

STAMINA – THE UNWELCOME WORD IN RUGBY TRAINING?

BY

STEVE JOHNSON.

The author played rugby for twenty seven years from the age of eleven. He claims to have been no more than an average player but always loved the game. He lived in Japan from 1976 to 1990 and was involved in coaching school and adult rugby teams during that time, experiences that would take a whole book to write about. He took the RFU Level 2 coaching award in Cambridge in 1991 then passed Level 3 in 1997. He was recruited back to coach a high school team in Japan in April 1997 and has been involved in the school and regional teams since then.

Introduction

Stamina work is something that most players love to hate and finding an effective way to develop stamina – one that the players will accept and do willingly (happily is maybe not the best adjective) - is an important area of the coach's job. When we broached the subject at my own club last year and talked about the need for running, our captain growled, "I did not join the rugby team to do track and field!" Other players nodded and the search for hard-working, yet rugby-based, stamina activities began. The key element is the players' willingness to participate with a positive frame of mind and a willingness to see the task through to the end.

How much do you move in games?

Generally accepted research indicates that the amount of actual playing time has, in recent years, risen to about one third of total game time. So, in an eighty minute game, we should be looking for between twenty five and twenty six minutes of full-time activity, undertaken at top speed and full power. The target, therefore, is to create/build a series of activities in which the players would be active for a certain period of time and the rest/recovery time would be double. For example, a one minute activity would



be followed by a two minute recovery period. Few plays last that long, though, so we mainly focused on a thirty second activity followed by one minute for recovery.

What skills can we include in a stamina-based programme?

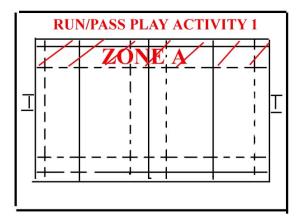
Actually, all skills can be practised in a stamina-based activity, but the key point here is that we are not actually coaching/developing the skill itself – although I don't think one ever stops doing that. We are rather providing a situation in which there is a more than fair chance of success so that the stamina aspect can be fully completed. In a passing activity, for example, we play touch (not tackle) so that the runners can carry on running.

The stamina-related aspects of play we work on are:

- 1) Passing and running play.
- 2) Contact work.
- 3) Defence.

In the contact work we want the players to keep going, so we use contact shields. Whenever we can, we use the arm-free contact shields such as the RadPads advertised in the Technical Journal a couple of years ago. Defence stamina-related work is undertaken with tackle bags and shields. It is the running to get into defensive positions that we are working on rather than the tackle itself – although we do keep an eye on correct technique and if it is not good we will pull the player out after the stamina session is over and go through the weak point again.

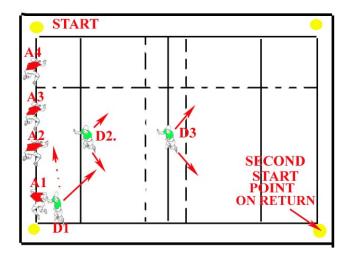
Run/pass play. Activity 1.





Assemble the players in speed groups in fifteen metre - wide zones that go from one goal line to the other. Depending on numbers, this activity can be done in sixes, sevens and, in extremis, eights.

There are four attackers positioned about ten metres from the goal line (one is a scrum half who is about fifteen metres out). The best number of defenders is three. If there are six in a group, have four attackers and two defenders; seven – four and three; eight – five and three. The first defender is a 'flanker', who taps the scrum half when the activity starts and then runs a covering course backwards to pressure the attacking players. The second defender starts on the half-way line and the third defender is on the far twenty-two metre line. The attackers' job is to score without (a) being touched in possession by any of the defenders, (b) throwing forward, or (c) knocking on. Flanker(s) and defenders chase back all the way, trying to defend their line. Failure by the attackers can be greeted with great hilarity by the defenders and the attackers have to either (a) run back to the original goal line and sprint the whole 100 metres, or (b) sprint to the target goal line in preparation to start the next time. This really depends on the ability of your players and only you can be the judge. As a guide, I make the top team run back to the start goal line and the lower-level players don't have to.



<u>Timing:</u> Ball travelling time. Assume that the longest time it will take the ball to get



from start to goal is 30 seconds, start the second and each consecutive run after 90 seconds (60 seconds recovery). That is slow, though, and you should soon see your team going at 20-25 seconds with a 40-50 second recovery time. Each attack group goes out and back, then attackers/defenders change. You can put more than one group in the channel and start them every 15 seconds.

