

OPTIONS AFTER THE WELL-PERFORMED RUCK

\mathbf{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 this year, Steve has been working at Hamamatsu University.

The author refers to channels that are numbered and uses Japanese terminology for describing those channels.

- The zero channel is the space between the set play (or ruck in the article) and the first defender and it would usually be between the back row and the fly half. (In this article it would be the post's channel at the ruck.)
- Channel 1 is the inside centre's channel, one pass after the half back's pass.
- Channel 2 is between the centres.

There is no shortage of advice on how to create a good ruck, but what do you do after that? In spite of what many say, I contend that in a keenly contested, hard-fought game, there is very, very rarely a quick ruck. By that I mean that if the defence is doing its ball-delaying work effectively, there will rarely, if ever, be ball so quick that there are no defenders in place. The only times we see constantly successful speedy rucks is when there is a disparity in the speed of the players in the two teams. So the question we have to address is this: What do you do



with the good, but not especially quick, ruck ball you have?

Of course, all will depend on the kind of team you have. For several years I had a team of small, mobile forwards playing against slower and bigger teams - so we worked on constantly playing the ball wide into channel 2 or 3 in order to pull their bigger forwards around the field, thus tiring them out. Although we were satisfactory at rucking, whenever we got the opportunity we used a lot of offloading plays, and for this the RFU offloading video done by Andy Robinson was really useful.

Last year, however, we had to review our game because we gained a number of big players (good), but they lacked the real stamina needed to move into wide positions to maintain 'our' game. To compound the problem, we also lacked a steady complete set of backs who were able to penetrate the defence (especially at inside centre) – the first time we had experienced this problem for a long time (bad). We were destroyed 69-26 by a team playing 'our' style of rugby and we had to do a very rapid re-think.

The first thing we did was review our style of rucking and we developed the style of ruck that I described in an article published in the Technical Journal on July 4th, 2006. We went to the videos of the (then) Super 12, the All Blacks against the Lions and the Tri-Nations. The ball-retention ability of these Tri-Nations players is the best in the world at the moment and there is one game in particular that I would recommend – the 2005 Australia home game against the Springboks. The Wallabies lost, but there is a series of ball retaining plays that we videoed and watched over and over again.

The key to the Wallabies' ruck ball success was (and still is) George Gregan. He is brilliant at running to the side, drawing defenders to him and releasing the ball at the key moment so that the receiver can often break the tackle and attack the gain line.

It took us about four weeks to perfect the new way of rucking – going to ground over the gain line and driving over was crucial – and we took our time over it. Then we found that we were getting good (clean) ruck ball, but our secondary play was still giving us grief. Essentially, our heavier, less mobile forwards could not get to the successive rucks quickly enough. So, we worked on constantly attacking the zero channel, and the drills that follow show how we developed a way to further retain the ball. Our forwards were big and powerful. Attacking this channel did not involve their running long distances, and they could punch (hopefully) at opposition stand offs, who are usually smaller and not such jolly chaps when they have to be defenders.



Coaches often tell their charges to run at space, but where are these spaces? We developed the following drills to teach our players where these potential spaces may be found. Since our forwards were not that speedy, our aim was always to break the gain line (good), so that the opposition defence line would be in an offside position and would have to retire before returning to defensive duties. The immediate aim was *never* for the forwards to score tries, but to constantly apply pressure, gain a few metres at a time and eventually we would be near enough the goal line to score.

We have found that if all players on the team are *expected* to create and support rucks, even the smallest of our players will go in with gusto at any time in the game - and we had some pretty small players!

Successful rucking at the first phase is not that difficult to achieve if the guidelines in my previous article are adhered to, but after the first phase there has to be a conscious decision on the part of the subsequent receiver on the next point of attack. Here in Japan we see a lot of otherwise very competent players simply running straight into waiting defenders. They continue to ruck well, but eventually, if the teams are of equal ability, they run out of options, or worse, run out of supporting players. Frequently the final ruck has too few players and they concede a penalty for not releasing the ball.

On 15th March 2005, the Technical Journal published Ray Schwarz's article on the 'The Two Man Drop' type of ruck, which interested me, but I could not see exactly when it would be appropriate – especially since we were focusing on rucking in areas where we would have enough players for conventional rucks. But I have come back to it recently and have come to the conclusion that the double drop would be very useful in the third ruck onward. If big forwards are going through more than five or six phases, then there will come a time when there are only two rucking players available and that is the time for the double drop. I hope that the drills I thought out will be of help to those who would like to use the double drop ruck.

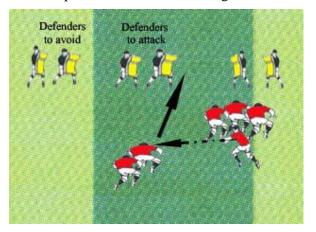
Notes:

- In all of these practices, the first ruck is not contested it is only used as a starting point.
- These plays are only the starting point. We needed to get away from the usual quick ruck in open play mode. Once these signals/calls were in place, then we moved on to successive locations for subsequent rucks.



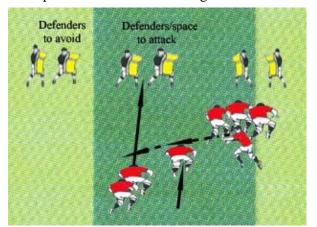
Play 1) Sign/call 'A'.

- Half back makes a short run to the side.
- The receiver takes a short pass as he comes on an angled run back towards the passer.



Play 2) Sign/call 'B'.

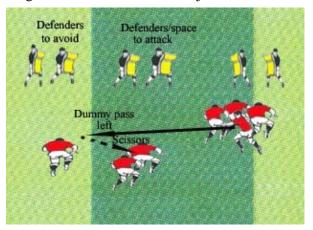
- Half back makes a short run to the side
- Dummy runner goes straight.
- Receiver takes a short pass as he comes on an angled run back towards the passer.





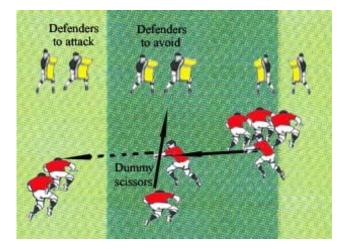
Play 3) Sign/call 'Gregan'.

- Half back makes a short run to the side.
- He looks as if pass will be going wide to the runner who is wide left.
- The scissors pass is given to the runner who has just been crossed.



Play 4) Sign/call 'Mayday'.

- Half back runs to the side.
- Dummy runner goes on a scissors course/line.
- Half back gives a long(ish) pass to the outside receiver.





Play 5) Sign/call 'Open'.

- The half back does not run sideways.
- He gives a normal pass to the receiver in the fly half position.
- The receiver goes forward then steps into the space between the waiting defenders.

