



RUGBY FOOTBALL UNION

## RFU Technical Journal - Winter 2001

### Decision Making in Attack by Tosh Askew

The author, Tosh Askew, played club rugby for Liverpool (later Liverpool St.Helens) 1977-1990 and represented both Yorkshire and Lancashire in the County Championship 1977-1990. He qualified as an RFU Senior Coach in 1990 and has been coach at Stoke-on-Trent, Waterloo, North of England U21's, North and Midlands U21's, England U17 Development Squad and since 1999 has been responsible for England U19's. At present he is setting up an RFU pilot academy for 16-18 year old players at East Durham and Houghall Community College.

The dictionary says that decisions are 'resolutions reached after consideration'. Consideration of a multitude of factors in an open-skilled game makes this a hugely difficult part of the game to develop. Coaches spend hours improving their players' physical condition and skills. All of this will be to no avail if those players do not understand the game and lack the vision to make the correct decisions in ever-changing situations.

Top-flight rugby players are, more or less, as fit and skilful as each other; what is likely to separate them is their ability to focus their attention at precisely the right moment and on the most relevant stimuli to allow them to make the correct decisions for themselves and the team. In the professional game especially, but in rugby generally, the biggest progress has been in defence; opportunities, therefore, are fewer and decision-making becomes increasingly more crucial.

A player must consider his own skills, physique, pace etc in making a decision. Other factors emerge at the same time: strengths and weaknesses of the immediate opponent; the strengths and weaknesses of the whole opposition; the conditions at that moment; the strengths of his own team and the immediate support. The player then has to weigh up the effects of his decision and how it will interface with his team-mates.

There are a multitude of options in deciding whether to pass and how to do it (before or out of contact?); should the contact be evaded or taken (stay up or go to ground?); is a kick an option (what type?). When so many variations and different decisions are potentially available, this area of skill must have a great deal of time devoted to it.

In the first weekend of the Six Nations in 2001 there were 19 tries scored, 17 of which came directly from turnover ball. Does this mean that on 17 occasions the wrong decision was made or did the errors occur in execution? I suggest that it was both. However, had several players used brain rather than brawn the total of turnovers might well have been significantly decreased.

Thinking and decision-making is a split-second process which usually takes place before the player gets the ball, and communication is a vital part of the process. Communication comes through the eyes, ears, voice and body language. The support player should consciously hold depth, which allows him to have a wider vision of the action in front of him. With what his eyes tell him he can then use the voice to inform the ball-carrier what he wants from him if the defence is in place. The ball-carrier then communicates by listening and this co-operation is crucial in decision-making, which leads to ball retention and more successful rugby. The wider vision of actions in the game is improved with depth and width of support, which will eventually assist the process of better decisions.

Educating your players and developing their rugby intellect are crucial if they are to make better decisions. We must strive to get intelligent players in all positions. as all players on the



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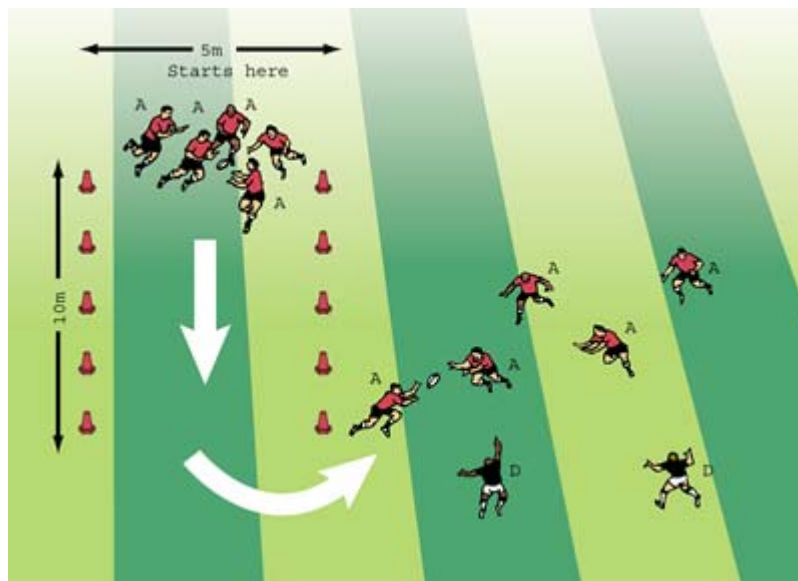
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pitch are decision-makers.

