



UTTLEY ON RUGBY

with
ROGER
UTTLEY

Tantalisingly close to a famous win

DESPITE all the negative coverage following England's loss to South Africa it was still a game they could easily have won.

If they had kicked the points when on offer, the indecisiveness shown in the dying moments would not have been an issue and there would have been no controversy about Chris Robshaw's captaincy.

It was confused at the end and deciding to kick for goal rather than going for touch did take too much time, but it is all too easy to be critical from the touchline or the comfort of our own living rooms.

Robshaw (pictured below) had had a massive game himself, carrying and tackling for 78 minutes, and I have a lot of sympathy for him. It is easy to forget the massive pressure under which he found himself at the end of a hugely physical game.

I would not be as critical as some people have been in their post-match assessments. While I would have preferred him to go for the corner rather than kicking a penalty at four points down with two minutes to go, you have got to back the captain's judgement on the field.

It is also worth pointing out that going for the corner does not guarantee you anything. If you look at the stats, England have not scored from a driven lineout since the days of Neil Back *et al*, when they really did have a big bullying pack.

There was a bit of a pantomime about how it all unfolded, but if he wanted the points he should have said 'going for goal, bang' and young Mr Farrell should have just got on with it.

Another reason why we people should not get too fired up about the result is the team lost by a single point to the current second-best team in the world, in a game which could have gone either way. England played better last weekend against South Africa despite the defeat.

The atrocious conditions meant there were always going to be mistakes from both teams. Accurate goal-kicking when the weather is like that becomes even more crucial as try-scoring opportunities are inevitably reduced. Miss your shots at goal and you will struggle.

This coming Saturday is something to look forward to when New Zealand complete England's autumn opposition. If you want to measure yourself against the best in the world then this is the time to do it, and it will be a massive challenge.

The last try the 'Blacks' scored against Wales on Saturday was absolutely sensational, and the accuracy of their left-to-right passing, normally not the favoured side, involving forwards and backs, was phenomenal during those last three passes.

Add to this Aaron Cruden's kicking, admittedly indoors in Cardiff, where he slotted seven from seven in filling in for



COMING IN England's Owen Farrell - 'a tidy enough player, but he doesn't inspire confidence'

“ Robshaw had had a massive game, carrying and tackling for 78 minutes. I have sympathy for him

Dan Carter, and it was a clear demonstration of what you need in a side when the margins are so small. The comparison between that and how England played when Manu Tuilagi broke down the middle of the field against South Africa was marked. It was Chris Ashton's inability to fix his man by straightening up which cost them. He ran a diagonal line rather than committing to the tackler, and his poor pass to Mike Brown compounded the problem.

It is not an easy thing to do at pace, but that is where New Zealand make it count. Their forwards are equally

adept as their backs when it comes to executing these basics accurately time after time.

They are much more instinctive when it comes to doing the right thing at the right moment.

England competed well at the breakdown against South Africa. This was encouraging, but I hope they have looked at what happened to Wales.

They had to put four or five players into the breakdown whereas the All Blacks only ever seemed to need three. The knock-on effect meant that even if Wales won the ball they still had too few players to take on too many defenders.

With Toby Flood ruled out injured the widely-anticipated selection of Owen Farrell is an interesting one. He is a tidy enough player, but he doesn't inspire massive confidence.

By contrast Alex Goode looks like someone who can make things happen. He has time on the ball and

appears to be a more natural footballer. Farrell, to my mind, seems a more manufactured alternative, and the problem with players like that is they tend to play by numbers.

That might sound harsh, but you have to make clinical, instant decisions at this elite level where the margins are so fine. He just seems a bit mechanical, and against these boys we need to be more fluid and positive.

You would have to say the chances of an England win are remote, but against both Australia and South Africa they were within one score, and where there's a will there's a way.

The England team just need a win, then the confidence will rise and people will see what they are actually capable of achieving. At the moment they are not sure how to get that all-important win. Could this provide the right opportunity and incentive?

The other point of note from the international fixtures last weekend was the demise of Andy Robinson as Scotland's head coach following their home defeat by Tonga.

It just goes to show that, no matter how good a coach you are, your success is ultimately decided by the players you have available.

I admire Falcons' mental toughness

IT IS great to see Newcastle Falcons were able to win in very difficult conditions over in Jersey last weekend, and that they are continuing to set and maintain their own standards.

It was a good away win in very testing weather, and at this stage of the season looking at the Championship table, the team have been able to establish an important gap at the top.

The top four have now sorted themselves out with Bedford, Nottingham and Leeds in behind Newcastle, and it is going to be interesting to see how the Falcons maintain the margin they have managed to achieve to date.

Every time the All Blacks play everybody wants to beat them, and the task for them every time they take the field is just to demonstrate how good they are. Sides just aren't rolling over for them, and the sign of a good team is how they do against sides who contest absolutely everything against them.

That is the sort of attitude the Falcons seem to be developing, and long may it continue.

Obviously at the end of the season there are the play-offs to negotiate, but they are creating the psychological strength to ensure they develop a really hard edge for when the pressure games come around.

Another thing that struck me over the weekend was the number of scrums going to ground where the offending prop is penalised for not being able to get a grip on the skin-tight shirts.

It is very difficult to get a bind, and to award a penalty for that seems disproportionate to me when you consider the advantage that is given to the opposition either in terms of yardage gained or points kicked.

I wouldn't want to see scrums repeatedly re-set, but something needs to be done in my humble opinion.



HIGH STANDARDS Newcastle Falcons coach Dean Richards