

## **Counter Attack or Build Up Play?**

**Is Build Up play aimed at creating scoring opportunities, or at limiting turnovers that will result in scoring opportunities for the opposition?**

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## Introduction

Both Build Up play and Counter Attacking training form part of any team's preparation. The amount of training time allocated to each will differ from team to team. An interesting question to ask is: How many scoring opportunities are created from Build Up play compared to the number of scoring opportunities created from Counter Attacking.

The answer to this question may give us more clarity on what should be receiving preference when allocating preparation time to either of these parts of the game. If we should find that the majority of scoring opportunities are created from Counter Attacks rather than Build Up play, should we then also not be asking the question? *"Should the emphasis of Build Up play be on creating scoring opportunities for the team or on limiting the scoring opportunities given to the opposition?"*

My interest in this topic stems from watching both the South African men's and ladies team over a period of time and noting that we concede a large number of circle entries during our own Build Up play. After observing a number of matches at the Men's World Cup in Delhi 2010, I noticed a similar trend in other teams who finished in the lower positions at the tournament. Should these teams be rethinking their approach to their build up?

## Method

In trying to get an understanding of the Build Up vs Counter Attack question, I looked at 14 matches from the Men's World Cup Delhi 2010. All scoring opportunities created were classified as either resulting from Build Up play, Counter Attack or Other. The number of Counter Attacks resulting from turnovers during a team's own Build Up play was also noted.

The starting point though was to first reach a definition for each of these categories for the purposes of this paper.

### Build Up Play

A slow deliberate playing of the ball out of the back, generally when the opposition has had time to set up their press. Build Up play is methodical, controlled and generally involves a number of horizontal passes between defenders. The aim of Build Up play is to create space or a numerical advantage that can be used to the benefit of the attacking team.

### Counter Attack

A counter attack is when a team attacks once they have won possession from the other team. Counter attacks may result from various turnover situations such as from penalty corners, long corners, opposition counter attacks or during opposition build up play.

### Scoring Opportunities

For the purpose of this paper, I defined scoring opportunities fairly broadly as any circle entry gained by a team. This was decided on, as the focus of the paper was not on the detail of whether a circle entry created a clear scoring opportunity or not, but rather on the play leading up to the circle.

**Note:** for the purposes of this paper, in both Build Up play and Counter Attack situations, if play was broken down and the attacking team took the free hit quickly (maintaining the flow of the attack), this play was still seen as part of the original Build Up or Counter.

Team	Number of Matches	Circle Entries via Build Up	Circle Entries via Counter Attack	Circle Entries Conceded on Own Build Up
Australia	3	36	38	7
Germany	3	32	30	15
Netherlands	3	17	31	12
England	3	22	28	9
Spain	2	17	13	9
Korea	2	17	16	3
Argentina	2	19	12	7
India	2	21	10	8
New Zealand	2	14	16	12
South Africa	2	13	9	10
Canada	2	12	6	11
Pakistan	2	8	20	4
		228	229	107

The results for circle entries resulting from the “Other” category were not included in this table as they were not of relevance to this paper. This category included circle entries gained from play such as penalty corner rebounds, long corners or 16yd restarts where the ball was played directly forward over distance eg. overhead or target hit.

It was interesting to note that the number of circle entries gained via Build Up and Counter Attack were almost identical. As we were only looking at a small number of matches, we must be careful to jump to conclusions as these results may be skewed by the quality of opposition the team was playing eg. Spain’s two matches analysed were against England and Australia.

What is interesting to note however, is the ratio of circle entries gained via Build Up play to circle entries conceded during the team’s own Build Up play for each team. Three of the four teams in the bottom four placings conceded around one circle entry for every one they gained via their Build Up Play.

## Case Study

We will now look specifically at two teams to see if we can gain a better understanding of the Build Up vs Counter debate and see if we can identify why certain teams have a greater percentage success rate during Build Up play.

The two teams we will look at are Australia and Canada. I chose Australia as they have one of the best ratios of successful Build Up play circle entries to circle entries conceded on their own Build Up play. They also play a style of hockey that is quite different to the style of hockey played by the other team I chose, Canada. I selected Canada as the other team in the case study, as they fall into that bottom bracket of teams at the World Cup that I mentioned earlier. I also believe that they clearly illustrate my view that these teams are possibly looking to play “too much” hockey during Build Up and as a result spend a large amount of the time in possession in the back third of the pitch.

We will look specifically at the following aspects of their strategies:

- 1) Build Up play
  - a) Is the midfield heavily involved in the build up or is the midfield bypassed using a more direct approach
  - b) Player positioning relating to being defensively sound if the ball is turned over (guard player or blocker)
- 2) Press Types
  - a) High press or deeper press
  - b) Where the team is aiming to win the ball and why

These aspects should give us a clearer picture on each of the team’s strategy and hopefully help us answer some of the following questions:

- 1) Is the team’s strategy predominantly one of Build Up or Counter Attack?
- 2) Do we think this is the correct approach for this team?
- 3) Why are some teams more defensively sound during Build Up Play – is it player quality or are there other aspects that we can identify?
- 4) Should teams be rethinking their approach to Build Up play?

# Australia

## Build Up Play

In the matches looked at, Australia played with predominantly two different shapes. The first being a system that resembled 2-3-2-3 (2 strikers, 3 midfielders, 2 “screens” or second midfield line, 3 defenders) and the second a more conventional structure with a back four that was pretty much 2-4-4 or 4-3-3 at stages.

### 2-3-2-3

#### Structure



3 Defenders (Yellow), 2 Screens (Black), 3 Midfielders (Blue), 2 Strikers (Red)

#### Roles of the Four Lines during Build Up

##### 3 Defenders

Where possible, look to pass the ball directly to the midfielders or strikers. They very seldom look to make a pass into the two screens, although will should the need arise.

