

HOW TO PERIODISE DECISION MAKING INTO YOUR ANNUAL PLAN

Introduction

How often as a coach have you watched your team miss an opportunity to score and said to yourself, why didn't you use the overlap? Or, why didn't you go down the short side? No matter the technical skill of your players, under game pressures their decision making skill will more often than not determine the outcome of play.

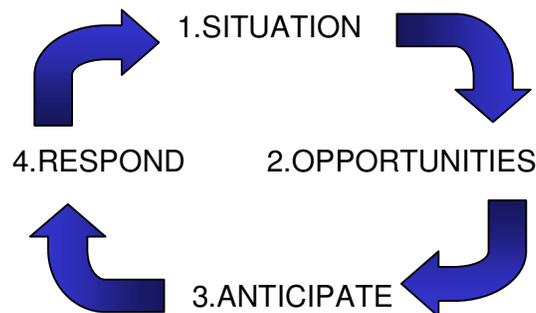
It is widely accepted that a comprehensive coaching program focuses on four independent areas of development;

1. Physical
2. Psychological
3. Technical skill
4. Decision making skill

Whilst the first three areas are customary components of the annual plan, decision making skills are often overlooked and rarely practiced with deliberate thought or purpose. To enable players and teams to reach their potential, decision making skills must be practised systematically within a structured plan. This paper will explain decision making skills in the context of Rugby and outline how to periodise its practice into your annual plan.

Decision Making Skill

“Decision making skill may be broadly defined as the ability to use elements in the playing environment to recognise opportunities that enable the athlete to anticipate the actions of other competitors, and thus make the appropriate response.”¹ The decision making process is as follows;



¹ Prof. Werner Helsen

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Decision making in sport is well researched and much information exists about its training principles. For example, we know decision making;

- Is trainable and complimentary with technical skills development.
- Can be periodised using strength and conditioning principles.
- Is accelerated by attaining high level skill proficiency.
- Is either an analytical or intuitive choice, depending on the time available.
- Applies to open skills more readily than closed skills.

There is also much information on the characteristics of highly skilled players who possess superior decision making capabilities. For example, we know expert decision makers are able to;

- Use available information effectively to make more accurate decisions, by immediately recognising and disregarding redundant information.
- Anticipate or 'read the play' as they have a high-level game knowledge by learning the links between patterns forming in the play and their eventual outcomes.
- Utilize greater visual awareness due to the reduced attention demands by focusing less on their own actions and more on positions and movement of players in their peripheral vision.

Rugby is extremely dynamic in nature and as a result, the level of decision making required of players is very complex. The decision making process revolves around a player's ability to situate themselves effectively amongst both players and the ball, and to respond according to the nature of the opposition's movements in offence or defence. The type and speed of the response chosen by the player is determined by either the tactical or strategic decision making skill utilized, and the quality of response, by the technical skill applied.

Whilst technical skill practice is well understood, both tactical and strategic decision making skills practice are not, despite being the two components of decision making skill. Their definitions when applied to Rugby are;

- Tactical decision making skill – the ability of the player to perform appropriately in general play, where the players and the ball are in motion.²

² Pierre Villepreux

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- Strategic decision making skill – the ability of the player to make the right choice and perform from set play, where the positions of players and the ball are fixed.³

Famed French coach Pierre Villepreux provides a good example of effective tactical decision making skill in Rugby as being, “when the ball carrier makes the right decision in relation to the defensive alignment of the opposition, and at the same time the support players react appropriately to whatever initiative is taken by the ball carrier.”⁴ Tactical decision making skill is best developed on the field using unstructured type practise.

Strategic decision making skill is completed prior to the restart of play and is commonly carried out by the captain or a team leader who decides what play to make and where, before communicating it to the rest of the team. An example in Rugby is performing a sequence play from set play that utilizes identified strengths of the team and exploits identified weaknesses in the opposition. Strategic decision making skill is best developed using a combination of both on-field structured practice and off-field game analysis.

