

Introduction Of Rugby To Children In France

by Jeremie Spencer, C.T.D., F.F.R.

The author represented England at scrum half in 1966 and played for Harlequins for seven years between spells at Bath and Northampton. He had cricket trials for Surrey and had been 'spotted', as a schoolboy, as a potential Tottenham Hotspur footballer. His professional activities in England saw work as a sports teacher in a variety of secondary and preparatory schools. After that he had a full coaching involvement in France as a county coach with the Basque-Landes FFR, as U16 and U19 coach to St Jean de Luz then as U21 coach to Avignon Bayonne. Since that work in France he has been heavily involved in Spanish rugby development with Catalan selection, club courses, Basque Country coaching, running U19 and senior representative sides and introducing the game to beginners in Spanish primary schools.

*There are contact elements in the article that would not be allowed with certain age groups in England. Coaches must be aware that they are responsible for adhering to the continuum whenever it is appropriate. **This may mean that certain aspects of the coaching information and coaching method in this piece would not be allowed at some specific age groups.***

The concept that I always start with is that children love discovering, inventing and having fun – all at the same time – in a stimulating environment. They should not, however, be allowed to work in the comfort zone as it bores them very quickly and hinders progress.

My formative work experience in coaching was for three years in a progressive English school and I then moved to France and soon adapted to their way that had been developed by Rene Delaplace. His system of introducing rugby was well expounded in England on many occasions by Pierre Villpreux. I have presented work based on this paper to various London and South East conferences in the past.

Objective. To create players who are **Courageous** (combative). **Loyal** (to rules, opponents etc.). **Intelligent and multi-skilled.**

Key areas of development.

Emotional. e.g. Concentration. Motivation. Courage. Resistance to stress. Fear.
Cognitive. e.g. Knowledge of the game. Understanding of the game. Intelligence.
Physical. e.g. Physique. Quantity and quality of technique. Athletic skill.

The eyes see, the head decides and the body reacts – all these are complemented by the above emotional considerations and all combine to produce the finished product.

The Child

Plays for pleasure.
Is egocentric.
Doesn't programme actions.
Has no anticipation.
Is drawn towards the ball.
Is apprehensive of contact with ground
And with opponents.
Is apprehensive about being knocked over.
Lacks skill.
And must gain pleasure through careful
Introduction of the key emotional areas.

The Adult

Anticipates with or without the ball.
Knows the laws.
Is physically prepared.
Has individual and team know-how.
Is familiar with the three key areas of
Emotional.
Cognitive.
Physical.

The Game

Bunching/swarming.
Satellites. Stands off in fear or anticipation.
Individual contributions.
Very few passes.
Weak defensive qualities.
Poor ball retention/poor continuity.

Recognises patterns of play.
Knows how to defend.
Varies the style of play.
Tight game.
Wide game.
Kicking game.
Knows something about strategy and
tactics. Achieves continuity through
support play.

Why start with a game situation?

1. Satisfies the child's desire.
2. Develops adaptability and familiarity with the demands of the game.
3. Develops game understanding, including better knowledge of the laws.
4. The child learns and discovers the complexities of the game little by little.

MOTIVATION – IMITATION – PERFECTION.

A typical coaching session.

1. Game situation – the coach **observes, diagnoses** and then **remedies**.
2. Skill learning – coaching to correct and help players to succeed.
3. Game situation – to see whether progress has been made.

First level

Behavioural observations	Our objectives	How
Pleasure. Maximum energy. Egocentricity.	Play/pleasure with the fundamental rules.	Very narrow pitch.
Players are drawn to the ball.	Let the bunching solve the emotional problems.	Relatively small numbers in opposition.
Some players are standing off through fear and/or anticipation.	Encourage the recognition that opponents exist.	Contact games with or without ball, collectively or individually
Fear of: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Being knocked over. • The ground. • The opponent(s). 		
Difficulty in advancing.	Go forward in defence and attack – the first rule!	1 v 1.

Second level

All the players participate and bunching becomes regrouping.	Realisation that opponent and own players exist.	Narrow pitch.
Beginning of co-operation between players.	Improve perception skills.	Variations on beginning the plays.
Passes appear.	Improve defence.	
Support play emerges.	Improve support play.	Games with various numbers of players.
Players go around the bunch.		Directives to the defence. 2 v 1+1.

