

Sports

World Cup explodes into life as hosts Japan stun Ireland

Schmidt's World Cup plans in tatters after stunning defeat

FUKUROI CITY: The Rugby World Cup exploded into life yesterday as Japan stunned Ireland 19-12 in the extraordinary upset that handed the exuberant hosts the result they had dreamed of and allowed their fans to embrace the first tournament ever staged on Asian soil.

In contrast to their victory over twice-champions South Africa which shocked world rugby at the last tournament, this win offers Japan a clearer path towards a first quarter-final appearance which would help sustain the tournament into the knockout stages.

The Brave Blossoms came from behind at Shizuoka Stadium thanks to a fearless kicking display from flyhalf Yu Tamura and a second-half try from winger Kenki Fukuoka, whose name only appeared among the replacements an hour before kickoff after a late injury.

Richly deserved winners over a shellshocked Ireland side recently ranked number one in the world, Japan's players hugged as Angus Gardner blew the final whistle and celebrated in front of the wild 47,813 fans as fireworks lit up the Shizuoka sky.

"With 50,000 fans, 40,000 in red jerseys, it makes you really proud," coach Jamie Joseph told a news conference, as the local media matched the Irish fans dotted around the stadium in applauding his side's phenomenal performance. "The Irish team is a quality rugby side but we've been preparing for this game a hell of a lot longer than they have. We thought we had a bit of an advantage in that and we just executed our plan." Ireland led 12-3 thanks to two early tries from Rob Kearney and Garry Ringrose but were ultimately made to look a shadow of the team that ploughed through Scotland six days ago, leaving coach Joe Schmidt's World Cup plans in jeopardy.

Left clinging on to what may prove a crucial losing bonus point, Ireland, however, are still well-placed to qualify and could still top Pool A if Japan fail to beat Scotland but their hopes of reaching a first semi-final look a lot less credible. "We played well in the first quarter and then we stopped playing," a rueful Schmidt said,

insisting that the Japanese had not exceeded his expectations but, unfortunately, merely met them. "The strength of the team will be how they respond and how they rebound from this," he added.

EXTRAORDINARY EFFORT

The hosts, who had never beaten Ireland before, admitted that their nerves got the better of them in the uneven 30-10 curtain-raising win over Russia and they duly came flying out of the blocks against the Johnny Sexton-less Irish. Ireland's gameplan of attacking off the kind of forward pressure that smashed the Scots and testing the Japanese with third-choice flyhalf Jack Carty's clever array of kicks paid dividends, with Ringrose and Kearney claiming first-quarter tries.

Tamura knocked over a penalty in between and Japan already looked like they had Ireland in their sights by the time he cut the deficit again with a second penalty.

With five minutes to go to the break the Irish threatened again, for what would prove to be the final meaningful time of the game, with an attacking scrum against their lighter opponents. The Japanese pack, however, responded with an extraordinary effort, destroying a full-strength Irish eight unchanged from the Scottish game at the put-in and driving them backwards before winning a penalty.

The crowd rose, producing a huge roar which was matched by the players, prop Jiwon Koo and hooker Shota Horie screaming at the top of their voices. A potential 19-6 Irish halftime lead turned into just a 12-9 advantage as an exhausted-looking Irish defence looked happy to hear the halftime whistle.

Japan, who had never got within 16 points in seven previous defeats to Ireland, were back at it after the break with more high-tempo attacking play and Ireland were hanging on as their penalty count inched up.

Utterly undone, Schmidt's men were making uncharacteristic simple errors and Fukuoka, a last-minute addition to the bench after an injury to Will Tupou, sensa-



SHIZUOKA: Japan's wing Kotaro Matsushima (C) is tackled during the Japan 2019 Rugby World Cup Pool A match between Japan and Ireland at the Shizuoka Stadium Ecopa in Shizuoka yesterday. — AFP

tionally gave Japan the lead with 20 minutes to go and Tamura slotted over his most difficult kick of the night to make it 16-12.

Ireland simply had no answer to the relentless Japanese defence, led by lock James Moore who made 23 tackles without missing one. With the home fans getting louder and louder, Tamura extended the lead to seven points eight

minutes from time and there was no hanging back for Japan as they finished the game deep in the Irish half to reach an all-time high of eighth in the world rankings.

