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Clinton scores crucial victories

Obama: Illinois, Minnesota, Kansas and Georgia

Clinton: New York, New Jersey and Tennessee

McCain: New York, New Jersey and Illinois

Romney: Massachusetts and Utah

Huckabee: Alabama and Arkansas

Ewen MacAskill in Washington
Wednesday February 6, 2008
Guardian Unlimited



Supporters of Democratic presidential hopeful Hillary Clinton in New York

Hillary Clinton strung together a series of crucial victories in Super Tuesday states tonight, slowing Barack Obama's recent surge in one of the biggest and most competitive contests in recent US history.

Clinton's early results and projections were better than opinion polls in recent days had suggested. Obama had built up momentum over the last week, eating into the 10 to 20 point opinion poll lead she had enjoyed only a few weeks earlier, but appeared to run out of time.

Both Republicans and Democrats were fighting it out coast-to-coast in 22 states for the right to represent their parties in the November White House race.

In the Republican race, John McCain, the Arizona senator, established himself as the clear frontrunner. He was projected to take several key early states.

His main rival, Mitt Romney, the businessman who has spent millions of his own fortune in the race, insisted he will stay in the race in spite of a poor showing. "There are some people who thought it all would be done by tonight but we are going to keep on battling," he told supporters.

The surprise element in the Republican race was Mike Huckabee, the Baptist pastor and winner in Iowa last month.

His appeal to Christian evangelicals helped him win southern states such as Alabama, West Virginia and Arkansas, but he does not have the appeal elsewhere in the country to mount a serious challenge to McCain.

Obama and Clinton are engaged in a suffocating fight to accumulate a majority of the 4,049 delegates to the Democratic convention in August that will choose the party nominee.

A decisive outcome is near impossible in the Super Tuesday

contest in spite of the scale of the vote. With Clinton and Obama so close in so many states, they were having to split the delegates.

Obama and Clinton conceded in advance that neither was likely to emerge from Super Tuesday with anything more than a relatively narrow edge in delegates.

"Senator Clinton, I think, has to be the prohibitive favourite going in given her name recognition, but we've been steadily chipping away," said Obama, seeking to play down expectations.

Clinton successfully blunted Obama, according to exit polls that put her ahead in many key states. Obama made early gains, building on the momentum that has seen him eat into the 10 to 20 point poll lead she had enjoyed only a few weeks earlier.

Exit polls projected Obama would win Georgia, a big southern state with lots of delegates at stake, and the small state of Delaware. He also took his home state, Illinois, which he represents in the Senate. He took Kansas and won the Minnesota caucus.

Clinton's biggest win of the night was Massachusetts, where she had enjoyed big poll leads but these were threatened by the endorsement last week of the state's senator, Ted Kennedy, of Obama. Clinton was projected to win Oklahoma, Tennessee and Arkansas, as well as New York, where she is senator.

New York is an important win, given it is one of the most populous states in the country, with 281 delegates at stake. But the Democratic proportional system means that Obama will receive a share of them.

The exit polls suggested Obama was winning over young, educated and black voters while Clinton had greater appeal among women, the working-class and Hispanics. But her share of women was not as strong as she had banked on.

Exit polls suggested McCain, who had built up momentum after last month winning New Hampshire and South Carolina and last week Florida, would take Connecticut, New Jersey and Illinois.

Romney was expected to take Massachusetts, but anything less would have been a disaster given he had been governor of that state, and Utah, another banker given the dominance of his co-religionist Mormons in the state.

The exit polls in Georgia suggested the result in the Republican race was too close to call with a three-way battle between McCain, Romney and Huckabee.

In a speech in his home state, Arkansas, Huckabee wrote off Romney's challenge, claiming that the Republican race had been reduced to two: Huckabee versus McCain.

Huckabee, who may be hoping eventually to become the vice-presidential running mate of McCain, signalled he will continue in the race: "We are still on our feet and, to the amazement of many, we are getting there."

