

Maori All Blacks v Lions Report



Lions deliver statement of intent against Maoris

Starting XV against Maoris helps nail down bulk of match-day squad for first Test
Gatland hails players' discipline as key to improved performances as tour goes on



Gerry Thornley
in Rotorua

Maori All Blacks 10
Tries: Messam Cons; McKenzie
Pens: McKenzie

Lions 32
Penalty try: Itoje Cons; Halfpenny
Pens: Halfpenny (6)

Opportunity knocked for the Lions starting XV in Rotorua on Saturday, and in almost every combination and area of the game they grasped both it and the Maori by the scruff of the neck.

In the process they assuredly nailed down the bulk of the team and match-day squad for the first Test next Saturday in Eden Park.

Maybe the weather helped, for the Lions were the rain masters, but even so this was an impressive statement of intent, most obviously from the unrelentingly powerful setpiece play of the pack, but also in the

accuracy of their breakdown work, a thick red line that conceded only one line break.

Maybe you had to be there to fully appreciate the tingling sense of occasion and the way the Lions subdued both a fired up Maori team and the majority in the 28,000 sell-out crowd.

In the first 40 minutes the lead exchanged hands four times, and there was never more than a score between them, and for all but five minutes there was less than three points.

Then the Lions squeezed the life out of a talented Maori side, who possibly did not help themselves by shifting Damien McKenzie and James Lowe to less familiar and more ill-fitting out-half and full-back roles.

For the most part the damage was done up front, and the points accrued in the second half – as so often happens – were in part from the heavy defensive load heaped upon the Maori in the first-half and then increasingly so from the start of the second.

Front-rows
A striking feature of this carefully managed tour is how the three sets of front-rows have operated almost independently. Here the Mako Vunipola, Jamie George and Tadhg Furlong

front-row were again in potent unison as they had been off the bench against the Provincial Barbarians and from the off against the Crusaders. The manner they turned the screw at scrum time, earning the tour's first penalty try, ensured they will start against the All Blacks.

George Krui's game time has matched them almost identically, and alongside him Maro Itoje partnered his clubmate with a monstrous 80 minutes of unrelenting carrying, tackling and clearing out. He has put huge pressure on Alun Wyn Jones for a starting spot.

Combination

The Peter O'Mahony, Sean O'Brien and Toby Faletau combination backed up their cumulative performance against the Crusaders with an even more impressive effort here. O'Brien's work rate was akin to Itoje's in its energy and effectiveness, and ditto Faletau, along with his footwork and restart returns.

They look good to go again next Saturday, with O'Mahony's credentials to captain the first team enhanced not only by his typically gritty performance, but by his captaincy too. As an aside, he developed a good, respectful relationship with Jaco Pyppe, almost referring to him as sir.

The penalty count was 15-4 to the Lions.

"I think we took the legs away from the Maori team in terms of the power we demonstrated up front," said Gatland. "The big difference for us and what's been significant for those two big wins last night

and against the Crusaders was our discipline.

"What's put us under pressure in other games were soft penalties, and giving penalties away. Our penalty count has been 12, 15 and that gives the opposition teams territory and momentum, a platform to attack from lineouts.

"And our discipline was so good last night, apart from one

15-4

Penalty count to the Lions, which Gatland identified as a crucial improvement on earlier games

or two penalties that were avoidable – it was also good against the Crusaders. That's been a significant part in terms of our performance and enabling us to change the game."

Behind the pack not only was Conor Murray at his best, but so too Johnny Sexton. Owen Farrell may well start next Saturday.

"He could have played on Saturday," said Gatland. "If it was a Test match he would have played. We just made a decision that it wasn't worth taking that risk. It's a quad strain that was very high and it's not on his kicking leg – it's on his left leg. I've no doubt that he will be 100 per cent fit for the first test. He will train tomorrow."

Sexton's game was the best out-half performance of the tour. No question. "Good. Good," was how Gatland described Sexton's 80 min-

utes. "As I've said, I thought he started the tour really ropery. I was pretty disappointed with the way he played for Leinster in that semi-final. It was not a typical Johnny Sexton performance, and in the BaaBaas game it didn't go particularly well for him and he seemed to lack a bit of confidence.

"But coming on against the Crusaders and on Saturday, he has come back and played well. Generally his kicking game has been pretty good, he attacked the line, put us into some holes and he played flat too, which was better compared to Damien McKenzie, who tended to play pretty deep. We are really happy with him."

Tandem

Gatland's complaint about the New Zealand tactic of blocking runners off the ball was in the context of the Lions midfield, and the possibility of playing Farrell and Sexton in tandem.

"We could go that way, we could potentially change and

do that during the match as well. We haven't sat down and discussed, and we'll wait til Wednesday. We've got an idea in our heads."

Ben Te'o and Jonathan Davies looked the part, each making the breaks of the night when they were in hard currency (the Lions making three to one), but as Gatland maintained, the back three and the utility back on the bench is still not clear cut, with the Chiefs game providing Elliot Daly with a big opportunity.

