

**AUSTRALIAN RUGBY  
FOOTBALL UNION**

**LEVEL III  
COACHING PROGRAMME  
2000**

**DEFENSIVE PATTERN  
WRITTEN ASSIGNMENT**

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## **A.R.U. LEVEL 3 COACHING COURSE** **DEFENSIVE PATTERN PAPER**

### **A. - INTRODUCTION**

The purpose of this paper is to demonstrate knowledge, and discuss basic methods and options an attacking team has in attempting to beat the pattern the defending team operates.

The starting point must be to state that the general principles of play are;

- GO FORWARD
- SUPPORT
- CONTINUITY
- PRESSURE?

The object of the paper is to discuss how the defending team can stop the attacking team achieving the above. To do this it makes sense to discuss the major aims of both attack and defence, and how to achieve them. Next, basic defence of first phase possession will be outlined, before going on to discuss defending for multi-phases. Thereafter the paper will outline methods of attacking from scrums and line-outs, in an attempt to manoeuvre and beat the defence.

### **B. - ATTACKING TEAM - MAJOR OBJECTIVES**

We may concur that the major objectives of the attacking team are;

- To gain and keep possession of the ball
- To gain territory/ground
- To score points/tries

This is achieved by;

- Winning the ball at set-pieces i.e. kick-offs, scrums, line-outs, or by
- Winning the ball in loose situations by forcing the opposition into making a mistake and turning the ball over through a handling error, a law infringement or by any other mistake

After winning the ball an attacking team achieves the major objectives by;

- Targeting opposition players who perceived as weak defenders, or
- Manoeuvring defenders into certain parts of the field, and then
- Committing those defenders, thereby
- Creating space, which in turn leads to the
- Creation of options to exploit that space, which hopefully means tries
- The essence is to manoeuvre defenders into areas of your choosing, to disorganise their pattern, and then to attack again

Key components of strong/successful attack are;

- Team ball-winning capabilities in set pieces and loose play
- Individual handling and running skills
- Individual strength, fitness and pace
- Speed of thought when fatigued
- Team awareness of won **strengths** and weaknesses
- Team awareness of opposition **weaknesses** and strengths
- Training to constantly improve offensive strengths and weaknesses
- Individual and team confidence
- Playing the game in a manner that will exploit all of the above

Just as in the sports of tennis or squash - where the aim is not necessarily to score 'winners' directly from the opponents serve, but to move them around the court to gain a position from which to contemplate a 'sure winner'. In quality rugby where defences are very good, the aim of the attacking side will not always be to try and score a try directly from first phase.

In modern rugby teams have fifteen exceptionally strong, fit and mobile athletes and they defend aggressively as one. Therefore, attacking teams must have a clear idea of their tactics in different field positions. They must be clear how they will maintain possession of the ball and move the defence around for any number of phases of play until space is created for a try to be scored.

Moreover, to avoid becoming predictable and easy for opponents to analyse, teams should vary their modes and points of attack and their lines of running. Unless, of course the attacking side has an unquestionable advantage in one area or another.

### **C. - DEFENDING TEAM - MAJOR OBJECTIVES**

- To stop the opposition from gaining ground and scoring points
- To halt the progress of the ball
- To regain the ball

This is achieved by ;

- reducing space, thereby
- reducing options, and then
- competing as a unit in all situations - 'to attack without the ball'
- matching strong defenders against weaker attackers and thus hopefully force a turn-over, and
- regaining the ball by forcing the opposition into making a mistake (turnover) or perhaps into kicking it away
- in essence, maintaining defensive cohesion for as long as it takes for the opposition to run out of ideas, make a mistake or tire.

Key components of strong defence are;

- Individual tackling technique
- Individual strength and physical fitness
- Individual and team confidence and determination
- Individual speed of thought when fatigued
- Individual awareness of own role in defence
- Communication in units and the ability to reorganise quickly
- Awareness of team **weaknesses** and strengths
- Awareness of opposition **strengths** and weaknesses
- Training to constantly improve defensive weaknesses and strengths
- Playing the game in a manner that will deny the opposition to play to their strengths

In the past successful defence used to be about having more players who could tackle well than the opposition. If an opposition player burst through, it was deemed to be because of a poor/missed tackle or a sublime piece of skill.

