

GAME LEADERS – Andy Tucker with Peter Slattery, February 2004

INTRODUCTION

Rugby Union has been played in many countries around the world for well over 100 years. The structure which we see in the game today does not resemble the game which was played 100 years ago, indeed I believe that most of the changes to the game and new rules by which we abide have given us a much faster and more open game than was played in the past. This has resulted in a better spectacle for those watching the sport as well as a more enjoyable game for the players.

Recently we have heard from a number of top coaches and others involved in the sport of their belief that no longer does the number on your back limit your involvement in the certain aspects of the game. We hear of players needing to be multi skilled, which to a certain extent I believe to be true. All players should be able to pass both to their right and left with equal confidence and results, all players should be able to tackle strongly with both shoulders using a number of types of tackle, all players need to be able to catch a high ball correctly etc. I do however believe that there is still a huge requirement for Leaders in the team who “call the shots” and direct other players around the field.

The game has changed but some things have not. With 15 different players and positions in a rugby team where focus is on varying roles, some players have a much better vision of what is occurring and are better positioned to recognise where opposition weaknesses lie.

The questions Why? and How? need to be considered more often when planning team strategies, structures and game plans.

Gone are the days of attacking sides recycling ball after ball producing high numbers of phases which almost guaranteed them tries. As the defensive patterns of sides become even tougher to break-down at phase I believe that more focus needs to be given on being creative from primary possession.

The concept of “Game Leaders” comes from a desire to create more attacking options. Using this structure allows attacking sides to have more options from all field positions by using players in specific and maybe non-traditional roles. Coaches need to explore new ways of using the ball in attack so as to break down extremely well organised modern defence structures.

Why do we use this tactic?

1. Backs (Game leaders) are better creators

In general backs are better ball players than the forwards. They are trained from an early age to recognise opportunities to breach the opposition defensive line as well as normally being more agile and much more comfortable with the ball in hand. A forward who has just been pushing in a scrum or lifting in a lineout has been totally

focussed on that job and as a result would not have a good idea of what is happening on other areas of the field and where attacking possibilities may exist.

As Dick Marks remarked in an early ARU level 2 coaching manual;

“The forwards are piano pushers whilst the backs are piano players!”

2. Using two ‘Play-makers’ (Game Leaders) as opposed to the traditional 10 role

Traditionally teams have played with a 10 carrying out the same role throughout a match, normally outside 9 whatever side of the field they are positioned and normally in the Key position. With game leaders we aim to split the traditional first receiver role into two i.e. two players sharing the responsibility with one taking play on the left side of the field and the other on the right side of the field. I would suggest that we use the 10 and also use the 12 as our other Game Leader.

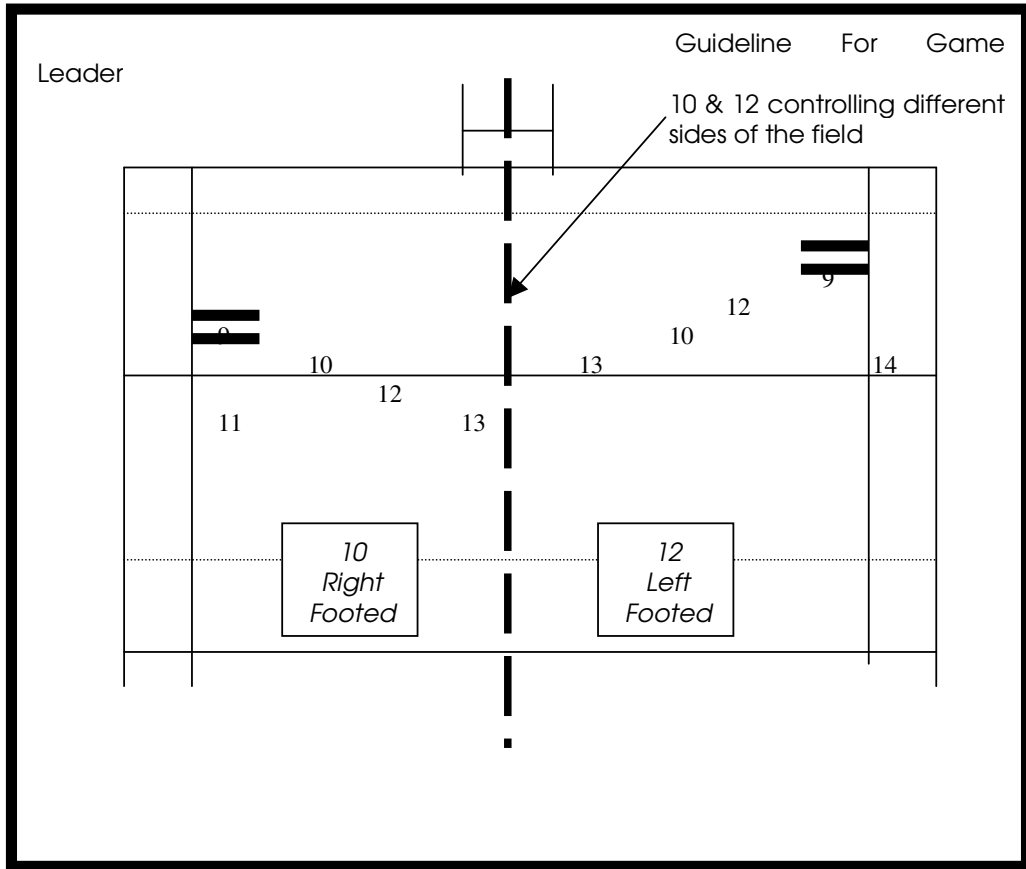
To quantify this we need to see the comparable strengths of both the 10 and the 12;

