

Utility Players - What value do they bring to the team?

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With the advent of Rugby in its professional form celebrating ten years, the past decade has delivered many changes to the game. These changes have centred on the Laws and an increased pace of the game. There has been a resultant need for coaching specificity, both in a tactical and player ability aspect. The players have had greater demands on their physical and mental preparedness, and selection in representative teams has advanced to regard the “value” a player brings to the team unit.

There has been a growing emphasis on “multi-skilling” of players. This can be interpreted to mean developing different aspects of the player – for example, overt skills and Law appreciation, to off field effects - diet/nutrition, handling the media, rehabilitation. All these facets amount to creating the “professional” player, in the “mastership/deftness” sense, and underpin the value that a player is credited with having. Another faculty to offer is the flexibility in playing position, which should give considerable value to a player. This idea of the “Utility Player” appears to offer both the individual and their team greater scope, opportunity, and range. In particular, as seven substitutes have to cover 15 positions, there must be players that offer flexibility and coverage. The role of the Utility Player has taken on a more important role in recent years, in particular at under age level.

Do Rugby programs in Australia cultivate the Utility Player? Do we give sufficient credence to the idea of a Utility Player? With the recently rejuvenated Under Age Championship programs and the introduction of a National Talent Program I propose that there is an important role for the Utility Player in the current Rugby climate. There are two main reasons for this. Representative teams need greater coverage from players to remain competitive throughout tournaments. Secondly, coaches and selectors of underage players have to be fundamentally considerate to changes in body shape that come with maturity and may mean a change in playing position.

A player's worth or value to a team is synonymous to an employee in a company. Time and money are invested in both cases, and performance is expected in return, whilst upholding morals, motivation and achievement. Often this is achieved by offering flexibility and variety. In rugby, keeping players challenged, motivated and sharp may be provided by equipping players with the skills and intricacies of other playing positions. A player may even uncover a natural affinity for another position eg No 8 to No 6, but may also offer a coach the opportunity to use him there in a game. As a junior player coming through, are you more likely to improve your chances of selection if you are able to fulfil a number of roles in your team? The answer is probably yes however if you are focused on a number of positions in a team is this to the detriment of your chosen position?

In talking with a number of Representative Coaches and selectors of Talent programs the priority in any selection must be selecting players 1 through to 15. One National Talent Program selector mentioned that he would never select a player on Utility value alone and although core skills are important, he looks at players who have skill, commitment, desire and the ability to put their body on the line in a

contest. However these selectors and coaches do see the value in being able to identify a player who potentially will need to change positions to further their rugby career. Only as recently as one year ago, Australian Schoolboy player Totafu Noa played in the Back row and has now become a Front Row forward. This move should maximise his representative career.

All selectors agreed that you need to put the best player in the specific positions starting with the props and ending with the fullback. After this has been done, the selection process in picking the reserves bench or the remainder of a touring party becomes harder and is always open to criticism. One of the questions that I asked was do you take the next best player in a position or do you take a player that can cover 2 or more positions? The answers were not as clear cut on this question with most speaking about the make up of the team and whether players in the starting line-up could cover another position. Most coaches and selectors commented that, particularly in Junior rugby, you need at least one forward and one back that are genuine Utility players on the bench.

International Rugby

At the international level a reserve's bench is generally made up of :

- Prop - Generally someone who can play both sides
- Hooker - Specific position
- Lock - Specific position
- Back Row - A player who has the ability to play Open side, Blindside or No 8
- Half Back - Specific position
- Inside Back - Ability to play 5/8 or Inside Centre
- Outside Back - Ability to play Outside Centre, Wing, Fullback.

The structure of this bench has probably not changed over the last ten years. Up to the mid-1990's, selectors would have chosen two forwards who could cover lock and back row. Contemporary examples of this sort of player are Owen Finnegan, Radike Samo or Mark Chisholm - all having the ability to play as Back row forwards and Locks, yet they are now not even making the bench. When they were selected, it was usually in the run on team. Would these players be better in the starting XV or do they offer more to the team as a player who can cover multiple positions? The Front row is another area that has become position specific. Tight Head and Loose Head Props at the top level are now trained specifically for their respective position. With more emphasis on the technical aspects of scrummaging you now must be highly skilled in your position to gain the edge in each scrum. Thus when picking a reserve Front Row forward you may not necessarily pick the next best prop but you sacrifice a little specificity for a prop that could possibly play both sides of the scrum. But who would be encouraged to keep training at both 1 & 3, if they want to be considered for a run on spot at 1 or 3? Recently, the Wallabies appear to have selected the reserve Prop to cover the position of the less experienced player. An example of this is having Bill Young at Loose Head and Al Baxter at Tight Head - the reserve Prop will in most cases be a Tight Head player.

