

THE FULL-BACK – PART 1

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A: GENERAL

1. THE IDEAL FULL-BACK

2. POSITIONING

1. THE IDEAL FULL-BACK

The ideal full-back is the complete rugby player, excelling in each of the generic skills of tackling, handling, kicking and running. He combines the perception and kicking skills of the fly-half with the evasion skills of the wingers. He has the ability to play in either of these other positions. In both defence and attack, the full-back operates in a unit with his wingers.

Operating behind the front-line attack and first-up defenders, the full-back's field of vision is wider than other players'; he also has more time and space than any other player on the field. With good communication skills, he should be organising attack and defence.

The full-back needs good positional sense. He must be safe in defence and in dealing with opposition kicks. Being in the right position involves anticipating the opposition fly-half's intentions. A good understanding of the game and a good tactical decision-maker makes the complete full-back.

2. POSITIONING

When the opposition are in possession deep inside their own 22, the full-back should stand opposite their fly-half; as play progresses downfield, the full-back will get progressively wider to defend against the running game and the diagonal kicks. The blind-side wing will cover box kicks behind the forwards.

Generally in defence, from most phases, he is about fifteen metres behind his threequarters following the passage of the ball along the line, staying just inside the ball.

From lineouts, the full back will cover the gap between his centres and then between second centre and open-side wing, by standing 10-15 metres behind them. The blind-side wing will be between the fly-half and first centre.

From a **midfield scrum**, he will take up a central position. For a scrum near his own goal line, he may take the short side depending on the defensive arrangements of his team. If the **scrum is 15 metres in** from either touch, he will take up a position behind and between his centres.

From **kick offs and re-starts**, he will tend to be on the side of the field where the ball is likely to land but generally to the centre of the field.

When defending **the goal line**, the full-back positions himself directly behind the defence to deal with any kicks through or over the defence. He may, however, be required to be in the back line as one of the first up defenders and covering his opposite number. It depends again on the situation, so positioning is greatly to do with anticipation.

B: THE SPECIALIST ROLE OF THE FULL BACK

- 1. JOINING THE ATTACK**
- 2. FIELDING KICKS**
- 3. KICKING ACCURATELY OFF EITHER FOOT**
- 4. DIRECTING AND INITIATING COUNTER ATTACK**
- 5. ORGANISING THE DEFENCE AND TACKLING**

1. JOINING THE ATTACK

The deep starting position of the full-back means his movements are hidden by the front-line attack. This allows him to choose where he can join the attack. He makes an impact by changing the pace, angle and numbers of the attack.

The full-back tends to enter the line between his outside centre and wing or outside his wing. The channels between fly-half and first centre tend to be the blind-side winger's channel of involvement.

Entering the backline can create overlaps and contribute to an outflanking movement. He can exploit the short-side from scrums and any that develop from a line-out by calling for a pass from the scrum-half. A good attacking situation is from inside his own 22 because the opposition full-back will position himself deep to cover the long kick.

He must understand his role in the attacking movement. Is he to be the main strike runner, the decoy or a link in the passing movement? Is he coming in at pace to penetrate, or is he arriving in a more controlled fashion to catch and pass the ball after fixing a defender?

When entering the attack the full-back should consider the following:

- Not to over-crowd the channel of attack.
- Not to slow the attack by adding an extra pair of hands that are not needed.
- Not to make it obvious where the run will be made.
- To enter the line late so the defence has little time to react.
- To have a contingency plan, a fail safe, if the ball is turned over and the full-back is not in position. Who is covering if the ball is dropped and subsequently hacked through by the opposition? Does the blind-side winger cover the full-back or is everyone committed to the attack - the contingency plan being everyone rushing back, trusting to their speed of reaction?

2. FIELDING KICKS

Attacking sides look to move the ball to space. If a defending side has spread its defences across the field so that there is no lateral space, a tactical option open to the ball carrier is to kick the ball into the space behind the defence. The full-back's responsibility is to deal with this. The tactical kicks the full-back may have to deal with are:

- **The bomb:** The full-back must be safe under the high ball. He must also be brave. The chaser will be hoping to get the first touch by leaving the ground and knocking the ball back to a support player. The full-back, under such pressure, must jump to take the ball early. An

advantage of jumping for the ball is that, by the laws of the game, he is not allowed to be tackled whilst in the air. He should not allow the ball to bounce.

