

COUNTER ATTACK

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With defensive organisation becoming ever more sophisticated, the opportunities to launch a successful attack in a game of rugby are becoming increasingly restricted to what football experts call 'transitions'. These are occasions when one team loses possession and a window of opportunity arises for the opponents to attack against an unstructured or unorganised defence.

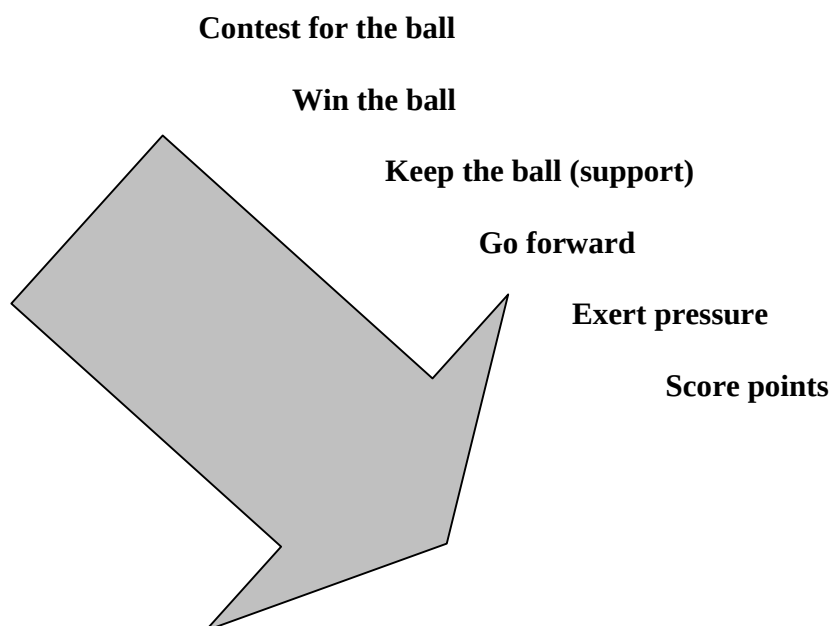
A good counter attack is one of the most exciting elements of the game, with the added suspense that anything can happen. It is often a high risk - high return situation because during a counter attack it is not just the defending team that is vulnerable. More often than not, what starts as a good idea or a rush of adrenalin from one player can lead to another turnover against an even less structured defence, resulting in a loss of territory or even points. In many cases this can be attributed to a lack of awareness of how to attack effectively and how to ensure that possession is secure and/or territory gained.

For the past few years in the northern hemisphere, France have been the best exponents of the counter attack, scoring many tries directly from turnovers and kick returns. It is no coincidence that they spend time on the training pitch practising counter attacks just like any other facet of the game. How many coaches do this at the grassroots level? A lot of the skill involved in launching an effective counter attack comes intuitively to players and, as such, it is sometimes perceived as being difficult or even undesirable to coach. There is no doubt that launching a counter attack has both pros and cons, but by having a simple counter attacking philosophy or structure in place and by practising some basic skills, players will be more likely to understand situations that occur during games and become more adept at turning these into successful attacks whilst retaining an element of instinctive play.

As a note of interest, this season's 6 Nations Championship (2007) produced 21 tries directly from turnover ball without going through any contact phases; this was 28% of the total number of tries scored (74). Obviously this statistic is not representative of the entire worldwide game, but it does provide an insight into how some of the top teams are scoring tries and how significant the counter attack is becoming.

Counter attacking structure.

