

FIH – Presentation Paper: Pressing – Forwards: their role, positioning and techniques

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1. Introduction:

Having moved to the men's game after a long spell in women's hockey I was acutely aware that I needed to update my current knowledge of team tactics used without the ball at the highest level. I was keen to understand not only the tactics employed, but their aims and rationale for using specific tactics.

Naturally pressing is a wide topic so I have narrowed it down to focus on two key areas for the study:

- The positioning and role of the attackers within a pressing situation and the techniques required
- The attackers role in 'double teaming' – in terms of where, when and how this happens

2. Study:

In order to make my research up to date I used video from matches from the Champion's Trophy (Men) in Barcelona, July 06.

The teams observed were as follows:

- Argentina (Pan Am Champions) x2
- Australia (Olympic Champions) x2
- Germany (World Champions) x2
- Netherlands (Olympic Silver medallists) x2
- Pakistan x2
- Spain (Champions Trophy Winners 05) x2

Final positions: (1st) Netherlands (2nd) Germany (3rd) Spain (4th) Australia (5th) Pakistan (6th) Argentina

3. Definition of Pressing:

Before entering into a study of this nature there must first be a clear definition of pressing. After careful deliberation I would consider it to be:

'A co-ordinated defensive team tactic to assert pressure on the opposition team who are in possession of the ball. The objective is to collectively dictate play so they can force the opposition into a certain area/s where they can be pressured into turning over the ball.'

For my research Presses can be subdivided into two broad types: Static and active pressing as defined in section 4.

4. Research Background and definitions:

To ensure clarity and consistency only restart situations in the deepest quarter of the pitch were used for the purposes of the research, though it is accepted that pressing situations can arise from turnovers where the ball is played to the backline in open play.

4.1 Static Press:

The defining point about this press is that the defending team are aiming to place pressure on the initial free hit, thus winning the ball from the first pass through an interception or hit/aerial that goes straight off the pitch and out of play. As such, the press is generally set close to the ball, high up the pitch (away from the defending teams goal) and especially from the sideline to 7m infield.

Static presses provide clear outlet/attacking opportunities on winning the ball because of the more 'set' nature of the press and attackers in advanced positions. This press is widely employed pressing style in the women's game because of the lack of quality long aerials or fast accurate hitters.

4.2 Active (or moving) Press:

An Active press can be defined by the team in possession of the ball being allowed, or encouraged, to make a pass with little or no pressure on the ball. The rationale for this is to encourage the ball into given (pre determined) areas of the pitch with the use of 'fake space'. Naturally some space is given to the opposition and thus requires decision making on the team's behalf as to when and where to pressure and win the ball back.

This type of press can be sub divided into a number of sub types. For the purpose of this study the height of the highest defender often the Centre Forward (CF) in relation to the distance from their own goal was used. In the context of 16 yard hits the following categories were used:

- 75 – highest player between 70 and 75 (25 yard line) from his own goal (often referred to as a full court press)
- 65 – highest player between 60 and 65 yards from his own goal (2/3rd press)
- 55 – highest player between 50 and 55 yards from his own goal (otherwise known as half court).

Note was also taken of the shape and positioning of the forward line (to gain a good idea of where 'fake space') and also how and where the ball was won. Video, taken from behind the goal showed how teams created 'traps' by double teaming with forwards and midfielders.

Subjectively it was soon possible to see how the teams in possession of the ball endeavoured to break down the press and avoid falling into the 'traps' set out by the pressing team.

What also became clearer was the strategies to counter attack from the set turnover positions.

