

SKILLS DRILLS AND THEIR IMPACT ON RUGBY

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As you look back on past eras of rugby and its players you can not help but realize that there has always been an element in rugby training that would be defined as a skills drill.

Thirty years ago it may have been something as simple as a halfback practicing his dive pass or kick from scrum base. Remember those days. Players of the past have always been able to catch, pass, run fast, side step, kick, tackle, etc. However they probably never experienced a complex training session that mixes all of these skills and more, as do the players of today. On the same ticket, imagine today's players taking part in a skills session run by Garrick Fay, David Dunworth or Tony Shaw of 1970's – 1980's fame. Their sessions may well resemble a mission of search, secure, destroy and disfigure if necessary.

This maybe very stark in its description but not far off in fact. It does highlight one important point. The players involved in different eras of rugby possessed a high skill level in areas that basically governed the style in which the game was played at that particular time in history. The ultimate reward for all their effort and skills training was to be in front on the scoreboard at full time. Sound familiar? I guess some things never change.

The driving forces behind the escalation of skills drills training in the modern game can directly be contributed to ever changing concepts and ideas envisaged by coaches and dominant rugby bodies from all countries, e.g. Bob Templeton, Rod Macqueen, QRU, NSW RU, ACT RU, ARU, etc. New Zealand, South Africa, France, England etc., all have their own concepts and ideas that we hope will always challenge and threaten each other's performances in order to maintain and increase the players skill level and not detract from the spectacle.

Modern day rugby has another potent influence on our game. The spectator. You might say we have always had spectators. So why are they more influential these days? It could be they demand more entertainment; they pay more at the gate and more importantly a healthy subscription to international television networks. These television networks in conjunction with viewers demand have become a driving force behind rugby's ever increasing entertainment value. This has become a major plus for our game.

How do we make it a more exciting and entertaining spectacle? Simple. Provide world class players going head to head in superbly drill teams executing an abundance of complicated, yet slick manoeuvres, involving the majority of both teams which produces countless eye catching tries and you have accomplished pay dirt.

Did I say simple! This would take years and years of skills coaching and fitness training of the beginner at under 7's level through the age groups, school boys, seniors and culminating in an elite arena featuring the superbly drill athlete [rugby players]. Sounds like Super 12 and recent test matches -V- New Zealand. Of course there are a number of other factors that are essential to fit into this super equation, such as your players health and fitness, mental toughness, susceptibility to injury, understanding of the laws etc.

The style we want the game to be perceived to be played has laid the foundations for our coaches to upgrade and initiate changes in their players skill levels if they are any hope of achieving their vision.

Some of the skills drills as we know them today, would not have been accepted twenty years ago. The slickness of interchange passing, angled diversionary runners, flat line defensive patterns and limited player numbers at the breakdown would have been viewed by most coaches of that era as high risk and thwart with danger and therefore discarded.

There have been some great references regarding skills drills published over a period of time, not the least being the Honon Drills and Digi Rugby. What more would any coach want to have a complete book of diagrams and descriptions of drills to follow for players at all levels and a videotape showing them exactly how they could be executed. These are fantastic references for junior players and their coaches to introduce the skills component of rugby into their game.

This and other types of references also incorporate one highly important part of rugby that helps the players sustain their interest in the game. The Fun Factor. Lets face it, you spend hours and hours on the training paddock for only 60-70-80 mins of match time, the majority of which is absorbed by high pressured, adrenalin charged decision making and complex patterns of play. There must be some form of enjoyment associated with the training side of rugby. Therefore our skills training opens the door for coaches to accomplish any number of positives. They allow the coach the opportunity to express his approach to the game in relation to the use of drills he trusts will be a reflection of the style of game he envisages his team playing. His selection of skills drills will instantly be identified by his players as meaningful, productive and fun. So not only do they see some benefit in improving their skill level, they actually enjoy training. This in itself has a very productive side to a team situation. The rapport between coach and player, player and player, and coach and team can and quite often will develop at this stage. How long it is nurtured and maintained is a skill in itself, described worldwide as coach management.

Most modern day players are always enthusiastic in trying to absorb information to improve their skill level. This provides the coach with the fuel required to drive his machine. His ideas and visions become the player's goals, the player's enthusiasm together and as a group, they will quite simply get the required work done.

