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British and Irish Lions Eye Strong Start Against Australia in First Test at Suncorp Stadium

July 17, 2025

– Categories: General News



The British and Irish Lions enter the first Test against Australia at Brisbane's Suncorp Stadium on Saturday, July 19, with growing confidence after the Wallabies named a side missing key players due to injury. This three-match series has long favored the touring Lions, and recent squad announcements only seem to tip the balance further in their favor.

The British and Irish Lions (B&I Lions), a combined team from England, Ireland, Scotland, and Wales, face an Australian side (Wallabies) notably without their experienced lock Will Skelton and powerful back rower Rob Valetini, both sidelined with calf injuries. Former Lions wing Ugo Monye, speaking to BBC Rugby Union Weekly, emphasized that the absence of these key figures weakens Australia's physical presence and diminishes some of their core strengths. "Without Skelton and Valetini, Australia is underpowered, and it takes away some of their super strengths," Monye explained, adding that the Lions were favorites even before seeing the Wallabies' weakened lineup.

The Wallabies also start rookie fly-half Tom Lynagh, son of Australian rugby legend Michael Lynagh, filling in for regular starter Noah Lolesio. Meanwhile, the Lions have named a star-studded squad featuring some of the best players in world rugby. Notably, Tom Curry has secured the crucial open-side flanker position over strong competition from Wales' Jac Morgan and Ireland's Josh van der Flier. Monye praised Curry's relentless work rate and versatility, calling him "a serious threat at the breakdown" whose mindset and physicality could be decisive.

Alongside Curry, the Lions' back row includes Ireland's Jack Conan at number eight and Tadhg Beirne, who typically plays lock but has been chosen at blind-side flanker over Ollie Chessum. This combination aims to bring a blend of physicality and experience to dominate the set-piece and breakdown battles.

On the Australian side, debutant Nick Champion de Crespigny and Fraser McReight will carry much of the responsibility in the back row. Former Wallabies hooker Stephen Moore noted that McReight is among Australia's "world-class" players who will need to shine if the hosts are to counter the Lions' strength. "The breakdown is going to be key," Moore said, "and if Australia wins there, they will win the game."

Despite their injury setbacks, Australia still boasts an exciting centre pairing in Len Ikitau and Joseph Suaalii, which Monye described as the Wallabies' "X-factor." The Lions, opting for continuity, have selected Scotland's Huw Jones and captain Sione Tuipulotu in midfield, with Tuipulotu recalling a heavy tackle from Suaalii in a recent club match. Monye sees the battle in the centres as pivotal: "Stop the centres, you stop Australia."

While the Lions appear to hold the edge in physicality and depth, Monye cautioned against underestimating the home side. The Wallabies will benefit from the passionate home crowd

and the pressure of playing on familiar turf. Yet, if the Lions come out strong early, the match could quickly become one-sided.

Saturday's kickoff is set for 11:00 BST, with live coverage including BBC Sport's text commentary, radio broadcast on BBC Radio 5 Live, and post-match analysis available on the BBC iPlayer and Rugby Union Weekly podcast. The first Test promises to set the tone for what should be a fiercely contested series in a contest that has historically tested the mettle of both sides.