##### 2 Screens or Deeper Midfield Line

Look to create space and open passing lines to the higher midfield line or strikers. The screens also offer support during attacks, but mainly in the form of a transfer option. The two screens also provide protection to the back three should there be a turnover. These screens will aim to avoid carrying the ball or get caught in possession.

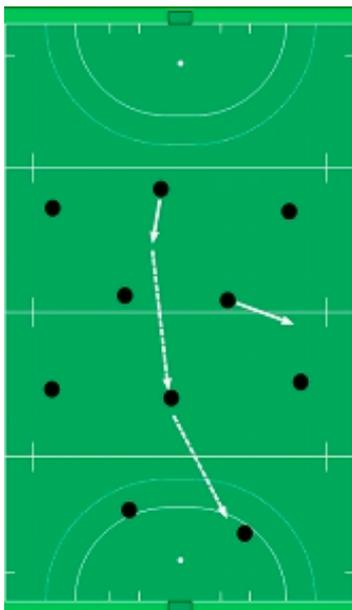
##### 3 Midfielders (Higher midfield Line)

The midfielders look to receive passes from the defenders and build attacks or create space for the other midfielders or a striker to receive passes. Their job is also to join attacks and score goals.

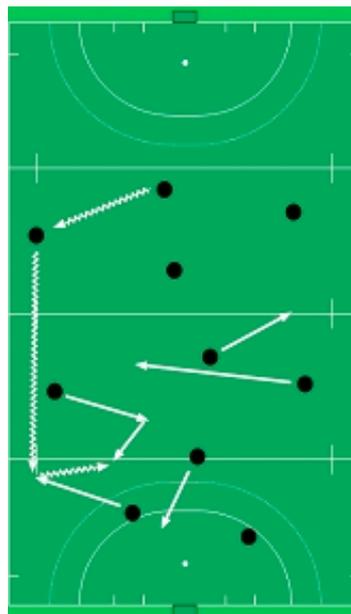
##### 2 Strikers

Their main job is obviously to score goals. If they receive a ball directly from the defenders, they will often look to pass the ball back to a midfielder and get themselves into the circle.

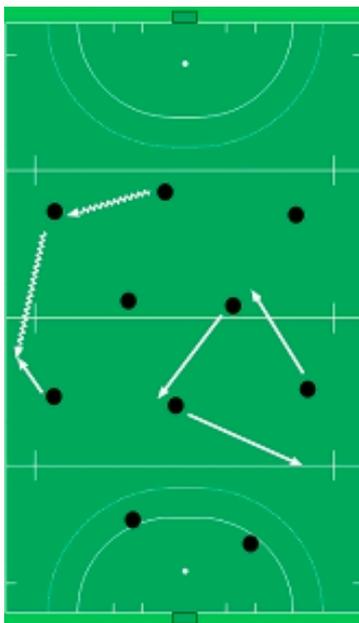
## Typical Build Up Movement Examples and Receiving Height



a) Screen creates space, direct pass to midfielder for deflection into circle for striker



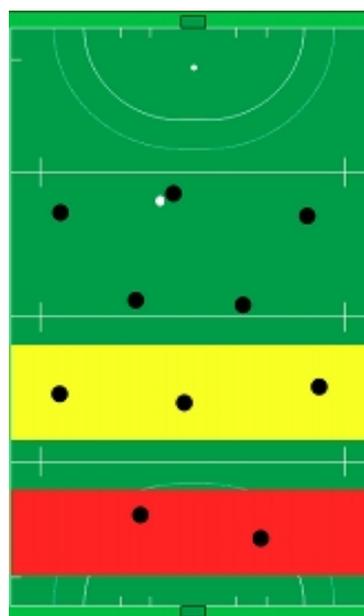
b) Pass from outside defender direct to striker leading wide into space created by midfielder lead. Striker then connects with midfielder joining attack



c) Pass from outside defender to midfielder leading wide. One screen may drift higher and be replaced by one of the higher midfielders. Outside midfielder then looks to connect with striker or advancing midfielder

### Average Receiving Zone Height

Direct passes received from defenders during build up fall predominantly in either the midfield receiving zone (yellow) or striker receiving zone (red)



## 2-4-4 or 3-3-4

### Structure

#### Roles of the Three Lines during Build Up

##### 4 Defenders

Slightly less direct than when playing 2-3-2-3 and will look to play the ball into the 4 midfielders. They are still relatively direct in comparison to a number of other teams and will target a striker or higher midfielder should the opportunity arise.

##### 4 Midfielders

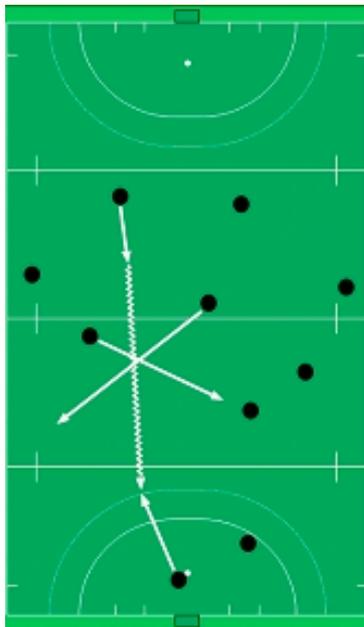
Look to create space to open passing channel for the defenders to target through, or to create overloads on a certain side of the field. The midfielders (deeper) also provide an outlet pass for the defenders, or will lead higher and wide to connect with passes made down the outside channels. They create attacks from the halfway line area or join attacks when the ball is played directly to the forwards.

