

STARTING POINTS TOWARDS ATTACKING OPEN PLAY & SUPPORT IN EXPLOITING SPACE.

By
Andy Johnson.

Andy is currently coaching at Birmingham University and he is the lead coach with the Midlands Division 18 Group Clubs' side. He is a Level 3 coach and is working towards Level 4. The other coaches that he refers to in the article are Eammon Quinn, Gary Meechan, Lawrence Kenyon, Nic Scott and Jim Robinson. The Midlands squad that he coaches won the championship and had seven players selected for the England training squad.

The article is a case study of one weekend in 2003 where players were presented with problems to solve in different rugby situations. They were encouraged to work out the answers/solutions and how best to construct effective playing shapes and options.

If any reader wishes to contact Andy, his e-mail address is adjohnson.coach@btopenworld.com

Background.

In developing the Midlands Division squad, I have encouraged players to think objectively, to plan, perform with flexibility and to reflect openly with others in the training and post-session reviews.

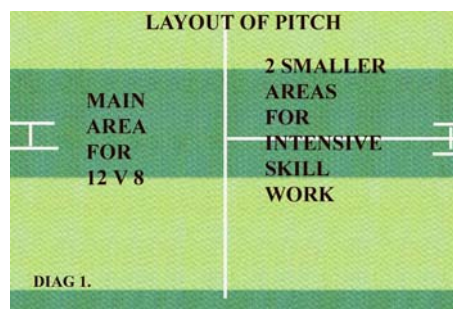
This empowering approach, underpinned by a quality mentoring structure, enables the coaching team to support players fully and make interventions where and when appropriate. It is crucial that players are questioned on the effectiveness of their decision making. Given freedom and responsibility, players seem to flourish and they 'step up to the plate'. There is a challenge for players and coaches alike.

As part of the Midlands U18 preparation for their England Trial Festival in January 2003, the players took part in a preparation weekend at Stowe School,

during which they were challenged in this way during one morning session.

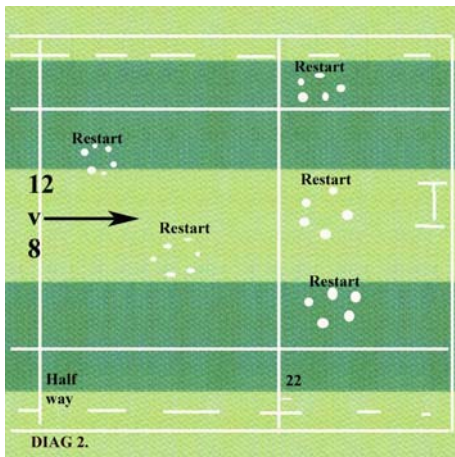
Purpose.

To explore attack and support options in various widths of space. The pitch was split into four working areas; the larger space was used for the 12 v 8 work and the remainder was split in two for a wide range of skills with those not involved in the 12 v 8 work. (Diag 1)

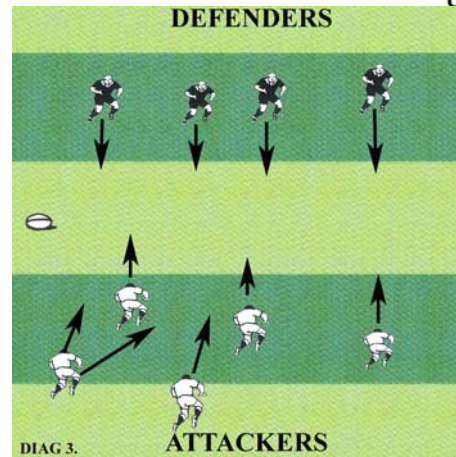


When they were working in the larger area, players were asked to create spaces

and exploit these in order to score in short ‘freeflow’ games of 12 v 8; all squad players were rotated between attack and defence and between working areas. There would be restart points that were marked with cones and the stoppage(s) would be called by the coach. Three, four or five players would previously have been told to cluster at the called breakdown point to leave space for the outside players, who would then have to recognise where that space was from different situations.



It soon became clear that the players had to work hard in order to make good use of each possession opportunity in an area of half the pitch. Coned circles were spread in the zone to show restart points, with some players from both sides kneeling in the coned area to simulate a scrum, ruck or maul. The challenge for the players working through phase plays was to create and exploit space, whether narrow or wide. The defenders organised quickly and collisions occurred. However, space was created, recognised, and exploited for scores by some players.



I wanted to break the decision making down to ‘micro level’ to enable the players to identify ‘narrow channel’ and ‘wider channel’ scenarios, in which their technique, skill and decision-making could be isolated and the intensity controlled.

The players were encouraged then to solve the problem and think about arranging themselves into more offensive shapes that might produce better results. The ‘micro coaching’ input that I emphasised was in setting up as two waves, so that the ball receiver had a ‘diamond shape’ of options in support.

