

At the time of writing, the Six Nations still hasn't reached its conclusion. But when it comes to England's tournament, I think a conclusion has been reached – it's not like a trip to Grand Slam chasing Ireland in Dublin in the final round of fixtures will see a dramatic turnaround. England, for whatever reason, seem to be in disarray, at a crossroads – what just months ago felt like it could've been the start of a new era has quickly left a sour taste in our mouths.

For context, I'm writing just after a record-breaking Twickenham defeat – yes, in all the time England have played at international level, never have they been as badly beaten at home as they were by the French this year. A real bruising. A scoreline of 10-53; when half-time came along with us 3-27 down, it was scarcely believable – yet I think we all thought that France wouldn't keep up the same rate of point-scoring for the second period. How wrong we were.

It's important to note that France are truly world-class and were expected to win. Previous French teams have always had quality individuals capable of winning games with a moment of attacking magic, but over the years they've lacked cohesion in both attack and defence, with effort levels also often left wanting. Times have changed recently though. Since Fabien Galthie took over as head coach in 2019, and no-nonsense Yorkshireman Shaun Edwards came in as defence coach a year later, their fortunes have drastically improved. Defensively so solid, so organised, a tactical kicking game so far ahead of their rivals, power in abundance, and of course that magical French flair sprinkled on top. So, when they ran in seven tries at Twickenham, perhaps we shouldn't have been too surprised. But for all of France's qualities, that huge defeat equally showed up many of England's deficiencies.

Two months ago, I said that under our new head coach Steve Borthwick, we as fans had to give him time. And I must underline that still – we have to give him time. Chopping and changing management so quickly is not the solution. There have been a few promising signs from his first competitive matches. Notably the way he's set about dealing with

the Eddie Jones era hangover by putting trust in, and being rewarded by, new selections – Ollie Chessum, Lewis Ludlam, Ollie Lawrence, to name a few. Borthwick also seems to be capable of, at least privately, admitting to his mistakes and learning from them. Playing Marcus Smith and Owen Farrell together never truly worked under Eddie Jones – Borthwick tried it against Scotland, watched it fail, and promptly abandoned it. Then after two disappointing games with Farrell at 10, Borthwick bit the bullet and dropped his captain for Smith.

But arguably, it's exactly this on-the-job learning that shows why we're at a bit of a crossroads. Borthwick did very well at Leicester Tigers, taking them from relegation candidates to Premiership title winners in his first two years of management. Yet that's the limit of his experience. Eddie Jones, for all his quirks and all the stories of him making players "physically and mentally uncomfortable", he had bags of experience and crucially knew how to get his players winning – evidenced by a run to the World Cup Final in 2019 and three Six Nations triumphs (2016, 2017, 2020). Borthwick simply doesn't have that pedigree. He will also perhaps be judged more harshly – Eddie took over from Stuart Lancaster immediately after the dismal 2015 World Cup on home soil and had four years before taking us to the final. Borthwick has taken the reins in the same year of his first World Cup in charge. There's one thing that English sports fans can't stand – and that's failure at a World Cup.

Yet expectations unfortunately have to be kept low going into the tournament in France this autumn. The brutal honest truth is that we're at least three years behind the French, three years behind Ireland and perhaps even three years behind Scotland – teams who have all found their way of playing, drilled it on the training ground, and then executed those plans in matches. Despite the quality individuals coming through, particularly as the level of the Premiership continues to grow, England just simply don't have a system right now. Marcus Smith is clearly a supremely creative talent and the leading candidate to be the fulcrum for our system (once we figure it out), but to get the performances that he

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delivers week in week out for Harlequins, Borthwick has to build the ecosystem for him to thrive. There are other players who could become world class international talents if the team is ticking on all fronts – namely Ellis Genge, Freddie Steward, Ollie Chessum, Jack Willis, and then of course Maro Itoje, who's arguably been world class for a while – but until England start performing well as a team and getting results, those players will face a similar fate to the stars of the aforementioned French teams of yesteryear – clearly talented, but if the team fails then they get forgotten.

The performance against France showed up this absence of a system. Rather surprisingly, England actually had more ball possession than the French. But France's game is built on territorial kicking, powerful set pieces, quick ball out of the rucks and devastating counter attacks. Executing simple steps to perfection. England's lack of system left players bereft of ideas to break the French down, leading to the sloppiness which buried us. The rucks were a bloodbath, with clearouts far too slow allowing the French to secure turnovers time and time again. Poor ball handling, countless knock ons, missed tackles, no commitment on kick chases... unfortunately for Borthwick these are becoming the hallmarks of his tenure.

There were numerous low points throughout the 80 minutes, but the clear winner in my eyes was France's fifth try. French fullback Thomas Ramos bursting through England's line in his own half, kicking over the top for scrum half Antoine Dupont to chase. Marcus Smith covered well to initially save England's blushes, but a half-hearted attempt from teammates to get back and help him saw Smith carried over his own try line with ball in hand. Still, England had numbers back and appeared to have secured possession, ready to kick a clearance downfield. Problem solved then?

Oh no. Somehow, despite at least six Englishmen lingering in the ruck and outnumbering the French, France's Charles Ollivon reached over the top to get his hand on the ball and ground it. The angles provided by the television replays couldn't quite get into the heart of the ruck to show it, but I'm glad they couldn't. How we didn't secure the ball in

that moment was hard to watch.

Looking ahead, I'm predicting England to take another hiding by the Irish in Dublin, who are somehow even better than France and looking to secure a Grand Slam on St Patrick's Day weekend – a result you'll know when you pick this up. As for the World Cup, England have been blessed with a favourable draw, with no teams better than us to face in the pool stages and then a possible quarter final against Wales. But Borthwick needs to work on a system behind the scenes, or else it could be another embarrassment.

Just on a final note, and I'm sure it'll be somewhat resolved by the time you read this, but I have to talk about the farce that's engulfed the BBC on this weekend that I write. Gary Lineker suspended by the BBC for social media comments made about the government's latest immigration plan. His close colleagues on Match of the Day, and many others working in BBC Sport, boycotting the weekend's action in protest. Talks with Lineker 'moving in the right direction' at the time of writing, hopefully bringing to an end a tumultuous few days for the broadcaster. Sure, Gary technically breached an impartiality clause in his BBC contract by making those comments, when he compared the language used to launch the government's latest 'asylum crackdown' with 1930s Germany. I take issue with the way it's been handled though, both by the BBC internally, but also in the media and by the public.

Impartiality at the BBC is to make sure the public can trust the outlet to provide facts rather than opinion on issues, so that you're not subconsciously biased to change what you believe. But Gary's a sports broadcaster, who works for the BBC once a week in a purely footballing capacity – you'd have to be a bit dense to read his personal social media posts on political issues and think that it represents fact, or indeed the 'BBC's opinion'. Many of the people telling him to 'stick to football' are the same people who scream for their freedom of speech on social media to be protected at all costs. Regardless of whether you agree with him or not, let him speak.

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