# **BALANCE & STABILITY**

"The art of playing the game on your feet"

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# **Introduction**

Professional Rugby has been with us for three sparkling seasons now. Since 1996, the game has witnessed many bright innovations that have contributed to an ever-increasing spectator and playing base. The game of Rugby in Australia appears to be in good shape as we prepare ourselves for the World Cup of 1999.

One of the quickest 'trends' to move through to all levels of the game is the interpretation of the modern lineout. New laws meant that players needed to learn new skills. And, in turn, new skills resulted in coaches discovering new methods of teaching. Professionalism has allowed both coaches and athletes the time and opportunity to achieve this.

The game of Rugby is not just a Sport, but fast becoming a Sport Science as we continually search for the slightest advantage in order to gain the all important competitive edge. At the top levels, the successful Rugby Athlete is now multi-skilled. It is not uncommon for athletes to specialise in a second playing position - Coaches encourage versatility throughout the developmental stages of the athletes education. The modern game of Rugby is producing backs who basically 'double' as second and third phase backrowers at the tackle, ruck and maul. Additional to this the game has encouraged forwards to express themselves with the ball. We now have Super 12 forwards who can kick goals and support and run with the skill and attitude traditionally associated with outside backs. Professional Rugby has paved the way for the production of a more complete and well-rounded Rugby Athlete.

The modern day Rugby Athlete strives for a high percentage of effective involvements in the game. Under present day laws - this can only be achieved whilst playing the game on your feet. A player on the ground is out of the play and of no value to his team at all - irrespective of his level of skill. I would like you to consider the key factors of Balance and Stability Skills and some practical ways for coaches to implement their Balance and Stability Program. Fundamental Balance and Stability Skills are not only pre-requisites, but compliment the development and execution of Rugby related skills. Just as any building or construction requires a solid base of support in order to stay up, so does the Rugby Athlete, eager for the opportunity to display their skills.

I believe we should all find time in our season plan to include a Balance and Stability Program. If your athletes spend too much time on the deck during a game, do you ever ask yourself the question why? Let's look at Balance and Stability closely and learn to play the game on our feet.

# BALANCE & STABILITY - WHAT IS IT?

What a wonderful sight it is to witness the apparent 'ease' with which gifted athletes such as Matt Burke and Ben Tune cover the pitch. Both athletes are very well balanced runners - especially when carrying the ball in space, out wide. Correct style and technique maximises the opportunity for effective movement patterns and reduces the risk of failure and/or injury. Although, not everyone playing the game of Rugby can move like Matt Burke or Ben Tune. Knowing that approximately sixty-percent of the game is contested at the tackle, ruck and maul, we need to apply the same principles of movement to an area that is congested with players on the fringes of quick rucks and mini-mauls.

When in traffic and carrying the ball forward, Phil Kearns at his best is the model of a well balanced athlete. His ability to secure possession, stay down low and pump his legs on contact, make him an invaluable asset to his team. Other than the offensive - defensive hits, displaying correct technique allows Phil Kearns to decide for himself when (if at all) he shall come into contact with the ground, and then transfer the ball. This ability is in stark contrast to a lot of players who wilfully collapse to the ground on contact when carrying the ball. In this instance the player is not really tackled, but allows himself to be tackled. It also appears that contact is made 'side-on' as opposed to 'square-on' - resulting in no opportunity for leg drive as the feet are pointing towards the sideline. Youngsters learning the game not only make 'side-on' contact, but also tend to take a deep breath and brace themselves to be as strong as possible on contact. This is a poor habit that is easily corrected.

Without Skills of Balance and Stability, some games of Rugby see players tripping over their own feet when entering rucks and mauls. Other problems include players who over stride prior to contact - leaving themselves with a skinny, long base and therefore weak through the diagonal. Or those players who enter the contact zone with their head down and their hips higher than their shoulders. These players are destined only to nose-drive to the ground and take others with them. Apart from becoming 'speed bumps' on the ground for the players following in their path, they have also failed to create a solid platform for a co-ordinated, well balanced and stable drive. Again, these habits only increase the risk of injury, (due to the stacks-on-the-mills) but contribute to a high penalty rate and cause frustration levels of all concerned to escalate. In these instances, the players approach is more physical than technical. Improved Balance and Stability Skills will solve a lot of these problems and make for a more enjoyable and free-flowing game. We may then refer to the contact situation in a game as an opportunity for the team in possession to strive for continuos play - keeping the ball alive and stretching the oppositions' scrambling defense. A well balanced ball carrier in close quarters may then be stable on contact allowing for continuity as opposed to the 'dead' ball that is stuck in a ruck or maul and then typically referred to as a 'breakdown' in play. These stop / start games are equally frustrating for both the player and spectator alike, not to mention the coach and the referee.

