

## **OBSERVATIONS ON AGE-GRADE v SIZE IN YOUTH RUGBY BY FRANCIS KENEALY.**

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Have you noticed the contradiction between what you are taught at your RFU Coaching courses and the reality at most youth team matches on a Sunday morning?

Skills and individual player development are the cornerstone of the coaching ethos, yet every weekend the physical imbalance caused by the different physical development of teenagers results in the 'big is beautiful' syndrome far too often.

I travel far and wide and, through the eyes of a coach, it is pretty obvious, as observed from the size of those standing on the touchline, that most coaches put in the bigger boys on what they deem to be the important matches – which, for some coaches, is all of them!

Are they wrong, or are they protecting their less physically developed players, or do they just want to win? I suspect it's a combination of all three. I have arrived at this conclusion from my own experiences, because I have wrestled with all three options at various times.

I coach an U13 team with twenty five squad members. Within that squad, our height ranges from 4ft 10in to 5ft 11in and our weight ranges from six to eleven stone. None of the boys is overweight or underweight, so they are carrying mostly muscle. This range that we experience is typical in all the teams we play against. You can equip the players with all the skills, but being pounded by so much larger opposition players is not going to help their development at all and I think that we need to alter the current structure to reflect the reality of what must occur all over the country on most weekends.

Having coached this age group for four years against many teams, I find that the 'big is best' syndrome starts at Under10 and seems to run to Under 16 when nature re-asserts its natural order and most boys are within a comparable and acceptable height and weight range. The differentials are at the peak between the ages of twelve and fifteen, yet the system allows players to play up an age group, yet can only allows players to play down an age group in cases where the other coach agrees and, usually, this is not allowed in a competitive cup or league match - which is when most of these guys are parked on the bench.

The result is that you see far too many teams bashing the ball up with their big players trying to smash the opposition physically, with evasion skills that are suddenly nowhere to be seen. If this basic ploy does not work, there rarely, if ever, seems to be a plan two. This may be the acceptable method of the national team, but it has brought scant reward since the Rugby World Cup. I have to wonder if the game at the highest level is not responsible for all the 'boshing' that we see at the lower levels of the game, with all the implications for the future.

The years ten to fifteen are, in my opinion, key to developing each player's skills and lifelong commitment to rugby. If the system continues to allow such physical disparity, I believe that we will lose far too many players who, although loving the game, are intelligent enough not to want to get hurt but are not content to sit on the bench. They want to develop their skills in match situations where the teams are evenly balanced. When we achieve this, the matches are high quality but the system ensures that it is difficult as many opposition teams do not have big enough squads to allow this.

Again, though, I have to ask - is this cause and effect? I say this because people at our club, who have taken teams through the ages right up to Colts, tell me that many of the teams with twenty five to thirty boys at U13 that they played regularly, have by U16/17 been reduced to the barest numbers. The physical imbalance may not be the only reason for the dropout rate, but I believe it is a major factor.

For those of you who are not sure if changing to a size and weight based system would be better, there are two factors to consider. One is that New Zealand run this system and it appears not to be harming their development too much. Secondly, take your mind back to when you were playing age group rugby; how long would you have continued your playing if, on just about every weekend, you played against opponents who were between fifty and sixty percent heavier in muscle than you?

The fact that so many boys *do* play against such heavier opponents on a regular basis surely means that we have to find a better system.