Number of repetitions: You set a number of rotations and one rotation works like this:

(7 player group)

	Attack	Defence	(Note)
1 st run	1,2,3,4	5,6,7	Number of runs in one rotation
2 nd run	5,6,7,1	2,3,4	equals the number of players.
3 rd run	2,3,4,5	6,7,1	
4 th run	6,7,1,2	3,4,5	Another great point about this
5 th run	3,4,5,6	7,1,2	activity is its shortness. This
6 th run	7,1,2,3	4,5,6	set of 7 runs would only take 9
7 th run	4,5,6,7	1,2,3	minutes.

If this type of activity is new, start with just one rotation and, as players' stamina improves, add more rotations. My team usually does 3 sets, which is 21 runs.

Front row variation: For front row forwards, especially heavy props (and maybe even for heavy, less mobile locks), the activity goes from goal line to half way line with a 30 second recovery period. This is not to disparage the front row, but research indicates that in a game the stoppage time for front forwards is about 30-45 seconds. So a shorter run and shorter recovery period is appropriate. Of course, the number of rotations is double that of your long distance group.

Comment:

This is **hard** but it is very enjoyable, I promise! I maintain that this activity is real rugby, and it is the players' chance to **play** the game. I have never had a group that has been unhappy with this stamina activity.

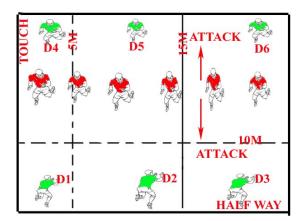
Run/pass play stamina activity 2.

6 v 3 and 3

The playing area is 30m wide and 22m long. This activity is good for stamina and also gives players a lot of opportunity to work on their passing, catching and angles of



running in short bursts. As shown in the diagram, 6 attackers alternately attack defenders 1, 2, and 3 then 4, 5 and 6.



They attack for one minute. Defenders can come forward to pressure the attackers, but when the attack on their goal line is over, they must retire to the goal line until the next wave of attack comes to them. After 60 seconds, teams have 10 seconds to take up new attack/defence positions and the whistle goes for the next attack to start.

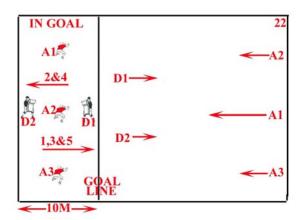
<u>Number of repetitions:</u> I suggest 5 times per team for the first session and see how they go. This can be increased as appropriate. My team usually asks me to set it for about 10 runs per team (20 minutes in total), but we have done 15 runs each; only you can decide what is the correct load.

<u>Competitive element</u>: Losing team has to piggy back winning team to the goal line, but the coach can make up anything.



Contact play stamina activities.

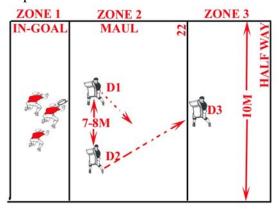
Activity 1: 3 v 2.



3 attacking players in the first group start in the in-goal area. One shield-holding defender (best shield is the arms-free type) is on the goal line (D1), another (D2) is 10 metres into the in-goal area. Attacker 1 hits the shield (D1) on the goal line, 2 calls the ruck ball he wants and cleans out the shield. 3 takes the ball and returns to D2 where he hits. 1 calls the ruck ball, 2 picks and goes back to D1. After 5 reps, they run to the 22m line. D1 and D2 prepare to defend the goal line, the ball-carrying attacker takes a quick penalty and the attackers try to score using any method they can (pass play/maul, etc.). The activity should take 30-35 seconds and Group 2 starts immediately afterwards. Group 1 changes attackers and defenders, and as soon as Group 2 has finished, they go. With 5 players there are 5 rotations for one set (attack 123 then 451, 234, 512, 345) – about 10 minutes for one set of 2 groups. The coach can decide the number of sets.

Activity 2: 3 v 3.

3 attackers alternately ruck out shield-holding D1 and D2 for 20 seconds. In goal is a good point to start.



