

Despite what I believe to be the best intentions of the administrators to “open up” our game of rugby, obviously it has not worked successfully. Certainly there are flaws in some of the recent law changes, but surely, they alone, cannot be held to be totally responsible for the stereotyped and negative play being introduced by a great number of coaches and players alike.

At a time when the profile of the game has reached new heights, we are running the risk of not taking advantage of this situation, due in part to the negative spectacle we witness on an all too consistent basis. Not only are coaches and players contributing to this negative play, but also the inconsistency of refereeing decisions/interpretations is a major factor. It is becoming all too clear that games are developing effectively into penalty goal “shootouts”.

Whilst we constantly hear from coaches that the rules are dictating the style of play being adopted, surely if one has the desire to play a more expansive game, then it can be achieved successfully. Maybe the desire to take a risk does not exist in a lot of people. Maybe a low risk policy creates less chance of losing. Maybe it is the fear of not winning and the potential loss of any resultant benefits.

Obviously, an “open” game can create greater risk, but instead of the negative attitudes enunciated previously, why not adopt “a better chance of winning” philosophy. The risk factor may be higher, but a positive attitude, coupled with an understanding of how the game plan is to be achieved, are two important issues in reducing this risk to an acceptable level. If the game plan is accepted, then obviously both the backs and forwards have roles to play. I am not suggesting the ball be passed along the backline at every conceivable opportunity, since this can create problems under the present laws. I probably should add that this is possible, providing a clear superiority is demonstrated by one side, but should the game be highly competitive, then a structured game plan has to be implemented, which allows the expansive game to be played intelligently.

To successfully implement this plan, there are some basic factors which need to be addressed. These ingredients are common, irrespective of the style of game, but it is imperative they be given considerable attention if we are to implement a consistent running game. These basic factors are:-

- Positive Attitude
- Skill Levels
- Pace
- Strength
- Fitness

Each of these factors is critical in the overall strategy. There must be a desire and an understanding by both coaches and players alike to play this form of game, but there does need to be quality skill levels, coupled with an emphasis on pace, strength and fitness.

If we are successful in achieving these aims, then specific issues such as communication, ball control (which includes ball security, ball retention etc), support, running angles and variety have to be looked at in detail. Obviously training drills need to be designed and the intent understood, so that the aims are achieved. These drills, and there are plenty of them, have to be performed in a quality manner, under pressure, on a consistent basis. This pressure can either be one of a physical nature, or one of time, but preferably a combination of both.

Under any circumstances, a strong scrum and quality lineout are desirable attributes of any team. Of course, these factors make the running game so much easier to play, providing the right balance is achieved in the involvement of both backs and forwards. Too often, as examples, we see the relentless march of the rolling maul, or persistent and aimless kicking by the backs. The justification by both coaches and players is that we must play territory and not give the opposition the chance of either tying up our possession, or else them receiving a penalty within kicking distance. I must admit I can sympathise to an extent with such a reaction, when these presumably are the dominant aims of the defending side. This attitude is no doubt heightened further by the inconsistency in refereeing interpretations.

However, as mentioned previously, we can lessen the chance of these events occurring if the team is totally committed to a controlled running game, and have the necessary attributes of skill, pace, strength and fitness to accomplish the task.

As has been said, simply there are only three things you can do with a football – kick, pass or run – though the selection of the best option consistently is a highly difficulty exercise. Even if the incorrect option is taken, the negative impact is lessened if a positive decision is taken. Any game is made easier, but particularly the expansive game, if there is a player involved who can read a game, and do it well. In all my years of involvement, there are few who could/can anticipate what is likely to occur, say two plays ahead, but it is not essential to have a “genius” for the style of game to be effective. Of course, it is highly beneficial if a halfback or five eight is the reader of the game, and more so if the forwards are confident in this player’s abilities.

It is clear that the open side backrower, the halfback and the midfield are critical elements in this style of play. The open side backrower must have a keen sense of anticipation. The half back, besides having all of the qualities normally required, must be able to read a game efficiently, and be able to communicate effectively between backs and forwards, whilst the midfield must be strong, balanced and skillful.

The communication aspect is one that is too often not given the due attention it deserves. There is too much expectancy by a greater number of players that things will occur as a matter of course. This does not happen consistently, and too often opportunities go begging because of this inability to talk.

Communication is a major factor in an expanded game, as it is critical in the link between the forwards and backs so that the balance being sought is achieved. It is in fact an integral part of all phases of the game, e.g. scrum, lineout, backline play, support etc.

There are philosophical differences between whether the ball should be played on the ground or else retained in the air. Undoubtedly a combination of both is required to be effective. The ball on the ground, with a quick shift, increases the tempo of the game, but it must be done intelligently. The constant quick ball to a player punching the ball up one off the ruck reminds me of six tackle rugby league, though there is no denying its effectiveness if done astutely. The ball in hand, with the resultant rolling maul, should be utilised, but it must be done in a controlled sense. Both are effective, though everybody must understand that the ultimate goal, once the initial advantage is obtained, is to spread the ball with the game played at pace.

We have simply stated that fitness, strength, pace and skill levels are critical factors. The open game cannot be implemented unless we are confident in our abilities in each of these areas. This game is played under substantial pressure, and it is not possible for a player to perform to the level required, unless he is highly capable in these areas.

Besides the obvious, the skill levels of each player have to be worked on at almost every training session, e.g. passing the ball under pressure, support play, running angles etc. Too often, we see highly regarded representative players performing menial tasks on a field, at a level commensurate with a schoolboy. This is not to say that the players do not necessarily have the ability to perform the skill competently, but it maybe that certain skills are accepted as being menial, with consequently little or no attention. All skills need to be fine tuned consistently, but not to the point of drudgery. This can be overcome by looking to achieve the same aim, but by implementing a different drill as a variation.

I am not suggesting that the ball be shifted wide under any circumstance. The running game must be controlled, but it must be done in a positive manner, with everybody concerned committed to that line of thought.

I accept there are risks, but providing we understand the individual's roles and responsibilities, and we possess the desire, coupled with the necessary attributes, both coaches, players, administrators and spectators will obtain a greater sense of satisfaction if the original concept of the game is re-activated.