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TOTAL RUGBY

FIFTEEN-MAN RUGBY FOR COACH AND PLAYER

JIM GREENWOOD

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Foreword

Like Jim Greenwood I'm dead against the 'play-safe' approach to rugby. Let's aim to win but to win with pleasure and challenge, where well-judged risk-taking is an important feature of our game.

The book seeks to show how this philosophy can be turned into actions on the field of play, and with a playing background of 20 caps for Scotland, a Lions Tour to South Africa plus considerable teaching/coaching experience with school, college and English Regional sides it is not surprising that the author has harmoniously blended his experiences in a most scholarly and yet practical way.

Total Rugby is a book you will need to read carefully and one you will want to refer to regularly in order to understand not only 'how' the skills of the game are taught but the important 'clues' players should be looking for in order to make correct decisions.

It's a book well worth reading—chock full of ideas—and if it persuades even a handful of teams to change their approach and play total rugby then the author for one will, I'm sure, feel his efforts were well worthwhile.

Don RUTHERFORD
Rugby Football Union England and British Isles

Introduction

Play and games are socially and specially rooted in our culture. Our national philosophy has recognised, much more than most other nations, the contribution of play and games both to the balanced development of the young and the sensible integrated lifestyle of adults. Our educationists have consistently pointed to the cognitive, social and cultural values of play and games in child development, and our psychologists and philosophers seeking a formula for a satisfying and integrated adult lifestyle recommend a balance or harmony between aspects of our life which may be described as intellectual ('homo sapiens'), work ('homo laborans') and play ('homo ludens'). The balance or harmony to be sought is not simply a matter of investing an equal amount of time to each of those aspects of life, but rather a problem of integrating the three appropriately in every human activity. This would mean, for example, that the play aspect of our lives must not only be an opportunity for spontaneous enjoyment but creative activity but, if it is properly to serve its purpose, it must offer challenges to man the intellectual and man the worker.

In this book Jim Greenwood has set out, as one might expect of a man with his pedigree in rugby football, a thoroughly enlightened prospectus for the 'second generation' coaches. But for me he has also produced something of equal value—a sound and sensitive philosophy for the athletic sports which is firmly based on the total needs of the athlete towards becoming an integrated, capable, stable and fulfilled person. Playing rugby football is thus revealed as an ideal environment for those suitably endowed with ability to satisfy at the same time the integrating needs of man as a thinker, as a worker and as a player. In setting out his views the author uncovers his own attitudes and behaviour as an outstanding coach and as an experienced and perceptive educator. In his own words his purpose is 'to help the player to become a complete player in so far as his physical, mental and emotional limitations allow. My job is to encourage him to enjoy and extend his abilities . . . I specifically do not want him to feel that his chief cause for self esteem is his rugby or that a bad game diminishes him as a person'. He could have added in support of his philosophy something I've heard him repeating often to players . . . 'but you've got

to work hard and intelligently if you want to be a good player'.

On the technical side *Total Rugby* represents a synthesis of the effective arts and sciences of coaching rugby football which Jim Greenwood has carefully evolved over years of analysing, experimenting and developing. I have had the great pleasure of observing and advising him teaching, advising and coaching at Loughborough which has been his 'laboratory' in recent years. In the process I have come to recognise and appreciate not only his impressive wisdom about the game, but his generous willingness to share with others his accumulated knowledge in order to advance the level of coaching for all. The publication of this book represents, in my opinion, a significant advance for rugby football coaching. The concepts, methods and materials that are included represent a resource that has so far not been available to coaches. In a sense rigorous coaching methods have come to be fully accepted only recently in rugby football compared with many of the other athletic sports, and as a result the application of sound principles and method may have lagged behind. The leeway would now seem to have been more than adequately made up, particularly with respect of Jim Greenwood's notions of 'total rugby' which may take the understanding and interpretations of the game onto a new and exciting level. It certainly deserves the most serious attention of coaches, players and administrators.

(60267c)

J.E. KANE

Principal, West London Institute of Higher Education

PART 1

BACKGROUND TO THE GAME

To help define this position it's useful to consider the polar alternative—play-safe rugby, which sets out to win by minimising the risk of defeat. This is based on two excellent tactical principles—to restrict in a given position the amount of risk you're prepared to take, and to play to your strength. Both of these figure in total rugby as elements in a mix; in play-safe they tend to define and limit the aspirations of the team. As part of the mix, they bring security and confidence; in isolation, lack of adventure and lack of variety.