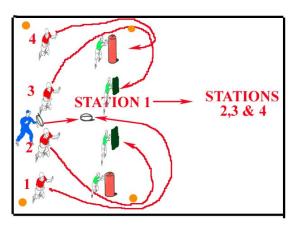


On the 20 second whistle, the 'free' defender runs into a deeper defensive position and the attackers maul him to the 22m line. At the same time, the other defender drops his shield and runs to the 22m line where he joins the 3rd defender. When the attackers reach the 22m line, they roll off the shield and play a 3 v 2 to score on the half way line. When they reach the half way line, they jog back to the goal line and prepare for the next run when attack and defence roles are changed.

If you make 3 groups of 6 they will be pretty busy. We like this as one of our warm up activities and we do about 5 rotations.

Defence-based stamina activities.

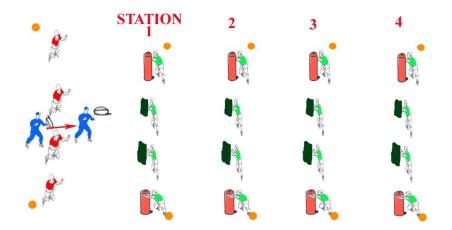
Activity 1: Continuous "through the gate" tackles.



As shown in the diagram, there are 4 defenders. There are 4 people at each station and the number of tackles you can perform will depend on the number of players and tackle bags available. The coach is the opposition scrum half.

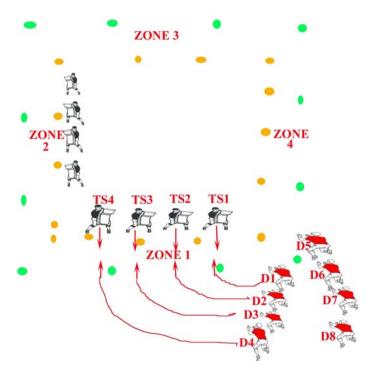
On a dummy pass from the coach, the players break to the cones, then go as quickly as possible back to station 1. The lead defender, T1 (tackler 1), goes through 'the gate' (round the marker) and dives on the ball. T2 and T3 clean out the 2 shield holders. T4 is the next defence leader and he calls T1 into position. When the coach does a dummy pass, T1 and T4 hit the tackle bags. All 4 then run back to the next station and repeat, continuing until station 4.





Rotations: Depends greatly on numbers. If you have 20 players, you can rotate so that the players go from tackle to holding the equipment at station 4, then 3, 2, and 1 before becoming tacklers again. From a stamina point of view, 32 players is perfect. With this number, 16 tacklers and 16 equipment holders go for a number of times or for a set time, but how often can we arrange that? We have 52 players and we can usually put 24 on this activity (3 stations) and 24 on activity 2 (following drill).

Defence Activity 2.





Use cones to make an inner and outer square. The inner square should be wide enough for 4 shield holders to take tackles and go back in safety (about 12 m?). The outer square should be about 1.5 metres wider. 4 shield holders are in zone 1 and another 4 shield holders are in zone 2. On the signal, D1 – 4 run into zone 1 and line up in front of the shield holders. On the signal, they advance and hit the shields in a medium high tackle (chest hit, with one hand lifting the leg). Drive for 1-2 seconds, release and quickly run into zone 2, where the same activity is performed against shield holders 5-8. As soon as tackle shield holders 1-4 have been released, they run across the area to the inside of zone 3. When tackle shield holders 5-8 are released, they run across to zone 4, and so on.

Points awarded: When the tackler drives the tackle shield holder back across the inner line, he gets a point. If the tackle shield holder drives the tackler back across the outer line, he gets a point. This competitive aspect raises the adrenaline levels quite significantly (!) and you will need a couple of referees on this to avoid injuries. We do this for 10 minutes per team and, typically, the scores are in the region of 180-178. Losing team has to piggy-back the winners to the goal line.

If we have 2 injured players who cannot tackle but can run, they act as the half backs (this is pretty hard too) and on the pass the tacklers break. If there are no passers, then the coach can be in the middle and when he sees that all 4 tacklers have arrived, he can call "break" or "up", or whatever your team signal may be.

There you have 6 stamina based activities that are fun, yet potentially hard work. I suppose the ultimate stamina activity is one where the players don't think they are doing stamina work at all and I believe that these activities come pretty close to achieving that. Enjoy getting the players fitter!