

Sports

All Blacks face pivotal Wallabies clash as Championship goes to wire

‘We’ve had our struggles this year, but it’s been a blessing in disguise’

AUCKLAND, New Zealand: New Zealand can put one hand on the Rugby Championship trophy with victory against Australia at their Eden Park fortress on Saturday, but the champions will not be decided until hours later when South Africa play Argentina in Durban.

Despite a stuttering campaign that has seen defeats to South Africa and Argentina, New Zealand are level on points with the Springboks at the top of the table and it could all come down to points difference if both win on Saturday.

New Zealand last lost at Eden Park in 1994 and they haven't been beaten by the Wallabies there since 1986. Flanker Akira Ioane called the Auckland stadium, which will be a 47,000 sellout on Saturday, a "fortress for the All Blacks".

"We want to make sure we put in a good performance and don't leave anything up to chance," he said. New Zealand went top of the Rugby Championship table after winning the Bledisloe Cup for the 20th straight season with a 39-37 win over Australia in Melbourne a week ago, secured only by a controversial try after the siren.

South Africa drew level when they beat Argentina two days later, leaving all four nations with a mathematical chance of winning the title. "It's been a very different championship for all four teams," said New Zealand head coach Ian Foster on Thursday.

'Wake-up call'

"It's exciting for the Rugby Championship that we've come to the last game and no one really knows (the outcome)." Lock Sam Whitelock captains the All Blacks as they chase a third consecutive Test win after Sam Cane failed to recover from a head knock.

It's a far cry from the start of the Rugby Championship when the All Blacks came off a 2-1 home series loss to Ireland to be thumped 26-10 by the Springboks in Mbombela. The under-fire Foster clung onto his job when the All Blacks bounced back with a 35-23 victory in Johannesburg but was again under pressure when Argentina won 25-18 in Christchurch.

Foster has opted for a new-look back row against Australia as Ardie Savea returns at number eight after paternity leave, alongside Dalton Papali'i and Akira Ioane. Injuries to David Havili and Quinn Tupaea mean a new centre partnership of Jordie Barrett and Rieko Ioane, with Beauden Barrett starting at fullback.

"We've had our struggles this year, but it's been a blessing in disguise, because it's something new for the young guys coming in and for all of New Zealand," said Papali'i of a 2022 campaign that has seen the All Blacks lose four of eight Tests.

"We aren't used to it, so it's about us finding our feet again. It's a wake-up call, it's Test footy, the best of the best. It's been a good learning curve." Australia have been forced into a pack reshuffle after lock Darcy Swain was banned for six weeks earlier Thursday for taking out the leg of Tupaea in Melbourne.

Towering lock Cadeyrn Neville replaces Swain with hard-running Harry Wilson given a chance at number eight. "It's great to have Cadeyrn available and Harry's been working really hard," said Australia coach Dave Rennie.

Fly-half Bernard Foley retains his place despite being penalised for time-wasting which led to New Zealand's Bledisloe Cup-winning try in Melbourne. New Zealand (15-1): Beauden Barrett; Will Jordan, Rieko Ioane, Jordie Barrett, Caleb Clarke; Richie



MELBOURNE: New Zealand's Will Jordan (C) evades the diving tackle of Australia's Bernard Foley (R) to score a try during the Rugby Championship match between Australia and New Zealand in Melbourne. —AFP

Mo'unga, Aaron Smith; Ardie Savea, Dalton Papali'i, Akira Ioane; Samuel Whitelock, Brodie Retallick; Tyrel Lomax, Codie Taylor, Ethan de Groot; Replacements: Samisoni Taukei'aho, Ofa Tu'ungafasi, Nepo Laulala, Tupou Vaa'i, Hoskins Sotutu, Finlay Christie, Roger Tuivasa-Sheck, Sevu Reece
Australia (15-1): Andrew Kellaway; Tom Wright,

Len Ikitau, Lalakai Foketi, Marika Koroibete; Bernard Foley, Jake Gordon; Harry Wilson, Pete Samu, Rob Valetini; Cadeyrn Neville, Jed Holloway; Allan Alaalatoa, David Porecki, James Slipper (capt)
Replacements: Folau Fainga'a, Angus Bell, Pone Fa'amausili, Nick Frost, Fraser McReight, Nic White, Reece Hodge, Jordan Petaia. —AFP

News in brief

Noble returns to West Ham

LONDON: Former West Ham captain Mark Noble is to return to the club as its sporting director, the Premier League strugglers announced Thursday. The 35-year-old Noble called time on an 18-year career with his boyhood club at the end of last season. He will begin his newly-created role in January. West Ham said in a statement that the former midfielder would "work closely in support of Hammers manager David Moyes and the current board". The London club are in the relegation zone after winning just one of their seven Premier League games. "I'm really happy to be coming back and can't wait to get started," Noble said. "I've spent the last 24 years as a player here, first in the academy and then in the first team, and obviously have a deep knowledge and understanding of the club." He added: "I see it as a position that I can grow and develop in both personally and professionally. "There are always difficult decisions to be made in football but along with my colleagues at the club, I will continue to put the best interests of West Ham United first."

