

HOW THE ELVS HAVE IMPACTED
TACTICALLY ON NUMBERS 9-15?

A DISCUSSION PAPER

BY

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The Experimental Law Variations (ELVS) have now been apart of the Australian rugby climate for the past 18 months. Through club rugby in Sydney and Brisbane initially, then the now defunct Australian Rugby Championship (ARC) and with the 2008 Super 14 and Tri-Nations, we have been able to sit back and view an improved product as a spectator. The players have commented that the game is quicker and more free flowing, which in turn has made the game more enjoyable to play and be a part of. As a coach, the new laws have promoted much thought and discussion with our peers, as to what impact they have had on our game planning, the play in general and our training structures throughout the year.

This paper will discuss what impact certain ELVS have had on the backline, particularly regarding the tactical aspect of the game. To assess the laws that have had the greatest impact on the backline, I have selected those ELVS, which I think have had the most direct effect on the way the backline play and think.

Backs must be 5m back from the hindmost feet at the scrum

This law has forced all involved with the backline to make a tactical decision on what will be the major focus in regards to attacking off the scrum – Gainline or Linebreak. The general consensus is that the gainline is now easier to achieve from the scrum than ever before, due to the 5m restriction placed on the defensive team, and with this, we have seen some teams' looking to adopt the following options more often than prior to ELV introduction –

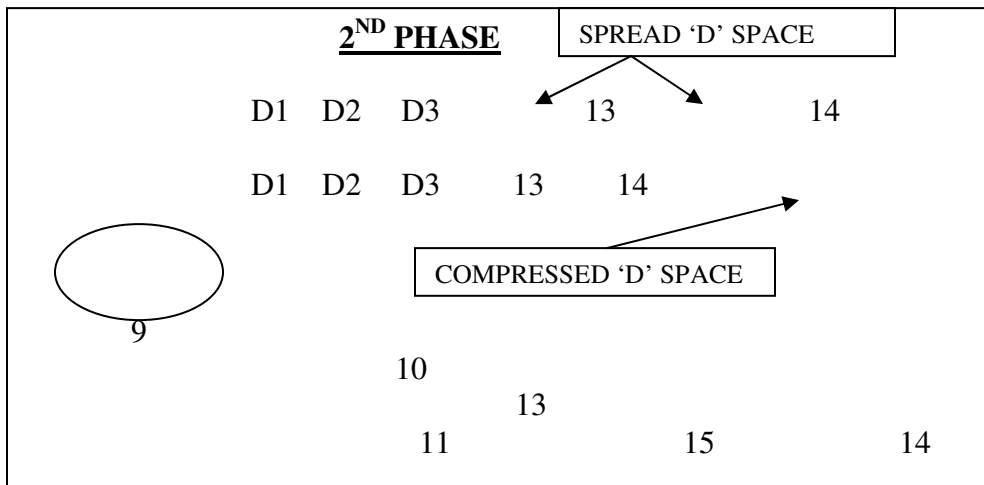
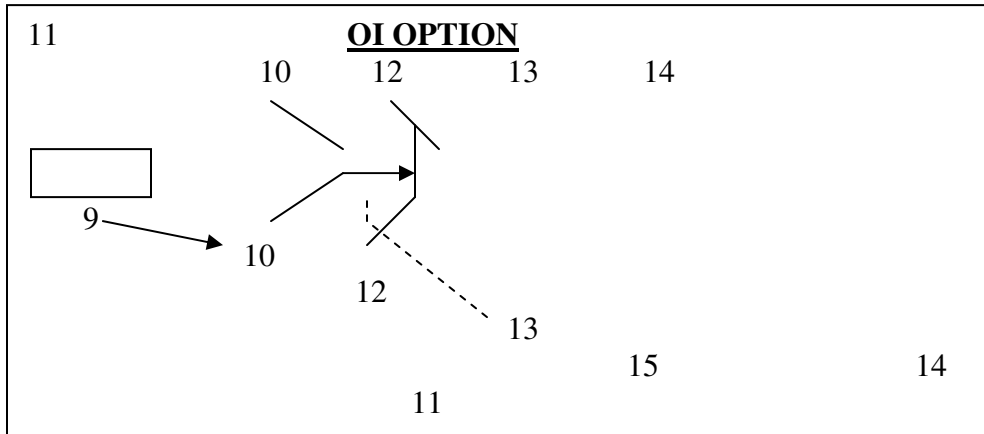
- 1) Taking the number 8 off the back of the scrum.
- 2) Using a flat alignment to play a starter move aimed at the opposition

