

ITV UNVEILS FORMIDABLE LINE-OUT FOR RUGBY WORLD CUP 2023

PLANS REVEALED FOR EXCLUSIVE COMPREHENSIVE COVERAGE



As kick-off rapidly approaches, ITV looks forward to live and exclusive coverage of the Rugby World Cup 2023 with a line-out of rugby's biggest stars.

With teams on the ground in France and in the UK, every game of the tournament from the massive opening match, France v New Zealand on September 8, through to the Final at the Stade de France in Paris on October 28 will be broadcast live on ITV1 and ITV4 with extensive content and match highlights available on ITVM.

Our fantastic selection of presenters and pundits will be providing the very best insight and expert analysis as ITV aims to capture all the colour and excitement of the Rugby World Cup.



Mark Pougatch leads the presentation team alongside Jill Douglas, who will host coverage from France along with David Flatman and Hugh Woosencroft.

Expert analysis comes from a formidable pundit line-up including Jonny Wilkinson, Maggie Alphonsi, Sam Warburton, Jamie Roberts, Brian O'Driscoll, Greig Laidlaw, Philippa Tuttiett, Bryan Habana, Sir Clive Woodward, Rory Best, John Barclay, Sergio Parisse, Gareth Thomas, Jim Hamilton, George Gregan, Sir Ian McGeechan, Lawrence Dallaglio, and Sean Fitzpatrick.

Co-commentators include rugby figures with a wealth of experience, including: Ben Kay, Ugo Monye, Shane Williams, Scott Hastings, Tom Shanklin, Gordon D'Arcy and Nolli Waterman.

Gabriel Clarke, Lee McKenzie and Topsy Ojo will provide reports, interviews and insights from the teams competing in France while match commentary comes from Nick Mullins, Miles Harrison, Johnnie Hammond, Martin Gillingham and Claire Thomas.

For the tournament ITV have designed an interactive studio set in the UK that allows the pundits to demonstrate physical analysis in the programmes, creating the platform for some of rugby's biggest names to bring viewers fresh perspectives and insights into the sport. The augmented reality set will also feature a balcony area overlooking traditional Parisian scenes for presentation purposes. A world-class former referee, JP Doyle, will also be on standby to help unpick the very latest rule changes and give an insight into how they work in reality.



ITV's coverage will also feature in its opening titles the version of iconic song *Non, Je Ne Regrette Rien* by legendary French chanteuse Édith Piaf.

Viewers will be able to watch and engage with Rugby World Cup coverage at any time with ITV Sport's digital offer.

Fans can watch all games live and on the go with the ITVX app which will have short highlights of every game, exclusive interviews, in-depth analysis and demos featuring with our expert pundits.

ITV Rugby's X and Facebook pages will feature all the tries and key moments of live broadcast games just seconds after they happen. Our Instagram and TikTok accounts will take you behind the scenes in France to give viewers the chance to see how France are hosting the famous tournament.

The ITV Rugby World Cup podcast will be available to download from your podcast provider. David Flatman is hosting 12 episodes across the tournament and will be joined by co-hosts and guests including Tom Shanklin, Sam Warburton, Nolli Waterman and more. Episodes will begin on September 4th with another 11 to follow throughout the tournament.

ITV recently revealed its creative campaign, across on-air promo, OOH, social, and influencer marketing, which turns to more unconventional methods to predict which nation will take the Webb Ellis Trophy - *'This One's Impossible to Predict'*.

With no clear favourite to win and a strong chance of a northern hemisphere team taking the trophy, the Rugby World Cup 2023, broadcast exclusively on ITV this Autumn, is due to be the most unpredictable in history.

ITV Creative Directors, Jack McPartland and Shane O'Neil worked with the illustrator Yousef Sabry to design 20 tarot cards, one for each nation participating in the tournament. The cards draw on the culture and symbolism of each nation, as well as recent form on the pitch and are brought to life in Yousef's trademark style, which blends surrealism, mysticism and iconography.

The promo, directed by Sami Abusamra of Mister Tibbs, uses a blend of comedy and suspense to tell the story of a rugby fan visiting a tarot card reader, looking for answers on who will win the Rugby World Cup. As the scene unfolds, even the tarot card reader is left perplexed when the cards take on a life of their own in a dramatic finale.

The OOH which showcases a number of the tarot cards can be found all around England and Wales in the weeks leading up to the tournament.

The cards will also be shared with iconic rugby pundits, such as Lawrence Dallaglio and Sam Warburton, who can be seen drawing and discussing the cards as part of the social campaign.

The Rugby World Cup 2023 kicks off with an unmissable match between the host nation, France, and the All Blacks on the September 8 at 6.45pm on ITV1 and ITVM.

The Rugby World Cup is a key part of ITV Sport's portfolio of first-class events, which also includes Six Nations rugby, England Women's qualifiers and friendlies, UEFA EURO 2024, FIFA Women's World Cup, the FA Cup, EFL highlights including the Sky Bet Championship, Sky Bet League One, Sky Bet League Two, Carabao Cup and the EFL Trophy, La Liga, the Tour de France, the NFL, Heineken Champions Cup, Gallagher Premiership Rugby and, in motorsport, Extreme E, plus British Touring Car Championships and MotoGP, SailGP, plus major competitions in snooker and darts.

Press contact: Tom Hodson on 020 7157 3015 or tom.hodson@itv.com

Picture contact: Peter Gray on 020 7157 3046 or peter.gray@itv.com

BROADCAST SCHEDULE [ALL TBC]

DATE	MATCH	GAME	CH	VENUE
Fri, 8 Sep	1	FRA v NZL	ITV1	STADE DE FRANCE
Sat, 9 Sep	2	ITA v NAMIBIA	ITV1	ST ETIENNE
Sat, 9 Sep	3	IRE v ROMANIA	ITV1	BORDEAUX
Sat, 9 Sep	4	AUS v GEORGIA	ITV1	STADE DE FRANCE
Sat, 9 Sep	5	ENG v ARG	ITV1	MARSEILLE
Sun, 10 Sep	6	JPN v CHILE	ITV1	TOULOUSE
Sun, 10 Sep	7	RSA v SCO	ITV1	MARSEILLE
Sun, 10 Sep	8	WAL v FIJ	ITV1	BORDEAUX
Thu, 14 Sep	9	FRA v URU	ITV4	LILLE
Fri, 15 Sep	10	NZL v NAMIBIA	ITV4	TOULOUSE
Sat, 16 Sep	11	SAM v CHILE	ITV4	BORDEAUX
Sat, 16 Sep	12	WAL v PORTUGAL	ITV1	NICE
Sat, 16 Sep	13	IRE v TONGA	ITV1	NANTES
Sun, 17 Sep	14	RSA v ROMANIA	ITV1	BORDEAUX
Sun, 17 Sep	15	AUS v FIJ	ITV1	ST ETIENNE
Sun, 17 Sep	16	ENG v JPN	ITV1	NICE
Wed, 20 Sep	17	ITA v URU	ITV4	NICE
Thu, 21 Sep	18	FRA v NAMIBIA	ITV4	MARSEILLE
Fri, 22 Sep	19	ARG v SAM	ITV1	ST ETIENNE
Sat, 23 Sep	20	GEORGIA v PORTUGAL	ITV1	TOULOUSE

