

**Australian Rugby Union
Level 3 Coaching Written Assignment**

**The Positives and Negatives of
Different Defensive Systems**

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2011**

The Positives and Negatives of Different Defensive Systems

"Offense sells tickets; Defense wins championships" (Paul Bryant, Alabama Football Coach).

The current laws of rugby are such that it favours the attacking team. Law 15.4 (Laws of the Game, International Rugby Board, 2011) states:

- (a) When a player tackles an opponent and they both go to ground, the tackler must immediately release the tackled player.
- (b) The tackler must immediately get up or move away from the tackled player and from the ball at once.

In theory, this would suggest that the attacking team is likely to maintain the ball, resulting in the opponents defending for longer.

IRB Head of Referees, Paddy O' Brien, has stated Law 15.4 and 16.2 will now become points of focus. "All players arriving at the ruck must come through the gate, and there will be little tolerance for tacklers not releasing or rolling away" (Mortimer 2011).

With the laws favouring the attacking team, it can be argued that there has also been a shift away from kicking. The IRB statistical analysis of the Tri-Nations matches between 2007- 2010 and the Six Nations between 2007-2011 support these findings.

2007-2010 Tri-Nations average kicking statistics

Kicks	2010	2009	2008	2007
	37	60	67	59

The trend is also the same for the Six Nations in the period between 2007-2011

Kicks	2011	2010	2009	2008	2007
	46	62	65	57	53

These statistics suggest that the attacking team focus less on kicking as a means to gain territory. This has led to the ball being kept in possession that may cause an increased number of tackles, therefore more pressure being put onto the defence.

It could be argued that the defending team is less likely to re-gain the ball from the attacking team's kicks. This in turn has put an extra emphasis on the defensive system as a means for turning over the ball. Good defensive structure can put the attack under pressure, which can lead to un-forced errors.

The ultimate aim for a team without possession is to deny the attacking team possession and territory. Each individual on the pitch has a responsibility when

defending. It is imperative that each player is a competent tackler else the defensive system that the team operates will break down.

The attacking team's goal is to apply pressure to create a disorganised defence. Disorganised defences could be easier to exploit because there is more space to attack. Without organisation, the defending team will potentially be chasing the game, and over time, this becomes very tiring and may lead to fatigue.

It is also important that there is frequent communication between defenders. In a game situation, defenders are often out of position. Effective communication such as 'hold', 'drift' or 'blitz' is important so that the players can react and maintain an efficient defensive line.

Tackle

Before looking into what defensive system suits the team, a real focus during training must be on the actual tackle and the technique used. Without a well-executed tackle, the attackers will have an opportunity to make the gain line that can lead to momentum and continuity.

The International Rugby Board defines a tackle as occurring "...when the ball carrier is held by one or more opponents and is brought to ground" (Law 15, Laws of the Game, International Rugby Board, 2011).

The traditional tackle, if executed properly, will bring the attacker to the ground. The tackler has stopped the attacking team's momentum, which could lead to a breakdown. Once a ruck has formed, it allows a contest for the ball as well as giving the defending team the time to set up a structured defence.

The negative side of the traditional tackle is that the attacker still has the ability to offload. Modern rugby players are stronger and more powerful, and offloads have become increasingly used as a form of attack. An offload keeps momentum and keeps the defensive structure disorganised.

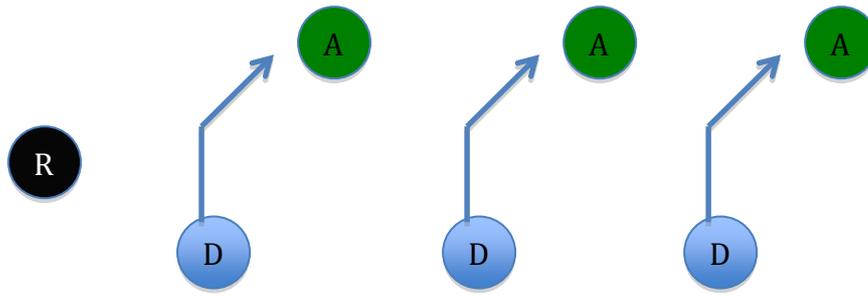
The 'gang tackle' is where two or more players tackle the attacker. The first defender targets the ball to stop the offload and the second defender tackles the legs. The 'gang tackle' is a high risk, high reward play.

