'Getting over the advantage line': how to manipulate space.

Rugby Union as a sport is categorised as an 'invasion game' of two teams. One team attacking with the ball, endeavouring to cross the opponent's try line whilst the opposing team prevents the attacking team crossing the try line by defending.

Traditionally rugby union training hours have focused on comprehensive and sometimes complex attacking skills and sequences with very little time spent specifically on defence. One of the most comprehensive improvements in modern day rugby at the elite level, and since becoming a professional game has been defensive technical skill, defensive patterns and systems. Clubs, teams, coaches and players have placed greater emphasis on defence, with training time now devoted to tackle technique, line communication drills, implementing of defensive structures and patterns to name a few. Elite level rugby teams employ the services of specialist Defence Coaches to improve this area. All of this is to prevent the attacking team scoring and moving over that crucial gain line. If that gain line is breached the defensive team have to work harder to stay organised to keep their line and numbers intact. They are on the back foot as opposed to the front foot giving more time & space to the attack.

With dramatically improved defence a system thought into offering attacking variations, whether in set piece attack or phase play, is imperative. The coach needs to develop more deceptive play to confuse, shift and isolate defenders and create mismatches to find gaps through the defensive line. This will hopefully lend the attacking team to getting over the advantage line and scoring or at least positive momentum and questioning the defence systems on phase.

A possible solution to "getting over the advantage line" from a set piece is to shape the back line into 'two lines of attack' from a scrum or lineout set piece. It is an organised deception ploy where players run pre-practiced lines. The 'two lines of attack' formation aims to assist the attacking team in manipulating the defence to create space and ultimately get over the advantage line. It can be a valuable strategy if you have a balance of robust runners and swift players in the backline. This strategy is presented in the discussion that follows.

Why use 'two lines of attack' on set piece attack?

When analysing elite level rugby such as Super 15, European rugby, Test matches etc, the evidence demonstrates well disciplined and organised defence from both the set piece and phase play situations. In my opinion, teams at this level have become so effective in defending the traditional alignment in set piece and phase play that coaches need variation through deception with the aim of creating space and mismatches using lead runners (give explanation of lead runner latter). Mixing of backline alignments and running deceptive plays off that, in my opinion, can be effective in gaining the desired outcome.

Defensive teams are familiar with a conventional lateral single line of attack (traditional alignment). Defenders at this level have an automated or conditioned response to this regular pattern using lateral drift to defend. Therefore the attacking team's ability to gain the advantage is limited primarily to defensive errors to break the advantage line. An unconventional set-up such as "two lines of attack" can lead to hesitation or uncertainty of response creating more opportunities for the attacking team.

It should be noted that set piece play provides greater opportunity for the attacking team due to the number of players committed to the scrum. Conversely, phase play provides less opportunity to capitalise due to the number of attacking players that are committed to the ruck.

The attacking strategy of 'two lines of attack' off a set piece play should aim at generating positive movement by getting over the advantage line. Simultaneously, the attacking play should endeavour to prevent the defenders in advancing past the gain line, forcing the defending players to plant their feet and, by and large, disrupt the integrity of the defensive line, thus creating space or a weak tackle. The role of each of the attacking players in committing to the play is integral in creating the uncertainty required to unsettle the defending players.

Finally in my experience, backline players become more enthusiastic and determined when running decoy deception plays such as the 'two lines of attack'. A new play, against the 'norm', creates this drive to achieve the desired outcome.

Where do you play the two lines of attack?

My philosophy is that the ideal times to run the 'two lines of attack' alignment is when the defending fullback is in the secondary defensive line and the defensive team need to drift as opposed to man on man. This is generally out

of the attacking teams 22m up to the opposition's 15m. However it can be used close to the opposition try-line if you want to isolate a weaker defender or target a certain area to initiate your phase patterns.

Although the 'two lines of attack' will have different options there may be a tendency to use this every play. However I would propose to use various backline alignments throughout a match keeps the opposition guessing and having to constantly adjust, hopefully drawing out a mistake.