"Thank you for today!" Japan hooker Shota Horie said to the crowd after being named man of the match. "Thanks to your cheers, I was able to run to the last centimetre, the last millimetre." — Reuters

Rays top Blue Jays to clinch playoff berth

TORONTO: Tommy Pham hit a two-run homer. Austin Meadows added a solo shot, and the visiting Tampa Bay Rays defeated the Toronto Blue Jays 6-2 Friday night to clinch an American League wild-card spot. The Cleveland Indians lost 8-2 Friday night to the Washington Nationals, allowing the Rays to book a place in the postseason for the first time since 2013. The Oakland A's also sealed an AL wild card thanks to Cleveland's loss. Tampa Bay right-hander Tyler Glasnow, making his fourth start since returning from a four-month absence caused by a forearm strain, did not allow a hit and walked two while striking out four in 4 1/3 scoreless innings. Oliver Drake (5-2) gave up one run in two innings to earn the win. Emilio Pagan pitched a perfect bottom of the ninth.

DIAMONDBACKS 6, PADRES 3

Jake Lamb hit a pinch-hit, three-run homer to cap a four-run eighth inning, and Arizona won its third straight game, defeating San Diego in Phoenix. Lamb has four career pinch-hit homers, two off Luis Perdomo (2-4). The Diamondbacks had only six hits, and none after Carson Kelly doubled to open a two-run fifth, until the eighth. Manny Machado had three hits, including his 31st homer, and Luis Urias hit an RBI double for a 3-2 lead in the seventh for the Padres, who have lost four in a row. The Diamondbacks have won six of their past eight.

NATIONALS 8, INDIANS 2

Gerardo Parra had three hits, including a home run, and drove in four runs as host Washington defeated Cleveland. The Indians were eliminated from playoff contention shortly after the defeat. Washington earned its sixth straight win and extended its lead to two games over the Milwaukee Brewers for the top spot in the National League wild-card race. Parra hit a solo homer, a two-run double and a sacrifice fly. Trea Turner's two-run homer capped a five-run sixth inning for Washington, which has won eight of nine. Washington starter Austin Voth (2-1) allowed two runs on two hits over six innings.

MARINERS 4, A'S 3

J.P. Crawford doubled home the winning run with two outs in the bottom of the ninth inning as host Seattle rallied to defeat postseason-bound Oakland. Matt Olson and Marcus Semien homered for the A's, who clinched one of the American League's two wild-card playoff berths before taking the field. Oakland dropped into a tie with Tampa Bay in the race for wild-card seeding and home-field advantage for the one-game playoff. With Seattle trailing 3-2 and one out in the ninth, Mallex Smith singled off Liam Hendriks (4-4). Smith advanced to second on a wild pitch and scored the tying run when Shed Long grounded a two-out single to center. On a 3-2 pitch, Crawford doubled down the left field line, with Long scoring from first.

ROCKIES 11, BREWERS 7

Charlie Blackmon, Raimel Tapia and Ryan McMahon homered, and Colorado beat Milwaukee in Denver. The Brewers remain one game behind first-place St. Louis in the National League Central. Sam

Hilliard and Daniel Murphy each had two hits for the Rockies, who stopped Milwaukee's seven-game winning streak.

Colorado put the game away with a seven-run sixth inning that featured a lead-off homer from Blackmon and a pinch-hit grand slam from Tapia.

CUBS 8, CARDINALS 2

Ian Happ hit a solo homer and an RBI double in consecutive innings to lead visiting Chicago past St. Louis. Cubs reliever Brad Wieck (2-2) earned the victory by getting one out in the sixth inning. Cardinals reliever Andrew Miller (5-6) was charged with four runs in one-third of an inning. St. Louis starter Dakota Hudson worked five scoreless innings and struck out 10. However, he walked five batters (one intentionally) and needed 97 pitches to get 15 outs. Chicago's Alec Mills struck out nine batters in five innings, and he allowed Matt Carpenter's solo homer in the fourth.

