MANAGING RUCK SPEED by Jono Farrell

ARU PERFORMANCE COACHES COURSE
Contents

1. Managing Ruck Speed – Introduction and definitions

2. 2015 Six Nations Statistics – Prozone (England v Wales); Ireland

3. 2015 Super 15 Ruck Speed Statistics

4. 2015 Super 15 Overall Placings and Try Scoring Statistics

5. Managing Ruck Speed – An Overview/Summary

6. The Coaching Methodology – Attack and Defence Perspective

7. Coaching Ruck Speed Management – Attack

8. Drills – Managing Attack Ruck Speed

9. Coaching Ruck Speed Management – Defence

10. Drills – Managing Defensive Ruck Speed

Drills – Managing Attacking Ruck Speed

Drills – Managing Defensive Ruck Speed
MANAGING RUCK SPEED

BY JONO FARRELL

In this assignment I will examine the importance of creating quick ruck ball from an attacking perspective, and alternatively, following it down from a defensive perspective.

I will itemise the skills required to manage ruck speed from both points of view, and look at measurable outcomes or statistics you can use with your players in post-match analysis.

Before we begin, let's have a quick look at the basic definitions of a RUCK, and RUCK SPEED:

RUCK

A Ruck is a phase of play where one or more players from each team, who are on their feet, in physical contact, close around the ball on the ground. Before we begin, let’s have a quick look at the basic definitions of a RUCK, and RUCK SPEED:

RUCK SPEED

Ruck speed can be defined as the time taken for a ball broken into contact and brought to ground to clearly exit a ruck and be played by a player not involved in that ruck.

WHAT WOULD BE CONSIDERED QUICK RUCK SPEED?

Now that we have defined what a ruck, and ruck speed are, it is important to define the length of time which would constitute quick ruck ball.

WHY IS GOOD MANAGEMENT OF RUCK SPEED SO IMPORTANT?

From an attacking perspective the ability to create quick ruck speed places the defence under pressure. The quicker the ruck speed, the harder it is for the defence to get set, get line integrity/shape/line speed. The team which can control the tempo of the game through their management of ruck speed is the easier it is to set the defensive line. From a defensive perspective, the slower the ruck speed, the easier it is to create quick ruck speed. The quicker the ruck speed, the harder it is for the attacking teams to create opportunities for their half-backs to snipe around the fringes, and also opens up space for your ball runners and outside backs.

The statistics from a recent Six Nations game between England and Wales (won 21-16 by England) below clearly show the value of quick ruck speed, and the advantages of managing your defensive ruck speed.
1) A major point of difference in the game was ruck recycle speed. England recycled the ball within three seconds 76.9% of the time, with an average speed of 3.48 seconds. However, Wales recycled within three seconds just 72.3% of the time at an average of 3.8 seconds.

2) To put ruck speeds into context, top tier international sides recycled the ball in three seconds or less 79.5% of the time in 2014, with an average of 3.2 seconds per ruck. Ireland (2.83 seconds) had the fastest average ruck speeds last year, with New Zealand at 2.97 seconds and Australia at 3.2 seconds per ruck. England's ruck speeds in the competition this year were an average of 0.92 players per ruck. Of these, 84 of 70 were within the first three to arrive.

More recently Ireland's dominance of the 2015 Six Nations was put down to their ability to maintain possession with 97% of attacking rucks with 620 attacking rucks and 97% ruck retention, but at the same time do so with the quickest ruck speed in the competition (2.9 seconds). The Irish also dominated the stats for first three players arriving at attacking breakdowns. 3) During Friday's game, England sent 76 players into Welsh rucks, averaging 0.86 players per ruck. Of these 76, 70 were within the first three to arrive.

4) During Saturday's game, Wales sent 84 players into English rucks at an average of 0.92 players per ruck. Of these, 70 were within the first three to arrive. Wales on average had an extra 0.13 defensive players arriving at each opposition ruck, a numerically small but statistically significant figure. Wales also had four occasions where these players were able to slow the ruck.

