

# RUGBY DEFENCE



**12 Strategies for  
Tackling, Contact and Defence**

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# Make Your Players Better Tacklers

*Coaching tackling is one of the coach's most difficult tasks. "It's all in the mind" many will say, but most of us want more concrete advice. In this article we concentrate on getting your players in the right frame of mind to tackle.*

## Dispelling the Tackling Myth

"All players should be able to tackle hard". This is not the true and not necessarily appropriate for the game. Tackling has an important role to play, but you cannot win games by just tackling. You also need to have players who may not be as defensively "hard" as others. Johnny Wilkinson aside, most international sides will have a less defensively strong fly half.

Tackling is also not just about bringing a player to ground, in fact it is a multifaceted action which requires different techniques in different situations with different players. Hence tackling practice needs as much variety as passing.

Physical strength is not the key to tackling. Good tackling requires a balance of mental strength, technique and physical ability. There will be naturally better tacklers, but, like most things in life, better tackling can be learnt – it takes patience and good understanding of how to create the right circumstances for all the players.

## The Right Atmosphere

Creating the right atmosphere in training helps make tackling practice not seem like a chore. Drills and practices need to be set up in such a way that weaker players are not in a situation where they may be embarrassed. It may seem perverse not to put them under pressure. How are they supposed to make the big tackle in the game if they are not exposed to similar circumstances in a practice?

However, draw on an analogy of goal kickers going through a poor run of form. We all know how easy it is to knock a player who is not kicking well. Poor confidence will tighten their minds and bodies, further reducing the likelihood of achieving the kick. The same is true for a tackler. Build their confidence, don't destroy it.

Phil Larder, the former England defence coach, talks about the positive attitude defenders must have. Terms such as "fear" and "injury" do not help develop the right frame of mind. Health and safety are important, but it is better to say "a good head position will ensure you land on top of the player", rather than "if you put your head here, you might get knocked out".

## 240 Tackles

In some games a shoulder shattering 240 or more tackles can take place. Therefore it is worth you and your players knowing the laws of tackling. And to turn the tackle into an opportunity to win the ball, players need to know exactly what they are or are not allowed to do.

## What Is a Tackle?

IRB Law 15: A tackle occurs when the ball-carrier is held by one or more opponents and is brought to ground.

## Responsibilities of the Tackled Player

The ball has to be presented or offloaded immediately. So encourage your players to present the ball as cleanly as possible. Be careful as the length of time allowed to do so is based on the referee's judgement.

If an attacking player is tackled close to the tryline they can only touch the ball down in one movement for a try to be allowed.

## Responsibilities of the Tackling Player

Make the tackle. Release the player. Get out of the way. Any player can play the ball as long as they are on their feet and have arrived at the tackle area with their backside facing their rugby posts (i.e. not from the side). Importantly the tackler, once on their feet, can approach from any side.

## Tackle Area Offences

- Not releasing the ball in time.
- Not moving away quickly enough.
- Not releasing the tackled player.
- A double movement in attempting to score a try.
- "Diving in over the top" (the player is off the feet).

# Make Your Players Better Tacklers (cont.)

## Shoulders Are the Only Weapon

In terms of the power involved in making a tackle, the “shoulder is the only weapon” is an effective mental reminder the tackler. Arms outstretched to “hit” with the shoulder produces a far more aggressive contact than the arm tackles many younger players tend to perform.

Of course the shoulder only tackle must be discouraged. It is illegal and dangerous to player and victim alike.

## Tennis Balls

Get your players to practise tackling with tennis balls (or juggling sacks or rolled up socks) in their hands. This encourages them to wrap their arms around their victim, rather than relying on a weak grip with the hands.

## Shorts

An old favourite from junior schools rugby, but a good way for a player to approach a tackle is to focus on the shorts of their opponent. Firstly, this aligns the player’s vision at the right height. Secondly, and since the movement of the attacking player will be from the hips, it reduces the likelihood of being fooled by a dummy pass.

## Eyes Open in Contact

Jim Love is the head coach with Arix Viadana in Italy, and is a former coach of the Maori All Black and Tonga. He says that the most important tip he gives his players is to keep their eyes open in contact.

### Betsen’s Eyes

Serge Betsen is one of the world’s most aggressive and effective tacklers – he rarely misses his man. The clear picture of this tackling machine’s craggy face shows one of his key attributes: he keeps his eyes open in contact.

Too many players close their eyes before they make a tackle or hit a ruck. This means they can lose sight of the target at a time when the target is probably still moving.

The position of the head in contact is as much a technical issue as a safety issue. We coach players to play with their heads up in contact. In the tackle especially it is important that the head goes in the right place, “cheek to cheek”.

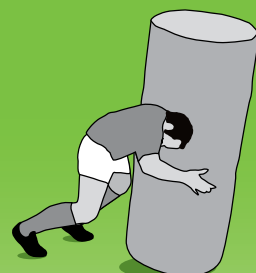
The problems come with players wanting to tackle with their

## Tackle Bags

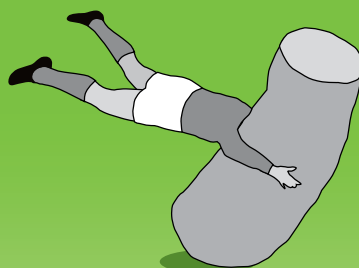
Tackle bags make soft, generally immovable targets and so can encourage poor tackling technique. Your players need to remember the following key points when using tackle bags in practices. Tacklers should:

- Keep the feet on the ground when tackling the bag.
- Keep the head up, eyes open and chin off the chest.
- Make sure the hips are not higher than the shoulders on impact.

### How to tackle a bag



**X** Head down



**X** Feet off ground,  
hips above shoulders



**✓** Head up,  
feet on ground

# Make Your Players Better Tacklers (cont.)

favoured shoulder. They then get their head in front of the ball carrier when coming in from the wrong side. Proper sighted targets, with the eyes open before contact, make this safer, as well as more efficient.

