

Backline Attack from First Phase

Penetrating Space - it's not rocket science!

Science plays an ever-increasing role in rugby as in other sports. From the minutiae of analyses to the physics of tackling, there seems little room for 'the artist'. While not downplaying the contribution of scientific endeavour, I fear we are in danger of undermining that vital creativity which raises the game above mere statistics. The area which most embodies the creative potential of players, as I see it, is first phase backline attack. Unfortunately, this creative potential is rarely realised, for a number of factors.

There is either fear or ignorance (or both) of the potential dividends of first phase backline attack and a reluctance to be creative or take risks from first phase possession. The conditions pertaining to first phase attack potential defy all arguments against "having a go".

The favourable conditions encouraging first phase backline attack may be highlighted in four related factors:

1. Time: there is at least 30 seconds available prior to set phase commencement to examine & assess the opposition defence formation. This allows more time for the tactical decision makers to choose and communicate appropriate tactical options, whereas from phase play this timeline could be as little as two to three seconds for processing the same amount of information.
2. Defence: the nature of set piece play places defending players in specific areas on the field, therefore allowing easier scanning of the defence. However, from phase play situations defence formations are constantly changing as a reaction to the number of players required to commit to the breakdown.
3. Space: set piece phases require forwards to be bound in a scrum or contained within 15m area close to the sidelines at a lineout. This has obvious connotations for the players not involved in contesting the set piece. Defenders, therefore must cover not only the width of the pitch but also the spaces behind the frontline defence.
4. Numbers: the attacking team effectively have two extra backs available (blindsided wing & fullback) in regard to first phase attack as distinct from phase play situations.

This is not to say that attack from phase play is impossible and should be discouraged, on the contrary the restrictions experienced by the attacking team are also experienced by the defending team, especially if the ball is made available quickly and the attacking is reacting collectively ahead of the defence.

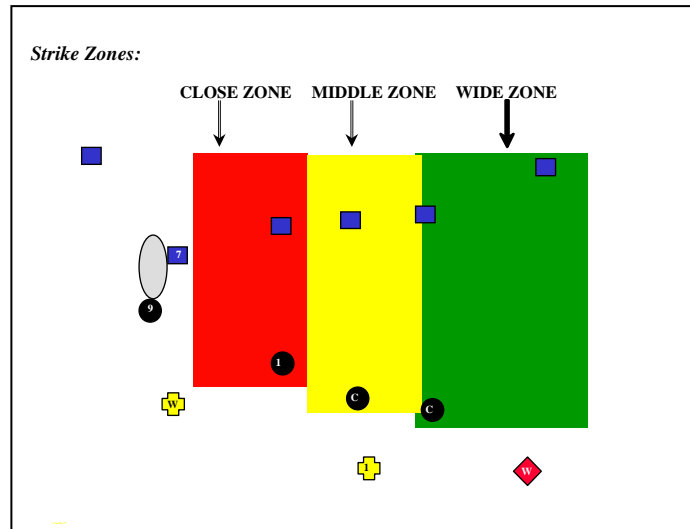
Once the back line is committed to attacking space there are key principles in determining success or failure:

- (A) The correct utilisation of '*linear space*' (the space in front of the attacking back line, sometimes referred to as the "corridor of power").
- (B) The attack formation, (the shape of the back line), and
- (C) The running lines of strike players.

(A).The use of the linear space will ultimately determine which team controls 'the pressure'. Appropriate use of linear space will also preserve lateral spaces for strikers to penetrate. How may this linear space be manipulated?

Essentially, the point where the first receiver catches the ball should correspond to the initial space where the attack intends to strike.

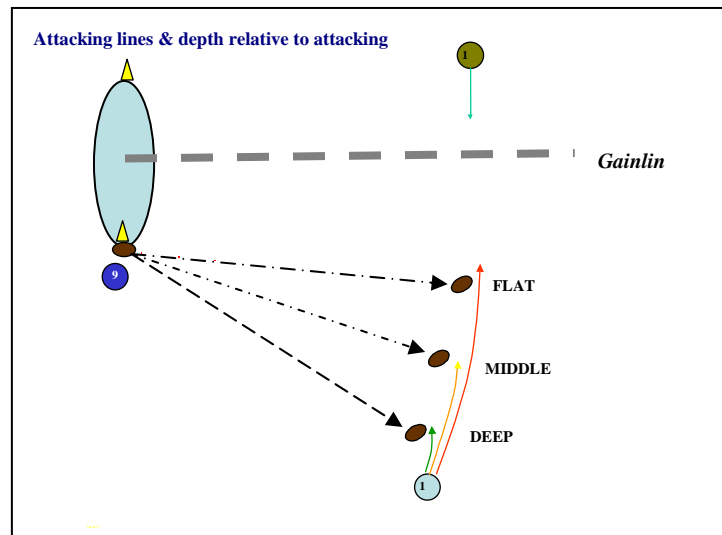
Let examine this in more detail. If we establish *three* lateral attack zones, the close zone (around the number 10 channel), the wide zone (the number 13 channel and beyond) and the middle zone (around the number 12 channel).



In order to facilitate an attack in the close zone the ball should be received as flat as possible, requiring an early run by number 10 and a sympathetic pass from No 9.

In order to facilitate an attack in the wide zone (around the number 13 channel and beyond) the first receiver should receive the ball in a deep position, thus allowing the attack to threaten and hold the defence before moving the ball into the wide channel of attack. And finally, to facilitate an attack in the middle zone (between numbers 10 and 13) the first receiver should run onto a pass somewhere between the flat and deep positions (a middle depth) thus holding the defence prior to receiving the ball.