Both coaches and athletes must understand the concept of Balance and Stability in the game of Rugby in order to benefit by it's practice. There are two types of Balance and Stability that we must consider. Static Balance and Stability Skills are a pre-requisite for the athlete to develop Dynamic Balance and Stability Skills. Let's look at some examples of each:-

# STATIC BALANCE AND STABILITY SKILLS

- 1. The counterbalance required in a mini-scrum 1v1.
- 2. The front-row when set as a unit of three heels up off the ground. This is a balancing act.
- 3. The full scrum set immediately prior to engagement minimises the opportunity for adjustment after engagement, increasing the stability of the unit.
- 4. The stance and body language of the lineout jumper and supporters prior to the jump and support preparation for the jump and support.
- 5. The hooker immediately prior to the ball being thrown in to the lineout.
- 6. The stance and body language of numbers 10, 12 and 13 especially from set play.

## DYNAMIC BALANCE AND STABILITY SKILLS

- 1. The counterbalance required when driving forward, on contact, when in possession feet approximately shoulder width apart, using 'tractor steps'.
- 2. The balance and stability displayed when 'cleaning out' opposition at the tackle.
- 3. The preparation for contact, and balance and stability required when entering rucks and mauls.
- 4. When the ball carrier pivots out of the contact situation dynamic balance and stability is required to execute the 'hit 'n' spin'. This is an advanced skill.
- 5. The pick 'n' go and leg drive on contact displayed by Phil Kearns.
- 6. The jump, support and descent of the jumper in the lineout when three players skills, athleticism and co-ordination, compliment each other.

The higher the level of the Rugby - the greater the athleticism and skill of the athletes involved. If you look for the above skills at Super 12 level, you will most definitely find them. The transition from Schoolboys to Colts Rugby (and then on to Grade Rugby) is when the game highlights the need for players to play the game on their feet. Most Schoolboy Rugby is all about a quick rucking game - players do not get the opportunity to develop a driving maul-style game as much as the seniors ... As the strength and condition of the athlete improves so does the understanding of the game - and of course the skill level. A multi-skilled team has options, rather than playing a predictable one-dimensional game. The drive forward on contact game allows for many more options and ways to transfer the ball. It is also very difficult to counter. Before we look at some practical ways to improve our Balance and Stability Skills, lets look a little bit closer at the Key Factors of both:-

### THE KEY FACTORS OF BALANCE

- 1. Traction
- 2. Body Shape
- 3. Steps Short, fast, 'tractor steps'
- 4. Leg Drive
- 5. Counter Balance Skills
- 6. Maintain pressure on point of contact

#### THE KEY FACTORS OF STABILITY

- 1. Broadbase feet shoulder width apart
- 2. Low centre of gravity
- 3. Body Control Pelvic Stability
- 4. Flat back, chest out
- 5. Chin off chest, looking forward
- 6. Trade off between Speed and Body Height

#### PRACTICAL WAYS TO IMPROVE OUR BALANCE AND STABILITY

I believe it is far too easy for coaches to identify a 'weakness' without offering practical ways to develop that 'weakness' into a 'strength'. Problems are sometimes highlighted without any solutions ... The following suggestions will suit the Coach when working with a variety of numbers in the group. Athletes must first be made aware of their technique and then understand the concept of Balance and Stability and how it fits into the game of Rugby. This is where the use of video analysis of the team or individual, plays a major role in the learning process.

## 1. Individually

A "one on one" coaching situation, or even for the athlete to work on their own.

- Athletes need to spend quality time improving the flexibility of their hips, lower back and hamstrings.
- Athletes also need to improve their Pelvic Stability so that they can generate maximum force and also resist opposition forces through the diagonal.
- Action / Reaction drills are ideal as part of the warm up. To stop / start, balance on one foot and change direction will also assist. Locomotor skills are ideal for youngsters.
- Preparation for contact is something that the individual can also improve at training. Its all about getting into the correct position to execute the skill.
- A scrum sled allows for the individual to work for ten to fifteen minutes before or after training on body shape, engagement, chasing the weight and also Pelvic Stability.

