2005

LEVEL III

TASK 12

IMPROVING SUPPORT PLAY IN COUNTRY RUGBY

COLIN JEFFS
INTRODUCTION

Rugby has developed greatly in the last 10 years and the emphasis has moved away from 10 man rugby to ball in hand. Therefore ball security and retention have the utmost importance in determining how a team can control and utilise the ball they have, to secure the outcome of a match.

Ball security and retention can only be maximised by having effective support in all attacking sequences.

Support can enhance the number of phases a team can execute by assuring ball security at the point of contact with the opposition. This can be in the form of ball retention, protection or deception to guarantee the forward movement of the attacking team. With more continuous phases, a team should gain more territory, increase the pressure on the opposition and increase the opportunities for scoring points.

The success of support can depend greatly on the ball carrier and their ability to create an attacking opportunity by their individual strengths, running skills and creativity. This opportunity may take the form of outflanking a slower defender or penetrating the defensive line due to a mismatch (eg. prop marking an outside centre).

Availability of players to support the ball carrier is vital at the point of contact with opposition. Attacking players must endeavour to present the ball in a manner which allows the support to secure the ball and maintain forward momentum.

Most teams base their general patterns of attack on favourable field position. To reach that position, a team must be able to move up the field and this will not occur without structured support and attack or attacking patterns.

Patterns of attack will greatly influence the availability and amount of support provided to a ball carrier. Set pieces are the most common focus area for attacking patterns to be based on and for support players to follow. However, turnovers and kick returns can also affect field position and hence support patterns.

Quick/speedy reaction of all players to “play what is in front of them” such as turnovers and kicks is essential. Their ability to then return to structured patterns is vital for successful support.

Rugby in country regions is becoming more popular but with this growth, the need for better coaching and a better understanding of how the game has changed is important for the success of all teams.

It is important to enhance a player’s technical skills as well as giving them structure and direction on how to implement patterns of play into their training and games.

The suggestions in this paper are a guide for players’ awareness of field position and patterns of support which can assist a team’s success.

Ability and commitment to these ideas can often depend on the effort of the players themselves. As it often is in the country however, you need to work with what you have and sometimes that can lead to a breakdown in the implementation of strategies, but persistence can produce rewards.
KEYS TO SUCCESS

Requirements of Players

1. Psychological and mental capacity to understand and perform roles in support patterns.
2. Understanding of the objectives of support patterns.
3. Satisfactory/high levels of fitness, mobility and agility.
4. Physical dominance.
5. Positive/strong point of contact.
6. Capacity to read a game and react appropriately.
7. Technically proficient in the position.

Objectives - Quality Ball at the Contest

1. Successful ball retention (including what should happen at the point of contact).
2. Dominant ball possession which reduces oppositions ball, resulting in eliminating scoring opportunities.
3. Structured phases of ball possession which create mismatches between players (challenges to the defence eg. slow defensive realignment) therefore establishing opportunities to score.
4. Players have roles in creating and maintaining patterns for support lines, and an understanding of their position and how they contribute to support.
5. Utilise set pieces as a platform for further attacking and “go forward” movements eg. Penetration and recycling at pace.
6. Create opportunities for dominant or “strike” players, to enter attacking movements in a more favourable or successful position.
7. Attacking patterns are enhanced or promoted by player’s understanding at where their support will be.

Role of Support Patterns

By using effective support patterns, an attacking team should be able to maintain ball retention by ensuring that the ball carrier is supported at all time.

This has the objective of enhancing the attacking team’s ability to cross the advantage line and thus cause the defending team to retreat, also forcing defending players to make poor decisions. As a result, opportunities (i.e. Attacking sequences) to penetrate the opposition’s defences, and score points should be created.

Support patterns are based on individual players and the team as a whole knowing and understanding their role and position on the field.

To build and develop such knowledge, coaching staff can utilise a range of strategies to establish field position

1. Field Zoning
2. Channels
1. **FIELD ZONING**

The playing field is divided into 4 zones A, B, C and D.

