

TACKLING

BY

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Use a Google search on "Football Defence" and you will find the titles of hundreds of videos and books to teach you how to defend. Try Google with "Rugby Defence" and you will be disappointed. It is as if defence does not exist in rugby!

In South Africa the position of Defence Coach does not even exist, let alone the 'defence coaching team'. We pay lip service to it. We have very little pride in defence and there are simply no drills or manuals on how to develop tackling skills and technique. We count 'jump on your back' tactics as tackles, when in fact they are lost ground! Our top international players guard goal line at the side of the ruck whilst standing upright with their hands on their knees. The vast majority of adult rugby players were simply never taught tackling as children – or were taught badly.

However, here is the good news. It is completely false to believe that tackling is a mental game or sign of courage. *Tackling can be taught and there is a method.*

Diving

The picture below comes from the front page of the RFU website. It's a scene played out thousands of times in any South African or English rugby club or school. You can almost hear the coach screaming for the kid to hit the bag harder and go in lower. We have all been there. Now this is right in front of the coach's eyes and right in front of yours! This picture highlights why, twenty five years after learning 'tackling', top international players still can't tackle.



The young player hitting the bag has his head down, his legs straight, his back curved (no Lordotic arch) and he hasn't a hope in hell of making a decent impact; half a second from the moment the picture was taken he was probably going to plough his face into the ground. Next time you pass a field, stop and look at these kids hitting the bag - it looks like boys diving into a swimming pool. Each player is going to feel discomfort from this action. If he doesn't do it hard enough, he is regarded as soft. Somewhere in these exercises he is going to hurt his neck and/or his shoulders.

We are teaching him to go off his feet and hit the ground. The whole object of a tackle is to ***stay on your feet and make the other guy go off his feet***. Don't believe me? Go through any game video and watch how often international-standard players voluntarily dive off their feet; we see it so often we take it for granted. It's the rugby equivalent of the soccer dive. Players must keep their feet in contact with the ground as long as possible

Can you believe that something we have done for so long, something so fundamental, is wrong? How are we ever going to undo twenty five years of this in our top teams? As professionals, we are not alone. My dentist, who worked in Ascot for twenty years, tells me that the reason my gums are receding is that dentists got it wrong in the sixties when they taught us to brush up and down. Nowadays they teach kids to brush sideways.

This is how I teach young players to tackle.



- Head is up and across the front of the body of the runner.
- His power step is left leg/left shoulder or right leg/right shoulder.
- The bag begins by moving towards him, simulating an opposing player.
- He stays on his feet and drives the bag back to me with his legs pumping throughout the sequence.
- He has a helmet and pads and feels no discomfort even, when hitting at 110% of his game-day hit.
- We can do this for forty minutes if we have to, until we get it right. We do this exercise forty eight hours before the game. It's like piano or golf - it goes off after two days if you don't do it!

Still don't believe me? Look at the body language of the players waiting to drill in the rugby photograph! Their hands and arms are crossed and they look apprehensive. This drill is a chore to them. Now look at the players in the gridiron photograph – they are already in the hitting position, eager to get in. Why? This drill is a thrill. We set it up to give them a rush. Each of those players is going to smack that bag back into me.

Hitting the heavy bag



- Learning The Hit begins with hitting the heavy bag.
- Start gently! Focus on angle and technique before power.
- Start with absolutely no step.
- In the picture the hitter (in hoops)s is coming off his power foot (the right foot).
- He hits into the bag with his right shoulder.
- It is important that his back is straight and his head is up.
- Eyes are open!



- He makes contact with his right shoulder first.
- His head is across the front of the bag.
- He slams his forearms into the target.
- He keeps a wide foot base.
- He begins driving upwards.
- He keeps his feet on the ground and drives. The bag must come off the ground.

At first concentrate on the technical points. We can develop hitting hard later.

Wrong !

The way you have always done it?



- There is no strong support behind the bag. Players will dive and collapse the bag onto the ground (each hurting himself in the process).
- Do not 'dive' where your feet leave the ground.
- Do not go in with your head down and your back curved.
- You will have no power and worse, absolutely no idea of where to direct the power that is available.
- You must not reach down to grab his legs.
- You must drive him up and off the ground!

Simple drill tips for the heavy bag

Not all of us have complex apparatus, so here are simple drill tips on how you can improve the use of the heavy bag.



- Attach a small piece of Velcro on the side of the bag and on a ball so that you can attach the ball to the bag. This will teach the tackler to go head towards the ball and to 'strip' by hitting *at* the ball. This concept will also teach players, when carrying the ball, to have the hand over the spike of the ball to secure it as we go in to contact.



- Do not let the tackler dive off his feet. All tacklers must learn to stay on their feet and drive the opponent backwards. It is completely wrong getting them to go in low! A good tackle *starts* from low but it is upward. Always support and provide resistance to the heavy bag. It is supposed to simulate an opponent.



- Use a boxing bag, or add supporting straps to your heavy bag. In the case of really young boys, one person can carry the bag around to give a moving target. For heavier bags you may need a weight lifting bar supported by two carriers, with the bag suspended from the bar. Always try to give the player a moving target.



- A good exercise is to get the tackler to lift the bag up and back over his head. This helps to develop explosive strength.
- Try a variation on that theme, which the kids love. Get him to spike the bag hard back into the ground. You can also vary this exercise by placing a bar or have others hold a rope in front of the bag to make the tackler come under the rope first before hitting the bag. This will teach hitting upwards from a low base.



- Half the problem with tackling is getting players into the correct hitting position. **START SLOWLY.** There is no need to move fast or hard. The first step to get right is the correct starting form and poise. The player in the foreground in red is right. Can you see the faults in the others?



- Put an end to beginning with players on their knees. This is wrong. A tackle is executed with the legs whilst the feet are on the ground and driving. Have the coach stand behind a bag and make the tackler look up and into his eyes. He *must* keep his eyes open in contact.