

Level 3 Assignment 12

Coach: Matt McGoldrick

Playing What You See or Playing Who You See?

I recently attended a rugby league match in Newcastle and I was interested to note how the ball players for the Newcastle Knights spent the entire match watching the opposition and calling their plays accordingly. This posed an interesting question as to whether this was the case in rugby union. On returning to training my side and watching other teams I came to realise that we were poles apart in this regard.

Obviously rugby league has certain benefits which will allow the players the freedom to summarise the opposition. These include:

- No contest for possession ensures that the players have a degree of certainty that possession will be maintained. This also eliminates the decision of whether they are required to assist to maintain the ball as in rugby.
- Specialised positions to defend on the field ensures that at any given stage the team with the ball will have a fair idea of who will be defending against them.
- Calls from the referee of dominant and surrender dictates how long the players will be able to lie on the tackled player slowing down the play the ball.

These factors have provided league with the ability to understand what plays will work on what defenders, who tends to make a bad read when placed under pressure and which defenders don't move very well laterally.

In rugby union we tend to take a different view on attack. Generally speaking the fly half will be the only player calling the plays which in contrast to rugby league who will have the dummy half, half back, five eight and fullback all calling the shots. This can place tremendous pressure on the "10" in rugby union. Not only are they trying to read the ruck area to ascertain whether they have won the ball or not they also are seeing what players are around them to organise the next attacking raid.

How many times when there is a forward outside the fly half do you see them run a switch back towards the ruck area? Whilst you could argue that this is the suck the defence and potentially set up the next phase with an overlap you could also argue that the flyhalf has called this play to provide:

1. Them with time to organise the next play.
2. The best use of forward outside them
3. Take the ball back to the forward to ensure the best chance of retaining possession

There is a common theme with these rationales and it is that they have nothing to do with challenging the defence. It's all about the flyhalf getting the team in a position to do something constructive on the next phase. Under a league scenario with multiple callers the team could possibly attack in a more constructive manner and challenge the defence utilising the forward as a running player rather than a player to recycle the ball.

So how to we improve our teams in this skill set?

Firstly, give your starter moves a context. The players need to understand:

- Where the space will be if successful
- What we hope the defence do (make a mistake)
- What to do if the defence don't make a mistake (plan B)

Once the skill is acquired the players need to be challenged to complete it under pressure. They also need to understand why they are doing it and where the space they are trying to exploit is. Add defenders and ask the players to call the move depending on who is in the defensive line. Are we going through them or around them, which play will allow us to make a line break?

Alternate the callers to make sure everybody gets an opportunity especially if the players can see a weaker defender wider out which possibly can be exploited. The players also need to be aware of the best attributes of the players around them and call the play accordingly. After all we players play to ensure that all the players around us look good don't we!

Secondly the flyhalf needs to be confident in the players around them and their calling. A simple drill which will help the players with the skill is leaving the attack with their backs to the defence. Nominate one player in the attacking line who can turn around and have a look at the defence. They then need to turn and call a play to the flyhalf.

This call will need to be based on how many numbers are in the defensive line, the type of player (tall, short, big etc) and where the space is in the defensive line. This is will take pressure off the flyhalf as when the attack turns around and plays all he is required to do is carry out the play and follow instructions. Players generally speaking struggle to assess the defensive line in a holistic manner. They see a defender but have so many other thoughts running through their mind that the finer details are lost on them. They need to see who they are, are they fast or slow?

The calls could be as simple as "give the ball early" to allow someone else to be the playmaker, "play holes" (meaning that the flyhalf is to take to the ball to line and the players outside are going to hit holes), or a starter move aimed at exposing a defender.

Following the play get the player who is calling to explain to the other players why they called the move. This is give all the players an opportunity to ask questions and understand what the other player is thinking and why. This also enables players outside the flyhalf with a skill set to call the plays. To progress the activity, make sure that you change the player who calls the play and vary the number of defenders to simulate a game situation. Ask the players to give you specific details of what they saw. This should enable the players to improve the vision and not only see space but see what players are near the space and whether they can be manipulated.

To avoid having too many players calling the plays the coach will need to devise a calling and override system. For example:

- On first phase only the flyhalf is to call the play. Too many voices can be a distraction and the defence is relatively stable.
- On phase perhaps second receiver is the dominant caller. This will allow the players around them to understand what the play is and what their role is. This can be a role that switches among whoever the second receiver is. Thus allows the flyhalf to watch the ruck and assess the speed of the ball.
- The flyhalf has the capacity to override all calls. If they deem the best option is to take the line on, all players outside need to react accordingly.

In summary when coaches say “just play what’s in front of you” we are assuming a lot. Firstly we assume that they can actually see what’s in front of them which may be harder than we think. Sitting in the grandstand the coach is able to get a holistic view of the game and hopefully see everything. For the players they have a myriad of options, patterns, starter moves running through their head. By following our rugby league counterparts lead and dividing the responsibility among the players rather than relying on just one player we are sharing the load and hopefully making the game easier. The recent NRL Grand Final showed that when one player is responsible for making all the calls it makes it very difficult (in Melbourne’s case), get any rhythm in attack. This often is the scenario in rugby union all the time.

Building the calling system and the ability to play more instinctively will take time. Not only to get the skill set required but to build trust among the players. Obviously there are many assumptions about the core skill level of the players and this may be higher priority than playing what you see. Preseason is a perfect time to challenge the players to take their games to the next level.