“Rugby positions each have a specific role to play. Different physical attributes are required, although strength and speed are key across the team. Most players will specialise in one or two positions which uses their skills and size to best advantage.” Gavin Hickie, Rugby Coach

Back row players and their roles have developed as coaches introduce initiatives and innovations to gain an advantage in the game of rugby. It can be argued that the specific role and characteristics of the ‘traditional’ 6, 7 and 8 are blurred as the game continues to evolve in the 21st Century. Players are becoming more and more athletic and possess multifaceted skill sets to cope with the demands of the game and to stay ahead of their opposite. The notion that the individuals in a back row only fulfil specified roles, dictated by the traditional positional descriptions of the 6, 7 and 8 has long gone. The more attributes and characteristics that a player can bring to the modern game only strengthen their appeal in the eyes of a coach and selectors. The more attributes a player has outside of the perceived traditional role of ‘their’ position, the more desired that player is in the make-up of a rugby team. Hence, the more a back row player can contribute outside of their traditional role on the rugby field, the more likely they are to enhance the balance of the back row unit. Thus making them more highly desirable to the selectors and coaching staff, ultimately leading to more positive outcomes for the team.

In a recent article from The Australian regarding selection of a back row player for Australia’s 2015 World Cup Campaign, it was highlighted that David Pocock’s selection in the number 8 position was based on the balance he would bring to the back row as a cohesive unit rather than him possessing what may be considered the desirable skill set of a traditional number 8 (this point will also be highlighted later in this paper).

“Pocock made a successful comeback after successive knee injuries sidelined him for almost two years, but he was behind Michael Hooper in the pecking order for the gold No 7 jersey.

But Pocock forced his way back into the Wallabies’ run-on side in the new position of No 8 to become arguably the most influential player in Australia’s bid for the World Cup.”

When reflecting on and researching the role of a back row player in rugby, the desired criteria of characteristics that a 6, 7 and 8 (while there are some common desirable characteristics) were expected to possess are quite distinct and separate from each other.
However, an effective back row blends three players whose abilities and skills complement one another, so the coach needs to be clear about the roles to be played by each of the players.

Some literature describes the roles of the back row as distinct and unique to the player with the particular number on their back. As described by websites and contributors to ‘better rugby coaching’ and the Level 2 ARU Rugby Coaching Handbook, the following points need to be considered when articulating the roles of each of the back row;

- What is the primary role of the number 7 (openside flanker)? Destroyer, link man enabling continuity, defensive leader?
- Is the number 6 (blindside flanker) going to be used as a "hard yards" ball carrier, a jumper in the lineout? Or are you going to play "another" number 7 instead?
- The number 8 is a part of the spine of the team and a key decision maker. So this player needs mental and tactical skills, as well as the physical skills, to make the most effective contribution.

A coach also needs to consider the team's playing style and how different back row combinations might enable you to play in different styles when selections are made. This may/will change depending on depth of playing roster, availability and injuries to players.

Other characteristics that are desirable include;

- Contribution to scrum
- Contribution to lineout
- Pressure on opposition in close
- Pressure on opposition out wide
- Running lines in attack (support play, linking) and defence
- Effectiveness in tackle
- Effectiveness at breakdown: securing or sealing off ball
- Speed of arrival at breakdown
- Relative contribution in front and behind the gain line
- Relative contribution on open side and blind side
- General involvement in play
- Effectiveness of back row moves
- Ball skills - running, handling, evasion
- Impact on the game

These imperative backrow characteristics are irrespective of what number each player wears, however, without a balanced back row that contributes to all of these desired characteristics there will have an adverse effect on the performance of the team. A coach and their staff must keep observing the back row in action to ensure that the balance is
there. Failure to achieve this may result in the back row unit being ineffective despite the high skill level of the individual.

All players irrespective of their position should possess general attributes, such as speed, strength, agility, acceleration, flexibility, mental toughness, determination, composure, self-discipline and knowledge of the games laws.

It is suggested that coaches and selectors use the same set of positional criteria when selecting their team. This will ensure consistency of selection and the ability to select back row players that have a common ‘baseline’ as a starting point. Coaches should conduct their own functional role analysis to establish the criteria which they will base their selection upon. Once the individual player’s strengths are identified, the question of contributing balance to the back row can be addressed.