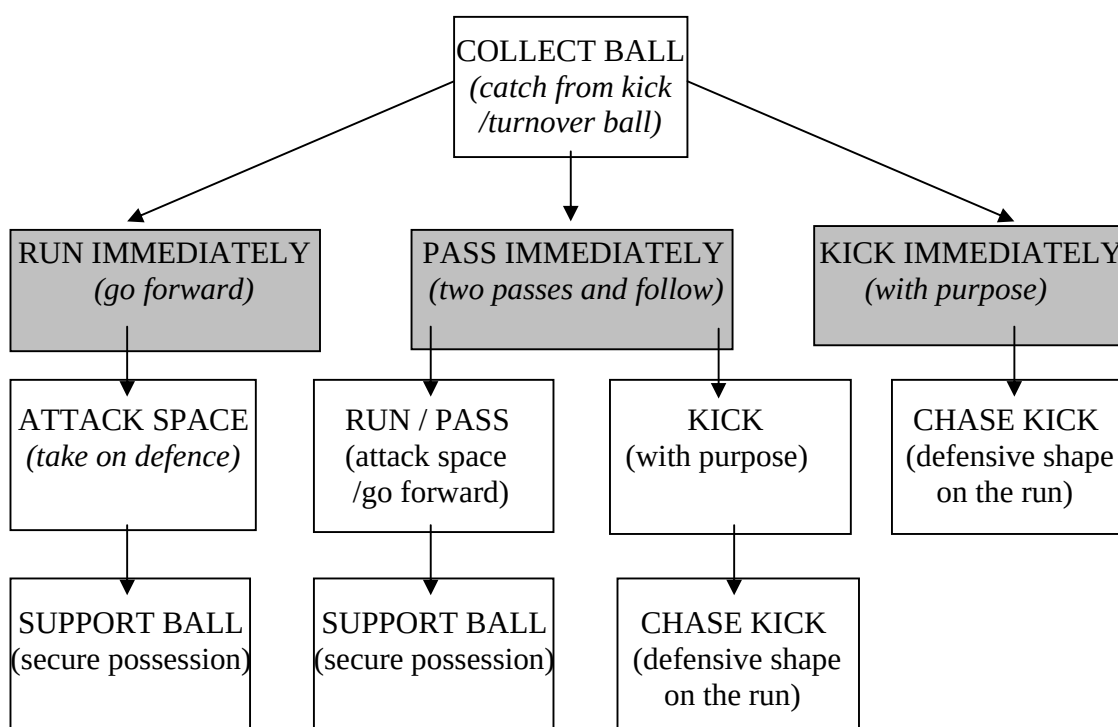
The basic principles of rugby can be broken down into the elements in the following diagram:



From a counter attack, players need to understand how to prioritise the options available to them so that they can make best use of possession. This is likely to depend on factors such as the score, time remaining, field position, own strengths, opposition weaknesses and even the weather, with their individual importance varying from team to team and from time to time. As long as there is an understanding amongst players of their particular counter attacking structure and tactics, then they will be better equipped to make more appropriate decisions based on what is around them.

The most important point to remember is that players should still play ‘heads up’ rugby, making decisions for themselves based on what they see around them to achieve a purpose (keep possession, go forward, exert pressure).

The following flow diagram represents some of the commonly used options available to a team from counter attacking opportunities. Options can be combined to make best use of possession and coaches can turn their own attacking philosophy into a structured framework such as this, with priorities and tactics that suit their team’s style of play:



Go forward and retain possession

If the decision is to run, then the ball carrier should ideally run forward and at space. As a ball carrier, he will probably be looking to at least get beyond the first line of defence so the ability to take on and beat defenders is a vitally important skill to possess, as is the awareness of where space might be on the rugby field.

From a kick return, the initial ball carrier should try to catch the ball on the full whenever possible, because this will allow for increased time and control to make a decision. He should then get his head up and scan what is in front of him. There is likely to be space either side of the chasing defence and possibly in between defenders (in the form of a dogleg or less agile defenders who are more susceptible to being beaten 1v1) as well as a space behind them (see '*Gain territory and structure the chase*' below). Any opportunity

to take on a defender in a 1v1 situation should be targeted, because these situations are more likely to result in the attacking player gaining territory.

If the defensive shape is good, then the decision to run forward to gain territory and get closer to supporting players is likely to be followed by taking contact or even a contest for the ball (typically from a scrum half 'box kick' where the ball receiver is immediately under pressure from the chasing defence). In this instance, if the receiver remains dynamic through contact, staying on his feet for as long as possible, then there is a much greater chance of supporting players being able to get back onside to help secure possession for subsequent phases of play. A point to note is that from the second phase, most top level teams will generally try and move the ball wide with players running from depth and at pace to exploit space and the lack of defensive organisation caused by the turnover.

If the ball is turned over at a breakdown or set piece, the decision to run immediately is less likely because teams can better exploit the unstructured defence by passing or kicking the ball. However, taking on a defender and looking for an offload will achieve the same purpose of getting beyond the defensive line.

Control the mass and exploit the space

If the decision is to pass, then the player who initially receives the ball from the turnover must react decisively, because the window of opportunity may be lost if he dwells on the ball. Again, the ball carrier must scan what he sees in front of him before making a decision. Usually this will mean attracting the majority of opposition players (controlling the mass) before changing the direction of attack to make best use of the space elsewhere on the field. This is the most important stage of a successful counter attack, because if defenders are not threatened by the actions of the ball carrier then they can concentrate on regaining their defensive shape and applying pressure of their own. From turnovers there is often a group of players already around the ball at the preceding ruck or maul; or if the turnover is from a set piece, they are still at a scrum or lineout. From a kick return, the chasing defenders tend to run towards where the ball will land, meaning that attracting defenders is, to a certain extent, already done.

