

MAKING PLAYERS THINK - IN LARGE OR SMALL GROUPS.

By
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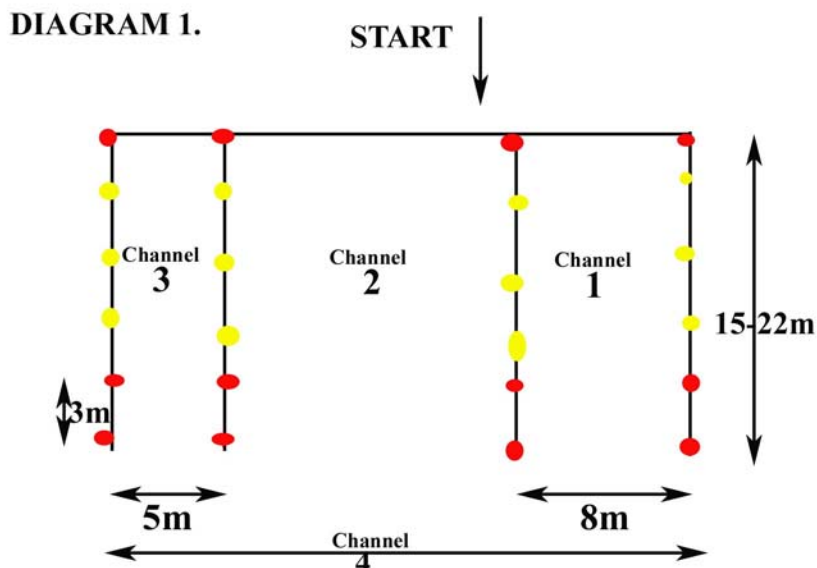
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Some players and some coaches seem to think that:

1. The coach is wired up to them somehow and will communicate all the right decisions throughout the match.
2. The other team will play along with their moves and game plans.
3. Their team members will think and play perfectly on the day.

If all the above is true, don't read on; you already have the perfect team playing the ideal opponents and you will always do well. The rest of us mortals have to go out every week to coach a team in the wind and mud and we have to spend hours planning the sessions; then half of the team decide not to turn up, preferring to stay at home to watch television. But feel proud if you are one of this group; probably 90% of us face problems like this on a weekly basis.

One thing is certain. If we are going to have a successful team, we need players who can make judgements under pressure and can deal with the unexpected. Therefore, we need to create training conditions where the coach *and* the players can have an input and that partnership can move the team forward. For the last ten years I have been using a coaching system of three channels. It all started with one channel and gradually developed into the three that I now use. The plus side of this is that you can use these channels with as few as three players and as many as thirty – perhaps even more.



Channels are always numbered from the left as players look at them as they start. If you are using the goal-line as the start point, ensure that you leave a good five metre gap away from the posts for safety.

- Channel one is eight metres wide.
- Channel three is five metres wide.
- Channel two takes up the width that is left over.
- Channel four is the combined width of all channels.
- For the vertical length of the playing area, you should allow between fifteen and twenty-two metres.

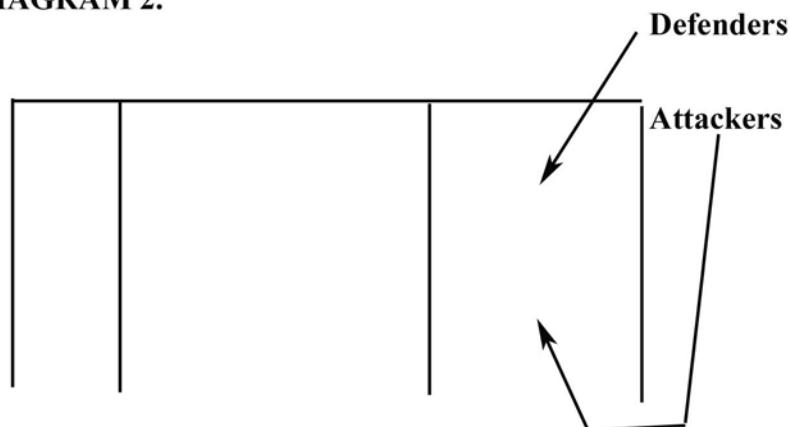
The whole area can be marked with cones, but any cones that form a horizontally marked line should be the same colour to help players to identify where they are in playing terms. There will be a starting and finishing line and another line three metres away from the start.

For the main exercise, about twelve to fourteen players is a good number. It can be brought down to three, but the coach would need to adapt the dimensions to suit those numbers. You can use as much of the pitch as is practical for larger numbers.

Two teams compete at any one time. Divide the groups in half, defenders (preferably in tackle suits) and attackers. The exercise is usually played full on, but if you feel you need to put some limit on the physical side, this can be regulated and altered by the coach. However, because attackers do not run from very deep, their speed is limited anyway. *All* the attackers *always* attack while the coach controls how many defenders can defend. The coach calls channel of attack first, followed by the number of defenders that he wants. A call of, “one, three” means channel one with three defenders.

All players, attackers and defenders, start from the outside corners of channel one or three on the horizontal starting line. (Diagram 2 - Example of attacking channel 1).

DIAGRAM 2.



Attackers become live by running outside the grid lines, turning around the furthest cone and advancing three metres to the next cone. They are then 'in play' and endeavour to score a try by any method that is allowed within the Laws of the game.

