

BEATING THE DRIFT PART 2

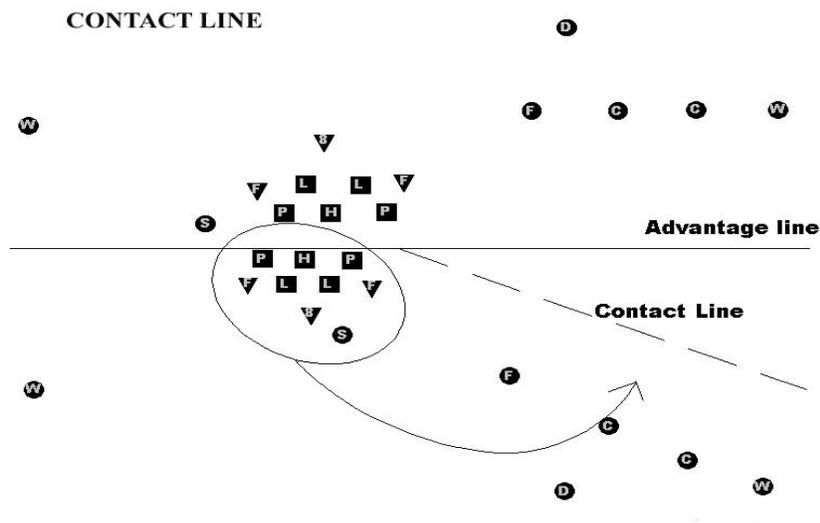
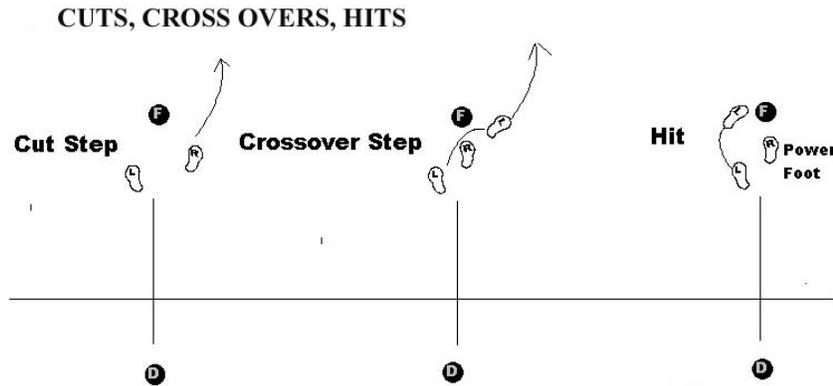
By
PHILIP COPEMAN

The author has been coaching rugby and gridiron since 1989 and played gridiron as an Offensive Tackle. He is currently assistant coach for defence at Primrose Rugby Club in Cape Town. He has a website at www.ironrugby.com if you wish to look in greater detail at his ideas.

This piece follows on from last week's Part 1, which is to be found in the archive.

A lane is the area that a runner can run in before he meets a defender. This too is dependent on time, as defenders move to close you down and tackle you. Lanes are as narrow as the hole at the contact point but they widen as you get past the defenders. In the diagrams the lanes are the dark shaded areas. Because the drift defenders are coming outwards, the natural tendency is to run away from them and go outside. This way of thinking is dominated by the 'option rugby' that pervades the current offensive thinking. Each runner is obsessed with 'linking' to his next man down the line. The problem with this thinking is that the drift is onto it. The drift is moving forwards and outwards. By the time that you have used up precious seconds making your break, the next drift defender has moved down the line to close off your option. The real opportunity lies in cutting inwards and putting the defender into a position of over-pursuit. Players have to be taught to cut inside.

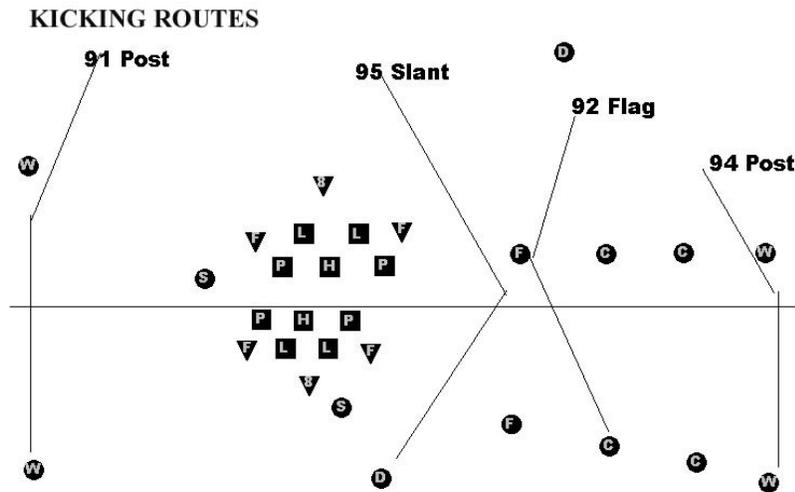
While the drift continues to remain as a single line, these lanes will always exist. To shut down these lanes efficiently requires a defence with line, linebackers and secondary. The drift does not offer this. It will always remain **vulnerable to the inside cut.**



Have a ready kicking game.

