THE STELLENBOSCH LAWS

HOW IS THE GAME GOING TO CHANGE?
AND
WHO WILL BENEFIT THE MOST?

Level 3 Coaching Paper

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Over the past 15 years we have seen a significant number of changes to the laws of Rugby. As rugby progressed from an amateur game into a professional sport, changes to the laws were required to make the game more attractive to viewing audiences.

Numerous rule changes have been introduced over the years. These changes have certainly made the game more attractive for both players and spectators, at the ground and for TV audiences around the world. With the introduction of each new law, there has also been a dramatic change in the way the game is played both tactically and technically. An example of this is the lineout. The introduction of lifting in the lineout saw an explosion in tactical variation and lineout lifting techniques. Who could forget the first time we saw the Welsh players lifting jumpers from below the knee on the shin bones, or Owen Finnegan walking in from the receiver position to take the line out unopposed! Not since the first major set of law changes to the game have a set of new variations had the potential to change the way the game is played.

The following paper will discuss the proposed set of Experiential Law Variations (ELV’s) and the effect they will have on the game. In particular this paper will examine which country would benefit the most from these changes, if these laws were introduced into the Tri Nations tournament.

HISTORY

The ‘Stellenbosch laws’ which they have become commonly know as, are a set of ELV’s that were originally developed by a think tank of rugby experts commissioned by the International Rugby Board. This ‘think tank’ included former coaches Rod Macqueen, Pierre Villepreux, Richie Dixon, Ian McIntosh and referee, Paddy O’Brien. Their primary goal was to simplify the rules of rugby so that refereeing decisions became more consistent, whilst keeping rugby’s unique contest for possession at the breakdown and at the set piece.

The ELV’s received their ‘nick name’ as they were initially used at Stellenbosch University in South Africa, but since then have been tried and continue to be used in varying forms around the world, including the Australian Rugby Championship (ARC) here in Australia and various competitions in New Zealand and Scotland.

Essentially the proposed law changes include 10 variations to the current laws;

- The backs must be 5 metres behind the hindmost feet at scrum time. (Except the halfbacks)
- Either side can use as many players as they like in the lineout, at any time.
- During a Quick throw in, the ball can be thrown backwards but not forwards.
- Touch judges are to police the offside lines.
- Offside and foul play are penalties. All other penalties are free kicks
- The ball cannot be passed or run back into the 22 and then kicked out on the full.
- The defending side may collapse the maul.
- The corner flag no longer exists.
- The team that takes the ball into the breakdown and does not release it will be penalised
- Players are allowed to use their hands at the breakdown provided they remain on their feet and are on side
As already mentioned there have been some variations to these laws being used in different competitions. Essentially the final rule regarding the use of ‘hands in the ruck’ has not yet been established. In the ordinal version of laws, ‘hands in the ruck’ was in fact prohibited but has been allowed in some competitions. The only other rule variation that seems to have caused resistance is the ‘pulling down of the maul’ for obvious safety reasons.

**WHAT EFFECT HAVE THESE LAWS HAD ON THE GAME**

After interviewing a number of coaches from the ARC competition, it became clear from their comments that a couple of ‘trends’ under the new laws had developed. Most coaches I interviewed consistently commented that:

- The ball was in play for longer periods and is cleared from the breakdown faster
- There were more points being scored in each game
- There are less long-arm penalties and more Free kicks, with most teams taking the ‘quick tap’ opposed to the scrum
- There was an increase in kicking, both contestable and for field position
- There were fewer lineouts in the game
- Most teams were using the full lineout opposed to short variations and the ball was getting in faster
- More tries were being scored from 1st phase
- There was more ‘unstructured’ attacking play with many players (forwards especially) having to act as the 1st receiver during the course of the game.
- There was a greater use of tactical substitutions, especially with the rotation of front row players.
- Having a steady scrum was vital in setting up 1st phase plays.

What does this mean? If we were to take these trends noted by the ARC coaches and apply them to our coaching, how would we adapt our coaching? What type of rugby player would we look for or try to develop in order to be successful?

From the list of trends, probably the most influential factors on the game are: the increase in time ‘the ball is in play’ and the faster pace at which the game is played. These two trends provide an environment where ‘unstructured attack’ with forwards acting as first receivers and ball players becomes more common.

Teams will need to become fitter and more skilled to adapt to this style. This was demonstrated with a number of teams from Sydney’s Premier competition the Shute Shield competition scheduling extra fitness sessions after the first round of games. This requirement for more mobile players combined with a reduction in the number of restarts (particularly lineouts), will give rise to a smaller somatotype in the forwards. Coaches will be looking for forwards (in particular the locks, flankers and number 8) who are more mobile and have more attacking skills that can be utilised in open play.

