

Sports

As typhoon nears, Wales weather Fiji storm to reach WCup quarter-finals

England and France are due to play their final Pool C game on Saturday

TOKYO: Wales weathered a furious Fijian onslaught to reach the Rugby World Cup quarter-finals yesterday, sending Australia through in the process, as Scotland thrashed Russia to set up a showdown with hosts Japan.

With approaching Typhoon Hagibis threatening to cause havoc with this weekend's final pool games, the Welsh found themselves in a storm of their own before emerging from a physical battering with a 29-17, bonus-point win.

The result guarantees Wales and Australia's progress from Pool D, which the Welsh top by three points ahead of their remaining game against Uruguay. Australia play Georgia on Friday.

"Look, that was tough. They've got some unbelievable individuals and we just had to stay in it," said Wales coach Warren Gatland.

"We've got a tough four-day turnaround to Uruguay. I think the medics are going to be working pretty hard in the next 24-48 hours. But pleasing to get that bonus-point win," he added.

With the pool stage culminating this weekend, officials warned that Hagibis, currently classed as "violent" — the top end of Japan's storm scale — is on track to hit parts of Japan's coast, possibly barreling straight into Tokyo on Saturday.

England and France are due to play their final Pool C game on Saturday in Yokohama, adjacent to Tokyo. If the game has to be moved, Oita in Japan's south-west is the most likely alternative venue, a source close to the French camp told AFP. World Rugby is due to give an update on the situation on Thursday. The typhoon could also affect this weekend's Formula One Japanese Grand Prix in Suzuka, west of Tokyo.

In Pool C, Oita was treated to an end-to-end clash marked by heavy challenges and a sickening, accidental blow to the head which ended Wales fly-half Dan Biggar's involvement.

Josua Tuisova smashed through three defenders to

score Fiji's first try before Kini Murimurivalu made it 10-0 after just eight minutes, with Ben Volavola missing both conversions.

But Josh Adams leapt high to gather Biggar's cross-field kick and get Wales on the board, and he dotted down again to make it 14-10 at the break as Tevita Cavubati and then Ken Owens spent time in the sin-bin — the first two of four yellow cards in all.

'WE'VE GOT TO DELIVER'

In a breathless second period, Fiji were awarded a penalty try and Biggar — who failed a head injury assessment just 10 days ago — was apparently knocked groggy after an aerial collision with Liam Williams.

Replacement fly-half Rhys Patchell kicked a long-range penalty to square it at 17-17 before Adams completed his hat-trick with an acrobatic touch-down in the corner. A Gareth Davies break through midfield released Williams to seal the win at 29-17.

In Shizuoka, Adam Hastings — son of Scotland great Gavin — starred with 26 points, including two tries, as the Scots thrashed already-eliminated Russia 61-0 to set up their showdown with Japan.

Scotland coach Gregor Townsend rested the likes of big guns Greig Laidlaw, Finn Russell, Stuart Hogg, Blade Thompson and Johnny Gray, with only a four-day turnover before facing the Brave Blossoms in Yokohama on Sunday.

But Townsend's bet on a largely second-string side producing enough to seal the win paid off as Hastings ran the show with aplomb at Shizuoka's Ecopa Stadium. "That's stage one of a two-stage week completed," Townsend said.

"We've watched a lot of Japan. I know they will have watched a lot of us too... we've just got to make sure we deliver our best performance," he added. Scotland will be anxiously watching reports on the incoming typhoon, as they will be eliminated if Sunday's game is



OITA: Fiji's wing Josua Tuisova (C) is tackled by Wales' number 8 Ross Moriarty (L) during the Japan 2019 Rugby World Cup Pool D match between Wales and Fiji at the Oita Stadium in Oita yesterday. —AFP

cancelled and marked down as a 0-0 draw, giving them only two points.

Earlier, fly-half Nicolas Sanchez showed Argentina what they had been missing with a masterful first-half performance as the Pumas restored pride with a 47-17 win against the United States.

Sanchez was controversially left out of the matchday

23 for the crunch match against England last Saturday, which Argentina lost 39-10, resulting in their first pool-stage exit since 2003.

But the Stade Francais playmaker ran the show against the United States in Kumagaya, which also witnessed the last appearance of 87-Test veteran Juan Manuel Leguizamón. —AFP

Brave Blossom bonanza as rugby shirts fly off shelves

TOKYO: It is early morning outside the sportswear store near the Prince Chichibu Memorial Rugby Stadium and customers are already queuing to get their hands on Japan's hottest property: a Brave Blossoms replica shirt.

The red-and-white jerseys are flying off the shelves as the Japan team continues to defy expectations at the Rugby World Cup, winning three from three and on course for a historic quarter-final.

Japan games are played in front of a sea of red-and-white shirts and sales have exceeded even the most optimistic forecasts — with 90 percent of the stock for the whole tournament already gone.

