



Defending In the Attacking Third

Objective: To help players recognize the transition to defense and the shape necessary to effectively defend in the attacking third. Making the play predictable in the attacking third will allow the midfielders and defenders to more easily get their defensive shape behind the ball and lead to winning the ball back more easily. Pressure, cover and balance in relation to the ball are crucial in order to make play predictable. This session will look at when the GK plays the ball out of the back with their feet and/or a throw, as well as when the back four win the ball.

1) 8 vs 4 keep-a-way (Warm-up – 15 to 20 minutes):

Three teams of 4 players play in 30 x 30 yard space (make smaller as skills allow). Two teams keep the ball away from the other team for 2 minutes. Defending team plays high pressure defense and wins a point every time they touch the ball. Each team plays defense once and teams compete to see who earns the most points when on defense. *Note: this game should be played in a fairly tight space to force offense to play quickly. Coach can also switch to low or high pressure to see if players around the ball defensively see the difference between when the ball is high pressured and low pressured.*



Coaching Points:

- Key is to make the play predictable – the first defender should be cutting off the angle of a pass that will switch the point of attack and force the ball and player to where their defensive numbers are versus trying to immediately win the ball.
- Discuss when to pressure, how to pressure and where to pressure ball - Immediate pressure on the ball and ensuring the first defender is making the play predictable by forcing the player with the ball into DEAD space (towards their cover defenders).
- Players in covering positions should be at about a 30-45 degree angle from first defender, communicating to them about which way they should be forcing the person with the ball, etc.
- Player(s) in a balancing position(s) should be behind ball, in a position to see both ball and 3rd attackers and to transition to attack if the ball is won.
- Defensive shape is a key to successfully winning the ball back. – connected, compact, and forcing the ball to where the defensive numbers are.
- Communication by players around 1st defender – must know when they can step up and pressure more tightly versus just forcing them one way, as well as which way to force the play (Force right or force left, etc).

2) 6v5 to 1 Big Goal and three small counter goals (20-25 minutes):

Two teams - 6 red players will be attacking the big goal and 5 yellow players will be attacking the three small counter goals (which are placed at the midfield line - left, center, and right). Coach can use players as targets in the three small goals to get more players involved. Coach has soccer balls out near midfield area and plays the ball in different ways:

a) play a ball over the head of the last defenders and towards the goalkeeper.
b) play a ball out wide and deep into the corners.
c) play a ball straight into the back four. *Variations:* Add another player to yellow, then can continue to add players on each team as deemed necessary.



Coaching Points:

- Reinforce coaching points from Activity #1.
- Visual cues for attacking team transitioning to defense are:
 - a) Which way is player facing when they get the ball,
 - b) is the back player facing their own goal or facing forward,
 - c) this then makes the forward who is transitioning to defense have to read whether they can pressure straight away or start to make play predictable (cut off angles of pass and force in direction where their team numbers are or back off and invite a pass into a pressure pocket).
- Also, as the ball is traveling, the forwards will need to decide whether to get in and win the ball right away and/or angle their body to force the ball back in a certain direction.
- If player receiving the ball does not have control, then tackle and win possession of the ball!
- If player receiving the ball does have control, then defender has to make a decision as to how closely to apply pressure, whether to contain or delay because they are numbers down, whether to close down space quickly because they are numbers up, and/or whether to force to DEAD space or to the outside, depending upon where they are on the field.
- Defender on the ball also wants to be aware of the attacking team's 2nd and 3rd attacking players
- If defenders can force the player with the ball into a numbers down situation and cut off weak side players, they are more likely to be effective.
- If there is immediate and tight pressure on the ball, defenders off the ball can squeeze the space centrally, making the field smaller for the attacking team.
- If pressure on the ball is light (loose), then cover and balance are looser.
- Job of four midfielders in front of the ball (and potentially 4 backs) to read when defender looks at a long target, puts their head down, preparing to send it long; this is the time they should be dropping off in front of the ball.

3) 11v11 scrimmage (30-45 minutes): Depending upon numbers, space will change. Ideally, finish with the number you normally play with in games. Play a regular game with goalkeepers.

Coaching Points:

- Reinforce coaching points from Activity #1 and Activity #2.
- Reinforce positive decision making opportunities (recognizing making play predictable, when to pressure, how to pressure, where cover is off the ball defensively, team shape, transition, etc.).

- Once defenders win it, are they able to transition quickly to the attack – if they are in good defensive supporting positions, once they win it, it is a simpler transition to the attack (they need width and depth quickly)

4) **Cool-down (10 minutes):** Juggling in groups of 4 and finishing cool-down with static stretching of major muscle groups.