

The Two-Man Drop

Producing lightning-fast recycled ball.

By Ray Schwarz, University of California at Davis and NCRFU referee in USA.

The article on the two-man drop is very much a report on coaching work that has been done by Barry O'Connell, an Australian coach who, now a retired schoolmaster, was rugby master at Nudgee College and also worked in coaching in the USA. Ray Schwarz does not claim to have invented the strategy, but got into conversation with the Technical Journal after Peter Thorburn's article (April 13th, 2004 – in archive). The Editor asked Barry O'Connell and Peter Thorburn for their thoughts on what was written on the subject and any coaches who have views are more than welcome to e-mail the Editor on Keithrichardson@therfu.com

I was recently introduced to Ireland Coach Eddie O'Sullivan's continuity drills, which we now call the *Ireland Net Drill* as players train under a three metre square net that is held about one metre off the ground. The work is valuable at developing strong body positions at the contact area. The first support players have to get a good body position to clean-out would be spoilers at the ruck, or at least move them away from competing for possession of the ball. Inevitably the predominant shape on the ground for the man who has been tackled is the 'long body ruck' shape.

I approached Eddie O'Sullivan after his talk, and told him of our commitment to *the two-man drop* at the University of California at Davis. When all passing and running options are exhausted and contact is seen as inevitable, UC Davis uses the two-man drop as a first option, and the long-body ruck as a second option. Our aim is to go into contact strongly and confidently in an attempt to assure 100% continuity through 100% ball retention; a lightning-quick recycle is part of the process. As Mr. O'Sullivan correctly pointed out, if a ruck is slow, it has no value.

With the two-man drop, the ball carrier keeps his feet as he goes hard into contact, at least initially. The next arriving team-mate (support) converts the would-be maul swiftly into a ruck, leaving the ball carrier standing in position as a legal blocker.

This is a particularly important skill for, say, a winger who finds himself isolated after receiving a high ball. If he can just hold his ground until support arrives, there will be no maul and turnover ball. O'Sullivan agreed with this much. But, at

least at the collegiate level here in America, we have found the two-man drop also works beautifully as open field running collapses into close contact.

The two-man drop starts as evasion or passing options have dried up and, just prior to ball-carrier engagement, arriving support cries out, “Two-man drop!” The ball carrier then:

- Power steps, turning and dropping a shoulder.
- Turns so his shoulders and hips become aligned more north-south than east-west (the latter would occur if he were to face directly upfield).
- Blasts an elbow or forearm.
- Raises a knee.
- Steps hard.
- Creates a wide base with strong balance.

We all know the benefits of such a power step. As this occurs, the ball is transferred back and the player must:

- Step hard in with right hip and shoulder up and into would-be tackler.
- At the same time transfer the ball to the left chest.
- Do not hold the ball out with two hands. Hold it tight to the chest or hip and preferably tight with two arms wrapped around it.

A powerful man in possession might be able to deliver a blow with the lead shoulder and maintain secure ball with the other arm, creating valuable separation space between the tackler and the ball. Most players, however, will step hard into the would-be tackler and simultaneously turn, twist (perhaps with a low centre of gravity) and, with elbows blasting back and forth, create space and bring the ball back and away from the tackler's reach.

So now the defender(s) are trying to tackle or, more likely, trying to form a maul with the ball carrier low and strong, facing north-south. The arriving support attacking player then rockets onto the ball with both arms, hitting and driving, ripping and dropping to deck to execute the two-man drop. The key factor here is the chest-to-chest contact of the two team-mates, which totally seals off defenders.

Ball carrier and support team-mate are now face-to-face, and chest-to-chest. The first player has made contact with the left shoulder and is joined by immediate support with the right shoulder into the ball carrier's chest. The initial ball carrier remains slightly forward, the support player hits up and then strips the ball, thus removing the ball *further* away from the reach of the defence.

