Defence Adaptation on Transformation of Attack with Two Pivot Men

The basic attack tactic of any serious team in today’s handball is to start the attack with one pivot man (3 backs and 2 wingers) and then, very often, during that attack one of the players goes to the 6m line as the second pivot man. In this way the team in attack presents a tactical problem to the team in defence and ‘tests’ its ability to play successfully against one and two pivot men, during only one attack. If this transformation, from one to a second pivot man, does not produce any result, the player who has gone to 6m, comes back to his position and the attack goes on. But the basic idea of attack, actually is not to play only once with two pivot men, so that this brings an immediate result. This could happen sometimes, but the basic value of this idea is that the team in attack, during one attack, combines several attacks with one and two pivot men. That represents a strong tactical impact, and by this only a serious test is made for the team in defence particularly if, the same player does not always come to the second pivot man, and from the same position, but they change.

That is why the problem of a defence reaction in these situations today gets increased importance and asks for an answer to the question: how should the defence react to this transformation of attack?

Naturally, each coach analyses this problem and considers it in his own way and draws conclusions from it applying them in practice. On this occasion I shall present some of my ideas. Firstly, I accept right away that a correct reaction of defence in situations when the offense combines the play with 1 and 2 pivot men, is tactically very actual, and that one should seriously consider all options of defence in those situations. But, I have to immediately speak up my position too, the one which shall, in greater extent, determine my further reflections.

If the adaptation of defence is the transformation of one into another defence when attack combines the play with 1 and 2 pivot men, then I do not like this kind of adaptation and I try to avoid it whenever it is possible.

Why is this? The reason is very simple. The basic idea of any team is to ‘impose’ one’s own way of playing onto the adversary. The team ‘which dictates the play’ has the initiative and is always closer to gaining the victory, than the team which has been imposed the way of playing, and has to adapt to playing to its adversary.

That is why, in my opinion, the insistence on adaptation of play which consists of changing of defence into dependence of the playing of the team in attack, is a very dangerous one, so that we could come into a situation to think more about the adversary and about how to adapt ourselves to its way of playing, than to think about our own play. And, if for each match, we have to adapt ourselves to a new adversary, then when are we going to play ‘our own play’, when shall it be that we make our adversary to think about us, to adapt itself to us? That is why one has to be careful with adaptation.

Imagine the situation: a team in defence plays 5:1, attack moves to play with 2 pivot men, defence adapts and moves, for example, to defence 6:0. After 5 to 10 seconds the attack
goes back to play with 1 pivot man, defence goes back to the formation of 5:1, attack again moves to 2 pivot men, defence again adapts itself…

My impression and conclusion is clear: in such a situation the attack ‘plays with’ the defence, meaning, in a more serious situation, during the match, the attack ‘makes fun’ of the defence, or as we say in our language ‘defence follows what attack wants to play’. And this is not clever.
On the other hand, I should not go to the other extreme, to deny necessity for adaptation and to claim that it is never necessary.

In recent years I have dedicated lots of my attention to this problem from theoretical consideration, analysis of many teams which use or do not use adaptation to different number of pivot men, to practical testing of various possibilities. Today, I think that I could say with many arguments that we may speak of existence of defence, which may play without adaptation, that is, without transformation, and of existence of defence which must use transformation, that is, they have to adapt depending on, whether the attack plays with one or two pivot men.
Let us consider the advantage and disadvantages of one and the other defence:

I Defences that need not be adapted

With lots of theoretical and practical arguments, I consider that defences 6:0 and 3:2:1 need not adapt, that is, need not to transform them into another one. These defences, if they are played with precision, may resolve all tactical problems also when attack is played with one or with two pivot men. But, I equally know that, in the moment when attack plays with two pivot men, many coaches have elaborated adaptations of these defences to many variations as well as a turn back to primary defence if attack comes back to play with one pivot man.
I consider that these transformations are necessary in situations when all defences play below quality, that is, tactically without precision.

