

ONE DEFENSIVE SYSTEM OR TWO?

BY

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KEY INFLUENCES:

- Brendan Venter – Head Coach at London Irish (1999-2003).
- Gary Gold – Head Coach at London Irish (2003-05).
- Mike Ford – Head Coach at Saracens (2005-06).
- Richard Graham – Backs' coach at Saracens (2006-).
- Personal observation and reflection on the game as a player and coach.

THE DEBATE:

England's new specialist defence coach, Mike Ford, will be one of the key figures as England look to resurrect their hopes of defending the World Cup next year. The former Great Britain rugby league international has already worked as a defence coach with Ireland and the Lions and has also been head coach at Saracens.

He stated his philosophy with, "The best style is a mixture of blitz and drift defence. If we want to do well in the Six Nations and the World Cup next year then you can't have the opposition looking at your defence and being able to say 'England do this every time'. There are some smart coaches and they'll come up with plays to break you down, so you've got to keep the opposition guessing."

The concept behind this paper is to analyse recent trends in defensive patterns, look at the strengths and weaknesses of the different types of system and present a rationale for the future.

THE PAST:

There can be little doubt that since the introduction of professional rugby union in the mid 1990s, the explosion of defensive systems has had the biggest impact on the way the game is played. The advent of daily training has enabled coaches to focus on key

principles of defence such as teamwork, communication and, most importantly, attitude. “Attack wins games, defence wins championships,” is arguably the oldest one in the book when it comes to coaching maxims, but if success is the barometer by which teams are judged then certainly ‘defence’ has put forward a strong case in the last few years. As the rewards for success have rocketed so has accountability and, with all teams looking for that edge, so new training systems and, more importantly, new defensive systems have begun to emerge.

The arrival of individual defence coaches from rugby league had a huge impact on this process. John Muggleton, the ex-Kangaroo, started the trend with the Wallabies in the late 90s and enjoyed immediate success, winning the World Cup in 1999, then Phil Larder led the way in the northern hemisphere with England and their great triumph in 2003. Alongside these, Mike Ford, Dave Ellis and Frank Ponissi are just three of many well known former rugby league players who have emerged as expert defensive gurus in recent seasons; domestically, at least in England, the emergence of the blitz defence has had the biggest impact. Under Great Britain legend Shaun Edwards, Wasps have led the way with three successive Premiership titles using their ‘blitz’ defence, a system adapted from the one that Brendan Venter introduced at London Irish and one that saw the Exiles claim the 2002 Powergen Cup. Prior to that there was only one generally accepted way to defend and that was the ‘drift’, which had held sway in rugby union for many years. Was it just a coincidence that, when Venter retired back to his homeland in the summer of 2003, just a season later South Africa claimed the 2004 Tri Nations with a similarly bold defensive up-and-in policy, reputedly under Venter’s watchful eye?

Stormers’ defensive specialist, Gary Gold, once a disciple of Venter’s at Irish gives an insight into why defences were so influential. With about 40% of tries coming from turnover ball, defence had graduated from being a chore to having the added incentive of forcing tries from turnovers. Gold said weekly sessions on defensive technique were now a must to master the various types of tackles, including the ‘leg tackle’, the ‘push down’ and the ‘double hit’.

THE PRESENT:

Fast forward to the present and we appear to have travelled full circle with these so-called gurus, who for so long held sway in the system; now they are under fire, accused of stifling the game. Has the attack, though, suddenly become the new defence with New Zealand’s success in the last eighteen months?

