

## **DEFENCE – TACKLING AND DEFENSIVE SYSTEM PRACTICE BY STEPHEN JOHNSON.**

*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.*

I begin with an obvious statement on defence - successful defence depends firstly on the courage and strength of individual players who are willing and able to tackle and secondly on a team being able to organize itself so that breaching the defensive wall is very difficult, if not impossible. I would like to suggest some drills and practices that may help develop a team’s defensive capabilities.

First, though, I do offer a word of caution. “Practise defence safely”. How many times have we heard this? Yet I would maintain that by definition, there is no *absolutely* safe way of teaching/coaching/drilling defence practices that involve players tackling other players. Of all the activities in rugby, tackling is the most contentious one when it is between players – the tackler is aiming to stop the opposition ball carrier and the ball carrier, in turn, is doing his utmost to ensure that the tackler comes off worse and does not succeed. Therefore, I cannot see any way that tackling practices between players can be anything but dangerous. So, from the very beginning, let me say that I firmly believe that when doing tackling practice, we should use every single safety item at our disposal; use suits, tackle bags, shields, shoulder pads, head protection, gum shields - anything that will make the contact activity as safe as it can possibly be. At the learner stage, young pre-teens and teens have to use shoulders and chests that are almost devoid of muscle. We need to be especially vigilant when there is a divergence of size and weight.

I will confess that, in spite of coaching the safest tackling practices I could think of, players in my teams have still been injured. What are the odds that a superb tackle will be met with a superb counter by the ball carrier, and that the impact will end up a draw? How *can* we be absolutely sure that both players are at their sharpest when they are on deck? If the tackler gets it wrong, it could be a broken collar bone, (if the head is in front of the ball carrier’s leg, it could be a knock out) and if the ball carrier is a little bit slack, he can be knocked backwards onto the ground and the potential for concussion is not that small. These injuries rarely occur, but if the opportunity for injury is there, we should not be taking an old-fashioned, macho approach of letting things happen; we should be taking care to ensure that the drills are designed to be as

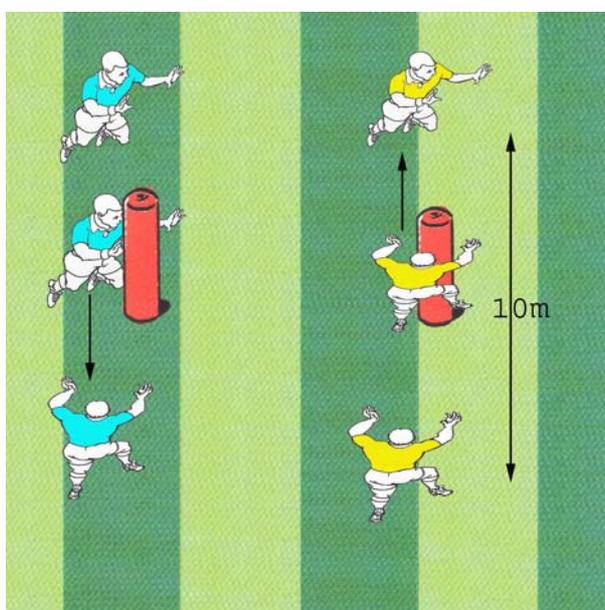
safe as they can possibly be.

What is the team's/coach's policy on individual tackling? Is it to tackle above the thighs and smother the ball so that it cannot be played, or to tackle round the legs, ensure the attacker is grounded, then regain one's footing to attack the ball? Alternatively, do we tackle low on the fringes of rucks and mauls and smother tackle out wide? As a defence system, do we adopt the (more) standard up and out approach, or try to blitz a la South Africa? There is not one single answer for all, but each method has to be determined according to the players at the coach's disposal.

For the four tackling practices that follow, let me start with the assumption that elementary/basic tackling skills have been coached.

