

TACKLE CONTEST AS A POINT OF ATTACK

The objective of the paper is to consider the tackle contest as a point or area, of attack.

The tackle contest is more often than not, overlooked as an opportunity for a point of attack. Depending on the team's strengths and weaknesses, avoiding, or playing quickly at the tackle contest, is more advantageous. It may not always be an option for teams to engage in a contest or view the tackle contest as an area from which to attack.

To be able to launch successful attack at the tackle contest, then we need to go back and look at what the ball carrier does to the defence/defender. A poor carry will more often than not result in poor ball presentation, thus creating slow ball at the ruck. In a perfect world, the ball carrier should avoid contact altogether, or the worst sort of contact known as 'T-boning', where the ball carrier runs straight into the middle of the opponent.

A common acronym used to assist players in understanding their role as a ball carrier is 'F.L.A.P' (Ben Pegna);

F – Footwork

Footwork always comes first and is the most important aspect. Players often consider footwork is primarily for the backs, but it is of equal significance for the forwards, given that they carry the ball more frequently in more congested areas.

The mindset should be, that we're *not carrying the ball to be tackled*. Instead, we're *carrying the ball to evade and get past the 'would-be' tackler*. The ball carrier is aiming to get a weak shoulder of the defender. To do this, the ball carrier needs to take a small step to either the outside or inside of the defender. As a priority, the ball carrier needs to plant his/her inside foot (to the defender), keeping footwork and body 'square' prior to contact, with strong body position.

L – Leg Drive

After attempting to use footwork and evasion, the ball carrier must assert him/herself in the contact situation. This is done either by accelerating through the gap after a failed tackle, or powering through a non-dominant tackle. The players use their legs to power through the contact area. The attacking players should strive to drive forward as far as possible and keep their shoulders square up the field.

Ideally, the ball carrier should aim to keep his/her chest facing towards the opponents' try line and the ball carrying arm, away from contact. If the carrier starts to turn sideways, the defender has better vision and access to the ball. Thus, preventing distribution or clean presentation in the event of the tackle being completed.

A – Aggressive Rip

If the tackle is completed, the ball carrier must fight to retain possession and present the ball on their terms. An 'aggressive rip' can be used. The rip should be away from the defender, with the shoulder nearest the tackler, aggressively ripping down toward the ground and away from the defender.

Similar to rugby league, the carrier fights to 'find his/her front' with chest facing down and the ball under the carriers upper torso - 'score the try'. This is crucial, because at no time should the defender see or access the ball.

P – Place

Once in the dominant face down position, with the ball out of sight of the defender, the ball carrier immediately recoils and places the ball as far back from the opposition as possible.

As regards the placing of the ball, the 'gold-standard' is a long place with the ball carrier's body parallel to the touchline. This maximises the distance between the ball and the defence and provides an easy target for the carrier's support. It also narrows the tackle-gate for defenders to access the ball.

Most of the time the 'gold-standard' isn't possible, but ball carriers still need to place the ball as far back as possible, 'jack-knifing' their body quickly toward their own try line. This means twisting and turning around the core, placing the ball back towards the feet to narrow the gate ('prawning').

KEY COACHING POINTS:

1. *FOOTWORK – get to the edges of the defender - 'run at the branches not the trunk'*
2. *LEG DRIVE – hips forward - drive forward*
3. *AGGRESSIVE RIP – pull the ball down hard and fall on the torso*
4. *PLACE – back to your team - long place or prawn*

The next major area of focus to create attacking opportunities at the tackle contest, comes from the support players and their decision making, based on the tackle outcome. The first support player identifies threats. If there is a threat, then the first support player needs to clear the threat. If there is no threat, then the player has the option to pick and go, or pass to another player.

The next support player has to identify their options: if there is a threat - then clean out the opponent; no threat - play. Support players need to decide whether to 'play or save'. That is, do they 'play' or promote the ball either by taking it forward themselves, or shifting the ball to another support player, or do they need to 'save' the ball, clean out the threat/opposition player.