ASTROS 4, ANGELS 0

Alex Bregman and Michael Brantley homered, and Jose Urquidy and three relievers combined on a three-hitter as the Houston Astros beat the Los Angeles Angels on Friday night. With the win, the American League West champion Astros (105-55) clinched home-field advantage throughout the AL playoffs. Bregman hit his team-leading 41st home run leading off in the second inning, but the game remained 1-0 until the eighth, when Brantley belted a two-out, three-run homer.

YANKEES 14, RANGERS 7

Giancarlo Stanton homered, drove in three runs and reached five times as visiting New York hit six homers in a victory over the Texas Rangers on Friday. Despite Stanton's big night, the Yankees were faced with another injury when left-hander James Paxton exited for precautionary reasons after the first inning due to tightness in his left glute. The Yankees (103-57) entered Friday night trailing Houston by two games for the best record in the majors and homefield advantage throughout the post-season. New York rebounded from scoring once in two losses at Tampa Bay by hitting six homers for the fourth time this season, raising its total to 305, passing the Minnesota Twins (303).

TWINS 6, ROYALS 2 (6 1/2 INNINGS)

Minnesota scored two runs in each of the first three innings, getting two-run home runs from Miguel Sano and Ryan LaMarre, in winning at Kansas City. The game was called after a 40-minute rain delay following the top of the seventh inning. Jose Berrios (14-8) was credited with a complete-game win. He gave up two runs on six hits and two walks in six innings with nine strikeouts. The Royals' Whit Merrifield went 2-for-3, and he leads the major leagues with 203 hits. He also has 31 hits in September, his ninth straight month with at least 30 hits, excluding March and October. The last player to do that was Ichiro Suzuki in 2007-08.

METS 4, BRAVES 2

Pete Alonso tied the major league single-season record with his 52nd homer, but it was J.D. Davis who hit the tiebreaking two-run homer that lifted host New York to a win over Atlanta. The seventh win in 10 games by the Mets cost the National League East champion Braves a chance at the franchise's first 100-win season since 2003. Alonso, who was 0-for-4 with four strikeouts Thursday night, wast-



TORONTO: Emilio Pagan #15 and Nate Lowe #35 of the Tampa Bay Rays celebrate after their team clinched a wild card spot following defeating the Toronto Blue Jays in their MLB game at the Rogers Centre in Toronto, Canada. — AFP

ed no time Friday tying the record set by the New York Yankees' Aaron Judge in 2017. Batting in the first inning, Alonso hit a line drive down the left field line on the second pitch he saw from Braves starter Dallas Keuchel.

DODGERS 9, GIANTS 2

Cody Bellinger and Corey Seager hit consecutive pitches for home runs to ignite a five-run second inning as Los Angeles raced to an early lead and went on to win at San Francisco. The Dodgers posted their 104th victory of the season, allowing them to move within one of the franchise record, set in Brooklyn in 1953. With the loss, Bruce Bochy takes a 1,052-1,052 record as the Giants' manager into the weekend. Bellinger belted Johnny Cueto's second pitch of the second inning over the wall in right field for his 47th homer of the season. Seager then smacked Cueto's next offering into the seats for his 19th homer. The Dodgers won for the 10th time in their past 17 meetings with the Giants.

PIRATES 6, REDS 5

Kevin Newman's second homer of the game, a two-run shot to left in the ninth inning, lifted host Pittsburgh to a walk-off win over Cincinnati. Newman's 12th homer came off Raisel Iglesias (3-12) and gave the Pirates their fourth straight win. They also have beaten the Reds all eight times the teams have met at PNC Park. Philip Ervin hit a two-run single and Michael Lorenzen an RBI single for the Reds, who have lost five in a row. Pittsburgh starter Steven Brault struck out a career-high 10 in five innings. He gave up four runs, four hits and four walks.

ORIOLES 4, RED SOX 1

Asher Wojciechowski threw six shutout innings, Renato Nunez crushed a three-run home run, and Baltimore won at Boston. Nunez's blast was his 30th of the season, and he drove in all four runs for the Orioles. Wojciechowski (4-8) held the Red Sox to four hits, walking one and striking out six. Boston, which got an RBI single from Xander Bogaerts in the ninth inning, lost to Baltimore for the sixth time in 17 meetings this year.

