

# **BUILDING ATTACKS WITH NARROW FORWARDS**

**Mike Williamson**

**Wales**



# Building attacks with narrow forwards.

## Introduction

Most `commonwealth` teams have played with 3 forwards; with wingers holding wide positions close to the sideline. This gives width in attack but often allows defences to play zonally without being pulled out of position. If the forwards are playing at the same height on the pitch, there is very little room to lead laterally in to space and, because the defence may defend zonally, there is little room to pass the ball to space.

There are some teams (more commonly in Europe) that play with 2 or 3 attackers who hold positions infield when their team has the ball in their own backfield.

### Characteristics

The forwards in this case are aligned at different heights but hold positions near to a line drawn between both goals as in **Fig 1** below.

These forwards might include wingers who have `tucked in` to the centre but I will call them high forward (HF), support forward (SF), and deep forward (DF).

The width can be provided by the left and right midfield players (LM and RM), while distribution from the backfield will be from Sweeper (SW) and Centre Back (CB); But also from Left and Right Defenders ( LD and RD)

The strategy is examined against a defending team with a forward line of;- Centre forward (CF), left and right wing (LW and RW). A midfield;- of Centre half (CH) and inside forwards( IL and IR); and a defence of Right and Left Half (RH and LH) and Full backs (RB and LB)

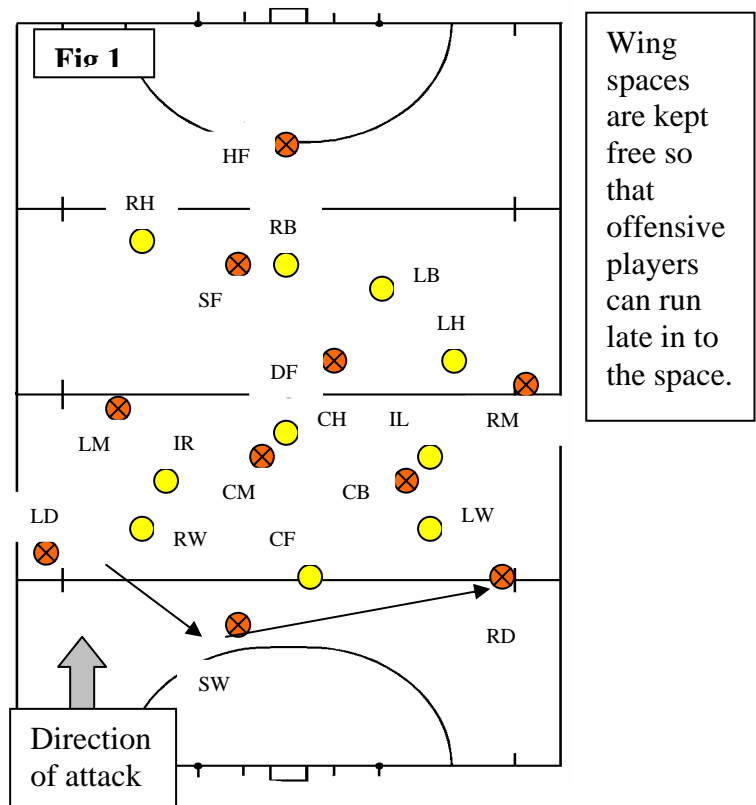
### Rationale;-

1. This alignment gives the offensive team height in attack and, if there is between 10 and 15 metres in vertical distance between the forwards, then they can be close enough together to link together when they receive the ball. This may enable the offensive team to have multiple layers of attack and to stretch their offensive threat over a longer distance from back to front.

2. The position of DF might be filled by any of the forwards in rotation. This position close to the midfield means that this player can help to defend the `core` of the pitch when possession is lost.

3. Midfield players need only to join attacks when the ball is safely secured in the attacking half. This can be achieved by running forwards onto the ball after transfer to wide positions; or receiving back from forwards who have `posted up` ahead of them

3. If the defending team bring their half backs infield to defend, then there is space behind defensive inside forwards. If these inside forwards are attack minded players the space can be exploited behind them, or they can be forced to defend deeper.



4. Defensive RH and LH may be dragged up-field to defend LM or RM, so it is possible to exploit space behind them.

5. Different heights of forwards allows each one the possibility of leading laterally in to unoccupied spaces. This means that defenders can be dragged out of zones more easily, or, there is more space to lead in to against man marking system.

This paper intends to examine how this alignment can be used to provide opportunities to pass the ball forwards from the backfield and, how the offensive team must make decisions depending on how the opponents defend this situation in different ways.

