

## Developing the tackle – Paul Tyler

As rugby union defences have become more rugby league like in their organisation so coaches have had to come up with new ways to try and unpick these defensive lines in order to score tries.

There are two main ways that teams try and penetrate these defences, the first is to kick over or through the flat lines of defenders, over 70% of rugby league tries come from a kick of some sort and rugby union is starting to follow the trend.

The second way is to offload the ball in contact, ***over 50% of tries in the last 6 Nations tournament and in the 2003 RWC contained at least one offload from a tackle during their build up.*** The offload to a support player at pace is very difficult if not impossible to defend against; the only really effective way is to prevent the offload in the first place.

The first priority for the tackler needs to be to target the ball and prevent the ball carrier being able to offload. This means the tackle target is higher than traditional (i.e. chest rather than waist), the rugby league tackle has become very obviously chest-to-chest and the first tackler has the sole objective of preventing the ball carrier offloading. This might suggest that the tackler needs to have huge upper body strength to achieve a successful tackle. However this is not the case as the success of the tackle lies in the timing and initial positioning and this can only be achieved through repetitive live practice, as it is very individual for every player.

In general the mentality needs to be that ***it doesn't matter if we don't knock the ball carrier down as long as he doesn't get the pass away.*** Once the first tackler has prevented the pass being made it is important that they are supported by a second (and if necessary a third) defender who help complete the tackle. The presence of a second defender in the tackle also gives us a better chance of winning a turnover either by winning the ball on the ground or holding up the ball carrier and winning the ball from a static maul.

The actions of the tackler in the Tackle zone\* decide whether the tackle is won or lost, how many times have you seen a winger chase a kick for 60 metres only to miss the tackle on the fullback because they are approaching too fast?

As the tackler approaches the ball carrier they need to slow down and take small fast steps (paddle), staying on the balls of the feet this allows them to react to any movement left or right the ball carrier makes and still make the hit with the shoulder. They should also make an effort to stay as upright as possible (with their head up) until the last possible moment; the focus should be on the target (i.e. the ball).

At the last moment before contact the tackler will plant one foot, drop the hips slightly and drive up into the target with the shoulder. It is essential that the ***initial hit is made with the shoulder*** and not with the arms (see Drill 1) and that the head is clamped in tight to the attackers body.

The plant foot is a matter of preference for the individual, some will plant the right foot in front of the target for a right shoulder hit and others will plant the left foot just left of the target for a right shoulder hit. I prefer players to plant the left foot just left of the target for a right shoulder hit, this means as they follow through the right leg is going directly through the target and not off to one side. However it is best to ***let each individual do which ever is most comfortable for them in each situation.***

Once contact has been made with the shoulder the tackler should look to clamp the ball, this will usually be with the 'hit arm' (i.e. right shoulder hit – right arm clamps ball) leaving the free arm to try and grab one of the ball carriers legs and pick it up. This has the effect of destabilising the ball carrier and allowing the tackler to control the tackle (see Drill 2).

Once we have control of the tackle we can decide how we want to finish it, in some situations we will want to drive the ball carrier straight to deck (i.e. if we are just off our try line). Whereas in other situations we can hold the ball carrier up until the second tackler arrives, this gives us the options of driving the ball carrier back, holding him up (to win the ball from a static maul), ripping the ball off the ball carrier or taking the ball carrier to deck and winning the turnover on the deck.

The supporting player (second tackler) must be confident that the first tackler has clamped the ball before they get involved. If the ball is still free when the second tackler joins there will be a big hole created in the defence for the offload.

