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NEWS

COMBINED SERVICES GEAR UP FOR SAMOA

The combined services rugby team are preparing to take on Samoa in their first international match in years.

The match is being played at Gloucester's home ground, Kingsholm, with the home crowd more than familiar with the strength and skill that adorn the South Sea Islanders' game with the likes of Junior Paramore and Terry Fanolua having graced the Kingsholm turf in the past and Eliota Fuimaono-Sapolu currently maintaining the tradition.

In addition, current Fijian international Apo Satala is another to have delighted the Kingsholm faithful in recent seasons and is likely to feature for the Combined Services side which draws from the Army, Royal Navy and Royal Air Force. Apo has recently moved to the Imjin Barracks based in Gloucestershire.

Given that it is the first time that Samoa have ever played at Kingsholm and only the second time for the Combined Services have played, it's a unique opportunity to watch a game of this kind.

"Over the past years we have developed a fantastic reputation for staging additional matches here at Kingsholm and we look forward to welcoming both the Combined Services and Manu Samoa for what promises to be a great occasion," said Ken Nottage, managing director of Gloucester.

"I am sure that the armed forces will put on a great show both before and during the match and we hope that the Gloucester fans will come along in great numbers to lend their legendary support as international rugby again comes to Kingsholm."

FRANCE V FIJI

There were no problems for France as they hounded a below par Fijian side into an inglorious defeat in rain swept Nantes to the tune of 34-12. David Marty and

Maxime Medard scored tries as France cruised to the easiest of wins. Fly-half Dimitri Yachvili kicked 19 points and a penalty try 11 minutes from time gave the scoreline a decidedly one-sided look.

Yachvili and Seremaia Bai landed two penalties apiece before the former's next effort led to a try that would have been out of place in an U12 match. A kick at penalty goal drifted wide but, when Napolioni Nalaga failed to gain control of the ball, Perpignan centre Marty was on hand to touch down and inflict more severe punishment. Yachvili recovered his composure after the miss that led to a try, to convert and added a penalty to make it 16-6 at half-time.

Winger Medard stretched the lead by scoring in the corner after impressive debutant Fabrice Estebanez's measured cross-field kick, with Yachvili unable to convert - though he then traded penalties with Bai twice more to leave the match poised at 27-12. There was still time for the French pack to force another score when a strong drive saw Fiji penalised for standing up in the scrum. The Fijian side appeared ponderous with no evidence of a game plan that they could embrace in the wet conditions.

Fiji plays Wales on Friday evening in Wales. They can do better and it is expected that they will do so.

SAMOA GUTSY IN DEFEAT

Ireland 20 Samoa 10

By Brendan Fanning

Even allowing for the fact that we live in an age of spin and counter spin, when awful news is dressed up as no more than a speed-bump on the road forward, we got a classic from the man on the public address system at Aviva Stadium yesterday.

Half-way through the second half he told us, with some excitement, that the attendance of 30,955 represented a record in the fixture. Indeed!



At the time we were having visions of all sorts of other records. Not since 2005 when they beat Argentina have the Samoans come first against a top-ranked country, but around the hour mark there was every reason to believe they could close the deal against Ireland in a stadium that statistically was more than half full.

At that point full-back Paul Williams was lining up another penalty – albeit a long shot – having slotted one six minutes earlier to close the gap to 13-10 in Ireland's favour. He missed. And four minutes later Ireland came back and took seven points to make it 20-10.

That emptied the tourists. Not that it filled up the home team a whole lot. Faced with the prospect of losing seven games in a row, of which five would have been Test defeats, had the Samoans done what they were capable of doing; Ireland came through in one piece.

And the shape of that piece? Eh, distorted. And nowhere more than the scrum which replaced last week's lineout as the point of most pain. Whatever was going on between the Ireland front row and referee Keith Brown – who was appointed to the elite panel only last April – they were seeing things from vastly different perspectives. This whole business of crouching and pausing and pursing your lips before engagements has given referees an unfeasible input into an area which already was ram jam.

Or perhaps it's just that Ireland can't scrummage very well. Either way, the prospect of the All Blacks, who have had their own issues at this phase lately, on Saturday is forbidding. There is so much for Ireland to fix before then.

They had more slow ball yesterday than they knew what to do with. Or put another way, Samoa had far more decent possession and what they left for Ireland wouldn't feed a sparrow. And despite aggressive and willing carries from Sean O'Brien, too often the cleanout was sloppy and the starter plays used to get the thing going again simply spluttered.

When you didn't see any way past this you felt the Samoans – who have only won once previously against Ireland – were in with a real chance. In the half-time huddle their excellent No 8 George Stowers was passionate in exhorting his team-mates to play the game in Ireland's end of the field. At that point, they trailed 13-7, despite having fallen behind to a Ronan O'Gara penalty inside 25 seconds – a start that should have kicked the home team onwards.

As the first half had developed they got more into the game, driven by a terrific amount of carries by their front five, and first-class back-up from man of the match Kahn Fotualii at scrumhalf.

Their try saved them for both its timing and execution were spot on. With Ireland at 10-0, after Jamie Heaslip had scored from close-in on 18 minutes, another score for them would immediately have left the tourists with a game to chase. Instead, they benefited from one of those infrequent rugby moments where a poorly directed pass pays out. As Tasesa Lavea reached for a pass that looked too far, Paddy Wallace stepped in to hit him only for the outhalf to get it away cleanly to Seilala Mapasua. The centre found Alesana Tuilagi on his inside with a great pass and that was that. Williams knocked over the conversion and it was a 10-7 game.

O'Gara made it 13-7 on the half hour with a penalty but from the moment O'Brien knocked-on the drop off to start the second half, Ireland started slipping further off the mark.

Samoa dominated possession in the 15 minutes after half-time as the Irish scrum continued to suffer.

It was O'Gara who eased the worry when on 66 minutes he got over from a quick tap by Peter Stringer under the Samoan posts. In the crucial moment of the game, Stringer's clever tap penalty set up his half-back partner O'Gara to score under the posts as the Samoan defence fatally showed a lack of concentration for the first time in the match.

When moments earlier Donncha O'Callaghan had fished the ball out of a ruck in Ireland's half, you expected the whistle to go and for Williams to have another pop at the posts. Instead he was lining up behind his own sticks as O'Gara added the points and the issue of who would win was put to bed.

The last act of the game was Brian O'Driscoll whacking the ball off the park, which if you could have translated it into words would have come out along the lines of 'get me out of here'.

Ireland ended a run of four straight Test defeats but it was another unconvincing display as they struggled to subdue a physical Samoa side.

England play Samoa on Saturday afternoon in England. Expect another physical encounter that will not be for the faint hearted.

