

## **DEVELOPMENT OF THE MODERN RUGBY PLAYER BY PETER HARDING**

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The modern player in the major playing nations is *vastly* superior in all physical characteristics than his equivalent was before professionalism came into Rugby Union.

It is widely recognised that the programmes run by the premiership clubs are now producing fabulous athletes that are stronger, faster, more mobile, larger and more enduring every year. In fact, if you compare the modern player to the player of twenty years ago, (misty eyed, romantic notions aside), you would be hard pressed to find any valid physical comparison.

This is due to a number of factors; a) professionalism, which has given the players the opportunity to train like athletes; b) the evolution of the game, especially the improvement in defence and the increased physicality of the contact area, which means that players who do not prepare physically will be either embarrassed or constantly injured; c) improved training techniques and the constant search for something that will give the team that 'physical edge'; d) a larger pool of players is being identified and developed at a younger age than has been done before, as well as Rugby League players of the highest level being recruited.

All these facts make the records of George Gregan, Fabian Pelous, Jason Leonard and our own 200 club members, Justin Bishop and Neil Hatley, not only meritorious but almost beyond belief.

The beauty of our sport is that it requires big, strong, fast, agile, fit and extremely tough athletes. There are really no other sports that require such a vast array of physical excellence. With all of this considered and with the increased emphasis on the physical capabilities of rugby players these days, what are the general axioms about physical performance and the modern rugby player that must be recognised if we are to be successful in training the rugby athlete?

### **PHYSICAL CHARACTERISTICS.**

The physical characteristics needed by our modern rugby players are the characteristics of a decathlete. Cardio vascular fitness, strength, speed, flexibility are

the basics and others such as explosiveness, anaerobic ability and reactivity are built on the base provided by these.

This being considered, there are two basics you cannot escape. When you see Yannick Jauzion or Daniel Carter glide through a gap or you watch Isotolo Maka's explosive bursts, it is obvious that running is a core part of the game. All aspects of the game start with this simple locomotive act.

In addition, when Andrew Sheridan scrummages against Pieter De Villiers in the Six Nations match, or when some halfback has to tackle a rampaging Sebastian Chabal, it will be equally obvious that raw strength is also a major prerequisite.

These two are the basics in a rugby programme that cannot be avoided; players have to run and they must do strength work.

### **TIME TO DEVELOP?**

There is one side effect to the increased ability of our players. The rugby is of a higher standard and is seen as an increasingly improving product by the competing sponsors and TV channels, all of whom are always on the lookout for more of our product – rugby matches. The players are asked to play more and more games and this does not sit well with any philosophy of physical development and can actually constrain any future improvements that we might be planning.

To consider this, let's consider the programmes of two of the great modern teams. All examples supplied are from personal correspondence with conditioners working for the separate teams.) But before you read it, ask yourself, is there any physical difference between southern hemisphere and northern hemisphere teams?

Example one is from the Canterbury Crusaders. Along with Toulouse and Leicester, they are one of the most successful clubs in the world.

Last season the Canterbury team had November/December/January and half of February as physical preparation for a fourteen week Super Fourteen season.

***In this time the team did no rugby during November and December.*** The only work done was an average of twelve hours per week on physical preparation. They divided the team into groups and carried out the following; the front and second row players did five hours of strength, two hours of acceleration/agility and three hours of running a week plus a game of tennis and a game of squash. Others positions were split according to the specific needs of the players in certain positions, so the outside backs concentrated more on speed and less on strength. In January their week was split equally between physical work and rugby; February was three quarters rugby and one quarter physical and during the season, work was almost one hundred percent rugby.

The obvious question is this: how can they do two months without a serious rugby session? In reality the answer is quite simple and is two- pronged:

A) The Crusaders have twenty players who have been at the team for five years. Therefore they know each other very well and the existing teamwork is very good.  
B) ***This is the very important point*** - the team starts playing in mid February and the Super Fourteen competition starts in March. Therefore, once they finish the two month block of preparation, they still have two months to prepare rugby-wise.

In the time that is available, therefore, they progress physically, tactically and technically.

