

Sports

Unconvincing Ireland too strong for Russia at Rugby World Cup

KOBE: Ireland returned to winning ways at the Rugby World Cup but were far from impressive in a 35-0 victory over Russia in Kobe yesterday. For all Ireland, the victims of a shock 19-12 defeat by hosts Japan last weekend, had made 11 changes, the fact it took them more an hour to secure a bonus point against a gutsy but limited Russia side would have been a cause for concern. Victory also came at a cost.

Fly-half Joey Carbery withdrew from his bench role shortly before kick-off with an a longstanding ankle problem, while an injury-hit Ireland saw number eight Jordi Murphy, who only arrived a few days ago after Jack Conan was ruled out, go off before half-time. "We're delighted to get back on the horse after last week and to pick up the bonus point was exactly what we're looking for tonight," said Ireland captain Jonathan Sexton.

The result was rarely in doubt, with Rob Kearney scoring the first of Ireland's five tries 90 seconds into the match. Peter O'Mahony and Rhys Ruddock also crossed Russia's line in the opening period with star fly-half Sexton, captaining Ireland for the first time after he missed the Japan loss with a thigh injury, converting all three tries before he departed at half-time. But Ireland's display was not akin to their 62-12 thrashing of Russia at the 2011 World Cup or indeed reigning champions New Zealand's 63-0 rout of Canada on Wednesday.

Instead this performance suggested Ireland, who could face either the All Blacks or South Africa in the quarter-finals should they beat Samoa in their concluding Pool A game on October 12, have work to do if they are to capture a maiden world title and become the first side

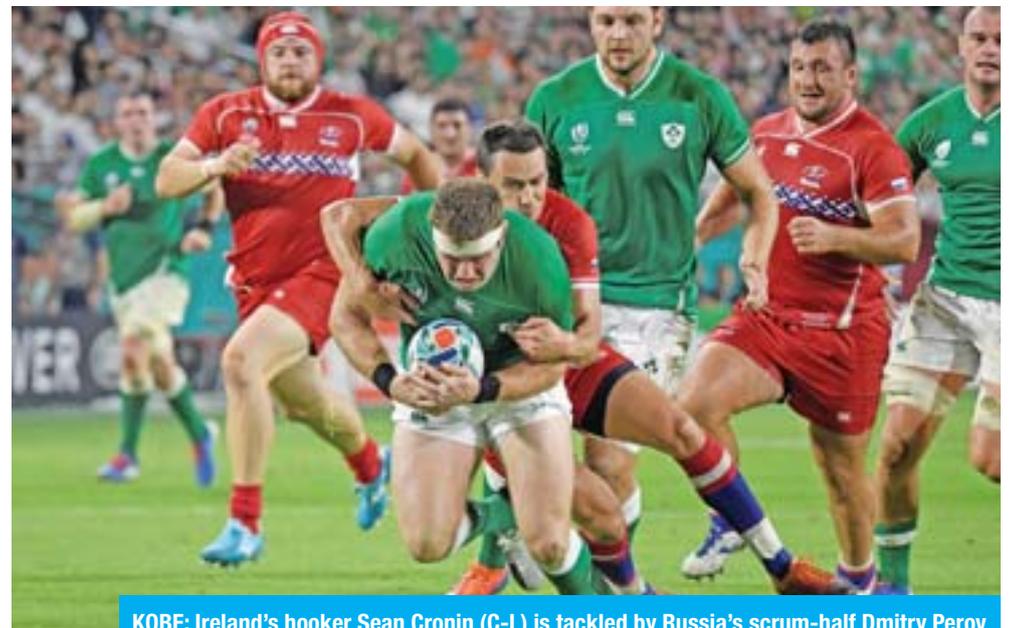
to lift the Webb Ellis Cup after losing a group-stage match. Being 'nilled' was tough on Russia, who again posed problems as they had done in 30-10 and 34-9 defeats by Japan and Samoa respectively. "I'm just so proud of our players. They absolutely gave everything," said Russia coach Lyn Jones. "We were organized. Our tactics worked well. Unfortunately we didn't score any points which was something but Russia's players gave everything they had and they were shattered at the end."

HUGE DEFENSIVE EFFORT

It looked as if Ireland might be eyeing a rout when Kearney scored under the closed roof of the Kobe Misaki Stadium before two minutes were on the clock. Second row Jean Kleyn's clever inside pass released Kearney and, with centre Bundee Aki running a decoy line, the veteran fullback carved his way round Russia left wing Denis Simlikevich from 40 meters out.

Sexton, one of the world's leading goal-kickers when fully fit, made light of a difficult conversion. But Russia, led by Dublin-educated fullback Vasily Artyemyev, harried Ireland with good use of the Garryowen — the name given to high kicks in rugby union in honor of the Irish club that pioneered the tactic. When Ireland, who started this tournament as the world's top-ranked side, returned to Russia's 22, however, they had their second try in the 13th minute with Sexton's clever grubber kick through the defense allowing onrushing flanker O'Mahony to score by the posts.

