

Fatigue, Buncefield and the world's best rugby team

Submitted by Kellie Mundell on Thu, 2015-04-02 14:05



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My son and I looked at our watches; Wales were one point up on the famous All Blacks rugby team with just 10 minutes to go. Would we be in the ground to see our first win over them since 1953? (Knowing that 30 years from now approximately a million Welshmen will be claiming “I was there!”)

It had been a very even game until that point. Could Wales avoid any mistakes in that last 10 minutes and hold on? In short, no they couldn't. They tired badly, made three mistakes, the All Blacks made none, scored three tries in that last 10 minutes and that one point lead turned into a 20 point loss. Later, literally tired and emotional, I tugged too hard at the stiff door handle of my car and it came off in my hand.

Tired people get distracted, make mistakes and break things.

One of the main reasons southern hemisphere teams are so good is that, raised and trained in good weather (on hard grounds) they are used to a tempo of play far beyond those of the northern hemisphere. The ground covered per player in a Super 12 match (their top club level) is greater even than a six nations international match. Southern hemisphere players are born and raised to play at a

higher tempo for longer. They are just less “all in” towards the end of a game and time and again they make fewer mistakes in the crucial last minutes.

Consequently, northern hemisphere countries have won just one World Cup but I can't recall who that was by just now. Rugby is only a game of course, but fatigue induced mistakes while working or driving can be fatal.

It's a law of nature that the body can adjust only by one hour per day from a split shift switch or jet lag. People suffering from this — or who have suffered a run of sleep deprivation or who are on medication that makes them drowsy, or who have been up for more than 18 hours straight — are as likely to have an accident as someone with 'drink drive' levels of alcohol in them.

At the Buncefield oil terminal in Hertfordshire, overtime of 20 hours a week wasn't uncommon before 2005. It was, not unexpectedly, considered a contributory factor to the biggest peacetime explosion in Europe. I once had a very interesting discussion with the board of a company whose (vehicle based) workers had had a glut of accidents because they “fell asleep at the wheel”. The directors said they were compliant with the Working Time Regulations; I pointed out that the individuals' physiology and biorhythms couldn't read those regulations!

Two challenges:

- Where is your fatigue policy robust and practical and where is it merely compliant?
- What are the human factor consequences of thinking only of the regulations not also the physiology generally?

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