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editor's comments

Dear All,

With the conclusion of the PRC we now step up to the PNC and, by my estimation the Junior All Blacks team that has been selected will give each union an excellent barometer as to where they stand in preparation for the 2011 RWC. It is equally an opportunity for each union to plan towards the RWC as, all the meeting of annual demands for the money that has been invested, will be of little consequence if the performances at the RWC do not exceed those achieved at the last one.

To ensure this and to take care of any eventualities that may occur so that they are not unexpected planning must start now in all aspects of the game – selection, succession planning, game planning, logistics, player availability, finance etc, etc. In some of these areas a sound methodology is available through the IRB and I am happy to offer my services as a facilitator to enable unions to design and deliver a RWC plan.

Without being too critical I believe that this has been the major drawback in past campaigns and one can only speculate how much better the more that satisfactory results would have been should planning for on-field performances been more effective.

At the other end of the scale I have produced an article on selection priorities for the situation I most often see in my visits, i.e. limited numbers and the priorities a team needs to have in making best use of the talent available.

Finally I include a summary of the main points I was able to glean from a book I have read recently on the New England Patriots.

Yours in Rugby,

Lee Smith

1. Selection Priorities

Selection considerations

1. If we are selecting a team should we select based on ideal selection criteria?
2. Should we select the best players and derive a pattern from the talents strengths and weaknesses?
3. If we are in a position of no choice, we have a squad and that's it, what should our priorities be?
4. Would these priorities be universal? If there are sufficient numbers to allow the selectors to have a choice are their priorities the same as a situation in which there so no choice at all?
5. Do they both work to the same end but with different time frames?
6. To what degree should selection be reactive to the abilities of likely opponents and to what degree should it be proactive, based on the talent you have fine tuned to opponents on a game by game basis where it a matter of emphasis within the overall plan?
7. To what extent should coaching and selection priorities be the same?
8. To what extent should back up by position be reflected in the abilities of the number one ranked player? This may mean we do not have to adjust the game plan when selection changes are made?
9. To what extent is selection at the amateur level different from selection at the professional level?

Let's start from the most common situation; a team that picks itself because, within the age bracket, what you have is the bare squad, say 25 players with limited backup in most positions.

The selection is not a matter of who to select but who to put where in order to maximise the playing resources.

The first priority is ability to win possession at set piece

Because it will cover deficiencies elsewhere the first priority is the ability to win set piece possession. If the tight forwards a marginal and are trained with a "hit and run" philosophy you won't build anything. The first few scrums and line-outs may catch the opposition by surprise. But this element will not endure as the game progresses, and as the season progresses even less so.

So you may as well face it, get the best group together, who can win you the ball, aim to have that group commit to their task and work on getting better as the season progresses.

Even if they are inferior you are not going to get anywhere without the ball and by hard work and sound technique, they will get better. In addition, they won't have the inferiority complex that the hit-and-run approach implies.

Also by winning the ball, you can decide what to do with it; it masks other deficiencies and enables you to play to your strength.

Selection priorities (contd)

Equally, defences will be less exposed if it is in fact a weakness.

Look for a good passing halfback

So you go for possession winning ability in the forwards at set piece. In deciding what to do with the ball the bottom line is a passing halfback and a sound decision-maker at #10 with at least a good pass off his/her favoured hand and a strong favoured boot.

A bonus would be a number nine who has a few more strings such as box kick and the ability to run, but the ability to pass, to convert poor ball to good ball, in one fell swoop, is the priority.

Now you may be in a position to convert possession to field position and to take the game from there.

Find a 10 who is a confident decision maker and who can convert possession into field position

Your lineout strength will determine whether kicks are made to touch or to contest. There's nothing worse than the forwards winning the ball only to have it kicked to a defender with time and space resulting in the opposition coming straight back at you.

As stated above a contestable kick is preferable and the skill that now needs to be developed in a chasing line is to chase in a line and run, steady up, force a decision and move into the tackle. A bonus is the opportunity to jump into the air to catch the ball.

So, the aim of the chase is to contest the ball, at least delay their attack and, on a number of occasions, force an infringement or gain a turnover from which a point of scoring attack can be made.

This, at the very least, will insulate an inferior pass- run attack from a turnover within the scoring range.

Now that we are down there and have the ball to put to the scrum or lineout or from a turnover, we have to keep the ball. This is best done by getting over the gain line thus shortening the support players' route to the point of collision or contact.

Even though numbers may be great, this is best affected by linear support from the base, pick and go up the guts around the fringes or off the first receiver. The choice is based on the positioning of the defence. Obviously you go where they are not. Right or left comes to mind also. This is the reason for number 10 being a good decision maker. This is what s/he is looking for.

By persisting with this by varying the point of the attack you may be able to build into the team a range of, say, three options with growing accuracy.