All these players, wherever they play, have to make swift judgements then act on them with decisions; it is through these decisions that a team functions or fails. The higher level of the game the more subtle the process, so the intelligence factor becomes hugely important. For some the ability may be innate and these players are like gold dust as they can make a team click. The majority, however, require education and development through practice and yet more practice. This will allow them to recognise cues and select the best option for their team. To achieve improvement, coaches must ensure that the players work constantly against opposition to replicate the changes in time and space they will face in matches.

All practice should be commensurate with the level of ability of the players; then the degree and intensity of the opposition must be appropriate so that the practice is a positive learning experience. If a coach is perceptive enough he will be able to put some decision-making into almost every practice that he organises. The biggest problem is generally to get players to look up and ahead rather than becoming transfixed by the ball. Once players begin to get used to playing with their heads up to scan the opposition, they will begin to get themselves into situations where they will be able to make better informed decisions. Once the whole team realises that they have a responsibility to communicate what they see, the whole complex process of decision-making will be improved. The following are drills that can be used to improve vision and decision. However, they are not 'drills' in the sense that they have to be set up then slavishly followed. Coaching has to accompany the progression if real improvement in players' skills is to occur.

Diagram 1



### SEQUENCE

- Five attackers use short inter-passing down a 5m channel.
- At the end of the channel they re-align and play the same way across the width of the pitch.
- Have two defenders (static to begin with) spaced well apart.
- As the scrum-half is about to pass, one of the defenders puts up a hand to indicate to the attacking players that they must move the ball wide to utilise an overlap/outside space.



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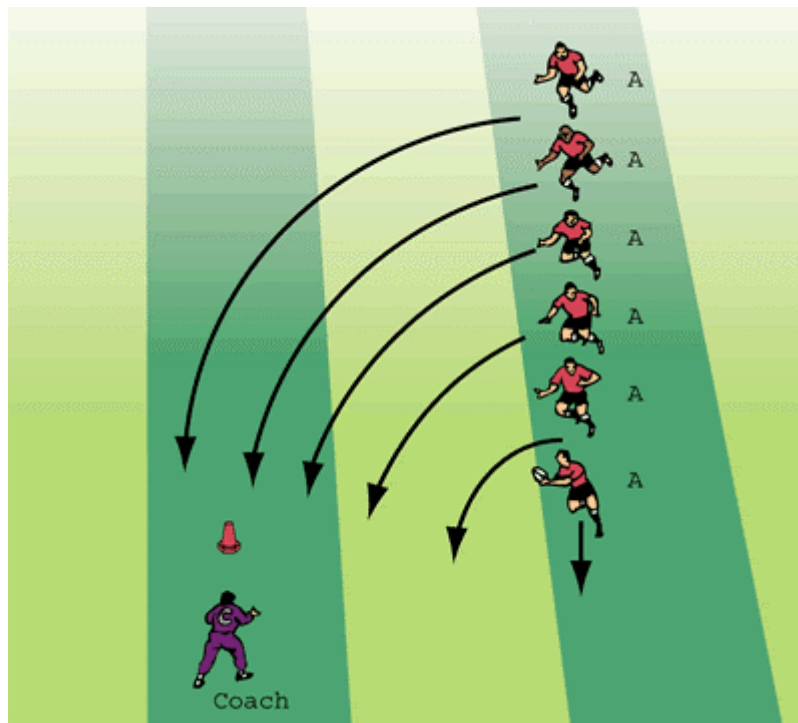
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- If he raises two hands that signifies that the space available is down the middle or somewhere short.
- The signals mean that the attackers have to adjust their running lines, timing of passes and support roles.

