

# DOMINATING THE CONTACT AREA BY GEOFF MOON, BRISTOL (ENGLAND) ACADEMY

The move in rugby in recent years to play a more expansive game has resulted in teams committing fewer players to the ruck and doing it more accurately To create space and go wide you need quick ball. This will not happen without an efficient breakdown.

Players' support-lines behind ball carriers and their decision-making as they are preparing to enter the breakdown need to be both accurate and efficient.

On defence, players need to be able to attack the opposition ball on the ground and remove bodies as required.

To dominate the contact area a few key principles need to be followed. I have listed some of these below.

# Accelerating through the contact zone.

To keep the ball alive in the contact area, the player carrying the ball has all the responsibility and he needs to follow the **key principles:** 

- 1 Carry the ball in two hands. This keeps all/most options open and asks questions of the defending player(s).
- 2 Run with an upper body tilt that is leaning forwards. This is to generate speed and power through the contact area as an upright body will not generally be dynamic in the contact area.
- 3 You need to have a forward step to generate speed. This will help you attack a weak defending shoulder and will make your more effective in moving the defender to keep the offload alive.

# **Key Rules.**

- 1 When you have the ball, hit the turbocharger. Acceleration is the key.
- Your step needs to be good enough to move the defender so that he is not able to dominate from a set, strong position.
- You fight to stay up. To play rugby, we need to be on our feet for the longest possible time



# Offloading.

The offload is a very effective way to unlock the opposition defence and there are two important phases to each offload – pre-tackle and post tackle.

#### Pre-tackle.

- Support players' lines of running should be directly behind the ball carrier.
- The immediate support player needs to keep his depth to enable him to make an accurate decision on what do next.
- The ball carrier's step needs to be good enough to move the defender so that a weak shoulder or space can be attacked.

#### Post-tackle.

- Support players' lines of running are directly behind the ball carrier.
- The ball carrier steps and goes with acceleration through the contact zone. The offload is alive and a genuine option if the contact zone is won.
- In all offloading post-tackle, the support player needs to be prepared to clean out if/when the ball carrier hits the ground and is surrounded by defenders.
- Strike moves that are planned and where you are looking to score from firstphase possession should have a designated runner looking for the offload in case defenders tackle the first attempt.

### **Dominating the Clean out.**

The motto has to be along the lines of, "Kill or be killed."

**Palms up on arrival at the cleanout** is a simple trigger the get the arriving player(s) into a low, fast, powerful position with eyes open upon entering the ruck. Any defender(s) threatening possession must be hit with a shoulder and removed from the contact area.

### **Counter rucking.**

- In phase play defence, train your halfback to identify a weak bridge over the ball.
- And by using a simple command like "Blitz", you send your guard dogs in.
- The defensive line will then move in one line.
- The guards will drive in hard over the ball and use wrestling techniques to remove bodies.



#### **Cleanout options.**

You need to create your own cleanout language for your team. Once you have given a specific name to each specific action, use all those names at training and in the game. Once players get used to them away from the game, their reactions on match-days will be sharper and quicker.

These need to be drilled constantly at training and in practice and all players in the team need to be ruthless in this aspect of the game. I would certainly advocate giving names to certain plays/scenarios and they should be used in practice and in matches. The name is not important; recognising when to call it is crucial. Some examples that we use are as follows:

**Seal:** A good call for the outside backs to remind them to look in the wide

channels after a ruck is successfully sealed by one of our players. This can be called once the player sealing (safeguarding) the ball is low and

hard over the ball

**Squash:** For a heavy player to remove a lighter player. We call this when an

opposing player is hard and direct on our ball. The call demands

immediate action to get the opponent off the ball.

**Rock:** This is a useful call when it is recognised that the opponents have a big

man over the ball and our first man is lighter. Rather than using direct confrontation, the lighter player will try to remove that heavier player

sideways.

**Blitz:** Attack the opposition ball as soon as they place it on the ground and

try to go and get it. If they form a weak bridge of protection, it is even

more urgent to go in and try to get hands on the ball.

**Twister:** This call is used when the opponents have successfully sealed off the

ball on the ground at the tackle. A direct confrontation will probably not dislodge him, so the effort goes into trying to twist the sealing

player sideways off the ball.

These are just a few of our terms and any team can invent its own set. The key is to have good clear calls from players who can be relied upon to identify the situation; that set of skills must be practised on training nights before being employed in matches.



#### **Loose forwards.**

- Communication patterns between *all* loose forwards is vital on defence.
- Loose forwards' defence patterns from scrums and lineouts need to be drilled by constant practice.
- In practice, run your loose forward trio against the rest of their own team to communicate patterns and reactions.
- Openside flanker's immediate action when our ball is won at a lineout back pedal to a deeper support position.
- Ideally, the openside flanker should never join the lineout drive unless the team is committed to scoring and that is his appointed role.
- The first defensive responsibility of the flanker is to tackle the ball carrier. This has to be a simple priority without too much concern about any other (possibly later) aspect of the game. Too much focus on the turnover (and what *might* happen) can compromise the quality of the tackle.
- Coach your second arriving defender to go for the turnover.
- All players in the team need to have the same high level of breakdown skills.

#### **Dominant defence.**

- Defending player needs to watch the core of the ball carrying player, as that part of his body will move the least. This gives a target that is not moving too much.
- The ball carrier can beat a man with clever feet or by showing the ball, so the focus on the core will help the defender to block out most movements that are there to beat him or get him in a weak position.
- Defending player's first movement is always forward.
- Tackling player needs to get his plant foot close to the ball carrier and use an active shoulder to stop the ball carrier dead.
- Eyes need to be open at all times when tackling (and throughout the tackle) and the tackler will have more chance of success when the front foot placement is close to the intended target.

Many players fall foul of the referee at all levels of the game because they do not know the Laws. It is vital that some time should be spent on getting the basics across to players and a team should have a 'coping' system so that they do not alienate the referee.

# **Understanding breakdown Law.**

- Look at all referees' decisions without any emotion. This will help you see things more clearly.
- Work with the ref and not against him.
- Staying on your feet usually gives you all rights in the game.



- Keep your hands out of the ruck.
- The ideal scenario should go along these lines: first defender put him on the deck; second player go hard and direct on the ball.
- You must enter the breakdown through the gate (i.e. your backside needs to be parallel to your own goal line).
- You must attack the opposition ball when it is on the ground.
- If you have made a clear decision on what you are going to do on arrival at the breakdown, there is going to be less chance of being penalised.

The tackle and breakdown areas can be heavily penalised by referees so it is hugely important to practise good technique that is within the game's Laws.