How to develop decision-making for Attacking Support Players following the Ball Carrier into contact?

Introduction

This paper identifies the technical/tactical elements involved for an Attacking Support Player (ASP) and details ways in which players may gain an understanding of simple decision-making processes to successfully maintain possession. If the aim of rugby union is to score more points than the opposition then players must be able to be technically proficient for a universally contestable game to take place. Through the utilisation of a decision-making model and different training environments, players should execute the correct technique at the appropriate moment when in an Attacking Support Player role.

Principles of Team Play

The Principles of Team Play are Possession, Go Forward, Support, Continuity and Pressure. Initially, the team must gain Possession. This is done, more often than not, at Restarts and Set Piece; occasionally a team may regain possession through applying pressure to the team with the ball. Once a team has possession they must Go Forward in order to put themselves in a positive situation. Thus, by gaining Possession and Go Forward, the team with the ball may put themselves into a position of control over their opposition.

Possession and Go Forward rely on unit and individual skills. At the Restart, Scrum and Lineout players have their specific role and responsibilities to gain possession, and when in possession it is an individual’s core skills that will determine the team’s ability to Go Forward by catch and pass, footspeed and agility, speed and deception. To maintain possession then players must be able to make decisions when they are in Support of the ball carrier. Whilst a player’s technical skill level is important here, their ability to choose the correct option will result in their team maintaining Continuity. If this is continually achieved, then Pressure may be exerted on the opposition and scoring points accumulated.

Therefore, it is the decision-making skills of the players that will assist the maintenance of possession; this is no more evident than through the support role of players to a Ball Carrier.

Contact Support Recognition

The most important recognition for the Attacking Support Player is to identify where the ball carrier goes through contact and identifying the correct option to take. The ASP is the player who is closest to the ball carrier when they go into contact; in some circumstances this may be a primary support player or in another a lateral support player. In all cases the ball carrier will end up in one of two places; either with the ball on the ground or with the ball in the air. This Contact Support Recognition (CSR) is important in the decision-making process as it can assist the reaction-time of the Attacking Support Player.
Contact Support Recognition can be developed in players in a number of ways. As a coach, it is important to identify both the learning styles of the player group, and then develop training regimes that account to these styles. All individuals learn by different means. In the ARU’s Level 2 Coaching Course the Learning Styles unit details these as Kinaesthetic, Reading, Aural and Visual. Kinaesthetic learners have a “perceptual preference related to the use of experience and practice” (Fleming & Mills, 1992); Reading (/ Writing) learners have a preference for information displayed as words; Aural (or Auditory) learners preference is through the spoken word; and, Visual learners prefer graphic images and symbols. As such, coaches need to provide different coaching environments to assist players attaining their potential.

If a coach is to develop their players, then the use of some of the abovementioned activities may develop Contact Support Recognition for the Attacking Support Player. The following aspect of this research paper details three variations to assist this development – Hierarchy of Decision-Making (Traffic Light Recognition Sequence); Video Enhanced Training; and, Tackle Support Technical Skill Enhancement.

**Hierarchy of Decision-Making:**

In the ARU’s Level 2 Coach Course identification of the First Support Players role in both Attack and Defence are highlighted. The importance of this is detailed through the Hierarchy of Decision-making Model (HDM), where the options available to the support player can be identified. The HDM is a simple tool for coaches to use to assist players in identifying the scenario in front of them and selecting the correct option to maintain possession for their team.

![Hierarchy of Decision-Making Diagram](image)

For the support player it is paramount that their options relate to what the ball carrier does, rather than a preconceived role as dictated by the coach; in many teams the philosophy dictates that when a player goes into contact they must find the ground, then the support player must remove any threat around the ball or take the space past the ball; this limits both the player’s and teams ability to exercise options.

Initially, when the ball carrier takes the ball into contact the ball carrier has a responsibility to maintain possession; the Support players then have the responsibility to maintain continuity of play. Their ability to identify the correct option to take is the key to maintaining this possession. Therefore, when this contact scenario occurs they must identify and execute the correct option; this is whether the ball has been taken to ground or whether it is still in the air. This identification will assist the player making a correct decision in support.
Traffic Light Recognition Sequence (TLRS)

a) Ball on the Ground

In the first scenario, there has been a Tackle: “A tackle occurs when the ball carrier is held by one or more opponents and is brought to ground” (Law 15: Laws of the Game. IRB, 2010). Here the ball carrier has been brought to ground and is now a Tackled Player. This player must now play the ball immediately and this can be assisted if the Primary Support Player makes the correct decision as to what to do in support.