To a panel of selectors and coaches, a players skill levels are reflection of many well-planned and structured training sessions. At a higher level this may well be the case. These players have already completed their rugby pathway from mini rugby through to senior level.

However the young under 7's players are only starting their rugby pathway. During their journey through rugby life most if not all rugby players will experience three very major transition stages, the same as they will experience in every day life. From an early age they will experience DEPENDENCE followed by INDEPENDENCE and culmination in INTERDEPENDENCE.

From the beginning of their pathway the young players will have a need for dependence. They will depend on you (the coach) to feed them information, to teach them things (skills) that will help them to play rugby like the Stephen Larkham's and Ben Tune's of the rugby world. With what they learn at this stage they will experience a sense of independence. At this crucial time the young players are either enhancing their ambitions and promise or accepting their current skill level. Their fitness, knowledge, determination etc., will get them to a certain level along their pathway. However if their skill level is below what is perceived to be an acceptable level they may struggle to survive at a more elite level or perhaps may never get the opportunity to perform at that level and beyond. They may feel superior to other players e.g., passes more speed, more strength and adapt to skills training faster than their peers. This is the stage where they may be ear marked as a natural, a worker, lazy or hopeless. As they grow and their peers catch up physically they become interdependent on their team mates. They will already have this feeling at a young age. However with the increased development of their peer's skill levels this phase of their rugby life will take on a far more important sense of accomplishment and success than it did during their early and then teenage years. It is important to note that at all stages of any player's rugby pathway skills training is at the forefront of their development.

A skill can be taught and a skill can be perfected. There must be an understanding of the subject being taught, along with the persistence and dedication required for practice, in a repetitive and often mundane fashion, until that skill is mastered and then practiced some more.

As a young player progresses along his pathway there is every chance his skills or skill requirements will change. In under 7's, 8's & 9's he may have been the strong fast winger who scored all his teams points by out sprinting or simply running over the top of his opponents. This would indicate that his preferred and natural skills were to be able to run fast, side step and palm off would be defenders. By the time he is in under 12, 13 & 14's and still growing, his coach may decide the team needs a player of his size and skill in the lock position. This earth shattering decision means the skills he has already perfected will more times than not be put on hold in favour of a new set. You can only imagine the parallels of the skills required for scrums, line outs, rucks and mauls as compared to those he had already mastered as the team try scoring winger. This dramatic change of event does not happen to all rugby players. Some players will go a complete career and never have to change position, perhaps boring personally for them but probably a bonus for the teams they played in.

Some players are tagged naturals, freaks, gods etc. This is an endearing expression used in relation to their outstanding skill in regard to certain aspects of their game. In recent times (20 years) you would consider the likes of the Ella's, Loan's, Maclean's, Farjones', Gould's etc., all the way through to the Wilson's, Horan's, Larkham's and Gregan's of today's world, as recipients of such glowing accolades in respect to their talents/vision etc., and rightly so,

In the rugby hall ways and bars of the world someone will always ask the question, "Great yes, but would they survive and be as good playing in today's game?" I say, yes. You have the athlete first then you introduce the skills and take it from there. Skills will always be required at all levels of rugby no matter which era you choose to look at and that will include the future.

New coaches will always come along with new visions of a style of rugby they would like to present to the rugby world. Along with these visions will come new skill levels required by the players to adapt to the coaches style. Twenty years ago who would have thought that netball and Australian rules football would be introduced into rugby training! Most advanced coaches of today or those able to access the above sports skills will probably stage a number of sessions borrowing or utilising not all but some of their skills drills at their sessions particularly in pre season training.

Having a squad of players who can perform a high level of complex skills with speed and precision does not guarantee you a champion team. However it does allow the coach the confidence to direct his players to perform in the style he wants and presents the players with a necessary ingredient for them to express their talents and hopefully progress through to a higher level of rugby.

I have mentioned the coach's management skill in maintaining an understanding of his player's abilities, strengths and weaknesses and there is no doubt some coaches are far more skilled and successful at this than other. However if his players are deficient in playing skills his management skills may well be utilized in other areas in order for him to maintain his sanity.

Skills drills and skills training alone will not make an elite player but a player without them could well be described by many as a referee or spectator.