ARU PERFORMANCE PROGRAMS

Level 4 Coaching Accreditation

Ryan Schultz

“Attacking Variables and Capabilities”
Introduction

Rugby Union is a complex game that aims for one team to score more points than its opposition to win. The large amount of laws, the various positions on the field and the multiple skills within the game creates a plethora of variables in how a team can try to play when in possession of the ball. In the modern era there has been an increased focus on players and teams being able to play an attacking style of rugby. For this to occur all players need to have an extensive skill set, have the capabilities to make accurate decisions and execute under pressure.

The Principles of Play of rugby are possession, go forward, support, continuity and pressure. For a team to be effective in attack they must have not only have the ability to execute these principles but also have variation in how they do this. Importantly an effective attacking unit has the ability to identify and attack the space left by the defending team. The following paper is a subjective overview of the variables on how individuals and teams can attack a defence. It will examine and focus on the following three points:

- Attack Scenarios: ‘Space’ Variables
- Attack Capabilities: ‘Space’ Identification and Execution
Attack Scenarios

A defensive team has only fifteen players to cover the large amount of space within a rugby field. Because of the large amount of space, there has been numerous defensive systems developed to try and nullify the attacking team’s options and to regain possession. Depending on what defensive system a team implements, theoretically there should always be some kind of opportunity or space for the team in possession to attack. The following diagram outlines the space and areas that a team in possession of the ball can attack or target. The four generic options for attack are:

1. IN BETWEEN DEFENDERS
2. AROUND DEFENDERS
3. IN BEHIND DEFENDERS
4. DEEP BEHIND DEFENDERS

Note:
- The blue circles represent defenders
- This is a basic interpretation of a defensive system and does not incorporate total number of defenders on the field of play and position specific roles of defenders.
In Between Defenders

There are numerous ways a team in possession can attack the space in between defenders. This scenario is a common visual observation of an attacking player especially if a defensive line is organised and has not been disrupted by the attack. At this specific point the attack can try to disrupt or decept the defensive line by using any of the following options:

- **Dynamic Ball Carries**
  - Ball carriers can attack the space inside or outside of a defender by utilising footwork prior to contact. Dynamic and late footwork can fix a defender which will result in them becoming unbalanced and losing the ability to transfer power through contact.
  - To maximise the chance of dynamic carrier’s primary support players can position themselves so that they are fixing defenders either side of the ball carrier. If this ‘shape’ is executed correctly the ball carrier has more opportunity to create a one on one with the defender opposite them.

- **Running Lines**
  - Players can run to the inside shoulder (unders) space or outside shoulder (overs) space of defenders.
  - The attacking player wants to run these lines late so that they can fix the defender and create weak shoulders.
  - It is important for the distributor of the ball to fix his defender before passing so that the next defender is isolated and minimising the ability of other defenders to join the tackle.

- **Defensive Queues**
  - Attacking players can identify queues from observing defenders body position or body shape.
  - Defenders with their shoulders turned in towards the ball can be attacked on their outside shoulder and defenders with their shoulders turned out towards the sideline can be attacked at their inside shoulder.
  - Players can also identify individual mismatches or weakness in the defensive line such as quicker players (outside backs) against slower players (tight forwards).

- **Deception**
  - Running lines of multiple attackers can create numerous decisions for a defender to make at one time.
  - The distributor can observe queues from defenders and pass the ball to the attacker that is in space.
  - Plays such as ‘blockers’, ‘switches’ or ‘hip balls’ are such examples.

By utilising and executing any of the above options the attack can disrupt a defence and potentially get ball carriers into space. This disruption of the defence can lead to quick ruck speed, offloads or line breaks that increases the chance of scoring opportunities.
In Between Defenders (examples)

Image 1. Dynamic Ball Carry

The ball carrier showed here is displaying dynamic footwork prior to contact which results in the defender losing balance and missing the tackle. Primary support can then assist the ball carrier through contact and over the advantage line.
A combination of running lines (unders and overs) are used by the attackers to deceive the defense through a ‘block’ play. The distributor reads the correct defensive queues (shoulders turned in) and gives the ball to the outside attacker who has a two on one in front of him. The ball is then distributed to space resulting in a dominant carry/linebreak.
Around Defenders

