



**The Rugby League
Coach Education Programme**

The Think Coaching E-Link

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Welcome

This week's issues looks at the very important topic of defence with two coaches from the NRL offering their views on the subject.

There is little doubt that at whatever level of the game you are coaching defensive preparation will take up a considerable part of coaching sessions. You may well be introducing tackling and falling to very young players or you could be preparing a team to play at the very highest level. Either way defensive is of vital importance.



ARTICLE 1

Defence

Steve Folkes Head Coach Canterbury Bulldogs

It had been seen it in two previous NRL grand finals; Craig Fitzgibbon or Adrian Morley rocketing out of the line, like Exocet missiles hell-bent on destruction. Then you'd have the likes of Luke Ricketson and Jason Cayless piling in, throwing their weight behind teammates in smothering gang tackles. Ball-runners would be held up by the first tackler and then driven backwards mercilessly.

So it seemed reasonable that in the lead-up to the 2004 final, the talk was again about how the Roosters would up the ante in defence. There was even the suggestion in some quarters that the Bondi Boys would out-Bulldog the Bulldogs – that they would grind down their opposition and finish over the top.

Statistics showed the Roosters were easily the best defensive team throughout the regular season. Just 368 points conceded in 24 games. Despite being the best attacking team, the Bulldogs were only third-best in points conceded, 123 points adrift of the Roosters and a safe distance behind St George Illawarra.

However, when it came to the crunch, in the game that mattered most, what did the Bulldogs do? They turned the tables on expectation. By keeping the Roosters scoreless for more than half the grand final, they ran away with the premiership 16-13 at a packed Telstra Stadium. Defining images from the game included a desperate last-minute ankle tap by Andrew Ryan and swarming defence which hustled the Roosters into a multitude of handling errors.

As fate would have it, **RLCM** spoke to Bulldogs head coach **Steve Folkes** about defence only weeks prior to the grand final. His attention to detail and unshakeable confidence in the Bulldogs' system provides an insight into why the old Berries were ultimately successful in 2004.

TRADITIONALLY the Bulldogs have been rugby league's bastions of 'Up and in' defence. Big hits, cutting off passes, denying space and time – that's how they've been defined for what seems like ages.

Even when the style was in the minority, the Bulldogs refused to waver. In many ways their approach acutely mirrored their nickname and, thus, a certain aura was created.

Yet even the most assured and knowledgeable of rugby league coaches will tell you that the game is about adaptation as much as anything.

The basic bone structure of 'Up and in' remains to this day, but its appendages have both multiplied and mutated.

"I guess you could say our team pattern, over the years, has been refined," says Folkes.

"It used to be just charge up and smash them under the 5m rule, but attacks are a lot smarter these days.

"The team with the ball has more room to work with and coaches and players are aware of how to exploit different areas, more so than they were in the past.

“You’ve got to move with the times. If something’s not working as well as it once did, you’ve obviously got to change it.”

Folkes is a firm believer that the holistic team aspect of defence is far more important than each individual’s prowess in tackling. He can identify technical flaws in a player’s tackling style and put in place steps to rectify it relatively quickly. However, coordinating and then adjusting a defensive system for the whole squad can prove much more intricate and difficult.

Keeping 13 moving bodies in symbiosis relies on several key factors, such as trust and awareness. No aspect is more vital though than communication.

“Communication is super important,” says Folkes. “It is as important, if not more important, than technique.”

“You can generally tell if the players are on their game by the way they talk and gesture to each other. We do a lot of drills in training based around communication.

“A team can cover myriad defensive lapses if it talks. I say that it is the responsibility of everybody in the side.”

“Coupled with that you have to have a belief in the system and each other. If you start questioning the system it doesn’t work.

“Say if we are caught short on a blind side, my instruction is to hold back for a second and wait for the marker to come across. That doesn’t work if you don’t have communication and belief.”

It is no coincidence that the Bulldogs club aims for a small turnover in personnel each year and maintains identical defensive systems from Jersey Flegg right through to first grade.

These strategies ensure a familiarity between players and a thorough understanding of defensive patterns.

Folkes admits that players coming from clubs where ‘Slide’ defence is employed can take time to adjust and may throw a spanner in the works of a well-oiled machine.

But, to counter this, Folkes also says there are certain players who come across from ‘Slide’ programs as weak defenders, yet shine under the guidelines of the Bulldogs’ confronting style.

One such player was centre Nigel Vagana, now of Cronulla, who arrived at Belmore as a suspect tackler, but emerged as a strong front-on defender after taking time to learn the ropes.

Vagana’s former coach says the Bulldogs’ style was more suited to his naturally aggressive tendencies and brought out the best in the classy Kiwi.