The 'gang tackle' can be a very destructive play. Stopping the attack or even pushing the attacker away from the gain line has many advantages. Most notably, there are already two or more defenders at the break down to start the counter-ruck. If performed correctly, the defenders are likely to slow the attacking team's ball down, which can lead to a more structured defence or to a turn over.

If the 'gang tackle' is not performed correctly it could put the defensive line under huge pressure. With two defenders taken out of the line, more space is left for the attacking team to exploit. This can lead to line breaks, putting the defence in a vulnerable position.

The Drift Defence

The drift defence system is one of the most common systems teams operate because it is low risk and easy to implement. The defenders focus on the attackers' inside shoulder and only drift when the ball has passed their channel. The drift defence is most effective when defending set piece ball. Although easy to implement, the drift defence can be infiltrated if not performed efficiently.



Positives

The benefit of operating a drift defence is that it can cover all attacking options. The defensive line has a slight curve to it, with the winger slightly behind, to combat the attacking team's kicking options. Performed correctly, the touchline is used as an 'extra defender' as the attackers are being pressurised on their inside shoulder, pushing them towards the touchline.

The drift defence limits the threat of switches and inside passes, as the defenders are focused on the attackers' inside shoulder.

Negatives

The possible disadvantage of operating the drift defence is that it allows the attacking team time and space with the ball.

Another problem may be the players' individual technique. When drifting to the next attacker, it is imperative that the defenders do not run directly towards the touchline. Once the defenders' hips are not facing forward, the defensive line becomes very susceptible to inside passes or a change of direction.

The drift defence relies heavily on communication, discipline and trust. Without communication, the drift could break down due to players not knowing where their teammates are. If a player decides to drift early, a gap may be created on their inside shoulder which the attacking team can exploit.

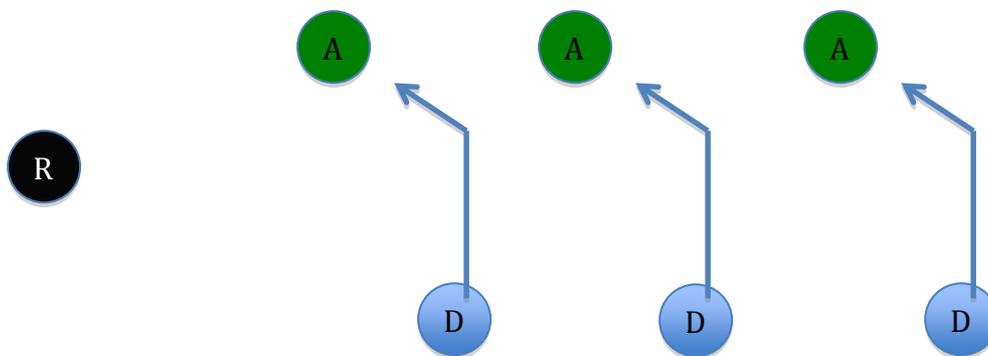
Coaching Points

- First movement forward, not sideways
- Hips remain forward at all times

- Communication

The Blitz Defence

The blitz defence system focuses on applying direct pressure to the attacking team by using line speed. The defenders, as a line, blitz (run fast) towards their opposite attacker. The system is usually operated with the defenders running 'out to in'. This simply means standing on the outside shoulder of the opposite attacker and targeting back towards the direction of the ball. The aim for the defenders is to pressure the attacking team and to decrease their time and space, potentially leading to poor decision-making. The blitz defence is usually led by the outside centre or players in a wide position to ensure that the attack does not move the ball wide. Ideally, a man and ball tackle is desired to prevent the offload.



