

## PRE-MATCH PREPARATION BY ANDY HICKLING

*Andy Hickling is the former Director of Rugby and coach to the British Army. He also coached the highly successful Army Sevens team for seven seasons. He is now assistant coach at Newbury, with responsibility for the forwards and defence. Andy has just completed his RFU Level 5 coaching course and, for his final assignment, he took an inter-disciplinary look at pre-match preparation.*

*This is an abridged version of the paper and the player interviews have been left out.*

### ***Do the 3 Ps really hold good?***

***Does prior planning and preparation prevent p\*\*\* poor performance?***

***If we do not prepare for the battle, can we expect to win the fight?***

***Those prepared to prepare stand more chance of success than those prepared not to prepare – true or false?***

### ***Let us explore.***

All coaches will have their own thoughts, data, and analysis on what they believe pre-match preparation is, when it starts and what it should consist of. This piece of work acknowledges these facts and, given just how widely one could develop and discuss pre-match preparation, I was initially only intending to explore in detail 'Match Day Preparation' that could have an effect on individuals and the team match performance. Having conducted a series of interviews with players<sup>1</sup>, given it is players that are preparing to play the game, I have had to widen the scope of the work to take into account the information gathered and acknowledge the different timescales when different players start to prepare for a game and what form this preparation takes. I have also talked to and consulted with the coaches that I have come into contact with in the season to date and their views and ideas are incorporated into the paper where appropriate. I will still, in the main, cover the game-day itself, but the findings from my investigations with players and coaches leads me to consider also the days leading up to the game in order to present a full and true picture in respect of pre-match preparation.

Given that this paper is a component part of the senior RFU coaching course, I have approached this preparation process from a viewpoint that the team will consist of full-time professionals. I have, where appropriate and relevant, demonstrated how part-time teams might need to adapt some of what I have proposed.

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<sup>1</sup> Attached details of interviews with:

David Rees, Andrew Dalglish, Ian Ascroft-Leigh, Wayne Thompson, Tim Walsh, Dan Smaje, Andy Reay

I have based my findings on many years' experience in the game but on, more importantly, talking to and interviewing players. The players interviewed represent a cross-section of a team in terms of position and have a wide range of playing level and experience. They range from:

- A player who has played at the top level of the international rugby under, arguably, the best ever coach of England.
- A player who has played and captained a Varsity team with all the intensity this brings in building through a series of games to a 1 game must-win scenario.
- Players with current Premiership experience.
- A player who played at a high level, but has only ever played the game for the sheer enjoyment and camaraderie.
- A player with high-level overseas experience and current captain of a Div 1 team.
- A young player (19) who has only played a handful of league games (Div1) and has no pre-conceived ideas on match preparation.

As the players I selected are a balance between forwards and three-quarters, I felt it may be possible to see if there were any major different mindsets between these two disciplines in respect of pre-match preparation. I do accept that, whatever I found, the sample that I have taken is only very small and it would not be correct to draw firm conclusions.

*Afternote - There appeared to be no major difference in the preparation process between forwards and threequarters; all the players, at some time on game day, are required to rehearse/ practise any closed skills that they were required to produce during the game. I did not find, as I thought I might, that the forwards would want the warm-up to be a more aggressive form of preparation than the threequarters. In fact it was the reverse, with all players preferring a more psychological approach to ensure that it was the mind that was correctly prepared for the game. The only time, apart from when unit skills took place, when there was a split was in the final period in the dressing room when the forwards liked to have a far more aggressive approach to the final minutes of preparation.<sup>2</sup>*

I, and the players that I interviewed, fully appreciate and acknowledge that there are many areas that can have a bearing on the individual and the team's preparation and performance over a season. I feel that the subjects listed below could themselves be stand-alone pieces of work on pre-match preparation and, although I do touch on a couple of the areas, I do not intend cover them in any great detail in this piece of work.

- The team and the individual's season strategy in terms of mental and tactical preparation for games.

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<sup>2</sup> In my current coaching appointment, due to the ergonomics of the dressing room, we are experimenting with the forwards being in a totally separate area from the backs as we have had a problem with aggression in the early part of the game.

- Debrief from previous fixtures – video analysis of previous game, fault correction, feedback.
- Pre-match training – how the match is to be played, fault correction.
- Different games present different scenarios and challenges – the big occasion, the away match, the environment, the officials; how important is the result?

In order to fully examine match-day pre-match preparation, I have looked at the issues through a number of different lenses:

- Leadership & Management.
- Psychological.
- Environment.
- Coaching
  - Tactical v Technical.
- Physical.
- Medical.