The critical weakness of playing minimum-risk rugby is that it gives the players little chance to exercise the full range of their talents. The critical flaw is constantly playing to the team's strength, is that it tends to perpetuate the team's weaknesses. Concentration on these elements produces, at its best, a formidable but dull efficiency always based on the power of the pack. When the basic tactics—typically, lactical kicking or taking the ball on the short side—are countered, there's often a lack of resources in alternative ways of playing the game. At its worst, possession becomes almost a liability at times, so limited in variety is their attack. 'If we can hang around their 22 long enough', you can almost hear them saying, 'Peter'll kick a goal'. Yet paradoxically enough, the power of their pack creates the perfect base on which to build a really enterprising team performance. What stands in the way is a lack of vision, or a lack of know-how.

The primary losers are the players. They become the victims of the play-safe syndrome: denied the preparation that would develop their talent, and the opportunity to use it, they gradually lose the techniques, the judgement, and most important of all the attitude of mind that makes enterprising rugby possible. They then become an excuse for the system—for, of course, you can't play enterprising rugby with players like that. This happens at all levels, but most blatantly at the top: some of the most prestigious teams throughout the world of rugby play this negative form of the game, teams with genuinely talented players, talents all too often allowed to atrophy. As a result everyone connected with the game suffers, and most of all the game itself.

TOTAL RUGBY AND COACHING

There was a time when the restricted form of the game was, for most teams, inevitable, coaching expertise on how to improve performance was simply not available. Teams that played something like total rugby did so through a happy coincidence of players, whose abilities

The Meaning of Total Rugby

1

TOTAL RUGBY AND PLAY-SAFE RUGBY

The rugby I'm concerned with as a coach is rugby at its most exciting—the fifteen-man handling game, in which every player is encouraged to show what he can do as attacker, defender, and supporting player, and in which the overall style of play gives him a chance to do so. This open, brilliant form of rugby is the most satisfying to players and potential players, at home or abroad, spectators, officials, and coaches. It's where the game's most memorable expression has been found in the past, and where—because of its wide appeal—its future should lie.

We need a new name for it, for play-safe coaches have found it expedient to equate fifteen-man rugby with reckless abandon, typified by a slavish commitment to spinning the ball wide. I believe in fifteen-man rugby, but the quality I prize most highly in a player is judgement, and one of the qualities I most deplore in a team is a slavish commitment to any single aspect of play. Total rugby is a convenient title to describe rugby that subsumes all simpler forms of the game and uses them tactically as judgement dictates, but which seeks whenever possible to play the fifteen-man handling game.

What most characterises this game is well-judged risk-taking. Much of the most immediate pleasure in games, for player and spectator alike, comes from successful risk-taking, the spice of adventure, perhaps because it affords a more complete expression of the player, or because it offers glimpses of virtues that go beyond the merely safe and conventional. Even in winning—that safest and most conventional measure of success—the best that the game can offer is the pleasure of winning with panache, of getting beyond the banal, the humdrum, the workaday.

To do this consistently you must be very positively committed to winning. What most clearly distinguishes total rugby is the variety and enterprising of its attacking methods, based on the all round competence of its players.

and temperament made it possible. The great justification of coaching—to my mind its only justification—is to make total rugby possible for a far greater number of players. The technical knowledge now available makes it possible for any team with adequate commitment to play more enterprising, enjoyable and entertaining rugby.

The basic challenge facing the coach is obvious enough: the quality of the rugby his team can play is dictated by the thoroughness with which he has prepared individual players, and the attitudes he has encouraged in them to the playing of the game. He may not now have the players to play enterprising rugby; he could be on the way to producing them. He has to devote more time, thought, and energy to ensuring that individual players can function effectively in a greater variety of situations—the more successful he is in this, the more acceptable become the risks of employing them fully, extending the range and enterprise of team tactics.

For most established coaches this will represent a shift of emphasis. First generation coaches have tended to see their job as organisational—assembling the players available into an effective team rather than improving the quality of the individual players. They have tended also to concentrate on the pack at the expense of the backs, and on the more mechanical aspects of play rather than those involving judgement in the players. What is needed is a more systematic, more comprehensive approach to the needs of the game.

A shift of emphasis towards the individual and enterprising play would, of course, be timely. Team games are under increasing pressure from individual players, and an approach that seeks to realise the individual's potential and evolve a style of play that gives him a maximum chance to show it is going much of the way to meet the challenge. Again, with educational change all around, the game will need to attract the younger player—as mini-rugby does—and keep him happy in a way that formerly was not felt to be necessary. Again, to solve the game's financial problems it's desirable that we attract not only more players but more spectators, and the slow handclap at Twickenham leaves no doubt what kind of rugby they want to see. At international level, it's becoming increasingly obvious that the winning team has to be able to play to the full, to stand a chance of winning. From every point of view, an approach to coaching that emphasises the importance of the individual and the need for enterprising play must pay off.

