

Breaking Down the Lateral Defensive Line

By Geoff Townsend

Options from Phase:

The evolution of modern Rugby has seen many changes but one of the most significant is that phase play now constitutes between 60 – 70% of game time. This figure was confirmed and agreed upon at a recent coaching conference.

Another recent development involves the growing emphasis on defence, with teams devoting time to tackling technique as well as communication in the defensive line with less defenders committing to the breakdown, hence the lateral defensive line term. Teams at the top level are even employing specialists to handle this area of the game.

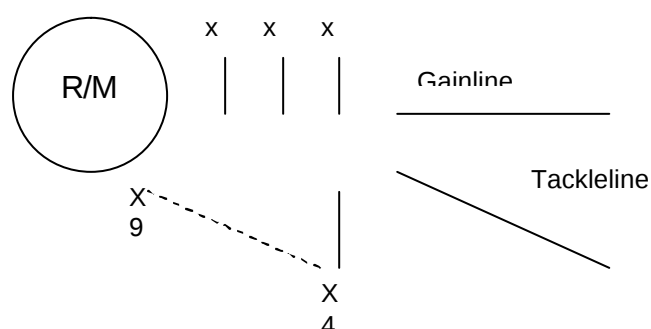
My assignment will be devoted to ideas that I have used, with some success and will continue to use in the future. Some of the methods I will outline are currently being used at the representative level. They are ideas I have been endeavouring to refine for a number of years.

The accepted methods used over the years of forwards running one out off the ruck and backs going through the hands off phase are having minimal success in the modern era due to the above mentioned improvement in defence.

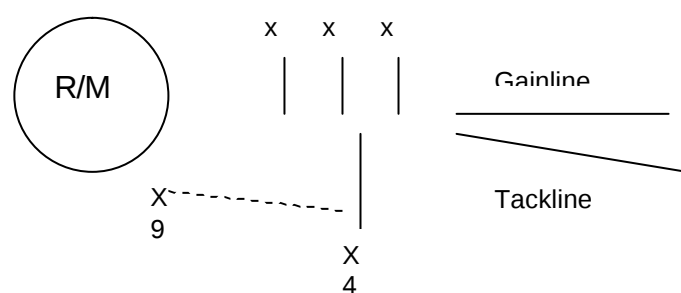
Recent developments have seen all players become multi-skilled, ie. Tight forwards being able to catch and pass and outside backs to maul, clean-out etc. Gone are the days where players were stereotyped by the constraints of their position. Players now should appreciate the number on their backs but don't let it become a "sentence". Lets see a forward involved with a switch or a decoy play. Breakdown the barriers. I believe we should go further, it will increase our attacking options.

Encourage the use of the flat pass from the base of the breakdown. It can be witnessed countless times at all levels of football where the clearing pass is received by the ball runner some 3 – 4 meters behind the gain line, therefore changing the tackle line and making it increasingly difficult for the runner to reach the gain line.

Example 1.



Example 2.

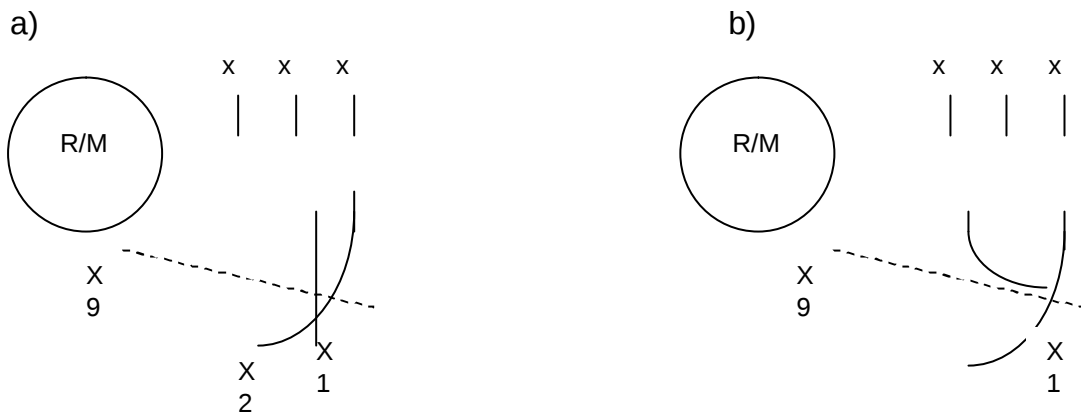


Example 2 gives the runner a chance to make and pass the gain line enabling the team to continue going forward and increase the likelihood of ball retention.

