



Spatial Awareness

A Progression for Coaching the Tactical Use of the Field of Play through Concepts of Space

If you do not know where you are and where you are going, you cannot move effectively! This paper is not an analysis of individual, group or team tactics. Nor is it a discussion of systems of play. Instead, it provides the youth coach with an age appropriate approach to teaching players concepts of concrete and abstract spaces on the field of play. As players mature at judging distances and angles on the field in relation from themselves to the ball, goals, opponents, field markings, teammates and corner flag posts then tactical decision making within the Principles of Play improves. This document provides coaches with developmental markers used within a thorough curriculum for player development, such as the US Youth Soccer Player Development Model.

Mission Statement

US Youth Soccer is a non-profit and educational organization whose mission is to foster the physical, mental and emotional growth and development of America's youth through the sport of soccer at all levels of age and competition.

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Contents

Primer	2
Tactics in General.....	5
Spatial Management.....	9
6-U	11
Attack and Defend	12
8-U	13
Attacking	13
Defending.....	13
10-U	15
Attacking	16
Defending.....	20
Goalkeeping	21
12-U	23
Attacking	23
Defending.....	32
Goalkeeping	32
14-U	34
Attacking	34
Defending.....	38
Goalkeeping	39
16-U	41
Attacking	41
Defending.....	43
Goalkeeping	43
19-U	44
Attack and Defend	45
Goalkeeping	46
Training Ground	47
Conclusion.....	48
Principles of Play	49
Player Roles.....	49

Sam Snow, Coaching Director – US Youth Soccer

Special thanks to the Editorial Review Boardⁱ

All concepts, Principles of Play and specific tactics need to be learned in well-planned and properly conducted training sessions. Look to the Coaches page on the US Youth Soccer website for session plans on these topics and more.

Primer

Soccer, like all team sports, involves both elementary and sophisticated tactics. Both experience and research tell us that skills and tactical thinking must be learned before children can be successful during game play. An important component in the early stages of skill development is spatial awareness¹. Of primary importance is coaching players in the concepts of the game – known as the Principles of Play (see Tables 1 and 2). Of secondary importance is coaching specific tactics to execute the Principles of Play. Gradually broadening players' awareness of space and the use of space on the field will lead to more enjoyable and attractive soccer. The general Principles of Play and the division of the field help clarify tactics for the beginning player and competent coachⁱⁱ. Within the zones of the player development pyramid from the 6 and Under age group to the 19 and Under age group, coaches should stair step players into elevated awareness of tactical tenets (Fig. 3). Beginning with general concepts, coaches should progress players' knowledge to specific tactics in exact areas of the field. While it is true that knowledge of the theory of the game helps the player to choose the right tactics that tactical ability depends on equally developed theoretical knowledge and practical experience. Neither theory nor practice can replace the other.

Understanding the characteristics of the age groups will help coaches be realistic about the tactical ideas that youth players can comprehend. However, do not be locked in by the age group while coaching the Principles of Play. Take a step-by-step approach toward awareness of space and the use of space on the field of play. When players can grasp the concepts then teach them. If the players are not ready for a tactical idea then wait until the next season.

A recommended approach helping players progress along the developmental pathway is the use of 'street soccer' games. In these games, clubs could mix the age groups and/or genders to provide for a richer learning environment. Another option is to use the 'academy approach' for an age group. In this approach, the players are not on a fixed team roster, but remain in a pool of players. Those players then move between training groups dependent on their developmental needs at the time. More details are available on the US Youth Soccer website on both possible approaches to enhanced player development.

The Laws of the Game can be used as one of the tools in helping players improve their spatial awareness. Start young players understanding of the soccer field first with the actual markings on the ground; i.e., boundary lines, halfway line, etc. As they move up in age groups, there will be new markings on the field for

¹ Spatial awareness is the ability to be aware of oneself in space. It is an organized knowledge of objects in relation to oneself in that given space and the relationship of these objects when there is a change of position; including an understanding of the concepts of distance, time, speed or depth.

them to learn such as center circle, penalty area and so on. By the time they are in the 12 and Under age group all of the markings from a senior soccer field will be seen (Fig. 1).

Beginning with the 6-U age group use maze games, and then beginning with the 10 and Under age group add in target games, to help players get into the habit of lifting their head to see the field. In training sessions use dots, disks and cones to mark tactical spaces on the field in order to literally ‘paint the picture’ for the players. As players learn about the marks on the field of play, they can be introduced to some concepts about the field that will affect how they play the game. For the youngest players it starts with understanding our half of the field and the other team’s half of the field. Progress this understanding by introducing abstract concepts about spaces on the soccer field kicking off with the channels on the field and concluding with the mental picture of the field as almost a graph paper grid layout.

While the first concept of space on a soccer field is horizontal, the halves of the field, the next to be introduced are the vertical spaces known as channels. Next to be taught to players are the horizontal spaces of the thirds. Finally, we end with subdividing the channels and thirds.

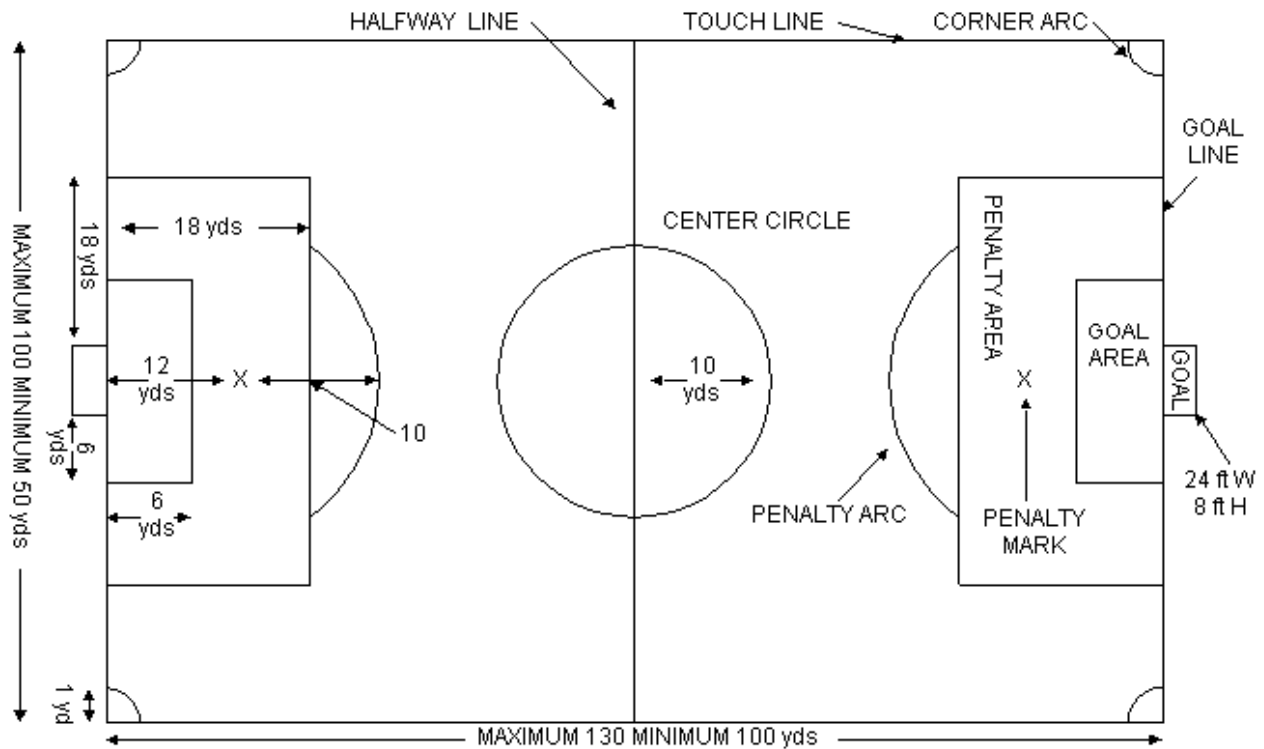


FIGURE 1 SENIOR MARKINGS OF A SOCCER FIELD [LAW 1]

There is a general concept of game strategy to be learned about the balance of safety and risk in possession of the ball in broad areas of the field, first in the halves and then the thirds of the field. The approach is safety in the defending third, a balance of safety and risk in the midfield third and taking risks in the attacking third (Fig. 11).

Initially teach safety first in the defending half of the field and take more risks in the attacking half of the field (Fig. 2). In the defending half this means dribble the ball toward the opponent's half or pass the ball among teammates to move out of the defending half. Safety in the defending half does *not* mean aimlessly kick the ball up field or out of bounds. It means move the ball under control. While young players are learning how to play skillful soccer, they will lose possession of the ball and a goal might be scored against them. That is a gamble worth taking. Let us not mindlessly kick the ball around the field due to the fear of giving up a goal. Learning how to play intelligent and skillful soccer will pay off in the end.