10/12

Option 1 has been used with the selection of a number 8 who can get off the scrum quickly paramount to this being a success. If the number 8 has done this and successfully targeted the opposition 10 and thus provided quick ball, then the backline, which may have remained intact due to no player being needed as a ball carrier or breakdown support, can look to take advantage of the numerical advantage by using a simple hands movement. The backline may also adopt the stance that the 2nd phase, is in fact essentially a 1st phase opportunity, with a full backline playing a starter move from here against an opposition defence that may be missing a 10 and thus be down on numbers or whose forwards have struggled to fold around the corner quickly enough due to them having to retreat first.

Option 2 has teams playing starters like 8-9-12 to the right hand side of the scrum or OI option (shown below). A Brisbane Premier Grade team with a 120kg inside centre repeatedly played moves similar to these and achieved good

success by targeting the smaller five-eighths and achieving very quick ball over the gainline, allowing the rest of the backline to work from 2nd phase against a defence who were down 1 or 2 inside backs, forced to compress and were essentially on the back foot. From here, backlines have looked to take advantage by maintaining the width and attacking the space, be that out wide if the defence stays compressed or between players if the defence has spread (shown below).



An interesting ploy used to get the ball quickly to the space when facing the compressed defence has been the cross field kick to the open winger. If the outside backs have been forced to play tighter to stop the threat of any inside breaks, then the opportunity has arisen for the attacking winger to position himself in the 5m line and receive an attacking kick. This could essentially be termed "Passing with your feet".

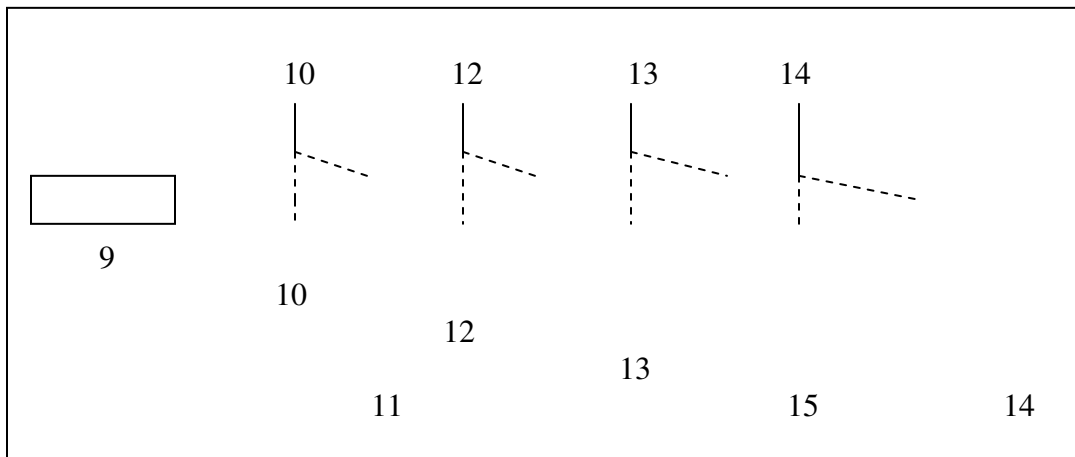
The starter move with a linebreak focus has not been forgotten though, with backlines believing they have more time and space to engage the opposition

defence than before. Statistically, the first 4 rounds in the 2008 Super 14 showed that 25% of tries were coming directly from scrums compared to 20% from lineouts. This was a reversal from the 2007 Super 14 where only 19% of tries came directly off the scrum and 31% came off the lineout. This change in trend can be put down to the attacking team having more time and space from a scrum, which has allowed ball players to make better decisions, whilst with the extra momentum, they can isolate individual defenders better than pre ELV days. For a ball player, attacking off the scrum has become quite similar to attacking off a play the ball in Rugby League. The 10, 12 and 13 does not have the added pressure of an "in your face" defensive line off 1st phase now and this has allowed teams' to take advantage of the extra time by using the full width of the field through there spacing initially and the ball player / line runner combination being able to work over individual defenders better and find space.

