

DEFENDING PRINCIPLES - INTRODUCTION



IAN BARKER

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Ian is somewhat unique having held leadership positions with US Youth Soccer and NSCAA and he has had extensive experience at youth and college levels. Ian coached for 21 seasons with the men's programs at the University of Wisconsin and Macalester College, before becoming NSCAA Director of Coaching Education in 2012.

Ian was the Director of Coaching and Player Development for Minnesota Youth Soccer Association for 10 years and is a Head Coach of Region II Boys Olympic Development Program

Ian's qualifications are extensive and he holds the USSF A License, NSCAA Premier Diploma and NSCAA Master Coach Diploma.

Webinar key points (by David Newbery)

The series commenced with an introduction to the topic presented by Ian Barker. Ian, the Director of Coaching Education for NSCAA, did a stellar job setting the stage for those presenters following.

I found the following points to be particularly pertinent:

1. Defending in practice is likely to be a more difficult 'sell to young players than attacking. Ian suggested using some reverse psychology and stress that defending is winning the ball back before it is possible to score goals.
2. Delayed high-pressure is a concept that Ian preferred to low pressure defending - the difference being that instead of dropping back into a defensive shape and waiting for the opposition to come forward, the defense applies controlled pressure to manipulate the attack to suit the defenders.
3. Ian stressed how important it is to work on the technical ability of the defenders in the same way as we would work on the technical ability of attackers performing such skills as dribbling, passing and receiving. It is critical to work with young players on their body position, quick footwork and ability to make a poke tackle, block tackle and slide tackle. These are prerequisite pressure defending skills before proceeding to cover, balance, compactness and delay restraint.
4. In discussing the compactness, Ian offered a helpful coaching tip to get players to think of left and right shoulder. Simply stated, defenders should be encouraged to take a quick glance over each shoulder to assess the positioning of their teammates and opponents.

Questions asked by participants and answered by Ian Barker

Q1: How can we get coaches to shy away from a sweeper, and teach a "flat" 4 and individual responsibility? Sergei Melnik

Response: I would suggest two ways. One is an appeal to coaches to help with player development by teaching players equally the importance of the ability to mark players and space, as well as to defend with a view to winning possession. Highlight the inadequacy of the sweeper system, as it is used in youth soccer, by having your attackers push up as high as they can on the sweeper to either make them engage or to concede even more space.

Q2: Are there any specific recommendations you have in terms of teaching proper defensive stance and footwork? Chris Burt

Response: In a warm up to the session do some mirror movement activity. Have one player dribble and have the defender back pedal and adjust their feet to the ball movement. After that I would recommend setting up small 1 vs. 1, or 2 vs. 2 scenarios with small goals, multiple goals, end zones or targets. Then allow for a lot of repetition. Take the opportunity to address the whole group and individuals as the need determines.

Q3: Do you have any advice to prevent stabbing as players apply pressure? Chris Burt

Response: I would not "prevent stabbing" if the players have established a good distance from the ball so that if they are unsuccessful they can still recover. In addition to distance the player needs to be balanced so that they can quickly move back and forth or pivot as need be. "Stabbing" or "toe poking" the ball can be effective in 1 vs. 1 duels.

Q4: Are there activities you would recommend to teach tackling? Jon Heath

Response: At younger ages you might do some work with two players over a stationary ball addressing it at the same time. Encourage the younger players to get the inside of their foot behind the ball with their body and weight behind the contact. As the players get older in the 1 vs. 1 settings you can address tackling with the foot nearest the ball, rather than crossing your body, slide tackling if appropriate, with an emphasis on getting a solid contact on the ball with your weight into the challenge.

Q5: At the U10 and U11 youth level, is it a good idea to start to teach activities such as 'Compactness' in a 3v3 format? Christian D'Ambrosio

Response: Yes, I think addressing notions of the field being big when we have it and small when we do not is very valid at U10 and U11. I would use a vocabulary that is appropriate for the age and certainly seek to teach them to stay close together and to work together to get the ball back.

Q6: At what age would you begin focusing on tactical defending rather than technical skills? Thomas Jones

Response: For tactics read "decisions". I think our balance in youth coaching should always be toward technical over the tactical, but not exclusive. Only when the players are technically proficient does the tactical come before the technical. So at U10 when we play 1 vs. 1 we will talk about foot work and surfaces of the foot and other technical issues, but we can

still consider, for example, “do we send them left or right?”, “do we try to win the ball or do we let the attacker make a move?”.

Q7: Could you please outline the role of the Center Back in managing the defensive line and the offside trap? Benjamin Olson

Response: The center back/s will very likely be the “leaders” of the defensive unit because of their central position. (Many team captains are center backs). When play is in the center of the field they have good vision of the action and can direct both the midfielders and the full backs. When play is to the flank it is the center backs who offer verbal and physical support of the near side full back. The far side full back now sees more of the field and they have a role in keeping the line organized as they can see more. Center backs are the most likely players to determine when to step and when to drop, based on their assessment of the pressure on the ball, the closeness to goal, the numbers of opponents and team mates in the area etc.

Q8: When should the Center Back advance up field with the attacking play? Benjamin Olson

Response: To commit a center back into the attack in the run of play, as opposed to a dead ball, will require cover from either a deep central midfielder or a full back. In the modern game the center back is not normally seen beyond their midfielders. If the center back can run forward with or without the ball, however, it can be very effective as the opponent may not have players ready to account for the forward movement.

Q9: Flat back four versus a sweeper stopper system. Some pros and cons in your opinion? Mark Mackinnon

Response: Sweeper, stopper as applied in youth games can be very effective. It often works that one player closely marks a forward and the other drops off for time and space to be able to clear the ball high and wide and far. In youth soccer too often, however, in order to win with this system we limit the opportunity for the players to equally handle the ball. Playing effectively with a back four in a zone system requires more work to develop. The benefits long term, however, are that the players now have to develop defending skills in 1v1 challenges and game awareness when covering or balancing. Couple these opportunities with encouraging defenders to seek to win the ball and then keep possession with a dribble or a pass is critical. I think coaching the combination of zone and man marking to all players is the right approach in youth soccer.

