



The Pewaukee Way

Teaching the Zonal “Flat” Back Four

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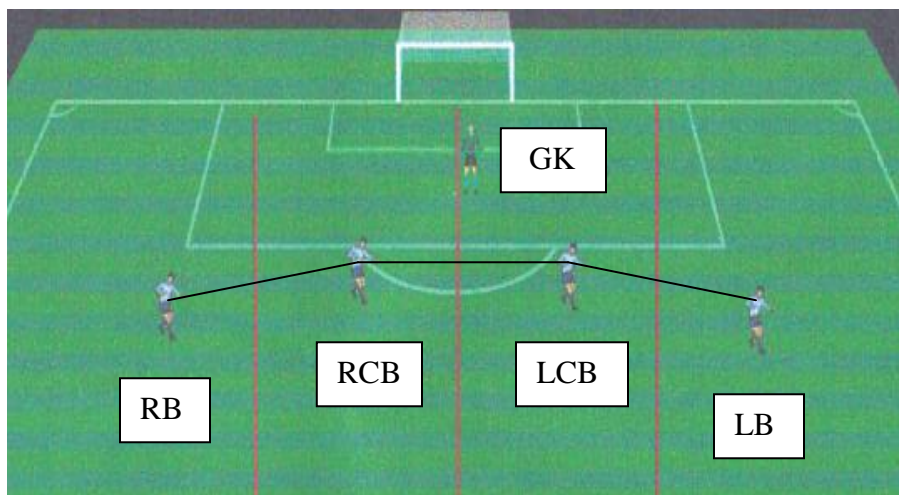
This document is intended as a guide to help you teach the zonal "flat" back four with your team. It will provide you with valuable coaching points and activities that you can use with your team. As part of the Pewaukee Way Player Development Program each full sided team (11 v 11) in the club will be using the zonal "flat" back four system for defending. Starting with the 2010-2011 season, each team is required to use this at one "event" as a minimum in each season. The goal is to then have each U13 and older team in the club playing with a zonal "flat" back four by the start of the 2011-2012 season. Coaches are free to choose how the top 6 players are shaped, however the zonal "flat" back four is the base from which all full sided teams in the club should be built.

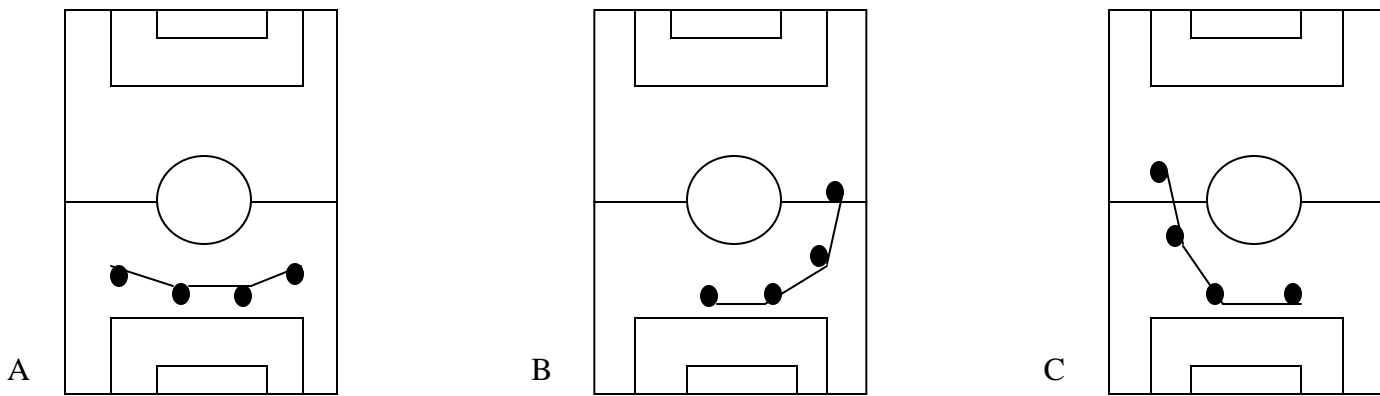
The Organization:

In the zonal "flat" back four, five players are organized as in the diagram below. There are two outside defenders, two central defenders, and a goalkeeper. Each defender is responsible for defending both the ball and any players that come into their zone. It is important for players to understand that their individual roles will change constantly during the match. Players have to be coaches where to be, when to be there, and how to work in unison with other teammates.

The back four players should think of themselves as being a part of one big chain and that they are connected to each other. It helps while introducing this idea to literally tie them together as a chain, using rope or other materials and having them move together.

Where the chain moves is then dependent upon the position of the ball. This is true for attacking and defending. The diagram on the next page illustrates this point and shows how the chain moves. In addition to moving across the field, the chain also must move up and down the field together as well.





Imagine the four defenders are attached to each other along a length of rope (A). When the ball is in play down the right hand side the right back advances to join the play tugging the other three defenders round. (B) When the ball is switched to the left, the left back advances pulling the center backs across and the right back into a covering position. (C)

Using the Back Four Line to Create a Defensive “Block”

Often times in soccer you will see a goal be scored, and the goalkeeper take the blame despite a host of errors that occurred in the build up to the goal. The zonal “flat” back four works much in the same way. For the team to have a good defensive scheme the back four line needs to have other midfield players who can integrate in and are a part of the overall defensive scheme. Putting these midfield players with our back line players can be referred to as creating a defensive “block”. Once the coach decides upon how to shape their block, they can then work to create a defensive plan and ball rotations for not only the back line, but the entire block. How to create this block will be dependent upon the philosophy of the coach. The requirement of the full sided coach in the Pewaukee Way Program is that they use a back line of four and shape it into a block of their choice.

Since the laws of the game restrict us to 10 field players, the most common combinations of defensive “blocks” are seen below:

Please note that while outside midfielders are a definite part of any defensive scheme, for the combinations below we are solely referring to back four defenders and central midfielders who will help “protect” our center backs.

Back Four	+	Central Midfielders	=	Defensive Block
4		1		5
4		2		6
4		3		7

In diagram 1 below, the team is shaped with a back line of four and 2 central midfielders to create a **defensive block of 6 players**.



Diagram 1

Lines of Pressure and Lines of Defense

Once the coach has worked through the organization of the defensive block of players, they are left with two “blocks” of players. Diagram 2 below shows the “top block” that is now formed from our previous set up of a back four and two central midfielders.

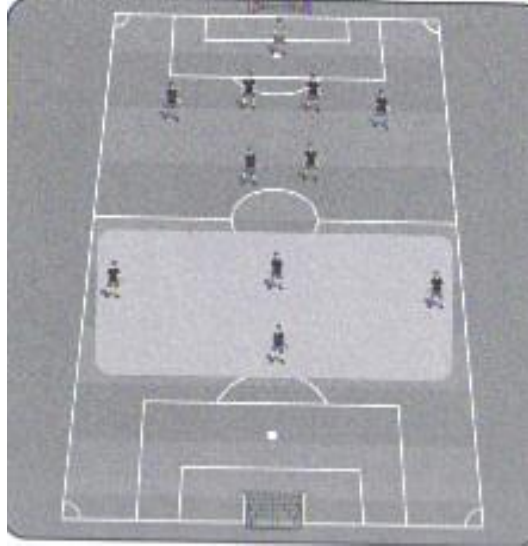


Diagram 2

Once the shape of these two blocks is determined, the coach then needs to consider where the team should organize their line of pressure and line of defense. These can change from game to game depending upon a wide range of factors. For our purposes these are defined as:

Line of Pressure: Where on the field the “first” defenders are positioned and where the team action of defending begins.

Line of Defense: Where the line of the back four defenders is located in relation to the first defenders of the “top block”, basically where they “set up”.

