

# Maintaining Kicking Effectiveness Under Intense Practice Conditions

by  
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It is apparent that games can be won or lost by the effectiveness of the kicker in any given match situation. Yet it is becoming increasingly obvious that the individual kickers may not be practising under the right circumstances and this may be resulting in poor kicking performances during games. Recent evidence by Thomas (2003) illustrates that the amount of successfully kicked penalties and conversions in the Six Nations is down on previous years. While these statistics are taken from top International level rugby, those involved in the lower levels may be well advised to revise their kicking practices.

In order to carry out a specific motor skill, it is vital that the athlete applies exactness in his training sessions so that, as a result, the practice situation mirrors the game completely. Mannie (2002) emphasises that ‘specificity’ can only be placed into real perspective when athletes and coaches understand that the more complex skills should hold the highest importance during practice.

Motor skills can be placed on a ‘closed’ and ‘open’ skills continuum (Mannie, 2002). Closed skills are at the lower end of the continuum because they take place under relatively predictable environmental conditions that are unchanging. Archery, golf, bowling and Olympic weightlifting are examples of closed-skill sports. Open skills, on the other hand, are at the higher end of the continuum because they take place in temporarily changing environments where decisions and reactions have to be made instantaneously. In team sports this is usually while the performer is on the run.

It could be suggested that a drop-kick at goal would be an example of an open skill because of the speed needed to react to a situation while in the opponents’ half and under pressure from the defenders. A place kick to convert a try or a penalty, however, is arguably more towards the closed skill end of the continuum, because the individual has time allocated to compose himself, place the ball on the tee, check the wind direction, assess the wind speed, ignore any distractions and take the kick.

From a statistical perspective, there is a special set of challenges that rugby brings about due to its chaotic and complex nature as a sport. Circumstances can rapidly change from game to game and phase to phase due to tactics, weather, available players and standing in the competition (Bracewell, 2003). However, with place kicking it should be a different matter. Considering that it is more of a closed skill, and ignoring the constraints of fatigue, pressure, environmental conditions and any psychological barriers, there should be little room for error.

Unfortunately, though, it is not that simple and it is in practice that the problems may lie. Thomas (2003), in a review of the 2003 Six Nations, indicated that there was a success rate of 72% for converted penalties over the fifteen matches. Considering that 195 points out of the total 708 points scored in the tournament came from penalties, there was a total of 75 more points that could have been scored (25 missed opportunities).

With regard to conversions, there was a success rate of 74%, totalling 110 points out of the 708, and 38 more points could have amassed from the 19 missed attempts.

Lyle (2002) suggests that sports scientists are continuing to develop increasingly high levels of expertise in support practice and technology in order to enhance the performance of athletes in preparation for competition. It would be fair, therefore, to conclude that the closer the influence of practice on the competition situation, the better the player's ability to recall the practised movements during the game (Magill, 1993).

According to Balyi and Hamilton (2000), there should be high intensity and specificity of training during the 'training to compete' phase of the season, combined with technical, tactical, mental and fitness preparation. Players should also be taught to perform under a variety of competitive conditions by exposing them to those competitive conditions in training. Martens (1997) implies that the more the practice drills simulate the competitive situation where the skill will be used, the more effective the players will become. In order to do this, the strategies and skills should be practised in game-like conditions and the heightened emotional state of competition should be simulated by increasing pressure on the player.

Successful rugby depends on a combination of skill and the capacity to perform throughout a game. This also goes for kicking, as it is an integral part of the game, and in many respects the match deciders are the kickers. Skill-based conditioning that is discussed by Coutts (2002), which is highly specific to competition, can also be applied to kicking in order that the kickers may perform their skills more confidently when placed in similar situations during competitive matches.

