

The RFU Guide to Coaching Positional Skills



Edited by
Ian Thompson



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INTRODUCTION

By way of introduction to this book please take time to read Ben's story as told by his PE teacher and coach.

BEN'S STORY

'Ben was a lad I taught from the age of 12 to 18. He was a secondary school pupil and I was his head of year; I also had the good fortune to be his PE teacher and the coach of the school team in which Ben played.

When Ben came to the school he had been playing rugby for the local club. He was squat in shape, so obviously a prop, but also had good, all-round rugby ability. Being a teacher, my role was to give every student an opportunity to develop a range of skills required to participate in sport. As a rugby coach, I saw my role as giving the players a wide range of rugby skills, regardless of their position.

Although Ben played prop he was involved in practices that involved handling, passing, running, support, decision-making, rucking, mauling, scrummaging, tackling and line-out. The other players in the team were also given the opportunity to practise this range of skills. He was first choice for every age group at school, including the 1st XV at Under-18 level.

When Ben was 17, I invited him and some other lads to train with the local club side that I was coaching. This was a men's team, and many of the players commented on the excellent handling abilities of the young lads; they were impressed with Ben's handling skills and surprised that a front-row player had such a high skill level.

Obviously, as his coach, I basked in the glory of this as a testimony to my ability to get the best out of players in the development of their all-round skills.

Several years after Ben had left school I met him at a Premiership rugby match. At first I didn't recognise the now tall and lean guy that stood before me. After all the usual pleasantries and catching up, I asked Ben if he was still playing. The answer was negative. As he had played all of his rugby at prop, he had now physically developed to a point where he felt uncomfortable in the front row, and was too light. He had thought about playing in another position, but was not confident enough to do so.

Even though Ben had the ability and understanding to play at senior level, I, as his coach, had neglected to give him the opportunity and encouragement to play elsewhere. He had come to me as a prop, and that is where he played for the six years I coached him. I had looked at the here and now and not the

future, and had failed to give him the experience and confidence to play in other positions. As a direct consequence of this I had curtailed his participation in the sport.

I would urge all coaches of young players to give them the opportunity to experience a range of positions, not just in training but also in competitive matches. I would recommend that all players ask for and grab the chance to play elsewhere. When the coach asks who wants to play winger or fullback or back row – put your hand up, give it a go and enjoy the experience. When the coach holds a scrummaging session – ask if you can join in and be taught how to play prop or lock or hooker.’

HOW TO USE THIS BOOK AND GET THE BEST FROM YOUR PLAYERS

The practices in this book will help younger players to understand the roles and skills required to play different positions in the game of rugby. It is also a reference for coaches and recommends a number of coaching games based on the development of core and unit skills.

In part I of this book we look at the roles, responsibilities and characteristics of ‘units’ in the team, such as the back three (wingers and fullback) or the back row (flankers and number 8). The book is written in this way, as players in these units tend to operate together, as well as support each other, to gain advantage in the game. Because of this, these players are likely to have the same core skill requirements, and their development follows common themes.

Each chapter is further divided into sections that follow a common format:

1. General description of the role of the unit and players, their skills and physical needs, such as strength, speed or agility.
2. Role of the unit and players in attack, defence and any set plays, such as a line-out or scrum.
3. Recommended small-sided games and games for understanding, to develop core skills through game-related practices. These games are referenced by numbers that link to full descriptions of the practices in the corresponding chapters in part II of this book.
4. Any positional variations within the units.

Part II of this book is dedicated to details of the small-sided games and other games for understanding that have been recommended in part I.

Coaching best practice promotes greater use of conditioned and small-sided games to improve a player's techniques and skills. The added benefit of coaching through games is that, at the same time, players develop tactical awareness and tend to be more motivated by the competitive and fun elements of the activity.

SMALL-SIDED GAMES

In this book 'small-sided games' refers to games for up to six players. Many of these games can be tailored to serve as warm-up activities, or adapted into general fun games that can be played in the garden or park with friends to further encourage players to develop their own skills.