A Super 14 coach I interviewed commented that he also felt more linebreaks were made in 2008 by using plays like option 2 (8-9-12) or plays that looked for a hole in the area between the scrum and 10. He felt halfbacks had in fact acted as the first ball player at times in the backline, and been allowed by referees to go outside the 1.5m area to the right from scrums, before the ball had been cleared by there number 8. This had led to back row defensive issues with the defending number 8's not being quick enough to cover the space between there openside flanker and 10. This led to me to ascertain that these types of plays would become more prominent, as they ticked both gainline and linebreak boxes off.

Defensively the new law has forced backlines to make a decision (see diagram) –

- 1) Do we continue to push up quickly and commit after the initial surge off the line? Or
- 2) Do we take 5-6 quick steps off the line, then adopt a passive slide and give the gain line to the attackers but maybe decrease the threat of a line break?



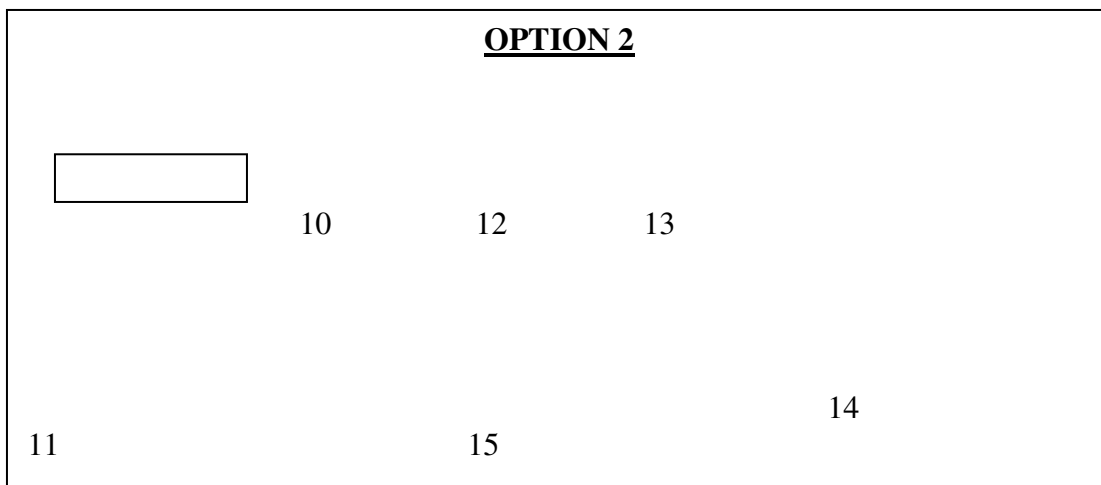
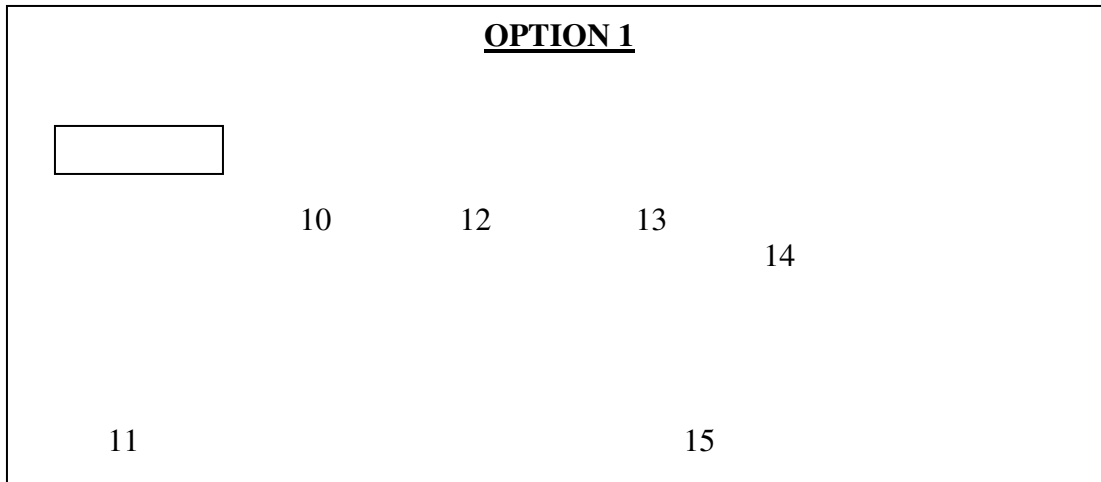
This decision I believe is dictated by the move that the opposition play. If they play a move that has the ball player playing late at the defensive line, similar to option 2 e.g. OI option, then the backline must continue to go forward and challenge them at the gain line, but if they play a move whereby the ball players pass early, then you can look to defend like some league teams do – that is 1) halt coming forward 2) start a passive slide and 3) force the opposition to make the play with the aim of forcing them towards the sideline and getting extra help from inside defenders.

