

Choose the best Sevens defence for your team - Part 1

With the sevens season approaching fast, teams are naturally turning their attention to the abridged format of the game. And why not since it breaks up a training session. But it is more than just touch rugby before the bags come out. Today's top sevens teams run defensive patterns which are as complicated, if not more so, than the fifteen-a-side game.

RugbyCoach helps you choose the sevens defence that best suits your team.

The seven man defensive system

Simple defence

There needs to be a line to face the opposition and some provision for a kick over the top, or if a break is made through the line.

The front line can either have six or seven players. With six players, the seventh player is placed behind the line to act as the covering player, more commonly known as the sweeper.

1 Basic seven up

If you are a strong, physical side, without maybe as much pace as other sides, then the basic seven up defence is ideal. Each man can take the player/zone in front of them. They do not need to slide onto another player when the ball is moved, meaning slower players might not be exposed. The slide defence can also mean a clever attacking side has more options to cause problems with switches and loops. There is less chance of this when defensive zones are allocated (see "Looking at 7 man zones").

2 Arc defence

As the ball is moved to the end of the line by the opposition the defence steps up at the other end of the line and across. This starts to block the options for the ball to return from whence it came. It might also be that players can be between the attackers and the ball, further reducing the options.

3 Press defence

With an organised defence in place, a press defence can be employed. This is a high-risk attempt to put so much pressure on the attacking team that they make an error. The defending team moves up very quickly in a close line, with the far end man hanging back a little for the kick. With all the defenders taking their own man and moving straight ahead, the attack may not have enough time to adjust.

However the dangers of the kick and chase by the opposition make this a do-or-die type defence when a quick score is needed to get back into the game.

Danger ball

The most dangerous times for a defence, other than a direct breach or kick over, are when they are disorganised, most often from a turnover. This is "danger ball" and the defence must realign and organise themselves as quickly as possible. In this case, players should fill in from the ball outwards, leaving the spaces, initially, wide out. Many tries from turnover are scored from space either side of a turnover from a tackle.

The sweeper

In a seven up defence, a player needs to be able to cover the kick over the top, or the break. The simplest pattern is for the end man who is furthest away from the ball to drop back (see figure 1). The player should only go back far enough to ensure he can return to the line. A more sophisticated player who is perhaps the play maker in the midfield could also drop back if the ball reaches the end, but certainly not as far as one would expect an end man to be (see figure 2).

Two in and no more at the contest

A sevens ruck or maul should be contested by ONLY two players on the defending side. The pitch is too wide with only four defenders rather than five. This is one of the hardest disciplines for non-Sevens specialists to take on board. It takes a deal of practice to remember to be patient and not over commit.



Figure 1 - Standard sweeper defence.

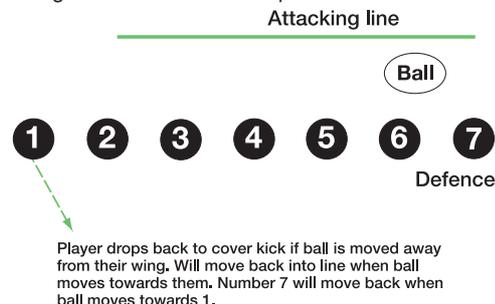
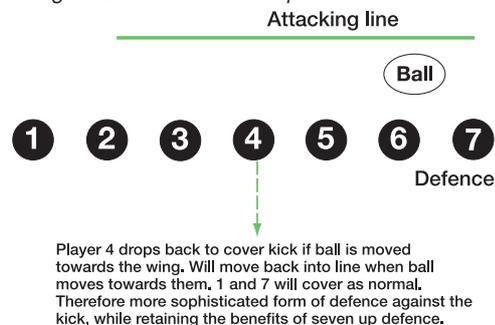


Figure 2 - Advanced sweeper defence.



Looking at 7 man zones

A defensive zone is more like a channel that the defender has responsibility for. No opposition player should be allowed to move through this zone. The defender must not be tempted out of this zone by switch plays or loops by the attackers. A zone defence is easier to coach, understand and put into action than a sliding defence. However it does suffer from the problem that makes sevens such a different game in many ways to 15-a-side. 6/7 players cannot cover the whole of the pitch by just taking zones.

A shifting zone is more effective, and this is more like a "man to man" defence. Each player numbers off across the pitch and looks at the man in front of them. The outside defender always takes the outside runner, even if there is a switch of players and so on across the pitch. This requires constant communication and trust between players. The defence is only as strong as its weakest link.

