Developing Decision Making for Rugby

Introduction

Rugby is a dynamic game, demanding, requires speed, endurance, strength, ability, teamwork and quick decisions. Coaches and players can easily practice drills and game plans to develop the basic game skills such as speed, endurance and ability. Coaches can also design flexible training sessions, create powerful game plans. Teamwork takes a lot of effort to build and maintain, and there is a plethora of information available in the methods of team building. A lot of emphasis is placed on developing the technical abilities of players – especially at younger ages. As the players develop and are exposed to more competitive situations, good coaches incorporate a focus on the development of decision making and problem solving skills.

Decision making is the difference in playing successful rugby. It tends to get pushed aside in training because it’s too hard to find and build decision making drills or the physical development and plays are easier to practice. On game day, you hear coaches urge players to “use their top 10%, play with your head, and make smart decisions” and outthink the other team. These comments can be meaningless if decision making is not emphasised in training and part of the game plan.

There is a range of theories on Decision Making but generally only two theories are implemented when playing or coaching rugby.

Analytical decision making is the ability to weigh up match situations and decide on what option to take and when to take it, for example, carry the ball, pass it on or play it into space when in attack, or place the opposition under the maximum pressure when defending. Tactics are a set of plans designed to maximise your strengths or target an opponents weaknesses to gain an advantage in a game situation. Developing decision making is about enabling players to make good tactical decisions on the field of play.

The other kind of decision making is intuitive decision making. These decisions are made when a quick reaction is required, when there is no time to think about things, but when the player just reacts to what they see, hear or feels. For example, the back rower finds themselves in the back line and with the vision and the confidence, chips over the top of the pressure defence for a team mate to gather and score.

Teaching analytical decision making can be achieved by talking about the issues, explaining what the best options are in a range of situations and why, and by asking players questions to test their awareness. As the players test this knowledge in game situations, the players will become more effective in the game.
The following is from an article written by Dave Hadfield (Understanding decision making in rugby)

“The late, great Italian educator, Maria Montessori, believed that children learnt most effectively if directors/directresses (she would not use the word teachers) created a rich environment and guided the children to self-discovery. This is how intuitive decision making is best learnt. Just substitute player for child and coach for director, and you can use the Montessori approach as a model for rugby coached to teach intuitive decision making.

As a coach, we should consider ourselves as a guide to player self-discovery.”

Players tend to learn how to make intuitive decisions by actually making them in game situations and simulated game situations, they actually learn by experience. Intuitive decision making is a skill that cannot be taught, but rather, that it can be learned by the player by their own effort.

Spectators of the game normally focus on the action of the game and don’t focus on the observation, orientation and the decisions necessary to make the brilliant actions to score the points. Coaches create systems with practice, game plans and plays for players to observe the actions in the game, to orient themselves and their team mates in the activities occurring in the time and space with practice, plays and experience. Coaching these four elements of Observe, Orient, Decide and Act to rugby players, can easily assist players to understand the decision making process.

These elements were developed by Colonel John Boyd and are used by American combat agencies to understand the decision making process to train their employees to adapt and find clarity in chaotic combat situations. Analogies between combat and playing sports are numerous. Both rugby and combat exist in chaos. Both strive for victory by pitting one set of people and tactics against another in time and space. Both demand unit cohesiveness in strategy, communication and execution. The biggest challenge in combat and in team sports is how to find clarity and cohesion amongst chaos.

Boyd came up with a decision making paradigm organized enough to bring clarity to chaos yet flexible enough to adapt “to any direct conflict. It defines the cycle by which we make decisions in a competitive situation.” (John F. Schmitt, Mastering Tactics. Quantico VA: Marine Corps Association). His decision making system was called the Observation, Orientation, Decision, Action Loop, most often called the OODA Loop.
Understanding and applying the OODA Loop will enable coaches to create powerful but flexible game plans, create attack and defence patterns and to prepare individual players to think, make a decision and react individually to the needs of the player group. By doing this, the players have a greater ability to understand the game of rugby and how to achieve victory by coordinating the actions of 15 determined players against the opposition. Ultimately, it is not just the actions but the steps leading to the decision to make these actions lead to victory.