##### 2 Strikers

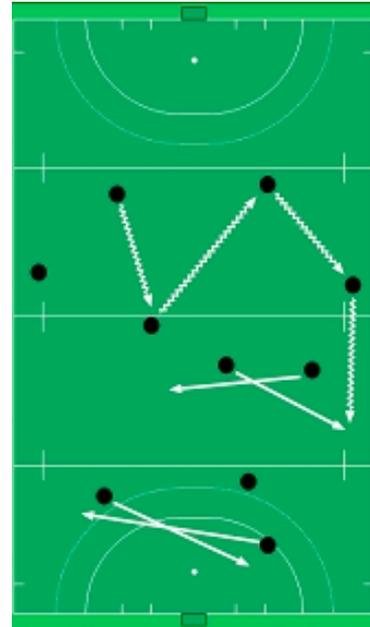
One of the midfielders may push slightly higher so the structure resembles more of a 3-3-4 with 3 strikers. Their job is obviously to score goals, but also to connect with target passes from the defenders or midfielders. They often look to bring the advancing midfielders into play after receiving the ball.



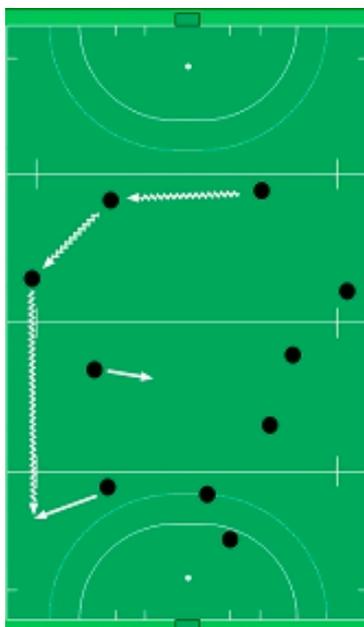
### Typical Build Up Movement Examples and Receiving Height



a) Central defender advances with the ball. Right midfielder leads inside while central midfielder leads high and wide. Central defender targets a striker through the space created by the midfield leads. Striker then connects with advancing midfielders



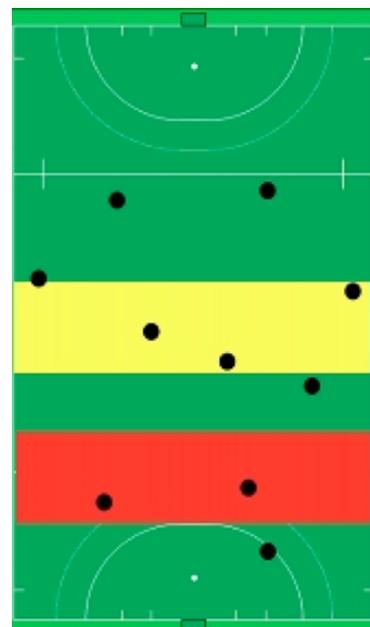
b) Central defender plays the ball into a midfielder who immediately makes a pass back into the back 4. The ball is played to the outside half who looks to make a connection with a midfielder who has lead wide into the outside channel, which has been cleared by the wider midfielders inside lead



c) The ball is played around the back four. Midfielder leads inside to clear space, while a striker leads wide into the outside channel. Outside half then targets the striker down the outside channel

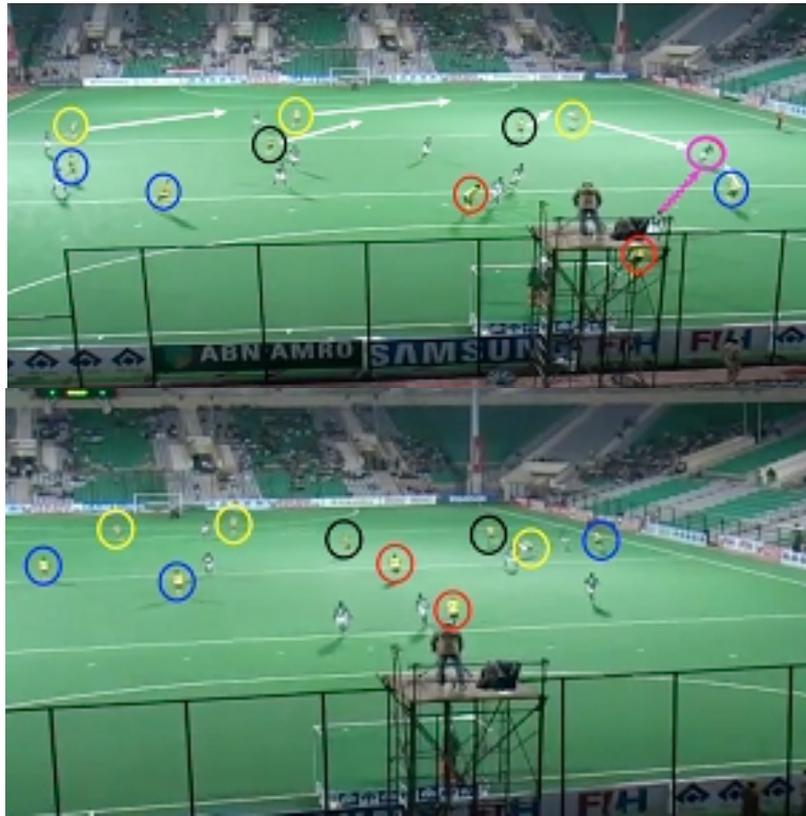
#### Average Receiving Zone Height

The ball is played into the midfield receiving zone (yellow) more than when playing 2-3-2-3, but is very often passed straight out with the ball seldom carried in this area. The higher receiving zone (red) is still targeted as with 2-3-2-3



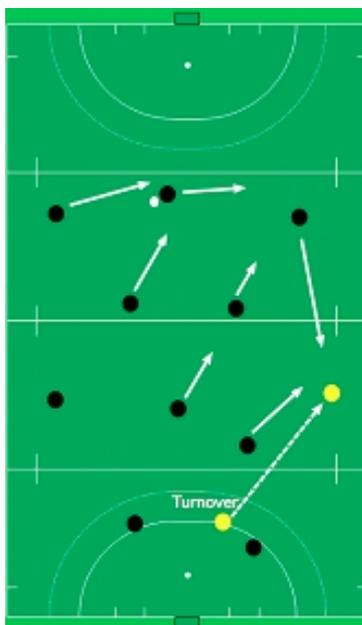
### Turnover Moment 2-3-2-3

We will now look at Australia's defensive structure when they turnover the ball to try and get an understanding as to why they have such a low number of circle entries conceded on their own build up play. We will look at this structure when they are playing 2-3-2-3 as this was their main approach over the three matches observed.



