

Report suggests one Aussie team to go

ONE Australian Super Rugby team will be cut from next year's competition, according to a South African report quoting Cheetahs boss Harold Verster.

The report on Afrikaans language website Netwerk24 claimed that SANZAAR would reduce the cumbersome five-nation competition from 18 to 16 teams — with one Australian and one South African side to get the chop.

Verster said the Bloemfontein-based Cheetahs had been given assurances that they would be safe, presumably leaving the Port Elizabeth-based Southern Kings in the firing line.

The Force, Rebels and Brumbies are the Australian clubs facing a nervous wait following SANZAAR's meeting in London on Friday.

"All I can say is that we are safe," chief executive Verster reportedly said. "I keep my ear to the ground."

"There is much discussion about the current series and the format and two teams of South Africa and a team of Australia (getting culled).

"There was even speculation that we would return to a Super 12, but my information is that we are going to be reduced from the current 18 to 16 teams, which means the Cheetahs are safe."

The report comes as chief executives of the five Australian Super Rugby teams continue dialogue with the Australian Rugby Union.

The Perth-based Force would be the easiest team for the Australian Rugby Union to axe, given that they currently own and operate them.

The Force have never made the playoffs but are showing some signs of life this season under bright new coach Dave Wessels.

The Canberra-based Brumbies have had off-field troubles in recent times but on the park they are Australia's most successful franchise and have won two Super Rugby titles.

The privately owned Rebels, meanwhile, have made an atrocious start to the 2017 season, suffering humiliating losses to the Blues and Hurricanes.

The Rebels have also never made the playoffs.

Henriques has doubts over quick's Test readiness

HE regards Pat Cummins as a freak, but NSW cricket captain Moises Henriques has questioned whether the Blues pacer is physically ready for the rigours of Test cricket in India.

Cummins, who last week took eight wickets in his first Sheffield Shield match in six years, was called into the Australian squad on the weekend ahead of the third Test after Mitchell Starc was ruled out

for the remainder of the tour with a foot injury.

Allrounder Henriques bowled Cummins, who played his only Test as an 18-year-old in 2011, primarily in six-over spells and said the pacer was in good physical condition.

However Henriques, who has played three Tests in India, said conditions there were a lot harder on the body which tended to pull up more sore be-

cause quicks had to bend their backs a lot more on the grassless wickets.

"I think Pat is a very special bowler, so in terms of skill-wise and if you want someone to play cricket for Australia, I think Pat Cummins is your man," Henriques said on Monday.

"But whether he's ready physically on the back of one Shield game, that's a com-

pletely different kettle of fish.

"There's a number of different factors when it comes into selecting guys to play for Australia in those sorts of conditions.

"It was only one Shield game earlier that he got ruled out and apparently he wasn't ready to play Shield cricket for NSW.

"Now on the back of one Shield game he's ready to play

a Test series in India, that's their (the selectors) call.

"Skill-wise, can he bowl at that level? 100 per cent he can. He's a freak of nature."

The second Test was played in a cauldron-type atmosphere which strained relations between the two teams and Henriques suggested it wouldn't be a good idea for the Indians to rile the normally good-natured Cummins.

TIME TO GAMBLE



Much-maligned Victorian all-rounder Glenn Maxwell is expected to replace the injured Mitch Marsh in the Australian team for the third Test against India in Ranchi starting tomorrow

Pictures: RAJANISH KAKADE and RYAN PIERSE

Maxwell, Cummins tipped to be named for third Test

BEN HORNE

GLENN Maxwell and Pat Cummins are set to come into Australia's XI to battle the pitch of doom in Ranchi.

Injury has forced Australia into two massive changes for the crucial third Test, and selectors look poised to unleash a side with an attacking mindset as its chief motivation. Victory in Ranchi is enough to retain Australia the Border Gavaskar trophy and for that reason there is no reason for Steve Smith's side to leave anything in the tank.