A perfect example of this was shown in State of Origin 1 this year when Mark Gasnier did such a good job defending Greg Inglis 1 on 1. The NSW team, realizing that the QLD game plan was to play laterally and get the ball to their excellent outside backs with early passes, were often seen adopting a slow slide which allowed Gasnier to receive inside help from defenders and limit the opportunities Inglis had 1 on 1. With my reference above that attacking from a scrum can now be related to attacking from a play the ball, a similarity can also be seen from a defensive perspective between the two codes.

The ball cannot be passed or run back into the 22 and then kicked out on the full

This law has had the direct effect of less line outs, the ball being in play longer and more counter / unstructured attacking opportunities presenting themselves. Super 14 statistics show that line outs were reduced from 31 a game in 07 to 26 a game in 08 and this has meant the ball is remaining in play and allowing initially the back 3 players to get more opportunities. Teams are being forced to make a tactical defensive decision off the set piece, regarding do we have 3 players back to do this or just the 2. These decisions centre around the positioning of the open winger. Two scenarios have presented themselves with this (see diagram over page) –

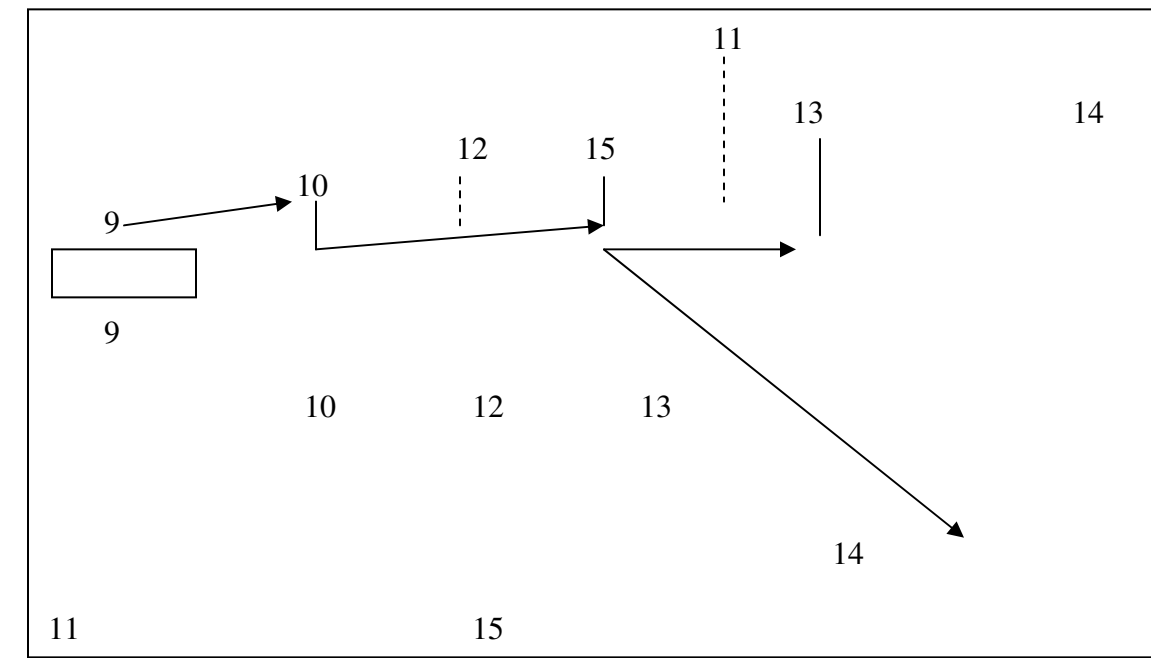
- 1) Open winger playing quite flat, with fullback covering the deeper open area and the blindside winger playing deep and close to the sideline or
- 2) Open winger playing deep, with fullback in the centre and blindside winger on the sideline



