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Defending in the Final Third : Center Backs and Center Midfielders

The tactics of the game are based on principles of the offense and defense, with one the opposite of the other. All teams need to understand and employ those principles in order to be successful consistently. This is especially true when defending in the last third. I have seen players make some poor decisions and teams with a very open defensive shape not spotted by the coaches. Indoor or outdoor, the principles are the same and we should always coach and train with them in mind. The defensive principles are : **pressure the ball, delay attack, deny space, compactness keep shape, make play predictability and balance.** These are broken down into 1st, 2nd, 3rd defender, group and team defending. Outside of the principles **good communication between all players is most important!!**

Two of the key positions with respect to defending in the final third are the Center Back (CB) and the Center Mid Fielder (CM). Here are some qualities of center back (CB) and center midfield (CM) players at the U-21 level for a German club (ref: Success in Soccer).

Center Backs (CB)

Technical : very good heading skills, very good passing short and long, good diagonal flighted balls, strong good tackler.

Tactical : good positional play 1v1, covering space, anticipate game situations.

Physical qualities : good speed and strength.

Psychologically : aggressive.

Center Midfield (CM)

Technical : solid passing and ball skills, good heading and shooting from distance.

Tactical : transition from offense to defense quickly and opposite, anticipate game situations, creativity, makes good quick decisions.

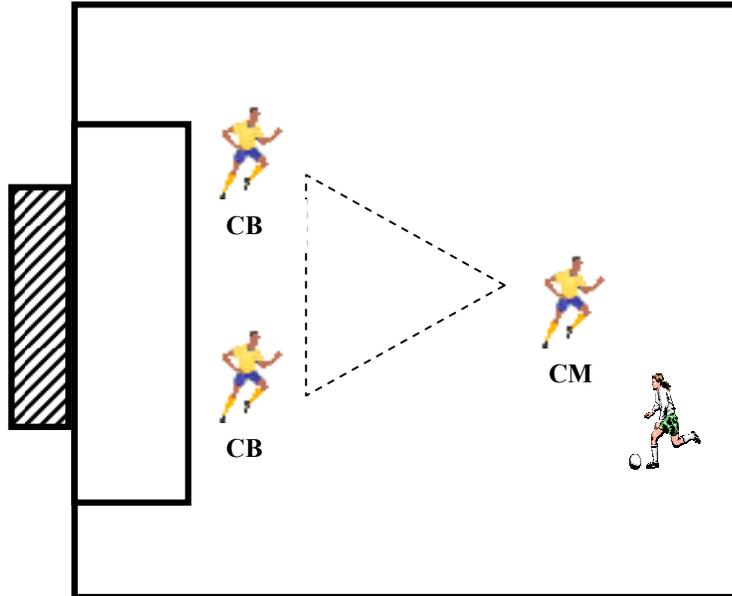
Physical qualities : good endurance, fast over short distance, good tackler.

Psychologically : strong leadership.

Obviously this takes a lot of commitment by coaches, players and family over a number of years.

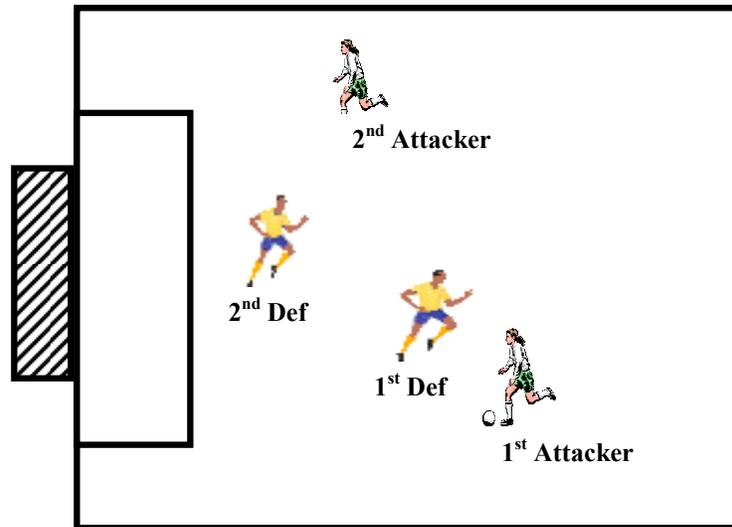
The center positions of the team are the most important as they contain the strength, engine and defends in front of your goal. The professional game shows how important the holding or defensive midfielder has become as fullbacks push deeper into attacking positions. The CB and CM players form a defensive triangle to protect the goal, implying that the space in front, behind and laterally to the CB needs defending. This shape needs to move, stay **compact** and maintain its shape as the ball moves position through **communication and visual cues.** The CM is the point of the triangle and the idea is to slow the attack down (**delay**) and force the play diagonally away from goal (**deny**). This allows other players to recover behind the ball and return into a team **compact** defense. If the midfield player can win the ball, win it; the main concern is NOT to get beaten allowing the opposition to attack the goal directly. The CM has to cover the space in front and laterally to the

