

COACHING SEVENS BY ROB BRIERLEY.

This article is based on a lecture that the author presented to the Eastern Canada Rugby Union at their coaching conference in Toronto in March 2005. Rob Brierley has coached at Scunthorpe and Driffield RFC and has been responsible for coaching with various age-group representative sides. He was an RFU YDO then RDO 1992 – 2005 and is now at Pocklington School.

GENERAL PRINCIPLES FOR SEVENS – ATTACK.

Gaining possession from **restarts, scrums and lineouts** is crucial as there are limited opportunities and limited time to win the ball.

Observation of the IRB World Sevens came to these conclusions:

There is an average of 4.5 scrums per game – 85% possession is retained.

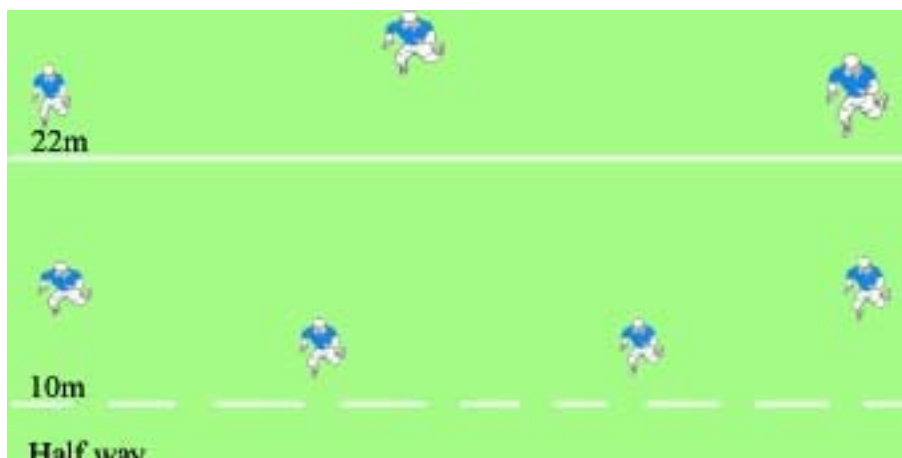
There is an average of 2.1 lineouts per game – 75% possession is retained.

75 % of are restarts are kicked short - 26% possession is retained after the short kicks.

Restarts: receiving.

Four at the front – three at the back:

- The amount of space covered depends on the kicking range of the opposition (age, ability, level). The traditional positioning for a receiving team is four at the front and three at the back in two separate lines.
- It is essential that all players come forward *onto* the ball. In the traditional front line the wider players should position themselves close to touch, five metres deeper than the ten-metre line so that they are covering a short hanging restart. These players should be good jumpers to compete for the ball in the air.
- The middle two players in the line should also be deeper than the ten-metre line and should cover the middle space from a short restart down the middle.
- The players in the line at the back should be positioned to cover the two 15 metre channels on left and right (probably 20m of width from touch) with one in the middle between the posts.



Much thought has gone into restarts and the follow-up chase in recent years, so there is a requirement for receiving teams to be able to adapt their structure to what the opponents do. This will include:

- Decision making over where restart is going; what is the positioning of the opposition chasing players?
- Communication between players on receiving teams.
- Support from central players to wider players.
- Potential to 'lift' for jump and catch.

Chasing:

- Work needs to be done with kickers on the height and accuracy of their kick as the quality short restart is the one most likely to be recovered.
- How should teams chase the ball will vary but there is some common ground. Most teams play one player fifteen metres in from touch, one ten in and one on the touchline. The configuration will depend on the quality of the kick and the roles of your chasers; i.e. does one contest, one go past the catcher and one go short looking for a tap down? Questions of age and ability should be considered here.
- Who contests the catch? Your most agile, quick jumper would be first choice and this player needs to be able to travel 10 – 15 metres at speed whilst being able to jump to compete with similar attributes to a high jumper.

Scrum:

They are very different from scrums in the fifteens game and they can easily become unstable as an attacking platform.

- Hooker might consider binding around the waist of the props while they bind on each other. This means that he is further away from the ball at the strike but more likely to get into play quickly.