***Don't forget the tackle is not complete until the tacklers are back on their feet and hopefully ball is turned over.***

#### **Tackler checklist:**

- ***Stay upright for as long as possible***
- ***Keep head up, focus on target (ball)***
- ***Slow down and take small steps before contact (paddle)***
- ***Plant foot, drop hips and hit up into target with shoulder***
- ***Clamp ball with hit arm***
- ***Look for leg with free arm and lift***
- ***Follow through***
- ***Recover from tackle as quick as possible to try and win ball***

#### **Supporter checklist:**

- ***Check ball is clamped so offload can't be made***
- ***Step in and make hit on ball carrier***
- ***Recover from tackle as quick as possible to try and win ball***

\* Tackle zone – this is the space (about 2m) between the ball carrier and the tackler as the tackler approaches

## **Drill 1:**

An attacking player either with a contact suit on or a ruck shield lines up opposite a tackler with a gap between them of about 2 - 3 metres. The tackler has their arms behind their back.

As the attacker moves forward the tackler comes to meet them and makes the hit on the attackers chest with the shoulder. The drill is all about technique and the tackler should not be looking to make a big hit on the attacking player at the same time the attacking player should not provide too much resistance. Player safety should always be paramount and players should not be subjected to the drill progressions until they have comfortably mastered the basics.

### **Checks for tackler:**

- ***Stay upright for as long as possible***
- ***Keep head up, focus on target (ball)***
- ***Slow down and take small steps before contact (paddle)***
- ***Plant foot, drop hips and hit up into target with shoulder***
- ***Keep the head tight in to the attackers body***
- ***Follow through***

With the defender having their arms behind their back they are ***forced to make the hit with the shoulder***, you can easily check to see if the tackler is in a good position at the point of contact.

Once the tackler is comfortable with the technique you can increase the distance between the tackler and attacker (up to 10 metres) so the tackler has to run a distance before slowing down and paddling to get in position for the hit.

***Remind the tackler that the last 2 metres before contact are the most important.***

Return to the original scenario where the tackler and attacker are about 2 - 3 metres apart, this time as the attacker approaches have them put in a small side step or feint a side step. This will test whether the tackler is balanced and in a position to move with the attacker to still make the hit with the shoulder. As the tackler increases in confidence and competence you can increase the distance and have the attacking player make more definite sideways movements (i.e. running a swerve line).

### **Common faults:**

- ***Head going down too early***
- ***Not looking at target***
- ***Approaching tackle too fast***
- ***Not on balls of feet in tackle zone***

## **Drill 2:**

An attacking player wearing a contact suit and carrying a ball (as they would in a game) lines up opposite the tackler about 2 – 3 metres away. As the ball carrier moves forward the tackler comes to meet them and makes the tackle (see check list below), at this stage the tackler should be looking to destabilise the ball carrier and control the tackle rather than try and upend the ball carrier and put them on the deck. At this stage the attacking player should not try and provide too much resistance as the tackler is still learning the technique and shouldn't be trying to make big hits yet.

### **Checks for tackler:**

- ***Stay upright for as long as possible***
- ***Keep head up, focus on target (ball)***
- ***Slow down and take small steps before contact (paddle)***
- ***Plant foot, drop hips and hit up into target with shoulder***
- ***Clamp ball with hit arm***
- ***Look for leg with free arm and lift***
- ***Follow through***
- ***Control tackle***

If the tackle is good and the tackler is in a good strong position they should be able to hold up the ball carrier and drive them back without losing control of the tackle or knocking the ball carrier over.

The same progressions can be made as in drill 1 where the distance is increased and then sideways movement by the attacking player is introduced.

When the player is confident and competent in all aspects of the tackle technique the amount of contact can be increased with the attacking player putting more effort into trying to beat the defender.

The final progression is to a live 1 v 1 drill where the attacking player has a line on which to try and score and the defending player must stop them. When the defence reaches a point where only 1 or 2 tries are being scored from every 10 attempts introduce a supporting runner for the ball carrier to try and offload to. This makes it a game-like situation for ball carrier, tackler and support player.

You can also add a second tackler into the drill to examine the role they play in finishing the tackle and by varying the size of the area you work in you can vary the type of tackle made and the approach to the tackle zone.

**Always remember the safety of your players is paramount, don't push a player onto the next progression until they are ready physically and technically.**