That said, it would be no surprise if another combination from last Saturday, that of Anthony Watson, Leigh Halfpenny and, if more on his previous than current body of work, George North, starts the first test as well.

Scoring sequence: 5 mins Halfpenny pen 0-3; 10 mins Halfpenny pen 0-6; 12 mins Messam try, McKenzie con 7-6; 20 mins Halfpenny pen 7-9; 22 mins McKenzie pen 10-9; 33 mins Halfpenny pen 10-12 (half-time 10-12); 44 mins Halfpenny pen 10-15; 51 mins penalty try, Halfpenny con 10-22; 55 mins Itoje try, Halfpenny con 10-29; 70 mins Halfpenny pen 10-32.

MAORI ALL BLACKS: L: Love (Chief), N: Milner-Skudder (Hurricanes), M: Proctor (Hurricanes), C: Ngatai (Chiefs), R: Itoje (Lions), D: McKenzie (Chiefs), T: Kerr-Barlow (Chiefs), K: Hames (Chiefs), A: Dixon (Highlanders), B: May (Hurricanes), J: Wheeler (Highlanders), T: Franklin (Highlanders), A: Ioane (Blues), E: Dixon (Highlanders), L: Messam (Chiefs). **Replacements:** R: Thompson (Highlanders) for Proctor (54 mins), C: Eves (Hurricanes) for Hames (62 mins), W: West (Blues) for McKenzie (67 mins), H: Elliott (Chiefs) for Dixon, M: Renata (Auckland) for May, L: Price (Blues) for Wheeler (all 70 mins), K: Pryor (Blues) for Dixon (72 mins), B: Hall (Blues) for Kerr-Barlow (74 mins). **Sin-binned:** Kerr-Barlow (48-58 mins).

BRITISH & IRISH LIONS: L: Halfpenny (Toulon, Wales), A: Watson (Bath Rugby, England), J: Davies (Scarlets, Wales), B: Te'o (Worcester Warriors, England), G: North (Northampton Saints, England), J: Sexton (Leinster, Ireland), C: Murray (Munster, Ireland), M: Vunipola (Saracens, England), J: George (Saracens, England), T: Furlong (Leinster, Ireland), M: Itoje (Saracens, England), G: Krui (Saracens, England), P: O'Mahony (Munster, Ireland), capt: S: O'Brien (Leinster, Ireland), T: Faletau (Bath Rugby, Wales). **Replacements:** J: McGrath (Leinster, Ireland) for Furlong, I: Henderson (Ulster, Ireland) for Krui (both 60 mins), S: Warburton (Cardiff Blues, Wales) for O'Mahony, E: Daly (Wasps, England) for Furlong (both 65 mins), K: Owens (Scarlets, Wales) for George, K: Sinckler (Harlequins, England) for Itoje (both 65 mins), G: Laidlaw (Glasgow Warriors, Scotland) for Murray, D: Biggar (Ospreys, Wales) for Sexton (both 66 mins). **Referee:** J: Pyppe (South Africa).

Player ratings

By Eamon Donoghue



15 Leigh Halfpenny (Wales)



7 He's yet to miss off the tee during this tour. He was very solid, with ball in hand and in defence, and is likely to retain the jersey for the first Test. Should also retain kicking duties.

14 Anthony Watson (England)



6 A quiet outing with limited opportunities as the Lions kicked or kept things tight more often than not. Did nothing wrong and chased with intent.

13 Jonathan Davies (Wales)



7 He straightened the Lions' running game, and made some great breaks – particularly one in the first half. He looked the most dangerous of the Lions backs.

12 Ben Te'o (England)



8 Warren Gatland singled him out after the game, getting better and better he said. The battering-ram centre has all but secured the 12 jersey for the first Test with another physical, all-action performance.

11 George North (Wales)



5 His place is in doubt, looked short on confidence and hesitant in the contact. Made very little impact, with the chances he did get, and should've done better for the first Maori try.

10 Johnny Sexton (Ireland)



7 Looks to be getting his mojo back. Took the ball right on to the gain line, mixed up his kicking game; he kept things on the front foot and played the conditions excellently. He's regaining his confidence at the right time.

9 Conor Murray (Ireland)



8 The master of box kicks. Played the conditions and took advantage of the host's nerves under the high ball. Gatland will be relieved to have one of his automatic picks come through in one piece.

1 Mako Vunipola (England)



8 A great all-round performance. Powerful and tireless in the loose and strong in the set piece. Played a big role in the penalty try too. Looks like edging Jack McGrath for the first test.

2 Jamie George (England)



7 He headed the Lions' dominance in the scrum. He carried well and was solid in the lineout, despite the testing handling conditions.

3 Tadhg Furlong (Ireland)



8 Excellent come scrum time, dynamic as ever in the loose. Powerful clear outs and carrying, his only negative being the concession of a first half penalty. Without doubt, the starting tighthead.

4 George Krui (England)



8 The English lock is the leader in the line out, and crucial to a dominant Lions set-piece which should be the cornerstone of their challenge against the All Blacks.