Practising place kicks without being fatigued does not replicate the demands of the game of rugby, and for this reason the following drills or similar practices should be carried out in order to assess a kicker's success rate while fresh and again when fatigued:

1. Ensure that a dynamic warm-up is completed before taking part in the practice.

2. Attempt ten kicks at goal, while fresh, from various positions on the field and record the number of successes. Allow one minute to set up each kick. Record heart rate if access to monitors is available.
3. Set up the illustrated conditioning drills and complete one drill before each kick that is attempted. Work for one minute at maximal intensity during each drill and again allow another minute to complete the individual kicking routine. Record the number of successful attempts out of the ten kicks while fatigued and monitor the heart rate.
4. Every kick should be taken from one of the ten designated spots.
5. Compare the number of successful kicks while fresh and when fatigued.

In completing this session, players may find that they have a higher success rate when they have not been under physical pressure while others may switch on more to the task when they have been challenged before each kick. Regardless of the outcome, players should not be led into a false sense of security by practising in unrealistic situations as in the first scenario. When there is the opportunity to clinch a match in the final minute of extra time with a conversion, penalty or drop kick, the chances are that the individual who has trained specifically and under pressure will be the one that gets the ball between the uprights.

**Example table of recorded heart rates and successful attempts at goal by the two players assessed in this pilot study:**

**10 ATTEMPTS (FRESH)**

PLAYER	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
1	✓	✓	✓	✓	×	✓	×	✓	✓	×
2	×	✓	×	✓	×	✓	×	✓	✓	✓

**HEART RATES**

PLAYER	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	Ave. Heart rate
1	108	101	94	103	103	103	113	108	108	108	<b>105</b>
2	137	136	141	138	140	138	138	133	132	129	<b>136</b>

**10 ATTEMPTS (FATIGUED)**

PLAYER	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
1	×	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	×	✓	✓	✓
2	×	✓	✓	✓	×	×	✓	✓	✓	×

**HEART RATES**

PLAYER	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	Ave. Heart rate

<b>1</b>	171	172	175	176	169	171	176	173	175	175	<b>173</b>
<b>2</b>	185	183	185	184	183	183	183	184	184	185	<b>184</b>

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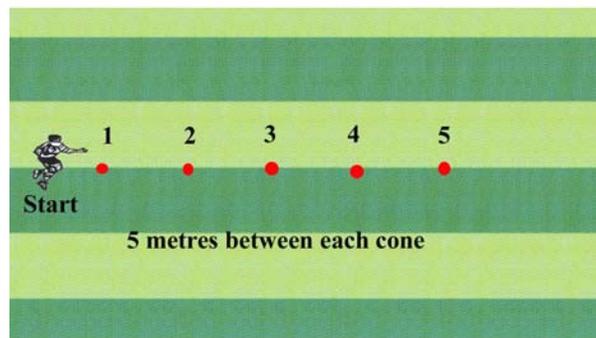
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## Conditioning drills.

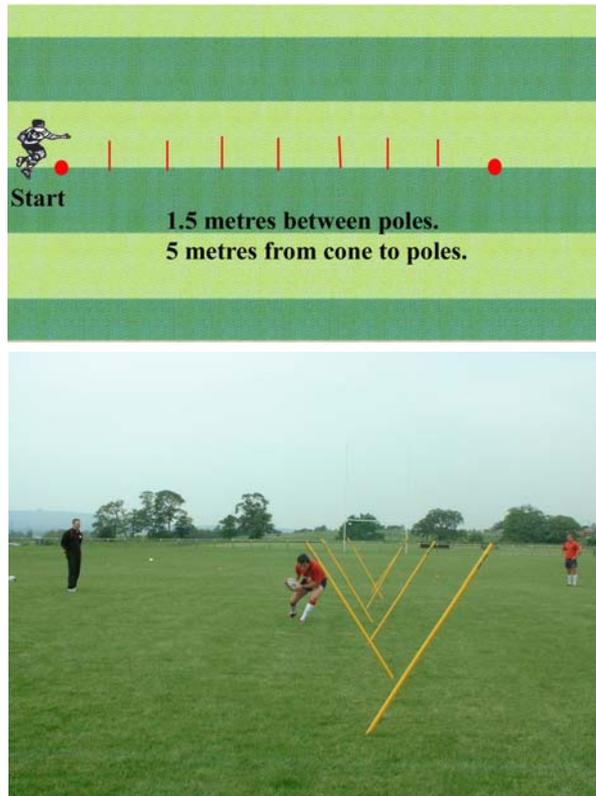
*The kicker works for one minute on each drill then has one minute to set up for the kick before going for one minute on the next drill. The ten kicking spots should be the same each time and should be chosen to allow the kicker success. It is best to work roughly on a semi-circular shape away from the posts so that the kicker has to kick from left, centre and right each time.*

