

## CHEIKA SEEKING ANSWERS TO WALLABIES QUANDARIES

**MELBOURNE:** Australia coach Michael Cheika is renowned for pulling off big renovation jobs in short order but his Wallabies project will still be a work-in-progress well into the abridged Rugby Championship. Under the deadline pressure of a looming World Cup, Cheika will give a first glimpse of his plans for the global showpiece in England when he names his matchday side to take on South Africa in Brisbane on Saturday.

For all but a few in the 31-man training squad, it may be a welcome ray of light about their places in the pecking order after a full Super Rugby season of being mostly in the dark. It may also be just a fleeting moment of clarity, however, with Cheika expected to trial a number of different combinations in the remaining matches against Argentina and New Zealand.

A training camp on the balmy Sunshine Coast last week shaved the squad down from 40 but appeared to settle little else for a team that finished last season with three straight losses to northern hemisphere opponents.

Though the starting front row appears to be sewn up with props James Slipper and Sekope Kepu either side of captain Stephen Moore, question marks abound from the second row back.

Cheika has yet to settle his ideal halves pairing, with the experienced Queensland Reds duo of Quade Cooper and Will Genia competing with the coach's former New South Wales Waratahs' pairing of Bernard Foley and Nick Phipps.

The return of France-based backs Matt Giteau and Drew Mitchell to the national

fold after several years in Europe has also posed a selection headache, with no shortage of capable centres and wingers in the squad. All three back row positions will be hotly contested, while the possible availability of Ireland-based lock Kane Douglas for the series' final match against the All Blacks may also shake up the second row. After the series, Cheika has only a second Bledisloe Cup test against the All Blacks and a commercially-driven match against rugby minnows, United States, in Chicago to examine his side before the opening pool match of the World Cup against Fiji on Sept. 23. The idea of the coaching staff still stuck at the drawing board a few months out from England might be alarming for fans. But Cheika, who guided Irish side Leinster to the Heineken Cup in four years and the Waratahs to the Super Rugby title in two, has been less worried about fitting players into a starting side than getting them all on the same page.

"So what we're trying to do is just get our plan right and make the guys believe in that," he told reporters on Monday. "Be very unified in what we're doing. It won't be complicated and what we want to do is get everyone doing the same thing."

As always, the spotlight will be trained firmly on the Wallabies forwards and how they hold up against the more muscular packs of the southern hemisphere powers.

They were outclassed in defeats to France, Ireland and England on tour, so any signs of improvement from the pack in the Rugby Championship may be vital for the team's confidence heading to England. — Reuters



Julian Montoya (center) in action in this file photo.

## ARGENTINA TO BANK ON SUPER RUGBY CORE

**ARGENTINA:** Argentina's future is expected to be on display in the Rugby Championship with the country preparing for their debut next year in an extended Super Rugby competition that is only likely to enhance the national side.

Five of the six players that could make their Rugby Championship debuts when the Pumas meet New Zealand in Christchurch on Friday are among a growing number who have signed contracts with the Argentine Rugby Union (UAR) to be a part of the country's new Super Rugby franchise next year.

Hooker Julian Montoya, lock Guido Petti, flanker Facundo Isa, centre Matias Moroni and winger Santiago Cordero have shunned big offers from European clubs to develop in the expanding southern hemisphere game. The sixth, utility back Juan Pablo Socino, has yet to

make his Pumas debut but impressed in a warm-up series with the French Barbarians in Argentina last month that ended 1-1.

Socino, who slipped off the Pumas radar after being part of Argentina's junior Punitas, re-emerged last season as an accomplished flyhalf or centre for Newcastle in the English Premiership. Should he establish himself for Argentina he could well become another player contracted by the UAR for a place in the core of home-based professionals.

In the Rugby Championship and World Cup pecking order he is behind flyhalf Nicolas Sanchez, who helped Argentina beat Australia 21-17 in October for their first win in their third season in the Championship. Argentina backed up that victory last November with victories over Italy and then a 18-13 win over France in Paris

when Sanchez put over three drop goals.

