

THE PLACE OF CREATIVITY IN RUGBY UNION BY ALEX PILZ.

The author was born and raised in South Africa. He has two Masters degrees, one from the University of Potchefstroom (South Africa) and the other from Michigan State University (USA). He became a registered Psychologist in 1997.

He worked with various rugby clubs and schools in South Africa, focusing on off-the-field as much as on-the-field issues. For example, he supported an athlete, the victim of a shooting incident, who has now sufficiently recovered to play in the RWC 2007 in France.

He has been Resident Sport Psychology Consultant with Harlequins Academy since 2003. He aims to help teams, but is clear that the building blocks of any successful side are the individual players. To that end he has worked with individuals in rugby union, football, golf and tennis.

An interactive website is under construction and will be launched after RWC 2007. Details of this will be published in the Technical Journal.

In this article I will argue that the return on investment for technical and physical prowess has reached an area of little variation. The deciding factor of discrimination in competitive sport lies elsewhere.

Consider two competing teams. Minutes before kick-off you may struggle to predict, with confidence, the outcome of the contest. Man for man, each combination is very similar. Each jersey is occupied by a very similar looking and well-trained athlete: they all tend to be equally fit, similarly strong, equally courageous and tough looking. When the game starts, they will all be very busy. However, will they be busy doing the right things? At an observable level, you will see many individuals doing many things. At a more important level, one may ask, what are athletes focussing on and how are they making decisions and acting on them? How are decisions made in a team when a well-rehearsed plan of attack (and defence) does not show desired results?

If technical prowess and physical condition are equally defined and supremely honed within each position and sub-group (for example, the tight five), what is different that will clearly separate the best from the above average? My immediate answer concerns the coherent application of the Top Two Inches (TTIs) of each athlete and of the team as a unit. And, if you accept this, what does this actually look like? Is well-trained structured play tempered (or balanced) by creativity, intuition and by being able to observe the bigger picture? How do coaches train to cope with unpredictability?

Three key performance areas soon become apparent. These are physical condition, technical prowess and mental toughness. Improvement and progress in terms of each key performance area is what most coaches aspire towards. If you can measure it and show a coach-specific and predictable improvement(s), then resources (time and money) may be applied. More such resources may be made available if the coach 'feels' that he has gained control in the process of its application.

However, where control is not guaranteed, the depth below the ice that we skate on may be very deep (and very cold when flirting with relegation).

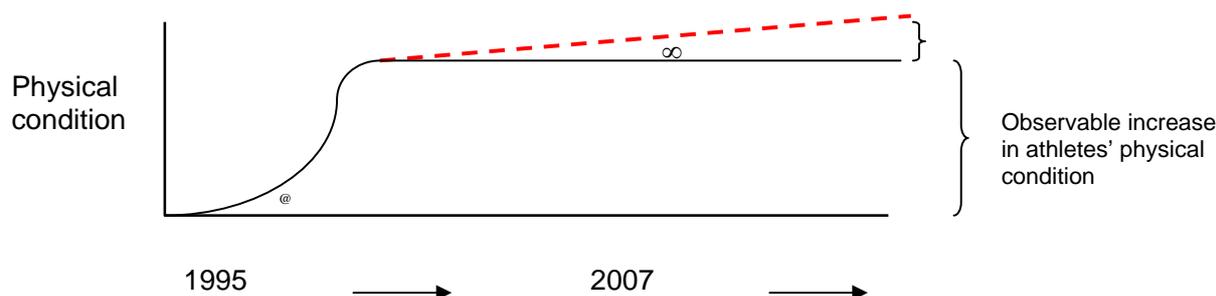
So what is your team’s competitive edge based on? What does competitive edge look like on the pitch? Is fitness your competitive edge? Are your athletes’ handling skills more refined? Is your edge your state of the art video facilities? How unique is your competitive edge? How long will it take before the opposition identify the edge you have and nullify it? In other words, as you plan to outsmart the opposition, they do the same. The net effect is many losers with many game plans saying in the post match analysis, “If only....”

