

HOW MUCH STRUCTURE IS ENOUGH?

Matt O'Connor
2003 ARU Level III Coaching Course

As the second professional era Rugby World Cup is upon us it is interesting to look at how the game has evolved since the advent of professionalism. One area that has received much comment by Australian pundits recently is:

HOW MUCH STRUCTURE DO THE PLAYERS NEED TO PERFORM OPTIMALLY?

In this instance structure refers to the teams attacking processes that generate pressure on the defence, create opportunities to score points and ultimately win games. In this area there has been a paradigm shift in the last decade. The game has moved from a situation where once there would have been a lineout call and a backs play. Now the process calls for a series of complicated sequences involving all players for as many as 5 phases. The question is how much structure is necessary? Alan Jones has been quoted as saying "over coaching is more dangerous than bad coaching". And in many ways he may be right. There is no definitive strategy that allows you to plot precisely the downfall of your enemy but it is essential that soldiers in the trenches have the necessary specialists, ammunition and tactical battle plan to maximize their chances of victory. When your team has possession of the football to a man they should be coached so that:

INSTINCTS + STRUCTURE = SUCCESS

Why do we need any attacking structure at all? Shouldn't the players be able to work out and make the decisions themselves? "They did in my day" is often the catch cry of ex-players! Times have changed. At the elite level Rugby players are highly paid full-time athletes. Surely part of their job description says something about taking the right option especially those in key game controlling positions. A detailed attacking structure is essential today to counter act and overcome the quantum leap in defence the modern game has made. Not simply the skill of tackling but all the techniques and strategies employed to stop attacking teams going forward, retaining possession and scoring points.

That, combined with the use of replacements and the fact that the defence have a numerical advantage at the tackle, it quickly becomes very clear that leaving the decisions entirely up to the players off the cuff is poor management. Lack of structures is non-coaching and a recipe for disaster. These new developments have changed the art of playing attacking rugby and coaches must redefine attacking philosophies.

It is the role of the coach together with his senior players to develop a structure that puts the advantage back in the hands of the attacking team and forces the defence react to the team in possession.

Attacking structure must enhance the core principles of the game: **going forward and support**. How the ball is advanced and the depth of support are central issues. A structure that fails to cater for these core principles breaks down very, very quickly.

Integral to the success of the structure is aligning it to the philosophy of the team. Everyone must be aware of what they are working towards, what needs to be achieved in each component of the process and what individuals roles are in order to reach the team objective.

Structured ball movement is essential to breaking down modern defensive formations. This is not a new concept and it makes perfect sense to move the ball to where the defence is vulnerable. The structure must comprehend how the ball is moved and who is at the tackle to support and retain possession. The focus has to be on moving the ball to the support not making the support chase the ball.

The core element of any attacking plan is actually getting possession of the football. The quality of the **SET PIECE** possession will determine what options are available from this point. A broadening of the traditional set piece of kickoff, scrum and lineout is possession from kick receptions. A by-product of better defence is that there is more tactical kicking in an attempt to relieve pressure, gain ground, breakup defensive structures and scores tries. This ball contributes a significant percentage to the overall ball usage in games. Any attacking structure must place due emphasis on possession from kick reception. And what your team is doing with this ball must be included in the attacking structure. A smaller element of the structure but potentially just as devastating is what to do with the ball you turnover from the opposition.

The next step is to ask what are you trying to do to the defence. The answer can be broken down into 3 areas:

- 1) **Move the defence**
- 2) **Keep the defence in a specific area**
- 3) **Break the defence line**

This will be the framework for your **PATTERNS** or **SEQUENCES**, as they are known. These patterns or sequences are the directional navigation system of the team. They determine if you go wide or short, left or right and where the ball goes from the next play. The rationale behind this thinking is to provide the attacking team the advantage of knowing where the ball is going on the current play and also the subsequent phase in order to send the necessary support players to retain possession and ensure it is fast, high quality ball. These patterns have to a certain degree superseded the "old" system of your #9 and #10 determining where the ball goes and what is done with it. The structure must have provisions for the key decision makers to alter the structure as they see fit. In devising these patterns the priority must be what creates the best attacking opportunities for the team. A secondary focus is what weaknesses can be isolated in the defence. The weaknesses can be individual, structural and/or athletic deficiencies. Patterns in reality are only limited by lack of creativity in coaching and/or lack of player skill levels to execute and adhere to the principles of going forward and support.

