

REAL-TIME DATA USAGE

19 March 2008 from talkdig.blogspot.com

This past weekend was a major weekend for me, one that would determine my core happiness for the rest of the year!

You see I'm Rugby mad. I've played it, I've coached it, and now I watch it, incessantly.

This past weekend was the concluding weekend of the European 6 Nations Rugby Championship, an annual international tournament between the home nations of Europe (England, Ireland, Scotland, Wales, France and Italy). A tournament that started in 1871 and every year since has been an excuse for all to bring out their nationalistic pride and cheer for their ancestral team! For me it's Wales, the land of my forefathers, the land of daffodils and of course sheep. Wales had the opportunity to win the tournament in style, beat France at home and raise the championship trophy undefeated, Grand Slam winners. And did they do it? They sure did!

Rugby, just like most American sports is now a professional sport and with it many changes have come. Dragged out of the traditions of amateur pastimes where the local butcher was your star player, teams today are forced to continually explore all possible avenues in an attempt to better themselves and obtain competitive advantage over their rivals. No longer is it good enough to just employ the best players and coaching staff, teams are looking elsewhere.

One interesting field of innovation that we were given a brief insight into during one of the games was the usage of statistical information real-time by the Welsh coaches that allowed them to then make real-time adjustments to how their team and players were approaching the game. Using the interesting technology Sportstec the Welsh team was actively making adjustments that helped provide a competitive advantage over their opposing team.

Around the field "spotters" were employed to feed information into a database application on specific events happening. Number of times a player passed to his left vs. his right, how many carries an individual had with the ball, number of times the ball was kicked from a certain place vs. passed, number of missed tackles by each player, success rate of a particular move, etc... By providing such detailed information on actions

performed by their team as well as the opposition, the coaches were then able to react and make tactical real-time changes, for example adjustments to the team's strategy on the field, instruction to specifically focus and improve in certain aspects of the game, as well as instruction to target identified weaknesses in the opposing team.

Did having this level of information access have a direct result on the outcome of the game? Who knows, but one thing for sure Wales beat Italy in this game 47-8, when on average the other teams who beat Italy did so by only 6 points! The other thing, did I mention, Wales won the Championship, undefeated!

So where next? If teams are able to get hold of and make use of such real-time data I just wonder how much further they could go.

What if players began to wear RFIDs in their shirts so we know where they are at anyone time. The ability to understand in real-time how much time they have spent in one location, how much time it took them to reposition, the average distance they make while running with the ball, efficiency of path traveled by each player when covering a kick-off. What about collecting information from body skins that can sense applied pressure? Could we measure the level of impact endured in a tackle thus giving the ability to predict level of fatigue vs. amount where performance begins to degrade, an opportune time for a tactical substitution perhaps?