

Newcastle Programme Notes: September 30, 2008

It must be a very long time since there was a full midweek set of league fixture in the Premiership – in fact has there been a week like this with all the teams in midweek action?

I was trying to remember the last time we had an evening Premiership game at Kingsholm the other day – apart from 'A' games and the like I think the last one we were due to play was a couple of years ago when the visitors were Newcastle.

If I remember correctly, and at my age there is a distinct possibility that I don't, that was the match that fell victim to the blanket of fog that descended over most of the country. I do remember seeing Patrice (TV Licence, moi?) Collazo lumbering out of the mist alongside Mike Tindall only for the bloke standing next to me to shout: "Look, Gorillas in the mist". Well it was funny at the time.

Hopefully the weather will be a bit better this evening, if it isn't chances are that I won't be standing in my usual space as I am making a last minute dash back from Amsterdam. Flights and car park spaces allowing I should be in for kick off, but if I am late can someone stop the teams coming out, please.

Even though they can be a bit inconvenient – especially for away supporters – I love night games. They tend to be memorable for all sorts of reasons. You only have to wander to the back of the Shed Bar to see pictures of one of the most outstanding matches – day or night – that has been played at Kingsholm, when we pipped Leicester with the last kick of the game. Not long after that we put a highly fancied Bath side away in another evening game.

It'll be interesting to see what difference the new floodlighting and grandstand has on the place. The old stand looked quite spooky in the half-light – like something out of an old Hammer Horror film – and the old floodlights left an eerie gloom over parts of the ground that seemed to compress the space even more. The atmosphere seemed to be enhanced and, especially on damp evenings, the sound of the crowd hung in the air. Hopefully some of that special feeling will remain.

So Newcastle then... Unfortunately for them they seem to be many pundits hot tip for the drop come the end of the season. The summer comings and goings saw Toby Flood and Matthew Taite moving on, plus the retirement of one of my favourite all time players – Matt Burke. They've got a couple of new faces though, including Adam Balding who not all that long ago was crashing his huge frame around in a cherry and white jersey.

Bar and terrace chatter has this one down as a pretty straightforward home win. As always, I am confident that come 9:30 tonight that will be the case. Don't expect it to be a walk in the park, though.

Long gone are the days when you could look at a fixture list, take out a magic marker and pick the matches that you knew were going to be winning bankers. After all not that long ago Harlequins would have been included into that bracket and look how close they ran us the other day.

If you cast your eye over the Newcastle squad in today's programme there are many familiar names – the human tank Jamie Noon is still there despite all the speculation that he was also heading out in the summer and they have a couple of heavyweight former All Black props in the considerable shape of Joe McDonnell and Carl Hayman who are more than capable of giving any front row a torrid time.

And let's not forget that little number ten who runs out for them every now and then. I'm sure that he has achieved one or two successes in his career, just can't remember his name though.

Actually that's a bit unfair. Johnny Wilkinson is one of the true greats of the modern game. He's one of those players who, in years to come when you sit with your grandchildren watching re-runs of the world cup final and that drop goal, you will say "Yeah, I saw him play at Kingsholm. Never finished on a winning side, mind..."

These games tend to be interesting affairs with more than a bit incident. Wasn't the great Serge Simon's first appearance for Gloucester against Newcastle? I'm pretty sure it was, and his first action was to flatten one of their second rows for some minor indiscretion. And what about that blatant trip by their prop, someone Van Zandfeldt, when Tofty was dancing his way to the line for a certain try. Didn't even get a penalty for that one!

And they tend to be very close run things, barring a couple of occasions nothing more than a few points tends to separate the teams at no side. We definitely hold the whip hand when it comes to recent results though, in the last ten league encounters we have won seven and had one draw.

Let's make that one in the win column this evening.