Task 13

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Are You Making The Most Of Your Kick-Offs?

AIM

To understand the technical skills required and tactical options available when your team is kicking off. To defeat kick-off receiving structures of well-coached teams. And to highlight the opportunities open for innovative kick-off tactics in the game of rugby union.

SHORT KICK-OFFS (1900-1995)

The short kick-off was used almost every time by almost every team up until about 1995.

It was very effective if the kick was accurate, a well-placed normal-side high kick. It could be ineffective, if the kick was poorly placed, either too far or too short and received by alert well-coached receivers.

However, fortunately for the kickers, well-coached receivers were rare on the ground. More often than not, poorly placed kick-offs were still effective.

LONG KICK-OFFS (1996-2006)

Over the last ten years, aspects of kick-off plays in rugby games changed significantly. The introduction of professionalism to rugby in 1996 provided well drilled teams the time to develop receiving kick-off structures. The confidence and ability of a team under the high ball from a mid-field restart began to improve.

A particularly significant change was the use of a long kick-off, in which the ball is kicked deep into the opposing team’s half with the intention to gain territorial advantage and eventually ball acquisition / possession from subsequent plays from strong defensive pressure.
KICK-OFF STATISTICS

In 2004-05 (IRB), 47% of all kick-offs were short kicks, where the ball acquisition from the short kick-off was a deplorable 1 from 7.

The remaining 53% of all kick-offs were long kick-offs.

A significant change to pre-1996, where nearly all kick-offs were simple short kick-offs.

REASONS FOR THE CHANGE IN KICK-OFFS

Probable reasons for such a tactical change to kick-offs post-1995 are:

a) The 1996 rule change: a player cannot call mark from a kick-off

And

b) The 1996 rule change: a receiver/catcher can be lifted

(Two players are allowed to lift a ball catcher to help catch the ball in high as a position as possible. Currently used widely by receiving teams.

Following on from these two rule changes, well drilled teams prepared to take advantage of short kick-offs. Well-coached teams organised short kick-off receiving structures by dividing the front rowers into kick-off lifters and locks into kick-off catchers, while the flankers and the backs got ready to attack.

Rather than kick-off short where ball acquisition was reduced to 1 from 7, a tendancy to kick the ball deep became favourable.)
QUESTIONS NEED TO BE ASKED OF KICK-OFFS

Questions were rarely asked of kick-offs prior to 1996, but are often asked today. Questions such as: What is the minimum outcome you will accept from a mid-field restart? Is it ball acquisition from a short kick-off? Is it a lineout with your throw-in within the opposition's half? Or is it to splinter and disorganised a receiving team's structure? Whatever the question, it must be asked ‘how can you be sure of achieving this’?

Questions help design tactics and, more important, help each player to know exactly what is expected of them. For instance, the kicker should know that he must either, put the ball high and short enough where the forwards can get into the act of contesting the ball or long and deep enough to encourage a kick for touch pressured by chasers. The rest of the team should know which it's going to be. In both cases, everyone should know that they must snuff out wide moves from the opposition.

Thus, it's not just happenstance. Your team needs to set concrete objectives. For example, if the kick-off is short and the maul forms they must know in which direction to push, if it's longer they must know they have to form a line, make the tackle or take position to cut off the pass.

For the purposes of analysing the last decade, kick-offs could be said to be divided into two categories, short kick-offs and long kick-offs.

If your team chooses to utilise these two types of kick-off in a game then you, as a coach, need to make sure you set concrete objectives for your players for both types of kick-offs. Different objectives need to be set for each different type of kick-off.
TECHNICAL SKILLS REQUIRED FOR THE KICKING TEAM

Before a decision can be made on whether to kick-off short or long or other, it is paramount the kicker achieves a certain level of kicking ability first.

For example, before a team decides to use a short kick-off, the kicker must master the kick first, a drop-kick so that team-mates can acquire possession from directly from the restart.

It is difficult for inexperienced players to accurately drop-kick the ball.

Key points for drop-kicking

- Hold the ball with its long axis pointing down so that when it hits the ground it bounces up to a position as if it was sitting on a kicking tee

- Place the non-kicking foot along side the ball hips width from the ball pointing in the direction of the kick

- Drop the ball next to the non-kicking foot

- Time the kicking foot so that it makes contact soon after the ball bounces so contact is made on the half-volley

- After striking the ball follow through in the direction of the ball

- Aim the kick so that team-mates can regain possession.

Remember, before a certain level of capability can be attained, training is necessary.

And only after a player has developed the kick, practised and mastered it, should the tactical decision made.
TECHNICAL SKILLS ACQUIRED BY THE RECEIVING TEAM

It is also important to evaluate the strengths and weaknesses of the receiving team before deciding on which tactical options to use in order to avoid kicking-off to their strengths.

