

FLAT BACK DEFENSE

“Then there was the season my top defenders, Charlie, Dave, Tom, and Michael were walking on to the field and a great big tree branch fell on top of them. I had to inform the rest of the team we were now going to play with a flat back four.”

See also *TeamDefense.doc*.

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Flat Back - Individual Footwork

Date: Sat, 19 Dec 1998

From: Gary Rue

All defensive systems are predicated upon the skills of the individual player. Individual training is the foundation of a defense and then the individual is implemented into the system. The individual training for a zone system is no different from that of a man to man. At some point in (most?) all systems, there are man to man responsibilities as well as zonal concepts.

Field players must develop the following defensive skills, regardless of the playing position:

- * footwork, quick forward/backward/sideways movements and stops
- * close down technique
- * containment and shepherding
- * tackling
- * support
- * double team
- * recovery

Possibly the most important skill to develop with any defensive player is footwork. Defense by definition is a reactive state, where the attacker causes the defender to take steps to stop some action. Because of this, the defender be able to move quickly in all directions. The player must be able to stop and restart his movement. To do this, the player must be in a balanced position as often as possible, and the feet must be trained to move in the quickest and most efficient manner possible.

<Note: I recommend flats when working on footwork early--it saves the field, the player's feet and reinforces balance without relying on cleats. Later, soccer boots must be used to further prepare the player.>

Footwork Exercises

Quick Starts/Stops (stops must be as quick as starts):

Setup--20 yard parallel lines, team is spread out over one line

- * jog forward, jog backwards
- * jog/sprint/jog/sprint forward, then backwards (on coach's whistle/command)
- * jog, stop on coach's command, sprint on coach's command
- * sprint, stop, sprint

Coaching Points--watch for over-adjustment of upper body such as leaning forward or backwards; hips too high, knees too straight; strides too long; first stride too long; extra foot movement to adjust

Starting Stance (players must be able to react with different foot positions):

Setup (any exercise where the individual must start quickly)

- * feet square
- * one foot ahead of the other (reverse)
- * sideways on (both sides)
- * feet wide apart
- * backwards and turn (both ways)
- * jump, land and go
- * laying on stomach/back
- * off a somersault
- * push by partner
- * being held by partner
- * moving with short quick steps in some direction

Turns and Cuts (the ability to turn and cut sharply is most important):

Setup--20 yard parallel lines, team is spread out over one line

- * jog forward, spin and jog backwards (backwards to forwards)
- * sprint forward, spin and sprint backwards (backwards to forwards)

Setup--5-10 yard parallel lines, team is spread out over one line; may need to run in groups

- * jog, plant (foot pointing forward), drop step turn (increase to sprint); change plant foot
- * jog, plant (foot pointed 90 degrees in turning direction, drop step (increase to sprint)
- * jog, plant (left foot pointed forward), cut to the right by stepping with right foot (increase speed, then change plant foot and turn direction)
- * jog, plant left foot pointed to left, power or cross-over step past plant foot to the left (increase speed, then change plant foot and turn direction)
- * jog, jump, land both feet, turn or cut
- * jog, jump, turn in air, land both feet, cut
- * jog, jump, land on one foot, cut

<Note: the star or wheel setup is excellent for these cuts. A 6-10 yard diameter circle with 8 spots. A player runs to the middle and cuts to the direction number and type turn chosen by the coach.>

Coaching Points--watch for adjustment steps or long and high looping steps on the cuts; rounded cuts are very common and must be made more acute; cross-over steps on cuts are very difficult when moving with any speed in one direction.

Quick Feet (one of the most common faults is a wide foot position and long, high strides; defensive players must learn how to run with short quick strides):

Setup--cones 3 yards apart north to south and east to west; exercises are timed at 15-30 second intervals with a 4-1 rest-work interval

- * sideways shuffles between cones (east/west)
- * up and back sprints between cones (north/south)
- * sideways shuffles (one set), shift to other cone and up and back sprint (one set); continuous
- * figure 8; west to north to east to west to south to east to west to north; etc.; run in opposition next time

Setup--open area

- * defensive two-step--square stance, feet a yard or so apart, run forward with a left/right/left combo to a square stance, feet a yard or so apart, and then move backwards with a right/left/right combo to the starting position. This is done as fast as possible continuously for 30 seconds. Use the next 30 seconds to rest and walk through the same steps, except starting with the right foot.
- * carioka--moving sideways to right, right foot out, left foot crosses behind right, right foot out, left foot cross right in front, etc. switch directions

Setup--zigzag 10 cones about 3-5 yards apart

- * forward shuffle around each cone
- * backwards shuffle around each cone
- * forward run the first cone, backwards run around the next, etc.
- * forward shuffle to the first cone, spin and backwards shuffle to the next

Coaching Points--watch for hips too high and knees not bent (get the butt low); never allow the feet to cross on a shuffling exercise; brush the top of the grass with the sole of the feet.

Setup--speed ladder or wooden slates 18 inches apart; flat cones can also be used, but cause the feet to step too high

- * sprint forward--step every 18 inches
- * sprint forward--double step (both feet in same area)
- * sideways down ladder--double step every 8 inches
- * facing forward--shuffle double step from side to side (double step in first section, step out, double step in next section, step out, etc.)
- * facing backwards--shuffle double step from side to side
- * sprint forward--alternate sections (every other one, every third, random)
- * sprint forward--step out every square blocked off
- * sprint forward--cross-over step in and out (left steps in, right steps out to the left side, left steps in (3rd area--36 inches), right steps out to the left side
- * same as above except, right steps out to the left side, then after the left steps in the right steps out on the right side

Coaching Points--let them have fun and ask them to feel as if they are dancing through these exercises; challenge them; watch for steps too high

As one last comment, even though all of the above is done without a ball, there are many ways to incorporate these types of footwork exercise into a training program and still feel that the players have touched a ball sufficiently, be it during warm-ups, cool downs or in between. You want to prepare the feet to be able to move in a certain way, then you want to speed up that movement. Be careful that the feet and legs are not too fatigued when trying to train for speed of movement.

Flat Back - Individual Close Down

Date: Sun, 20 Dec 1998

From: Gary Rue

At most times the ball must be put under some kind of pressure. Low pressure is where the defender is a short but definitive distance from the ball. In low pressure situations, the defender and the defensive system wants to guide the ball into preferred areas or the defense just wants to prevent penetration by the attack. Low pressure defenses only want to give up low percentage chances to the attack, putting many players around the ball and staying compact in the central defensive end.

With high pressure defenses, the ball is closed down quickly and tightly. This requires a high work rate by the defender, but the pressure is likely to cause mistakes and loss of possession by the attack.

In either case, the first defender or the one most responsible for the man with the ball must know how to close down on the ball. The close down is a method that brings the defender to proper distance from the attacker, be it 5 yards or one foot.

The close down starts when a ball is passed to an attacker. When the ball is in flight, the defender uses this time to sprint towards the receiving attacker. This is the critical time in a close down as it is the best time to gobble up ground between the defender and the attacker. All too often, the defender does not react soon enough and gives the attacker great space to receive and decide what the next play will be.

Just before the receiver is to touch the ball, the defender must stop the sprint and go into a balanced state, being ready to react in any direction. The closer to the attacker, the more critical being on balance becomes. It is when the defender is in motion that the attacker can use the defender's momentum to beat him. The

defender must first stop, then change directions. Often in a directional change, the player is again off balance and can be beat again. An on balanced player can react quickly the first time in such a manner that he is still on balance for the next reaction.

To go on balance requires the player to suspend movement, with feet a comfortable distance apart. The body may be turned slightly facing the ball and the direction the player wants the attacker to go.

After the touch is made, the defender uses the time before the next touch to close down more space. If the touch stays close to the attacker, the defender should go into a sideways-on (or side-on) stance and take short steps or hops to get closer to the attacker. The defender should stay as balanced as possible with any leanings away from attacker back towards the defended goal. The defender must not allow the attacker to get past or behind him, and that is why the defender should be ready to react quickly going backwards as he shuffles forward towards the ball. The reason he needs to be side-on is to be in a better position to go back.

1v1 exercises are best for teaching close down. Either the defender serves the ball to an attacker and closes down or a third player serves the ball. It is critical that the ball is served from different angles and from different distances to train the defender properly. The defender should start from different distances from the attacker as well.

Defenders that are beat by the attacker on the first or second touch are not on balance. Defenders that are not tight enough initially may not be working hard enough on the initial pass. Defenders that stay well off the attacker after reception are not closing down properly.

Flat Back - Individual Support

Date: Mon, 21 Dec 1998

From: Gary Rue

I will forego any discussion on containment, shepherding and tackling. These are critical defensive skills and techniques, but I want to put more emphasis on support, double teaming and recovery as we inch our way towards more flat back development.

We will keep the defensive support comments in this section to positions that are near and "behind" the ball and the first defender, as there are support positions on the attacking side of the ball and behind, but off the ball.

One of the first mandates of a coach to his players in a flat back defense (any defense really) is to "get behind the ball." Defensive support has three main functions:

- * support the first defender on ball
- * mark or be able to close down the support attacker(s)
- * stop the through ball behind the defense

The supporting position on the ball should be the first priority. The defender must be positioned to take over as the first defender if the attacker gets past the initial defender. This positioning should not be too close, as the attacker will probably be moving at speed if he beat the first defender. On the otherhand, the support defender should not be too far from the ball and give the attacker too much space and time before he comes under pressure again. The closer the ball is to the goal, the closer the defender should be in support; however, the more angled the ball is to the goal (i.e., wide of the goal, but close to the goalline), the more distance (vertical) and the flatter (horizontal) the supporting defender can be in relation to the ball.

3-7 yards can be used as a base vertical distance (also called depth). If the skill and speed of attacking players is considered greater than that of the defenders, the more depth a supporting defender may need. The depth could be extended to as much as 10 yards, the closer the ball is to the halfway. If the ball is being marked and supported by the midfielders, the backs may want to be 10-15 yards in support of the supporting defenders. This is another element in support defense that we will skip over for the time being.

A good starting point rule of thumb on support angle and depth for the closest support defender may be to draw a line from the far post to the ball. The support defender should be somewhere along this line. This line puts the defender in good position to deter or prevent through balls. The problem with this method is when the ball is in the center of the field. The horizontal support angle of the far post line may be a little too vertical for a supporting defender.

The support position is next dictated by the support attacker. The wider the attacker, the further away laterally, the support defender may want to play. The further away from the ball the attacker is, the further away from the support attacker the supporting defender can play (if the attacker is outside of the penalty area). The more dangerous position an attacker is in (such as a run on goal), the support defender must provide more attention, both visually and physically.

A distance halfway between the two attackers is a good starting point if the attackers are square. If the second attacker is forward, the defender must give him attention and play tighter. Here the through ball between the defenders is a real concern as the defender will not have a distance advantage on the attacker if there is a run on goal.

There are several ways to train supporting defense.

Setup: 2v2 no defense; Attacker one (1A) has the ball, Defender one (1D) closes down and 2D moves into a supporting position between 1A and 2A. 1A passes to 2A who is square, 2D immediately closes down and 1D drops back into support. Vary the exercise by the two attackers jogging down the field with the two defender going back with them. To liven up the exercise, have the receiving attacker try to beat the defender closing down or deliver a through pass to the other attacker making a run behind the recovering defender.

Coaching points: watch for a too vertical drop position on the supporting defender; be sure the close down is proper. The coach can either have the first defender force the ball wide or take a defense stance that forces the ball towards his support.

Setup: 1v1+1; in a 10x20 yard grid, attacker is on the top of the grid, two defenders are on the bottom line; 2D plays a ball to the attacker as 1D closes down; if the attacker beats 1D, then 2D moves immediately into the first defender role. Vary the exercise to encourage more 2D participation by restricting 1D to no tackling and no participation past the halfway line.

Setup: in a 30x20 grid, 2D plays the ball to A well wide of the attacker, varying the depth; 2D must now recover from a wide starting position to get into a good supporting position. Add a goal and other restrictions on 1D's defense or when 2D can recover.

Other small sided unrestricted games with small goals are 1v2 2v2, 3v2 are good environments to work on supporting defense.

Support may be the key element to flat back systems. We discussed the near ball support. Later on, we will talk about the off-ball support positioning, which actually is where the flat back gets it's name.

Flat Back - Individual Recovery

Date: Wed, 23 Dec 1998

From: Gary Rue

Adequate pressure on the ball and recovery of supporting defenders is a key to any defensive system, especially in a flat back. It is important that the recovery is with urgency and situation awareness. A recovering defender must get back to stop the ball, support the defender on ball, mark attackers in dangerous positions or support another supporting defender.

In the following description, assume the scenario of the ball penetration being down the side. Later, penetration down the middle will be discussed briefly.

The initial steps of a recovery run in many cases should be towards to the goal post nearest the player. As the defender recovers near post, he assesses the situation and starts to curve his run out when he feels he can get between the attacker and the goal. If he starts his run towards the attacker, the attacker may be able to angle towards the near post before the defender can get there. By starting towards the near post first, the defender should be able to keep the attacker wide of the goal (assuming the attacker is breaking down the center). The key time where a defender can start moving out off the near post run is when the defender is even or past the attacker. Here, speed of the attacker plays a role. A slower defender will want to continue recovering towards the near post until he is sure he can get between the attacker and the goal.

Central defenders that are not recovering to ball want to recover towards the middle of the goal. They want to move out towards the ball and the first defender as they go past the first defender. It is important the recovering second defender look for other attackers that are moving into dangerous positions. The second defender should look for a position that will give support to the first attacker and a marking presence on the other attacker(s).

The third recovering defender moves into support position to support the second defender. At this point the third defender could take on the marking responsibilities of the second defender and allow the second defender to be in better (closer) position to support the first defender. This third defender may have recovered to the middle of the goal or to the far post, depending upon how quickly the second defender recovered or where the off-ball attackers were going.

In a flat back, the third and fourth back defenders shift towards the ball align themselves with the depth of the second attacker. Their key roles are to keep the defense compressed by not getting deeper than the second defender, provide near ball coverage by shifting over towards ball, stopping any balls played behind the second defender and marking or staying aware of any off ball attackers.

Attackers that penetrate down the middle require the defenders to recover towards the center of the goal. It is very important for second defenders (one on each side of the ball) to stay fairly compact (3-5 yards wide of and behind the first defender). Again, this compactness may have to be compromised to mark a near attacker. The defenders wide of the second defenders need to be compact as well and to pick up the marking responsibilities on attackers. The defense wants to provide a barrier across the danger zone in front of the goal, not allowing the ball to penetrate any gaps and force the ball to be played square and wide.

Recovery of the first defender can be practiced by setting up a 10 yard channel near a touch line from the goalline out. A ball is played down the touchline for a wide attacker to run onto. A defender is positioned near but inside the attacker. The defender must recover and keep the attacker wide as the attacker tries to take the ball across the inside channel line. The defender's initial recovery angle and then the angle of closing down the ball are watched. If the defender does not recover to the inside, the attacker may be able to get in front. If the defender does not close down at a good angle or is still running, the attacker may be able to cut back behind the defender. The defender should be in a balanced close down position (see prior post on close down) to contain the attacker.

A gate near the goalline can be created on the inner channel line for attackers that can get the goalline and cross the ball. The defender now must stop the attacker from cutting to the center, but stop the cross of any attacker that can get to the goalline. The starting position of the defender can be changed to get the desired results. Defenders with great speed will need to be shown the need to recover to the inside first, as their tendency is to run down the ball.

