Winning the Contested Football

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The game of AFL has always been based on the ability of players to win their one on ones and is critical to ‘gaining possession of the football’. The ability to win the ball is a fundamental of the game and team success along with disposal skills and the player’s character.

A concern with the ‘natural development’ of young players to use their bodies to out-position their opponents and win contested possessions is the decline due to opportunities to practice this art. Based on subjective observations, there has been a dramatic decline in the number of players doing kick to kick at school, in the streets or in the parks in recent times. If you add in the reluctance for coaches to do hard contested training for fear of injury, the chance to compete against other opponents is basically during games only.

Therefore coaches need to ensure they are doing drills, scrimmaging and small side games to provide opportunities to develop this aspect of the game.

When instructing young players in this area, the following points are essential:

1. It is important to instruct players to anticipate and hunt the contest. Very few young players going looking for the body contact.
2. When developing contested ground balls, it is imperative to teach good technique. Step over the ball, body line the ball and not simply lead with the head, to enable players to protect themselves when going for the ball.
3. Teach players to spend time over the ball, keep their eyes on the ball and gather it once. Young players often fail to watch ball right into hands and come up off the ball too early, resulting in a double grab. Complete one task at a time.
4. Develop player’s core strength to enable them to be balanced, hold their ground and stay on their feet when physically hitting into the contest.
5. Have players engage their opponents and positioning their body between the ball and opposition player at the right time to gain the advantage. This can be marking, stoppage or ground ball situation.

A simple way of addressing contested ball situations with your players is by explaining the concept using the analogy of ‘Ball – Body’. As players move towards the ball they should position themselves with the mind-set of ‘Ball – Body’.

When introducing an opponent or opposition add the word ‘opponent’ to the analogy, e.g. ‘Ball – Body – Opposition’. The focus of the player is to still body line the ball, but now they attempt to
position their body between the closest (most dangerous) opposition player, usually their direct opponent. This is commonly referred to as ‘protecting the ball’, ‘protecting the ball drop’ or being in the ‘best position’ anticipating when the ball will come.

When scheduling practice, provide the players time to master the techniques before advancing to next level. A simple way to look plan it is:

**Step 1:** Block the practice - no pressure or contact.

**Step 2:** Block the practice – with pressure and or contact

**Step 3:** Randomize the practice – with no pressure no contact

**Step 4:** Randomize the practice – with pressure and or contact

The following set of drills and games sense activities can be used by coaches to assist in developing these concepts.
Ground Ball Pick-up Grid

Explanation:
Drills that use a roll of the ball by the coach/helper then a pick-up by the players in a line is a good way to develop pick-up techniques, however this usually has a wait time for participants. A more player inclusive (participation and numbers of touch) friendly activity could be the Pick-Up Grid.

Area:
Rectangular area of around 30 x 40 meters (depending on space & number of players available).

Instruction:
- Players pair up (player 1 & 2, Red and Yellow in the below diagram) in the space of the rectangle, standing beside each other.
- One football between two players. Player 1 rolls the ball forward in the area, player 2 body lines the ball (Ball – Body) and gains possession.
- Player 2 then repeats for Player 1.
- Coaches remind players of the ‘Ball – Body’ focus and good pick-up technique.

Awareness:
Other pairs will be are rolling in the same area which provides perceived pressure and body’s to negotiate. This gives players opportunities to position their body (‘Ball – Body – Opposition). Players from other pairs are not to deliberately interfere with other pairs.

Add pressure:
Once players have had some touch opportunities, introduce pressure by allowing the player who rolls the ball to follow up and chase. Pressure is three quarter intensity and tackles (if any) are hold tackles, not full contact tackles to the ground.

Variation 1:
Make groups of three, the 3rd player (green) spreads around the outside of the grid and feeds (rolls, handballs or kicks) the ball into the grid. The feed is to the advantage of player 1 or 2 (Red or Yellow).

The receiving player returns the ball to the feeder and then moves (leads to or makes space) to receive and lead to a different feeding player. Rotate which player receives the feed and feeding players after 1 minute. Also rotate or mix up the type of feed (such as a roll, handball or kick).
Teaching Points:
- Ground ball pick-up and air ball – Eyes on the football.
- Body line the football.
- Protect the ball with your body, Ball – Body – Opponent and move at the football.
- The drill also develops clean hands, leading patterns, disposal skills and much more.

Variation 2:
Keep the players in groups of 3s. Players move to either end of the space with two players at one end and one player at the other. Player 3 (green) kicks to advantage of player 1 (Yellow). Player 2 (Red) applies three quarter pressure. This continues for a set number of kicks, then rotate positions.

Variation 3:
Players work in groups of four. When a player marks or gains possession, they simulate a mark or free kick and the players must kick over the mark.

As a result the leading player leads on a 35-40 degree angle with a combination of left and right leads (area may need to be wider to allow this safely).
Contest Square 4 V 2

**Explanation:**
The aim of the drill is to win the football (gain possession). Use weight of numbers to spread the defenders, maintain possession (use loose players), then move the ball into the forward fifty aiming to finish with a shot at goal. The contest square drill commences with a feed to advantage of the four inside the square verses two. Play remains inside the square until the coach calls ‘GO’. On the outside of the square, two defenders ★ can defend only when play leaves the square. If defenders win possession, they move the ball to their forwards. All forwards have defenders (this is up to the coach). Play continues until a score or the coach calls ‘STOP’.

**Variation:**
Instead of a feed by the coach, start the drill with a stoppage (ball-up or throw-in) with a 5v2. The fifth player is a ruck player, a third player as a ruck could be added to the defending team as well.

**Teaching Points:**
- Contested ball skills and body position
- Spread
- Give and block and move to space
- Disposal skills to advantage,
- Forward leading patterns and defending leading players
Contested Ball Drill – In the air and ground level
Jamie Macri – AFL Victoria Central Murray Football Development Manager

- **Coach 1** Kicks high to contest A.
- Players on Group A contest mark and ball winner pushes back off the mark, before running off and switching the play - by kicking out in front of player B, who is leading away from goal. The ball winner kicker follows his kick to station. The non-ball winner stays on station A for the next contest.
- **Player B** runs the ball up and kicks high to contest C. Contested ball winner from station C pushes back and squares the ball into the corridor, handballing in front of running player D then follows handball to group D. The non-ball winner stays on station C to contest the next contest.
- **Player D** has a bounce then kick to leading **player E** who marks then handballs back to player D who follows up his kick then handballs to **coach 2**. Players E goes to group F and player D goes to group E
- **Coach 2** then rolls the ball on ground to group F, the ball winner handballs the ball to coach 2 who then rolls on the ground back to group F for a second contest. The ball winner from the second contest kicks to coach 1 then sprints to group A. The non-ball winner stays on station F.