

The Principles of Play

The five Principles of Attack and five Principles of Defence were formalized by Allen Wade, Director of Coaching for the English Football Association in 1968, when he wrote, "*The FA Guide to Training and Coaching*." Every System of Play takes into account these 10 principles. The Principles of Play revolutionized the thinking of soccer coaches the world over. These Principles of Play have since become a world standard in the development of team play. Other sports, such as rugby and field hockey, adapted the Principles of Play to their own game.

Allen Wade passed away in 2008, but his legacy will live on.

Some of the terminology from Allen's original book may have changed slightly, but nothing much else has.

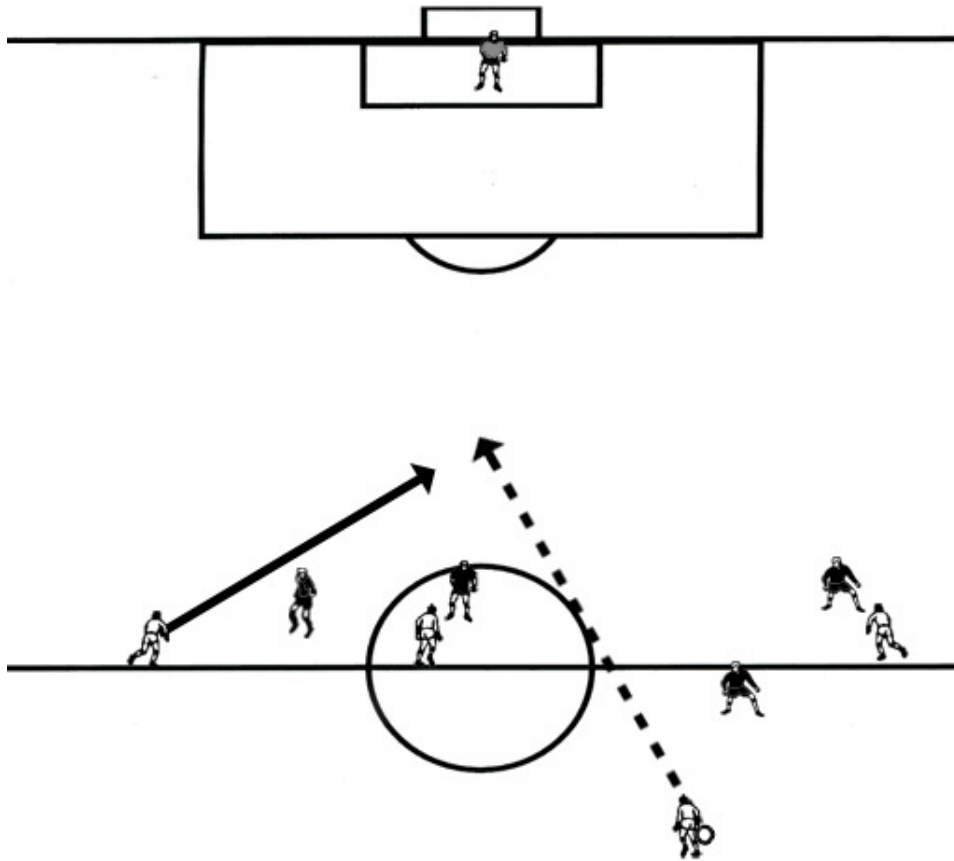
Soccer is a game of "Cat and Mouse" and each team changes its persona when the ball changes hands. From being creative, fun-loving, expressive, skilled attackers, the team should become stingy, totally committed, deadly serious, get-the-job-done defenders.

The Five Principles of Attack and Defence reflect this. For each principle of attack, there is a counter to it – a corresponding and neutralizing Principle of Defence.

Attack	Defence
Penetration	Delay
Support	Depth
Width	Concentration (Compaction)
Mobility	Balance
Improvisation/Creativity	Discipline/Patience

Attacking Principle No. 1 – Penetration

As soon as the ball is re-possessioned, the first thought should be, "Can I score?" If not, is there a forward player in an unmarked or advanced position where the question then is, "Can we play the ball to him or her?"



Can an early ball in behind the defence or to the feet of one of the front players give the opportunity of penetrating the defence?

This is not "kick-and-hope." This is the quick counter-attack that so often catches teams off-guard. Even the goalkeeper, after making a save, or catching a cross, should look up field to see if a quick kick or throw could penetrate the opposition to produce a scoring opportunity.

The best and most free-flowing teams in the world always look forward first even though they won't necessarily play the ball forward.

How players are arranged in a team system of play will produce certain advantages and disadvantages to the principle of penetration, and we will discuss those later when we move back into systems.

Defending Principle No. 1 – Delay

The defending team must do everything possible to prevent a quick counter-attack after losing the ball. This may be accomplished by one player going to the attacker with the ball and applying pressure and so preventing the forward ball.



