



# THE SHOWDOWN!

The women's Six Nations kicks off at its rightful home – Twickenham – this season and the prize of the Grand Slam could be on offer in that opening game

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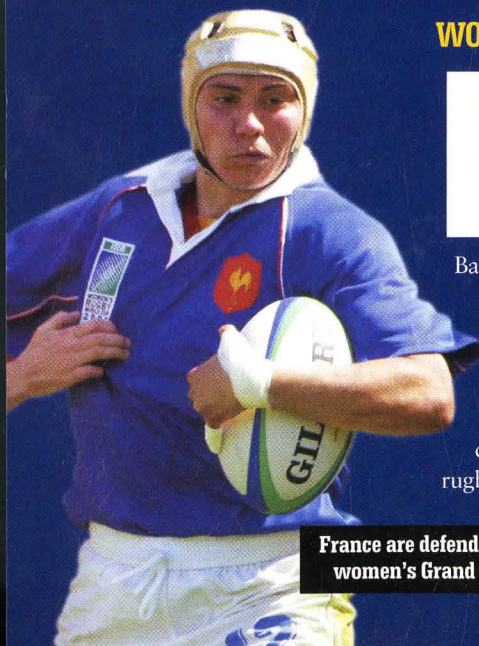
**E** NGLAND and France will start the 2003 Women's Six Nations Championship as joint favourites for the title. Current champions France are still rightly seen as Europe's best women's side, but England's achievement in reaching the final of the World Cup in Barcelona last summer ensures they can start the tournament full of confidence.

Dominating the preparations for this season's championship will be the decision to finally allow women to play an international match at Twickenham. Although student finals and national cup finals have been played at the home of English rugby, this will be the first time that the country's top

players will step on to the same field as the men, wearing their rose with pride.

England will play France as a double-header with the men's International on 15 February, and performance director Carol Isherwood thinks the decision is long overdue: "I'm thrilled, particularly for the players who have worked so hard and deserve this recognition. I have also been hugely encouraged by the support we have received from senior members of the RFU in recent years to help us achieve the goal of playing at the national stadium."

France will be worthy opposition to step out at Twickenham and, as they are used to playing in their own national stadium, they should easily rise



France are defending the women's Grand Slam





## WOMEN'S SIX NATIONS



France and England clash at Twickenham this time, in a unique double-header with the men



Scotland and Sharon Brodie (above) start at home to Ireland



to the occasion of playing in front of a major crowd.

The 2003 Six Nations will also be a landmark occasion for England prop Maxine Edwards, who will be starting her 13th season of international rugby. Jason Leonard's female equivalent did take a break from the sport for the birth of son Sean ten years ago, but the 35-year-old has been an ever-present in the England front row for the past six seasons.

Edwards, who made her international debut in England's match against Wales at Blundellsands, home of Waterloo rugby club, back in 1990, still has one major ambition left in rugby and she aims to complete it this season. "I have yet to see a women's rugby International at Twickenham, let alone play in one," she says. "In 15 years I have seen attitudes to women's rugby change dramatically. It was originally seen as unskilful and a joke by many men, but now if you tell people you play they are normally impressed.

"The game itself has changed from being a mere social pastime to a serious sport requiring serious training, coaching, nutrition and preparation, and more funding has greatly benefited the England women."

Edwards first began playing with some of the great names in the women's game, the newly retired Gill Burns of England and Liza Burgess of Wales, but she says she is far from close to hanging up her boots. "My intention was to retire after the World Cup until we lost in the final!" she says. "I'm looking towards the next four years of club rugby with Saracens and four more

international seasons. I want to step up my fitness training to the next level and, together with England's new forwards coach Paul Stone, I'm working on dominating the front fives in the Six Nations. There are a lot of young players coming through but I want to be the first-choice England prop; there's always something more to learn in the front row."

Edwards combines working part-time as a business analyst, training as a professional athlete and looking after ten-year-old Sean – a stressful balancing act. But she will undoubtedly be a figurehead as England bid for the Six Nations crown. England coach Geoff Richards is looking to the future and says he is impressed with the speed of skill development shown by some of the young international players. But – as every front-row player will tell you – they definitely improve with age, so Edwards looks set to realise her Twickenham dream this season. Forwards coach Stone is lucky that Edwards has decided to go on as the foundation of the England scrum. Teresa O'Reilly was one of five England players to retire after the World Cup. Gill Burns was another and she leaves a huge hole in the squad, as do both Teresa Andrews and Jenny Lyne (Phillips) who are both having a year's sabbatical from the game.

If England are missing Burns and O'Reilly, then France have bigger problems replacing Nathalie Amiel, the woman around whom the side has been built for more than a decade. When France took last year's Grand Slam – with a victory over England in Lyon – it





Will England be celebrating in 2003?



Scotland's strength is in their experienced pack

was Amiel who led her side in an awesome display, in both defence and attack. Amiel made her France debut as a 16-year-old in 1986, when France played their first International, against Britain at Richmond.

