Performance indicators that discriminate winning and losing in elite men’s and women’s Rugby Union

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Abstract

This study aimed to identify performance indicators that discriminate winning and losing in elite men’s and women’s Rugby Union during the latest World Cup competitions. The knockout stages of the men's 2015 Rugby World Cup (n = 8) and women’s 2014 Rugby World Cup (n = 8) were compared. Findings suggest that in the men's game, winning teams kicked a greater percentage of possession in the opposition 22-50m with a view to gaining territory and pressuring the opposition (winners = 16%, losers = 7%). In the women's game successful teams adopted a more possession driven attacking approach in this area of the pitch. Successful women’s teams appear more willing to attack with ball in hand following a kick receipt and adopt a more expansive game through attacking with wider carries in the outside channels. The percentage of lineouts won on the opposition ball was found to be an important performance indicator that discriminates winners and losers, regardless of sex (winners = 18%, losers = 11%). Findings suggest successful men's and women's teams adopt different tactical approaches to knockout competitions, this knowledge should be used as a basis for coaches to develop tactical approaches and training methods which are sex dependent.

Key words: performance analysis, match success, tactical approaches, KPI.
Introduction

The observational study of teams and players has become an important factor when applying effective coaching, training and selection in team sports (Hughes & Bartlett, 2002). Understanding factors that determine game success is crucial to enable coaches to adopt effective tactical strategies, with Rugby Union benefiting significantly from the introduction of performance analysis and the professional era leading to a drive to maximize performance through improved scientific and analytic support (Vaz, Mouchet, Carreras, & Morente, 2011). Seminal work primarily focused on patterns of play (Eaves & Hughes, 2003; Eaves, Hughes, & Lamb, 2005) and the physiological demands of the sport (Austin, Gabbett, & Jenkins, 2011; Cunniffe, Proctor, Baker, & Davis, 2009; Deutsch, Kearney, & Rehrer, 2007). However, more recently the focus of research has been to establish performance profiles for individuals or teams and importantly to apply these to match outcome (Vaz et al., 2011). As such, several studies have identified factors that discriminate successful and unsuccessful performance in the elite game (Bishop & Barnes, 2013; Hughes et al., 2012; James, Mellalieu, & Jones, 2005; Jones, Mellalieu, & James, 2004; Ortega, Villarejo, & Palao, 2009).

Performance indicators may be defined as “a selection, or combination, of action variables that aim to define some or all aspects of a performance” (Hughes & Bartlett, 2002, p.739). With the aim of informing tactical approaches to the game, previous research has focused on identifying performance indicators that determine match outcome (Bishop & Barnes, 2013; Bremner, Robinson, & Williams, 2013; Ortega et al., 2009; Stanhope & Hughes, 1997; Van Rooyen, Diedrick, & Noakes, 2010; Vaz et al., 2010). Those indicators previously related to winning include, lineout success (Jones, Mellalieu, & James, 2004; Ortega et al., 2009; Vaz et al., 2010), turnovers conceded
(Ortega et al., 2009; Vaz et al., 2011), ruck speed (Bremner et al., 2013) and number of kicks out of hand (Ortega et al., 2009; Stanhope & Hughes, 1997; Vaz et al., 2011). In addition, winning teams have been found to be more effective at crossing the gain line (Bremner et al., 2013; Diedrick & Van Rooyen, 2011), miss fewer tackles (Ortega et al., 2009; Vaz et al., 2011), make more line breaks (Ortega et al., 2009) and make fewer carries (Bishop & Barnes, 2013) than losing teams. Variation between studies in the key performance indicators that relate to match outcome, may be the result of the sample studied which was a mixture of domestic and international competitions, Northern and Southern hemisphere and league and knockout competitions. Van Rooyen et al. (2010) found differences in the performance indicators between the knockout and the pool stages of the 2007 World Cup. This supports the notion that a team's tactical approach may, indeed, be influenced by the format of the competition and the quality of opposition.

