

Samoa Exit with a Flourish – 10th October 2015

Samoa v Scotland

Bearing in mind that Scottish football and rugby fans are renowned for travelling in their thousands across the world to support their sporting heroes, then Newcastle upon Tyne, just 65 miles from the Scottish border, was effectively a home game for the kilted fans. Anyone could be forgiven for thinking this match was being played in Scotland with their supporters filling the city of Newcastle and turning it blue with the flower of Scotland ringing around St James's Park.

When the two teams last met in Durban back in 2013, it was the Samoans who defeated the Scots.

Scotland and Castres Olympique second row Richie Gary was set to gain his fiftieth test cap and Glasgow Warriors' winger Sean Lamont gained his 100th (albeit from the bench.)

Samoa's starting line up had a home nations feel to it, with the Pacific islanders fielding no fewer than six players currently contracted to English or Welsh teams. Nevertheless, home and pride are interwoven into Manu Samoa. All the team and management have emphasised that throughout this tournament. Also, commonly highlighted is the physical threat that Samoa carry. This can sometimes do a disservice to their potential attacking threat. Scotland were in no doubt about this, after a scintillating first 40 minutes.

The game saw Samoa push the Scots right to the edge with a scintillating performance only spoiled by them giving away 19 penalties.

From the start, Scotland were scrambling, suffering two turnovers. It didn't take long for Samoa to add to their early penalty with the creative Tusi Pisi claiming their first try after confirmation by the TMO. This took the score to 10-3, sending shockwaves through both the Scottish defenders and supporters. A lack of concentration in defence offered Scotland a way back, which Seymour duly took to level scores at 10-10 through Seymour.

Tusi Pisi finished the game with a personal haul of sixteen points. He managed to match, and in the second half beat, the Samoan all time record for the most points scored for the team. As he commented later the Samoan approach was beginning to pay off;

"For us, I think this week was about not over analysing things. We took that mentality into the game and it worked for us in the first 45-50 minutes"

With only fourteen minutes gone, hooker Leiataua crashed over the line for Samoa's second try and the third of the match.

Both teams hit back in a short spell with several treks upfield in quick succession, with Samoa reaching the twenty minute mark on top of a 15-10 scoreline, even with Tusi missing a conversion.

Scotland began to build a little pressure half way through the half, led by Laidlaw calmly steering his team. However, they were soon under pressure again as Lee-

Lo scored. Samoa were now playing flowing rugby combined with superb handling which the Scots were struggling to come to terms with defensively. At this point and with a seven point lead, Samoa were dominating. Midway through the half they had carried the ball 193 metres compared with Scotland's 65 metres.

Problems continued to mount for Scotland with Wilson being yellow carded, having lashed out with his foot on Fa'asavalu whilst being held. Tusi Pisi converting the resulting penalty.

In the remaining ten minutes of a scintillating half, Scotland finally struck back. Being rewarded for kicking to touch on a penalty. Hardie scored with a pushover try, which Laidlaw duly converted to level the scores at 23-23.

Samoa were not to be suppressed. Taulafo thought he'd scored Samoa's fourth try in the 36th minute. However, after what seemed like an age, Laidlaw was correctly adjudged to have been pulled out of position as he put the guard up for the tackle. They went back for the penalty, which put Samoa three points ahead at the break.

The Samoan team's efforts should have perhaps brought a bigger leading margin after dominating the first half, with a superior 62% of possession.

It was clear that Scotland needed to have more control after the break. Early pressure resulted in a number of penalties against the Pacific islanders. The crowd of 51,982 were being entertained handsomely. The Pacific island players would be disappointed that they gave away several penalties through the second period. A series of penalties for Scotland were kicked to touch with the hope that they made the scrum count. Samoa provided stout defence and forced Laidlaw's mind into going for the posts on the third penalty. Three more infringements followed with kicks missed for Scotland. However, they maintained their momentum. South African born Nel thought he had clinched it in the 73rd minute only to have his try chalked off. It was left to Laidlaw, Scotland's most consistent player of the day to settle Scottish nerves. He darted in to light up the stands and put Scotland ten points ahead with the kick.

It was typical of Samoa that they weren't finished, Matu'u had the Scotland fans biting their finger nails by scoring near the posts with two minutes remaining. A just reward for their late flourish.

The unbridled joy of Scottish fans that followed on 80 minutes was as much a reflection on Samoa's skill and enterprise as well as their own relief.

Afterwards, Maurie Fa'asavalu playing in his third World Cup, summed up the feeling in the dressing room;

"I thought the effort that the boys put in was good. I think it's important that we play our own brand of rugby and enjoy it. Rugby is the number one sport back home, we enjoy the physicality of it and we enjoy throwing the ball around."

Some of the statistics were particularly telling; Reynold Lee-Lo carried the ball 120 metres by himself – only slightly less than the top three carriers for the Scots combined.

“Lee played magnificently today. He was fantastic. He showed his class.” Coach Stephan Betham stated after the game. He continued, “credit to the boys, they played right up to the eightieth minute. You can’t win a test match when you give away so many penalties. We have got to go back and see where we went wrong.”

His opposite number, Vern Cotter, praised the Samoan team, commenting that;

“We came across a Samoan team we had not seen at this World Cup. They were very good with the ball. They should be a proud rugby nation. It was one of the most physical games we have had.”

Scotland captain Greg Laidlaw, who scored an impressive 26 points, agreed that, “they did play some tremendous rugby.”

There was just one last treat for the remaining fans inside St James’ Park as the Samoans performed the Siva Tau once again in front of the main stand, which, like some of their play, was received rapturously.

By The Reporters’ Academy