London Wasps were one of the most successful teams to operate the blitz system. Shaun Edwards, the highly respected rugby league player and ex-defensive coach of London Wasps, introduced the blitz system. The blitz took the English Premiership by storm and attacking teams simply could not deal with London Wasps' domination in defence.

London Wasps were the best team in England, and arguably Europe, throughout the 2000's with the team winning the Heineken Cup in 2004 and 2007, The English Premiership in 2003, 2004, 2005 and 2008 as well as the Anglo-Welsh Cup in 2006.

The same system also succeeded on the international stage when Shaun Edwards introduced the system to Wales. Wales won the Grand Slam in 2008, only conceding 2 tries in 5 games.

Positives

The blitz is a high-risk high reward play. A positive of operating the blitz system is that the defenders can cross the gain line quickly and win the space.

Decreasing time and space is crucial because it immediately puts the attackers under pressure, which can lead to errors.

The defenders can also identify and target weaker players. If an obvious weak link has been spotted, the defenders can focus on that area to eliminate attacking options.

Operating an 'out to in' running line with speed allows the defenders to target the attacking players' blind side. A man on ball dominant tackle could produce turn over ball as the momentum is now with the defending team creating the chance of a knock-on or counter-ruck. Dominant tackles have a demoralising effect on the attacking team whilst building confidence in the defence.

The blitz can also change the attacking team's mindset. If the blitz has been performed successfully and put the attacking team under significant pressure, the likely result is for the attacking team to stand deeper, resulting in more ground lost and less attacking options.

Negatives

The blitz defence is highly vulnerable to an attacking kick behind. The defenders are blitzing at speed, leaving a large space behind them. Changing direction is very difficult at speed. If the kick is accurate, the defending team will be under immense pressure at the back with only the fullback and winger to clear up against an onrushing attack.

The blitz works if all defenders come up together as a line. If any player is left behind, a dogleg is created which the attack could exploit. If the attacking team breaks through, there is a significant amount of space.

Due to the explosive nature of the blitz, the defence operates at high speed, which could lead to players having difficulty in changing direction if the attack were to do so.

Coaching points

- Line up on outside attacker's shoulder (out to in)
- Quick line speed
- Remain as one defensive line (no doglegs)
- Communication
- Aggressive man on ball tackle

Conclusion

At the professional level, teams are now operating a hybrid version of the blitz and drift. "There's so much analysis going on now that other teams soon figure out what you're doing," (Mike Ford, quoted in Westerby 2009). Operating a lone defensive system leaves the team vulnerable to variations in attack as their defensive system may become predictable. With in-depth analysis, an opposition

team will create a game plan to counter-act the defensive system if it is not updated. Operating a hybrid defence has an element of surprise. Continually varying the defensive system throughout a match may leave little time for attack to adapt and respond to the defensive system.

The ability to change the defensive system during a match is difficult due to the complexities of each system. At a professional level, players have many hours to practice different defensive systems as opposed to players at grassroots level.

Professional teams will tend to operate different systems depending on where the attack is. At a grassroots level, teams are more likely to operate one defensive system throughout a match. At a lower level, players are less likely to have the decision-making capabilities to change defensive systems quickly.

At a grassroots level, a combination of the blitz and drift could be developed in a simpler form. For example, an option could be utilising the line speed from the blitz to get over the gain line and then ease off the pace to operate a drift. This is one way a team can implement a hybrid version, but in a simpler format.

To conclude, I believe there is not a set defensive system that will guarantee success. Each coach must work out what system to operate with the environment they are in. Dave Ellis, current French defence coach states, "The more intelligent coach will adapt his system to the players he has" (Westerby 2009). It is imperative that the defensive coach keeps evolving with the game and continually updates and tweaks their system to maintain unpredictability.

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