5  Defensive strategy and tactics

Core principles

1. Everyone defends
2. Cover
3. Pressure
4. Recovery
5. Team shape – compactness
6. Offside trap
7. Defensive transitions and choices
8. Defending dead balls

We start with defense because that is the core of every good team – even if they score 6 goals a game. It all starts with defense.

5.1  Everyone defends

The core principle of every good team is that everyone plays defense, all the time. You start by defending at the front, you defend in midfield, and you defend at the back.

5.1.1  Defending at the front (by strikers)

Strikers have three main defensive responsibilities:

- **Closing down** the ball and pressuring the defender.
  - Many teams do this, but you may need to do it a bit smarter
  - Closing down especially tight on defenders who look uncomfortable on the ball
  - Closing down quick and tight when your team is in “high press” – trying to press in the opponents' defensive third of the field. Most teams do this sometimes but not all the time.

- **Channeling**. Your team may decide before the game whether to channel opponents to play through the middle or along the wing.
  - If you want to force opponents back into the middle, strikers try to pressure the defenders from in front of them;
if you want the ball played down the wings, pressure defenders from the inside toward the side line, cutting off infield passes.

- **Goal kicks.** Strikers must work to position themselves on opposing goal kicks (see “defending dead balls” for more on this):
  - Away from defenders
  - Facing the ball
  - Far enough back that only a well hit ball will go over them
  - Covering the correct side of the field
  - Moving immediately after the kick into nearby attacking positions before the defense can re-organize

**Key:**

*Good defense by attackers is a foundation stone for good team defense.*

*It really matters.*

### 5.1.2 Defending in the middle (midfielders)

Midfielders are responsible for defending against other midfielders and strikers. Let me repeat that: **midfielders must get back to defend against opposing midfield and strikers.** They cannot just leave it to the defense. At least two midfielders have to get back!

- **Defense first!**
  - Midfielders must think defense first, offense second

- **Take responsibility** for the correct area
  - Midfielders are responsible for defense between the penalty areas, on their side of the field and in the center (see below)

- **Mark their midfield**
  - Midfielders need to know that they are responsible for “their” midfielder. If “their” midfielder carries the ball as far as our defense, they have failed

- **Standard first/second/third defender strategies apply** (see defensive tactics, below)
  - Checking back across into the center.
  - The far side midfielder must track back and across, as they can become responsible for the opposing center mid.
  - They can leave their own midfielder to be managed by the far side defender.

Defending by defenders is covered in the 5.2 below.

**Key:**
Midfield defense is all about effort. Anyone can do it –
they just have to work hard!

Notes:
5.2  **Cover**

Most defensive systems work around the concept of 1\textsuperscript{st}, 2\textsuperscript{nd}, and 3\textsuperscript{rd} defenders, and that is how this section is organized.

The player closest to the ball is always the first defender; the player supporting the 1\textsuperscript{st} defender and playing behind him is the 2\textsuperscript{nd} defender; and the player supporting the 2\textsuperscript{nd} defender, or playing further away from the ball is the 3\textsuperscript{rd} defender.

![Figure 1 1st 2nd and 3rd defenders](image)

A3 has the ball, so D1 is the first defender, D2 is the second defender, and D3 is the third defender.

5.2.1  **First Defender**

The player closest to the ball becomes the first defender. His job is to close down the space near the ball, getting between the attacker and the goal, preventing the opponent from dribbling forward, and cutting off passing lanes where possible.

- **Close quickly.** Get close to the attacker as soon as possible
- **BUT do not jump in** or over-commit.
- **Main objective is to contain** until the midfield gets back to cover
• **Make a stand at the edge of the box**: stop back-peddling and containing before you reach the penalty area. You have to try to make a tackle before the attacker gets into shooting range.

• **Take a good defensive stance**
  - Half turned but still facing the attacker
  - Overplaying one side to make attacker go the other way (usually toward the sideline)
  - Knees deep bent, as low as you can go
  - On your toes, not flat footed
  - Taking small quick steps

• **Be aggressive** – use fake tackles to put the attacker under pressure

• **Look for the opening to tackle** when the attacker’s control fails

• **Make your tackles solid**. Make it a personal goal to win every 50-50 challenge

• **Fast recovery** when beaten – get back behind the ball immediately (become the second defender – see “Recovery”)

• **Slide tackling**
  - **Only slide if you know you will get the ball**. On the ground = out of the play
  - **Slide with the kicking leg extended**, other leg bent away from contact
  - **Never slide in with both feet**
  - **Never slide with the studs up**
  - **Fast recovery** is key. Jump up immediately

**Notes:**

**5.2.2 Second Defender**

The second defender must do two things at once:

• **Mark the second most dangerous attacker** (the one closest to the man with the ball)
  (medium-to-close marking)

• **Protect against the first defender getting beat**

So being a good second defender is all about **positioning**, just as being a good first defender means being able to stop an attacker one-on-one.

