

Counter Attack: Tactical Component by Guy Baker, Head Coach, Women's National Team

One myth to quickly dismiss is that we are the only country that has a great counter attack. Each of our opponents has a good to great counter attack. Each team we compete against presents many different challenges including the counter attack. In fact, there have been many games when our opponents have had better counter attack opportunities than we have had. Maybe their defense created those opportunities, maybe our offense created those opportunities or maybe a combination. In many games our opponent executed their counter attack better than we did. Among the top teams, there is little to no separation in all the areas of the game. Some games that slight separation might be the counter attack; or it could be defense, offense, 6x5 or 5x6. Some games it might be the bounce of the ball. One of the many great things about international water polo is the unique styles of all the teams. Each team has similarities, but each team also has differences. The short term challenge is to execute our style of play each and every game better than our opponent executes their style of play. The long term challenge is to continue to evolve our style in order to remain successful.

Since we started in 1998, there have been numerous changes to our physical, technical, tactical and psychological components of the game. Probably, the single biggest change has been to the counter attack. Following the 2000 Olympic Qualification Tournament, even though we had qualified, it was apparent that we would have to re-think our tactical approach to the counter attack. With some moderate changes we had an improved counter attack at the 2000 Olympic Games and with that success we spent the next two years completely overhauling our entire counter attack tactical and technical system. We have continued to this day to make the necessary changes to our counter attack. Our opponents can be a great provider of information on what needs to be changed.

As mentioned this article will provide a glimpse into the tactical component of our counter attack system. For those that are interested in learning more details about our counter attack, I would suggest attending one of our many Programs for Athlete and Coaches Education (P.A.C.E.) opportunities, whether it is a Coaches Conference, Clinic or Private P.A.C.E.. P.A.C.E. offers the chance to watch the Senior National Team in action whether live, video or both. Reading about our counter attack then seeing it is a great way to understand our system.

TERMINOLOGY

Lanes	Three vertical counter attack lanes
Right Lane	Right defensive side line to right defensive post
Center Lane	Right defensive post to left defensive post
Left Lane	Left defensive post to left side line

Key Points

1. *Vertical = goal line to goal line*
2. *Each counter attack starts with two players in each lane*
 - A. *Right Lane: x1 and x2*
 - B. *Center Lane: x3 and x6*
 - C. *Left Lane: x4 and x5*
3. *It is important that a counter attack moves in a vertical direction and has proper lane spacing*

Lines Two counter attack lines

1st Line First players in the right, center and left lanes
 2nd Line Second players in the right, center and left lanes

Key Points

1. *A great counter attack must also have correct 1st and 2nd Line spacing.*
2. *It is possible for x1, x5 and x6 to become the first player in their respective lanes because of the defense to counter attack situation. For example: 4 drives on x2 as the center is called for an offensive foul. x1 should be the first player in the right lane.*

Categories Three counter attack categories

Primary 1st Line advantage
 Secondary 2nd Line advantage
 Transition No advantage

Key Points

1. *Primary Counter Attack: 1x0, 2x1 and 3x2*
2. *Secondary Counter Attack: 4x3, 5x4 and 6x5*
3. *Transition Counter Attack: 6x6*

Sections Three horizontal counter attack sections

Create Section Defensive goal line to the defensive ten meter line
 Read Section Defensive ten meter line to the offensive ten meter line
 Attack Section Offensive ten meter line to the offensive goal line

Key Points

1. *Horizontal = side line to side line*
2. *Create Section*
 - A. *Create advantages in this section*
3. *Read Section*
 - A. *All players locate the ball, the advantage and the center in this section*
 - a. *All players quickly determine Primary, Secondary or Transition Counter Attack and organize attack structure*
 - B. *The ball and the players are in the correct position before entering the Attack Section*
 - a. *The defense may change as the attack is organized, but the ball and the players need to be in the correct position upon entering the Attack Section*
4. *Attack Section*
 - A. *Finish attack whether Primary, Secondary or Transition*
 - B. *A great counter attack will be able to be a Primary or Secondary Counter Attack upon entering the Attack Section and be able to switch quickly to a Transition Counter Attack if the defense defends the advantage*

The Read Section is one of the key factors of a great counter attack. The tendency is to try to make attack decisions inside the Attack Section. That is too late. A good defensive team will have already defended the counter attack situation and can gain control of the offense. It is important to emphasize the Read Section key points. An advantage is created, there has to be recognition of the advantage, or if there is no advantage; that also has to be recognized. A great counter attack team will recognize the counter attack situation in the Read Section and organize the attack before entering the Attack Section.