The exercise can then be changed by removing the channel and letting the first attacker try to go on goal against a recovering defender, starting from the halfway. A second defender is added near the center circle to provide recovering support. A second attacker is added for the second defender to mark. A third defender is added and later a third attacker. A fourth defender could be added if the exercise is allowed to progress this far. When the third defender is added, the coach may want to start developing at this time the positioning of the defenders in the flat back system.

Flat Back - Individual - Double Team

Date: Sat, 26 Dec 1998

From: Gary Rue

Without question, the double team is one of the least trained of the defensive techniques; however, it can easily be incorporated into warm-up or individual defensive exercises. The double team is a key element that takes a defensive system, especially zone or a flat back to the next level. The problem with the double team is that to do it correctly requires teamwork and timing.

There are a couple of ways to effect a double team. One is for a defender to close down and pressure the ball, as the second defender comes in late, usually from behind. In this method, the first defender usually dictates the opportunity by stopping and containing the ball. The second defender moves in and is often the aggressor in trying to strip the ball from the attacker as the first defender continues to contain.

The second method is the timed concurrent close down of both defenders. Often, this type of double team occurs close to the touch line where the attacker can be lured into a false sense of space and time as the defenders are some distance away. The close down is performed quickly and at the same time by both defenders. Almost always the other defender comes from the side or "square" of the attacker.

The first order of business in the timed double team is to make sure the attacker cannot split the defenders or go forward. The "downfield" defender must take away the touchline drive as the "square" defender ensures the attacker cannot go between the defenders. The defenders should be less concerned about winning the ball and focus on their defensive positioning.

When next to the touchline (or goalline), the defenders should "allow" the attacker to lose the ball instead of the defender taking the ball. It does no good to kick the ball out of play and give the possession back to the attacker.

Communication is important, but with training and experience, defenders can recognize and react without verbal or visual signals. In the delayed double team, once the defender feels he has the attacker under control, he can raise a hand or say "Double!" This would be a signal for the closest square of trailing defender to move in for the double team.

In the case of a timed double team, the "in charge" defender should be the one that controls the penetration paths the attacker can take. He is the one that dictates when the close down takes place. Generally, he is the one that calls for his partner to get closer. Communication talk could be something like this, "Take square! With me! With me! Close! Close!"

As added defensive protection, especially in a timed double team, a third defender should move into the path between the double teaming defenders. A good support distance would be 10-15 yards depending upon the positioning of the support attackers. The third defender should look to intercept any passes played between the double team.

The timed double team can be trained in the warm-up dribbling game of Knock-out. The setup is a rectangle marked area such as 20x12, depending upon number of players, age and skill level. 8 to 15 players could work in this area. Two defensive players are identified and the other players dribble. Have the dribblers score points by dribbling from one goalline to the other. The defenders are to identify a dribbler, force the dribbler to a side line and "steal" the ball via a double team. Attackers can retrieve balls knocked out of play by the defense and start again. The defenders can compete for the quickest "knock-out" of all players or for the lowest attacker score.

The coach should watch for and discourage "individual" defensive play, as the defenders should work together to "lock" an attacker in. Identify the players that take a lead role or work well together--this could help in establishing player positions in games.

A good exercise to develop the delayed double team is a 1v1+1 setup. Practice along and close to a touchline. D1 plays a ball to A1 and closes down. D2 who starts 10 yards behind A1 and doesn't move until A1 touches the ball or until D1 communicates control.

The coach should look for a good recovery angle to come in from the side to keep A1 from cutting into the middle.

Often, the defense will have the extra numbers around the ball to make double teaming a possibility and can provide their team with the opportunity for great counter attack situations.

Flat Back - Zone 101

Date: Sun, 27 Dec 1998

From: Gary Rue

Just as the individual skills and techniques are the foundation of the any defense, the understanding of when and how to utilize these skills within a system is just as important. As there are many ways to play a flat back system, I will try to stay generic enough in the training exercises that a coach will be able to adapt his players to his particular system.

The flat back system we will discussed is based upon zonal defensive concepts. In zone play, a player must cover a determined space. Each player is concerned with defending an area of the field rather than to mark a man. Specifically, in a zone, the player must constantly decide how to support a teammate defending the ball and mark near-by attacking players.

Players must defend as a team in zone play. Maintaining a proper team shape is crucial. The team must move towards the ball as a collective group, while still maintaining shape and attentiveness to forward attackers.

There are several advantages to zone play as discussed in an article by Jeff Tipping in Coaching Soccer, "Zonal Defending: Is It Right For Your Team?"

- * Easier to maintain defensive shape as players are less inclined to get pulled out of position.

- * Players generally do less running as they don't have to track opponents all over the field.

- * It is easier to hide weaker players.

- * Teams are able to attack more efficiently from an organized shape.
- * A greater number of defenders are around the ball

Some disadvantages include:

- * It is difficult to pull a player out to mark an "assigned" player
- * Verbal communication is mandatory and indispensable.
- * Flatten defense without proper depth, positioning and recovery can lead to through balls and breakaways.
- * Players must constantly decide whether to mark or support a teammate.

The keys to good zonal defending:

- * The central defender(s), as the whole team pivots around the center backs.
- * Defenders do not cross in front (or behind) each other except in emergency situations, such as to provide cover or stop a through pass.
- * The ball should be forced wide and kept wide. This helps the defense to "step up" and compress the attack.
- * There must be constant pressure on the ball to prevent the vertical serve.
- * The central back(s) must decide whether to step up to compress (and catch opponents offside) or drop back and provide defensive depth.

Date: Mon, 28 Dec 1998

From: David Graham

At 12:25 -0500 27/12/98, Gary Rue wrote:

>The keys to good zonal defending:

>* The central back(s) must decide whether to step up to compress (and
>catch opponents offside) or drop back and provide defensive depth.

This is true not only for the backs as a unit but for each of the backs. As Gary wrote earlier in his post, the decision whether to mark or cover is critical in this system, and to my mind this is something that makes it difficult to teach flat back systems to younger players (say, below about U15/U16), where the 'diamond back' system seems to be the preferred option because of its clearer roles. In reality, the 'flat' back rarely looks completely flat as the closest defender pressures the ball and the other backs move into position to provide defensive support or mark attackers, and the fluidity of the system when it works well makes it a great option *if you have the players*. As Gary says, you need to really strong central defenders!

Coaches wanting to try this system should also perhaps consider an additional decision, which is whether to play with two centre backs and two "stay at home" wide backs or two centre backs and two attacking wing backs. I tend to think it was not coincidence that the two teams in the WC final in July both used the latter system. Of course, then you need two extraordinary wide players in addition to your two strong central players, as this system makes tremendous demands on them, and you also need extremely good communication to fill in the gaps as players go forward.

Date: Mon, 28 Dec 1998

From: Gary Rue

Ted Goeltz asked: Can the flat back be successfully played without a VERY fast defender?

Speed in the back is a very good thing to have with whatever system you are playing. Speed can make up for a lot of mistakes. However, I don't think that tremendous speed is needed, just decent speed. What I found was a player that understand depth of support was the most critical factor. When playing a flat back, you still should have a good deal of support depth between the ball and the goal. If a slower player's position can give him a head start in a run, then often the slower player can be effective.

Last season my original center back was speedy enough, but was too aggressive pushing forward. When I replaced him with a former sweeper that understood support depth, the breakaways stopped. I believe the system helped put players in good positions to defend, once they understood their roles.

Date: Tue, 29 Dec 1998

From: Connie T. Matthies

Hi, Ted:

My bu14 team played a modified 2-3, which really was almost functionally identical in operation to the 4-1 defensive setup used in most 4-4-2 alignments. In our experience, and in observation of others, the key players are the 3 central folks (the 2 center backs/sweepers and the DCM). The DCM needs to be very aggressive - and it helps to be big, as an aggressive "hulk" often forces play out of the middle, which ain't bad. Speed is not as important as aggression and work-rate for that job.

At least one of the 2 center backs needs to have superior speed, in my experience (otherwise, you really couldn't take good advantage of the flatness of the system) - but they also needed smarts and spirit. Because the two center backs and the DCM must work very closely together, it is important to watch out for personality conflicts and rivalries - because the system will fall apart in a hurry if they play "blame" games or refuse to give needed backup.

The wing Ds mostly needed solid defensive skills (good holding and good patience) - so, while speed is always nice, average or slightly above is probably all that is required if the defensive skills are there. So, if you have a solid defender who has only average speed, wing D is a decent place to put him.

And, don't forget the keeper - as he is an essential part of this defensive group. When using a system which compresses the field forward, the keeper turns into a quasi-sweeper. As a result, he must have solid field skills and excellent composure. He also needs to communicate well - and feel confident in handling

breakaway situations (which occur more often in this system) - so that he has the judgement to decide when to come out and when to stay home. Frankly, IMHO, one of the most important folks in this system is the keeper - so don't even consider using the system unless you have an above-average keeper.

Date: Mon, 28 Dec 1998
 From: Tom Defilippis

My rule of thumb in the flat four indetermining when to compress and when to drop off and collect , was if the player with the ball is under pressure and cannot serve a long ball because his head is down , we compress and bite the hell out of the ball with double team (especially on the sideline which Gary pointed out so well I might add) and somtimes triple team causing a series of errand passes leading to INTERCEPTION. On the other hand if the player can serve we drop off. As a rule. We rarely play offside trap because your gonna get scr\$#@ in the end.

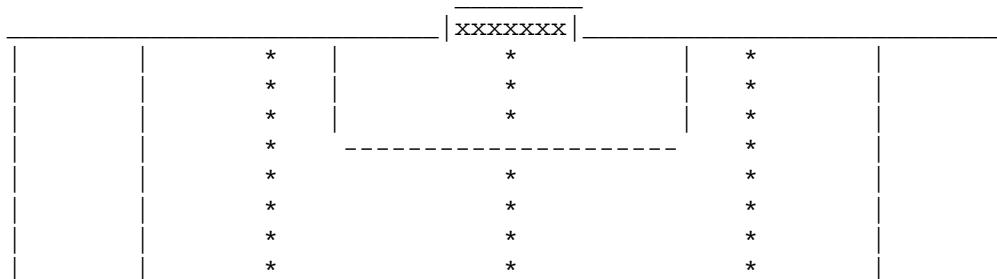
Flat Back - Zone 102

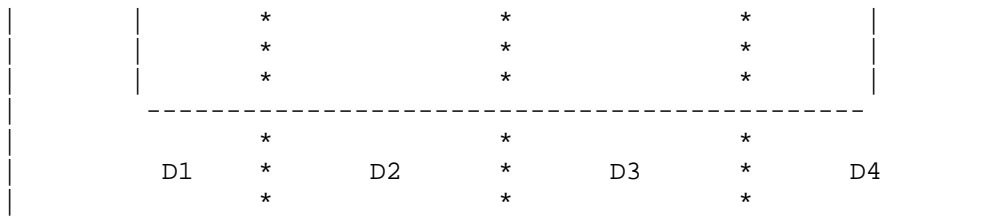
Date: Mon, 28 Dec 1998
 From: Gary Rue

One of the best ways to understanding zonal defending is to the divide the field into 4 vertical channels. For the purpose of discussion, let's assume a 60 yard wide field. Draw a vertical line down the center and 2 vertical lines 9 yards from each post. That will give two 13 yard central channels and a two 17 yard outside channels. The exact distance is not (or should not be) an issue as the players will not have lines drawn on the field during games. Perhaps for a 70 yard wide field, channels of 15 and 20 yards would be more appropriate.

The central channels are smaller because the defense need to be more condensed in the center and allow more room near the touchlines. In the case of 4 back defenders, each defender is responsible for a zone and be able to cover the adjacent zone. As you can see in the first example, the central defenders (D2, D3) have three zones each they may need to move into or cover, were as D1 and D4 only have two. <Be sure to set the following diagrams to a non-proportional and smaller font>

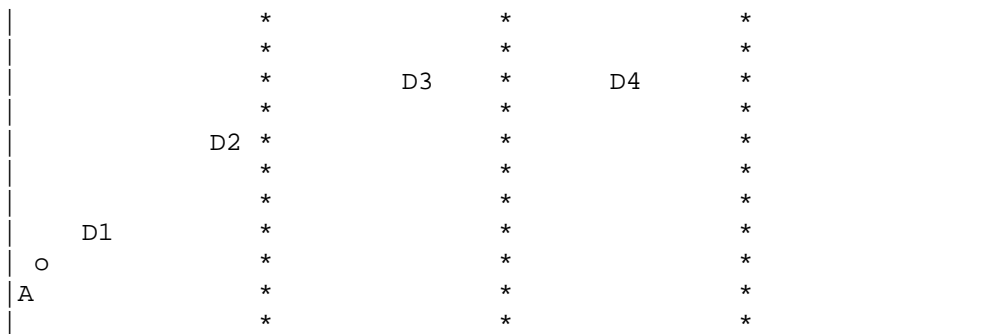
(Figure 1)





As shown in figure 2, when the ball is near the touchline, D1 closes down ball as D2 moves into the outer zone to provide support. D3 and D4 are slightly deeper (only a couple of yards) than D2, as they have moved over into their adjacent zones. D3's and D4's positioning is dictated by the positions and movements of the off ball attackers.

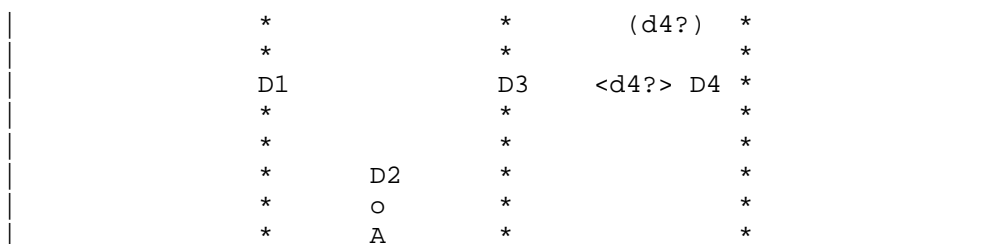
(Figure 2; ball near touch)

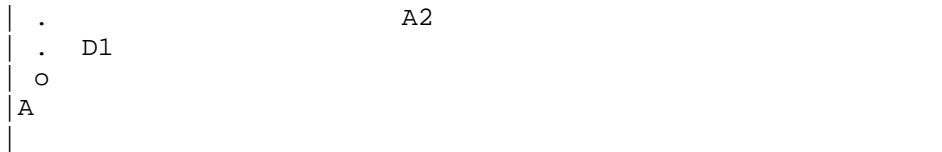


In figure 3, the ball is in a central zone. D1 and D3 have moved into or close to that same zone as D4 has condensed the defense by moving into his adjacent zone. D4 has some flexibility in his positioning and actually controls how flat the defense will be. D1 and D3 must support the ball and they can only alter their positions slightly mark nearby attackers. (d4) could play deeper and provide greater depth ONLY if there are no forward attackers. Or <d4> may actually slide over move and pick up D3's current mark, thus freeing D3 of that responsibility.

In this situation, the defense wants to allow the attack to pass square and wide and take away any through balls through the middle. If A beats D2 to the middle, D3 would step over and pick up A, as D1 and D4 would move over more to support D3. Hopefully, D2 would recover to pick up the pieces left by D3 and D4.

(Figure 3; ball in center)





D1 may also be able to recover on the pass and pick up A2, leaving D2 in the same defensive support position. D2 and D1 should be communicating.



Notice, the support defense is flatten out closer to the on ball defender as the ball gets closer to the goalline (this in reference to the first question).