The Rugby World Cup brings together the best players and international teams in the world. Analysis of this competition allows an understanding of how the game is played at the elite level and the tactics used by successful teams. Despite this, the game is changing rapidly and research conducted on different competitions suggests the style of play used by successful teams has evolved over time. Van Rooyen and Noakes (2006) found successful teams adopted a more possession based approach to attacking when studying the semi-finalists of the 2003 Rugby World Cup. However, at the 2007 World Cup, all eight of the knockout matches were won by teams with a lower ruck frequency (Van Rooyen et al., 2010). This suggests a more territory-based approach through kicking and pressuring the opposition compared to a possession orientated strategy. More recent evidence from the 2011 Rugby World Cup supports this notion with
winning teams making fewer carries (25 fewer) and completing fewer rucks (22 fewer) than losing teams (Bishop & Barnes, 2013). These data suggest that in knockout rugby at the highest elite level, winning teams favour a territory based rather than a possession based approach to the game. However, since 2011 World Rugby have introduced several new laws, many of which aim to increase the ball in play time, speed up the game and make it a more attractive prospect for spectators (World Rugby, 2015). This suggests that tactical approaches may also have developed overtime to meet the needs of the modern game. An up-to-date analysis is warranted to establish if styles of play have changed since the 2011 Rugby World Cup and help to establish game based knowledge and ensure coaching strategies and tactical approaches are current.

Although traditionally a male sport, the International Rugby Board included female rugby within the union in 1994. In more recent years, women's rugby has seen a 90% increase in participation levels since 2004 with over 15000 registered players in the 2013 season (England Rugby, 2013). At the elite level, many international teams now have full-time professional players. Despite this, there is a clear lack of published research on the women’s game, how it is played, and what factors are important for match success.). Elite female players have been found to travel less distance in a match at a lower average speed than male players, as well as spending 10.5% less time in the high intensity running or sprinting zones (Cunniffe et al., 2009; Suarez-Arrones et al., 2014). In addition, a lower average number of impacts in the female game (n=704.8 impacts; Suarez-Arrones et al., 2014) compared with the male game (n=1274 impacts; Cunniffe et al., 2009) have been reported. Although based on a small sample of eight elite players (Suarez-Arrones et al., 2014), these initial findings suggest that the
women's game is played at a slower pace with fewer game related impacts. Physical characteristics measured in male rugby players have been found to play a critical part in performance behaviours associated with success (Smart, Hopkins, Kenneth, Quarrie, & Gill, 2014). Smart et al. (2014) found player speed to correlate with line breaks, tackles, breaks and tries scored during games, variables that have previously been shown to relate to match success (Bremner et al., 2013; Diedrick & Van Rooyen, 2011; Ortega et al., 2009; Vaz et al., 2011). In the women's game, a slower paced match with fewer impacts associated with tackles, carries and rucks suggests the style of play adopted by elite men’s and women’s teams may differ. Therefore, a comparison of men's and women's competitions is warranted to help establish sex specific performance indicators that discriminate winning and losing.

The aim of this study was to compare performance indicators in elite men’s and women’s Rugby Union and identify those that discriminate winning and losing teams based on the most recent World Cup competitions. An understanding of these factors will help inform coaching methods and establish a basis from which tactical approaches can be developed specific to both men's and women’s Rugby Union.

Methods

Design and Sample

The study compared teams from the men's 2015 Rugby World Cup and women's 2014 Rugby World Cup. Performance indicators were compared between winners and losers to identify which may discriminate successful and unsuccessful performance. The sample included the knockout games of the men's 2015 Rugby World Cup including the
3rd place play off (n = 8) and the games in the 1st-4th place play off and 5th-8th place play off in the women's 2014 world cup (n = 8).

**Performance indicators**

Following a review of previous research (Bishop & Barnes, 2013; Bremner et al., 2013; Hughes et al., 2012; James et al., 2005; Jones et al., 2004; Ortega et al., 2009; Vaz et al., 2010, 2011) performance indicators were established. These were: tries, penalty kick success, conversion success, drop goals lineout success, scrum success, ruck frequency (by area of pitch), kick in play (by area of pitch), tackle completion, carries (categorised as pick and go, carry off 9, carry off 10, support carry, kick return, other carry), breaks, visit to opponents 22 (divided into points scored and no points scored), turnover conceded (divided into unforced and forced), penalty conceded (by area of pitch). In addition, total possession of the ball when in play was coded as a descriptive variable.