Third level

Individual actions are the starting point of collective projects.	Understanding and construction of 2 nd and 3 rd phases of game.	Learning of some complementary rules e.g. offside at rucks and mauls.
The play is organised with reference to defence.	Employ the three forms of play and know how to adapt them.	Directives to attackers or defenders.
Beginning of organised game.	Improve and reinforce individual and collective technique.	Large pitch. 2+1 v 2+1.

I have developed my own way of doing things based on these basic theories and obviously my character and personality have been important in how I have tackled the work.

I always try to develop a real identification with the children and some of the following may be of interest and/or use:

- I always try to develop a real identification with the children.
- I am very aware of the magic space between teacher and child.
- I have a tendency to use their language and their humour.
- I always try to get down to their height to reassure them and attempt to de-dramatise the adventure that I am going to put to them.
- My structure base is the history of rugby development since Roman times. The Romans have invaded Europe and have set themselves up to live in these vanquished lands – Britain and France are examples – where they play a variety of games. One was called Haspartum, a glorified running battle. The French watched these games and developed their own version called ‘the soule’, where two villages challenged each other to get an object (a sheep’s bladder, for example, stuffed with vine leaves or sand) into the opposing village’s square. This led to attack and defence in a game that could be between up to five hundred a side over a space of many kilometres. In that space there would be natural obstacles of fields, woods, marshes and streams – and there were no rules!
- This is the story that I present to the children and invite them to live it in the game that follows. There are no rules, other than safety ones, and we just get on with it, for this is roughly the game that was played until the English introduced the basic rules (1823-1874) that led to the three fundamentals of rugby... go forward, support and get continuity.
- This scenario allows the children to discover, invent and construct THEIR rugby in their own magic wonderland.

- Every time I introduce the game in this manner during six lessons, they invent their own version of rugby without the word rugby being mentioned and certainly without any technical work. That can wait for the second level!

MIEUX VOIR - MIEUX JOUER THE BETTER YOU SEE – THE BETTER YOU PLAY.

There are **three fundamentals** to the game as mentioned above. They are **go forward, support and get continuity**. All of these are controlled by the pressure of time and space.

Players have **three important facets**. The **cognitive** – the eyes see and the head decides. The **physical** – the body reacts. The **emotional** – the physical and cognitive merge and are complemented by emotional considerations to produce the finished article.

Players' rights.

- You can pick up, carry, pass or kick (only out of hand) the ball in any direction.
- You can block or tackle the ball-carrier.
- You can take the ball from him.

For the moment there are no specific rugby rules, only safety ones.

- You may not touch any player above the shoulders.
- No tripping.
- No pulling jerseys.
- No kicking the ball off the ground.

These elementary rules allow decisions to be made between contact and avoidance – running into space; they allow children to lose their fear of contact in a wholly natural, unforced way.

Progression in practical sessions.

1. **Warm up with communication as the theme** in grids of 10 -15m x 10 -15m.
 - Get players to run and pass in any direction. Develop the awareness (by voice) of the role of the ball-carrier as being distinctly different from the non ball-carrier (support player). Let the children decide who calls, as use of the voice is very important. It is usually the support (non ball-carrying) player who should be hungry and should call for the ball. This allows a game within a game, where the children can themselves count who calls most often, thus becoming the 'champion of hunger' for possession.
 - The same exercise without the voice. Introduce hand signals as instructions/commands.

- The same again but introduce a whistled signal. When the whistle sounds, the ball-carrier offers the ball, a support player rips it then continues to pass to another player.
- Develop that theme so that the ball-carrier places the ball on the ground on the whistle.
- On the signal, the other players combine and push the ball-carrier out of the grid.

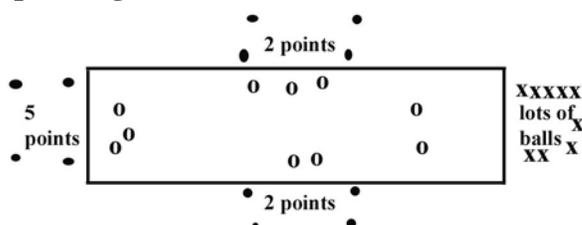
2. The fundamentals.