## Bin the Bags

A number of coaches tell us to bin the tackle bags as quickly as possible if you want a quick improvement in your side's tackling. Players too easily become accustomed to making the types of tackles they would never dare to attempt in a game, flying in at the wrong angles amongst other misdemeanours. Yes, use them for a short time, but not week in, week out.

## Rugby Coach Tackle Matrix

The tackle matrix puts players into the category that most suits them. The aim is to move as many players UP and RIGHT. If they are already good "technical" tacklers then you can develop their post tackle technique further.

Recognising where players are in the table will enable you to differentiate your training more effectively. The "terrifying" tacklers could usefully spend more time on their technique, the "tactical" tacklers on their confidence, and the "timids" on remedial work. The key here is to split the groups to enhance their individual needs, rather than lump all the players into together. 🍀

## Training Tips for Poor Tacklers

Give your remedial tacklers (e.g. the "timid" tacklers in the matrix) confidence by setting up the following drills.

- Have the ball carrier running backwards. The tackler has to chase and put them on the floor. Develop this by making the ball carrier walk backwards and then stand still. Then the practice can be developed with the ball carrier moving forward.
- In the same drill move from tackle shield standing, to tackle shield moving, to ball carrier standing, to ball carrier moving.
- Put a piece of tape on the shoulder of the tackler. This is what they need to focus on hitting the target. Then put a piece of tape on the shorts or target area of the ball carrier. This is the target.

It might be difficult to do this in wet weather when the tape might fall off, but the pressure of putting the tape onto the hitting point works in the mind of the tackler.

- Make sure players tackle with both shoulders during a practice session – a common sense point but one often missed.

## Rugby Coach Tackle Matrix

	Bad Technique	Good Technique
"Hard" player	<p><b>Terrifying:</b> Flies into tackles without fear, but with little understanding of what needs to be done to achieve a good tackle.</p> <p>The player can be effective, but also extremely dangerous and likely to be involved in injuries (theirs and others), even in training.</p> <p>They can miss tackles because of poor technique, but not from lack of effort.</p>	<p><b>Terrific:</b> The best sort of tackler. Uses the right technique to the maximum effect. Imposes themselves physically in the tackle and looks to make tackles happen. They rarely miss a tackle.</p>
"Soft" player	<p><b>Timid:</b> Not only avoids tackles, but when they do have to make a tackle, the player has little or no concept of what to do.</p> <p>They are a danger to themselves and are not reliable in a game situation.</p>	<p><b>Tactical:</b> This player does not have a bad technique but is not keen on making tackles. They will only make tackles as a last resort.</p> <p>They can, however, often be fired up in a big game.</p>

# Tackle Legs for Turnovers

**Paul Tyler looks at tackling the legs as one of the simplest ways of realizing turnovers. “You can’t play rugby without the ball.” After all, the main priority of your team’s defence should be to win back the ball from the attacking team before they score.**

A player on the floor has no “rights” to the ball. Consequently the most effective way to turnover the ball is to get the ball carrier onto the ground as quickly as possible and then compete for the ball once it is released. Tackling the legs is an ideal way to do this.

## Key Factors of Tackling the Legs

- 1 It is easier to tackle around the legs from the side** Players should line up so that the ball carrier is not coming straight at them. By letting the player get level and driving them sideways increases the chances of bringing them down, though there will be some ground lost. In practices, technique should be ingrained through slow motion drills before building up to full pace.
- 2 Keep the head up and eyes on the target (the thighs)** Losing sight of the target is one of the main reasons for missed tackles. Eyes on target and open as long as possible will keep the head in position and focus correct. For weaker or worried tacklers this focus can reduce the chances of other thoughts getting in the way.
- 3 Stay upright for as long as possible** Upright in this case means in a body position that can adjust to changes in the ball carrier’s movements. As soon as the feet leave the ground or the player stoops too much, then balance is reduced and a strong tackling stance lost.

- 4 Take short fast steps as you approach the tackle** Ideally a good tackler will have both feet shoulder width apart and no more than 1/2 metre from the ball carrier. Using fast feet exercise followed by a tackle can improve this technique.
- 5 Get the head behind the backside and arms around the thighs** With the eyes open, the player aims to place head on the backside of the ball carrier. In essence this means the shoulder drives into the thigh. As soon as this happens, the arms wrap round the legs and form a “ring of steel”. How often do we hear this expression outside the first few tackle lessons of a youth player’s career?
- 6 Stay on your feet and drive the legs** A common mistake with “leg” tackles is to assume that the player making the tackle wants to fall to the ground quickly. The longer the tackler can stay on their feet, the more likely they are going to be able to drive the opponent to the ground.
- 7 GET BACK INTO THE GAME QUICKLY!** The tackle is not over until the tackler is back in the game. As the tackler slides down the ball carrier (remember the “ring of steel”), he should be getting ready to get back onto his feet quickly. 🍀

## Exercise 1

A good practice is to have one tackler in a small box with three other players, one with a ball. The ball is passed around until the coach shouts “TACKLE”. The tackler then has to tackle the ball carrier as quickly as possible. The tackler will learn how to keep a good position to tackle yet still be flexible to move around.

## Exercise 2

Using the previous exercise, with three attacking players, and a tackler in a small square, a tackler can be challenged to make as many tackles as possible in a 30 second period of time. A tackle is completed once the ball carrier is on the floor and the tackler has picked up the ball.



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# The Slice Tackle for Drift Defences

**Nick Tatalias and Philip Copeman describe how an aggressive tackle borrowed from American Football can win you vital metres, or better still, the ball.**

## Using the “Slice Tackle”

When covering across in a drift defence, there is a good chance that any tackle made will lead to the ball carrier using his momentum to go beyond the tackle and possibly offload the ball to one of his team mates.

If we employ the techniques of gridiron players, then we have a chance of driving the player backwards in the tackle.

## The Head in the “Slice” Tackle

Normally the tackler’s head goes behind the ball carrier, otherwise the ball carrier would land on top of the tackler’s head. In this case, however, the tackler’s head goes in front because the ball carrier is going to be driven backwards.