**Keys:**

• **Stay close enough to your own man** that you get there very soon after the ball if a pass is made.

• **Watch for the second attacker making a run** into space behind you

• **Get the angle right** to support the first defender

• Ideally, **be close enough to the first defender** that an attacker beating the first defender runs immediately into you before he gets the ball back under control
• **Be prepared** to become 1\textsuperscript{st} or 3\textsuperscript{rd} defender if the attack switches focus

**Figure 2 Positioning for second defender**

- **Well positioned defender.**
  D2 is the 2\textsuperscript{nd} defender. He has taken up a perfect 2\textsuperscript{nd} defender position:
  - **Backing up D1**, and can quickly close if A1 dribbles past D1
  - **Close enough** to close down A2 quickly if A2 gets the ball
  - **Blocking the passing lane** from A1 to A3

- **Poorly positioned defender**
  2\textsuperscript{nd} defender is playing almost level with D1. This brings him closer to A2. But A1 now has three new options. He can:
  - Dribble around A1 to the outside, where there is now no cover [1]
  - Make a throw ball behind D2 [2]
  - Pass the ball in to the target man up A2 front
  - The 2\textsuperscript{nd} defender, while only a few yards away from being perfectly positioned, is now almost useless.

So as second defender, you need to make small adjustments to get the positioning right. This critically important. Typically, youth players do not adjust until **after** D1 has been beaten. That is too late.

Notes:
5.2.3 **Third defender**

It's all about positioning and awareness for the 3rd defender.

He is primarily a zone defender. While watching for possible switches to a wide player on his side of the field (where he would become 1st defender), he is mainly concerned with providing cover for the 1st and 2nd defenders.

Most important, it's his job to make sure to cover against crosses into the goal mouth.

**Key points for the 3rd defender:**

- **Mark the third attacking player loosely.** Only close enough to close down after a direct switch pass (when you become the 1st defender).
- **Zone marking**
  - cover for second defender
  - move to the middle against crosses
  - must watch both for midfielders cutting in to receive a cross behind 2nd defender, and his own man at the far post. **If in doubt, cover the center and leave the far post.**
- **Becomes 2nd defender** if 1st defender is beaten and 2nd defender has to go help.

**Figure 3 Basic positioning for 3rd defender**

In Figure 6, D3 is the third defender. His primary focus is on providing cover for D1 and D2, and for protecting the vulnerable space behind them (the danger zone)
In Figure 7, D2 is now 1\textsuperscript{st} defender. D3 has moved over to become 2\textsuperscript{nd} defender. This leaves A3 unmarked, and the oval space unguarded. That’s dangerous but necessary, because A1 and A2 are the immediate threat. That’s why the midfield has to defend! Only the far side midfielder can mark A3 and cover the danger zone.

\textbf{Key:}

\textit{Become 2\textsuperscript{nd} defender immediately, before A1 can get past D2 as well as D1}

In Figure 8, the point of attack is now the wing, and the danger area is in front of goal. D3 is now 3\textsuperscript{rd} defender, and must guard both against a run toward goal by A2, and a far post run by A3.
Key:

*Don't let an attacker get between you and the ball or you and the goal in the danger zone.*
You *must get to the ball first!*
5.3 Pressure

Pressure means pressing an opposing player who has with ball, trying to force a mistake.

Pressure requires alertness, effort, intensity, and anticipation. It requires a commitment to winning the ball back. Just wanting to is not enough.

Pressure takes effort and desire! It does not “just happen.”

• Get it back! The player who loses the ball must work extra hard to quickly get it back. It’s your fault – make it right!

• Pressure means playing tight. The time to press hard is right when an opponent is receiving the ball – don’t wait till it is under control! Tight usually means within touching distance of the opponent – not 2-5 meters away

• Work as a team. Single players cannot press effectively

• Loose pressure is worse than no pressure at all. It does not push the opponent into mistakes, and it takes defenders out of position

• Pick your spots. Pressure can be applied all over the field, in selected areas, or both depending on circumstances

Don’t jump in with reckless challenges. (see 1st Defender section above)

5.2.1 Where and when to press

Fields are divided into three zones: defending, midfield, attacking. Most teams always press the player with the ball immediately in the defending and midfield zones. Some also press in the attacking zone.