### PRACTICE 1. Three players and a tackle bag.

**Diagram 1.**

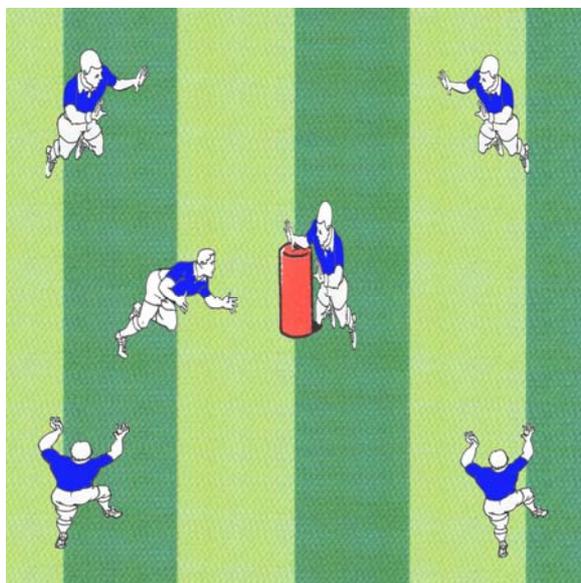


The aim of this drill is to focus on good leg drive and a powerful front tackle.

- The players line up ten metres apart, and on the coach's whistle, player 1 lifts the tackle bag and carries it across the zone as quickly as possible.
- When he reaches the other side, he then throws/thrusts the bag at player 2 with all his power.
- Player 2 has been waiting in the 'gorilla' position – hands are near the ground, knees are bent, eyes are up and forward.
- He 'welcomes' the bag with a powerful leg drive. He then continues across the zone, and throws the bag at player 3.
- The tackle bag should stay in the vertical position (or as close as possible) throughout the exercise.
- Continue the drill for as long as the players show good form.
- Aim for one minute with three players in one line.

**PRACTICE 2. Six players in a small square (approx 5 m x 5 m) with one tackle bag.**

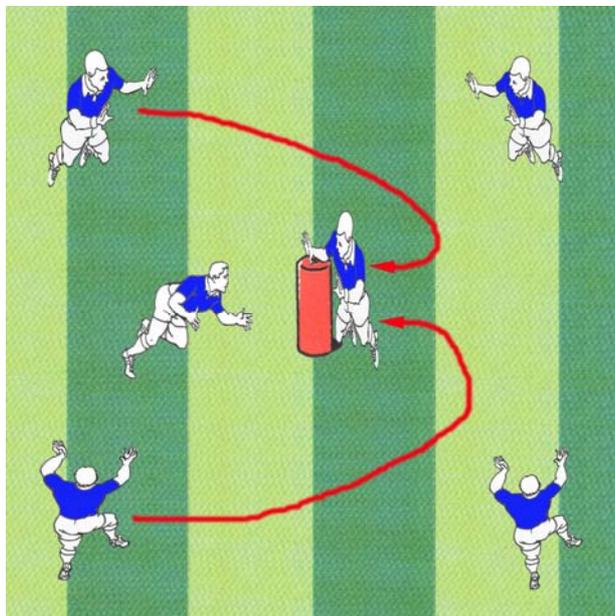
**Diagram 2.**



- One player starts by holding the bag, and the other five are tacklers.
- Nominate the first tackler. On the coach's whistle, the first tackler comes in low and hits the tackle bag low (thigh height tackle).
- The first bag holder runs to the side of the square then the first tackler gets to his feet quickly, picks up the bag and another tackler comes in to make the next tackle.
- There is no rotation, no numbering – the tackler is the one whom the bag is facing, with the holder on the far side.
- Work for one minute and then have a one or two minute break to coach/talk or just rest.
- Do five sets. This is hard work, but the good thing about this practice is that it is easy to see who has good/bad form, and who can maintain his form when tired.

