

Basic Guide To Formations and Positional Training

Most teams (and new coaches) are thrown into games after just a few practices, often before the coach has had a real chance to teach the players anything. Thus, new coaches often feel intense pressure to "win", and may take early losses personally. This can lead them to worry excessively about where to put their players to maximize their "wins" when they really should be worrying about giving their young charges valuable experience in all parts of the field. These same fears of "failure" (i.e., not winning) can also cause some youth coaches to focus on a few stars and relegate the rest to the bench or supporting roles. When this happens, most of the players don't learn anything or have any fun, and even the development of the "stars" can be harmed in the long run.

How You Define "Winning" Will Affect All You Do

It is important to let players and parents know what the coach defines as "winning" at the start of the season. In their developmental years, kids really do "win" at soccer or, for that matter, any other sport if they have fun with their friends; learn enough about the game to become a fan; and get some healthy exercise. Numerous studies show that while kids certainly enjoy winning contests, their short attention span allows them to quickly forget the score in the last game, at least until some adult makes a big deal out of it. In addition, because kids are naturally more focused on their own performance than on the performance of the group, kids can be perfectly happy if they had a great game themselves even if the team lost in a blow-out.

Because kids have these wonderfully short memories and an ingrained focus on "me", any coach can have a "winning" season by setting the kids up to succeed at some task in every game and praising them for this accomplishment. Of course, a good coach also wants to teach them to work together and to whittle down the "me" focus a bit. Therefore, good coaches will include some team objectives that encourage the kids to work together (e.g., "Let's see if we can get 3 passes in a row in each quarter"). So, don't be afraid to use a long-term focus and to define "winning" in a way that gives everyone a fair chance to succeed.

Develop A Long-Term Focus

The first few games simply show the skills that any prior coaches taught your players and give you an idea of their natural athletic talent. So, the last thing on the mind of a new coach should be worries about winning the early games. Instead, the focus properly should be on long-term skill development. When this happens, the wins ultimately will start coming to your team as they become one of the more skilled teams on the field. This can take up to a year or more, so be sure to let everyone know in advance that you do not intend to worry at all about the short-term won/loss record.

How does a new coach who knows nothing about soccer get these kids trained and organized, so that they will be the most skilled? It is not very hard, as long as you keep it simple.

Basic Soccer Positioning Is Easy

Soccer is a very simple game. It has only 3 basic positions that are used in attacking, and only 3 basic positions that are used in defending. This is why many soccer clubs are moving towards 3v3 and 4v4 games at the younger age levels, so that players get a good foundation in this basic positioning. In addition, by playing 3v3 or

4v4 soccer, younger players end up with substantially more contact with the ball, which improves their skill level and makes things more fun.

Basic Defensive Positioning In a Nutshell

The 3 basic positions of players on defense are best described by the acronym "PCB" (Pressure-Cover-Balance).

The person closest to the ball is called the First Defender, and his job is to provide PRESSURE on the ball.

The second-closest person who is goal-side of the ball (meaning closer to his team's goal than the opponent) is called the Second Defender. His job is to provide COVER. That is, to be in a position to immediately become the pressure person if the attacker gets by the First Defender. In addition, the Second Defender will frequently have the additional job of guarding (called "marking") another off-ball attacker to whom the ball might be passed for a shot. The Second Defender will normally choose to take up a position ball-side of his mark if possible, but will mark goal-side if the ball-side position makes it impossible for him to provide support for the First Defender. Goal-side marking is also used if a defender knows that his mark is much faster than he is, as it gives him the lead that he needs to keep from being beaten.

The defender who is in the deepest position (closest to goal) if a line were to be drawn directly from the attacker to the goal is called the Third Defender. His job is to provide BALANCE to the defense. In essence, he is providing additional cover for the two primary defenders, and also watching out for additional incoming attackers making runs towards the center or far post areas of the goal.

