



Skaven Playbook

Or, Offensive Behaviour. Part 1.

By Paul Gegg

It's late in the match, the opposing star player is looking for a last-second game-winning touchdown and your fans are already drifting off to get drunk. But then one of your players somehow fashions a block on the ball-carrier and the ball squirms loose – another player picks it up by his fingertips and launches a hopeful pass into opposition territory - your marked catcher pulls it down, dodges out and dances into the Endzone for the winning score. Snatching victory from the jaws of defeat – is there a better feeling? This end to end play is beyond most teams but with the awesome Skaven, it isn't too uncommon. Sometimes they really can achieve the seemingly impossible.

The thing is that Skaven possess a unique collection of qualities that allow them to scurry between opposing legs, nick the ball and rack up the scores - incredible speed, access to AG 4 players and bargain-basement price cannon-fodder so they can afford a few substitutes too. Add a bit of brute-strength, albeit unreliable, in the shape of a Rat-Ogre and they are formidable as well as fun to play.

Not all of you will remember when Skaven first appeared on the Blood Bowl stage. It was way back in White Dwarf 86 (1985?) when we were introduced to the Skaven Scramblers, led by star-thrower Breet Braingulper (although my favourite was the grotesquely-obese Glart Smashrip). So having been around since practically the game's invention, it was therefore somewhat surprising that no playbook came along until Jim Mawby's BB Mag 10 Article in 2003 and even then, that's been the only doffed-cap to the Blood Bowling Rats. Well here I am to re-address the balance. In this article I'm going to examine the players, skill progression, some specific plays including the fabled One-Turn Score (without Stat Increases) and polish off with possible rosters and tips for both Tournaments and League Play.

RIGHT, LET'S GO

Well I guess we can start with the obvious - speed. Boy, these guys are quick. All standard players Movement 7 and rookie Gutter Runners can cover up to an amazing 11 squares. Even the Big Guy is fleet of foot! Terrific movement - so make the most of it. Spread your players out and watch your opponent struggle to cover all your scorers. On Defence; use your movement to continually re-deploy. Force your opponent into risky plays and try and turn him over.

Next up – Gutter Runners – they really are the stars of this team. They are the most reliable dodgers in the game and therefore are notoriously difficult to mark. That's of course if the oppo can catch up with them in the first place. Apart from being incredibly good at evading opposition TZs, the AG4 makes them perfect ball-handlers. At only 80,000 gold pieces and being able to pick four of the little blighters, well, that's the first four spaces on the roster filled up.

Skaven have always been a decent team but not really outstanding. That was probably because the Rat-Ogres were a complete liability for a good while. The NAF tables (world rankings for the uninitiated to the growing tournament scene) at then end of 2003 would attest to that. But with the introduction of the 2004 Wild Animal rules, the Rat-Ogre became the must-



have accessory for that season and Skaven started to, probably unfairly, win too many tournaments. It really was Year of the Horned Rat. So I was quite pleased to see the Blood Bowl Commission get together and remove General Access from the big idiots at the last Rules Review. No longer a liability but not a definite name on the team-sheet either; Skaven coaches have to go back to the little guys on the team to win the games and that's good news for all.

No team with access to AG4 players have as cheap a basic player as Skaven. These plucky Linerats hold up the Line of Scrimmage, mark dangerous foes, rarely touch the ball and even rarer get within a sniff of a life-saving Apothecary. In fact, you've got to wonder why they do it at all, but at 50,000 gold pieces per rat, you shouldn't complain.

Did someone say Mutations? Apart from the rather uncompetitive Chaos (certainly at low TRs), Skaven are your only opportunity to try out the fun Mutations. I'm not sure any of them are so brilliant that you must choose them when you roll a double, but they certainly add flavour to your games - though thankfully still no 'Spontaneous Combustion' (remember that from 2nd Ed?). More on Mutations in the Players section.