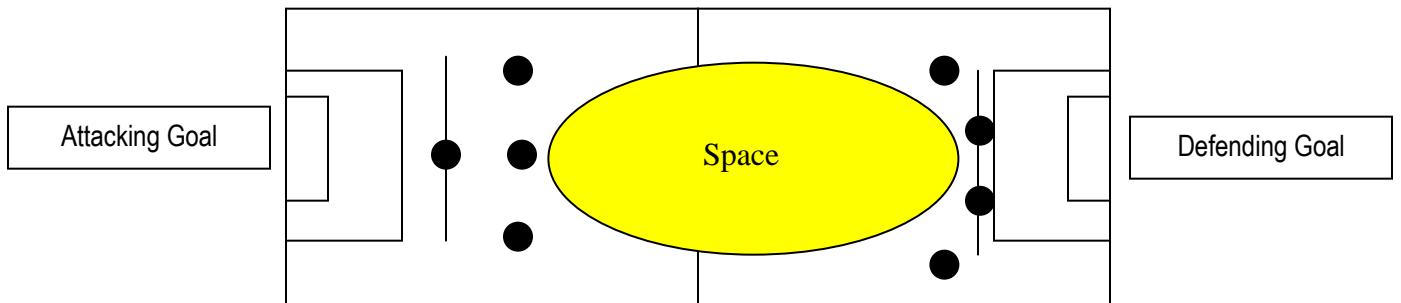


Diagram 3

In diagram 3 above the team has set a “high” line of pressure and a “low” line of defense. The result is that both team blocks are not coordinated together and a huge space exists in our team shape. It is necessary that in our defensive scheme the line of pressure and line of defense allow the team to remain compact when defending. The scheme has to be to defend high up the field, in the middle, or closer to our own goal and both blocks have to be coordinated in this plan.

How Zonal Defending Becomes Ineffective

There are two reasons why zonal defending can become ineffective and viewed negatively by coaches. First players must understand that their individual roles and responsibilities change constantly in this system. If a player is not coached where to be, when to be there and how to shift position as the play dictates, huge holes appear in the defense and goals flood in. Coaches must thoroughly instruct players on positional play in game like situations. The end of this manual will provide you with teaching principles for your team and back four as well as game situations that you can use to teach these principles.

As important as the role of the coach in making zonal defending effective is the individual contribution of the players. In youth soccer the man marker and sweeper system gives each player very simple, well-defined roles. Either follow someone around the field and stop them playing or stand deep of everyone and clean up the trouble. Zonal defending requires players to identify the movement of the ball, opponents, and teammates. It requires players understand when to be a ball winner and when to be responsible for covering space. Most importantly it requires **communication**, the willingness to talk to teammates, to organize and take responsibility. The inability of our young players to communicate ideas with each other on the field coupled with the failure of coaches to adequately teach the system can make zonal defending ineffective.

Through the creation of educational materials such as this document, a unified coaching staff with a similar approach, coaching clinics, and training sessions, PSC will make improvement in these two areas. Keep in mind that this is a process and does take time. The implementation of this zonal defending plan building from the "flat" back four will make the club better by developing, well rounded, thoughtful players, giving our teams better shape defensively at all times, and allowing for transition into our attacking system much more smoothly.

Basic Zonal Defending Principles

The defensive system that is built with the zonal "flat" back four relies on players reading the game to make decisions and communicate as well as coaches teaching players where to be in game like situations. The principles below are general guidelines that apply to all players in the system.

1. Pressure Must Be Applied to The Ball Before Defense Can Begin

Until there is pressure on the ball the team must drop towards their own goal. When pressure is applied the team then can step and compress space. The team should have a set line of pressure where the defensive action begins. As a general guideline the player whose zone the ball is in is responsible for applying pressure. Where the ball is determines what "type" of pressure is applied.

- Pressure must be immediate
- Pressure must force the attackers vision down
- Pressure must make play predictable
- Pressure must prevent passing penetration

2. Pressure Must Be Accompanied By Immediate Cover

Covering players are responsible for filling space behind the pressure player to eliminate the threat of dribble penetration. Quality defending requires a team to get numbers up around the ball everywhere on the field. This concept of flooding the zone with the ball is referred to as **Ball Oriented Defending**. The goal in ball oriented defending is to create a diamond shape wherever the opponent moves the ball on the field. Diagram # 4 below illustrates this concept. In the top picture a diamond shape has been created by the four closest players. In the bottom picture the ball is in a different location which means that our diamond shape has been created by four different players. Before this can happen, however, the first principle of pressure must occur which will allow team defending to occur.

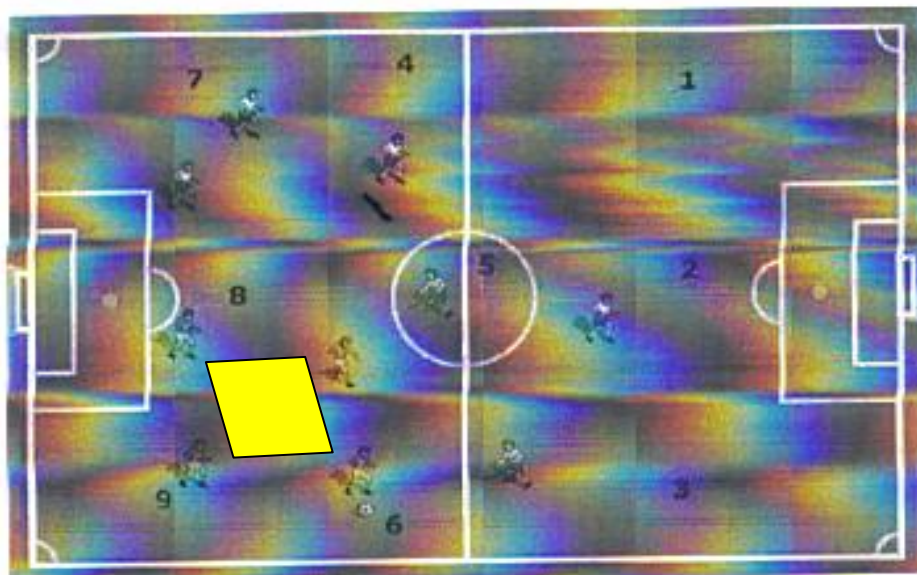
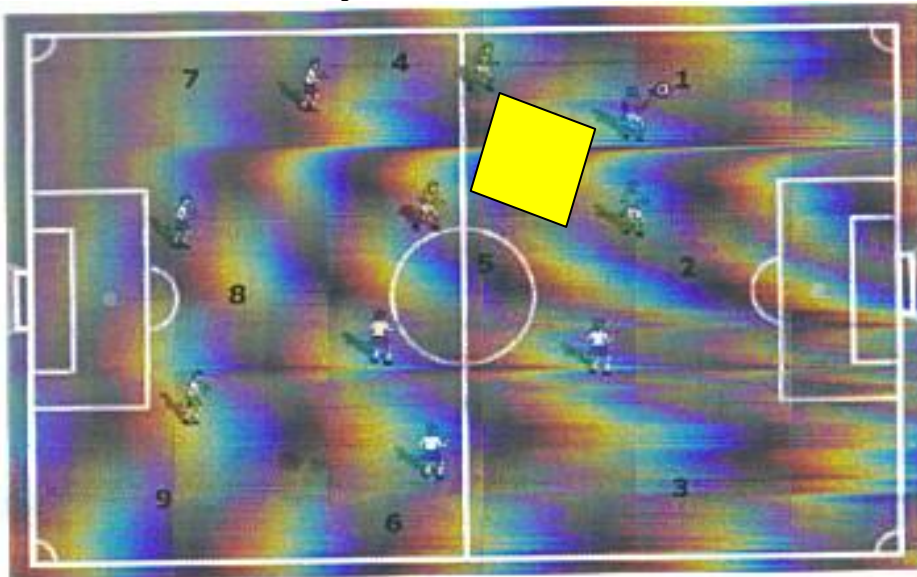


Diagram 4

3. The Team Defends Together

When pressure is applied, the entire team must step together to stay compact, and when pressure breaks down the team must drop together. So our level of pressure is another guideline for player positioning. Good pressure on the ball = step up team block. Poor pressure on the ball = drop off slightly. Also space cannot exist between lines on the field, or between pressuring players and the rest of the team. A good guideline is that if the ball is in the attacking half use 13-15 yards between lines as the ball is less of a threat. If the ball is in our defensive half use closer to 10-12 yards between lines of players. Another rule of thumb is to have about 10 yards between players in the same line. The team must shift across the field together as the ball moves. The ball dictates where players move and players have to learn to react quickly to the ball. In general, the team must move as one unified block whenever the ball moves. This puts high demands on work rate and concentration. In diagram # 5 below the team has moved forward because there is good pressure on the ball. The back four line (dotted line) would be around 13-15 yards off of the midfield line because the ball is in our attacking half. The space between players in the back four line would be a little more than 10 yards. It is obvious that there is a large amount of space behind the back four line. If proper pressure is applied, however, this space is not dangerous. It becomes dangerous when pressure is broken and the opposition have time to play into the space. So a key teaching point is to teach our lines to drop slightly when we have poor/no pressure. Another moment this holds true is when our team has ball possession and loses it. Teach the back line to drop off 5-10 yards EVERY time so that the game is kept in front of them.