Sat, 23 Sep	21	ENG v CHILE	ITV1	LILLE
Sat, 23 Sep	22	RSA v IRE	ITV1	STADE DE FRANCE
Sun, 24 Sep	23	SCO v TONGA	ITV1	NICE
Sun, 24 Sep	24	WAL v AUS	ITV1	LYON
Wed, 27 Sep	25	URU v NAMIBIA	ITV4	LYON
Thu, 28 Sep	26	JPN v SAM	ITV4	TOULOUSE
Fri, 29 Sep	27	NZL v ITA	ITV1	LYON
Sat, 30 Sep	28	ARG v CHILE	ITV1	NANTES
Sat, 30 Sep	29	FIJ v GEORGIA	ITV1	BORDEAUX
Sat, 30 Sep	30	SCO v ROMANIA	ITV1	LILLE
Sun, 1 Oct	31	AUS v PORTUGAL	ITV1	ST ETIENNE
Sun, 1 Oct	32	RSA v TONGA	ITV1	MARSEILLE
Thu, 5 Oct	33	NZL v URU	ITV4	LYON
Fri, 6 Oct	34	FRA v ITA	ITV1	LYON
Sat, 7 Oct	35	WAL v GEORGIA	ITV1	NANTES
Sat, 7 Oct	36	ENG v SAM	ITV1	LILLE
Sat, 7 Oct	37	IRE v SCO	ITV1	STADE DE FRANCE

Sun, 8 Oct	38	JPN v ARG	ITV1	NANTES
Sun, 8 Oct	39	TONGA v ROMANIA	ITV3	LILLE
Sun, 8 Oct	40	FIJ v PORTUGAL	ITV4	TOULOUSE
KNOCKOUT PHASE				
Sat, 14 Oct	41	W Pool C v RU Pool D	ITV1	MARSEILLE
Sat, 14 Oct	42	W Pool B v RU Pool A	ITV1	SDF
Sun, 15 Oct	43	W Pool D v RU Pool C	ITV1	MARSEILLE
Sun, 15 Oct	44	W Pool A v RU Pool B	ITV1	SDF
Fri, 20 Oct	45	W QF1 v W QF2	ITV1	SDF
Sat, 21 Oct	46	W QF3 v W QF4	ITV1	SDF
Fri, 27 Oct	47	Bronze Final	ITV1	SDF
Sat, 28 Oct	48	Final	ITV1	SDF

PRESS PACK INTERVIEWS

MAGGIE ALPHONSI



Who do you think will win the World Cup and why?

My obvious choices would be Ireland or France, especially when you think about world rankings. And with Ireland winning the Six Nations and the performances that they put in throughout the tournament, apart from the close fixture with England, you'd feel that there are very strong favourites. And then France obviously, home tournament, second in the world. They didn't necessarily produce during the Six Nations, but a team you would feel would be ranking quite high up there. And how the teams on the other side fare will be and fairly interesting. England, Australia, Wales. I'm going to say I'm going to say it's between Ireland and France.

Who, whether a team or a player, do you most look forward to watching?

I guess I'll come back to Ireland because of Josh Van Der Flier, I'm a massive fan of his. Obviously I'm back row through and through, so I'm looking forward to seeing him. I'm looking forward to seeing Gregory Alldritt for France. If you look at the European championship cup final with La Rochelle, he was player of the match, and he's just had a good season. Coming back to England, Freddie Steward, I'm hoping Tom Curry is back to his best, obviously he's had lots of injuries this season. I think any of the Sale and saracens players I've got to really talk about. I really hope Ben Earl gets a real good crack at England and I hope he gets a chance to shine, as I'm a big fan of his.

What do you make of the home nations' chances?

Scotland are a side, I think, you almost can't count them out. I mean, they've got some big games - their first match is a massive one against South Africa. Yeah. So you know they've got a tasty pool, but they are a side that I feel like you can't count out they had a good six nations, you know, beat England but continued on from that. For them I hope that they progress out of pool stages into the quarter or semi final. Ireland, World Cups have always been a stumbling block for them. My fair hope is that they do well. England, considering the side of the pool that they've got, you feel that they could make it to the semi finals for sure.

Wales, you feel after what's happened during the Six Nations there is going to be a turnaround. They've lost Ken Owens, a significant loss but they've got some good young players in that setup, who you feel this could be their stage to really perform.

MARK POUGATCH



Who do you think will win the Rugby World Cup?

I think France. The pressure of being at home, of course, will be immense. And the fact that they've never won it before will mean it will be immense. I think in a way it quite suited them not to win the Six Nations because otherwise there's that whole, 'Oh, my goodness, how long is this unbeaten run going to go on for?' You saw an amazing Top 14 final, you saw La Rochelle win the European Cup again. They've got Dupont, the best player in the world, at scrum half. I just think it's all coming together for them to win the World Cup, which would be actually amazing for the sport. And actually the sport needs another northern hemisphere team to win the World Cup - England the only northern hemisphere team to win the World Cup, which is insane. So I think it'd be really really good for the game actually as well.

Who, whether a team or a player, do you most look forward to watching?

Well, I love Dupont. I know it's not particularly original, but I love watching him. The reason I love watching him is because you can be watching your game, you can be thinking he hasn't done anything yet. He's going to do something - somebody like that just knows their moment, picks their moment, makes the most of the moment and it's the seminal moment and I just love players like that. Who you can't take your eye off, as I say in a way, almost more where they haven't done anything. Because you're just expecting them to do it. I'm very intrigued about the New Zealand team because they're going to change coaches after this. And people have underplaying them a bit too readily. And of course I'm particularly intrigued about the Ireland team because of all the stories about how they've never won a knockout match, but they've been so good. And they've won the Grand Slam again, can they actually do it this time from a really horrible side of the draw. I mean, it's such a shame for the game and for this World Cup that the draw was made as early as it was, because we've got this terrible dislocation of strength on either side of the draw. But absolutely fascinating. And I'm intrigued to see what Ireland will do.