Okay, so far so good. They need a major weakness to make them balanced and you don't have to look any further than Armour Value of 7. Nearly one in two floored players will be at least stunned. If you are not careful, very quickly you will be players down - a KO and a couple of stuns and suddenly those AG4 players are starting to look a little lonely on the pitch. A complete

kicking can quickly follow. The best defence against being beaten up? No doubt about it - score. Or at least look like scoring. Your opponent (unless he is really canny or mad) will be doing his damndest to stop you scoring and is less likely to be beating you up at the same time. Besides, as your KO box will almost certainly be busier than your opponents, the more scores, the more chances you get of replacing your injured comrades.

In the end, you've got to go to toe-to-toe sometimes to force the ball loose on defence and those Runners will come a cropper as soon as your oppo starts targeting them, so look after each and all of your players. It's a fine line between being beaten up and losing heavily and being beaten up and still winning. Often it's just one stupid Linerat that makes the difference. Stay alive and you always have options.

Overview complete - let's look at the players in a bit more depth.



THE PLAYERS

Storm Vermin. These are your blockers. Block and AV8 means they are tougher than all your other regular Skavs. They can survive at the Line of Scrimmage (although I don't recommend you start them there) and are noticeably more tricky to get rid of permanently. But at 90,000, you are paying 40,000 for Block and an AV point, so I don't know about having more than one initially, whatever your format. One, however, is a necessity so you can block at least one per turn with negligible risk of turning over.

Normal Skills: Tackle and Guard.

Double Skills: Dodge or Claw (you've even got a ready-made miniature).

Gutter Runners. These are your play-makers. Movement 9, Agility 4 and Dodge. I nearly always field the maximum (although possibly only three at a league outset). Ball-handling on 2s, tricky to take down and even cage-breakers in the right setting. I'd almost be willing to call them the team Blitzers.

Normal Skills: Block and Side Step - a blodging, side-stepping Gutter Runner can cause absolute bedlam for an opponent's offence as he just can't be pushed away from the ball-carrier.

Other Normal Skills: Shadowing as an addition to Block and Side-Step. With Movement 9, your opponent is likely to give up trying to escape on foot. Add Diving Tackle on top and any opponent's rushing game could be stopped in its tracks. At a later level of progression, Pass Block is also worth consideration for defence-minded Runners.

Key Normal Skill: You NEED Strip Ball. More on that later.

Double Skills: A little controversial but Dauntless; partly because then you have a player that can get into all sorts of positions for a one-dice blitz but also because on a second double, Horns then gives you singularly the best player in the game. "Movement 11. Agility 4. Strength? One more than you".

Alternative Double Progression: Very Long Legs - never chosen it myself as Dauntless seems useful throughout the game whereas VLL followed by Sprint only really provides you with a "cheesy" (or is that just mice?) one-turn scorer. My advice; go with the Dauntless and be ahead so you don't need to rely on the one-turn score.

I should mention Stat Increases here too. Runners get so many SPPs that stat increases come by fairly regularly. I'd go with

Dauntless on a Double 5, but take the stat increase elsewhere. An AG5 Runner can do things that make your (and certainly your opponents') eyes weep let alone a ST3 Runner. The mind boggles.

Throwers. I don't like them personally. You wouldn't put up with an Elf Thrower with AG3, would you? No. So why take risks with ball-recovery when you have AG4 players around? Still, they are your best bet for ball-handlers should you find yourself out of Re-rolls with alarming regularity and many good Skaven coaches use them extremely well. With Accurate they even become better passers than the Runners and they have in-built immunity to Strip Ball. Should you find yourself in the position of an AG increase on a Thrower; cherish and protect him.

Normal Skills: Accurate and Block, then maybe Safe Throw. Could go Dump-Off but I always feel it's a bit risky to throw the ball away during your opponent's turn (no Team Re-roll should your Runner fail to catch it).

Double Skills: Big Hand for picking up on 2s in TZs (with Sure Hands Re-roll) is really useful. Otherwise, Strong Arm to improve throwing success even more.

