

A Tri Nations 2007 Analysis as a Pre RWC Barometer

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Beyond any polemic statements made during the competition whereas teams should leave players home in the wake of the RWC preparation, this 2007 edition of the southern hemisphere tri-nations tournament revealed some interesting new trend towards the coming World Cup.

This year, and independently of the teams' selected players, there was a strong incentive towards the development of a *high volume of high intensity* type of game, where all matches has been played with at least 43% of Actual Game Time (AGT) and an average of 46.3% which is so far unique not only for the tri-nations but for world international competitions (for reference the last IRB RWC 2003 was played at 42% AGT - source IRB 2004).

Table 1 shows the figures of AGT for all the six games played in 2007

SA-Aus	SA-NZ	Aus-NZ	Aus-SA	NZ-SA	NZ-Aus	Average Comp
49%	49%	43%	44%	49%	44%	46.3%

Table1: legend: SA=South Africa; Aus=Australia; NZ=New Zealand; Average Comp=Average for the Competition

Although half of the games were played at over 45% of AGT (which I call the "zone 45"), compared to a third of the games last year, the score lines were tighter and less tries were scored, certainly meaning that focus was made on the defense system's rehearsal prior the World Cup, but could also denote less efficiency in playing at a higher volume/intensity level.

What certainly needs to be noted is the capacity this year for South Africa to sustain a higher volume/intensity game. Whereas the Springboks were usually playing in the "zone 40" the last few years (like France and England), the tendency shown with South African franchises in the 2007 S14 to increase game continuity, volume and intensity has certainly well transferred to the international level.

As shown in table 2 which summarizes the AGT of the two test matches the All Blacks played at home against France last June, the All Blacks still hardly ever produced their trademark style of game of early and powerful penetration behind the gain line with offloads in the tackle. Since 2006 it seems that the All Blacks are purposefully playing in the comfort zone of their opposition in order to study better the forces in presence, as well as putting themselves under pressure, gaining valuable mental toughness progress in the process.

NZ-France 1 st Test	NZ-France 2 nd Test	Average AGT for 2 Tests	Average AGT Tri-Nation
35%	44%	39.5%	46.25%

Table 2: AGT NZ-France tests compared to NZ AGT in the tri-nation

Within a month time the All Blacks adapted to produce 18% more AGT at international level, and used two of the tri-nations games against South Africa (with two games at 49%) to push it beyond the usual "comfort zone 45" which is now standard for the NZ players.

Once more, the southern hemisphere teams while restraining somehow their game to avoid strategic setbacks in the world cup, has shown the way. Facing the evidence of modern rugby collective and individual tighter defense systems, they laid the foundation for upsetting the ever increasing influence of tighter defense lines by increasing by far the capacity of pacing the game beyond the breaking point for most team worldwide. The physical pressure these teams will put on their oppositions with or without the ball will be such that rival teams will not be able to compete legally (meaning within the rules of the game) at the crucial point of modern rugby: the breakdown. It is clear for me today that only the team able to comfortably, consistently and efficiently perform beyond the "zone 45" at international level with enough adaptability margin will lift the trophy in Paris next October. In my opinion, only 4 teams in the world today have the capacity to lift their game's volume and intensity confidently beyond the "zone 45": New Zealand, Australia, now South Africa (it was not the case just a year ago!), and for Europe: Ireland.

To be effective not only during a game or two as test rugby is designed for, but during a complete tough tournament such as the RWC, the quality player depth factor will also be crucial. With this in mind, the New Zealand team development has been well ahead of the oppositions. They developed in less than four years two interchangeable teams able to compete at the highest international level, hence leaving them with a great margin for tactical maneuver or injury coverage from the bench.

The issue of the 2007 IRB RWC is drawing close. More than ever, I think that this competition is going to revolutionize the way rugby is played and moreover how the training is meant to be to maximize efficiency. Later we will all realize that there was the rugby before RWC 2007 and what evolves after it. For some it will be an illumination, for others... business as usual but in any case, our game will change. I am even more convinced of that.

The sad part is to realize that rugby is now mostly better played without the ball than with it such the game became defense oriented. We can not ignore the fact that the team conceding the less amount of try has better chances of winning. Nonetheless I am convinced that the above mentioned teams will give us through their extraordinary conditioning and skill development for playing a high intensity game a lesson of offensive rugby with the "physical conditioning erosion factor" to annihilate the oppositions.

Let the game begin, and let's enjoy it!