What do you make of the Home Nations' chances?

I still think Ireland have got the best chance. I think that their strength in depth is absolutely magnificent now and it's a testament, obviously, to their coaching to their structure, particularly to their relationship between the provinces and the national governing body. And Johnny Sexton of course is key but they've got so many players to choose from and they've got such a level of self belief, and they've got a style of play which has moved on in the last four years. So I think Ireland have got the best chance, and if they were to win in my goodness when they deserve to win it from their side of the draw. Even though England got a better half of the draw, let's not pretend they are a certainty by any means even to get through - we saw that in 2015 when they hosted the World Cup. So Ireland have by far and away the best chance and again, much as I think would be amazing for France to win the World Cup, ditto for Ireland as well.

JILL DOUGLAS



Who do you think will win the World Cup and why?

I think France will win the World Cup because they have got great strength in depth. They are on home soil. They look more organised than any French team I can remember. They're powerful, they're passionate and I think they have a very good chance of finally winning the World Cup.

Who, whether a team or a player, do you most look forward to watching?

There are so many exciting prospects in this World Cup from some of the smaller nations right through to the big guns that we always enjoy seeing. From the likes of the Springboks and New Zealand. Probably with a little bit of Scot in me, I've got to say I'm looking forward to seeing the likes of Finn Russell how he performs given that he plays in France or has been until this season. I think he will light up the tournament and Darcy Graham back from injury from Hawick, which is where I grew up. So I've got to be kind of slightly Scottish-centric when it comes to that but equally, I think I'm excited by every single member of that French team, and particularly the front five, who I think are world class.

What do you make of the Home Nations' chances?

Wales have had a tough Six Nations and a tough journey to get to this World Cup. That said they always perform. I think they need to put a smile onto the face of Welsh rugby, so they'll take that responsibility strongly. I think Scotland will find it tough, but they can surprise anybody on their day. I think England are almost unknown because they are rebuilding. Their coach really hasn't had an awful lot of time with them. You cannot have that quality group of players and not perform. I think England will surprise us and go deep into the tournament. And I think as far as Ireland are concerned this is their best chance. It's a generation of superstars. They should be challenging for top honours. Do they have that extra X factor to get over the line? I think Farrell is a genius and has got the best out of them and I'd love to see them go deep in the tournament. If not this year, then when?

JONNY WILKINSON



Who do you think will win the Rugby World Cup this time and why?

"I think it's exciting that Ireland and France should go in with real opportunities, I think both of those could definitely do it. I think however there's a real momentum growing in the Southern Hemisphere at the moment, just with the Rugby Championship and the way that's taking shape, and the quality of those clashes, and that's probably quite powerful for those teams coming in. Going on previous form France and Ireland have shown over and over again that they really deserve to be in with an amazing shout, but the guys who have known how to win the Rugby World Cup the majority of times over the years are quietly going about their business."

Who - whether a team or player - are you looking forward to watching and why?

I love the personalities of all the teams. I think France's energy, their ability to really bring physicality but also that unpredictability and that explosive flair side I really enjoy. I think Ireland have a really powerful structure at the moment. But I think if you want to look at New Zealand, they do have a skill set which is very nice to watch. Mentioning England, it's always so exciting when you know the players, you know what they're capable of, it's exciting to see them go out there and put it together, because you know if they do, it's going to be great. Players-wise, I think for me I'm

always interested around the 9-10 area, with Ireland in the Jamison Gibson-Park, someone that's bursting on to the scene. I think Aaron Smith is similar, he's done it before in World Cups and has that experience. You have Dupont for France, so the No9s I think are going to play big roles. I also like No7, back row, so maybe the likes of the Ben Currys and the Ardie Saveas, these guys are going to have a big impact and Ireland have got a fabulous back row. And then finally the beauty of the speed in the back field - I think South Africa have got a guy called Kurt-Lee Arendse who's been on fire, as well as Pennaud for France, who's another one who I would pay a subscription fee to watch weekly.

What do you make of the home nations' chances?

I don't think there's ever been a World Cup that we've gone into with two Home Nations, including France in that Six Nations bracket, genuinely having a very powerful stake to that trophy. Scotland are also in a space where they are immensely challenging at the moment, and Wales are coming in hugely under the radar and we'll have to see how the warm-up games go to see how they're doing. For England I'm also excited, I think when this team plays at its fullest and it turns up on the front foot, and operating with all of that weight in action, then I think that story is going to change very quickly. More so than ever in this World Cup I think the first round of games is going to be a scorcher, so from Day One it's going to be hold-your-breath time.

GREIG LAIDLAW



Who do you think will win the Rugby World Cup and why?

I think it's going to be tight. I do think Australia have got a very good chance because they're on the right side of the draw, Eddie Jones's history of coaching is the shock and awe factor in terms of getting the job done quickly. So yeah, and I think Australia have very good players as well. So if they get a bit of luck, and keep everybody fit, I think Australia might win.

Who, whether a team or a player, do you most look forward to watching?

France, because they've been playing so well, because they're in their home country, and also that probably ties into their players as well so you know, whether it's like Greg Alldritt,

Antoine DuPont, or a guy I played with in France, Damian Penaud. He is absolutely electric, he's great to watch and a strong figure in the French team.

What do you make of the home nations' chances?

Well, I think obviously Ireland are probably looking to be the favourites, obviously there was a very strong Six Nations, and deservedly so, they've done it over a long period of time. I think Scotland are in a pretty good spot as well, to be honest. So I think if Scotland can stay injury free, they are going to give themselves a chance to get out of the group at least, and then hopefully they can progress from there. And I don't think England will be far away, to be honest. Steve Borthwick is a very good coach, England have got good players. And probably Wales you know will be coming up behind the rest at this moment in time, with the struggles they have had.

BRIAN O'DRISCOLL



Who do you think will win the Rugby World Cup this time and why?

South Africa - as three-time champions they know how to play Rugby World Cup winning rugby and I don't want to put the hex on Ireland.

Who - whether a team or player - are you looking forward to watching and why?

I'm looking forward to watching Tonga and Samoa with their returning All Blacks coming home to play.

What do you make of the home nations' chances?

I think Ireland have the best chance of the British and Irish sides although don't discount England with a more favourable route to the semis - once they are there they can win it with growing confidence.

SAM WARBURTON



Who do you think will win the Rugby World Cup?

I said in the Six Nations I thought whoever had home advantage in the Ireland and France game was going to win. So having home advantage, Ireland won that game. I still think that's the same. So I think France being at home, I think the Stade De France will be like a carnival every home game, and it's going to take an almighty performance to beat them at home.

