

# THE DEVELOPMENT OF THE MULTI-SKILLED PLAYER

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The game of Rugby, like everything, is constantly evolving. As we enter the Fourth World Cup in 2003, we see that the nature of the game has changed dramatically and that we as coaches need to move and manage that change. It is our responsibility as contemporary coaches, to prepare players to be effective under present and future conditions.

Traditionally the game of Rugby catered for all body types, positions were stereotyped and particular skills tailored to the individual positions. The present game has seen physiques, skill and fitness levels of players alter from the past. Hence, the need for a more multi-skilled player, not only at the elite level, but also at all levels of rugby. This means not just being able to scrummage or kick goals, but the ability to pass, tackle, kick and play a first receiver role. As the game has become faster with continuous play, players must be more competitive at the break down, all players must contribute to keeping the ball alive. To achieve these backs must be able to tackle and have good contact skills, forwards must be able to fill in for backs with adequate handling and running skills and all players must be mobile, physical, skilful and versatile.

A number of issues have arisen as a result of this contemporary style of football:

Training.

- Teams are training more as a unit ( as opposed to the old style of training forwards and backs separately – forwards practicing scrums and lineout/ backs concentrating on back line moves and kicking)
- Training consists of more ball drills and simulated game scenarios. For example teaching forwards how to pass under pressure and for backs competing positively at the breakdown.
- Body shapes and the way players train are areas that are evolving, with forwards being fitter, stronger, mobile and better skilled ( e.g. Owen Finingen and Jeremy Paul) whereas the backs must be both fast and physically stronger to enable them to be more effective on contact(e.g. Sterling Mortlock, Nathan Grey).

It is only when the majority of players in a team possess a broad range of skills, top quality fitness and full physical development that a coach is able to utilise a wide range of tactical options.

In the previous era of the game, it was recognized that the forwards won the ball and the backs scored the tries. The game that is emerging at this time, insists that all players have versatile abilities. As a coach it is evident that the development of ball skills, attacking skills and linking skills stand out. All players must realise that their role is becoming less defined in the modern game and they must be competent in all facets of the game in broken play.

The skills that are outlined in this paper appear to be the most significant areas in all aspects of the game:

- The ability to pass the ball, not only laterally across the field, or short passes in a forward rush, but the ability to be able to perform
  1. an inside pass to a player running at a new angle
  2. pass a ball around an opposing defender's body
  3. pass off the ground immediately after being tackled
  4. deliver an accurate pass from the back of the ruck or maul
  5. In a 'hooker's role' – the ability to pass a long flat pass to the inside backs from a lineout.
  6. Be able to anticipate and deliver a flick pass in traffic.

If you have possession of the ball, are fit enough and have superior ball skills, then you will always advance the ball.

- The art of being competitive at across field breakdown of play is an important part of the modern game. To guarantee continuity of play and maximum possession of the ball. Ball retention is vital. The importance of phase ball must have fifteen players on the field who are capable of securing the ball at the breakdown. The skill required for this facet of the game and which need to be included in training sessions are:
  1. When a player is in possession of the ball, they must have the ability to take a tackle and maintain possession until THE support arrives.
  2. in reverse, the skills to make the tackle, return to your feet and gain possession of the ball
  3. assisting at the breakdown to gain possession of the ball
    - driving the ruck or maul forward
    - Whilst on your feet, rucking over the tackled player to maintain the ball on your side of the breakdown.
    - Picking up the ball to gain possession

Having 'on the ground skills' and ball retention techniques are a must for all players.

- The skill of speed has always been an important part of the game. However there are many facets or speed necessary to execute the new style of rugby. The ability to run at pace, move into gaps and move around the field at pace require skills that develop : - explosiveness
  - acceleration
  - agility
  - endurance

These skills will enable players to:

1. compete at the breakdown first
2. back up attacking players
3. enable the player to get off the ground at breakdowns.
4. be in the defensive line to make tackles.

Whereas in the past these skills were left to a select few players, they are now the responsibility of the whole team.

