COACHING DECISION MAKING IN RUGBY
BY
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"For all its physical character, rugby is a thinking game" – Brian Lochore.

There are many attributes required to be an effective rugby player but none has been as under coached, particularly at youth levels, as decision making. Coaches have always appreciated good decision makers and are always in search of them but, until relatively recently, coaches have not focused on how to develop decision making in their players. With the game becoming more and more technical and defences getting better organized, the difference between winning and losing can often come down to few key decisions. Different types of examples that all coaches will have seen many times are (i) a loose forward finding himself in the backline but with the vision and confidence to chip over the top of a pressure defence for a team mate to gather and score or, not quite as welcome, (ii) the player who, two metres from the goal line, fails to spot an obvious overlap and instead goes himself, gets isolated and loses the ball.

Decision making is the ability to analyse a situation (whether it be in attack or defence), formulate a range of possible options, then pick and act upon the most appropriate. Decision making can be separated into two ends of a continuum. An analytical decision is one where the player has time to consider the options and access knowledge. An example would be a fly half calling a backline move at a scrum or line-out. At the other end are decisions we call intuitive decisions. These are the decisions that are made when there is limited time and a player reacts to the external stimuli without consciously thinking about it. An example would be the player who, when the ball is loose, decides whether to dive or pick up the ball. Although the nature of both are very different, the more experienced a player gets at making correct decisions, the more their decisions lend themselves to becoming intuitive.

Coaching analytical decision making.

The analytical decision makers of a team are usually those in charge of making decisions at the different restart aspects of the game (i.e. scrum, line-out, kick-offs, penalties/free-kicks and drop-outs). What follows is a sequential approach to coaching these players' analytical decisions (access to video analysis equipment would certainly be beneficial to many of the processes below):

- With the benefit of time to make an analytical decision, the best approach is to make sure your decision makers have a comprehensive understanding of the game and the team's playing system. Involve them in team and opposition S.W.O.T. analyses. In relation to the attack, they must understand that no team can defend everything and that, as decision makers, they are looking for where the defenders have had to compromise.
- Use a diagram of the pitch divided up into tactical areas (Appendix C). Use this as a focus for a discussion on expected defensive alignments at each tactical area.
- Develop a list of possible attacks (and alternatives if things go wrong) that would exploit compromises made by the defence at each tactical area. For example, when defending within the opponents' 22, the defensive team usually opts to defend the vast space in depth (between defensive backline and defensive goal-line) so the back three tend to lie a great deal deeper in preparation for a kick into the space down the field. This compromises their ability to defend the space in width, leaving them vulnerable to a wide attack through the hands.
- Develop a list of physical cues the opposition will be displaying for each expected defence weakness.
- Perfect the attacks on the practice field individually (add the expected defence they will be run against) and highlight the defensive cues to watch for. Include alternatives (emphasise the need for quick and clear communication).
- Perfect the different attacks by randomly calling out the cues the defence may show them (the decision maker makes the call). Include alternatives.
- Add a defence and have it switch through the different defensive alignments and cues. The decision makers make the appropriate decision, communicate the decision and finally execute their decision (Have defenders begin by exaggerating the cues before making them more realistic). Include alternatives.
- Repeat this process at the different tactical points around the pitch. Include alternatives.
- Further discussion should include developing the ability to predict the next defensive alignment for the second phase.

Feedback is a critical part of the process, particularly in relation to team confidence. Players need to have faith in the team's playing system, coaches and decision makers. Players need to know whether mistakes are tactical, technical or both. Coaches then need to address the appropriate aspect. These guidelines can be incorporated into unit practices or team practices.

Coaching intuitive decision making.

According to Dave Hadfield (*Understanding Decision Making in Rugby*), intuitive decision making cannot be effectively taught by talking or showing players what to do. Instead, players build up the ability to make these decisions by being exposed to real or simulated game situations. In other words, they learn through self discovery and experience.

The role of the coach now is one of a facilitator; he must give the players enough realistic experiences of decision making in order for the players to learn through making their own decisions.

