

A level 3 coaching paper – Brendan Allardyce~~Back to the Future~~

What to do at the breakdown?

Rucking and Mauling choices

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Introduction

Many reasons have contributed to making the 'breakdown' the biggest area of discussion, conjecture, ~~deliberation,~~ confusion and robust debate involving all stakeholders in the ~~modern game of rugby.~~

A well-worn ~~Rugby~~ question would seem to surround whether Rugby teams should predominantly ~~choose to base their style of game on a~~ ruck or maul ~~preference.~~ Both breakdown ~~preferences options~~ have been well explored in Rugby literature. The purpose of this paper is to consider options at the breakdown (or at contact/~~post-contact~~ as it is often referred) ~~and~~ discuss rucking and mauling as team ~~decisions options choices, and how teams and their coaches choose strategies for rucking and/or mauling.~~ It will suggest that in a 'pure' form, 'mauling' as an option has been underplayed and put on the 'backburner'. It will also suggest that a multi-pronged strategy ~~or team style~~ with both ~~rucking and mauling as options is preferred.~~

Background

It seems to me that Rugby coaches and their teams have often deliberated over a preferred option at the breakdown. Some have suggested that the modern game is about "avoiding the breakdown" and playing a free-flowing game based on super-fast continuity. ~~(insert quote)~~ ~~As suggested in a previous paper by Brad Royal:~~

"Rather than initiating a ruck or maul, players can by-pass the breakdown by adopting a strategy of off-loading the ball to support in a pre-contact, contact or post contact situation.....it is a philosophy in modern-day rugby that will endure as it is an attractive style of play, realises less stoppages....."

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I support this general notion but would add that when breakdowns happen and the ball is 'passively active' mauling in particular can be a fruitful option not just for retention but also for attack as mauling itself ~~should~~ can be seen as a variation in the point of attack.

Innovative breakdown tactics have been developed greatly ~~(amongst others)~~ by former Brumbies mentor and current Wallaby coach Eddie Jones. Support and a range of contact options were centrally concerned with a "ball alive" philosophy which again focuses on quick ball movement away from contact with free flowing continuity. ~~(insert quote)~~

New Modern laws (2001) seem designed to encourage more rugby played 'on its feet' and off the ground. Yet for many rugby teams ~~rucking seems the easiest and most often taken option. Perhaps~~ the desire ~~to ensure better for multiple phases of~~ retention, the need to build phases of possession patiently (against flat, organised defences) and ~~with the a typically~~ reduced commitment of forward numbers at any particular breakdown ~~encourages a rucking style, rucking seemed the easiest and most often preferred taken option.~~

Mauling decline

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Many teams have fallen into a style of quick mini-rucks, hitting the deck ~~quickly~~ thus ensuring fast-ball movement to another point of attack. Whilst I believe that ruck ball played quickly is a viable option and should be encouraged and used often, this should not be at the detriment of strong mauling skills. Teams and coaches could benefit greatly by also using mauling and by not neglecting mauling ~~as an option for for variation in both retention and attack~~ and as a significant platform to build and rebuild pressure.-

More and more across the Australian rugby landscape mauling seems confined to occasional lineout drives and the odd mini-maul involving 4 or 5 forwards driving a contact situation forward before a quick release.

Rugby teams with favourable playing personnel (usually a “big pack”) have in the past favoured a driving game played “off the deck and on your feet” with mauling and lineout drives predominant. The maul has been a successful attacking platform and weapon. It caters for a well-drilled pack with strong body shapes playing a tight forward orientated game. Whilst once it may have been the domain of big forwards mauling can also be employed by all team members to great effect. I am arguing suggest it still has a place amongst rugby team options and is more than just an opportunity for a massive tight 5 to show off how strong and cohesive they are.

Drives from lineout common other maul starts not common and underused.

The rucking option has often been favoured by smaller, more mobile teams with pacy back-rows determined to play a faster game with retention built on quick recycled ball. It would seem fair that whilst this is the quickest delivery of ball it is also a delivery means that is fraught with challenges. Post-tackle if the ball is to be found on the ground then players are forced to make split second decisions including but not only:

- Rolling away
- Releasing/Placing
- Removing their hands
- Staying on their feet/holding their body weight
- Cleaning out
- Rucking with their feet legally

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Additionally referees are forced to adjudicate ~~a-on~~ situations with many variables, highly open to ~~many~~ interpretations including but not limited to:

- -failing to roll away
- not releasing
- over the top - sealing off /not holding your weight/sealing off
- hands in ruck
- rucking off the ball

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Referees are also more likely to reward defenders at a ruck where there seems more of a contest for possession than reward a defender who is trying to halt a driving maul. Ruck ball can become more susceptible to turnovers and be easier for defenders (highlighted by 'jackals' like George Smith and Phil Waugh) to steal ball.

