The Future of Rugby

Where is the game heading? Where do we want it to go?

The Origins and History of the Game

When William Webb Ellis picked up the ball during a soccer game and ran, he created history. Rugby Union started to evolve as the “so-called” running game. Originally the game especially in the Northern Hemisphere still had an enormous amount of kicking for field position during the match. However this has now changed and the game has finally graduated to become the renowned running game.

In the past coaches looked for forwards that were excellent specialized players at set pieces such as Wales dominant scrumming pack that were around in the Seventies. Backplay consisted of passing the ball through the hands to the winger. Second phase play if reaching five phases was determined by coaches as excellent recycling of the ball. Hence the force of the All Blacks during that time.

The key issues in order of importance about the game in the past seemingly were:

- Field Position
- Attack
- Possession
- Defence

Teams competing even at the National level would kick away possession in order to gain field position and from there launch their attack.

Where are we today in Australia

The game has changed priorities and in many ways swapped priorities. Possession and defence have become the key issues in the game. Attack is important however field position has become of lesser importance.
Therefore at present in the modern game of Rugby Union the key issues in order of importance now seem to be:

- Possession
- Defence
- Attack
- Field Position

When comparing the present key issues with the past, the obvious difference has been field position. Field position no longer plays a major part in the equation of the modern game. For example the two teams competing for the Super Twelve Grand Final in the year 2000 predominately used possession and defence as two key issues in the game. The Brumbies predominantly recycled possession at the break down while the Crusaders game plan was not to contest possession but use hard hitting defense as the key to their win.

Emphasis is now on strength, size, speed and ball skills. The backs are much stronger and bigger. It is hard to imagine Phil Bennett the five eight from Wales who had excellent attacking and kicking skills but slightly built playing in today's game. Likewise forwards are picked on speed and ball skills as well as strength and size. It would be interesting to see if the fast, high work rate and tireless Chris Roach because of his size make the Australian backrow in today's game.

At present apart from the front row, the rest of the forwards are interchangeable. There seems to be a lack of specialization developing between breakaways and the second row.

Straight-line defence across the field is on the increase with not all forwards committing to the ruck, as was the norm in the past.
Positives to keep in the game

- The scrum is essential in its present structure and allows competitiveness and pressure to be applied to the opposition.

- While defence is important, attack is to remain the key focus to an exciting game. The game has now a larger captive audience and must be entertaining and enjoyable to watch.

- Maintain specialized positions, which we are at risk of losing.

- Lineouts are an important part of the game and should to a certain degree without becoming messy still be competitive. In addition lineouts clearly distinguish us from all the other codes of football.

- There remains a dichotomy between forwards and backs. For example Tim Horan could not play front row.

- Possession is important and coupled with this comes the art of running and the skill of ball handling.

- Recycling the ball in the ruck

- Variation of second phase play, meaning the team with possession can either maul or ruck the ball to regain possession at the breakdown.

Negatives and Prevention's

- Too much emphasis on defense which is stifling the game. Must be scope for attack. Meaning defense does not become paramount and dominate the game.

- Non commitment to rucks and mauls which makes the opposition less competitive at the breakdown and in turn decreases the attack of the team holding position

- Kicking is keep to a minimum

- Referees make decisions based on the effect certain plays have on the game. For example deciding whether to penalize players that will not effect the outcome of the game.

- Remember the grass roots of Rugby. Do not neglect our youth and development stages.

- The loss of body shapes being able to play in the game. For example players in the front row generally do not have the opportunity to interchange.
What is the Future

Rugby will not survive unless it has a nursery of players to pick from. The future of rugby is to nurture and expand this base. We have to continue to grow to make rugby the major football code in Australia.

Development of coaches is also an important issue. There are certain countries that have the athletes similar to ours, however their knowledge of the game makes them unable to compete at the highest level even when playing for their country.

Rugby is now a professional game with large amounts of money and sponsorship. There is unparalleled interest in the game in Australia and Worldwide. Television is attracting large audiences and player exposure is now greater than it has ever been. The media is using our high profile players to advertise and promote a wide number of products.

It is important to maintain this level of support and interest. For Rugby needs to be an individual game and not a clone of league or a cheap imitation of American football. It seems that Rugby League has embraced some of the concepts of American football and has suffered as a consequence. Some of the rule changes are being bought in to take it back to the old gladiatorial game. Rugby should be warned by this and maintain its integrity.

I was once talking to an old rugby steward who years ago was comparing League and Union and made the observation, that as their was no money in the game their remained a certain amount of integrity in the game of rugby. “Imagine he said, there is thirty seconds to go. You are playing the All Blacks for a million dollars and you are lying on the ball on your try line at the bottom of a ruck. Well now we are!”

