

Rugby – France v Scotland

Gutsy Scots come up short in Paris.

Scotland suffered an agonising defeat to France for the second year in a row, after five Camille Lopez penalties earned the French a 15-8 win, at the Stade de France on Saturday.

Having failed to win against 'Les Bleus' in Paris since April 1999, and having lost consecutive opening weekend 6 Nations fixtures since 2006, Scotland Head-Coach Vern Cotter was keen to turn the tables and produce a memorable night – in what was his first 6 Nations match in charge.

A wonderfully worked Dougie Fife try gave Scotland a real chance and reduced the deficit to one point just before half-time, but constant French possession and force in the second half proved too much.

There was a sense of extra motivation from the French players and atmosphere from the fans, in the first match since last month's terrorist attack on Paris.

After a good line-out steal from Jonny Gray (who was making his first 6 Nations start), Scotland flanker, Blair Cowan, was penalised for holding onto the ball.

From the resulting penalty, Lopez opened the scoring for France on 3 minutes, when his kick deflected off the right-hand post and went over.

Despite France enjoying the lion's share of early possession, Scotland were awarded a penalty on 14 minutes when the French forwards collapsed the scrum. Laidlaw split the uprights with the resulting strike from the left-hand side, to get his team on the score-sheet and level the game.

France restored their lead with 17 minutes on the clock, when a straightforward Lopez penalty from a central position,

sailed between the sticks. (6-3)

Scotland were forced into an early substitution, with Glasgow Warrior's winger Tommy Seymour (an influential figure during the Autumn Tests) picking up a knock. He was replaced by Edinburgh's Dougie Fife.

French full-back Scott Spedding enjoyed a lot of powerful runs as his team put the pressure on mid-way through the first half. However, the Scottish defence held strong and prevented any deep breaks.

On 24 minutes, Scotland had the chance to draw level again, when Pascal Pape was ticked-off on half-way, for an offside offence. Full-back, Stuart Hogg, attempted the long-range kick from fully 50 metres – his effort had the distance but drifted wide of the posts.

Just minutes later, a fantastic break from Scottish centre Mark Bennett, gained his side a good 20 metres. Hogg then split the French defence and brought play just five metres from the try line. After a few phases of play, Finn Russell made a drop-goal attempt, which was sliced wide. A really poor execution, which was a missed opportunity for the Scots.

On the half-hour mark, Scotland were putting continuous pressure on France. An interception from Alex Dunbar, allowed him to kick up-field for Hogg to chase. Deep into the French 22, the home side were then awarded a penalty, when Hogg illegally tried to strip the ball. Lopez cleared the danger.

For the next 5 minutes, it was 'Les Bleus' who were enjoying the vast majority of possession and territory. Quick hands from the ruck created a 3 on 2 opportunity, but thanks to a remarkable double-tackle from another Six Nations debutant Finn Russell, France were forced into a handling error, relieving the pressure.

An offside from a Scottish forward on 37 minutes enabled Lopez

to convert his third penalty of the half to extend his sides lead to six points.

Just a minute later, arguably Scotland's 1st half Man of the Match, Stuart Hogg, made significant ground again, within the French 22. Both Hogg and Dunbar came inches from the try-line, but were unable to ground the ball. The ball was then shipped out wide and following good hands from Bennett and Euan Murray – Dougie Fife dived into the corner to score his first Scottish try.

What has become known as the "whitewash fever" has troubled Scotland in the past – with the ability to score tries eluding them in recent 6 Nations campaigns. It was therefore a crucial score for the team, not only in this match, but for their overall confidence in this year's tournament

Greig Laidlaw's conversion attempt was desperately unlucky. From the tightest of angles, his right-footed kick bounced out from the left-hand post. Half time: France 9-8 Scotland.

With France gaining the ascendancy, a cross-field kick ten minutes into the second half, was caught by Scotland's Fife, who then slipped out of play. In frustration, he threw the ball into touch, forcing Nigel Owens to award a penalty to the French, which Lopez duly dispatched, increasing the lead to 12-8.

As both packs were slightly reshuffled, France put the pressure on yet again. Just metres from the Scottish line, a careless knock-on gave Scotland a scrum. From the following set-piece, Euan Murray was punished for dropping to his knees. Lopez's resulting penalty bounced off the post and the deficit remained at four points.

Mid-way through the second half, Scotland were dealt another blow. The referee invited number 8, Johnnie Beattie, to spend a 10 minute break in the sin bin, after an infringement in the ruck. With a man advantage, the French smelled blood.

Sterling defence from a gutsy Scottish pack, helped them survive wave after wave of French attack. After 65 minutes, the game was really starting to open up – it was end to end stuff.

Scotland had two chances which would have allowed them to score a try in the last 10 minutes. On 71 minutes, a long pass out towards France's Yoann Huget in the middle of the park, was travelling through the air, when Scottish winger, Tim Visser galloped on at speed and came desperately close to an interception. With no-one at home for the hosts, you have to feel that if Visser had managed to gather that ball, it may well have been try time.

On 74, Finn Russell scooped up a knock-on and set off on a counter-attack. He chose to kick and chase, and looked in pole position to retrieve the ball, only for it to bounce awkwardly and straight into opposition hands. In what proved to be a match of narrow margins, it has to be said that the luck wasn't with Scotland in the closing stages.

With the Scots desperately searching for a way into French territory, they were awarded a penalty, with only four minutes remaining. Russell kicked for touch, and following the line-out, the ball was put through the hands, but one stray pass out-wide, gave France the chance to hack the ball down field.

A good counter-attacking ruck from the French forwards, enabled substitute second-row, Eddy Ben Arous, to get his hands over the ball and secure the penalty.

In a very tense atmosphere, Lopez continued his accurate kicking performance, to increase the gap to seven points and surely put his French side out of reach.

From the kick-off, France saw out the remaining minute, by going through the phases, before match-winner Lopez sent the ball high into the Paris sky and out of play, to confirm a hard-fought win for Philippe Saint-André's men.

It was a very important triumph for the French, who will aim to avenge their fourth-place finish in last year's Championship. They will now travel to Dublin, to face an Irish side who enjoyed a comprehensive win on the road earlier today, when they beat Italy by 26 points to 3. In next weekend's match, France will have to be more clinical with their finishing and will have to try and make all their attacking pressure pay dividends, in what will be a gruelling fixture.

As for Scotland, they will head back home and get ready for a match next Sunday in Edinburgh, against the Welsh. The 2013 champions, will be desperate to get their campaign back on track, following last night's narrow 21-16 defeat to England at the Millennium Stadium.

Despite the defeat tonight in Paris, and the succession of penalties given away – Scotland have many positives to take into the encounter at Murrayfield. They can take heart from their strong, resistant defence and the fact that they did not concede a single point whilst outnumbered, during the second half.

Furthermore, the six players making their first Six Nations appearance coped extremely well with the pressure and atmosphere. Replacements, Sam Hidalgo-Clyne and Fraser Brown, who came on at scrum-half and hooker, respectively – gave a solid performance.

Of the four starters both Jonny Gray and Blair Cowan were instrumental in putting in crucial tackles and gaining turnovers, with Mark Bennett and Finn Russell breaking France's defensive line on numerous occasions and providing attacking opportunities for the Scots.

This Weekend's Results:

WALES 16-21 ENGLAND

ITALY 3-26 IRELAND

FRANCE 15-8 SCOTLAND

Next Weekend's Fixtures:

ENGLAND v ITALY (Saturday, 2.30pm)

IRELAND v FRANCE (Saturday, 5pm)

SCOTLAND v WALES (Sunday, 3pm)