### PROGRESSION / DEVELOPMENT

- Make both defenders raise one or two hands and the attackers have to count the number of raised hands and go wide on an odd number or short on an even number of hands.
- When they cope with this, progress further by adding more defenders. This makes the attackers scan faster, thus ensuring that their decision-making skills are being developed.
- Have a situation where a kick is called for by the widest attacker when he reads a cue from the last defender, who can be sitting down or have his back turned to the attack.
- Decrease the amount of available time and space to the attack by making the defenders walk then jog forward as the No. 9 plays the ball and they raise their arms. This work may start as a drill but quickly develops into a skill practice where attacking players have to look up as they are re-aligning and communicating what they see to the inside, flatter players who are under the greatest pressure of time and space. From that view and the decision that is communicated they can then play the appropriate role; fixing defenders with a pass, running past defenders, acting as a strike runner or becoming a trail runner. All become realistic options and are practised in a game situation with defenders.

Diagram 2



### SEQUENCE

- Players start in single file and come out right or left to take short passes.



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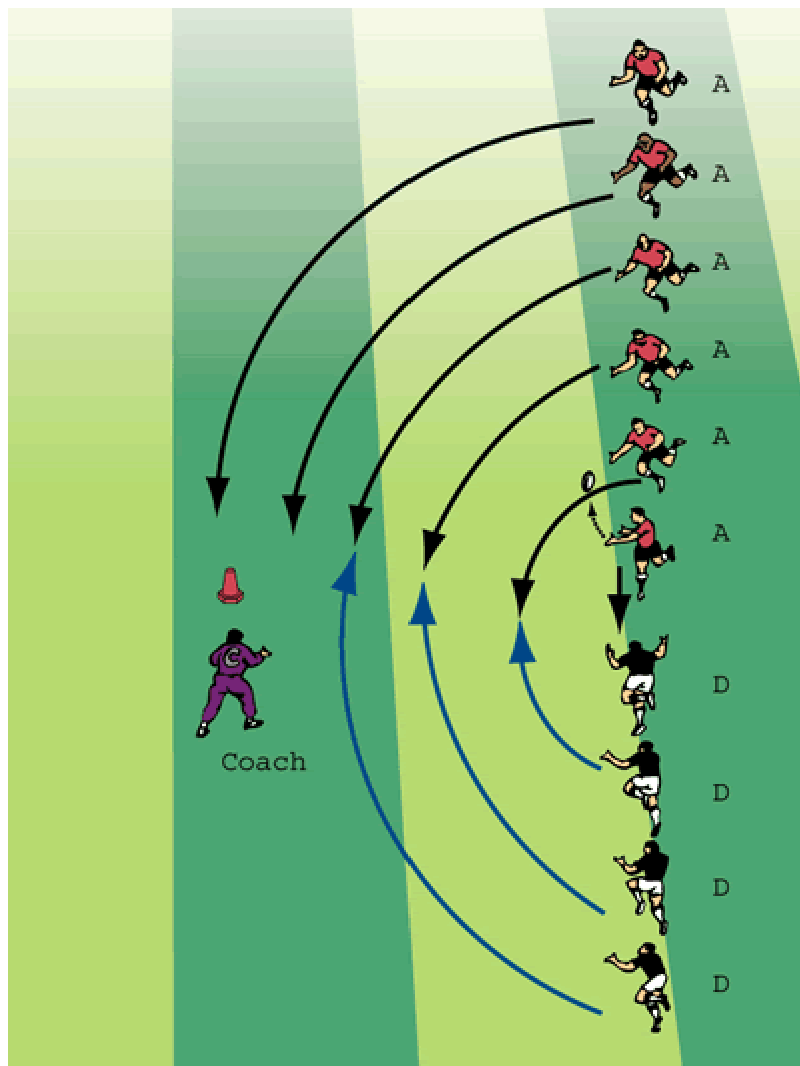
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- The last man puts the ball down somewhere near the cone.
- As this is happening the coach will be positioned in front of the players and he indicates with his arm which way the attack is to go.
- The attackers re-align to comply with his visual instruction.

### PROGRESSION / DEVELOPMENT

- The progression then is to put defenders in single file to pressurise the attackers.

