

Kick and Run or the Through Ball

So when is the through ball “on”? Not as often as many players, coaches and spectators think. At the majority of youth matches when a team gains possession of the ball the spectators supporting that team begin to yell go, go, go... kick it! Unfortunately too many coaches join in the chorus. Now for younger players they too will want to kick the ball down field and chase it or try for the long solo dribble. This is understandable as they are still at an egocentric phase of life and are tactically immature as well. The fans are usually caught up in the moment and the yells are an emotional release, but rarely good tactical information. The coaches on the other hand have no excuse to call for the through ball unless it is “on”. So coaches must teach their players when it is “on” to make the long penetrating pass into the attacking half; a.k.a. the through ball.

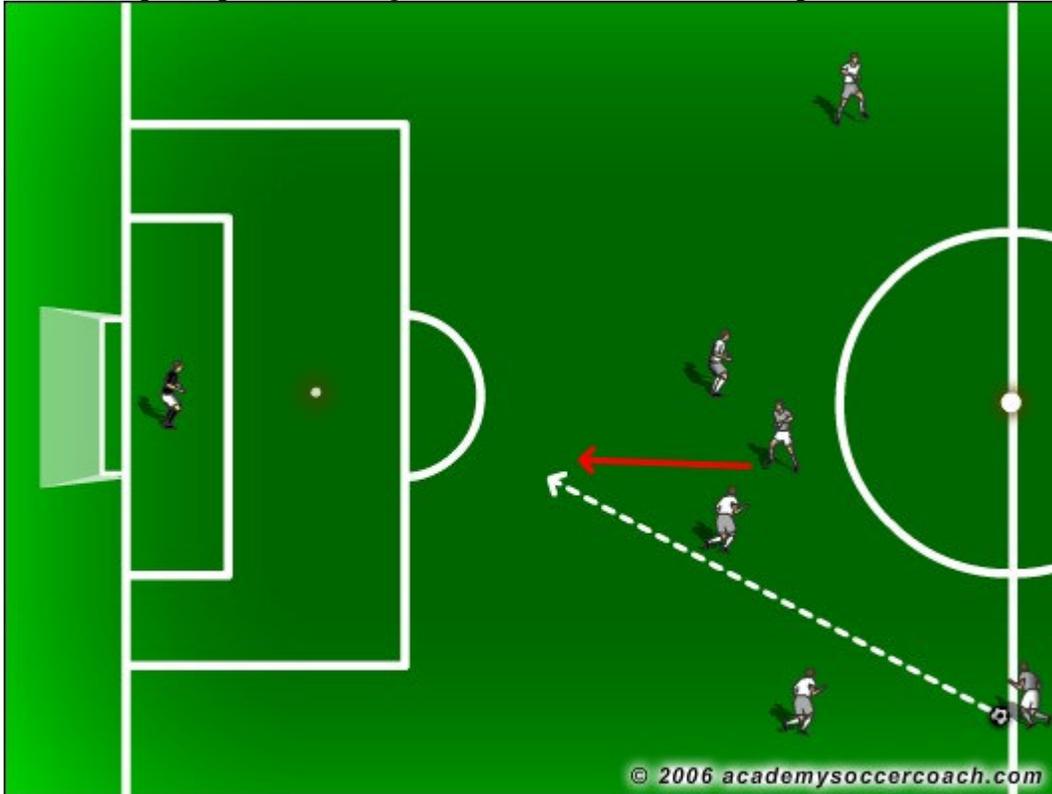
Three situations need to occur almost simultaneously for the breakaway to be a possibility.

1. The player in possession of the ball (1st attacker) must be under light or no pressure so that he has time to get his head up to see the possibility of the deep penetrating pass. He must recognize the open space behind the opposition’s backline and the chance for a teammate to run into that particular space. It does no good if the open space is on the right side of the field and the teammate is on the left side for example. Additionally the player with the ball (1st attacker) must have the skill to deliver the pass with the right pace, at the right height and at the right time.
2. The opposition’s backline must be up field and therefore there is now open space behind them. Twenty yards of space open behind the opposing fullbacks may not be enough as it is likely that a long pass into such short space will run out-of-bounds. [This largely depends on the age group as twenty yards of space in an U8 or U10 game is quite sufficient.] Thirty or more yards of open space behind the opposition is a tactical clue that the long pass might indeed be on. [The exception could be the chip pass that will stick when it hits the ground, but it is a slower pass so the opponents will have more time to make recovery runs.] Most of the long passes should go to the flanks as the opposing wing backs have no support there. If an opposing central defender comes into that space to challenge for the ball then so much the better for the attacking team if another attacker can get into the central space and now be 1v1 with the last central defender or even perhaps 2v1. Remember that a deep pass down the central channel of the field will most likely be picked off by the opposing goalkeeper unless the pass has backspin on it so that it will stick when it touches the ground and not just run on into the penalty area to be scooped up by the keeper.
3. The last ingredient is the position of teammates. There must be at least one player in a high position ready to run onto the long pass. The closer that player is to the offside line the better. It’s a bit of a gamble but if he starts his run from an onside position then getting into the space at the same time as the ball will put him free and clear into a 1v1 with the keeper.

