

New Zealand Maori v Japan Preview

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Saturday, 28 June 2008 McLean Park, Napier, NZ.

Kick-off: 2:35 PM local NZ time (11:35 AM Japan time.) Referee: Carlo Damasco (Italy)

Recent encounters: this is the first time Japan and the Maori have met. The Junior All Blacks represented NZ rather than the Maori in the first 2 years of this tournament. Following is a list of Japan v JABs games. JABs 51 d Japan 3, 24 June 2007, Tokyo, Pacific Nations Cup. JABs 38 d Japan 8, 24 June 2006, Dunedin, Pacific Five Nations. JABs 55 d Japan 31, 19 May 1974, Auckland. Japan 23 d JABs 19, 3 June 1968, Wellington.

Preview The full Japan national side travels to New Zealand for the first time in two years and the first time under New Zealand born head coach John Kirwan. Two years ago, under Frenchman Jean-Pierre Elissalde Japan lost 38-8 to the Junior All Blacks in Dunedin in the Pacific Five Nations tournament, the precursor to the present Pacific Nations Cup before Australia A joined in 2007. In 2007 the JAB beat Japan 51-3 in Tokyo. For 2008, the Maori replaced the Junior All Blacks as the New Zealand side in the tournament and Japan will face this side for the very first time.

A lot has happened in the interceding two years and there are very few survivors on either side from the Dunedin clash. Hoani MacDonald and Tamati Ellison were on the bench that day for the JAB, while in the Japan side Hitoshi Ono, Tomoaki Taniguchi, Takashi Kikutani, Toshizumi Kitagawa, Hare Makiri, Shotaro Onishi and Kosuke Endo were part of the XXII. Ono was captain on that occasion.

For this encounter, JK has made a number of changes to the line-up after relatively stable selections over the first three rounds of the PNC. JK is using the depth of his squad which will also give more players valuable exposure to international level rugby, especially in the demanding New Zealand environment.

Regular captain and No8 Takuro Miuchi has been rested with the captaincy role going to tight head prop Tomokazu Soma. Soma recently captained Japan against Kazakhstan in Almaty and as the elder statesman in this XXII he will be looked at for guidance from the younger players. Also in the front row, Yuta Inose is back as loose head prop after starting the first three rounds on the bench and he is joined by hooker Taku Inokuchi for his first run-on start in the PNC. The Toyota pairing of Tomoaki Taniguchi and Toshizumi Kitagawa make up the second row while there is a new look back row. NZ-born lock Luke Thompson is back in the national side for the first time since the Rugby World Cup, though he will start as blind side flanker for the first time in a test. Meanwhile Hare Makiri retains the No7 jersey for the fourth test in a row and Ryu Koliniasi Holani is at No8 to complete the all foreign born back row.

In the backs, World Cup halfback Tomoki Yoshida starts in the run-on side with Fumiaki Tanaka dropping back to the bench. James Arlidge is at five-eight for his eighth test in a row after starting in all 7 previous tests played so far this season for Japan in the crucial play-making position. He can also be expected to be given the goal kicking duties, as has been the case this season. Hiroto Onozawa has been rested from the wing for the first time this season with his place on the left flank taken by Christian Loamanu. Tongan-born Loamanu is in the starting line-up for the first time this season after starting from the bench in the previous three PNC rounds. Kosuke Endo, who recently agreed to terms to play with Canterbury in the Air New Zealand Cup later this year, retains his place on the right wing. Shotaro Onishi and Yuta Imamura are back as the centre pairing while versatile Bryce Robins will start at fullback.

NEC's Naonori Mizuyama is again the back-up hooker while Yosuke Ikegaya is the reserve prop. Koji Shinozuka can cover the second and back rows while Yoshitaka Nakayama will cover the back row positions as needed. Tanaka is the reserve halfback while Shaun Webb and Hiroki Yoshida will cover the outside back positions. There are also a number of back-up goal kicking options with Onishi, Webb and Hiroki Yoshida regular kickers at club level.

Across the board, JK has chosen a big and bulky squad in an attempt to counter the size and expected physicality of the Maori side. The XXII contains seven overseas born players, including five from New Zealand and two from Tonga. For the Maori, coach Donny Stevenson has also used the depth in his squad to try to keep players fresh and cover injuries. Co-captain and centre Tamati Ellison is joined in the starting line-up by younger brother Jacob although the latter will play at prop. The other co-captain, Liam Messam, will start at No8 this week.

Although there is not a lot of test level experience in this Maori side, Piri Weepu is one of only a few capped players, most of the Maori play across the five New Zealand Super 14 sides and this will set the challenge for the Japanese team. The likes of Messam, Ross Filipo, Hoani MacDonald and the Waldrom brothers in the forwards along with Weepu, Ellison, Shannon Paku and Hosea Gear in the backs will provide stiff opposition on home soil for the Japanese challenge.

Adding incentive for the Maori players is the possibility of an All Black spot given injuries to the likes of Richie McCaw and Ali Williams. After tests against Ireland and England the All Blacks have this weekend off and so coach Graham Henry and his staff can be expected to closely scrutinise Maori form in this match.

Other Round 4 Games

Tonga v Samoa

Saturday, 28 June 2008

Teufaiva Stadium, Nuku'alofa.

Referee: Ian Smith (Aus)

'Ikale Tahi Tonga

1- Semisi Telefoni, 2- Ephraim Taukafa, 3- Tonga Lea'aetoa, 4- Josh Afu (Reds), 5- Paino Hehea, 6- Hale Pole Tu'u'hoko, 7- Nili Latu captain (NEC), 8- Samiu Vahafolau, 9- Soane Havea, 10- Pierre Hola (Kobe), 11- Mani Vakaloa, 12- Epeli Taione, 13- Sukanaivalu Hufanga, 14- Samisoni Pone and 15- Seteleki Lu'u'au.

