

Refs having too much say in outcome of games

WAYNE SMITH



IF there is one theme rugby critics, and indeed rugby's critics, consistently harp on about, it's consistency.

The Wallabies lack it — more on that in a moment — but so do match officials, and never was that shortcoming more evident than in the back-to-back Rugby Championship Tests on Saturday. Australia's epic next-to-last-gasp victory over the Springboks will forever be tainted, at least in the memories of South African and neutral fans, by Irish referee George Clancy handing Bryan Habana a yellow card in his 100th Test.

The moment Habana went high on Adam Ashley-Cooper, Clancy was reaching for his pocket, although Kiwi assistant referee Mike Fraser momentarily stayed his hand by beseeching him to take another look at the incident on the big screen.

Springboks captain Jean de Villiers seized the moment to remind Clancy that not 10 minutes earlier he himself had been collared high by Rob Simmons at the other end of the field, which was true enough, though Habana's tackle did look marginally the more dangerous.

Maybe by now Clancy had had enough of high shots — Duane Vermeulen had also been penalised, also contentiously, for his bell-ringer on James Slipper in the first half — because he refused to be deterred and officiously pointed Habana in the direction of the naughty chair.

It was a sickening moment, not for Ashley-Cooper who seemed fine, but for the universally respected Springbok winger.

All he ever will recall of his 100th Test is that he cost South Africa the match and quite possibly the Rugby Championship as well, although if any fingers are to be pointed, they should be at Morné Steyn for missing touch in the 77th minute and presenting Australia with the ball that Rob Horne soon after deposited over the tryline.

Barely two hours earlier in Napier, French referee Pascal Gauzere conjured up an even more contentious moment when he disallowed a try to Leonardo Senatore after the Argentinian lock charged down a Ma'a Nonu kick, regathered and scored.

Gauzere ruled no-try because Senatore supposedly knocked on, even though the replay clearly showed he hadn't.

Once again rugby fans were presented with one of life's great conundrums: bad enough when referees miss something that did happen, but how is it they so often see things that didn't happen?

Gauzere's mistake, which cost the Pumas the chance to close to within five points of the All Blacks, must have been evident even to himself when he watched the big screen yet he chose to ignore it.

Earlier, however, when replays showed that Israel Dagg had indeed been inside his 22 when he cleared for touch, not outside it as the touch judge initially ruled, the Frenchman reversed the decision after watching the replay.

Why overturn such a trifling decision while allowing a clanger to stand?

Come to think of it, why didn't he act on replay evidence that clearly showed All Blacks winger Julian Savea being taken out without the ball when a try was in the offing in the opening minutes of the game?

Referees don't have to worry about getting physically smashed — although Kiwi Glen Jackson did cop a devastating "don't argue" from Ben Tameifuna in a recent ITM Cup match that cost the huge Waikato prop a five-week ban — and yet still they make some appalling mistakes, so perhaps the Wallabies should be cut a little slack when they err.

And they did err in Perth, early and often on Saturday night, but in the end they composed themselves enough to get the job done, even if the feeling lingers that the better side lost.

Greg Martin was way off-base with his claim that Wycliff Palu "dogged it" against the All Blacks but there is no denying that the No 8's rugby is flat at the moment.

It was commendable of Michael Hooper to pull out Palu's impressive run and tackle stats from the Eden Park Test but high numbers don't compensate for low impact and it may be that Palu simply needs a breather.

If Bismarck du Plessis can be stood down to the bench for looking tired, why not Palu, especially since Scott Higginbotham delivered so much in the final quarter without, remarkably, giving away a single penalty?

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Overall the Australian backrow looks out of balance at the moment and not just because of Palu.

Only a year ago it seemed Scott Fardy was on course to develop into a world-class six but it hasn't happened, at least not yet.

There is no denying he works hard, compensating in part for the fact that Hooper, for all his many other outstanding virtues as a footballer, doesn't have nearly the same presence over the ball of a Matt Hodgson or a Liam Gill, let alone a David Pocock.

But there is no denying some of the sparkle has gone out of Fardy's play and the Wallabies desperately need him to rediscover it.

And what to do with Kurtley Beale after his seven game-changing minutes off the bench? Does that build the case to put him in the starting side at inside centre in place of Matt Toomua or merely provide compelling evidence of his worth as a super-sub?

The primary argument for starting with Toomua ahead of him is that he is a far stronger defender than Beale.

Yet twice he ineffectively rushed up out of the line in Perth, opening the door for the South Africans' only try.

So, arguably, what Toomua offers in defence is not enough to offset what Beale offers in attack. Clearly, too, from an ensemble perspective, the Tah-ing of the Wallabies backline is no bad thing.

