

Spotlight on remaining semifinal places

There is still plenty to play for as the 2008 Absa Currie Cup reaches the final straight, with three teams scrapping it out for the two remaining places in the Premier Division semifinals.

With the Sharks and the Vodacom Blue Bulls both already assured of home semifinals, the Vodacom Free State Cheetahs, the Xerox Lions and Vodacom Western Province will fight it out this weekend for the right travel to Durban or Pretoria to oppose them.

The Cheetahs will host the Boland Cavaliers on Saturday afternoon, in a match the defending champions would be expected to win with a bonus point, and thereby book their semifinal place, whilst the 'match of the weekend' sees Western Province entertain the Lions in a winner-takes-all clash in Cape Town (kick-off 5.05pm).

The permutations for the Newlands clash are simple; the home team needs to deny the Lions a bonus point of any sort, they need to score four tries and they must win by 19 points or more to make up their current points' difference against the Lions. A Lions win of any sort over WP will see them into third place on the table leaving the Cheetahs in fourth position, regardless of their winning margin over Boland.

But the uphill task does not end there for WP, who are also sweating over the fitness of playmaker Peter Grant, the Springbok flyhalf having hurt his ankle in Wellington last weekend. World Cup-winning Bok fullback Percy Montgomery is on standby for Grant, having been included on the bench for the second weekend in a row.

Western Province head coach Allister Coetzee has admitted that the odds are stacked against his side, but he found solace in the fact that they are firmly in control of their own destiny.

"The nice thing is that it's up to us," he said this week.

"We know that if we want to reach the play-offs, we must win with a bonus point as well as secure a winning margin of 19 or more points.

"It's a big ask yes, but certainly not impossible and a target we will certainly be having a crack at," added Coetzee, a former Springbok assistant coach.

"We know what we need to do and on our home ground with the Newlands faithful behind us, the team will be very fired up to achieve."

The Lions, too, will be fired up for Saturday's match, especially after going down 34-20 to the table-topping Sharks last weekend - a bitter pill to swallow after they led 8-3 at half-time, only to let the game slip in the final 10 minutes.

"We've put the game behind us, and we're focusing on Cape Town now,"

wrote Lions mentor Eugene Eloff in his official weekly column. "We butchered a fourth try that would have taken all this pressure off of us, but in hindsight, maybe it is better to go into this match with this pressure."

Two teams not facing that much pressure this weekend are the Vodacom Blue Bulls - or the 'B' Bulls as they have been termed this week - and the Sharks, the teams in second and first place on the Absa Currie Cup log, respectively.

The Bulls, who host the Valke in Pretoria on Friday evening, have selected a makeshift team in their final league match, with head coach Frans Ludeke resting his star men ahead of the semifinals.

Hooker Derick Kuun, lock Victor Matfield, No.8 Pierre Spies, scrumhalf Fourie du Preez, flyhalf Morne Steyn, winger Bryan Habana and centre Wynand Olivier will all take a complete break this weekend, with young lock Wilhelm Steenkamp taking over the captaincy and a host of talented fringe players getting an opportunity to make their mark at Absa Currie Cup level.

Ludeke, speaking on www.bluebulls.co.za, explained his thinking: "Firstly, the Bulls would like to honour Peter de Villiers's request to give the Springboks a break during the Absa Currie Cup.

"We also managed their training schedules over the past few weeks in order to keep them from over-training, but I still feel that they deserve a break.

"Secondly, we have worked hard to get into the semifinals and now that we are in the ideal situation - where we are going to stay in the second place on the log no matter what happens on Friday is a great position to be in.

"However, we are going to go out against the Valke with the sole aim of picking up five log points and to keep our momentum for the play-offs.

"Thirdly, resting players is the best way to get rid of niggling injuries and players such as Morne Steyn, Derick Kuun, Wynand Olivier and Marius Delport have played in almost every game so far and a break will wonders for them."

The Sharks and the Cheetahs are both hosting matches at 3pm on Saturday.

The Sharks need a win over the Wildeklaar Griquas to confirm first place on the Absa Currie Cup standings, whilst the Cheetahs can move into third place should they beat the Boland Cavaliers - and the Lions lose to WP.

"We're not getting ahead of ourselves at this stage, we need to stay focused for this match," Sharks coach John Plumtree told www.sarugby.co.za. "We have plenty of respect for Griquas and they won't make it easy for us."

And, as if to prove just how serious they are ahead of their final league game against Griquas, Plumtree has selected a powerful Sharks unit, with 11 Springboks in the starting line-up - including World Cup-winning captain John Smit (in his first start at any level since July 5) - and a further four Boks on the bench.

Plumtree, September's Absa Currie Cup Coach of the Month, added: "The guys are fully aware of the challenge at hand.