While the proportional system used by the Democrats made it likely the Democratic race would be inconclusive, the Republican winner-takes-all system meant that McCain stood a chance of knocking out Romney.

Super Tuesday comes after thousands of hours of campaigning, more than a score of debates and millions of dollars spent on advertising.

At stake in the Democratic race are 1,688 out of the 4,049 who will decide the nomination at the Democratic convention. Clinton is seeking to regain the Democratic front-runner status that she enjoyed almost all of last year but lost after being

defeated in Iowa and South Carolina last month. Obama is hoping to take the front-runner mantle for the first time to carry him into the next round of elections.

Both the Clinton and Obama teams predicted they would both emerge with substantial numbers of delegates and that the battle would continue for months yet.

Super Tuesday has proved to be more competitive than most US general elections. The parties in general elections normally only concentrate resources in about a dozen or less swing states but the candidates over the last week have had to do battle in almost all 22 states.

Results by candidate

Clinton (Delegates allocated proportionally) Arkansas (35 delegates) Massachusetts (93 delegates) New Jersey (107 delegates) New York (232 delegates) Oklahoma (38 delegates) Tennessee (68 delegates)

Obama (Delegates allocated proportionally) Alabama (52 delegates) Delaware (15 delegates) Georgia (87 delegates) Illinois (153 delegates) Kansas (32 delegates) Minnesota (72 delegates) North Dakota (13 delegates)

McCain Connecticut (27 delegates – winner takes all) Delaware (15 delegates – winner takes all) Illinois (57 delegates – allocated proportionally) New Jersey (52 delegates – winner takes all) New York (87 delegates – winner takes all)

Romney Massachusetts (40 delegates – allocated proportionally) Utah (36 delegates – winner takes all)

Huckabee Alabama (45 delegates – allocated proportionally) Arkansas (31 delegates – allocated proportionally)

Democratic tide may have turned

Suzanne Goldenberg in Washington
Wednesday February 6, 2008
Guardian Unlimited

On a good night for Hillary Clinton, there was perhaps no sweeter victory than the one in Massachusetts – a state snatched back from Barack Obama, and a dent in the prestige of his patrons in the Kennedy clan. The early win in Massachusetts was important for Clinton who needed some upsets tonight to turn back Obama's momentum and restore her chances of capturing the Democratic nomination in the week ahead.

While the real tally of Super Tuesday delegates has yet to emerge, the result in Massachusetts, and expected wins in New Jersey, New York and other states, at the very least spares Clinton the prospect of abject humiliation.

Her campaign immediately set to work spinning the result in Massachusetts. "One of the biggest surprises of the night is Massachusetts," the campaign said in a statement.

The good news ran out fairly soon after that as Obama chalked up victories audaciously close to Clinton's backyard – Connecticut and Delaware.

Obama also fulfilled expectations that his grassroots organisations would pay dividends across the midwest and in caucus states. He easily won in Kansas, Minnesota and North Dakota.

But the larger point had been made: the momentum that Obama had been riding for the last week may have turned.

Clinton's win in Massachusetts will be an embarrassment to Ted Kennedy, the liberal lion of the Democratic party. Kennedy's endorsement of Obama last week had been

devastating to the Clinton campaign, practically anointing her opponent as the rightful heir to the clan's legacy.

The Kennedy stamp of approval injected Obama's campaign with a burst of momentum, threatening Clinton in California and other states.

In the last week, Kennedy and other members of the clan had campaigned ferociously for Obama in California and other states.

Clinton's win in Massachusetts goes some way to restoring a sense of order. Her ability to resist the allure of the Kennedy clan now establishes her as a powerful campaigner in her own right – particularly since her husband deliberately adopted a low-key approach on the campaign trail in last 10 days.

With the first results, Clinton was also able to claim an ability to appeal to voters in the south – Tennessee – and in a traditionally Republican state – Oklahoma.

