

Maintaining Continuity

Ball movement is the key to success

Continuity is the one team principle all coaches and players involved with Rugby strive for. Whether it is for the purpose to attack the space and/or maintain the space, the common goal is the same, to advance the ball to score a try. The IRB states “It is the aim of the team in possession to maintain continuity by denying the opposition the ball, and by skilful means, to advance and score points” (Laws of the Game 2008). The strategies and tactics to do this vary from coach to coach and from team to team.

This paper will focus on the main issue of maintaining continuity through ball movement. Continuity of possession can be achieved via securing possession at rucks and mauls. However, it is continuity of play that is the real key to success, and this can be achieved through ball movement. As the old saying goes “the ball always beats the man”. There is no truer statement that can be applied to the modern game of Rugby.

Continuity by definition is uninterrupted connection, continuous (Wikipedia 2008). Maintaining continuity and, in particular, forward progression of the ball, does not necessarily equate to the formation of a ruck or maul. (John Widdowson 2008). In fact, a ruck or maul provides the defending team with a small break, an opportunity to set a defensive structure to then contest possession. Therefore continuity of play has stopped and the attacking team must devise ways to maintain continuity of possession. If, as the attacking team you do not allow for the formation of a ruck or maul, the defensive team does not get the opportunity to set their defence, and one is able to advance the ball forward quicker and more easily. If you are able to do this often enough, eventually the ball will be moved to someone in space who is able to score a try.

Why should we continue moving the ball?

The ACT Brumbies and the Wallabies under the Rod MacQueen regime built success on the back of continuity for possession. Players were highly skilled in contact and became proficient in terms of ball retention. It was not unusual for both teams to maintain possession for long periods of time. Starving the opposition of possession would not only cause them to fatigue quicker, creating more space and opportunities to attack. It would also affect the decision making of the opposition, often making poor defensive decisions, which created further opportunities to attack.

However, over time defensive strategies have adjusted and unless an opportunity presents itself, the defensive team only commits limited numbers to contest possession. Instead they set their defensive line and look to attack on the next play. In many scenarios there are more defenders than attackers

on their feet that are able to participate in the game. This has allowed defence to dominate Rugby.

Law changes over time, have also contributed to the dominance defence has over attack.

Law 16.3 Rucking states; a player rucking for the ball must not ruck players on the ground. A player rucking for the ball tries to step over players on the ground and must not intentionally step on them. A player rucking must do so near the ball.

The lack of rucking in the modern game, has enabled tacklers to slow possession down by lying over the ball and not rolling away. As a result, the attacking team has been required to send more players into the breakdown to maintain possession, than the defence. In fact if we consider the past two World Cup winners South Africa and England respectively, both won their title on the back of strong defence and the ability to slow possession down of their opposing team. In 2003 England scored 327 points while only conceding 88 points in their seven matches. In 2007 South Africa scored 278 points and conceded 86 points.

Below is a table from the 2008 Six Nations Championships also illustrating how strong defensive teams have become.

Team	Average Number of Tries Scored Per Match
England	1.6
France	2.2
Ireland	1.8
Italy	1.2
Scotland	0.6
Wales	2.6

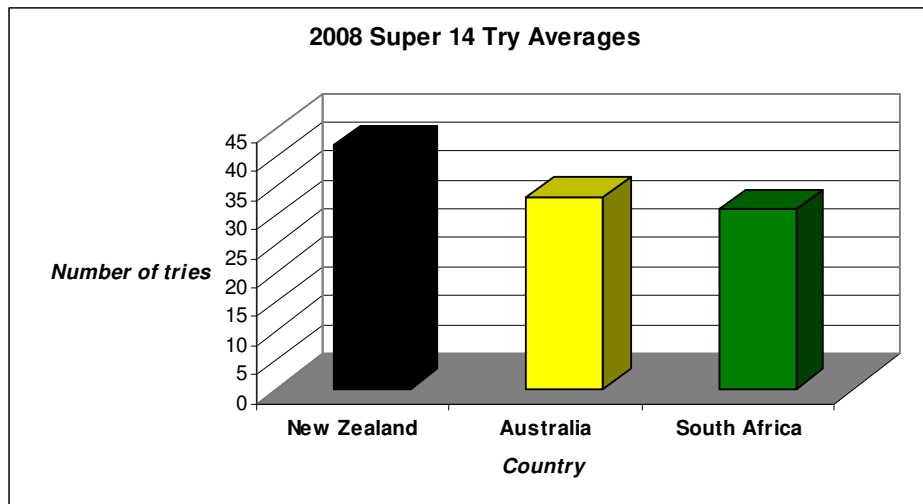
Coincidentally, Wales won the tournament and were rewarded for their adventurous play. But overall, for the average number of tries scored per match to be so low, indicates one of two things;

1. That the defence is extremely strong, and or
2. That the attack and attacking options of the teams are extremely poor.