5 Maro Itoje (England)



8 An incredible athlete. Itoje showed the strength of his all-round game with seven tackles, constant carries and a great opportunistic try. His understanding with Krui could edge him ahead of Alun-Wyn Jones.

6 Peter O'Mahony (Ireland, capt)



6 What a turnaround since coming in as a late replacement for Jamie Heaslip against England in the Six Nations. Was cool and composed as captain, and his team followed suit with a disciplined performance.

7 Sean O'Brien (Ireland)



7 Went the distance, as he continues to impress with his fitness and energy levels. Strong at the breakdown and carried well. Such a physical presence that he had the Maori unsettled. Should keep the shirt.

8 Taulupe Faletau (Wales)



7 Classy performance from the Welsh number eight. Made yards off static ball, and directed a strong performance from the Lions pack.

Bench

7 The new frontrow of Jack McGrath, Ken Owens and Kyle Sinckler maintained the upper hand in the scrum. Iain Henderson made some powerful carries, while Elliot Daly showed a lot more spark than North when introduced.

Warren Gatland

7 The Lions coach won't select his test team until Wednesday but it's hard to envisage him straying too far from this line-up after they executed his game plan. Not too pretty, but a blueprint on how to get the better of the All Blacks.

Reaction

Murray shines through the rain and mist

'We converted pressure into points, which was really pleasing,' says Munster star

GERRY THORNLEY

Last Saturday night was tailor made for a vintage Conor Murray performance, and he delivered one.

Once again he kicked more than any other player, 10 times in all, and whether stepple box kicks or long touch finders, they were all on the money. As the NZ Herald on Sunday put it, it looks like he punts at a basketball hoop for practice.

But there were also 55 passes, more than twice Tawera Kerr-Barlow and thus any other player on the pitch, and all of them were on the money too, while there were eight carries and six strong tackles all over the park. His reading of the game and innate footballing shone through the rain and mist.

ing behind a dominant, mauling and scrummaging pack, in a febrile atmosphere, in a team wearing red, and led by Peter O'Mahony. Remind you of anywhere Conor?

"A little bit yeah," he said with a laugh. "I'm not sure, I can't quite get the name, but I think it's a bit familiar."

Cup rugby
The point being that it was cup rugby and mightily effective.

"We converted pressure into points, which was really pleasing. I keep going back to the conditions but it's winter down here, and it is going to be difficult, so you adapt to the conditions and you play what you think your strengths are."

"I thought we did that quite effectively and the kicking part is one part of it. The maul and the scrum put us in positions to

kick penalties to touch, and gain territory. I thought it was quite effective and managed well."

And, he said, enjoyable. "You could see it in the lads' body language, that it was really enjoyable. Because the pressure was on us. Any time you lose over here, people tend to get on your back and it was a really good way to respond, and the group is in a good place now."

As for O'Mahony reprising his role as Munster captain in Lions red?

"The usual, sure I've used to him talking the whole time! I thought it was really important that he didn't change. That will stand to him. Suddenly you're named as Lions captain, and maybe that might put a bit more pressure on him, but he was his usual self and he played really well tonight."

"People really respect him around the place. He knows he has a chance of being involved and like every other player he's keeping his head down and



“Any time you lose over here, people tend to get on your back and it was a really good way to respond, and the group is in a good place now”

working, and trying to get the nod."

"I think from playing against him fellas really respect him anyway. He's a hard player, he leads by his actions on the pitch and lads followed him tonight, which was great. It's a massive honour for him and his family,

and I'm delighted for him."

To the notion that the Lions are a divided squad, Murray laughed and said: "Yeah, someone said that didn't they? No, not at all. I think people are talking about the additions to the squad and it all happened in 2013 too, and we were a really tight group."

Fields of Athenry

"Every single player was in the dressing-room a while ago singing the *Fields of Athenry*. We sing one of the songs from all the four countries if we win. So they're just going to buy into it. Everyone will welcome them. It's probably difficult for those lads to come in, but lads seem to have welcomed them really well, and I'm sure they're relishing an opportunity to play for the Lions, and there's massive focus on the group. And there's no divide."

"Right now things are going well but we know, you see the All Blacks the other night and they'll be a massive test so we've got to kick on again."

"But definitely, the fans coming in and the numbers around, the group is getting tighter and we're enjoying playing together. So it's good right now but we've a massive amount to work on throughout the week."

All the signs are that he will be renewing his rivalry with Aaron Smith.

"That would be nice. He's a top player, I've played against him a couple of times and massive respect for him, TJ as well and tonight against Kerr-Barlow. They've a wealth of experience and class at '9."

Murray is in prime form and at the peak of his powers. He says he's happy with where he is, before deflecting the focus onto those around him, and especially in front of him.

"We're gelling really well and we're able to read each other without having to say too much, which is a sign that things are going well."

"Yeah, I feel good about it, I feel fit and feel ready for it, ready for the challenge of the next week or so."



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