Exclusive interview with Anthony Watson: Henry Pollock is the best thing to happen to English rugby in a decade, Eddie Jones will love facing England at Twickenham & I'm sorry for writing Ireland off as being 'over the hill'

Following the first round of Autumn Nations Championship fixtures, Anthony Watson sat down with Grosvenor Sport to cover a range of topics.

Watson reviewed England's impressive win against Australia, singling out Fin Smith and Henry Pollock for particular praise. Having worked under Eddie Jones, Watson also gave an insight into how the Japan coach will be relishing a trip back to Twickenham this weekend.

After an action-packed weekend, Watson also reviewed how Wales, Scotland and Ireland got on as well as looking forward to the blockbuster France vs South Africa clash this Friday night.

England won pretty comfortably with the forwards dominant, but how would you assess that performance given that Australia were awful?

"Australia weren't brilliant, there's no getting away from that. However, if you look at scenarios where Australia lacked accuracy, you can point a lot of that down to England actually applying pressure. It's an easy get - out to say Australia were really poor. They weren't at their absolute best, of course, but a lot of why they were inaccurate was down to England's good defence.

"More importantly, England really showed attacking intent. Fin Smith looked really sharp and controlled the game very well. What I really liked seeing from him was taking the smart option to keep momentum by putting the ball in behind Australia, forcing them to exit from an awkward scenario on their own five - meter line. That just piles pressure on. If you've been defending in your own half and the ball goes in behind you, you're forced to exit, handing England a set - piece attack 15 or 20 meters out. Finn Smith was integral to that.

Finn Smith confirmed he'll be an England fly - half for years to come. How good can he be? Are we looking at someone like Jonny Wilkinson in stature?

"I would be reluctant to compare him to England's best - ever fly - half, mostly because I don't think it's fair on Fin. Fin Smith wants to be the best player that Fin Smith can be, not as close to Jonny Wilkinson as he can get. The game has changed so much that a lot of these comparisons with ex - players are entirely invalid. Finn can absolutely be one of the best fly - halves in the world, if not the best.

"He, Sacha Feinberg - Mngomezulu, and others will have serious competition for the next five to ten years. Marcus Smith isn't going to go away quietly either; he will always have a point of difference that no one else in world rugby has, which keeps him in the conversation because in some games playing Marcus is going to be advantageous. All of those things point towards a stronger England."

You mentioned the attacking intent England showed. Does this suggest Lee Blackett's voice is being heard a bit more?

"It's dangerous to read too much into the article about Lee Blackett and how much involvement he has. Steve Borthwick would never have brought Lee in if he didn't think he could have a significant impact on the attack, so there's never been a case of Lee not having enough say.

“The Six Nations is a different competition by nature; those games are a little more combative and attritional, which doesn't always lend itself to showing off your attacking style. While I'm not making excuses for England's attacking intent in the Six Nations last year - it was still a way of direct comparisons between the two aren't entirely fair.

“The longer Lee is in that position, the better England's attack will get. It points towards the players having a greater understanding of what Lee wants, so it's simply a matter of time in the saddle.”

What did you read into the article suggesting players asked for a showdown with Borthwick because they were unhappy?

“When you've got a professional environment with 35 or 40 blokes who all want to play for England, it's not realistic to expect everyone to always be happy. You’re not going to get everyone singing around the campfire.

“That's always going to bubble under the surface in elite environments, whether it's South Africa, New Zealand, or anywhere else. What I really didn't like about that article was the timing. Sitting on that information from the summer to release it two days before England's opening international of the season felt intentionally aggressive and harmful.

“I understand the journalist has a job to do, but the timing was poor. I was also not fond of the personal attacks on Steve. We see a lot of negative communication across sport right now, and launching attacks of a personal nature on a head coach already under pressure wasn't entirely fair.

Henry Pollock is irrepressible. He was picked on a 6-2 bench and delivers whatever is asked of him, doesn't he?

“The key thing is that he backs up his words. I honestly think Henry Pollock is the best thing that's happened to rugby in this country for the last five or ten years. He divides opinion and polarizes people's thoughts on how rugby should be, but love him or hate him, you're going to watch him play. That's brilliant for the game. People debate whether showboating or celebrating is a good thing, but it keeps the conversation on rugby.”

