

## DEFENDING: Theories & Concepts

Coaching defense is similar in theory to coaching attacking: you must begin with individual defending before going on to group and team defensive tactics. The general rule of thumb by which all coaches must coach is this: "There are no tactics without techniques!" Players need to learn defending as an individual, in a 1v1 encounter, before they can really begin to understand group dynamics. Coach defending, but start with individual skill first.

In his book, *The Soccer Method "Defending"* (©2006 Reedswain Publishing), author Hank Mariman writes: "The coaching of young soccer players is based primarily on having possession of the ball. Clearly the players must learn how to play when their team has the ball. However, they must also learn about playing when the opposition has possession. Ultimately they must be able to perform in real games, and in real games their team will not always have the ball... 'Defending' is then also a key element."

Coach defense. Start by emphasizing the 5 Defending Principles:

- 1) Pressure-Delay
- 2) Support-Depth
- 3) Balance/Compactness
- 4) Concentration
- 5) Clearing the Ball

Begin the teaching of defense with defending in a 1v1 battle (Principle #1). Progress to small group work -- defending in a 2v2, 3v3 and 4v4 environment (Principles #2, #3, #4). Drill defending in numbers-down situations, such as 3v2, 4v3, 7v4, etc. Then coach team defending. Decide, based on the talent of your players, what kind of team defending you will employ in a given match.

There are 2 basic types of team defending:

- 1) Zone Marking -- players are assigned areas of the pitch and defend within these zones;
- 2) Man Marking -- players are assigned opposition players.

Of course, there is a combination of the two that is popular -- man marking within a zone. Within these 2 concepts are other tactical considerations, such as how to play your backline -- flat, staggered, in a diamond, etc. Most professional and elite teams play zone defense, which was not always the case. In fact, as little as 15 years ago, man marking was the popular choice. But now, soccer players have gotten bigger and faster and more skilled technically paving the way for zone defending. Amazingly, many high school coaches have stuck with the man marking dinosaur for whatever reason!

Youth teams should go with a zone defending system. On rare occasions, you may need to man mark an individual player. The drawback there is that by putting a defender on the opposition's best player you not only may take the opposing player out of the game but you are definitely taking your player out of your attack.

Zone defending is better for youth teams because it takes away individual responsibility. A young player asked to man mark an opposing player will be more hesitant about getting into the attack when his other team is in possession of the ball.

So let's get going with our discussion of defense, beginning with individual defending, specifically in a 1v1 situation.

To begin teaching individual defense to your players you must first teach the players how to defend in a 1v1 situation. The first defending principle -- Pressure -- refers to the first defender; that is, the defender closest to the opposing player with the ball.

Upon losing possession of the ball, a player must apply pressure to the opponent in an attempt to regain possession. Indeed, as important as it is to win the 1v1 confrontation as an attacker, it may be even more important to win the 1v1 battle as the defender.

Individual defending should be a major part of a practice session and should be an emphasized theme in preseason training.

First and foremost teach the correct stance:

- 1) Stance is not flat-footed, with the feet planted and wider than the hips, weight on the balls and toes;
- 2) One foot ahead of the other;
- 3) Body balanced in a slight crouch;
- 4) Eyes on the ball.

One of the practice sessions I would run with my girls' team was titled, "The Competitive Cauldron". It is based on the University of North Carolina system as directed by Anson Dorrance, the women's head coach. This session begins with 1v1 battles and I would alternate the emphasis -- either defensive or attacking.

Before emphasizing the defensive portion of the 1v1, I would run the following drill that teaches not only the correct stance but also the right way to approach an attacker in a 1v1 situation.

### **Defending Drill -- "Delay-Tackle-Takeaway"**

Setup: All players with a ball. Players place ball 10-12 yards away.

>> The first run is called "Delay" and involves 3 movements:

- 1-Players sprint the first 5-6 yards
- 2-The next few deceleration steps are slow and short
- 3-The player then stops in the correct defensive position about one yard short of the ball
- This procedure is called "Quick-Slow-Sideways Low" -- Quick (sprint), Slow (deceleration), Sideways Low (defensive stance)

>> The second run is called "Tackle"

- Here, the players sprint or move quickly and aggressively to the ball
- Upon reaching the ball, the players assume the correct blocking/tackle position –
  - Feet form a right angle
  - One foot, the plant foot, is alongside the ball
  - The other foot, the tackle foot, is placed in front of the ball, the ankle and heel aligned with the center of the ball

>> The third run is called "Takeaway"

- Players sprint or move aggressively to the ball and, performing a pull-back (bottom of foot is placed on top of the ball and is pulled back and behind the player who then turns and takes a dribble), take the ball away

Each run should be performed as many times as it takes for the players to become comfortable. After which the coach could then make it a fitness, competitive drill by calling out any of the 3 segments -- "Delay", "Tackle" or "Takeaway". After each run, players should return to the starting line by backpedaling. From this 1v1 segment you can then move into 2v2, 3v3 and 4v4 matches, all of which will further emphasize the five defending principles.