Who, whether a team or a player, do you most look forward to watching?

Team, I'd say Australia, because I think there's been a lot of rugby that's been played up north this year and we've all taken our eye off the southern hemisphere as if they're not around. I think there's going to be some great performances from New Zealand they're always going to be around, and South Africa. I don't think Australia are going to probably win the World Cup. But the team they've got, and the players they've got, they're going to be capable of a big upset and are probably gonna go further most people think. And with the whole Eddie Jones going back I just think it makes a good story as well.

What do you make of the Home Nations' chances?

I think Ireland have got the ability to win it, England have got the ability to get to a semi-final, Scotland and Wales will need a very good run to get to the quarters.

LAWRENCE DALLAGLIO



Who do you think will win the World Cup and why?

You have to look at the odds in the tournament and six out of nine of the World Cups have been won by South Africa and New Zealand, two thirds of those tournaments have been won by two teams. So both of those teams are in the mix. They're also both on the same side of the draw, so they could both theoretically be out by the quarter-final stage. When you look at the host nation, France, you look at World Cup history and of the nine World Cups, three have been won by the host nation. So again, that is a factor that has to be considered. Yeah. But the host nation have also got to a final and lost as well. I'm still going to genuinely believe that France and South Africa for me are the two teams that are, at this moment in time, if I was going to pick a team, it'd be one of those two. And then if I was going to pick only one, it would I'd say be France. So if you push me into it, I would say it's between South Africa and France. And the reason I say that is because at this moment in time, I think they've got bigger forwards than anyone on the planet. And they've got incredibly talented players as well. The forwards I think, both sides of the ball, you just need a cannon to get them off the ball.

Who, whether a team or a player, do you most look forward to watching?

There are so many really I'm very excited about watching. Caelan Doris, I think he's certainly the player that has already announced himself as a world class player, but I think from my own position, him and Gregory Alldritt are my sort of two favourite number eights at the moment.

What do you make of the home nations' chances?

England I think will surprise people like they always do, because they've got a point to prove. Steve Borthwick has got a big job on his hands. I think England do quite a lot of good work in their camp. They'll be fitter, stronger, faster, better prepared, and if they win their group I think I could conceivably see England getting to a semi final with a bit of rugby left in them. I do think Ireland can win the World Cup. But I think going into a tournament as the number one side of the world is a different pressure. They've always gone into a World Cup with a sort of tag that they're underachievers, really. But now they're not underachievers, they're actually overachieving, they're playing really well. But I can tell you from my own

experience, when you're the number one side, it's a different pressure. It still relies on them keeping some of their key players fit. They've got depth to their squad. There's a bit of a question mark around Jonny Sexton about how many games he's gonna get banned for because he probably will pick up a ban. Wales we don't know because Warren Gatland probably doesn't know at this stage, everyone's writing them off, which is a good thing for them. But I wouldn't write them off completely. I think if they got out of their pool, and they gave Australia a good game, who knows you know what's possible and they've performed well in World Cups of late. Scotland are a dark horse without a doubt - they could conceivably turn the tournament on its head in the opening weekend, beat South Africa you know, everyone's looking at France, New Zealand, but you know, that could be the game that they were they could spring a few surprises and anything can happen.

UGO MONYE



Who do you think will win the World Cup and why?

I think the team who are the favourites to win the World Cup are the current holders, South Africa. They have an enormous ability to be able to score tries, to put points on the board. I think whoever wins the World Cup this year will probably be the top try scorer and South Africa are most definitely in that bracket.

Who, whether a team or a player, do you most look forward to watching?

Ireland are the number one side in the world. They were number one side of the world in 2018 and the build up to 2019 and they still are yet to go past the quarter finals. Those learnt lessons I think will probably put them in a really good position. France are the hosts and have been sensational over the last couple of years. As a football fan, I go back to 1998 when they had the hologram of Zidane on the Arc de Triomphe and there's a million people on the Champs-Elysee, I think that's part of the history which they will lean upon and try to unify. And the other one would be the All Blacks. This must be the first World Cup they've not gone into as favourites, their coach is leaving at the end of it and the timing of that could have a disruptive effect, but probably more so a galvanising effect.

What do you make of the Home Nations' chances?

Scotland in isolation have been a team that have been able to string together big performances and put together some incredible results and start rewriting their own history. So they're brilliantly positioned but their group is unfortunately potentially a group of death. England, despite the poverty of their performances over the last couple of years, are I think in a strong place. They're also not spoken about - I think a huge aspect of sport is pressure, and England currently don't have it. Same for Wales. Warren Gatland is a serial winner knows how to manage big tournaments.

SEAN FITZPATRICK



Who do you think will win the World Cup and why?

I think there's a number of teams that could win the World Cup, but I think at the moment, although the Irish are number one in the world, I think the team that is number two, currently France, would go in as favourites. I think playing at home is an advantage. They've had great success over the last few years. They have probably the best club competition in the world, that delivers quality international players.

Who, whether a team or a player, do you most look forward to watching?

I'm obviously quite interested to see how the All Blacks do, we've got a number of new players. We've probably had a difficult, you know, four years in terms of what happened in Japan after that semi-final against England. And it's been a slow build. I think COVID probably hit New Zealand harder than than most other rugby nations, in that we basically played against ourselves. And I think we've had a bit of a knock-on effect and it wasn't really until last year that that got exposed when we got beaten by the Irish. I'm quite happy that a lot of people aren't talking about the All Blacks that we're under the radar if we could be.

What do you make of the home nations' chances?

Wales and England have been helped with the draw. I think Ireland and Scotland being in the same pool, along with South Africa and Tonga, are going to find it very difficult. And although they've built huge depth I think Ireland has just been phenomenal with what they've achieved in the last 18 months, two years, but I just think that is such a difficult pool

to get out of. It's all dependent probably on that first game against Argentina for England, whether they can just progress straight through it to the semi-final. With Wales, they've got Fiji first up. That could be a telling factor in terms of the state that apparently they're in. You hear from Warren Gatland they're in great shape, but he would say that.

GEORGE GREGAN



Who do you think will win the World Cup and why?

I think France will win the World Cup. The reason is they've just got a really good young team who I think learned a lot from getting into the quarter-final in 2019. And I think, from my perspective, sometimes you need to have a disappointing experience at a World Cup to get that experience to make you hungry for the next one. I think they definitely had that.

Who, whether a team or a player, do you most look forward to watching?

