

**CONTINUITY -
DON'T DIE WITH THE BALL
BY
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Continuity: the state of being continuous, an unbroken succession, a logical sequence.

In the first article in this series (Technical Journal Archive, 22.1.08), the concept of the sidestep to challenge a defensive structure and move effectively into the space between two defenders was developed. From this, one can explore ways of maintaining continuity and, in particular, forward progression of the ball, which does not simply or necessarily equate to the formation of a ruck or maul.

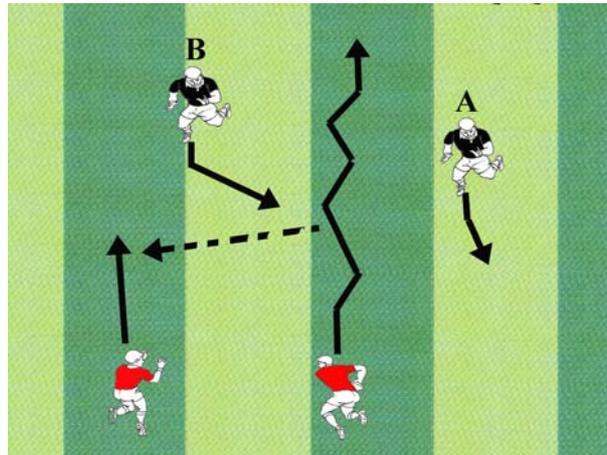
Whilst the setting up of a ruck or maul might satisfy the first two of the three definitions of *continuity* offered above, there are other alternatives which present themselves as more logical options if one wishes to maintain forward momentum in attack.

Central to all of these options is not only the management of the tackle by the attacker, but the 'mind-set' of the entire team, which needs to be focused on creating, identifying and executing opportunities to maintain forward momentum. This requires mental and physical agility.

With reference to the previous article on the sidestep and the concept of attacking the space between and immediately behind defenders, one can consider options to maintain forward momentum of the ball, the attacker having been tackled by a defender 'drifting' across.

The first and obvious option is akin to that in open play, which would be to challenge the defender and beat him with a pass to the support player. In Diagram 1, the initial ball carrier has stepped into the space but Defender B has reacted to this and now applies pressure and is looking to make the tackle. Recognising this, the initial ball carrier now passes to the player who Defender B was marking.

DIAGRAM 1.



More often than not, however, a tackle is likely to be made and it is this scenario that will form the basis of the next three possible options.

1. Passing High:

After the defender has made contact in the tackle, the attacking ball carrier will allow his lower body to move in the direction of the impact, but his upper body begins to move around the back of the tackler.



The ball should be held on the pads of the fingers, applying pressure through all ten areas to maintain a firm grip; *if the support player is available* the pass can be made at this point. This will mean the attacker has not begun to move towards the floor.

N.B. The sidestep will place the attacker at an angle that allows for his body to form either an 'L' or 'C' shape; the player does not lead with the ball through the space, but can extend his arms around the back of the defender after the tackle/impact has been made.

2. Passing Medium:

The initial contact remains the same as above, but the release of the ball will be made as the tackled player moves towards the ground.



Having managed the contact area with a good body shape, the attacker may wish to delay the release of his pass to allow a support player to move closer to him.

N.B. To assist the practice on this occasion it may be of benefit to the tackler if he were to begin at the potential impact point in a squatting position, which will allow the attacker to practise the offload/passing technique.

3. Passing Low:

The passing options 1 and 2 above, having been considered and rejected in the game situation, allows option 3 to be attempted. The attacker make contact with the floor along with the tackler and, having managed the contact, the attacker should be

striving to form the 'L' or 'C' shape with his body, utilising core muscle strength to assist this.



Having formed a good body shape, the attacker will have maintained effective control of the ball using the ten points of contact and, with the ball slightly away from the torso, he can deliver the ball slightly backwards away from the gain line using a basketball chest pass.

By moving the ball away from the gain line, it should allow time and space for the support runner to move onto the ball, with the pressure reduced but not totally eliminated. This delay will give slightly more time for the support player to arrive and so maintain the forward momentum on the ball. It also gives the tackled ball-carrier the option of choosing the optimal supporter to receive his pass, should two or more support runners be present.

