Sevens Rugby: Core Skills in Action
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Introduction:

In 2016, Rugby Sevens will take it’s place alongside 27 other sports in the Rio Olympic Games in Brazil. This inclusion has seen a vast development of the game since the announcement in 2009, most notably the women’s game, where “more women are playing Rugby internationally than ever before, as global participation increased from 1.5 to 1.77 million (18% growth) in 2014. Australian Rugby has demonstrated similar growth, which highlights the relevance, diversity and global nature of our sport”(A. Larratt, 2015).

Context:

As a game, Rugby Sevens comprises the most exciting components of Rugby Union compressed into 14 minutes of action and is then repeated six times in a tournament. The ability of players to execute the core skills of rugby under the pressure of time, space, and under fatigue and do so consistently over a two day period is unique to Rugby Sevens. Player’s abilities to develop and execute the core skills, dictates the effectiveness of the team and their success or failure. Doing so in six different games against six different opponents is another challenge entirely.

The physical and mental parameters created by playing seven players against seven players on a full sized field for two seven minute halves, generates a playing environment that requires players to be technically accurate as well as physically and mentally conditioned. The 2014-15 IRB and WWS series saw the ball in play for 7 minutes in the men’s game and 8 minutes in the women’s game. On average the Australian women pass the ball 44.5 times and the Australian men pass 33.2 times per game. There are 9.2 offensive rucks and 8.5 defensive contests in the men’s game, while the women compete at 8.9 offensive and 10.2 defensive rucks on average. The overall playing environment reflected by these statistics of the Australian approach to Rugby Sevens, is one of an expansive, high passing game with an emphasis on controlling contact offensively and competing for the ball in a ruck more often in the women’s game. All of this requires the players to be technically accurate in each of the afore mentioned core skills consistently under fatigue in order to be effective.

“The difference between elite and novice is the ability to perform your core skills consistently under pressure with diminishing time and space”, Darryl Gibson (Hickie, G., & Donaldson, E., 2015).

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This paper will focus specifically on the core skills, however it is done with the understanding that players are physically conditioned to be able to execute the skills under fatigue and are able to effectively work off the ball and repeat their efforts consistently over a two day tournament.

**Catch / Pass:**

The key focus of the women’s game and to a lesser extent the men’s game is the ability to catch and pass with accuracy consistently over a variety of distances. The Australian Women’s team pride themselves on their ability to unlock defences by using the ball with width and accuracy. Their ability to pass the ball over 10 meters plus, out in front, at pace consistently on both sides sets them a part from the rest of the world. The men also execute the skill of catch pass, effectively extending their range to 15m consistently and on occasion surpassing 20m plus to unlock the press defence that many teams apply against them. Similar to the game of 15’s, the use of accurate passing to unlock defences and exploit players in space is well utilised in Rugby Sevens. The key difference is that more often than not the space is already available and the challenge is to pass accurately to maintain the space and allow players to attack the space effectively. The above statistics regarding passes thrown by the Australian Women and Men reinforce the importance of being highly accurate and efficient in this core skill. Transference to the 15’s game is direct as player’s ability to shift the ball into space or out of contact result in positive outcomes.

In order to develop the core skill of catch pass, it must be practiced in every session and in a variety of situations. Players “need to be competent in delivering a variety of passes accurately in both directions. The different types of passes include the flat lateral pass, the spin pass, the short pass, the floated pass, and the pop pass” (Jones, 2013). A number of passing drills commonly used within the sevens game include; pull backs, pass resets, T switch drill.

A. The pull back passing drill is one that allows players to develop their ability to pass and receive in a closed scenario while reinforcing the expectation of inside support and resetting into depth.

This activity also provides the opportunity to vary the depth and width of the pass to reflect game requirements.

B. Pass resets is another activity I use with my teams in order to effectively replicate the width and depth I want to see in a game. It is another semi-closed drill with no defenders, however the constraints can be varied by the width of pass and the tempo of release.

C. T-Switch Drill is an activity that practices a common attacking pass to attack the inside defender. This activity also allows players to practice their footwork and decision making.

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This is just a snap shot of drills but the key point is to practice repetition and develop the skill then introduce constraints to place players under pressure. Based on the statistics from the 2014-15 season a ball is passed every 6.3 seconds in the men’s games and the women’s every 5.7 seconds, placing a huge importance on this core skill of rugby within the game of sevens. Understanding that this skill will most likely be executed under fatigue is also important. Aaron Smith of the All Backs and Highlanders suggests training “under pressure and under fatigue because that’s how you are for 80% of time in a game”(Hickie, G., & Donaldson, E., p.98, 2015).