The next element in the structure is **STARTER PLAYS**. What to do with set piece possession? The majority of these, with the exception of short lineouts, 8(6) running from scrums and kickoff receptions, require the backs to carrier the ball into contact.

Therefore this forms a significant part of the training done by backs in a unit environment. Starter plays are designed to take the ball forward, break the line or set up the subsequent phase. The execution of the starter play has a massive impact on the effectiveness of the pattern overall. Every effort must be made to maximize the success of these plays by: having players in motion, a high degree of deception and designated support roles at the tackle.

The next piece of the puzzle is your **PHASE OPTIONS**. These are what move the ball from phase to phase and complete the pattern. The principles for starter plays all apply here but just not to the same degree. Phase options can be broken down into 4 broad categories:

- 1) **At the tackle**
- 2) **Off 9**
- 3) **Off 10**
- 4) **Outside 10**

Again your own imagination and your players only limit these. However, it is worth considering the complexity of the option, the time to organise the play and the number of passes required in relation to the depth necessary for the option to meet its objective.

How you structure patterns is entirely up to individual teams but here are some examples.

- 1) **3 PLAY FOCUS: 1 CALL THAT INCLUDES STARTER, 1ST PHASE OPTION AND 2ND PHASE OPTION WITH A DIRECTION**
- 2) **2 PLAY FOCUS: 1 CALL THAT HAS THE STARTER AND THE 1ST PHASE OPTION BUILT IN AND A DIRECTION**
- 3) **1 PLAY FOCUS: STARTER PLAY AND A DIRECTION**

This can also include areas or zones of the field.

Endless options can be added to this. Some common ones include:

- Keep going call
- Over call option → must have ball
- Pick & go
- 9 pass
- 12 pass
- Mini maul
- Various kicking options

These can all be made while the pattern is in motion. A vital component in taking your chances in attack are your players ability to play what is in front of them by adapting to the circumstances that arise, taking the right option and executing correctly.

The **SET PIECE** philosophy and the policy at the **TACKLE** must heavily support the structure. This goes without saying. It is pointless planning sequences if you cannot win

high quality set piece possession. The same applies, there is no point in developing and practicing 3rd phase options if you cannot guarantee winning the ball at 1st and 2nd phase tackle situations.

A detailed attacking structure is not something you can develop over night. It can be difficult to inculcate into the players, especially those who have had limited experience with such a system. In many cases you are asking the players to hand their trust over to a system that is unfamiliar to them and in some cases shelve their natural instincts. These instincts are the very things that have got them to where they are and confidence in the system can take time. An important step in fast-tracking this confidence is allowing the players a role in the development of the structure. This will provide valuable ownership of the system and make their on field management role much more powerful and enhance their commitment to make it work.

The attacking structure is much more intricate and time consuming to develop than is your defensive formation. That is simply due to a requirement for higher level skills and the associated structural dynamics. Firstly, the skills required must be identified. From there it is essential that the identified skills are taught, practiced and developed to the point that the skill can be executed under pressure in competition to ensure the structure does not fall down. Often the attacking skills for a structured environment are not innate. Many players have exciting individual attacking instincts but these must be harnessed and refined into team structure. Individual brilliance is fantastic and often the difference between first and second place, as long as the other team members don't have to pay the price for the brilliance. The structure will only be as sound as the individuals that hold it up. Secondly, in order to improve the micro-processes and the how these processes interact it is essential that the players understand the rationale behind the structure. That way they will be able to contribute fully to the team. In identifying these skills the question that must be asked is what do the players need to put the defence under maximum pressure.

In relation to the complexity of the structure it should be aimed at the level of competition. The lower the level the more basic it can be. The more contact time the staff has with the players the further it can be developed. How much and how rigid it is will depend on how well the playmakers can read and control a game. The size of the window to make adjustments on the run will be determined by how decisive and what degree of vision these players possess. The structure must take into account the strengths and weaknesses of the group.

The greatest scope for the structure is it empowers players with direction and potential under pressure. By implementing the structure via what is practiced and practiced and practiced provides enormous scope to gain control of the environment and enhance the chances of success. The structure must be flexible enough to include things like the phase options we want to execute, defenders we want to run at and manipulate, areas of the field we want to attack and structural weaknesses in the defence we want to exploit. Another advantage of the system is it get support players in position early to facilitate fastball and greatly improves the chances of getting the ball to the most dangerous players in the best attacking positions. If you are not blessed with great decision-makers in certain positions you can greatly reduce the margin for error by eliminating many of the decisions that need to be made.

