

Basic Ideas for Coaching Zonal Defending
Tom Turner, OYSAN Director of Coaching and Player Development
January 2002

Basic Concepts

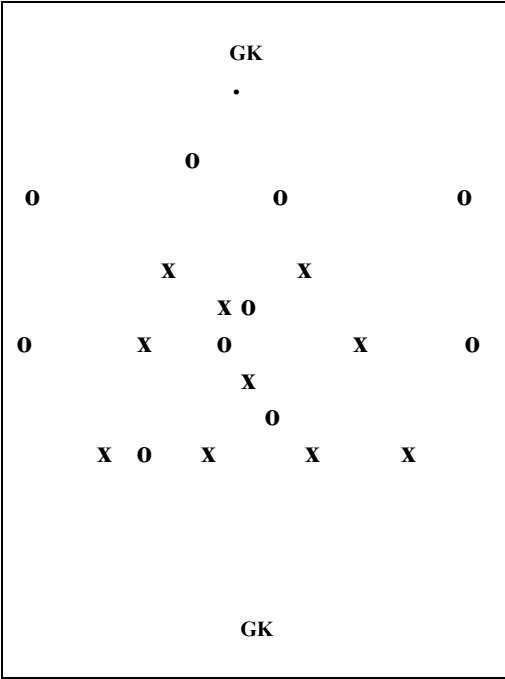
Coaching players to understand zonal defending can be a relatively simple matter, with the “big picture” concepts built around the idea that a team must try to stay in its’ assigned “attacking” formation (shape) and move as a block when defending. In general, teams will vary the depth, or starting point, at which they begin to defend, based on the tactical situation before them (the number of attackers and defenders in the immediate area), the relative strengths and weaknesses of each team, the score, the time remaining, the field and climactic conditions, the red card situation, and the importance of the final outcome.

Zonal defending is more practical and efficient than strict man-to-man marking, although individual marking assignments often complement zonal organizations. A zonal defense can be implemented with any attacking formation; however, the line of confrontation (starting point) will be influenced, to a degree, by the number of players on the field (red card situation) and the number of players in the forward line, as it is obviously much more difficult to press with one striker than with three! Regardless of which formation is used, and assuming teams of eleven, the basic visual cues for the team to begin to implement a zonal defensive system are as follows:

1. Goalkeeper Possession. When the opposing goalkeeper has possession, all defending players protect the middle of the field and concede outlet passes to the flanks. The simplest rules of thumb are for the strikers to drop off to the beginning of the midfield third, for the backs to adopt positions where they can attack any punts before they bounce, and for the wide players to push towards the center of the field. This picture, with both teams playing 4-4-2 and the X’s defending, can be seen in Figure 1, below.

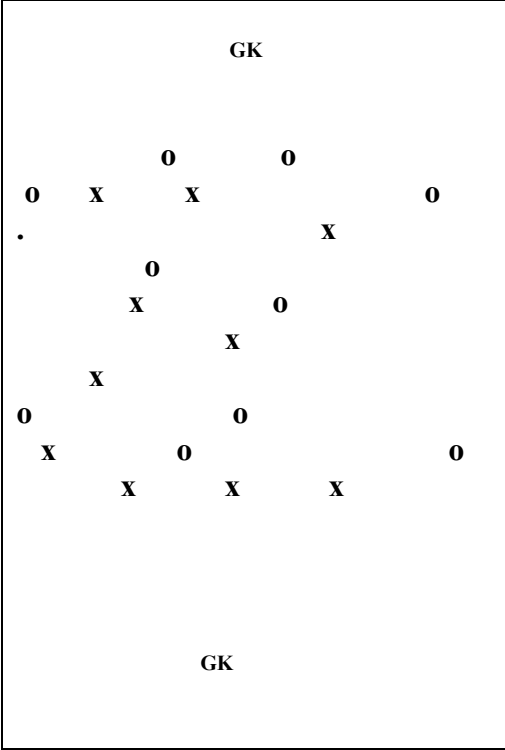
2. Wide Player Possession. When the ball is on one side of the field, the players closest to the ball move to constrict the near-side space, while the players on the weak (far) side move towards the center of the field and leave opponents farthest from the ball unmarked. In Figure 2, below, both teams are playing 4-3-3, the X’s are defending, and the O’s right back is in possession.

