

Unit 7.
Callum Payne
Pathways & Performance Coach, 2025.

Introduction

The pick and go is a tactic in rugby union whereby a player at the base of the ruck (usually one of the larger forwards) will attack ball in hand with several close support players. It attempts to gain small amounts of ground or generate multiple phases of attack with consistent success due to the low risk / low reward nature of the tactic.

Like box kicking, the “pick and go” is an often-maligned part of the game by the public. Despite sometimes being criticized for being boring or a waste of time these aspects of the game remain popular in their use at every level of the game for the simple reason that when performed accurately, they help teams win.

This paper sets out how to coach in some detail the “pick and go” in Rugby Union. There are a number of skills required, and like all aspects of the game, individuals will develop their own as they practice and play. This paper will summarise three of the primary styles of pick and go currently employed in rugby. It will also explain three of tactical reasons for employing the pick and go, and how to maximise their benefits.

This paper is written in December 2025 based on the laws currently in use in Australia. The current laws of the game as well as referee interpretations are taken into account as they stand at the time. Should this paper be read at a later date ensure that any law variations are explored and coaching tactics adjusted accordingly.

Ultimately, the pick and go (on attack) will support the principles of play (primarily **Go Forward & Support** in addition to **Continuity, Pressure & Score**) while defensively the pick & go provides opportunities for all six (**Contest Possession, Go Forward, Support, Pressure, Regain Possession, Counterattack**).

Attacking Systems.

The three pick and go systems detailed below are commonly used but this list is not exhaustive. These systems can all have variations, both in their functional roles and key factors.

Coaching any attacking system should always be dependant on the players currently performing the task and variations related to their strengths and/or weaknesses is recommended.

The systems have all been given colloquial names in order to help define them:

A: Traditional.

B: Modern.

C: Speedster.

Leg drive to **win** the win momentum post collision.

Land in **control** of the tackle.

Landing in control of the tackle means that the ball carrier has landed with the ball between their body and any opposition threats, usually on top of the ball – “score the try” is frequently used to describe this. This will give *support players* more time to make accurate decisions.

Player B: *Support Player*; Latch & Clean

The primary *support player* will be pre-bound to the ball carrier (on the side of the *ball carrier* that they are going to carry towards) and assist them by driving them **through** the initial collision supporting the ball carriers forward progress. This does not constitute “a flying wedge”, Law 9.22, as there will only be one player pre-bound. Following the tackle the *support player* then releases the *ball carrier* and changes their focus to clearing any immediate threat posed by the defence (Defenders attempting to counter-ruck or steal the ball).

Key Factors:

Latch: Drive **through** not down.

In order to generate go forward, the support player must use their latch to ‘carry’ the *ball carrier* through the collision. If this is not done it will often result in the ball player going to ground early, generating little go forward and the *support player* is at risk of being penalised for going off their feet – Laws 15.3, 15.12, 15.16

Clean: Eyes **up**.

Identify **threat & clear** it.

It is critical that in Pick and Go scenarios that any *support player* identifies and removes an opposition defending threat and doesn’t just take space.

Player C: *Support Player*; Clean or Bridge

The secondary *support player* is a key component of the *continuity* principle. As the *ball carrier* and primary *support player* engage in the collision, the secondary *support player* will identify emerging defensive threats to the attacking teams *go forward & continuity*. If there are any immediate threats to the ongoing possession of the ball, the secondary *support player* will remove them through cleaning out. If there are no immediate threats the player will “bridge” the ruck legally by arriving and maintaining a low body position above the ball. Current law interpretations by referees allow a supporting player to maintain contact with the tackled player provided the ruck remains a contest by following law 15.3 and engaging any attempt at a counter ruck through driving them away as opposed to sealing off the ruck or collapsing it (Laws 15.12 & 15.16b)

Key Factors:

