2008
Level III
Coach Accreditation
Task 13:

“Tactics implemented in relation to the Experimental Law Variations In Brisbane premier rugby”
**Introduction**

The 2008 Brisbane premier grade rugby competition was played under several law changes that were known as experimental law variations. Some of these law changes had an impact on how the game was played and some did not.

Many coaches were successful in adapting different tactics that suit their team strengths in relation to the experimental law variations and their impact on the game, not all tactics implemented were the same and not all tactics implemented were successful.

This discussion paper will examine the experimental law variations that had an impact on the game and how it was played as well as the different tactics used by different coaches/teams to best suit their desired approach to the game.

The experimental law variations that had a tactical effect on how different teams approached the game were

1. Inside the 22m line
2. The Lineout
3. Tackle/Tackle Contest
4. The Maul
5. The Scrum
Inside the 22 metre Line:

When a defending player receives the ball outside the 22 metre line and passes, puts or takes the ball back inside the 22 metre line by any means, then the ball cannot be kicked directly into touch or the lineout is in line with where the ball is kicked.

Teams were initially reluctant to attack from behind their own forty metre line for fear of turning the ball over at the tackle contest therefore early in the season kicks were returned with kicks. High kicks aimed to land just outside the 22 metre line became the preferred option for kick returns early in the season. As the season progressed coaches began to devote more training time to improving their counter attack options. Players began to make genuine efforts to support the kick catcher and provide counter attack options. The ball was in play a lot more because of this rule change and as the season went on the ball was in hand rather that up in the air as teams became confident with their counter attack options. Teams were more positive in their approach to both counter attack and general play attack from inside their 22 metre line. Interesting to note that the sides that were the major improvers with their counter attacking options, East’s, Brothers and Sunnybank finished the regular season in the top four with East’s and Brothers going on to contest the grand final, while those teams that persisted with returning high balls struggled to maintain possession and build momentum.

Scrum

The offside line for players who are not in the scrum and who are not the teams scrum half, is now five metres behind the hindmost foot of the scrum. This was the experimental law variation that provided the greatest variety in tactics used by teams.

Early in the season this was the opportunity for backlines to use their big plays to try to break the defensive line or score tries. The reasoning behind this was that the extra space between the attack & defensive line would give attackers more time to work the opposing defender to create an advantage. The “blindside winger” was now a lot more involved in both the attacking plays and defensively to cover his opposite creating an extra man in the attacking movement. Defences
became a lot smarter as the season progressed, through video analysis of backline plays, and it became a lot harder for attacking sides to make a break or score from their backline scrum plays as defenders matched up in defence.

Teams that possessed a dynamic powerful number eight began to use him off the back off the scrum to attack the midfield backs and attract them to the tackle and tackle contest. If this was executed successfully and a quick recycle provided the attacking side would then have a full backline to go at a defensive line that was short of numbers or a mix of backs and forwards, allowing the backs to isolate and expose defenders thus creating an advantage. Back row moves began to appear as attacking sides would try to commit the defensive back row which would mean the midfield would have to become committed to the tackle and tackle contest that followed. To counter this effect on the defensive line half backs began to become a lot more involved in the front line defence from scrums. The defensive half backs began to position themselves inside the five eight in the defensive line and commit to the tackle rather than constantly pressure the opposing half backs passing.

Coaches reported devoting more of their training time to the backline being flexible with their play and capable of adapting and changing their plans on the run. Backline attack from the scrum became relative to the effectiveness of the back row, as the shape and numbers in the defensive line became unpredictable. Attacking from second phase, after a back row play, meant that any pre called backline play could not be executed effectively, as the defensive shape was not as the attackers imagined, therefore calls would be changed “on the run” to pinpoint defensive mismatches and attack effectively.

**Lineout**

The law change that a quick throw could be thrown straight or backwards, but not forwards, meant that teams were using the quick line out option more often. Long kicks for territory that had a poor chasing team were virtually ineffective as a quick throw to a team mate would provide chances for counter attack or a return kick under far less pressure. If a quick throw was available players would simply
pass to a teammate who, early in the season would return a high kick and chase, or launch a counter attack if teammates are in support.

