Firstly to understand the way I am trying to portray this document as if I am a player, so you need to read this as if you’re a player.

As a player some of your best ideas for attack can often come to mind from watching how defence patterns are influenced by the way attack is structured. Defence in recent years in rugby has made huge steps forward, the standards have risen in both technique and patterns and we are starting to think of different defence’s for certain parts of the field.

Above all we as coaches are prepared to present our own ideas of defending or implementing a new defensive idea apposed to what we were often taught from a young age.

The reason for touching on some of the defensive issues mentioned above is that there are a couple of key elements of any defence pattern or idea that you must have. Or the system of defence will be broken, these for mine are trust in your fellow player, that belief in the defensive system the ability to make a dominant tackle and communication.

There are many ways of getting over the advantage line some of the more obvious ways are running a decoy play with option with ball player making his choice based on what decision the defence
has made. Or flat pass straight from 9, there are plenty more and every coach has his own ideas.

I personally would like to see more challenging of the defence line by having the attack set up a little more unconventional by doing this I feel we automatically create some doubt in the defence. As mentioned above one of the key elements of defence is trust and belief. If we the (attack) can create some doubt which then leads to lack of trust and belief then you already put yourself in a position to get over the advantage line. As an attacking player or team you only need one defending player to not trust his nearest player or for example come out of the line or come in to make a tackle that didn’t need to be made. As a ball player you wait for these situations to arise so you can find the space that has been created by a poor defensive decision.

So the magic question…how do we do this, get our attack set up to create those little seeds of doubt in the defence? It’s a little easier to explain my thoughts from set play as it’s more then likely the only time where the players are in standard positions in all parts of the field the position for defence will often vary depending on field position but largely not to much. In general play we often see attack patterns rolled out, trying to get a miss match or lack of defensive numbers but often these end up in trying to maintain possession whilst trying to continually get over the advantage line……lots of hard work.

So back to our ideas on creating doubt in the defensive line, the key positions that can be manipulated are most likely your back three 11, 14, 15 and back row as they are often given a covering or roving role in defence. The majority of the defensive pressure is on the back row, 10, 12, and 13. Make no mistake all these defenders
will be very capable defenders but ultimately they rely on each other for there defence to be at its best.

Trust is the key thing in defence, simple example being if an attacking team from a scrum runs a simple play 8 runs committing flanker passes to 9 running hard inside shoulder line at defending 10 with the option of playing his 10, 15 who have run hard flat line outside shoulder of ten. Automatically we have created some indecision as the ten was relying on the flanker to pick up the attacking 10. The defending 10 now has to decide whether to tackle the 9 coming hard at his inside shoulder but also playing on his mind is if he makes that decision will his 12 make the adjustment and come in on the attacking 10 and 15 coming through? Either way the attacking team has won the battle as the indecision has been created and they should get over the advantage line maybe even break the line.

Above I spoke about the 11, 14, 15 and back row, In my mind being the most vulnerable or easiest to manipulate. The back three’s mind set will often be that of not wanting to get caught to far out of position the wingers wont follow his apposing winger totally. As he will not want to offer a short side up and the fifteen will always be conscience of having to cover kicks particularly long of high kicks. He would prefer to be coming forward to his kicks rather then turning and chasing. So whilst the defending 11, 14, 15 wont drift to far away the set positions the attacking 11, 14, 15 can really be placed and if utilized effectively can put defensive pressure on back row and 10,12,13. We only need one of those players to make poor choice and we have made it over the advantage line.
Field position is always one of the key thoughts when you decide to play a certain move. For some reason we change our thought process when we the (attacking team) are in our own half or quarter of the field. When actually it is really the time the defence is most vulnerable the task of the back row and 10, 12, 13 is high as the (defensive) back three are definitely thinking don’t get caught out of position for kick, even if you run it they still come forward and then you can kick so they are always hedging there bets or in that covering mind set.

A defending team will always become very low risk in there decisions when in there own 22 and rightly so, at lineout time they will often not challenge the apposing lineout rather have the mind set of let them win it and deal with options they may throw at us.

At scrum time I feel we have our best opportunities to create the doubt and get over the advantage line easily. I find this is the case based on the fact that the forwards are in a much more condensed space. Where as lineout’s can be spread and bodies can be put in motion quicker as they are already on there feet. Scrum time tight five not much help initially and back row hopefully supplying weight in scrum.

Example attacking scrum 25 meters out from try line with 20 meter left short side. Our (the attack) first thought should be if I was defending this what would I be thinking? Some of the thoughts would be

- Shut down the short side
- Be aware of the chip/grubber/cross kick
- Be aware of the decoy plays and the options they may run off them.
I’ve only mentioned three points above and there are a few more but even mentioning those three you can see the pressure that is placed on the 11, 14, and 15. They are thinking don’t leave open the short side and make sure I’m ready for all those kick options? Even before the scrum is packed the defensive scrum will be thinking worst case scenario keep the scrum square as this will give defending backrow equal opportunity to execute the pattern they have chosen in defence to cover both short side or open side attack. As stated by thinking what you would do if you were defending can really assist with your manipulation of defence patterns to your advantage.

If we go back to the above scenario, attacking scrum with 20 meter left short side. An option that could possibly create doubt and give easy meters over advantage line would be by placing the attacking 10 and 12 on short side with the winger. The message we are sending we are most likely wanting to attack short side.

Reaction from defence could possibly be to number up similar or wheel the scrum to put there back row in more dominant position. All along the attacking goal was to attack right side and get quick ball. The attack by moving numbers to the short side and using the momentum of the defensive wheel to our advantage. We (attack) were always going to attempt to wheel our scrum right and use the momentum of there attempted left hand wheel and run a play involving backrow to right side.

Another easy option to challenge or confuse defence is to play your ten flat and with a little more width, then placing your blind side winger inside 10 and you 15 outside ten. By doing this attacking options automatically open up, but more importantly defence has been challenges just by our formation.
Defending winger will be hedging his bets wanting to follow his apposing winger but not wanting to open up the short side. Defending fullback will be concerned his apposing fifteen being more or less in the front line but also concerned about covering all possible kick options that could be played. Defending 10 has issues as he will be unsure, he’s not sure who will receive the ball the backrow will also be worried about similar things creating confusion in channel between scrum and 10. If there unsure its likely 12 and 13 may also have concerns also based on backrow and 10’s uncertainty. As discussed it’s all about trust in defence and if that trust is challenged and they make a poor choice then a good ball player/footballer will find the space after a poor decision has been made.

In summary challenging the advantage line is never easy but is one of the necessities of playing rugby, any coach or player wants the ball going forward. Thinking about placement of attacking players can influence defensive decisions which can make getting over the advantage line easier.

Placement of the players along with a player’s ability to show deception with the ball in hand can be very hard to defend at all levels of rugby. Often we only coach things we have been taught of seen. More lateral thinking could and experimentation with ideas will only help the game move forward.