

# Boosting Your Rugby IQ

## Reference Guide

This information package contains a summary of general tactics and keys to success for your reference.

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## Keys to Success in the Modern Game

The overall keys to success in the modern game of rugby are:

1. **The right state of mind.** Successful teams focus their attention on the relevant aspects of performance, and they train and play with high personal spirit and team spirit. They do the right things individually and as a team to mentally prepare for training sessions and competitions.
2. **Organized defense with an attack mentality.** Successful teams are organized and physical, and exert pressure to disrupt the opposition and win the ball back.
3. **Win the battle up front.** Successful teams dominate the set pieces. They dominate the breakdown by being first over the ball and underneath them all. Everyone is able to steal the ball. Everyone is able to clean out the ruck. Everyone is able to step out of contact and make the hard yards to get the ball past the advantage line.
4. **Take advantage of opportunities.** Successful teams focus on finding opportunities (i.e. space or mis-matches) and attacking them. If they don't see an opportunity, they create one.

# Quick Ball

## *Creating Space and Mis-matches*

### Context

#### Temporarily Disorganized

When a breakdown occurs, the defense is temporarily disorganized, resulting in good attacking opportunities:

- **Space:** the defense has not had time to completely fill up the defensive line on the far side, resulting in gaps and overlaps. Typically, the space is out wide, because the available defenders build the wall from the ball outward. However, some defenders may spread out too quickly and leave inside attackers unmarked, resulting in gaps in the defensive line.
- **Mis-matches:** tight five forwards may be caught out wide, because they have not had time to shift in close, resulting in mis-matches (e.g. a winger against a prop).

#### Recycling Speed

Ball that is very slow to become available in the ruck is called "Slow Ball," and ball that is very quick to become available in the ruck is called "Quick Ball."

The longer it takes the ball to become available, the more time the defense has to organize and deny opportunities. Quick ball represents the best attacking opportunity, because we are able to play the ball while the defense is still disorganized.

## **Goal**

Win quick ball

## **Key to Success**

Go forward

## **Tactics**

We win quick ball by getting past the advantage line (i.e. by going forward).

Getting past the advantage line allows our supporters to quickly run forward through the "gates" at the breakdown, whereas the defense has to go back and around. Put simply, going forward allows us to get there first, and the team that gets there first and gets lower wins the breakdown.

Alternatively, if we get tackled behind the advantage line, then slow ball (or a turnover) is going to come as a result, because OUR players have to come back and around, whereas their players are able to quickly run forward through the "gates" and get there first.

The bottom line is that if you are going forward, then you should win quick ball.

## **Additional Tips for Winning Quick Ball**

### Going Forward in the Tackle

One key to getting past advantage line to **go forward in the tackle**. Going forward in the tackle has more to do with speed, agility and quickness than it has to do with brute strength. If contact is going to occur, then quickly step out to avoid the defender's shoulder and then drive forward through the arms. Getting past the defensive line, even if only partway, will help set up quick ruck ball or allow you to offload into space behind the defensive line.

### Going Forward in the Ruck

Once we have gone forward in the tackle, our support players must **go forward in the ruck**. If our possession is being threatened, then we must be physical and hit the ruck "full on," driving beyond the initial point of contact, in order to ensure that we win quick ruck ball. The quickest ball comes when there is maximum separation between the defense and the ball.

# Getting Past the Advantage Line

*You have to earn the right to go wide*

## Goal

The goal of a handling attack is to gain territory (i.e. get past the advantage line) while retaining possession.

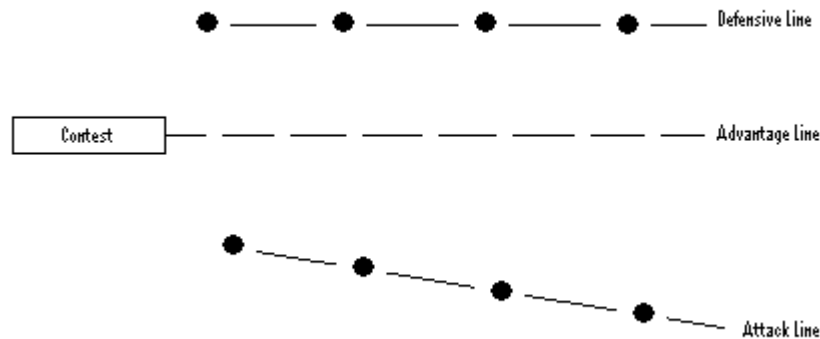
## Options

### Direct Attack

We can get past the advantage line quickly by setting the attack line close to the advantage line, and then going directly forward. The closer we are to the advantage line, the less time the defense has to: a) come forward and gain territory; and b) react and get across.

