

An Individual Collective Game: Mindset Change for Performance Development

By Frederick Claro, HP Coach
TBI Director of Training, P-PS / JATS

Alright, I can already hear voices screaming: "what is he talking about?" Dreadful to suggest that the individual is above the team, heresy, *lese-majeste* do I hear in the background... Well, it is right in a way, but it could also be a mind shaker statement to understand better why northern and southern hemispheres rugby are drawing far apart quality wise year after year. In this issue, we shall analyze how different systems and mindset are generating two different kinds of evolutions in the game. We will see how the individual decision making in action has more impact with the southern hemisphere players than with their northern hemisphere counter parts and how it affects their game respectively. We shall also see how the self-confidence built by southern hemisphere player to beat their opponent with one on one confrontation is paramount to key decision making and to the success of a sound offensive game plan to defeat the purposes of the currently too much defense oriented game.

If northern hemisphere rugby is to close the ever growing gap, it would first need to admit and understand these differences objectively. It would also need to assimilate the results and act accordingly. In this article I will explain how.

Let's reestablish a fundamental concept first: yes rugby is a collective sport. It is even said to be a "collective combat sport" in France. Of course the notion of ball conquest is fundamental of the game. Nothing can be achieved as an individual: only a collective greatness and osmosis will achieve great success. Nonetheless, everything starts with the players as individualities. These individualities must merge as one to become "greater than the sum of all individuals". To achieve such this goal, players will develop physical, technical, tactical and psychological abilities to reach their full potential.

One of the biggest mistakes made in western nations is to commit young players far too early in specializing first in a sport, then towards a position of play in the case of a collective sport such as rugby. Developing polyvalence in athletes and players is certainly the best development possible over a long period of time. Moreover, a player evolving in the game at different positions will develop inherently two qualities we shall see later are paramount to achieve optimal performance in the game: self-confidence leading to better decision making, and leadership abilities.

At the earliest stages of training, physical (fitness and conditioning development for group age), technical and tactical training should be introduced simultaneously and adaptively to suit the developing players. In this area, southern hemisphere players are better prepared for total rugby play, and this not only shows at the highest level of the competition. It is embedded in grass-root rugby too. The last couple of years, rugby has generally evolved

towards a more defensive trend, and it has become more difficult for attacks (or should we just say the ball users) to score more tries and get the upper hand in games.

This current defensive pattern has made a lot of teams embrace the fact that it is actually easier and somehow safer to play without the ball than with it, and the last RWC showed some great example of the most negative rugby played in the history of the game. It has become fact nowadays that teams are mainly playing a defensive style of rugby so as not to lose, rather than playing a total expansive rugby in order to actually score more tries and win the games. The very few exceptions to this new "set pattern" are being found among teams in New Zealand, Australia and the Pacific Islands.

No one would deny the fact that the very first fundamental of the game is to "go forward" with or without the ball. Let's put ourselves for a minute in the most difficult situation of the game today: having the ball and playing offensively. The very organized defense lines are, in most instances, even at the lowest level of the game, denying attacking teams the chance to cross the gain line, forcing the ball users to constantly recycle the ball in numerous frames of play in order to provoke a more and more hypothetical numerical or positional advantage or also hoping for a few missed tackles for the attacking team to feed upon.

This now-standard scenario has two possible evolutions depending on which side of the equator the game is played. The typical game style for northern hemisphere teams is to play a safe "percentage" rugby, holding on to the ball frame after frame, milking a penalty to either kick at goal if field position has been achieved or go for the lineout and gaining more valuable field position with a kick in doing so. The typical answer to this scenario from a southern hemisphere team, specifically coming from New Zealand, Australia or the Pacific Islands is to proceed with minimum passing to players who are capable of winning in a one on one situation. In this style, the ball carrier steps in the space between defenders (not crashing into them), resists tackle, avoids going to ground or does so the latest as possible beyond the gain line, and looks for support players in the interval for an off-load or go to ground with support for a quick recycle of the ball further destabilizing the defense. The aim of this operation is to cross the gain line quickly, force the defense to retreat through the gate to contest the ball and provide quick continuity for the game to evolve quickly behind the gain line, hence keeping a front foot motion and increasing tremendously the chances of scoring after just a few frames because the defense system will be severely altered.

To play this kind of expansive game, a team needs players able to win one on one situations or even one on two with a great deal of deception, power, agility and ball skill. Originally, a few players per team were capable of being the strikers as they were called, making most moves also all the more predictable. Today in all the southern hemisphere teams, all the players can strike with power, and the danger is now potentially coming from anywhere on the field at any time.

This recently became even more obvious to me upon watching an ERC and a S14 game one after the other. It is strikingly clear that there is a completely different attitude and

mindset behind the two styles. Reflecting on it, I asked myself if it really was by choice that European rugby is slower, less prone to attacking options and the answer is I believe: no, not a deliberate, but it is probably a forced choice. Why forced? European rugby does not have many players who are capable of facing one on one confrontational duel for the entire duration of the game to win the gain line. The few players who are capable to do it are either south hemisphere players playing their trade in Europe (is it coincidental that they have been hired in Europe? Why are southern hemisphere players such in demand in the old continent?). A few local talented players spread out in domestic rugby teams possess the skill and power, but are also too often restricted to "play safe". Then the question arises: Why? Why are there not more players in Europe able to perform and win confrontational one on one duel for 80 minutes during a game? Simply put, the fitness and conditioning level of European players is way below par than that of their southern hemisphere counterparts. This fate is due mainly to early positional specialization, a lack of multi lateral sport development approach and a late development in maximum strength and power conversion. Too many links of the training developmental chain to reach high performance level are irreversibly missing. In Europe, all segments of development are too often hermetically separated. Players' preparation from 8 years of age and up to high performance involves the technical aspect of the game, then the tactical and then the physical aspect. It should rather be seen as one unbreakable block. Kids should be prepared for future strength and power development so that when the time comes to really enhance the body performances, these young bodies are ready to undertake the job and not be broken by it as it is now too often the case. For the best proof of this, just look at the number of young players (and also athletes in other sports) achieving peak performance at junior level and being thereafter unable to reproduce top performances at senior level. It is nowadays a trade mark of European sport in most disciplines. Early specialization will make athletes peak young with little prospect for future development.

