

SPIRAL OR ON-END KICK?

BY

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His kicking achievements are many: club points record holder at Coventry for the 1998 season with 333 points; club points record holder at Fylde with 1495 points; National 2 points record for the season 1996 with 404 points at Fylde; most penalties in the 1996 season with 82 penalties at Fylde and Allied Dunbar points record holder during 1996 with 420 points.

As a coach, I am becoming increasingly frustrated with my club kickers over the matter of the distance and accuracy they achieve when kicking from hand. Not only am I frustrated with my own club kickers, but I also watch Premiership or National League games and see that most of the kickers now have adopted the on-end method (Australian Style) for kicks to touch.

I am baffled why any player would be happy to kick the ball twenty to thirty metres when he could easily be achieving forty to fifty, but that is essentially what the on-end advocates are accepting. Give me a kicker who can put my team fifty metres up the park anytime! That's the sort of distance you get from a kicker who can spiral the ball into touch, yet so often kickers are just happy to put the ball into touch with a small gain in territory.

What is the game about? Surely the basic principle is to go forward as far as you can from any play(s). When you get a penalty (or a free-kick in some circumstances) and the decision is to go for touch, you want to see the ball fly as far as possible into the opponents' territory. If you can get close to their goal line, the opportunity to drive after the lineout is a real possibility as a successfully executed kick should have got you to within (at most) ten metres of their goal line.

Don't get me wrong, backs, I am a massive advocate of open running rugby, but I am also an advocate of playing to your strengths too. As I see the game at the moment however, kickers are more than likely to be content to kick the ball roughly to the 22m line, thus making it very difficult indeed to score from a catch and drive,

especially as the lineout these days is strongly contested and you are not always guaranteed your own ball in the lineout.

Before I continue, I will concede one point in favour of the on-end kick. A right-footed kicker, who is kicking to touch on the right hand side of the pitch, (or left-footed to left touch kick) might usefully employ the method and I would accept that, but there could be a never-ending debate on that too.

Let's look at the arguments relating to the two kicks.

Spiral kick.

When you spiral kick the ball, the pure fact of the dynamics, no matter how scientific we get about this, is that the ball will travel further by cutting through the air than it would have travelled with the on-end kick. The spin seems to cut the ball through the air.

You will also see that the ball curves to the left when a right-footed kicker kicks to the left and a curve right will be achieved by a left-footed kicker kicking right. This allows you to hit the ball further and to curl it into touch at a greater distance from where the kick took place. Any kicker worth his salt should be able to put the ball into touch between forty and fifty metres upfield. With the spiral kick you really only have one issue, which is with the slice. If the kicker does not concentrate on keeping his head down and following through, there is a possibility of a sliced kick infield.

On-end kick.

Kicking the ball on the smallest part of the ball is, for me, a risk in itself. You really do have to be a very skilled and proficient kicker to get this one right most of the time. The likes of Jonny Wilkinson and Charlie Hodgson can do this as well as I have seen any player perform it, but even these players don't make the ground they should. To me, the simple dynamics of the ball shape going through the air will affect the distance a great deal.

One benefit of this kick, I will admit, is that you can get accuracy. However, having said that, your potential length of kick is severely compromised, so you are left with accuracy at the expense of length (and probable accuracy if the kicker has not practised properly). This can be a significant loss when distance is impaired. A right footer kicking to touch on the left side of the pitch is able to hit a direct line into touch with no curve on the ball but he will achieve no great distance as the very action is imposing restrictions on the potential length of kick. Some club players will struggle to kick further than twenty to thirty metres with the method, though elite players will achieve more.

A clear example of these different styles from top players was there for all to see in the recent Six Nations. England's Charlie Hodgson, who kicks on-end, was injured and replaced by Andy Goode, who kicks spiral. Who kicked more successfully? Who

gained more distance and who had the better accuracy? It seemed fairly obvious to me that the answer was Andy Goode.

The on-end kick came to us from Aussie Rules. They use this kick because their game demands more accuracy as their target area is much smaller than ours in Rugby Union. Often their target is no wider than the width of a person, so the need for accuracy is much greater. If you think about it, their playing area is a cricket pitch and the idea is basically to kick the ball into each other's hands so they essentially get a free kick to get the ball to another team mate; that is the initial (and narrow) target. To score, they have to get the ball between the posts, which is also a very difficult task, and the target area is slightly bigger than when aiming for a player, but it is still only about fifteen feet.

This technique was then adopted by Australian Rugby League, which in turn was passed on to Rugby League here in England. Then some bright spark thought it would be a wonderful idea to bring into Rugby Union here as, the reasoning presumably went, it must be the best method if the Aussies use it.

However, Rugby League is a totally different beast from Union when it comes to kicking. They don't necessarily need to kick a great distance into touch as their main priority is getting the ball back for six more tackles, which in Rugby League is vital. Union is far more territorially based from where the kick to touch crosses the line, especially when the catch and drive is to be used from a lineout. There are also far more turnovers in Union than in League.

I strongly believe that the spiral kick should be coached and practised if teams want greater distance from the kickers from hand. My thoughts are based on watching the modern game and on my own experiences as a kicker who now coaches. It may be fine for the Hodgsons and the Wilkinsons to kick the ball end-on, but that may not work nearly as well for the rest of the kickers in the game.