Shirts are being sold as soon as they can be replaced, said Danny Robinson, manager of the Rugby World Cup megastore in Tokyo.

"Everybody loves the Japanese jerseys. It's much, much more than we anticipated. Every day people are waiting at the door and coming in to grab the jerseys. So it's very difficult to keep them on the shelves. We keep bringing them in every day," he told AFP.

However, it's not just Japanese who are snapping up the shirts. Robinson estimates that around half of the people buying Brave Blossom jerseys are foreigners. Jesai Knight, an Australian rugby fan, has been searching high and low for his souvenir.

"I came today to get one of those Japanese jerseys. We came here yesterday at about 9:30 in the morning, and they were sold out already at that point. And they told us to come back at like 9 o'clock today to get one," said Knight.

The 38-year-old has also encountered an issue many foreigners living in Japan find infuriating — finding the right size for the Western build. "I am an extra large... it was a little difficult," he told AFP, gleefully snapping up the one XL jersey available.

The availability of Brave Blossom shirts has not been helped by a supply problem with a warehouse in Chiba, to the east of Tokyo, that was affected by Typhoon Faxai a fortnight before the tournament began. "The warehouse actually lost electricity," said Robinson. "So people were picking by hand with flashlights to get the products here."

The hiccup was resolved "a long time ago" and deliveries are now coming in two or three times per week, he added. The World Cup has been a bonanza for Canterbury, the company that produces the Brave Blossom shirts along with other rugby gear.

They had forecast sales of 200,000 throughout the tournament — which ends on November 2 — and "90 percent has already been sold", said Yoshi Katsuta, head of Rugby World Cup operations for Canterbury Japan. "We are truly sorry" that some fans cannot get their hands on a Brave Blossoms jersey, but such demand was "really difficult to predict", Katsuta told AFP. "We expected foreigners to also buy Japan shirts but not on this scale," he admitted.

Another feature of this World Cup — the first held in Asia and in a non-traditional rugby hotbed — is how the home fans have "adopted" teams and dutifully bought their replica jerseys.

"I'm not sure we've ever seen a World Cup where the home fans have supported all of the teams this well," tournament organiser Alan Gilpin told AFP in a recent interview. —AFP

England calm before storm as typhoon threatens World Cup

TOKYO: England will not suffer from any loss of momentum if this weekend's Rugby World Cup clash with France is cancelled due to violent weather, prop Dan Cole insisted yesterday. The heavy-weight Pool C game on Saturday and hosts Japan's crunch Pool A showdown with Scotland a day later, both at Yokohama, are in danger of being washed out by an approaching typhoon.

But Cole promised that England coach Eddie Jones would have the players match-sharp for the quarter-finals if the fixture is called off — which would

see England advance as group winners along with France.

"I think if anything does happen, I'm sure Eddie and the staff will be primed," he said. "We won't just be sat twiddling our thumbs in the hotel room. We'll be out working and making sure we maintain our sharpness throughout the tournament." Cole squirmed a little when asked about life under Jones, whose abrasive style has ruffled feathers wherever the Australian has gone.

"It's never easy because he sets such high demands," admitted Cole. "Eddie pushes the team hard but if you want to be successful you've got to be pushed hard and the boys have responded to that," he added.

"Eddie has won World Cups before and been in World Cup finals. He has the experience and has been there before and done it. "He has a plan and he's never satisfied with what's happened before

Australia are through but plenty on the line in Georgia clash

TOKYO: Australia have already qualified for the quarter-finals of the Rugby World Cup courtesy of the Wales' victory over Fiji yesterday but the Wallabies will still be anxious to stamp their authority on their final Pool D match against Georgia.

The twice world champions and 2015 finalists head into Friday's match at Shizuoka Stadium with another much-changed line-up and have yet to produce a commanding 80-minute performance in Japan.

Coach Michael Cheika is convinced the permanent

revolution in his team selection is working, though, and has named a third starting flyhalf in four matches for Australia's first test meeting with the powerful Georgians.

Matt To'omua has already led the line in Japan, coming on for Bernard Foley against Wales and firing Australia's ultimately fruitless comeback in a loss that will almost certainly condemn the Wallabies to second place in the pool. Cheika will expect the David Pocock-captained side to hit the ground running after slow starts in all three of their previous matches in Japan and believes he has a reasonable idea of what Georgia will bring to the game.

"They are very physical, that's quite obvious and they like the set pieces. It's a real challenge for us," the coach told reporters on Tuesday. "A lot of their players are playing in the professional leagues in France and England as well. They are well attuned to competition at the high level.

"We want to show them how we play our rugby and I

Scotland need to be 'spot-on' against Japan: Townsend

SHIZUOKA: Scotland will have to be "spot-on" when they take on Japan on Sunday for a place in the Rugby World Cup quarter-finals, coach Gregor Townsend has warned. The Scots, with Adam Hastings shining at fly-half, notched up a nine-try, 61-0 drubbing of winless Russia yesterday to ensure a mouth-watering showdown with the hosts in Yokohama next week.

