

Sports

France survive scare to beat USA 33-9 at Rugby World Cup

Bonus point keeps the pressure up on old enemy England

FUKUOKA: France ran in three late tries against the United States yesterday to earn a vital bonus point in the Rugby World Cup 'group of death' with an erratic 33-9 win. Les Bleus were just 12-9 ahead with 13 minutes to go before Gael Fickou, Baptiste Serin and Jefferson Poirot dotted down to secure victory against the underdogs.

It was the type of inconsistent performance followers of French rugby have seen all too frequently — breathtaking flair let down by a raft of handling errors. But the bonus point keeps the pressure up on old enemy England, who play Argentina on Saturday in another Pool C clash of the heavyweights.

"It was a very difficult match but the important thing is that we won with a bonus point," said fly-half Camille Lopez, who picked up the man-of-the-match award. USA captain Blaine Scully was delighted his team had been able to push France, three-time World Cup finalists, until the closing stages.

"It's where we want to be. We want to be testing ourselves in the best competitions against the best teams in the world," Scully said. "We're not expecting any quarter and we don't expect them to give it to us."

France looked sharp at the outset, an incisive break by Lopez slicing open the United States mid-field after just two minutes. And Les Bleus were on the scoreboard four minutes later, a counter-attacking move ending in a sublime Lopez chip for winger Yoann Huget to dot down for a scintillating try.

USA coach Gary Gold had called on his team to improve "every aspect" of their game after they went down to England 45-7 and the Eagles held their own for the first quarter, as AJ MacGinty scored a penalty after some pressure on the French line.

But France extended their advantage after 24 minutes when Lopez's perfectly judged cross-field kick found Alivereti Raka in space on the right-hand touchline for a simple try. The USA kept in the contest and MacGinty slotted another penalty on the half-hour mark, again the consequence of some sustained forward pressure as France lost their flow.

Huget's try aside, it was a patchy first-half performance from Les Bleus, a pre-match downpour and humid conditions making handling difficult.

'DESTABILISED, UNBALANCED'

France had a chance to register a third try when Sofiane Guitoune burst through on a mazy run but his long pass to Raka was adjudged forward. Frustration grew for France as the handling errors increased and coach Jacques Brunel brought on a wealth of experience from the bench.

The only time the USA had ever beaten France in a 15-a-side match was in the 1924 Olympics — the last time rugby XV's featured in the games — but they came within three points with MacGinty's third penalty.

With the French supporters in the crowd starting to get nervous, centre Fickou finally put some daylight between the two sides, crashing over from short range for a try converted by Lopez to give the favourites a 19-9 lead.

And just two minutes later, Serin put the result beyond doubt with a try that again was created by another cross-field kick to Raka. With the USA tiring and the clock running down, prop Poirot put the icing on the cake with a catch-and-drive pushover.

It was only the second time the two teams have met in a World Cup — France won the only other match 41-14 in 2003. Next up for France is a match-



FUKUOKA: France's wing Alivereti Raka (R) is tackled by US wing Martin Iosefo during the Japan 2019 Rugby World Cup Pool C match between France and the United States at the Fukuoka Hakatanomori Stadium in Fukuoka yesterday. —AFP

up with the physical Tongans on October 6, before 'Le Crunch' with England in Yokohama that may decide who tops the group and earns a likely quarter-final clash against Australia.

"There's work to do. Still quite a lot of work to do, that's clear," Brunel told French television. "We

struggled to control the game. We made a lot of errors. We were destabilised, unbalanced."

Gold, so furious with his team after the England defeats, was effusive in his praise. "We never gave up the fight, not for the full 80 minutes. Just so proud of everyone," said Gold. —AFP

England dismiss Argentina's 'boring' jibe at World Cup

TOKYO: England's players have hit back at accusations by Argentina that they play "boring" rugby before this weekend's World Cup clash in Tokyo, refusing to get drawn into any mind games. Earlier this week, Pumas hooker Agustin Creevy tried to get under England's skin in the build-up to the crunch Pool C game, taunting: "They always play the same way — sometimes it's boring. Saturday is going to be like a war, it's like a final for us."

But Saracens hooker Jamie George hit back yesterday. "I don't think we do play boring rugby," he said. "I'm not overly surprised he's tried to say that, but he's entitled to his opinion. "Hopefully we'll prove him wrong on Saturday," added George. "I don't think it's very justified and I'm sure he's just trying to rattle us a little bit. He's more than welcome to try."

Flanker Sam Underhill chimed in that there were "no prizes for style — just trophies", before attack coach Scott Wisemantel also brushed off Creevy's jibe. "He might have been at a boring club, I don't really know," Wisemantel said of Creevy's two-season spell in the English Premiership with Worcester.

