

**TEACHING RUGBY:
Number 5
Contact Skills
(Part 4)**

By Loc Vetter

All would probably agree that given the option of taking contact, and taking contact closer to an opponent's goal, the latter is preferred. Getting closer to the goal means breaking by an opponent and that break carries the risk of getting caught after making a move to get around a defender. Even if it is clear that the ball carrier won't get very far, it makes sense to get to the far side of an opponent.

This is even more the case now, as referees consistently enforce the law that a player arriving at a breakdown or tackle be facing away from their own goal. This means that if a tackler grabs a ball carrier from behind and then gets up, they must scamper to their side of the ball before snatching it.

Therefore, it is more of an advantage than ever for the ball carrier to get as far down field as possible and to the far side of the opponent/tackler. The only exception might be where there are far more enemy players, and moving further into them puts the ball carrier at unacceptable risk of being smothered and stripped of the ball.

Getting beyond a tackler is generally preferable but that screws up such techniques as drive-in-and-down and drive-in-and-pop. In those techniques, the tackler was kept between ball carrier and the goal line.

Now what are we going to do?

Corkscrew.

Ball Carrier Moves

It is the bane of many coaches to have a ball carrier run across the field. In most circumstances, a good ball carrier, whether finishing a sidestep, swerve, simple head fake, stutter-step, or just running over a defender, ends up running straight down field. This is a very good thing.

If the ball carrier continues at an angle, or on a course with big zigzags or curves, however, he is very difficult to support. Risk to possession goes up if support isn't there.

So our ball carrier makes a move and then turns toward the opponent's goal, but in the process is caught by the enemy. Our team should have a way to deal with that situation, because it happens a lot.

CORKSCREW

There is another characteristic of moves a ball carrier makes on a tackler. With the shoot of the side step, the first phase of the swerve, or the move after the head fake or stutter step, the ball carrier moves off line and across the pitch a bit.

We've said we want our support to be straight behind and up field of our runner. So does our support then move over with the ball carrier's move?

No! Our support recognizes the ball carrier's evasive move on the defender. As the ball carrier is caught by the defender, he twists back towards the original line and his support is in perfect position, straight behind. We've labeled this twisting, sometimes contorting move the corkscrew.

Ball Carrier Options

The options are now identical to those we covered in the drive-in. The corkscrew-and-pop is beautiful. If the conditions for a pop pass (control, eyes, and depth) are met, we do it.

If the criteria for the pop are not met, the ball carrier goes down, body across field, and places the ball, with slow immediacy, under control, at arm's length, pressing the ball to ground straight back from the belly button.

Support

There are a few differences between the drive-in techniques and the corkscrews. With the drive in, the tackler often remains on his feet, and must be cleared as debris. With the corkscrew, the tackler usually goes down with the ball carrier and cannot participate in play. Therefore, opportunities for the snatch and go are more frequent with the corkscrew-and-down than with the drive-in-and-down.

In the situation where the ball has been placed back, but the next defender is too close for us to snatch and go, the technique should be the same as in the drive-in situation. The supporter gets low enough to be able to put hands on the downed ball carrier. The chin/head should be up to see what is coming, and to give the referee the appearance of positive play.

When the chin is down, it looks to many refs like negative play, "going over," the source of so many penalties. Chin off of the chest is also a safer position. With the arrival of opposition, this position is optimal to protect the ball and ruck on the far side.

Difficult Skills For the Ball Carrier

These skills must be learned off-pace. The ball carrier in the corkscrew will find that if the tackle begins just as the initial running line is left, he will tend to go down even further off that line, in bad position for support. If the tackle is from behind when the ball carrier is again headed toward the opponent's goal, the tendency will be for that ball carrier to go down with the body lined up along the long axis of the field.

(It's OK for rugby coaches to think of all pitches as having goals at the north and south ends, so that we can remind players to run north south, but when tackled, get their bodies going east west.)

The ball carrier must accept that trying to get around a tackler carries the risk of being caught from the side or behind; a situation that is more difficult to make the ball optimally winnable. The ball carrier must accept and be ready to work

extra hard to achieve corkscrewing back towards the original running line and then achieving one of our two goals: 1) dishing to a charging teammate, or 2) going down, such that the body is east -west, and the ball is placed so it is optimally winnable.

Coaching Points

Coaches will probably find that drills for corkscrew-and-down require a lot of coaching. There will be a lot of mistakes but these provide opportunities for improvement!

1) Ball carriers will fail to get their bodies east west, so that their legs obstruct access to the ball.

Coaching Point: They must be reminded to recognize early on that they are being tackled, and react violently to control the tackle situation. The move to get back to the line on which support will be arriving requires recognition, commitment and strength, particularly in the trunk. It is good to remind the team of the use of the trunk musculature - core strength - when they are suffering through abdominal strengthening exercises.

2) Ball carriers will place the ball out by their head, where it is at higher risk of being poached, rather than straight out from the belly button.

Coaching Point: A tackled player will intuitively resist placing the ball near the tackler who is wrapped around their legs. Intuition is wrong here, in that the tackler is on the ground and cannot participate in play. It is also very easy for an opponent to poach or spoil a ball that is placed straight back from the nose. When placed there the enemy has almost the same access to the ball as we do.

We want our support to have every advantage possible. Further, the ball carrier's teammates are looking for a ball straight back from the navel – to snatch, protect, or ruck over. Insist, particularly in practice, that such a ball be perfectly placed.

3) First support will try to clear debris that is not there, as the tackler has gone down with the ball carrier.

Coaching Point: This is a classic opportunity to stress the need for the supporter to read the situation.

Supporters know the options with a downed ball carrier – protect, clear debris, or snatch and go. They know to get low to protect if opponents arrive too soon to make a snatch and go viable. They know to clear debris if they can see enemy socks in the field of vision that includes their teammate and the ball. They know we all like it when the snatch and go allows us to set up the perfect next phase ball a bit further up the field.

Supporters must decide amongst those options. They have to get better at decision making – decision making that must be reflexively fast in the game situation, and therefore drilled, drilled and drilled some more.

4) When the first supporting player practices the snatch and go, he will not get low enough. There will be a tendency to bend at the waist, taking the ball with the arms almost straight, and continue down field with a falling forward, unsteady gait.

Coaching Point: Sometimes it is good to require that the supporter actually straddle the downed ball carrier, and squat on their teammate, before taking the ball. This is not-all-that-nutty, in that it puts the supporter on the far side of the ball, low, head up, able either to snatch and go or to dish a little two handed pop pass to a hard charging teammate.

It is rare, if ever, that a supporter, sits on a teammate before picking up a ball. But time contracts in a game. The drilled sequence of get low, straddle and squat becomes a low, dynamic, snatch of the ball as the tackled ball carrier is left behind. To see it done well is to watch a phenomenal little skill.

Save the Pop for Last

It is clear that of the options we have presented, the corkscrew-and-down is the most challenging and that the corkscrew-and-pop requires very little honing and encouragement. In the corkscrew-and-pop there is a tendency for the supporting runner to take a line too far from the breakdown and the ball carrier must decide whether to pass or keep. And when deciding to keep, the ball carrier must get on down and present a perfectly winnable ruck ball.

In general the corkscrew and pop is fun and easy and we save it as the last skill to drill – almost as a reward for having worked so hard on the others.

This column was originally intended for coaches but the intended readership has blurred a bit, as much of what I've written is just what I tell my players. This brings to mind the sequence: Skills, skills at pace, coach themselves.

We haven't yet described how to get these skills going at pace, with some decision-making and pressure. That will come in the next column.