However, where games have safety or contact implications, such as scrums or tackles, these must be monitored and supervised by a qualified and experienced coach. In this book, for activities where this applies, the exercises are clearly marked and must be supervised by a qualified coach.

GAMES FOR UNDERSTANDING

These are games for larger numbers of participants and are designed to highlight specific tactical elements in the game, such as defensive patterns or exploiting back-line space. In these games players are put into game-related situations, and coaches should encourage their players to experiment and explore alternative ways of gaining advantage from each situation. Generally, there is no right or wrong way to play these games but, coached in this way, players develop their own tactics and routines, which are easily transferred from the training ground to match day.

Games for understanding need more structure and organisation and should be planned and delivered under the direction of a qualified coach. Coaches should encourage players to relate their actions and tactics to the 'principles of play' as discussed below. This will not only help players to understand their decisions but will also provide a general framework for playing in the broader game.

PRINCIPLES OF PLAY

All play in rugby, both in attack and defence, can be thought of as combinations of six general 'principles of play':

1. Contesting possession

Having possession is the single most important player condition of the game. Without possession of the ball it is impossible to attack in the game, to score points or ultimately to win.

2. Going forwards

Going forwards towards the opponents' try line is the principal objective of the game of rugby. In attack, going forwards with the ball increases the likelihood of scoring points, disrupting defences or creating space. In defence, going forwards denies the attacking team time and space, and increases the likelihood of them making a mistake.

3. Support

In attack, support players provide options to pass the ball, to change the point or direction of the attack, or to secure and keep the ball available in contact. In defence, players support each other in defensive units. For example, a back-row player may provide defensive support to a fly-half or centre against an opposing team's midfield attack.

4. Continuity

Continuity is a measure of how well or otherwise a team plays without stoppage. In attack, this means keeping the ball available through multiple phases of play without mistakes. In defence, it is a measure of how well the team coordinates and realigns its defence, or switches from defence to attack when the ball is turned over.

5. Pressure

The aim of both sides is to put opponents under pressure. In attack, pressure is a factor in breaking down defences and creating scoring opportunities. In defence, sustained pressure is a major factor in forcing mistakes and gaining possession of the ball.

6. Communication

Communication is central to all the other principles of play. Undoubtedly, communication is the single most important factor for all successful teams. Organisation within the team can only be achieved through effective communication.

WARM-UPS

Every training or pre-match activity should begin with a warm-up designed to mentally and physically prepare the player for exertion. The principal aim of the warm-up is to increase the heart rate and prepare muscles for exercise in a controlled and progressive manner. However, the warm-up can fulfil other functions: by linking it to the main activity it can provide an opportunity to begin to coach elements of the session. When tailoring a warm-up, first consider the content of the main session and work backwards to design each of the warm-up stages.

Key factors include:

- Always include a warm-up before every session
- Within the warm-up include dynamic stretching to prepare muscles for activity
- Warm-up activities should be game-relevant and session-specific – for example, preparation for contact should include ball carrying (game-related), wrestling (physical condition) and competition (mental preparation)
- Warm-up sessions should generally use simple activities that progress from low intensity to high intensity
- The warm-up should not be seen as a separate event but as the foundation to the main session and supporting the theme of that session.

Warm-up practices

Note: The numbers refer to the corresponding practice games in part II.

Small-sided games:

Handling (1, 2, 8), Running and evasion (12, 13), Tackling (26)

Games for understanding:

PREPARING FOR EXERCISE

It is not the aim of this book to go into depth regarding the nutritional needs of players: the reader is directed to look at any of the many excellent sources of information on this subject. However, there are a number of simple 'golden rules' that should be followed during training and on match days:

1. Before exercise

- Eat your last main meal around 3–4 hours prior to exercise.
- Snack after this period, but on foods that break down quickly, e.g. soft fruits.
- Be well hydrated before training or a game. Start taking small amounts of water at regular intervals up to 6 hours before kick-off.

2. During exercise

- During exercise or during the game, take regular drink breaks, or when there is a stoppage in play always have at least a mouthful of water.

