

Wheelchair Rugby League

An Introduction



Contents:

Page 2	Introduction
Page 3	Basics of the Game
Page 4	Match Officials
Page 5	Defending – Tackle, Defensive Line, Marker
Page 6	Attacking – Play the ball, Carry, Kicking, Blocking
Page 8	Drills – Ball Tick, Tag, Mirrors, Line Passing, 2 v 1, 2 v 2
Page 12	Conclusion

Introduction

Wheelchair Rugby League was developed by Frenchmen Wally Salvan and Robert Fassolette in 2000, originally as a form of rehabilitation. As it began to grow as a sport, the French toured Australia in 2004 and introduced the game to us in England in 2005.

Acknowledged as a fast and exciting spectator sport, the Wheelchair Rugby League Association has managed to expand the game despite the competition from already established team sports such as wheelchair basketball and murderball. The catalyst for the sports' recent increase in popularity was the successful 2008 Wheelchair Rugby League World Cup, organized by the New South Wales Rugby League. This has led to an increase in participation at club level and the formation of a Talent Development Group by the Rugby Football League.

Wheelchair Rugby League is unique amongst wheelchair sports in it's faithfulness to the rules of its sport of origin, rugby league. It is also extremely inclusive as it can be played by teams of mixed sexes, mixed age groups and both able-bodied people and those with a range of disabilities.

It is crucial to remember that Wheelchair Rugby League is not just a disabled sport but a sport in which disabled people can participate on equal terms with non-disabled people.

It is worth mentioning that for many coaches, this may be the first time that they have been involved in coaching a disabled sportsperson. While this may seem a daunting prospect to some coaches, it is often easier than coaching able-bodied athletes.

It is my belief that this is because a persons limitations are often more apparent if they are disabled than the limitations of an able-bodied player. A player who has a lower limb problem is just as mobile as anybody else once everybody has got into their chairs. Some players who have spinal problems may not be able to bend, twist or reach too well and this will become clearly apparent.



The difficulties that such people encounter and overcome in their everyday life ensures that they will find their own way of passing, tackling and playing the ball. This is one of the unique joys of coaching wheelchair rugby league, the opportunity to help these players find innovative ways of playing the game.

The important thing, as in all coaching, is communication. Never try and ignore or avoid any potential problems with a disabled player. Talk to them diplomatically but directly about any issues they are having and treat them in the same way as all other rugby league players.

For the remainder of this document, Wheelchair Rugby League will be referred to as WRL.

Basics

As previously stated, WRL remains faithful to the sport of rugby league but obviously the use of wheelchairs requires that there are some changes to the rules by which the game is played. A copy of the full international rules is available on request but the basic differences are as outlined below:

Playing area – This should be a hard surface such as a sports hall, ideally 18-22 metres wide and 40-45 metres long.

Ball – A standard size 4 rugby league ball, slightly deflated to 6psi.

Players – Each team should consist of 5 players and up to 5 substitutes.

Kick-off – Should the ball bounce and go out of play, it is the receiving team who receive possession, either near the touchline or with a central 8 metre restart if the ball went dead-in-goal. If the ball goes out on the full, it is a penalty on half-way to the receiving team.

Play the ball – This is described in detail in the Attacking section of this handbook.

10 metres – the standard 10 metre measurement in rugby league such as 10 metre lines, 20 metre restarts and such are replaced by units of 4 metres. For example, in Wheelchair Tag Rugby League the defence retires 4 metres from the play the ball, a kick off must travel 4 metres, and so on.

Scrum – There are no scrums in WRL, they are replaced by a tap restart.

Kicking – All kicking is done by hand, utilizing the top of a closed fist, with contact being made by the area around the thumb and forefinger.

Scoring – Points are awarded as per rugby league, with conversions / penalty goals being taken from an extended kicking tee, which must be no higher than the wheel of the kicker.



Match Officials

Unlike rugby league, WRL uses two referees who are positioned on either touchline. In addition, there should be two In Goal Judges to assist on decision making but no Touch Judges are used.

The primary referee is the Offensive Referee, who will deem when a tackle is completed, control the tackle count, mark the play the ball and monitor the attacking team for infringements. They have overall control of the match.



The secondary referee is the Defensive Referee who will mark the defensive line and monitor the defensive team for infringements.



Defending

As in rugby league, there are a number of different opinions on which is the best way for a team to defend in WRL and there are several different systems in use. Which is the best method differs from team to team, dependent upon their goals and attributes. Some teams like to use a marker but no fullback and other teams do not use a marker but play with a fullback. As in rugby league, there is no right or wrong, only opinion.