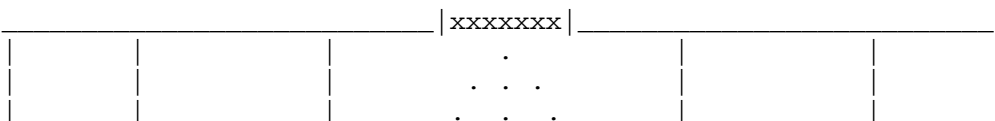
Flat Back - Off-Ball Positioning

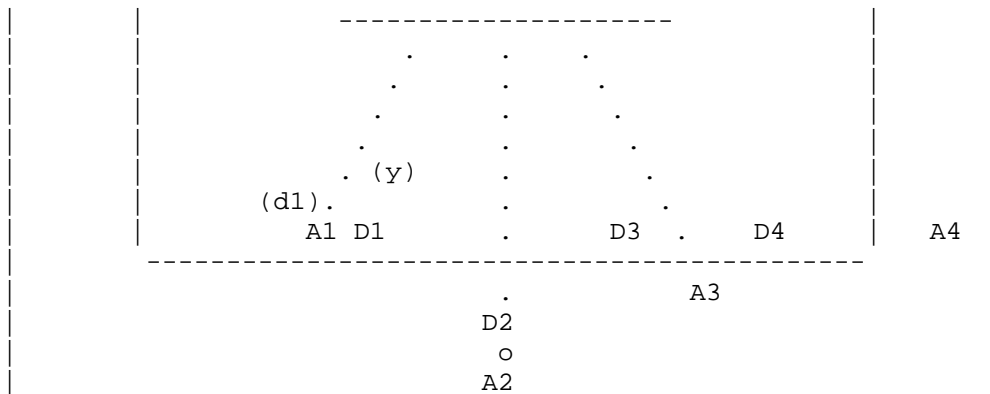
Date: Tue, 29 Dec 1998
 From: Gary Rue

The exact positioning of the off-ball defender based on his "mark" needs to be discussed further. Drawing triangles can help pinpoint this critical positioning. The three vertex points of the triangle are the ball, the center of the goal and the off-ball attacker. The off-ball defender when marking an attacker needs to be within this triangle; that is, he needs to be on the ball-side.

In the figure below, D1 is within the triangle of A1, A2 and CG (center of goal). If D1 was in position (d1), then D1 could not support the ball and would put A1 ball-side.

Also in the figure D3 is within the triangle of A2, A3 and CG, supporting D2 and marking A3. D4 is also within his triangle of A2, A4 and CG (not drawn).





Several points need to be made. Notice how D1, D3 and D4 have "flatten out" to compress the attack away from the goal. The depth of the position is based on the support depth needed for D2. Being this close to the goal, the backs should not be more than 5 yards away. D1 probably wants to be a shade more goalside of A1 than the ASCII ART allows, but if D1 were to be at position (y), then D1 would not be able to adequately support D2. This could pull D3 and D4 back and put them too far away from A3. If D3 stays at his current position, A1 may be able to take advantage of the space behind D3 and still be on-side. For instance, A2-->A3-->A1 (who has made a run behind D3).

Actually D1 probably wants to play some games with A1 by dropping back a yard waiting for A1 to step up even, then stepping forward a yard to put A1 clearly off-side.

If A4 is not there or anywhere close, D4 could move over into the A2, A3, CG triangle, taking over the A3 mark, allowing D3 to move into a double team on A2. D4 is the player with the best view of the situation, able to see the ball and the goal, plus all "dangerous" attackers. If A2 is under heavy pressure, A4 may want to dictate a "step up" of the D1, D3, and D4, which would put A1 (and A4) in an offside position forcing him to come back.

Now what if A3 makes a lateral run behind D2? What should D3 and the other supporting defenders do in this situation? There are a couple of options for what could be a desparate situation. D3 could let A3 go and let D1 pick up the second player in a 2v1 situation (ugh!). D3 could slide up into a double team on A2 restricting the passing options. Or D2 could leave A2 for D3 and drop back to mark A3 (probably wouldn't happen).

The recommended option would be for D3 to follow A3 (along the defensive line) to the other side of D2. This move may leave D2 without adequate support if A2 is able to get past D2. D4 will have to move over to support D2's left side, but this would leave great space to play A4 into. However, D3 may still be in a good position to pick up the support until D4 can slide over. Once D3 has completed the cross-over, D3 could take over A1's mark, leaving D1 to pick up A3.

Only in emergency situations do you want your defenders crossing behind one another in a zone, but this is one of them.

Flat Back - Zone in the Midfield

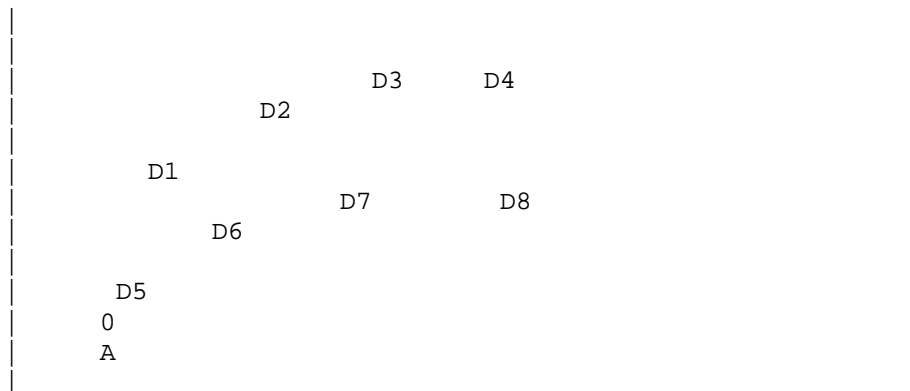
Date: Thu, 31 Dec 1998

From: Gary Rue

The midfield plays a key role in a team's defense. The back players must key on the midfield players in their positioning. If the midfield players break down, the back players must adjust their positions to plug the gaps.

The midfielders zonal setup is very similar to the backs. When the ball is in a lateral zone (figure 1), D5 pressures the ball as D6 provides close support. D7 and D8 are slightly back of D6 looking for off-ball marks. The backs are some yards back almost mirroring the midfielder's shape, but slightly closer to each other. Note how the back four are a shade more compressed laterally, with the midfielders providing most of the defensive width.

(Figure 1)

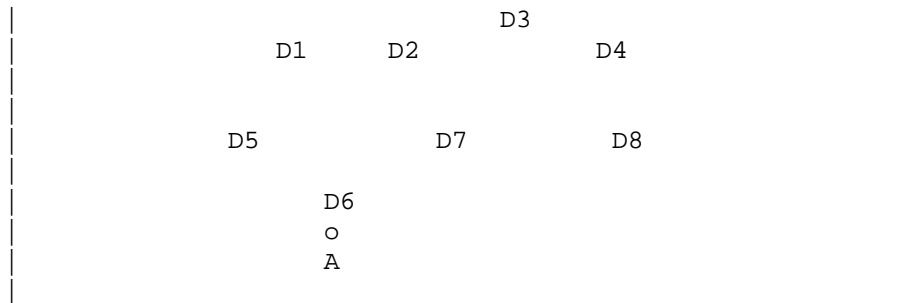


The only area to which A (in figure 1) can safely play the ball is square or down the left touch. D1 is in a good position to cut off any runs or passes along the touchline. Also, a ball over the top to the far corner should be easy for D4 to track it down. The best A can do is reverse the ball to the opposite touch and have his team try to find a gap in the defense as it rotates over. Although not shown, Forwards D9 and D10 should be tracking back and either applying pressure on A or filling in the middle to pressure the square pass, hopefully causing A to have to drop the ball back.

Now assume the ball is played square from the sideline to a central zone (see figure 2). The defensive shape quickly changes. The center midfielder D6 closes down the ball as D5 drops back and provide close support with D7. The backs (D1-4) are flat several yards behind the midfielder line of defense with the center

back furthestmost from the ball (D3) a few yards deeper. This gives D3 a good recovery angle and a couple yard head start on any through balls. D3 can easily flatten out if an attacker mores forward and tries to stretch out the defense. Again note how the backs are slightly more compressed laterally.

(Figure 2)



In figure 2, the defense wants to take away all through balls and force A to play wide. The space towards the left touch looks so inviting. A square ball wide, should be quickly closed down as the defensive shape would change back to figure 1. When the ball is on the side and pressured, the defense has the silent defender (the touchline) to aide in restricting the attack's options.

These are the base positions for a zone. The exact distance between players is difficult to state in that field position and player capabilities (on both sides of the ball) are major factors. Start with a 7-10 yard standard and adjust. Usually, the players figure out what kind of spacing is appropriate.

Four backs and four midfielders are being used for demonstrations. Other formations can be adapted along these same principles. It's up to the coach to decide what those adaptations are.

Flat Back - Implementing

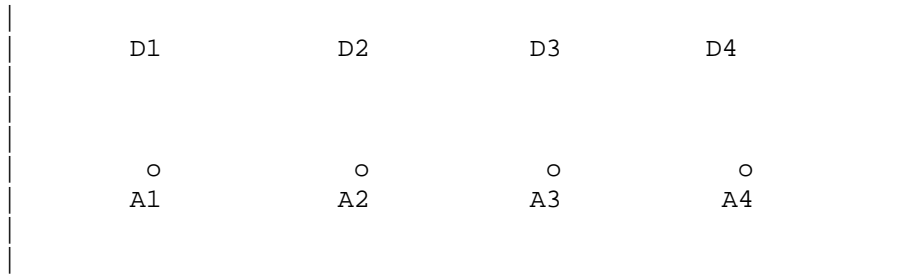
Date: Fri, 1 Jan 1999

From: Gary Rue

Now we have reached the point where we start to show how to implement a flat back zone system. The following walk throughs can done before warm-ups or after a heavy conditioning session. These are the first exercises a coach should do when explaining how a zone works.

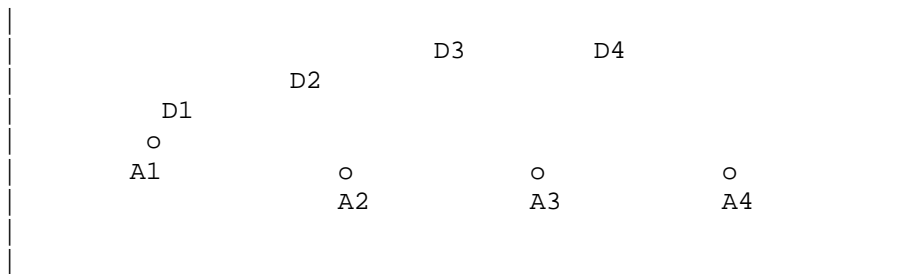
Four "attackers," each with a ball, are spread out evenly across a field. Four "defenders are 10 yards away and matched up directly across from an attacker (figure 0).

Figure 0



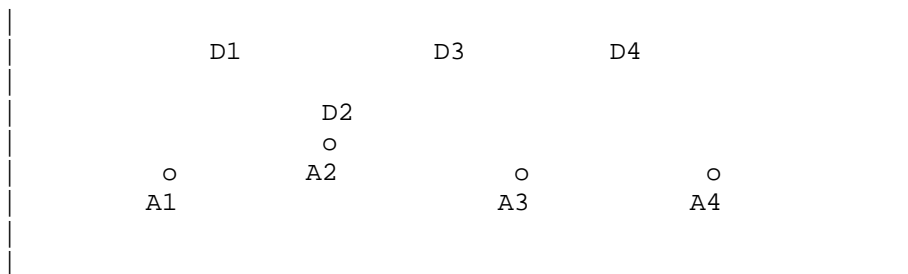
In the first example have one of the wing attackers (A1 in figure 1) dribble forward a couple of yards. The defender across from him (D1) immediately closes down forcing the attacker towards the touchline. The second defender (D2) moves over and up into support position. D3 and D4 slide over.

Figure 1



Now have A1 move back and A2 move forward. D2 immediately closes down as D1 drops back into support. D3 moves up to support D2 and D4 lines up with D1 and D3. (Figure 2)

Figure 2



The coach keeps switching the "active" attacker. Take it slow and tell the current attacker to move back and instruct the next one to move forward; the defense should adjust quickly. Initially the defenders must understand the "first" position. Adjusting to the movement of the ball will come later. Freeze the players and point out positioning problems.

After the defenders seem to have a grasp of the proper positioning, remove all balls but one and have the attackers move the ball between themselves, pausing the ball at least 5 seconds so the defenders and coach can assess their positions.

The coach should now explain how the defensive support roles are not only for the on ball defender, but to be able to "mark" and close down the second attacker. Start keying support positions based on the location of the stationary second attackers.

Variations of this setup could be to only have three attackers that are spread out and change their lateral positions a little. The defenders would have to decide (and communicate) which one closes down.

Also, 3 defenders versus 4 attackers can be used as well. Even with three defenders, it is important for the defenders to shift to the ball side. For instance, if the ball is wide, the defender furthest away from the ball may be positioned on the field's vertical center line.

In a future session add the defensive halfbacks between the stationary attackers and the defenders. The coach at this time may want to implement his base system. For instance, a 3-5-2 system could be set up to assume the shape of a 4-4-2 (and mirror the examples in prior posts) by dropping the off-ball wing half back as a fourth defender.

Later sessions could use this same setup to outline specific situations that have or may come up in a game. By "walking" the players through these setups, they should have some sense of how to respond on the field.

Date: Thu, 1 Jan 1999
From: Carl Laib

I use this system with one difference. If the outside attackers (A1 or A4) are pressing forward with the ball, the wing defenders (D1 or D4) turn the attacker to the inside as opposed to the touchline. In doing this we feel that we are channeling the ball into our strength where tenacity and patience usually deliver us the ball. If the attacker is successful in taking the ball to the outside we quickly respond with a double team on the touchline.

Date: Fri, 1 Jan 1999
From: Richard Brown
Hello Carl,

Teams sometimes push the attack into the middle, when you have good defensive inside mids behind the ball. If the attack is beyond your inside mids, it is dangerous to allow space in the middle of the field in my opinion at least.

Date: Fri, 1 Jan 1999
From: Gary Rue

Carl, I agree with Ritchie's comments below. Squeezing towards the middle without tremendous support behind the on ball defender is asking for trouble. However, with a packed defense, this tactic can be very effective.

I like to squeeze everything outside. The only time I force anything to the middle is in our attacking third. If this tactic works for you, then I'd say it's the right thing to do.

Date: Fri, 2 Jan 1999
From: Carl Laib

Yes, I agree that there is risk involved. The whole idea is based on quickness to the ball. If the outside attacker is quicker than our wing defender then we have to take the angle and use the touchline to delay the play and wait for help.

What makes this work is that the first defender has until the count of two to get to the ball. The second and third defender must be set shortly thereafter. The first defender must read the situation and make a decision. Most of the time we will choose to steer the ball toward the second defender.

It is our preference to win the ball away from the touchline where we have more options to mount our counter attack. Our focus isn't really on them scoring, however that is certainly one of the possible outcomes, we simply want the ball to go where we are strongest. We're not going to allow a good shot whether it comes from the side or directly in front of the goal. At least that's the way I drew it up.

Without quickness I wouldn't do it this way however without quickness I wouldn't be playing a flat four either.

Date: Sat, 2 Jan 1999
From: Chuck Coan

We have a lot of success forcing everything inside that is outside of shooting range (roughly 30-35 yds for my U-15s and the d3 womens team I coach. This virtually eliminates crosses and isolated defender / attacker situations on the end lines. If they do get to the corner we send a central defender to help contain and fill the center with one central defender, the weak side back and a recovering central mid player.

the weak side halfback covers weak side runs.

the ball side mid cuts off the back/diagonal pass.

the ball side forward cuts off the up the line outlet and tracks any runners out of their backfield.

the cf drops to an outlet pass when we win the ball and cut off central backpasses and runs.

the far side forward moves central and as far forward as she can get.

