

Sports

Wales hold off Australia with thrilling 29-25 victory in Rugby World Cup

Unbeaten Six Nations champions Wales top Pool D

TOKYO: Six Nations champions Wales took a massive step towards topping Pool D with a thrilling 29-25 victory over valiant Australia in the Rugby World Cup yesterday. The Welsh were 23-8 ahead at half-time but they had to withstand a furious second-half onslaught when Australia fought back to within a point late in the game.

Wales, 43-14 winners over Georgia in their opener, will now be confident of finishing their pool unbeaten, with their next opponents Fiji in Oita on October 9 before taking on Uruguay in Kumamoto four days later.

"Relief at the moment," said Wales coach Warren Gatland, when asked what he was feeling after the match. "Tough second half but the boys pulled through. It was a tough Test match. Very pleased with the first half. We didn't have a lot of ball in the second half and Australia kept coming at us and putting us under a huge amount of pressure. But we were able to hold on thankfully."

Australia captain Michael Hooper said the game "came down to the wire". "Some big calls there. Some went our way, some didn't," said Hooper. "We've got to pick ourselves back up. We'll review it. Probably right now recovery's key. We've got a six day turnaround. This sort of format, competition, you've got to move on pretty quick."

WALTZING MATILDA

An electric game full of enterprising, interlinking play from both sides on a balmy late afternoon in the Japanese capital made for a marvellous spectacle of running rugby. The 47,885-strong crowd had barely taken their seats after the anthems when Wales were on the scoreboard.

The ubiquitous Aaron Wainwright turned over esteemed Wallaby jackler Michael Hooper from the kick-off, Gareth Davies finding Dan Biggar in the box for a straightforward drop-goal with just 37 seconds on the clock.

Biggar went wide on his first penalty attempt minutes later as Wales continued to attack with fluidity, George North being brought down with the line begging.

The largely red and yellow crowd at Tokyo Stadium traded respective ballads, 'Hymns and Arias' for 'Waltzing Matilda' with mutual applause for both renditions. A hearty round of collective boos, however, rang out when an image of England coach Eddie Jones was shown on the big screen.

Biggar spurned a second shot at goal as Wales looked to build on their momentum. The ball was quickly recycled from the attacking line-out, Biggar putting in an inch-perfect crosskick that Hadleigh Parkes gathered, the Kiwi-born centre outleaping Marika Koroiwete and spinning past Dane Haylett-Petty to dot down in the corner.

The Welsh fly-half hit the extras but saw a second, long-range drop-goal go wide. Hooper escaped punishment for a late, high hit on Biggar, French referee Romain Poite deciding a penalty was sufficient.

BIGGAR HEAD INJURY

Wales lost their throw-in from the kick, handing Australia the chance to fire back down the pitch, a Parkes tackle on opposite number Samu Kerevi preventing a sure try.

The Wallaby forwards arrived en masse, and with the Welsh defence scrambling, Bernard Foley cross-kicked perfectly to veteran Adam Ashley-Cooper, the winger stepping inside Josh Adams with aplomb to scramble over for a deserved try.

Foley scuffed the conversion, but with both sides more than willing to throw the ball around, it didn't seem to matter. Biggar bundled Serevi into touch after the strapping Fiji-born centre had two-stepped around Jonathan Davies, but the fly-half paid for that defensive showing by being subbed off with a head injury, replaced by Rhys Patchell.



TOKYO: Wales' lock Alun Wyn Jones (C) is tackled by Australia's lock Rory Arnold (C-L) during the Japan 2019 Rugby World Cup Pool D match between Australia and Wales at the Tokyo Stadium in Tokyo yesterday. —AFP

Foley and Patchell traded penalties before Gareth Davies pounced to intercept a deep pass from a stuttering Will Genia to sprint home from 60 metres.

Patchell converted to make it 23-8 at half-time and dropped a goal four minutes into the second period as Wales looked to turn the screw.

Australia were far from done, however, David Pocock providing the perfect offload for Dane Haylett-Petty to score the Wallabies' second try, Matt Toomua converting. The Welsh defence, built around No 8 Josh Navidi and skipper Alun Wyn Jones, winning a Wales-record

130th cap, could only hold firm for so long as Australia proceeded to camp out in their 22m area with a series of set-pieces, Hooper eventually being driven for an invaluable try Toomua converted.

Games between the two sides are traditionally tight and so it again proved, Toomua hitting a 69th-minute penalty to reduce Wales' lead to just one point. Patchell responded in kind, Tomos Williams kept an Australian kick to touch in play and Wales saw out a tense final five minutes to set themselves up as likely Pool D winners. —AFP

Powerful Georgia slay giant-killers Uruguay

KUMAGAYA: Georgia overpowered Uruguay at the Rugby World Cup for a 33-7 bonus-point win yesterday, the popular South American underdogs unable to repeat their heroics against Fiji four days earlier.

