



**The Rugby League  
Coach Education Programme**

**The Think Coaching E-Link**

**Issue 11**



## Welcome to Issue 11 – Winning the ruck

### Introduction

One of the Rugby League Coach Education Programmes most popular STEPs workshops is “Winning the ruck”. In this issue we explore this area of the game with two well written articles. The first of these giving an insight into current St Helens coach Daniel Andersons attitude and philosophy in this area.

### Coach Development

Since the last e-zine was produced we have welcome another 28 subscribers including coaches in Germany. We are also in the middle of the 2005 Regional Performance Camps and we are using this years programme to help to identify twelve coaches for the Coaches Development Camp later in the year.



# Attitude needed in the ruck

By Daniel Anderson & Ashley Bradnam

On TV, radio and in papers media types are incessantly decoding matches into confusing graphs revealing where losing teams lost the plot. “You’ll see it here”, they’ll bawl, as they sketch lavish circles and uneven squares around even more elaborate grids and diagrams, “This is where they fell away in their completion rates”.

The belief is a high completion rate translates into success, which is wrong. Something doesn’t add up! Sure, good ball possession is important, limiting mistakes help and good kick-chases also contribute. But don’t be fooled into believing impressive statistics epitomize impressive performances.

Parramatta coach Brian Smith believes completion rates simply reveal the quantity of ball possession, not the quality. Other coaches agree. The New Zealand Warriors enjoyed one of their best seasons ever in 2001, however their completion rate is nowhere near as good as seasons past. Infact, in 2000, the Warriors finished the year with the best completion rate in the competition, yet sat just off the base of the ladder and well out of finals play offs.

So where does the truth lie. Losing coaches frequently bemoan their victory chances went west ‘On the ground’ (i.e. in the ruck area). So what can coaches do to improve their performance in this crucial area?

“The main thing in this game is attitude”, counters former New Zealand and current St Helens coach Daniel Anderson, “It outweighs all other aspects and I’ll take the right attitude over statistics any day”. No one has derived a graph representing player attitude and is unlikely to ever do so. But Anderson believes if such a statistic was presented it would demonstrate a clear correlation between appropriate attitude and winning. It’s not that Anderson is uninterested in technical aspects of the ruck area rather he sees them as being intertwined with the player’s personal mind-set.

“The main thing about any team winning on the ground for me is how much resolve and how good your attitude is. If you have a real strong attitude and you’re motivated you’ll come out better on the field because you’ll do the things conducive to winning. The ruck is an ugly area – a lot of bodies are in there – and there’s various techniques you can adopt to keep things smooth and quick which would help you play the ball more rapidly for example. The same goes for tackling and offloading and other areas of the ruck – there’s hundreds of little techniques which help you on the ground but the point is it all come back to attitude”.

The meat of Anderson’s message is this: You can teach the player what to do but his attitude will dictate if he does it in battle. “We are constantly trying different drills at training making sure players can still play the ball quickly despite being trapped in heavy traffic or while copping shoulders. We train under different referee interpretations, finding the best evasive methods from the time the ref calls held to the time you play the ball and you still have players all over you. We have found if a player is stronger through the hip and gut area they can get rid of defenders easily and can fight for us to get penalties. Weaker players tend to get pinned longer and those that don’t have the proper techniques also spend longer than they should in the play the ball area and all that adds up to a loss of momentum. The best guy we had at the Warriors in this regard was Kevin Champion and he learned his techniques with a combination of learning the proper techniques and adopting the right attitude over a long period of time”.

Anderson sees every ruck as a contest – in defence or attack. He believes this is one battle that must be won before the game's back is broken. In attack the aim is to play the ball quickly, in defence it's to control the tackle and assert dominance thus providing time for your line. Accordingly one of his aims when he moved across the Tasman was to improve his player's core strength.

"I use the example of a young player on all fours about to play the ball and if you push his hips when he's in an arched position normally he'll just roll over and be turtled. But the seasoned hard player will take the push in the hips and hold his ground – he wins the battle. That's why strong and experienced players are so valuable in the ruck area".

When Anderson talks about dominating the tackle he's referring to the grey area of attacking without the ball. The aim of every defensive system is to stop the ball carrier on contact. If the carrier goes through the defensive line after the point of contact, then that can be counted as a lost tackle.

If you don't dominate a tackle with good technique or player numbers then your defensive line is under pressure to reset and move up. Most defensive systems and ours included aim to stop the forward momentum of the ball carrier as quickly as possible after collision.

Once again though, Anderson reiterates his mantra. "If you don't take the right technique and attitude into the ruck area you'll find yourself giving away penalties. While at the Warriors we once lost to St George Illawarra in the play offs and I don't think we won a ruck all day. Our tackle technique was very weak, we went in too low and the Dragons were always on the front foot. Technically, there's plenty of things we did wrong on the day but the main thing was our attitude was wrong".

