

The Rugby League
Coach Education Programme

The Think Coaching E-Link



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Introduction

First of all a “Happy New Year” from everyone in the Coach Education Department. 2007 will be an exciting and challenging year for everyone involved in coaching Rugby League.

The big story will be the launching of the new UKCC courses. These are now up and running following the successful pilots that ran in October and November. More information is available on the website. In addition to the courses themselves the Bridging Packs for existing coaches will finally be available in the next few weeks.

On the Coach Development front there will again be a regional coaching conference in Cumbria, With the possibility of other regional events. Further STEPs workshop are also being developed. Coach Development Camp will again happen in October along with the second Women and Girls Coaching Conference.

Representative Coaching Opportunity

The Civil Service Rugby League team is looking for a coach for the 2007 season. The team will play the RAF, GB Police and GB Students in the Skanska Cup.

Anyone interested in coaching the team should submit their cv to Michael Mainon at michael.mainon@ntlworld.com



The Evolution of Offence

By Michael Hagen (Head Coach Parramatta Eels)

Contrast the early and mid 80s with our present time. What do you see different about the game of rugby league? Sure the basics are still run, pass and tackle but specifically what have you noticed that has changed in attack?

On a very simplistic note, we can say points scored. Harking back to that earlier era, rugby league played host to some willing, yet low-scoring affairs, most notably in Grand Finals. These days the action is more free flowing and rarely do we see both teams score less than 10 points.

To analyse the matter at a deeper level, certain avenues have been pursued by coaches to both exploit and counter the growing number of tries scored. The neat tactical interplay may be lost on those oblivious to rugby league's finer points, but not to those who have had to stay abreast of all trends.

Michael Hagen is one such person. As Newcastle head coach since 2001, he has enjoyed having some of the greatest attacking rugby league weapons at his disposal – the likes of Johns, Gidley, Tahu, Kennedy and previously MacDougall. Yet, in the same way, he has refined and assisted their strike power, he has closely watched and plotted against the offensive prowess of other stars throughout the NRL.

Hagen spoke recently about effective attack and how it has evolved in the modern age.

There is no doubting the single biggest influence on offensive structures in the last two decades has been the introduction of the 10-metre rule. When Michael Hagen talks about a brief history of attack, it's at the very forefront of his mind. It falls in the first of two categories he mentions – obvious and subtle changes to league tactics. Doubling the distance from the play-the-ball to the defensive line has no doubt revolutionised the way the game has been played. Indeed, that was the primary intention for amending the laws.

"It really was a war of attrition under the old five metres," Hagen says.

"Rugby league back then was defence-orientated, predominantly because of the space between the two sides.

"It was nice, hard footy, but it could also be dour, which wasn't fun for the spectators, the players or coaches, none of whom could show their full array of talents."

Not surprisingly, the teams that took fullest advantage of the extra room were those with good ball distributors and talented outside backs. When the rule change came into effect in season 1993, Brisbane had halves Allan Langer and Kevin Walters, offset by flying backs Steve Renouf, Willie Carne, Michael Hancock, Chris Johns and Julian O'Neill. The following season Canberra became Premiers with Ricky Stuart, Laurie Daley, Mal Meninga, Ruben Wiki, Ken Nagas, Noa Nadruku and Brett Mullins in its back line. Neither the Raiders nor Broncos could exactly be accused of lacking skill.

“Those teams had very athletic players,” Hagan says. “Brisbane and Canberra revolutionised the way the game was played.”

“If you compare them to the type of team Newcastle had at that stage, the Knights were built around hard forwards.”

“The irony was that they focused a lot on slowing the speed of the game down when everyone else was getting quicker. The game itself had evolved past that point and had changed the requirements for success.”

These days the Newcastle team has a highly potent balance in its line-up. There are still gritty forwards who revel in the centre of the park, but there is unquestionably a slant towards attack.

In comparing the old Knights’ forward pack to the new one, Hagan says, that overall, they are roughly on a par. However, the present side is more diverse in its attributes and available options. It must be said that league’s present attacking outlook is not entirely derived from the introduction of the 10-metre rule. Other rule changes and a shift towards fulltime professionalism have also shaped the way we play the game.

The abolition of raking in the play-the-ball, neutralization of scrums, policing of one-on-one steals and recent benefit of the doubt laws all favour the attacking team.

We have also seen catching on the full in-goal become a 20m restart, whereas under previous rules the most likely result would be a goal line dropout. Interchange laws have shifted significantly, going through an unlimited phase before today’s 12-man guidelines.

About the only rule changes that expressly favour the defending team are the dominant tackle and a slight alteration of the held-in-goal directives.

Hagan says the NRL naturally “lends itself to attacking teams”, and of all the laws introduced or altered, a personal favourite is the 40-20 rule.

“I think the 40-20 rewards a good attacking attitude,” he says.

“It adds another dimension to the game by allowing the momentum to shift so suddenly. Any team that is on the back foot on their own line can gamble and have a chance at another set so close (to the opposition line). You can effectively dig yourself out of a hole with it.”

“I know our stats show that when we get within the opposition’s 10-metre line, we score 80 per cent of the time. I think that’s similar around the league, so a 40-20 should put you at least close to that mark.”

While many things may change, some priorities stay the same. Hagan believes there are factors, Which have always been – and will be for generations – vital to effective, attacking rugby league.

They are as follows:

- High possession percentage
- Effective control of the football
- High completion rate of sets

- The ability to compound pressure on the defence
- Good field position followed by an accurate kick
- Speed at the play-the-ball
- Good body position

If we were to look for a prime example of when these factors have helped a team win against the odds, there would be no need to search further than the 2001 Grand Final. Back then, Hagan was in his first year as an NRL head coach. The transition to the elite level had been made slightly easier by the alteration of the interchange laws at the start of the season.

Therefore, Hagan was on equal footing with other coaches in at least one important facet of the game.

However, countering this was the continued emergence of the Parramatta Eels under Brian Smith. The Eels won the Minor Premiership unchallenged and were strong across the park, in both attack and defence. It was thought they would win the title convincingly on form shown throughout the fixture rounds. Yet, when they faced off against Newcastle in the final, everything came undone within 40 minutes. The Knights led 24-0 at halftime and half Andrew Johns was running riot on the back of groundwork from the likes of Ben Kennedy, Steve Simpson and Bill Peden.

Looking back, it is easy to say that Newcastle had a quality team that should have worried the Eels. At the time in question though, Parramatta had such momentum and solidarity that they appeared impenetrable. Put simply, Newcastle was able to put its nose in front on the back of the basic attacking philosophies listed above. Most noticeably they starved Parramatta of possession and territory so that no matter how good the Eels were playing; it was largely limited to working the ball out of their own half. And this was after multiple sets in defence.

Ultimately it was a case of Newcastle defending through their attack, posting tries and blunting the Eels' offence by running them ragged – another milestone in the evolution of attack.

This month's article first appeared in the RLCM and appears here by kind permission. The Rugby League Coaching Magazine website has a wide variety of products that are useful for coaches. They can be contacted via this link <http://www.rlcm.com.au/home.htm>

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

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