As indicated earlier the use of decoy and shadow runners has been a recent revelation to the game but I believe that we are only just scratching the surface. Throughout the rest of this paper, I will be outlining some of the methods employed both in close contact and out wide.

Phase Options

Example 3. – Decoy runner (one pass off the ruck)

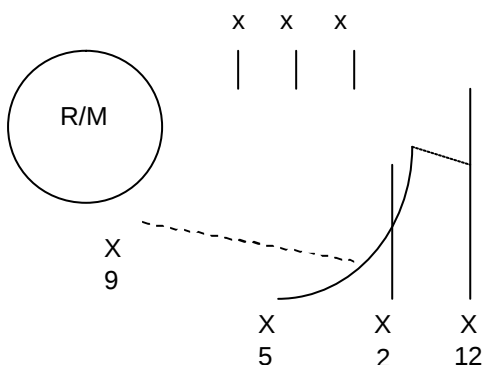


As mentioned earlier the attacking side often resort to a one off pass from the base to a player who will invariably be smashed by multiple defenders (usually forwards) and quite possibly not make the gain line, or even worse turn over the ball.

What is the shadow runner doing from the base?

- 1) Protecting the ball receiver
- 2) Giving the ball runner a little extra space
- 3) Most importantly, increasing the ball runners options

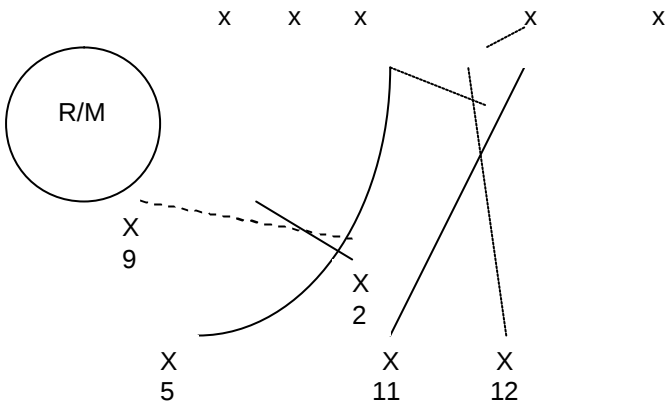
Example 4.



Example 4 shows No.5 targeting the outside shoulder of the third defender and with the use of an effective fend and bridge will open up a number of options. In this instance the defensive line is usually condensed about three wide with greater width outside the above mentioned defenders. With No.5 strong at contact his options increase, he can pop a short pass to a support No.12 or perhaps even more effectively a gut pass to hard running support who maybe encountered by an arm tackle or an ill-prepared defender. Another option

depending upon the strength of the ball carrier is a second decoy after contact (as in Example 5).

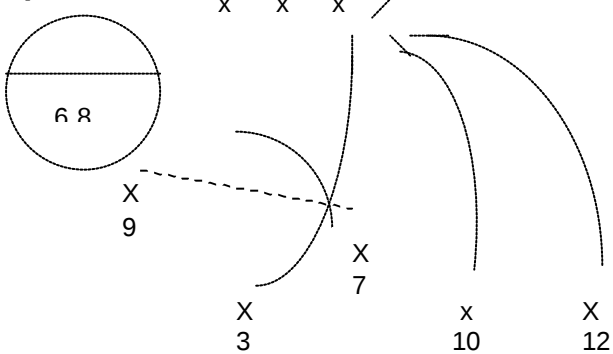
Example 5.



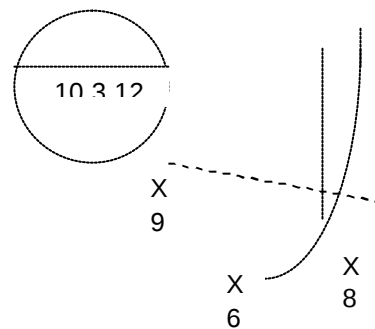
There is always a chance to increase your options after an initial decoy play where play can be sequenced, the next series of plays was one we used effectively this season.