*Defender D1 moves in to close down the space and prevent a forward pass. The team needs to buy-in to a common philosophy for this tactic to work. As well, D1 needs to continue to move in a little closer than here to be almost **touch-tight** to the attacker and so prevent the forward pass*

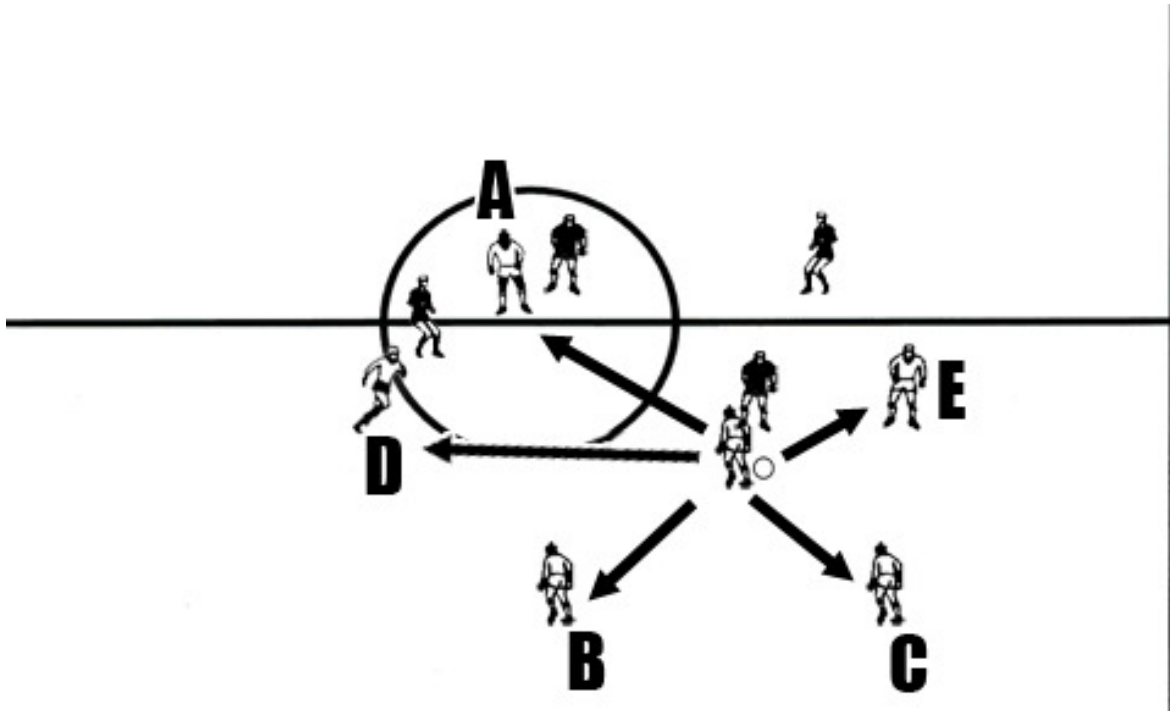
However, unless the team cooperates, one player delaying will easily be by-passed by the ball being played away from the pressurizing player. As well, the defender nearest the ball may not be able to push in on the player with the ball if he is faced by two attackers – a classic 2 vs. 1 situation. In these circumstances it is normally advisable to keep both players – the player with the ball and the 2nd Attacker in front of the delaying defender.

The role of the defender nearest the ball is called the 1st Defender.

When we discuss systems, we also need to decide the team philosophy with regard to delay. Do you pressure immediately? Or does the team fall back to “delay” collectively? We'll discuss more about that in the defending principle of concentration.

Attacking Principle No. 2 – Support

To keep possession and to be able to move the ball down the field, the player with the ball (the 1st Attacker) needs support.



The player with the ball needs passing options

Forward support (Players A & E), back support (Players B & C), and side support (Player D), will allow the man-with-the ball options, and put doubts in the minds of the defending players.

The first "shape" of the tactical formation is now beginning to emerge – with triangles and diamonds emanating from the player with the ball in his/her immediate playing area. This is a very good reason to play 3 vs. 3 and 4 vs. 4 play for players of all ages as it helps to develop the triangular/diamond understanding necessary for team shape and for re-shaping.

