

## **Encouraging instinct and opportunism in rugby whilst still maintaining structure and pattern.**

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I, like many keen followers of rugby, have seen the game change enormously since the coming of professionalism in 1995.

Of the many criticisms made of the new game, perhaps the most common has been that the ability to read the play and take advantage of opportunities seems to have been 'bred' out of the modern player.

Indeed, following Rod Maqueen and Eddie Jones' stewardship of both the Brumbies and the Wallabies, 'sequence' plays have taken the idea of a 'set piece' to a new level. Our friends on the other side of the Tasman have rather uncharitably called the new Australian approach "Chess using Footballers as the pieces".

Having watched the Wallabies Autumn campaign in 2002, I had also noticed what I perceived as an absence of initiative, expression and opportunism in their approach, and yearned for the days of Mark Ella turning such opportunities into points.

Thus this paper's initial purpose was to prove that reliance on proscriptive plays would eventually breed out any enterprise a player had.

I believed that Australia had become a team that a) couldn't individually see opportunities as they unfolded, and b) were reluctant to react through lack of confidence or reluctance to detour from the script.

I also set out to prove that this proscriptive approach had taken away any ability for the players to improvise.

Yet the more evidence I gathered, the more my mind began to change.

It appears, however, that at club, Super 12 and International level, those teams who used patterns, structures and sequences were clearly more successful. More importantly, these teams; i.e: Eastwood, University, Canterbury Crusaders and even Auckland had developed their sequences to compliment their player talent. In other words, their sequences are designed to give such players the chance to express themselves.

I believe however, that the real danger in a proscriptive approach is taking it into training.. A training programme that is too focused on blocked skill drills and unopposed game rehearsal may lead to a ‘dumbing down‘ of skills.

What’s more, unless players clearly understand what game sequences have been designed to achieve, their focus will be on the execution rather than looking for the preferred outcome.

So, in this paper, I aim to define proscriptive and instinctive play, cite examples of players considered instinctive and examine how these skills were learned. I will then suggest possible ways of marrying a proscriptive approach to planning while still developing and utilising instinctive play into your game plan.

In short, I want to have my cake and eat it too.

## **The development of structure and sequence plays.**

For me, Rugby began in the seventies, where until recently, the game was one of set pieces interspersed with brief flashes of open play.

As such, the game plan and the way a coach prepared a team reflected these conventions.

The majority of time was spent rehearsing set pieces in units. Forwards spent the bulk of their time doing scrums and lineouts and backs practiced moves from these set pieces. What happened after tackle 1 was basically up to the players.

Set pieces and starter moves were mostly developed in isolation, as there seemed to be little need for each unit to know what the other was doing.

Even so, the majority of training and planning time was dedicated to highly structured rehearsal.

So, on the rare occasion when play progressed into 2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> phases, players relied almost completely on their instincts, as they hadn’t prepared to do anything else. Although these forays were rare, we look back with rose coloured glasses thinking the game was a rich mine of expressionist play.

From the late ‘70s until today, a number of factors have changed the game enormously.

An increase in coach education in Australia, the reduction in set pieces through changes to the lineout laws in 1995, a more liberal use of advantage and various

attempts to clean up the breakdown meant that continuity had become increasingly important in winning rugby games.

The emphasis at the set piece had changed from just a contest to a method of restarting play.

Interestingly, the introduction of proscriptive defensive patterns from League coaches made 1<sup>st</sup> phase plays more difficult to score from.

Put simply, a cereal phase game meant that forwards and backs needed to know more intimately what each other was doing.

### **Sequence plays. Who uses them and what are they trying to achieve?**

In my opinion, sequence plays are no more than a natural extension of what we've always done for decades. The only difference is that now, the set piece doesn't finish when the ball leaves the scrum, but until the next stoppage in play.

Multi-phase sequence plays were pioneered by the ACT Brumbies in the mid-nineties, and since then have been adopted by many teams from International down to Club level.

These sequences vary in their level of complexity from giving players a general idea where the play is going at tackle 1, 2, and 3 etc, to plays that identify the roles of all 15 players up to tackle 5 and 6.

