



**The Rugby League
Coach Education Programme**

The Think Coaching E-Link

Issue 10



Welcome to Issue 10 – Offence

Introduction

Previously in “Think Coaching” we have looked at the importance of defensive preparation. In this issue we flip the coin and look at offence. In particular this month's articles look to illustrate how the game is evolving with the emphasis being less and less on rigid structure and more towards player empowerment. More than any topic previously covered we anticipate that this issue will stimulate debate amongst coaches and hopefully will result in future articles that reflect this.

Coach Development

This week saw the announcement of two more coach development projects. Both will be with the Student Rugby League. The first will cater for the organisations performance coaches, while the second is designed for the individual club coaches.



SUCCESSFUL ATTACK

By Grant Bell – Former Head Coach of the North Queensland Cowboys

I am fortunate to have gone through a number of coaching phases in relation to attacking football. If you recall back to the early 80's, attack really revolved around the success that Warren Ryan and Jack Gibson had, and it gave many coaches a strong foundation to build on.

In terms of finding creative ways to score tries, the late 70's through to the mid 80's was very much a time of going against the grain. Once the unlimited tackle rule was scrapped, coaches woke up and said 'Okay we have got to use the football we have got to be prepared to play a little bit'. Then we came to the mid-to-late 80s where we hit this period where defence became more organised and as a result, attack became more structured. Some good things came out of that, but I still think there are a lot of negative tactics that have stemmed from that era which still pervade at all levels of the game today.

I believe there are certain sides that have real trouble getting over the line because of this notion that you need structure if you are going to score. People have a concept of a 'must-do' plan where you have got to go to A before B before C and that will give you a try. They think if they don't do it in that order and aren't organised, then they won't get there. That concerns me a little because I think that the way our players are developing and the way the game is progressing, it really lends itself now to a much more open approach to attack.

Our first principles of attack are to go forward, find a gap and retain the ball, although sometimes I feel there is too much emphasis on retaining the ball. I find that as soon as I tell my players I want them to hold it, that's when our play becomes really negative and our chances of winning go out the back window.

Take a situation at Newcastle a few years ago when Sam Stewart was under instructions not to pass the ball. Stewart was the captain of the team and his duty was to carry the football forward, but never to pass. In this day and age of video analysis, it was diabolical because opposition sides loved it. I can tell you the guys that go on to NRL level defensively say 'This player plays with his right arm, this player offloads with his left arm, this player doesn't offload, this player will push through, this fellow will ball play before the line'.

Now some of you might think it is a lot of information. But if players can't operate mentally at that level and be able to make decisions to nullify play, they don't last very long in first grade. So for the Knights to have Stewart in their side just made the job that much easier for the defence. I'm not blaming anyone in particular here, just trying to exemplify that at that time there was this perception that offloading was too much of a risk; that teams needed 75 - 80% completion on the stats sheet to win. That notion really restricted a lot of what happened in attack.

At the same time along came Wayne Bennett at the Broncos. How much do you think Bennett emphasized ball retention? Not a lot. He talked about the result. He said to his players 'I will back you to try things and I will back you to trust yourself and use your ability'. Consequently they played that way, won a lot of games and were very exciting to watch. Their attack was basically a result of not placing restrictions on their players.

I'll admit I have red sets and green sets, or what I call the yardage sets and football sets. It isn't like the traditional red zone and green zone when there is this imaginary line on the field where our players turn from boring footballers into brilliant footballers. How many times do you see a team play without any skills until they hit halfway, then all of a sudden the players have better hands,

better eyes. It's a bit of a silly concept. My red sets and green sets are based on the situation. If my side have lost the ball behind, had a losing play or thrown a bad ball, then there is not much point in us trying to throw the ball around and create something out of nothing on the next play.

So you have to make the decision to say we will try and build for something and go forward for a couple so we can gain some momentum and slick our minds back. Sometimes it will take all six tackles, so then you look for a restart and try and get a fresh start at the opposition down their end. Or perhaps you will only need to punch two forward before the team is in a good position to attack. It is all subjective. If the opportunity is there, we can play football five metres from our own sideline or tryline. I try and put the notion into my players that they have got a responsibility on the field to interpret what is going on. Obviously the more ball the opposition have, the better chance they have got of beating us, but it is more the quality of what we do with the ball that we have it that is going to determine the result.