Zones Five designated areas inside the Attack Section

- Zone 1 Two meter line to the four meter line from the offensive right post to three meters outside the offensive right post
- Zone 2 Four meter line to the six meter line from the center of the goal to the offensive right post
- Zone 3 Two meter line to the four meter line from the offensive right post to the offensive left post
- Zone 4 Four meter line to the six meter line from the center of the goal to the offensive left post
- Zone 5 Two meter line to the four meter line from the offensive left post to three

meters outside the
offensive left post

Key Points

1. *The Zones are a specific location inside the Attack Section. As the players move in a vertical direction and depending upon the counter attack situation (Read Section), the Zones provide a specific destination based upon the defensive position at the start of the counter attack and the specific counter attack situation.*
2. *Each player has a clear destination and each player knows the destination of each player.*

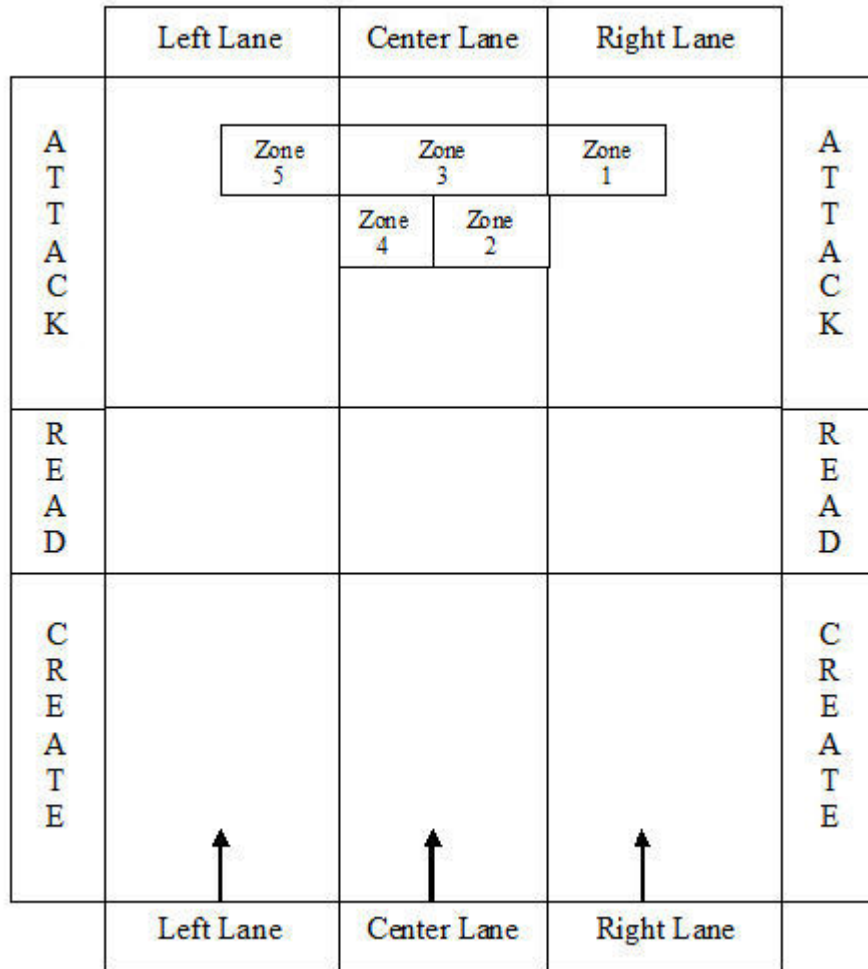
It is important to note that each part of the counter attack is connected:

- Vertical: Lanes to Lines to Zones
- Horizontal: Create to Read to Attack
- Vertical to Horizontal and Horizontal to Vertical

Outlet The initial counter attack pass from the goalkeeper

Cut Off A swimming and/or spinning technique used to create an advantage or seal a defensive player

