IDENTIFYING WEAKNESSES IN A TEAM & IT’S DEFENSE

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This article has been written with the intention to trigger coach’s minds on how to get an edge on the opposition during a game and learn how exploit weaknesses in their defense.

As a coach you may have a multitude of ideas, outlines and goals for your team, but it can be hard to decipher what to analyze during a game. One of the best ways to overcome this, is by mapping out what your are to study in the opposition team prior to the game and then allocating said roles to fellow coaches (assistants) or to reserve/injured players in your squad. Not only will his help you gather more information in a shorter period of time, but it will also teach them how to develop an analytical appreciation of the game and what you are identifying as the coach.

Observation of the opposition can prove a wide and varied challenge if you get into micro facets of technicalities, especially when breaking their defense down to singular individual character traits, this fine tooth analysis is usually left to professional teams who have excellent software analysis systems that highlight and record individual data/footage, this then can be scrutinized to fine detail and micro game management can materialize.

Basically from a full back to a tight head prop can study their individual opponent in great detail prior to the game, to highlight how they will individually exploit their opposite’s weaknesses.

This article wont go into such in depth detail, but will highlight the “obvious” areas of opposition weaknesses that can be witnessed at real time and without software analysis required.

The subject matters to be looked at are based around the opposition weaknesses;

• Attitude and Discipline
• Line Speed
• Line spacing and shape
• Basic individual mismatches
• Set piece set up (Lineout and Scrum)
**Attitude and Discipline**

One thing I believe about individuals or teams weaknesses comes down to two things, ATTITUDE and DISCIPLINE, without the right attitude and a disciplined athlete, you will always have a weakness in an individual that will ultimately weaken the team. This is one of the reasons that all defenses in any team sport have weaknesses.

Attitude to work hard in defense and the discipline to keep to the shape of the defense determine the good from the bad teams when it comes to hiding or finding weaknesses in teams defensive systems.

Finding ill disciplined defenders in opposition teams can be a simple as watching a player not bring up the line speed at the same time as his/her team mates, not filling the guard or 1st space at the side of the ruck quick enough, or a player who flies up out of that same position, leaving a gap where the ball came from.

A disciplined athlete and team will always be harder to identify weaknesses in, but there are weaknesses.

**Line Speed**

Line speed is based on how fast or how slow the opposition’s defense puts pressure on your team, but within line speed you have the speed of the back fill defense too (i.e. the defensive players bringing the line up on far side of ruck/breakdown)

If a team comes up passively, it allows your team to get runners and players into gaps and shapes to allow continuity of play, plus manipulation of their players to allow strike plays to be completed, this can be seen as weakness, but if the defense has good shape and equal spacing with no one shooting out the line, it can also be seen as a strength, so determining what weaknesses my be available from their line speed vary.

One example of creating weakness in a passive line speed defense is to create quick on the gain line multi phase attack options, the quicker you get to the tackle line and beyond it, the more passive and unorganized their defense will become, creating quick 2-3 phase plays to manipulate a defense to stretch them out or into one area of field will start to highlight their individual weaknesses too. Get a defensive line moving backwards at speed with doglegs and you control the game and the try scoring opportunity ratios.

Teams that play aggressive “Blitz” type defenses are fundamentally harder to breach with ball in hand and width to game, but blitz teams are vulnerable to chip/grubber kicks through and over defensive lines, plus the team that plays a constant blitz defense are prone to fatiguing later in games and creating staggered alignment in the defensive shape as the fitter players leave the slower players behind. They also concede more penalties in their eagerness to shoot off the line.

Back fill line speed is always an area that can be attacked, the players who have just tackled someone or coming off the bottom of a ruck are prone for filling the line too slow, creating a huge gap, dog leg or fatigues player to exploit.
Line Spacing and Shape
In simple terms, Line spacing means the distances between players in defensive line and the shape means; is it flat, curved, dog legged or arrowed etc?
Line spacing is the easiest facet of defensive line to identify, the gaps and width between defenders can be identified in seconds, but how can it be exploited?

Simply by stretching the defense if they are bunched and by penetrating/punching if they are spread, but it can be a little more in depth than this.

If you have athletes in your team who are good side steppers in confined spaces, these athletes can highlight a flat-footed defender or slower player in that defensive line, this will converge these defenders and ultimately create spaces from where they came from. Also players bunched at the rucks will create bigger spacing in the outer defenders, hence providing more options for spaces and gaps to attack.

