

When Individuals Count What Does It Add Up To?

Keith Lyons

Centre for Notational Analysis

Cardiff Institute of Higher Education

Introduction

This paper has been written with three audiences in mind. Firstly, it is intended as a supplementary paper to the Development Squad's tour report written by Mr Robbie Williams. Secondly, it is an attempt to share with the Union's Technical Director some of my observations about the performance of elite Welsh rugby players over the last two years. Thirdly, I hope it will act as an introduction to the work of the Centre for Notational Analysis for the newly constituted National Player Development Committee.

Some Background Detail

In April 1991, I was invited with a colleague (Gareth Potter) to video and analyse the fixture between Wales Under 19 and the touring Japanese Schools team. Although informal links had developed prior to this point with the Union, this was the first formal arrangement to provide detailed notational analysis. The Under 19 cohort analysed went on to play against Scotland and tour Canada.

At the same time, links were made with the Under 21 squad and the senior squad. Under the direction of the Technical Director, Jeff Young, and the National Coach, Ron Waldron, the analysis of representative Welsh teams developed. Later that April, Gareth and I videoed and analysed the Under 19 and Under 21 games played against Scotland at Stradey Park, Llanelli.

The access we had to these three squads and their coaches has provided the foundation for our current work in the analysis of performance. We feel we have been uniquely privileged to analyse the performance of three groups of players in a way that has given an insight into the range of talent available for the development of the senior team.

In 1992, when the A team was constituted as part of a strategy for the development of excellence and the Development Squad was initiated, our work in video analysis extended to five squads of elite players.

Quantity into Quality?

Gradually, as the scope of our work in support of the Technical Department has increased and we have gained experience in working closely with national coaches, we have been able to reflect on the potential contribution notational analysis can make to the quest for excellence in Welsh rugby. The recent Development Squad tour (May 1993) acted as a catalyst for my thinking in this respect.

Until the touring party arrived in South West France, the Development Squad was as much a concept as a reality. During the 1992-1993 season the squad had been offered a varied programme of activities and had formal contact with a fitness adviser assigned to the squad. Once in France the task for the management was to forge a team identity from a squad of players and to further develop the performance of each player. Whilst this is a familiar problem for coaches of representative teams, I think the Development Squad posed a specific problem. Although it might be argued that all coaches seek develop players, this development process is the central rationale of the Development Squad. The individual player counts explicitly.

I was invited to join the touring party as a video and notational analyst. I recorded each game and then analysed the performance for feedback purposes. What surprised me in my week with the squad was the thirst individual players at this level had to learn more about their own performance. Players had access to the tapes and spent hours viewing and re-viewing the games in which they played. The video tapes became triggers for active discussion.

I can think of two very good reasons why the players were so interested. One is that the coach, Stan Addicott, gave positive encouragement to the analysis and provided times during the tour to discuss performance. A second reason is that the players themselves understood the significance of the concept of development. I believe the tour party saw themselves as valued individuals and by the end of the tour had moved to a corporate identity. By being valued they were able to value others. At times, the squad became greater than the sum of its parts.

The squad won two of its three matches and gained invaluable experience in the process. In all three games the standards of Welsh fitness were far in excess of those of their French opponents. In the last game of the tour, the team was perceived as a real threat and the team chose not to pass the ball!

In our two years with the teams we have noticed a significant improvement in the levels of Welsh performance in fitness terms. The careful attention paid to monitoring, testing, individual training programmes and nutrition is having an effect! This too presupposes a concept of development that focuses on individual players. It may be coincidence but in the Summer Tours 1993, Welsh representative teams won 10 of their 11 fixtures.

The careful analysis of Welsh performance has scratched the surface of what can be observed, recorded and shared. For two years the Centre for Notational Analysis has provided quantitative information on performance. The next big step is to provide qualitative information. This will require that greater attention is paid to individuals.

The Development Squad's experience to date is a useful benchmark for a process that values individuals. All rugby playing nations will have to carefully audit their systems for identifying and developing talented players. From our experience, the five representative squads provide a comprehensive framework for this process in Wales. Unfortunately transforming the framework into a delivery system will be resource hungry.

In education, there is considerable emphasis being placed upon the concept of differentiation. This relates to delivering knowledge and experiences to individuals within a group context. It seems to us that our two years have underscored how we need to find ways to differentiate in rugby. The Development Squad has given me an opportunity to see the potential of a process that prioritises qualitative information based upon careful quantitative analysis.

I hope it would not be unfair to suggest that with the Technical Department and the national coaches the Centre for Notational Analysis has contributed to the mapping of the modern game from Under 19 to senior team. Now we have some basic cartography we can get on and discover variations in contours in fine detail.

When individuals count, it adds up to very special process. The quest for excellence must build on this. The Development Squad has embodied this approach and the recent visit to France indicated how far along the track we have come in one year.

1 July 1993