**PRACTICE 3. Six players in a small square (approx 5 m x 5 m) with one tackle bag.**

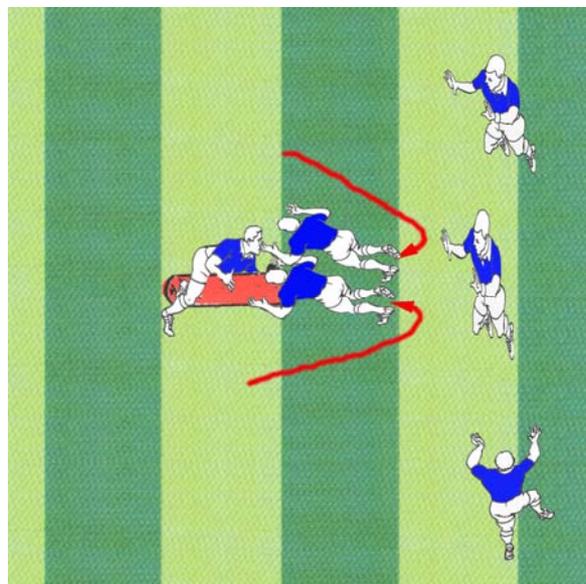
**Diagram 3a – phase one, the first tackle.**



The starting point is the same as in the previous practice and the extension is as follows:

- Player 1 makes the tackle, gets to his feet and as he does so, two other players come from the same side as the tackler.
- The player who held the bag goes back to where the tackler (in this case player 1) came from.
- These two players go around the bag, bind on each other and (attempt to) drive the tackler back.
- The tackler resists as much as possible. After one or two seconds, the cleaners-out return to the side of the square and the tackler becomes the new bag holder.

**Diagram 3b – phase 2, the defenders come round, go through the gate and drive the tackler back.**



**Coaching points:** The cleaners-out must drive along the length of the tackle bag, and all players must work on their body positions with low hips, head up, etc. Although not shown here in the diagram, use protection for head and shoulders.

### TEAM DEFENCE.

The key to good team defence is for the each player to focus on the attacker he is initially marking and then on the one he *will be tackling*, so ways to *nominate* and *communicate* are key areas for practice. If the defender next to the point of release of the ball watches and calls the ball (“wait, wait, UP!”), then the other defenders can concentrate on their own targets.

When the ball is in line with – or inside – the defender’s line of defence, he is the ‘main’ defender; his responsibility is to tackle. When the ball is moved outside the defender’s individual line, he ceases to be a ‘main’ defender and becomes a ‘support’ defender. He will attack the ball and he needs to inform the ‘main’ tackler.

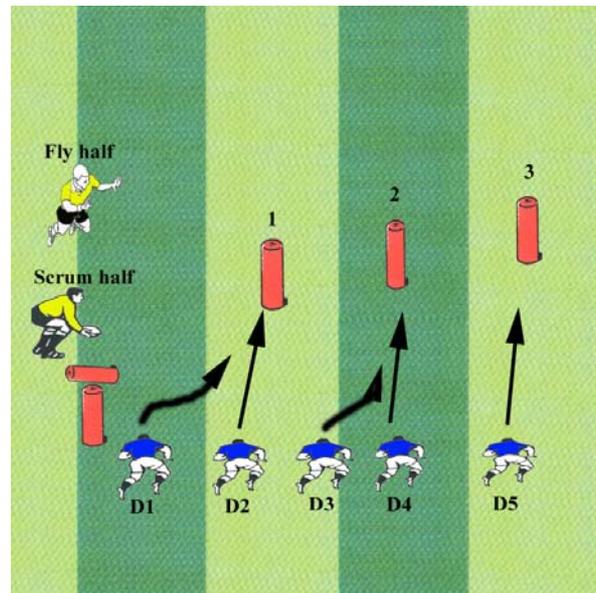
The diagram (Diagram 4) shows a typical defence line at a breakdown. D1’s area of responsibility is next to the breakdown – he covers any pick and go and the scrum half. When the ball is passed out, he becomes the support defender for D2, and so on.

## TEAM DEFENCE DRILLS.

### Team defence drill 1.

Set up the equipment as shown in Diagram 4.

