Team pressing – not just a mindset

Pressure your opponent in any part of the field in a constructive and organized way, by Schellas Hyndman, NSCAA Staff and Head Coach, Southern Methodist University (Dallas, TX)

General remarks

The most recent World Cup in Korea and Japan featured changes taking place in today’s game. Are they really changes, or are teams simply better prepared for tactical demands? The 2002 FIFA World Cup Korea/Japan Technical Report included some interesting facts and statistical analysis: For example, 20% of the goals scored throughout the World Cup were scored from rapid counterattacks, while another 30% of all goals were scored from set pieces. Combination play and pressing were also important.

Team pressing was a very popular tactic, particularly in the midfield, despite the hot and humid weather. Many teams pressed the ball and doubled up in certain places on the field. They used team pressing to condense the field and limit the space and time available to the opposition.

Teams that played as a compact unit were successful in disrupting the opposition’s rhythm of play. Denmark, England, Ireland, Japan, Korea, Sweden, Turkey, and the USA all used pressing throughout the World Cup. Ireland was particularly impressive for its high-intensity defending. Korea and the USA also stood out for their work-rate and team pressing tactics. Korea was a tremendous surprise in the World Cup: They played in a Dutch 3–4–3 system and dominated their opponents with and without the ball for most of their matches. Four months of hard training prepared the Koreans to press their opponents and find success.

The definition of pressing

Pressing, in soccer, is the attempt to put pressure on the opposition when they have the ball. It is an attack tactic related to an "attacking defense" style that covers the entire field. It is not tied to any particular playing system.

Prerequisites for pressing

The first prerequisite for pressing is having the mentality to attack with and without the ball. According to FIFA coach Andy Roxburgh, three more basic elements are also necessary to employ this sophisticated defending strategy:

- physical conditioning equal to the demand,
- knowledge of how to press (angles of pressure and positions of support players), and
- key individuals within the team to lead the press.

Necessary skills and abilities can be categorized as follows:

- motor skills and technical-tactical skills: good general condition (endurance, speed, agility), 1 v. 1 skill, mastery of various game situations (1 v. 1, 1 v. 2, 2 v. 2 etc., up to 6 v. 6);
- mental and sensory abilities: excellent mental adaptability, good game awareness (peripheral vision, anticipation of game developments), concentration, willingness to learn;
- social skills: team-oriented thinking, discipline, respect for leaders, aggressive but fair attitude toward opponents;
- emotional characteristics: ability to perform, willpower.

Putting it into practice

To use team pressing successfully, players have to master certain concepts and actions:

- The field is divided into two halves by an imaginary centerline perpendicular to the real one. Through positional play and by traveling with the ball, the team creates a strong side

Double- teaming an opponent can cause a turnover and a quick counterattack.
(where most of their players are) and a weak side. Pressing can always be used on the strong side (Illustration 1).

- Pressing zones are located on the sidelines: attack pressing in the opposition’s defense zone and midfield pressing near the centerline (Illustration 2).
- Through skilful positional play, players can limit the width and depth of the field.
- Defensive plays that slow things down can give teammates a chance to catch up with the rest of the team.
- Players should try to outnumber the opposition near the ball: This puts pressure on opponents, forces 1 v. 1 situations and provokes misplaced passes.
- Players farther away from the ball should cover space and opponents and wait for passes.
- Whenever there is a chance to win the ball, use positional play to make it impossible (or at least difficult) for opponents to pass back to the goalkeeper or their teammates.

**Conditions for pressing**

There are several factors that will influence a team’s decision to press:

- Climate, field size and field conditions: A wet, uneven field is good for pressing: The player with the ball is more likely to make mistakes under strong opposition pressure, which increases your chances of winning the ball. High temperatures, on the other hand, quickly lead to exhaustion if you use pressing continuously, which makes the tactic progressively less effective.
- Score and time remaining: As the game wears on, players get tired and lose the aggressiveness required for good pressing. However, when the score is close (0:1, 1:2) near the end of the game, pressing can provide the losing team with a good chance of pulling out a tie, or even winning. The winning team, meanwhile, should forget about pressing and focus on protecting its lead.
- Location: You always have a better chance of controlling the game when you play on your home turf. The public expects the home team to win, so pressing tends to be effective at home.
- Relative ability levels: Pressing works well when the opposition’s outside defenders and/or outside midfielders are in good condition but weak on technique; this increases your chances of winning the ball quickly.
- Opposition at less than eleven players: Attacking the player with the ball (e.g. double-teaming) is easier when you outnumber your opponents.
- Opposition’s playing style: For example, if the opposition builds its attacks with fast, long passes in the air from defenders to a target player in the middle, then pressing is risky because the attack may bypass your players. On the other hand, a team that builds its attack with short passes from defenders can easily be stopped with pressing in the wing zones.
- Defenders’ ability against even or superior numbers: If pressing fails, then your defenders will find themselves equal to or outnumbered by their opponents. In that case, they have to be able to slow down the game and take a defensive stand.