The pressure practice operated in coned channels with attacks of two lines of runners versus a defence (See Fig.2). Initially the defence was not conditioned. Then, by changing the width of the channel, different entry points could be identified for the defenders, with their numbers controlled by finger signals behind the back of the coach, who was facing the attackers.

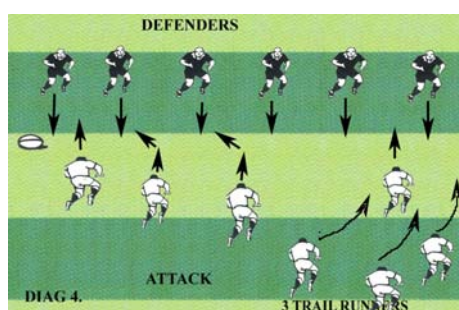
- Key points about outcomes were reviewed on the small, portable whiteboard which I keep on the touchline.

Narrow channel attack (5-10m width).

In the small group channel activity, the players [3+1 v 2 + 2] were set further challenges.

- Firstly, I asked them to explore narrow situations such as short sides around ruck and maul, in which the defenders have to cope with a trailing runner who occupies space before the ball is distributed.
- Secondly, I introduced situations in which the same trailing player runs into space where possession is given as late as possible, according to the communication and awareness of the 2 waves of running lines. (See Diag 3)

As the squad worked through the situations, coaches were able to take players from the groups and work them away from the main practice in smaller adjacent channels (See Fig.4). Here the coaches monitored players attacking in overloaded situations; with increased pressure and decision making in 1v2 (1+1 deeper) and 2v3 (1+2 deeper or 2+1 deeper).



Outcomes from the channel practices.

In narrower channels, the striker occupying the space *after* the ball is distributed is more difficult to defend against than one who occupies the space before the ball is passed.

As the attackers ‘play with the defence’, the first line of attackers (the playmakers) need to read the cues of the defenders’ positioning and use good footwork so that the weaker edges of defenders and the narrow gaps in between are opened up. The second wave ‘strikers,’ or deeper players, must set up in position to hit the line as late as possible to get into any narrow holes of space in the defence. The options for the entry point and pass selection to a target runner depend on the vision, decisions and communication between players.

KEY FACTORS

- In the narrow channel attacks, where potential contact and collisions can occur, players must be able to sustain good leg drive
- Excellent footwork, both lateral and linear, is needed to ‘play with the defence’. Attackers must react to cues and move defenders so that weak areas are exposed.
- Precision in attackers’ ball transfer skills and ability to make quality feints are all vital evasion requirements, particularly in these narrower congested areas of play.

This can also be modified and developed for a wider channel threat and decision-making.

Wider channel attack.

After a drinks break the squad played 'freeflow' (a game with no line-outs or scrums) in one half of the pitch. Occasionally I would use the coned circles to 'hold' some players as if there were a restart situation. At all times, players were encouraged to play with width and to look to utilise space.

Once the players had some success, I asked them to introduce some of the shapes and formations that they had tried earlier in the narrow channels. The initial outcomes were:

- Some players did not retain a second wave out wide.
- This resulted in congestion of space, allowing defenders to organise effectively.
- Some players picked lines in midfield that halted the initial slide of the defence, enabling early miss passes to be made to wider players. This usually led to scores.

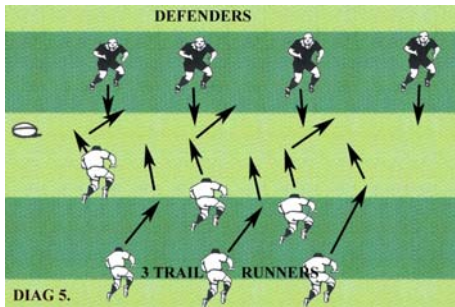
I usually intervened here and, in micro session, tried to get players to appreciate what would happen if wide target players set up early *before* the ball was distributed for the miss pass. Fig 3 shows how a wide target receiver occupies the space early and positions himself opposite a defensive gap. Again the 2nd wave of support offers a 'flatter' diamond support shape.

KEY FACTORS

- Playmakers and their support runners need to set up early to take best advantage of the quicker cut-out passes from first or second receivers.
- Speed, precision of distribution and anticipation of 'cues' from the ball carrier are critical in breaking down defences. The ability of players to practise their 'pre-scan' and 'scanning of options', a quality of the most effective players, is vital and must be encouraged in *all* players.
- The second line support players must be patient and they must try to read the options developing from early possession and the reactions of defenders.
- Precision of delivery to the strike runner as late as possible, whatever his line of run.
- The immediacy of wide support offers a potent threat while challenging the defensive organisation skills of opponents.

Line option running set-ups.