Japan are unbeaten in their three Pool A matches, having notably claimed the shock scalp of Six Nations giants Ireland. "All aspects of our game have to be spot-on against Japan," Townsend said, underlining that his team had to make the best use of the ball when in possession against what he called a very well drilled Japanese outfit.

Scotland opened their campaign with a 27-3 defeat by Ireland before rebounding to rack up an impressive 34-0 victory over Samoa. "The Ireland game is already in the history books, it was a missed opportunity where we didn't get our best game in place," Townsend said.

"You move on to the next game and what the players have done since that Ireland game, I couldn't ask any more of them. "It's two games now we haven't conceded a try or even a point, which is very encouraging."

Townsend added: "If we hadn't got the bonus point, Sunday would have been more difficult." The former fly-half rested a quintet of front-line players in Greig Laidlaw, Finn Russell, Stuart Hogg, Blade Thompson and Johnny Gray as he juggles his 31-man squad on a punishing four-day turnaround for the Japan game.

"It's always been in our schedule," Townsend said. "It's a challenge, we know the opposition have had a good rest going into the game. "It's really important we recover well tomorrow... and do our best to play our best rugby Sunday."

Townsend said Scotland would be in close touch with World Rugby as a typhoon bears down on Japan, threatening to disrupt the weekend's games. Scotland could be eliminated if Sunday's game with Japan is cancelled.

"We'll be getting updates from World Rugby over the next two days as to what contingencies are," he said. Russia coach Lyn Jones said he wouldn't know who to bet on between Japan and Scotland. "If I had 10 yen, I wouldn't know who to go for on the night!" the former Wales flanker joked.

"Scotland have speed and skill and if

— Eddie brings that ability to make sure everybody is aligned."

Defence coach John Mitchell also denied that England were concerned about weather disruptions as Typhoon Hagibis nears, also putting this week's Japanese Grand Prix in Suzuka at risk.

"We don't let that kind of noise deter our preparation," he said about alarmist weather reports. "We pride ourselves on being adaptable and flexible for anything that's thrown at us," added Mitchell, who confirmed that England are likely to rest Billy Vunipola's sore ankle until the quarter-finals. "Ultimately if there are factors outside of our control, we'll find other ways to prepare." Mitchell brushed off suggestions that England's 44-8 Six Nations thrashing of France at Twickenham earlier this year would give them a psychological advantage this weekend.

"That really hasn't come into our thinking," said the New Zealander.

"World Cup rugby is a totally different beast — it's a one-off and has its different pressures. As you can see from some of the big games in this tournament, the pressure is immense."

England, still the only northern hemisphere side to lift the World Cup after Jonny Wilkinson's extra-time drop goal floored Jones's Australia in the 2003 final, are unbeaten in Pool C after wins over Tonga (35-3), the United States (45-7) and Argentina (39-10).

But Cole conceded that the English — who have minor injury concerns over Joe Marler (back) and Jack Nowell (hamstring) — have yet to hit top gear. "We want to keep the momentum going that we've built in the first three games," said the Leicester prop.

"We haven't played our best game of rugby yet — that's evident from the first three games, but we're still building and still getting better." —AFP

am sure they will be showing us how they play theirs." Australia are also determined to remove from their game the high tackles which have seen them heavily penalised in the pool stage.

Totemic Georgian flanker Mamuka Gorgodze, who plays in France's Top 14, can take some tackling and does out a few big hits as well. Gorgodze will renew his acquaintance with his former Toulon team mate James O'Connor, who starts in the Wallabies centres with Samu Kerevi.

Georgia coach Milton Haig, whose eight years with the team comes to an end after the match, said he was quite clear what his players could expect from the Australians.

"We know what they'll bring — they've got skill, they've got pace and they've got a couple of boys in the midfield that they'll use to get gain line," the New Zealander said. "They've improved their forward play over the last 12 months as well. —Reuters



SHIZUOKA: Russia's number 8 Nikita Vavilin (L) is tackled by Scotland's lock Ben Toolis during the Japan 2019 Rugby World Cup Pool A match between Scotland and Russia at the Shizuoka Stadium Ecopa in Shizuoka yesterday. —AFP

they can put pace on Japan and get outside... "But Japan are so well drilled, they're an incredibly difficult side to play against. "It's going to be a hell of a game!"

Jones said Russia exited the tournament with their heads held high despite previous defeats by Japan (30-10), Samoa (34-9) and Ireland (35-0). "It's been a huge success as a late inclusion into the tournament," Jones said, describing Tier One rugby as "supersonic".

"The level is another sport for Tier Two nations." But Jones insisted that the experience of playing in a World Cup was invaluable to his players. "We're going to benefit from this and we look forward to the future with some optimism, we can only get better," he said.

"The physical potential in Russia is unlimited," Jones said. "It's a sleeping bear, a sleeping giant, we need to shake it awake." —AFP