Of course, the realisation of these objectives won't come overnight. Extending the range of play of the individual and the team is a gradual

access. Unless you set out to do it, however, it may not come at all. There is no need to sacrifice success on the way—even if you measure success only in the most conventional way, by winning without regard to how you won. You can prepare to play enterprising rugby, and increase it before you put it on the pitch; you can revert to play-safe when circumstances demand it. But how much sweeter to win with flair! ENTERPRISE MATTERS?

THE COACH AND THE PLAYER

The critical technical question for the coach or committee man to ask is 'to what extent has being a member of our club accelerated that player's progress?' Every player likes to feel his ability is growing, and detailed, personal help towards that improvement is perhaps the most valuable thing the club has to offer—it's at once technical aid and a guarantee of the club's interest in him.

Beyond that, every player can be helped to feel that he has a contribution to make to the preparation and development of the team. There's little scope for discussion on the practice field—you need decisive leadership to get high work-rate—but time can be made for it off the field.

And the aim of team playing policy must be to offer every player the chance to use in the match the abilities he has developed. Everybody in rugby knows how many exciting and talented players are denied the chance, game after game, to show what they can do and to build confidence in their ability to do it.

Beyond the club team, the player has his sights legitimately set on some form of representative honours. The higher the level, the greater the part that sheer talent must play in success, but at every level solid preparation by the club should be evident. The player's talent is often specialised and takes the form of one commanding talent—his strength at prop, for example; the club's contribution should be the all-round competence of his other play, the range of skills he has acquired, the attitude of mind he has developed. No representative coach has the time to coach in this sense: the club coach has to do it.

THE COMMITTEE AND TOTAL RUGBY

Committee men are, in most amateur sports, chosen less for their consciousness of technical developments than for their administrative ability and willingness to serve. (And in rugby, as in most amateur

sports, the game suffers from this division of interest.) They are, however, inevitably those most jealous of their club's reputation—the people who helped to create it. It's particularly important, therefore, that they should move beyond the 'all that counts is not losing' attitude. They might take pride in the fact that their club has very much more to offer than a desperate need to win. That they have a coherent preparation policy, so that the prospective player will have a real chance of maximising his potential; that they play enterprising rugby in which every player has a part; that their talented players are given the all round competence that ensures the best chance of their talent being used at a higher level; that they often win, and that they win by playing quality rugby. If they can add to that that they offer coaching at all levels, that every team is watched, that there is a coherent, fair, selection process—that, in fact, the individual player is seen as an important club member—they will have real grounds for pride in their club and an assurance that the club is respected for the right reasons.

In one other respect the club, and especially the coach and committee, can enhance their reputation and make an important contribution to the health and attractiveness of the game. They are the people in the best position to establish and maintain high standards of conduct on the field. The referee—with the backing of Disciplinary Committees and the Union—can certainly curb the excesses of the few, but the club is in the best position to encourage a positive outlook in all its players. The reputation of the game itself has not been helped by the image of the rugged, hearty, the bar-room hero from the undistinguished XV whose claim to fame is his capacity for beer and song. But the image of manliness that finds expression in deliberate undulation and foul play is destructive of the game itself. There's little harm in attracting to the game those who enjoy simply a robust social life, but it's impossible to justify attracting those who see in it a chance for physical violence.

The committee concerned with the club's reputation can make it clear that there is no place in their team for the habitually dirty player. If we are to attract players to the game it's got to be on the basis of a robust, enjoyable, and positive activity. The atmosphere in the club itself is the best guarantee of this positive approach on the field.

It's difficult, too, to dissociate a negative approach to the style of play from a negative attitude to the game's ethics. Play safe, nine-man rugby, by placing an emphasis on physical confrontation and often es-teeming strength more highly than skill creates more situations where violence can erupt, and predisposes the team towards it. Those with a

responsibility for the club's reputation might bear this in mind.

BEING A SPECTATOR

When this book first appeared, spectators were not normally mentioned in books on rugby. 'The game is for the players' was a sentiment fit sure to win applause. It was unnecessarily exclusive even then; rugby is in part a display activity, and to be a focus of attention may well enhance a player's efforts and enjoyment.

Since then, the need for the game to attain a higher profile and earn more money has meant that the spectator on the line or in the armchair has assumed new importance. He has become the key that unlocks the door to financial security. I've no doubt that total rugby will prove more attractive to the spectator, and especially to the casual television watcher, than any other kind.

It's important, however, that those who in increasing numbers pay at the turnstiles should contribute positively to the atmosphere of the match. We must face the probability that what soccer crowds do today, rugby crowds may do in ten years' time. There are already signs of negative expressions of allegiance: not cheer but whistling cheering their team, some are beginning to attack the opposition. There's a lot to be said for every club and every union emphasising that without the opposition team there wouldn't be a match, that they form part of a like-minded community and would, if they lived nearer, probably be our friends. I like our spectators to clap the opposition and cheer us.

