

Set Piece Play: The Four Principles

No matter what phase -- attacking or defending -- you are talking about, Set Piece Play is an important aspect of coaching in soccer.

What is Set Piece Play?

Any type of free kick -- be it Goal Kick, Corner Kick, Direct Kick, Indirect Kick, Kickoff, or Penalty - or Throw-In or Dropped Ball is considered a Set Piece and as such should be practiced. Other phrases or words used to describe these situations are "Dead-Ball" or "Re-Starts".

When practicing these aspects of the game most youth coaches seem to focus more on the attacking side and rightfully so. A Set Piece Play is the only time a ball is stationary and allowing the attacking team to actually organize and run a set play of sorts. Most coaches have a few set plays concerning mostly corner kicks and free kicks. And these set plays are practiced.

But defending set pieces should never be ignored. No one has ever really done a scientific study on what percentage of goals are scored off a free kick. Estimates range from 25% to 35% of all goals scored come off a set play like a corner kick or direct or indirect free kick. Whatever the percentage, it's impressively high enough that defending them is as important as conducting them.

Whether attacking or defending a set piece play, keep these four principles -- the what, where, who, when and how -- in mind:

- Be Prepared: know exactly WHAT your responsibility is;
- Be Organized: know exactly WHERE on the pitch you should be;
- Be Aware: know exactly WHO is where at all times;
- Be Active: know WHEN to move and HOW to get where you need to go -- Get to the ball!

Perhaps the most exciting of all set piece plays is the Corner Kick. Coaches dread them when their team is defending one. Coaches love them when their team is taking one. Both are because of the goal-scoring opportunity the corner kick presents.

Detailed attention is paid to the attacking corner kick and not enough to the defending of it. Adhering to the Four Principles -- Be Prepared, Be Organized, Be Aware, Be Active -- is the first key to both attacking and defending a corner kick.

Before moving to the attacking and defending portions of a corner kick, let's first look at some important concepts.

Four Types of Corner Kicks

- In-Swinging Kick: the ball is kicked and bends or curves in toward the goal.
- Out-Swinging Kick: the ball is kicked and bends or curves away from the goal.
- Short Corner Kick: this is where there are 2 players close to the ball; usually, the 2 players do a quick 1-2 passing combination with the first player then crossing the ball in toward the goal area.
- Play Back Kick: this is a safe, conservative alternative, where the ball is kicked back up the wing toward an outside midfielder or fullback who has made a run down the sideline toward the corner.

Scoring Areas

- The Near Post: the post area closest to the corner where the ball is being kicked.
- The Middle: the area between the two posts extending out from the goal line to just past the penalty spot/mark.
- The Far (or Back) Post: the post area farthest from the ball.

- Top of the Box: the area stretching from one side of the 18 yard or Penalty Box to the other, extending out from the penalty spot/mark to just outside the box.

TAKING THE CORNER KICK

There is no particular kick or particular scoring area that is the preferred. The general rule of thumb when taking the corner kick is to vary it from kick to kick -- in-swinger to out-swinger to short corner.

Youth coaches, obviously, are not going to practice too many "in-swingers" or "out-swingers". Just getting the ball into the penalty area is enough. However, it is important to have some set plays. This gives a look of organization. Plus, young players like it.

The best way to do this is to have one setup plan (all the players set up in the same spot for every kick) with two or three options off of the one setup (see examples next 2 pages). Coaches with players capable of striking the ball to or past the back post need to teach the "in-swinger" and "out-swinger" and have designed plays for all four kicks.

DEFENDING THE CORNER KICK

The main question -- or should I say, dilemma -- is whether to employ a "Man Marking" system or go with "Zonal" defending. The feeling here is that, despite the fact that many youth teams prefer the man-marking system, Zonal Defending is best. Man Marking has too much individual responsibility, and, therefore, too much accountability should a goal be scored. Defense is a team thing. Zonal defending requires team unity. Team organization. And is simple, really to teach, both at the small-sided game and at 11v11.

Rules of thumb, regardless of level of play (8v8 or 11v11):

- Always have players on both posts and tell them to remain in their spots until the ball makes its way out of the box. (Note: Who can ever forget the 1999 Women's World Cup Final when the great USA star Kristine Lilly headed away a ball that was destined for the back of the net in overtime against China. Lilly had been parked at the far post like she should have been and stayed put. USA Goalkeeper Brianna Scurry was clearly beaten by a shot to the far post but because Lilly was smart enough to maintain her position, she was able to clear the ball away, keeping the game tied. The USA went on to win on Penalty Kicks and Brandi Chastain received all the credit for her game-winning PK, but without Lilly's save there would have not been a PK segment.)
- When possible, have a player within 10 yards of the corner to take away the "short corner" opportunity.
- Make sure that your Goalkeeper has line of sight to the ball or, at the very least, can see the ball.
- "When in doubt, boot it out" is a good, safe mantra; rather than try something risky, it's better to give up another corner kick and reorganize.
- Cover the scoring areas.