5) There were fewer English players at Welsh rucks, those players having less impact on ruck speed. This means that the slower rucking of the Welsh can be attributed to their own urgency in recycling the ball. This was one of the most significant factors in the Welsh making the gainline just 54.2% of the time compared with England's 57.5%.

6) Welsh prop Gethin Jenkins arrived to Welsh rucks on 40 occasions, making no contribution to the ruck 26% of the time. The other 19 players who played for Wales didn't contribute 4% of the time. Statistically, Jenkins' workload was the lowest of any Welsh player.

(above information from Prozone Website)
Ruck speed is clearly a dominant factor in Ireland's success in the competition.

- The urgency of the first three arriving players to attacking rucks ensured that Ireland dominated the physical contest and maintained possession over periods of time, as evident in their superior number of attacking rucks.

Other Teams Top Defensive Arrivers

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Other Teams Top Attacking Arrivers

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Ruck Retention

- 97%
- 96%
- 95%
- 95%

Average Attacking Ruck

- 2.9 seconds
- 2.8 seconds
- 2.7 seconds
- 2.3 seconds
- 3.2 seconds

2015 Six Nations - Ruck Statistics
The table above was taken from the 2015 Super 15 competition and is the lowest of all teams, in particular in the D zone. Both teams struggled to score tries and place opposition teams under pressure throughout the competition.

The Bulls and Sharks quick ruck speed % is the lowest of all teams, in particular in the D zone. Both teams struggled to score tries and place opposition teams under pressure throughout the competition.

- One of the most potent attacking teams in the competition (Hurricanes) created the quickest ruck speed on average across phases 1 and 2.

- Teams like the Bulls struggled to create quick ruck speed – in particular across all phases and in their D zone. This may have been a conscious part of the game plan, but could potentially make them an easier team to defend against, as this would give defensive teams time to set the defensive line and defend with line speed.

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The following observations regarding ruck speed can be taken from the table:

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The ruck speed table and the Super 15 table (above) prior to the knockout stages seems to indicate the following:

- Teams which had the ability to consistently create quicker ruck speed like the Hurricanes and Waratahs tend to do better in the competition and score more points.
- Teams like the Bulls and Sharks who struggle to consistently create quick ruck speed tend to struggle over the course of the competition.
- Teams which were able to score in excess of 400 points. There is clearly a correlation between the ability to create quick ruck speed and the ability to score points.
- Teams which were able to create quick ruck speed (Hurricanes, Waratahs, Crusaders, Highlanders) were all able to score in excess of 400 points.

Overall Super 15 Overall Placing Following Pool Stages (Table sourced from SuperXV.com Rugby Website)
It is clear that teams which consistently produce quick ruck speed score more tries.

The only real anomaly in this group would be the Hurricanes. Unusually they had a potent game and quick ruck speed (particularly in the B zone - 71.5%), but instead of capitalizing on being one of the best attacking teams in the competition, their defensive record was the lowest in the competition. Unsurprisingly their opponents scored more than just a number of those scores by the Hurricanes from the halfback position. While there may be many reasons for this, quick ruck speed would have attributed to the halfback’s ability to run from the base of rucks and snipe at any point. The Hurricanes’ ability to run from the base of rucks and snipe at any point.

One statistic that stands out in the table above is the number of tries scored by the halfbacks from the halfback position. While there may be many reasons for this, quick ruck speed would have attributed to the halfback’s ability to run from the base of rucks and snipe at any point.

The only real anomaly in this group would be the Cheetahs. Unfortunately their tempo game and quick ruck speed (particularly in the B zone - 71.5%) wasn’t complimented by a solid defensive record and this resulted in the team not capitalizing on being one of the best attacking teams in the competition. Unsurprisingly their opponents scored more than just a number of those scores by the Hurricanes from the halfback position. While there may be many reasons for this, quick ruck speed would have attributed to the halfback’s ability to run from the base of rucks and snipe at any point.

