



# UTTLEY ON RUGBY

with  
ROGER  
UTTLEY

## Falcons' game is short of ambition

**I** SAW three lots of rugby last weekend, and it is interesting going from international games the previous week back into the bread and butter of club action.

As well as the Premiership matches between Saracens and Exeter, and Harlequins and Leicester, I was at Kingston Park to see Newcastle Falcons play Moseley. The contrast from the Six Nations was fascinating.

I had not seen the Falcons in the flesh since their wonderful win over the Tongan national side in November, a night where they really looked good, sharp and incisive as a team.

A couple of things struck me from Friday's 36-3 home win – firstly, the fact they were never in any danger of losing.

Secondly, both teams took the bludgeon approach to make progress and lacked any real subtlety.

The Falcons are singlemindedly working hard towards their goal of promotion and a win is a win, but I would love to see them looking to develop their game a bit more with a view to the end-of-season play-offs.

Obviously they need to make sure they win the thing, but they will have to show more of an expansive range of skills if they are going to achieve promotion and survive in the Premiership.

Simple little things stuck out like a sore thumb from Friday, most notably the fact that players need to recognise when the ball needs to be carried in two hands.

There were a number of occasions where breaks were made and support players ran some good lines but, because the ball-carrier had the ball under one arm, they were effectively showing prospective tacklers they had no intention of passing. The defender in that instance had no decision to take other than making the tackle, and a number of opportunities were wasted as a result.

The full-back Tom Catterick was one player who stood out with some very incisive running. Unfortunately he (and he was not alone) exhibited this trend of one-handed carrying. Maybe players are more concerned about losing the ball in contact. Whatever the reason, the negative result of this habit means that the ability to offload goes right out the window, as does the opportunity to score tries.

If teams are going to score tries they have got to attack on their own terms. Strike runners need to run towards the posts, not the touchlines. If they do this and aim to run at the inside shoulder of the defender opposite, the drift defence is halted, and opportunities to get to or beyond the gain-line will improve.

Try-scoring opportunities will increase as a result, and for all of their undoubted success and progress this season I feel that is one area of Newcastle's game which could do with some attention.

They are going to have to be more ambitious and speculative in their attacking play if they want to firstly get back into the Premiership and, more



**AT A CROSSROADS?** Roger Uttley can see the benefit of synthetic surfaces, such as the artificial pitch at Saracens' Allianz Park, above. Below: Tom Catterick caught the eye during Newcastle Falcons' comfortable victory over Moseley last week, with ball-carrying a big issue

importantly, be competitive when they get there.

One very positive aspect of the evening was the impact made by Ollie Stedman when he came on in the back-row, scoring on his home debut.

It was an excellent performance. He really did not look at out of place in the slightest, he is a big lad and looks like he can play a bit of football. He is to be congratulated for a really encouraging personal performance. Looking at it from another angle, his arrival at the Falcons is a great shot in the arm for ambitious guys playing on the local scene.

The fact the Falcons are prepared to sign players from the likes of Tynedale and give them exposure at a higher level is a really positive statement.

If Newcastle are going to be the region's flagship team it is important they keep a North East base to their squad.

It is never good to see promising players leaving for other parts of

the country when they could be picked up by their local side.

The Falcons are still winning games and it all looks a bit easy for them, but I then compared their game with Moseley to the next day's offering when Saracens hosted Exeter at their new home in Barnet.

We used to have the old Middlesex

Athletics Championships at the same venue so it was fascinating for me to see how the ground had come on with all the recent improvements.

It has generated a massive feel-good factor.

People were genuinely looking forward to the brand of rugby they were going to see, in no small part due

to the new synthetic pitch Saracens have installed.

Exeter, in a way, were on a hiding to nothing, and spent most of the afternoon just tackling. The quick surface is probably not one that particularly suits their natural game, but it is one which gave the public a sight of what the future of rugby could well look like.

Personally I think it is a positive move which will benefit the sport, and then later the same day we had a real top-notch contest between Leicester Tigers and the Premiership champions, Harlequins.

It was a really good game during which Quins proved their status as the side to beat in the competition.

They are the real deal, and even without some of their top players it was a day which showed how fortunate England are to have a second-string scrum-half like Danny Care.

The individual try he scored was absolutely superb, and while we can all debate the merits of Care versus Ben Youngs for the starting No 9 spot, the fact remains that Stuart Lancaster has two very good options and players capable of playing in different styles.

### FRANCE ARE DOWN – BUT NOT OUT

**I DISCUSSED** last week the dangers which could befall England between now and the end of the season, but the only thing on their minds right now will be France at Twickenham on Saturday.

Fortunately, they have had a fortnight to prepare with their starting players rested up, which is one of the great advantages resulting from the agreement between the RFU and the clubs.

The best players are going into the test season with the best possible recovery time, while the bench players have, at the discretion of the England management, largely been allowed to go back to their clubs and get valuable game time.

England can now look forward with a bit of optimism, but always having in the

back of their minds the fact France pose a very real threat.

If the French can get their own game going they can have backs running against inside shoulders, offloads left, right and centre and the inherent dangers posed by their natural *joie de vivre*.

Regardless of their first two defeats France are always a danger, but there is not a great deal of confidence and they have to get their selection right.

They looked to be at sixes and sevens in their last match against Wales.

From an English perspective you just hope we go out and put the pressure on.

Forcing a few mistakes early on will help, and away from Stade de France they are eminently beatable.

