

Australia pursue three in a row against wounded Pumas

Rising star Leota earns Wallabies run-on debut

BRISBANE: Flanker Rob Leota will make his run-on debut as Australia look to inflict more pain on Argentina in Townsville tomorrow, while Reece Hodge won the race to replace an injured Tom Banks at fullback. They were the only changes to the starting side yesterday for the Rugby Championship fifth-round clash in north Queensland, with coach Dave Rennie keen to build on consecutive upsets of world champions South Africa.

Melbourne Rebels' rising star Leota gets his chance in only his second Test, joined in the backrow by skipper Michael Hooper at openside flanker and Rob Valetini at No.8. "He's really impressed us with his work ethic on and off the field and worked hard for this opportunity," said Rennie of the 24-year-old Leota. "Big man and ball-carrier, he has been close to selection in the past."

Hodge comes in for Banks, who has been ruled out for up to 10 weeks with a fractured arm suffered in the team's 30-17 win over the Springboks last weekend. A fit-again James O'Connor was an option but Rennie instead went for the versatile Rebels star, despite Hodge struggling under the high ball when he came off the bench last week. "Hodge put down a couple of high balls last weekend but he was otherwise excellent," said Rennie.

O'Connor made the match-day 23 and will see his first action since May, when a groin injury sidelined him after he had made the fly-half role his own. That position has now been taken by Quade Cooper. "We were pretty keen to keep it as constant as we could," Rennie added of the selections. "We're determined to build on the past couple of performances on Saturday night."

In an otherwise unchanged backline, scrum-half Nic White kept Tate McDermott out of the side and will partner Cooper, with the impressive Len Ikitau alongside Samu Kerevi in midfield. Hodge will roam the backline with last week's two-try hero Marika Korobete on the left wing and Andrew Kellaway on the right.

Among the forwards, James Slipper plays his 109th Test in the front row alongside Folau Fainga'a and powerhouse Taniela Tupou, while Izack Rodda partners Matt Philip in the second row. Argentina head into the game on the back of four straight tournament defeats, although they will take heart in earning draws against Australia twice last year. —AFP

BRISBANE: Wallabies coach Dave Rennie has urged his team to stay focused as they eye three wins in a row for the first time since 2017 against a wounded Argentina tomorrow. Australia head into the Rugby Championship fifth-round clash with momentum and confidence after consecutive victories over South Africa, propelling them to number three in the world.

In contrast, Los Pumas and coach Mario Ledesma are under mounting pressure after four straight defeats, scoring just two tries while conceding 136 points. Despite this Rennie remains cautious of a team battling to bounce back, and conscious that Argentina frustrated his side by grinding out two draws last season. "We know the Argentinians will be desperate because they have had four losses so far and they're a good side," he said yesterday ahead of the clash in Townsville, in northern Queensland, the second game of a double-header with New Zealand facing South Africa in the early match.

"They'll want to express themselves, they throw more passes (than South Africa), they counter when given the opportunity and they are very good at it. They're also very good at filling the field, are disciplined around defence and can be hard to break down. What we've learned over the past few weeks is we have to hang in the fight for a long time, sometimes it takes 60 or 70 minutes to crack a side," he added. "We're certainly in no position to sit back and relax and be happy. We're still a long way from the team we reckon we could be."

Rennie has made two changes to his starting side, handing flanker Rob Leota a run-on debut in a backrow marshalled by skipper Michael Hooper and Rob Valetini. The versatile Reece Hodge got the



BRISBANE: New Zealand's Scott Barrett is tackled by Argentina's Tomas Lavanini during the rugby Championship match at the Suncorp Stadium on Sept 18, 2021. —AFP

nod to replace fullback Tom Banks, who is out for up to 10 weeks with a fractured arm. A fit-again James O'Connor was included on the bench and will see his first action since May, when a groin injury sidelined him after he had made the fly-half role his own. That position has now been taken by veteran Quade Cooper, who made a remarkable comeback earlier this month after four years in the international wilderness.

'Different beast'

While Argentina managed to bank two draws against the Wallabies last year, they have not scored more than 13 points in any Rugby Championship game this season and Ledesma admitted Rennie's team

was "a different beast" to 2020. "They've beaten the world champions twice and I thought they really dominated the game (last weekend)," said Ledesma, who has former Wallabies coach Michael Cheika assisting him.

"We're playing a different beast than last year. We have had a couple of bad games on the hop," he added. "We're really concentrating on getting better and we're playing against a team that is really confident." Ledesma named an unchanged run-on side to the one that crashed to a second-string New Zealand last week, with Santiago Carreras retained at fly-half with first-choice number 10 Nicolas Sanchez still out injured. —AFP

New Zealand recall big guns for Springboks clash

BRISBANE: New Zealand will return to full strength for the historic 100th Test match between the All Blacks and South Africa tomorrow as they seek to seal this year's Rugby Championship. Coach Ian Foster made eight changes to his starting line-up for the Test in Townsville, Australia recalling veterans including playmaker Beauden Barrett and influential lock Brodie Retallick. Flanker Ardie Savea again captains the team after leading an experimental side to victory over Argentina last week.

Foster said he was excited to face South Africa for the first time since taking over as head coach after the 2019 World Cup, when the Springboks became world champions. "This has got a bit of a legacy moment feel about it - 100 Tests and 100 years, it certainly

makes it special, along with the fact we haven't played South Africa for a couple of years," he said.

But Foster said the All Blacks, who top the Rugby Championship table and can wrap up the tournament with a win, were not dwelling on the match's historic importance. "We are all aware of the history and legacy of this match and respect that, but the only way we can do justice to that is to prepare well and focus on what we have to do," he said.

The majority of Foster's changes were up front, an area where he said the All Blacks expect a "torrid" time from the physical South Africans. Prop Joe Moody is the only remaining member of the tight five that started against Argentina, with Codie Taylor, Nepo Laulala, Scott Barrett and Retallick all brought in. Luke Jacobson and Akira Ioane line up alongside Savea in the back row.

Beauden Barrett returns at fly-half with Damian McKenzie moving to the bench and David Havili replaces Quinn Tupaea in the centers. "We're excited and getting ready for what will be a huge challenge," Foster said. "It will be the first time a number of our guys have played South Africa so they're excited and ready for it." —AFP