Q10: Have you coached 1v1 defending using the FA’s ‘5 downs’ (Shut down, Slow down, Sit down, Stay down, Show down) and do you think it’s effective? Sophie Dewar

Response: I have not explicitly used the “5 downs”. If I understand this correctly we are saying, “get close, get your body low and then get ready to win the ball”. So if that is a correct interpretation it is solid information no doubt. We have to develop ideas and language coaches can understand and then make sure they can communicate with the players. As such the “5 downs” make sense.

Q11: How do you get players to stay disciplined defensively during the excitement of a game? Marc Campoverde

Response: Great question! Part of the solution can be your coaching demeanor. If you can stay calm and be clear and concise with information it allows you to help the players. When the action is frenetic and last ditch in the goal box then you are not going to effectively coach during the game. In the flow, however, I would be continually reminding players, most usually not immediately engaged with the ball, as to staying alert and to moving in to good spaces.

Q13: How young can we start the flat four formation? JJ Villanueva

Response: In 6v6+ you may not have four defenders, but rather two or three, even so the ideas of pressing and covering will apply so concepts of ‘zone’ are valid. As soon as you enter into 11 vs. 11 then the relationship of your back four to each other, and the Goalkeeper and midfielders, as to pressure, cover and balance needs to be addressed.

Q14: I must have missed Attacking Principles of Play. Is there a way I can get a copy? Dennis Willms

Response: We are close to introducing a new platform that will allow us to provide access to the Attacking Principles’ series on-demand.

Q15: I think an activity that deals with balance in width is critical to coaches teaching this principle to players U10 and above. Could you include an activity that addresses this component of the balance principle? Chuck Coan

Response: I would employ a six goal game that can be used to illustrate to the players the degrees of threat to each of the three goals to be defended. Most clearly when a wide goal is attacked the far side defenders should be encouraged to shift over to balance the threat of both opponents and space rather than defend the far side, low threatened, goal.

Q16: Ian, do you have some insight regarding getting defensive backs to work the ball out of the back? Timm Meyers

Response: I would work a lot on activities that start with the GK so the issue of getting the ball out the back is repeated. To begin I might restrict the opponent to having fewer players who can press or even having an exclusion line. This way the GK is encouraged to play the ball out with feet, or by bowling the ball to defenders. You must encourage the defenders when the ball is won to get wide and get open to both receive the ball and to be able to dribble or pass it. In the beginning of playing out the back you may find opponents press you and steal the ball. My advice is to stay the course with the concept and also develop ideas as to how if your defenders are “taken away” can we play to the midfield and get out.

Q17: Idea of Pressure ... I love the idea of marking to make the possessing players put their heads down verses the idea of being touch tight marking...can you expand on this idea? Michael DeLeo

Response: Touch tight marking is really important at times, for example on dead balls or in areas really close to the goal. At many other times though being so tight means that adjusting to a ball played to space is tough or getting “rolled” by the opponent happens. If players can be helped with the idea of seeing both the opponent and space and then making up ground on the ball as the ball is moving they can become more effective overall defenders.

Q18: If defenders win the ball, should we give them a counter attack goal to score in, or perhaps find the feet of a forward? Michael McAllister

Response: Yes, all of our small sided and game activities should include the concept of a counter option. This option could be a goal, a target, the coach etc. Bottom line we need to encourage our defenders to win the ball and to counter whenever possible as opposed to kicking the ball out, or stealing it and then having the activity stop.

Q19: In activity 2, would you ever go to a transition? Brian Zawislak

Response: In activity 2 the idea is that if the two win it they try to dribble out of the grid. As such the transition/counter option is there. You could change it and ask they pass the ball out to a team mate etc. Importantly though we must have that transition/counter option.



Q20: In the activity on balance where there are three grids, are the players allowed to leave their zones or do they have to stay in their assigned grids? Brooke Walsh

Response: To get the activity going and to establish the ideas I would keep the players in the assigned areas. As quickly as possible though, and over time for the balance of the activity, try to remove the conditions.

Q21: In the balance drill if you take the zone requirements away doesn't this just become a regular scrimmage? Katherine Kuhn

Response: Yes, that is correct. You would certainly want to include a half way line and play to honor the off side rule. All our activities need to head toward a final game. You would employ the zone conditions to establish some specific and relevant ideas through repetition and then allow the game to happen.

Q22: Do you consider transition to attack as a Principle of Defending? Matt Malej

Response: Good question Matt. I would be very comfortable seeing transition addressed as a principle at the end of both attacking and defending or explored as an entire principle unto itself. When coaching young players we must be mindful as to how much content we put in. As such I would always have a counter option in a defending session, but would not address what we do after we win as much as how we win it.

Q23: Is there any importance of Width for defense? Zerihun Jemaneh Woldegeorgies

Response: Width employed by opponents is used to pull defenses out of shape and to potentially get behind a team to cross. As such while defending the center of the field and the goal is critical, being able to defend effectively in wide spaces is also essential. Full backs must be good 1v1 defenders. Using the sideline to "help" defensively is always an option, but so is forcing wide attackers into the center of the field where play may be more congested and/or they are on their weak foot.

Q24: In a month with 8 training sessions how many sessions would you recommend working on defending? Sterling Nabours

Response: I do not think there is a hard rule here. I could see two express dedicated sessions to defending and two to attacking as being solid. The remaining four sessions might include one or two on specific situations such as dead balls etc. and one or two on possession and movement.

Q25: Should you practice balance in the defensive 3rd of the field? Jason Isaac

Response: Yes, a very clear example would be if the ball is at the corner flag you would expect your far side defender to be tucked in field a long way balancing off the far side opponent and space by the goal. Similarly around the top of the box you will want pressure on the ball and you will want defenders ready to both close a player and step into a space.

