

HOW TO SOLVE YOUR LINEOUT PROBLEMS

BY

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How many times have you sat down within a team environment and heard the dreaded words, “Why aren’t we winning any lineout ball?” Unfortunately, it’s a common problem that involves many complex factors, but it can all too easily turn into a coach’s nightmare. But do we, as coaches, add to any existing problems by sometimes over-complicating the operation?

We’ve all seen how complex the lineouts are at international and top-flight club level, and this is understandable due to the amount of time the teams devote to that area of the game; it gets time devoted to it because it is a key confrontation area in any major competition. But has it got to be that complicated and that difficult to win ball at the lower amateur level?

There are many potential issues that can cause a lineout to malfunction. The hooker may not be throwing the ball in straight or at the right pace, there may not be enough ball-winning lineout specialists, and team selection and recruitment can all play important parts. But, in spite of any problems that may exist, having the right structure and correct options is something that can be worked on and sorted out fairly quickly on the training pitch.

The first piece of advice that I would offer to a team that isn’t winning any line-out

ball is simple: **shorten your lineout**. This, a fairly simple solution, is something that many teams just don't try, yet it seems fairly obvious that the greater number of players you have in a lineout, the greater the chance you have of losing the ball because there are so many options and factors that seem to conspire to make a lineout fail.

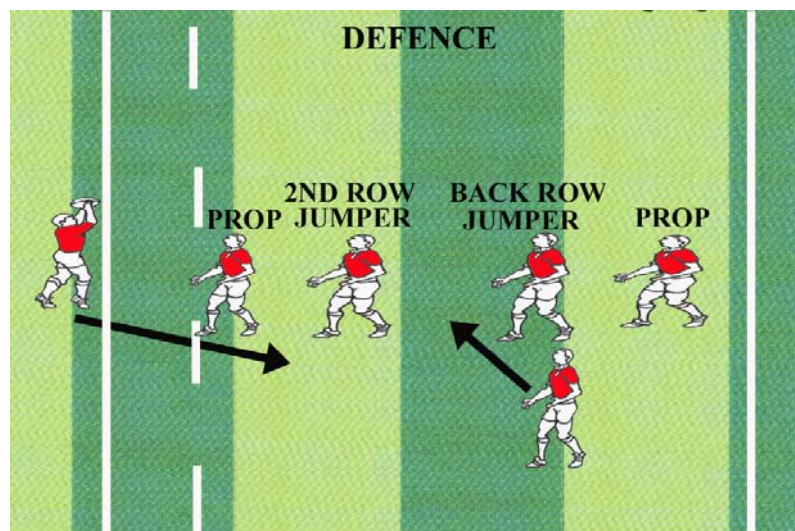
Why is this so in a full lineout?

1. In the normal full lineout, there are more lifters for the jumpers to rely on in order to get in the air and challenge for the ball. Therefore, there are more things to (potentially) go wrong.
2. At the same time, the opponents have more players who are able to jump for your ball, which in itself will unsettle your hooker before he ever throws the ball in.

By taking the simple decision to shorten the lineout, you make it far easier for the referee to see if any infringements are being made by the opposition – and the chances of your winning your own throw are greatly enhanced.

The simplest short lineouts are (1) a four-man and (2) a five-man.

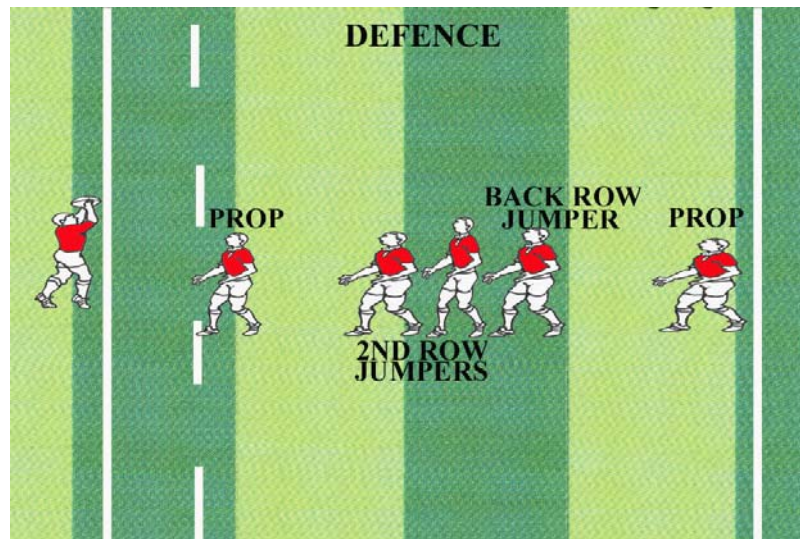
1. Four-man lineout.



- The intended jumper stands in the scrum half position.
- The scrum half stands just inside the fly half.
- The hooker sweeps around into the scrum half's place after the throw.
- The positioning would ideally be (a) prop at 1, (b) second-row jumper at 2, (c) back-row jumper at 3 and (4) prop at 4.

The safe ball would go to 2 and the slightly more risky throw to 3.

