Dan Cottrell's All-time All-rounders

5 Must-Have Rugby Games
Dan Cottrell’s all-time all-rounders

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Game key

- Minimum number of players per side. For example 6v4
- Minimum area in metres. For example 30x20
- A quick game where you can introduce the skills within five minutes. The game can then be developed or continued.
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About the author

Dan Cottrell is the author of many rugby coaching books and DVDs. He is editor of Better Rugby Coaching, the twice weekly, free rugby coaching email, and has a regular column in Rugby World magazine. When not digging out insightful coaching approaches, he is working in the game as a practising RFU Level 3 Coach, a WRU Course Tutor, and assistant coach for the Wales Women’s team. He was formerly with the Young Ospreys as a skills coach, and remains heavily involved with his son’s rugby team.
Dear Rugby Coach,

When I was a rugby player, I loved playing games in training. Back then I just thought of it as a fun alternative to boring drills.

Now I’m a coach, I like my teams to be involved in games in training as much as possible. It’s not just that games are fun. It’s because they work. They are motivational, put players into key decision making roles, involve competition and can be used to recreate match intensity.

However, playing a full-on, 15-a-side game in training is neither always possible nor practical. Even if you have 30 players available, a full game is unlikely to isolate the areas of play, the skills and techniques you want to concentrate on, or to involve the players you want to focus on.

These are among the many reasons why the top coaches first devised small-sided games. And why international squads like New Zealand and leading clubs like Bath all use these types of games in training.

Every player I now coach will play at least one, if not two, small-sided games in a session. I have my favourites and the players have theirs too.

In this book are my (and my players’) five favourite games. They cover the core attack and defence skills used in the 15-a-side game. They are quick to set up and have few rules, and can be fiercely competitive. Honed over many years, I return to them over-and-over again during a season.

Once these games commence, be ready for fierce action and little quarter given. Referee them hard. I have seen blood and tears from some of these encounters, and yet the players always say they’ve enjoyed it.

Play these games and see your team’s skill levels and motivation soar.

Yours in rugby,

Dan Cottrell

P.S. The games in this book are reproduced from my 48 Rugby Skills Games manual. Click here or visit www.rugby-coach.com/48rugbyskillsgames for more information.
How to use the games in training

This book features a selection of games to develop match-like scenarios and pressures in practices. The emphasis is on putting the players’ skills and techniques into the contexts they will be used on match day. The objective is to enhance the players’ tactical choices, to make better decisions, and to take better options in open play, while practising the very skills that give them the options in the first place.

One outcome of training through games is to help the players see tactical situations in the same way, so that certain actions during the match will trigger a collective response.

The games apply both a “games sense” and a “games for understanding” approach to rugby. Games sense is a player’s ability to adapt to the ever-changing circumstances of the match. The awareness of the relative positions of team mates and opponents, the constraints of the pitch, and the game objectives all help to create better rugby decision makers.

Teaching through games develops a player’s skills by using “play” rather than “drills”. The competitive elements of the game increase the players’ enjoyment of the activity, and so enhance their motivation to practise.

Underpinning these approaches is the coach’s role. To allow the players to play, you need to step back and “let the game be the teacher”.

This does not alleviate your responsibilities or input into practices. Your role is to identify a problem, establish ways to correct it, and then guide your players to find solutions. Of course, you will also still need to work on technical skills independent of games.
How to use the games in training

Advantages of training through games

Match-like: The games come as close as we can to replicating the changing scenarios and unpredictability of real matches.

Decision making: The players will seek ways to improve what they are doing, to meet each game’s objectives. By focusing on particular skills within these competitive games, you ensure that techniques, as well as decision making, are developed.

Complementary: You practise defence and attack at the same time, and in a variety of situations.

Skills based: The games focus on applying core skills under realistic conditions. Footwork, whether to beat players, make the tackle or enter a ruck, as well as decision making, whether to pass or run, tackle or hold, enter a ruck or prepare for the next phase, are an inherent part of every training session.

Diversity: The games can be used to prepare the players for the session, embed a skill following a drill, or as a bit of fun to end a practice.

Problem solving: The games can help you identify problems with players or tactics outside of the match. The players themselves can then solve the problems under match-like conditions, whether such problems are skills oriented – pass left handed from a ruck, or tactically focused – overcoming a 5 v 3 overload in attack.

Fitness: The games work the players hard, so are a great way to introduce fitness training into sessions.

Motivation: All players want to play more games and do fewer drills. They train to play rugby matches after all. Since there are many answers to most of the problems within games, you can avoid negative feedback.

