

How to Defend Against and Compete on the Oppositions Throw into the Lineout

Introduction:

The lineout is a major contributor to possession of first phase ball when restarting the game of Rugby Union.

In the past, the throw in to the lineout was a lottery as to whether possession could be regained from the throw. The players had to contend with minimal spacing between the two lines and no spacing between the players in the line itself. How jumpers were expected to jump out of this mass of bodies was a mystery to me. Most ball, if won was a tap back to the $\frac{1}{2}$ back or a drive or rolling maul. The term best used to describe it was “a dockyard brawl” with much pushing, shoving, and pulling to prevent the opposition winning the ball. The standard of throwing varied with different styles being used and this also contributed to this free for all.

With the advent of the modern game, teams are separated by a one metre gap from each other ie 0.5 metres either side of the line of touch. The players can stand between the 5 and 15m lines with the team throwing in dictating the number of players allowed in the lineout. The only restriction on the team with the throw, is that the minimum number of players participating is two. Lifting is now allowed and support players can run any arc from the lineout to support the jumper or the ball, whilst throwers we like to think have improved their accuracy. The coaching of lineout skills has improved as evident in the most recent Level 2 Coaching Manual.

The change in the law which now allows the team awarded a penalty to kick directly to touch, and still retain the throw in to the lineout has demonstrated how useful it is as an option to the non offending team. The lineout has become a valuable attacking option and most teams expect to retain possession due to the myriad of variations used by the team with the throw in. The lineout with lifting is a lot cleaner, the jumps are spectacular, and the height achieved is amazing. The number of skills now required has expanded significantly as the non jumpers now have specific roles as lifters, blockers, runners, dummy runners etc. Added to this, are the variations in length of the lineout used. The numbers of players participating and the changing of positions and interchanging of roles has lead to the lineout becoming an exciting area for the players to participate in and coaches to coach.

What strategies should the defending team adopt?

Is there any hope of winning the ball from the opposition's throw, as this is the contention of many teams that competition at the lineout is difficult if not impossible?

General Strategies:

I believe that some of the opposition's throw is winnable. Why should we give away possession without a contest? Rugby is a game of contests and the lineout is a primary

method of restarting the game and gaining possession of the ball. Therefore I would contest each lineout, everytime.

To assist in this process, it is necessary to do some homework on your opposition and to practice and experiment with different defensive patterns and personnel to maximize your chances. Each player should learn the skills involved in lifting and jumping as players are required to have specific roles in the lineout and this will improve the flexibility of the unit. They need to learn to read and recognise cues or triggers in the lineout and must be alert to these various cues at all times. An extension to this would be that each player can adjust to a role, either as a jumper or a lifter, on a call from the best positioned player.

- 1) Study the opposition by means of video, TV, personal or peer appraisals
- 2) Look for patterns – who are the major jumpers, how many players are used in the lineout and where? Do they drive or feed runners or the Halfback? Do they use certain variations/setups in different parts of the field.
- 3) Can you crack the lineout code used? Who calls their lineout? Does he repeat calls or setups when he gets tired?
- 4) Did the opposition take any ball off them and where? (looking for a weakness.)
- 5) Decide on a defensive strategy for your team – either to compete for every lineout or compete in certain zones of the field only. Need to decide when to use a specific defensive pattern eg 5 metres out from your own try line.
- 6) Appoint a defensive lineout leader whose job is to count the number of opposition involved with the lineout and to call a particular defensive pattern.
- 7) Do an analysis of each jumper. Do they step first? Some players still do a small step(s) first before they jump so look for that cue.
- 8) Do an analysis of the hookers throwing style. If he holds the ball in front of his face before starting his throwing action, then takes it back then throws, this can be a useful cue for the defending jumpers.
- 9) Every forward should learn how to jump and lift in the lineout.
- 10) Use contested lineout training sessions to teach players to react to different situations.

