

**Teaching Rugby:
Number 4
Contact Skills
(Part 3)
By Loc Vetter**

We've discussed the role of contact in the modern game, not only as a group of techniques for maintaining possession, but for optimizing the quality of that possession, and disfiguring the defense in the process. Drive-in-and-down is what we termed the most fundamental of method for placing the ball in an optimally winnable position, at the tackle. We have yet to cover Drive-in-and-pop, Corkscrew-and-down, Corkscrew-and-pop.

What about other options, such as the "squeeze-ball," used to such effect by the Irish and our own Women Eagles? What about "posting" the ball, used well by former Eagles Brian Vizard, Chris Lippert, and others, without really ever putting a name on the technique?

We have a lot to cover. Let's get going.

In this, the third of four segments on Contact Skills, we will write of the fastest possible continuity, the drive-in-and-pop. But we should start with a comment on "squeeze-ball."

I mentioned that the options we use each season have changed over the years, (Rugby, August 2001, p 23). For the last decade or so, it seems that the technique of getting down, with the body across the field, and placing the ball back for winning, has been almost ubiquitous. From high school programs to test matches, our players have observed others doing what they have been taught to do. Exceptions have proven the rule.

Squeeze Ball

However, when I watched the Irish side have its way with the Eagles in their last test, and then saw the US Women in their August 2001 win over Canada, a contrast was noted in many of their contact situations. Observed was a technique of maintaining the tackler between ball carrier and goal line, driving in low and hard, controlling the ball and preventing opposition access to the ball – to this point the technique is just what we and many others have taught for years.

Starting here the technique is different: the ball carrier goes down, not with a twist to get the body across field, but directly down, leaving the head up field, and then squeezes the ball down the body. The ball then appears emerging from between the kneeling thighs. This is "Squeeze Ball."

It can be very fast ball, and the body position is such that there is a bit of distance between tackler and ball. It can even obviate the need for any additional forwards, as the ball, behind the thighs and in front of the feet, together with the two players, one from each side, can constitute a ruck, (if the ball goes to ground just an instant before the knees), and there is now an off side line. Given the tendency for modern referees to restrict the behavior of defenders at a ruck that is clearly won by the attackers, the ball will not be spoiled.

So why am I not teaching this technique before the other four we have been using?

Maybe I will. But, this technique is best used in some of the same settings as our tried and true “Drive-in-and-Down.” There are many settings when squeeze ball technique cannot be used: side on or from the rear tackle and a tackle in which the ball carrier is not in sufficient control.

Remember, one cannot give a pop pass in the squeeze ball technique. Therefore, the standard drive-in-and-down method of making the ball winnable is still needed.

There is precious little time to teach college sides all they must know to play the game. They can’t get great at too many skills. Therefore, we have chosen to do only a subset of skills, and do those things very well.

Will squeeze-ball become one of our basics? We just don’t know, yet.

Column

Ball carriers should endeavor to take the ball up the field, towards their opponent’s goal line. For the purposes of this discussion, let us term the line down which the ball carrier is running a column. We mentioned that support for a teammate that is entering contact, and for a teammate that is “striking” (i.e., penetrating the defense), should be straight behind that ball-carrying teammate. Worded another way, support should get into the same column as its ball carrier.

For the contact technique we have already covered, drive-in-and-down, it’s clear that the first supporting player, whether choosing to clear debris, protect ball, or snatch and go, can best do so when coming to the breakdown up the ball carrier’s column.

Drive-in-and-Pop

The fastest and sometimes most vibrant option for continuity can be to have a ball carrier explode a defender, then dish the ball to a teammate who is blowing by. Conversely, when this exchange is blown, possession, momentum, and sometimes games are lost.

It is probably worthwhile to look with some detail at the three things needed to successfully complete this little pop-pass exchange in the contact setting. When, in the opening moments of what might be, and could always become, a drive-in-and-down, the ball carrier finds that there is 1) sufficient control of the ball that a nice little pass could be made, 2) a teammate is coming hard from depth, and 3) there is either eye contact or the ball carrier can see the support’s eyes focused on the ball, the “pop” is on.

When drilling this technique, players are asked not to give the pop unless all three of these things are present. We also require that the receiver of the pop pass have at least five yards of depth when the decision to pass is made.

Remember, however, that there is no exception here to the rule that all passes go straight across the field. The straight-across-the-field rule is very important here, for it creates an easier pass to catch for a player who will be coming harder, with a defense that is forced to wait until all hope is lost for defending the advantage line. It is ugly when this pass is tossed back to a big

forward, who is still or just jogging, and who sees the ball and a defender coming at about the same speed.

So why, in drills, require the five yards of depth?

- It forces support to be deep. Everybody wants to be given a nice ball with which to gallop up the field. Players soon learn to come from depth; otherwise, the pass will not be given, and the drill reverts to drive-in-and-down. What would have been a fun cavort, turns into a need to hustle back and support the ruck.
- It forces the ball carrier to look at the option, and make a decision.
- The ball carrier has time to practice making a nice little pop pass.
- The team gets to practice successful continuity more often than knock-ons and failure.
- Most importantly, time shrinks in a game. What was five yards in drills becomes five feet or last instant success in a scrimmage or game.
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One Hand or Two

In our introduction to ball handling, we emphasized the two handed pass and the advantages of running much of the time with two hands on the ball. Practicing running and handling with two hands on the ball can actually make it easier to get good at making the little pop pass with both or either hand.