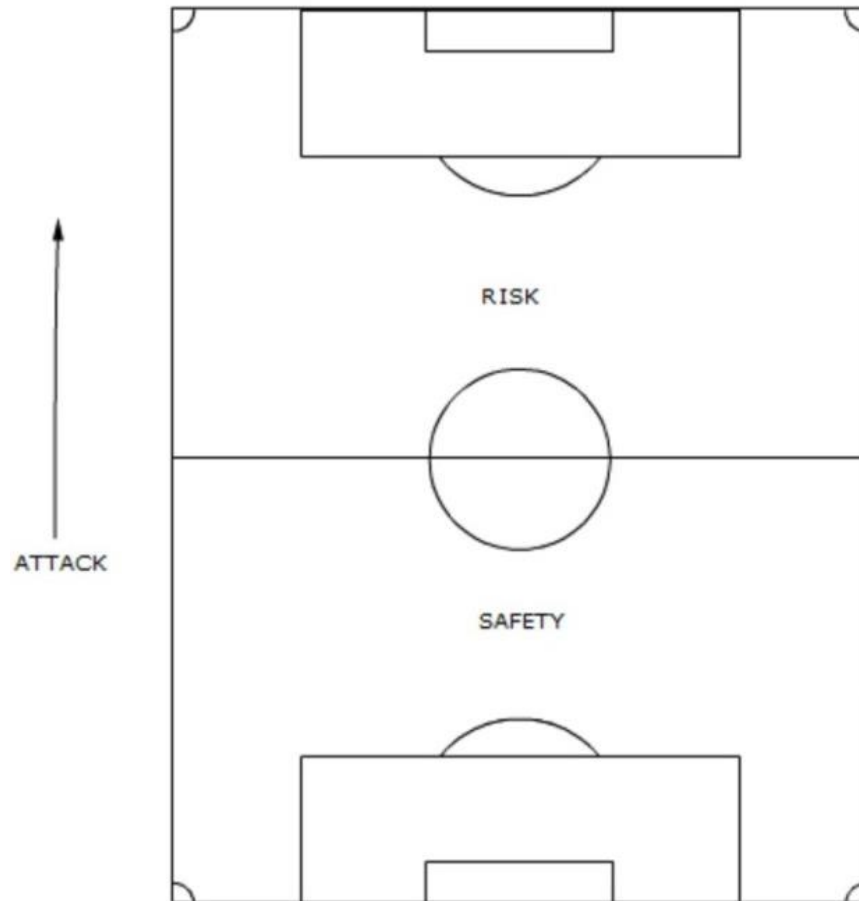
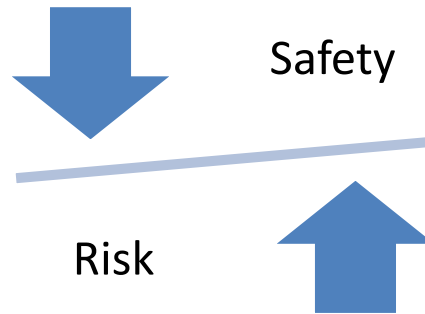


FIGURE 2 A FOUNDATIONAL CONCEPT ON THE SOCCER FIELD

Some of the Laws of the Game can also be used by the coach to help players assess distances. For example, the kickoff requires opposing players to be outside the center circle. They now have a concrete experience of

measured yardage. A similar opportunity exists with the Laws that require defending players to be set distances from the ball. Those distances are 4, 5, 8 or 10 yards dependent upon the age group. These Laws are 8 – The Start and Restart of Play, 9 – The Ball In and Out of Play, 10 – The Method of Scoring, 11 - Offside, 13 – Free kicks, 14 [12-U and older] – The Penalty Kick, 16 – The Goal Kick and 17 – The Corner Kick. Law 15 – The Throw-In, which dependent on the age group, could be a pass-in or a throw-in requires opponents to be at least 1 yard away from the passer/thrower.

As a coach teaches his or her players the Laws of the Game also use them to help players ascertain distance, as it aids with spatial awareness. That capability affects ball skills (for example the distance for a shot) and tactical positioning (angle and distance to the ball as an example). A good eye for judging distance also affects tactics with the speed, timing and angle of runs.

Tactics in General²

Before players can learn to use skills (technique and fitness), they must explore the space where the skills can be used (tactics). Tactics may be defined as the art of planned and rational play, adjusted to meet game situations in the best way possible. Tactical awareness, to some extent, is a matter of talent (mental and physical); it can be developed to a considerable degree by suitable activities, coaching and age appropriate training.

A player's tactical ability and experience can be judged by the extent to which the player can use both practical and theoretical knowledge in match play. Tactical experience is relative to age, individual characteristics and the soccer environment in which a player grows.

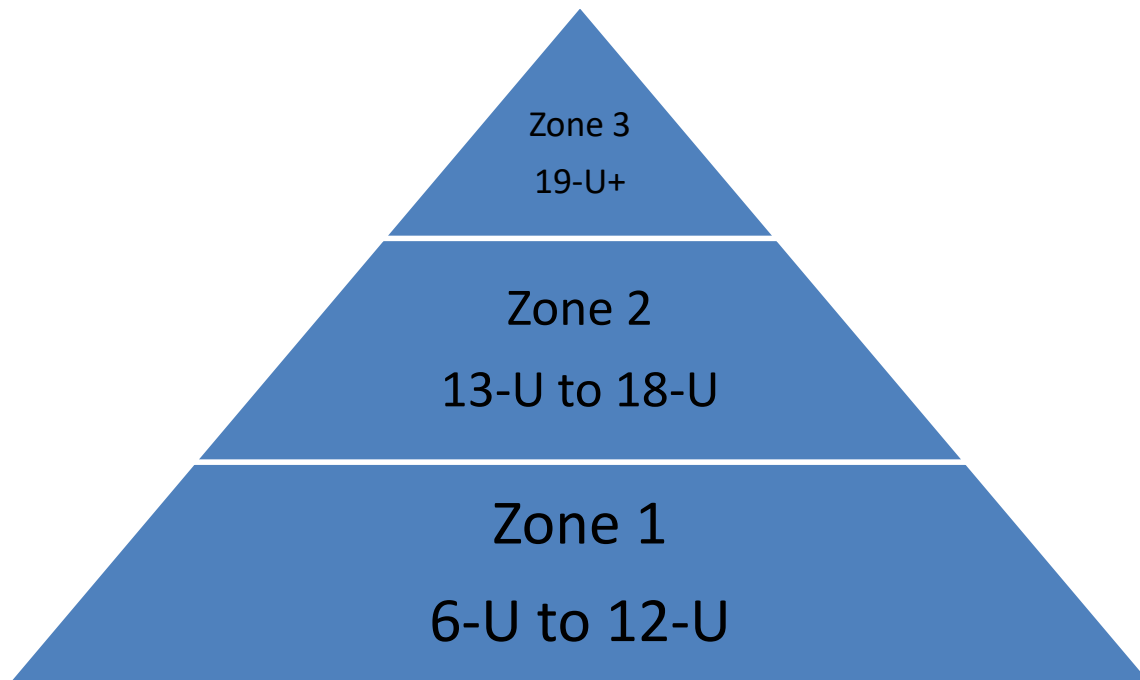


FIGURE 3 PLAYER DEVELOPMENT PYRAMID

² Excerpts from **SOCCER** by Arpad Csanadi

As players grow through the zones in the player development pyramid they internalize game concepts. Understanding soccer has a lot to do with recognizing and using space on the field, whether attacking or defending. Tactical examples are given throughout the document of how players can learn to utilize space on the field. Using space on the field requires intelligent movement and positioning. It is said that 98% of the game at the top level is spent without the ball -- various 'locomotor' movements, etc. Off-the-ball movement is at the heart of quality soccer.

Soccer players need to learn when to run and when to *not* run. There are times when it is tactically correct to not run. They also need to learn at what angle to run. Far too many American players run constantly in straight lines on the field. Coaches must teach players when to make straight runs and when to make diagonal, square and bent (bending³) runs. Of course these runs could be forward or backward on offense or defense.

Players must also learn about the timing of runs, when to start and when to stop. With a novice player most off-the-ball runs start too early so the player is marked up once he or she arrives in the space where he or she hopes to meet the ball. Directly incorporated to the timing of runs is the pace of the run. Recovery runs on defense are probably going to be all out. Tracking runs on defense will have to match the pace of the opponent being marked. Many, but not all, attacking runs without the ball will start off slow or at a moderate pace and then accelerate at the last moment darting past an opponent to meet the pass.

Two factors must evolve for youth players to intentionally use off-the-ball runs. Psychosocially they must grow out of the egocentric phase. Additionally they must mature in their ability to estimate distance and angle. Over time these factors improve with players thus leading to the possibility of the following off-the-ball runs.

Teenaged players should be able to conceptualize and execute all of these off-the-ball runs. All seven movements are possible with the top 12-U teams – provided they are on an appropriate size field.

ATTACKING RUNS

Seven possible attacking movements a player will make in a game without the ball:

1. **Checking** – (away from and back to the ball). The idea of making a movement in one direction, stopping, and then sprinting off in the opposite direction can be introduced at 10-U and then clearly a part of the training plan from 12-U onward.
2. **Supporting** – (to a teammate under pressure). The idea can be introduced at 8 and Under age group and then clearly a part of the training plan from 10-U onward.
3. **Penetrating** – (between opponents, preferably through a different 'seam' than the ball travels through; i.e., straight pass being played to an angled/diagonal run or an angled/diagonal ball being played to a straight run). One could say that penetrating runs with the ball occur for 6-U and onward. However, tactically timed penetrating runs through the seams of the opposing team likely will not start until the 12-U age group. Many adult teams have a difficult time with this type of attacking run – as opposed to just mindlessly sprinting up field. Players to the left of the bell curve in the 12-U age group could read the run, but they will need a really good coach to help them see the tactical moment and to take advantage of it. When to run and when to hold the run will be the biggest challenge to teach.

