

Rugby – Scotland suffer agonising defeat



Scotland suffered a heart-breaking loss on Saturday evening, when Jean-Marc Doussain slotted a last-minute penalty for France, at Murrayfield. Despite the fact that Scotland were in control for the majority of the match, it was 'Les Bleus' who grabbed the two point victory – to keep their RBS Six Nations title dream alive.

After a poor start from the home side, Scotland did well to be in-front at the break – courtesy of tries from Stuart Hogg and Tommy Seymour. Youann Huget silenced the Murrayfield crowd in the 45th minute with an interception try to turn the score on its head. Weir's penalty on the hour mark gave Scotland the slight advantage, before Doussain's penalty secured a 19-17 win for the French.

There was a different atmosphere at the national stadium for the visit of France, with Scotland having clinched a valuable win in Rome, last game out. It could therefore be argued that expectations were high when taking into account the French absentees; with captain Louis Picamoles, Wesley Fofana and Dmitri Szarzewski the most notable omissions from the squad.

As soon as Jules-Plisson got the game underway, it was his side who had the upper-hand. Scotland collapsed the first scrum, which gave scrum-half Maxime Machenaud the chance to slot the first points of the match – which he did with ease, to give France a 3-0 lead after only two minutes. After a quick counter attack from the French, it was Duncan Weir who made a try-saving tackle on winger, Huget. An infringement in the ruck by the Scot's resulted in a further French penalty, which Machenaud dispatched to extend the lead.

The poor start really sparked the Scottish team into life, and following a turn-over, Stuart Hogg kicked high into the in-ball area. The French defence made a hash of retrieving possession, which allowed Hogg to dive onto the ball for the try. Judging by his celebration it was a certain score – but referee Chris Pollock went to the Television Match Official (TMO), for clarification. Laidlaw confidently added the extras to give Scotland the lead for the first time in the match (7-6).

A careless offside, let the reliable right-boot of Machenaud cut short the celebrations, just minutes after Hogg's try, and restore the French lead. The lack of creativity shown by 'The Bravehearts' in the recent loss to England, was swiftly brushed aside when Matt Scott's quick hands allowed Tommy Seymour to finish brilliantly in the corner. Any Six Nations team would have been proud to score such a well-worked try – Laidlaw added the extras to give Scotland a 14-9 lead. Despite a fast-paced end to the half, no more points were scored – and Scotland went into the break with the ascendancy.

With possession and territory, Scotland made a very encouraging start to the second half, but on 45 minutes, it all went drastically wrong. With a great try-scoring opportunity looming, Duncan Weir's long, risky pass was intercepted by Youann Huget, who ran 80-metres to score the try. At a time when the Scottish support should have been celebrating – instead, it was a head-in-hands moment. Yet again, Machenaud was accurate with the boot – to rub salt in the wounds of Scotland.

In a very scrappy second-half affair, Greig Laidlaw's 45-metre penalty attempt fell just short. Just seconds later, France gave away another penalty. This time, it was Duncan Weir who was given the kicking responsibility, from a similar distance. The resulting kick from Weir, split the posts and Scotland were in front once again, with eighteen minutes remaining. (17-16)

With very few scoring opportunities being created, the score remained in Scotland's favour with just minutes to go. A penalty given away by the home side, allowed France to kick the ball downfield and gain possession deep in Scottish territory. Following phase after phase of French attack, Scotland were penalised for not releasing in the tackle – right in front of the posts. In normal circumstances, this would be a very simple kick for replacement Jean-Marc Doussain. However, under intense pressure and surrounded by the jeers of the Murrayfield crowd – the Toulouse scrum-half slotted the penalty to give France what can only be described as unconvincing win.

It is a result that both the Scottish players and fans alike, will find very hard to take. Scotland coach Scott Johnson agreed that it was harsh on his team, but reiterated that there were still improvements to be made. He stated: "It's a fickle world, in sport. Against Italy, we benefitted from it, but this week it was France. We played pretty good rugby but we should have won that game – we let ourselves down".

Scotland's number eight and man of the match David Denton expressed his despondency at the result. "This is one of the most disappointing days I've had in a Scotland jersey. We gave everything but we were very unlucky at the end there...we dominated the game".

France can now look forward to challenging for the Six Nations title, when they face an Irish side who will be full of confidence after their convincing win over Italy, earlier today. Depending on other results, either team could be crowned champions in Paris, next Saturday night. As for Scotland, they face a tough match against Wales in Cardiff, but will know that the pressure is now off – and they can focus on spoiling the party for the men from the valleys.