COUNTER ATTACK DIAGRAM



PHILOSOPHY

1. **A great counter attack will dictate the tempo of the game**
Our defense and offense must be supported by an up tempo counter attack
2. **A great Counter Attack will begin on defense**
Defense is the foundation of the team. It is impossible to have a great counter attack without having a great defense. It is important to connect the defense to the counter attack; in other words a defense to counter attack mentality.
3. **A great counter attack will be established in the first quarter**
The Defense to Counter Attack mentality has to be established in the first quarter. The rewards of this effort may not be seen until the fourth quarter. Has the opponent the physical and psychological training to counter attack for four quarters? The fourth quarter counter attack has to be at the same high level as the first quarter.
4. **A great counter attack will designate a role for each player**
Each player has a designated role based on their defensive positioning and the counter attack situation. The defensive positioning is determined by the location

of the defensive player when the counter attack begins. The counter attack situation is determined in the Read Section.

5. **A great counter attack will have each player executing their role**
Each player must execute their role, starting in the Create Section, proceeding through the Read Section and finishing in the Attack Section. All players must understand the role of each player.
6. **A great counter attack will have at a minimum one player with an advantage**
This is imperative. The mentality has to be every counter attack will have an advantage. At the Senior National Team level, the defender position, x6, is the most common area that creates an advantage.
7. **A great counter attack will move players quickly into the offense**
The Transition Counter Attack is emphasized as much as or more than a Primary or Secondary Counter Attack. The Transition Counter Attack is the most important component of the offense. Every counter attack must have proper spacing and conclude inside the Attack Section.

TACTICAL PRINCIPLES

1. **Position players defensively that will enhance all aspects of the counter attack**
There are many possibilities with this tactical principle. One example would be the defensive positioning of the center position. The center at x3 is their normal flow of the game position. With the center positioned at x3, the initial counter attack position will be the center position in Zone 3, which is also their normal position in the offense.
2. **Cut off at x1 and x5**
The first responsibility of x1 and x5 is to cut off their defensive player. This responsibility covers two important factors of the counter attack. One, the defender position is the most common area where we gain an advantage. A good counter attack defensive team will use 1 and 5 to cover for the center that is behind on the counter attack. By cutting off 1 and 5, x1 and x5 will stop or delay their ability to cover; therefore the defender will maintain their advantage. Two, the cut off movement creates the appropriate spacing in the 2nd Line.
3. **Outlet the ball to the Line with the advantage**
Primary Counter Attack would be a 1st Line outlet pass from the goalkeeper. If the 1st Line advantage is too far away for the goalkeeper to throw an outlet pass, then the goalkeeper outlets the ball to the 2nd Line for a pass from the 2nd Line to the 1st Line. Secondary Counter Attack would be a 2nd Line outlet pass from the goalkeeper. Transition Counter Attack would be a 2nd Line outlet pass from the goalkeeper. We attempt to get the ball to the most open player. Our goalkeeper has to be ready to outlet the ball anywhere in the pool; 1st or 2nd Line and Right, Center or Left Lane.
4. **Locate the ball, the advantage and the center in the Read Section**
This principle should be emphasized, then re-emphasized and then emphasized again. It is easy to say locate the ball, the advantage and the center in the Read Section, it is much harder to do in the actual game. Determine the counter attack

situation in the Read Section; Locate the ball then determine whether the counter attack is a Primary, Secondary or Transition Counter Attack. It is important to always locate the center, even if the counter attack is a Primary or Secondary Counter Attack.

