Free-scoring French leave Irish history tilt in tatters



In the end, it was the most ill-fitting of send-offs

Many of them were likely left trying to process what they had witnessed across the previous 40 minutes.Peter O'Mahony, Conor Murray and Cian Healy may have 374 caps' worth of Ireland experience, but even that most seasoned group of stalwarts would struggle to recall any recent spell where Ireland were so thoroughly bested.Simon Easterby's side came in with the 2025 Triple Crown already secured, chasing both a Grand Slam and the first ever hat-trick of outright titles in the competition.When, with 37 minutes remaining of the game, they had overturned their third half-time deficit of the championship thanks to Dan Sheehan's converted score, that potential history still stretched ahead of them.

Yet across the scintillating spell that followed, France scored 34 straight points to gain the upper hand in the game, the Six Nations title race and, perhaps, the competition's defining rivalry of the past four seasons.Should France go on and win the championship against Scotland next weekend, it will be that half hour that is viewed as the defining passage of their campaign, their remarkable blend of power and flair all the more impressive for occurring after star player and captain Antoine Dupont had departed injuredSuch was their dominance through the period it was easy to forget that, with Fabien Galthie having opted for a 7-1 bench split, they did it all with La Rochelle flanker Oscar Jegou playing centre."We've seen it from them before," said Ireland skipper Caelan Doris of facing Les Bleus during such a purple patch.

"We've experienced it first hand, but we've also seen it against other teams so far in this campaign."It was a big message for us this week, stopping them on the gain-line and not allowing them to get quick ball."We weren't good enough in that area.Although Ireland only gave away six penalties, there were plenty more occasions when France were able to play with greater freedom thanks to a penalty advantage.If that was one way in which the visitors were able to get on such a roll, Ireland's interim head coach Simon Easterby felt their dominance in the collisions was another.

"They're as good as anyone when they get behind you and they get on the front foot," he said after his first defeat filling in for Andy Farrell."It's probably down a large part to the collisions that we weren't able to put in place ourselves, but also credit to the way that they play the game as well."Across the past four seasons, these sides have now won two head to heads each, both having done so once away from home.Barring a French stumble next weekend, it will likely be a pair of titles apiece too.

Yet, rarely, across the period has one team felt so superior to the other, even for only half an hour.Ireland will surely point to areas where they could be and normally are better.For the second game in succession they played 20 minutes a man down with Joe McCarthy's first-half yellow card feeling particularly avoidable.They lacked any clinical edge during their own period of ascendancy too.Given France's final try came off a Damian Penaud intercept from within the shadow of his own posts, it is fair to say that France scored the same seven points as Ireland did from the latter's visits to the opposition 22 across the first 75 minutes of the game.Here, hopes of an unprecedented third consecutive outright title fell by the wayside. While there remain outside chances of salvaging a title from the wreckage, the emotional swing is surely huge.

Ireland have not lost consecutive games since 2021 and Doris was quick to try and turn the page to Italy in Rome next week.He said: "Regardless of how the table is shaping up we still want to get our best performance out there and finish on a high for the [retiring] lads and as a team on a whole."Yet, for a team that has made no bones about the desire for a signature achievement, when including the failure to make it beyond the quarter-finals of the World Cup in 2023, there is an