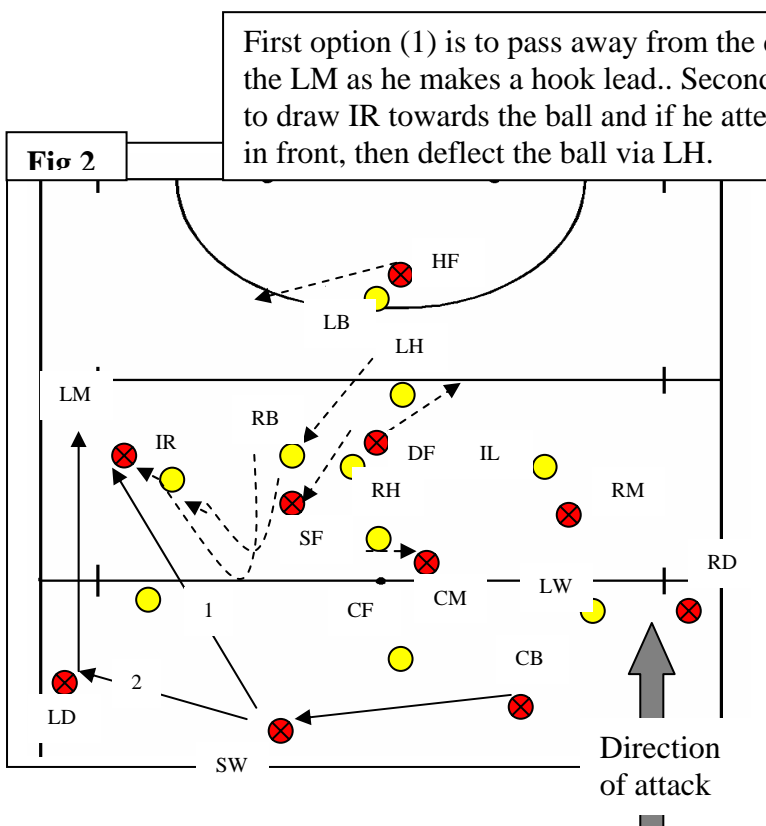
## Getting the ball to the attacking 1/3 of the pitch

### 1. Defence is marking man-to-man in midfield and in defence

#### a) .Attacking with ball side midfield player.

In **fig 2**, below, the forwards, holding positions infield allows the ball side midfield to use the wing space to lead into. If the opposing inside forward marks by stepping in front, the full back has the following options:-

- i) Hit to forwards leading back to ball to deflect the ball behind the defending midfield player.
- ii) Use the ball side half back to deflect the ball. This works particularly well when the midfield player leads first toward the ball to draw his defender away from the space he wants the ball deflected in to.
- iii) Pass to midfield player who makes hook lead to receive the ball behind and wide of his defender.



SW must look carefully at the position of the defending LW. If he `sags` infield to narrow the gap between himself and IL then there is a greater chance of interception, therefore the `dog-leg` pass via LD is preferable.

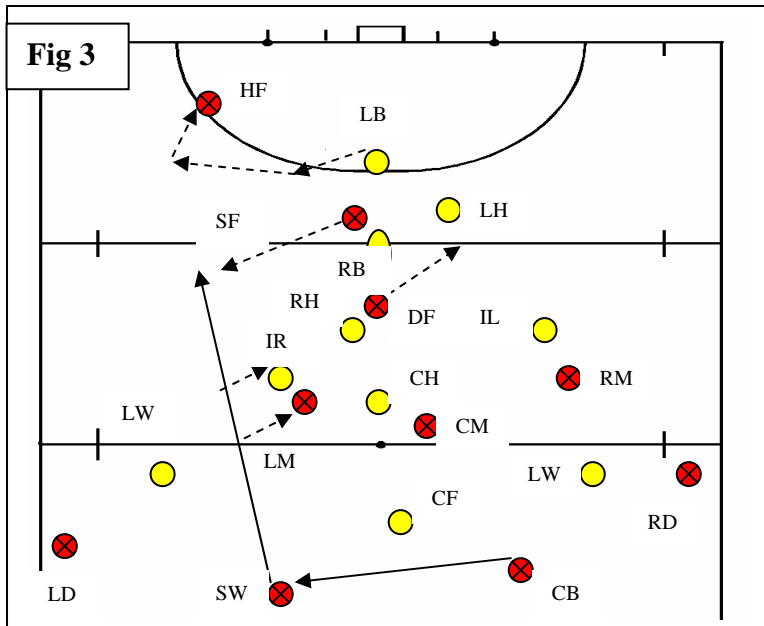
HF leads high to the ball side to support LM a 2v2 down the left flank

DF leads back to midfield space vacated by LM to offer short pass for SW and to draw RB away from goal. If LM receives higher than RBs position then there will be an easier attack to the circle

It is advantageous for SW to use a slap pass since it is possible to keep the eyes up throughout the pass to see late attempts to intercept. With this type of pass it is also easier to disguise the pass to LD or to play the ball past the left foot of IR to SF. Throughout the preparation to pass, SW must look also at the movement of the `spare` (LH) defender and CH to see if they move across to the ball side.

**b) Using midfield to clear wing space for forwards to lead in to.**

Against man-to-man marking in midfield it is easier to pull defending inside forwards away from the passing channels to the wing spaces, as in **fig 3** below.