Coaches can use a 'two pass' rule for counter attacking opportunities, whereby the new attacking team immediately completes two passes to change the point of attack and move the ball away from the masses and into space where there are more opportunities to take on defenders. It is important to note that these passes tend to be most effective when they are executed to the nearest supporting player and players are running at defenders' inside shoulders to stop them from covering the available space on the pitch. Floated or deep miss passes (as opposed to fast and flat) have a similar outcome to poor running lines in that they allow the defence time to restructure and pressurise the ball carrier. The effect of moving the ball away from the initial turnover from a deep kick is best seen when a

team fields the ball and immediately passes it towards the middle of the field where more attacking options become available. This relies on other attacking players working hard to get back onside to support the attack and identify where the space might be.

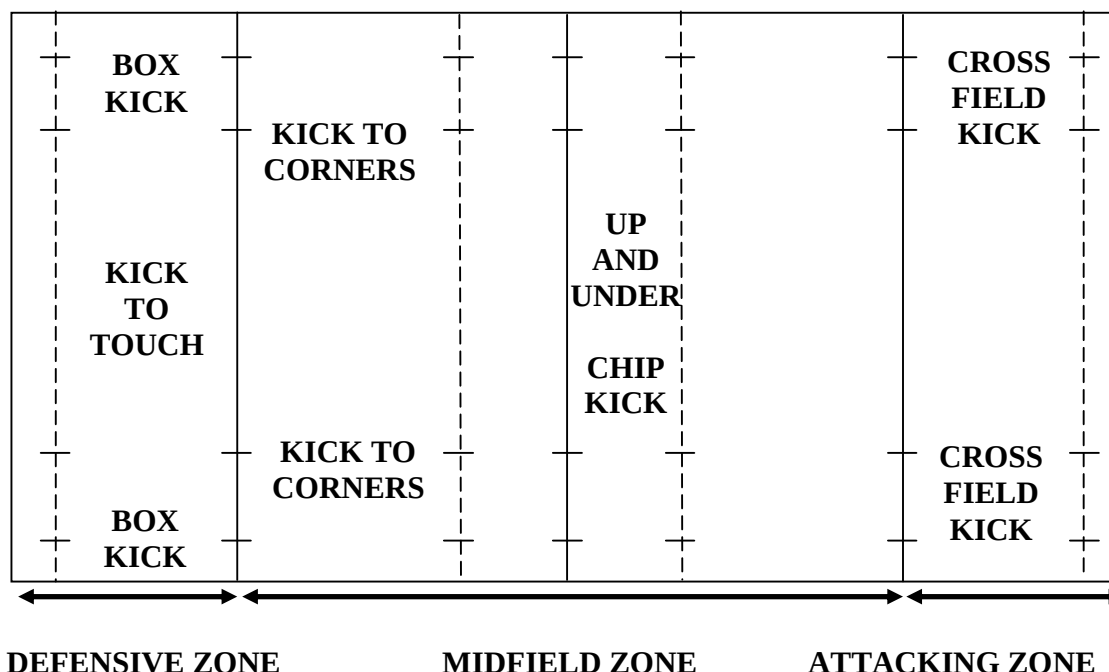
Once the ball has been moved into space, the new ball carrier is usually better positioned and has more time to make a decision to run, pass or kick, based on what is around him. Supporting players should run from depth and at pace to keep the attack going forward. As a simple rule of thumb, if someone is in a better attacking position than the ball carrier (i.e. in more space or with fewer defenders in front of him), he should receive the ball, bearing in mind that the aim is to score but a key determining factor will be to secure possession and/or gain territory. From breakdowns, the two-pass rule can be used to great effect because the defending team are likely to be standing deeper out wide (expecting to attack), which allows the attackers to pick them off one by one.

Gain territory and structure the chase

If the decision is to kick, field position will usually be an important factor. Teams should, ideally, have a kicking strategy in place, which, like the counter attack strategy, is often underused by coaches. In any situation, the ball carrier should look at what is in front of him (both immediately and further up field) when deciding whether to kick or not and if the decision is to kick, which type of kick to perform. This requires a degree of spatial awareness and obviously the ability of all players to perform the skill accurately.

Setting the field into zones allows for kicking options and, indeed, the counter attack as a whole to be tailored to a team's specific attacking philosophy. For example, in the defensive 22m zone a coach might encourage a kick from counter attack with the aim being to gain territory and get the ball off the pitch so that the team can regroup with everyone behind the ball. If the intention of the kick is to gain territory whilst keeping the ball on the pitch, then the targeted area will probably be close to the touchlines so the chasing defence can box in the kick recipient by forming a flat defensive line whilst on the run. An option becoming more popular is a deep kick down the middle of the field. Deep defenders generally protect the touchlines, so the time taken for these players to recover a kick allows time for the defence to put pressure on the ball carrier to limit his options.

