

TACTICAL DECISION-MAKING

By

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Tactical decision-making is a critical component of a successful winning team. Understanding the areas and methods of attack and defence required to win, and then applying these within a pressurised environment, are the essential elements. The eventual outcome will also of course be influenced by the individual player's physical development and their ability to perform the required technical skills to implement the tactical approach.

At the very top level of the game a significant technical or physical advantage does not usually exist, nor indeed sometimes at lower levels where teams can be often evenly matched. In these circumstances it will be the tactical decision-making of the teams and the players within that dictate outcome.

So what are the influences on the tactical decision-making process?

With American gridiron football, in contrast to rugby union, most of the process has been removed from players and rests with the coach. The quarterback may well have some influence on the range of tactical approach but the options available are most often set before the game and transferred onto the field of play to be used as and when required. In rugby union the decision-making process is vastly different; the game is more robust and requires instant decisions, more decisions and much greater flexibility and speed of thought. During a rugby union match the game can change from attack to defence in a moment. Possession of the ball is continually challenged and territory can move rapidly from attacking zone to defensive zone.

In preparation for a rugby union match, players and coaches will assess opposition strengths and weaknesses and this will dictate much of the strategic decision-making for the game. Teams understanding their own strengths, weaknesses and limitations will also affect their tactical approach from week to week. However, each team will also enter the season with a characteristic style or type of general tactical approach or pattern of play, influenced by the players' and coaches' philosophy and perceived abilities of the squad of players. This club 'mind set' manifests itself through descriptive generalisations such as 'forward orientated team', 'running team', 'attacking/defensive minded team' etc.

This 'mind set' of the team is further developed through the form and type of technical development, both in individual and unit development, within the training content. The common core amongst all these varieties of 'styles of play' is the end goal, **to win, to be successful**. Competitive teams simply do not prepare to entertain. The game strategy approach teams choose to play may well be entertaining and exciting, but the desired

outcome is the same as a team that adopts a restrictive, outwardly negative approach. That goal is *to win*.

The simple objective of any team approach is to out-score the opposition, hence it is important when formulating a tactical decision-making approach to know how scores occur.

So where do most scores originate from, how are they created, what is the most common lead up to try scoring ?

The tables below show analysis taken from Rugby World Cup 2003 (RWC) European Rugby Cup 2004/05 (ERC) and 6 Nations 2004/05 (6N).

TABLE 1	Origin of Tries		
	RWC 2003	6 N 2004/05	ERC 2004
Areas of Origin			
Within 22 metre line	44%	30%	44%
Between 22 and 10 metre line	23%	30%	26%
Between 10 metres and halfway	10%	12%	9%
In scoring teams own half	23%	28%	21%
	100%	100%	100%
Total in Attacking Half	77%	72%	79%
TOTAL TRIES	332	71	171

Table 1 – Shows that in all 3 tournaments over 72% of tries originated from within the attacking half. This is no great surprise but it could impact on how teams view their decision making in their own half; what are they trying to achieve and is the whole team aware of the objective?

TABLE 2	Frequency of Tries		
No. of PHASES	RWC 2003	6 Nations 2005	ERC 2004
None	109	31	48
1	90	15	49
2	49	6	25
3	28 (83%)	7 (83%)	18 (83%)
4	23	6	8
5	10	1	8
6 - 13	13	5	15
TOTAL TRIES	332	71	171
The table shows that 83% of tries were preceded by 3 or fewer second phases			

Table 2 - Shows the number of phases that preceded all tries scored in the 3 tournaments. The results here may more surprising with 83% of all tries scored resulting from 3 phases of play or less. The mantra of achieving high continuity and ‘keeping the ball alive’ on first viewing does not align itself completely to the overall objective of winning the game.