Q26: At what age do you introduce the zonal concept? Lewis Martin

Response: See Q.13

Q27: What age do you suggest adding speed of play to many of these techniques? John Sullivan

Response: In order to get defenders sharper and quicker with their defending skills and ideas you need them challenged by the opponent. The more competent the team in possession in tight space the more of a challenge to your defenders. Having your defenders outnumbered, but insisting on team pressing in a training game will inevitably develop their response to superior speed of play.

Q28: What age group do you recommend to start introducing shielding? Chris Sage

Response: As soon as you can have the players compete in 1v1 duels shielding can be discussed. Shielding is the role of the player in possession trying to deny the defender the chance to steal the ball. In a 1v1 the better the defending the greater chance the player will need to shield the ball.

Q29: What is a good way to teach pressure, cover and balance if you play three players in the back (8v8)? Brian Mulford

Response: Brian, I would play multiple goal games, four or six, or even play to end zones. In this way the importance of effective pressure is clear and the job can be shared across the field. As the person pressing changes so do the roles for each player.

Q30: What is the earliest age group to introduce these principles? Jerald Kilmartin

Response: See Q.5 and Q.6

Q31: What age do you suggest teaching slide tackling? Neville Feltham

Response: Rather than chronological age I would consider the physical and cognitive maturity of the group and the challenges of the level at which they play. In many levels of youth soccer the need to slide tackle should not really be there. The technical level of opponents is not such that they are gaining big advantages in 1 vs. 1 duels. I think slide tackling is a skill and necessity at higher competency levels.

Q32: While being compact in transition and defensive, does the team explode into a counterattack? Yinka Oluteye

Response: The speed at which you counter will be a personal one for the coach and a team identity for the players. My overall rule of thumb would be that we defend with sufficient organization that when we win the ball we can begin the counter attack. If we keep our team shape while defending then our players are typically in the right shape to effectively go to goal. We need to be compact when we do not have it and "big" when we do.

Q33: At what point/age do you start to mold players into a certain position they're likely to keep/develop specifically in? Johannes Terpstra

Response: Johannes, you will get way more than one answer with this question. My opinion is that you resist over specialization in the U6-U10 ages. As the players emerge into the U11+ ages physical, technical and psychological skill sets may predispose a player to certain positions. One consideration is that at higher levels some utility may get a player a chance to get in the game. So while we must create the special players we must also try to develop "complete" players.

Pressure

WHY USE IT

All coaches know how it feels when their team is attacking and loses the ball, and their defender is unable to hold up play long enough for help to arrive. This teaches defenders how to hold up attackers.

SET UP

Mark out a 20x10 yd area with a goal at one end. You need to have a pair of cones at the far end and a pair five yards nearer the goal. We've used eight players including a keeper. You need balls, bibs, cones and a goal.

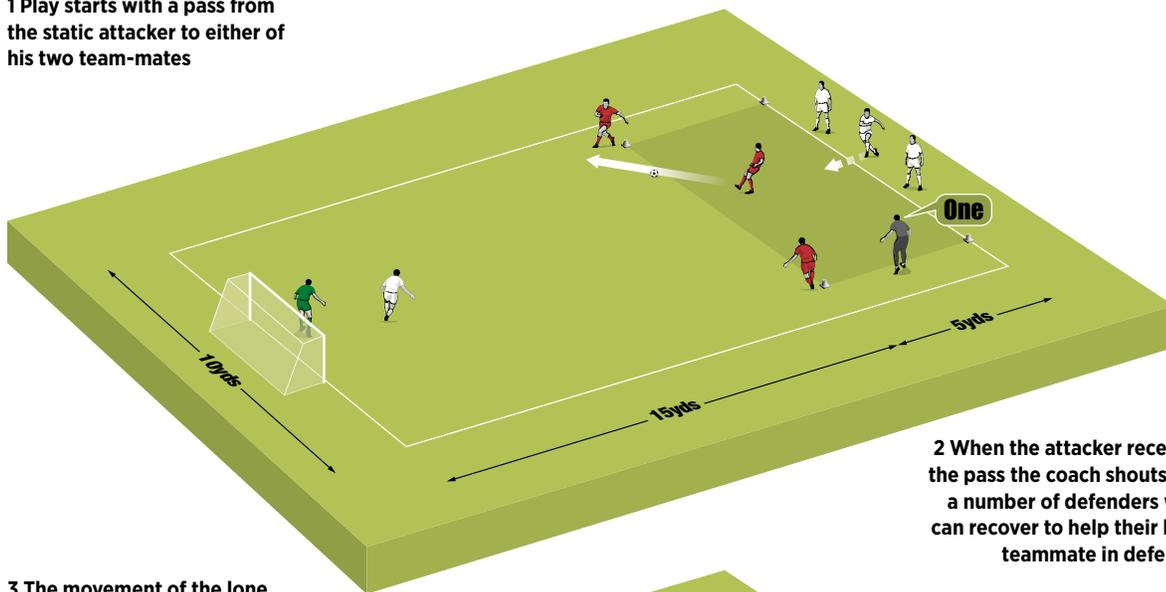
HOW TO PLAY

Split the players into three attackers, who stand at the cones nearest the goal; three recovering defenders, who are five yards back at the far end of the area; a defender in front of goal; and a keeper. The middle of the three attackers acts as a server and passes to another attacker. When the attacker receives the ball that is the signal for the coach to shout out the number of recovering defenders that must get back to help the lone defender. Play restarts with the attacker each time.

