

Tackle Contest

Philosophies, tactics & technical elements

This paper will discuss two separate tackle contest philosophies in attack and defence. The techniques and skills needed to embrace both on the field are fairly similar and will be discussed.

Both philosophies embrace the concept of ball retention but have differing consequences to the wider style of play – go past the ball (take space) / stop at the ball (occupy the space). Taking space allows for a quicker style of play but requires more accuracy and physicality – occupying space may result in a slower style of play but can arguably be achieved with less accuracy and physicality. Both styles rely on the ball carriers efforts (pre/during & post tackle), that will be discussed later in the paper.

Many junior team coaches have adopted the ‘occupy space’ style of rugby – get to the tackle and protect the ball. This has clear advantages around ball retention and security both issues with young / junior players. A problem associated with this can be that at the LTPD stage of learning of those players, there is still a coaching mindset of:

“forwards get there” for every tackle contest/ruck.



ARU LTPD Model.pdf

This catch-cry is used as a tool to assist players develop a sense of their roles and responsibilities on the field, but with the game changing and requiring all players to have expertise at the tackle contest, this is an area of coach education that should be addressed and filtered into junior coaching. A common problem for juniors and seniors is the analogy of the crashing train – if the 1st arrival player post tackle stops at the tackle to ‘occupy the space’ the next arriving players have limited options and can then hinder access to the ball by the #9 and also create a scenario of ‘over-committing to the breakdown’ leaving fewer options in attack and also fewer support players in the immediate phases after that.

Senior teams that embrace the ‘occupy space’ strategy may look to do so to limit numbers at the breakdown and allow for more options in next phase attack. Issues arising here are that the space between the ball and potential counter-ruck is limited, as is the off-side line between the defenders and the attacking advantage line - new Law in 2018 around a ruck is now formed by 1 player: <http://laws.worldrugby.org/?domain=20>



The strength now of most ruck defences and the importance put on the 10,20,30 / pillar, post roles means that a small ruck would arguably mean the best option for an attacking team with an 'occupy space' philosophy would be to 'play off 10' to provide the width to nullify the strong ruck defenders. This has implications for the wider style of play of these teams.

There continues to be a grey area around interpretation by referees of 'sealing-off'. Until this is clarified and consistently policed many coaches & players will have equal levels of success, failure and frustration around how best to occupy space and be able to withstand a counter ruck effectively.



In both strategies, the work done by the ball carrier is paramount to success (measured in either ball retention and/or speed of ball out and back into play). Footwork pre-contact to target a 'space not a face' /weak shoulder is not coached enough, adopting a win the contact approach encompasses the ball carrier always trying to make/break the advantage line. Ball transfer away from contact and continued leg-drive through contact should allow for the ability to execute a 'man on fire' – aggressive roll on the ground to allow the player to execute a half or full long place.



Without a good half/long place, both tackle contest strategies start to become much more difficult to execute as it allows the defending team much more opportunity to counter ruck and contest for possession. It also decreases the time and space for the 1st arriving support player to either protect ball or take space.

The fundamental difference of the 'take space' philosophy is what the 1st arriving support player does – they take the space over and crucially past the ball. This requires accuracy at the gate and the contact with any opposing players. By taking the space it affords the next arriving player the opportunities depending on the scenario facing them:

1. Occupy space over ball but remain active if a threat enters the gate(plug/seal)
 - a. In the case a threat does enter the gate the player occupying the space over the ball has 2 options: targets the threat and takes the space and threat (cleans out the opposing player) or adopt a strong position and withstand the pressure
2. Pick and go
3. Pick and pass

Taking the space allows for a faster play of the ball and therefore more options to play differing shape – off 9 or 10. The defence remain in motion which makes creating a strong cohesive line difficult under flux.

The technical & tactical elements to 'taking space' rely on good body shape into contact and appropriate reaction to the visual cues and actions of the opposing players. Analogies of 'plane taking off' / 'win the shoulder – win the win the leg-drive = win the space' can all be applied to this strategy. 'One bullet – one kill' can be applied to try and encourage a team not to over-commit at the tackle contest, focusing on reacting to the situation in front of each player. Similar to practising a skill, the ability to react to visual cues has to be coached and done with high repetition and multiple, game realistic scenarios to allow that reaction to become a behaviour and transition the player to be able to do so on an associative or autonomous stage.

The skills used by both philosophies in attack can be applied to the tackle contest from a defensive aspect as well. The ability to occupy space relies on being quick to the tackle contest and being able to get into a strong and stable position over the ball – this can be applied to a 'tackler plus one' strategy where the 1st arriving defensive player, post tackle, goes for the ball / pilfer.



The ability to be accurate and take space can be applied to a 'tackler plus one' strategy as well where the defence want to attempt a counter-ruck situation and turn over possession.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=t93oxAuFnQg>

Going back to a previous point above, the more players within a team that develop these set of skills from an early age the more options a team and the coaching group will have to set a style of play or philosophy at the tackle contest in both attack & defence. Players at the highest level of community rugby still do not have an extensive range of these skills due to a number of factors. Playing under a specific style of play that only coaches to that style leaves a player with a limited set of skills and a limited ability to be able to adapt to a new style or structure of play. The lack of appreciation and understanding of the LTPD goals and markers by clubs and schools limit the playing groups that coaches inherit and this has a cyclical effect on the coaching philosophies – coaches then perpetuate the problem by either continuing to coach to a specific style and do not address the skill set downfall, or try and introduce new styles without proper up-skilling or dedicated time allocate to learn and execute new skills and styles in closed or open environments in game-like scenarios or pressures. This is a generalisation and is not totally generic to all coaches or systems but would be a correct generalisation of the state of the game at the community level.

The above is primarily significant when based on prescribed patterns of play – coaching the ability for players to ‘play what’s in front’ dictates that players understand the ramifications of executing each strategy at each breakdown, what the immediate effect that has on arriving support players and crucially what options are available on the next phase. By having an over-prescribed style of play players are only coached on the skill necessary to execute that style. Simulating alternating breakdown scenarios is imperative to allow players to react to visual cues and choose which strategy to adopt at each individual breakdown – the flow on means play makers have to identify this and react and call appropriate plays for the next phase and beyond. This all means players should be coached, in progressively more realistic drills, the techniques needed for both strategies – the coaches philosophy should therefore be to prepare the players for both scenario (‘occupy space’ when needed & ‘take space’ when available). To limit our players in philosophy, and by association technique, is to hinder them and not allow them to play the game to its fullest.

The game at the community level is going through a transition from an over-prescribed style of play to a zone-based style of play – thrown into the mix is the concept of ‘play what’s in front’. The ability of the playing group will / should always dictate the style of play adopted by a team, club or school – so the development of varied skills and game understanding should be the focus of any / all coaching groups at the community level of the game.

Useful Links:

<http://laws.worldrugby.org/?domain=20>

https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCGp6x0A93qorZ_F1Tm_8vmw

<http://www.rugbyaustralia.com.au/Portals/22/2018%20Laws/Game%20Management%20Guidelines%202018.pdf>