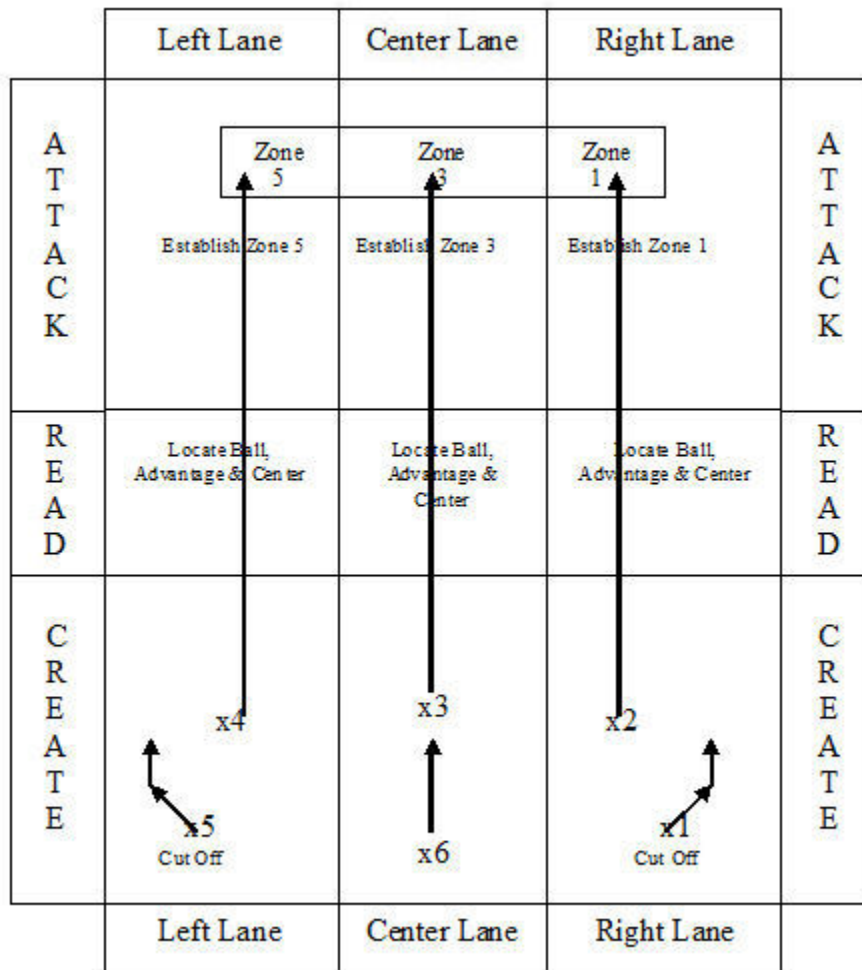
5. **1st Line establishes Zones 1, 3 and 5**

The first players in the Right, Center and Left Lanes have to establish Zones 1, 3 and 5 as quickly as possible. The tendency of a 1st Line player who is guarded is not to swim as fast as when there is a 1st Line advantage. The role of the 1st Line, if there is no advantage, is to occupy their defensive player by establishing Zones 1, 3 and 5 as quickly as possible.

6. **In order to shoot the ball in Zone 2 or 4, the player must have time to pick up or catch the ball and move forward**

Any shot in Zone 2 or 4 is a Secondary Counter Attack. A player who is open to shoot has to be patient and attack forward before shooting the ball. This will allow time for the counter attack players to rotate to defense to cover the defensive player who is trailing. The weak side player in Zone 1 or 5 will rotate to defense as the player in Zone 2 or 4 is preparing to shoot. Zone 1 rotates to defense when Zone 4 is preparing to shoot and Zone 5 rotates to defense when Zone 2 is preparing to shoot. If there is a player in Zone 2 and 4, then the player who is not shooting also rotates to defense as the other player is preparing to shoot. The counter attack players must rotate until the trailer is covered. If the player in Zone 2 or 4 is open to shoot and either pick ups the ball and shoots quickly or catches a pass and shoots quickly, the players responsible for rotating to defense will not have enough time and will not be able to cover the trailer. If the shot misses the opponent will have a Primary Counter Attack. A good counter attack and offensive team does not allow Primary Counter Attacks. If the strong side Zone 1 or 5 rotates to defense then the defense will be able to defend the advantage as the player in Zone 1 or 5 rotates out of offensive positioning.