³ Bending run: running in a curving pattern, usually to arrive at a specific point just as the ball does.

4. **Unbalancing runs** – (to the blind/off-ball side of the opponent). Coach these runs from 14 and Under age group and onward. Runs number 1, 2, 3, 5 and 6 will be a lot for the 12-U age group to learn well enough for it all to be a conscious part of their game. Third attacker {3rd} (see Table 2) runs for the 12-U age group are possible if it's presented in a somewhat concrete manner, such as far post runs on a cross or a corner kick.
5. **Clearing** – (out of a wide channel for a teammate's penetrating run). The notion of run out of a place on the field to open that space for a teammate is an idea that 12-U players can comprehend. Again, make it a bit concrete for them with a tactic like – when the left or right fullback overlaps then forward players should pinch in toward the middle of the field to help open the space on the flank.
6. **Overlapping** – (run from behind a teammate in possession to receive a pass from that player). The tactic could be taught from the 10-U age group and onward. The problem for 10-U players with this tactic will be patience – theirs and their parents, and possibly their coaches, too. However, players who are not expected to run-n-gun all the time could add the overlap to their attack.
7. **Withdrawing** – (into a wide channel). A player in a flank channel getting 'sideways on' or 'backside to the outside' type run. 'Withdrawing' is to get out as wide as possible when on the attack; get some chalk on your boots. Even 10-U players can begin to grasp that idea, especially if they get passes from teammates when they are wide on the field and unmarked. However, the idea of withdraw in order to create space for a teammate in the central channel of the field may not click for the kids. It is an indirect reward for a 10-year-old. For example, Logan says, "Yeah my run opened up Derek, but he got the ball instead of me. I made the run, why didn't I get the ball?"

DEFENDING RUNS

Eight possible defending movements a player will make in a game without the ball:

1. **Recovery** (a recovery run usually occurs in transition from attacking to defending). Players on the now defending team run back toward their half of the field to get into good defensive positions – think goal-side⁴. Once in the goal-side space players decide to be first {1st} or second {2nd} or third {3rd} defender [see Table 2]). Running back toward their goal to defend makes sense to kids in the 8-U age group. This group can also put pressure on the ball. Intentionally executing the roles of 2nd and 3rd defender will occur with older age groups.
2. **Closing** (moving to close the distance between the opponent in possession and the defender applying pressure). The idea of controlling one's speed as you close down the dribbler can be planted as a seed in the minds of 8-U players. The run is executed by the 1st defender.
3. **Tracking** (moving with an opponent who has made a run to another part of the field). For sure the straightforward notion of pick up an opponent and run with him or her when your team is defending is comprehensible to the 10-U age group.
4. **Marking** (keeping close to an opponent to prevent that opponent receiving a pass or getting off a pass or shot). It's concrete, but since it's off-the-ball, the skill can be taught at 10-U, not sooner.
5. **Covering** (when a 2nd defender (see Table 2) provides cover [support] to the defender on the ball). The maneuver should be coached beginning with the 10-U age group. The coach will have to be patient though as the kids will often forget to recover in order to cover.
6. **Sliding over/pinching in** (when an outside player moves toward the middle of the field to help defend). That player will 'slide over' to balance [see Table 1] the defense). This is a much more abstract recognition of space and a tactical moment in the game, so teaching it to 12-U and older players is realistic.
7. **Stepping up** (refers to fullbacks or midfielders moving forward toward the halfway line; executed by the 2nd and 3rd defenders). The 12-U age group could get the idea since it is a way to stay compact. That idea, both for defending and attacking, is important to teach and reteach from this age onward.

⁴ Goal-side: a position between the ball and the defending team's goal.

However, only coaches with solid understanding of the principles of defense will be able to teach the concept in a way the 12-U players will understand.

8. **Dropping off** (to move away from the opponent being marked). An individual player or several can do the maneuver. Usually it is done by the defender pressuring the opponent in possession in order to delay the attack. Players in the 12-U age group can pull off this slow retreating movement as part of group defending.

The last two defensive tactical movements, stepping up and dropping off, are only introduced to the 12-U age group; consistent execution of those defending tactics begins at 14-U. Based upon these assumptions, then the saying that 12-U is the Dawning of Tactical Awareness jumps off the page.

Every player has a technical-tactical radius (Fig. 4). The radius is the effective range around a player in which he or she can execute a technique to propel the ball. How wide the radius is will be impacted by age, quality of technique, power, tactical experience and awareness, vision, technical speed and quick thinking. It is expected and hoped that as a player matures, chronologically and soccer experientially, the technical-tactical radius will expand. A player's judgment of distance and angle directly affects performance within the technical-tactical radius.

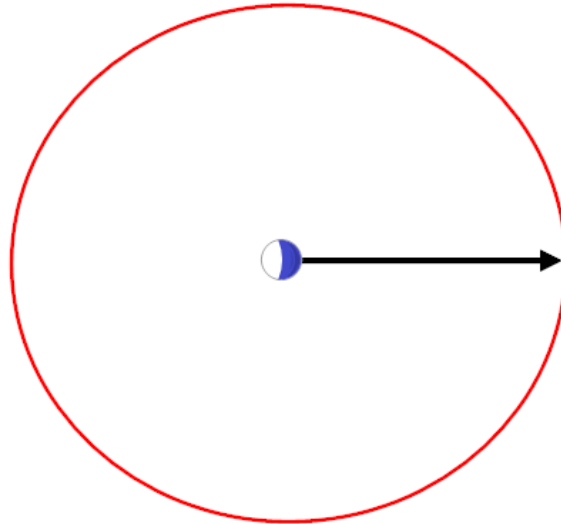


FIGURE 4 THE USE OF SPACE ON THE FIELD IS IMPACTED BY THE TECHNICAL-TACTICAL RADIUS

From an awareness of the markings on the field, the location of the ball and other players, a young player can recognize live space⁵ and dead space⁶ in a tactical sense and then intelligently use those spaces at the appropriate time. The use of spatial management⁷ identifies the soccer savvy player.

All players develop at different rates. Some children will understand the concepts of soccer before others. While cultivating players the coaches must conscientiously use the Slanty Line theory from Dr. Muska Mosston.

⁵ Live space: open, or free, space created for a teammate by enticing an opponent away from an area.

⁶ Dead space: for the attacking team, areas of the field occupied by players of the opposing team.

⁷ A great phrase which describes a player who has an awareness of space and makes good tactical decisions based on that space. Time and space relationships go hand-in-hand on the soccer field.

Spatial Management⁸

The growth of a player toward the stage of spatial management begins with physical literacy. A very young player's first inkling of the concept of spatial awareness begins with learning personal space, which is "the space that the body or its parts can reach without traveling away from a starting location" (Graham et al., 2003, p. 243). The next step toward spatial management is to comprehend general space, which is the remainder of the space on the field that can be reached through a variety of movements. Awareness of the space in which a player functions is fundamental to playing soccer. A basic concept in the understanding of soccer is the ability to maneuver one's body and/or the ball within a space. Coaches of all levels and ages of play, but especially those in Zone 1, should have a conceptual overview of the movement analysis framework of the ways that the human body can move (Laban, 1977). The framework breaks down movement into four concepts: where players can move (space awareness), how players can move (body awareness), the quality of the movement (effort awareness) and the basic relationships that exist in player movement (relationship awareness). Coaches can use these concepts to help players gain an understanding of the fundamentals involved in movement, including spatial awareness.

Teaching the concepts of spatial awareness, particularly personal and general space, is fundamental to the tactical (cognitive) and physical development of young players. Improved spatial awareness aids in the development of problem-solving skills that can transfer to the match. Subsequently, the content of training sessions must supplement players' gradual comprehension of the give and take of space on a soccer field. For example, childhood tag games require children to see a space and perform or move effectively within that space. Initially, this process of looking and moving is slow, but with instruction and experience, the players will learn to move and look for spaces automatically. Soccer players must successfully manage the space that surrounds them; i.e., tactical awareness, a.k.a. – reading the game.

The give and take of space is exemplified in the principles of play by width and depth when attacking and compactness when defending. The give and take of space is at the heart of spatial management in the tactical sense for players. It must be noted that tactics and formations⁹ are the execution of the principles of play. Space expands and contracts around players, all within the boundary lines, during a match. Learning spatial management takes time. The concept cannot be taught once and then abandoned. Good spatial awareness in soccer players results from concepts that are revisited and reinforced throughout the club's curriculum.

When possible use field markings, goals, corner flags, coaching sticks, rope and/or cones – of a variety of shapes, sizes and colors – to make abstract spaces more concrete for young players during training sessions.

⁸ Deborah Stevens-Smith, "Teaching Spatial Awareness to Children," *JOPERD*, Vol. 75 No. 6, (August 2004), 52-56

⁹ Players who have good spatial awareness can learn to play within an area that represents their position's responsibility.

As players get older and the game becomes more advanced, spatial awareness will become even more important. An awareness of where, when, why and how to move in space is imperative to playing quality soccer. Talk with players about how these concepts fit into soccer each day.



