It’s cliché and it’s not news, but you can't teach athleticism. Other difficult-to-teach attributes are toughness, instinct and that go-for-the-throat mentality, which, along with measureables like speed and strength, are part of an athlete's makeup. The 7s Eagles could use a higher dose of all of the above (as could most teams who aren’t winning as much as they should, by the way).

With those veins in mind, there are some things to take notice of.

The first is the fact that two of the Eagles’ top three scorers have played a lot less minutes than they could have.

Carlin Isles averaged around four minutes a game in Port Elizabeth and a little over three in Dubai, almost all of them coming in the second half and often when the Eagles were trailing. Yet, he leads the team in tries this season with six.

Why? Three possible reasons. One is his speed endurance. He, himself, admitted it isn’t where it needs to be, and some believe he only has one good burn in him a game.

In his breakout game against Tonga in Australia, he managed two – one in the first minute of the game and one midway through the second half, both resulting in tries. Against Wales in the Port Elizabeth Plate Semifinal, he had one that resulted in a try, and he had another which put the Eagles in a great position to win the game, which they squandered. Against New Zealand in Australia, he had to turn on the gas to catch a New Zealand ball carrier and bring him down. Shortly thereafter, he switched the gas on again to score.

So I’d argue Isles is more than a one-run guy.

Another possible reason is that perhaps the coaching staff likes him in the closer role. Well, if you don't have the lead, there's not much reason to preserve your best scorer. Why not let him help build a lead you can protect or extend, instead of ask him to dig you out of a hole?

Isles did start four games in Australia, and the Eagles went 1-3 in that stretch. So starting the speedster isn't a fix-all. But it's part of the equation, and, after all, Australia was the guy's first tournament.

The third possible reason, which I will address later on, is that perhaps there's a belief Isles does more harm than good when he's on the field. There have been some complaints that he is out of position on defense a fair bit.

The other guy who could have played considerably more minutes this fall is Luke Hume, who has five tries, which makes him tied for second on the team with Maka Unufe.

Coach Alex Magleby chose not to parachute Hume in for Dubai after he missed the lead-up to the tournament while playing on the fall 15s tour. A week later (Hume still having missed the lead-up to the Dubai/Port Elizabeth leg of the Series), Hume was brought in. He was subbed in at halftime of the first game, a loss to Portugal, and started the rest of the tournament. Hume immediately and consistently made a positive impact on offense.

There seems to be some negative perception about bringing 15s guys into the 7s setup and giving them minutes right away. I used to be baffled by Paul Emerick's lack of playing time when he would join the 7s Eagles midway through the season. Sure, his fitness was an issue, but he would often pull an Isles or Hume – come in and play really well off the bench in a game that was already lost.

Fitness wasn't the only issue, as there seemed to be a line of thought that Emerick had to earn his spot. Perhaps the same could be said about Hume. News flash: these guys are now professional athletes. They're owed common decency and their paychecks. They're not owed minutes.

Sure, they don't make much, but there are hundreds, if not thousands, of rugby players in America who would love to swap places with them. Playing time is a privilege, not a right, and if Hume gives you a better chance to win (which he does) and isn't a team cancer, he shouldn't have to serve an arbitrary penalty of a tournament and half a game to "earn" his spot.

Hume is far from a perfect player, but his potency on offense outweighs his deficiencies, like throwing a horrendous interception after Isles' second run against Wales in Port Elizabeth or whiffing on some tackles. He is a creator who can consistently step and run through defensive lines on the international level, and the Eagles have very few of those guys.

Back to reason No. 3 on Isles – that he may do more harm than good while he's on the field. If Isles is often out of position, that's a bad thing. But how much worse is it than being in the right position and missing a tackle, something numerous Eagles do on a regular basis, including Eagles who start routinely? How much worse is being out of position than knowing where the right position is, but being unable to get into it due to a lack of athleticism?

This brings me to Miles Craigwell, whose situation is a second thing to take notice of. He was given plenty of opportunity to make up two head coaches' minds on his abilities as a player. Now he's seemingly off the 7s radar. But, was he put in the position to succeed? Craigwell was tried almost exclusively as a wing, and he ended up not being a fast or savvy enough runner to justify being on the field as a wing.

But is he explosive enough to be a 7s prop? I argue yes. He is far more agile and fast than several guys who've played in his absence, and he is far more powerful in the tackle than others.

What made Craigwell stick out from the second he stepped on a rugby pitch was his ability to lay the wood. I once had an NFL head coach tell me there are very few guys who can run and hit, so when you get one, you hold onto him. That there are lots of guys can run and make a tackle, but those who can run at full speed and really hit are at a premium. Craigwell can do that.

As he started to focus more and more on skills and strategy and the finer nuances of rugby, Craigwell made fewer and fewer ball-jostling hits.

Isles can relate. His speed endurance when he first left track was great. In training, he would sprint, reload, and do it over and over again. As he's gotten more immersed in rugby, that speed endurance has waned, because he's focusing on other things. He said one of the things he intends to get back to over the holidays is working on his speed endurance, while also continuing his rugby education.

Craigwell didn't lose the innate ability to hit people really hard while on the run, or the instinct to know when to do it. It was trained into the back of his mind. He can pull it to the forefront again. He just needs to be put in the position to do it. And, the former Brown safety hasn't lost his God-given athleticism, something he has on most 7s props.

The athlete versus polished rugby player struggle is one most rugby teams in America deal with. Do we play Player A, who has the rugby attributes Player B doesn't, or Player B, who has the athletic attributes Player A doesn't? There's not always a clear-cut answer, and it's a decision that should be made on a case-by-case basis.

But rugby skills can be learned, whereas you-know-what can't. And it's not like the Eagles have to make the decision between winning now with rugby guys or building for later with athletes, because they aren't doing a whole heck of a lot of the former.

Now, if Rocco Mauer, Blaine Scully and Andrew Durutalo were all healthy this fall, would Isles and Hume be better suited playing small but impactful minutes and Craigwell better off working on 15s, because the surrounding talent is better? Perhaps.

And in the pipeline for the future are people like Mike Te'o, Don Pati, Thretton Palamo and Cam Dolan, who possess both the athletic ability and rugby ability. So the argument may somewhat settle itself over time.

But, another thing to take notice of is whether or not we just wait for those guys instead of keep trying to mold guys like Derek Lipscomb, the former Columbia linebacker and Hume's Old Blue teammate, or Otusia Tupouata, the former Utah football player now with SFGG, or even Eric Duechle, the former Air Force All American who is still trying to transition from relying solely on

his superior size and athleticism.

The moral of the story? The Eagles are not just a few injuries away from competing seriously for Cups. They’re not just some more time in the system and a few less mistakes away from feeling comfortable about qualifying for the Olympics. They’re athletes, and athletes putting in really good minutes, away, too.