All players should be taught these basic principles, and how to apply them in a game setting. It's also very important that players understand their supporting duties to those players who are immediately around them. For example, someone who is a midfielder must know that they must automatically and immediately assume the role of the "pressuring defender" if they're the closest player to the ball. Additionally, they must understand that they need to loop around to provide cover for the defender behind them and pick up his mark if they're initially beaten by the attacker. Sometimes, young players mistakenly believe that, unless they have been given the job title of "defender", they do not have defensive duties. Indeed, some coaches refuse to even use the label of "defender" in order to avoid this confusion, and just refer to the players at the back of the group as "backs", in order to reinforce the idea that everyone is a "defender" when their team does not have the ball.

It is normally easier for players to learn this basic positioning in terms of "Pressure-Cover-Balance", rather than using terms like First Defender. Thus, all that a young player needs to know is that the closest player to the ball is the Pressure player and to know what the job of the Pressure player is. Ditto for the Cover player and the Balance player.

Basic Offensive Positioning In a Nutshell

There are also 3 basic positions in the attack. The person with the ball is called the First Attacker. His job is to retain possession while getting the ball as close to goal as possible by dribbling, passing or shooting.

The player(s) within an easy ground pass of the First Attacker are called Second Attackers. Up until the time when the ball is advanced to within scoring range of the goal, the primary role of the Second Attacker(s) is to prevent loss of possession, while still allowing the ball to be advanced forward if at all possible. Prior to getting

into scoring range, a single Second Attacker typically will position himself so as to allow short relay passes between himself and the First Attacker in order to move the ball around the defenders). Of course, the goal of the attackers is to get the ball past all of the defenders into unobstructed space within scoring range of the goal and then, ultimately, into the goal itself.

Therefore, as the ball moves into scoring range, the role of the single Second Attacker switches from a "safety-first" orientation of keeping possession, which may even involve moving the ball away from the goal in order to keep it. Instead of "safety", the Second Attacker's role is to set up a shot on goal for himself or the First Attacker.

At this point, the Second Attacker's needs to move into a position that will allow the First Attacker to pass the ball into "scoring space" behind or to the side of the defenders, i.e., space from which an immediate shot can be taken. The positioning of the single Second Attacker will depend on the number of defenders to be beaten. Normally, however, a single Second Attacker will position himself on the far side of the defenders and set up within scoring range of the far post area. This allows him to distract and/or pull one defender away from the central goal area or, if unobserved, to sneak in the "back door" while everyone is watching the attacker with the ball.

Where there are two Second Attackers (i.e. close supporters) available, they will position themselves to form a moving triangle with their on-ball teammate, by moving into space between or to the side of the defenders so that the ball always has a clear path to their feet. As the ball is moved into scoring range, one of these players will often abandon his close support role and will become a Third Attacker although this job also may be taken up by any other off-ball teammate who can fulfill the duties.

The Third Attacker's job is to unbalance the defense by making deep runs, usually to the far side of the goal. By doing this, the Third Attacker pulls defenders away from the goal mouth; distracts the keeper and defenders in front of the goal; and opens up space in front of the goal which can be exploited by incoming teammates.

All players need to be taught these basic principles of attacking support. In particular, they need to learn the concepts of setting support triangles (basic keepaway) and how to move to create basic 2-man and 3-man attacking support, because these tools are essential weapons used by all soccer players to maintain possession in tight spaces and create scoring chances.

Applying These Basic Positioning Principles In Games

Ideally, your players would not be required to play any games before they acquired some basic ball skills and learned some a bit of soccer positioning. In truth, most clubs probably would be better off if they held skills contests like races to see which team could dribble around all of the cones in the shortest amount of time instead of games for beginning players. However, many clubs throw the kids into games before they are remotely ready to play, which causes coaches to pull their hair out as they try to figure out ways to organize the kids so that they have fun and put their skills to some use.

