

## BEATING THE DRIFT PART 1

By  
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*In the diagrams, **D** is the full-back (or 'diveback' in gridiron terms). **F** is the fly-half.*

*The second part of this article will be published next week.*

The drift defensive system, born and bred in rugby league, has weaknesses that, when properly exploited, will show it up for what it is – a crude, one dimensional system that is easily beaten. It is the most widely-used defensive system and all coaches will come across it, but it can be beaten.

Some of the solutions presented here require a major coaching commitment and are a departure from the methods familiar to many rugby coaches. You should examine the ideas and decide what is possible for your team; this is not an 'all or nothing' proposal.

### Definitions

I use a number of terms which context may not be familiar to all rugby coaches.

**Rugby:** Rugby Football Union.

**Option rugby:** This is my term for the normal rugby attack, which lines-up the players from the set piece or loose scrum and in which each player passes the ball outwards. In his turn, each player has the 'option' to kick, run or pass if he sees an opportunity.

**League:** Rugby League.

**Football:** Gridiron.

**Handoff(Gi):** This is not to be confused with a rugby hand-off. This is a gridiron term and involves the receiver being given the ball hard into his stomach. It is pushed there, not passed.

**The drift:** Drift defence.

**Channels:** I use the gridiron numeration for channels - odd numbers on the left, even numbers on the right. So Channel 2 is the inside channel on the right of the scrum or maul.

**The run and shoot:** This is an offensive system found in a number of sports, particularly Gridiron and Lacrosse. Emphasis is on ball retention, with the 'big' play only made at a suitable opportunity.

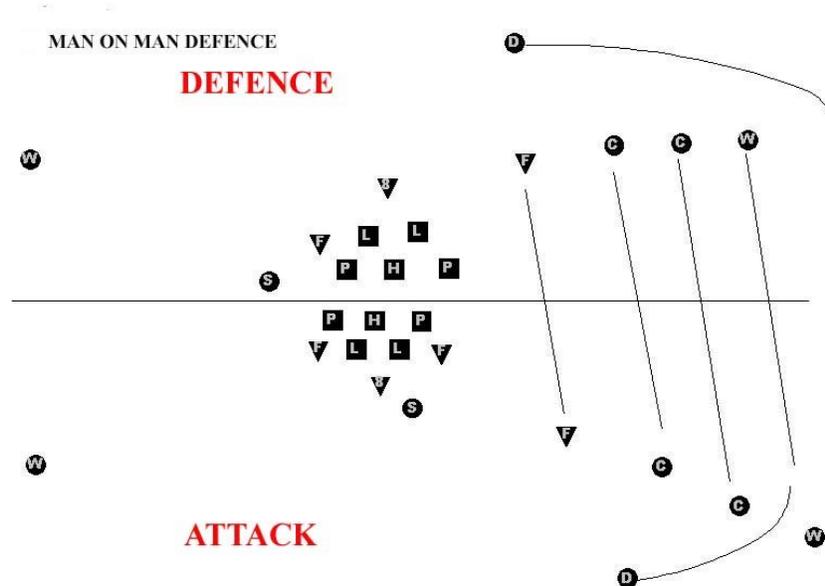
**The Impi defence:** The defence that I recommend as an alternative to the drift. It is based on the methods of the 19th century African warrior, Shaka Zulu, has three levels

and forces play towards our forwards rather than away from them as the drift does.

**A hit:** The process of coming into the tackle with a straight back, head up and across the opponent's body from a lower angle than your opponent and driving him upwards and backwards.

### Man-on-man defence.

The traditional Rugby Union defence is man-on-man where the defender tackles his opposite number. Each player shades his opponent from the inside, pushing the offense out to the side line. If the opposition brings an extra man into the back line, then the defenders all move over one. The last outside man, unmarked, gets covered by the fullback.



Forwards get out of the set piece or loose play as fast as possible and make their way to the breakdown point as fast as possible to try to retain possession. This system worked in the amateur days, but in the modern game, with forwards often joining the backs in second phases, it becomes complicated to organize who does what. The man-on-man defence has given way to the drift in the top level game.

The drift gives an efficient means of countering any extra man that may enter the line. It is easy to organise and reshuffle according to the way the attackers line up. It also pushes the attack out towards the sideline where, hopefully, it runs out of space. If a new player enters the offensive line, the player originally assigned to the gap where the new player enters takes on the new player and each defender outside that plays man on man. All defenders, particularly the forwards, are drifting to the outside. This can happen over two or more phases. It is typical of League patterns, which are based on six downs with early attacking from short, sharp plays up the middle. As the number of downs develops, the plays become more adventurous and move wider.

