“To Hammer or not to Hammer? That is the Question”

A discussion paper on the “Tackle Contest”

2005 Level 3 Task

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The Tackle contest

One of the most important principles of rugby is to maintain possession. During a match there are many ways to achieve “ball retention”. Every time a player takes the ball into a contact situation he is taking part in the most complex and unpredictable contest in the game of rugby. This contest can take less than a second and involve between two and ten players however a team’s ability to dominate their opposition when carrying the ball into a contact situation is vital to not only the team’s success but also their overall physical dominance.

In the past rugby teams would do hours of training running head long into pads or team members, getting so low to the ground that going to ground (falling to ground) was inevitable and for that matter strongly encouraged. The coach would give instructions like “Hit and Drop” or “Hit drive drop”. There was little or no decision making and the team would take this mind set into a game. Playing the options they trained, not what was presented in front of them. In recent times we have began to coach our players to be in a strong body position and use footwork and leg drive to try and expose a week point in their defender.

The ever evolving laws of our game and the defensive skills now common place in Rugby have led to support at the tackle being of the utmost importance. If a player is put to ground and not supported in an instant a defender will secure the ball or the attacker will inevitably be penalised for not releasing the ball on the deck. This development has led to a situation where we see support players beginning their involvement in the contact at the same time if not before the ball carrier reaches the defence. The support player usually binding on to, and driving the ball carrier into and hopefully through the attempted tackle. In Australia this process is called the “Hammer”

I believe the Hammer is very effective at winning the Physical contest at the tackle but may hinder a players ability to beat a defender in his own write. When the hammer is used the ball carrier usually ends up on the ground any way, a few meters further up the field. The main benefit being that the support is already there and a ruck or maul is formed instantly so the opposition has little chance of stealing the ball and the defence are required to retreat to an on side position. In close quarters this may be important but out wider a supporter may be of better value staying in a position to receive an offload or inside ball. When coaching a team it is important to encourage the players to use the most relevant support / contact option available. When supporting a teammate the decision “To Hammer or Not to Hammer?” is a very important skill to Master.
Contact Skills

A player’s skill set in a contact situation both with and without the ball are very important if a team is to compete at the Tackle Contest. When a team dominates this facet of play the key outcomes are usually obvious to the spectator.

- Forward movement.
- Fast recycle of possession.
- The perception of physical dominance.
- Apparent control of the game.

Defenders seem helpless as two or three attackers drive headlong up the field with the ball carrier somewhere in the middle. The off side line for the defence is moving steadily toward their goal line. All because of dominance at the tackle Contest. As with most unit skills or Styles of team play they all hinge on the individuals being highly skilled in the basic areas of each situation.

Ball into Contact
- Good body position. [Wide base, Forward momentum, low body height etc]
- Ball away from contact.
- Footwork just before contact, trying to attack the Defenders week point.
- Strong fend or ability to keep defender away from ball.
- Effective leg drive into and through contact.
- Ability to keep a strong body position and go to ground in a good position.
- Ability to protect the ball and place back when on the ground.

Supporting the Ball carrier into Contact
- Positioning themselves to take part in the contest.
- Communicating to the Ball carrier.
- Deciding on a support option [Hammer, Cleanout, Pop pass, off load, hand off etc]
- Hammer Technique.
- Cleanout technique [including Identifying the threat]
- Knowledge of the Laws to minimize penalties [lost Possession]
The list goes on but unless players are skilled in all these areas their options in Contact will be very limited. If a player does not practice all these skills and learn to make a decision and communicate his intentions to his teammates, the team’s play will be one-dimensional. A team that is not very skilled at all the options available in contact will gradually start doing what they are familiar with. The defence will pick up on this one-dimensional play and will stop covering for the other alternatives.

For example if a team is limiting their options to taking the ball into the Tackle, with a Hammer for Support. Gaining a few meters and going to ground to provide fast ball. The defence will soon stop committing to the Break down. Their main aim will be to realign in defence as fast as possible, Knowing that the attackers will not off load, set up a maul or vary their play in any way.

The importance of multi skilli...
Conclusion

As a coach it is important to have a well drilled team, but not at the expense of creative and varied play. The best rugby players “Play the Game”, they see what’s in front of them and react. They are not hindered by limited options, they are intelligent enough and skilled enough to make a decision when they are confronted with a situation. I think this should also be encouraged at the Tackle Contest.

By educating players in the laws of the game and training them to make decisions under pressure. Then as long as the team’s individual skills are up to it the quality of rugby on display can only improve. And hopefully the results will come.