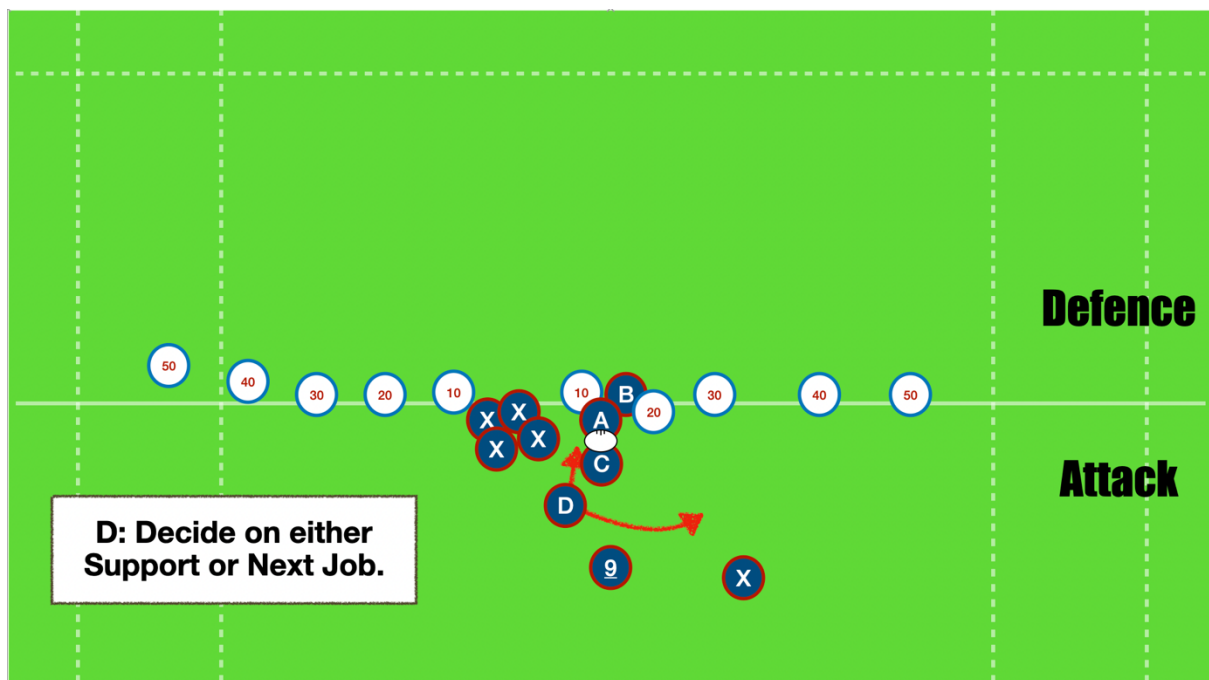
Approach & Scan.

Eyes **up**, hips **low**.

Move First

Player D. *Support Player*. (tertiary)

It is important that the support player begins to approach the collision zone while scanning with their eyes and making their decision during the approach depending on ruck progress. Sitting back waiting for a picture to become clear will cost too much time and allow the defensive threats time to disrupt or attack the ball. The tertiary *support player* will identify if they are required to protect the ball in the forming ruck. If they are not needed, they will move into a role for the following phase.



System B

Modern (Pass Option)

The “modern” system is similar to the “traditional” system, albeit with a greater level of focus on the post contact elements of the tackle contest. This system has defined roles for all *support players* and multiple ball carrying options. This greater variation of attacking threats aims to exploit defensive errors, however, it requires greater accuracy, reaction speed and decision making by the attackers compared to the “traditional” system. Failure to achieve this can leave the attacking team vulnerable to defensive threats.

