

Counterattack from Defending a Corner

A counterattack is possible when the opponents send most of all of their players forward, but lose possession of the ball. The counterattacking team uses rapid transition and direct play to get numbers up and to get a shot.

The first principle of counterattack is that the counterattacking side must take any risk to ensure that the ball moves forward at top speed to the opponent's goal without ever stopping. The ball must not stop moving forward.

By passing the ball forward and by running with the ball at best speed, and by ensuring that the ball never stops moving forward for any reason, every opponent beaten by the first pass from the counterattacking team will be unable to recover to help defend.

Because the ball does not stop moving forward at full speed, any defenders that stand between the ball and the goal will have, at most, one chance to stab at a tackle.

The second principle of counterattack is transition, getting numbers up in the opponent's half so quickly that defenders are numbers down against a ball that won't stop moving to goal.

Starting the Counterattack After Defending a Corner Kick

To start the counterattack, your team has to pass or clear the ball into one of your striker's feet immediately. If the clearance goes wide, which is safe, or does not go directly to the strikers, the counterattack is off.

With one striker working back from the center circle, and the other halfway between the first striker and the flag, perhaps at the corner of the 18, there is an area between the two where your strikers have a good chance to gain possession directly from a clearance. Train toward clearing or passing the ball toward this space to start the counterattack. Strikers must work to be first to the ball so they can turn it and pass it or run with it.

When your strikers do get possession directly from the clearance, your players leaving the penalty area will be sprinting to cross the half-way line in 6 seconds or less, depending on your age group. Several of your players will be supporting your strikers, and a few defenders will drop off the attack to help leave a little depth in your team shape.

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Counterattack Passing

Train toward passing directly forward to the forward most player or to the player in the best position to go directly forward to goal.

All passes that go forward with more than one defender remaining to beat should go to FEET. When your attacker with the ball and a supporting attacker reach the last defender, the last pass goes to SPACE behind the last defender.

During the counterattack, no pass to the wing can be allowed, as it allows opponents can recover while the ball goes sideways on the field, killing the counterattack.

No player may hold the ball or delay a pass forward that is available, as this too kills the counterattack.

Counterattack Finishing With No Supporting Attacker

What the last defender fears most is that the attacker with the ball will not stop moving to goal at top speed. The defender fears being left alone and forced to tackle, and fears the possibility of the embarrassment of a missed tackle. Putting the opposing defender in this situation is required to succeed in counterattack, and moving forward without stopping will create this situation.

When faced with a defender in the final third, your attacker with the ball must be willing to take the risk of losing the ball in order to get a shot. Encourage your attacker to take on the last defender to get a shot, not to hold the ball. Persistence will yield good results. In training, your attacker might lose 7 balls out of 10, get 3 shots, and score 1 goal. In the real match, you would gladly lose 7 balls to get 1 goal.

Counterattack Finishing With a Supporting Attacker

When a second attacker is available, the first attacker must take on the last defender, and must run straight to the defender with the ball to freeze the defender. As the defender steps forward or prepares to tackle, the first attacker should play the ball into the space behind the defender for the second attacker to finish. Passes against unsupported defenders go to space behind the defender, not to feet in front of the defender.

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Common Failure Modes

The ball is well cleared but your strikers don't get it and turn it. Counterattack never starts.

- 1: Your midfielder passes to the wing near the touch-line. Nice chance to start a crossing attack, but the counterattack is over.
- 2: When challenged, your player near midfield holds the ball a few moments before playing the ball forward to another attacker or forward into space.
- 3: The opponents recover because the ball stopped moving forward.
- 4: In final third, first attacker (with ball) does not run directly at last defender, but slightly to the side, gets slowly steered away from the goal.
- 5: While both your first attacker (with the ball) and a second attacker move toward the opposing sweeper in the final third, the first attacker passes to the second attacker's feet in front of the sweeper, instead of passing to space behind the sweeper. The sweeper is comfortable with your two players passing it around outside the 18, but no one gets close to shooting.

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Counterattack Exercises for a Youth Team

- 1: 1. 2 v cone defender to space. Up striker checks back from cone goal toward down striker with ball, 30 yards from cone. Down striker passes to up striker and runs forward to support. Up striker turns ball, runs at cone with goal, plays ball into space behind cone for down striker coming forward. Train toward having down striker bending run to be able to get to ball on either side of cone, behind cone. Down striker should use a hand gesture to indicate where ball should be played. Train toward having the up striker let the ball go early, or the down striker will be offside when the ball is played into space behind the cone.
- 2: 2 v 1 to space, limited defender. Same as #1 versus defender with hands on hips, but playing normally otherwise.
- 3: 2 v 1 finishing to goal with goalie from the half-way line. Start defender at goal post, 2 attackers with a ball at center circle, no restrictions. (Here's your best chance to make sure everyone is letting the ball go early, to space behind that last defender).
- 4: Set team to defend corner kick. Serve a ball from the flag, let team clear it. See if everyone can get across the half-way line in 6 seconds. Count out loud to make it a fun game. Just a couple of tries for fun, let them giggle. No need for push-ups, but challenge each to not be the last player across the line.
- 5: Counterattack from corner kick to full-size goal v 2 defenders. Add strikers. Place counterattack goal and goalie at full-size for your age group. Add an opposing defender at the half-way line and a second opposing defender coming out from his or her goal. Ask team to work toward clearing ball to striker's feet. Make sure the ball does not stop moving forward until it is lost or your side gets a shot.
- 6: Counterattack from corner kick to full-size goal v full pressure. Place opponents in the penalty area where the counterattack starts, a couple outside the penalty area, a couple at the half-way line, and a goalie in the opponents goal. Play for real.