As the support player (snake or driver) drops to deck, the maul has been successfully converted to a ruck while the defender and initial ball carrier remain

on their feet somewhat over the ball. The would-be tacklers must now keep their hands off if a scrum-half steps in and offside lines are now clearly set for the next arriving players.

At this point blockers may join in, or the scrum-half might step in directly, but we regularly have the scrum-half stepping in to clear, possibly drawing offside or hands-in penalties. This is an incredibly quick, dynamic ruck, requiring fewer players than usual to win it.

There is another side benefit. The initial ball carrier remains on his feet and can, therefore, rejoin the action so much quicker. Similarly, the support player who goes to deck rarely gets the attention of defenders. When the movement is performed quickly and precisely the defence never know what has hit them, then suddenly the ball is being spun out.

There are a few variations from this, but that is essentially the two-man drop. As our spring season drew to a close we added some refinements to the drop; one example was where both players dropped so that their heads pointed towards opposite touch lines. This created a very wide gate, but if there is no quick support, the ruck is effectively over.

There is probably nothing terribly new here for most coaches and the next tool/skill to build up is the long body ruck.

After coaching it, and watching our players execute the two-man drop with great success for two years now, I have even noticed big Australian flanker, Owen Finegan, execute it perfectly five metres out. He could have taken the ball forwards and bowled over a fullback for the try (probably, but *maybe* not). Instead, recognizing his offence was better organized than his opponents' defence and that his scrum-half was swiftly arriving, he stripped the ball from his teammate, who remained standing up and blocking the lone defender. Finnegan dropped to deck. Gregan stepped in at that instant and, with no pressure upon him, delivered a pass that swiftly led to a try out wide right.

At the time I was amazed at Finegan's complete lack of 'goal-line fever' and his commitment to a ploy that guaranteed certain possession at the recycle stage. That is, to swiftly establish (totally secure) the next beachfront from which to stage the next phase of attack.

Barry O'Connell, who was once rugby coach at Nudgee College in Brisbane until his retirement, also coaches in Northern California at Jesuit High School and at UC Davis. He replied to the article with the following points. He had, after all, introduced and developed the two-man drop to UC Davis.

Simply, Ray, we apply the two man drop **immediately**, before any ruck or maul is set/called by the ref. We put two bodies between the ball and the poacher. UC Davis does it **very quickly**. We don't have 'collapsing a maul' as there is no time to form a maul or for a referee to call "maul formed". Two-man dropping must be second nature if you are going to use it.

Having seen every NPC game this season on TV I cannot believe the number of players who go to ground **by themselves**. I would say 95% do and this leads to all the hands in and attempted poaching. Slow ball here we come!

Davis holds up a split second longer and goes down in pairs and the poacher then has to reach across two bodies to get to the ball. That's why we drove St Mary's and Reno insane - they could not get their hands on the ball and they could **NOT** slow it down. It just kept coming back on our side.

George Smith said as much on a Rugby programme here a month or so back. Poaching over one body is easy, but he stated that he felt that two can be a health problem. Cleaning out a poacher who is reaching over two bodies is so much easier than when the poacher has straddled the isolated ball-carrier

That is why we did the two-man drop extremely in close at contact practice. We had to make the support player move immediately to seal off the ball and drop with the original ball-carrier. When it is performed at pace there is rarely a problem with slow ball being hampered by hands being all over the possession.

I am amazed at players all over the Southern Hemisphere, including Australia, going down by themselves. This is an open invitation for either having the ball poached or for the ball to come very slowly, thus giving defences time to get themselves set.

To me the biggest problem with the modern game is the 'poacher'. Inevitably in rugby, as soon as a country comes up with an attacking 'gem', everybody is looking for the negative to shut it down.

The quick recycle, on which the running game lives or dies against the poacher, has become the challenge. Australia, through the likes of George Smith, became very adept at the poaching game and, subsequently, the slowing down of the game.

