

## Super 14 2008 Analysis and Comments about the ELVs

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

The 2008 Super 14 season has straightened some records with southern hemisphere rugby and certainly the two best teams of the moment played against each other in a high intensity final.

This year was also a special year in the way that the IRB decided to test through the SANZAR competition some variations of the laws. From the set of law variation known as the Stellenbosh Law Variation (first tested in South Africa); a set of Experimental Law Variations (ELVs) was brought upon to be tested in this year S14 competition.

The major changes to be tested included:

- Free Kicks for laws infringements except for off-side and foul play
- The ball must be caught in the 22m to be kicked directly in touch
- Defense line will stand 5m from the feet of the hindmost scrum player

The ELVs influence on the game took a few weeks to set in, but from week 4 onwards, after the expected adaptation time to the new rules, we could see the positive effects brought to the game. The ELVs are designed to accelerate the pace of the game, reduce kicking, and provide better free running rugby and offensive opportunities. The 2008 competition certainly offered that although the defense systems were even stronger than ever.

Let's have a look at some ball in play statistics. I studied, like in the last 4 years, the Actual Game Time (AGT: when the ball is actually in play) on 15 randomly chosen games from week 1 to week 13, including teams of the three represented nations, plus the semi-finals and the final. The following table will show the AGT for Super 14 rugby in 2006, 2007 and 2008.

2006	2007	2008	SF1	SF2	Final 2008
44%	45%	50%	53%	42%	53%

Table: Average AGT based on 15 games per competition; SF1 = Semi-Final 1; SF2 = Semi-Final 2

The 2008 average AGT represents a 12% increase compared to the average of the two precedent seasons. Looking at the playing style of the teams, nothing much changed from one year to another technically or tactically, therefore we can attribute this consequent AGT increase at that level to the effectiveness of the ELVs. The reviews from players, coaches and Unions staff were positive, deciding the IRB to extend the ELVs worldwide for the season 2008-2009. Moreover, the 2008 Tri-Nations series will be played under the ELVs with two more added Stellenbosch law variations:

- Matching the number of players in the lineout not mandatory
- Collapse of the maul allowed

This will certainly bring some more opportunities for positive game movements.

Southern Hemisphere nations have seen the ELVs for what they are: a game enhancement designed to produce a *higher volume of higher intensity* game. It has globally been a success in their implementation also providing the referees with means to keep the game flowing for the benefits of all. We can fear though, that northern hemisphere teams might not see it that way and take the opportunity to infringe more in the wake of sanctions being lowered (much fewer kicks at goals with the ELVs) and developing a sense of impunity. If this occurs, the referees in Europe will certainly have to wield the yellow card often to break the habit quickly or simply witness European rugby sinking even deeper towards the negative aspects of the game.

Southern Hemisphere rugby has set new standards of play under the ELVs, let's hope these standards will be embraced worldwide for the good of the game, the players and the public alike.