The 'two lines of attack' can be executed from a scrum or a lineout. Generally you are engaging all backs therefore scrums packed on a sideline edge are ideal. If a blindside of more than 20m is offered then certain blindside plays will be executed instead of the 'two lines of attack' alignment.

An important and obvious note is that any set piece play requires quality set piece. The plays are more likely to be compromised if set piece ball is disruptive.

The Key Roles of Players in two lines of attack are:

Receiver/Ball player:

The ball player must run with the ball in two hands. Carrying the ball in two hands questions the defender that he is either passing, running or kicking as opposed to one hand that indicates he will carry only. He must take the ball forward initially and engage his opposite defender.

Lead Runners

The lead runners traditionally are your penetrative runners such as your midfielders and fullback. They move with the ball player to the line and either take a flat pass or act as a decoy for the pocket runners. They need to be convincing, and run at pace and call for the ball. Basically "sell the move" and force hesitation or a misread from the opposition. They need to fix their intended targets. The outcome of their role is either slow the foot-speed of the opposite defenders and stop the lateral drift or run through a gap or weak shoulder after receiving a flat pass from the ball player.

Pocket Runner/s (second line of attack)

These are the players running the second line of attack. When they are arriving they should attempt to be hidden at the start and before the ball has arrived to them. They should attempt to be only visible at the last

minute and then as commonly known around the Australian franchise teams, they need to 'bounce out' and appear in the created space. Unlike the lead runners they need to be quiet therefore time is needed training to perfect these plays and run them instinctively. Generally the pocket runners are your quicker players as they are searching for the predicted gaps that might appear around there position. If you are running two pock runners generally your 1st pocket runner must have the catch/pass ability as well as speed as they will have to either play out the back or attack a gap.

In regards to the "two lines of attack" alignment my philosophy has been not to predetermine who the ball is delivered to. Everyone who runs the play should expect it or call for it if space appears through a defensive misread or good use of the extra man. I advocate on all these plays that the 10 isn't the sole decision maker. The support players such as lead runners and pocket runners are the decision makers as well and if a gap appears then the team predetermined strike call to indicate to the ball player that he must pass him the ball then and there must be invoked.

Pocket runners can be from 1 to 5 players depending on what alignment you want to execute.

Examples of 'two lines of attack'

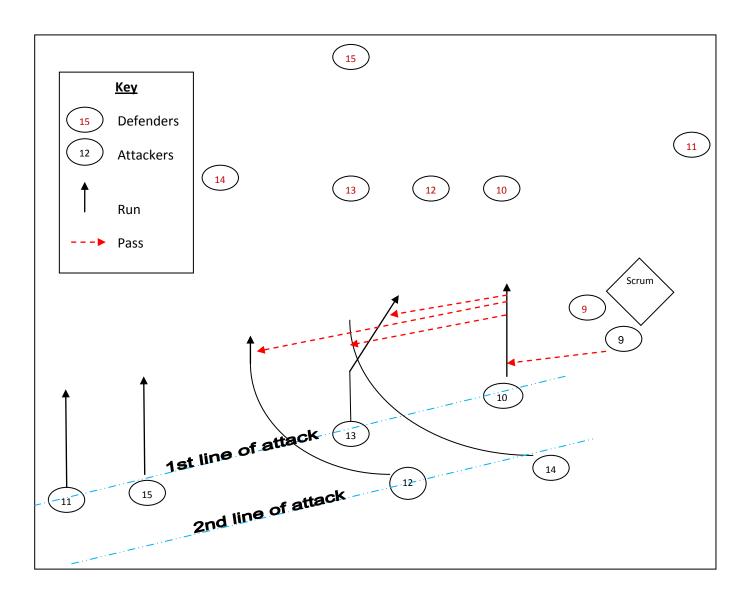
Example 1

As with all deception plays the main objective to hold the defence and force a decision. This will happen if the move is taken at pace to the line and have runners appearing undetected before hand.