Federer teams up with Nadal

LONDON: Roger Federer will team up with long-time rival Rafael Nadal for the final match of his glittering career, Laver Cup organisers announced on Thursday. The 20-time Grand Slam champion will play doubles with the Spaniard, who has won 22 majors, at the O2 arena in London on Friday. Federer and Nadal, representing Team Europe, will face US players Frances Tiafoe and Jack Sock of Team World in the evening session. Federer, whose most recent competitive match was a loss to Hubert Hurkacz in last year's Wimbledon quarter-finals, has been struggling with a knee problem and will not play singles in London. "I'm not sure if I can handle it all but I'll try," said Federer, 41. "This one feels a whole lot different. I'm happy to have him on my team and not playing against him. "Playing with Rafa feels really different. To be able to do it one more time, I'm sure it will be wonderful and I'll try my very best."

'Status quo' no option: Strauss

LONDON: Andrew Strauss has insisted "the status quo is not an option" as he called on county chiefs to back his reform plan for English cricket which includes cutting the number of first-class Championship matches. Former England captain Strauss has spent the last six months overseeing a high performance review for the England and Wales Cricket Board, launched following the men's Test team's humiliating 2021/22 Ashes series loss in Australia. His panel have come up with 17 recommendations, 15 of which already have the required backing. But two of the most significant changes needed the support of at least 12 of the 18 first-class counties. Strauss is adamant a reduction from 14 Championship matches per team to 10 is needed. His panel are also urging the adoption of a six-team top division sitting above two secondary conferences, who would play off for one annual promotion, to replace the current two-division model. —AFP

Mayweather expects 'easy payday, easy opponent' in Japan

TOKYO: Floyd Mayweather says that Sunday's exhibition boxing match against Japanese mixed martial artist Mikuru Asakura will be an "easy payday, easy cheque, easy opponent". The 45-year-old boxing great, who is reportedly close to agreeing a rematch with UFC superstar Conor McGregor, beat Japanese kickboxer Tenshin Nasukawa after just two minutes when they fought in an exhibition in Japan in 2018.

The fight was widely seen as a farce but the American vowed to give the crowd this weekend at Saitama Super Arena, just north of Tokyo, their

Embattled Suns owner Sarver to sell NBA club

LOS ANGELES: Phoenix Suns owner Robert Sarver, banned for a year and fined \$10 million by the NBA for racist and misogynist remarks and workplace bullying, said Wednesday he will sell the team. Following the punishments imposed last week, NBA players union executive director Tamika Tremaglio called for Sarver to be banned for life, and NBA stars LeBron James and Chris Paul declared the penalties too light.

Major sponsor PayPal said it would not renew its deal with the team if Sarver were still involved, and Suns vice chairman Jahm Najafi called for Sarver to resign. "In our current unforgiving climate, it has become painfully clear... whatever good I have done, or could still do, is outweighed by things I have said in the past," Sarver said in a statement.

"For those reasons, I am beginning the process of seeking buyers for the Suns and (Women's NBA) Mercury," Sarver's decision was welcomed by NBA commissioner Adam Silver as well as Sarver's co-owners and the NBA Players' Association.

"I fully support the decision by Robert Sarver to sell the Phoenix Suns and Mercury," Silver said in a statement. "This is the right next step for the organi-

Quartararo defies pain in 'push to the max'

MOTEGI, Japan: MotoGP world champion Fabio Quartararo will defy pain this weekend in Japan after a nasty fall that blew the title race wide open with five grands prix to go. Yamaha's Quartararo crashed out in first-lap mayhem at Aragon last Sunday and going into what could be a wet Motegi circuit just 17 points separate the top three riders.

The Frenchman was pictured in the aftermath of Aragon with bandages covering his torso, but he is in a positive frame of mind for the Japanese GP on Sunday, even if forecasts are correct and it rains. "I had my first training so it was ok, it's just abrasion," the 23-year-old Quartararo said on Thursday of his injuries. "It's a little bit painful but I don't think on the bike it's going to be a big issue."

