Rugby Talent Development: A Commentary

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My reading of the rugby talent development article written by Simon Worsnop (2016) leads me to believe, unsurprisingly, that NZ and England have similar challenges around the whole area of talent identification and development. I also find myself agreeing with many of the contentions of the authors regarding the critical importance of coaching in the development process and the very real challenges in coach education and development when many of those coaching young kids playing rugby are dads (and mums) who accidently put their hands up or were too slow to take them down. Yet without these parents’ service, we in New Zealand rugby circles would be up the proverbial creek without a paddle when it comes to finding coaches for our rugby youngsters.

New Zealand is a small country with a population of under 4.5 million people, hidden away down at the bottom of the South Pacific. Most who visit the country rave about its natural beauty, ranging from fjords and glaciers, to upland deserts, geothermal geysers and active volcanoes, to beautiful swimming beaches and some of the best snow skiing in the Southern Hemisphere. As beautiful as the country may be, however, there is one thing that New Zealand is better known for even than its scenery and that is its prowess at rugby union. For those unfamiliar with rugby, it is a rough, tough game of physical contact played by two teams of 15 players over 80 minutes. It’s like non-stop American football without physical contact played by two teams of 15 players over 80 minutes. It’s like non-stop American football without physical contact played by two teams of 15 players over 80 minutes. It’s like non-stop American football without physical contact played by two teams of 15 players over 80 minutes.

New Zealanders started playing rugby within 30 years of the first European pioneers arriving in the 1840s and took to it like ducks to water. The tough, physical game was perfectly suited to hard-working, hardy pioneers—most of whom worked long, strenuous hours on the land. Since then, the game has become deeply embedded into New Zealand culture. It is said that when the All Blacks, the New Zealand national team, lose (which is not that often) the local stock market goes down, and when we fail at the World Cup the whole country goes into a state of depression. This may be a slight exaggeration, but you get the message!

The All Blacks brand—the black jersey and the silver fern—is known worldwide, creating one of the most instantly recognised international sporting teams. Since 1903, the All Blacks have notched up an amazing 75% winning record against all opponents, an unparalleled international sporting record. In 2015 New Zealand won the Rugby World Cup title for the second consecutive time. To put New Zealand rugby’s performances into the context of playing resources (these figures are a few years old), the country currently has 27,374 senior male rugby players, compared to the following numbers for its four greatest international competitors—England 166,762; France 110,270; South Africa 109,878; and Australia 39,380. It is also fair to point out that each of our great competitors has significantly superior national economies and financial resources to New Zealand. NZ Rugby also supports two age-group teams—the NZ Secondary Schools (for players still at high school and under 18 years of age), which plays annual fixtures against Australian teams, and the NZ Under 20 team, which competes in the World Rugby Junior World Championship. Prior to 2008 there were separate international Under 19 and Under 21 competitions. Since the inaugural IRB Junior World Championship in 2008, New Zealand has won 5 titles (including the first 4), and been beaten finalists once. So it’s true to say that, in rugby, New Zealanders well and truly punch above their weight!

You’d imagine, after reading this introduction, that we must be doing something right and I think as a keen rugby-playing nation, we are indeed doing some things right! As rugby is our “national” sport, we tend to get access to the best athletes of all shapes and sizes. It may surprise many to know that there are more teenagers playing soccer in NZ than rugby; but rugby is the sport with the history, the prestige, the money, and the blanket TV coverage. We have a subscription TV channel that plays rugby 24/7.

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At the youth level, NZ Rugby has some smart people doing a lot of work to make sure that our youngsters are enjoying their rugby, are playing modified games suited to their age and stage and that they are being well-coached as possible. At all ages under 13, all players must play at least half a game and if there is a blow out (one team is up by 35 or more at half-time), the coaches of both teams must meet and come to an agreement as to how the game can become a more even contest. Our game is also becoming “browner”—the wave of Pacific Island immigration starting from the 1960s has brought increasing numbers of talented players into the NZ game. The Pacific Island players tend to mature physically earlier than players of Caucasian ancestry and to ensure safety and counter the natural fear of playing against bigger, more powerful opponents, NZ youth rugby has been weight-restricted for many years. This means that some boys who are very early physical developers may have to play with older boys, but the scheme has served its purpose well. This tends to encourage smaller boys, who are later developers physically, to stay in the game.

