

## **THE CENTRES: WHAT DO YOU EXPECT FOR EACH POSITION AND HOW DO YOU SELECT?**

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### **Introduction.**

The ‘science’ of team or player selection is not an exact one. Merely to discuss the merits and selection of two players in isolation, in this case the mini-team of numbers 12 and 13, belies the need for players to fit into a balanced team in which individuals and units alike, through necessity, must complement each other in the way that they play. For the purposes of this paper, however, the focus must be weighted strongly towards a general assessment of what we might reasonably expect of a player in each of those positions.

At the very highest level of the game, especially during the World Cup, there have been some interesting selections made with the England team, not least the reinstatement of Mike Catt and the high-profile shift of Jason Robinson to a centre role. Whether these have been successful or not is open to debate, but they do highlight the selection dilemmas that accompany the decision-making processes in the centre positions.

### **Common Ground.**

There is a number of factors which should be common to all players in any team and players are selected on the premise that they demonstrate these abilities better than others. These factors are:

- Having a level of fitness that allows them to complete their basic tasks throughout the period of game (“a lack of fitness makes cowards of all players”, Smith, L; 2003).
- The ability to tackle effectively off either shoulder, using a range of techniques to suit the situation.
- The ability to retain the ball in a tackle, allowing team-mates to continue an attack.
- The ability to make and catch a pass to suit the situation.
- The motivation to step in and try to make amends for another player’s mistake(s).
- To be able to do the above *under pressure* in a competitive game.
- The ability to read the game as it evolves and then to react appropriately.

Players at the very highest level will display these attributes and will have relatively fewer weaknesses than players who have not been selected. Indeed, many current international three-quarters are becoming interchangeable; players are moving towards what Greenwood (2004) describes as the “complete back”.

### **The Game Plan.**

It has already been stated that selections should be made as part of the overall game plan. If the attacking strategy is to play a ‘wide’, expansive game it may be advisable to have an inside centre (IC) with the ability to make an accurate, well-timed pass to an outside centre (OC) who is a quick and agile runner, using the space in those wide channels to his (and his wingers’) advantage. Teams playing a ‘narrow’ game, attempting to punch holes in a defence, will seek to have big, powerful runners who control contact on their own terms and can either break tackles or offload skilfully to supporting players.

### **The Centres: Specific Requirements.**

Whilst some centre pairings may contain players with similar traits, making the players almost interchangeable (think of de Glanville & Guscott; Catt & Greenwood), there are certain characteristics that may be identified as specific to each position.

Both players need to have good understanding of how to play the game – the principles of both attack and defence.

- In attack, they both need the vision to see where the attack should be focused, such as a weakness in their opposition’s defence or an opportunity to outflank, bringing the winger into play.
- In defence, they require the ability to make head-on (offensive) tackles against players who are often larger than themselves, but they also require defensive (side) tackles as more agile opponents attack the gaps.

There is, however, a need to evaluate the needs of the position based upon general team strategies and situations that arise through the natural progression of a game. In turn, this will allow for the most appropriate selection to be made.

### **The Inside Centre.**

- Tends to be a bigger and stronger player than the OC.
- Should have quick acceleration to make the best use of what is usually limited space.
- Is generally a more physical player, who quickly gets play moving forward towards the gain line.
- Needs the ability to worry and commit defenders (often two opponents) to the tackle.

- Can read play as it unfolds in front of him and sees the options both inside and outside.
- He will be a brave, strong tackler who is prepared to stop his opposite number or any number of supporting forwards involved in the attack (Scott Gibbs, for example). Statistics show that IC can make almost twice as many tackles as the OC (Hardy, 1997) and the IC tends to lead the defensive pattern, especially off set-piece play. He needs, therefore, the skills to play his own game *and* lead his colleagues at the same time.
- He must be a good communicator – this player acts as the link between all in the 9/10/12 ‘pod’ *and* the 12/13/winger ‘pod’. Indeed, the OC may often rely significantly on the IC for knowledge of what is going on.

At lower levels of the game, the IC is often seen as a ‘battering ram’ who is merely there to tie up defenders. However, a good defence will soon spot a one-dimensional player and capitalise on that. That said, both players need the skills in tight situations to hold up the ball, wait for support and off-load or ensure that the ball is retained effectively.

### The Outside Centre.

- Tends to be a faster player than the IC with more opportunity to beat an opponent 1v1.
- Often a less physically imposing player than the IC.
- Probably more agile to get into space and use it effectively.
- He is more likely to have better handing skills, especially regarding necessary accuracy over varied distances to hit a winger whilst attempting to make the best use of the space available.

### Kicking.

The ability to execute a range of kicks, both in attack and defence, has become an increasingly important factor in selection. An IC who complements the fly-half (e.g. left/right footed pairing) is becoming more crucial as game strategies develop. Important factors are:

- The ability to clear the ball under pressure in defence, especially the IC.
- The cross-field kick or wiper in attack.
- A long punt when playing for territorial advantage.
- The grubber or chip-kick to put themselves or a runner through into space and/or behind a flat defence.

### Selection.

With these general characteristics noted, the coach can then assess the players available and make a more scientific judgment of who will best suit which position. But getting the

balance right is by no means simple. The unit within a team has to gel together and other factors, in addition to the ones listed above, need to be considered.

- Do the players get on and do they have interpersonal skills?
- Experience.
- Availability.
- Fitness/injury.
- Attitude to training.

It is also important to give careful consideration to two other aspects – substitutions and the future. The coach has to take great care in the selection of replacements. He must select either a replacement who can play in either of the positions or select players to start the game who can be moved, if required, to a different position, thus reducing the effects on the ‘balance’ of the team.

The question of ‘the future’ should always be in the mind of the coach. He must always be planning for the inevitable factors of injury, retirement and non-availability. Thus a policy of player development and gradual integration from the reserves, the second team, colts and juniors is required to ensure that, when the time arrives, a player coming into the side has the experience and skills necessary to fulfil the roles and ensure an effective back division.

### References.

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