This has two crucial consequences. First, there are fewer miss hits because the head does not need to be turned and thus lose

focus on the target. Second, the spine is kept in line which reduces the chance of injury.

## The Shoulder is Still the Number One Contact Point

The tackler’s shoulder must be the first point of contact, and then must drive into the ball carrier. Ideally, the shoulder would impact on the ball carrier’s spare rib, and under their elbow.

“The imagery I like to use is slicing the player in two and leaving the legs standing on the beach”, says Nick.

## Practising

- 1 Individual tackle technique needs constant one-to-one supervision. This should be done slowly at first to ensure the correct technique.
- 2 The emphasis should be on the knees bending, the head up and the target area. Build up the pace as your players become more confident.
- 3 Ideally, start on tackle bags with a ball velcroed to the side away from the tackler, or with the bag holder holding a ball on the front of the bag. The more you can get the bags to be “active”, the more the players can get a sense of good foot positions and better timing. 🍀

### Slice tackle

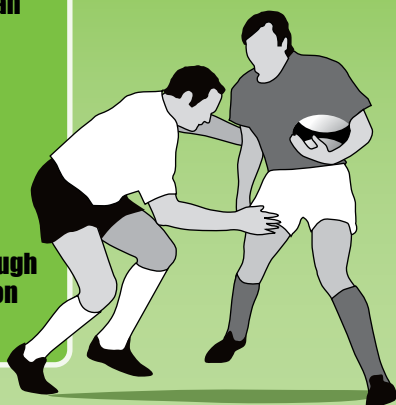
**Bend at knees**

**No forward lean at waist**

**Straight back**

**Head up, eyes open**

**Hit with left shoulder through the belly button of ball carrier**



## Key Points

- 1 The feet must remain on the ground.
- 2 The angle of attack in the tackle is upwards.
- 3 Keep the eyes open and the head up.
- 4 The spare arm (of the non contacting shoulder) should be ready to wrap around or dislodge the ball.

*Nick Tatalias and Philip Copeman are both rugby writers and rugby coaches in South Africa. They are also former US American Football players.*

# Powering Up into Contact

**Nick Tatalias and Philip Copeman say that we should look at the American Football technique of tackling and conditioning to improve rugby defences. Here's what they suggest.**

## Core Rugby Fitness for Contact

Contact in rugby means players should not just concentrate on athletic ability and strength but also on absorbing the impact on collision. Using methods from American Football we can gain much from the science of collision and the body.

## Summary of Good Contact Conditioning

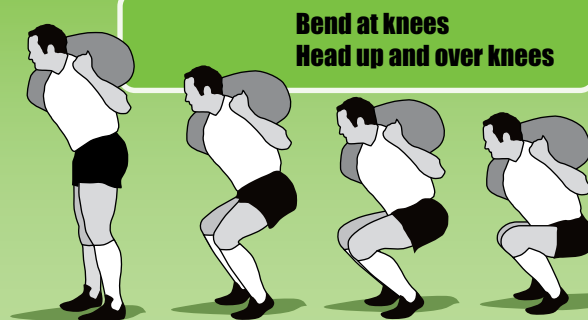
- 1 Condition the mind as well as the body for contact.
- 2 Poor biomechanics increase the chances of injury in the contact situation, so focus on good technique first.
- 3 Conditioning needs to focus on the neck and core.
- 4 "Shoot the arrow" into contact. That is, use the "explosive" legs to provide the "bow" and then a strong core as the "string" to "shoot" the body (the "arrow") through the tackle area.
- 5 Players need to focus on bending at the hip and not the back.
- 6 Coaches need to work on coaching contact very early in pre-season so the players are conditioned better for the start of the season.
- 7 Players can reduce the risk of injury in the tackle by having momentum into the tackle (at least the same speed as the ball carrier).
- 8 Static bags do not provide the right environment for contact sessions.
- 9 Lift the head in the tackle for safer and better tackling (and to keep the back straight) thus increasing the confidence of the player to keep this form in the next tackle. The eyes can also be kept on the ball carrier or target more easily, and the arms are better placed to make contact with the ball carrier.
- 10 Use barbells and sport specific equipment (such as scrum machines) to develop strength, strength endurance, and power and explosiveness. Mix these activities with sport specific training in the contact area to maximise power and technique.

## An Alternative Way to Core Strength

You can use overhead squats with sandbags or normal squats with team mates or sandbags. Remember, players need to keep the back straight and bend at the hips and knees.

The deeper that the player can squat the better the strength that will be developed ("ass to grass"), providing the player doesn't have knee pathology. It is good to be lifting unusual shapes and the contours of the sandbags or team mates will increase the force on the back and neck and thus help build the muscles in these areas. 🌱

### Squats with sandbag



### Homemade Sandbag Making

You can construct your own sandbags. Apart from sand, you need about 10 double strength plastic bags and then large canvas bag (you can get these from most hardware stores). Finally, some very strong industrial tape and some twine.

Put about 10kg of sand into five of the bags and tie the bags up with the twine – make sure there is no air in the bags. Place another bag around this bag for extra safety. Then put the bags into the canvas bag and seal this with twine. You now have a 50 kg sandbag.

You can adjust the canvas bag weight by changing the number of "sand bags" inside.

*Nick Tatalias and Philip Copeman are both rugby writers and rugby coaches in South Africa. They are also former US American Football players.*

# Winning the Contact Contest

*The New Zealand Maoris are well renowned for their aggressive defence. Players like Jerry Collins make opposition sides fear having the ball and so make mistakes. However, there is more to a defensive strategy than making big hits, says Jim Love.*

## Tackling in Practice

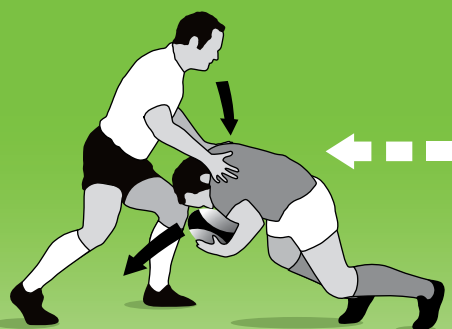
We tend to mostly work on passive and aggressive tackling.