3. After exercise


- After exercise your body is ready for food to make up for lost energy and to aid recovery. You should plan to eat a balanced meal after exercise or a game; try to include both carbohydrate and protein at this time, such as boiled chicken or fish (lean protein) with a carbohydrate-rich food such as pasta, potatoes or rice. Also include fruits or yoghurts with your meal. Drink plenty of water to rehydrate. A general rule is you should drink the same weight in water as the body weight you lose during training or the game. Initially it is good practice to weigh yourself before and after exercise until you become familiar with how much liquid you need to take after exercise. Remember you will need to drink more on a hot day.


Key to Diagrams

 Direction of pass

 Direction of moving player

 Cones

 Imaginary line dividing pitch

 Attacking player

 Defending player

PART ONE

POSITIONS

CHAPTER 01

BACK THREE

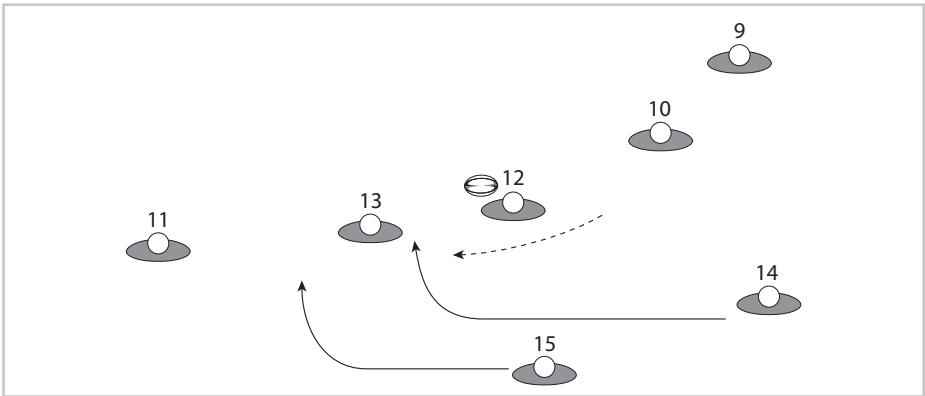
GENERAL

The two wingers and fullback work closely as a mini-team within the team, sharing and switching roles to provide cover across the field both in attack and defence. To do this, the three players must be able to read the game, understand each other's role and communicate well as a unit. To be effective in both attack and defence, the wingers and fullback must have a full range of attacking and defensive skills: genuine pace, excellent handling and evasive skills, and determination to take on and defeat opponents in one-on-one competition.



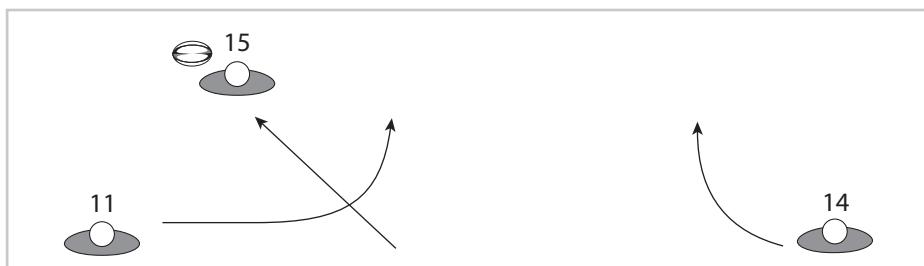
ATTACK AND COUNTER-ATTACK

In attack, the wingers and fullback act as 'finishers' by scoring tries. They should have a combination of pace, strength and agility and are often the quickest players on the field. To make use of these strengths, many attacking plays aim to put a winger or fullback into space. For example, the play shown in the figure below has the right winger and fullback coming into the line to create a potential attacking overlap and put the left winger (No. 11) into space, with a clear run for the line.



Against opposition kicks, the wingers and fullback operate as a unit to provide across-the-pitch cover defence against kicks to midfield or wide kicks towards the touchline. The fullback and both wingers must be safe and secure at catching the ball and effective at launching a counter-attack, kicking or standing strong in contact and waiting for support to arrive.