A dominant forward display laid the foundation for an impressive victory by Georgia, who will now target an upset against Australia on October 11 as their path to a shock quarter-final place from Pool D.

Uruguay had rocked the tournament with its first shock result, beating highly talented Fiji by 30-27 in a pulsating match in Kamaishi on Wednesday. But Georgia coach Milton Haig had targeted yesterday's clash as a "must-win" game and made 12 changes from the side that lost 43-14 to Wales.

"Really proud of the boys and of how we played. It was important for us to get this first win out of the way," said Haig. "We've worked so hard over the last four months — even four years really — so pretty stoked that we ended up getting the job done."

"The pack is a strength of ours, scrum time, maul time, stuff like that. We knew they would come down, four-day turnaround for Uruguay. We knew it would be tough for them." It was Haig's side — ranked six places above Uruguay — that started the brighter, a sustained spell of forward dominance at the scrum leaving space out wide for winger Alexander Todua to score in the left corner.

WATER BREAKS

Both sides struggled to impose themselves early in energy-sapping humidity in Kumagaya, which saw the first water breaks at this year's Rugby World Cup. Georgia's next score came on the half-hour mark. The forwards shoved Uruguay



KUMAGAYA: Georgia's full back Soso Matiashvili (R) is tackled by Uruguay's wing Nicolas Freitas during the Japan 2019 Rugby World Cup Pool D match between Georgia and Uruguay at the Kumagaya Rugby Stadium in Kumagaya yesterday. —AFP

back with another powerful scrum, leaving number eight Otari Giorgadze to pick up at the base and dive over.

Uruguay hit back against the run of play, a clever inside ball slicing up the Georgian defence and leaving inside centre Andres Vilaseca a free run in under the posts. Esteban Meneses' men could have reduced their arrears further but Felipe Berchesi pushed a penalty attempt wide and the teams turned with Georgia leading 12-7.

Georgia extended their advantage only minutes after half-time, with Uruguay again unable to resist pressure from the heavy forwards and letting prop Levan Chilachava force his way over for a try brilliantly converted from the touchline.

A catch-and-drive from a line-out fin-

ished off by Giorgadze secured the bonus-point for Georgia as Uruguay found no answer to the heavier pack. Uruguay were wilting in the heat and humidity, and a tired error on their own line let outside centre Giorgi Kveseladze in for an easy try to put the result well beyond doubt.

And with only three minutes left on the clock, Uruguayan replacement Facundo Gattas saw a red card for a high shoulder charge to the head, the tournament's second on-pitch dismissal.

Meneses refused to blame the four-day turnaround for Uruguay's defeat, saying: "We knew (about) this. We were preparing for this. We (made) preparations, physical and technical and mental. "We were prepared for this." —AFP

England wary of Argentina's 'X-Factor'

KOBE: England expect to face an Argentina side boasting both forward power and "X-factor" backs when they continue their Rugby World Cup campaign against the Pumas in Tokyo next weekend.

Eddie Jones's men, one of the pre-tournament favourites for the title, have enjoyed comfortable wins over second-string nations Tonga (35-3) and the United States (45-7) in their first two fixtures at Japan 2019.

But a sterner challenge should await them in the so-called 'group of death' when they face Argentina in Tokyo on Saturday, October 5. After an agonising 23-21 loss to France in their Pool C opener, Argentina beat Tonga 28-12 in Osaka on Saturday.

Victory at the Hanazono Stadium was all but assured by a four-try salvo that yielded a bonus point inside 26 minutes, with Argentina hooker Julian Montoya scoring a hat-trick. Unsurprisingly, perhaps, the Pumas' performance fell away from that point, with Tonga fullback Telusa Veainu scoring two tries for the Pacific islanders.

Argentina, however, had done enough and England forwards coach Steve Borthwick told reporters on Sunday: "In that first 30 minutes they delivered the performance they needed to win the game."

"They got the tries and had won the game by that point in time so it was a pretty professional performance." Two of Montoya's tries came from line-outs, with a clever blindside play followed by a conventional catch and drive.

But while impressed by their set-piece form, Borthwick said there was more to 2007 and 2015 World Cup semi-finalists Argentina than scrum and line-out power. "They have a very good forward pack," said former England captain Borthwick, a lock in his playing days.

"We know that and we've seen that over

a period of time. Their scrum has improved from where it was which you would expect with a coach like (Mario) Ledesma now he has been there for a period and had a chance to address that.

"While Montoya played very well yesterday they have another outstanding hooker in (Agustin) Creevy who came on later in the game." "Then they have some backs who have got the X-factor. (Nicolas) Sanchez and (Emiliano) Boffelli are two that spring to mind straight away," added Borthwick.