Indeed, aggression is one of the characteristics which underpin the Bulldogs’ defensive ethos.

“It’s all about attitude,” says Folkes. “Aggressive, motivated, enthused – that’s the best defence.”

So what are some of the elements that define the contemporary style of defence employed by the Bulldogs, a “New Millennium Up and In” if you were to label it?

Across the NRL other teams call their similar styles “Up...Up”, implying that the defensive line moves forward, holds for a millisecond, assesses its options, then responds accordingly while maintaining momentum.

Well, plenty of the basics remain the same. Folkes still wants his men standing on the outside of their opposition, tempting rivals to attack them up the middle or target perceived gaps on the fringes.

And he still wants players swarming in and dominating at the point of impact, herding and hurting the team with the ball as much as possible.

“Unless we get caught terribly short we never use ‘Slide’,” says Folkes.

“The biggest factor behind our style is that it is pro-active. We dictate to the ball-runner where he will go rather than the other way around.

“The big thing with ‘Slide’ is that you aren’t going forward and you allow the other team to push you around wherever they want. We don’t want that.”

Unashamedly, Folkes admits size plays a large part in his team’s approach to defence.

Guys such as Willie Mason, Steve Price and Roy Asotasi haven’t risen to prominence by sheer luck. Nor has 105kg lock Andrew Ryan or giant rookie Sonny Bill Williams.

Their large mass, along with relatively quick foot speed, equates to greater momentum in tackles and takes the energy out of attackers both on the ground and off it.

Folkes notes that in years gone by, 100kg-plus players were an exception. Now they are the norm.

Even his backline players hover within range of the century mark.

“The size of blokes these days has just evolved,” says Folkes.

“We are big human beings these days. It’s a fact of life in football now that if you aren’t 16 stone, you are going to struggle.

“You have to be an extremely talented footballer if you are not around that mark. I don’t like to write anyone off, but it’s going to be tough for them.”

The Bulldogs mentor contends that players of the modern era are more attuned to holding size, thanks to greater education, nutrition and weights programs.

Through the pre-season players will do gym work up to half-a-dozen times per week, an exertion that is complemented by an array of vitamins and supplements?

In essence, the development of the monster modern-day player has come with professionalism, providing greater time, resources and information.

These same benefits have extended to another area of defence – ruck work.

Wrestling specialists have been brought on board and detailed attention has been focused on gaining the ascendancy in the play-the-ball.

“The ruck is the most important area of the game,” says Folkes.

“It’s all about being the side that gets momentum and having the other side standing rather than coming at you.

“Good speed at the line, good tackling technique and getting a few blokes in the tackle slows them down.

“From there you’ve got to control the man on the ground. Regulating play-the-ball speed is extremely important. If you go forward and play-the-ball quickly, you will dominate territory nine times out of ten.”

Such is the intricate way in which Folkes approaches his team’s defence, thought has been to a variety of defensive scenarios.

Much the same way as he has had to be adaptable, Folkes expects players to be able to analyse various scenarios and use the required course of action.

“It’s very hard to script every part of the game,” he says. “Part of the reasons we pay these players the big money is because they can make decisions themselves.”

For instance, in most midfield skirmishes where the attack is one-out, Folkes likes the first defender to meet the ball carrier quickly and go around the midriff to stop the momentum.

Defenders which arrive at the tackle thereafter are used to wrap the ball up and produce a more dominant tackle and slow play-the-ball.

Inevitably this allows the attack to offload at various stages, but even then Folkes has broken the approach down to nullify individuals.

He contends that a forward like Ali Lauti’iti will pass 70 per cent of the time he has the ball, with the preference being to force him to offload before the defensive line, rather than at it or through it.

Elsewhere on the paddock, certain formations and strategies change, in line with the Bulldogs’ customized approach to defence.

As with all teams, the Dogs compress their line more when defending down the opposition’s end and gradually spread out as they protect their own territory.

Generally though, to make ‘Up and In’ styles work, you have to be prepared to cover most of the field. Folkes says the negative aspect of spreading out is that decisions become more difficult for defenders the wider they get.

Another aspect Folkes has given consideration is the way in which his tacklers peel away from the play-the-ball.

By piling numbers into tackles, a team can leave itself susceptible to be short-staffed on the next play, as only two defenders can fill the marker positions.

On the occasions where the opposition gets a quick play-the-ball, the Bulldogs have a contingency plan.

“We found in three-men or four-men tackles that if we left the extra men to slide back into the A-defender position (first either side of the ruck), we were getting caught out,” Folkes explains.

“The opposition was scooting in behind and the guy peeling away was getting called offside by the referee.

“We’ve decided now that the guys peeling away run straight back behind the play-the-ball. This covers a gap and gets them back in the line quicker than running diagonally.

