

## Sports

# Game would have gone ahead 'if New Zealand needed the points': Parisse

**TOKYO:** Italy captain Sergio Parisse has slammed the decision to cancel his side's World Cup match against New Zealand because of Super Typhoon Hagibis, saying the game would have gone ahead if the All Blacks needed a win.

The number eight also said it was "ridiculous" for organisers not to have an alternative to cancellation as "it isn't news that typhoons hit Japan". In an unprecedented move at a Rugby World Cup, organisers scrapped today's matches between England and France, and New Zealand and Italy — with both fixtures in the path of the powerful typhoon.

While England and France both advance to the quarter-finals regardless, with two points each from a Pool C match now deemed a draw, Thursday's announcement ended Italy's slim hopes of reaching the last eight.

Admittedly, this would have required Italy to beat three-time world champions New Zealand for the first time — and with a bonus point. "It is difficult to know that we won't have the chance to play a match against one of the great teams," Parisse told reporters in Toyota City yesterday.

"If New Zealand needed four or five points against us, it would not have been cancelled," he added in comments published on the official Rugby World Cup news service but later removed. With a match meant to be played at the City of Toyota Stadium officially declared a scoreless draw as a result of the cancellation, the points Italy received left them third in Pool B on 12 points behind South Africa on 15, with reign-

ing world champions New Zealand topping the group on 16. The All Blacks will now face the runner-up of a tightly-contested Pool A in the quarter-finals.

While few expected Italy to cause a huge upset this weekend, the 36-year-old Parisse, whose 142 Test appearances are second only to retired New Zealand great Richie McCaw in the all-time list, was disappointed not to be facing the All Blacks for what could be the final time in his long career.

"We had the chance to play in a big stadium, against a great team," Parisse said. "It is ridiculous that a decision of this nature has been made because it isn't like the fans arrived yesterday. "It is ridiculous that there was no Plan B, because it isn't news that typhoons hit Japan. The alternative is Plan B. When you organise a World Cup you should have one in place."

Parisse even suggested there was an element of disrespect in the decision, even though Italy have lost every one of their previous 15 Tests against New Zealand. "Sure, everyone might think that Italy versus New Zealand being cancelled counts for nothing because we'd have lost anyway, but we deserved to be respected as a team," he added.

"If Italy and New Zealand decide they don't want to play, then fine. But as I said before, if New Zealand needed the points it wouldn't have been cancelled."

Meanwhile Italy coach Conor O'Shea lamented a "horrible" finish to the World Cup. "I



**URAYASU:** New Zealand's head coach Steve Hansen (L) and captain Kieran Read attend a press conference in the team's hotel in Urayasu yesterday, during the Japan 2019 Rugby World Cup. — AFP

saw the players' reaction after training and it was horrible because these guys have given their lives to Italian rugby and their World Cup has ended on the training pitch, when it should be on the playing field," he said.

"I feel bad for Sergio and the whole squad." But All Blacks coach Steve Hansen said cancellation was a "no-brainer", insisting when you "get a typhoon to the level we're getting then safety is the paramount thing". — AFP

## Fiji offer blueprint to trouble Wales

**OITA:** Fiji bowed out of the World Cup leaving a blueprint for putting Six Nations champions Wales under pressure and highlighting the need for more Tests against the Tier 1 nations. The free-running Pacific islanders are always popular crowd-pleasers with their audacious off-loads and while they failed to make the final eight in Japan they were not far off despite limited preparation.

They pushed Wales all the way, leading 10-0 after eight minutes and were 17-14 up with 20 minutes remaining before a late 15-point surge saw the Tier 1 side come out on top 29-17.

With limited preparation compared to the top-ranking sides, Fiji coach John McKee conjured up a "constant attack" game plan that would have future Wales opponents taking note.