Reserves: 16- Viliami Ma'asi, 17- Kisi Pulu, 18- Milton Ngauamo, 19- Enele Taufua, 20- Fangatapu 'Apikotoa, 21- Hudson Tonga'u'ia, and 22- Vungakoto Filimone Lilo.

Squad members not used: Pat Boone, Tevita Fifita (Yokogawa), Lotu Filipine (IBM), Makoni Finau, Samiu Ika, Emosi Kauhenga (Ricoh), Sione Lavaka, Metui Maile, Sateki Mata'u, Tupou Palu, Soane Patita, Sione Piukala, Vaea Poteki, Sione Timani, Toma Toke, Sione Mone Tu'ipulotu, Isileli Matakaiongo Tupou and.

Head coach: Quddus Fielea.

Manu Samoa

1- James Johnstone, 2- Loleni Tafunai, 3- Simon Lemalu, 4- Filipino Levi captain, 5- Kane Thompson, 6- Semo Sititi, 7- Alafoti Faosilivia, 8- George Stowers (World), 9- Uale Mai, 10- Eliota Sapolu-Fuimaono, 11- David Lemi, 12- Anitele'a Tuilagi, 13- Henry Fa'u'afili, 14- Esera Lauina and 15- Gavin Williams.

Reserves: 16- Hiroshi Tea, 17- Ati Olive, 18- Daniel Leo, 19- Jonathon Fa'amatuainu, 20- Notise Tauafao, 21- Roger Warren and 22- Gasolo Salima.

(Extended) Squad members not used: Ati A'a, Ki Anufe, Alapasa Cordtz, Jeremiah Fatialofa, Dominic Gabriel, Census Johnstone, Reupena Levasa, Lolo Lui, Taligatuli Moala, Samasoni Moala, Luti Pese, Ruperake Petaia, Junior Poluleuligaga, Muliufi Salanoa, Bell Sasulu, Neli Sasulu, Peni Sapau, Mahonri Schwalger, Chad Slade, Raymond Stowers, Solomona Tavita, Iosefa Tekori, Evile Telea, Paletuatoa Toelupe, Henry Tuilagi, John Vui.

Head coach: Taula Lepale Niko Palamo.

Tonga is playing the first of two home games to finish off the 2008 Pacific Nations Cup and the island nation will be hoping that the home ground advantage can get them across the line for their first win of the tournament. Samoa too has lost all three opening games and so this promises to be a fiercely fought contest in order to avoid the wooden spoon.

Last year in 2007 in the PNC, Samoa had a resounding 50-3 win in Apia, but then Tonga stunned their neighbours at the Rugby World Cup in France several months later winning their Pool A match 19-15, so revenge will certainly be on the minds of the Samoans this time round.

Australia A v Fiji

Sunday, 29 June 2008.

Ballymore, Brisbane.

Referee: Jonathon White (NZ)

Australia A

1- TBC, 2- Sean Hardman (QLD), 3- Sekope Kepu (NSW), 4- Mark Chisholm (Brumbies), 5- Peter Kimlin (Brumbies), 6- Hugh McMeniman (QLD), 7- Richard Brown (Western Force), 8- Stephen Hoiles (Brumbies), 9- Ben Lucas (QLD), 10-

Daniel Halangahu (NSW) 11- Digby Ioane (QLD), 12- Timana Tahu (NSW), 13- Morgan Turinui captain (QLD), 14- Lachlan Turner (NSW) and 15- Drew Mitchell (Western Force).

Reserves: 16- John Ulugia (Brumbies), 17- Guy Shepherdson (Brumbies), 18- Van Humphries (QLD), 19- Julian Salvi (Brumbies), 20- Brett Sheehan (NSW), 21- Sam Norton-Knight (NSW), and 22- Mark Gerrard (Brumbies).

Squad members not used: Ben Alexander (Brumbies), Al Campbell (Brumbies), Matt Carraro (NSW), Mitchell Chapman (Brumbies), Pek Cowan (Western Force), Scott Daruda (Western Force), Francis Fainifo (Brumbies), Matt Hodgson (Western Force), Josh Holmes (Brumbies), Leroy Houston (QLD), Poutasi Luafutu (QLD), Salesi Ma'afu (Brumbies), Tai McIlsac (Western Force), Patrick Phibbs (Brumbies), Tyrone Smith (Brumbies) and Jerry Yanuyanutawa (Sydney Univ.).

Head coach: Phil Mooney (QLD).

Fiji

TBC

Head coach: Ilivasi Tabua.

For this clash with Fiji, head coach Phil Mooney has kept the same run-on forward pack from the side that defeated Tonga 90-7 in Sydney last weekend. Ben Lucas is back at halfback after recovering from a knee injury with Brett Sheehan moving back to the bench and Patrick Phibbs dropping out of the XXII. Daniel Halangahu swaps with his Waratahs team mate Sam Norton-Knight as starting five-eighth while further out Lachie Turner moves from fullback to the right wing to make way for Drew Mitchell in the starting line-up. Mooney has a lot of class available to choose from with a lot of Wallabies being released from Robbie Deans's squad to play the French over two tests.

Late in the week prop Ben Alexander was called up to the Wallabies squad to replace injured Matt Dunning. His replacement in the starting line-up is to be confirmed.

Last year, Fiji playing at home kept Australia A to a 14-all but this year things are bound to be much tougher playing a far stronger Australian side in Brisbane.