Periodisation and the Annual Plan

The importance of developing a periodised annual plan for training cannot be emphasized enough. The periodisation process ensures that all areas of development are prepared and implemented at desirable times during the season. An annual plan enables the coach to teach actively and not reactively, with a constant view of the overall plan for success. The result is similar to that of a well planned training session; players are able to practise with purpose and coaches are able to teach with self-assurance, both with the knowledge their time is being effectively utilized.

Decision making can be periodised using the well known principles of volume, intensity, frequency and overload. They can be applied to decision making skill training as follows;

- Volume - is applied from low to medium to high as the level of technical skill proficiency increases.
- Intensity - remains medium to high as this level of concentration is required to accurately make decisions and apply tactical and strategic skill.
- Frequency - is applied from low to medium to high as the complexity of training tasks increases.

³ Pierre Villepreux

⁴ Pierre Villepreux

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- Overload - is attained at the end of each training phase by increasing pressure to game standards. This is achieved by gradually reducing the time available to make decisions and increasing the level of contact and/or nature of collision.

In aligning these principles to the annual plan, the complimentary nature of technical and decision making skills practise is never more evident. The decision making skills practice must build upon the technical skills practice, and it is highly reliant upon the attainment of skill proficiency. For example, if players are unable to practise the stationary catch and pass accurately and consistently, how can they be expected to draw and pass a defender successfully under pressure? Or, if the forward pack cannot pack strongly against a scrum machine, how can they be expected to defend a whip wheel and still provide quality ball for a right side scrum move?

The capacity to make good decisions relies upon the ability to perform skills, and in the same way, the capacity to periodise decision making relies upon the development of a technical skills plan.

With this in mind, an annual plan is specifically designed according to the capabilities of the team and the competition they participate in. The annual plan made reference to herein has been designed for participation in the Sydney Premier Rugby Competition (See Appendix 1).

The annual plan of fifty-two weeks is divided into six training phases, each responsible for generating specific training responses at different stages of the season;

- General Preparation – 10 weeks
- Specific Preparation – 5 weeks
- Pre-Competition – 6 weeks
- Competition One – 8 weeks
- Competition Two – 14 weeks
- Transition – 9 weeks

The annual plan is cyclic in nature and aims to progressively overload technical and decision making skills. Each training phase is divided into macrocycles of three to five weeks duration. Each macrocycle is broken down into smaller microcycles which represent the traditional training week of three practises and a match. Essentially each of these components represent small blocks of work which drive towards an end goal and if evaluated regularly, can be altered to suit the team's needs without changing the nature of the overall plan.

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Technical Skills and the Annual Plan

Technical skills proficiency, which forms the basis of sound decision making skills, is best attained through periodised practise. It is therefore imperative a planned approach be applied to the practise of individual, core, unit and team skills. This plan must take into account the nature of skill development i.e. skills are best learnt from simple to complex and training is best taught using blocked practise drills through to random practise games.

The technical skills plan begins in the Specific Preparation phase and initially focuses on the individual skills of handling, kicking, jumping, throwing and push-resist mechanics, and the unit skills of scrummaging and lineout supporting. They are trained using structured practise where the focus is on skill execution and completions. Training is predominantly one v one or unit v unit and centred on the application of technical skill.

A learning focus is applied to training with the introduction of match practice in the Pre-Competition phase. The core skills of catch and pass, track and tackle, tackle contest and evasion and the team skills of performing patterns of play are practised more randomly with a higher degree of variability. Training is mainly small group v small group or as part of a team and concentrated on developing teamwork and continuity.

The first Competition phase is primarily concerned with the development of set play skill and starter plays. They are trained using structured practise where the focus is on performance. Training is largely unit v unit or team v team and very competitive in nature. Core and team skills are also practised, though as an attachment to set play.

