

Sports Friday

Editor Malachy Logan Phone 01-6758366 email sports@irishtimes.com web irishtimes.com/sports



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Rugby News

Sexton set to miss start of Six Nations

On doctor's advice, Ireland outhalf availing of a 12-week break after fourth concussion

GERRY THORNLEY

Ireland will have to begin the defence of their Six Nations crown against Italy without Johnny Sexton, who is resigned to being out of action until February 14th, the day Ireland play France at the Aviva Stadium on the second weekend of the 2015 Six Nations. As he will then have been without a match for 12 weeks, Joe Schmidt will have an awkward decision to make as to whether that should be Sexton's comeback game.

Sidelined since suffering concussion in Ireland's win over Australia at the end of November, this 12-week rest is on the advice of a Parisian neurologist, Dr Jean-François Cherman, who is employed by Rac-

ing Metro along with several other rugby and football clubs to examine all cases of concussion within their clubs.

Reports on the website of the daily French sports newspaper *L'Equipe*, where the story broke yesterday (not long after a press conference confirming the arrival of Dan Carter on a three-year deal to replace Sexton) suggested the latter had been suffering from headaches and nausea. But they appear to be, thankfully, a little alarmist.

Clash of heads
Sexton is reputedly feeling well enough to train, albeit non-contact work, but it transpires that the concussion he sustained against Australia due to a clash of heads with team-mate Rob

Kearney in the 77th minute was his fourth such episode in the last 12 months.

While they have not been severely concussed episodes, and Sexton is apparently relatively symptom-free over the last fortnight, Dr Cherman is of the view that Sexton should take a 12-week break from all contact work to allow ample time for the problem to be cleared up. Dr Cherman is regarded as an expert in this field.

Sexton's lengthy lay-off is a precautionary measure but on the understandable premise that his health comes first.

This means he will be absent for another seven games for Racing Metro, including Top 14 games against Toulon and Clermont as well as their final pool games in the European Champions Cup against Treviso and Northampton, to add to the three he has missed since the Australia match.

He has only played six matches for the Parisian club this sea-

son as a broken jaw had earlier sidelined him for seven games.

Sexton has been an ever-present under Joe Schmidt save for the November games against Samoa last season and Georgia this season. But he is now ruled



■ Jonathan Sexton: won't be available for Ireland's first game against Italy

out of Ireland's opening defence of their Six Nations title against Italy in Rome's Stadio Olimpico, where Ireland lost in Declan Kidney's final game as Ireland coach two seasons ago.

Ian Madigan was back-up to Sexton on the Argentinian tour and in the Guinness Series last November when making his first Test start at outhalf (since the 2012 summer tour games in

north America) against Georgia. This season he has been playing at inside centre for Leinster.

Paddy Jackson, who was the starting outhalf two seasons ago in the games against Scotland, France and that fatal defeat against Italy, was back-up to Sexton in the first four of last season's Six Nations games, although hasn't appeared since the home win over Italy.

Starting regularly

Jackson missed Ulster's defeat last week against the Scarlets, while the one indigenous outside half who has been starting regularly for his province has been Ian Keatley, whose replacement appearance against Georgia was his first cap since the summer Tests against Canada and the USA in the summer of 2009. In other words, Schmidt must choose between three players who have started just nine Tests at outhalf, and only

three of those against front-line opposition.

Whoever is now chosen to replace him, Sexton will now use the next eight weeks as a quasi pre-season. With the World Cup also in mind, it may not even be the worst thing to happen to him.

At least Sexton will be able to kick and run, and pretty much do anything besides risking another bang on the head for another eight weeks, and so will be physically fit if not match fit.

His need for match hardness and to be more familiar with collisions would be more acute if, say, he was a backrower, but then again he is one of the more physical and effective defensive outwards in the world.

The imposition of an enforced 12-week absence may seem unusually exact for something that, unfortunately, is anything but an exact science. But at least the reason for Sexton's prolonged absence is precautionary in nature.

Rugby Analysis

Liam Toland



Connacht arrive at the RDS with new spring in their step

watching you for a while and I think you've a real future".

Tonight, however, the Connacht threat is in Dublin and, based on extremely strong team selections, I can't wait to see what unfolds. Both teams are stacked for combat with the weather threatening to hold well.

