

CRONJE BACK AS SPRINGBOKS LOOK TO TOPPLE WALLABIES

PERTH: Scrum-half Ross Cronje has shrugged off an ankle injury and Pieter-Steph du Toit returns at lock in the only changes to the South Africa team to face Australia in Perth tomorrow. Cronje, who has established himself as regular this season, missed the Rugby Championship win over Argentina in Salta with the knock he suffered in the Springboks' opening match against the Pumas in Port Elizabeth. But he has proven his fitness and will partner fly-half Elton Jantjies, while Francois Hougaard returns to the bench.

In the only other change to the starting team, du Toit comes in for Franco Mostert, who has been a stalwart for the Springboks and gets a break because of his heavy workload. It means du Toit is reunited in the

second row with captain Eben Etzebeth, who makes his 60th appearance.

The only other change to the matchday squad sees the inclusion of experienced fly-half Handre Pollard among the reserves. "Even though we travelled to three continents in 10 days, this group has the desire to get better, and learn from previous experiences," said coach Allister Coetzee.

"The performance in Salta was not perfect, but we are looking forward to the next opportunity to improve as individuals and as a team." The Springbok coach again emphasised that the Wallabies will come with a massive challenge. "They are a well-coached side, with great deception on attack. Their playmakers

and strike runners complement each other very well and we will have to be very sharp on defence," he said.

"If you look at their performances against New Zealand, you will see how well they have functioned in scoring nine tries and 63 points in two matches."

South Africa (15-1) - Andries Coetzee; Raymond Rhule, Jesse Kriel, Jan Serfontein, Courtnall Skosan; Elton Jantjies, Ross Cronje; Uzair Cassiem, Jaco Kriel, Siya Kolisi; Pieter-Steph du Toit, Eben Etzebeth (capt); Coenie Oosthuizen, Malcolm Marx, Tendai Mtawarira

Replacements: Bongsi Mbonambi, Steven Kitshoff, Trevor Nyakane, Lood de Jager, Jean-Luc du Preez, Francois Hougaard, Handre Pollard, Damian de Allende. —AFP



SYDNEY: A file photo taken on August 18, 2017, shows Australian Wallabies rugby player Bernard Foley receiving a pass during the Captain's Run ahead of their Test match against the New Zealand All Blacks in Sydney. — AFP

RUGBY

NEW-LOOK ALL BLACKS OFFER PUMAS CHANCE TO SHINE

NEW PLYMOUTH: Argentina will put their rugby credibility on the line in New Plymouth this weekend against an All Blacks experimenting with their line-up. Now in their sixth year of the Rugby Championship, much more was expected of the South Americans than just three wins from 29 matches. They have never beaten New Zealand.

Two years ago, things looked good for Los Pumas when they made the World Cup semi-finals and with the bulk of their squad joining the Jaguares to play Super Rugby the following year. But in two games against the All Blacks last year they appeared to have taken a step backwards—conceding a total of 93 points.

Both sides have made seven changes for Saturday's clash. While the All Blacks are looking to build depth, Argentina are in search of a glimmer of confidence. Coach Daniel Hourcade tried to put a positive spin on the disappointing history against New Zealand when he named his side yesterday.

"For us to play against the All Blacks is always a huge motivation and you end up with positive things, because facing the best makes you grow," he said.

But Hourcade could be forgiven for wondering what to do next. Easing up on Argentina's traditional bruising forward game in favour of a more open, running style has not paid the desired dividends. When Los Pumas do play tight, captain

Agustin Creevy is able to muster a powerful unit that has caused the All Blacks problems in the past, but he will be without one of his finest lieutenants this weekend with 78-Test veteran Juan Manuel Leguizamon dropped.

Enforcer Tomas Lavanini was also not required despite being cleared of further punishment after being sent off against South Africa a fortnight ago when he collected two yellow cards.

In all there are four forward changes and three in the backs with Hourcade saying he chose his best line-up, which includes the return of Nicolas Sanchez to partner Tomas Cubelli in the halves.

GIVE IT A CRACK

If the All Blacks have concerns about their misfiring performances against Australia they were not showing it. Instead, coach Steve Hansen did not hesitate to rest Sam Whitelock, Liam Squire, Aaron Smith, Ryan Crotty and Rieko Ioane who represent 201 Tests-worth of experience.

Sam Cane goes to the bench and Ben Smith goes on holiday-between them worth a further 110 Tests. Up steps an injury-free Nehe Milner-Skudder for his first appearance since the 2015 World Cup final and a natural fit for the high-paced game Hansen is developing. —AFP

RIVERON HAS DIFFICULT CHALLENGE AS NFL OFFICIATING CHIEF

NEW YORK: Alberto Riveron has a difficult challenge, and he's taking it on at a pivotal time in the NFL. Riveron has stepped in this year as the league's chief of officiating, replacing Dean Blandino, who joined his predecessor, Mike Pereira, as an analyst at Fox. Both Blandino and Pereira have been lauded for their skills in communicating and explaining officiating calls, something they carried into television from their positions at the NFL.

Riveron plans to continue the transparency - Blandino was a regular on Monday talk shows and on social media, breaking down plays from the previous day - as he directs a staff that now will include 21 full-time officials. He worked as Blandino's main assistant before moving up, so the adjustment hasn't been overwhelming in any way.

But there are differences. "I was not as in tune with internal workings like I am now," the 57-year-old Riveron says. "I was involved in the officiating, the evaluating and the developing of the officiating program. I now basically overlook the entire department. That means working with other departments like broadcasting, marketing, strategy, a lot more than I was before. My job and my goal is to be consistent and to get it right."

Fans often believe game officials get it wrong too often, though Troy Vincent, who runs the league's football operations, cites the extremely high percentage of correct calls. Vincent is emphatic when describing a smooth transition for Riveron.

"Al has always been in AMGC (Art McNally GameDay Central, where video reviews are made) the past four to five years," Vincent explains. "Al and Dean were the ones in AMGC making the calls, collaborating with the referees and those they had been handling with stadium instant replay, and dealing with the (TV) trucks over the last three to four years. We look at succession planning all the time, seeing is there a better setup?"

The new setup also has Russell Yurk and Wayne Mackie assisting Riveron. "Russell, not just Dean, was someone who was always part of the implementation of our instant replay policies and rules," Vincent adds. "Now actually having him in-house, we just upgraded in that particular role. Now, he's inside of AMGC; he was based in Arizona before."

"Having Wayne coming off the field - one of our better officials - now leading our efforts on development and identification, there's a better team approach." Riveron, who was born in Cuba and moved to the United States with his family at age 5, takes over just when New York headquarters will make the final decisions on replay reviews, in consultation with the referee at each stadium. Those refs will be using Microsoft Surface tablets for reviews rather than going "under the hood" as part of the NFL's emphasis on eliminating dead time in games.

"We want to make the game more enjoyable for not only our fans in the stadium, but also for our viewers at home," Riveron says. "We are in the entertainment business, and we want to make sure that we come out with the best possible product. From the officiating side, there are certain things that we can do without giving up the consistency and efficiency of what we do of moving the game along." Such as a 40-second clock now in use after a score or a PAT when TV doesn't go to a break. "It consistently moves the game along and tells everybody what is next," he says. "There's not that lull period in between where we are guessing what's next and what's coming. All 17 crews are doing it the same way." — AP