When a young player is physically fit and able to perform, he/she will relish the physical challenges of the game, gain in confidence, impose his/her game to the opposition, be mostly injury-free and develop his/her decision making. This is actually what it comes down to in every single action of the game: what decision a player and his teammates directly involved in the action are taking for the good of the team.

This is where I see it as a free exchange of stimuli and responses between a player and the collective. For the good of the team, and in response to an established game plan, all players will make individual decisions which correct or not, must be supported instantly by the group. It is important to realize that in this aspect, rugby is an individual sport, as players react to what they see in front of their eyes, analyze instantly what will be best in the moment for the team and select the proper course of action to implement a clear and sound decision, made in the moment individually on behalf of the group.

When a team is attacking, once the ball comes in the hand of one of the players, he knows that his duty for the team is to go forward and cross the gain line. He must select instantly what he sees fit in that moment. He must decide if he is in a good position to attack the space between defenders (knowing support will be there) or if he should instead pass the ball to a better-positioned teammate. In a lot of instances, we see southern hemisphere

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players stepping and attacking the space as soon as they are positioned as the first receiver. All players have the necessary fitness, power and power endurance to challenge the opposition for 80 minutes in the numerous one-on-one situations which will occur. This is where we can see at its best the fusion between the physical, technical and tactical abilities of the players, constantly analyzing the moment in front of their eyes and taking the decision to "have a crack at it". This is the result of a superior system of player development, culminating at the highest level to the eradication of ineffective individual and collective decision making even under the condition of fatigue.

The decision-making process of a player is an individual decision which will affect the entire team at that particular moment. The team will deal with the positive or negative consequences of that decision in the moment without even the blink of an eye. This is where the collective supports the individual himself melted in the group. There is a strong notion of trust involved and this trust is the result of a progressive linear development of all members of the team towards the goal of error free decision making in the heat of the action. The successive moments of an action are in fact a chain of individual decisions made by the individual players of the best thing to do at the present moment. The collective result of an action is the sum of all the decisions made by every player involved in that action, every one supporting, improving or correcting the decision made a fraction of a second previously.

To develop such players, one must enhance their self-confidence (not to be confused with arrogance) by developing all required aspects of the game physical fitness and stamina, general and specific technique and tactical astuteness. This must be done progressively and timely. Putting the players early on in numerous game-like one-on-one situations will enhance their confidence in decision making, get the young players to enjoy the feelings of beating an opponent in a one-on-one situation then bring in the support players, and the mini-units will be ready to function and perfect themselves time after time. Get the players to go in contact, to the sacrifice with the purpose being to beat their opponent one-on-one and cross the gain line with support, while providing secure ball for the continuity of the game beyond the gain line. The team who fulfills the most of these mini-missions during 80 minutes will win the game.

The mindset should be:

Player reads the game → Player makes the decision to attack the space → Teammates make the decision to run in support in the same interval for an off-load or link with the ball carrier to resist tackles and move in deep behind the gain line → Other teammates analyze the new situation → Take the decision to pursue the action for game continuity, replace themselves in support → The next ball carrier will make a new decision on if, when and how to penetrate the defensive line etc...

A similar chain of decision making is also involved of course in any defensive action.

This is where we see that it is clearly a chain of individual decision making, supported by the collective in accordance of the objectives (game plan). We can also see that in gaining the

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confidence to make decisions with basically every move, players increase the leadership level within the team. Such a system raises the leadership level of every single player who is constantly involved with the complete development of the game for the team. As a result the motivation increases by far, boosting the self-confidence level hence closing the circle of events.

About a year prior to the last RWC, two European nations moved into this direction: Ireland first and then Wales with high level of improvement and results. These two nations changed their system to better fit into the new era of rugby, and they are the precursors in Europe. We saw some very positive results from these teams this year, whereas French, English and Scottish rugby are far less dominant than in the past.

The future of the game and development of its new generation of European players starts with the acceptance of some system weaknesses. These must be remediated by molding young players' development towards individual decision making, one-on-one confrontation in game-like situations in training and games. Moreover perfecting the context in which these players will grow is paramount: treat and provide physical, technical and tactical training must be focused on as a unit and not remotely linked entities as it is currently thought and taught. The decision making process in the action is to favor the players' self-confidence and leadership abilities at earlier stages of the training. It will be for the greatest benefit of the team. The teams must support individual decision making with a purpose rather than oblige the players to obliterate themselves individually and collectively in a suffocating environment of negative rugby as it is too often seen.

Skilful, fast, powerful, confident players able to defeat the opposition in the multiple one-on-one duel situations occurring during a game will set the team on the front foot. It will be difficult to stop such a system even with the best drilled defense lines. Strong collective rugby starts with each individual player. Having these players systematically and patiently enhanced through the years with and for the team will certainly build the strongest foundation for success.

Safe training,