It seems that those teams at Test (Australia, New Zealand, England) Super 12 (Auckland, Canterbury, ACT) and Club level (Eastwood, Sydney Uni) have had the most regular success.

That is not to say that less organised sides cannot win, but more consistent results have come from the more proscriptive sides.

The more proscriptive sides tend to control possession better and clear the breakdown area quicker and more regularly.

In attacking zones, these sequences look to disrupt the defensive line. Through quick 'play the ball' a slow aligning defensive line can be exploited or outflanked.

By constantly changing the point of attack, a mismatch in defensive markers can be orchestrated ie: A prop having to mark up against an attacking centre. Or even exploit a player with poor defensive skills. ie: De Wet Barry from South Africa

has a habit of racing out of the line to cover his inability to read the play; therefore, by burying those players that cover for him in (back row) and putting extra numbers into his zone after tackle 3 or 4, you can expose this weakness.

When clearing the ball from defensive zones, sequences can be designed to relieve pressure on the kicker or explore attacking options in this end of the field.

As they identify each player's role in the sequence, players have clear criteria that they can be evaluated against.

On the surface, this approach can appear mechanical. Ironically, often when it is particularly well executed.

### **Instinct. Who's really got it and who really needs it?**

Most of us would admit that the ability to read the play, assess and take action accordingly is critically important for some players on your team.

But not every player. And not all the time

Instinctive players in positions like 1/2, 5/8, Inside centre and fullback are certainly an asset when it comes to piercing the defensive line.

Yet players in the tight five almost certainly need to be both teamwork oriented and process driven. Without these skills, the coordination required for the scrum, lineout would almost be impossible to put together.

Instinct is merely a skill (like strength, speed, height) that has been developed over a long period of time. It is important to identify instinct and select for it in the positions who require it. But not for those who don't.

#### **Identifying Instinct.**

*Example 1:* In a Super 12 game, Queensland is awarded a free kick, Reds halfback Josh Valentine quickly gets the ball in his hands, takes a tap heading out to the left hand side of the field where lazy defenders had failed to get onside. He feeds Chris Latham who goes in for the try.

*Example 2:* In a club game in Sydney, The three Ella brothers handle the ball twice each in the one movement to score for their Randwick club side.

Both of these examples would tend to demonstrate value of instinctive play in the game of rugby.

But are these players merely taking advantage of skills developed over years of conscious practice?

Just as a weightlifter who hits the gym every day gets stronger, the 2 above examples show how constant practice of certain skills in a random sense achieve a dominant ability.

Josh Valentine's ability to sniff out a tap opportunity is a skill shared by Steve Merrick, Valentine's mentor, long term coach and team-mate. A skill coincidentally shared by another former Merrick apprentice, Tim Rapp. During Valentine's and Rapp's 'apprenticeship', this skill has been consciously embedded.

And the Ella's ability to 'keep the ball alive' and find each other owes more to the daily games of 'thousand a side' on the street than either formal coaching or genetics. Put simply, the way of breaking a very crowded defensive line was to go forward and back up, getting additional touches that add to the defence, and find some space where none existed.

Put simply, players with dominant skills will naturally look to use them. The coach's ability therefore is to identify the talents their players possess, design sequences that take advantage of them, encourage these players to use them when appropriate them and to continue to develop such skills.

It is ultimately an unconscious decision made through years of repetitive practice of a random skill.

*Example 3.:* Matt Rogers comes into play as a substitute in the 60<sup>th</sup> minute of a Test match. Late in the phase count he senses that the man marking up on him is a tight forward. As soon as he gets the ball, he places the defence, puts a move on and beats his man.

In League, the purpose of the game is to exploit mismatches in the defensive line. After years of random practice, Matt made an unconscious decision to take on his man.

Because he knew the purpose of the sequence was to create such a mismatch, he took advantage of the opportunity.

### **The implications to Game plan and training.**

There is no doubt that playing without a proscriptive game plan will force players to play to their individual strengths.