Choosing the best Sevens defence for your team - Part 2

In the last issue we outlined using a 7 man defence in an attempt to put pressure on the team in front and allow a defensive team that does not possess as much pace as the opposition to compete more effectively. Now we will concentrate on six man defence and one back.

The most common form of defence is the 6 up and 1 sweeper combination. The advantages of such a system are:

- One player can be assigned to sweep and be a specialist in that role.
- The sweeper is normally placed in a position which allows them to organise the defence.
- If there is a turnover the sweeper can quickly add an extra attacking man from depth.
- A 6 man defence is often perceived to be facing a 7 man attack. This is true of the most basic forms of attack, but most sides will not spread out in this convenient manner, so it makes less difference if it is 6 men or 7 in the front line.

Using a 6 man defence

The slide – the crucial element of any front defence is the ability to shift from side to side to cover the width of the pitch. With 6 rather than 7, this is mite harder! Imagine each opposition player occupies a channel through which they can attack. This channel needs to be defended when the ball carrier reaches the defensive line. There are seven attacking channels and only six defenders so the defenders need to slide between the channels. In its simplest terms, one of the outside channels cannot be defended, so this must be the one furthest from the ball. When the ball moves right, the left hand outside channel is not defended, and the players move right.

Communication and trust – the slide needs communication. Communication means players can trust their inside shoulder is being covered. This is important because the shift inevitably means that players need to turn somewhat and will lose sight of their team-mate beside them.

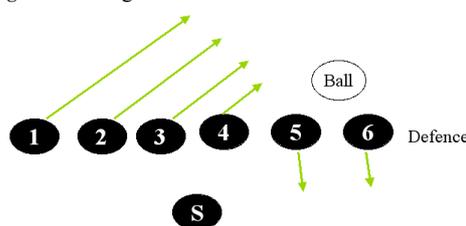
Communication also gives the defence confidence, something that will be felt by the opposition! Shouting that you have a man covered can mean that even you are not quite in place, the attacker may be convinced of this fact.

Slide arc – in the previous issue we talked about the opportunity to arc round behind the ball to cut off the return pass. The slide lends itself more naturally to this type of defence. In a

move not dissimilar to the one employed by Hannibal against the Romans, if the defence at one end lets the attackers move up a little more than they expect, the sliders can come round from behind reducing the options for the attacking side. See figure 1.

The sweeper - there are a number of

Figure 1: sliding arc



As the ball reaches one end of the line, as the defence moves back at the end, the other end moves round, cutting off the return pass

options how the sweeper can position themselves. The normal mode seems for the player to follow directly behind the ball more along the attacking line. The sweeper's role is to cover any kicks plus tackle any breakthrough. With a sliding defence there is more chance than in a man on man for breakthroughs because dog legs can be created more easily. A sweeper could also move just between the two 15m lines, following inside the ball. See figure 2. This can give them more vision of the attack and if the ball is switched quickly they are less likely

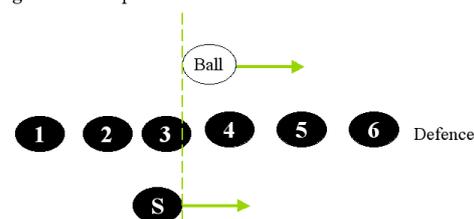
Switch kick to counter sweeper

If you note that the other side's sweeper is moving in line with the ball then a possible way to counter this is the switch kick. This pre-determined tactic also exposes the slide as it aims to exploit the gap left by the last man who has to slide inwards.

How it works: in the midfield a long deep pass is made. The receiver then switches with another player who promptly kicks the ball back, against the grain of the pass over the defence and into the vacant gap left behind by the outside defender who is sliding in. See figure 3.

to be wrong footed. See "switch kick to counter sweeper".

Figure 2: sweeper inside the ball



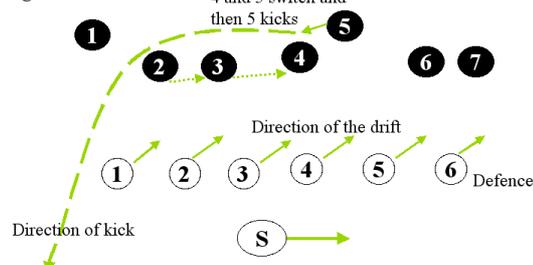
As the ball moves across the field the sweeper is not directly behind the ball, but is able to see where the ball is going and what needs to happen to cover kicks or breakthroughs

Sevens tackling – the role of the supporting player

The ideal tackle is one which prevents the ball being offloaded, so some form of smother tackle. However against bigger players this is more dangerous. In this case the defence has to be wary of the supporting players. Often a bigger player is aiming to fend off the tackle and then offload if necessary. This goes for smaller players who are aiming to step before being tackled.

