INTRODUCTION

Phase play attack to put it simply is what occurs between the set pieces when you have the ball. Phase play attack is more effective when you have continuity and a high tempo. There are 5 key aspects to phase play attack and they are:

1. The breakdown
2. The defensive line
3. The space and using the field
4. Support (numbers)
5. Alignment

THE BREAKDOWN

This is the most influential aspect of phase play attack as it has a direct influence on the defensive line and support. If we pose the question “what is the ideal attacking situation?“ The answer would be quick ball going forward. If the attack is going forward then it stands to reason that the defensive line is going backwards, allowing the attack to be flatter forcing the defense to commit earlier and therefore giving them less time to make good decisions or to keep their shape without infringing. If the speed of the ball from the breakdown is “quick“ then it will only compound the above problems for the defensive team. If the attack is going forward then this allows them to be more efficient at the breakdown which means less numbers in the breakdown and more support and options to play with outside of the breakdown. This then allows you to play a high tempo game which gives you time and space to play in, everything the defense is trying to deny you. Factors which can influence the speed of the breakdown are:

- A,B,C’s (Agility Before Contact) - allowing you to get in behind the tackle or defensive line which forces arriving players to go back around through the gate which allows the attacking support to be first to the breakdown.
- Ball Presentation - being able to be dynamic on the ground which allows the ball to be used quickly.
- Winning the contact.
- Technical capabilities such as leg drive and body height etc..
- The point of attack.

After all this the attack will be left with 2 types of “ball“ to play with:

1. Quick ball or
2. “Speed up” ball - ball that needs to become quick.
THE DEFENSIVE LINE

An effective phase play attack will move defenders in order to disrupt the defensive line. A high game tempo and Go forward ball will move the defensive line backwards from this point an attacking team is looking for 3 things.

1. Gaps - space in the defensive line,
2. Overlap - Superior numbers
3. Mismatch - a forward running at a back or a back running at a forward.

If none of the above situations are available then the attacking team would look to ask questions of the defensive line. You would do this by having runners in motion and support coming from depth. Below is a basic set up from a break down which would allow the attacking team to have support coming from depth to either clean out or be an offload option if the front line decided to take on the defense. The support players would also be passing options for any of the front line attackers.
Below are some of the options available from the basic setup. The fly half here can play short to 3 or pass behind the back of 3 and pass to S1 in a second man play. This play asks questions of the defensive line by having runners in motion and support players coming from depth.

The below play can also be used of the setup with 3 or 4 taking the ball into contact and having S1 and S2 at the breakdown very quickly to ensure that quick ball is achieved.
It is important to note that the key pass (that is the pass that makes the play) must be thrown as close as possible to the defensive line to ensure that the attacking team take full advantage of any mistakes the defense may make.

**SPACE AND USING THE FIELD**

There are 3 areas where attacking teams should be looking for space:

1. In the defensive line,
2. Directly behind the defensive line
3. In the back field where the back three defend territory.

While the last 2 give attacking opportunities they are generally exploited by an astute kicking game. While good phase play attack can create opportunities to exploit the space behind the defense, it is the space in the defensive line which should be our primary focus. It is easy to confuse width with space, to avoid doing this consider space as a ratio of: **Defenders : Metres he/she can cover.**

For example 1 defender: 7 meters would be the edge of what a defender can cover. Coming from a scrum or line out we essentially start a “race for space”. If the first breakdown occurs in the midfield then all the space is on the other side of that breakdown “around the corner”. If you are able to win this race then you have a head start on the defensive team who are then forced to play catch up by either slowing the ball down at the breakdown, which may lead to penalties. Or by over folding in defense which puts them at risk of being punished by a switch of direction. E.g 21’s, 31’s etc.. The speed of the play will also question the defense's ability to maintain their shape.

Below an example of getting “around the corner”.

![Diagram of space and using the field](image-url)
Once we are getting around the corner it is then important to use the full width of the field. So we must be able to attack in the 15m channel. There are 3 reasons for this:

1. There are usually very productive opportunities down this channel
2. It forces the defense to respect and defend this space, which commits defenders.
3. By committing defenders to this channel we spread the defense on the open side which creates bigger gaps between defenders (space).

SUPPORT

Support is important to phase play attack because of its effect in a variety of different areas.

1. At the breakdown - not enough support and you risk losing the ball, too much support and you are being inefficient or wasteful with your numbers.
2. From Depth - Support from depth can be very dangerous as usually defenses don’t see them coming or are unsure of where their impact may be. Support coming from deep can impact the speed of the breakdown, extra numbers in the line and generally force defenses to make decisions.
3. After passing - players who support after passing can become extra numbers by looping to create an overlap or staying involved to take an inside pass to catch out a lazy defender. They are also vital to ensuring that the ball is secured and quick when it is played with width.
4. From the inside - Players from the inside must work hard to be support so that their are options on the outside when a quick ball situation occurs. There is no point having quick ball if there is no one to use it.

All these areas have an impact on an attacks ability to have continuity, which in turn builds pressure on the defense.

ALIGNMENT

The speed of the ball will affect our alignment in that if the ball is quick then the attack can afford to be flatter as the defense is on the back foot and not pressuring the attack as much. If the ball is slow then the attack would be deeper to allow you more time to deal with a defense which is on the front foot and therefore putting the attack under pressure. As a general rule attack should be relatively flat with width rather than being deep. If an attacking team is deep then you allow the defense the time to make the right decision and you also give them time to correct any mistake that they may have made. By having a flat alignment attacks can isolate defenders by forcing them to commit to one on one situations. Attacks will also pose an immediate threat to the defense which then allows the attacking team to manipulate
the defense (taking them where we want them to go). Lastly by being flat it will allow you to get full value for any good play that you create as the defense is committed.

**CONCLUSION**

On the surface phase play attack may seem to be passing, catching, loops and angles. However in detail it is ensuring that the aspects surrounding it are given their due diligence. The breakdown, alignment, support, space and the defensive line all have an influence on each other and a certain amount of balance between each is required to have an effective phase attack.