

HALFBACK PASSING

A COACHING FRAMEWORK

BACKGROUND

I would be the first to admit that throughout my Rugby playing career as a halfback that my passing was never my strongest asset – I am sure I would have the support of some first fives I played with on this fact. However, my passing technique was an area of my game that I worked very hard on and spent countless hours reviewing, adjusting and practicing. With little coaching support I eventually became self-sufficient in analyzing my own passing and could adjust and correct my technique within a match from one pass to the next.

After 25 years of playing halfback and putting my head in places to retrieve a rugby ball I would rather forget. I finally hung up my playing boots and moved into the world of rugby coaching. Since then I have been asked on numerous occasions to take coaching sessions on halfback passing. Initially, I found it very difficult to channel my expertise into a coaching session that wouldn't cause the player to experience an information overload. I discovered that by breaking down the halfback pass into four sections, it gave the players greater clarity on the technical fundamentals of passing. These four sections also gave me a reference point and a framework to base my halfback coaching on.

OVERVIEW

I often start any new halfback session with this analogy:

“Halfback passing is a lot like writing. Everyone has their own individual handwriting style, however, you need to use letters and words in the correct order to make sense of what you are writing. Much the same with halfback passing, halfbacks have their own passing style but they still need to adhere to the basic technical fundamentals in a sequential order for the pass to be successful.”

As a coach, I try to get the halfback to understand that I am not there to coach any particular passing style but to help them implement or refine some techniques that will ultimately improve their passing.

It is widely recognized that the primary role of any halfback is to pass a rugby ball quickly from point A to point B when it is readily available. Throughout this article I refer to this as the halfbacks ‘speed of service’. The faster the speed of service will

allow more time and space for the attacking team – giving them a clear advantage over the defensive side. The technical fundamentals within the coaching framework discussed in this article are designed to improve the halfbacks overall speed of service.

So what are the technical fundamentals of a halfback pass?

I break down a halfback pass into four sections:

1. Approach
2. Set Up
3. Pass Action
4. Follow Through

Each of the four sections has technical fundamentals that form the basis of the halfback-coaching framework. It is within this framework that I can assess a halfbacks passing and coach the techniques they could implement or refine to improve their passing.

It is important to note that although I breakdown and coach the four sections in separate parts, I do not want to create four distinct parts to a halfbacks pass. The ultimate goal is to achieve fluency between all four parts. This will lead to a stronger, quicker and more consistent pass.

Note: Whilst the following framework is geared towards halfbacks passing a ball from the ground, the fundamental techniques can be applied to any type of halfback pass – Ball off the top of the lineout, from the maul or popped off the ground at a tackle situation.

HALFBACK PASSING FRAMEWORK

1. APPROACH

A halfback is generally in motion prior to passing the ball either from moving from ruck to ruck or at the set piece. The approach section is focused on the movement the halfback takes to the point of where he/she will pass the ball.

Technical fundamentals for the “approach”:

Scanning

This refers to the halfback’s peripheral vision and focus when approaching the ball.

The halfback should be 'scanning' the following:

- *The defensive line* - At set piece and phase play. Assessing any defensive holes and potential mismatches
- *The backfield* - The area behind the defensive line for any potential kicking options
- *Intended receiver of the pass*
- *The ruck or set piece* - Assessing an appropriate path and speed to address the ball

Common Error

Some halfbacks firmly fix their approach focus on the ball at the ruck or set piece and do not register any secondary information. Often this is the cause of poor decision making by halfbacks, they have a preconceived idea of what they are going to do regardless of what the situation they are presented with.

Communication

An effective halfback is an effective communicator.

The halfback's communication during the approach should include:

- *Direction of play* – Information to be provided to players by the halfback on which direction they are going, who he/she is likely to pass too and the distance of the first receiver from the halfback. Often all of this information is simplified by teams by using one word in phase attacks i.e. Hammer = attacking the same direction, Passing to a forward runner, Forward runner to run close to the halfback to receive the pass.
- *Players involved in the next phase* – The halfback needs to communicate with the intended receiver of the pass during the approach. Acknowledgement between the halfback and the intended receiver will allow for a better 'timing' relationship between them both.
- *Players at the ruck* – Communication from the halfback to the players at the ruck includes:
 - a) Type of delivery the halfback wants the ball – Pop pass, placed on the ground
 - b) Speed of the ball being presented
 - c) Additional demands for players to cleanout, ruck over the ball or block.

Common Error

A halfback may use a call of 'hot', 'fire' or 'mayday' to let other players at the ruck know that he/she wants the ball immediately. Inexperienced halfbacks often think by yelling this call numerous times is communicating effectively. Unfortunately, they neglect the other lines of communication and find themselves under pressure when the ball does come out quickly as they are unaware of whom they are passing to next.