- **The punt:** This kick will occur when a side wants to relieve the pressure. A side will kick long, down the 15 metre channel and organise its chase to prevent a counter-attack. If a counter-attack is stopped at source, the side not in possession will be going forward and hoping for a turnover. The full-back should never get caught with the ball behind his forwards if the opportunity is available to find touch first.
- **The chip/grub kicks:** These are intended to be re-gathered by the kicking side. The usual defenders who collect these kicks tend to be the sweepers from first phase ball – the blind-side wing or scrum-half. If the kicks go too long, the full-back will have to field them under pressure.

3. KICKING ACCURATELY OFF EITHER FOOT

He must be capable of executing a variety of kicks: the punt to touch or downfield deep into opposition territory; the chip to beat the defender who has chased the ball; the high kick to avoid being caught behind his forwards; the place kick; and the drop kick for drop outs.

He must be able to kick off either foot to find touch so that his forwards can regroup. Another option is to kick the ball high so that the forwards have time to get back between the ball and their own goal-line. He also has the chance to recover possession by chasing the ball.

Punt to touch or deep downfield

Two options: 1. End-over-end punt.

2. Spiral punt.

1. End over end technique:

- Hold the ball slightly outside the line of the body, which enables greater swing of the kicking leg.

- Release hands to the side, allowing the ball to drop in correct shape. Never throw the ball up or push it down as either action on the ball will force a deviation from the desired kicking shape
- Head over the ball and look down as you strike the ball.
- Kick through and beyond the ball.
- Follow through, left hand to right foot (right footed kickers), right hand to left foot (left footed kickers).
- Continue movement forward after the kick, using body momentum for extra power and distance.

2. Spiral punt technique:

- Hold the ball slightly outside the line of the body (as above).
- Desired ball position: for a left-footed kicker, 1 and 7 on a clock; for a right-footed kicker, 11 and 5 on a clock.
- Dropping the ball from this position, not a slicing kicking action, will create the spiral.
- Release hand to the side, almost placing the ball on a shelf, and release. Never throw the ball up or push it down as this will deviate the ball from the desired strike shape
- Head over the ball and look down when you strike.
- Kick through and beyond ball, creating forward momentum.
- Continue this forward momentum after kick.

Chip Kick

In order to execute this kick successfully, scan for space beyond the approaching defenders. A poor chip kick will cause a perfect attacking opportunity for the opposition against limited defenders.

Chip Kick Technique:

- Control of the ball is crucial as you will be running at pace when attempting to execute the kick.
- Release ball from two hands. Do not throw the ball up or push it down.
- Head down and over the ball on contact. Try to avoid looking at oncoming defenders.
- Strike the ball lower to the ground than when spiral or end-over-end kicking; this creates more control whilst kicking on the run.
- Look to aim to catch the ball yourself, judge the pace at which you are going and the target space area.

Goal Kicking

Very important kick in today's game. The full-back, along with the fly-half, are usually the main goal kickers.

Goal Kicking Technique (brief):

- Align ball on a kicking tee. The exact position will be specific to individuals, dependent on approach, strike, habits etc.
- A slow, calculated approach is best. Power comes from last step, **not** a pacey approach to the ball.
- Focus on the point of contact on the ball, **not** the target. This will keep the head down.
- Shoulders kept tight in a coil ready to open on contact with the ball.
- Non-kicking foot should be aligned straight towards the posts (target).
- Kicking foot:
 1. Come straight from six inches behind ball.
 2. Strike ball.
 3. Follow foot straight for another six inches towards the target.
- Head down and over ball on contact.
- Shoulders turn to face posts on contact, then hold straight in follow through.
- Follow through forward and towards target, never fall away after the strike.

Drop Kick – Restart and 22 drop out

Important kick with the aim to re-gain possession.

Technique:

- Hold ball in position you want to strike it.
- Release ball by moving hands to the side; never throw ball up or push down.
- To achieve height, ball is dropped closer to the body.
- Non-kicking leg should be dropped by bending the knee, enabling the kicker to get under the ball.
- Delay the kick slightly, as you want to strike more up than forward. To strike the ball on the half-volley with the ground will mean lack of height, but more distance.

- Aim to come right under the ball, striking up and continuing the foot upwards after contact for increased height.
- Keep the head down and focus on the ball and point of contact. Lifting the head will cause mistiming of the strike.

4. DIRECTING AND INITIATING COUNTER ATTACK

COUNTER-ATTACK

With a positive attitude of mind and self-confidence in his own ability, a full-back can launch counter-attacks from opposition's deep kicks, long 22 drop outs or long kicks at goal.

Sometimes the full-back will have to field a high ball, sometimes he will have to retrieve a ball rolling on the ground either in front or behind him. Sometimes he will be faced by a broken-field, sometimes by a well organised chase. The decision whether to run, kick or pass will have to be taken. He must avoid being caught in possession behind his support. He will operate with his wings who are deeper than the midfield and can usually get back to help out. There will have to be communication between the three and some form of organisation or movement pattern in place.