- Ground Skills such as stepping over the ball with a wide base of support and a low centre of
  gravity also need to be rehearsed leading with the left and then the right side of the body.
  Other ground skills include the baseball slide and back to feet picking up a loose ball on
  the run, or the advanced skill of diving on a loose ball, regaining your feet and playing the
  same ball.
- Primary School students should also be introduced to gymnastics at school or in a club.
   This will also develop a wonderful background for the athlete.
- Again, as part of the warm up, the individual can vary their base of support and alter their centre of gravity as they move through a series of 'spinners'. A jump and twist at 90, 180, 270 and 360 degrees to the left / right will also assist the development of Balance and Stability.
- Other suggestions are included in the NSWRU TIP Program for 15-18 year old athletes. Coaches are encouraged to be a little creative and work with their fellow staff to develop their own program, which is dependent upon their own facilities and needs.
- The use of wobble boards and balance beams are also an excellent way for an athlete to
  have fun and improve their balance. We can complicate the exercise by introducing the ball
   so that athletes have a couple of things to concentrate on at one time. The wobble board
  encourages proprioceptive input, which is the sensory messages transferred to the brain to
  increase the bodies sensory awareness in space.

#### 2. Pairs

When the coach divides a group into pairs, he may practice the following skills of Balance and Stability:-

- Working 1 v 1 the attacker runs forward, whilst the defender offers resistance with his hands on the shoulders of the 'balanced, driving' player. The defender has his arms at full length and running backwards.
- Partner work one player leads, the other follows. Players work in a small grid, stay facing each other working on a mirror image of the player who leads. This will improve your players action and reaction.
- Agility belts can also be used very effectively. As above, one leads the other follows ... the
  progression allows for the introduction of a ball for each athlete to carry. The roles can then
  be changed so that there is one attacker and one defender the aim being to break the
  velcro join at the centre of the belt.
- The defender wears a contact suit or carries a shield and the attacker hits and drives forward for five to ten metres. Pelvic Stability is a must for the attacking player he must learn to work with his 'abs on'. Athletes require functional strength.
- Two players can join forces and hit and drive a rucking sled for five to ten metres at a time.
   Players must drive with their legs, draw with their arms and be stable through the centre.
   This can also become a conditioning exercise, once correct technique has been acquired.

- There are numerous action / reaction drills that a coach has at his disposal when it comes to athletes being introduced to wrestling. Athletes can wrestle on the ground, on their knees or in a standing position arms at full length and gripping onto the opponents jersey at the shoulders. One athlete is the attacker, one the defender they may work for a limited amount of time (five ten seconds at a time). The next progression is to introduce a ball and/or a third person, creating a 2 v 1 situation.
- Confident athletes can then work on a hit 'n' spin or a rip 'n' spin exercise at training. It is
  here that the coach can work on individual skills that are specific to the game of Rugby.
  Satisfaction is gained by all involved when these skills are learnt and then overlearnt to the
  stage that one day they are performed consistently well throughout the course of the game.
- The ball carrier should also develop a 'recoil' immediately after contact with the defender.
   Some may refer to this simply as a 'bounce' thus creating space between ball carrier and defender. The ball carrier must be able to perform this skill on both the right and left hand sides of the body, secure possession in a well balanced and stable position.
- Apart from wrestling, judo is another sport from which we can learn. Athletes must learn how to fall correctly and then quickly regain their feet. I believe a lot of the problems associated with newcomers learning how to tackle is that they lack the confidence that two brothers develop by wrestling each other in the backyard. This natural form of 'play' can be utilised in our education program. The roll tackle is the perfect example of the principle of momentum used to great effect in the sport of judo. The smaller Rugby players are not built for crashing front-on hits, yet can de-stabilise their opponent by adopting this tactic. The beauty about the roll tackle is that if the tackler ends up on the ground, they are normally first to their feet and can then win possession! (The perfect tackle).
- Finally, we can teach athletes how to bridge on contact when carrying the ball so that they
  can learn to counterbalance themselves. Other skills include the 'hit, recoil, rip and drive the
  bus'. Two players joining forces must also bind and travel at a pace that allows them to
  maintain their feet. There is a tendency for inexperienced or overzealous athletes to try and
  go too fast, often resulting in them losing their balance.