- Quick off the mark
- Excellent passing skills on both sides
- Excellent running lines and ball playing skills
- Excellent communication and organisational skills in attack and defence
- Ability to fix defenders by taking ball to the line
- Excellent kicking game

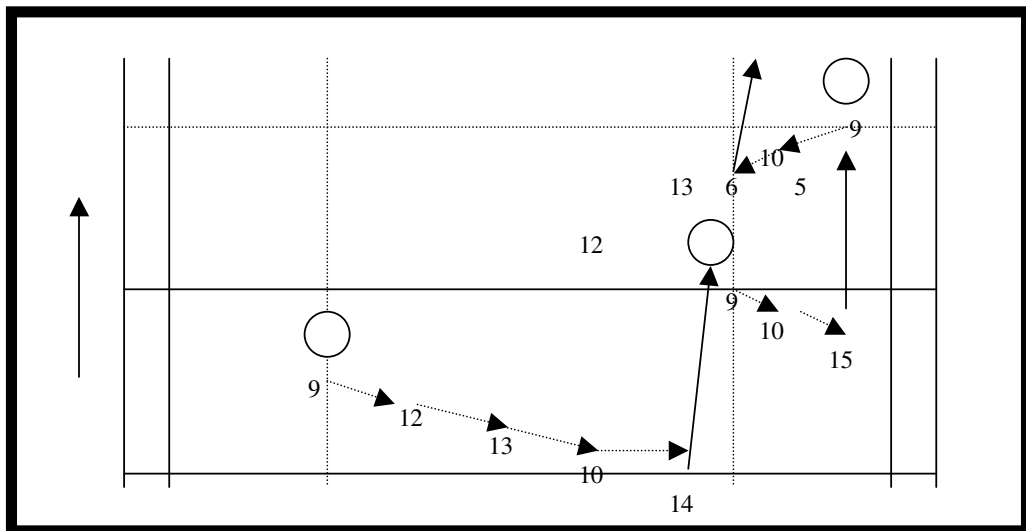
So Who Plays Which Side?

In the modern game most top level back-line players should be able to and can kick with both feet, this will make the choice of sides easier. However if that is not the case and we have a 10 or 12 who is strongly left or right footed then that would dictate a preference as to which side they controlled;

**Game Leader Example;
v From Lineouts**



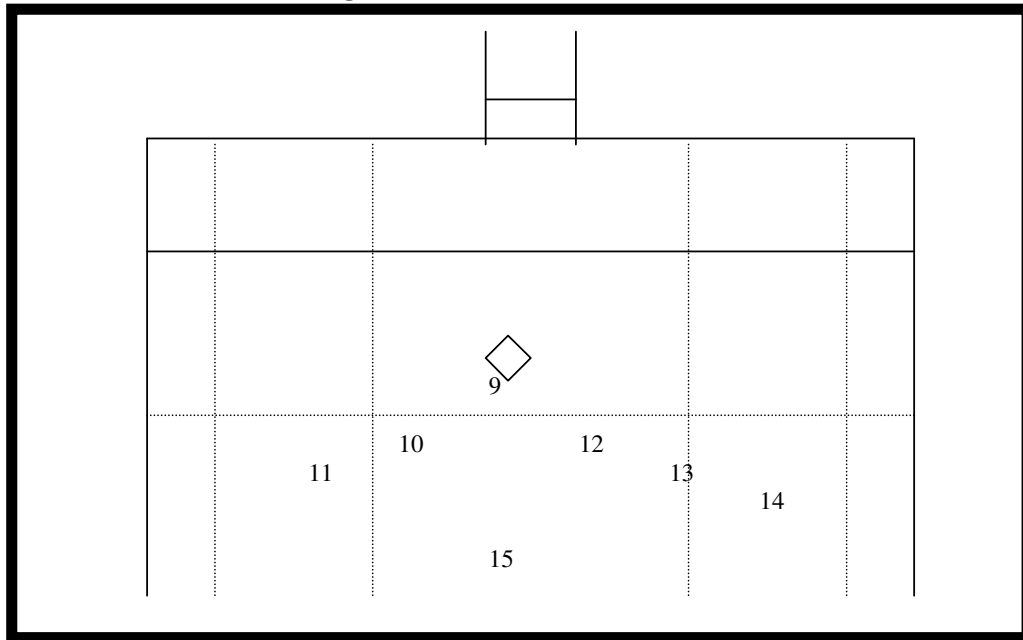
As an another option, to the example above the Game Leader (12 on the left and 10 on the right) could stand wider (outside 13) which will put him closer to position for phases on the other side of field. See example below;