### Passive tackles

The tackle is made with the weight of the oncoming player being used to bring them to the ground. Head on tackles, where the ball carrier is coming towards the defender are passive tackles. Our aim is to connect with the shoulder, wrap your arms around, then flick your body around so you end up on top. The player can now go for the ball.

From tackles and rucks, some attacking players will “pick and go”, meaning they will “pick up” the ball from the ground and then drive forward. If they are very low to the ground, say below thigh height, then I get the defender to push down on the area between their shoulder blades, so they fall down. The defender can then compete for the ball.

### Dealing with a low driving player



### Aggressive tackles

The defender drives the ball carrier in the direction they want. Side on tackles, where the ball carrier is past the defender are aggressive tackles. Our aim here is to put the attacker in a situation where you have all the advantage. Make contact with the shoulder first, then arms wrap. The final three or four steps are explosive so that your driving foot is close to the attacker as possible.

## Defence at the Rucks – Numbers

Some top coaches will say, “only commit two players to any ruck situation as a defensive side”. I would say the number should be more like three or four. You need to balance trying to disrupt good possession by contesting the ruck and leaving enough players spread across the field. Three to four players is more than enough, because the fifth player arriving at a ruck is unlikely to make much difference, due to the amount of bodies around the ball.

## Defence at the Ruck – Should We Contest?

Do you contest every ruck, or do you want the opposition to win the ruck and hope they make a mistake? It seems a no-brainer – contest every ball at the ruck.

So you have to make the opposition work hard for their possession, but if they are putting more than three into a ruck situation, then I tend to get my players to lay off the contest and concentrate on the next phase. Three or less opposition players into win their own ruck ball and it is well worth contesting.

But don't contest aggressively if:

- 1 Your side is giving away penalties at the rucks.
- 2 You are leaking valuable ground when the opposition win the ruck because of the resources you have committed to win the ruck, meaning you have gaps elsewhere. 🟢

## The Counter Rucker

Here the ball has effectively been won by the opposition, and it is near the back of the ruck. Our player, known as the counter rucker, tries to push an attacking player who is standing over the ball, out of the way. I don't like this because it's taking him out of the defence line. However, if we have time to organise our defence, then it might be worth it for nuisance value.

*Jim Love is head coach of Italian professional side Aris Viadana and CEO of the New Zealand Sports Academy ([www.nzsportsacademy.co.nz](http://www.nzsportsacademy.co.nz)). He is a former coach of the Maori All Blacks and Tonga.*

# Winning the Contact Contest (cont.)

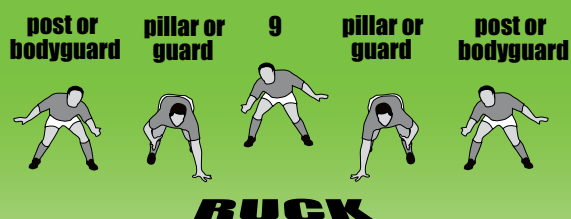
## Pillars, Posts and Guards

Defending close to the ruck requires organisation, just like from a lineout or scrum. Since it may be different players in position at each ruck, the following simple system can be used.

One player stands behind the ruck, to organise and protect from a drive through the ruck. Two players then stand either side of the ruck. The closest man to the ruck is the "pillar" or "guard". They stand just by the back foot and ensure no player attacks by the side of the ruck.

The second man out is the "post" or "bodyguard". They stand no more than two arms' lengths away from pillar / guard, protecting the outside, but being able to double up if an attack comes in close into the ruck.

### Close defence terminology at the ruck



## Three Point Stance

Players close to breakdown situations, like rucks, can adopt a "three point stance" if they have time. This means the player makes three contact points with the ground: both feet and one hand. From this stance they are in a good position to drive forward to tackle players close to the ruck. It is based on American football's linemen.

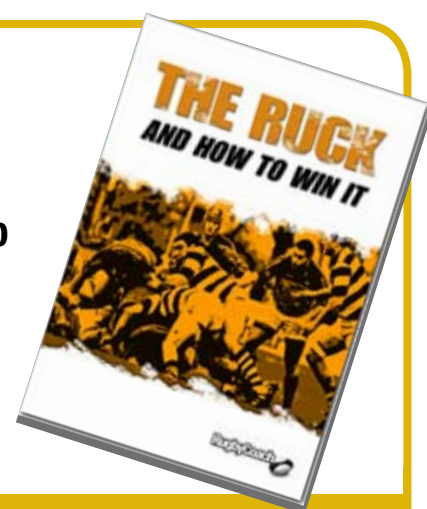
### Three point stance



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# Get Your Defence Up Quicker

*An extra split second of pressure on your opponent's key decision makers can be the difference between success and failure. Give your team an extra defensive boost by utilising the techniques used by sprinters to gain the maximum acceleration from a standing start, says Dan Cottrell.*

## Body Positions

### Feet

Research says that the most effective sprint start is where the front foot is in line with the back knee, for example the right foot is in line with the left knee. This optimises the elastic nature of the leg muscles meaning the best boost off the mark. It is also the easiest position for a player to correctly align in the heat of a game.

Practise getting the feet into the right place by having the players go down on one knee and putting the foot on the other leg in line with the knee. Rise into a crouch position, sprint and then reset. The more this can be repeated, the more likely a good habit will be formed.

### Arms

The speed of the arms in a sprint has a strong influence on the speed of the legs. The arms need to work in opposite directions to the movement of the legs. Promoting the same leg and arm forward in the sprint start position is a trap that non-sprinters fall into. There are a couple of ways to counter this.

Start with the right hand on the floor in line with the left foot, if the left foot is the furthest forward, or vice versa. Then have the left hand behind the back. Once "out of the blocks", the arms need to be pumping as fast as they can.

### Balance

The centre of gravity of the body must be forward. The shoulders should be beyond the knees, and the players set on the balls of their feet, with their toes ready to spring forward. A hand on the ground can help maintain balance.