How important is it that he gives Steve Borthwick options for a 6-2 bench split going into a World Cup?

“He's got the physical attributes to mix it on the wing if he needs to, as does Ben Earl. When you look at 33-man World Cup squads and how hard international rugby is now, having players who can jump between the forwards and the backs is huge.

“If you want to go with a 6-2 split, having those guys is imperative. It frees up spots for specialists, whether you want to take an extra nine, ten, or fullback, allowing for much more flexibility.”

Another player with stardust was Immanuel Feyi-Waboso. It's imperative England keep him fit, isn't it?

“Part of the reason England started that game so well was because Manny and Tommy Freeman had a lot of touches on the ball in the first half. You want your game breakers involved as much as possible.

“Every time Manny touched the ball, he looked like something might happen. He wasn't just on his wing; he was on the left, the right, and in the middle. Keeping him fit is paramount. The injury was unfortunate, but I just want to see him get a run of games together to get that monkey off his back.”

If we're nitpicking, Australia busted England's defence once or twice late on. Is that a cause for concern ahead of Japan and New Zealand?

“I don't think so. Australia had a purple patch when they had nothing left to play for, and it was inevitable they were going to get some momentum eventually. The defensive error on the three - man lineout in the dying stages was a freak moment you rarely see.

“For that last 15-20 minutes, Henry Pollock was defending on the wing - which he hasn't done a great deal of - and defending against shape in phase play is totally different when you don't have perfect numbers inside you. England also had a mix-and-match backline at that point. Every head coach wants an 80-minute performance, but England had done enough by then.”

Japan come to Twickenham this weekend with Eddie Jones at the helm. What are your memories of him, and how much will he relish this?

“He [Eddie Jones] will love it. Japan have never beaten England, and Eddie would love nothing better than being the first coach to do it at Twickenham. He's been in charge of some monumental underdog moments; this is something he will relish.

“When we first worked with him, I remember him being incredibly precise and clear on what was expected of the collective and the individual, which made us really tight as a group. On the 2016 Australia tour, he embraced that "backs against the wall" mentality - the attitude of "We're England, nobody likes us, let's just go out and do what we do." I enjoyed the confidence we took from him. ‘Who cares, we’re England, that’s it.’

“I loved my time working with him. He's a brilliant coach who is always one or two steps ahead regarding where the game is going. People are quick to forget because of how things ended, but he still has the second-highest win percentage for an England head coach.”

You mentioned that England takes motivation from the fact that nobody likes them. Are they the Millwall of world rugby?

“Maybe the fans are a little bit different! There's definitely an element of embracing that, especially across the Six Nations and in games against Australia where there is always a bit of history and niggle across all sports. It is a common theme that England and Australia don’t get on. Carrying that mentality through is important.”

Can you see Japan legitimately troubling England this weekend?

“If they [Japan] don't have a super trick up their sleeve, no. I didn't see enough against Wales to think they're going to put on a show at Twickenham that can stifle England's momentum. However, with Eddie Jones and Neal Hatley coaching, I would not be surprised at all to see a trick or a loophole - like Italy in 2017 - to try and steal momentum away from England. But they will still want to play fast, Japanese-style rugby.

Have Australia gone backwards? What are their big issues heading toward the World Cup?

“I wouldn't say they've gone backwards; they did beat South Africa a few months ago. With Les Kiss coming in, it's just about time in the saddle. They undisputedly have the players, particularly in the backline. Tom Wright is a world-class fullback, Joseph Suaalii makes things happen, and Max Jorgensen is probably in the top three or four wingers in the world right now.

“It's about how the coaches create a game plan to ensure those world-class players have more influence. They have 11 months before the World Cup, and they will be significantly better by then.”

Does the constant coming and going of rugby league players switching codes hinder team cohesion?

“It stalls the ability to build specific micro-relationships, like within a back three, if players are constantly rotating in and out. However, there is so much player movement across world rugby right now - due to moves abroad, injuries, or non-selection - that the coming and going of league players isn't a significant enough factor to drastically impact overall cohesion.”

What do you make of the Jack Willis situation at Toulouse? Should England offer dispensations to players abroad?

“Creating a dispensation for one player sets a dangerous precedent. If you make it available for one, everyone will seek it. I would like to see a sabbatical style implemented instead. If an England player has over 60 or 70 caps, give them the opportunity to do a set period abroad - say two years - and still qualify for England.

