



## The ICA 2015 Tour de France Package Cues for attacks, counterattacks, and blocking

**Compiled by Jennifer Sage**

I've compiled several interesting and fun articles from cycling racing blogs, written by professional cycling coaches on racing techniques. Specifically, these are tips on attacks, counterattacks, and blocking. By reading these tips, an instructor will understand in more depth how to implement these kinds of strategies and cues into a profile of a stage; it will be more authentic when you cue an attack or counterattack at a more appropriate time in the race. I've also given you the source where I found it, so you can dig deeper into their website for even more information.

Once you are inside these posts, for example, *The Art of the Counterattack* on the Cyclingtipsblog, you can search their archives and links in the articles for even more racing tips. Even if you don't race, or even ride bikes, these are a fabulous source for motivational cues for your classes.

The following are directly quoted from the source listed. The **yellow highlights** point out what I think are some of the more relevant tips for your classes.

Allez! Allez!

### **The Art of the Counterattack**

From Cycle Faster and [Cyclingtipsblog](#)

Simply defined, a counterattack is an offensive move that is launched right after a breakaway is brought back, or straight after an opponent's attack is caught. The tricky part is making the counterattack stick, which isn't going to happen if it's not done at the right time.

At the beginning of a race the first few attacks almost never work. Everyone is still excited and fresh and you'll almost always be chased down. To get into an initial break you have to wait for the 4th, 5th, or 6th attack by the time something will stick (and there's no guarantee that it will stick for long). You can tell by the mood of the peloton, the conditions, and the terrain as to whether anything is going to get away or not. If you're racing in a Masters category, **good luck ever getting a break to stick. These old foxes chase everything down!**

Let's focus on the end of the race. **One of the best times to counterattack is late in the race when everyone is getting tired. If you're tired, it's a good indication that everyone else is tired too. You just have to be prepared to suffer more than the others.**

At club level racing you'll often see the same guys doing all the work while the others are sitting-on waiting for things to come down to a bunch sprint. When I say "work," I mean the arduous task of chasing down the breaks. They could have a number of motives for doing so, and it's in your best interest to understand what those are.

### A few scenarios:

1. A great place to counterattack is after a hard chase effort by the bunch and the break is brought back. Once the break is caught there will often be a lull in the pace. Take full advantage of this lull and disorganization and launch a counterattack (if the race situation makes sense to do so). The guys at the front who were working their tails off will want a rest and will expect others to chase. Everyone else will expect the guys at the front to resume the chase.

2. If it's close to the end of the race and the bunch is all together, chances are that everyone will be motivated to chase everything down and bring it to a sprint. There's not much sense attacking in the last kilometer if it's a blistering pace, but I've seen it work on occasion. If you're not a sprinter there's no harm in trying your luck early. If you're going to do this, it's best to counter after someone else's attack has been brought back. There's a chance that the momentum of the chasers will be broken, which you can take advantage of. However, if there's a team driving the pace it will be a doomed attempt. Unless you're Cancellara you won't get away if the speed of the bunch is 45km/hr.

3. You've made your way into a successful split with half a dozen other guys and you have a teammate with you. Perfect. One of you has a 90% chance of winning if you play your cards right. Plan it so that your teammate attacks at the final kilometer or so (or vice versa). He's got to give it everything he's got and hang out there for as long as he can. He has to completely sacrifice himself even though he knows he'll probably be caught. This will force the others into a defensive position and make them start chasing. You're obliged to do nothing except sit at the back. The moment the group catches him, you launch your attack. I can almost guarantee that the chasers will stop and look at each other, expecting one another to pick up the workload. You might have another wheel-sucker come along with you, but your odds are now much better. By the time the bunch behind you gets organized you'll be well away and your teammate will be sitting in with no chasing responsibilities.

Being able to read the race is arguably more important than fitness itself. The key to a successful counterattack is making sure you do it when everyone is tired or there is confusion in the peloton. The best way to practice this is by getting out there and throwing caution into the wind. You'll learn far more from your mistakes than from your victories.

Another great [Cycling Tip](#) from Jeff Bolstad. There's good reason why he wins 1/3 of the races he enters...or was that Merckx? Either way...pay attention, folks. You'll learn something from this guy.

At its most basic, an attack is an attempt to distance one's self from other riders, but an attack can have a more subtle purpose. Here are a few examples:

### **1. Kicking the hornet's nest**

Radios didn't ruin cycling, but they did take some of the hilarity out of it. Back before radios, and when races were less formal affairs, one of the racers (his name escapes me) was infamous for attacking, getting out of sight, and then hiding in the bushes. When the peloton came by, he would jump out and tag onto the back, while his rivals chased away on the front.