Drills should be based on real situations. For example, have a scrum half pass to a player to replicate the moment of release for the sprint. Practices should focus on reaction times, while maintaining balance. For example, the player must not move before the ball comes out from the back of the ruck or maul.

Be tough on offside and reaction times. This can turn the drill into a competition with positive and negative points for good speed v. going offside.

### Head

Sprinters focus ahead, initially looking only at the first few feet on the ground in front of them. This is impractical. However, the line of sight can still be restricted to allow the maximum

sprint. The sprinting defender does not need to see the bigger picture, only the player they are to chase down. Defensive guards and the outside defenders can cover the other aspects. So the head should be focused ahead, probably at hip height, with the peripheral vision looking to see when the ball is to be released. The most astute player will be able to tell when the ball is released from the movement of their target.

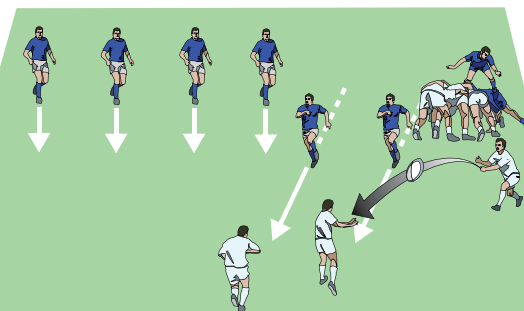
## Rush Defence

The rush defence works well if the other elements of the defensive system can cover. **Rugby Coach** suggests that it should generally only be used outside your own 22 metre area. Of course, it is also very useful if you are trying to prevent a drop goal.

The rush defence has a further advantage. The defending player is likely to be set in the correct position to make a tackle: a good base and lower body angle aimed at driving up into opponents. So sprint-start training has the effect of enhancing tackling skills.

All players should practice the sprint-start, but in particular the forwards because they are most likely to use it. A sprint for most forwards is likely to be over 10 metres or so. A good starting position will be vital to give them that extra advantage. 🍀

### Rush defence



*A rush defence can work well when two defenders sprint up to put pressure on the first (and/or second) attacker. The other defenders come up slower, to maintain a defensive line. The defending scrum half (#9), or another player, covers the space inside the first defender.*

ground covered ▬▬▬ direction of run →

# Defensive Systems

**Paul Tyler looks at the two approaches on which you can base your defence, and at the different circumstances in which you might adopt these two strategies.**

## Reactive Defence

In this instance, the team defends without competing for the ball and waits for the opposition to make mistakes. This can be effective:

- In wet weather when handling is difficult.
- If the opposition's handling skills are poor.
- When you don't want to give away penalties in your own half (for example, you're defending a lead).

### Key factors for success

- **Tackle the ball carrier to the ground quickly** You need to prevent the attacking side getting over the gain line. By tackling the ball carrier to ground immediately you stop their forward momentum.
- **Don't compete for the ball on the ground** Don't risk conceding penalties by competing for the ball. Instead the tackler should get back to their feet and in position for the next tackle quickly.
- **Don't commit too many players to the breakdown** Although you are, in effect, letting the opposition have the ball, by not committing too many players to the breakdown (at rucks and mauls) you will make sure you always have a strong defensive line. Usually you will have more defenders than attackers.
- **Defend six inches behind the back foot** Don't give away unnecessary penalties for being offside. The players either side of the breakdown must set the depth for the defensive line.
- **Get set early and go forward to make the tackle** Players must get into position as quickly as possible and be ready to move forward into the next tackle. The objective is to make tackles as close to the tackle line as you can.

### Reactive game practice

Set up eight defenders v five attackers in a 20 metre square. Let the defenders concentrate on preventing the attackers' progress, without giving away penalties or competing for the ball on the ground. Their success comes from the attackers' mistakes.

## Proactive Defence

With this approach, whenever the opportunity presents itself defenders must compete for the ball on the ground or in the air. This is more risky in terms of conceding penalties and takes more awareness by the players.

If the opposition is good at keeping the ball, a proactive defence is often the only way to gain possession.

The most important factor in a proactive defence is knowing where and when to compete for the ball, to give you the best chance of "stealing" it. Getting this wrong will either give away penalties, or leave your defence weak in other areas.

### Key factors for success

- **Identify opportunities to turn over the ball** In general this is whenever the ball carrier is isolated. Look for teams who play a wide game, with slow back rows or who don't support each other effectively, and ball carriers that go to ground very quickly, make breaks which aren't supported, or run upright into contact.
- **Tackle to maximise turnover chances** This can mean tackling low to put the ball carrier straight to ground, tackling an upright runner high so they can't release the ball, or simply tackling the ball carrier into touch to win the lineout.
- **Commit players to breakdowns if the turnover is on** Once you have identified a turnover opportunity, you must commit more defenders to the tackle area than the attacking side. Either to drive them off the ball on the ground, or if the ball is held up to drive them into touch or stop their momentum.
- **Be alert to your own attacking opportunities** As soon as you have the ball you must be able to counter attack. This requires players who are willing to get aligned in the deep, and quickly, to be effective going forward. 🏉