Both candidates carried their home states, Clinton in New York, and Obama in Illinois. However, Obama was doing well in New Jersey and Connecticut, states that practically count as Clinton's backyard.

Clinton's strong showing after a week which seemed to belong to Obama now give her a head start in the battle of perceptions that lies ahead.

The final outcome from last night's contests could take several days to emerge. In part, that is due to the Democratic party rules which award delegates proportionally in every state. That could give a boost to second-place finishers, who would otherwise be eliminated under a winner-takes-all system.

Early voting in several states, including California, also could delay a result.

The contest in the coming weeks now depends on the ability of both camps to persuade voters and pundits that they performed better than expected.

In reality, however, the two contenders fell back on their core supporters. Clinton, as in previous contests, relied heavily on support from white women as well as pensioners. She also dominated the Latino vote, winning 75% of their votes in her home state of New York.

But Clinton showed real weakness in her ability to compete against Obama for the African-American vote – even among women – could hurt her chances in the contests ahead. Obama won 88% of the black vote in Georgia.

Obama also improved his share of the white vote, even in southern states such as Georgia where he won 39%. Although Clinton was still in the race last night, Obama remains a favourite as the campaign moves into three back-to-back contests over the next week.

Obama is expected to do well in Louisiana, which holds its caucus on Saturday, because of the large African-American population. Obama is also well placed for the contests in Washington, DC, and neighbouring Maryland and Virginia next week.

While the Clinton campaign has pinned its hopes on March 4, when the powerhouse states of Ohio and Texas, go to the polls, it may prove increasingly difficult to hang in for the long haul.

Depending on Obama's tally once the dust settles on last night's contests, a string of wins from Washington state through Louisiana and Washington, DC, could give him an insurmountable advantage – especially if he is able to rebuild his momentum. Candidates need to win over 2,025 delegates to

secure the Democratic nomination.

Clinton, meanwhile, has set her horizons on Ohio, where she has been endorsed by the popular governor, Ted Strickland. Her economic message is also expected to resonate in a state which has been hurt by job losses. She is also counting on a strong showing in Texas, which has a large Latino population, to put her over the top and secure the nomination.

Early results reveal a fragmented Republican party

Ed Pilkington in New York and Suzanne Goldenberg in Washington
Wednesday February 6, 2008
Guardian Unlimited

As the Republican party begins to pore over the Super Tuesday results in its search for a leader to steer it forward into the November general elections, it was clear from early results that the party remains highly conflicted about its direction and guiding principles.

As expected, John McCain, the putative frontrunner, took his home state of Arizona. He also wrapped up New York, New Jersey, Illinois, Delaware and Connecticut where his main rival Mitt Romney had actively campaigned.

But as the night wore on, it seemed McCain was facing at least one other claimant to the Republican leadership in Mike Huckabee. "A lot of people have been saying this is a two man race. It is – and we are in it," Huckabee told supporters in Little Rock.

McCain was still well positioned to win the delegate race for the Republican nomination. But Huckabee certainly demonstrated his unexpected staying power in Georgia and Alabama, which the former Arkansas governor won. His presence also turned Tennessee and Georgia into three-way races and – more ominously for McCain – his appeal appeared to carry beyond the southern states.

Huckabee was a major factor in the midwestern state of Missouri, which borders his native Arkansas.

Romney took his own state of Massachusetts, despite McCain's provocative decision to spend Monday campaigning there. He also was projected to take Utah, Minnesota and North Dakota.

The refusal of either Romney or Huckabee to crumble entirely before the McCain machine now dents Republican hopes of settling on a clear winner, and avoiding the brutal blood-letting in the party.

James Dobson, the founder of the hugely influential evangelical group Focus on the Family last night became the latest right-wing conservative to denounce McCain and say he would not vote for him "under any circumstances".

