

BY PETER JOHNSON.

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From set-piece possession, the favoured attacking option is usually to disrupt the opposition defence in midfield by committing the defenders to the tackle near or beyond the gain line. Tactical options can take the form of:

- A short pass from fly half to inside centre who has changed his angle of run (an 'inners' line).
- Switches.
- 'Rangis'.
- Bringing in the blind-side wing.
- Inside centre taking a flat pass from the scrum half.

Whatever the choice, communication with the back row is vital so they know where to head for and who is involved in the initial strike. This gives them an advantage over the opposition back row, as they should have less trouble in getting to the breakdown before their opponents.

The open-side flanker will generally be first to the breakdown. He has to read the situation and take a tactical decision, usually involving whether to utilise the ruck, maul, rip and peel or rip and pass etc.

The general rule is that the threequarter involved will try to stay on his feet and turn inside towards (not away from) his support. The back row will try to take the ball a little further on from the initial tackle area.

There are problems if the ball has been dropped in midfield or the backs fail to get near the gain line. This means that the back row will have to run back to secure the ball and this scenario should be practised as teams tend to practise moves that always go to plan.

Here are a few exercises to practise the link.



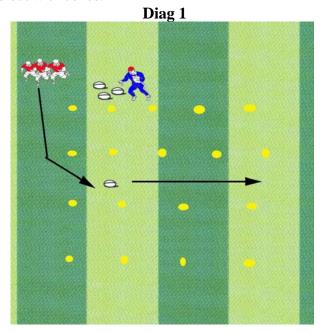
The back row working together beyond the tackle.

Exercise 1:

Players in groups of 3.

The coach has a supply of balls.

Channels are marked out with cones.



Coach rolls ball into any one of the channels.

First player of the first group is to lift and pop the ball to the next player. The 3 now play off each other with pop passes or rip and spin etc until the end of the channel.

Key Points:

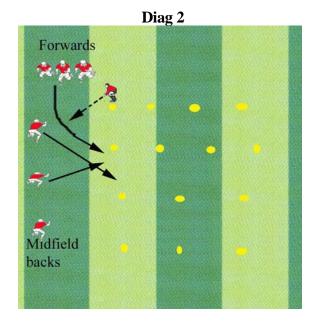
- The space is generally in the channel where the tackle took place. Continue the attack down the same channel.
- Back row work together. There has to be communication between them.

Exercise 2

The backs are arranged in groups of 3 opposite the channels. They are arranged in several waves.

The back rows are also arranged in 3s and in waves





The scrum half passes a ball to the first set of backs.

Fly half and inside centre switch.

Inside centre puts ball down *or* holds ball up on the signal from the coach.

First back rower strips the ball from the ball carrier and plays down the same channel.

Progression:

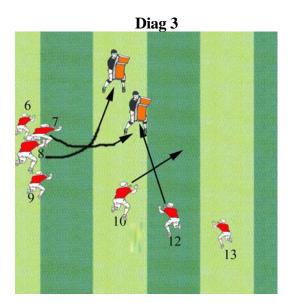
Put tackle-shield holders in each of the channels. Ball carrying threequarter hits shield and back row players respond.

Key Points:

- Midfield player(s) try to stay on feet in the tackle.
- Strike runner turns inward towards the back rowers so they can see the ball all the time.
- If tackled to ground, strike runner hits the ground with his outside shoulder i.e. if he received the ball from his left, he hits ground with the right side of his body. This allows the option of the offload. If he hits the ground with the inside (thus presenting his back), he loses sight of the supporting back row and they lose sight of the ball.
- One advantage of hitting the ground with the inside shoulder is that after the back row have cleaned out, the scrum half will find it easier to sweep the ball away without the tackled player's legs in his path.
- Back row get beyond the tackler and put pace on the ball.



Exercise 3



Midfield bring the ball back and make contact with first line of shields.

