

## **Decision Making in Rugby**

Here is a paper by Pierre Villepreux. He presented it at the 1993 Asian Pacific Congress in Calgary. Eleven years have passed, but this remains one of the benchmark papers on this most important aspect. Pierre is now an IRB Regional Development Manager. Mike Luke, USA Rugby's Technical Director, translated this document from French, and assisted in its composition.

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### **Introduction**

Definition of decision-making: the capacity of the player to execute an action following some conscious tactical or strategical choice.

### **Definition of Rugby:**

***A game, which includes both confrontation (with the opposition) and collaboration (within the team), in which two opposing teams fight to gain possession of the ball, with the aim of scoring against the opposition, as a result of their individual and collective efforts***

It is the relationship between attack and defence, and the way in which they alternate one with the other in the course of the game, which lends a particular sense to this definition of the game. This requires that every player must learn to interact not only with his teammates but also in relation to the actions and reactions of the opposition.

One definition of ideal performance in the game could be that the team be capable of winning or regaining possession and score by handling and/or kicking the ball, without allowing any breakdown in the action.

Our definition of tactical skill is the ability of the player to perform appropriately in open play. Open play is defined as the movement of the players and the ball once set play is over and the players and the ball are moving on the field.

Strategic skill is the ability of a player to make the right choices and to perform from set play (scrum / line-out / penalty / kick-off / drop-out).

There are two approaches to preparing the players to enable them to play a dynamic game:

- 1 The acquisition by all the players on the team of an ever-increasing number of individual technical skills, with no relation to the reality of the opposition.
- 2 The development of each player's tactical understanding of game situations, in direct relation to the actions and reactions of the opposition.

The second of these approaches implies that the players must practice in order to develop some common and consistent interpretation of the game, at game speed, to enable them to participate fully in the on-going action of the game.

This means that all the players on the team have a similar way of 'reading the game', in direct relation to the reality of the opposition.

A common and consistent understanding of the game among the members of the team becomes particularly important in what we have called "open play".

Decision-making in Rugby Football is particularly important in this area, precisely because it is impossible to predict exactly how the opposition will react to counter the attack in progress. The best example of effective decision-making in Rugby would be for the ball carrier to make the right decision in relation to the defensive alignment of the opposition, and at the same time for the support players to react appropriately to whatever initiative is taken by the ball carrier.

The two options defined above to (on the one hand, a technical approach, and on the other, a tactical approach) are not contradictory, but rather complementary, and we shall discuss the relationship between technical and tactical skill later in this presentation. However, the factor which determines the effectiveness of each player in the constantly changing situations in the game - ball carrier and/or support players - is the player's ability to analyse where he/she is in relation to whatever form of defence he/she confronts. The same is true for the defending players who have to adapt their game to whatever the attackers do.

One of the primary roles of the coach is to create for the players game-like practices which will help them to better analyse all the problems posed by the defence. All players need some common "code" to help them read the game in a similar fashion, especially in broken play. The objective is to enable players to apply this code at game speed. This provides the players with a set of consistent reference points and enables them to analyse the characteristics of the various situations in the game. Once the players have acquired this code, they are able to do the following:

- To analyse simultaneously any problem presented by the defence.
- To anticipate what will happen next.
- To choose an appropriate action as quickly as possible.

The player will then be able to move into the best position to be able to participate in whatever individual or collective action is going on.

### **Types of play**

In open play, the number of basic situations is relatively few and includes the following:

- When the defence is grouped together, the obvious choice for both the ball carrier and the support players is to go wide.
- When the defence is spread across the field, both ball carrier and support players must try to penetrate.

The coach's task is to help both the ball carrier and the support players to come to a similar conclusion about what to do, at any given moment, in light of their perception of what is happening in front of them. This means that every player:

- can perceive how the defending players are arranged on the field, at any given moment
- can perceive his/her own position in the attacking alignment and can get into a position to be effective according to the needs of the moment (close support, wide support, immediate intervention, delayed intervention).