This particular 'two lines of attack' primarily attacking through the midfield. The play is forcing the midfield to make a decision. As shown the attacking 10 will receive a flat pass from 9 (the 5m defensive law allows the attacking 10 to receive it flat and gets away from opposing 9 if he is attempting to get out from the scrum and gives him still enough time to take it to the line and play the one pass move) take it to the line and engage the opposite 10. 13, the lead runner, will run his line at the inside shoulder of defensive 12, forcing him to make a decision to either take the attacking 13 which he will have to turn his hips in and make the tackle or trust that his 10 will drift off the attacking 10 and take him. However, generally the defensive 12 stays on the attacking 13. The attacking 12 known as a pocket runner, who is a second line of attack (hence two lines of attack), bounces out behind 13 early and attempts to attract the defensive 13. Meanwhile the blind attacking wing who is a hiding

pocket runner appears late behind 10 and runs his line between his fellow 12 and 13. The decision made is where the space will appear

In my opinion I find this move very effective owing to the fact the move involves the 10 taking the ball to the advantage line and delivering with a flat pass to the lead runner (13) or blind wing pocket runner for either creating a gap and at worst allowing lead runner and pocket runners a 1v1.

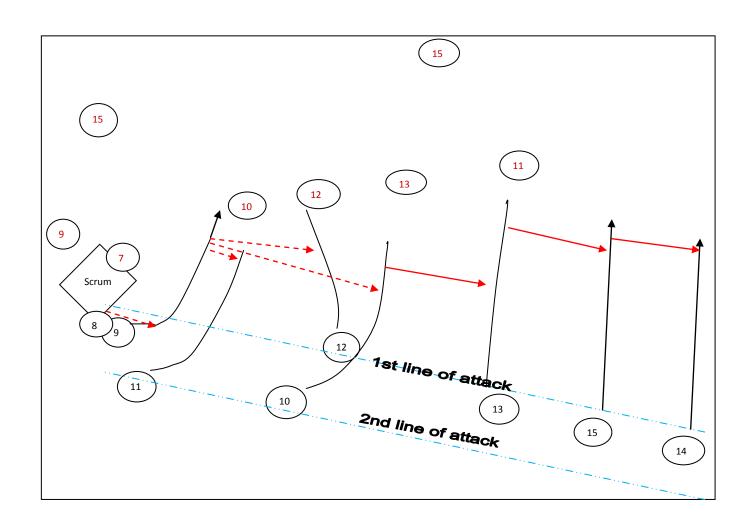


Example 2

In my opinion there are excellent opportunities from scrums with the defence back five metres to use your 9 as the 1st receiver and play a 'two lines of attack' play. The move below is from a left-side scrum and the 9 will look to attack inside the 10. Here the eight will pick and feed 9 and the 9 will then go

to the line and attack the inside shoulder of the defending 10 and have options off it. This play has about up to four different options that can be executed as the play unfolds. Where the play finishes will depend on how the defence reacts to the 'two lines of attack'. It is important on the play the attacking 12 (lead runner) targets the inside shoulder of his opposite 12 to engage him. If the defending 10 takes attacking 9 and defending twelve takes attacking 12 then a gap will appear for pocket runner 11. If the defending 10 doesn't take 9, then 9 will have the option of taking that space himself. Following behind the 12 'bouncing out' is 10 who can continue to feed the line. The option to hit the 10 will present itself when the defending 7, 10, 12 & 13 close the space around the attacking 9. Numerically the will be an opportunity to find space wider.

In my experience this move at worst gets the attacking team over the gain line as defenders hold and wait for the pocket runners to appear and it is usually a 1v1 tackle as lead runners & pocket runners have held up the other defenders allowing for quick recycle.



There are numerous other examples of 'two lines of attack' such as double blocker runners which is also very popular in Rugby League and these can be from scrum, full lineouts and shortened lineouts where you are sending the big forwards against smaller backs to create mismatches and inevitable gain line advantage.

In my experience players are enthused by anything they see as innovative. Executing an innovative back alignment and running numerous options off that such as the 'two lines of attack' for the purpose of dominating the gain line, in my opinion is an effective option that can be used by all coaches.