Winning Lineouts - The Race for Space.... at Pace

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Introduction

The professional era and the allowance of lifting in the lineout have brought a new dynamic to an important facet of set piece play. While once a unit that often best resembled a "dockyard brawl" in amateur times, the lineout has become a thing of rare beauty combining speed, athleticism, strength, intuition, teamwork and strategy. The introduction of the Experimental Law Variations (ELV's) at the senior level has provided increased scope for experimentation in both attacking and defensive lineouts, and further challenges the skills required for contesting the lineout.

This paper will examine the skills needed for efficient lineout play under the ELV's, methods of space identification and creation, tactical considerations, practical ideas on how to train for the skills required, plus examining the role of the defensive lineout in disrupting the quality of attacking ball. While the paper is aimed at those currently playing under the ELV's, it is hoped that many of the strategies and ideas are transferable regardless of the playing level, laws and resources available.

ELV's and the Lineout

The Premier clubs have been using the ELV's for a few seasons now. From a lineout perspective these include:

- A quick throw may be thrown in straight or towards the throwing team's own goal line
- There is no restriction on the number of players who can participate in the lineout from either side (minimum of two)
- The receiver in a lineout must stand 2 metres back from the lineout
- The player who is in opposition to the player throwing in the ball may stand in the area between the 5 metre line and touch line but must be 2 metres away from the lineout
- Lineout players may pre-grip a jumper before the ball is thrown in
- The lifting of lineout jumpers is permitted

It has been interesting to see the development of lineout options over the past few years. Many coaches were duped into thinking that the short lineout was dead, as they feared a mismatch in favour of the defence. Many teams employed an 8 or 9 player defence eg 3 pods of 3 players which emphasised a tight defensive unit at the front, middle and back.

Others tried standing the halfback in as a lifter, with a forward at halfback. Depending on where the ball was thrown, the forward could join the lineout as a lifter with the halfback resuming his more traditional role.

The removal of the old law re numbers in the lineout increases the strategic options of both sides. The attacking team may decide to use less numbers in the lineout to increase attacking options around the 10/12 channel or wider (or a variety of both). Defensive teams may decide to only defend one or two sectors of the lineout (2 pods of 3) eg front and middle and bolster their defensive numbers. This strategy can also be effective if your opposition thrower struggles to hit the back consistently. Smart plays around the front (ie in the 5m channel) or around the back (around the 15m channel) present further opportunities.

The introduction of ELV's in Super 14 (not all rules) and Tri Nations was met with some negativity by the coaches. My opinion is that most of the rhetoric was borne by lack of understanding rather than fact. The principle of moving to space and winning the ball remains regardless of the rules. We have seen in recent Tri Nations games the Springboks use a 3 man attacking lineout against a defence of 5 or 6 players. It is the skill of their lineout lifting/jumping combination and their ability to get the jumper off the ground quickly that has seen them win their ball easily. This has created running options in the midfield ie an attack/defence mismatch. We are also seeing in Sydney Premier rugby the return of short lineout options. The options are endless and are increasing in efficiency with familiarization of the ELV's (and an increase in strategic courage).

Statistics comparing the Current laws vs ELV's taken from the Super 14 competition (2007 vs 2008), show that the average number of lineouts dropped by three per game (31 vs 28). This is hardly statistically significant and highlights the increased ball in play time (another positive of the ELV's). Interestingly, the lineout was a fairer contest with ball won on own throw dropping from 81% to 77% under the ELV. Similar statistics were evident in other ARU controlled fixtures. This is the mostly the result of increased defensive competition, further reinforcing the need now to have both an effective offence and defence at the set piece.

The recently completed IRB Junior World Championship 2008 (U20) reinforced the importance of having a competitive lineout. Not surprisingly, teams with solid set piece ball were the most successful. 24% of tries came from the lineout (with another 22% from scrum ball). Average lineouts per game were 30, with 78% won by the team throwing in. 65% of tries came from play with one ruck/maul(R/M) or less (37% no R/M, 28% one R/M) so set piece possession (both lineout and scrum) remains the best ball with which to attack.

The following table shows the lineout efficiency of the teams that had an own ball lineout win % higher than the average and the position they finished in the Championship:

Team	Rank	Own Throw Won %	Opposition Throw %
New Zealand	1	88	18
South Africa	3	88	29
Australia	5	87	34
England	2	86	26
Wales	4	83	14
France	6	80	23

Quality 1st phase ball still provides the best platform for attack and try scoring opportunities. In the 2007 Rugby World Cup, 32% of tries came from lineout ball.

