

Teaching Individual and Small Group Defending to Youth Players

Keeping Defensive Themes Simple and Enjoyable

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Coaches, we have all been there. We have been firmly attached to the bench, watching our team struggle to stop some crafty little player weaving in and out of our midfield and backline like a mouse in a maze hunting for the cheese. The frustration is almost unbearable. Some coaches attempt to shout instructions from the sidelines: “Don’t dive in!” “Keep your feet moving!” “Why can’t you work together?” “How many times have we worked on this in practice?” Others who are more patient and understanding choose to watch the nightmare unfold and attempt to sort out how they will fix the problem in training in the weeks and possibly months to come.

Teaching individual and small group defending to youth players is not the easiest task for coaches. Many times children disregard a defending session because they see defending as boring and far less exciting than going to goal and just playing the game. Agreed! But youth coaches must take the time to carefully teach defending, little by little, in simple terms and with fun, creative activities.

The activity diagrammed below is taken from Jeff Pill, US Women’s National Staff Coach. He presented this activity as part of an entire session on zonal defending at the USSF “A” License Course last summer in Deerfield, Massachusetts. Since participating in this session, I have found the activity useful in training players U12 all the way up to collegiate men. In all cases, the players have a wonderful time competing and learning the ins and outs of zonal defending. Obviously, the college guys love the fast pace and competitive aspect. Youth players love it because the game does not stop and there are lots of goals to be scored (although scoring goals is not the focus of the session, scoring lots of goals is a nice byproduct of the activity).

It is recommended that coaches use this activity as part of an entire training session on zonal defending. Before using this activity, coaches must take the time to train the fundamental aspects of individual defending. It is important to teach players the importance of closing the gap between them and the opponent attacking with the ball (first attacker). It is also essential to teach the players to slide into the tackling zone (4-5 yards in front of first attacker) so as to not overrun the first attacker, communicate with their teammates (“I’m on ball!”) and also shuffle backwards in order to delay penetration and identify the right time to use a poke or block tackle to dispossess the opponent and quickly transition to the attack.

It is also important for coaches to use small number games like 1 v 1, 1 v 2 and 2 v 2 to introduce the roles and responsibilities of the second defender. The 3 v 3 activity diagrammed below can be used when players are ready to begin learning the role of the second defender, but is probably more effective when they have shown proficiency in this concept and are ready to move on to learning the function of the third defender and defending as a small group.

3 v 3 Transition

Players: Two teams of 6-9 players.

Space: 20 x 35 yards- 3 small goals on each endline; a marker such as a flag or coaching stick on each touchline to indicate midfield.

Balls and Equipment: A good number of balls placed near the center goal on each endline. Use different colored or shaped cones in order to clearly identify goals and midfield.



3 v 3 Transition Game- Lots of action, fun and coaching points!

Explanation: Players go 3 v 3 to three goals. When the ball goes out of bounds in a team's defensive half OR a goal is scored through one of the goals they are defending, the three players defending those goals come off the field, and 3 new players from the same team come on the field with a ball. All new balls start with the player in the middle line.

Score is kept and the emphasis for the coach is teaching defending. The coach should focus on the principles of defense and reward smart defending by using a lot of praise and positive encouragement. Let the kids play, but choose appropriate times to stop the game and make coaching points. Do not "overcoach" and stop play too much. Although you will feel the need to correct everything that goes wrong, resist the urge to do so, as overcoaching will lead to boredom and lack of motivation in your players. Carefully choose your coachable moments and, when you do, make those moments count!

Coaches may choose to call offside, using midfield as the offside line.