

## THE NUMBERS GAME BY ANDY DIXON.

*Andy Dixon is a Level 3 Coach, Coach Tutor and Tutor Trainer based in the North East of England. He is also a Senior Coach in Rugby League, an External Verifier for 1<sup>st</sup>4Sport, the RFU's awarding body for coaching awards, and is working towards becoming an RFU Referee Coach. In April 2006 he wrote an article on 'Educating Referees' and on July 18<sup>th</sup> one on the use of kicking in the game.*

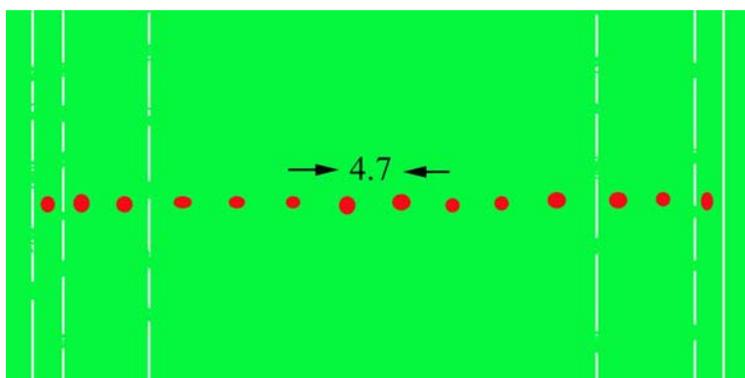
*The main points in this article were presented to the Northern Referees Federation, suggesting to the referees how the game is played to allow them better to predict how play might develop in certain situations.*

Sometimes we can forget very basic principles, not only in terms of rugby but also in terms of the basic mathematics of the game. Coaches are always trying to get their players to “play what they see in front of them”, particularly when they encounter (or preferably manufacture) an imbalance; big against small, strong against weak, fast against slow, two against one, five against three etc. Amongst all these different options, the 2v1 situation, in itself a basic mathematical situation, is probably the one we are looking for the most but is this not, perhaps, because we no longer have the ability to play 1v1 with any confidence or ability?

If we extend the maths from player numbers to width on the field we can look at both defence and attack in terms of metres of pitch and how we can defend or attack through these channels. The following is pure maths and the actual rugby situations probably do not occur all that often, but the figures may perhaps make us think a little more about our defensive and attacking patterns.

Figure 1 below shows a basic open play situation with 14 players spread across the pitch with a full back positioned behind this line which, on a full sized pitch of 70m wide, would give fifteen equal spaces of 4.7 metres wide.

**Figure 1 – Open play**



It is accepted that these spaces might vary closer to where the ball is, especially by the defence using ‘guards’ and ‘body guards’, but let’s keep this simple and equally relevant to the attack as well as the defence.

Thinking defence, can we defend these 4.7m gaps? In general, I think we would all agree that we could probably do this irrespective of what defensive pattern we might use, whether it be man-to-man, one out, drift, umbrella or any combination of these. This is the basic ‘flat defence’ cloned from Rugby League many years ago and still being used quite successfully at all levels of our code. Thinking attack, can we penetrate these gaps? Again, if a player hits the centre of these gaps at pace and receives the ball just at the time he hits the gap, then it is unlikely that the defenders on either side can move the 2.3m sideways to make the tackle. We do see this on rare occasions when timing, speed and angle are perfect and when we do, it is always a great play that literally ‘bursts’ the defence and is normally achieved by bringing in a strike attacker from depth, who hits the space whilst his team mates keeps the defenders on either side committed. Invariably, though, this player is picked up by shuffling the defence or committing an equivalent strike defender to plug the gap and, in general, the flat defence with only 5m spaces will hold up. A secondary question for the attack, however, should be, “Can I pass the ball five metres?” then another question ought to follow, “Can I do this off both hands?” This is perhaps not too important where only 5m spaces are concerned, but bear this in mind for later.

Figure 2 below shows the pitch situation at a full lineout with ten players (the pack, scrum half and wing) within one 15m line, four players spread across the remaining pitch and a full back positioned behind this line. Again, on a full sized pitch of 70m wide, this would give five equal spaces of 11 metres wide.

**Figure 2 – Full lineout**



It is accepted here that the space close to the lineout can be quickly plugged, allowing the defensive drift and reducing the size of these spaces - but again, let's keep this simple.

