

CONTACT SKILLS AT THE BREAKDOWN

By
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Every action has a reaction and a ruck is the consequence of what is often a poor decision or a good tackle. Players must be encouraged to aim for the weak points of a tackle with good footwork and/or off loads. The man in possession must **control the contact** to the best of his ability.

APPROACHING THE CONTACT is the time that the player should be thinking about what to do; the contact phase is too late for the best decisions. When the tackle seems inevitable the player must get his body before the ball. The defender must not be able to play the ball in the tackle and players, especially young ones, should be encouraged to move the ball slightly back in the stance to make sure that it is safe from defenders. It should always be held in two hands so that it is held strongly in the tackle. But this allows an offload to be made if that is the best course of action.

Practise evasive running often. Get players to run at a defender many times to work out how to develop their own sidestep and always encourage them to offset the tackler from where he wants to be. Ask questions of the defence and the most useful tool is the feet.

Once contact is made, players have to **fight the ground** and they must not go down lamely. Get them to continue the footwork to drive forwards as long as possible so the support can get into their best position to assist. A man who hits the ground immediately at the tackle has probably given up that possession.

CLEAN AND DIRTY BALL.

We want **clean** ball whenever it can be presented. This is possession that you can play from, the cleaners have gone beyond and the supporting runners can see because it has been effectively presented. **Dirty** ball allows the opponents to form an organised defence, is held too close to the tackled player's body, it is not well presented, the cleaners have not freed it up and the result is poor possession.

Dirty ball requires a great deal of effort to get it back on track.

- The ball carrier has to work beyond the point of the ball and he has to drive forwards so that the tackler does not continue to dominate.
- He has to use knees and elbows to propel himself from a weak position to a stronger one so that he can place the ball on his terms rather than the tackler's.
- When the tackled player has to hit the ground he should push the ball back as far as he can with hands on the ball all the time; it should not be rolled back. The reason for getting the ball away from the body is that it forces any opponent who tries to steal the ball into a weak position. If the tackled player holds the ball close to him, the opponent simply has to adopt a strong squat position and he can lift the ball on his terms when he is very difficult to move.



If, however, he places the ball well back the would-be stealer is stretching and is in a weak position that is much easier to clean out.



The general rule for players at a ruck is that they should not go in unless they have something to do. Too many players charge blindly into a ruck because it is there and they have not worked out their role. This is not to say that players should not go in, rather that they should think about the process. They should always scan the situation and try to work out what their best contribution will be. The first man to the tackle should always work himself past the ball unless it can be picked up. The bridge position is not positive enough and it is far better to work hard to place a body between the ball and the defenders.

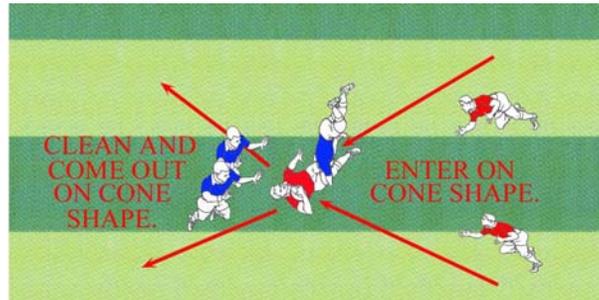
If the defenders manage to get a stealer into position, the first supporting attacker must get below his body height to force him up and out. The target should be the player's chest and he must quickly get his own hands between those of the stealer.



He should then drive forwards and push the stealer's hands out as that is his weakest point. The support player then has to drive past the ball by using his strong quads in a low body position that does not allow a high and potentially weak neck position.

- Look carefully on the way in. Top speed is not essential.
- Aim for accuracy – do not miss the intended target.
- For young players in practice, it can help to make them go on one knee just before going in to assist. This slows down the movement and gets them into a low body position.
- If players go in too hard or too fast, they often end up slipping over the top of the ball/tackle and the opponents have a free steal. Rushing in is not the answer but each player has to do something useful on arrival.
- Get players to see their support role body position as the one they would adopt at a tackle. Face forwards, drop low and drive the legs powerfully forwards.
- Practise decision-making and effectiveness with the ball carrier on the floor and have two shield carriers come in from different angles and at different times.

- Make players think about assessing the situation and working out what the initial threat is. Too many players are conditioned to hit a body – wherever it is!
- Think of a cone shape at the tackle when you are a support player. Come in on a cone shape and knock them out on a cone shape.



Try to get your players to think of:

- Not going into contact.
- Once it is inevitable, use the feet or an offload to beat the defender.
- If the tackle is successful, fight the ground as long as you can.
- Place the ball well back.
- Support players – scan on the way in and have a positive role and impact.
- Work hard to free the ball up quickly so that (a) it does not get shut down and (b) there is not a stack-up of players and the opportunity to play early ball is lost.