



## INFORMATION PAGE

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### An update on attack

With thanks again to Lee Smith

#### Introduction

Once the ball has been won from a scrum or line-out, or retained and recycled from post-tackle, ruck or maul, the aim of the attack is to get over the gain line. The further over the gain line the better, and if the “move” has created options and the one chosen is correct all the better. Of course the correct option is the one that results in a player being put into space that has been created by team-mates, allowing the defence line to be penetrated.



But in order to achieve this, the set up needs to be successful and the set up starts with the commencement of the episode of play.

#### Set Pieces

Both scrums and line-outs start once the ball is in touch or when the referee indicates that the scrum will be contested to restart play.

#### Gaining Possession

##### *Line-out*

It is not so much winning the ball at line-out but winning it to complement what the backline wants to achieve in attack. So, while gaining position is a priority, the backline that is going to take the ball forward needs to let the forwards know what type of ball they want.

The major considerations are based on the time and space created by the various options at the line-out.

##### *Option 1:*

If the line-out is played short, usually to number 2, the distance number 9 has to pass to the first receiver, usually number 10, is increased. To overcome this number 10 may have to stand closer. Whatever the case, the ball is either longer in the air allowing the defence to move forward or, with number 10 now closer, this player will have to be

closer to the defenders at the tail of the line-out. These factors preclude a movement wide out by the attacking line.

So, why throw the ball to number 2?

The throw may be made because it is the easiest place to win reliable ball. Timing is simplified and the ball is not long in flight making ball thrown here, very reliable.

Tactically the ball thrown here may not allow for wide attacks, but reliable ball will enable number 9 or number 10, to clear the ball from a defensive situation by kicking.

This may be helped by forwards mauling the ball but not over the 22m line, if the clearance is to be made to touch.

If the clearance is to be made down the field, but not to touch, that has to be supported by a sound chasing pattern.

*Option 2:*

If the ball is thrown to the centre or end of the line-out number 9's pass will clear the ball further to number 10, giving this player more time and space.

A factor that emerges here is the type of delivery.

If the ball is taken down and mauled then less space is available to attack as the offside line moves forward from the line 10m back from the gain line to a line through the hindmost foot of the defence of maul.

It is, therefore, unlikely that attacks will be made successfully wide out, more likely around the channels of numbers 10 and 12.

However, the maul can assist this by delivering the ball on the forward move. This should mean that the defensive line has to move back to remain onside.

A further manoeuvre is to roll the ball infield taking the defensive forwards out of play on the touchline side and drawing in the defensive inside and midfield backs to defend the maul and to defend runners from the maul. This obviously reduces the defenders in the backline giving the attack an overlap.

Should the ball be delivered immediately from the top of the jump the space between the lines is retained so the ball can be moved wide. In order to retain this space and to clear the players from the end of the line-out the ball must be passed immediately, as wide as possible and the receiver must accelerate onto the ball to get as close to the gain line as possible. This not only commits the defence but also ensures that even a half break can get over the gain line.

The final delivery option is to catch the ball and bring it down but to not go forward so that the distance between the attacking backline and the defensive backline is not eliminated. This is particularly successful if the ball is won at the end of the line-out as the defenders at the tail end have to commit to stop the drive and the 15m line serves as an offside line so these players cannot move beyond it into the midfield until the line-out is over. As a result, this serves to retain the space and create a range of options along the attacking backline.

### *Scrum*

It is of some concern that discussions regarding options at the scrum assume that both sides can be advanced depending on field position, as a matter of course.

While the clockwise rotation of the scrum can happen with relative ease and assists attacks moving the ball from right to left, as it takes the defensive loose forwards out of play, sound opposition scrums will prevent this. When this does occur deliberately care must be taken not to infringe.

To do the opposite, that is to rotate the scrum counter clockwise, to take advantage of the same situation when you go left to right, is a much greater challenge and one only superior scrums can achieve.

So, as a starting point, scrums should be stable, at best moving forward, and the ball should be channelled to the right of the number 8. As a starting point, this will create the total range of options.

### **Going forward from set pieces**

#### *The line-out*

What line-outs give a team is the complete width of the field to stretch the defence. This isolates individual defenders so that there is space on either side of each defender that the attack can penetrate.

Variations in the alignment of the attacking line will enhance this.

The success of the attack depends on the degree to which each ball carrier threatens their designated defender, preventing them from drifting onto attackers further along the attacking line.

So it is up to each ball carrier to commit their designated defender. By doing this, they hold the defender giving the attack space on both sides. This is based on the assumption that each defensive player is square onto the attackers this gives the two options it is highly unlikely, as most defenders will position inside the designated attacker conceding the outside space, eliminating the inside option to the ball-carrier and backing their speed to defend the outside space. More on defending outside in defence later in this article.

