

Overview of Pressure, Cover & Balance

Objective: To provide coaches with a basic understanding of the principles of the team defensive tactics of pressure, cover & balance. The role and technical breakdown of each defender role will be explored in later Coaching Points.

Discussion:

Pressure, cover, balance refers to the responsibilities of the defender based on their proximity to the ball. Formerly, the defenders were identified as the first, second, and third defenders....but USSF is moving away from those names, as they do not help the player know what their job is, whereas the name of the responsibility does.

Pressure Defender

The pressure defender is not someone on the field with a baseball cap that says "pressure defender". The pressure defender is the defender close enough to the ball to pressure the ball, to possibly tackle the ball, and to possibly turn the first attacker (the player with the ball) away from the attack.

The pressure defender's role is pressure. The defender first tries to prevent possession by denying the ball, if possession is gained then the defender tries to prevent the attacker from turning his/her hips to goal, if the attacker has turned to the goal then the defender tries to keep the attacker from being able to run at goal, and, at all times, tries to prevent the attacker from getting a shooting opportunity. How do you know when you are applying enough pressure? When you aren't so close that the attacker dribbles by, but close enough that the attacker must put their head down look at the ball.

Cover Defender

The cover defender(s) are those close enough to cover the space behind the first defender should the attacker with the ball dribble by the pressure defender, **and** far enough away to block the likely passing lanes leading to the goal. The positioning of the cover defender is critical to their success. They need to be close enough behind the pressure defender to stop a dribbling run by the attacker with the ball, should that attacker beat the pressure defender....but also far enough back and wide to protect the passing lane that the attacker with the ball may try to use to pass to their closest teammates on a run to the goal. They do not worry about the attacker with the ball passing to a nearby attacker that is the same distance from the goal...because if they do they will end up marking too tightly and allowing a penetrating pass to go between them and the pressure defender.

Balance Defender

All other defenders are balance defenders. These are defenders who are not close enough to pressure the ball or to cover space behind the pressure defender. Balance

defenders are generally not close to the ball. They provide "balance." This means that while other defenders are close to the ball to apply pressure and to try to win the ball, balance defenders cover space on the side of the field away from the ball. Balance defenders also track runners who run at space behind the defense. They do not simply mark attackers closely that are far from the ball. Rather, they guard the space between the ball and these attackers...keeping their head on a swivel: look at the ball, look at the wide attacker, back to the ball, back to the wide attacker.

Lastly, the roles of the individual defenders changes as the ball moves around the field. A cover defender can instantly become the pressure defender should the player directly before them receive the ball. The former pressure defender would then drop off and likely become a cover defender.

Take aways:

Coaches should strive to learn the proper labels of the tactical roles for team defending.

Coaches should use these terms when describing what the players should be doing while defending.

Players should grow to understand their role in defending, in relation to the ball, at any given time.

Players should grow to understand that their role changes as the ball moves.