In phase play, particularly when defences are scrambling or trying to organise to shut out the attack, line option running can be fruitfully employed. Fig 4 shows how players set up in two lines where the front line picks effective lines/angles and the second line hit contrasting angles into space at pace.



The vision of player to see and recognise situations, anticipate opportunities and communicate with each other is critical here.

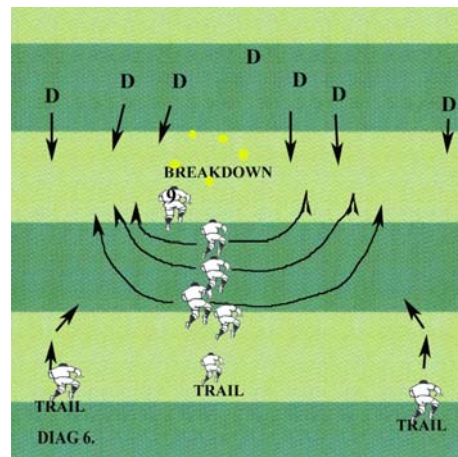
KEY FACTORS

- Recognition of threat opportunity and excellent communication.
- First line players ‘playing with the defence’ and running angles to hold defenders.
- Second line players pick lines and hit the gaps/ spaces.
- The ball transfer to the best striker is communicated and executed with precision.
- First line players now work hard to offer support to those players who got in behind the defensive line.

Fig 5 shows a setup which the Midland players arranged from behind a breakdown. This ‘blitz’ movement allows for target players to be hit from the base and depending on the line taken, then key players can support, with wider players offering option lines.

KEY FACTORS

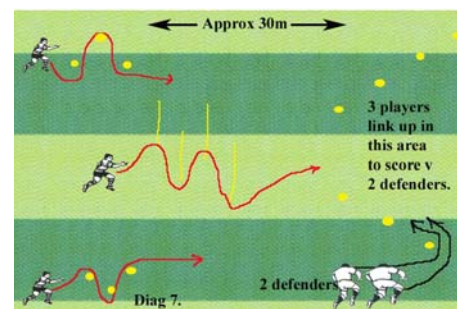
- Scanning of opportunities in defensive formation.
- Clear communication of option chosen.
- Anticipation of new opportunities during movement.
- Excellent evasion and support.



Pre-reception movement – some options.

It is clear from some of the practices shown in the session that attention to starting position, timing and recognition of available space can be approached in different ways. Some pre-reception set-ups enable players to move defenders before they get the ball and also before they have decided on a specific attacking option.

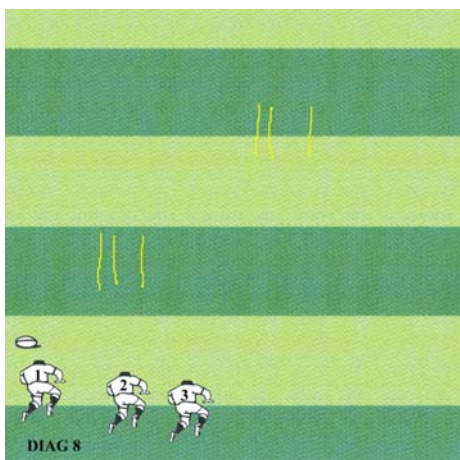
There are many ways to achieve the desired end result. The two movement drills that follow worked well for the Midlands in developing effective play in various channel widths. (**Diags 7 & 8.**)



In Diagram 7, the drill shown is to challenge players' footwork and support shapes. The three attackers have different footwork obstacles and must attack quickly to beat the two defenders. These 3 attackers will never be running as they might in a normal 'drill'.

The defenders can be started by the coach so that the challenge changes each time and the intensity of the defence can be conditioned.

Diagram 8 shows a drill to rehearse footwork, spin and offload options using a staircase of 3 poles.



Player 1 is scrum-half.

Player 2 is first receiver.

Player 3 scores by putting the ball down.

The sequence is:

1 to 2.

2 takes ball to middle pole, dips right shoulder as if going into defender then

twists clockwise into space between poles.

He goes through the space then passes to 3.

3 puts ball down and is now acting scrum-half. 1 becomes first receiver and 2 takes the pass to score before becoming the next scrum-half.

There are important issues for the players in this practice.

1. All players will have to change their running lines across the face of the poles (defenders).
2. Foot placement, shift of body weight, heel turn, leg drive and explosion are critical.
3. Offload capabilities are constantly being practised.

SUMMARY

The critical issues for attacking players are:

- Set-up and support shape in any channel, be it narrow or wide.
- Lines and option running off the ball.
- Pre-scan and scanning ability of players.
- Evasion skills, particularly nearing and in the collision zone.
- Offload and passing competency.
- Game understanding.
- Recognition of and use of space.

(The author will soon be following up this article with one on movement-specific skills and preparing for contact.)