This change in body type will be most prevalent in the lineout. With teams not having to match numbers it becomes more important to be able to throw to multiple spots down the lineout quickly rather than to 2 or 3 big players moving around. I believe most teams will look to spread their attacking lineout out and primarily use a fastball to the area not marked by the opposition. It will be vital to have at least 4 or even 5
lineout jumpers, but only one of these will need to be an exceptionally tall player and all will be required to have a larger ball running component as part of their game.

The scrum, however, will be a different story. After the usual period of experimentation, teams will begin to see the value in taking the scrum option instead of a free kick, provided they have a solid scrum of course. Having the ability to disrupt the opposition ball or to manipulate one side of the scrum up not only gives the backrow a distinct advantage in defence, but also opens up attacking options particularly on 2nd phase.

A team that can move the attacking side of the scrum up and is able to produce a fast breakdown or line break around the 13 channel, should be able to create scoring opportunities particularly if they go the same way in attack. With the scrum turned and the defending backs, 5 metres back, opposition forwards are forced to take a longer and backwards path to defend the far side of the breakdown.
An attacking team that utilises this principle and can produce fast 1st phase ball and continues to attack the same way will be very hard to stop. So in essence a strong scrum (with a penetrating 13 or 15) will in fact become a very potent attacking structure.

The increase in the number of scrums will also see an increase in the number of backrow plays, in particular combination type plays using both the centres and the backrow in unison. These plays will be ideal in advancing a team as far as possible over the gain line, as the ball does not need to be passed backwards five metres before it is advanced. These types of plays will be mainly used from scrums on the left hand side or the midfield. Ten years ago the ‘pet play’ used to be 8 9 15 down the short side: under the new laws it will become 8 9 13 and then 2nd phase folding the same way.

As you can see, under the new laws a strong scrum will in fact become even more important and that means the selection of good scrummaging props and in particular the tighthead becomes vital. But the question is how will teams be able to balance the selection of big scrummaging props with the requirements of a faster game? I think here we will see coaches exploit the laws of rugby and use a ‘tactical rotation’ to maximise the time fresh props are on the field. A team can start the game with a big strong tight head and then after 20-30 mins a coach will replace the tighthead with a fresh prop to finish off the half. Then 15-20 mins into the second half the loosehead will fake an injury and the tighthead, who is now rested, will come back on and finish the game. This will enable sides to pick big scrummaging props and not have to worry about the pace of the game affecting them late in each half. I am sure this is not what the lawmakers intended but in a professional game coaches will look to exploit any advantage they can.

Another major requirement to be successful in a faster game with more attacking space will be the mobility of the backrow, particularly the mobility of the number 8 and the halfback. I have deliberately included the halfback as part of the backrow, as his combination with the 8 7 and 6 in the defence off scrums and 2nd phase will become vital in preventing teams scoring within the early phases of play. The number 8 will need to act more like a 2nd flanker from set piece. The ‘Stephen Hoiles’ type of player who is more all-rounded and mobile will be of great benefit to a team here. The big, ball running number 8’s (Wycliff Palu) of the current game will need to be moved into the second row, where their lack of mobility can be hidden, but their ball running skills still utilised. A strong physical, running halfback who can defend around the rucks and who is be able to run with the ball in attack, will also be a distinct advantage.

There will also need to be a major emphasis on improving the attacking skills of the team. In particular the forwards will now be required to act as ball players and runners and occasionally to clear the ball from the breakdown (as no halfback will be able to make every ruck). No longer will a team be able to rely solely on one receiver (normally the fly half) for the whole game. More players will be required to get into the 1st receiver position and it will not be uncommon to have props and locks forced to defend against centres and wingers.

With potentially more unstructured play, coaches will look to try and bring some form of order in attack. Australian rugby has already started to head in this direction, but the new laws will speed up this process. Teams will move away from assigned roles
and will look to form an attacking-shape off phase play rather than settling into nominated positions after a restart.

This structure will be more fluid like, mixing forwards and backs together with the goal of trying to open both sides of the field up to attack and allowing players to choose where to attack opposition teams. Teams will look to have a couple of ball players or disturbers, operating on either side of the ruck, intermixed with ball runners. The key here will be trying to balance who the ‘ball players’ are and who the ‘runners’ and support players are, based on a players natural talents rather than their desire to be the playmaker. Too many ball players or runners and not enough supports working at the breakdown will be a major challenge for coaches to address in the modern game.

As the game develops with this split attacking system, I also believe that teams will start to incorporate a split defensive system as well. Teams will move to having left
and right centres, left and right locks, and so on in phase play. Using this system will help minimise the number of times forwards are caught defending together and being mismatched against faster backs. Each centre will control one side of the field in both defence and attack. This style of play will of course favour teams who select players i.e. forwards who are natural ball runners, with good footwork and agility skills. The team who is able to exploit these mismatches in attack will create more scoring opportunities. A split defensive system will also enable a team to switch into an attacking shape very quickly, particularly when a turnover is created. Tall rugby league forwards such as Brad Thorne would be ideal for this style of game.

