

Principles of Soccer

ATTACKING

The principles of attack will help a team in possession of the ball react to any situation during practice or a match. These principles apply regardless of the system of play, formation being played or how the match evolves. The principles of attack apply when a team is looking to keep possession of the ball, move forward into an attacking position or creating chances to score a goal. Principles of attack include the following:

PENETRATION: Penetration is the ability to play through or behind the opposition. Penetration is achieved by exploiting space with good on- and off-the-ball movement. A key facet behind the principle of penetration is to encourage players to look forward and exploit the space behind the opponents.

CONTROLLING POSSESSION (support): To maintain possession and control the movement the ball down the field, the player on the ball will need support. Forward, back and side support facilitate attacking options. When in possession, player support requires good distribution of the ball to spread the field. Angles, distance and timing of passes also very important. This also includes the ability to switch the point of attack and control game tempo.

WIDTH: Stretching the defense to create width should always be in the minds of the attacking team. Opponents can be stretched vertically or laterally. The ability to stretch opponents laterally across the field provides the opportunity for penetration through wide areas. Correct positioning also gives opportunities to switch the play to exploit the weak side.

MOBILITY: Individual speed and the ability to interchange positions, or mobility are important in contemporary soccer. The ability to interchange positions and provide good movement to support situational play, creates attacking opportunities. Movement on and off the ball will create the space needed for the attacking players to connect more passes.

CREATIVITY: The events that occur immediately after regaining possession often determine the outcome of a competitive match. A fast, positive response at this time can catch teams off balance and in poor defensive shape. Transition should be discussed as part of the strategy and tactics of a team, and the principles covered in this section should be used.

FINISHING: Simply put, finishing is successfully scoring a goal when creating scoring opportunities. This means shooting the ball at the correct moment, making sure shots are on target, following shots on goal and ensuring the ball gets past the goal keeper.

DEFENDING

Defense is about taking away the options and space from your opponent. Simply put, when your team is defending, you want to make the field small and the options of the other team very limited. Note: Every Coach will have different terminology for these defensive principles, but the general ideas will always remain the same.

PRESSURE: This is the role of the first defender. The first defender is generally the person who is closest to the ball. Their primary role is to deny and control the penetration of the other team (they don't want the ball to get behind them). The role of the first defender is further broken down into four steps: approach, delay, control and tackle.

APPROACH: The first defender must engage with the attacker quickly – running towards them with pace, but then slowing down as to not allow the ball to get in behind them. Once they engage with the attacker, they need to get into an athletic position, legs bent, body balanced, feet ready to move.

DELAY: In a good athletic position, the first defender slows down the attacker by moving with the attacker, oftentimes sort of shuffling side to side backwards. It's important not to let the attacker get too close while delaying, because then it will be too easy for them to dribble past you. A general rule is to keep the attacker just over an arm's length in front of you.

CONTROL: Once the first defender has slowed down the attacker (delayed them) then they can start to control them, and channel them into one direction. Maybe that means force them to their non-dominant foot, maybe that means to force them to the sideline where there is less space, maybe that means to force them to the middle where there are defending teammates to cover. It's important to understand there is not necessarily a right and wrong here. Don't think your child is doing something wrong if they are forcing the attacker centrally, maybe that is what the coach wants them to do because the attacking team's strength is flank play (crosses). This also includes the ability to control game tempo.

TACKLE: We regain the ball from the attacking team by tackling or intercepting. The tackle is risky because once you commit or go to the ground as a defender, it is difficult to recover. There are different forms of tackling – sometimes it's a simple poke to win the ball from the attacker, sometimes it's a full-on slide tackle (which is completely legal unless you go in with your cleats up or hit the player before the ball) and then other times a tackle is a last-minute block of the ball before a penetrating pass or shot. Most often, the first defender does not tackle. Instead, they approach, delay and control to the point where the second defender is able to intercept the passed ball.

COVER / SUPPORT: While the ball is being pressured, all other players should be getting into defensive positions. The positions taken should support the pressuring defender in case they are beaten. This is called providing defensive cover or support.

BALANCE: As your team concentrates their defense in the area of the ball, defenders not near the ball must position themselves to cover important spaces (normally central areas of the field) in order to prevent attackers from making penetrating runs into these open spaces.

COMPACT / COMPRESSED: A compact or compressed team will reduce the MOST dangerous space a team can exploit. As you organize your defense, limit time and space for the opponent by concentrating your defense in the general direction of the ball. In order for a team to be compressed, there must be collective movement and communication. Defenders should also attempt to stay "goal side" in order to limit the other team's ability to directly attack the goal.

CONTROL & RESTRAINT: Players often make poorly timed or off-balanced attempts to win the ball. You must play "under control" when challenging for the ball. Players should refrain from tackling unless they are confident they will win the ball.