

The Rugby League
Coach Education Programme

The Think Coaching E-Link



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Introduction

Welcome to issue twenty which you will notice has a brand new look incorporating the RFL's new branding. In this issue we will once again look at defence with one of our articles being an interview with the new Celtic Crusaders coach John Dixon. In addition we have an article by Ricky Stuart the Australian national coach written when he was head coach at the Sydney Roosters.

Coach Development News

In the last couple of weeks a coach development project has been launched in partnership with the South Yorkshire Service Area with an induction at the English Institute of Sport. A full programme of activities is now in place that will facilitate the coaches' development.

Subscribers to this e-zine now number over eleven hundred and continue to grow.



ARTICLE 1

Absorbing Pressure

By Ricky Stuart – Article written by Ashley Bradnam

A team's aptitude for creating and sustaining pressure on the opposition often determines the result of the match. Limiting mistakes, controlling field position and ball possession, completing sets of six and concluding them in a dominant field location undoubtedly contribute to reaping winning returns. Conversely, the ability to absorb pressure plays a crucial role. It's no good cracking through the opposition if they simply crack you right back. The top teams can sop up seemingly relentless raids on their own line, tackle after tackle, set after set. Some coaches call it the ability to attack in defence. There's no doubt it can play a significant role in dictating the outcomes of contests. So how do you coach it?

"It's a matter of creating the consistency in creating and absorbing pressure' says Sydney Roosters coach Ricky Stuart. 'You can't have one without the other and be successful. Firstly, if you are consistently under pressure there's a reason for it and that needs to be identified immediately – it might be because you're turning the ball over or kicking poorly – but secondly, if you are under attack you need to be able to defend it and see the battle out".

It's often proposed the best result to the completion of a set (apart from scoring) is to gain a repeat set. Deftly placed grubbers into the in goal have become customary by way of achieving this and few NRL teams don't have players who excel in executing them. It's therefore to be expected that at some stage in a match a side should expect to face repeat sets coming off their own line. Quite often it's during this pressure situation that the game's result will become known. If the attacking team can turn pressure into points it gives them greater confidence of achieving a similar result the next time they venture 'downtown', however, if the defending side sustains the pressure continuously, it can break the back of the attacking team who seem to throw their hands in air and scream 'how can we get through?'

The key Stuart believes lies in the mindset of the defenders.

"It all depends on how you approach it mentally' says Stuart. 'I say to my players don't look at it as a whole set of six. Just say to yourself I have to make a tackle here, just one tackle. You never see a set of six where one player makes all the tackles – it gets shared around. You only have to make one tackle, or sometimes two. So by cutting your processes down to achieve the result the entire team benefits. If they (the opposition) get another set of six at the end of the set then you have to say to yourself it's time to make another tackle. And it just keeps going until they either score or you get the ball back. It's a contest".

Stuart advises players to use the time between the repeat sets (i.e. waiting for the drop out) to regroup and refocus on the upcoming tirade. Unyielding defence promotes mistakes from the opposition and Stuart considers communication central to any defensive structure.

"The only time you stop communicating is when you are fatigued and you can't talk. If you can't talk you're being lazy and then you're not thinking correctly. I'm a firm believer in communicating through the entire line of defence and if you are, you're stronger because of it".

As a player Stuart's kicking game was unparalleled. He controlled matches with long, pinpoint perfect torpedo punts. As a coach he understands the value a first-class kicker can bring to the team, especially in pressure circumstances. He stresses the importance of getting away a good kick and then making that first tackle as far away from the try line as possible.

"I can see what our mindset is like from watching the drop kick. If we've got a poor drop kick it's because we're really fatigued and struggling. If the kicker doesn't have the energy to kick the ball, what hope do we have in defending our line? Individual performance creates team performance and the kicker has the responsibility to make his kick as long as possible to help out the team. If he doesn't then he's letting us down. The kicker only has one job to do and he's got to make sure he does it correctly. If he gets away a good kick it lifts the morale of the rest of the players".