WOMEN IN RUGBY

Another group who have attained unexpected importance are women players. Undertaken by the criticism of prejudiced men and women, more and more women are taking up rugby as a sport. Much of the criticism is unencumbered by fact: those most vocal tend to be those with least direct experience of the phenomenon. Exactly the same kind of criticism greeted the pioneer women players of tennis, track and field athletics, lacrosse, judo, and so on: in due course rugby will become a perfectly acceptable game for women to play.

I've thoroughly enjoyed coaching Loughborough, England, and GB Women's teams. A nicer bunch of people, more dedication to the game, more pleasure in playing, I've never encountered. But as a coach, what stands out is the talent the best women players show for the game. In terms of reading the game, intelligent decision-making,

improving answers to unexpected problems, range of skills, the women give nothing away to the men. They are equally committed to attack and defence, and equally whole-hearted in contact. When you consider that none of the players has any experience pre-dating higher education, their feeling for the game is remarkable.

This registers with spectators. I've seen spectators converted in a matter of minutes: they come to watch a 'women's rugby match', and almost immediately find themselves watching a 'rugby match'. And at the top they're watching a high-quality match. All of my teams have played total rugby, and the women play it technically as well as any male team.

Moreover, the spirit in which they play—very committed and very clean—is wholly refreshing: the men could learn from it how to make a tough game acceptable to parents at large. Their love of the game is reflected not merely in their putting up with uninformed criticism but in their paying personally to represent their country: sponsorship is still spasmodic because public approval is still spasmodic.

Little by little, however, they are achieving media respectability. Still, of course, there's a tabloid desire to focus on the fringe that the women's game shares with the men's: those incapable of making a mark as players try to make a mark as clowns. But this is becoming increasingly dated: they are attracting serious TV and newspaper interest, and that reflects and will accelerate public acceptance of the game.

The most significant problem that faces them is resentment of their trespassing in a male preserve. It's serious because those who manage that preserve are precisely those most able to offer help to the women. They need club support—a pitch for Sunday matches, coaching assistance, referees, the use of changing facilities. In exchange they create a bigger, financially more secure club, add a social dimension, and attract media attention.

Here, they've come a long way in a short time. There's no reason for them not to consolidate that gain. If you can, give them your help.

THE COACH

The second-generation rugby coach, like his committee, can easily find a broader base for reputation than that of organising a team for play-safe rugby. The word 'coach' is imbued with the notion of skill, and attention to detail, and the true concern of a coach is the skill and technical flexibility shown by his players and his team. Some coaches

have derived a spurious reputation from the sheer physical prowess of the players they have available. The real question is not 'how successful is that team?' but 'how successful could that team be?' and the measure of the coach is how nearly the whole team approximates to that potential. This view poses a challenge to those coaches whose clubs have the best players, and offers recognition to those coaches who do getting work in more difficult conditions.

Beyond that is the contribution the coach makes to the development of the game, and of coaching expertise. Coaches now must accept the fact that the technical development of the game is largely in their hands and part of their responsibility is to the game as well as to their club and players. This is true of the tone of the game as well as its technical content, and in both respects short-term gains—achieved e.g. by condoning violence, preaching hatred of the opposition, or encouraging minimum-risk rugby—may well prove long-term losses. Such measures are an odd basis to choose for building a reputation.

The development of coaching expertise is a challenge. There's no doubt that very, very few coaches can consider themselves well-equipped for the job even in terms of the information and methods now available. We are approaching the stage where mastering what's already available will amount to a full-time job, and may have to be undertaken at least on a regional basis by full-time staff, (a suggestion implemented almost immediately by the R.F.U.) but a grasp of the principles, use of source books, and attendance at courses will put any intelligent, committed person in a position to offer valuable help to the team.

Paradoxically enough, despite the amount of knowledge available, I don't believe that we've really got started on coaching. The next ten or fifteen years may well see radical innovations in the tactics, techniques and coaching methods used in the game. So undeveloped are coaching techniques that every coach can expect to add something new of his own. Indeed, this is one of the rewarding aspects of coaching—that you can always develop personal insights and techniques, and take coaching a step further. Once the U.S. gets fully involved, rugby coaching may well take off.

My own aims in coaching are, no doubt, much affected by a background in teaching, and the fact that coaching and being coached are educational experiences. I want to help the player become a complete player so far as his physical, mental and emotional limitations allow. My job is to encourage him to enjoy and extend his abilities, and take a proper pride in them. I specifically do not want him to feel that

his chief cause for self-esteem is his rugby, or that a bad game diminishes him as a person—ninety-nine out of every hundred human beings have never heard of rugby, and they still get by. Nevertheless, if he chooses to play, I'd like to see him measure himself against his fellows, and be given the chance to express himself as fully as possible. To that end, the rugby we play must be total rugby.