Looking at these statistics and combining them with the new ruck law under the IRB's Experimental Law Variations (ELV's) which states players are able to use their hands and feet to try and win or keep possession of the ball, without being guilty of foul play, means attack and teams attacking options must improve if;

- Coaches and teams want to be successful, and
- We want to improve Rugby as a spectacle and hopefully attract more players, spectators and sponsors to the game. This will allow the game to grow and prosper in the future.

It probably poses another question, do we entertain or is it winning at all cost? As coaches shouldn't we coach our team to do both. If we look at the 2008 Super 14 competition you will see it is possible to do this. The graph below shows that teams from New Zealand were far more creative and adventurous in terms of their attack compared to both the teams from Australia and South Africa. As a result the New Zealand teams averaged far more tries per game.



The Canterbury Crusaders from New Zealand won the tournament and scored the most number of tries with 53 throughout the season. They defeated the NSW Waratahs in the final, who only crossed for 39 tries. Whether it is coaching philosophy or the player's skill set, it is clear that the attack of all teams around the world needs to improve. If not, defence will continue to dominate the game.

How do we move the ball?

It is the primary job of the attacker to advance the ball forward. To do this effectively, the attacker must possess an array of skills that allows him to have a number of options as the defence approaches. At the most basic level, the attacker has three options to advance the ball forward. They are;

- Run
- Pass and/or
- Kick

All three options present different advantages and disadvantages. The outcome of the option taken by the attacker is determined by the skill set of the attacker, and by the skill set of the defender/s. If the defence rushes up fast, the attacker may identify the space behind them and kick. If there is only one defender or a large space between defenders, the attacker may elect to run. And if there is a support player in space the attacker may pass. Problems arise if;

- The attacker is unable to read the situation, and/or
- Is unable to perform the skill required to execute his decision.

Therefore, as a coach it is important we provide our players with not only all the 'tools' to do the job well, but also all the skills to use those 'tools' when required. So if he decides to run, he can. If he has to pass, he can. And if he is required to kick, he can. This can take hours of training, but should not be determined by position. If all fifteen players in a team are capable of making these decisions and have the skills to execute them, defensively they would be difficult to stop.

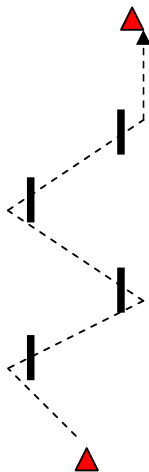
Run

Attackers cause the defence the greatest problems when they are able to get behind them. (John Schropfer 2008) By avoiding contact, attackers can find it easier to advance the ball forward. Agility, speed and deception are all important ingredients when trying to evade a defender

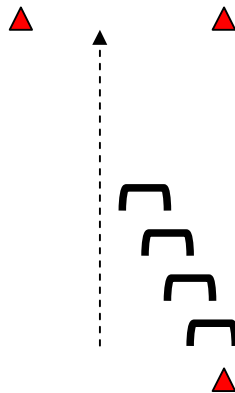
Agility

Agility is the ability to change direction without loss of balance, strength, speed or body control. (Alan Pearson 2001) There are endless activities that provide players the opportunity to improve ones agility. The use of training aids such as agility poles, hurdles and ladders can help provide variety in your session.

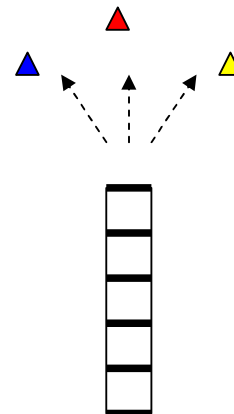
Slalom



Hurdles



Ladders



If players are able to isolate and/or evade a defender, they become a dangerous attacking option. This provides the attacking team with numerous options and can help them go forward.

Speed

There is no substitute for speed. If an attacker is quicker than a defender, it is difficult to prevent them from going forward. Players with speed must work on identifying opportunities in a game that allows them to use their speed to evade a defender. This can be developed through the use of touch games in training.

