


Rugby – Scotland v Australia

With both teams on potential hat-trick results, it was to be the Aussies who took the win in an exciting encounter at Murrayfield.




Those respective hat-tricks were three wins in a row for Scotland against Australia, and for Australia, three Northern Hemisphere International wins in row. And it was to be the Southern Hemisphere side who were to come out on top in a thrilling match at Murrayfield, which saw both sides having chances to gain the upper hand and take the Hopetoun Cup back to their trophy cabinet.

Both teams had made several changes, both forced and tactical, to their line-ups from the previous week. Scotland's interim coach, Scott Johnson, selected a mixture of young and old heads to get an idea of who could stand up to the rigours of an extended International tournament – better known as the 2015 World Cup – and Australia's Ewan McKenzie selected from the squad which was left following his suspension of six players for 'going out on the lash' before the Ireland game.

The game started badly for Scotland with 50-Cap, Jim Hamilton giving away a penalty in the first minute, allowing Christian Lealiifano the chance to put three early points on the board. The home side struck back a few minutes later as the first of  many breakdown penalties was slotted home by Greg Laidlaw.

A further few minutes into the game and the Scots were up in the Aussie 22, hammering away at the line. The play was stopped when Grant Ghilchrist knocked-on when only inches short, but referee Jaco Peyper had been playing a penalty advantage to Scotland, so Laidlaw had a kick for the lead. And the lead he duly took as the Scots went ahead 6-3. Straight

from the restart, the Wallabies went on the offensive and some clever passing saw the ball out wide and in the hands of their No. 14 Joe Tomani. However a Sean Maitland-Nick De Luca combination decided the winger was going no further and they hauled him the four or five metres to, and over, the touchline. But, again the old lineout failing of inaccuracy came to the fore and Australia won ball from the retake. They used the possession to build a head of steam, but ended up having to be satisfied with another three points from Lealiifano. They weren't completely satisfied, though. With 25 minutes on the clock, quick ball from a ruck had the Aussies on the front foot and a neat inside pass from the mercurial Quade Cooper to Man-of-the-Match, Israel Folau, put the full back through on Ryan Grant, who he just barged out of the way, allowing him to dive over for the match's first try. Lealiifano knocked over the conversion to put the visitors 6 points ahead with 15 or so minutes of the half left.

And what a fifteen minutes for Scotland. They had the majority of the possession and territory, Laidlaw scoring another two penalties to bring the Scots up to within a point, and then they scored a try... Well, nearly... With five minutes left on the clock, Johnnie Beattie put Maitland in the clear and the full back sprinted off up the middle of the pitch. With only Folau to beat, he drew the full back in, then released a long pass to Sean Lamont. However, Folau hadn't been completely fooled and he raced across to put in a try-saving tackle when  Lamont was within touching distance of the line. A quick recycle and the forwards were pounding away at the Wallaby's defence again. However the Australians managed to turn the ball over and the pass went to Lealiifano in front of his posts. De Luca was on his case immediately, forcing a fumble which he pounced on to dive over for the try that wasn't. Again, though, Peyper was playing an advantage and the visitors were awarded a scrum to end the most exciting passage of play in the half. The half ended a couple of minutes later with the Australians still in the lead by that one point.

It only took the visitors two minutes of the second half to notch up their second try of the match. Quickly recovering from a lineout awarded when young winger, Chris Feauai-Sautia, received a pass as he was sprinting up two metres OUTSIDE the touchline, the ball was moved quickly through the hands and it was again Cooper who delivered the decisive pass to that same Feauai-Sautia, who, this time, was INSIDE the line on the other side of the pitch. This time there was no error as he fought his way past the defender to score in the corner. From the kick-off, Scotland attacked up the middle with the backs carrying well, but again the play ground to a halt with yet another penalty. Weir went for the line and got Scotland deep into the 22. Winning ball from their own lineout, Laidlaw saw a chance to nip through a gap, but he was soon pulled up. Australia cleared from the ruck, but the assistant referee had seen an infringement. This 'infringement' appeared, on first viewing to be a slap from Rob Simmons on Moray Low, which turned out, on closer – and slower – inspection to be a mighty swing at Low's jaw. Peyper had no option but to reach for the yellow and Simmons spent the next ten minutes in the bin.

Laidlaw then stepped up to score his fifth, and final kick of the match to draw the home side to within three points.

But this was immediately wiped away as that scourge of all coaches, the penalty just after the restart, was awarded to Australia, which Lealiifano scored to take the lead back up to six points. The last half hour was fairly evenly matched with, again, possession and territory fairly even, but with the penalty count creeping ever higher. Scotland managed to get close to the line again after a deep kick from Weir saw them in the Aussie 22, but they were held out and for Australia, Lealiifano managed to miss three relatively easy kicks in succession. The hosts threw everything at the Aussie defence for the final few minutes, but couldn't get the breakthrough they needed, so 21-15 was how it ended.

This was a match from which Scotland can take a great deal of pride and heart. It was a complete sea-change from the performance against the Springboks the previous weekend and a good few players put their hands up for future selection. Scott Johnson's final round of matches before Vern Cotter arrives is the 6 Nations next February/March, so let's hope that a similar step up in performance is on the cards for, at least, the two home matches against France and England.