The hierarchy of the party fears that such vitriol could turn the primary campaign from a healthy debate about the future of conservatism into a cat fight that can only benefit Hillary Clinton or Barack Obama. McCain and Romney have been launching negative attacks on each other in recent days that have only added to a sense of internal acrimony. How the party emerges from this bruising process could have long-reaching implications.

The Republicans are potentially facing a period of turbulence reminiscent of the prolonged soul-searching the Democrats

went through during the 1980s. It was precisely the powerful coalition of conservative forces put together by Ronald Reagan in those years that has now started to become unstuck.

The so-called "Reagan coalition" was a combination of previously disparate elements into an unstoppable army that has kept the Democrats out of power for all but eight of the past 27 years.

It brought together social conservatives largely from the south whose battle cry was anti-abortion and the sanctity of marriage, and economic conservatives motivated by tax cutting and rolling back the state and located mainly in the north.

But during the second term of the Bush administration the economic conservative side of the coalition was challenged by the rise of the federal budget to a record \$3.1 trillion. The social conservative side of the coalition has also been struck by a string of morality scandals involving prominent Republicans and several evangelical church leaders who for much of the past 20 years have acted as the party's recruiting sergeants.

The difficulty for McCain as he begins to pick his way through the debris of this shattered coalition is that he must have at least one eye now on the presidential election in November.

In recent months he has tacked sharply to the right in order to overcome some of the resistance to him from hard-core conservatives.

The danger is that if he swings too far to the right in order to secure his party's nomination, he will alienate the younger and more independent voters who would be precisely those he would need to entice in November away from Clinton or Obama.

By the same measure, if he swings back too far to the middle ground, he will court further accusations that he has betrayed Reagan's legacy, thus further accelerating the disintegration of his party.

The possible compromise for McCain would be to attach Huckabee, whose popularity among social conservatives was reaffirmed last night, to his ticket as vice-presidential candidate, then hope above hope that he can hold the creaking alliance together.

Extra firepower sent to Afghanistan as UK digs in

● Record deployment of paratroopers

● Country may be sliding to civil war

Richard Norton-Taylor and Ian Traynor in Brussels
Wednesday February 6, 2008
The Guardian

A fresh British force with extra firepower is to be sent to Afghanistan as the US intensifies pressure on other European allies in an increasingly urgent attempt to prevent the country from collapsing into civil war. In what is being described as a "critical week" for Nato's role in Afghanistan, the British move, due to be announced today, shows that the government is prepared to maintain a significant military presence there despite severe pressure on its already overstretched army.

All three regular battalions of the Parachute Regiment will provide the backbone of 16 Air Assault Brigade when it takes

over from the existing UK infantry brigade based in Helmand province, southern Afghanistan, in April, defence officials said. It is believed to be the first time so many paras have been sent on a joint combat mission since the second world war, though the total number of UK troops there will remain at about 7,700.

They will be supplied with extra armoured vehicles and new Merlin helicopters. However, pressure on the army has meant the brigade has had to scavenge troops from other regiments to fill manpower gaps. The Ministry of Defence is also expected to announce that Britain's 3 Commando Brigade will take over from 16 Air Assault Brigade in six months' time.

In London today, Condoleezza Rice, the US secretary of state, will have talks with David Miliband, the foreign secretary, in what an official called "an important window to step up the international community's game". The meeting comes at a time of public clashes between Britain, the US and Hamid Karzai, the Afghan president, over policy and tactics.

Christopher Langton, senior fellow at the International Institute for Strategic Studies (IISS), described this week as "critical" for Nato's role in Afghanistan. The Rice-Miliband talks also come on the eve of a Nato defence ministers' meeting in Vilnius, Lithuania, which will be dominated by the burgeoning crisis in Afghanistan.

Against a background of transatlantic recrimination over troop contributions and where to deploy them, the Nato meeting is an attempt to reinvigorate policy on Afghanistan by drafting a road map clarifying what Nato is doing there, what it is trying to achieve and how to achieve its aims "within a given timescale", according to an official at the Vilnius session.