4.3 Additional Analysis:

Mid way through the video observations I further sub divided these categories to gather more information regarding current trends in world hockey. These were:

- Active Press:
Research into the ratio of teams using reverse pressing and with whom. Observations and data was collected on:
 - Indication of who often reverse pressing was used
 - Regularity of CF reverse pressing
 - Regularity of LF or RF to reverse press
- Static Press:
 - Ratio of static press in centre of pitch and at sides. Sides were identified from the sideline through 7m inside (where the dashed circle starts)

5. Research Findings - Statistics:

The results from the matches observed were as follows:

5.1 Analysis by Game:

Match No	55	65	75	Total Active	Total Static	Total Presses
1. Germany v Spain	37	25	12	74	12	86
2. Netherlands v Australia	42	8	7	57	4	61
3. Australia v Pakistan	46	12	7	65	8	73
4. Pakistan v Germany	17	11	23	51	11	62
5. Argentina v Netherlands	38	9	13	60	5	65
6. Spain v Argentina	23	20	12	55	10	65
Total	203	85	74	362	50	412
Average of total Presses	50%	20.5%	17.5%	88%	12%	

Ratio of Static to Active 1 to 7.5 Naturally with one team losing towards the end of the match there were more static presses in the second period and especially in the last ten minutes.

There was a lot more deep (55) static pressing than I had perhaps expected at a Champions Trophy tournament, which is often synonymous with open attacking hockey. This may have been because of the extreme temperatures (for the European teams) and the video was taken from the first two days of the tournament when teams tend to be more conservative. The prominence of counter attack hockey where goals are scored and corners won through fast breaks on turnovers obviously has some impact on this.

I had expected there to be more Static presses than just 12%, especially on sideline balls. These were so often ineffective in winning the ball high, largely due to long aerials. There seemed to be far more success in 'positive' aerial passes than I had witness previously, with good movement patterns employed.

5.2 Break down by Team

	ARG	AUS	ESP	GER	NED	PAK	% of Total
55	35%	71%	48%	27%	74%	35%	50%
65	26%	5%	10%	35%	19%	28%	20.5%
75	35%	14%	11%	24%	2%	26%	17.5%
Active Total	96%	90%	75%	86%	95%	89%	88%
Static	4%	10%	25%	14%	5%	11%	12%

I found these statistics fascinating. The team that won the tournament, on paper, played the deepest defensive hockey (Holland 74% 55 press) and Australia, the Olympic Champions played the second most 55 half court press. Argentina, the team who played with the highest presses actually came last, although my summation would be that this position was not reflective of the play and they did create a lot of open play and penalty corner chances throughout the tournament. Spain clearly static pressed high up the pitch the most and were also the most effective at doing it.

5.3 Static Press – central or wide

As expected the majority of static presses occurred at the sides. It was evident that the position of the forwards and especially the CM determined whether or not the static press was feasible as outlined in 5.1.

Central 33%
Wide: 67%

5.4 Reverse Pressing

In 38% of active presses included a splitting of two defenders – 34% of the total were by the CF and 5% by the wide forwards. Subjectively I would have thought these figures to have been higher and may have been skewed by the matches observed and possibly the heat that existed during those two days.

6. Roles of the Forwards in the press:

In many senses the forwards of the pressing team are the most important in ensuring it is successful as they:

- Are closest to the ball and therefore the first line of defence
- Set the pressing shape
- Generally have to ensure the correct decision as to what ‘type’ of press to employ and the distances from the ball are correct. This maybe called by the SW, CM or Captain.
- Ensure the middle of the pitch is protected (critical area)
- Decide when the press becomes active and when to get the defender’s eyes down
- Are the best outlet should the ball be turned over

It is largely the forward’s job to ensure where and when the play is isolated through closing down and the correct angles and at the appropriate time.

There are many secondary, and similarly important roles of the forwards within a press. It is probably easiest to split up according to the pressing type, with examples:

6.1 Roles in Static Presses:

The forwards are generally much closer to the ball and closer together in static pressing. Their roles could be defined as:

- Deny interplay between defenders (back 4) – this would often be the CF role. Their positioning would depend largely on whether both Full Backs were in central positions or just one (ie with the other one working with the half back to provide an aerial)
- Cover a set passing channel and be ready to receive an attempted hit (eg RF taking the line ball when the LH has ball)
- Ensure that there is no easy aerial – Most ‘full’ static presses on the sidelines require a fourth forward. The CM is often utilised in this situation as shown below.
- Be aware of cross field aerials going in behind them. Example: if the ball is with the LH the pressing RF would need to be aware of an aerial pass going over his head to the opposition RH
- Ensure they are not ‘flat’ or square with team mates and thus making it easy to hit through the pressing line

