

Rugby Australia 2017 Performance Coach (Level 4)  
Performance Academy Learning & Development Task  
#9

# Defence – The Essentials & Systems

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## *The definition of defence - the action or role of defending one's goal (try line) against the opposition.*

Defence in rugby forms a critical part of a team's overall strategy & game plan. There are a number of stirring, emotionally driven quotes that sum up the importance of defence in sporting teams.

Zelka Obradovic, widely considered as the greatest European Basketball coach of all time famously quoted, *"If you play good attack, you win games but if you play good defence you win championships"*.

Zelka's comment seems to have merit if one considers that the following teams won their major tournaments boasting the best defensive records of the competition.

- 2015 – New Zealand All Black were crowned Rugby World Cup Champions after conceding a try every 17.2 minutes & most importantly conceding the least points on average in the knockout stages
- 2015 – The Wallabies were crowned Rugby Championship Champions after conceding the least amount of points in the competition
- 2015 – Ireland were crowned Six Nations Champions after conceding the least amount of points in the competition
- 2016 – England U20s are crowned Junior World Champions
- 2016 – England were crowned Six Nations Champions after conceding the least amount of points in the competition
- 2016 – The All Blacks were crowned Rugby Championship Champions after conceding the least amount of points in the competition

It must be noted that England won the 2017 Six Nations despite finishing 2<sup>nd</sup> behind Ireland in points conceded after conceding 4 more points than the Irish.

# What makes a good defence?

There are some key components to a good defensive system:

- 1. Communication** - Teams can communicate well with both macro & micro chat give themselves a great opportunity to be a good defensive team. Players need to communicate to each other to identify the attacking threats from the opposition. Positive communication reinforces confidence in the players & in the defensive system they are using.  
Communication when used effectively can be intimidating for the opposition. When a team is communicating effectively, they are able to best implement their system & take time & space away from the opposition.
- 2. Tackle Technique** – Even the greatest defensive systems can fail if players don't have good tackle technique. Currently, the Wallabies under Michael Cheika are focusing on tackle technique that allows the defender to end up on top of the attacker. In order to be successful in this, tacklers need to:
  - a. Track the inside shoulder of the ball carrier and take his space
  - b. Ensure hands are up & elbows are tucked in
  - c. Use little quick steps in to contact
  - d. Dip into contact with eyes on the target area once the lead foot is close to the ball carrier
  - e. With a strong square hip base & front foot forward a small lunge position the tackler hits under the ball carrier, & wraps their arms tightly in a squeeze to ensure the tackle sticks
  - f. The tackler then chases their feet bringing the ball carrier down to the ground & ending up on top of them as the shoulder makes contact.
- 3. Attitude** - There is an old adage that defence is about attitude. Certainly, players who enjoy the physicality & confrontational element of the game seem to make better tacklers & defenders. "There is only one ball on the field and it is yours" is a commonly used expression by defensive coaches. The opposition only have temporary ownership of the ball & players need to display an attitude in defence where they are constantly trying to get 'their' ball back from the opposition.
- 4. Know your role** – A key element of a good defensive system is that players know & understand their role in the tackle, around the ruck & in the system in general. Most

defensive systems prescribe to a two or three man tackle policy. It's critical that the first arriving player understands what is expected of them arriving at a tackle contest. For example: If a dominant tackle has occurred, the defensive system could include the first arriving player to either take the space at the breakdown to ensure slowdown of the opposition ball or a turnover.

Another example would be, if the tackle is a low chop, is the inside defender expected to wrap up the ball & go to ground or to attempt to 'jackal' the ball on the ground? Players, knowing, understanding & performing their role will ensure better outcomes in defence.

5. **Linespeed** - Regardless of the Defensive system, defenders must exert pressure on the attacking team by using linespeed to limit the attacker's time, space and options. Teams who successfully use linespeed & remained connected defensively put themselves in the best position to stifle their opposition's attack
6. **Fitness** - In order for players to successfully implement a Defensive system they need to be fit. Being fit allows them to make the 2<sup>nd</sup> effort in defence & have the urgency to reload & work off the ball.
7. **Discipline** - Players must have the discipline to use the Defensive system. Deviation from an individual player can cause the entire system to fail. Players need to be knowledgeable & up to date with the laws & how best to manipulate them for gain. The tackle area in particular is constantly evolving in the Law Books & is the area of the game where the majority of penalties are conceded.

# Defensive Systems

Teams typically implement a one or a combination of the three most common defensive systems & tweak them to their needs. The complexity or simplicity of a team Defensive System should be based on their own team's strengths & the oppositions attacking threat. Teams with higher skill level will be able to use a number of different defensive systems in the same game based on where they are located on the field & what threat the opposition is showing.

