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Winning the Advantage Line and the effects by Defensive Pressure at the Breakdown

Task 13, Level 3 Coaching Assignment by Marco Caputo

Introduction:

The majority of professional rugby teams attribute a large majority of their success in the modern game to their defensive strategies, and in particular their detail in and around their attempts to regain possession at the tackle contest.

The most successful teams have clear cut strategies that can vary depending on where on the field the tackle is contested, the circumstance of the tackle (a dominant tackle or a passive tackle) and finally whether the effected tackle was made beyond or behind the advantage line/gain line.

Taking into consideration all of the above, the question of what the best and most effective policy immediately post the tackle was a question of:

- **Whether to Jackal?**
  - Whether to attack and contest the football on the ground on the tackled player

OR

- **Whether to Boss the Space?**
  - Whether to occupy the space between the ball carrier and the on coming arriving players

Method:

My analysis took in every individual tackle contested in Super Rugby by the teams that finished in positions 1 – 6 (Bulls, Stormers, Crusaders, Waratahs, Reds, & Brumbies) in the regular 2010 season.

The analysis also looked at the phases of play, the context of the contested rucks where an advantage line had been established by the previous breakdown and the outcomes of the contested rucks as determined by the referees.

Advantage Line:

The analysis determined that in attack when the advantage line had been won, it had played a significant part in the ruck, with the speed, quality and effectiveness of "clean" ruck ball, which contributed massively to the clearance time, and positively effected the quality of "usable ball" for which the attack to continue to play with.

Defensively the defending team were able to manipulate and effect the speed and the quality of ball that the attacking team could play from when they had "won the collision" at the tackle and were able to establish advantage at the advantage line with the attack less likely to wish to play expansively while under duress and more likely to kick the ball in which to establish field position.

Defensive Advantage Line gains resulting in Turn-over's:

My research determined that there was a significant relationship with advantage line gains (defensively) and the frequency of pressure able to be applied at the breakdown.

- Defending teams were able to exert pressure at the ruck 50% (Jackal or Boss) more times when they were able to stop the attacking team behind the advantage line.

- Defending teams were able to exert pressure at the ruck less than 30%(Jackal or Boss) when the attacking team were able to break the advantage line.

- A turn-over was 6 times more likely to occur when the defending team was able to stop the attack behind the advantage line in comparison to when the attacking team had breached the advantage line.

- A turn-over was 3 times less likely to occur when the attacking team had beached the advantage line in comparison to making the advantage line.

- Referees were 40% more likely to award a penalty against the attacking team for "not releasing" when the defensive team had won the advantage line in the outside channels (side line – 15m line) in their own half of the field.

- Referees were 50% more likely to penalize against the attack for "not releasing" or "off your feet" when the attack was forced into error (i.e dropped ball or poor pass behind) after the defense had won the collision at the tackle and won the advantage line.

Findings:

The research concluded that there was a "trade off" effect between achieving a positive defensive outcome at the ruck and conceding a penalty to the attacking team.

- The analysis concludes that the "jackal" player was the most effective way of achieving a turn-over or a penalty in favor to the defense after the advantage line was won however, this was a "high risk" option and the player was 20% more likely to concede a penalty rather than result in a penalty to the defense after the advantage line had been won.

- In contrast, the reverse clean-out or "bossing" before the ball was retained at the ruck by the defensive team once the advantage line had been won was 50% more likely to result in a positive outcome (penalty) to the defensive team when the attacking team was under pressure.

Applying the outcomes suggest that a defending team is more likely to achieve a positive outcome when exerting pressure at the breakdown once the advantage line has been won.

The outcomes suggest the defending team's primary focus should be winning the collision at the tackle resulting in a positive gain for the advantage line.

Once the defensive line has regularly closed down the attack behind the advantage line the referee was 40% more likely to "police", "referee" and "watch" the attacking team at the ruck for any infringements that were likely to result in penalization.

The findings also suggest that the immediate arriving defending players focus should be on "bossing" the space and area over the tackled player resulting in 50% more likely outcome of a penalty of the defending team.

Conclusion:

Rugby is a sport that continues to evolve. Since the inception of professionalism in 1995, Rugby as a game has become faster, with the players becoming stronger fitter and faster year by year.

The early years of Super Rugby from 1996 – 1999 teams had a main focus on attack, retaining possession for long periods of time and converting these periods of attack into points, with an average of 7 tries being scored per game.

From 2000 – 2007 the focus shifted on defense and defending teams contesting the ball at the tackle and competing for possession at every tackle. These years produced a golden age of No7's in Super rugby such as George Smith, Phil Waugh, Josh Kronfeld, Richie McCaw and Schalk Berger who all changed the nature of the ruck at the tackle contest.

I am convinced the game is again in a transitional and evolutionary phase.

This research demonstrates that changing nature of the tackle and the effect of "winning the advantage line" and the effect of "winning the collision" at the tackle plays.

The data and statistics clearly demonstrate the benefits of winning gain line and effects that this has on the psyche of the referees.

The Jackal V's Boss technique is now a widely discussed topic and tactic that is "common practice" in super rugby.

Players such as David Pocock have of mastered this art form.

I hope the information above has demonstrated the importance and highlights the need to embrace this change in Super Rugby.