Once again, each of these areas presents a massive challenge and in the main I have focused my discussions on:

- Leadership and Management
- Psychological

It does seem that I have taken for granted, assumed in fact, that there is a need for pre-match, match-day preparation. I feel I need to challenge this and ask the question:

### **Why do we need to become embroiled in pre-match match-day preparation? Is it really required?**

Why, for the sake of argument, for a 3pm kick-off, can the players not turn up at their leisure, change when they want and be on the pitch ready to play five minutes prior to the start of the match? After all, they have they not prepared all week - or at least at training sessions within the week? The players know each other and, in most instances, have been playing together week-in, week-out for a number of games. Is the team not professional enough and organised enough just to be able to turn up and play? Warm up - who requires a warm up? The slip fielder at cricket can stand for hours with no action then suddenly the snick and the diving one-handed catch is required; how was the fielder warmed up both mentally and physically? If players need to warm up, can they not be trusted to undertake this themselves?

Oh for the ideal world! Rugby is a team game and my research with the players has demonstrated that the players *do* need their comfort zones, their feeling of the safety net, that extra lineout, that extra rub from the physio, that togetherness of the team hug and the team banter. The players interviewed, to a man, left me in no doubt that pre-match preparation and certainly that last couple of hours together before kick-off are vital. The main point that came through very strongly was that the players wanted *a routine*, a process. So whilst I feel it was appropriate that I challenged the need for a highly structured preparation for games, particularly on game days, it is the players that say:

### **THERE IS A NEED FOR PRE-MATCH PREPARATION**

Having established from the players' perspective that pre-match preparation is a component part of the game, the research demonstrates that the nature of this pre-match preparation does vary from player to player. The different approaches are affected by the experience the player has, the level of game being played, the coach and, of course, individual preferences. What I will demonstrate by making use of the information gathered is that, because rugby is a team game, it is necessary to find a way within the routine and structure to accommodate all the varying views. Although one can produce a blueprint, I fully acknowledge that within the blueprint there needs to be the flexibility for players' individual needs to be accepted and catered for.

One of the interesting points that did come through from the study was that players felt that their views were sometimes not considered or reflected in the planning of pre-match preparation (leadership & management lenses). It was the coach who often dictated what was to happen. My interviews with the players show that players in this scenario can have the tendency to switch off and go on auto pilot and prepare in their own little world. This could be counter-productive for the team as it could mean lack of team cohesiveness and lack of togetherness at the start of the game and during the warm-up prior to the game. This does raise an interesting issue in regards to Player-centred coaching and the effect it could possibly have on the preparation process. The balance has to be found between what the individual player wants and what the team requires

Before looking in detail at the preparation process I have summarised below the major points to come out of my research with the players:

- **All wanted a routine** of some description, particularly on game day.
- Some players only started to think of the game the evening before kick-off, but **all players interviewed did undertake serious mental preparation the night before the game.**
- The preparation process is about preparing the player and the team, not the coach; **players want to be consulted.**
- Preparation for some players starts early in the week prior to the game with videos analysis of the opposition and individual opponents.
- **Warm up should be game-related** and views on length varied between 10 and 30 minutes.

- **Individual time was important to all players interviewed** within the final build-up to a game.

It became apparent when I had conducted the interviews that the players only articulated their own individual preferences. I was left feeling that they took an awful lot of what happened in pre-match preparation, particularly in the last twenty four hours prior to kick-off, for granted. They readily accepted a lot of things that were placed in front of them. Using my experience from numerous teams and scenarios and taking a consensus view from my research and interviews, I produced my thoughts and presented them to the players for comment. I amended the findings accordingly to get a balanced view of what the players thought acceptable with contentious points discussed through and a compromise position found. What I have detailed below is the buy-in approach to pre-match preparation from a mixed group of players in terms of playing position, ambition and experience. Whilst players did have very firm views on pre-match preparation, it is a team game and the management and coaching staff are a part of this team. They have a lot of experience to offer and their thoughts must not be discounted; this is why some of the thoughts detailed are from a personal and other coaches' and managers' experiences.