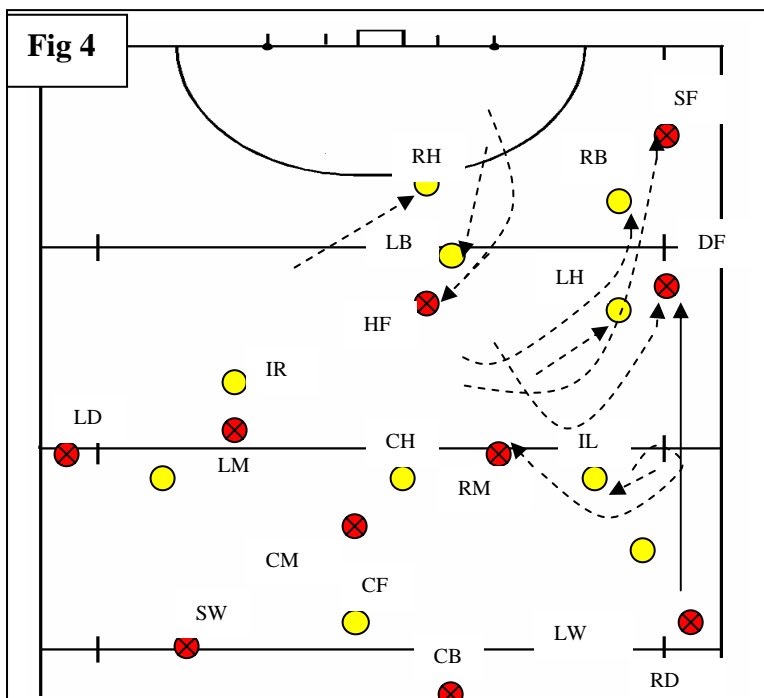
The defending inside forward is marking man-to-man so it is possible for LM to pull IR out of the channel so that SF can receive leading outwards. Here HF also leads in the same direction so that there are possibilities of receiving at different heights.

Forwards will be more likely to win the `foot race` to the ball if they are on the ball side of the defender.

In this case DF leads to the non ball side as he is;

- i) more likely to receive in that space
- ii) He will avoid pulling his marker (RH) into the passing channel

In the case that the ball side midfield player (RM) holds a wide position as in **fig 4**, then, if there is not a safe pass inside, he can lead infield to receive from the wide defender on his forehand side. In this movement, he hooks his lead to bring his defender slightly towards the ball before running diagonally infield. This lead allows RM to dribble at the space behind the defending CH. This gives the possibility of creating a 2v1 situation; with RM and CM against the defender CH.



The straight ball from RD parallel to the sideline is preferable for receiving on the reverse side, if it is possible for DF and SF to receive this pass running away from the defender. The long pass to the right corner for HF to lead out is

ineffective since it is difficult to receive on reverse stick under high pressure from LB.

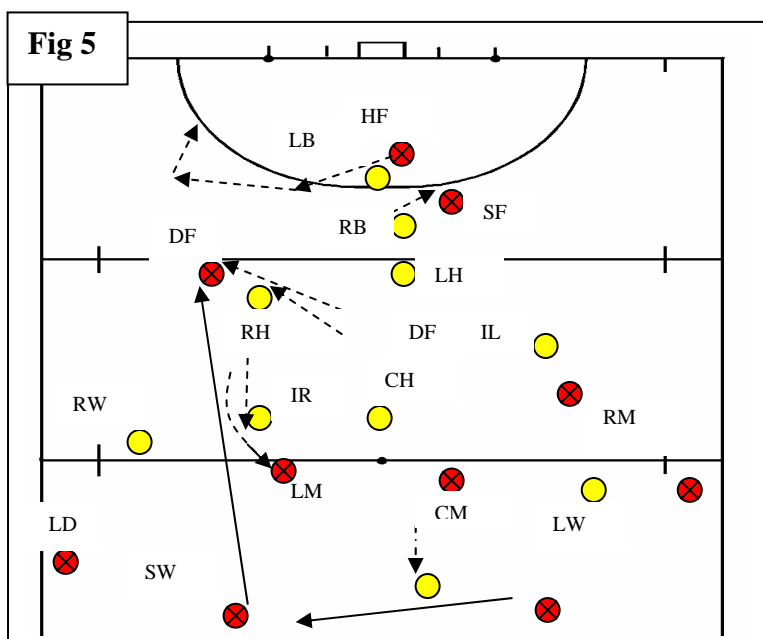
If all the forwards are man-to-man marked then they can have the following principles;-

- i) In all cases, if side marked; to lead to the space to the side furthest away from the marker.
- ii) Forwards who are back marked, lead towards the ball to post up for the ball and to draw their defender away from goal.
- iii) Forwards who are front marked in deep positions lead laterally, inside or outside to the channels
- iv) Forwards who are deep and who are loosely back marked;  
Stay in position to receive passes;  
Create an angle to receive the ball in a position which does not block a passing channel to wing spaces or to leads by higher forwards;  
Adopt a body position sideways on to goal, to see the movement of others higher in the pitch and to see the position of his defender.
- v) Forwards who are tightly back marked, lead in behind their defender to turn the defender to face away from the ball.

