

ADVICE FOR THE ASPIRING FLY-HALF BY STUART BARNES.

Stuart Barnes broadcasts for SkySports and writes for the Sunday Times. He played fly-half for Newport, Bristol and Bath and won ten England caps and a place on the 1993 Lions tour to New Zealand. He was part of teams that won five league titles and eight cups, one with Bristol and the rest with Bath.

Let us be totally hypothetical about this one; how to make the perfect fly-half. Where are we going to start? The first answer – and it may be in the negative but it is important – is not in the gymnasium.

The temptations to bench-press the weight of two bull elephants in the manner of Jonny Wilkinson in his pomp will be great. There is something wondrous about a little ten thumping runaway forwards back onto their bottoms. Certainly it became a major part of the Englishman's game, but he has a one in a million attitude towards the physical stuff. He goes above and beyond the call of duty.

Of course you will need sufficient levels of muscular power just to play the game, and the higher the standard the more strength required. But take a look at a video of Andrew Mehrtens of New Zealand or Australia's Stephen Larkham. You can all reach that physical level without living in a gym.

Rugby Union is obviously about strength but some positions rely more on mental strength and dexterity than physical prowess. Fly-half is perhaps the prime position for these requirements. The crucial word in your fly half lexicon is *understanding*; you must, first of all, understand the game. You have to understand the reasons why you kick, pass and run, the reasons why you scream at your scrum-half to deliver quick ball, slow ball or no ball. You have to be a general and have to be prepared to bully those who are usually much bigger. Boss the game!

Manage the game. You will not be able to do that until you have immersed yourself in the game. Fly-half is more than a drop-kicking, goal-kicking position; it should be a seminal cog in the wheel of the team. Good teams have good tens and good tens are controllers of a game. The brain has to be thinking ahead of those around you, especially opponents.

Some fly-halves find it easier than others. Some are fortunate to be born with slightly quicker wits and speed of thought. In the press, such players are generally regarded as instinctive. The great news is that you can become instinctive; few are born to this

particular manor. What made Wilkinson the player he became was the hard work he put into his basic thinking and understanding of the game and then, the practice of the skills that enabled him to utilise the knowledge.

Take passing - perhaps even more important than punting if you want to play expansive rugby. Stephen Larkham looks the most natural passer in the world and you have all heard or read of Charlie Hodgson's natural passing skills. Well, the great news is that it is all nonsense. I am yet to see a baby come out of the womb and throw a twenty metre cut-out pass off either hand.

It is a prime skill on which to work. If a fly-half is not equally adept off either hand, a defence can work out a likely passing game. The best are fluent off left *and* right. Brian Ashton, now head of the Academy system, used to work with me at Bath and he nurtured this less than instinctive skill in me. Have a go at what he used to get us to do. Your scrum half fires out a pass to you while a friend stands two paces from you. As soon as you touch the ball, he steps towards you and forces you to pass under pressure. Keep doing this drill until you can accurately pass to your centre in a split second.

Then add two attacking mates but also two defenders. The defenders will stand motionless but your offensive colleagues will move late off their lines. One will run into a defender, the other into space. You have to learn to see the space and deliver the right pass. The quicker you see the killer pass, the less time a defender has to react as your runner sails gloriously through the gap. When you develop speed of mind alongside a trained speed of hand, you have a ten that can cause problems.

David Skrela is worth a brief mention here. The Stade Francais fly half is chunky, to put it mildly. He does not dwell in the gym yet he is a key member of one of Europe's best clubs. Why? Because of his speed of mind and technical ability to execute the right pass.

Passing is a tool of the trade without which you will not make the grade. The key physical component to go with the pass is acceleration. Once you have mastered the passing skills, you will find yourself standing flatter and flatter when you want to keep the ball and attack through the middle. Defences love an extra second to readjust. You can deprive them of that second when you are on the gain line. It will take months or years of drills with your friends standing almost in your face as you catch and pass accurately, but it will be worth it.

Add pace off the mark and you make opponents' lives even more hellish – wonderful. Let them drift onto the rapid centre that threatens on the gain line. The seven or opposing team drifts and – bang!– you spurt through the gap. Not everyone is naturally quick, but you can work on your speed. Wilkinson is not a sprinter but he maximised his speed and watched the training drills of Jason Robinson to develop clever footwork to put defenders off balance. Even if you do not make it clean through the gap, if you can catch them off balance and get half way through a gap, your support runners should be through.

Then there is the other side of the ten's game, the boot. Fly halves that only pass or only kick are of limited use. The opposition knows too easily how to read you. Spend time kicking the ball and do not concentrate on just the one foot; if exclusively right footed, a flanker that knows his business will push you onto your left side and the spectators will jeer as you slice your kick, or groan as it is feebly kicked into the charging arms of that flanker. Be able to kick off both sides. It is vital. It is not much fun, working on that bad leg that sends the ball limping into touch but nurture it, it will strengthen with a little care and attention. Once you are striking the ball well, ask a team mate if he will put some pressure on you and charge. In a match you have little time, even when you are perfectly positioned to kick.

Back to understanding; think where you stand. It is easy to give yourself time to clear your lines but if you stand safely behind your pack, the opposition might not get to you but they sure as heck know you are not going to threaten with your back line. Fine if the wind and rain is lashing and you want territory, not so good if you have Brian O' Driscoll waiting to take advantage from deep. **Your job is to keep the enemy thinking.**

That is why I will finish as I started. Yes, you must be a competent tackler at least. That too is a matter of technique. Physique and strength are important but they are of lesser importance for a ten than maybe any other position. You need a quick mind and the instinctive ability to read a game, either through hand or boot, not to mention some speed over ten metres. Develop these aspects of the game and tell those forwards when you want fast or slow ball; to borrow from George Orwell, 'fast ball good, slow ball bad' when it comes to using your backs.

Don't be shy, be the boss, but remember, no matter how good people say you are, a few more passing drills and a few more hours watching Mehrtens and Larkham play the game will make you better. Good luck, but do cut the time in the gym and get out on that practice pitch.