At least Australian rugby is having these discussions on the back of a victory. And what an important victory it was in the context of how rugby is travelling in the Australian marketplace.

It wasn't just that the Wallabies won — it was how they won and what that said of their character.

There's talent in the side Ewen McKenzie has assembled and even a certain unreliable level of skill.

But Australians needed proof these Wallabies would dig deep to deliver, and now they have it.

McKenzie slams 'yo-yo' media on Beale selection

The press focus on the No 10 spot exasperates the Wallabies coach

BRET HARRIS

WALLABIES coach Ewen McKenzie has described the media as "yo-yos" after he was asked whether Kurtley Beale deserved to start against Argentina on the Gold Coast on Saturday night after his cameo off the bench against the Springboks in Perth.

Notwithstanding that the Springboks were a man down with winger Bryan Habana in the sin bin, Beale enlivened the Wallabies' attack when he came on at inside centre in the 73rd minute, combining superbly with his NSW Waratahs teammates in the backline such as fullback Israel Folau.

Beale's performance in the 24-23 win over the Springboks has commentators questioning whether he should start at five-eighth or inside centre against Argentina.

"You blokes are like yo-yos, aren't you?" said McKenzie, who was clearly exasperated by the question. "You go backwards and forwards. You go round and round on the 10 thing. I don't know what you want me to say."

"We picked the combination we thought would work for the game and that's what we'll do again."

McKenzie would not have had to field the question about Beale if he had not flip-flopped on the five-eighth position. Bernard Foley started at five-eighth in the clean sweep of France in June, but McKenzie handed Beale the gold No 10 jersey for the opening two Bledisloe Cup Tests against the All Blacks.

After the Wallabies' record 51-20 loss to the All Blacks in Auckland three weeks ago, McKenzie recalled Foley and put Beale back on the bench. While Foley kicked the match-winning conversion of winger Rob Horne's try, Beale arguably made more impact on the game in his seven minutes off the bench.

But McKenzie said that was the sort of impact he expected from the bench players, indicating Beale would remain a super-sub for the Argentinian Test. "I think you know me pretty well. You know I like to use the bench. Apart from one game, I think we've used the bench pretty well," he said.

"We want players to go out there and make a difference because we actually value them. Everyone seems to think the players outside the 15 are inferior players ... in their own right. They're quite capable of going out there and making a difference."

"They are quite capable of starting and making a difference, too. You can only put 15 on the field. The rest have to come off the bench. We'll just use them the best way we think we can get an outcome for the game."

Even though the Wallabies got out of jail against the Springboks, McKenzie is unlikely to make many, if any, unforced changes for Argentina. Brumbies winger Henry Speight will become eli-

gible to play for the Wallabies this week but his Test debut has been delayed by the aggravation of a hamstring injury and he will be sidelined indefinitely.

"His comeback trail has been pretty seamless. He literally woke up sore. It's not like he has had another episode. He has woken up sore in the same spot, the same area," McKenzie said.

"I'm not interested in creating some sort of chronic issue. He is with the Brumbies and they have been rehabbing him well. We'll wait and he will be available when he is available."

McKenzie was hopeful hooker Tatafu Polota-Nau would recover from a knee injury in time to play against Argentina, but he was still doubtful. "He has been progressing really quickly. He did a bit of contact work yesterday morning. A little bit more to do yet, but he has progressed very well."

"If he is fit, we will obviously consider him (as a starter). We aren't going to take damaged players into the game."

"We brought him in this week

for a reason. We thought he was pretty close and he is. It would be nice if he was available."

One of the best scrummagers in world rugby, Polota-Nau would certainly be handy against Argentina, who pride themselves on their powerful scrum. "It's part of their rugby psyche, the scrum. They certainly did a great job on South Africa the other week," McKenzie said.

"We had that discussion last time we played them in Argentina and we handled them well on the day. Without getting too technical, some scrums go well against some scrums and other scrums don't."

"As you go through, you have your bogey teams. We scrummaged well against Argentina last year so I expect us to do the same."

McKenzie was pleased with the Wallabies' scrummaging against South Africa, but they still conceded six points from penalties for scrum collapses. If Polota-Nau is unavailable, James Hanson will start at hooker with Saia Faingaa likely to reclaim his place on the bench from Josh Mann-Rea.

Modest match-winner celebrates milestone



GETTY IMAGES

Kurtley Beale, right, begins the celebrations as Wallabies winger Rob Horne streaks to the line to score the winning try against the Springboks

BRET HARRIS

THE Wallabies may have ruined Springboks winger Bryan Habana's 100th Test in Perth on Saturday night, but they helped him celebrate the milestone after the game.