I always keep an eye on the Australian team just to see how they're tracking with Eddie Jones and seeing how they will go in on their side of the pool. No-one's talking about them much, which I think is a good thing. Antoine Dupont to me is just a wonderful player. Can kick off both feet, always really, really calm and composed leads by example and I think he will really rise to the occasion with those big moments.

What do you make of the home nations' chances?

I think Scotland are going to be dangerous. No one's really talking about that, they're talking about Ireland. I think they showed in the Six Nations this year the ability to back up. They beat England, and then they backed up the following week at Murrayfield and I think they're getting more and more comfortable playing against anyone in the world and playing their game. I think Ireland have proven for probably a good year and a half now that they're the best team in the world, that playing style which is super disciplined, they can hold on to the ball for long periods of time. I expect them, if they get past a quarter final, which they've never done, they're two matches away from being world champions. Wales, I just think they're going in a struggle, particularly on that side of the pool. I think England are always going to be good - World Cup history shows that they do well in World Cups.

NOLLI WATERMAN



Who do you think will win the Rugby World Cup this time and why?

I think this will be the most competitive Rugby World Cup that there has ever been. The fact that the quarter-finals are reasonably hard in some pools to predict, especially who comes first and second, makes it exciting already. With France playing such incredible rugby and being a home nation, is awesome but I do think that the All Blacks will lift the trophy.

Who - whether a team or player - are you looking forward to watching and why?

I am most definitely excited to watch Tonga play. Yes they're in an incredibly difficult pool but I believe with the players that will now be representing Tonga, whether it's the three former Wallabies that played in the 2019 World Cup or the long list of former All Black, They have a huge amount of individual talent and I think if they come together and perform as a team, they will be magnificent.

What do you make of the home nations' chances?

Starting with England, I think the work they have is more around the variation that they're going to face in the pool stages with the likes of Argentina - physical, very confrontational - to Japan, who are very well-drilled and execute in such a different way. I think Wales will most definitely get out of the pool, but how well they do in the pool will determine the challenges they face moving forward. I think how Scotland play and their style is brilliant, it's just whether they can be consistent. I think in the pool, South Africa are the team who will struggle more than Ireland, mainly given the huge number of injuries that they've got.

DAVID FLATMAN



Who do you think will win the Rugby World Cup and why?

It looked like when France played Ireland in the Six Nations, actually in the last 20 Ireland were in better nick, and they just knew their onions a bit better and relied on individuals a little bit less, they looked like a slightly superior machine. I think South Africa are as cohesive at their best as Ireland. But I think they have a far less intricate way of playing rugby, so I think it's probably easier to translate from classroom to field under pressure. So I love the idea of Ireland winning it, love it. But for me, the Boks would be favourites.

Who, whether a team or a player, do you most look forward to watching?

I really want to say someone other than Frans Malherbe the South African tighthead just because I love watching him because in a game of players that have to do it all, Frans Malherbe but doesn't really claim to doing it all at any point. He does one or two jobs very, very well indeed. A massive strong man with great genetics. I like watching him do his work and survive around the field.

What do you make of the Home Nations' chances?

Ireland have a brutal group with Scotland - I would love to be wrong but I see Scotland going out in the group stages. Ireland could win the World Cup. England, absolutely no idea - I think it's easy to say, well, Steve Borthwick is picking Leicester guys, no what he's doing is he's picking guys that he knows best. And one thing he knows about them is that they will stick to a plan. I'd love Wales not to struggle with this World Cup. I'd love them to start with just winning by one point in an amazing first game against Fiji but as we've said about Wales for quite a long time now, they're not in a great place domestically, logistically, financially, all of those things, commercially. But actually, they've got loads of brilliant players. And they've got a coach who really knows his onions.

CLIVE WOODWARD



Who do you think will win the Rugby World Cup and why?

I think you've got two standout teams at the moment which are fortunately Northern hemisphere teams. I think France and Ireland are the two standout teams that both played well recently, they'll go in as hot favourites. I think France are the team to beat, someone's going to beat France to win the World Cup. It's like England in 2003, we were number one ranked in the world, favourites to win, no-one could beat us. I think it's the same with France. Playing at home, good team, good coach, Galathié - Edwards. They've got everything going for them. So I think someone's going to happen to France in terms of sending off or something dramatic. Ireland are going to be close, and the Southern hemisphere are all a bit undercooked at the moment but they're gonna be there or thereabouts.

Is there a team or player in particular that you're looking forward to watching this time?

I think from an English point of view, I just like watching England play. Yeah. I know he's one of the more senior players, but Owen Farrell's got such a huge role to play in the World Cup. You know, there's no bigger fan of this guy than me, but he's got to play 10. I think if he plays 10, he's captaining the team, then England have got a chance. I think if Farrell goes well, they should make the semi-finals and then it's a one-off game.

What do you make of the Home Nations' chances?

The draw has been really quite tough on Scotland, especially having this group with South Africa and Ireland, but they've got a good team. I think that this last year's Six Nations was a great tournament, especially France and Ireland did well. England are certainly moving in the right direction, I really do think England are going to do very well to win it, I think they should make the semi-finals. I really hope a Northern Hemisphere team does win the Rugby World Cup because it's been a long time since 2003. I think Wales are a little bit behind Scotland, they've got a tough draw but they've got a good team, make no bones about it. So for the Northern hemisphere I think it should be a great World Cup. And as I say, someone's got to beat France and I'm not sure who.

GARETH THOMAS



Who do you think will win the Rugby World Cup this time and why?

I think France will win the World Cup. Having played there I feel as a nation they handle home pressure very, very well. The nation will be fully behind them and as a spectator I always find that in any global sporting event, the better the host nation does, the more enthusiasm, and excitement builds around the tournament, even after a supporter's number one team is gone, regardless of their nationality, that individual usually starts to support the host team. They have some of the best players individually who play even better together. They also have a stable spine through their team which has stood them in very good stead.

Who - whether a team or player - are you looking forward to watching and why? And what do you make of the home nations' chances?

I'm looking forward to seeing Scotland. After the disappointment of the last World Cup, I feel they have a point to prove individually and collectively. They are in a group of death, which means any team can cause an upset, so every point and every second in every game is crucial. I would love them to shock us, like they were shocked in the last World Cup. From a Welsh perspective I'm looking forward to seeing some of the young guns perform. Tommy Reffell, and Sam Costelow. These are forming the future of Welsh rugby in two very vital positions, seeing if they can repeatedly perform at the highest level in a quick turnaround will dictate whether they can fulfil their potential.

JAMIE ROBERTS



Who do you think will win the World Cup and why?

For some reason, and this is my gut telling me, Australia. There's just something about Australia. I think they've got all the ingredients to win the tournament. I'm calling Australia to beat the All Blacks in the final.

