

# THE GAME IS CHANGING AGAIN!

The game of rugby is about to change again and unfortunately in my opinion it is going to be for the worse.

The most significant change to the game in recent times has been the advent of the highly structured flat line defense. Prior to 1998 in Australia it would be fair to say that relatively very little time was dedicated in training to the practice of defensive structures and patterns.

In 1999, Rod Macqueen's Wallabies showed the world that structured defense can win you major games and subsequently crowning glory. The Wallabies conceded only a single try in their 1999 World Cup campaign and that was in their pool game against the USA. It was commonly acknowledged that structured defense played the major role in their success.

Subsequently, the rest of the world has followed. Defenses improved that dramatically that the world powers and custodians of the game (the IRB) through conferences on the game have looked at laws that will in some way help to break up the flat line and encourage more ball movement and creative play ( e.g. allowing a second chance to progress the maul).

After my recent trip to the UK and after watching the South Africans in this years Tri-Nations tournament I am convinced that the game will face an even greater challenge in maintaining it's attractiveness as defensive structures start to evolve.

The Wasp's club in London, Zurich premiers for the last 2 years and European champions last year, has introduced a defensive pattern that has the potential to turn our game into a forward dominated game played primarily around the ruck with a great deal more kicking. So far it is the closest thing I have seen to the Sydney Rooster's highly successful rush up defense.

It is cleverly quite simple but as Warren Gatland (Wasp's Head Coach) says, "it is very high risk but brings with it very high rewards!" While it is simple in structure it requires sometime to bed down because the concept is foreign to many of the players and in particular to outside backs.

The defensive pattern is zonal, only when they are faced with a large overlap will players slide. The keys are:

- Stay square. In other words don't turn your shoulder unless you are coming from outside in.
- Get off the line at speed. Although I could not get a definitive measure for a comparison of line speed with the Reds, purely from observation, Wasp's line speed would be more than twice as quick.
- 14 men in the front line need to be committed to it.

- When the opposition has the ball within the 15 metre lines the defensive line compresses so that the open side winger is no further than the furthest goal post. The defensive line then shuts like a hinged gate.
- The line is lead up from the outside. This is almost natural as the quicker players tend to come in from the wing.
- The winger, and to a lesser degree the outside centre have the toughest task as they have to make a decision to commit to players entering the backline- usually the blind side winger or fullback.
- Get an arm on the ball carrier. As Shaun Edwards (defensive coach and former Great Britain Rugby league international) says, "I don't care if you miss the tackle, but you have to get an arm on them. By doing that you will slow them down and someone else will come in to bash them." Line speed is the key. Wasps players take that much ground from the opposition that the initial hit is often well behind the advantage line. Even if the ball player breaks a tackle by slowing them down they still make the hit over the advantage line.
- Slow the ball at the tackle. Aggressive 2 man tackles with a flop. This allows the defense to set and again get off the line quickly.
- Recognise that between the 22's is the chip zone. This is the area of the field that you can expect chips or grubbers in behind. Usually from scrum and lineout the half-back is very active and prepared cover any such kick. It is not just left to the half back though to cover the other backs turn and get back as quick as they can as well.

The result of a structure like this is a very aggressive in your face defense that stops the ball from progressing past the outside centre.

Oppositions try to beat it by standing deeper in an attempt to get around. This is rarely successful because of the line speed, however if they do achieve it they create the overlap so far behind the advantage line that they are usually picked up by the cover in tackles that are still behind the advantage line.

If they attempt to throw floating balls to go over the top an intercept is usually taken or the receiver is smashed by the outside defender.

The reason that Wasps can execute this pattern so effectively is the size, speed and power of their players. Physically their forwards are monsters with aggressive attitudes. They love the confrontation and surprisingly so do their backs. It helps also that the skill level of opposing teams are not as accomplished as those players in the Southern Hemisphere and that their competition is played in wet conditions for a large part of the tournament.

The South Africans however have adopted it and it has proved extremely successful with them posting their first Tri-nations title for some time.

Get it right and it is very hard to beat. So how do you beat it?

I am not sure that anyone at the moment can definitely tell you how you can successfully beat this structure. In talking to various coaches around the world preliminary thoughts turn to deception through decoy runners, kicking and playing close to the ruck.

Currently, kicking and close to the ruck attack are the preferred strategies in the UK. Image what it would be like when and if both teams defend like this and do it well? What sort of spectacle do you think we will get?

Many rugby league experts are concerned about the state of their game. Rarely these days is the ball thrown wide, the predominant attacking strategy is to play close to the tackle. As a result the game itself has become one dimensional. Run from dummy half or hit a runner at speed close to the tackle to take the 10 metres. Do this 5 times then kick.

The South African Super 12 teams this year started to employ a similar defensive structure. Next year after their national teams success one could only assume that they will continue to enhance this structure and why not? It suits, large aggressive men whom previously failed to excel at defending against teams that play a quick expansive game.

Are we headed in the same direction as Rugby League?

The Reds had the best defensive record in the 2004 Super 12 but finished 10<sup>th</sup>. While we conceded less points than any other team the structure and patterns failed to create enough pressure on opposing teams. I would have to say that the Wallabies are the same (they would be because we have the same coach and structure) - "passive but effective defense".

Is a passive defensive strategy going to be enough in the years to come to win you a title? Is there room for a combination of both defensive strategies? Are the players capable of "situational defense", reading a situation and calling the appropriate defensive strategy to match?

In my opinion the shape of the game will change in the next few years. Rush up defensive strategies in various forms will be used by the majority of teams. The game will consequently be played more around the ruck area. Kicking will become an even larger component of our game as teams strive to get over the advantage line. Width in attack will diminish. More tries will be scored by forwards than backs.

This paper poses a lot of questions, questions that at this point in time I don't have the answers for. I hope however that this paper may be the basis for further debate and discussion amongst those at the top level of Australian Rugby.

I do believe that the shape of the game will change again. I know that as a coaching team with the Reds we will look at strategies to beat the Wasp's style of defense because I am sure the South Africans at least will come at us better structured than ever.