For those performance indicators that were expressed in terms of the area of the pitch, the pitch was divided into four areas: the attacking team's dead ball line to the 22 m line, the attacking team's 22 m line to halfway, the defensive team's halfway to the 22 m line and the defensive team’s 22 m line to the dead ball line.

**Procedure**

Games were analysed using the sports analysis software Sportscode Elite (Version 10.3, Sportstec, Warriewood, Australia). Each match was analysed by the same experienced analyst who had an in-depth knowledge of Rugby Union using an analysis template to allow the coding of the performance indicators as well as a timeline for when the event took place. Data were then exported to Microsoft Excel 2010 (Microsoft Corporation, Washington, USA) for further analysis.
System Reliability

Intra-observer and inter-observer reliability were both assessed using two randomly selected matches from each World Cup competition. Cohen's Kappa Coefficient ($K$) was used as the measure of reliability (equation 1):

$$K = \frac{(P_o - P_c)}{(1 - P_c)}$$  \hspace{1cm} (equation 1)

Where $P_o$ is the percentage value of agreement and $P_c$ is the percentage value of expected agreement by guessing.

For intra-observer reliability, two matches were re-analysed by the primary analyst. Classification of Kappa values (Altman, 1991) showed that a very good level of agreement across the range of KPI’s coded (range, $K = 0.95 - 1.00$). Inter-Observer reliability was assessed by having two matches re-analysed by a secondary analyst. The secondary analyst also had an in depth knowledge of Rugby Union and was an experienced performance analyst. Again, a very good level of agreement was found (range, $K = 0.88 - 0.98$).

Data Analysis

Data analysis was completed using Microsoft Excel 2010 (Microsoft Corporation, Washington, USA) and SPSS 23.0.0 (IBM Corporation, New York, USA). Using a Shapiro Wilkes test, a large proportion of variables (91%) were found to be normally distributed. Thus, parametric tests were used for statistical analysis. A Two-way mixed
ANOVA was used to identify statistical differences both between winning and losing teams (within subjects factor) and between sexes (between subjects factor). Statistical significance was accepted at the 95% level. In order to allow comparison between groups, data was presented as descriptive statistics (mean and standard deviation).

Effect sizes (ES) were determined using Cohen’s $d$ (Cohen, 1969) where $d$ less than or equal to 0.20 represent a small ES, $d$ greater than 0.20 but less than 0.80 a moderate ES and $d$ greater than or equal to 0.80 a large ES.

**Results**

Descriptive statistics of performance indicators between sexes are displayed in Table 1. Inferential statistical results are displayed (Table 1) to demonstrate any interactions or main effects present for each performance indicators, with significant findings highlighted in bold.

**Tries and Possession**

Number of tries scored affected match outcome ($F_{(1, 14)} = 15.16, \ p = 0.002, \ d = 1.41$) with winning teams (4.4 ± 2.8 tries) scoring more tries than losing teams (1.8 ± 1.1 tries). However, no differences were seen in total possession either between winners and losers or between sexes (Table 1).
**Breaks**

A match outcome*Sex interaction was present for number of breaks ($F_{(1, 14)} = 7.22, p = 0.018$) (Table 1). Winning women’s teams had a higher number of breaks compared to losing teams, whereas the number of breaks made by men’s teams were consistent between winners and losers. This was demonstrated by a main effect for sex ($F_{(1, 14)} = 6.69, p = 0.048, d = 0.65$), with women making more breaks ($5.7 ± 3.2$) than men ($3.75 ± 2.6$) irrespective of match outcome. A main effect for match outcome was also seen, ($F_{(1, 14)} = 5.66, p = 0.032, d = 0.66$), with winning teams ($5.7 ± 3.8$) making more breaks than losing teams ($3.8 ± 1.7$).