There are several key factors that influence the ability to make an effective intuitive decision:
- Response time – the amount of time between registering a cue and then reacting to that cue.
- The number of responses to choose from.
- The time available to make the decision.
- The risk factors involved to the player/team.
- Anticipation – or the ability to recognize the situation and pick up earlier cues than the less experienced player 'reading the game' (this may come from SWOT analysis).
- Arousal levels – if a player is too aroused (or not aroused enough) his ability to make the correct intuitive decision will also be affected detrimentally. This, of course, varies from individual to individual. There are two key dimensions of attention which, to an extent, dictate a players' decision making ability. These are a player's ability to focus on many or a few things (narrow or broad) or whether he relates this information to himself (internal) or to the situation itself (external).
Broad external – a player who rapidly assesses a situation and easily develops a sense of anticipation (such as choosing a backline move);
Narrow external – required the moment a response is given and is completely focused on one or two pieces of external information (reacting to one opponent);
Broad internal – analyses and plans very well and can access previous experiences or knowledge (tactics or strategy);
Narrow internal – very much in tune with his body, can rehearse mentally or use imagery (goal kicking).

We all tend to have a preferred style but can, through psychological skills training, improve our ability to use the other styles. Of course each style is suited to different aspects of the game.

As with all coaching, players need a sequential progression from easy to complex. As the facilitator, the coach must begin by breaking the game into small scenarios where the influencing factors actually assist the player in making the right decision.

Gradually these factors can be made more game like. Each scenario should be introduced as a problem to be solved. Of course, players will be able to choose more effective solutions to the situations if they have a sound grasp of the appropriate skills. By exposing players to these situations, it will allow the coach and player to assess the effectiveness of their skill development. If there are any technical deficiencies, the scenario will highlight them and generally motivate players to improve the associated skill. Once this level is reached, a real game is required.

- There should be progression and it should start with limited number situations (1v1, 2v1) in order to minimize the number of cues.
- The practice should be conditioned such that each separate cue is exaggerated before gradually making them less obvious and more realistic.
- Add more players but limit their actual involvement in the practice. They are there purely as a distraction to help players focus on the appropriate cue. Find different ways to disguise the situation to help develop anticipation skills.
- Gradually build into larger numbered scenarios (3v2 then larger). As the number of attackers increases, different players (i.e. ball carrier & support player) will have to make different decisions Each mini/separate scenario should have been focused on individually so it should just be a case of joining them together.
- Incorporate all scenarios into conditioned team runs in order for players to appreciate their relevance to the game and help develop their ability to anticipate them.
- Encourage discussion, particularly encourage players to ask questions of those players that appear to be making the fastest correct decisions.
- Reinforce the key principles of rugby, particularly in relation to predicted defensive patterns (i.e. penetration in the middle will lead to subsequent space out wide).
- Finally, once players are making effective decisions, try to encourage them to predict/anticipate what the next decision/scenario/cue will be.

In conclusion, the ability to make effective decisions is critical to the game of rugby. There is obviously still the need for players to be fit and accomplished skill performers, but equally every player needs to have sufficient understanding of the game to make effective decisions. Educators have long known that we gain a better understanding of concepts through active learning; it is time for coaches to embrace this idea.

A team of players with a sound knowledge of the game, who have spent time reading the same cues and making the same related decisions, whether it be from first phase, as a ball carrier or a player in support, will demonstrate a unity and continuity on the field that will prove formidable. All players want to win but by discovering for themselves *why* and *how* to win they will also develop into more rounded players and, as coaches, this must always be our goal.

References:
1. Jim Greenwood -Think Rugby (third edition 2000).
2. Jim Greenwood -Total Rugby (fifth edition 2003).
3. Ken Hodge & Alex McKenzie - Thinking Rugby (1999).
4. Dave Hadfield – Understanding Decision Making in Rugby.
5. Pierre Villepreux – Decision making in rugby (1993).
6. John Ross – Decision Making and Coaching.