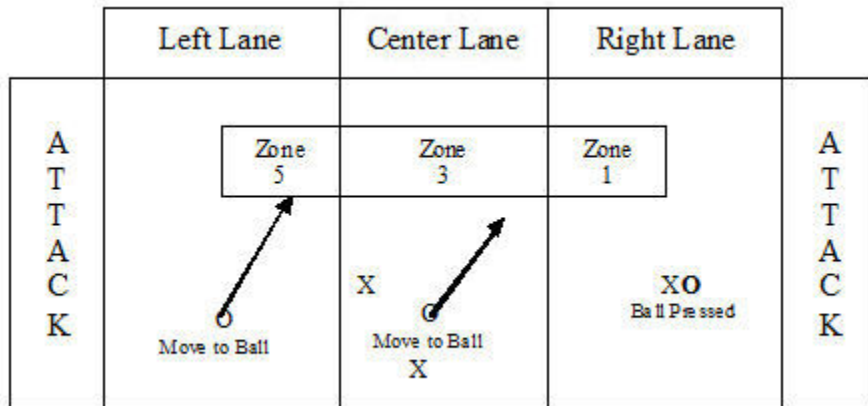
DIAGRAM: Lanes, 1st Line and Cut Off @ x1 and x5



ADVANTAGE RULES

1. Ball is pressed, move to the ball
2. Ball is not pressed, commit defensive player then move away
3. Defense has not committed, accelerate to commit the defensive players then apply Advantage Rules 1 or 2

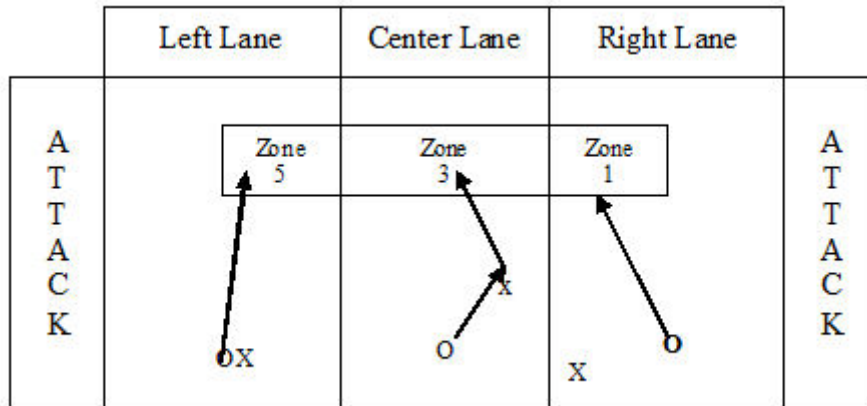
DIAGRAM: ADVANTAGE RULE #1



Primary Counter Attack: 3x2

1. The player with the ball in the Right Lane is pressed
 - A. The player with the ball must invite the pressure, which will pull the defensive player out of position
 - B. The player with the ball must continue to attack vertically as the defensive player is moving towards them. Attack vertically with the ball in the hand counter attack technique
2. The players in the Center and Left Lanes move to the ball.
3. The players in the Center and Left Lanes stay in their respective lanes and must keep moving vertically as they are moving to the ball
4. Pass will be made as the defensive player commits to the player with the ball; depending upon the remaining defensive player; the pass will be either a short pass to the player in the Center Lane, long pass to the player in the Left Lane or a short pass to the player in the Center Lane followed by a pass to the player in the Left Lane

DIAGRAM: ADVANTAGE RULE #2



Primary Counter Attack: 3x2

1. The player with the ball in the Right Lane is not pressed
2. The player in the Center Lane omits their defensive player and then moves away from the ball
 - A. The player in the Center Lane establishes the center position in Zone 3
3. The player in the Left Lane establishes Zone 5

ADVANTAGE RULE #3

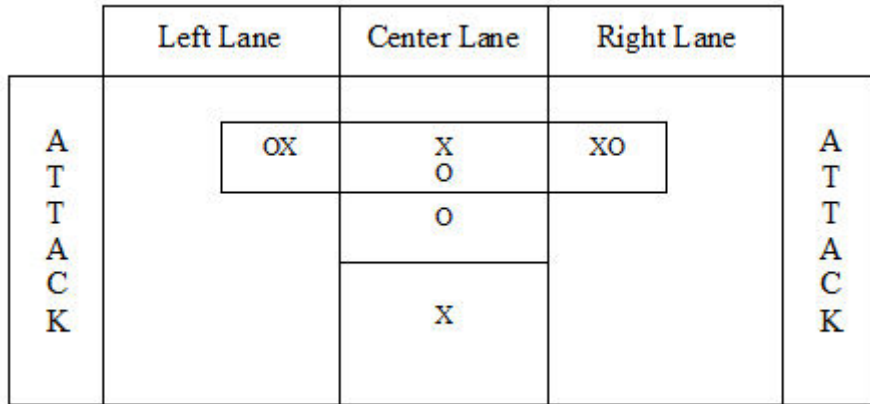
Primary Counter Attack: 3x2

1. The defense has not committed
2. It is important that all three players accelerate to commit the defense
3. If the defense does not commit, the player in the Center Lane will pop upon entering Zone 3

