

## PRACTICES AND DRILLS TO HELP PLAYERS TO ENJOY RUGBY BY STEVE JOHNSON.

*Steve Johnson has been involved in Japanese rugby for thirty years, first as a player for the Kobe Regatta and Athletic Club, then as a guest coach for Fushimi Technical High School, full coach of The Yamaha Rugby Club and since 1997 as PE teacher and coach at Hamamatsu Technical High School. Steve was possibly the first foreign coach to be involved in high school rugby and was certainly the first full-time high school coach. His mantra of “Enjoy Rugby” attracted a lot of media attention, because until recently the concept of sport being enjoyable was alien to people in Japanese sports circles. He has been featured on Japan’s “News Station”, which is rather like the former “News at Ten” in England and other local television programmes. From April 2006, Steve will be working at Hamamatsu University.*

The recent article by Tosh Askew (10th January 2006) on attacking the 13 channel gave me the opportunity to think about (a) why there is such an apparent lack of vision shown by the England backs in recent games and (b) how to try to find ways to overcome the deficiencies if such shortcomings appear in our own teams.

I start by assuming that the players can actually perform the required passes, but there has to be communication about *when* the pass is required and *what type* (short/long etc) of pass is needed in the circumstances. These don’t always happen naturally and players often need help through coaching, so, to try to increase individual vision and awareness by the ball-carrier and potential receivers, I try to introduce practices in which receivers come in from different angles; the added benefit is that we potentially confuse the defenders into hesitating for a crucial split second.

Most of the practices that I have developed have the ball carrier running straight, as I believe that that line of run will always hold in the immediate defender(s) and that will release space for the support runners. (If the defender(s) slips sideways towards the support runners, the ball carrier must always be encouraged to spot the movement and keep running straight ahead.) If there is one basic difference between northern and southern hemisphere open play, it is that the southern hemisphere players start their attacking run and they all attack different spaces at the same time; the northern players seem only interested in crashing individually through defences. Perhaps some of the drills that I suggest here can help coaches with this apparent problem.

## OPEN PLAY PRACTICES AND DRILLS.

### 1. Passing and receiving.

(a)

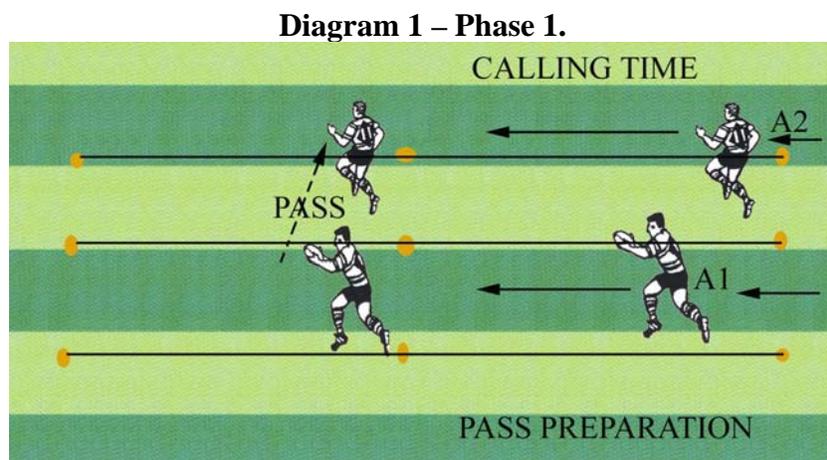
The players line up in pairs at both ends of the channel, which is marked with cones. The passing players always run straight along their line and pass when they reach the mid-point cone.

Receivers run straight and call the direction of the pass as they run. The moment they want the ball they call, “Now”.