Full field pressure can be a tremendous weapon. It can lead a team to dominate even a more skillful and talented opponent. But it demand tremendous fitness and commitment.

Full field pressure also requires the team to play a high line (see “Pushing up” below), making the field shorter and giving pressing midfielders and strikers a smaller area to cover.

Teams that cannot press all through the game can still increase the pressure for a period of time: many teams press for 5-10 minutes at the beginning of the game, after half time, and if possible in the last ten minutes.

Pressure is all about energy and commitment. Defenders will crack if pressure is exerted long enough!

Notes:
5.4 Recovery

Recovery, like Pressure, takes effort and desire. It does not just happen.

**Getting beat does not mean you are out of the play.** It means you have to work hard to hustle back or “recover.” That’s how the team gets between the ball and the opposing goal, and how the team creates a numbers-up situation around the ball.

There are four kinds of recovery runs. They are designed to:

- **Apply pressure on the ball.** Here you simply chase as hard as can after the player with the ball, aiming to get it back.

- **Get goal-side** of an opponent so you can mark him. Here the aim is not an immediate tackle, but getting back between an opponent and the goal.

- **Get goal side of the ball** to cover space behind team-mates (becoming 2\textsuperscript{nd} or 3\textsuperscript{rd} defender (see below). Like other goal-side runs, you aim for a specific spot on the field where you can see trouble developing. In this case, you aim to get between an opponent and the goal, even if he doesn’t have the ball right now.

- **Direct recovery.** Track back more generally in line aimed at the nearest of your own goal-posts

**Everyone is expected to make recovery runs all the time:** only the strikers are not required to come back as far as necessary to get back into the play.

**Notes:**
5.5 Team shape

Modern defenses work very hard to retain a **compact team shape**. In a nutshell, this means that on defense, the team squeezes together vertically and horizontally to reduce spaces between players, cover better for each other, and create numbers up around the ball.

Compactness specifically closes down the “hole” in front of the defense, a danger area if opposing attacking midfielders and strikers get free there.

The diagram shows a well-organized team in a compact shape.

**Key points:**
- Even the sweeper is out of the penalty area
- Near side midfield and defense are channeling play down the flank
- The striker is cutting off lanes across the field
- Midfielders are closing down attacking lanes to opposing midfielders
- Defense is set up well to support
- Few gaps, every player is within 10 yards of another player
Key points:

- Defense is covering an area almost twice as big as for a compact defense
- Lots of holes and gaps
- Easy passing lanes to midfield, where opponents have numbers up
- Striker is detached and no help defensively
- Far side players are spread far to the side, effectively out of the play
- Sweeper is very deep, disconnected from rest of the defense

5.5.1 How do you stay compact?

Everyone on the team has to work on this, but there are four keys:

- **Striker** works to isolate the attacker with the ball, channel play as required by team strategy
- **Defense** pushes up to compress the field
- **Midfielders** drop back quickly toward goal, and push in toward the center of the field, away from the wings. They do not hang around upfield, and do not allow the play to pass them on the inside
• *Far side players* pull in toward the center of the field

*Notes:*
5.6 Offside trap

The offside trap can be an important defensive tool in some situations.

The trap is sprung by all defenders pushing up suddenly together, leaving one or more attackers in an offside position. When executed correctly, the trap can be very effective, especially in situations described below. Executed badly, and it is a recipe for disaster. So the trap must be practiced.

5.6.1 Moving up together

The trap just extends normal strategy - pushing up the defense - sometimes as far as the half way line. All the defenders have to move up together. Players must know that they are operating a trap, and developing the cohesion that makes for an effective trap can take time. And players have to communicate!

5.6.2 When and how to use the trap

The trap works best against teams that use the long ball. It should be sprung when the ball is with the opposing defenders and they are about to make a long downfield pass. As the ball is being prepared, defenders step up together and leave opponents offsides.

5.6.3 Role of the goalie

The goalie plays a key role in the offside trap. Because all defenders have moved upfield, a large gap is created behind them. If opponents defeat the trap, they will be chasing down a long ball into this space.