The No.6 position vacated by the injured Mitchell Marsh has been an ongoing conundrum for Australia for years now, but a difficult, dry deck that may only last three days has brought game-changer Maxwell firmly into the box seat.

Maxwell has not played a Test since November 2014 in the UAE, and if he gets across the line it would complete a remarkable return from what was a turbulent summer.

Marcus Stoinis only arrived in India late last night giving him just two days to prepare, whereas Maxwell has been on tour from day one and spent crucial time preparing in Dubai.

Usman Khawaja is also on tour, but his struggles on the sub-continent in the past could see the left-hander struggle against Indian spinner Ravi Ashwin.

On a difficult pitch where



run-scoring could be perilous, Maxwell has the ability to fire off quick lower order runs that

have the potential to change the game.

Meanwhile, Cummins had his Indian visa ready to go a month ago and has declared he has never been more ready for his long-awaited second coming to arrive. Cummins (pictured) admits he was surprised to be called into the side to replace the injured Mitchell Starc, but says he was told weeks ago he was on standby for the tour.

Cricket NSW has argued that Cricket Australia has pushed Cummins' return too quickly, but the 23-year-old believes staying home for Sheffield Shield cricket might have been even tougher on his body than the short-sharp spells he will deliver this week in Ranchi.

"I knew I was on standby for the tour a couple of months ago but really, I thought the bowlers weren't going to bowl too many overs, so I hoped they weren't going to get injured," he said.

"I hadn't really thought about coming over at all.

"They're not great, bowler-friendly wickets for quicks which actually means I won't bowl too many overs.

"From that point of view it was always going to be a plan that was pretty comfortable along with playing some Shield games."

Genia could make early Reds return



Will Genia

WILL Genia could be set for an earlier than expected return to the Reds following the shock merger between Parisian powerhouses Stade Francais and Racing 92.

Genia, the Wallabies halfback, is contracted to Stade Francais for the 2017-18 Top 14 season but player contracts from both French clubs are now up in the air after yesterday's dramatic announcement.

Genia, 29, had previously expressed a desire to return home to Queensland at some stage but the merger could see that happen as soon as next year.

While pairing up with Racing 92 playmaker Dan Carter next season

would hold appeal, Genia remains passionate about the Reds and would strongly consider an offer. A return to the Reds would be a major coup for Australian rugby, on the back of Wasps star Kurtley Beale signing with the Waratahs and Wallabies through till the 2019 Rugby World Cup.

Genia is in Brisbane this week after being given time off by his French club.

Fringe Wallabies halfback Nick Frisby is signed with the Reds through till 2019 but his form has been patchy so far this season. It's understood that Stade Francais and Racing 92 players will enter discussions with the players' union in France this week.

Jones wary of praise from Hansen



Eddie Jones

EDDIE Jones compares the praise England have received from New Zealand coach Steve Hansen to the fairytale of Little Red Riding Hood being deceived by the wolf.

Hansen congratulated the Six Nations champions for retaining their title by downing Scotland 61-21, despite seeing the All Blacks' record of 18 successive Test wins equalled at Twickenham.

The mastermind of the 2015 World Cup triumph insisted England are finally fulfilling their potential, playing the "sort of rugby people want to see," and offered Jones the message of "well done, champ. It's thoroughly deserved, well done." In a frustrating quirk of the

international fixture list, the game's top two teams are being kept apart until autumn 2018 when a seismic showdown is to be staged at Twickenham.

Jones is wary of Hansen's approval, however, as the rival coaches exchange words for the first time since England's rise as a genuine threat to New Zealand's global dominance.

"It's a bit like Red Riding Hood and the wolf when the wolf comes dressed up as the grandmother," Jones said.

If Ireland are toppled in Dublin on Sunday, as well eclipsing the All Blacks' 18-Test milestone Dylan Hartley's men will become only the sixth team to complete back-to-back Grand Slams.