If all three situations do not happen simultaneously then it’s just another footrace for a 50/50 ball. If a team does that too often in a match then they will be facing counterattack

after counterattack and they will run the legs off their forwards. All of this leads to a lack of compactness and team cohesion as the match wears on. Bottom line – not fun!

If all three ingredients are not on at the same time then keep the ball. Dribble for penetration or possession or make short passes to teammates' feet with the intent of getting the opposition out of good defensive shape and then penetrate into the attacking third. This requires patience along with individual and team discipline.



Here the opponents' backline is fairly square (flat) and up-field as they move forward to support their attack. A pass by the outside right fullback has been intercepted by the opposing left midfielder. A forward holds his run (or makes a checking run to loose a marker) until the pass has been struck and then sprints into the space to meet the ball and now has a 1v1 with the opposing goalkeeper.

So how can players make the through ball even better as a tactical option?

- ☑ When the through pass is made into the central channel then a diagonal run from the flank going onto the ball in the center of the field is the most difficult for the defense to read and stop. This run could be from a forward who has moved into a flank position to draw out a marker and then darts back into the center of the field or from an outside midfielder or as seen in the illustration above by a forward in a central position and near the offside line.
- ☑ Straight runs down a flank channel should receive a diagonal pass from the center. The runs are made by outside halfbacks or fullbacks.
- ☑ Straight runs down the flank onto a straight pass is also an option, but unless the receiver of the final pass cuts inside to go towards goal then the most likely outcome is a cross.

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- ☑ The most ideal option, and the one the most difficult to pull off, is a diagonal run from one flank and a diagonal pass from the opposite flank meeting centrally. The run could come from an outside midfielder or a looped run by a forward.

The first option and the last option both require that forwards check out of the front space and move back towards midfield.



The through ball on the flank can often be set up by the double pass. Two attackers are in flank positions. The deeper player is in possession of the ball. The higher player makes checking run A and receives pass 1. He makes pass 2, a first touch pass back to the support attacker who in turn makes pass 3 into space ahead of his teammate and behind the opponent. Pass 3 could be on the ground and straight or a bent pass or a chip pass. The high player makes run B onto the through ball. This run could be straight or bending. The angle and height of the pass depends upon the space available. The angle of the run also depends on the space the attacker could use.

So when in a match is the counterattack with a through ball most likely to occur?

- After the opposition has taken a corner kick and the defending team has regained possession of the ball. Odds are high that the opponents have sent many players forward into or near the defending team's penalty area. At that time there is a great deal of open space behind the opponents and in front of their goal. The defending team which has now regained possession of the ball could attack into that space with a drop-kick by the goalkeeper or a long penetrating pass by a field player. At least one forward must be alert and in good position to run down the ball and drive towards the opposition's goal.

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- b. After the opponents have carried out a dead-ball play (free kick or throw-in) far up field and like the corner kick scenario above possession of the ball has been gained by the defending team. This is why teams should go to tight man-to-man marking when defending against a throw-in within a 30 yards radius of the ball (or less for younger teams); to force that turn-over and counterattack down the flank where the throw-in took place.
- c. When the opponents are carrying out a build-up attack, make an attempt at a risky penetrating pass (threading the needle) and that pass is intercepted then a deep pass behind the opponent's backline is likely to be on. At this moment the opposition will have been in an attacking shape that is spread out so now there is space between opponents to make passes and off-the-ball runs. Opposing players will have been making forward runs when suddenly possession changes. Their forward momentum can be used against them if the defending team that has just intercepted the ball is quick enough in transition.

Clearly these conditions for the through ball are not a frequent occurrence in a match. The ultimate goal for the coach is to teach the players well enough that they recognize for themselves when it is "on" for the through ball. Only then will the players read the game fast enough to pull off the through ball play in the brief moment it is ON.