Who, whether a team or a player, do you most look forward to watching?

I'm looking forward to seeing Fiji and it frustrates me that they play Wales first off actually as a huge game for us. But Fiji now, a quarter of their team now plays for the Fijian Drua. One of those Pacific islands teams is going to make the quarter finals, and I'm not quite sure who it is, whether it's Tonga, Samoa, or Fiji.

What do you make of the home nations' chances?

Scotland, they're going to beat one of the Springboks or Ireland, they will target the Springboks because it's their first game. And if Scotland can replicate the form of the Six Nations, I think they could well beat the Springboks, with their ability to play with ball and hand and score tries. Ireland have got to win five big games on the bounce to win the tournament, and I'm not quite sure they have the depth to win five big games. That side of the draw is brutal. We know this tournament is attritional, and teams lose players, you know, they just hope for Ireland so they don't lose their pivotal players.

HUGH WOOZENCROFT



Who do you think will win the Rugby World Cup and why?

I think France will win the World Cup, because I think they've been building for some time. They've proven that they can beat the best teams. There's been occasions where, particularly against Ireland, they haven't come out with a result. But I think the main difference is going to be home advantage. The crowds, the passion that we've seen from the French fans, if they can bring that into this tournament as well, I think it's going to be such a huge boost for what is an incredibly talented squad.

Who, whether a team or a player, do you most look forward to watching?

I always look forward to watching England, and it's very intriguing. Under Steve Borthwick, we didn't see much from them in the autumn in terms of a drastic change in style. But I think with a little bit more time, particularly the preparation camps, Steve is going to be able to get his ideas over a little bit more clearly. Hopefully with the players conditioned in a slightly different way that will maybe suit his game. Zach Mercer is a player who I'm hoping gets in the England squad and who has obviously been in France who can have a real impact in England teams.

What do you make of the home nations' chances?

I don't want to hammer Welsh rugby as a whole, but obviously the issues that they've seen over the last few years have not been conducive to a positive working environment. When you think about Scotland, they have the chance you know, they play a fantastic brand of running rugby, I think Gregor Townsend getting his contract sorted is massive as well. And they've got nothing to lose. I think for England, it's tough at this World Cup. Obviously with changing coach so close to the World Cup, from what I've seen so far, I don't think we're going to trouble the best sides. Ireland are an incredible side - incredible depth, great players. I think they're a serious contender to win the thing overall.

SHANE WILLIAMS



Who do you think will win the Rugby World Cup this time and why?

Ireland being the number one team in the world, have to be talked about. But as far as I'm concerned, France who have the World Cup in their back garden, I spent a bit of time in France this year and last year, the whole country's buzzing and with 'Dupont For President' and all this, they're certainly confident of their team and why not? But having watched the Rugby Championship now, typical New Zealand look a force to be reckoned with. I think it would be between those two (France and New Zealand) and the fairytale would be that France can win the World Cup in their own backyard.

Who - whether a team or player - are you looking forward to watching and why?

I'm always going to keep my eye on wingers, I'm a big fan of Cheslin Kolbe, I know he's had his injuries and I hope that he can hit the World Cup running, fully fit, and he's the kind of player I enjoy watching. I think Darcy Graham in Scotland is a great little player as well, I watched him against Italy - he's a player of my stature, very greedy, he takes players on, brave in defence, good footwork. Mark Telea for the All Blacks, I think he's been superb, he's come into the squad, he's got great feet, again he was superb against Australia alongside Will Jordan. And of course Antoine Dupont in France, he'll certainly be flying the flag for France and leading from the front.

What do you make of the home nations' chances?

We've had a tough time of late in Wales with contract issues and things going on behind the scenes and politics, but there's always a chance. I think it's a little bit soon for this crop of players, for us to go on and win the World Cup, I certainly hope they do - of course they do - but with the fact that Alun Wyn Jones and Ken Owens and players like Rhys Webb have called time on their international careers puts a lot of pressure on the youngsters. I think England are almost in the same position as Wales, Steve Borthwick has come in and he's got a lot of work to do, it didn't go particularly well in the Six Nations, so I wouldn't count them as contenders. And Scotland will be capable of an upset for sure but I don't see they have the strength in depth to win a World Cup. So if there is a team out of the ones we've already mentioned, it probably is Ireland. They just need to take that confidence, keep Sexton fit and wrapped in cotton wool.

PHILLIPPA TUTTIETT



Who do you think will win the World Cup and why?

It's difficult to look past France, I watched the Top 14 final the other day. Oh my gosh, fantastic rugby but intensity, and desire to play, the ruthlessness - add into that the fact that it's a Home World Cup as well. And then you've got your likes of Dupont coming off the back of that win as well. He's in form, feeling so motivated and confident.

Who, whether a team or a player, do you most look forward to watching?

I'm looking at Fiji with two hats on. So as a Super Rugby fan, I'm really excited to see them play because they have had a lot of development in their game. They're always the exciting throw it around, throw the rugby ball around team, but they've lacked that game management. They could be a wildcard to really progress through this tournament.

What do you make of the home nations' chances?

Let's start with the Welsh because that is my main interest. I'm really not sure how well they're going to do, I hope that they progress through their pool but I can't honestly see them progressing further than the quarters. For Ireland, this should be theirs - everything is written in the stars for them. Scotland have got a tough side of the pool, but they've got good players. They've been playing great rugby, so I think they would be disappointed if they didn't get into the knockouts. I could easily see England getting into a final as I could see them being knocked out in the quarters again. The only team I really am convinced about is Ireland, and it will be sort of theirs to lose, to not progress in the tournament.

TOPSY OJO



Who do you think will win the Rugby World Cup and why?

If England don't win it, I'm going to go for South Africa. I think the way they play the game is suited for tournament rugby. Very efficient, very clinical, and as defending champions, I back them to repeat it if England don't.

Who, whether a team or a player, do you most look forward to watching?

Antoine Dupont, definitely. Really looking forward to seeing him. Cheslin Kolbe as well, South Africa, very much looking forward to seeing him in action as well.

What do you make of the home nations' chances?

Probably the strongest they've been, collectively. I think Ireland being top of the tree will have a huge part to play. I think England, Scotland, Wales won't be looked at as seriously which actually could play into their favour because they just go about their business a bit under the radar. I say Scotland, Wales have got very tough pools to get through. But you get through the pools, anything can happen. I think England will be quietly glad that they're on the other side, may come through their pool and be in with a good shout.

BEN KAY



Who do you think is going to win the World Cup and why?

