

Principles of Defense

Good defending begins with an understanding of how the principles of defense are applied by both the individual player as well as collectively within the team. The moment a team loses possession an immediate organization begins.

- **Pressure** – The moment possession is lost the nearest player(s) try to regain possession or apply *pressure* on the ball, if possible. Players giving immediate chase can also help to *delay* the attack by making recovery runs that deny the opponent the opportunity to play the ball quickly forward. If a defender cannot put “immediate” pressure on the ball, he or she must drop back and delay the attacker’s advance.
- **Delay** – The pressuring defender(s) forces the attacking team to slow down so that the defense may organize. While applying pressure the defender must be careful to not over-commit. If the defender is beaten easily, the time for the team to organize is shortened.
- **Depth** – This refers to the immediate organization of players behind the pressuring defender. While the ball is being pressured all other players should be recovering into defensive positions. The positions taken should support the pressuring defender in the event he is beaten. This is called providing defensive cover.
- **Balance** – As the team concentrates their defense in the area of the ball, defenders away from the ball (opposite side of field) must position themselves to cover vital spaces (central areas) in order to prevent attackers from making penetrating runs into these spaces in which to receive the ball for an attempt on goal. All players who are on the opposite side must seek positions in which to provide balance to the defense.
- **Compactness** – As players recover towards their own goal and organize their defense, the objective is to limit the time and space for the opponent by concentrating their defense in the area of the ball. Defenders also recover centrally towards their goal in order to limit the opponents’ ability to directly attack the goal.
- **Control and Restraint** – Players must be disciplined and play “under control” when challenging for the ball. Too often players make poorly timed or off-balanced attempts to win the ball. Players should restrain from tackling until they are confident they will win the ball.
- **Counterattack** – The ability of the team to effectively counterattack forces the opposing team to keep players focused on their defensive responsibilities, not allowing them to become actively involved in the attack. The threat of a counterattack improves the defending team’s ability to defend.

Defensive Roles

It is important for players to understand their role and function within the game as well as their position. While the team is defending, a player will assume the responsibility to provide pressure, cover, balance or depth.

- A. Pressure (pressuring defender) the closest player to the ball.
 - Apply pressure to the ball to regain possession if possible.
 - Deny penetration of any kind.
 - Select proper angle of challenge.
 - Select proper speed of challenge.

- B. Cover (covering defender(s)).
 - Provide cover for the pressuring defender.
 - Select proper angle of cover.
 - Should be a distance that the covering defender can tackle or immediately close down the attacker who has beaten the pressuring defender.
 - Distance of cover will vary with the third of the field and the amount of pressure on the ball.
 - Responsible for tracking supporting attackers who make forward runs.

- C. Balance (balancing defender(s)).
 - Track attackers away from the area of the ball who are making forward runs.
 - Squeeze space towards center of the field to "lock up" vital areas.
 - Preserve balance/shape.

- D. Compactness (collective play of all players).
 - Pressure, cover, balance together provide depth in defense.
 - Organization of defending between the various lines, e.g. midfield and defending line.
 - Proper positioning, spacing and number of defenders in area of the ball vital to maintain depth in defense.

Principles of Attack

Unlike most team sports, soccer does not have a series of set plays. It is a fluid game in which the player who has possession of the ball must always have several options to pass the ball. The more options a player has, the less likely they are to lose possession. Therefore, it is necessary for players not in possession to quickly help the player with the ball. While defenders attempt to make play predictable, attackers look to make the attack unpredictable by improvising. In an effort to score goals the offense utilizes penetration, depth, mobility, width and improvisation.

- **Penetration** – The first choice of the player with the ball is to penetrate the opponents' defense. Depending where the player is on the field they can look to shoot, pass to a teammate that has penetrated the defense or simply dribble for penetration or to space.
- **Depth (support)** – When we refer to depth in attack we are talking about support play. Good depth provides the player on the ball with all around support so that there are options to play the ball forward, square or back. The more options a player has, the less likely they will lose the ball. Good support play is achieved when there are good angles of support, proper distance of support and speed of support. The shape most often seen in good support play is a triangle. Players who stand or run to create straight lines are destroying support and risk losing possession of the ball by eliminating options for the player with the ball.
- **Mobility** – Movement is necessary in the game so that players can create space for themselves or for their teammates. Good mobility involves moving in support of the ball as well as “playing without the ball.” Players without the ball need to “unbalance” the opponent’s defense by running into positions that will create scoring opportunities or create space for the teammates near the ball (the work of the attackers away from the ball).
- **Width** – When a team is in possession of the ball it has to use all the area available in which to play. Successful teams use all the width of the field and as much of the length as the offside rule will allow. The more space they have in which to play in, the greater the time and space each player in possession will have. As a result, there is less chance of being pressured into mistakes. Using the full width of the field makes it difficult for the defense to provide good cover and compactness.
- **Improvisation** – There are many times when players have to use their own individual flair to create passing or shooting opportunities for themselves or teammates. Clever dribbling or inter-passing eliminates defenders and creates openings for attackers. Players, who have the ability to turn quickly, evade a challenge easily, shoot off balance or even perform their own “tricks” to create opportunities, are an asset of a team.

Attacking Roles

Developing an understanding of your task and function in the game is vital for successful attacking play. With defending teams trying to take away time and space, attackers must quickly make decisions based upon these roles and functions in order to be successful in attack. Players whose technical skills break down under pressure will find that they are always out of time and cannot make simple decisions that benefit the attack.

A. Player on the ball

- Player with the ball is the most important player.

- First choice is to achieve penetration by making the best tactical decision based upon the player's technical capabilities.

B. Supporting player(s)

- Player(s) in immediate support of the player on the ball.
- Positioned behind, square or in advance of the ball based upon pressure applied to the ball.
- Positioned at the proper distance to insure that one defender cannot restrict both attackers.
- Must combine with the player on the ball to gain penetration through bent runs, overlapping runs, 1-2 double pass, wall pass, takeovers, etc.
- Bent and overlapping runs may isolate the player on the ball for dribbling.

C. Attacking player(s) away from the ball

- Attempts to unbalance the defending team by making constructive runs to increase the attacking options, most runs are penetrating.
- A penetrating run allows for the possibility of an attacker away from play to receive the ball or create space behind their run for another attacker.