Common Examples:

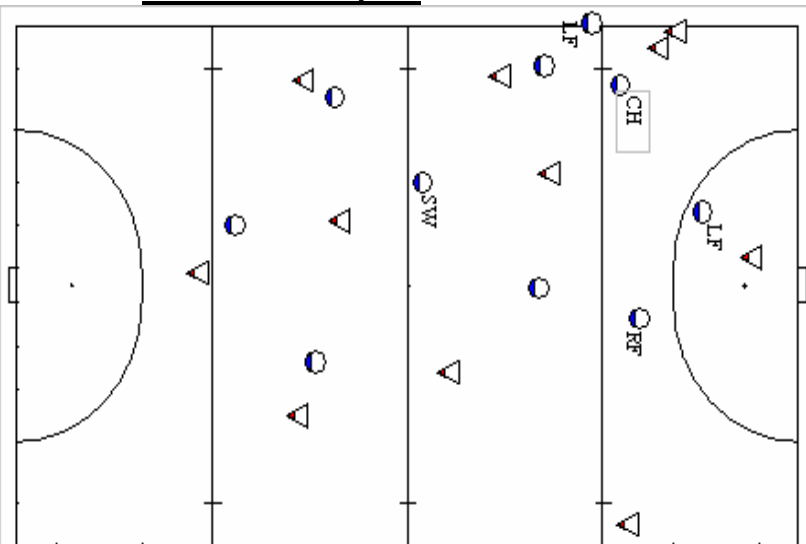


Fig. 1 Static Press Left Hand side:

The diagram shows the more common static press on the left hand side as used by teams such as Spain.

- CH steps up to make 4th Forward. His role is to close down the aerial if threatened and anything on the dangerous 45 degree angle. If the hands are together of the passer he should drop off
- CF cuts the line to the Full Back
- LF takes the line ball (dropping off if body shape and hands suggest the ball will be hit)
- RF prevents direct cross field ball and ensures he is still able to drop and cover/pressure an aerial pass to the LD
- The Midfield are zonal covering the channels between the forwards and on a line to their opposite number

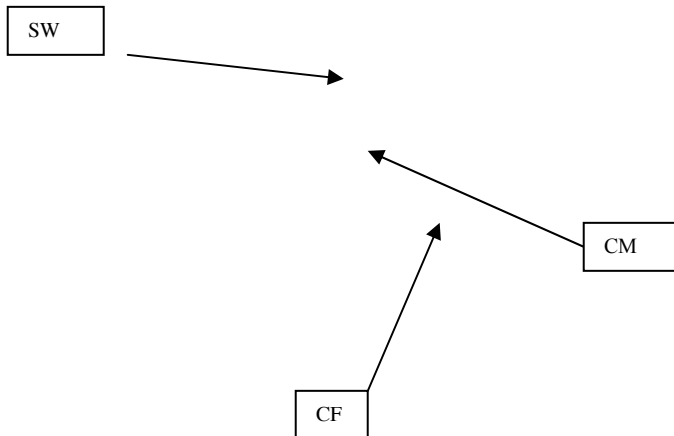
Other roles:

- The SW steps into the whole behind the midfield covering the line to goals where possible
- The rest of the defence are man to man with the help side defender aware of covering behind

Fig 2. Central Static Press (Photo)

This example shows the Spanish team against Argentina

- The CF steps between the full backs thus preventing transfer
- The CM assumes the CF position
- The SW steps up to fill the space behind the CM
- The Inside forwards are zonal



6.2 Forward Roles in Active Presses:

The principle roles in active pressing can be defined as:

- Set the shape to ensure where the ball goes (creating fake space) – typical examples of this are the Wingers (RF/LF) who drop off to show the opposition space. This would tend to take place on the help side of the pitch, This could then become the ‘trap’ zone for the pressing team with the CF and RF working (by reverse pressing) to ensure the ball is kept there and won on that side of the pitch.
- Reverse press to one or both sides. This is generally premeditated, based on where the ball is to be won, but also on the attributes and strengths of given members of the defenders (eg. If they have the ability to hit long or play a penetrative aerial) or more importantly to ensure that the ball goes to the fake space offered as outlined above. Several examples of this were observed during the Champions Trophy matches.
- Read the game and be the ‘trigger’ as to when the press starts and the team becomes aggressive. From the Champion’s Trophy matches there are more examples of teams stepping up the whole line and pressuring as a unit. Australia showed several examples of this where they started at 55 (Half Court) and then stepped out as a unit to 65/70 in a fast ‘ambush’ type manner
- In addition to where the ball is ‘triggers’ are also taken from actions by the defenders in possession of the ball. These are:
 - (1) Poor or slow pass between defenders
 - (2) A miss trap by a receiver
 - (3) The defender’s body shape is ‘closed’ and therefore his passing options are reduced
 - (4) The Full Backs move forward with the ball towards the pressing line
- Work with midfielders to double team and pressure passes into the opposition midfield, especially the Inside Forwards (IFs)

Full Press (75) with reverse press to LH

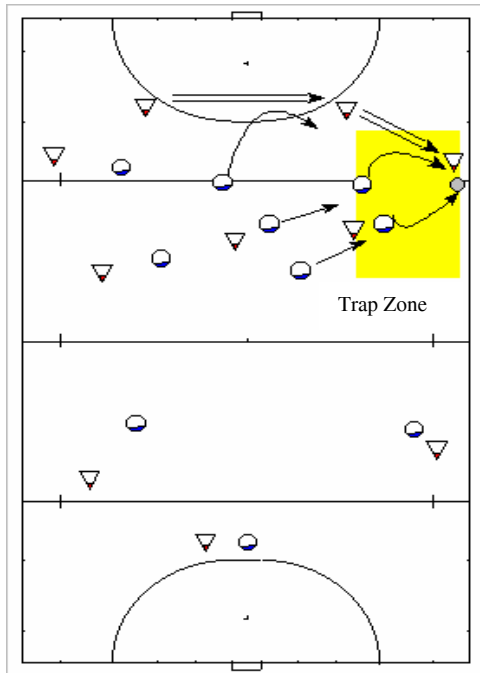


Figure 5: Full Press (75) with target zone on right hand side

- LF stepped up the pitch to discourage the simple pass to RH
- CF then reverse presses and pressures LFB in case he travels or to deny him chance to get his eyes up and making a pass
- RF closes on an arc to force ball wide
- IR hops to double team with the RF
- CH also works with this group of players

7. Forward Shape and Movement

It is clear to see in Section 5 the need for the forwards to set the right shape for good co-ordinated team pressing to be successful – closing off critical areas and opening up the fake space to encourage the ball to go into a particular area is crucial.

There were other less common observations that are being employed by many teams around the world. Some of these are outlined below:

7.1 Opening 'Pocket' Space

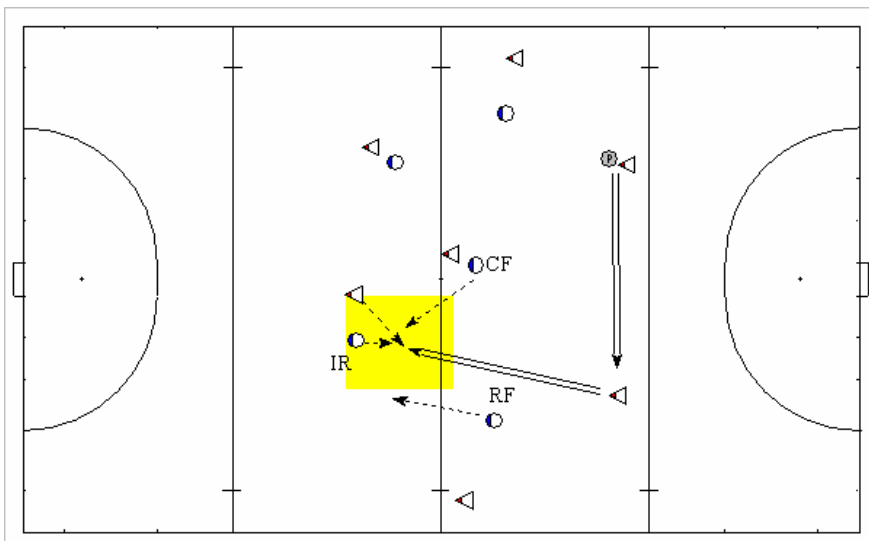


Figure 6: Closing Pockets – double team CF/IR

- Forward line slightly wider to encourage ball central
- CF deeper
- LF stepped up slightly
- As pass goes into opposition LM the IR and CF close very fast to force turn over
- RF must drop to ensure they do not pass out to an advancing LD
- Midfield generally zonal in this situation

