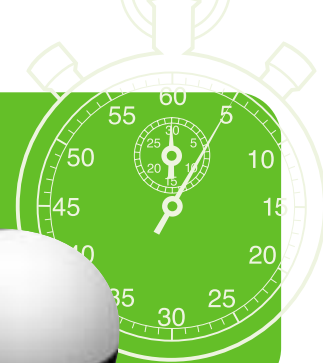


Insights and expertise in rugby union coaching

RugbyCoach



Apr07 vol4 issue9

Current Trends in Top Flight Rugby

Six Nations, Super 14s and Heineken Cup are showcases for the latest coach thinking. Some of the plays and tactics are simply old ideas in new clothes, others are more challenging. Dan Cottrell looks at some of the old and new from the Six Nations you can use for your team.

Throwing In

When the hooker draws back the ball before throwing in, it acts as a trigger for the jumpers, unfortunately for both sides. To avoid the opposition team anticipating the throw, hookers are using a couple of tactics.

- 1 Throwing with a very short back lift. This means the ball is drawn back to about level with the eyebrows, before being launched to the front of the lineout.
- 2 Drawing back the ball slowly and releasing at any stage of the draw back. The opposition jumpers will not know when to go up.

Lean Forward in Scrums

Taller props have struggled somewhat with the new "touch" laws on the engagement. Because of the distance to engagement has been reduced, they cannot get their hips in line with their knees and are finding themselves compromised in the scrum.

It is noticeable that some teams are now holding back the props before the engagement. The second and back rows are acting as a counter balance, pulling back on the props, so the props can lean forward on the balls of their feet. At the back of the scrum, the number eight pulls back on the second row to help their balance.

It is not a new idea. Mike Cron, the All Black scrummaging guru, has been advocating this style of scrummaging for some time. Some under 18 sides have also been using it, because the law has been around at this level for a number of years.

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editor's letter

This month's main theme is solving problems. Page one and two use the current trends from the top of the game to prevent opposition players winning your lineout, help taller props scrummage, and neutralise the "blitz".

What to do after you have won the lineout is covered on page 4, by Jim Love. On page 6, we examine another tactical problem – when to attack the blindside.

A very common difficulty of giving bad news about selection, and what you can do better, is discussed on page 5. We look at making best use of your training space on page 7. And on the back page Alan Jones discusses how he uses games to problem solve.

On page 3, read why the IRB do not endorse the use of supplements.



Dan Cottrell

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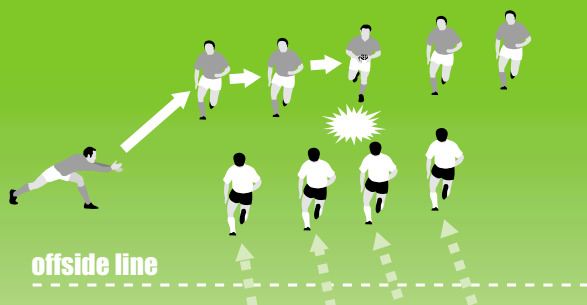
Current Trends continued from P1

Beating the Blitz

Many teams employ a "blitz" defence. Essentially this means cutting down the space between attacking and defensive backlines as quickly as possible, with the aim of preventing the ball going beyond the outside centre (number 13).

Standing flat, under pressure from the blitz

Moves struggle to get beyond outside centre



direction of run pass tackle

In the Six Nations, the French and Irish backlines stood further back or deeper in attack to reduce the effectiveness of the "blitz". This allowed time for the ball to be moved wider out and into the spaces where their dangerous attackers could operate.