Linerats. As mentioned before, the great thing about these guys are that they are expendable so can be used to tie up dangerous enemies and are cheap enough to allow for a few substitutes. They don't tend to attract many SPPs though, so try and give them Block and they have a chance of getting to 16 SPPs before they die or get too injured to carry on.

Normal Skills: Block then Tackle.

Other Normal Skills: You should have at least one Dirty Player. Make sure you only foul key opposing players (Wardancers, Ghouls, opposing Gutter Runners etc) as fouling means your Runners are more at risk should they be on the floor. I hardly ever foul without this skill as you've got enough numerical problems without getting players sent off too.

Key Normal Skill: Kick. You NEED Kick. More on that later too.

Double Skills: Guard is great for your Line of Scrimmage, as is Foul Appearance. FA has the added advantage of causing passing teams bit more of a headache, though one is only a mild irritant rather than a full-scale migraine. Leader could also be considered if you are short on Re-rolls.

Rat-Ogre. Now that these guys have lost Block as an easy skill choice and obviously can't use Team Re-rolls, they are back to being unreliable. So you've got tough decisions to make. Do you want to use your blitz on a player that will waste it one in six times and will then turnover fairly regularly? In a lot of cases, the answer is still yes as you don't necessarily want to try and pass a 4+ Wild Animal check to move him into a better position. Mitigate this by using him towards the end of the Turn or give more thought to where you deploy him in the first place.

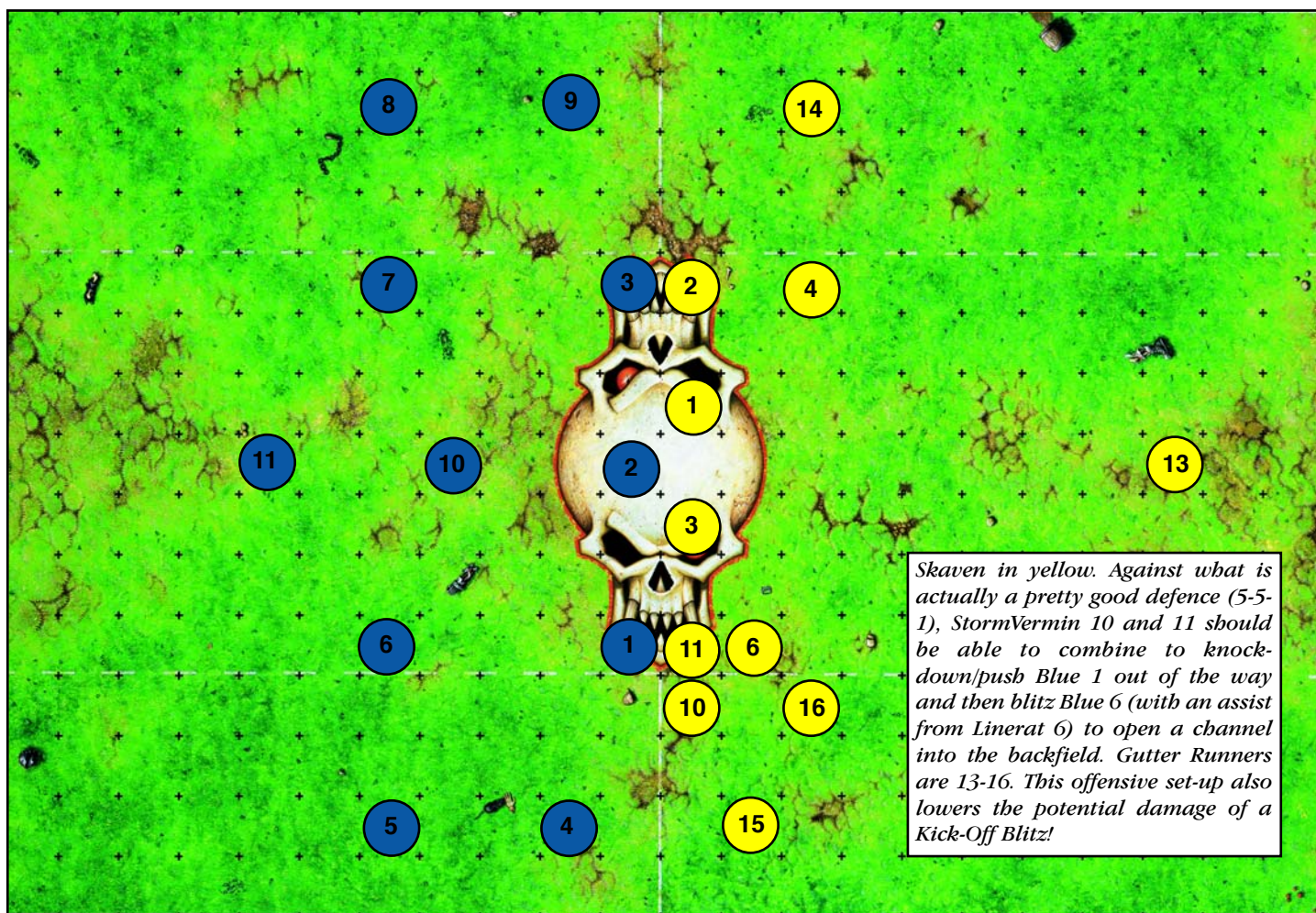
He is incredibly annoying to opposing dodgers (whether he is wild or not, unlike a boneheaded Ogre), especially with that Prehensile Tail. Frenzy can help him get close to opposing cage-protected players and also be used to even up numbers by pushing unsuspecting players off the pitch. But beware of canny opposing coaches who line up defensive assists for the possible second block. What with all the other skills, Mighty Blow is fairly unheralded on these guys, but that helps hit players stay hit and again even up the numbers.

