

REDEFINING ATTACK IN MODERN RUGBY

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Subject : The Relevance of Attack Shape in Modern Rugby

Attacking shapes and their evolution has been a major element of rugby in recent times. Different groupings of “attacking pods” and strategies surrounding them have dominated gameplay and coaching across all levels of the game.

The way these pods are presented, mostly using numbers to denote how the forward pack are distributed across the field, can come in various forms. The “1331” shape, popularised by the All Blacks, was the first of many shapes established and has proved to be the most popular. The “1” denotes a forward holding on the edge of the field, whilst the two sets of “3” refer to groups of three forwards who hold in the midfield. The idea behind these formations is to give players a predetermined place from which an attacking sequence can commence. The pods are accompanied by a player from the backline aligning behind them, with a range of options available to connect with other players in different areas of the field. The shape gives the attack clarity and purpose.

There have been a number of variations of “1331” that have been developed and popularised in world rugby. These shapes include but are not limited to “2222”, “3221” and “4211”. Each attacking shape has its positives and negatives, exploited by teams that best suit a particular asset of the shape.

Whilst the emergence of the shapes was theoretically a huge step forward for rugby, it remains a matter of opinion whether these shapes are having a correlation to an increase or prevalence in scoring in the modern game.

Employing data from the Shute Shield and the Rugby World Cup, I am going to explore the impact that attacking shape is having on scoring outcomes. In doing so, I am going to assert if substantial training time commitments to learning attacking shapes is defensible.

Data

I have chosen four random Shute Shield games from 2023. In these games I have identified the origin of the tries in relation to field position and scoring mechanism.

Eastwood Vs North	Tries scored Eastwood	Tries Scored Norths	
	Origin : Lineout Inside opposition 22 (lets call A Zone). Penalty advantage	Intercept try	
	Origin : Lineout Inside opposition 22. Penalty advantage	Lineout inside A Zone	
	Kick error opposition . Counter	Turnover post lineout steal	

	Origin : Lineout Inside opposition 22. Penalty advantage	Lineout 25metres out . ATTACK SHAPE	
RANDWICK VS TWO BLUES	Tries scored Randwick	Tries scored Two Blues	
	Two blues error 20m out from own line .	Lineout A Zone	
	Lineout A Zone	Inside 22 pick and go	
	Lineout A Zone	Tap and go pick and go post penalty	
Manly Vs West Harbour	Manly Tries Scored	West's tries scored	
	Manly Pick and go.	Lineout inside A Zone	
	Lineout inside A Zone	Intercept	
Sydney Un Vs Easts	Uni tries scored	Easts tries scored	
	Post kick error from Wests	Lineout 30m out . ATTACK SHAPE	
	Lineout A Zone	Lineout A ZONE . Pick and go	
	Scrum A zone	Lineout A ZONE . Pick and go	
	Lineout A Zone	Scrum A Zone	
	Missed Easts exit		

After analysing the data, we can deduce that of the 27 tries were scored across the four games:

- Two tries were directly from Attacking shape
- Five were a result of pick and go
- Two had a scrum origin
- Twelve had a basis at the lineout

The conclusions of this data set would be that attacking shape is not playing a large role in scoring in the Shute Shield. The set piece is the predominant mechanism for scoring, followed by tight pick and go attack around the ruck. "A Zone" (22m-Tryline) accounts for almost every scoring origin.

In making these observations, it is useful to now assess what is contributing to the decline in attacking shape efficacy.

What is impacting the impact of Attacking Shape on scoring?

The Rise and Rise of Defence

One factor that could be contributing to the demise of the attacking structures is how defence continues to get better and better. Eddie Jones popularised the statistic that *75 % of tries are scored within 3 phases of set piece*. This led to his famous quote that *“possession rugby is dead.”* Shute Shield statistics support the comments of Jones, Rugby Hub identifying that 74% of tries scored across the 18 Rounds being done so within the first three phases. It appears that once a defence is set, it becomes very difficult to penetrate.

But why is?

On most pod shapes there are roughly two-three variations to play the ball. Defence coaches have now picked up on this and defences are covering these options accordingly. It doesn't matter if there are other players in wider channels, because the defensive team know if they can shut down the pod options the ball will never reach the edge options.