When the ball is on the ground, the Attacking Support Player must identify if the ball is available, visible or hidden:

BALL ON THE GROUND

GREEN

AVAILABLE

AMBER

VISIBLE

RED

HIDDEN

To assist players in determining the correct option to take, the traffic light colour sequence is a simple mechanism to develop decision-making. Using the Green, Amber, Red sequence players can be directed to select the correct technical application for the situation.

AVAILABLE

GREEN

No Defensive Threat: Play it!

VISIBLE

AMBER

Defensive Threat: Make Ball Available!

The Green Light signifies that the ball is available and, as such, the Attacking Support Player must be able to play it. Here early identification should allow the player to communicate with the Tackled Player and allow them the time and space to play the ball. This also means that the Attacking Support Player may need to adjust their foot-speed and position so that they can accept a ball that has been long-placed, popped, held in the air or rolled back. By doing this the Attacking Support Player will assist their team in maintaining both possession and continuity.

The Amber Light signifies that the ball is visible and that opposition players are in a position to contest possession. Opposition players may be within the tackled area but not over the ball which would suggest the Attacking Support Player has to make contact with an opposition player. This must be done by coming through “the gate” and making contact with the opposition so that their head and shoulders were above their hips.
Tactically, an *Amber* ball would see an opposition either on their feet entering through “the gate”, on their feet above the ball moving forward or on their feet trying to gain possession of the ball. Here the opposition would either be “driving through” or in a “pilfer” position. This is positive for an Attacking Support Player as the body-shape of the opposition will assist in determining the correct technical skill they need to perform.

In order to make this ball available the Attacking Support Player would have to either ‘drive past the ball’ or make contact with the pilferer. In order to execute these techniques successfully, the Attacking Support Player should either maintain body-shape and leg drive and ensuring that any opposition threat was removed from the vicinity of the ball or remove the player by getting their shoulder and hips lower than their opposition. By doing this the Attacking Support Player will assist their team in making the ball available.

The *Red Light* signifies that players are lying over the ball. In most cases this will be an opposition Tackler who fails to roll away post-tackle. In this case the Attacking Support Player must slow their line-speed going into contact and bring them almost to a stop. In this way they can make contact with the opposition player and with correct technique, dip, hit and drive the player off the ball. By doing this the Attacking Support Player will assist their team in making the ball visible then available.

Therefore, in the TLRS for the ‘Ball on the Ground’ assists the Attacking Support Player by giving visual cues from the defensive threats to assist their decision-making processes and, ultimately, the technique they must execute to maintain possession and continuity.

*b) Ball in the Air*

In the second scenario, there has been contact with a defending player but the ball carrier has remained on their feet. Here the ball carrier may have been able to use their footspeed, agility and contact skills to get into a dominant position; this will give the Attacking Support Player positive options to use the ball. However, opposed to this, is when the defensive player is more dominant than the ball carrier and, thus, the Attacking Support Player must work harder to maintain the team’s possession.

When the ball carrier and the ball are still in the air, the Attacking Support Player must identify if the ball is available, visible or hidden:
Using the Traffic Light Recognition Sequence again, the decision-making process of the Attacking Support Player can be developed.

The **Green Light** signifies that the ball is available and, as such, the Attacking Support Player must be able to play it. Here early identification should allow the player to communicate with the Ball Carrier and allow them to assess the options available to them; hit-turn-pop, pass through contact, or a face-and-space offload. Once again, this means the Attacking Support Player may need to adjust their foot-speed and position so that they can accept the ball.

The **Amber Light** signifies that the ball is visible and that opposition players are in contact with the ball carrier. In this position the ball carrier still has some dominance as they would normally be bridging with one arm and holding the ball in the other. The Attacking Support player must react quickly and move to the ball-side of the ball carrier. In this way they can bind onto their player with one arm and bind onto the ball with the other arm.

In this way, the Attacking Support Player has now formed a Maul: “A maul begins when a player carrying the ball is held by one or more opponents and one or more of the ball carrier’s team mates bind on the ball carrier. A maul therefore consists, when it begins, of at least three players.” (Law 17: Laws of the Game. IRB, 2010). Thus, for an **Amber** ball the decision-making process of the Attacking Support Player is of paramount importance; identifying that the ball is visible early into the contact, or prompting its position, will result in a positive outcome for the attacking team.

