The Importance of Stats in the modern game:
By Baden Stephenson

Introduction:
Since the inception of Super 12 and professional rugby the game has changed and developed in numerous ways. Players and coaches alike at the elite level have a new found access to source key information on themselves and opposition through the emergence of video analysis packages. This can be attributed to technology and the use of statistical data.

Background:
Stats are crucial part of the modern game. Stats provide both the coaches and players with hard evidence about individual, unit and team performances. Stats provide a key feedback mechanism that not only provide you with areas of the game the team or individuals are performing well in but also areas that need to be addressed and improved on. Stats can also play a key role in dissecting opposition teams’ strengths and weaknesses and a thorough profile on the way they like to play the game.

During the 2006 season I utilized an extensive bank of stats on a weekly basis after each game. I would often say to my team that “The stats and DVD never lie.” As a player and a coach I have seen far too many examples of players being very satisfied with their performance after a game as they focus on a couple of their positive outcomes that may have occurred e.g. the try they scored, big tackle they made or pass they threw. As a coach I am interested in the actions, decisions and involvements of individuals over the course of an 80 minute game. Game day stats provide an overview of what the team and individuals did for the entire game.

Throughout the season the main statistical information I focused on for our team revolved around the following areas:

- Set piece – our ball / opposition ball
- Phases – our ball / opposition ball
- Turnovers – lost and created by the team and individuals
- Missed tackles
- Penalties

These key areas were constantly referred to in our training environment, game plan information, individual focus points, half time summations and post game reviews. These were also the basis of our goal setting and key performance indicators that the team agreed on throughout the season. Rather than concentrating on too many areas or new things all the time I found it very useful to focus and concentrate on consistent areas.

I found the stats to be a valuable tool to assist with my planning of the week. After reading through the stats on a Monday it usually highlighted areas that the team had performed to a high, satisfactory or poor standard. When implementing training sessions I felt the players responded well when provided with statistical information and actual examples that occurred in the last game that they could relate to.
Examples of this included in attachment 1 – Early in the season we spent a lot of time on our attacking structure and working for multiple phases with numerous phase options. While our team had the best ability to retain possession for multiple phases in the competition the reality was and stats told me that over 80% of our attacking play was for 3 phases or less. Therefore we adjusted our attacking options and structures to create opportunities within 3 phases rather than retaining possession at all costs and not trying to penetrate or score within this time frame. Likewise in defence we had the best defensive record in the competition and the stats told us that 75% of the time we would be forced to defend for 2 phases or less. As the season wore on there were some consistencies and I was able to adjust the training load to ensure that the training drills and activities were game specific, relevant and transferable into game situations.

Stats are critical to development but should not be the only form of feedback. It is very important that the coach provides feedback on what he sees and also asks the players to review and evaluate themselves. What does not come out on the stats sheet is technique, game sense, attitude, effort, referee interpretations, communication, game scenario’s and decision making.

As a coach I found it very useful to ask other coaches within the club their opinions because sometimes you are focused on some areas that you may miss or neglect other areas. I found it very interesting working with my assistant coach early in the year. As an ex fly half I would be focusing on vision, space, numbers and the next phase while my assistant David Palavi (injured Brumbies hooker) would really focus on ball presentation and body positions at the breakdown which was his strength and background. We both developed a thorough appreciation of what we needed to view and assess however it did show that coaches can focus on different parts of the game and put a stronger emphasis on detail in different areas.

The stats provide coaches and players with raw data; it is a challenge how to interpret that information. Stats can’t be read in isolation – often there are a number of factors surrounding the positive or negative involvement. A prime example that occurred this year was a winger missed a tackle in cover defence as he was stepped on the inside at a critical time in the match. At that time in the game I was disappointed with the technique of the attempted tackler’s body height and foot position was quite poor. After watching the DVD I realized that the player who missed the tackle had made a significant effort during the 3 phase lead up to the try which included making an excellent tackle on the opposite side of the field after running a good cover line before reloading with urgency and then sprinting to cover again. The player acknowledged his technique on the 2nd tackle was poor however I applauded his actions as he covered nearly 140 meters in two phases, his effort was outstanding and this was something we had been working on and spoken about at training and in review meetings. Having the ability to react to what has just happened will often effect the how a player reacts.
Over the last 12 months there has been a significant shift from the multi phase or sequencing attacking styles that brought success to the Brumbies and Wallabies under the tutelage of Rod McQueen and Eddie Jones. There seems to be a far bigger focus on still providing structure but really encouraging players to play what is in front of them. To do this successfully and consistently players need read the cues, make educated decisions and react accordingly when opportunities might arise. At the conclusion of the 2006 representative season I would suggest the Wallabies have had some success with this policy while I think the All Blacks seem far more proficient and confident with this style and policy. Players such as Stephen Larkham, Dan Carter and Aaron Maugher possess good peripheral vision, excellent skill sets and will often back their instincts.

Throughout the pre-season and during the season I constantly encouraged players within my team to read the cues and back their skills. One of the challenges I found throughout the year was to back individual’s skills and decision making but also have the ability to play within the team structure. I didn’t want to encourage players to play what is in front and then blow up at individuals if their stats were poor because they were backing themselves. At one stage throughout the year I actually held the team and individual stats back for a couple of weeks as I felt some players were looking too much into the stats and it may have been influencing some confidence levels. A number of players in the team were very competitive and would compare individual stats. This can be a positive as players can compete against each other to get better stats but I was also wary of having players not backing themselves in fear of turning up poor ratings on the stats.