First rule – score or prevent the opposition from scoring.

Go forward. Invent games (or include in the normal game) where the mere fact that one side has advanced earns them points. In the learning process we should continuously be looking for specific and positive skills and they should be rewarded.

Normal game – One point for a ball-carrier who goes forward, one point for stopping the attack going forward and one point for scoring.

Specific game



Aim: The Xs try to get the ball into one of the scoring zones.

The Os try to prevent this.

If the ball-carrier is held up for more than two seconds, the ball goes back to the bank.

3. Introduction of mirroring.

The attackers must learn to develop the skill of losing their shadow, their reflection – the opposing defending player. At first this is an individual responsibility but it soon develops into a team requirement. In the early stages of the development, get players of the same weight and height (as far as possible) to oppose each other.

Normal game – one point for going forward, one for preventing the ball-carrier going forward, one for the attacking player who has lost his mirror, one for the defending player who is opposite his mirror and one for scoring.

Specific game 1 – (i) Start with a normal game, where one team has the ball and the others may not touch it. On the whistle, the ball-carrier drops the ball and he and his team-mates all try to cross the score line while the others try to prevent them by each defender being responsible for the attacker that he is mirroring.

Second rule – offside – therefore passing backwards, therefore support.

The aim then becomes to go forward (receiver always tries to go beyond the person who passed) without losing the ball, support your attack or prevent the ball-carrying side from scoring.

Specific game 2

XX	The 2 sides have a ball each. They all pass but may take no more than 3 steps with ball. The first team to score without an error scores a point.	00
X X		0 00
X XX		00
XX		0 0
X		0

Method:

- Each team has a ball and all attack at the same time.
- They pass but can take no more than three steps with the ball.
- The first team to score without a mistake scores a point, gaining a reward for being the faster side to score.

Extra points are then awarded as follows – one point for going forward, one if, from a pass, the receiver goes beyond where the pass came from, one for any attacking player who loses his mirror, one for any defender who (a) maintains or (b) recovers his mirror position, one for a player who prevents the attacker going forward and one for a try.

Third rule – a player is held with the ball at ruck or maul.

Aim –

- Go forward without losing the ball.
- Support and score, or
- Prevent the ball-carrying side from going forward.
- Recover their ball, go forward and score.
-

N.B. the ball is always available to be won by either side unless the competition for possession becomes too difficult. (This is an early lesson so it can be difficult!)

Normal game – one point for going forward, one for my partner going forward thanks to my pass, one for the ball being available after a tackle at ruck or maul, one for mirroring, one for preventing the ball-carrier going forward and one for scoring

Specific game –

X	0	0	0
X X			
X X	0	0	0
XX			
XX	0	0	0
X			
XX	0	0	0

Method:

- The Os defend their zone.
- Once their zone is beaten they play no more, making the game 12 v 4 three times.
- The attacking players must look for the easiest way through (strength against weakness).
- The defence must prevent, for as long as possible, the attack from scoring.
- Defenders are not allowed to touch the ball.

Measuring players' progress can be part of the sessions after each change of rules or theme.

x	0
x	0
x	0
x	0
x	0
x	0
x	0
x	0
x	0
x	0

Method:

- The Xs must score with (i) one ball each, (ii) one ball between two players, one ball between three players etc.
- The Os must prevent the scores.

SIX LESSONS TAUGHT TO BEGINNERS IN SPANISH SCHOOLS BASED ON THE ABOVE.

Lesson 1.

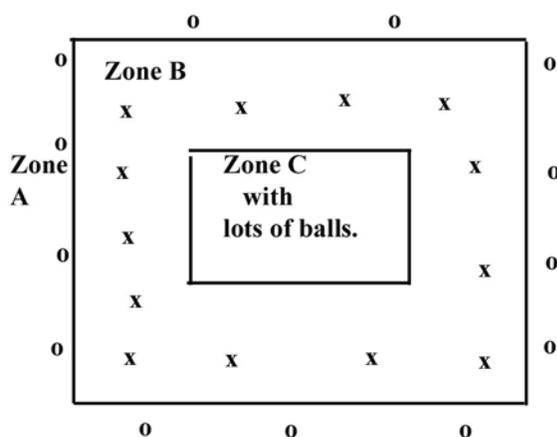
1. Warm up ten minutes.
2. Twenty-minute period with a theme of (i) dedramatisation of contact through the introduction of 'the soule' and (ii) observation of the children's behaviour. The object of the game is to score behind the try line or to prevent the other side from doing that.

