

THE PRINCIPLES AND TECHNIQUES OF DEFENCE IN RUGBY UNION BY PAUL WESTGATE

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1. The Aims of Defence.

Today, defence is a major part of rugby union and teams need constant practice. Given that in a game of rugby, possession of the ball is generally 50%-50%, do we as coaches spend at least 50% of training time on defence? Probably not, as our players generally prefer to run with the ball than run after the ball! However, in rugby you can either attack with the ball or without the ball and for me the concept of 'attack without the ball' is an accurate description for the mindset needed to be successful in defence. It is based on dominating your opponent – making him reactive to what you do!

Defence, or attacking without the ball, has two aims. The primary aim is to regain possession and the secondary aim is to prevent the attack crossing the gain-line. These aims are achieved by either dominating the tackle or pressurising the attack. Successfully dominating the tackle will result in the ball carrier losing the ball in contact or being turned over. Successfully pressurising the attack will force them backwards or across the pitch, by not letting them get over the gain-line until the attacking team is forced into an error or tackled into touch.

2. Ten key factors for a successful defence.

- i. <u>Attitude.</u> Players must defend with attitude! There is only one ball on the field and it is yours! The opposition only have temporary ownership of it (i.e. when you make a mistake!).
- ii. <u>Confrontational.</u> This is both physical and mental. Players must be physically tough, aggressive and relentless in defence. They must make powerful, driving tackles that stop attackers. But they must also be mentally tough, displaying a 'warrior-type mentality' and an aggressive mindset. The best defenders impose themselves on attackers.
- iii. <u>Communication.</u> The team must organise its defenders and identify the attacking threats and communication is vital. Defending players inside and outside the ball carrier must communicate clearly and loudly while pushing forward. Communication is not only for the team's benefit but it also exerts pressure on the opposition: big talk (intimidation) and small talk (organisation) are vital.
- iv. <u>Go Forward.</u> Defenders must exert pressure through correct line speed, thereby limiting the attackers` time, space and options and 'protecting' the gain-line

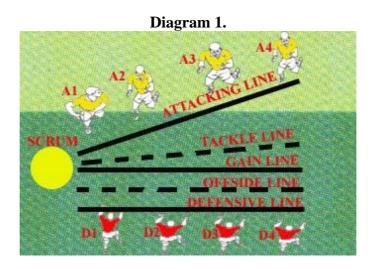


- v. <u>Technique</u>. It is essential that the tackler and the first supporting defender know their roles, responsibilities and the Laws (and crucially the difference between a stand-up 1-on-1 tackle and a tackle on the ground). The tackler must track the inside shoulder of the ball carrier and take his space; he needs (a) quick footwork with a strong square hip base; (b) the front foot forward and close to the ball carrier, low body height and eyes on the target area; and (c) hit, stick, squeeze and chase the feet as the shoulder makes contact. Decision-making on what type of tackle is needed is also important. The first supporting player must know as much as possible about his entry to the tackle area; if the ball is not visible, he must attack the body or legs; if the ball is visible he must 'target the ball', either looking for a turnover or to slow it down (legally!).
- vi. **Enthusiasm.** Defenders must like tackling! They must have an eagerness to hunt the ball and an exceptional work ethic off the ball.
- vii. <u>Fitness.</u> Players need to be fit and must have the urgency to reload (and start again).
- viii. Alertness. Players must be alert and react to quick taps, turnovers and attacking kicks.
- ix. <u>Commitment.</u> Players must have total 'buy-in' to the team's defensive systems(s). They must maintain a disciplined line and good defensive shape, irrespective of fatigue, injury, laziness and/or pressure. They must also trust their team-mates!
- x. <u>Discipline.</u> Players must know the Laws and they must 'play the referee' at the tackle area. After all, most penalties are given away here!

3. The Battlefield.

Defence starts with the battle for possession and the battle starts at first phase. Teams will have defensive strategies at game restarts (i.e. at scrums, lineouts and restart kicks). The aim is to regain possession or, if that is not possible, put the team in possession under pressure by not allowing them 'quality ball'. A team that has 'quality ball' has any number of attacking options without pressure, so any opportunity to cut down an attacking team's options will swing the balance in favour of the defending team.

Before battle commences, battle-lines are drawn up in attack and defence. (See Diagram 1)





The **attacking line** is where the attackers line up.

The **defensive line** is where the defenders line up.

