

**SPACE -
I CAN SEE IT, HOW DO I GET INTO IT?
BY
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The Oxford Dictionary defines space as ‘a continuous unlimited area or expanse which may or may not contain objects.’

While tutoring over the last four years on Level 1 courses for aspiring coaches, my first question has been, “What type of game is rugby?” The reply is invariably a resounding, “It’s a contact game!”

This is not my philosophy. I prefer to view rugby as an evasive game where contact is a consequence of someone getting into the same space as you at the same time. How, then, might this popular mindset be challenged?

Who in rugby can not close his eyes and visualise ‘that try’, which characterised the Barbarians v the All Blacks game in 1973 in Cardiff? Some of the most gifted players of all time came prepared to challenge each other, and the game gave us ‘that try’ without a ruck or maul in sight; it was a demonstration of how to execute core skills. How did it begin? I will return to this question shortly but want to consider some aspects of the modern game.

Over the past few seasons defensive patterns have become very structured, building on the basic patterns of man-on-man, drift and one-out formations. Defence has become a dominant aspect of the game, which has generated phrases such as “defence wins games” etc.

Whilst individual and collective defence is important, it can be argued that it has been at the cost of the loss of players' attacking potential through failure to develop fundamental core skills, such as footwork and handling.

I now return to the question, "How did it begin?" and I suggest that, having retrieved the ball in front of his own posts, Phil Bennett changed direction whilst moving forward and various closing players missed him. He then passed to J.P.R. Williams and so began one of the best tries, finally finished in the corner by Gareth Edwards, ever seen. The whole sequence was truly memorable.

Phil Bennett was a player with exceptional footwork and his ability to use the sidestep helped to initiate a piece of history. I believe that the sidestep is rarely coached and is a skill that is underused. If a player were to become proficient in this skill, his change of direction while moving forward, which can occur in a matter of two or three steps, makes him far more effective - and more difficult for an opponent to deal with. Carwyn James, when coaching the 1971 British Lions, had observed that, "These All Blacks are built to be sidestepped."

The opponent is obliged to shift his centre of gravity and, therefore, his balance. The initiative moves to the attacker, allowing him to gain the space left by the defender; at worst he will be able to take any contact on advantageous terms. The ball carrier can prepare for possible contact, giving him the opportunity to use one of the options below

- Pass just before the contact arrives.
- Pass round/behind the defender or out of contact.
- Pass off the floor if tackled.
- Be in a good body shape to place the ball further away from the point of contact when initiating a ruck.

Choice of the correct option and skilful execution maintain continuity.

The first skill used as a teaching medium on the present Level 1 coaching courses is the sidestep. The presence of the sidestep so early in the course emphasises the importance of this skill in the eyes of the authors of the course syllabus, and supports the evasive nature of the game and the need to give the players the skill/technique to achieve this. Encouraging the players to avoid contact using this evasive skill will generate the confidence to beat the individuals in defence, which will eventually break down defensive systems.

Having managed to gain the space between players, one should consider which space then becomes the most difficult to defend. This might be the space immediately behind the defender, as purely and simply that defender is facing the wrong way and is effectively out of the game; by the time he has turned to get back into the action, the attacking player/support runner has a head start.

Throughout the article I want to challenge the coaching community's acceptance of such phrases as, "You can't coach it - a player can either sidestep or he can't?" or, "Players do it naturally." I believe that it can be coached.

Players enjoy competition and playing games, so an ideal way to begin a coaching session on the sidestep would be to use a game of tag evasion/invasion, where spatial awareness, change of direction and change of space would be of paramount importance. Possible warm-ups might include:

- Corner Ball.
- End Ball.
- Stick in the Mud.
- Chain Tag.
- Leap Frog Tag.

I am sure the list is endless and many imaginative coaches will have their own favourites. (There is an explanation of these games at the end of the article.)

When playing a game, players often intuitively do things without comprehending what has taken place. This provides an opportunity for coaches to set scenarios where the skill can occur. The sort of practice might be 6 attackers v 4 defenders working in a 15m x 15m grid.