Figure 1



In Figure I, the X team has “dropped off” and “tucked in” to protect the center of the field.

Figure 2



In Figure 2, the X team has moved towards the left (ball) side as a block.

Building the Details

Once the players understand the basic visual cues for forming and moving as a block, the coaching must focus on the details of zonal defending in order to improve the quality and consistency of individual and team play. Understanding the details can take many weeks, months and even years for players to apply “naturally” within the flow of a game, and it should be remembered that the practical distinctions between zonal and man-to-man defending often become blurred within the flow of the game.

Outlined below are the themes most common to zonal defending.

Recovering Behind the Ball.

If and when the opponents break pressure by switching the ball to the weak side of the field, the line of recovery for players played out of the game is a diagonal run backwards and towards the ball side. In Figure 3, both teams are playing 4-4-2 and the O's (who are playing from top to bottom) have succeeded in switching the ball from the right back to the left back. At this point, the X forwards are behind the ball and their line of recovery is backwards and towards the right side of their team. In this instance, the O's have succeeded in gaining territory and forcing the X's to drop deeper towards their own goal.

Figure 3

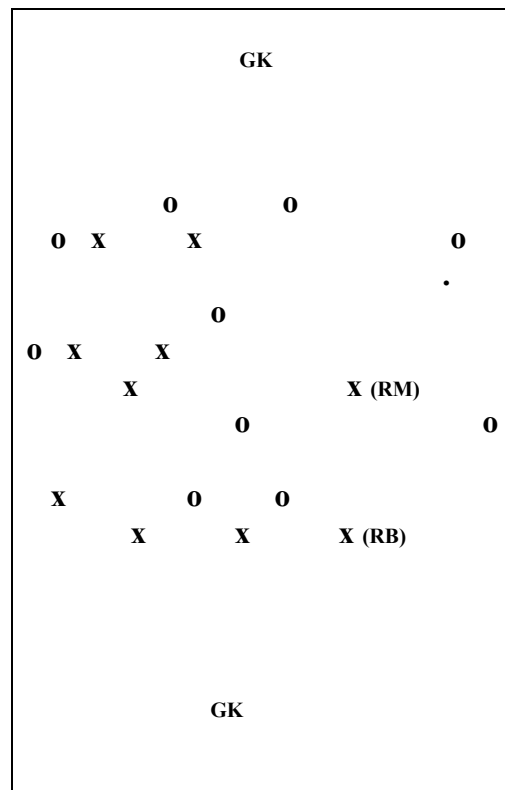


Figure 3 shows the immediate responsibility of the wide X players when the O team breaks pressure.

Rotating on the Weak Side

In the example shown in Figure 3, the X forwards are no longer able to pressure the ball so the X team must concede attacking space and drop further back. In this situation, the X's will begin to defend through their midfielders, with the right midfielder (RM) responsible for pressing onto the ball and the right back (RB) responsible for covering the O's left midfielder. This action is only tactically viable, however, when the rest of the X team has worked across the field to cover the remaining open spaces. If the right midfielder pushes forward before cover has arrived, he or she is likely to be played out of the game by the left back and the O's will have an excellent opportunity to quickly attack goalward. As a general rule, the further the ball is from goal, the less important it is to needlessly press forward on the weak side when the first line of confrontation has been breached.

Pressuring and Making Play Predictable

Assuming the ball cannot be recovered immediately, the secondary tactical goals for any defense are to make the game as predictable as possible and then win the ball back. These aims are achieved by coaxing the ball towards attacking spaces limited by defenders and the sidelines, or by funneling the attack into more central spaces where covering defenders are available to help win the ball. A critical element in the defending process is the challenging player's mentality; a second consideration is their speed and angle of approach.