The **gain-line** is always extended along the middle of a scrum or lineout.

The **offside line** can vary (e.g. the back foot of a scrum or 10m back from the lineout).

The **tackle line** is basically where the attackers and defenders meet. It will vary depending on the defensive system and defensive capabilities of the team. It is usually nearer the attacking line than the defensive line.

The rules of engagement on the battlefield are set down in the Laws and again it is vital to know these and use them to your advantage!

4. Defensive Shape.

All defensive systems will have a recognisable defensive shape and this shape is an important key in building a defensive wall that can absorb and nullify various attacking threats. The defensive shape is the angle in which the defensive line advances forward. This is obviously different for different systems but the shape, or line, must be maintained and the defenders must commit to it.

The attackers are continually trying to create situations that lure defenders out of their line in order to disrupt and break their defence and/or create space. They will do this by using inside runners, players running at angles or by using two waves of attack (option runners entering the line late, at pace and attacking space). Very simplistically, in an **In-to-out** or **Drift** defence, the defensive shape is a moving line with the inside defenders ahead of the outside defenders, pushing the attackers towards the touchline. The 'shape rule' in a **Drift** defence is that under no circumstances must a defender advance ahead of the defender inside him. In an **Out-to-in** defence, the defensive shape is a moving line with the outside defenders ahead of the inside defenders, pushing the attackers back inside.

In an **In-to-out** or **Drift** defence, once the ball has passed the defender's zone he should continue to push forward into the space inside the ball carrier. If this shape is maintained for at least 2 zones inside the ball, then it will be possible to defend against any inside passes or switch(es). Defenders must always resist the temptation to follow the ball and be alert to defending the space inside as well as outside the ball. Defenders closest to the scrum or lineout must lead and develop this shape. This is usually the fly-half who, after addressing the immediate threat in front of him, then leads the defensive line forward. Many teams now have good defensive shape leading from the first defender, which is why attacking teams often attack the 'seam' of the defence (the space inside the fly-half). It is also the space where the attackers are nearest to the gain-line and more likely to get some 'go forward' rugby.

5. <u>Defensive Zones.</u>

To help maintain a team's defensive shape, it is important to think of defence in terms of defensive zones (Diagram 2a). A defensive zone is the space a defender is responsible for. The key defensive zones are the ball carrier's space and the two spaces or zones either side of the ball carrier. A successful defence will ensure that these key defensive zones are covered and that the relevant defenders stay strong and square in their zones.



Diagram 2a.

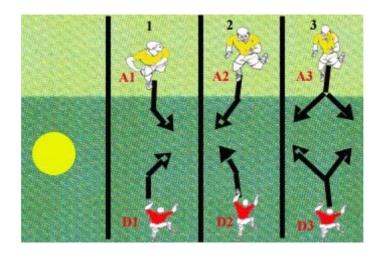
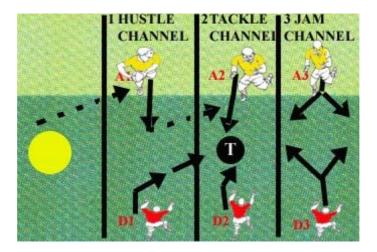


Diagram 2b.



The players inside the ball carrier should execute a **'hustle line'** (Diagram 2b). Their role is to push forward onto the inside shoulder to cover the inside channel. They must not fold in behind or fade out of the defensive line. They have a vital role as primary support at the tackle contest.

The players outside the ball carrier should execute a 'jam line' (Diagram 2b). Their role is to defend the outside option for the ball carrier. They must remain square (i.e. hips facing forward) as long as possible in their zone so they can 'jam' the outside channel (no way through!) and also be an effective defender outside (by 'tracking' the next attacker).

'Tracking' is the first stage of the tackle sequence when a player moves from a stationary start to the point of contact (i.e. the tackle) while controlling the ball carrier. When 'tracking' an attacker, the aim of the defender is to position himself to his advantage and strength (i.e. he stays square with a strong body positioning and correct shoulder presentation). The defender's positioning should be at least a body width inside the attacking player in his zone. This reduces the ball carrier's option of a late change of angle and running at the weak shoulder of the defender.



Staying square allows the defender a good vision of his zone *and* of the zone of the defensive player on his outside.