Often some of the most exciting forms of attack are where a side chooses to launch a counter-attack on receipt of an opponent's kick. Because of the positioning of the back three, it is often the wingers or fullback who starts the counter-attack and has space to accelerate and challenge the opposition at top speed. The back three should regularly practise their counter-attack skills from different areas on the field. For example, in this counter-attack play shown above, the fullback has received a kick 'midfield' and decided to launch a counter-attack. The left-hand winger (No. 11) has moved quickly infield to change the angle of the attack, and the right winger (No. 14) has read the situation and moved infield to take a pass and change the point of attack.

Attack pressure practices

Note: The numbers refer to the corresponding practice games in part II.

Small-sided games:

Handling (1–10), Running and evasion (all), Continuity (all)

Games for understanding:

38, 39, 41, 42, 43

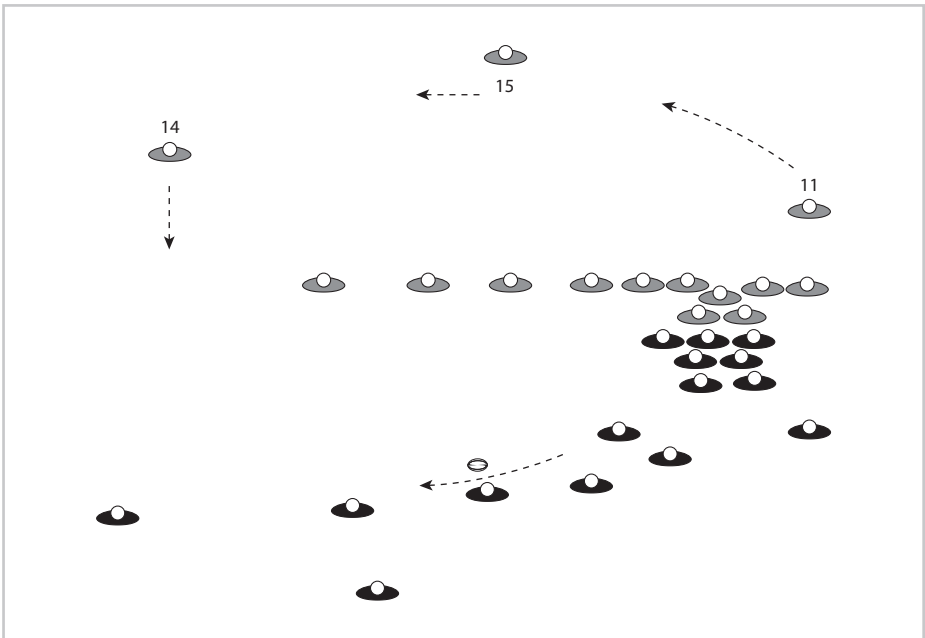
DEFENCE

To fulfil their defensive roles, the fullback and wingers must have good vision to read the game and great communication and organisational skills to maintain defensive cover across the pitch; they must also be courageous and technically excellent in the tackle.

In general play, the back three give depth to the defence, operating



behind the main defensive line to limit the opponents' attacking options. As the attacking side moves the ball, the back three position themselves to anticipate kicks and they cover for players breaking through the main defensive line or against wide running attacks. For example, the defensive alignment in the figure below shows the open-side winger (No. 14) in position behind the main defensive line to defend the cross-field kick. The fullback (No. 15) is in position to cover a centre-field kick or to move quickly to support either winger, should the ball be directed wide.



As the attacking play moves across the field, the defensive back three (No. 11, No. 14 and No. 15) move as a unit to keep the defensive cover. The open-side winger (No. 14) moves forwards into a tackling position, the fullback tracks across to provide cover against the 'kick through' or line-break at the point of play. At the same time the blind-side winger (No. 11) moves infield to cover the ground left by the fullback and give midfield cover against a kick back into this area.

The effectiveness of this defence strategy relies on the ability of the back three to read the game, communicate their intentions and move quickly as a unit in response to the attack.