Here the goalie must become a field player – another sweeper. He must cover the entire defensive third of the field, swell outside his box.

5.6.4 Risks and choices

The offside trap is risky when playing teams that use short passes and dribble, and when facing players faster than the defenders. The trap may still be worthwhile, but players need to be more careful when using it and especially ready to make long recovery runs.

Players also need to see whether the other team has learned how to defeat a trap. If they have not, you can use the trap all day. If they have – especially if you see midfielders making delayed runs that get them behind the trap – it’s probably a good idea to put the trap back in the box for another day.
**Figure 8 Successful offside trap**

Key points:
- All three defenders moved up together
- Attacking players did not react in time
- Defender did not release the ball quickly enough
Key points:
- D3 failed to move with the rest of the defenders
- A1 is now wide open behind the defense
- A2 has plenty of time to make a good pass forward
- D1 and D2 are too far forward to recover

Notes:
5.7 Defensive transitions and choices

How your team plays defense once they have the ball is a matter of choice, balancing the risk of playing the ball out of the back against the reward of maintaining possession.

There are fundamentally two models for defensive transition. Most teams play both, but lean heavily in one direction or another:

- **The long ball.** Favorite for many years of English teams, long ball soccer depends, as the name implies, on booting the ball long distances from the back and challenging effectively up front.

- **Multiple short low risk passes.** Favored by technically advanced teams, especially in Spain and Italy but increasingly in England as well. Key is to take advantage of numbers up to find the open man, steadily moving up the field while maintaining possession.

Each approach has different costs and benefits. Different kinds of teams find they are best suited to one or other:

- **Long ball soccer** is safer in the short run, with little risk of giving the ball away in the defensive third. However, the ball is played without much accuracy, into a space where opposing defenders will be numbers up. The loss of possession is likely, and the opponents will soon be attacking again.

- **Short ball soccer** is somewhat riskier at the back, as passing the ball around invites pressure and possibly expensive mistakes. However, you do keep possession, tire out the opposing forwards who have to run after the ball, and draw opposing midfielders and defenders forward into more exposed positions.

In general, teams with defenders who are big and strong but have limited foot skills are suited to long ball soccer, especially if they have big fast forwards capable of winning 50-50 balls.

In general, teams with smaller and more technical defenders find it comfortable to play possession soccer at the back.

Requirements for playing short ball soccer at the back:

- Defenders who are comfortable on the ball
- A goalie who is also comfortable using his feet to receive and pass
- Midfielders who will come back to play possession with defenders, and who are technically advanced and comfortable passing the ball back to defenders
- Constant movement at the back as players move into space and create passing lanes. **Short ball soccer cannot be played with static defenders.**

Notes:
5.8 Dead-ball defense

About 40% of goals at the top level are scored from dead balls – free kicks and corners. So dead-ball defense is not an after-thought: defending against dead balls is critical if you want to win games.

This section uses a number of diagrams which indicate where specific players need to be positioned.

The diagram below numbers each of the players for an 8-aside team, but can easily be extended to 11-aside:

Legend

1 = Sweeper
2 = Right defender
3 = Left defender
4 = Right mid
5 = Left mid
6 = Center mid
7 = Striker
8 = Goalie

Near side = Ball side of field
Far side = Non-ball side of field
Near post = goal post nearest ball
Far post = goal post furthest from ball
5.8.1 Free kicks

General principles for defending all kinds of free kicks:

- **Hold the line.** Make sure that the defense does not collapse right into the goalmouth, where it's easy for attackers to score in a scramble.
  - Hold the line at the edge of the penalty area most of the time
  - For close in free kicks, hold the line no nearer in than the penalty spot

- **Stay between attackers and the goal.** As attackers move, stay with them keeping between attackers and the goal

- **Mark tight.** Players who are man marking must **play the man first.** Don't worry too much about the ball – stick tight with the opponent. Be within touching distance at all times.

- **Be alert.** Dead ball defending means **getting to the second ball first.** before the opponent.

- **Push out.** As soon as the ball is cleared out of the penalty area, all defending players (including midfielders) must **sprint to push up out of the box.** One slow player can leave every attacker onside. Several slow players simply invite the attackers back into the danger zone.

- **Make a wall.** The number of players in the wall should range from 1 at about 35 meters out, to 4 (or more in 11 aside) for kicks right on the edge of the box.
  - **The goalie sets up the wall.** It’s the goalie's job to position the wall – players in the wall must listen to what he says
  - **The wall stays still.** It should not jump around.
  - **The goalie must have see the ball all the way.** The wall should cover one side of the goal, while the goalie covers the rest. The goalie must have a clear view of the ball as it is struck. See [below](#) for details.