Will the increased money change the game? Players need first of all to play for the love of the game. Many of these players are playing for their financial future. The question is how far will they go.
As I write this, the Olympics are on: the ultimate sporting event. People from low socio-economic backgrounds see success at the Olympics as their “ticket to wealth”. It has become evident that the athletes may do almost anything to win. This includes placing their lives at risk by taking dangerous performance enhancing drugs. We are naïve to think there is not a widespread use and that the same mentality will not infiltrate Rugby.

The way the authorities handle these problems will determine the ultimate longevity of the game in its present form.

We are now in a position to change the flow away from the game of rugby towards league. This is already started and should be not be encouraged and funded. We need to make Rugby the major football code in Australia. This needs to start with the encouragement and development of the juniors as the future of our game rests with our youth.

Recent discussions have centered around the amalgamation of rugby league and rugby union. The present Australian Rugby League Coach, Chris Anderson has expressed ideas in favor of amalgamation of the codes and this was echoed as reported by journalists by the present Australian Rugby Union President in 1999. This was widely condemned in rugby union circles. Having studied and completed a major paper on “Merger and Acquisition Behavior” as a masters student, I am suggesting that the management of both codes take a little more time to understand the complex nature and determine the compatibility of the codes. Poor cultural fit has been the nemesis of many mergers that once appeared to make good strategic sense. Findings suggest that at least fifty percent of all mergers do not achieve their expected goals due to or at least in part cultural and personnel conflict.

Therefore in my opinion union should not amalgamate with league. The philosophies of the games have been different for years. While there are existing infrastructures in league which could be utilized they are not necessary ideal. Who would run the game? What rule changes would be brought in? Union is just now becoming increasingly popular in it’s own right and I feel that league is trying to stave off their own demise. Over one hundred countries play union, while there are only three or four countries that are competitive on the world league scene if that. It is a game on the wane!
Rule changes need to be kept at a minimum to ensure the game stays in its present form. However changes can be made to ensure continuity of play and keeping rugby an open attacking spectacle. Ex All Black and current Super Twelve coach, Laurie Mains espoused these statements when he accused the Brumbies of playing gridiron, that is structured plays using obstructions, decoy runners and specialist offence and defensive players being interchanged. These accusations have also been leveled at present against the current Australian team by the Northern Hemisphere teams. The interchange rule has the potential to stifle the game greater than any other rule change. Having fresh players in the defensive line will greater impair the attacking ability of opposition teams as most line breaks tend to occur when players are fatigued.

Other Peoples Perspective’s

*Michael O’Connor : Duel International, Rugby League and Rugby Union*

**The Question – What is the Future of Rugby?**

Michael believes that Rugby Union has a good future largely because of two major points, its strong International Base and Corporate Sponsorship such as Vodafone which is an International company. There is no doubt that globalization is on the increase and here to stay. This will continue to benefit the game of Rugby Union. According to Michael both the Australian Rugby Union and the International Rugby Board are in a financially strong position where as the International Rugby League are having financial difficulties. For example the demand for tickets between major International Rugby Union matches far outweigh supply, therefore financially the code is in a strong position. The issue is to spend the money wisely to ensure that the money is not wasted. This will ensure a strong future for the code.

In addition he believes that the future of Australian Rugby Union is to ensure that our National side continues to be the best International side in the world, as winning creates interest to all people through out Australia.
However if the financial gain is at the International level, he sees the major threat being player development at club level. This may be the area where other codes erode our future player base before reaching the International arena.

Michael believes that Australia should have a forth side in the Super 12 competition to increase the depth of playing talent, stop the fringe players including our youth from venturing overseas and increase the support for the code. He believes this base should be either Melbourne or Perth and notes that may depend on where International games can be successfully held.

**The Question - Will Rugby Union and League Merge?**

Michael can not see a merger ever happening as both codes have different supporters. He believes that the “hardened supporters” of both codes will not let it happen. Because of the global nature of Rugby Union, other countries would not want the Wallabies to become a stronger outfit and these countries would fully reject a hybrid game.

He believes that Rugby League will always have a place in Australia and this is shown by the Television ratings that follow League Club football. There is little interest in Rugby Union at the Club level. The interest is at the Super 12 and International level.

*Peter Parr: Development Officer of the Bronco’s Rugby League Team, Co-Coach of the Western Reds and Adelaide Rams Rugby League.*

**The Question – What is the Future of Rugby?**

Peter believes that rugby has excellent corporate sponsorship and that the code is only good at the top level. Being a staunch Rugby League person he believes that the Super 12 was not as interesting this year as in the past and mainly referred to Queensland’s style of play.

He believes that if the Australian International side and not been so successful in the World Cup and the Bledislow Cup, the code may have been in a different financial situation and would not have grown in stature.
He has no interest in Club rugby and finds it boring to watch. This comment is echoed in the Television ratings. He admits that he doesn’t understand the basic rules of the game and believes they are too complicated!