Pros of standing deeper:

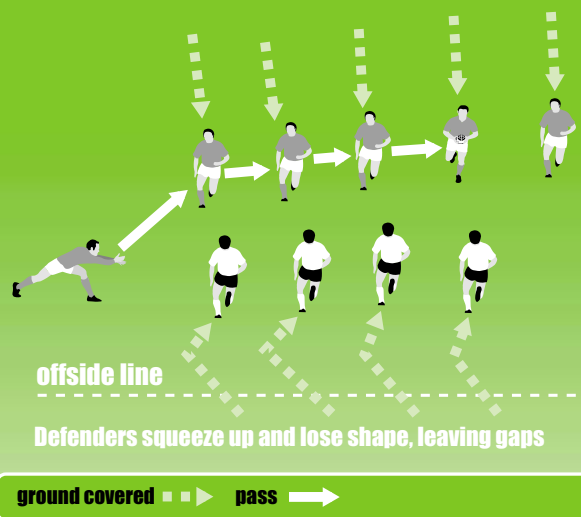
- There is more time to move the ball wider.
- The defensive line can become ragged the further it has to come forward.
- A "blitzing" line has to drift, which can cause inside defenders to be poorly positioned if attackers come back on a switch or cut moves.

Cons of standing deeper:

- It is easier for defences to read moves.
- The ball carrier can be caught a long way behind the gainline, meaning it can be more difficult for the forwards to support effectively.

Standing deep, preventing the blitz

Attackers run further with the ball to interest defenders



Stand deep if you want to exploit the space wide out. Your runners and dummy runners must interest their opposite numbers to create confusion.

Changing Your Tactics When the Opposition Least Expects It

What sort of defence do you use? Does the opposition come to expect the same type of defence from your side? If they do, then you have an opportunity to strike, like the Scottish team against England in the Six Nations.

The Scot's fly half constantly kicked the ball into the corners of the England end of the field. As England threw the ball back into the lineout, the Scots did not contest for the ball in the air, only trying to drive them back once the lineout had been won.

The Scots continued with this tactic for at least 25 minutes. Finally they kicked the ball out on England's five metre line. This time the Scottish team did contest. They unexpectedly threw up the number 2 jumper, who disrupted the throw. In the ensuing mess, a Scot's player gathered the ball and dived over the line for a try.

- Lesson one: mix up your defensive tactics.
- A more powerful lesson: mix it up when your opponents least expect it. For instance, change from a drift to a blitz defence ten minutes before half time.

"Whoever can surprise well must conquer"

John Paul Jones, Scottish born American naval hero in the U.S. War of Independence (1747-1792)

Do Your Players Know What Supplements Are Safe?

Coaches have a responsibility to ensure the health and safety of their players. The use of supplements is one area that needs careful consideration. Dan Cottrell spoke to IRB anti-doping supremo Tim Ricketts and South African medical expert Mike Lambert about this important subject.

There has been a big increase in the use of supplements both during matches and in training as players aim to achieve their peak performance levels. It is important that players fully understand the nature of what they are taking. They must ensure they do not compromise the anti-doping regulations of the International Rugby Board (IRB) by taking prohibited substances that may be contained within supplements.

Some over-the-counter and prescribed medications may contain prohibited substances which commonly lead to inadvertent positive tests for athletes.

The main problem with nutritional supplements lies with the fact that these are not regulated by the authorities in the way "normal" food products are. This means manufacturers are not required by law to list the actual ingredients of the supplement on the label. This has resulted in several anti-doping rule violations being recorded by rugby players who took a nutritional supplement containing a prohibited substance.

Tim Ricketts has told me that reliable studies have shown that up to 25% of nutritional supplements on sale to athletes may contain small amounts of prohibited substances, commonly including anabolic androgenic steroids and stimulants. Some contain large enough amounts of these prohibited substances to result in a positive drug test.

The IRB View

The IRB does not endorse supplement use. Any player that takes a supplement does so at their own risk. Players are encouraged to seek professional guidance from a qualified medical practitioner, accredited sports dietician and/or a registered nutritionist about their diet and supplement use. It is very easy to make a mistake without taking advice prior to

taking prescribed or over-the-counter medicines. Various medicines contain prohibited substances. It is vital to check with the prescribing physician or pharmacist prior to purchasing any medicines that they do not contain prohibited substances.

What Substances Can Be Taken Safely Without Running the Risk of a Positive Test?

Many Rugby Football Unions have outlined their policies on the use of drugs and supplements. All maintain a strong condemnation on doping. The list of prohibited substances and methods is modified on an annual basis by the World Anti-Doping Agency (WADA) and it is important to remain aware of such changes.