Let us first of all look at the days building up to and the night prior to a game. As I have stated, I do not intend in this paper to cover team training (rugby); this would be a stand-alone piece of work. What I will look at from the research is what individual players do and/or would wish to do in the week prior to the game in preparation for the game outside structured rugby training sessions. Major points that come out are:

- The more professional the environment, the more information players want on the opposition and on their individual opponent (information must be available as required, management lens). Some players are not very interested, if at all, in the opposition. I have suggested that this is a mistake and information that one gathers help prepare and defeat the opposition must be an advantage. To know how one's opponent plays has to help one prepare (management, coaching & psychological lenses). *(Afternote – given a run of poor results at my club I have re-examined this area as I have started to feel that too much time is being spent on the opposition and not enough on our own team. I have not had time to research this issue in detail but I have spoken to the visiting former Wallaby coach, Jake Howard, who is helping Oxford University prepare for the varsity game. He advocates very little information, if any, being gathered on the opposition and certainly no involvement by the team in analysing them. He feels all efforts by the players should solely concentrate on their and your own team's performance. I will certainly be taking an in depth look at this area of preparation)*
- A rest day in the week seems to be a must for most professional players and the favoured days seems to be on the Thursday for a Saturday fixture. This, for part-time clubs, does become an issue as Thursday is traditionally training night. Should thought, therefore, be given to training being moved to Wednesday to give more recovery prior to the game on Saturday? (leadership, management & physiological lenses). There would, of course, then be:

- The problem of which other night one trains on in the week, as issues such as when players have recovered from the last game etc come into play (management, coaching & physiological lenses).
- Nearly all players like a final team run, conducted by the players, whether this be as the last part of the Thursday evening session or on the Friday (the preferred day) prior to a Saturday game. Most players do not like a free day on the day prior to the game.
- There was not great cry for other team-bonding events, although an informal activity on the day prior to the game was favoured by one player. The majority, following the captain's run, preferred down time and free time. A team meeting and dinner together the night before the game, if staying away, is the preferred consensus.
- Sleep and nutrition played an important part in players' personal preparation.
- Most players would prefer to stay away as a team the night prior to a game.

Looking at some issues in more detail through specific lenses in respect of the day/night before the game:

### Sleep & Nutrition.

Players, as one, wanted to ensure that their sleep patterns and nutrition were correct the night prior to a game, whether staying away or in their home environment. It therefore follows that every effort should be made to ensure that the 'team'<sup>3</sup> has sufficient sleep and nutrition the night prior to the match and that it is of the correct quantity and quality. If we examine this through the leadership and management lenses, education of the whole team is vital so that everybody understands what is required of him in respect of sufficient sleep and correct nutrition<sup>4</sup>. As part of the team coaching programme, lectures on nutrition and lifestyle management from subject-matter experts would be invaluable and should be conducted. These guidelines and rules need to be established in pre-season and a buy-in obtained from the team. This then becomes a self-management issue if players are not gathering before match-day.

Management must ensure that, if the team is to be gathered prior to match-day, facilities are in place to allow all rules to be adhered to. It is also an important management issue and, therefore, one of leadership that individual needs (within reason) are catered for on gatherings before match-day. My research on sleep and nutrition indicates that all individuals, even though we are in a team sport, have differing needs and some peculiar rituals and routines that are self-management issues. The overriding factor is that each individual's need is met. Whether this is by

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<sup>3</sup> The TEAM is not just players - it is the players, coaches medical and management staff

<sup>4</sup> US Olympic official website

Health 24 website

Dr Chris Idzikowski – Edinburgh Sleep Centre

BBC Health Website

[www.coachwales.com](http://www.coachwales.com) (International consensus conference, IOC, Lausanne June 03

Advanced Sports Nutrition – Dan Benardot

each individual or collectively as a team is a management, leadership and instructional issue.

### Environment.

Where the team stays the night prior to a match will play an important role in players staying relaxed as they prepare for the game. The environment must be conducive to match preparation in terms of there being no distractions during sleeping hours and no major distractions that lead to a de-focus from the game. Looking at this issue through the psychological lens, it is important that the team are allowed to adopt the correct frame of mind for match-day. Again, this has to be a self-regulated issue if the team is not gathering before match-day but if the team are to meet the day, or days, prior to a match then it is important that the team can relax. This is only possible if each player's needs are met. What is not required are distractions, with players complaining they have not got what is required and worrying more about non match-related issues than relaxing and game preparation.

The team meeting prior to dinner that the players have indicated they would wish to hold would also be an important time for both the management and players to reinforce what is required the following day. It gives the forum for a positive mental build up which is vital to ensure players sleep well, know fully what is expected the next day and go to bed confident in what they have to achieve.