You can't do this anymore, but a well-timed attack can set up a miniature version. Say, for instance, that a break that you don't like the looks of has a gap and any moment now the guys driving the chase are going to look to you to work. It would be much better if these other chuckleheads would chase the move down for you. Attack, but don't give it all that much. This will leave you fresh enough to slide back in near the front of the pack as you're caught, and give you a good view of the flurry of counterattacks it provokes. This will often put an end to the breakaway, at little cost to yourself.

Two beautiful things about this move are that the more heavily marked you are, the better it works, and that it works as well with 2 laps to go as with 20. Timed properly, it can set up a teammate-less version of the Poor Man's Lead-out.

### **2. The Poor Man's Lead-out**

Speaking of which, the Poor Man's Lead-out is one of the most basic and effective of team tactics. It only requires one teammate. Of the two teammates, the weaker sprinter puts in a late attack, while the sprinter sits on. Like all great cycling tactics it gives your opponents two choices, neither of which has much appeal. Namely, they can either chase the rabbit down and lead the sprinter out, or they can not chase, and let the rabbit win.

This can work in field sprints when you don't have enough people to do a proper lead-out, but is most effective out of breakaways. Because the sprints are slower and there are fewer people to keep track of, normal lead-outs are fairly pointless in breakaways. The Poor Man's Lead-out, however, is incredibly effective, since everyone is probably tired and therefore more likely to hesitate. The rabbit wins more often in this situation.

### **3. Attacking as blocking**

The time-honored method of blocking is to sit on or near the front and refuse to help set the pace. This is fine, but once a chase gets organized, it's bordering on bad manners to get in the rotation and mess it up. That's not to say that people don't do it, or that it's not effective—they do and it is, but push your luck and you can get all kinds of hate coming your way, some of it physical. Instead of making enemies or getting put in the ditch, try attacking the chase. Experienced riders may ignore you, realizing that you won't ride away from a paceline on your own. On the other hand, they may

respond to your attack. When you're already working hard in a paceline, making an anaerobic effort hurts, bad. Some of the chasers may start thinking about getting some shelter; those that remain will have some of the wind taken out of their sails; the chase will take some time to get organized again.

### [Attack on the Lull](#)

Have you ever noticed the times in a bike race when someone attacks and everyone hesitates, expecting each other to chase it down? The ebbs and flows of the peloton are something that you can use to your advantage if you know how to read them.

I was racing the other night and remembered one of the golden rules of attacking: **Attack on the lull.**

Webster's Dictionary defines "lull" as: *A pause during which things are calm or activities are diminished.*

The further a race goes on and the more fatigued the riders get, the more pronounced the surges and lulls of the peloton are. There's no use attacking when the pace is at 50km/hr. That means you'll have to be riding at 60km/hr just to get away. Fat chance.

Instead, wait for the pace to calm down. There is usually a lull when the riders at the front of the bunch who have been doing all the work either shut a breakaway down, or give up on it. This is the perfect time to counterattack. Preferably closer to the end of a race when everyone is tired, the finish line is near, and everybody is thinking about their own chances of winning. Everyone will expect the riders who have been doing all the work to chase you down, but it's unlikely since they've just put a big effort in. This works much better with small groups, as *everyone* will be tired.

A teammate of mine orchestrated this to perfection last week. We were in a breakaway group of about 20 riders. He unleashed a massive attack in the last 3 laps of a criterium. He was never going to get away, but sacrificed himself to put the hurt on the bunch. Everyone was strung out gasping to get back onto the wheel in front. My teammate kept the pressure on until he couldn't do any more damage. Once everyone regrouped there was a big lull in the pace as everyone needed a rest. This is when I hit them—HARD. I was still hurting but I knew it was now or never. Only 2 others followed and everyone looked at each other, expecting someone else to chase us down. We had a 200m gap in no time and they couldn't bring us back by the time they sorted out who was going to do the chasing.

*Note: I didn't win, but the attack worked like a charm I'd better go back and read my [Top Sprinting Mistakes](#) post Also my teammate here is Duncan Smith who's won the Tour of Valencia and 3rd in the Tour Down Under—WOW!*

## To Attack Or Not To Attack...That Is The Question From Cyclingtipsblog

Do you ever notice that some guys get in every winning breakaway and seem to have all the “luck”? Well, it’s not so much “luck” as it is knowing when and where to attack. I raced last night in some tough windy conditions and saw many futile and senseless attacks that went absolutely nowhere. Not because the rider wasn’t strong enough to get away. Purely because those attacks were launched at the wrong time or wrong place. Here’s some rules on **when to launch a successful attack for a breakaway**, and when NOT TO launch an attack when bike racing. Of course you won’t be successful every time, but these general guidelines should increase your chances of getting away.

### **When riding into a strong headwind:**

**DON’T ATTACK**—It’s too hard! You won’t be able to get enough speed up to significantly make a big gap on the group and you probably won’t have the strength all alone to hold it. Remember, there will be a pack full of riders swapping off turns behind you. You probably won’t be stronger than them all combined.