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(All statistics sourced from rugby.statbunker.com)
Teams which produced some of the quickest and most consistent ruck speed statistics have backs which feature prominently in the leading try scorer tables. This can be attributed to a number of things, including defensive teams which may have attempted to send more numbers into rucks to slow down the attacking ruck speed of teams like the Highlanders, Hurricanes, Crusaders, and Chiefs. This tactic can leave teams vulnerable out wide, and in terms of defensive numbers and consistency, this has often been the case, especially when the Highlanders, Hurricanes, Crusaders, and Chiefs have been involved.

The only real anomaly is David Pocock – many of his tries were scored off the back of the Brumbies highly successful driving maul. The other teams with backs which feature prominently in the leading try scorer tables were:

- Highlanders
- Hurricanes
- Crusaders
- Brumbies
- Waratahs
- Chiefs
- Hurricanes
- Highlanders
- Waratahs

TJ Perenara is the only half back on the list, but this is not surprising given the fact that the Hurricanes consistently produced quick ruck speed and Perenara would have capitalised on this. The only real anomaly is David Pocock – many of his tries were scored off the back of the Brumbies highly successful driving maul.
A combination of quick ruck speed, halfbacks with the ability to run and challenge defenders and big, powerful outside backs would again suggest that teams which produce quick ruck speed will score more tries and put pressure on defensive lines. These statistics would appear to support this theory.

The Hurricanes leading try scorer is a half back, while the Highlanders halfback ranks second. The top try scorers in each of these teams are backs. These two tables above show the top try scorers for the two leading teams in the 2015 Super 15 (FH – first half; SH – second half; FS – first scorer; LS – last scorer; H – Home; A – Away).

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Managing Ruck Speed

### Coaching Methodology

#### Develop: The Mindset – The Skills – The System

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<td>Ball Carrier, Hammer, Bullet, Seal</td>
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#### Attack

- Triangle Defence
- Inside/Outside Hunt
- Tackler Chop and Pop

#### Defence

- Counter Ruck (Seal)
- Poob Ball Security (Carrier)
- 2nd arriving player late or ineffective (Hammer)
- 1st arriving player late or ineffective (Hammer)

#### Measurable Outcomes for Match Analysis and Feedback to Players

- Number of + Hammers per player
- %Low tackle completion for each player
- %1st arriving player v opposition
- %1st arriving player (Hunt) in before opposition Hammer
- %2nd arriving player v opposition
- %Tackler pop
- %Lockdown
- %Pick and Pop
- %Pick and Go
- %Rucks under 3 seconds in duration
- %Rucks 3 seconds plus in duration

#### Extras

- %Rucks involving players outside of the system - EXTRAS
- %Rucks involving players outside of the system - EXTRAS
- TURNOVERS won and reason
- Number of Turnovers and reason
- Turnovers conceded and reason
- %Rucks involving players outside of the system
- %Rucks involving players outside of the system
- %Rucks under 3 seconds
- %Rucks 3 seconds plus

Please continue to read on for an expansion of the above summary.
When it comes to coaching the breakdown and management of ruck speed, I believe that the following methodology can prove very useful when preparing your sessions:

**Create and Develop:**

1. **The Mindset**
   - The ultimate objective is to create quick ruck ball through good individual skills and efficiency of arriving support players. This is a process and will require players to be educated thoroughly.
   - Focus on the mindset required to create quick ball when on attack:
     - **Go forward when carrying** – gain line is key
     - **Urgency to get support players to tackle contest first**
     - **Know roles as arriving support players to avoid inaccuracy and overcommitting**

2. **The Skill**
   - What skills are required to generate quick ruck speed?
     - **Dominant ball carry**
     - **Effective ball placement and security**
     - **First support player – tackle the tackler (HAMMER)**
     - **Effective clean (BULLET)**
     - **Decision maker (SEAL)**

3. **The System – Tactical Application under pressure**
   - Know roles as arriving support players to avoid inaccuracy and overcommitting
   - Urgency to get support players to tackle contest first
   - Go forward when carrying – gain line is key

**Managing Ruck Speed – Attacking Team**

I have found that players respond very well to sessions which contain each of the above elements and drills which clearly have these themes as their base:

1. **The Mindset**
2. **The Skill**
3. **The System – Tactical Application under pressure**

When it comes to coaching the breakdown and management of ruck speed, I believe that the following methodology can prove very useful when...
THE SYSTEM - Tactical Application under pressure

MANAGING RUCK SPEED - DEFENSIVE TEAM

The ultimate objective is the opposite of when on attack – to slow the opposition ruck speed.