The **Red Light** signifies that the ball carrier has gone into contact with the ball in two hands on their chest. In modern rugby this occurs mostly on a pick-and-go play, where forward momentum and drive is needed plus a quick recycle of possession. In this case, the Attacking Support Player must position them behind the ball carrier and once contact has occurred bind onto them driving through the contact area. Early awareness of a “hidden” ball will assist the player to carry out the technique needed.
The importance of the Attacking Support Players decision-making here is paramount to maintaining possession. Poor decision-making may result in poor technical execution, which in turn may lead to a change of possession. Correct decision-making but poor technique may also result in this. An example of this from this year’s Tri-Nations came in the final minute of the South Africa v Australia Test in Bloemfontein, where poor technique resulted in a penalty to Australia and a historic win!

Subsequently, by utilising the colours of a traffic light a player may be able to identify the environment in front of them and utilise the correct technique for the situation. In this way, a player may improve their decision-making process under both pressure and fatigue.

**Video Enhanced Training (VET)**

A method to assist the speed of decision-making by players is through the use of video footage. Video footage is a simple means of delivering a measurable improvement in a player’s speed of decision-making (Abernethy, 1991; Farrow, 1998). There are a variety of ways in which this can be achieved through the use of match footage, from reviewing past matches and evaluating the tackle-contest support plays and their rate of success, to edited clips where players are given a short amount of time to detail what option they might take within a situation.

By using edited clips a coach can manipulate the time taken for a player to make various decisions regarding the type of action required in an Attacking Primary Support role. As Fadde (2006: 237-238) states,

> Experts in many skill areas are able to recognize situations, select an appropriate response, and execute the response in time frames of less than one second. The cognitive component of such reactive skills is sometimes called perceptual decision-making (PDM), meaning extremely rapid decision-making based primarily on visual perception. An example is the use-of-force decisions made by police and military personnel. Emergency response situations and all kinds of vehicle operation, from personal car to fighter jet, involve PDM. PDM is also an essential aspect of reactive sports skills, like return of serve in tennis, blocking shots-on-goal in hockey or soccer, and hitting a pitched baseball. However, although PDM is recognized as an essential element of expert performance in such skills, it is generally conceded to come from instinct or massed experience and is not systematically taught. Training that target PDM has the potential of getting more learners to expert levels of performance faster.

An example of this is the use of 4-6 clips which initially show a ball carrier going into contact, at which point the screen goes blank for an allocated amount of time, for example 3-10 seconds. Within this time frame the player must write down what they’ve seen and what the Attacking Support Player should look to do. The still-footage below would be an example how this Video Enhanced Training would work to aid decision-making of the Attacking Support Player:
In Example 1, by using the Hierarchy of Decision-Making and TLRS as detailed previously, the player would be able to identify that the ball was (1) on the ground and (2) that it was an Amber Ball. If more information was required the player might add that the Attacking Support Player (circled) was in a lateral position to the ball carrier and not in the best position to contest possession. The second piece of footage allows us to view that this position resulted in the player not being square on contact, which may have resulted in a Penalty to the Blue team. As noted in the ARU Game Management Guidelines (2010), “Players who play the ball after a tackle must do so from the direction of their own goal line and directly behind the tackled player or tackler nearest to their goal line (ie. ‘though the gate’”).

In Example 2, the player should be able to identify that the ball was (1) on the ground and (2) that it was a Green Ball. In this scenario, the player could also detail what option they would communicate to the Tackled Player so that their team maintained continuity. In this second clip, this is what occurred with the Attacking Support Player receiving the pass off the ground and running forward to space to maintain continuity.
In Example 3, the player has gone into contact but is in a dominant position. Here it seems as though the player is going to ground, however with good leg drive and body shape they have been able to maintain good body position, keeping the ball in the air and maintaining continuity. Players viewing the initial footage may have identified that the ball was (1) going to ground and (2) that it may have been a Green Ball if the Attacking Support Player (circled) arrived quicker than their opposition (boxed).

In this way, Video Enhanced Training can improve the decision-making processes of the Attacking Support Player by developing the cognitive processes of the athlete so that they may reduce their reaction time in specific segments of the game; as this paper details, this segment is the role of the Attacking Support Player in maintaining their team’s possession and continuity.

**Tackle Support Technical Skill Enhancement:**

The final piece of the jigsaw puzzle is the on-field component of training. In order to develop decision-makers, coaches must equip their players to utilise their skill set autonomously. However, in order to do this succinctly, a player must progress through the different stages of skill learning. In the ARU Level 2 Coach Course these stages are identified as Cognitive, Associative and Autonomous. Here the coach must utilise skills training methods to develop clear decision-making options in their players.