We force inside, double team, win ball, drop to center back, serve to checking cf, knock wide to running ball side winger, far side striker makes run to ball for a line pass or a 1-2 combo. cf sprints straight for near post pulling the defense and the weak side winger runs late and wide to receive the cross. shot - score!

The joy of it is that my kids get this right time after time and the variations are endless.

Forcing inside to where you are numbers up and stacked deep is a great idea in the mid and attacking thirds.

The 2 situations we do not force inside are

1. within shooting range of our goal.

2. in our half on a break away

otherwise we let them in to the middle and let our "defenders with a little streak of cruelty" (as one coach put it!) do their work.

Flat Back - Communication

Date: Sat, 2 Jan 1999

From: Gary Rue

Once the players have some idea of their shift, close down and recover responsibilities, it is time to add communication. Players first need to know who is going to pressure the ball. The entire zone structure is based upon who is on ball. If two players go to ball, dangerous space may be left undefended and other supporting defenders will not know which areas they need to defend.

The defender (aka D1) that closes down the ball announce his intentions by saying "D1's ball!" Support defender D2 could also instruct D1 to pressure ball by saying, "D1's ball!" The player's name is added to establish habit. "My ball" or "your ball" can be too ambiguous at times, though it is better than nothing at all. When the ball is moving quickly between players in a fast moving exercise, the players may even drop the name and announce themselves as the man on ball by just saying, "Ball!"

Note that the words used are not as important as their meaning. If a grunt is understandable in a crisis situation, then it is effective communication. On the other hand, to make words understandable, they must be used over and over in practice and in games.

Other communication is by the support player to assist the on ball defender in how much pressure to apply, what direction to force the attacker or even some good advice, such as "quick feet" or "no stab."

"Pressure!" is a term that could tell the on ball defender to apply heavy pressure and stop the dribbler from doing anything positive with the ball. This indicates that support is sufficient to allow the first defender to overcommit a little.

Other information may be to "close touch," which means take away the touchline dribble or pass. For example, a forward attacker has made a run to the touch and could cause problems if the ball is passed there. "Force wide," "force middle" or even "force to me" can be useful shepherding terms.

"Keep square" is used to allow the attacker to go left or right, but not allow anything behind the defender. This is most often used when the attacker is in a central zone and within shooting distance. The defense may have flatten out and the only support is the GK.

Amongst the support defenders, picking up and passing on marks may be the second most important communication behind. Defenders, be it backs or midfielder's should constantly be looking for marks in their "zone." When an attacker is moving into another defender's zone, the information needs to be passed on; e.g., D3 may say "D2, lock on 15" when #15 is making a run into D2's zone, or D3 may say, "D3 has 15" to announce his marking responsibility. Players trained in communication that don't announce their marks are probably not thinking about marking.

Of course, there is the defense compression talk of "Step!" or "Pull!" Teams don't have to be playing an offside trap to compress, but in the case of a flat back, the flat defenders better work as a unit and not individuals. It does no good for 2 or 3 to step up and one or more to stay behind.

If the team is running a trap, it is best if one player (center back) be designated to command the unit. A trap is normally run just before a pass forward.

On the converse compressing the attack is generally when the ball is not able to be passed forward. In this case, several players, preferably the off ball defender (or even GK) can give the order.

Other communication could be adjusting depth or width of the support defender by the off-ball defender(s). The support defenders could/should tell the on ball defender which direction to take the attacker.

All of this can be mandated in practice. Coaches generally have a tough time getting the players to talk. The biggest problem, though, may be the players that don't listen.

Players don't talk for several reasons. One is lack of confidence and understanding. If they don't know what is going on, then what are they going to talk about.

Players won't talk if they feel as if their communication is not being heard and acted upon. This is especially true between older and younger players. Too many times, players will say, "Why talk, he never listens." Communication is a two way street and the coach needs to be the traffic cop.

Flat Back – Using Channels

Date: Wed, 11 Aug 1999

From: Gary Rue

In a flat back, the shape of the back defenders is critical to its effectiveness (but this can also be said about all defenses). A little exercise that helps reinforce the shifting and support roles of the defenders are by using channels.

Setup: create a 44 (wide) x 30 (or longer) area. With flat cones mark off two wide channels of 12 yards and a central channel of 20. Put three attackers in each channel, along with 3 defenders. The attackers have no restrictions EXCEPT they cannot go into another attacker's channel. The defenders have no restrictions. The attackers score by dribbling over the back line, either via 1v1 or a through ball to another attacker behind the defense. Offside is strictly enforced.

Coaching points: when the ball is in a wide channel, the central defender should be close to the wide channel (especially if the ball is very wide) to offer support to the wide defender. The off ball defender should shift over into the central zone.

The "on-ball" defender's job is to slow down and close down the attacker on ball. He must not get beat 1v1 and should not allow the dribbler to get to the inside-- forcing dribblers to the inside without defensive depth behind the first line of defense is suicide.

The central defender is to support the wide defender in case he is broken down on the dribble. If the dribbler gets to the inside, he must close quickly to force him back wide (a double team with the wide defender is a possibility). <Though not a possibility in this exercise, some consideration must be given to an overlapping wide attacker--the center back may have to go out to stop this man.>

The off-ball defender's alignment is even with the central defender. His purpose is to mark any attacker not marked by the central defender in the center area, look to cutoff angled through balls played behind the central defender and mark or close down any wide attacker that comes into play on a cross or ball switch. If the central defender must move up into support of the other defender, the off-ball defender must move into the center and make the best of a potentially bad situation.

When the ball is in the central zone, both wide defenders should be in support of the central defender. They must stop any ball played between them and the central defender. They have marking responsibility of anyone that is in their area. It is very possible that all three defenders will be in the central zone. The support defenders need to take advantage of pushing forward, compressing the attack when the ball is in the center, not giving away their defensive depth in support of the central defender.

Variations: use the halfway as the halfway for positional recognition; change the width of the channels if too wide. Add a second central defender and an additional central attacker. Allow one of the four attackers to move between channels (allows for coaching of passing marking responsibility between defenders). Put in a "halfway line" 10 yards deep into the grid to allow the attack to move the ball without defensive pressure--the defenders are restricted from this area. Add a recovering defensive halfback if the attack is able to get forward 20 yards--look for the double team. Add attacking halfback for play backs and servers into the front attackers or for over the top balls.

Exercise problems: The attack may not be adequate enough to provide a good enough training environment. Even though many players tend to play vertical, put them in a vertical only environment and all of a sudden everything deteriorates. Good 1v1 attackers will really make this session work the best. The quicker the attack can switch the ball, the better idea the coach can get on the defensive shift.

Flat Back - Training Games

Date: Sun, 3 Jan 1999

From: Gary Rue

After the players have gained a general understanding via the walkthroughs of how a zone works, it is now time to put them into game like situations. Small sided restrictive games work best initially. Of course, the individual exercises described in previous posts are being could be used in the early part of a practice session as a build up to the small sided games.

In every exercise or game that has a team defense emphasis, "SHAPE" was the operative and oft-repeated word. We were looking for a shape that was directly related to the walkthroughs--a shape that put pressure on the ball, had immediate second defender support and good off-ball support, also known as balance.

A coach can stress defensive shape in most exercises and games. However, there were many common restrictions when working with the flat back. In many of the exercises, offside must be enforced to establish the compressing value of the flat back. The use small goals or no goals helped the defenders focus more on their positioning and stopping the attackers from penetrating. Fields wider than long are good at promoting shifting. Multiple small goals spread across the goalline also helped promote shifting. Games where the defense can go from even or numbers down to numbers up help to force the defense to shift to the ball. Vertical zones are quite useful as well.

The coach may need to freeze play and walk the player(s) into proper position, restarting at a point where the player(s) can physically adjust to the desired position during play.

Following are some examples of exercises that can be used to train the flat back:

3v3 on small 2 yard goals--stress flat back 3 shape, other-wise free play.

3v2 small goals--2 players defend one 3 yard goal and attack two 2 yard goals in a 20x15 grid. The 2 players must contain the 3 by playing a two-man zone trying to force the attack into a 2v2 situation. When the 3 man team is on defense, a double team should be initiated as often as possible.

3v2+3v2 with a big and small goal--Divide a 40x30 field into vertical halves with the six defending a 3 yard goal in the center and a large goal and GK at the other end. The four defenders have no restriction, but 3 attackers are restricted to a particular half of the field. Defensive shift could put the defenders up 3v4.

4v4 no goals--each team tries to dribble over the opponents goalline in a 30 (long) x 40 (wide) area. Here the back four shape is stressed. This is a good exercise to stop the dribbler from advancing. One team may be released from any zone duties so the coach can focus on the other team. Offside is enforced. Widen the field to increase defensive shift. (Add goals big or small or combo.)

5v5 with big goals and GKs. The coach designates one player from each team as the "halfback" who looks for double teams with one of the four backs. Offside is enforced.

3(or 4)-for-all--The defenders are inside the D on the 18. Seven attackers are up field. At the time GK punts the ball up field, the center back(s) run around the goal as the wing backs run out to and step on the touchline. They return to find their defensive shape and stop the 7v3(4) attack. If needed, add 2 defensive midfielders that immediately go out to defend the punt. Since our system had one of our wing halfbacks drop back to support our flat three backs, the defensive midfielders had to run out and touch a spot on the touch need the halfway, then recover.

8v8/9v9/10v10 wide field, multiple small goals--Set up a field that is extremely wide, but short (e.g., 50x80) with three 3 yard goals spread across each goalline. Put each team in a formation (one team should be in a formation that mirrors their system). Keep number of backs and midfielders as close as possible. In 9v9, we used a 3-5-1, 3-4-2, 4-5 and 4-3-2. This is a great exercise to watch for defensive recovery on the off-ball side and to promote shifting to the ball.

8v8 Through Ball--40x40+ 2 10 yard endzones, players score by hitting through balls to teammates inside their attacking endzone. The teammates cannot enter the area until the ball is played and the defender cannot enter at all. The defense tries to stop the pass from getting through. Once the players figure out to play over the top, then the defensive midfield must try to stop the service. To force ground through balls, the coach could mandate the ball touch the ground before crossing into the end zone.

4v4 transition--4v4 (with teams of 4 at each end) on a 40x40 field when ball crosses goalline (anyway), the defending team is replaced by new attacking team that has control of a new ball or is distributed to by the GK. The key is that the new attacking team moves quickly into the attack. The remaining team on the field must quickly recover. Play continues between two goals with GKs until the ball goes over one of the goallines. Watch for recovery shape.

NSCAA 1999 -- Zonal Defending

Date: Wed, 31 Mar 1999

From: Gary Rue

Zonal Defending
NSCAA 1999 Convention
Jeff Tipping
January 21, 1999

Tipping discussed pros and cons of zone (most of which were in the convention program, which replicated a recent article in Soccer Journal). He added that other team can force your team's match-ups.

Warm-up: half of the players are in a circle with a ball; players inside check to a ball and says to which part of the body the player should toss and it is returned with a one-touch; this progresses to the player receiving and playing back with the foot volley.

Now in pairs, one player receives and plays to his teammate who one-touch returns. Teammate must communicate his location. Improving communication is an important reason for this warm-up.

Center back training
2v1 + 1v2

Setup: 60x40, halfway line, 2 small goals at each end; 1v2 in each half as 3v3 overall; when ball is played to the attacker in one half the first defender closes down and the second defender must decide support depth. If the attacker is under heavy pressure, the second defender can play flatter.

The defenders must learn two comments:

- 1) "I've got ball!"
- 2) "Switch!"

Remove small goals and use three small goals positioned behind the two small goals (longer area). Add defensive player for each team, now 3v1 + 1v3. The zone now starts to take shape. Use both backs and halfbacks as defenders, as the halfbacks need the same zone training as the backs.

Add second attackers for a 2v3 look in each half. The defenders constantly need to adjust their position vertically and horizontally, trying to maintain the same constant spacing (10-15 yards).

The defenders must slide to the ball side when the ball moves wide; and then compact wall in the center when the ball is central.

The Italians move their off-ball wing back (4 man back) forward to help set their off-side trap--fewer players to coordinate the "step up." As the ball moves away from the defended goalline, the defenders (and GK) go forward; and they must move backward as the ball moves toward goal. Key defensive communication could be "Up!" or "Back!"

Add neutral 2 wing halfbacks to work on angled cross-field balls. The coach must decide how to play the crossed ball. If the off ball back plays on the ball side of the wide forward player, then he will be in better position to defend the angled run into the middle by this attacker.

However, if the attacking team is able to cause the defense problems with the crossed ball, by playing the wing back on the outside shoulder of the wing attacker, the defender should be able to track down this cross corner ball. In this position, the defender can easily put the wide attacker offside as he is in position to see both attacker and ball. <ed. this was an interesting concept, but perhaps one that is for the very high level player.>

In a 5 v 6 set up (no goals), three attacking midfielders attempt to play the ball through a 3 man defensive midfield "screen" to two attacking forwards playing against three flat defensive backs. When the ball gets past a midfielder, the midfielder spins and doubles teams the forward with one of the backs.

Play a game with 3-3-1 shape vs a 3-3-1 shape; change one team to a 2-3-2 to teach backs how to play as center backs in 4-x-x.

Center forwards are very important to a defense, as they are to make the other team's play predictable, by taking away the center or the drop ball and forcing play wide and into the zone's strength.

Set a vertical line on the field and have the defense keep the attack in front of that line or in the opponents half of the field.

Flat Back - Pros and Cons

Date: Mon, 2 Mar 1998

From: Richard Brown

Pros

Less open space on the wings, then a stopper/sweeper.

If left back gets beat by wing, LCB is there to pick up the wing. When LB recovers he can double team the wing if the wing still has the ball. If LB has his man LCB can double team.

Wing back overlaps or decides to dribble up himself, only slight over shift protects that space just in case.

Team can play closer using the offside rule.

Cons

Wing player can cross the ball behind the defenders (on ground or flighted).
Effective and very dangerous cross.

Wing can cut inside his wing back and pass into the space between his wing back and his sides center back. To a striker making a run from that centerbacks blind side. You can kill flatback with that pass.

On a counter numbers up or down, on a wing attack as the two center backs fall back, the wing cut back passes on ground to the trailer or trailers moving toward goal in the middle of the field. They have time to shoot because they are falling back or fall too far back. Giving the trailer time and space to shoot.

Coming down the field at around the beginning of the attacking half, there are holes to blind side through from a player attacking the middle. Nice touch to a fast player.

You can short pass through it if play that way. Similar to the pass the wing makes when he gets inside the wb-as I mentioned above. Square horizontal pass to a team mate past one of the CB, receiver immediately one touch short vertical pass. Original passer makes little diagonal run on receivers blind side.

Just outside the area.

Attacking from the middle you can post up a striker on a CB, and redirect the ball to the space between him and the other CB or wing back. To a player running through, you can square one touch, or the better pass a reverse through pass. Just redirect so that it goes behind you with spin to slow it down. As the striker passes he turns ball side screening his CB, or away dragging his CB or holding his attention delaying his pursuit.

Mistakes also happen with any defense, WB runs opponent into CB. CB falls down or WB lets attacker go a little too early. Another attacker is getting a little too much attention from the other CB. OHOH.

Flatback is a good defense, I like playing against it.

Flat Back Four Functional Training

Date: Tue, 11 Nov 97

From: David Graham

>What about a flat back four defense.