**Speed / Agility: Use of Footwork and Acceleration**

Within the game of sevens the ability to use footwork against defenders, beat a man with speed and run lines as a support player is highlighted by the outcome of beating that defender often results in a try being scored. The expanded nature of the playing field against what is usually a six man defensive line with a sweeper in the fullback role cannot be understated and players ability to exploit this advantage with speed and agility emphasis the attacking philosophy of sevens. Both men and women in the Australian program show the ability to beat defenders with footwork, speed and running lines, consistently scoring 26.1 points in the women’s series, while the men on average score 21.2 points per game. Players with footwork are dangerous in all forms of the game, however the added space and limited contact points in sevens allow players with agility and speed to threaten the defensive line and challenge defenders to make decisions. Invariably a defender makes a poor decision or is too slow to react, which creates the opportunity for the attacking an advantage.

Players within the game of sevens must be able to win one on one contest, so it is imperative to have footwork and speed. Preparing players for this include specific sprinting drills, agility activities and again constraints based activities that require players to develop their ability to challenge defenders consistently with confidence of beating the first defender and then asking the cover to over track, creating opportunities for support. Players with speed are extremely important in Rugby Sevens as opportunities are created that allow man on man contests with space. The most notable Rugby Sevens exponents of this currently are the USA’s Carlin Isles and Australia’s Elia Green. Both ex-track athletes who have transitioned to the Rugby Sevens arena. Their ability to accelerate into space and finish has resulted in their team’s recent success in Dubai.

Using sprint techniques and specific speed training is a must in the sevens game. Players ability to accelerate to top speed over short distances and their ability to change direction at speed whilst maintaining their balance allows them to be dangerous in attack and cover effectively in defence.
Decision Making:

Seven to eight minutes of ball in play, attacking possession for 3.30 minutes for the men and 4.20 minutes for the women mean that players must make good decisions consistently or risk turning over possession. Within the game of sevens, decision making can be seen in attack, in support, in the attacking and defensive breakdown, in the defensive line and in the tackle contest. In no other form of rugby are these decisions tested as consistently or under the fatigue levels as they are in Rugby Sevens. The picture that players see is simplified by having fewer bodies on the field, however it is also amplified by the speed at which these decisions need to be made and the accuracy of each decision. Every facet of rugby is contest, so players in Rugby Sevens are required to make good decisions constantly to retain possession or to create turnover opportunities.

Although strategically different to fifteens, the principles of effective decision making such as when to take the line on or when to shift wide (Hickie, G., & Donaldson, E. (2015) applies. Player’s individual ability to read defences and exploit weakness are imperative to the success or failure of their attack. Within the game of Sevens rugby, players are continuously asked to make technical decisions and execute them effectively. Attacking players must decide what position to present the ball in; Pencil, Long Place, Squeeze, Pop etc. Support players must decide how to seal: Latch and seal, clear out defender, scan and protect. All of these decisions are based on the actions of the ball carriers and defenders and have specific cues that can be practiced and refine. The key variable is the speed at which the decisions need to be made and the impact of making poor decisions on the teams result.

The skill of decision making can be practiced in closed drills or in open game related activities. Teaching players what cues to look for is the most effective process for post tackle and break down decisions. Cues include the number of players in the break down, the distance a support player is, what type of tackle is affected. What body positions the attacking player has landed in. Developing a number of responses to these cues and practicing them constantly allow players to be accurate and efficient in their post tackle decision making. Accuracy and speed can be practiced at training by the replication and repetition; testing this knowledge however must be done in full contact games, as timing of decisions and execution is fundamental. Transferring this application to the 15’s game has been successful as players like Liam Gill and Sean McMahon have shown equal skill in both forms of the games. It could be argued that players development and decision making has been accelerated by competing on the international Rugby Sevens stage. The decision in 15’s and Sevens are parallel, however the number of bodies is increased in 15s. The ability to make decisions accurately and at speed however is emphasized in sevens and can be an asset in 15’s.
The ability to read defences and exploit mismatches is another aspect of this core skill that can be improved through practice and makes the player a more threatening attacking player. “...to simplify decision making, the attacking player should be constantly assessing the defence and counting” (Blackburn, 2013). Defensively good decisions also provide opportunities to turnover ball in the tackle contest or resulting breakdown. Making good decisions post-tackle by understanding the laws of the game allowed the Australian Women to improve their ability to gain more possession to unleash their attacking abilities and resulted in a ranking of number Two in the 2014-15 World Series. The Australian coaching staff understood that “A ruck is a phase of play where one or more players from each team, who are on their feet, in physical contact, close around the ball on the ground” (World Rugby, 2015), meaning that the tackler could reload to his or her feet and compete for the ball from the position they reloaded from and meant the defenders retained an extra player in the line or in the ‘half’ position. This exploitation of understanding the laws added a dimension of decision making at the breakdown that increased Australia’s rate of turn overs in both the men and women’s games. Again, the best form of practice is through contact games that reflect game play.