Compare this with Toulouse, who play in the suicidal French competition, (a competition of which their sixteen-year coach Guy Noves said in December last year, “J’en ai marre” (I have had enough!). Toulouse, the most successful side of the professional era, plays in a competition where they finish mid-June (if they make the final) and start again mid-August. That allows an eight week break from competition but in this ‘break’ they have to prepare for the following season, when most experts would agree that a team needs four to six weeks full break at the end of a season for mental and physical regeneration. Add to this the fact that they supply half of the French team then ask the question - how is it possible for these players to improve any of their physical characteristics?

There is a short answer from the ‘Preparateurs Physique’ of Toulouse; it is not possible! Toulouse are a typical French side, have a tough and uncompromising pack and sublime backs. But because of the French schedule, their trainers are always fighting a losing battle. Survival is the key and you have to get sides from week to week games. Therefore they progress in rugby but not in the basic physical parameters.

Toulouse have a training co-ordinator, a conditioner for running skills and a strength coach. All of them will tell you the players have not physically improved (other than that you would expect with normal maturation) in a long time. But they will tell you that for their players to match up physically with more physical nations, the players need time to train away from the pressure of the competition. The players want to, half the team is in the French squad and know what they compete against in internationals, but they simply do not have the time.

Guy Noves said at the end of last season, “Our international players are completely cooked, physically and mentally,” which is a great turn of phrase that explains exactly what the problem produces! I wouldn’t be surprised if some successful English teams were in the same boat.

The two cases, Canterbury and Toulouse, emphasise the difference in preparation between the southern and the northern hemispheres.

- a) Southern hemisphere teams have a significant break (although it is now shorter with the competition involving fourteen teams).
- b) In the countries involved, players play no more than thirty games a year, ***including*** internationals.

- c) The players have a space in the year where a significant amount of time (two to three months) is dedicated to physical preparation.

These statistics are far from ideal. Obviously it would be better if we could limit players to twenty four (or fewer) games a year, with each test against a top eight nation counting for one and a half games!

It stands to reason that the objective of clubs is to win games. To do this we must develop players tactically, technically and physically. It is not possible if the clubs are handed schedules based on survival, where players play from one week to the next without rest.

This English season is a little saner than the French. If you are an unsuccessful club and do not make the second round of any competition and play no part in the finals, you have thirty one games to negotiate and have time for a month's holiday and three months of preparation for the following season (Sept to 1<sup>st</sup> weekend in May). This is still about a month short, but it is manageable.

If you are a successful team, however, you could play a maximum of thirty six games and be involved from September to June. Three months break, which will include a month's holiday? Unmanageable if you wish to develop players.

If you have international players on your books, it becomes a nightmare as these players are missing for ten weeks of the year and for at least five weeks of that time they play a form of rugby that is of a much greater intensity, mentally and physically, than the majority of club games. That's international rugby.

### **THE RUGBY YEAR.**

In my estimation, in the perfect world the year should be structured as follows. This is assuming that there is just one competition and no internationals (!). (We will not even get into the discussion about summer rugby.)

Competition consists of as many teams as you like with a maximum of twenty to twenty four competition games. Therefore you have from the beginning of October to the middle of March in general competition matches.

Then we have five weeks of finals which end on the last week of April with a championship game. No player plays more than thirty games and is available for *all* competition games for his club, which automatically strengthens the competition and competitiveness of each and every game (that's the most important thing isn't it?).

We are then left with May as the holiday month, with June, July and August as preparation for the next season; September provides a little more time for preparation plus trial matches. This also gives teams who don't make the finals extra time to prepare physically and, potentially, time to improve for the next season's challenge of rising up the table. Perfect.

This structure allows time to develop the physical and technical attributes that a player needs to succeed in the game. But of course this is not possible as TV commitments and European competitions, with six, possibly nine games and then the international games, add another wedge of up to ten games. Then we add another competition, the cup that is played for between English and Welsh clubs. A top player could have fifty games in a year on his schedule and the real possibility is that the most valuable resource in the game, players, would be decimated very quickly.

Fortunately coaches of the premiership clubs are smart enough to look after their resources by cycling players into and out of games and by having enough players on their registers to cover every position three times over. This way the best players get time to recover and turn up to the majority of important matches.

This argument is central to the health of the game and it is, of course, currently being argued in another forum. Although the structure of the competition I have mentioned will never happen, if we want our players available for our clubs to ensure a vibrant competitive premiership with intense battles every week and all the stars on show, we must find a way of continuing the long term development of English players.