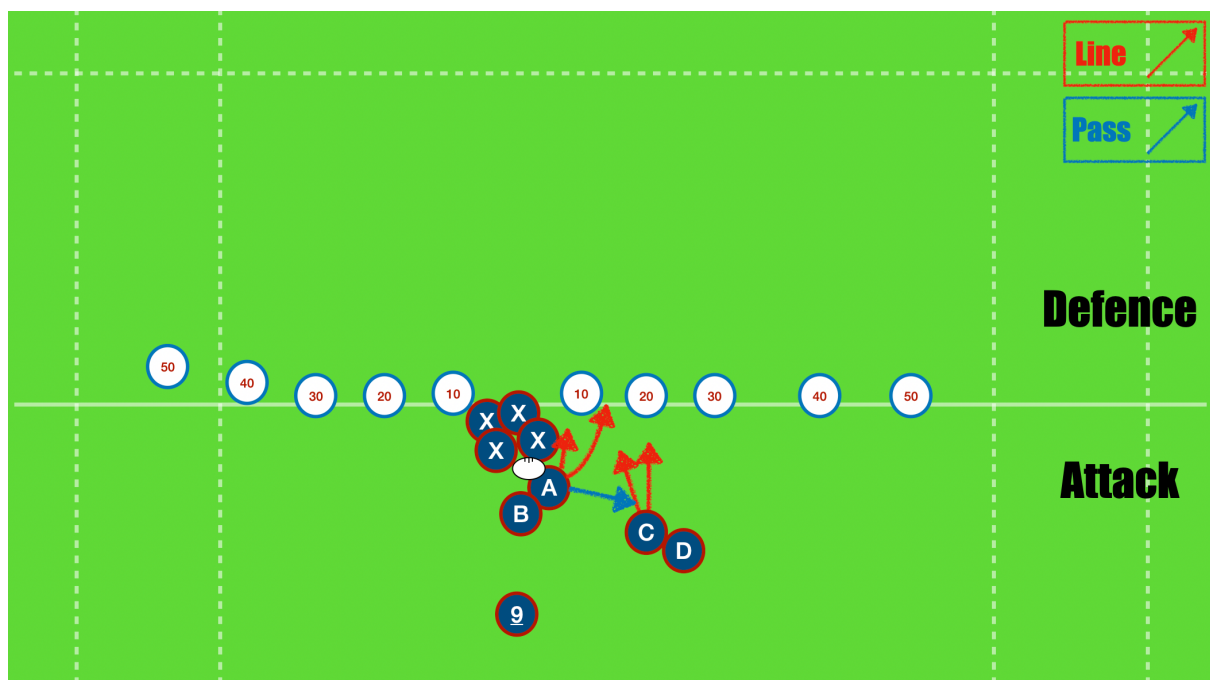
Role Labels

Player A: Ball Carrier/Distributor

Player B: Support Player.

Player C: Support player / Ball Carrier.

Player D: Support player



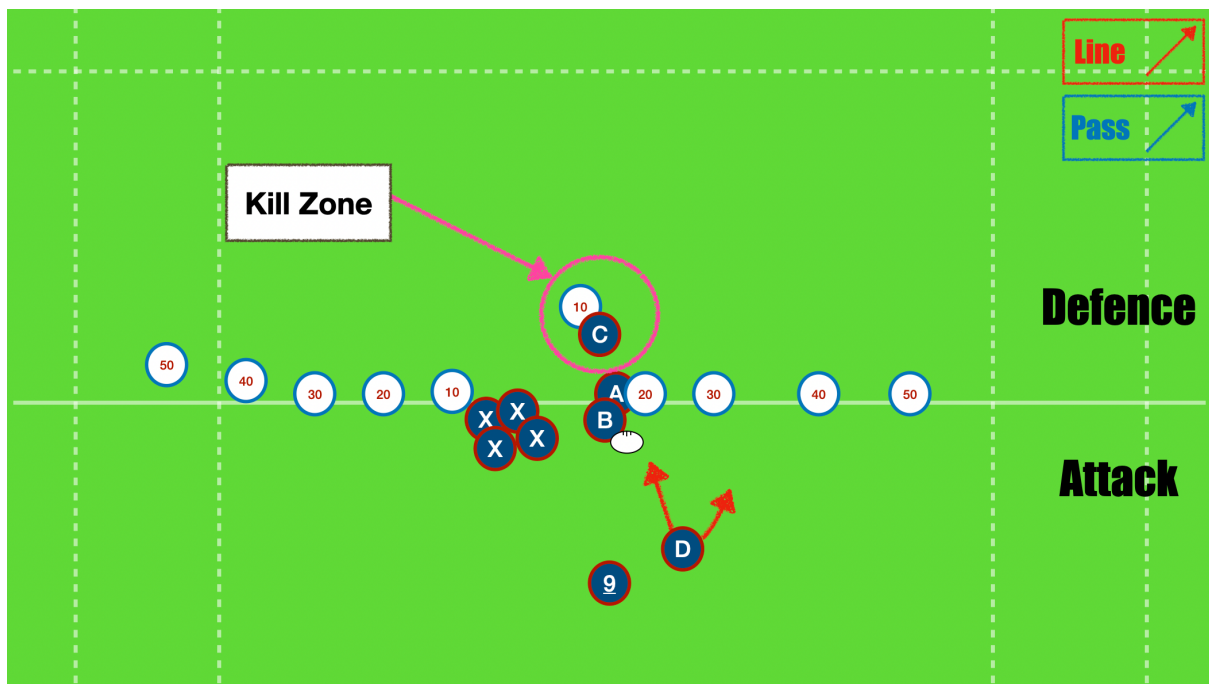
Player A. *Ball carrier / Distributor / Support player.*

The *ball carrier* is to position themselves on the outside of the ball. With hands touching the ball, they will look at the defence and determine whether to carry themselves or distribute to Player C with a short Pass.

Role B. *Support player.*

If Player A carries the ball, Player B will play the role of the primary *support player*. The primary support player will always come from the inside and attempt to bridge legally without going past the ball carrier. Player B may be required to clean out due to either the outside cleaner missing their role or the defence sending extra players to disrupt/steal the ball.

