# AUSTRALIAN RUGBY UNION LEVEL III COACHING COURSE 2002 - 2003

# **ASSIGNMENT 12 - TECHNICAL PAPER**

"Counter attack – A story of missed opportunities"

By:

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# Counter attack – A story of missed opportunities

## Background

It is a generally undisputed fact that the leading national Rugby Union teams have proven that a strong defence capability is the cornerstone of success. The Wallabies widely acclaimed win in the 1999 RWC was on the backbone of the Rugby League based approach to strong and aggressive defensive team play that saw only one try conceded by them through the tournament.

The simple for and against points statistics for the top teams in the 2003 Rugby World Cup further highlight the strong defensive aspect of their capability.

Team	Play	Win	Loss	Pts For	Pts Against	Score Against Ratio
England	7	7	0	327	88	27%
Australia	7	6	1	345	78	23%
New Zealand	7	6	1	361	101	28%
France	7	5	2	267	155	58%
Sth Africa	5	3	2	193	89	46%
Ireland	5	3	2	142	79	56%
Wales	5	3	2	149	126	85%
Scotland	5	3	2	118	130	110%
Source: The Australian - Newspaper - 24 Nov 03						

What this indicates is that it is increasingly difficult to penetrate these strong defence lines. The question then arises with all this emphasis on defence in matches and training should not the focus increase on the skill of counter attack to take advantage of those moments when the defence posture is at its weakest when the players are in the wrong formation and are aligned to attack as opposed to defence following an unexpected turnover.

The importance of effective counter attack is highlighted further by examples of game breaking moments such as the Wallabies, Stirling Mortlock's intercept try versus the All Blacks in the RWC 2003 Semi Final.

Counter attacks that result in scores are great boosters for morale and confidence of the scorers, while being gut wrenching confidence sappers for those that slipped up, both individually and the team.



### Aim

This paper will highlight the requirement to emphasize counter attack in the game by understanding the principles, practicing skills and developing options in order to make the most of presented opportunities to defeat ever more capable defence structures.

# Requirement

To achieve any level of capability training is necessary, yet for most teams the emphasis tends to be on set pieces, defence and the breakdown. In addition in the backs who are usually considered the best open running attacking weapons in a team, there is often a strong emphasis on practicing a number of set moves. The problem of course is how many are actually implemented in a match situation. At team practice they may work on up to 10 moves or sequences, however in reality probably only manage to use 3 - 5 of these in a game.

The requirement then seems to be that smart, reactive and dynamic counter attack capabilities across the team are required to take advantage of the opportunities that arise.

# **Opportunities**

While many would argue that counter attack stems from opportunism and therefore should rely on players natural flair and skill, the reality is that there are many and varied counter attack opportunities in a match situation. So much so that they should be considered to be an expected phase of play, that is practiced for.

For example think how many times are any of the following counter attack opportunities presented in a match?

- Fractured tackle ball
- Drop ball or knock on
- Kick return field play, penalties
- Ruck and maul turnover
- Set piece steal (scrum or Lineout)
- Restart pilfer (Kick offs, 22m)
- Interception
- Charge down
- Plus many others.

The key element in all these is that they are a regular and exploitable part of the game and should be a planned for in the attack plan in a match. Players must be prepared for and trained to respond as they present a crucial chance to score or gain significant field position.

# **Principles**

### Coach Mandate

The key principle that governs both whether a team or players will countenance a counter attack is the support, mandate and options to try from the coach. Players must have confidence that they have the mandate to chance their arm and try. Counter attack must be a team philosophy that borrows on the SAS motto of "Who dares wins" and gets players to make decisions quickly, to trust their instincts and show confidence.

### **Awareness**

A crucial part of any counter attack response (as per the rest of the game), players must be aware of what the opposition are doing in response to the turnover, where they are positioned, where are the spaces, any player number imbalances and where are the identified weak links. Therefore players must have a look, assess and decide.