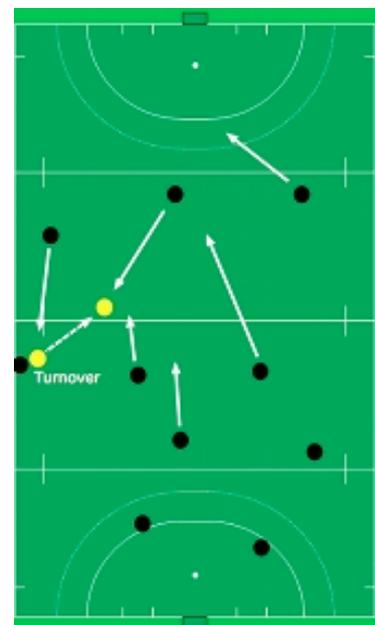
If Australia turn the ball over in an outside channel or the opposition passes the ball wide after turnover (purple circle), the screens play an important role in managing the counter attack. The outside defender (yellow circle) will look to engage with the ball carrier, while the screen (black circle) on the ball side will drop behind the outside defender to provide cover. At the same time, the screen (black circle) on the help side will drop deeper and across towards the ball side and both the central defender and help side defender will drop deeper and across towards the help side.

The higher midfield line (blue) and strikers (red) also work back hard, specifically those on the ball side who look to apply reverse pressure on the ball carrier. This ensures that they have at least four covering players between the ball carrier and the goal and are defensively secure.



a) Ball side defender meets ball carrier. Two screens deeper and across as cover. Central and help side defender move across and slightly deeper to provide cover

b) Australia is slightly more exposed when the screens are higher than the turnover point. Central defender may then need to step on the ball side with the screens and help side defender working hard to get into cover positions



## Australian Press

### High Press

The Australian high press is an extremely aggressive in your face approach. The response by many of the teams against this press was to try and be very direct from their restarts, or to take restarts quickly, in many cases using an aerial pass out of the back to avoid being placed under pressure.



- Rob Hammond (red circle) ensures he is directly in front of the ball carrier that is looking to take a quick restart
- Striker positions himself on the 5-yrd line outside the circle and forces the defender to take the ball back to the 16yd mark. Australian deeper defenders are man to man due to Taekema's ability to throw long aerial passes
- Striker ensures the defender on the ball is unable to make an easy forward pass. Midfield ensures no free passes into the Dutch midfield
- As the ball is played wide, the striker who was positioned in front of the ball runs hard at the outside defender. Outside midfielder runs at Dutch advancing outside defender with the aim of forcing a poor pass. Australia look to win possession in the midfield against the side line, or in the deep defensive zone (dotted circles) if an aerial is thrown



- a) Striker positioned on 5 yards from the ball to apply pressure. Midfield ensuring no free passes forward into the Pakistan midfield. Australian deeper defenders man to man to protect against the aerial or target ball. The aim is to force the wide pass.
- b) As the ball is played across the back, the striker runs hard at the central defender, again with deeper players (midfield) not allowing any passes to free players. This again forces a wide pass to the outside defender.
- c) Left striker now runs hard at the outside Pakistan defender to force a poor pass into the midfield
- d) Australia look to create the turnover either against the sideline or in a slightly deeper area if an aerial or target ball is hit (dotted circles).

## Half Court

The Australian half court press is a mobile dynamic approach rather than a sit back and wait approach. Although a player might run at the opposition defender to force a pass, it is never more than one player at a time coming out of the press to apply pressure. Once the player has forced the pass, they will look to retreat again and the next player goes. The aim is to force the pass to either side of the field and look to win the ball in these wide areas.



- a) Striker (red circle) prepares to run at the Dutch central defender as the ball is passed from the outside half.
- b) The striker runs hard at the central defender to force a wide pass. Only once that pass is made does the second striker start to run hard at the outside half. The first striker then start to retreat. Deep defenders are man to man aware of the aerial pass.
- c) Striker continues to run at the outside defender to force the pass, with the midfield behind looking to step on players to force the turnover.
- d) If the pass is made outside, Australia look to win the ball in the area against the side line (dotted circle) or in this case where the aerial is thrown, the deep defensive area (dotted circle)



- a) Striker (red circle) prepares run at the central defender of Spain.
- b) The striker runs hard to force the outside pass, as no free forward passing options are available.
- c) Outside striker runs hard to apply pressure on the outside half to force a rushed pass. The midfielders then look to step hard on the Spanish midfielders to create the turnover.
- d) The turnover is created in the outside zone (dotted circle) with the Australian left defender and central defender in this situation

## Australian Summary

Having looked at both the Australian build up play and press types, we get a clear picture of the team's overall approach. Irrespective of the build up shape, they are extremely direct and look to get the ball forward at the first available option. The ball is seldom passed between the defenders more than two or three times before a forward pass is made.

