

Position-Specific Skill Development of Lifters and Jumpers in the Lineout

by
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The lineout is the most abundant set piece play and, arguably, the most contestable of set pieces in the game of rugby. Many coaches are aware of the saying, 'lose the lineouts - lose the game.' This is often true and there is a correlation between lineouts lost and the result of the game; however, the reverse is unfortunately not as true, as winning all your lineouts does not guarantee a win. In clubs, academies and schools, the majority of time that is set aside for lineout practice is in most cases spent creating lineout options and tactics. This may be due to several factors, the main one being time. However, we often overlook the need to develop solid playing characteristics in these jumpers and lifters, thereby reducing the overall effectiveness of the players and the lineout.

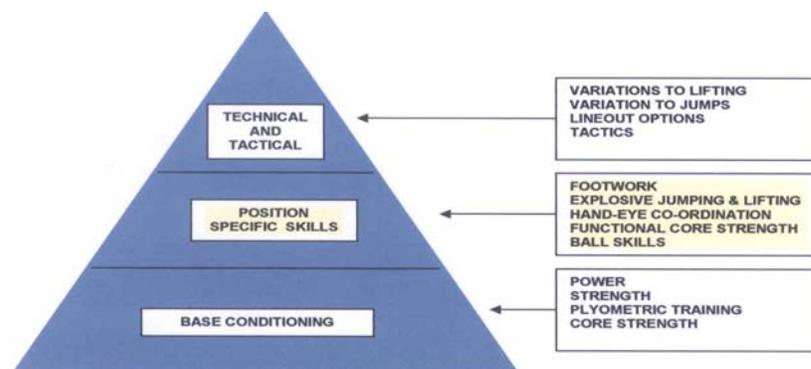
This article aims to *identify* the key characteristics of good jumpers and good lifters in the lineout and to discuss ways to *develop and improve* them.

Firstly it is important to highlight the key personnel in the lineout.

- **Thrower** (usually the hooker).
- **Jumpers** (Second row /back row).
- **Lifters** (All forwards).

Jumpers tend to be second and back row players and all lineout forwards from the hooker to the second rows should be proficient lifters. Therefore this type of skill conditioning will benefit all forwards. Below is a *player development pyramid*. This is my own theory of the objectives of developing players. This particular pyramid centres on the development of lineout forwards.

Player Development Pyramid for a Lineout Forward.



The player development pyramid shows a progression of a developing player from base conditioning through to technical and tactical aspects of the position.

Base conditioning.

Base conditioning forms the basis of physiological development. In lineout jumpers and lifters it focuses on power and strength, plyometric training for jumpers and core strength. Strength and power is developed through weight training and Olympic lifting, the latter having plyometric effects. Core strength is vitally important in both jumpers and lifters. Jumpers need solid trunk strength while they are being lifted *and* when they are stabilising in the air; the lifters require this core strength as a stable base for the jumper.

Position-specific skill development.

This is an oft-neglected area of a player's development, but forms the vital link between base conditioning and technical lineout work. In this phase we develop the base conditioning into more functional exercises; exercises are developed that create and strengthen neuromuscular pathways and combine conditioning exercises with technical lineout attributes.

Explosive lifting and jumping is a progression from resistance weight training to more functional exercises. For example, jumpers would do resisted plyometric work combined with footwork patterns and lifters would use powerbags and some resisted player lifts. These are discussed in more depth later in the article.

Footwork is *key* to movement in the lineout, and this will be trained primarily in a linear movement, forwards or backwards in the line.

Functional core strength relates to movements that jumpers would encounter whilst in the air and the similar movements that lifters encounter when lifting. These exercises can be quite inventive and will, in most cases, include a rugby ball, medicine ball and a fit ball.

Hand-eye co-ordination and delivery of the ball are skills that can be developed using most skill-based exercises. The article will concentrate on this aspect of the player's development.

Technical and tactical.

This phase forms the sharp edge of a player's development and is often dependent on the player's direction through coaching and the teams which that player represents. A player will have a solid grounding of physical attributes gained in his/her base conditioning and position-specific work and will now practise different lineout jumps and/or lifts.

There are different techniques to lifting and jumping. For example, some coaches will train their players to jump off a base of two feet close together (two foot take off) and some will coach the one foot take-off. The exercises and drills in this article aim to develop muscular and neuromuscular conditioning combined with lifting and jumping techniques and coaches can adapt the drills according to their preference of style. Tactics, lineout options and foot patterns will be fine-tuned in the phase.