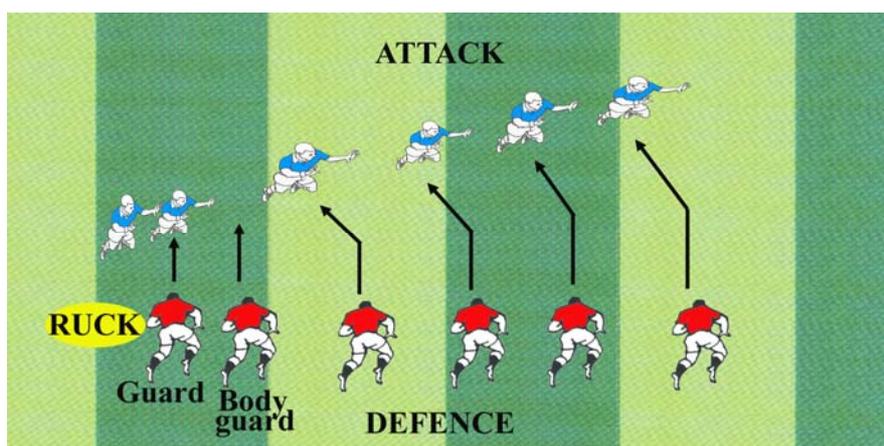
Have we seen a move away from one specific system to one where the players call the shots on the field, depending on the situation they find themselves in? With so much video analysis now taking place in the modern game, every team’s system is intensely scrutinized by the opposition in the lead-up to the game or tournament, weaknesses are

pinpointed and hopefully exposed. So are coaches and players now becoming smarter and are we seeing a combination of traditional drift with up-and-in/blitz style defences? What are the benefits of this and how can it be implemented? Is it recipe for disaster, asking players to make too many decisions on the field, particularly front row players who have just got up from a scrum and must listen intently to a call from the scrum half or fly half as to what defensive system is being implemented at the next breakdown? Lets take a look.

THE 4 UP.

How does it work? (Diagrams 1, 2 and 3)

Diagram 1 – the four up/blitz/rush from phase play.



Phase play defence: It is vital that the guard and bodyguard come up straight at about an arm span apart. They will close off any snipes from the attacking scrum half or any inside passes from the first receiver (usually the fly half). They must not chase the scrum half if he snipes across the line as that would leave holes on the inside again.

After these two have done their job in phase play, each defender gets on the outside of his opponent and comes up hard and fast in a line allowing him to make the tackle on his *inside* shoulder.

Diagram 2 – the four up/blitz/rush from the scrum.

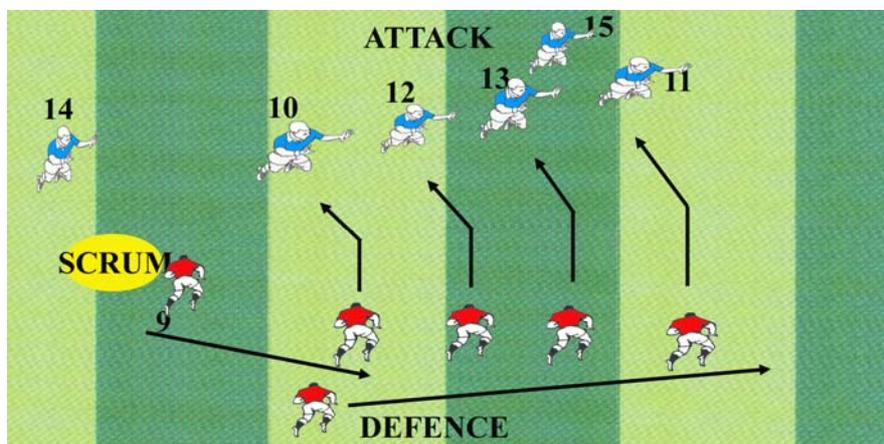
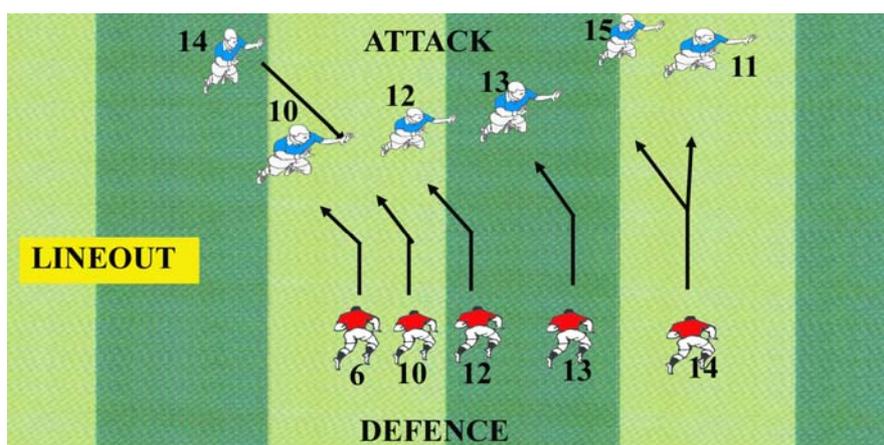