The Dutch demonstrated this quite a lot, especially against Argentina.

7.2 Reverse Pressing by winger

An increasingly used tactic to ensure a team can defend 1 v 1 against an opposing back 4. Once the winger has closed down the Half Back they follow their pass around if it is played back into the back 4. This enables the CF and help side winger to close down and create a 3 v 3 situation. It is essential that the midfield and defence of the pressing team step up behind to ensure there are no easy passes and increase the interception possibilities.

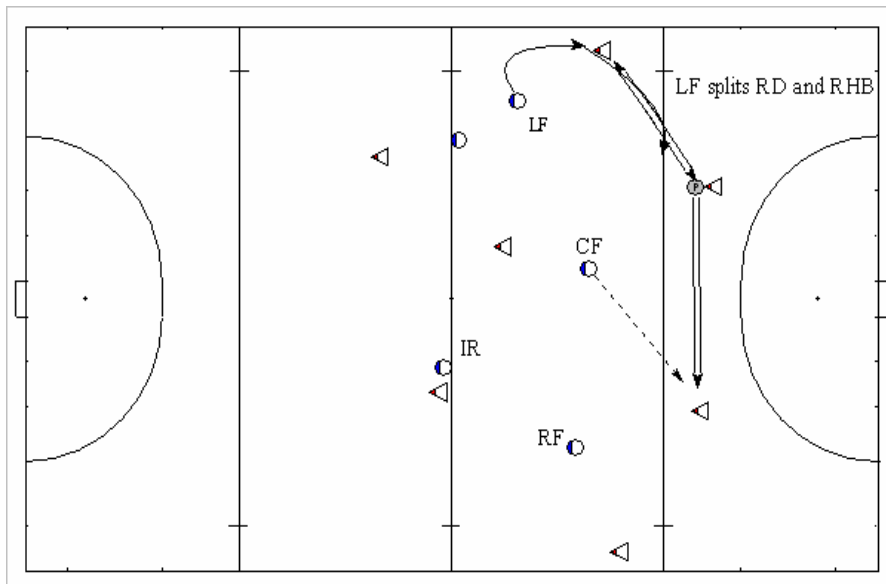


Figure 7: Reverse Press by winger

- LF in this scenario has closed down the RH
- As pass is played back into the FBs the LF cuts the line between RH and RFB with an arc type run and pressures the RFB
- CF and RF can also now use this as a trigger and step up to apply pressure to all 3 the LFB and LH

The Spanish were observed doing this where the CF and LF would reverse and forced the RFB to hit through the middle of the pitch as shown below in Fig 8