Normal Skills: Break Tackle means that he can dodge through a single TZ on 2s and even into a three-TZ cage on 4s. Guard will also help the Linerats around him get a leg-up in a possible blocking war.

Double Skills: BLOCK! Pro, Claw and maybe even Tentacles would be nice afterwards but he progresses so slowly that you won't be getting more than one double on this guy so just remember the block, right?

OFFENCE

A lot of people have scored a lot of TDs with Skaven over the years and, unless you are new to the game, then much of the info below should already be known to you but I will summarise the key plays. Most of which are achieved in two-turns, so set-up is important.

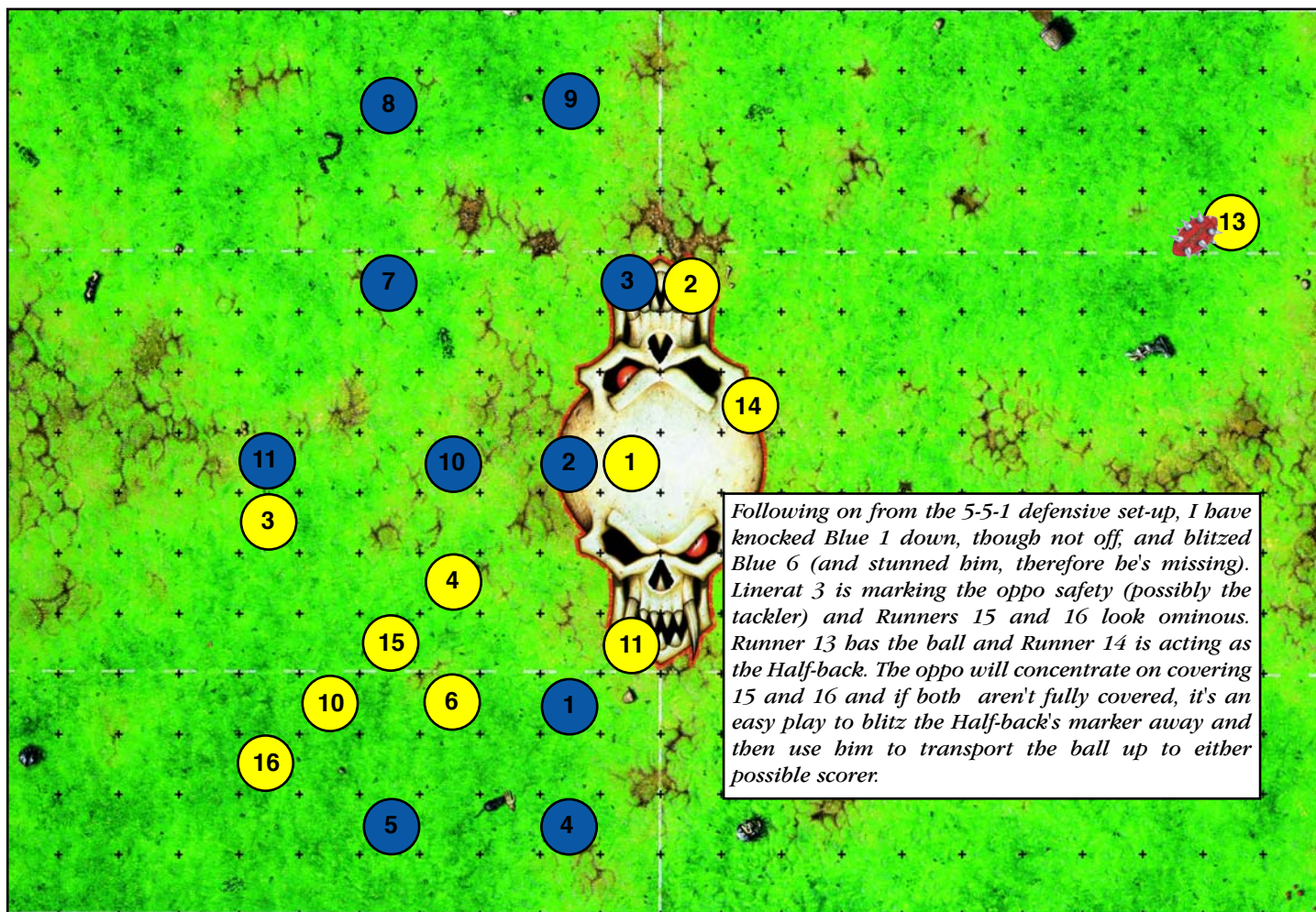


Generally one Gutter Runner should collect and stay deep out of reach. You then need to force an opening for other Runners to get downfield. I generally only send two downfield so the fourth Gutter Runner should be open as a conduit (I like the term 'Half-Back'), as should the Thrower. These conduit(s) should ideally be safe from being hit during the oppo's only defensive turn and maybe even safe from being marked too. Should the kicked ball end up near the LOS, then one of the three forward Runners can pick up and run back towards his own endzone. The deep Runner can then take his place at the LOS, leaving the other two LOS Runners to head into opposing territory. Got that?

Let's examine some of the plays:

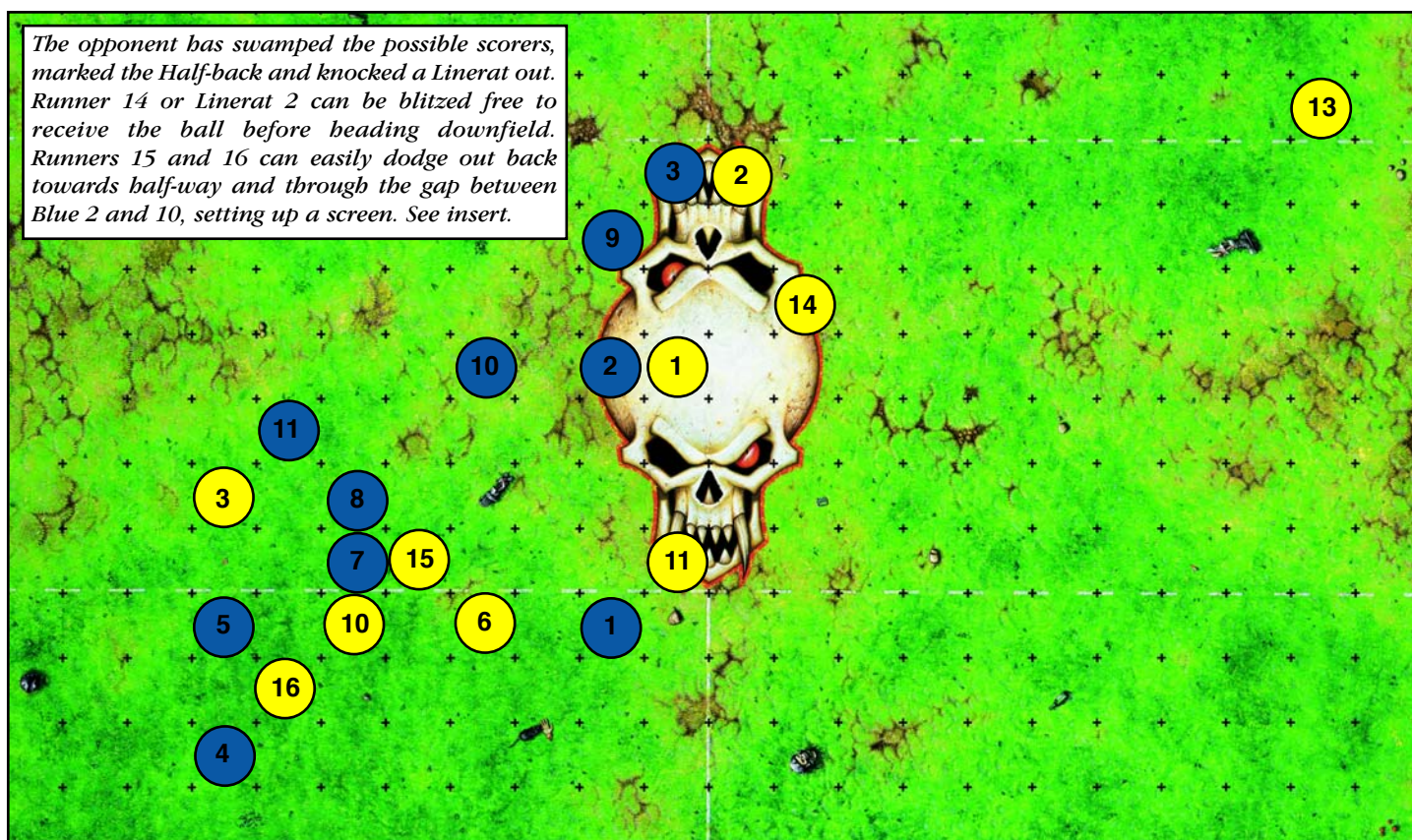
Two-pronged Attack: Force a hole, or holes, in the defensive line and send a Runner down each of the flanks if possible. The 5-5-1 defence actually makes that unlikely but you won't always be playing against 11 or good defensive set-ups. Most tournament and early development teams (excluding Dwarves) will only have one tackler at most. Make the most of that by forcing the tackler to choose which flank he defends. You'll have at least one Runner standing and possibly two come your next turn. Hand-off to the Half-back and pass into the Endzone for a waiting Runner or pass to the Half-back for a hand-off (although the markers will need to be blitzed off the potential scorer). Good opponents will recognise the threat of the Half-back but the long pass is still achievable on 4s (75% chance of success with Re-roll) if you want to/are forced to miss out the middle man.