Diagram 3 –the four up/blitz/rush from the lineout.



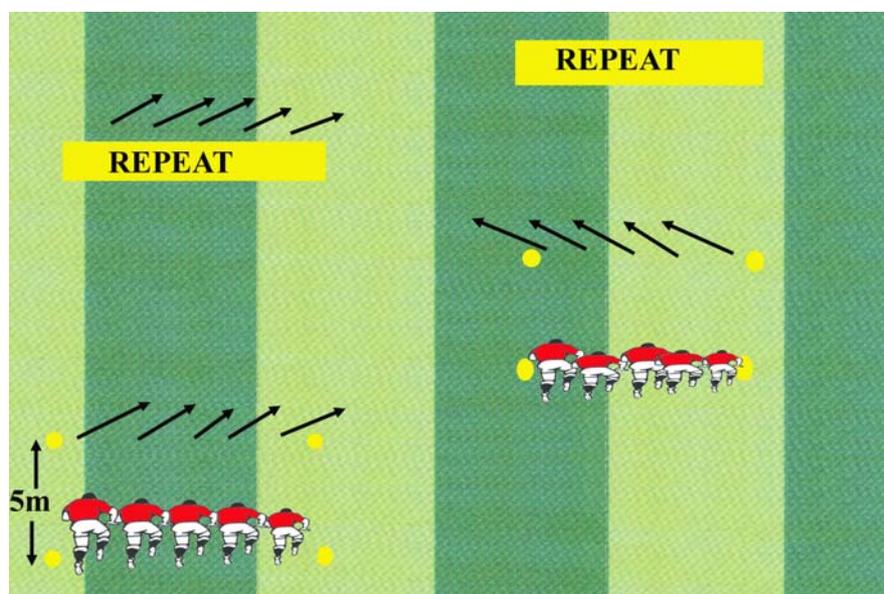
Lineout defence: To give the back line greater width in defence, a common practice is to drop 6 from the lineout. The lineout contesting policy might be compromised, but the trade-off is that it allows the backs greater defensive security.

The four key principles to be worked on in training are:

1. Speed off the line.
2. Alignment.
3. Adjustment.
4. The hit.

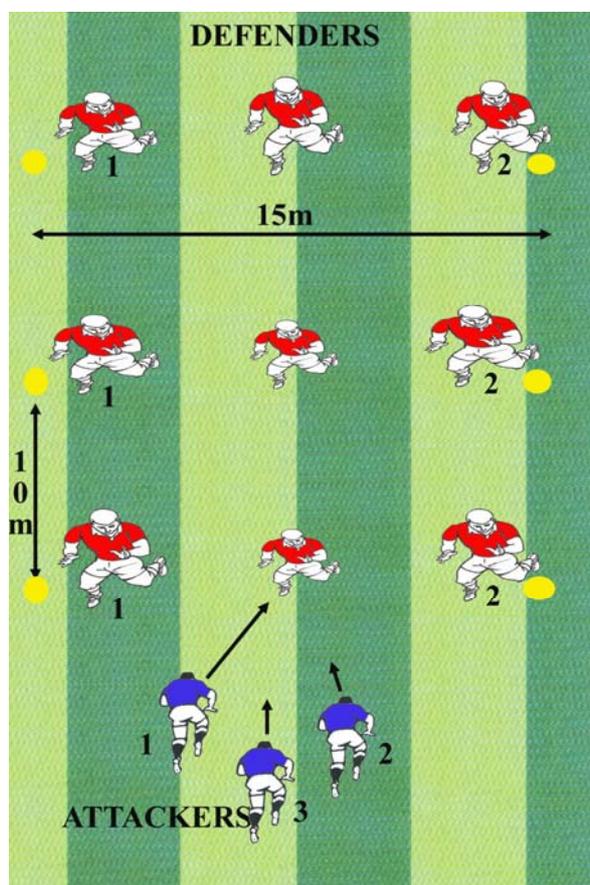
Diagrams of training exercises that develop the necessary skills such as speed off line and correct alignment shown in the next two diagrams (Diagrams 4 and 5).