Well, I'm glad you picked that one, because I can't do better than refer you to Bruce Brownlee's brief article called "Teaching the flat back four", which you can find through Dane Luhrsen's excellent Wheaton Wings web site at the following URL: <http://ridesafeinc.com/wings/flatbackfour.htm> .

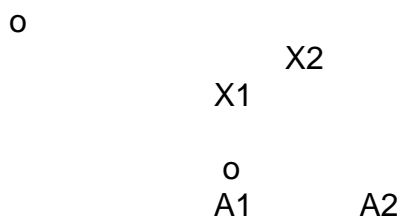
Bruce has also produced a very good MSWord document on this subject which is well worth asking him for, IMO.

When working on functional training for 4 flat backs, I think you have to be especially conscious of the following:

- knowing when to mark tight, when to drop off, when to tuck in;
- teaching the four backs to 'slide over' when the ball is on one wing (i.e. give up the space on the weak side);
- avoiding getting caught square, especially in the middle (i.e. making sure your central defenders understand how to support each other);
- ensuring that central defenders can seal off the space behind the wing fullbacks when the ball is on the wing.

Bruce suggests moving from a 2v2 warm-up drill to 4v4 functional work and then to 6v4 and 6v6. Depending on how comfortable your players already are with this system, you may prefer to begin your functional work with slightly reduced numbers, e.g. 2A v 3D, and use one side only of the pitch, before introducing the fourth back and one or more additional attackers.

Flat Back Four



No defense works all the time, be the opposition top level or mediocre. The scenario that you lay out here can be countered by X2. X1 can play to delay and allow A1 to pass square to A2. That is not a problem. The only thing the defenders need to worry about is penetration. X2 should be playing off 5-7 yds (depending on where the ball is on the field) maybe a little more if in the other team's half. When the square pass is made, X2's covering run should be: 1st into the path of a vertical pass and 2nd toward pressuring A2. This is a curved run that really is more square than curved. If X2 comes directly at A2 from his/her support position, then the vertical pass is always there, although X1's recovery run is in the direction of the pass so it becomes a foot race. However if X2 makes the run to pressure the ball as I have described, with X1 making an angled recovery run to support X2, it is difficult to execute the type of pass you

described. Even a 1-touch pass can be thwarted if the defenders are quick, although this is the most difficult attacking style (1-touch) to defend. We train our players to defend in this manner - to isolate the ball and make play predictable. Square passes will rarely hurt a team, whereas penetrating passes can be killers. Training the run of a second defender becoming first defender to *not* be straight, but toward the dangerous passing lane first then toward the ball can make a world of difference. My players are becoming able to turn a 3v2 situation into a 2v2 by applying this principle and isolating the players who can play the ball. We still have a long way to go, but they are beginning to see that when they make the direct run at the new 1st attacker, they don't limit options, whereas changing their runs as described above can make a world of difference and make the play more predictable. This is why I spend a lot of time on defense. There are a number of very subtle things that can make a difference, that have been passed over by their other coaches over the years.

Flat Back Four Training

Date: Fri, 3 Jul 1998

From: Gary Rue

I recently read a book on how to train the flat back four, "Coaching the 4-4-2," by Floriano Marziali and Vincenzo Mora, published by Reedswain Inc. Mostly based on the book, I will try to give a quick overview of specific exercises for backs and midfielders. To break up this note, I will discuss the exercises with the backs in this post and the midfielders (and backs) in the second post. These following exercises also should be practiced by the midfielders as their basic movement will be the same as the backs.

Divide the field into 4 vertical zones, A-B-C-D respectively. Zones B and C are narrower (about 16 yards wide) since they are the central zones. Number the backs, starting with 1 as the left wing back, through 4, the right wing back. I recommend drawing the following out or use some checkers or chess pieces.

Start with the defenders in their zones, each facing an attacker in their zone, about 10 yards up field. The ball is to move from each stationary attacker and stop as the defense shifts.

When the ball is in the lateral zone A (close to zone B), 1 has closed down ball, backs 2 and 3 are in B, with 4 being in C, near zone D. Back 2 is good 2nd defender support depth (about 5 yards), with 3 and 4 on a horizontal line, about 6 to 7 yards deeper than 1. Note, there are two horizontal lines of covering, one where back 2 is and the other where backs 3 and 4 are, 1 or 2 yards deeper.

When the ball is in the central zone B, back 2 closes down the ball, 1 retreats to about 5 yards deep, near or on the vertical line between A and B. 1 supports 2

and maintains contact with his mark in his zone. Back 3 supports 2 at about 5 yards, near or on the vertical line between B and C. Back 4 has moved over into zone C, on the same 5 yard deep horizontal line of backs 1 and 3. The ball continues to zone C and D with the defensive rotation the mirror image of the prior two.

Once the defenders understand their roles, the setup is made a little more dynamic with the ball being passed between any of the attackers without adhering to a sequence. There is still no vertical movement by the attackers, though they may move laterally a little within their respective zones.

To continue with the basic zone play of a 4-4-2 formation, the 4 midfielders are now added with the static attackers in front of them. The same rules of movement detailed for the 4 backs in the prior post, apply to the 4 midfielders. When the ball is in the lateral zone, the wing midfielder closes down the ball with the near side center midfielder in support and the other two midfielders a shade deeper and even across. The back 4 mirror this setup, maintaining the same distance from their companion midfielder, 10-15 yards apart.

The midfielders' shape is the same as described for the backs when the ball is in one central zone, with the center midfielder closes the ball and the other backs at a supporting distance. The backs, however, go flat, except for the back in the opposite central zone as the ball, which drops about 2-3 yards deeper. The backs compact towards the center as before.

An overlap in a lateral zone is then addressed, starting with the ball in front of the wing midfielder with a player overlapping the ball. The back four shift slightly more toward the side and slightly back, still maintaining their shape. This is extended to stopping the ball in a lateral zone and marking a forward player in the same zone.

Exercises are then done to practice the interchange of marking a forward attacker between the two central backs, when the ball is in a central zone. To do this, the forward moves laterally from one central zone to the other, as one center back drops back from a goal side/ball side marking position into support of the other center back who moves forward on to a goal side/ball side marking position.

This exercise is later extended by the attacker moving into the lateral zone. The wing back picks up the attacker and marks in advance of the attacker; i.e., the wing back is either to the side or slightly in front of the attacker.

When the ball is in a lateral zone, the zone definitions are changed to match the location of the 4 players with respect to forward players moving laterally. That is the four zones are defined evenly between the touchline of the ball zone and the far post, leaving the area wide of the far post as a dead space. Attackers in this

dead space need to be watched, but not marked by the off ball wing back. The defenders practice passing marking responsibilities in this setup. Another forward attacker is added to setup.

Flat Back Three

Date: Fri, 18 Dec 1998

From: Gary Rue

This past fall, I used a flat back defensive system for the first time at the high school, having used a sweeper system in years past. We played a 3-5-2. The system worked better than I imagined as we allowed only 12 goals in 18 games with 9 shutouts. In the coming days, I hope to provide some insight, thoughts and exercises on how I trained the team to play the flat back defense.

For background, this was a totally new system to all players (and coaches). The system not only had to be trained from ground zero, but the players had to be sold on the concept, so they could play with confidence. In my opinion, the key to our success was finding the right three backs as quickly as we did.

In our first scrimmage, we played a team that by season end scored over 138 goals in 23 games and was ranked 21st in the nation by USA Today. They dominated play, but thanks to an all-world day by our all-state goalkeeper and some poor shooting on their part, we only lost 1-0. They riddled our backs with breakaways--the on ball speed and skill of one of their South African exchange students was phenomenal (<http://www.bardstown.com/~bhsoccer/>).

It was a great lesson. We saw enough good things from the flat back system that we were encouraged. The scrimmage allowed me to identify and make some personnel changes. The center back, who was not blessed with great speed was constantly being caught too flat. To rectify the problem, I moved my former sweeper back from a central midfield position and the current center back to the wing. It only took a game or so to get the ex-sweeper to play a little flatter and not as deep. The threesome clicked the first regular season game and the team never looked back. I put this in the category of LUCK as I've had seasons where it has taken many games to found the right combination of system and players.

I will probably break down the future posts into three general areas of training:

- * individual defending techniques
- * zonal concepts
- * implementation of the system

Zonal Defending Training Session

Date: Sat, 5 Sep 1998

From: Gary Rue

Training Goal: Zonal Defending, 2nd defender support role

Age and prerequisite training: U14 and above; solid foundation is 1v1 defending, pressuring and closing down ball, second defender support, off-ball marking, doubling teaming, zone defending concepts.

Warm-up:

* 2 man pass and move

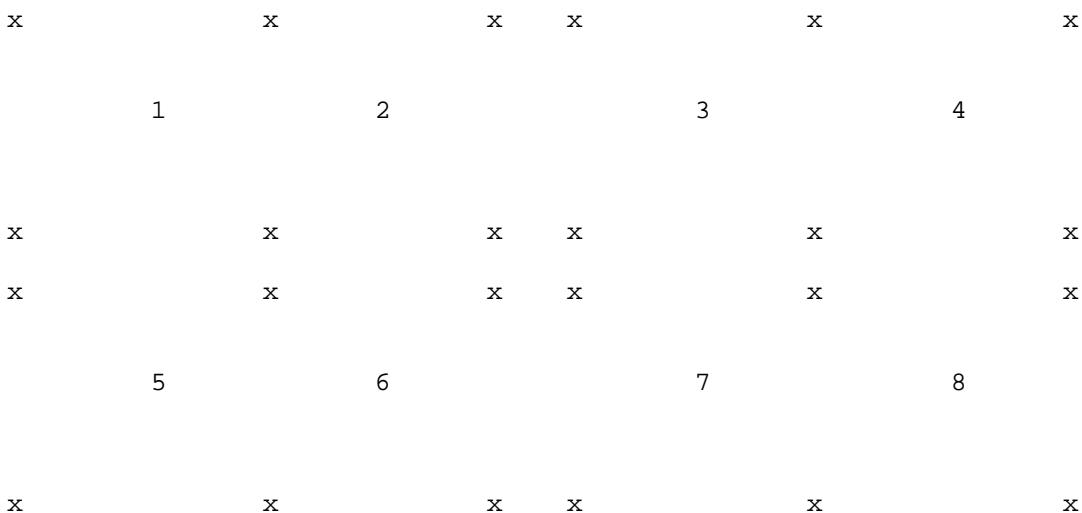
* 1v1 in open field (attacker tries to get behind defender)

* double team knockout; groups of 5-7 players with ball dribbling in grid and 2 players steal ball via a double team until all dribblers "knocked out"

Technical/Tactical Session:

The grids and exercises were set up to accommodate an 16 man squad. The coach should use this session to place emphasis on first and second defender concepts.

Setup: 4 10x15 grids, joined in pairs along a 15 yard side. 5 yards between each set of pairs (total length of penalty area). A second set of grids (#5-8) are next to the first set, separated by 5 yards. The 5 yard separators are there to minimize interference by the neighboring groups and to allow the coach to walk between the groups.



* 1v1; players work in pairs per each grid. Coaching points--close down, shepherding; footwork

* 2v2; players in grids 1 & 2 combine as do the players in grids 3 & 4, 5 & 6, 7 & 8. By removing the separating line, they now play in 15 x 20 grids; They try to score by dribbling across their opponents goal line. Coaching point--initial and immediate close down; recover into 2nd defender support role; double team opportunities; communication.

* 2v2 zone; ask defenders to stay in same formation and to switch players when they overlap. There is not much change in the way they were working before, other than establishing the fact that they are playing a zone. Coaching points--1st defender restricting dribbler's options; second defender communication and support; double team opportunities.

* 3v2 zone; The players in grid 7&8 are moved to the other 3 grids; a pair of 2 yard goals are set up on one goal line and a 3 yard goal is set up on the other within each grid. The 3 player team attack the one goal as the two player team attack the two goals. Coaching points--2 defenders must contain and try to generate a 2v2 or 1v2 situation by taking away options to supporting attackers. The 3 defenders are to look for double team situations while maintaining their shape.

Match Conditioned Session:

The following games use a back 3, but this can be useful as prep work for a back 4 as the concepts do not change and the field width is more conducive to a 3 man back. First defender pressure, second defender support and third defender adaptability are primary focuses. The roles of the midfielders can start to be addressed at this point.

*5v5; remove all cones separating the grids and play in the 40x45 grid with 3 three yard goals on each goal line (45 yard width). Set the team shapes as a 3-2 formation. Substitute the remaining players after a couple of minutes of play. Coaching points--when ball is wide back 3 should shift to ball side. The center defender should be between the outside and center goal and the opposite defender should be in front of the center goal. The two "midfielders" should shift to ball side, looking to drop back in deep support if needed. Their initial objective when the ball is lost to the other team is to "get behind the ball;" that is, between ball and goal line.

10v5 on goal with GK; extend the 40 yard length to 60 yards and put three goals on the counter line. The 5 defenders maintain the 3 (backs) -2 (center mids) shape. The ball starts with a GK punt to the attack. The 5 defenders start from about the center of the 18 yard line. While the punt is in the air, the midfielders have to run out to the touchline before they can go to ball. The wing backs must run to the corners and the center back must run around the goal. Alternate the defenders after 3 GK punts. Call offside. Coaching point--watch for defensive shape as the defenders setup after their runs. It is important that they shift

quickly to ball side and that they stop the through balls. The play of the two defensive midfielders and the supporting positions of the back players in relation to the midfielders should be a prime focus of the coach. The offside back needs to pay particular attention to the players that are moving in behind him, in case the ball swings around to his side.

Match Related Session:

7v7 with two GKs. Extend the width to 55 yards and set the opposite goals about 75 yards apart. Set up each team in some desired shape, such as 3-2-2 or 3-3-1 or 3-4 or 4-3 or 4-2-1, depending on what you are trying to accomplish or your preferred shape in the back.

Once the session reaches the match conditioned stage of the training, it very important that the coach establish what the defensive roles of his players should be, particularly those of his halfbacks.

NSCAA 1999 -- Zonal Defending

Date: Fri, 16 Apr 1999

From: Gary Rue

Zonal Defending

Tony DiCicco, Head Women's Coach, U.S. National Team

NSCAA National Convention 1999

<Convention Program Notes>

Warm-up: Technical warm-up - groups of 4 or 5

1. Passing and follow, one-touch as often as possible
2. Stretch
3. Wall passing receive and spin turn. Two-touch and pass to someone else.
4. Two-touch juggling
5. Stretch
6. Double pass and spin turn--A to B, B passes back to A (double pass) and spins for next pass from A.
7. Head juggling

Exercise #1: Training for back third defending

Grid size: 60x35 - two-zone game 3v.3+1

Coaching Points:

1. Individual defending
2. Slide, but keep spacing
3. Communicate

4. Close down as the ball is moving.
5. Use of offside law

Exercise #2: Training for middle third defending
Grid size: 30x60 - 5v5 with players on the end line

Coaching Points:

1. Condense horizontally
2. Force centrally, good individual defending
3. Track the penetrative run
4. Communicate, pass on players to next defender
5. Close down while ball is moving

Exercise #3: Coach the game
Utilizing whatever large space is available

Create game and coach players within the game.

Using a Zone Defense with the "M" or "W" Alignment

Date: Thu, 22 Apr 1999

Subject: Re: 2-3-2-3

From: Connie Matthies

Hi, Shel:

In the 2-3 (as well as the 3-2), the back 5 need to work as a unit. Frankly, the 2 sweepers in the 2-3 operate in virtually the same manner as CBs in a flat 4.