The advantage of this is that the average height of receiving is fairly high up the field. This has the advantage of when turnovers are conceded, they are defensively secure as they have numbers behind the ball and the opposition attack is generally starting from fairly deep.

Press types used by the Australians back this up. These are extremely dynamic and aggressive, putting opposition defenders and midfielders under enormous pressure.

In summary, the more times you get the ball forward into deep attacking areas, the more scoring opportunities are created, the more you have a chance to put opposition defenders under pressure when you lose the ball (or from their restarts) and the more defensively secure you are (defensive numbers and distance for opposition to attack).

This direct approach and intensity (maintained by frequent substitutions and high fitness levels) of their play is a major weapon for Australia and a large number of teams struggled to cope with this in Delhi.

# Canada

## Build Up Play

In the two matches I looked at in which Canada played, they used two predominant structures. The first structure was a fairly conventional 3-3-4, while the second was a 3-4-3 or 3-2-5 where the two outside halves push high up the flanks to create what is effectively a four-man midfield with the two outside midfielders (the central midfielder now forms a part of the triangle of three at the back with the two central defenders).

### 3-3-4

#### Structure



4 Defenders (yellow), 3 Midfielders (blue), 3 Strikers (red)

#### Roles of the Three Lines during Build Up

##### 4 Defenders

The four defenders look to transfer the ball around the back a number of times, until midfield movement has created forward passing options. The defenders often look to pass the ball into the deeper midfield players (Short and Pereira), rather than bypass them and look to hit the strikers directly.

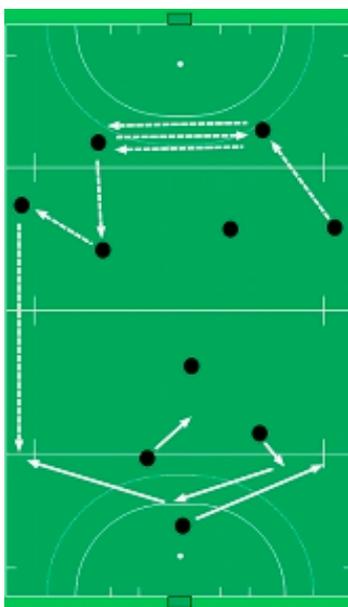
##### 3 Midfielders

Often play at varying heights aiming to create space. As mentioned earlier, the deeper midfielders often provide a pass outlet. The higher midfielder will look to join the strikers when attacking.

##### 3 Strikers

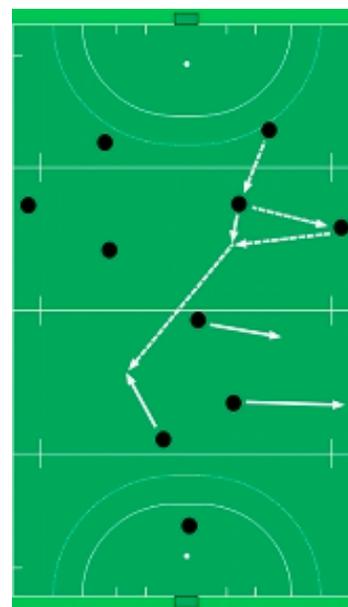
The strikers hold a narrow position to keep the space down the outside flanks open. They then look to lead into the outside areas to connect with passes from the outside defenders.

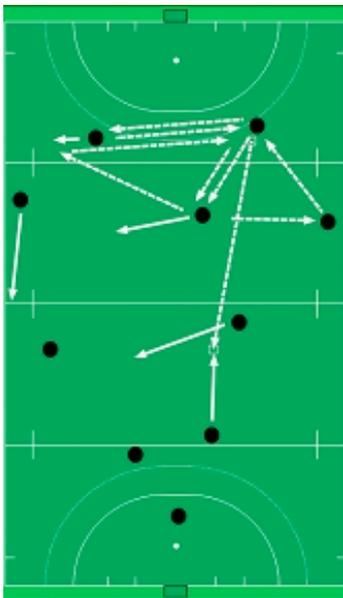
#### Typical Build Up Movement Examples and Receiving Height



a) Ball is played around the back and between the two central defenders a number of times. Then played into the midfield and out to the outside half. Outside half then connects with the narrow striker leading wide

b) Ball played from Central defender into deep midfielder and out to outside half. Outside half connects with the deep midfielder again, who then connects with a striker through the space cleared by a higher midfielders wide lead

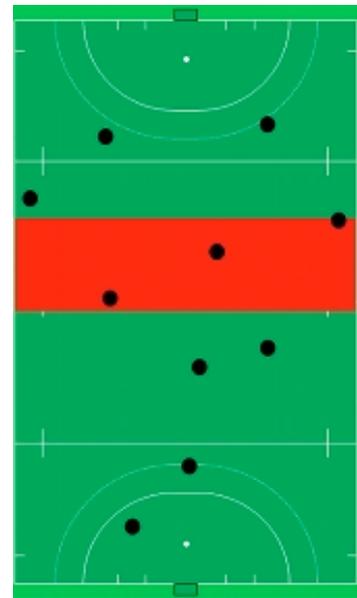




a) Ball played into the deeper midfielder and back out or between the two CBs a number of times before a target ball through the space cleared by the deep midfielder

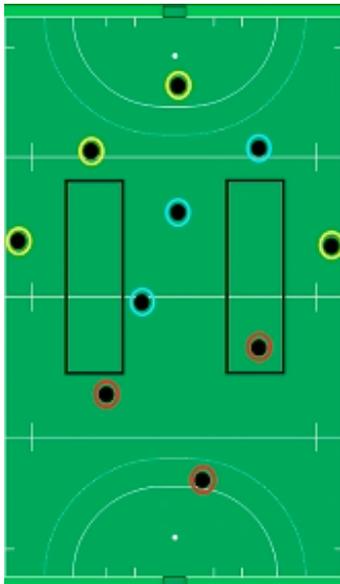
### Average Receiving Zone Height

The preferred forward passing option is into the two deeper midfielders (red zone)



