This paper will discuss the role of team “shape” and its evolution in the modern game and the role it plays in team patterns. What is it that makes shape important and play such a significant role in today’s Rugby? Are there any negatives to implementing a team shape? What relationship does shape have to team patterns of play?

By Definition

Shape – refers to the position players take up in both attack and defence; this normally occurs through phase play.

Patterns – refer to how attacking teams move; this may be from side-line to side-line or moving in one direction then returning.

As most would be aware, the game of Rugby was historically divided into two distinct groups – Forwards and Backs. Each of these units whilst in the same team tended to work in isolation. Forwards win the ball and backs attack with it whilst the forwards follow the ball to repeat their ball winning/retention. This style of rugby contained little of the “shape” and “patterns” that we see in today’s modern game.

The advent of patterns meant players knew where the ball was going and therefore increased the team’s ability to retain the ball and continue to attack, thus the evolution of multi-phase attack. The maintaining of possession is paramount to aspects of the game such as building pressure, stressing the defence, denying the opposition time with the ball and increase in fatigue levels in the opposition required to defend for extended periods of time.

In professional Rugby a majority of tries are scored within 5 phases of play so the chances of scoring increases in relation to time in possession. What must also be considered however in the longer a team is in possession without scoring the greater the chance of either turning the ball over or conceding a penalty.

The Table below shows the number of phases before points are scored in Super Rugby in 2016.
An analysis of these statistics shows that on average 40% of all Super Rugby Tries were scored from 1st Phase. This indicates that attack from set piece, lineout and scrum or turnovers result in 40% of the tries scored. Therefore, how much ‘shape’ is needed to achieve this result. The lowest number of tries across the Super competition were scored from 7+ phases yet there traditionally has been a focus on building phases which in turn builds pressure and pressure can then be turn into points? These statistics go against that line of thinking. Whatever ‘shape’ and perhaps more importantly ‘pattern’ at team uses in attack statics show that at Super Rugby level the most success scoring tries is achieved within 3 phases.

So it would be a valid assessment that teams tend to ‘strike’ to score within 3 phases (or perhaps search for territorial gain), as opposed to maintaining possession for long periods of time and thus risk the possibility of turnover, penalty or kicking the ball away due to an inability to penetrate defence.

There are many who believe that a team cannot play effectively or successfully without clarity of shape and the use of patterns. Players understanding the team movement of play and their roles within the system either in attack or defence.

Then of course there is the old adage of the best players who have a high level of skill and decision making ability should just be permitted to play what is in front of them rather than be confined to a particular pre-planned shape or set patterns.

Eddie Jones is very much an advocate of prescribing team patterns through shape. He believes players should not have to think too much and merely use their skills within the organised environment he creates for the team. This however does not preclude the players from taking their opportunities when presented when available however the less they have to think the better.

Alternatively David Campese the legendary Wallaby winger who possessed freakish attacking skills believes the modern player is being curtailed from expressing their individual skills and flair because coaches are placing restrictions on their freedom to express themselves.

An important factor that must be taken into account when discussing the use of shape is the development of more complete Rugby players irrespective of the position they play. The modern game requires all players to have expertise in functional roles through contact, at the breakdown and passing and attacking ability.

What shape a coach implements with his or her particular team will primarily be determined by the players at their disposal.

Do Forwards attack of 9 or 10 – or both? Is the attack flat at the line or deep? Does the team play with two lines of attack? Or is the shape a 1 6 1 or 1 4 3 or 1 3 3 3 1?

Once the shape is decided then of course it must be established how long such a pattern lasts from the shape in a game situation or is the shape the default when chaos exists? An established shape gives players clarity in the role and therefore clarity as a team. It also provides a platform where they can return to re-establish order in their attack following periods of unstructured play. It is from this platform that the team once again can launch its attack (patterns) – using its shape.

Whilst shape is often related to a team’s attack, coaches must also establish a defensive shape and preferable one that transfers easily from attack so that a team can transition when there is a turnover of possession.

And finally is a team able to change its shape, whether attack or defence during a game? This is often required when the opposition produces unexpected of different tactics to those expected, or if the team suffers an injury to a significant member of the team and one who plays a pivotal role in the team’s shape and does field position influence the teams shape in either attack or defence?
A team’s shape has to be able to deliver:

- Micro patterns
- Macro Patterns
- Attack Patterns
- Defence Patterns

Once these are established have the flexibility to deal with game variables as discussed earlier in addition to: opposition, weather, yellow and red cards.

Applying a team shape and subsequent patterns to a team first and foremost must be based on the players available and their skill sets. Training sessions should highlight the need to improve the functional skills of all players at all aspects of the game outside of Units.

The most successful teams in World Rugby today have the ability to play shape and pattern using all their players in a variety of roles. Flankers in outside channels, props as passing links between forwards and backs, all players with the ability to shift the ball effectively under pressure and secure/maintain possession by being technically efficient in the contact environment.

Shape and patterns give players both individual and collective clarity of role on the field and yet the most successful coaches incorporate a licence for their most highly skilled players to express themselves when the opportunity arises. Or perhaps the opportunities are simply create by effective execution of shape and pattern? The best of both worlds!