“That's a happy medium that keeps the core group of players in England while allowing loyal servants of English rugby to explore France.”

Wales made hard work of Japan. Are they improving or, if not, do we just have to be patient?

“We have to be patient [with Wales]. Being brutally honest, they need more depth and better first-string options in key positions to mix it like the Wales of old. Number 10 is undoubtedly an issue.

“You look back at players like Rhys Priestland and Dan Biggar; they need someone who can dictate their way around the park. They also need a few more bulk ball carriers. Jac Morgan is an absolute joke of a player. He is so good; and Aaron Wainwright is good, but they just need more size and a dominant ten.

Do you worry for them against the All Blacks?

“Yes [I worry for Wales]. Steve Tandy is a brilliant coach, but New Zealand's attack is sharp. Once they get momentum, they are extremely difficult to stop. I would be surprised if the game finishes within 30 points.”

Under Dave Rennis, the All Blacks seem to be rediscovering their true selves, not least with big forwards and McKenzie and Barrett interchanging at 10 and 15. They are both mercurial players.

“Those two are ridiculously good ball players [Damian Mckenzie and Beauden Barrett]. They see space and go to it, and all options - kick, pass, run - are available to them. The crazy thing is they are doing this without Richie Mo'unga and Ruben Love who have been left behind.

“People have floated the idea that Beauden Barrett is past his prime for a while now, and I just love seeing guys like that roll up their sleeves and prove people wrong. He's a world-class player who still has a lot to give New Zealand rugby.”

Scotland folded against New Zealand in the second half. What did you make of that?

“Unfortunately, that's been a bit of a theme for Scotland, apart from when they play England. For whatever reason, they just can't seem to get the job done against New Zealand. There is a little bit of inaccuracy that creeps in as the games get tighter.

“Whether it's a mentality thing or not is impossible to say from the outside, but they have the players and a ridiculous backline to do it. They need to get that monkey off their back and beat New Zealand at home; doing so would give them the freedom to appreciate how good they can actually be.

How do you see the game between Scotland and Australia going? It’s important for both coming off bad defeats, isn’t it?

“I just hope it stays dry because those are two great backlines and I want to see them throw the ball around. Both teams lost their openers and underperformed compared to expectations, so it's going to be a tight game. Australia has a point to prove after Twickenham and will want to come out firing.”

“I would probably go for Scotland. They have home advantage and will be reeling from missing out against New Zealand. Australia still have glaring issues, and their 10-minute purple patch against England isn't enough in international rugby. It'll be tight - maybe a five-point margin to Scotland with home advantage.”

Ireland looked impressive against Argentina despite people suggesting they were over the hill. Were you surprised?

“To be honest with you, yes, I was. I was one of the people saying they [Ireland] wouldn't get back to their previous level because of the squad's age profile and their reliance on systemic attack over individual X-factor.

“But I'm happy to retract that statement! They looked as sharp and sleek as I've ever seen them. Sam Prendergast made great decisions, Hugo Keenan looked sharp, and the interplay between the forwards and backs, that link, was excellent.

“They looked like they are all singing from the same hymn sheet. Right now, Ireland and France look like the clear number one and two in the Northern Hemisphere.”

France plays South Africa this week. How do you see that going given France's incredible depth?

“The French depth at scrumhalf alone is berserk. It is the deepest in the world. You have got Dupont, Lucu, Le Garrec, and Serin and all would start for almost any other international team. I think this game will be settled up front. If South Africa can build the platform they are so used to building, they become very difficult to beat.

“However, France are notoriously difficult to get one up on in the forward pack at home. It's going to be a nuanced, carefully managed traditional test match. If I had to pick, I'd say South Africa will get the job done.”

Looking ahead to the next World Cup, can South Africa maintain their #1 status and make it three in a row?

“As we sit here right now, South Africa are undeniably the favourites. But it is difficult to make predictions this far out. Rassie Erasmus is notoriously good at keeping things fresh and progressing the game, so they won't be resting on their laurels.

“They've made it abundantly clear they want to win another, especially since this will be the last opportunity for a lot of that squad due to their age profile. They've managed to dominate world rugby without any real dip, and it's hard to think of a realistic scenario where they don't go into the next World Cup as the team to beat.”