For a number of seasons now I have worked at overcoming the poacher. *Simply put two bodies between the poacher and the ball* is the philosophy, though applying it in a game is a little more difficult.

Despite what Ray said, I am happy to have the two bodies on the ground (left shoulder to left shoulder or vice versa) and force the poacher try to reach over two defenders to get his hands on the ball. By doing this, the poacher does leave himself open to legitimate and fair damage, particularly around the rib area.

Now that the IRB has helped by introducing the ‘come in the back door’ law and referees are interpreting the law effectively at the tackle, a two-man drop and subsequent roll-back of the ball works well (always bearing in mind that we are doing this in USA).

Ray infers that one man stays on his feet. To us this only works when you have a big unit that can hold a strong defender at bay. The mere name *two-man drop* infers that both go to ground.

Intentionally or unintentionally, variations of two-man drop seemed to be in vogue for a time. However, having seen the bulk of all Super 12 games this season, I cannot believe the number of ball carriers who go to ground solo. Figures, I believe, show that almost 60% of penalties occur at the tackle and the majority of those are against the ball carrier, most often after running in isolation.

We drill quick recycling in live practice. I use live work at practice as much as I can, working on the old philosophy that, until practice is as tough/tougher than games, you are not benefiting, as known as *train under pressure, play under pressure*.

The key issue of two-man drop is to maximize the body widths of defenders on the ground. We simply work on –

- Power step.
- Hit with lead forearm.
- Secure ball above trailing hip.
- Ripper hits with left-on-left or right-on-right shoulder contact and drives on. The ripper controls the ball.
- On the call of "down," both normally hit the deck (a powerhouse initial ball-carrier may stay up and drive as the ripper drops).
- Ripper rolls the ball the ball out if that is the best option.

The drill sessions on this are fully opposed, bitterly contested and I referee them as, hopefully, a game referee would. Any major/minor technical fault leads to an automatic turnover. We call this *Guts and Glory* and it has a different rule for each of the 6 x 5 minute sessions.

Naturally, wherever possible, we move the point of attack with the quick recycling to stop the opposition bunching its defence. Quick recycling brings the enjoyment factor into the game for both players and supporters.

The process works well for us (again consideration must be given that this is in the USA) and leads to most enjoyable rugby.

Before the 'poacher' arrived in rugby, there seemed to be a flow to proceedings and this added attraction to the game. You could run 'sweeps' one after another because the ball was available 'on-time' and teams could time their sweep runs.

The two-man drop comes into play as soon as the running option has been shut down. It does apply in the forwards but has, I feel, become vital in the backs as going to ground when you are isolated there is a recipe for disaster.

I'll give you an example. I am 12 and you are 13. You as 13 have the ball and an outlet pass or a break is not on for you. I, as 12, am the nearest inside player and I work in tandem with you, reacting immediately to the situation.

You turn in slightly while still leading into your tackler with your outside forearm. I race to you and engage you with me acting as ripper (right to right or left to left shoulder contact). As our support arrives, the option is for both of us to go to ground or for me alone to do that, leaving us with either two parallel bodies or a leading standing body and one on the ground. If the ball is rolled out, the scrum-half can maintain continuity.

When players work in tandem, they starve the opposition of possession. It is not always necessary to drop, though, and effective drives are an alternative and effective strategy. We have certainly managed twenty five metre drives upfield after being caught in the backs. When this happened we eventually dropped the driving mini-maul and kept the runners coming wide to fully stretch the defence. I stress again, however, that this is in the USA, but we can starve the opposition of possession by developing this mentality to work in tandem.

Peter Thorburn will be best known here as Director of Rugby and Head Coach at Bristol Shoguns. Before that he had coached New Zealand 'A', New Zealand U21s, various New Zealand 7s teams and had been an All Black selector. He was a New Zealand representative on the IRB Shape of the Game Committee and initiated and drove discussions that resulted in the 'five second rule' at the maul being introduced in June 2001.