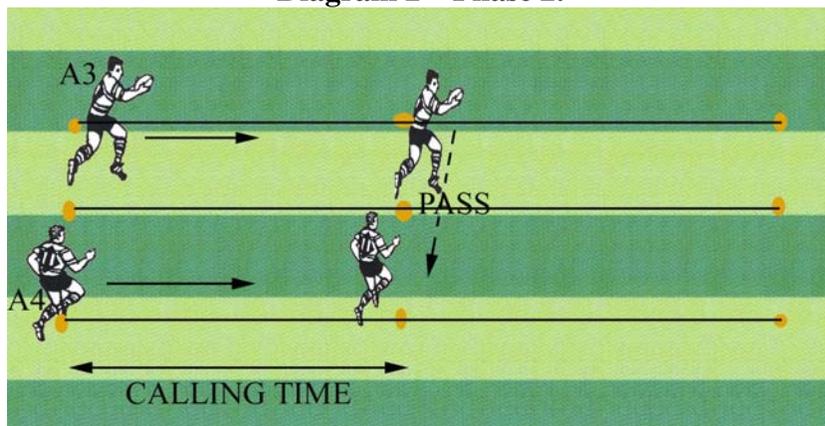
On the first run, the receiver’s call might be, “Right, right, ..... now!”

On receipt, 2 passes to 3 and 3 and 4 go back down the channel from which the ball has come. Players 5 and 6 complete one rotation.

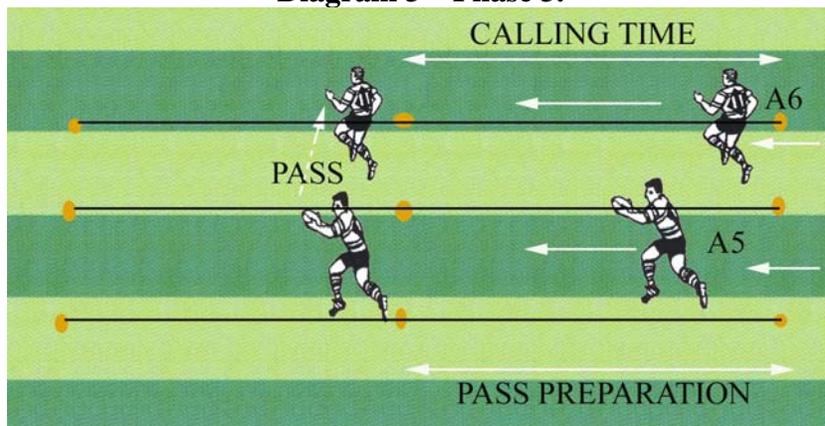
Continue the practice for one minute on passes to the right, then change to passes to the left. Repeat as often and as long as is needed and adjust the speed of the work to suit the level of the players you are coaching.



**Diagram 2 – Phase 2.**



**Diagram 3 – Phase 3.**



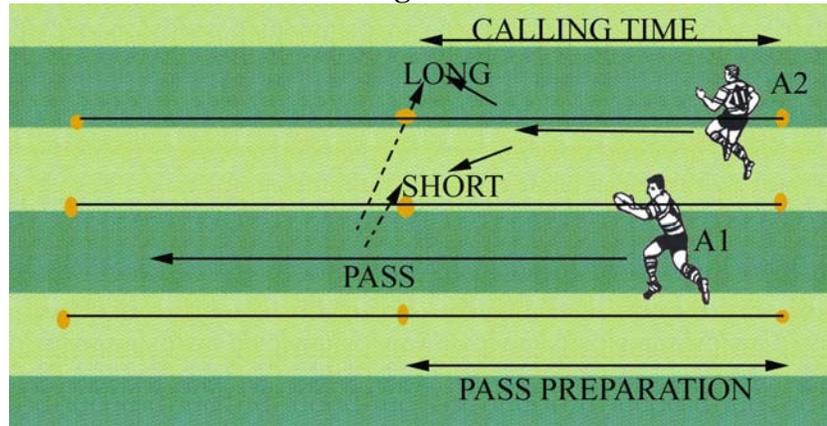
**(b)**

Set up the practice as before. This time the receiver steps suddenly and runs left or right of the mid-point cone in the receiver's line. He makes the appropriate call to the passer and that call might be, "Right, right ..... short... now!"

