

## KICKING BY ANDY DIXON.

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In an article of mine on scoring skills, I purposely avoided the subject of kicking, placing it in neither the 'scoring' nor 'possession' skill sections. Of course you can score from a kick; drop goals, penalties and conversions all add points but they are also strongly associated with possession. Other kicks can give away the ball and, though the ball can be regained from opponents, much depends on the situation and how the players react immediately after their side kicks. This article looks at kicking in open play only; kicks from set-pieces will be dealt with in a later article.

Yes, I know I was a front row player most of my time. Perhaps, though, listening to an old prop who gets frustrated at the use of completely indiscriminate kicking might give a few ideas to the backs and the coaches who give them freedom with the boot. I am not against kicking; it is a powerful weapon in any team's armoury, but I am against *indiscriminate* kicking and the poor decision-making associated with it - probably due to neither the kicker nor the decision-making process having enough practice time.

As with all weapons, there are set rules for their use and if we don't follow them we get hurt - not bodily in this case, but hurt by losing possession, territory or by points scored against. Any weapon is particularly dangerous in an untrained hand, but we let our players loose with a loaded foot, safety catch off and let them point it in any direction they want. We need to have some firing range rules.

The bedrock for the principles of kicking in open play must be to accept that poor kicking gives away possession and this alone is fundamental to how we understand the use of kicking. It should be accepted that the loss of possession may be fleeting, but the very moment we let the ball fall from our hands, we are no longer in possession; that is a fact. It is also accepted that just because we are no longer in possession it doesn't meant the opposition are and it doesn't necessarily always mean danger. However, the fact remains that when we don't have the ball we can't score, irrespective of how good we are at anything else.

Once we accept that kicking loses possession, we can look at three principles of chasing, re-possession and turning the defence.



## Chasers

Every kick must be chased by someone. It doesn't matter where we are on the pitch, what situation we are in, what type of kick is used; all kicks must be chased and chased hard. Even kicks to touch should be chased, they might not find touch or the opposition might take a quick throw in, both of which are ideal opportunities to counter attack for the alert opposition. Without chasers, everyone in front of the kicker remains offside, which also allows the opposition space and time to move and construct an attacking formation.

Don't plan on the kicker being the chaser, they don't always make it past an attempted charge-down or late tackle and are often impeded by opposition players on their slow run back. If we accept that there must be a separate chaser, or chasers, then this needs players coming from behind the kicker which, in turn, requires kicker and chasers to be communicating and watching each other all the time. It necessarily follows that indiscriminate kicking is unlikely to have this communication and vision and such kicks will not be chased.

Indiscriminate or unplanned kicks tend to come from panic situations when the ball carrier loses or runs out of support - or does not have the technical skills to control the situation. More increasingly, however, they seem to come from a complete lack of ideas of what to do; some players have no store of experiences to draw on and no practice under game conditions during coaching sessions. It is inconceivable that, even at the highest levels, some players can have no idea of what to do with the ball when they are closed down, but to just "hoof" the ball is ridiculous. We don't introduce kicking until the U11 age grade, so they have to get out of tough situations by playing handling rugby. Perhaps if we sent our players to join the 10 year olds we might get rid of this sloppy side of our play.

## **Re-possession**

Every kick must be executed with the aim to immediately re-possess the ball. Even a ball kicked to touch should be chased hard by our own side, first to be there in case the opposition attempts a quick throw in. If we don't believe we can get the ball back, we won't even begin to try; if we don't even try we may as well just hand the ball to the opposition anyway.

Re-possession is closely linked to having chasers, which shows how doubly important it is to have fast, confident chasers working off set plays or audible calls from broken play.

## Turning the defence

Every kick must be executed so that it turns defenders around, effectively making them run backwards (or sometimes sideways in the case of the full back) from a virtual standing start. Any kick that can be fielded by a player coming forward onto it, particularly with the space and time to pick up speed, should be considered to be a failed kick unless the chaser can get there before any acceleration has taken place.

This is important when we use the chip behind or grub through when faced with a defender coming at the ball carrier and both players are running at near full pace. The



ball carrier may lose a bit of speed as the kick is made but the defender has to stop, turn around and then accelerate in the opposite direction.

The whole principle of turning the defence also includes the other two principles where we have a chaser, or chasers, and we are looking to regain the ball. There does seem to be a decline in the success of this type of play but analysis usually shows that the timing of the kick was wrong. It will often have been executed too early so the defender has time to turn, the kicker doesn't have a chaser with him or his own chase is half-hearted, and/or, all too often the kick is poorly placed so that it is easily and quickly picked up by another defender - and not the one who the kicker is trying to turn and beat. We shouldn't be using this type of play in traffic; it is a one-on-one tactic that can only work using all three principles shown above.