Peter believes that Rugby is at least financially secure and because of this fact if the money is channeled in the right direction the code will continue to develop. Similar to Michael O’Connor he sees a concern with Club rugby and the development of rugby players before achieving the International or Super 12 level. The code could erode at this level first!

Having experienced the demise of trying to start a Rugby League Team in staunch Aussie rules territories such as Perth and Adelaide, Peter believes each code has captured different markets, the league – the club market, the Aussie rules – the southern market and Rugby Union the International market. Peter believes the codes before making any future strategies should consider looking after their own market first.

The Question - Will Rugby Union and League Merge?
Peter believes that the codes will always remain separate and that they will not merge. “For a start would the world nations such as Argentina accept a hybrid game. I think not! There maybe talk in the top level board rooms by the owners (sponsors) of the paid TV stations, but it will never take off.” He believes that people won’t accept the merger as Australian’s are slow in accepting things and do not readily accept change. Peter states that “both codes have totally different cultures.”

Steve Thornton : CEO Queensland Rugby Union

The Question - What is the Future of Rugby?
Steve believes that no one can forecast the future of Rugby. However he believes that from his perspective two main issues have to be addressed first. We must create and organise a simple coherent product for commercial exploitation.
This is to establish strong “free to air presence”. For example Rugby League and secondly AFL are the dominant sports in “free to air coverage”. The structure of the sport at present is Super 12, Club and International. This has to be looked at. He believes “free to air coverage is the commercial underpinning to our game of Rugby.”

The second key issue is to penetrate the public school system because the majority of our rugby players come from the private school system.

Steve believes that Rugby won’t continue to have a truly strong State or National team unless theses two issues are addressed first. “Once these are done and only when they are done will we be in a better position to judge the future of Rugby”.

**The Question - Will Rugby Union and League Merge?**
Steve did not have much to say on this matter. His personal belief is that both codes will not merge.

*Phil Mooney: Queensland Under 19-coach and Club coach of Brisbane West’s Rugby Union*

**The Question – What is the Future of Rugby?**
“The real issue is our grass roots rugby. The main concern is financial hardship that the clubs must endure. The money is not coming our way.” Phil is concerned with the repercussions of not having clubs in a strong financial position and the development on a whole, of the club competition. He believes we are loosing out on the clubs two main players who are chasing the dollar. The older experienced player that is important as a peer leader and coach to developing players and the young player because of the perception that if they do not make Super 12’s by twenty one – twenty three, they believe they are not going to make it in Australia. He is concerned about grass roots rugby and the lack of loyalty from players especially the younger players, as these issues erode our player base.
He is concerned that clubs are being used as a springboard to money and are expected to turn out international players. For example Internationals such as Ben Tune and Daniel Herbert have played all through the ranks at the GPS Brisbane club. This has been a costly exercise for the clubs in terms of coaching, clothing etc. These players receive player remuneration with little return going back to the original club that had spent time and money developing these players. He believes there should be a system that some money that the Internationals earn should filter back to the club. Phil believes this solution may be a “little left field” however the club issue is a real concern. Both Michael O'Connor and Peter Parr point out that this is an area where league excels.

Overall Phil believes rugby has grown and has a great future but we must be aware of the issues facing grass roots rugby.

The Question - Will Rugby Union and League Merge?
Phil does not see this happening. He believes that we are financially better off and being a global game only strengthens our code. He believes no hybrid game would work as International countries would not accept the game nor play us. He believes league has some great athletes that would strengthen our players base. He believes as I do, as years go by these league players will come to us.

Conclusion
Rugby in Australia has always been and hopefully always will be the “running game”. Under the rules the game can still return to the days of old where kicking and mauling ruled. For the good of Rugby we hope not. Rugby “heavies” should always be able to understand and enjoy the finer points of game such as scrummaging. However to ensure rugby’s long term survival it has to be seen as an exciting, tough, fast and open game played by athletics of a different body shape and size. Defence can be important and is obviously of paramount importance but the game needs to be attractive to all people – ex players, the mums and dads, sons and daughters.

Rugby needs to maintain it's own identity and shape it's own future. The game “played in heaven” needs to be identifiable as rugby in fifty to a hundred year’s time, not a clone of rugby league or gridiron.
This future will be largely shaped by the financial backing of sponsors, the media, management decisions, the International success of our National team and the development of our youth through to the senior ranks. We must endure to improve our club standard and be aware that this area is an area that the other codes may see as our weakness and attack.

My future wish is that more people will want watch top class games and want more. Mothers will want their sons and daughters to be rugby stars, children will see a future in excelling in the game so that the game will flourish Internationally and in all parts of Australia.