Rugby is a tough game, but the most important toughness is the ability to be tough with yourself, to demand more of yourself than your opponent does, and that's not inconsistent with a tone in the team that's generous, positive, thoughtful, honourable. *Т/С/Т/Е/С/С/Е/В/Е/С*

His rugby on the field has got to provide him with something memorable, some spots of time that will live with him. The wider the range of those moments the better. They may be aesthetic or heroic, expressions of speed or power or judgement, fitness or skill, individual or group—but they've got to be memorable expressions of his youth and talent. He's got to feel the elation of winning well, with a touch of style and class, and especially of winning against the odds. He's got to recognise that he can win as an individual against his immediate opponent and against himself, even if the team loses. I'd like him to remember being magnanimous in defeat, generous in victory. I'd like him to enjoy the sense of belonging to a team, and being proud to belong to it in victory or defeat.

Some of these points I've put in the past tense, because they are a recognition of the best of what rugby has offered me, and because, like thousands of others I'm aware that given the right conditions, rugby is more than simply a diversion over a comparatively few playing years. It's up to the coach to ensure that these 'right conditions' are available to as many of his players as possible, in their interest and in that of the game.

The basic right condition is the spirit in which the game is played. In the earliest days, when referees were felt unnecessary, there was common agreement that there were things in life more important than the result of a match. Without some sense of a greater good—be it sportsmanship or the quality of the experience or the game itself—the importance of winning can grow to destructive proportions. It's up to the coach to keep some such greater good present to his players.

Understanding the Game

The basic pattern in the game is that of alternate concentration and dispersal. The laws are so designed that there's a constant clearing of the field, with a large number of players concentrated in a small area—at scrum, line-out, ruck or maul—so that there's a large amount of open space for the remaining players. The aim of this is to tilt the balance in favour of the attackers—to give them space in which to work. This is complementary to the single most characteristic law of the game—passing back—which is designed to create situations in which the player has a chance to get past his opponent in the most exciting way—by *easily* kicking.

The space available to the attackers allows them to stretch the opposing defence; long passing will force each defender to defend a wider zone and give each attacker a better chance of making a break; short passing will create space on the flanks to release a speedy winget or allow a supporting overload.

The action sequence in the game is that of stop-go corresponding to the basic pattern of concentration—dispersion. This is of the utmost importance to the game.

It makes the game possible

Figures produced to show the amount of time the ball is actually in play (25–30 minutes) tend to suggest that there's a great waste of time—but the pauses make the game practicable. Without them, the physical demands would be too great. *Inducing fatigue in the opposition* by prolonged pressure—e.g. physical contact, sustained ball speed—both in the short term and the long term are effective bases for attack, and a recognition of the physical limits within which the game is played.

It restores order

One aspect of the basic pattern can be seen as order-disorder; the longer the fluid phase of play continues the greater is the probability of disorder. This sets up mental and emotional pressures in the players

that correspond to (and no doubt affect) physical fatigue. Restoring order—the 'stop' phase—becomes more necessary as players become tired, and the laws recognise this by linking stoppages to mistakes.

It creates set-pieces favouring the defence

The basic situation at any stoppage in the game approximates to that at a set scrum (see p. 13).

The *reference line* is the line which the offside laws allow the pressuring element of the defence to take up.

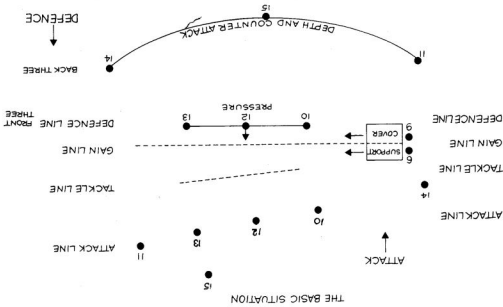
The *gain line* is the point reached by the ball before the stoppage. For either side to go forward they must get the ball across the gain line.

The *tackle line* connects the points at which respective opponents will meet—which, given an expected similarity of pace and reaction time in the opponents, will be midway between the defence line and attack line.

The *attack line* is the line along which the back division expecting to gain possession take up position. To allow the ball to be passed without undue pressure they must make space for themselves and tend, therefore, to lie in echelon. If they intend to kick, the echelon must be shallow. If they intend to do a move then individual players will probably have to alter their positions. It's highly unlikely that the most effective positioning will in fact be a straight line even for passing the ball out (see p. 218). However, the line in the diagram conveys the basic situation adequately.

