

## The Fast Feet and Agility Programme as a Core Component in Coaching Rugby Union

### An Introduction to the “Fast Feet and Agility” programme.

Inversion drills, which include Fast Feet, agility and proprio-reception exercises, have come to prominence in recent years. Their use by coaches in the Australian Super Twelve teams as well as the Wallabies is drawing attention to their potential throughout the sport of Rugby Union.

The Fast Feet and Agility programme has been used in Rugby League for a number of years and it is used during the warm up, is incorporated into training sessions, stand alone drills and exercises used up to five times a week. The theories and aims of this program are relatively new to state rugby in Western Australia and the purpose of this paper is to discuss the benefits and limitations of the Fast Feet / Agility program in Rugby Union.

### Overview of the Benefits of the Programme.

Although the benefits of these drills are well documented, it is, in my opinion, doubtful that their true potential can be achieved without incorporating them into an overall comprehensive coaching plan and programme. In the same way that a coach would treat the skills of passing and tackling as a core component of Rugby Union, Fast Feet and Agility skills should be looked upon as an additional core component. The reason being that these competencies and agility skills can affect every aspect of Rugby Union. They are used in defence as well as attack, in team and unit skills as well as in team and unit patterns. Every player, no matter what their position can benefit from the skills and competencies that this type of program develops.

Fast Feet and agility drills, when incorporated into an overall coaching plan should aim to create improved reaction times, better co-ordination, explosive acceleration, a formulated

step pattern, the ability to convert power more effectively into forward momentum as well as improved agility and balance.

### Using the Programme to Develop Player Skills.

Most training templates such as passing and catching have been learnt to such an extent that players no longer have to put too much thought into the process. Coaches should be aiming for Fast Feet to be performed at the same level as these basic skills. This is potentially of enormous benefit particularly when coaches are continually asking players to change their point of attack, face-to-space, to beat defenders with good footwork, or when attacking one shoulder to the other.

As coaches we continue to ask the ball carrier to use the full range of options available to them. Thus, allowing them to get the inside foot down more effectively, allowing balance and acceleration through contact and impact as well as use the three-step pattern. These all help to maintain continuity and forward momentum. In defence it allows players to take space away from attackers and to speed off the line. It also enables players to adjust to attackers with better balance and control, hopefully allowing the defender to dictate the terms of the contact and dominate the tackle.

Fast Feet mixed with multi-directional agility drills and some line drills can also greatly benefit agility, balance and co-ordination. The Fast Feet and Agility programmes also help stride frequency, which in turn produces increased acceleration. It has been shown that the improved balance, agility and co-ordination of players also helps them to cut down the occurrence of some injuries.<sup>1</sup> Also, when a ball is used in some of the fast feet agility drills, carrying the ball in two hands requires very good core strength and pelvic control, and you need this to maintain good balance and efficient leg mechanics. These can be developed from carrying a Rugby ball up to a medicine ball.

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<sup>1</sup> Mark Alexander, Sports Coach Vol. 23 No. 1 Autumn 2000.

While the above skills and drills promote balance and co-ordination, stand alone balance activities and sessions should also be incorporated into the overall coaching programme.

#### The perceived drawbacks and limitations of Fast Feet and Agility programmes.

The Fast Feet and Agility programme and drills should not be seen as a quick fix or a one-off wonder. It takes time to learn the movements, skills and patterns; time to build a template in the players' brain, known as neurodevelopment. Both neurodevelopment and motor patterns should be coached with a high quality of work and with considerable time spent focussing on individual components. So much so, that the programme needs to be structured at several different levels throughout the whole season or playing year for the whole squad.

In addition to stand-alone general exercises for the whole squad, some Fast Feet agility exercises need to be as position specific as possible. Other drills will be developed for units, both in attack and defence. Skills and drills should also be as game specific as possible; this may be as simple as carrying a Rugby ball.

Core strength skills and exercises should also be part of the programme and pelvic stability should be reinforced consistently during the skills, programmes and exercises, as players often do not focus on them enough outside of specific core strength exercises. As already mentioned these should include some game specific situations such as carrying a rugby ball. Notwithstanding this some stand alone Fast Feet and Agility drills should also be performed while carrying a ball in two hands if possible.

Coaches should also be aware that in Rugby Union we require different running techniques than that of track sprinters.<sup>2</sup> We require maximum speed much earlier than track sprinters. Rugby Union players sprint from zero metres up to thirty metres so a lot of the focus of the programme should be in the acceleration phase. We also require Rugby players to have a lower centre of gravity, a lower foot recovery, and a lower knee

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<sup>2</sup> Mark Sayers, Running techniques for running Rugby, New Zealand Coach 7(3): 20-23

lift, all of which make the player better able to balance, power, acceleration and momentum. All of these skills need to be encouraged and coached as part of the programme so the skill and knowledge of the coach and associated staff can also be a limiting factor on how successful the programme could be.

Some special equipment may be required such as. Fast Feet ladders, macro and micro hurdles. There are some drills for Fast Feet agility that do not require equipment such as Multi-directional agility drills, line drills, cone step patterns and partner sprints and exercises.

#### My own experience with Fast Feet and Agility programmes.

The actual experience of planning and implementing the Fast Feet and Agility programme (run with the first grade squad training twice a week for the whole season) has shown that a lot of time needs to be spent on the programme. In order to use the Fast Feet and Agility programme to create maximum benefit, it was necessary to incorporate it into the warm up, some strength sessions and some stand alone specific sessions, as a workstation in some tempo endurance exercises. Core stability, and balance exercises were also incorporated into the warm down. It became apparent that, although the skill or template had been learnt, with a simple addition to the Fast Feet drill such as passing a ball, the skill would fall apart. As discussed by Dr Peter Davies, Manager of Sports Science, Olympic Athlete programme at the Australian Institute of Sport, we should give athletes time to establish the learning of a new skill before adding a variation.<sup>3</sup> So again it was necessary to allow a lot of time for the skill template to be learnt. At the same time, this had to be balanced against trying to get the step pattern into position specific and into game specific drills and patterns as soon as possible and as often as possible.

In my experience there did appear to be a drop in the occurrence of some injuries with the incorporation of the Fast Feet and Agility programme. Perhaps the combination of better balance, core stability, agility and a regime of dynamic stretches all contributed to this.

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<sup>3</sup> It's All In The Brain! Article by Dr Peter Davis in Sports Coach Vol. 22, No. 3 1999

The best results in a game setting seemed to be achieved in the area of getting beyond the defender and of attacking the triangle of space behind the defender. Also when in contact at an area of our choosing it definitely helped to transfer the power into forward momentum. A specific example of this would be when in the line out, the forwards caught and drove. It also helped immensely turning a driving maul into a much more progressive and dynamic game situation. I believe greater benefit will be achieved when the program continues in the coming season building on the advances already made.

### Conclusion.

The programme offers benefits in every situation. It should not, however be seen as a quick fix, every player learns at a different rate. It will take players a lot of time and effort to learn this programme but, I believe it could have benefited more with a higher level of purpose, intensity and quality work. Players need to be made aware of the benefits that it will bring to their game. Once learnt, the use of these skills can only help Rugby become more explosive and dynamic in every core unit and team skill.

### References

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