### **When riding with a tailwind:**

**DON’T ATTACK**—It’s too easy! When things are easy for you, it’s a good indication that it’s easy for everyone else. You’ll most likely have half the pack on your wheel as you attack or you’ll have some weaker rider on your tail and will mess it up for you because he won’t be able to hold it in 5 mins.

### **When riding into a crosswind:**

**ATTACK!!!**—Crosswinds are a great place to attack. If someone tries to go with you and they bring a few more riders then there’s only so many people who can draft behind before the rest of the pack gets [put into the gutter](#). You can start working with these guys and put the whole race into the gutter until a split in the field happens. Be prepared for this in the crosswinds and don’t be someone who gets put into the gutter.

**When riding on a decent: DON’T ATTACK**—once again, it’s too easy for everyone else to follow (and possibly dangerous). It’ll all come back together on the bottom of the decent anyway. Don’t waste your energy.

**When riding up a hill: ATTACK!!!**—Climbs are one of the best places to attack. **Everyone knows it’s coming, but there’s nowhere to hide and to draft off other riders.** You’ll only get the strongest riders following your attack on a climb, which means you have a good bunch to work with. **Don’t attack too early into the hill. Wait until everyone is getting tired. If you’re getting tired, it’s a good indication that others are as well. You just need to be prepared to hold it and to suffer more than the others would!**

**When riding into the feed zone: DON’T ATTACK**—not cool.

**When riding into a corner: ATTACK!!!**—Only if it's safe and you're near the front. There's huge potential to cause a crash here so use this one wisely. Attacking into a corner will add an element of surprise and will cause the riders at the back to get strung out and gaps will open. Pay attention to the wind direction. If you're turning into a tailwind or a headwind, don't bother. Crosswinds are the golden rule here.

**After you've caught a breakaway group: COUNTERATTACK!!!**—Many times there will be a lull in the peloton directly after you've caught a group who have been away in a break. Often the main workers in the peloton are tired after chasing and will not likely chase you down at this point. **This is a great time to get a jump on the bunch and launch a counterattack.** The lazy guys sitting in the back won't chase you and the worker bees may let you go as well. You'll probably have a few others who will join you in a moment when they see you getting away and will increase your chances of making the break stick.

**TIP:** **When attacking, do it like you mean it.** You need to have a large amount of speed on the rest of the pack to get away and you need to maintain it until open up a gap. You can't attack from the front of the bunch or everyone will follow. You can't attack from too far back or else it takes away that element of surprise. You need to attack from about 5 to 10 riders from the front to get good amount of acceleration on the group. This way no one will be able to follow. Attack like it's a 200m sprint. Concentrate on maintaining your pace and recovering after you've got a healthy gap on the bunch.

Also, if your attack in an attempt to bridge to another breakaway is dragging up the rest of the peloton, sit up and try again later (unless your intent is to chase down the breakaway for **your team**). If you try to bridge to the breakaway while dragging the rest of the group with, you'll do nothing but waste your own energy while the rest of the bunch sits on. Once you catch the break you'll be too shattered to win the race anyway. What was your point in doing this in the first place then?

## Blocking

Blocking is a race strategy you may have heard of before. It involves riders with the same interests moving up to the front of the main field while they have a teammate ahead in a break. **The riders at the front will disrupt the pace so that the breakaway has a chance to get away and an organized chase never gets off the ground.**

This is a legitimate tactic that does the exact job it's intended to. **Pro teams don't actually "block" per se. Teams will go to the front of the peloton to control the pace by riding what's called a "false tempo." Just fast enough so that it doesn't look obvious that a disruption to the pace is occurring, but not so fast that they'll catch the breakaway.**

I think this tactic is all fine and dandy for races that are comprised fully of teams, however I don't agree with teams using this tactic in club racing. Club races are mostly made up of individual riders along with a couple stacked teams. It doesn't take much for those teams to get one or two guys in the breakaway and then completely shut the race down. This makes for a horribly frustrating and negative race for the rest of the riders. The only thing that the individuals can do is organize their own chase (which is difficult to do) but it is often futile because the larger teams will just roll through to the front and disrupt the pace.

In my opinion the tactful way for teams to handle breakaways is to go back to the middle of the peloton and sit in (if they have a rider in the break). If a chase gets organized then they should let it happen without disruption. This makes the race better for everyone and it doesn't become a numbers game for the teams.

*BTW...The best thing to do if you're in a race where riders are blocking is to try to bridge to the breakaway in a small group. This way you won't be wasting all your energy towing the whole pack around only to have everyone roll you at the finish. [Here's a post I wrote on attacking and bridging \(see last paragraph\).](#)*