Rules:

- Players may pick up, carry, pass or kick the ball from hand in any direction.
- Defence may block or tackle the ball-carrier.
- They may take the ball away from him.
- There are no specific rugby rules, only safety ones –
- No player may be touched above the shoulders.
- No tripping.
- No pulling on jerseys.

A clue may be offered at this point – if you want to go forward, stay on your feet.

3. General technique research for twenty minutes by exploring the children's will and capability to co-operate in teams in a passing game. There is one ball and the ball-carrier may not run with it; he has to pass in any direction to unmarked teammates and the opponents can only intercept or get possession if the ball hits the ground. The team with the longest passing sequence wins. There is no contact and the game progresses from a large area to an increasingly smaller one to make the game more difficult. The game can be punctuated with a series of relays using basic rugby skills such as passing, placing the ball on the ground and picking up on the run etc.
4. Directed game situation for twenty minutes with a theme of dedramatising contact and getting more directional running.



- The 0s must get into zone C by getting through zone B from zone A.
- They score by picking up a ball in zone C and getting back to zone A.
- The Xs can stop them in either direction by holding onto them for two seconds.
- If the defenders succeed in holding on for two seconds, the ball is replaced in zone C.
- The Xs may not move out of zone B.
- Each score gains one point.

Lesson 2.

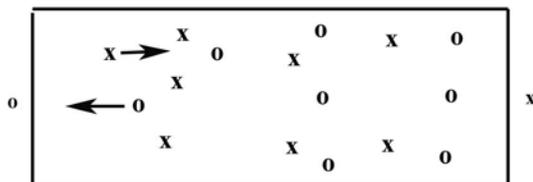
1. Warm up ten minutes.

2. Twenty-minute period with a theme of the concept of mirroring. The aim is to go forward without losing the ball and to score or prevent the opposition from doing so. There is one point for going forward, one point for preventing the ball-carrier going forward, one point for the attacker who loses his mirror, one point for the defender who stays opposite his mirror and one point for scoring. It is important to stress staying on the feet if players want to go forward and when you choose pairs for mirroring, try to have them, as far as possible, with a partner of equal height and weight.



- The Xs must try to score.
- The Os must try to stop them.
- The Xs have a ball each.

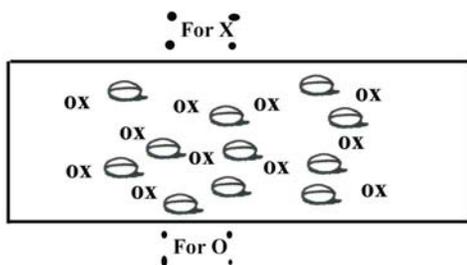
3. General technique research for twenty minutes with a theme of co-operation in a passing game with one ball and two score lines.



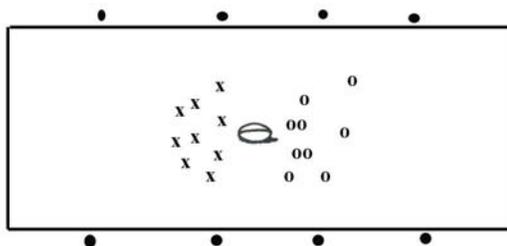
Change 'goalkeepers' when last pass is caught. He is replaced by the person giving the pass.

- Players may pass in any direction.
- A team scores when they get the ball to their receiver behind the try line.
- After a score the receiver is replaced by the person who passed to score.

I followed this game with a series of contact combats with 1 v 1 in pushing, pulling, lifting, Chinese wrestling, reflex games etc. This was then taken into a game to stress the mirror concept.



