



Martin Gallagher - Director of Rugby

The Outside In Defensive Strategy

(A personal view)

In my experience the most significant change in Rugby Union Football since the onset of professionalism (1996) has been the defensive alignments and the structured organization of players in both primary defense and phase play.

Individuals and countries have also influenced the shape of coaching – France with David Ellis, England with Phil Larder and Australia's ARL (Australian Rugby League) Coach have greatly been inclined to bring a different perspective to the defensive alignment and management; but Shaun Edwards at London Wasps and Brendan Venter (now back in SA) and Gary Gold at London Irish have been using the “outside in” defensive structure – which is probably the newest type of defense to materialize in the past few years.

The game has taken on new roles for players and also new technical titles; guard, post, pillar these have all become commonplace. Communication has also become a key component – as the level of noise rises so does the intimidation factor?

A modern practice, at the very elite levels of the game focuses hugely on defensive skills, decision-making in contact (the type of tackle required – tackle selection), communication, speed of execution and structural organization. These facets are underpinned by the key principles of defense –

- Forward
- Pressure
- Fitness
- Tackle
- Deny time and space
- Communication
- **ATTITUDE**

However as I noted there are more specific skills needed and these are -

Type of tackle:

- **High – low**
- **Wrap**
- **Gang tackle**
- **'Ball n' all'**
- **Push down tackle...**

A player's individual skill and confidence in the tackle/contact area is critical. It is imperative to have players who know how and when to use the 'tackle selection' noted above. Contact skills that are needed to slow the ball release are very important in the modern game – players such as Richie Mc Caw (NZ) George Smith (Australia) Serge Betsen (France) Jamie Cudmore (Canada) and Schalk Burger (SA) have become good exponents of this in recent years.

There are keys to making this type of defense successful

- Working together in a straight line
- Communication – **BIG TALK** (intimidation?) **Small Talk** (organization!)
- Timing of the “**UP / IN**” as one wall – no stragglers leaving the side gate open!
- Defenders in position quickly organized
- Line speed
- Players in the best positions (forwards closer to the breakdown)

These are simple keys but take time to coach and organize. Failure to apply these can lead to the attack exploiting holes in mistimed movement or indecisive communications.

Only one international team South Africa (under coach Jake White) has employed a similar type of defensive system in 2004. They call it the “RUSH” defense. It has been fairly successful for them at home and in the Tri Nations but was made to look some what average in some of the games during the Autumn/Fall 2004 Internationals – it will be interesting to see what system change they will make with the games they have these season.

Another interesting defensive battle will be the British & Irish Lions and the All Blacks this Summer/Winter (depending where you are) I wonder what defensive system Sir Clive Woodward will employ to negate the flat attack pattern employed by the Graham Henry and Wayne Smith.

How it should work?!

The defender gets on the outside of his opponents shoulder and comes up hard and quick (in a wall). This allows him to make the tackle on his inside shoulder.

The conventional way is to be on the inside and push out therefore taking the attacker on your outside shoulder. In the outside in defense you will hit the attacker blind as he/she will be looking for the ball in the pass and will have taken their eyes off you.

Another advantage is that you defend the gain line quickly and effectively. In denying time and space you will effectively slow down the momentum of the attack and provide the attackers with fewer opportunities. The outside in defense also is a good tool for creating errors in individuals attacking skills as players who can't handle immense pressure are or will stay deeper as to be able to make their pass therefore putting the whole backline under pressure.

There are some weaknesses in the defense system. The main one I have found is the speed of the line, when players don't come up in a line as a wall. Defenders need to know how to organize themselves and who does what best (this needs to be worked out in practice). Coaches need to watch for the outside players getting up too quick as this causes spaces inside and the ball carrier can both sense and see this if they know your defensive structure.

The other area to work out in practice is the decoy runner, analysis of opponents can provide you with their attack patterns but it's about which defenders and the communication along with the correct decision making skills that will help neutralize the attack.

It is difficult to go around as the outside winger/player as he/she spots in from the blind and is almost the last defender until the sweeper or full back comes across. That said one needs to be cognizant of the grubber or chip kick and this is the sweeper has a role to play, as there is space behind the defensive line.

Fitness - is a key component of this defensive system, as it requires the up and back movement - Speed Agility Quickness {SAQ/®} - is a good way of preparing this system, speed off the line, the adjustment, the TALK (communication) and the contact/tackle all have an effect on the players ability to reorganize and commit and offensive defense.

Conclusion

When executed correctly the “**Outside In**” defensive system can be a tremendous offensive weapon. I have found it encouraging that coaches want to know more about how it works and what its benefit are. It will be interesting to see what teams use this in the near future, and what new if any defensive systems will be designed in the future.

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Outside In Defense

