

A Rugby Day Like No Other



A Championship-winning moment: Jamie Heaslip magnificently denies Stuart Hogg a try five minutes from time at Murrayfield.

Recovered yet? Pulse back to normal by now? Still think the heroics demonstrated in Rome, Edinburgh and London are more suited to the realm of fantasy? Join the club.

There has never been a day in the history of this Championship, whether four, five or six teams contested it, to equal last Saturday.

Indeed, there's never been a day in the history of international rugby where, even in the case of the teams heavily beaten, every side attempted to run with the ball with such abandon.

This was rugby as we who love the game want it to be played as opposed to the 'bish bash bosh' body slamming that had dominated the Championship during its first four rounds.

Last weekend, the men who have inherited the jerseys of Simon Geoghegan, Gareth Edwards, Serge Blanco and Rory Underwood wrestled back rugby union from the over-coached, video-analysed generation and returned it to its Corinthian roots.

It was a joyous expression of how rugby, played liked this, makes for as compelling a spectacle as any field sport, and to have the chance to witness all three over the course of a compelling day was a privilege. It made one grateful William Webb Ellis picked up that ball all those years ago and ran with it.

Does all of this mean that we're in for an offense-led jamboree come the World Cup in six months' time? Of course not.

But what it does demonstrate is, as suggested in this column a week ago, that the playbooks of the Northern Hemisphere's best can find away to integrate a running game with incredible physicality at ruck time.

Wales set the ball rolling in a match where they could have run up over 70 points, producing the least Warren Gatland-like performance of the Kiwi's time in charge.

And had it not been for Gareth Davies' dropping a ball en route for a certain try, followed by Leonard Sarto's last gasp touchdown at the opposite end, 61-20 could just as easily have read 68-13 in Wales's favour. And that might have got the Principality across the line come tea time that evening.

In Murrayfield, despite some Stuart Hogg-led heroics, particularly in the first half, Ireland began like a steam train through tries from Paul O'Connell and Sean O'Brien, but Scotland dug in and ensured the contest remained alive by half-time. But in the second half, a supremely disciplined Irish side clocked up a further 20 points as they turned their territory and possession into the only currency that counts in the game.

Added to that, they were supremely disciplined in defence, and thanks to an incredible try-line challenge from Jamie Heaslip to deny Hogg a certain try, Ireland prevailed to smash the Scots by 30 points. Four tries scratched off in one match having scored only four tries in the previous four outings, Ireland took the lessons learned from defeat in Cardiff and left everything on the Edinburgh sod. By then, Wales were out of the equation, and virtually everyone felt the 26-point win England were left requiring to seize the new Six Nations trophy was beyond the sweet charioteers. It was, but only just.

As a nation that's had its fair share of glorious failure stories down through the years, despite the euphoria of retaining the Championship for the first time in 66 years, we had more than a little empathy for a heroic English effort.

But what added to the history making narrative was the return, despite a 20-point reversal, of the glorious champagne rugby that has traditionally made France the second favourite rugby team for fans in this hemisphere at least.

Had England pulled this off, it would have been all the more glorious given that France didn't lie down at any stage and produced some jaw-dropping attacking play, primarily through winger Noa Nakaitaci.

And had they eked out six more points, even the most ardent critic of Perfidious Albion couldn't have begrudged them a feat that bordered on the astounding.

At 10, George Ford betrayed the notion that there's no place in the modern game for the more diminutive unit, while his fellow half-back Ben Youngs who, like Conor Murray, benefited so much from his Lions experience in Australia, produced a career-best display.

England, with a game plan like this, will make for formidable World Cup hosts. France, wearing its best rugby face, shall not be easily over-turned when Ireland meet them in Cardiff, while Wales, in such a mood, will represent a formidable foe come the Autumn.

But for the second successive spring, in the wake of 11 wins from 12, Ireland are champions and will now lead the European charge to wrestle the World Cup from New Zealand.

And after a day like last Saturday, anything feels possible. What a day. What a Championship.

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