Flight Path

The flight path refers to the halfback's running path, running speed and body height when approaching a ruck, scrum or lineout. I use an analogy of an airplane landing (Basically the opposite of the airplane taking off analogy used in a ruck cleanout situation). The halfback should be lowering their speed and body position within a two-meter radius when approaching the ball – "landing zone"

- *Running Path* – The initial running path to the ruck or set piece should be the shortest route – as long as the halfback is still in an appropriate position to provide support to the ball carrier if needed. As a rule of thumb you will find most halfbacks take a banana shape line to the ball.
- *Approach at landing zone* – An assessment is to be made on the angle to approach the landing zone. Done correctly it will assist with the momentum of the pass in the set up phase i.e. if passing left to right, the halfback would enter the landing zone slightly on the left hand side.
- *Running Speed* – Initial speed should be fast, as the halfback needs to get to the situation quickly. On arrival to the landing zone a more controlled approach on the balls of the feet is necessary – they must have the ability to react to any situation and change direction quickly.
- *Body Awareness* - A distinct lowering of the halfback's body height should be apparent in the landing zone - bending the knees and at the waist. Hands should be up and ready to react to any situation.

Common Error

Many halfbacks fail to lower their body height in the landing zone. This results in a slower transition into the set up phase and contributes to a halfback's slow service.

2. SET UP

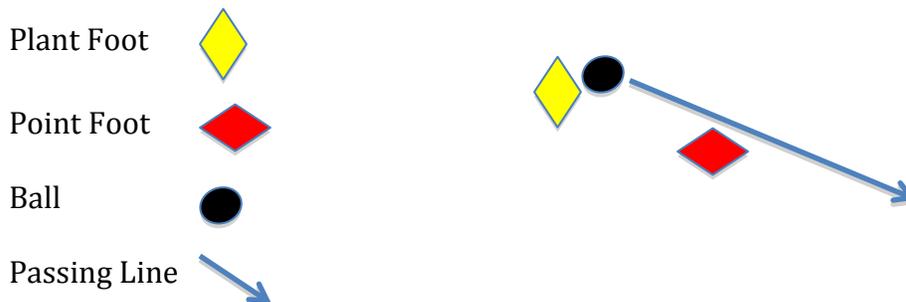
The set up is the positioning of the halfback on the ball pre-pass. If the halfback has approached correctly he/she should be in a low body position in anticipation for the arrival of the ball. From this position the halfback will be able to get into the set up position quickly.

Technical Fundamentals for the 'Set Up':

Feet Placement

- *Plant Foot* – The 'plant' foot (fig. 1) is the foot furthest away from the intended receiver of the pass, i.e. if you are passing left to right, the plant foot is your left foot. In terms of passing a ball from the ground the closer this plant foot can get to the ball adds to the force production in the pass action.
- *Point Foot* – The 'point' foot (fig. 1) is the foot pointing to the intended receiver of the pass, i.e. if passing left to right; the point foot is your right foot. There should be a clear passing channel between the ball and the intended receiver of the pass.

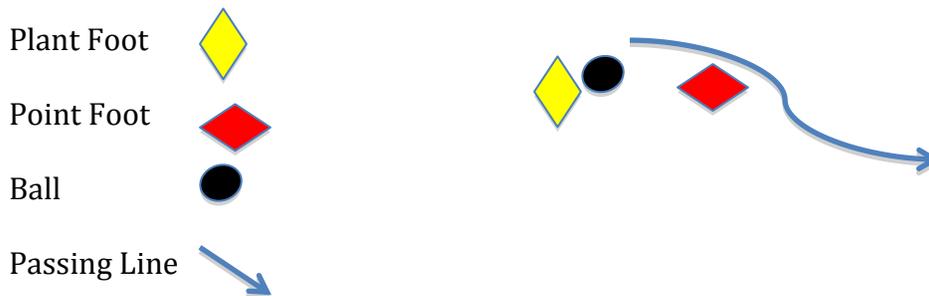
Fig 1.



Common Error

One of the most obvious errors in a halfbacks passing technique can be his/her point foot placement. A closed stance (fig 2) is where a halfback places their plant foot too high and closes off the passing channel to the intended receiver. This will cause the halfback to pass around the plant foot and over rotate their upper-body. In doing so they will become unbalanced and their momentum will not go down the line of the ball. This will lead to inaccurate passing that will more often go behind the intended receiver.

Fig 2.