During the final Competition phase a combination of core, unit and team skills are practised according to the teams' ball winning, ball securing and ball utilising capabilities. Training is a mixture of small group v small group, unit v unit and team v team practise depending on the learning, skill execution or performance focus. It is predominantly unstructured in nature, becoming more structured as the organisational abilities of the team and the level of match strategy increases.

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Decision Making Skills and the Annual Plan

Following the development of the technical skills plan, decision making skills practise can be applied to the annual plan. Decision making skills are best learnt from simple to complex, similar to skills practise, and is best taught using high through to low levels of immediate feedback.

The General Preparation training phase provides opportunities for the player to participate in ball game activities and strength and conditioning training. During this phase the amount of decision making practice on the field is negligible and as a result it is the best period to develop decision making skills off the field.

Tactical decision making skill can be enhanced by undertaking sports vision training. Vision is often the last skill developed, yet can be the first to fail under fatigue. Therefore participation in interactive video displays and simulated match viewings that allow the player to visual search for specific cues and respond with the required action or answer are important training methods to use. For example, what cues identify that a defender is fixed? – the inside foot is planted and weight transferred to heels. Or, how do you identify an overlap? - scan both teams' players and apply mathematical principles of addition and subtraction.

Strategic decision making skill can be improved by increasing perceptual knowledge through the study of matches, law, plays and gameplans. For example, what does close penetration in attack cause the defense to do? - come closer together and concentrate in a small area close to the ball. Or, what does wide attack create? - conditions favourable for penetration through the resulting gaps created in the defense.

The volume of decision making skills during the General Preparation training phase needs to be low and the levels of intensity and arousal medium. A sufficient frequency is two 30-minute sessions per week, one tactical and one strategic.

The Specific Preparation training phase provides opportunities for players to master skills and parallel routines. Decision making practice is introduced during structured on-field practice and requires high levels of immediate feedback from the coach.

Tactical decision making skill can be enhanced by practicing extra concentration skills during individual skills training. For example, how do pairs negotiate grid passing through traffic? – by keeping heads still to utilize peripheral vision skills and communicating. Or what skills do you

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require, besides catch and pass, to accurately draw a stationary pole and pass to support? - visual tracking skills, a well timed call, and the ability to decipher the sounds made by a support player.

Strategic decision making skill can be improved by practicing unit skills according to nominated calling structures and desired outcomes. For example, how can a lineout throw to 4 with a fake forward and catch and pass off the top, be communicated in simple numerical code? - use a three number calling structure, the first number being the nominated jumper, the second the movement and space, the third the type of delivery. Or what cues identify the particular backline defensive patterns being used? - staggered alignment for up-and-out, outside shoulder positioning for up-and-in, line speed for man-on-man, wide alignment for 1-out.

The volume of decision making skills during the Specific Preparation training phase should be low to medium and the levels of intensity higher. It is necessary for a frequency of two 30-minute sessions per week, one tactical and one strategic, with overload generated in the final session by progressively reducing the time available to make the decision and response.

The Pre-Competition training phase provides opportunities for the player to learn core and team skills in a more unstructured environment. Decision making practice is increased during on-field practice and requires lower levels of immediate feedback from the coach.

Tactical decision making skill can be enhanced by applying sets of general play rules to core skills practice. For example; what are the tackle contest options available to the first support player if the ball carrier is on their feet? - if the ball can be seen, drive on it; if the ball cannot be seen, drive onto the player in possession. Or, what cues identify that a wide counter attack is an option available? – a staggered kick chase with less defenders than available attackers.

Strategic decision making skill can be improved by practicing team patterns from slow ball, where defense is well organised, and applying them to game situations. For example; how is continuity achieved in an 'exhaust' or same-way pattern? - by ensuring for each phase, the attack crosses the advantage line, so the defense is continually regrouping from a position in behind the play. Or, does close penetration and wide attack rules apply also to kicking in attack? - yes, a penetrative deep kick down the field will result in the defense coming closer together and a wide kick diagonally across the field will create gaps in the defense to attack.