PHILLIES 5, MARLINS 4 (15 INNINGS)

Rhys Hoskins scored on a 15th-inning error as host Philadelphia emerged with a walk-off win over Miami in a game that lasted 5 hours, 13 minutes. Marlins reliever Adam Conley (2-11) hit Hoskins with a pitch to begin the 15th. Phil Gosselin then walked, and Andrew Knapp's sacrifice moved the runners up. Following an intentional walk, Adam Haseley hit a grounder that shortstop Miguel Rojas bobbled before throwing late to home plate. Ranger Suarez (6-1) pitched the final three innings for a Philadelphia bullpen that fired 11 scoreless innings. Bryce Harper notched a triple, a double and two RBIs.

TIGERS AT WHITE SOX DOUBLEHEADER, PPD.

Detroit saw a 4-2, fourth-inning lead wiped out when the opening game of a doubleheader at Chicago was rained out. The second game was also postponed, too. The teams will play a straight doubleheader on Saturday. The Tigers and White Sox will then conclude the regular season with a single game Sunday as scheduled, meaning both teams will end the season having played just 161 games. — Reuters

Australia's O'Connor finds World Cup road to redemption

URAYASU: Once hailed as the "Golden Boy" of Australian rugby, utility back James O'Connor went through the mill but found redemption just in time for the Rugby World Cup. O'Connor will earn his 50th cap when he runs out against Wales today but admitted he did not expect to wear the Green and Gold again after a string of off-field scandals.

"No, I didn't think I would play for Australia again. I wanted to, but I didn't think that would be a reality," said O'Connor, 29, who spent six years in the wilderness when Rugby Australia tore up his contract.

O'Connor can play almost anywhere in the back line and was a prodigious talent — the youngest to play Super Rugby at the age of 17 and the second-youngest to pull on the Wallabies jersey a year later.

A ruptured spleen nearly killed him at 16 and he faced years of battling depression, addiction and injury problems. The powers-that-be in Australia finally lost patience with O'Connor in 2013 when the then-23-year-old was prevented from boarding a flight from Perth to Bali because he was drunk.

Forced to look elsewhere, O'Connor went to Europe where he plied his trade for London Irish, then Toulon but his off-field troubles did not stop there. He was arrested and fined in Paris during a cocaine bust and became persona non grata also in France.

On the pitch, he was hampered by an injury to his left ankle that meant he could only train once a week and had to inject himself with a local anaesthetic to get through matches. English premiership outfit Sale Sharks gave him another shot in 2017 and he began his long road to recovery.

The troubled player revealed last year that he had faced his demons at a retreat in Iceland which used sensory deprivation, heat exhaustion and deep states of meditation. "I just want to open up, have fun and play. I think that is the keyword for me, play," said O'Connor. "When I am enjoying it, I am fighting for myself and playing my best rugby for the team."

'FAR TOO MANY SCARS'

Coach Michael Cheika was prepared to let the phoenix rise from the flames, picking him for the Rugby Championship game against New Zealand in Perth that the Wallabies sensationally won 47-26. Cheika said at the time that O'Connor's long lay-off would work in Australia's favour as opponents would not be familiar with his game.

And his current teammates in Japan have given the reformed O'Connor the thumbs-up. Attack coach Shaun Berne said the player had a clean slate. "I didn't know him before — I just see a bloke that wants to play for the team and with the team."

"My experience is the new James O'Connor and he is just so willing to adapt to any role I give him. He is willing to move on different plays, be flexible with his role. I think he has been great, a good team man."

Scrum-half Will Genia said O'Connor had been "exceptional" at the World Cup in 2011 when he played mainly on the wing. Moving to the centre, he has helped the team with his ball-playing skills as well as his mazy running, Genia said.

"He's come a long way, it's good to him see performing on the biggest stage of them all," said the scrum-half. O'Connor himself has vowed to be "just there in the moment and enjoy it", and the former playboy brushed the attentions of a Japanese television channel that voted him in the top three best-looking players: "I've got far too many scars all over my face." — AFP