The defenders, who can go right from the start to their defensive position, can only tackle when the attackers have got into the channel and have gone past the three-metre cones. If you let the defenders tackle right at the end where the attackers enter the grid, the attackers will never get into the channels to taste success.

The coach will now manipulate the game, putting in as many defenders as the attack will cope with, building up the defence as the players get more confident with their decision making. The narrow channels will result in a tighter game, the wider channels a more expansive game.

This fits in with the 'whole/part/whole' style of coaching. The coach can work primarily in a channel which he feels is where his team has a weakness; it could be the close game or the wide game. He can also coach his team at the same time in defensive roles, so he is actually coaching two halves of the team at the same time.

Initially, some players in the team will find this a hard practice because they may be used to the coach telling them where to run and stand. However, all players can think if we give them a chance, so put the responsibility on them in coaching sessions. If they have anything about them at all, they will respond and maybe you will have discovered another decision maker in your team that you never knew you had.

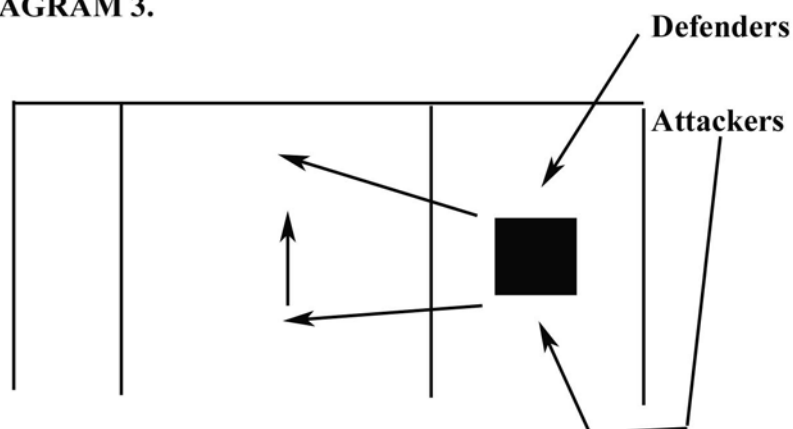
When you have centred on a weakness in the team game, ask the players for their input on the problem. Be prepared for the possibility that they might come up with a better answer than you have thought of, but if the players understand the problem and can come up with answers, you've won. After all, they are going to have to do this in the game without the help of the coach. Empower them to have their say without their feeling that they are undermining you. This can be helped by the coach making the practice, which after all is a mini-game, as easy or as hard as it needs to be. This can be achieved just by changing the number of defenders and/or working in narrower channels.

There is a real danger in players' perception if you work in narrow channels all the time, as the players will continually maul. This can be overcome by either (i) playing more time in the wider channels with increasing numbers of defenders or (ii) having a rule that on the blast of a whistle they have to attack an adjacent channel. (In diagram 3, players have attacked channel 1 and on the whistle they have moved to channel 2. This becomes more interesting when the attack is in channel 2 and players can, on the signal, attack channel 1 *or* 3).

You can coach players within this mini-game, or you can take them out of the game and do some skill drills. It is important for the coach to be aware of when players need to be

put under pressure and when they need a skill(s) to be improved out of the game situation. This is how the 'whole/part/whole' method works best.

DIAGRAM 3.



The common faults for the attackers in this mini-game are the same that appear in every match, such as losing the ball in contact and not looking for space by deliberately running into defenders. You, as coaches, see these faults every week and I don't wish to bore you all by trying to list them. It does, however, help players if you can video the channel work. If players see on a television screen what they have done, they cannot argue with it and realism sinks in quickly. Try, if you can, videoing the following week as well so there is a point of comparison. I have found videoing these channels very productive, but you need a camera on which you can slow the playback down and will also pause playback without the picture shuddering, otherwise you will lose much of the benefit. Try to archive these tapes so that you can see both players' and coaches' improvement throughout the season.

Attackers will quickly learn to set up ploys or moves as they come into the channel. They will learn to communicate before entry and whilst in the channel. They will learn to work as a team, as support play is a 'must' in restricted areas. One simple but important facet of the game that players seem to take an age to work out is not to let the smallest player come into the channel as ball carrier and take contact if stronger options are available, but that gives a chance for us coaches to say something to help future decision making.

Attacking must be carried out from both sides, say six attacks from channel one and six attacks from channel three, as we need the players to work off both hands. If I am using these channels mainly for attack, I always put the defenders in contact suits. If, however, I am using these as mainly defensive channels, then I need to take the players out of the suits and use bibs to distinguish between attack and defence.

The attackers and defenders will still enter the channels in the same way as before for full-on play, but we can now simulate the situation that happens in the game when the defence has more players on its feet than the attack - as generally happens in the ruck situation.

This time the coach would call the channel number, number of attackers and then the number of defenders. A call of, “one, two, three” means channel one with two attackers and three defenders. Once again, on a whistle or voice signal, you can have the attackers attack another channel and you can vary the ploys to test your defence. Play it as a game situation, let the players express themselves and let them learn by their mistakes. It is better for them to make these mistakes in the channels during practice than in your league match on Saturday.

My next article will be on how to extend the use of the channels to take in set play.