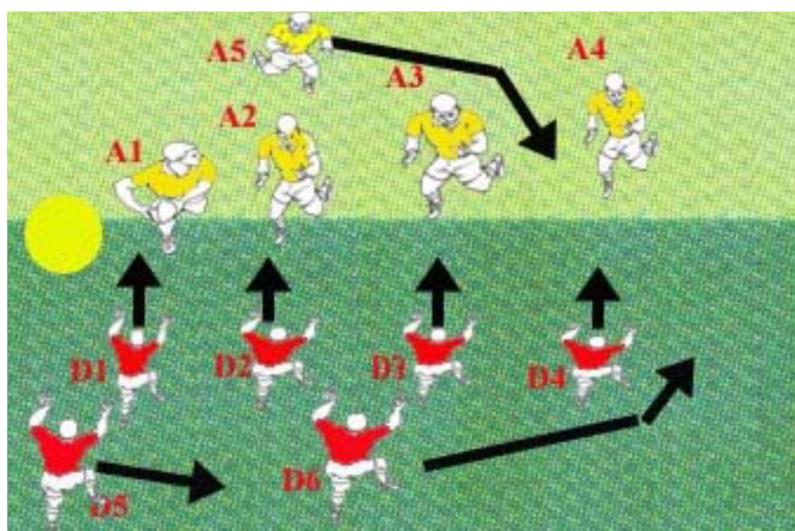
The three typical systems are:

- Man on Man Defence
- Up & Out/ Drift Defence
- Blitz/Umbrella Defence

All defensive systems have a recognisable defensive shape and this shape is the key in ensuring the system is successful.

**Man on Man Defence** is typically used close to the defending teams try line where the threat of chips & grubbers is greatly reduced. Its most effective off set piece where the blind winger & scrumhalf can be used as an additional defender should the scrum be close enough to the sideline. The man on man system typically specifies that players will start on their oppositions inside shoulder

Essentially, every player is responsible for the man directly opposite them. The open winger & fullback need to decide before the ball is in play who has the last attacking player in the line. The blind winger & halfback must track on the inside of the ball as it moves through the attackers hands.



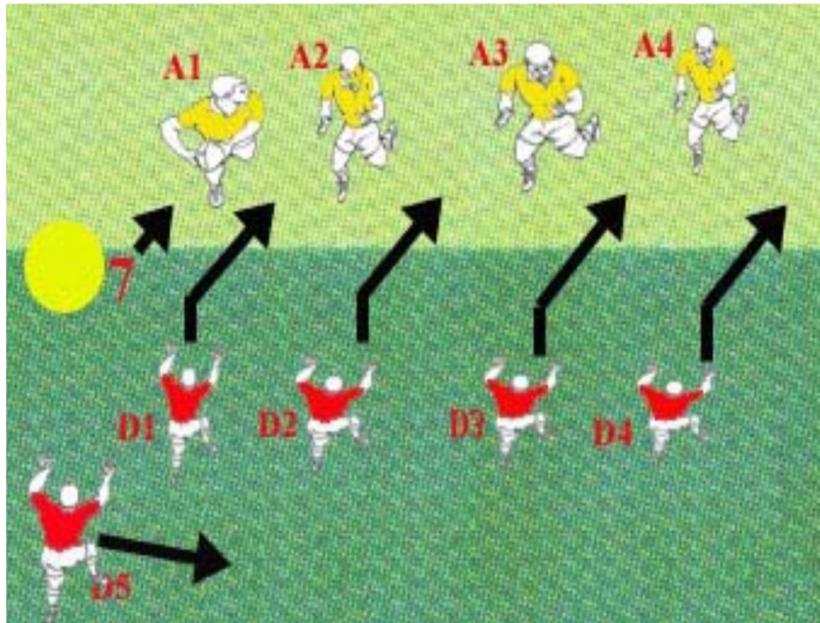
Strengths:

- Player numbers are matched at the start
- Defenders have a numerical advantage due to the blind winger & halfback being able to pendulum behind the first defensive line

Weaknesses:

- Reliance on dominant tackles as the attacking team are close to the defensive teams try line
- Attacking teams can use the Blind Winger & other attacking threats to enter the line forcing defensive players to look up at the 2<sup>nd</sup> attacking line threat. With no space to play with, a Linebreaks is likely to be points scored against the defensive team.

The **Up & Out/ Drift Defence** system is the most common defensive systems & the easiest to use. The defending players focus on the attacker players inside shoulders and get off the line square before drifting once the ball has left the opposite attackers hands only.