Defending the zones inside and outside the ball carrier is vital. Attacking teams are always looking to isolate a defender and to put a supporting runner through the space either side of that defender. An astute ball carrier will spot an inside or outside defender who is compromised because he has faded out of line, his hips are turned in or because he has folded in behind another defender.

6. Defensive Spacing.

Spacing is the distance between defenders and the appropriate spacing will depend on the defensive style and system of the team, the defensive abilities of the players, the attacking threats of the opposition and the position on the field.

In an **In-to-out** defence, maintaining good, equal spacing is vital as the defensive line moves forwards and sideways. However, equal spacing does not mean that every space between the defenders is the same. It should be equal to the spacing of the attackers – or at least organised so that all the attacking threats are covered.

Players nearest the set piece or breakdown will be more compressed (the bodyguard, for instance, being closer to the guard on his inside than to the next defender on his outside), but as you move outwards along the defensive line the spacing will become gradually wider. Again, the important spacings are the zones inside and outside the ball carrier. Familiarity of the inside and outside man's capabilities (e.g. his speed and tackling effectiveness) is important so that space between defenders is disciplined. In phase play, for example, a back would stand closer to a prop than he would to another back. It is vital, therefore, not only to look up at who you are defending but also to look inside at who is 'protecting' your inside shoulder.

A vital component in effective spacing and maintaining good spacing is the defensive line's starting position. Being fully prepared in the line with scanning and awareness, talk and urgent reloading will ensure that the defensive line begins with the appropriate spacing.

7. Defensive Line Speed.

The speed which the defensive line moves forward towards the **'execution line'** is very important. The 'execution line' is the critical point or line of pass of the attacking play. You must, therefore, identify what the attacking team is trying to create and adapt your line speed accordingly. For example, a fly-half standing flat should be put under pressure with fast line speed.

The ball carrier and his support players are attempting to exploit the space between them and the defenders. He is trying to either break the line himself or give the telling pass just as the attacking line and defensive lines meet. Pass too early and the threat is covered by the defenders. Pass too late and there is contact, an interception or a turnover. Meanwhile, the defenders are attempting to cut down the attacking team's options by closing the space between the two quickly and



effectively. So, as the defensive line moves forward, it must continue to scan and communicate all threats. Awareness and judgement are vital. It must not allow itself to be pulled out of shape. It must not allow any defenders to become redundant at the critical point where a defensive decision has to be made (e.g. a loop pass or switch). Line speed must be varied to create uncertainty and to make attackers pull moves early.

Correct line speed is essential and will depend on the shape rule of a team's defensive system. A **Rush** defensive system will demand faster line speed than an **In-to-out** or **Drift** defence, where a 'holding' pattern is more likely to be adopted (i.e. allow the play to evolve without interference to the defensive shape). The defending team can now 'influence' the pass and push the attacker(s) towards the defender who has *never* missed a tackle – the touch line! In a **Drift** defence, the line speed is usually determined by an inside player (e.g. the fly-half) whereas it is usually an outside centre in an **Out-to-in** defence. Line speeds can even change between players if you want to create 'alleys' or if the attackers outnumber the defenders and an outside defender deliberately breaks the line to tackle man and ball.

Correct line speed should take into account that the defender will slow down before contact and be balanced before making the tackle.

8. <u>Defensive Organisation from 1st Phase.</u>

Attack from 1st phase has a relatively high chance of success because there is more space available while the forwards are engaged in the set-piece play - up to eighteen players can be concentrated into a small area. Also, the initiative is with the attacking team because it can dictate where the defence sets up. However, defence from 1st phase is easier to manage because the defenders know exactly who is defending next to them and this allows for better communication and execution.

Defensive systems will reflect the defending team's strengths but also the attacking team's style of play. There are basically three defensive systems: (a) **Man-on-man** (and its variations), (b) **In-to-out** or **Drift** and (c) **Out-to-in**. Most teams use a combination of these systems.

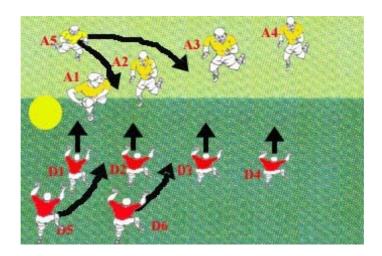
1. **Man-on-Man Defence** (Diagram 3)

This is the traditional rugby union defence. Each player tracks his opposite number from the inside, pushing the attack towards the touch line. Defenders usually align flat and may come up together fast (D1 tackles A1, D2 tackles A2 etc.).