So the coach must create practices for the players, which cover all the possible situations of the game:

- in open play (15 v 15)
- unit play (forwards against forwards, backs against backs, etcetera)
- individual play (2 v 2, 2 v 1, 1 v 1)

### **Team Play**

In a general team sense when there is open play, this means that the players must understand how the disposition of the defence changes in response to the movement of the attacking players (15 v 15):

- penetration causes the defence to come closer together and be concentrated in a small area close to the ball
- attack out wide causes the defence to spread across the field

If penetration has really caused the opposition defence to be concentrated in a relatively small area, then all the conditions are favourable to attacking out wide.

Conversely, wide attack creates the conditions favourable for penetration through the resulting gaps created in the defence.

It is exactly the same for kicking in attack:

- deep kicks up and down the field (penetration)
- wide kicks diagonally across the field (attack out wide)

### **Unit Play**

The unit play includes, for example, forwards against forwards, backs against backs, forwards against backs and *vice versa*.

### **Individual Play**

For the individual player, this means the capacity to recognize all the specific situations in the game which involve a small number of players, for example 4v4, 4v3, 3v3, 3v2, 2v2, 2v1, etcetera.

This ability of the player to situate him/herself in the diverse movements of the players and of the ball, and to take into account the disposition of the defence is the essential principle of decision-making during the game.

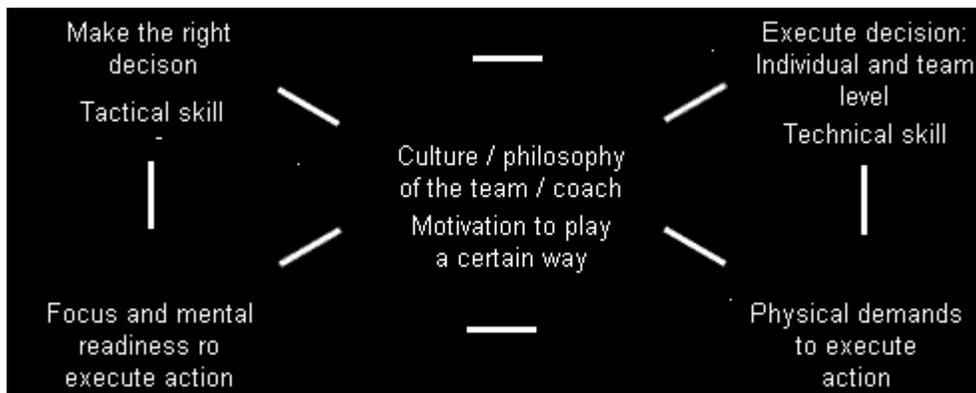
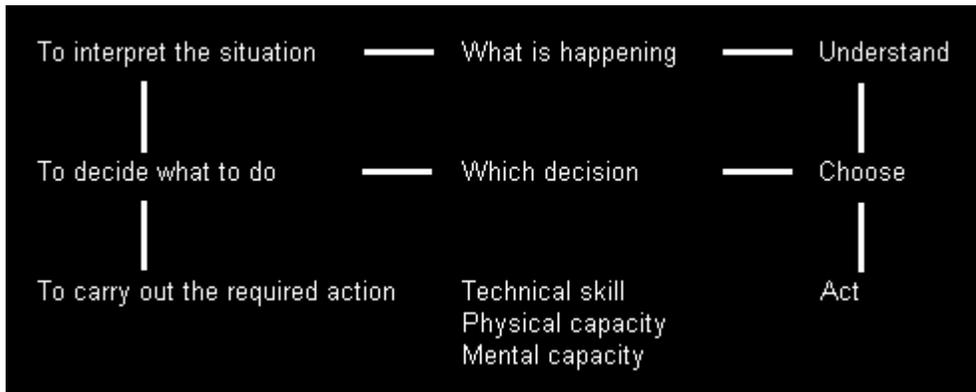
## The process of decision-making