Tactical, Technical, Coaching and Physical lenses – Although this will be a major issue in the week's build-up to a game, it should become less of an issue the day prior to the game apart from team meetings and the captain's run as this is a time for, in the main, relaxing. Players have indicated that they want a captain's run. The majority, and I would argue all should, will carry out their own mental rehearsals (psychological lens) and, where necessary, hone closed skills as appropriate (kickers etc). Although the captain's run should be self-regulated it must not, from a rest point of view, be allowed to go on too long (**management lens**).

### Medical.

This issue of players that are struggling with injuries and whether or not they are fit to play can be a difficult and sensitive area to manage during the pre-match preparation process. I am talking about injuries that players can mask, not the player who obviously can not play. It can be an area prone to conflict between the player and coach. The question of confidentiality between coach, players and medical staff can become an issue and an area that will constantly have to be addressed. A number of question that coaches have told me they often have to ask in the week prior to a game are listed below. I would suggest that it would help greatly if the question were examined and reflected on through a variety of lenses, namely psychological, medical, physiological, leadership, management, ethical and moral:

- How late can a decision be left as to the availability of players?
- What is the effect on the player and team if the player is not available to train in the week prior to the game but is available for the game?

- How important is the player to the team?
- How important is the game?

It is very important when these issues are addressed in the preparation process that the coach retains the respect of not only the injured players but the whole team.

There are no easy answers to the problems posed by injuries to players. In informal discussion with a number of rugby medical personnel, including doctors and physiotherapists, there were no hard and fast answers or solutions. Each case has to be treated on its individual merits and *managed* accordingly, so as to have the least negative effect and maximum positive effect on the players in question and on the team

Given that no players I talked to raised the fitness-to-play issue, I did go back to the players I had questioned to get their viewpoint. To a man, they all admitted that they would always want to be given every opportunity to play (fit or not) and would always want to be able to demonstrate their fitness in the form of a fitness test. I have had personal bad experiences of fitness test and even when I have had conditioners design specific rugby-related tests, players have still broken down during the game.

There is no getting away from the fact that this is a very difficult area to manage; the bigger the game, the bigger the call for a player to declare himself unavailable. I do firmly believe that this is an area in the pre-match preparation that, when examined in detail, in particular through the psychological, management, leadership and medical lenses, the coach can work with the players and medical team to ensure that the best prepared team, in terms of not only fitness but the best interests of the team performance, takes to the field. Injured players do at some stage in the preparation for a game have to respect that rugby is a team game and not all the team take to the field of play - but all have a part to play. By introducing a set of protocols to deal with this area, many of the problems would be addressed. These protocols could be based along the following lines with adjustments made to suit different teams and scenarios as appropriate:

- A deadline set in the preparation process for a decision on player availability in respect of fitness.
- A deadline is set as to what training session a player must take part in to be available for selection.
- The decision on fitness is taken in a formal document assessment between coach and medical staff and, where appropriate, the player.
- If the squad size allows it, pressure on players to perform week-in week-out to justify their selection is removed by a rotational system being employed. Players would then feel comfortable at not having to play when not fully fit, but this of course would still not cover the ‘big game scenario.’

### Match Day.

Irrespective of whether it is an away fixture or a home fixture, players and management must take a personal responsibility to arrive at the pre-match meeting,

detailed in the pre-match routine, in the correct psychological state and also physically prepared in terms of dietary, hydration and rest and relaxation needs. All players interviewed have highlighted the need for a team meeting in some form or other. There are, of course, differing views on when this should be; some prefer it away from the ground and some like to do it at the ground - but the general consensus was that, once players are at the ground, the team meeting/gathering, even if it is only a few minutes, serves as the focus that this is the start of the game's 'switch-on time.' I have stated that all players, coaches and managers need to arrive at this meeting fully prepared and totally focused. It is too late to arrive at this meeting ill-prepared in terms of mental state or nutritional needs. It is no good trying to play catch-up; preparation to play on game-day starts as soon as one wakes up, not as one walks in the team meeting.

### What are we preparing for on match day?

We are preparing fifteen players, who are all **individuals**, to play a team game. A game that is highly physical, at times brutal, at times subtle, mentally challenging and physically draining. The match lasts eighty minutes, but after forty minutes there is the opportunity to change, reinforce, encourage or castigate the team and individuals. We are also preparing seven replacements that may or may not be involved in the game. There is also a management team comprised of coaches, specialist coaches, medical staff and individuals who enter the playing area or its surrounds and who also must be as prepared as the players to fulfil their respective roles. A well tuned management and coaching team can and should influence games.