## **2. Midfield is defending zonally and the defenders are marking man-to-man.**

The defending inside forward may `zonally mark` (**fig 5**). By doing this he attempts to mark any midfield player in his area, while trying to intercept longer passes through the inside forward channel. Behind midfield, LB, RB, and RH are marking man-to-man, with the half back from the non-ball side (LH) acting as a spare defender.

In this case SW can make the decisions about IRs ability to defend different types of situation. LM may lead towards ball to draw defender closer to the ball. The ball can now be passed at pace past the defending player, with one of the forwards needing to lead to the space behind LM. It is also possible for LM may receive a short pass from SW, in order to peel infield and transfer to the help side through CM or CB.



a) If the defender stays deep to prevent the long pass then SW may pass to LM who is now free. This allows him to attack 1v1 using the space behind the midfield player or to look to pass the ball in behind his defender.

b) LM may lead wide of the reach of his defender. This may allow the sweeper to hit or sweep hit, with disguise, past the defender to LM. This can help to pull the defender (IR) out of his intercepting position and allow SW to pass long through the vacated channel.

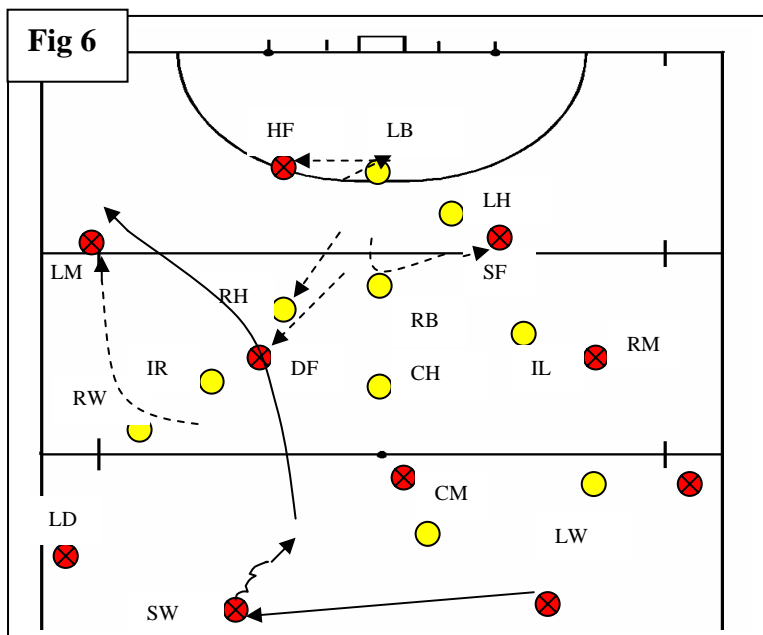
c) LM leads behind his defender for aerial pass from SW.

It is an important skill that the sweeper identifies the balance and movement of the defending midfield player and therefore which type of pass he is unable to defend. The ability to disguise this pass is important. Again, the use of a sweep hit allows the passer to keep his eyes up throughout the forward swing of the stick which means that he can see the movement and balance of the defender up to the moment of contact with the ball.

In the next example, ( **fig 6**), SW uses his body position to threaten to hit to SF who leads to the non-ball side. This movement forces defenders RB, RH and LB to protect long passes to the centre of the pitch, while the spare defender (LH) is attracted for a short moment by the lead of SF. The movements of DF and SF clear space for a long ball through to the top circle for HF. LM leads in behind IR who stays to defend the long ball from SW

The purpose of the forwards movements is to cause the defenders a problem of whether to be drawn away from the centre of the pitch to mark LM or to mark tightly near the centre. The movement of DF back towards the ball ensures that there is cover in midfield for LM who is high and wide.

SW can also use DF to deflect to LM past the left foot of IR.



The midfield player ( LM),leading high and wide causes a dilemma for the defence full backs and half backs.

If a defender pushes out to mark LM then there is no spare defender to cover the markers of the three forwards.

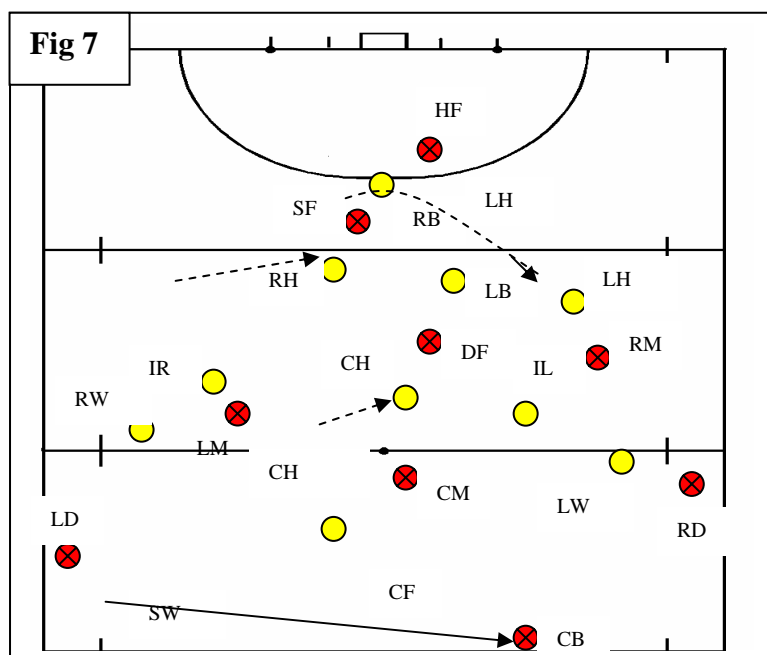
If the defence keep a spare defender covering the middle of the pitch then LM should get the ball.