Arguably the greatest winger in South African rugby history, Habana's century was marred by his controversial sin-binning for a head-high tackle on Wallabies winger Adam Ashley-Cooper in the 65th minute.

While Habana was in the bin, the Wallabies came back from 23-14 down to snatch the win 24-23 with a try to winger Rob Horne in the 77th minute. The Wallabies invited the Springboks into their dressing room after the game to share a beer and presented Habana with a signed jersey to honour his 100 Test caps.

"We're in the same shed cele-

brating Bryan's 100th Test," Horne said. "Just enjoying that together. We're doing a presentation to him at the moment."

"I congratulated him after the game on his 100th. Anyone who can get 100 Tests for their country, it's a privilege to play against someone like that."

The sin-binning of Habana was the turning point in the game. Irish referee George Clancy went straight to his pocket, but an assistant referee advised him to watch a replay of the tackle on the big screen.

Springboks captain Jean de Villiers argued that Habana's high tackle was no worse than the one Horne had made on him earlier in the game, which resulted in a penalty, but Clancy thought it was dangerous and sent the veteran winger off.

It soon became evident that the Springboks were not playing under Clancy's law but Murphy's

Law. After holding out the Wallabies, the Springboks received a relieving penalty near their own line in the 76th minute after replacement back Kurtley Beale failed to release the ball in a tackle.

All the Springboks had to do was kick the ball out, win the line-out and close out the game, but Morné Steyn's kick did not find touch, which gave the Wallabies one last chance to score.

With Habana still in the bin, the Wallabies backs combined brilliantly to put Horne into the clear down the left-hand side and he swerved inside Steyn's attempt at cover to score in the 77th minute.

Five-eighth Bernard Foley's conversion gave the Wallabies a fortuitous 24-23 win.

As soon as Horne scored, Habana came back on, but his re-entry had been delayed by almost two minutes while officials waited for a break in play.

Horne was reluctant to talk

about his try or Habana's sin-binning, preferring to praise the character of the Wallabies for coming back.

"It was good just to get on the end of it really," Horne said.

"It was tough out there. It was a bit of a war, a true test of character of our side. We were coming off the back of the other week. We had to show our identity and what we are all about."

"We didn't give in and we kept on playing footy. Our supporters could see how much it means to us."

"Heading into the game that was our main focus ... to make it happen. It did take us to the last minute to make it happen, but opportunities in Test matches come along few and far between. In the end we were fortunate enough to get it done."

Horne said the Wallabies had a point to prove after their record 51-20 loss to the All Blacks in Auckland two weeks ago.

Stunned Springbok veteran Matfield accuses Wallabies of cheating in maul

BRET HARRIS

CHAMPION second-rower Victor Matfield has accused the Wallabies of using illegal tactics to nullify the Springboks' rolling maul in their loss in Perth on Saturday night.

The rolling maul is one of the Springboks' main attacking weapons and the Wallabies were delighted they were able to negate it in their last-gasp 24-23 win.

But Matfield suggested the Wallabies had illegally joined the Springboks maul from the side to stop it and he had alerted Irish referee George Clancy to the tactic.

"I must say they did very well in stopping our drives and our mauls," Matfield said.

"That's something we'll have to have a look at. That's a big weapon of ours and it didn't work for us."

"We'll have to see how legal it

was, but it was one area that didn't work for us."

"I went to George a few times and asked him to look if they were coming from the side. It's difficult to say now. We'll have to have a look at the video and maybe they were fine and we have to improve in the way we set our maul."

Matfield said it was disappointing for the Springboks to play with 14 men after star winger Bryan Habana was sin-binned in the 65th minute for a high tackle on Wallabies winger Adam Ashley-Cooper. "It's difficult, but it happened," Matfield said.

"It's a pity we had to play with 14 men in that last 10 minutes. We need to make sure when you tackle you go low and hopefully next time we won't do it again."

"It's very difficult to say anything about that."

Matfield admitted the Springboks let the game slip out of their

De Villiers hints at a Super Rugby stint in Australia

SPRINGBOKS captain Jean de Villiers will consider playing Super Rugby in Australia when he retires from the international game after the World Cup in England next year.

De Villiers, 33, said he would be looking for a different

experience and playing in Australia was an option.

"It's actually something I thought about yesterday," said De Villiers, who will play his 100th Test for the Springboks against the All Blacks in Wellington on Saturday night.

"Looking at the new national league (NRC) that they've got going here, I think that's great for rugby in Australia and rugby as a whole."