### Prior to arrival at the ground.

Irrespective of whether the team has been together the night prior to the match or is meeting on match-day, my investigations have shown that a flexible routine to enable players and management to prepare correctly is important. Detailed in the table below is a structure that could be adopted:

Serial	Activity	Time	Remarks
1	Wake up.	At a time to allow a breakfast to meet individuals' needs. <sup>5</sup>	It is important that individuals have had sufficient sleep to meet their needs. Too much sleep can make individuals lethargic and should be guarded against.
2	Relaxation.	Prior to the formal team meeting/gathering it is important that the 'TEAM' has time to relax and individuals have their own time.	Not only is it the players that need time to relax, but also the management team. A relaxed team should perform more effectively. <sup>6</sup>
3	Visualisation.	Certain team members will want to make use of time prior to the formal meet time to visualise the events that are about to unfold.	This will be an individual discipline but one that can and should be developed within the team. Most of the players interviewed did the majority of their visualisation work earlier in the week, but this time can still be used for good mental preparation.
4	Fuel/re-hydration.	Available throughout the pre-match period.	
5	Team meeting.	If staying together, prior to final light meal before KO.	Players felt that, if possible, it was good to have the final team meeting to talk through the game and expectations prior to arriving at the ground. If this is not possible then players did wish for a meeting at the ground prior to KO.
6	Light meal.	At least 2 hours prior to KO.	Individuals will have own preferences, routines and rituals.
7	Medical.	As appropriate.	It may be possible for the medical team to undertake some strapping and rubs to save valuable time at the ground.
8	Travel to ground.	Allow sufficient time to prevent stress.	There is nothing worse than the pre-match routine being affected by lack of time and stressed individuals. <sup>7</sup>
9	Arrival at ground.	See detailed timings below.	

<sup>5</sup> All individuals will have a different dietary requirement on match days and this should be met wherever possible.

<sup>6</sup> Numerous publications, but in particular Leading Teams, Richard Hackman & Relaxation and Stress Reduction Workbook, Martha Davis

<sup>7</sup> A well researched paper on Stress in Sport by Arunjot Singh - <http://serendip.brynmawr.edu/bb/neuro/neuro03/web1/asingh.html>

Exact timings have not been detailed in the above table as what time kick-off is will determine the time available. All individuals will have their own preference as to how they manage their time before the team meeting. What I have laid out is a framework to work within. These are the activities that should occupy the time prior to the formal pre-match preparations.

Lets us now examine the serial in the table above through the relevant lenses.

### Leadership & Management.

Good leadership and management in the hours leading up to a match, particularly if the team are staying together, is for the management to appear anonymous unless required (highlighted in research). This is the players' time for relaxation, visualisation and personal preparation<sup>8</sup>. My experience suggests that certain players will seek out management, so they must make themselves available as needs arise. Good management will ensure that all the players' needs are met without being intrusive. It will be important that self-discipline has been instilled within the team to accommodate players' needs in respect of sleep and that players do have enough food and hydration throughout this preparatory period. Whether travel to the ground is as a team or individuals meet at a time previously arranged, the management team should ensure this happens in a relaxed and informal manner.

### Psychological.

It is important that nothing in this period prior to the formal events of match-day in any way have a negative affect on a player's psychological preparation. Once again, good management and leadership skills will ensure players' needs are fully taken care of and good routines and players' buy-in will cover all eventualities of preparation that will ensure a good psychological state of mind.

Environment – it is important that players feel comfortable in their surroundings in the time prior to the formal preparation. If the team are together, convivial surroundings are important. If players are meeting directly at the ground, then once again each player will have his own preference as to his preparation - but it should have been discussed in pre-season that this is an important time and match-day is match-day, not a time for outside distractions and stress. Players need to fully understand that this period is as important as the match itself and, therefore, they must not put themselves in an environment that causes stress or distracts from the preparation detailed.

Physical - time 'off legs' is very important for players in this period and it should be a time of the least possible physical exertion. Although there is no scientific research, it is a theory being discussed that even electronic games cause not only physical, but also mental exhaustion, and should be avoided in this period if one is to achieve maximum performance in the match. Each player will, of course, have his own relaxation

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<sup>8</sup> Foundations of Sport and Exercise Psychology – Robert Stephen Weinberg, Daniel Gould  
[www.mindtools.com](http://www.mindtools.com)

Methods, but this is an area that different techniques can be experimented with, tried and then developed to suit the team's and individuals' needs.

