

# ATTACKING WITH DEFENCE BY HOWARD LYCETT

*The author is a Level 2 coach at Leigh RUFC.*

Whilst watching this season Super14 and Tri Nations competitions this season, it was noticeable that the games had a high turn over of possession, which resulted in points from tries or penalties. As the games progressed, I began to analyse the reasons that led to the turnovers. I initially put it down to poor ball carrying technique or running with a lack of support. It became clear that, although some turnovers were due to poor ball carrying, the majority were forced on the attacking team by good preparation, excellent technique, good communication and ruthless determination from defenders to win the ball back. I now believe that we should amend the saying of “attack with support” to include “attack *and defend* with support.”

I have listed a number of principles, which I believe must be adhered to so that we can make a successful “attacking defence.”

## **The Principles:**

1. Preparation.
2. Tempo.
3. Communication.
4. Trust & Technique.
5. Staying Alive.
6. Aggressive Support.
7. Exploit or Denial.
8. Discipline.

## **1. PREPARATION.**

It goes without saying that coaches should know their players’ strengths and weaknesses. Players with a weakness in their tackling techniques can soon be exposed, therefore the coach needs to go back to basics to improve both defensive skills and confidence. The coaches should also get to know the opposition or learn to make quick assessments of the rival players’ strengths and weaknesses.

Things to look for could be poor body positions, bad ball carriage, one-sided passing weakness and poor decision-making or constant running without support. This preparation was clear during the Tri Nations series, where a number of players were singled out for special treatment by the defence.

## **2. TEMPO.**

It was quite noticeable that the tempo in defence was variable and games often took on different tempos at different times. The tempo could be raised when the attacking side got into certain areas of the field, at predicted times when the attackers showed signs of fatigue or when certain players received the ball.

When the defence line moved up, it did so quickly to reduce attackers' time and space, thus limiting the decision-making time and causing confusion.

It appeared that the Southern Hemisphere sides preferred to take the opposition to ground in the tackle (rather than holding them up) as this gave them a clear defensive line in which they could reorganise their assets. This is very different from the maul, which has a moveable line and leads to defenders being sucked in to repel advances.

### **3. COMMUNICATION.**

It is vital that the defensive team lines up correctly in defence, all runners are marked and responsibilities and tasks given. At times the defence calls of "set" and "press" were often enough to convince the attacking team that the defence was set and ready, when in truth this was not the case. Defensive chatter should be encouraged from an early age with players being free to nominate, for example, "my man" or "support left." Big runners like Jerry Collins were not targeted for quick turnovers as it usually took a gang tackle to stop his momentum, whereas Dan Carter and Lote Tuqiri were channelled into defensive areas where the defenders could nullify the support runners. Good communication is essential for all of this to work.

### **4. TRUST & TECHNIQUE.**

The southern hemisphere sides appear to have reverted to the traditional one-on-one tackling technique of a low hit below the waist to stop momentum and ground the ball carrier as quickly as possible. Front-on tackles are both aggressive and powerful, with the tackler endeavouring not only to stop the ball carrier's momentum but also to lift and drive him back beyond the attacking line to nullify the support players by making them overrun. In the northern hemisphere, the double gang tackle or 'ball and all' tackle is often used to wrap up the ball carrier's attempt to offload.

The single tackler option going to floor quickly puts pressure on both the ball carrier and the referee because of the subsequent actions when the ball is grounded. Many penalties were awarded to the defence when the grounded ball carrier became outnumbered and would (or could) not release the ball.

Double tackler options are usually a lot slower and can lead to the ball carrier remaining on his feet until support arrives to form a maul.

Players must be confident that their team mate will do his job and make the tackle. If the trust is there, the support players will do their job and cover the attacking support players.

Some of the tackling techniques have been modified to try to force ball carriers to make a mistake. One tackle, which has come via American gridiron and rugby league, is a tackle into the area of either the ball-carrying elbow or arm. This tackle forces the arm/elbow back into the ribs, which in many cases forces the ball to spring loose. Similarly, the ball can be attacked in the same way to use the 'bounce' effect of the ball against the attacker's body to cause disruption.

Another technique is the spin tackle, in which the defender impacts on the ball carrier and, in the act of bringing down his man, spins around his body in order to end up in very close contact to the ball as it goes to ground.

The Super 14 players showed great confidence with their team mates' ability to tackle and put the ball carrier down either on or behind the gain line, therefore they didn't need to become involved in the tackle and could focus their attentions on the recovery of the ball.

### **5. STAYING ALIVE.**

The tackle does not end with both players on the ground. The defender must strive to stay alive and get back on his feet to attack the area of the ball. Good foot speed, strength and much agility is required to disengage immediately from the grounded ball carrier; a number of the Super 14 players were observed using the grounded player as leverage to regain their feet and some players used the ball (illegally) to get up. This manoeuvre prevented the ball carrier from placing the ball away from his body.

