

CONTROLLING CONTACT & EFFECTIVE CONTINUITY BY GARETH REES.

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The paper was written as an aide memoir for the 16 Group National and Divisional Coaches as part of a number of resources produced to ensure that players in the national programme receive a consistent diet in respect of core technical and tactical principles.

BASIC PRINCIPLES.

Getting all players to recognise and react to situations similarly builds attacking momentum and results in effective play which is difficult to defend.

Communication is vital. If all players understand where the team is intending to strike, then players can prepare to support effectively, thus giving them an advantage. Try to avoid contact if at all possible. Contact slows down the progress of the ball and gives the opposition a chance to steal the ball, slow it down or get organised defensively.

Keep possession.

The ball carrier must **win the collision** (contest) when it does occur.

The ball carrier must be in control of his body and the ball before he considers ball presentation or the offload.

The ball carrier must run confrontationally to penetrate (mind set) and must try to move defenders as late as possible to dominate any resultant contact situation.

Players on a penetration run/hit up must tighten their grip on the ball.

Present the ball when going forward.

THE ABOVE CREATE PRESSURE

Being tackled is to be expected during the game and is not a major problem. However, losing the ball in contact is.

WINNING THE COLLISION.

- Go forward powerfully when the collision is inevitable. Grip the ball tightly.
- **Foot speed is essential to dominate the defender:**
 - To close the space between the ball carrier and the defence puts pressure on the defender.
 - Create and hit the weak side of the defender.
 - Step pattern: move the defender one way, step forward to the other side then a third step takes the ball carrier into and (hopefully) through the impact (inside leg, powerful drive). At this point, if the tackle is successful, the ball carrier must drive hard with the outside leg to get his hips up and round to at least parallel with the goal line.
 - On going to ground, the ball carrier should initially cover the ball with his upper shoulder, thereby preventing the tackler or his inside shoulder support challenging for the ball. When in control, consider the options. An offload should always be in the player's mind but if the tackle is completed he has to decide on how the ball will be presented, close or long. If the 'long' option is the choice it will make the first defender after the tackler reach for the ball and he will become unstable if he has to reach too far.
 - Trailing players must prepare early and also look beyond the collision to recognise possible attacking options (heads-up play). The scrum half is vital as he must communicate with, and to, the rest of the team.
 - Players on either side of the ball carrier must 'get in behind the ball carrier', (a very important phrase) to ensure continuity. Their job is (i) to leech onto the ball carrier and power him through the contact or, (ii) to be available for an offload or, (iii) to balance the play on the opposite side of the leeching player.

Support players must learn to communicate and to prepare early for helping the ball carrier and everyone is responsible for continuity, whatever each player's immediate role is/was prior to the contact. Further, it is not simply the forwards' responsibility and the wider a side attacks, the greater is the responsibility of the wider players to provide primary support.

OPTIONS FOR THE BALL CARRIER.

The ball carrier has essentially nine options:

- Pass before contact.
- Beat the defender.
- Having attempted to beat the defender but is held, he must get his shoulder past the contact and look to offload.

- Having attempted to beat the defender and is held but not controlled by the tackler, he should stay on his feet and pump his legs vigorously to allow the primary support to leech on and power him through the contact.
- Having attempted to beat the defender but is held as above, a dynamic mini-maul is effected with the help of the immediate support players on a pre-arranged call.
- Having attempted to beat the defender but is held as above, he pumps the legs but is forced to the ground by the tackler. The primary support players must recognise what is happening and call, “Down” to help the rest of the support in their own decision-making.
- Having attempted to beat the defender but is hit without being held by the defender, the ball carrier can hit, recoil (come off) and pop to a runner or pop to a distributor, depending on the level of penetration.
- Tackled and going to ground early – control ball and body then look for offload possibilities (but only if the above control is gained, then see the pass and only then make the pass).
- As above then going to ground and setting the ball up with quality presentation of the ball with awareness of the proximity of support. This is very much the last option.

Making the right decisions in the contact area results in effective ball retention. In essence there are basic decisions to be made by those involved at the contact area, based around one simple question:

“How do I improve the condition of the ball for my team?”

Ball carrier:

- Pass,
- beat,
- power through,
- offload,
- or carry out effective presentation of the ball.

Primary support players:

- First man - does he leech onto the ball carrier if he stays up and power him through the contact,
- and/or be available for the offload out of the tackle?
- If the ball carrier goes to ground, does he ‘blow over’ and clean out the opposition or ‘stick’ over the ball (only if isolated and defensive pressure is great).

Second man – options:

- Balance up the drive to power the ball carrier through,
- assist with the ‘clear out’,
- ‘pick & go’,
- or pop/lift the ball to a runner.

- If the offload comes, the question to ask is, “Can I continue the forward momentum or do I distribute and move the ball away to attempt to penetrate elsewhere?”

Secondary support players:

In essence the basic decisions are the same:

- “**How do I improve the condition of the ball for my team?**”
- “Can I improve the condition of the ball for my team by going into the breakdown?”
- “Should I stay out and create the first or second wave of attack? ”

TEAM PLAY FROM CONTACT.