### History of the drift.

Until a few years ago many rugby coaches did not put much emphasis on defence and some still don't! Fifteen players, if spread out across the field, can cover a great deal of space.

Laws have been changed to create more space for attackers: there is the ten metre law, with all forwards included in the line out; full binding for all forwards in the scrum; laws to help quick rucking; and the advantage law to keep broken play going and to encourage continuity after turnovers. These, along with the full back and forwards joining the attacking line, can present many problems with overlaps. This in turn makes it more likely that defenders will misread their role.

Rugby League has been dealing with overlap problems for some time. With only thirteen players on each side, there is more space to attack as defence is more thinly spread. The Australians, who have a strong domestic game of League, were the first to introduce the drift and it put a new emphasis on defence. This culminated in the top two defensive Union teams, England and Australia, battling in the final of the 2003 World Cup. Countries like New Zealand and South Africa, who were weaker on defence and have a less significant internal League presence, are finding defence a lot harder to implement.

As the offensive systems develop in the future, I believe the drift will be shown up as one dimensional. There are many improvements that can be made to the way we defend. The defensive systems of gridiron are based on complex systems to cope with the fact that the attacking side can block defenders out of the game as their receivers run into the backfield to receive a forward pass.

### Weaknesses of the drift.

- The drift is a defence that spreads itself out to handle all options. To beat the drift we need a plan to attack them at specific points of weakness. We need to initiate and execute offensive moves from **a published play book**.
- The key to setting up the drift is to make sure that the job of marking the attacking fly half is left to the open-side flank. This means that in a set piece scrum, they are giving up defenders in the middle to bolster the outside. So the first point of attack is the inside channel and our attack will **introduce a running back**
- League is a game played at a faster pace with fewer stoppages than Union. League players tend to be of uniform size and smaller than the biggest Union players. Crudely put, everyone is a centre or an open-side flanker. League players are generally good tacklers whereas Union players are often chosen for a variety of skills other than tackling. The drift offers a spread out defence but there will usually be **weak defenders**.
- In League there are a limited number of downs with no kicking at the beginning of a set of six, though pressure increases throughout the set to achieve something without handing possession back to the opposition. In Union, with no requirement

- to hand possession back to the opponents, we must develop a strategy to **retain possession of the ball**.
- Current thinking in attack is to line the backline deeply to give it time to develop and for the backs to run onto the ball, thinking that plays right into the hands of the drift. As much as it gives us time to form a play, it also gives the defenders time to get organised. It brings the contact line into our back field. We need to line up in a shallow formation and **attack the advantage line**.
  - There are no rucks and mauls in League. Basically one attacker hits the line and, when he is stopped, he rolls the ball back through his feet. In Union we can pile on pressure. Once we have found the weak points we must run our strongest runners against these weakest points and we must bring our backs and loose forwards into run support so that we hit them effectively with a 'double team'. We must **force the contact**.
  - All defences have channels, holes and lanes. The drift lines up in a single line going sideways. Each defender is committed to his outside man. The drift is vulnerable and huge lanes are created if you **develop the inside cut**.
  - League is based on a six down system that results in a monotonous style of play; there is a sequence that usually goes along the lines of, 'hit, hit, hit, swing, swing, kick' (or similar variations). In League there are no kicks in the early phases so there is no need to have depth to the defence. The defenders in the drift defence line up in one flat line and run outwards. The drift is, therefore, vulnerable to a chip kick over the defenders' heads, particularly when this is directed inside. We must **have a ready kicking game**.
  - League is a predictable game. All players and spectators know where the ball is going - down the line. So the drift lines itself up, almost knowing what will occur. But we are not obliged to run from formations that the defence expects. Don't give the drift what it expects. The defence feeds on order - **choke the drift with chaos**.

### Use a published playbook.

The playbook is chosen by coaches and senior players. The aim of the attacking plays must be to run our strongest runners against their weakest defenders as often as possible. We must have a clear system for quickly calling our resources into play and directing support.

Currently the way we play against the drift is to run the ball down the line depending on how the defence reacts. What I am suggesting is a far more structured approach where *we* take the initiative. We take the decision-making away from the individual and put it back into the hands of the captain and the management. The emphasis is that we must all know where the play is going and these patterns must be carefully practised and ingrained before going into a match.

