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Teaching the Game One Coach's Approach

It is intriguing to note that, with one wonderful exception named Tracy, I've been coaching college rugby since before any of my players were born. While much of what a coach sees and hears, adopts and steals, adapts and modifies, or even comes up with on his own is worthless, I've been reinforced on some points, and those will be the content of this series. For now the "series" will deal only with handling. If feedback suggests interest, or even expressions of ireful disagreement, I might go on to write, at the "player new to the game" level, about contact options for the ball carrier and early support. Perhaps some would like to hear about a defensive pattern that has seemed effective and is easy to teach. For now, here are some thoughts on handling and running in support of the ball carrier.

One Coach's Principles

Detail & Precision

Of my idiosyncratic coaching style, details and precision are stressed. The concept here is that if the technique is good, and the players practice doing it perfectly, then if they fall a bit short of perfect under stress, the technique will still be effective.

Present a Rationale

A second point is that it just doesn't cut it to tell a college student to do something a certain way because, "I said so," or because, "That's the way it's done." They might not verbalize that they want to know why, but they do. And if you can't explain it, maybe you can't even convince yourself that this is the option to use. A healthy coaching discipline calls for the coach to have thought most stuff through, be satisfied that this is the way to go, and be able to explain the rationale.

Concentrate on Basics

A third principle is to stress basic skills. I once heard Ron Mayes comment that the sequence was: give them skills, then skills at pace, and then they coach themselves. While it can be fun to put in some razzle-dazzle, first phase penetrating move, championships can be won with no back line plays whatsoever. Done it.

It is important not to so encumber an athlete or team with so specific a repertoire of skills and plays that you coach out their personal flare. If the players understand why you are choosing a certain pattern of play, contact options, or defensive scheme, that flair, within

the context of a team approach, will blossom, be fun, and be exploited to your advantage. It is uncanny how often one of your better players, who you know fully understands the guidelines that the team has adopted, blatantly violates what was thought to be a fully engrained principle, and scores a try! You sure don't want to coach away that option.

Passing Lines

I utilize simple passing lines to develop handling and support skills. Early in the year I start with the lines limited to four players, with three yard passes required. If there are more than forty players, we'll run two sets of lines next to one another. This allows lots of repetitions and keeps the passing skill requirement such that there will be lots of success. They will go only about 30 to 35 yards, as you need to move to the other end to make the next point. Save the lines with "jog backs", for after the skill basics are taught. You want a group of players together so that you can speak in other than a yell, and be heard by all. There are a great many points that need to be made, but one should limit it to only three points at a time. Often only one is optimal.

If it's the first session of the season, or guest coaching, watch one down-and-back with no instruction, to see where the players are. Have them go "off pace," or slow enough to perform near perfectly. Coach and players will note that things are not perfect, and that there is definitely a spectrum of skill within the squad. Have them take off again, with the only instruction that the next group goes when the group in front of them has gone five yards, (or has passed the cone, if you have placed a cone and it is a particularly dull group.) Also ask that they change the wings with the centers at the end of each run. Those are two things, next line starting and changing out the wings, that the coach should not now have to worry about – but you will probably have to remind at some point.

Pass Straight Across the Field

After these few lengths without coaching, introduce the first key deal: Pass the ball straight across the field. Of the scores of little things that make great rugby, this to be the most important. If the ball is passed on a line parallel to the goal line, the following advantages are taken: The pass is legal; the support player knows exactly where the ball is coming; the support player can see the ball and where to go in the same field of view; the passer need not turn the upper body to make the pass, the support player can come onto the ball at fastest pace and is immediately advancing the ball, rather than making up ground that would be lost with a pass that was other than straight across the field. Further, as the skill level advances and the players want to move the ball along the line quickly, they will realize that only if the ball is caught in front, in the sense of towards the opponents goal, and caught with a hand that is extended towards the passer, can the really cool, single step, take-an-give be executed. That is most easily done with the flat pass, the pass that is straight across the field.