It is useful to recall our use of the terms tactical and strategical:

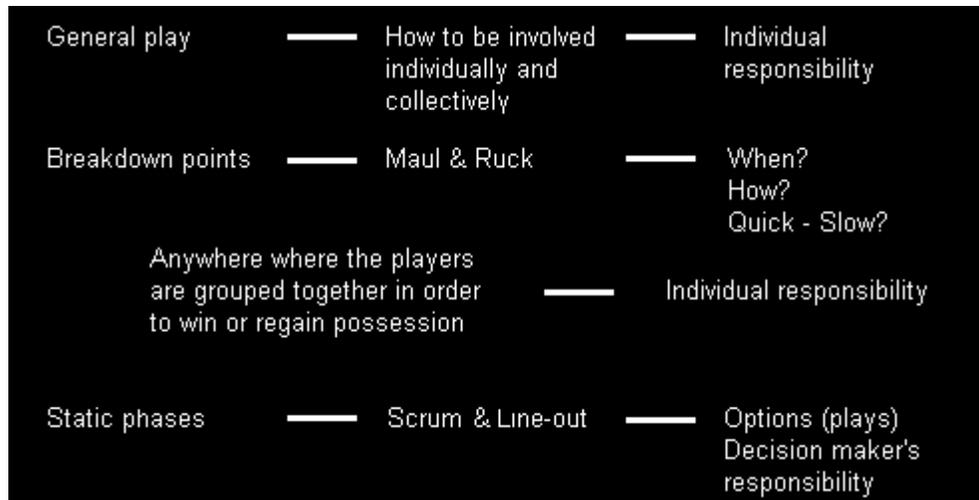
Tactical: the ability of the player to perform appropriately in situations where there is some uncertainty about the outcome (e.g. in general play);

Strategical: the ability of the player to make the right choices in situations where the positions of the players involved is evident (e.g. in scrum and line-out).

For every player, at any time and at game speed, the process of decision-making includes:



The player engages in all of the steps shown above. Tactical decision-making remains the most important, as it conditions all the others. Everything relies on the conscious perception of the tactical movement of the game (how the players move around the field).



It is clear that tactical decision making, as it happens during action of general play gives the player great freedom of initiative.

Strategical decision-making, which is done prior to the restart of play (strategic options) is usually carried out by the strategical decision-maker (may be the captain) who decides what "play" is "on" and communicates this to the other players involved.

Ruck/maul are particular cases in general play, which remain options, which are used only when there is no other more dynamic option.

As for other events, which arise from general play when the players are grouped together near the ball and play continues, two groups of players have to make decisions about what to do:

For those who are participating in the ruck or maul, the main concern is the timing of the release of the ball

- When should the ball be released quickly ("quick ball"), in order to capitalize on the disorganization of the defence?
- When should the ball be held in ("slow ball"), once the defence has had time to reorganize, the question then is how to disorganize the defence again.

For those who are not participating in the ruck or maul, the decision concerns how to use the ball (choice of play):

- If it is quick ball, we rediscover the characteristics and tactical reference points of general play.
- If its slow ball, we rediscover almost the same characteristics and reference points as in static phases of the game (scrum and line-out).

## Characteristics

**Easiest:** (mostly general play):

The defence is disorganised, the attackers must constantly reorganize in order to keep the defence off balance. (N.B. importance of individual initiative of the player.)

When defence is still disorganised the attackers must choose the best form of play in relation to the momentary weak point of the defence; understanding of the defensive patterns.

**Most difficult** (scrum & line-out or slow ball)

Defence has reorganised.

Attack: choose a type of play to disorganize the defence again.

In both cases the role of the scrum half is crucial.

Defence is very organised, the tactical decision maker must choose the best form of attack in relation to the strengths and weaknesses of the opposition.

## The modern game

Analysis based on a study of many matches shows that the key factor in performance is the appropriate use of possession, rather than the amount of possession gained.

