General Play Attack – the Development of Intelligent Performers  
Martin Field-Dodgson  
Level 3 Paper

This paper will examine the key factors that we should concentrate on, and drills and activities we can use, to train players to effectively assess a situation and to be able to perform the skills necessary to achieve a positive outcome during general play attack.

The overall aim is to develop the player as intelligent performers.

**Core Skills**
The Core Skills required for players to attack in general play include:
- Catching and Passing
- Foot-speed and agility
- Identification and manipulation of space
- Communication

The first two (2) skill areas are more often trained due to the number of drills/resources available and the ease in which they can be coached and included into a session.

Perhaps the most crucial, and under-coached skill is the identification and manipulation of space in order to achieve the first principal of team play – “go forward”.

The first priority for any ball carrier in general play is to assess the situation they find themselves. This can be done by asking:
- Am I in the best position to take the ball forward?
- If not, who is and can I get the ball to them so that they can take the ball forward?
- If no one is in a better position, what are my options?
- Could I potentially do something to put someone in a better position?

While these questions are hypothetical in nature, they present a reasonably proficient thought process for players to follow. An invasion game included in a training session would quickly assess this type of decision making in players. This simple game would also illustrate to the coach who posses a high level of decision making and which players require more opportunities to develop this skill. The overall aim is to develop the player as intelligent performers.

**Ball Carrier taking Responsibility**
The specific area we are concentrating on is when the ball carrier is in the best position to take the ball forward, or if by some action they can put someone else in a better position.
Space:
The easiest way for a player to maintain space on the rugby field is to move, carry, direct, the ball in a direction adjacent or away from that space. These actions will prevent the opposition from moving into the space as their first priority should be to cover the threat of the ball carrier.

This relationship between ball carrier and defender is an important one to consider because in effect, defenders’ actions are governed by the ball carrier - irrespective if the defender is the best tracker in the world, they are still changing their behaviour in accordance to what the attacker does.

This relationship is primarily responsible for the development of the “face & space” running line whereby an attacker runs directly at a defender in order to “fix” them (eg prevent them from moving across the field) and then through a change in direction attacks the available “space”.

It is possible for a ball carrier (and lateral supporters) to effectively use this relationship to their advantage. More often than not however, ball carriers engage in actions that result in a negative effect for themselves or their support. The primary reason for this end result is that players often do not have the necessary skills to recognise and understand the situation, and the ability to effectively execute the correct option.

Back to Basics
Like many aspects of rugby it is possible to simplify this topic down to a few basic concepts. The first concept is that where possible a ball carriers first priority is to carry the ball “forward”. (We will look at when it is possible for a ball carrier to do this, and when it may be a better to move the ball to someone in a “better” position). The second concept surrounds a ball carriers ability to “open” and “close” the shoulders of the defender(s).

The following drills and activities will develop these concepts alongside the decision making process that is required. Examples of these drills have been included in the Appendix. These drills will include three different “environments” –

- “Man On” situations or when there is an equal number of attackers against defenders,
- “Minus 1” situation when there is fewer attackers than defenders, and
- “Plus 1” situations when there are more attackers than defenders.

Developing Decision Making
While the drills above require elements of decision making the environment is always pre-determined, allowing the players to make prior judgements on their upcoming actions. To continue the learning process and to progress the decision making of the players, drills and activities should be developed that incorporate random environments. This can be done in a staged approach –
A coach calling the random environments (eg 3v2, 3v3, 2v3 etc)
A coach signalling the random environments
Random environments naturally occurring

These activities should also include situations where the defenders come at the attackers from different positions. More often than not coaches will implement these types of activities where the defenders operate together from start to finish, however in general play, defending players can come from anywhere, especially following a line break by the attack.

Using the grid set up in diagram 1 it is possible to see any number of variations exist whereby the starting positions of both the attackers and defenders can be manipulated in order to change the environment.

**Diagram 1:**

![Diagram 1](image)

A more continuous activity that promotes decision making is illustrated below. A set number of players (3-4) align along each side of the square with 2 defenders positioned in the middle. One (1) line at a time attempts to make it to the side of the grid that is opposite to where they started without being tagged (two handed on the hips) by the defenders. Once passed the defence the ball carrier can pass the ball to any player standing in any of the two (or three) other lines to attempt the same result.

![Diagram 1](image)
**Manipulating the Space**

The next constant that needs to be altered is the space in which the players operate. Altering this variable presents a changed environment which may alter players’ perceptions about the potential to reach the desired outcome. This may in turn effect their decision making.

While miss-matches between attacking players and defending players (a winger up against a tight-head prop) may alter the end outcome of a particular phase, the same processors (ball carrier to “fix” a defender and lateral support to run an effective running line) must be followed irrespective if there is 10 metres too work in or 40 metres.

The drill illustrated below can be used as a starting point to introduce players to different spaces through which they have to attack.

The diagram shows that 2 attackers are attacking against 2 defenders in a 10-15m channel. The defenders are standing behind the offside line (illustrated by the green cone) and can only move forward when the halfback puts their hands on the ball to pass to the first receiver. Once they attack in Grid A the coach can nominate the next channel to attack in (Grid A again or in the wider Grid B), or swap the roles around so that the defenders become attackers. The coach can also increase or decrease the number of players so that the environment is always changing.