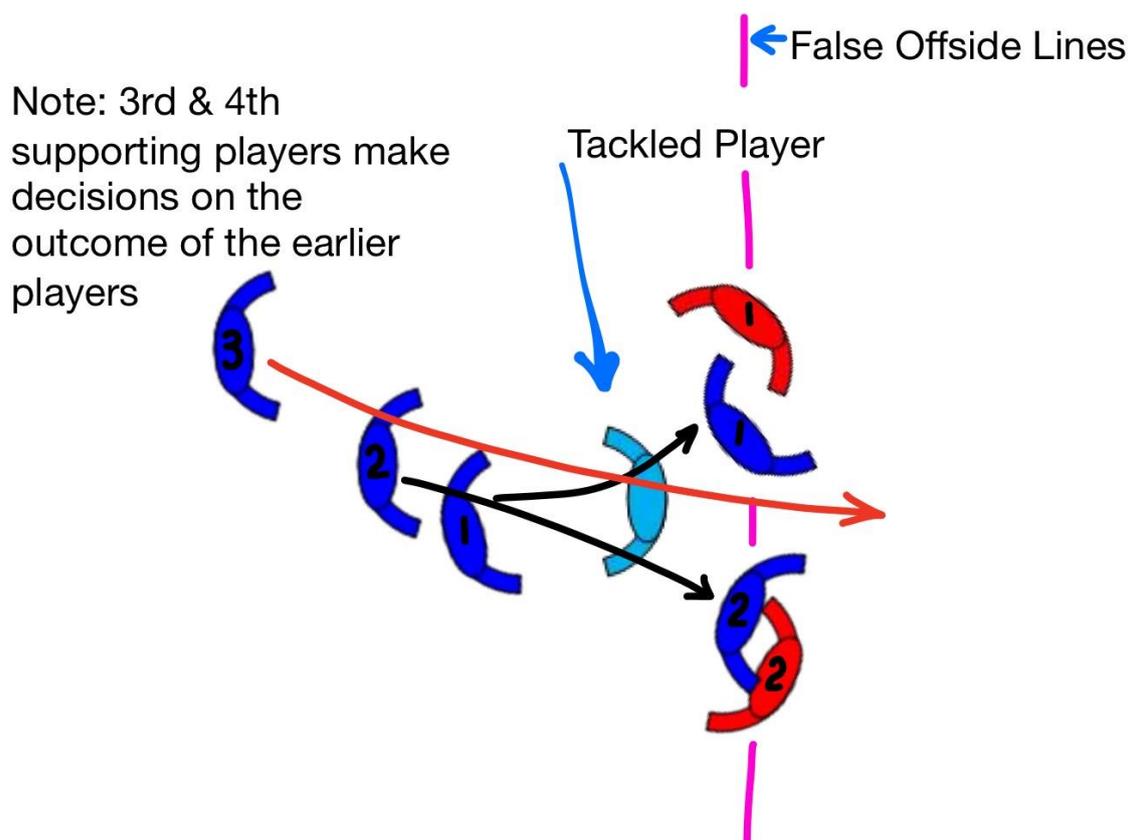
The immediate options for the attacking team at the tackle, in no particular order, are:

1. Pop-pass from the tackled player to a supporting player. It is preferable that the call comes from the support player. There is nothing more frustrating than observing a tackled player popping a pass to a supporting player, who only has eyes for the opposition who then fumbles and knocks on;
2. pick and go by the first supporting player - if the player picks and go's to the side of the ruck, then he/she needs to square up (hips facing up the field) as quickly as possible, trying to avoid being tackled going across field; and
3. first support player - pick and pass to another supporting player

The fourth and fifth options are ones that are generally overlooked or underplayed:

The fourth option is to create a hole in the middle of the ruck and attack through the opening. To achieve this option, there needs to be a high level of speed and accuracy in the cleanout, as well as good decision making by the support player/players, who will be exploiting the opening. Depending on the quality of the cleanout and the number of defending players, the third or fourth supporting players will be the ones looking to exploit any hole that is created through the middle of the breakdown.

To create the hole for players to exploit, the cleanout of opposition players needs to be immediate, with supporting players cleaning out over the ball, from 'inside to out'. This means that when a supporting player cleans out a defending player, he/she should aim to get their head on the inside of the player and clean to the outside (see diagram below) of the ruck. The advantage of this positioning is that the players cleaning out, then create an obstacle for defenders as they try and fold around to the far side of the ruck.



The cleanout and pick and go through the gap, all need to occur as quickly and simultaneously as possible. The player picking up the ball and promoting it forward, needs to run straight. The player should avoid going to the side of the ruck as he/she may run into the back of their own team members, thus incurring a penalty for obstruction. Any delay in the pick and go could also result in a penalty, as players cleaning out - if they don't execute and get caught wrestling with their opponent - could be viewed as obstructing/blocking the defender.

KEY COACHING POINTS:

1. *Dominant carry and quality ball presentation;*
2. *support players need to clean out over the ball 'inside to out';*
3. *the pick and go needs to occur as quickly as possible to exploit the hole and avoid any chance of incurring an infringement for obstruction; and*
4. *the player picking and going needs to go straight to also avoid running into his own players as they cleanout to the side.*

The advantage of this option is that by executing accurately, the attacking team puts itself in behind the opposition defensive line, with minimal defenders in front. The hardest place to defend is in behind the ruck, as defenders are now in scrambling mode and the attacking team only needs to enthusiastically take advantage of the scrambling defence.

The fifth option, which is also under-rated and underused, is the driving maul from the base of the ruck. Generally, driving mauls begin from lineouts or from kick-off receipts. Driving mauls from the base of a ruck generally occur from dead/slow ball. The players, primarily forwards, should regroup at the base of the ruck, or if needed, some players off the deck, would help in the set up. The ball carrier would pick and go into contact with three to four players in support.

As with the driving mauls off lineouts, the tightness and narrowness of the front pod is vital to the mauls success. Supporting players bind onto the inside (heads inside) of players in front and drive in towards the middle of the ruck. The players at the front need to provide the strong base for the slow and controlled moving maul.

The advantage of attacking around the breakdown is that players are not running at set defensive lines as in Rugby League.

A focus of attacking through or at the edges of the tackle contest, forces teams to commit numbers around the ruck. Hopefully, this will force the opposition to narrow up their defensive line and commit extra defenders at, and around the ruck. This will in turn, create space out wide for the backs to exploit.

Reference List

Article: Ben Pegna; *'FLAP – a four step procedure to produce quick ball in contact'*

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