**Support Play:**

Support play is the corner stone of rugby and is never as important as on the Rugby Sevens field. With the improved coaching of teams defensive systems and the afore mentioned opportunity to contest breakdown possession, players need to be accurate and effective with their support play both with ball in hand and in the break down, minimizing the oppositions ability to turn the ball over. Working in threes is a given in order to secure possession and recycle effectively. “When considering continuity in sevens, the general rule is that players should support in threes, where three includes the ball carrier (Blackburn, 2013). This ability to support the ball carrier also provides opportunities to receive an off load or pop pass off the ground if the attacking player has dominated contact.

Fiji is a country that in both their men and women’s games, look to off load through contact and alter their support lines with that intention in mind. Australia play a more contact recycle game that requires players aligned behind the ball carrier to seal but can be adjusted by depth if again the ball carrier is dominant. “Support players must work hard off the ball to give the ball carrier options to pass or offload out of the tackle. They should be constantly reading the play, which means assessing situations as they happen on the field, and making decisions based on the movements of the ball” (Blackburn, 2103). Keeping the ball alive and learning to run support lines is a skill that can be practiced by using some traditional Rugby Sevens training games such as one-touch, drop of touch and off-side touch to teach players to get into supporting position to retain possession. Altering the constraints can again further
challenge the players to adapt and improve.

**Tackle:**

The ability to beat a defender in sevens is the cornerstone of the attacking philosophy the game was established under, however the skill of tackling an attacker and containing the threat is one that wins and loses games. This particular skill is one that can definitely improve a players ability on the fifteens field. Players ability to connect, track and then effect a one on one tackle is continuously challenged on the sevens field, usually at speed and under fatigue. Players that are able to affect a single man tackle and reload to compete for the ball are extremely effective in both forms of the game, however on the Rugby Sevens field with less support and more space to cover this becomes even more difficult. Playing a 6:1 system with a sweeper out the back means that defenders are required to cover 10 meters or more and put themselves in a position to tackle attackers constantly. Attacking teams are looking for a disconnect between defenders that will allow them to isolate one defender and beat the tackle.

The modern game now also requires defenders to reload and compete for the ball or realign as the A defender immediately, so the effectiveness of the contest or tackle becomes even more important on the Rugby Sevens field. Players need to be taught the fundamentals of an effective tackle in closed drills, then progress to tracking and then again live game like situations where they need to affect multiple tackles. Rob Hoadley encourages coaches to “teach the isolated skill component of each tackle in controlled training drills then teach the decision making process”. As previously stated, an effective tackle can allow players to contest possession and turn over the ball. Again, to improve the skill of tackling players need to practice consistently at training and in game based contact activities and in live contact games.

**Summary:**

The playing conditions of Rugby Sevens requires players to develop their core skills to an extremely high level. Due to the constraints of time as well as the amount of space available and limited players on the field, accuracy and consistency of core skills is the differentiating factor between winning and losing. Players who develop these skills to the level of International competition are invariably able to apply the same skills to the 15’s game. In the recent Rugby World Cup the following players had graduated from the Sevens pathway; Adam Ashley-Cooper, Bernard Foley, Matt Giteau, Rob Horne, Tevita Kuridrani, Ben McCalman, Sean McMahon, Drew Mitchell and Nick Phipps. All of these players played vital roles in the success of the Wallabies throughout the tournament and are extremely accurate and consistent with all the core skills previously addressed.
These players represent but a snapshot of the number of players that have played Rugby Sevens for Australia who have gone on in their careers and played Super 15, Pro 12, Top 14, Premiership, Top League or for the Wallabies.

Not to be outdone the Australian Women are now full time professionals with players consistently nominated for the World Player of the Year award. In the past three seasons, Charlotte Caslick and Emilee Cherry have been nominated with Emilee Cherry named World Rugby Women’s player of the Year in 2013-14 season, demonstrating excellence in each of the core skills discussed. The development of these two players in particular demonstrates the ability to learn and improve core skills through the excellent coaching of the Australian program after transitioning from Touch Football.

The continual growth of rugby Sevens as a viable pathway for both Men and Women with develop better athletes and rugby players and will progressively lead to developments in the game. The core skills addressed in this paper are applicable to both Rugby Sevens and 15’s, with a player’s ability to execute these under pressure a differentiating factor of success.

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*NB References have been included for resources for further reading.*
References:


2014/15 HSBC Sevens World Series Statistical Report

2014/15 World Rugby Women's Sevens Series Statistical Report