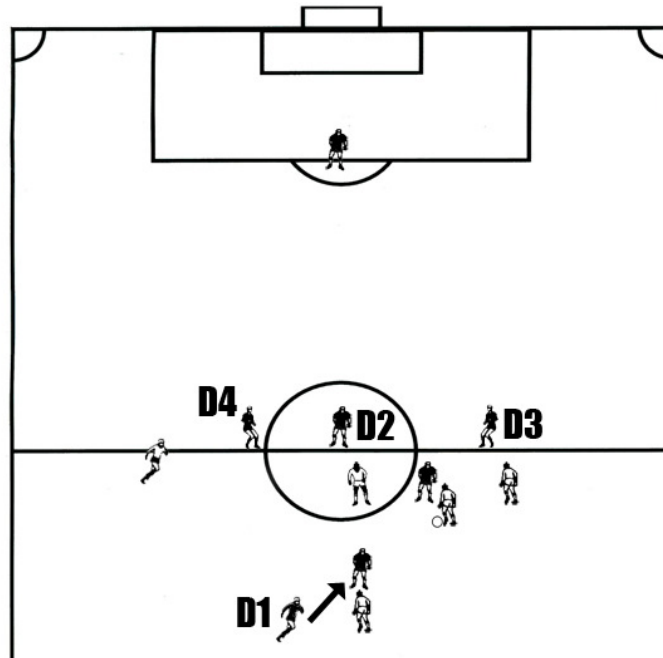
The player with the ball is referred to as the "1st Attacker" as opposed to our "1st Defender." The player or players giving immediate support are called the "2nd Attacker or Attackers."

Defending Principle No. 2 – Support (or Depth) in Defence

As the attacking team seeks to support their 1st Attacker, so does the defending team in its cat and mouse attitude by supporting their 1st Defender – the delaying player.

We said earlier, if the delaying player is unsupported, he/she can be easily by-passed.

The defensive support by the players nearest the challenging player tries to give close support. Their distance of support will depend on the situation and what part of the field they are supporting the player on the ball, but generally speaking, the defensive support is much tighter than the attacking support, as attackers are trying to create space and defenders are trying to restrict space.



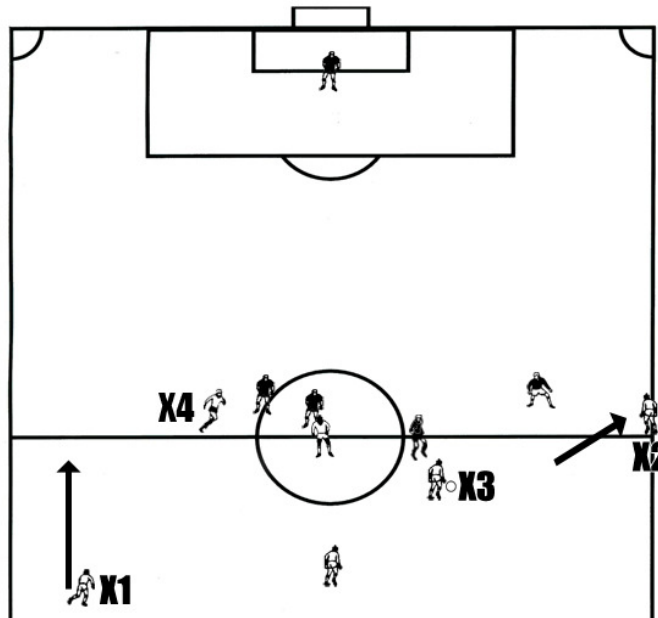
Support defenders cut off the passing options for the opposing team

Depending on what is happening in the game, and the situation in the defence, the 2nd Defenders would be angled behind the 1st Defender as we see with **D2** and **D3** (depending on the part of the field and how much advantage is being taken of the offside law).

Take a good look at the position of **D1**. He appears to be "wrong-side" of the ball, but is alright in the situation we see here. **D2** and **D3** are giving adequate back support (assisted by the position of **D4**). **D1** needed only to recover to get goal side of the rear-supporting white player to deny the attacker with the ball the back pass option. However, if any of the **Back 3 (D2, D3 or D4)** were out of position, **D1** would be compelled to work hard to get into a deeper supporting position to help cover the delaying player.

Attacking Principle No. 3 – Width

Stretching the defence is always in the minds of the attacking team. A defending team can be stretched vertically and laterally. The front players will try to push the defence back as far as they will go, but the other important way of stretching the defence is to use the width of the field.



The exploitation of the **Width of the Field** pulls defenders out of position and big holes appear in the back line between players. In the graphic, **X2**, in addition to supporting **X3**, is stretching the defenders by pulling out fully wide on the right and so creating the gaps for the players to pass through or run through.

On the other hand, leaving the wide space clear as we see on the left side to allow players to exploit that wide space with runs from deep positions, as **X1** is doing here, is another way of exploiting of width with a switch of play by **X3**.

Wide players on the side away from the ball produce the “**3rd Attacker or Attackers.**” **X1** is a 3rd Attacker, exploiting the width on the weak side of the field, looking for a diagonal ball from **X3**. **X4** is also a 3rd attacker as he is not giving immediate support, but is doing something other than using the Width as we will explain in the next Attacking Principle.

