

Samoa pay the Penalty as Japan hold all the cards

The English town of Milton Keynes is still known as a 'new' town having being purpose built in the late 1960s. The record crowd of 29,019 watching this crucial Pool B game between Samoa and Japan in the relatively new Stadium, MK were firmly behind the newly appointed darlings of this World Cup, Japan.

New town, new stadium, new record crowd and whilst there's not been exactly a new order established at this tournament; Japan's momentous victory against South Africa certainly has inspired both on and off the pitch. The days of eighty and a hundred point victories seem distant.

A must-win game for both sides put added pressure on the players going into this game, and it was the Japanese who handled it better, with a 26-5 win over the South Pacific Islanders.

The early exchanges saw Samoa's backs, Tuilagi and Nani-Williams make breaks. Tuilagi being no surprise to Japan with a number of their players having played against him. His England international brother Manu, looking on with the Samoan contingent in the crowd.

Sadly, for Samoa it would be a while before they threatened again.

This was on the mind of Samoa's coach, Stephen Betham, commenting after the game: "We were disappointed not to have commanded ourselves better".

Japan settled well and started to produce controlled and consistent play which culminated in Yamada cutting in from the right wing beginning a move that ended in the opposite corner with Full Back Goromaru going over. Play was brought back to an earlier advantage and Japan's full back Goromaru took full advantage and slotted home an easy penalty right in front of the posts. Goromaru then had a chance to double Japan's lead and although his kick was hooked wide, Japan continued their domination.

Only 6 minutes had gone, but this was a warning across the bows for Samoa.

Japan continued to maintain control and were the more patient. Nevertheless, Nanai-Williams showed his skill and verve for counter attacking at the few opportunities he was presented with. The number 15 has made a promising start to his international career.

The game was probably won and lost within the first twenty minutes, with Japan showing the more discipline. Then came the tell-tale factor of the game with two yellow cards in four minutes for Faifili Levave and Sakaria Taulafo, Samoa found themselves down to thirteen and light on numbers in the pack, resulting in them not being able to get out of their own half for the following fifteen minutes, requiring a huge defensive effort from the players on the pitch.

Levave was shown a yellow card for a no arm tackle. Just three minutes later Samoa's prop Taulafo followed his teammate to the bench after taking down a Japanese player in the air.

With two men down Samoa produced a series of incredible defensive moves along their own line whilst sacrificing Tuilagi for Afatia to help man the defences.

They managed to forge a couple of attacks of their own but with only thirteen, they were struggling to gain the width to make any impact.

On the 23 minute mark the stout defence was breached with Samoa conceding a penalty try after collapsing the scrum. Once again, Goromaru easily slotted home in front of the posts to put Japan 10 points clear.

The first half continued the same way with Japan dominating possession, forcing handling errors from the Samoans, with penalties given away at the breakdown. There was an official warning about breaking the offside line repeatedly. However, the real body blow for the Pacific islanders came on the stroke of half time. The Japanese began to grow in confidence, and were providing some big 'hits' of their own. Their patience paid off as the clock turned red on the first half, they went over through Yamada after a missed tackle on the sideline. Goromaru again adding the two points, leaving the score at 20-0.

The statistics told their own tale with Japan having 75% of the territory and Samoa conceding nine penalties to Japan's three. Most telling was that all of those penalties were conceded by Samoa in their own half.

As Samoan Centre Johnny Leota commented after the game;

"Discipline definitely discipline was the problem. Maybe the boys were too up for it, they knew it was a game we needed to win, it doesn't give us an excuse to make those mistakes though."

Whilst the Samoan players were searching for improvement in the second half, credit to the Japanese side for the quality of their performance.

However, the second half continued as the first half finished, Goromaru adding another penalty to take the score to 23-0 and taking his kicking success to five from a possible six.

Nevertheless, the crowd were soon on their feet as by necessity, the Pacific islanders began to throw the ball across the line in an effort to force the Japanese defence. Perez was notable on a couple of occasions in breaking from his own twenty two. Perenise, Matu'u and Afatia replaced the front row for Samoa in an effort to gain additional impetus.

After another penalty from Goromaru, came something for the Samoan faithful to cheer about, with a fast break, effortlessly turning defense into attack. Perez slipped through a Leitch tackle on 64 minutes to score a quick, well-manufactured try. Perez was rewarded for his earlier efforts after sustained pressure and attractive rugby from Samoa. It was clearly not their day as the resulting conversion hit the upright. Tusi Pisi playing alongside his brother Ken continued to show glimpses of skill in breaking the line but in a scrappy last 10 minutes, Samoa had their third yellow card of the game with Lock Filo Paulo binned for not rolling away. The sad figure of Paulo crouched on the touchline after being yellow carded summed up Samoa's day.

Japan carried the day 26-5 and their progress in this tournament will only add to the interest in the country of the 2019 hosts.

As for Samoa it's easy to forget that they numbered almost half the caps of Japan and indeed, it's only just over a year since the Brave blossoms broke into the World's top ten.

Tim Nanai-Williams once again showed flashes of what he is capable of at this level in his fourth test. His was a realistic view which also reflected his excitement at representing his country;

"They were just too good for us on the day, they came firing when the whistle went off, we couldn't stop the momentum. I'm soaking up every opportunity I have for the Manu boys. I hope I have done the jersey proud and done the family proud. That's all I can do at the moment, hold my head up high, play to the best my abilities showcase my skills on the big stage. We have to soak it up and pick ourselves up for next week."

Nanai- Williams is a potential new shining light for Samoa and for those thousands of fans back in Samoa who follow the 'People's Team' well, tomorrow is a new day.

By The Reporters' Academy

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