2. Five-man lineout.



- The positioning would be (a) prop at 1, (b) second-row jumper at 2, (c) second-row jumper at 3, (d) back-row jumper at 4 and (e) prop at 5.
- Have the middle three players fairly tight with a gap after the front prop and in front of the rear prop.
- If the opponents do not set with you, get on with things pretty quickly. If their main jumper is not active quickly enough, throw straight to the middle. If they mark up, bring in rehearsed options.

The other alternatives to solving your lineout problems are things like quick throw-ins. If you struggle to win lineout ball, why wait for the opposition to form the lineout? Take quick throws and take away the majority of risk of losing the ball. This is relatively risk-free, but is hard work for the back three players as they have to react quickly and take the throw-in before a lineout has formed. This can confuse many opposing sides that might enjoy a methodical game and it certainly breaks up the pattern or regularity. What it takes out of the game is any uncertainty that is all too easily associated with a struggling lineout. But it has to be worked on in training and the back three have to be prepared to get back quickly to retrieve then get the ball quickly back into play. Then the rest of the team has to know what is likely to happen next – so it is not a simple matter of telling three players that they are responsible for quick throw-ins!

When you are in possession and you know that your lineout creaks, you have to devise strategies to ensure that you kick for touch as little as possible. You are playing into the opposition hands if you intentionally take the option of kicking for touch, when you already know that you are likely to be weak at the ensuing lineout. The kicking strategy is going to be very important here and the whole team has to know what is to happen – and they must practise the likely patterns as often as possible. It is easy to say that your team will kick for position rather than a lineout, but what do the other fourteen players do after that kick for a field position? Who does what from a box kick? There has to be structure, which can be practised just as much as the usual lineout practices.

Another potential solution to the problem is movement in the lineout, which can wrong-foot the opposing jumpers and helps teams to win more possession. For

instance, try to fool the opposition into thinking the ball is going to be thrown to a certain jumper and you win the ball somewhere else. This is relatively simple with dummy jumps or looking as if a certain player is going to be lifted. The main jumpers can also change places to add to opponents' confusion and, hopefully, indecision. What it does require is that *all* players in *every* lineout look as if they are going to be used. Too often we see teams with just three interested parties in the lineout and it does not require a great brain to guess where the throw is going.

Before you look at these factors, you must understand why you aren't winning any ball in the first place and for that you will have to go over all the basics of lineout play first. There are a number of important issues:

- The jumping action itself - is it the correct way to jump? Are you getting enough height and using your legs to generate power? Too many jumpers fail to generate height because they are 'heavy' off two feet from a static position – and are, consequently, very heavy for the lifters. It is far better to think of the jump as an action close to the take-off into a springboard dive. There is a big step into a double-footed spring that is accompanied by a dramatic upward surge of both arms, which must keep moving throughout the jump.
- Then, are the lifters doing their jobs properly by getting a good lift at the right time? The front lifter should grip just above the knee on the lower quads while the back lifter gets a solid, wide grip with the thumbs together just below the cheeks of the backside.



The lifters must keep walking to get close to each other so that the lift is a good one; if they are apart, the lift will be low and also very energy-sapping (as in the photograph below).



In a good lift, the back lifter should twist in slightly behind the jumper to protect the possession from the opposition.

Lifting on the shorts should not be encouraged. The fabric of the shorts moves and the actual lift will be very short of its potential maximum. It can also be very painful for the player being lifted (See photograph below).



- What is the hookers throwing like? Has he got the calling structure worked out and is his timing right? There should be two basic calls:
 1. Jumper-triggered call. The jumper is in the air before the ball comes in. It needs to be a fairly fast delivery to beat their front jumper and is fairly simple. At the amateur level it should ensure a regular supply of possession.

2. Hooker-triggered call. This is more complex and can easily go wrong if not practised enough. The ball is in the air when the jumper goes, so the timing and precision of the throw both need to be spot-on.

A team must play to its strengths and if your lineout isn't the best option for your team, then have a game plan that tries to avoid the ball going into touch as much as possible - or you're always going to be fighting a losing battle. Use the back three to avoid having to have some lineouts if that strategy suits what you have available in your team – but make sure it is well practised.

Always be aware of capitalizing on opposition mistakes and get the mentality that most 'mess-up' ball will be yours. You will be surprised how much of this is available in a game.

When you defend the opposition four or five-man lineout lineout, use a mirror defence and just go man-for-man against your opposite number. Get to the lineout early and be prepared to chase your man – wherever he goes. A useful option is to jack up your front jumper in front of theirs, forcing them to use the longer ball over your jacked player. This is a more complex throw and the opposition might just panic and make a mess of their throw.

When you have a penalty kick to touch and an ensuing lineout, pre-call on the way in; this means that the opponents are running at the same time as they are trying to sort out a defence. Get tempo into the play and throw in before the opposition settle. It may look like a simple ploy, but it works – keep opponents moving and guessing.

Whatever you do, do not become obsessed with the numbers on players' backs. Use the best people available for the job. If the means jacking up a scrum half at two in the lineout, go for it and sort out who will play at scrum half for the next phase. Above all, though, practise it!