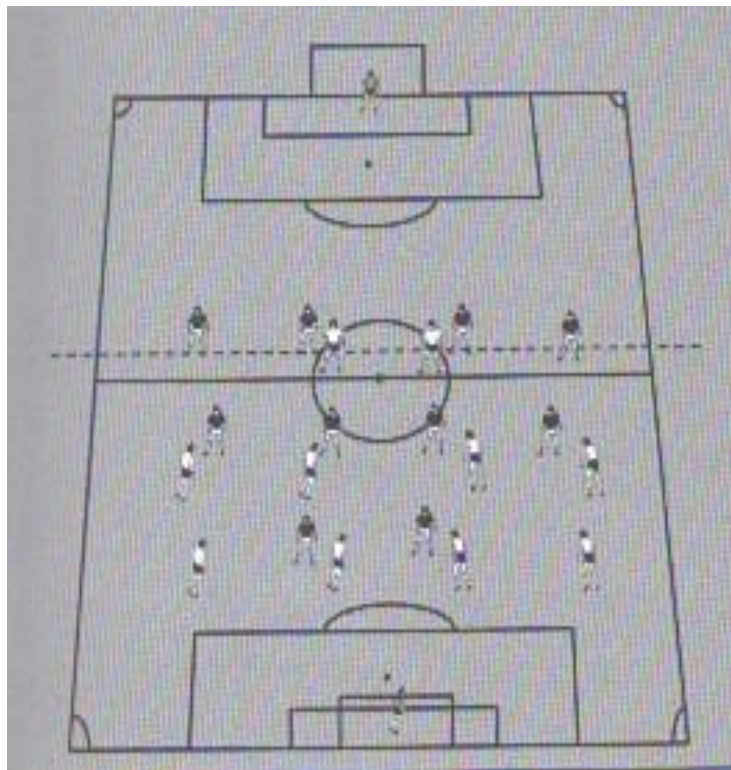


Diagram 5

4. The Team Must Step Up and Compress Space Every Time the Ball Moves Towards Their Attacking Goal

On defensive clearances and on any back passes played by the opposition the team must step to recover space and to eliminate time the opposition has to make decisions. The team has to be careful, however, not to “rush” forward as some back passes are intended to set up forward passes.

Specific Tactical Cues For the Back Four:

The previous four principles were zonal defending principles and applied to all players of the team. The next five cues are specifically designed to be used as guidelines for the back four players and the coach working with them.

1. Protect the Space Behind the Back Line

When pressure breaks down in midfield, all four backs should drop back and central as a group to protect the space behind them. Ideally the backs will drop so that they could head away any vertical ball. At a minimum, the backs must be able to beat any attackers to a vertically played ball behind them centrally. The backs must continue to drop until pressure is re-established and the threat of the vertical ball is eliminated, or until the space behind them is small enough that the goalkeeper can intercept vertical passes.

2. Intercept Balls to Feet or Deny the Turn

The best backs will be able to position themselves to eliminate the danger of balls played behind them, but also such that they can step forward to intercept passes to the feet of forwards or attempted passes into the gaps between the back four. Defenders will increase their chance of intercepting passes by positioning themselves ball side and goal side of attackers within their zone. If it is impossible to intercept the pass, then the backs must be quick enough to close space and deny the attackers the opportunity to turn and run at the back line.

3. Never Cross In Front of Each Other

When the ball is in front of a specific back, only that back should step up to pressure the ball. The remaining three backs must drop into covering or balancing positions. One back should never cross in front of another back to pressure the ball and to “do another backs job” When backs cross in front of each other, gaps are left in the field which attackers will exploit.

4. Be Patient If the Attackers Have Good Width

If there is an attacker wider than the attacker in possession, than the outside back can never apply pressure on the ball. In this situation, pressure must come from the center of the field, and the outside back must drop to keep the widest attacker in front of them. If the outside back tries to apply pressure and leaves the wide attacker, the other defender will get caught in the middle and concede space and balls behind.

5. Use the concept of 3 + 1 or 1 + 3

This concept can help keep the back line always as a unit. There will be times when one player will need to step “out” of the line to pressurize. The other three remaining players must ensure that they stay close and connected as a team of 3 defenders. We cannot have the back line split apart into 2 groups of 2 players. The minimum is that one player is “out” from the other three. If we have three another player can fill in temporarily as our fourth defender as needed. This concept should also useful for when the ball is switched and players have to rotate to another side of the field.

Integrating Players From the Defensive “Block”

The defensive block was comprised of our back four defenders and central midfielders involved in the defensive action. Below are some ideas that the coach can use to help keep the central spine strong while at the same time have play on the flanks covered. One tactic that can be used is to create a “defensive diamond” using the back four and one central midfield player. This is also a particularly useful tactic for coaches who are moving from a stopper sweeper system to a zonal back four. In diagram 6 the defensive diamond is created. In the picture the right outside defender (4) has advanced into midfield and “pulled the other three members of the chain (3), (2), and (5) into a triangle shape. This triangle has been turned into a diamond by one of our center midfielders (6). If the ball were to move down the left hand side, our right defender would come back and be the outside right point of the defensive diamond.

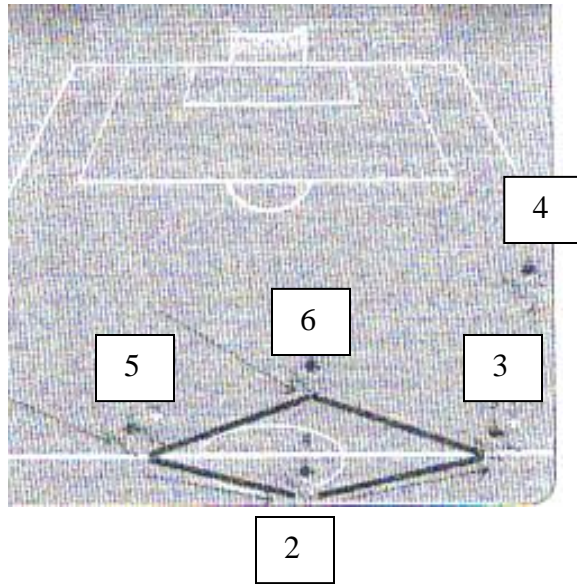
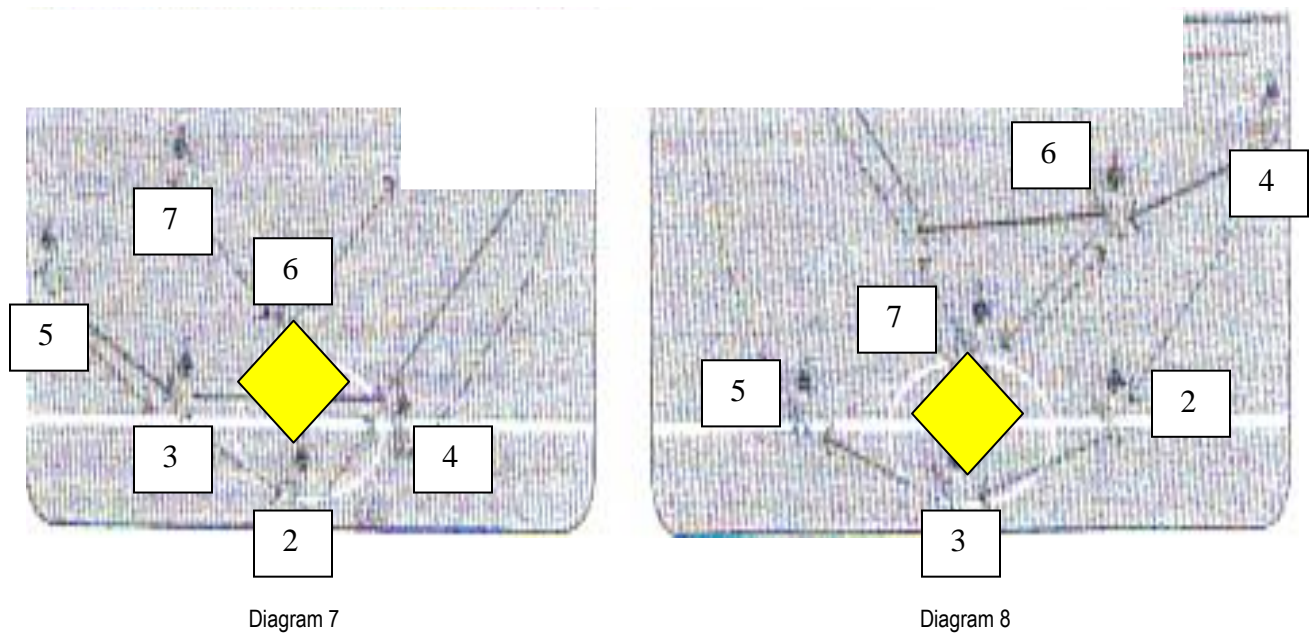


