



Structuring & Improving Unstructured Attack by Darren Coleman.

The author presented this paper at the Churchill Coaching Conference in Canada in June, 2004. He is a graduate Bachelor of Human Movement Science and has a wide coaching background. He is Head Coach to the Calgary Rugby Union Mavericks in the Canada Super League, has experience in the Italian Serie 'A' National League with US Rugby Benevente, has been with the NSW Warratahs as an assistant coach in the Super 12 and in their academy and this year he coached the Canada 'A' XV against the England Counties.

The reason I chose this topic is that I feel Canadian Rugby, in general, has a weakness in its ability to attack with imagination and creativity outside the set piece and initial pre-planned two to four phases. I feel this is a by-product of many of the players taking up the sport so late in the teenage years and not having the necessary time to develop their attacking skills and imagination. This, along with a lack of regular exposure to the viewing of international star players and mimicking the things they may see on TV as impressionable young players, perhaps leads to the under-development of creativity.

There are many factors contributing to good attack, including solid set-piece work, opposition analysis (i.e. attacking perceived weaknesses) and pre-planned 'sequence plays', whereby the first three to four phases from the set-piece are rigidly planned. This presentation/paper will focus on areas where the game loses a little of its structure and your team has the ball and is searching for the all-important line break.

The three parts to the presentation, which I see as vital contributors to a team's ability to attack, are:

1. **Individual Passing:** A player's ability to pass accurately over a long distance at pace and the teaching points and drills for improving this.
2. **Individual Footwork:** The ability of a player, when presented with a 'one-on-one' opportunity in attack, to have the skill to take advantage of it or at least create a half break.
3. **'Phase Plays':** When the breakdown ball is static and the defence is structured and organized. Getting groups of players not involved in the breakdown having the ability to run three, four or five-man plays which will create a gap when they are under pressure and fatigued.

PASSING.



Not only in Canada (where players on average pick up a rugby ball later in life than in other countries), but the world over, elite players struggle with the most fundamental skill of passing the ball accurately over a reasonable distance when running at speed.

In this section I will focus purely on the development of the spiral/spin pass. In my opinion, for any pass over the distance of five metres, this pass is the most accurate and reliable due to the spiral spinning of the ball giving its flight path more consistency than you tend to get with other passes. I do understand and appreciate the need to develop all types of passes. However, if coaches can develop their team to pass accurately over a greater distance, it gives the team an opportunity to attack with greater width, thereby opening up the gaps between defenders and creating more opportunities for players to get 'one-on-ones' against defenders and use the footwork skills we will cover in the next section.

I feel coaches, as a rule, do not allocate the required time in training sessions to developing this pass, preferring to focus on 'big picture' plays. However, if 'player 'A' cannot pass the ball eight metres to player 'B' with consistency and precision, the 'big picture' plays will never be realized.

Many of the following exercises can be used at warm-up to give you time efficiency in practice as opposed to running laps or running drills. When using these drills as a warm-up, coaches **must coach** and must not be content to let players continue with poor technique while you organize the next segment of training.

In my opinion, eighty percent of the work in the spiral pass comes from the back hand, both in giving power and direction to the pass; the front hand is merely there in a supporting role. You will see players, when passing from their non-dominant side, wishing to use too much of their front or dominant hand. Secondly, as with all target sports and activities, the follow-through of the dominant hand (in this case the back hand) must be full and must finish pointing in the direction of the target; a good example is the basketball free-throw. In the learning stages, that hand should be left up for a few seconds after the pass to ensure good learning habits are being followed.

Hand Position: The fingers must be spread and the back hand positioned towards the base (not the tip) of the ball. The back hand/wrist should also be slightly cocked or rotated to give the ball its rotation. It is the action of the wrist and fingers, not the arm, that spins the ball. The front hand should be positioned towards the front of the ball to assist in holding the ball in the back hand and it provides slight assistance in the spinning action of the ball.

As mentioned above, I feel that about eighty percent of the work comes from the back hand. You should, therefore, use drills that develop this aspect without the assistance of the front hand. I have listed some basic one-handed drills that increase in difficulty and specificity; they finish with some two-handed passing drills.

- One-handed passing in the air to the coach, focusing on back hand work and a good even spiral of the ball.