The current thinking in rugby gives too much leeway to individual 'flair'. This is based on the belief that a really good player can size up the situation and take advantage of the gaps in the defence. In Football we call this the *option offense*. Each player either

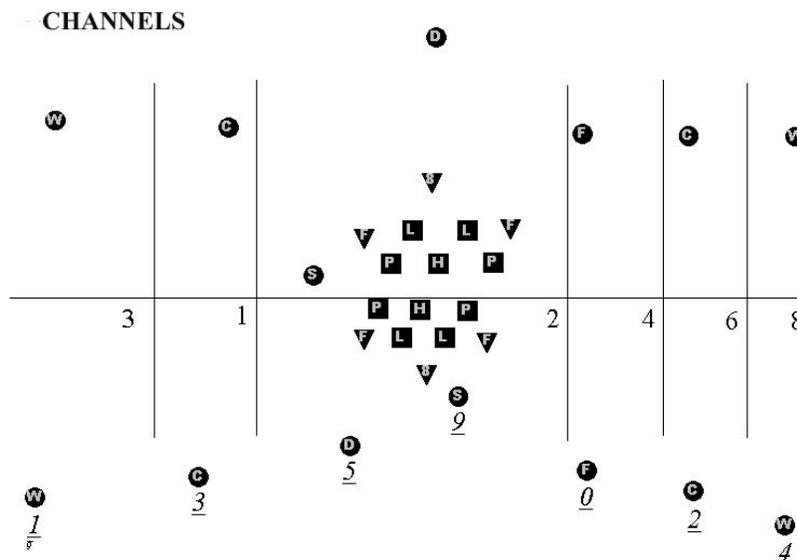
plays it or passes it out, leading to a predictable flow. Offensive players react to the defence and to their own team's unpredictable movements. This means that support is slow to come to aid the point of contact. The offense slows down and becomes predictable. The drift thrives on this predictability.

### Winning Points

- Plays are chosen by coaches and senior players.
- Plays are practised extensively.
- Captain or scrum-half calls the plays.
- Signals can be suitably coded so as not to be understood by opposition

All the players in the team and the club must know the play book. If a player gets promoted from a lower team, he must immediately fit into the plan. If a player changes position or fills in for an injured or occupied player, he must automatically understand his new assignment. The offensive captain (usually scrum-half), in particular, must know the playbook.

As long as we execute our plans properly, it is difficult for the opponents to change a defence that players have learned. If they have learned the drift, they are going to play the drift. The play book should be based on simple principles. I have used the following conventions: blue for left and red for right; channels running to the left are odd numbers and channels to the right are even numbers. The breadth of these obviously varies by the stage of the game, but these channels remain the same for set phases as well as broken play.

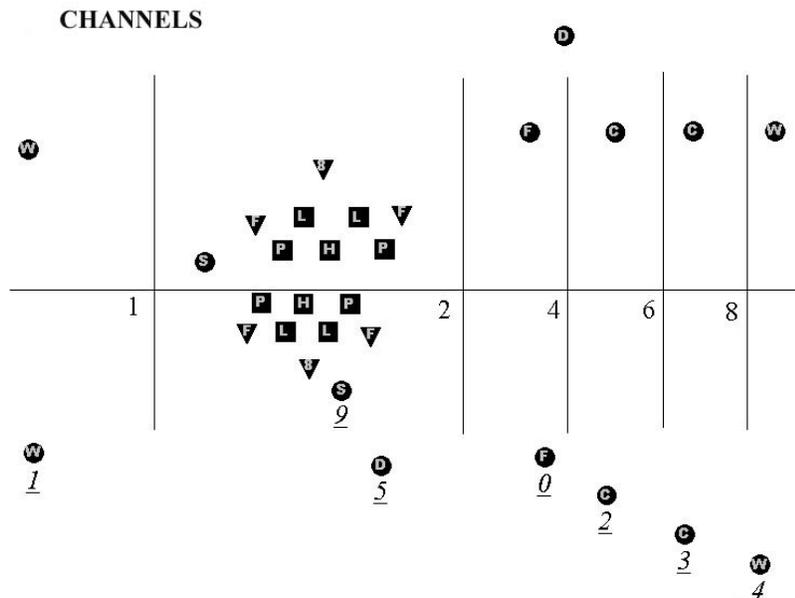


The numbering system identifies where we will carry the ball. The ‘hole’ the we want to hit has odd numbers on the left and even numbers on the right. The left-side gap between forwards and the fly half is 1 and on the right it is 2; left side between fly half and centre is 3 and on the right it is 4; left side between centres is 5 and on the right it is 6; left side between centre and wing is 7 and on the right it is 8. That gives you the first of a two-numbered signal.