○ - Ruck or Maul

Game Leader Example

▽ From Attacking Scrum



Should a game leader become unavailable then the next available back slots into the role

The 15 acts as the communicator from behind the attacking line as he is in a better position to inform the Game Leaders of attacking opportunities and bring himself into the attack at the correct time

3. Assist In Creating Attack Variety

To change the player standing at 1st receiver has long been used by sides to confuse the opposition defence. Quite often teams adopting this approach do so by putting a big forward in position to take the ball up to the opposition and set up a ruck or maul. This is aimed at committing the defence inside backs so as to create a mismatch out wide when the ball is re-cycled. This can still happen using either of the Game Leaders, depending on which side of the field) would be used to dictate and direct play and/or attacking runners.

4. To assist in changing the attack channel/focus

I believe that when in attack one of our main objectives has to be to create as many opportunities as possible. By using Game Leaders we are able to identify opportunities and put players into the spaces or assist in running our forwards at the opposition backs.

5. To Force The Defensive Line To Adjust Thus Creating Some Elements Of Indecision

To have personnel and positional change during a match or set of phases will always create an element of surprise for the opposition thus creating doubt leading to indecision. When this occurs it presents a great opportunity for an attacking side to strike and exploit the disruption in the defence. By changing the first receiver the

defensive running lines of the opposition are disrupted eg. from a scrum an open side breakaway changes his running line to adapt to the first receiver, if that player changes it will obviously cause some indecision/uncertainty.

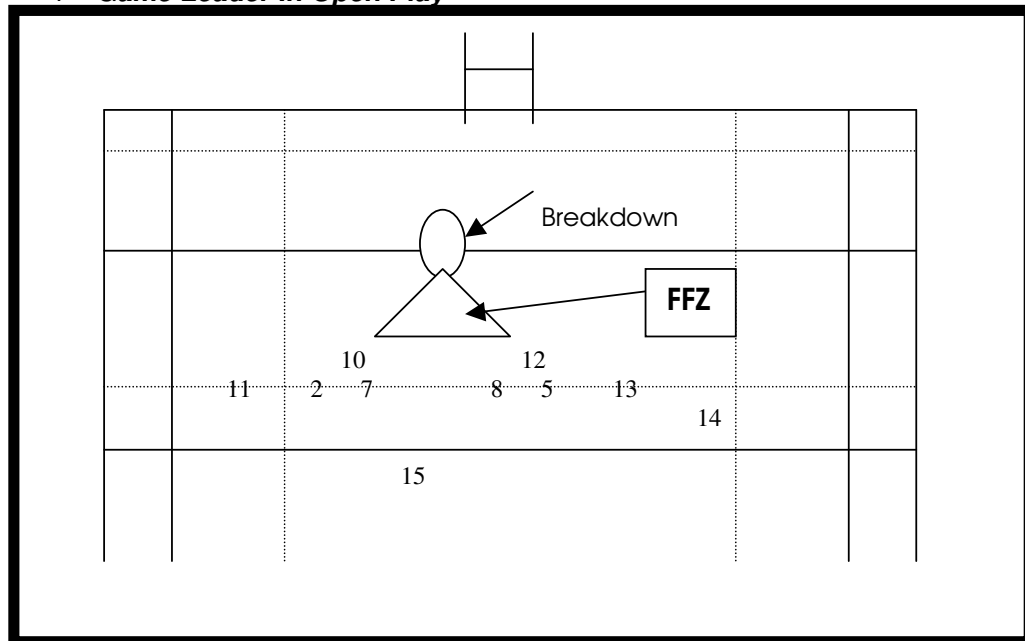
6. Forward Free Zone (FFZ)

So often we witness good quick ball being presented at the breakdown all that is needed is simple quick passing out to where the space has been created and just as the 9 is about to pass the ball to 1st receiver a forward gets in the way of the pass or decides to intercept the ball and either truck the ball up or take a couple of steps before passing to an outside man. Very often the opportunity has been lost.

For this reason we have the Forward Free Zone or FFZ. This is an area where forwards fear to tread and is kept clear for the Game Leaders to use as they see fit. It may be their decision to send a forward runner up or take the ball up themselves through this area but it is the decision of the Game Leaders and MUST be kept clear of forwards.

Example

▽ Game Leader In Open Play



Another reason for not overloading the FFZ is that in modern day defences most teams are very well drilled around the breakdown and mark up as Pillar & Post well with the Key Defender marking the opposition ball player.

From the Game Leader position the player can read the opposition defence and if then the defending Pillar or Post leave a hole they can put a support player into that space.

Forwards not in the breakdown do not hang around in the FFZ, they look for work as runners off the Game Leaders or as directed by the Game Leaders.