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The volume of decision making skills during the Pre-Competition training phase needs to be medium and the levels of intensity high. A sufficient frequency is three 30-minute sessions per week, two tactical and one strategic, with overload generated in the final session by progressively reducing the time available and increasing the level of contact/nature of collision.

The Competition 1 of 2 training phase provides opportunities for the team to fine tune set play, and develop starter plays in a structured training environment. During this phase decision making practice is greater during on and off-field practice and due to the performance focus, requires high levels of immediate feedback from the coach.

Tactical decision making skill can be enhanced by applying rules of engagement to starter play practice. For example; how do you prevent the defense slowing up your ball for the next planned phase? - ensure ball carriers have strong ball running abilities and engage support players quickly past the ball. Or, what cues indicate that the latch or hammer should be used to drive the ball carrier in behind the defense? - a fan defensive alignment with defenders spread apart at the breakdown.

Strategic decision making skill can be improved by increasing knowledge of set play offensive and defensive capabilities and applying them to set play practise. For example; if the teams' strength is in the outside backs and the lineout is proficient, how do you best provide the backs the ball? - throw to 6, to disengage defensive back row, and deliver off the top ball to provide the most time and space available to move the ball out wide. Or, how can a strong front row apply effective pressure on the opposition strike? - LH and hooker bind tighter to bore in underneath opposition hooker or front row move sideways to reduce offset and create a more front-on engagement to upset opposition hooker.

It is common at this time for coaches to provide players with 'road maps' which chart starter play options from different parts of the field. This method of dividing the field into grids or channels and applying particular plays to each is a good method of developing strategic decision making skills and is a precursor to the establishment of gameplans.

The volume of decision making skills during the Competition 1 of 2 training phase should be medium and the levels of intensity high. It is necessary to increase the frequency to four 30-minute sessions each week, two each for tactical and strategic, with overload generated by progressively reducing the time available and increasing the level of contact/nature of collision.

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The final Competition training phase, 2 of 2, provides opportunities for the team to apply specific tactical and strategic principles, gathered from match and opposition analysis, to create sequence plays, gameplans and match strategy. Decision making practice is at its highest level during both on and off-field practice and depending on the focus; be it learning, skill execution or performance; requires low to high levels of immediate feedback from the coach.

Tactical decision making skill can be enhanced by studying how and when particular opposition players operate, and devising responses. For example; how do you nullify the counter-attacking opportunities of a fullback with a lethal right-foot step? - kick to his right-hand-side to force him to run to his left, and defend the inside shoulder. Or, how do you combat an opposition backrower who is effective at the 'jackal' and able to counter-ruck strongly? - have the second arrival at the tackle contest aim for a lower body hit and drive, to roll him onto his back away from the ball and slow his progress.

Strategic decision making skill can be improved by studying how and when an opposition teams perform, and devising appropriate actions in response. For example; how do you trouble a team who relies on scrapping at the breakdown? - avoid repeated tackle contests by employing a policy in which you control the ball strongly for two phases and kick long and accurately on the third. Or, how do you reduce the strength of a dominant opposition lineout on your throw? - employ short lineouts with a walk-in jumper to create extra space, or adopt a walk-up structure, with the call made in advance, to reduce available time.

The required volume and intensity of decision making skills during the competition 2 of 2 training phase is high. The frequency should be five 30-minute sessions per week with overload generated regularly by reducing the time available and increasing the level of contact/nature of collision.

The Transition training phase provides opportunities for players to participate in cross training activities that promote active rest and regeneration in preparation for the following training year. There is neither decision making practice nor direct coaching input as individuals are having minimal impact upon team performance.

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Conclusion

Decision making skill is an important area of development that should never be overlooked. It must be included in the annual plan, in a manner that builds systematically upon technical skills practice. By developing decision makers in this way, coaches will benefit from having players better able to both read the play and respond to situations with the correct action.

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