Each ball carrier in the formation is given a number. A simple way is to use the second digit of the back’s shirt number. For example, if you wanted the inside centre, number 12, to run up the 3 hole (between fly half and inside centre), that play would be a 32.

Backs are the primary runners. If one (or more) is caught at the tackle, ruck or maul, a forward would take up his place and carry out his assignment. For example, if a flanker were standing in the inside centre position because the centre was caught up, then he would be the ‘2 Back’. The principle is that every play is planned and executed according to a script. Every Offensive player must know his assignment in the play and must execute it at full pace.

A ‘Trad Right-Red 42 Double’ means that we want to stand in a traditional line formation out to the right, Trad right. We want the inside centre (number 12, runner 2) to run into the 4 hole between their fly-half and centre and we want a simultaneous hit from a supporting runner – that is the Double. Learning the playbook can take months, so the sooner you start the better. Watch any great NFL team and you will see the offensive players moving in synch, their legs moving together like dancers.



**Identify the weakest defenders.**

I know this sounds obvious, but coaches do not do this and it takes a definite game plan.

In the drift there is no place to hide a weak defender. It borders on bullying, but these weak links must be exposed and exploited with no mercy. Many rugby players have to cover a wide range of skills other than defence and, even at the highest level, there are players who do not tackle well – or at all. At club or school level this will be worse than at top level, so coaches must exploit the weakness.

At the higher levels this is a simple matter of watching the opposition game tapes. At lower levels where we do not have these facilities, we need to test the opposition out and make these decisions very early in the game. There should be a clear communication between the coaches, the captain and the players.

This is not the same as devising a plan to sidestep, switch, sweep or dummy around a weak defender. **Take the contact directly to the weak defender** and expose him to the confrontation again and again. If a player can't tackle, he can't tackle and nothing is going to change that in the game. The more we attack the weak defender, the more we destroy his and his team's confidence.

In the single line defence that is the drift, there is no place to hide. When all is said and done, the drift requires tacklers and even the weak defenders have their assignment. If they try to move the weak defender to another place, our strongest runner follows him.

### **Winning Points**

- Pick the weakest defenders and run at them.
- Interact with the coaches who can see this easier.
- Double-team for maximum effect.
- Don't always try to run around the weak defender.
- Follow the weak defenders if they are moved.
- If you find a weak spot, stay there until they fix it.

Their only solution will be to substitute the player or put up a double team defence. The moment they double up on defence, they ruin the drift and they allow an overlap opportunity somewhere else. So I propose that our runners are coached in confrontational technique that enables the maximum hit on the weak defender. By delivering a hit onto the weak defender we are not going to offer him an opportunity to 'jump on your back and pull you to the ground'. By forcing the contact, we effectively take him out of the play.

### **Introduce a Runningback.**

A runningback is a speedy back who is able to run in the inside channels and is strong enough to confront heavier forwards when the situation demands it. In the modern game, scoring opportunities rarely develop from the first phase from a scrum. Yet this is one of the best opportunities to attack the drift. The defensive forwards are obliged to bind into the scrum and the open-side flanker is forced by law to be bound. By wheeling his side

away, you cause pressure on him to cover the inside channel. Most teams try to exploit this by having the number 8 pick up from the base of the scrum or have the scrum-half break round into this channel. However, most self-respecting flankers are quick enough to stop this slow, lumbering attack. A runningback, particularly from scrums, is another matter and is likely to cause a lot of problems for the inside channel of the drift. If they have to use another back to cover this channel, then their whole defence is in tatters.

### Winning Points

- Wheel scrum to put defending flankers and scrum-half out of play.
- Runningback starts 6 metres behind the number 8 or loose scrum.
- Full speed handoff(Gi) rather than a pass.(The ball is *pushed/placed* into the runner's stomach.)
- Runner must focus on defenders.
- Open-side flank and fly-half converge as blockers or cleaners.
- Head up leaning forward, feet are under the shoulders, ready for contact.
- As there is no passing, runner concentrates on moving up field
- Play strikes near the scrum and our forwards use the advantage of prior knowledge to reach contact point before defenders.
- Contact point is beyond the advantage line. Defensive forwards must enter the maul from behind the last defender and will initially have to run back to do this legally..