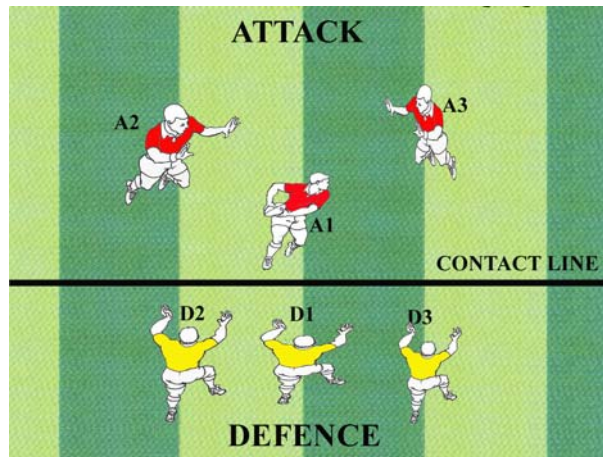
By getting back quickly onto his feet, the defender also regained the initiative. In most of these situations the defender made a snap decision to either attack/steal the ball or disrupt the follow-up by taking on the players trying to clear out the ruck area. When attacking the clear-out, the defender crouched low and attempted to lift and dump the clearers back onto or in the area of the ball in order to slow down the opposition's possession.

### **6. AGGRESSIVE SUPPORT.**

The supporting players must decide when the ball carrier's chance to offload has gone so that they can arrive at the area of the ruck to support the tackler. The most successful turnovers came from the tackler driving the ball carrier to ground back beyond his supporting players. This action immediately put the supporting defenders on the front foot and gave them more options to win the ball and counter-attack. Supporting defenders should arrive at pace in a low, crouched position, anticipating 'the steal.' The Tri Nations showed this in abundance, with all players understanding their role on arrival at the breakdown and they also had great enthusiasm to win the ball.

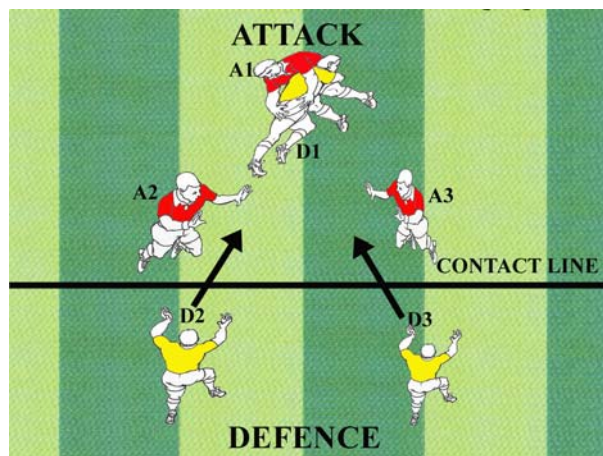
On arrival at the tackle area, the supporting defenders have a number of options, which include 'pick and go', 'pop and support' or pick and await more support.

**DIAGRAM 1.**



In Diagram 1, Attacker 1 is the ball carrier supported by A2 and A3 coming from depth and at pace. The defence line is straight with D1 assuming/deciding that he is the tackler and preparing for that tackle with D2 and D3 covering the attacking support players.

**DIAGRAM 2.**



In Diagram 2, Defender 1 hits, lifts and drives back the ball carrier back beyond the line of contact, negating the support from A2 and 3. This enables his supporting defenders to close in through the gap and attack the now grounded ball.

**7. EXPLOIT or DENIAL (STEAL or STACK).**

The most successful teams exploited this newly created hole in the attack and pushed through more support at pace in order to overload the opposition cover.

D1 gets back on his feet quickly and, in doing so, is allowed to get his hands on the ball. D2 adds support either to stop the grounded ball carrier delaying the ball

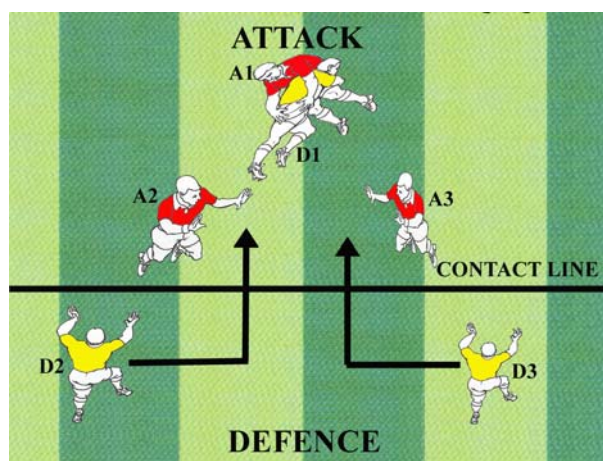
placement, or to repel any attackers trying to clear out the defenders. There is also a real opportunity for the turnover with a pick and go or a pop pass to D3. The gap is now exploited and defence quickly turns into an attack with momentum and tempo that will, in all probability, prevent any reorganisation by the attacking players.