The German government, stung by a letter – leaked to the German press – from Robert Gates, the US defence secretary, complaining that it should send more combat troops to Afghanistan, is coming under even more domestic opposition to what are seen as counter-productive American blandishments. Canada, meanwhile, has threatened to withdraw its troops from Kandahar province next year unless other countries contribute more troops.

However, the Guardian has learned that France may increase its military presence. It is "looking at ways [to] share a greater burden", an official said yesterday.

Nato officials sought to put a positive spin on the campaign and depict the security failings as a local problem. Despite the transatlantic recriminations about troop numbers, Nato spokesman James Appathurai said the Nato force had gone from about 8,000 to more than 40,000 in two years. "Force generation in Afghanistan has worked," he said.

But Matt Waldman, Oxfam's Kabul representative, told the Guardian: "Persistent poverty provides the conditions for insecurity to spread. The urgent priority is to achieve a coherent approach which focuses greater efforts and resources on rural development."

Attacks from improvised explosive devices and mines have increased by 69% over the past year, according to Nato.

The IISS yesterday said Britain and its Nato allies were in danger of undermining Karzai, who faces elections next year, by cutting their own side-deals with local leaders. It cited the appointment of a former Taliban commander as the mayor of Musa Qala on the recommendation of the British. The US and Afghan governments have criticised UK plans to train and arm community defence forces and attempts to persuade Taliban fighters to change sides.

Karzai recently blocked the appointment of Lord Ashdown, the former Liberal Democrat leader, as a UN envoy with responsibility for coordinating the international effort in Afghanistan.

Dr John Chipman, director general of the IISS, yesterday warned that the tensions between Nato and the Afghan government were surfacing at a time of "worrying fragility" in the alliance's commitment to the continuing mission in Afghanistan.

Brown to approve use of wiretap evidence in criminal proceedings

● Change backed by police and civil rights groups

● New review to examine practicality and safeguards

Will Woodward and Richard Norton-Taylor
Wednesday February 6, 2008
The Guardian

Gordon Brown is to approve the use of evidence gathered by phone-tapping and other intercept evidence in criminal court cases.

He will make a statement to MPs today on the findings of an independent privy council review, chaired by Sir John Chilcot, a former permanent secretary, which urges changes in the law to allow intercept evidence to be used.

Brown will announce another review, by a civil service committee, to establish how such evidence could be used in practice and ensure safeguards are put in place. Britain is one of the few western countries which does not admit such evidence in court.

Opponents of changes include MI5, MI6 and GCHQ, who have argued that it would reveal their sophisticated intercept techniques. The parliamentary intelligence and security committee said last week the agencies were "adamant that their intercept capabilities must not be disclosed in court". The security services are nervous because changes could allow defence lawyers to demand full disclosure, including transcripts, of the whole operation. Some Whitehall officials also fear any change would be vulnerable to challenge in the courts on human rights grounds.

The former home secretary, David Blunkett, told Channel 4 News last night he was "very sympathetic" to the idea that intercept evidence should be allowed but there were "very major challenges".

He added: "There still are, which is why I think the announcement by the prime minister tomorrow will be of a limited nature." Unless the nature of the intercept was properly recorded, defence lawyers could have a "field day", Blunkett said.

But he added: "New methods of communication across the world and locally have changed the nature of way in which tapping takes place."

The shadow home secretary, David Davis, said: "This sounds like a breakthrough. We have been calling for this for years. The use of intercept has proved vital to counter-terrorist efforts almost everywhere else in the world."

Chris Huhne, for the Liberal Democrats, said: "The use of intercept evidence is overdue and will help to bring many criminals to justice without resorting to desperate measures such as a further extension of the period of detention without charge or trial to 42 days." The move came as Brown and the justice secretary, Jack Straw, continued to face criticism over allegations that a government whip, Sadiq Khan, was bugged when he visited Babar Ahmed, a childhood friend and terror suspect, in prison.

