Implementing Linear Support

Preamble
Over the past few seasons, much has been written about the different applications of lateral and linear support while in attack. By the very nature of forward play, the concept of linear support (“truck and trailer” running lines) has been easy to implement at training and apply in game situations. I do believe that the same cannot be said for backline support. International Rugby aside, the difficulty facing many club coaches is that their player pool is made up of individuals who have been playing the same way, in some instances, 15 or more years. Old habits in lateral support, coupled with a seeming lack of desire to become involved in breakdowns, are hard to break.

The difficulty facing the 1st Grade team at Hong Kong Football Club (HKFC) is that our ability to effectively recycle possession through the backline is minimized by the lack of mobility and physical dominance of our backrow and through the predominance of lateral support in the backline players. This “style” of play has been a contributing factor to the team’s inability to sustain pressure on opposition teams throughout the season and our failure in this year’s Grand Final.

Philosophy in Attack
The basis of the following progression of drills relies on a number of individual and unit skills being either covered in previous sessions or developed through team work and understanding. Among these factors is the need for players to avoid becoming isolated and, if isolated maintaining “their leg drive” and creating a maul situation until support arrives. The success of this aspect depends on communication between players. Additionally, as this paper is primarily aimed at backline players, it is vital to develop an urgency to get to the breakdown. This is facilitated by good communication and anticipation of teammate’s actions and intentions. While this is a much more difficult component in attacking play, it is vital to the success of a team’s efforts to recycle quick ball and make the most of attacking opportunities. Lastly, consideration should always be given to the field position and the team’s game plan. Players must be aware of their position on the field and how this affects their decision-making while in possession and while acting as a support player.

Drills
Following is a developmental series of drills and activities that has been fine tuned and will be implemented in full during the coming season in an effort to integrate a shift in support lines and, ultimately, a change in game plan. While the aim of this exercise is to alter the running and support lines of backs, the drills are appropriate for all members of the team, especially loose forwards. Each stage should be used as a 10 – 15 minute segment and, if possible, players should be placed in contact suits to minimize the possibility of soft tissue damage.

Key Factor Analysis:
The tackler should:
- Be closing the gap before any lateral movement (to the left in the diagram )
- “Tracking” the attacker to avoid inside movement
- Be attempting a “dominant” tackle by driving forward
- Making shoulder contact and wrapping arms in the tackle
- Getting to his feet and immediately contesting the ball
The ball carrier should:
✓ Maintain a running line by “attacking” the tackler before moving to the outside – stepping inside should not be allowed until “free practice”
✓ Use fend, swerve or step in an attempt to get around the tackler
✓ Target defender’s shoulder in an effort to “win” the contest
✓ In the case of an effective tackle, making the ball available
✓ In the case of a “maul tackle”, maintain leg drive until support arrives

The support players should:
✓ Delayed arrival from the ball carrier’s “shadow”
✓ Make support decisions based on the outcome of the tackle contest
✓ Linear support that follows the penetrator’s channel

Functional Role Analysis of the Support Player:

- **Ball is hidden**
  - **a) Ball carrier is brought to ground**: Straddle
  - **b) Ball carrier stays up and drives**: Drive maul
  - **c) Ball carrier passes**: Secure possession/drive/present/peel off

- **Ball is visible**
  - **Before contact**: Running from depth and in the channel
  - **In contact**: React to ball carrier’s potential to pass

Stage 1 - The Tackle (controlled practice)

- **Ball Carrier/Attacker**
- **Defender**

**Aim:**
To retain possession at/or beyond the gain line

The most important factor in continuity is the ability of the ball carrier to make the ball available at the breakdown. The first step in dealing with introducing linear support is to ensure that all players are working to improve their skills in evading the tackle and making the ball available. The ball carrier must enter the tackle zone at pace and with the intention to evade the tackler so that the ball itself does not become involved in the tackle situation.

In addition to developing effective evasive techniques, the ball carrier must make the ball available in all situations. In the case of an effective tackle, the ball must be controlled and placed in an advantageous position. In the case of a tackle where the ball carrier is not taken to ground, momentum must be maintained through leg drive until support arrives.

For the purposes of this first stage, tacklers will be instructed to practise tackles that bring the player to the ground. Focus will be on “driving” tackles aimed at either the legs or waist of the opposition. For this stage, the grid is 5 metres wide and 10 metres long.

The ball carrier maintains a running line for the opposite marker which allows the tackler (in this case) to practice left shoulder tackles. At the tackle, the tackler tries to get to his feet and contest the ball while the ball carrier places the ball so that the supporting player can play the ball.
As a micro-skill, focus should be on the body position, technical application and ball play of all three players involved in each activity. As this activity provides the basis for all that follows, it is vital to spend an appropriate amount of time ensuring that this step is technically accurate in the tackle, the contest and in support decision-making.

