



Rugby and the Army: tactics and warrior spirit

1/2 - BRENNUS 4.0

Le chef de bataillon Pierre-Charles de l'École de Guerre Terre

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If there is one team sport where the symbolism of war is regularly invoked, it is rugby. It is not uncommon to find the metaphor spun from the fight during a match, in the flood of media commentary. One player will be compared to a shadow warrior, one will admire the way another has set the opposing defence to allow his comrade to take the interval and run away. The heroic defence of a team that has deployed barbed wire is also to be praised for not giving in to the opposing waves of attack.

In short, there is no shortage of analogies. But beyond these regular allusions, it is interesting to look more precisely at what leads ordinary people, or specialists in this sport, to do regularly. The first question is whether the fighting dimension of rugby is merely a superficial figure of speech, or whether it is deeply rooted in factors common to both rugby and the army.

In rugby, as in inter-services combat, success is achieved through a judicious articulation of effects: the players in the former, the weapons in the latter. Rugby, like the Army, is based on a ground of common values that unite the players on the pitch and the soldiers in combat.

By going back to its origins and analysing its practice (rules, tactics, training), but also its values, it becomes clear that the links between rugby and the armée de Terre are not just based on a simple cookie-cutter comparison, but on a set of factors inherent to the game and to combat, as well as to the codes governing the two human communities.

Rugby: a warlike symbolism present from the very beginning

Soule, a game played historically in Picardy and Normandy, is often mentioned as the ancestor of rugby. Indeed, two teams compete for the possession of an object (a wooden

ball, a pig's bladder filled with air or straw) to be placed in a goal. The game is rough but codified, contrary to the image often conveyed of an ultra-violent sport. It is comparable to knights' tournaments in popular circles. It comes from several cultural influences: Roman, Frankish and Scandinavian. Soule requires courage, physical vigour but also tactical organisation in order to defeat the opponent. Valour is not enough. William the Conqueror and his Normans brought the game to England after the invasion of 1066 [1].

Although there are rules, the violence inherent in the game sometimes leads the royal power to forbid it. Jean Lacouture describes the soule in these terms:

"The game of soule was violent and passionate, essentially popular, although occasionally nobles took part. In the majority of cases, the game consisted of a group of villagers led by a leader, a champion, to conquer the soule in the middle of a melee and bring it back to their village" [2].

Many terms in the author's description refer to war and combat: passion, champion, leader, conquest, melee. Indeed, at the time, battles often resembled a brutal melee mixing *pietaille* and knights.

It was in the town of Rugby in 1823 that the sport of the same name was born. Although it is obvious that it has a violence not very present in other team sports, the notion of mastery of the latter appears very quickly. It is a reminder of the need for the army to develop combativeness and aggressiveness, while constantly demonstrating a capacity to control violence, without which armed action can be counterproductive. Thus, Thomas Arnold, the director of the Rugby School, sees rugby as a way of educating young men from high society, through a tough sporting confrontation, but where violence must be controlled [3]. 3] For him, rugby promotes the training of leaders.

At the beginning of the 20th century, war, like rugby, never ceased to evolve, their respective laws and rules aiming to curb their original violence. The art of war and the game were also changing. Indeed, the first takes into account the impact of firepower on the manoeuvre, the second is influenced by the evolution of the players' physique, the forwards becoming heavier and more massive, while the outfield players, called three-quarters, remain more slender.

Rugby and the Army: a close view of combat

The First World War, in which rugby paid a heavy price, paradoxically helped to structure the game in France, as allies with great players in their ranks created a real craze for the oval ball among the French armies and population. The Army then actively promotes this sport.

It is interesting to study the comparison made between rugby and inter-service combat in an article in *La Vie au Grand Air*, a sports magazine published on 21 February 1914, entitled "Rugby in the Army". What is still called football and rugby is evoked as a game where :

"The love of one does not give way to the cause of all. Not all tactical solutions to problems are based on the linking of arms; not all tactical solutions are born in the spirit of dedication and self-sacrifice. On the football field and on the battlefield, the same

principles of submission to the general interest and cooperation of all units to the idea of the whole are applied. If defence is sometimes an imperative necessity in combat, nevertheless attack, offensive initiative and daring are the true qualities of all military action. This idea, which rugby develops to the highest degree, is the one that has made the glory of French armies across all continents. Our national character likes to go on the offensive, nevertheless this attack must be reasoned, it requires a clear conception of the tactics to be followed, it requires a quick glance and composure. Because it is a hard sport, it has a special character, it is good for the individual whose body it strengthens and whose courage it hardens" [4].