A kick from counter attacking opportunities is often a favourable option if the opposition is chasing the game, because territorial advantage can have an effect on any player's mindset (it often seems far more difficult to score if you are 80m from the try line than if you are say 40m from the try line, despite there still being the same number of defenders in front of you). Players should understand that the option to kick from turnover ball should never be viewed in isolation because there are always the options to run or pass. Below is a diagram of how a kicking strategy could be structured:



If the attack is in the opposition half, then players may be more comfortable taking a risk by putting up a high kick, chipping over the defensive line or kicking across the field with the aim of gaining territory and recovering possession. The risk with this is that if the ball is not recovered, then the team will be left vulnerable to a counter attack themselves. From a turnover in open play it is possible that the opposition full back will be out of position (in an attacking position), meaning that the option to kick for territory straight from the base of the breakdown can be more advantageous. One important consideration for the kicking team is the offside law and how this affects retreating support players.

It must be understood that, although the kick might seem a viable option in terms of territorial gains, a poor kick can easily result in a loss of territory of equal proportions, particularly if the kick chase is poor. On the flip side of this, a poor kick can be partially corrected by a good chase that puts the opposition under pressure. When chasing a kick, players should form a flat defensive line as quickly as possible whilst on the run, ensuring that some players remain in deep positions to field returning kicks (sometimes resulting in what commentators call 'aerial ping-pong').

A counter attacking structure that sets out the parameters and guidelines for players will allow for more effective decision making and will enable coaches to assess and evaluate counter attacking situations.

Coaching tips

Arguably the best way for players to make the most of opportunities that arise during a game is for them to practise these situations during training. Small-sided games are a good way of promoting the use of a particular skill in a controlled environment whilst still allowing players the freedom to express themselves. **Games of touch rugby in a 30m x 30m** grid can be adapted to practise various counter attacking skills. For example:

Kick return: Defending team kicks the ball to the attacking team and chases the kick. Attacking team receives ball and plays 5v3 touch against the defence through one phase. The attack must assess the situation and react accordingly, aiming to score a try. The game can be gradually built up to resemble a full-scale counter attack.

Attack

- Catch ball on the full where possible.
- Look up and identify defensive weaknesses.
- Support players get into position early and talk to the ball carrier about their options.
- Attack with pace and at space.

Defence

- Kick strategically.
- Work hard to get into a flat defensive line.
- Nominate who will tackle whom.
- Pressurise the ball carrier.

Variations

Defence:

1. Players run from different corners of the grid.
2. Two defenders go up followed by a third defender.
3. Adjust spacings between defenders - wide/narrow, defend with a dogleg.

Attack:

1. Players start near the kicker.
2. Players start at corners of the grid.
3. Players complete at least two passes.
4. Players are allowed to kick.

Turnover ball: Teams play ruck-touch with slow breakdowns so both teams can realign. At any given breakdown, the coach signifies a turnover and the teams must react to their new roles (defence or attack). Both attack and defence must react quickly with the attack aiming to score a try. The game can be adjusted so the breakdowns are in different areas of the field.

Attack

- Look up and identify defensive weaknesses.
- Move ball away from the masses quickly.
- Support players get into position early and talk to the ball carrier about their options.
- Attack with pace and at space.

Defence

- Identify your defensive weaknesses (including at fullback).
- Get into a flat defensive line quickly.
- Nominate who will tackle whom.
- Pressurise the ball carrier.

Variations

Defence:

1. More/fewer players go into the breakdown.
2. Two defenders go up followed by a third defender.
3. Adjust spacings between defenders - wide/narrow.
4. Defend with a dogleg.

Attack:

1. More/fewer players go into the breakdown.
2. Players can attack with more width.
3. Extended the size of the pitch.
4. Players complete at least two passes.
5. Players are allowed to kick.

To launch a successful counter attack, players should be able to:

- Beat a defender in a 1v1 situation off either foot by swerving, stepping, spinning etc.
- Stay on their feet during contact for as long as possible with a good leg drive.
- Pass (and receive) the ball off either hand over varying distances with accuracy and whilst on the move.
- Run on appropriate lines to commit defenders and preserve space for team mates.
- Kick accurately under pressure to various targets off either foot.
- Scan and identify space on the rugby field and communicate this to team mates.
- Understand when and where to run, pass or kick, based on defenders' movements and their own support players (and be able to execute these skills accordingly)