"I don't think that's the case and he obviously hasn't been watching much of the Premiership," added the Australian. "It's a bit like me making a judgement call on the Jaguars. (England's game) is varied and can be very structured at times — but in this tournament a third of our tries have come from unstructured play, so I don't necessarily agree."

England have opened with victories over Tonga (35-3) and the United States (45-7) in Japan following a horror 2015 tournament when they became the first World Cup hosts to crash out in the pool stages.

Argentina present a tougher challenge before they face France in their final group match, but England could fast-track rampaging prop Mako Vunipola's return to the starting line-up against the Pumas, despite him only playing 17 minutes of rugby in four-and-a-half months.

Vunipola, who had hamstring surgery in May, aborted an attempted return against Ireland in a World Cup tune-up after damaging scar tissue. However, the 54-cap loosehead prop returned to full training late last week alongside Jack Nowell, giving England coach Eddie Jones a full 31-man squad to pick from.

"He's a huge player for this team and probably been one of our most consistent performers over the last four years," said George. "It's safe to say he's one of the best front-row forwards in the competition. He's worked incredibly hard off the field to get himself right. We're very excited for him to get out there and show what he can do because we're fully aware of how destructive he is."

Underhill predicted this weekend's game would come down to who dominates the set piece. "Obviously the maul and scrum are a massive part of Argentina's game," said the Bath flanker. "It's a threat to nullify but also an opportunity to impose ourselves on the game — that probably falls under the category of 'boring' rugby but it's an area we look forward to getting stuck into." —AFP

Parisse back for Italy in crunch Springbok match

SHIZUOKA: Talismanic No 8 Sergio Parisse will become rugby union's second most capped player when he skips Italy in their crunch Pool B match against South Africa tomorrow. Parisse will win his 142nd cap, overtaking Ireland's Brian O'Driscoll, with New Zealand's Richie McCaw atop the overall list with 149 Test appearances.

Italy coach Conor O'Shea retained 12 of the team that beat Canada 48-7, handing starting spots to Parisse, Tito Tebaldi and Luca Morisi. Parisse lines up for the do-or-die match in Shizuoka with Gloucester's Jake Polledri and South African-born Abraham Steyn in a competitive backrow.

Australia unleash teen sensation Petaia at WCup

TOKYO: Nineteen-year-old sensation Jordan Petaia is set to become Australia's youngest Rugby World Cup player after he got the nod yesterday for this weekend's game against Uruguay. Petaia was named on the left wing for his first cap on Saturday, after injuries wrecked his Super Rugby season with the Queensland Reds and delayed his international debut.

The Wallabies are coming off a stinging 29-25 defeat by Wales which left them odds-on to finish runners-up to the Six Nations champions in Pool D. Coach Michael Cheika said he was sure the 1.90m (6ft 2in) Petaia was ready to make his debut despite his limited playing time this year.

"It's pretty exciting. He got pretty close to getting his cap on the last spring tour and he's looking good in training so it's going to be a great opportunity," Cheika said. "There's not many guys that get to make their debut in a World Cup so he's blessed with the opportunity. I know he's a fine young man and he'll take the opportunity with both hands for sure."

Petaia was named in Australia's team to

Ireland look to steady Rugby World Cup campaign against Russia

KOBE: It is a game Ireland dare not lose and one in a sense they cannot 'win' when they try to revive their Rugby World Cup campaign against Russia today. Ireland's hopes of being crowned world champions for the first time suffered a setback with a 19-12 defeat by Japan last time out. But despite that loss, bonus-point wins over both Russia and Samoa in their final two group matches will see Ireland through to the quarter-finals after they started Pool A with a convincing 27-3 victory over old rivals Scotland.

Ireland coach Joe Schmidt has made 11 changes in personnel after a five-day turnaround, with fly-half Jonathan Sexton returning to the side after missing the

Dean Budd, who captained the Italians to a 48-7 win over Canada last time out, locks down with David Sisi, Andrea Lovotti and Simone Ferrari propping down either side of Luca Bigi.

Tito Tebaldi faces the daunting task of keeping livewire Faf de Klerk quiet at scrum-half, with Tommaso Allan given the task of dictating play at number 10. Jayden Hayward and Luca Morisi are in midfield, with Michele Campagnaro and Tommaso Benvenuti on the wings and Matteo Minozzi at full-back.

Italy kicked off their campaign with an unconvincing 47-22 win over minnows Namibia, meaning they have a maximum 10 points after their opening two games, with the All Blacks awaiting them after the South Africa game.

"We've been looking at what's the best group we could have," said O'Shea. "We've specifically planned to play against South Africa and tinkered at various different things. "We're looking forward to it. It's going to be physical, and

we've picked players who can interchange, no matter what numbers are on their backs."

Like the Springboks, O'Shea plumped for a six-two forwards-backs split on the bench in preparation for what is likely to be a tough clash upfront. "We did discuss going 8-0 on bench because of what promises to be a forwards battle, but we'll leave that for another day!" the former Ireland full-back joked.