Diagram 4 – speed off the line/alignment drill.



Groups of four or more work up the pitch through four stations. They concentrate on speed off the line through five metres and on maintaining alignment throughout.

Diagram 5 – practising the ‘adjustment’.



Attacker 1 enters the channel with the aim of beating the middle defender. Depending on which side of that defender he attacks, defender 1 or defender 2 will react and assist the central defender. The player who assists the central defender looks for either a double hit or he looks to prevent the offload. This is repeated through the grid.

Strengths

The biggest advantage of this system is that you cross the gain line quickly as an effective line. In denying time and space you will slow down the momentum of the attack and provide the attackers with fewer opportunities.

The system also creates individual errors as opposing players who can't handle immense pressure will generally stay deeper to give themselves more time, thereby putting their whole backline under pressure and invariably putting themselves behind the gain line. This is magnified in wet and windy handling conditions, which is extremely relevant in Northern Hemisphere rugby.

It is a difficult system to go around as the outside winger/player comes in from the blind spot of the attacker, invariably forcing a handling error.

Hits tend to be head on, allowing more impact tackles and turnovers, rather than soak-up tackles, which are a common feature of drift defences (see later).

Weaknesses

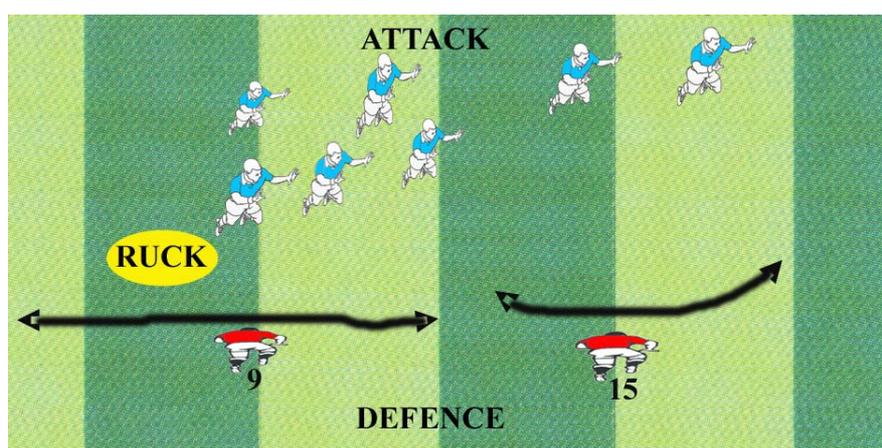
If all players don't come up as a line, particularly in phase play when forwards and backs are inter-mingled, then dog-legs can appear.

Outside players getting up too quick can lead to space appearing on the inside and the ball carrier can both sense and see this if he knows your defensive structure.

Teams can be susceptible to the kick in behind and it places huge pressure on the full back to do two jobs – closing the gate behind the winger hitting in and also covering deep kicks. Whereas the full back traditionally works in tandem with his wingers in a drift defence, his ally in the blitz defence is the scrum half who covers the chips and works as an auxiliary full back. The full back has a key role to play from set-piece too, particularly scrums set inside the 15metre channels. If he feels he cannot cover the last man in behind the winger then he must communicate to the rest of the back line, who must then switch to a drift.