Deception

If an attacker is able to deceive the defender, this will help the attack go forward. Skills such as 'dummies', a swerve, the 'goose step' and tempo running can put doubt into the minds of the defence. Tempo running is being able to change your running speed from slow to fast or fast to slow, depending on the situation. When performed correctly, this can leave defenders grasping at fresh air.

Pass

Passing can be broken down into three main categories;

- Pre-contact
- In contact, and
- Post contact

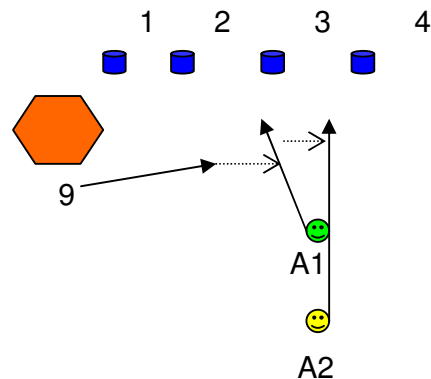
Pre-contact

Prior to contact the attacker has a number of options available to him to help progress the ball forward. This is an area in the game that is under utilised, especially in and around the ruck. Forward runners often run one out, and it is easy for the opposition to dominate that collision. If the attacker is able to shift the point of attack by passing, defenders are forced to make a decision and/or a number of decisions in a short period of time. This can put doubt into the mind of the defender and could force an error in judgement and/or execution of his skills.

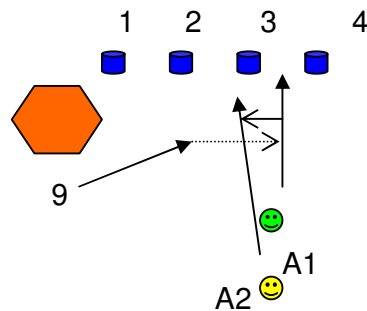
Ruck defence has become the most organised component of any teams defensive system. Positions are given designated roles and responsibilities. This has become the cornerstone of all good defensive teams. In terms of attack, if one is able to breakdown the oppositions ruck defence, in essence you destroy their whole defensive pattern. This can be achieved through short passes (tip-on's) to support coming from depth and accelerating onto the ball.

For Example

1.



2.



Support (A2) must have depth allowing him to react to the attackers (A1) movement. The added advantage with deep support is defenders do not mark you. This potentially makes this person one of the most dangerous attacking options on the field. This starting formation also means if and when the ball carrier does go into contact, support is close maintaining continuity either of play or at worst possession.

Below are the key elements that will determine the success of the option taken pre-contact.

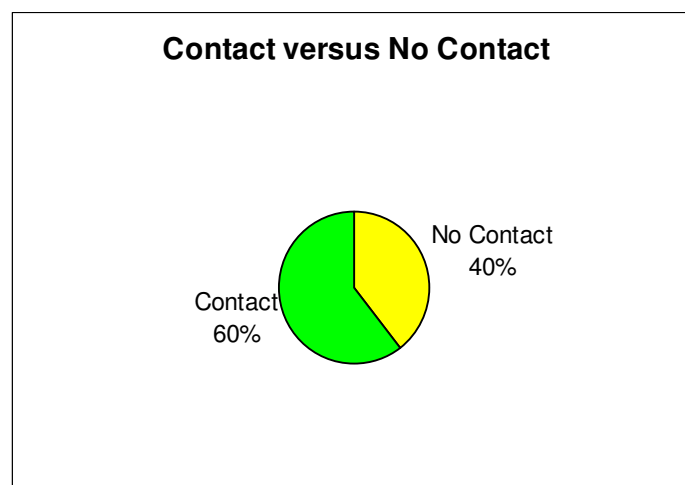
1. The attacker must have sufficient leg speed and appear as if he is preparing to go into contact. This will engage a defender and they too will prepare for contact.
2. The attacker should be encouraged to carry the ball in two hands. This again will put some doubt into the mind of the defender as he cannot be sure if the attacker will run or pass. Having the ball in two hands also allows the attacker to pass at the exact moment he elects.
3. The angle of run the ball carrier takes. The ball carrier should attack a shoulder to create and/or preserve the space for the support player, and therefore the intended receiver of a short pass.

4. The support player must communicate effectively to the ball carrier.

Other passing options available to the ball carrier pre-contact include;

- Switch pass
- Cut pass
- Circle ball
- Long pass, and
- Place and take out

These pre-contact options have almost become extinct over the last five to ten years. Coaches and players have focused on contact skills. The graph below shows how the game is played.



