Creating and Developing your Forward Line Play

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To successfully play the modern game of Australian Football you need to develop effective positional play which is a combination of role play, tactical elements and structures. At the attacking end of the ground your forwards need to be an extremely organized group and play the role as instructed, bringing with them a very competitive brand of play. Along with a creative mindset, a want to convert opportunities and a ‘team first’ approach is the attitude needed to play forward.

Over the years the coaching terminology has changed and even some roles are now different – so if you ask coaches what is the perfect forward set up you would get many different answers. ...talls, smalls, hybrids, forward pressure specialists, resting ruck, resting mids.....that’s 6 players so we are already full!

What are some Forward Roles?

1. Must have the ability to compete one on one in the air and on the ground. Good leading patterns are critical to this position. The main anchor position close to goal and must be able to read the long high ball. Good goal finishing ability.

2. Must have the ability to read the ball off hands and also win the ball at ground level. A strong conversion rate from minimal opportunities - good goal sense is needed. Must be hard working and bring lots of defensive pressure.

3. A strong competitive type with ability to lead up and back repeatedly, providing the main leading target option for players bringing the ball out of defence and into the forward half. A good endurance level is needed in this position as when they don’t receive the hit up they need to wheel around and be front and centre of the CHF contest behind them.

4. This is generally the hybrid type player. Can win the ball in the air or on the ground, possesses good football instincts, the ability to play up high or deep forward and provide defensive pressure.

5. Will be used as the 5th on baller. Needs to work up to the wing as a sweeper of the opposition at stoppages and possess the ability to win the ball in close and have good defensive instincts. The role requires hard running and willingness to follow team structures and disciplines.

6. A good reader of the play and must be a very dangerous player around goals. Must be a goal kicking player that works up and back the ground all day. Strong endurance levels with the ability to lose his opponent with leg speed. The ability to win the ball at ground level is a must. Defensive skills and chase downs will be a feature to this position.
Forward skill set:

- Forward players need strong, clean hands, above average kicking skills and must be able to anticipate and react.

- In order to stay ahead of your defender, forward players need to be constantly moving, multiple leads. This makes the defender continually readjust their set up.

- The modern forward must pay full attention to the play up the field. Players need to watch what might happen at its earliest and react to this anticipation. A good deep forward in the goal square can anticipate his team mate winning a stoppage on the centre wing and begin his movement towards space. If he is visible and calls loudly he may have up to a two metre advantage on his opponent.

- It is important to reinforce that if the team mate up field does not win the ball it doesn’t matter. What does matter is the forward player must push back, reset and look for the next opportunity to begin again. In this simple movement you have already made your defender change their position three times.

- If you are standing still your defender is winning, they don’t have to do anything!

- Whatever structures are put into place, every player must understand the structure and their role within it.

- Finally, you have to play what you can see in front of you - the best forward players are those who anticipate the play and react quickly – this can taught at training and reinforced on match day.

Looking at the skill set required the coach can develop some specific activities to assist their forwards develop their game and also practice with defenders.

**Activity One: Multiple Leads**
The player starts inside the goal square at position 1. The player leads hard towards position 2, if not used he changes direction to lead to position 3, if not receive the ball he arcs around the boundary side leading towards the goals. The kicker is in control and can kick to the leading player at any position. Ball marked – go back for set shot, if dropped must recover and have a snap shot at goals. Depending on the age group have the players complete this on multiple occasions with a 30 sec rest between attempts. Include a defender to add pressure – good practice for the defender.
Activity Two: Forward Entries

The purpose of the forward movement drill is to teach not only key forwards, but also smaller forwards, to be on the move and to run different angles to receive the ball from players up the ground. This can be introduced to players at a young age to reinforce where to move. Youth and senior players can also benefit as this drill focuses on getting the best chance to win the ball either in a contested or uncontested situations.

This will teach forwards they do not always start a lead from being flat-footed in the goal square. Often forwards may be up the ground after chasing an opponent. The forwards must then charge back towards their own goal to reset their position to be an option for their team.

1. Coach rolls ball into Red who with no pressure, kicks to leading Red half-forward. This Red half-forward has Black defending him.
2. While this is occurring the other Red forwards reposition themselves to either lead up at their teammate or for a long kick to their advantage.
3. Red half-forward looks inside 50 and kicks the ball to the best option. Red forwards should be leading at Red half-forwards, with one Red forward sliding back inside 50 as the longer option.

Variation:
Add forwards and defenders at both ends. Defenders (black) can transition to offence if the ball is turned over (if they gain possession). They can then move the ball to 1 of 2 free midfield players who can then kick to the best forward option. The drill continues until a score or a second turn-over of possession occurs.