Examples of defensive plays to use:

1. Man on Man –“If your man is in then you are in” to mark him.

This set up is easiest when the opposition has a 7 man lineout but can be used for shorter lineouts too. The hooker stands between the 5 metre line and the touch line and puts pressure on any move around the front or pressure the $\frac{1}{2}$ back pass. The rest of the lineout stand as normal with the Loose head prop at 1, the No 4 at 2, tight head prop at 3, No 5 at 4, the No 6 at 5, No 8 at 6 and No 7 at the end of the lineout. This set up involves the tight prop having to move from looking at the touchline to looking across the field depending on what jumper feels they should jump and he is involved as a lifter. This is very difficult for the non-throwing team as the lifters depend on the jumpers to call so that they know whom to lift. This set up is easy for the throwing team to counter by using many variations. They can vary the set up of the lineout, use players in different roles and have lots of player movement in the line by switching positions.

2. 3,3,1 formation.

An alternative to 1. is for the non-throwing team to have a 3,3 1 setup. Traditionally this has meant that the Loose head prop is at 1, the No 4 at 2, the Tighthead prop at 3, they form the first set of three. The No 6 and No 8 lift the No5 and form the second set of three. This leaves the No7 free to prevent any attacks around the back eg a Willy away or to put pressure on the opposition backs if the ball is passed. The hooker stands in the tramlines as before.

A natural progression in this area would be that there is no need to be hamstrung by traditional roles. In other words a lock may not be the most agile jumper to use at 2 and a flanker or No8 may well be best suited to that jump whilst the lock may become a lifter. This premise should be considered for each defensive example I describe although for simplicity sake I will describe the more traditional roles.

3. Use the hooker in the tramlines as a lifter of the most agile lock/jumper who moves into the Number 1 position in the lineout.

Usually the tight head prop lifts from behind. This allows the loose head standing at 3 to lift the No5 with the No 6 lifting behind. The No 8 and No7 are left to prevent any attack around the back of the lineout or to pressurize the backs and shadow the ball. This set up has the advantage of putting the first jumper in front of his opposite number as he uses the hooker as a front lifter. The hooker cannot pregrip but can assist the jumper once the ball is over his head. This is very hard to adjudicate and in reality the hooker lifts as soon the jumper starts his jump. With this set up two teams of three are created again and are very useful at putting pressure at the front of the lineout. The major weaknesses with this setup, is you are vulnerable to moves/drives around the front and at the back. At the front of the lineout, the hooker is involved in the lift and as the front jumper always has a go, there is no one to stop a move here except for the half back and players peeling around from the back. At the back of the lineout the throwing team could create a jump by instituting a dummy slide at the front and using one of their lifters to peel off to the back and lifting the No8. The movement of players will commit the non-throwing team to their predetermined set up.

4. Place the Halfback in the tramlines, use the hooker as a lifter of the No 5 lock and place a big mobile forward, eg No 8 in the half back position.

This again provides a 3,3,1 setup. The big forward at halfback can cover from the centre of the lineout to the end with the Halfback in the tramlines covering the front half of the lineout. I often call this big forward player the “enforcer”, as he must be prepared to stop any attack that constitutes a punch through a gap or around the back. He also can attack through a hole and pressure the opposition Halfback or around the back and pressurise the outside backs. If the ball is likely to be moved wide then the enforcer can stand at the end of the lineout or infield of the lineout once he remains within the 15 metre line. This position provides him with an uninterrupted view of the opposition back line and a head start to pursue the ball. This particular set up is very akin to the standard 7 a side lineout defense pattern. The Halfback can resume his normal position once the lineout is over. If the ball is fractured and tapped down to his teams advantage it is the role of the enforcer to clean it up and take it forward leaving the Halfback to clear it to his waiting backline.

5. A jumper at number 1, with only a support player/lifter behind – none in front.

In this set up an agile and light lock or backrower jumps at 1 in the lineout with the strongest prop lifting him from 2 in the lineout. The jumper tries to intercept the throw and jumps on the hookers throw. The advantage with this set up is that the jumper is in front of his opposite number and if the throw is not spot on he will cut it off. Another forward and the other prop can lift the other lock. At the back there are 2 forwards free to contest, either to stop an attacking drive, put pressure on the backs by shadowing the ball or one of them could be lifted/supported to contest in the air.

There are variations to this theme where the hooker could join the line as a lifter, the Halfback could go into the tramlines and an enforcer could help put pressure on the opposition as described in pattern No 4.