Find loose-forwards that are confident ball carriers and/or are effect scavengers

In selection, this is where the loose forwards come into play. Two carriers, if the tight forwards can help well and good, and a scavenger, whose longevity is paramount. This enables the others can run off him/her and can provide umbrella protection

Selection priorities (contd)

at the breakdown. Of course s/he will be unable to perform that role all the time so all deserve training in the scavenger role. Maybe # 10 and perhaps # 9 can be excluded if you want them to run the ship.

Momentum builds pressure and pressure creates points that should be taken no matter by what avenue they are offered.

I'm unsure of the relative conversion rates of penalty kicks made to touch resulting in a try from a lineout and penalty kicks, resulting in points, but I have my suspicions that the latter is the most productive.

Select the best goal kicker (not always 10) and roster team-mates to help the kicker practice

As a result, the next priority is to select the best goal kicker and delegate team-mates on a roster to help the kicker practice.

It is important to realise that, on most occasions, kicking concedes possession in general play and at re-starts so, when a turnover is achieved and possession can complement field position decision making is essential to apply pressure. When the team has field position, possession must be retained to maintain the pressure and the pace of play should accelerate to go forward but no beyond the team's skill set.

So in terms of selection these are the attacking priorities.

But if you can't win the ball then the selection priorities should focus on stopping them.

Select players who are confident tacklers and who are willing and able to go into collision safely and effectively

The two skill priorities that are the basis of selection are tackling and catching the kicked ball.

Tackling can be taught but it also requires a willingness to go into the collision safely and effectively. Not blood and guts but determined composure and drive to ensure that the outcome is to make the ball contestable.

Select players who can confidently catch a kicked ball

Similarly catching the high ball, snaffling the loose ball by going to ground and coming up with it and contesting the tackled ball are all essential skills and selection criteria.

While it may be expected that fitness takes care of itself this can no longer be assumed given the lifestyle of most amateur players. The skills need to be complemented by fitness so that their performance can be sustained. There is insufficient time in most situations for these to be separate components, they must be combined and there must be sufficient equipment to allow this to happen. Remember tiredness makes cowards of us all.

Select players who are physically fit or, perhaps more importantly, are willing to do the work (often on their own and away from supervision) to improve their fitness

2. Sustainable Success

A summary of the main points in:

"The Blueprint. How the New England Patriots Beat the System to Create the Last Great NFL Superpower" by Christopher Price, Thomas Dunne Books, St Martin's, New York.

Staffing

1. Ensure longevity of coaching and management staff to build for long-term success.

Structure

1. Separate ownership from the front office and separate both from coaching. All should be autonomous in their own right to achieve prescribed individual goals working towards a collective end.

Selection

1. The select team players before individuals.
2. Base selection on the versatility of the player to play in the number of playing positions.
3. Once a strong base is being built, take a risk on talent. It is felt that if these players are marginal in other respects, the strong leaders that have emerged from the establishment of a strong base will prevent disruption.
4. Have backup that will put pressure on the incumbents so performance doesn't deteriorate. While finance may prevent backup in all positions it is worth selecting so that there is backup in depth in a limited number of key positions. The number of positions will depend on the finance available.
5. Select experience as a stop gap measure placing them on short-term contracts.
6. Place young players on short term contracts to reduce the element of risk.
7. Have a comprehensive scouting system.
8. If you develop a system and your assistants go elsewhere to coach at a lower level they provide a valuable network for selection and pre-selection training.
9. Continually revised rankings in your succession planning and make sure you justify any changes. Make sure these justifications are recorded.

Playing Patterns and Strategies

1. Know your systems and patterns that you are evolving overtime and make sure the team plays to them. Select either to the pattern or for diversity so that there is talent that can offer a greater range of options within the patterns.
2. If the model to which you are working isn't broken by the end of the season break it by going through the game planning process. Once that has been rebuilt, test it against what you had already in place and by comparing these two finalise what your overall strategy is going to be.

Sustainable success (contd)

3. Maintain detailed records of individual opponents and teams to establish their behaviour and their patterns.
4. When developing a game plan isolate a limited number of opposition weaknesses to exploit.
5. Committed to a long-term strategy of teambuilding and avoid "miracle" cures in the short run.
6. Defence wins games.
7. A successful system creates a raft of duplication by others and increases the need to look at all things including minute detail to continue to have an edge.
8. Sound defence has a greater margin of error than sound attack. This is why there is a focus on defence. Successful attack is only as good as the next game, if opponents are doing their homework correctly.
9. Do something because logically it is likely to be successful, not because you have always done it.

Player and Staff Relations

1. Avoided personal loyalty.
2. Delegate to staff and support them.
3. It is important to have a core of staff that has been with you for a long period of time who know what you want. If they know what you want they can shorten the planning and development phase when you go to a new appointment.
4. Relationships with players are game related.
5. Experience in the competition is invaluable in achieving success.
6. Personally be the bearer of bad news.
7. Friendly but never friends.
8. Coach aloofness can create player unity.
9. Don't play favourites.
10. Research the complete person, not just the player.
11. Small personal things count when dealing with players' welfare.