In the backline we have a classic example in Matt Rogers. Is his best position Fullback, Outside Centre or Wing? His natural ability to play more than one position may work against him in the selection of the Wallabies team. Does he in fact offer more to the team as a player coming off the bench and covering four positions 12, 13, 11-14, 15 rather than a starting player? Some people will argue he is better suited to the bench, but if he is the best Outside Centre should he start there?

Other players at the international level who are possibly seen as Utility Players include Canterbury and All Black player Daniel Carter and South African player Brent

Russell. Carter has been able to cement a position in the All Black starting XV at Inside Centre however he is always spoken about as a potential All Black 5/8 and Fullback. Often when replacements come on to the field in All Black tests match Carter is moved to number 10 or 15 and the reserve player takes the number 12 position. Should the starting player be moved to accommodate the reserve? The balance of the team is most important, hence the selection of a Utility player on the bench should cover the injury or replacement rather than the starting player, but does the selection of a utility back come at the detriment of the second best Centre, 5/8 or Winger? Does this also influence a coach with his use of a tactical substitution or impact player?

Brent Russell has been the most noted Utility player of recent time because of the influence that he has had off the reserves bench for the Sharks and the Springboks at number 10, 13, 11/14 and 15 – where ever he is needed. However if he had been given a chance to start in a side in a specific position, could he have become a regular 1st XV player? Has his reputation as a quality Utility player been a disadvantage to him?

Another player who was encouraged to develop the skill and ability for another position was Matt Giteau. In junior rugby he played at Half Back. To make the Australian Under 21 team he had to move from half back to 5/8. He now has developed into one of Australia's best inside backs and offers a lot to the team as a back up half back, 5/8 or inside centre. The utility value that Matt brings to a team is huge, and certainly seems advantageous towards his selection.

Under Age Rugby

The emphasis of the Utility player at the under age level is more important than at the International Level. Tournaments at Under age rugby from Under 21 down to Under 12 are played as week long Championships. The ability to change the team over this period of time can be very difficult. Thus the importance of picking players who can cover different position becomes imperative. The breakdown of a reserves bench at Junior Australian Rugby Union tournament is as follows.

Front row	Front Row
Hooker	Lock
Back Row	Half Back
Back	Back

Apart from the compulsory positions Front Row and Lock the make up of each teams reserve bench is at the discretion of the coaching/selection panel.

The biggest difference to the senior level of Rugby is the emphases of the scrum as an attacking weapon, in Under 19 law the scrum can not be pushed more than 1.5 meters. Thus when picking your reserves for an Under 19 Tournament the ability to play on both sides of the scrum or even as a Hooker means that your value to the team is significant due to the ability to cover 3 positions.

In junior rugby it is important that players are coached to be able to play both sides of the scrum, this will enable them to be comfortable and safe if they are required to play in any given match. It may also give them some insight into what they may expect in the Front Row in senior rugby.

The other forward reserves will include players who can play at both Lock and Back row and again having the ability to play in both positions increases your chances of advancing to the next level. I know in my own experience at the Schoolboy level, I

will select reserves that can play both as it gives you many more options as a coach to cover all situations

In other reserve selections the half back position is one in which you need to select a specific player and with regard to the other backline positions, there needs to be players who are adaptable to be able to play numerous positions. With the number of games that are played in these tournaments playing squads need to include players who are multi skilled and offer proficient position coverage.

Conclusion

The Utility player does have a role in the modern rugby team, particularly at the junior level where they play week long style competitions. With a number of games played over a short period of time, positions need to be covered outside the starting XV. It is also important to consider that players develop physically at different ages and that a player playing fullback one year may play blindside flanker the next depending on his physical development. Thus the ability for a coach to teach his players to be multi skilled and flexible in their outlook, is incredible important.

With the technical elements of scrummaging at Junior level not coming into play to the same extent, due to Law limitations, the ability to play across all three positions is often welcomed. At international level there is less need for the utility player. It may be more advantageous for a player to be able to cover a couple of positions but in one off games the squad can be actively altered to deal with both injuries and a different opposition. Recent changes to the tactical structure of the game suggest reserves are selected often on the tactical options they offer, rather than substitution in the case of injury.

Utility players do bring a lot to a rugby team but it may be detrimental to their own selection. I believe that it is the role of the coach to enable young rugby players to have the greatest opportunity to further their careers by making players multi skilled and also multi talented. This will enable them to cover a number a positions, but not so as to disadvantage them in their first choice Rugby position. The Utility player improves his chances of making the team but this may hinder his chances of making the starting line up.