If the attacker can control the tackle area, the above options give the ball-carrier a wider window of opportunity in which to offload. This allows for development and adjustment to the lines of running of the support player(s) to take full advantage of the space around the contact area, especially the space behind the defence. The timing and execution of the release of the ball is pivotal to ensure full exploitation of attacking opportunities.

It should be understood that, for the attacker taking contact, there is always the option of making contact with the ground to place the ball and so create a ruck for the support players to compete for the ball. The contact area is a very changeable scenario and, as much as the attacker may wish to explore all available options, the decisions occur within hundredths of seconds and some options will be impractical/impossible. Ultimately, the player making contact with the floor may arrive quicker than anticipated, in which case the creation of a ruck is the safety

net whereby the attacking team can keep possession. It is the thesis of this article, however, that offloading out of contact attacks space behind a defence and maintains more effective forward momentum than going through multiple phases of ruck ball.

This may also be very challenging for coaches, as players who are enthusiastic to maintain the momentum on the ball may recognise the situation but make a poor decision and ‘force’ a pass that was unlikely to succeed due to:

- Poor management of body shape by the ball carrier.
- Using the wrong option.
- Support player not recognising the situation, or poor execution of running lines

When coaching these concepts to players, they are presented as options *should the situation be appropriate*, or options that can be adapted if the scenario changes. For those who have attended the RFU Level 1 coaching course, some of this will be familiar. When coaching these techniques I use short distances initially, which allows players more opportunities to practise with an emphasis on developing good technique. To add realism and develop understanding of both the technique and the scenario, I prefer to use tackle suits rather than pads.

The practice below is not definitive and is offered as possibility. It uses:

- A flexi-pole/corner flag to simulate a defender.
- Attacking players in tackle suits.
- Two 5m x 5m grids which will facilitate practice on both left and right sides.

The defender’s movement is angled to simulate the latter part of the drift defence; as the grid size increases, the movement will be forward and across. The initial pass from the attacker begins the practice and he will then use a support running line to support the new ball carrier.

DIAGRAM 2A – INITIAL PASS PHASE.

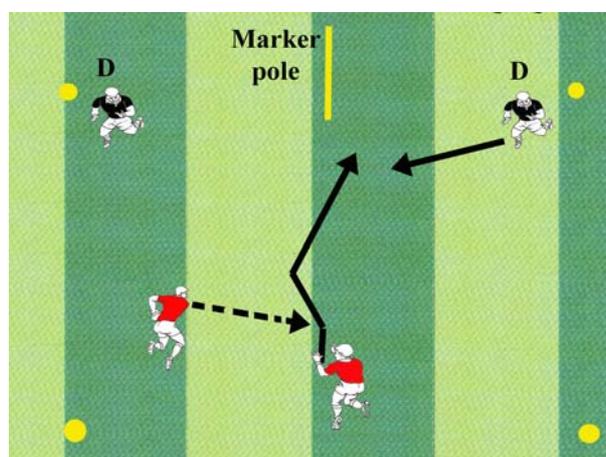
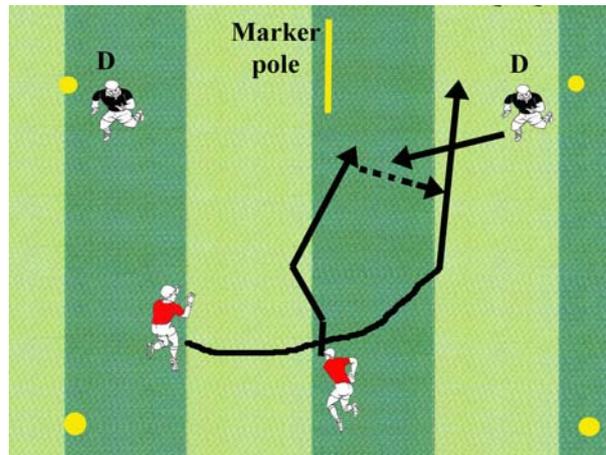
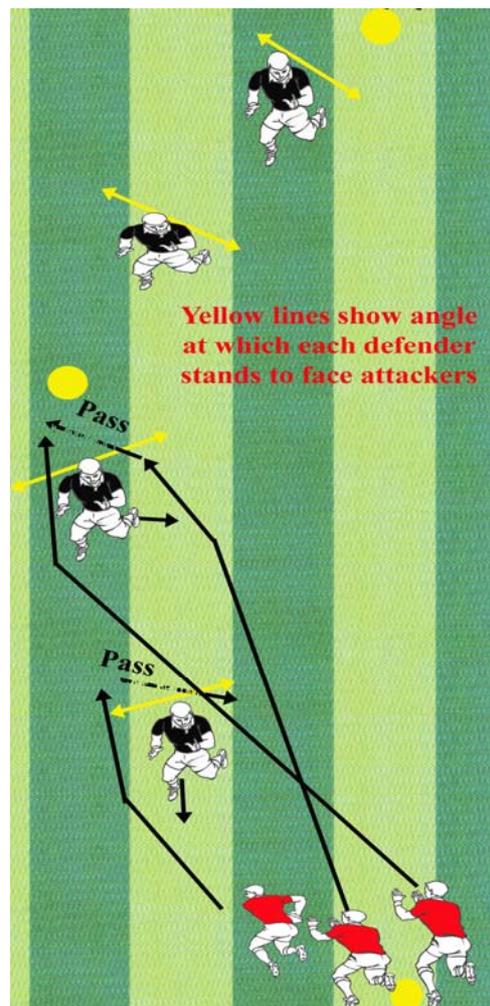


