

Tonga carry the Threat but Argentina carry the day

Rugby fans at a sunny Leicester City Stadium were served up a treat in the first ever clash between Argentina and Tonga as the Rugby World Cup bandwagon rolled into town.

Tonga looked to carry the momentum from their victory over Namibia into today's game, but it wasn't to be, as they went down by 45 points to 16 against a convincing Argentinian side.

Tonga had named their oldest ever side to take to the pitch. Off the pitch rumours swirled of the Argentine Football World Cup winner Diego Maradona being in the stadium. Therefore, the obvious line to be used in the press box was one about 'handling errors.'

Stirring anthems and Tonga's Haka, Sipi Tau were matched by Tonga immediately taking the game to the opposition. Tonga looked bright from the start, penetrating the Argentinian defence with strong running coming from the likes of Telusa Veainu, Vunga Lilo and Fetu'u Vainikolo.

Only six minutes in, and they were ahead after a period of fast running rugby. With some excellent passing combinations they sliced open the Argentinian defensive line and were then able to move the ball out wide for Kurt Morath to go over and give the Tongans an early advantage. The conversion attempt by Morath ricocheted off the post and no further points were added.

Tonga continued to go through the phases looking for mismatches and getting over the gainline. Ikahe Tahi were clearly fired up for the game, personified by Centre Siale Piutau running 20m to congratulate all his pack individually in gaining a turnover. It could have been better for the Tongans on 11 minutes Takalua almost doubled the lead after a quick, counter-attacking piece of play by the Tongan backline but the Newcastle Falcon dropped the ball just a couple metres short of the line under the challenge of an Argentinian player.

You would expect the Pumas to have a significant period of play and so it proved in the mid part of the half. A penalty from Sanchez was rapidly followed by two tries from Tuculet and Imhoff. The first after a strong burst by Herrera whilst Imhoff's was easy on the eye having been made from Argentina's own half. Another penalty on 26 minutes suddenly put Tonga 15 points behind and looking a little ragged, giving a number of turnovers.

Imhoff and Tuculet continued to combine well for Argentina, but Tonga began to slowly find their way back. Firstly, through a penalty on 32 minutes and then through a passage of play that will long be remembered after this World Cup. A series of phases which were spellbinding, resulted in the Tongan prop Soane Tonga'uiha securing five points after an offload by Telusa Veainu.

Before the majority of the crowd had even sat back down in their seats, both sides had converted penalties to make the score 23-16 after the restart. Argentina began to kick Tonga out of the game with two penalties, kicked by Nicolas Sanchez who scored a total of 25 of Argentina's 45 points earning him the Man of the Match title. However, it was the Tongan kicker, Kurt Morath, who

wasn't as clinical as hoped in front of the posts adding afterwards "It wasn't a typical day with the boot, but you can't be 100% all the time".

Still the Tongan play was exciting and looked promising with their defence working together to keep out the Argentine attack and closing them down before they could get going. At times, the defence were a bit too keen and were penalized for players straying offside. Despite Tonga's exciting bursts it was Argentina who began to take control. They ran in another two tries to secure the bonus point victory, and with it all but ending Tonga's hope of reaching the quarter finals.

Argentina just had time for one final try as the clock turned red, through Santiago Cordero, and the ever-present Sanchez capping off a great afternoon with the boot to slot home his eight kick of the game.

It was clear to see the disappointment on the Tongan faces after the game, and the captain Nili Latu summed it up;

"We came into the game believing we could win it, but composure let us down. We wanted to get points from the kick off and felt we were in the game until the 60th minute. Our confidence was building from the start and the early kicks. Argentina are one of the top teams in the world and we will take a lot of confidence from this game. We will continue to stick together, regroup and come back twice as hard against the All Blacks".

The score of 45-16 looks a little one-sided but certainly didn't reflect Tonga's enterprise, who kept up with the high tempo of the Argentinian game. The players will have plenty of positives to build on for their final pool game against the World Champions.

By The Reporters' Academy