full training this week and was expected to be in Super Rugby action for the Lions against the Stormers in Cape Town on Saturday, hours before new national coach Rassie Erasmus is to name his squad for the June 2 international against Wales in Washington



Crusaders lead standings on 46 points



Daniel Ricciardo

records would tumble thanks to the new hypersoft tyres which are making their competitive debut this weekend and track resurfacing.

Ricciardo was third in Monaco last year, after taking pole and finishing second in 2016, and is aiming to take the final step on Sunday. "Both drivers have got a good feel for the car, the car's working quite nicely, but it's only Thursday morning," Red Bull principal Christian Horner told Sky Sports television.

"We have had a competitive chassis all year and of course the straights are a bit shorter here, so that concertinas it all together," Raikkonen was fifth fastest with Renault's Carlos Sainz sixth and Valtteri Bottas seventh for Mercedes. Mexican Sergio Perez, who holds the race lap record of 1:14.820, was eighth for Force India. —Reuters



Coach Chris Boyd and Dane Coles of Hurricanes at the post match interview.

DC and three subsequent tests at home to the touring English.

It would have been a timely return, but Whiteley was left out of the Lions line-up without explanation when the team was named yesterday. He missed six months last year with a groin injury and has sat out most of this year with a troublesome knee injury.

Whiteley was named South Africa captain last year but was injured in the build-up to the final test of the three-match series against France last June.

He missed the entire Rugby Championship campaign against Argentina, Australia and New Zealand, plus away tests against Ireland, France, Italy and Wales in November and December.

Eben Etzebeth took over as Springbok skipper but he, too, has not played this year, having undergone surgery on his shoulder. Though speculation around the captaincy continues, there have been local media reports saying that Etzebeth could be named in the squad after stepping up his training regime in recent weeks. —Reuters

Ricciardo leads Red Bull one-two in Monaco practice

MONACO: Australian driver Daniel Ricciardo produced a record lap around the streets of Monaco yesterday as Red Bull dominated opening free practice for Formula One's most glamorous grand prix.

The 28-year-old mastered the winding, metal-fenced streets with a best time of one minute 12.126 seconds, already quicker than Kimi Raikkonen's 2017 pole position of 1:12.178 for Ferrari. Dutch team mate Max Verstappen was second quickest, 0.154 seconds slower. The 20-year-old was also summoned to stewards after reversing onto the track after running off at the first Sainte Devote corner.

Championship leader Lewis Hamilton and closest title rival Sebastian Vettel were third and fourth, with the Mercedes driver lapping in 1:12.480 and Ferrari's German managing a best effort of 1:13.041.

Hamilton leads Vettel, last year's winner in Monaco, by 17 points after five races. Drivers had predicted before the session started that lap

China to play Thai hosts in Uber Cup semis

BANGKOK: Defending champions China will face dark horse Thailand in the last four of the Uber Cup after a dramatic day in the women's event yesterday, while South Korea will play top seeded Japan in the semis.

Thailand edged into the final four, with Busanan Ongbamrunphan sparking jubilation among the home crowd by winning the final women's singles 9-21, 12-21 to seal a 3-2 win. Star player world number four Ratchanok Intanon started the tie well for the home side, demolishing Indonesia's Fitriani Fitriani in the first game. But the visitors won the next two points, before a Thai doubles pair clawed back a point and Busanan powered her team to victory. "I am really happy that I can make one point for my team," 22-year-old Busanan said after the match, adding that the home support helped "a lot". As for their chances against China, she said it would be "very tough."

"But I think everyone in my team can do it. I will try my best," she added. China recovered from a nervy start to beat Denmark 3-1. Mia Blichfeldt drew first blood, taking apart world number 5 Chen Yufei in the opening singles.

But 14-times Uber champions China came back strong, with Olympic champion Li Xuerui finding her rhythm in her comeback tournament to beat Natalia Koch Rohde 21-7, 21-9 in 30 minutes. "I was definitely better prepared today," Li told organisers after the match.

Heavyweights Japan and South Korea complete the semi-final line-up, both also stuttering through their quarter-final ties on Thursday. Japan's women clawed back a win following the first match 21-19, 21-16 defeat of world number two Akane Yamaguchi by Taiwan's Tai Tzu-ying, who ranks higher than her.

The top-seeds bounced back with doubles pair Yuki Fukushima and Sayaka Hirota tearing through their rivals in the next match, followed by a routine 21-11, 21-12 win by singles world champion Nozomi Okuhara. South Korea also struggled to get started against Canada, but eked out three wins against their unfancied opposition.

Victory was sealed by 16-year-old An Se-young, who celebrated exuberantly after her 21-13, 19-21, 21-11 win in the third singles over Canada's Brittney Tam. "I told coach Kim (Ji-hyun) that I would dance on court if I won," she said after the match, according to a Badminton World Federation press release.

The prestigious biennial event has brought together 16 top teams from five continents for a week of intense competition for the men's Thomas Cup and the Uber Cup which is contested by the women. —AFP