The full-back concentrates on the ball. He does not have the peripheral vision of the support player. It is the support player who helps the full-back take the decision to counter and how. However, if the receiver catches the ball cleanly and is running at full speed, he does not need someone else to decide whether he should counter-attack or not.

Technical Skills

- Catching under pressure.
- Passing – long pass, switch and loop passes.
- Running – speed over ground; footwork to beat defenders
- Support – width and depth linked with communication with the ball carrier.
- Managing the contact area.

Key Factors

- The support player helps the fielder of the ball in decision-making.

- Only counter-attack if the kick is poor and the ball is immediately available.
- Bring the ball forward with pace.
- .Dummy to strength by running towards the congested areas, then take the ball into space.
- Play the ball BEFORE contact.

5.ORGANISING THE DEFENCE AND TACKLING

He is in the last line of defence and responsible for organising it in the eventuality of a breakthrough or outflanking movement. He has to close down and tackle any player who has broken through or gone around the defence. He tries to regain the initiative by reducing the ball carrier's thinking time and approach at an angle which limits his options. Whilst protecting his inside shoulder, he will marshal him towards the touch-line and tackle at the best possible moment.

Pendulum Cover Defence: When playing a 4 up defence (i.e. the open-side wing is up in line with the centres), the full back plays up and out, gets ahead of the ball and closer to the touchline. The blind-side wing covers across when the play goes open. Communication among the back Three is essential.

When play is in midfield, both wingers drop back and position themselves slightly infield but ready to field any kicks. If the opposition then moves the ball wide to the right hand side, then the right winger moves forward level with his centre. The left winger covers across behind the full-back. If the opposition attacks the left flank, the left winger will move up level and the right winger covers.

C: POSITIONAL SKILLS OF THE FULL BACK

1. **Technical and Tactical**
2. **Mental**
3. **Physical**

1. TECHNICAL AND TACTICAL

A. ANTICIPATION, THE ABILITY TO READ THE GAME.

B. FIELDING KICKS. THE PRIORITY IS TO DEAL WITH OPPOSITION KICKS OF ALL TYPES.

- Quality high-ball receipt skills
 - under pressure (off the ground)
 - whilst running
 - with feet firmly planted on the ground
- Gathering the ball
 - Rolling towards him
 - Turning to collect the ball rolling away from him

C. HAS GOOD KICKING AWARENESS (PUNT FOR FIELD POSITION, BOMB TO RECOVER BALL AND GIVE FORWARDS TIME TO GET BACK, CHIP AS ATTACKING WEAPON).

- Must kick off EITHER foot with accuracy and length, both as an attacking option and to relieve pressure. Variety is key.
- Goal kicking and restarts are a plus.

D. RUNNING

- Timing into backline with lines and with power and speed.
- Able to step off either foot at pace.
- Able to create space for wings and others.
- Understand and execute the requirements of counter-attack and get the ball (and preferably a ball-carrier) in front of the team as quickly as possible.
- Be the key attacking player from set and phase play, running with confidence and daring.

E. HAS EFFECTIVE INDIVIDUAL TACKLING TECHNIQUE

- Strong tackler off either shoulder—all types of tackle.
- Ability to shadow and manipulate ball carrier.

F. CONTACT

- Be decisive and positive; try to avoid being caught in possession behind support. If tackled, be strong on feet to buy time for support to arrive.

G. COMMUNICATION

- Use panoramic vision of game—anticipate—scan—act—communicate.
- Accurate and continual positive communication and option-calling skills.
- Work in tandem with wings in attack and defence.

H. PASSING

- Long clearance / soft.

2. MENTAL

A. PHYSICALLY BRAVE

B. ABILITY TO SEE WIDER PICTURE QUICKLY

C. ADVENTUROUS

D. CONFIDENT

E. DECISIVE

F. AGILITY

G. CALMNESS

H. STABILITY

I. COMMUNICATION - leadership within the back three.

3. PHYSICAL

A. CHANGE OF PACE

B. FOOTWORK / AGILITY (side-step, swerve, acceleration, power)

C. STRENGTH (upper *and* lower body) is needed to fend off chasing, would-be tacklers and to stay up in the tackle. This gives support players time to get back and help out.



D. HEIGHT can be beneficial when fielding the high ball; but may not be when lifting a ball from the ground. For the latter event, **flexibility** (lower back and hamstrings) is desirable.

E. GOOD HAND TO EYE CO-ORDINATION

The second part of the article on the full back will appear in the TJ next week.