A runningback is a very special player. In the NFL they earn a million dollars a year. What we require is a very fast, explosive runner who can get over the advantage line and either cut through the defence or deliver a substantial hit, holding up the defender until support arrives or driving and spinning through the contact. Usually a smaller player, he must be able to stay on his feet after the contact.

### Winning Points

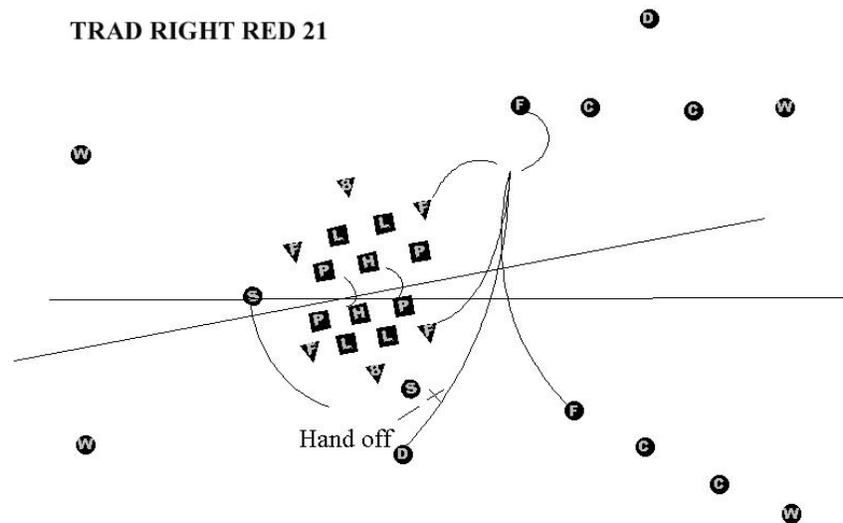
- Hit the line running at full speed.
- Inside arm is up to receive handoff(Gi) in stomach.(Ball *pushed/placed* into his stomach.)
- Keep the eyes focused on the defence.
- Tuck the ball away for safety.
- Run with a wide stance, legs pumping.
- Scrum-half is responsible for ensuring the ball is 'placed' correctly.
- The **handoff(Gi)** is not to be confused with a **short pass**. A handoff is a much faster process, although it does require practice
- The advantage of not having to look for the ball means you can focus on the defenders. This advantage must not be under-estimated.

By using fakes, delays and reverses, you can hit their line at a number of angles. The scrum-half and running back have to become a really special combination. In football, the running back has become so powerful that the authorities have had to put restrictions on

him. For example he cannot run forward until the play has begun. There is no such limitation in rugby, which means that a running back can line up six metres behind the scrum and be moving at full speed well before the defending forwards are allowed to unbind. But too much of current rugby thinking ends up with the lumbering No 8 picking up from a standing start – the pick and drive. I am proposing something far more dynamic, a fast back line player who gets behind the defence in next to no time.

I come from a long history of playing Gridiron Football, where a running back is such a vital part of the game. It seems strange to me that rugby has yet to effectively use this weapon. The key goal is to get the play over the advantage line and into their backfield. By going close to the scrum, we are able to put our open-side flank legally in a position between their retreating, defending forwards and our attacking runner.

This pressure up the middle is the key component that ruins the drift, which starts by giving up defence in the middle. They leave the open-side flank to cover the fly-half. But we will present a big challenge - an explosive back who is running fast and probably past the defending open-side before he can break off from the scrum.



### Attack the advantage line.

The problem with lining-up the backs deep and having them run onto the ball is that it takes time. The drift uses this time to run up past the advantage line and cause the point of contact to happen in *our* space. The results are horrendous. Besides losing metres, we essentially put all our forwards offside and they have to ‘retire’ to enter the game. We need to bring the contact line right up, preferably over the advantage line. To change this requires a mental change. We need to change from an option offense that *develops* plays to a **run and shoot offense that executes plays**. With practice these plays can be performed faster. However, each phase must be completed and a new one begun before the defence has had time to bring up support.

### Winning Points

- Line up flat against the advantage line.
- A static fly-half who acts as a distributor.
- Men in motion before play begins.
- Usually only two passes per play.
- Execute swiftly.