TECHNIQUE

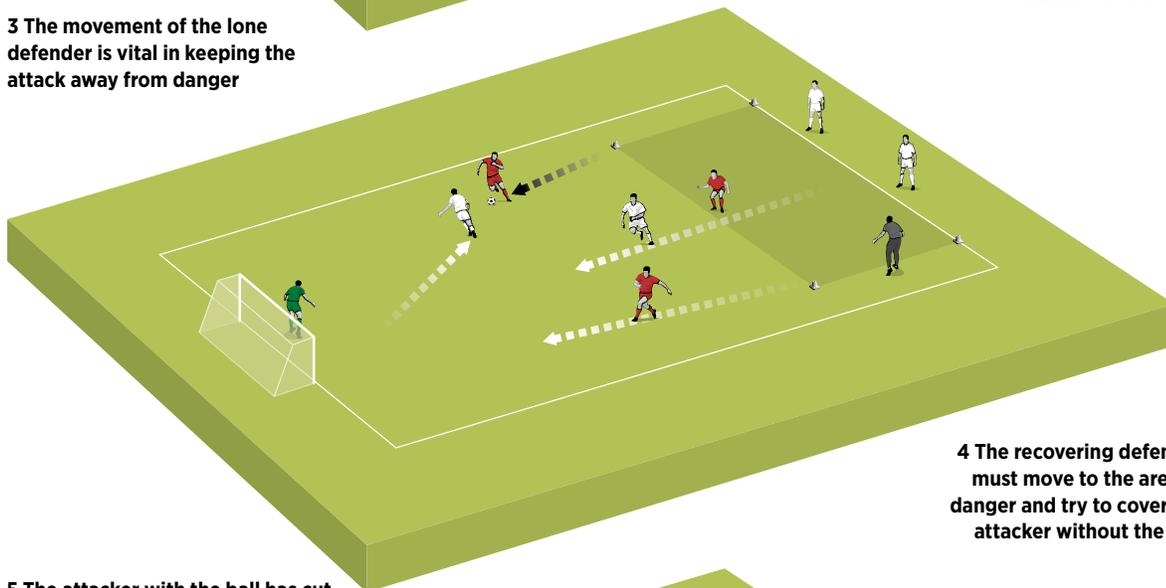
Rio Ferdinand can read the game well and knows how to position himself to make life difficult for attackers. It is this skill that defenders need to learn, plus recognising when the team has to recover and get back into defence.

1 Play starts with a pass from the static attacker to either of his two team-mates



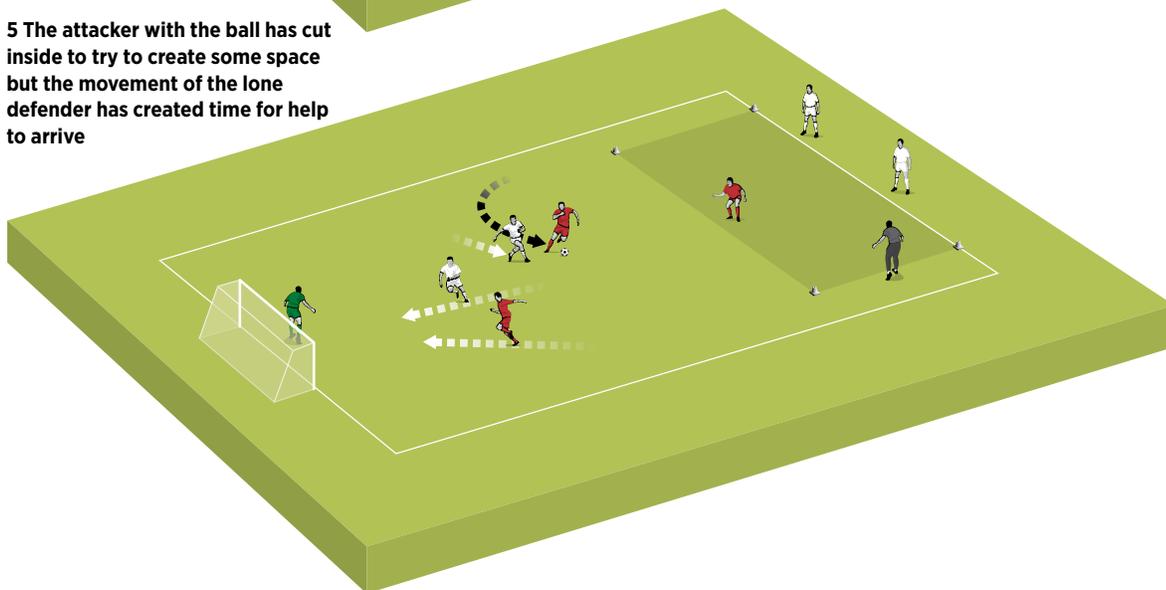
2 When the attacker receives the pass the coach shouts out a number of defenders who can recover to help their lone teammate in defence.

3 The movement of the lone defender is vital in keeping the attack away from danger



4 The recovering defender must move to the area of danger and try to cover the attacker without the ball

5 The attacker with the ball has cut inside to try to create some space but the movement of the lone defender has created time for help to arrive



Player movement

Ball movement

Run with ball

Shot

Cover

WHY USE IT

Working in pairs in midfield or attack is an ideal way to disrupt passing teams by positioning and support play. Anticipation is also important when players attempt to intercept.

SET UP

Set up an area of 16x8 yd split into two eight-yard zones. We've used 11 players.