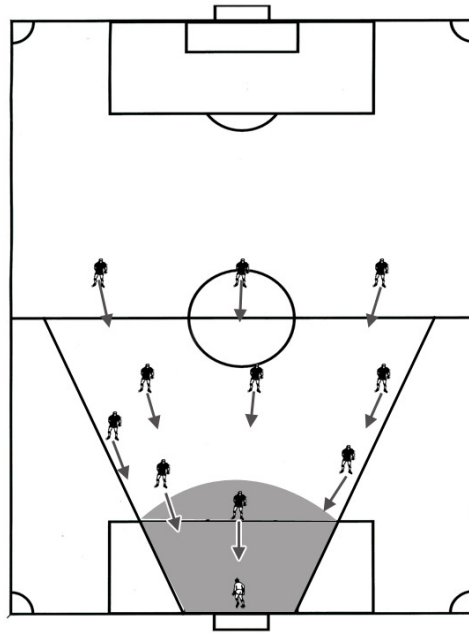
Wide players on the weak side from the ball may not need to be fully wide. Whereas, generally speaking the wide player(s) on the side of the attacker with the ball will be fully wide – right out on the touchline(**X2**). In Northern England a coach may well advise a young player to “Get chalk on your boots, Lad!” Chalk being the sideline.

This way the wide player creates the space to receive the ball and to look to go forward. Or pulls a defender out to mark the wide attacker and therefore creates space inside for a player or the ball to move through.

Defending Principle No. 3 – Concentration

If attackers are trying to stretch the defence, it makes sense for defences to concentrate themselves in the most vulnerable areas – the scoring zones. Concentration and the next defensive principle, Balance, work closely together, as do Delay and Defensive Support. If a defending team is in anyway unsure of itself, it should fall back to cover the goal, stay compact, and give away space in less dangerous parts of the field. The offside law, if skilfully applied by the defenders, assists in holding attackers out of the dangerous “scoring” zone (more about that later).

Some coaches call this retreating defence “Compaction.”



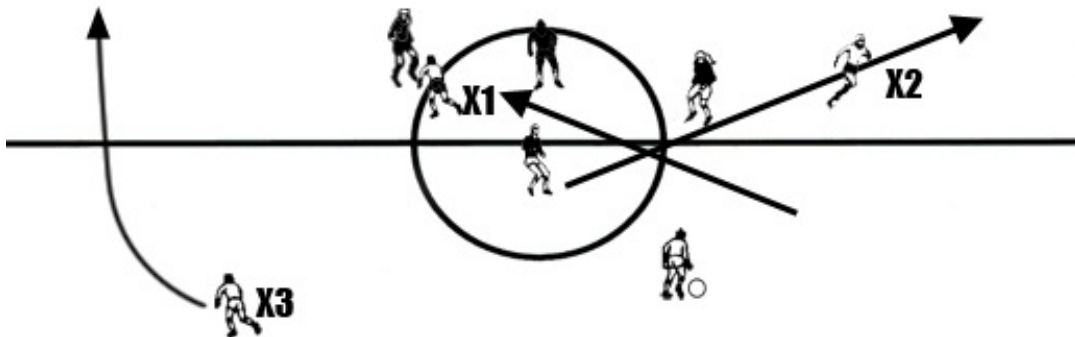
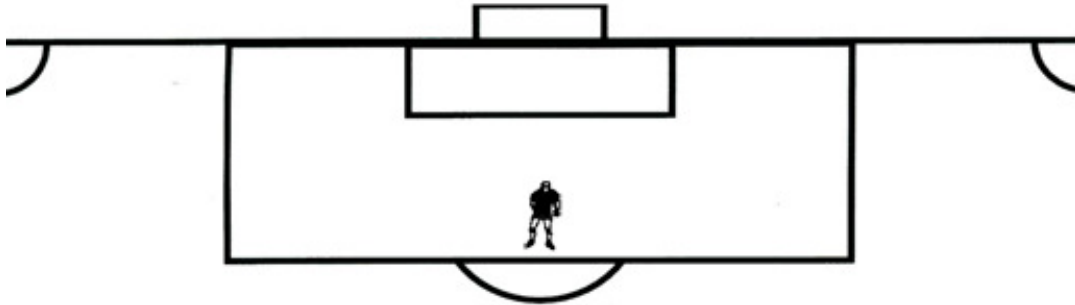
Players funnel back towards the area in front of goal, with some protection from offside. This is the Principle of Concentration. The shaded area is where over 80% of all goals are scored from.

Players not in good defending positions will immediately recover by funnelling back towards the space shown in the graphic on the lines indicated by arrows – straight towards their defending goal. Recovery runs are very important and need to be performed immediately – possibly by all players on the team – when possession is lost.