If a lineout throw is not straight, a free kick is awarded to the non throwing team. This presented coaches and teams with choices depending on variable such as the score, field position and even their own team strengths. Again sides looked to take advantage of the space between the two backlines and take a quick tap and shift to the backs to attack, but as mentioned earlier defensive systems improved throughout the season and it became harder for backlines to penetrate. Sides with a strong scrum would look to use this option particularly when in the attacking forty metres of the field. The attacking systems mentioned in relation to the scrum rule changes then came into play.

One noticeable change to the game that occurred due to the lineout law changes was that there was far less stoppage time. Players no longer had the luxury of strolling to the sideline to form the lineout and play on, now they were faced with the prospect of having to organize the defensive line and defend the counter attack or return kick. The ball was in play more and players had less time to recover between involvements.

With neither side now determining the numbers in the line out short line outs disappeared after the early rounds of the competition. Defending line outs always had to jumping pods to cover the space that was usually available using the tradition short line out. Coaches soon understood the difficulty of winning clean secure ball to attack from a short line out and the short line out was no longer a successful option.

Other changes to the lineout laws such as being able to pre grip the line out jumper or being able to peel off from the front as soon as the ball is thrown in had no real tactical bearing on how the games were played.
**The Maul**

Defending players can now pull down the maul. This law variation basically took the maul out of the game. Teams could no longer use the maul to draw in defenders as the maul was simply brought to ground by one or two defenders. Premiers East’s reported scoring only one try for the whole season from a rolling maul.

**Tackle / Tackle Contest**

Immediately the tackle occurs there are offside lines that are set from the hindmost part of the tackle. This meant that defenders must retreat to be onside before tackling any support player who receives the ball from the tackled player. Attacking sides would look to get in behind the defence from a tackle offload then shift the ball wide, away from defenders still struggling to get onside. Penalties were awarded early in the season as players struggled with the new offside line at the tackle rather than being formed off the ruck/maul.

Any player can play the ball at the tackle contest as long as they are on their feet. This was the one experimental law variation that was unpopular with all coaches and players interviewed. The general feeling was that initially the tackle contest became an ugly mass off bodies with everyone involved trying to get their hands on the ball. More attacking players were needed at the breakdown and many backline players had to work hard on their tackle contest skills. Coaches reported devoting more training time to the ball carry winning the tackle and being able to provide clean ball for a quick recycle. Skills such as footwork into contact and long ball place away from the tackler became a priority in assuring quick recycle from the tackle contest.

South’s reported changing their approach to the tackle contest so the first man in cleaned out to put his body in front of the ball and the next two arriving players would then seal off the ball to prevent defending hands reaching in for the ball. Their alternative if this was not an option was to have everyone blast past the ball and put their bodies between the defenders and the ball. As the season progressed the second option of blasting past the ball proved to be the successful option.
Summary

The experimental law variations were seen a positive introduction to the Brisbane Premier Grade rugby competition. Players and coached agreed that the game was played in a much more attacking fashion with the ball in play more than previous seasons and more tries being scored by all teams.

The increase in the amount of time the ball is in play and the reduction of “down time” at the set piece was the most influential factor in both tactical and physical preparation for the weekend matches. Attack in general play seemed to be a lot less structured and players enjoyed the freedom of being able to attack whatever defensive structure they would confront.

Initially their seemed to be more kicking, especially return kicks, but as mentioned previously the longer the season progressed, and coaches devised tactics to suit their tam strengths, the more attacking and attractive rugby became and the tries began to flow.

Strength and conditioning coaches also reported having to change their own approach as the season went on. More aerobic based work was performed with the focus shifting to intensity and movement as opposed to strength maintenance which had been the case in previous seasons.

The experimental law variations were a success because they challenged coaches to devise new tactics and provided players with different options when playing the game. The game as a spectacle became more enjoyable with more action resulting from less stoppage time and the ball being in play for longer periods. Players and coaches enjoyed the challenge and spectators appreciate the action.
Footnote:

Thank you to coaches, players and support staff from the following clubs for their time and contribution.

• East’s Tigers
• South’s Magpies
• Sunnybank Dragon’s
• University
• GPS
• Brothers

Chris Lane