Part of the puzzle can be solved by making some preliminary decisions about the "style of play" which your team will use on attacks and defensively. Because attacking is harder to learn than defense, it can often be helpful to pay more attention to defensive skills at the outset. This can serve to hold down the scores against

your team while your kids are learning the basics. Also, narrow losses can help to keep parental morale up, especially if the kids clearly are having fun and getting praised for their work.

Picking A Defensive Style of Play

With just a little direction, even very young players will be able to understand that if their team sends everyone to the opposing goal, their own goal will be wide-open and vulnerable to a counterattack. But, of course, if everyone stays back to guard their goal, they won't ever score or have any fun at all.

One good approach is to ask your players to think up some solutions to the defensive problem. One of the first suggestions that you'll probably get is to leave somebody by the goal. However, when you ask for volunteers, you are likely to find that everyone will want to be in the attacking group. Well, if nobody wants to stay to guard the goal, then what other solutions are available?

Option 1: Man-Marking

One defensive solution is to have everyone pick one of the players on the other team to guard when the other team has the ball. Instantly, you have introduced the concepts of marking and following your mark. But, what happens if somebody loses his mark, either because he gets distracted or is slower than his mark or is simply beaten? Well, then you need to have the nearest available player jump in and cover for him, right? This is the second basic element of defensive support and needs to be learned and re-learned constantly. However, man-marking may be unsuited for players below U-10s, as they tend to be very easily distracted. In addition, because of the lack of size and strength in the younger groups, most opposing players tend not to be scoring threats until fairly close to goal so it may well be a waste of defensive manpower to mark players outside of scoring range.

Option 2: High Pressure Defense (Defensive Swarm)

If young children are put onto a field with a soccer ball, divided into teams, and just told to use their feet to kick the ball into the goal of the opponent, they will instinctively play "swarm ball" (or "magnet ball" or take the "beehive" approach to the game. Why? Because they all like to be where the action is which, oddly enough, is where the ball is. As a result, they instinctively are applying a defensive style which is known as "high-pressure defense", in which several players try to surround the opponent and keep him from going forward.

Is the swarm a "bad" thing? Not necessarily so, at least from a defensive standpoint, as long as any attackers that choose to stay out of the swarm are accounted for. The swarm actually tends to be very effective at shutting down attacks by an opponent until the opposition learns to spread out on its attacks and develops the skill to accurately pass the ball to open players. Moreover, kids tend to adjust automatically as the swarm becomes less effective, so the size of the swarm naturally gets smaller over time even without coaching intervention.

Whether or not to permit a swarm obviously will depend on the number of players that you have on the field. In 3v3 or 4v4, it will be harder to swarm with more than 2 players, because you will leave your goal wide open. In 6v6 or above, it is possible to use a multi-person swarm fairly effectively.

Option 3: Low-Pressure Defense

There is also another defensive solution available which is relatively easy for younger players to execute. In this solution, you can send 1 player to slow down the person with the ball and another one to back him up in order to give everyone else on the team time to get back and set up in front of the goal area. This is called "low-pressure defense," and is an approach which can work well IF 1) the pressuring players know how to do their jobs and 2) the retreating players are ready to become the pressuring players themselves if the ball is played to an attacker who is close to them. In fact, many top-level international teams use the low-pressure defensive system, so we weren't kidding when we said that a defensive "swarm" is not necessarily a bad thing. Of course, attacking players must be closely marked when they get into scoring range, particularly when they've developed the leg strength to make lofted shots on goal.

Handling Other Common Defensive Problems

What happens if the other team has some really fast players? Well, if you also have some really fast players who are good defensively, one easy solution is to man-mark these particular threats even if you are using a low-pressure or high-pressure system overall. Also bear in mind that even a slow defender can be quite effective in stopping a speedy attacker once he learns basic defensive footwork and positioning. Lots of players who have had exposure to other sports such as basketball will already have been exposed to these concepts. Essentially, the job of the initial pressuring defender is to slow the attacker down by getting in his way, giving ground as slowly as possible, but not making any attempt to win the ball until cover has arrived. This is a job that anyone can do with practice, so don't allow your slower players to avoid learning these vital skills because of their lack of speed.