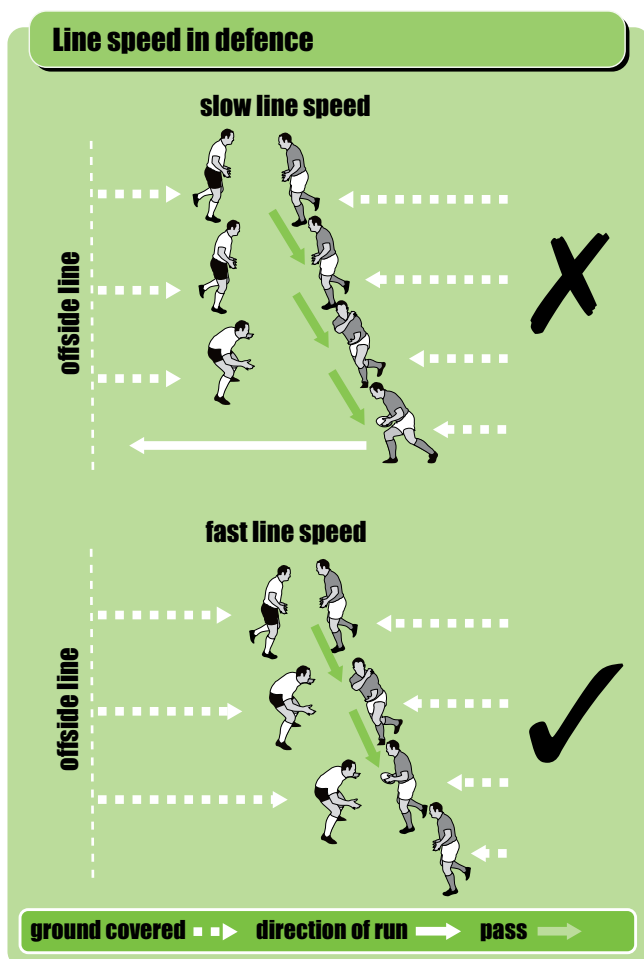
*Paul Tyler is a level 3 qualified coach, a rugby development officer for the SRU and a qualified referee. He played representative rugby in both codes until a serious neck injury ended his playing career at the age of 22.*

# Squeeze Their Attacking Options

**Getting your players up quicker is the key to a better defence, says 2005 Grand Slam winning coach Mike Ruddock. He gives us a top class insight into how to improve your team's defensive systems.**

The defensive line is set across the field from set pieces and more often, rucks and mauls. There may be up to ten players in the line facing the opposition in attack.

I want to concentrate on making this line as effective as possible to pressurise the opposition into making mistakes and giving up the ball.



## Line Speed Focus

One of the key factors for a strong defence is the ability to quickly close down the space between the defender and the ball carrier. Do this as a defensive line and the attacking team's options reduce very quickly.

To increase the line speed of your defence you need to be FAST:

- **“F” is for “Fitness”** Conditioning and defence go hand in hand, because tired players will reduce the effectiveness of the defensive line. Use drills that test not only the defensive system, but also work the players hard.
- **“A” is for “Accelerate”** Getting to the attack as quickly as possible requires acceleration – get the feet hitting the ground fast and the arms pumping once out of the blocks.
- **“S” is for “Speedy off the mark”** Get out of the starting position fast, so improve the speed off the mark – be in a balanced, forward leaning stance, ready to spring towards the attacking line.
- **“T” is for “Time your runs”** Improve your team's reaction time – players need to get moving towards the attacking line as soon as the ball is released. Anticipation and triggers will give your defensive line this edge.

## How to Improve Your Defensive Line Calls, triggers

Different sides use different calls to start the defensive line going forward. I like to get my players to move on the “trigger” of the starting gun, not waiting for the “bang”. So if the call to move is “HIT”, then the players are out of the blocks on the letter “H”.

## Movement patterns

The defensive line goes forward first. Cut down the first few metres by going straight forward, not at an angle. This means the defenders run less distance to get to the attacking line. What happens after these first few metres depends on your defensive strategy.

## Line discipline

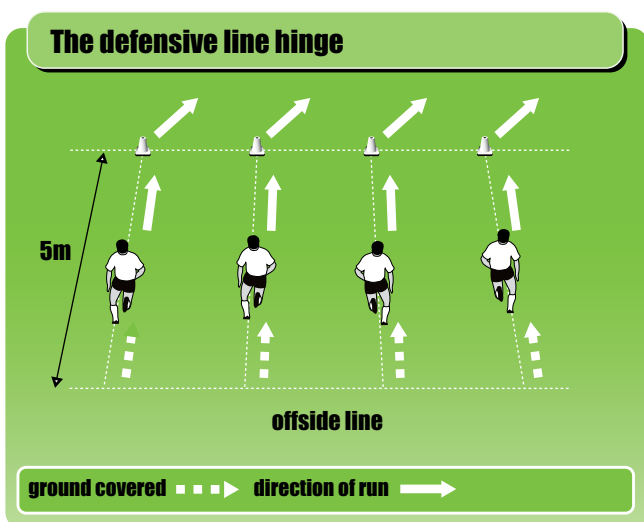
A good defence, no matter how fast, needs line discipline. My drills concentrate on maintaining excellent speed and a rigid line, where they are no gates or dog-legs. The space between the players should be no more than an arm's distance. When the players become more disciplined, then this distance can increase.

# Squeeze Their Attacking Options (cont.)

## Different Strategies

Some sides will go “up and out”, which means the line moves up 2 to 5 metres and then drifts out in the direction of the passing movement. Others move “up and in”, where players go up, and then in towards the attacking side, so the receiver will not see where the tackler is coming from.

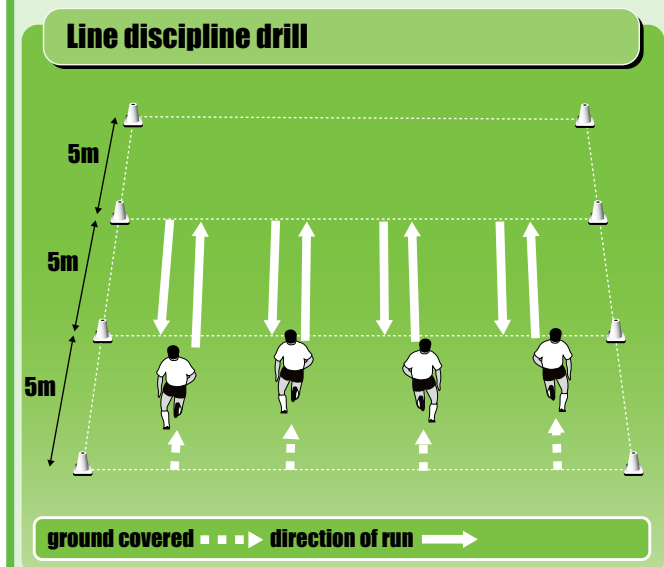
Essentially, for both systems players move up and then turn on a “hinge”, as described in the illustration, but maintain their lines of integrity. 🟢



*Mike Ruddock coached the Wales team to its first Six Nations Grand Slam for 27 years in 2005 and its first victory against Australia for 18 years. He also coached Ireland A, Leinster and famously the Swansea side that beat the Australian national side in 1992. He is now the coach of the Worcester Warriors, the England Premiership side.*

## Line Discipline Drill: Up Two, Back One

Mark out a box, 12 metres wide and 15 metres long, with cones every 5 metres. Four players start at one end of the box. On the trigger command (for instance “HIT”) they sprint forward 5 metres, slow down for 5 metres. They then run back 5 metres (either backwards or sideways), and line up with the 5 metre cones. They repeat the sequence to the end of the box.