**Progression**

The next step in the progression of activities is to introduce an environment that is changing itself both in terms of space, and the number of players. This is best achieved through use of a game based activity where both attackers and defenders must use decision making to achieve their desired outcomes. Games such as Ruck Touch, drop of touch, or two ball touch where the contact and the
breakdown are all controlled, will fulfil this requirement. These games will clearly demonstrate the principles that we have attempted to develop through the use of these activities.

One other game based activity that can be used to develop these skills further has been included below (Break out Touch). While the manipulation of the defence is not game related, it does provide an unstructured setting to examine the decision making capabilities of players when opportunities present themselves.

**Break Out Touch**
The outline of the game is very much the same as ruck touch, or any of the ‘contact’ based games of “touch”. The major difference is that the defenders are split up into 2-3 groups. This is done by giving the players a number (1, 2 or 3. The defenders must remember their number as at any stage during the game the coach can call out one of the numbers – all players who were given this number must immediately fall out of the defensive line and run back to a certain point (at least 15-20 metres away from the rest of the defenders). Once they reach this point they can then resume their defensive duties, which will probably be as cover defenders after the attack has hopefully identified, and attacked through the space left by the defenders.

**Outcome**
The ultimate outcome following the implementation of these drills and activities is that every player, from tight-head to fullback, has an idea of what actions they need to perform when they find themselves in possession of the ball. Irrespective of the environment (attacking v defending numbers, available space, speed of ball delivery etc) each player should be able to recognise what is required and have the ability to execute an option that will promote “go forward” for their team.

The drills and activities suggested provide an endless number of environments in which players can find themselves in, thereby practicing, and providing feedback on, their decision making abilities.

**Conclusion**
The purpose of this paper was to break down the often under-trained and misunderstood concepts surrounding general play attack. What has been presented describes the key actions by any ball carrier when they find themselves in general play. A number of activities have been demonstrated to train these skills and attributes ending with some games that will ultimately test the intelligent performer.

There are endless variations to the activities and games presented that coaches can implement that will continually ask questions of their players. While the concept of experiential learning is another topic in itself, it has its basis in the processes described above.
Appendix 1

Example - Man on Activity

1v1 Funnel

Environment:
- Equal attacker’s v defenders (man on)

Desired Outcome:
- Ball carrier carrying the ball over the gain line.

Best Outcome:
- Ball carrier beating the defender.

Key Factors:
- The attacker should accelerate quickly to "cross" gain line.
- The attacker should initially run at the defender attempting to "fix" them.
- Once the defender is committed (fixed) they should change their direction and run to "space" not at a "face". This will force the defender to make the tag from behind or the side.
- Carrying the ball in 2 hands will improve evasion.

Talking Points:
1. Should the “desired outcome" be "an attacker carrying the ball over the gain line"?

Asking players what the desired outcome should be in a 1v1 situation and the answer will most likely be to “beat the defender”. If we repeat this question in a 2v2 situation the answer may be the same but the more you increase the numbers (4v4, 5v5 etc) then players may become less committal in their responses.

The question that we have to ask is; Why?

If players do become a little unsure about the desired outcome when more players are involved then it would be safe to assume that the actions they take on the rugby field, when in this situation may also be "less committal". Understanding the desired outcome would provide these players with a clear direction as to what is expected.
**Example - Minus 1 Activity**

1v2 Funnel

Environment:
- Fewer attacker’s v defenders (minus 1)

Desired Outcome:
- Ball carrier to maintain the ball by staying on their feet and moving forward.

Best Outcome:
- An attacker carrying the ball over the gain line.

Key Factors:
- The attacker should accelerate quickly to "cross" gain line.
- The attacker should initially run at a defender attempting to "fix" them.
- Once the defender is committed (fixed) they should change their direction and run to "space" not at a "face". This will force the defender to make the tag from behind or the side. It may also draw in the other defender who feels threatened by the ball carrier’s actions.
- The attacker should use leg drive if they come into contact with a defender to drive forward and to stay on their feet.
- Carrying the ball in 2 hands will improve evasion.

Talking Points:

2. When would a ball carrier engage their lateral support by passing them the ball?

Any pass from a ball carrier to a lateral supporter is potentially moving the ball away from where secondary support is likely to come from therefore a pass to a lateral supporter should only be an option;
- If the supporter is in a better position to take the ball forward, or
- If the supporter is in a better position to “buy” time for support to arrive.

**Example - Plus 1 Activity**

2v1 Funnel

Environment:
- More attacker’s v defenders (plus 1)

Desired Outcome:
- An attacker to beat the defence while carrying the ball over the gain line.

Key Factors:
- The attacker should accelerate quickly to "cross" gain line.
- The attacker should initially run at a defender attempting to "fix" them.
- Once the defender is committed (fixed) they should either;
  - Change their direction and run to "space" not at a "face". This will force the defender to make the tag from behind or the side.
  - Pass the ball to their lateral supporter to carry the ball forward.
- Carrying the ball in 2 hands will improve evasion.