If a player is caught out on a transition from attack to defence, that player's immediate objective should be to recover as quickly as possible towards the goal in an attempt to get goal-side the ball. As a player recovers, he/she assesses just how far the recovery needs to be and looks for, and listens to, the advice of the rear-most defenders. "Pick him up!" "Come back!" Or "Hold there!" If the back defenders feel they have adequately covered the concentrated area and want to retain team shape they will hold the advanced recovering defenders in front of them to provide an outlet if and when they win the ball.

Attacking Principle No. 4 – Mobility

Individual speed and the ability to interchange positions are so important in the modern game. As an attacker moves forward, sideways or diagonally, with or without the ball, the opposing team has to adjust and this can unbalance the defence.



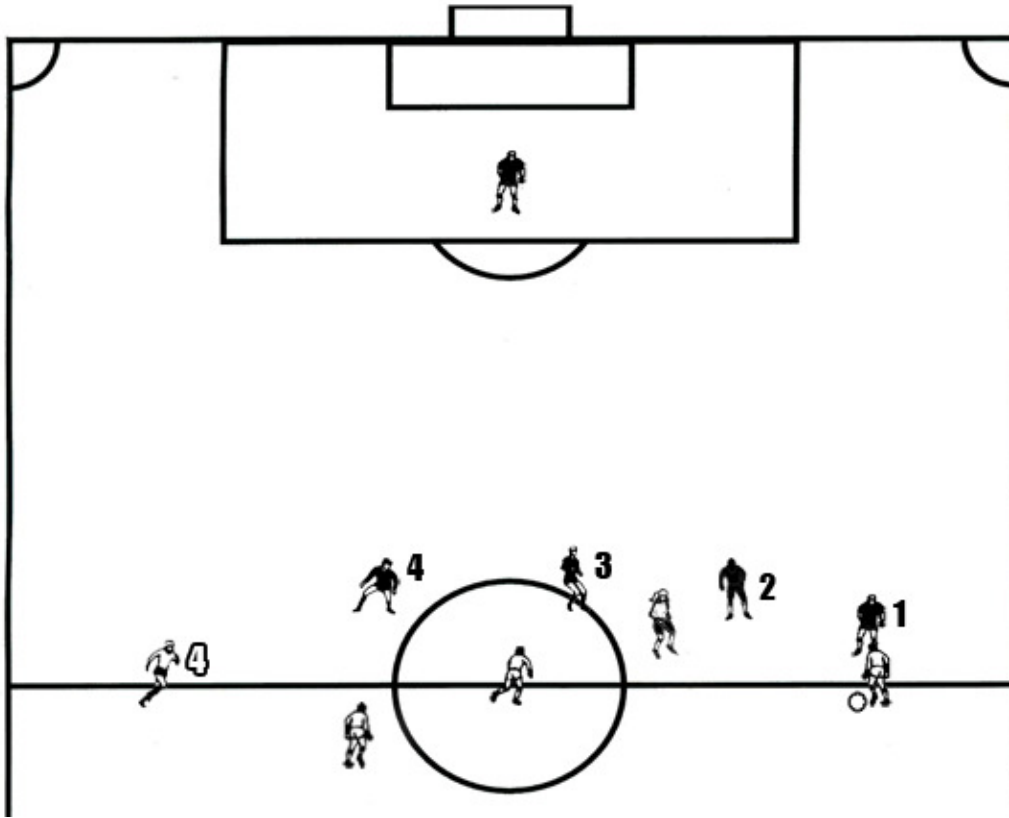
X1 & X2 make diagonal runs that will cause the defenders to react – positively or negatively. X3 makes a forward and wide run

As we see in the graphic the opposition are faced with a dilemma caused by the runs of **X1**, **X2** and **X3**. Who goes with whom and how far should they go? Whatever decisions are made there is the potential for uncertainty and confusion in the defence. We'll look at these considerations later in the "systems" sections where among other things the offside rule will assume great importance. Also the system of defence – Zonal or a Sweeper/Man Marking system – will deal with the principle of **Mobility** in different ways.

The "Interchange" of positions requires good understanding from the attacking team in order to maintain the attacking shape, otherwise the team can be caught out on the counterattack if and when possession is lost.

Defending Principle No. 4 – Balance

If mobility is being used to try to unbalance teams then that principle of defensive “**Balance**” must be exercised to counter the attacking runs and maintain and retain the defensive shape. Now the picture is becoming more complex as more players are needed to give the team its balance.



