

## EDITOR'S NOTES

### 15.5.07

The email has completely replaced the letter as far as the Technical Journal is concerned and the greatest response has been on issues relating to age-group rugby. There are, of course, many young players and size and maturity are vitally important in the way the game can be played. Even at the highest levels, there is often no substitute for power which, when matched with skill, is very hard to stop. When young players compete, early maturation can have a disproportionate effect on matches. But is it an aspect that we need to over-worry about?

Jon Loftus writes:

“Just catching up with the Technical Journal and was very interested in the issues raised by Francis Kenealy and then “Spike” Milligan’s response. Clearly, we all are/should be concerned at the safety implications of the height and size mis-matches that we all witness week in and week out and I do think that there is too much emphasis placed on winning, which, naturally, is going to encourage the selection of the bigger, stronger, more mature boys. I am certainly not an anti-competition ‘liberal lefty’ - children are naturally competitive, which I encourage in my U10s team. I see it as a requirement of any sport, but especially in a game as physical and confrontational as rugby – but I do agree that the emphasis should be more on technique, skill and putting the ‘drills’ into practice. By creating highly competitive environments, a sport can become exclusive rather than inclusive (something that I have witnessed with the football team that my son played for), to the detriment of the sport generally; this usually occurs where there is a highly competitive league structure with promotion/relegation issues.

Coaches are encouraged to play who they regard to be the *strongest* players, therefore excluding newcomers to the sport and those players requiring more practice/experience. Owing to the requirements of the different positions, rugby needs to remain as inclusive as possible, as young players develop and mature at different stages.

However, the size mismatch has always been an aspect of youth rugby. I remember my own experiences when playing for a school team. As a ‘late developer’ I experienced three years of playing against bigger, stronger and faster opposition. Indeed, it happens at senior level too, even at top class - remember Jonah Lomu v Tony Underwood? Yes, the old adage “a good big ‘un will beat a good little ‘un” is true, but you develop your skills (and character!) accordingly – it taught me to tackle low and I became very strong defensively because of it.

As boys mature at different ages, you do get the ‘men against boys’ situation, but by playing the late developers down an age group (or two) you then create an imbalance of mental maturity, which is equally unfair.

If you are to be a rugby player, you need to accept that you are going to come up against players who are either taller or heavier or faster or stronger or more powerful – it is inherent in the game owing to the different skills and strengths required in the different positions. The sooner you get used to that, and learn to deal with it and adapt, the better.”

Perhaps the argument will remain forever in the game as there is no ready answer or solution. In the end we will probably have to rely on the common-sense of coaches! Now there’s another item on the discussion list!