

Absa Currie Cup fab four finalised

The Xerox Lions secured the fourth and final place in the Absa Currie Cup semifinals as Vodacom Western Province won the battle, but ultimately lost the war in the final match of the regular season at Newlands on Saturday.

WP beat the Lions 14-6 but failed to secure the bonus-point victory and a winning margin of 19 points or more to leapfrog their opponents into the playoffs.

The upshot is that the Lions will travel to Durban to take on the log-topping Sharks on Saturday (kickoff 2-30pm) while the Vodacom Blue Bulls, who finished second, host the Vodacom Free State Cheetahs (third at Loftus Versfeld (kickoff 4-30pm).

Speaking after his team's 14-6 loss to WP on Saturday, Lions coach Eugene 'Loffie' Eloff said he would start thinking about the semifinals on Monday only, but the Lions boss was a relieved man nonetheless.

"It feels like a win," said Eloff, whose team beat the Sharks in last year's semifinals. "It was a tremendous defensive effort and we showed great courage."

The Lions battled for possession against a fired-up WP team, but Eloff revealed that his team had come to Cape Town to win and not just for 'damage control' - a defeat by less than 19 points.

"Our goal was always to win," revealed 'Loffie'. "We wanted to slow it down to keep the structure, but we also wanted to attack. It may have looked (from the side) that we just wanted to contain, but that certainly wasn't the case - we just didn't have the ball and couldn't do much from there."

Vodacom WP skipper Jean de Villiers cut a disconsolate figure after the match on Saturday, saying: "The Lions played to get into a semi-final. But they weren't the better team on the day.

"We had the opportunities (today), but we just didn't capitalise," added De Villiers, who scored one of his team's two tries on the day. "I think our individual brilliance, which is usually our big strength, was also our weakness."

In other action this weekend, starting on Friday evening, the Vodacom Blue Bulls - who, win or lose, were already assured of finishing in second place on the standings - beat the Valke 22-20 in Pretoria.

The Bulls rested a host of their frontline players like Derick Kuun, Victor Matfield, Wikus van Heerden, Fou du Preez, Morne Steyn, Wynand Olivier and Bryan Habana and the determined Valke - in search of bonus points ahead of the promotion/relegation matches - very nearly stole an unlikely victory.

The home team scored three tries to two, with the Valke getting a losing bonus point, but that proved to be futile for the Men from East Rand as the Boland Cavaliers claimed a four-try bonus point on Saturday in the 90-point thriller against the Vodacom Free State Cheetahs.

The Valke spent Friday night in seventh place - which would have meant a promotion/relegation meeting against the Griffons - but Boland's four-try bonus point, in their 50-40 defeat to the Cheetahs, saw them dr

back into eighth position on the log. The Valke will now meet the Leopards, who ended first on the Absa Currie Cup First Division log, in the promotion/relegation matches later this month.

The Cavaliers managed six tries of their own against the Cheetahs, with skipper and Man of the Match Piet van Zyl - Boland's most-capped player of all time - rattling up a hat-trick of tries.

Josh Strauss, Elgar Watts and Deon Scholtz scored the Cavaliers' other tries, but it was never enough for the visitors, who conceded seven tries to the Cheetahs, with fit-again skipper Juan Smith scoring twice.

Former Bolander Jongi Nokwe - playing in his 50th Absa Currie Cup match - claimed their fourth, and bonus point clinching try shortly after half-time, before tries from Smith and Nico Breedt put them into a commanding 42-14 lead. The rest of the match belonged to the visitors, however, as they outscored the defending champions by 26-8.

There was a try-scoring blitz of a different sort in Durban at the same time as the Cheetahs-Boland match - Saturday, as the Sharks - who finished top of the log at the end of the regular season - scored 10 tries to the Wildeklawer Griquas' two in their 66-12 annihilation at the Absa Stadium.

Livewire loose forward Keegan Daniel, now the top try-scorer in the competition, scored a hat-trick of tries whilst World Cup-winning Springbok winger JP Pietersen scored two of his own, with Frans Steyn, Albert Berg, John Smit (in his first Currie Cup start since 2005) and Odwa Ndungane also getting on the scoresheet.

The Sharks showed they meant business throughout; despite Griquas scoring two tries through Sarel Pretorius and Naas Olivier, and the Men from Durban will be looking to transfer this form into the play-offs; they go about picking up their first Absa Currie Cup trophy since 1996.

"It's hard to put into words the spirit in the Sharks squad at the moment," powerhouse Sharks flanker Jean Deyssel told www.sarugby.co.za. "There is still a lot of rugby to be played, with the semifinals up next, but we're aware of the job at hand and there will be no let-up from our side until we've won that trophy!"