**Tackle Completion**

A match outcome*sex interaction for tackle completion was present ($F_{(1, 14)} = 5.22, p = 0.038$). Losing teams completed fewer tackles than winning teams, but this was sex dependent with women's teams displaying a greater difference in tackle completions between winners and losers in comparison to men's team's. The importance of tackle completion was demonstrated be a large effect size ($d = 1.94$) between winning and losing women’s teams. A main effect was shown for match outcome ($F_{(1, 14)} = 12.74, p = 0.003, d = 1.24$) with winning teams having a higher tackle completion rate ($92.3% ± 3.9%$) than losing teams ($86.8% ± 4.9%$).

**Carries**

INSERT FIGURE 3 NEAR HERE
A match outcome*sex interaction for the percentage of pick and go carries was present

\( (F_{(1, 14)} = 13.15, p = 0.003) \). Losing teams had a higher use of pick and go carries compared to winning teams, with women's teams having the greatest difference between winners and losers compared to men. There was also a main effect displayed for match outcome \( (F_{(1, 14)} = 19.37, p = 0.001) \), with winning teams \( (11.6\% \pm 7.4\%) \) using pick and go carries less than losing teams \( (21.6\% \pm 13.9\%) \). A main effect for sex \( (F_{(1,14)} = 38.80, p = 0.001, d = 1.79) \) showed women's teams used more pick and go carries \( (24.4\% \pm 11.9\%) \) than men's teams \( (8.3\% \pm 4.2\%) \). A main effect for sex on carries off 9

\( (F_{(1,14)} = 19.58, p = 0.001, d = 1.84) \) showed that men's teams had a higher percentage of carries off 9 \( (38.5\% \pm 6.9\%) \) than women's teams \( (24.9\% \pm 7.91\%) \). Total carries, pick and go, and kick return carries showed large effect sizes \( (d = 1.32-1.52) \) between winning and losing women’s teams.

**Rucking**

Rucking in the opposition 22-50 showed a match outcome*sex interaction \( (F_{(1,14)} = 25.98, p = 0.001) \), winning men’s teams had a greater proportion of rucks in the opposition 22-50 \( (51.1\% \pm 12.1\%) \) compared to losing \( (43.8\% \pm 8.5\%) \) teams, while winning women’s teams had fewer rucks in this area \( (34.1\% \pm 8.5\%) \) compared to losers \( (48.25\% \pm 7.4\%) \). A match outcome*sex interaction for Ruck own 22-50 was present \( F_{(1,14)} = 7.71, p = 0.015 \). A number of other effects were seen, such as winning teams having increased ruck percentage in the opposition 22 compared to losing teams and sex effecting rucking percentage in the opposition 22 (Table 1). Finally rucks in their own 22 was affected by sex, with men’s teams having an increased proportion of their rucks in this area \( (10.5\% \pm 6.8\%) \) compared to women’s teams \( (4.42\% \pm 3.11\%) \).
Kicking

Total number of kicks was affected by Sex ($F_{(1, 14)} = 13.25, p = 0.003$), with men's teams kicking (23.6 ± 7.1) more than women's teams on average (13.8 ± 4.6). An interaction for the proportion of kicks made in opposition 22-50 was present ($F_{(1, 14)} = 8.24, p = 0.012$) with winning men's teams kicking more in this area of the pitch than losing teams, while winning women's teams kicked less in this area than losing teams. A main effect for match outcome for kicks in their own 22-50m ($F_{(1, 14)} = 8.84, p = 0.010$), showed winning teams made more of their kicks in this area (48.5% ± 10.7%) compared to losing teams (41.4% ± 8.4%).

Penalties

Total penalties and penalty success did not affect match outcome, sex or match outcome*sex interaction (all $p > 0.05$). A match outcome*sex interaction was present for penalties in own 22 ($F_{(1, 14)} = 7.15, p = 0.018$). Percentage of penalties in own 22 increased for women’s losing teams (41.2% ± 16.7%) compared to winning (18.7% ± 15.4%), whereas men’s teams percentage of penalties conceded were similar between winning (23.3% ± 13.7%) and losing (18.5% ± 15.1%) teams.