The following sections give detailed instructions on what to do to defend against very common dead ball situations.
Defending: Mid-range free kicks

- Hold the off-side line at the edge of the box
- Man mark tightly
- Challenge hard for the ball
- Goalie must own the 6 yard box

**Figure 10 Defending mid-range free kicks**

**Actions**

- Center mid [7] is one man wall. Jump and turn as ball is played
- 4 man markers ([2,3,1,4]) – at edge of box, retreating quickly as ball is kicked
- Near side mid [5] guards against sneak attack; drops back into center after ball is kicked
- Striker stays up-field, tries to attract 2 defenders.
- Goalie [8] owns 6 yd box
- **PUSH OUT TO PUSHOUT LINE AS SOON AS THE BALL IS CLEARED**

Defending: Close in free kicks

- Solid wall, well positioned by goalie, facing the ball and ready for action
- Markers to pick up other attackers
- Push out as soon as danger is cleared
Figure 11 defending close in free kicks

Actions

- 3 man wall – Sweeper, center mid, near side mid ([1,7,5]). Maximum 10 yards away; positioned by goalie to block near post and near side of goal
- Goalie [8] positioned at far post. Must be able to see the ball directly as it is struck (get rid of extra wall players if necessary)
- Man markers – far side defender and far side mid ([2,4]). Must close down possible second shooter at the top of the box
- Near side defender [3] guarding against trick play or marks player in that area
- Striker [6] occupy two opponents as defenders
- **PUSH OUT TO PUSHOUT LINE AS SOON AS THE BALL IS CLEARED**

The wall is key, and the goalie must be in charge of organizing the wall. He must make sure:

1. the near post is covered.
2. there are enough players in the wall
3. he can see the ball as it is being struck.

Players should form the wall initially with one player turned backwards to look at the goalie who is giving instructions. The goalies may yell, but sometimes gestures are better:

- the number of fingers raised is the number of players needed in the wall
- pointing left or right moves the wall in that direction
- thumbs up – OK, right number, right place.
5.8.2 Defending: Long Corners

Objectives:
- Make it hard for attackers to reach danger zone around goalie
- Be aware of attackers options, such as short corners

**Figure 12 Defending long corners**

Actions
- Goalie [8] in middle of goal, comes for everything within 6 yard box
- Near side defender [3] blocks the near post
- Far side defender [2] on far post, guards against late runner
- Center mid, far side mid, sweeper [4,6,1] block attackers' path to the “block out area”
- Near side mid is free defender [5], mops up and guards against short corner
- Striker [6] stays up and tries to engage two opponents
- **KEY: GET TO THE BALL FIRST AFTER IT DROPS. Expect to find the ball on the ground**
- **PUSH OUT TO PUSHOUT LINE AS SOON AS THE BALL IS CLEARED**

5.8.3 Defending: short corners

Objectives
- Close down short corner immediately with two players
- Other players adjust

**Figure 13 Defending short corners**
**Actions**

- Near side mid – who was the free defender - [5] immediately closes down
- Near side defender [3] moves out and closes down ball carrier near goal line
- Far side defender [2] moves to become near post defender
- Sweeper [1] moves toward ball
- Far side mid and center mid [4,7] man mark (as for long corners)
- Goalie moves toward near post
- Striker [6] stays up and engages 2 defenders
- **KEY: Stay sharp and aware of what’s going on**
- **PUSH OUT TO PUSHOUT LINE AS SOON AS THE BALL IS CLEARED**
5.8.4 Defending their goal kicks

Objectives
- Force opponents into error; deny them possession
- Striker should be far enough back that it's hard to get the ball over his head
- Midfielders MUST be deep enough to stop the ball going over their heads

Key: *attack the ball immediately*

**Figure 14 Defending opponent goal kicks**

Actions
- Striker [6] moves to near side wing; also covers short kick to their fullback
- Center mid [7] stays in the middle
- Near side midfielder [5] camps in target area
- Far side midfielder [4] cheats into the middle daring opponents to play the ball across to the far wing
- Near side defender [3] man marks tightly against their striker
- Far side defender [2] also cheats into the middle a bit; stays level with near side defender
- Sweeper [1] plays diagonally behind near side defender, protects against defender being beaten