Through skills training a coach can manipulate the training environment so that the players can work in either a Closed or Open environment. With respect to this paper, training drills to enhance both technique and decision-making of the Attacking Support Player will be detailed.

In a Closed environment, a drill that would assist the development of decision-making in the Attacking Support Player is where two players oppose each other in a 3m x 3m grid, with a hit-shield and ball in the middle to simulate a tackled player. On the coaches whistle the players get to their feet, enter the area ‘through the gate’ and contest what is in front of them. Manipulation of this drill occurs with the inclusion of agility poles which the players must round before entering; this could give one player a speed advantage to the ball and ensure the opposite player made a specific decision based on what the first player to the contest did.
The diagrams below detail this:

**Diagram 1: Tackle Support drill (i)**

A1 & D1 go off coach’s whistle; first player to the contest area must win possession or space past ball.

**Diagram 2: Tackle Support drill (ii)**

A1 & D1 go off coach’s whistle; D1 attempts to ‘pilfer’ the ball & A1 must make the ball available by removing the threat.

In this environment, the decisions made by the Attacking Support Player are affected by the action of the Defensive Support Player. In diagram 1, if the defensive player is slower to react, then the decision may be that the ball is available and a ‘pick and go’ option is more appropriate. In diagram 2, the defensive player might have a very lower centre of gravity over the ball ensuring it is more ‘red’ than ‘amber’ which may require a different engagement action to maintain possession.

In order to make it an unpredictable environment and Open Skill training, the coach may utilise space and player roles to ensure that both the Ball Carrier and the Attacking Support Player react to what’s in front of them. In this scenario a coach may have 2-3 Attackers v 2 Defenders, utilising various groups of defenders. In this way they may determine what options the defence will take, which in turn will require a specific response from the attack. The differing scenarios might be as follows:
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Defence</th>
<th>Attack</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Tackle and passive defensive support</td>
<td>Ball on Ground – Green Ball: Play it (dependant on ball carrier position)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tackle and close defensive support</td>
<td>Ball on Ground – Amber Ball: Take space past the ball to make it available</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tackle and aggressive defensive support</td>
<td>Ball on Ground – Amber Ball: Remove threat</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Passive Contact with Ball Carrier</td>
<td>Ball in Air – Green Ball: Communicate offload</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Close Contact with Ball Carrier / Close Support</td>
<td>Ball in Air: Amber Ball or Red Ball: Latch or Hammer Maul positioning</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Diagram 3: Open Tackle Support Drill**

D1 makes contact with A1 (either Tackle or Ball Carrier still on feet).

D2 runs inside line in defensive support; A2 runs Overs-line to ensure ball carrier can pass ball.

**Drill variations:**

i. D2 stays on the outside of D1.

ii. D2 assists D1 with the contact (group tackle environment).

iii. D2 attempts a ‘pilfer’ after the tackle has occurred.

iv. Etc.

In this way, the decision-making of the Attacking Support Player can be developed within a controlled playing environment. This development will be influenced by the technical competency of the player but early identification of the available options will enhance the opportunity for the maintenance of possession.
Conclusion:

As Passos (et.al.) conclude in the research paper, *Manipulating Constraints to Train Decision Making in Rugby Union*, “The main conclusion from our work for coaches and sports scientists is that decision making should be improved through training methods that provide an accurate balance between stability of actions, which gives structure to the players’ performance, and variability, which allows them to cope with the uncertainty of situational constraints, such as the behaviour of specific opponents” (2008), so too has this paper identified that decision-making methods for Attacking Support Players can enhance a team’s ability to maintain possession and continuity. This paper has identified that by utilising a variety of methods a coach can assist this decision-making ability within their players. Using methods such as the Traffic Light Recognition Sequence within the Hierarchy of Decision-Making at a Tackle Contest, Video Enhanced Training and on-field Tackle Support Technical Skill Enhancement methods coaches can assist players through a variety of means to develop these decision-making qualities in players.

With the decision-making role of the Attacking Support Player in mind further studies are recommended to further develop this training scheme. Further enquiry should be made as the relationship between the height of the Attacking Support Player and their vision of the contact area, in relation to the decisions they make. This paper does not have the scope to investigate this however; it is a main area of development within the current NSW Waratah training group (Foley, 2010).
References:


Foley, M (2010) *A workplace conversation regarding HSBC Waratah training methods for decision-making of tackle support players.*
