

## Starter Plays – Time Well Spent or Wasted Time?

Having been bought up in the UK, I remember many a cold winters night spending what seemed like an age, practising intricate starter plays for both lineout and scrum ball. Some of the plays we used to run as young boys were extremely complex, with players running dummy lines all over the place in order to cause confusion in the defensive line so that we could make a break and score. Our game plan was simple, every time we had a scrum or lineout in the opposition half, we would run one of our many creative starter moves and we would score.....easy!

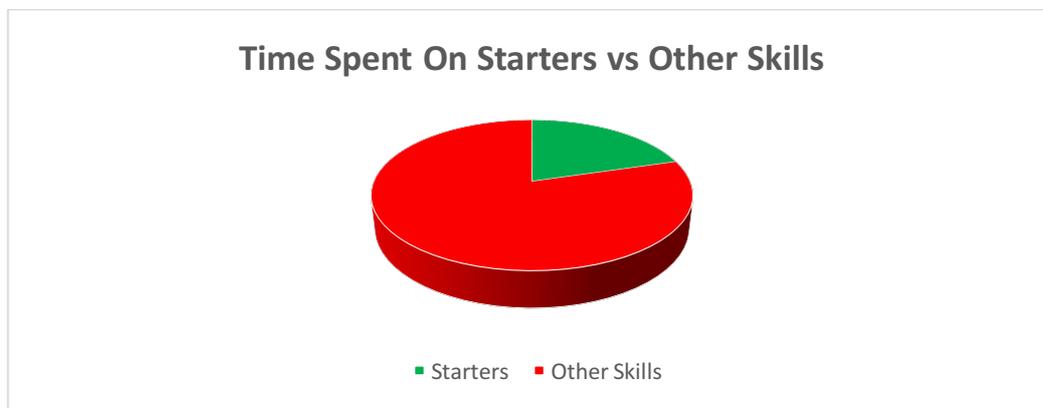
Running the plays at training against passive or even no defence, gave us false hope and as soon as we attempted to execute these starters under pressure in a match situation, the reality started to dawn, that we had to have more than just starter plays in our locker in order to win games. I thought that this was blatantly obvious, but we continued to work on these plays in the hope that they would lead us to success. They didn't!

From a young age, I realised that, in my opinion, starter plays were not all they were made out to be and were in reality only a small portion of the game. With this in mind I will review and discuss the reality of how effective starter plays really are and how many tries are scored within the first phase of a set piece. Should we as coaches, spend time creating these wonderful looking plays or should we spend more time on developing players with the ability to execute core skill in order to make the most of opportunities when they present themselves during games?

To begin my investigation into this topic, I spoke to 5 coaches, who all coach at different levels of the game (super rugby, school rugby and premier grade) and asked them what amount of time they spend on starter plays per week, having 2 session of 90 minutes.

Coach 1	40 minutes	22%
Coach 2	30 minutes	17%
Coach 3	25 minutes	13%
Coach 4	40 minutes	22%
Coach 5	50 minutes	28%

Based on the figures stated above I have taken an average percentage of time spent on starter plays per week by the 5 coaches.

