

Coaching General Play

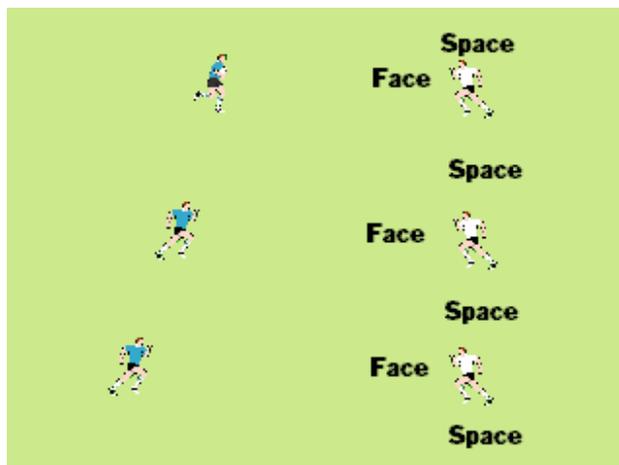
By Damon Emtage

The modern game of rugby is seeing the ball in play more than ever before, and as a consequence coaches need to investigate the effects this has on the way they coach the game. Philosophies of play that see less tactical kicking and greater reliance on ball retention has made general play the fulcrum to this approach.

General play exists where the structure of set piece play is absent. The general play conundrum for coaches is achieving some rational execution of play in the unstructured environment that characterises general play. A current approach to this conundrum at elite levels is the sequencing of phases to predetermined patterns of play, yet it is the purpose of this paper to propose an alternative strategy to this coaching dilemma – environment coaching.

Environment coaching is based around the premise of attacking players interacting with their immediate playing environment and selectively making decisions based on the characteristics of that environment. Crucial to this end is the accurate identification of general play (GP) environments. There are two GP attack environments – Plus1 and Man On. A Plus1 environment exists where the attack outnumbered the defence and a Man On environment exists where the defence equals or outnumbers the attack.

Environment Identification of these two environments is critical to strategising a method of attack. Important concepts of spaces and faces need to be acknowledged before appropriate attack strategies can be employed. Face refers to any defender and space refers to the gaps between defenders.



When a Plus1 environment is identified all players inside the overlap should run at a face and the extra players run at a space. The impact of this on the successful execution of a Plus1 scenario is that the attack runs at the defenders with high footspeed to fix them and draw and pass and thus prevent them from sliding to cover the extra number of players attacking them. Should the defenders decide to not allow themselves to be fixed, the

attackers can take advantage of semi committed defenders by choosing to hold off passing and penetrating space presented to them.

When a Man On environment is identified all attackers run at a face and then a space as they numerically are inferior to the defence and must find themselves space to penetrate through to go forward. Running at a face then into space is encouraged because delaying running into a space by running at a face for as long as possible preserves the space to be penetrated. Committing too early to running at a space will result in defenders reacting to this intention and hence minimising the space to be penetrated. Running solely at a face, and subsequently into a defender, is discouraged from a number of points.

Initiating contact when the attack is outnumbered puts great stress on ball retention and quality. Finding space to penetrate though enables the tackle line to be broken. The benefit to the attack should this occur is that the current experimental tackle law works in their favour with regard to continuity options and limiting the actions of the defence.

Law 15.7b says that *at a tackle or in close proximity to a tackle, other players who play the ball must do so from behind the ball and from behind the tackled player or the tackler closest to those players' goal line.* Penetrating space therefore puts the defensive line offside and empowers the options of the attacking team through enhanced speed and quality of ball.

Critical to effective execution of these two GP attack environments is the understanding of support roles and responsibilities. Support is the responsibility of all players not involved in currently carrying the ball forward. It is a secondary action, a reaction to the central focusing action being undertaken by the catalyst, the ball carrier. Because it is a reaction in response to the actions of the ball carrier, such reactions need to be predictable and consistent. If this is the case the ball carrier can selectively focus on the only variable they cannot control, the defence.

The majority of coaches, however, achieve coordination of players by structuring the ball carrier. Alternative consideration should be given to empowering the ball carrier by removing restrictions, removing the reliance on set play verbal communication /moves, and structuring the players not in possession so that a consistent system of support exists therefore creating an infinite number of options for the ball carrier.

Empowering the ball carrier by removing any restrictions such as predetermined sequences of behaviour allows the immediate playing environment to be interacted with. So often ball carriers are playing to the actions of their teammates and not to the defenders in front of them and as a result they miss valuable attacking opportunities. Assuming defenders in front of them will react/respond in an anticipated manner is fraught with danger. The most powerful player on a field is the ball carrier and as a consequence that player has the ability to influence actions and reactions of all participants. If the ball carrier is making decisions from cues emanated by opposition players the attacking team is then significantly empowered in their interactions with the immediate playing environment.

A consistent system of support is necessary for the ball carrier to react to the defensive line. Lateral, primary, and secondary supporters need to be very consistent in their roles and responsibilities to the ball carrier as fellow supporting players. Such systematic coordination of attacking players means late reactive decision making and subsequent option taking is able to be taken with the confidence of a coordinated support system.

Recommendations for the rugby coach

Integrating such environment identification and execution into training and ultimately into match situations is the challenge that presents coaches. Critical to this is the selection of training environments to facilitate effective transfer. Traditionally coaches teach GP through behavioural training. This training environment is very prescriptive, not dynamic to the playing environment, and is based around the rehearsal of predetermined implementation of actions. Such a practice environment artificially manufactures a sterile playing environment where key factors such as decision making and environment identification are absent, not fostered and not developed.

The essence of game based sport is to develop decision making abilities that then facilitate the application of physical skills. Consequently, executions of physical skills are most effectively implemented in environments where decision making is an advanced ability. Reading and reacting to environmental constraints is therefore a most necessary ability to play rugby, and environment training and coaching can help to foster this.

Environmental training is based around players interacting in game environments where they are able to gain dynamic abilities to identify environments, choose variety of action cues, and choose the most appropriate cue to be actioned. The benefit of this form of training over the traditional behavioural training is the players exposure to developing decision making capacities in game situations. Behavioral training often promotes artificial interactive training environments that then only foster artificial decision making capacities, thus providing poor transfer to real game environments. Because rugby is a dynamic game where predictability of opponents actions is impossible to reliably predict, game preparation strategies must take into account this dynamism.