**Advantages of pressing**

According to Arrigo Sacchi, the successful former coach of AC Milan and the Italian national team, the advantages of pressing are that it:

- keeps opponents from dictating the game,
- stops teams from playing their style,
- encourages your own team and boosts courage,
- helps the weaker players on the team to develop confidence,
- strengthens personality and determination, and
- helps on counterattacks.

**Disadvantages of pressing**

However, pressing also has certain disadvantages:

- It functions poorly when the opposition’s defense alternates between two zones covered by various players.
- Players tend to move close together in pressing situations; this creates a lot of open space behind the defenders.
- Pressing teams tend to play a more static and predictable game after they win the ball, losing their creativity and feel for the game.
Pressing situations

- After winning the ball, players are too close together for constructive attack building (lack of width and depth).
- Pressing places high demands on a team’s ability to cooperate and play a compact game.

Pressing situations

- Ball is played back to the goalkeeper.
- Ball is played over the top of the opposition’s defense.
- Ball is played back to a defender who lacks either technical ability or support.

Pressing situations

- Ball is played to an opponent at the sideline.
- Your team loses possession (nearest player to the ball immediately initiates the press).
- Opponents enter a designated pressing zone. The press is dictated by the direction the opponent is facing while in possession of the ball.

Illustr. 3 Attack pressing

The objective of attack pressing is to put pressure on opponents in their own half (in their own defense zone), to interfere with their attack building and to confuse them, all in the hope of regaining possession as quickly as possible. This type of pressing is also known as high-pressure pressing:

- All players switch to defense immediately upon losing the ball.
- The entire team moves forward. The player closest to the ball carrier attacks and creates pressure. At the same time, all other players mark the nearest opponents between them and the ball, including the opposition’s goalkeeper. They limit the width and depth of the midfield.
- The team forces the entire opposition toward the endline.
- Opponents on the opposite side of the field are only loosely marked.
- The team plays as a single compact unit, with the goalkeeper acting as sweeper and running to intercept long passes in the air.

Illustr. 4 Midfield pressing

The objective of midfield pressing is to slow down the opposition’s attack building and to organize your own defense at the same time. Midfield pressing starts in the area near the centerline:

- The defensive line maintains contact with the midfield and can use the offside trap. This restricts the opposition’s playing space.
- The goalkeeper acts as a sweeper behind the defensive line and runs to intercept through passes.
- The team forces the opposition toward the sideline.
- After losing the ball, players pull back to a designated area near the centerline and do not put pressure on the opposition in its own half. Instead, they wait until a good opportunity for pressing (e.g. pass to an opponent at the sideline) presents itself.
- Ideally, two players move to put pressure on the ball carrier. Opponents near the ball are marked closely.
- Opponents on the opposite side of the field are only loosely marked.
- The team plays as a single compact unit.
AMATEUR ADULT TRAINING

SAMPLE FIELD SESSION

WARM-UP

1 SETUP
- Three players practice with one ball.

COACHING POINT
- Work on developing the mentality to prepare for pressing.

SEQUENCE
- 1 v. 2 shadow pressing
- 1 v. 2 defend wall pass
- 1 v. 2 live play

2 SETUP
- Mark out a 30 x 15-yard field.
- Six players outside the field and three inside.

SEQUENCE
- The players outside the field are limited to two touches.
- The players inside try to press and win the ball.
- All six players start on the outside with one player eventually moving into the field.
- Players switch roles and position after one minute.

COACHING POINTS
Defenders should:
- develop an aggressive defending mentality,
- put immediate pressure on the ball and make play predictable,
- support the first defender,
- anticipate next pass to intercept or put immediate pressure on opponent,
- cut off passing lanes,
- move together as a unit, communicating and directing play.

VARIATION
- The players inside the field play 1-2 touch; players switch positions on turnover.

3 SETUP
- Mark out a field 70 x 44-yard field with two goals with goalkeepers.
- Divide the field into three zones (two 28x44-yard endzones and a 14x44-yard middle zone).
- Divide players into three teams of four (A, B and C).

SEQUENCE
- A starts out attacking against B on one goal. If B wins the ball, A uses team pressing to win it back and score.
- B tries to get the ball out of the zone. If they succeed, they play combinations freely and without interference across the center zone and then attack against C on the other goal.

COACHING POINT
- By requiring players to shoot from the attacking zones, you force opponents to use attack pressing.

VARIATION
- In each attacking zone there is a neutral player who helps whichever team has the ball, to reinforce the pressing.
SAMPLE FIELD SESSION

6 V. 6 + 2 GKS

SETUP

- Mark out a field the width of the penalty box from endline to centerline.
- Players play 6 v. 6 on two goals with goalkeepers.

SEQUENCE

- Players are limited to three touches.
- The entire attacking team must cross the centerline before scoring (ball carrier must dribble across).
- Attackers must shoot within four seconds.

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**COACHING POINT**
- By requiring players to complete a certain number of passes, you create pressing situations for opponents, who should recognize and take advantage of them.

**VARIATION**
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