Make sure the players keep their alignment, with the same spacing between each other and moving forward at the same pace.

Once I am happy with their pace and discipline, when they come forward on their last run before exiting the box, I will use my arms to indicate left, right or straight ahead. As they reach the end of the box they “hinge” and move in the direction indicated.

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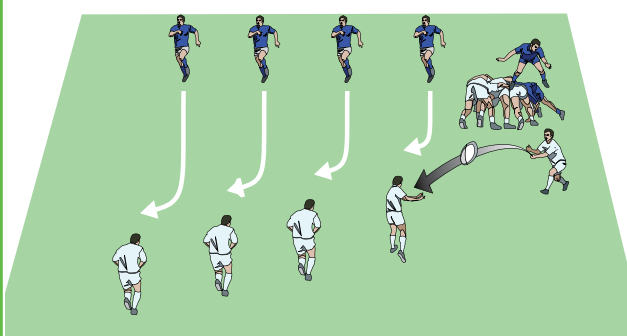
# Inside and Outside Shoulder Defences

Here **Dave McLean** of the Sunshine Coast, Queensland, Australia describes an alternative to the “J” curve. The “outside shoulder” defensive structure.

Rugby league teams typically use the “outside shoulder” defence to shepherd the opposition back inside. This prevents them getting on the outside of their opposing players and allows the defence to cover the inside ball or step back inside.

Rugby union teams typically use the “inside shoulder” defence, allowing a “J” curve movement to track the inside ball or step back inside.

## “J” curve defence



Defenders go up and out.

direction of run →

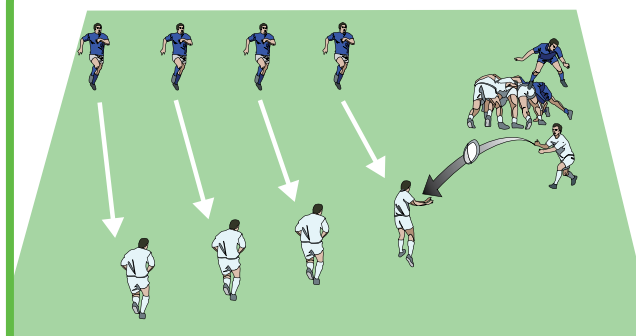
If the attack has someone with a good step or turn of pace, they will often beat the defender on the outside. It is extremely difficult for a defender who has been left flat footed to recover and close the gap on the attacker.

## The “Outside Shoulder” Defence

Where you have a backline that is not as quick off the mark, or have injuries to usual backline players and so have to use players out of position in the backline, try an “outside shoulder” backline defensive pattern instead to see if it results in better containment.

This defensive structure can work for the entire backline or specific targeted positions such as inside or outside centre (#12 and #13) if you’re aware of your opposition’s strengths. But be aware that your “loosies” (that is, back row players in the Northern hemisphere) still have to work hard and cover the inside. 🟢

## Outside shoulder defence



Defenders start outside the player they are marking.

direction of run →

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# Kill Off Their Fly Half's Attacking Options

**Observing your opponent's fly half can help you reshape the way you defend. Repositioning your backline from their set piece plays can pressurise their attacking players and with good execution wipe out their plans, says Dan Cottrell.**

## Their Fly Half's Position at Set Pieces

The pivotal position to indicate the attacking intentions of the opposition is usually the fly half (#10). Read where he stands and then implement your defensive pattern accordingly and get set to pressurise their attacking options.

## Exploit Their Fly Half's Weak Foot

Even before kick off, it should be clear from their warm-up routines which foot their fly half favours. Few players are equally good from both feet, so pressuring the player to use

their "weaker" foot should be to your advantage. If the fly half has to change foot then your team should have more time to charge down the kick, force a poor kick or even catch the fly half in possession.

The fly half may pass the ball to a centre (#12 or #13) for a "wiper kick" (where the ball is kicked to the opposite side of the field). If the opposition has a left footed centre, then they will be happier to use this option on the right hand side of the pitch. In which case, close down this centre's good foot and make sure your winger is prepared for the kick. 🍀

Where Their Fly Half Stands	Your Defensive Pattern	Advantages	Drawbacks
Flat and close to the gain line	<p>Employ a straight up, rush defence.</p> <p>Leave smaller gaps between your midfield players.</p> <p>Your open side winger should stay out wide and deep in case of a cross kick.</p>	<p>This pressurizes the opposition fly half and inside centre to make poor decisions.</p> <p>It's easy to implement for your fly half and centres because they are running at their opposite numbers, so reducing the opportunities for confusion among other players.</p> <p>The narrower gap between your fly half and opposite flanker makes the breakaway forward's job much easier.</p>	<p>Your players need to move up together. At speed this may be difficult to do, leaving the possibility of "dog legs" or gaps in your defensive line.</p> <p>It leaves your opposite winger exposed if the attackers pass the ball out wide quickly.</p>
Deep	<p>Employ a drift defence.</p> <p>Every defender moves up and out so they are, in effect, tackling the man outside their opposite number.</p> <p>Your winger should be kept wide, but not deep.</p>	<p>The tactic gives your players more time to read the opposition's moves.</p> <p>You have better cover across the width of the pitch.</p> <p>The tactic tends to force ball carriers to run sideways, which cuts down on their attacking space.</p>	<p>It allows the attack more time on the ball.</p> <p>You are susceptible to breach if a move goes against the grain of the drift.</p>

# A New Way to Defend the Lineout

Watching some of the latest trends in international and top class rugby, **Dan Cottrell** has noticed that teams “squeeze” the back line together when they are lining up to defend the lineout.