Line Out and Scrums

There was a main effect for match outcome for lineout success on the opposition ball ($F_{(1, 14)} = 12.38, p = 0.042$). Winning teams won a higher percentage of opposition lineout ball (18.4% ± 10.91%) than losing teams (11.3% ± 9.1%), irrespective of sex.
The large effect size ($d = 1.03$) suggests this variable to be important in discriminating winning (17.4% ± 12.8%) and losing teams (7.4 ± 5.0%) in the men's game. In addition, a large effect between winners and losers ($d = 0.97$) was seen for lineout success on their own ball in the men's game, with winners successfully securing a higher percentage (92.6 ± 5.7%) than losers (82.6 ± 12.9%). No differences in scrum success on their own ball or the opposition ball were observed between winners and losers, regardless of sex.

**Discussion**

The aim of this study was to compare performance indicators in elite men’s and women’s Rugby Union and identify those that discriminate winning and losing teams. In the women’s competition a range of performance indicators discriminated winning and losing teams, in contrast, fewer performance indicators discriminated match outcome for the men’s competition. An example of this was that the number of breaks influenced match outcome, however, this was dependent on sex. Breaks in the women’s World Cup showed winners to have on average five more breaks per game than losers, whereas, the number amount of breaks in the men's World Cup were similar regardless of match outcome. This increased number of breaks for winning women’s teams could be attributed to tackle completion rates, with losers having a lower percentage of tackle completions (84.9%) compared to winners (93.9%). This supports the notion that losing women's teams missed a larger number of tackles which resulted in more line breaks and the potential for increased scoring opportunities. However, these data do not provide evidence of the attacking and defensive strategies that may have resulted in
these observed differences between winners and losers. In line with previous research, similar tackle completion rates and number of breaks were seen between winners and losers in the men’s game (Bishop & Barnes, 2013; Jones et al., 2004), suggesting missed tackles and any resulting breaks could not be related to success.

Previous research on analysis of attacking parameters of men’s rugby have demonstrated winning teams make fewer carries and completed fewer rucks than losing teams (Bishop & Barnes, 2013; Van Rooyen et al., 2010;). However, the present study suggests that in the men’s game both total carries and ruck frequency were similar between winners and losers. Nevertheless, in the women’s World Cup, a trend was noted towards a higher number of total carries by winners (98.1 carries) compared to losers (72.9 carries; $d = 1.32$). Further analysis of carry type revealed that at the women’s World Cup, losers made more pick and go carries (32.9%) compared to winners (15.8%) ($d = 1.42$), while winning teams completed more carries off 9 (d = 0.86), support carries ($d = 1.0$) and carries following kick receipt ($d = 1.52$) than losing teams. These findings suggest that successful women’s teams appear more willing to attack with ball in hand following a kick receipt and adopt a more expansive game through attacking with wider carries in the midfield and outside channels. Whereas, losers in the women's game had more pick and go carries, which may be reflective of a limited game plan lacking width, or as a result of the defending team effectively slowing the ball down at the breakdown resulting in an organised defence and fewer opportunities to move the ball wide.

The total number of kicks per match did not affect match outcome. In the men’s World Cup, winners kicked away more possession in the opposition 22-50 m than losers (winners = 16.3%, losers = 7.3%), while in the women’s World Cup, winning teams
kicked less in the opposition 22-50 m than losers (winners = 9.3%, losers = 19.2%).

These findings suggest that in the opposition half, successful women's teams favoured a possession driven strategy using phase play to break down a defence, while successful men's teams opted to kick and apply pressure to the opposition with the hope of forcing a turnover, leading to an attacking field position from which points can be scored.

Winners kicked away more possession in their own 22-50 m area of the pitch than losers (winners = 51.9%, losers = 42.3%), regardless of sex. This finding supports the notion that winning teams favoured a more territory based approach in this area (own 22-50 m) through kicking for territory and pressuring the opposition.