Note to Diabetics on Insulin

Insulin lowers blood sugar levels and can ultimately cause long term brain, liver and kidney damage. The advantage gained by abusing such a substance can be extremely minimal and on occasions it can have no effect whatsoever. Diabetics can apply for an exemption for this substance. This requires a standard therapeutic use exemption application form. This can be downloaded from either the national anti-doping agency in the player's country or from the IRB website within the anti-doping section.

Summary

- Players could land themselves with a sanction of up to two years for a positive test for a banned substance achieved from a supplement.
- Players who take supplements without advice from their physician risk damage to their health.
- Players who may be eligible for doping control must advise this fact to their treating physician to ensure medications containing prohibited substances are not prescribed inadvertently. 📌

The current WADA Prohibited List can be obtained at www.wada-ama.org or on the IRB website (www.irb.com) within the anti doping section.

The Best Attacking Options from Lineouts

The lineout offers different options to scrum set plays. It is, therefore, vital that you have clear tactics to make use of possession once you've won lineout ball.

Catch and Drive

Without a clear objective, many catch and drive mauls end up with the forwards happy with their progress, but with poor ball for the backs to use. Our main purpose for a catch and drive is to create go forward from which we can develop plays. For example, we will run off the maul and use offloads and quick rucks to tie in defenders to allow time and space for our backs to attack. We also use it to manipulate field position – for instance, if we want to create a larger blindside to attack.

Setting up the catch and drive has changed over the years. These days sides bring the ball down from the jumper to set up a maul before driving forward. We use what I call “points mauling” – we constantly change the point of attack to make it more difficult for the opposition to defend against our maul.

Key Points of a Catch and Drive Maul

- 1 Maul to your objectives.
- 2 Create quick ball after the end of the maul with offloads or mini rucks.
- 3 Set the maul before the drive.
- 4 Attack through the maul by changing the points of attack.


The Length of Our Attacking Lineout

We use very few full lineouts for two key reasons:

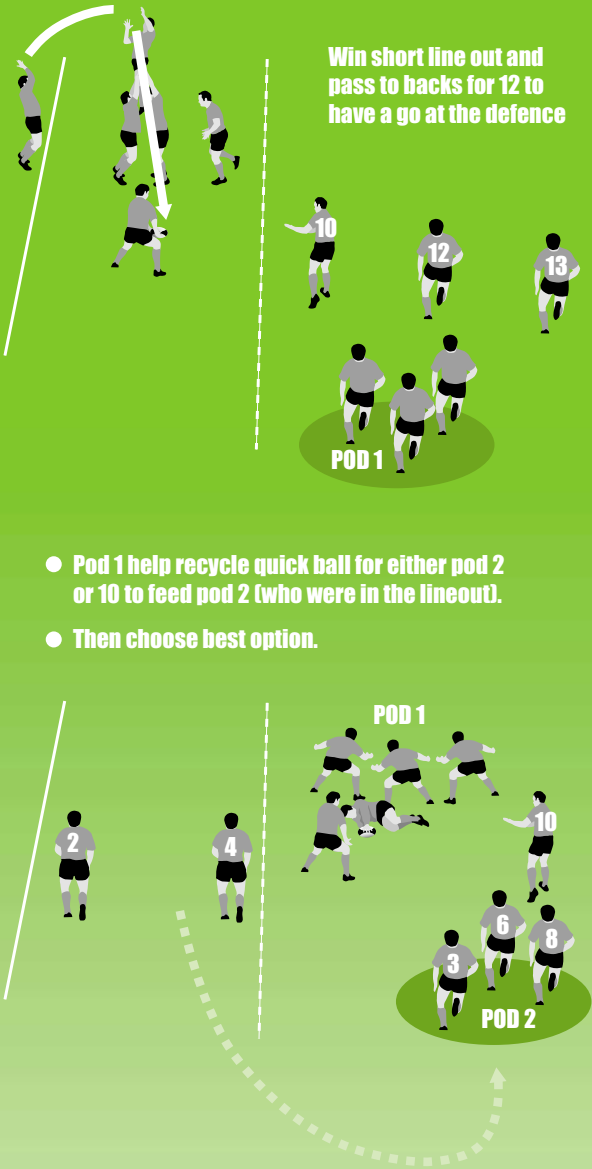
- 1 They provide easy opportunities for interference.
- 2 The referee cannot easily see what is going on.