- A Zone (opposition's try line to the 22 metre line)
- B Zone (opposition's 22 metre line to ½ way)
- C Zone (attacking team's 22 metre line to ½ way)
- D Zone (attacking team's try line to the 22 metre line)

The general pattern in attack is determined by the team's field position (and defensive patterns) in each of the 4 zones. However, the opposition defensive patterns will influence your team's lines of attack (in terms of penetration) and this could affect the level of ball security.
A ZONE

Aims
1. Maintain intensity mentally and physically.
2. Positive and correct decision making.
3. Players to be “highly reactive”- play what is in front of them.
4. Support patterns must be executed correctly to increase pressure on defensive lines.
5. Effective recycling of ball to maximise attacking sequences.
6. Execute all attacking sequences.
7. Score points.

B ZONE

Aims
1. Create mismatches in defensive lines and increase pressure on opposition.
2. Maintain intensity mentally and physically.
3. Positive and correct decision making
4. Players to be “highly reactive”- play what is in front of them.
5. Execute all attacking sequences.

C ZONE

Aims
1. Penetration of the defensive line due to effective recycling (i.e. Going forward) due to structured support patterns.
2. Deep field position using strategic kicking.
3. Maintain intensity mentally and physically.
4. Positive and correct decision making.
5. Players to be “highly reactive”- play what is in front of them.
6. Execute all attacking sequences.

D ZONE

Aims
1. To reduce pressure on your team by either a deep clearing kick (from players 9 or 10) or running the ball out. This choice would depend on the team’s abilities and circumstances of game.
2. Establish and maintain an increased awareness of the need for ball security.
3. Maintain intensity mentally and physically.
4. Positive and correct decision making.
5. Players to be “highly reactive”- play what is in front of them.
6. Execute all attacking sequences.

By having players understand their role and the role of others in each of the 4 zones, they will know where attacking sequences will occur. This will enable them to arrive at the point of contact more quickly than the opposition. However, the defensive patterns of opposition in each zone will also determine how effective support will be at breakdowns.
ESTABLISHING ROLES IN SUPPORT PATTERNS WITHIN ZONES

All players have various roles in any given zone depending on the point of attack.

EXAMPLES

A Zone
- Lift intensity in support of ball carrier.
- Astute decision making for attacking options.
- Go forward to score points.

B Zone
Execute set patterns of attack with greater emphasis on creating mismatches and opportunities for “strike” players eg. kick or running plays.

C Zone
- Execute set patterns of attack (which are supported by set patterns i.e. 4 x 4 channelling)
- Strategic kicking to turn opposition around.
- Kicks must be supported by appropriate players (chasers) depending on position of kicks in play eg. Open and blindside winger.

D Zone
From clearance kicks:
- “Loose forwards” protect and support the kicker.
- “Tight forwards” push forward with the kick.
- Blindside winger pushes up quickly to eliminate quick lineout.
- Outside backs move up in a straight line to neutralise counter attacks.
- Winger and loose forward protect D Zone from counter-attack.

From set pieces (i.e. scrum or lineout):
- Backrowers perform attacking movement to reduce pressure on kicker by engaging opposition’s loose forwards.
2. CHANNELLING/CHANNELS

Besides the players understanding their positions and role in relation to field position, they also need to know and understand the movement of the team's attack laterally.

Therefore, the playing field is further subdivided into 4 channels similar to the ACT Brumbies system in the first two years of Super 12. (However in the first two years of the Super 12 competition the Brumbies used an 8 corridor system.) From any restart, all players know exactly what channel the attack will focus on initially, and if holes appear as play progressed, players can identify them and refocus the attack into that particular channel.

N.B. Only 4 channels would be used outside elite levels
EXAMPLES OF SUPPORT PATTERNS USING 4 X 4 CHANNELLING

This involves splitting the forward pack into 2 pods of 4 forwards, (4x4) who are responsible for clearing alternate breakdowns. They are also able to provide support for ball carriers as well as taking the ball forward themselves (with support in numbers) and challenge defenders to commit to breakdowns.

Below are a few samples of 4 x 4 plays, that can assist in maintaining support and ball retention. All plays can be executed in Zones A, B and C.