- The Xs pick up a ball and try to place it in the score zone.
 - The Os try to prevent this.
 - There is one point for a score then the attack and defenders change roles.
4. Directed game situation for twenty minutes with a theme of getting teams of players to come together to go forward.

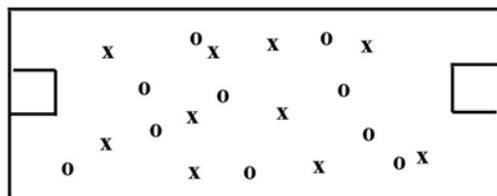


- The ball can be passed by hand around the group in possession.
- The side with the ball must try to work together to push the other group backwards.
- Each cone that is crossed is worth one point for the attack.
- The defenders may also push back and they get one point if they take the ball-carrying side back beyond a cone.
- The ball-carriers score one point for a try.

Lesson 3.

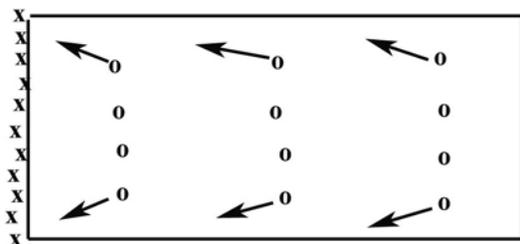
1. Warm up ten minutes.
2. Twenty-minute period with a theme of support linked with (i) the introduction of off-side and (ii) the idea that all attacking players must be behind the ball-carrier and all defenders must be on the other side of the ball. The objective is to go forward without losing the ball, pass, support and score. The defence tries to prevent scores and the mirror concept is stressed throughout. There is one point for going forward, one point for preventing the ball-carrier going forward, one point for supporting players being in position, one point for the attacker who loses his mirror, one point for the defender who is opposite his mirror, one point for taking the ball from the ball-carrier and one point for scoring.

- General technique research for twenty minutes with a theme of co-operation and support through a passing game with the progression of introducing targets to encourage support.



- The last pass to score must be received by the last passer in the square. This can then develop into a game exercise with a ball for each side and the two sides pass (no more than three paces with the ball before each pass), cross over and score. The side that scores first gets the point for scoring quickest.

- Directed game situation for twenty minutes with a theme of support and game organisation.



- The Os defend their zone.
- Once their zone is beaten they play no more, making it a game of, for example, 12 v 4 three times. The attacking team has three attempts then changes roles.
- The attacking players must be encouraged to look for where it is easiest to get through (strength against weakness); the defence must prevent, for as long as possible, the attack from scoring.
- Defenders are not allowed to touch the ball.

Lesson 4.

- Warm up ten minutes.
- Twenty-minute period with a theme of support, organisation and co-operation with the objective of going forward without losing the ball, passing, supporting to score or preventing the other side from doing so. There is one point for going forward, one point for preventing the ball carrier going forward, one point for having support players in place, one point for the attacker who loses his mirror,

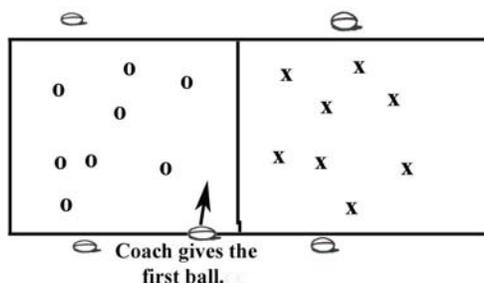
one point for the defender who is opposite his mirror, one point for the player who receives the ball via a pass and one point for scoring.



- The Xs try to score with one ball, then one ball between two, one ball between three etc
 - The Os try to prevent them scoring without touching the ball(s).
3. General technique research with a theme of co-operation. The game now progresses into a game where players may run with the ball and make as many passes as possible in one minute without dropping the ball or having it intercepted. The players now have to decide if it is best to run, find or create space, or to pass the ball and score. The defending side can only intercept passes and must not touch the ball-carrier. The longest sequence is proclaimed the winner.

I followed this game with a handling and running relay.