#### Strengths

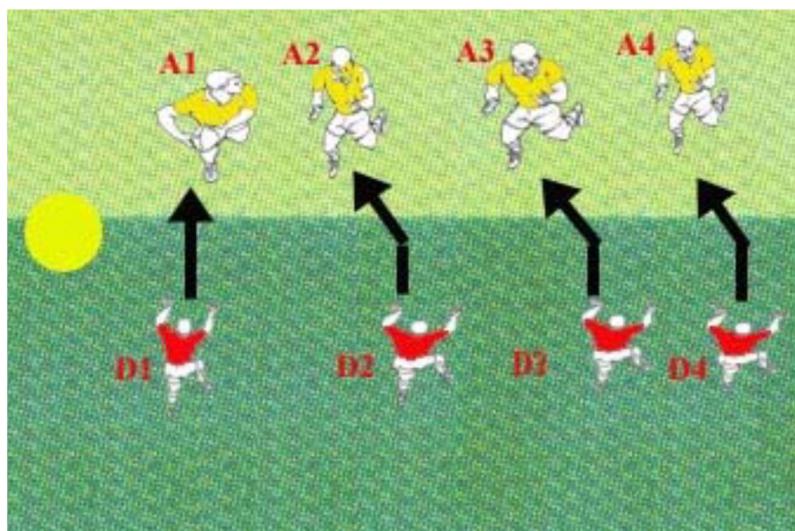
- This defensive system covers all attacking options. The system is typically implemented in a heel to toe line across the field & as a result allows the outside defenders more time to make decisions
- The system limits the threat of attackers cutting back and inside passes, as the defenders are focused on the attackers' inside shoulder & will always have cover on the inside
- The system takes advantage of 'jockeying' the opposition to the sideline & using the sideline as an additional defender.
- By pushing opposition on to the touchline it allows defensive teams to get off the line aggressively in the next phase & trap attacking teams behind the gainline

#### Weaknesses

- Players can tend to get lateral & not implement this system with good linespeed. It's essential that players are square & get off the line with intent.
- The consequence of not getting off the line quickly is that the attacking team will be left with more time & space to manipulate the defence
- This system relies heavily on the player on the inside the 'staying in the game' on the inside. If a defender gets lazy & doesn't remain connected on the drift to the player outside him then a gap will be opened up on the inside

- Overzealous defenders keen to shoot out of the line badly expose the defensive system. All players have to have faith in the system

**The Blitz/Umbrella Defence** is a high risk & high reward system focuses on applying direct pressure to the attacking team by using line speed from the outside, trying to get into the attackers blind spot. The system dictates that the defenders line up outside their opposite attackers outside shoulder. The whole defensive line blitzes/rushes up & one defender will be a shooter rushing out further than the other defenders to 'shut the gate' on an attacking team. The aim of the system is to pressure the attacking team by taking away their time & space & adding the risk of being tackled blind sighted The most critical part of a blitz defence is having players with a skill set to implement the system. At different times, the All Blacks & Springboks implemented the system & had Conrad Smith & Jean de Villiers respectively running the system & being the key decision maker. The system is generally led by the outside centre



#### Strengths

- Defenders get across the gain line quickly take time & space away from the opposition stifling the attacking threat
- The Attacking team forced back and deep behind the gain line to make their passes
- Tackles are made behind gain line putting the attacking team under pressure to get back to their breakdown to protect the ball
- It requires a high skill set from the attacking team to go around & can open the attacking team up to the risk of interceptions

## Negatives

- The blitz defence is highly vulnerable to an attacking kick behind. The defenders are blitzing at speed, leaving a large space behind them. Changing direction is very difficult at speed. If the kick is accurate, the defending team will be under immense pressure at the back with only the fullback and winger to clear up against an onrushing attack.
- The system relies heavily on every player performing their role. If any player does not get up as quickly as their inside & outside team mates they create an attacking
- The system creates space behind the defensive line & is therefore vulnerable to well executed kicks
- The defensive players are getting off the line quickly & can struggle to change direction if attacks change direction

## Summary

Defence in rugby is an essential part of the game that will continue to evolve based on:

- Skill levels of players
- Law changes
- Fitness of players
- Innovation of coaches

There is no 'one size fits all' approach to defence & any combination of systems can be used. As long as all the players understand the defensive system & buy into it, it will have good potential for success. In addition to defensive systems, coaches also need to consider their defensive policies regarding folding around the ruck, the position where their team is on the field & kick chase.

Whilst scoring tries & playing running rugby will always be fun, it's critical that coaches spend as much time on defence as attack. Team Culture can often be assessed & observed by the way teams defend rather than the way they attack. Players need to be encouraged to push the limits in defence to create a dominant tackle, a turnover or slow the opposition's ball down.

Winning your team a game with a dominant tackle outweighs scoring that winning try.