**Stage 2 – The Pass Option – before contact** (controlled practice)

* Aim: To advance the ball beyond the gain line and to penetrate laterally

The grid is set out as in Stage 1 – a one-on-one tackle – but the ball carrier is looking to pass on the inside channel before contact is made with the defender. This is still controlled and the ball carrier must make for the outside (left) shoulder of the defender.

For the purposes of effecting this drill, it is wise to make the support player (S1) delay his run so that he can shadow the running line of the ball carrier, decide on the best line of attack and hit the pass at pace. A clear and loud call for the pass must be made by the support player well before contact.

Stage 3 - Pass in the tackle (freer practice)

* Aim: Introduce opportunities for greater decision-making – the ball carrier must make decisions based on the effectiveness of the tackle and his ability to evade and make for the defender’s shoulder in an effort to make the ball available during or after contact.

The grid is set out as above, except the ball carrier is allowed to attack either shoulder of the defender. The ball carrier must decide which shoulder to attack to best make the ball available.

Communication between the attackers is essential at this stage, as the supporter must be ready to attack the ball if the tackle is effective and the ball remains unplayable by the ball carrier. Therefore, it is vital that the running line shadows that of the ball carrier.

The ball carrier may decide to pass in the tackle, or take the ball to ground in a controlled situation and then pop the pass to the support runner. There is no option to maul the ball at this stage. If the ball carrier is held up, the attackers must drive forward and take the tackle to ground to make the ball available.
Stage 4 – Contest at the tackle (freer practice)

Aim: Introduce decision-making drills for both attacking and defending players.

The setup for this stage is as above, except a 2nd defender (D2) is introduced in a supporting role. Therefore, D2 must only enter the grid once contact has been made between the ball carrier and the defender.

D2 must remain inside the first defender and must enter the tackle zone from an on-side position. This Law will have to be revisited and demonstrated. D2 should be aiming at contesting the ball at the tackle and remaining on his feet. If the initial tackle is not effective, D2 should practice “steering” the ball carrier to ground while staying on his feet. Once the ball carrier has been released, the ball should be contested. If the pass is made in the tackle, D2 acts as a drifting defender.

The supporter’s (S1) decisions will be based on a) the ball becoming available in the tackle and b) the actions of D2. S1 may be required to accept the pass and carry on beyond the gain line; he may have to pick and go; he may have to clear out; or he may have to straddle.

Stage 5 – Game Situation (freer practice)

Aim: To place the skills learned into a controlled game situation that would approximate play in the centres.

The grid for this stage is doubled in size – 10 x 10 metres. The play is initiated when the acting scrumhalf passes to the “centre”. Before this stage evolves to “free practice”, the attackers are limited to simple passes rather than complicated switches, loops, etc. Attackers must react to the decisions that their players make – if the 1st receiver decides to attempt to break the defensive line, the outside support must run a line that shadows the ball carrier and therefore, places him in a position to receive a pass or contest the ball at the tackle. Equally, if the 1st receiver passes, he must assume a position that allows him to run a line of support that shadows the ball carrier.

Defenders must attempt to “track” their opposition in an attempt to eliminate the option to step inside the tackle. Effective communication between the defenders is vital at this stage and even more important once the drill evolves to include switches, circle balls and loops. Once a tackle is effected, defenders need to react in the manner established in the previous stages. An additional consideration for the attackers will be the timing of their arrival at the breakdown. If the supporter has secured possession, the 2nd defender should not join the tackle contest, but should adopt a position as “pillar” defence.
Stage 6 – Linear Support – (Free Practice)

Aim: To introduce the addition of channel support from “traditional” backline positions that are associated with starter moves. This drill should be allowed to progress to 2\textsuperscript{nd} phase.

This stage must be confined by space to discourage the natural desire for lateral support from backs and actively encourage linear support. An ideal area that allows 2\textsuperscript{nd} and 3\textsuperscript{rd} phase options is the 22m area, played across the field – from sideline to sideline. It is best to use players in their positions and oppose them with either another backline or with the forwards.

The attack is initiated by the stationary pass from the scrum half. It is expected that the flyhalf and centres will attempt to make the gain line and advance the ball. These players must be made to adopt running lines that do not drift across the field. Simple moves (switch, loop, cut out pass, circle ball) are encouraged, but it is the role of the primary supporter and the linear supporter that is the focus of this stage.

If the nominated move attacks the inside channel (a switch between 10 and 12), the blind wing will become the primary linear supporter in addition to the primary lateral supporter – the scrumhalf (or the openside flanker in the case of an expanded activity that includes forwards). In this example, the flyhalf would act as the primary receiver for the 2\textsuperscript{nd} phase and link with the fullback and outside centre.
Conclusion
The drills contained in this paper are designed to introduce the concept (and importance) of linear support in backline play. The individual Stages lend themselves to adaptation depending on facilities and player numbers. A defensive extension could be to begin to develop a pattern of “pillar” defensive pattern so that defending teams do not over-commit at the breakdown. Whatever is adopted must be dealt with as an individual skill exercise so that players are allowed to master the basic principles before moving on to the next level of application.