

What is continuity and how important is it in the modern game?

Introduction

This paper will explore the definition of continuity and its contribution to the modern game. The need for continuity is highlighted by the IRB which in 2010 states:

"It is the aim of the team in possession to maintain **continuity** by denying the opposition the ball and, by skillful means, to advance and score points. Failure to do this will mean the surrendering of possession to the opposition either as a result of shortcomings on the part of the team in possession or because of the quality of the opposition defence. Contest and **continuity**, profit and loss.

As one team attempts to maintain **continuity** of possession, the opposing team strives to contest for possession. This provides the essential balance between continuity of play and continuity of possession. This balance of contestability and **continuity** applies to both set piece and general play.

Individuals can win games with sheer brilliance on occasions but a team playing a strong continuity game can destroy oppositions consistently and regularly. Continuity affects not only technical elements of the game such as ball advancement and possession but also the esthetics of team morale, the spectacle of the sport and ensuing commercial impact. Continuity is the foundation of the game and the method by which you should play. The rhythm supplied by continuity provides the game with its heartbeat. A heartbeat that resounds clearly through a team, a flowing, invincible feeling that beats out success.

In today's highly competitive world for the attention of spectators Rugby can not afford to be arrogant in its battle for the crowds. It needs to deliver a fast, flowing and exciting sporting spectacle to compete for the commercial attention of the public both in the grandstand and in the living room.

When continuity is lacking games have no heart or structure it becomes a stop start process which engages neither player or spectator. It is frustrating for all involved which leaves the demoralising feeling of never quite hitting the sweet spot. A mindgame which taunts the best of players.

Dr Adam Fraser, a leading educator, researcher and thought leader in elite performance, talks about FLOW being the best personal space to be in. The moment at which "we are in the zone. Where we feel focused, completely engaged, exhibit positive emotions, where our mind set is positive and optimistic, where time disappears and we feel in control of what we are doing. When we have moments like these we are in a psychological state called FLOW."

When continuity and flow meet in the same time continuum the earthly game truly transcends to a heavenly game.

Definition

So, what is continuity? According to Collins English Dictionary 2010 Continuity (-ities) n. pl means:

1. logical sequence, cohesion, or connection
2. a continuous or connected whole

Who doesn't want cohesion in their team, a connected whole and connection between players, players and the ball and players and the game.

For the purpose of this paper I believe continuity has three elements:

Team: For a team it is defined as a free flowing game enabled through preparation, anticipation and flexibility. It is the rhythm which your team will find through a combination of optimum pace and ball momentum. The type of continuity is dictated by the physical attributes of teams taking into account size, strengths and experience of your team.

Physical: The physical translation is to maintain momentum in the ball. The ability to keep continuity alive, like a living, breathing thing with energy. The longer the continuous play the more energy in the movement. The key goal is to avoid stopping the movement and losing the energy. The physical translation for a player is maintaining the ball while staying on feet and dominating opposition through using the core skills of staying on their feet and pumping their legs while moving forwards.

Mindset. Being in tune with, and trusting, fellow players is only possible with open and honest communication both off and on the pitch. It is of particular importance during a game between support players and ball runners. Understanding and knowing individual strengths and weaknesses increases players ability to anticipate the direction of the game and their part in it. In the flow zone players will be alert, anticipating and forward thinking. And once tasted they will never forget the feeling.

Dr Fraser states "We should also understand that when we focus on mastery we are much more likely to get into FLOW (being 'in the zone'). One of the many benefits of focusing on mastery is that it is a state of continual improvement."

Like the holy trinity it is only if these three aspects combine simultaneously that flow and continuity are evoked in a game.

Why is continuity important?

To gain the engagement and commitment of players to an idea, a coach must explain and demonstrate its importance.

Continuity has the power to transform a team. FOR EXAMPLE.

The Wallabies in 2010 have consistently played with strong continuity - in the first twenty minutes of matches against: South Africa (date - score - time), the All Blacks (date - score - time). Then losing continuity the rhythm of the match falls apart, confidence diminishes, heads drop and the competitive advantage goes to the opposition: South Africa (date - score - time), the All Blacks (date - score - time).

Continuity negates:

Players being hit	Taking out sniper effect	Going to
ground		
Being dominated and losing gain line		Stops and loses
energy	Support players out of the game	

In attack continuity enables:

Progression over the gain line with faster and free flowing action	
Not surrendering and advancing the ball	
Consistency in attack	A proactive attitude and mindset
to the game	
Identification of all options to ensure continuity of play, opening up	
minds of players	
Get into a rhythm and take control of the situation	

4. Enabling players to anticipate situations and foresee possible solutions early is key to ensuring continuity in a game. Without the ability to anticipate situations, the physical core drills of continuity will be nullified. The aim should be for a player to be able to:

Foresee space in the game	
Identify early on a blocking wall and strong defence	
Weigh up options of passing to a support player, or player in better	
position	
Recognise that going to ground is a last resort due to the loss of energy	

Anticipation comes through agility of thought and speed of reaction. Promotion of continually changing situations for players and requiring them to make options will develop this in players. Backed up by effective communication between player with the ball and support players.

For example coaching drill for anticipation: Closed eyes, pre-position situations, setting up defence and a play around the player, on the whistle assessing quality of decision and speed of play. To get players to be proactive in their choices not just reactive.

5. To physically coach continuity the key is to keep it simple. There are two basic choices for players and a strong commitment to either option will help avoid high risk rugby:

Either pass before the line of defence
or
Make an early commitment to attack the line

IRB Law 2010 states that "Rugby's distinctive features are maintained through scrums, lineouts, mauls, rucks, kick-offs and re-starts. Also the key features relating to contest and **continuity** - the backward pass, the offensive tackle." It is the backward pass that enables play to continue in face of a healthy defence.

Players should be coached to advance the ball by staying strong on their feet, using an arm to push away a defender while maintaining a strong body position, with legs separated. Then use the upper body to turn the ball and feed a supporting player or hold the ball when turning for a supporting player to drive the ball forward, then rip and feed.

For an effective backward pass the focus must be on core stability in body and legs to enable staying on feet prior to going to ground, if necessary, in a strong position to relay the ball, either in traffic or in space. The aim is to pass efficiently and position body to receive a ball either in support or in space. When in contact it is being strong enough to stay on feet and dominate the defence to advance with the ball, or for support players to be able to secure or move the ball. It is proactively seeking the optimum position.

5. The core physical continuity skills which must be mastered are:

Domination of defence by strength of tackle
Appropriate body position - especially strength in contact
Pumping legs, staying on feet
Presentation of ball
Communication by support players

Teaching these skills with timely, pedantic and exaggerated methods will ensure maximum uptake. The focus on mastery will create the cycle of continual improvement.

6. There are four simple drills that can be used effectively in coaching

continuity:

HIT POP
HIT SET (RIPPER IN)
HIT DRIVE DRIVE DRIVE GO TO GROUND AND POP

BALL UP

HIT DRIVE DRIVE GO TO GROUND AND CLEAN OUT TO

PRESENT BALL

Follow these with game effect situations for example:

Ruck touch with no ground option, encouraging timely and effective support communication

SUMMARY

To summarise, continuity is not only the physical element of maintaining momentum in the ball. It is an anticipating and flexible mindset from both player and team that focuses on mastering the physical elements of continuity: the backward pass, ball presentation, body positioning and communication. It is continual improvement that peaks when players attain mental flow, physical continuity and the rhythm of their game at the same moment in time. Only when the three elements combine will continuity become a constant presence in a team's game.

Mastering the mindset and physical elements of continuity will create a powerfully, cohesive and mentally strong team.

(1647 words)