### Wide Attack

The deeper we set the attack line and the wider we attack, the more time we give the defense to: a) come forward and gain territory; and b) react and get across. This is especially true if our passes are deep - every deep pass gives the defense more time to come forward and cover across.

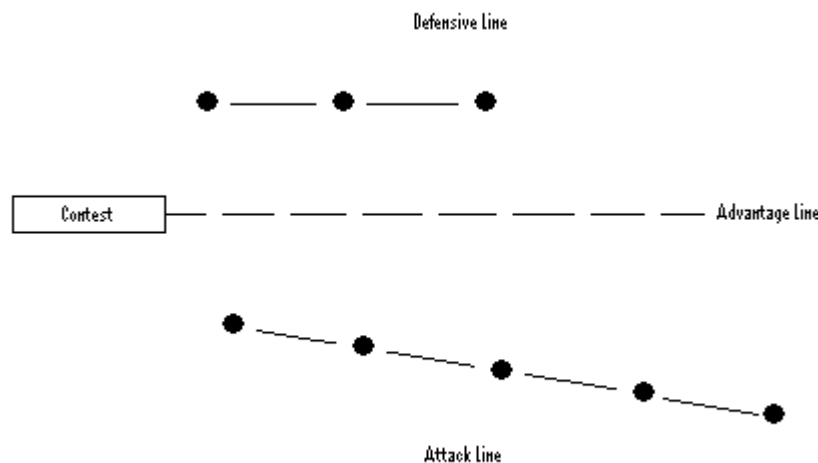


If we are tackled behind the advantage line, then we are losing territory AND there is a high risk of having a turnover at the breakdown - the team that is going forward has the advantage at the breakdown.

As such, every pass wide is a risk that: a) we will not achieve the advantage line; and b) we will turn over possession.

However, **IF** there is a clear opportunity out wide (i.e. space or a mis-match), then a wide attack can result in a try! The reward would be worth the risk.

Fast, "flattish" passes are effective when attacking wide because they minimize the time defenders have to get across and close the space. Additionally, the use of decoys can help to "check" the defense (i.e. make them hesitate), thereby preventing them from covering across in time.



### The Intelligent Decision

Unless there is a clear opportunity out wide, a team's best chance of getting past the advantage line is to go directly forward, with a focus on attacking the space between defenders. Going directly forward and getting past the advantage line will also help us to win quick ball, thereby creating opportunities out wide. Hence the expression, "you have to earn the right to go wide by going forward first."

# The Breakdown

The team who wins the battle up front wins the game. Quick ball creates opportunities (i.e. space or mis-matches) that the attackers can exploit. Alternatively, slow ball provides the defense with time to organize and deny opportunities. Turnovers are pure gold - not only do they deny the opposition an attack opportunity, they also create an excellent counter-attack opportunity.

## Defense

### **Goal**

The goal of the defending team is to legally steal the ball. Even if they are not successful, the act of trying to steal the ball will slow down the ball, thereby providing the remaining defenders with time to organize.

### **Keys to Success**

Be first over the ball and underneath them all

### **Important Law Interpretations** - *"If you are there first and grab it, it's yours"*

In 2009, the IRB implemented a law interpretation that says if the first arriving defending player grabs the ball BEFORE a ruck is formed, she can legally CARRY ON playing the ball after the ruck has formed. Even if the ruck forms, you don't have to let go - just carry on playing it.

Players must stay on their feet while trying to steal the ball.

If the tackler gets to her feet on time, she can pick it up from any angle before a ruck has formed.