Diagram 6

The rotation of players used to create the defensive diamond on each side of the field is shown below. Notice that this defensive “block” uses 6 players. Diagram 7 shows the defensive diamond on the left side of the field, while diagram 8 shows the defensive diamond on the right side of the field. In diagram 7 our left defender (5) has moved out to pressure and “pulled (3), (2), and (4) to form a triangle. This triangle has been turned into a diamond by central midfielder (6). One can also note that a second defensive diamond can be made between (5), (3), (6), and (7). If the ball were moved by the opposition to our right side as in diagram 8 then we need to teach the team how to “shift”.

Since player (4) can most easily get out, they go out to pressure the ball and in doing so they pull the “chain” along. (2), (3), and (5) have now moved over to make a triangle. This triangle is now filled in by (7) to make a diamond. (6) has gone from the back line and moved into a position that can help cover (4) who is pressuring the ball.

The team that previously used the stopper/sweeper system could think of this as a “ball-oriented” system that dictates who the back diamond is. On the left hand side (2) is the “sweeper” while on the right hand side (3) is the “sweeper” Notice that the two center midfielders also performed this see-saw movement to interchange positions based upon the position of the ball.



Another way to integrate players together is to have a central midfielder “drop” into the back four line. In the diagram below the outside right defender has moved up to pressurize the ball. In this case both central defenders have also moved with to provide cover. While this happens a central midfielder rotates into the back line and another midfielder covers the center of the field. Here the principle of 3 + 1 has been used by the back line as 3 defenders have gone to the ball as a team of 3.



In this system of play the wide defenders often times “step” into the wide positions to pressurize the ball. They are often the closest players to do so when the ball is switched by the opponent. The coach can use the central midfielder(s) to reshape the back line as previously discussed. The interaction between the wide defender and wide midfielder are also an important one for the coach to teach to ensure that “gaps” do not develop in the team shape. In diagram 9 the ball is high up the pitch on the left hand flank. In this case the closest player to pressurize would be the outside left midfielder. Doing this keeps the forward players centrally located and open to a counterattack when the ball is won.

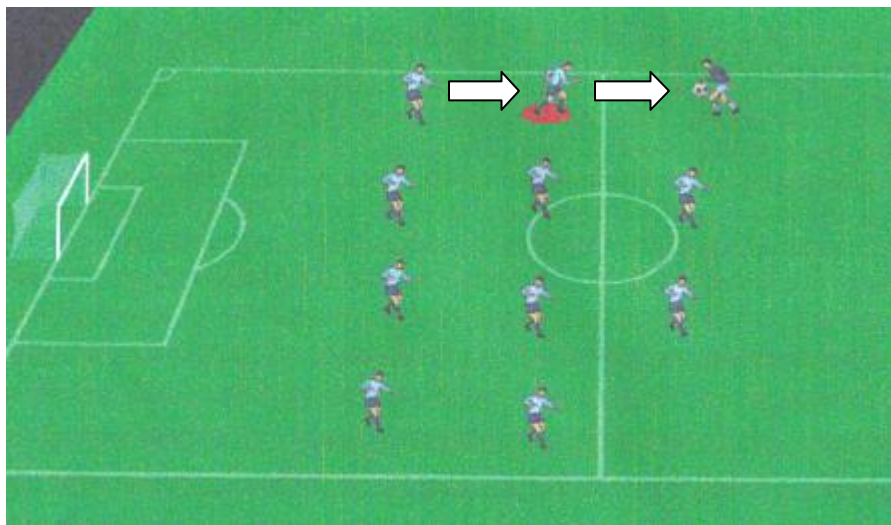
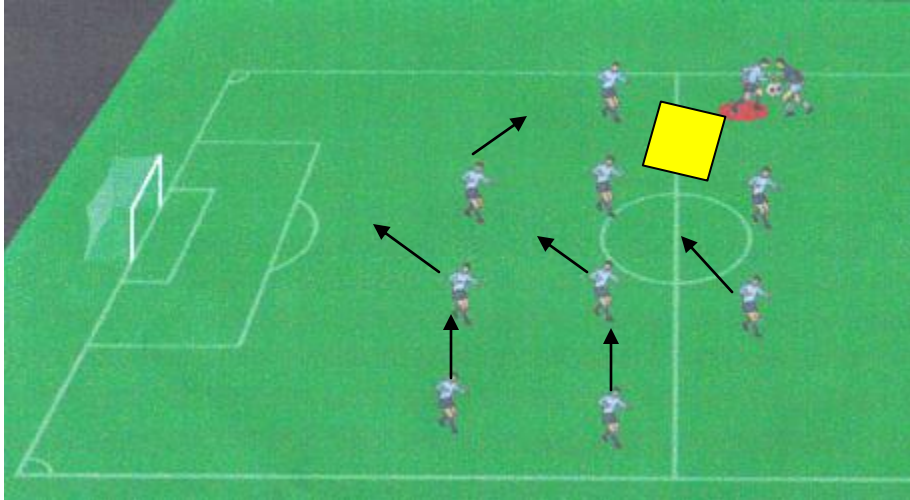


Diagram 9

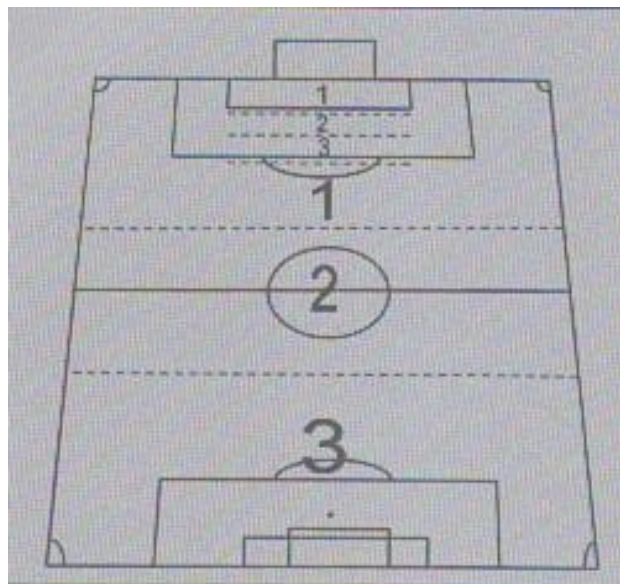
When the wide midfielder goes to pressurize the ball, a space will be created on the left side of the midfield. The coach must decide how this space will be filled and have the team trained to cover the space. In the diagram below the player that has filled the space is the outside left defender. This then causes the defensive chain to be pulled over. Shifting in this way keeps central players from moving out wide. The arrows in the diagram represent possible movements of the other players. Every movement that has been made during the team shifting will be dictated in order by:

- 1) Position of the Ball
- 2) Position of Teammates
- 3) Position of Opponents



The Role of the Goalkeeper

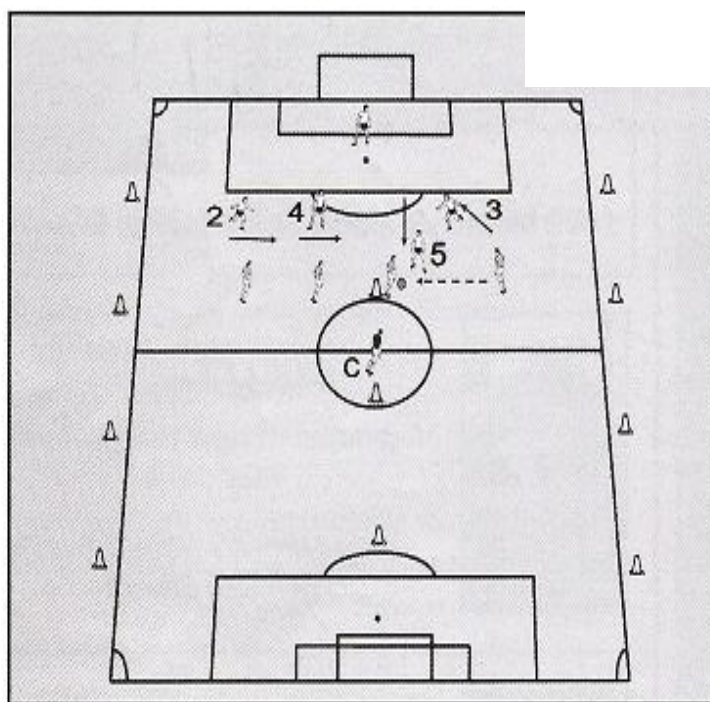
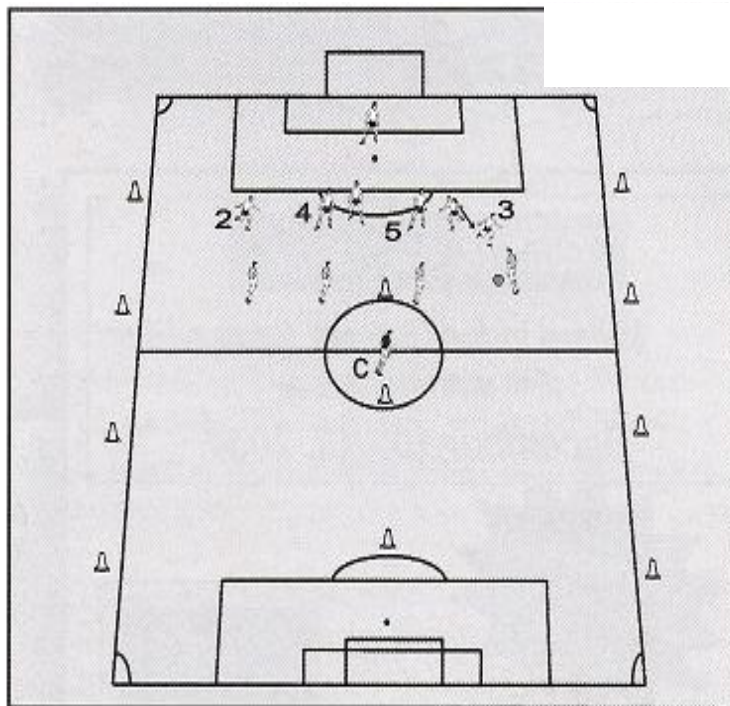
The goalkeeper plays a pivotal role in the defense of the team. Like the back line, their position is related to the position of the ball. The goalkeeper has to be alert and aware if the need exists for them to come out and cover the back line. A good rule of thumb for positioning can be found in the picture below. The goalkeeper divides the penalty area and field into thirds. The goalkeeper then positions themselves in the penalty area in relation to which third of the field the ball is in.



Zonal Back “Flat” Back Four System Training Activities and Progressions

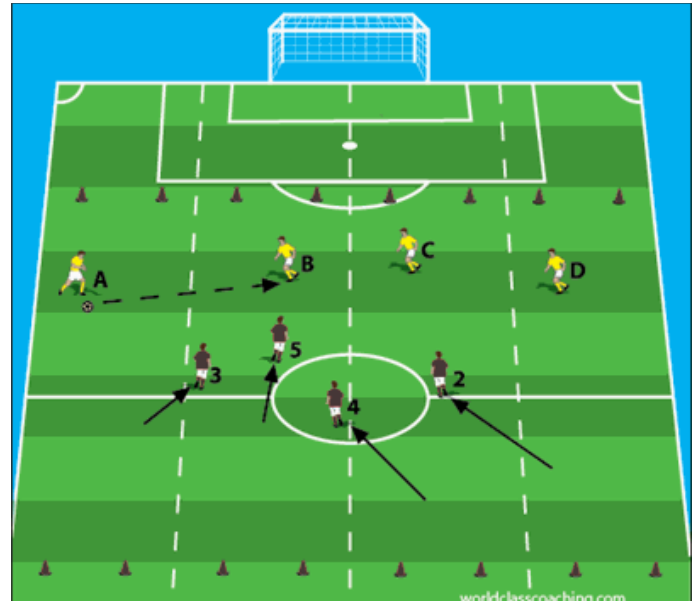
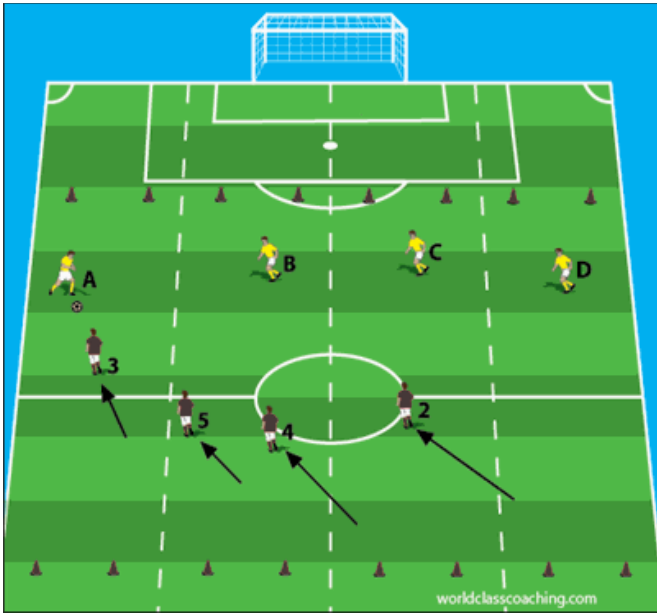
For any zonal defending system to work it is absolutely essential that individuals understand their roles within the team and that the team understands how to work together during match play. The next section will give you training activities and a progression of practices that the coach can use with their team. This progression starts as individuals in the back four line and then builds up to an 11 v 11 situation.

Concept # 1: Teach the Back 4 Line to Move and React to Ball Horizontally



Two lines of 4 are set up across from each other to “mirror” each other. We are training the players that represent the back four (2), (4), (5), and (3). The attacking players pass the ball across their line and in front of the defenders. The defenders adjust their position to mirror this movement. This is working on marking zones and marking players and distinguishing between the two, depending upon where the ball is. You will notice in the diagrams above that player 3 is initially pressurizing the ball. When the ball moves away from player 3’s zone, they slide back and in to cover player 5 who is now pressurizing the ball. After the coach feels that the players have the concept of pressuring and covering as a team of 4, the attackers can go live at goal against the defenders and goalkeeper.

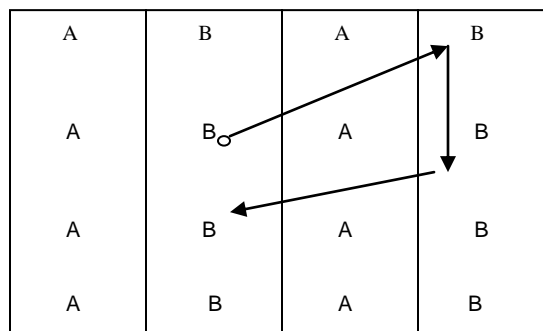
In these activities, the players move with the ball directly in front of them. It is worth pointing out, however, that this pressure and cover shape applies throughout the course of the entire match. Even if the ball is farther away and in front of one or two other lines, this shape is still adopted and used as the ball is the object that dictates our shape. This will be covered in more detail as we teach the back four line to move forward.



