

RWC 2007 Statistical Analysis: Where is the Game Going?

By Frederick Claro HPC, October 26, 2007

Of course the IRB will publish within the next few months a complete game stats analysis of the World Cup, which will be much more precise in terms of the variety of the game elements analyzed.

I kept looking and analyzing the games' Actual Game Time (AGT, representing the time where the ball is effectively in play), as I believe it is a fundamental issue to understand where the game is going. Again, if the field and possession time are important indications to analyze a game, this world cup at least has proven in a few occasions that getting the "lion share" of the ball possession and field occupation doesn't mean to win any longer.

I will address more precise comments on the new defensive trend of the game in another issue as I shall here concentrate in presenting the actual numbers and facts of the game as it went on.

To analyze every single game would have been a very fastidious issue, and the IRB will come with a general AGT figure in its future stats release I am sure. The IRB figure for the AGT of the RWC 2003 was 42% average (source IRB 2004).

Here, I analyzed the AGT of 10 group games of the major contenders for final glory, the quarter finals, semis, 3rd place match and the Final. Below are the general figures of AGT for group and final phases based on 18 games analyzed and also an analysis country by country (major contending nations):

AGT figures for 10 major group games and final phase: 18 games, average AGT: 43.5%

Details:

Average AGT 10 Group Games	Average AGT for the Final Phase
42.6%	45%

Average AGT for France:

France- Argentina	France- Ireland	France-NZ	France- England	France- Argentina	Average
43%	41%	54%	45%	47%	46%

Average AGT New Zealand:

NZ-Italy	NZ-Scotland	NZ-Romania	NZ-France	Average
43%	43%	42%	54%	46%

Average AGT South Africa:

SA-Samoa	SA-England	SA-Fiji	SA-Argentina	SA-England	Average
39%	44%	41%	38%	46%	42%

Average AGT England:

England-SA	England-Tonga	England-Australia	England-France	England-SA	Average
44%	41%	40%	45%	46%	43%

Average AGT Argentina:

Argentina-France	Argentina-Ireland	Argentina-Scotland	Argentina-SA	Argentina-France	Average
43%	46%	47%	38%	47%	46%

Note: Another game entered the stats for the 10 group games: Wales-Fiji which has been played at an average AGT of 44%

The final phases of the competition were played at an average AGT of 45%. I mentioned before the competition started that I believed that only a team able to play in the zone of 45% of AGT can win the trophy as the latest innovation in the game has been the trend to play a "high volume / high intensity" type of game, specifically with the teams from the Southern Hemisphere. Very few teams in the world are able to play in the "zone 45" comfortably, and South Africa joined this exclusive club very recently in 2007, after successfully converting their high paced game in the Super 14 towards the national team.

I believe South Africa won because that team provided the best compromised package between the traditional conservative, low-risk rugby played in Europe and the much more expansive total rugby style played in Super 14 and tri-nations competitions. Traditionally, South Africa has always been the more "European" of the southern hemisphere's teams, playing a more conservative, physical rugby. What they were lacking is the conditioning and higher level of skills to cope with the "high volume, high intensity" game played by New Zealand and Australia. Australia leveled themselves down due to a lack of competitiveness in the set piece parts of the game, specifically the scrum, whereas the All Blacks developed one of the best forwards pack in the world for its physicality, polyvalence, technique, and set pieces competitiveness. This is where South Africa had to emphasize their game development in the likely event (prior the competition started...) they would meet in the

final. Physical conditioning and skill development were paramount during the S14 and tri-nations campaigns, and transferred well to the national teams as the Springboks were able to play two games against the All Blacks (both lost, but they proved a point..) at 49% AGT, where the ball was physically more carried than during the world cup, hence inducing more fatigue. These were two good tests showing the evolution of South African rugby!

As a result, the combination of their natural ability to play a conservative game with their freshly acquired capacity to sustain bouts of game at high volume and high intensity was the winning combination, and deservedly so. Looking at it even closer, they really didn't have to employ themselves too much to win the competition, playing at an average AGT of 42%, well within their maximum limits, whereas in the recent past, the South African team would be in its comfort zone in the range of 40%...

A question arising after watching the competition is: where is the game going? So obvious it was that the emphasis was placed on defense and position kicking. In many instances I found myself yawning and thinking that we were back to the "bad old days of the up and under"...

This world cup has proven to the unbelievers that the adage: "it is easier to play without the ball than with it" is certainly true!... For how long?...

To be continued....