

Rugby – Edinburgh v Toulouse



Edinburgh v Toulouse, Heineken Cup Quarter Final, 7 April 2012

Possibly not the match of the season, with a fair number of mistakes and penalties, but certainly the match of Edinburgh Rugby's history, with a superb, gritty win over the mega-budget French super-team, Toulouse, in front of 37,881 spectators – a record for a UK Heineken Cup match – to qualify for the semi-finals for the first time ever.

With Edinburgh being given a grudging chance of finishing fourth – out of four – pre-tournament by the experts 'off the telly', they have shown over the piece what they are capable of when they play to the standard that is necessary to progress in the club game's most prestigious tournament – and silenced – or, at least, put their gas on a low peep – the critics in the process.

Toulouse were clear favourites before the game with only the most loyal supporters giving Edinburgh any sort of chance against the French stars. And stars they were. The team sheet read like a who's-who of French rugby, with a couple of 'imports' included for good measure. None of this fazed the home side, however, and straight from the kick-off, they put the visitors under pressure. Ball from an early Edinburgh scrum, was collected by Natani Telai, who passed the ball back to Laidlaw. His huge up-and-under was contested by an 'excess' of Edinburgh players and Mike Blair came down with the ball in hand to power through the visitors defence and score the opening, and their only, try – less than two minutes in! With Greg Laidlaw's successful conversion, Edinburgh were 7-0 ahead.

Toulouse struck back less than a minute later with a Lionel Beauxis penalty to take the score to 7-3, and for the next 15

minutes or so, neither team could really gain the upper hand, until another Beauxis penalty took the visitors to within a point. With 26 minutes on the clock, Allan Jacobsen gave the visitors another chance to take the lead, by getting himself yellow-carded, followed two minutes later by Ross Rennie. Beauxis put his third penalty of the day between the uprights to take Toulouse into the lead, 9-7.

It didn't take them many more minutes to put 13-man Edinburgh under the cosh and pile on the pressure. A clearing kick from the host's defence was collected inside the French 10 metre line by Timoci Matanavou, who set off upfield at a blistering pace and burned a hole straight through the despairing tackles of the Edinburgh defence, to score the visitors only try of the day. With the kick missed, Toulouse were now 14-7 in the lead and still looking at several minutes against 13 opponents, However, like Boroughmuir the previous night, Edinburgh went off-script and took the game to the French. With Jacobsen back on, the ball was moved up the field and following several phases of play, the ball ended up in the hands of Laidlaw, giving him the chance of a drop-goal. Goal duly scored and Edinburgh were back to within four points at half-time, 14-10.

The first five minutes of the second half really belonged to the visitors and only some superb saving tackles stopped them breaking through the defence. Getting the ball upfield, Edinburgh set up a ruck in the French half and when the ball came back, William Servat 'found' it in his hands in an off-side position and was promptly yellow carded for his efforts, Another Laidlaw penalty took Edinburgh to within a point and they were starting to look like the better side. Both Tim Visser and Lee Jones took themselves on penetrating runs into the French back division, Visser's ending, after a chip over Poitrenaud, when he was 'accidentaly' wiped out by his opposing winger. Jones, on the other hand, managed to win a penalty, which gave Laidlaw the opportunity to show the crowd

he was human after all, when he missed the posts by inches.

Despite being a point behind, the Men in Black were not for sitting back and for the rest of the match, Toulouse could barely get out of their half, another penalty from Laidlaw taking the Scots two points ahead, before the final two minutes came around. Yet another penalty for Edinburgh out near the left touch line saw the visitors surrendering, with one of their forwards shaking Roddy Grant's hand in congratulation. Laidlaw took every second he could over the kick and, just as the 80 minutes ticked over, he sank his fourth successful kick. Referee Nigel Owens, blew up for full time and Murrayfield erupted in celebration of the 19-14 win over the current French league leaders and, widely recognised, best team in Europe. Well not today they weren't!

After the match, both captain and Man-of-the-Match, Greg Laidlaw, and coach Michael Bradely, had nothing but praise for the crowd's support before, during and after the game, saying that the sheer wave of noise and colour helped them up their game at the moments when they really needed to.

Edinburgh now have a semi-final to look forward to against Ulster or Munster in Dublin at the Aviva Stadium – or Lansdowne Road as everybody still calls it – and that in itself, is a tremendous achievement. For a team who can hardly buy a win in the RaboDirect League – they are currently eleventh out of twelve – Edinburgh have beaten and, on occasion, taken apart some of the best teams that Europe has to offer. Can they go all the way? Well, the 'men off the telly' aren't now quite so certain that they won't.



Photo and Report – John Preece

Web – <http://www.photoboxgallery.com/jlp-photography>