

Technical-Tactical paper
Level III 2004/2005.
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The role of the modern Halfback... Is he a nine or a seven perhaps

Since the game of Rugby went professional in 1995 there have been numerous positive changes to the way the game is now played. We have witnessed a more defensive structure appear, we have seen the points system increased, bonus points added, lifting in the lineout, variations on lifting, safety at scrum contests and the game has progressively become faster.

The current national coach has expressed a view that players will not be multi skilled but more specialized in their roles and players like the half will have a higher level of core skills.

However, the role of the half back has also changed dramatically during the past 10 years. It would be fair to say that this position has had the most significant change and for a number of good reasons. The changes now promote the argument ... What do I want from my number 9”?

Case study Traditional half vs. an extra back/back rower. You decide

The case for the traditional number 9.

Since the inception of rugby we have had a dedicated player to link the forwards and the backs and along the way provide some sound decision making. It is apparent that this link is essential to ensure the principles of rugby are achieved.

A current player evaluation that is currently used defines the roles and responsibilities of the half back into 6 groups under the heading of essential skills.

They are;

1. Handling
2. Running
3. Kicking
4. Defense
5. contact
6. Position.

Key points making this a specific position are;

- Feed ball to scrum.
- Ability to take a variety of passes early
- Link forward movements to back line play
- Clear pass from tackle contest (both ruck and maul)

- Clear ball from lineout
- Defend around the ruck.
- Kick where appropriate off both feet
- Give direction to forwards in tackle contest situations.
- Ability to vary pace and sprint fast over 30 metres.

A scrum half has a technical understanding revolving around option taking and organizing delivery platforms and delivery timings with the forwards. Defensively the 9 takes on the role of cover defender where the running line is directly across the field.

There are many plusses for you to continue with the modern, standard halfback as mentioned above. The key components are a strong passing game, ability to read the play, provides a strong link to assist the backs to “go forward” and traditionally a strong defender.

It is easy for the modern coach to stick with the tried and true halfback and the main argument for it is, well it fundamentally works. What other sport can allow a 75 kg player to compete with athletes over 100kg? Get him to play halfback. The risk factors are also very low when contemplating who your link should be.

The case against

The modern game is seeing the half back look like a 2nd 5/8 or a third flanker, depending on who you are and who you are coaching.

The current Wallaby half and his role is a classic point. Rarely does he receive the ball from the lineout, except when at first receiver (10 role), this adding an extra player to attack play (addition). Defensively he is one of the more technically correct defenders in the team.

Tactically his mind is sharp and his vision without peer. Solid around the scrum in attack and sets up backline play very well.

But...

His passing from phase play is technically against the traditional halfback roles. Pick up the ball and 2 steps back then offload? I don't recall my coach in high school telling me that. Yet when a flanker or the reserve 9 is in this role there is a crisper pass to deliver to either backline or next phase runner close to the contest

Let's look at the same player evaluation for a flanker.

Again there are 6 essential skills

1. Handling
2. Running
3. Set plays
4. Defense
5. Contact
6. Position.

As you can see there are some very close similarities that add to the discussion of using an extra flanker as your nine.

In relation to the common topics, here is a list of similarities.

Handling

- The ability to take and give short passes
- Ability to pick up the ball off the ground at speed
- Ability to pass the ball accurately with varying length and speed.

Running

- Ability to accelerate quickly
- Ability to run with control , change pace sidestep, change direction and swerve

Defense

- Ability to communicate defensive lines
- Alignment and re alignment
- Positioning
- Technique

Contact

- Ability to ruck and maul
- Ability to generate leg speed into contact

Position

- Ability to support play fro continuity
- Understand opportunities for counter attack from the cover defending role.

Key differences however are

- Set plays, that is contribution to the scrum, execution of back row moves, ability to support and jump in a lineout. It should be noted that many halfbacks now are taking more of an active role in the line out , such as jumping and used as decoy jumpers(mainly due to weight advantages as well as excellent aerial ball skills.

The only essential skill that is not the same is the ability for the flanker to kick. Yet this is not to say the flanker is unable to kick. (Prime example is the multi skilled George Smith)

In this modern, professional world where the players at the highest level are on hand for training almost 24/7 we are seeing players with exceptional ball skills that are just as adaptable to passing from the ruck as the traditional 9

At the amateur level i.e.; 2 nights a week and play sat) we probably don't have access to the HPU or individual skills coaches to hone the skills as detailed as the professionals, but we can identify players who can multi skill.

Sure, have a halfback in the traditional sense but does he/she have to be in the traditional mould.

Below is a graph of positives and potential negatives for consideration next time you are at the selection table or considering your options for next season.

<u>An extra flanker:</u>	Assume the role of halfback and. When it comes to clearance time the ball should be well presented and the role undertaken by another flanker/ or any well skilled player.	<u>Risk,</u> Medium. You would need to ensure that your players have strong passing skills and work on vision drills to assist decision making. Kicking options may suffer.	<u>Benefits;</u> You then create an extra scavenger at the tackle contest. It also adds to your attacking options
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Decision; I would strongly opt for this option as it gives an extra dimension to the play. Consider the benefits of being able to play 3 very fit athletes all well skilled in catch pass and defensively astute. Provides an extra option at lineout time, where by you utilize your thrower to offload to the play maker. If you are the sort of side that likes to roll the lineout forward first, you have an extra work horse in your pack.

<u>An extra winger</u>	Speed at tackle contest and size around the ruck. Has a good kicking game and defensively solid	<u>Risk</u> The ability to get caught up or become isolated. Defensively could miss those crucial one on one tackles. Passing is such a key component of the nines role so you would suffer here	<u>Benefits;</u> Speed around the tackle contest; ability to offload in contact
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Decision; Not very viable as the risks will far outweigh any benefits

<u>An extra 10.</u>	Vision, style attack. The ability to read the play as well as have a structured passing game	<u>Risk,</u> Would want to set up all the play. Defensively not as solid as other choices.	<u>Benefits</u> Additional kicking options Crisp passing Tactical decision maker close to the phase action. Double opportunity to attack.
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<u>An extra hooker</u>	Distinct link between forwards and backs. Ideal for line outs and teams with a very strong forward pack. Also a front row replacement on tap.	<u>Risk</u> A tendency to be more forward orientated. Traditionally used to a tight game. Speed is a concern	<u>Benefits.</u> High workrate Extra muscle up front
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<u>The traditional 9</u>	<u>Players</u> Years of experience from school days and early teaching and training A clear understanding and perception for the game	<u>Risk</u> None really	<u>Benefits</u> Kicking skills Passing with accuracy Speed over a short distance as well as support
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There is absolutely nothing wrong with the traditional nine, all I have intended to do is add a bit of debate on the advantages of using an extra flanker to add a different dimension to your play. Against certain sides this year (2005) I have used a multi skilled nine (AKA Flanker) with a great deal of success. It's not for every one, but it does put doubt in the minds of the opposition both in attack and defense.

The benefits would outweigh the disadvantages, especially in the area of tactical passing and kicking