While the priority in picking the Pumas now lies with players based at home, coach Daniel Hourcade is relying on European experience in the form of back-row forwards Juan Martin Fernandez Lobbe and Juan Manuel Leguizamón.

Veteran Leicester Tigers prop Marcos Ayerza and lock Manuel Carizza, back in the squad after a good season for the Stormers in South Africa, are also in contention. Centre Juan Martin Hernandez is still a part of Hourcade's plans to make Argentina play more attacking rugby, but has fitness issues and will miss the early part of the Championship in order to be fit for the World Cup. Leicester wing Gonzalo Camacho is also under an injury cloud and timetable for a return later in the Championship but Saracens prop Juan Figallo is out after surgery last week on a knee injury. — Reuters



Michael Cheika

## BOKS INJURY WOES CONTINUE

**CAPE TOWN:** This year's Rugby Championship holds extra significance for injury-plagued South Africa as coach Heyneke Meyer scrambles to test his available combinations just two months out from the World Cup. When Meyer took over the Springboks at the start of 2012 he would have expected to use this tournament for fine-tuning of his game-plan, but instead will seek cover for injured first team regulars in the coming weeks.

With experienced campaigners Duane Vermeulen, Willem Alberts, Frans Steyn, Fourie du Preez and Jacque Fourie in a race against time to be fit for the World Cup in England, Meyer is still looking at his options across a number of positions.

There is also uncertainty over the availability of captain Jean de Villiers after a knee reconstruction that saw him miss the entire 2015 Super Rugby season, though he came through an unscathed 20 minutes in the 46-10 victory over a World XV last Saturday.

He is likely to only feature in the latter stages of the Championship having been sent to his province for game-time at a lower intensity. Meyer showed his hand to some degree in the World XV win, where obvious rustiness was mixed in with some sparkling attacking play.

None of the days of the Boks just bashing it up at numbers 12 and 13

with the centre combination of Damian de Allende and rookie Jesse Kriel, who played fullback for the Bulls in Super Rugby, one to watch in the Championship if allowed to flourish with both exciting runners.

With mercurial fullback Willie le Roux and experienced wing Bryan Habana added to that mix they look a side set to play a much more ball-in-hand style of rugby.

The exciting Handre Pollard was selected at flyhalf against the World XV but is likely to be replaced by the more experienced and more consistent kicker Pat Lambie for the start of the Championship.

Morne Steyn is still part of the squad, though he has not played since the loss to Australia in Perth last year as the team moves away from a kicking and territory based game.

The front row looks settled with Bismark du Plessis and Adriaan Strauss set to continue to alternate at hooker, while Victor Matfield and Eben Etzebeth are certainties in the second row if fit.

The injuries to Vermeulen and Alberts have knocked out two of Meyer's most physical loose forwards, with specialist Warren Whiteley and Schalk Burger likely to play number eight, while Marcell Coetzee adds muscle and Francois Louw some guile on the side of the scrum. — Reuters



Duane Vermeulen in fitness race.

## CASTLEFORD SLUMP TO DEFEAT

**LONDON:** Daryl Powell was left struggling to think of a worse 40 minutes during his Castleford Tigers tenure after they slumped to defeat at Hull FC.

The Tigers, who arrived in Hull boasting a five-match winning run, went into the break 14-6 ahead after a try double from Denny Solomona and one for Luke Dorn.

However, they capitulated after half-time, as Tom Lineham crossed over twice to lead the hosts to a 21-18 win and prevent Castleford from moving into the Super League top four.

And the coach revealed there may have been some complacency, with former NRL trio Gareth Ellis, Mark Minichiello and Mickey Paea all missing from the Hull FC line-up.

"Did we take them lightly without Ellis, Mini and Paea? If we did, we shouldn't have," said Powell. "The second half was abysmal and after being 14-6 up we were unrecognisable. The second half was as bad I've seen since I've been in charge. I think it was evident they wanted to win it more and we made too many errors. We had big opportunities and we are asking questions as to why we didn't take chances in front of us?"

