



The rise to high intensity, a comparative analysis of rugby and land forces

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The parallels between rugby and combat engagement have been the subject of numerous writings¹, ^{emphasising} the tactical parallels, the moral forces, necessary in both rugby and combat, and the common principles. All these points are perfectly relevant. Rugby is obviously a sport very close to "tactics" as understood in the army: conquering and mastering the field, specialisation of dedicated "operational functions", articulation, staggering, etc. The principles of warfare defined in France find full expression there.

The purpose of this essay is to supplement these analyses by addressing the question of the rise to high intensity and the return of the prospect of a major conflict. Since the professionalisation of rugby in 1995, changes in this sport have not only been numerous, but also very profound and rapid. There has been a real transformation of the game. For the armed forces, the technological developments of recent years are changing a number of habits and introducing decisive changes here too.

Developments in the two spheres, rugby and warfare, are of course independent of each other. However, certain factors have a common origin and proceed from the same logic.

Balance of power and management of space

Within a generation, the physical preparation of the players has brought about a profound change in morphology: the average weight has increased considerably, with athletic statures shaped by extremely targeted training. At the same time, endurance and speed have also increased. To put it in military terms, we are therefore witnessing both

increased shock capacity and resistance, but not at the expense of manoeuvrability, quite the contrary. These data and standards apply to all teams: a team that fails to hold its own in the race for individual and collective performance will be swept aside for good.

Since the early 2000s, the French Army's commitments have always been characterised by a very favourable tactical and technical balance of power. Whether in Afghanistan or in the Sahel, no enemy is commensurate with our tactical capabilities. In the event of a return to high-intensity conflict, faced with opponents who are structured, equipped and trained in a highly effective manner, the French Army will have to be ready to take on the challenge. In the event of a return to high-intensity conflict, in the face of structured, equipped and trained adversaries that are symmetrical or almost symmetrical, and at a time when global military spending is increasing year by year, it is important to restore the notion of the balance of power. Both in terms of individual performance: tactical and technical training, equipment at the cutting edge of technology, guaranteeing both the capacity for aggression and the protection of the occupants (this is the ambition of the SCORPION programme), but also in terms of mass: collective training, maneuver mass, through the ability to concentrate effects and means locally and punctually, without forgetting, however, digital mass as such (against an adversary with technological parity, numbers are a quality in themselves).

This notion of balance of power is closely linked to the use of space: on the ground (2D), in the air (3D) and in cyber-electromagnetic space (5D).

The ground is important. In rugby, one is generally more efficient on one's own, thanks to the presence of a larger and better known public, but also because one has one's bearings, the habit of playing on it, the physical knowledge of its characteristics: the nature of the soil, the depth of the goal, many insignificant details recorded by the human body that save the necessary fraction of a second. Modern rugby is manifested by an evolving relationship to the pitch, with much faster rescheduling and re-articulation than before between defensive and offensive lines, resulting in a new way of covering space. This is also the ambition of the SCORPION fight:

to allow not only a finer and faster knowledge of the terrain, but also a faster swing of effort from one compartment of the field to another.

Modern rugby has also developed a more dynamic and precise way of appropriating the space of the 3rd dimension, through a more important use of kicks for example, which are a way of freeing oneself from the constraints and frictions on the ground to move the confrontation line and disrupt the opponents' backs. Here too, the parallels with ground forces are interesting, since current operations, and even more so those of tomorrow, are very much in 3D. This space is really a multiplier of ground actions: whether it is air combat, which has proved its worth in the past, or the future, it is a space that is a real asset.² in Operation Barkhane, or the use of multiple drones by ground units. The very low layer is a natural evolutionary environment for land forces, intrinsically linked to what happens on the ground.

Contributions of digital technology: 5D

Rugby, like other sports, has taken the decision to integrate new technological possibilities into its operation, based on the collection and processing of massive data (sensors enabling real-time monitoring of the physiological state of players during a match, recording of matches, individual and collective statistics, etc.). Coaches can thus optimize the individualized management of their players, employ them at the most appropriate moment (in the tactical course of the match), replace them in time to preserve their physical potential over time (with a notion of projection into the operational duration, that of the season). Moreover, knowledge of the opponent, a permanent concern, is promoted by the fine exploitation of match data, but also of open source information, in a kind of permanent "RETEX process".