The **fewer passes** in an offensive play, the better. Every pass takes time and risks error. Skip passes and switches do little good. In the end these are only effective if they are done right at the last moment before contact. In the end, only one man carries the ball over the contact line; everything until that point is just distribution.

I propose a **stationary fly-half**, where the other backs run onto the ball. The fly-half is not a runner, he is the distributor of the ball. The moment the defence starts to charge at him, they risk over pursuit and can open up the inside lanes. The fly-half can even initiate his own run if the defence has over-committed. By standing still, the fly-half makes an easier target for his scrumhalf. If fly-half and scrum-half are both long passers, two passes can cover virtually the entire width of the field. Effectively, the running play can be delivered to any desired channel in just two passes.

The standing fly-half is also better placed to drop kick or chip to his receivers. Current offensive thinking has him chasing down his own kick into the box, but this is better achieved if the target receivers are running onto the ball.

I also propose '**men in motion**'. The backs (or attackers) begin motion before the ball is released. As long as they do not cross the offside line they can build up both sufficient lateral and forward speed to execute complex offensive plays. This will help them to stand flatter and still get the play off in time.

### Force the contact.

The drift comes from League where there is no need to concentrate defence in one place as the attackers can only ever produce as much pressure as their single best runner. There is no supporting pressure and no marauding loose forwards who pile into the maul to add drive to a break. In the 'run and shoot' offense, we run against the weakest defenders, use the set plays in the playbook to give advantage and use flat positioning to bring support to the contact point faster than the defence can get there.

Whereas the 'option offense' has attackers standing wide, waiting for the offload, our approach is the opposite. Supporting players are not waiting for the ball. We know where the breakdown is going to happen. The supporters will be 'piling in' quickly behind the ball carrier.

'Option rugby' has the runner trying to sidestep the defender and offloading if he

makes contact. The typical tackle that a drift defender makes is from the inside out, with his head behind the tackled player as he drags him down to the ground. I am proposing that the runner knows that the contact is coming and he sets himself up for it. The defender is not prepared for a force that does not try to avoid him, but instead comes straight at him.

In the ideal hit, the runner cuts into the defender and delivers a positive blow to the defender that floors the defender and allows the runner to continue. In the second best option, the runner holds up the defender and the supporting attacker comes in to finish the job.

There are a number of techniques to coach the runner in the ‘breakdown’, the ‘dip’ and the ‘hit and the spin’. These are Football techniques to help break a tackle. The runner is moving quickly and, as he sees the defender cross his legs, he cuts back inside, breaks down his stride into short choppy steps, dips down to a low angle and makes contact with his shoulder, keeping his legs wide and driving forward.

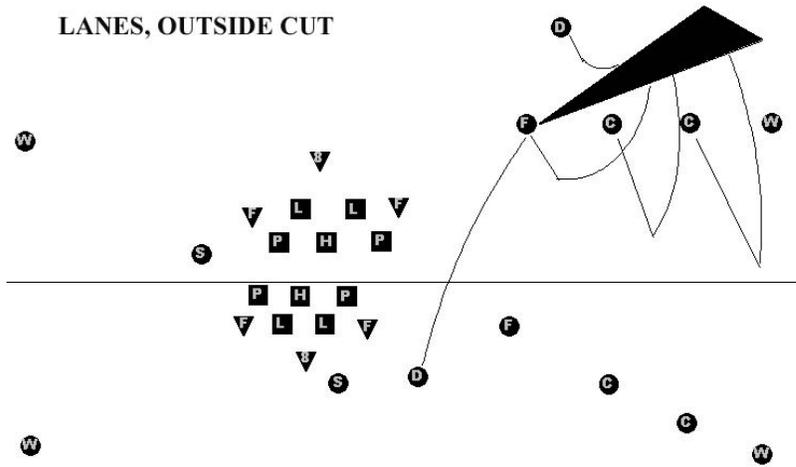
In addition to the techniques for the runners, the supporters can add assistance by using ‘scoop blocks’ and ‘bull rushes’. All these techniques centre around keeping the head up with eyes forward on the emerging situation.

- Defenders in the drift are not used to contact being forced on them. They expect the attack to move the ball out sideways. The most common error that they make in moving sideways is to cross their legs.
- Defenders that cross their legs will usually miss the tackle.
- A cross-legged defender is no match for a direct hit.