Both head coach Eddie Jones and long-time assistant Borthwick were due to travel to Tokyo to watch Australia's match against Wales on Sunday, with one of those teams likely to be England's quarter-final opponents should they reach the last eight.

Nevertheless, Borthwick insisted England's attention was firmly fixed on Argentina. "We want to focus on improving on our recent performances and being the best team we can possibly be next Saturday," he said. "We know that they are a very good side and we will be preparing accordingly." —AFP

Ireland's Sexton: Japan loss could be 'blessing in disguise'

KOBE: Ireland star Johnny Sexton believes a stunning World Cup defeat by Japan could yet prove to be a "blessing in disguise" because it took place during the group stages. Fly-half Sexton missed Saturday's shock in Shizuoka with a thigh injury and could only watch helplessly as tournament hosts Japan won 19-12 to throw Pool A wide open.

But the playmaker, who featured in Ireland's dominant opening 27-3 win over Scotland at Japan 2019, took heart from the fact that his side can still get their World Cup campaign back on track.

Sexton contrasted Ireland's current position with the past two World Cups, where they eased through the pool phase only to suffer quarter-final defeats by Wales and Argentina in 2011 and 2015 respectively.

"The only blessing in disguise is that in the last two World Cups I've been involved in, we've not cruised through the group, but we've had everything go our way in the pool stages," Sexton told reporters in Kobe on Sunday.

"And then we've had the day we had yesterday (Saturday) in the quarter-final. And we'd be going home today. "So the great thing now is that we've got the rest of the pool to get things together."

Matters are still in Irish hands, Sexton said, if they can win their last two games

against Russia and Samoa and score a healthy number of tries. Ireland need "two big performances" to get to the knockout stages. "And we know that if we can get there, we've got a chance."

'RESPONDED REALLY WELL'

Sexton added Joe Schmidt's men had a proven ability to bounce back from defeat, noting that Ireland had been battered 57-15 by England and then beaten Wales twice before impressing in their opening World Cup win against Scotland.

"We've responded really well in terms of the other recent setbacks," he said. "A five-game winning run now would be great, that would do nicely." Sexton, who expects to be fit to face a Russia side unlikely to trouble the Irish, said he understood why he had not been risked against Japan.

After suffering a strain against Scotland, he could not train fully on Monday and Tuesday, meaning "the preparation time was so short the guys made the decision for me to sit this one out." "You want to play every game but hopefully I can pay back the squad this week and next week too."

Connacht centre Bunde Aki could be recalled in place of the concussed Chris Farrell, although veteran fullback Rob Kearney has passed a head injury assessment (HIA).

"Chris Farrell has a confirmed concussion, so he won't recover in time for Thursday," said Ireland forwards coach Simon Easterby. "Rob Kearney passed his HIA two so he's in that process."

Meanwhile Ireland have summoned back-row forward Jordi Murphy to Japan after Jack Conan was ruled out of the rest of the World Cup with a broken foot. —AFP

Pedersen survives storms to win cycling world title

HARROGATE: Denmark's Mads Pedersen created a huge surprise when he emerged from a rain-drenched Yorkshire road race with cycling's world title yesterday. The 23-year-old timed his last-gasp run to perfection to beat a devastated Italian Matteo Trentin and Swiss rider Stefan Kung in silver and bronze positions after 261km and over 6 hours and 27 minutes of exhausting racing.

"That's an unbelievable day, I didn't expect this morning," said the Leopard-Trek team rider who won much as an under-23's racer. "It was just survive, survive, survive. Then hope for the best in the sprint," said Pedersen, who was far from favourite to beat Italian 30-year-old Trentin, usually a crack in the sprints.

"When I saw the finish line I thought

anything can happen," he said. The race was shortened Sunday morning as relentless overnight rain took its toll on the narrow roads through the Yorkshire dales, flooding an iconic hilly section of the route which was cut out altogether.

The rain also turned the Harrogate fan park into a quagmire and grounded the television helicopters. Dutch 24-year-old Mathieu van der Poel had looked set for victory with a lap to go but cracked suddenly and spectacularly.

The conditions took a huge toll. Only 46 of the 182 starters crossed the finish line. Among the early victims, defending world champion Alejandro Valverde cut a sorry figure as he pulled out with 100km to go.

Ireland's Dan Martin and Belgian Philippe Gilbert, world champion in 2012, former Tour de France winner Geraint Thomas and reigning Vuelta champion Primoz Roglic of Slovenia, all dropped out.

But the rain gave Pedersen his chance. In 1993 the Oslo worlds were also run in a downpour as the now disgraced American former rider and admitted doper Lance Armstrong won in short sleeves in a deluge, crossing the line in near darkness. —AFP