Learning how to get your athletes or team to create different shapes and spacing is a coaches challenge, but once they learn the fundamentals of how to move defenders around and create miss-matches, they will become more affective as a collective group.

Basis Individual Mismatches
When it comes down to this section, microanalysis can take over enormously, from speed, to balance, to genetics, so I will keep this brief and simplistic, plus create a few areas to consider and adapt accordingly to your team or level of rugby.

The obvious scenarios;
- Big on small
- Fast on slow
- Evasive player on a flat footed defender
- Tall on short in lineout
- Lower into contact than opposite player at clear out point of breakdown
- Power player on a weaker tackler
- Good offload player against a constant low tackler
- A player who constantly shoots up out of defensive line or the opposite affect, hangs back in shape/speed of line
- A player who is prone to getting squared up on a late angled runner and cant adjust feet to make tackle affectively
- A player who is fatigued by making 2-3 tackles in a row
- A player who is weak on types of kicks such as bombs, kicks in behind, slow on turn
• A player who constantly tackles high is prone to being carded for dangerous tackles or beaten if side stepped late or ducking just before contact
• Social loafers, players who shy away from contact area and hide at side of rucks and mauls
• Lazy back fill players who create holes where last breakdown occurred, by not bringing up line and closing gate of last ruck
• A defender who over pursues on a fast drift defense and gets square on to ball carrier, this makes them prone for side stepping

These are the obvious and easy on the eye weaknesses that can be identified in split seconds. The hard part is getting your team/athletes to find them.

Coaches and spectators have the luxury of sitting back and observing these events take place at a slower speed than the actual game speed and reaction times that on field athletes deal with under fatigue and psychological pressure situations.
I believe that by highlighting these types of weaknesses and showing visual evidence (game footage) to your athletes, they will learn to trigger these cues and start identifying weaknesses on a more regular basis.

Creating mini game sense scenarios in practice can also adapt these skill adaptations and lead to a more successful outcome.
One simple way is by putting X player or players in colored bibs and they are the identified weakness in defensive line with certain defensive weaknesses, the attacking team then learns how to break that line by attacking X players who have said weaknesses.
Repetition of these game scenarios will trigger the athlete’s minds to learn how to spot these key situations and frailties in defenses and opposition players during games.

Weakness in the Set Piece
Lineout;
Stating some of the obvious situations that occur in the lineout;
• Can the hooker hit the target
• Does the hooker “cock” his throw, allowing for a definite indication of when throw will commence
• Can the hooker hit tail of lineout if the front and middle jumpers haven’t delivered or producing any quality ball to attack from
• Do they use hooker to boost at front of lineout leaving space down 5 meter channel
• Are their jumpers aggressive in the air
• Are they only using X or Y jumper
• Do they have predictable lineout system
• Can their boosters still deliver under quick movement from opposition pods
• When they bring jumper down, are they leaving gaps between booster and jumper, to allow “splitting” to stop catch and drive situations occurring
• Is their flanker shooting off tail of lineout to attack/pressure opposition 10, leaving a gap for a peel round or break from scrum half at back of lineout

These are some areas that can be identified and exploited during a game. The lineout is a very technical area that can be broken down into individual micro management through analysis and technical knowledge. But it can never be underestimated where teams can get an edge in this part of the set piece game by understanding, identifying and implementing a system to pressure the opposition lineout.

Scrum;
The scrum is one area of the game where individually you are most vulnerable to disrupt a collective outcome if you don’t get your game management right. This also highlights where you can identify weaknesses in the opposition scrum under close scrutiny.

Canadian Scrum experts like David Docherty and Kevin Wirachowski can dissect a scrum to the most microscopic detail and install minor adjustments to get an edge in the scrum, but sometimes its hard to identify these adjustments without prior knowledge or the know how of how to make these technical refinements.