Defence generally becomes narrow due to the over commitment of defenders near the contact area (ruck). This over commitment can be a result of any of the mentioned attack options above. If at any time the defence loses their spacing and connection that allows it to cover the width of the field, there will be opportunities on the outside of the last defender. The ability for an attack to identify space in the outside channels and transfer the ball quickly to width, will provide them with opportunities to attack around the outside of defenders. When attacking around the outside of defenders, it is imperative to consider the following:

- **Identification of Space**
  - Outside attackers must be assessing what’s in front of them so that if the attack at any point has more players then the defence, quick decisions can be made.
  - After identifying these specific attack opportunities, communication must be transferred to the players closer to the ball.

- **Quick Transfer**
  - When space has been identified on the outside of defence it is imperative that the ball is transferred to the outside attackers quickly.
  - To ensure the outside attackers don’t lose their space the transfer of the ball must be executed by square attackers to ensure defenders are fixed.
  - The 1st and 2nd receiver must transfer the ball quickly without taking away too much of the space created out wide (1 or 2 step passes).

- **Support Lines**
  - It is important for attackers who have passed the ball in to continue to support the outside attackers.
  - Due to the defence being stressed it is most likely that the defenders are working hard towards the sideline to cover the outside space. This will create weak inside shoulders of the defenders in which inside support players can attack or be options for continuity (offloads/pop off the ground etc).

- **Transfer Options**
  - Shortside Attack – attacking short sides can be created when an attack plays off the sideline leaving a short channel from where the ball has come from (previous phase). If players from the previous breakdown work off the ball and reload, there are opportunities to form an overload if the defence has over folded. The often scenario on short side attack are 5v4’s, 4v3’s and 3v2’s.
  - Width Attack – attacking teams have the opportunity to attack with width through the outside channels when attackers outnumber defenders. These opportunities can generate from quick ruck speed and line breaks where defence has narrowed towards the ruck. When there are too many attackers to transfer the ball through, two lines of attack (front line and second line) can be utilised to minimise the number of passes.
Early square transfer from the 1st receiver allows the outside attackers time and space to capitalise on an overlap of attackers. Each ball carrier stays square and commits defenders in front of them allowing the last attacker to receive the ball in space that results in a try.
In Behind Defenders

Another opportunity and area of the field the team in possession can attack is in behind the defenders/defensive line. Depending on the position of the field, this space is traditionally only covered by the halfback and can be attacked through a variety of kicking options. The following are potential ways to attack this space:

- Grubber/Chip Kicks
  - Grubber/Chip kicks can be executed to get into the space behind the defensive line. When executing this option it is important to consider:
    - The kicker needs to ensure his path of the kick is clear. This can be achieved by getting on the outside shoulder of their opposite defender so that the kicking path is in between defenders (grubber) or ensuring that they kick the ball before the defensive line so it cannot be charged down (chip).
    - An individual player can kick for himself or kick for supporting players. It is important that supporting players either identify the kicking opportunity or are aware that the kick is going to happen.
    - A kick for supporting chasers can be the better option as the kicker can angle the ball into the space away from the covering defender (halfback). It is also important to kick the ball further enough away from the defensive line so they cannot turn and chase to recover the ball.

- Contestable Kicks
  - This option can be used to clear your own defensive half or to potentially regain possession through a contest of the ball. This kick is usually executed by the halfback through a box kick but can also be performed by other kickers. It is important to consider:
    - The kick needs to be performed to ensure there is a contest for the ball or that the arriving chasers have every chance to pressure the ball receiver.
    - The boxkick option is best suited to be performed within the outside channels as this position isolates the opposite winger and minimises their chance to counter-attack. To perform an effective box kick the halfback must have protection at the ruck so that he has enough room to perform the kick without getting charged down.
    - A contestable kick by other players can be performed anywhere within the field but is best suited from midfield and towards the outside channels. At this point the fullback is also usually positioned midfield and would need to cover ground to contest the ball. Wingers are typically positioned evenly behind the defensive line and fullback which would result in them having to turn and move backwards towards a contestable kick.
    - It is important that the kick chase are aware that a contestable kick is going to be executed so that an effective kick chase line is formed. The chasers also need to know who is going to contest the ball or what options can be executed if the opposition regains possession (eg. Dominate tackle/counter ruck)
    - Please note – the above relates to a traditional pendulum back three defensive system.
Image 4. In Behind Defenders (contestable box kick)

