

## **THE VALUE OF 7s FOR THE 15s GAME AND PLAYER DEVELOPMENT**

**By  
Mike Friday, National 7s Coach.**

*The author played for Wasps in two periods, 1990-1993 and 1997- 2002, with a spell between at Blackheath. He made his debut for Wasps 1<sup>st</sup> XV in 1991, made an England 7s debut in 1996 and captained England at the 1998 Commonwealth Games and the 2001 World Cup.*

*He retired from playing 7s after the World Cup but made a comeback as a coach/player, assisting Joe Lydon; he played in the first five legs of the 2001/02 series. After the 2003/04 series he took over as Head Coach for the Bordeaux and London events.*

In the past, even now perhaps, there has long been a number of doubters as to the benefits of the sevens game because it was seen as a completely different game from fifteens. However, the cries that sevens was a jolly for the lads, or even a holiday, are long gone.

England have recognised the importance that sevens rugby can play in a player's development as they progress along their pathways of improvement and advancement. The international sevens programme has now been running seriously for some four years and has been an integral part of a number of current internationals' elite pathway, most notably from this season's internationals Josh Lewsey, James Simpson Daniel and Jamie Noon, who were all part of the 2002 winning Hong Kong 7s team. We are also seeing the next crop making their name internationally with Pat Sanderson, Peter Richards, Ugo Monye, Mathew Tait, Phil Dowson and Magnus Lund - all part of the 7s programme over the last twenty four months and now travelling with the Churchill squad this summer.

The obvious question relates to why sevens has played a part in these players' development. The answer, for me, is simple; there are fewer players on the pitch, which means there is absolutely nowhere to hide. There are certain organisational differences between sevens and fifteens, but the sevens game is based around rugby players who can execute their basics to a very high standard whilst simplifying the technical restarts of the game (i.e. scrum and lineout). If a player can't execute the basics he will be found out. Every player is crucial at all times and one mistake normally costs your team a try; produce three mistakes and you normally lose the game at the highest level!

Therefore, if a player's basics become competent and disciplined at sevens, that player should have every chance of repeating this in the fifteens games he plays. A

player in sevens will have the ball in hand far more, make more decisions defensively and attack on far more occasions than he would ever do it a fifteens game. It is very easy to go missing in a fifteens game with the pundits saying something along the lines of, “He did alright, didn’t do a lot wrong.” The reality, however, is more likely to be that he probably touched the ball four or five times, made a couple of decisions and had a few tackles to make. In the modern professional game, England needs players who are comfortable on the ball and understand what is required of them when they are off the ball. They need to be clinical in the tackle and physical and comfortable when defending space. Sevens, have no doubt, is one major environment where these attributes can be developed, improved and perfected.

When I talk about basics I mean the following.

- Passing is the key to rugby. All players need to be able to execute *all* types of passes accurately and quickly and understand how and when the specific pass is required. Sevens will test a player’s technique, variation and ability to take the early catch.
- Running lines both on and off the ball need to be clear. They need to know how to manipulate space, create space and preserve space for themselves and team mates. The common mistake by the uneducated is to play the game thinking they have all this space in which to run across, without understanding what they are trying to achieve. Spatial awareness becomes second nature if a player is to be successful.
- Contact time become very important, as getting isolated becomes so easy on the pitch. Sevens in the professional era has become a very physical affair with ball management being crucial. Techniques, both in terms of when and how to take contact and support your team mate in contact, need to be clinically precise. These skills and reading of situations will be tested and players need to understand what technique is appropriate for which situation and then each member of the team must be able to execute precisely.
- Defensively, players are also challenged in many ways. Players need to be able to technically execute appropriate tackles individually and still be disciplined to work as a unit. Further to this, it educates players to become comfortable when they are defending in wide, open spaces - which means they have to understand positioning, when and how to buy time for the team and when the time is right to take the space. The cruel reality in sevens is that a missed tackle will be a try for the opposition and it will be there for all to see!
- Fitness and work rate will be tested to the maximum as will the ability to think clearly when tiredness and fatigue become paramount.

Decision-making underpins all of the above basics. What is clear is that the importance of execution and understanding is magnified with only seven of you on the pitch. The players have more opportunities to make good decisions than they

would in a fifteens game, be it at contact time, in defence, where and how to attack, what pass to execute, whether you should attack the space or whether you should pass and support, running lines on and off the ball and communication. It encourages rugby players to play with their heads up and to play what they see; also, (dare I say it?) it encourages them to think!

The sevens game also provides the player with an environment in which to test his mental toughness and resolve, both when playing a game and also *off* the pitch. A player needs to be able to ‘switch on and off’ mentally between games. The whole set-up is different from the 15s game. In 7s, a player will play at least three games in a day and they must all be mentally trained to cope with this unique environment. This provides a good education for players to train and improve their concentration and mental skills.

At England 7s level the differing environments around the world pose an interesting learning curve for players, as they must enter packed stadiums where they will receive different receptions. Some of these receptions are friendly and some hostile, but all of them are electric and intense. The players experience a challenging environment with nowhere to hide and they are expected to execute their basic skills with clear understanding and accuracy.

After all, isn't this is what is expected if they want to be a full international?