The Importance of a long two-handed place in maintaining possession

The aim of this assignment is to highlight how important a long two handed place (ground skills) by the ball carrier is in maintaining possession but also to demonstrate the effects of correctly or poorly executed technique on winning the tackle contest, winning the breakdown and attacking options. The following information will look at what is poor or correct technique in regards to ground skills used by the ball carrier, what variables are involved in assisting with strong ground skills i.e. winning contact, separation between the ball and defender and the impacts this can have on attacking options. A number of match clips will be used to reinforce arguments.

This article will also seek the opinion of 3 current Level 3 Coaches in relation to their thoughts on the importance of the topic. The Coaches interviewed are Andy Cole - Western Australia State U16’s Head Coach, Dwayne Nestor - Perth Gold Head Coach & RugbyWA Junior Elite Manager and Jarred Hodges - National Indigenous U16’s Head Coach and Australia A Schoolboys Head Coach.

Once a player has been tackled by law they have a number of responsibilities. The iRB Laws of the Game Rugby Union, specifically 15.5 states:

1. A tackled player must not lie on, over, or near the ball to prevent opponents from gaining possession of it, and must try to make the ball available immediately so that play can continue.

2. A tackled player must immediately pass the ball or release it. That player must also get up or move away from it at once.

3. A tackled player may release the ball by putting it on the ground in any direction, provided this is done immediately.

4. A tackled player may release the ball by pushing it along the ground in any direction except forward, provided this is done immediately.

5. If opposition players who are on their feet attempt to play the ball, the tackled player must release the ball.

Due to the above laws it is critical that the tackled ball carrier initiates strategies pre, through & post contact to ensure the best possible chance of recycling possession. The following points detail technique that can be used to ensure possession is maintained:

1. **Win Contact**: body shape before, into and through contact is vital. Important core technique includes lowering body height by bending through the knees, dynamic footwork “fast & controlled feet” that are in contact with the ground. A cue quite often used for feet through contact is “L-step” (footwork through

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contact in a L shape i.e. step to the side of defender then planting the ball
carriers nearest leg forward and to the side of the defender to be as strong as
possible. Target for the ball carrier is space “look for light” which includes a
“weak shoulder” i.e. ball carrier to work away from defenders mid-line. An
important point here is that the ball carrier works to at least a weak shoulder
and attempts to remain square “hips and shoulders square” or “face the
space” through contact. If the ball carrier attempts to work across a defender
from shoulder to shoulder in close proximity they place themselves in a
vulnerable position to be dominated.

2. **Through Contact**: Working through contact the ball carrier should attempt to
put space between the defender and the ball by fending/palming dynamically
& transferring the ball to the arm away from the defender. A strong, dynamic
leg drive is crucial to dominate this aspect of the game (whilst it is stating the
obvious a strong leg drive and good go forward will assist placing the ball
back) If contact is unavoidable the ball carrier should bring the ball back into
two hands and “hug the ball” into the chest in preparation for hitting the
ground.

3. **Post Contact**: On hitting the ground ideally the ball carrier is looking to
dynamically place the ball as far back as possible from the defence controlling
the ball with two hands so as to assist provide a steady platform for the team
to maintain possession and launch the next phase of attack. The cues “jack-
knife” and recoil are often used for this technique. The player must fight hard
particularly if there are defenders present.

The following footage titled Possession demonstrates the techniques discussed
above, poor ground skills and how this can make access to the ball easier for
defenders and includes instruction from Andy Cole using WA State U16 players:

![Possession (Possession.MOV)](Possession (Possession.MOV))

Further to the techniques discussed above the demonstration previously displayed
shows the ground skill titled “score the try”. This technique has been developed as a
strategy for a ball carrier who finds themselves isolated and is looking to “buy” time
to allow support to arrive. By scoring the try i.e. going to ground after being tackled
on top of the ball as in the motion of diving to score a try, the ball carrier is able to
delay access to the ball by defenders. Obviously is important that the ball carrier still
plays the ball immediately (players should be tactically aware of how the referee is
managing the tackle) & recoil of “jack-knife” the ball back with an explosive two
handed place to remove the ball from defenders. By the time the ball has been
placed back if support has not arrived it will not matter how good the place back
technique is!

In maintaining possession support is always a critical factor and without effective
support strategies the ball will be consistently turned over. Whilst this research does
not go into support strategies it is important to note as mentioned above if the support is not present in a timely fashion then it will not matter how well ground skills are executed. Of equal importance to an attack is the pace or speed at which the footy can be recycled to launch the next phase of attack. The following three clips (Wallabies vs. All Blacks, Hong Kong Bledisloe, 04/11/10) demonstrate well executed long two handed place back, with support that provides the platform for clean quick ball to launch attack from the breakdown:

The following clip displays a well executed place back under defensive pressure. Without the place back by All Black No.9 Jimmy Cowan in this clip the defender Wallaby Nathan Sharpe would have had easier access to the ball and may have been able to get his hands on it to turn it over. The place back definitely has an impact:

The following clips the outcome of a poorly executed place back:

In the above clip whilst Wallaby Nathan Sharpe is under extreme defensive pressure and the ball provided is not excessively slow it give the defence just enough time to reset. In this situation if the ball had been dynamically placed back it may have led to the All Blacks being slightly on the back foot defensively!