The size of grid and number of players is something that we coaches generally consider and control. A large grid to begin the session can be reduced in size to encourage quicker changes of direction, and increased awareness of opposition and space.

Footwork.

Footwork and decision-making are the fundamental components of the ability of an attacker. When discussing this with players, I ask if anyone has ever seen someone cross a busy road when they really should use the appropriate crossing. They highlight that the need to adjust both their speed and direction is dependant on the vehicle/object that is moving into their space. Whilst not recommending this as a practice or as a technique, it highlights evasive skills through the use of footwork and the use of decision-making based on what they see and what they are aware of.

Some players may find this a more difficult skill to acquire than others and, having used a coached/warm-up game, we may need to specifically coach the technique. This will improve the proficiency of all players and erase the bias most players have against performing the skill off one or the other foot.

Players need to develop footwork that gets them to move on the balls of their feet with changes of direction at pace. Flexibility and strength in the area around the ankle will assist in providing a stable pivot and will generate dynamic movement.

The basic skill requires a foot to be placed either to the left or right, with the weight being transferred over the foot; the knee will be flexed and will now be in line with and over the foot. The upper body should see a shoulder drop in the same direction that the weight has been transferred. To transfer the weight in the opposite direction, the shoulder can lead as you drive off the foot. (Photographs immediately below highlighting all key points - foot placement, knee over foot weight transfer, shoulder lowered, and transfer of weight in opposite direction).



Breaking the skill *to its component parts* can be achieved with a few offset cones, which can be adjusted as the technique develops towards a skill practice (Practice 1, diagram 1):

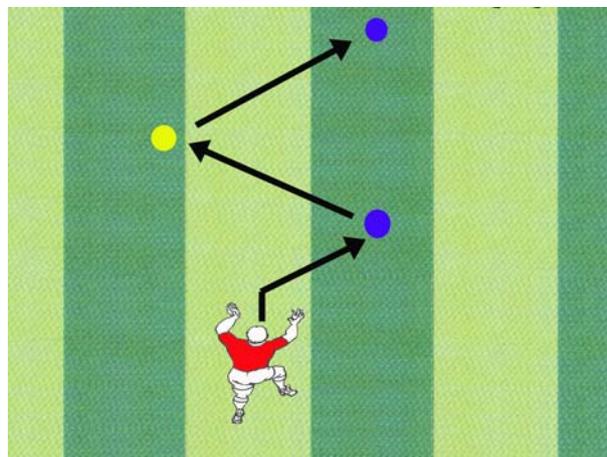


Diagram 1.



The purpose of the cone is to provide a target for foot placement; the foot is placed on the inside of the cone but should not touch the cone. I have used the word *place* to support the precision of the technique. The arrows show the direction of travel and initially the cones may only be a stride apart as they are offset.

As the technique develops, poles or tackle bags can be used to simulate defenders and the space targeted to step into (Practice 2, diagram 2.):

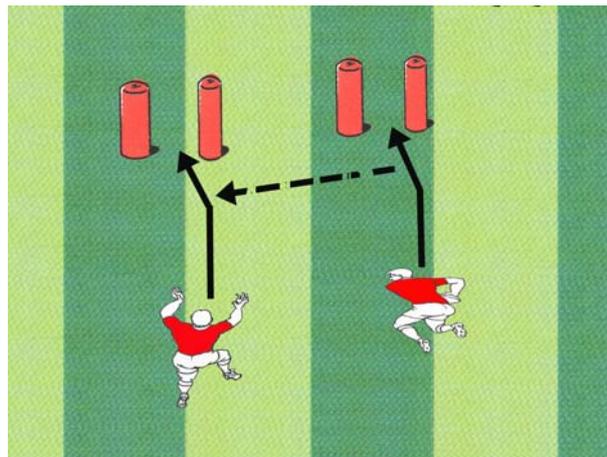


Diagram 2.