It is important to manage a flow through all of these phases as they are interlinked, i.e. team foot patterns can be introduced in the footwork drills during the position-specific phase. The triangular shape of the pyramid is not representative of the amount of time spent on each of the phases as this should be determined by the coach, depending on each player's physical or skill development. It is, however, important to note that without a base of good strength in the conditioning phase, the position-specific skill work will be less effective right through to the technical phase.

Jumpers.

We will look firstly at the jumpers. The role of the jumper in the lineout is to provide 'ball' or possession to the team. This possession is vital to a team's attack and, as stated earlier in the article, the lineout is very contestable. Success in providing the possession from the lineout is dependent on an efficient lift and jump and an accurate throw.

Below we will identify the key characteristics of a good lineout jumper and then illustrate ways to improve these traits.

Characteristics of a good lineout jumper.

- Footwork – quick feet in a linear movement.
- Powerful jump – vertical movement.
- Effective shift from linear movement to vertical (jumping) action.
- Strong body shape in the air.
- Superior ball skills.
- Excellent communication.

Developing these characteristics in players.

- **Footwork** - Linear footwork drills using cones and ladders.
- Players practise fast feet on a shuttle run between the cones. Sprint to first, back to start; to second, back to start; to third, back; and to fourth and back etc.



- Players practise fast feet in the ladders with a variety of foot movement patterns. In this drill the player is moving in and out of each ladder space whilst moving to the end of the ladder.



■ Vertical jump.

- Plyometric drills and medicine ball exercises.



- The jumper is lifted as he holds a medicine ball.
- At the top of the jump he passes the ball to another player at the side – where the scrum half would be.
- As he passes the medicine ball, a rugby ball is thrown as in a lineout.

■ **Effective shift from linear movement to jumping.**

- combination of quick feet drills and vertical/ plyometric jump drills.



- The player works on fast feet sideways in the ladder.
- At the end, two supporters time their movement to lift him up as in a lineout.
- When the movement is perfected, the player being lifted carries a medicine ball throughout the drill.
- A useful progression for the lifters is to warm-up and practise on a tackle bag to perfect their technique before lifting a player. (See photographs below).



■ **Maintain body shape in the air.**

- Functional core stability and medicine ball jumps.



- The working player supports his weight at shoulder level on the air ball.
- A medicine ball is passed to his side, assisting core stability while developing hand-eye co-ordination.

■ **Ball skills – soft hands and delivery of ball.**

General ball skills using small balls to improve hand-eye co-ordination.

Supports.

The role of the lifter at the lineout is to lift and support the jumper whilst he is in the air and to bring the jumper safely to ground. The lifter also forms an important part in the formation of the driving maul from the lineout.

Characteristics of a good lifter.

- Explosive lift strength.
- Quick hands and feet.
- Reaction and co-ordination.
- Excellent communication.

Lifters.

■ **Explosive lift strength.**

– Power bag/medicine ball drills and resisted player/ tackle tube drill.

■ **Quick hands and feet.**

– Footwork drills combined with power bag and medicine ball drills.

■ **Co-ordination and reaction.**

– Live lifting and pod work with two lifters and one jumper.

How to I apply these drills and exercises to my sessions?

Things to consider

Age group – When considering age, we shall look initially at younger players and the rules of their age groups. In age groups where players are not permitted to lift or support, emphasis should be placed on footwork and jumping drills. In much older players, who are playing in the club set-up, changing lifting techniques can be difficult. However, implementing some of these drills will improve traits over a period of time.

Ability level of the players – This is linked in some ways to age. However, there are drills in the article that are very simple and can be applied to all levels. The progressions are also shown.

Time – Amount of time with players is possibly the most important factor to consider. For some coaches, time can be quite limiting and use of the time with players needs to be on priority aspects of the game. My suggestion to those coaches with limited time with their players is to attempt to include these into the warm-up. The footwork drills can form part of warm-ups for sessions and games. Alternatively, choose a lifting and jumping drill for ten minutes prior to a lineout practice. The net effect over several months will show improvements in the players

Equipment and facilities – The equipment used in all of these exercises is relatively simple and substitutes can easily be made while still maintaining the essentials of the concept. Most footwork drills only use cones and most clubs and schools will have a tackle tube for lifting. Medicine balls and ladders are easily obtainable. Some of the exercises are more effectively done indoors and each coach will need to work out for himself which exercise is best practised indoors or outdoors.