- The put-in, strike and re-gathering of the ball should be one continuous movement with no delay.
- A team with a coordinated approach or a physical dominance at the scrum can create slight advantages. A collective drive past the ball by all the forwards can provide cleaner ball and has the advantage of delaying the opposition forwards' reintroduction into the game. Wheeling can move forwards away from the direction of pass. It can also be used to protect the clearance of the ball by the attacking scrum half from his challenging opponent.
- Scrum half needs to be very skilled (and practised) at clearing ball that could be untidy.

Lineouts:

Key areas -

- Athletic jumper(s).
- Movement on the ground to get away from an opponent's challenge or to stay with an opponent when it is his team's throw.
- Must guarantee possession.

In order to win possession

- Using the scrum half can be an advantage as it offers an extra man in the line.
- Using one man to lift can provide extra height and can guarantee possession.
- Using the two players as lifters can provide options for the throw as there will be more height in the lift than an unaided jump or one with a single lifter.

There are strengths and weaknesses in each lineout type:

- A traditional lineout without lifters may mean relative lack of height, pressure on both the timing and the accuracy of the throw and possession can be more easily challenged after a catch than when the jumper had the support of a lifter (or lifters).
- Employing lifters can slow possession, limits attacking options because three players are involved in winning the throw and overthrows generally lose possession because three players are out of the game whilst the jumper is in the air.

Retaining possession – free kicks/penalties/decision making/handling.

Free kicks / penalties:

- Speed of attack depends on the state of the game. It is possible that a team may want to run-down the clock by retaining possession without scoring.
- Kicks for touch can slow the game or gain territory, but possession is contested and possession has effectively been given away.
- Important to retain possession and stay in control of ball in hand.
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- A kick for goal needs a strategy as three points may be an adequate return in some cases, but may be insufficient with only seconds to go before the final whistle.

Decision-making near contact:

- Play the ball prior to contact. The ball carrier must not become isolated from his support so practise pulling away from the defensive line if being isolated looks a possibility. If the tackle is inevitable, the ball carrier must dominate the collision space.
- Play through the contact with offloads.
- Play after contact with a pass from the ground or effective ball presentation for back-up players.
- Move the ball away from contact areas. There is a relatively simple but effective strategy of the 'two pass principle' where the ball is passed through two pairs of hands (probably scrum half and first receiver) before looking for attacking options.

Handling:

- Quality passing *in front* of the receiver will keep the attackers on the front foot.
- There is a need for a variety of passes – very much like basketball players, who are able to handle in many situations.
- Width of attack must be manufactured and maintained to stretch the defence at all times.

Creating space – Space in front/between/behind/around.

Space in front – the space between attack and defence:

- Attackers must be aware of the distance between them and the defenders as this degree of space will condition the next move(s).
- Play close to the opposition to 'fix' defenders.

Space between – recognising space and creating space between individual defenders is essential to attacking play and the skill must be practised. For example:

- Isolated individual defenders, trying to control too large a zone of field, have to be spotted and taken on.
- If defenders are grouped – play around them with width of passes.
- Dog-leg in the defence line – play over the dog-leg to wider players.
- Lazy middle defenders - play wide to open gaps in middle.

Space behind –space behind defensive line:

- Distance to try line – a long kick can be used for the chase and can be very profitable if there is no sweeper.
- Distance between line and sweeper – a chip or grubber kick can be used for the chaser to recover.

