

Sport Rugby union

Confident Lancaster needs new firepower to fend off snipers

The days of encouraging defeats by sides from the southern hemisphere and the "certainties" of last year's Six Nations seem a long time ago, writes Owen Slot



There was a time when England could lose to the All Blacks by less than a score and it felt like a moral victory. That time was only five months ago in the first international of the summer tour. In Auckland there was a crisis of missing personnel facing Stuart Lancaster and a five-point defeat felt like his finest hour. The clock has

ticked on too far for any such comfort to remain.

Only three points separated England from New Zealand at Twickenham on Saturday, but it would be misleading to suggest that they were cruelly denied, whatever you thought of Aaron Cruden's dubiously awarded try.

England finished 24-21 down but comprehensively behind. They have

found four consecutive ways of losing to the All Blacks of late, three of those by five points or fewer, but only Auckland felt anything like rough justice or so near yet so far.

Lancaster, the head coach, insisted afterwards that his team were on track for the World Cup. (Not that you'll ever hear a coach say the opposite.) As for the All Blacks' winning habit, he said: "We don't think the gap is very big at all." However, away from cameras and microphones and the business of making reassuring public statements, he must surely be questioning this "track" of his.

A few months back, Lancaster's England seemed firmly headed in the right direction. However, the All Blacks experience has put paid to that; the certainties of last season's RBS Six Nations Championship campaign have faded. Some of those certainties have already been tinkered with and changed by Lancaster himself.

Before the Six Nations, for instance, England's policy was for a two-sided attack with a second playmaker at No 12 who could kick. That description neatly fitted Billy Twelvetrees. Yet whither, now, Twelvetrees or indeed that kicking No 12?

New Zealand have simply exposed that making merry on the scoreboards of the Six Nations does not translate to the rest of the world. The next three weeks are now huge: a massive test of Lancaster, his team selection policies, his choice of when to stick and when to twist, how to decide what is not working; and what is the difference between a selection that is not working and a player he should stick by because he has just had a bad day or two. When is two bad days too much?

A point of note here: Lancaster has a good record as a selector. He has few failures (Joel Tomkins, the exception); he picked an inexperienced back line for this year's Six Nations and should have won a grand slam. On Saturday, many (like me) questioned the selection of Jonny May and, after three minutes, were given our answer.

Where Lancaster's analysis must now be falling is on his dead cert at



Sign of the times: the impressive performance from Attwood, until recently the

No 10. In Owen Farrell, Lancaster has always shown faith, never doubt. Firmness of opinion is, of course, a quality, but an inability to question yourself is not. Lancaster is playing a dangerous game with his fly half because his loyalty to Farrell has limited his other options. In so concertedly grooming Farrell as his No 10 of choice, Lancaster has not developed the experience levels of the alternatives.

"What if Farrell gets injured?" has long seemed a reasonable question. "What are the alternatives?"

Farrell's kicking on Saturday was poor, his game-management was poor. Lancaster gave repeated assurances

that, despite his lack of game time, he would be up to speed. But what if Farrell's qualities are sufficient to win a Six Nations game but not one against a giant from the southern hemisphere?

This is a big issue for Lancaster. Stick with him throughout the autumn and risk heading further in the wrong direction? Or try a different track?

The option of using George Ford at No 10 and Farrell outside him has been mentioned frequently by Lancaster. It should not be dismissed as idle talk; Lancaster means it and has allowed glimpses of it but has never given it the opportunity to bed in. The good money was that we would see it in 12 days' time



Hands-on approach: Hartley, left, and Kruis attempt to stop Cruden from orchestrating another threatening attack from New Zealand at Twickenham

Australia and England — they have not been content just to man the barricades when a player down, they have scored a try themselves.

Conversely, they have successfully proved the value of being a man up. Four times this year, an opposition player has been shown a yellow card, and they have scored a try every time.



fourth choice in the second row, shows that England's established order may well change between now and the World Cup

against Samoa. It is not unlikely that this will be the starting 10-12 combination when the World Cup comes round.

It fits perfectly into Lancaster's philosophies. It gives him his two-sided attack with two kickers and twice as many questions to ask of opposition defences. If Lancaster were to move Farrell out to No 12 against South Africa this Saturday, it would be harsh in the extreme on Kyle Eastmond, but it may benefit England. Shifting Farrell out to No 12 would retain, for England, the comfort of his goalkicking prowess.

One argument against Ford at No 10 is the reliability of his goalkicking, but if

he has Farrell outside him, that is problem solved.