The mindset – what is the mindset required to slow down opposition ruck ball?

• Know your roles (and the laws) so as to avoid unnecessary penalties and overcommitting
• Utilise clear communication and clarity with inside and outside defenders
• Be accurate and execute well in low tackle %

The skill – what skills are required to generate quick ruck speed?

• Low tackle (Chop and Pop or Chop and Reload/Roll)
• First support player take space or get on ball (HUNT)
• Second support player (HOLD, FOLD, JAM)

Merging these skills into our system

How do we test these skills listed above in a realistic tactical situation under pressure?

When planning training blocks and sessions related to managing ruck speed, I will always look to develop both sides concurrently so that players understand the process from both the attacking and defensive perspectives. Each session will start with a warm up which focuses on the mindset required, be it the attacking process or the defensive process. Each session will then move on to skill development, where the players will focus on the specific skills required to manage the ruck. Finally, the session will conclude with a tactical environment under pressure, where the players can apply what they have learned in a realistic situation.

When working within the particular SYSTEM we are aiming to adopt in games, I will now go through some of the processes that I have found to be effective in coaching players and developing these areas.
COACHING RUCK SPEED MANAGEMENT

– ATTACKING TEAM

THE MINDSET

It is important to always create the right mindset in a player’s mind so to what he will need to be thinking in order to execute under pressure.

The mindset we are after in this scenario all relates to ACCURACY, URGENCY and ROLE AWARENESS.

ACCURACY – from the ball carrier, arriving players executing their roles accurately

URGENCY – from the first 3 arriving support players

ROLE AWARENESS – what is my role as a ball carrier? what will be the decision maker of the game? (clean the first threat) whom will be the BALL CARRIER, BULLET, SEAL.

ROLE AWARENESS – what is my role as a ball carrier? whom will be the decision maker of the game? (clean the first threat) whom will be the BALL CARRIER, BULLET, SEAL.

I have found the best way to commence each training session working on this area is with a game of special rules touch. The touch game has to have specific rules that will assist in developing the appropriate mindset. These touch games can be around 6 – 8 minutes long and focus on one, or multiple mindsets by employing certain key rules. These will transfer to what is being focused on in the skills and tactics section later in the session.

1. Ball carrier must get to the edge of the defender preceding and shift the ball across his chest away from the tag and execute a perfect place kick. This will develop the ball carrier and ball security mindset.

2. Hammer v Hunt – attack team must get their first arriving player to the ball carrier before the opposition player does (Develops urgency)

3. Action and communication of breakdown process – attack team must get 3 players past over the ball in order of HAMMER, BULLET, SEAL (Develops communication and roles)

For the attacking team to retain possession in a game of unlimited touch: 1, 2, or 3 mindsets would be

Examples of some of these rules would be:

These games of touch help to lay the foundations of the MINDSET and set the tone for the remainder of the session.

(Develops communication, roles and mindset of attacking team)

The mindsets we are after in this scenario all relate to ACCURACY, URGENCY and ROLE AWARENESS.

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The mindset we are after in this scenario all relates to ACCURACY, URGENCY and ROLE AWARENESS.
Now that the MINDSET foundations have been laid, the focus shifts to the specific SKILLS required to execute that MINDSET.

**Key Techniques**

1. Ball in two hands to start
2. Face then space. Get to an edge, but hips square.
3. Power leg into contact – inside leg
4. Brace or fend to create separation
5. Leg drive

**Ball Carry** – get head and shoulders through contact; fight to keep hips square

Quick ruck speed relies heavily on a positive carry, and effective ball placement.