In this case the RB has stayed central while LH has now marked SF. The defence might also respond by RH pushing out to defend LM while RB marks DF.

### 3.Zone defending in midfield and zone defending in defence

A defensive tactic which can be used to overcome the leads of the three forwards is to use a hybrid of zone and man-to-man marking in the defence. This involves using two Full Backs, who pick up man-to man. The Right Half and Left half roles are to step up and outwards when they are on the ball side; and to run infield to mark when they are on the weak side. This system may be adapted so that the nearest defender to the ball side channel steps in to `block` the wing space while the remaining defenders `slide` to the ball side to mark the nearest point of threat.

Here many of the movements of the offensive players are similar to those employed against man-marking defences. The midfield and forward players need to explore how far to the edge of a zone a defender is prepared to move. The emphasis is on movements which `cut the gaps` between zonal defenders.



It is in the defence interest to prevent the attacking team from transferring the ball (particularly quickly or high up the pitch) since the switching of marking will be easily lost after a number of transfers. The attacking team will look to keep possibilities open to transfer the ball. The transfer might be helped to be more threatening if it is higher in the pitch (ie. through midfield, rather than between SW and CB.) Long transfer passes in the backfield will change the angles more quickly and effectively than short transfers.

In **fig 7**, the ball carrier (CB) should be looking to pass to one of the three forwards because there is no cover behind these players and LH is blocking the wing space on the ball side.

If a defender intercepts the ball but has poor control, or is dispossessed, there is a chance for a circle entry.

If the RH defender is running from the weak side then it will be difficult for him to get a strong marking position quickly

The defending team can use CH to block the route to goal from long passes to the forwards, but, if he is deep enough to prevent a hard hit ball from CB, then there will be room for CM to receive in front of CH. This position can also be used to transfer high through midfield.

The offensive team can use DF to drag RB further away from goal and to occupy the spaces between the defensive inside forwards and his marker (RB). This movement by DF allows LM and RM more opportunity to lead high and wide without leaving the midfield empty.

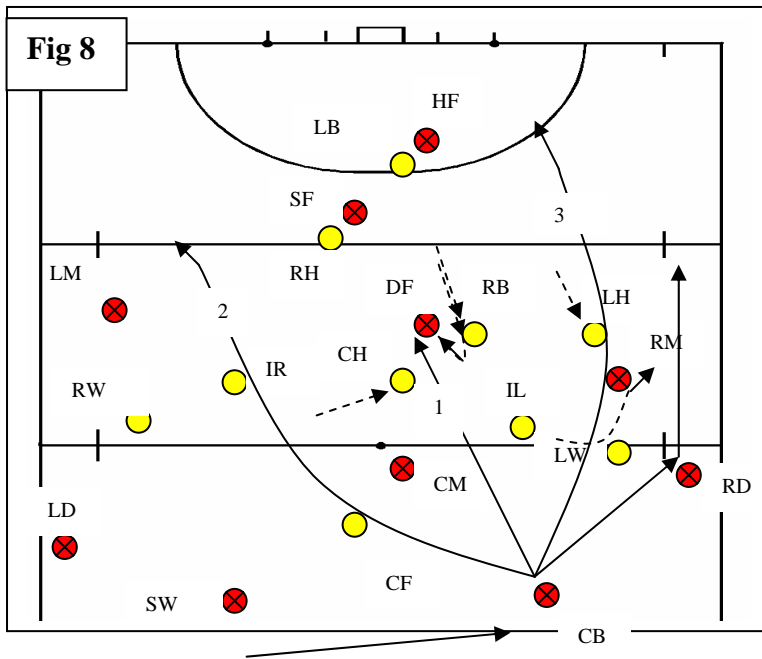
In **fig 8**; If DF is in a slightly higher position than the defensive CH and IL then a pass to DF can eliminate the defensive midfield.( pass 1)

LM and RM can lead behind the defending midfield and try to `occupy` the RH and LH.

In This way it may be possible for the help side midfielder LM to pull RH away from the centre of the pitch. This gives the chance for a hard hit ball to SF. If RH stays in the centre then a diagonal

aerial (pass 2) to LM is possible. If DF is near enough to IL then the pass in to DF may draw IL to defend this pass. Now RM moves to a position in the space in front of LH

If LH steps up to mark RM, now the long hit to the forwards to HF will be more effective since the `spare` defender is too high to help defend.