Thinking defence, can we now defend these 11m gaps? This is a bit more of a problem now, I think we would all agree. Even if we can keep these gaps from getting bigger by not drifting too far, dog-legging or losing shape up the field, all these 11m gaps are still difficult to defend. Thinking attack, can we penetrate these gaps? Again, using basic principles, if a player hits the centre of one of these gaps, even at less than full pace and maybe not even with exact timing, it is unlikely that the defenders either side can move the 5.5m sideways to make the tackle. As shown above, we sometimes see the line being burst at the 5m gaps but do we often see the line being burst with these 11m gaps and directly from lineouts? The answer is, strangely, "No", and it probably only happens as frequently as we see the line penetrated when it has only 5m gaps.

I return again to basic maths and the sort of questions that players and coaches might ask of themselves. "We sometimes get through 5 metre wide gaps, shouldn't we get through gaps which are twice as wide?" or, "If we get through a 5 metre wide gap in defence four times in a game, shouldn't we get through an 11 metre wide gap in defence eight or nine times?"

So why doesn't the maths stack up? Maybe it's because the maths is simple but the rugby is not, as we seem to be forever looking for ways in which to complicate such a basic mathematical process. Let's have a look at a few examples.

From the full lineout there is quick ball off the top and out to the backs, who are coming at pace. Two passes get the ball to the outside centre within six to seven seconds if the passes are quick and accurate. This takes the ball over thirty metres from the defensive back row. From there, we have 2v2 where we can look at bringing in a strike attacker (fullback or blindside wing) or even look at trying to go 1v1 against the opposite number - remember 1v1? Sadly, we don't seem to have too much confidence with these man-on-man situations, probably because we don't allocate any time to practise them and our players are wary of even attempting them, believing the odds are stacked against them.

Another simple option at the lineout is to catch and drive, suck in the opposition forwards or at least keep them 'honest' and close, and then get quick ball out to the backs with the same man-on-man opportunities out wide. If the opposition forwards do not hold the drive, a quick call can change the play to a forward attack which, in turn, may even draw the opposition backs over, making the spaces even greater than 11 metres and the score out wide should be even easier if the forward drive should stall and the ball is released quickly enough.

This was used by the All Blacks with great success in Autumn 2005 because of their skill levels, the ability to pass off either hand over ten metres and their confidence in the one-on-one situation. Complications that affect this simple, mathematical play in our own game include:

- The seeming necessity for some players (coaches) to include at least one phase of contact from the lineout, which
  - dramatically slows down quick play (“time is width”),
  - destroys the effectiveness of the offside line separation (running space),
  - allows defenders to realign quickly (more numbers, easier defence) and
  - reduces the size of the 11m gaps
- The use, or over-use, of perhaps unnecessary moves such as
  - the ‘run around’ or ‘circle ball’ at 10 or 12,
  - switch passes, especially back inside drawing contact, and
  - the ever more popular use of Rugby League style blocking runs which:
    - are nearly always illegal (obstruction) even if they are not picked up by the referee.
    - hardly ever draw a defender anyway.
    - do not give, at worst, an offload possibility like a true ‘option receiver’ and
    - worst of all, reduce the attack by one player, thus giving the defence an overlap so they, not the attack have the 2v1 advantage.

It’s now worth remembering the two other considerations for attack; can we pass these distances and can we do it off both hands? Eleven metres is a reasonable distance, but do our players have the skill to do this, remembering that a skill is “a technique we can perform successfully, every time and under pressure”? Note that we need passes of 11 metres or so that are accurate every time – not the occasional 25 metre pass. When we break down the technique, we need reasonably long, accurate passes to the hands (target) of players coming from depth and at pace, but we often see the ball hitting the receiver around the ears, the receiver having to stop and/or jump to get the ball or the receiver overshoots the ball carrier, who then gets caught in possession because he has lost his support. Passing and catching are basic skills – we start practising these at U7 with Mini Tag, so why are they ‘lost’ when players are in adult rugby?