On receipt, 2 passes to 3 and 3 and 4 go back down the channel. 5 and 6 complete one rotation.

Continue the practice for one minute on passes to the right, then change to passes to the left. Repeat as often and as long as is needed and adjust the speed of the work to suit the level of the players you are coaching.

**Diagram 4.**



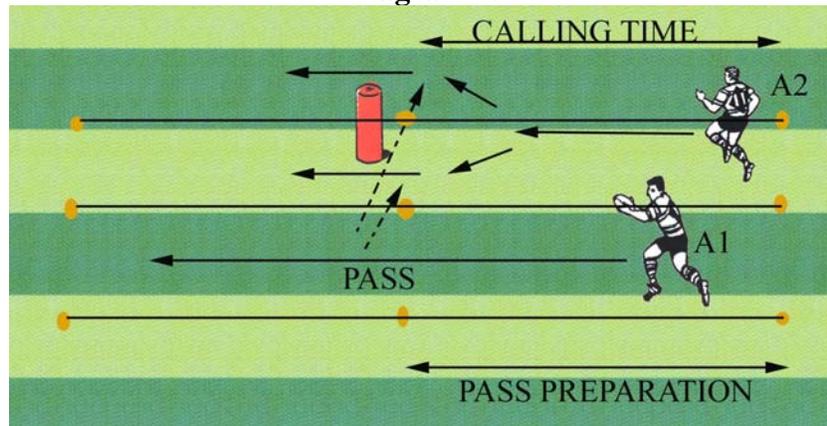
**(c)**

This time, place a tackle bag (representing a defender) in the receiver's channel. The practice is the same as (b) above but the receiver now has to take action to avoid contact

and has to work harder to inform the passer when and how he wants the ball. The timing and execution of the pass have now become more difficult.

Continue as in (b) above.

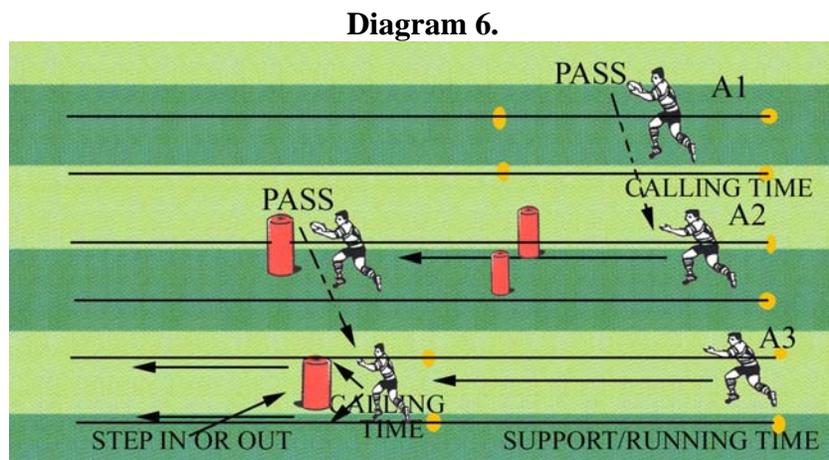
**Diagram 5.**



**(d)**

This is a very difficult extension of the practice. Create three channels and place two tackle bags in the middle channel then one more a few yards after them. Place one tackle bag in the third channel. Calls are as above.

