

Eagle Eye: At the Center of Things

Written by Alex Goff
Tuesday, 12 July 2011 17:55



If there's one position on the USA National Team that is still full of questions, it is the position of center.

In the last two seasons we've seen five different combinations in the USA midfield, and while Head Coach Eddie O'Sullivan might have his preferences, filling out the position for the World Cup looks to be a tough job.

O'Sullivan recently penned an article about what the positions of inside and outside center, and what he expects out of those athletes. It makes for interesting reading, because on the USA National Team, his options don't always fit the mold.

Here, quickly, then, are Eddie O'Sullivan's options at center, based on the players picked in the 50-man World Cup Pool:

Paul Emerick. Once in jeopardy as the #1 man, he appears to be the top guy at outside center now. Hard-runner, strong passer, good defender.

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Tai Enosa. Experimented with as a backup option at fullback, flyhalf and wing, and in fact could step in at any back position exception possibly #12. Has to defend better to be a #13.

Troy Hall. Tested as a flyhalf, but might be better off as a center. In O'Sullivan's article, he says an outside center can be small then the inside, and should be able to kick and pass ... that's Hall.

Thretton Palamo. Will be playing football so this is moot. But he's a guy who is big enough to play inside, and shifty enough and explosive enough to play outside. But it won't be the Eagles who find this out, it will be the Utah Utes football team.

James Paterson. Coming back from injury, he can play outside center, wing or fullback ... if he can play at all.

Junior Sifa. One of the anomaly players. Sifa is small and shifty, but pans out usually as an inside center. Good defender.

Andrew Suniula. Prototypical inside center guy, in that he is big, and physical, and at his best can break through tackles. Can actually kick a bit, too.

Roland Suniula. Despite being Andrew's brother, he is more like Sifa as a player. Not enough raw pace or lateral bounciness to be an outside center.

Kevin Swiryn. Been a wing mostly these days but was a center in college. Still has the ability to play outside center.

Pate Tuilevuka. Has played flyhalf, center and wing for the USA. Deceptively quick and playing a lot of 7s this summer, which is good if he wants to get a spot with the Eagles. He is a big guy who has skills and can be either 12 or 13, but seems to be preferred as an impact sub.

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Seta Tuilevuka. One cap and didn't have a great game. Has had a lot of adapting to do to play for the Eagles, but remains an exciting prospect at 13.

Chris Wyles. Usually thought of as a fullback or wing, Wyles moved back to his old position of outside center at Saracens, and played superbly, helping Saracens to a Premiership title in England. He can run, pass, tackle, and kick (left-footed).

That is a list of 12 players, looking for four or five places, and, ultimately, two starting positions.

Here's what we know about this:

1. Palamo won't be there, as he will be playing football.
2. Hall has a shot (and in fact we could have listed Volney Rouse here, too) but it is a long shot right now.
3. Swiryn will be on the squad ... as a wing.
4. Wyles will be on the squad somewhere ... most likely as the starting fullback, but he could be used at center in the middle of the game or after a late-game substitution. Start at center? Don't rule it out.
5. Emerick and Andrew Suniula look to be a lock right now.
6. James Paterson, like Wyles and Swiryn, could be listed at another position if he makes the team. His big issue is his pec injury. Will he make the team without playing for it? Very hard.
7. O'Sullivan could well decide he wants a different pairing of centers for different games. More than any position, center could be the place where O'Sullivan looks for a specific

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matchup, and a specific combination. It is distinctly possible, then, that we could see Andrew Suniula and Paul Emerick in one game, and Junior Sifa and Seta Tuilevuka in another.

8. What about Mile Pulu? Many think he's as good a center as the USA has. He's not in the World Cup 50, and as we've just shown, there's already a lot of competition.

9. In my opinion, with Wyles and Swiryn and possibly Enosa and Paterson on the team at other positions, and with Palamo not available, and with Andrew Suniula and Emerick at the top of the selection list, it comes down to this: Hall, Sifa, Roland Suniula, Pate Tuilevuka and Seta Tuilevuka training and playing for two spots, with one player being an inside and another an outside.

That's it. Three test matches to make tough decisions, and at center, the decisions come down to five guys fighting for two very, very elusive places on the plane.