1. LINEOUTS: (positions will depend on players’ ability)
   - On “2 ball”, the 4 jumper, the two lifters 1 and 3 and the 2 (hooker) acts as one group. Players not involved 5, 6, 7 and 8 are the second pod.

   **Phase One**

   → pass
   ---> run

   2 ball off the top with inside centre 12 running underlines (i.e. attack inside shoulder of defender) to attack.
   - outside centre 13 secure ball upon tackle
   - 5, 6, 7, and 8 (i.e. Pod 2) clean out at point of attack (II channel)
Phase Two

Halfback 9 feeds to five eight 10 who passes to pod 1 (i.e. 1, 2, 3, 4) who have looped around after lineout win, and run inside or outside the five eight 10 with one ball carrier and 3 support players into the point of contact. If ball is secured quickly, support players are not to over commit, but protect halfback (this is significant in all plays).

Phase Three

- Halfback 9 passes to 5, 6, 7, 8 who have “wrapped” around and drive forward (i.e. Pod 2) (III channel) (N.B. players must get off ground quickly from previous clean out)

At this phase, options on backline attack should become clearer as to where the defensive line is weakest. Attacking movements are still moving in the same direction (i.e. IV channel) or returning to weaker defence in channels I, II and III. N.B. It is important that a call system is operating to enable players to provide support in the channel that the attack is focussed on (sample at end of this example of 4 x 4)

Options can be based on where the ball is thrown (eg. 4 ball or 6 ball), but the simplest is always having the hooker 2 always in the pod with the respective jumper and lifters.

The same attack sequences as used in the lineout example can be followed. Players need to know where they stand in the lineout if not actively involved and be ready to move quickly to the first hit up by either centre (12,13) to clean out for good ball presentation.

If short lineouts are used, the same pods of 4 players can be utilised with possibility of variation in the first attack phase.
b) SCRAMS

Phase 1

x - defender

From the scrum similar phases can be executed as from lineouts. For example, 12 or 13 can take the ball into contact with the opposition, other to secure ball upon tackle 5, 6, 7 and 8 i.e. Pod 2 break from the scrum to clean out over 12 for ball retention.

Phase 2

Halfback 9 feeds to five eight 10 who passes to pod 1 (i.e. 1,2,3,4) who have looped around after scrum win, and run inside or outside the five eight 10 with one ball carrier and 3 support players into the point of contact.
From this forward movement, the 5, 6, 7, and 8 (pod 2) are quickly on their feet, supporting and receiving the ball from the halfback 9 and take the ball forward into contact again.

What channels are utilised will depend on field position, number of defenders in each of the channel etc.

At this stage, mismatches can appear which gives the attacking backs, the option to execute their plays.  

**N.B.** If a blindside is played the only difference in the pods is that the blindside lock 4 becomes the player in the 2nd pod of 6, 7, 8.

The options of pods suggested previously are only a starting point and many variations on these basics can be developed. Variations will depend upon player cohesion and competence improves regarding 4 x 4 support patterns.

An example of an advanced option based on a series of calls which indicate direction of attack and support into particular channels or directions.  

- Dog: indicates attack is directed the same way of ball service (i.e. always to the open side)  
- Fish: indicates attack is to the open side twice then back in the opposite direction once  
- Cat: indicates attack is directed to the open side once and then back in the opposite direction for two plays  
- Bird: indicates attack is directed one way, then return to the opposite and then back to the first direction

These are only a few examples and coaches are encouraged to create or vary these to suit their game plan. It should be emphasised that all these options can be modified according to set pieces (i.e. Scrum, short or normal lineouts)
Conclusion

The objectives of support patterns and the concept of 4 x 4 pods was implemented by the NSW Country Cockatoos with varying degrees of success in 2004 and 2005. Training is a key point in this strategy and the more practice a team puts in, is directly related to the success of the plan. It has also been used at country club level, but consistency in following patterns throughout the game was the biggest problem. Success can be achieved with dedication to following the concepts. With success variations can be implemented to suit the ability of individual teams. The main goal is to stretch the opposition’s defensive patterns and utilise the whole field of play, to enhance your opportunities to score points. Being able to “play what is in front of you” is a major factor in success, but a basic structure can assist in achieving these goals, hence the basis of this paper.