TABLE 3	Frequency of Tries		
No. of PASSES	RWC 2003	6 Nations 2005	ERC 2004
None	62	10	39
1	28	6	13
2	36	10	23
3	50 (51%)	10 (52%)	23 (57%)
4	34	7	18
5	30	6	13
6	28	5	5
7	11	4	14
8	13	0	5
9	9	2	3
10	7	1	5
11 – 25	24	10	10
TOTAL TRIES	332	71	171
The table shows that just over 50 +% of tries were preceded by 3 or fewer passes			

Table 3 - shows the number of passes complete prior to tries being scored. Again the results are consistent across all tournaments with 50% + of all tries developing from 3 or fewer passes.

Statistics can, of course, be misleading and certainly within the RWC and ERC there was a wide range of ability among teams with some match scores over 100 points. However, there is a clear consistency within all the 3 tables and all 3 tournaments, the 2 potential maverick tournaments having their statistical analysis reinforced by the 6N tournament which had a much closer balance of ability within the competing teams.

Aligning these analysis figures to the development of a philosophy for tactical decision-making would, on first viewing, lead to teams being very restrictive in ambition within the defensive half and limited to strike move options and/or 2 or 3 phase play in the attacking half. However, the teams that won these tournaments could all be described as 'expansive' in their approach and very attack efficient. Examples are Wales (6N), Toulouse (ERC) and England, contrary to the analysis figures, (RWC). England were not particularly expansive *during* the tournament but they were expansive leading into the tournament, which may provide important guidance into the interpretation of the statistics.

During another recent high level event, the Tri Nations series (statistics not available to date), New Zealand won through to be crowned champions. It is well acknowledged that New Zealand have adopted a very positive attack-minded approach to their performance. However, they were defeated by South Africa who had an aggressive defence and Australia, with an attack-minded, high continuity approach, lost all their matches. Turnovers and counter-attacks accounted for most of the scoring in this tournament, Bryan Habana scoring 2 tries from turnovers for South Africa from 70m after Australia had completed 10+ phases of play. New Zealand noticeably adjusted their tactical decision-making in the final match against Australia. In the defensive half, acquisition of territory became a higher priority and they took the kicking option much earlier in their phase play than in previous matches. Equally, in the attacking half, preservation of territory took a higher priority, again using a variety of kicking options after 5 or 6 phases.

In summary of this statistical information, the common theme from all tournaments is that the most *efficient* attack minded teams have won. All teams possessed players who could convert turnover ball from all areas of the field into tries and were capable of scoring from strike moves from first phase and from within the attacking zone. The ability to achieve this has been developed over a long period of time and this ability is a critical factor in the pursuit of success. However, this ability within these winning teams, although existing and contributing to their success, is not the only common component. Control of the attack-minded approach has been an important factor in their success. The ability to secure and preserve territory and recognition of the need for caution has been balanced successfully within all these winning teams with their highly developed attacking ability.

Winning rugby is not achieved by simply controlling the territory or maintaining a high level of possession and continuity or strong aggressive defence. It is achieved by the efficient use of the possession received, strong aggressive defence, having a clear tactical

decision-making strategy applied by all players within the team and understanding the necessary requirements when playing in the different areas of the field of play. The required level of tactical decision-making to be successful can only be achieved by going to the edge of the decision-making process, visiting the high risk areas on a regular basis and refining the decision-making and thought processes accordingly. Only so much can be achieved on the training park; it can only be within actual match action that tactical decision-making can be fully developed and refined.

This leads on to other factors affecting the overall development of tactical decision-making - political and financial pressures. Across the world, rugby administration is structured in different ways, placing each club, each development playing level, each coach and director of the rugby development, into different and varied areas of concern and objectives. To fully develop tactical decision-making within a team, there is a high degree of risk involved in the process. This means that losses will occur on route and the club and coach will come under pressure. It requires, therefore, clear focus on objectives and a fair degree of courage and bravery from the coaching and development staff. In England, this simply manifests itself in the promotion/relegation issue that is current within the Premiership League. This may well be another issue entirely, but it is still an issue that directly affects the development of tactical decision-making amongst the clubs involved and could severely hinder the long-term development of the national team.