

**TEACHING RUGBY:
Number 3
Contact Skills,
(Part 2)**

By Loc Vetter

In last month's issue we stressed the reason for spending time on contact skills, choosing which options to teach, and part of the first option - driving in with the ball and then placing it in an optimally winnable position.

In this article we'll present the role of supporting players. Then we will deal with one way to teach the techniques.

First Support

We ask our players to watch the ball carrier and, as early as possible, see that the teammate is taking the ball into contact. In many of our patterns, all know who is taking it in and how. We ask that the first available support player fall in straight behind the ball carrier.

Depth is key. We see more errors of arriving too soon than errors of supporting from too much depth. At least several yards of depth is ideal at the moment of contact. It takes time for the contact to occur and for the ball carrier to either commit to getting the ball down, or giving a little pop pass. For either of these options, we do not want our support to get there too soon.

The only exception to this "be late" concept is when the opposition is at the breakdown in numbers. Now the risk of them driving over our ball is very real. Recognizing such a numbers advantage, and having that trigger early arrival in support of our ball carrier, is a difficult skill to develop.

Indeed, I suspect that some opposing coaches have enjoyed watching their team drive over ball that should have been ours. They have not, however, enjoyed defending the very quick forward re-drives and other advantages of committing few forwards to the loose. Such is the tradeoff. For the last few years we have done it this way, with some success.

After our ball carrier explodes the tackle and goes down, the picture can dictate three options: clearing debris, protecting the ball, or snatch and go.

Clearing Debris

If the tackler or any opponent is on their feet and at risk of touching our ball, they are cleared away. We term this "clearing debris."

Our support must come from our side of the ball. We must be lower than our opponent. Contact with the opponent must be low-to-high. Diving "out-of-the-pool" is the concept we are selling.

We teach players to wrap the opponent with our arms and try and start them towards their own goal. If we do drive them off, then push them off to the side a bit, so that subsequently arriving opponents cannot drive into their teammates backsides and counter our efforts to clear the way. If that opponent won't be driven, be low, with spine straight and parallel to touch. This way a teammate may be able to push on you and effectively drive off opponents.

Always be as aware as possible of the ball. Never kick the ball. Ruck on the far side of the ball. Head, shoulders, torso, pelvis, legs, and feet must all be on the far side of the ball. Possession is, after all, the goal.

We virtually never commit more than three forwards to a loose. There are exceptions, but by the time several forwards from each side have joined a ruck, the quality of the ball, win or lose, will be lousy. It might even be that the attention of a late arriving forward would be better focused on setting a good defense.

This scenario of the ball carrier going down and delivering the ball back, with a support player driving over, is really the classic ruck. If we took it in and started a ruck (i.e., put the ball on the ground,) and it doesn't come out, we'll get the put-in on the subsequent set.

Remember: *Ruck on the far side of the ball!*

Protect Possession

If the tackler went down with the ball carrier, he/she cannot participate, but often the crowd of opponents is such that the ball will be very quickly at risk and there is really no opportunity to further advance the ball. Now our first support gets to the far side of the ball and gets very low. Body position here is key.

We do not "bridge" exactly, but getting to the far side, and then putting hands on the downed ball carrier, with our head up, can be a very advantageous position. With the head up one is much less likely to be called for going down over the ball. The player with chin off the chest is not only in a safer position, but looks like they are doing something constructive. With the head down, the neck can be more easily pushed down, and the perception of the observing referee is that this player is just blocking the opposition from access to the ball – penalty.

This support player, who has gotten to the far side of the ball and low, so that bent arms are leaning on the downed ball carrier, must also be in a position to drive up into an arriving opponent. Knees are bent, buttock is low, and eyes are open.

We ask for the hands to be on our downed ball carrier to reinforce being low and so that the arms can be used as part of the exploding up into the arriving opponent. Often it is just while arriving to this role that the opponent arrives. If our supporter got low early enough, then chances of protecting our ball by rucking the opponent on the far side of the ball is optimal.

Snatch and Go

Our third option for the first arriving support player is snatch and go. Very often, or at least more often than we recognize and take advantage of, the best option for the arriving first support player is to snatch the ball and advance it upfield, even just a few more yards. This supporter should try and get body weight over or beyond the ball before the snatch. The ball should be snatched up to the chest with both hands.

We endorse grasping the brief opportunity to advance the ball, straight upfield. This allows teammates to get to the ideal straight-behind support positions, with an eye towards creating even better quality ball a bit further

upfield. This causes the off side line to advance, the defense to back up, and in general improves the flow of the game for us.

We do *not* advocate a forward picking up if the situation requires one of those little spins or running around a big mass of mauling players. It is, however, one of those points on which coaches can sometimes be proven wrong.

A player with good judgment can sometimes snatch up the ball, and even though having to run several paces to get around the mass of rucking players, advance advantageously. More often, however, the new ball carrier gets caught before reaching the advantage line and the situation now is worse than if the would-be advancer had left the ball for the scrumhalf.

Grid Work

My first coach, Dennis Storer, started one year with inspiration brought from exposure to the New Zealand game. He was enthused with a series of drills that he referred to as “grid work.”

When we speak of grid work, we are referring to drills with three characteristics: First, the drills are done slowly, or sufficiently off pace to make speed a non-factor in learning. Secondly, the drills are done in relatively small areas; say 7 x 10 or 10 x 15 meters, marked off by cones or lines; with one side termed the baseline. Third, each grid has a four to six players.

Always introduce contact skills in off-pace drills!

Drive in and Down in Grids

The skills outlined above can be logically introduced using grid work. Early in the year, experienced players are dispersed to serve as role models and teachers for less experienced players. Later in the season, we will do grids with likely teammates from the various sides working together. Use as many grids as needed to get the desired player count.

I generally set up the grids while the players are stretching. When sent to the grids, the players immediately begin passing or playing keep away, while coaches make sure the grids are appropriately populated.

To work on the skill at hand, the following sequence is followed:

1. Each player, with a ball, without any contact at all, practices getting from a standing, crouched, powerful position, to the ground. Emphasized is the concept of getting down violently but under control. It should be knee, then hip, then shoulder and then, at “slow immediately,” the ball is placed firmly at arm’s length at the level of the belly. We emphasize not using the ball as a crutch going down (you will see this a lot) and placing the ball with perfection.
2. A defender, initially somewhat passively, stands three meters from the baseline. At walk pace, which invariably becomes a jog, the form of exploding the tackle, low to high, is added to taking the ball down. The various players in each grid take turns with roles and, importantly, critiquing techniques.
3. As the ball carrier takes the ball to the ground, the tackler typically gets left standing. Now we add in the first support player, who works on good

technique for clearing debris. Starting from adequate depth is stressed. Working on the technique of actually using our hands to push off of the down ball carrier is good.

4. A second supporter is now added. This player works on snatching up the ball and going up field.
5. After these four players (tackler, ball carrier, supporters one and two) have worked on these skills, the pace can be increased. Also one can add in things like requiring a score at the other end of the grid, which is ten-meters away, with two passes to teammates. This encourages getting re-involved in play after fulfilling one's role at the loose. A second tackler can be added.

Be sure to emphasize that the goal in grid work is to perform the skills off pace to perfection. Do not allow poor technique at any pace, but especially when learning the basics.

Coming soon: Drive in and pop, Corkscrew and down, Corkscrew and pop, and how to practice these skills at pace.