

Stormers and Cheetahs at Vodacom Super 14 crossroads

The Vodacom Stormers and the Vodacom Cheetahs find themselves at the crossroads as the 2009 Vodacom Super 14 goes into its fifth round this weekend.

The two local sides have had disappointing starts to the season and will need morale boosting wins at the weekend if they are to turn things around.

The Stormers, with three losses from four starts, host the Auto & General Lions at Newlands in Cape Town at 17h00 on Saturday.

They will face a Lions team that will be as hungry for a result as they are and which is well rested after its bye weekend. There have been positive signs in all three of their defeats, most recently against the Bulls last week, but the consensus is that the Stormers need an 80-minute performance.

More importantly, they need a win in their final match at home before embarking on a tough five-week tour that sees them face the Crusaders, Waratahs, Brumbies, Hurricanes and Highlanders.

Coach Rassie Erasmus has retained Willem de Waal at flyhalf and made three changes to his starting XV. Fijian winger Sireli Nakelevuki returns to the run-on team in place of Tonderai Chavhanga, who is on the bench.

Schalk Burger and Adriaan Fondse are back with Francois Louw and AJ Venter reverting to the bench. JD Moller is back from injury and will be used from the bench.

The Cheetahs, who are without a win in four matches, have a tough assignment against the Blues in North Harbour on Friday (08h35 SA time).

Although they have suspended wing Rene Ranger back, the Blues remain injury-hit. Flank Josh Blackie and wing Paul Williams have been added to a long injury list that already includes Rudi Wulf, Benson Stanley, Tasesa Lavea and Anthony Boric.

This could benefit the Cheetahs who have reverted to their strongest available line-up for the clash.

Coach Naka Drotske has made six changes from the side that went down against the Hurricanes last week. Danwel Demas returns in place of Bjorn Basson on the wing, first choice centres Meyer Bosman and Corr Uys replace Hanno Coetzee and Piet van Zyl and first choice scrumhalf Tewis de Bruyn is back in place of Sarel Pretorius.

In the pack, Nico Breedt replaces David de Villiers at lock and Adriaan Strauss starts at hooker ahead of his namesake Richardt, who is on the bench.

The Sharks will be looking to extend their unbeaten run to five when they face a much changed Reds outfit in Brisbane on Saturday (11h05 SA time).

The Sharks have been playing with confidence that has seen them record back-to-back wins in New

Zealand. Assistant coach Chris Boyd says the team is yet to play its best rugby.

“We are confident because we've gained points, but we haven't performed to our potential,” he said. “So what's driving us probably more than anything else is not so much the confidence but the knowledge that if we are more accurate in our execution and option-taking, we'll play better than we have and that striving for good performances is what will keep motivating the team.

Boyd added that the Sharks will have their work cut out on Saturday. “The Reds are a dangerous side, they can play, they're a young side and I think Phil Mooney has got them going pretty well - we certainly won't be taking them lightly.”

The Reds have made seven changes for the match at Suncorp Stadium. Prop Ben Daley gets his first chance in the starting XV with an injury to Greg Holmes, while talented Blair Connor has earned a start on t wing.

Uncapped wing/fullback Rod Davies, prop Jack Kennedy and Brisbane-born Highlanders recruit Ezra Tayl (lock/flank) move onto the bench after promising displays in the Reds 2nd XV.

Coach Phil Mooney says a win will be crucial ahead of his team's bye weekend next week.

“Mathematically we need to win to get back up with the pack,” he said. “The way the competition has been the moment, everyone seems to be beating each other, so you're only stringing a couple of wins away from being back.”

The high-flying Waratahs, one of three unbeaten teams at this stage, have a tough away assignment against the Brumbies in Canberra on Friday (10h40 SA time).

The Brumbies are back after their bye weekend and will be looking to get back on the winning track after a loss to the Force in their previous match. They will also be vying for their 100th victory in Super Rugby.

The Brumbies have made one change to their pack and re-arranged their backline. Blindside flanker Peter Kimlin gets his first start after coming off the bench for the first three matches while Tyrone Smith also receives his first run-on appearance at inside centre. Smith's inclusion allows Wallaby captain Stirling Mortlock to revert to his more familiar role of outside centre with utility back Adam Ashley-Cooper shifting to the wing. Josh Holmes will also start at scrumhalf against his former team.

The Waratahs are unlikely to make changes to their side but coach Chris Hickey has drafted loose forward Luke Doherty and prop Jeremy Tilse into the squad as cover for Wycliff Palu and Al Baxter who are carrying injuries.

Hickey is expecting a similar clash to what his team had last week against the Reds.

“The all-Australian matches hold a certain level of intrigue and passion, and that will be there again on Friday. Canberra Stadium is one of those really good grounds to play footy at; the crowd provides a great atmosphere and we're looking forward to the challenge of getting down there and putting our best foot forward,” he said.

Defending champions the Crusaders will be without inspirational captain Richie McCaw as they try to avoid fourth successive defeat when they face the Force in Christchurch on Saturday (06h30 SA time).

McCaw's knee injury sustained against the Highlanders will keep him out for around a month. The champions also have injuries to wings Jared Payne (ankle) and Kade Poki (ankle) as well as centre Casey Laulala (shoulder).

Coach Todd Blackadder is hopeful of having experienced fullback Leon MacDonald, who had an injured shoulder, back in time for the match.

After a good start, the Force slipped up against the Chiefs last week and will be relishing a scrap with the wounded champions. Coach John Mitchell has warned that the Crusaders will be desperate for victory to keep their hopes alive.

"History shows they don't often suffer repeat losses and they'll be throwing everything at us. What's important is that we respond with the same urgency and finish our tour with a strong performance after our result in Hamilton", Mitchell said.

The significance of the Chiefs win over the Force last week will be put into perspective when the Hamilton-based team travels to Invercargill to play the Highlanders on Saturday (08h35 SA time).

After three consecutive losses the Chiefs may well have turned the corner. A good win against a struggling yet resilient, Highlanders team would send out a strong signal that the Chiefs may well live up to their pre-tournament billing as title contenders.

For more, visit: <https://www.bizcommunity.com>