I think France are going to win the World Cup. They haven't always dealt with home advantage well, in 2007 I was part of that team that beat them in the semis, but I think it's a different French team in terms of their confidence.

Who, whether a team or a player, do you most look forward to watching?

I really want to see how Tonga and Fiji do. I think both have electric back lines. But actually, I don't think Tonga, I could be proved wrong, I don't think they'll get out of the group. Because they're just in the group of death. But I think they will decide the group. You could very much see Scotland potentially beating South Africa and then losing to Tonga.

What do you make of the home nations' chances?

Obviously Scotland and Ireland being in the same group and alongside South Africa, Tonga - it's such a hard task for them. I think Ireland aren't quite as confident as they were maybe a year ago. Scotland, as I said, could easily beat South Africa and then lose to Tonga, lose to Ireland. Just because of the difficulty of that group. There's a bit of nerves in Wales, we've got a lot of friends there, and they're very worried about the Fiji game. But if they get through that they're on the right side of the draw, as are England and I think Warren Gatland will feel quite confident about that. From an English perspective, they shouldn't be quite as confident potentially as they will be because Argentina will be a tough challenge for them. But if they win that they should get into the semi-finals and then you're two games away from winning it.

IAN MCGEECHAN



Who do you think will win the World Cup and why?

I can't look beyond France at the moment, but also know that teams develop through World Cups which I think is the other fascinating thing. But I think France are well coached, They've come through very consistently over the last three, four seasons now since the last World Cup. It's probably the team that's developed best I think, and they are strong right through the team. So if they hold it together, and it's not the pressure of playing a World Cup in France, they're the ones that I would think will be winning a final.

Who, whether a team or a player, do you most look forward to watching?

I'd like to see Scotland go well because I think they're playing some of the most exciting attacking rugby. But also, World Cups have always been good for Australia, they bring something to the tournament simply because of the quality of their players and how they respond to World Cups. Tonga, I think will be a dark horse team in that group. And Ireland I would love to see you do well, as well as Scotland. Simply because they've been so consistent. And some of the rugby they've produced is different to the way other teams have approached it. A lot of credit to Andy Farrell for that.

What do you make of the home nations' chances?

I think the big challenge for Scotland and Ireland is the draw, obviously, when you've got the top five teams in the same half of the draw it will lead to some very good pool games. I think England and Wales will be very pleased and I think they'll be quietly confident, you know, if I was Steve Borthwick or Warren Gatland to think that certainly a quarter-final or even a semi-final is there with with two very good games.

BRYAN HABANA



Who do you think will win the Rugby World Cup this time and why?

Given that this is in my opinion going to be the most competitive RWC that we have ever seen, it's so difficult to call a winner. We have seen injuries to some key players who will miss out but I really like the fact that South Africa are going into this RWC as a bit of an underdog. Despite losses against both Ireland and France in November last year, I was extremely encouraged about the type of rugby that the Boks were playing and with some exciting and talent youngsters being given an opportunity as well as some proper hard men upfront, I honestly think that they can do what's necessary to win the tournament.

Who - whether a team or player - are you looking forward to watching and why?

Four years on from RWC2019, Antoine Dupont continues to show the world what a phenomenal player he is and with the tournament being in his backyard, I can't wait to see how he performs at rugby's greatest showpiece!

What do you make of the home nations' chances?

With England and Wales on the 'easier' side of the draw, their route to at least a semi final does seem a bit more simple but with Argentina in the mix, that's also not that simple. Ireland and Scotland in a pool with South Africa is definitely the more challenging of the draws but Ireland are in my opinion the best placed home nation to summit the RWC challenge and get their hands on that elusive Webb Ellis trophy.

RORY BEST



Who do you think will win the Rugby World Cup this time and why?

I think Ireland are going to win the Rugby World Cup because they have been playing the best rugby for the past 12-18 months, they're a very complete team, they can play in different styles, they can take teams on physically but they play with a lot of precision and accuracy and speed. And also they have now developed a lot of depth."

Who - whether a team or player - are you looking forward to watching and why?

I'm looking forward to seeing Fiji play. Having done a little bit of work with them a couple of years ago, you understand how skilful and talented these guys are. They're going to get plenty of preparation put into the World Cup and some world class players, like Sam Matavesi, Viliame Mata, Semi Radradra, Josh Tuisova, so really looking forward to seeing what they can do in what will be a really open group with Wales, Australia and Georgia.

What do you make of the home nations' chances?

I think the home nations' chances are good, as I said previously I think Ireland have a very good chance of winning it, England have a very favourable draw. I think Scotland have a hard draw from an Irish point of view, but also South Africa in that group. And Wales like England are coming from a very open side of the draw in terms of teams potentially struggling a little bit for form and results. And so the home nations have a really good chance this World Cup. But to broaden it out slightly, I really hope that we have a Northern Hemisphere winner. I think we've, over the number of World Cups we've had, the number of Northern Hemisphere winners doesn't reflect where the game is. So if it's not going to be a home nation, hopefully there will be a Northern Hemisphere winner."

NICK MULLINS



Who do you think will win the Rugby World Cup this time and why?

Head: New Zealand, Heart: France. Dreams: England, Ireland, Scotland or Wales. The All Blacks appear to have cottoned on to the news that there's a World Cup around the corner and have looked ominously good in the Rugby Championship. France though have been the hottest ticket in town for the last couple of years and rugby romantics would be stirred by the idea of just a second home winner for 28 years in Paris on October 28th.

Who - whether a team or player - are you looking forward to watching and why?

When you reflect on World Cups gone by, some of the fondest memories are made in unlikely places by unfancied teams. Japan beating Scotland four years ago will live with me forever. So in the early weeks of the tournament I'm excited by Argentina and all they'll bring on and off the pitch against England. I'm looking forward to sharing Portugal's joy as they play in just their second World Cup and meet Wales in Nice on the second weekend. Chile, Tonga, Samoa and Romania are also on my commentary list in the pool stage and they'll all have their own stories to tell.

What do you make of the home nations' chances?

Ireland offer the best hope of a Home Nations victory. They're Grand Slammers, they've been re-writing history these past few years, they're number one in the rankings. But, but, but...Can they get beyond the quarter-finals for the first time ever, can they deal with the pressure and are they too reliant on an increasingly injury-prone Johnny Sexton? Scotland playing without fear might create some headlines, particularly if they can see off defending champions South Africa on the opening weekend in Marseille. England and Wales fans are banking on Steve Borthwick and Warren Gatland sprinkling a bit of magic dust on teams who haven't inspired of late. They head to France in hope rather than expectation.

