LINE OUTS - THE DEVELOPMENT OF WINNING PRIMARY POSSESSION

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With the development of professional rugby and the resulting progression of coaching staff and teams, we have moved into an area of rugby never before encountered. Over the years we have witnessed the likes of Phil Jackson (Chicago Bulls/Lakers), Mike Shanahan (Denver Broncos) and Sir Alex Ferguson (Manchester United) busily instructing the teams, drawing on boards, verbally directing play.

As we have witnessed this and observed there mannerisms and there emotive behaviour, we too have developed as coaches in our structures and communication with players. We are now at a point where our structures and that of our opponent are so closely monitored, we have to constantly redirect and restructure our patterns of play and our systems in winning primary possession. At the highest levels we understand the set up of our opposition and the options they will run off set structures generally, from structured possession. We spend countless hours breaking down our opponents’ structures, calls and movements. Always identifying actual movement and key movement/positional indicators.

Over the years we have developed many different ways of concealing our strategies, in the modern rugby world that is very difficult. In line out play this is an area we have really focussed on due to the amount of ball won or lost at this primary possession area. By combining various combinations of words, symbols and numbers, we have been able to create codes that generate the direction of the ball. Intent on finding our player in space for a clean take down and initiation of phase of play. With the development of more athletic players, stronger defensive systems and more pressure applied to the thrower of the ball (usually the hooker). The once safe retention of primary possession has now become a 50/50 option especially when you are playing a tall athletic side.

In this document I intend to offer an alternative focus to the line out, whilst asking why we maintain structures which are at times fragile. The majority of teams focus on movement in the line out to create space should we all do this?

From statistics of test match rugby in 2003-all series-all rounds-both halves-all zones, we have a clear picture of the value of line out possession.

- Line outs provide approximately 14 opportunities with the ball per team, per game on average.
- Considering that the structured source of ball on average is 29.2 opportunities per game, line outs contribute almost 50% of all structured ball.
- The retention rate at International level of the teams studied, rated between 71-86%. The majority between 76-80%.
How valuable would be another 5% at that level? Take into account the options for attack off the line out, we really need to examine alternative systems in retaining and protecting this source of primary possession.

Structured possession still accounts for 58% of all possession in top level rugby (as per statistics of RWC 2003). When you break down the amount of structured possession turned over line outs are comparative to although marginally higher than kick off reception. Interestingly enough it is still the most common penalty option outside of a shot at goal. Hence the decision by coaches to attack opposition line outs is a calculated one. With the contest favouring, but not assuring the throwing side statistically.

CURRENTLY

Over recent years we have focussed on player (whether it be supporter or jumper) movement along our line or player number reduction in the lineout. What this has created in effect is a smaller target area in which to throw and confusion for the thrower, supporter and jumper. This to the point of frequent cases at all levels of throwing to a non jumper. In fact there is a constant theme of players taking the ball standing in a line out clearly unmarked. What we have created is space!

The basic principle of taking line out ball is beating the opposition to the ball. This by speed, timing, physical presence and coordination/skill level of thrower, supporter and jumper. One of the best things we can teach our forwards with regards to line outs is; the team forming and calling the ball into the line out are the only ones on the field that categorically know where the ball is going to be thrown to. If we create the space, reduce the confusion and react as a unit we will consistently retain possession at the line out. This is also the case with many other facets of primary possession.

One of the greatest areas of confusion initially is the line out call. One player incorrectly hearing or missing altogether the call can negate the efforts of the rest of the line out. There are many instances at all levels, of players not receiving the correct call. Resulting in a ball turn over or worse.

So the first way to reduce confusion would be to eliminate the line out call!

Secondly the movement in the line out. By jumpers and supporters moving in and out of the line, you create the possibility of players colliding with each other. If you are throwing the ball before the player is lifted, one small obstruction can impede the jumpers timing resulting in missing the ball. Once again player movement will cause confusion at one stage or another.

Next remove the player movement in the line out!

The final change you can make is the reduction of the ball usage call. If you state all ball is to be driven then you instantly reduce the amount of calls you use for ball usage options.

Finally reduce/remove completely the line out call!

Having someone to throw, to support and to jump are without option.
Set field positions create line out calls?

By defining set field positions as line out target zones you instantly create a system whereby you no longer need a call. The problem with this is if the zone is for example between the halfway and their ten metre line and the option is to throw to four who is heavily marked, we have left ourselves no options. What can we do?

Option calls

We create an option call. By creating a simple option call, we empower the jumper to decide if the ball is easily winnable. If the number four jumper in this instance, decides there is more space or a better option he makes his option call. For the purpose of this exercise we will use a simple sequence; flat two, lob two, flat four, lob five, long six (sequence 1-5). If the area we are in is the flat four ball and the jumper identifies six as a better option he calls “double up”, which for this example will mean two sequences along. So instead of a flat four it is now a long six ball. Alternately if he identifies a flat two as his better option he calls “double down” which means two sequences down. Now it’s a flat two throw. Hence we are reducing the calls, lessening the opportunity of a mistake, or miscommunication.

No call line out option

In the case of the above mentioned example, the player gets to four is relatively unmarked and elects to receive the ball and wins it. You actually have no call at all because the line out is predetermined by field position and the fact all ball is being driven unless otherwise instructed. Hence four ball and drive, with no call. This system reduces opportunities of confusion, and reduces the opportunity to turn the ball over merely by finding unmarked space.

Creating space

The issue here is it is easy to mark up against as all players can easily mark up against there opponents. Therefore we need to be more efficient in our basic skills. Firstly we need to spread ourselves throughout the ten metres on offer to us. Forcing our markers to match us. If we are prepared to trust the thrower of the ball, we release the ball from the throw before the jumper gets up in the air. Instantly reducing the opponents’ reaction time. Secondly we spread the opponents’ strengths by creating a gaping line; the opponent is less likely to reach his peak or contest for the ball as effectively as if he were correctly supported.

Spreading the load

The basic system of having your one and two as a pod then your three a metre and a half away, with your four and five a further metre and a half away. This spreading your key supporters and jumpers at the front of the line out. Followed by your six and seven a further one and a half metres away. Suddenly by expanding your line, reducing your calls and minimising your movement, you increase your chances of winning your own ball.
Basics and repetition

The focus from this point forward would then be technique. This philosophy is based on the idea that only one side knows where the ball is going. Therefore speed is a major component as is correct technique execution. The only way you can manufacture this is by constantly training the same technique and instilling the self belief in the line out unit.

With speed being of such a high importance we must concentrate on stable, explosive lifting. The back lifter should maintain open palms, not gripping the shorts. By gripping the shorts you expose the jumper. If someone knocks or grabs your arm you instantly destabilise the jumper. By maintaining an open, non gripping support you can still support the jumper with one arm. The front lifter should clasp the inside jumping leg (middle of line out being centre) with both hands. Both should start with bent legs to create explosive power and a straight back to increase upward drive. The final part is making sure the Jumpers and supporters understand space. Ask the players open questions at which the answer cannot be “yes” or “no”. Make them commit to the policy of space!

In summary by reducing the need for complicated calls, minimising movement and utilising correct technique and space, you will increase your chances of maintaining your possession. As we endeavour to increase our knowledge and our professionalism as coaches let us not lose sight that we don’t have to re invent the wheel every time.

Sometimes it just needs a retread.