THE BREAKDOWN
LEVEL 3 – ADAM FAHEY

INTRODUCTION

The breakdown is an integral part of the game and some coaches would suggest the most important contributing factor to winning a game of rugby. How many times would you have heard a coach say “if you win the breakdown you win the match”. With a range of 110-160 breakdowns per game it is hard to argue against that statement.

So what constitutes a breakdown?

The breakdown can be classed as a phase of play involving a tackled player and one or more opponents from either team involved in a contest for the ball e.g. A ruck or a maul. To understand the breakdown better there is a need to have an understanding of the laws relating to the breakdown area. The laws that have major impact on the breakdown area are Law 15 – tackle, Law 16 – ruck, Law 17 – maul.

The tackle law (Law 15) refers to ‘a tackle occurs when the ball carrier is held by one or more opponents and is brought to the ground’. Once the tackle has been made the tackler must release the tackled player and roll away or get to his feet. As soon as he is on his feet the tackler can play at the ball from any direction as long as a ruck hasn’t been formed there is no offside at the tackle contest. Within this law there are some subtleties’ that benefit the better exponents of the tackle situation creating turnovers. The example being the tackled player, the tackler only has to hit the ground with one knee whilst in contact with the ball carrier on the ground to be deemed the tackler. This enables the tackler to get to his feet quicker from any direction to affect a turnover. Examples of the better exponents of this technique are Richie McCaw (Crusaders), Francois Louw (Stormers), Daniel Braid (Reds) and David Pocock (Force).

In the Super 14 competition in 2010 there was a major philosophical shift on how the referees would interpret the tackle area. The aim was to create a more free flowing spectacle by favouring the attacking team. The key was removing the rights of the tackler and their ability to attack the ball. The interpretation in 2010 now states ‘a tackler must make a clear and defined release of the tackled player before attacking the ball whilst on their feet’. In previous year’s players like Richie McCaw were able to make a tackle and get to their feet immediately whilst still remaining in contact with the ball stifling attacking raids.

Law 16 relates to the ruck and 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. The ruck is the most common form of the breakdown. The arriving players who become involved in the breakdown must remain on their feet and come through the ‘gate’. The gate is the entry point for both arriving attacking players and defenders. The gate is defined as the extremities of the tackled player and tackler across the field. The gate is for ever changing as tacklers roll away and more players join the ruck.
Law 17 relates to the maul, a maul occurs ‘when a player carrying the ball is held by one or more opponents, and one or more of the ball carriers team mates bind onto the ball carrier. Again the arriving players must come from behind the maul and bind onto another player.

FACTORS RELATING TO THE BREAKDOWN

There are a number of key factors relating to the breakdown and how those factors affect the game in particular the turnover, jackal or steal. A player like George Smith made the ability to turn the ball over an art form and with players of all ages and levels trying to replicate that it has become a big part of the game. We are going to explore what constitutes an effective turnover and have a look at some examples of players throughout the Super 14 season in 2010 and their different styles. The main factors include;

➢ Laws
➢ Body positioning/Technique
➢ Game knowledge/awareness

LAWS OF THE GAME

We have already touched on the laws relating to the breakdown and how the best exponents in the game of the turnover understand and manipulate those laws. The examples provided will look at the specialist number 7 position from a number of different teams and countries involved in the Super 14, 2010. What makes these players so good at effecting the turnover is their knowledge of the laws and what they can and cant get away with. A prime example of this is Richie McCaw there is constant argument over whether McCaw is a cheat or does he understand and read the game better than anyone. Naturally he is going to give away penalties at some point in the game as these players live on the edge of what is deemed to be legal and what is a penalty offence. As coaches it is hard to be too critical of such players as you want your specialist 7 playing on the edge creating havoc amongst the opposition particularly at the breakdown.

BODY POSITION/TECHNIQUE

This is the most crucial factor relating to the breakdown and the turnover. Each player has there own unique style and method in performing the turnover but there are a lot of key traits found in all of these players when performing the turnover. Some of the key traits which enable turnovers are;

➢ Getting into position quickly over the ball – either square on parallel with the sidelines being able to go straight down onto the ball in a bridging position this method is quick but exposes the top of the neck and back region to be a target for defenders or placing a leg over the tackled player facing the sideline exposing your hard parts to be targeted, a lot slower but provides more options once the ball has been stolen.
➢ Lower centre of gravity – the body is in a squat position bending at the knees powering through the legs once hands have been placed on the ball. Once in this position it makes it harder for the defenders to clean you out.
➢ Speed/Physical presence – the ability to be in position very quickly and to have the physical capacity to maintain that position to effectively steal the ball. Speed not only relates to how quickly a player can get to the breakdown but how quickly the player can put himself into a strong position well over the ball supporting his own body weight.