Should the ball carrier pass without committing, the defender's line of running will allow the player to slide with the ball, in support of teammates, further along the defensive line. It may allow the defence to shuffle onto the next attacker, eliminating an overlap and the entry of an extra player as a penetrator.

This means that in order to hold the defence, each ball carrier's line of running should be angled slightly inside in order to hold the defender.

To hold the defender the pass needs to be delayed to prevent the defence sliding.

By doing this the ball carrier takes up all the space between the attack and defence lines. This means that, when the ball is passed, the receiver may receive the ball and the tackler at the same time. This is against the principle that you should never pass to a player in a worse position than yourself.

This can be overcome in two ways:

For some reason a deep attacking line that accelerates onto the pass creates a threat and leads to uncertainty in the defence. The greater the distance between the attack and the defence, the more the initiative is in the hands of the attack. The closer the space between the two the more the initiative is in the hands of the defence. So the best of both worlds is created by an attack that runs from depth, receives passes flat creating hesitancy in the defence reducing the defence's reaction time.

This results in the momentum being with the attack to get over the gain line.

The second solution is for the ball carrier to recreate the space that commitment of the defender has taken away by pulling the pass back to the next attacker who adjusts by standing deeper.

Players can commit the defence individually, but it can also be done by decoys operating as a mini-unit. This is based on the principle that the space that is created as the space the player has moved away from, not the space player is running into. In the case of the decoys it is players who are not in possession of the ball who do this.

So when numbers 12 and 13, in a position to receive the pass, run a line back infield field, the line holds the defence.

Now, number 10, who is usually the playmaker, passes to a second line behind the decoys and stretched to the far touchline. The space created by the decoys creates room to attack and, depending on the behaviour of the defence, an overlap may result.

The ultimate is the playmaker to choose the option based on the behaviour of the defence. If they are held by the decoys go wide, but if they are not use the decoys.

Whatever method of penetration is used, the basic blueprint is to create a situation in which there are more attackers than defenders forcing a choice on the defence. Based on the choice the defence makes, the role of the attack is to pass the ball to an unmarked player.

The model for practising the situation is 2 versus 1 or 3 versus 2. In the 3 versus 2 example it is the role of the player entering the space between the initial two attackers to force a decision on the defence and given the attack an option to penetrate.

2 versus 1 is the first step in coaching players to play to what is in front of them.

The defender must make a decision and the attacker's responds to this. If the defender stays on the ball carrier ball is passed to the free player. If the defender drifts onto the overlap, the ball carrier takes the gap the defender has moved from.

In the 3 versus 2 situation when all the attacking players are in the same taking line the third attacking player has the overlap and the initial two players have the same options as 2 versus 1.

The second 3 versus 2 situation is where the third player, as the penetrator, enters the space between the front two attacking players from behind either of them. The later this player enters, the less the reaction time of the defence.

To play what is in front of them, what are the options for the attack?

Quite simply, the three options:

- Dummy and go if the defender moves on to the penetrator.
- The second is to pass to the penetrator if the defender doesn't drift.
- And the third, if the outside defender moves in to tackle the penetrator, the pass should miss the penetrator and go directly to the second attacking player in the front line.

This last option is a difficult one as the passer receives an inside pass and vision of the defenders further along the line will be limited. Maybe the outside attacking player has to be the player to call the options as this player will have full view of the behaviour of the second defender.

As I have often said this blueprint takes some time to register and requires plenty of practice before it becomes successful. That is the nature of playing what you see in front of you, learning to read the cues.

It involves knowing what to look for, recognising and reacting to it. Playing what is in front of you is all about cues.

The advantage is that, because the attack is reacting to the defence, the attacking mode of play is difficult to analyse. For this reason it is worth the time that has to be spent learning to read the situation and make the successful choice of options.

Let's just take a simple example of reading the alignment and the space the defence is conceding:

- Pass too far away, and they drift.
- Pass and don't pull the pass back, the receiver receives the ball and the defender at the same time.
- The defender get's ahead of the remainder of the line, the ball carrier inside this defender takes the outside gap. If a pass is made the receiver becomes the victim of a spot tackle.

Now let's say the defence has been penetrated. Experienced defences will turn with the penetrator isolating this player both to the left and the right. This will prevent the player using lateral support. At worst the penetrator is tackled, the lateral support, not being stopped in their tracks, overshoot the collision and put themselves out of play.

The cue to support is to get in behind and provide linear support, so that an unobstructed pass can be made to supporting the players.