There are still situations in a game where you may choose not to compete, but there is gold to be won with aggressive defensive opposition. Most coaches have their teams practice winning their own ball, the importance of disrupting the opposition is now vital and needs to be practiced at training. Rugby (as opposed to League) has always encouraged restarts to be a true contest for possession, the ELV's increase this attractive component of our game.

Space Identification and Creation

The simple premise of any lineout is that *there is always space*. The ability to identify the space is a skill which few players possess intuitively but can improve through training drills which encourage flexibility of thought, communication and movement. Too many lineout structures are devised in a way that players are moved in to prescriptive positions, rather than working to space around the zone they are looking to receive the ball. The difference may be small but a lineout that empowers speed of thought, technique and space creation will win out over programmed positioning.

As coaches, we must always remain mindful of the skill sets our players possess and work within those boundaries. This can include physical (height, strength etc) and aerobic (speed, agility, jump). The primary goal of a lineout is to win possession, the how is not as important as the how many won ie there is no point doing 'funky' lineout movements if the players can not perform them. A simple straight up jump will work if done at speed with correct technique. A tall lineout may work well with minimal movement if jumpers are lifted to full height and in space, whereas 'vertically challenged' players may need more evasive skills to find space and win ball. The percentage of ball you win on your own throw will go some way to determining your team's outcome in the match (as shown by the try % data discussed previously).

In situations where the defensive number outweighs the attack, there will still be space (possibly directly behind the third man in a 3 player pod) or it may be necessary to create space. Space can be on the ground or in the air.

There are several ways to achieve this and include:

- a fake in one direction to move the opposition pod and receive the ball moving in the opposite direction eg fake forward and take 1-2 steps backward
- "Selling" a different throw eg the front pod rushes forward and fakes a jump, enticing the opposition forward. This may create space towards the rear of the pod, allowing a smart lineout to move to that space to win easy ball (ie around the 3 or 4 position).
- A speed race. Beating your opposite number off the ground with a well timed throw
- Walking in to the lineout and jumping immediately, especially while the defence is still setting.
- Movement. There are different schools of thought on movement and both have merit. Again it depends on the quality of your players or the lack thereof in the opposition. The latest trend has been to use minimal movement and win ball through speed off the ground and sound technique. The premise is that the less movement, the greater chance the attack has of beating the defence into the air. If defenders are taking their cues off their opposite number (eg watching knees for straightening) then a single movement reduces reaction time. Alternatively, many lineouts have had great success using multiple movements to create a space, with the final movement working into that space and winning the ball. Many club teams struggle to react to multiple movements, often defending the first movement and finding themselves stuck in the air or rendered useless when returning to the ground.
- There is a popular misconception that lineout effectiveness is dependant on getting height. Lineouts can be won on low or lobbed throws if the above factors come into play.

Tactical Considerations for both the Attacking and Defensive lineout

As discussed previously, the relative strength and weakness of either your lineout and/or your opposition will most likely determine the structure and throw patterns that will bring the highest win percentage. Other factors will include the position on the field where the lineout is formed, your game plan (eg you may hit the back and go 'off the top', if you want quick ball to play wide from first phase), any traditional playing styles (some clubs play the same style every year), and game day conditions (eg wind, rain). The conditions may impact on your options, for example it may be very difficult to hit the back on very windy days so you may opt for more catch and drive options, or short lineouts.

In simplest terms, in attack you should aim to structure options that give you the best opportunity to win ball most advantageous to your team's objectives. Defensively, you should set structures that offer the throw that is most detrimental to your opposition. In both cases, you want to take your opposition to where you want them to be, to either create space to win your ball or disrupt their ball winning ability. Your aim should be to win 100% of ball on your throw. In defence, if you can win 30% of opposition ball and disrupt another 20% (ie slow delivery or make the ball quality poor), then you will go a long way towards a successful outcome. Given the high try scoring % off first phase, an efficient lineout unit can maximise your team's attacking platform while crippling your opposition.

Part of a coach's planning should be to have a defined strategy for each week and each opposition - this is vital to achieving our game objectives. This is easier for the higher levels with video of opposition but most clubs follow a pattern/philosophy. Your player leadership group should have buy in, particularly where you possess players who can think quickly to identify opportunities. You need to know your players and what will work best for them. The current "generation Y" type player is more likely to "buy in" if they feel consulted and part of defining the plan. They are also more likely to embrace their ideas than yours, so it may be smarter to go with them.