Absentees

Leinster's obvious absentees in their injured ranks are all making an impact but the real concern is the province's inability to shake off the opposition, especially relatively mediocre Harlequins.

If Connacht's crossed their Rubicon in beating a weakened Scarlets 14-8 then Leinster's fixture tonight will be the storming of the Roman citadel. Down 3-8 in the first half to Scarlets – courtesy of two terrible own goals off poor fielding which led to eight points in three minutes – they worked their way back to a crucial victory. With any sort of a platform, Connacht, with the obvious backline quality aided by speedsters Matt Healy and co, can do damage to the 11-point spread.

“

Connacht are a potential threat to Munster; both are west of the Shannon(ish), both are the only real professional alternative, and a both have a huge (potential) following

That said, their lineout will have to provide the quality and therein lies an Achilles' heel allied to their poor kick off receptions.

But like Leinster, Connacht don't have explosive ball carriers up front so the game in many ways will come down to the breakdown, where Connacht have kept themselves in games while Leinster have struggled in this facet.

Up front, it is a massive opportunity for Leinster's starting tighthead who was shunned last week in the Aviva. Tadhg Furlong has much to prove at scrum time, but so too has the Leinster scrum. No doubt, he was deeply frustrated last week, so aside from the scrum battle, Furlong will offer quite a punch around the park which will make for interesting viewing.

In the end, like all Leinster Connacht matches, it'll come down to Connacht's hunger for the fight and Leinster's ability to negotiate the challenges. And, no doubt Leinster will be extremely conscious of Kieran Marmion's electric break.

PS: If Saturday Kitchen floats your boat and you're struggling with left over Christmas Pudding check out Tom Kerridge's Spiced orange cake with plum sauce and Christmas pudding ice cream. Happy Christmas!

tiamtoland@yahoo.com

Guinness Pro12 Preview

Connacht on the cusp of history as Leinster labour

Visitors are a side on the up while Matt O'Connor's men do not look happy

Leinster v Connacht

RDS, 7.35

Live on TG4

JOHN O'SULLIVAN

Over the next fortnight Irish rugby's internecine rivalries won't be for the squeamish as provincial bloodletting is disputed ferociously, in pursuit of bragging rights, individual and collective, but more importantly, Guinness Pro12 points.

Leinster, for example face Connacht, Munster and Ulster, in that order and by January 3rd, will either be looking up at, or down on, all or some, of their rugby siblings. The finishing positions in the league dictate the qualification order for next season's European Champions Cup and at present a tea-towel would cover the provinces in terms of the table.

Connacht travel to Dublin standing on the cusp of history as they have never beaten their hosts twice in the one campaign – they won 10-9 at the Sportsground earlier in the season – never won in the RDS and it is 2002, in Donnybrook, since they last prevailed in the capital.

Pat Lam was able to rest all bar secondrow Aly Muldowney, the only survivor from the team that started in the superb European Challenge Cup victory over Bayonne in France. Connacht are seeking a fifth win in succession in all competitions so there is no shortfall in confidence or momentum.

Henshaw is back

Ireland international Robbie Henshaw is back to partner Bundee Aki in the centre, New Zealand centurion Mils Muliaina will grace the RDS for the first time and scrumhalf Kieran Marmion shouldn't get as much latitude from a Leinster backrow, once bitten. Up front, John Muldoon leads a pack, and a team for that matter, that will relish the physical collisions.

In times past, Connacht might have relied on spoiling tactics to inconvenience their hosts but the western province has enough talent to guarantee



Connacht's Kieran Marmion breaks free to score his side's opening try against Leinster at the Showgrounds in September. PHOTOGRAPH: JAMES CROMBIE/INPHO

a handsome dividend from the currency of possession and territory. It's possible to view the game in macro or micro terms and in the latter respect watching how the numbers 13s, Henshaw and Luke Fitzgerald influence proceedings, will be an instructive companion to the main feature.

Leinster coach Matt O'Connor has made seven changes to the side that tipped past Harlequins last weekend, some of which are down to player management issues, while others herald a return from injury, as is the case of Dave Kearney, Kevin McLaughlin and Shane Jennings. There's a new front-row, Noel Reid is named alongside Fitzgerald in the centre while Jamie Heaslip is the only survivor in the backrow.

