

RUGBY AUSTRALIA

LEVEL 4

STRUCTURE

V

UNSTRUCTURE

Peter Hewat

Structure v Unstructure

What does your team need? How are you preparing your team?

Rugby is one of the most interesting and unique games in the world. Every game is always different and there are many ways a game can be won or lost. The challenge to us as coaches is to simplify things and deliver a program that best prepares our team to give them a genuine chance to compete and win on game day. There are many aspects that go into creating a suitable program and to deliver this program we obviously need to have a good understanding of our playing group and identify our team's strengths and weaknesses.

As there are constant changes in our game, it's vital when creating a suitable program that we understand the trends in our game and we look very closely in to the important aspects within the competition we are coaching in. A game can be determined by the strength of a team's structured and/or unstructured play. What REALLY matters to your team? What are you putting your time into at training? How are you preparing your team and is it relevant to the competition you're coaching in? Hopefully by the end we can get some clear answers to these questions.

Structure gives your team organisation and includes lineout / maul, scrum and restarts. A lot of teams have a big focus on the first 3 phases from each of these set piece facets of play. Each player normally knows exactly what they are doing and where they need to go within these 3 phases. The problem with this is that most teams now have a specialised defence coach and are well prepared to breakdown these attack structures and sequences. We have all seen or been part of teams that spend a lot of time practicing these sequenced plays from both lineout and scrum, getting perfect ball from the top of the lineout or getting front foot ball from a nice square scrum and scoring many a training try without any pressure. As much as we would always like these perfect situations to eventuate, we all understand that things don't normally work out this way on game day and a lot of time spent on these perfect structures and sequences could be spent perfecting other parts of our game. So, what are you putting your time into at training, is it important and is it relevant?

Let's now have a closer look at unstructured play. Unstructure mainly comes from kick return/counter, turnovers (transitions), and quick taps. The advantage with unstructured play is that it's a lot more difficult to set a plan to defend these facets of play. There is obviously a degree of disorganisation with unstructured play and some teams are far less comfortable with being disorganised than others. This normally indicates that they have not been put in these unstructured game specific situations at training and therefore struggle to adapt. Again, I ask the question, how are you using your time at training?

Below are average ball in play times and turnovers per game stats from the last 2 years of Super Rugby and the 2017 Rugby Championship. As I have recently been coaching in Japan I have also attached the same stats for the Japanese Top League competition:

Super Rugby 2017 (*Game Lens & STATS*)

Ball in Play per game (average) – 34 min

Turnovers per game (average) – 28

Super Rugby 2016 (*Game Lens & STATS*)

Ball in Play per game (average) – 32 min

Turnovers per game (average) – 31

The Rugby Championship 2017 (*Game Lens & STATS*)

Ball in Play per game (average) - 34.30 min

Turnovers per game (average) - 27

Japanese Top League 2017 /18 (*Data Scrum & Opta*)

Ball in Play per game (average) – 32.24 min

Turnovers per game (average) - 29

As you can see from these stats, there was nearly a turnover every minute of the game which means there is a potential transition from either defence to attack or attack to defence every minute of the game. This suggests that there is a significant amount of unstructured play involved and I would suggest that this is a common trend in world rugby at the moment. From these stats there are a few important questions that need to be answered. Firstly, is this stat applicable to the competition you are coaching in? Secondly, are you preparing your team to compete and win or are you preparing your team to just participate? What I mean by this is, have you got the balance right in regard to practising your structured and unstructured play? If you do have the balance right you are preparing your team to compete and are giving them every opportunity to win, but if you haven't then you are not actually preparing your team with game specific training and you are preparing your team just to participate.

Game specific training is when the players are being coached in situations to mirror the intensity and pressure they are going to encounter in a game, both from a tactical and physical point of view. If training is too easy then the players are not being challenged which means they are not improving and not learning how to cope with game specific situations.

CONCLUSION

As the above stats from numerous competitions around the world tell us, there is nearly a turnover every minute of the game, therefore our players are involved in unstructured situations a lot more than they are involved in structured situations. It's our responsibility to prepare our players so they can cope with all situations they are going to encounter in a game and as previously discussed it's hugely important we create a training program that reflects this.

In my opinion we need to spend more time creating unstructured scenarios so our players are comfortable transitioning between defence to attack and attack to defence. It's vitally important that all players from 1 to 15 are upskilled to feel comfortable in these transition situations so they have the confidence to execute when under fatigued game like situations.

Structured play still has a role to play as it gives our team organisation. It's a base to start our attack from set piece situations and to have a strong set piece in our kit bag is important. It keeps the defence guessing as to where you are going to attack from and through your preview of the opposition you may have seen a weakness in this area that you would like to target and expose.

But as the stats suggest we can't rely on this and I believe we need to educate our players more in these unstructured situations and teach them when we break this organised set play and just play what is presented in front. As we discussed earlier, defences are very well structured and well prepared, so the ability for players to break the structure and create an opportunity from unstructure is becoming more and more important. Not only is it important from an attack point of view but players must have good instinct and have the ability to react quickly so they can shut down any potential attacking threats from the opposition when transitioning from attack to defence.

Our unique game is constantly changing and evolving, and it's our duty to keep up with these changes so we can prepare our team the best possible way to give them every opportunity to win on game day. Therefore, it's extremely important for us as coaches to understand the trends in our game and in particular the trends within the competition we are coaching in. The big question is, are you preparing your team for actual game specific situations that reflect your competition or are you preparing your team to what you have previously done in the past?