Rugby, because of the complexity of its rules, the keystone of which is the back pass, the very marked differentiation of the role of the players on the pitch and its physical confrontation dimension, is closest to combat between weapons. A team must demonstrate collective discipline and rigorous tactical organisation in order to coordinate its forwards as well as possible (players who are naturally heavier and more massive, used for confrontation and in the melee). A team must demonstrate collective discipline and a rigorous tactical organisation in order to coordinate its forwards (naturally heavier and more massive players, used for the head-to-head game and in the scrum), its hinge (consisting of the two playmakers, leaders and strategists of the team) and its three-quarters (faster outfield players, intended to take the gaps in the opposing line-up).

Thus, the forward game, based on impact, shock, embodies in essence the physical confrontation whose primary purpose is to provide a point of support for the attacking team, so that it can, after one or two points of fixation, launch its three-quarters positioned in depth, ready to attack. In the same way, the ground manoeuvre can be articulated around the shock "movement to annihilate the opponent's will", but also the "movement to destroy the opponent's will". overrun [...] movement intended to reach directly the rear echelon [...] movement to be favored"[5]. 5] The first is clearly similar to the forward game, the second to the three-quarters game, which will be favoured in priority, so as not to limit the rugby confrontation to a succession of collisions that impoverish the aesthetics of this game.

This fine coordination is reminiscent of the mission terms commonly used in the Army and the need for the combat tactician to constantly seek the optimal use of his weapons in order to multiply their effects.

General Pierre Chavancy, whose son is a player in Racing-Métro 92 and a French international, sees rugby as "a strategic sport par excellence", where as in combat and despite the obvious difference in the violence of the confrontation, "the winner is often the most lucid and intelligent in key moments" [6].

[6] Thus, training is a fundamental aspect in inter-service combat, as in rugby. The value of men, however great their talent, is not enough to win the decision. The more a unit has trained to tirelessly repeat its tactical skills, the more efficient it will be in combat. The Anglo-Saxons call "drill" this training process, which aims to constantly reproduce the same gestures and procedures, in order to strive for perfection. This is how "skills", or intensive passing work carried out from a young age and perpetuated at the highest level, give New Zealand players a domination over the ages over other nations.

The former great international and former opening half international Pierre Albaladéjo

confided that,

In the 1960s, the English were sometimes amazed by the ease with which French linemen kept the ball alive. At the end of matches, English players would ask their counterparts where they got their insolent ease of play from. If the French were careful not to answer them, using innate inspiration as a pretext, their combinations were indeed the subject of assiduous repetition in training.

7] The practice of rugby within army regiments thus deserves to be encouraged. It allows the development of a true sense of collective action. On the rugby pitch, the soldier learns to obey the team's strategists and tacticians: the scrum half, the front and opening half, the three-quarter leaders or line players. He learns to always think about his placement and action in relation to the ball carrier. He understands that the use of shock, of force, only makes sense when it comes to exploiting a higher level of play. Therefore he will only use it if it proves to be necessary. A forward player should not, therefore, systematically seek contact, if he can release the ball in time, with a dislodged player. Rugby is therefore a real school of strength control in a collective setting.

As for the defensive line, it imposes an iron discipline par excellence, both in the individual confrontation (commitment of the player to tackle and not to give way from the field), and in the team confrontation (commitment of the player to the ball). collective organisation (ability to constantly move back into the line, so as not to make the defensive system give way, despite the wear and tear and fatigue imposed by such an effort).

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3] Richard Escot, Jacques Rivière, Un siècle de rugby, ed. Calmann-Lévy, 1997

4] Michel MERCKEL, 14-18, le sport sort des tranchées, un héritage inattendu de la Grande Guerre, Villematier, Le Pas d'Oiseau, 2013, p. 72-73.

5] Centre de doctrine et d'emploi des forces, Tactique générale, FT-02, July 2008, p. 70.

6] Yves BILLON, "Le général de Lyon et le soldat du Racing," Le Progrès, January 31, 2015.

7] Fabien TARIS, Le Crunch, toute une histoire, documentary, 2016.

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