Scrum law changes have seen many teams worldwide scummage for longer in order to gain penalties and/or hold their opposition in the scrum for longer periods of time, hence locking in the oppositions back row. As a result of this, coaches need to be aware of the contribution and importance of having a dynamic back row in which each player can make positive contributions to the attacking scrum. Therefore it can be suggested that the days of automatically making sure the flankers are the first players to break away from the scrum are gone. Flankers and the No. 8 must work in unison with the tight five to achieve the desired outcome for any scrum throughout a match. Whether that be to lock in and add pressure to the opponent scrum or look to break early to pressure the opposition into making a mistake, a coach must ensure that a back row player understands the objective and the their role during this aspect of set piece play and it is not a time to rest on the side of the scrum.

While the scrum and lineout are important set piece areas to which the back row must make positive contributions, the breakdown constitutes 70 per cent of the game. This is an area of vital importance for any team and coach when developing a game plan and selecting players, especially a back row player.

One of the most important areas when considering the suitability of a back row player is the breakdown. The breakdown is increasingly seen as an area where a game is won or lost. Many consider turnovers as being the ultimate measure of success. Whether that being the ability to steal opposition’s ball or the ability to slow down the opponent’s ball as this allows your team to regroup defensively. The back row players need to be able to contribute to this aspect of the game. In the past, traditionally the No. 7 has had this responsibility. However, as the recent 2015 Rugby World Cup taught us, the No. 7 does not need to be the only player on the field to be effective in this vitally important facet of the modern day game.

The Wallabies, David Pocock was the most effective exponent of the breakdown at the Rugby World Cup with a total of 17 turnovers in the tournament. In the majority of games
he played, he wore the No. 8 jersey. In fact, many of the Australian sides selected during the World Cup saw Michael Cheika select two traditional No. 7’s in the run on-side. During these games the Wallabies had a balanced back row that were able to pressure opposition ball at the break down, a huge component of slowing a team in the modern day game.

A recent article from The Australian highlights the importance of the breakdown and turnovers as well as the balance of a back row rather than the number on the players back;

“For all the justifiable praise the much-maligned Wallabies’ scrum has received for turning the tables on England at the set piece and for five-eighth Bernard Foley’s flawless performance, the game was won at the breakdown where Pocock was the dominant figure.

Whether he is wearing No 7 or No 8 on his back, Pocock is the best “fetcher” in world rugby.

With his enormous strength and low centre of gravity, Pocock was almost immovable at the breakdown and gave Australia a crucial point of difference.

The Wallabies won nine turnovers against England and Pocock had a hand in just about all of them.”

Pocock was outstanding, England coach Stuart Lancaster said in an understatement. Every time we threatened their line there was a turnover that he was involved in.”

New Zealand’s Ritchie McCaw is arguably the best No.7 in the world (Appendix 1). Yet, during the 2015 Super Rugby Competition for the Canterbury Crusaders he wore the No.6 jersey four times. Coach Todd Blackadder selected McCaw in this position after he had considered the balance and roles of the back row that was selected each week.

A coach must consider a back row players ability to contribute to the scrum, lineout, kick off and open play. However, it is imperative that the balance of the back row be paramount when considering players strengths and suitability to play in a certain position. No more so than the back row and the need for each player to compliment the other two in this ever evolving entity. Fundamentally, when making selections a coach must consider the back row functioning as a unit, rather than the skill set of the individual player, potentially nullifying the number they wear on their back.
REFERENCES

- ARU Level 2 Coaching Course Record Book
- IRB Coaching website – irbcoaching.com
- http://www.betterrugbycoaching.com/
- twitter.com/FoxSportsLab (Appendix 1)
APPENDIX 1

Below is a snapshot of Richie McCaw’s All Black career. It not only highlights his game stats but also shows his dominance in the breakdown area of the game.

From Fox Sports;

Considered a controversial character on the field by some fans, it cannot be disputed that McCaw’s consistency in his back row role, game changing performances and qualities as a leader are central to the record breaking back to back RWC wins for New Zealand.

Forwards Coach Graham Rowntree focused on “As the game has got quicker there are more phases and more opportunities to get back into the game and Richie McCaw is still the best at that. He’s a real natural ball poaching 7.”

Little subtle techniques he would base his game on and as a Back Row player those are the small margins you need to be successful. He always seems to have been innovating and influencing the game at the very highest level and that is what has kept him at the top so long.”