Balancing play is an extension of delay and support provided by players away from the ball

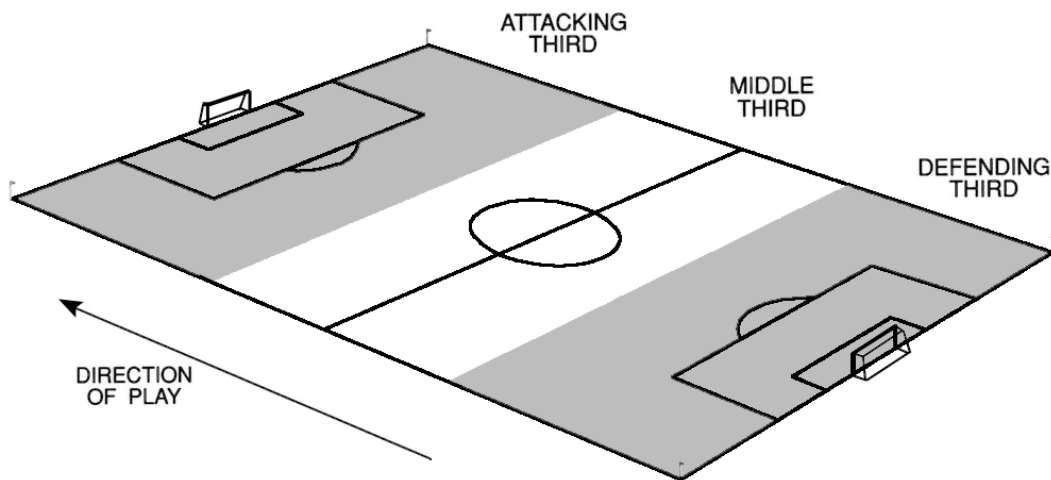
Although black defenders #4 and #3 appear to be exposed to a potential 3 versus 2, they have balanced off defender #1 & #2 to counter the danger down the defensive left hand side. The wide white player (#4) appears unmarked, but is a long way from the ball and for the moment, not dangerous. The rebalancing job can be done before attacker #4 receives a long pass or receives the ball after one or two passes. In the graphic, defenders #3 and #4 are the “**Balancing Players**”, or what are termed the “**3rd Defenders**.” In today’s game, one of the most important 3rd Defenders is often the goalkeeper playing the Sweeper Keeper role by policing the space behind the back defenders.

Notice how “flat” the Back 4 is as they use of the offside rule to hold the attackers away from goal.

If you find your eyes rolling because it is becoming confusing, don't worry. We've all been there. Read this Principle of Play section again – not now, but later. It will all start to make sense and you will see why the Principles are so important to Systems of Play.

Thirds of the Field

Before covering the final two Principles of Play, we should quickly look at the importance of coaches and players thinking in “thirds” of the field, rather than the more conventional halves. While the rules of the game and field markings split the field into two, the tactical considerations are better viewed in thirds.



In the **Defending Third**, the general philosophy is that of caution.

The **Middle Third** is the battleground for dominance and the build-up area for successful attacks.

The **Final Third** is where 99% of all goals are scored from.

For that reason, the thinking in the Attacking Third must be very different than in the Defending Third.

The **Defending Third** is the no-nonsense zone where any danger is met by playing for safety – perhaps by a long clearance kick, even playing the ball out of play to concede a throw-in or corner if under extreme pressure. Nevertheless, good teams will always look to play out of the back if it is safe to do so.

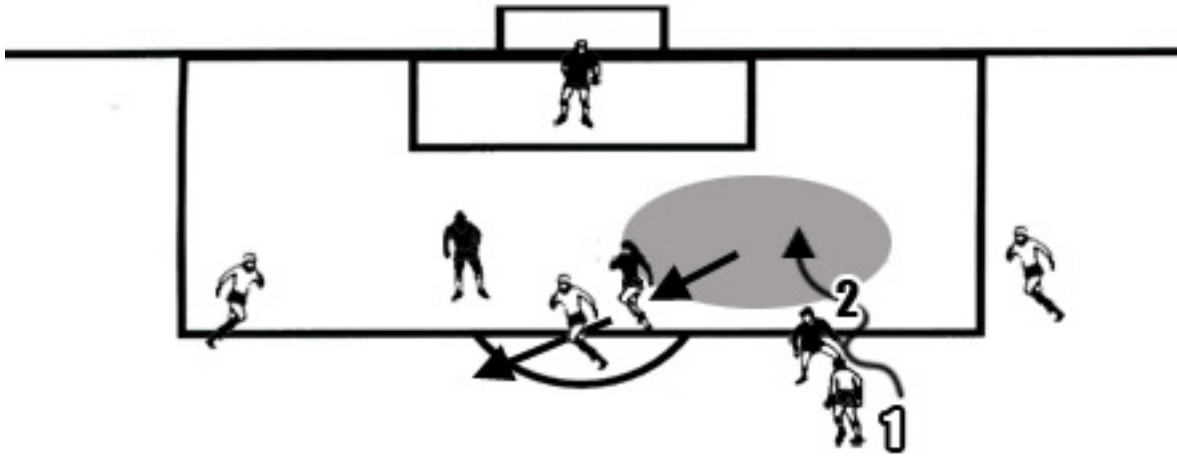
The **Middle Third** is less-dangerous and is the build-up zone, but any mistake made in that area of the field can also be costly.

