

LEVEL 3 COACHING COURSE

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TOPIC : ‘ *The Evolution of Rugby in the 21st Century* ’

Rugby has made remarkable progress globally in the last five years with the game becoming professional and the formulation of exciting new initiatives which have captured the imagination of the Rugby supporter. The emergence of the Super 12 series and the Tri-Nations competition has whet the appetite of Southern Hemisphere Rugby fanatics whilst the Five Nations tournament continues to produce an exciting brand of Rugby from our northern counterparts. In addition, the Pacific Rim tournament and the development of Rugby in Asian countries have seen the game reach a new level. All are striving to capture the ultimate achievement in Rugby, namely World Cup champions.

Rugby in Australia has emerged as one of the four major ‘football’ codes in the country due to a number of factors. The development of the game at the grass roots level is producing a more highly skilled athlete and offering a product , which is attractive to potential players and their parents. The outstanding performances and marketability of the Wallabies, the performances of the Australian U21’s, the exposure to the game in AFL strongholds such as Melbourne and Perth and to a lesser degree, the ability of Rugby League to continually attract negative publicity have contributed to the soaring popularity of Rugby. This has produced a better-educated, addictive Rugby supporter who understands the intricacies of the game and its’ associated culture.

However, for the game to capitalize on its’ current position radical changes need to be introduced to Rugby to maintain and increase the groundswell of support being generated. One major deficiency in Rugby is the fact it has a stop/ start nature. It is not a structured game but one based on unpredictability. Rugby League for example is a game which is very structured and appealing because of its’ basic nature. The game is defense oriented, low risk in attack with an emphasis on field position. The modern player is a physical robot who lacks versatility

and athleticism. But to the credit of the game it has introduced changes to ensure the game is a continual spectacle. The game momentum is maintained after stoppages. Basically it has become an arm wrestle or a test of durability.

The two other codes which are a threat to the existence of Rugby are Soccer and Australian Football. Both games provide constant entertainment as the ball is continually in play. There are limited breakdowns until the action recommences. Like Rugby League they appeal to a certain mindset, a supporter protective of their chosen sport and often critical of other football codes. Soccer appeals to the multitude of cultures in existence in our capital cities whilst Australian Football has had major marketing success in recent years with the Sydney Swans and Brisbane Lions. All three have expanded to accommodate a national support base, which Rugby should be looking to emulate.

This years Bledisloe Cup games provide evidence that Rugby is in need of immediate change. We witnessed games involving superbly fit, multi skilled athletes whose attempts to entertain capacity crowds were thwarted by regular interruptions in play. The referee awarded penalties for indiscretions which could not be ignored despite excellent use of 'advantage'. In the first encounter the All Blacks won comfortably with their goal kicker contributing 29 points through penalty kicks and one solitary conversion. They managed to score only one try in comparison to the Wallabies who posted two five pointers. Despite out - attacking the opposition the visitors still were on the end of a drubbing.

A similar scenario unfolded in the return encounter. This time it was the Wallabies turn to inflict a decisive defeat on their enemies from across the Tasman with the goal kicker contributing 17 points. It was a wonderful victory from an Australian Rugby perspective and an excellent promotion in front of a world record Rugby crowd but really did the spectacle do anything to attract new supporters to our ranks? Listening to comments from the uneducated indicated there was limited attacking play and too many penalties which resulted in goal kicks which were of too much value. From the ardent Rugby supporter the

general consensus was that it was similar to a Northern Hemisphere style penalty shoot out !!

It seems as though the game itself is hindering its' enormous development potential. It is time to assess three major aspects of the game. These include :

- 1. The value of tries*
- 2. The value of penalty goals and field goals*
- 3. The value \ options for conversion attempts*
- 4. The amount of actual game time in representative games.*

The modern day game of Rugby is played at a frenetic pace by athletes coached to test the mettle of referees by pushing the rules to the enth degree. The laws of the game, especially the tackle law, have changed to provide a more appealing spectacle. This includes 'avoiding the breakdown' by popping, rolling or handing off the ball to support players in an attempt to generate attacking momentum and de-stabilize any defensive structure. This style of play has resulted in teams committing fewer players to a ruck or maul and occupying space adjacent to the tackle. More players are loitering offside to counteract any attacking momentum and to thwart attempts to advance beyond the gainline.

It places referees in a difficult position. Do they continually give penalties for offside or minor indiscretions in general play, thus halting the action for potentially another penalty kick? A possible solution to the existing problem is to increase the value of a try and reduce the value of a penalty goal. It would certainly make the decision to continue attacking or take the 'soft three point option' a lot easier. Therefore I suggest tries be increased to seven points. Indiscretions by the defending team will result in the attacking intensity being maintained and no time for the defense to relax. In effect it would reduce attempts by the defending team to kill the ball in the tackle, loiter offside or commit 'professional fouls'. If the latter occurred the offender would be automatically sin binned, an aspect of Rugby which has been under-used at all levels. Teams with one or two fewer players would obviously be at an attacking and defensive disadvantage.