The 'blitz' type of defence is based on the Man-on-man system (i.e. fast line speed and aggressive communication). Defenders defend the ball carrier and support players near him, aiming to block out any passes. This can be very successful in phase play and when there are more defenders than attackers.



Diagram 3.



Advantages:

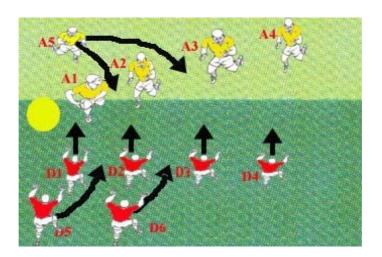
- Intimidating.
- Effective against a flat backline.
- Puts ball carrier's support players under pressure.
- Can be used with another defence system (e.g. **Drift** or **Out-to-in**).

Disadvantages:

- Defenders are more committed so are vulnerable to miss passes and kicks in behind.
- In its aggressive form with fast line speed, defenders are prone to conceding penalties.
- Less effective against a deeper lying backline outside defenders will not get to their opposite numbers.

2. <u>Man-on-Man Isolation Defence (1)</u> (Diagram 4)

Diagram 4.





This system identifies the target runner, usually an extra man joining the line close to the attacking 10 or 12 (A5), and aims to 'isolate' the extra man. All defenders stay with their opposite numbers, including the defending openside winger who should stick to his man. The defending blindside wing (D5) or full-back (D6) will tackle the extra man.

Advantages:

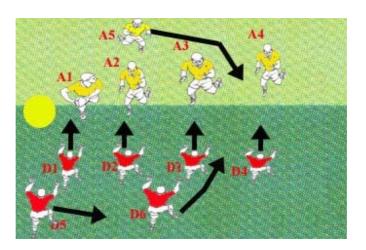
- Effective from a lineout.
- Effective if extra man comes into line.
- Exerts pressure.
- Closes down options for extra man by defending his support.

Disadvantages:

- At a scrum, the defending blindside winger must come across and be closer to the
 defensive line. The space left by the covering blindside winger is thus vulnerable to
 attack.
- Defender must isolate and nullify his opposite number. This emphasises the importance of the one-on-one tackle.
- Space left by covering blindside winger is vulnerable.
- Defender must get between the ball carrier and his inside support.
- Defenders need to be alert to where space will open up and beat attackers there.

3. <u>Man-on-Man Isolation Defence (2)</u> (Diagram 5)





This system caters for the extra man (A5) coming in outside the 13 (D3). The openside winger (D4) will attempt to defend both the extra man and his opposite number. The role of the defending openside wing is to anticipate the 2 v 1, so he must stand narrow and turn and shift outwards as the inside player receives the ball. He must position himself so that if the pass comes he can make the tackle. The full back (D6) will tackle the extra man (A5) and D4 will stay with A4. If D6 has to make the tackle, D5 (blindside wing) moves to the corner at full back.



Advantages:

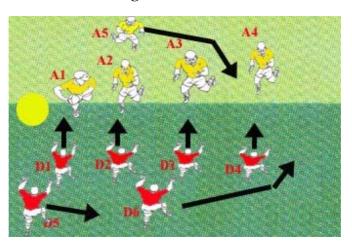
- The fastest opponent is unable to get clear and so the cover defence does not need to stretch itself.
- By leaving attacking player directly opposite in that position, it will rarely result in the defending wing having to make a tackle or stop a pass.
- Full-back will cover any line-break.

Disadvantages:

- Lot of responsibility on the defending winger. He has to 'psych out' his opposite number and be in a good position to catch him.
- Full-back has to read what happens and react quickly.

4. Man-on-Man Overlap Defence (Diagram 6)





This is yet another variation! When the attacking team brings in the extra attacking player (A5), usually the full-back, it forces the defence on the outside to adjust and move in one. This allows the overlap to be created on the wing. The cover is directed to the touchline and the defending full-back (D6) takes the last man (A4). The defending blindside wing covers across at full-back. The defending full-back (D6) and blindside winger (D5) must stay inside the ball and shift across as needed. This is the basis of the 'pendulum defence'.

Advantages:

- Good use of touchlines, forcing any line-break out wide.
- Cover defence already moving out wide to support at breakdown.