A lot of coaching literature on halfback passing is based on feet positioning as it is an important element for passing accurately. I also like the halfback to concentrate on placing both feet into position simultaneously. This will minimize a halfback's set up time - rather than placing the plant foot then the point foot in a rocking action. This is a relatively new school of thought but in today's modern game where speed of service is paramount, this can make a difference.

Center of Gravity

Two aspects determine a halfback's center of gravity over the ball – the width of the base (halfbacks feet positioning) and the bending and lowering of the hips and knees.

- *Feet Position* – This can differ among halfbacks depending on the height of the player and what he/she feels comfortable with. It is important to note that if they go too wide with their feet they will reduce their other options in terms of running or kicking. A new school of thought is by having closer feet positioning it will allow the halfback to change their option quickly (run or kick) if the opportunity presents itself.
- *Hips and Knees* – I place a greater importance on bending the knees as it brings the halfback closer to the ground. This allows a greater force production in the pass action. As a general rule of thumb you would be looking for a halfback to set up with a 90° degree bend at the knee and a 45° degree bend at the hip.

Common Error

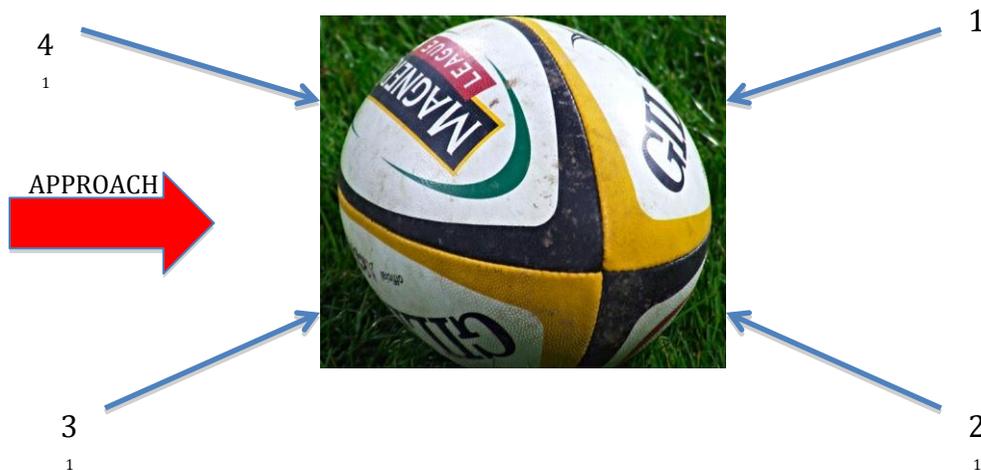
Halfbacks that sit on the back of their heels cause an unbalanced center of gravity during the set up phase. This can contribute to handling errors as the halfback would have an unbalanced center of gravity and be slow to react to the ball.

Hand Placement

Hand placement on the rugby ball is an important aspect of passing. A firm grip and 'feel' of the ball is required for halfbacks to pass effectively.

I like to split the ball into four quadrants using the seams of the ball to indicate each of the four zones. I then number them off clockwise. For example: If you placed a rugby ball on the ground with two quadrants (half the ball) facing upwards you can number off the quadrants clockwise (fig 3)

Fig 3.



- *Power Hand Position* - The 'power hand' is the hand of the halfback at the back of the ball i.e. if you are passing left to right the power hand is the left hand. This hand is the more important of the two positions and should position itself under the half of the ball towards the back. For example: If approaching the ball in Fig 3 - passing left to right - the power hand position should be on back of the ball on quadrant 2 with fingers spread and the thumb line positioned on the border of quadrant 1 and 2 (fig. 3)
- *Guide hand position*- The 'guide hand' is the hand at the front of the ball i.e. if you are passing left to right the power hand is the right hand. This hand will provide stability to the pass and rotation from the thumb and first finger. The guide hand position will differ between each halfback, as it will be determined by the individual's comfort and feel of the ball.

Common Error

Adjusting the ball or re-gripping the ball once in the hands is a common error - particularly for halfbacks when receiving a ball off the top of a lineout. It adds to the time the ball is in the halfback's hands and slows down their speed of service. I place an emphasis of focusing on the ball in the air coming towards the halfback so they can grip it correctly in the first instance and get the pass away in a shorter time period.

Sight Target

Just prior to passing the ball the final part of the set up process is for the halfback to fix their focus to their intended target.

Common Error

Most halfbacks before passing will unconsciously check if the intended receiving player is ready by looking at their eyes to see if he/she is looking at them. An error can occur when halfbacks transfix on the receivers eyes and use that as a reference for the passing target. Inevitably, if they do this then the receiver will most likely receive the ball back on their inside shoulder, which will halt their momentum forward. It is important for the halfback to understand that they need to move their focus from the receiver's eyes to their actual target of their hands half a meter in front of them.

