Attacking from your own half… too risky?

This paper will look at the best platforms for attack using as its basis the statistics obtained by the IRB[1] at three different international tournaments (6-Nations and Junior World Championships in 2011 and Tri-Nations from 2010).

A summary of the relevant statistics is provided below followed by a general analysis on attacking options. The paper will then proceed to a more in-depth analysis of attack from within the team's own half (including counter attack). The paper will conclude with some guidelines on game strategy and coaching relevance.

GENERAL MATCH STATISTICS	Tri-N 2010	6N 2011	JWC 2011
Average number of tries per game	5.8	3.4	6.8
Total Passes	300	297	244
% of total passes from halfback	47	49	43
% of total passes from Forwards	19	15	16
% of total passes from Backs	34	36	41
Total ruck maul	186	194	133
Total kicks	37	46	35
Average number lineouts	22	24	23
Average number scrums	14	12	19

TRIES SCORED	Tri-N 2010	6N 2011	JWC 2011
% Tries scored by Forwards	38	25	34
% Tries scored by Backs	62	73	66
% Tries scored in outer 15m channels	60	50*	48
% Tries scored between 15m and posts	32	28*	31
% Tries scored Left Side (not incl. posts)	40	45	44
% Tries scored Right Side (not incl. posts)	52	33	35

* *Approximation only*

[1] http://www.irb.com/newsmedia/mediazone/gameanalysis/index.html

ORIGIN OF TRIES	Tri-N 2010	6N 2011	JWC 2011
Origin of try: % scored from own half	33	22	32
Origin of try: % from 50m to opp. 22m	19	39	33
Origin of try: % from opp. 22m to tryline	48	39	35
% Tries from Lineout	35	39	33
% Tries from Scrum	14	14	21
% Tries from Penalty/Free Kicks	11	10	6
% Tries from Turnover Ball	12	16	18
% Tries from Opponents' Kicks	21	22	14
% tries from 0 phases	29	30	36
% tries from 0-3 phases	69	70	77
% tries from 0-6 phases	83	80	94
% tries from 0-9 phases	95	92	99

Analysis of the modern game and relevance to training plans

We can first look at some general statistics that may help us as coaches when preparing our season plan. As the majority of coaches are involved at the amateur level, then at best we will only have two training sessions per week. So we need to ask if we are training effectively by ensuring that our approach is in line with the modern game.

Catch and pass are core skills that are essential for good attack. If we say there are on average 300 passes made per game, then we can expect our team to make half of those. If our training sessions are to replicate games then we should check to see if we complete 150 passes and more, of which, half of those again, should be made by the halfback. Now within those 150+ passes, they should involve and element of passing under pressure and passing with decision making.

With this in mind and with the time constraints limiting us, it's clearly not beneficial to spend long sessions of pure catch and pass drills within the season proper. Perhaps we can set aside time during preseason for such drills along with setting special remedial drills in-season (outside of team training time) for those that need it. But the majority of our catch and pass needs to be completed under game like situations. It is then that we can demand accuracy from each player with each pass. Going through the motions of a catch and pass drill, even in warm-up, is of no real benefit to players or the team.

We can apply the same reasoning to rucks and mauls. If we say there are on average 150 rucks per game, then as coaches we need to ask if we are spending an appropriate amount of time on this aspect of the game. Some may argue that training ruck and mall at a high intensity and full contact is too risky with respect to potential injuries. This is a valid point, as we cannot expect to make every training session exactly like a match, otherwise our players would end up playing three "matches" per week.

However, there are other ways to ensure the ruck policy that we have set for the team is practiced often and reinforced. For example, completing attack and defense drills with support players winning the ball back in attack or the defensive team checking to see if there are counter attack opportunities at the ruck. The intensity will vary week to week, depending on the time of the season and this is where a good periodization plan comes into effect.

We could also ask how much time do we spend on defensive structures realizing that it theoretically comprises 50% of the game? Have we defined roles for each player at set-piece defense? Have we accounted for every possible scenario that the opposition may throw at us in attack? Do we give our players opportunities for decision making in defense? A theoretical or whiteboard session on defensive roles needs to be backed up with many repetitions, the same number of repetitions as that in attack. If we can defend well for 6+ phases, with good tackles and good structure, not letting them get over the advantage line, then the chances of teams scoring would be minimal (as most tries are scored within that).

Best Platforms for Attack

Let's now focus our attention to attack and more specifically to attack started from within our own half. If we look at the statistics we can see that on average one third of tries are scored from first phase. Also we can roughly say that 35-40% of tries are scored when started from the attacking 22m zone. We can also see that 70% of tries are scored in less than 3 phases.

This would indicate that scoring from set piece is still a good source for tries. Having a dominant scrum and lineout will enable good front-foot ball in the opposition 22m where one mistake in defense will prove costly. Therefore having good set piece and working attacking patterns off that will be valuable in attack and present good try scoring opportunities.