In recent years, there has been a lot of improvement from teams in catching kick-offs. Coaches are starting to get their best catchers taking the kick-offs, not just the locks. However the tallest players do have an advantage.

Eddie Jones and Wayne Smith are two pioneers of improving kick-off catching in rugby union that I know of. Both the Australian and New Zealand national teams went through periods where they found that they were not winning many receiving kick-offs. Eddie Jones and Wayne Smith turned to Aussie Rules for training methods to improve the percentage of kick-offs won cleanly.

Here are some coaching points for kick-off catchers in rugby union:

**Key points for catching**

- Line your body up with the flight of the ball
- Keep your eyes on the ball
- Form your hands in a “W” position
- Fingers are outstretched and thumbs almost together
- Concentrate on finding the manufacturer’s name as the ball comes towards you, and never take your eye off this until it is in your hands
- Meet the ball slightly in front of your head with the arms extended, outstretched, ‘long arms’ so to speak.
- The ball should be firmly gripped in the fingers
- Keep your eyes on the manufacturer’s name on the ball even after the catch
TACTICAL CONSIDERATIONS FOR THE KICKING TEAM

Once your players have practised and mastered the technical aspects of kicking-off, your team is then in a good position to put your opponent under huge pressure from mid-field restarts. With the opposition spread to receive the kick-off, your team has the opportunity to position the ball in an area where the opposition is weakest.

Aside from the well-known short and long kick-offs that I have discussed, there are many open opportunities for innovative kick-off strategies.

The Split kick-off

The traditional forwards out to the left contesting a short or long kick-off can become too predictable and easily received by well-organised teams. In these types of kick-offs, professional players spend hours honing their skills in receiving the ball with perfection, not just advancing twelve to fifteen metres but deep into their own 22m area.

A “Split kick-off” routine which does work, requires the kicking team to split half of its forwards out to the left of the kicker and the other half (of its forwards) out to his right to contest the ball. By setting up as such, it forces the receiving team to separate their catchers, lifters and protectors. This reduces the chances of a receiving forward tripod from catching the ball or forces a catcher to be isolated when receiving the ball. A kick into space, to either side, left or right is possible. Which side to kick is often up to the kicker, wherever he sees the weakness is in the opposition’s receiving structure.

The Blue Bulls kick-off

With receiving kick-off structures well-coached and well-organised these days, I believe current defences are poorly aligned in the middle. Modern receiving teams do not seem to cover the short kick off up the middle very well. There could be a weakness there too?
Another kick-off tactic is the “Blue Bulls kick-off”, to drop-kick the ball so that it grubbbers and just trickles over the 10m line. In positioning three forwards in a triangular formation around the ball and nominating the front-most player to make the tackle, you force the opposition to make to two gather rolls before he even gets going. The Blue Bulls used this type of kick-off a lot to great effect in their season when they won the 2007 Super 14 title campaign.

The Manu Samoa kick-off

The “Manu Samoa kick-off” routine is similar to the “Blue Bulls kick-off” routine in that it uses a grubber kick except that the grubber drop-kick is kicked with more vigour and it can be placed anywhere. The ball should be kicked to an isolated player and should be a surprise to most receivers. Manu Samoa used this type of kick-off a lot in their 2007 Rugby World Cup pool game to great effect, ironically, against South Africa.

The Surprise kick-off

The “surprise kick-off” routine, which should work, again requires the kicker to kick up the middle and along the ground, but this time to kick the ball short and slowly between receivers. The kick should be aimed to go about 15m. With the centres and full back chasing hard, there is an opportunity to thump tackle and recover the ball from a single isolated backline player who is often lurking on the 22m line and who is not normally accustomed to receiving kick-offs. The team kicking-off should disguise the routine as a long kick off or a split kick-off. The key issues to this type of kick-off are to chase hard and don’t touch the ball until it has gone its 15m or unless you can get man and ball together.
CONCLUSION

While technical roles for both the kicking and receiving teams were analysed in this paper, tactical considerations of the kicking team remained the focus.

The analysis of occurrences of short kick-offs and long kick-offs identified a great change during the past ten years.

Long kick-offs in 2004-05, though seldom seen in 1994-05, accounted for approximately half of occurrences. And although kick-offs in rugby games have different aspects from ten years ago, they still remain to be one of the important set plays in a game.

However, for all the progresses and changes to kick-offs that have been made in the last ten years, teams tend to spend all their time on preparing just their set pieces, defence and breakdown. Coaches still allow little time at training if any at all for kick-off preparation and practice.
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