In League, the early phases usually consist of short, controlled passes. As the number of phases approaches six they swing the ball out for more adventurous plays. However we all know where the ball is going and the defence spread accordingly. The basic character of the drift is a long line that spreads out across the field where each player has an outside tackling assignment. If we pressure them up the middle with a running back, we attack the advantage line by lining up shallow. As we cut inside, they are forced to stand up to the advantage line and to pursue us.

The moment that they do this, we must have a ready kicking game. This is not the same as a scrum-half getting the ball and then, in his wisdom just 'booting it into the box'. I am talking about a calculating, stationary fly-half catching the ball and, after one step, chipping the ball over the heads of the defenders so they have to turn around 180 degrees to follow the ball.



The notion of a stationary fly-half goes right against most current rugby thinking, yet he can chip the defence and recover his own kick. Option rugby plays right into the hands of the drift. In the time that it takes for the fly-half to settle, make the kick and then start to chase, the defenders turn around and have an equal (if not better) chance to get to the ball. I am proposing using informed ‘receivers’, who run to precise, predetermined points. The stationary fly-half helps to perfect this accuracy. The receivers start from behind the fly-half so there is no need for him to charge downfield to put anyone onside.

The drift usually keeps players back in the wing position to cover the kick to the side line. I am not proposing to kick for touch as this effectively gives them the ball. I am proposing that we kick to our own ‘receivers’. This type of play is inspired by a Football pass over the top to a tight end or running back. As the forwards are also informed of the kick, we are able to bring up resources to quickly recover the ball. This is not the ‘up-and-under’ game played by amateur rugby in the 1980s. We are not in the business of kicking the ball to them. **Possession is paramount.**

Retain possession of the ball.

In League there are a limited number of downs and there is usually no kicking in the beginning. The drift merely has to keep the attack busy for a few phases then they are suddenly under pressure to get something done or give the ball back. Inherent in the drift is the weakness that it is passive. All we have to do to deal with it is make sure that we don’t mess up and give them back the ball.

What is not obvious is how we do it. Look at any game for a few minutes at any level and watch what happens when the ball is turned over. It is rare that the defence forces an error. It is almost always the offense making a mistake, along the lines of knock on, forward pass, losing the ball forwards in a tackle, players becoming isolated and not

having enough resources at the breakdown. You would think that these are simple things to overcome, but in truth even players at the highest levels are specialists and can not perform all skills perfectly.

Winning Points

- Focus on the defenders, not on your support.
- Go into contact firmly holding the ball.
- Let the best runners carry the ball.
- Prize possession over yards.
- Support must focus on ‘cleaning’ not on waiting for the offload.

In my experience there are very few players who can actually carry a ball and retain clear thinking in a contact situation. Plays must be called from our playbook that give the ball to our best carriers and the other players must perform the supporting role.

Our plays have very few ‘moving parts’. The reality about passing the ball is that, in the end, only one player can carry it over the contact line. Before we hit the contact line let us make sure that we have full control of the ball. Let the carrier have enough time to concentrate on the defence. If we are hitting them at their weakest points, then that is all the advantage we need.

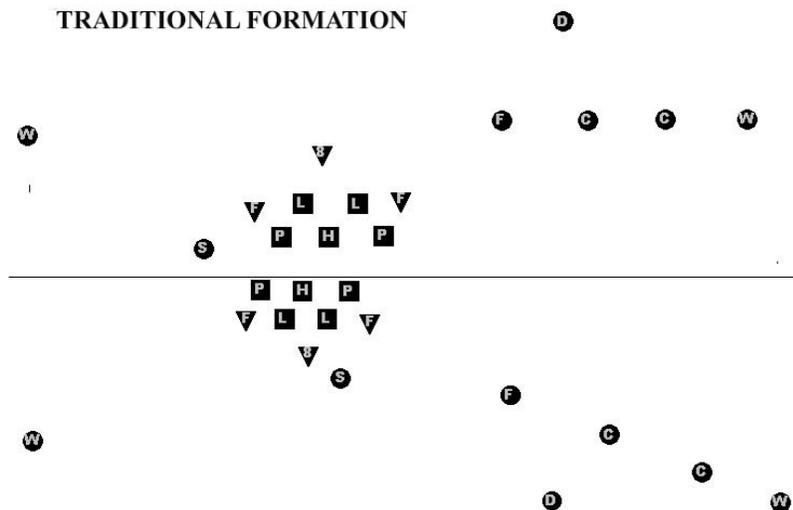
We need to be as fast as possible to get the ball to the ball carrier, who then holds onto it until he is brought down. The support, in an ordered and planned manner, recycles the ball which is then given to another designated carrier who runs until he is brought down. This is the essence of the **run and shoot** – getting our best players **running** against their weakest defenders and when they move to cover us, **shooting** into the holes that have been created in the defence.