"We knew we wouldn't win an arm wrestle or a penalty shoot out with them, so we had to back ourselves to score tries. You saw we didn't take penalty shots, we took scrums or kicked to the corner," McKee said. The first of their three tries came from a backline move after taking a scrum instead of a penalty close to the Wales line.

And they won a penalty try in the second half when Wales collapsed a lineout drive after Fiji kicked for the corner rather than take an easy shot at goal. "We chanced our arm a little bit and backed our attacking play, to see if we could put them under pressure to see

how they reacted," McKee said. "For large parts of the game, that worked very well for us."

Just as they dominated Wales for much of the game, the free-spirited Fijians started the tournament racing to a 21-12 lead against Australia before wilting to lose 39-21. Between Australia and Wales, they suffered an upset loss to Uruguay and beat Georgia.

"What's pleasing to me is we had an opportunity on the world stage to show what this team's capable of," said the New Zealand-born coach. The 29-17 scoreline against Wales was little different to the 23-13 result the last time the two teams met at the 2015 World Cup.

But in the intervening four years, Wales played 48 Tests of which 41 were against fellow Tier 1 sides.

Fiji, a Tier 2 team, played 27 Tests which included only 10 against Tier one nations and their hastily cobbled together outfit still managed wins against France, Scotland and Italy.

"Coming to the World Cup, it's a big factor when you don't play so many Tier 1 Test matches, the uplift in intensity is difficult to go with," McKee said.

"Every World Cup, the competition gets higher and higher. In 2015 we thought we did OK and with a lot of work we could do better and we haven't. We're sort of in the same position."

"If we play more Tier 1 Test matches that will be great. But at the same time, I understand that it's very complicated to organise the whole international calendar." McKee's frustration echoed that of Georgia coach Milton Haig who said his side's 43-14 loss to Wales in their opening game was a perfect example of why they need to play Tier 1 opposition regularly.

"You can't play a team like Wales at the World Cup and produce miracles if you are not used to playing at this speed," Haig said. "Georgia needs at least four matches a year against Tier 1 teams and until that happens, these are the results you will get." — AFP

## Henshaw back as Ireland chase vital bonus point

**FUKUOKA:** A fit-again Robbie Henshaw will make his first World Cup appearance in Japan tomorrow after being named to start in Ireland's crucial match against Samoa in Fukuoka. Ireland need a bonus-point win to ensure they qualify before the final Pool A showdown on Sunday between hosts Japan and Scotland — if Typhoon Hagibis allows it to proceed.

"We can't control what happens with the Japan-Scotland game, so tomorrow it's up to us to get our business done as best we can," coach Joe Schmidt said when naming his side yesterday. Ireland-Samoa, played in the country's south-west likely to be spared by Hagibis, is the only game on Saturday to go ahead and Pool A is the only pool with qualification still up for grabs.

If Ireland win without a bonus point it will put them at risk of finishing third despite losing only one game as the pool goes down to the wire with Japan on 14, Ireland on 11 and Scotland on 10.

The return of the 38-Test centre Henshaw, who suffered a hamstring injury soon after arriving in Japan, is one of 11 changes from the side that beat Russia 35-0 as Schmidt zeros in on his first-choice line up.

"Robbie is fresh and we're excited to have him in there. It is a little bit about balancing the load as well, albeit in a huge game for us," Schmidt said. Half-backs Conor Murray and Johnny Sexton will start together for the 55th time, equalling the Ireland record set by Peter Stringer and Ronan O'Gara between 2000 and 2015. Sexton, Bundee Aki, Tadhg Beirne and Keith Earls are the only survivors from the Russia match while hooker Rory Best returns to captain Ireland for the 37th time, overtaking Keith Wood and moving into second place behind Brian O'Driscoll (83).

Only flanker Peter O'Mahony and full-back Rob Kearney are missing from what is thought to be Schmidt's preferred starting line up. O'Mahony and Garry Ringrose are the only two Ireland players that have started in the first three matches. The former is on the bench against Samoa and the latter has the weekend off. — AFP