The Sharks, who last appeared in an Absa Currie Cup Final in 2003, won 12 out of their 14 league matches this season - with the Bulls and the Cheetahs the only teams to have beaten them. In fact, the Sharks have not lost in the Currie Cup since going down 31-9 to the Cheetahs in Bloemfontein on July 19.

The Durbanites - under the guidance of September's Absa Currie Cup Coach of the Month, John Plumtree scored 57 tries and conceded just 29 in their 14 league games and finished with a positive points' difference of 207.

Meanwhile, there was plenty of action in the Absa Currie Cup Under-21 competition this weekend, with the Valke U21's and Griquas winning through to the final in 'Group B'.

The Valke beat the SWD Eagles 43-31 in semifinal action on Friday evening, whilst Griquas beat the Mpumalanga U21's 47-8 on Saturday.

In U21 'Group A' action, the Vodacom Blue Bulls Under-21's made it six wins from six as they beat Free State 31-22, whilst the Sharks won their second match of the season against the Leopards - winning 43-22.

The Blue Bulls will now play the Lions in next week's 'Group A' semifinals, with Free State and WP opposi

each other in the other semifinal.

In Absa Currie Cup Under-19 action this weekend, Griquas and the Griffons moved into the 'Group B' Final with wins over the BA Mighty Elephants and the Valke, respectively.

In 'Group A' action, the Sharks beat the Leopards 33-5 and the Blue Bulls went down 23-20 to Free State.

The Sharks, with four wins from six matches, will play against the Golden Lions in 'Group A' semifinal action next weekend, with WP's U19's set to oppose Free State's young guns.

Top points-scorers:

170 - Earl Rose (Xerox Lions)

167 - Morne Steyn (Vodacom Blue Bulls)

104 - Conrad Barnard (Wildecklauer Griquas)

84 - Chris Rossouw (Vodacom Free State Cheetahs)

75 - Willem de Waal (Vodacom WP)

Top try-scorers:

9 - Keegan Daniel (Sharks)

8 - Jacques Botes (Sharks), MJ Mentz (Wildecklauer Griquas)

6 - JP Pietersen (Sharks), John Mametsa (Vodacom Blue Bulls), Tiger Mangweni (Vodacom Blue Bulls), Wynand Olivier (Vodacom Blue Bulls), Jongi Nokwe (Vodacom FS Cheetahs), Andries Bekker (Vodacom Western Province), Bjorn Basson (Wildecklauer Griquas), Michael Killian (Xerox Lions), Doppies la Grange (Xerox Lions)

5 - Waylon Murray (Sharks), Ernie Kruger (Valke), Sarel Pretorius (Wildecklauer Griquas), Jaco Pretorius (Xerox Lions), Earl Rose (Xerox Lions)

4 - Danwel Demas (Boland Cavaliers), Willem van Zyl (Boland Cavaliers), Albert van den Berg (Sharks), Dewald Pretorius (Valke), Marius Delport (Vodacom Blue Bulls), Akona Ndungane (Vodacom Blue Bulls), Wikus van Heerden (Vodacom Blue Bulls), JW Jonker (Vodacom FS Cheetahs), Fabian Juries (Vodacom FS Cheetahs), Sireli Nagelevuki (Vodacom WP), Rayno Benjamin (Xerox Lions), Willie Wepener (Xerox Lions)

3 - John Daniels (Boland Cavaliers), Elgar Watts (Boland Cavaliers), Deon Carstens (Sharks), Chris Jorda (Sharks), Rouan Cloete (Valke), Johan Jackson (Valke), Derick Kuun (Vodacom Blue Bulls), Pedrie Wannenburg (Vodacom Blue Bulls), Heinrich Brussow (Vodacom FS Cheetahs), Tewis de Bruyn (Vodacom FS Cheetahs), Robert Ebersohn (Vodacom FS Cheetahs), Kabamba Floors (Vodacom FS Cheetahs), Wilton Pietersen (Vodacom FS Cheetahs), Hendro Scholtz (Vodacom FS Cheetahs), Juan Smith (Vodacom FS Cheetahs), Schalk van der Merwe (Vodacom FS Cheetahs), Tonderai Chavhanga (Vodacom WP), Jee de Villiers (Vodacom WP), Wylie Human (Vodacom WP), Lukhanyo 'Trompie' Nontshinga, Franco van der

Merwe (Xerox Lions), Jaco van Schalkwyk (Xerox Lions), Jano Vermaak (Xerox Lions)

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