### Arrival time at the ground – factors to be considered.

As a team game, it is important that the 'team' arrive as one at the ground or meet at a time as one for home fixtures. The 'team' is the whole team, players and management. Why is this important? There will be individuals within the team who will have their own thoughts on when they would like to arrive and they will want their own space respected; but as the players' interviews demonstrate, it is a team game and other individuals within the team will worry, maybe not publicly but internally, why a certain individual has not arrived. This can also cause particular stress to management, therefore meet times become particularly important to ensure that stress levels are kept to a minimum at the most critical time in any team's agenda. It is important that time is built into the pre-match preparation programme to allow individuals the time and space that they require.

How long should a team be at the ground prior to kick-off? My research into this has shown that the compromise time for the formal preparation to start is 1½ hours prior to kick-off. From this it follows that whether it is a home or away fixture 1¾ hours prior to kick-off is the optimum time to arrive at the ground.

Reasoning for this is:

1¾ hrs builds in possible traffic delays etc. It also allows for the team meeting, if required, a get-together and banter before players fully focus. If arriving at a ground by coach, the pre-match meeting banter will have taken place previously. There will be a need for familiarisation with foreign surroundings at away fixtures and some players do like to meet with friends/family prior to the team meeting; others of course wish to avoid this. Again, catering for the individual needs within the team needs can, and should, be met.

Experience and my research<sup>9</sup> have shown that arriving at a venue when players and management having too much time on their hands can lead to lethargy and anxiety in players and must be avoided. Too much time can also lead to mental fatigue, as players start to burn up adrenalin and nervous energy which leads to physical energy being expended. By the same token, not having enough time leads to some players displaying anxiety and stress as they feel they have not got enough time to prepare. One must also guard against too rigid a routine as this can lead to complacency.

So how did I arrive at the timings for the pre-match preparation at the ground? It was important to work backwards from kick-off time and create a timeline of what has to be achieved. Empowerment is, and was, a powerful tool in this process to ensure that buy-in is achieved from all team members.

For the purpose of planning, kick-off time will be H hour

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<sup>9</sup> [www.defenselink.mil/specials/stressawareness](http://www.defenselink.mil/specials/stressawareness)  
[www.mindtools.com](http://www.mindtools.com)

Serial	Activity	Time
1	Team arrives at ground, team banter, adjust to surroundings, individuals allowed time and space, meet friends/family.	H hr minus 105min.
2	Medical/physiotherapy/strapper – also to be available in hotel, pre-meet or as soon as first player arrives at ground (leadership, management & medical lenses).	Minimum - H hr minus 105min.
3	Dressing room preparation – covered in detail as separate heading.	Completed prior to H hr minus 90.
4	Team meeting/gathering – If this has not been possible prior to arrival at the ground then it is important to have a formal meeting. Whatever, a quick gathering to formalise the time for focus has arrived is important to players. Players want any form of meeting/gathering to be short, sharp and to the point – covered in detail as separate heading.	H hr minus 90min.
5	Individual warm-up – players must arrive at team warm-up fully prepared for team and match-related activities (an area all players highlighted, insisted on and was one of the major component parts of their pre-match preparation).	As required.
6	Referee visits team – stud check, talk to respective playing units.	H hr minus 35.
7	Team warm up – Covered in detail as separate heading.	H hr minus 30.
8	Final dressing room preparation - covered in detail as separate heading.	H hr minus 5.
7	Kick-off.	H hr

All teams, players, coaches and management will of course have:

- Their own view on the time required,
- whether all activities are required and
- are there any serials to add.

I will now expand on each serial that I have identified in the table above, examining each serial through the appropriate lenses.

### Arrival at ground.

Punctuality is vital to allow for efficient time management and to prevent stress within the team. It is also important that outside distractions in this initial period of arriving at the playing venue do not distract from the main goal. Leadership and management (lens) play a vital part in this period in ensuring that both players and management are not distracted and, although relaxed, remain inwardly totally focused (psychological lens).

It is important in this period that an area is provided for those members of the team that want a quiet area to be able to relax in. The dressing room needs to be prepared prior to this time if possible. This of course may not be possible for some teams for away fixtures (management & environmental lenses).

A major psychological (lens) advantage can be gained in this area as to how a team presents itself on arrival, particularly for away fixtures. A striking corporate image and team togetherness can instantly sow seeds of doubt into many opponents' minds. Vis a vis mental toughness (psychological lens) in your players, it is important in this area when teams arrive at *your* home ground.

