

Ballymena hit, hit and run away with it

"NOT PRETTY, huh." Even Ballymena coach Andre Bester could see beyond the scoreline after the first flush of celebration had subsided at Eaton Park.

Ballymena are a team supremely indifferent to complication or the provision of spectacular rugby and the South African was positively beaming over his side's lack of niceties on a difficult surface. The points will do for now.

Ballymena ground down the edges of an athletic St Mary's, hit them hard up front, hit the running backs and midfield, booted the ball away from their danger zone at will and continued in that vein for a full 80 minutes.

"It slipped away from us. The game was certainly within our grasp," said St Mary's captain Conor McGuinness. "St Mary's have a pack that can compete with anyone, and a backline. But we've still to put it together. We are disappointed because we've let two games slip now. But I think you'll find that teams can lose four or five matches this season and still finish in the top four."

McGuinness was not being overly partisan in his summary. St Mary's, short seven players including lock Steve Jameson and prop Emmet Byrne, had plentiful possession and, when they opened up, looked like a side of ability and, crucially, entertainment. But

BALLYMENA	23
ST MARY'S	13

Johnny Watterson

they ultimately lacked incisiveness.

Ballymena's pragmatism, to their ultimate success, was stifling, and although McGuinness caught the home side napping midway through the first half and split them from the back of a scrum with a well judged break for the game's first try, Ballymena gave away little else.

"If you look at South African rugby, defence is number one," said Bester. "And that's the big thing we instill in our players. If you don't have defence you cannot play. It takes a lot of discipline and character to do this but we are picking guys who can do it."

"I knew at one stage, where it went from us being 13-10 up to 13-13, that we would win if they didn't score in that phase. Their players were lying all over the pitch. If you get hit back, hit back all the time, it's difficult to come back."

It was the exchanges between Simon Mason and Richard Ormond which dominated the early scoring taking the game to 6-3 before McGuinness jinked through unopposed.

Just before the break a handling error from Nowlan, following a Mason punt, handed Ballymena a five-yard scrum. As St Mary's struggled to handle the push, Mason came to the line to stride through a stretched defence for a 13-10 lead.

On 65 minutes a brave decision to kick to touch rather than take a penalty gave Ballymena the much-needed foothold. As back row Andy Graham collected in the line-out, the drive was too forceful for the Dublin side, who collapsed in a heap on the wrong side of the line, Graham emerging with the ball.

As Bester said afterwards: "We would like to put 60 points on the board, but I don't think it's going to happen."

Week three and Ballymena are now the team to beat.

Scoring sequence: 1 min: S Mason pen, 3-0; 6: R Ormond pen, 3-3; 12: S Mason pen, 6-3; 26: C McGuinness try, Ormond con, 6-10; 32: S Mason try, con, 13-10. 47: R Ormond pen, 13-13; 65: A Graham try, Mason con, 20-13; 79: S Mason pen, 23-13.

BALLYMENA: S Mason; S Stewart, J Wells, J Cunningham, D Macartney (capt); D McAleese, A Matchett; N McKernan, A Stewart, R Irwin, M Blair, G Longwell, A Graham, T McWhirter, D Topping. **Replacements:** S Richies for A Stewart (55 mins), S Coulter for Wells (57 mins), R West for Blair (80 mins).

ST MARY'S: K Nowlan; J McWeeney, P McKenna, E Gibney, M McNamee; R Ormond, C McGuinness (capt); J Maher, P Smith, P Coyle, D Bourke, I Bloomer, T Brennan, M Cuddihy, V Costello.

Referee: **T Redmond** (Leinster).