We use three, four and five man lineouts, with mauling options (as above). We also attack around the front of the lineout (the front peel) or around the back (back peel).

Plays from the Lineout

The lineout lends itself to using “pods” to develop plays. A pod is a designated group of players who take the ball and set up a position on the field. The group can also support an attack, leading to a line break or a quick ruck ball to exploit a disorganised defence. From shortened lineouts forwards can be set up behind the back line. 

Shortened lineout pods



Win short line out and pass to backs for 12 to have a go at the defence

POD 1

- Pod 1 help recycle quick ball for either pod 2 or 10 to feed pod 2 (who were in the lineout).
- Then choose best option.

POD 1

POD 2

pass →
ground covered - - - →

Jim Love, head coach of Italian professional side Viadana and a former New Zealand Maori coach, is head of the NZ Sports Academy. www.nzsportsacademy.co.nz

Breaking Bad News About Team Selection

Telling a player he is picked for the team is one of the best parts of the job of being a coach. Telling them they are dropped is probably the worst. Dan Cottrell helps you break bad news.

No matter what level you coach at, players will react in a wide variety of ways to being dropped. Each individual has their own motives for wanting to play. Professionals rely on selection for their livelihood. (An England player can expect to receive £10,000 for an international match.) Amateur players have other motives to remain in the team, which equally apply to the professionals, like pride or being with their friends. Some players simply want a game, whatever the standard.

Whatever the reasons, no player likes being dropped. The better you know your players, the easier it is to know when and where to break the news to each of them. You then need to be able to use the right language, in the right manner.

Six Step Plan

- 1 Prepare the player: "I have some bad news and it's going to be very disappointing for you."
- 2 Tell them they are "not included" in the team for the game. Don't use terms like "dropped".
- 3 Explain why. This is not a list of excuses or apologies, but a straightforward explanation of the reasons for your choice.
- 4 Demonstrate understanding. The impact of the bad news is going to be disappointing. The player needs to know you care about their feelings.
- 5 Give the player some targets, but don't make promises. Some players will want to know what they can do to get back in the team. However, make sure you don't promise them selection in the next game.
- 6 Gain commitment for the future: "you are still an important part of the squad and it is not just about 15 players on the pitch, but the whole squad over the season. Can I count on your commitment in the coming weeks?"

Bad News Don'ts

- Don't hurry the discussion with the player.
- Don't give a long list of reasons why a player is not selected.
- Don't promise anything you cannot immediately deliver.

Timing

There are no good times to give bad news. However, there are "less bad" times. Coaches approach the situation in a variety of ways – a team announcement before training, after training, posting the team on the board. Some of the less popular ways are asking the captain to tell the players or giving out two colours of bibs in training and then saying that one colour is the selected team. Alternative methods include:

- Ask the players at the start of the season to say when and how they think the team should be announced.
- Say that you will give every player an explanation before or just after you announce the team. However, you reserve the right to not explain before, if time does not allow it (e.g. you may be waiting on an injury or availability report).

The "Telling"

There are some crucial factors in the manner in which you convey the news to the player.

- **Voice** – the tone of your voice needs to be calm, and non-threatening. Be clear, positive and dynamic in how you explain the reasons for non-selection.
- **Eye-contact** – maintain eye-contact throughout the conversation. Sometimes it is worth looking at the player's eyebrows, if you find it hard to meet their direct eye line.
- **Deliver the news at the same height** – both sitting or both standing.
- **Listen** – expect some feedback. Don't reject what they say, but empathise.

"Speak when you are angry – and you'll make the best speech you'll ever regret."

