

Level III Assessment Task 12

Key Factors Influencing Quick Ruck Ball

Matt Kaye

Factors influencing Quick Ruck Ball

Introduction

The contest for possession of the ball is one of rugby's key features. As one team attempts to maintain continuity of possession, the opposing team strives to contest for possession. This provides the essential balance between continuity of play and continuity of possession.

The most common contest for possession occurs at the breakdown, particularly at the ruck contest. A ruck is a phase of play where one or more players from each team, who are on their feet, in physical contact, close around the ball on the ground.

The word "quick" is difficult to measure in terms of the amount of time the ball carrier takes the ball into the contest to when the ball is played to begin the next phase of play. Most teams are striving to gain quick ruck ball as it reduces the time the defensive team has to get a structured defensive line.

Therefore, what are some key factors that may influence the length of time of the ball in the ruck contest?

The importance of quick ruck ball has been a priority of many Super 12 teams over the last few years. In the 2005 Tooheys New Super 12 season statistics indicate the Australian teams (Brumbies, Waratahs & Reds) have a greater focus on delivering quick ruck ball than their New Zealand and South African counterparts.

Table 1

Teams	Number of Rucks	Number of Quick Rucks	Percentage
Reds	906	619	68.3%
Brumbies	803	507	63.1%
Waratahs	859	521	60.7 %
Crusaders #	784	343	43.8%

Canterbury Crusaders were 2005 Super 12 Champions

The above table demonstrates that over 50% of all ruck ball is quick, this may be due to a number of factors outlined later in the document. It should also be noted at this point that opposition defence may have changed their philosophy in contesting the ball at the breakdown. Not contesting the ball at the breakdown will allow the defensive team to have more defenders in the defensive line.

Key Factors of Quick Ruck Ball

Footwork into contact

As the ball carrier is approaching the defender the ball carrier should be looking to beat the defender or at least preserve space. This can be achieved by the ball carrier going directly at the defender; this will commit the defender to the tackle. Just prior to the defender making the tackle the ball carrier should make a short lateral step from either leg, transfer the ball away from the contact and cock the inside arm ready to fend the defender.

Once the ball carrier has taken their lateral step, he/she should be positioned to go through the shoulder of the defender; at this stage it is important for the ball carrier to plant his/her inside foot as quickly as possible. This is often referred to as the 'Power Step' and assists the ball carrier in balance/stability and leg drive through the tackle contest, it also ensures that the attacker is in a strong position in preparation for contact.

During this process it is also important for the ball carrier's hips to remain facing forward at all times. Short strides through the tackle contest will generate leg drive.

With good footwork into and through contact by the ball carrier the defender has less likelihood of making an effective offensive tackle.

Body Height

A previous study by (McKenzie, Holmyard & Docherty, 1989) identified the particular body position of the ball carrier when going into contact and the associated successful retention of the ball. This study was undertaken during the 1987 World Cup involving the following teams; Australia, Canada & New Zealand.

The table below outlines the findings from this study; it demonstrates that the height of the ball carrier high, medium or low, has an impact on the outcome of the ball being recycled. The lower the body height the higher the percentage of successfully retaining the ball.

Team	Body Position (%)		
	High	Medium	Low
New Zealand	31.6	49.1	58.1
Canada	41.7	44.1	51.5
Australia	23.1	46.8	53.3
Overall	31.9	46.6	55.5

Therefore when going into contact the ball carrier should be looking to lower their body height pre contact to increase the chances of retaining possession.

Ball Presentation

If the ball carrier has been dominated by the defender in the tackle contest it will be difficult for the ball carrier to dictate how they present the ball. The body position of the ball carrier on the ground also has an effect on the size of the entry point into the tackle contest. The wider the entry point the greater the area for the opposition players to attack the ball. Therefore many teams are now looking for their players to narrow the entry point by trying to get their body parallel with the sideline.

The key factors for ball presentation are as follows;

- Ball away from contact, close all joints and rip upper body through 90°, in order to attack the ground.
- Aim to land more chest on, and on the inside of the front shoulder, as opposed to the back of the shoulder, otherwise momentum will carry the ball-carrier on to his back – thus presenting the ball to the opposition.
- Once on the deck, the ball carrier is to aggressively push the ball to arms length, or if possible move the whole upper body backwards towards the support to allow the ball to be placed further away from the defenders
- To facilitate strong powerful leg drive and strong technique through contact and on the ground, the ball carrier should ensure that abs are activated prior to initiating footwork into contact, and this should be maintained until ball is cleared from the contact zone.
- When on the deck legs should remain firmly on the ground – if they flay up, generally ball carrier will have landed on the back of his shoulder or abs will not have been activated.

Attacking Support Players

The first important factor for the arriving players is to target over the ball. The support player should ensure that he watches hips of ball carrier so he can react to keep directly behind him but in some depth in order to provide options when the ball carrier comes into contact.

As the first support player approaches the contact zone, he should lower his body height by bending through the knees and hips (not lower back), so that when he gets to the ball he is in a position to pick and drive if no defenders are at the ball, or remain over the ball in a strong position. This will also ensure that he will be in good position to clear out if a defender is at or near the ball.

Additionally as part of the decision making process the 2nd & 3rd support players should also assess which role they are required to complete, whether it be clear out any potential threats or protect the ball in a strong stable position.

Defending Players

The number of defenders in the tackle contest will also be a large contributing factor when trying to get quick ruck ball. If for instance a defending player is in a low position contesting the ball it will require good technique from the arriving attacking players to win quick ruck ball.

The other contributing factor with the defending players is the tackler, who is off his/her feet and not moving away from the tackle contest. It is often the case that the tackler is unable to move away because of the position they ended up in during the tackle, however if the arriving attacking players are effective they will be able to clear over the ball resulting in quick ruck ball.

Gain Line

The Gain Line is a contributing factor to the receipt of quick ruck ball. The gain line is the imaginary line through the middle of the contest from one touch line to the other and parallel to the goal line.

If the ball carrier breaches the gain line it is somewhat easier for the attacking team to recycle quick ruck ball. This is due to the defending team having to retreat backwards to enter the tackle zone through the legal entry point and contest the ball. Alternatively with the attacking team going forward it is easier for the supporting players to enter the tackle zone at pace and from the correct entry points.

Summary

A number of factors will influence the delivery of quick ruck ball in the game of rugby. In any one game there may be 150 to 250 ruck/maul contests. This is a large percentage of the game and the individual skills of the players in these contests will have an impact on the result of the game.

Having the ability to generate quick ruck ball will provide the defence with less time to set a structured defensive line therefore creating space for the attacking team. Practicing the skills at training in both a closed and open environment will assist in the transfer of these skills to the game.

References

1. IRB Laws of the Game
2. McKenzie, Holmyard & Docherty (1989); Quantitative analysis of rugby: factors associated with success in contact. *Journal of Human Movement Studies* V17 p 101-113
3. ARU Level I Coaching Manual
4. 2005 Tooheys New Super 12 Statistics