### Shuttle sprint – 1 minute.



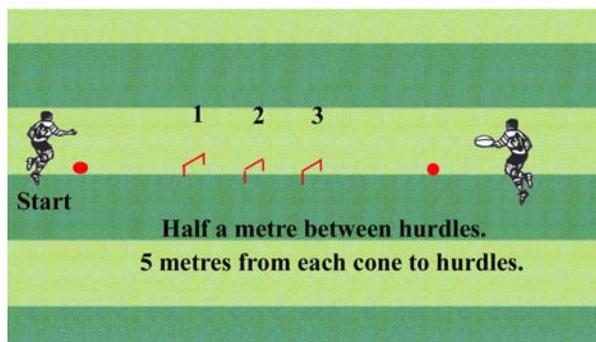
- Start at cone 1.
- Sprint forwards to cone 2.
- Run backwards to cone 1.
- Sprint forwards to cone 3.
- Run backwards to cone 1.
- Sprint forwards to cone 4.
- Run backwards to cone 1.
- Sprint forwards to cone 5.
- Sprint *forwards* to cone 1 and start again.

### Agility drill – 1 minute.



- Sprint through the poles, which should be slanting away from the centre to force the runner on a wider arc of run.
- At the end cone, spin off and come back through the poles.

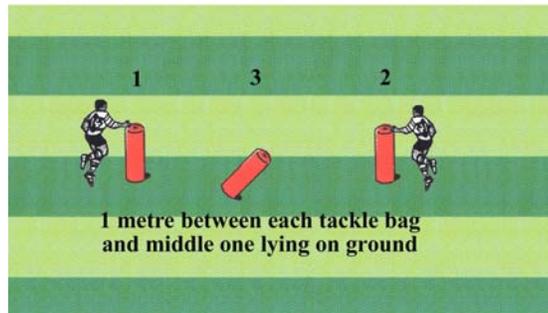
### Plyometric/reaction drill – 1 minute.





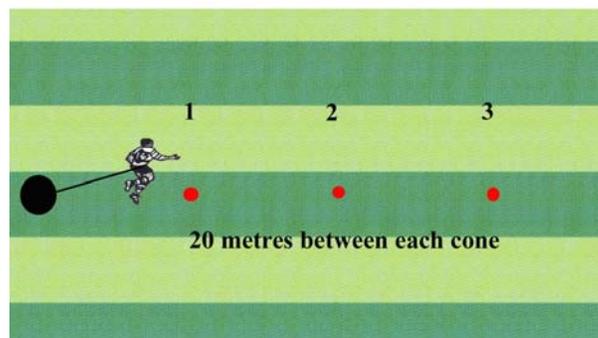
- Single step hops over the hurdles.
- At the end of each set of three hurdles, go down on the front, get back up immediately.
- Receive a pass from assisting partner and give a pass back immediately.
- Sprint forwards, touch the cone.
- Go back over the hurdles in the other direction, hopping on the other leg. (This gives the partner time to carry the ball to the other end.)

### Tackle drill – 1 minute.



- Jump over the middle bag 3.
- Tackle bag 1.
- Get up quickly, jump over bag 3.
- Tackle bag 2.
- Continue.

### Resisted tyre pull – 1 minute.





- Start at cone 1 with harness on.
- Sprint to cone 3 and take harness off.
- Sprint to cone 2 then back to cone 3.
- Put harness back on and repeat.

(If you do not have the proper harness/equipment, you can easily improvise by using an old car tyre, a length of rope and a bicycle inner tube as the harness.)