"We are still in a good spot and we need to learn lessons. We ran out of gas but then we found some at the end but we didn't deserve to win." Elsewhere, Adam Quinlan inspired St Helens to a nail-biting 35-34 victory over Huddersfield Giants, grabbing a hat-trick on his debut. Head coach Keiron Cunningham was pleased with what he saw from the 22-year-old, who joined from Parramatta Eels this month, and reserved praise for Luke Walsh after his last-gasp drop goal sealed the points.

"That's why we brought (Quinlan) over," said Cunningham. "We knew he was a great support player. Instinct got him those tries."

"He's a natural footballer who's going to be good for us. He didn't know all the players' names; he only jumped off a plane on Monday."

"(Luke Walsh) practises that in training. He always kicks from a long way out and to the side, so it was no fluke. He's had a tough period with injury but he really shone with ball in hand. That's going to be a good boost for him, it will give him that confidence he needs."

Meanwhile, Warrington Wolves boss Tony Smith was pleased not only to overcome Wakefield Wildcats - coached by his brother Brian and inspired by Jacob Miller's four-try showing - but also to boast clean bill of health after the 40-20 win.

"I don't think we've any injuries from the game. I've been waiting to be able to say that since round one," said Smith after his side secured a play-off place.

"We're pleased overall. We played alright considering. Wakefield have come a long way in a short period of time and at time were breathing down our necks. We had a lot of adversity to overcome. We had a small team out there, down in numbers in the forwards in a big way. We had to play a different way and got that right most of the time." — AFP



Conrad Smith

## HANSEN MUST PERFORM ALL BLACKS BALANCING ACT

**WELLINGTON:** The All Blacks' veteran core of players will drag themselves through one final Rugby Championship and try to bed down tactics for the World Cup, but coach Steve Hansen must also strike a balance between proven performers and the future of the team.

Several of Hansen's side are unlikely to wear the national jersey again after the World Cup in England later this year. Conrad Smith, Ma'a Nonu and Dan Carter are joining French clubs while captain Richie McCaw, hooker Keven Mealamu and loosehead prop Tony Woodcock are all expected to retire from top-class rugby at the end of the year.

Hansen has overhauled the 2011 World Cup winning side by introducing new players to provide an exciting balance to grizzled veterans, aiming to play a high-paced game and stretch their opponents across the field. Much of Hansen's World Cup squad will already have been pencilled in before New Zealand bid for a fourth successive Rugby Championship title, but there are opportunities for fringe players to make the final cut on Aug. 30.

World Cup winners Cory Jane and Israel Dagg will also be trying to ensure they are on the plane to London in a crowded selection puzzle in the outside backs after injury-ravaged seasons took a toll on their form. While Hansen will use the Championship to fine tune his World Cup plans, he has also said he

needed to think beyond the tournament when a large chunk of his experienced core will move on from New Zealand rugby.

Hansen has often spoken about the double-edged sword facing the All Blacks in rugby-mad New Zealand. Maintaining a winning side requires the introduction of fresh faces and experimenting with untapped potential, but fans expect the All Blacks to not only win the World Cup but also win every test match they play.

Hansen has picked an extended 41-man squad for the southern hemisphere championship to give himself the opportunity to look at players like winger Nehe Milner-Skudder and flyhalf Lima Sopoaga, who are more likely to feature from 2016 onwards.

Sopoaga could still play in the Rugby Championship after a brilliant Super Rugby season vaulted him into national contention, though Hansen said the learning curve was steep. "It's a big ask to expect (him) to come in and take over a role like (flyhalf)," Hansen told reporters. "He's got quite a bit of learning to do before we let him loose." "But, at some point, we'd like to think we can get everyone a bit of an opportunity over these next (few) games." "He may even force his way into the 31 we take to the World Cup, but it was too good an opportunity to miss to not give him an education." — Reuters