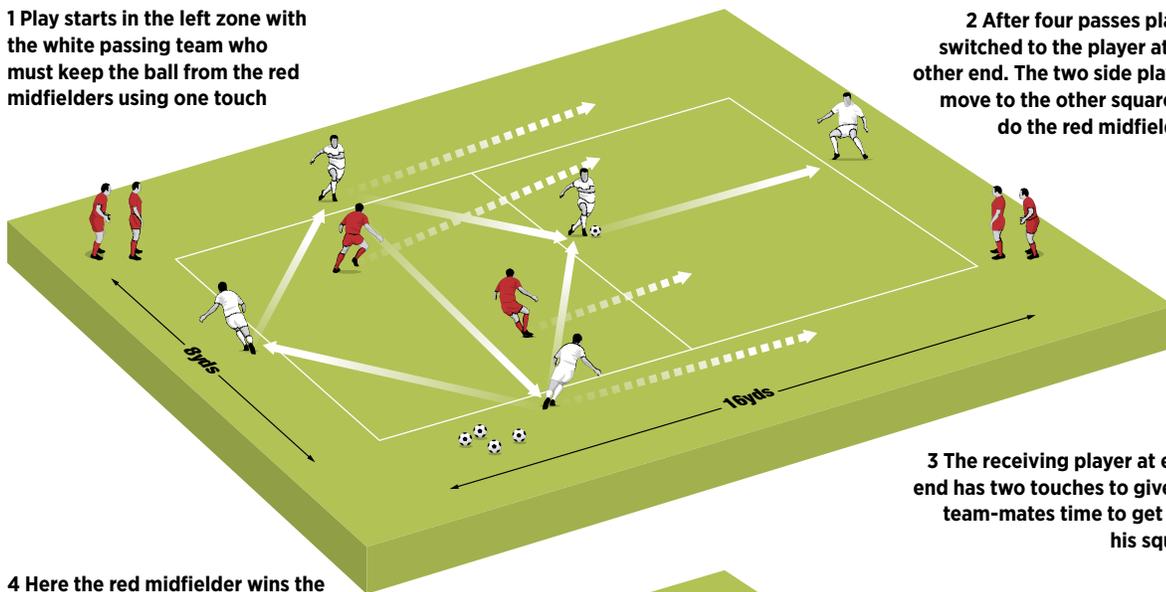
HOW TO PLAY

Start with four white passing players on the outside of the first zone, with two red midfielders in the centre. One white player is on the far side of the second zone and the other four red players wait in pairs to replace the midfielders. The passing team must make four consecutive passes without midfielders touching the ball. After the fourth pass the ball is passed to the player on the far side of the second zone and all the players move to that zone, needing to make four passes again. The passing team have only one touch so passes must be accurate (make this two touch if needed). The player in the opposite half has two touches to give the others a chance to move into his half. If the red midfielders win the ball they dribble out of the area to win a point.

TECHNIQUE

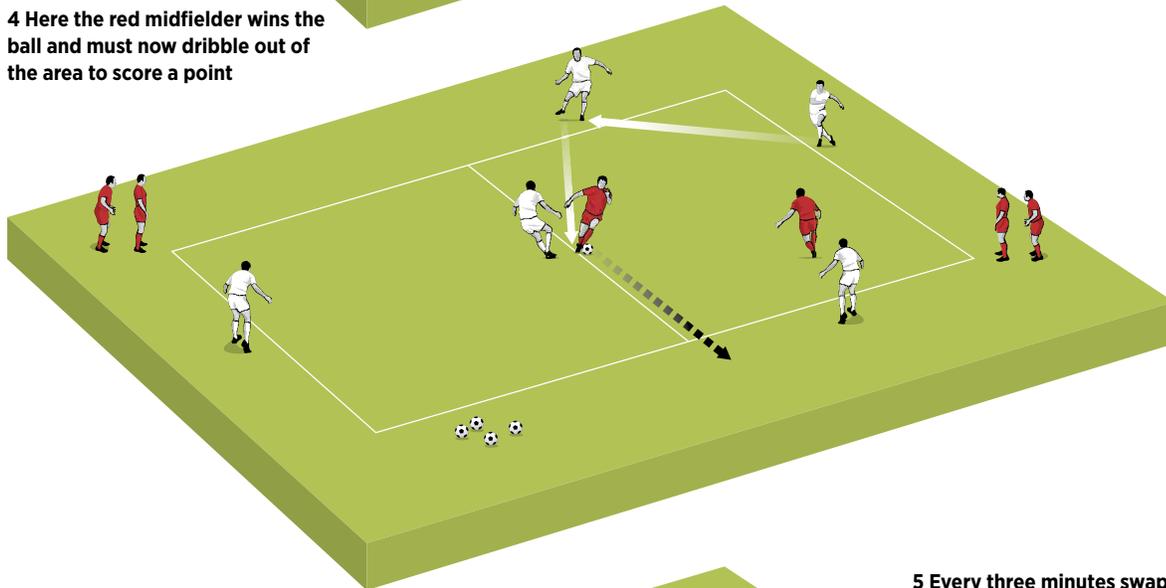
Your team will benefit from learning how to close down and pressure players passing through midfield.

1 Play starts in the left zone with the white passing team who must keep the ball from the red midfielders using one touch