Now the players move to a more game like situation. The field has been divided into four zones and four small goals are placed at the end of each zone. For the team that is attacking, players cannot change zones, but the ball can cross zones. For the defensive team, players can move into other zones to adopt support positions. Players should work on identifying who is to pressure and who is to drop and cover. In the diagram above to the left, player 3 has stepped out to pressure the ball. This player should call "I go ball", when the ball moves as in the diagram at the right, player 5 now says "I go ball" as the ball is in his zone. Player 3 has adopted a covering position. When the ball is lost players instantly go to playing as defenders. Players can score by dribbling into the goal or by passing the ball through on the ground. Passing the ball through would mean that the defensive team allowed a penetrating pass. The game below can also be used to teach players how to pressure and cover as a line of 4.

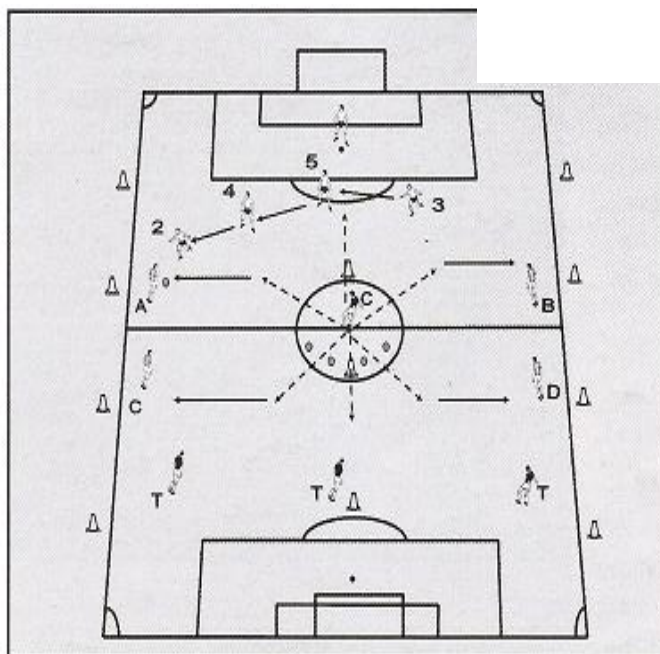
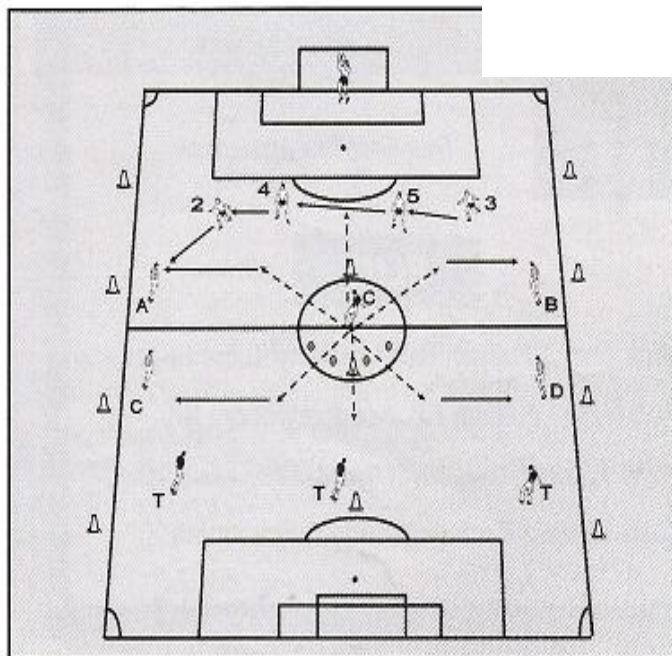
4 Players Per Zone in 4 Zones

- 16 players total in game, field is divided into 4 different zones, and 4 players are put in each zone as shown in diagram
- Players must stay in their given zones
- Zones are 10-15 yards wide and 25-30 yards long
- Teams work to keep possession of the ball by passing it through a line of players who defends
- Team B has possession in the diagram and one A group defends while the other waits
- When the A team wins it they try to connect to their waiting teammates and the line of B players defends
- Coach the defending team to have the appropriate player pressure and others play at correct covering angles
- As the ball moves players try to make goals (spaces between them) smaller



Zonal Back “Flat” Back Four System Training Activities and Progressions

Concept # 2: Teach the Back 4 Line to Move and React to Ball Vertically



Now that the group of back four players now how to defend as the ball moves horizontally, they also need to know how to operate and work together as the ball moves up and down the field vertically. Since we are now moving the line in multiple directions the coach can introduce signal words to simplify the movements to be made. Examples of such words can be: UP, OUT, HOLD, DROP, SLIDE

UP = Move up the field towards attacking goal

OUT= A player moves outside of the 18 to pressurize

HOLD = The line is not going to drop back any further or concede any more space

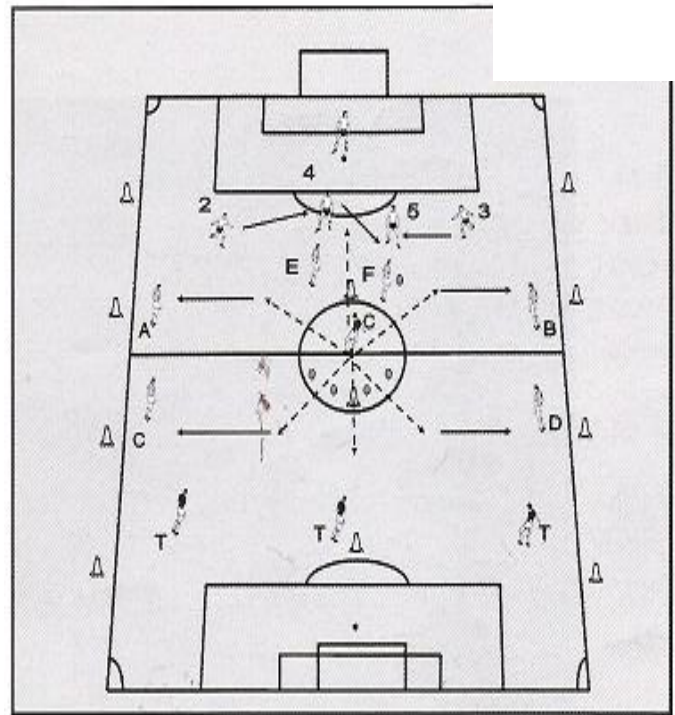
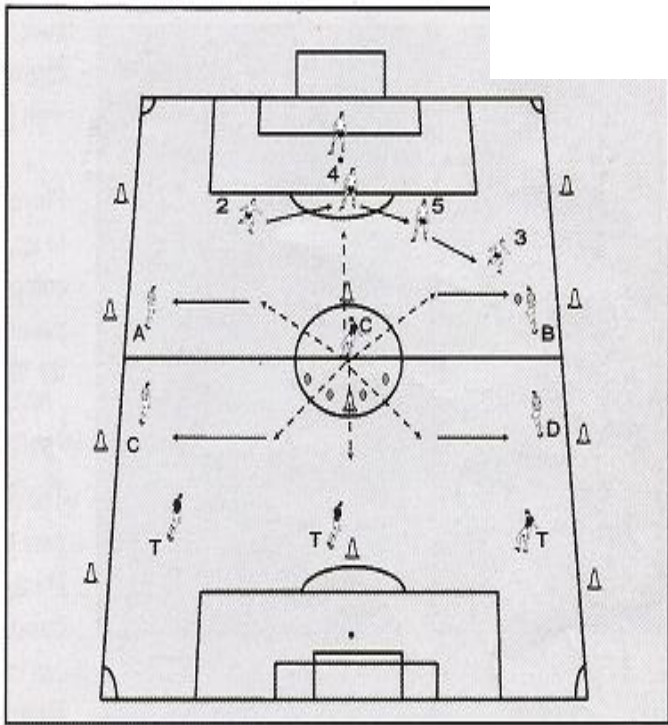
DROP = Poor pressure on the ball or threat causes the line to drop

SLIDE = The ball has been switched by the opponent or moved and the entire team or line needs to adjust their positions

In the diagram at the top left the coach now has the options of A, B, C, and D to pass the ball to. These players will work to “pass” the ball and the coach will work with the team to check their positions as well as use the code words previously discussed. The defending team can win the ball back only with interceptions and can pass to targets “t” when the ball is won.