## 3-4-3

### Structure

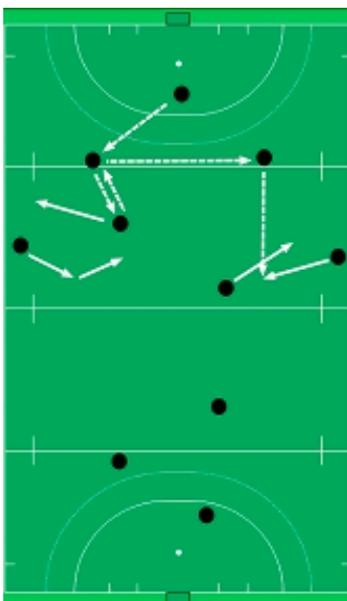


3 at the back with outside halves pushing high up the outside flanks

The colours indicate the original line the player was in when playing 3-3-4, yellow defenders, blue midfielders, red strikers

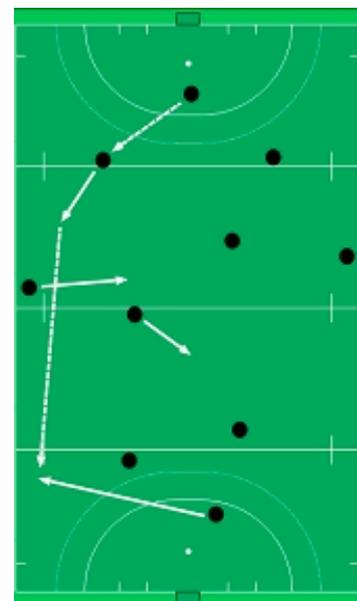
One of the main reasons for playing this way is that the outside halves stretch the width of the opposition press with the aim of creating two passing lanes (shown by the black rectangles)

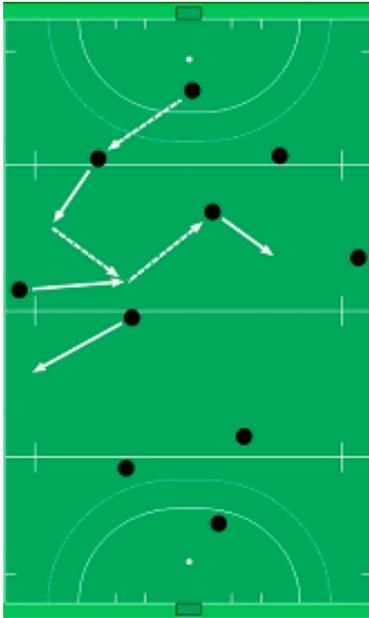
## Typical Build Up Movement Examples and Receiving Height



a) Ball is played between the back three triangle, into the midfield and back out again. The outside half (in 3-3-4) who has now pushed up into a wide midfield position leads inside to receive a pass from the left defender in the space cleared by the inside midfielder.

b) Ball is played to the right defender who advances and connects with a striker leading wide from a central position. The space is cleared by the inside leads of both right sided midfielders.

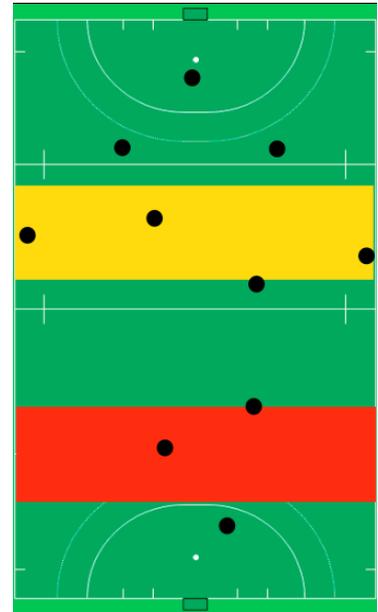




a) Right defender advances with the ball and then connects with the outside midfielder who has lead inside. The pass is then made back to the deeper midfielder who looks to connect with higher players.

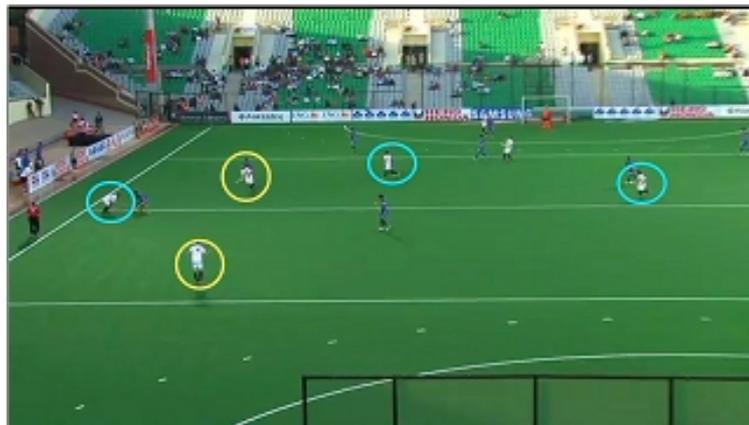
### Average Receiving Zone Height

The two predominant receiving zones are the area where the four midfielders operate (yellow band) and the striker receiving zone (red band) where the strikers usually receive the ball in the outside channels