Scotland have also finally achieved the historic milestone of playing at their national stadium; three new players were capped as they beat Sweden 32-3 at Murrayfield in November as a curtain-raiser to the men's victory over Fiji. The women received the backing of the SRU director of rugby Jim Telfer, who said: "Scottish rugby is a game open to everybody.

"We believe it is right that the women's international team should be given the opportunity to do the same as their male counterparts – to run out at Murrayfield

experience as a strength and conditioning coach across a range of sports, and he has already paired up with new fitness coach Clive Brewer to improve the overall performance and results of the Scottish women.

The women's game in Wales has been boosted by a £100,000 three-year sponsorship deal with PHS, which will relieve a lot of the financial pressures of the past few seasons. With former national coach John Williams becoming a WRU district director, A-team coach Phil John has taken over at the helm, with Wales Under-21s and Ebbw Vale wing Alun Harries as his assistant.

Wales are looking to youth once again this season, with an all-new front row taking on the British Police in a pre-Christmas training match. Wales are continuing to bring on their young players through their league and

## WHEN FRANCE TOOK LAST YEAR'S GRAND SLAM, IT WAS AMIEL WHO LED HER SIDE WITH AN AWESOME DISPLAY

trying to win for their country." Telfer was also on hand to lend support and present new caps after the match, including one to wing Sharon Brodie, who scored twice on her debut.

Scotland and Wales have both appointed new coaches to take them into the 2003 Six Nations. Gil Stevenson has the task of preparing Scotland for the domestic Internationals and he is already looking ahead to the 2006 World Cup. Stevenson brings a wealth of

regional system, which is becoming stronger and stronger each season. National captain Mel Berry – who plays for Wasps with England's Paula George, Shelley Rae and Sue Day – will need to galvanise a Welsh side that will be missing Liza Burgess, Jackie Morgan and Pip Minto in the forwards, after the trio retired after the World Cup.

They have, though, been boosted by a permanent home for 2003. Instead of travelling around, they will



Maxine Edwards packs down for her 13th year





After 72 caps, Liza Burgess will be missing from the Wales team

England powerhouse Selena Rudge will move from centre to hooker

play their three home games at Cardiff RFC. Being there will also ensure the WRU won't have to move the games far in 2004 to allow the women their rightful home at the Millennium Stadium.

Burgess, particularly, will be missed in the forwards – after 72 caps – and if Berry can deliver two wins they should crack open the champagne for her at the WRU.

Wales start against Spain, who proved last year and in the World Cup, where they troubled England for an hour, that they are more than capable of springing a surprise. They have a powerful pack, are inventive in the backs and will be pushing hard for third place in 2003.

Ireland, who will target one win in the championship, have been forced to recruit heavily following the retirement of eight World Cup squad players and the loss of Maeve Quirke and Henley's Bridget Montgomery for the season due to injury.

They have strengthened themselves by drawing players from the provincial championship, which continues to grow both in terms of size and strength, and coach Donal O'Leary is looking forward to the season. He says: "We now have a core group of young players who have 14 or 15 caps, and have the experience necessary to prepare for and compete in this season's Six Nations Championship. Our preparations received a setback with Canada cancelling their tour and the Falcons

postponing their tour, but this has been redressed with the run-in from Christmas to the Scotland game."

Irish captain Suzanne Fleming is also full of confidence as she looks ahead to 2003: "We gained a lot of young, fresh talent in the squad this season. I am

looking forward to seeing these new players develop, and rise to the challenge of the Six Nations Championship," she says.

"We came very close to beating Wales and Scotland last season, and indeed the Spanish game was also a close match for us. I am looking forward to these three matches in particular, and believe we can come away with a win in at least two of them."

Ireland have for too long been the underdogs in the women's Six Nations, but they have addressed their problems at the very bottom of their domestic game and can only continue to improve.

Once again, the women's Six Nations Championship looks set to be a bigger and better spectacle than ever before and it is only fair that the women's game is finally starting to gain the recognition it deserves from the respective governing bodies

and the general public. The 2003 Women's Six Nations Championship will be a landmark festival for the history of the women's game – let's hope it lives up to all expectations. **RW**

## Women's Six Nations 2003 FIXTURES

Who plays who, and where, this season

### SAT FEB 15

England v France, Twickenham: 1pm

Wales v Spain, Cardiff RFC: 4pm

Scotland v Ireland, Meadowbank Stadium: 2pm

### FRI FEB 21

Wales v England, Cardiff RFC: 7.15pm

### SAT FEB 22

Spain v Ireland, Madrid: 4pm

France v Scotland, Evreux: 3pm

### SAT MAR 8

Ireland v France, Thomond Park: 6.30pm

### SUN MAR 9

Scotland v Wales, Meadowbank Stadium: 2pm

England v Spain, Harlequins RFC: Noon

### FRI MAR 21

Wales v Ireland, Cardiff RFC: 5pm

### SAT MAR 22

England v Scotland, Harlequins RFC: 1pm

Spain v France, TBC

### FRI MAR 28

Ireland v England, Thomond Park: 7pm

Wales v France, Paris: 8pm

### SAT MAR 29

Scotland v Spain, Meadowbank Stadium: Noon