In the next clip Wallaby half Will Genia is tackled and isolated from support. Genia lands on top of the ball “score the try” technique, but does not attempt to “jack-knife” the ball back after falling on it. As a result the ball is easily accessible and turned over by All Black Jimmy Cowan:
The next footage is a great example of what can go wrong with poorly executed ground skills, specifically a one handed place. All Black Corey Jane drives into contact and upon being tackled to ground attempts to place the ball back with one hand, subsequently his hand is knocked and possession is turned over to the Wallabies inside the All Black’s 22m zone in fantastic attacking position:

I believe all of the clips shown above highlight the importance of effective ground skills and that the long two handed place provides the attacking team with the opportunity to present fast and stable ball to launch attack (noting that support for the ball carrier and tackled player is a vital element to maintaining possession).

With this in mind I have interviewed three current Level 3 Coaches who are all involved in coaching at the elite level of the game from U16’s to Perth Gold. Please see finding from interviews below:

**Andy Cole – Western Australian State U16’s Head Coach**

1. **What are your key considerations for maintaining possession? Answer:**
   Before contact: “face the space” i.e. target space, Body shape – strong and good height, hips and shoulders square to the drive, Attain good separation between the ball & defender through fend, Leg drive. In contact: fight for body shape. Post contact: the shoulder in contact with the ground should pull through, Decision making for release options – if a long place it should be a controlled post with the bottom hand pushing the ball along the ground, the ball and arms should not rise off the deck. Primary support is critical and needs to arrive strong with correct body shape and height, Dominate the space and scan for the greatest threat whilst over the ball (don’t blow past the ball to allow opportunities for defenders to work in behind – ½ clean out with ball at back foot). Team philosophy is also important in regards to next option e.g. play quick ball, scoot, set up etc.

2. **How important are ground skills? Answer:** Very important – ball carrier must fight for body shape going to ground and must have a memory of what good shape looks and feels like. Legs should be East to West with head, upper body and shoulders North to South. Do not capitulate!

3. **How do you develop ground skills/technique? Answer:** Break the skill down into component parts and then build it back up by manipulating
pressure, limiting time and space. Provide pressure under contact and overload. Introduce activities where the player must fight. Identify deficiencies in skills.

Dwayne Nestor – Perth Gold Head Coach & RugbyWA Junior Elite Programme Manager

1. **What are your key considerations for maintaining possession?** Answer: Ball carrier – win contact by leg drive, Two hands must be on the ball prior to contact to ground followed by a strong purposeful place, Support players must win space over and beyond ball.

2. **How important are ground skills?** Answer: Very important. A lot of coaches blame support but the ball carrier must have adequate skills.

3. **How do you develop ground skills/technique?** Answer: Isolate the technique e.g. 1 v 1 ball carrier versus defender and manipulate the scenarios and variables. Open contest to begin with but then focus on the execution of the place. Progress to ground skills where there is a 1 v 1 scenario with defender over ball carrier on the ground, ball carrier to work hard from different positions on the ground. Focus is, are there two hands on the ball?

Jarred Hodges – National Indigenous U16 Head Coach & Australia A Schools Head Coach

1. **What are your key considerations for maintaining possession?** Answer: Strong carry – timing of run (poor timing = static), footwork prior and into contact, body shape and shape driving, Support

2. **How important are ground skills?** Answer: Critical as they play a vital part in quality possession, sloppy = slow ball. The type of presentation is important and a cue I use is 6 o’clock in regards to getting the ball back as far as possible. Another technique I employ is “score the try” to get players to land on the ball followed by a dynamic place back.

3. **How do you develop ground skills/technique?** Answer: Through simple language and cues that resonate e.g. 6 o’clock. Keep the info narrow and articulate it effectively. A long place may mean different things to different players so it needs to be specific e.g. what is long? Break the skill down into parts and work on technique before progressing to game sense and skill scenarios that employ competition. Start simple.
The overall message from the above interviews is that ground skills play a very vital role in maintaining possession and that whilst there may be differing methods of developing ground techniques and skills coaches need to place a focus on developing them.

As prescribed by all three Level 3 Coaches interviewed when developing ground skills a good place to start is by breaking the skill down and starting with technique e.g. 1 v 1 scenarios and controlling the variables, followed by introducing more challenging drills e.g. 2 v 2 and 3 v 3 with added pressure before progressing to game sense/skill scenarios.

An area that has not been covered so far in the material presented is strength and conditioning and it is important to note that improving a player’s strength and conditioning is sure to show benefits for player’s technique in this area. The SmartRugby DVD resource produced by the Australian Rugby Union has a range of abdominal strength activities that can be implemented to assist with improving ground skills.

In conclusion I believe the above presented information (International Test Match footage, Ground Skill Demonstration Presentation & Level 3 Coach interview’s have demonstrated the importance of a Long Two Handed Place in maintaining possession particularly when attempting to deliver quality ball at pace.