Brown's move will be welcomed by civil rights groups, the prosecution service, and the police.

The director of public prosecutions, Sir Ken Macdonald, has long argued that intercept evidence should be admissible in court proceedings.

The director of Liberty, Shami Chakrabarti, has argued that the move would allow people, notably terrorist suspects, accused of wrongdoing to know what intelligence was being held against them.

Sir Paul Kennedy, an appeal court judge who monitors communications intercepts, was sceptical.

He said in his official report last week: "I am firmly of the opinion that the benefits of any change in the law [on intercept evidence] are heavily outweighed by the disadvantages."

The intelligence and security committee said last week: "At its simplest, it is a question of whether using intercept material in court would result in more terrorist convictions than are already achieved through its use to generate leads, and whether these would be sufficient to outweigh the possible reduction in the capability of the agencies to identify the terrorists and disrupt the attacks in the first place."

Backstory

Sir John Chilcot was asked last July to lead an independent review considering whether tapped phone conversations should be allowed as evidence in court. Recordings from free-standing bugs are currently admissible in a criminal trial, as are recordings where one of the speakers is an undercover police officer. Phone-tap evidence gathered abroad is also allowed to be put before a jury, but intercepts of land lines or mobile phones can only be used for intelligence gathering, and are not admissible in court. Civil liberties groups have called for the ban to be lifted, arguing that it offers an alternative to lengthy pre-charge detention, but the intelligence services fear it could expose details of their operations. Some 800 public bodies can currently request personal communications data, including every police force, prison and 474 local authorities, as well as the security and intelligence agencies.



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Rules and respect are the buzz words as Capello seeks winning mentality

Richard Williams
 Wednesday February 6, 2008
 The Guardian



Fabio Capello has insisted that a strict code of behaviour is vital if the England team is to improve. Photograph: Tom Jenkins/Guardian

At Milan, Juventus and Real Madrid the players knew Fabio Capello as "Mister", the name bequeathed to generations of managers in Italy and Spain by the British coaches who spread the game around the world. In England itself, however, he will have another title. The players can call him "Boss", Capello declared yesterday, leaving no doubt that the title is freighted with meaning.

To the England football squad the Italian's iron word will henceforth be law. And that, as we have learnt this week, means no wasting time with computer games, no strolling down to breakfast at whatever time suits the individual, and absolutely no golf in the run-up to tonight's match against Switzerland.

"On Thursday they can play all the golf they like," Capello said with a grim smile during his pre-match press conference, while explaining the need for a code of behaviour.

"We are only here for three days," he said, "and in three days you need to try and work and create a way of working. To do that you need to set some rules. Eating together and getting up from the table at the same time and being punctual – these things are about respect for other people and for each other. Three days is not a long time to create a group mentality. If everybody leaves as soon as training finishes, it won't be enough to get to know each other. It's important to spend time together.

"We need to work in an orderly fashion. Because we work together not many days, compared to working at the clubs, we need strict rules. If we follow those rules, we'll create a group and a specific winning mentality, which is what I want."

And if those rules are broken? "People make mistakes but, if they want to be part of this group, they will want to follow the rules. If someone doesn't, then we will analyse why the rules were broken and take the appropriate course of action."

A board beside Capello read "4 English, 5 Italiano", which turned out to be not a teasing reference to national preferences in defensive strategy – a traditional English flat back four versus an Italian-style catenaccio quintet – but a guide to the channels on the headphones provided for journalists needing a simultaneous translation from the manager's native tongue.

"I will speak English with you when I am sure that I know

all the terms and all the right words," he said. "You are good at twisting things, so I want to be very careful. But with the players I can explain and communicate in English and I'm happy about that."

Other than announcing the appointment of Steven Gerrard as temporary captain, Capello was giving little information away, least of all in terms of the selection or the tactical approach to be unveiled tonight. As is his habit, he will tell the players of his line-up just before they leave the team hotel for the journey to Wembley. The formation, however, might just see Capello modifying the practice of a lifetime.