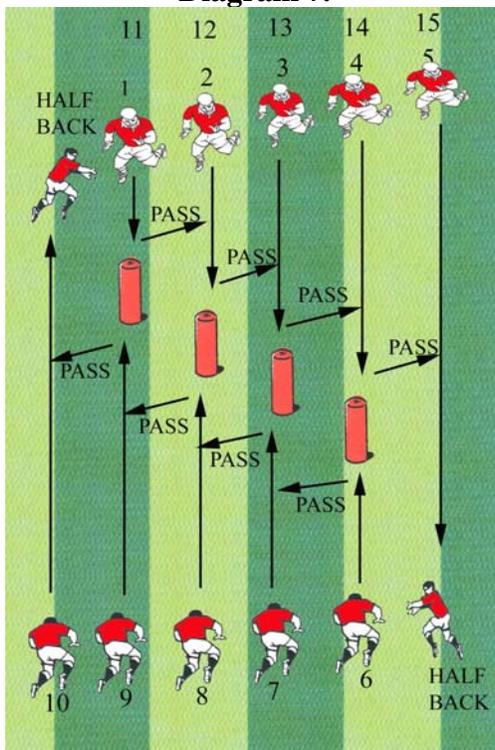
Player 1 passes to 2, who runs between the bags. Player 3 then calls for the type of pass he wants and when he wants it. As the players improve, shorten the distance between the bags in the middle channel.



## 2. Open line passing and receiving.

The players line up in groups of five with a half-back (scrum half). The tackle bags are lined up as shown in the diagram and represent defenders. As the players become more skilled, the second, third and fourth bags can be moved forward. Be aware, though, that this practice is more difficult than it looks.

**Diagram 7.**



On the coach's command, the half-back passes to 1, who runs straight at his bag and delivers a good pass to 2. After passing, each player has to avoid his bag and continue to the end.

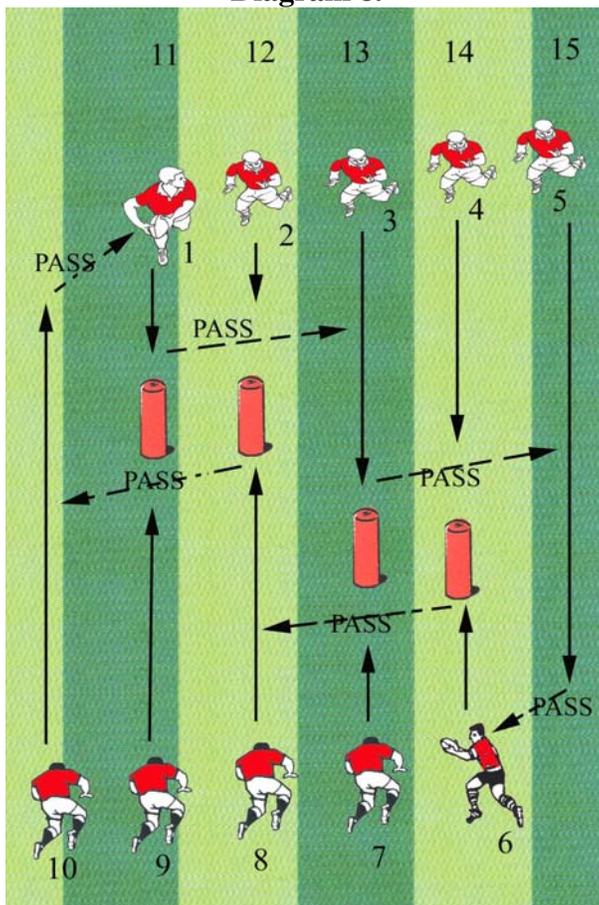
Player 5 runs through, takes his pass then passes to the waiting half-back at the other end, who starts his line off to go down the channel.

Keep changing players' positions as often as possible.

### **3. Open line passing using cut/miss passes.**

The players line up as in the practice above, but the tackle bags are realigned so that if 1 passes to 2, it would be a 'hospital pass'. So 1 has to deliver a cut/miss pass to 3, who runs at his tackle bag before delivering the ball to 5 and the process is repeated as in the diagram below when 5 passes to 6 etc.