The attacking players will seek to challenge most defenders by attacking, or having a running line towards, the defender's inside shoulder; this will challenge the defender to stay on his running line as any movement from this could provide the attacker an opportunity to attack space. If the attacker is deceptive enough, with a good running line and sidesteps, he may encourage the defender to begin to move - or at least to shift his centre of gravity, thus placing him at a disadvantage. At the very least, the changes of direction and angle by the attacker may cause a defender to

- Have doubt and uncertainty.
- Shift his weight from the front of the foot to the heels.
- Rotate around the waist, looking at the potential change in direction with resulting poor balance.

Inducing the defender to move, or encouraging a defender to continue his motion in a specific direction to create a space for you to sidestep into, will provide line breaks, a head start, opportunities and, of course, tries.



Game-related practice allows players to visualise and recognise possible scenarios. Sidestepping enhances the effectiveness of the running lines of players. Below, the players are using a 3v3 practice in a 20m x 15m grid. The ball carrier targets the inside shoulder of the player marking him, while the outside players vary their running lines to create space to sidestep into. (Practices 3 and 4, diagrams 3 and 4).

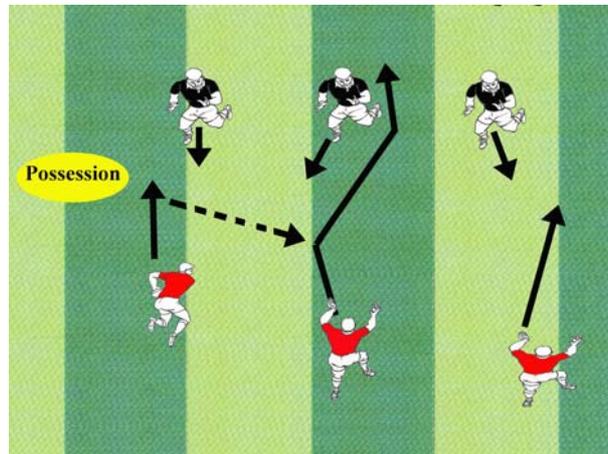


Diagram 3.

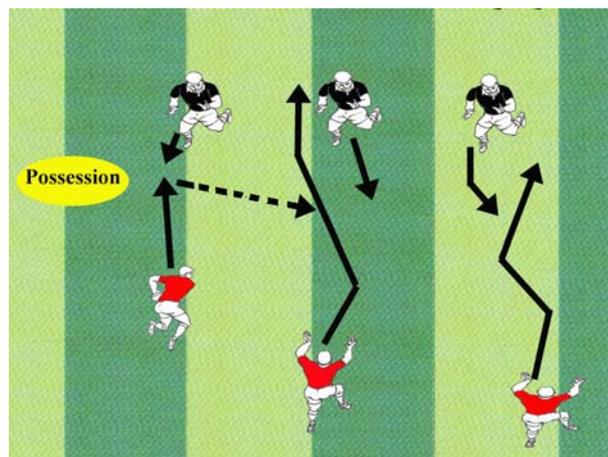


Diagram 4.

Through the development of the sidestep and use of footwork, players will develop a better understanding of weight transference, flexibility of the ankle, the use of this technique to maintain movement of the defender and, ultimately, they will develop the ability to change direction quickly whilst maintaining forward movement. This can be achieved within two or three foot placements (Practice 5, diagram 5).

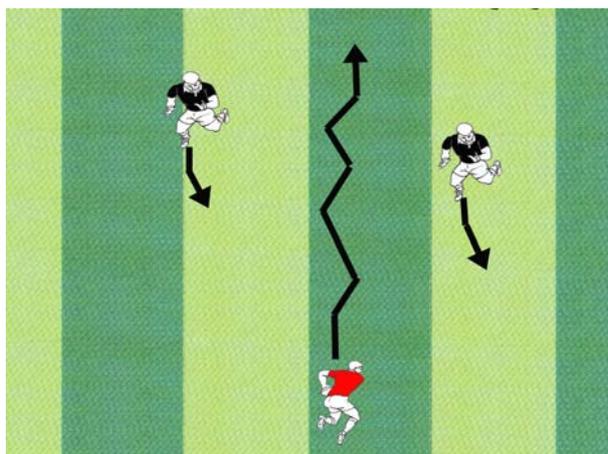


Diagram 5.