Some good examples of the different methods can be used when comparing players such as Schalk Burger, Daniel Braid and David Pocock. Whilst Burger is not as quick as Braid and Pocock he uses brute force to attack the breakdown and leg drive to move bodies to isolate the ball and turn it over. Daniel Braid relies on speed to the breakdown and displays a lot more finesse, his ability to quickly get into position with good body shape to enable him to steal the ball. David Pocock is a combination of brute force, finnesse and speed his ability to perform a tackle and get to his feet and be in a strong position over the ball is remarkable. See clips below as examples.

Burger01.mpg  Braid 01.mpg  Pocock01.mpg

GAME KNOWLEDGE/AWARENESS

All good players have an excellent sense of game knowledge and awareness to what is happening during the game and the ability to be in position quickly. As a specialist number 7 or back rower the ability to read the game separates the good players from the elite players. The impact the player can provide due to the fact he is able to read the game is a contributing factor to creating turnovers. This impact can also stifle attacking teams phase structure and assist in your own teams defence structure. If the attacking team has to send more players into the ruck to combat a possible turnover something has to change the attacking team has to adapt which could see an imbalance of more defenders v attackers. The players awareness when to attack the breakdown or just fold out into the defence line also have a major bearing on creating turnovers. This is where players like Richie McCaw and Francois Louw are specialists they pick their moments and are very decisive in whether to attack the breakdown or not. Both players are a lot taller in stature than Braid and Pocock so by having a natural ability of isolating an attacker, hitting from an angle they are able to put themselves in to a position to steal the ball.

Louw01.mpg  Louw02.mpg  Mccaw01.mpg  Mccaw02.mpg

The order of arrival to the breakdown of these players also has a major bearing on creating turnover ball. The players mentioned above would either be at the breakdown or in the vicinity of the breakdown constantly throughout the game and more than any other player. It is their decision making process which enables them to be most effective when creating turnovers, when to go in or when to stay out. Below is a table of statistics relating to each player mentioned throughout the Super 14 season;
### BREAKDOWN STATISTICS - PLAYERS SUPER 14 - 2010

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>PLAYER</th>
<th>Minutes played</th>
<th>Tackles made</th>
<th>OOA 1st 3 on defence</th>
<th>Breakdown Turnovers</th>
<th>Penalties</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>David Pocock - Force</td>
<td>640</td>
<td>127</td>
<td>108</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Schalk Burger - Stormers</td>
<td>847</td>
<td>149</td>
<td>37</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Francois Louw - Stormers</td>
<td>963</td>
<td>139</td>
<td>109</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dewald Potgieter - Bulls</td>
<td>537</td>
<td>81</td>
<td>43</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Phil Waugh - Waratahs</td>
<td>893</td>
<td>134</td>
<td>136</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Matt Hodgson - Force</td>
<td>1030</td>
<td>183</td>
<td>124</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Liam Messam - Chiefs</td>
<td>967</td>
<td>177</td>
<td>91</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Richie McCaw - Crusaders</td>
<td>814</td>
<td>160</td>
<td>94</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Daniel Braid - Reds</td>
<td>728</td>
<td>134</td>
<td>88</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

As you can see the breakdown and in particular turnover ball is a major part of the game and can be crucial in the outcome of a game. It is that ability for a player to get himself into a position quickly enough to perform the task. Remembering the players mentioned in this document are full time athletes and are amongst the best exponents in the world of performing the turnover, jackal or steal and it has taken years of specialist coaching, weight training and video analysis to be able to compete at this level.

### RESOURCES

1. SmartRugby Booklet 2010
3. The Sydney Morning Herald ‘No more rich pickings under new breakdown laws’ Tony Robson, 24th January, 2010
4. The Australian ‘Robbie Deans says new interpretation of the breakdown needs to be modified’ Bret Harris, 24th February, 2010
5. Verusco database