This is best achieved by the ball carrier attacking the defence, using evasion skills, to the left or the right. This is done in the knowledge that the space created as the space the ball carrier has moved away from as I've said above. By passing back into the space the straight line running support maintains the line and runs onto the ball. There are variations for the transfer of the ball which will be covered later in this article.

### *Scrum*

The vast majority of what I've said is the same for scrums. After all, the offside line being 5m back from the number 8's feet makes it close to 10m back from the gain line.

What assists the attack is having left and right options and the law requiring defensive forwards to stay bound on to the scrum until the ball is out. This is very different from the line-out.

This last requirement of law forces the defence to use number 9 in one of two ways, stay close to upset the attacking number 9 behind an inferior scrum or join the defence of line 5m behind the number 8's feet. The first creates equal numbers in the front line of the attack and makes the defence vulnerable to the extra man. The second creates options at number 8 and number 9 around the scrum, which can lead to the gain line being penetrated close in.

A further variable for the defence is whether the attack is going left or right.

Should the scrum wheel, it usually clockwise, Plan B must be to go with the movement left as the defensive loose forwards are taken out of play.

It doesn't matter if the movement is down a narrow side or the open side.

The use of the narrow side can depend on the positioning of the blindside wing, the cue being the positioning to receive a kick offering pass and ran options or the position to defend these options offering space to kick into.

While a proportion of attacking backs can stand open and blind numbers can lead to an overlap if the players run from open to blind, the usual option, although there is nothing to say that players cannot run from the narrow side to the open side.

Changes in the offside laws and in the positioning of number 9, can isolate number 10 if this channel is played into, this is especially so if number 9's pass is fast, wide and flat with number 10 running onto the ball using number 15, and the blindside wing as support.

So, we have the attack going forward and to continue this we need the ball carrier to be supported.

### **Support**

Once the gain line has been broken support is needed to maintain the momentum. The difficulties that can result from the support not being available because of the positioning of the defence lateral to the ball carrier are covered above.

The transfer of the ball can occur before contact, which keeps the ball carrier in play, or during and following contact which takes the tackler out of play. If the ball carrier can handle the situation it is not a silly idea to attack one of the opposition's best defenders to get them out of the way exposing lesser defenders as play develops.

In order to free the arms to pass in contact, the ball carrier has to evade the tackler so that the tackle is low.

The only option that will free the arms when the ball carrier runs into the tackler is if the ball carrier is able to hit and spin and make a "gut" pass to the support.

The other passes are those made around the body of the tackler or a chest pass from a stable position on the ground and finally the ball carrier placing the ball and support picking about and going forward.

Care must be taken in the last two options so that the player receiving or picking up the ball is not immediately tackled stopping the attack.

If there is insufficient space the first support player should remove the threats and create space for the players that follow behind.

If a ruck or maul is formed the offside laws create space that can be used to remount the attack.

Quick ball maintains momentum, but, if delivery is slow, standard practice is for close in receivers to drive over the gain line to get momentum going again. These tend to take place close to the ruck and this is where the opposition is most numerous. To be effective the receiver should run onto the ball and not take it standing still. This is a frequent fault.

It is a thought for a group of players to group 1 or 2 passes wide to re-establish momentum as the defence may be a bit thinner further out.

### **Phase play ball**

Apart from getting momentum going, because of slow ball, the major decision to be made is which side to go once phase play ball has been won.

While this is a matter of numbers the cue is the speed of delivery of the ball. Fast ball would seem to indicate that the defence is being left behind and has to chase to keep up, so moving the ball away from them should be the play.

The other cue, numbers, is based on whether there is an overlap or an underlap. If we have more than them we should go that way and if we have less than them we go the opposite way.

If, by mistake or out of necessity, the ball is passed to the underlap side linear support can be used to get the team out of a potential difficulty. This is achieved by grouping players behind the ball carrier, who then threatens the defence line at a miss match and the overload of players at this point can help the attack to go forward.

To enable players to adapt to these situations, set up an activity that has two 15m wide channels about 15 to 20m long with the players grouped between the two. On “go” five attacking players and five defensive players run in opposite directions and enter a channel from the end line as they play towards each other.

All the attack will go one way following the ball carrier, all the defence, not being able to see which way the attack is going, split their commitment between the channels. Once committed to one channel the defenders cannot change.

The attack is faced with a variable number of defenders that are always less than they have. The overlap can be practiced.

Once this is well developed the numbers in defence can be increased so that on some occasions, the number of defenders will be greater than those in attack and the underlap strategy will have to be used.

Additions to this are to “ignite” the attack with a number 9 pass. Secondly, practice channel play followed by lateral play across the field followed by further channel play down the field, simulating the predominant mode of attack in the game.

Best wishes to all.



Tom Jones  
Regional General Manager



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