Peter's original article (Archive, April 13th 2004) came about when I asked him to offer some coaching ideas on the ruck, knowing that it is a part of the game that is disappearing – at least as it used to exist. He did stress that his ideas, some a couple of years old now, were more about trying to create a positive thought process into the post-tackle shambles than they are about the ruck itself.

His article was read by Ray Schwarz in the USA and the following is Peter Thorburn's coaching response to the 'two-man drop.'

It is interesting to see that people are thinking around the rugby world and trying to find innovative ways of playing the game. In my article, I was trying to show what I believe is happening/should happen around the contact area and offering my own philosophy of the game from what I have seen and from my experience.

To me rugby is about:

- Players on feet.
- Ball off ground (in hand).
- Creating '*Go forward*' possession.

The advent of the 'use it or lose it' law rewarded players who went to ground and created a certainty of continuity of possession. However, with the evolution over a few years of the static flat line defence in Rugby Union, (quoted by many as 'rugby league-like' - except that in league the defence line is back ten metres) the defenders are now usually 'in the face' of the attackers.

The five second law has re-rewarded the players who stayed up at contact by re-creating the fluidity of the defensive line by encouraging mauling.

Players and coaches have grasped the opportunities from the *big mauls* that evolve from lineout drives and kick receipts, as well as potentially from

penalties or free kicks, although very often they do not have the ball at the back of the maul while still moving forward.

What haven't been taken hold of are the *mini mauls*, especially where backs are in contact with the defence. When they *fight to stay up*, they get the support players (snakes or whatever you want to call them) to get onto the ball carrier and get go forward - thus keeping the defensive line back-peddalling with any close-by defenders having to 'come through the gate'.

These mini mauls also give great variety of options in continuing the attack. These options are varied but certainly use circle ball, the drive, runners and looping off the mini maul. Auckland in NPC and The Blues in the Super 12 were using this technique with so much success that they won both tournaments, begging the question of why they stopped using it. They were automatically creating *genuine* rucking opportunities with their pick and go and clean-out.

The key is:

- Go forward.
- Work for front-foot ball.
- Work on players' awareness of *when* to go to ground. This has to be done with full control of the ball.
- A key component is to stay up long enough to turn the tackle into a maul or muck/ruck –whatever- which reduces the *legal* options of the tackler.

The point of my article in the RFU Technical Journal was just this.

This is not to say that the two-man drop and the long body presentation on the ground (etc) are not good options. They are, however, just part of the many options at the breakdown.

The technique required to achieve these two sets accurately at game speed is far more demanding of training time than developing on-foot mauls and, particularly, mini mauls. The key to me is the role of the ball carrier, especially when he goes to ground *after* obtaining *go forward* with, usually, the assistance of his 'snakes' or 'drivers'. His control and positioning of the ball alongside the key roles of the cleaners is coming back into our game in New Zealand as teams are now sequencing less and sending more players to the breakdown area.

The team with the ball determines where it goes and how many players go to it and players (and coaches) benefit by knowing this.

We, as coaches, need to be very careful not to over-complicate phases of play. The breakdown area, to me, is and has been a shambles for as many years as I have been involved in our great game.

You are correct in stating that players appear to go to ground too easily, thus making it easier for the defenders to set the 'D' line and for the tacklers to pick the ball from the tackled/grounded player.

Once again it is the support players' (in appropriate numbers) *responsibility* to clear the area and ensure retention. We have too many watchers and waiters in the game when urgency is the essence.

We had a generation of players (prior to the five second Law) who were rewarded for going to ground and those who stayed up were punished—we still battle to change this automatic subconscious action. Only continual hammering at training will change the mind set.

It is **easy to go to ground** and much more difficult to stay up. It also requires high levels of fitness to maul correctly and frequently. I encourage you to continue to find ways of playing the game and ensuring retention of possession but not just for the sole sake of possession. **There must be 'go forward.'**