Another important consideration is the impact of ball delivery on the backline. The lineout remains the place where an attacking backline has most room - off the top gives time to backs, but allows opposing flyers at back of lineout time to hone in on the number 10. Down and give, stops the flyer, but gives backline defence 'reading' time. Down and drive sucks fringe flyers in and is preferable for kicking - particularly if a drive forward is possible.

Ball to the back of the lineout is better off the top for backs, as it takes the front of the lineout out of play defensively at tackle 1. Also OT ball at the front can be fraught with danger for 9 and 10 (as it is a longer pass and cuts down time for the No 10), but can crowd defence in that channel, creating attacking mismatch opportunity if going wide.

Some tactical considerations may include:

Attacking ball

- Personnel should determine the simplicity/complexity of what you do. It is better to execute simple plays than have complex options that are lost.
- Analyse the opposition defensive pattern and throw away from it. Learn to read their "D"
- Define call options weekly for each game and change weekly (3-4 week cycle) to avoid video analysis by opposition. This does not mean a great disruption each week. It may be as simple as having 3 or 4 different structures within a set up, using the same options. This provides variety and allows you to take the space in different opposition set ups. For example a 7 man set up could include:
 - a) 4.....3
 - b) 3....1.....3
 - c) 3....2.....2
- Options to meet game plan objectives eg if you want to play with width, the 'go to' option may be at the back with ball off the top. If more confrontational style is required, catch and drive options may suit.
- Try something new in most games eg 2 man lineout with no walk in (ie a one man lift). It will disrupt the opposition defensive thinking. It may also see your future opposition spending valuable training time planning to defend something which won't be used against them.
- Split the defensive pods. This will require speed of thought, footwork, deception and timing, plus an accurate throw. The ball will be delivered in space. *The race for space at pace*. If one attacking pod can attract two defensive pods, this will create space between the pods that should be identified as the optimal position to receive the ball.
- Use short lineouts (eg 3 man). Most opposition will use a 5 or 6 man defence. Again, the ability to attract both defensive pods will create space. The attacking pod has the freedom to run along the line, determine where the space is and use this flexibility to win the ball.
- When proficiency is achieved, work towards having an "off" call where you call two jump options in the one call. The jumper intended for the first call nominates "off" if heavily marked, then throw to the second option.
- Get to lineout quickly and take quick throws to anyone in space: Immediate ball
- Throw beyond the 15m if heavily defended (lineout over)

Defensive Considerations

- Have a set plan and stick to it, regarding where and how you want to defend (numbers, structure). There is always flexibility to refine 'on the run' however your practiced strategy should be the priority.
- Defensive pressure does not always immediately manifest itself in won ball. Often, the opposition lineout won't disintegrate until the second half but often the seeds of collapse are sown in the first half by competing hard repeatedly and slowing the quality of ball won by the opposition.
- Set quickly. Once the lineout is set, the opposition can not take a quick throw. Another advantage is when the opposition like to "walk in" to lineout. Often the opposition will be influenced by your defensive numbers and follow your lead, rather than their wishes
- Effective communication is vital, as you need to think and react on the run. This includes nominating attacking threats. A loud lineout will often influence the attack and dupe it into going where the space isn't.
- It is impossible to defend all throws, so "offer" them the throw you want them to take eg if the hooker is a weak thrower to the back, guard the 2 and 4 option and offer the back. Offer the throw that is most detrimental to the attack. This includes changing your structure depending on where you are on the field. For example, you may give the attack the front option close to your line, as it is easier to shut down. It also reduces the speed the ball reaches the No 10, allowing your 'fetchers' to get off the back and apply pressure.

 Alternatively, on their line you may defend hard the front and middle, forcing them to take a riskier throw to the back.
- Consider your defensive numbers based on areas of the field. Close to your opposition's line, you may decide to stack the numbers 3 pods of three. This puts great pressure on the opposition hooker and jumpers to execute well. Between both 22m lines, you may decide to use a 5-7 man defence, and in your own 22m it is probably wiser to use a 6-7 man defence to combat any driving mauls, peels etc. In your own 22m, you also need to decide whether to compete with all, some or none of your pods.
- Lifters need to be "free agents" ie not pre grip and face the jumper. They need to be able to react to a variety of situations and should be facing the opposition on set up. Lifters need to be spatially aware.
- Get a hand on the ball. This disrupts the thinking (and delivery) of the opposition ball, upsets the blockers and allows the opportunity to disrupt any possible drive.

Training for the lineout

Many coaches and their teams spend their time training set piece unopposed. While it allows time to practice winning ball and gaining confidence through good execution, it does not replicate game day situations or place the players in scenarios where they need to execute their skills and think under pressure. That is not to say that all training needs to be opposed, there is certainly a place for unopposed practice as part of the overall weekly training plan.