- Front-on one-handed partner passing that starts over four metres and progresses to greater distance as the skill develops. Focus on good ball flight and follow-through with the hand finishing by pointing at the target. Initiate the pass from the hip to develop the strength, co-ordination and power of the wrist and forearm.
- Progress this to work with two balls, working on opposite sides of the body. Keep in mind that when the player is focusing on catching the incoming ball, his follow-through hand drops earlier. So two balls *may* go against training a good follow-through.
- One or two balls, front-on and using the one-handed pass accompanied by pitter-patter steps to teach that players should be able to pass comfortably off either hand when either foot is planted.
- Side-on, one-handed pass using one ball. Passing with the inside foot only slightly back to give a natural and realistic angle of the body when passing laterally. Coaching focus here should be on the path of the back arm being in the direction of the target, not pulling across the body to assist with giving the ball spin. Remember the spin comes from the wrist and fingers.
- Side-on one-handed passes with one ball and with pitter-patter steps.
- You can now repeat this sequence of exercises with two hands.

The use of an over-weighted ball can be incorporated into practice. (I know Gilbert produce one called the 'Morgan Pass Developer', or I have seen many coaches use sand-filled balls, although these may be a little too heavy and cause poor technique.) My theory on this is that this extra specific strength development will increase the length of a player's pass, not that he needs to be able to pass the ball twenty metres. However, when he has to only pass it ten metres he should not be physically strained so that he can focus on the accuracy of the pass.

I find that the pitter-patter steps whilst passing not only works on developing the pass from either foot, but also develops basic foot speed/co-ordination and gives the session a warm-up or conditioning option as well as basic skill development.

How you progress this from here is limited only by your own imagination. The most basic, and sometimes overlooked, method is for players to go up and down the field over a set distance in width passing the ball at various speeds. Ensure that you have enough balls so that players get as many repetitions as possible in the time you have. Players working in groups of five will pass once every fifth pass and players working in pairs will pass once every second pass, thus achieving an increase in skill repetition that leads to faster improvement. Once you are happy with the basic execution of the spiral pass you can begin implementing decision-making scenarios into your drills, but I stress that *if players cannot pass accurately consistently it does not matter how many times they take the right option, the ball will never arrive at its intended receiver.*

FOOTWORK.



Again, this aspect of the game is where coaches leave players to their own devices too much because they perhaps feel it is not an area worthy of valuable training time. I do agree that players have differing levels of ability and limits in this area and we are not going to turn all players into Jason Robinson, the England full-back/wing and a quality attacker. An example I do know of, however, is from the personal experience of working hard on the footwork of David Lyons, the Wallaby No.8. When he was a younger Warratah Academy player, we worked very hard on this aspect of his game and to see the effects now that a 115kg/260lbs ball runner with good footwork has on the field confirms to me to that it is an area worth pursuing.

It is not only used by outside backs when presented with space to make a clean break, but also very relevant to tight forwards when taking 'hit-ups' into a wall of defence. Having the ability to put effective footwork into pre-contact lets the player avoid being hit in a clean tackle. He can, therefore, make a break, get over the gain line or, in the worst case scenario, win the contact and leave the hands free to offload or offer a good presentation of the ball.

I do not confess to be a world leader in the development of foot speed, agility and evasion and I see many strength and conditioning coaches nowadays using work to develop fast feet in their practice sessions. Many of the basic drills/exercises I will show you have been taken from other sports, some modified to become rugby specific, others left simply as they are. Surely, though, we should be prepared to look into other sports to learn and the one that comes immediately to mind is Gridiron American Football. The footwork training that goes into their running backs is vast and begs the question of how much we could use this with our players when we are looking at players improving their ability to get over the gain line or beat a defender one-on-one.

A basic progression I see is initially developing and training the player to move his feet quicker whilst in a wide base stance. This can be a basic pitter-patter drill over a short time frame (not to fatigue), emphasizing the wide base as it is needed when we wish to change direction.

This can be then progressed to include co-ordination/reaction activities. For example, when the players are in the pitter-patter drill, send cues for where they have to quickly move their feet out to a position (or point) and back without losing rhythm.

From there, other stimuli can be used, such as colour-coded cones, reaction to a hand signal to take off in a certain direction or reaction to an approaching defender.

Another effective method of developing foot speed and co-ordination is the use of speed ladders and numerous variations in exercises and degrees of difficulty can be used or invented. Again I find ladders a good fun way to warm-up as players are not overly stretching-out too early in the session.