Appendix A

Analytical Decision Making – Possession within 22

1. Define the situation – put-in at a scrum on our own 22 and15 metres in from the right touchline.
2. After SWOT analysis, we decide their defensive back three will set up relatively deeply to protect the deep space, particularly as we have two power kickers.
3. We decide our alternatives are fivefold:
    (i) A kick to touch from our scrum half (cues: the score-line, time left in the match, pressure on our scrum, strength of their line-out).
    (ii) A left footed kick for touch from our fly half (cues: as above and strength of our fly half's left foot).
    (iii) A miss move to our outside centre who kicks the ball deep behind their open-side winger for our backs to chase (cues: depth of the back three, the quickness with which the open side winger comes up and the covering by their fullback).
    (iv) A miss move to our outside centre who attacks their outside centre and releases our winger into the space left by their deep open-side winger (cues: depth of the back three, the quickness with which their open side winger comes up and the covering by their fullback).
    (v) Attacking the blindside through a flat pass straight to the winger, who attacks the space left by their deeper than normal defensive winger. (cue: wheel/pressure on the scrum, depth of their blindside wing).
4. In this situation an initial probable alternative will be a controlled kick to touch or kick behind one of their back three.
5. Practise calls and execution of each play.
6. Repeat each alternative with the appropriate exaggerated defensive cue. For example, for the blindside move, wheel the scrum to the right and make the defensive blindside winger drop right back. Slowly reduce the exaggeration of the cues. It is sometimes good to show the team certain cues that indicate

when *not* to choose an alternative. In this case it may be a left hand wheel, when the opposing scrum half remains at the base of his own scrum and their blindside wing is a little further up than usual. Let them try to run it! We learn well from our mistakes.

7. Alternate between different defensive cues. Start with obvious cues and gradually make them more realistic, but always check that players are reading the correct cues.
8. Make time for plenty of feedback and consolidation, but remember there is more than one way to skin a cat. Some players may have a tactically sound alternative approach but it is imperative the team has a consistent approach to each situation.

Appendix B

Intuitive Decision Making – A loose ball.

1. Define the situation – a loose ball 1 v 1.
2. Place the ball on the floor in between two opposing players.
3. Ask the question, "What is your goal in this situation?" Discuss the answer(s).
4. Move the ball closer to one player. Ask the same question of both players again. Discuss
5. It is likely that the players will offer such answers as
    *   Gain possession.
    *   Maintain possession.
    *   Go forward.
    *   Maintain continuity by presenting or distributing the ball effectively to a team mate in a better position.
    The player in the more defensive role will also come up with a set of objectives. This can also be treated as a decision making situation.
6. Vary the distance that the ball is from the attacker. Each time the players compete for the ball, discuss/feedback on how the situation and desired outcome changed.
7. Be mindful of the probable skills that will be used. It is likely the following decisions will be accompanied by the following skills:
    (a) Ball too close to defender – ruck them off it.
    (b) Ball close to defender - dive on it and present it appropriately to supporting players (ruck).
    (c) Dive on the ball and get up, form a strong body position and present ball to supporting players (ruck/maul).
    (d) Pick up and pass to a supporting player.

8. Apply this situation into a contact possession practice. The coach has an extra ball that he will occasionally throw between two opposing players. Blow this whistle to let otherwise engaged players know there is a new ball in play.
9. Build on the initial situation by adding an attacking support player.
10. Situation (a) pick up and go forward, (b) ruck over the top, (c) indicate to ball carrier whether to set up a ruck or maul and react accordingly, (d) support positions (run from depth and with width into space).
11. Continue this progression by adding both defensive and attacking players and focusing on those additional players' decisions.
12. Instruct the players that in all the subsequent team drills, any loose ball or additional ball added by the coach should be handled and reacted upon in this way.
13. Consolidate all situations into further practice in order to make decisions intuitive.

Appendix C

Tactical Areas:
This example on the final page shows twelve tactical areas (coloured), but the concept can be applied as simplistically or as detailed as required.