

ATTACKING THE 13 CHANNEL.

By TOSH ASKEW.

Tosh Askew was the England U19 coach and took the side to the recent World Cup. He has been in this position since 2000, when he was assistant coach and he has been in charge 2003 – 2005. He has recently been appointed as an assistant to Brian Ashton and John Wells as skills coach to England 'A'.

He presented a session to coaches at the Midlands Conference 2005 on attacking the 13 channel and how to develop effective footwork to make that possible,

Tosh started by suggesting to the coaches that he was not there to give them answers and drills on how to attack; he felt there would be more value in the whole group discussing how we can all develop a common theme in the game to turn attack back into a preeminent position over defence.

He did not subscribe to the attitude that defence wins games and firmly believes that wider attacks have been neglected in the showpiece of the game, last season's Zurich Premiership and now the Guinness Premiership, and even England. In top matches, defenders are regularly seen crowding around the contact area – yet the possession is *still* boshed up time and time again in the manner of poor rugby league of a few years ago.

It would appear that the game has forsaken the art of developing fast feet and hands to move defences. The skills may be practised in training but they do not show too regularly when the game starts and guile seems to have been sacrificed for power and size. One of the unfortunate end results is the increasing injury list and the ever-decreasing career life-expectancy for top players. In a recent injury audit, it was found that the average injury absenteeism from the game is *sixty nine days per player per annum* at the top end of rugby.

He suggested that we do need to go back to developing skill, pace and adventure to stretch defences. Coaches have to develop players' skills to create holes by forcing the defence to get wider so that the real threats of pace, numbers and lines of run will dominate the game rather than the current 'bosh is king' approach.



1. THE MOST IMPORTANT SPACE IN THE GAME IS THAT BETWEEN THE ATTACK AND THE DEFENCE.

The coaches were invited to suggest what the requirements are to play a wider game with their squads. The suggestions below are in no order of merit, but they are what the coaches themselves suggested:

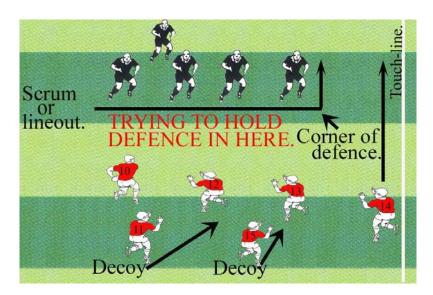
- Fitness.
- The ability to win good set-piece possession.
- Helpful conditions in weather and pitch surface/quality.
- Positive players' attitude.
- Game understanding.
- Handling ability *throughout* the team.
- Ball retention and recycling skills.
- Vision to spot a potential space, then the skills to hold that space open while the decision-making process takes the attack to that point.
- Awareness of depth and width of both attack and defence.
- Discipline and work ethic throughout the team.
- Pace and perseverance.

2. THE BALANCE BETWEEN WINNING AND PLAYER DEVELOPMENT.

- Do we put players into the gym too early and sacrifice skills and playing the game? New Zealand may well have a better model for their young players, who do not take up weights till they reach the age of eighteen. They concentrate more on playing the game and the skills that are needed to play it well. At the recent U19 World Cup, Tosh discussed the problem with the New Zealand coaches and was amazed to hear them say that their players were envious of the England players' physiques and would hate to have to change close to them. When it came down to who played rugby more effectively and skilfully, however, the smaller Kiwis were far advanced in skills, vision and execution.
- When opponents can match your physicality, skill levels will be the deciding factor in winning.
- English rugby is too one-paced and there is little sense of urgency. We
 complete our moves too far back in attack, which allows the defence simply to
 hold off then step up when the ponderous attacking move has been finished
 and we are not good at changing the depth and pace of the attack by enough
 players at the same time.



3. THE BASICS OF EFFECTIVE, WIDE BACK PLAY IS TO GET THE BALL AROUND THE CORNER OF THE DEFENCE WITHOUT THE CORNER BEING ALLOWED TO MOVE FURTHER TOWARDS THE TOUCHLINE.