With increased opposition in lineouts and the ELV's allowing unlimited defensive numbers, the focus of training needs to be on enhancing skills and educating players on creating and getting to space. How much time we spend on training the lineout and how we do it differs depending on the team environment (eg club vs professional) and the total training time available through the week. Players should be encouraged to practice their skills away from training (eg hookers up to 50 throws in their own time), as this will maximize pod and structure practice time. However, for players to improve technique, communication and decision making, it is vital that the majority of training be done in a competitive environment. There needs to be a balance between skill work and team structures.

No matter the level, it is important for the coach to not assume that the players have the basic skills necessary to complete an effective jump/lift activity. In pre-season it should be part of training to review the individual components of lineout skills (eg throwing, lifting, jumping), together with 3 man pod work (lifter/jumper/lifter). This can be done both closed and opposed. Repetitive drills allow for skill refinement and identify areas for improvement. While most senior level players should be doing off-season weight programs, there is a fitness element to the lineout that is best achieved through multi-lift activities. This also helps in improving the strength necessary to achieve full height. There are many simple drills to do this.

Below is an example of a grid that covers most of the pod skills required, including various styles of jumping:

The Jumping Grid

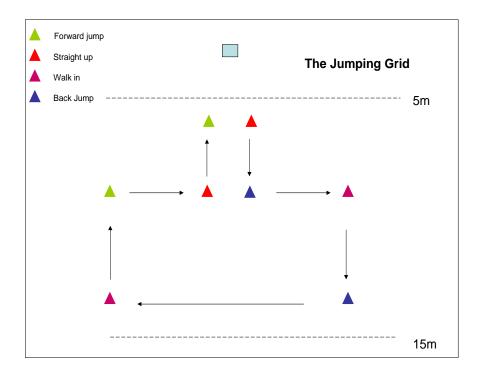
Explanation: A grid that allows the players to perform a series of jumps (8) in quick time incorporating forward, straight up, back and walk in jumping/lifting. (2 each)

How the Drill Works:

- A series of cones are laid out in a grid, with the colour dictating the type of jump required
- Pod works around the grid clockwise, commencing at cone 1, performing 8 jumps at a controlled pace
- Once a pod has reached cone 3, another enters the grid and starts
- Work through grid as many times as necessary

Extension:

- 1.Work counter clockwise
- 2. Introduce hookers to throw in ball (4 hookers if group large enough or split grid in half if only 2 hookers they get to practice running to the mark and throwing quickly)



Key Learning Points:

- Communication between pod members as to type of jump required
- Decision making dictated by colour of cone- thinking on the move
- Ability to quickly think and change technique dependent on jump type
- Must maintain good technique when under pressure on the move
- Skill fitness through repetition

Effective training that has a focus on "space" is best achieved in an opposed environment. It is important that all members of the forward pack are working. It is equally important that modern day players are flexible, as most are needed to perform both lifting and jumping functions, so ensure players are rotated to practice all skills. Avoid having lineout members not working ie work in pods of 3 or more. It is not always necessary to have a ball thrown, so this may open up the opportunity for the hooker (s) to go and practice throwing. When the ball is introduced, make sure the hooker throws down the middle of the tunnel. This creates a very competitive

environment. If a six man defence is usually employed, you may also plan to have the remaining forward(s) practice their running lines off the back of the lineout against an attacking backline, giving the backs some game situation pressure as well.

The key to skill training should be on creating and getting to space. This can be achieved by working in confined spaces between cones, with a nominated attack pod. This can simulate the space for various jumping scenarios (eg front, back etc) . The emphasis should be on moving the defensive pod, getting off the ground quickly and getting to full height. The defence can gauge success by grabbing the wrist of the attacking jumper for example. If the attacking pod has found space and is at full extension (jumper should be encouraged not to jump across the line), then it should be difficult for the defence to make contact. For variation, have the attacking pod walk in versus a set defence- this will emphasise space identification.

As the ELV's allow for a mismatch, drill extensions should include variation in numbers. Note that this should not just be an attacking numerical advantage, be mindful to have more defenders as well. The use of these mismatches will force the players to communicate, encourage evasion and require precise skill execution. They will be forced to either create space or identify where it already exists, get there and operate at pace. Speed into the air and returning to ground can be best practiced in this method. It is also worth considering structuring training to include a "what happens next?" component. The ELV's have unstructured the game somewhat, so rather than practicing lineouts in sets, it may be wise to practice multiphase attacks off one lineout, then return to do another. This will help the players think beyond the unit skill (where do I need to be next?).