While the “inside passing” skill (Rugby, Sept 2000), is drilled with two hands on the ball virtually all of the time, a simple variant is to require that pretend contact with a pretend defender be made with one hand, dishing the pop pass with the other. Then, when working on the drive-in-and-pop option, one hand can, if needed, assist in control while the pop pass is made with the other.

It can be said that the advantage of two hands on the ball is not only control in contact, but the player with two hands correctly on the ball can pass in either direction, dummy either way, or kick, without repositioning hands. Our impression has been that if forced to drill with both hands on the ball, the single-handed stuff comes quite naturally.

Stay in the Column

So why did we bring up the concept of “column” earlier in this piece?

If one watches players new to the game learn the pop pass, it will be noted that the passes tend to be quite wide. There is a natural tendency for potential pop pass receivers to put some distance between themselves and the nasty looking location of the contact; natural but not good:

The column in which the contact is occurring is the only one in which the defense is at least partially disfigured. Further, if the supporter bursts by, taking the ball and continuing straight up the field as close to the breakdown as possible without being caught, with one step this new ball carrier has put all players involved in that loose play behind them. They can't “get an angle.”

Moreover, the new ball carrier has every teammate who falls into the column to support the first contact –still in perfect supporting position. Not only that, but as defenders converge on the column down which the attack is developing, they must be weakening their coverage somewhere across the breadth of the pitch.

As our team knows the column in which we have the discipline to stay, it is easier for us to position our attacking back line, so that we can spread or kick the ball efficiently to the more weakly defended area.

Teaching and Learning The Drive-in-and-Pop

The same grid work set up presented in the last issue works well for all of these contact skills. Emphasize that when the new ball carrier is given the ball, the original ball carrier must disengage from contact and support the new break. Generally, require a pass or two before the group can score at the far end of the grid. Do emphasize scoring. The skill of putting downward pressure on the ball, without knocking it on, warrants practice.

Coaches will notice that the defenders tend to be quite passive at first; and this is good for the initial repetitions. Later, defenders can dictate just how hard the initial ball carrier must work to keep sufficient control to succeed with the pop.

It is probably good for some efforts to fail. We generally make the point that it should be rare for our criteria for the successful pop pass to be met. Indeed, it is probably one in ten drive-in type contact situations that result in pop pass continuity.

Two key points should be stressed here: 1) everything about the drive-in-and-pop and the drive-in-and-down are the same, except the final moments. At each such contact we must look for the option of pop pass continuity, knowing that we can always fall back (literally) on the option of going down with the ball, and 2) if we never look for it, we will never complete the pop pass.

If supporters are not occasionally reinforced by the completed pass and the fun gallop, the skill will disappear. Supporters will stop working to get depth and stop looking for the pop. They will just dutifully assist with the recycling of ruck ball. We will then be less dangerous and less fun.

Therefore, do drill this great contact skill option.

In the next and last part on Contact Skills, we'll cover other great ways to stay in our columns, Corkscrew-and-down and Corkscrew-and-pop. Also, it is time to drill these skills at pace.

About the Author: Dr William Laughlin Vetter has spent the vast majority of his 22-year coaching career at the helm of college teams. He started coaching in 1979 at Loyola College in Baltimore, Maryland while doing his residency in orthopedic surgery at Johns Hopkins Hospital. He helped found the Bacon RFC (which he also coached) in Baltimore, but continued his association with Loyola for four years, until 1984, when he returned to his San Diego, California home.

He coached at San Diego State for four years, three of them with former Eagle Steve Gray. During those four years (1984-88) San Diego State went 113-12-1 and won the 1987 National Collegiate Championship.

He then moved to the University of San Diego, where in four years (1989-94) the team went from mediocrity, including an 0-8-1 year, to finally tallying 101 wins and, finishing 3rd in the 1993 Pacific Coast Collegiate Championship.

Loc moved his family back to Maryland and served as assistant coach for the Naval Academy men's team from 1996-98. The Middies reached the National Collegiate Final Four in 1998. He took over Navy's fledgling women's program in the fall of 1998, where he continues today. The Navy women reached the Collegiate Final Four in 1999.

Dr. Vetter has also coached at OMBAC, the Southern California Collegiates, Pacific Coast Collegiates, and the All American forwards for three years under head coach Jack Clark. He has coached 23 All Americans and six Eagles.

Loc has a Bachelor of Science degree in Physical Education, a Masters degree in Kinesiology and his Doctor of Medicine, all from UCLA. He started playing rugby at UCLA in 1970, under Dennis Storer, the first Eagle Coach.

He has toured as player, coach, or physician to 11 countries on four continents. He has USA Rugby Coaching Certification, Level II in the old system, Level III in the new system, and RIU Level III.