Stuart instructs his kicker to aim for the halfway line about 15 metres in from the touchline. He aims in that direction because it allows the kicker to shoot straighter, which assists in gaining distance. But again, he repeats his mantra about attitude.

"That's the thing that will ultimately make the difference. You can get a great kick away, but if you don't then back that up with the right attitude in defence you'll pay for it. Often in situations like this, the team will be forced to scramble; be desperate to make the tackles and get where they have to be. All that comes down to is attitude – you don't have good desperation if you've got poor attitude. You won't apply or absorb pressure if you're attitude is poor. It's as simple as that.



Decisions Maketh The Defender

By John Dixon

“He can’t tackle - he can tackle. He is a poor defender - he is a good defender.”

Such comments are heard on the sidelines and in selection panel meetings throughout the year. Though tackling and defending are in many ways synonymous, good coaches know teams and individuals need coaching to be able to do both.

In this article John Dixon sets out some of his philosophy on defence.

DIXON: Being a defender is a broad encompassing thing as opposed to just being a good tackler. The two are interwoven. To be able to defend, you have to be able to tackle. One on one you have to be able to make the tackle. A big man has to be able to tackle a small man; a small man has to be able to tackle a big man. A slow man has to be able to close down on a nifty little player. These are just some of the combinations that make our game so much of a challenge.

Sometimes though, people can tackle but they are not necessarily good at defending. The two are not mutually exclusive, but one is a sub-set of the other. To be a good defender, you must be able to tackle. However, being able to tackle, isn’t all that is needed to make you a good defender.

So the player has mastered his tackling technique. What factors determine that he can be a good defender?

DIXON: Attitude is a key. The desire to make the tackle no matter what the circumstance. Things like decision-making come into it as well, in terms of the ability to turn up in the defensive zone and then make the right decision. This is linked to anticipation. This is the ability of the defender to know the ball is going to arrive at that moment and know that it’s a tackle he can make, or know the ball is going to arrive a moment too early and say I’ve got to hold off here and push on to the next player. Communicating with other players around and ahead of you is another factor so the key things are attitude, decision-making, anticipation and communication.

How do you instill these skills into the good tackler to make him into a good defender? The player has a lot of decisions to make out there, so can you drill them on being a defender?

DIXON: It’s innate in some people. It’s like the good ball player. They see things and they’ve time and I think a good defender has got that innate ability as well. But no one is a closed book. At any level, we can ask that our players make good decisions so we should be able to drill and teach decision-making in a team system and have some success. We can set up scenarios and ask, “Do you tackle this player or do you tackle that player? What are the cues and signals that say this is the player to take?”

You have to cover the whole gambit and there is a host of things in that. You’ve got to cover where the attackers physically outweigh your defensive players and where there is a numerical imbalance between attackers and defenders. You have to teach young players how to defend off a scrum and how to do that effectively in different areas of the field. There are hundreds of scenarios so you can’t cover them all every time but you can and should work on players making good decisions in a variety of situations that are likely to come up in a game.

Sometimes the decisions will be reactive ones in terms of the line is broken, so how do we react and how do we respond to cover the breach? Sometimes they might be pro-active. This now is the situation where we can gain ascendancy when they've got the ball because we can get up, make a tackle, dominate the tackle and jam them into their own defensive corner.

You mentioned different areas of the field. What are some of the decision-making situations there?

DIXON: You might be defending your own line, or have the opposition pinned on their line. There are different decisions to be made. When you defend on your line, the best place to defend is off your line. You need to push off the line and get out there and take their time and space and reduce their potency by getting amongst them as quickly as you can. Their mindset is that they've got the yards behind them so now they've got depth and width. Defensive decisions here have to be good because there is no margin for error.

