

FURTHER COMMENTS ON THE RUCK

BY

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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.

Introduction:

I read the article ‘The Two-Man Drop’ by Ray Schwarz (Technical Journal Archive: Winter, 2004) with great interest and in my coaching in Japan we worked at ways of developing the idea. We went even further and developed four kinds of ruck.

- 1) Standard ruck.
- 2) Quick ruck.
- 3) Double ruck (Ray Schwarz’s idea).
- 4) Call to maul from what was looking like a ruck situation that did not develop (in other words, the tackle was not completed so there was no need to ruck).

However, we found ourselves really struggling, because, unlike in previous years when we had been small and very quick around the field, this year’s team had a relatively slow-moving pack of forwards who were unable to get to these high-speed breakdowns. So, we reasoned that if we could not produce high-speed ruck ball, then the best ball for us would be ruck ball behind the line of defence. The reasoning was that, even if the ball was a bit slow, at least the defenders would be retreating away from the offside line and we could develop continuity in that way. We started working on the aspects below and very rarely did we fail in our ruck play.

We also noted that there is a tendency among teams at the top level to tackle higher than waist level and, although there may be compelling reasons (such as getting to one's feet quickly and attacking the tackled ball), if someone tackles a bit high at our level, we want to run right through them. And so it went; after the first few missed tackles, other teams were forced to start tackling low and that is when we put the *new* ruck system into operation.

The aspects we focused on are as follows:

1. Ball carrier.

a) The hit.

The ball carrier approaches the tackler with the ball in both hands and the firm grip on the ball is most important (see photo 1 – Danny Grewcock).



Photograph 1.© Gettyimages.

As late as he possibly can, he changes direction to attack the space on one side of the defender or the other (see photo 2).



Photograph 2. © Gettyimages.

He alone has this choice of which side to choose and he factors in all the details which aid him in this decision, such as which shoulder he prefers to hit with, which hand he better controls the ball with, etc.

The attacker then puts the ball under the opposite arm (i.e. left shoulder hit means the ball is tucked under the right arm) and his final *big* step is to the side of the tackler's body, making sure that the inside leg is the one that meets the tackler (see photo 3).



Photograph 3. © Gettyimages.

As he lowers his body for the impact, we are looking for:

- Low posture.
- Eyes looking forward.
- Hips down.
- An elbow push from the ribs into the tackler as an extra pressure play if the tackle is a bit high.

With this motion, there is a chance that the would-be tackler will miss the tackle, but we are not counting on that. Hitting with the inside leg makes it possible for the ball carrier to go forward so that he goes to ground beyond the line of defence (see photo 4).



Photograph 4. © Gettyimages.

The most important thing is going to ground behind the tackler – the first defender. Attackers often just hit straight into the tackler and, unless there is a big advantage in power and/or weight, the ball carrier will be put down in front of the tackler. Such a drop will make it easier for the tackler to get to his feet quickly and attack the ball. Certainly the next defender, the ‘poacher’ (‘jackal’ here in Japan), can attack the ball and a turnover in this situation is not hard to imagine. However, if the ball carrier can break the defence line by even one metre, then the next defender has to retire in order to come in through the gate before he can attack the ball, which should give more than enough time for our sweepers to arrive.

b) Going to ground.

Because the ball carrier keeps his body straight and does not turn towards any support players that may be coming up, the next step is (naturally) outside the defender's body line. This means that in principle the defender is only able to use half his body power to effect the tackle. If the attacker is actually tackled, he then takes two short, quick power-driving steps forward as he goes to ground. (If he has not been tackled, he continues on until he is dragged down). These two steps place him behind the line of defence (assuming a one-line defence system on the offside line, which most teams adopt). The ball carrier goes down on the non-ball carrying elbow, with the ball firmly pressed into the stomach – just like scoring a try.

Going to ground behind the line of defence makes it far more difficult for the tackler to attack the ball after getting to his feet. He will have to stand up facing his own goal line and will probably have to straddle the ball carrier with his back to the attacking support players, whose cleanout work will be therefore made much easier. Furthermore, the neighbouring defenders will have to go backwards before being able to enter the tackle zone and any subsequent ruck.

c) Release of the ball.

The attacker knows his running time is over, so he plans his fall so that the ball is tucked underneath him and he goes down on the non-ball carrying (inside) elbow. This means that the ball is momentarily hidden from any potential ball-grabbing defenders. He then quickly rotates his body inward (i.e. towards the tackler), thrusting his backside violently out at any nearby defender and places the ball down in a long arm action. This not only keeps the ball as far away from the defence as possible, but pushing the hips out violently *also* keeps the defence away from the ball. It is very important that in this motion he keeps his body sideways on and does not roll over onto his back – rolling over makes the jackal action easy. “Belly button down,” is the call. In that way, he avoids the ‘squeeze ball’ offence movement and no penalty is given away.

2) 1st support player.

This player goes in hard over the buttocks of the ball carrier using the opposite (inside) shoulder (so if the first attacker steps right, ball carried in the right hand, the support player follows in with the left shoulder), driving him a bit further forward and, when the moment is right, he calls for the ball carrier to go down. As that happens, he continues his drive into any standing defender, using his outside arm, cleaning him out and thereby making the ball available for the third player.

3) 2nd and 3rd support players.

If the defence is limited in numbers, the third arriving player should be able to pick and go, but if there is a blocking defence, the second and third support players continue the clean out, making sure the ball is clean for the scrum half.

Still in pursuit of the double drop....

If the defender is strong and is making it difficult for the first ball carrier to create a ruck, the first support player changes the call to "double". He then rips the ball free and goes

to ground himself. The original ball carrier does all he can to keep the defence at bay, but I don't think this will produce quick ruck ball. We are ensuring continued possession, but by the time the sweepers have arrived, the defence line is usually re-set.

Using these methods, we raised the level of a very ordinary team with no real speed players, to a side that kept the ball for long periods of time and kept a lot of pressure on the defence. Unfortunately, in the 'grand final' we allowed the fastest player on the field enough space to score three times against us and we lost 17-24. The forwards controlled much of the game through these methods explained above, though, and although we were disappointed to lose, our players were satisfied that they had played to the best of their ability.