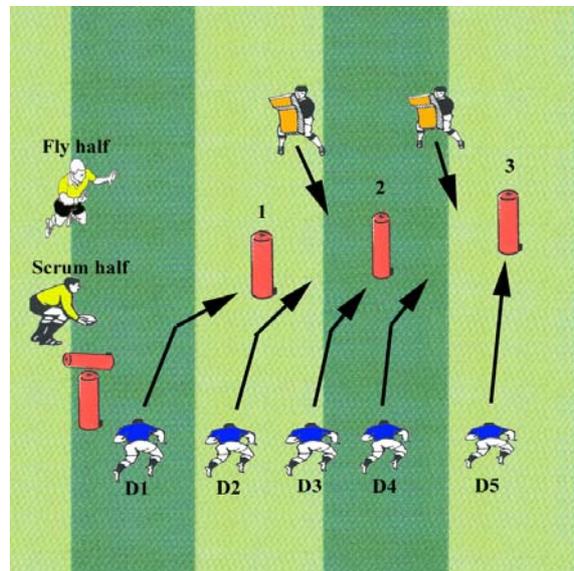
**Diagram 4.**



- D1 calls the ball and when the defence line advances. D2 hits tackle bag (TB) 1, and D1 supports the hit.
- D4 hits TB 2, D3 supports.
- D5 hits TB3.
- Defenders retreat back to the defence line and repeat the drill. Depending upon player numbers, you can rotate the players or they can repeat the drill a number of times in the same position.
- To start the activity, the scrum half passes the ball back to a stand off who is not involved in the drill – we want the players to really focus on the tackle bags and not be distracted by a ball.

## Team defence drill 2.

**Diagram 5.**

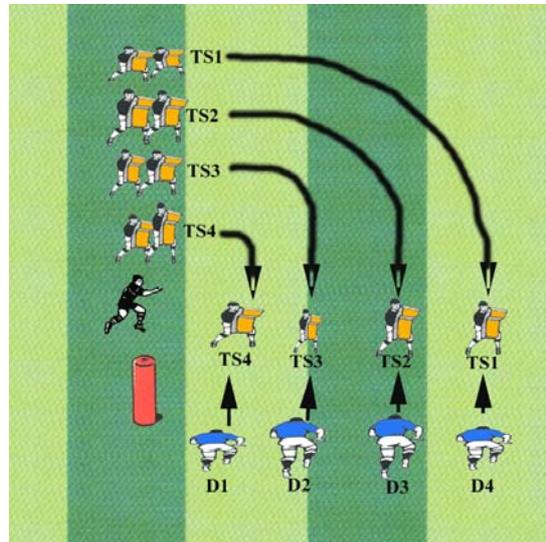


The set up is as for Fig. 4 above, but also included are two shield-holding runners, who join the attack line from behind (back three runners?). They do not run every time, only on the signal from the coach. When they run, the defenders react and tackle them, in the way shown in the picture. When they don't run, the defence is the same as in (1) above. It is *suggested* that with this adjustment in defence,

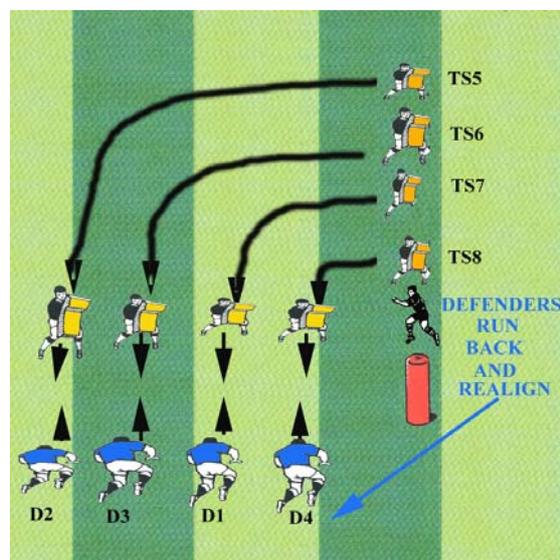
- D1 hits the first TB,
- D2 goes through to take the TS1,
- D3 takes TB2,
- D3 goes through to take TS2 and D5 takes TB3.
- The TB tacklers get to their feet as soon as possible to continue as support defenders for the main TS tacklers.