If Player A distributes the ball to Player C, Player B will become the tertiary *support player*.



Player C. *Support player (outside cleaner) / Ball carrier.*

If Player A carries, Player C will fill the role of secondary *support player* (outside cleaner). The outside cleaner is required to clear the initial defensive threat and drive them into the “kill zone” behind the tackle contest. This will disrupt any defensive fold and buy time for the following attack phase to identify and attack space in the defensive line.

If Player A passes to Player C, Player C then becomes the ball carrier.

Player D. *Support player.*

If Player C becomes the ball carrier Player D will fill the role of outside cleaner.

If Player A carries the ball, Player D will become the tertiary *support player* identifying whether they are required to assist in the tackle contest or move into a role for the next phase (If repeating the same system they can move straight into the role of Player C

System C

Speedster (Outside backs or momentum maintain play following a dominant carry).

This version of the pick and go has a number of significant differences from the first two as a more opportunist element of the game operating as an unstructured element of play. There are still functional roles that are required and coaching the players on the key factors involved in these roles is critical to ensuring this play benefits our team. It can be an effective tool to use for exploiting missing defenders, maintaining momentum following a dominant carry or getting outside backs involved to take some of the workload off the forwards.

The Functional Roles involved are the same as those in the other pick and go systems, however due to the unstructured and usually faster execution of play, it requires the *support player/s* to be highly adaptable and aware of potential scenarios. The *ball carrier* will often find themselves in a 'one on one' scenario with a cover defender should they break the defensive line leading to offload opportunities.

Threats to attacking momentum or weaknesses in execution are present in this system and can be countered through a clear focus on objectives (is the ball carrier attempting to break the line, gain ground or reduce team-mate workload?) and therefore executing the key factors required to achieve that goal.

A common mistake in this system is getting held up and slowing down the team momentum. This often happens when the ball carrier stands upright after picking up the ball before attempting to gain ground through their carry. A focus on remaining low for at least the initial steps will help to mitigate this.

A second error that can often occur is the ball carrier losing the tackle and tackle contest resulting in loss of territory. This often occurs when support players are not in position and the defence is set ready to leave the line. If the defence is organised and the attack isn't, it is recommended *support players* are coached to both identify and communicate this to potential "speedster" ball carriers and either delay the play until support is available or change the play to a clearance pass.

Tactical uses and how to train them.

1. Speed Up (maintain / generate momentum, create lightening quick ball - LQB),
2. Slow Down (Chew the clock, set for exit or kick).
3. Compress the defence (create width).
4. Muscle up (Goal Line attack)

Speed up.

Any of the three above versions of the pick and go can serve to either generate or maintain momentum. The key difference between the two is that in order to generate momentum from static ball a higher emphasis on winning the collision and an aggressive clean must occur to allow quick play of ball the following phase. When looking to maintain momentum it becomes vital that the ball is available to be played quickly post tackle due to accurate work from the *support players*.

Clarity around who the ball carrier will be the subsequent phase will be is critical. This will either be the player assigned Role D or the last player from the preceding ruck. This can be decided by in-game communication and decision making, or by strategic application of predetermined roles through coaching systems.

Threats arising from using the pick and go to generate or maintain momentum typically stem from 'overreaching': playing too many phases and running out of *support players*. Coaches can minimise this threat to our *continuity* by implementing structured systems or "rules" like "Maximum of three pick and go's before resetting" or adding non-traditional positions to the pick and go system to increase support numbers (involving wings or midfielders). Clear coaching of players not directly involved in the pick and go (games drivers/controllers) on their identification of the space created and clear communication systems around moving from the pick and go back into a more width-based play system will also support this.

When attempting to **generate** momentum or speed of play it is advisable to attack the same direction. Once momentum has been generated, a shift to attacking whichever side of the ruck is weakest defensively to **maintain** our momentum can occur.

Slow Down.

Both system A and B can be used to effectively "chew the clock" or run out time at the end of a half or game.

The key focus here will be ensuring that all four players are involved, and the *support players* maintaining a high level of discipline. As this game play is often viewed as negative, match officials will pay extra attention to any players failing to abide by ruck laws and will look for any sign of players sealing off illegally (Laws 15.3, 15.12 & 15.16b).

The focus of the ball carrier should shift away from *go forward* to maintaining possession by ensuring they control the tackle and subsequent tackle contest. When the ball becomes available to play the ref will call "use it" from this point the attacking team has five seconds to play the ball. If they fail to do so it will result in a scrum to the defending team.

