

Scientists may have unlocked the secret behind success in the NRL

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JCU's Dr Carl Woods and colleagues looked at the performance indicators of winning and losing NRL (National Rugby League) teams. He says a number of factors stood out.

"Winning NRL teams run further during the game, they have more try assists, offloads and dummy half runs. They also hold on to the ball more and kick further."

But he said the study's unique finding was the relationship between a high number of missed tackles and a lowly position on the ladder.

"This suggests that higher ranked NRL teams have more comprehensive defensive strategies and less missed tackles when compared to their lower ranked counterparts. We would expect to see players in more successful teams tackle in pairs or groups - otherwise known as gang tackling."

Dr Woods says gang tackling is not exactly a secret weapon, but what was less well known was what happened immediately after.

"With the defending side committing more than one person in a tackle, it can open up holes along the defensive line. Defending players need to spread at speed following the tackle to fill those holes. Higher ranked teams may be better at this given their lower number of missed tackles noted in this study."

He said the finding dove-tailed neatly with another fact the scientists had uncovered.

"Our results showed that higher ranked teams accrued a greater count of dummy half runs. This is an attacking strategy commonly employed against an unstructured defence.

"So, higher ranked teams may not only spread at speed following a gang tackle but they appear more equipped at identifying and exacerbating holes in an opponent's defensive line when they try to employ the same defensive tactic."

Dr Woods says the study broke new ground and needed to be repeated for sports scientists to be sure of its findings. He said it also didn't look at locational or environmental factors that other studies have shown to have an impact on a team's performance.

He says the analytical techniques could also be applied to other sports to examine the relationships between [performance](#) indicators and match results.

More information: Carl T. Woods et al, Explaining match outcome and ladder position in the National Rugby League using team performance indicators, *Journal of Science and Medicine in Sport* (2017). [DOI: 10.1016/j.jsams.2017.04.005](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jsams.2017.04.005)

Provided by James Cook University

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