When the ball is at C or D, the back four take up positions with regard to A and B, and do not get drawn to the ball, they will have to be patient and keep in mind that a midfield would also be in place during a live match.

Once the ball has been passed wide, the back four SLIDE into position. Notice that the back four is NOT FLAT, but rather angled and linked between each player, with the central defender being the deepest player. This player can effectively be called the “Sweeper”. When the ball is with B player 4 becomes the sweeper and when the ball is with A player 5 becomes the sweeper. So the deepest defender is a shared responsibility between the two center backs and the responsibility depends upon which side of the field the ball is at.



The diagram above to the left shows the ball with B and player 4 becoming the deepest defender. Notice that 2, 4, and 5 form a triangular shape that when we add the midfield can be the defensive diamond in the back.

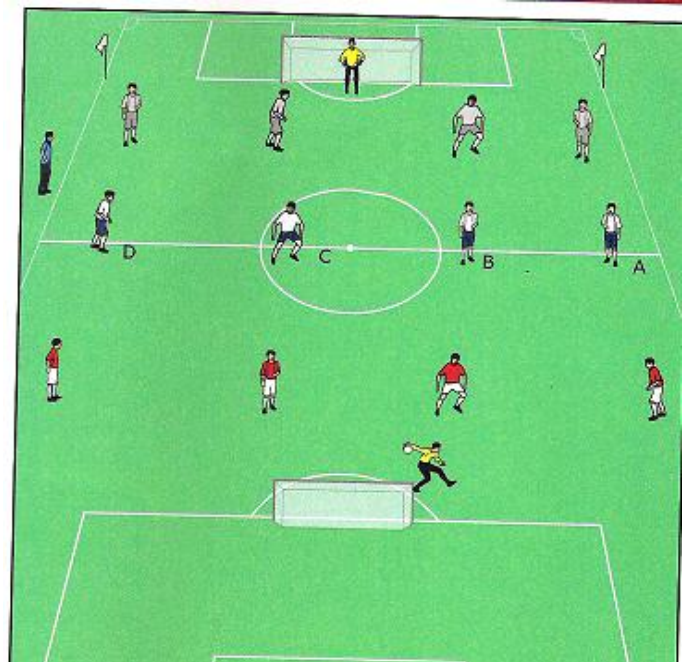
The diagram to the right above shows the coach adding two strikers E and F to increase the passing options and choices for the back four defenders. The coach should stop/freeze play at any time to check defenders positioning. Defenders continue to position themselves based on the position of the ball, their immediate opponent, and the goal. At the same time they must maintain their shape to ensure that there are no holes created between them for the opposition to exploit.

8 v 4 Overload Game

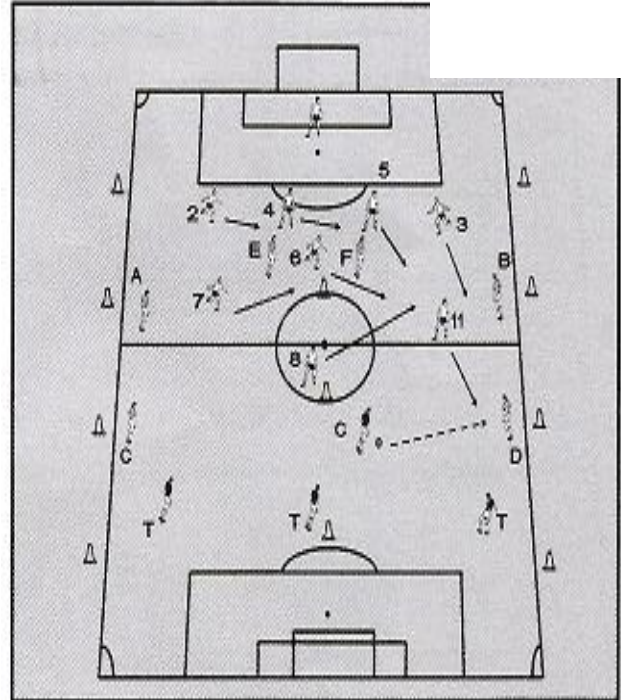
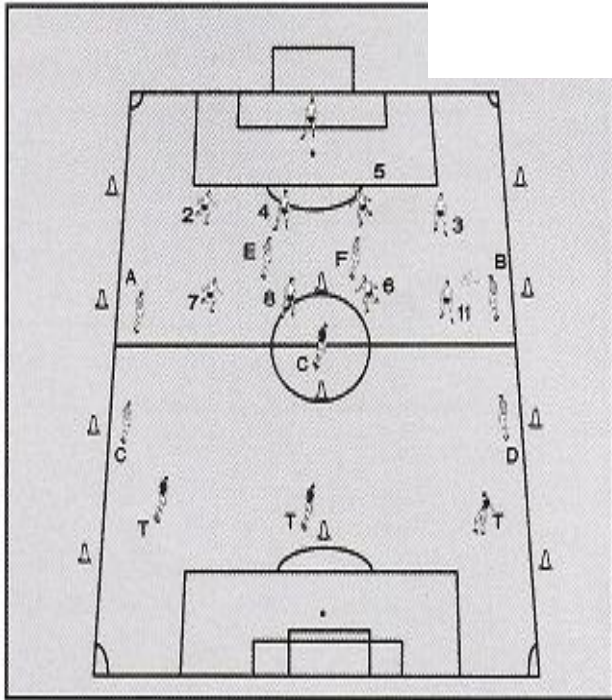
To now test the players in a more realistic game situation, a field is set up from 18 to 18 with full size goals and goalkeepers. There are two back four chains playing against each other (gray and red in the diagram) There is a midfield line of 4 as well (white)

Play starts with the GK rolling the ball out to the red back four who will attack the goal with the four white midfielders to create a 8 v 4 situation.

The defenders are obviously outnumbered, however, must work hard as the ball moves, communicate well, and be patient. When a goal is scored, the ball goes out, or the goalkeeper saves, then the gray team plays with the white midfielders and the red back four defend against the attack.



Concept # 3: Teach the Back 4 To Work With Central and Outside Midfielders



Now that the back four chain has been taught how to move vertically and horizontally we must also teach them how the midfield is to defend in front of them. This is where the coach conveys to the team their tactical plan for defending. Any tactical plan should address the following depending upon the position of the ball:

PRESSURE = Where does it come from when the ball is at various spots

COVER = Which players move into covering positions as the ball moves

BALANCE = Where do players go to provide defensive balance to the team shape

RECOVER = When the team moves from an attacking shape, where do players recover to

It is at this stage where the coach can begin working with the defensive block to develop a system of movements for defending. Working with the block of players will teach individuals and lines of individuals how to work together as a TEAM

Using the same progression of practices used previously, the coach now adds the midfield on top of the back four line and the ball is circulated between the attackers. Again the team can only win by intercepting the pass. Examples of possible movements are shown in the diagrams above for a four player midfield.



Another practice that can be used by the coach is to again divide the field into four zones with small goals at the end of each zone. In the first game above to the left, a defensive block plays against 4 attackers. The attackers cannot move zones, however, the defenders can. You can add in the rule that the defenders can only intercept the ball. In this diagram the defensive block involves 6 players. Once the players have developed an understanding for how to work with central midfielders the coach could add on any wide players in their chosen pattern as well as midfield attacking players. We now have a more complex game that involves two lines of players attacking against two defensive lines of players.