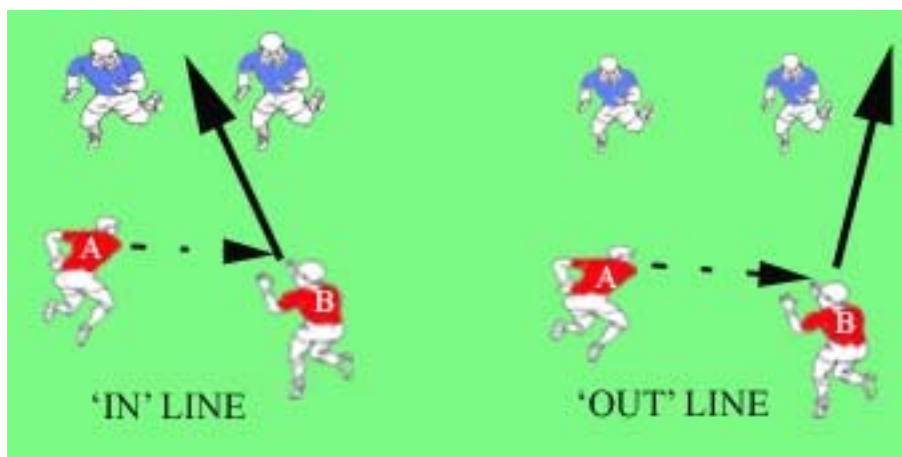
Space around - between the corner of the defence and the touchline:

- Attacking side must recognise which player is at the corner of the defence line. If a slower player is caught there, then that can be exploited. If it is a quicker player, then running lines must interest him to gain an advantage.
- How narrow is the defence? If it gets caught too narrow, play should go wider around them.

Using space – do you penetrate, outflank or kick behind the defenders?

There are various skills that can be employed and the following should be readily available to successful sides.

- Effective footwork.
- Pace.
- Offloads.
- Switch plays.
- Circle ball and loop plays.
- Kicks to space for the chase and recovery.
- Effective angles of running lines with use of ins and outs. (See diagram below.)



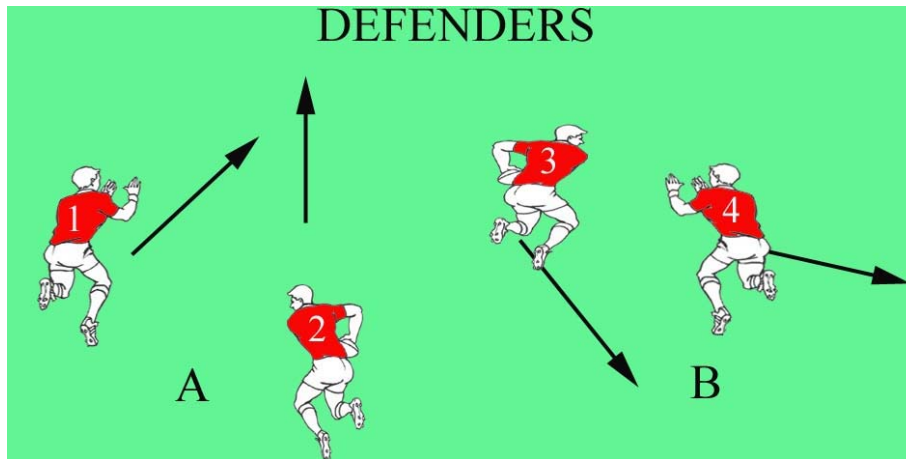
- Head-up play at all times.

Concepts of territory and going forward are key principles in fifteens rugby – how do they apply to sevens?

Support – Width/depth/number/pace

Inside shoulder

- Pass and move then drop into the pocket, which is very different from the usual movement in fifteens.



In A, the fifteen a side game, going forward is very important as focus has to be on crossing the tackle line and, therefore, the gain line. A support player (1) needs to support appropriately with a ball carrier (2), who will take the ball up to the defence. This can happen in sevens too, but as retaining possession is more important than in fifteens, (through limitations on time but an increase in space), playing ‘backwards’ away from the defence line is possible. This is a more traditional way of playing sevens, with teams moving away from the confrontation of the tackle. Support players have to adjust accordingly. In this example B, the ball carrier (4) backs away from the defence while the immediate support (3) drops back to become a passing option.

Width:

- Width of play will stretch the defence.
- Attacking players must hold width once it has been produced.
- This does put a premium on the ability of all players to make longer passes of the required speed and trajectory.

Depth:

- Players must work hard at coming from deep positions to bring pace to attack.
- Passing at varied angles will pull the defence out of the line they want to hold.
- All players, who have got flat when brought close to the defence through an attacking run or contact, have to work hard to get back into a deep support position.

GENERAL PRINCIPLES FOR SEVENS – DEFENCE.

