

O'Sullivan Hoping for Better Against Tonga

Written by

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You ever start a board game, make a lousy dice throw on the first roll and say: “that was just for practice” ?

Would that we could do that a lot in life. Perhaps, though, it would be a good idea for the USA Men’s National Team to call for a do-over. They got hammered by the England Saxons on Saturday. It was not really even close. Head Coach Eddie O’Sullivan was trying out several players and combinations, and very little clicked at all.

“Despite the disappointing score line against the Saxons we did find out a lot about the players we needed to assess,” said O’Sullivan. “We also got an opportunity to see players in different positions and combinations.”

The assessment, if you look at the side set to play Tonga on Wednesday, wasn’t too pretty. Only Colin Hawley and Scott LaValla return from Saturday’s squad as O’Sullivan makes 13 changes.

“We have made 13 changes for the Tonga game with more experience and familiar combinations throughout the team,” O’Sullivan told RUGBYMag.com. “With Chris Wyles unavailable and Mike Palefau having returned home for domestic reasons, we are also looking at Roland Suniula as a fullback option. As a ranking test it is a game we have targeted to try

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and win. But it will be a tough test as Tonga, like ourselves, are using Churchill Cup as part of their preparation for Rugby World Cup.”

Yes, that’s right. If anyone thinks it’s going to be easier, because it will be easier, they are mistaken. Tonga, which defeated the USA 25-15 in the 2007 World Cup, are no pushovers and will battle relentlessly at the breakdown and not give an inch in any physical confrontation. They also have breakaway speed.

The Eagles will have to be careful, and smart, and can’t treat this game as a way to just exorcize what was a nightmare match on Saturday.

O’Sullivan has tried to be philosophical.

“We are obviously unhappy with the Saxons result,” O’Sullivan said. “We knew we were taking a risk with the team we selected and hoped we would be a lot more competitive. But we made a lot of errors and paid a heavy price on the scoreboard. We needed to see some players in a high pressure situation and also rest players for the ranking test against Tonga, just four days after the Saxons game. That was logic behind the team selection for the first game.”

The result doesn’t bode well for the USA’s depth, but the search continues. As the coach said, he will be trying Roland Suniula at fullback, hoping still to find depth at that position. The front row remains a work in progress (and, by extension, the scrum), but the interior backline, if it performs well Wednesday, could be settling in.

The USA performance had its positives. The first five minutes and the final five, when the Eagles put some good continuity together through the forwards, and produced a Tai Enosa penalty and a well-deserved try for Scott LaValla, were small hooks to hang their hats on.

And even more open play using the forwards produced some positive play. But the backs never clicked, and passes often didn’t find their mark at all, and the Saxons tested the outside defense early, found it wanting, and kept going back to the trough.

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This week, whether the players involved are coming off the Saxons drubbing or just getting started this season, they have to retain the lessons learned in that game.

“The important message we stressed to the players after last Saturday is the mistakes we made were uncharacteristic and very fixable,” O’Sullivan said. “We turned over a lot of ball and frequently abandoned our defensive system. Against Tonga it is important we return to the standards we normally adhere to in test games.”

USA lineup to face Tonga:

15. R.Suniula
14. C. Hawley
13. P.Emerick
12. A.Suniula
11. K.Swiryn
10. N.Malifa
9. T.Usasz
1. M. Moeakiola
2. C. Biller
3. S. Pittman
4. L. Stanfill
5. S. Lavalla
6. I. Basauri
7. T.Clever (C)
8. N. Johnson

Replacements:

16. P.Thiel
17. E.Fry
18. J.Van Der Giessen
19. P.Danahy
20. M.Petri
21. T.Enosa
22. T.Hall