A ruck has formed as soon as one player from each team arrives and is in contact over the ball. AFTER a ruck has formed, a defender cannot put her hands on the ball.

## Tactics

The goal of the defending team is to legally steal the ball. We also want to ensure that we have enough players available to build the wall. As such, the primary tactic is "Tackle, Jackle," whereby we only commit two players to the tackle situation.

There are three basic options when approaching the tackle situation:

1. **"Tackle, Jackle"** - The primary tactic is "tackle, jackle" - immediately after a tackle is made, the first arriving defender tries to get her hands on the ball before the ruck is formed - *"Get there first, grab the ball and hold on for dear life!"*
2. **Counter-ruck** - Only "counter-ruck" (i.e. ruck back) IF we spot a clear opportunity to turn over the ball (i.e. we see the ball OR we make a tackle behind the advantage line - *"the team that is going forward has the advantage at the breakdown"*)
3. **Stay out** - If you do not spot an opportunity to turn over possession, then stay out and help fill up the defensive line - *"Build the wall"*

## Attack

### **Goal**

The goal of the attacking team is to win quick ruck ball

### **Keys to Success**

Be first over the ball and underneath them all

**Important Law Interpretations** - *"You can fall AFTER contact, but not BEFORE"*  
Players must make an effort to stay on their feet, as opposed to intentionally going to ground. As such, players must clean out an opposition player first and then, afterward (and if necessary) fall to the ground, as opposed to immediately going off their feet (i.e. "diving" before contact).

As long as you are moving a player and then fall as a result of that process, you are fine. If you are being penalized, then simply try to stay on your feet a little bit longer, and try to look like "an airplane taking off" as opposed to "an airplane landing."

## Tactics

The goal of the attacking team is to win quick ruck ball. The quickest ball comes from having the "cleanest" ball possible. Any ball that is not in contact with the opposition is "clean" ball. As such, the primary tactic at the tackle situation is the "clean out."

There are four basic options when approaching the tackle situation:

1. **Clean out** - if our possession is being threatened, then "clean out" the ruck: hit the ruck full on and drive the defender back off the ball, thereby creating separation between the defense and our ball
2. **Secure** - "secure" the ball once our possession is no longer being threatened, because the players ahead of you have already cleaned out the ruck. Just like a No. 8 at the back of a scrum, your role is to keep the ball in front of your back foot until the halfback is ready to play the ball - *"last person secures, like a No. 8 in the scrum"*
3. **Stay out** - if the ball is already secure, then stay out and join an attack line
4. **Pick n' go** - if we are on the opposition goal line and want to "grunt" it over, OR whenever there is space for the arriving player to cleanly pick up the ball and go forward - "if you spot an opportunity (i.e. space or mis-match), attack it!"

If we go in for the clean out, but the opposition backs away first, then simply stand over the ball in a low body position (e.g. one foot behind the ball, one foot beyond the ball, fingertips on the ground).

# Richie McCaw's breakdown break down

By TOBY ROBSON in London - Stuff.co.nz

04/12/2009

School was in today and All Blacks captain Richie McCaw gave a master class on the breakdown.

For the four reporters present it was like a university tutorial from a teacher with a PHD in openside play, with honours.

The way McCaw sees it, the breakdown's just not that complicated.

You get there first, grab the ball and hold on for dear life despite your body being subjected to all sorts of unthinkable agony.

If you can do that, he reckons, then you deserve to come away with the ball.

The IRB this week ratified a rule change that says if the first arriving defending player gets his hands on the ball before a ruck is formed, he can legally carry on playing it.

Probably best to let McCaw explain the rest.

"The problem before was it was open to interpretation by the ref. So if you got there first and there was no-one from the other team then it's not a ruck so you can play the ball.

"As soon as someone touches you it's a ruck, so what's was happening is some refs would allow you to keep playing it because you were there first and perhaps should have won it.

"Other refs would say the guy on the ground had released it almost immediately, but had held it just long enough for a ruck to form. So you had a go and didn't win it and the ref said hands off.

"That was where a lot of inconsistencies were, just through the referee's interpretations.