CB moving in an arc shape while looking to cut out balls that could be played between CBs. The CB's have to cover each other, the space between them and the vertical space behind them. Once a team loses possession they are in transition and should immediately switch to defending their goal. This is where our defensive triangle comes into effect :



The CM applies pressure quickly and under control forcing the attacker in one direction, ideally towards the touchline. Making play predictable and keeping the attackers head down reduces their options to penetrate. The two CB must remain compact and in support (**depth**) of the CM while watching the center forwards movement. This gives us a 3 v 3 situation, not ideal but as long as players are patient while others are recovering it can work to reduce shoots on goal. The CBs must be careful not to get separated laterally and vertically in this situation (**balance**). What our young players tend to do is mark the attacker to tight and when he/she moves the defender goes with them opening up the space for the offense. As long as we are compact and the further the attackers separate the more accurate the pass has to be as it travels a longer distance. The longer the distance the better the chance to recover defensively running diagonally as the ball travels. The player moving without the ball seems to be causing most of the problems defensively to our teams. Here are some ideas that may help, keeping the defensive principles in mind.

Train your 1st and 2nd defenders by utilizing a 2v2 setup going to goal. In this situation, the 2nd defender may have several questions : Stay with my player? What position do I take up? Support teammate? Or drop back to my goal? The 2nd defender should be communicating with 1st defender to apply pressure and direction to make the attack predictable, away from 2nd attacker and goal. The 2nd defender can also pick up visual cues that can help with anticipating the situation, body shape, attacker speeding up or slowing down. The 2nd defender should take up a supporting position diagonally behind on the inside shoulder not too deep (3-5 ft). Keep the hips square to reduce the amount of goal the attacker can see and maintain proper spacing between the CB's so balls cannot be played between them. This will force the attacker laterally. Do not follow the 2nd attacker laterally or vertically as this opens up the space they want to exploit and the CB's lose compactness. The idea here is to reduce the 1st attacker's options, making play predictable so we can win the ball back. If the 2nd attacker does receive a pass because we have forced him wide, are recovering diagonally to the ball and our keeper is covering the near post. This leaves a small and predictable area of the goal to shoot at.



Covering the long ball this is a visual and anticipation decision by all defenders, which most times happens to late. Visually, if the attacking player has time (lack of defensive pressure) they can get their head up to see the field and open their hips to play a long ball forward. Most players wait until the ball starts to descend to react resulting in chasing the ball towards their own goal under pressure. The ball has now penetrated the space we wanted to defend. So how can we defend this? Not with a sweeper, as I feel it takes away from a young players development. Once we anticipate the long pass, the defense and midfield, except for the 1st and 2nd players applying pressure, drop towards their goal. This allows the defense to attack the ball in the air and the midfield ready to pick up the second ball and clear it.

If the ball is played centrally, one CB should attack it the other should drop and tuck in along with the fullback who is closest to the ball. Their role is to defend the space behind the defense so that if the ball is flicked on or drops to the side they can pressure it going towards the opposition's goal creating a defensive triangle. The other fullbacks tuck in laterally square to the non-attacking CB making it balanced on the weak side. This would be a "flat" 4 defense. A 3-player defense would create the defensive triangle with the wide midfield players providing the balance. If the ball is played towards or along the touchline then the fullback attacks the ball while the other defenders drop behind and diagonally across the pitch with the last two defenders defending in front of the goal again "flat" 4 defense. With 3-player defense the outside player attacks the ball the rest of the players take up the same shape with the wide midfield player on the opposite side dropping in.

These are a couple of tactical ideas that I have used in the past but at times just getting the ball out of defense works best. Ultimately the best defense is the player's technical ability to keep possession of the ball. Otherwise, youth teams defense breaks down due to the mental concentration required that would deplete player's energy levels.

Have A Great Tournament Season !!

Coach Murph

It's For The Kids !!