Disadvantages:

- If line-break is inside defending 13, it could exploit space between defending blindside winger and full-back (full-back already committed to reaching touchline).
- Blindside wing must cover space left by full-back.
- Emphasis on one-on-one tackling by full-back.



5. **Out-to-In Defence** (Diagram 7)

This type of defence has been successfully employed by some international teams such as South Africa and some Premiership teams such as London Wasps. The defensive line comes up fast on the outside shoulder of the attacking line. Note that the line speed reduces from 14 in to 10 (D4 into D1). The defender then makes the tackle on his inside shoulder. Variations include 'Banana shape' of the defensive line and 'Rush' defence', with either the 13 or 14 (D3 or D4) up very fast to cut out any outside option. The players will line up flat but on the outside shoulder of the attacker.

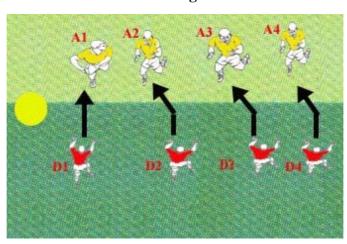


Diagram 7.

Advantages:

- Defender hits ball carrier 'blind' as he is looking inside for the pass.
- Very intimidating.
- Defenders defend gain line quickly and effectively. This slows down momentum of attack and limits attacking options.
- Leads to errors as immense pressure is exerted.
- Attackers forced back and deep in order to make their passes.
- Difficult to go around. Defending openside wing alert for interceptions.
- Effective from slow ball.
- Tackles made behind gain line.

Disadvantages:

- Players must come up as a line or gaps in defence will be exploited. If outside players are up too quickly, this will create space inside and give advantage to the ball carrier.
- Relies on players organising themselves and each player knowing his role.
- 'Individual' type of defence.
- Emphasis on communication and decision-making as defenders must pick up option runners.
- Openside winger is last defender and vulnerable until sweeper/full-back comes
- There is space behind the attacking line so it can be vulnerable to grubber/chip kick.



- Vulnerable to long pass around or over the furthest forward defender.
- Defenders need to be fit as system requires frequent up and back movements.

6. **In-to-Out or Drift Defence** (Diagram 8)

This is the most common form of defensive organisation and has its origins in rugby league. It requires excellent communication skills. Basically, three players can now defend against four because the defence is drifting across the pitch towards the touchline and can, therefore, cope with the extra man.

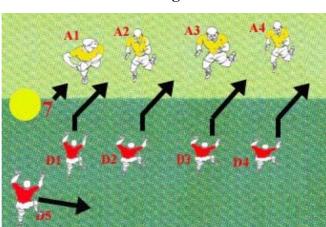


Diagram 8.

From set piece, the attacking fly-half (A1) is tackled by the defending openside flanker, the attacking inside-centre (A2) is tackled by the defending fly-half (D1) and so on... The blindside winger (D5) defends 'across, up and across' to cover any line-break. If no extra man comes into the attacking line, the defending openside winger (D4) takes his opposite man and the 13 (D3) comes in to contest possession.

Defenders usually line up inside their opposite man but the outside option may be necessary if the attack is spread. The **In-to-out** or **Drift** defence is more a concept than a pattern. This is because, unlike the other systems, it does not identify a definite target. Instead, it works on shepherding the attacking backline across the field, pushing it across the field by giving them the outside. This hopefully eliminates the threat of a midfield line break. As the attacking team moves across the field, their options are limited and time is 'bought' for the second line of defenders.

Advantages:

- Effective if defence outnumbered.
- Forces attack towards touchline and out of space.
- If alignment slightly staggered, drift much more effective.

Disadvantages:

- Defenders rely on inside help.
- Vulnerable on inside/at seam of defence.
- Communication not always effective or aggressive.
- Drifting players have side-on body positions.
- Less proactive. Defenders are reacting to attackers.
- Vulnerable to 'unders' lines from attackers.

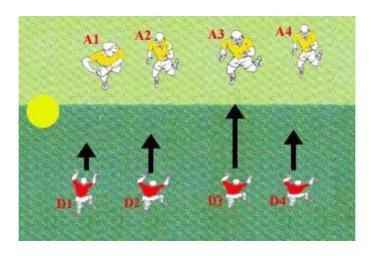


- Attackers just need to run straight and take advantage of outside space.
- Vulnerable to inside cut and chip kick because defenders committed to outside man.