The technique discussed will also provide the players with the ability to manage the contact area to their advantage by using a number of the options listed earlier in this paper.

These options and the roles of support players to maintain continuity will be developed in future articles, but the key to effective attacking is simple -

MAINTAIN CONTINUITY – DON'T DIE WITH THE BALL!

WARM-UP GAMES.

Corner Ball:

Grid Size: Varies.

Teams: Size varies – 3 v 1, 6 v 2, etc.

Rules:

The purpose of the game is for the player who is not in a bib (in the team with fewer players) to be tagged with the ball. Players in bibs (and in the team with greater numbers) pass the ball between themselves in an attempt to tag the non-bibbed player. The players cannot run with the ball, but can pass and move when they do not have the ball. The non-bibbed player can move in any direction but must remain inside the boundaries set by the coach. To be tagged, a player carrying out the tagging must have two hands on the ball and the ball makes contact with the tagged player's torso.

Key elements:

- Change of direction and pace by all players.
- Good handling skills, reach for the ball, ten points of contact (pads of fingers).
- Player to be tagged is alert and moves away from the ball.
- Players attempting to tag the player work together seeking to corner the target player, reducing space and using the boundaries as a barrier.

End Ball:

Grid Size: 15m x 15m, 20m x 20m, (varies).

Teams: Size varies 5 v 5, 3 v 3, etc.

Rules:

One player from each team goes to each end of the grid and can only move laterally between the two cones that mark the end of the pitch area. (The coach may allow backward movement if appropriate at a later stage.)

The rest of the players spread out within the grid and can move without the ball, which is passed between the players; the aim is for one team to pass the ball five times and then pass forwards to their player at the end of the pitch. The opposition will prevent this occurring by trying to intercept the ball. If the side in possession drop the ball it will be handed over to the opposition, who then attempt to make their five passes before scoring.

Key elements:

- Change of direction and pace by all players.
- Good handling skills, reach for the ball, ten points of contact (pads of fingers).
- Players use body to feint change of direction, causing the player covering them to move.
- Anticipate where players may move and pass the ball into space early.

Stick in the Mud:

Grid size: 15m x 15m, varies.

Teams: 1 v 6, 2 v 12, varies.

Rules:

One player has possession of the ball and has to tag as many players as he can. Once a player has been tagged he must stand with his feet apart. To be released back into the game, a player who has not yet been tagged crawls between his legs.

Key elements:

- Change of direction moving into space.
- Avoid the ball carrier.
- Be prepared to change body shape to release players.

Chain tag:

Grid size 15m x 15m, 20m x 20m, varies.

Teams: 1 v 15, varies.

Rules:

One player stands in the middle of the grid with the other players standing between the cones at one end of the grid. The aim is for the large group of players to cross the grid without being tagged with a two handed touch on the shorts. Once the single player has tagged someone, those two players join hands and return to the middle. The players who have not been tagged, having reached the end safely, turn round and try to cross without being touched by the two players who are holding hands. Now they are joined together, they each use the free outside hand to tag. Those players touched now hold hands and form another chain. This continues until all the players have been tagged.

Key elements:

- Change of pace and evasive change of direction to avoid being tagged.

Leap Frog Tag;

Grid Size: 15m x 15m, 20m x 20m, varies.

Team: 1 v 15, varies.

N.B. Safety element:

Players should be strong enough to support another's weight. One player adopts the 'frog' stance with one foot forward one back, knees unlocked and chin tucked down on the chest. Each leaper places his hands on the middle of the back, having approached from behind the player, presses slightly as he jumps and separates his legs to move forward to land in front of the 'frog' player. Before commencing the game I would allow players to practise this.

Rules:

This game operates the same as 'Stick in the mud', the only variation is that the player tagged moves into the 'frog stance' and is released back into the game by another player leaping over him.

All of these games can be developed and changed by coaches and are offered merely as a guideline. Some will require careful management of space as players will be moving around in different directions and speeds, developing peripheral vision at the same time as warming up.