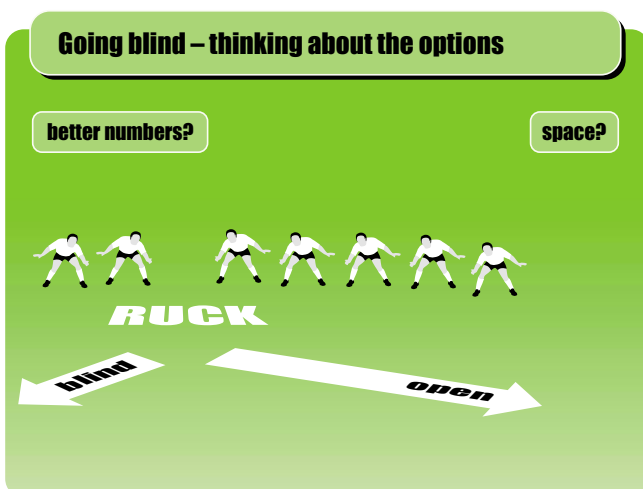
Dr Laurence J. Peter, American educator and writer (1919-1990)

Attacking the Blindside

Dan Cottrell identifies when to attack the openside or blindside, and how to do it effectively.

Numbers or Space

A simple calculation is required to work out whether you should attack the blindside. If your numbers are greater than the defence, then it is worth exploiting. If you want to attack the openside, then look to see if there is space wide out.



Attacking the Blindside

When your players identify they are going to attack the blindside, they need to pass the ball very flat and close to the gain line. The deeper they stand, the more chance there is that the opposition defence can track back and push the attack into touch. Only use miss passes if the ball is going to a player with no one in front of them. Normally, though, quick passes where the passer has fixed their opposite number should suffice.

Attacking the Openside

When the space is wide out, the ball needs to move to this area without the defence cutting down the outside players. There are three ways to avoid this:

- 1 Deep passing, where all the players stand further back from the gain line than normal (used by the Six Nations Champions, France).
- 2 "Block" – here a miss pass is used to get the ball wide, but the missed player runs in front of the pass, thus momentarily holding the defence.

- 3 Dummy switches – to hold the defence and prevent them drifting across. Then a dummy switch or cut pass can have the effect of interesting inside defenders. Remind the ball carrier to hide the ball from the opposition in the action of the dummy switch and the dummy runner to convince the opposition they are going to take the ball.

Setting Up the Blindside

Here are three ways to set up a blindside:

- 1 **From a kick off reception:** the receiver or the runner off the first receiver, runs infield immediately. Team mates will recognise this is going to happen, and support the runner so a quick ruck can be formed if there is no breakthrough. Opposition forwards will generally shift towards the ball carrier, leaving only a wing on the blindside. If executed quickly, then there is a good chance the opposition will not react in time, allowing a blindside attack.
- 2 **From lineouts:** attack through the centre of the defence from a ball "off the top" (straight from the lineout receiver to the scrum half). As lineout forwards from both sides move in to contest the ruck, a possible blindside overload will be created. This works even better from a shortened lineout (see Jim Love's column on page 4).
- 3 **From left of field scrum:** the number 8 picks up and goes right (or a similar back row move). It is an easier pick up than going left and will tie in the opposition back row. 🍀

Player Communication is Key

The scrum half is unlikely to be able to assess whether to attack the blindside or not, so he will rely on a call from the fly half (or stand off). Normally a pre-arranged call will help. For instance "yes" to go left, "no" to go right.

Note, the blindside wing or full back should have a call to tell the scrum half there is a numbers advantage. For instance, "red, red, red".

"The blind, short or narrow side (take your pick) is everywhere on a rugby pitch, but only the truly intuitive footballer instantly recognises where it is and takes rapid action to exploit it."

Don Rutherford, former RFU Technical Director

How to Make the Most of Your Training Spaces

Teams will train on pitches or fields which either represent the whole pitch or subsections of the whole pitch. Dan Cottrell looks at ways of maximising the use of the training space you have available.

Training Space and Pressure

Technique requires no pressure to hone, since it should be performed correctly, not always quickly. Players need space to perform a technique, for instance a side on tackle, without requiring to rush to get into position. You can therefore work in a smaller area than if you working on a skill.

Skill is technique performed under pressure. You can use your space in two ways to increase pressure. Either you can increase the area, meaning players have to move further to perform the technique, therefore testing fitness, spatial awareness, and decision making. Or you can reduce the size of the space, testing speed, quickness of thought, and allowing for greater repetition.

Cyclical Drill Space for Technique

A cyclical drill allows players to continue to perform an activity a number of times. Normally a player will run from one corner or point to the opposite side. Either immediately or after a short wait they will return. Cyclical drills work best for building technique through repetition.