Defending players on each side of the tackler should be prepared to either tackle the receiver of the offload, so don't step in too far, or make a further tackle. So as an attacker approaches the defensive line, it needs to get tighter to each other, and if they then move back from the line, then it needs to spread out.

Figure 3: switch kick



3 passes a long pass to 4. 4 switches with 5 who then kicks the ball over the heads of the defenders for black 1 to run onto. Since the defenders have left the gap on the "blindsides" because they are drifting and the sweeper is moving right as well, this should give 1 a good chance of gathering a free ball.

The best sevens attack in the world

“Score off scrums, stretch the defence from lineouts and break downs, then score” says Mike Friday, the England sevens coach. We look at the way he achieves this with the highly successful national team, winners of the prestigious Hong Kong Sevens for the last three years.

Basic principles

- 1 Give the fast man space to run around defender.
- 2 Any three on three situation should be seen as a chance to beat the defence.
- 3 Otherwise pull the defence to one side and then attack quickly the other way, normally from a break down or lineout.

Create some space out wide

There is a principle in sevens that a good way to create gaps is to spread the attackers out, from touchline to touchline. Against a team that is defending with six players in their front line and a sweeper, then gaps will surely appear.

This is not the way that Mike Friday likes to play the game. He gives two very good reasons:

- 1 A winger would prefer to beat their man with space on the outside, especially if they think they are faster than their opposite man.
- 2 Shorter passes are quicker passes, and most players will prefer to pass shorter, especially off their weaker hands.

Therefore from lineouts and rucks, the principle of alignment is to squeeze up a little more and give the winger the chance to run wide. And when we mean run, we mean head down, arc out and go for it.

Three on three: line break

From scrums, England are looking to score from a line break. In sevens, the defence outside the scrum will be three backs on three backs.

Mike Friday took over as head coach from Joe Lydon, the current England 15 a side attack coach. With Lydon's background in rugby league, he saw any chance for a three on three as an opportunity to break the line.

Good footwork, a change of pace, or a change of angle would be able to draw a defender out of position. A quick pass creates a two on one and then a chance for a line break. Lots of work on two on twos and three on threes to give players the confidence to take out the opposition.

Pull the defence

Where the defence is more organised, then the aim of the attack is to pull the defence to one side of the pitch and then pass the ball quickly back the other way. With the winger standing further infield than normal, as soon as he receives the ball, he then pins his ears back and heads out to beat their opposite man.

There are two elements to this simple movement.

Element 1:

After passing the ball each player must move in and behind the person they are

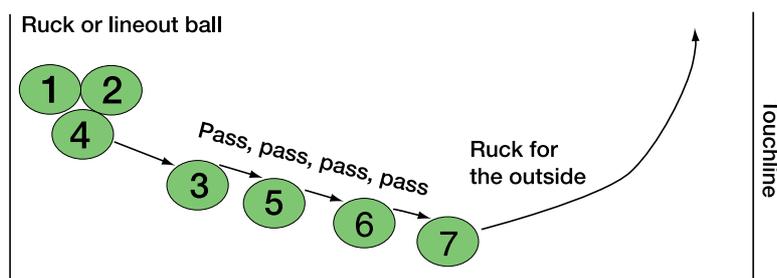
passing to. Sometimes known as the post or pocket position.

Element 2:

If and when the winger finds they cannot beat their opposite man, they then must STOP. Amazingly, but only momentarily, their defender will stop. The winger can then pass the ball back into the post position and the ball is moved away very quickly. The defence should have been moved around enough for spaces to open up, either close to the ball, in the middle or further out.

