

# Reflection on the 2006 Tri Nations

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One year prior the next RWC in France, it is interesting to look at some statistics of this year competition and also review what we saw in the wake of a prospective analysis of the forces in presence.

First let's review some statistics of the competition:

Ball in play time	Lineouts	Scrum	Tries	Stoppages	Stoppage time
41%	31	19	4.7	83	33 seconds

Figure 1: Average per game data based on this year 9 games of the competition

New Zealand	Australia	South Africa
42%	41%	38%

Figure 2: Average ball in play time per nation

What are these numbers telling us?

That still compared to past international games, elite international rugby is plaid with more continuity, with less stoppages, hence less recovery time between bouts of ball in play time. A study has shown that NZ players for example are used to play in the zone of 45% of real game time and more (Claro, Rugby Evolution 2005). Australian rugby is closed in figures than NZ rugby, and players are also comfortable with high level of ball in play time, which is not the case of South African rugby, which by nature is more static and based on a classic approach of physical defiance and field positioning. In the figures above mentioned it is to be noticed that the first game All Blacks-Australia have been plaid at an incredible 49% ball in play time!

So roughly all three teams plaid at a rhythm and intensity close to what they are used too domestically and internationally, although NZ and Australia were well within their comfort zone whereas South Africa plaid at their usual intensity.

The competition was easily won by NZ two games prior the end of the tournament. NZ plaid their three games against South Africa at an average of 38% of ball in play time. NZ plaid their three games against Australia at an average of 45% of ball in play time. This clearly indicates that one of the goals of the NZ team was to play the oppositions in their comfort zone rather than their own. This automatically did put more pressure on NZ to win games and to get the team out of tough situations at time. Moreover, only in very specific occasions did NZ revert to their usual fast, powerful penetration game with offloads in contact, or pick and drive. NZ game was all in all more static than usual. It seemed that one year prior the world cup, the All Blacks are not willing to give the oppositions some free time to practice their defense against their trade mark game! We

also did notice that Australia reverted to another style of rugby during the competition and specifically towards the end, where they deliberately kicked more possession and didn't unleash their dreaded backline. Is this a coincidence? Not so much so it seems.

All in all it is going to be very interesting to see how NZ and Australia will play during the November tour to Europe. My anticipation is that the All Blacks for instance will again play in the comfort zone of the oppositions, which is 38-39% against France, around 40-41% against England and 43-45% against Wales. They will leave little chances for these teams to practice their defense against their trade mark game, meanwhile putting themselves into some kind of jeopardy the team will have to get out, in the process gaining in mental toughness. As far as the game evolves, winning the world cup can not be done at less than 42-43% of real time play. To be a top contender, any national team players should be easily playing games at that level in the zone of 45% or more...Physical conditioning is a vital limiting factor of high performance rugby. Total expansive rugby can only be plaid by cutting edge prepared and conditioned players, whose optimal bio-motor abilities combined with sound technique and a sharp mental toughness, will bring the best game plans to success. The logical prediction is that team playing with more physical intensity, a fast and powerful game with more polyvalent players will muffle their oppositions and asphyxiate them. Very few teams in the world have this profile today and even fewer in Europe!

It is true that "test rugby is about winning", but rugby is an extremely strategic game and by manipulating the parameters of team development, it is possible to learn much without giving away too much. With the clock ticking one year from the RWC in France, what it is paramount is to win in Paris, anything until then is mere training and rehearsal. For many potential winners...It already is too late!