Defences 6:0

The main idea of attack, when it plays against defence 6:0 with 2 pivot men, is to ‘split’ the defence into two parts, left one and right one. This is easy to see because one pivot man finds himself between defence players 2 and 3, and the other one between players 4 and 5 (picture 1a). At that moment the compactness of defence 6:0 disappears, the attack has the possibility of playing 2:2 (cooperation between a back and a pivot man) on both sides; left and right.
As tactical means, attack may use a feint of back to sides, block and double pass. Each of these ideas could be further elaborated, that is, there are still more solutions. In case none of these ideas of playing 2:2 is sufficient enough, there is still, one more left, a rather strong tactical solution. If, for example, a left winger has run into the second pivot man, then the left back has moved to the position of the left winger, and the middle back to the position of the left back (picture 1b). If after playing 3:2 the defence 6:0 is ‘divided’ into two parts (the left one and the right one), then the left back (from the position of left winger) runs into the middle, takes the ball from the right back and then has several possibilities: to shoot, to pass one of pivot men if the players 3 or 4 are trying to stop or block him.

If, somehow, the defence has succeeded in hindering this, there is a great possibility that the left back may pass to the right one, who also has several possibilities: shot, pivot man or winger (picture 1c). Because of all these possible tactical problems which the defence may produce in the play of two pivot men, some coaches make various adaptations of defence 6:0 and change over to defence 5+1; 4+2 or some other formation.

And all of this is due to the fact that the defence 6:0 has not played tactically with precision. How should the defence 6:0 play, in order not to make some adaptation, that is, transformation? At the moment when the attack turns into a play of two pivot men, the defence 6:0 must not split into two parts. It has to stay compact which is succeeded by extensive flank movements of all players of defence. In this manner, the defence 6:0 keeps its basic quality, and it is, in the first place, the density of players in the middle. The defence played in this manner must not allow, at any moment, that the pivot men are placed simultaneously between two players 2 and 3 and between 4 and 5 (picture 1a) because it ‘splits’ the defence into two parts. When the ball is on the left side of defence, correctly played defence is the one, when the pivot man is between the players 2 and 3, while the other pivot man is between the players 5 and 6 (picture 1d). When the ball is on the right side of defence, one pivot man is between the players 4 and 5 and the other one between the players 1 and 2 (picture 1e). By this manner, the pivot man on the opposite side of the ball is always in a passive position and could not participate in the play of 2:2.
Against the pivot man who is on the side of the ball, one plays ‘normally’ that is, according to the principles of defence 6:0, the same way as it is played against only one pivot man. In such a way, a tactical idea with two pivot men loses its value and the defence 6:0 needs no adaptation.

**Defence 3:2:1**

Defence 3:2:1, like a deep defence, has always been good in a play against one pivot man. Because of that, the attack with two pivot men against this defence has always been the first idea of many coaches. However, the real value of the defence 3:2:1 reflects precisely in its quality of non-alternation in any situation when the attack plays with two pivot men. So, if the defence 3:2:1 holds out against the attack with two pivot men, then, in most cases, the attack has no other idea and the psychological advantage is on the side of the defence. Now, let us look at the placement of players in defence 3:2:1 when the ball is on the left back (picture 2a) in offense and when the ball is on the right back (picture 2b).

At first sight one could see that the defence 3:2:1 ‘covers’ both pivot men and the back with the ball. Then, where is the tactical danger for this defence when the attack plays
with two pivot men? The danger is, if the players at the front line of 3:2:1 defence start running automatically, and without following the movements of the two backs in offense. A normal position of players at the front line is shown in the pictures 2a and 2b. It means that when two backs in offense play widely, they are approached by left and right halves (second players in defence) rather deep, up to 10-11 m. But if, after several passes between backs in attack, one of the backs starts toward the middle and there gets the ball, it may happen that the half ‘by automatism’ runs from 6 m after the back, because he has been doing this several times already, although this back is not in his zone of activity any more. At that moment the opportunity to shoot opens up for the back, to pass the ball to one of the pivot men (picture 2c) or to pass to the opposite back who also may have more possibility to end the attack (picture 2d).