**Diagram 8.**



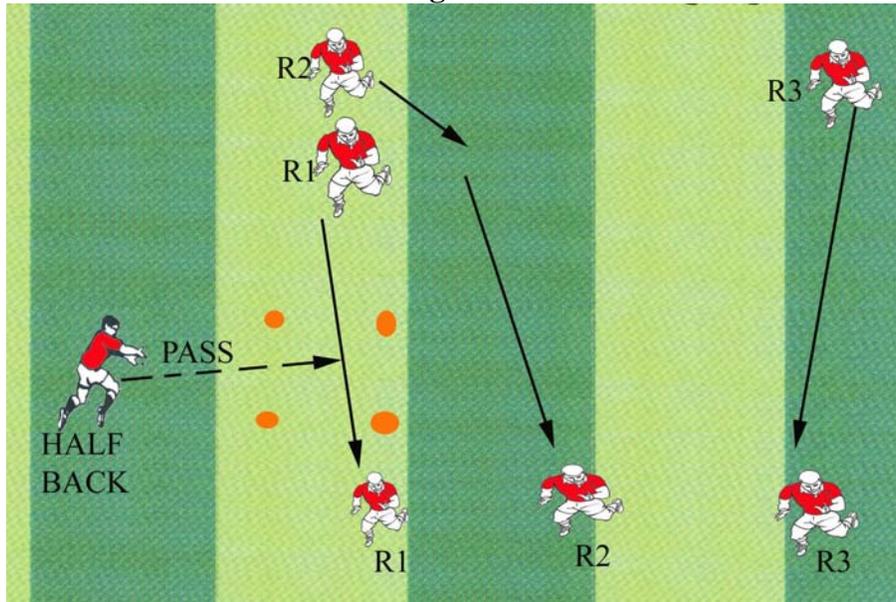
#### **4. Taking the ball at speed.**

**(a)**

This is a critically important issue in coaching rugby. To create the situation, put down four markers in a box shape (as shown below) and this is the area into which the half-back must pass. In this practice the receivers must decide for themselves how far away from the box they need to start so that they can be moving at speed when they take the pass. (In the diagram, R = receiver.)

R1 takes a flat pass from the half-back. R2, 'the Owner' (our own term for this critical player), comes from a hidden position behind R1 to take an open pass. R3 comes from a wide position to take a short pass, which will make the passing easier for R2.

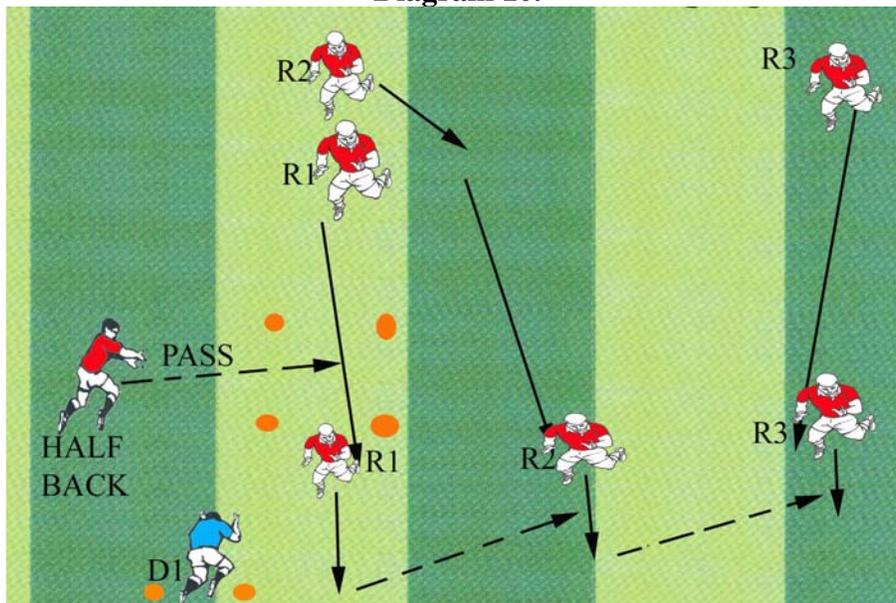
**Diagram 9.**



There is no defence but do look out for timing of the pass from R2 and the angle of R3.