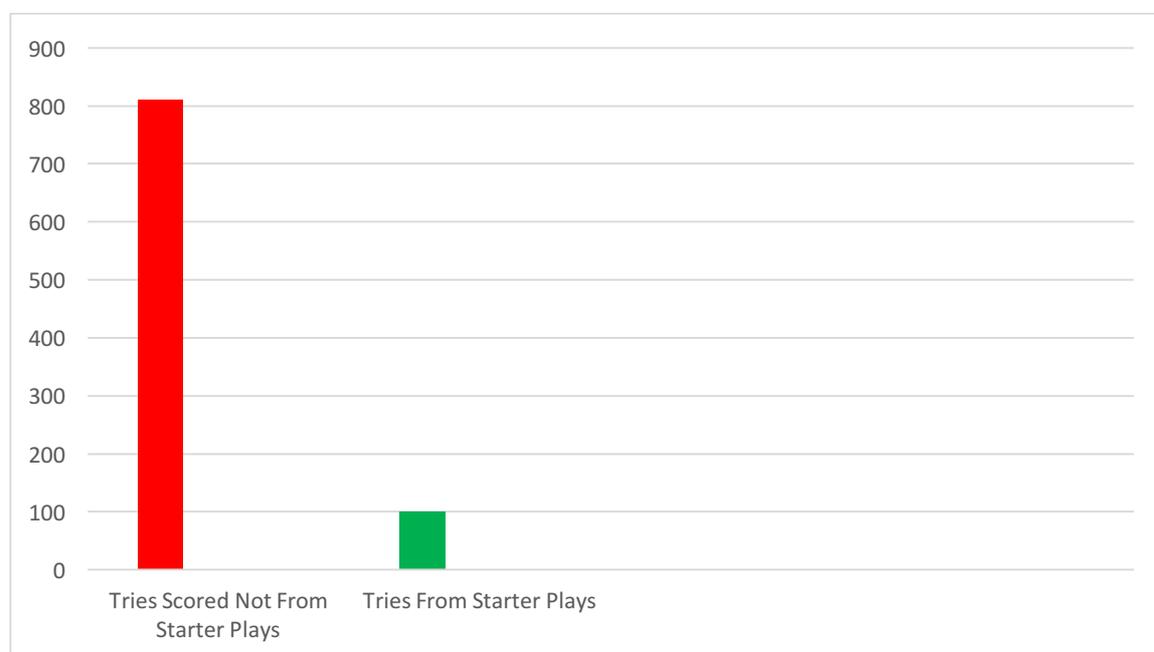


Having an average of 37 minutes (20.4%) of weekly training time spent on starter plays, it makes sense that a return on time invested would be to score 20.4% of the teams tries from starter plays. (ie. Within 1 phase of a set piece. Not including driving mauls or push over tries)

I will investigate the percentage of tries scored within 1 phase of set piece in the Super Rugby 2016 competition.

Team	Tries Scored	Starter Play Tries	% of Starter Play Tries
Blues	45	5	11%
Brumbies	56	9	16%
Bulls	47	3	6%
Cheetahs	47	3	6%
Chiefs	76	12	15%
Crusaders	68	6	9%
Force	25	2	8%
Highlanders	56	4	7%
Hurricanes	72	12	17%
Jaguars	44	5	11%
Kings	34	2	6%
Lions	81	5	6%
Rebels	46	5	11%
Reds	33	7	21%
Sharks	40	3	8%
Stormers	52	3	6%
Sunwolves	33	6	18%
Waratahs	55	8	15%
<b>Total</b>	<b>910</b>	<b>100</b>	<b>11%</b>

Having discovered the figures in the above table, I have formulated a graph in order to provide a clear visual image of the amount of tries scored from starter plays vs tries scored not from starter plays.



With the data collected it is evident that an average of 11% of tires scored are from starter plays. With this in mind, spending an average of 20.4% of training time on perfecting starter plays makes little sense.

## **So What Should We Spend the Extra Time On?**

As a coach, having the ability to enable and develop players so that they can deal with all potential situations that they will face during a game situation is key. Taking an analytic approach, the amount of times a player receives the ball in open play compared to receiving the ball from a starter play is significantly higher, so it would make sense to develop a player's ability to play with ball in hand in an unstructured situation rather than focusing such a large amount of time on starter plays.

In the modern game, defence is so well structured that the ability for players to create an opportunity and then execute is massive. The All Blacks are leaps and bounds ahead in this respect and the consistent success is evidence that players that can execute open play opportunities are generally more successful than teams that rely on starter plays to score or create scoring opportunities.

## **Conclusion**

With all the evidence gathered in this study, I have a clear opinion on how I believe sessions should be run and what things should be of high importance.

Starter plays obviously play a significant part of the game and can be a great tool from which to launch an attack, get over the gainline and set up 2<sup>nd</sup>, 3<sup>rd</sup> and even 4<sup>th</sup> phase opportunities. But in reality, that's as far as it goes. Yes, teams do score from starter plays and yes they can be very effective but the evidence clearly shows that teams score an average of 89% of their tries post first phase, therefore, creating a team that has the ability and confidence to attack successfully in open and unstructured situations is, in my opinion more important than creating a team that can execute complex starter plays but struggle to execute opportunities in open play.

As is human nature, we tend to follow a leader or stick to what we know. Spending 20% of training time on starter plays is what has been done for decades and therefore coaches who have been players and have been coached in this way, may struggle to adapt to spending less time on starter plays.

I also believe that another reason for spending such a significant amount of time on starter plays is that coaches can be lazy and uncreative. Allowing teams to spend large amounts of time practicing starter plays prevents a coach from planning new creative drills or exercises for players to develop. A coach that is truly driven to get the very best out of their players will constantly be creating various scenarios in which the players can develop and in return will create a team that can convert opportunities when they present in real game situations.

With all the above in mind I strongly believe that players and teams should spend significantly more time working on core skill (catch/pass) than perfecting starter plays. Developing players that are able to play and adapt to what presents in front of them is in my opinion of far greater value than creating players that look good running starter plays but become lost as soon as the structure of first phase attack is removed.

Times have changed, the game of rugby has evolved and we as coaches must evolve too. Be an innovator not a follower. Be someone that people want to become, not a mirror image of someone that people have seen many times. Dare to think outside of the box, dare to be different, dare to do what you think is right!