But also the players of defence 3:2:1 know that this is a basic idea of attack and that they have to be ready. At a given time when the back starts toward the middle, the half stays in its place, and the back is taken over by the front centre (picture 2e). In case this tactical detail is resolved, the defence 3:2:1 will play successfully also against two pivot men, that is, it will not be necessary to adapt, that is, to transform.

At this opportunity I am obliged to say that this quality of defence 3:2:1 is not easy to achieve and apart from tactical knowledge, the players have to dispose of high level of physical preparedness, because this way of playing is extremely demanding.

Once, as a player, I used to participate in this kind of defence play 3:2:1, and later, I applied it, as a representation coach of my country, and abroad, too. This means, that this way of playing has been tested in practice for years, and for years has been bringing results, too. But even today I meet coaches who ask me what would happen if the attack with two pivot men manages to outplay the defence 3:2:1. In my firm opinion, the defence 3:2:1 is good only if it could play successfully against both, one pivot man and
against two pivot men. And if the attack, attacks the defence 3:2:1 really well then I would change the defence. In handball there is no defence which did not get a goal.

II Defences which need adaptations

The defences which have to be adapted are, in my opinion, defences 5:1; 4:2 and the ‘zone press’. In its basic variant these are very good defences against some systems of attack, but in practice, they cannot successfully resolve all the problems which the attack may put forward combining the play with one and two pivot men.

Therefore a basic precondition that someone plays these defences is to have a well elaborated transformation into another defence, quality-playing of that other defence and again the transformation into original variant when conditions are met. First of all, this depends on individual quality of each player in defence.

Now, let us consider only tactical possibilities of adaptation of these defences.

Defence 5:1

Defence 5:1 is a very good defence if the attack against it is played as against the defence 6:0. A forward player (front centre) has a task to move away the middle back as far as possible, in order to hinder the intersection of backs. Problems of such defence appear when the attack goes over to two pivot men and in this situation the defence 5:1, very often adapts itself, that is, transforms into another formation. One could use many ways of transformation which depends, first of all, on the profile of defence players.

Entrance of the middle back

The simplest transformation of defence 5:1, when the middle back goes over to the second pivot man is, when the front centre goes, with the middle back, to 6 m and in that case the defence transforms into defence 6:0 (picture 3a). This transformation could be used in cases when the front centre is a player who can play in defence 6:0 in the middle, that is, in positions 3 and 4. But if the front player plays the winger or some other player in defence 6:0, who cannot play the positions 3 and 4, then some other transformation has to be used.
Maybe the most frequent combination is that the front centre 'takes over' one of the backs when the middle back goes to 6 m and in this way makes transformation into 5+1 (picture 3b). This transformation is particularly suitable when, on the position of right back, there is a player who uses his right hand. The variant of this defence transformation 5:1 into defence 5+1 may be played so that the front centre stays on his position and hinders passes between two backs (picture 3c), so that when one of the backs starts toward the middle with the intention to shoot the front centre takes him over, that is, transfers into 5+1 (picture 3d).

*Entrance of the back*

When the back enters 6m, the middle back usually spreads, and the front back follows him leaving the space where, most probably, the other back will run into to try a jump shot (picture 3e).
That is why one of the halves (the second defence player) accepts a standard pivot man who is already on the 6m line, a centre half and other half take care of the other pivot man and of the second back. That means that a centre half or half goes out onto the second back, depending on their understanding at that moment or according to a previously agreed solution (picture 3f). These two players who went out onto two backs often are very aggressive, so that this transformation may even have characteristics of transformation into defence 4+2.

**Entrance of the winger**

The most frequent variant of defence adaptation 5:1, when the wingers run onto 6m, the second pivot man alike, is that the last defence player (whose winger ran into) accepts the first next player, and that is a back (picture 3g).