Spatial Management = Temporal and Spatial Insight

“Don’t run so much,” Johan Cruyff^{fiii} once said, meaning that players often cover lots of ground but to no effect. “You have to be in the right place at the right moment, not too early, not too late.”

6-U

Do not be locked in by the age group while coaching the principles of play. Take a systematic approach toward awareness of and the use of space on the field of play. When players can grasp the concepts then coach them. If the players are not ready for a tactical idea then wait until the next season.

Realistically very young age groups are not ready for the concept of the balance between risk and safety. At this age, they will be learning the meaning of boundary lines and the other markings on a soccer field. Learning about the marks on a soccer field will be quite enough for the youngest players. Do not concern yourself with trying to teach them the abstracts areas (open space, thirds, etc.) on the field that do not have actual lines on the ground. For the horizontal use of the field teach beginning age groups which half of the field is ours and which is theirs (Fig. 5).

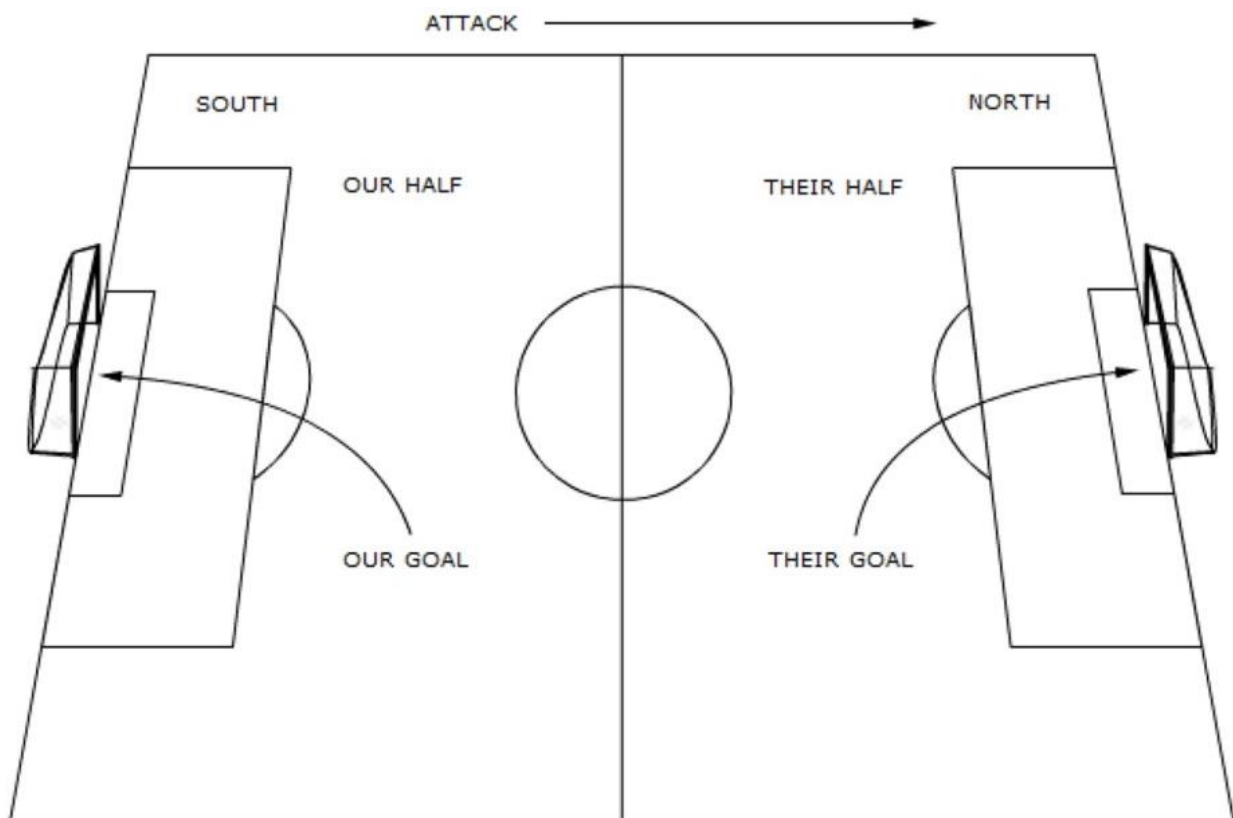


FIGURE 5 NOVICE CONCEPT OF THE SOCCER FIELD

Learning which way to go on the field is an achievement for the youngest players. Understanding that we switched the halves of the field at halftime¹⁰ and are now shooting at the goal that we defended first is another big conceptual step for these children.

Attack and Defend

The predominate Principles of Play (see Table 1) initially are penetration and pressure. The plan of attack for 6-U players is dribble as far as you can and then shoot (Fig. 6). Defending for very young players means go get the ball, dribble away from the other players and then shoot.

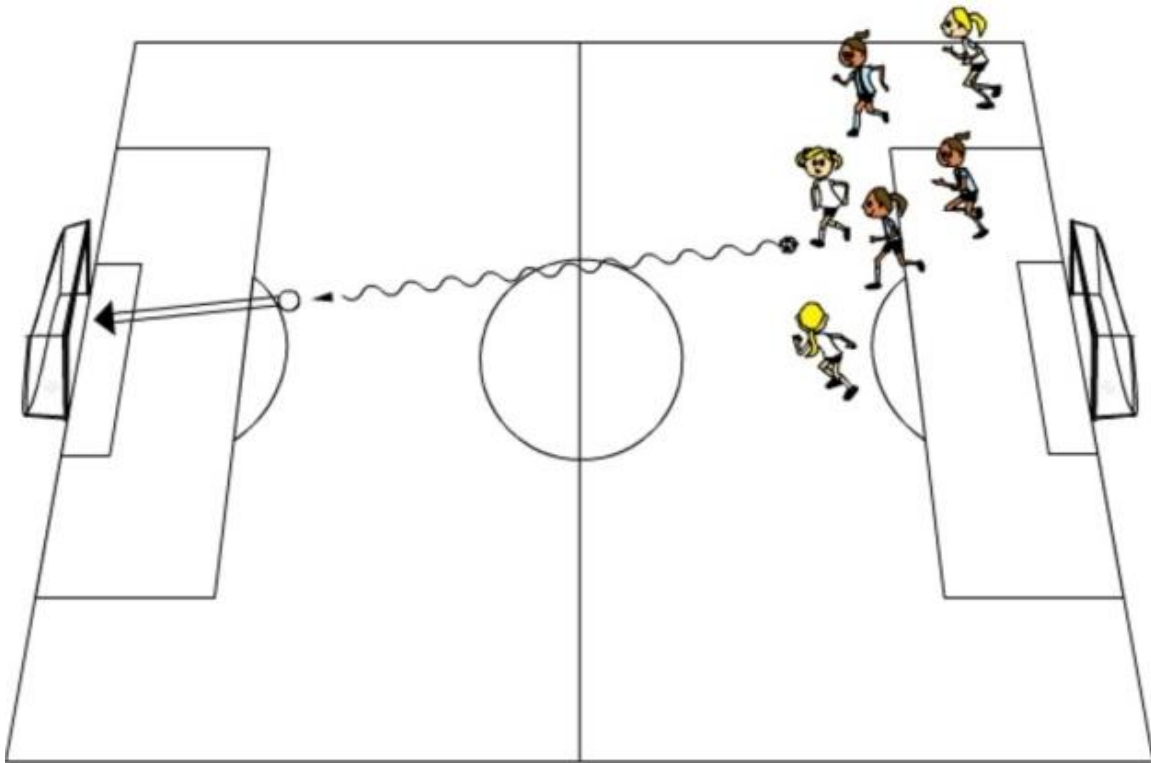


FIGURE 6 NOVICE ATTACK: DRIBBLE, DRIBBLE – SHOOT

Please note that 4 vs. 4 for 6-U players is not a small-sided game. It is the BIG game for them. It is the 11 vs. 11 version of the game for 6-U teams. For this age group 1 vs. 1, 2 vs. 1, 2 vs. 2 or 3 vs. 2 is a small-sided game. Spatial awareness is partially developed by using small-sided games.

¹⁰ Remember to switch ends of the field only at halftime, not between quarters. Making that change only once will reduce player confusion.

8-U

Do not be locked in by the age group while coaching the principles of play. Take a step-by-step approach toward awareness of and the use of space on the field of play. When players can grasp the concepts then coach them. If the players are not ready for a tactical idea then wait until the next season.

Attacking

For players who are better at comprehending boundary lines, introduce them to the idea of going around the other team to the outside of the field. Once you get past the opponent then cut back to the inside of the field to go to goal. This maneuver uses the Principles of Attack of width and penetration.

The Principles of Play (see Table 1) may now expand to include support (see attacking run # 2) while attacking or defending. Passing – mostly to a teammate, but not to open space – is an emerging skill at this stage. With the players, instill the concept of passing lanes (Fig. 7). The passing lane is open space between two teammates where a pass could be made. Continue to encourage their dribbling, especially in the attacking half of the field. Passing though must be an option for them, and this choice is now a tactical decision. When to dribble and when to pass is a basic decision that comes from reading the game (Fig. 8).