6. No contest on the jump but wait and drive them back approach.

Many teams have decided not to contest the jump but to contest once the opposition has secured possession. This usually means that the players turn and face the opposition jumpers and attempt to block any forward momentum they may generate, as well as pressurise the Halfback by getting through any gaps to disrupt any quick ball. If the team in possession try to maul the ball the opposition are in a good position to counter this by attacking the outside hips that are exposed.

I believe this tactic is of little benefit and is negative play. By conceding possession, the best you can do is prevent any drive forward and if lucky drive the team in possession backwards and hold them up, possibly resulting in a scrum feed to you. The team with the throw can still compress and provide quick ball off the top to the Halfback and their backs.

Some teams in South Africa especially have experimented with an American Gridiron formation or Scrimmage to prevent forward momentum of the team with the ball. This was to best prepare them for the drive or block- players turn and face the opposition (ie face the opposition try line) have one hand on the ground, one leg bent and the other leg back. I have not seen any team use this ploy in recent times.

If a team is not going to contest a lineout throw, they would still benefit by putting a jumper up at 2 who would jump on the hookers throw. This does put pressure on the hooker and provides a contest at the front of the lineout. The other players could adopt a posture that suggests they were about to contest the throw, then change and adopt a position to blow blockers out once their jumper had secured the ball. This has a double benefit in that 1) it does not give a psychological advantage to the throwing team as you look as if you will compete and 2) as you may only attack the lifter when he returns the jumper to the ground and thus becomes a blocker, adopting a low body position enables you to prevent a drive and is the best defence against this attack or challenge.

7. Best positioned player calls they will jump, rest adjust to roles required.

A progression necessary for the modern game is that all players learn the art of lifting and jumping. This is especially useful in the defensive lineout. Each player can call a number or code, which states that they think they are in the best position to jump. As such the player immediately in front and behind become the lifters for

that jumper. This versatility which is so useful for your own throw can with practise be used to defend against the opposition's throw. It is I believe a progressive step forward from the old fashioned man-on-man mentioned in 1. This would require a high skill level and intense concentration on behalf of the players.

When to jump? What is the trigger?

The defending team should aim to get to the lineout before or at the same time as the team with the throw. This will reduce reaction time and prevent them getting a quick uncontested throw. The defensive organiser should call the number of participants in the lineout and hence the agreed defensive pattern.

The number 2 jumper should be instructed to jump off the hooker's throw. The lifters should be completely subservient to and concentrate for the jumper's cue, looking at the hips and assisting when they start to jump. Pre-gripping is an advantage as this jump is usually straight up with the idea of cutting the ball off. Many hookers throw the ball to 2 with its flight path going up in contrast to a 4 ball or a slide where a lob ball is usually used. As this trio's confidence grows they may attempt going back with their opposites to cover a slide.

The defending team's No2 can receive a very useful cue if the throwing hooker holds the ball out in front of his face, takes it back behind his head and then throws. This is a warning to the contesting forwards and is very easy to read. Modern throwers need to learn to start with the ball held behind their head and only move the ball forward on the throw. Variations on the height and length of the throw come from the wrist and hand movement. This is much harder for the defending team to read/judge.

The No4 jumper will use his opposite man as the trigger. The cues will come from watching the feet, hips or hands. This team of three must be adept at moving quickly forward and back and adjusting quickly to the jump to be able to compete with the variety of jumps and variations of jumpers used at this position.

The other player ie No7 covers any break at the back and follows his usual role of following the ball and pressuring the backline.

Attributes of a jumper:

Jumpers need to be confident, aggressive, positive, alert, thoughtful and analytical in their approach and believe they can win the other team's ball.

SUMMARY

I believe that a team should develop an attitude to contest the opposition's throw at almost every lineout. They need to be ready and organised early to contest.

Defending players will need to pick up their rating to get to the point of the contest and prevent a quick uncontested throw. They need to be positive in their approach and aggressively challenge for the ball. Jumpers need to be athletic with a natural leap.

They must be confident and anticipate the moment to commit to the jump. I think that variation 4 mentioned above, is the best defense to a 7-man lineout and should contribute to your ball winning potential. It does require practise and the players should be given adequate time to adjust to their roles. Opposed lineouts is a good way

to test your strategy especially if you do not know the other teams calls. This can easily be arranged at club practice.

