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Let's Talk Tackling

By Gary Roberts

The game of Rugby league consists of two main principles and from these two principles the game evolves –

Attack and Defence.

Celtic Crusaders and former Brisbane Broncos Assistant Coach John Dixon describes on how the Broncos want their younger players to tackle as they move through the grades.

Firstly the legendary coach Jack Gibson explains about defence in Roy Masters' Book 'Inside League' about Defence training sessions during the 1970's.

“Now the modern coach is really conscious of defence. In past days selectors were only worried about whether a player could run the ball. It did not matter if he couldn't tackle as long as he could advance it.”

“But with our defence the boy who could run the football wasn't so successful because week after week we would jam our defence. We made that our number one priority. We gave recognition to players who went well in defence. I'd read it out 'He made 17 tackles', 'He made three in a row'.

“We drilled at it because, in the old days, not that long ago, if you went to football training there was no such thing as spending one minute on defence. They would spend one and a half hours running the football, but on Sunday you are lucky to have the ball 50% of the time.”

“In reality, at training the coach should spend 50% of the time on defence and 50% on attack. That is what happens on game day.”

From the book 'Inside League' by Roy Masters printed 1990. Jack Gibson back then may have been the first Rugby League coach in Australia to pick up on the importance on defence in the game and spent equal time on the training paddock involving defence and attack during the same session.

Now back to the present, we hear of footwork, fast feet, same leg same side, head in close, ball and all, smother tackles, edge defenders, ABC defenders all terminology that refers to the art of the tackle and tackling, a terminology that is reasonably new to the modern game.

Top coaches are always looking for a slight edge to get their club a win in the tough world of professional Rugby League, thus the terminology and jargon has evolved.

But, is the defensive game that is played at the highest level and the jargon used starting to get in the way of teaching the game at the junior level, and does this assist in the development of players at the junior level?

John Dixon explains it simply, he advises that the systems and patterns that are played in the professional game should be left up there with the super coaches with Bennett, Smith, Chris and Daniel Anderson and the like, as they strive to find a small advantage.

The junior game is about developing and educating players, for the long term and a correct technique must be showed at a junior level before young players move on to the senior level.

John Dixon explains, “I think the tackle is important. But coaches have gone away from the tackle and we

have got very much involved in defensive systems and patterns and all sorts of things, and I think the basic tackle, which is the 'One on One' tackle, has been neglected.

"One of the reasons that 'One on One' tackling does not receive enough attention is that it is difficult to produce game-like tackling at training. Tackling hurts, so a lot of coaches at junior and senior level give insufficient time to teaching and practicing the fundamentals skills of 'One on One' tackling. Ways need to be found to include basic tackling techniques [no matter how brief] in most sessions."

"It does not matter how big players are, or how small they are, small players will have to tackle big guys and the big guys will tackle small, elusive guys. If a player cannot make a tackle 'One on One', then I know he is in strife. At the Broncos we had a great emphasis on making the tackle and being able to tackle everybody, whether they are big, fast, slow, little or whatever.

The method of tackling had changed over the years, in past days all children were taught how to do 'front on', 'side on' and 'rear' tackles all around the legs, beginning with arms and hands around the buttocks area with the head behind or at the side and bringing the player to the ground by sliding down his legs with clasped arms, and the game saw great tacklers develop and mature through this method. Possibly the best ever at this type of tackle was the great cover defender Johnny Raper. A tackle around the chest area 'front on' was rarely contemplated.

Nowadays figures indicate that only 10% of tackles are around the legs and 90% are around the chest area, the aim is to stop the ball being advanced. Dixon differs with the method in vogue today, of using the high tackle to stop the ball first; he states that at junior level the first action is to stop the ball runner.

"I look at it differently, maybe at the Broncos we coach the junior players different to most. I don't see a Tackle that way [chest high, first] some people do emphasise stopping the ball initially, but we work on Primarily stopping the ball runner first and then secondly we stop the ball."

"The majority of tackles nowadays are front-on, in the days gone by, we had more emphasis on side on tackles and later we taught blocking tackles when the players began coming more forward."

"So, for today's game, the players need to be strong with their head lead and strong with shoulder contact for all tackles whether front on, side on, or rear and they have to be very good at it. All tackles stem from the players ability initially to make good shoulder contact in a one on one tackle."

"At the Broncos our primary target zone is from the belt line up and below where the ball is carried [midriff] and that is for all tackles. The midriff area is a part the body that the player moves the least.