The biggest weakness of the drift defence is that it avoids contact. So as long as we don't do stupid things, they won't be coming after us for the ball. They are happy to run behind us as we carry the ball outwards. We don't always have to meet their contact. We can at any stage carry the ball back to the other side. **The draw play** is an extreme version of this.

Choke the drift with chaos.

I come from a Football background and it is always strange to me why rugby players always line up in the same offensive position. Sure, this does help them to order themselves, but it also gives the defence time to straighten out and put themselves in place. We are under no obligation to stand in the traditional formation. We do this because we believe that we can pass the ball out to the outside and magically a gap will open and we will run around the defence.

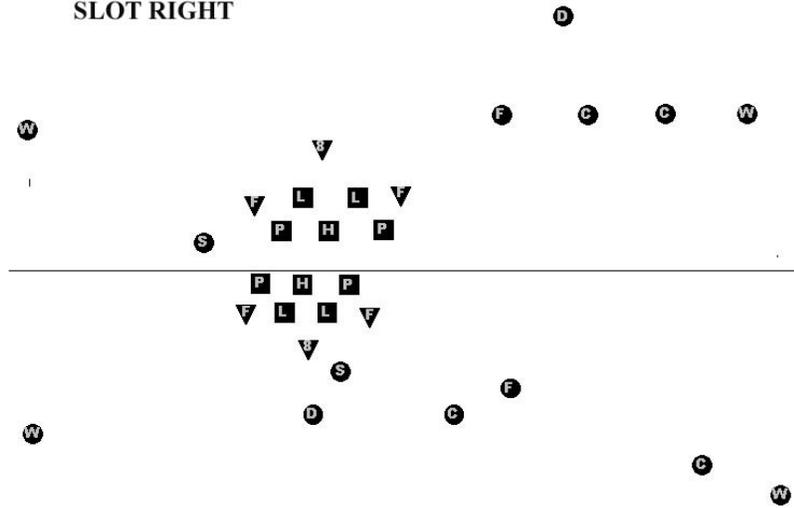
Man in Motion means putting players into motion before the ball is out of the ruck, maul or set piece. The offside rule merely states that you must be behind a certain line. You can line up on one side of the field and, four seconds before the ball comes out, you can sprint thirty metres across the field to line up in a completely different formation. You can even start from way back and hit the line running at full speed as the ball comes out. The drift will struggle to realign itself in half a second.



Set plays like line-outs and scrums should be the biggest scoring opportunities because half the defenders, the forwards, are bound into the set piece. Yet it is the broken play pieces that cause the real scoring opportunities. This is because in the broken play, the drift breaks down and can't form into order. So why not let us present them with chaos right at the start?

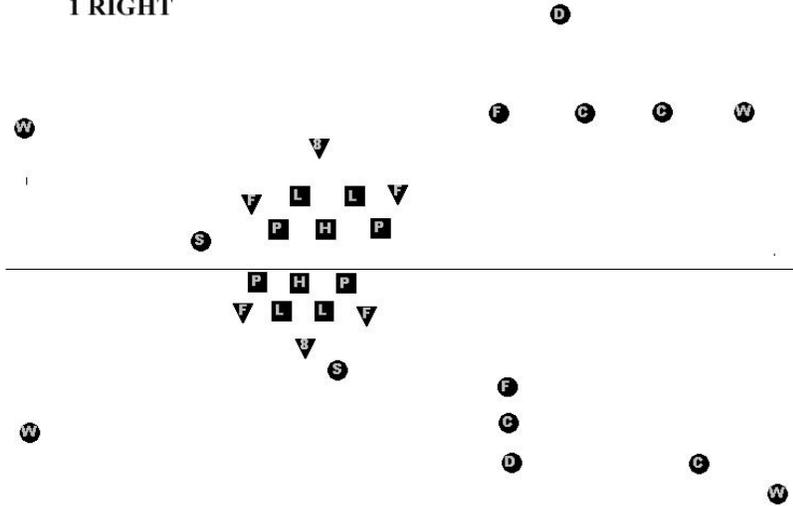
Line up in varying formations like the 'Slot', the 'Split' and the 'I' formation and set men in motion before the ball is out. It is very confusing for the drift to deal with an attack that is not in a straight line. In particular, there is no need to keep our strongest runners in one position. We should be rearranging our formation so that our strongest runner runs against their weakest defender. Make it their problem realigning their drift to accommodate us.

SLOT RIGHT



The various formations give greater options for plays that send the ball off in unexpected directions. It requires a full explanation and the style and creativity of coaches, knowing the strengths of their players, will allow a suitable playbook to be drawn up for the team.

1 RIGHT



SPLIT RIGHT