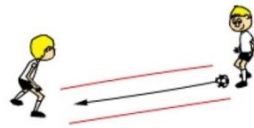


FIGURE 7 UNOBSTRUCTED SPACE BETWEEN TEAMMATES COULD BE A PASSING LANE

Moving together when attacking is a positive accomplishment for players in all age groups and especially so with ones this young.

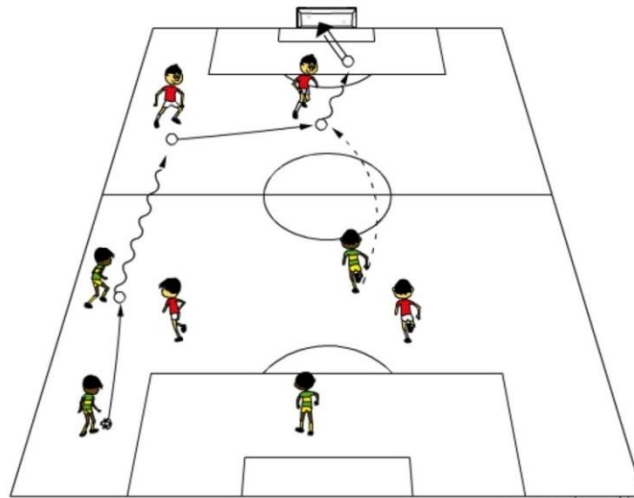


FIGURE 8 YOUTH ATTACK: DRIBBLING, SHOOTING AND PASSING

Defending

Players in this age group can begin to learn the notion of recovery runs (see defending run # 1) and closing runs (see defending run # 2). Of the two types of defending runs, the recovery run is easier for kids to comprehend.

Children in the 8-U age group quite naturally chase after the ball – often regardless of who has it. The coach’s task may not be getting the players to make a closing run, but to help them judge the distance of the run. Judging the distance will help players make the right choice of when to go for the ball and when to go guard their goal instead. Their rudimentary judgment of the distance between themselves and the ball can also help with the angle of the run to have a real chance at getting the ball and not just run into the opponent.

All players must be encouraged to make recovery runs back toward their goal area when their team is defending (Fig. 9). Once the recovery run is made then they will most likely be in a better place to begin defending to regain possession of the ball. Running back toward their goal area and the goal gives young players a concrete space on the field to find. Having all of the players make recovery runs also instills the style of play that we all defend and we all attack.

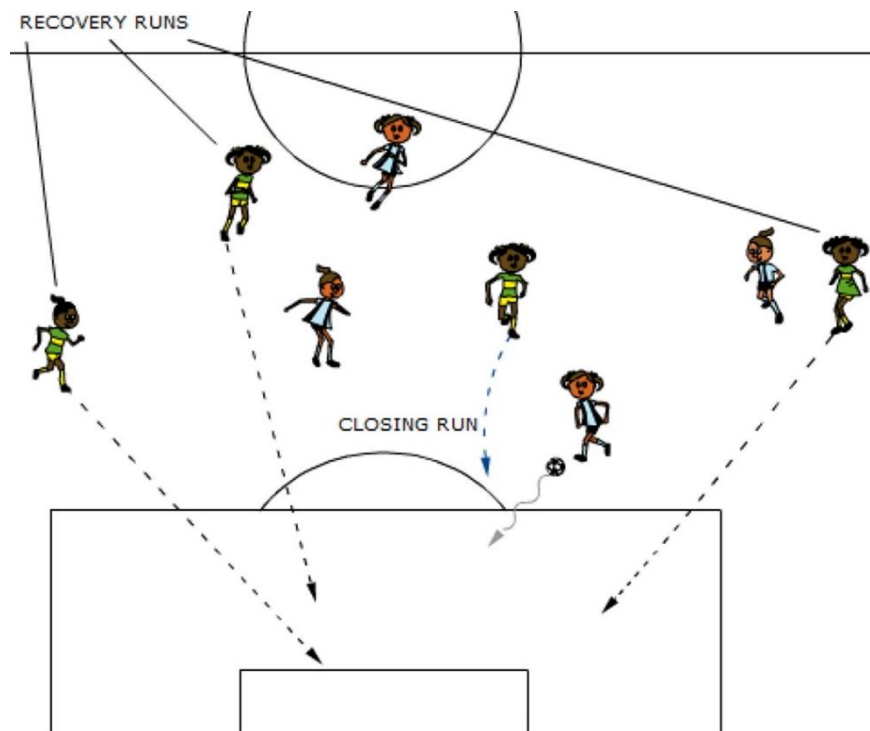





FIGURE 9 CLOSING AND RECOVERY RUNS

Please note that 4 vs. 4 for 8-U players is not a small-sided game. It is the BIG game for them. It is the 11 vs. 11 version of the game for 8-U teams. For this age group 3 vs. 1, 3 vs. 2, 3 vs. 3 or 4 vs. 2, as well as the combinations from the 6-U age group, is a small-sided game. Spatial awareness is partially developed by using small-sided games.

Reinforce:

-  Names of the markings on the field
-  Playing within the boundary lines
-  Which are our goal and half of the field and which of those objects are the other team’s. Flip-flop those objects for the second half of the game.

10-U

Do not be locked in by the age group while coaching the principles of play. Take a systematic approach toward awareness of and the use of space on the field of play. When players can grasp the concepts then coach them. If the players are not ready for a tactical idea then wait until the next season.

Reinforce the spatial concepts previously taught to the children. Earlier they learned about the halfway line that divides the field horizontally into north and south ends. That is a relatively simple concept to be learned since the line is marked on the field. The next line is conceptual only and initially will be difficult for the children to comprehend. This line runs from the center of the goalmouth through the penalty mark, the center mark, the next penalty mark and it ends in the center of the opposite goalmouth. This intangible centerline divides the field vertically into east and west sides (Fig. 10). 10-U players tend to play predominately in a north ↓ south direction. They can, and should be expected to also play east ↔ west. Coach the players to attack across the abstract centerline with a diagonal dribble or pass or a square pass.

From this age group onward the option of air space becomes increasingly possible. While soccer is best played on the ground, playing the ball in the air is often the right choice.

The vertical game prevails with children in this age group. Subsequently, teach them well how to play within and across the channels on the field. As they progress in conceptualizing the channels then it becomes important to establish the view of the thirds on the field.

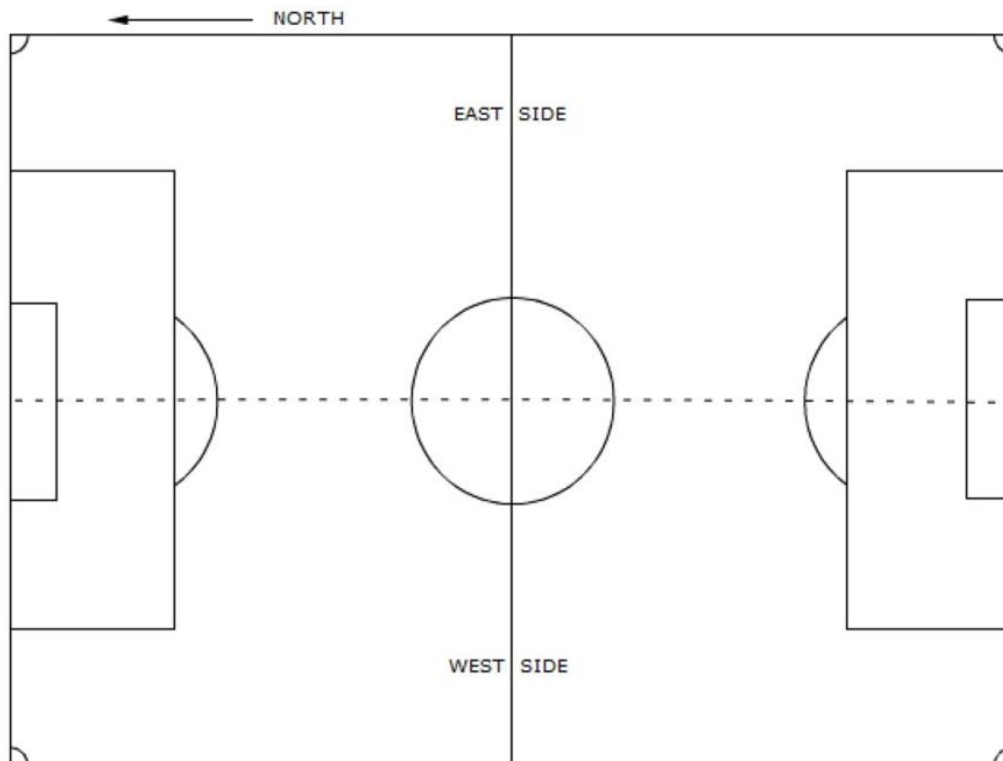


FIGURE 10 THE CENTER LINE DIVIDES THE FIELD VERTICALLY

Attacking

Channels

The vertical spaces stretching from goal line to goal line are the channels of the field (Fig. 12). They are the central channel and the two flank channels (often called the flanks). Youngsters play mostly a vertical soccer game, so the concept of channels should be logical to them. Channels are useful when giving young players the notions associated with width or switching the point of attack (Fig. 11).

For attacking players to stay connected to each other in the channels when the point of attack is wide on one flank then the weak-side¹¹ should move in toward the central channel until the ball is moved back toward the middle (see attacking run # 7).