To make matters worse for Russia, centre Kirill Golosnitskiy, desperately trying to cover,



KOBE: Ireland's hooker Sean Cronin (C-L) is tackled by Russia's scrum-half Dmitry Perov (C-R) during the Japan 2019 Rugby World Cup Pool A match between Ireland and Russia at the Kobe Misaki Stadium. — AFP

slammed into a post protector and was carried off on a stretcher. Russia were forced into a huge defensive effort in near their own line and lost lock Bogdan Fedotko to a yellow card in the 34th minute. Moments later, Ireland's pressure told when blindside flanker Ruddock powered over for a try. Yet Ireland failed to make the most of their man advantage either side of half-time, although Russia fly-half Ramil Gaisin was unable to reward good work by his for-

wards when he pushed a long-range penalty wide. Ireland eventually raised their game in the 62nd minute with a rare backline move. Replacement Jack Carty's chip ahead was regathered by Keith Earls and he sent in fellow wing Andrew Conway, whose uncle Mark McDermott is a member of Russia's coaching staff, from near half-way. And four minutes from time Ringrose went in for a fifth try that flattered Ireland. — AFP

Leitch returns for Japan's World Cup clash with Samoa

TOYATO CITY: Japan coach Jamie Joseph yesterday made three changes to the starting side who stunned Ireland for this weekend's Rugby World Cup Pool A clash with Samoa. The hosts, who topped the Irish last week, have recalled talismanic leader Michael Leitch as they look to make it three wins out of three against the Pacific islanders on Saturday in Toyota.

Despite Leitch's return, openside flanker Pieter Labuschagne retains the captaincy after an impressive first run-out as skipper against Ireland. "Lappies has kept it — we want to minimise Michael's responsibilities so he can focus on his own game," explained Joseph, referring to Labuschagne. "It worked well last week and we want to continue that. Lappies has done a very good job leading the team on the field, Michael is still our team captain."

Atsushi Sakate comes in as starting hooker for the Brave Blossoms and Wimpie van der Walt at lock, while veteran Luke Thompson has been left out of the match 23. Shota Horie drops to the bench after his man of the match display against Ireland when Japan produced the shock of the tournament by winning 19-12. Winger Kenki Fukuoka, who came on to score Japan's only try of the match in Shizuoka, is again named among Japan's replacements. Leitch, who inspired the jaw-dropping 34-32 upset of South Africa at the 2015 World Cup that put Japanese rugby on the map, returns at blindside flanker to win his 66th cap in red and white. — AFP

Italy's Polledri, from Bristol sandwich shop to WC star

SHIZUOKA: Jake Polledri's heady rise from working at a sandwich shop in western England to turning out for Italy at the World Cup continues unabated after his man-of-the-match performance against Canada bagged him a starting spot against South Africa. The 23-year-old Bristol-born flanker put in an eye-catching shift in Italy's 48-7 win over the Canadians, beating 14 defenders during the Pool B game in Fukuoka, more than any other forward in a single game since the tournament first began in 1987.

He also ran 106 metres from 16 carries, with three clean breaks and four offloads. Polledri admitted he still had to pinch himself over his journey from making sandwiches to playing for Hartpury in the English National One (third division) just two years ago, before being picked up by Premiership outfit Gloucester. "It's pretty amazing, playing in the World Cup is unbelievable," he said. "I haven't played South Africa before... It's a hell of an experience to be playing them, let alone in a World Cup."

Polledri, whose father Peter was a Bristol stalwart back in the 1980s, qualifies for Italy through his paternal grandmother, a fully fledged "old school" Italian who still struggles with her English. Her grandson is still learning Italian, though he credits a raft of English speakers in the Italy squad as making life much easier as he cracks on with language lessons.

'Dedication, determination, desire'

Former Hartpury director of rugby Alan Martinovic was full of praise after the Canada game for the "dedication, determination and desire to get to the top" of not just Polledri but also Seb Negri, another former player at the club who was named on the bench for the Springbok game. Polledri, who even made a decisive pass which set up a try for Negri against Canada, said the team had been "very positive" about that game.

"The first game was very scrappy for us in terms of structure," he said in reference to their opening 47-22 victory over Namibia. "The second game against Canada we looked a lot better and played a lot more how we wanted to play." With a maximum 10 points in the bag thanks to try-scoring bonuses, Polledri said: "There's nothing more really you can ask for." As for South Africa, he said the Boks were "looking strong. It's going to be a good test, but that's why we're here, to play against the best sides and the best players in the world". "It's going to be a tough battle. I imagine it's going to be a forwards game otherwise you wouldn't go for that 6/2 forwards/back split on the bench," Polledri said. "They're playing well, they're on a bit of a streak at the moment. It's going to be hard for us but we've just got to go out there and do what we do."

Competition in the back row, he added, had been fierce. "Everyone's hat was in the ring for selection," he said, with skipper Sergio Parisse and Abraham Steyn set to start alongside him in the back row. Asked whether he might have picked up some Afrikaans at Gloucester — where he is coached by Johan Ackermann and has a handful of South African teammates, including current Bok lock Franco Mostert — that might help to decipher South Africa's moves, Polledri was blunt. "I'll concentrate on learning Italian first!" — AFP