- Catching and kicking skills are extremely important to all aspects of the game of rugby. The ability to receive the ball from a pass or kick, opposition drop or error or unplanned play is skills that may be incorporated into simulated game drills at training. It is by gaining maximum opportunities from the opposition's errors that a team may have an added advantage in today's game.  
Kicking the ball is often seen as a "panic response' rather than a planned device to gain a better result. Kicking skills should be the responsibility of all players, especially the ability to kick with both feet.
  - Competing for the ball in the air has become a technique of great significance. The ability to defuse the bomb, kick ahead and regather to mount an attacking sequence has always been an important part of the game. However, to have players that compete in the air at kick-off and 22 metre restarts, both in attack and defense add a competitive element to any team.
  - Strength conditioning is necessary for all players:
    - Chest – upper back and shoulders must be well balanced to provide the best strength for tackling, scrums, rucks, mauls and sprinting
    - Trunk – for all aspects, particularly turning, jumping and sprinting
    - All lower limb muscles.
- Strength is needed for: - speed
- to stay on your feet and compete at the breakdown
  - defend with uncompromising resolve
  - take the ball to the opposition defense line and either break the line or maintain possession in setting up a ruck or maul.
- Defense. Whereas in past eras of Rugby, tackling was mainly left to the inside backs, fullbacks and backrow, defensive patterns, various tackling methods and numerous defensive techniques are necessary to have a fully competent defense. The contemporary player needs to have the skills and knowledge to defend in all positions and circumstances. An example of this is this front row, which rarely tackled in the past, is now expected to make double figures on the tackle count.

It is deemed that the skills identified are completely necessary to a competent player in this millennium. The following chart will outline the differences in specific positions in the past and in present situations.

PROPS PAST	PRESENT
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Good scrummaging</li> <li>• Blockers in lineouts</li> <li>• Big men, fierce on engagement</li> <li>• Always committed to tight ruck area</li> <li>• Not a large commitment in defense</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Good scrummaging techniques to take the scrum weight</li> <li>• Ability to play on both sides</li> <li>• Strength to lift in the line outs</li> <li>• Ability to run and pass</li> <li>• Agility, power, mobility</li> <li>• Greater contribution in defense.</li> </ul>

HOOKERS PAST	PRESENT
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Throw ball in lineout</li> <li>• Organize scrums</li> <li>• Highly involved in tight play</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• With the adaptation of support in the lineout, the accuracy of the lineout throw has doubled.</li> <li>• Strong organizational ability</li> <li>• Direct scrum movement in both attack and defense (e.g. wheel scrum)</li> <li>• Ability to pass from both sides, especially off the lineout win where the hooker becomes half-back</li> <li>• Ideally a hooker who has the skills and work rate of a flanker</li> <li>• In defense, a high involvement in close and out wide.</li> </ul>

LOCKS PAST	PRESENT
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Big men who were strong in scrums and physical/unassisted in the lineout jumps</li> <li>• Ability to cart the ball to opposition</li> <li>• Tough and dominant at the breakdown</li> <li>• Ability to defend around the ruck area</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Good at getting high in the air, both in lineout with assistance and in general play ( especially at the restarts and kicks in general play</li> <li>• Greater emphasis is placed on ball and running skills and defense work rate</li> <li>• Ability to read the game and to win own lineout ball ( split second guess the opposition and call to intercept their throw)</li> <li>• Defense right across the field.</li> </ul>

NUMBER 6 BLINDSIDE FLANKER	PRESENT
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Covered the blindside attack</li> <li>• Second line of defense</li> <li>• Covered the half back in lineout</li> <li>• Played a tighter game</li> <li>• Blocker in the lineout</li> <li>• High tackle count</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Position for an impact/harder player</li> <li>• Real impact in defense and attack, especially down the centre of the field</li> <li>• Ability to off-load in a tackle</li> <li>• Good line out jumper</li> </ul>

NUMBER 7 OPENSIDE FLANKER	PRESENT
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Very fast around the field, following the ball at all times to pounce on any dropped ball</li> <li>• Constantly pressuring the flow of the ball across the field</li> <li>• High tackle count</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Ideally this player has great speed, built low to the ground and has the ability to pressure opposition ball at the breakdown</li> <li>• Options are greater the more ball skills and speed the player has</li> <li>• Able ball player</li> <li>• Very good in defense</li> </ul>

NUMBER 8 PAST	PRESENT
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Good lineout jumper</li> <li>• Good defender</li> <li>• Defensive line in general play was to the corner posts</li> <li>• Ball runner</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Strong ball runner both in close to the ruck and out wide</li> <li>• Skills to offload safely</li> <li>• Ability to compete for the ball in the air</li> <li>• Ability to work forward from the scrum and also set up the back row.</li> </ul>

With regards to the backs, their demands are fairly similar to the past.

However, two main areas appear to be more relevant to today's game:

1. The old adage of "it does not matter what number you have on your back, you are all ball getters at the breakdown" is now more prevalent. A back player who can take a ball into the breakdown zones and control it for phase play or more importantly, steal possession in defense has a greater ability to control the game.
2. Back players must now compete and dominate with every type of 'ball in the air' scenario.

To involve the most enterprising backs is an asset to the modern game.

As stated throughout this paper, the contemporary rugby union player, no matter what position they are playing, must be multi-skilled to be competitive and dominant. With young players being monitored or contracted for future opportunities to play representative football, training all the skills on a full time basis may develop a more multi-skilled or elite athlete.