Therefore, the no. 10 (first receiver) takes up an initial position that will allow all three receiving options (i.e. 'deep').

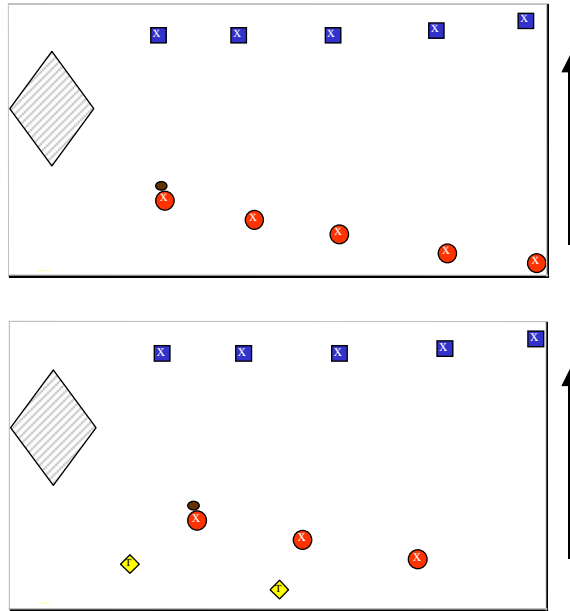


A critical factor in ensuring the success of the attack in the identified zone, is the timing of individual passes in conjunction with manipulating the linear space. Ultimately, the timing of passes is dictated by the speed of the oncoming defence. A simple guideline is the following: the slower defence advances the later passes should be made to ensure that players are checked, and the opposite applies to a fast advancing backline.

It's all about putting pressure on the defence.

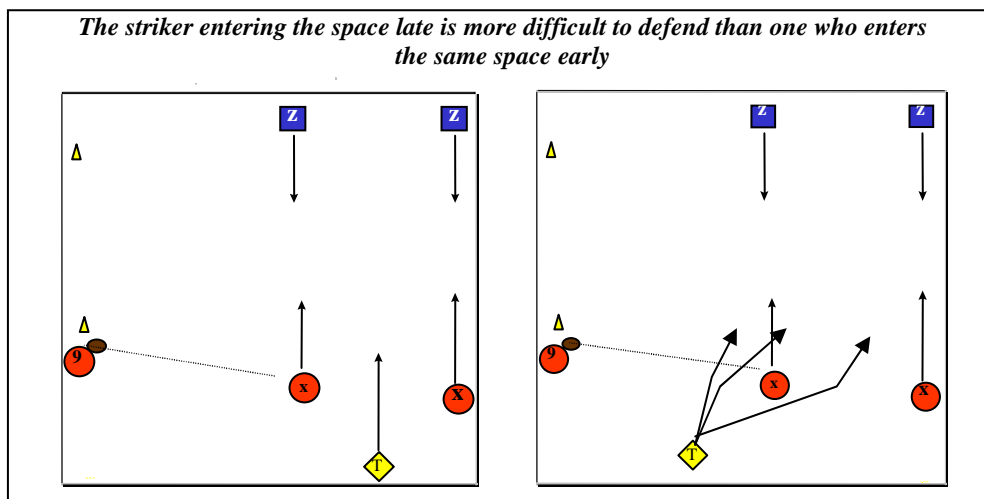
(B). *The attack formation adopted has implications for the use of linear space.* If the back line spreads across the field in a lateral formation the threat is created by stretching the defence. In order to hold the defence and successfully move the ball wide into space, the inside backs must control their running speed in order to facilitate quick passing (kicking to an unmarked player positioned wide is also another strategy). Adopting a 'two-line' attack formation reduces the width of the attack, however it poses a problem for the defence in identifying the potential strikers, causing some doubt, since they are positioned behind rather than outside the inside three backs. To maintain pressure on the defence and reduce their reaction time, correct use of linear space must be adopted by the attacking backline.

Organising a defence for a lateral attack formation is easier than a 'two-line' attack formation



(C). Keeping with the theme of putting pressure on the defence, if the intended strike-runner enters the space *after* the ball rather than *before* the ball enters the same space it reduces the time defenders have to react. Therefore, initial positioning inside or outside, but not in the intended channel of attack by the strikers is a key factor in successfully penetrating the space. Basically, the later the striker arrives in the 'gap', the better.

The striker entering the space late is more difficult to defend than one who enters the same space early



Some teams may have several back line attack patterns, others may have in the region of 20-30 variations at their disposal. A common question raised by players is which option to choose and what factors will influence their choice?

Factors such as weather conditions and defensive player's strengths and weaknesses are obvious.

An additional guideline which can be applied is *D.E.S.*

- *Directness*: move towards the opposition rather than away from the opposition
- *Efficiency*: reach the gainline as quickly as possible, by running and/or passing
- *Simplicity*: use the option with the minimum number of passes.

Players sometimes focus on the movement pattern or structure of an attack option rather than the process of implementation. If a defence is being beaten by a simple attack pattern executed well, should the attack consider a different pattern for the sake of variation? How many times do players change options based on this criterion!

Developing successful back line attack is somewhat of a paradox;
it's difficult to succeed without experiencing failure, improve without taking risks, develop confidence in individuals without empowerment, and promote collective ownership without sharing ideas.

It's not rocket science!

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