

SPORT

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TO BE HIS
OWN MAN**

Paul Kimmage with
Nicolas Roche, Pages 10-11



UNSTOPPABLE

CAPTAIN O'CONNELL INSPIRES DRAMATIC TITLE WIN



SIX NATIONS
SPECIAL
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Ireland retain their crown on day of twists and turns

BRENDAN FANNING
at Murrayfield

THE dream finale, with four teams going to the start line on the final race day, ended with Ireland having done just enough to hang on for back-to-back tournament wins in a thrilling and at times unbelievable climax.

It was the first time since 2007 that each of the three games could have produced a Championship winner, and the deal wasn't sealed until the last play of the last game, in Twickenham last night where England just failed to overcome Ireland's better points difference.

"Winning this tournament is a massive boost for us to be honest," said coach Joe Schmidt.

On a day of days in the Six

Nations, when 27 tries were scored in three games, the tone was set from the first game, when Wales powered to a 61-20 win over Italy in Rome. The 41-point victory meant Ireland had to beat Scotland by 21 to overtake Wales.

In the end, Ireland's huge 40-10 win in Murrayfield set England a target of a 26-point winning margin in order to finish top, but France managed to hold them out in a madcap game, which finished 55-35, to give Schmidt a second Championship ahead of the World Cup in the autumn.

"France were unbelievable," said Ireland captain Paul O'Connell of the game in Twickenham, "scoring some great tries, it was a great effort for the Six Nations. If only we all did so much to play every weekend, it's already an unbelievable tournament but

I think this weekend has been brilliant for it." There has been speculation that the Irish captain may retire after the World Cup, but he was non-committal when asked if this was his last Six Nations. "I genuinely haven't given an answer because I don't have an answer myself. If it does finish, it's a great way to finish."

While there had been much comment in the last week about the uneven playing field that is staggered kicks-offs on the final day, Six Nations chief executive John Feehan said he is fundamentally opposed to any change in the structure.

"Firstly the schedules are made two years in advance, they don't just appear," he told the *Sunday Independent* yesterday. "The avowed aim here is to spread the word and have as many as possible watch the Championship. If you play at

the same time you minimise not maximise your audience, which across the three games will be up to 25 million people. If you were to schedule those games simultaneously you'd halve that number.

"It's not just about the money, but about access. We get many of what you would call occasional viewers to the Six Nations — it's not just the diehards. So this is about reaching out and converting people.

"If you were to go back to simultaneous kick offs you'd have far less money which would have a knock-on effect on the unions and how they can develop the game — especially Ireland who wouldn't have the resources of England and France. To reduce the number of people who can watch the Championship would be patently stupid."

Search for coach to replace Simmons began months ago

GER SIGGINS

THE task of replacing Phil Simmons as Ireland coach will move up a gear tomorrow when the post is advertised, but the process has been underway since October.

"When Ottis Gibson was sacked as West Indies coach in September the first thing that came into my mind was 'Phil'," says Richard Holdsworth, Cricket Ireland's high performance director.

"He has been very open with us so we were able to begin planning. I'm very pleased for Phil and it's a job he's had his heart set on and we wish him all the best."

Cricket Ireland engaged a headhunting firm some weeks ago and it has been drawing up the profile of the required candidate and identifying potential recruits.

Soundings were also taken at the World Cup, and former Ireland coach Adi Birrell — now with South Africa — strongly recommended his compatriot Dale Benkenstein.

The 40-year-old played 23 one day internationals for South Africa and had a successful spell captaining Durham before he retired in 2013. He was appointed coach of Hampshire last season and took them to promotion with just one defeat in 16 games.

Another high-profile candidate will be John Bracewell (56), the former off-spinner who played 94 times for New Zealand in the 1980s. He coached them from 2003-09 and until January this year was also with Gloucestershire where he worked with William Porterfield and Kevin O'Brien.

Other names mentioned but unlikely to be available are

Ireland's batting coach at the World Cup, Matty Mott, former Australian batsman Greg Blewett and former England coach Andy Flower.

"We have had a couple of direct and indirect approaches and they are interesting, and good", says Holdsworth.

Cricket Ireland are looking for a coach with strong first-class experience, ideally in international cricket. The latter requirement cuts the field down significantly but could include assistant coaches at top level.

"Test cricket is now higher up the agenda for us and we will be looking for someone who could take us to that level," said Holdsworth. "In some ways we are looking at a mix of Adi and Phil, an experienced player and coach, and someone who will help on the structural/organisational side.

"There are people out there,

and it remains to be seen whether we can entice them to Ireland. What has happened over the last six weeks will show many that Ireland can provide a great opportunity to advance your career."

The advertisements will run for 10 days and interviews will take place immediately after.

"We will appoint as soon as we practically can", says Holdsworth.

There is some leeway with the players on leave until April 15, but the new man may not be in situ when England visit Malahide on May 8.

"Phil has a three month notice period which we waived," says the performance director, "but that may not be possible with the new coach so plans are in place for an interim appointment on a short-term basis."

Simmons' legacy. See Page 6

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