Whereas in the **Final Third** taking risks is what good attackers are looking to do by using dribbles and fakes, back-heels – in fact, anything that is going to create an opportunity for getting a shot at goal or for making an opening for an attacking team-mate. Gambling and consequently losing the ball in this area is not as critical as the other two thirds and therefore, should be encouraged.

So that sets the scene for our final two Principles of Play.

Attacking Principle No. 5 – Improvisation/Creativity

This is the most exciting principle. **Improvisation** is not exclusively reserved for the attacking third, but this is where it is most effective. Twists, turns, back-heels, dribbles, volleys, overhead kicks, all have a place here with only limited risks. If the ball is given up in the Final Third, the opposition still has to penetrate through two-thirds of the field to even get a shot on goal.



Attacker #1 should be encouraged to use his skills of speed, dribbling, and faking to exploit the space behind Defender #2

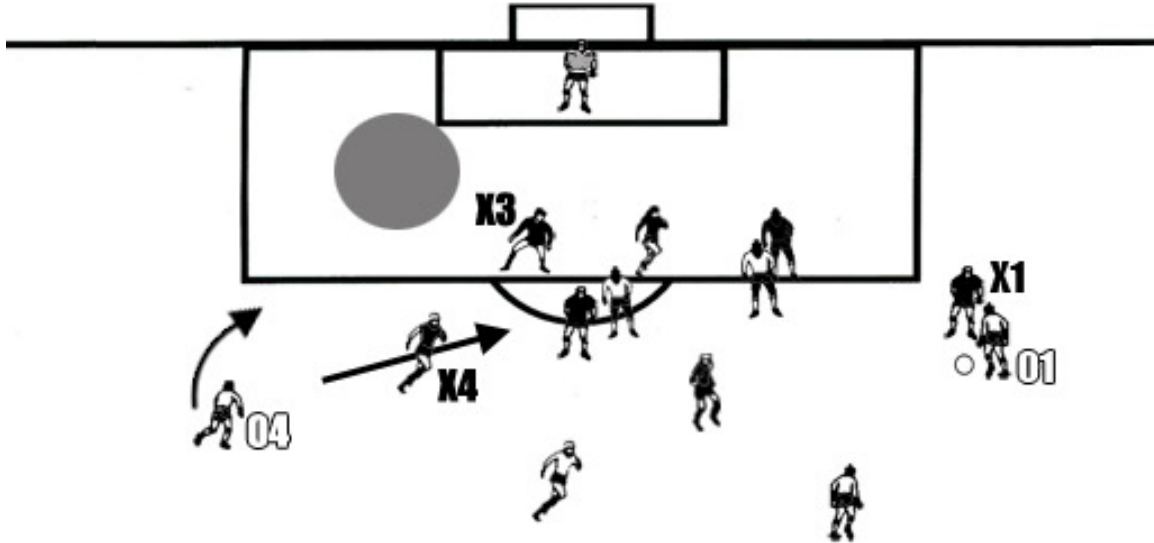
Trying dribbles and back-heels in the Defending Third of the field would not be too smart – unless the player was very accomplished and very aware.

The same applies in the Middle Third where a little more creativity and improvisation should not be discouraged, particularly with the right players. Nevertheless, giving the ball up by a careless gamble here could be costly because of the danger of a quick counterattack.

However, in the graphic while **Attacker #1** is applying Improvisation & Creativity by dribbling past **Defender #2**, while **Attacker #1's** team-mates are using the other four attacking principles to provide the best opportunity for success by **#1**.

Defending Principle No. 5 – Discipline & Patience (Control and Restraint)

If a defending team has observed all the previous four defending principles, it will find itself, for the moment, in good shape and ready to deal with most, if not all, contingencies.



Good all-round defending by observing the first 4 Principles of Defence should not be thrown away by hot-headed decisions

In the graphic, the defending team is consolidated defensively. If **X1** dives into the tackle indiscriminately, the well-balanced compacted defence could quickly become disjointed. Similarly, if **X4** moves in and **X3** gets drawn towards the ball and moves further inside to cover the central area they risk exposing attacking space for **O4** to exploit if **O1** could bend a flighted ball into the shaded space with his left foot.

