



UTTLEY ON RUGBY

with
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UTTLEY

Policy of youth is right for England

It's refreshing to see younger players shine

DESPITE the rain and the cold, Dublin was the place to be on Sunday if you were a rugby fan.

I can always remember as a player, the first thing I would do on match-day was to check the weather.

I have to admit my heart sank a little on Sunday when I opened my curtains to find a grey, wet and windy Dublin morning, and I could imagine one or two of the current players having similar thoughts.

Once again we had two teams on this occasion desperate to keep their winning streak going.

The hosts had the great Brian O'Driscoll beginning to fire on all cylinders alongside new tyros like Simon Zebo, the talented winger, and a feisty pack with bags of caps and experience.

So, what were England going to bring to the party?

Well, I was fortunate enough to attend a Q&A the previous evening where the England coaching staff spoke to a group of supporters.

When asked about the relative lack of experience in the England side, Stuart Lancaster responded refreshingly that he

and his staff had a great knowledge of players coming through the system.

They felt confident that, having identified those young players with the talent to play at this level, they needed to give them the opportunity to prove their worth.

To date this would appear to have been a very successful policy, with experienced players like Toby Flood and Dylan Hartley having to spend time on the bench while the likes of Owen Farrell and Tom Youngs hold centre stage.

Once again, this was always going to be a very tight match. The conditions were appalling (I had no desire to be on the pitch at all!), but what a great stadium and gladiatorial atmosphere.

Some people said that what followed was dull and boring. I found it another great example of what the game can offer in terms of a contest.

The France-Wales game the day before was played with the emphasis on holding on to possession, and both teams trying to maintain continuity at the breakdown.

There was more kicking in Dublin, and I thought Alex Goode answered all his critics in the way he dealt with the high ball. The much-vaunted Irish backline were unable to exert any real pressure.

The axis of Ben Youngs and Farrell continues to develop. Youngs prompted and chivvied his forwards. Farrell gave another very accomplished performance and maintained his goal-kicking form.



MAKING AN IMPACT Alex Goode answered his detractors in Dublin

The centre combination of Billy Twelvetrees and Brad Barritt were very solid, and played their full part.

As discussed last week, the introduction of Manu Tuilagi off the bench was a very sound move midway through the second half. Mike Brown, playing out of

position, once again had another very good game.

The only back to disappoint, in my opinion, was Chris Ashton. He had his back to the opposition at times, and basically just seemed to lack the energy and concentration shown by his team-

DEBATE RAGES OVER LIONS CAPTAINCY

DISCUSSION was rampant in Dublin about who might go on this summer's Lions tour to Australia.

And most importantly, who might captain the side.

On that front the unlucky Sam Warburton from Wales has slipped down the rankings as Harlequins captain Chris Robshaw's stock has correspondingly risen.

The return to form of Ireland's Brian O'Driscoll was also finding favour as an experienced senior pro, and one who has participated in both the worst and one of the best Lions' tours.

He knows all about the Lions, their ethos and why this is so important in the professional era. Watch this space.

mates. The forwards laid the foundations for this heroic victory.

Chris Robshaw has really grown into the role of captain, playing at seven. He was simply outstanding, as were Tom Wood and James Haskell.

They neutered the efforts of a talented Irish back three and, as a result, supported by their front five, were consistently able to outplay the opposition at the breakdown.

England's strength off the bench was again emphasised, particularly with the introduction of Courtney Lawes, who made a superb brave tackle at a critical moment.

The frustration this created among the Irish was evident in the citing of Cian Healy.

England were so in control that even the sin-binning of James Haskell did not allow Ireland the opportunity to gain any advantage.

So, for England, can they continue to maintain this form?

They have their last home game with France a week on Saturday.

They are then away to Italy, who cannot be taken for granted, and finally face a mouth-watering clash with last year's champions Wales at the Millennium Stadium.

I am sure that Stuart Lancaster and his team will not be looking so far ahead, though. Making sure they get their preparation and performance right, one step at a time, will be their approach.

A thin line between success and failure



FOR the second week in succession the RBS 6 Nations Championship served up a heady mix of contrasting fortunes and types of matches.

Italy's justifiable expectations of going to Murrayfield for a win were obliterated by a Scottish try-fest which they seemed incapable of matching on the day. The result simply highlights the fine margins between success and failure that exist at this level of the game.

In their previous game against France, Italy played with a sustained level of intensity that the French were unable to contain, despite a ferocious effort in the last few minutes. Playing more on the front foot, decisions went Italy's way,

“ The Scots' belief visibly increased the longer the game went on, in contrast to the laboured Italians

passes stuck and a much-vaunted victory was achieved.

At Murrayfield, maybe they made the mistake of trying to play too much rugby and Scotland showed what damage their back three could do from a turnover situation, even from deep inside their own half. The Scots' self-belief visibly

increased the longer the game went on, in contrast to the increasingly laboured efforts of the Italians.

At Stade de France there was massive pressure on two under-performing teams to gain a first championship victory. What followed was a classic example of modern rugby: a game dictated by the heroic efforts of both teams in defence saw them nullifying repeated attempts to attack with the ball in hand. It was a serious arm-wrestle where the first to blink would lose.

On this occasion it was the French that gave an excellent Welsh attack a smidgeon of room to breathe for a great try in the corner – a confidence-boosting

win for Wales and another frustrating and mystifying loss from the French.

Why was Freddie Michalak (pictured left) not replaced when he was obviously carrying a knock, for instance?

The sound of the French booing their own side indicates the dire straits Philippe Saint-Andre and his team now find themselves in.

The danger now for England is that every team at this level is capable of producing at least one winning performance in the tournament.

English fans will just be hoping that France will not start winning again on their trip to Twickenham in just over a week's time.