Key Performance Area 1: Physical condition.

Since the introduction and development of mirrored, musically equipped and state of the art fitness centres, how much fitter, stronger and faster can our top athletes become? Athletes can all improve their fitness; however, in today’s terms, how much fitter *can* they become? The knowledge is out there. ‘Strike while the iron is hot’ was a very appropriate adage more than a decade ago when professionalism and rugby union embraced. What does the fitness hot-iron look like today? What more must be done to strike the balance between strength (power), speed and stamina for each position to underpin a solid overall work rate?

One assumption is that the margin of increase in terms of one’s physical condition is now minimal. Since the beginning of professionalism in rugby union, diets, energy expense-recovery cycles and aerobic/anaerobic fitness levels are highly regulated (measurable) and optimised. The rate of progress in these areas has stabilised. What does the next level of increased physical dexterity look like?

Schematically it may look as follows:



@ Refers to the first rate of growth that we have witnessed since the advent of professionalism.

∞ Refers to (potentially) the second rate of increase in terms of physical ability.

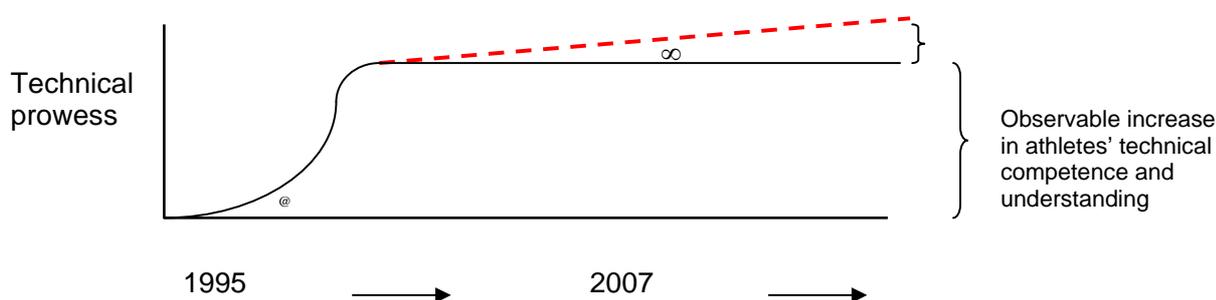
Key Performance Area 2: Technical prowess.

The initiation of media technology and electronic equipment into rugby union has led to a point of saturation in terms of technical expertise. We have reached a limit in our ability to evaluate the opposition and our inability to avoid being the object of scrutiny and evaluation by the opposition.

We can go no further in increasing our confidence in the statistical conclusions we draw, or in reading defensive/offensive running lines for each position on every part of the pitch at any point in the game.

So what will progress in this Key Performance Area look like? What does the next step of increased technical insight and ability look like?

Schematically it may look as follows:



@ The first rate of growth that we have witnessed since the introduction of professionalism.
 ∞ Refers to (potentially) the second rate of increase in terms of technical prowess.

Key Performance Area 3: Mental toughness and creativity.

Mental Toughness, or The Top Two Inches, I believe, underpins and fuses an athlete's great physical condition and technical mastery into a formidable entity to become an excellent member of a sub-unit, team, squad or even as a bench-warmer. Much has been said about the application of the TTI in sport under the banner of sport psychology. However, application of the principles of sport psychology as a means to secure and maintain competitive edge is easier said than done.

