

From Footy to Flying

Former All Blacks Captain Richie McCaw learned a lot about performance and safety on the rugby field. Richie tells *Vector* what he's taking from that into the air.



"You use your peripheral vision, and your head is up, and you're taking in the things in front of you and around you."
Photo courtesy of John McCaw/McCaw Media.

Preflight

Preparation is everything. It gives you confidence and helps you perform better.

If the ABs played poorly, and we weren't as focused as we should have been, when we analysed it post-match, we could always track it back, at least partially, to a lack of preparation. We didn't quite fix something as well as we should have.

I ended up having a preparation routine, so when I got to game day, I was confident that I'd done everything I could.

It's easy to pay lip service to preparation, especially if it's the same routine every week. Just 'checklisting' stuff, you know, 'yeah, that's fine, yeah, that's fine, done that, ticked that box,' and you get on the field and it's a bit different. You realise why it's important to be genuine in your preparation. Those drills you thought you could miss and it would be okay. Then it doesn't work and you think 'Oh God, I should have done them.'

Often a few little things missed in preparation can add up to a lot during a game.

So I'd get to Friday and I always gave myself a bit of time to think about what was going to happen the next day, and made sure I'd thought about what could happen, before I got on the field.

If you don't do that, each little 'what if' comes at you once you start playing.

Anticipating a Weather Change

Being flexible means that when the game wasn't going the way we expected it, we could easily change tack.

The opposition might have thrown something at us that was completely different from what we'd been expecting.

But in your prep, you'd get ready as much as you could for those differences as well.

We'd do our homework on who we were playing and what the game was going to be like, and we'd get out there, and the opposition wouldn't play the way we thought they would. So we had to be flexible. 'Change the game plan, because this isn't working'.

The night before a game, I'd take some time on my own and consider what could go wrong, 'What happens if we end up with a guy sin-binned? Or two guys sin-binned? How am I going to deal with that? What will I do if we're ten points down with five minutes to go? What are my options?'

So the next day, you're hoping it doesn't happen but if you get there, and it does happen, you've got somewhere to start, 'Oh that's what I thought about.' I wasn't left feeling helpless, I had things up my sleeve to try.

Also, what you don't want after the match, is everyone looking at the game again, and saying to you 'It was obvious, why didn't you change?' And all you can say is, 'Well, I don't really know, it just wasn't the way I was expecting it to be.'

When Things Go Wrong

Forget the mistake you just made, you've got other things to take care of right now.

On the rugby field, you concede a try or whatever, and if you dwell on that mistake, you're not going to focus on what you've got to do right now.

Your attention has to be on the here-and-now. You're ten points down and there's ten minutes left in the game. Is worrying, and cursing yourself for the error, and being really tense, going to help?



It's about what you can do right now that can maybe turn that situation around.

So you have to stay engaged, stay thinking, keep watching what's happening.

As Captain, I'd always be trying to think ahead to avoid those mistakes, 'If something happens at a certain point in the game, this is the decision I'll make, this is the option I'll take'. Not thinking ahead, I'd run the risk of the decision being made for me, when I'd be out of options.

For Instructors, CFIs, Operators

A high-performance activity is unforgiving of mistakes. Lessons have to be learned quickly.

Early on, if someone new to the team made a mistake, I used to get a bit frustrated with them, because the consequences of that mistake could be quite big.

Then one of the coaches said to me, 'Did you give him everything he needed to avoid making that mistake, all the information, all the resources? Or did you assume that just because he's a Crusader now, he should know everything?'

And it made me realise that often when someone makes a mistake, the failure is that of the people around them. What did they not do or say that they probably should have?

If a mistake is made, I look at the learning environment first, for why. Apart from it being fair, it's the best way for someone to eliminate mistakes as much as possible, as quickly as possible. That's good for the whole team.

Leave Your Ego Outside the Cockpit

When I became New Zealand Captain, I felt like everyone was looking at me and I had to know it all. I had to be the one to make the decisions.

But I had a lot of good senior players around me, especially early on, who'd captained provincial sides, and who knew just as much as, if not more, than me. But I felt like I had to prove myself to them a little bit.

When I became more comfortable, I wasn't worried about how we got the right answer, as long as we got it. And it didn't always have to be coming from me. One of the other boys would decide to do something and I'd think it was good.

When you mature, you don't care where that right idea comes from, if it's the right one, then just get on with it.

What I did do, was make sure we had an environment where dialogue was pretty regular. And me as Captain, I was just as vulnerable as they were, in terms of feedback. I mean, they could give me advice and I'd take it.

You've got to have an environment where you're all debating things, so even if we said, 'Well, this weekend we're going to do this,' and not everyone agreed, we'd make sure we had a proper debate over it.

Sometimes you don't get consensus, but it's really important everyone feels like they've had their say, and it's considered, especially if they don't agree. Because once a decision is made, you have a better chance of buy-in from everyone.



Richie getting some flying tuition in a Douglas DC-3.

Know When Not to Fly

Sometimes as Captain, I'd have to say to the guy who was limping around the field, staying staunch, 'Hey mate, it might be time to get the other guy out here. Go and sort yourself out because you're only going to make it worse.'

I had to do the same and put my hand up when things weren't right. We always came back to what was best for the team. When you're trying to be tough and gutsy, but really you can't perform, it's actually not good for the team.

We had an environment where you could say, 'Look, I'm struggling here.' And if it was the right thing for the team, then no-one took it wrongly. If it was genuine that you couldn't do your job right, or you were endangering yourself, then you put your hand up.

I'm not saying we always played with things 100 per cent. Sometimes we did play when things weren't quite right, but you'd discuss it with the doctor and the physio first to make sure they were okay with it.

There were several times when I'd been training during the week, hoping I'd come right. I'd get to Thursday and I just knew I couldn't play. Actually, it was a relief to make the decision. You don't want to let the team down, but actually you're letting the team down by not saying so.

If it was obvious you shouldn't play, that wasn't so bad. The really tough decision, that took some maturity, was if things were marginal.

I'd go to someone I trusted and ask them what they thought I should do. I'd say to the doc, 'This is the way I'm feeling.'

What's your opinion, do you think I could make things worse, by playing?' Talking to other people usually made the decision quite clear.

Situational Awareness

On the rugby field, you have to be very aware of what's happening around you. You need to know where people are coming from. You use your peripheral vision, and your head is up, and you're taking in the things in front of you and around you.

When you're under the pump, it's easy to lose spatial awareness. You drop your head, and your eyes start gazing at one thing, you know, that 'thousand-mile stare'.

We learned that when you're under pressure, the brain sort of shuts down and you don't see anything, so how can you decide what to do then? Whereas you want to be up and looking and taking in what's being offered to you.

So you lift your head up and suddenly, you can see what's going on, and you can make proactive decisions and you feel better – 'Hey, where do I go now, what do I do now?'

In some games, I'd be head down with that tunnel vision, and kind of lose where I was in the game, but I'd catch myself and I'd force myself to look up and I'd see the stands and the far posts, and then the peripheral vision would start opening up.

Then I'd be back to the moment and not worried about what I'd done or what might happen as a result. It became 'okay, what do I do now?' ■