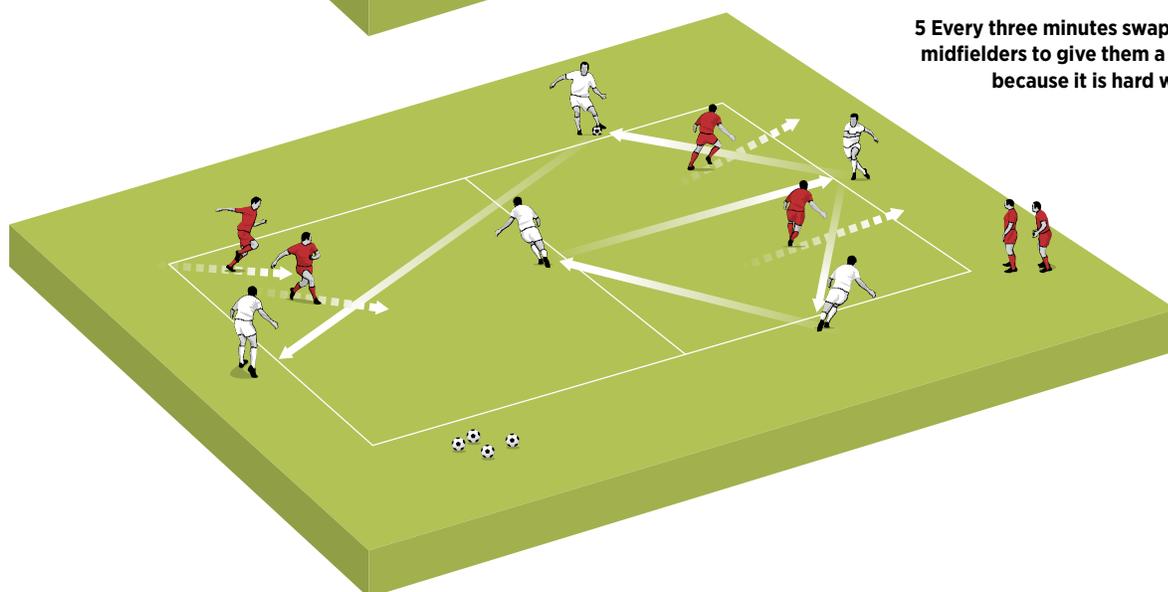


2 After four passes play is switched to the player at the other end. The two side players move to the other square, as do the red midfielders

4 Here the red midfielder wins the ball and must now dribble out of the area to score a point



3 The receiving player at each end has two touches to give his team-mates time to get into his square



5 Every three minutes swap the midfielders to give them a rest because it is hard work

Player movement

Ball movement

Run with ball

Shot

Compactness

WHY USE IT

If you haven't got the ball, you won't be able to win so this game teaches teams how to move together to press the opposition all over the pitch and force a mistake that wins the ball.

SET UP

Set up two goals on one half of your normal pitch. We have used 13 players in this session. You need bibs, balls and cones.

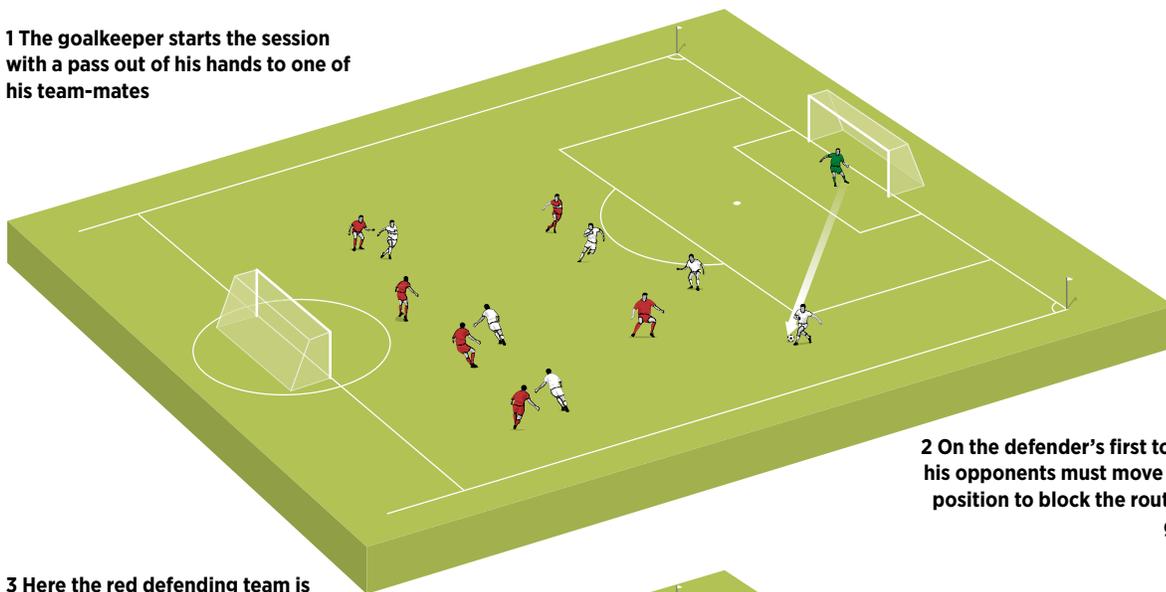
HOW TO PLAY

Split your players into two teams, one of six players with no keeper in a 4-2-0 formation and one of seven players with a keeper in a 3-1-2 formation. The team of seven starts with the ball in the hands of their keeper. He plays it out into the back three and they attack from there. The team of six has no keeper so they must go tight on their opponents and press high. If not it will be easy to slot into the open goal. Make sure both teams play with and without the goalkeeper so both teams practise pressing

TECHNIQUE

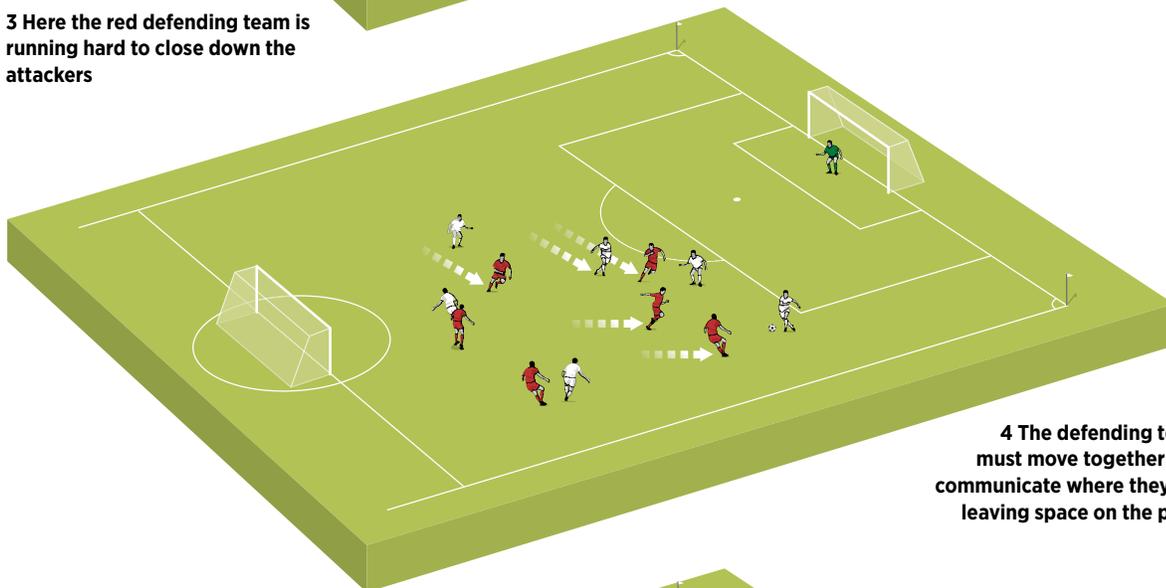
All players must be switched on and concentrating fully. They must stay on their feet and pressure their opponents quickly to force a pass backwards or sideways.