Once the structure is in place it becomes very easy to adjust it in accordance to the different opposition encountered or add new options as the competitive phase progresses.

There has been a shift in the rationale of attacking structures by the coaching fraternity of world rugby. The objective is to develop a more potent brand of rugby, which places forwards and backs more in their traditional roles in an attempt to maximize each unit's strengths and to increase the chances of creating line breaks and/or tries at first phase. France's coach Bernard Laporte previously was an advocate of polyvalence - the multi-skilled player as the answer to world rugby domination. He has since done a back flip saying you need specialists in every area to do their job and contribute to the team. At the same time the nuance of polyvalence is still evident at international level by the athleticism of the tight five and size and strength of most backs. These physical attributes allow the players to contribute much more than just their role. Research by the Wallabies coaching and technical staff has shown that 1st phase line breaks are so important they have included them in their key performance indicators.

Stuart Barnes wrote an article recently saying "that we are at the end of the recycling era. Defences are too good for the vast majority of attacking teams. The more phases you keep possession the greater the chance of spilling it, being intercepted, flattened in a tackle-there are any number of negative outcomes" Barnes believed that precision and pace were a necessary ingredient in any successful attacking formula. And the emphasis should be placed on first-phase and turnover possession. That's fine if you are blessed with the players that possess these skills or you can develop them in your existing players. But why not develop your attacking structure around those elements. If that were the case the framework would be made of a lot more pliable material, one that encourages and presents opportunities for those players who own the precision and pace to impact the game.

Communication is a vital component of any effective process and attack in rugby is no exception. In order for all members of the team to participate and fulfill their roles they must all be coached on the same page to begin with. For the structure to be fully absorbed by the player's communication from coach to players must be appropriate. The team captains and playmakers must understand the structure fully to educate the other players and implement it on the field. And lastly the individual players need to know their role in order to participate proactively in the process. And what a process it is to see 15 rugby players all working collectively to construct an attacking sequence! Unfortunately, too often players fail to communicate at the micro-process level (impact, support, pass, defence) and as a result many wrong decisions are made and opportunities lost.

The attention to detail is what makes the structure successful. The little things must be done correctly to allow the structure to function. It is imperative that the smallest technical details are maintained in all processes: individual skills, pass & catch execution, running lines, body positions, ball delivery at tackle and set play and communication to name but a few. Once these are eroded cracks start to appear and it is not long before the demolition squad is called or the board is calling for the coach's resignation.

If the program and training is right with practice the cognitive process can be eliminated. This is the ideal situation in order to develop the appropriate instincts and reactions. The

players must get to the stage where they automatically know the structure without thinking about what happens next. The only way this can happen is by exposing the players to the appropriate number of specific repetitions and the players doing the necessary self-learning. Once this has been done they are in a position to react to the opportunities the structure does not cater for and “play what is in front of them”. In order to develop this, opportunities and scenarios must be presented that encourage the players to practice the options available both within and outside the structure. The structure must be reinforced and developed at every opportunity by integrating it across all the core-training elements

The balance between a reliance on the structure and the team’s ability to react and play what is in front of them is the challenge. You must develop the players to be ruthless in each part of the process and the discipline to execute it as perfectly as possible to maximize the pressure felt by the defending team. This must be built into the coaching and training philosophy if the team is to take the chances it creates and seize the opportunities presented by the defence.

A rugby team is no different to any other organization in the world. Its most valuable asset is human resources. The players, their skills, insights, experience, natural ability, character, commitment and courage will all contribute to successful attack. Without structure a good defence force will win the battle and more than likely the war.

You need a structure that clearly defines winning the ball, where you want to move the ball, who is going to get it there, who is going to carry it into the opposition when it arrives and who is going to win it at the tackle. This can be done for up to 3 phases. Then build in the necessary variations you need to give your on field generals the power and capabilities to “play what is in front of them.” The structure supports the players and the options they take. You cannot rely on the players being there and making the right decision all the time. How often are games won and lost by the decisions the ball carrier and support players make? A detailed attacking structure is an effective way of maximizing the opportunities. The structure reduces the number of decisions asked of individuals in a game and gives them the scope to focus on the execution of the core skills. If the players know: what they are expected to do now, how they do it, what they have to do next and why they are doing it, the structure is just about spot on!