The proof of the target zone of where to tackle is emphasised by the magical ex Bronco ball runner Steve Renouf, who repeatedly when attempted to be tackled low by a defender showed what a swerve of the hips and a strong fend could do for an defending player who came in too low to tackle the champion centre.

"The beltline down to the knees was the traditional area target zone in the past for a 'side on' tackle, but a player still has movement there, they can open their body up or they can swivel their hips like Renouf would do and beat you with a fend if a defender is committed to that lower target area."

Footwork is another really key part of being a good defender; it can be underestimated in tackling.

Although some great Bronco players such as Trevor 'The Axe' Gillmeister and Gavin Allen could launch at a tackle with two feet planted firmly on the ground it has been proven that this is not the footwork technique used commonly in the modern game.

Dixon continues, “Many tackles are missed because players don’t use their feet ‘to get to the tackle. Players will plant their feet or place their feet wide apart and waiting for the ball carrier to come to them, this is not good technique. As a general rule the best defenders are on the balls of their feet and have their feet fairly close together and have one foot up and one-foot back.”

“A defender is normally at the mercy of the ball carrier if the defender plants his feet too early. The defender can get bumped, run over, have no drive or cannot move laterally. This is where the ‘jumper grabbers’ come from, or the tackle is only shoulder contact with no leg drive or an arm outstretched attempting to implement a tackle, rather than moving the defenders whole body into the tackle.”

”The defender should take short steps to the tackle, so that if the ball runner does shift, the defender can take his feet to where he wants to go”.

”The Broncos don’t over emphasise which leg the defender should have forward in the tackle, whether it is same leg/same shoulder or opposite leg and shoulder. The key is to get the front foot in close to the ball carrier. Weight distribution is needed through the leg drive, so if it is the near leg or the off leg it doesn’t make much difference to us.”



Winning The Tackle

By Chris Fullarton

Winning the tackle is a huge factor in winning the game. More and more coaches are concentrating on dominating the tackle not just when defending but also in attack. Coaches are scrutinising hit up statistics looking at the number of play the ball wins.

Basically, a play the ball win is when the ball carrier is able to land on elbows and knees and square on to the D line, enabling him to play the ball before the defence is set.

The player requires several skills to achieve this. They include speed, strength, footwork, timing and ball control. Team skills include support play with options to reduce the number of defenders involved in the tackle.

The player hitting the line square on has a far better chance of achieving a play the ball win. Also a sideways runner is more likely to get one under the ribs or be anchored, held up and gang tackled. It is a tough game but by using footwork to get between defenders and going to the line square on, you greatly improve your chances of simply not being bashed up.

Of course, several other factors such as field position must be taken into account.

Take exit sets by our red zone for instance. The plays more commonly used here are dummy half scoots and ruck plays usually against a compressed defence. The Roosters are good at being able to anchor and frog march a ball carrier running a poor line or trying to stand in the tackle rather than find his front.

Rhys Wesser, a most likely first receiver from a kick return or dummy half scoot, is adept at reading when to run, fight the tackle or promote the next play by way of a play the ball win. Dominant play the ball wins on exits are essential in building momentum for the kick.

In the green zone, a good go forward on tackles one, two or three should create opportunities for a spread against a D line that is not set. Forwards with good agility and speed are a bonus but good strength, footwork and balance are essential.

Adrian Morley is a great example of a dominant, skilled, ball carrying forward who consistently stays square on and wins the play the ball. Glen Lazarus is another example. While not the fastest forward, he was very strong, balanced and with good footwork at the line. He knew how to stay square and land on his front.

The required line running, enabling the player to go square at the line, is dependant upon the defensive pattern being used. Add to this the fact that most teams will adjust their defensive pattern to jam or slide and it is evident that running lines have to be adjusted also. Good line running basically attempts to off balance or misalign defenders. Remember the goal is to be square at the line when contact is made.

If the defence is jamming up and in, the initial running line is to the inside shoulder creating a defensive reaction, then step to the outside and square at the line. If the defence is sliding, angle to the outside shoulder then step to the inside and square at the line.

Unfortunately, it appears to be more of a natural instinct for players to want to run around the defence than use footwork and run through spaces. Simple and competitive designer games can reinforce these skills.

For example:

- (a) If the ball carrier runs sideways and does not straighten to pass or hit the line, it is a turnover.
- (b) Three metre defensive line - one on one tackles. If the ball carrier does not stay square and find his front in the tackle, it is a turnover.

Players soon become aware of what is required. Chris was ready to go on but we had the point. There is much more to it than just taking the tackle. The player in attack has to win the tackle and a big factor in this is to be square when you get there.

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