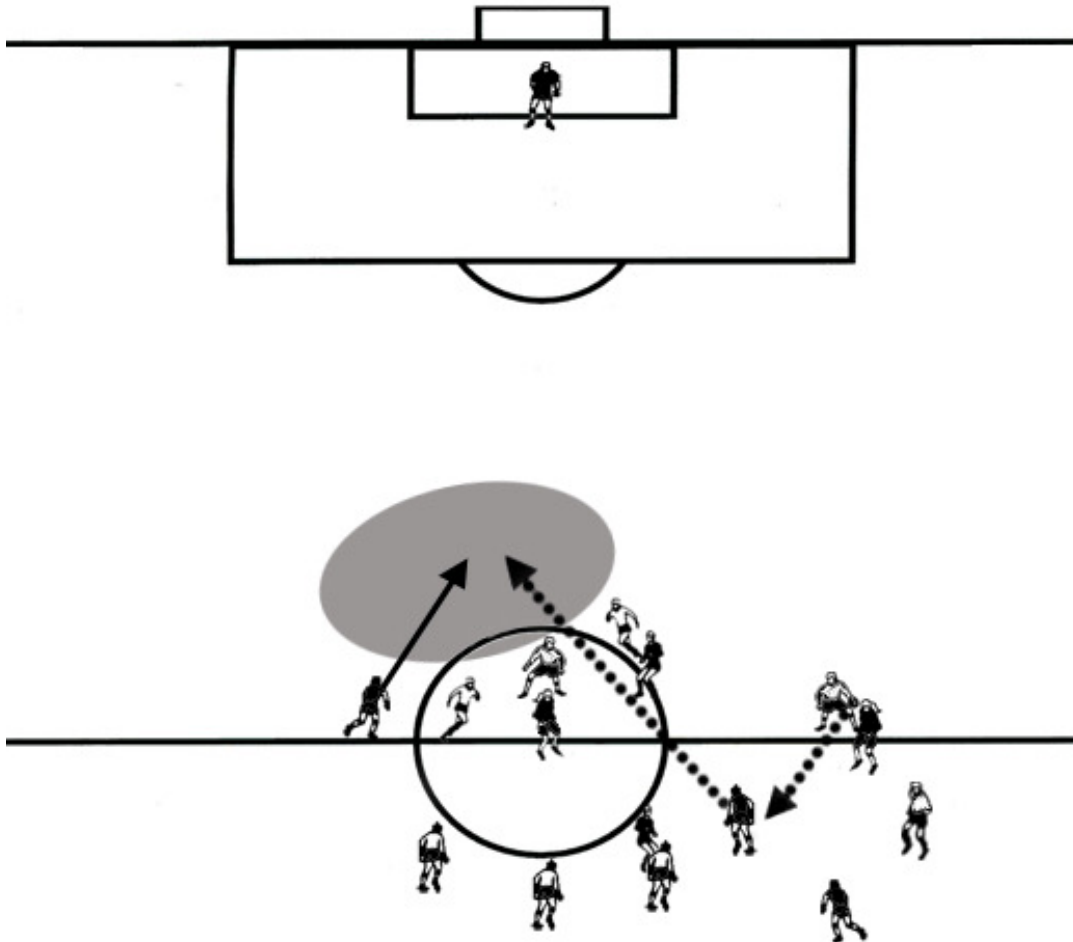
In the graphic, the defenders, for the moment, should remain patient and exercise control and restraint and **X4** and **X3** should hold out a little longer to retain the team balance and shape. Of course, the situation will change as soon as the ball is moved, or an attacking player moves into a new position. If **O1** takes on **X1** or passes the ball, the whole defence then has to re-adjust and re-organize.

This is really what the game of soccer is about – the challenge of one player against another and one team trying to nullify the other and then breaking out in the effort to secure the victory.

Transition

The word “Transition” has become a key buzzword in today's game – although “Transition” has been around the soccer world for ever (Counter-Attack!). However, “Transition” is even more important in the modern game. What happens usually after possession has been re-gained or after the ball is lost can often determine the result of the game. This is when a fast, positive response can catch any team off-balance and in an attacking shape as opposed to a defending shape and therefore, exposed at the back of the defence.

As teams build up attacks, they look to move out and to move up and therefore, become more vulnerable if they give the ball away.



Jekyll and Hyde persona required when possession is regained to immediately change into an attacking mode before the opposition can re-group

The attacking shape is more open and expansive than a defending shape – which has to be compact.

On the re-possession after an interception or tackle, quick action can catch the opposition before they can regain their defensive persona and positions. This is another example of the principle of Penetration.

In looking at transition there is a psychological factor at play. An attacking team with its tail up and savouring the chance of scoring a goal, will find itself disappointed when the ball is surrendered and may well be extremely vulnerable at that moment as it strives to put on its aggressive defensive mask.

Good teams have a split personality – Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde. They play both ways – immediately they have to. So one moment they are free running, expressive and creative. The next moment they are mean, determined and task-oriented.

So transitioning to attack requires a very quick look at the penetration possibilities and teams should work on this aspect of play in practice.

Conversely, switching immediately to defence after a failed attack, with all the defensive principles in action, must be instilled into the players and again, worked on in practice.

Having completed this segment and if you came to here after completing Chapter 2 of the Systems of Play section, we suggest you return now (or when it is convenient – we don't want to saturate you with information all at once) to **Chapter 3 of Systems of Play**.