Now That LH is occupied with RM, and RB has been drawn a few metres up-field, the defender RH is very isolated.

If HF now leads along the baseline to receive an aerial (pass3) from CB then LB will be reluctant to leave the centre too early because of the lack of cover in the centre.

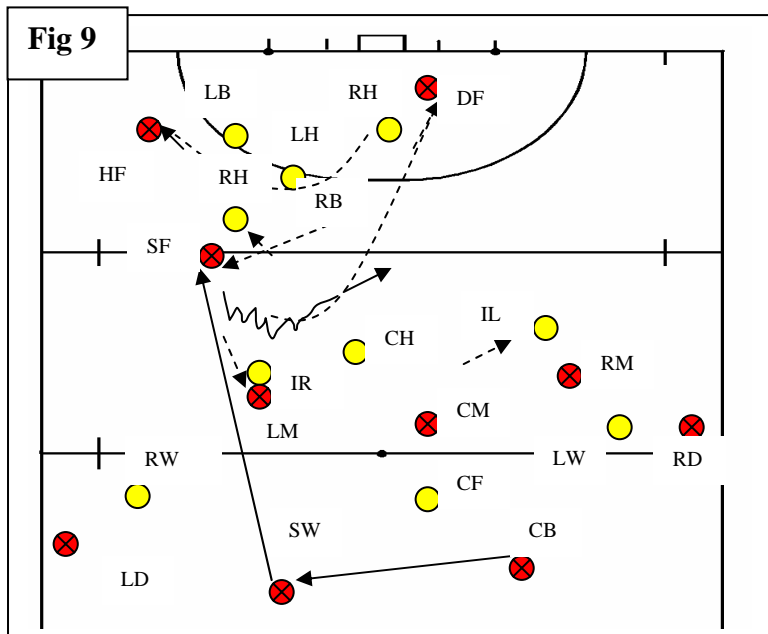
If RB drops back to cover the centre of defence; DF can receive from CB.

DF may peel to play 2v2 with RM against LH or, Peel in behind CH to transfer to the help side and LM

### Movement and Linking of forwards in the last 1/3 of the pitch

This refers to the movement of forwards once midfielder gets the ball high behind the defending midfield.

In **fig 9**, If more than one of the forwards lead wide, and they are followed by marking defenders, then this will clear space behind RH in the centre of the attacking 1/3 of the pitch, allowing the chance for the forward or midfielder player with the ball to run 1v 1 at the circle. The player making the higher lead (HF), needs to get to the position quickly, to get his feet facing towards goal in order to present a threat to LB once SF has received the ball.



Against man-to man marking it may be possible to clear space in the attacking 1/3 of the pitch to allow opportunities for 1v1.

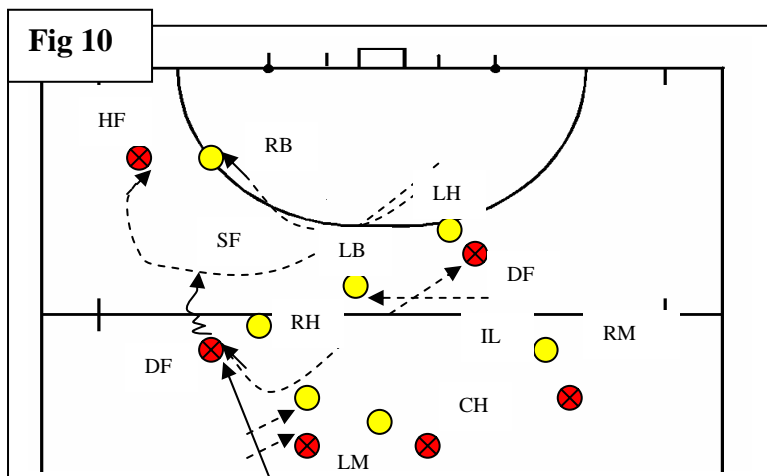
HF leads to the ball side to provide a second receiving option for the pass from SW.

DF who is infield leads high to provide a threat in the circle which vacates the space behind him.

If RB defends behind SF, SF peels infield to attack the top of the circle. If the defender (CH) drops to help defend, then SF can transfer towards the help side through CM or RM.

In **fig 10**, RH is preventing the peel inside. Now DF can allow the ball to flow across his body and try to make a 2v2 with HF. The decision to attack this direction is made easier because the cover defender (LB) is on the inside of RH.

In this example, the height of the spare defender (LB) means that it is possible to eliminate him with an early pass to HF.