The consequences of this recurrent situation are these:

- If, as expected, team B get the ball and intend to handle they will take the ball back behind the gain line and to reach it again will have to cross the tackle line: they run the risk of losing the ground between the gain line and the tackle line. Possession is only a potential advantage.
- If, unexpectedly, team B get the ball quickly and know how they're going to use it, they ought to be able to cross the gain line before coming into contact with their opponents.
- Whichever team gets the ball across the gain line will have its pack running forward, which generates the most powerful impetus in attack. So far as the pack is concerned, the greatest advantage, in terms of angle of run, accrues when the ball crosses the gain line close to them. The further out the strike is made the less important this advantage becomes for the same yardage of gain. It's important, therefore, that the team should have planned and practised



methods of attacking close to the scrum, line-out, maul, or ruck.

- The tackling power of each team tends, as a consequence, to be grouped in the back-row (to limit attacks close in) and in the front three (in-ic-oc-to pressurise passing movements), with a joint aim to prevent the ball crossing the gain line against them or to minimise such gain. If they can make their tackles on the tackle line, then their team has gained ground, and their pack is moving forward. This is an important consideration in selection.

- This concentration of defenders is one of the first elements to be considered in decision-making: the attacking team must have appropriate methods of taking them on, disfranchising them, or cut-flanking them.

- Any check in the action of the game, such as those provided by the stop-go pattern, will tend to allow the defenders to regroup in the optimum defensive formation. In first-phase situations this regrouping will be complete, and even from mauls and rucks any holding delay will result in a situation approximating to first-phase. Effective second-phase possession—a situation in which the defence has been put under pressure, the tackle ball has been kept available, and the attacking side has regrouped quickly—will lead to a much better attacking situation. Each of these elements, however, is necessary to produce an effective second-phase situation.

It simplifies decision-making

The constant occurrence of situations in which the defence positioning and tactics are predictable, and where divergences from the expected formation are significant and obvious, makes the spotting of potential weaknesses easier for the tactical decision-makers.

It provides a simple basis for team tactics

Apart from a team strategy—the overall view of how the team intends to play the game—there have to be team tactics. These are the team's response to the recurring set-piece situations in the stop-go pattern. It is moderately certain, for example, that in every match the team will be awarded a scrum about fifteen metres from the opposing line, and fifteen metres from touch. They will know—by thought, experiment and practice—what attacking gambits are effectively open to them and what gambits possible to them in theory are ruled out by the limitations of their players. It's then for the tactical decision-makers to select the best option against these particular opponents on this par-

ticular day on this particular ground at this particular moment in the match. Incidentally, therefore, it provides a simple basis for team coaching, unit coaching and coaching of the individual.

ATTACKING PRINCIPLES

What emerge from these considerations are three basic imperatives:

- Get possession
- Go forward
- Support the ball-carrier

But these imperatives, narrowly interpreted, can be a recipe for nine or ten-man rugby. Accordingly, it's useful, while appreciating their truth, to rephrase them:

- Get the ball
- Get it into space
- Get to it first

Get the ball

The minimum realistic possession the team must aim for is all its own ball in the scrum, the line-out, and when your own player takes the ball into the ruck or maul situation. Whatever you get beyond that is a very desirable (see above) bonus. You must also be prepared to take advantage of any ball gifted to you by the way of penalties and misplaced kicks of any kind.

The first priority in any team is to get possession, and the first priority in coaching the units is to ensure that you do. The critical mistake of play-safe coaches, however, is to spend a disproportionate amount of time and energy on it at the expense of preparing the team to make a varied and intelligent use of the possession when they win it.

The use they can make of it is to some extent determined by the quality of ball that's won. Good ball is controlled so that it arrives where it's wanted, when it's wanted, at the speed it's wanted. Ideally, it arrives under those conditions with the opposition going backward so that their defence is off balance, but that again is a bonus.

Get it into space

Possession is only a potential advantage. Poor quality possession, or inadequate decision-making, or poor execution—especially in the face of sensibly applied pressure from the opposition—can make it a liability.

● ball margin

It becomes a real advantage when the team has the initiative in using it. Essentially, this means that the team has chosen how to use it, and aren't forced by their own inefficiency or the aggressiveness of their opponents into limited or involuntary actions.

Tactically, having the initiative is the key to total rugby. Any lack of understanding or uncertainties about the process of decision-making, or its attendant technical requirements will lead to some loss of the initiative, and an inability to exploit fully the abilities of the players. The coach has two jobs here: to improve decision-making and to ensure technical efficiency.

Every player must be encouraged to play intelligently since every one is required to make personal decisions—primarily about the direction of his support running in attack or defence, and about distribution when he's the ball-carrier. The tactical decision-makers, however, are thinking for the team as a whole. They must be thinking ahead all the time so that before the referee blows his whistle they're evaluating the situation. I've written extensively about their preparation in Think Rugby (A & C Black). The sequence of decision-making is:

1. Assessment of situation
position in field, state of the team, guidelines, time in the match, opposing formation, situations, score, opposing strengths/weaknesses, conditions.