1 The goalkeeper starts the session with a pass out of his hands to one of his team-mates



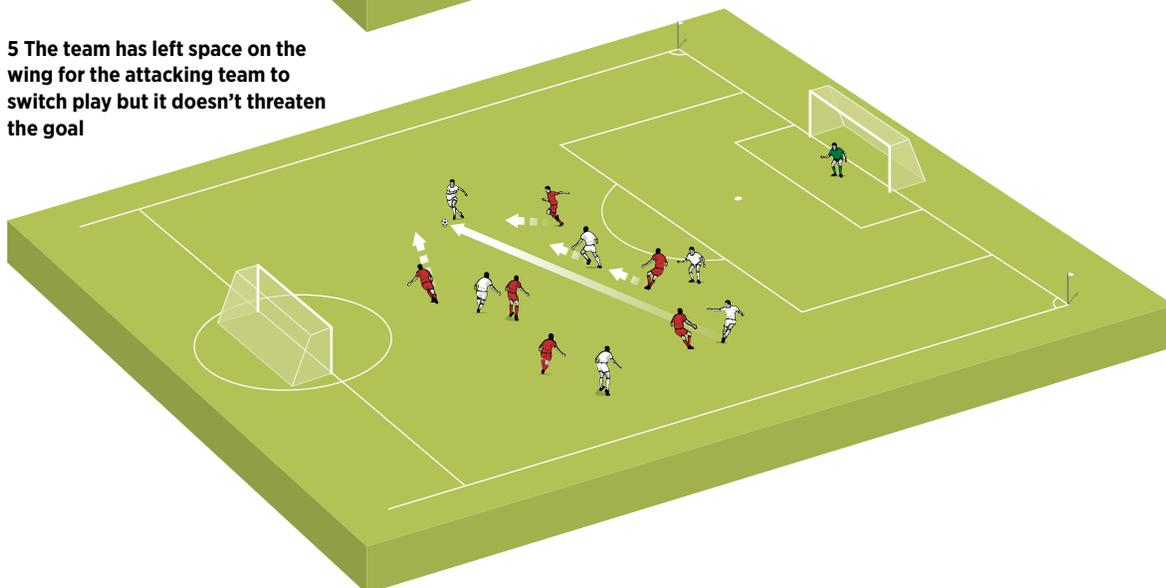
2 On the defender's first touch his opponents must move into position to block the route to goal

3 Here the red defending team is running hard to close down the attackers



4 The defending team must move together and communicate where they are leaving space on the pitch

5 The team has left space on the wing for the attacking team to switch play but it doesn't threaten the goal



Player movement

Ball movement

Run with ball

Shot

Control - restraint

WHY USE IT

Mourinho's teams have perfected the art of closing out space around their goal, breaking away on the counter to create chances against attacking teams. It is based on squeezing space in his team's half. This session is a simple way to coach that skill.

SET UP

Set up a 40x30 yd area with two small goals in the corners at one end and a normal goal at the other. You need balls, bibs and cones.

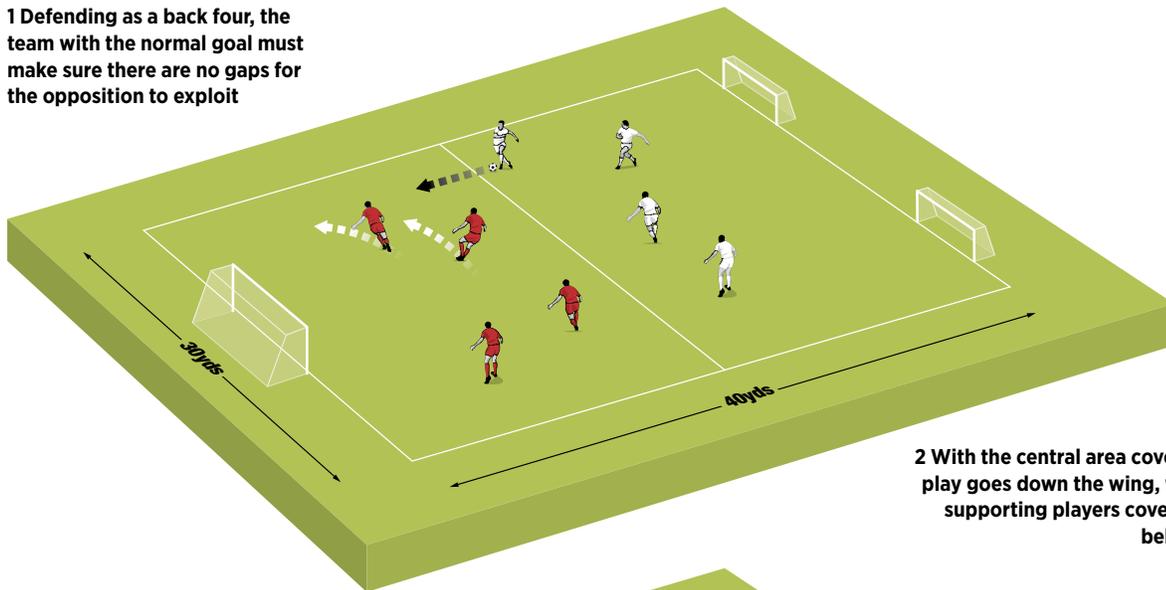
HOW TO PLAY

Play a 4v4 with no passes above head height. The players defending the two goals play like a four-man midfield, while the other four defend the single goal as a defensive unit. The team defending the single goal must be a tight unit squeezing space in front of goal because there is no keeper. The opposition do the opposite, forcing play inside by protecting the wings. Play five attacks and then swap teams.

