

Defending In the Middle Third

Objectives: To help players recognize the transition to defense and the shape necessary to effectively defend in the middle third. Pressure, cover and balance in relation to this shape are crucial in order to make play predictable and win the ball back.

1) Split the middle (Warm-up – 15 to 20 minutes):

Make a grid that is wider than longer (50 yards wide x 30-40 yards long – 10-12 yards long for each zone) and make three zones. Split group into three teams of four – 4 red, 4 yellow and 4 blue (make sure one group of 4 is your midfielders). Two groups are in the outside zones on opposite sides, while the group of 4 midfielders are in the middle zone. The teams on the outside are passing the ball back and forth and try to play the ball through the middle zone to the team on the opposite side (NO balls can be served over the top of the middle group!). If the team in the middle wins possession of the ball, they switch with the team who tried to play it through. If the ball goes through the middle, they stay until they win possession of it.



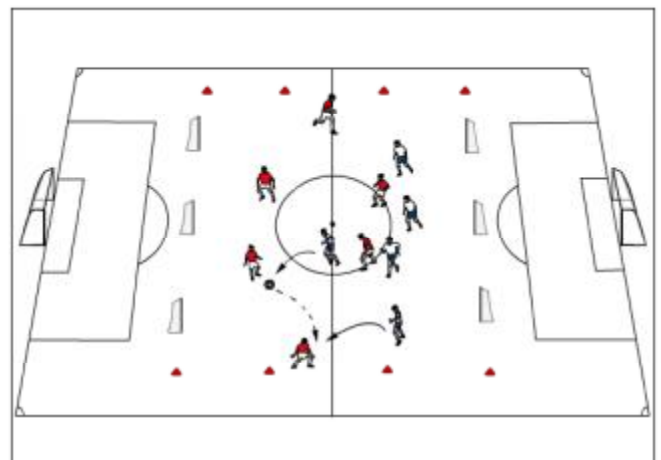
Coaching Points:

- Discuss when to pressure, how to pressure and where to pressure ball - Immediate pressure on the ball and ensuring the first defender is making the play predictable by forcing the player with the ball into DEAD space (towards their cover defenders).
- Players in covering positions should be at about a 30-45 degree angle from first defender, communicating to them about which way they should be forcing the person with the ball, etc.
- Player(s) in a balancing position(s) should be behind ball, in a position to see both ball and 3rd attackers and to transition to attack if the ball is won.
- Defensive shape is a key to successfully winning the ball back. – Flat, connected and compact, forcing the ball to where the defensive numbers are.

2) 6v5 to 6 small goals (20-25 minutes):

6 red (4 midfielders and 2 forwards) and 5 yellow (4 midfielders and 1 supporting central defender) each going to three small goals, placed on the left, center and right of each end. Use middle third of the field...it should be wider than longer (50-60 yards wide x 40-45 yards long).

*In this activity the coach is working with the 5 yellow players, helping them to defend against a team with numbers up. **Version 2:** Add another player to yellow creating a 6v6.*



Coaching Points:

- Reinforce coaching points from Activity #1.
- Visual cues for defenders are:
 1. If player receiving the ball does not have control, then tackle and win possession of the ball!
 2. If player receiving the ball does have control, then defender has to make a decision as to how closely to apply pressure, whether to contain or delay because they are numbers down, whether to close down space quickly because they are numbers up, and/or whether to force to cover or to the outside, depending upon where they are on the field.
 3. Defender on the ball also wants to be aware of the attacking team's 2nd and 3rd attacking players.
 4. If defenders can force the player with the ball into a numbers down situation and cut off weak side players, they are more likely to be effective.
 5. If there is immediate and tight pressure on the ball, defenders off the ball can squeeze the space centrally, making the field smaller for the attacking team.
 6. If pressure on the ball is light (loose), then cover and balance are looser, as well.
 7. The balancing player should recognize third attacker movement off the ball (i.e.: overlapping runs) and shift slightly to weak side if there is loose pressure on the ball. If there is tight pressure, balancing player simply needs to be aware of players coming through, communicating to teammates about when to pick them up, pass them off and when & where to shift on the field defensively.

3) 9v9, 10v10 or 11v11 scrimmage (30-45 minutes): Depending upon numbers, space will change. Ideally, finish with the number you normally play with in games. Play a regular game with goalkeepers.

Coaching Points:

- Reinforce positive decision making opportunities (recognizing when to pressure, how to pressure, where cover is off the ball defensively, making play predictable, team shape, transition, etc.).
- Reinforce coaching points from Activity #1.
- Ensure 2nd and 3rd defenders are tracking players coming through – keep sight of the ball and the player (s).
- Recognize when they can pass players off (zone) and when they need to mark player to player (as ball gets into the middle third, players will see that the defending action may start off in a zone, become player to player marking, then be a combination of both).
- Players must slide (move) from side to side as a defensive unit staying connected...but balanced.
- Once defenders win it, are they able to transition quickly to the attack – if they are in good defensive supporting positions, once they win it, it is a simpler transition to the attack (they need width and depth quickly).

4) Cool-down (10 minutes): Juggling in groups of 4 and finishing with static stretching of major muscle groups.