Teaching Points:

- Kicking to advantage and marking skills are a focus.
- Decision making, body positioning and timing of leads are important.
- Team work required to free up space (movement).
- In variation, transition skills (defence to offence) are important. Forwards need to quickly transition from offence to defence and apply pressure.

Some Forward Structures:

There is not a perfect blueprint - yet coaches who are well researched and knowledgeable in the game can create successful forward line structures. It is important to structure your forward line to suit your players, age group and skill level. Having set structures are great but probably not relevant until players are about 13-14 years old, but teaching them the role of the CHF, HF or FP is important. Structures can still fall down for mature age players if they do not commit to important components themselves.

Line Out

The Line Out set up can be used when there is a stoppage on the wing, half back or even at half forward:

- Allows your forwards to create space between them (at least 20m) and on either side – assist the mids who may be under pressure when they win the ball to kick to an area
- Creates one on one contests – all forwards are potential targets – engage a defender -
- Sets up forwards to be front and centre to the next contest eg if ball kicked over Forward #5 head then they become a crumber to the next contest
- Allows the forwards to round up a spare defensive player
- You can vary the set up and have one or two of your forwards set up in lateral positions and play a defensive role as well
Sometimes a coach will find the composition of their forward line comes down to who is available. In youth football - two smalls, two tall and 2 mid/hybrid type (players who can rotate between deep forward, high half forward and even on ball) are ideal.

3 – 1 – 2

- A simple but effective structure is two deep, one in front of the deep forwards and three one centre half forward and two high half forwards
- The three deep are separated in the goal square, two on the goal line about 10-15 metres apart and one about 5–10 metres out from the top of the square.
- The player at the top can be used as a blocker for the leading forward or as an initial lead. The importance of the separation is so that when the players lead they will most likely have a one on one chance of contesting the ball rather than being outnumbered. Another important point is the forwards must lead to different areas.
- The centre half forward player needs to be a strong, marking, mobile forward. They need to be strong in the contest and giving continual efforts. They can be isolated for one on one contests, so if they cannot win the ball, they must make sure their opponent cannot win it. This gives their team mates time to get in and help or to cause a forward 50 stoppage.

Triangle Talls
- Where the forwards are split in pairs with a tall and medium/small working together.
- The tall working as a leading target and medium/small as crumber around the contest or as a hit up player.
- Not only do they work together as pairs – it is important that the six forwards are constantly moving.
- If the ball is coming in one side of the ground then the nearest pair become the targets while the pair on the opposite side of the ground can move into the space behind them. The deep pair need to hold their ground.

**FWD SET-UP: TRIANGLE TALLS**

3 - T

- Suitable for a mobile medium/small forward line where you need space created
- HF push up the ground – involved as extra on ballers, hit up players
- Not used – crumb the next contest
- Constant movement – quick play on ‘wheel and go’

**FWD SET-UP: 3-T**

4 – 3 – 2

- High HF to play as an extra mid – attacking role while the Centre has a more defensive role to assist the defenders
• CHF – key marking target
• HF/FP out wide to create space
• FF and FP deep in the square – with plenty of space in front of them

Adapting to Defensive Strategy:

There are always factors that will influence the situation inside the forward line such as extra defenders, match ups etc. An example of adjusting is when the opposition plays an extra defender. Have the forwards set up as a line out so that they can cover the extra defender and always make a contest.

Conclusion:

So what are the keys for all coaches in developing successful forward line play:
• Assess the skill set of your forwards – individually what are their strengths and areas for improvement?
• Develop a set of individual skill practice activities - these can be done pre or post training
• Teach the role – on the whiteboard, in the training session, feedback on match day
• Develop forward play – structures can be set up and practiced – no defenders and with defenders – include in your training drills
• Connect the forward play with the mids and defenders – all players need to understand the structure and how to play to its strengths

The coloured diagrams used in this article are **Animate MyTeam’s Real-Eye Coaching Images** which cater for all age groups and performance levels - from junior through to the elite - and can be used on all types of digital devices or by printing to display. The Real-Eye images are the perfect coaching tool to outline game plans, player positioning, training drills, zone setups and the various set plays that coaches are trying to implement. The images allow coaches and players a “real-life” perspective that significantly improves a players ability to visualise what is being coached, understand and retain the necessary information, and can be used for playbooks, weekly meetings, pre-match meetings and for one-on-one or line group coaching.

To find out more, visit [www.animatemyteam.com](http://www.animatemyteam.com) or email Dan Haberfield dan@animatemyteam.com