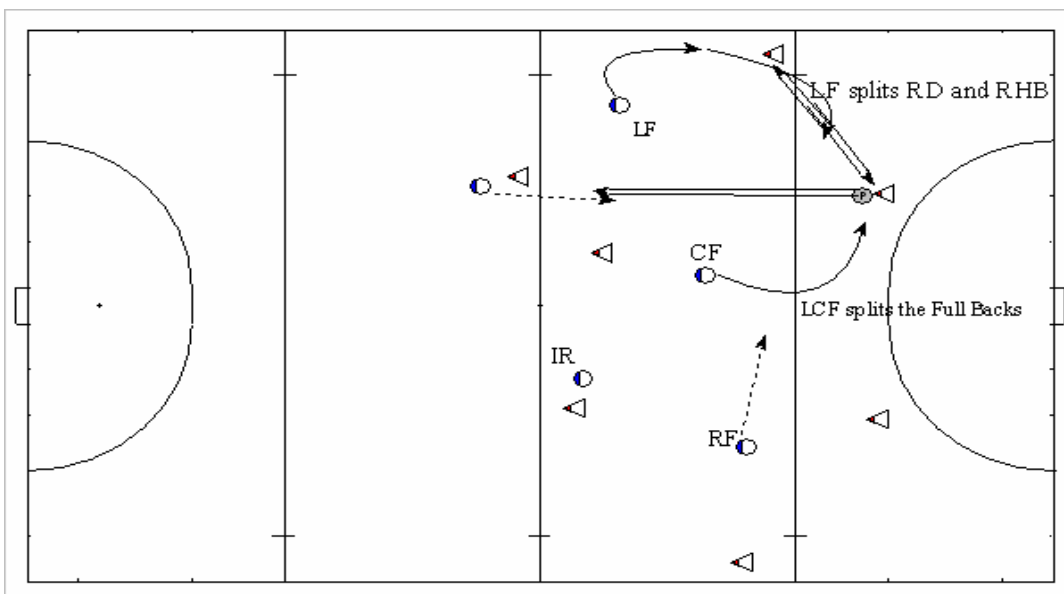


Figure 8: Two Forwards Reverse pressing to force RFB to hit long or aerial

7.3 55 Press – ‘Ambush’

Australia and the Netherlands were particularly effective at this type of press especially if a team tried to creep the help side Full Back.. In some respects it is similar to the scenario shown in Figure 7 but the trigger may be slightly different. Triggers observed were often one of the Full Backs travelling with the ball. This is naturally easier when it is the LFB carrying the ball as he would need to ‘pull back’ the ball to be able to transfer the ball right. This scenario is outlined in Figure 8.