Another important aspect is support. How do we get support? It all relates to player movement and what they do off the ball. Most of us at training will practise how to catch the ball, how to pass the ball or how to run with the ball. We do lots and lots of stuff with players about the skills of what to do when the football is in their hands, but it seems we forget about teaching them to how to receive it in an optimum position. How long out of an 80 minute game will the half back have the ball physically in his hands? Between two and four minutes. What about wingers? It is more like 15 seconds for them. We spend all our time teaching them what to do for something which they can do for a maximum of four minutes a game. It's the same with defence. How much time do our lock forwards spend actually tackling, getting on the ground or getting off the ground? No more than five minutes. So out of our weekly training sessions, we spend 95% of our time working on something that we do in total for say eight minutes of an 80 minute game of football. That's 95% of training for 10% of the actual game. What do our players do for the other 90% of the game?

They do all the little things we call 'off the ball play' which is really the most important part of the game. Most people skip it at training because it is very hard to teach. If there is one player you can learn from about 'off the ball play', I'd say it was Terry Lamb. He was always in motion and if you watch video tapes of Lamb, it is very rare that he will get wider than perhaps five metres either side of a particular goal post. He lived in that area – his 'work space' you might call it. It was his duty on both attack and defence to patrol that area and constantly support his teammates.

As a coach doing ball work, you should be watching who is not moving, as opposed to who is moving. Often we tend to get in and we coach way too close to our players.

How much are we really seeing about what our centre is doing when we get in among the ruck? Is he positioned? Is he coming back off the footy? Is he lining up saying 'Here is a space, I am going to go here'? How do we know when we are standing in a ruck obscured by other players? A lot of times we like to give ourselves a rap and like to think we are important by getting close to the players and seeing what effect we can have. But the session doesn't run better because we are there, moving with the play. So get yourselves away, stand back, let them run, stand off and say what is the centre doing? Why is the centre there? Then you are watching the real play.

Successful attack doesn't come from concentrating on ball retention and go forward alone. They are important, but often we make the things important when they are easier to coach. It is honestly very easy to coach someone to pass the ball or to receive the ball or to coach someone to run between markers. Structured play coach's against player movement. Too much structure takes the notion away from your players that they should just go and play football.

Drive past a park during winter and the kids are down there playing footy. How many rules are they playing by? They don't care about the rules, they just want to play. Coaches put rules in because they make us comfortable. We know we have always got that security blanket, but please don't make that your training session in attack.

When I am running attacking simulations I love to make them as competitive as possible. It keeps the players interested and it makes them push themselves to their limit. Sometimes I will say whoever wins gets to pick the penalty for whoever loses. They might say 'Because you lost, you have got 300 sit ups and 150 push ups', so all of a sudden it becomes a real contest. At the senior level I will put my right side against my left side and they play for beers. That challenge puts a different slant on training rather than the boring monotonous stuff.

The harder players try, the more innovative they become as well, which is a good way for them to think.

ARTICLE 2

An Approach To Developing Attacking Strategy

By Ray Unsworth – Director of Coach Education, Rugby Football League

The compilation of this article stems from work done with our performance coaches, and reference should be made to former Warrington, St Helens and Great Britain player David Lyon for his contributions to that process.

If we agree that the start point for defensive preparation is individual tackle technique, then I would suggest that it's no different when formulating your approach to the game with "**ball in hand.**" You can only begin your preparation at the beginning, by identifying the core attacking ingredients that players need to possess, which eventually will underpin your overhaul attacking strategies.

Core skills; such as passing, play the ball, kicking, footwork and lines and angles of run are obvious start points for consideration. But within each of the identified areas, comes huge amounts of work on the technique that underpins every component in each of the recognised skills.

For example if I was to benchmark just one of the skills, passing, then how much work is there to be done in that area alone?