“If they get back quicker than expected, then they push the others defenders wider and cover that ‘A’ position.”

When it boils down to it, defence is a philosophy and Folkes has plenty of little sayings, such as "you don't teach scramble defence – that comes from the willingness of the player" and "Sometimes you need to concede ground to stop momentum".

In all, he estimates time spent on defensive work by the Bulldogs would equate to 60 per cent of the workload in training. For the requisite levels of communication and structure to be attained, it is necessary to devote greater time and effort than to attack, which to many players, comes more easily and naturally.

ARTICLE 2

COWBOYS' HOPES HANG ON DEFENCE

By: Robert Rachow

NORTH Queensland already maintains a reputation as a stronghold of the Australian Army, Navy and RAAF.

Now the Cowboys rugby league club is aiming to become the region's fourth defence force.

Aware they conceded a forgettable 803 points in their 2002 campaign, the Cowboys intend on displaying Kokoda-like resilience when they contest the Telstra Premiership this year.

Over an intense pre-season that brought personal bests in strength, muscle mass and skin-fold tests, the realisation was that the extra fitness would count for little if the players could not rework their defensive mindset.

Accordingly, a microscope was placed on individual tackling technique and the overall team structure.

Head coach Graham Murray believes the new systems in place can be simplified to a number of key factors.

"Players now have certain responsibilities," Murray explained after the club's impressive pre-season win over Manly.

"They are basically tied to each other (in defence) and if they can move off the line quickly and get good solid contact, then we're on our way to winning the ruck."

It's the element of being responsible which has been rammed home to the squad.

When Neil Henry joined the Cowboys as assistant coach last year he began scrutinising facets of the team's game that could be improved.

While the club had just completed one of its most successful seasons, holes in the wall were not difficult to find. In defence, Henry recognised that lack of application was mental and physical.

"Our new system is built on a foundation of accountability . . . something that wasn't so clear-cut before," Henry said.

“We've worked hard with the players in regard to decision-making on the edges and also worked hard on strength for when they have to go one-on-one with the bigger sides.

“Basically our aim is to be tighter around the ruck and if teams want to beat us, they have to chance their arm and go around us.

“Our defensive line will be shorter and we'll play an 'up-up' style, which means we'll get off our line quickly, consolidate, see what the opposition is doing with the ball and then move up again.”

Two generic terms which have brought the ire of coaches in recent times are 'Rooster-style defence' and 'sliding defence'

The former has come about in the hype of last year's grand final victory by the gang-tackling Roosters, while the latter is often confused with cover defence or numbering up on the fringes.

Murray and Henry make it clear “In our first trial there were nine penalties in the ruck in the first nine minutes,” Murray said recently when asked of the Roosters.

“If the standard has been set, anybody planning on slowing down the play-the-ball will be penalised out of the game.”

Although not putting four or five defenders into each tackle, the Cowboys will admittedly encourage a 'high energy' defence which focuses on aggression and competitiveness.

Smaller players who were targeted last year -- such as Nathan Fien, Chris Sheppard, Aaron Payne and Matthew Bowen -- will not hide.

Instead they have been instructed how to use rivals' momentum as their greatest ally and taught to read play and improve their individual technique.

“For starters the notion of sliding has been completely eliminated,” Henry said.

“In fact, our players have been told they are not to move laterally unless the ball is past them. Nine-tenths of tackling technique comes down to footwork, getting your feet in close to the target so you can't be beaten by a step.

“You also want to get your head in tight so you can get solid contact . . . play with controlled aggression, but be a competitor.

“A lot of coaches like their defender to get a handle, something to hang on to, such as tackling with your right shoulder and grabbing behind the attacker's knee with your left arm.

“You don't want to lift the attacker too much, but common sense says a bloke on one leg will be easier to stop and then you can use his momentum to rotate him at the point of impact.”

Derided throughout rugby league's history for being as critical to defence as teats are to a bull, wingers form an important part in the Cowboys' new system.

Luckily in Matt Sing and Ty Williams the club has two players who offer great experience and vocal communication.

“I would actually say our wingers have the hardest job defensively of any of our players,” Henry said.

``It's up to them to set how much we compress our defensive line and they call the situation, which then determines the rules we use at that particular spot on the field.

``When you take into account they have to cover for kicks as well, that's a lot to do."

In all, the ultimate plan is to dominate in defence using a higher level of fitness and greater cohesion between teammates.

Should the scheme be successful, in turn, the team stands to benefit in attack from greater possession and field position, furthermore preserving energy.

Coaching staff like to describe the new regime as an honour system.

Cowboy's fans hope to be saluting on a regular basis.

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What are your thoughts about the articles in this issue?

What are your thoughts on Defence?

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