

Wilkinson should not be the scapegoat for England's failings

Jonny Wilkinson should not take the blame for England's inability to play any imaginative rugby in their unsuccessful Six Nations campaign



By [Huw Harrow](#)
Thursday 25 March 2010



Paddy-K via Flickr Creative Commons

Andy Powell's golf buggy antics on the M4 aside, the biggest talking point to emerge from this year's Six Nations was Jonny Wilkinson's place as England's fly half. Last weekend Martin Johnson finally made the decision that many had been crying out for, replacing the golden boy of English rugby with his former Newcastle teammate Toby Flood for the championship finale against France. Wilkinson appeared to be carrying the can for England's continued failure to produce any sort of imaginative backline play throughout the tournament and many pundits have, in my view unfairly, called for the record point scorer in international rugby to be put out to pasture.

England did show some signs of life in the backs at the Stade de France, but whether having Flood pulling the strings for England throughout the earlier stages of the tournament would have made much of a difference is doubtful. England's problems in attack did not stem from Wilkinson, the quality of ball he received from his forwards throughout drastically limited his options. Sides will always have to end up kicking if possession is being recycled from rucks so slowly that the opposition defence has time to go off and make a cup of tea before forming their defensive line. Even Barry John would have had trouble getting a backline moving in the sort of circumstances England invariably found themselves in.

Wilkinson is not the most dynamic of fly halves, that much is undeniable. He doesn't stand flat or threaten the gain line often. But he shouldn't necessarily have to. With the predominance of kicking in the game at the moment, the modern fly half functions to control territory and the scoreboard with the boot first and foremost. There can be no doubt Jonny is still well capable of this, as he showed by coming off the bench against France to land a monster 50 metre penalty from the right touchline in the driving rain.

Apart from the peerless All Black Dan Carter, there are few other 10s in the game right now who we might

describe as creative fly halves. South Africa are perfectly content to pick a kicking machine in Morne Steyn, the Grand Slam Winning French prefer the pragmatic Francois Trinh-Duc to the enigmatic Frederick Michalak and even the attack orientated Welsh side rely on the steady presence of Stephen Jones to call the shots.

The attacking impetus of these sides comes from other positions and that is another area where Wilkinson can feel let down. Riki Flutey, who was selected alongside him at inside centre to offer a more imaginative outlet, was anonymous all tournament. Key outside backs Delon Armitage and Ugo Monye were also off form and it was not until they were replaced by the Northampton pair of Ben Foden and Chris Ashton respectively that England began to look dangerous out wide.

The alternatives to Wilkinson hardly present a compelling case. Though Flood did little wrong in his display against France, and he may take his fair share of the credit for England's improved showing, he is yet to convince as a big game player, his kicking in particular falling to pieces too often. Shane Geraghty has similar doubts surrounding his ability with the boot and the most precocious talent of them all, Danny Cipriani, has seen his reputation nosedive to the extent that he is moving to the Melbourne Rebels in the hope of revitalising his career. The less said about Andy Goode the better.

Flood may have done enough to earn a longer run in the side, but if so it should be at the expense of Flutey in the centre not Wilkinson. That way Flood can focus on injecting some spark in to England's play with Wilkinson there to take the burden of kicking away from him in a similar manner to the way Wales have sought to accommodate James Hook in their backline.

Scapegoating Jonny for England's inability to create tryscoring chances this Six Nations is rather short sighted. The slow ball delivered by his pack and the poor form of the attacking weapons around him were far more to blame. He has faced no such criticism for his club form for Toulon and it seems the English media have ridiculously high expectations of what he can provide. Whatever you may say of him there is nobody else you would rather see stepping up for the crucial match-winning kick in the 79th minute and, for me, he is still the man England should aim to build their backline around. Martin Johnson should leave Jonny to do what he does best and address the problems England have in other areas rather than expecting him, or any other fly half, to magically transform England's fortunes.



4 comments

Martyn Madden

26 Mar '10 at 11:43 am

Agree completely, Flutey was a shadow of himself this Six Nations although a point people have ignored is he has only played 4 matches for Brive this season, due to injury. Mathew Tait was not the creative back this writer said he would be, and Wilkinson was not receiving quick or good go forward ball from his back row, Nick Easter should be dropped as he is simply too slow to be an international number 8, all other teams in the six Nations have a good number 8 now and the role they play in quick ball and momentum is vital, look at Xavier Rush at Cardiff.

It is interesting to note that running fly halves such as Ruan Pienaar, Phil Godman are not being preferred right now, and the English media/fans have an unrealistic and nostalgic view of what Jonny Wilkinson should be. In 2003 Will Greenwood was outside him running angles and he had arguably one of the best back row combinations of all time in front of him.

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dan

26 Mar '10 at 11:33 pm

Completely agree with this article. The media using Wilkinson as a scapegoat has got boring. It's the same

old story that's been repeating itself for the past 2 or 3 years. It is not simply down to the fly-half to determine the quality of play. The problem lies with slow ball to Jonny Wilkinson. He cannot stand flat because of such slow ball that he receives from Care and there are numerous problems with the pack.

It's annoying how articles about how Wilkinson being "past his best" etc. keep churning out after every bad performance by England. He never actually gets credited for the good and clever things he does. He has made mistakes this tournament involving his kicking out of hand, but it is ridiculous how the media point at him, saying how he should make way for Flood and be dropped. Toby Flood had a good game against France, and he has a good future ahead of him, but England's improved performance was not down to the replacement at no. 10. The pack played better and Care's ball was faster allowing more options, rather than the past performances.

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Matt

3 Apr '10 at 11:49 am

Fully agree - Wilkinson does get the blame whenever he doesn't win the game for England, completely ignoring the other 14 players on the field.

One thing to point out on the below comment:

"South Africa are perfectly content to pick a kicking machine in Morne Steyn"

.. which I think is ignoring or missing a something pretty major. I've never been a huge Steyn fan but apart from being the leading point scorer in 2010 Super14 he was also the top try scorer for the competition up to the end of March 2010.

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Huw Harrow

5 Apr '10 at 5:53 pm

Matt - must admit I was unaware of that particular stat. It's still relatively early in the S14 though so I'd be very surprised if he stayed in that position. Maybe, he's a different animal at club level, but from what I've seen of him in action for the Boks he does little in open play other than sitting back in the pocket lauching up and unders for Habana to chase. Predictable but effective.

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