Is Ford ready? An answer of a kind was provided by England's best player on Saturday: Dave Attwood. The lock has been banging on the door, demanding entry into England's elite and has long been anchored at fourth choice for the second row and required injuries to two players above him in the pecking order to get picked. What he has shown is that England have strength in depth and that maybe Lancaster should have turned to him earlier.

It may seem small beer for England fans, but it is by no means insignificant that their team do not feel disheartened

by the evidence of a run of four Kiwi defeats. They were not dispirited afterwards, they were angry — as you would hope — and convinced that they still had the All Blacks within reach, infuriated that they had once again failed to catch them.

"We are definitely getting closer," Mike Brown said after the game. "We feel good enough to win."

England may feel that they are getting closer but they are not close enough. An intriguing three weeks will now be played out as Lancaster decides whether to stick to his guns. To beat the southern hemisphere, right now, he needs more firepower.

winning numbers game

In a ten-minute spell against Australia in Auckland, they scored two.

This is no coincidence, it is something they train for. On Saturday, while the television footage of the Coles incident was being replayed on the big screen, the All Blacks did not stand and watch, they started preparing for the likelihood of being a man down. "We were planning our thinking," Read said, "making sure we got our tactics right."

They talked about the lineup and the likelihood of Aaron Smith, the scrum half, taking the throws. This is something that Smith had practised.

So when Coles was indeed shown a yellow card, they were ready. What ensued was an abysmal ten minutes for England, when Care kicked the ball away three times and allowed New Zealand to keep almost all the possession.

The closest anyone came to a try was when Sonny Bill Williams broke the

line. Had he passed to Smith on his left, they would have scored. "The reality is we won the game in those ten minutes," Steve Hansen, the head coach, said afterwards.

They gave a masterclass in the process.

Scorers: England: Tries: May (4min), penalty try (79). Conversion: Ford (79). Penalty goals: Farrell 3 (18, 22, 40). New Zealand: Tries: Cruden (14), McCaw (46), Faumuina (71). Penalties: Cruden 2 (24, 37) Barrett (66). Scoring sequence (England first): 5-0, 5-5, 8-5, 11-5, 11-8, 11-11, 14-11, (half-time), 14-16, 14-19, 14-24, 21-24. England: M Brown; S Rokoduguni (rep: A Watson, 62), B Barritt, K Eastmond (rep: G Ford, 64), J May, O Farrell, D Care (rep: B Youngs, 62), J Marler (rep: M Mullin, 54), D Hartley (rep: R Webster, 73), D Wilson (rep: K Brooks, 73), D Attwood, Clawes (rep: G Kruis, 22), T Wood, C Robshaw, B Vunipola (rep: B Morgan, 52). New Zealand: I Dagg; B Smith, C Smith (rep: R CroTTY, 57), SB Williams, J Savea, A Cruden (rep: B Barrett, 59), A Smith (rep: T Perenara, 66), W Crockett (rep: B Franks, 59), D Coles (sin-bin 57-67, rep: K Mealamu, 66), O Franks (rep: C Faumuina, 45), B Retallick (rep: P Tuipulotu, 40), S Whitelock, J Kaino (rep: L Messam, 66), R McCaw, K Read. Referee: U Owens (Wales). Attendance: 82,000.

England



Ratings by Alex Lowe

6 MIKE BROWN (Harlequins) Short of his best — solid under the high ball, but dropped a pass with a try begging

6 SEMESA ROKODUGUNI (Bath) Did his basics well, but could not get into the game in an attacking sense

7 BRAD BARRITT (Saracens) Not a natural No 13, but made his tackles and brought organisation to the midfield

6 KYLE EASTMOND (Bath) Delivered some great passes, stood up to the defensive task and justified his selection

8 JONNY MAY (Gloucester) Roared back to international rugby with a quite brilliant try and he was always a threat

5 OWEN FARRELL (Saracens) Short on rugby and his tactical kicking game played into New Zealand's hands

5 DANNY CARE (Harlequins) The scrum half was also guilty of a poor kicking game, particularly in the second half

8 JOE MARLER (Harlequins) The loose-head prop was a strong defender and a willing workhorse in the loose

7 DYLAN HARTLEY (Northampton) Delivered a faultless lineout display and put himself about in the loose

7 DAVID WILSON (Bath) The prop was chiefly used as a ball-carrier and he delivered another solid performance

8 DAVE ATTWOOD (Bath) The new dad was outstanding on his third start. Dominant in the set-piece and the mauls

6 COURTNEY LAWES (Northampton) Made an abrasive start, but missed a tackle that led to a try

6 TOM WOOD (Northampton) Important to the lineout, but do England need him to be more influential as a ball-carrier?

7 CHRIS ROBshaw (Harlequins) England's best player in the first half, but his influence waned later on

6 BILLY VUNIPOLA (Saracens) Made some big carries, but the No 8 is turned over too often at the breakdown

Replacements

George Kruis (Saracens; for Lawes, 23); Good introduction. **6 Matt Mullan** (Wasps; for Marler, 55) **Rob Webster** (Bath; for Hartley, 73) **Kieran Brooks** (Newcastle; for Wilson, 73) **Ben Morgan** (Gloucester; for Vunipola, 53) **George Ford** (Bath; for Eastmond, 65) **Ben Youngs** (Leicester; for Care, 62) **Anthony Watson** (Bath; for Rokoduguni, 62)