Once a player has a reasonable base in foot speed, co-ordination and reaction that have been developed from the above line of drills, it is time to put him into game-specific drills. I find it is best to tailor these to the positions they play; for example the tight-five forwards, who more often hit-up very close to the breakdown and work in limited space, need to practise in this specific scenario and workspace. The drill replication for them usually requires them having more a stutter type of step with a small angle change and an emphasis on leg-drive just after contact; realistically, the number of clean breaks they make from this position is minimal and the main aim is to enable them to avoid being hit squarely and cleanly, to get past the point of contact or to be able to get their hands free. With these players a trade-off has to be found on optimal body height as well.

Back rows or inside backs, who may more frequently have their ball-running opportunities a little wider with a little more width between defenders as well as working space between them and the defensive line, will have a bigger lateral component to the sidestep with more of an emphasis on making a clean break, even if they do not have the hands free to offload. I try to replicate these scenarios with defenders in suits or holding bump pads.

Moving out, we get to outside centres, wings and full-backs, who more often are presented with one-on-one chances with reasonable room to move and they generally arrive at the situation with a little more speed prior to receiving the ball. Therefore, the drills for this group are tailored this way and generally it is too much baggage for the defender to use a shield or pad *and* defend realistically. When you build up this work, have the defender approach the attacker from different positions, i.e. front-on, side-on and from outside to in, so that you replicate the different scenarios they will confront in a game.

Generally, for all these type of evasion skills, a player must be taught the basics of setting up their defender(s) for the evasive move. It is my opinion that many players' evasive moves do not work because they have not positioned their opposition tackler well by drawing him in one direction and into a train of thought before hitting the big step and changing direction.

The key points when teaching this are:

- Setting up the defender.
- Analyzing what is or will be in the space you are about to step back into.
- A hard breaking, direction-changing step. With the foot landing in front of the knee, it requires a good power-to-weight ratio in the stepping leg.
- A quick/acceleration step with the foot landing behind the knee so as not to lose forward momentum after the change of direction.
- Foot speed and acceleration away from the point, so as to turn this into a full line break.

Many players who possess natural ability at this will have their own idiosyncrasies that they have developed over years of unstructured playing. If they are effective at it, do not



try to change too much - just provide them with the opportunity to practise it and further develop their skill.

Exercises/drills to replicate and practise evasion and footwork are limited only by your imagination. This segment is purely designed to have you understand the basics of it and its teaching points as well as its importance. Now I have you thinking about it, you must develop fun, specific and innovative ways to practise it.

PHASE PLAYS.

What to do when the ball is slow coming from the ruck, the defence is reasonably well organized and has plenty of numbers? Kick? Yes, it is an option, but you may already be in good field position and may not want to give the ball back to the opposition; sometimes, all it takes is that one half break to get over the gain line and our attack has impetus again and, better still, *we* have the ball.

I refer to three, four or five-man plays as '**phase plays.**' They are designed to break up this well-set defence and put players into a half hole or, even better still, a full one to get your team going forward again.

The objective of this section is not to teach you hundreds of '*special*' plays, as once teams analyze these '*special*' plays they become redundant. It is rather to open up your eyes to their worth and to appreciate a system on how to practise and teach them.

I have found over the last five years that it is important to find the right balance as to the amount of time you spend practising them related to the number of occasions you use them in the game. For example, if you spend fifteen to twenty percent of your practice time drilling them and only use them three or four times in a match, is it worth it? The other side of the coin is if the players have not been drilled enough in them and are not totally confident in their ability or the ability of those around them to use these plays quickly and under pressure and fatigue, they will never be used and your problem of breaking a defensive wall is still there. Worse still, if they are not precise and accurate in using them, the ball will go down and you would have been better off just continuing to bash it up.

