

Baloucouné's back in action

By CHRIS JAMES

ROBERT BALOUCOUNE returns to the Ulster side for tomorrow's Champions Cup match against Northampton.

The fit-again Ireland winger will hope to help Dan McFarland's men clinch qualification for the knockout stages with a third successive win in Europe.

Baloucouné, 24, is one of seven changes to the side beaten by Munster last weekend in the URC as Stewart Moore is brought in to partner James Hume at centre, with Andy Warwick, Marty Moore, Kieran Treadwell and Marcus Rea all included in the pack.

Nathan Doak is also in at scrum-half with John Cooney injured. Alan O'Connor will captain the side from the second row.

Baloucouné (above) has been missing for his province since picking up

Northampton Saints v Ulster

Tomorrow, 3.15pm, BT Sport 2

a shoulder injury in the win over Clermont Auvergne last month.

But the postponement of festive URC fixtures against Connacht and Leinster meant he only had to sit out the second Champions Cup victory – over tomorrow's opponents – and that Munster fixture.

He said: "It's never a good time to get injured but I suppose with those games postponed I didn't miss too many games."

"We were disappointed with the Munster result but I think we've made up for that with a good week of training."

ULSTER: M Lowry, R Baloucouné, J Hume, S Moore, E McLroy, B Burns, N Doak, A Warwick, R Herring, M Moore, A O'Connor, K Treadwell, Marcus Rea, N Timoney, D Vermeulen. **Reps:** J Andrew, E O'Sullivan, T O'Toole, S Carter, G Jones, D Shanahan, I Madigan, B Moxham.



CHAMPIONS CUP

Coombes

raider

GAV PONCES LATE

By PAT POWER

GAVIN COOMBES scored a 78th-minute try as Munster came from behind at Castres to make the Champions Cup knockout stages.

The fourth time was the charm as the No8 blitzed over from close range after Tadhg Beirne had won another penalty, which was kicked to touch on the five-metre line.

Munster had earlier blown three penalties to touch, making a mess of the lineout each time.

But Coombes' score made up for those earlier errors.

Thomas Larregain's 28th-minute try was the highlight of a messy but enthralling opening half.

He was the first on the scene when Ben Botica chipped over Munster's solid defensive line.

Jack Crowley had kicked Munster into an 11th-minute lead with a penalty after Santiago Arata had gone off his feet at a breakdown.

Munster quickly settled into a set-piece plan and forced the upper hand. They kept things simple in their own half, kicking for territory cleverly, while Beirne and captain Peter O'Mahony ramped up the pressure on the set-piece and breakdown.

But the Frenchmen were disciplined, giving little away and troub-

Castres.....	13
Munster.....	16

ling the province more than they would have expected. The game had gone ahead in temperatures hovering around zero at Stade Pierre Fabre despite Castres reporting six positive Covid-19 results from routine testing on Wednesday.

Those test results accounted for some of the hosts' 13 changes from the side that beat Stade Français in the Top 14 last Saturday.

The visitors, meanwhile, had made five changes from the side that had downed Ulster last weekend.

Munster fought their way back into the lead in the opening ten minutes of the second half, courtesy of two Crowley penalties.

But they gave away two kickable chances of their own after 55 and 66 minutes. Botica converted both to make it 13-9.

Castres then tried to shut the game down.

They seemed to have played the percentages better than Munster had earlier, until Coombes' late score which was converted by Crowley.

SCORERS — Castres: Try, Larregain, con, Botica, pens, Botica 2 **Munster:** Try, Coombes, con, Crowley, pens, Crowley 3



KEITH AT IT
Keith Earls tries to break down Castres but (below) Gavin Coombes proved the hero



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LET'S CLAW THE TIGERS

By JOHN FALLON

ANDY FRIEND is confident Connacht can get past Leicester Tigers today — and take a step towards reaching the knockout stages of the Champions Cup for the first time.

And while the crowd will be reduced, he feels the fans still have a big role to play as they bid to defeat a Leicester side who beat them by six points at Welford Road last month.

The attendance is capped at 3,000 at The Sportsground but

Connacht v Leicester Tigers

3.15pm, BT Sport 2

head coach Friend — whose side have not played since their 10-8 URC win at home to Munster on New Year's Day — said: "The crowd always have a role."

"They are great for us, they make life uncomfortable for the opposition."

"But it is up to us, too, to do that more than the supporters. Their voice only lifts when we are playing

well. If we're showing our intent in defence as we did against Munster, or intent with the attack on the ball as we have done throughout the season, that will bring their voice which will make it even more uncomfortable for Leicester."

"So if they're not shouting, it's because we're not playing well."

"So we need to play well to hear them. It's going to be a great challenge and that's the beauty of the game of rugby."

CONNACHT: T O'Halloran, J Porch, S Arnold, B Aki, M Healy, J Carty, K Marmion, M Burke, S Delahunty, F Beaham, O Dowling, N Murray, C Prendergast, C Oliver, J Butler. **Reps:** D Heffernan, T Tulmaugh, J Augier, U Dillane, P Boyle, C Blade, C Fitzgerald, T Farrell.



FRIEND ... crowd-pleaser