

Drop Ashton? Don't be Hasty...

Following England's Six Nations win over France, [Harry Hawkins](#) argues that the criticism of Chris Ashton is unjustified

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Stuart Lancaster's England side are on course for a Grand Slam. Image: thesportreview.com via flickr Creative Commons

Let me start by saying that England were not great on Saturday. France brought an intensity to their game that we haven't seen since the autumn and it rattled the hosts. A couple of suspect interpretations at the breakdown were all that stood between France and a valuable away victory, and the ultimate ten-point winning margin flatters England to say the least.

But – as we all know – Grand Slams seldom arrive in the shape of five consecutive dazzling try-fests and I defy anyone to show me a Six Nations champion that hasn't ridden their luck to some extent at least.

I have been bemused, therefore, by the calls from various pundits to drop Chris Ashton for England's next game against Italy. Ashton is "playing himself out of the team" wrote one journalist on Monday morning; another suggested that he might "pay a high price for his defensive frailty". It must be said, Ashton had a fruitless game in general, but the condemnation seems to centre on his failure to tackle France's Wesley Fofana as he seared through England's defence for a virtuoso solo score.

First things first – anyone who thought that Chris Ashton was ever brought into the England camp to shore up the side's defence is fooling themselves. His value is in the tries he finishes, the tries he creates and an innate ability to be in the right place at the right time. He also chases kicks with as much industry as anyone in the Aviva Premiership and constantly distracts defenders when England are on the ball. Whenever England are at their attacking best, Ashton is never far away.

Secondly, Ashton is hardly the first player to fail to shackle Wesley Fofana in the last two years. With deceptive feet, an eye for a line and a vicious hand off Fofana is one of the hardest men to tackle in this hemisphere one on one. It is interesting, then, that so much English media attention focussed on Ashton's failure to tackle and so little on Fofana's elusiveness.

It seems awfully impetuous to drop the former Northampton winger. Was Ashton not part of the triumvirate of English who did that most rare thing in the Autumn of scoring a try against the World

Champion All Blacks? Did he not open England's try account this Six Nations against Scotland? Granted, he failed to score against Ireland, but then again no-one scored a five-pointer that day, and it was Ashton who worked so hard to win a valuable breakdown penalty in the dying moments of the game to deny Ireland even a sniff of a victory. He is also in decent form at club level for Saracens, most recently bagging a double in tough conditions against Edinburgh in the Heineken Cup. Surely he deserves better than to be cast out as a result of one missed tackle.

England will certainly tinker for the clash with the Azzurri - the likely return of Ben Morgan in the forwards will cause a few positional shuffles in the pack. Lancaster might also consider a midfield pairing of Twelvetrees and Tuilagi, resting Brad Barritt before what will surely be a massive defensive effort against Wales.

But Ashton should stay. Let him play himself back into his best attacking form against one of the Championship's weaker defences. He may yet come good for England and, if he finds his best form, could end up facing the Wallabies this summer wearing the red of the British and Irish Lions.



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