Repetition: By using different games, you can work on the same skill over and over again, but in a variety of scenarios.

Competition: The games are more competitive than drills. The players will strive to “win” the games and therefore will work harder to find solutions to the problems set.

Team building: The games are fun. They promote team work and foster team spirit.

Players first: There is less emphasis on you coaching and more emphasis on the players learning. This promotes deeper learning certainly, but also encourages the players to take more responsibility.

Full on activity: The games allow more players to get involved. There are no queues and less “waiting around” time, giving each player relatively more training time.
Playing the games

All the games in this book are competitive, with clearly defined objectives. There are three different types of game included:

**Small-sided games:** These look at ways of applying rugby skills in different scenarios. There are minimal numbers of players on both sides, so play should be fast and furious. The two sides should change from attack to defence frequently, ensuring players get plenty of opportunities to be involved in both.

The games have rugby elements, but may not always look like rugby games.

**Conditioned games:** These focus on isolating skills in a rugby game with constrained rules. These games avoid obvious repetition, whilst enabling skills to be continually reworked. There is a more defined attack and defence, resulting in a more rugby-like game.

**Game situations:** These games look at ways of finding rugby solutions to rugby problems. The objective is to replicate match day conditions and scenarios, giving the players plenty of opportunities to test their skills under pressure. These games are as close to playing a “real” match as you can get in training.

When to play games

This depends on your approach. You can use games for a warm up, to work through an individual skill, to practise a unit skill through the phases, to replicate a particular match situation. You may follow a drill with a game to put the skill into context. Wayne Smith, the All Blacks assistant coach, says that he looks to create or use a game to practise every facet of training.

Alternatively a game can be used as a reward, an incentive to get training going, a way to break up a training session, or a method of winding down. Whatever the circumstances, the game can be just as hard as the toughest conditioning session.

Managing the games

**Pictures:** Each game is illustrated with three pictures, explaining how the game should be set up and developed, and to highlight key techniques where appropriate.

**Numbers and area:** The pitch sizes and the numbers of players involved are guidelines only. You can adjust the dimensions of the pitch to suit the skills of your players.

Some of the games require equal teams, but you might find yourself with unequal numbers at training. The two most obvious ways around this are to give the weaker team the extra player, or use rolling substitutes. In which case, number up one team so that one player is replaced in numerical order after every attempt.
**Equipment:** The games require minimal equipment. Most can be played anywhere, from the training pitch to the beach.

**Scoring:** The games are competitive and the players will want to know how they can “win” them. Scoring is an important element of the games, with points awarded not just for tries, but also for meeting the objectives of the game, such as the performance of the skill being tested.

You can enhance the scoring system by adding your own targets. For instance, you might add a point for a team that gets past a certain line on the pitch, maybe the gain line, or uses a specific skill to achieve an outcome, such as a good side on tackle.

Avoid deducting points. Turnovers and restarts with the other team in possession are more motivating ways of encouraging a team not to make the same mistake twice.

**Let the players find their own solutions**

It is sometimes too easy to jump in, telling the players your ideas about how they can win the game. Don’t forget the games are designed to replicate match scenarios, to teach the players how to adapt to different situations. Most of the decisions in a match are made on the spot by the players, not by you.

Instead allow the players the time and space to discover the best ways to score points. Short group discussions and good questioning can be used to draw out many of the answers.

Don’t worry if the players take time to work out the rules. One measure of the success of the game is how the players react when they come back to it in a few weeks time.

At first the games may be chaotic, with lots of mistakes. That’s simply what happens when you enable players to discover what they can influence and change in competitive, match-like conditions. The key is that, on match day, your players approach will become less chaotic, with better decision making and a better application of skills.
Intense defence

Constant tackling for an intense workout

Defending is more tiring than attacking. It is physically and mentally draining. Yet players need to keep their standards high and quality good in the tackle. This is a great game to knock out the cobwebs.

Set up

Players: Two teams of 5 attackers v 4 defenders.
Area: 10m wide, 20m long box with a line across the middle.
Equipment: Two balls.

Game notes

- Change the attacking teams once a tackle has been made, a try scored or an infringement has occurred.
- When changing the attacking teams, the defence recover to defend the middle line from the new attack. The previous attack return to their starting line.
- Play for 60-120 seconds, depending on fitness levels, then change the attacking teams.

Score

- 1 point for each attack stopped legally.

