

TRIPLE CROWNS, CHAMPIONSHIPS AND GRAND SLAMS

By John Mcl. Davidson
Former Honorary Historian & Librarian, Scottish Rugby Union

The Triple Crown

There are several honours achievable by the Home Countries (England, Ireland, Scotland and Wales) and the Triple Crown is confined to these countries alone. The title for this rather mythical accolade is thought to have been coined by newspaper journalists. A country is said to have won a Triple Crown when it has defeated each of the other three Home Countries in the Five (now Six) Nations Championship series of matches in any one international season. There is no trophy, cup or flag or other reward for achieving a Triple Crown: merely the prestige of having done so.

Scotland and England met in the very first rugby international in 1871. England then first played Ireland in 1875, whilst Scotland's first match against the 'Men in Green' was in 1877. England then played Wales in 1881 and Scotland first played the Welsh in 1883. Ireland played Wales in 1882 and again in 1884 but it was not until 1887 that an Ireland v. Wales match became a regular fixture. Only then, when the four countries were playing each other on a regular basis, could the phrase 'Triple Crown' come into operation.

Scotland's first Triple Crown success came in the season 1890-91 when they defeated Wales 15-0, Ireland 14-0 and England 9-3. Including that first success, Scotland has won a Triple Crown on ten occasions.

The Grand Slam

This accolade, somewhat as mythical as the Triple Crown, is also thought to have been the invention of journalists. A Grand Slam is achieved when one of the countries taking part in the Five (Six) Nations series of matches (the four Home countries plus France and, now, Italy) defeats each of the other countries in any one international season. Scotland has had Grand Slam successes on only three occasions: 1925, 1984 and 1990.

The Five/Six Nations series

Scotland and France first met in an official rugby international in 1910. From that date, war years and disputes apart, and up to and including season 1998-99, the competing nations played each other in the Five Nations series of matches. Although it was not officially intended at the outset, it was perhaps inevitable that newsmen compiled the international match results into a league table.

It is possible to win the match series (the 'Championship') without necessarily achieving a Grand Slam or a Triple Crown. A country could be Champions even if it was defeated in one match but unlikely if it lost two.

Up to, and including 1992, there was no tangible reward for a country's being champions. However, for the 1993 series of matches, a handsome reward, known as 'The Five Nations Championship Trophy' (now 'The Six Nations Trophy') was presented for competition. France was the first winner. The French did not achieve a Grand Slam having lost to England by one point but, by winning each of their three other matches (six championship points), they took the title ahead of Scotland, who came second, England third and Ireland fourth – all with four points. The winner of the last Five Nations Championship, in season 1998-99, was Scotland who, like France in 1993, lost only one match (to England, 21-24).

Scotland have been Five Nations champions on 19 occasions. The first Six Nations Championship in 1999 was won by England with four wins and one defeat (at the hands of the Scots!) – a total of eight Championship points.

Scotland's Triple Crowns prior to 1925

As recorded above, Scotland first tasted success in season 1890-91. They repeated the feat in 1894-95, in 1900-01, in 1902-03 and in 1906-07. A sixth Triple Crown eluded Scotland for eighteen years – until season 1924-25 – and what a season that turned out to be!

Successes and disasters

The first Scotland-France rugby international was played at Inverleith on 22 January 1910. It was a season of mixed fortunes for the Scots. They defeated France 27-0 at Inverleith, lost 0-14 to Wales in Cardiff, were successful by 14-0 against Ireland in Belfast, and lost to England at Inverleith by 5-14.

Season 1910-11 was an unmitigated disaster for Scotland: they suffered defeat in each of the four international matches they played. That was the first time that the Scots had lost all their matches in any one season. The match against England was Scotland's first visit to Twickenham. It is recorded that some of the Scottish players were unable to find the entrance to the ground and, in order to obtain access, had to make their way through some private allotments!

Near things

The nearest Scotland came to clinching a Grand Slam success came about in season 1919-20 when they won three of their four matches but were denied the ultimate success when they lost to England, in the last match, at Twickenham. Season 1922-23 saw a similar repeat: again, England denied the Scots success by defeating them at Inverleith, also in the last match.

A Grand Slam success

However, Scotland was not to be denied in season 1924-25 when they won all four matches: defeating France 25-4 in the last international match to be played at Inverleith, Wales by 24-14 at St Helen's, Ireland by 14-8 in Dublin and England by 14-11 at Murrayfield (the very first match to be played at the then new stadium).

The aftermath – and some timely quotes

Despite Scotland's success in season 1924-25, some pundits and observers have written that the Grand Slam team was not as good as those of earlier seasons leading up to 1924-25. Some of the critics were Scots. How true or accurate such observations were is impossible to gauge after such a gap in time but, over the past 75 years since their first Grand Slam success, Scotland's international teams have reached peaks and slithered into troughs but have still maintained the country's position as one of the leading rugby nations. Further Grand Slams were achieved in 1984 and 1990 and Scotland have been Five/Six Nations Champions on 19 occasions (including the three Grand Slams) since 1910.

Some quotes relevant to season 1924-25

'G P S Macpherson, the Scottish captain, wrote of the game several years later: "England got more of the ball particularly in the second half, so we could not dictate the play. To some extent they used the touchline and, curiously enough, the game moved more along our left-hand side of the field so that Smith on the left wing...had no opportunity to attack. The Scottish forwards had some glorious foot rushes but, somehow, these did not fructify with the 'good ball'

we were looking for”.’

John Griffiths: *The Book of English International Rugby, 1871-1982*
(Collins Willow, London, 1982)

‘It was A M Smallwood, the Leicester wing’s fourteenth and final match for England and it was the first time that he was on the losing side, having enjoyed twelve wins and one drawn game.’

‘Ilan Smith’s sensational scoring feats (eight tries in two games) during the previous matches in this season tended to obscure A C ‘Johnny’ Wallace’s exploits of scoring six tries in Scotland’s four internationals (two v. France, two v. Wales and one each against Ireland and England).’

Terry Godwin: *The International Rugby Championship, 1883-1983*
(Collins Willow, London, 1984)

In *The Rugby Football Annual, 1925-26*, C D Stuart (late of The Royal High School, Edinburgh) wrote: ‘...there is still a lingering doubt as to whether the team accomplished much...there is, in some quarters, the suspicion that Scotland’s victories were not so much due to the excellence of the team as to the comparative weakness of the opposition...the impression is that the Scottish international side of 1924-25 was not as strong as some of its predecessors.’

‘Whatever happened in the years that followed, this match will remain as one of the greatest ever played between England and Scotland, and certainly the most exciting to be staged at Murrayfield. It was a remarkable opening to a great ground, and all who have visited and shared in its pleasant atmosphere will pay tribute to the Scottish Rugby Union for their boldness in building such a stadium.’

J G B Thomas: *Great Rugger Matches*
(Stanley Paul, London, 1959)