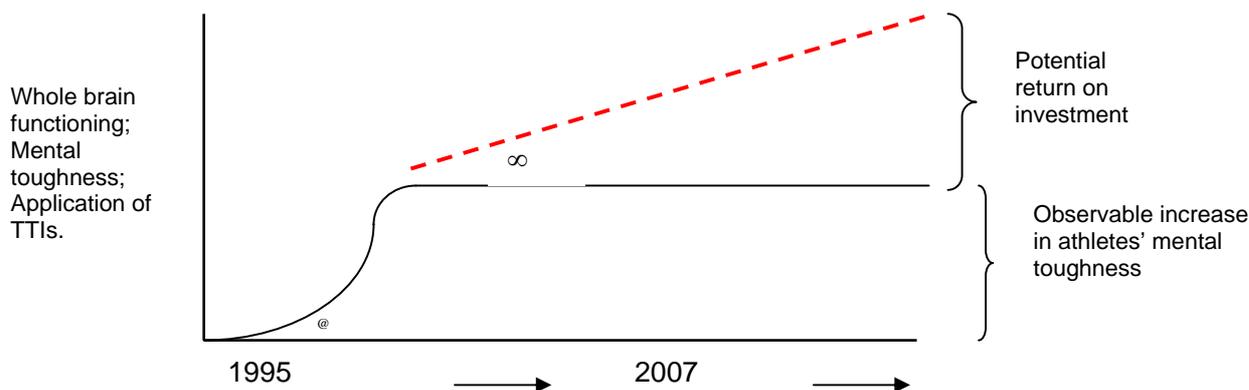
The application, even an operational definition, of the TTI comes in many forms. Some may suggest that it is a process of thinking correctly under pressure. Others say it is the ability to appropriately separate the issue and the response. Increasingly, it is referred to as big match temperament and being in the zone.

For the purposes of this article, I would like to describe mental toughness as the ability to apply the full functioning of all the TTI within an individual and between individuals as a team, enabling them to meet and exceed the demands of any competitive situation.

Where robust measures exist, for example the optimal height of a lock or VO-max for every position, it is unreasonable to expect the same for TTI. At most, the application of the TTI is observable through the consistent execution of technical and physical dexterity to meet and exceed the demands of the situation. In the same vein, for example, one can neither observe nor measure humour – however, laughter *is* observable and measurable.

It is clear, certainly to me, that the margin to increase your competitive edge through the application of fully functioning players' brains is, as yet, untapped.

Schematically it may look as follows:



@ Refers to the first rate of growth that we have witnessed since the advent of professionalism.

∞ Refers to (potentially) the second rate of increase in terms of TTI application.

What, then, is the TTI - the Top Two Inches? The TTI refers to the two hemispheres of the cortex (brain). Each hemisphere can be divided, resulting in what may be called a four quadrant model of cognitive preferences. It has become clear from extensive research that the brain has four distinct and specialised structures, which refer to four distinct types of thinking, each roughly corresponding to one of these brain structures.

In terms of securing and maintaining competitive edge, all four thinking styles need to be applied in terms of what is required by the demands of the situation. Where the team is the unit of analysis, the team should collectively apply all four thinking styles to harness their combined energy.

To conclude, I believe that the scope of progress to secure and maintain competitive edge in terms of physical and technical prowess is largely exhausted. Increased competitive edge will be marginal unless the application of the four thinking styles is recognised and brought into play.

I hope to develop this theme in two future articles and will deal with:

- What the four thinking styles are.
- How they are related to rugby.
- How to develop them.
- Potential risks if the route is embarked upon.
- The potential role of the captain in ensuring that the team tries to utilise the TTI when things go wrong – or not quite according to plan.

The next piece will cover the details of the TTI and the last one will be concerned with leadership and who will be prepared to test the water- and what it takes to make the plunge and to go for it!

Who will have the vision and sustained conviction to adopt a different approach in the face of league/cup results, sponsors craving increased spectator value, committees and owners wanting wins and paying spectators demanding value for money?

Questions from the Editor:

What do you coaches think of this as a starting point for the way you coach? Is there now too much structure? Should players be encouraged to use their scanning skills then their brains to work out answers without having to resort to a numbered or coded strategy? Is the whole concept too risky in the current rugby climate? If you do have a view, please let the Editor know by email at Keithrichardson@therfu.com – then look out for future articles.