New Zealand



ALL BLACKS

6 ISRAEL DAGG (Crusaders) Beaten with ease by May inside the five-metre channel for the opening try, but always a threat

7 BEN SMITH (Highlanders) Not a day for the wing to display his full attacking range, but still showed his class

5 CONRAD SMITH (Hurricanes) Even apart from May streaking past him, this was not one of Smith's best days

6 SONNY BILL WILLIAMS (Chiefs) Generally well marshalled but made one break and was physical in defence

7 JULIAN SAVEA (Hurricanes) Roared back to international rugby with a quite brilliant try and he was always a threat

7 AARON CRUDEN (Chiefs) Place-kicking game was off and looked a bit sheepish after his try, but had a decent game

7 AARON SMITH (Highlanders) Grew in influence with slick distribution and his box-kicking was a lesson for England

6 WYATT CROCKETT (Crusaders) There were few scrums to get stuck into, but had a solid all-round game

5 DANE COLES (Hurricanes) The yellow card for a stamp did not prove costly, but it blotted the hooker's copybook

6 OWEN FRANKS (Crusaders) Conceded one scrum penalty, but made his share of tackles and his break led to a try

6 BRODIE RETALLICK (Chiefs) Not as dominant a figure as usual and was replaced at half-time with a shoulder injury

8 SAM WHITELOCK (Crusaders) Challenged in the lineout, but produced a performance of the highest quality

8 JEROME KAINO (Blues) Ran through two players to set up the try for Cruden, tackled tirelessly. Relentlessly good

8 RICHIE MCCAW (Crusaders) Raised his game in the second half and his team followed suit. Scored his 25th try

8 KIERAN READ (Crusaders) A trademark display from the world's best No 8: great hands, heavily involved in the loose

Replacements

Patrick Tuipulotu (Blues; for Retallick, 40) **Charlie Faumuina** (Blues; for Franks, 48) **R CroTTY** (Crusaders; for C Smith, 48) **B Barrett** (Hurricanes; for Cruden, 60) **B Franks** (Hurricanes; for Crockett, 60) **K Mealamu** (Blues; for Coles, 66) **TJ Perenara** (Hurricanes; for A Smith, 67) **L Messam** (Chiefs; for Kaino, 67) **Referee:** Nigel Owens (Wales)

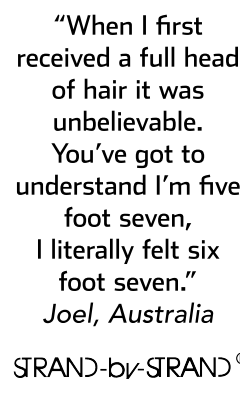
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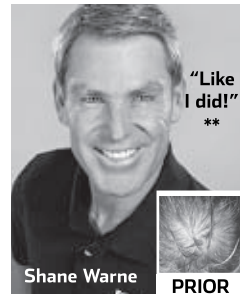
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Owen Slot Chief Rugby Correspondent

One of the most impressive achievements in the All Blacks victory at Twickenham on Saturday was the way they withstood so successfully the yellow card for Dane Coles and the challenge of playing a man down.

However, there should be no real surprise that they did not concede a try in those ten minutes because they have played for more than an hour of rugby this year with only 14 men on the pitch and have not conceded one.

It is widely proven that a yellow card can kill off a team or be the turning point in a match. However, this is

another piece of accepted wisdom that New Zealand have successfully challenged. When Coles was sent to the sin-bin in the 56th minute for kicking out at Danny Care, it appeared to be the perfect opportunity for England. Yet England were unable to make their numerical advantage count. They did not get close to scoring; they struggled even to get in the All Blacks' half.

New Zealand have now been shown yellow cards seven times this year and they have not conceded a single try when a man down. You have to go back through ten yellow cards, to the Rugby Championship last year, to find one that cost them a five-pointer.

Holding out when a man down is "something you pride yourself on", according to Sam Whitelock. "It's a test of character within the group," Kieran Read said.

Indeed, twice this year — against