**Statistical Information:**
To highlight that some stats can be misleading I have analyzed a number of stats from this year’s Super 14:
Contestable kicking has become more popular with teams in an attempt to break strong defensive lines. The Crusaders scored the most tries from kicks in the 2006 Super 14 competition however they were ranked 8th out of the 14 teams in percentage of kicks that were contested (36.5%). In isolation this stat shows that they didn’t have the strongest contestable percentage but they had a very good % of turning contestable kicks into try scoring opportunities and it doesn’t take into consideration the field position the Crusaders enjoyed from territory kicks.

The stats for two rival teams at inside centre are interesting:
Matt Giteau for the Brumbies made 58 of his 62 tackles attempted (93.5%) while DeWet Barry from the Stormers made 64 of his 95 tackles attempted (67.4%). Both centres are renowned for their defence. What this stat does not tell us is what percentage of these tackles is dominant, neutral or passive. The Stormers play a traditional Sth African rush, high risk defence while the Brumbies play a more push defence. This stat doesn’t put into context which defenders were defending on either side of the player, the defensive policy of their particular teams, game scenario’s or what parts of the field tackles were either made or missed. While I was surprised at the amount of missed tackles Barry conceded I would be interested in finding out more information on this stand alone statistic. Each statistic should be taken in context.
At end of the 2005 Tri Nations the Wallabies defensive coaching staff were boasting the best defensive completion rate (93%) in the competition. While this is an impressive stat it was clear to see that the defensive policy was to make tackles and then reload back into the lateral line as quick as possible. While the All Blacks percentage was lower than this they clearly put more pressure on the opposition ball throughout the tournament in hope of forcing turnovers by flooding the breakdown with numbers when dominant tackles were made. The team had good success in slowing the opposition ball down and also forcing turnovers which they were able to attack from. The best defensive % certainly did not relate to quality performances.

The Brumbies improved their defensive record from 2005 to 2006. The team increased their dominant / neutral tackles from 15.4% in 2005 to 18.4% in 2006. With this stat in mind one could assume that this increase would have led to more forced turnovers, however they reduced their forced turnovers from 10 per game in 2005 to 8 per game in 2006. The team only conceded 22 tries from 13 games (average 1.7 per game) in 2006 compared to 34 tries from 11 games (average 3.1 per game) in 2005. While this is marked improvement it is worth noting that the team conceded 40 penalties in defence (average of 3.07 per game) which resulted in 9 points per game as opposed to 15 penalties in defence (average 1.4 per game) resulting in 3 points per game. A number of factors would have influenced this statistical shift. I know the Brumbies put a lot of time into their defensive policy and structure. They focused on putting more players at the tackle which results in more players contesting possession on the ground which affected the penalty count and also more dominant / neutral tackles. There is a fine line in skill and judgment in defence with both the tackler and 2nd/3rd man involvement in transition from tackle contest involvement to ruck involvement. This is an area that the All Blacks and particularly Crusaders and Hurricanes are very efficient at. The Brumbies change of focus and policy in this area can be described as successful however you need an understanding and awareness of the factors which affect the statistical data.

George Smith made the 6th highest number of tackles in the Super 14 competition with 174 and his tackle percentage was 89.7% which enabled him to compete for possession at the breakdown. Smith was able to force 25 turnovers throughout the season which is outstanding. However, Smith is also the most highly penalised player in the competition for infringing in defence. In isolation these stats can be misleading or even meaningless.

**Conclusion:**
In a long term (macro) planning sense stats can also be used to observe general trends in the game. The game has been defence and contest orientated over the last two years. The access to stats across a competition or a range of competitions over a period of time will provide the quantitative facts about how the game is being played. The stats that occur at International or Super 14 level don’t always necessarily correlate to what is actually happening at club level however I do feel that players and coaches at this level do follow the trends that are often set at the higher levels.
It is important to have a global view on stats as quite often one area can and will influence stats in other areas of the game. Most teams will set individual, unit and team goal, targets and Key Performance Indicators (KPI’s) at the start of each season and review them as the season progresses. Statistical data is a direct way in which these areas can be managed and monitored. Stats provide an excellent coaching tool for providing feedback and setting realistic and achievable goals and player focus points. Good statistics don’t always transfer into good performances or winning games. Stats will not necessarily let you know if you are building pressure on the opposition and your conversion of opportunities into points.

I am totally aware of the need to select developing players onto the representative pathway that have the athletic capabilities. It seems each year players are fitter, stronger and faster however it does frustrate me when there seems to be a focus solely on the physical stats of individuals rather than complimenting the core skills, anticipation and effort of players. If George Smith was judged solely on his ability to run a beep test (level 9) he would have struggled to play 1st Grade for Manly let alone any representative levels which will one day see him as the most capped Wallaby forward in history.

As previously mentioned I believe stats play a very important role in the modern game for both players and coaches in relation to providing quantative feedback, planning training sessions and also game planning against your upcoming opposition. It is important that coaches don’t use stats as their only tool. Providing subjective verbal feedback, use of game vision, questioning, error correction and problem solving etc are just as important to ensure your players and team improve and enjoy their rugby.

APPENDIX 1 Tuggeranong Vikings 1st Grade Stats for 2006 attached.