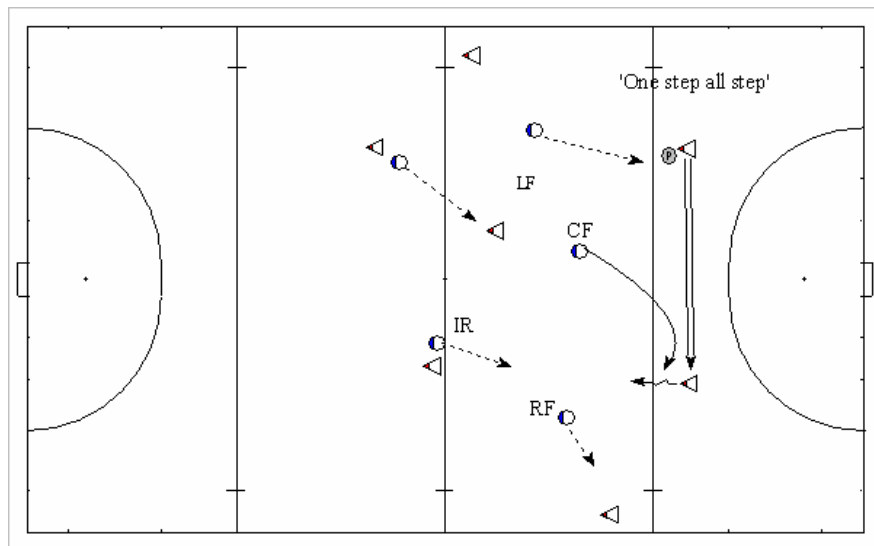


Figure 9: 55 Ambush Press

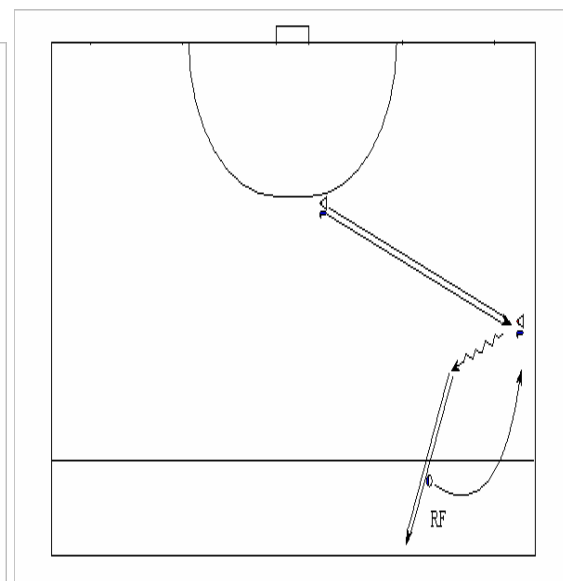


Figure 10: RF closing down

The examples shown in most of the examples show the RF making an arc run to force the ball outside (EG Fig. 3 and 5). However there were situations when teams will change this to close down on an arc to force the ball inside. The advantage of this is that counter attacks are often more successful if the ball can be passed easily into centre field as it opens up the more passing situations and space in which to play.

However, I still believe it is too easy for the RH to drive in field and make penetrative passes, especially the danger balls direct to the CF or LF travelling in field as shown in Fig. 10 above.

8. Key techniques of the forwards

As the first line of defence forwards need to have speed of thought and pace in which they do things.

- Closing Down – get the angle and distances right:
Whilst this is an ‘off ball’ skill the ability to close space quickly, on the correct angle (to protect the centre of the pitch and force the defender outside) and get the footwork and stride pattern correct is actually a difficult skill to master.
- Reverse Pressing:
Also known as ‘reverse pressing’ this means an attacker who splits the defence into two in order to keep the ball on one side of the pitch and prevent inter play and re-transfer between the defenders.

Traditionally it would be the CF who would cut the field in half, ensuring the ball was kept at one side given they were the only player on the pitch with two players (the CD and SW) to deal with. However, it is apparent now that teams can use the left or right forward to do this as was employed by England at the World Cup Qualifier and Holland and at the Champions Trophy

- Tackling:
Several techniques are employed depending on the position in relation to the opposition. These include the block tackle and reverse stick tackle when confronting the attacker face on and the shave and steal when the attacker is moving and is being approached from behind.
- Intercepting and trapping hard balls
Naturally there are occasions when defenders try to hit through presses and these passes, if trapped, can prove ideal counter attack situations. The body position, hand position and grip are all key points in ensuring trapping occurs. There appears to have been an increase in attempts to intercept lateral passes where the ball is being transferred around the back, especially with the flat reverse stick whilst players dive across the pitch.
- Running down aerials
With the increase in length, distance and accuracy of aerials (all which developed quickly with bowed sticks and players who can drag flick) the forwards have to be able to effectively run down and pressure an aerial from the back. Several techniques were observed with the most common now working on the stick starting up and trying to pressure the line of the ball. This seems to apply more pressure (all be much of it mental) on the arialer!
- Receiving cross field aerials
The ability to run (often backwards) and receive aerials is also a developing technique, especially against teams who static press a lot such as Spain.

9. Decision Making Requirements for forwards

- Attackers need to be aware of the distances between themselves and the other players on their team. Getting correct distances between each forward is essential. If they are too close together they are vulnerable on the outside in wide areas, if they are too far apart their team are vulnerable to penetrative passes in behind them, particularly on the 45 degree angle. The distance to the midfield line is also important. If the forward line closes down and leave a big gap behind them there is a lot of space for the opposition to exploit.
- Understanding of when, why and whom to pressure. Teams will frequently target a particular player who the want, or don't want to have the ball depending on aspects such as their ability to aerial, not aerial, hit long, only play short etc
- Assessing distances as to when to reverse pressure and close down without leaving a big space behind them. An understanding with the Inside Forwards is therefore required and peripheral vision and verbal communication essential.
- Assessing the passer in terms of their body shape and hands ensuring they cover the potential passes available to them. This may require dropping deeper or moving sideways.

10. Strategies employed to break presses

The following techniques were some of those employed to break the presses discussed above:

- Pressure release aerial - where aerial is played so the team can set up their own press.
- Positive aerials – where passes are made both lateral cross field (to space) and vertically. There were definite planned patterns of play and movement to create the space for these aerials and release player to receive them in space
- Aerial on the move
- Deflections through the midfield to the forwards
- Collapse press then attack outside – especially against static presses
- FB drive with space cleared ahead of the ball
- Fast deep transfer