

UTTLEY ON RUGBY

with
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RAISING A GLASS TO THIS SEASON'S HEINEKEN CUP

SWITCH Saracens taking on
Racing Metro in Belgium

THERE was so much Heineken Cup rugby on TV last weekend that it was difficult to catch it all and try to maintain a normal life!

One of the games that did grab my attention was Saracens' moving their date with Racing Metro over to

Brussels. It looked like they attracted a decent attendance. They are certainly increasing their brand image, and getting some decent results into the bargain.

A number of players from clubs like Exeter are featuring strongly,

especially after their superb performance at Leinster two weeks ago.

Last weekend's defeat at home to Clermont showed just what depth is needed at the Heineken Cup level, and no matter how well Exeter played they

were just out-gunned by a really top-class team.

Those hard-working teams with smaller squads can make a dent from time to time, but when it really comes down to the crunch they just haven't got enough in the locker.

Ups and downs of halting relegation

IT was interesting to read the recent comments of Sir Ian McGeechan, who has suggested a five-year period where there would be no relegation from an English Premiership expanded from the current 12 to 14 or even 15 teams.

This would allow English players and the national side ultimately to benefit in the same way that the Welsh, Irish, Scottish and southern hemisphere teams currently do by having no promotion or relegation out of their top competitions.

In many ways the measures that Ian is proposing make a lot of sense, but they do leave a lot of issues unresolved.

For example you have this period of five years with no relegation, but what happens after that?

From a parochial perspective a major issue would be when exactly might this system be put in place?

Provided that Newcastle Falcons actually gain promotion this season and are

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up there I would say it is a very good idea!

But if I was an owner of an ambitious Championship side and a block was put on my club's promotion chances I would look to get my money out as quickly as possible.

Therein lies the danger for the game. If they were to be denied that opportunity it would be a classic case of the goalposts being moved halfway through a game, and nobody would want that.

On a wider sporting thread the concept of promotion and relegation is firmly entrenched in British sport - after all, this is what makes for a decent competition. It

has long been established in football, but the counter-argument to that in rugby is that it does not necessarily contribute towards good entertainment as the fear of failure and all that entails can lead to negative, dreary matches.

I was always brought up on the fact that rugby was a players' game, and that it mainly attracted spectators who had played the game to some degree or another. Since it has become professional the need to increase spectator attendance has become key.

The problem is that rugby is a complex game and not easy to understand. To address this the law-makers have attempted to simplify various elements of the game to make it more comprehensible and interesting to the new fans.

From a spectators' point of view I want to see lots of action, and that is one of the reasons why a rugby league game can be a very good to watch. It is also a reason why union and league have moved closer

together, and the idea of players taking contact after one or two passes then quickly recycling the ball shows a lot of similarities between the two codes.

Ever since the game went professional in 1995 it has been evolving, and it is very easy for people of my vintage to say 'it wasn't like this in my day'. There are different imperatives now, one of them being that winning has become the main criteria of success.

The whole concept of leagues started in the mid-1980s after I had finished playing, though we had grown used to national cup competitions in my time.

We all enjoyed playing in a more structured competition rather than that of the 'friendly' fixture list which was the norm at the time. Clubs used to play against clubs they were friendly with, if a grudge between the two developed then the fixture may well have been dropped!

How times have changed.

England players are lost in France

THE whole question of player availability is back on the agenda as we approach the November internationals.

The England management have said that French-based players will not be selected for England duty, and Steffon Armitage of Toulon is one of the main names being mentioned in this regard.

This is a tough one for Stuart Lancaster who seems to have developed a good working relationship with the English Premiership clubs in gaining meaningful access to his players for match preparation.

He is not going to have that same relationship with the French Federation, and I think he is right to make a statement.

The reality of the situation, however, is that with games against the top three teams in the world coming up on consecutive weekends there are inevitably going to be attritional injuries.

If there are not suitable replacements available from the Premiership you would be a fool not to call on the likes of Armitage and Co.

From a coaching perspective, getting someone of that quality into the squad is not going to be hugely disturbing, even if he has not been an ever-present.

In ignoring this possibility, you are in danger of cutting your nose off to spite your face.

Stuart is a highly-principled individual, not the kind to say one thing and do another.

That said, there are a lot of good English players playing a high standard of rugby down in France now, and if they are in top form like Armitage then why not make use of them?

One argument says picking French-based players might open the floodgates to all of England's top players upping sticks across the Channel, but the reality is that not all English players are Francophiles - or indeed good enough to play out there.

I don't see it as a major problem. The current England squad has some quality and depth. If it means bringing someone up from the England Saxons, like say, Tom Johnson from Exeter, then so be it.

He looks a real handful, and even without guys like Armitage I am sure there are several other aspiring players who would relish the opportunity to step up and make their own mark on the big stage.

TOUGH CALL
Stuart Lancaster