"So what they said was simple. If you are there first and you get your hands on it then you probably should have won it. Even if the ruck forms you don't have to make that judgement, you just carry on playing it."

However, McCaw now believes further clarifications need to be made to ensure players stay clearly on their feet while trying to play the ball.

"It would mean more accuracy. There are guys who sort of lie on the player on the ground and look like they are on their feet. There has to be, I think, a genuine attempt to get the ball while you are on your feet. That would help.

"At least if you know if you are on your feet, you've had a crack and you can carry on going. It rewards good play. If you are there first you get a chance to play."

He believes keeping players on their feet would also allow the attacking team a fair chance of clearing defenders out at the ruck.

"I do it too. You try to get a lot lower, but you can't use someone else's weight to rest on. You get a guy who leans with his hands on the ground. "If a guy's down there you can't move him. You try and come and try to clean him out it's pretty hard to move him."

If a side is going forward at the contact area, McCaw reckons you should probably be able to win the ball legally.

"The advantage line is a big indicator at the breakdown I believe. If you are going forward, then probably seven out of ten times you should get the ball back and if you haven't there is probably infringing.

"If you get knocked over behind the advantage line then slow ball is going to come from that because your forwards have to come back, so there's more chance of a turnover."

McCaw doesn't profess to have all the answers and is the first to say the referee's job is almost impossible due to the speed of the collision point.

"I don't know the answers either. If you are going to make it a genuine contest there is going to be a bit of interpretation."

McCaw does not think he's ever been picked on by referees and believes his record proves he is no cheat.

"I go through all my games and if I give away more than two penalties at a breakdown I've got it really wrong.

"If there's one that's fifty-fifty and one that I got wrong I sort of accept that might be right, but that's about finding the line.

"If you keep doing it [you are stupid]. I've never had that sort of situation. You might get the odd one with three in a game, but that's a bad day for me.

"There's no point arguing with the ref if he's going to get you for something that you think is legal... you might as well make a change."

## **RICHIE'S BREAKDOWN BREAK DOWN**

"I don't think the breakdown is that complicated. What complicates it is it happens so fast bang that's where it becomes hard for the ref.

"The real rules of the breakdown are the tackle player must release and if he gets to his feet he can pick it up from any angle provided there hasn't been a ruck.

"As soon as one player from each team arrive and are joined that's a ruck and there's no hands. If you arrive through the gate from the opposition you can pick the ball up. That's as simple as it is."

# Counter-Attack

There are two types of counter-attack opportunity: kick returns (including kick-offs and restart kicks) and turnovers.

## Kick Returns

### **Context**

In kick return situations, the defense tends to be somewhat disorganized, resulting in good attacking opportunities (i.e. space or mis-matches). The key question is whether the kick and chase provides us with time and space to find an opportunity and attack it.

### **Goal**

Gain as much territory as possible

### **Keys to Success**

Find the opportunity and attack it

## Tactics

The receiver is to collect the ball, then read and react:

- a. **Run Immediately** - if you spot an opportunity (i.e. space or mis-match), attack it
  
- b. **Pass Immediately** - if you see someone in a better position to go forward
  - *A player at **depth** will have more time to find an opportunity and attack it*
  - *A player near the **middle** of the field has more attacking options*

[Note: For this reason, the fullback is often used to start the counter-attack, with the wings collecting the ball and immediately passing to the fullback]

- c. **Kick Immediately** - if you see open space up-field **OR** if you can't find any opportunities
  - *If you see an opportunity (i.e. open space up-field), attack it - "kick to land, not to hand"*
  - *If you don't see an opportunity, then create opportunities by kicking and chasing a high and deep bomb (i.e. "tester")*

If you collect the ball and DON'T have time to do anything, then simply go forward and be dynamic through contact, trying to stay on your feet until support arrives.

Support players must work hard to get back behind the ball so that they can contribute to the play.

## Turnovers

### **Context**

In turnover situations, the defense will typically be disorganized, resulting in good attacking opportunities.