Wherever the space exists it must be used, therefore teams must:

LOOK – TALK – REACT

All players need to appreciate basic attacking concepts:

- The key communication comes from the players out wide – they have time to scan upfield looking for defensive weaknesses and mismatches.
- Early communication from the first receiver (10 or player in the 10 spot) should override all calls.
- If the ball is quick with a defence scrambling to re-organise itself, then attack the space that exists - wherever it is! There is a range of options such as ‘pick & go’, or passing quickly to mismatches out wide.
- If the defence is spread and organised (probably ball that has been slowed), **go through it** using two waves of attack – first wave runs confrontationally to hold/fix or move the defence, the second to penetrate.
- Slow ball: attack around the fringes with organised support (pick and go/ pick and maul - till momentum has been created) or, attack off the 10 -12 -13 with a second wave, using big men as option runners. Power running to space with support (diamond shape and the ball carrier and support must then be looking for all the earlier mentioned possibilities).

THE IMPORTANCE OF MOMENTUM.

Players need to be aware that momentum will have a significant effect on the defence. Running confrontationally at any defence will result in a change in the defensive alignment:

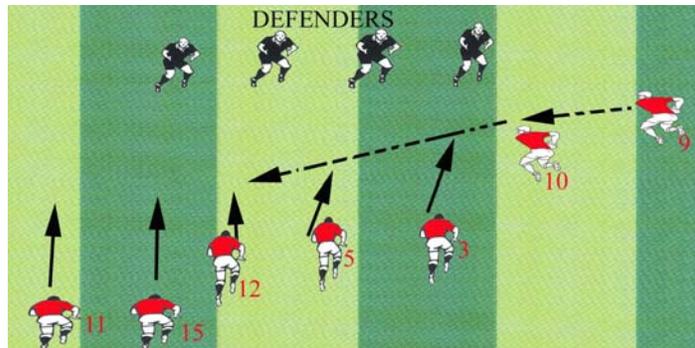
- A player running hard at space will pull defenders to him as they attempt to prevent penetration. This will result in space being created for a support runner.

- If the defender does not react accordingly or he reacts then moves out late, anticipating the pass, the ball carrier must immediately take the space.
- A ‘pick and go’ – or a series of them - a snipe by the 9 or a lift/pop to a runner attacking an undefended fringe will result in drawing in (backward and lateral movement) the lateral defensive line, thereby creating space and time - either in the line or outside it, as the defence is drawn in to stop the direct, ground-making attack.
- Working off the ball to aid the development of momentum. If potential space exists out wide, then powerful and convincing, off the ball decoy running, from out to in, will fix the inside defence. If penetration does not occur immediately this action should act to delay defensive support for the next breakdown.

Depending on skill levels of the players concerned, there are two possibilities with this scenario.

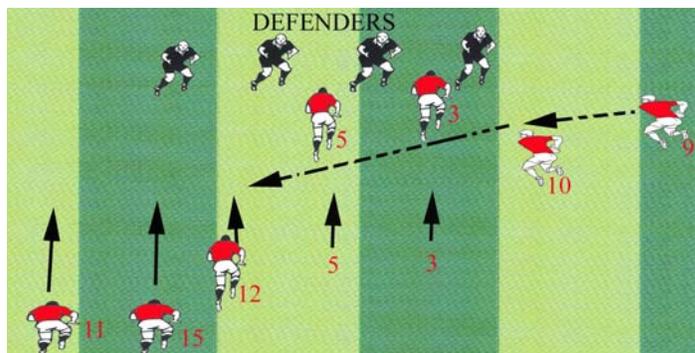
1. Diagram 1. The 10 passes in front of the two players (first two outside the 10). This decoy run holds defenders so that the ball can be passed to a wider receiver. The ploy is probably best suited to younger and/or less skilful players.

Diagram 1.



2. Diagram 2. With more skilful players (and referee allowing) the defence can be held more effectively with a pass *behind* the two decoy runners.

Diagram 2.



Obviously the alignment of the players is slightly different but success does depend on the 10 (or first receiver) being able to throw a very flat pass that is hard and accurate.

Significant momentum can be established by a dynamic driving maul (ball isolated at the back, all players entering from behind the rear foot should ensure that they do not bind onto the new ball carrier. 'KEEP HIM FREE' must be a priority). This is difficult to defend against because:

- When set up properly, there is no contest for possession.
- There should be pace on the ball.
- It gets the opposition defence retreating.
- To stop the drive, the opposition either must either pull it down (probable penalty) or put extra men in, which automatically creates space somewhere else on the field.

Momentum created by dynamic rucking after penetration has occurred is difficult to defend against as:

- The 'pick and go' attacks the least defended part of the pitch (behind the tackle).
- Dynamic rucks allow the 9 to sweep the ball away to the advancing backs, who are scanning for the space in which to attack as the defence retreats and is drawn in.
- Momentum can be established if players have an appreciation of the value of effective offloads. A ball delivered to a runner coming from depth at pace continues the forward momentum, draws defences in whilst also keeping them on the retreat. An effective offload to a support player from a ball carrier who has been stopped at or before the gain line potentially allows the receiver to shift the ball away from the contact area (slightly condensed space) to another player who, playing head-up and scanning options, can attack space or, by using a second wave of attack, can look to penetrate/gain momentum somewhere else.