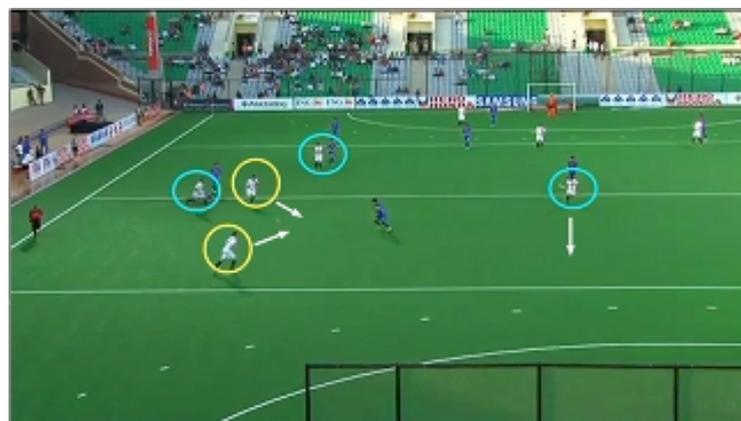


## Canada Turnover Moment

Canada conceded almost one circle entry on their own build up play for every one they gained. As with Australia, I looked at Canada's defensive structure when the ball was turned over to see possible causes for this. I looked at this defensive structure when playing 3-3-4 as this was Canada's predominant structure in the two matches I observed. Below is an example of such a turnover.



In the first picture we can see the Canadian midfielder (blue circle) about to lose possession against the sideline. He has received the ball after rotating with the left defender (yellow circle) who has lead inside. The other two midfielders (blue circles) are caught above the turnover height, while both central defenders are caught fairly wide apart.



In the second picture we see both left defender and left central defender going at the ball, which has been passed inside to a striker. One midfielder works back on a straight line to try and provide cover.

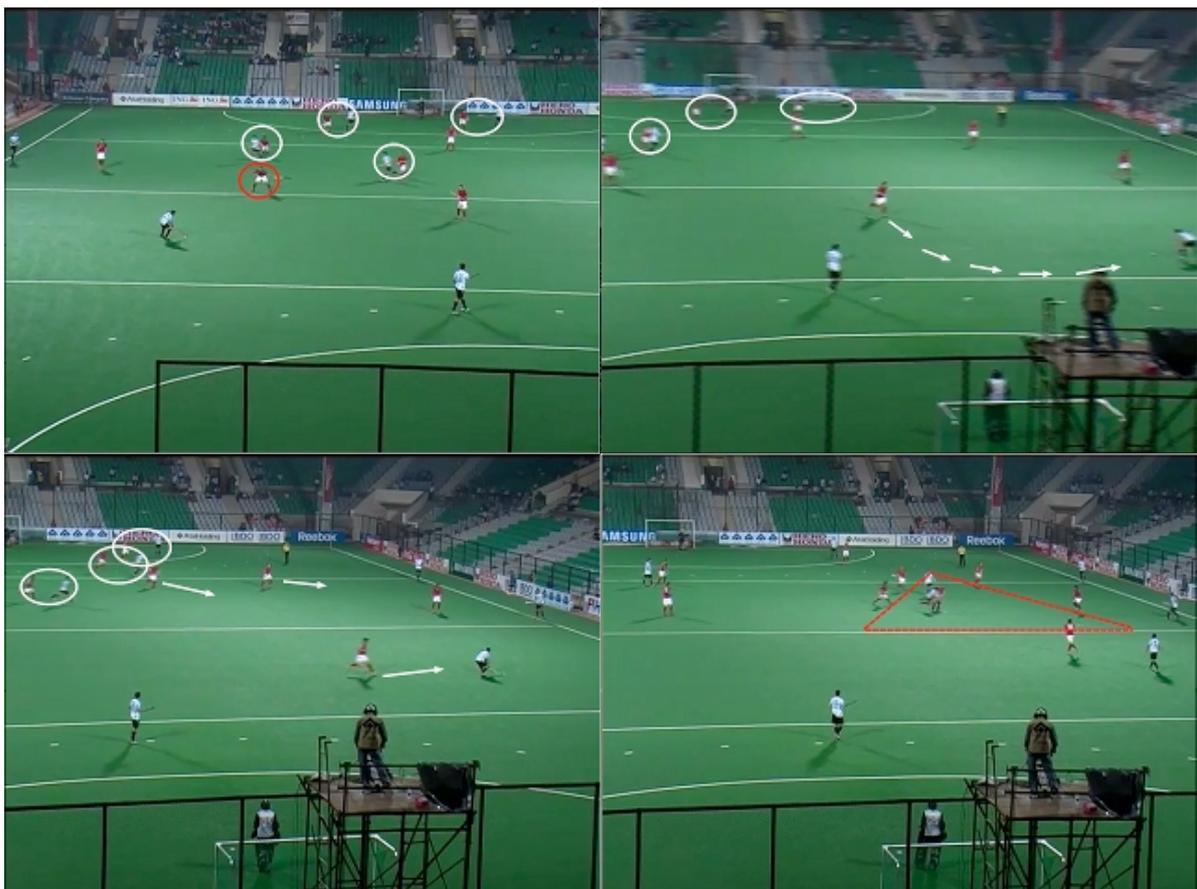


In the final picture we see the left central defender applying pressure on the ball carrier, while the right central defender has moved across more centrally to provide cover. When the Korean striker loses the ball, there are only two Canadian defenders behind the ball. As Canada often passes the ball into these central midfielders (often their deepest midfielder), they are vulnerable when turned over because of the numbers they have behind the ball at this moment and the distances between these defenders and midfielders.

## Canadian Press

### Half Court

The Canadian team used a half court press for the entire match in both matches I observed. The approach differed though, with a slightly more aggressive approach against Argentina.