Diagram 6 illustrates the fullback and scrum half working together.

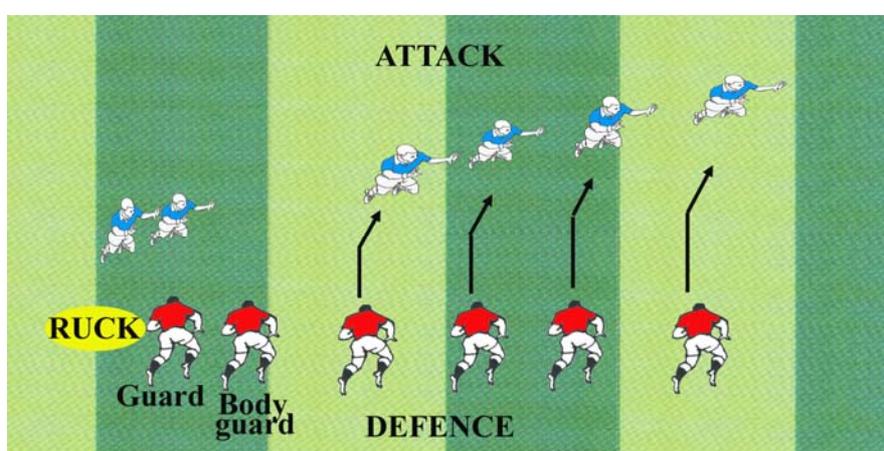
Diagram 6 – scrum half and full back working together.



THE DRIFT DEFENCE

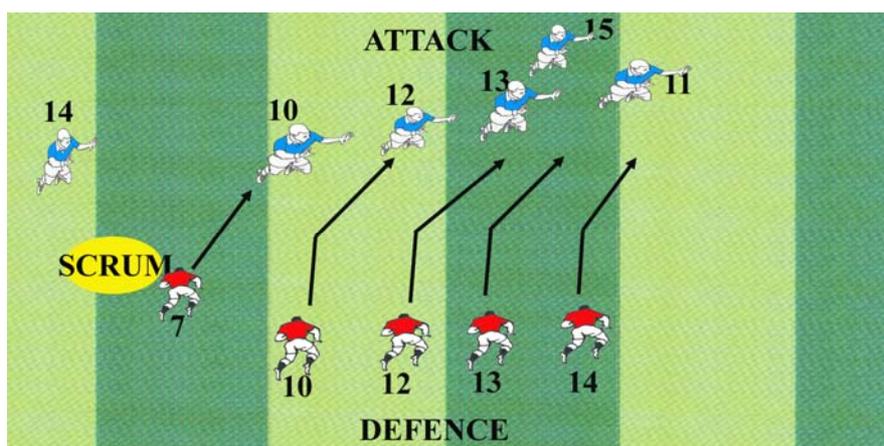
How does it work? (Diagrams 7, 8 and 9)

Diagram 7 – the drift defence from phase play.



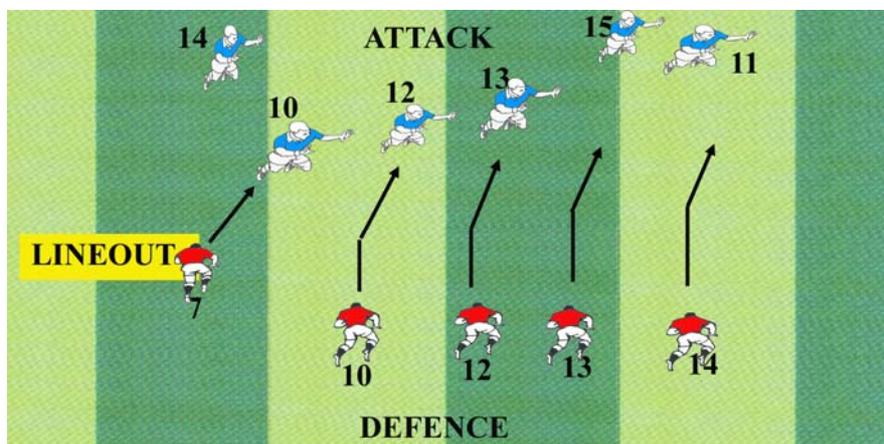
Defenders line up on the inside shoulder of their opponent.

