

THE BLINDSIDE – BY DON RUTHERFORD, FORMER RFU DIRECTOR OF RUGBY.

Forget the idea of studying Law 1 or examining the playing surface in the hope that you will stumble across it! You're out of luck, because we are dealing with a *concept* (meaning, conceived in the mind), albeit a fairly simple one.

The blind, short or narrow side (take your pick) is everywhere on a rugby pitch, but only the truly intuitive footballer instantly recognises where it is and takes rapid action to exploit it. Yachvilli recognized it in the recent France v England match, as did Howley and Van Gisbergen in the Munster v Wasps Heineken Cup semi-final. Michael Lynagh (Australia) recognized it in every match he played and Jonny Wilkinson is fast developing Michael's ability. Usually the key players in exploiting the blindside are both halfbacks, both wings and the fullback – five very important players at the blindside. These should be 'head up' as opposed to 'head down' or blinkered players who, before the ball is in their hands, have quickly looked at their opponents and counted how many of them were defending the blindside as opposed to the open side. If they are really smart, they may even have noted mentally whether they were faced with forward defenders or back defenders! Logic then takes over. If the opponents have six on one side of the delivery point and only two on the other, it seems to me that there has to be a compelling reason for attacking the heavily defended side. Yet most teams do so without thinking. I

suspect most halfbacks wait until the ball is in their hands before making a decision. In nine cases out of ten this is too late and, sadly, it's a fairly common deficiency.

En route to exploiting the blindside, it's helpful to grasp that the game becomes much easier the moment a ball carrier gets in front of the forwards. The ball carrier can be a forward or a back, it makes no difference. You can use the full width of the pitch and attack from your own twenty-two - but forget this fundamental principle of play at your peril.

A 'head up' player, plus any coach worth his salt, will know that a blindside exists from kick off, scrum and lineout as well as at the more obvious contact point between players once the referee has decided that a ruck or maul has formed. 'Head up' players also recognize instantly whether they are receiving quick ball where defences are disorganised, or slow ball where defences are lined up in a sprint start position ready to flatten would-be attackers.

Obviously, the five key players referred to earlier should have a telepathic understanding of what's happening and react to each other's every move. In attacking the blindside, usually the least defended area, players should attack the space on either side of opponents and not the opponents themselves. Like Jerry Guscott before them, Will Greenwood

and Ben Cohen are masters of exploiting space that has been created by England's desire and ability to offload the ball before or on contact. This team strategy makes it easier for supporting players to cruise between defenders.

From restarts, unless they are short and in the middle of the field, there is inevitably a blindside that can be exploited. Sometimes it's a pass direct from scrumhalf to wing or fullback, sometimes from scrumhalf to a charging forward. In any event someone and, in the above examples, the outside half, should be creating a diversion to the openside in an effort to distract the defence. Once again, this diversionary tactic to the openside is part and parcel of any successful blindside attack. Come to think of it, a 'diversion' is a vital part of any type of attack.

At first glance, lineouts seem less likely to produce blindside options, but if you are playing against a slow-thinking front of the lineout player, then a quick underhand throw-in or a ball to the first jumper delivering to a peeling player from the back of the lineout can produce surprisingly productive results. A long throw, which is caught and driven infield and the ball delivered as the driving maul is moving forward, can also create blindside options. Never let the opposition *think* that you will always attack the openside. Keep them guessing.

Scrummings are very productive opportunities for blindside attacks, initially through the No 8 linking with his scrumhalf or vice-versa, and either attacking left or right. On the right-hand side of the field, a ball from scrum half to right wing, if the latter has the wit to

vary his running lines, can open up defences quicker and easier than a can opener.

It's up to the halfbacks, wings and fullback to assess the width of the blindside so that only the optimum number use it. For example, a ten or fifteen metre blindside is probably best suited to one or two attackers. A twenty or thirty metre blindside gives greater flexibility.

I recommend that coaches either spend some of their match viewing end-on, or have the match videoed end-on. From this viewpoint, space, or lack of it, becomes obvious. Sadly, many halfbacks call a string of moves which bear no resemblance to how the defence have covered the field. Recently I watched a 1st Division game in which three tries went begging in the first half because the attacking side failed to realise that their opponents' blindside was totally undefended. They simply and predictably moved the ball back towards the waiting defence.

It's more common to see the blindside being exploited from ruck and maul. From a quick ball, an attacker who takes a flat pass and hits the spaces at pace can cause serious problems for the defence. Suddenly the defence has to turn and their organisation is thrown into disarray. Defending a ruck/maul or any scrum/lineout in the last third of the field, especially on the defenders' left side (attackers' right) requires first-class preparation and precise discipline in execution. The defending scrum half has a key role in pressurising his opposite number and/or the opposition No.8 at scrum ball. Kieron Bracken and Matt Dawson are real exponents at causing

havoc at the base of the scrum by stealth and timing. To attack an arm, or the ball, of an immediate opponent can totally frustrate the attacking intentions and cause confusion at the base of the attacking scrum.

The defending left wing has important decisions to make in these field situations. Does he stay out and mark his opposite number or does he step in and take the first attacker? The answer depends on questions like:

1. Can the defending scrum wheel the attackers and which way?
2. Can the defending left flanker and No.8 see the ball at all times when it's in the scrum, thus knowing precisely when to leave the scrum?
3. What position are the defending outside half and fullback taking up in defence?

Defensive tactics may have to change, depending on the composition of a team as well as the known strengths of opponents. Whatever the decision, the defenders need to be positive and must never dither. The worst decision an individual or a team can make is not to make one. To dither or to hesitate usually spells points on the board for the opposition.

The blindside may be one of many intangibles in a rugby match, but once the concept is understood and properly used it can bring enormous rewards. It's up to the half backs to recognise quick ball or ball delivered as opponents are in retreat. This is what the half backs thrive on. Thereafter take the ball as flat as possible, aim for space, pin your ears back and go!