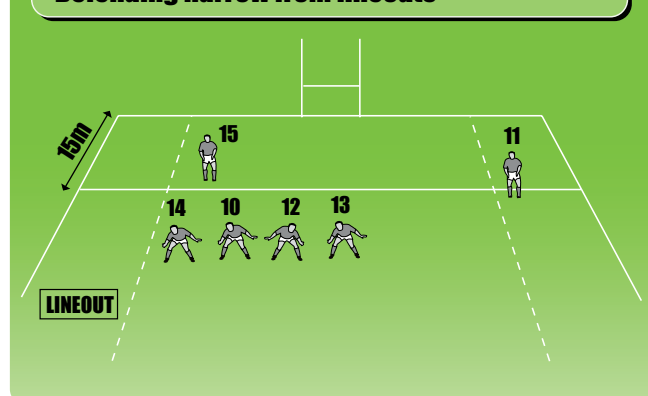
## The Tactic

An alternative defensive system from the lineout has been employed by a number of top sides recently. The blindside winger comes up into the defensive line, next to the fly half (#10), and with the two centres (#12 and #13) they squeeze together. If the opposition ball emerges quickly, these four players rush up in a tight formation to stifle any chance of a wide move.

- 1 The consequences of this “narrow” defence have been a reluctance for attacking fly halves to move the ball wide for fear of interceptions.
- 2 The tight defence means it is also tough for teams to break through the middle of the field.
- 3 The tactic additionally protects weaker tackling fly halves, since the blindside winger and inside centre (#12) can “double team” in the tackle if necessary.

In this “squeeze” defence, the full back (#15) usually covers blindside kicks by standing on the 15 metre line on the side of the lineout. The openside winger stands on the other 15 metre line and in the backfield. This defence is vulnerable to chips over the top, so the fullback and open side winger have to be able to cover for this eventuality. 🍀

### Defending narrow from lineouts



## Mauled in the Mauls?

Norman Blair coaches a 1st XV team in Ireland, which plays in the qualifying league immediately below the All Ireland League. Here he describes his team’s tactics for defending against the maul in their own 22.

We used to struggle against mauling sides, particularly in our 22 metre area. We tried various techniques to overcome this, but the most effective has been the following.

- Most scores from the maul come from lineouts inside your 22. Don’t give away penalties as this enables your opposition to kick deep into the corners.
- We compete for all opposition lineout ball except close to our line. When defending these lineouts we adopt the following drill:
  - At the moment the attacking jumper’s feet touch the ground you have a possible “tackle” situation.
  - All our players therefore face the opposition and crouch at waist height preparing for the low tackle.
  - They don’t watch the ball, but concentrate instead on the opposition – notably, the lifters’ hands and jumper’s feet.
  - As soon as the jumper’s feet touch the ground our players who are directly opposite the lifters tackle them and attempt to drive them in behind their jumper. The defending player opposite the jumper catches him high as he lands and attempts to turn him towards our line.
  - We call the technique simply “stop it before it starts”.

A mauling side can’t maul unless they are on their feet. So use leg tackles to bring ball carriers to the ground and don’t worry about giving up a little ground. In this instance, rather than double team tackle, you could have the first defender bring the ball carrier to ground, so allowing the second player to compete for the ball.

# Turnover Ball – An Opportunity and a Threat

**Jim Love, the Arix Viadana coach, likes to dedicate time in training to dealing with turnover ball to make the most of both the attacking opportunities and limit the opposition's threat.**

## Defending Against Turnover Ball

We have a clear tactic to reorganise and reduce the potential damage. The first move is for the back three, the two wingers and full back (#15), to drop back. Many sides will kick turnover ball and we need to protect our back field.

The rest of the players employ a scatter defence. The inside players will push up and out. This means they will run up to the gain line and then push out along it. They don't, however, ever venture beyond the gain line. The players on the extreme of the defensive line will act slightly differently. They will push up but not as far as the gain line.

Because of the nature of a turnover, stopping the attack on the gain line is a bonus. Therefore we are willing to give up territory to ensure we are secure under attack.

## Winning Turnover Ball – The “Three Pass” Rule

If we win a turnover ball we always try to push the ball three passes away from the turnover point. The players will then consider the options. Sometimes there will be overlap. If not, a chip over the top of the defence will normally be the choice.

Turnover ball means that the odds are stacked in your favour. It is an opportunity to pass, pass, pass and check the options, wherever you are on the field. You retain the element of surprise.

It is likely the opposition full back will not be in place because he was involved in the attacking line. He might well be chasing back into position so the quicker the three passes, the more chance of exploiting this opportunity.

We train to make it second nature that we will follow the same pattern when we win turnover ball. We use lots of games where there can be an opportunity for a turnover to arise. Sometimes this is by my instigation, for instance “when I blow the whistle, the ball is given to the other side”, at other times by setting up the defence and attack in positions before giving the ball to the defenders.

## Summary

- Use practise games to get players familiar with turnover ball tactics.
- In defence, be prepared to give up some ground to ensure there are no leaks.
- In attack, move the ball three passes away quickly from the turnover and then check the options. 🏉

## Tapping the Foot for “Heads Up” Rugby

Here's a game we use on half the width of the pitch. I put equal numbers of players on the try line and 22 metre line. Both sides face outwards so they can't see each other. I will go along each line and tap the foot of any player who I want to be involved in the next play. I then chuck in the ball to one of the sides and those players who I have tapped try to score or prevent the other side scoring.

*Jim Love is head coach of Italian professional side Arix Viadana and CEO of the New Zealand Sports Academy ([www.nzsportsacademy.co.nz](http://www.nzsportsacademy.co.nz)). He is a former coach of the Maori All Blacks and Tonga.*