"You've lost the game before you've even started if you can't front up physically. "It's a war, South Africa, nothing else. I'm glad I'm off the pitch and not on against them." There had been some discussion over whether Parisse might be benched for the game given Steyn's eye-catching performance from No 8 against Canada.

But O'Shea was quick to dispel such rumours. "We talk the whole time about selection," he acknowledged. "But Sergio is one of the greatest players under the high ball and his role this weekend will

play Italy last November before being ruled out with a hamstring injury, and then suffered a similar problem before Australia's warm-up Test against Samoa last month.

"He's got a lot of talent, Jordan, and we'll see it for the first time. This will be the first game I've ever been involved in with him," said Cheika. "At the same time, he's just starting out so we'll let him get into the flow and see how he feels. He's got a couple of very experienced campaigners next to him in Dane Haylett-Petty and Kurtley (Beale)."

The teenager, the first Australian to make his Test debut at a World Cup since Berrick Barnes in 2007, said he was anxious about getting injured again before Saturday's game. "I'll just try and get through the week first — I don't want to jinx it," he said. "I'm just going to get to that game on Saturday and see what happens from there."

"I'm excited and just keen to get on," Petaia added. Matt To'omua, who starred at fly-half as a replacement against Wales, will earn his 50th cap as he shifts to inside centre in partnership with Tevita Kuridrani.

Nic White and Christian Lealiifano were preferred as Australia's ever-evolving half-back combination, while Haylett-Petty shifts to the right wing and Beale starts at fullback. Captain Michael Hooper is one of only two players retained in the pack along

Japan loss with a thigh injury.

Sexton, who will captain Ireland for the first time in his illustrious career, reckons the Japan defeat may have been a "blessing in disguise" because it came in the pool phase rather than in the knockout stages where there is no chance of recovery. "He always demands such high standards of himself. That just sets the tone for everyone around him," Ireland back-row Rhys Ruddock, who plays in a Leinster side skippered by Sexton, told reporters at the Kobe Misaki Stadium yesterday. Ireland should have more than enough in their locker to see off a Russia side ranked 20th in the world, having won their only previous World Cup meeting 62-12 eight years ago.

And Schmidt was confident Ireland could bounce back to secure a quarter-final place that will likely pit them against either reigning world champions New Zealand or South Africa. "I'm still incredibly positive about this group," the New Zealander said.

"They are such a good group of young men that

struggled to control the game. We made a lot of errors. We were destabilised, unbalanced."

Gold, so furious with his team after the England defeats, was effusive in his praise. "We never gave up the fight, not for the full 80 minutes. Just so proud of everyone," said Gold. —AFP

Italy (15-1)
Matteo Minozzi; Tommaso Benvenuti, Luca Morisi, Jayden Hayward, Michele Campagnaro; Tommaso Allan, Tito Tebaldi; Sergio Parisse (capt), Jake Polledri, Braam Steyn; Dean Budd, David Sisi; Simone Ferrari, Luca Bigi, Andrea Lovotti

Replacements: Federico Zani, Nicola Quaglio, Marco Riccioni, Alessandro Zanni, Federico Ruzza, Sebastian Negri, Callum Braley, Carlo Canna. —AFP



TOKYO: Australia's fly-half Will Genia speaks during a press conference with teammates full back Jordan Petaia (L) and centre Christian Lealiifano (R) in Tokyo during the Japan 2019 Rugby World Cup. —AFP

with Allan Alaalatoa as Cheika rotated 12 players in his starting XV. "Many of these guys have been starting players for us over the last three or four years. Everybody's got to play their part on this trip and this is the opportunity for some of those guys," Cheika said.

Australia (15-1)

Kurtley Beale; Dane Haylett-Petty,

they are determined to make sure we get it right in these next two games. Then beyond that, it doesn't matter which team you play in the pool next door to us, it is a monumental game," Schmidt added.

The hot and humid conditions under the closed roof of the Kobe Misaki Stadium, have made ball-handling difficult and that could be an issue as Ireland go in search of the four tries they need for a bonus point.

"We know the stats from the last two games that have been played here, 30 handling errors in one and 35 in the other so it's being able to adapt to that," said Ireland assistant coach Andy Farrell, whose son Owen played for England against the United States in an earlier World Cup match at the ground. "How do we adapt? We make sure there is a no-excuse mentality."

Farrell insisted complacency would not be an issue, adding: "We look back to our last result and that's enough. It doesn't matter whether it's New Zealand or Russia, it's about getting back up on the horse." —AFP

Replacements: Jordan Ulese, Sekope Kepu, Taniela Tupou, Rory Arnold, David Pocock, Will Genia, James O'Connor, Adam Ashley-Cooper. —AFP

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