4. Directed game situation for twenty minutes with a theme of reaction to variable situations.



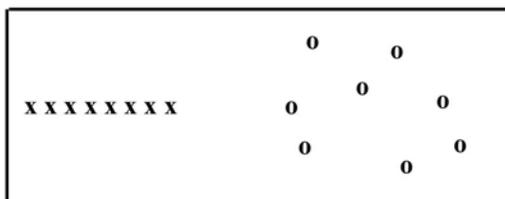
There are two versions of this game and both involve five balls, the first being with the coach.

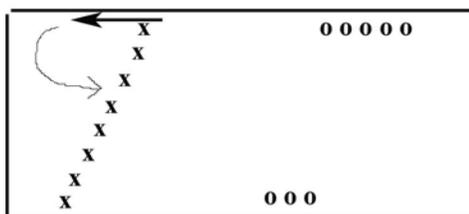
- (a) At each fault/error the team not handling takes over the attacking role and attacks from any of the remaining static balls. This encourages communication and re-organisation from both teams.

(b) The same side plays all five balls after a mistake or a score and tries to re-organise itself faster than the opposition.

Lesson 5.

1. Warm up ten minutes.
2. Twenty-minute period with a theme of playing after ruck and maul, making the ball available and liberating possession. If a player is blocked or tackled and the ball is not playable, the fault means that possession goes to the other side. Players must be reminded that they should be on their feet if they want to play the ball. The mirror concept is still being stressed. There is one point for going forward, one point for preventing the ball-carrier going forward, one point if, from a pass, the receiver goes forward, one point for mirroring, one point if the ball is available after the attacker is blocked or tackled and one point for scoring. Stress staying on the feet, trying to go past the player who passes to you and the concept that the last passer becomes the first support player.
3. General technique research for twenty minutes on the theme of developing co-ordination and co-operation through a game of Australian touch. The side with the ball must have the ball in two hands and try to touch a player on the opposite team with that ball without running when in possession. The aim is to get into position without the ball and it develops making passes, communication, trying to lose a mirror and scoring by touching an opponent with the ball for, say, thirty second spells.
4. Directed game situation for twenty minutes to develop the recognition of play situations.

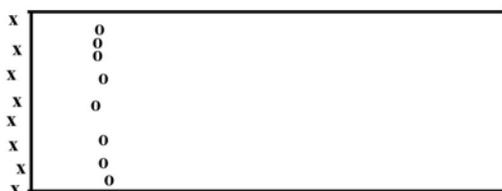




5. The Xs start with their backs to the opposition. On a signal from the coach they turn round, see the situation and play it. This starts from a static situation. Then move on to a mobile start and, when the attack starts to move, the coach gives instructions to the defence on where/how they are to move.

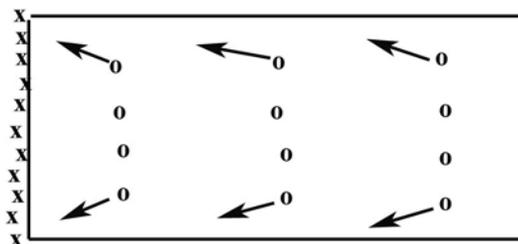
Lesson 6.

1. Warm up ten minutes.
2. Twenty-minute period in a game situation with the three basic rules of rugby. The objective is to go forward without losing the ball, support whilst keeping the ball available and score. The other side tries to stop the score.



3. The Xs must score with one ball each, one ball between two players, one ball between three players etc. The Os must try to prevent them from scoring without touching the ball.
3. General technique research for twenty minutes with the theme of communication and avoiding opponents. The game is touch rugby with and without a ball. The game with a ball is straightforward but when there is no ball, one player is designated to be the ball. When he realises that he is going to be touched he must name another player who then becomes the ball. This second game is inventive and is most instructive in spotting which players perceive and appreciate the game situation. Peripheral vision and communication skills are used throughout.

This would be followed by a Federation control valuation test that appeared earlier.



- The Os defend their zone.
- Once their zone is beaten, they play no more.
- The game is a series of 12 v 4 three times.
- The attack has three attempts to score before roles are reversed.
- The attack must look for where it is easiest to go through (strength v weakness) and the defence must prevent, for as long as possible, the attack from scoring.
- Defenders are not allowed to touch the ball, but are allowed to advance to the limit of their respective zone.