

A 2007 Six Nations View

By Frederick Claro

This year is a crucial year for the elite of our sport as once again, the RWC is looming around the corner. The Tri-Nations competition will give us a last statement on the southern hemisphere forces prior the event this coming summer, whereas the June tours should not bring much novelty concerning European nations who will mostly rest and recondition their fatigued players after the usual exhausting seasons on both side of the Channel.

The 2007 Six Nations Tournament reconfirmed once more if necessary what we all know for a while: European rugby is fading as a result of players' work overload and lack of recovery. If France won more convincingly this year, it certainly was not due to an evolution of the quality of rugby played, but more to the fact that at last, players were completely rested from domestic games during the entire tournament. Were some lessons learnt from the past?

As far as game evolution goes, Ireland has shown once more in 2007 that they are the best team of the northern hemisphere, producing quality rugby throughout the event with consistency and continuity at its best. Should they ever have lost the game against France will be debated for years to come, and more maturity in the last game would have land them the championship on the Goal Average. Well, it is all history now and only the next RWC will show if Irish players can really close a game when needed.

I have consistently said that in the wake of the evolution of the game which is producing more and more game time, physicality and continuity under the leadership of the All Blacks, only the teams able to raise consistently the volume and intensity of the game to 45% or more of Actual Game Time will have a chance to hold the Web Ellis Cup in Paris this year. Let's have a look of the game continuity produced in this 2007 Six Nations:

The following games were used for analysis with all 6 teams represented at least once:

- Italy-France
- Ireland-France
- England-Scotland
- Ireland-England
- Italy-Ireland
- Wales-Ireland

Italy-France	Ireland-France	England-Scotland	Ireland-England	Italy-Ireland	Ireland-Wales
39%	40%	42%	39%	42%	44%

The average game time on these six 2007 game samples is: 41% where the average game time for RWC 2003 was 42% but the average game time for the last 2 editions of the Six Nations was in the range of 40% showing therefore a consistency in lower volume of play within European rugby, but in my opinion far from the required minima to hope approaching New Zealand game intensity in the next event. As previously analyzed, elite NZ players 'comfort zone is in the range of 45% of high intensity game time. At that rate most European players are physically and hence technically "in the red" or if able to sustain the rhythm, it would not be for long and would quickly lead to fatigue and to an error prone game evolution.

In comparison, the first Australia-New Zealand game of the 2006 Tri-Nations was played at an incredible 49% Actual Game Time rate. The winner of the next RWC will be the team able to subtly blend a very high level of game volume and intensity with enough creativity to offset the ever improving defense systems developed.

Among all European teams, only Ireland has shown that they are on that path of development, and I wouldn't be surprised to see them as the last European team standing in the path of southern hemisphere teams, specifically the All Blacks. France at home should evidently not be written off, but it is more and more obvious today that their game plan choice is set to the 2003 England's game approach: strong forwards, control of the set pieces, hermetic defense and kicking for goal from anywhere on the field to get the scoreboard going. Unfortunately, French players today are far from the quality and experience of England players four years ago. England had the team to fulfill the plan four years ago. France will fail as they have nothing else to propose. They will moreover be physically outmatched position by position to defy a NZ team yet to peak with two interchangeable teams.

As of 2007, there are two distinctive leagues in the rugby world: The All Blacks and the rest of the world! Individually and collectively, NZ players have no match in present form among European teams...and others! Nine months prior the next RWC begins, all physical, technical, psychological and tactical parameters are in favor of the men in black, and as things are currently evolving, it would need some very serious miracles for the NZ men not to lift the Cup in Paris.

Never before has the physiological and bio-motor aspects of the game been such a limiting factor of performance for the vast majority of teams. Superior conditioning coupled with sound individual, collective technique and tactical astuteness, are the primary factors of success in rugby today. The success of New Zealand rugby lies in its constant self-questioning and never ending way of answering questions. New Zealand rugby is in a constant motion on and off the pitch where solutions are always offered to arising problems, where it is not a question of money, but a question of culture and solving a never ending jigsaw game. At the end of the day, anywhere in the world, the game of rugby comes down to extremely basic fundamentals:

- Go forward with or without the ball
- Get the ball and secure it (combat and support)
- Get it back if you don't have it (combat and support)

- Score more than the opposition to win the game

All the rest is just plain talk... Who does these better than anyone else today?

Who brought these fundamentals to an optimal point today?

Who can compete 80 minutes or longer at high intensity to achieve these fundamentals?

Who achieves these fundamentals in what I would call a "zen spirit"?

Answer: the winners of the next RWC

I believe rugby will not be trained and played the same way after this coming world cup.

The All Blacks will set a benchmark so high, that it will shake the game down to its foundations. There is going to be rugby before and after 2007 so much will be NZ domination in the next competition.

History is marching. Lessons have been learnt. Let the game begins!