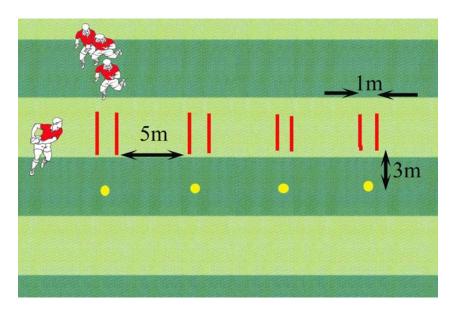
The diagram above shows the shape of what was often practised by the U19 squad. Possession could be from scrum or lineout. From the scrum, the wheel with the right prop up was encouraged to take the opposition back-row away from the open-side back play then the possession went immediately to the backs without any contrived collisions or taking the ball into contact. From a lineout, there could be one hit into a tackle before the ball was quickly recycled.

- 10 and 12 were encouraged to try to attract the defenders into what was happening in their area.
- Whatever they tried, the end result had to be that the defence was not allowed to slide sideways towards the open-side touch-line.
- 11 and 15 were encouraged to run into all plays and to develop their vision of what their role should be; are they decoy runners or can they hit a space?
- All plays are to end in a score if the attack can achieve that. Scoring is more
 important than carrying on with the practice when it develops into forwards
 hitting in.
- The big problem that players were encouraged to solve is this: how can you best attract defences that are too far away from the attack and how can the skills of the attack keep the defenders honest?

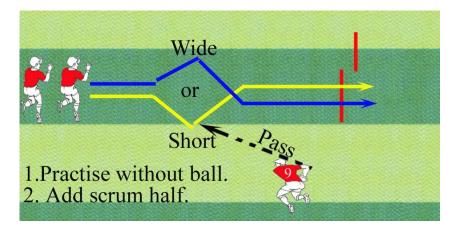


PRACTICAL SESSION.

The starting point of the practical content was footwork before *and* after receipt of the ball so that defenders are not comfortable at any stage of a handling movement. Ski poles were used as targets for the players and were set out as in diagram 2.



Players line up behind their poles and practise a change of direction before they receive the ball and before entering the poles. Once through the poles, they must straighten up. The practice can start without a ball so that the players get used to the footwork that is required and they must try to keep their chest facing the opposition try line as they go through the poles. They must also be in control of their running speed and balance so that the appropriate pass can be given.

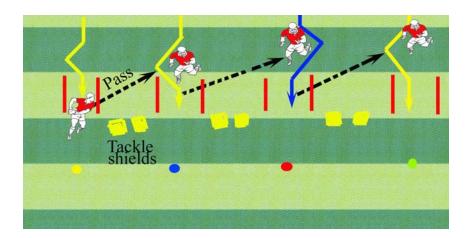




A scrum-half can be introduced later and his pass goes where the receiver asks for it to be placed. The pass can be one of (i) deep, (ii) short or (iii) flat and the runner makes his 'in to out' move before catching the ball.

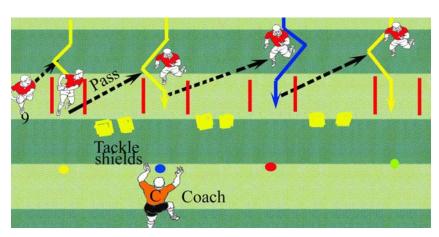
The movements must be realistic so that a defender(s) might be interested if the same movement were reproduced in a game. Effective footwork is the key and has to be stressed at all times.

The practice progressed to groups of four players running together through their channels.



The players must run the same lines as before. Each player should use changing footwork and he goes through his gate before passing back to the next player, who receives the ball *before* he gets to his gate. If the pass is early, the ball will be given before the next player has stepped; too late and he will be on the tackle line and unable to pass.

Once the players have mastered this skill, the coach can make decision-making more complex and ensure that the players are looking up at where the defenders will be in a game. The coach holds two coloured cards, yellow and blue, and faces the players.





He stands behind one of the four coloured cones (yellow, blue, red and green) and holds up one of the cards. This signal can become progressively late as the players improve. The yellow card is a signal for a pass to the next available channel; the blue card demands a miss pass across the next player and any pass that is given must be made before the player goes through the gate. The coach should start behind the yellow cone and he can change his position once the players are comfortable with what is being demanded.

The players must be encouraged to maintain their stepping and change of direction before getting the ball, even when the demands become difficult. The purpose of all the skill work here is the unsettle defenders to try to work a gap or a weakness in a defensive formation.

As the players improve, you can add your own club moves into the structure of the practice. Be aware when you introduce them that the gates are your tackle line.