

In sport, home really is where the points are

THE Bulls' heartbreaking defeat by the Brumbies on Saturday means Australian and New Zealand teams will compete for the Super 15 title next weekend, rather than a South African team having an opportunity to travel to Hamilton to exact some revenge for the Sharks' defeat there in the 2012 final.

While this will be of little consolation to their supporters, there is some kind of silver lining in the result for the Bulls; it means some of the country's top players escape a demanding trans-Indian flight as well as one more high-intensity, bruising Super 15 clash.

They will not have to spend almost two days in airports and aeroplanes for a return trip to New Zealand before many head into the international season, while others begin long Currie Cup campaigns.

This travel issue is unique to the Super 15. I am not aware of another competition in which teams travel across as many time-zones in such a short space of time.

In the US, sports teams occasionally travel across North America, a six-hour flight across four time-zones.

But this pales into insignificance compared to the multiple long-haul flights across 10 time zones faced

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by Super 15 teams.

Perhaps the only comparison is the world sevens rugby series, for which teams effectively fly around the world three times in a five-month period.

In 2012, the Sharks almost pulled off one of the great sporting feats of 'travel endurance' when they flew to Brisbane for a play-off match, then to Cape Town for the semifinal and eventually to Hamilton for that final.

Five long-haul flights within two weeks, perhaps a bridge too far, although athletes will never blame the enormity of this kind of challenge (and nor should they).

However, their ultimate final defeat was perhaps not surprising.

Travel fatigue is not the only adversity faced by a travelling team. Home-ground advantage is a well-known phenomenon in every

sport, with between 55% and 65% of matches being won by the home team. In Super rugby, that figure stands at 61%.

When the home-ground advantage is international (home team welcomes visitors from another country), success rises to almost 66%, which means that the home team is twice as likely to win against long-haul travelling teams.

The reasons behind this are fascinating but, as yet, inconclusive. Aside from travel, theories include increased confidence and territorialism for the home team, familiarity and experience with the facilities, local conditions and fans and, interestingly, sub-conscious bias by referees who appear influenced by home-ground support.

Research has shown that more penalties and yellow cards are given against away teams in Super rugby. Combine this with more leniency towards home teams and you find evidence of bias in decision-making as a result of crowd noise.

It's also possible, with some relatively simple statistical analysis over the history of the tournament, to estimate just how many points this home-ground advantage is worth.

For instance, if a team's average home ground result is a 4-point win, compared to an average 1-point defeat away, then that team enjoys a five-point swing by playing at home.

In Super rugby, using this method, it can easily be calculated that the average 'swing' as a result of playing at home is around 10 points per match — the average Super rugby score is 26-21 in favour of the home team; a 10-point turnaround.

Of course, this is just the average and it does not necessarily determine the result. The simplest way to conceptualise it is to realise that the team that is travelling internationally is about 50% less likely to win its next match than if it was playing at home, because it starts with a virtual handicap of five points.

History shows that travellers can overcome this deficit, but the odds still favour the home team.

For the Brumbies, a second long flight in a week awaits, en route to an away match in another country. Sports science says the Chiefs must be highly favoured. The players will, of course, have other ideas.

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India too good for tame Zim

INDIA wrapped up their one-day series against Zimbabwe at the first opportunity yesterday, as they beat the hosts by seven wickets in the third ODI at the Harare Sports Club.

After bowling Zimbabwe out for 183, with legspinner Amit Mishra claiming 4/47, India needed just 35.3 overs to pass their target as captain Virat Kohli's half-century saw them home.

Kohli finished unbeaten on 68, having adapted perfectly to the slower pace of the wicket in a measured 88-ball innings.

Although Zimbabwe got opener Rohit Sharma cheaply for the third time in the series, Shikhar Dhawan struck 35 from 32 balls to provide India with a solid base.

Sean Williams's 45 was the highest score in a tame batting display by Zimbabwe, who lost both of their openers in the first seven deliveries and were bowled out in 46 overs.

Although Hamilton Masakadza and Brendan Taylor put on 65 for the third wicket, there were no other partnerships to speak of as the Zimbabweans put up another tame showing.

The final two matches of the series will be played in Bulawayo on Thursday and Saturday. — Sapa-AFP

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