Defensive Mentality

Because of the open spaces created when attacking, a team is most vulnerable to counter-attacks when the ball is first turned over. For this reason, all players must be willing to accept their defensive responsibilities when the ball is turned over. If the closest player to the ball can immediately regain possession (first objective), or hurry an opponent (second objective), or steer the attack in a predictable direction (third objective), the chances of successfully recovering the ball are improved; in contrast, if there is no closing down, there will be no coordinated recovery of the ball. All players must be willing to defend.

Recovery of the ball is also made more likely if teammates "read" that the chance to regain possession, or press, is "on," and quickly move into good covering (close) and balancing (peripheral) positions. When possession is won, the team should immediately look to counter-attack; if no counter-attack is possible, the team should spread out into an attacking shape and begin their build-up.

Pressuring Speed and Angle

The speed and angle with which a player defends can also help increase the chances of successful recovery. At the moment the ball has been turned over, the faster an opponent is pressured, the less time they will have to look up and play a long pass; by immediately pressuring the ball, the risk of counter-attack will be reduced. As the defensive action becomes less immediate and more coordinated, players responsible for starting to pressure must be more aware of their speed and angle of approach.

The role of the forwards in organized team defending is generally to steer the play towards covering teammates, not to win the ball. With this in mind, the speed and angle of their approach, the distance they close to, and their spacing as a line of two or three, will be designed to reduce the likelihood of backward or sideways passes that can eventually result in a switch in the point of attack. If the ball stays on one side of the field, the forwards will have achieved their immediate aim and the movement of the ball will have become more predictable for the midfielders and defenders.

The rules of engagement change for the midfielders and defenders, whose objective is to deny opponents space and win the ball. While the general rule is to deny forward penetration by passing or dribbling, often a midfielder or defender's speed and angle of approach will "invite" the attacker in possession to continue dribbling in the same direction (more predictable for teammates) or pass into a tight or crowded space. Winning the ball is always the primary goal of defending, but keeping the ball in areas of the field where space is limited, or forcing the ball backwards to allow numbers to be organized behind the ball are the key secondary concerns of organized defending.

Compactness and Balance

The distance from the back of the team to the front of the team, and from side to side, determines how much space is available to the opponents. If the defending team decides to "press" the ball, when, for example, the right back is under pressure in a corner of the field, the back line should move towards the ball (compacting) and the players on the right side of the team should move inside (balancing), leaving the vulnerable spaces behind the team and on the right flank. The distance between and within the three lines (depth) is based on the skill level of the opponents: How far can they kick the ball? Can they play quickly and skillfully enough to break pressure? How fast are the forwards relative to the defenders? It is also based on the ability of the defending team to close down the ball in a tactically sensible way. If there is no pressure on a player who can pass 60 yards to the opposite side of the field, it makes no sense to commit players to the ball and leave spaces that cannot be defended. This concept is most evident when watching professional matches where defenders are more hesitant to routinely "squeeze" the game because the attackers are more able to combine out of pressure, or solve the problem of pressure by making long, accurate passes; it is the long balls played horizontally or diagonally across the field that require long recovery runs and pose the greatest tactical threat to teams that play very compact zonal defense.

In many cases, defending teams will start the process of recovering the ball closer to the halfway line to minimize the amount of open space behind their defenders. More often than not, the professional approach to defending is simply to vary the starting depth for defending, based on the game situation (time and score) and the likelihood of recovering the ball.

Tactical Cues for Pressing

One of the most aggressive options in the strategies of team defending is the decision to press the opponents in their own half of the field. This tactic can be designed to force more punts, or to win the ball back earlier, or to purposely change the tempo of the game.

There are a number of basic tactical cues that signal that the press is “on” and players should become familiar with these through regular and consistent practice. Some of the most common pressing situations are listed below.