Hopefully I can identify the a few areas where you can find a weakness in their scrum without a huge amount of technical scrum knowledge.
Here are some of the easy to identify scrum weaknesses that may be targeted during a game;
• Body height at engagement; the ability to come down on (S-Africa style) or get under a front row (Argentina style) on the engagement will give you the initial impetus at the first point of contact, some teams suffer from being too high on most occasions and being 2 inches below their engagement height can give you an edge if they are a physically larger team/front row
• Body height of collective group, i.e. scrum imbalance. The horizontal shape of a scrum in an ideal world would be as flat as a dining table, from front row to number 8, but it rarely happens with physical exertion being dispersed by individual players based on their height, weight and power imbalances all being of varying dynamics.
If you use the principles of good body posture and shape of each individual in the scrum, you can easily identify scrum imbalances to target, high on one side, low on other are the most obvious visual cues, but if you can get above a scrum you will also see imbalances on who is further forward/back from his corresponding player at the side of them.
All these areas of scrum imbalance can be targeted, it’s now the knowledge of you the scrum doctor or the on field players to identify them and manipulate
them accordingly during the game

• Speed across the line; this refers to the “engage” section of the scrum, the imaginary line between two opposing front rows just after the “touch” call by referee, the team that is quickest across the point of contact line will get an edge, just like defensive policies with tackle line and gain line principles come into play, get over the gain line in the scrum and you will control the initial engagement

• Tight head dominance; there is an adage in rugby these days that who are the 2 most important players in your team? Answer: your tight head prop and your reserve tight head prop! How true is this?
If you are front row guru then you may agree, I am a big believer that your loose head is of equal importance, but it is common knowledge that if your TH dominates their side of the scrum, the ability to move the scrum in an anti clockwise direction (Right side up) will give you an advantage to run back row pick ups with 8 to 9 plays become more affective by steering the opposition back-row away from the attacking channel down the side of a scrum.
This situation immediately creates more work for the opposition 7 & 8 to cover and nullifies the ability for the blind side flanker to flat line in defense across the field

• Wheeling; in a similar vein to the above TH dominance situation, by moving a scrum anti or clockwise can have a positive affect and create weaknesses in their defensive system.
The ability to wheel a scrum lies 99% of the time in the referees interpretation of the laws, but one way to get an edge at scrum time on your own put in legally is to wheel the scrum just as the call “break” has been made by your scrum half or number 8. Why? Simply it means that your front row is closer to their players than the opposition and the opposition front row will have to work harder to get back as they are now behind the attacking teams players. This solely alone gives you an edge in attack in phase play for support runners, but also tires the opposition front row leaving opportunities eventually for comeback/reverse plays later in the half or game when they are more fatigued and getting flat footed

• Back row cohesion; There is no substitute for a great working back row in defense, they cover so many aspects of nullifying threats within 20 meters of the scrum zone in defense, but a poor defensive back row can cost you a multitude of tries at the set piece.

If you think of it logically, the attacking backline have a numerical advantage at scrum time, in defense you need to play a full back a little deeper to cover cross/chip/grubber kicks on 1st phase play, you have to leave your blind side winger in place in case the opposition attacking scrum half shoots blindside off back of scrum, you may also see their open-side winger hanging back to cover cross/wiper kicks, all these scenarios can be exploited by your attacking back line if the opposition back row don’t know how to cover the zones in and
around the scrum and once ball has been moved away to attacking fly half.

One of the easiest weaknesses to spot at scrum time is the separation and spacing between the defending 7 & 8, if the open-side (7) shoots up out the line leaving the number 8 flagging, there is always an attacking channel here to manipulate. A couple of ways to manipulate this are to run a 9 to 8 back inside pass off back off a scrum (TH lead) or an inside pass from fly half to blind winger once ball has been moved away from scrum.

A blindside flanker maybe lazy back filling in defense at set piece and may struggle getting across field behind the initial front line defending players (usually backline) or is slow to get off side of scrum (loose-Head lead) making themselves vulnerable for blindside pick and goes off back of scrum.

There are also situations where defending number 8’s keep driving on “break” call, allowing splits seconds of delay in their defensive cover, or the opposite affect of not pushing at scrum time leaving an opportunity for a secondary drive, this can be easily identified, identify 6, 7 & 8 all with their heads up and not driving with shoulders square in scrum are prime visual cues to get your scrum to initiate a secondary drive at scrum time, this will lead to scrum dominance and the opposition team on the back foot in defense

**Summary**
I hope some of these observations have triggered the tactical mind to dissect the opposition team with a more calculated and analytical approach, that will eventually give your team and athletes an edge on how and when to target opposition weaknesses and how best to exploit them.