These days however defence is a team commitment - 'attack without the ball' - and must be prepared for as such. Opposition offensive strengths must be studied, and defensive patterns must prepare for successive phases. As stated, strength in the tackle, fitness and communication must remain constant until the offensive team runs out of ideas or makes a mistake.

#### **D. - BASIC DEFENSIVE PATTERNS**

There are four basic types of defensive pattern which a team can operate from first phase play and usually only applies to the backs and open-side;

- 'One-on-One' or 'Man-on-Man' - where a defender covers his direct opponent in any move/play the attackers try to use
- 'Zone' - where a defender stays in his immediate area/channel, and tackles whoever comes into it.
- 'One Out' - where a defender lines up the player directly outside his opposite man
- 'Drift' or 'Slide' - where the defence decide to tackle 'One-on-One' until the ball moves past a certain point, at which time the defence changes to operate the 'Drift' pattern.

Which system a team will use depends largely on field position, the opposition's strengths and the quality of the defending team's weakest defender. The system used will usually only apply on first phase of play. Thereafter a defence must be very flexible, and react to the opposition's point of attack.

In multi-phase play, teams have become so adept at recycling the ball quickly, that almost as soon as one player is tackled, another runner is waiting to take the ball on at speed. It is therefore unwise to commit all forwards to rucks or mauls unless an extended drive is attempted.

After the first phase drive has been made, the defence should 'fan' out around the fringes of the breakdown. Thus, the traditional tactic of inside backs tackling the first runner from phase play should be avoided. Forwards are assigned most of the close-quarter tackling; backs should be less inclined to be drawn-in, and should be organised to defend against a broader attack. If the attacking team does align a ball-carrying forward against a back, an advantage is likely to arise.

Successfully defending second/multi-phase play relies on;

- an organised screen, which is
- well prepared/briefed on opposition patterns/plays, or which
- can think quickly and read the opposition's plays, and then can
- communicate constantly, and (importantly)
- has individuals committed to, and capable of, making turnover tackles.

## **E. - BEATING A DEFENCE**

### **FROM A SCRUM**

Given the following circumstances;

- A front-five which can comfortably win its own ball
- A back-row with physical presence
- A strong, competent scrum-half

Perhaps the best option from a scrum has to be a back-row move. The ball is already as close to the 'gain line' as it is possible to get, and the defending forwards are (or should be) bound to scrum.

If a player can drive over the 'gain line' and force the opposition forwards to retreat upon breaking - not forgetting that the new ruck law - then what better method is there to gain fast momentum down the field?

The initial drive can be exploited by speedy recycling, with further hard drives by bigger carriers. These players can be brought onto the ball at different angles, at gaps or brought into contact with perceived weaker tacklers by judicious passing by the scrum-half. The scrum-half has a vital role in creating uncertainty in defenders, and must be prepared to take the ball on himself. (Conversely, in defence the scrum-half must bear a lot of responsibility for organising the line).

Following a number of hard drives, the defence should be forced into a retreat, and perhaps the line of play can be changed by giving the ball to a strong inside back or to a forward ball-carrier running at an opposition back. Thereafter, if the ball is being recycled well a team has the option to continue with the same tactic of using the forwards or inside backs to carry the ball, or allowing the stand-off and outside backs the opportunity to exploit whatever space may have been created during the process.

If this tactic is pursued, care must be taken to;

- vary the initial back-row move used
- to ensure the team has the ability to recycle the ball consistently
- the ball skills of bigger ball-carriers are good enough in close-quarters
- to ensure passes are not made too far behind the 'gain line', thereby giving the defence a possible advantage
- that the scrum-half creates uncertainty in the defence by changing angles of attack close to the breakdown, and using legal dummy runners
- that the team does not over-use the tactic, thereby becoming predictable, possibly tiring out the forwards, and/or failing to use talented runners in the backs
- support of own team-mates post contact?