Compress

All 3 systems detailed above can be used effectively to compress the defensive line creating space on the edge for the attack to manipulate and attack.

System B can be extremely effective here due to its focus on disrupting a defensive fold. When executed well, attacking the same direction for multiple phases can create positional mismatches. By disrupting the defensive fold, players are slow to get into the defensive line and other teammates are often required to cover for teammates. Due to the high number of support players required for it to be effective, distributors and ball players must have a good level of open field attacking skills in order to effectively attack the space created with lower numbers of attacking support players.

System 3 can be very effective in compressing the defensive line due to its speed and the *go forward* it will generate if used effectively. Due to the difficulty in the *support player* arriving on time, if the carry is ineffective or the ball carrier loses the tackle collision the defence can easily win back momentum. Winning the collision by the ball carrier is critical in order to achieve the goal of compressing the defence.

Muscle Up.

Using the pick and go to attempt to score from close to the try line has long been a favoured tactic due to the minimal *go forward* required to achieve our goal. Once the rucks being formed begin to move past the goal line, the defence does gain two advantages.

1. The try line will become the offside line in place of the hindmost feet of the ruck.
(Law 15.4)

2. The held-up law now rewards the defensive team.
(Law 21.16)

The *ball carrier* key factor of carry height is critical in this scenario. *Continuity* takes precedence over *go forward* and all players need to be aware of this.

Coaching the key factors.

Coaching the skill and technique aspects of all systems can be done through the *Play with Purpose* model. The contact part of the session can be modified through use of pads and minimising or modifying contact levels.

Primers & closed drills run throughout the warm-up phase of training are an effective method for generating repeated motor patterns (skill and technique) and developing understanding of the individual roles at lower speeds & intensities. These same activities can be used as closed drills throughout the “practice” phase of the *play with purpose*.

The tactical use of the pick and go, in particular, the ability to **compress** the defence or **speed up** the play can be done through game simulation or variations of ruck touch/held (*Games based approach*).

Example of game design for *Play with Purpose* model:

Pick n Go touch.

Skill Focus:
Accurate use of Pick & Go at speed.

Key Factors:
Body height.
Eyes up.

Game drivers identifying mismatch opportunity

Attacking team (A) has 3 min to score as many tries as possible. When touched, the ball carrier **MUST** go to ground with one support player “bridging” the ruck.

They have 5 balls to attack with. Once a ball is dead they re-start with another ball from the pile. Attacking team start with the ball on the 22m line.

Defensive team has 2-3 players more than the attackers.

Defence must make a two person touch. After making the touch both defenders must do 5 situps

Attacking team should be challenged to use multiple pick and goes to bleed the defence of numbers before exploiting the space created

Alterations to drill:
Make it tackle.
Add/Remove Kicking options.
Increase/Decrease the amount of time allowed.
Increase/Decrease the number of balls to be used.
Change defenders post touch exercise.

Age 15+

Summary

The pick and go can be a powerful attacking weapon when used with accuracy and focus. Helping our players gain clearer understanding of what their goals are in-game and then developing the systems, tools and skillsets to achieve these goals is essential for increasing our successes. The pick and go can be integrated into almost any attacking style and used to support or modify game plans with a relatively low use of training time. It is critical that the coach has a clear understanding of when, why and how to use the pick and go if we are going to coach it as part of a consistently successful attacking system.

References:

Play with Purpose & Games based approach. – Community Coaching Course, Rugby AU. Pro Shane Pill, Flinders University.

Attacking & Defensive principles of play. – Community Coaching Course, Rugby AU.

Laws mentioned:

9. Foul Play.

9.20 Dangerous play in a ruck or maul.

9.22 Teams must not use the ‘flying wedge’.

“On the latch – only illegal if the player is latched on each side of the ball carrier. Comfortable with a single latch...” Clarity provided from Referee Sam Jones.

15. Ruck.

15.3 Players involved in all stages of the ruck must have their heads and shoulders no lower than their hips.

15.4 Each team has an offside line that runs parallel to the try line through the hindmost point of any ruck participant. If that point is on or behind the try line, the offside line for that team is the try line.

15.12 Players must endeavour to remain on their feet throughout the ruck.

15.16 Players must not:

b. Intentionally collapse a ruck or jump on top of it.

21.16 When a player carrying the ball is held up in-goal, so that the player cannot ground the ball or play the ball, the ball is dead. Play restarts with a try line drop-out or a 5m scrum, depending on how the ball entered in-goal. (see law 12.12a, and law 19.1 row 5)