### Medical Preparation.

Most players like to be pampered prior to playing and this medical preparation and the conditions and environment (lens) that it is conducted in can be vital to team preparation. This area and time also lends itself ideally to players getting in the correct frame of mind for the match and ideal personal focus time (psychological lens). It is also a time players can express themselves to a member of the medical staff who are not part of the coaching team about last-minute worries and concerns - issues they would never discuss with the coaching team (psychological lens).

### Dressing room preparation.

I am not talking about what individual players undertake in this area, but what the players are presented with in the dressing room. Although it is appreciated that it will always be difficult to replicate the home dressing room for an away fixture, every effort should be made to ensure the environment (lens) is replicated as closely as possible. This said, it goes without saying that the facilities provided for the visiting team should be as bare and minimal as to be just deemed acceptable (environmental lens).

Attention to detail and making the players feel important is a factor that must be taken into account when considering what should be done with the dressing room (leadership & management lenses). Individual name cards, photographs of each player with their honours and club playing details plus kit that has been presented in a highly prestigious way should all be considered. Ample supplies of players' needs in terms of food and hydration drinks should be available. Motivation signs focusing on team goals, individual goals plus particular targets and goals for the match and season can be displayed around the dressing room (psychological lens). These should not be a distraction, rather a reminder of what is required. A timetable of events leading up to kick-off should be displayed along with a clock so that nobody is any doubt as to what has to be achieved and when (management & leadership lenses).

Music plays a big part in most players' preparation and my research has shown that one fit does not suit all. This is borne out by further scientific research<sup>10</sup> that demonstrates that different individuals require different music for stimulation and relaxation. In this modern era the personal stereo is the ideal tool for this purpose. There will be occasion when a certain theme for a match can incorporate a particular piece of music that is applicable to the whole team (psychological lens). The players' interviews showed that there was no objection to team dressing room music as

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<sup>10</sup> The Magic of Music in Movement  
Effects of asynchronous music on flow states and shooting performance among netball players

personal music can block out team music and some of my research does dispute the scientific research.

### Team meeting.

This needs to be short sharp and to the point and, if at all possible, take place prior to arrival at the ground. It needs to be player-led but coach controlled (leadership, management & tactical lenses). The meeting needs to be a forum for reminders and reinforcement, not discussion and certainly not for any changes. As this meeting is close to kick-off it may help if a set routine and format is adopted that the players have bought into so that everyone feels within their comfort zone. Motivation can commence in earnest in this forum and this would be the ideal place to show a motivational video if the match being prepared for lends itself to it (psychological lens). Overuse should not be made of video motivation, otherwise it loses its desired affect. Players and coaches have differing views on motivational videos. Some players prefer the out-and-out motivational video with all the trappings of loud music and all positive action (emotional lens). Others wished for a more technical video, highlighting both good and bad points that needed to be addressed prior to kick-off (technical, tactical coaching lens).

### Individual warm-up.

There is no 'I' in team but this is an 'I' period. All players will require to prepare physically and psychologically (lenses) in certain individual ways. This point was highlighted by all players interviewed.

### Officials.

It is important that when the officials first meet the team and coaching staff, they get a positive feeling; get the officials onside from minute one (psychological & management lenses). I am not suggesting that you grovel to the officials, but a quiet, firm and polite attitude can go some way to getting the officials to warm to the team. A conversation with the referee in the week prior to the game can be a very good ice-breaker. For home games it is important that a system is in place so that officials are met and greeted by club officials and, therefore, feel welcome (management & psychological lenses).

### Team warm-up.

This can prove to be a difficult area and one that has to be bought into by the players at the outset of the season. Players have been given ample time for their personal preparation and this is the time that the 'I' goes and the 'TEAM' comes to the fore (leadership & management lenses). What should be undertaken in the team warm up and who should conduct it is a matter for some debate. In talking with the players and coaches from across a wide spectrum of the game, it is one area on which there is no consensus. Some coaches want 25/35 minutes warm up. Players want, in the main, the minimum amount of time with the balance being in the 20/25 minute region. All players want to hit bags at some stage in the warm-up. Most, if not all the players,

deemed that the warm-up was purely motivational and in effect mental preparation (psychological lens). It certainly was not an opportunity for coaching (coaching lens). The players did want the warm-up tailored to what was to happen in the game given they had conducted individual physical preparation prior to the team warm-up. The purpose of the team warm-up is, therefore, to prepare the team tactically and psychologically (lenses) for what they were about to undertake. A number of players felt that the team warm-up should not be exactly the same each week as, by changing what was required of the players, it became a mental stimulus and involved them in decision-making, something that would be required throughout the game. In respect of who should take the warm-up, the players' consensus was that this is now the rugby coach's domain, not the fitness advisor, as seems to have been the case for a number of years. The players' reasoning for this was that it is a game of rugby that is about to be played, not a fitness session.