**Observations**

Considerations for **Observations** can include the following:

- **Outside Information** – knowledge of the opposition strengths and weaknesses, weather conditions.
- **Unfolding Circumstances** – injuries, opportunities, how plays develops, opponents actions.
- **Feedback from previous OODA cycles**.
Orientation

Orientation is the most important step in the OODA loop. It is the most easily corruptible of the four steps. Orientation requires the observer to yield to frail human qualities, such as cultural, heritage and previous experience.

Considerations for Orientation can include the following:

- Cultural Tradition – what other sports have been played, the evolution of rugby in Australia
- Genetic Heritage – the player’s physical characteristics and ability, size, speed, strength, agility, vision, reactions, ability to think, etc.
- Previous Experience – in rugby, sports and life, generally, the more the better.
- Analyses/Synthesis – how we interpret what is seen.
- New Information – each new situation is added to our observation.

Orientation emphasises the context in which events occur, so that we may facilitate our decisions and actions, that orientation helps turn information into knowledge. And, knowledge not information, is the real predictor of making good decisions.

Decisions

When we make our on field decision, we form options based on the situation and pick the best based on our experience through the use of our observations and orientation to build choices.

Considerations for Analytical Decision Making can include the following:

- Strategic Goals – the high level of the game plan objectives: pressure, possession, field position, and the pace of the game.
- Operational Goals – the play or the phases of play and the desired outcome.
- Tactical Goals – the specific tendencies of the individuals on the team; ie: quick rucks or tight mauls.

The players should know the goals of the game plan, the pattern of play, and their individual roles. This can only come from practice and experience.
Considerations for **Intuitive Decision Making** can include the following:

- Creative passing
- Unique defensive adjustments
- Use of different attacking skills
- Different scrum engagements
- Fakes, dummies and deception
- Timing
- Support
- Game changing actions
- Flair – individuality

This is the individual creativity, judgment and flair of the player. The more experience, the more talent, the more confidence, the better the intuitive decision making will be. This can take years of hard work in fundamentals and experimentation in technique to perfect intuitive decision making.

**Action**

The execution of what we decide to do may provide the outcome of a basic pass, catch, tale or setting up the next phase or by scoring points.

Once the result of the action is observed, the OODA loop starts over. In a rugby game, you want to cycle through the four steps faster and better than the opposition – hence, the loop.

**Practicing Decision Making by Incorporating the OODA Loop**

As a rugby coach, rugby practice and game preparation are almost exclusively dedicated to action. We teach the players to run, pass, tackle, ruck, maul, scrums etc… We focus their growth in the gym to increase the player’s strength and endurance to act faster, stronger and quicker than our opponents, to give ‘us the edge’. Fundamentals of the game are essential; however, understanding and applying the OODA Loop within structure practices and formulated game plans will improve the team’s performance and the performance of individual players.
Feedback

By providing occasional feedback to players in training and game situations, coaches can allow the players to correct errors themselves, again forcing them into the decision making process on a more regular basis. If a coach constantly provides feedback to the player or the team, there is the danger of over analyzing the performance, or the players may become reliant on the coach to solve the problems as they arrive, depriving the players the opportunity of developing their decision making skills.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the ability to make effective decisions is critical to the game of rugby. There is still the need for players to be fit and accomplished skill performers, but equally, every player needs to have the understanding of the game to make effective decisions.

The application of the OODA loop provides a powerful decision making framework that can be used by coaches and players to achieve dominant results. It can make a game more rewarding to the players and give steps for self improvement towards team success. It emphasises the process used to determine the actions and not just the actions themselves. The ultimate goal of applying the OODA loop in rugby is to operate within the opposition’s decision cycle. To re-emphasize Boyd’s ideas on the OODA loop, the individual and the team that executes their game plan more inconspicuously. More quickly and with more irregularity while denying their opposition the ability to do the same should be the victorious side.
References


Edison, Captain Toby; Modern Business Strategy

Hadfield, Dave; Understanding Decision Making in Rugby.