Usually, the nearside sweeper acts more like a true sweeper (i.e., straight cover person), while the farside sweep acts more like a man-marker for anybody making the near-post run. Here is a write-up which I did on this system awhile ago, which may help to clarify things a bit in terms of the operational stuff.

Feel free to call them CBs if this suits you, with the outside players being wing backs and the central player in the 2nd line being a DCM. I liked the sweeper terminology, because it made them realize two important things: they needed to stay home and they needed to provide flexible marking and pick up the danger man on a scoring run if the other Ds got beaten.

Hope this answers your questions. Give me a holler if it doesn't.

Connie

USING A ZONE DEFENSE WITH THE "M" OR "W" ALIGNMENT

Many youth teams use a defensive alignment with 3 front defenders and a sweeper, and will play the 3 defenders using a man-to-man assignment (i.e., follow your player around the field and keep him marked), with the sweeper playing in front of the goal and going to assist other defenders as attackers get closer to the goal.

Disadvantages of man-to-man, with sweeper:

Playing with a sweeper has one critical disadvantage, in that your team rarely will be able to take full advantage of the benefits of the offside rule because the sweeper's position allows significant penetration into your half. Playing man-to-man defense while using a sweeper also can have another critical disadvantage where the attackers are small/quick and are attacking against defenders who are big/fast, because the sweeper's position invites attackers to come close to the goal, where the superior speed of the defenders is less valuable and the superior quickness of the small attackers allows them to cut around the bigger defenders.

When to Use a Zone Defense:

If your team is lucky enough to have a size/speed advantage over its opponents, then a good defensive lineup to try is a zone defense used by the British and Germans, which is called the "M" or the "W" because of the shape of the defense. This system keeps the attackers far upfield, which allows a team to take maximum advantage of its size/speed advantage, because the opponent is forced to advance the ball either by dribbling or by use of long balls into space, where a speedy defender should be able to pick up the cross before the attacker can arrive.

What Does This Alignment Look Like:

This system is very similar to the system known as the "flat back 4", except that it allows two defenders to go to the attacker with the ball (thereby placing greater pressure on the attacker by use of the second defender concept developed by the Germans, and allowing automatic immediate backup if the attacker gets by the 1st defender). Under this system, the team is arranged as follows:

General Line-up On the Field

G

RSW

LSW

RD	CD/CM	LD
	RM	LM
RF	CF	LF

As you can see from the shape of the five defenders (RD, RSW, CD/CM, LSW, LD), this looks like an M or a W, which is how the alignment got its name.

How Does This Alignment Work:

Under the system, when an attack is coming in on the left side, the LD and LSW go to the attacker (so that he is always double-teamed). The first one there has the job of simply getting in the way of the attacker and slowing him down until help arrives and the kill can be made. While the attack is coming in, the other defenders start moving into their zone coverage. The RSW moves over to look out for attackers going to the near post, the CD/CM looks out for attacks down the Center, and the RD looks for attackers going for the far post.

The key for the defenders to remember is that they **MUST** drop back slowly, so that they stay behind or even with the ball, in order to take maximum advantage of offsides and to force the attackers to play into big open space in front of the goal, where speed of the defenders is likely to cut off the attack or force a sloppy shot. Off-ball defenders must mark up on attackers who are in their zones, in order to look to intercept any crosses which will come to their players. Off-ball players also must be ready to quickly switch over to pounce on new attackers in the event that the attackers manage to switch the attack to the opposite side of the field. This means that, if the ball is switched to the other side, the LSW and LD must immediately and quickly move over to guard the near post and back post off-ball players, while the RSW and RD go to the ball. The CD/CM needs to cover the near post in such situations until the RSW can come into position, and the RM also should step in to help to cover the central area or near post area (communicating with the CD/CM) if the ball has switched sides - in order to insure that all zones are covered.

Once possession of the ball has been regained, and the ball is moving back the other way, **ALL DEFENDERS** must quickly move up to the midfield line in order to leave as many attackers as possible offsides. It is **CRITICAL** that the defenders all move up in a coordinated manner, to avoid the dangerous situation where one lazy defender is hanging back; a long ball comes in; and the attackers are numbers-up behind the defense.

At the midfield line, the alignment looks like this:

The zonal concept is very easy for players at U12 and above to learn (even though it is often not taught until they reach HS or college levels). If the proper players are placed in the positions as described (so that there is exceptional speed in the middle and good speed at the wings), they really only need to remember five basic rules:

1. Nearest Wing and Sweep always go to the ball.
2. The job of the first defender is to slow down the forward attack, and then wait for his support.
3. The off-ball Sweep guards attackers going for the near post; the off-ball wing guards attackers going for the far post; and the CD guards runs against the center area.
4. Defenders must move back slowly (stay even with the ball or slightly behind it) to take max advantage of offsides.
5. Defenders must move up VERY QUICKLY AND TOGETHER when the ball is turned and is going the other way.

Relationship between Midfielders & Backs in Flat Back 4

Date: Thu, 12 Aug 1999
From: Michael F. McNeish

I'm interested in hearing comment on the relationship between the midfielders and backs in a flat back 4. I expect to play a 4-4-2 this year w/my U19 girls comp/travel team. My practices have been directed primarily at 1st, 2nd, and subsequent defender coverage and shape in a zone. The girls are beginning to get the idea of zone and defensive shape.

However, I see problems developing between midfielders and backs, particularly in the outside channels. For example, in a situation where the left wing-mid is marking the ball in her channel and the rest of the midfield has adjusted zonally, how should the backs be adjusting to the ball? In this case, I have been telling the left back to move up toward the ball so that she (a) can provide defensive support to the left wing-mid but (b) also continue to mark any attacker in her "channel". The remaining backs adjust towards the ball marking attackers in their areas while at the same time keeping defensive shape and depth.

A problem frequently develops when the left wing-mid is beaten at the touchline on the dribble: Should the attacker be picked up by the center mid or the left back? If the CM picks up the attacker, it will frequently mean that she will have to cross behind the left wing-mid, a no-no in zone coverage unless the LWM and

CM are smart enough to communicate the switch and the LWM actually moves (very quickly) into the CM's zone. On the other hand, if the left back moves up to pick up the attacker when the LWM is beaten, she may be leaving an attacker unmarked in space behind her. The remaining backs could adjust further to the left, particularly the central defender on that side, but that would seem to really open up space on the far side for a quick switching pass to a midfielder or defender making an off-ball run out of the back.

It would seem safer to me to

- (a) have the left back pick up the attacker;
- (b) have the remaining backs slide further to the left with the central defender picking up anyone behind the left back;
- (c) make sure the right back does not slide quite as far as the rest so she can look for runs into the acreage on the right side of the field;
- (d) make sure one of the forwards is tracking off ball runs out of the back by defenders (the RWM could also assist here).

We seem to have fewer problems adjusting by the center-mids and central defenders in the middle channels.

Date: Thu, 12 Aug 1999

From: Connie T. Matthies

In your situation, the LD should pick up the runner, and the LM should be making a hard sprint to back her up.

In the meantime, the LCD should be moving over to pick up the mark of the LD - while the DCM should be dropping back to take the slot vacated by the LCD.

However, these rules really should not be cast into concrete. There are times when it makes sense for the DCM to pick up the off-ball attacker (esp. if that attacker is coming central and/or setting up 1-2s to bypass the outside D - and the LM is badly beaten). In this situation, the DCM (who is a major field boss of your defense) should be looking around to decide where to tell the LM to go. All depends on who is in the middle. If there already are 3 attackers in the middle (so the RD, RCD and LCD already have marks), your DCM needs to be yelling like mad for your beaten LM to get her rear central ASAP (and/or for the RM to get in to cover) - as you have an overload in the making. Of course, if the LM is about as close to the relay attacker as the DCM (i.e., has some reasonable prayer of getting to her in a timely fashion), then it is probably better for the DCM to stay central and tell the LM to pick up the relay.

Normally, staying central is the better option for the DCM - as you know that there is a reasonable chance that the on-ball attacker will turn in towards goal fairly quickly (where the DCM would pick her up anyway) and/or the on-ball attacker will head towards the corner for a cross while the relay attacker will head

towards the box to become a target (in which case, the DCM or somebody better be grabbing her or there is going to be an overload in the key central area).

Best way is to think of the DCM as a stopper - who picks up the most dangerous central runner and serves as backup for the two CDs (who function much like sweepers). While there are times when a stopper may be forced to go to the outside, and for a wing mid (or even AM) to drop in to cover, this requires really good communication to work. Until your players are used to the formation, your best bet is to have the DCM stay central, in all likelihood.

Date: Thu, 12 Aug 1999

From: Connie T. Matthies

In a 3-2 system at the back, the DMs function almost like stopper/sweepers in front of the line.

The farside DM usually picks up the ACM (unless there is a more dangerous farside runner coming through who is not being tracked by the farside WM). The nearside DM usually will come to the ball, unless the WM is tracking back with the ball carrier and already applying pressure and/or he must stick with the AM because the farside DM has gone to the dangerous farside runner.

If the nearside DM goes wide to pressure the runner, the nearside WM normally will come back central (i.e., they will switch places temporarily). When the attack is coming into the danger zone around the goal, the folks who are playing DM handle the normal stopper-type functions of picking up the most dangerous targets (and also directing traffic).

The 3-back system requires very smart players at DM who also are very mobile. IMHO, most teams below around u16 are quite unlikely to have players who can read the game well enough to handle the 3-back system (as, in reality, the coverages are so fluid that all 7 primary defenders - the WMs and the 5 others - will be changing positions on the fly to cover their current zones).

When the system works, it works beautifully. But, it requires so many sophisticated decisions about who is the most dangerous person - and so many good communications and/or "reads" about who is needed where - that it really isn't suited for younger groups IMHO. On the other hand, the 2-3-2-3 works pretty well with the younger set (with the same number of primary defenders), because the positioning in this system doesn't send the attacking mids up as far, so that somebody almost always will be tracking back with the outside runners. This, in turn, reduces the workload (and mental load) on the central defensive group.

Date: Thu, 12 Aug 1999

From: Robert C. Christensen

Sure, the mids (especially a DM) should be picking up the attacking CM. The problem is that in the 4:4:2, there are other very common ways to attack, among them:

- 1) overlapping runs by outside defenders, and
- 2) wide runs down the line by mid wings.

Therefore, there are 4 potential attackers to aid and abet the 2 designated forwards. These attacks by the non- forwards are very effective at spreading wide the zonal backs, which is a sure way for any zonal back system to concede goals. Having this many potential attackers also makes the attack much less predictable (although most teams will routinely use only a couple of these potential attackers).

Savvy teams will utilize the space down the touchlines that is commonly conceded by the zonal back systems, then provide either a deep cross to a slightly withdrawn striker, or an early cross to the attacking CM. The zonal team must try to stay organized in front of the goal in order to win these crossed balls.

Another common way to beat the zonal-back system is to play a short pass through diagonally to an onrushing wing, who then gets behind the defense and is able to either cut inside for a shot, or feed a more centrally located attacker who is exploiting the space resulting from the other backs sliding over ball side to cover for the beaten defender.

A less common way to attack a zonal-back system is to completely overload one side of the field with attackers, with the hope that they backs will keep sliding ball-side. Then look to switch fields to a wide back who has tons of room.

The 4:4:2 is very flexible, and you will see many different teams using many different flavors of this basic bunch of numbers in a certain order (the 4:4:2). Most high level teams using the 4:4:2 utilize a zonal back system of one form or another, but even these are very different in how they operate (for instance: pocket defense vs. hi-pressure). Mids, in particular can have widely different roles in these various systems. Some are trained to shepherd the ball carrier to certain areas of the field where the defense converges to overwhelm the ball carrier (pocket defense). Others are trained to immediately pressure the ball and to be as tenacious a pit bull. On the attack, the roles are just as varied.

Handing Off Attackers Dribbling Across Zones of Coverage in a Zonal Defense

From: Steve Buterin

I was wondering if anyone can suggest a practice or exercises that work on the handing off of attackers dribbling across zones of coverage in a zonal defense. This season I am introducing zonal defense to my team (u15). The only

significant problem they have encountered so far is what to do when the attacker dribbles from touch line to touch line across defensive zones.

What type of approach run should the 2nd defender take as the attacker approaches her zone and she becomes the 1st defender? What is the best method to accomplish the hand off from one zone to another? Are there any dynamic games or exercises that focus on this aspect of zonal defense?

Date: Thu, 3 Feb 2000

From: Gary Rue

Taking the ball laterally to the middle is a great attacking move, because of what Steve noted. It causes disruption to the defense, specifically to the support defenders, as the space the dribbler left is prime attacking territory for an overlap, unless the support defense can regain shape and balance.

My recommendation on how to deal with an dribbler that takes the ball to the inside in a zone defense is two fold:

- * once a defender has locked onto an attacker with the ball, s/he must maintain that defensive contact until the attacker releases the ball and he is not a prime attacking option. That is, if the attacker is still close to the ball, has made a penetrating run forward or is in the penalty area, s/he should be considered a prime attacking option and the defender should maintain his mark.

- * look for a double team from the midfield (or forwards) to help stop this attacker.

Zone defenders should not be locked into their position. This is one case where the defense needs to adapt to the situation, where the wing player ends up in the middle, with his teammates adjusting. A perfect example is an overlap run down the wing, where the wing dribbler takes the wing defender to the middle. The center back must come over and cover the overlapper.

Defenses that understand shape and can automatically adjust to disruptive runs by the attack are generally referred to as well organized. If you have a tape of the US-China WC match, there are many places where you can stop play and see a US counter-attack foiled by three-person Chinese defensive wall set on or about the 18, each defender about 5 yards apart. Their defensive organization was a thing of beauty, and it stopped the US whose attack was too centrally oriented that game.

Date: Thu, 3 Feb 2000

From: Tim Crawford

First off, as long as the attacker has the ball, don't ever let the defender "hand" them off. This will always lead to an offensive advantage.

Preach the zone, but also how to fill it back up.

For example, attacker comes down the left sideline into the defensive third and is engaged by the fullback, the attacker proceeds across field into another "zone", followed by the fullback, as he does, the stopper comes over to double team.

If the midfielder on the left side does not get back to fill the hole left by the trailing fullback, then very likely another attacker will fill it and be available for an outlet pass when the doubleteam stops the original attacker. Now you have a free attacker with the ball in position to cross cleanly to the goal or to attack from the endline.

To often, kids are taught the zone, but play it like a block of swiss cheese. Defensive "assignments" turn into lapses in coverage and easy goals happen.

Game Problems - Support Shape in the Back

Date: Mon, 23 Aug 1999

From: Gary Rue

Because part of coaching (and playing) is about solving problems that arise in a game, I thought I'd try out a new subject--specify a specific game problem and explain how I would solve it. It is hoped that others would have different ideas and thoughts on how to deal with that problem. As my team is high school, I will discuss how I would deal with the problem at a high school level, but I would love to hear how other coaches would deal with a similar problem at the lower (and upper) ages.

Team Shape--flat back four, 4-3-3 wingless (i.e., three center halfbacks with the wing backs providing most of the wide support)

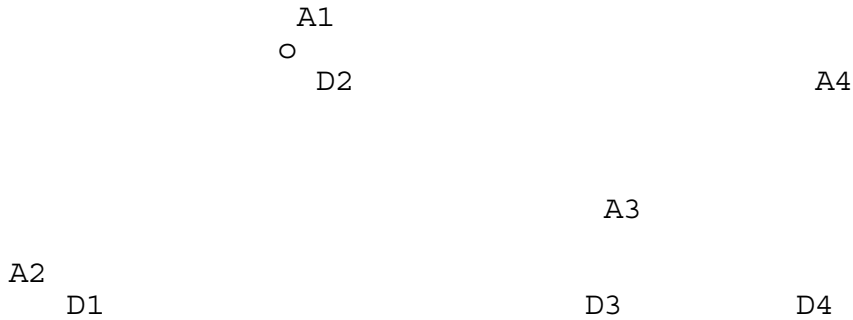
Situation--a goal was scored in a recent game when a central defender (who started on or about his 18) closed down the attacker (about 30 yards out). The ball and attacker got by and behind the defender for a breakaway.