Example 6

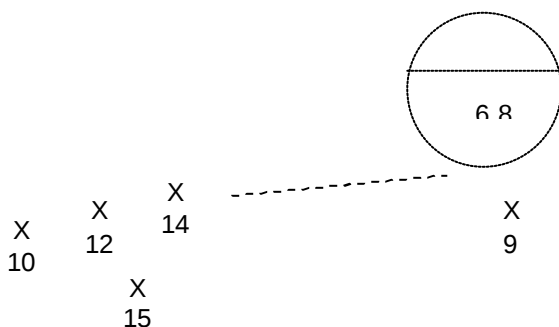
a)



b)



c)



As the diagram shows, example 6a shows a slightly different decoy option, one which many representative teams are now using but not first pass from the base (as per example 3b). Example 6b shows the decoy option which I referred to in example 3a.

The essence of this sequence of plays is to attempt to encroach the gain line with two decoy plays from the base, with quick ball recycled using both forwards and backs, enabling an

almost full backline to reverse the point of attack against a defensive line of predominantly forwards.

Back tracking to examples 3 a & b, although there appears to be little difference between both options there is a subtle difference and I will attempt to show how both can be used effectively and in what circumstances.

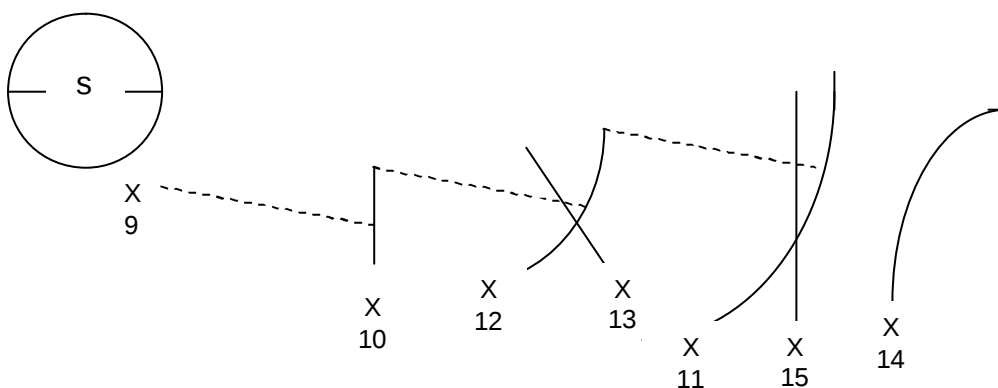
Example 3a can be used more effectively wider and in some space and depth, probably 2, 3 – 4 passes wide, with the decoy runner attempting to fix the defender long enough to prevent him from sliding out onto the ball receiver. The runner receives the ball on an angle and can vary his running lines accordingly.

Example 3b is a common option now used in both set and phase play and I believe is more effectively completed with a flat alignment, “in the face of the defenders” so to speak. The timing of the flat pass enables the decoy player to almost camouflage or hide the receiver, with the pass almost brushing his shoulder. We are effectively attempting to commit two defenders to the one attacker, opening up space out wide. It was an option the Waratahs used recently to score against the touring Irish side, off set play.

It is extremely important that the decoy runners in these options and all others remain alert because the pass may come to them if the defenders start to drift a little early.

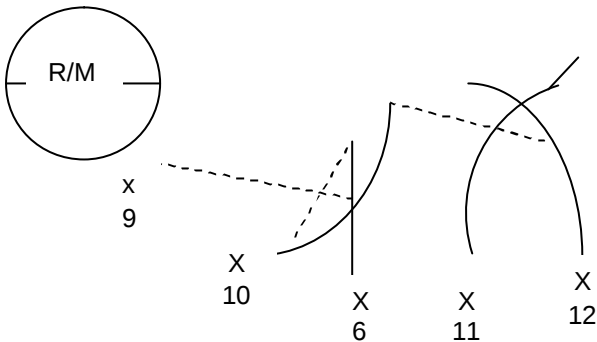
Example 3a and 3b can also be used together effectively, we were fortunate enough to have success on a number of occasions with the next option.

Example 7



The use of the forwards as first or second receiver can also create further options from phase enabling the speed men to receive the ball in space.