When defending in WRL, it is important to consider that changing direction at speed requires longer than on foot and that too much speed forwards or to either side in the defensive line can leave a team vulnerable. For the same reasons, correct positioning in defence is probably more important than in rugby league as a player is unable to quickly take a couple of steps sideways to alter their position.

The basic mechanics of defence are described below:

Tackle

A tackle can be made in one of two ways, by either the removal of one or more of an opponent's tags or by them losing their momentum. When a tag has been taken, it should be held in the air to indicate to the referee that a tackle has been made and the tag should then be dropped to the floor where the tackle was completed.



If an attacking player's momentum is stopped by one or more defenders who are trying to remove their tag then the referee will deem the tackle completed, even if no tag is removed. Should an attacking player have no tag on their shoulder then the defender only needs to touch them on that arm between their shoulder and their elbow to affect a tackle, the area that would be covered by the tag.

While chair to chair contact is inevitable, it is only legal for a defender to make contact with the ball carrier if they are attempting to remove a tag. If a defender pushes their chair into an attacker, using both hands and without trying to remove their opponent's tag, they will be penalized for foul play.

Defensive Line

The defensive line must retire 4 metres from the play the ball, to the point indicated by the defensive referee. When the ball is being played, the defensive line can not move forward until after the ball has been passed, as in Mini rugby League.

Marker

The defending team is allowed one marker at the play the ball. This marker must be square and between 0.5 and 1 metre from the play the ball. The marker can not move until the ball has been passed as in Mod rugby league.

Attacking

As an attacking player in WRL, timing and angles are even more important than in rugby league and this is because it takes longer to accelerate or decelerate than it does on foot. It must also be considered that changing direction requires more time and space, particularly when moving at speed.

For somebody new to playing WRL, the most noticeable difference when attacking is that you cannot propel yourself while holding the ball. To push your chair while in possession, it is normal to place the ball in your lap but it must not be gripped between the knees.

Aside from the differences in movement between WRL and rugby league, most other attacking play is the same. It is still important to ensure that players look for gaps, draw and pass, create overlaps etc. Due to the nature of chair movement in defence, wrap around plays and switches in play are particularly effective methods of attacking and only having five players on the team is far more limiting than the fact that the players are in chairs.

Play the ball

The area in which the game of WRL differs most from rugby league is at the play the ball as the use of wheelchairs makes the standard play the ball impossible. In WRL, the correct play the ball procedure is in four stages as explained below:

Tag – In addition to a tag on each shoulder, players also carry a number of spare tags. Once an attacker has been tackled, they must replace at least one tag before playing the ball. If both tags have been removed in the tackle, it is only necessary to replace one tag, the second being

optional. If a player is deemed tackled due to their momentum being stopped but retains both tags, then they are able to play the ball immediately. The act of replacing a tag symbolises a player regaining their feet before playing the ball and therefore a player tackled by the momentum rule is the equivalent of being tackled standing up.

Position – As in rugby league, the tackled player must ensure that they are facing their opponents try line before playing the ball. They must also be at the place at which the tackle was made, as indicated by the Offensive Referee.

Tap – Once their tag has been replaced and they are positioned correctly, the player may now tap the ball. This represents the ball returning into play as with the ball been played backwards by the foot of a rugby league player. The ball is to be tapped on the floor in front or to either side of the player. If any player has a disability which prevents them from reaching the floor, they will instead tap the ball on their wheel. Such players are identified to match officials and opponents by a coloured band or tape on their arm.

Pass – Once the ball has been tapped, the player then passes the ball onto a team mate. The pass can be as short or long as the passer wishes and can be to any player on their team who is in an inside position. This replicates the act of the dummy half pass.

Sequence – It may be helpful for beginners to remember the sequence as TPTP: Tag, Position, Tap, Pass. It is not permitted to play the ball to yourself.

Carry

In WRL, both hands are required to move forwards effectively and it is therefore not possible for a player to carry the ball in the same way as rugby league. When pushing, an attacking player carries the ball placed on their lap but it must not be gripped between their knees. It is the ball carriers responsibility to maintain control of the ball during a tackle but there is no ball stealing permitted. To enable players to change direction while still having the ball available to pass means that there is generally more one handed carrying and passing in WRL than in rugby league. This is why a size 4 ball is used.



Kicking

The full range of kicks used in rugby league can also be used in WRL. A kick is made by striking the ball with the top of a closed fist, using the area around the thumb and forefinger. Kicking in WRL requires a great deal of accuracy due to the size of the court. The reason that a slightly deflated ball is used in WRL is to avoid excessive bounce on the hard playing surface.