In an unstructured game, field position and forcing opposition mistakes becomes very important. Kicking the ball down field into open space and forcing teams to run the ball back can be a good option, particularly if you can tie the ball up at the breakdown and gain the free kick. This is the main reason we are starting to see a lot more kicking in general play and less counter from the fullback. A strong kicking fly half who can gain field position without kicking the ball out, and a back three who are not only able to run the ball, but also able to return kick will be very important. This is a skill that has been neglected in the Australian game over the years. I feel that teams will also look at selecting two fullbacks in the side rather than picking specialist wingers. These guys will interchange between fullback and blind wing based how the play develops particularly in defence.

WHO WOULD BENEFIT PLAYING UNDER THE NEW LAWS

Before we can assess which country would benefit the most from playing under these new ELV’S, we need to look at the traditional make up of these international teams and the way in which they approach the game.

New Zealand
- Are considered to be consistently the best international team in the world.
- They have a very strong scrum and reasonable lineout, usually selecting one very tall lock and one of average height.
- Tend to pick good ball runners with ability to offload particularly in the forwards and especially in the backrow.
- Dangerous in broken play and from counter attack.
- Force turnovers at the breakdown and often score from these.
- Normally pick long and accurate kickers at Flyhalf and Fullback.
- Select a physical confrontational running halfback.
- Exceptional and very fast Opensides combined with a ball running backrow.
- Very fast backs with electric wingers who tend to be poor kickers.
- 1 to 15 tend to be natural ball runners.

Under the new laws New Zealand will flourish the most. The change in the number of set pieces i.e. an increase in the number of scrums (their strength) and the reduction in the number of lineouts (considered a weakness) only strengthens their set play. The unstructured attacking environment is ideal for New Zealand as they have an abundance of quality ball runners not only in the national side but also right throughout the country. Their forwards are mobile and they have plenty of pace in the backs.
New Zealand’s strength under the current laws is their ability to force turnovers at the breakdown and then shift the ball wide and score. These counter attack skills, which they have developed over the years, gives them the perfect grounding for playing a game that consists largely of unstructured play. The ability to move seamlessly from a defensive pattern into an attacking shape and vice versa will be vital under the laws as due to the increase in turnovers at the breakdown.

Whilst New Zealand doesn’t use a strict attacking shape they do interchange the play between forwards and backs very well. Their game is based around creating one on one opportunities and relying on individual pace and footwork to beat the defender. To be successful at this they need players who have a high level of skill not only at the breakdown but also in open play. New Zealand is arguably one of the most skilled teams in international Rugby. This all-round ability or high skill level will be highly advantageous under the new laws.

In terms of personnel, they have a strong scrummaging front row, normally select one tall lock and use three other make-shift jumpers which gives them the four options they require. They consistently produce fast, ball-winning openside flankers who are able to turn the ball over at the breakdown. They have a physical running halfback who also acts as a close defender around the ruck ideal for defending the far side of the breakdown from scrums. They select strong kicking fly half’s and fullbacks who can kick long for field position as well as distribute the ball. They are blessed with pace in the backs and all have the ability to beat the opposite man one on one. The only weakness lies in their wings and their inability to kick the ball, however with the natural pace and try scoring ability they posses, I believe they will look to counter attack and run the ball anyway.

South Africa
- Big Aggressive forwards in the tight five
- Strong scrum and solid line out (tend to rely heavily on Matfield)
- Play a physical game and try to monster teams off the park.
- They play field position using their kicking game and survive on opposition mistakes and minimal ball.
- Play rush up defence and try to force opposition teams back into their big slow forwards.
- Very good at slowing the ball down at the breakdown however are poor at defending fast ball
- Limited in attack variation and usually score form opposition mistakes
- Love to play bash and barge style game, which suits their personnel.
- Normally have big slow backrow, but have been picking faster mobile players of late.
- Usually have strong kicking fly half’s and physical confrontational centres.
- Wingers are very fast and experts at the intercept. However they are not noted kickers of the ball.
- Normally have a running halfback who is a quality ball player.
- Plenty of speed in their half’s

South Africa could go one of two ways. If they continue to pick massive, slow forward packs (especially in the tight five) then they will struggle, particularly with the
increased pace of the game. Their props and tight five whilst solid and disruptive scrummages, but are nowhere near mobile enough to be of any value in open play, even if they incorporate a tactical rotation policy. A faster more expansive game will greatly expose this weakness. The mobility of their forward pack is a major limitation that affects the development of South Africa’s attacking game. Until this policy is changed, South Africa will not develop an expansive attacking style and will always revert to slowing the ball down and using the bash and barge style they currently employ.