If the tackled player does manage to hit the ground with his knees and elbows first, the method usually used to get the ball back is the squeeze ball technique. This can make things difficult for the arriving defenders because of the narrow gate, which could lead to the referee awarding a penalty for coming in from the sides or because the defender is higher and slightly off balance when stretching over for the ball. The rear of the head, neck and shoulders are exposed to the clear-out players. In this situation, patience is a virtue and the decision could be made to deny or slow down the opposition ball. This is done by hitting the clear-out players low then driving or ‘stacking’ them on top of the ball.

### 8. DISCIPLINE.

One observed problem was a temptation or over eagerness to get hands on the ball, which often led to the award of a penalty. The better teams overcame this by ‘talking’ the ball. This conversation between team mates at times ‘helped’ the referee to decide if/when the ball was free. Another problem was defenders getting to the breakdown at such a speed that they fell over the grounded players, thus giving away a penalty in the process or not being in a position to support or steal the ball. Players needed to read the situation, assess the options and make good decisions. Some of the better exponents of this are the All Blacks hooker Keven Mealamu or the captain Richie McCaw, who both appear to spear in through the gate by running an L shaped line from being Defender 2 or 3. (Diagram 3.)

**DIAGRAM 3.**



### 9. TRAINING.

Basic tackling is the key with the emphasis to hit low and aggressively to put the ball carrier down as quickly as possible. Once this skill has been mastered, foot speed and

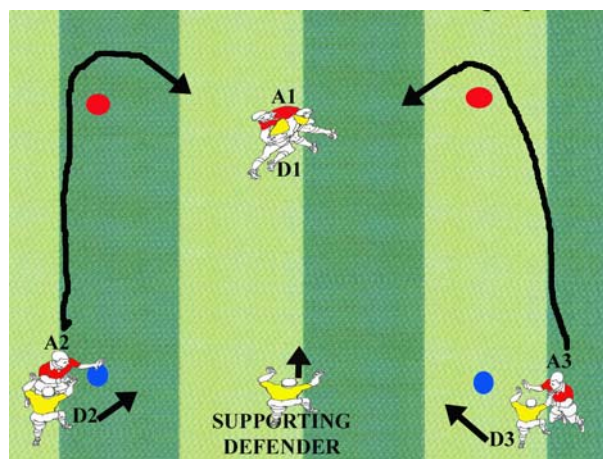


agility are required to get up quickly to prepare for the steal or denial of possession to the tackled team. At all times players must be allowed to exploit what they see.

I would envisage a training package for this might have some/all of the following:

- Basic skills sessions covering all tackles.
- Tackles using pads/bags and introducing a ball.
- One-on-one wrestling that ends up on the floor. Then there is a race between the two players to see who can get to his feet first. After that, a ball can be introduced and the two wrestling players can try to win it after getting back to their feet. Reaction times soon improve.
- Controlled practice game (Diagram 4).

**DIAGRAM 4.**



In this practice game, A1 is tackled by D1. A2 and A3 are ahead of A1 on the blue cones and have to get back around the red cones to support. This gives the defenders D2 and D3 the advantage so that they get success as they do not have to run backwards to support D1.

As the defence improves, the distance between the cones can be reduced so that the attackers are able to get to their tackled player, A1, more quickly.

As the players improve, more numbers can be added to make the practice more game orientated.

This can be made yet more game-like as the coach adds another (preferably different coloured) ball that has to be played on the coach's command. This ball could be placed anywhere near the tackle and keeps players on full alert as they do not have the luxury of setting their sights on a single target too early; rarely is there just one option in a game when a tackle takes place. They must practise to play what they see, so then that skill can be further enhanced when no new ball is introduced after a sequence of tackle situations when an extra ball was introduced.

## CONCLUSIONS.

The principles of team play, *go forward*, *support*, *continuity* and *pressure*, are easily transformed into elements of the attacking defence.

Speed in defence is essential to reduce the opponents' decision-making time and the available space they have in which to move. All of the defence must make good, quick decisions and relay information/instructions to their support players to make the tackle or support the tackle. The tempo of the defensive line can be used to confuse and stifle the attack.

The best tackle is the traditional low, driving front-on tackle which either gets the ball carrier to ground quickly or drives the ball player back beyond the contact line. The whole of the defensive line must then stay fully alert and react quickly and positively to any opposition breakdown.