As the authors imply, rugby is a game for all shapes and sizes, and the coaches of our young players place them in positions that suit their body shape and size. That may sometimes mean that some youngsters don’t have the experience of playing in other positions, but my feeling is that our coaches are fairly flexible around this and open to players experiencing playing different roles. These days, many backs are as big as forwards anyway and so as players get older, skill set and skill level also play a part in the position that players occupy. There are a number of examples of players changing positions in their late teens and reaching top-level rugby in their new position (e.g. All Black hooker Keven Mealamu shifted from loose forward in his late teens, as did NZ-raised Wallabies prop Sekope Kepu).

My perception is that the approach to coaching in New Zealand rugby is often less prescriptive and drill-based than is the case in many other countries. Awareness-creating approaches to pedagogy, focused on helping players to solve problems for themselves, have been advocated for many years in New Zealand, as has the game sense approach, with its implicit learning advantages to developing young players’ skills and decision-making. We probably work harder on the “how to coach” than we do on the “what to coach”. I believe we are surfing ahead of the wave with our coaching methodology. This has reaped benefits for our players and I believe it will continue to do so.

NZ Rugby’s community rugby staff has researched youngsters’ intrinsic motivation to play rugby (and why they stop playing) and they work hard to encourage coaches of youngsters to help players fulfil their hopes and needs from playing the game. Changing socio-economic conditions (which often see both parents working), modern challenges to rugby around injury and concussion and the threat from other sports and leisure opportunities means rugby has to work hard to keep young players in the game and keep the conveyor belts of talent turning.

The fact that we are a small country probably enables us to be a little nimbler than our bigger compatriot countries. We have very good integration between high performance and the community game, particularly around coaching and the integration is getting better. This old academic from a long time ago isn’t quite sure what the authors mean by a “dialectical interaction between a governing body and its wide volunteer workforce” but I assume it’s something to do with talking to each other and understanding how each can help the other. If I’m right, I think NZ Rugby does it reasonably well.

We have a small army of volunteer talent ID/selectors at the youth level around the country who are educated, supported, and appreciated and who give absolutely sterling service. They gather triangulated data about players from around NZ and pass it on to national selectors. We have provided very good individual development plans for our high performance players for many years and we are rolling out a similar programme for our high performance coaches. We have placed a real focus both on the development of good character (we want our players to be better people, better partners, husbands/wives and better citizens) and strong mental skills in our player development programmes.

The more open, adventurous, 15-man rugby played in Australasia is one way we think we can keep rugby relevant. Many of our young players play touch (non-tackle rugby) at some stage in their lives. This contributes to an appreciation of space on the field and the fun to be had from recognising, creating and using it, not to mention developing great footwork and an ability to step, swerve and pass well (even the forwards)—all elements that have characterised NZ Rugby for many years. We have a small population and we’re struggling to attract decent crowds to our games and forward-based slugfests filled with driving mauls have not, nor will they ever, get people coming through the gates or watching rugby on television. We try to encourage our coaches to let players play the game with the “wind in their hair and the sun on their backs”, unencumbered by more structure than is absolutely necessary.

We are constantly working on how to improve our coaching, both at community and high-performance levels and are currently implementing a number of initiatives. To our detriment, we continue to be the world’s leading exporter of high performance coaches (Ireland, Scotland, Wales and Georgia are all coached by Kiwis). Whether we are doing better than England in coach education and development is hard to say, but English clubs do seem keen on employing NZ coaches. There is no doubt in my mind that the quality of coaching is probably the most critical part of the puzzle. Sure, we need to provide relevant competitions, provide engaging spectacles of professional rugby on television and give boys and girls a game that is safe and enjoyable. But if we add in a coach or coaches who understand the age and stage of the players, design great practices (using modified games as much as possible), understand the players’ needs and aspirations and proactively help them meet these (fun,