TECHNIQUE

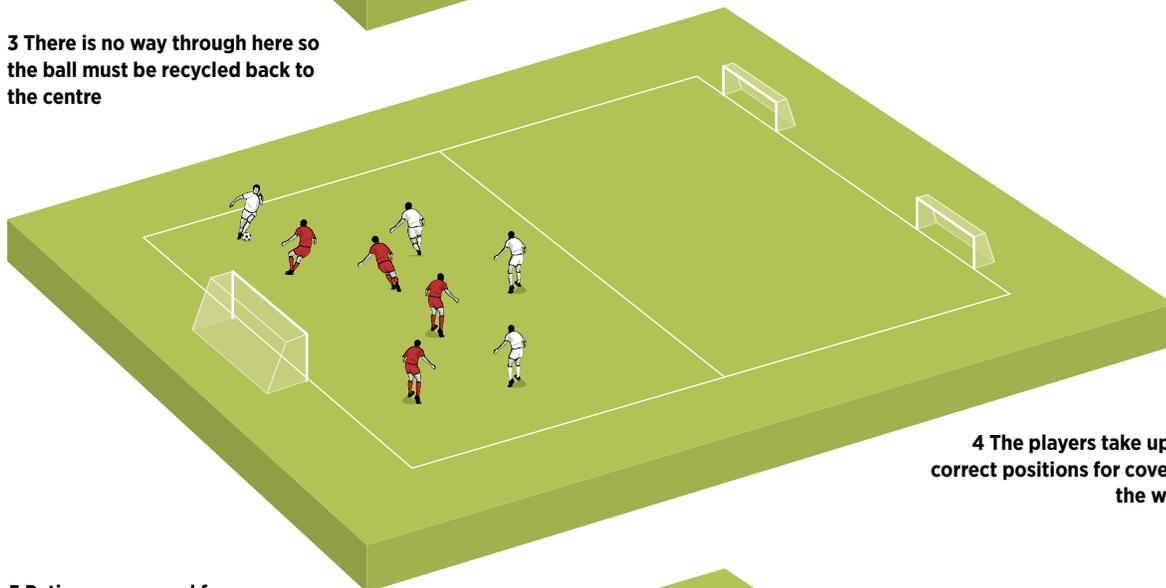
Both teams use defensive tactics but one plays like a four man defence and the other like a four man midfield. This covers the main areas and tactics that teams use when defending. The midfield blocks wide and forces play into the strong defensive middle, leaving nowhere for teams to penetrate.

1 Defending as a back four, the team with the normal goal must make sure there are no gaps for the opposition to exploit



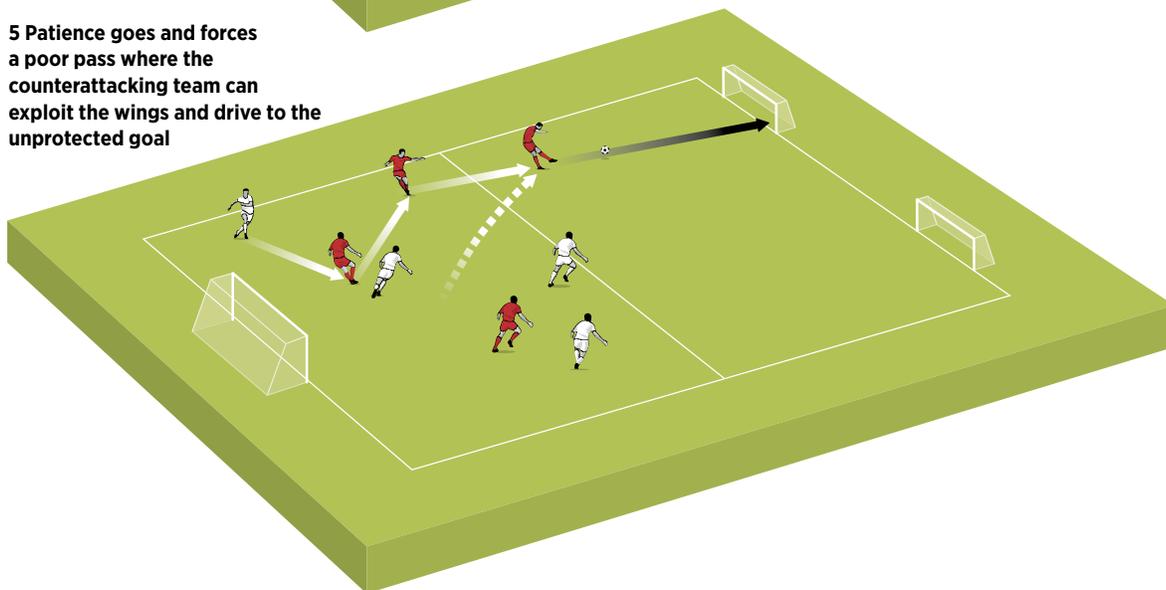
2 With the central area covered play goes down the wing, with supporting players covering behind

3 There is no way through here so the ball must be recycled back to the centre



4 The players take up the correct positions for covering the wings

5 Patience goes and forces a poor pass where the counterattacking team can exploit the wings and drive to the unprotected goal



Player movement

Ball movement

Run with ball

Shot