- When an opponent is running towards his or her own goal line and has not secured possession, there is relative security in pressing forward as a group.
- When there is a throw-in deep in the opponent’s end and the thrower does not have great range, there is relative security in pressing forward as a group.
- When the ball is in the last third of the field during open play and the attacking team has numbers in that area, there is relative security in staying high and pressing as a group if the ball is turned over.
- When a defender takes a very poor first touch, or makes a poor pass or clearance that places a teammate in trouble, there is relative security in pressing forward as a group.
- If the ball is in the air or bouncing awkwardly in the final third of the field, there is relative security in pressing forward as a group.
- Following a restart, such as a free kick or corner kick, any partially cleared ball presents an opportunity to press the game in the final third.
- When the ball is played to a goalkeeper with poor kicking skills, or to their weaker side, there is relative security in pressing forward as a group.

Finally, it should be remembered that the line of confrontation must be based on the status of the game and the tactical situation in the game. Pressing, as a matter of course, is too predictable and too demanding physically, so varying the starting point for defending is a much more subtle and efficient way to defend.

Passing Off

Under most circumstances, the team’s defensive shape should remain recognizable and, when possible, opponents should be “passed off” to teammates in the same line (back, midfield, or forward) as they move horizontally, across the field; or passed off to other lines as they move vertically, up and down the field. This passing off serves to maintain good defensive shape, but the decision to pass a player off is generally dictated by the timing of the attacker’s run relative to the movement of the ball, the relative numbers (attackers and defenders) in the line behind, and the immediate threat to the goal. A team’s starting shape is meant as a guide, not a recipe, and it is never wise to insist on the rigid alignment of players either in attack or in defense; the game of soccer is simply too fluid to be played by formula.

Flattening Out

Another important consideration is the “flattening out” of the back line. When a team “squeezes” the game, the back line must “step up” to minimize the space the attackers have to play in. As a rule of thumb, the back line should move up in relation to the passing length of the other team. If the opponent’s cannot easily kick the ball over the defender’s heads, their starting positions are probably correct. However, if the defensive line is constantly turning to run down long passes and conceding dangerous break-a-way opportunities, their starting position (depth) is probably too shallow.

Playing the Offside Game

Consideration must also be given to offside tactics. In general, attacking players making early runs into offside space should be allowed to run offside, while players making well-timed runs must be tracked. This decision is often a matter of experience.

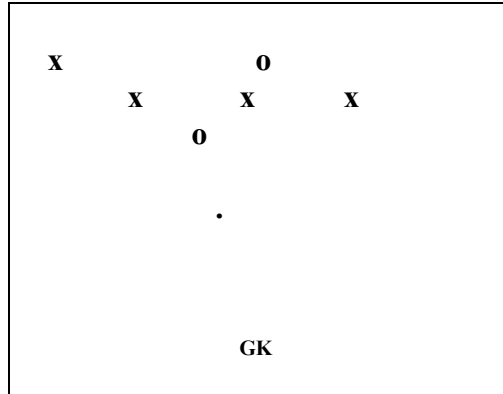
In classic “offside trap” situations, the defense can look to step forward as a coordinated unit, or the last defender can step forward on his or her own when an attacker runs forward before the ball is kicked. In either case, the focused coach must be alert in encouraging thoughtful movement and making the correct offside calls in practice. While teams will vary the depth at which they flatten out (based on personnel, formation and strategy), virtually all teams will look to flatten out as the game is played closer to their own goal, with the understanding that the goalkeeper should act as the covering player. It is bordering on tactical suicide to routinely play with a high back line and an offside trap.

A final element involving offside space and a flattening back line comes into play when teams are defending in their own half, and particularly when they are defending deep in their own penalty box. In these situations, the team should always look to step forward when the attacking team plays the ball backwards away from goal. Further down field, this movement serves to keep the team compact; if the defense has been backed up inside their penalty area, moving forward helps create pressure on the ball and provides the goalkeeper with more space and a better view of any shots.