What to call out

- “Communicate, encourage and execute”
- “Keep your shape in the tackle. Head up, bent knees, driving in with the shoulder”
- “Move up together”

Coaching notes

✔ This is a very physical game so you need to think about modifying the size of the pitch, the time tackling and the “CHANGE” timings to match your team’s needs.
✔ Emphasise the “team” effort in the tackle. Each defending group of four should target to win a set number of points.
**Passing in a tight, flat, crowded situation**

This game works on communication, handling skills and vision. Because the attack has no depth, the defenders can often be amongst them, meaning normally lateral passing becomes less effective. You should see some interesting solutions.

**Set up**

Players: 5 attackers v 3 defenders.
Area: 30m wide, no more than 10m deep.
Equipment: One ball.

**Game notes**

- Start with two handed touch tackling, but only allow the ball carrier two seconds to then pass the ball. In full contact allow offloads.
- Any infringement leads to a restart.
- There are no offsides, so the defence can go anywhere once you have thrown the ball in.
- The attack has five attempts.

**Score**

- 1 point for a try.

**What to call out**

- “Ball carrier: move the ball away quickly, keep the defence moving”
- “Defenders: get in between the attack”
- “Supporters: get into lateral space”

**Coaching notes**

- It might take some time for the attack to find solutions. Ball carriers may initially dither on the ball, rather than looking for options before they receive the pass.
- The ball carrier will need to go forward to draw defenders. However he might need to go sideways or even backwards if he wants to develop forward movement somewhere else.
Receiving and returning long kicks
Long kicks are very much a part of any team’s attacking strategy, so your wingers and full back need to know their positioning. Your midfield players also need to understand how to support the counter attack.

Set up
Players: 6 counter attackers v 4 defenders.
Area: One half of a normal pitch.
Equipment: One ball. Some cones to mark out a ruck or scrum just inside halfway line.

Game notes
- Play normal rugby rules. Restart the game after any infringement or if a ruck forms.
- Make sure the wingers and full back start in their likely starting positions when defending a ruck or scrum.
- Move the starting point around.
- Kick the ball into a variety of places, high and low.
- The counter attacking group can kick.

Score
- 3 points for a try scored over the halfway line.
- 2 points for a legal kick into touch over the halfway line.
- 1 point for a legal kick into touch over the 10m line.

What to call out
- “Run to space”
- “Call early for the ball”

Coaching notes
✓ This is part of your counter attacking strategy and tactics. Work on different scenarios to challenge your players to come up the solutions.
✓ Think about your team’s kicking options when counter attacking.

Set up a “ruck” area, with players arranged as in the picture.
Kick the ball into the backfield. Play normal rugby rules until there is an infringement or ruck.
The attack score by crossing the halfway line in possession, without running through the “ruck”.

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Recycling the ball to change the point of attack

This is a great game for forwards. It concentrates on maintaining continuity, while making decisions about where the next drive should be.

Set up

Players: 6 attackers v 6 defenders.
Area: Two 10m wide, 15m long channels, set out side by side.
Equipment: One ball.

Game notes

- The ball can be moved between the channels any number of times, but only after a ruck or maul.
- The back foot of the ruck is the offside line.
- Any infringement, a turnover or a try leads to a restart.
- Depending on the success rates, add or subtract defenders.

Score

- 1 point for a try.

What to call out

- "Footwork before contact"
- "Drive low and straight"
- "Support players at the ruck: drive over the ball or clear the ball quickly"

Coaching notes

✔ Make sure the defence is as active as possible. This makes the attack work harder to get low in the drive.
✔ Don’t be afraid to adjust the numbers if there is little success. Also consider having your scrum half acting as an extra player to clear the ball.
**Working on drift defence**

A well organised group of four defenders can stifle an attack. By drifting together in a line, they can force the attack out towards the touchline. The key is to prevent gaps appearing in the defensive line.

**Set up**

- Players: At least 7 attackers v 4 defenders.
- Area: 30m wide, up to 30m long.
- Equipment: One ball.

**Game notes**

- The attack has four attempts to beat the defence. Each attempt stops when there is an infringement, a try is scored or a tackle made.
- Though you should start with two handed touch tackling, it is good to move on to full tackling quickly. Allow offloads with the full tackling game.

**Score**

- 1 point for a try resulting from a break on the outside of the defence.
- 2 points for a try resulting from a break on the inside of the defence.

**What to call out**

- “Push up as a defence as well as across”
- “Keep checking the distances apart so you don’t get out of line”
- “Tell your team mates where you are going”

**Coaching notes**

- This game works well for sevens training.
- A good defence will cover the inside. Then if an attack looks to break on the outside, they will run back and across to intercept.