Effective play is achieved by the team which is capable of ensuring a complex series of sequences of play linked together, whatever the origin of the possession or when it occurs in the game. The most effective play (in terms of points scored: tries/penalties) is achieved when the team is capable of putting together at least 2-3 phases of play.

The majority of points are scored from ball won back from the opposition at the breakdown or in ruck or maul, or in broken play, e.g. producing counter attack, and much more often than from scrums and line-outs. Defence is much more organised at set play. In fact, few points are scored directly from set moves off scrum or line-out. Points are more likely to be scored from second or third phase play following these set moves.

Taking this analysis one step further, we find the following:

- The team that wins the game engages in less ruck/maul situations, but when they do form them, they always produce quick ball;
- When the initial set play produces penetration down the middle of the field, it is more likely that a complex sequence of play will produce effective continuity;
- Kicking in attack can be either very effective, or ineffective. If the ball is recovered after the kick, a try is scored approximately 90% of the time;

This analysis suggests that the coach's first preoccupation should be to make the players as effective as possible in broken play. To do this, the players need to understand the game of movement so that they can then understand each other.

If the objective is really to develop continuity in the game, thanks to the capacity of all the players to play in a coherent way, linking the game of the forwards to that of the backs and *vice versa*, then it is essential to practice in the areas of improving understanding the game and the decision-making processes of all the players. This is the only way of creating some kind of logical link between the actions of each individual player within the game.

So, we need to produce players able to adapt their game to the reality of the opposition, with skills, which enable them to assume any role in either attack or defence.

It almost goes without saying that in set play, each player reverts to his position in the team, in which he must be able to perform adequately. With these skills, the players are then able to perform in all aspects of the game, whether it be broken play or set play, ruck or maul, or the tackle situation, in attack or in defence.

The forwards must first and foremost play like forwards, but also be able to handle and run like backs; conversely, the backs must also be able to drive into the opposition like forwards and guarantee winning or maintaining possession.

## **Practise**

There are three types of practices:

- Technical approach: focus on individual skills
- Fun approach: play from a very individual perspective
- Tactical approach: developing players in a game situation

### **Technical approach**

A technical approach, based on the practice and development of technical individual, unit and team skills (passing, catching, rucking, mauling, line-out, scrum, etcetera), leaving the players to discover how these skills are linked together to produce dynamic play, through the games they play in.

### **Pleasure**

Playing for the pleasure of playing, for example at school in recreation time when there is no direct coaching input: there are no scrums or line outs, just play with the simplest of rules; in this case, individual initiative is very important, but this kind of game will only help the player to develop as an individual, and will do little or nothing to create a total team performance.

### **Tactical**

A tactical approach - the one we are proposing - which requires that the players learn how to play effectively in practice by playing the game itself, both at the level of the beginner and of the high performance player. At all levels, the game in opposition is used to develop the player and the team simultaneously, including both technical and tactical skill development. The technical skill is in

fact the outcome of a clear understanding and acceptance of the demands of the game.

Technical skill by itself is of little use, if it is not used at the right time, in the right place and in the right way in the sequence of the game. This tactical and technical work could be done with a lot of different practices, for example: The complexity of the exercises is a function of the level of the players' ability. The coach creates the initial situation and the problem to be solved; the players respond positively or negatively, and according to his/her perception of how the players perform. The coach must change the level of difficulty of the practice, to make it more or less difficult and complex.

Game situations are related to the:

- Team
- Unit
- Individual

Interpretations of the problems by the players can result in positive or negative actions. The coach gives feedback at this time.

Practices are carried out either just as in the game, or through controlled practices; the objective of these practices is to develop decision-making among the players (ACT-REACT-ADAPT). They include the forms 15 v 15 (with much reduced numbers at the beginner level), forwards against forwards, backs against backs, etcetera, taking into the account that at the beginner level, there no are forwards or backs, just players.

This does not mean that it is not necessary to work to develop the game from set play, but, at this moment, we enter into the area of strategy, which is not the subject of this presentation.