This is particularly true with set pieces near or on the 22m as the opposition fullback will be out of the defensive line. Being able to attack wide with good catch and pass to exploit the numbers and get well over the advantage line will provide a good platform for attack.

Counter Attack

However, we can also see that approximately a third of the tries are started from a team's own half. The opportunities presented here would seem to come from counter attack and turn over ball or from set piece where the opposition are not expecting teams to run the ball.

An attacking back three will always pose a threat to any defense due to their speed and evasive skills. Any lapse in concentration with the kick chase defensive line can be easily exploited by the elusive runners running at pace. Beating the frontline of defense usually with the back three will be the first opportunity. Then once the line is broken working off the ball to get it out wide or to look for mismatches or preferably both at the same time.

Although counter attack is primarily playing with the opportunities presented to us by the defense it is also important to place some structure into this aspect of the game. This is a good question that can coaches can ask themselves, does the team have an actual strategy for counter attack or is it just simply playing what's in front of you.

Some possible set-ups for counter attack include:

a) playing for a mismatch with back three running at slower forwards and beating them with footwork and speed – this can be done with the back three linking up with switches and short balls
b) shifting the ball to space and looking for mismatch in second phase – this can be done by designating the fastest player not involved in first phase to then nominate the widest and slowest defender from the opposition and attacking at that point
c) attacking through the middle with the back three and then going wide second phase – being set for second phase with wide passes and perhaps some blockers running through or loops to create more space

Other opportunities include quick lineouts and turn over ball. Being able to anticipate the opposition kick is a good attacking opportunity. A team trying to clear from deep in their half with pressure on them will often field a kick that may just go out and so the quick lineout comes into play.

The same is true for a turnover gained in your own half. With the opposition previously on attack and perhaps the fullback and blind winger in the attacking line, a turnover presents an ideal opportunity to counter attack from within your own half. Again the same principles apply as above. And it may not necessarily be shifting wide on first phase that produces tries. Getting set up with designated elusive runners on second phase who can exploit space could be just as effective.

Attacking from own 22m

From one's own 22m, other teams are generally expecting a kick. This could often involve the fullback deep and one of the wingers dropping back to cover the kick also. With 2 defenders out of the line, there is the possibility to run the ball at space. Shifting wide for a wipers kicks and seeing how the opposition reacts would be a good platform for attack. If an overlap can be manufactured then the team will run, if not then go for the wipers kick. Or set up the ruck and kick the next phase.

Again this could be used particularly off strong set piece. Also a team must proceed with caution and can't be expected to use this all the time. So if we are to run from our own 22m zone then the conditions should be dry or perhaps the wind is blowing against us so there would be not much advantage in a kick. Another situation to run from the 22m zone could be early in the game when the opposition are least expecting it. So the element of surprise is important in order that the defensive team will always be in two minds as to what the attack is doing.

Coaching Relevance

From a coaching perspective we have to understand how to train these concepts. It is not merely a matter of saying, "play what's in front of you" or "eyes up, look for space". We need to settle on a strategy and then think of ways in which we can train it, going from closed drills (skill repetition with little decision making) to more open drills (complete decision making in game like situation).

a) The first step would be to ensure the players have the ability to catch and pass and run with eyes up looking at the defense – so a number of catch/pass with attack/defense drills need to be repeated. Having less players in defense will help develop awareness of space and it will also help the defensive team when similar situations occur on the field.
b) Working in groups of 6 or 7 to identify space – different scenarios can be set up by the coach such as turn over ball, long kicks, short kicks, free kick etc. Working in smaller groups means that everyone must work off the ball and communicate and we can error correct the players' mind-set more easily.
c) Putting different players in coloured bibs may also help in drills – slow guys in red, fast guys in blue – this will help the team on counter attack to see where mismatches can easily occur (either setting up for first or second phase).
d) Practicing the different scenarios 15 on 15 (turnover ball in own half, counter from kicks, quick lineouts etc.), which will involve communication from the back three players and those players working off the ball. This is probably the most important tool in order to identify space as the ball carrier is not in the best position to do so. Other players must learn to communicate effectively.

Conclusion

Attacking from one's own half is definitely worth the risk. We should question the safety first policy attitude adopted by many teams and if the conditions are right than attack could be the best option. The statistics show that it works, it is a matter of giving our players the framework to execute at the correct time.

As coaches we should ask ourselves how much time we dedicate to counter attack. The time spent on this facet of the game will have positive repercussions for attack in general as players identify space more readily and improve their handling skills. It is up to us as coaches to recreate different scenarios at training so that the decision-making skills and the communication required can be practiced.

Lastly, if we look at this from the other perspective we can conclude that a team's ability to defend the counter attack is crucial. If this is proven to be a source of many points then reducing those opportunities will stifle the opposition. Assigning roles in the kick chase and turn over ball scenarios and practice at training will benefit the team greatly.