Picking An Attacking Style of Play

Once you have decided on the best way to defend your own goal, then you are ready to decide on the best way to attack your opponent's. Many youth coaches are inclined to put their biggest/fastest kids as attackers to try to outrun the opposition, and to try to get the ball to these speedsters as quickly as possible by having their defenders "boot it" down the field. While this approach, known as "boot-ball", is somewhat similar to an attacking style known as "direct play" it is done with considerably less finesse.

Although this approach may be effective initially, it doesn't tend to produce good soccer players in the long run for a couple of reasons. First, it promotes over-specialization since nobody gets to be an attacker except for 1-2 stars and all the rest of the team learns is how to kick the ball hard and far. Second, it fails to teach any of the players how to retain the ball in tighter spaces by using teammates. Over time, the early-maturing players who were the "stars" on these teams lose their size/speed advantage as puberty starts to level the playing field. Additionally, since all they know is how to be a fast-break forward, most upper-level teams will not be interested in them. Meanwhile, the supporting players whose only job was to mindlessly boot the ball up-field to the stars will not have any ball control skills and will likely have only mediocre defensive skills as well. So, resist the temptation to adopt the boot-ball style of play.

In the long run, the best future training for players is to teach "possession-style" soccer based upon the basic offensive positioning noted above. In this approach to the game, players are taught to control the ball well by using their body and feet to shield it from an opponent. They are also taught to use supporting teammates to move the ball in tight spaces by means of short passes which get longer as they develop strength and ball control. Additionally, they pick up the courage/ability to take on a pressuring opponent by dribbling. After developing these skills early in a small-sided setting (e.g. 1v1, 2v1, 3v3, etc.), the players will have little

difficulty when extra players are added into the mix as the extra players will simply provide additional options on where to move the ball.

For suggestions on how to train your players in these basic positions, see the Practice Plan section.

Picking Formations For Older Recreational Teams

Okay, but what if you are stuck with a team that is playing 8v8 or 9v9 or 11v11, even though it is plain that many of them need lots of remedial work on the basic skills? And, what happens when you get your team assigned only 2 weeks before your first game so that there is no possible way to cover even beginning 1v1 work before you are thrown to the sharks?

You know that many parents and players may start questioning your abilities if your team starts losing its games by big margins, even if you have solid credentials as a coach. Also, since this is recreational soccer, your job of player development is likely to be complicated by having at least 1-2 players who have little athletic talent/interest, or who have physical/mental impairments that make learning more challenging. Unfortunately, it is unlikely that some of these kids could become soccer players even if you spent every waking hour on the task. Finally, the kids on your team might have lots of overall athletic talent, but may be smaller/younger than average and be unable to win footraces or pushing contests with kids who are a foot taller and 50 pounds heavier. At this point, you may simply have to face the reality that short-term wins are very unlikely, no matter what you do.

When you are facing these types of predicaments, it may become necessary to use some initial positioning assignments just to buy the time needed to work on the basic skills of the core group of players, bearing in mind that it may take 2 or more seasons to accomplish this. While it IS possible to play virtually position less soccer from the beginning by adopting an approach based upon natural swarming, it may be so unfamiliar to your audience that you decide that it's more trouble than it is worth. So, if you decide to use positional assignments for your group, here are some suggestions.

The First Few Weeks

For the first few games at least, consider putting your best players on central defense. While you probably won't score, at least you'll avoid getting clobbered quite as badly. Then, as soon as you can, try to develop a few promising players to work in as wing defenders which will allow you to rotate your more seasoned players into the central midfield or even into a forward role. It is generally considered that the hardest job on the field is sweeper, or central defender, if you're not playing with sweeper. The second hardest is center midfield and central defender with a sweeper behind him, followed by center forward, left defender, left mid, right forward, right defender, left forward, and right midfielder. Typically, for weaker or less-talented players, it is conventional wisdom to put them in one of the easier positions and sandwich them between two solid players so that there is good cover if they run into problems.