DIAGRAM 2B – SUPPORT PHASE.



A further exercise (DIAGRAM 3) requires timing of the offload depending on the proximity of the support runner.

DIAGRAM 3.



The attackers work around the half circle of defenders and, when in possession of the ball, attack the shoulder of the defender. The ball carrier can target either shoulder to attack and the immediate support player must adjust his running line to receive the ball. When reaching the third and fourth defender, the support player may not be available immediately and this is where the delayed release of the ball will be most effective. The defenders form an arc but stand at an angle facing the group that is about to start (see yellow line in diagram). To facilitate the practise of the technique, each ball carrier steps into the shoulder of the defender he is going into.

The practices above can be utilised to develop the techniques for maintaining the momentum of the ball through passing out of the contact area. A number of factors impact on the technique:

- Each player's ability to maintain control of the ball – ten points of contact with the pads of fingers.
- The ability to move initial defender and attack the space – sidestep/footwork.
- The ability to manage the body in the contact area – core strength.
- Confidence in the ability to be prepared to use one of the techniques in a high-pressure situation.

These will be developed through this high intensity but low impact practice, as the players can initially walk through the practice to acquire the correct technique. The terms are mine alone and, as with other aspects of the paper, are not definitive.

The Rugby World Cup has provided a festival of rugby with surprise results, great skill and technique and games that will be remembered for quite some time. When discussing the RWC with recent converts to the game, they immediately recalled the encounter between Fiji and Wales. It challenged their pre-conceived ideas that rugby was purely for human 'stock cars' running into each other. They were animated at the players' ability to evade contact and, when caught, to manipulate a pass, which demonstrated a level of athleticism they had not previously associated with the game.

Setting national allegiances aside, that game will long be remembered for fluidity of play and the spectacular tries that followed. This, in turn, was dependent on the players' ability to pass out of contact and so provide the supporting player with an opportunity to continue to run with the ball. Surely this is one of the reasons why many want to watch and support the game of rugby.

The information and practices in this article are there for consideration to challenge players and enhance their ability to maintain forward momentum of the ball. In so doing it will empower them to fulfil the instruction I recently heard being screeched with great ferocity from both coaches and supporters, "**...don't die with the ball!**" Although I was denied the opportunity to speak with the respective coach/supporters, I have no doubt whatsoever that they share my vision of control of the tackle and the maintenance of forward momentum of the ball!