The Goalkeepers Role

Given the principle of compactness, the amount of space created between the defensive line and their own goal is proportional to the line of confrontation; it also follows that defending high in the opponents half of the field increases the risk of conceding break-a-way opportunities. When a team is employing pressing tactics, the integrity of the defensive organization is more likely to be maintained when the goalkeeper fulfills the role of the “sweeper-keeper,” with the concept of “starting position” key to successfully defending against through balls. If the starting position is too close to the goal when the defenders fail to clear a long pass, as shown in Figure 4 below, the attackers will have more time and space to outrun the defenders and challenge the goalkeeper.

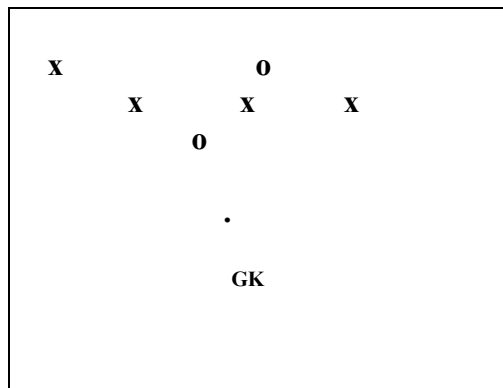
Figure 4.



In Figure 4, the goalkeeper's starting position is too deep to cover a through ball and the attacker has time and space to outrun the defenders.

If the starting position is further from goal (Figure 5), the goalkeeper is often better positioned to intercept the through ball and either clear to safety or seek to maintain possession.

Figure 5.



In Figure 5, the goalkeeper has started further from the goal line and is well-positioned to reach the through ball and diffuse the break-a-way threat.

The goalkeepers starting position must be based, not only on the position of teammates, but also on the ball's distance from goal and the level of pressure exerted on the player with the ball. At the top levels, many players can accurately kick the ball 60 yards or more. This means that if the goalkeeper wanders too far off his or her line and there is no pressure on the opponent with the ball, there is an increased risk of being chipped. In all cases, the goalkeepers starting position must balance the need to help defenders deal with the threat of through balls while being cognizant of the threat of long pass into goal. The

goalkeeper's physical dimensions, the level of play, and experience will all help determine "good" starting positions.

The Importance of the Training Ground

Developing awareness of individual and small-group defensive tactics can and should be developed through small-sided games, with the instincts for pressuring and recovering developed early on in life following natural transitions in possession. As "team" tactics become more relevant, around the early teen years, the concepts of compactness, pressing and varying the line of confrontation can become more related to the quality of performance and the outcome of practice games and live matches.

At players reach the age of ten and eleven, an offside line should become a common feature of practice, and the practice should include realistic soccer situations rather than drills. Moving the offside line to various depths can help players experience the natural cues required to step up or drop off as a team, or flatten out at the back.

With smaller-sided games of up to 5v5, an offside line 10-12 yards from goal is ideal; with larger numbers, the use of different looks will force players to create variable solutions to common problems. For example, if the offside line is at the halfway line on a 90-yard field (8v8), there will often be more space behind the defenders if the team has stayed connected in attack. In this case, flattening out without pressure on the ball, or not tracking a well-timed attacking run, can be dangerous tactical mistakes. On the other hand, an offside line closer to the goal (20 yards) on a 90 yard field (8v8) concedes space in front of the defenders and creates different defensive problems, such as closing down attackers checking into space between the back line and the midfield line. As an added tactical bonus, using offside lines in practice forces attackers to react in more sophisticated ways if they hope to outwit their teammates and score.

It has been noted that "team shape" is a term used to describe the numerical organization of players by line. To develop a working understanding of how individual players defend within an organized team shape, practicing with reduced versions of 11-a-side systems can be most helpful. For example, a team playing 3-4-3 might play 8v8 games in practice with the players organized as 2-3-2, or they may play 9v9 with the players organized as 2-4-2. If the preferred system was 4-4-2, the practice game might be 9v9 with the players organized 3-3-2. For a 4-3-3 system, nine players can be organized as 3-2-3. In all cases, the practice situation should closely resemble the match situation, with players organized into roles and the game providing the tactical cues for action.