## **FROM A LINE-OUT**

Given the following circumstances;

- A competent thrower-in of the ball
- A well drilled line-out unit
- A strong-passing scrum-half
- A physically robust stand-off

Attacking from 'off-the-top', with flat ball being passed to the stand-off for further transfer, can potentially provide an excellent platform. As above, the ball is already close to the 'gain line', and by law the back-line defence is well behind the 'gain line'. Added to which, the ball passed to a fast-moving inside back has an excellent chance of moving down the field. If the player is tackled an attacking back-row player from the end of the line-out is in a good position to support and promote continuity.

The play can be varied enormously, with different running lines and points of attack to keep the opposition guessing. The attacking side can gain further advantage if the forwards know the point of attack in advance. Moreover, players making dummy runs can assist in creating uncertainty or confusion in the defence, and it is quite possible that a 'bust' leading to a try can be manufactured from first phase - particularly if instigated inside or around the opposition's 22m line.

The running lines of supporting players are very important if this tactic is adopted. As stated, it is likely that the ball has good momentum, and this gives the ball-carrier a better opportunity of shrugging-off a tackle and staying on his feet. Thus, supporting players can concern themselves more with keeping the ball going forward - from this 'moving platform' - than with the need to recycle it.

Specific moves can be designed to give the ball to the most powerful or talented players. Furthermore it must be re-emphasised that the defence is likely to be in disarray if they are committed to observing the ruck law, and space is likely to be materialise for exploitation. If they are not, then penalties should ensure.

Perhaps in this area of play - as opposed to closer driving play - it is the stand-off and not the scrum-half who has the most decisive role. The initial link from the line-out is vital. The stand-off must take the ball as flat as possible and at pace. His well-timed pass to a player moving a speed will set up the momentum to create a 'moving platform', and it is important that the fly-half is willing to take a 'hit' in the process. The fly-half may also be the 'fact' and use other, more robust runners with the ball.

He must then get quickly onto his feet and be ready to link again and again until space is created somewhere and the fly-half can run himself. For as Mark Ella once said, "If I touch the ball once there's a chance someone will score, if I touch it twice the chances are the person I pass it to will score, if I touch it a third time, then I will score". These days with better defences more phases are likely, but the principle remains the same, the fly-half must dictate and create.

If this tactic is pursued, care must be taken to:

- ensure the teams line-out skills are well drilled
- vary line-out options, and not move it 'off-the-top' every time
- vary the first receiver from the fly-half, to alter the point of attack
- ensure that supporting players know which area is being attacked
- attempt to maintain a 'moving platform' for as long as possible
- be ready to get talented runners into space
- have one or two 'killer' moves for creating try-scoring 'busts' around the 22m

## **F. CONCLUSION**

The game of rugby is constantly evolving in response to new laws, new interpretations of laws, players' improved abilities and more advanced coaching techniques. However, notwithstanding the quality of defences, the general principles of play; GO FORWARD, SUPPORT & CONTINUITY remain the same and will continue to do so.

Coaches/teams may make many shrewd and detailed observations of the opposition and their tactics, and develop plans to counter strengths and exploit perceived weaknesses. However, the beauty of the game is that it is a game, and the coach, no matter how good he is and how well he prepares, he (usually) cannot play it, that is down to the players.

Therefore we cannot close a discussion on defence and attack without mentioning the 'human' factor. Rugby comes down to a man against man contest - position against position - and more often than not the team with the most naturally talented and athletic players succeeds. A supremely gifted or physically superior player can usually unlock the tightest of defences with moments of brilliance or awesome power.

This is what makes the game so attractive. Brilliant players do win games if they are given the ball, and it would be a full game if they did not. Consider the likes of Campese, Edwards, Davies, Ella, Gibson, Duckham, Blanco, Gerber, Lomu, Guscott,

Larkham, Lafond, Merhtens and Cullen. Can any player really be (or have been) confident playing against them? Can any coach make complete provision to nullify their threat? It would be extremely difficult. However, if it were possible to nullify the threat of one brilliant player, with other players of real quality in the same team a coach's job is nigh on impossible.