The success of former

"I'm getting to the end of my career now. I don't know how long I'll be going. When my contract ends again I'll definitely be looking at all options and if my body is still ready to go, I'll be looking everywhere. "I'll definitely look at a different experience. But that's just throwing thoughts around. It's not really something I've thought of for too long."

The success of former

Springboks backrower Jacques Potgieter at the NSW Waratahs side has not escaped De Villiers' attention. "He (Potgieter) has made a fantastic move. It has rejuvenated his career. He has been fantastic for the Waratahs. (Waratahs coach) is doing something right. What he did at Leinster, again now here. Must be a good coach."

BRET HARRIS

came through for us. Set piece very good. Kick-offs. That set piece they won back and went on to score, that was a bit of a problem, and from then we were very good at the kick-offs as well.

"We have an attacking mindset — we want to go out there and score tries. Last year we scored the most tries per game of any international team, even more than the All Blacks."

Matfield, 37, said he felt good in his comeback for the Springboks, but his fitness was not tested fully because of the wet conditions.

"It felt pretty good. I don't think it was the quickest game ever to play. That helped a little bit, but I think next week (against the All Blacks) I'll be tested," he said.

Matfield, who was a key member of the 2007 World Cup-winning team, said playing in next year's tournament in England was the reason for his comeback.

Connolly: bring in Robinson for scrum

WAYNE SMITH

JAMES Slipper is expected to be fit to play against the Pumas on the Gold Coast on Saturday, but former Wallabies coach John Connolly believes the moment has arrived to recall Australia's best scrummaging loosehead, Benn Robinson, to the Test side.

There is only one scrummaging challenge the Wallabies will face this year more daunting than the one awaiting them at Skilled Park on Saturday night and that is when they again confront Argentina on their home soil in Mendoza on October 5.

In recent weeks, the Pumas have dealt harshly with both the All Blacks and Springboks scrums, both of which have troubled Australia, and while it doesn't necessarily follow the Wallabies pack will struggle against them, there is no question Argentina will view Saturday's set piece battle as the key to claiming its first Rugby Championship scalp.

Slipper has been the pick of the Australian pack this season, registering more carries than any other forward, but Connolly believes he is far better suited to tighthead, his original front-row position.

It will take another season of Super Rugby for him to readjust to the right-hand side but in the meantime, and certainly for this Test, Connolly is adamant Waratahs stalwart Robinson would represent better value at scrum time.

Connolly is well aware Robinson has fallen out of favour with Wallabies coach Ewen McKenzie

'If the Wallabies can defuse the Pumas scrum, it would be a huge psychological blow'

JOHN CONNOLLY
FORMER WALLABY COACH

after playing seven Tests under him last year but insists this is the moment to reactivate his career.

"I'd take my best loosehead in against the Pumas and I think he's the best. You have to evaluate whether what he adds to the scrum offsets what the Wallabies will lose around the field by not starting Slipper, and the danger is that Robinson hasn't played at the top level in a while. But if the Wallabies can defuse the scrum as a Pumas weapon, psychologically it would be a huge blow and I think Robinson is worth the risk."

The Wallabies won that psychological battle last year in Rosario, albeit with some unexpected help from English referee Wayne Barnes after being trapped in a scrummaging battle on their own line early in proceedings.

Barnes awarded three successive penalties to the Pumas, who each time elected to set another scrum. After putting both Australian props, Slipper and Ben Alexander, on a final warning, Barnes finally lost patience and gave Slipper a yellow card when the Wallabies collapsed again but did not award Argentina a penalty try.

When the Pumas inevitably went for a pushover against the seven-man pack, the Wallabies unexpectedly fractured them, the ball squirted loose and Michael Hooper pounced on it for Will Genia to clear downfield.

In that moment, the spell was broken. Having failed to knock out the Wallabies with their best punch, the Pumas then looked clueless as Australia romped away to a 54-17 victory.

Indications are, however, that McKenzie will keep the faith with Slipper and his back-up, Pek Cowan. Certainly he played down Slipper's early departure against the Springbokson Saturday night.

"That's just the perils of putting your head in the front row," said McKenzie. "He's all right, just a bit stiff."

Winger Henry Speight's hopes of kicking off his Test career next weekend, after finally becoming eligible on Thursday to play for Australia, were dealt a minor blow when his hamstring twinged ahead of the Canberra Vikings' NRC clash with Queensland Country on Saturday.

Genia's hopes of an immediate Test recall also were dealt a blow on Saturday when he barely made half a dozen passes as Brisbane City meekly capitulated against Melbourne Rising at Ballymore, losing 79-18.

"We were very weak and passive at the ruck and just got blown off the ball," said Genia, who has no expectations of a recall after Nick Phipps turned in a generally efficient game for the Wallabies, save for a couple of errant passes.