

DEFENCE BY NEIL BACK

Neil Back is Defence Coach at Leicester Tigers, the club he played for three hundred and thirty eight times and scoring one hundred and twenty five tries in the process. He represented England in sixty six games, four as captain, and scored sixteen tries and one drop goal. He played in the Rugby World Cup in three tournaments in 1995, 1999 and 2003. He was with the Lions in South Africa 1997, Australia 2001 and New Zealand 2005.

PRINCIPLES OF DEFENCE.

Quite often the winning team is determined not by what they do in offence, but by what they do in defence – using their ability to attack and apply pressure in defence. I mean much more than simply tackling the player with the ball; disciplined and effective defensive lines will not only nullify the creative attacking opportunities of the opposition, they will also lay the platform for success by forcing a turnover of possession at the tackle area or by forcing the opposition to kick.

The basis of defence can be narrowed to a few basic principles.

1. Apply Pressure.

Limit the time, space and, therefore, the options of the offensive team.

2. Win Territory.

A quick-moving, disciplined defensive line that applies pressure can often prevent the offensive team from getting over the gain line. The loss of ground while in attack can have a demoralising effect.

3. Win Possession.

The old saying, “you can’t win without the ball,” sums up the third principle. Strong, effective first-up tackling coupled with applied pressure and breakdown intelligence from the second defensive player to arrive will achieve a higher turnover of possession or, at worst, slow ball for the attack to play off. The second defensive player’s objective is, if he and the tackler can’t turnover possession, to compete hard to make the offensive team commit more than two players to the contact area so the defence has greater numbers when the ball is played. This will lead to double hits and less area for an individual tackler to police. In essence, if your team can limit the time the opposition spends with the ball and/or limit the amount of quick, effective ball to play off, it will go a long way towards boosting your chances of winning.

4. Physically Dominate the Opposition.

Quite often a defence that is 'physical', i.e. powerful driving one-on-one and/or double tackles that stop attackers 'in their tracks', can have a marked impact on a game. If opponents are concerned by the fact they are to be solidly tackled, a further mental 'pressure' can be placed on their game, leading to mistakes through hesitancy, which in turn can lead to the turnover of the ball. I must stress that your 'physical' defence doesn't 'cross the line' and become illegal play. This can lead to unwanted penalties, which puts the ball back in your opponent's hands and your team ends up deep in your own half.

DEFENSIVE ORGANISATION.

Individual Tackling.

For a defence to be effective, each player in your team must be competent at tackling one-on-one. As a coach, it is important to concentrate on each player's:

Technique – develop front-on and side-on techniques that put opponents to the ground, but that also allow the tackler to quickly get to his feet to contest the ball or roll away from the tackle area.

Balance & Positioning – be able to react to the unexpected, moving quickly with control. Without balance, a tackle loses its power. Players should position themselves to dictate which shoulder the attacker runs or steps back into whilst keeping on their toes to enable them to accelerate into the collision.

Footwork – shorter, quicker steps and correct positioning of your feet in approach and upon collision will add to the effectiveness of the tackle. Adopt a stance that allows you to move and quickly follow.

Shoulder Contact – contact point should be hit with the 'top' of your shoulder and not your arm.

Head Position – head to correct side and kept close to the tackled player's body. Look at the contact point to keep your neck and back 'locked/straight'. A bent neck will lead to ineffective tackles and possibly injury.

Timing – contact with shoulder sequenced after front foot placement, supported by back leg drive. Power in tackle will come from the legs. You must know when to make your move and 'strike'.

Defensive Line.

Your defensive line has to be a well drilled and cohesive unit. A coach has to instantly review his team's defensive performance, identify and correct any errors that occur.

Some common errors are:

- The defensive line becomes narrow.
- An individual player moving up and out of the line too fast.
- An individual player moving too slowly.
- A player being drawn across field, thus leaving space.
- Tired or lazy players not drifting to cover on the inside of a 'drifting/sliding' defence.
- Blindside/short-side players 'over-reading' the play and covering/folding underneath and across to the open side of the field, leaving you vulnerable to a 'switchback' to the short side.
- Players marking space instead of opposition players.

Communication & Understanding.

Successful defence depends on each player making correct decisions. This decision-making process is enhanced by good coaching and communication to enable the player to:

- Identify the problem.
- Decide on the correct action to take.
- Have the skills to execute that action.

To assist this process, **communication** is paramount and should occur when:

- Equating numbers each side of the ruck.
- Nominating your role.
- Identifying and nominating the player you are going to tackle.
- Giving encouragement to fellow players, especially when they become fatigued.

Conditioning, Commitment & Attitude.

Conditioning – improved conditioning of your team leads to:

- Increased work rate.
- Faster player reactions.
- Increased enjoyment.
- Lower error rate.
- Good self feeling.

Commitment – players respond to both a challenge *and* encouragement. Statistic sheets can be useful motivational tools if used correctly. Remember, missed tackles have more effect on the game than the actual number of tackles. Offer praise to players with high work rates as well as those that make quality tackles or the tackles that really count in desperate situations.

Attitude – players must have a positive attitude in defence, with targets to achieve. These may include:

- Collectively moving forward and winning the physical battle by attacking the opposition's offence by reaching the gain line and winning back territory whilst in defence.
- <90% team tackle success (100% individual tackle success).
- >6 team penalties conceded.

'Apply pressure, force errors to win back possession and control the game.'