The halfback has set up for a box kick at the base of a ruck and is protected by surrounding players. The kick is performed to land into the space in behind defenders and has an effective line of kick chasers. A designated chaser contests unopposed for the ball and regains possession.
Deep Behind Defenders

Depending on the defensive system the opposition is implementing there will always be space deep behind the defensive line. Due to the make up and laws of the game of rugby that makes all possession a contest, it is important that the team isn’t trying to attack with ball in hand all the time. Through effective positioning and execution, the team in possession can kick the ball into more suitable parts of the field and try and regain possession from there. This can be done through the following:

- Effective Kicking
  - Effective kicking can be achieved by any player in the team if that have the skill set to execute.
  - A kicker must firstly identify the space they want to kick to and get themselves into a positive position to kick. It is important for the kicker to have enough time and space to perform a long kick so that the ball is not charged down.
  - A lot like the contestable kicks outlined above, the support players must provide a kick chase line to pressure the opposition and shut down the counter-attack options.
  - Kicking to the corners and sideline of the field eliminates counter-attack opportunity and also decreases the return kicking angle.

The ability to execute an effective long kicking game deep behind the defensive line and into a corner can have a positive influence on the outcome of a game. This gives teams the opportunity to contest possession in their own half and also pressure the opposition to exit into their own attacking half.
The attacking team is currently positioned just outside their own 22m. The flyhalf receives the ball from a lineout and kicks deep in behind the defensive line and finds space. This results in the opposing fullback fumbling the ball and an attacking scrum 25m our from their attacking try line.
**Attack Capabilities**

The ability for an individual to identify space, inhibit the skillset to perform under pressure and have a tactical knowledge of the game is imperative in forming an effective attacking player. A team can develop their attacking potency if all players have these traits and apply it in a competitive match environment. The following chart provides an overview of key attacking components for individual players and teams to develop:

![Attack Capabilities Chart]

**Visual Awareness (EYES)**

- Visual awareness refers to players using their ‘EYES’ to scan what is occurring in front of them. Players can be identifying any of the four attack scenarios:
  - In between defenders
  - Around defenders
  - In behind defenders
  - Deep behind defenders

- It is also important for players to have the ability to assess that there may not be an evident opportunity to attack and react to it accordingly.

- This observation from players is the decision-making process and can be relevant to the specific teams attacking philosophy and patterns.

- It is important for a player to have an understanding of how their team is trying to play in attack but also has the capabilities to make effective decisions from what the defence is doing at that specific time.
Transmission and Communication (comms)

- Once a player has made a decision it is important for them to communicate this to the players around them. This communication will allow for the execution of the decision by ensuring all players are aware of what exactly needs to be executed.
- Depending on the decision the communication can be relevant to:
  - Close Communication
    - Players around the decision makers hearing the communication and reacting accordingly.
    - Eg. Decision to carry the ball is communicated and near players then reacting to support the ball carrier.
  - Far Communication
    - Players who have identified opportunities and are not near the ball need this communication to be transferred in towards the ball.
    - This communication effectively makes the decision for the receivers to then execute actions relevant to the messages coming from the outside attackers.
    - Eg. Space identified by outside attackers is communicated towards the breakdown, 1st and 2nd receivers can then transfer the ball quickly to the outside channels where there is space.
- The communication of decisions does not always need to be verbal but can also be relayed through physical actions. (eg. Hand up to signal kick from the most outside attacker)

Specific Physical Reaction (Action)

Once a decision has been made and communicated, the relevant players must physically react and get into an optimal position to execute. This resulting movement will increase the chance of execution and impact the outcome of the decision that has been made. Effective decision making, a solid skill set and an understanding of the tactical side of the game will enable a team to attack with confidence. All relevant attacking options must be developed through game specific training and players need to have the confidence to execute under pressure in a competition environment.