In this game diagrammed at the upper right, the attacking team cannot move zones, however, the defensive team can. Goals are scored by dribbling or passing the ball through the small goals. Eventually change the condition and let all attackers change zones and let defenders tackle the ball to win it

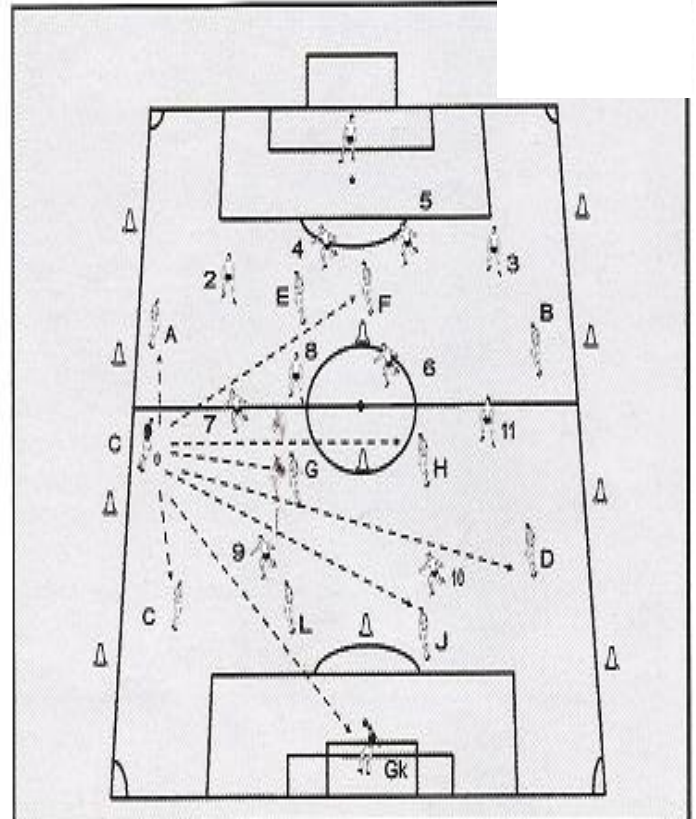
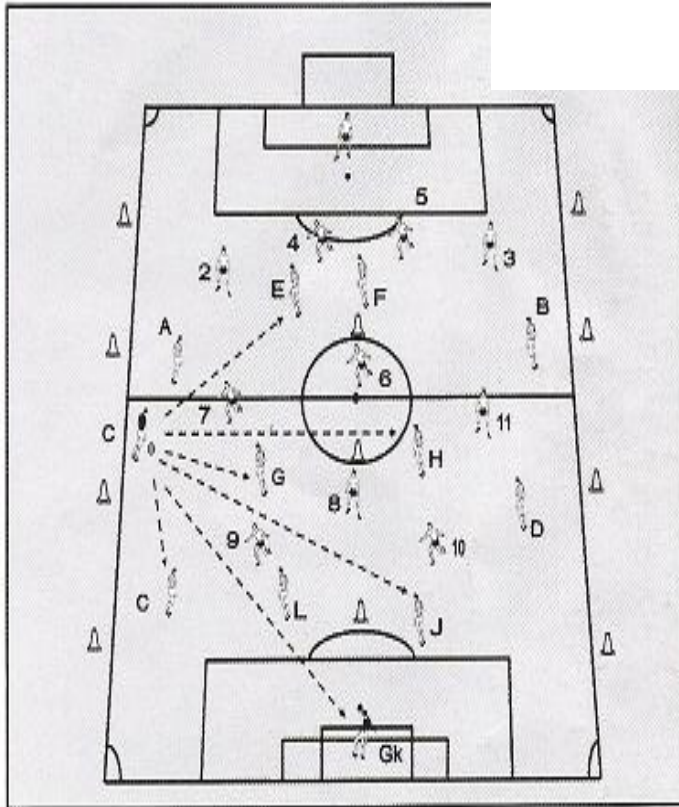
The final progression shown below would be to have one back line and midfield defend a large goal with goalkeeper against 8 attackers (8 v 8) The defending team can play to small target goals when they win possession



Five Things a Midfielder Has To Think About

- *Recover* back and get *goal side*
- Be the *pressurizing player* to stop the player on the ball (win, delay or force one way)
- *Support* the pressurizing player with angle, distance and communication
- Cover their *own opponent*, so as they receive the ball, they can close them down
- *Step into passing lanes* to prevent forward passes

Concept # 4: Teaching Players 11 v 11 Shape and Movements



In the last practice progression we built play up to an 8 v 8 situation. In the final teaching phase we will add the additional players and use a full sized pitch. It is at this point that team tactics such as setting the line of pressure and line of defense, steering the ball, transition to attack, etc., can be discussed in more depth.

In the diagrams above the coach serves to the opponents in different locations and the defending team tries to win the ball back individually and collectively. The objective of the defending team when they win the ball could be just to chip the ball into the opponents GK, this would put them back on defense and allow the coach to work on team defending shape.

Zonal defending as a team using the 4-3-1-2 system of play is shown on the top left team (numbered players are the defending team). This session can be set up in any team's preferred system of play. In the example shown at the upper right the team is shaped in a 4-4-2 (numbered players are again the zonal defending team)

The Full Field Four Zones Game

- Regular 8 v 8 or 11 v 11 game
- Field divided into 4 horizontal zones
- Award defending team points when they win the ball back in a chosen zone
 - Example: Zone 1 = 3 points, Zone 2 = 2 points, Zone 3 = 1 point, Zone 4 = 0 points
 - This would change depending upon where coach and team want to force the play and win it
 - Great for working on lines of pressure and defense as well as where to press and try to win the ball
- All players try to work together for common defensive purpose, when team does not have ball
- Give defending objectives to both teams



Implementing the Flat Back Four

Making a change, even midseason!

You've read the articles. You've talked to other coaches. You've seen it on the playing fields. It's right for your team, and you want to make a change. How can you possibly do it midseason?

Well, I can tell you first-hand, it can be done. I heard many positive things about using a flat back four defense. You know the arguments. Improve decision-making. Increase technical demands, and therefore, technical ability. Improve the team's counter attack. And, in addition to all of this, it better fit the players that I had; that is, in comparison with using a single Sweeper deep in the back.

Before we started, I discussed the change at length with the team and at length with the parents. The conversation with the parents was particularly important. I had to set expectations for the coming weeks, as well as limit, the best I could, any sideline coaching.

In order to make the switch we needed to be well grounded in the basic concepts of 1st, 2nd, and 3rd defenders; that is, pressure, cover, and balance. My players clearly understood and executed the role of pressure (1st) defender, and had a basic understanding of covering (2nd) defender; however, we would need to work on this, as well as in the area of defensive balance (3rd defender).

We spent the next practice reviewing the role of the first defender and "introducing" the second defender. At the following practice we worked primarily on cover. This was a fairly easy concept for the players to understand; however, getting them to execute consistently and communicate effectively, was difficult. We were making progress, though.

The tough part of the change was teaching the role of the third defender. This is obviously a vital part of playing a flat four in the back since you lose the safety net of the Sweeper. "Balance" is a tough concept for U12's to comprehend. I found speaking in terms of "Shape" got the message across much more effectively. They understood the need to maintain shape, and could see how that related to what was going on in the field. Telling them to maintain balance meant nothing. Telling them to watch their shape made them aware of the space, their teammates, and the opponents they were trying to defend.

Making this change was obviously a difficult and risky task. We were a U12 Boys team fighting to earn Premier status. We could hardly afford to give away a game because the coach wanted to try something new. Fortunately, we were at a point in our schedule where we could take some chances. As luck would have it, we had a stretch of league games against teams in our district that were struggling a bit. Even with a new system, we should be okay.

Additionally, these games sandwiched a tournament we had entered at U13. Since we were playing up an age group, parental expectations were low. We could afford to try something new. This gave us a total of six games in which we could test the waters, certainly a long enough time to see if we could adapt this scheme.

So how did it go? Much better than expected. We've made great progress, but there are still mistakes. Several times along the way, we got caught too flat and gave up the breakaway goal. Many times our shape would break down, and we'd give up dangerous passes. Our covering defender still needs work. Too often, we get hung up on what part of the field we're playing, and leave our teammate all alone. Lastly, after much encouragement to make runs into the offense, we did...all at once leaving no one in the back to play defense.

Those are the downsides. Here are the plusses. Technically, everyone's game is getting better. We're playing smarter; more technically and tactically sound soccer. Overall, we're defensively much stronger. We ran off four straight shutouts during the season, and two straight shutouts in District playoffs to win the District tournament. And, we earned our Premier status.

Here's the bottom line. You can make changes. The players are way more flexible than we give them credit for. Certainly, in our case, the scheduling opportunity was a lucky break, but there's always a tournament upcoming you can use to test the water. Also, there's the Fall season. Fewer games. Fewer tournaments. Less pressure. Take that opportunity to stretch your players and teach them something new, even in mid-season. In the long term, you and your players will benefit greatly.

Jim DiSalle
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