3. PASS ACTION

A smooth transition between the 'set up' and 'pass action' is required for all types of passing from halfbacks. With increased fluidity between the two sections will result in less time on the ball and improve the speed of service from the halfback.

Technical fundamentals for the 'pass action':

Leg Drive

Having bent the knees in the set up phase it will allow the halfback to drive off their legs and create an increased force production in the passing action. A slight weight transfer will occur from the plant foot to the point foot but by driving off both legs it allows increased power to generate from the legs into the pass.

Common Error

Halfbacks under fatigue will often stop bending the knees and solely rely on bending at the hips during the set up phase. In doing so they lose the added power of the leg drive in the pass action. To compensate for this they will implement an excessive rotation of the upper body, which will result in an unbalanced pass action and passing that will often go behind the intended receiver.

Stay Low

The halfback should keep his center of gravity low and maintained throughout the pass action.

Common Error

Halfbacks that stand up during the pass action or lift their head up will inevitably cause their passing to go up i.e. too high for the intended receiver.

Wrist Snap

If the power hand and guide hand positions on the ball are correct then a significant amount of power can be generated from the halfbacks wrists and fingertips during the pass action

- *Wrist* - Rotating the wrist of the power hand will generate the majority of the spin on the ball. A quick explosive movement of the wrist is required
- *Fingertips* - The fingertips are the last part of the pass action that will have contact with the ball. Particular focus on the guide hand thumb and first finger is required to flick and impart spin onto the ball.

Common Error

Often younger halfbacks pass the ball out of the palms of their hands and do not get the transfer from the fingertips into the pass. Lack of flick from the fingertips on the ball can reduce the amount of torque on the ball and minimize the speed the ball travels through the air to the receiver.

4. FOLLOW THROUGH

The follow through is the movement of the halfback after the pass action. A distinct momentum shift down the line of the ball should be evident from the halfback.

Hands down the line

The hands and arms of the halfback should follow down the line of the ball without crossing each other. This will improve the accuracy of a halfbacks pass, as regardless of a slightly early or late release of the ball it will be travelling down the correct line to the intended receiver

Common Error

Halfbacks that swing their arms across the line of the ball will often have an inconsistent pass. By swinging their arms on an arc across the line of the pass they have to release the ball at the exact moment for it to travel down the correct line – if

they release slightly early or late then the line of the pass will be too far in front or behind the intended receiver respectfully.

Body Down the line

The halfback should continue his/her momentum down the line of the ball. This will increase consistency in pass but also aid in getting to the next ruck quickly.

Common Error

The halfback's moment is pulling back away from the line of the ball. The cause of this is because they have stood up during the pass action haltering their momentum.

SUMMARY

The following table is a summary of the framework and technical points discussed in this assignment.

I have used this framework as a checklist when assessing a halfback's pass during a coaching session. In doing so it has given me a reference for the techniques I would need to coach for each player to help them improve their pass. The framework has been a helpful coaching tool and one that I have used with success. It is a shame I didn't have it when I was playing....

HALFBACK PASSING FRAMEWORK			
FRAMEWORK	FUNDAMENTALS	TECHNIQUE	COMMON ERRORS
APPROACH	SCAN	DEFENSIVE LINE	Fixing approach focus on the ball
		BACKFIELD	
		RECIEVER OF THE PASS	
		SET PIECE OR RUCK	
	COMMUNICATION	DIRECTION OF PLAY	Overuse of the 'hot' ball call
		PLAYERS INVOLVED IN NEXT PHASE	
		PLAYERS AT THE RUCK	
	FLIGHT PATH	RUNNING PATH	High body position in landing zone
		APPROACH AT LANDING ZONE	
RUNNING SPEED			
BODY AWARENESS			
SET UP	FEET PLACEMENT	PLANT FOOT	Closed point foot
		POINT FOOT	
	CENTER OF GRAVITY	FEET POSITION	Standing on their heels
		HIP AND KNEES	
	HAND PLACEMENT	POWER HAND POSITION	Adjusting the ball in the hands
	GUIDE HAND POSITION		
SIGHT TARGET	HALFBACKS FOCUS	Fixing on the eyes of the receiver	
PASS ACTION	LEG DRIVE	DRIVING OFF BOTH LEGS	No knee bend
	STAY LOW	CENTER OF GRAVITY LOW THROUGHOUT	Lifting the head during the pass action
	WRIST SNAP	WRIST AND FINGERTIPS	Passing from palms
FOLLOW THROUGH	HANDS DOWN THE LINE	ARMS AND HANDS FOLLOW	Swinging arms
	BODY DOWN THE LINE	BODY MOMENTUM	Momentum stopped