**(b) Adding the defence.**

**Diagram 10.**

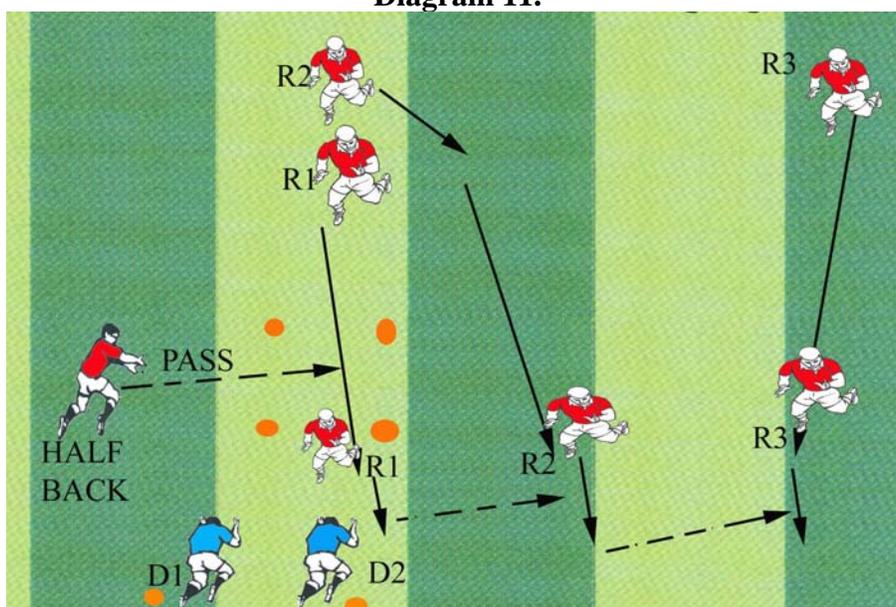


This is virtually the same as 4(a) but there is the complication of one defender (D1), who can move forward only when the ball is passed to R1. R1 must run straight to hold the defender in and must pass to R2 so that the defender cannot get to him.

If D1 moves early and outside R1, R1 must hold his running line to beat D1 on the defender's inside.