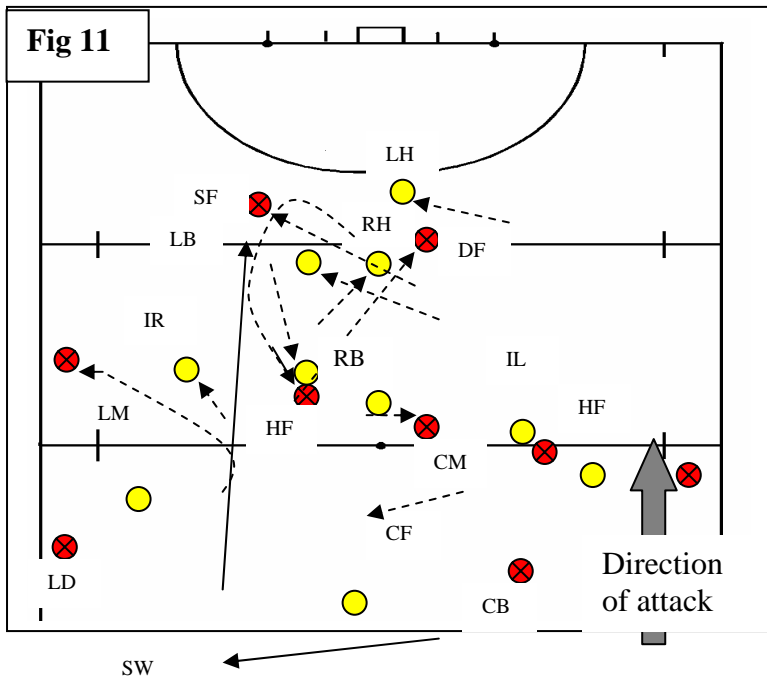


DF leads to the far side of the circle to provide a lead inside the circle and to keep LH away from the 2v2 on the ball side

The covering defender is to the inside of DF, so the decision is to peel to the outside to make a 2v2 with HF.

### High /Low rotation in forwards

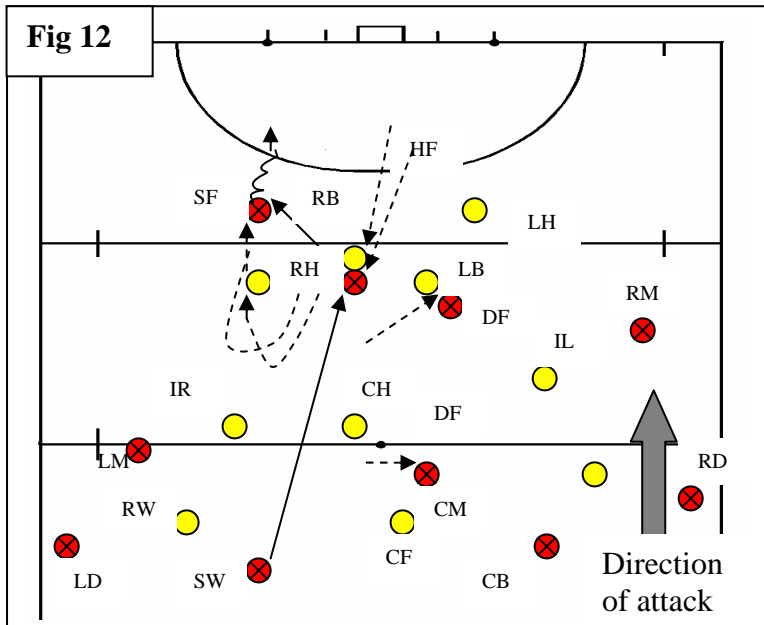
Forwards marked tightly deep in the pitch, can receive the ball moving towards goal if they lead diagonally in to the space behind their defender. In **fig 11**, DF runs hard diagonally to receive the ball level with or beyond his marker (RH). This results in either committing LH to taking over the marking of DF; or, drags RH away from his original position.



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If a HF leads early to the ball side laterally and his defender prevents the pass, he may lead back down the pitch from high to low. In this way he can receive the ball moving away from his defender and back towards his midfield players to pass the ball back in to midfield players who are facing the goal.

This allows for a 'blind' lead by SF) running a short distance from the help side in to the space created by the HF.

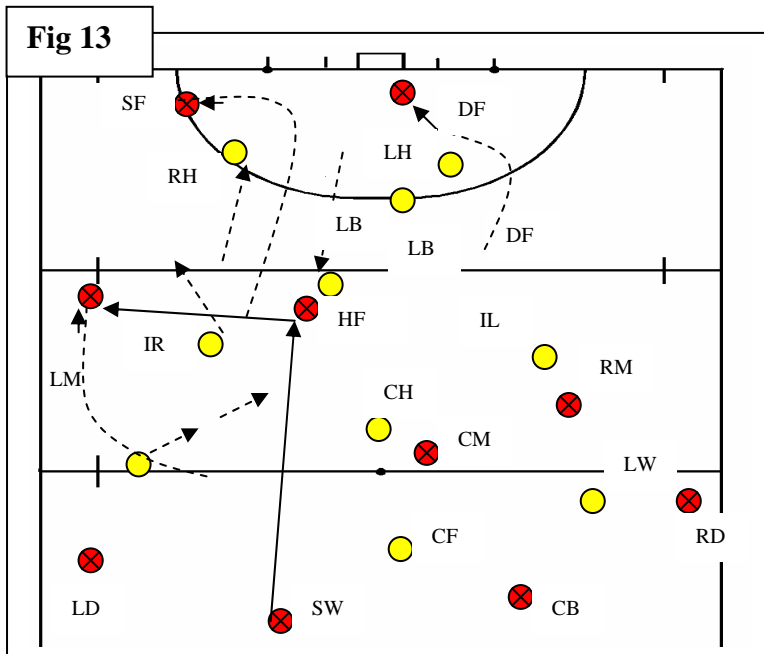


If the support forward is being front-marked while the high forward is back marked there is the opportunity to deflect the ball off the high player.( **fig12**)