Diagram 8 – the drift defence from a scrum.



*The defending 7 is allocated the task of either tackling the fly half or holding for a switch that might come back to him. The defending 10 moves onto the attacking 12 **only** when the attacking 10 has passed the ball. If the attacking 10 and 12 switch, the defending 10 must take the attacking 10.*

Diagram 9 – the drift defence from a lineout.



The defensive alignment gets a bit closer at the lineout and the 7 is utilised from the tail to take the first receiver. This allows the defending 10 to take the second attacker, whether it be the blindside winger or the 12.

The drift defensive system is the most widely used defensive system and most coaches at some stage of their career will have coached it. Instead of lining up on the outside shoulder, as in the 4up, players line up on the inside shoulder and are effectively looking to shuffle or drift onto the next man once the ball is passed. One of the biggest allies of the drift defence is the touchline, often referred to as the ‘extra’ defender. The key to implementing the drift defence from set-piece is to make sure that the job of marking the attacking fly half is left to the open-side flanker.

Strengths.

Attacking play in the northern hemisphere generally spends too much time trying to run around the outside of the drift with lazy players, often forwards, finding it easy to fill in on the inside, leaving the backs to shuffle the play towards the side line and hopefully out of play.

The drift defence has been extremely popular in the amateur game because opposition attacks have spent too much time and effort trying to get *around*, rather than *through*, it. With the ‘extra defender’ of the touch line, these defences have found things relatively easy.

Weaknesses.

Defenders in the drift are always chasing the outside man, making them susceptible to a change of direction. Defenders often get themselves in a poor body position with their hips parallel to the touchline, making an aggressive hit almost impossible. This is why you so often see defenders in the drift with their backs to the attack, with over-pursuit a general cause of this. The conventional way is to be on the inside and push out, thereby

taking the attacker on your outside shoulder.

If the opposition break the gain line out wide, the 15 is often faced with the last tackle, but as he is so deep it is often an impossible task to tackle a winger in full flight

THE FUTURE:

We may find that at the elite level a combination of both types of defence is implemented, whilst at junior and grassroots level, where there is little time to practise, the traditional drift defence will still hold sway. There is little doubt, though, that if teams and coaches outside professional rugby have the confidence to implement the Blitz defence, they could develop a distinct edge over their opponents.

A number of Premiership teams is now using a combination of drift and blitz to keep the opposition guessing. This is most prevalent at set-piece, when an astute back line can implement the blitz defence without involving the forwards, whilst in phase play, with forwards and backs inter-mingled, the drift is favoured. Often you see teams blitzing in phase play when the attack has a breakdown near the touchline, making it easy to fly up, knowing the opposition have only one way to attack.

Teams are also using the blitz defence purely to maintain their speed off the line, believing that by closing down the attackers' space they will put the opposition under pressure, thus forcing individual errors. This was a particular feature of South Africa's 'rush' defence success in the 2004 Tri Nations, though there has been limited success since then. However, they still remain the only international side to implement this style of defence.

There are pitfalls in having a combination of defence calls. Whilst playing the unpredictability card can sometimes confuse opponents, having different calls for different systems can also be confusing to the team making those calls in the heat of battle and can be counter productive in the end. It can also lead to indecision from players who feel they must be seen to be calling *all* the systems.

Having played under a drift defence for the majority of my playing career, I can say I felt more comfortable implementing the blitz whilst at London Irish, but I equally understand that the modern coach and modern teams must have different options to pull out at specific times and that we could see more sides operating with both. The defence system (or systems) that is used is dependent on the quality of your own team as well as the quality and the playing style of the opposition. No method is better than the other and coaches should coach the method that is best for their team or best suited for a certain type of opposition.