Within land forces, the 5th dimension (cyber, electronic warfare, information management, data processing) carries the same dynamics, with the difference, for obvious reasons, that access to information is much more difficult, including for friends. A rugby field, a small and finite space, not only allows for blue force tracking³ perfect, but also a transparency on opposing positions. Nevertheless, the land forces are engaged in a dynamic of 5D appropriation, the objective of which is to contribute to the domination of any potential adversary, by being able to decide faster and better, on the basis of precise data and by saturating the opposing information system if necessary.

In both cases, whether it is rugby or war, the limits are also the same. The role of the leader (or coach) is twofold: to know the limits of his technological system, and to overcome them by a certain intuition and a sense of decision, in the heat of the action, but also in the long time it takes to prepare his "fighting tool". A technology can only perform to its full potential if it is internalized by an organization, in its structures and processes, and if it is the subject of reflection.

Moral forces: preserving one's own, annihilating those of the adversary

The collective dynamic at work in a rugby team can also be found in any military unit. A human construction with complex interactions, launched in a chaotic environment where it is a matter of reacting to an opponent who is determined to impose his will, a rugby team, like a land forces unit, knows that it can confront violence. Of course, the potential level of violence is very different, but the human mechanisms remain the same: in both cases, it is necessary to show physical and moral courage, to seek contact, in a momentum based on individual goodwill, transcended by the collective under the impetus of a leader.

Tomorrow, as today, neither increased mass (the size of the players or the protection of vehicles) nor digital technologies will be able to avoid the decisive moment of the brutal confrontation. However, it is possible and desirable to mitigate the effect of the shock, or even delay it, by influencing the opponent's fighting spirit. In the field of warfare as in the field of sport, domination does not consist solely in physical or technical superiority, but in the ability to destroy the cohesion necessary for the opposing group to function, by instilling doubt about the ability to overcome, by creating such an astonishment that it annihilates resistance, by cutting the indispensable bond of trust between the group and its leaders, or even between a population and its army... or between a public and its team.

Psychological action and disappointment through the media and social networks are common and even indispensable practices to gain the upper hand or lure the adversary into believing his intentions. The famous haka is, moreover, the transposition into the field of sport of an initially deeply warlike ritual, aimed precisely at galvanizing the troops and intimidating the opponent.

Within the land forces, this is what is at stake in the consolidation of the professions of influence (the chain Xg⁴). Their field of application is precisely the sphere of morale, of perception, in order, ideally, to multiply the effects of the manoeuvring units at a lower cost: in most Western armies, professionalization has strongly limited the volume of melee units, which are long to form and difficult to regenerate. Weakening the adversary's will to fight thus contributes directly to the preservation of the friendly potential.

With regard to the principles of maintaining the morale of friendly troops, in combat situations as in rugby, much has been written. It will therefore suffice to recall that, beyond the ability of leaders or trainers to motivate prior to action, it is immediately tangible success in the heat of the action that keeps the group together. A rugby team or a military unit that has to cope with severe setbacks, losses, intense pressure, can have the greatest difficulty in maintaining its momentum and its will to win. It is in the interest of land forces engaged in high-intensity operations to have the capability and training to get the upper hand from the outset.

Both land forces and rugby are facing an increase in intensity in their respective fields. The advent of advanced technologies, based in particular on the processing of more and more data, is leading to a rapid change in activities (sports and warfare) that were previously subject to slower developments. The optimisation of ever more precise factors, made possible by technology, changes the structures, the preparation of the action, the conduct of the action itself and the exploitation after the action. Digital technology, continuing in this respect a very old general trend, is imposing itself: in both sport and the forces, refusing a technology, whether voluntarily or not, mechanically leads to a fatal downgrading in a competitive context. It is not the technology as such that allows one to outperform the opponent, but the use to which it is put.

The human aspect must therefore remain at the heart of the concerns, and it would be dangerous to believe that technology would make it possible to do away with it. On the one hand, because every technology requires and provokes human adaptation, in processes, modes of action, but also, more fundamentally, in mentalities. Individuals must therefore be trained to make the most of technology. On the other hand, because, whatever the technology, the action is ultimately led by men and women. In rugby, as in combat, it is the closest knit group, the most solid, the one that does not give up, that wins, and the more the intensity of the commitment increases, the more this axiom will apply.

1 Recently, two posts on the Way of the Sword blog, or in the publications of the War

School - Earth.

- 2** Although procedures still need to be refined, especially in terms of C2 and interaction with ground units.
- 3** Real-time tracking of friendly positions by automatic geographic coordinate feeds.
- 4** "Xg" for the staff functional chain (Jg, Gg, Sg) dealing with military influence and actions on perceptions.

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