However, if they shift away from this policy, (as they have began to do in the backrow) and begin to pick smaller, faster and more mobile players then the new laws may actually suit them. South Africa could play a territory game kicking the ball down field with their strong kickers, forcing teams to run the ball out from their own half and surviving on opposition mistakes. This is very similar to their current game. With their solid scrum and physical centres, they could set up the attacking structure mention earlier by using a combination backrow play. Their physical centres would be ideal in getting well over the gain line and they would be very hard to stop on the next phase, especially with the pace they have in their half’s. The only problem is South Africa doesn’t have the talent pool of evasive ball runners like New Zealand to draw upon, particularly in the forwards. Their forwards are very direct in their play, which is fine when you are playing within a narrow corridor. Under the new laws forwards will need to fill in the back line more often and you will need players who are more evasive and mobile. Potentially South Africa could do very well under the new laws; unfortunately I don’t believe that South Africa’s selection policy will change. It’s not in their national psyche to move away from the direct game and any coach in the super 14 who has tried to do so and develop an expansive style has not lasted long as a head coach. South Africa will also have to contend with the introduction of a quota system. This selection policy has the potential to be detrimental to their game in the short term.

**Australia**

- Considered the best tactical thinkers of the modern game
- Exceptional defensive team
- Traditionally played ‘target rugby’ however have moved to using an ‘attacking shape’
- Look to attack the line with lateral opinions rather than in depth
- This makes them susceptible to counter rucking team
- They are a more expansive team than they have been in the past
- They have a poor scrum and a very good lineout.
- Prefer to play a fast ruck ball style of game.
- The forwards are not noted ball runners or ball players (this has improved) and the current back line is limited by their passing abilities
- Very good open side flankers
- A distributing halfback who does not traditionally run with the ball (however this has changed)
- Traditionally pick running, ball playing Fly half’s who are not noted kickers
- Usually pick a big running centre and ball playing centre
- Strong running and kicking fullback
- Big physical wingers who are also poor kickers

Australian rugby would need to undergo a major change if it wanted to be successful under the new laws. The increase in the number of scrums (currently a major weakness of the side) and the decrease in the number of lineouts (considered their strength) will limit the amount of quality 1st phase possession for the team. Not
having a strong scrum not only puts the side under considerable pressure in attack, but also puts the team at a major disadvantage in defence as discussed earlier. Opposition sides will definitely take the scrum option to exploit this.

Australia also doesn't traditionally produce or 'select' natural ball running forwards like other countries such as New Zealand. Forwards in the past were discouraged from displaying attacking skills during games or the 'target rugby' style of play was made far too complicated for these players to digest. Forwards possessing these sorts of skills were often overlooked for more 'structured' players. Not having forwards who have developed natural attacking skills reduces the teams' ability to play an expansive game successfully.

Australia also lacks a long range kicking game, preferring to select running, passing fly half's. Unfortunately not having the ability to kick long consistently is a major disadvantage, particularly when playing at altitude such as South Africa. This once again is a skill that has been neglected by coaches as players have developed through the system.

However, one of Australia strengths is their ability to be an innovative rugby team, not only on the field but also in the coaching department. They are considered the world leaders in devising new tactics and methods of play. This ability is not to be underestimated or undervalued and gives them a significant mental pool to draw on. Another major advantage for Australia is the number of players and coaches throughout the country who have experienced at least a full season under the new laws from club through to the ARC. With a number of talented players coming through this will give them a significant insight into playing the game under the new laws.

The introduction of the new laws has certainly made for an exciting and faster paced game. If Australia wishes to be successful in the future, improvement in a number of areas needs to occur. Despite reports to the contrary, a number of these skills are in fact being worked on. This is evident to anyone who has observed the national team train in the past twelve months. This development or improvement needs to occur well before these players reach the national side and this responsibility falls upon the second, third and fourth tier of coaches throughout Australia.

No one can doubt that the implementation of the EVL’s has been highly successful. Continuous observation over an entire season has allowed decision makers the opportunity to assess the potential impact of these laws before any permanent changes are made. Whilst many of the Super 14 countries would certainly enjoy playing under the ELV's in the international arena, there will be strong opposition to such a change. Some of the northern hemisphere teams, who generally prefer to play a slower paced game, which suits the weather conditions and their traditional strengths, will be highly reluctant to such a change. There may also be the perception that the southern hemisphere sides will have a distinct advantage as they have already experienced a full season under the new laws. Unfortunately, money and TV ratings may in fact be the final determining factor as to whether these laws are implemented.