Contesting possession – Scrums/lineouts/free kicks/penalties.

Scrums:

- An important factor on what to do is the *speed* of the opposition strike. This will dictate whether to contest or disrupt.
- Their *strength* in the scrum will largely dictate whether the best defence is to drive against them or wheel.
- The most effective answer might be thoughtful scrummaging, where a combination of tactics can be used, e.g. give on their engagement and follow up with a late drive or pulling action.
- Whatever happens or is tried, the three scrummagers have to get back quickly into play.

Lineouts:

- The quality of the opposition throw will largely dictate whether the best defence is to jump against and/or disrupt.
- The use of the hooker as a scrum half will free a defender from the lineout.
- How many are used to support the jumper? Using only one can free a defender from the lineout.
- The delivery from jumper to scrum half can open up a valuable attacking option where the scrum half runs straight through the line of the lineout. This is usually not an option in fifteens but does appear regularly in sevens.

As with attack, there are strengths and weaknesses to any strategies used. For example, by not using players to support the jump, a defence will usually not contest possession for the ball unless the throw is inaccurate; similarly, if a hooker is used in the scrum half position, there must be a space left at the front of the lineout.

Free kicks / penalties:

- Can and should generally be taken quickly! Defenders should anticipate the decision and react quickly to cut down attacking options.
- The retreat must happen quickly and there is no time for defenders to simply watch play; they have to learn how to scan the attack while they are retreating ten metres.

Where possible, the defence should react to force the ball carrier to run towards potential tacklers, i.e. those positioned ten metres from the penalty mark. This channelling takes practice and instinctive speed of thought. There is not much time following the whistle before a penalty is taken.

Denying space – Pressure / inside to out? / sweep or a bobby?

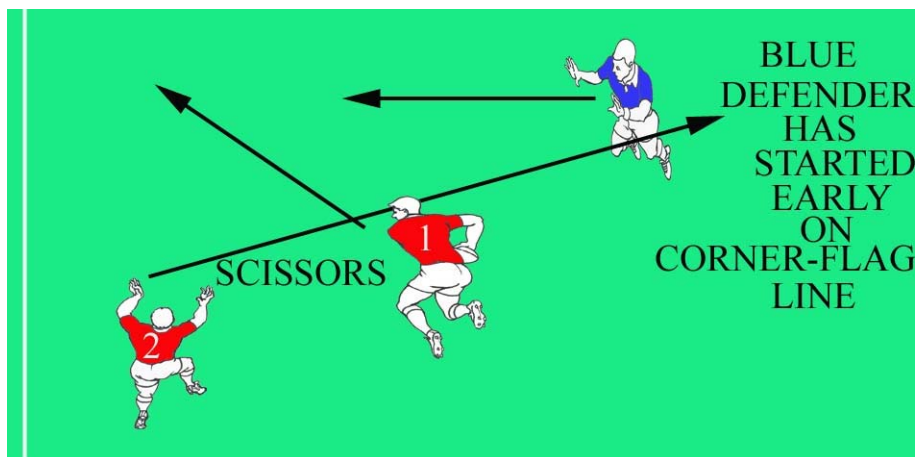
Pressure:

- Six (or fewer) players ought to be in the primary defensive line and communication between players is critical.
- There must be an aggressive and positive press as a team unit with no dog-leg.
- Apply pressure to force the attack into (hopefully the wrong) decisions.

Inside to out?:

- Players defend the inside shoulder of their opposite number and defend in channels.
- Drift on to next channel only when communication comes from the inside, then a support tackler has the defender's original channel covered.
- Ensure movement away from inside support once the call is made so show that the inside player has his next channel covered.
- A useful possible ploy is sending a wider player ahead of the defensive line – this 'out to in' movement can upset the attack when their ball carrier spots a defender ahead of the ball and ready to tackle an attacker should the attack continue.
- Maintain discipline as a team and work together with confident communication.
- Organisation will only come from recognising strengths and weaknesses, e.g. where are their quicker players and how do we defend against them?

The ability of players to move laterally across field at speed while remaining organised is critical. With a wide attack, disorganisation infield can be exploited with changes of direction whilst the outside space is being closed down.

