

RBS Six Nations – France 22

Scotland 16

Scotland gain bonus point, but inexperienced pack crumbles against French forwards as injuries and handling errors prove costly.

Business as usual, after three successive defeats Les Bleus can finally banish their abysmal run of form and claim to have turned their Six Nations campaign around.

Perhaps the monumental pressure on France to eke out a victory against Scotland should be taken into consideration when assessing the Scottish performance. This was not just another game for France, but an opportunity to return to winning ways in front of a capacity crowd at the Stade de France, an opportunity they weren't going to give up lightly.

Despite going ahead at the start of the second half, Scotland didn't have the guile to survive the impact of the French forwards sheer brute force and their rolling mauls were particularly impressive in full flow.

At the very core of the problem for Scotland was a misfiring scrum, and the injury to the more experienced John Barclay within the opening minutes of the game set the tone for the forwards, this was going to be a bruising encounter. The failed head injury assessment meant John Hardie had to basically start the game from the opening quarter of the game and ominously he too went off just after the second half kicked off, also with a head injury.

Injuries were to become a dominant theme in the game for Scotland with Greig Laidlaw substituted with an ankle injury after only 20 minutes into the encounter.

His replacement Ali Price, came into the game and immediately lost his head, reversing a Scotland penalty after pushing Lopez to the floor. Although the three points were missed and his blushes spared, the effect of losing the captain seemed to reverberate through the team as Finn Russell's bizarre conversion attempt indicated a team playing without the poise or confidence necessary to beat France at home.

Scotland however did take the game to the wire and if key players hadn't gone down injured, the pack had asserted itself and handling errors were a rarity, then it may have been a different story.

There were numerous chances in a frenetic first three minutes at both ends of the Stade de France but handling errors from both sides set the tone for an entertaining and hard fought contest. In the end mistakes and missed opportunities defined the game and ultimately shifted the balance of power in France's favour.

The game started at a frightening pace as both sides challenged for the kick off but Scotland's first attack was scuppered by poor handling as 21 year-old prop Zander Ferguson lost control of the ball. France immediately sprung into action, taking the ball to Scotland's 22' before winning the first scrum encounter ending in a penalty to France. It was a kickable one at that and Camille Lopez stepped up to take the three points.

Scotland's second attack ended within metres of the French try line as Six Nations newbie Hugh Jones missed an opportunity to intercept the ball mid-flight.

Scotland did hit back with an excellently worked passing move, which saw Huw Jones offload mid tackle and provide an assist for the ever hungry full back Stuart Hogg to take the first try of the day. France soon returned the compliment as Gael Fickou powered through on the wing after some patient rugby by

the French, Camille Lopez coolly converted before Scotland kicked two successive penalties, narrowing the score to 13-11.

By half time Scotland were only two points down, heroic defending by Fraser Brown and the Scottish forwards kept Scotland within touching distance. France's dominance at the scrum turned into possession but with only one try to show for it, they would have been rueing missed opportunities at the interval.

The offload stats were telling in terms of possession and dominance, France offloaded twelve times in the first half to Scotland's three. But it was a tough physical encounter and Northampton Saints Louis Piccamole stood out amongst others in this immensely physical French pack.

Scotland started the second half strongly as Tommy Seymour kicked the ball deep into French territory, managing to regather the ball before passing to Tim Swinson who ran under the posts for a second Scottish try. Perhaps the breathless start to the second half got the better of Finn Russell who uncharacteristically kicked the conversion under the posts just moments after celebrating the try.

France kicked another penalty to tie the game at 16-16 and Scotland went onto miss two difficult penalties, ceding a further six points, which could have altered the dynamics of the game altogether. The French forwards relentless assault on the Scottish defence took no prisoners and Fraser Brown walked off the pitch in a daze on 66 minutes.

After a period of French dominance the Scottish defence held on and a key last ditch tackle by Huw Jones on 70 minutes prevented a try by the narrowest of margins. The referee decided with the benefit of a video replay that control of the ball had been lost and ultimately that tackle kept Scotland in the game at 16-16.

But it was Huw Jones mistake that cost Scotland a penalty on

the 71st minute that fans will remember despite his try saving efforts moments earlier. Maxime Machenaud's excellent tackle led him to spill the ball and Camille Lopez duly took the penalty with aplomb.

Finn Russell was replaced by Duncan Weir after a shaky second half performance and despite excellent performances from Hamish Watson and the Gray brothers, the Scottish scum felt like it was being flailed at times throughout the game. France converted another penalty to take the lead to 6 points. The final few minutes of the game ended with Scotland's blunted attack missing key passes before possession resided again in the hands of the French pack who looked at times, unstoppable.

Even Hogg was stripped of the ball towards the end of the game, surely a sign that Scotland had given all they could muster but were simply outgunned by a ferocious French pack.

Although defeat will be hard to take in these circumstances, the intensity of the game and the genuine closeness of the tie means Scotland will be licking their wounds.

But it was a game France had to win, and Scotland were always going to be hampered by losing the captain Greig Laidlaw and key players early on.

A valiant effort by Vern Cotter's side but the performance was short of what was needed to win the game.

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