Upsides of Cyclical Drills	Downsides
Repetition.	More difficult to organise.
Easy to observe.	Can reduce the game related aspects since players may be running to a specific point, which never happens in the game.
Lots of activity.	

Create "Chaos" in Your Training Space

Training spaces can be very ordered. Words like "drill" and "grid" are about precision. Good for technique, not so helpful for skill. Creating chaos in the training spaces increases the need for spatial awareness and quick decision making.

Ways to increase chaos:

- 1 Change starting points into starting areas of three to five metres in width.
- 2 Players can finish along a wide line.
- 3 Introduce "spoilers" and "cheaters" within the space to disrupt the normal flow.
- 4 Work for intense short periods of time with lots of noise and "hurry up".
- 5 Change the dimensions of the spaces frequently to change the mindsets.

Training Space Warnings

- *Too much space for technique* – keep technical training inside a small area so players can increase the repetitions and don't have to run too far (and thus not be in a good position to perform).
- *Don't allow resting time in drill time* – your training space needs to allow players to be continually working in drill time. If too many players are standing around, you need to reassess the dimensions of the space, or even split the space in two.
- *The same dimensions can become boring* – if players always train in the same spaces, they can become stale. Circles and triangles are two shapes you can use to add variety to your training routines. Have you ever thought of using the side of a hill as a place for a well worn drill?

Paint Pictures

Any drill or practice needs to lead to a game related situation. Use the space to "paint" a picture of the position on the pitch and show why the exercise is being carried out. Sometimes players will react differently if they think they are on their own five metre line or close to the opposition touchline.

Other than normal boundaries on a pitch, you can add a line of cones to represent "gain lines" or "tackle lines" where your players might expect to be tackled. 🟢

"You have no control over what the other guy does. You only have control over what you do."

A J Kitt, former US skiing champion and motivational speaker

Double the Effectiveness of Your Coaching Sessions

The “Games for Understanding” approach to coaching doubles your effectiveness because you are coaching two skills at any one time, says rugby author, Alan Jones.

I use a step-by-step approach to improve skills. It is based around the concept of “Games for Understanding”, where all training is based around the game situation. I use games as much as possible to illustrate and test the skills.

The Step-by-Step Approach

- 1 Identify the technique you want to improve.
- 2 Play a rugby-based game that rewards the use of this technique.
- 3 Break to practise a weakness exposed by the game.
- 4 Return to the game to see an improvement.

Examples of Games to Improve Skills

- **To practise rucking** – the ball carrier must go to ground after five steps. This develops attacking and defending rucks, and encourages passing.
- **To encourage passing** – count the number of passes executed in a move and score this number of points for a try scored. Thus, a try after six passes scores more points than a try after two passes.
- **Ball retention** – play on a very narrow pitch, and time each team’s possession. That is, give one team the ball and start a stopwatch. Stop the watch when they lose the ball. Keep track of the record time.

Case Study: “Keeping the Ball Alive”

I identified that we needed to work on keeping the ball alive, and on tackling, so I devised a variation to the rules in which a tackle to ground was a turnover. No rucks, no mauls – if the ball carrier is tackled, it’s a turnover.

We play the game seven-a-side on a 20 metre x 30 metre pitch, which gives some space to exploit, but not too much. The side in possession looks for space, passes before or out of contact, and supports the ball carrier. The other team has to tackle properly, because that is the only way to get the ball.

After a few minutes we stop the game and have a short, traditional session on a technical aspect. It can be a few minutes on tackling, or on offloading. Then we return to the game to see if there are some improvements.

Not only do we practise the main points of tackling and keeping the ball alive, but also our attack practises looking for space and support play, and our defence develops their defensive patterns. Both sides improve their communication.

Summary

Using Games for Understanding you will:

- Practise concurrently two opposing skills, doubling your effectiveness.
- Practise ancillary skills such as communication.
- Practise skills in a game situation, improving game sense and understanding.
- Increase player enjoyment.

Alan Jones is a Community Rugby Coach in Berkshire, author of Winning Tag Rugby, and runs his own coaching business.

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