

ROB KEARNEY BACK FOR IRELAND, HEALY ON BENCH

CARDIFF, United Kingdom: Ireland coach Joe Schmidt is taking nothing for granted in the World Cup Pool D opener against Canada, naming a near first-choice team for the clash at Cardiff's Millennium Stadium tomorrow.

Full-back Rob Kearney regains his starting spot after being rested in the final warm-up match against England, Simon Zebo dropping to the bench.

Prop Cian Healy is also named among the replacements, Jack McGrath starting at loosehead as his Leinster teammate eases back into action following long-standing neck problems. Veteran lock Paul O'Connell captains the side and will pack down alongside Ulster's Iain Henderson, McGrath accompanied in the front row by hooker Rory Best and tighthead Mike Ross.

Jamie Heaslip anchors a powerful, first-choice back-row featuring Sean O'Brien and Peter O'Mahoney on the flanks. Connor Murray resumes his slick half-back partnership with fly-half Jonathan Sexton, Schmidt resisting the urge to give Eoin Reddan or Ian Madigan a run-out against the Canadians.

New Zealand-born Jared Payne combines with Luke

Fitzgerald in midfield, while David Kearney and Keith Earls are named on the wings. There was, however, no place for centre Robbie Henshaw, who picked up a hamstring injury in training on Tuesday.

"We're quietly confident he'll be ready for next Sunday (September 27 against Romania)," said Schmidt. After the Canada game, Ireland go on to play Romania in Wembley, Italy at the Olympic Stadium on October 4 and arguably the pool-topping decider against France back at the Millennium Stadium on October 11.

Team (15-1)

Rob Kearney; David Kearney, Jared Payne, Luke Fitzgerald, Keith Earls;

Jonathan Sexton, Conor Murray; Jamie Heaslip, Sean O'Brien, Peter O'Mahony;

Paul O'Connell (capt), Iain Henderson; Mike Ross, Rory Best, Jack McGrath

Replacements: Sean Cronin, Cian Healy, Nathan White, Donnacha Ryan, Chris

Henry, Eoin Reddan, Ian Madigan, Simon Zebo
Coach: Joe Schmidt (NZL) — AFP



LONDON: England's rugby players with Courtney Lawes (center) gather with teammates during a training session at Twickenham Stadium, London yesterday. The Rugby World Cup starts today with England playing Fiji and ends with the final on Oct 31. —AP



LONDON: Britain's Prime Minister David Cameron, waves at the media as he poses for photographs with school children, Martin Johnson, England's Rugby World Cup 2003 winning captain holding the Webb Ellis Cup and Maggie Alphonsi, part of the England women's team who won the World Cup in 2014, as they take part in a photo opportunity outside 10 Downing Street in London yesterday. — AP

RUGBY WORLD CUP QUARTER FINALS

'POOL OF DEATH' PROMISES THRILLS GALORE

LONDON: England, Australia and Wales will battle for a route to the Rugby World Cup quarter finals from probably the toughest first round pool ever drawn in the tournament's history. And even Fiji will not let the leading Pool A trio get away easily—particularly when the extravaganza starts at Twickenham today when they take on the English hosts. One of the criticisms of the World Cup is that the pool stage has too often been predictable, with the two major sides in any one group rarely being tested before the final eight come together. However, Pool A is anything but a foregone conclusion. Only Uruguay having the look of makeweights.

Organisers have been criticised for holding the pool draw in December 2012, so far ahead of the tournament, based on the world rankings at the time. But if anyone is to blame, it is Wales.

The draw came when they were on a seven-match losing streak that saw them fall to ninth in the rankings, with the top eight sides all seeded. Wales' defeat by Australia in late November of that year, a match played purely for financial gain, backfired spectacularly.

If they had not played it, Wales would

have been ranked seventh. In a professional era where money has become the dominating factor in so many rugby union decisions, it is a cautionary tale.

Halfpenny blow

Wales are now having to confront even more pressing problems after injuries suffered in a 23-19 warm-up win over Italy deprived them of ace goal-kicker Leigh Halfpenny and in-form scrum-half Rhys Webb for the entire World Cup. Halfpenny's absence could be particularly tough in a pool where points difference could be a factor in deciding which teams go through to the last eight.

