

This month presents me with a great opportunity to talk about the Six Nations – printing constraints sees me pen this after the second round of fixtures, but thanks to a rest weekend in mid-February you'll be reading this only one round of fixtures further on. The backdrop of this year's tournament is that it's a World Cup year, so in an ideal world each of the six nations would like to be in a position where they've got their preferred players, tactics and system, and are also bang in-form. In my eyes this could certainly be said of three of the nations – the other three are at various different stages of getting there.

Let's start with the defending champions France and their qualities. Attacking verve and undeniable flair in the backs, big bad guys in the forward pack; head coach Fabien Galthie is certainly getting more out of this precociously talented squad than previous bosses. There are some undeniable star talents – Antoine Dupont, Romain Ntamack, Gregory Alldritt, Julien Marchand, Cyril Baille, Damien Penaud, ... all have a claim to be the best in the world in their positions. Heading into a World Cup on home soil, in which they could well be the favourites, the French are perhaps seeing this Six Nations as an opportunity to try out some more players and ultimately give themselves more options. It comes with a big 'but' though. There's every chance that, in typical fashion of France in years gone by, for all their talent they just end up failing to put it all together. At the time of writing I've just seen them get beaten by the Irish, which brings us nicely onto our next team.

Ireland are the favourites for this year's Six Nations and should also get the 'grand slam' of five wins out of five. At this point they also have a realistic shot at World Cup glory; it's a tantalising target, given that they've never progressed past the quarter finals previously. There's quality all over the park and they're unbelievably well drilled under Andy Farrell (yes, that's England captain Owen's dad). A superb, athletic back row make them

a nightmare at the breakdown, securing penalties which elder statesman fly-half Jonny Sexton duly knocks over. Try scoring moves straight off the training ground are so slick and well drilled, orchestrated by the experienced half back pairing of the aforementioned Sexton and Conor Murray. Hugo Keenan at full back has really caught my eye, 2022's IRB World Player of the Year. Josh van der Flier is a menace of a flanker, and somehow even he's being upstaged by his fellow back-rower Caelan Doris. The Irish look so comfortable this year and are building the perfect momentum going into the World Cup – I really don't see any other side getting close to stopping them.

Of course that's a bit of a shame for the spectacle, as the battle for the trophy is less engrossing. But there's plenty of intrigue elsewhere in the standings. Scotland are surging ahead of the bottom three it appears, and perhaps even closing in on France, with a dominant win over England in the first round of fixtures (despite the scoreline suggesting a much tighter contest) followed up by a crushing defeat of Wales. They combine some of the best elements of both the Irish and the French in their play; their backline is so threatening and when they're on song they are my personal favourite team to watch, just so entertaining. Finn Russell thinks on a different plane to any other fly half out there, and with an ever-growing maturity in his game now, he's being trusted by head coach Gregor Townsend ever more. Gregor's realised the opportunity to build the team around Finn and let him flourish – and he's reaping the rewards. I was particularly stunned against Wales, where his crossfield kicks were pinpoint and created tries out of thin air. But I've also got to mention big wing Duhan van der Merwe, whose try against England will go down in Six Nations history as one of the most memorable – bulldozing through tackles, stepping player after player before crossing the line to finish. I think their match against Ireland in Edinburgh

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on March 12th is the pick of the remaining fixtures in the tournament.

So they're the three teams that I think are hitting their peaks at the right time – how about the others? England are an interesting case. New coach Steve Borthwick is still figuring things out, getting his system together, deciding how he wants to play at international level and which players he wants to field. It's his first tournament in charge remember - we as fans have to temper our critical instincts and give him the space to experiment. This Six Nations offers a great opportunity to find out how he wants England to operate ahead of the World Cup – a tournament where we've got a favourable group and a nice run to the semi-finals. So let's hope he's tries out some new players and varies the tactics to find what works – both things that he's already seeming to be doing.

We struggled against Scotland – defensive errors aside, despite having lots of possession and territory, we lacked any kind of cutting edge in attack. Eddie Jones frequently used a dual playmaker strategy, with natural fly half Owen Farrell regularly played at inside centre in the 12 shirt due to his solid all round game. Unfortunately this fell flat against Scotland in Borthwick's first match – with no genuine ball-carrying threat who could take the short ball and punch a hole in the defensive line, fly half Marcus Smith's only options when we opened the play up were to spread it wide or run with ball in hand. It became far too predictable and Scotland mopped our moves up time and time again, recording huge numbers of tackles without ever being overstretched. Against Italy, perhaps not the best indicator, but hard hitting Ollie Lawrence came into the side at inside centre, with captain Farrell moved to fly half, and there were instant improvements. Lawrence was awarded Man of the Match for continually denting holes in the Italian midfield – exactly what was missing from the previous week's defeat. I still think it'd be nice to see 23-year-old

Smith come back in at fly half – however reliable Farrell has been in the past, his kicking hasn't been as metronomic this time around. Smith is the future and has so much more to offer in attack; all he needs to have is a variety of running options outside him so he can let his creativity flourish. There's been big performances from some of the other players too – wing Max Malins looks sharp, Jack Willis and Lewis Ludlam look good in the back row, Ellis Genge is a force at loosehead prop, and young second rower Ollie Chessum has really caught the eye too.

Wales are in disarray seemingly – battered in the first half at home to Ireland in their opener, then comfortably dispatched by Scotland. I thought the return of Warren Gatland as head coach would turn things around, but his old favourites (Justin Tipuric, Dan Biggar, Ken Owens) are getting on a bit; and then there's 37 year old veteran Alun Wyn Jones who surely can't be expected to continue to lead the team on the field. They're definitely in the early stages of a rebuild – at the moment they're odds-on to go through the tournament losing every game. Even the away trip to Italy looks treacherous, having lost at home in that fixture last year. Italy meanwhile are getting closer and closer each year to being consistently at the level of the other five nations, but still lack nous in key moments. Injuries to key players including Paolo Garbisi haven't helped this year, but they did run France very close in the opener and then arguably went tit-for-tat with England in the second half at Twickenham. A bright future beckons for the Italians.

The Six Nations this year has provided great entertainment; I always find it transforms these drab winter weekends into a much more enjoyable season. Once again I've made it difficult to make room for other content – but it's worth mentioning the Manchester City situation. They've been charged by the Premier League for numerous alleged breaches of financial rules – over 100 times in nine years between 2009 and 2018 to be

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precise, which is unprecedented.

Financial Fair Play works on a 'spend what you earn' basis – there's murmurs that City have both inflated their earnings and hidden some spending. The breaches are apparently so serious that points deductions and fines applied could lead to relegation. The Premier League should consider this punishment seriously to deter other mega-wealthy clubs from breaking rules in future. To be fair to City, it does seem quite crazy at the moment that they're under fire after a transfer window in which they spent nothing on transfers (and have been praised for astute business in previous windows) – compared to Chelsea, who have thrown money at players like no other team before in history. It'll be very interesting to follow this story as it develops.

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