**Team defence drill 3.** “Swing defence.”

**Diagram 6a – phase 1.**



**Diagram 6b – phase 2.**



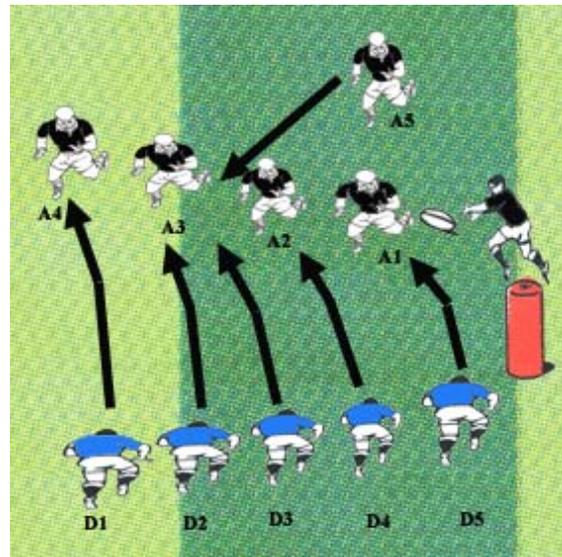
This drill is to develop defence continuity.

- In phase 1 the TS holders run to the right of the defenders.
- When all are set, the scrum half does a dummy pass to start the activity.
- The TS holders try to run past the defenders, who ensure they are taken out firmly.
- When all the TS holders have been “tackled”, the second line of TS holders runs out the other side (phase 2) and the defence line has to move as quickly as possible to realign, and move up on the scrum half’s dummy pass.
- The ball is not passed out, so defenders can focus on their opposite numbers.

**Team defence drill 4.**

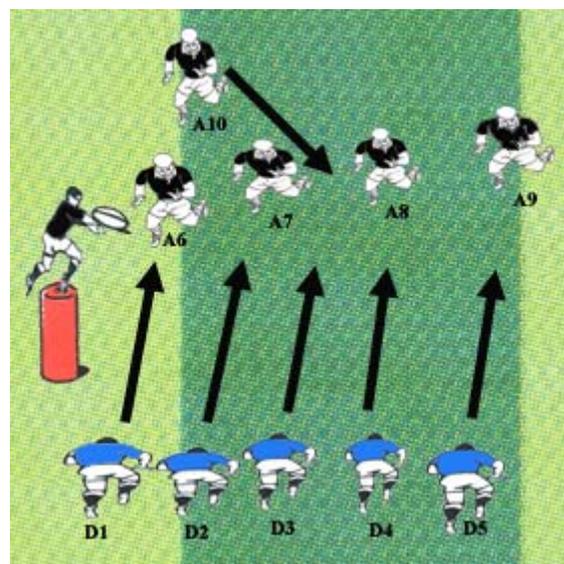
“Swing defence against the ball”. The set up is as for (3) above, except the attackers do not have tackle shields and the ball is passed out.

**Diagram 7a – phase one, the first line of defence.**



- Attackers 1-5 run right and take a running pass.
- Defenders move up as the ball is passed, and defend as in a normal game.
- EVERY DEFENDER MUST MAKE CONTACT WITH HIS OPPOSITE NUMBER REGARDLESS OF WHETHER OR NOT HE HAS THE BALL.
- Attackers run their normal courses. Once contact has been made, attackers 6-10 run out the other side and defenders scurry to realign opposite them.
- When the SH sees that all the defenders are ready, he passes the ball out.
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**Diagram 7b – phase two, run back and realign for second line of defence.**