#### 3. Threes

With one team of fifteen athletes the coach can maximise participation by working five groups of three:-

- Working 2 v 1 the defenders have a shield each and resist the attacker who binds with both arms and drives with both shoulders.
- As above, although the defenders bind like second rowers and the third person packs like a No.8. Again we have a 2 v 1 situation. The No.8 drives forward, whilst the others offer resistance.
- Wrestling 2 v 1 one attacker lies face down on the ground and must bind on the two
  defenders as he attempts to get to his feet. The two defenders are kneeling beside the
  attacker at the start of the activity. The coach can decide whether they work for 10, 20 or 30
  seconds. The Coach must also add Safety rules to these fun games.

- Scrummaging 2 v 1 one tighthead packs against a loosehead <u>and</u> a hooker. the Coach
  can rotate the players around and vary the skill from balance to resisting force and other
  movements that are more common to a 1 v 1 scrum practice.
- There are "Five Stages to the Lineout Jump and Support" in the teaching / learning progression. Players can be rotated through the roles and learn the skill by trial and error, pre-gripping and introducing verbal cues. The lineout jumper must be well balanced in the air and stabilised by his two mates who support him.
- A game of 'clusters' can be played with youngsters learning about the art of scrum assembly. Loose head, hooker and tight head take their binds and display skills of Static Balance and Stability.

# 4. Unit or Squad Practice

The coach can decide to make full use of any combination of previous activities to suit the size of his group. Some other suggestions for groups of 8-20 include:-

- Make full use of body height tents work your players in a figure 8 fashion as they improve their awareness of their body height. When fatigue sets in, body height is lost. Introduce a rolling ball once stage one has been covered.
- Set out 6-8 players in a channel each holding a shield or wearing a contact suit. The ball
  carrier can bump and drive his way through the centre, whilst maintaining his feet. Only one
  defender can make contact at one time the talented athletes when carrying the ball will be
  able to hit 'n' spin and change the ball from one side to the other. This is called 'running the
  gauntlet' and often assimilates a game.
- As above, although referred to as 'swimming the gauntlet' as the channel is brought in much closer and the ball carrier learns to fend with his lead arm. The breast stroke - type action will allow for an inside bind (preferably on the contact suit) and space created by taking the defender away from the centre. The ball is also transferred to the other arm prior to contact. The first attempt should be at a walking pace ...
- 8-10 players line up on the tryline, link arms and run out to the 22m line. The aim is to work together with identical foot speed. The coach can develop three speeds - slow, medium and fast and the link at the arms cannot be broken. The speed and the length of the step must be consistent and will become difficult when fatigue sets in or co-ordination and timing is lost. Communication then becomes vital.

#### Applying the Transfer of Learning from Other Sports

Balance and Stability when related to cricket may well refer to the batsmen's stance and his ability to use his feet to play the ball correctly. When the batsman is off balance, the ball may be lofted, mis-hit or a clean miss. Likewise in golf - although the ball is stationary. The golfer must also be well balanced when playing tee shots and especially when hitting the ball out of the rough or from the side of the bunker. If we attempt either shot in either sport and are poorly balanced the chance of poor execution rises. Although our sense of balance does come from our middle ear we are able to learn from other sports as well. If these sports are played at a

Primary School age we have a better sports later on in life.	chance than	someone w	ho may be	introduced to	these

Coaches are encouraged to learn what they can from these other sports. If you have a friend who coaches these sports, then you really do have a convenient and valuable resource ...

- 1. Gymnastics
- 2. Wrestling
- 3. Judo; Hap-Ki-Do
- 4. Netball
- Basketball
- 6. Athletics

The physical education of the Rugby Athlete provides a solid base from which we can work. Both Coaches and Athletes are searching for more knowledge as the game moves deeper and deeper into Professionalism. We all should broaden our knowledge by learning from other Professional Sports.

#### CONCLUSION

In conclusion, I would like to thank all those people with whom I have worked and coached over the past couple of Rugby seasons. No man can survive in isolation, and I have always enjoyed the opportunity to discover new ways of solving problems by sharing ideas with the next person. This paper is the direct result of observing many season's of Rugby players making the transition from School-Age to Colts Rugby (U20 years of age). We had to find ways of teaching athletes how to hit, drive ... and to continue to drive on contact as opposed to a hit and drop to the ground. We have learnt quite a bit more than just that along the way, as new options evolved as each season passed by.

I hope that this paper offers you as a coach, or athlete some inspiration to meet your challenge that lies ahead. If you as a coach find that skills of Balance and Stability is lacking in your players I have one question for you to answer. How much time do you allow for improvement? Manage your time and include Balance and Stability as a part of your program. I believe we should encourage our Athletes to play the game on their feet!