- A Canadian midfielder (red circle) pushes through into the front line to prevent any inside passes into the Argentinean midfield, with the midfield and deep defenders man to man to back this up.
- Once the ball is played right, the Canadian striker runs hard on an arc to ensure he keeps the ball on one side of the field.
- The deeper defenders and midfielders remain man to man and track their players as they move across the field.
- The Canadian left striker holds wide to force the inside pass, with the midfielders and free central defender stepping to create the turnover in the pocket (red triangle)



- a) As in the approach against Argentina, one midfielder pushes into the front line to give Canada what is effectively a 4-3-3 line up in the press.
- b) The back six of Canada are man to man, with one free defender (as Korea have five players in their own half (4 defenders and CM))
- c) Canada are less aggressive than against Argentina and the strikers shuffle from side to side, maintaining their height on the half way line. No striker comes out of the press to apply pressure or push the ball to one side of the field.
- d) Once the Koreans play the ball down the flank, the Canadian players track their players and look to win the ball out wide (red rectangle)

## Canada Summary

In comparison to Australia, Canada is far more conservative and patient in their approach to build up. This mindset is also seen in their approach to pressing with the team being less aggressive in comparison to Australia.

Most build up play will consist of a number of passes between the back four, with a tendency to look to play the ball into their more experienced midfielders (Short and Pereira) often. Their success rate of getting the ball forward into the outside channels for their narrow strikers to receive high up the pitch is poor. The average receiving zone during build up is therefore deeper in the field, with them spending a large amount of time in possession in the back third of the pitch.

This high number of passes during build up exposes them to a greater risk of losing possession (often in deeper areas). The tendency to look to pass into their deeper midfielders also exposes them to more turnover possibilities and in my opinion negates two of the team's best players.

## Canada Alternatives

So the question is: Are there alternatives for Canada during Build Up, which can minimize risk at turnovers? Obviously, a change in shape or system played is one area that could be looked at. Even with the current structure, I still believe opportunities are available to be more direct during Build Up. I have taken two examples, which indicate possible opportunities missed to get the ball forward earlier into higher areas of the pitch.

### Example 1



In the first example, the right has the ball. Right midfielder leads inside to open space in the outside channel, with the striker leading wide into the space created. The right defender does not spot the pass (red line) and makes a pass back to the central defender.

Later in this same build up a second opportunity to make a forward pass arises. Midfielder leads deeper to create a passing window, which a striker leads into. Once again the defender does not make the forward pass (red line) and opts to make a pass back to the other central defender (white line)

The ball was then passed back to the left central defender, who now finds himself under pressure from the Argentine striker (red circle) in a deep area of the pitch. This build up consisted of eleven passes and Canada where turned over on the eleventh pass

## Example 2



In the second example the Canadian midfielder carries the ball into an Argentine pocket. A higher pass (red line) to the striker leading wide is missed and the pass is made inside to the midfielder (white line).

The pass is then made deeper to a central midfielder with the higher passing option having been missed.

Once again Canada have the ball in a deeper area of the field with the opposition striker (red circle) applying pressure.

## Conclusion

Having established that the spread of scoring opportunities between Build Up and Counter are fairly even, we asked the question: Is Build Up play aimed at creating scoring opportunities or at limiting scoring opportunities for the opposition.

After looking carefully at both Canada's and Australia's approach to both Build Up play and Pressing, we are able to get a clearer picture of each team's overall approach and mindset to their game plan.

Questions we were looking for answers to included:

- 1) Is the team's strategy predominantly one of Build Up or Counter Attack?
- 2) Do we think this is the correct approach for this team?
- 3) Why are some teams more defensively sound during Build Up Play – is it player quality or are there other aspects that we can identify?
- 4) Should teams be rethinking their approach to Build Up play?

## **Australia**

From looking at Australia's approach to both Build Up play and Pressing we get a fairly clear picture, that Australia seem to have a greater Counter Attack mentality than Build Up approach (although the statistics on these two are fairly evenly matched).

There is a clear understanding on what strengths the team possesses and how to best utilise them. I feel it is a very good approach and suits the player skills, fitness levels and Australian mindset (aggressive, direct and in your face).

The system and approach creates a large number of scoring opportunities and ensures that they are defensively secure on build up play and the pressure applied to teams is a major contributor to their success.

## **Canada**

Canada seems to have a fairly balanced view between Counter Attack and Build Up play. Their press types are aimed at sitting deeper to contain teams and is less aggressive than Australia's approach to pressing. This makes them less effective in creating a large number of good counter attacking opportunities.

Their approach to Build Up play is more deliberate, with the ball being passed a greater number of times before looking for forward passes to higher areas in the field. As a team their ratio of scoring opportunities created on Build Up play vs scoring opportunities conceded on their own build up is 1:1.

My view is that this is a combination of both structure and intent. As seen earlier, at the turnover moment Canada are often left with only the two central defenders in a position to defend the turnover, due to the deeper areas the ball is turned over as a result of the ball spending so much time in this deeper area.

Build up play using this approach has the following disadvantages:

- 1) The greater the number of passes, the greater the possibility of an error occurring.
- 2) The longer the ball is passed around these deeper areas, the more time the opposition has to set up areas to win the ball
- 3) By playing the ball in to "key players" often it is predictable and results in these players being turned over more often, thereby negating their value

The question now is whether Canada and similar teams should change their approach and is it that simple? My view is that every team should aim to get a clearer picture of their overall approach and then look at how this affects each aspect of their play.

If a change to a more direct approach is considered, teams must take into consideration how this impacts the skills required (hitting over distance, midfield and striker leading, types of receiving skills). When looking at press types, it is fine to say team needs to be more aggressive, but to play with this intensity requires teams to be in the physical condition to pull this off. All of this impacts the focus of training and the time required to ensure the team has the capacity to carry out a change in approach.

Although a balance between being direct and being patient always needs to be maintained, my view is that these lower teams do need to look at a more direct approach with the main aim of minimising their risk of conceding on Build Up. There needs to be both the structure and the intent to bring about this change.

**THE END**