![Diagram](image)

As the front centre holds the middle back, that means, that the defence has transformed into 4:2, where there are two aggressive players against a back and centre back, one half and the centre half hold strictly two pivot men, and the second half controls the remaining back in attack, but not so strictly, because of the maintenance of defence density (picture 3h).

A rarer variant is when the furthest player stays on his position and helps with one pivot man, and the rarest variant is when the furthest player goes with his winger to 6m and comes back together with him.

**Defence 4:2**

A more modern version of defence 4:2 is a very aggressive defence towards the back and middle back, but that is why there are many opportunities for attack to play with two pivot men. Also, a number of possibilities to transfer to two pivot men are rather wide. A free back may run onto the second pivot man, a side back where there is a forward defence player (‘closed back’), a free winger or a side winger where there is an aggressive defence (‘closed winger’).
**Entrance of the free back**

The entrance of ‘the free back’, that is a back who is not under the strict attention of two forward players, is more theoretical than practical case. This solution, the attack shall use rarely for a simple reason that in that case, the half stays near the back that came to 6m and two forward defence players play even more aggressively, that is, from the formation 4:2 they transform to formation 4+2 which completely interrupts the playing of two backs. The only solution is that the back that went to 6m goes back to his position (picture 4a).

**Entrance of the closed back**

In case ‘the closed back’ goes onto the pivot man, that is, the back or middle back who has in front of him a front defence player 4:2, the simplest solution is that this player, the front centre, goes together with him to 6m, that is, to transform into defence 5:1, and if we see things as they are, the front centre, who went to 6m with his player, actually plays an individual defence, that is, pressing everybody until the attacker goes back to his place in attack (picture 4b).

**Entrance of the free winger**

The entrance of ‘the free winger’, that is, the winger who finds himself at the opposite side of two front centres in defence 4:2, in the position of the second pivot man, is resolved so that the furthest defence player continues to watch over the first defence player from that side, and he is, at that moment, the back (picture 4c). This means that the furthest defence player switches to play pressing the back, so that the whole defence gets a deep formation 3:3 (picture 4d). In that situation, the play of attack backs has become more difficult which usually provokes returning of the winger back to his attack position.
Entrance of the closed winger

This is a very frequent variant in defence 4:2. The winger tries to come to the position of the second pivot man, at the time when the half should go out onto the back. In that moment a centre half cannot follow both pivot men and there is a possibility, unless the defence transforms quickly, that one pivot man becomes completely free (picture 4e). The reaction of defence, that is, its transformation may proceed so that the furthest defence player follows his winger to the second pivot man, while the other defence players continue to play as up to that moment (picture 4f).

Provided that the furthest defence player is a tall player and is able to watch over a pivot man, it is possible also, a takeover between the players, the furthest player who takes over watching over a pivot man, and the centre half will take charge of the winger who turns up as the second pivot man (picture 4g).

In that situation only a front centre, in front of the back, has to watch over the back, in case he goes in width onto position of the winger, so that he has to follow him because of the furthest player who does not find himself on his usual position. He goes together with the winger or watches over the second pivot man (picture 4h).
Zone press

The defence of a pressure zone is a defence which cannot function especially without transformation into other formations. For this defence all the players have to have a very good individual education, that is, there must not be a problem of if they are playing 6 or 10 meters, or if they play on the left or right side of the court, or if they use more left or right diagonal defence attitude. This kind of defence can be played only by the players who know how to play defence 5:1 or 3:2:1.

The formation of this defence is like defence formation 3:3. The very idea of playing this defence is very simple. While three backs in attack play in front of the defence front line, one uses the principles of zone defence and the players of the front line do not change their places but take over the backs in attack if they change their places (picture 5a).

But in case that any attack player goes to the position of the second pivot man, his defence player goes with him, and plays pressing towards him until he comes back to his attack position.

Author: Pokrajac Branislav