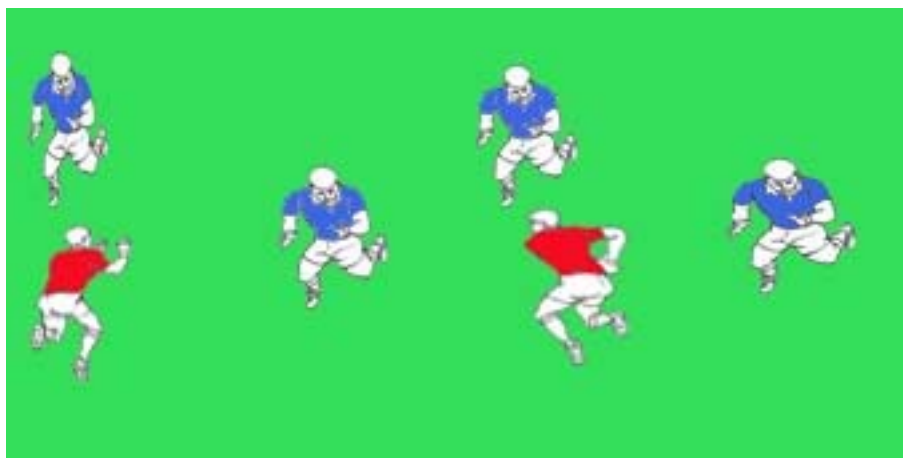


Sweep or a bobby?

- Sweeper – a permanent designated full back

- Bobby – the two end players can take it in turns to police the space behind when the ball at other side of field (pendulum effect).
- A mix of the two might be a sensible option. There is a case for creating depth to defence just as we would try to get depth to the attack.
- How much kicking is there? It generally loses possession and must not be seen as a substitute for attacking ideas. There has to be a positive reason for any kick and it should nearly always present an attacking opportunity.

It is possible to box or surround players in the attack line with a structured defence. There is no offside when the opposition have the ball in open play and this can be an excellent strategy to apply pressure. However, as the bobby will leave five (or fewer players) in the defensive line, it requires team organisation and the players must have practised the play so that they understand the implications of what happens next.



Here, the blue team attempts to cut off the ball carrier by sending players out of the defensive line to isolate him from his support. Players in the defence need to be confident in the tackling ability of their team mates and be sure that there is sufficient speed within the team to cover the gaps created. The players stepping out of line play a high-risk, dangerous game where they are looking for an interception or a potential wrap-up tackle.

Tackling – Types of tackle / floor / offloads:

Tackling is often based upon the momentum of the runner, which is easier in the go-forward game of XV's. In sevens, when players often move away from the defensive line, there is no momentum to be used. Sevens players must almost be able to adapt to put players to ground. Offensive tackles can be used, with most of the momentum being generated by the tackler. The potential danger here is that the tackler will probably come

out of line to make the tackle. As in the attempted interception, timing is critical and can be very effective.

Types of tackle:

- Individual players must concentrate on play immediately in front of them – do not ball watch.
- Wrap (smother) tackles are most preferable as they stop the ball and the attacker's momentum and progress.
- Put the ball carrier on the floor so that he must release the ball. It is immediately playable by either side.
- Work hard to put the ball carrier on his back and/or get on top of him as he hits the ground. The tackler should be back on his feet and back into the game before the tackled player.
- Commit few(er) players to the breakdown.

Offloads:

- Players immediately next to the tackler must close down lateral space and anticipate runners coming into those spaces at the side of a tackled player.

Regaining possession – turnovers:

- At the tackle.
- All players must understand the Laws relating to ruck and maul – and what they can legitimately do when/how.
- Intercepting opponents' passes.
- Applying pressure will lead to turnovers.
- Work hard – fitness is a key element.
- Have a team plan on how many players will be committed to the breakdown, but have a plan B if it is not working.
- The sweeper is hugely important and acts as playmaker at turnovers as he automatically has depth of position to run from to add momentum.

The easiest way to defend in this abbreviated version of rugby is to maintain possession and frustrate the opposition.