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## ARTICLE 2

# The Ruck is the Centre of the Universe

By Owen Dalkeith

You hear many of today's NRL level coaches preaching that the ruck is the centre of the universe. To the novice coach the ruck may not seem as a focal point for the success of their football team. But a team that is constantly beaten on the ground will always be on the back foot. Daniel Anderson has previously spoken about the attitude a player needs when entering the ruck to ensure success. Players must see the ruck as a contest that must be won. They must enter the ruck looking to win. But how do we coach the player to win the ruck?

There are two ways a coach can help his team win the ruck- Technical and Tactical. Firstly lets look how a coach can give the player the physical skills to win the ruck.

### TECHNICAL

#### **Coaching the attacking player in a dominant position.**

When attacking the sole job of the ball carrier is to hit the ground in a strong position preferably with the ball close to the chest and resting on his elbows and knees. The elbows and knees need to be wide enough so as to provide a good base of support and prevent him from being turned in the tackle. From this position the outside leg can be brought forward to a standing position in a single movement therefore speeding the rate at which the ball is played. If the defender is attached to the legs of the attacker have them bring their upper torso and body back towards their ankles before playing the ball. If the defender is attached to the attackers upper torso then the attacker

should tuck drag his legs up under his torso to help him regain his feet quickly. This is ideal situation, of the attacker on elbows and knees, is not always possible.

### **Coaching the attacking player who has been turtled**

Sometimes the defender will win and the attacker will end up on their back. A quick recovery from this point is vital to ensure that the play the ball is quick enough to still put the defence under pressure. Coach the 'turtled' player to bring the knee closest to the ball up to his chest, roll towards the ball and using the outside leg stand up in one motion and play the ball with the other leg. In all play the balls the minimum amount of movements will create a quicker play the ball.

A key point for recovery from a 'turtled' position is to coach your players to remain tight so that their arms and legs are not spread. If the tackled player fights the tackle rigorously and in doing so spreads out he provide the defender with more opportunity to pin him to the ground. Coach your players to stay tight and roll rather than fight.

### **Coaching the defender to slow the speed of the play the ball.**

There are many ways a defender can slow the play the ball and some of these techniques have been getting a large amount of press due to the success of the Sydney Roosters 'gang tackling' and 'pile and peel'. Again the defender must enter the collision with the attacker with the attitude of winning and dominating the advantage line ie the defender must look to be the player moving forward at the point of contact so as to take advantage of the dominant tackle rule. The best possible result for a defending coach is to have 2 or more of his players in the tackle with the attacking player on his back at the point of contact with the ground. To ensure the attacking player is 'turtled' the defender must look to keep the movement in the tackle going and aim to get hold of the attackers far leg or far arm. By grabbing the attacking players far leg or arm and pulling them towards the defender the attacker loses their base of support provided by the attacker's knees/elbows and can be easily turned.

A defender can more easily achieve this goal by turning the player whilst still standing. The defender making initial contact to halt the runner's progress then attacking the edge (shoulders/arms) of the attacker to turn them in the air.

## **TACTICAL**

### **Coaching the team to win the ruck in attack**

Movement around the ruck and variation in ruck plays is the best way to win the ruck in attack. This is due to the fact that good movement and variation around the ruck will cause the defenders to make more tackles off balance. When a defender is off balance the height of their target area is lower giving the ascendancy to the attacking player and allowing him to fall in a strong position. Good off the ball running also makes it more difficult for defending teams to commit more players to the tackle.

Secondly encouraging second phase use of the ball will provide your team with a chance to attack a defence that is retreating and not able to stack the attacking player with defenders.

### **Coaching the team to win the ruck in defence**

A coach can prepare his team well to win the ruck in defence especially using the new dominant tackle rule to his advantage. Tactically using more players in the tackle will more often than not cause the tackled player to move backwards at the point of attack and therefore give the defenders longer to regain their feet.

Also by placing more players in the tackle and slowly peeling (pile and peel/stack release) of one at a time ruck speed can be slowed. Another tactic that is effectively used by the Sydney Roosters is to have two defenders dance with the attacker effectively keeping them off the ground and walking them back. Therefore the tackle is not completed and although the attacker is contained

and the defending team can retreat the 10 metres. This is more effective when a larger defender is tackling a smaller player.

Finally with all the techniques and tactics used by coaches and players today the ruck contest in the end still goes back to which player has a more determined attitude when contesting the ruck. The player who enters the ruck with the correct attitude will win more rucks than they lose.

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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](mailto:haydn.walker@rfl.uk.com)

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