The Emergency of the Kick Battle

Kicking has become one of the most important parts of the game. A kick, and the defensive system attached to it, have the power to not only gain territory but apply substantial pressure to an opposition. Kicking has become so impactful that games can almost be predicted based purely on the statistic of kicks per team. It is no coincidence that the top four sides in the World Cup were at the top end of the kicks per game metric;

New Zealand - 30.7 kicks per game
South Africa - 25 kicks per game
England - 35.9 kicks per game
Argentina - 25 kicks per game

Totals per game;

3 vs 4 playoff game 82 kicks
1 vs 2 game 67 kicks

The Shute Shield data from the 2023 season also supports the theory that raw kicking numbers will directly correlate to a team's success. The most successful attacking side kicked the ball an average of 25.7 times per game, whilst the least successful attacking side kicked the ball an average of 17.9 times per game.

If we are kicking the ball so much, it stands to reason we will have less opportunity for attacking shapes.

Weather

Rain, wind and even humidity can drastically impact a side's ability to effectively attack with the football. Attack shape requires skill and precision to execute well, and poor weather certainly

does not help this. Most of European Rugby is subject to unbecoming weather on a regular basis, whilst the Shute Shield in recent years has also seen more than 6 games per season played on a rainy day.

The recent Rugby World Cup final was an apt example of weather infringing on the way a team likes to play rugby. New Zealand traditionally play an expansive attacking game, more so than the other international tier 1 nations. Due to conditions on the day, New Zealand were forced to kick 30 times, South Africa contributing an additional 37. New Zealand carried the ball 133 times for only four line breaks and one try. In doing so, they conceded 18 turnovers. The risk failed to outweigh the reward on this occasion. Zero tries were score from an origin of attacking shape.

Where to for Attack in Rugby ?

From the above, it could be argued that attacking shapes and structures are becoming less and less important. There will always be a need for them, as they can help guide a team and give them options. However they are no longer new and defences have adapted. It is now incumbent on attack to evolve.

Variation

Many teams are now playing hybrid models of their attacking shapes . This means they are mixing up their pod numbers. This is to constantly paint a different picture for the defence, making it less easy for the defence to read the attacking options . Pods of three can become pods of two. Pods of three are becoming pods of four. Teams are making themselves less readable by adding variety, often based on their field positioning.

Teams are also starting to use more traditionally attacking structures like a, exhaust pattern, being continual attack that goes one way and only changes when someone spots space or they get to an edge. The simplicity of the attack complements continuity and reduces unforced errors.

The other option is the pick and go, keeping the ball closer to the ruck. The All Blacks started like this against the Irish in the quarter finals from 40 metres out and were able to move the ball within 10 metres of the try line. The French also regularly use this tactic. It places pressure on the defensive side to avoid infringements rather than being a genuine scoring option.

Attacking Kicks

The recent world cup highlighted how the attacking kicks are now one of the best weapons in rugby. With defences getting up harder and faster to shut down passing options, a kick in behind can make the defence second guess their linespeed, making the space behind the advancing defence line an area of vulnerability for the defensive side . In the world cup quarter final between France and South Africa, nearly 50% of tries came from attacking kicks.

Launch Plays

As identified above, the first three phases of an attacking sequence are vital to scoring success. If you don't score in these phases, you are unlikely to score at all. So now teams are focusing quite heavily on their " launch" plays. A "launch" is a prescribed pattern for the first two to four phases of an attack. If you are unlikely to score after three phases, it is logical that you will focus heavily on the first three phases.

Set Piece

Set Piece will continue to be a dominant indicator of success in rugby. The failure to win your own set piece ball provides incredibly advantageous attacking ball, the source of many attack based tries in the modern game. The set piece provides rare opportunity for the attacking team to have

less than 13 players defending them. If you cannot attain these situations in a game, it is near impossible to get the attacking upper hand.

Additionally, mauling has in recent years become an element of the game of which one cannot be successful without. Over 50% of the tries scored in the Shute Shield had an origin at the lineout inside of A Zone.

Conclusion

Based on recent personal experience and supported by a range of data, I suggest that attacking shape is playing less of a role in the success of a given team than it once did. Defences have reached a point where they are able to defend for long periods, should they survive the initial three phase period. It is not conducive to a teams success to spend long periods in wide attacking formations in a game, and thus it is also not conducive to spend large portions of training on the attacking shape. I suggest that time is best spent on launch opportunities, defensive system and set piece, the areas that are shown to be of most importance to a teams success.