Whether the 1st Line has an advantage or not, it is imperative to establish Zones 1, 3 and 5. The counter attack must be properly spaced both vertically and horizontally and conclude inside the Attack Section. The 1st and 2nd Lines have to have proper spacing. If the Primary Counter Attack is stopped, there must be an immediate reaction to the Transition Counter Attack. If the 1st Line has not established Zones 1, 3 and 5, then the 2nd Line will be unable to be in the correct position.

SECONDARY COUNTER ATTACK STRUCTURES

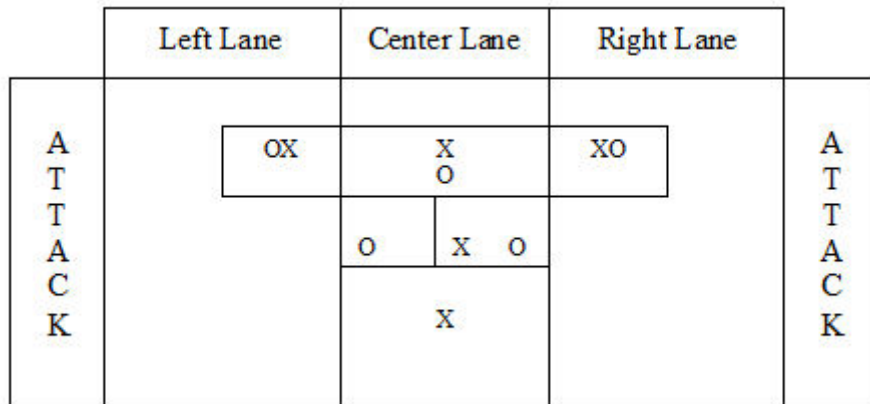
DIAGRAM: 4x3



4x3 Counter Attack Structure

1. 3x1 Structure
2. 1st Line establishes Zones 1, 3 and 5
3. 2nd Line one player; either Zone 2 or 4 or center of the goal in Zone 2 and 4

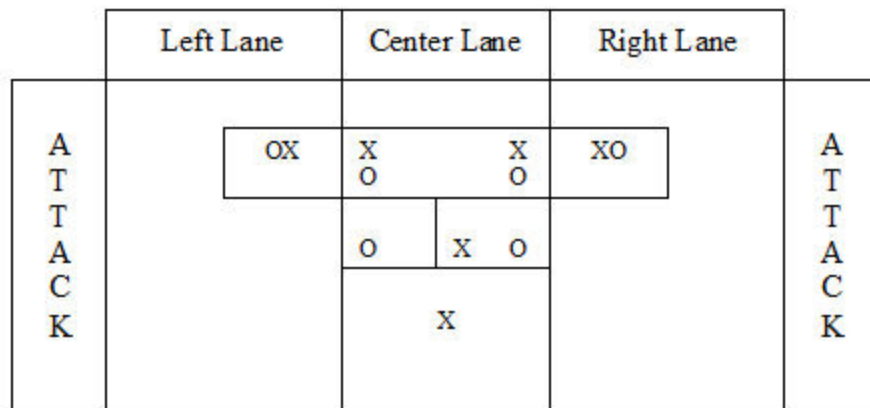
DIAGRAM: 5x4



5x4 Counter Attack Structure

1. 3x2 Structure
2. 1st Line establishes Zones 1, 3 and 5
3. 2nd Line two players Zone 2 and 4

DIAGRAM: 6x5 Counter Attack



6x5 Counter Attack Structure

1. 4x2 Structure
2. 1st Line establishes Zones 1, 3 and 5
3. 1st player in the 2nd Line establishes the 3 or the 6 post depending on the location of the 1st player in the 2nd Line
4. The 1st Line player in Zone 3 moves to the opposite post as the 1st player in the 2nd Line establishes the other post
5. 2nd Line two players Zone 2 and 4