# Confidence

Once a decision is made be positive in enacting the play do not be indecisive. Whether it results in a break or not, **carry it out with commitment**. Confidence can be built and the risk profile reduced by having players operating as a team in support of a counter attack. Like any other phase of play this must be practiced and developed as this removes the reliance on an individual's Campese style brilliance and flair and makes the decision process for all players easier.

### Ball in hand

Retention of the **ball in hand** is the key philosophy that should underpin all the following principles and patterns. Having won the ball it is important that players then treasure that possession.

Additionally a kick back through as part of the counter attack, unless well placed with good chasing support players, generally simply results in the ball being turned back over to the opposition. I would argue that unless the tactical situation (score line, time remaining etc) dictates a defensive play, then the counter attack should in the main be mounted with ball in hand.

# **Timing**

In this paper I am elaborating the view that the **ball should be used immediately** a counter attack is presented, because if players on receiving possession simply fall back into a consolidation hit it up pattern that attempts to push through the defence in a number of phases we are back to where we were in normal phase and pattern play against an organised defence structure.

The action and reaction speed of players is crucial in order to take advantage of the situation, gain momentum and return the ball carrier over the gain line. Usually this means immediate response to:

 Exploit a defence hole around the player on the ground following the tackle that fractured the ball loose

- Capitalise on the former attacking teams field disposition in relation to depth and defensive posture
- Utilise an overlap of players
- Commit opposition but not isolate the attacking runner(s)

Additionally it should be noted that sometimes it may be necessary to slow proceedings as per Rugby 7's, in order to wait for support players to position themselves or for the opposition to commit their defenders and therefore identify the best point of exploitation.

### **Defenders**

The speed of exploitation is crucial as the players must seek to capitalise immediately while the opposition are still in their attack structure formation and before they reorganise into a defence structure.

Therefore the execution must seek to:

- Isolate and outnumber the defenders.
- Fix the defenders by;
  - Running at them to force them to come at you,
  - Close the space between the attacker and defender
  - Focus the defender attention
  - Move the ball away to the created space
- Target weaknesses
  - Weak tackler
  - Player without confidence
  - Injured or slow
  - Out of position slower forward amongst backs

### Support players

These are generally a must have (although runaway tries can be individually effective). They assist to create a numbers imbalance for the attackers and give the counter attack team the width to spread away from defenders.

Crucially the support players must seek to keep the ball in play and achieve:

- Depth so that players are running at pace and able to support the ball carrier or player.
- Angles run at angles to catch the chasing defenders off balance e.g. slice back at an infield angle against a defender running at a cover defence angle.
- Support pods use other players in groups to create number mismatches.
- In a position away from the immediate ball area and defender focus and posture.
- Immediate support players must be drilled and respond to any ruck and maul that may develop – it is no good waiting for dedicated forwards or players to do this task.
- NOT become isolated themselves, always have further support players.

# **Execution**

As with all principles they are good in theory but until they are executed on the field with understanding and confidence by the players they are only helpful for filling the coaches and players handbook.

The essential element of a counter attack consists of good passing to support players running at gaps created by the confusion in the defence pattern and retaining the ball in hand.

However with the improved efficiencies in defence it is necessary to include a capacity for players to incorporate some basic fixing and gap creation moves that add the additional element to open the crucial hole in the defence line as it readjusts.

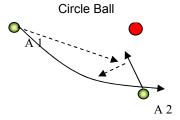
# Fixing & Gap creation

These simple plays are usually component parts of more sophisticated patterns that are usually incorporated in the set piece back plays, however the reality is that they should be part of the entire teams repertoire in order to be executed competently, and quickly by anyone at any time.

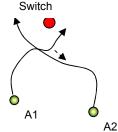
Of particular importance is that they should be able to be executed by a simple call between two or three players on the spot without having to set up for an elaborate move or sequence as they would be off a set play.