When you have the opposition coming out of their own quarter, their thought processes are primarily about ball retention, momentum and the kick on the last play. A fast moving defensive line can exert real pressure here. There are still decisions to be made. Your side does have room to compensate if there is a defensive error but down on the opposition's line you are probably talking about attacking defence. Really, you are trying to attack the ball with your defence. Different decisions are being made when compared to defending your own line. The aim is to be as aggressive and as dominating as you can. This has to be done along with the decision not to do something that draws the penalty and allows the opposition a soft get out.

Situations arise all over the park. Take defending a last play in the middle of the field. The team may have a player designated to harass the kicker. The rest of the defensive line is faced with a decision when to pull back off the footy because they need to get back for the kick return. A player, playing in the centres, should wait until they kick or shift the ball. He could be faced with the situation where he has attackers coming down his side and he doesn't have the wingman outside him because he has retreated down field for the kick. That's where the good defenders, whatever the situation, come up with good answers. The fact that they can tackle doesn't necessarily enable them to come up with the answers. It is the decision-making that counts. Even the kind of tackle can be a vital decision. Do you tackle high through the ball or low around the legs? Often a player goes high and gets pushed off. In most of these instances, the player should have gone in low and completed the tackle. However, in another situation going in high may have been the right decision because at that point in time a high tackle would have stopped the ball and the offload. In a game recently, I saw a try scored because both players tackled low on the same ball- carrier. Both players made a good tackle in terms of low-tackling technique but the tackle didn't shut the ball down. The offload came and a try was scored. The technique for a low tackle was right but the decision by both players to tackle low, instead of one tackling through the ball, was wrong.

This is where your video analysis can be used. You have a look at that situation with the player/s and discuss what they did, why they did it and what could have been done differently. The players can see the vision, talk through the decision they made and hopefully be better for it in the future.

In defence, everybody should understand their role in the line and how the responsibilities of that role respond to varying situations. However even within a rigid defensive pattern there can and should be allowances for players to make decisions 'outside the box'. Within a team structure a player should be able to say, "I can read the play and I can make a decision that the place for me to be is right here, right now, as opposed to the team defensive system which may demand that I stay here and hold the line or push up."

Because he can read the play, in the situation that has arisen this good defender says the best thing to do now is break the pattern and make the tackle. Players will make mistakes with this kind of decision but through analysis and practice they can and will make better decisions and thus become more effective defenders

What drills would you use to have players work on to be a good defender?

DIXON: I don't think there is any magic with drills. It's technique and then the numbers game. It starts with one on one. Then it goes to two on one and two on one in small spaces and two on one in large spaces. Then it goes two on two and three defenders on two attackers and so on. The drill is built up to try and get the players in different field positions under different scenarios and reacting defensively in those situations. You also have to work with the size factor. The small player has to match up against the bigger player and the big players against the smaller more agile ones.

For the small player the challenge is to be effective when tackling the bigger players. The big player is not going to go around the small man but he has to be able to cope with the fact that his opponent is large and has to be able to tackle him with some dominance. He has to be effective on him when he tackles. In some situations he can't just go in low around his legs when the ball carrier hits the line because there will be an offload or the quick play the ball. But you don't hide that small player away. You work on his technique and his decision-making and you work hard on the troops around him to provide support.

We don't want to lose those smaller players. They are so valuable in our game because they ring Alarm bells in defenders' minds, particularly the bigger forwards. That's the wonderful thing about our game. You want those little blokes. What we have to do is find the strategy that is best for them - a strategy that allows him to contribute both in attack and defence. It is not just the small player you have to work with. There is a flip side to the coin. You have the big player who is strong, carries the ball well but is poor laterally in the defensive line. He is as equally a problem as the small player and requires equal amounts of coaching to overcome his shortfalls. They tend not to be found out as often because generally they've got more troops around them. But at the back end of both the first and second half of the game, players around him have to be alert when he is lined up against the smaller, spontaneous attacker. His lateral movement may not be good and the smaller player poses a real threat.

So what do we conclude from all this: To be a good defender, you not only need good tackling technique but attitude, communication and, above all, good decision-making.

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