But by using a sequenced approach to your game plan, you reduce the number of decisions a player needs to make, liberating them to take advantage of the instincts they have.

A proscriptive approach does however, require a lot of training time to be taken up in rehearsing the moves, much of it in a closed sense.

Yet to develop a players instinct, a more random approach needs to be implemented.

### **The Hockeyroos.**

One of the greatest sporting memories I have is of seeing the Hockeyroos play during the Sydney Olympics. Yet despite being a vastly different game to Rugby, their coach, Rick Charlesworth can provide a number of clues on getting the balance right.

When seeing this team play in the flesh, it is amazing how structured their attack is. In fact, their sequences are written down on their hockey sticks, with Charlesworth constantly bellowing out which one to apply from the comfort of the dug out.

Despite being highly proscriptive at game time, the focus of training has been on designer games. In other words, t acquiring skill through competition, and practicing in a random rather than a blocked way.

Rick Charlesworth's plan was to break down his proscriptive game plan into the individual skills required to execute it, and them develop them in a game sense.

### **Putting your plan together.**

I guess the first thing to do is to undertake a talent audit of your team, and the skills each team member possesses. Then, prepare sequences complimentary to your skill base. ie if you've got a lightening fast winger, then develop your sequences to give him an opportunity one-on-one with space against his opposite number.

It is then important to demonstrate what each sequence is set out to do.

What's more, it is equally important to rehearse and test these sequences on the training paddock by doing as much opposed work as possible. That way, you practice skills in a more random sense.

Like the Hockeyroos, it is important to make a large proportion of your practice time devoted to learning skills and testing them through designer games.

Learn in a blocked sense then move into game play quickly. If speed of recycling is important in attacking your opposition, go through your breakdown protocol in a blocked drill and then spend the majority of time testing the skill in a game like the “Tunnel of Death”.(see below).

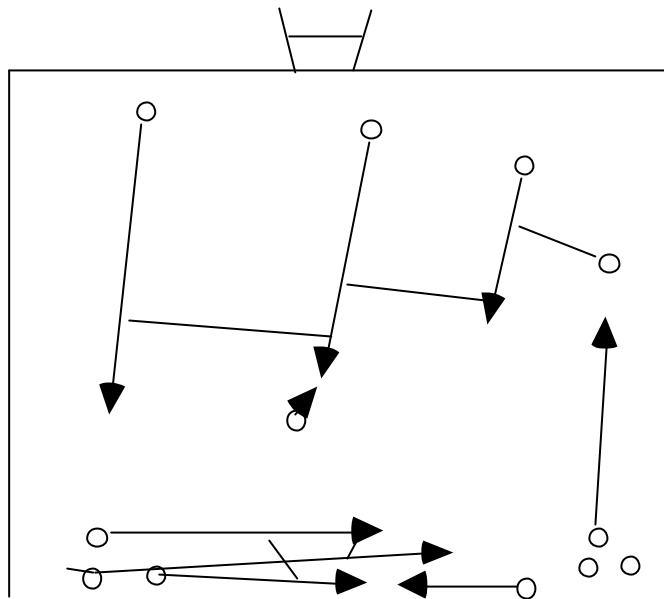
Games themselves develop ‘game reading’ skills among your ball players, so games like ruck touch, 3 ball touch, ‘Take it Up’ and ‘corridor footy’ help in a number of areas.

But generally, the more often random skills are practiced, the better they become, and more structured you are in a way that is sympathetic to your teams skill set, the more successful your team will be.

#### **Appendix: Games and random skill drills mentioned in this piece.**

<p><b>C ontinuity Triangle</b> <b>Number of players: 15 or more</b> <b>Equipment: 1 ball.</b> <b><i>combination rehearsal drill</i></b></p>
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This drill increases the size of the triangle even further to an area that takes up half the field. Group 1 starts off with one player remaining behind. A high ball is put up to one player from group 2 who moves forward to mark it. He passes the ball to one of the three remaining players in group 2. they clear their area by long lateral passes and are met by one defender from group 3. they pass the ball onto one of the three remaining players from group 3 who continue to execute the hit and recoil drill, against a defender from group 1.