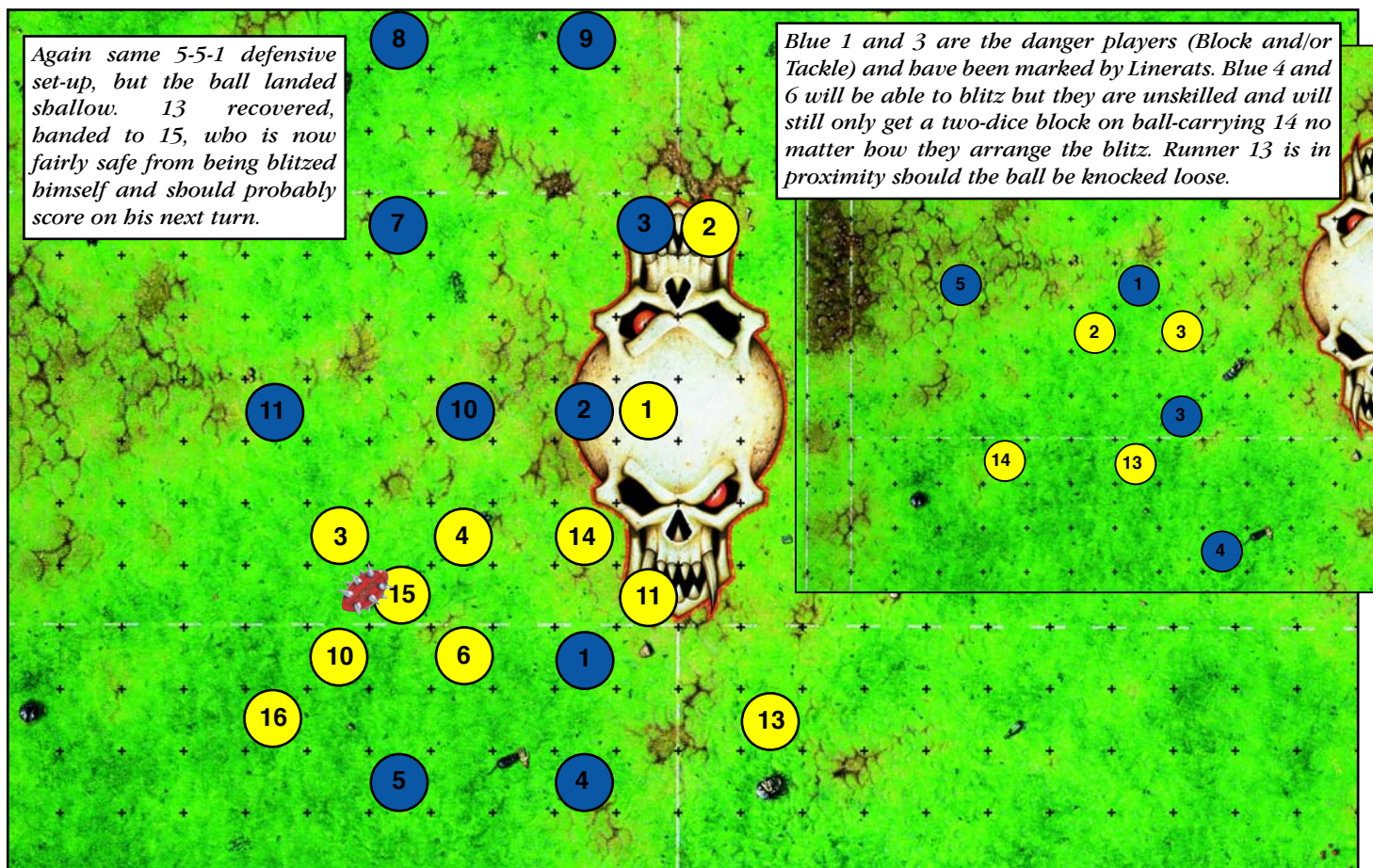
Concentrated Attack: Run the two Runners down the same side. The Oppo's defence isn't stretched but the Runners can screen for each other, can dodge out of TZs easy enough to help with assists and are well-placed to pick up future dropped balls. By focusing the defence on one side, it also possibly leaves the other half of the field open for your next turn...