Advantages of Mauling

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~~For example~~ An innovative rugby team in 2001, Brisbane 1st Grade grand finalists the Gold Coast Breakers used mauls as an attacking weapon from both short and long arm penalties. Not unlike an old 'flying wedge' but legal the Breakers players would quickly set up a maul on the ball carrier and drive forward with much success.

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The quick-set driving maul involving many players (including backs) was a surprise to opposition ~~teams~~ defences, who are so used to fanning out into a flat line from an almost 'voluntary tackle' ruck platform, but also ~~The tactic also proved~~ an inventive way of keeping the ball and yet attacking dynamically.

In the worlds premier rugby competition the Super 12 in 2001 Auckland and Wakaito (especially) surprised opponents and enjoyed success with strong technically proficient mauls that carried the ball 30-60 metres and disorganised defences for next phase attacks in the process. Perhaps this is where a well drilled team with BOTH maul and ruck options can take an advantage.?

The British and Irish Lions of 2001 were fully expected to base their style around a mauling game and they certainly showed glimpses of their powerful mauls. This did not mean that they had no outside backs, on the contrary players like O'Driscoll and Robinson proved world-class, it also did not mean they were incapable of recycling quick ruck ball, they often achieved that. It meant that they played (some would argue underplayed) to one of their team strengths and lessened one of their possible weaknesses namely, turning over ruck ball to a ravenous and speedier Australian back-row.

I remember vividly several discussions in 2001 with a powerful lock forward formerly of Brisbane Wests (who played 1st Grade in the mid to late nineties), who in fine Wests tradition constantly lamented the reduction in the amount of mauling in the modern game. He often suggested that any team brave enough to (even sometimes on a few occasions) revert to a tight, driving maul-based game would catch out opponents, hold the ball longer, attack better, score more points and incur less of referees wrath because a well constructed maul is easier for a referee to facilitate than what is often a 50/50 mess on the ground.

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Advantages of Mauling

- Can start after a ruck (by getting numbers to the back of a ruck and effectively restarting play by picking up and setting).
- Surprise element (not expected by defences)
- Less open to referee interpretation (as mentioned the mauling side is favoured because defenders are often forced to join from the side or drag the maul down)

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- Harder to defend against (takes significant defensive effort and energy and good technique to defend against – e.g. a defensive tactic involving quick thinking and good leg speed)
- Arguably easier to coach and also easier to perfect technically than the swag of ground skills needed in a ruck/post-tackle ground situation
- Less prone to errors/turnovers or even contestability
- Can succeed against modern defences because you are trying to attract defenders and attack through the defensive line not around it. A successful maul can bunch defenders in behind and commit them thus opening up defences for later phase strikes wider of the original mauls point of attack.

Disadvantages

Slower ball than quick ruck ball

Arguably harder to coach mauling skills like body position, leg drive and leg speed

The argument against

It is often espoused that a strong mauling game promotes an imbalanced more forward dominated slower less entertaining game that is not exciting and expansive. Also that mauls and only appeals to ‘old school’ forwards with big body shapes who are purists of a long forgotten old age version of the game.

My response to this is **‘nonsense’** – as with all things there needs to be a balance. I am arguing that in recent seasons the pendulum rightly or wrongly has swung more towards a rucking game and that astute and innovative teams and coaches can redress this by ‘multi-skilling’ with a ~~repertoire~~ repertoire that might include a fast-ball ruck and go game but also a maul based style/strategy where ~~beneficial~~ driving and/or rolling mauls are used to best effect.

Even if a driving or rolling maul is practised and rehearsed as an occasional attacking weapon, it can for reasons promoted in this paper (especially the element of surprise) be truly effective.

Conclusion

Even if a driving or rolling maul is practised and rehearsed as an occasional attacking weapon, it can for reasons promoted in this paper (especially the element of surprise) be truly effective.

I firmly believe that technically sound mauling skills are not just the domain of massive tight 5 forwards. All of the rugby team can contribute to a process of staying on their feet, finding the right body position and driving forward, in a controlled and dynamic way. It was encouraging to note that the Gold Coast Breakers player who initiated much of their successful mauls was a slightly-built outside centre.

Go you good maul!

Brendan Allardyce
September 2001

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