Wales still have plenty of attacking threat in the likes of centre Jamie Roberts and wing George North. Nevertheless, they have lost their last 10 Tests against Australia. And their crunch pool matches against England and the Wallabies will be at Twickenham rather than Cardiff's Millennium Stadium.

Wales coach Warren Gatland was defiant about the situation. "If you (media) can do your jobs and write us off as much as possible and we can come in there being written off, which seems to be happening at the moment,

that's the best situation for a Wales team to be in," said the combative New Zealander. For England, the challenge will be to put together three good performances something they've rarely managed since Stuart Lancaster took charge in 2012 starting with Friday's tournament opener against Fiji. Doubts remain over England's line-out, with first choice hooker Dylan Hartley dropped for disciplinary reasons, their ability to compete at the breakdown and whether they can make the most of a back-line featuring dynamic wings Anthony Watson and Jonny May.

But home advantage could be an important factor for a squad with plenty of strength in depth. "We are in a unique position to be playing in a World Cup on home soil and to have the support of a nation behind the team," said Lancaster. Two-time world champions Australia, who also won this year's Rugby Championship, boast a brilliant back division. But the scrum has long been a problem area for Australia and coach Michael Cheika hopes the Wallabies' reputation won't count against them. "The only way we can change that perception is by consistently performing in that area," he said. — AFP

WATSON RELISHING TEST AGAINST FIJI GIANT

BAGSHOT, United Kingdom: England wing Anthony Watson is ready for a thorough test of his all-round game when he confronts giant Fiji flyer Nemani Nadolo in the World Cup opener at Twickenham today.

At 6ft 2in and 205 pounds, Watson is no shrinking flower, but his statistics are put into the shade by Nadolo, who stands 6ft 5in and weighs almost 282 pounds. Nadolo is more than just a giant however. The goal-kicking Crusaders flyer is one of the best finishers in the game, having been the joint-leading try scorer in the 2014 southern hemisphere Super Rugby tournament and adding nine more tries for the New Zealand side this year.

For the 21-year-old Watson, looking to add to his five tries in 11 Tests, confronting Nadolo will prove an acid test of his defensive game. "I've got tremendous respect for him as a player," Watson, speaking at England's training base in Bagshot, southwest of London, said of Nadolo on Wednesday.

"He's a world-class winger. I'm approaching it like I would playing against (Wales') George North.

"Fiji have got the ability to counter-attack from anywhere," said Watson. "So defensively we're going to have to be on the money in all areas of the pitch. We can't switch off for a second otherwise they'll take advantage. It will be a good challenge for us." Yet for all the talk of England wearing down Fiji up front as the best way to subdue the Pacific Islanders, Watson hopes the tournament opener will see the backs showing their skills.

"We would like to think we can punish them from all areas of the pitch. While Fiji are always looking to do that, we pick and choose our moments when it's on. And if it is on, then hopefully we can take advantage."

'Adapt on the run'

Fly-half George Ford, who plays in the same Bath side as Watson, will have a major say in whether England produce an all-round game. Traditionally, England have tended to prefer a forward-based game backed up by a kicking No 10 who can help the pack maintain good field position deep into the opposition half. But Ford was adamant the England management want players to be able to think on their feet. "We train so we can adapt on the run," Ford said.

"They (the coaches) want us to be a decision-making team, they put the onus on us in training and games to adapt to what's in front of us." At 5ft 9in, Ford is a poster-boy for rugby's longstanding boast that is a game for all shapes and sizes—a claim that at the professional level becomes increasingly hard to justify in an era of seemingly ever taller and heavier players.

"Obviously I am smaller than most lads on the pitch but I don't feel threatened by it," said Ford.

"There are other areas of the game other than being big and powerful. There is the mental side of it, being a bit smarter, a bit cleverer, being a bit quicker, having a feel (for the game).

"I do get asked that question a lot. When little lads come up to me and say 'you're not very big' and they are usually bigger than me. I tell them not to worry about it and make sure that they can kick the ball." —AFP