7. **Arrowhead Defence** (Diagram 9)

This is a combination of **Drift** and **Out-to-In** defence that targets specific players as the danger. An arrowhead is formed at 12 or 13. D3 rushes up to put pressure on A3, hoping either to tackle him in possession or to cut out a wide pass.





Advantages

- Puts pressure on a key player in the attacking back line.
- Forces play back inside (if you have a good back row).
- Can create 'alleys'.
- Flexible you can call it as the game unfolds.
- Effective if attackers outnumber defenders.

Disadvantages

- It is a complex system.
- Needs great communication.
- Hard to maintain physically for whole game.
- Risky if defender misses tackle!

9. <u>Defensive Organisation in Phase Play.</u> (See Diagram 10)

In phase play, defence now becomes more complex due to a greater number of variables. It is more challenging because forwards **and** backs are in the defensive line. The key to successful phase defence is to get as many players as possible to the breakdown first. This is so that the ball can either be turned over or slowed down sufficiently so that the defensive line can reorganise, thus creating a situation where there are more defenders than attackers. A ruck really is good news for a defence. The attackers generally have to



commit more players to secure possession and the defence are on their feet and on the front foot. Many now consider that the constant recycling of the ball is to the advantage of the defence, because the longer a team keeps the ball the more chance there is of losing it, being turned over, flattened in the tackle, intercepted or giving away a penalty. Today, most tries are scored within three phases.

The organisation around the contact area is the key to successful phase defence. Teams will continue to use their preferred defensive systems in phase play but the set-up around the contact area is usually consistent.

After a tackle has been made and the subsequent ruck or maul formed, the players not committed should align themselves on either side of the break-down.

The player closest is called the 'guard' (D1). The 'guard' should align himself half a body width from the ruck, behind the offside line and with his outside foot forward. His role is to defend a forward pick-and-go around the side of the ruck and drive the attacking player to ground with his inside shoulder. The next player is the 'bodyguard' (D2). He should be an arm's length from the bodyguard and level with him. His role is to defend the opposition scrum-half and the inside shoulder of the next defender (usually opposite the attacking first receiver). These two 'guards' defend the channel closest to the breakdown. They must hold their position until the opposition fly-half passes the ball outwards. The defending scrum-half usually defends the space behind the breakdown and acts as sweeper as the attack unfolds (D5).

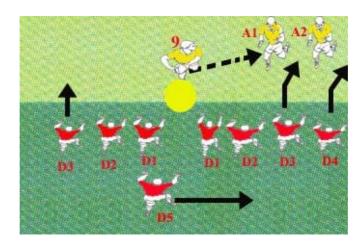


Diagram 10.

They play an important part because they set the mark as to where the offside line is and they set the position where the other supporting defenders line up. They usually indicate with their arm up.

In phase play, the backs must marshal the forwards and ensure the tight forwards are nearest the breakdown. This will avoid mismatches and keep the line organised on the outside. As the ball is passed out to the fly-half (and if there is no immediate threat), the guard and body guard should 'shoot' from the inside (i.e. press hard from the inside and cut down the inside space). This also forces the attacking support runners to move backwards.



The next player in the defensive line after the 'bodyguard' is the '**Captain**' (D3). He usually covers the attacking first receiver. His role is to call the ball out from the breakdown and lead up the rest of the defenders. Players usually line up flat with the end man hanging back for the kick and they should be focussing on the attacking threat in front of them and *not* looking inside to the breakdown.

At third and subsequent phases, the attack will focus on creating situations where there is a numerical advantage or a mismatch. A back can isolate a defending forward by using his superior footwork skills and speed or a forward can isolate a defending back by using his size, strength and power.

If a team continually attacks in the same direction, a situation will arise where there is a 'pooling' of players on the side from which the attack originally came and, therefore, too few defenders on the side where the next wave of attack is to be launched. So, it is important to set up a 'far side' defence early. Usually the first two defenders arriving at the breakdown will move over to the far side of the breakdown and fulfil the roles of 'guard' and 'bodyguard'. This prevents the defenders on the outside having to commit to the area next to the breakdown. They can then concentrate on protecting the outside space.

Conclusion.

Most teams will use defensive systems based on the models above. When attacking without the ball there is no particular right way or wrong way but the principles hold firm. Ultimately it is the ability of the team without the ball to apply attitude and their tactical intelligence that will decide how long they have to attack without the ball.