

EDITOR'S NOTES

17.10.06

The plea for any comments on last week's article drew one response from Stephen Johnson in Japan. It could not have been a more timely reply as this week's main article is by the same person. The Technical Journal has many opinionated readers, but they tend to be the strong, silent types who keep their opinions to themselves – away from the coaching arena, that is. Please – improve the quality of the articles by offering your opinion on the content. If you think the ideas are sound or just slightly off the wall, say so with an e mail to the Editor.

But back to Stephen Johnson:

“Allan Lewis looks back with some regret (I feel) that the giant step forward achieved by the backs of the 1971 Lions did not result in a permanent change in the way rugby developed in the home countries. First of all, that group of backs contained arguably the best - not only of their era - but of the entire 20th century. Carwyn James's vision was extraordinary, but to achieve those heights, he had some superb talent to work with - the best backs of 100 years all in the same team! (BUT, also bear in mind that the fitness levels, and the overall ability of the forwards has risen by huge leaps and bounds in recent years. Watch the knock-ons/mistakes of the forwards in the 1973 NZ-Barbarians game, and it can be seen where the game has advanced.)

The facts are usually that most teams have (at least) one weakness in the back line, and most coaches have to cover up that weakness by simplifying the whole back play/team play process. Constant ruck play is low-risk, low return play that has one huge advantage - it tires out the defending team. An average team can ensure continuous possession, and stay in a safety zone, in which - at worst - they will not lose by very many.

But, I am sure I speak for all coaches out there when I say that I would LOVE to play the stimulating, exciting game that is being espoused in the article. I coached a school team in Japan for 9 years, and if we discount the first two years it took for us to become competitive, in the final 7 years I was there, we played attractive 1971 Lions style running rugby for 5 of the years, when we had the players to do so. In 2005, I had a tiny bunch of speedy forwards who could offload as well as any team I have ever seen (we copied everything we saw in the 2001 Lions video, and Super 12 games). Quick ball out to the backs, and when we were on-song, we were great to watch. We maybe used a only handful of rucks in every game. Our tournament record that year was 12-4, so we did not go to the nationals, but gee, when I look at the video highlights, they were pretty good. BUT small, so we always lost the big games on size.

In 2006, all those players had left school, and we had remaining just one winger and a scrum half capable of playing that type of game, but we had good, big, solid forwards. What would you have done? We played a non-stop, rucking game, and despite our severe limitations, we did not have a bad year. I'm now helping the university team

who THINK they have a good set of backs, but in reality DO HAVE a good set of forwards. We are playing a nice mix, ruck'em out of sight in the first half, and throw the ball wide in the second. But that is because the other teams are not very good! (We are climbing up the leagues, and have not reached our level yet!)

I think in the final analysis, you can create all the wondrous skills practices and drills you can think of, but when it comes down to it, DNA counts for a lot. If the players don't have that little bit of natural talent/awareness/elan - call it what you will, to create the spark for high-risk-high success play, then exciting rugby has to wait for another year - to everyone's regret I suppose. Another thought to put out - a lot of sparkling rugby has been played by teams coached by people who were the very opposite in their own playing careers, so it really does come down to who you have available!"

Now if the letter writer can get this to rural Gloucestershire from Japan, there has to be hope for some success from you other coaches who may be a bit closer geographically.

Is Allan Lewis right – or is Stephen Johnson's pragmatic approach the one you would follow?

Unfortunately there are no prizes, but comments can be sent to:
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