Take Every Opportunity to Get Better

Having done that for a few lengths, I pose the question: Which did most of you find easier: a) Passing the ball straight across the field, or, b) Being in a support position such that the ball could be taken at pace, in front, by hands reaching for the passer? Most realize they hadn't thought much about their support running. These are "passing" lines, not "catching" lines. This is the point at which to introduce the most important principle of the efficient drill: *Every role in every drill is an opportunity to get better*. In the case of introductory passing lines, without question the more difficult knack to nurture is being in a good position to change pace, to a real burst to top speed, onto the pass. A length or two with that concept freshly mentioned are then done.

Ball-less Passing

An option that I first saw done by coaching guru Ray Cornbill has value here (and elsewhere). He actually did it as the first drill at the clinics I saw him give. Ask all the players to place the balls on the ground, and then run the passing lines with perfection, but without the balls. Add another sense to the drill by asking each player to scream "BURST!" when changing pace to come onto the ball. The ball should be envisioned as having been passed perfectly, chest high, straight across the field, with timing such that it can be taken from the air and passed to the next player within two steps. Insist that the players reach for the ball, towards the passer. The passer should pretend to be passing the ball, dead ball, no spin, to the space in front of the support, at chest height. Ask the group to humor your oddball drill. I tend to ridicule those that clearly cannot speak and run at the same time. Inform the players that we need a little Hollywood here.

Run-less Passing

When back at the end, each group picks up a ball and the space between the groups is increased a bit. Now the players are asked to make a few perfect passes without running at all. Just pass the ball down their line without running. Experienced players might at first find this drill beneath them. Now is the time to point out that we absolutely need the newer players to improve and contribute, and that the chance to learn by imitation is something we must give them. Also, *even the best can get better at the basics*. The very experienced must challenge themselves to make every pass absolutely perfect: Dead ball, long axis straight up and down, a bit of pep on the ball, it should go exactly to the tip of the middle finger of the far hand of the receiver, which of course will be extended towards the passer, and for this drill, is a target.

Look then Pass

Be sure and look-then-pass. By looking we mean with the eyes and perhaps the head, but not the shoulders. Try it with the specific directive to look, then pause, and then pass. Some players must unlearn the tendency, so effective in basketball, to give the no look pass. There is little or no place for the no look pass in rugby. The look before the pass is also an important component of the effective dummy.

The group will find plenty of challenge in this stationary passing. It can be pointed out that most of the passes were off-perfect, even in this drill that has no opposition, no running, no game pressure, or any other complicating factor. This is the ultimate in “unopposed,” yet really perfect passing still is not there. Reassure that we’ll try it again in a few days, and they will like what they see.

Now try it with the elbows of both arms of the passer held tight to the sides of the body. This will highlight that it is possible to pass the ball accurately, with some pep on it, with just the wrists and hands.

One can try all of the above while jogging in place. Now try all but the elbows at the side part with the pass coming from above the head, but arriving at the same perfect spot of chest high for the catcher. Now try in from below the knees, again passing to a spot exactly in front of the chest of the receiver.

Never Pass “To” a Teammate

Make the following point before getting back into running passing lines: Never pass the ball “to” a teammate, but rather to the space which a teammate is running, or to a spot from which a teammate can take it from the air and do something good with it. The only exceptions to this rule are the pass from maul to scrumhalf, and service of scrumhalf to fly, when the fly is taking the ball for a planned clearing kick. Often even this should not be an exception!

Run a few more lines with encouragement and reminders of the points made so far:

- Pass the ball straight across the field
- Look then pass
- Reach for the ball
- In support, position to take the ball on the burst
- Touch the ball first with the far hand, and before it reaches you
- Pass chest high to chest high, unless opponent dictates another option
- For passes less than about 4 yards, give a dead ball pass
- Run with the ball in two hands

It would be typical for me to put all of the above into the first practice of the season, and many subsequent training sessions. But, there is very much more, without moving to what could be considered a higher level. That is to say, we can move to emphasize details of other fundamental skills, and should do so, before moving to more complex concepts.