Diagram 3



Once the last man is put away the coach will have instructed the defenders where to go, e.g. three to the left of the cone, one to the right; spread very wide to leave holes/spaces; bunch up to leave space on the outside. Attackers will have to:

- Scan the situation
- Communicate
- Act



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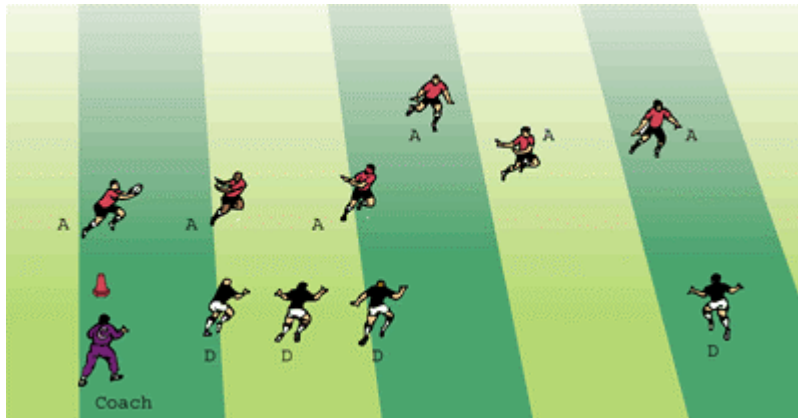


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The coach sets any problem he wants by arranging the defence before they go to the single file. For example the following diagram illustrates a situation that can be manufactured to practise a decision-making situation that may need work on it.

Diagram 4

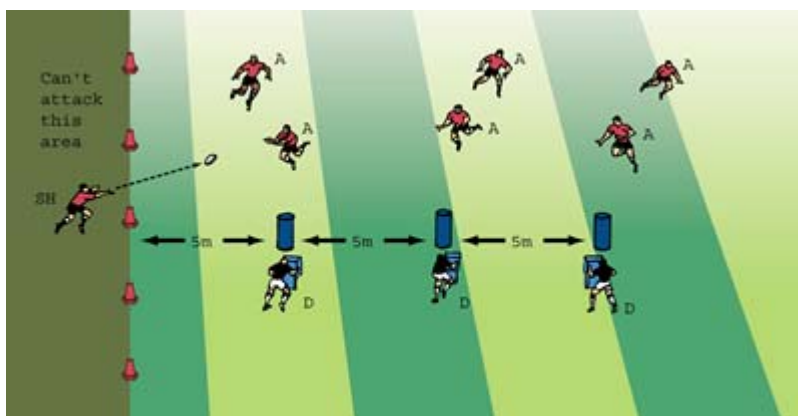


Can the inside three realise that they must fix and keep the defenders in tight where they are?  
Can the outside attackers keep the last defender out wide, thus allowing the free attacker to come through the big gap?

- The players may have failed to see these situations and options in matches and could have made incorrect decisions.
- The coach can manufacture such situations in practice, to help those players to see their cues and appreciate their role. Looking for space and choosing the best option and getting another into it requires much practice for all players.

Diagram 5 illustrates the sort of work that can be used to encourage quick decision-making on the practice pitch.

Diagram 5



### SEQUENCE

- Three defenders hold contact pads and they stand behind three free-standing tackle bags. Their role is to step out into the spaces on either side of the tackle bags as the



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ball is moved along the attacking line.

- The later they step out from behind, the more pressure is put on the decision-making attackers.
- The pad holders can go into the space taken up by another pad holder if they wish.
- The attackers must try to put runners through holes or around the outside of the tackle bags, depending on where the pad holders go.
- The back three attackers will have a better view and should be able to communicate the best options/decisions to the inside players.
- With the three bags and three pads it is 6 v 6 but if the scrum-half runs with the ball he can make it 7 v 6.
- If two bag holders go to the same space there will automatically be a hole to exploit.

### PROGRESSION

- Time and space can be taken away from the attackers as they become increasingly competent at the skills.
- The defence can move progressively later so that the attackers have less time to react to what is in front of them.

All practices should have decision-making elements in them and it is essential that coaches challenge and develop the top two inches of the body as well as the rest of it. Teams should not rely on only one or two key decision-makers as it is everybody's responsibility.

With England U19's, we have had many very talented players who have previously played in teams with strict and limited strategies when they were younger. When we want these players to develop and play at the top level it becomes difficult for them, as their decision-making and understanding of the process have not been challenged or developed.

The challenge for us coaches, especially those dealing with younger players, is to develop these decision-making skills alongside all the other essential requirements of the game; that has to be an integral part in developing the complete players. As a coach, ask yourself the question, "Can I help the players to deal with a constantly changing environment of a match, where they are being tested on a moment-to-moment basis?"



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