The value of a penalty goal should depend on the position on the field from where the attempt is taken. For example, attempts at goal from a range inside thirty metres should be worth one point only. Surely a team on the attack would forego a shot at goal for only a solitary point (unless scores were even). Undoubtedly they would opt to react quickly with a tap kick and maintain pressure. The second option would be from between the thirty metre and forty five metre mark for a two point gain. The element of difficulty is increased along with the points value but would teams choose to risk a potential seven point gain, through positive attacking play for the prospects of a possible two points?

The final option would be beyond the forty five metre line for a maximum three pointer. It may appeal to teams with deadly accurate kickers but may only be an option in an extremely close encounter. Other factors such as ground conditions, wind and the preferred side of the kicker may also influence the decision whether to continue to attack. In all three instances Rugby as a spectacle is the winner due to the increase in game time and the intrigue of pressure decisions. The 'zones' could also apply to field goals, which bear too much value with the long-range scenario, as is the case with the penalty goal, becoming a critical component. It would prevent the unimaginative attacking team from opting for a drop goal from directly in front when they haven't the skill, strength or team play to breach a defensive line. The other proposal would be to reduce the value of a field goal from three to two points from any position on the field.

The suggestion of Zones could also apply for conversion attempts with options becoming appealing to both kicker and spectator. The modern day goal kickers are invaluable to their team but their contribution could be even worthier with an option of one, two or three points regardless of where tries were scored. For example the basic conversion could be attempted from directly in front of the goalposts on the 22-

metre line for one point. The second option would be from the junction of a 30- metre line and the 15- metre line in from touch from either the right or left side of the field for a two-point gain.

The final option would be from forty metres out, directly on the sideline from either side of the field. The challenging attempt would be rewarded with maximum points and a definite psychological boost to team.

Imagine the hypothetical International with a try scored in the dying stages, leaving a team two points in arrears. The captain must decide between a two-point attempt to draw the game or back his kicker to slot over the goal for victory from forty metres out on the sideline. Or a team requiring a bonus point for losing within the seven point margin for a semi final berth. The only way of achieving the playoffs is by going for the most difficult conversion.

Whatever the case there is no doubt the introduction of point scoring options has benefits for the Rugby supporter by adding an element of mystique and risk.

Apart from the issue of points is the current timing process used in Rugby. Statistics have indicated that a remarkable amount of actual game time is lost through stoppages. These include two crucial aspects of Rugby in lineouts and scrums. Players take their time preparing for lineouts to regain breath and to ensure vital ball is secured from this set piece. From the time a kick travels over the sideline until the ball is thrown back into play could be on average around thirty seconds. If thirty lineouts are required in the course of a Rugby game that is potentially fifteen minutes of game time in which the obsessive Rugby follower is denied entertainment.

No one can detract from the need to take time when preparing and structuring lineouts but should the paying customer be the ones who lose out. The same applies to scrums. The Rugby scrum is a very positive aspect of play, two tonne of manpower meeting head-on, inches from the ground, remaining totally focussed. The collapses and repacking of

scrums can't always be avoided but the time lost over a duration of a game definitely adds up. Surely Rugby would benefit, especially at International level, by stopping the clock. Teams are encouraged to use time consuming ploys when leading games or to counteract the opposition momentum. Time-off does occur for injuries and free kicks are awarded at lineouts and scrums to keep the game flowing. The supporter would not become as frustrated if they knew each stoppage, either unavoidable or a professional ploy, would not disadvantage their team or their value for money.

The issue of time-off could apply to penalty goal and conversion attempts. The clock would be ceased when the kicker indicated their intention to kick for goal for penalty and recommence on striking the ball. To be technical the clock could be stopped after/if the kick has gone dead and recommence when the 22 drop out or half way restart is taken. Similar 'rules' would apply for a conversion attempt with the clock stopping after the try and recommencing at the restart of play. The thought of having an extra twenty to thirty minutes playing time is appealing to the public as it would require an even fitter, more skilful, durable athlete to endure the extra game time!

Other concepts could be discussed which reinforce the enviable position Rugby is in at the turn of the century. For example the suggestion of introducing zones for penalty goal attempts may attract criticism from those who would foresee even more spoiling tactics from the defending team with the option of easy points from penalty kicks not an attraction. This potential problem could be counteracted by the correct use of the sin bin as previously stated or by the implementation of the 'technical foul', as employed in Basketball, or the 'Red Card' used in Soccer. The thought of giving away points or losing a player for repeated infringements would ensure such practices do not become part of the new era of Rugby.

In summary Rugby has reached the crossroads and is in need of an overhaul. The game will continue to survive due to its global presence but is under threat from other sporting codes, which are gaining popularity. By addressing all aspects of the game itself and making adjustments to be a more attractive and competitive product, the support will follow. That support is our youth who will decide which sport to pursue as a vocation or possible career and who will form the nursery of players, the sports mad supporter who is seeking the quality 'football' package, the media who are attracted to the strength of a game and importantly the corporations who provide astronomical amounts of funding to assist the development and marketability of a product in return for maximum exposure.

Rugby has always resisted change but undoubtedly the time has come to 'use it or lose it' to survive !