DAMP SQUIB THAT REFUSED TO EXPLODE

Simon Barnes expresses the disappointment of most neutrals at the final of the Rugby World Cup on 7 November 1999.

So I went to the World Cup final, and it took me two days to get there, and oh dear, wasn’t it absolutely awful? I badly want someone to suffer for it all, but for the life of me I can't think who. Who the hell can I blame?

But it is not as if anyone played particularly badly, or that people weren't trying, or if the coaches failed to come up with a proper game plan. It was just one of those occasions where sides met without ever really coming together. The earth didn't move: and you may always blame the earth.

Of course, any match of rugby would have looked pretty second rate compared with the gloriousland impossible semi-final when France orgiastically destroyed the New Zealanders.

But no, they did the job. They didn't set out to spoil the spectacle, and anyway, you couldn't blame them even if they did. Athletes do not seek to entertain: they seek to win, and we watch it because the process is absorbing, and occasionally glorious.

And those with a patriotic stake in the match would have shared the Australian delight in their own inexorability. Sport is not played for the neutrals' benefit. The fact of the matter is that sport is only incidentally entertaining, and when it seeks to be entertaining it becomes wrestling.

And France? You can hardly blame them for fading to reach the angelic heights of f previous week. They tried very hard to swing from the chandelier. It was hardly their fault that every time they tried, the rope broke.

The Australia defence was too good for the France hacks; and for the most part, the France defence was too good for the Australia backs. But alas, that didn't make for a brilliant tip defensive game, which can be every bit as thrilling as the expansive kind.

It was just a bit of a mess. The Australians won the World Cup without ever playing a tea good game. I expect plenty of neutrals said the same thing about England winning the frotth 35 World Cup in 1966.

It was real enough for the players. You could see the real joy in victory, and see, too, that the French felt the compensatory bitter satisfaction of defeat. But it was an odd occasion: mile voyeuristic, deeply unsatisfactory: like watching the couple next door when they have their clothes on.

Because most of us felt it had nothing to do with us, which was quite the opposite of what neutrals felt during the great semi-final. There were too many neutrals present, which always a danger with cup finals. There was no home team. The ground was full of New Zealanders and South Africans who had final tickets and supposed, well, they might as well go along.
And Cardiff never felt like an appropriate place to be, and the pitch didn't exactly help. I have never seen such a rotten stretch of grass; it would have embarrassed the football clubs I used to cover in the Isthmian League. It did as much as the Australia defence to nullify the France backs.

But really, there is no one to blame. When you watch a lot of sport, you know that sometimes it is great and sometimes it is not, and you never know which or when - which is one of the reasons why you keep going.

Australia got what they wanted, and for that matter, what they deserved. The neutrals didn’t but that is just their, or rather our hard luck. I didn't expect the Ausaies to ask: 'Was it good for you too?' Which was just as well.

Others were hinting even, before the tournament began that a southern-hemisphere official would be given the job of refereeing the final for the simple reason that northern hemisphere referees had taken charge in 1991 and 1995. With Hawke and O'Brien blorting their copybooks, and with the four Australians in the top 16 ineligible through the need for neutrality, Watson was the only man the tournament organisers could turn to.

Watson was one of the least experienced referees available, having officiated at only twelve internationals before the start of the tournament. Indeed, there is a hollow ring to the fact that the final was his thirteenth international.

It was more galling still that experienced and respected men such as Jim Flaming, Ed Morrison and Derek Bevan - of Scotland, England and Wales respectively - were available for the job. All three had received good reports for their performances earlier in tournament; it was their misfortune to come from the wrong side of the planet.

Simon Barnes  The Times
The Australia rugby camp was a very pleasant group to be associated with on Saturday night. But then again, one would not expect it to be any different with this great team of world champions. Throughout this tournament they have been wonderful ambassadors for their sport and country.

They thoroughly deserved to be crowned kings of rugby after a typically tense final in Cardiff on Saturday. There are some real strengths in this team and one only had to study the celebrations after the final whistle to understand one of the main reasons why this team is successful.

It was not just David Wilson hugging Tim Horan, but Wilson embracing John Best, the team doctor, Tim Horan lifting Tim Lane, the backs coach, off the ground. Everyone was included in the celebrations. From this display of emotion it was evident that it is a very happy out with every member of the team having an important role to play. Everyone in the team treated equally and has contributed to the victory.

Before every international, an ex Wallaby is invited to address the team on what it means play for Australia and present the jerseys to them. It is these little touches that set this group apart.

They are a very open and friendly bunch. They were not locked away in a team room in the bowels of the hotel on the evening before the game. They were to be seen wandering around their hotel, drinking coffee, signing autographs and generally chatting easily to any one. They ate in the public areas of the hotel along with other guests and were friendly approachable and polite. It was all done to try and keep the players from getting too tense prior to such a big game. But it also has the effect of keeping the group in touch with family, friends and supporters.

Rod Macqueen, Jeff Miller and Lane have created a wonderful atmosphere that not only allows the players to perform at the highest level, but for it to be enjoyable. It is interesting in a new age of professionalism that this team seems to operate on the 'old school' values and traditions. They are well rewarded for their efforts, but that is how it should be. By the same token it does not appear to be the prime motivation in this team.

I had the pleasure of being invited into the team room before the game by Macqueen. The walls were blanketed by faxes, e-mails and messages from well-wishers from all over world. The players were reading them all and it appeared that a few of then were genuinely moved by some of the messages.

The squad has an immense amount of talent, but it is how this is organised that is the key their success. The planning and lateral thought that goes into each performance is amazing. This is fed into the players on the training pitch, but then it is left up to them to make decisions during the game.
Stephen Larkham is a very good example of how this system works. He is an amazing talent and rather than burdening him with instructions, he is given as many options as possible every time he touches the ball and is left to choose the one he wants.

There was, however, one cloud hanging over the final. The foul play that appeared to have been instigated by the French was disgraceful. There appeared to be several cases of eye-gouging and this is just unacceptable. The evidence was obvious to anyone who saw John Eales after the game with his eye weeping and suffering from blurred vision, from a scratched cornea.

The rumours of biting and gouging in the semi-final between the French and the All Blacks went unanswered. The All Blacks could not raise these points without being accused of being bad losers.

I hope now that the Wallabies ask for some action to be taken against the French, given that they are in a better position to do so, having won the game.

They should not have to ask as the World Cup citing committee should be in overdrive to find the offenders. I do not think these things should sour the fantastic achievements of the Wallabies, but it must be dealt with through the appropriate channels and not just shoved under the carpet.

I thought that Bales handled it very well when he was asked straight after the match about what went on. He did not want to discuss it and wanted everyone to concentrate on the victory and their achievement rather than the actions of the French. I agree with that, but it should not left up to him to do anything about it anyway.

Well done, Wallabies. You have gone about your job in a quiet and understated way, you achieved it clinically. You out-played and out-thought your opponents and no doubt you will be studied and emulated. Enjoy the victory and your achievement, because we have certain enjoyed what you have done and the way you have done it.

*Michael Lynagh The Times*