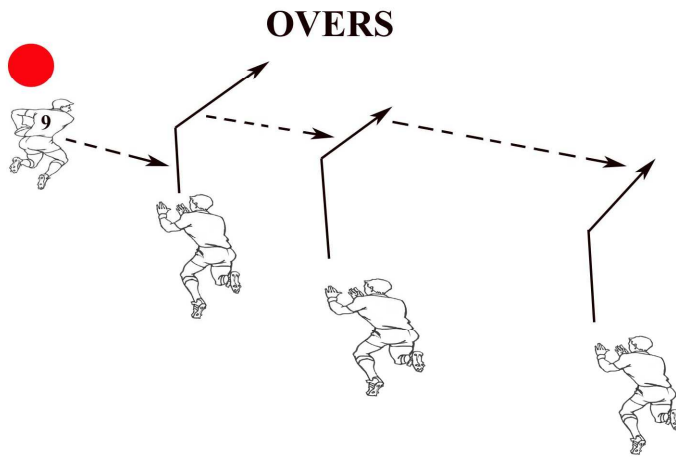
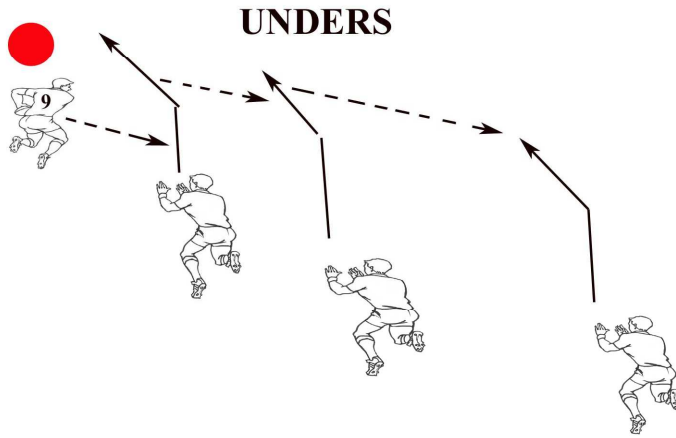
A basic teaching progression for giving teams the confidence to use them might look something like this:

1. Give the play a name and explain the running lines of the play, such as who takes the ball, where he goes and who he passes it to etc.
2. Walk through the play slowly and without pressure, with everybody being clear on the role of each participant as well as optimal starting positions. This is important for *all* participants.
3. Identify roles within the play. This can be done with names or numbers and begin to get players to call these names or numbers once the play has been called.

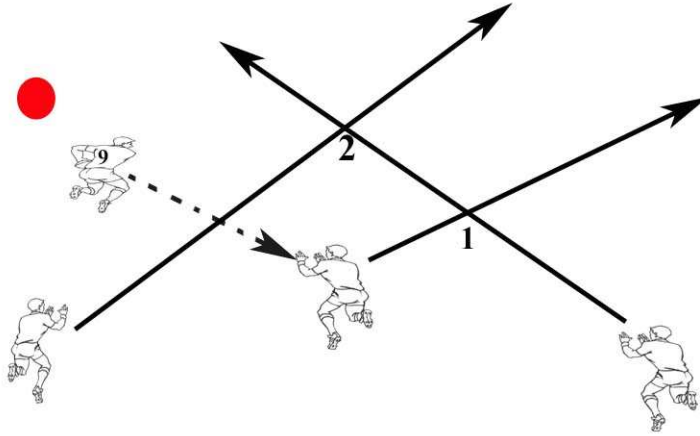


4. Organize a chain of command. Once the play had been called, for example, who calls it? Then identify the order in which players take the roles. In, say, a 'double-switch' that is called by the playmaker, make sure that the player receiving the first switch pass shouts, "I'm one"; "I'm two" is then called by the player receiving the second switch pass. You may wish to give priority to certain players for certain roles so that you have the ball in the hands of your more dangerous ball runners more often.
5. Run through the play with no time restraint from when it is called and when it has to be executed, therefore giving them time to organize without pressure.
6. Run through the play with a time restriction from when the play is called to when the roles are identified and the play executed.
7. Explain what you are trying to do to the defenders in front. You might say something like, "This running line is designed to take this defender here, the decoy is to take out this defender and this pass is to find the hole between these two defenders".
8. Run the play when players are tired and fatigued and concentration levels are down.
9. Run the play against a defence so that timing, space and the role of each member of the play is being learnt and the play is becoming increasingly familiar.
10. Incorporate the play(s) into games, warm-up activities and team runs.

Next I have provided two basic co-ordinate running lines and two simple phase plays to demonstrate and provide impetus for you to further investigate this part of attack. If we continue to attack off static ball without imagination and variation, we are relying purely on defensive errors in tackling, not judgement, and as teams in the modern era spend more and more time on defence these errors may not come before we make an error in attack and turn the ball over.



DOUBLE SWITCH



MISS PASS INSIDE