Traditionally, the attacking team has played the percentages no matter what in this area with exiting out of this area through a kick considered the norm. Whilst this is still the major consideration, the new law has made the attacking team rethink what is the best way to use this ball in this area from set piece. Option 1 seems to lead to the team winning possession from the set piece adopting a long kick and chase from traditional sources (9 or main kicker), and forcing the 2 receivers to make a decision on either returning the kick e.g. high ball, or running the ball back against a stacked line chase and risking the chance of a turnover. Option 2 has allowed the 3 receivers to shift the ball 2 pass or build a better case to test a stacked line chase. It may also be imperative that the best catcher of the three is positioned where they feel the ball is most likely to go to ensure the initial catch phase of the counter attack is achieved.

Option 2 has also allowed the likelihood of the team winning possession from the set piece playing positively and shifting the ball from this area. With only 3 defenders in the front line, we have seen teams play much more positively from inside their defensive 22m area. An example which covers both situations can be seen using the following play (see diagram over page) – 10 cut to 15 standing

between the centres who can either kick long open or move ball onto 13 who has winger outside. His decision will be based on the open winger positioning and how he reacts to the ball being shifted from 10 to 15 – does the winger stay back or has he moved quickly forward? Whichever way, the following play will allow hopefully for a more positive outcome. It may also be seen that teams pick players that give them more kicking options to ensure they keep the back 3 guessing as to where the ball is going. A Berrick Barnes type player may become the model 12 and along with box kicking 9's and strong kicking 10's and 15's, you will have a 4 pronged kicking team to get you out of this area or at least open up the opportunity to either move the ball or clear it from most sources in the backline.

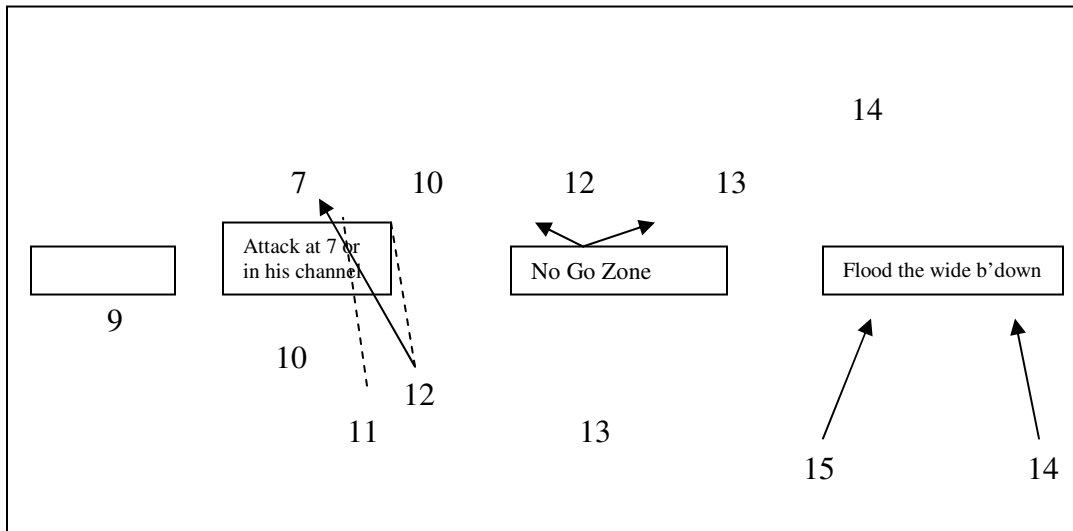


Either side can use as many players as they like in the lineout, at any time

With this law, teams have now had to think about what is the most effective way to use the defensive lineout. Teams have used 3 pods of 3 as an alternative to the normal formation whilst we have also seen sides place a forward (normally the openside flanker) in the defensive line. This has meant the attacking backs have to make a tactical decision regarding what is the best way to attack this set up. In the past the rolling maul would have been a tactic employed directly off the lineout to force the openside flanker to make a decision – do I stand my ground or am I needed around or in the maul?, but with the maul becoming null and void, with it being able to be brought to ground without the fear of a penalty hanging over your head, this decision is not one the defender will readily have to make.