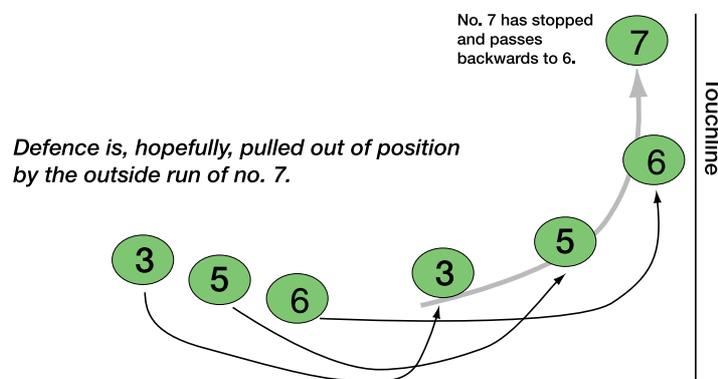
Note: all these passes must be to the next man, no miss passes.

Sevens attack from ruck or lineout



The ball is moved away from contact, with short passes, and the winger (no. 7 above) has plenty of space to try to beat their man on the outside.

Seven attack if winger has not made outside break



The winger (no. 7) finds he cannot beat his man. He STOPS, turns and passes the ball backwards to no. 6. No. 6 immediately passes the ball to no. 5 who can look to see where the space is. The rest of the players have realigned themselves, but not too far apart.

Sevens: first things first

We interviewed Colin Hillman, former Welsh Sevens coach and now coaching with top international sevens invitation side, the Samurais. With the international sevens road show now up and running again, he gives us some insights into the current sevens thinking at the top level.

Work on your defence first

We might have the luxury of some of the best players in the world: they have pace, great stepping ability and of course can catch and pass. In the little time available for tournaments we concentrate on getting the defence right first, because these players are excellent in attack already.

Sweeper system

We always work with a sweeper system, where 6 players play in front of one. The sweeper covers kicks and acts as the last man in defence. However it does mean there is an overload in favour of the attack.

The chain

The key to this defence is: don't get broken through in the middle. In my experience, if a player gets through the middle then the sweeper has little chance of making the tackle, or preventing a try. Either they get "stepped" by the attacker, or there is a 2 v 1 situation. The defensive line at the front works like a chain to prevent this happening.

3 man defensive unit

We work in 3 man defensive units. The player who is defending the ball does not move up unless he has a man either side of him.

The 3 men pressurise the ball carrier. They do this by squeezing together a little and forcing the ball carrier to make a decision. In the meantime the other defenders close off the "passing avenues". In effect, they are closing the gate and forcing an error from the attacking team. The aim is to show the attack the space on the outside, between the widest defender and the touchline. In other words, back your pace to cover the outside break.

No such thing as a static defence

We like to say that if you are standing in defence you are not working. It is constant push, push, push up the field, forcing the other team backwards. The 3 man unit is pressurising the ball and the other defenders are getting in amongst the attacking team. We want the opposition ball carrier to look up for options to pass and only see your shirts.

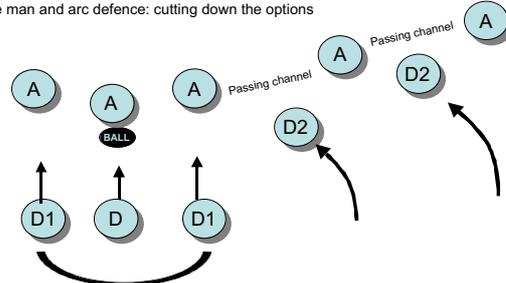
Picture the defence moving up as an arc, with the ball being surrounded by defenders. One of the most effective examples of this I saw was in the Middlesex Sevens when the rugby league side the Bradford Bulls literally walked up and across the pitch in defence – all the time they maintained a solid wall of defence. 🍀

A great game to use for 3 man defence

We start on half the width of the pitch and match 3 defenders against 5 attackers. The defenders have to shift across and up the field and pressurise for 2 minutes.

It is amazing how successful they are if they follow the "chain" principles. Increase the width of the pitch as the defence becomes more successful.

Three man and arc defence: cutting down the options



Three defenders press up on the ball carrier. The middle defender concentrates on the ball carrier and only moves forward if he is sure of the other two defenders support.

The other defenders (D2) arc round to reduce the options. If possible they should try to get into the passing channels – so the attackers cannot pass to their team mates.

Clive Norling, the famous Welsh referee tells a story of the gravestone of Thomas William Griffiths James in Swansea on which the inscription reads: "Here lies an honest man and a referee". Norling comments: "So that proves that we can bury two in the same grave in Wales."

From Odd-Shaped Balls by John Scally, Mainstream Publishing