2. Provisional decision

The earlier a provisional decision is made, the better. The more players affected by the decision, the earlier it must be made.

As soon as he has made this provisional decision—which is dependent on getting good ball—he should turn his attention to a provisional alternative: what he'll do if he doesn't. In fact, he'll probably have to kick, but he wants that kick to be as effective as possible. In all team practices, even programmed unopposed, he should be encouraged to make his call, register his alternative, and act in accordance with his opportunities. TELE

3. Communication

All those directly involved must be put in the picture. This always includes the back-row. It calls for a code—less to baffle the opposition than to speed communication.

Co-operation

Every call will demand some change in positioning if it's going to have maximum effect: there's no point, e.g. in having your outside centre twenty metres back if the fly-half is going to kick. Co-operation must be effective and fast. Discipline is essential.

Execution

Up to the moment of execution, the call is provisional—it can be changed if any unexpected advantage or disadvantage occurs. No call will be successful if those involved in the action fail to act with purpose—they must make a positive, disciplined contribution to the action, on or off the ball.

The structure of the game imposes the responsibility for tactical decision-making on the halves. The scrum-half assumes responsibility for tactical decisions in forward attack, and attack on the blind; the stand-off, for the backs. In all team practice, they (and the rest of the team) should work together to establish how they should handle different situations. The coach simplifies their job:

- by providing a strategy—a basic pattern of play in which the whole team feel confident—and establishing typical situations in which to use it;
 - by providing a limited choice of tactics at recurrent situations and establishing with them what the cues should be for final selection (see Chapter 27);
 - by making both conversant with the basic coaching process FACTS (a) they need models of typical situations they'll encounter (b) they must have expectations of where the opposing defence will be weak (c) they must check out these expectations in order of team preference (what 'we'd like to do') and decide
 - by habituating them to the process in all team practices;
 - by offering guidelines on how to deal with opposition pressure (see Chapter 28).
- The coach simplifies the fly-half's job:
- by constantly encouraging him to get his head up and look at the situation—he has to learn to look, and to trust his reading of the situation (see p. 276);
 - by establishing with him basic principles of attack (see immediately below);

- by suggesting guide-lines for decisions in the terms e.g. of areas of the field;
- by working through recurrent situations (see p. 276) with the team.

There are only four basic choices open to the tactical decision-maker, as to any ball-carrier: to run, to pass, to kick, to set up a move. It's highly important that he—or the players immediately next to him—be able to do all four. Limited decision-makers impose limitations on the whole team. This kind of limitation is critical at half-back and the coach must work to ensure that both the halves become at least competent in all four basic activities.

Decision-making implies purpose and whatever action he takes must be purposeful: a tentative decision-maker is a contradiction in terms. This sense of purpose must be shared by all those involved in the action—each has a job to do. Nothing must be done mechanically. This is one function of unit and team practices.

Key ideas in games are those of variety and flexibility in attack, variety so that the opposition cannot simply predict our actions, and flexibility so that when our opponents can match our basic strength or style of play we have effective alternatives. Each team needs a good 'mix'—a balanced variety in its use of the ball to keep the opposition guessing and all our own players involved in the match. The coach, by establishing basic ideas, suggesting guide-lines, and working through recurrent situations, can make the player aware of the various possibilities and how they can best be deployed.

The most important guide-line that the coach offers is in the choice of basic striking points and consequent staple activities. This is fundamental in establishing your basic style of play, and leads to coherent selection policies, and a coherent programme of team building and preparation. Within its mix, every team tends to have such a basic staple activity. It's a source of great strength provided that it's used as a matter of choice and not necessity. To select or coach simply with one purpose in mind, to leave your team dependent on one form of attack, is myopic: it may in the short term be successful; in the long term it leads to poverty of play.

The overriding tactical aim is to create a situation when the ball can be taken across the gain-line and possession retained. By choosing striking points and maximising striking power there, the coach can set up staple activities to achieve this. For the wide overlap game, which is a staple activity in fifteen-man handling rugby, for example, the most appropriate striking point is outside-centre: your aim is to get the

ball to him, in space, and to attack through him, the full-back, and the winger. Once this decision is made, the coach can establish priorities in selecting and coaching, and begin to work with intelligence and purpose. He knows that, whatever else they may be able to do, the scrum-half, fly-half, and inside centre must be able and willing, when it's called for, to spin the ball to outside centre. He will begin to define what he expects from inside centre and outside centre, and see them as a pair. He knows what he requires of his full-back. Technically, too, he has now set himself precise problems so that he can use his time and energy—and that of his players—effectively.