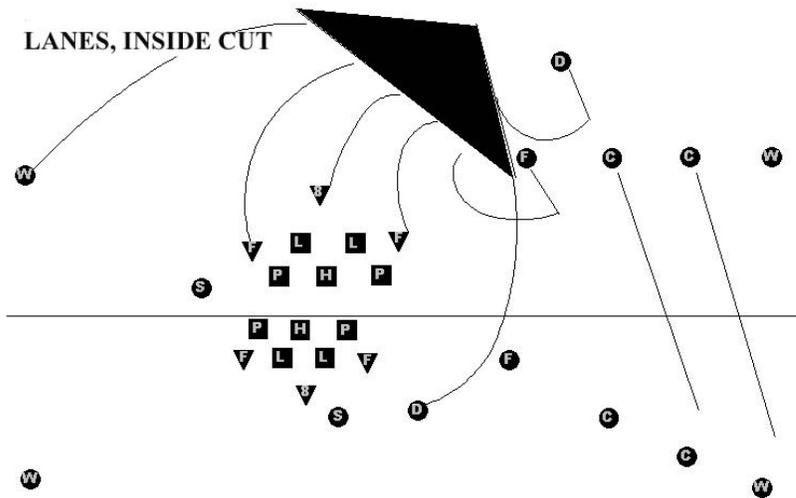
### **Use the inside cut.**

Defenders in the drift are chasing the outside man. Our current attacking strategies spend too much time trying to run around the outside of the drift. The failure to achieve this consistently is what has made the drift so popular over the last few years. Its key weakness can be exposed by cutting inside and running at the defender. Defenders defending the outside either cross their legs to get to where they want to be or they face outwards. If the runner does cut inside, the defenders are forced to ‘turn around’ to make up the distance lost. This is why you so often see defenders in the drift with their backs to the offense, a result of this over pursuit.

LANES, OUTSIDE CUT



LANES, INSIDE CUT



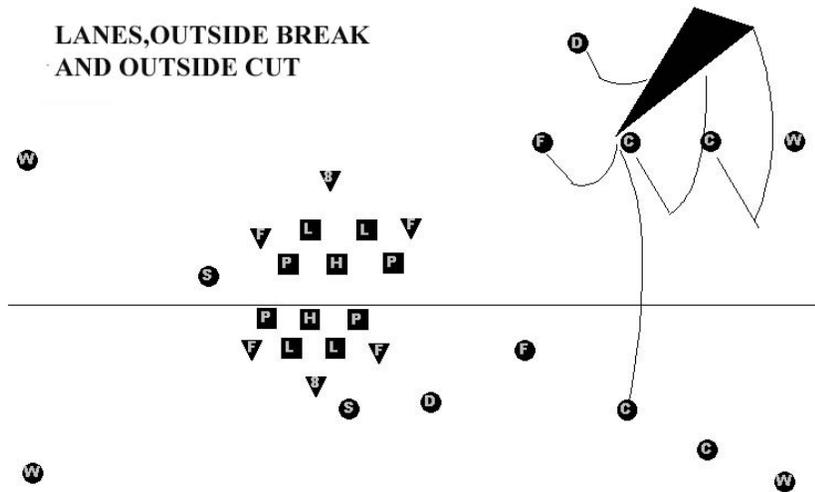
All defences have channels, holes, lanes and angles of pursuit. Channels are the straight lines, holes are the gaps between the defenders, angles of pursuit are the curves and the dark areas are the lanes. Holes and lanes exist in space/time rather than in space alone. They are there only for a short moment.

In the classic man-on-man defence, defenders would take on a man, but in the drift, defenders defend a channel. The fly-half runs forwards and outwards to the inside centre, the defending inside centre runs forwards and outwards to the outside centre (and so on). In the diagrams below, the channels are the first straight line that the defenders

run. They then break into an angle of pursuit and do anything they can to close down the attack.

As defenders run down a channel, holes develop between them and they are not necessarily in a horizontal plane. If a defender runs in front of another defender, he creates a hole for a cut. The drift teaches defenders to come out in a line. Unfortunately for them we do not arrive at the same time in each channel, so there is always a vertical gap to cut inside or out. So a hole always exists momentarily in time. Holes can also be created by blocking the defender backwards or sideways.

**LANES, OUTSIDE BREAK  
AND OUTSIDE CUT**



**LANES, CENTRE BREAK  
AND OUTSIDE CUT**