Maks van Dyk, signed from the Cheetahs on a short term

How they stand

	P	W	D	L	PF	PA	TF	TA	TB	LB	Pts
1 Munster	9	7	0	2	217	133	22	9	2	2	32
2 Ospreys	9	7	0	2	237	138	22	10	2	1	31
3 Warriors	9	7	0	2	221	161	23	11	3	0	31
4 Ulster	9	6	1	2	224	119	24	9	3	2	31
5 Leinster	9	5	1	3	226	148	25	16	4	2	28
6 Connacht	9	6	1	2	162	139	17	13	1	0	27
7 Scarlets	9	4	2	3	194	160	20	16	2	1	23
8 Edinburgh	9	3	1	5	130	213	12	27	0	1	15
9 Cardiff Blues	9	2	1	6	197	253	20	24	2	1	13
10 Zebre	9	2	0	7	108	227	10	24	0	1	9
11 NG Dragons	9	1	0	8	128	211	8	23	1	3	8
12 Treviso	9	0	1	8	125	267	13	34	1	1	4

contract, arrived in Ireland last Wednesday week, and came on as a half-time replacement for Leinster A in the British & Irish Cup win over Plymouth on the Saturday. The scrum went for-

ward on his arrival so it's a decent start.

Leinster's set piece will again be under scrutiny having been a little scruffy over the two Harlequins matches. So too will their

patterns, and their effectiveness is the subject of debate and O'Connor has a fair point when suggesting that the same criteria in critiquing are not applied countrywide.

Criticism

He elaborated on the subject of criticism. "It's a yardstick, I'll say that. Connacht are a point behind us, they're having an unbelievable season. Munster and Ulster, where are they in Europe? Ask the question, but we're getting beaten up. That's not our doing. Whether it's fair or not is irrelevant really, we just go about doing what we do. We try to be as good as we can."

A key for Leinster might be to declutter minds; that is to avoid dwelling on what they're not doing, the mistakes and just trust to instinct, good tech-

nique and habits. They may need to relax to find a playing rhythm.

The bookmakers, hardly charitable institutions, have Leinster as 10 point favourites, it appears a lot based on recent events, and it's reasonable to assume that those odds might prove attractive to a few Connacht supporters and beyond.

For once though in recent times winning will suffice for Leinster.

LEINSTER: R.Kearney, Z.Kirchner, L.Fitzgerald, N.Reid, D.Kearney, J.Gopetr, I.Boss, M.Bent, A.Dundon, T.Furlong, D.Toner, K.Douglas, K.McLaughlin, S.Jennings, J.Heaslip (capt). **Replacements:** S.Cronin, J.McGrath, G.D'Arcy, van Dyk, J.Conan, L.McGrath, C.Marsh, G.D'Arcy, Henshaw, B.Aki, M.Healy, J.Carty, Q.Roux, A.Muldowney, J.Muldown (capt), E.McKeon, G.Naoupu. **Replacements:** D.Hennefer, R.Loughrey, F.Beacham, U.Dillane, W.Falcone, C.Blade, C.Ronaldson, D.Leader. **Referee:** Ian Davies (Wales).

Despite this, Leinster are chasing an equilibrium in tone and content performance wise for most of the season. McLaughlin was asked why. "Believe it or not, it can be from trying too hard sometimes. I think we're overrunning plays sometimes, we're not holding our feet."

"So as players we have to improve our execution. The plays are there, we need to execute them. Get the scores early and execute when we get our chances. That will change the pace of the game and improve our confidence on the pitch as well."

"Guys are getting over-excited and trying to force it a little bit. And those knock-on errors do have an impact on confidence when you're on the pitch."



Bundee Aki's comfort on the gain line in heavy traffic will be a threat to Leinster. PHOTOGRAPH: JAMES CROMBIE/INPHO

Fronting up physically the key for returning McLaughlin

JOHN O'SULLIVAN

Amelia Earhart once said that the "most effective way to do it, is to do it." Leinster might borrow a bit of that conventional simplicity in trying to find a way past Connacht at the RDS.

Rugby's simple premise is the team that dominates the physical collisions tends to win. For Leinster's returning flanker Kevin McLaughlin that's a one-line script that the team must deliver with conviction.

"It's pretty obvious, we need to front up physically. If we don't front up physically