"For sure it's going to be burning, especially on the first session, but I don't think it's going to be a problem riding the bike." Quartararo saw his championship lead over Italy's Francesco Bagnaia slashed to 10 points, while Spain's Aleix Espargaro is also firmly in the title

money's worth in his latest lucrative post-retirement performance.

"I think the last time I came here, it was so quick nobody got a chance to enjoy it," Mayweather, whose nicknames include "Money", said Thursday after a practice session which was delayed by an hour because he "overslept".

"I'll make it quick, but there's not many bouts on the card so I'll make sure to go to three (rounds), unless you all want me to make it quick." Mayweather was reported this week as saying that he will fight McGregor for a second time next year.

The two met in a much-hyped boxing match in 2017, with Mayweather winning by a 10th-round technical knock-out to retire with a perfect 50-0 record. His previous exhibition match was against "Dangerous" Don Moore in Abu Dhabi in May. Mayweather was inducted into the International Boxing Hall of Fame in June. —AFP

zation and community." Added NBPA president CJ McCollum: "We thank Mr. Sarver for making a swift decision that was in the best interest of our sports community." Silver had said when the sanctions were announced that he didn't think the violations rose to the level of forcing Sarver, the Suns managing partner, to sell the club, as was done in 2014 with former Los Angeles Clippers owner Donald Sterling over racist remarks.

Los Angeles Lakers superstar James, a four-time NBA Most Valuable Player, had said the league "got this wrong" with that decision. On Wednesday, he tweeted his approval that Sarver will sell.

"I'm so proud to be a part of a league committed to progress!" James said. In announcing the sale, Sarver declared it "the best course of action for everyone". Sarver was banned and fined after a 10-month probe into his 18-year tenure at the Suns.

The NBA had commissioned the investigation in the wake of a damning ESPN report on the club's "toxic" work environment. Investigators found that Sarver "engaged in conduct that clearly violated common workplace standards, as reflected in team and League rules and policies." "This conduct included the use of racially insensitive language; unequal treatment of female employees; sex-related statements and conduct; and harsh treatment of employees that on occasion constituted bullying," their report said.

Courage to come forward

Investigators, from the law firm of Wachtell, Lipton, Rosen & Katz, said multiple witnesses told them



MOTEGI, Japan: Monster Energy Yamaha MotoGP rider Fabio Quartararo of France (L) speaks to Aprilia Racing rider Aleix Espargaro of Spain (R) prior to a pre-event press conference at the MotoGP Japanese Grand Prix in the Twin Ring Motegi circuit in Motegi. —AFP

hunt. Quartararo is relishing the fight, starting at the first Japanese MotoGP in three years after the pandemic cancelled recent editions. "What can you do? With 17 points around all three, everyone is pushing like hell," he said. "Having only 17 between us three, we will push ourselves to the maximum and in the end, I think it is nice." —AFP



TOKYO: US boxer great Floyd Mayweather (R) prepares as he takes part in a training session at a gym in Tokyo on September 22, 2022, ahead of his planned exhibition boxing match against Japanese mixed martial artist Mikuru Asakura on September 25. —AFP



Robert Sarver

Sarver's aggressive behavior often seemed intended "solely to provoke a reaction from employees-to embarrass them or assert dominance over them."

Sarver said Wednesday he thought the one-year suspension would give him time to "focus, make amends and remove my personal controversy from the teams that I and so many fans love." Amid the ongoing criticism, however, he decided that he didn't want to be "a distraction."

Suns Legacy Partners, the group that manages the Suns and Mercury, said the decision was "in the best interest of the organization and community." The group acknowledged the "courage of the people who came forward" and said Sarver's departure was only part of the task of reshaping the work environment of the franchise. —AFP

Osaka pulls out of Pan Pacific Open with pain

TOKYO: Naomi Osaka's woes deepened when the struggling former world number one pulled out of her home Pan Pacific Open in Tokyo complaining of abdominal pain on Thursday. The 24-year-old Japanese was set to play Brazil's Beatriz Haddad Maia in the second round later in the day but withdrew saying her "body won't let" her compete.

"It's an honour to be able to play at the Toray Pan Pacific Open in front of the amazing fans here in Japan," Osaka said in a statement released by organisers. "This has and always will be a special tournament for me and I wish I could have stepped on court today, but my body won't let me."

"Thank you for all your support this week and I will see you next year," she added. Osaka, a four-time Grand Slam winner, was looking to end a poor run of form in Tokyo, where she is the defending champion from the last time the tournament was played in 2019. —AFP