The graph shows, that while 60% of Rugby is played in contact, there is still 40% of the game played with no contact. With this in mind, how much time do coaches devote to practising these pre-contact skills? From my personal experience as a player, not much. However, as a coach I ensure the players I work with spend at least 30% of our training week practising these skills. Training should replicate what occurs in the game. The team's attack as a result of this practice has improved, and we received ten bonus points for scoring four tries or more throughout the season. This was up 50% on the previous season. Many of the tries scored came as a direct result of some of the pre-contact skills practised.

What a team does in this 40% can determine the outcome of a match. It therefore makes sense that players are highly skilled in both elements of the game. If players are efficient and competent in both contact and not in contact, the teams attack and attacking options will improve, therefore making it harder to defend against.

In Contact

As stated already, 60% of the game is played in contact. Because of this, it is important players are confident in contact and have options available to them in order to maintain continuity. The tackle law has a huge impact in the options available to the attacking team.

Law 15 - Tackle

A tackle occurs when the ball carrier is held by one or more opponents and is brought to ground.

A ball carrier that is not held is not a tackled player and a tackle has not taken place.

Opposition players who hold the ball carrier and bring that player to ground, and who also go to ground, are known as the tacklers.

A tackled player must immediately pass the ball or release it. That player must also move away from it at once.

By definition, this is encouraging ball movement and emphasises its importance.

Under the ELV's law 15.2 states when the ball becomes unplayable at a tackle the referee will award a free kick to the team not in possession of the ball when the tackle began.

Coaching under the ELV's, preventing the ball from becoming unplayable has been a focal point. Combined with the law regarding rucking and the use of hands in a ruck, a good attacking movement can easily be halted and the opposition get a free kick. This is why creating a ruck is not always the best available option. Because of this change in law, coaches and players have had to consider what options they have available to them in contact.

Below is a list of some of the options attackers may use when in contact in order to keep the ball 'alive'.

- Gut pass
- Hit and spin
- Mini maul
- Screen pass

These skills must be practised and rehearsed at training, allowing players to get a 'feel' for the movement and awareness of when to use it. When executed correctly these skills all cause greater problems to the defence than a ruck or maul. Preventing the defence from getting set can only help one's attack.

Post Contact

The ability to keep the ball moving once through and/or lightly in contact, again asks more questions of the defensive team. Like pre-contact and in contact, the attacker has numerous options available to him post contact, which will keep the ball moving. Some of these options are listed below;

- Go to ground and pop
- Pop as you are falling to ground
- One or two handed off load
- Flick pass
- Lay it back

Under the ELV's, defending players are put onside by retiring behind the applicable offside line. If the player remains offside the player can be put onside only by the action of the opposing team. There are two such actions:

- Opponent runs 5 metres with the ball.
- Opponent kicks.

This change in law makes it very difficult for the defending team to get back onside once the attacker breaches the defensive line. Laying or rolling the ball back once tackled at this stage, will provide the supporting players with the time and space required to execute their options. This again encourages ball movement.

Kick

The use of attacking kicks can help maintain continuity of play. The employment of recent flat rushing lines of defense, often denies the attacking team the time and space required to execute their running or passing movements. One option available when faced with this kind of defensive structure is kicking and attacking the space behind the line. Some see kicking as a negative option when attacking. I disagree; some of the best tries in recent years have been from the use of small kicks.

Through improved technology and research, players and coaches have been able to identify and expose opposition's deficiencies through tactical kicking. Cross-pollination across all football codes (Rugby Union, Rugby League, AFL and Soccer) has also seen players become highly skilled and proficient in this area. Images of George Smith grubbering through for his support, Matt Giteau cross kicking for Lote Tuqiri and Kurtley Beale chipping for himself was regularly seen throughout the Super 14 and Tri-Nations competitions. Whether it is a punt kick, torpedo, grubber or chip, some players appear to almost have the ball on a string and can place it wherever they like.

Conclusion

Fast, free flowing and entertaining, that's how Rugby should be described if it is to compete with the global sporting market. Who will ever forget the 2000 Bledisloe Cup match in Sydney or the way Fiji played at the 2007 World Cup. Players having the ability to avoid contact and, when caught, to manipulate a pass to continue advancing the ball forward. Now that's exciting!

With the introduction of the ELV's, it is evident that we have seen a change to the way Rugby is being played and coached. As stakeholders in the game, coaches are responsible for making the game attractive to players, spectators and sponsors alike. By maintaining continuity through ball movement we may just see the gap close between the dominance defence currently holds over attack. If this were to happen we would get a far more entertaining product.

"Ball movement is the key to success"

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