Variations on the above themes can be used to counter shorter lineouts. I think it is best to have a predetermined formation in mind for whatever number of players you are up against and stick to that formation no matter what structure the opposition uses.

It must also be said that the players could adopt an interchanging role as mentioned earlier, where the best positioned player calls that he will jump and the players around him will lift and adjust to other roles as needed. A 1 or 2 jumper always competing to put pressure on the hooker's throw could compliment this.

The following are only suggestions and are only limited by your imagination and the ability of your players.

6 man lineout defense:

A 3,3 formation could be used to defend against a six-man lineout. The front trio could be the lock with both props as lifters. This could easily be amended to the most agile lightest jumper thrown up by any two lifters who can produce the maximum lift. They would concentrate on the hooker's throw. The second trio could then comprise the other lock, No 8 and No 6 and would follow and pressure any middle jump. The hooker could be left in the tramlines. The No 7 takes up a defensive position just outside and behind his Flyhalf.

A variation could be to use the hooker as a lifter with the Halfback in the tramlines and the No 8 as the "enforcer" as described earlier.

5 man lineout defense:

A 2,3 formation would be useful against a five-man lineout. Place an agile jumper at No1 (either a lock or flanker) with the strongest lifter eg a prop behind him at 2. They would jump on the hooker's throw. The other trio could be made up of a lock, with the other prop and a flanker as the lifters. The No 8 should take up the half back position as the enforcer with the Halfback in the tramlines. This leaves the hooker and the No 7 free to assist the defense outside the Flyhalf. Alternatively the hooker could be used as a lifter and if so that would leave two flankers free in the backline.

4 man lineout defense:

A useful defensive formation would be 2,2 with a lifter eg the loose head prop at 1, and the No 4 lock together as one pair, then the No5 lock with a flanker behind. If the ball is thrown to the front, the No 4 will jump and is lifted by the prop and the No 5 lock. This leaves the flanker free to add pressure. If the middle or back is used the No5 jumps and is lifted by the flanker and the No4 lock with the LH prop covering the front. If the opposition spread out and are unlikely to use a lifted jumper, then having the flanker at the back ensures an equal contest man on man as well as increased speed to the next breakdown. I would again put the Half back in the tramlines and use the No 8 or a big mobile forward at the Half back position but standing more infield and if possible beyond the end of the lineout.

3 man lineout defense:

In this case a single trio could challenge anywhere the ball could be thrown once they were proficient at moving backwards and forwards without losing their ability to coordinate a jump. I would again suggest a big mobile forward to act as half back.

2 man lineout defense:

This is the standard seven-a-side lineout and as such should include both locks as the jumpers with another forward standing at the end or beyond the last man in the lineout with the Halfback in the tramlines. The Halfback covers the front of the lineout and the forward covers the back.

Does position on the field have any bearing on the defensive strategy used?

There are two things to consider that will have a bearing on your approach: 1) the number of players the throwing team use and 2) which defensive pattern best suits your playing personnel. As the opposition dictates the number of players they will use in a lineout and the defending team at best can only match that number, I believe the defenders should have a predetermined defence organised for that number and should contest. There is no advantage in conceding less numbers to the lineout as the attacking team with the throw could win possession easily with a quick throw and get a drive on and so gain easy metres of territory.

Whether you use one defensive strategy over another will depend on your player's ability to contest and concentrate. I prefer the use of an "enforcer" and keep the Half back in the tramlines as I described earlier and I would always contest at No 2 with my most balanced and agile jumper no matter where I was on the field.

Other coaches have suggested they would use a different pattern for different parts of the field, using distance from your own try line as the determinant. It is felt that contesting in the air leaves you open to a drive especially 15 metres out from your own line. So an example would be:

50m to opposition try line	contest all ball in the air
25m to 50m	contest at 2 and 4 only
15m to 25m	contest at 2 only
0m to 15m	no contest but attack drive aggressively

CONCLUSION

The non-throwing team should contest all lineouts. Every time a throw is won in this manner it adds to the positive psyche of the team and is a very useful adjunct to their primary possession. It is essential to agree beforehand with the players on some defensive formations that are to be used and that they are practised on a regular basis to ensure success.

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