Generally, width – achieved by intelligent use of the channels – is most applicable to the build-up phase of the attack. When a team attempts to strike at goal, chances must be taken and decisions made quickly. As a rule, the attack should maintain width and reestablish it as quickly as possible whenever it is lost.

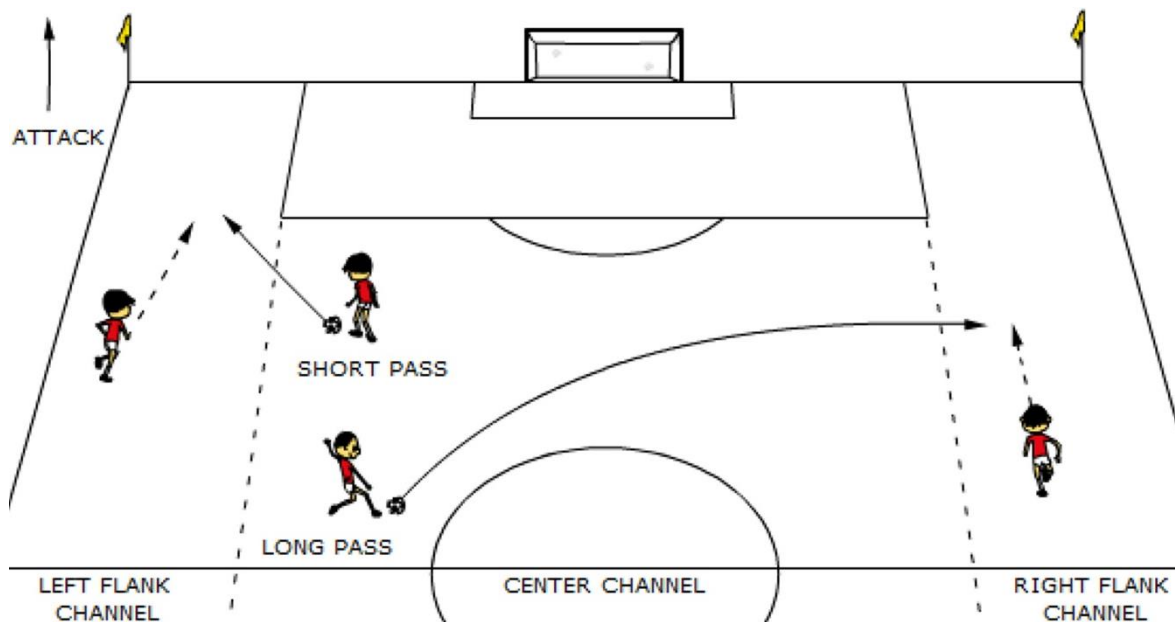


FIGURE 11 SWITCHING THE POINT OF ATTACK

An attack covering three channels, while useful, is not as important as filling the weak side when the ball changes channels. Having attacking players staying wide on both flanks means passing distances, supporting angles and penetrating runs are more difficult. All three factors are influenced by the spatial awareness (judging distances) of the players.

Note that the long pass depicted in the diagram above is directly influenced by the player's technical-tactical radius as seen in figure 4.

¹¹ Weak-Side: pertaining to the side of the field away from the ball.

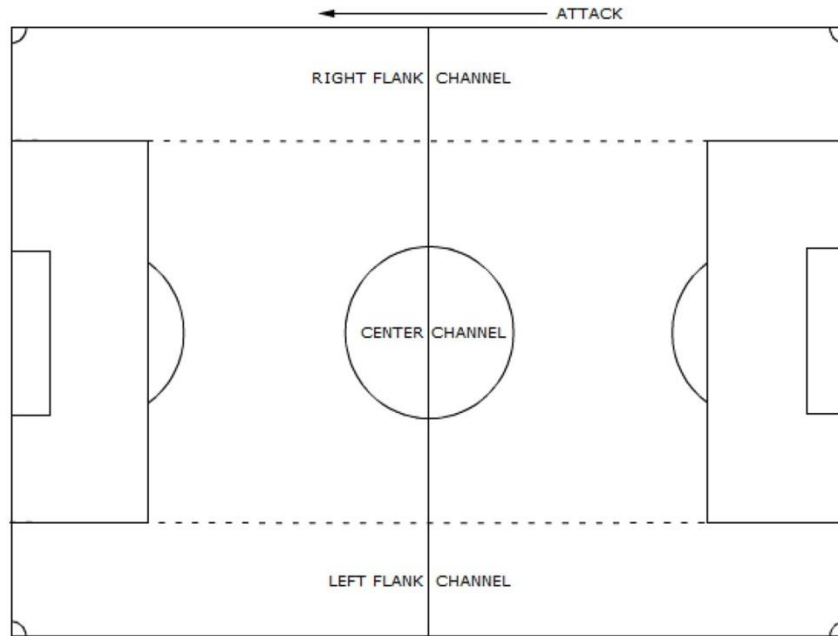


FIGURE 12 THE CHANNELS ON A SOCCER FIELD

Thirds

The thirds of the field are horizontal spaces stretching from touchline to touchline. They are the defending third, midfield third and the attacking third (Fig. 13). The midfield third is the same for both teams, while the defending third for one team is the attacking third for the other. Once players understand the halves of the field and the east and west sides of the field then begin teaching the thirds of the field. Using thirds of a field is useful for coaching the idea of playing through the 'midfield' area. The basic strategies performed in each third help make for an attractive and well-played game.

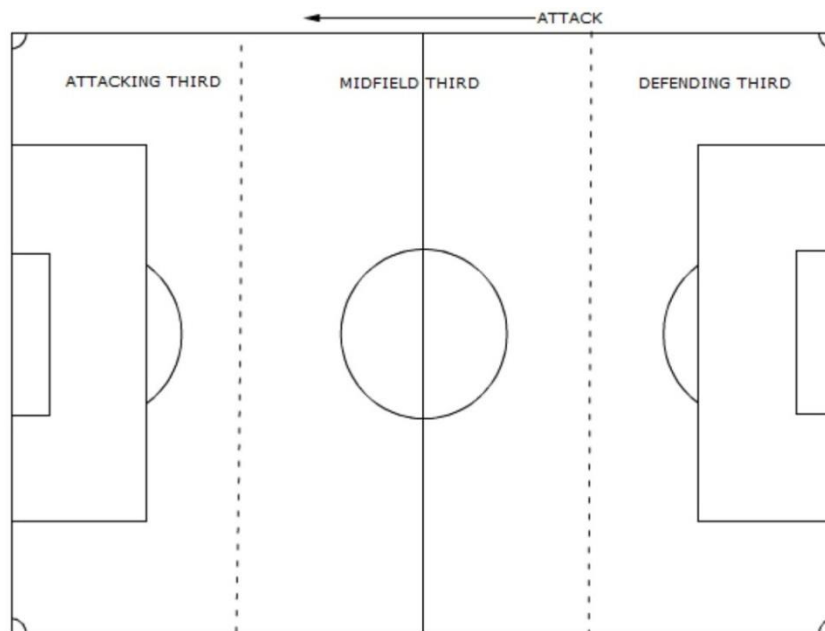


FIGURE 13 THE THIRDS ON A SOCCER FIELD

Players having progressed in this stair step approach to learning the game will now be using all three channels of the field when attacking (Fig. 12).

From 10-U onward teach the players to assess the balance between playing safely and taking risks through the thirds of the field (Fig. 14). Generally play simply and safely in the defending third. In the midfield third recognize the moment for a safe or risky move based on the situation. The rule of thumb though in the midfield third is that while on your own half of the field, think safety. Once over the halfway line players should look to take more risks in order to penetrate into the attacking third. In the attacking third risk more in order to create scoring chances.

The boundary lines, the halfway line and other markings on the field help young players know where they are on the field. The new spatial concepts, without any concrete markings, are the channels and thirds of the field. These are abstract parts of a soccer field seen only on diagrams and in the mind's eye. It is challenging to get the bird's eye view¹² of these unmarked lines on a soccer field into the conceptual understanding of youngsters. Players knowing where they are on the field in relation to the channels and thirds helps them with tactical decision making. This includes the continual decision between safety and risk.