Take Care With Positional Rules

Having started out with assigning players to particular positions in a formation, it may be difficult to try to abandon the positional approach later. All is not lost, however. Why? Because you can set positional rules which allow players lots of flexibility to participate in the play. For example, those players who are assigned to

act as wing defenders can be given positional "rules" to cover opposing attackers, but don't need to have their feet nailed to the midline. Instead, you might allow them to follow the opposing attackers anywhere so, if their mark (the player they are responsible for) drops back to his own penalty to try to get the ball, your defender will be on his heels trying to steal it back and put it in the net. Your sweeper likewise can be given great freedom to simply play off of the main group of teammates as the trailing defender, i.e. the 3rd Defender or Balance player. If everyone is at the opposing goal, then he can move up as well and even score if the ball comes his way. Your center midfielder might be assigned to act as the fill-in for the sweeper, and told to drop back to cover if the sweeper goes to goal. Other players will also be given support duties for the players beside, in front of, and behind them.

Adopt Developmental Rotation Plans

Additionally, you need to create a plan to train your players so that, over the course of 1-2 seasons, most will be able to play in any position on the field. Finally, you will need to spend considerable time teaching the fundamental principles of support and defense, as well as the basic skills that form their foundation. As a result, as your players gain the knowledge and skill to apply these principles, their "positions" can ultimately serve more as guidelines for their major area of responsibility while they are in this particular relative space.

What initial formation should you choose? The basic decisions involved in choosing formations will be covered in the "Advanced" section, along with a discussion of various common types of formations. However, regardless of the formation, you must remember that your ultimate goal is to develop every player to the point where he can do any job on the field with reasonable competence and that, to reach this goal, each player **MUST** know the basic principles of offensive and defensive support.

Specialization Is For Advanced Players - Not Beginners

As players get to high school age, it is likely that they will start to "specialize" in one or two particular areas of the field which best suit their talents. At this stage, coaches will also pay greater attention to adopting a formation and style of play that capitalizes on the special skills/talents available, while masking any weaknesses. This approach is possible because the players have progressed intellectually to the point where their brains are ready for the challenge of complex tactical decisions and they will have developed emotionally to the point where they are more willing to sacrifice their individual goals for the goals of the group. Even at this age, however, coaches must be mindful of their duty to work on correcting those weaknesses, instead of merely trying to cover them up.

Do not make the mistake of treating your young charges like older high-school players. There is, obviously, huge difference between a 17 year-old and an 8 year-old. Similarly, but less obviously, there is a huge difference between a 12 year-old beginner and a 12 year-old who has been playing soccer for six years.

New players need to gain experience in all positions. Don't try to constantly "hide" them in positions that will cover up their deficiencies. This is the lazy coach approach. Far better to take the time to develop their skills, so that they don't need to be hidden.

Of course, this does not mean that a player should be forced into a position/job for which he clearly is not ready. Many shy players are reluctant to play goalkeeper, for instance. While it may be okay to give them chances to try this out in practice, and even push them to try, games may be a different story. If they really think that they'll

humiliate themselves playing keeper, they'll rarely do a good job there. Ditto for players who are fearful of playing forward or back positions. So, if you get a shy one or one who is afraid to try new things, you may need to take a longer-term approach to their particular development. As long as you are keeping the player's development in mind in making positioning decisions, rather than focusing on the "wins", you should pat yourself on the back.

Will you make mistakes? Of course. Some probably will be doozies. But, every game or two, you will have some little tyke who gets the wonderful "I can't believe I did it" grin on his face as he attempts something which he never thought was possible and sees it work. Be careful about those grins, though. They tend to be addictive!