### **Goal**

Gain as much territory as possible

### **Keys to Success**

Find the opportunity and attack it

### **Tactic**

Move it wide quickly with two immediate passes. The defensive line is deeper out wide (expecting to attack). As such, the attackers out wide have more time and space to find an opportunity (i.e. space or mis-match) and attack it.

## **Roles and Responsibilities**

In the modern game of rugby, everyone is expected to be able to do everything in phase play, without hesitation. EVERYONE rucks, EVERYONE passes, EVERYONE tackles, EVERYONE jackles.

However, positional specialization still exists during set play, resulting in certain positions being better suited overall to performing certain roles.

In order to ensure that we are playing to our unique strengths, it is wise for athletes to play the game with a certain role in mind, but be prepared to step up and immediately perform any role if the situation demands.

### **The Units**

#### **Forwards - "win the ball"**

The primary role of the forwards is to win the ball: win the line-out, win the scrum, win the kick restarts and lead the way in winning the breakdown. The forwards are also often called upon in phase play to be the "big runners" who punch the ball past the advantage line and win quick ball.

#### **Backs - "take advantage of our opportunities"**

The primary role of the backs is to take advantage of our opportunities to score points or relieve pressure. The backs also have a key role in defending against a running attack, as well as covering all kicking options and then launching successful counter-attacks.

## The Mini Units

### **The Tight Five - the "Drivers"**

The role of the tight five (i.e. 1, 2, 3, 4, 5) is to drive forward, using their physicality and technique to dominate the opposition. The tight five call upon their exceptional body position, strong leg drive and indomitable spirit to drive the opposition back off the ball, and drive forward past the advantage line as a ball carrier.

If we are winning our set pieces and going forward in phase play, chances are it is because of the tight five.

The tight five should focus on being near the middle of the park, so that we can have "power in the middle and pace out wide."

The mantra for a tight five player should be, "Never take a backward step."

## **The Back Row - the "Hunters and Gatherers"**

The role of the back row (i.e. 6, 7, 8) is to cause destruction at the breakdown, using their speed, courage and skill to be "first over the ball and underneath them all." Their primary focus is on cleaning out the ruck on attack, and jackling the ball on defense.

The back row "hunt the ball," by scanning the field and taking a running line that will put them in the right place at the right time to make an impact at the tackle situation if they are needed. The back row are expected to work very hard, so that they are frequently in position to win the ball immediately after the tackle.

The back row are masters at asking and answering the following questions as they approach the tackle situation:

1. **Attack** - "Is our possession being threatened?"
  - a. If our possession is being threatened, then "clean out" the ruck
  - b. Once our possession is no longer being threatened, "secure" the ball for the halfback
  - c. If the ball is already secure, then stay out and join an attack line
  - d. If there is space, then pick n' go
  
2. **Defense** - "Do we have an opportunity to turn over possession?"
  - a. If you are the first arriving defender, then immediately try to get your hands on the ball before the ruck is formed ("tackle, jackle")
  - b. Only "counter-ruck" (i.e. ruck back) IF you spot a clear opportunity to turn over the ball
  - c. If you do not spot an opportunity to turn over possession, then stay out and help fill up the defensive line

When we kick the ball in phase play, the No. 8 should scan our own depth defense and drop back to fill a vacancy as required, in order to ensure that we cover against all kicking options.

### **Inside Backs - the "Orchestrators"**

The role of the inside backs (i.e. 9, 10, 12) is to orchestrate the game (i.e. manage the game plan and defensive organization). All three should be constantly reading the situation and talking to the players around them. Note that the 10 and 12 should be equally comfortable playing at first receiver.

**Halfback (9)** - Spot your receiver(s) early, while your teammates win the ball. Get into position to play the ball as soon as it is won. Politely point out infractions to the referee. Most importantly, take the initiative to read and react:

- **Choose your receiver:** If we win quick ball, then immediately play the ball in the same direction. Scan the attack lines and distribute the ball to the line that you think has the best chance of going forward with support.
- **Choose your kicker:** Choose the kicker who has the best chance of gaining the most territory, and recognize that this person might be you!
- **Have a go:** If you see an opportunity (e.g. space next to the breakdown), attack it by going for a run.