"Even though we're already assured of a semifinal place we can't look too far ahead. Besides, we want to put in a good performance ahead of the semifinals - every win helps!"

Meanwhile, with the Absa Currie Cup's Premier Division nearing its semifinal stage, and the First Division semifinals already getting underway this weekend, the various youth competitions in South Africa are also nearing their climax.

It's already semifinal time in 'Group B' of the Absa Currie Cup Under-21 competition, with Mpumalanga's U21's hosting Griquas on Friday and the Valke hosting the SWD Eagles on Saturday.

The Vodacom Blue Bulls U21's currently top the log in 'Group A', followed by Free State, Vodacom WP and the Golden Lions.

The Blue Bulls will be up against Free State and the Sharks will host the Leopards in the final bit of U21 'Group A' league action this weekend, before moving onto the semifinals next week when the first-placed team hosts the fourth-placed side and two plays three.

It's a similar story in the Absa Currie Cup Under-19 tournament, with 'Group B' semifinals taking place this weekend and the league stage of 'Group A' still on the go.

In 'Group B' semifinal fixtures, the Griffons' U19's will host the Valke and the BA Mighty Elephants will face Griquas in Kimberley.

Vodacom WP's U19's head up the 'Group A' standings, followed by the Sharks, the Golden Lions and Free State. The Vodacom Blue Bulls will oppose Free State and the Sharks are hosting the Leopards in the last bit of 'Group A' league action this season.

The Absa Currie Cup Under-19 play-offs will continue next weekend with the final of 'Group B' and the 'Group A' semifinals taking place.

Absa Currie Cup facts of the week:

- Veteran Vodacom Free State Cheetahs winger Eddie Fredericks - who scored his 50th try for Free State against the Sharks on July 19 - will play his 100th match for the defending champions this weekend.

Fredericks, 30, has played 97 Absa Currie Cup matches and could still reach his century this season. Meanwhile, hooker Richardt Strauss, prop Kobus Caldo and fullback Bevin Fortuin will all be playing in their 50th matches for the Free Staters on Saturday.

- Fredericks is not the only Cheetahs speedster celebrating a milestone this weekend, with Springbok wing Jongi Nokwe set to play his 50th Absa Currie Cup match. Nokwe, who scored a record-breaking four tries against the Wallabies in a Tri-Nations match at the end of August, has played 41 Currie Cup matches for Boland and eight for the Cheetahs.

- Loose forward Gareth Krause will be playing in his final match for Wildeklaar Griquas this weekend, against the Sharks in Durban, before taking up a playing contract at Roma in Italy. Krause will be playing in his 96th match for Griquas, after also playing 29 games for Border between 2002 and 2003. The 26-year-old former SA Sevens star has played a total of 87 Absa Currie Cup matches - 73 for Griquas and 14 for Border.

Absa Currie Cup log:

Sharks 52

Vodacom Blue Bulls 49

Xerox Lions 41

Vodacom Free State Cheetahs 37

Vodacom WP 36

Wildecklawer Griquas 19

Boland Cavaliers 13

Valke 13

Weekend fixtures:

Friday, October 3:

Vodacom Blue Bulls v Valke

Kick-off: 7.10pm, Live on SuperSport 1/CSN

Saturday, October 4:

Vodacom Free State Cheetahs v Boland Cavaliers

Kick-off: 3pm, Live on SuperSport 6

Sharks v Wildecklawer Griquas

Kick-off: 3pm, Live on SuperSport 1/Mnet

Vodacom Western Province v Xerox Lions

Kick-off: 5.05pm, Live on SuperSport 1/Mnet

Weekend teams:

Vodacom Blue Bulls v Valke:

Blue Bulls: 15 Zane Kirchner, 14 Tiger Mangweni, 13 Stephan Dippenaar, 12 Wayne Julies, 11 Rocco Jansen, 10 Burton Francis, 9 Heini Adams, 8 Dewald Potgieter, 7 Pedrie Wannenburg, 6 Deon Stegmann Wilhelm Steenkamp (captain), 4 Juandre Kruger, 3 Ruan Vermeulen, 2 Chiliboy Ralepelle, 1 Jaco Engels.

Replacements: 16 Bandise Maku, 17 Dean Greyling, 18 Fudge Mabeta, 19 Jacques Burger, 20 JP Joubert, 21 Francois Brummer, 22 Stefan Watermeyer.

Valke: 15 Jeffrey Perkins 14 Frank Wagenstrom, 13 Johan Jackson, 12 Franco Booysen, 11 Poerie van

Rooyen, 10 Hanno Coetzee (captain), 9 Gerrie Odendaal, 8 Sean Plaatjies, 7 Thabo Mamojele, 6 Gert Lubbe, 5 Nico Luus, 4 Wouter Moore, 3 Dewald Coetzee, 2 Jody Jeneker, 1 Zane Killian.