**(c) Increasing the defence.**

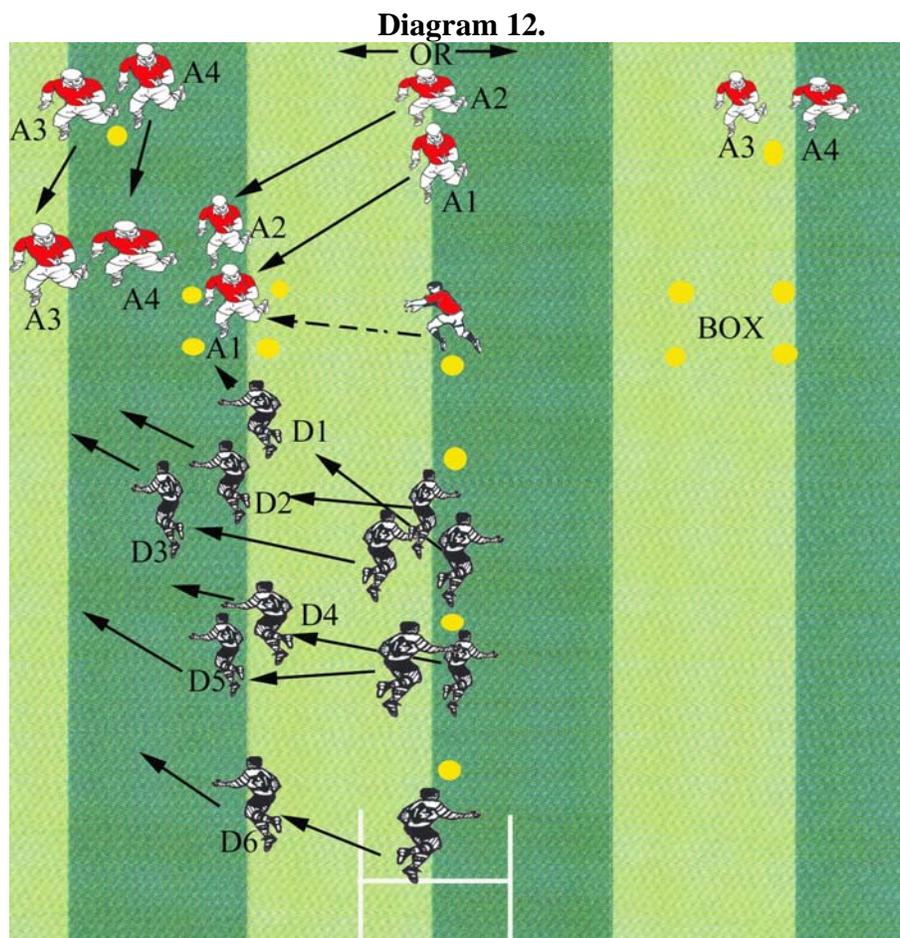
**Diagram 11.**



There are now two defenders, who can only move when the ball is passed to R1 and this places far more pressure on R2 than on R1. Coaches will need to adjust how far away the defenders start from the attacking box, as this will vary depending on the ability of the players.

Though this is a practice that tests timing of a pass, the attackers must be aware of when the defence has gone wide too soon and they must have the confidence *not to pass and keep running straight.*

## 5. Four v three + two + one.



### Setting up.

Divide the squad into two teams, attack and defence. As you will see from the diagram above, two attackers are directly behind the half-back and they choose which side they want to attack. There are more attackers in a wide position on both sides. Defenders line up by their defensive cones.

### Attack.

- The central front attacker (A1) runs left or right but shouts out his decision so all the attackers know which way he is to go.
- When the receiver is ready for the pass in the box, he must call to the half-back.
- At the same time as A1 starts his run, A2 goes behind him in an 'Owner' position so that, if necessary, he can (a) clean up a bad pass, (b) take a short pop pass from A1 or (c) support A1 in ruck or maul if he is tackled.
- A3 runs from wide to attract the outside defender, thereby creating space for A4, who runs straight.
- Thus A1 is presented with a range of options to choose.

### Defence.

- As soon as the front three defenders see A1 run, they are allowed to leave the central cone and run sideways to the initial defence point.
- They may not move forward till a pass is made, when they can move up and out as necessary.
- Defenders 4 and 5 are allowed to move out when they see the half-back pass the ball.
- Defender 6 is allowed to move when he sees the first receiver catch the ball.

### Continuity.

- Each attack continues as long as the attackers have the ball in a viable position.
- Defence is made with a holding tackle and the practice does not work well with touch-rugby 'tackles'.
- If an attacker is held, he goes to ground (defenders are not allowed to poach) and another attacker comes in to act as half-back.
- Continue until a try is scored or the defenders intercept a pass.
- As soon as the action stops the next attacking wave starts.
- Recommended time for each attacking team – seven minutes. Go for longer and boredom can set in.

### Coaching points.

- We want to create a situation where all players are comfortable taking a flat pass.
- We found that there has to be a calling system so that the receiver could take the ball at speed.
- The half-back has to learn to trust the call, knowing the receiver will be there.
- We want to create a play where a player coming from a previous play will arrive at a good angle.
- A2 always supports from behind A1.
- Having A3 running a short line holds the wide defence in and helps A1 with his decision making.
- The second and third lines of defence ensure that the attackers focus all the way through the practice until they score.