An example of a simple skill development drill would be:

Pod Contest grid

How the Drill Works:

- Three cones of different colours laid out along a line, representing a 2, 4 and 6 iump
- 2 pods of 3 stand on either side of cones
- 1 pod is to nominate a cone colour
- Both pods run to the colour cone and utilizing the correct technique get up and contest an imaginary ball
- Jumpers can begin by clapping 3 times in air before calling "down" or touch wrist of opposition jumper
- Have the same pod nominate 5 times, then 15 sec break for discussion and problem solving, then have alternate pod nominate 5.
- Repeat as necessary

Extension:

- 1. Have hooker throw ball directly down middle to enable an equal contest
- 2. Coach nominate area between two cones eg orange/white. This makes the group work in a confined area and highlights the need to find space.
- 3. Vary attacking and defensive numbers



Key Learning Points:

- Communication between lifters and jumper plus timing is of utmost importance.
- Aim to get the jumper to reach the top of his jump every time as the ball arrives.
- Core stability is crucial for the jumper
- Jumper to be straight in air, not jump across the line
- Lifters to keep chins square, full lift on toes with arms fully straight. Finish under jumper. "Throw and catch" if technically proficient.
- Communication required between pod members as to type of jump required
- Decision making dictated by colour of cone- thinking on the move
- Ability to quickly think and change technique dependent on jump type, availability of space
- Must maintain good technique when under pressure on the move
- Skill fitness through repetition

Once skill work and unopposed structure work has been completed, it is important to practice your game day lineout structures opposed. Obviously, this is easy in a club environment where you can compete against another grade team. The use of lineout games or awarding points for attacking execution or effective defence are ways to keep the sessions 'spirited' and match specific.

An example shown to me is below:

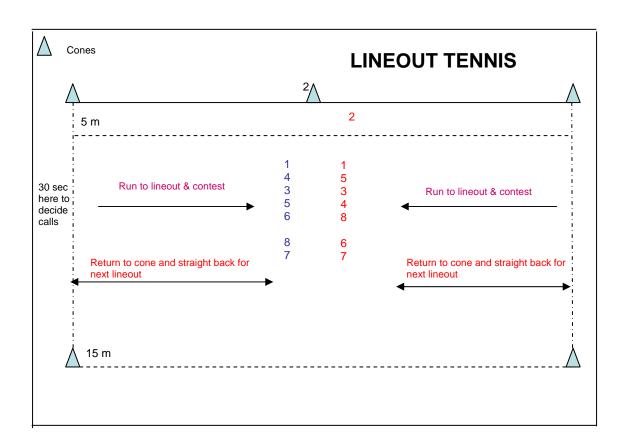
Lineout Tennis

How the Drill Works:

- Grid is set up with cones spaced 20 m apart, with one cone in the middle (10m) from where the throw is to be taken
- One team assembles on either end of the grid
- Each team will have three consecutive throws and have 30 sec prior to the first throw to call their lineout options (should all be 7 man to begin with)
- The teams then meet at the 10m marker, where the first lineout is effected
- At the completion of each lineout, the teams jog down to their marker 10m away and return immediately for the ensuing throws
- Coach will call the score. To win the point, the lineout must be performed to the coaches satisfaction (winning the ball is not sufficient). ie straight throw, strong lift, good jump, good communication etc
- Opposition gets the point if jumping team performs poorly
- Scoring is per tennis ie 15-love, 30- love, 30-15 etc
- After the first group of throws, the second team has 30 secs to call their options and then the teams come together and repeat the steps for the group of three throws (unless "set' is won)
- If set is won, next set begins with losing team to throw first
- Play best of 3 or 5 sets depending on time

Extension:

Integrate 5, 4 and 3 man lineouts where applicable Use driving mauls Play on one or two phases



Key Learning Points:

- Game type pressure to execute lineout
- Fun environment but competitive
- Game type timeframe to deliver lineout
- Communication on the run
- Incorporates all the techniques learnt
- Allows for all lineout variations to be used
- Fully contested scenario

Summary

The lineout has become an important factor in providing quality possession that may lead to try scoring opportunities. The introduction of the ELV's has increased both the level of competition at the lineout, and the skills required to win possession. The ability to get to space and get in the air quickly are key components in winning lineout ball. Today's lineout contest is really a race for space.....at pace.

References: IRB U20 Junior World Cup - Statistical Report 2008 ARU ELV Comparison Statistics