Inside Passing - the “pop” pass to bursting close support

In progressing towards being great handlers of the ball, our next option is to work on a much shorter pass. Seems like it should be easier, but no, indeed. Not only is the skill just as tough, in the sense of doing it effectively under pressure, but it is these short

passes that often provide the breakthrough continuity that leads to scores. Particularly at the Naval Academy, it is good to think in terms of breaching the defensive line at some point, and then being capable of pouring through that break in the defense. The concept is that we are switching from a passing line to a penetrating force. We're trying to break the glass with a ball peen hammer instead of an open hand.

Have the players gather round in a group in front of you (the sun or other distraction should be behind them, not you). A straight line should be near, either a field line or a line of cones. Present the "breaching the defense" and explain the following drill. Three players take off from the group single file, down that line. The lead player of each group of three has the ball, and after getting to pace, that player moves off the line, as if swerving away from an opponent who is on the line, or driving into an opponent that is off of the line. Just as that ball carrier comes off of the line, it is look then pass. The pass is just popped, almost straight up and down, and is consistent with our rule of straight across the field. It is never higher than the brim of a hat, and is a dead ball. The effect is to leave the ball in the air, over the line.

The first support player, is running low, with both palms up, and bursts forward to take the popped-up ball out of the air. And then the cycle repeats.

The drill can be paced up and sometimes we run it under bridges of arms of coaches and injured players standing along the way, just as incentive to stay low. Another effective touch is to have the passer tap the ground twice after the pass, but before chasing. This will almost magically increase the pace of the drill and get people lower. This tapping the ground will also demonstrate the concept that it is **better to be a little late than a little early**. The support player who's a little late tends to run harder, in order to get there and contribute. Also, the late player gets a perspective on the field and the ball carrier. The running line can be optimized and support options assessed. It is remarkable that in the two seconds or so that the pop pass is in the air, a hard running supporter can cover ten to fifteen meters. What a deal to see a big, sprinting forward take that ball near the grass and blow up into the next opponent, crashing over for the try!

About Running Low

When asking players to run low, just as with everything else, they need a how and a why. They should get low by shortening the stride and bending the knees. This is preferable to bending at the waist, which does not lower the center of gravity, except in the very few with very heavy upper bodies. The notion is that we want our belly buttons lower than the opponents'. We'd prefer to be running that way when we take the ball because it can be difficult to tell, when focused on the ball, if you are going to be hit right away.

In the contact situation, the lower player, tackler or ball carrier, has a distinct advantage. The lower player can effectively push the opponent's cleats from the turf. The lower ball carrier can get to the ground, or get the ball to the ground more easily. The lower ball carrier can more often control the exact position of body and ball as the tackle progresses.

The lower ball carrier often has arms free to provide continuity. The lower ball carrier can sometimes explode the tackle and amble on up the field.

The lower tackler, on the other hand, is more likely to get the runner to the ground, disrupt passes by being under the runner's arms, and can generally better control the situation.

Emphasis must be placed on the notion that "low" here means a position of explosive advantage. The players should be thinking of the position used to squat, as in weight lifting. Ideally the back is hollowed, feet a bit wider than the shoulders, knees bent, chin off of the chest. I like them to think of a descriptive feat I first heard from former OMBAC Bing Dawson, in rugby we "Dive out of the pool, never into the pool".

So now I've written 3,441 words, and have yet to spin a ball, take contact, or do any unit or team skill work. Yikes! The above, the first of the season, can take 45 minutes. Later it takes less than ten. Introducing what it is you are looking for, exactly, can be of great value. These skills must be drilled and seemingly picky points stressed. Having been part of a national championship game we won by one point, I believe it is good to get across the point that little things can make that little difference. It can make you a champion.