Replacements: 16 Ryno Barnes, 17 Gavin Whittingham, 18 Dupi du Preez, 19 Reg Muller, 20 Freddie van Zyl, 21 Daan-Roux van Coller, 22 Dewald Pretorius.

Vodacom Free State Cheetahs v Boland Cavaliers:

Cheetahs: 15 Bevin Fortuin, 14 Eddie Fredericks, 13 JW Jonker, 12 Meyer Bosman, 11 Jongi Nokwe, 10 Jacques-Louis Potgieter, 9 Tewis de Bruyn, 8 Duanne Vermeulen, 7 Juan Smith (captain), 6 Heinrich Brussow, 5 Barend Pieterse, 4 David de Villiers, 3 Kobus Caldo, 2 Richardt Strauss, 1 Wian du Preez.

Replacements: 16 PW van Vuuren, 17 Coenie Oosthuizen, 18 Nico Breedt, 19 Schalk van der Merwe, 20 Jandre Blom, 21 Hennie Daniller, 22 Kabamba Floors.

Boland: 15 Justin Peach, 14 Deon Scholtz, 13 Piet van Zyl (captain), 12 Dewey Swartbooi, 11 Danwel Demas, 10 Elgar Watts, 9 Marnus Hugo, 8 David Hendricks, 7 Josh Strauss, 6 Zolani Mofu, 5 Nico Esterhuysen, 4 Cecil Kemp, 3 Jacobie Adriaanse, 2 Pieter Wium, 1 Janro van Niekerk.

Replacements: 16 Clemen Lewis, 17 Jean Botha, 18 Johan Peacock, 19 Angelo Brinkhuis, 20 Neil Papi, 21 Hein Myburgh, 22 Lionel Cornelius.

Sharks v Wildeklaar Griquas:

Sharks: 15 Stefan Terblanche, 14 Odwa Ndungane, 13 Adrian Jacobs, 12 Francois Steyn, 11 JP Pietersen, 10 Frederic Michalak, 9 Ruan Pienaar, 8 Ryan Kankowski, 7 Keegan Daniel, 6 Jacques Botes, 5 Johann Muller (captain), 4 Steven Sykes, 3 Jannie du Plessis, 2 John Smit, 1 Tendai Mtawarira.

Replacements: 16 Bismarck du Plessis, 17 Deon Carstens, 18 Albert van den Berg, 19 Jean Deysel, 20 Rory Kockott, 21 Bradley Barritt, 22 Waylon Murray.

Griquas: 15 Conrad Barnard, 14 Egon Secons, 13 Alwyn Hollenbach, 12 Riaan Viljoen, 11 MJ Mentz, 10 Naas Olivier, 9 Sarel Pretorius, 8 Gareth Krause (captain), 7 Stephan Gerber, 6 Rohan Kitshoff, 5 Jacques Lombaard, 4 Wayne van Heerden, 3 Bees Roux, 2 Hans van Dyk, 1 Steph Roberts.

Replacements: 16 Dean Hopp, 17 Ruaan du Preez, 18 Brendon Snyman, 19 Tyrone Holmes, 20 Dougie Helmuth, 21 Wouter Watermeyer, 22 Gavin Passens.

Vodacom Western Province v Xerox Lions:

Western Province: 15 Conrad Jantjes, 14 Joe Pietersen, 13 Sireli Naqelevu, 12 Jean de Villiers (captain), 11 Wylie Human, 10 Peter Grant/Percy Montgomery, 9 Ricky Januarie, 8 Luke Watson, 7 Franco Louw, 6 Schalk Burger, 5 Andries Bekker, 4 Adriaan Fondse, 3 Brian Mujati, 2 Schalk Brits, 1 Wicus Blaauw.

Replacements: 16 Deon Fourie, 17 JC Kritzinger, 18 Schalk Ferreira, 19 AJ Venter, 20 Bolla Conradie, 21 Peter Montgomery/Gio Aplon, 22 Morgan Newman.

Lions: 15 Louis Ludik, 14 Michael Killian, 13 Jaque Fourie, 12 Doppies la Grange, 11 Trompie Nontshingane, 10 Earl Rose, 9 Jano Vermaak, 8 Ernst Joubert, 7 Justin Wheeler, 6 Cobus Grobbelaar (captain), 5 Franco

van der Merwe, 4 Anton van Zyl, 3 Ross Geldenhuys, 2 Willie Wepener, 1 Heinke van der Merwe.

Replacements: 16 Ethienne Reynecke, 17 Lawrence Sephaka, 18 Jannes Labuschagne, 19 Wilhelm Koch, 20 Chris Jonck, 21 Louis Strydom, 22 Jaco Van Schalkwyk.

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