

“If we can’t pass left, then attack right.”

By Keith Harron

TARGET

To examine issues concerning the lateral pass in rugby union.

BACKGROUND

Most people have a natural side based on their dexterity, usually the right side. It follows that the priority attack for a number of sporting codes is from the right to the left due to the dexterity strength of its players. Hockey, water polo, soccer and Australian Rules players prefer to counter-attack with the ball coming from the right to left pass, and elite rugby league teams have based game plans down the left side of the field due to the strength of their players right to left pass. This league tactic, coupled with attacking players aiming at the less preferred defensive shoulder, sets up an effective team attacking policy. Indeed, a simple rugby union game plan consisting of playing expansive attack going right to left aiming at weak shoulders and of a more conservative attack going left to right plays into the hands of the attacking skill abilities of players. It may work well until your team secures a couple of left-handed backs or the opposition recognizes your game plan by match analysis.

WRESTLING WITH DEXTERITY STATISTICS

It would be unwise to develop “the right to left attack plan” without examining

- (a) whether the priority rugby pass is the right to left lateral
- (b) whether there is a distance and accuracy difference in the natural compared to the unnatural lateral pass
- (c) simple strength/power exercises as well as skill drills to improve the unnatural lateral pass

(A) **What is the priority rugby pass?**

- Pass statistics of four 2002 rugby games produced the following:

	Australia v Sth Africa (Tri Nations in S.A.) 40 mins/half	NSW II v Qld I (Schools) 25 mins/half	Met North v Met East (Qld Schools) 30 mins/half	GPS v AIC (Qld Schools) 30 mins/half
Halfback pass	96 (50%)	69 (50%)	58 (45%)	64 (49%)
Right to left lateral	35 (18%)	30 (22%)	19 (15%)	36 (28%)
Left to right lateral	48 (25%)	23 (17%)	32 (25%)	18 (14%)
Circle ball	2 (1%)	1 (·7%)	2 (1%)	0
Switch	6 (3%)	4 (2%)	3 (2%)	5 (4%)
Inside flick	0	0	2 (1%)	0
Pop	6 (3%)	6 (4%)	10 (8%)	5 (4%)
Maul Transfer	0	4 (2%)	3 (2%)	2 (12%)
Total Passes	193	137	129	130

- *Comment : The halfback pass and the lateral pass are the priority rugby passes, with the halfback pass at times accounting for more passes than all other passes combined. Whether the left **or** right lateral pass is more used is not evidenced by this brief study.*

(B) **Is there a difference in the accuracy and distance of the natural pass compared to the unnatural lateral pass?**

- 46 1st XV squad players in Brisbane were tested for their natural and unnatural lateral pass distance and accuracy. This was done by setting out hurdles of 3'6" in height in a lane at 1 metre apart for 30 metres. One pre-pass step and one follow-through step were allowed. Passes above 3 metres or which landed 2 running lanes either side were deemed inaccurate. Testing occurred in November (46 players) and again in June (14 players who had subject themselves to a training regime to improve the unnatural pass).
- The initial November test saw a 3.3 metre distance difference between the natural and unnatural pass (only 4 players were left-handed). 9 players (18.2%) passed inaccurately on their unnatural side with 3 players passing further on their unnatural side. The least individual passing distance differential was 1 metre whilst the greatest was 7.5 metres. Furthest pass was 24 metres, with the five-eighths having the best passing abilities both ways.
A general observation was that players felt uncomfortable passing unnaturally in a test situation.

- The June testing saw a 3.7 metre distance between the natural and unnatural pass despite a conscious coaching effort to reduce such a skill disparity. There appeared to be “*lateral passing ability to either side*” improvement in only 50% of the players despite a season’s coaching with passing emphasis.
- *Comment : This study exhibited a considerable difference between the natural and unnatural lateral pass, with the right to left pass being the strong pass in all but 15% of the players tested. Despite coaching efforts to improve the unnatural pass over a 1st XV rugby season, research indicated that passing ability is difficult to improve. Perhaps the coaching staff didn’t get it right or perhaps 16/17 years of age is too late for changing unnatural skills.*

(C) **Exercises and drills to improve the unnatural lateral pass.**

Biomechanists, strength experts and physiotherapists tend to classify lateral passing as a complex task involving learned behaviour assisted by hand-eye co-ordination, pelvic stability, scapula stability and strong muscles/ligaments controlling shoulder abduction. Incorporating the following into the training year should improve the unnatural lateral pass:

- Strength training needs to develop those muscles providing shoulder abduction. Mirroring the unnatural pass using dumbbells and progressively overloading should not be neglected in the weight room.
- Pelvic stability drills will aid speed but also assist in stabilizing the trunk when passing. Excessive pelvic tilting will create passing errors.
- Scapula stability can be achieved through simple contraction exercises involving contracting the scapulas together to create the ‘V effect’. Theraband exercises mirroring the lateral pass (ie one handed lateral abductors with bent elbow) should also develop scapula stability.
- Hand-eye co-ordination on the unnatural side can be developed through catching/hitting games prior to training that stimulate the weak side. It is an enjoyable activity that surpasses verbal chit-chat and may create good team environment. A Chinese doctor suggested that all rugby players should learn the piano to improve their dexterity of limb and mind – perhaps a touch too far!
- Skill drills are endless to improve the unnatural lateral pass. Drills that do not allow natural lateral passing are viciously effective in exposing player skill deficiency. Starting all passing drills on the left hand side at least prioritizes the unnatural pass.
- *Comment : All of the above ideas were periodized into the training year of the aforementioned players tested and coached, and there appeared to be few skill improvements. Further expert input is needed to convincingly improve the unnatural lateral pass. We gave it a shot, but may have missed the target. I have a suspicion that passing to be both sides needs solid coaching from Day 1 of a rugby players pathway. If not, a team ends up being forced “to attack right” due to skill deficiencies.*

WHAT DID WE LEARN FROM THIS ADVENTURE?

The simple analysis of the lateral pass exposes challenges for coaches at all rugby levels. While the research methods here may have been simplistic, these questions should be added to your rugby checklist:

1. Do you know whether your players are right handed or left handed?
It is as important as height, weight, skinfold etc.
2. Have you ever tested the lateral passing ability of your players? They enjoy it far more than a beep test, bench press or vertical jump tests.
3. Have you ever considered developing the unnatural side in the weight room?
4. Do you start passing drills on the left hand side?
5. Have you ever realized that the best way of getting out of the D zone on the right side of the field is to pass naturally rather than kick right-footed with an open-side flanker charging at your kicker?
6. Have you got a competent halfback? He passes as much as all the other players combined in your team.
7. Do you know how to improve the unnatural lateral pass? (If they are playing in heaven, 'He' might know).
8. Can you do Maths? Passing along the backline from the 9 to 10 to 12 to 13 to 14 will get you 12 metres farther away from a set piece or breakdown if you are doing it from right to left as opposed to left to right.
9. How are most tries scored? Perhaps attacking right to left as the best option, driving a set piece the next best and then attacking left to right. My Maths sways in this direction.
10. Finally, did you know that if your team can't pass left, then attack right?