THE CLEARING PASS – TO PICK UP OR TO SWEEP?

There is much discussion about the clearing pass technique being demonstrated by many scrum halves at the elite level. Much of the contention centres around the predominance of players to pick up the ball at the breakdown prior to initiating the passing action. The purpose of this assignment is to analyse the prevalence of the pick up technique compared to the more traditional sweep pass at Super 14 Level and offer some technical analysis.

The data was collected on three international scrum halves George Gregan (Brumbies), Byron Kelleher (Chiefs) and Ruan Pienaar (Sharks) during six (two each) Super 14 matches in 2007 and involving clearing passes from the breakdown only. The following data was collected:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Player</th>
<th>Pick Up Pass</th>
<th>Sweep Pass</th>
<th>Total Passes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>George Gregan</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>46</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Byron Kelleher</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>47</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ruan Pienaar</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>44</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>95</td>
<td>42</td>
<td>137</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The data indicates a clear preference for the pick up pass technique with George Gregan (68%), Byron Kelleher (63%) and Ruan Pienaar (79%) utilising this form of delivery on most occasions. In contrast the sweep pass technique was utilised by George Gregan (32%), Byron Kelleher (37%) and Ruan Pienaar (21%) significantly less.

TECHNICAL COACHING POINTS

The following provides a detailed technical analysis of the pick up pass:

- On approach the inside foot should be moved quickly to the side of the ball. Body height should be lowered by bending through the knees while keeping the backside down (not the folding at the waist) to maximise vision either
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side of the breakdown and to the target. At this point feet should be shoulder width apart with the outside foot offset back in a split stance with toes pointing forward and on the balls of the feet to allow for greater stability. *(see diagram 1)*

- Weight at this stage is distributed on the inside leg. Hands should be placed either side of the ball with the inside hand cupped over the back two thirds and the outside hand on the front two thirds. As soon as hands are on the ball it should be pulled back strongly to the inside hip to avoid interference from opposing players. *(see diagram 2)*

- The passing movement should be initiated simultaneously by driving off the inside leg and stepping directly back utilising the outside foot as a pivot to get clear of the tackle contest. *(see diagram 2 and 3)*

- In one movement the inside shoulder should rotate horizontally towards the target while the outside foot is driven in the direction of the receiver and stamped on the ground as weight is transferred rapidly from inside to outside leg. *(see diagram 4)*

- The upper body should follow through with the weight distribution in a pendulum motion from ball pick up on the inside hip to ball release, with the arms in slight flexion throughout. The passer flicks inside wrist from flexion to extension to initiate over spin and the ball should be released when both hands are pointing at the receiver – “point and shoot”. *(see diagram 5 and 6)*

- After the follow through and on ball release the inside hip should snap to a stop. This dynamic weight transfer and hip snap is critical to maximising pass power.

- On completion of the pass the outside foot’s toes should be on the ground and pointing in the direction of the receiver with weight and chest over the front foot allowing the passer to step forward for a quick transition to the next breakdown. *(see diagram 6)*

*Diagram 1*  *Diagram 2*  
*Diagram 3*  *Diagram 4*
Diagram 5

Diagram 6

Key Coaching Points

Pick Up Technique

- Inside foot close to ball
- Lower body height by bending through the knees with backside down
- On balls of feet shoulder width apart in split stance for greater stability
- Pull ball back strongly to inside hip
- Drive off the inside leg and step back to clear the tackle contest

Pass Technique

- Transfer weight rapidly from inside to outside leg
- Outside foot driven in the direction of the target and stamped on the ground
- On ball release snap inside hip and shoulder to a stop - square to the target
- Finish with both hands pointing at the target – “point and shoot”
- Maintain a low body position from pick up to release
- Follow the line of the ball in support

Common Errors

- Folding at the waste reducing vision and minimising leg drive to initiate the passing action – minimised by bending at the knees and keeping the backside low during pick up
- Excessive vertical rotation or “popping up” prior to release of the ball resulting in a high trajectory – minimised by adopting and maintaining a low body position from pick up to release
- Outside arm fading away on release of the ball causing it to finish behind the receiver on a curved trajectory – minimised by finishing with both hands pointing at the target

CONCLUSION

The data offers an interesting insight into the shape of the current game. Of 137 passes analysed 69% utilised the pick up pass technique with only 31% opting for the more traditional sweep pass. This trend reflects the fact that teams are working significantly harder at the breakdown to turn over possession making it increasingly difficult, if not impossible, to clear the ball directly off the ground.

This increased incidence and more structured system of counter rucking is forcing scrum halves to pick up the pass and step back from the tackle contest to avoid interference and allow a successful clearance of the ball. In fact in most instances the
sweep pass was generally only utilised as a clearing option from the scrum half to the five eight kicking for territory within the defensive 22m area.

Of additional interest the data identified an average of only 23 scrum half clearing passes at the breakdown per game. This relatively low number is probably indicative of the current trend to off load in the tackle or off the ground in an effort to get in behind the defensive line and avoid the breakdown contest.

It would appear from the research that although much criticism is levelled at scrum halves opting for the pick up pass it is becoming a critically important component of their skill set. In summary it is imperative that the modern scrum half is adept at all forms of delivery but particularly the pick up pass technique if they are to ensure quality delivery at the breakdown.