Blocking

Attacking players are permitted to block the hand or arm of a defending player who is attempting to tackle them. However, this must not be confused with actually fending. To fend off an opponent to any other part of their body than their hand or arm which is making a tackle will be penalized.

Sample Drills

As stated earlier in the module, many rugby league attacking and defensive drills can be adapted for use in WRL and the most restrictive factor is the team size rather than the use of a wheelchair.

In this section there are several basic drills listed which are suitable for both coaches and players who are new to WRL. These drills have been carefully selected as exercises which will develop core skills for players but are particularly good drills for rugby league coaches to observe to better understand the differences in player movement in WRL.

Ball Tick

4 players in an 8 metre square. 1 player has a ball and must attempt to touch each of the other players on the arms or upper body with the ball. Ticked players are frozen and are only released to continue if the ball is dropped. Striking at the ball is not permitted and the game ends when all targets have been ticked.

This drill teaches the targets evasive skills in the way they use their chair and also the way they are positioned in the chair (lean, twist, duck) to avoid being ticked.

The ball carrier is learning a fundamental WRL skill of being able to move and change direction at speed while still being able to make the ball quickly available to hand. A proper grip is essential.

While coaches should be observing the points I have mentioned above, this is also an opportunity to assess a players chair skills in the same way we would be able to observe a rugby league players footwork.

This game should be played at pace and can be played by as many players as required by adjusting the square size or even adding a second ball.

Tag

6 or more players in a square at least 8 by 16 metres. Split into 2 equal teams, each player wears 2 tags and must try to remove the tags of the opposing team's players. When a player has collected a tag, it must be returned to their base before they collect any more and a player in possession of an opponents tag cannot have one of their tags removed. Players are allowed to block tackles as in a WRL match but must leave the space when both of their tags are removed. The game ends when one team has no players remaining.

This is another drill which uses evasion both of and in the wheelchair while players are also blocking tackles. In addition, players are required to track a target, time and affect a tackle. Players will develop a better understanding of where to position their wheelchair to make a tackle.

Coaches again have the opportunity to assess chair skills but more importantly, a players tackling technique. If a would-be-tackler approaches a player with their arms extended, they will be blocked and will also be unable to change direction. Players must get their approach right and be close enough to affect a tackle before attempting to do so. Also monitor the teams for communication and teamwork in co-ordinating their movements.

This game can be played by any number of players by simply adjusting the size of the playing area.

Mirrors

6 players with 2 x 4 metre channels, with each channel divided in half. There should be 2 players in each channel, one on either side of the half way line. The players on one side are defenders, the players on the other side are attackers, with 2 players resting.

The attackers are to move around freely within their channels, trying to beat their opposing defender without actually crossing the half way line. Attackers are permitted to switch channels and after 1 minute, players rotate positions until they have been in each position and therefore spend 2 minutes attacking, 2 minutes defending and 2 minutes resting.

While this may at first appear to a coach to be another chair skills drill, this is far more. This drill is about positional sense in both attack and defence to either beat or contain an opposition player. It is important that defending players turn their chair with their back to the opposition when switching from side to side. This is because if they do get beaten, they are facing in the right direction to push and chase. It is also imperative that the defenders are communicating to monitor switches by the attacking players.

This drill can be expanded by simply adding extra channels for extra players. It is also important to add extra resting positions as this drill can be very strenuous when played at game speed.

Line passing

5 players on a court 20 metres wide and as long as possible, with players line passing while traveling lengthways down the court.

In WRL, line passing accurately and at game speed is significantly more difficult than in rugby league. The whole aspect of timing changes dramatically and a less than accurate pass is extremely difficult to catch as players moving at speed cannot simply stop, jump or stoop to catch a ball.

The ultimate object of the exercise is not to be able to pass the ball along the line and back two or three times without dropping the ball while moving slowly. While that is a good starting point from

which to progress, the goal is to be able to move the ball from one side of the court to the other at game speed, which might only be possible once over the length of the court.

The key is for all players to do their pushing 'off the ball'. If a player is moving at top speed before they take a pass, they have enough momentum to 'catch, look and pass' without slowing down the speed of the line. However, if a player is trailing the ball carrier slowly when they take a pass, they must do one of two things. The first is to place the ball on their lap and begin pushing to get their speed up before they can pass the ball on and that time is not available to players in a match. The second is to simply pass the ball on having slowed down the pace of the line and the team's attack will have lost all momentum.