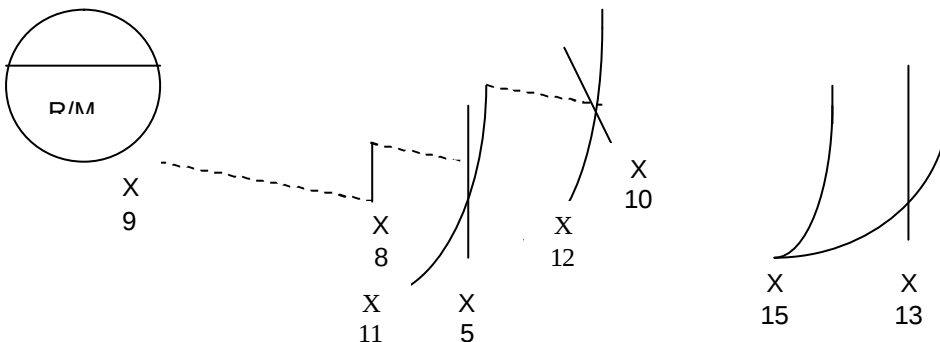
Example 8



Example 8 shows a wide ball from the base cutting out No.10 received by a forward who throws a circle ball pass to an inside support attempting to fix any slide defence. The receiver from prompting by outside support initiates a decoy play as in example 3b, attempting to release No.11 into space. This same option can be used wider with the aim again being to up the faster players into space.

Another option using the forwards can see two distinct waves of attack as pioneered by the ACT Brumbies.

Example 9

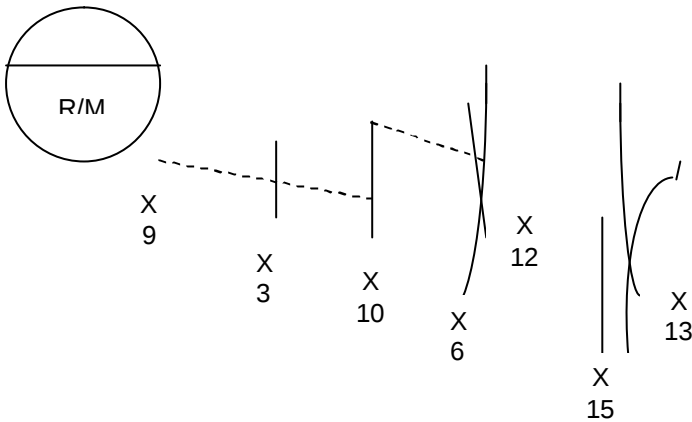


By using forwards as first or second receivers any number of options can be performed with both inside and outside backs receiving the ball or acting as decoys. As indicated in Example 9 we have used two decoy options example 3a and 3b hoping to provide space for faster outside players who can change their running lines and angles ever so slightly in response to the reaction of the defenders.

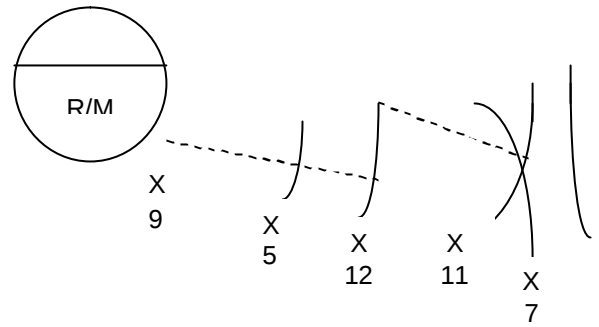
Decoy options on both sides of the ball carrier can cause the necessary anxiety in the defensive line to create space, particularly if the inside pass is used earlier in the game.

Example 10

a)



b)



In both instances the ball receiver takes the ball to the defensive line dummyming inside and selecting the necessary decoy option as called.

How do you train these options? Initially there was a degree of scepticism from the players but in small groups unopposed is a great way to start. As the timing and the running lines/angles improve you increase drill sizes making the drills semi-opposed entailing one to two phases. Finally graduating to a game like scenario, nine/ten versus five/six fully opposed.

Who calls the play? Usually in most phase situations I encourage the first receiver to nominate himself, with the decoy option call usually coming from the ball receiver (particularly in example 3a). The ball receiver can see an area or a particular player we may be attempting to target (perhaps a tight forward caught out wide).

There seems to be a great reluctance from most coaches and teams to take the play too far away from the previous set play or breakdown for fear of turning over the ball. As mentioned earlier if all fifteen players are coached in all areas of the game this shouldn't be of concern and will enable teams to use some of the options mentioned earlier. A good alternative would be to use your "supposed" decoy runner after running several options alluded to earlier. All players should be prepared to receive the pass.

These are a few of the options, variations and extensions that I currently coach and I believe that it is an area of the game that will continue to evolve as teams strive to breakdown the Lateral Defensive Line.