If the defender (RH) marking SF recovers to prevent the deflection, High forward can receive and peel to pass back in to CM or RM to transfer to the help side attack

Or

pass out to LM who holds a wide position as in **fig13**



With the ball in a wide midfield opposition, a baseline player (SF in this case), offers greater passing angles for LM

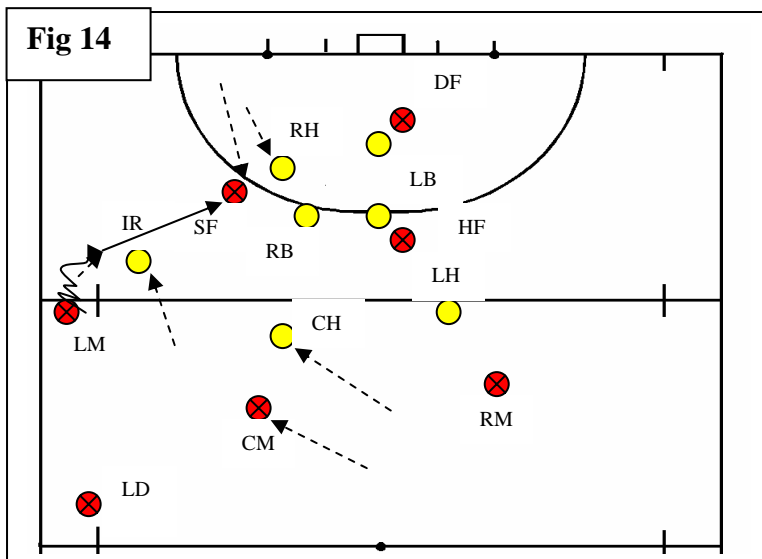
SF on the baseline on the ball side, then this player may lead deeper to `post up` on the `shoulder` of the circle.

In the example below;-

This allows a post play from LM passing in to SF and receiving return pass.

or;-

a wall pass to eliminate IR from LM off SF



If LM runs through towards the circle after the pass in to SF, and the post play is not successful, then LD can support in the space left by LM to receive and cross in to the circle.

LM may continue his run on the outside to cut the circle near the baseline

## Conclusions

### Examples

The teams who have come closest to this model have been Spain and Netherlands.

### Observations on receiving skills

1) When receiving leading away from the centre to the wing spaces, if the defender is close to the receiver, there is little chance of eliminating defenders unless the receiver can maintain flow with the ball.

2) Successful aerial passes are those received by high forwards leading along the baseline, or by midfield players receiving diagonally.

Forwards are mainly unsuccessful in receiving diagonal aerial passes running away from goal because of the difficulty in contacting the ball in front of the body.

3) Diagonal passes received running away from goal are difficult to receive under very close defensive pressure because of the need to slow down the feet to receive, particularly on reverse side. Unless the first touch is of a high standard the ball moves away from goal which allows the defender time to recover.

- 4) `Hook` leads are an essential technique in leading for a pass by midfield players and forwards because this allowed the receiver to move in the same direction as the pass. This makes it easier to keep `flow` in attack after receipt.
- 5) Where forwards receive without the opportunity to flow immediately, attacks usually only continue successfully if the ball is passed to a deeper or wider player who is facing goal.
- 6) `Screen` receiving against close marking defenders can be used to maintain flow and protect the ball.

**Important skills in passing from SW and CB in this model:-**

- 1) Use of sweep hit allows late change of intentions in executing the pass from defence to forwards and therefore, are more difficult to intercept.
- 2) Deflection passes can be used off midfield to wing spaces.
- 3) Deflection passes can be used RD and LD in to wing spaces.
- 4) Disguise in aerial passes particularly after shaping to sweep hit

**Other observations:-**

- 1) Against all types of defence;-  
Forwards achieve more varied movement if they start at different heights in the pitch.
- 2). High to low movement by forwards achieves;-
  - a) an overload in midfield to allow play through midfield
  - b) the dragging of defenders up-field and away from defence
  - c) an extra player in to midfield in a position to prevent counter attack. This helps to cover midfield players who have led high and wide
- 3).Where a forward could not maintain `flow` in attack, width is best provided by from behind the ball by midfield players or wide defenders arriving late in to attack.
- 4).Promoting a wide midfield player high in to the wing space achieves;-
  - a) a free player behind the defending teams midfield, or
  - b) the dragging of the `spare defender` away from the centre, or
  - c) a defending midfield player to defend very deep

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