An alternative striking point that every team needs to develop is that close to the set-piece. The closer the strike is made to the set-piece, the more quickly you get over the gain-line, and the more quickly you get the pack moving forward. This is the most powerful source of impetus in attack, and a basic way of creating good second-phase situations: it has the added advantage of keeping the ball close to the pack, and, therefore, in the event of a breakdown, in a sound defensive position.

Unhappily, as with kicking in attack, it is an art that is open to abuse: most play-safe teams use some variation on this theme, without developing the means of exploiting the resultant second-phase situations, and without alternatives in the event of this staple activity being countered. It's also fair to say that most such teams fail to exploit fully the actual forward drive, by keeping it narrow rather than wide and deep—creating space in which to drive forward (see p. 63).

The basic situation can be set up by the forwards themselves, or by the backs feeding the forwards. Typical examples are the line-out peel (see p. 175), back-row moves (see p. 145), and rolling off a maul. Of these, the last has the great advantage of being performed against a potentially disorganised defence (but see p. 190).

The stocky, elusive, quick-moving figure of the running scrum-half typifies this form of attack. The backs may also set up moves to get the ball back in front of the forwards (see p. 225)—one thinks of the crash ball exponents who by sheer continued power drive through to get in front of the back-row.

This kind of forward attack should be directed by the scrum-half: he is in a far better position than any of the forwards to indicate the type and direction of attack.

Get to it first!

The aim of the striker is to score, and to do so with minimum delay—

delay in any game is to the advantage of the defenders. The more wholeheartedly he believes this the more likely he is to complete the break, and to stretch the opposing defence. But the coach must accept that despite the best efforts of those inside him to create the chances for him, and his own best efforts to get clear, the ball-carrier will often be tackled. It's vital that support be there to continue the attack, or at least retain possession. For this they must get into the action area fast. Their efficiency will depend on:

- **Communication**—good decision-making allows time for communication, and organised team-play—e.g. established striking points—allows clear communication.
- **Personal decision-making**—thinking ahead, predicting, quick appreciation of unexpected developments—the back-row especially, but all the pack must be encouraged and helped to think on their feet (see p. 181).
- **Basic mobility**—in choosing his striking points, the coach may well take into account the mobility of his pack. Within limits he can select his players with a particular striking point in view, and he can obviously use his fitness training to improve the speed range of all his players. It's highly unlikely that his pack can be characterised simply as 'powerful' or 'mobile'—if it is he's in a difficult situation. In such a case, he may well establish striking points that will impose less strain on his pack—~~close at hand with the powerful pack, so that they can economically bring their power to bear on their opponents, far out for the mobile pack, so that they can run their opponents around and make sure of possession before the heavy infantry arrive.~~ Neither extreme is desirable since automatically attacking possibilities of the team are limited, and its vulnerability in defence increased.

- **Support exercises**—it's comparatively easy (see p. 256) to coach intelligent support running in attack and defence, and such exercises are a basic part of team practices.

Although support is often seen as a function of the pack, every member of the team must be prepared to help. Broadly speaking, the player who passed to the player who was tackled is best placed to be first supporter (see p. 214). This must be drilled home in unit and team practices (see p. 269).

Support is the key to all team play, and speed—a product of *forethought, fitness and self-discipline*—is the key to effective support.

This is as true of the centres fighting to get back in position to maintain defence or continue attack as it is of forwards arriving to set up a Maul. 'Get there first' is engraved on the good player's heart.

But this speed must extend to their actions after they arrive: they must be helped to recognise priorities, especially in dealing with the loose ball. A typical aid for this is to be found in Chapter 14, 'Cyclic Exercises'. And the principles should be drilled home in all team practices.

DEFENCE

The more you see of games, the more obvious it becomes that for consistent success your defence must be absolutely sound.

There are three elements in defence: pressure, cover and depth. These are necessary whenever the opposition have or are likely to get the ball in set play, loose play, or counter-attack.

- **Pressure** is generated by the front three and in specific cases—e.g. defence close to a set-piece—the back-row. Its aim is to deny the opposition the initiative, to harry them into mistakes, and if possible to regain possession beyond the gain-line (see p. 242). When the opposition are consistently moving the ball wide, the front three and back-row may adopt a 'drift defence' to provide cover against overlap attacks.

- **Cover** is provided by the pack as a whole with the back-row leading. It's concerned with providing safeguards to the pressure groups by creating a wide, deep, defensive pattern of cross-field running (see p. 247).

- **Depth** is provided by the back three—the full-back and wingers. It's concerned with defence against kicks, a third line against running attack, and the generation of counter-attack.

For the pattern to work effectively, each of the groups must work as a small team giving intelligent, disciplined support to each other, and must develop a pride in their small team play. Each section must be given adequate practice and coaching in their roles.

Beyond this, it's desirable that the whole team is given adequate experience in dealing with particular situations when the other side has the ball (see p. 281).