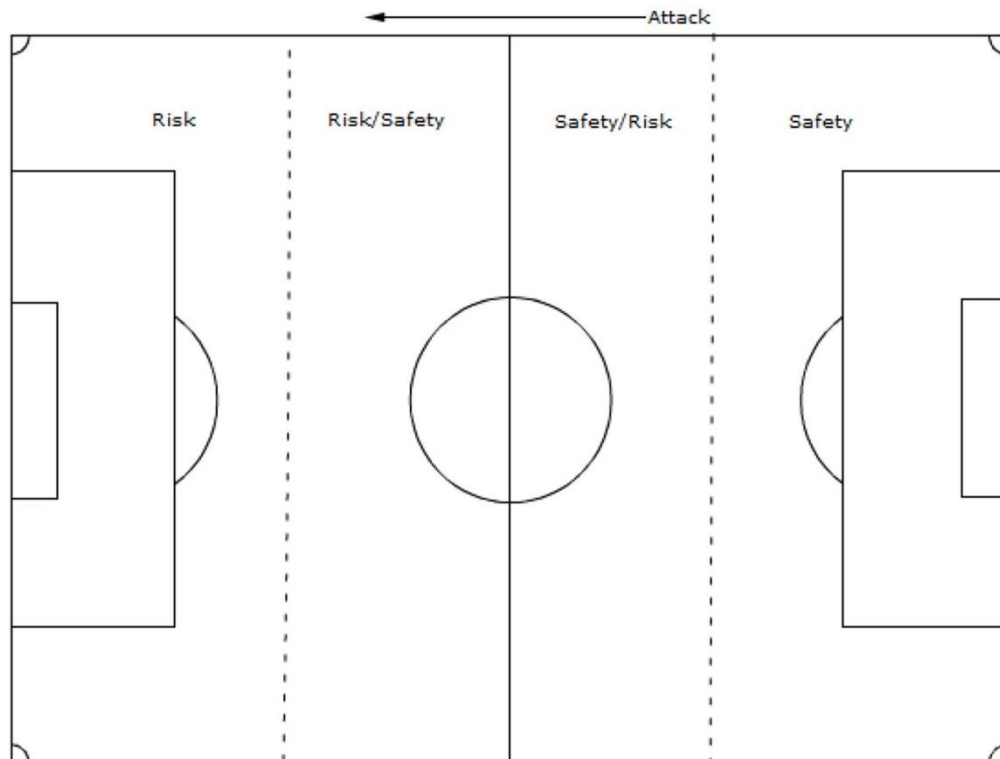


FIGURE 14 THE BALANCE OF SAFETY AND RISK

When on the attack in order to play cohesively through the channels and thirds of the field, players should regularly perform passing combinations (Fig. 15). These combinations can come from the proper positioning (distance and angle of support) of two attacking players (see attacking run # 1), but sometimes also in a

¹² The bird's eye view of a soccer field can be taught through the use of video games or watching soccer on television.

group of three forming the shape of a triangle (Fig. 16). Improve their recognition and quick use of passing lanes (see attacking run # 6).

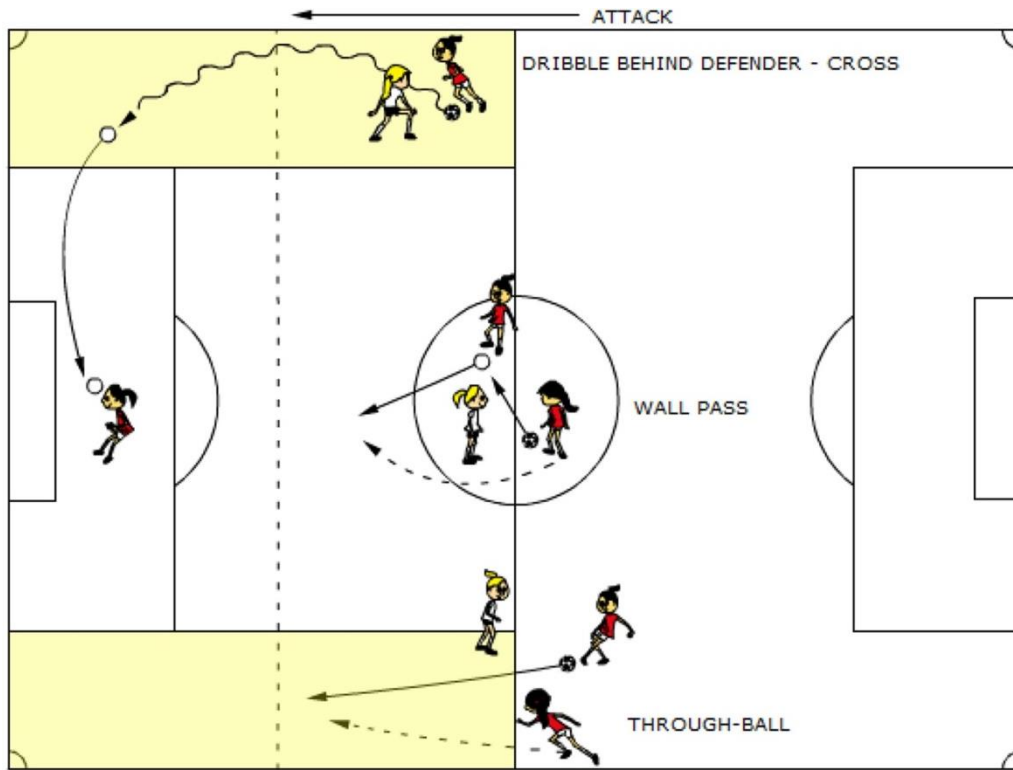


FIGURE 15 FLANK PLAY AND COMBINATIONS

The group shape of a triangle requires the ability to judge distance and angle (abstract thought). Having a triangle around the ball, whether attacking or defending, is a key tactical shape. However, it requires three players to read the game the same way at the same time. That means seeing into the future (temporal) and understanding space (conceptual). The use of the space will impact the distance and angle the players form in a triangle in relation to each other and the ball. Begin teaching the triangle shape at this age – just be patient. Remember that each kid will get the picture in his or her own time. Creating triangles around the ball while attacking will give a chance for at least one of these penetration opportunities to present itself (Fig. 15 and Fig. 16).

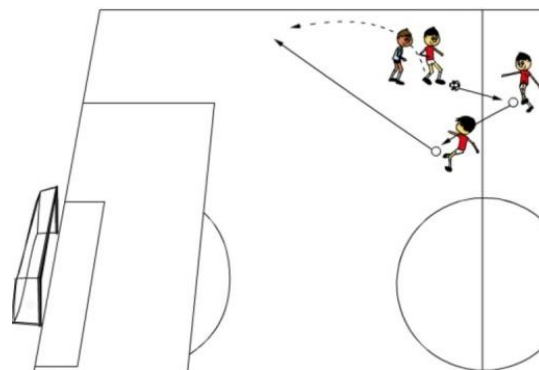


FIGURE 16 TRIANGLE ATTACKING SHAPE

Defending

Defending in pairs (see defending run # 4) should be an improving talent by the 10-U age group (Fig. 17). Distance and angle of support by the second defender are spatial concepts (see defending run # 5). Teach this tactic in the defending third first and then move up the field in its execution. By all means teach players to give defensive cover anywhere on the field that they are pressuring the ball. It may be easier though for 10-U players to remember to provide cover when they are closer to the obvious concrete space (penalty area) near their goal (see defending run # 3).

Getting goal-side should be coached consistently from this stage of development onward (Fig. 18). Now add to the details of quality defending by coaching the players on how to get ball-side¹³ as well as goal-side (Fig. 18). Correct positioning in regard to both goal-side and ball-side requires good judgment of distances and angles between oneself, the ball, opponents and your location on the field.

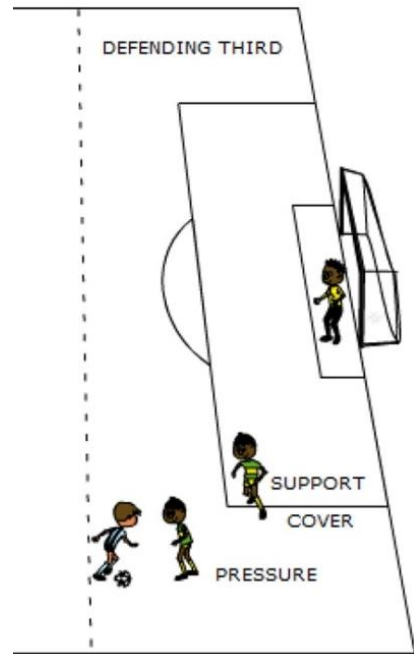


FIGURE 17 PRESSURE AND COVER

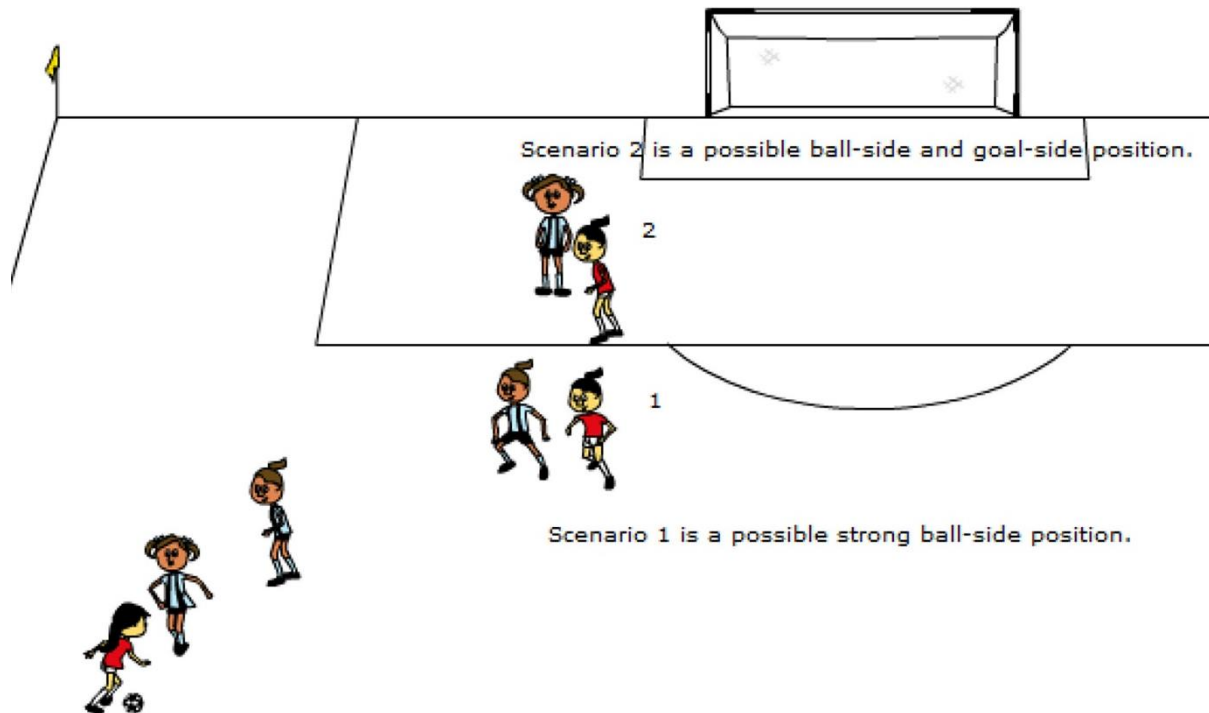


FIGURE 18 BALL-SIDE POSITIONING

¹³ Ball-Side: pertaining to that side of the field where the ball is.