**Dominant Ball Carry**

The SKILLS
Ball Placement – be active in getting ball away from threats and closer to support

Key Techniques

3. Strive to get on ground to 3 to resist any threat or to ball, elbows in high, feel underneath hips
2. Ready to surge forward to clean
1. Eyes up, line back

Seal – 3rd arriving player to assess then take any remaining threat, seal ball, pick up, or pick and pop to attacking halfback

Key Techniques

3. Don’t let threat reload
2. Win shoulder battle and foot race for space through contact – transition from running style to low body height for clean is key
1. Win foot race to the tackle against opposition

Bullet – 2nd arriving player to remove most direct threat to ball

Key Techniques

2. Create separation between carrier and tackler – tackle the tackler out of the contest, use underhook and shoulder campaign
1. Liverpool to get to tackler quickly

Hammer – 1st arriving player to tackle the tackler

Key Techniques

3. Strive to get on ground and throw against ball
2. Hit him low on the hip to chest
1. Pencil or Nord South place – break at the hips and work away from nearest threat

Ball Placement – be active in getting ball away from threats and closer to support
The SYSTEM is the process you want players to follow each time they enter a tackle contest. The SYSTEM will involve players having specific roles and fulfilling these to achieve a common outcome.

The MINDSET and SKILLS that have been developed will be employed in the SYSTEM.

For the purpose of quick ruck ball, the SYSTEM I have employed is:

**BALL CARRIER**
- **HAMMER**
- **BULLET**
- **SEAL**

Each player has the responsibility to communicate their role and then execute the role to ensure maximum efficiency and quick ball.

DRILLS THAT CAN BE USED TO ASSIST IN DEVELOPING THE SKILLS REQUIRED:

**Dominant Ball Carry: 1 v 1 – Side-on**
- Focus: 2 hand start, Fix, Shift, Power leg, ball transfer, brace, leg drive

**Dominant Ball Carry: Footwork drills**
- Focus: Efficient execution of the SYSTEM, technical accuracy, each closed skill, and the successful execution thereof will lead to the successful implementation of the SYSTEM.

These drills are not new or revolutionary, but must be done within the context of what you want to achieve. Technical accuracy is king.

The SYSTEM is the process you want players to follow each time they enter a tackle contest.
Dominant Ball Carry:

1 v 1

– Back-to-chest

Same as above – carrier has to work to turn, then get square and fight through contact – finish with quality ball placement for carrier, and pop to feet or roll for tackler.

Ball Security and Placement

On knees to fall forward and place one of the defenders in behind.

Dominant Ball Carry: 1 v 3 – Carrier starts front-on to tackler, add extra defender either side. Footwork past first defender into contact with quickly ball placement for carrier, and pop to feet or roll for tackler.

Same as above – carrier has to work to turn, then get square and fight through contact – finish with quality ball placement for carrier, and pop to feet or roll for tackler.
Ball Security and Placement - On side to man-on-fire roll to place
**Bullet - 1 & 2**

- In pre-contact (Hammer tackles the tackler)

- Working on winning shoulder battle and foot race for space over ball through contact (Flat back, fast feet)

**2 & 1 - Dominant Ball carry with Hammer**
Seal position to pick and go, or pick and pop to support player.

Seal position to explode clean out against advancing bag.

Seal technique v bag.

(Start in SEAL position then adjust to either hold seal shape, pick up ball, or pick and pop.)

Bullet 1 v 1. Vary distance and threat posed by bag (start in SEAL position then adjust to either hold seal shape, pick up ball, or pick and pop.)

Seal position v bag.
THE MINDSET

From a defensive perspective, the MINDSET is one that much different from an attacking one.

First to be in a better position to win the breakdown battles between opposing arriving players.