**No mistakes Drill (tunnel of death)**

**Number of players: 12 or more**

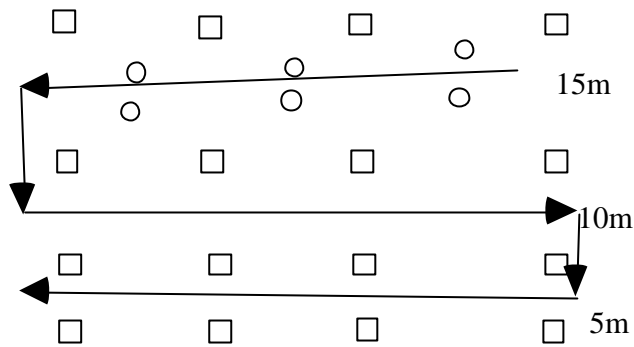
**Equipment: 6 tackle suits**

Divide the group into two teams; 6 with the shields, the others with the ball. The half always remain with the team with the ball. 3 drill channels are set. The first 15m wide, the second 10, and the third only 5 m wide. each of these channels are divided into 3 sections with 2 shield holders in each of the squares in the first row.

The aim is for the attacking team to make its way up the first row, down the second then up the last without going out of bounds. The defenders defend their square until the attackers have past, then move across to the thinner channel. If a mistake is made, the attackers go back to the beginning.

To add pressure to this exercise, put it under the stop watch. This not only creates competition, but forces quick continuity when the channel is wide, and tighter stuff when it is narrow.



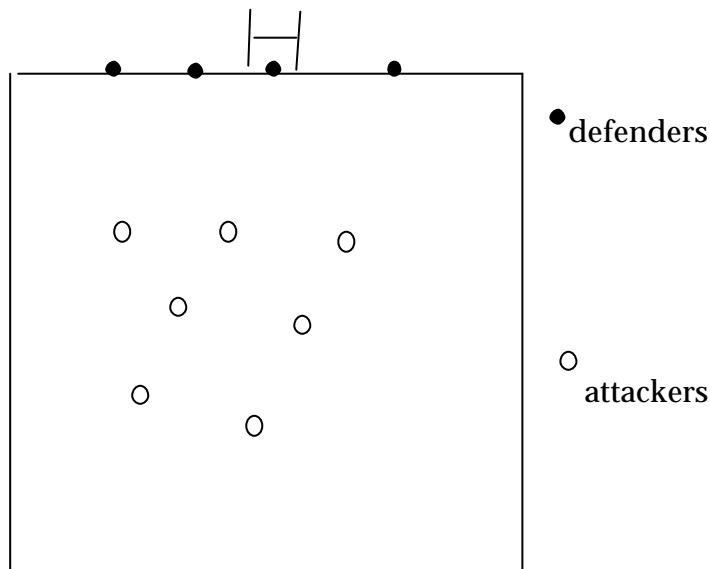


no mistakes drill

**Donkin Slide Defence Game (DG 1)**  
**Number of players: 11 or more**  
**7 attackers vs 4 defenders**  
**1 ball**

Four defenders kick out from their own goaline to the to the attackers who are randomly aligned.

The attackers have 6 phases to score whilst defenders must defend using either a tackle or a two handed touch. Attackers once touched, must drop to the ground and place the ball. One nominated player must be acting 1/2 at every touch. The idea of the game is to allow defenders the opportunity to slide, communicate and be effective without panic.



**Donkin slide Defence Game 2. (DG 2)**  
**Number of players: 13 or more**  
**2 balls**

\*two groups of five attackers with a ball each align on the try line and side line respectively. Their aim is to reach their try lines which are parallel to their starting position.

In the centre of this grid are three defenders who must double handed tag the ball carrier.

Group 1 moves first with the defenders turning and facing up to group 2 immediately after the first attacking raid.

\*Variation A third and fourth group of attackers can be added if your numbers are too large.

defender numbers can be varied. 3 becomes 2 plus an acting halfback.

