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# INTRODUCTION

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**O**h God. It's 23rd October, 2011, and there is just half an hour to go in the Rugby World Cup Final between New Zealand's All Blacks, the hosts, and France's Les Bleus (the Blues). The All Blacks are leading by a solitary point, courtesy of an improbable try to prop Tony Woodcock, and a penalty goal by the (justifiably) much-maligned Stephen Donald, New Zealand's fourth choice pivot, having lost Daniel Carter, Colin Slade and Aaron Cruden to injury over the course of the tournament (Donald will eventually have a TV movie made of his story).

The French, who lost pool matches not only to New Zealand but also Tonga (hell, they even struggled against Japan!), have actually expended very little energy in making the final, which they have achieved rather more by good luck than good management. They have plenty in the tank, whereas the home side looks to be virtually out on their feet. Skipper Richie McCaw, it later transpires, is playing with broken bones in his foot, and it takes every bit of energy they have to defend the narrowest of leads.

I usually don't drink more than if I were driving during a Test match—never more than a couple of beers. But not this night, oh no. This night, I have consumed an ocean of ale, and I am, I'm not ashamed to admit, as drunk as ten men by the game's tortuous denouement. Drunk and emotional, as the match ends, I feel a huge weight lifted from my shoulders—of shame, of blame, of grief, almost.

I feel like I am finally able to breathe.

As does the immutable Brad Thorn, I weep: unselfconsciously, joyfully, ecstatically. The All Blacks have finally won the Cup that has eluded them for 24 years... 24 ghastly, fallow, haunted, harrowing years.

So how do you follow up this epic change of fortune, this gargantuan shifting of the tides?

Simple. You try to become the first side ever to successfully defend the Rugby World Cup.



When Craig Joubert's whistle brought to an end that preceding half hour's torment at Eden Park in 2011, it also brought an end to two-and-a-half decades of hurt for every New Zealand rugby supporter since the All Blacks last held the William Webb Ellis trophy in 1987.

Summarily, this agony included the ignominy of their semi-final defeat to the Wallabies in 1991, the agony of the extra-time loss to the Springboks at Ellis Park in the 1995 final, the shocking second-half turnaround defeat by the French in the 1999 semi-final, the Stirling Mortlock intercept try in the 2003 semi-final, and finally, possibly the

worst of the lot, the quarter-final loss to France in Cardiff in 2007.

All different, each of them horrible in their own ways, each of them humiliating and painful psychological blows inflicted on the rugby nation that has always set the pace.

Somehow, aside from that first tournament, the World Cup never seemed to offer anything but misery and disappointment for the Men In Black and their supporters. Where everybody else had the opportunity to simply compete in a tournament and try to get as far as they could, the All Blacks always entered the competition with the expectation of victory, with the looming spectre of failure hanging over them, and with the most unwelcome epithet—“chokers”.

So, with that hideous albatross finally off their backs after that *excruciating* one point victory at their Eden Park fortress, thoughts swiftly turned to the next tournament—England, 2015. The challenge: to be the first All Blacks side to win the Webb Ellis trophy away from home, and to be the first side ever to win successive tournaments.

Because the All Blacks lose so infrequently, especially recently (just the two losses and a couple of draws since 2011), every defeat is etched into the minds of New Zealand rugby lovers. Any defeat (or, indeed, any draw, or narrow victory), gives opponents hope and the rugby media fuel for suggestions that the All Blacks are cracking and that the chasing pack are gaining on them. And with their historical record at World Cups, who can blame competitors for attempting to undermine the side that has dominated world rugby; that rightly or wrongly, has always been the favourite.

The Rugby World Cup has always been quite unlike the equivalent cricket or soccer tournaments in that usually it is likely to be won by only one of four sides—five at a push. Only New Zealand, Australia, South Africa (twice each), and England (once) have ever held the little gold trophy aloft, while France has made the final three times (losing to New Zealand twice, and to Australia in 1999—always the bridesmaid never the bride, as they say). And despite the improvements made in the Irish, Welsh, even the Scottish national sides (all under Kiwi coaches),

until late 2013 it still seemed likely that the 2015 tournament would be taken out by one of those “big four”.

But with an almost-win over the All Blacks at the end of 2013 (in a match most of the world’s rugby media had very much decided was a foregone conclusion), a solitary loss (to England) in 2014, a best-ever run of ten consecutive victories, and victory in the 2014 *and* 2015 Six Nations tournaments, the Joe Schmidt-coached Irish side have announced themselves as a serious contender for the 2015 event—not just a strong second-tier rugby nation, but one of the big guns. Could this be the year there is a significant change to the prevailing rugby world order?

The All Blacks are (still) the obvious favourite. They are the Cup holders, they have been ranked as the number one side in the world since 2009, and they have a huge depth of quality players in most positions. But then that has usually been the case and the Men In Black have only triumphed twice, and only ever at home.

The Springboks are always going to be there or thereabouts. Their pack always comprises huge men (of which they seem to have an almost inexhaustible supply) who thunder into rucks and mauls and extract a huge physical toll with bone-crunching tackles and ball carries, while they also rely (heavily) on dead-eyed goal-kickers of the likes of Percy Montgomery or Morne Steyn (who are also similarly adept at snatching drop goals). The English are usually cut from a similar jib, groomed as they are for the most part in the Public School system (bearing in mind that for some reason, in England, “Public” means, very much, “Private”). And while both England and South Africa have both shown they are more than capable of playing an expansive game, running the ball from deep and genuinely trying to score five pointers, it is also quite possible that they will both revert to type come tournament time and look to play a more risk-averse, percentages-type style of game.

So, the team that has tasted World Cup glory (twice, the same as NZ) that is perhaps the *least* likely to triumph in England this year is the Wallabies. Their forwards are not up to the standard of the other

Southern Hemisphere sides, they are onto their third coach in the last two years, and they seem distinctly unsure what their best inside-back combination might be. In this regard, the team they might most closely resemble is the French—at the time of writing they are ranked sixth and seventh respectively and I would be extremely surprised if either of these sides were to progress past, say, the quarter-finals.

In this book, I will offer my thoughts and opinions, plus those of a few knowledgeable, hand-selected guest contributors, as to how the tournament shapes up, how it may progress, and just what has led us to this point.

As I embarked on writing, it became clear to me that the last word on the 2015 tournament shouldn't belong to me alone, but rather it should be informed by a bunch of people with whom I have discussed the game with over the years—different people notice different things in the game, and have wildly differing perspectives on the World Cup. I am grateful for the input and energy they offered when I started getting tired of my own opinions!

By the time the tournament kicks off, with a match between the hosts, England, and the 12th-ranked Fijians, any number of things may have changed. Injuries may decimate any squad leaving them vulnerable to the rigours of such a gruelling tournament, great players may retire or lose form and new stars may rise. What I hope to do is to provide a backdrop to the tournament and to suggest what may happen if form and favour shine upon those who have played the best rugby in the run-in to the World Cup.

Is there a huge surprise waiting for us all at the 2015 tournament?

Quite possibly.

The great thing about a tournament is that there are always surprises and upsets. It is not necessarily about being the best team in the world, it is also about being the best team on the day, about the rub of the green (especially with regard to contentious and subjective refereeing decisions), and about having a few things go your way.

But what it is mostly about is the world's greatest players showcasing

their extraordinary talents and about the rest of the squad chiming in to contribute where required. It is about covering off the basics, eliminating errors and about (ahem) being ahead on the scoreboard at full time—which is ultimately all that really matters.

This is The Last Word on The Rugby World Cup 2015.