"I've always played 4-4-2," he continued. "But 4-4-2 or 4-3-1-2, these are not the most important aspects. In the matches I've seen recently there have been only two or three teams playing 4-4-2. Many play with one person up front. But I have ideas about how to make the team play. I have my ideas and my plans."

A month of travelling to Premier League and FA Cup matches has given him, he said, a different perspective on the English game. "I always followed English football on television before my appointment. But English football seen live is completely different, very intense and very physical, and there are very, very good teams."

His objective is to create a unified team in time for the first World Cup qualifying game against Andorra in September. In the meantime he will be studying videos of each friendly match and passing on his observations to the players.

"We've worked very hard on the tactical front for the last few days, all of this in order to create a group mentality and, more importantly, a way of moving on the pitch that reflects my ideas about football," he said. "I've seen some English clubs move on the pitch like I want my team to move. So for some it won't be anything new. Others who aren't used to moving this way will have to adapt."

On the psychological front, his principal task will be to restore the self-belief so badly damaged by failure to qualify for Euro 2008. But that, as he pointed out, is not an overnight job.

"What I will try to pass on to the team, especially, is to regain their winning mentality by being confident in their own resources and by playing bravely. I believe we need to leave the past behind. We need a positive mind-set and to look ahead. But we can't perform miracles in three days. We've only just started our work. Give us time in order to show results."

And after a month in England, had he come to share the general view of England's players as pampered wastrels?

"I think players are the same everywhere," he concluded. "My first impressions of these players are very good. They're very attentive and eager to impress. With this spirit and mentality I believe we will be able to do very well."



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Flood backs Wilkinson to turn the tide of criticism in Rome

Centre deflects the unfriendly fire directed at his Newcastle team-mate, writes Robert Kitson

Wednesday February 6, 2008
The Guardian



Toby Flood has compared Jonny Wilkinson's stature in rugby union to that of Tiger Woods' in golf. Photograph: Paul Harding/Action Images

England could scarcely have fallen to earth with more of a bump on the opening weekend of the Six Nations Championship but the players believe last weekend's sharp decline against Wales was merely a blip. A lengthy postmortem has concluded there is nothing desperately wrong with the team's structure or leadership and has rejected any criticism of Jonny Wilkinson's performance at fly-half.

One of Wilkinson's Newcastle team-mates, Toby Flood, even drew a comparison yesterday between England's record points scorer and Tiger Woods as he dismissed talk of Wilkinson being removed from the starting line-up to face Italy in Rome on Sunday. "Look at Tiger Woods," countered Flood. "If he doesn't win a tournament, he's a failure. If you set the bar as high as Jonny has done in the past and you're only 80%-90% there, you put yourself in the firing line from the press."

"I've been a bit shocked, to be honest. Personally, I thought Jonny was on top form. He kicked well, defended well and organised the game well. Whenever a team loses there doesn't necessarily have to be a fall guy but people often search for things that aren't there. There are occasions when players make mistakes and I made two or three myself. When you're playing in the position Jonny does, the mistakes you make are simply highlighted. Of course he's disappointed because he's played in an England side and lost. But he's a strong enough character to realise what needs to be done this weekend. Having world-class players like Jonny, Simon Shaw and Phil Vickery can only be beneficial to the team."

Flood's loyalty is commendable and his head coach, Brian Ashton, has already indicated he will not be "throwing any toys out of the pram" in terms of his selection, which will be announced at lunchtime. England supporters who left Twickenham tearing their hair out at their side's 26-19 defeat, however, will be interested to hear the management does not regard the second-half meltdown as any more than just a series of unfortunate events.

Shaw, England's influential lock forward, also confirmed

there had been no re-run of the dramatic summit meeting which followed England's 36-0 defeat by South Africa in the pool stages of the World Cup. "There was no crisis meeting," revealed Shaw. "It was just a case of 10 minutes when we made a lot of mistakes and they capitalised on them. Throughout the rest of the game they were no real threat and we were in complete control.

