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POOL B GUIDE!



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WHAT DOES IT TAKE TO BECOME A LEGEND?

KEITH WOOD'S RUGBY WORLD CUP POOL B GUIDE



ROMANIA

Key players: There were some surprise inclusions - and omissions in the Romania squad and they will travel to France with several members of their pack boasting Top 14 experience, including former Bayonne flanker André Gorin.

RWC History: Romania competed in every Rugby World Cup from 1987 - 2015. They recorded one win in 1987, 1991, 1999, 2003, 2007 and 2015. They lost all pool matches in 1995 and 2011.

World Ranking (at time of print): 19

Keith Wood's prediction: Ireland kick off their 2023 campaign against Romania, confident of getting off to a winning start. Even though the bonus point is expected, this game will be very physical, particularly at scrum time; on past experience, this can be a bit nervy. What kind of team Andy Farrell fields is an interesting question, as Ireland will likely have to go strong against Tonga the following weekend, and full tilt against the Springboks the weekend after that. I expect a comfortable winning margin but not everything going to plan.



TONGA

Key players: Malakai Fekitoa needs no introduction after spending last season at Munster, and 24 All Blacks caps to his name. Equally Charles Piutau, a quality backline operator who played for Ulster and Bristol in the last few seasons, being one of the highest paid players in the game. Clermont's George Moala is another vastly experienced ex-All Black in Tonga's ranks. Ireland need to beware of letting these three have any kind of platform to work off.

RWC History: Tonga have appeared at every RWC aside from 1991; a sensational 19-14 pool win over France in 2011 saw them agonisingly miss out on a quarter final spot by a mere two points.

World Ranking (at time of print): 15

Keith Wood's prediction: Tonga are a relatively unknown quantity, full of line breakers, skill and aggressive contact. If they click they can score from anywhere and I expect a tough encounter before Ireland pull away in the second half.



SOUTH AFRICA

Key players: Where do you even start. The core of the 2019 World Cup winning team remains intact; Eben Etzebeth and Malcolm Marx are in fine form, Munster's RG Snyman is back from two serious knee injuries, and winger Cheslin Kolbe will cause carnage if he's given any kind of space to work with. A complete team from 1-15, plus the 'bomb squad' bench.

RWC History: They stand with New Zealand on three wins and are aiming to be the first country in history to win the Webb Ellis four times.

World Ranking (at time of print): 2

Keith Wood's prediction: A mouth-watering clash awaits under the Stade De France lights - this promises to be one of the best games of the World Cup. South Africa's lack of an experienced out-half turns the game in Ireland's favour, although SA have always timed their peak to perfection at World Cups. A narrow win for Ireland.



SCOTLAND

Key players: Stuart Hogg has sadly retired but there's still no looking past Finn Russell at 10 - the Bath man is capable of moments most players don't even dare to dream of, let alone attempt to pull off. Scotland could also do with Hamish Watson finding the type of form that saw him selected for the 2021 Lions Tour.

RWC History: Scotland reached the semi-finals in 1991, and were an agonising minute away from repeating the achievement in 2015 before being denied by Australia with the last kick of the game. A poor showing in Japan last time out saw them heading home at the pool stage.

World Ranking (at time of print): 5

Keith Wood's prediction: An ideal scenario would see Ireland arrive into this game having already sealed their quarter final place. That would give Andy Farrell the opportunity to rest a couple of players ahead of the knockout stage, but it all depends on what has happened before this game. Scotland will have a big say in this group and their pre-World Cup form against France shows they have the ability to beat anyone on their day. I wouldn't call this game so far out!





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