Openside flanker takes the short cut and rips the ball from the ball carrier. He gives a gut pass to the No.8, who carries the ball forward to the second line of shields.

He makes contact and the other two members of the back row join him. They can both cross bind and leave the ball carrier to go to ground.

Another option is to create a maul and then distribute to the scrum half. The actions are left to the coach to advise.

The backs realign to attack either left or right.

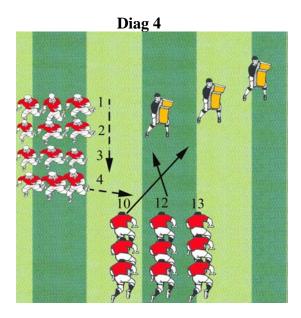
Progression:

The second defensive line defends the open-side. Open-side flanker to give a pop pass to the No.8.

Further progression: (See diagrams 4, 5 and 6 below.)



1st sequence



Players 1, 2, 3 and 4 are stationary – pass from 1 to 2 to 3 to 4.

4 acts as scrum half and passes to 10.

Ball is taken into contact with the first shield and the ball can be presented from the up (standing) position or from down (on the ground).

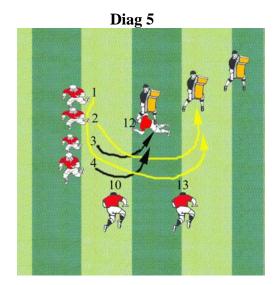
The backs should play an assortment of 'moves' prior to the contact, such as switch, rangi etc.

1, 2 and 3 now recycle the ball.

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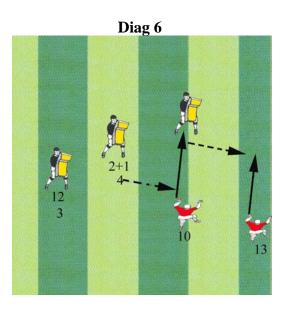


2nd sequence



- 12 goes to ground and first support player clears out (3).
- 4 acts as scrum half to sweep the ball to a forward runner (2) who takes the ball into contact.
- 1 clears out.

3rd sequence



Ball is now passed to remaining backs (2 backs will have realigned) to beat the last defender.



Decision-making: midfield looking for back row support

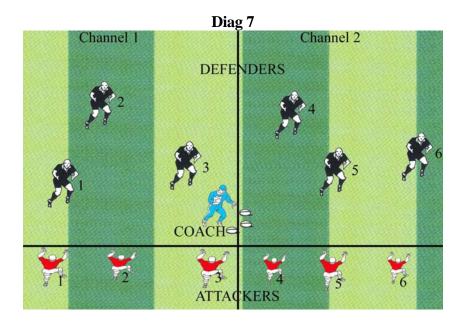
Exercise 4

Two channels are to be marked out, each about 10 metres apart.

A back row with a midfield against a similar group i.e. 6 v 6.

Three defenders in each channel and spread about that channel so there are plenty of gaps to attack.

Three attackers at the head of each channel.



If the coach gives the ball to the attackers in channel 1, then only channel 1 is to be used (and the same for channel 2).

If the coach gives the ball to the attackers in channel 1, only the defenders in channel 1 can defend. Those in channel 2 remain where they are.

However, the attackers in channel 2 are to come around into channel 1. The attack becomes 6 v 3.

Before the breakdown occurs, the ball carrier should be looking for his support coming from deep. The support should be trying to read what is happening in front so that they can be effective in continuing the attack.

Key points:

- Initial attackers move the defenders around with passes and different angles of run.
- Ball carrier should be looking for his support runner(s).
- Support comes from deep and that support times the run to advance the ball further.
- If the tackle takes place, the support should strip the ball carrier and take the ball on.



• Communication should take place between the ball carrier and the support.

There is no end to the ways that this can be developed and coaches will work out what suits them best. However, it is an area of the game that is often neglected in training and many coaches assume that the midfield and back rowers will get it right during the game. It is, however, a linking skill that requires practice.