"We've obviously had a review but I don't think it was necessarily anything to do with a leadership issue or a loss of control. It was simply down to one error made worse by another error. Those kind of things are very difficult to change within a game. A lot has been spoken about leadership on the field but we had everything in our minds. We knew we couldn't give Wales anything to feed off. Unfortunately there was a 10-minute period when we made a lot of mistakes."

While Wales' improved second-half performance and the loss through injury of both Lewis Moody and Tom Rees, clearly played a part, Shaw argues England should be encouraged by their first-half display rather than dwelling endlessly on the negatives. "You've got to recognise that we played a half of brilliant rugby and definitely should have been more points up. We were

disappointed coming in while Wales were probably buoyed by the fact we hadn't scored more. People say that when you've got a side under the cosh you've got to put the nails in the coffin. Some of our mistakes were a result of our enthusiasm to score more tries and put them away."

Flood also feels England have been harshly judged on the tactical front – "They scored their second try so quickly there was no period of time in which to play territory" – and does not feel England will struggle to recover in Rome. "You can't ensure mistakes won't be made or that there won't be occasions when the proverbial hits the fan. It was obviously a tough thing to deal with but, as a group of players, we need to pick ourselves up and realise what's done is done. Sunday is a huge test for us and a good way to right some wrongs."

The players recognise they owe their coaches a swift response. "There's a huge responsibility to perform every time you pull on an England shirt," concludes Flood. "As players we know that, when we cross that white line, there is nothing more the coaches can do. If anything that's an exciting thing."



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Hamilton to return to Spain for tests next week

Formula one

Alan Henry

Wednesday February 6, 2008

The Guardian



Lewis Hamilton

Lewis Hamilton will return to Spain for further tests with the McLaren team later this month with the FIA welcoming the tough measures being promised by the circuits in Jerez and Barcelona.

Hamilton was subjected to racists taunts during testing in Barcelona and is back in the country on Tuesday for three days of further testing at Jerez before taking part in three more days in Barcelona from February 25.

The sport's governing body, while impressed with the statements of intent from the Spanish authorities, last night said the behaviour of the supporters would be closely monitored, in effect warning them that they are on probation. "We have not yet received a full report but we have received clear assurances from the circuit and sporting authorities in Spain that measures are now in place to prevent any repetition of the kind of racist abuse witnessed last weekend," said an FIA spokesman.

"We understand that such abuse is a criminal offence under Spanish law and the authorities will not hesitate to act if required. This zero tolerance approach is welcomed by the FIA and we will monitor events very closely at the forthcoming formula one tests to ensure that everything is done to prevent any repeat of those appalling scenes in Barcelona.

"Racism has no place in motor sport and racists will not be allowed to hijack our sport from the many millions of genuine motor racing fans from across the world."

For their part, McLaren offered no further comment on the issue but sources close to the British team have indicated that it will be "heads down and business as usual" at these two crucial tests where Hamilton will be joined by his new team-mate Heikki Kovalainen and the team's Spanish test driver Pedro de la Rosa.

It is understood there will be no additional security arrangements for Hamilton at these tests unless the circuit authorities involved feel it to be appropriate.

Ramon Padreras, the managing director of the Circuit de Catalunya, said the racism row has been blown out of all proportion and his circuit did everything it could to resolve the situation when it first happened.

"Last Friday, 10 people with a megaphone behaved in a

unacceptable way against the British driver," said Padreras. Right away, we kicked two of them out, we cleared the stands right in front of McLaren's garage and we decided to take measures for Saturday, closing up the terrace right above them. The problem was solved then.

"In no way can the behaviour of 10 fans represent the 55,000 who enjoyed the three days and knew how to behave. I think that in some cases the behaviour of some 10 or 15 people has been taken out of context, and we are in complete disagreement with that information.