The Feint: Used when you have two downfield Runners in the Concentrated Attack being tightly marked. You need a back-up plan. Use the fact that your oppo has over-committed on one flank to attack the other side with your Half-back (or even the end of LOS Linerat). Then it's a matter of screening with all available players; Runners and the unmarked Linerats, before dodging as many other Linerats out as you can manage.



The plays so far rely on transferring the ball to the scorer on your second turn, possibly via another player. However, you can eradicate any ball-transferring errors by getting the ball-carrier into a safe position to score on your first offensive turn.

One-turn Cage: Get the ball into the hands of a Runner in a cage in the oppo's half. Easy when the oppo is players down or has dropped back to cover the pesky Runners following a two-turn lesson earlier in the match. The problem here comes with one of your cornermen being blitzed and then your scorer being marked or, worse still, danger players like Strip-Ball Wardancers and Vampires knocking the ball loose.



Rolling Cage: Not one that I'm well-versed in (as I like to have my scores on the board), but you have options with Skavs and one of them is to wait a little longer on offence which means your opponent may be forced to go hurry up on his offence with obvious potential side-effects of spilling the ball for you to score another. Give Orcs seven turns to score and you may well come a cropper. Give them three or four turns and they are far more likely to make mistakes you can pounce on. Skavs have the agility to stay out of harm's way for a little while and Throwers make for hard targets in a good cage, so why not take a bit longer if the situation warrants it (apart from stopping yourself winning any Most TDs awards)?

Cajones Play: For when things have gone awry or when the ball has landed practically on the Line of Scrimmage and you're feeling brave. A rookie Runner is tough to take down if the blitzer doesn't have Block or Tackle. Period. On many occasions I've sent Runners free towards the Endzone when I didn't have to, knowing that all the block/tacklers are marked and the only play is a two-dice block needing a straight POW. This is particularly useful when the oppo is down to one Re-roll as he is unlikely to take you down without using it. Once a player is down to no Re-rolls, he'll play more conservatively AND you can still capitalise on the smallest mistake. Even if he takes you down, he probably won't be in a position to get the ball safe, let alone recover it, so assuming you have a second Runner in close proximity, the rats are still the more likely scorers (see above inset).

Just a quick note on Dwarf and, to a lesser extent, Chaos Dwarfs. These guys are tricky. Sure you can run rings round them for a while but Block and Tackle are well-suited to injuring your star-players. Once they catch up with you, you can find yourself short-handed **very** quickly. My advice here – spread out the Runners across the pitch and force the Dwarfs to chase them down individually. Also use Re-rolls for failed dodges early in your turn if you may be leaving Runners in Dwarven TZs.

That brings me onto playing with less than four Runners. I always have an Apothecary and keep it practically for exclusive use on Gutter Runners. So I guess you could say I have five available for a tournament match (course you would be well-advised to refrain from using an Apo in league play for anything other than a death or stat decrease). Even so, Gutter Runners are fragile when knocked to the floor so get used to playing with only a couple. I guess this is where a Thrower comes into his own, freeing up the remaining Runners to act as receivers, and as long as you have at least one eligible receiver, the one-turn cage or the screened drive/feint is available. Like Wood Elves, you can still score whilst being beaten up. It's just can you get the ball back afterwards? That's the tester.

Right, that's it for this week. Next time I'll be covering defence and how you stop your opponent from scoring touch downs!

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Paul won an 86-man Tournament in Spain last year as coach of the Darkthunder Cheatahs. He was also in Team England that recently won the EuroBowl in Germany. He has won Most TDs at two majors; the Blood Bowl and the DungeonBowl – and lost late in both of them to the eventual winners. All with Skaven. Not with a Rat-Ogre.