The timing is the key element of this drill simply because accelerating in WRL takes longer than in rugby league. Once a team can competently repeat this drill at game speed, the door is open to introduce a full range of attacking moves from rugby league, such as inside passes, face balls, wrap around plays and scissors. All of these moves work well in WRL.

2 v 1

3 players in a 5 metre channel, approximately 10 metres long.

Due to a WRL player having no control over their chair when carrying the ball in two hands, it is accepted that there will often be contact between an attacker and defender after the attacker has passed the ball, due to the chair 'rolling on'.

As in rugby league, it is important for an attacker to draw the defender before passing to their supporting team mate. If this is done properly, the 'rolling on' may inadvertently impede the defender in contact, aiding the attacking team.

It is important as an attacker to utilize the fact that in WRL a defender cannot slide sideways. Whenever possible, an attacker should attempt to either turn the defender away from their supporting attacker or to pass the ball close enough to collision to impede the defender with their chair within the laws of the game.

If Attacker 1 is in possession with Attacker 2 to their left and a Defender ahead, they have two passing options:

Firstly, they could approach the Defender with the defender slightly to their right and arc across the front of the Defender, turning him away from Attacker 2. Once the Defender is turned away from Attacker 2 the pass may be made, although too acute an angle will make the pass a difficult one.

Secondly, they could approach with the Defender again slightly to their right. Just prior to collision they pass the ball to Attacker 2. If this maneuver is conducted with sufficient speed their progress and inevitable collision with the Defender will eliminate the Defender as a threat to Attacker 2.

It is important to practice both of these passing options, remembering to switch the side from which the ball starts and rotate the players. This drill can be increased to 3 v 2 or 4 v 3 as required by increasing the width of the channel. This drill should be used to develop timing and communication in attack.

2 v 2

4 players in an 8 metre channel, approximately 10 metres long.

This drill requires Attacker 1 (the player starting with the ball) to attempt to neutralize both Defenders 1 and 2, while making a hole for Attacker 2 to break the defensive line. For the purpose of the example, Attacker 1 is on the right. There are two passing options available to the Attackers:

Firstly, Attacker 1 drives at speed for the gap between Defender 1 and 2, attempting to draw and turn both defenders. If one defender is reluctant to engage and stays with Attacker 2, then Attacker 1 may need to adjust their angle and aim for the inside shoulder of the furthest Defender. At this stage Attacker 2 becomes the key player based upon their decision as to which line to take and their communication with Attacker 1, which is dependent upon the position of the two defenders. If both defenders are drawn into the centre by Attacker 1, then Attacker 2 may hold their position on the left but must time their run correctly and ensure they hit the pass at full speed to utilise the gap. If Attacker 1 has had to shift towards the left to draw both defenders then Attacker 2 needs to pass behind Attacker 1 to go through the gap created on the right hand side. It must be remembered that the ball must not be passed before Attacker 2 has gone behind Attacker 1 or this will be an obstruction as per normal rugby league rules.

Secondly, Attacker 1 aims towards the gap between the two Defenders while Attacker 2 stays at the far left of the channel. Attacker 1 then turns to the right, dragging their defender with them and turning them away from Attacker 2. This will leave sufficient space between the two defenders for Attacker 2 to pass through at speed, with Attacker 1 passing the ball to them as they make the break.

The players should be rotated and the ball should be played from both sides during the drill. This drill can be expanded to 3 v 3 by widening the channel. The coaching emphasis in this drill should be on the timing, communication and lines of attack.



Conclusion

The object of this session is not simply to provide you with a list of rules or technical data, nor is it to furnish you with a chart of do's and don'ts. The premise behind this session is to supply you, as a rugby league coach, with sufficient knowledge of the basics of Wheelchair Rugby League to enable you to begin coaching this rugby league derivative.

This game has become so appealing to many because of the speed, collisions and excitement it provides and as the game and its player base continues to expand it will need more coaches.

In comparison to coaching rugby league, coaching Wheelchair Rugby League is probably best described as 'the same but different'! Once a coach has become accustomed to the differences in movement between wheelchairs and running athletes, then we're back to coaching rugby league.

It is worth mentioning again that while many of the people who play Wheelchair Rugby League are disabled, they will expect to be spoken to and treated exactly the same as able-bodied players. Nobody will be more aware of their potential strengths or limitations than them.

As a final word, probably the most attractive feature of Wheelchair Rugby League to many people is its inclusiveness. There are not too many sports where regardless of gender, disability or even age (to an extent); all players can compete together on an equal level. As stated in the introduction:

It is crucial to remember that Wheelchair Rugby League is not just a disabled sport but a sport in which disabled people can participate on equal terms with non-disabled people.