The total number of penalties conceded by winning and losing teams was similar for men and women, this is in line with previous research (Bishop & Barnes, 2013; Jones et al., 2004; Vaz et al., 2010). For the men’s World Cup, no differences were seen in the distribution of these penalties on the pitch between winner and losers. However, in the women's competition, winning teams conceded fewer penalties in their own 22 m than losing teams (22% less). Conceding penalties in this area will increase the chance of the opposition scoring points through penalty goals or from gaining an optimum attacking field position. These findings suggest that pitch location of penalties conceded influenced match outcome with winning teams being awarded more penalties in attacking positions than losing teams. It is suggested that the ability of the winning teams to apply more pressure and force more penalties in attacking positions was indicative of success at the 2011 Rugby World Cup (Bishop & Barnes, 2013), a theory supported by differences between winners and losers at the most recent women's World Cup. However, this may also suggest better discipline by winning teams when
defending in their own 22 m given the increased likelihood of a scoring opportunity from a penalty.

Results from the present study found the percentage of lineouts won on the opposition ball to be an important performance indicator that discriminates winners and losers, regardless of sex. Winning teams stole more line outs than losing teams, this was particularly the case in males where winners stole an average of 17.4% of lineouts per game compared to 7.4% for losers. In addition, winners in the men's game were more successful at securing their own ball (92.6 ± 5.7%) than losers (82.6 ± 12.9%). These findings support previous research which has established success at the lineout to be a key indicator that discriminates winning and losing teams (Jones et al., 2004; Ortega et al., 2009; Vaz et al., 2010, 2011). Therefore, regardless of sex, teams should place a significant emphasis on the lineout and development of a successful attacking lineout which minimises the chances of losing the ball as well focusing on defensive lineout strategies which can increase the chances of stealing possession.

The current study has supplemented existing research identifying performance indicators that discriminate winning and losing teams in elite Rugby Union. It is important that the findings of the current study are interpreted cautiously as the results are only based on performances from the 2015 Rugby World Cup knockout stages and the 2014 Women's Rugby World Cup top eight playoffs, therefore they cannot be generalised to lower playing levels or different competition formats. Future work should focus on non-knockout competition formats, particularly in the women's game. This will help direct tactical approaches and methods of coaching across female Rugby Union.

An important consideration when interpreting these results was the clear difference in how balanced the matches were in the two different competitions. The women's Rugby
World Cup games had an average point's difference of 24 points per game where as in
the men's competition this was 15 points. Vaz et al. (2011) suggested a general profile
of performance indicators could be created in unbalanced games (16-34 points), but
found no performance indicators discriminated winning and losers teams in a sample of
close international games. This supports the findings of the present study which found
few performance indicators discriminated winners and losers in the elite men’s game.
However, the larger average points difference in the women's games could account for
the wider range of performance indicators found to influence match outcome. A further
limitation relates to the interpretation of the findings based on conducting numerous
ANOVAs on multiple variables which inflates the likely hood of a type 1 error in the
analysis.

Conclusion

In conclusion, these findings identify performance indicators discriminating winning
and losing in the knockout stages of the most recent men's and women’s World Cup
competitions. Findings demonstrated that a small number of performance indicators
were able to discriminate winning and losing teams in the knockout stages of the men's
Rugby World Cup, with lineout success on opposition ball appearing crucial. Hence,
teams should place an emphasis on the development of a successful attacking lineout
which minimises the chances of losing the ball as well as focusing on defensive lineout
strategies which can increase the chances of stealing possession. In the women's Rugby
World Cup, successful teams favoured a more possession based strategy through
attacking with wider carries in the midfield, outside channels and following kick receipt.

Results from the men's competition were found to be similar to findings of Bishop and Barnes (2013) from the 2011 world cup which found a territory based approach to be the most effective strategy for success. The findings reaffirm previous knowledge and further support the use of this tactical approach for success in the men’s game at the elite level. These differences in game strategy between sexes provide a basis for tactical support to help maximise success in both the men’s and women’s game. Importantly, coaches should consider these strategies when designing appropriate coaching and training tools which are sex dependent.

Acknowledgements: None declared

Funding None declared

Competing interests None declared
References


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