Secondary Counter Attack: Key Points

1. The role of the 1st Line player in Zone 3
 - A. First Role
 - a. Establish center position in Zone 3
 - b. Commit the defensive player in Zone 3
 - c. All good defensive teams defend the players closest to the goal
 - d. If there is no player in Zone 3, then the defense will be able to defend the advantage and leave the open players outside the post which is lower scoring percentage than a player in front of the goal
 - B. Second Role
 - a. During a Secondary Counter Attack the player in Zone 3 will move as the player in Zone 2 or 4 is moving forward preparing to shoot
 - b. It is important to stay patient and not move too early or move outside the post

- c. Also, there is a tendency for the defensive player in Zone 3 to focus on the player shooting in Zone 2 or 4, which will leave the player in Zone 3 open for a pass from the player in Zone 2 or 4
- d. If the movement is too early and/or outside the post, the defensive player will be able to help the goalkeeper by defending part of the goal

C. Direction of Movement

- a. 4x3: Move away from the ball as the shooter in Zone 2 and 4 is moving forward preparing to shoot
 - b. 5x4: Move away from the ball as the shooter in Zone 2 and 4 is moving forward preparing to shoot
 - c. 6x5: Move to the opposite post as the 1st player in the 2nd Line

2. Advantage Rules

- A. It must be emphasized the importance of applying the Advantage Rules to Secondary Counter Attacks
- B. The reads and decisions must be the same

- a. Ball pressed move to the ball
- b. Ball not pressed, commit defense then move away
- c. Defense has not committed, accelerate to commit defense then apply Advantage Rules 1 or 2

C. Example: 4x3 Counter Attack

- a. 2nd Line Center Lane Advantage
- b. 2nd Line Right Lane outlet pass
- c. 2nd Line Right Lane ball is pressed
- d. 2nd Line Center Lane moves to the ball and receives pass
- e. 2nd Line Left Lane cut off and seal
- f. 2nd Line Center Lane w/ball to Zone 2 up and slide forward to shooting position
- g. 1st Line player in Zone 3 moves away from the player preparing to shoot in Zone 2
- h. 1st Line player in Zone 5 rotates to defense as the player in Zone 2 is preparing to shoot

3. Primary and Secondary Comparison

A. Similarities

- a. Create advantages
- b. Cut Off @ x1 and x5
- c. Outlet the ball to the Line with the advantage

- d. Locate the ball, the advantage and the center in the Read Section
- e. 1st Line establishes Zones 1, 3 and 5
- f. Apply Advantage Rules

B. Difference: 6x5 Counter Attack Structure: 4x2

- a. Difference is the four players in the 1st Line, with the 1st player in the 2nd Line becoming the fourth player in the 1st Line
- b. Every 6x5 counter attack the ball is not pressed, whether the defense has or has not committed
- c. 1st player in the 2nd Line accelerates to the 3 or 6 post
- d. 1st Line player in Zone 3 moves to the opposite post

6x5 Counter Attack: How to form the 4x2 Structure

1. First player in the 2nd Line accelerates to either the 3 or 6 post

A. First player in the 2nd Line: Left Lane

- a. 6 post

B. First player in the 2nd Line: Center Lane

- a. Moves away from the ball to the weak side post
- b. Ball Right Lane-6 post
- c. Ball Left Lane-3 post

C. First player in the 2nd Line: Right Lane

- a. 3 post

TRANSITION COUNTER ATTACK

- 1. Counter Attack always concludes inside the Attack Section and has proper spacing and balance
- 2. Attack before the defense is set

If the conclusion of the Counter Attack is properly spaced and balanced and the Center is not already in Zone 3, then each player will only have to move one position as the center moves to their position. This is an important point and the most significant change to our counter attack. The changes made to the counter attack dramatically improved our Transition Counter Attack. At a maximum each player will have to move one spot for our attack to be balanced. During a game, the center is the majority of the time in Zone 3 at the conclusion of the counter attack which maximizes the Transition Counter Attack and the Half Court Offense.