There are numerous of these but some of the simple but effective options are outlined below:

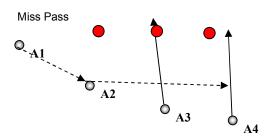
 Circle ball – Ball carrier (A1) passes, the receiver (A2) straightens or runs back at an angle toward defender to fix them, initial passer (A1) loops behind and receives ball back. A1 can then fix or draw the wider defenders and opens space to link up with any number of support options wide runners, players running back at an angle etc etc.



• **Switches** – change angles with a support runner. A1 must fix and draw the defender with the ball transfer to A2 occurring close to the gain line as the defender commits to A1. An alternative option with a switch is that if the defender doesn't commit it is easy for A1 to dummy to A2 and carry on



Miss passes – moving the ball quickly across attacking players to those in space. With practice and players who communicate well it is possible to add the previous component moves off receiver A4. Add ons such as Circle ball (A2 or A3 around A4 linking to wider Atk players or those looping in from the blind side) and Switches flow easily and potentially open up defensive holes very rapidly.



The key thing about these basic moves is that in an open game play situation they are very effective in fixing defenders and opening gaps. Players in conducting the moves must target the shoulders of defenders and endeavour to open space, preferably in the direction away from the bulk of the supporting defenders (outside).

These component moves must be practiced regularly and by all players so that they become part of the instinctive attacking options that are crucial for effective counter attack.

With these moves it is then possible to tie them together as part of practiced response structure so that when teams encounter different scenarios or opportunities all players have some idea of where they should be to assist in the team aspect of the counter attack. It must be emphasised that any structure that is developed and practiced should not stifle the individual's flair and the eye for an opportunity that good players are blessed with.

# **Pattern Options**

The very essence of counter attack is that it must be responsive to the situation, and as outlined previously there are so many situations that it is impossible to practice set responses however it is possible to have some general patterns that may apply.

The aim of any pattern though should be to exploit the immediate advantage you have in attack and break through the initial line of defence, ultimately to score but in the event that the defence scrambles the aim is to be set the ball up well over the gain line and allow the team to get into any of its attack patterns of play against what will be a disrupted and disjointed defence pattern.

Given the variability of the situations likely to be encountered I have simply outlined a couple of options in relation to general field position that when used in conjunction with all the execution principles, in particular gap creation moves can go a long way towards effective counter attack as an individual but more importantly as a team.

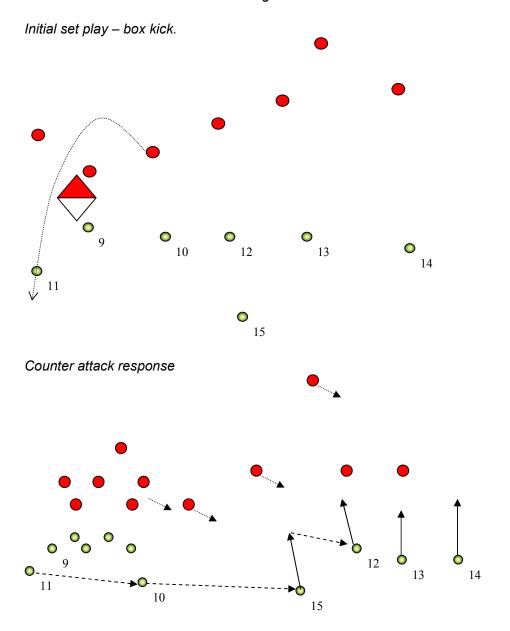
### Centre Field

Any centre field turnover is where the awareness and decision making of players receiving the ball will determine the best option. The general principles that should be followed include:

- Exploit through where the turnover occurred exploit immediately over the player where the turnover occurred.
- Go wide to either side with an attempt to create a pod using a gap creation move (see "Sideline – close play" diagram below for example).
- If it is from a kick through exploit in the direction of the open side where the wide backs as opposed to back towards the forwards.