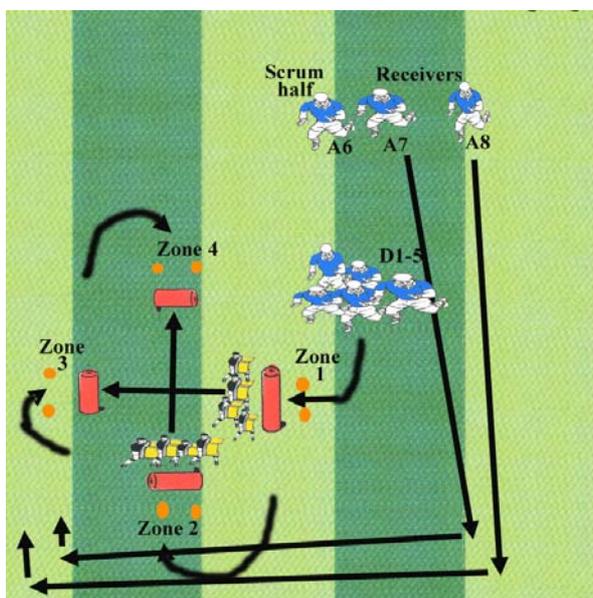
From my experience, because of the running aspect of the drill, the tackling tends to be scragging rather than high impact, so I think it is a safe one, even though it is player versus player and not versus equipment.

### Team defence drill 5.

Defensive rucking drill with contact (8 v 8)

Although this is not a tackling practice as such, I do think it is good to put in here – it is a good defence drill.

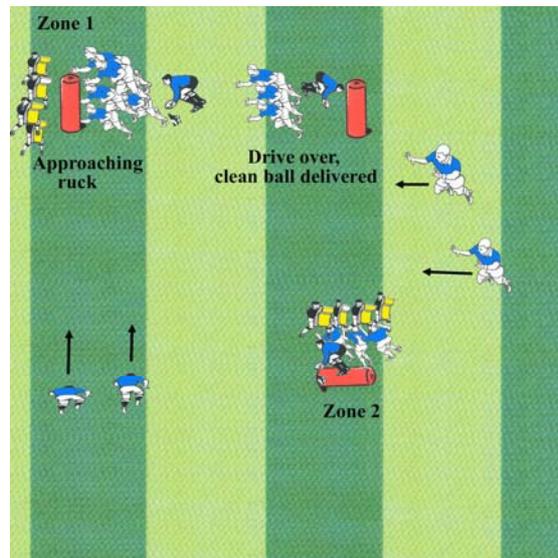
**Diagram 8a**



Set up as shown in the diagram 8a

- There are eight shield holders inside a four tackle bag square. They go back and forth across the square as shown. There is a ball inside the square by each tackle bag.
- The target of the first five defenders (D1 – 5) is to drive the shield holders back, secure the ball for the scrum half, who passes out to the two remaining “counter attackers”.
- Once they finish at the first bag, they run around to the next zone, go through the “gate” (the two cones) and repeat the drill.

**Diagram 8b.**



- They go round the square (shown by the tackle bags) once (i.e. four defensive rucks).  
The key mental aspect of this drill is for the fourth and fifth defenders to assess what kind of formation they need to form to drive over the ball. Inevitably, the first defender will drive over the ball by himself, which is acceptable; we don't want him to wait around for a team mate and lose the possession. The second and third defenders will bind and drive, one each side of D1. D4 and D5 will see what the situation is. If the middle two shield holders have not been driven back, they will have to support D2 and D3 and drive over the ball. If the two middle shield holders have been driven back, then D4 and D5 will go wide to take out the two outer shield holders. Communication is very important here.
- After one circuit, change defence and shield holders and go again.

Here in Japan, defence is generally seen as a duty rather than an enjoyable part of the game so I have had to work hard to develop the idea that tackling and defence is fun, because everyone can do it. Not everyone can kick goals or run the length of the field to score a try, but with determination, everyone can tackle. All my teams know they have a responsibility to congratulate loudly and acknowledge their team mates' defensive successes, which means that when the other team gets the ball, our players are still eager and very much in the game.