Our team played a game this year where we didn't handle the above situation well. We played a number of starters aimed at the midfield and this allowed the opposition 7 to track well from the inside and give himself a better position / opportunity to turn possession over. After analysis, it was thought we had 2 options that would negate his influence –

- 1) Attack directly at him and force him to make the tackle or at least make a defensive decision or
- 2) Play a wide starter move and flood the wide breakdown



When we came up against this extra man in the defensive line again, we found that both options were successful, with the forward struggling to defend in the 10 position when we ran multiple runners at his channel as he would not have been forced to deal with these situations as often in training as a normal 10, whilst he did not receive the head start or opportunity for a turnover, when we moved the ball to the wider breakdown, allowing our team to get good numbers into it before his arrival.

During a quick throw in, the ball can be thrown backwards but not forwards

This has had a similar effect to not being able to kick out on the full when ball has been passed back or run back into the 22m area. More unstructured attacking opportunities have definitely presented themselves due to this and this has meant that the back 3 have had to work more on their cardio-vascular fitness than ever before to make sure they can and want to take the available opportunities. In terms of when to take these opportunities, we must be careful as they also present the defensive team with a good turnover opportunity if the first up tackle is made. 3 players behind the ball is an essential starting point for the attacking team, and kicks that have been kicked to the open side of the field

or with a narrow chase present the best opportunities due to there being a lack of defensive numbers around the area.

Tactically, we may see teams not setting the lineout as quickly as normal, allowing time for their backs to work back behind the ball and form an attacking opportunity or even an organized starter play. I feel this is an area that has not been fully exploited yet, with only the Sharks of 2008 showing any initiative. Against the Reds this year, Ruan Pienaar (9) dummied an initial quick throw and placed the ball on the ground, which had the effect of forcing the Reds defender in front of him to switch off before Stefan Terblanche came flying around the front and received a pass from Pienaar, who had picked up the ball again. The ball unfortunately didn't go 5m, but this showed how the quick lineout could be used as a weapon. .

Players are allowed to use their hands at the breakdown provided they remain on their feet and are on side

An increased awareness of the tackle contest and improved reaction and efficiency to the breakdown has been requirements highlighted in the backline repertoire through this law. A statistic I kept this year for the backs was 'pilfer' or 'jackal' attempts per game. I classed an attempt as when an individual had his head over the ball or you could see a genuine aggressive attempt being made to turn possession over. The backline unit improved from 4 attempts per game in the early part of our season to 10 or 12 attempts per game by the end. This had the direct effect on our team gaining more turnovers than before or slowing the opposition ball down, which indicated to me that the players recognized this was a skill that had a huge effect on the outcome of the game under the new law and that they had to become more technically proficient in the area of tackle contest and be tactically aware of the importance of 2nd and 3rd men into the tackle.

The breakdown demanded more attention to detail with the new law and this meant that on occasions more backs were needed into individual breakdowns. The previous school of thought by most backlines may have been along the lines of person passing the ball to the ball carrier was the only player initially needed in the breakdown to seal off the ball, but with the new law allowing for a contest until the ball is cleared, the backs have had to learn to flood breakdowns particularly the wider ones. Another example here could be seen by our team having to use the blind winger as a support player when the centres were running a 'crash ball' off 1st phase. This was a change our team made after the opening 4-5 rounds when we had seen that 1st phase possession was being turned over more than ever in this area and also meant we could keep our 10 out of it for the next phase.

The ELVS have allowed for a game that will present greater opportunities than before for the backs. The new laws will bring closer the skill sets that both forwards and backs require to play this game. As coaches, this will impact on how we structure our training sessions in terms of what content needs to be covered prior to and during the season. A positive mindset is necessary from all parties and it is early days in terms of backlines experimenting with new processes and structures, so like anything, over time, we will see different approaches to the ELVS. What won't change initially will be the increase in tries scored, 1 on 1 situations and the ball being used for longer periods, which makes for exciting times for players numbered 9-15.