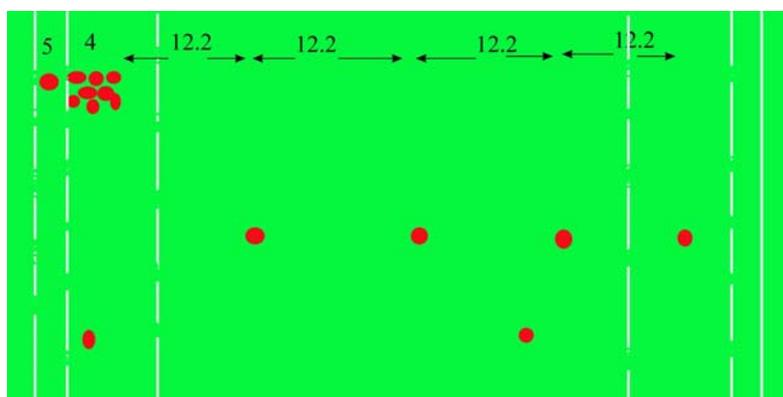
Is all this part of the reason why we don’t play simple, numbers rugby anymore – we can’t pass accurately off either hand over 5 metres to players coming at pace on a timed, angled run?

Again, I use last year’s All Blacks as an example but will point to their opponents, Wales, and this appears to be the case. In about a ten minute period, Wales were given penalty after penalty, opting each time to kick for touch to the left hand side of the field to get a 5 metre lineout. The choice of the left hand side suggested to me that they had no intention of even trying to exploit the spaces out wide (it is more difficult to pass to the right for a right handed player) and showed that they had no confidence in their own skill levels or ability and that they believed that the defence would stop them and maybe turn over the ball. This might have been the case but they didn’t really know, as they hadn’t even tried properly to look for any weaknesses, never testing anyone in defence. Each time, Wales looked to gain an advantage in the forwards but never in a positive way; they seemed to be hoping the All Blacks would

do something wrong or illegal and their focus seemed to be on a penalty try, not on looking to score by playing themselves.

If you have a look at Figure 3 below, there is a scrum five metres in from touch and the spaces are even bigger at over 12 metres wide. Even without any wheel, the defending back row is even further away from the 13/14 channels than at a full lineout. All the situations shown above for the full lineout are equally as relevant for this scrum 5 metres in, perhaps more so with the extra metre added to each gap for the attack to exploit or the defence to cover.

**Figure 3 – 5m Scrum**



I've been talking to the referees about what they might expect at these situations, explaining how players will be exploiting the spaces out wide and looking to work on these big gaps, perhaps using strike attackers in the outer channels. Referees might reasonably predict play to develop this way. The reality, however, is quite different and very seldom does the game develop like this, even though the numbers would suggest that the chances of breaching the defence are better if we did. The Autumn 2005 internationals have shown that the All Blacks, at least, have the required handling skills plus the confidence to attack one-on-one and looking to beat a defender, not just run into him/them. But this does not seem to filter down into our game.

We need to practise contact, of course, and rucking and mauling are important aspects of modern play. But we should also look at keeping play simple and let the maths work in our favour. For it to work in a game, we need to ensure our players work on the speed, length and accuracy of their passing *and* the catching and timing/angle of running of the receivers. The examples given above are from set pieces but similar situations do occur in open play after a few phases of contact, so it is just as important for players to be given time to practise recognising these situations and the decision-making processes that arise.

We do need carefully constructed drills that start with 1v1 in the appropriate space, with sufficient depth for players to get to game pace, using fully opposed game situations playing against ‘proper’ defenders (not the third team front row).

We seem to have lost the concept of ‘playing to win’ and instead seem to be looking more towards ‘playing not to lose’ and, as such, we may have lost the skills associated with beating a player one-on-one, particularly out wide. Sometimes it looks like we now consider possession and phase play to be key skills in winning the game but, as important as they may be, they are not scoring skills. They often seem to be used in a process of hoping the defence makes a mistake; surely we ought to promote getting our attack doing something positive.

We need to make our attacking game attacking again. Get down the club on Sunday mornings and watch the U7s and U8s play their non-contact Mini Tag, using basic handling and running skills. Listen to the coaches encouraging the one-on-one situations and watch the confidence of the ball carriers, completely unaware of any problems that might occur and oblivious to the consequences, looking only to beat that player in front of them. Watch the passing off both hands and look how players look to exploit the gaps (“Run at the spaces, not at the faces,” is a phrase we often use) to beat the defenders. The players do not often use 2v1 very well and do not always understand how to fix or draw a defender, but 1v1 is no problem and they’ll have a go – something we seem to have forgotten.