GABRIEL CLARKE



Who do you think will win the Rugby World Cup this time and why?

I think it's the most open Rugby World Cup in terms of northern hemisphere and southern hemisphere candidates. The winner I think will come from the side of the draw which has South Africa, Ireland, New Zealand and France in it, not forgetting Scotland. I think it's a World Cup that France really must be hopeful of winning. I think most people will select France as their team to win and the team that beats France wins it.

Who, whether a team or a player, do you most look forward to watching?

I'm really looking forward to watching Damian McKenzie of New Zealand kicking, because he missed the last World Cup through injury, he's a brilliant talent, small, one of those players a bit like Ange Capuozzo who I'm also looking forward to watching for Italy, who's been a difference maker for the Italian team in the last year or two.

What do you make of the Home Nations' chances?

Obviously Ireland are number one ranked team in the world. They've beaten everybody. They have a really good team. They have some outstanding individual talent. They have a coach now who I think is as calm and composed in Andy Farrell who is potentially at his peak or coming to his peak, which makes it hard to bet against them. Outside of that Wales are in a bit of a mess, I don't see Wales going beyond the quarter finals. England I think will reach the semi finals because I think they'll still be good enough to win their pool. Scotland have a really tough draw, being in with South Africa and Ireland. It's hard to see them beating one of those two teams, but they start with South Africa and maybe that's the match where they cause one of the great upsets.

CLAIRE THOMAS



Who do you think will win the Rugby World Cup and why?

I think it will be France. I think that the loss against Ireland in the Six Nations did them the world of good. I think they needed to have a reason to go back to the drawing board and to refine things because momentum is a brilliant thing, but it can also catch you off guard. Home advantage does make an enormous difference, particularly in the cauldrons that we're going to see across France this autumn. This is their time. I think France are gonna get over the line.

Who, whether a team or a player, do you most look forward to watching?

I'm a massive Azzurri fan, I love the Italians. I've covered them a lot over the last couple of years - I was there when they beat Australia historically, I was there when they pushed the box all the way for about 50 minutes in Genoa. I think Kieran Crowley has worked wonders that I'm baffled as to why he's not his contract renewed for after the World Cup.

What do you make of the Home Nations' chances?

None of us know which Wales are going to turn up at the World Cup and I say that as a Welsh woman with some serious concern, but the noises we're hearing coming out of camp are positive. I was with England at the Lensbury and the positivity in that camp was stunning. The difference under Borthwick is enormous. My heart bleeds for Scotland, because that is a hideous draw. But I'm really excited to see what they can do because they have two opportunities to throw the kitchen sink at title contenders. It's about time Ireland came good and if there's a squad to do it, it's this one. But my hesitation would be the results in the play-offs for Leinster.

SCOTT HASTINGS



Who do you think will win the Rugby World Cup or why?

I'm gonna go for France, purely and simply because home advantage really tells. They've become such an expansive rugby team, very skillful, very disciplined and I just believe they've got a real understanding of each other. They've been through some really tough games. And the Shaun Edwards factor is part of it, but also there's a real steel within them. And so for me home advantage, but there's another five teams that I think can really win this World Cup as well. And when it gets to the knockout stages, anything can happen.

Who, whether a team or a player, do you most look forward to watching?

I'm really looking forward to seeing Fiji play. And the reason for saying that is they do play some phenomenal rugby. They've got some brilliant athletes like Viliame Mata, who is an Edinburgh player, a great number eight and such a skilful player who epitomises the way they can play the game. And we've seen in the southern hemisphere the Drua side doing particularly well in the Super Rugby series, and if there's a discipline around that Fiji team, can they provide the shock within the tournament in much the same respects as Japan did in 2015?

What do you make of the home nations' chances?

Ireland and Scotland are in the same pool along with South Africa, the defending champions, so it's gonna be really tough for Scotland to to jump out of that pool without any shadow of a doubt. You've got incredible talent with the Irish rugby team, very well drilled, very well coached. Number one rugby team in the world. It's all about momentum. Can they build that momentum? For England, they're going under the radar a little bit with Steve Borthwick. I think they can get their systems in place, they need to get their tournament off to the right start. For Wales we know about the building blocks that Warren Gatland is trying to put in place - you take away the Alun Wyn Jones, the Tipurics of the world, it could be a tough competition for them.

LEE MCKENZIE



Who do you think will win the Rugby World Cup this time and why?

Ireland. They have been flawless for the last couple of years, beaten all the major teams multiple times and have huge strength in depth.

Who - whether a team or player - are you looking forward to watching and why?

Anthoine Dupont. Never tire of seeing his magic and in front of a home crowd, he will thrive even more.

What do you make of the home nations' chances?

Scotland have such a tough draw in the 'pool of death'. This Wales side is a bit of an unknown but Gatland will guide them through the pool stages I expect. England, who knows? They have flashes of greatness but you need more than that. They'll make it to the quarter finals and then the flash needs to last a full 80 minutes.

MILES HARRISON



Who do you think will win the World Cup and why?

The prime candidates at the moment are France and Ireland for the northern hemisphere, but you have to factor in the southern hemisphere. You can see Australia on an upward curve, and with Eddie Jones in charge that's quite a story. South Africa clearly as champions

have never been anything else but ultra competitive for every World Cup they've taken part and New Zealand might be a good outside bet.

Who, whether a team or a player, do you most look forward to watching?

I think the one I really am looking forward to watch is Antoine Dupont, because he has been built up to be and has won the award of being the world's best player. This is taking even him into uncharted waters where he has become his side's leader, his side's main player, the one that brings together the style of play, the forwards and backs, it is an awful lot to shoulder.

What do you make of the Home Nations' chances?

If you're looking for a likely winner of the tournament then Ireland do stand head and shoulders above the rest. But England and Wales have gotten themselves into what many people believe to be the favourable half of the draw.. So that leaves Scotland because of where they find themselves in that really difficult part of the draw. I think on their day, they can be a match for anybody if they're allowed to get it right and play the game that they want to play.

MARTIN GILLINGHAM



Who do you think is going to win the Rugby World Cup and why?

I think South Africa are the outstanding favourites. They're playing their traditional brand, but I think that they have created additional dimensions.

What do you make of the home nations' chances?

I think England have a favourable draw. Although there is absolutely no evidence other than perhaps battling effort in Dublin at the end of the Six Nations to suggest that England really have any chance of troubling the likes of Ireland, of troubling South Africa, of troubling France, even New Zealand. I think Scotland's problem is they've been making huge strides, but their draw is wretched. Wales, they're not where they want to be. Ireland has to be the side if there is to be a Home Nations winner.

ENDS.