Problem--The supporting backs were not in good enough support positions to recover and stop the ensuing breakaway. The backs were too wide and too far away to support their back teammate this close to the goal. The attacker should have been marked by a halfback. The closing defender over committed for a loose ball that allowed the attacker to get behind him.

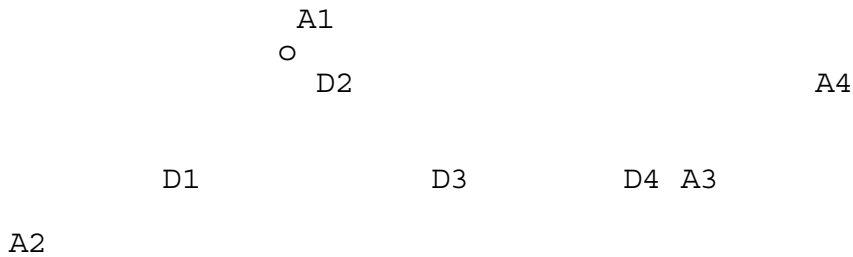
Tactical Solution--the defender over commitment and the lack of defensive halfback support will be dealt with at another time, as the defender does not normally overcommit and the halfbacks were out of shape because of transition. The prime focus needs to be the lack of back support. An example of what was

and what should have been follows (A--attacker, D--defender); note D2 started on the same horizontal line as D1, D3 and D4:

(Problem)



(Solution)



Notice how far back D1 and D3 are as D2 closed down the ball (at least 12 yards). This create way too much space between the ball and the other back defenders. Also notice how wide D1 and D3 are. When A1 got past D2, there was no one but the GK to take him on as D1 and D3 could not recover quickly enough. In the solution, D1, D3 and D4 all step forward and close ranks to about 7 yards behind the ball. D1 or D3 should be able to stop the ball if it gets by D2. They are also in position to stop any through pass to A2 (currently in an off-side position or A3). Also note how D4 moves into a ball side position on A3.

Technical/Tactical Exercises:

A1 A2 A3

D1 D2 D3

In a non competitive setup (see above), three or four attackers are positioned in front of three or four defenders, separated by about 10-12 yards away. The players should be spread fairly wide across the field. The coach serves a ball to one of the attackers. One defender closes down the ball as the other defenders shift to the ball, as they move forward. The attacker players the ball back to the coach and the defenders retreat. Progress to where the attackers pass the ball between them (slowly) as the defenders adjust. Add an attacker that is forward and moving laterally. As the coach passes to one of the stationary attackers, the defenders must pick and mark (or pass on) the moving attacker.

In a controlled play setup of 40x40, play 2 forwards +3 halfbacks v 3. The attackers try to penetrate the back 3 defense with through passes. The halfbacks cannot go forward except on 1v1 attempts. Encourage the forwards to drop it back to the halfbacks. Look for the defensive shape on the drop; how quick do the defenders recognize the drop, how quickly they move forward as a unit and are they ready to recover on the ensuing through ball. Progress to a 3+3v4 if the defense is getting the hang of it.

In a grid of 50 (long) x 80 (wide) and 4 goals (2 yards) on each end, play 8v8 with a 4 back shape. The extra wide and short field and multiple goals encourages switching the ball as well as attacking down the middle. The defense should be able to shift and support one another.

Date: Mon, 23 Aug 1999
From: Richard Brown
Hello Gary,

My confusion is showing again, if your playing flatback four you have two central defenders not one. So if one left and moved up to close down a central attacker, there should have been the other central defender back in support. Now that first defender who moved up was not diving, but going for a loose ball that he thought he could get before the attacker right. So things happen, and he did not come up with the ball right. How was there a breakaway? When the other central defender should have been back in a support position. Plus don't the two wing backs pinch in a back support position if the ball is in the center of the field in a flatback.

What is the defensive mid who was beat during this time, regrouping to have a flatback four midfield? He should have been falling back behind the closing down player to get the defensive shape back. In other words he should take the central defenders place who closed down the first attacker. So the central defender was now the defensive midfielder. An interchange of positions.

I never played flatback, but that is the concept of man marking, in a staggered defense.

Date: Tue, 24 Aug 1999

From: Gary Rue

Hey, Richie, if you're confused then I must have a big problem. The "supporting" central defender was at least 15 yards wide and 12 yards back at the time the other center back closed down the ball. In my diagram, the first drawing was how we WERE positioned. The second drawing was how we SHOULD have been positioned. When the pressuring center back misplayed the ball, the attacker was very quickly into the space behind that defender. The supporting backs were just too far away to adjust and too close to goal to make much out of any angled recovery.

Your comments below just echo what we are trying to do--we just didn't do it. Unfortunately, the pressuring defender did dive and the ensuing events showed our shape problem. Neither the other central defender or the wing back were in good support positions and the recovering halfbacks were not there to double team the ball or to get behind the ball and support the pressuring back. Actually, the supporting backs at the time are very young players (ninth graders) and have never played in a flat back before. They were more concerned with marking the other attackers. It was a good learning experience.

Date: Tue, 24 Aug 1999

From: Gary Rue

Gary, I would prefer the mids setup their own "wall" between the ball and the back four; however, that is not always possible. In a perfect world, the backs would be supporting the halfbacks (who are pressuring the ball) and marking forward attackers, not pressuring the ball.

In answer to your question, the mids can certainly recover behind the ball and form a seven man wall, if you will, but that is not real common, unless the attack is a slow buildup. If it does happen then it will occur on or somewhere inside the 18. Once the midfielders track back, the backs need to pull back a little. Generally, I want the midfielder closest to the ball to double team with the pressuring back. The supporting halfbacks can fall back in behind, one of which should fill in for the back that went forward.

Here again, the dynamics of play and positioning of all involved will help dictate the actual play. My rule of thumb is when we are on defense, we need to "get behind the ball, first, then figure out who to support and who to mark."

Last year when I was playing a 3 back, I had the off ball wing half track all the way back to fill in on the off ball side. The other 4 halfbacks set up a wall in front of the backs. Different styles for different systems. Does this help?

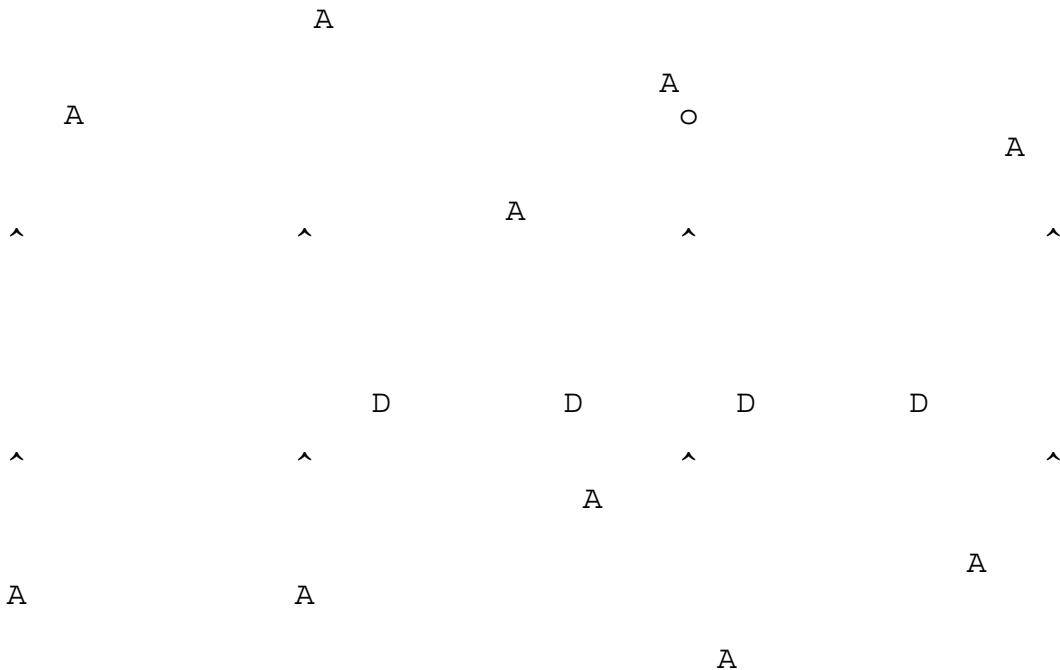
Flat Back: Stop the Through Ball from Opponent's Midfield

Date: Tue, 26 Sep 2000

From: Gary Rue

One of the prime positioning responsibilities of the flat back is to stop penetrating through balls. The following exercise helps a flat back learn to shift and position themselves in the face of an passes out of the opponent's midfield.

Setup: with flat cones, create a horizontal channel of 10x60 yards. Inside the channel are the four defenders. On each side of the channel are 4-6 attacking players spread out across the whole width. For ease of switching the point of attack, the attackers may want to position a player forward with back to the channel (as if he was a checking forward player). The attackers should not be an a flat shape, but have some depth and width. The attackers move the ball around trying to off balance the defenders where they can deliver a pass past the defensive line to the attackers on the other side.

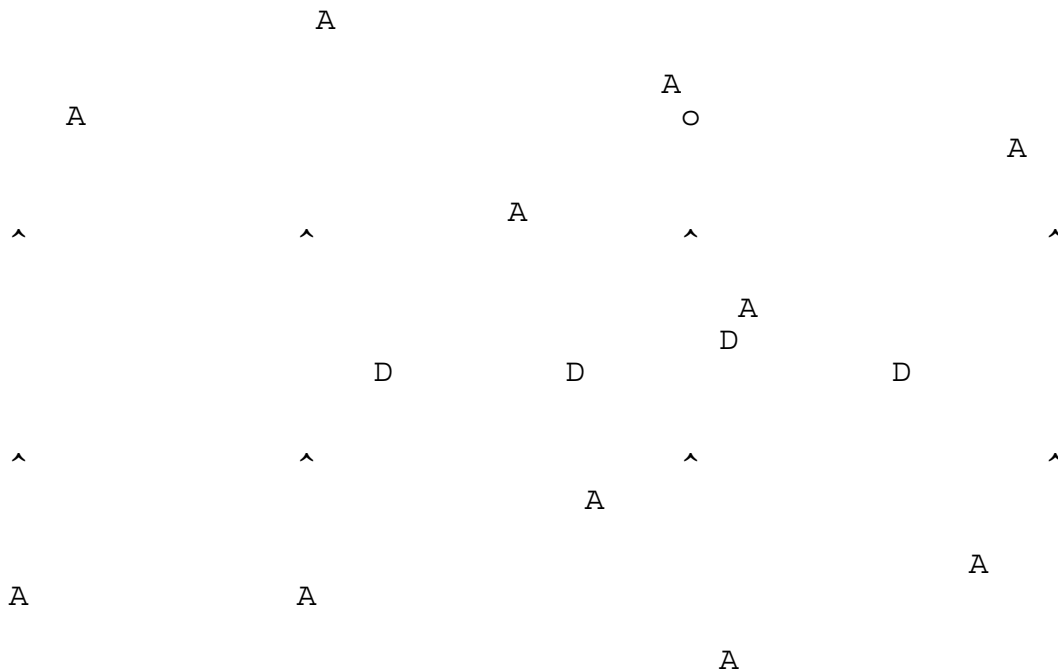


In this exercise, we will assume that the halfbacks are applying appropriate pressure and the backs are just in support of the halfbacks. In the example above, the ball is central and so are the backs. They have gotten closer together and moved towards the center. As the ball moves wide, they should shift to that side as well.

Notice the defenders have moved to closer to their back restricted line. This is because they are trying to stop the through ball. In a flat back, you want to create space between you and the ball when possible. If the ball is close to midfield, the space is 10-15 yards. It is 5-7 yards when the defense is backed up to its 18. If

the ball is dropped further away, they should move forward. As the ball comes forward, they should move back.

Once the basic movement is trained, an attacker can be added to inside the channel. Now the defenders must mark this attacker, passing his on as the attacker moves side to side. Balls can be played into the attacker who can turn and pass or drop it back. If a defender must move forward to mark an attacker, the other backs must adjust their positions forward in order to not create too much space between the marking defender and the rest of the backs. This space creates angles for through balls. The diagram below shows the slight difference in positioning when an attacker must be marked in the channel.



Flat Back 4 Defense to Stop the Through Ball

Date: Sun, 26 Aug 2001

From: Gary Rue

I don't think humble is the term--inattentive or lazy may be the more correct adjectives. To be honest, I don't remember the question so I may have just skimmed over it due to lack of time, which I'm very short of these days. Thx for the defensive support. :-)

Here's an exercise I recently ran across. Though not shadow play, it is a better setup than one I have recommended in the past on training the back four to stop the through ball. As the exercise progresses, many defensive set situations can

be addressed. It may also point out certain tendencies in players who are too aggressive or too passive.

Setup: In a half field, cut up the sections into 4 horizontal sections 10 yards deep and full field wide. I put my back four in one of the middle grids and my midfield in the other central grid. In the outside grid are the rest of the team divided, though I may put the forwards on the grid adjacent to the backs. Grids 1 and 3 make up a team and grids 2 and 4 are a team. The purpose of the exercise is to find gaps through the adjoining grid for a through ball.

Coaching Points: Defensive shape and team shift are key concerns. We teach the players to drop back as deep as possible and not push up to the top of their grid. We work on the defender closest to the ball moving forward; the second closest defender moving over and up in support; the third man across being a little deeper than the rest of the four backs (or mid field); and the fourth man being somewhere between even with the second defender and even with the third defender.

Variation: Allow players in the passing grid and/or the target grid to move into the defenders grid as target players. The defenders must now pick up marks as the other player come into the grid. Note, these offensive may be restricted from playing the ball through the grid, only dropping it back. They must also adhere to the "offside" line the defenders establish.

----- Original Message -----

From: Keith Morganstein

Lots of talk about shadow play this week, buried in other topics. One coach had requested help with teaching by the shadow play method, but was practically ignored. I made a feeble, rambling attempt to answer that fell far short of satisfactory.

I'm trying to teach the flat four to a young group myself (U12G). The youngest group I've tried this with. Frankly it was going right over their heads. I think I was trying to explain too much at once. Even my half field situational games were not going that well. I needed some help if I was going to be successful.

So I did some searching. I went to Ken Gambles site at Decatur sports myself. Looked up Gary Rue's exercise of the day links. #18 & #19 are just what I need. Very good introduction, examples & diagrams of the flat four zone defense. There are good details on using Shadow Play to demonstrate, teach and implement the system.

One thing I find interesting (and turned the mental lightbulb on) is the idea that if your playing a 4-4-2, with the flat four, you teach the midfield the same system as the back !!

My co-coach (former Div 1 college player) and I are putting this info right to work and are Very confident we will be successful teaching the flat four in this manner.

From: David Graham

This is an excellent game for the purpose Gary describes. As in many of these multiple zone games, as Gary says, one of the key coaching points is to ensure that players give themselves enough depth -- I know most of our young players tends to gravitate to the closest possible point to the ball. (This is a key coaching point, for example, in the ever-popular "3-zone game".)

