

The Pass: from one player to another is it?

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What is more natural than a pass in team sport and rugby? This technical skill is taught from the younger age and matured through the years to a level of (supposed) mastery by the age of 19 or 20, although of course always perfectible in some extent. It is the single act of gift to a partner which will allow the movement to continue and flow; or so it is supposed to be.

In most instances, the pass involves the ball carrier and a receiver. It is a deliberate act of allowing the ball to circulate towards a place where partners will be in a better position to either score a try or continue the forward momentum towards the opposition goal line. Therefore, the pass has parameters known to both the attacking team (let's assume the attacking team to be the ball users, which is actually not always the case) and the defending team:

- It has to be performed backwards (law of the game)
- It has its phases: preparation, travel in space, reception (technical and physical)
- It goes from one player to another (technical and physical)
- Its trajectory can't be altered once fired and the ball is airborne (physical)
- Chances of successful completion are bound to the technical/tactical environment at the very moment the pass is made (technical & tactical)
- There will be one receiver only for any pass made (physical)

This essay proposes to have a look at the different elements of the pass and find some potential improvement in the approach of the game. We shall analyze the different types of passes occurring during a game and see how the classic approach of passing could be altered to increase efficiency and defensive line deception.

There would be two different kinds of passes occurring in a game:

- The short close range pass
- The open field pass

In the first case, we are in a fairly simple case of a passer/receiver scenario, where the decision making by the player passing the ball involves the right timing of the pass and its intended receiver who is generally a partner running or standing nearby. The outcome of the pass is generally a 100% success at close range unless under intense defensive pressure. This type of pass will usually occur when the ball exits a ruck and the tactical decision was made to carry the ball in contact at close range with the first receiver; or also in the situation of a pass in contact to a partner coming in support in the same space interval. In both cases, the information taken from the game by the player passing the ball, the player receiving the ball and the defenders is clear, and the reading of the game is simple. It is not the situation we are interested in here...

The open field pass is a much more interesting case of study as we actually can orientate the game into an information deception scheme in favor of the ball users instead of the defenders as it is too often the case nowadays with the modern reinforcement of the defensive lines.

The open field pass occurs from set pieces (scrum and lineouts), or from rucks when the decision to take the ball wide has been taken. It is not necessarily involving only the backline as forwards can be thrown in the mix too. Therefore the whole team should be aware of such a game situation and train accordingly.

Let's have a look at a classic situation: a scrum 40m out, on the 15m line. The decision has been taken to take the ball wide where the halfback will relay the ball to the 10 acting as a pivot. 1st five will spin the ball wide, miss pass 12 for 14 in the line, 13 out wide, 15 on the inside. 14 will either attack the 12 channel, move the ball wider or inside to support players.

In most instances if the scrum is not disrupted and neither is the pass of the halfback from the base of the scrum, the 10 will receive the ball standing and immediately fire a spin-pass in front of the receiver (14), 12 and 13 acting as decoy runners. From there the players, receiver and support players will read what is in front of them to make the next decision in continuing the play. Identically for the defenders, the information taken from the move will be pretty clear if decoy runners are not well timed; but the intention will be difficult to hide for long, because the pass will actually be aimed at the intended receiver.

Let's imagine now the other way around: the pivot do not actually pass to a receiver, but fire his pass on an ideal trajectory where all runners could actually intercept the ball on its trajectory as they see fit. In this particular cited example, 10 spin his pass flat with 12, 14, 15 possibly and realistically being receivers, running at different angles; they see while the ball is in flight what is happening in front of them, and the actual decision of who get the ball is a matter of the split fraction of a second in decision making reading the game. Hence the player in best position gets the ball calls it and gets the support of the others. This would increase by far the unpredictability of the move as in a way, even the pivot will not know who will get the ball.

Is this realistic? Can it be applied? It actually was a few years ago with great consistency and accuracy by one of the greatest rugby team in history: the Canberra Brumbies in the 2004 Super 12 competition, which they ended up winning that year. On the international scene only the Wallabies of that period and Ireland (2005-2006) had the ability of this great passing skills with a high degree of reliability and efficiency.

This concept applied at its best was during the 2004 Super 12 Brumbies campaign, specifically in the semi final and the final. In the final, they were able to play against another great team the Canterbury Crusaders a style of rugby at a level never achieved at the time and in my opinion never achieved since. The Brumbies put over 30 unanswered points to the stunned Crusaders in the first thirty minutes of the game. They were actually at that point literally "walking on water".

How were the Brumbies able to achieve this fate? It was mainly due to their superior ability to attack the advantage line, recycle quick clean ball, and their superior passing capacity. They had the two best passers of the game at the time: George Gregan at halfback and Steven Larkham at 1st five who consistently used the technique of firing their passes on an ideal trajectory which could be intercepted in flight by two or three players. Backs receivers were also skilled in the same concept and always able to deceive the defense line of the Crusaders. The Brumbies were able to cross the gain line in most attempts and forced the Crusaders to play defensively retreating constantly on the backfoot.

To be able to realize this it all start with an optimal coordination between 9 and 10, who both must be outstanding passers. In a back move, the coordination between all potential receivers and the pivot must be silky and well worked. From the outside, it actually looks like the receiver who made the decision to intercept the ball in flight is taking the ball "by surprise". If it surprises the viewer, potentially even team mates, chances that it will surprise the defenders are pretty high. We all know about "decoy runners", but how many decoy runners could actually take the ball and carry it efficiently to the line? It is not about "decoy runners", it is all about 2 or 3 runners, coming towards the ball's trajectory at different angles, all capable of taking the ball in flight by cutting its trajectory with the very same efficiency, but getting only one runner physically taking the ball and ensure that this runner is the best one to do so at this particular moment of the game. It is about passing skills, precision, running angles, reading the game ahead and moreover decision making in the very heat of the action and communication. All these parameters have to be adequately trained. It is time consuming, very frustrating at time but the reward is some sort of invincibility!

In the first 30 minutes of the 2004 Super 12 final, the Brumbies offered in my opinion the best rugby ever played and were able to perform so because most of their passing was using this very concept. It was reproduced with less consistency in my view by the Wallabies and Ireland on the international scene. I still believe today that the Irish team of 2005 and 2006 had the smoothest and best passing skills of any international team in the world.

During the 2007 IRB RWC in France, the general passing skills dropped dramatically and today the passing skills of the professional players are not at the standard it used to be 4 or 5 years ago. This could be induced by tougher defense systems, but the ELVs were made in favor of the game expansion. My assessment is that players rely too much on strength and power for passing, not enough on accuracy, and moreover players may not have time to work on the actual symbiosis necessary to fulfill the requirements of this passing concept. They should as it is an undeniable lethal weapon against the modern days reinforced defense systems.