These warm up touch games create a competitive mindset aligned with the rules, and reinforce that players must be urgent and get in

The SKILLS

Track

Key Techniques

1. Target zone left – 3 perfect lateral zone cues on attacking players earns a turnover (Develops low tackle mindset)
2. Tag and Hunt must hit deck next to carrier, and pop back into a standing V position (Develops mindset of getting back to feet and footing)
3. Hammer v Hunt – as explained above (Develops mindset of getting in first)
4. Action and communication of tackle process (tackler – BALL, inside and outside HUNTS) (Develops mindset of getting in first)

Examples of some of these rules would be:

using touch games with specific rules helps to get the core of what we would be after in a game context.
Key Techniques

1. Use tracking techniques
2. Eyes up, drive arms through
3. Hand-to-elbow lock
4. Drive through feet
5. Aim to land on top
6. Squeeze arms, break at hips and either pop up or roll and reload

Low tackle – chop and pop: chop and roll/reload
Hunting skills – take space or get on ball

Key Techniques

1. Take space – same skills as cleanout technique

2. On ball – strong wide base, elbows in, knees tight on tackled player

3. Rip ball up to chest

The system

The system is very simple and involves a tackler and inside and outside hunts. The tackle focus is low, and the focus for the hunts is either take space past the ball, or get onto the ball. The system encourages players to work hard in these roles to allow the rest of the defensive line to concentrate on the next phase, setting early and numbing up.

I was first introduced to this system by Damon Emtage (former Brisbane Grammar 1st XV coach) and have used and adapted it over the past 4 years. A simple system that I have found to be very effective in slowing opposition ruck speed one that is easy to explain to players.

The system

1. Take space – same skills as cleanout technique
2. On ball – strong wide base, elbows in, knees tight on tackled player
3. Rip ball up to chest

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The Triangle concept can be simplified in the following way:

1. If the ball carrier shifts to the inside (L) of the tackler, the INSIDE HUNT will work into the tackle contest, and the OUTSIDE HUNT will make the decision to hold, fold, or add to a counter ruck based on efficiency of INSIDE HUNT and TACKLER.

2. If the ball carrier shifts to the outside of the tackler (R), the OUTSIDE HUNT will work into the tackle contest, and the INSIDE HUNT will now make the decision to hold, fold, or add to the counter ruck based on efficiency of the OUTSIDE HUNT and TACKLER.

Tracks 1 & 2:
- Two-hand push on thigh/hand and head behind knee
- Tip: Use hoop to draw lead leg in closer

As was mentioned previously, it is very effective to develop the skills required from defensive perspective concurrently with those required from an attacking perspective.

Drills that can be used to assist in developing the skills required:

Ball carrier works on DOMINANT BALL CARRY technique/footwork at the same time.

1. Track 1 – Two-hand push on thigh/hand and head behind knee (Tip: Use hoop to draw lead leg in closer.)
Tackle – Low tackle – start on one knee, slipping on feet. Focus on leg drive, hand-wrap and finish (Pop or roll and reload depending on where the tackler lands).

Hunting – Taking space

1v1 – either live or using bag (Vary distance of bag so HUNT either gets on ball or moves forward to take space)
Putting all of these together – ATTACK and DEFENCE (3 v 3; or expand to 4 v 3 and then 8 v 7)

Attack team to use SYSTEM – Carrier, Hammer, Bullet and Seal to retain ball and manage ruck speed

Defence team to use SYSTEM – Triangle D to attempt to slow ball down, force error or turnover

• This is a good drill for really observe those skills in action. Coaches can really identify the skills and identify any trends or weaknesses.

• Using a simple recording system on a portable whiteboard where the coaches and players record who wins the 1st arriving, 2nd arriving... etc.

• An excellent way of testing these two systems against one another is to have one coach work with the attack group and one work with the defence. This also makes it fun and creates competition for the players.

• Players

• Can also make the drill multi-phase and increase size of grid to adjust running distances prior to entering tackle contest/attack.

• Any starting positions of additional players – side of grid, back of grid. Teaches players

• Adding more players increase intensity and adds more roles to the drill

• RUCK SPEED

• HAMMER v HUNT

• LOW TACKLE v CARRIER

• Drill becomes a contest between attack and defence

• Receiver must pass to middle man, then becomes HAMMER

• Coach plays ball to either side

Summery of Sources used for statistics:
1. Prozone website
2. Queensland Reds
3. Super XV.com Rugby website
4. Rugby.statbunker.com website