### Sideline - Close

This situation applies when the counter attack opportunity occurs in a channel close to a sideline in front of the main bulk of players and may arise from any number of turnovers – ruck & maul, tackle turnover, box kick. Refer to the diagrams below for illustration. The principle should be to push the ball quickly using long passes across to the open side of the field, where the remaining backs in particular have scope to create an imbalance and expose attacking runners. The ball should be shifted to the far side by long passes using 11/14, 10 & 15 to the outside backs who were in the open (usually 12,13,14/11) prior to the turnover. This group (12,13,14) should create a pod of attackers who push down the opposite sideline channel using a gap creation move to mutually support and to beat the scrambling defence from the opposite side of the field.



The crucial aspect of this play is the quick ball transfer from one side of the field to the other, with players repositioning and grouping themselves into an attack pod, with a capacity to use a gap creation move to beat the defence. This creates the attack advantage imbalance but must be done quickly and therefore requires practice.

# Sideline - Open

The opportunity arises on the open side away from the bulk of players, perhaps from a kick or tackle turnover when the opposition was attacking wide. The focus on response should be to stay wide on the same side. Again the immediate response should be from the wide backs to immediately support and attempt to break through the defence using a gap creation play as the cover attempts to scramble. If the initial phase does not penetrate the subsequent phases should look to swing the ball back to the original side of play to catch the defence imbalanced where they will usually have the slower forwards standing out wide. These slower defenders should then become the target of the attacking backs particularly the original blind wing.

# Set play attack

There are a series of options from line outs and scrums whereby the defending side may deliberately target the set piece of the opposition to create the turnover then build a counter attack on these. There are numerous options in this area that lend themselves to a more detailed discussion and outline of options than is possible in this paper. Hence I will not elaborate upon them other than to highlight that if the strength of your forward pack allows it attacking plays should be practiced from fractured ball from the set piece.

### Practice

Having mandated the necessity for skilled and responsive counter attack it is necessary to practice the skills needed to reduce the risk in execution. I will not outline the many drills and options that can be utilised other than to highlight the key areas that must be practiced.

These skills require continued practice to ensure their execution is effective:

- Passes long distance and while running at pace.
- Quick hands catch and transfer of ball quickly.
- Running at pace in the open drawing and beating defenders.
- Ball pick up loose ball and kick catch returns.
- Support immediate support to ball carrier in a tackle or ruck and maul situation.
- Stepping "face to space" players must step past defenders not run into them.

Drills incorporating these skills are many and varied with some of the key features that must be achieved including:

- Players must read the situation and react quickly and instinctively game play situations with a competitive opposition are ideal for this.
- Game scenarios where various situations are set up (line out, kicks etc) the
  attacking side runs through normal patterns then a turnover is simulated with a
  counter attack then practiced.
- Defenders response should be varied so that mixed defensive postures develop that the counter attack team should read and react to – eg. All defenders up in a line, staggered approach, lazy runners etc.
- Timing emphasize quick ball from the turnover or breakdown.

The more you encourage and practice the art of counter attack skills the more confidence the players have, the more effective their execution and of course the less riskier it therefore becomes.

# Counter Attack - Rules

All players like to have some simple edicts that are drummed in through the season. In terms of counter attack the cardinal rules that have been outlined in this paper and that if players apply will assist in making the counter attack no longer a story of missed opportunities.

- Awareness look and make a decision and stick with it.
- Respond immediately.
- Be confident and decisive who dares wins.
- Communicate attacker and support players.
- o Fix defenders and shift ball to space.

- Link to support players.
- o Use gap creation moves.
- Move forward, pass flat and run onto the ball at pace.
- Don't get isolated.

# Conclusion

This paper has highlighted that with the strength of defence structures in the modern game it is crucial that players and teams are able to capitalise on all opportunities when the ball is turned over.

Counter attack provides a chance to exploit weaknesses in the defensive posture of the opposition. Timing, decisiveness and awareness of the play situation are crucial factors. Importantly though teams must prepare and practice to incorporate gap creation plays in the counter attack.

There are patterns and skills that can be used by individuals and teams to ensure that the team conducts counter attack with confidence and effectiveness. Practice of the art of counter attack is crucial if the risk is to be reduced and the opportunities taken.

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