***First Five-Eighth (10)*** - The role of the first five is to set the overall depth of the attack line from the advantage line, and constantly scan the environment to identify opportunities (i.e. weaknesses). As soon as she sees or hears of an opportunity, then she is to coordinate with her teammates and attack it. If she doesn't see an opportunity, then the first five takes on the role of "creative playmaker."

Set Play: Unless kicking, the 10 should stand/set the line as close to the advantage line as legally possible while still being able to pull off the planned move. The closer we stand, the less time the defense has to react, and the less time the defense has to run forward and gain territory.

Phase Play: Try to align as first receiver in the back line. Stand in a standard, deep position so that all options are open: you can attack wide, you can kick or you can run forward and attack the line. From this standard deep position, simply read and react:

- **Find the opportunity and attack it:** If you see an opportunity (i.e. space or mismatch), attack it. Call "see me" to the halfback and take advantage of that opportunity. You have the option of using the big runners as decoys. If you see an opportunity to kick (i.e. open space up-field), attack it and coordinate the chase so that we either collect the ball immediately (e.g. grubber, chip or kick-pass) or put the receiver under immediate pressure.
- **If you don't see an opportunity, create one:** If you don't see an opportunity, then take the initiative to create opportunities for yourself or others by changing your running line and using fakes.
- **Turn slow ball into quick ball:** If we have slow ball, then call a slow ball play and use the big runners (i.e. forwards) to punch the ball past the advantage line and win quick ball again. Call the slow ball play regardless of where the big runners are (we will take our time to get organized, then start again).

***Second Five-eighth (12)*** - As the situation demands, switch between the roles of "creative player" or "distributor." In phase play:

- **Step in:** Align near the middle of the attack line, and immediately step into the first receiver role if the 10 is not available.
- **Relay information:** Constantly relay information to the 10 to help her make decisions (i.e. help to her to know when we have an opportunity). Call "see me" if you spot or hear of an opportunity and want the ball.
- **Find the opportunity and attack it:** If we have the numbers (i.e. more attackers than defenders), then simply run straight and move the ball to the open player. If you see a player in a mis-match situation (e.g. a winger against prop), then pass immediately to provide her with enough time and space to beat her opposite one-on-one. If you see a gap or think you can beat your opposite one-on-one, go for it!
- **If you don't see an opportunity, create one:** If you don't see an opportunity, then take the initiative to create opportunities for yourself or others by changing your running line and using fakes. Once you get past the defensive line, even if only partway, look to move the ball wide to the speedy outside backs who will have a clear run for a try ("find your support").

### **The Outside Backs - the "Exploiters"**

The primary role of the outside backs (i.e. 13, 11, 14, 15) is to exploit attacking opportunities created by the players inside them, and to exploit counter-attack opportunities. The centre (i.e. 13) is an all-around back player who has speed, agility and running skills similar to a back three player, as well as tactical and passing abilities similar to an inside back.

The back three (i.e. wings and fullback) also play a critical role in covering against all kicking options, and acting as a last line of defense against a running attack. A back three player can also act as an extra attacker, either joining the inside or middle of the attack line as a challenging "surprise" for the defense, or joining between the centre and wing as an extra wing.

## Qualities of Successful Teams

*"It is amazing what can be accomplished when nobody cares about who gets the credit"*

- Robert Yates

**Trust Each Other:** show their weaknesses and are open with one another, asking for help when needed and willingly supporting each other

**Talk it Out:** resolve conflicts and debate ideas openly and respectfully

**Commit to the Plan:** team members have clarity on the plan and their role and, after engaging in open discussion and having their voice heard, everyone is willing to say, *"I may not agree with it but I understand it and, for the good of the team, I will support it"*

**Hold People Accountable:** team members hold themselves and each other to high standards, accept feedback from others and take personal responsibility for doing their part to help the team succeed

**Focus on Team Performance:** pursue high standards of team performance, and are never satisfied unless the team as a whole has achieved excellence

*It's all about excellence, teamwork and respect*

## Qualities of Successful Players

1. **Fit** - are fit, fast and strong
2. **Talented** - have excellent technical, tactical and mental skills
3. **Keen** - are driven and have a positive spirit