



Jules Hudson

COUNTRY ESCAPE

For an Englishman who's lived in the Principality for much of his life, what could split loyalties more than watching England v Wales in the Rugby Six Nations Tournament?

So, the Six Nations Rugby Tournament is over for another year and the winners are revelling in their well-deserved victory. For years I've watched the Six Nations on countless TVs both at home and in pubs and hotels around the country, but until this year I'd never managed to get to one in the flesh. So imagine my delight when at last I had the chance to see a real international, between two of the greatest teams with the greatest of rivalries, in the spiritual home of English Rugby. We were off to see England v Wales at Twickenham.

In the run-up to the match, pundits and managers confidently predicted the winner of this much anticipated clash would probably go on to lift the trophy. And I was in no doubt that given the choice of any fixture this year, for my debut international this would be as good as it got. We made a weekend of it, booked into our favourite hotel and left baby Jack with old friends, whilst we headed off to the game and the party that would inevitably follow it.

For many years, regulars at these events had told me the atmosphere at any international was so good it was hard to quantify, and as we drew near to the rising mass of steel and concrete that is Twickenham, I began to understand what they meant. Sharing our growing excitement at just being there with countless good humoured strangers from both Wales and England, I found myself being asked many times a question that up to this point I'd not actually given much thought to: Who would I be supporting?

This may seem odd, but many who posed the question knew that, having spent much of my life in Wales, my loyalties as an Englishman were likely to be strained. In truth, I was delighted that two nations I held in equal regard, both on and off the pitch, were about to play in front of me. We went into the ground and found our unexpected touch-line seats sure in the knowledge that, whoever won, I'd be happy. In my mind, at the end of the day the best team would win and, so long as we all got to enjoy some good clean rugby played by the best in the world, everyone would be a winner.

With a lump in my throat, I joined in both National Anthems and we soon became acquainted with our neighbouring supporters. As if to illustrate my

predicament yet further, we found that those to our left were behind England, those to our right were behind Wales, and predictably I was left in the middle.

As the game started to unfold, the home side soon had the upper hand. A swift succession of penalties quickly gave England a nine point lead that jumped to 16-0 with a spectacular try just 10m from our seats. So thrilling was the action and so intoxicating the atmosphere, I found myself up and down like a yo-yo, cheering and chanting with the best of them. Despite this, my Welsh neighbours bore their frustration at having yet to score well, and the banter just got funnier as the second half got underway. It looked as if England would run away with victory, leaving Wales to nurse the shame of a '0' on the board at full time, but thankfully it wasn't to be. With barely 20 minutes left, Wales suddenly came to form, rapidly closing the gap on England's 25 point lead with an impressive 21 points to put them within a try of victory and a comeback that'd go down in history.

In the closing minutes as the Welsh wing tried once again to break out towards the English touch line, I found myself on my feet yelling him on, much to the delight of the Welsh supporters sitting around me. The game had become electric and we were on the brink of seeing the sort of turnaround that only Rugby can provide. But with the call of the final whistle it was obvious that today it wasn't to be. Wales' great efforts had come too little too late, and without doubt you'd have to say the best team won.

As we all shook hands and headed out for a beer, the banter and good humour continued long into the evening. Regardless of the outcome we wouldn't have missed it for the world. By now we'll all know who's won the tournament, but in a sense I'm not sure it matters. The real winner through these many competitions isn't the nation with the most trophies. It's the game itself, where good humour, good grace and the support of good sportsmanship makes a winner of us all. 🍷

JULES HUDSON was born in Essex but stayed in Wales after studying archeology at Lampeter University. He has worked in television since 1996 and is a member of the *Countryfile* team, but is best-known as the leading face of *Escape To The Country*. He moved back across the Border in 2012, to Herefordshire.

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