In summary from all the information that I gathered, it would be fair to say that players would like the warm up to be about 25 minutes in duration and concentrate on defence; hitting contact and activities should be totally game related (psychological & coaching lenses). It is therefore very important that players make maximum use of the time allocated for personal physical preparation.

#### Final dressing room preparation.

All players felt that this time is certainly a time for the team and the leaders within the team to ensure that the team leave the dressing room in the correct frame of mind for the battle ahead; it is not a time for coaches; they do not play the game. The players did put a rider on this that there will always be individual occasions when coaches with motivational skills can be made use of in this period. It was agreed by the players that this needs to be a very short period of time of around five minutes (empowered leadership lens).

### **Kick Off.**

#### Summary

What became very apparent during my many interviews is that, even though we are playing a team game, the individual has to be given the opportunity to prepare in his own particular way. Individual mental preparation was vital to all the professional players that I interviewed. That said, all players fully understood that the team had to take preference the closer one gets to kick-off and in any team preparation activity.

The coach's role in the pre-match preparation process certainly takes on more of the role of leadership and management than that of technical and tactical coaching, except of course in the tactical and technical rugby sessions (lenses) in the week's training prior to a game. In all the teams/coaches that I researched<sup>11</sup>, even though there is a

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<sup>11</sup> Harlequins, Wasps, Penzance, Ospreys, Rotherham

team manager, it is the coach who is in total control on game day; the manager should ideally operate as a facilitator.

I certainly conclude that prior preparation and planning for a game is vital to performance, as is routine on match day. Routine certainly helps the management team but it is the benefit that it brings to the players, who are allowed to drop into their comfort zone when they follow a set routine on match days, that can not be overstated. The majority, in fact all except one, wanted to be in this comfort zone particularly on game day before kick-off, the coaching team ensuring of course that they do not become complacent (leadership & management lenses), as it allowed them to channel all their energies towards peak performance during the game.

### Player interviews.

After a brief introduction to each player of what I was undertaking I let the players discuss and talk openly as to what they saw as pre-match preparation. It became apparent in all the interviews that the players had grown up with different forms of preparation and the majority of their preparation was dictated by whoever was coaching them. Even at the top level, certain procedures and processes have been suggested to players which the players had picked up on to implement without either understanding or buying into what they were doing. The interviews did last some time, but towards the end of each interview I did ensure the following issues had been addressed:

- Did they really want match preparation and how structured did they require it to be?
- What did they want, not what did the coach want, as individuals in respect of pre-match preparation?
- Produced a check list to ensure that we had covered:
  - Week prior to game.
  - Day prior to game.
  - Game day prior to arrival at ground.
  - Arrival at ground.
  - Dressing room prep.
  - Warm-up.

I informed them that I would wish to come back to them for comments once I had collated all the data and amend it accordingly so that they were all able to buy into the blueprint for pre-match preparation.

## Overall Conclusions

- ❖ There is certainly a need for pre-match preparation. It is a skill that can be trained for. We put major effort into tactics, tackling, passing etc. My findings from players point to how important pre-match preparation is to them in producing a performance. We therefore need to train players and coaches for pre-match preparation.
- ❖ There is great scope, particularly in younger players, for player development in the area of pre-match preparation to help them improve their game performance.
- ❖ Specific positions require specific skills in the warm up i.e. kicking, throwing, catching.
- ❖ There is a need for prioritisation of activities in the pre-match preparation process. The differences required by individual players in respect of their preparation need respecting and commonalities that exist need securing.
- ❖ There has to be a balance struck between psychological and physiological preparation.
- ❖ The coach remains accountable and the correct balance between player-centred preparation and team preparation needs to be managed and implemented.
- ❖ This paper has led to changes in pre-match preparation in the environment that I am currently coaching in. I have “managed change” with no conflict. By interviewing players individually, suggesting views on a one-to-one basis and then producing a consolidated, agreed upon compromise position, I have secured total buy-in from the team and management to a new pre-match preparation routine. This, in line with other component parts of the Level 5 course, required me examining the issue through a number of lenses to arrive at a balanced, thought-through, workable plan. This approach to change has proved enlightening and one I will certainly adopt in future change-management environments.