PASSING

The Grip – how to hold the ball

The Carry – one and two handed carries

The Pass – basic pass - short pass - long pass

- spin pass - pass from the floor

- standing pass - moving pass

- weighting the pass - timing the pass

- Selection of pass

The Catch – early – late – standing – moving

And undoubtedly players need to be proficient in every aspect of each component of the skill. And it's the same with all other core activities, because the reality is:

Without mastering the simple skills, it is impossible to take performance to a higher level.

So, core skills work is the foundation of preparation.

Where to next?

POSITIONAL SPECIFIC WORK

What is it?

Quite simply it is the core skills and activities relative to the various playing positions. Which need to be practised in isolation initially and then in combination with other players who carry out similar roles that interact during the game e.g.

Positional specific groupings

Front row – 8 & 10

Back row – 11– 12 & 13

Organisers – 7 – 6 & 9

Centres – 3 & 4

Back triangle – 1 – 2 & 5

Menus of activity relative to each playing position need to be created and implemented into your programme.

By way of example, a programme of practices for a full back may well include; High ball, ground ball, and in goal retrievals, pocket and turn chase returns, ruck and wide play supports.

So, moving on;

Core skills, practised, analysed and refined. Allied to the various playing positions and progressed. What's the next piece of the jigsaw?

SITUATIONAL COACHING

This is the placing of your players into specific game related situations, and allowing them to make decisions based on what is in front of them, what they see.

So therefore there are now three pieces to our game preparation matrix;

(1) What skills do you need? – **core**

(2) How do they relate to the position you play? – **specific**

(3) During the game they manifest themselves in all situations – **situational coaching**

Having put into place the building blocks to support your attacking plans, what's now need is a coat hanger on which to hang it all, we need a;

STRATEGY

Strategies are simply guidelines that give structure to the plans you formulate. They are usually based on principles of play that reflect and display aspects of your coaching philosophy. Strategies should be reviewed and adjusted if necessary, to suit your current thinking as to how the game should be played. But any strategy should be mindful of, and cater for, the skills and abilities, strengths and weaknesses of your playing personnel.

How often you adjust or make changes to your strategy is entirely your call, it may be on a weekly basis or dependent on whom you play. But by and large the infrastructure [principles, stock plays and team vocabulary] will remain the same.

Considerations that could have an impact on your strategy on a regular basis would include such things as;

The opposition – their strength and weakness

Injuries and unavailability to your squad.

The formulation and rotation of your bench.

Match conditions – venue – officials

The score!!!

And I would suggest also that your strategy displays some of these primary coaching objectives;

Go forward

How important is that?
It's a yardage game!

Recognition, reaction and understanding of;

What's in front of you?
Who's in front of you?
Where do you need to carry the football?
Which space do you need to lead into, to cause an effect?

Domination of field position

Create a "platform" to play of

Build and sustain pressure

Create positive finishes

Pressure kicking game
Repeat sets
Score

And finally **PREVIEW** and **REVIEW**.

I can't emphasise enough just how important these two elements are, and indeed based on the information and evidence generated from preview and review, how they become the major cause of adjustment to any of your plans. There are obviously many other considerations when putting together your full attacking strategy that are not covered or indeed only touched upon in this article.

- **Personal qualities.**
- **Leadership.**
- **Roles and responsibilities**

These are the **people** considerations that need to be taken into account.

The various **field plans** that can be utilised to give direction to achieving positions from which to launch sustainable attacks are another consideration.

And if coupled with the important elements of **support play** and **decision making capability**, will only serve to capitalise and maximise any go forward attacking strategies.

Articles 1 and 2 appeared originally in the Rugby League Coaching Magazine and are produced here for educational purposes only by their kind permission.

The Rugby League Coaching Magazine website has a wide variety of products that are useful for coaches. They can be contact via this link <http://www.rlcm.com.au/home.htm>

Have the issues raised in these articles been of any use to you?
Would you like to see further articles on the subject?

Drop us a line at haydn.walker@rfl.uk.com

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