Some really good variations on this, in addition to the ones Gary suggested, include limiting the number of touches, either the number to be made by an individual player or the total that can be made by the team as a whole before the ball must be passed. I have found that because there is no defensive pressure on the ball, a lot of players tend to play very slowly: another possibility is thus to allow one or more of the defenders to enter the attackers' grid to put pressure on the ball. When GKs are playing, I station them in the two middle zones and allow them to use their hands when defending; this means I can then allow teams to play the ball in the air as well as on the ground, though I limit passes in the air to head height or below. I can also allow GKs to throw the ball to their teammates.

I don't know where Gary found this game, but my own source for it was Joe Luxbacher's very useful book "Soccer Practice Games" (Human Kinetics, 1995).

Flat Back 4 Defending in the Wind

Date: Mon, 9 Apr 2001

From: Gary Rue

I concur with Richie. The defenders should be deeper than normal when the ball is played forward. However, a defense can still move forward, compressing the opponnets away from the goalline. However, it is critical that a team that is compressing the field should start moving back when or just before the ball is played. When the defense is moving into the wind, it is imperative that they recover quicker and deeper than normal.

One of the key mistakes (in my opinion) that compressing teams make is that they remain flat and or stationary when the ball is played forward. Even a trapping team (one that steps forward just prior to the ball being played) can/should start recovering as the ball is played. Of course, some coaches and players think they can sell the offside if there is great separation between defender and attacker. Sooner or later, this will be a huge mistake regardless of the ability of the assistant referee.

Flat Back Four Shape When Attacking

Date: Mon, 29 Oct 2001

From: Bill Coach

Purists believe the basic position for players while entering the attacking third are as follows:

- 1- Forwards (2) inside the penalty area, creating targets by moving. Criss / Crossing runs, checking, blind-side runs etc.
- 2- Outside Mids (2) As they progress towards the attacking third, position narrow in front of the 2 center mids.
- 3- Center Mids (2) behind outside mids, create wide or forward overlaps and interchanges with Outside mids.
- 4- Flanking runs are then made by Outside Backs, One on each flank.
- 5- Central Defenders (2) at the half way line. Depending on opposition forwards at the half way line, 2 Central or one withdrawn mid remain goal side. (one more defender than attacker to prevent counter attack.

Now before anyone gets themselves upset over player positions, the above is not my recommendation, only an observation from literature I've read. Many teams use outside Mids in flanking plays or crosses. What do you prefer?

Zonal Defending – U10s

Date: Tue, 13 Apr 1999

From: Jim MacQueen

With due apologies to those who think you should not waste time on tactics and formations with U10s, there are some things about defensive tactics which should be taught at this age, and starting in the direction of zonal marking and defending is at the top of the list.

Too many coaches do one of two things wrong: They put their defenders in the back and "lock them into place", which I suppose is what Gene is afraid you might do. Obviously, whether 11v11 or 8v8, all the players are attackers when you have the ball, and all are defenders when you don't. Everyone needs to be involved in play, and this means defenders pushing up, supporting, and making well chosen runs; and forwards dropping back or pressuring the ball. As for midfielders, they never stop working, right? :=)

The other wrong thing is trying to mark man to man. Very good coaches in other respects make this mistake in youth soccer. They give each defender a certain "number" to mark and expect the defender to somehow get involved in both the

attack and in keeping their man out of play. This system is bound to fail with young players...in fact, it fails with most older teams.

The so-called "flat 4" is simply zonal defending, using the principles of both zone and man to man defense. In 8v8 soccer, it would be easy to change it to a flat 3. The main point of emphasis in stopper/sweeper defending is that the outside backs and stopper find marks in such a way that the sweeper is kept free of man marking and can "sweep up" loose balls. In the flat system, the central defender(s) may or may not have a man to mark, depending on how many forwards the opponent deploys. Generally these days, you expect to have one more defender than the opponent has forwards...the typical 8v8 team would have 1 or 2 forwards deployed. The main point of emphasis in the flat system (which should never really be "flat", BTW) is that instead of having assigned opponents to mark, the outside defenders are expected to pick up the closest opponent when the other team gets the ball. They are responsible for (but not stuck in) a zone which changes with the position of the ball on the field.

The main purpose of this defense is to get as many defenders as possible pressuring the ball and defending the main support attackers while more or less conceding the weak side of the field with light defense. In theory, it takes so long to switch the point of attack that everyone can slide over while the field is being changed and keep the defense consistently strong on the ball side.

The advantage to your own attack should be equally obvious. When your team has the ball near the opponent's goal, your own weak side defenders, and almost always your central defender, do not have to be as concerned about defending roles. They are free to get really involved in the attack. My last U11 team played flat 4 and the majority of our goals were scored by one of our central defenders!

To give your players a team shape, think of the field as having three lanes the long way. Assuming 3-3-2, each defender is more or less responsible for a lane, as is one midfielder. But, when the ball is in an outside lane, the middle lane defenders should be sliding over into that lane and the outside mid should be sliding over into the middle lane. Only the weak side outside defender should be taking care of the weak side away from the ball. If the opponent switches fields, simply slide everyone across with the ball! Players pick up and defend the opponents nearest to them in their lane, with the primary responsibility for pressuring the ball going to the forward and mid on the strong side (or mid and defender if the opponent has managed to penetrate your end of the field) and everyone else looking to deny their man the ball by cutting off passing lanes, and/or hiding their man from his teammate.

All of these ideas can be quickly and easily taught to U10s in portions of 1-2 practices which concentrate as much on basic skills such as passing, receiving and tackling as they do on the defensive scheme. I hope these ideas help you

somewhat...there is a great deal on zonal and "flat 4" defending in the list archives.

Date: Tue, 13 Apr 1999

From: Scott Placek

Jim makes an excellent point about some of the poor concepts being peddled as "man to man" defending. As a rule I prefer man marking with my older teams, but certainly not in the way Jim describes. He is absolutely correct that to expect number to number marking to be effective is silly. Either you sacrifice the ability to move away from the man when you are in possession, or you are left with numbers down situations when you lose the ball. A good man marking system trains defenders to identify the "most dangerous" man and mark him until you regain possession. Switches occur only when there is a more dangerous unmarked man, not based on zonal responsibilities. I recently took over a U18 team and had about 6 sessions to prepare for our first game. A week before the game I met with the captains to ask about the system they had been playing. I was told it was man marking. Somewhat encouraged, I went to the first game to find my defensive midfielder was constantly standing in space while opponents ran free around him. I encouraged him to find his mark early and to stop marking space, at which point he turned to me and said, "I am keeping my man marked" Well his "man" as he saw it was standing around midfield while the game went on around my defensive mid. I realized, here was a U18 player who as recently as last fall was being told to "number mark"

We made some quick adjustments, but it still wasn't pretty. I tend to agree that younger players need to learn the principles of zonal defending. They also need to learn individual marking. Which particular system works best will vary team to team. But please don't have your players number mark whatever system you choose. The long range damage to their development is serious.

Date: Tue, 13 Apr 1999

From: Jim MacQueen

<< A good man marking system trains defenders to identify the "most dangerous" man and mark him until you regain possession. Switches occur only when there is a more dangerous unmarked man, not based on zonal responsibilities. >>

What you describe is actually (to me, an old basketball player) a zone defense utilizing man-to-man principles. It is exactly what I teach, but I call it zonal defending. While I do not use the concept of "most dangerous man" in first picking up a mark, it is certainly the cue I teach older players to determine when to switch.

Flat Back 4 for U14

Date: Wed, 9 Aug 2000

From: Dennis Mueller

U-14 is not too young for a flat back 4.

One decision that the players need to learn to make is what to do when the other team uses only 1 or 2 forwards who push up. If all 4 players stay back, your team can be badly outnumbered at midfield and it may make it easier for the other team to make unpressured passes to the forwards who can then find themselves in a 1v1 situation.

Coaches usually spend a lot more time on what to do when the front-line attackers momentarily outnumber the back 4. That is relatively easy to work on because all you need do is play some offense with 6-7 attackers vs defense using only the back 4 + K or back 4 + K and a midfield chaser.

It is harder to work on the idea of one or two strong forwards working against the back 4 simply because if you let the offensive mids have free reign, they will often choose to either carry the ball forward or to interpass and will not try the killer pass to a forward who has got himself into situation where a good pass would result in a 1v1 (or 1v0). Also, it is hard to practice unless you have a forward who can constantly move working to get lost in the zonal coverage when one or more of the defenders gets lost ball-watching.

The flat back four lends itself well to compressing the field to both support the midfield on offense and making runs to attack.

I think one of its weakness is the loss of responsibility that can occur when an attacker passes from one "zone" to another, it is even more susceptible if two forwards work together to get numbers up on a single defender, if only momentarily (this is most likely to happen when neither of the forwards has the ball, but it could be passed from midfield). The best protection against that is to have a midfield that can apply enough defensive pressure so that quality forward passes cannot be delivered at the moment that a defender is outnumbered (and of course, the 4 better make such lapses in coverage very brief or no amount of midfield pressure will work).

Attacking the Flat Back 4

Date: Wed, 26 May 1999

From: Jim MacQueen

One of the more interesting trends I'm watching right now is a pretty obvious change in the way in which teams are attacking the zonal 4.

Generally, it used to be that the most effective way of attacking this was to try for lots of possession time in the middle of the field when in the final third, playing for a chance to make a little ground pass to a teammate running through the flat defense. Obviously, this required two things: being able to hold the ball under pressure and good teamwork in timing the runs and the pass. Still, this was thought to be better than trying to switch the point of attack because the latter usually required a long flighted ball which gave the defense time to slide over.

What I am seeing now is what I would call the "early cross". Basically, this means that instead of trying to get the ball deep to the end line as you might want to do against a sweeper (because it forces him out of the middle and gives you numbers up in front of the goal), the outside attacker with the ball tries to serve an early ball to weak side teammates making various runs towards the middle and the far post.

While this attempts to exploit the main weakness of zonal defending, which is that on the side away from the ball, the defenders are usually outnumbered by attackers, it does mean the attacking team must be strong in the air and/or have explosive acceleration when the ball is served. The team I have seen recently which really seems to have these two advantages, and which is well-trained in this form of attack, is the US U17 National Team. Even when marked goal-side/ball-side, this team still manages to get off quality shots from "early cross" service.

Date: Wed, 26 May 1999
From: Patrick Van de Wille

I agree with Jim's excellent observation, and would add that another very effective anti-flat-4 weapon is the ball punched through flat defenses diagonally, maintaining a high-speed attack but switching the point of attack to the weak side. This is usually a ground ball played through the center, aiming for a running centre-lane striker but also valuable as a "standard" long ball for a run by a winger, exploiting the open area behind the weak side defender. After all, the field's not THAT wide...

NSCAA 2001 -- Attacking the Zone Defense

Date: Tue, 13 Feb 2001
From: Gary Rue

Below are personal notes of a session at the NSCAA Convention in Indianapolis, IN on January 18, 2001.

Session: Attacking the Zone Defense
Clinician: Mike Parsons, Director NSCAA Coaching
Date: NSCAA Convention, January 18, 2001

The purpose of the session was to train the players to find and operate in the areas (seams) between defenders playing a zone defense. Timing of showing runs and body position to see and play the next pass were key individual requirements.

6 + 1 v 3 - 6 attackers play keepaway (possession focus) with extra attacker in the center

- find player in the middle (reinforce the possession focus)
- middle player should find the seam (split defenders), finding a different seam for next pass
- one touch return
- open up body to give more return pass options
- other players to play as quickly as possible

3 (backs) v 2 (forwards) + 4 v 3 (midfielders)

- attack is to get to the endline; restart with coach; defense plays to coach if possession gained
- defense plays zone
- get to endline in as few passes as possible
- demonstrate defensive shift as ball is played to wing midfielder; ball is dropped to a back and played to the other wing quickly to beat the shift
- work with the center midfielders to show to the ball at different times
- add a forward and marking defender; add goals and GKs
- restrict the pressure area; that is, do not allow the defending front runners to pressure the backs until they get closer to the midline
- move the attacking midfielders towards attacking end (away from the ball when it is in the back) to create more space in which they can move into on a showing run
- work with the back defender in order to help the attacking forward later; if the attacking back with ball is not under pressure, then defender should play deep; as the attacking back comes under pressure, the back defender steps up and applies tighter coverage to the attacking front runner
- work with the attacking front runner; the front runner needs to constantly look to move into ballside (same side of the pitch as the ball) space behind the defender; if the wing midfielder can't play the ball into that space, then the ball is played to depth (dropped to the back) and the back looks for a opportunity to put the ball into that space (over the top?)

Play the game straight up with no restrictions. Look for the picture (and tell the players) when something good happens.

Flat Back 4 versus the Stopper/Sweeper

Date: Fri, 25 Feb 2000

From: Gary Rue

Derrek, I don't agree with his comments. I don't think the sweeper/stopper roles are any more natural than the zone concept. The error in the logic is that it seems as if these players are understand the sweeper and stopper roles, when it's their athleticism and positioning that is getting the job done. In a good system the sweeper and stopper are very defined roles that must be coordinated with the other players. Actually, I believe many defenses succeed because of the imputed of the attacker.

True, the zone may require a little more understanding by more players of the team system and situations, but a zone overall is perhaps the easiest thing to teach. Forget positions, the hardest thing to teach players is the combination of how to cover, have depth and be balanced. The sweeper is the band-aid solution for a coach, because by definition, sweeper provides depth, cover and balance with his positioning. Put an athlete in this position (which many coaches do) and the defense will be able to withstand a lot. It's not necessarily because of the sweeper system.

Now, I'm not saying using a sweeper is not a good system--it is. I'm just trying to respond to the comments below. I play a sweeper when I have certain talent, a zone when I have other talent. A coach can teach either system regardless of the "religion" of the player--though I would certainly build a church if that would bring in more of these players :-)

Flat Back Four vs Man-Marking Sweeper System

Date: Fri, 6 Apr 2001

From: Dennis Mueller

Around here (Central NJ) youth teams mostly play with a sweeper and not as a flat back. There are some exceptions, but they tend to be the older teams and teams that are among the best talent-wise. I think for a flat-4 to work, you do need to have 4 or 5 defenders who are smart, dedicated and reliable.

I think the reasons for this are: To do a flat back four well, the players must get pretty comfortable with each other, communicate well and work together. Those are things that don't just happen and they happen even less when players are subbed out frequently in order to promote more equal playing time and/or you can't count on having the same back 4 (or 4 out of 5) at every game and practice.

Conceptually a man-marking system with a sweeper is easier for youth players to understand. Mostly youth teams around here man-mark the forwards and leave the sweeper free to pick up in case anyone is beeten and the midfielders come

back to defend other midfielders, so to some degree it is a mix of zone and man-marking (zone far from the goal and man-marking as you get closer to goal)

There is even a very successful HS coach here who has used a numbers man-marking system with a sweeper for years and has won many league and a couple state titles using it. The "beauty" of the system is its simplicity every player but the sweeper is assigned a player to mark and that player MUST mark his assignment. The sweeper provides cover. Intellectually, it is NOT a challenging system, but some players cannot do it, they simply lose their marks and can't find them soon enough. That coach did not give such players much playing time. In my opinion, it is a bit too inflexible and has a bunch of theoretical flaws. Such flaws were never systematically exploited by any other team. Things like dragging defenders out and forwards back, or switching right and left, or pulling everyone to one side so a good dribbler could have a go down the other side in a 1v2, or attacking with your sweeper against his sweeper simply weren't done with much regularity or at all (I suspect that since some of the players were pretty smart, they would have abandoned the marks who were not in dangerous positions and helped out had such things been tried).