Goalkeeping

The position of goalkeeper (a.k.a., ‘keeper) is introduced in the 10-U age group. All children this age should play all of the field player positions as well as goalkeeper during the soccer year. When playing ‘keeper the child needs to understand the spaces on the field just as when playing as a field player. Additionally the goalkeeper needs to gain a feel for the size of the goal and then positioning in relation to the goalmouth. The general position for the ‘keeper (GK number 1 in figure 19) is in the center of the goalmouth so that the distance to either post is the same. Position the ‘keeper 1 or 2 steps out of the goalmouth to begin narrowing the distance and angle to the ball, but also at this stage to learn how to avoid colliding with the posts (GK number 1 in figure 19) as the goalkeeper moves laterally to make saves (Fig. 19).

The next idea will take time to teach to these young players, as it requires them to have ‘eyes in the back of the head’. Teach young ‘keepers (GK number 2 in figure 19) to use the goal area lines to understand where they are in relation to the goal behind them (Fig. 19).

The final spatial concept is easier to understand, but more detailed to game situations. When the ball is near and to one side of the goalkeeper’s goal (GK number 3 in figure 19) then protect the near post space. Position an arm’s length (fingertips of the outstretched arm can touch the post) distance from the goal post and at a 45° angle to the post (Fig. 19).

Begin at this age to coach the goalkeeper to move back and forth (vertical) to stay connected with the team. This movement will help the young ‘keeper to manage the playing space in front of goal.

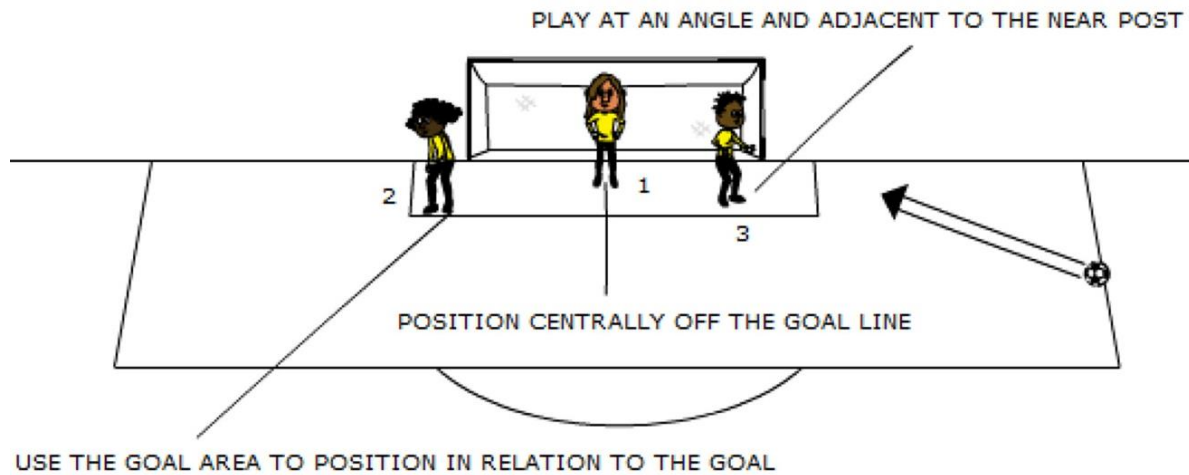


FIGURE 19 INITIAL GOALKEEPER SPACES

Please note that distribution for a goalkeeper is passing the ball. Hence the ‘keeper must see passing lanes just as the field players do.




The cartoon below depicts the growing sense of time and distance (space) in a young 'keeper (Fig. 20)...



FIGURE 20 JUDGING SPEED AND DISTANCE IS CRUDE¹⁴

Please note that 7 vs. 7 for 10-U players is not a small-sided game. It is the BIG game for them. It is the 11 vs. 11 version of the game for 10-U teams. For this age group 4 vs. 4, 5 vs. 4 or 6 vs. 4, as well as the combinations from the 6-U and the 8-U age groups, is a small-sided game. Spatial awareness is partially developed by using small-sided games.

Reinforce:

-  Old and new field markings
-  The balance of risk and safety
-  Passing lanes

¹⁴ Cartoon by Bill Hinds

12-U

Do not be locked in by the age group while coaching the principles of play. Take a step-by-step approach toward awareness of and the use of space on the field of play. When players can grasp the concepts then coach them. If the players are not ready for a tactical idea then wait until the next season.

Players in the 12-U age group should have a good feel for these conceptual spaces of thirds and channels (Fig. 21). Players at this stage are developing the cognitive ability of abstract thought, which heralds the dawning of tactical awareness. Having a bird's eye view of the soccer field in their minds is realistic now. While their intellectual understanding of the channels and thirds will be good, they will still be inconsistent in their tactical performance in those nonconcrete areas of the field. Be patient with this fact during matches. Occasionally at training sessions, use dot or disc cones to mark off the thirds and/or channels to further teach them these otherwise intangible tactical spaces.

Continue to coach the players that the aerial route is tactical space to be exploited. All previous spatial concepts must be continually reinforced plus divide the field into channels, thirds and the attacking third into thirds. Reinforce with these players all of the previous Principles of Play (see Table 1) and now also coach them on depth, both in advance of and behind the ball. Continually refine the Principles of Play (see Table 1) throughout the rest of their soccer careers.

Law 11 influences the players' awareness of distance, space and timing. Offside influences spatial awareness and the use of that space from this age onward.

Attacking

When attacking encourage players of this age to use combination passes, wall passes for example, to play their way out of the defending and midfield thirds so that they can enter into the attacking third under control of the ball. We must move away from merely kicking the ball up the field.

Thirds and Channels

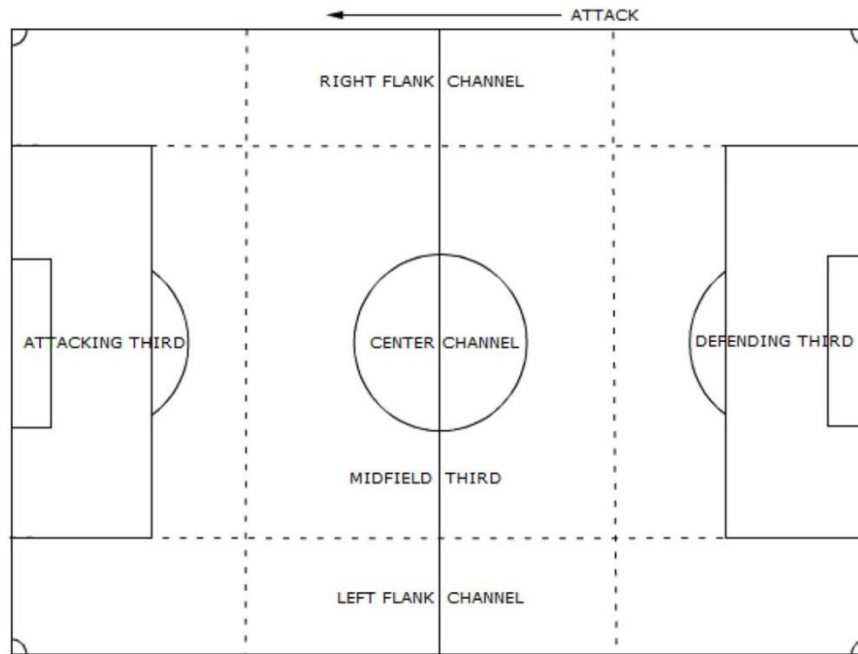


FIGURE 21 HORIZONTAL AND VERTICAL CONCEPTS OF THE SOCCER FIELD

Coaches must help young players understand that they can use the flanks (outside channels) to spread out the game and thus open up passing and/or dribbling lanes (see attacking run # 5). They are now executing width as a Principle of Attack. In the flank channels they can use wall passes, but the double pass can work especially well for getting behind defenders and into the attacking third (Fig. 22). This is the execution of depth as a Principle of Attack, both forward of the ball and behind the ball.

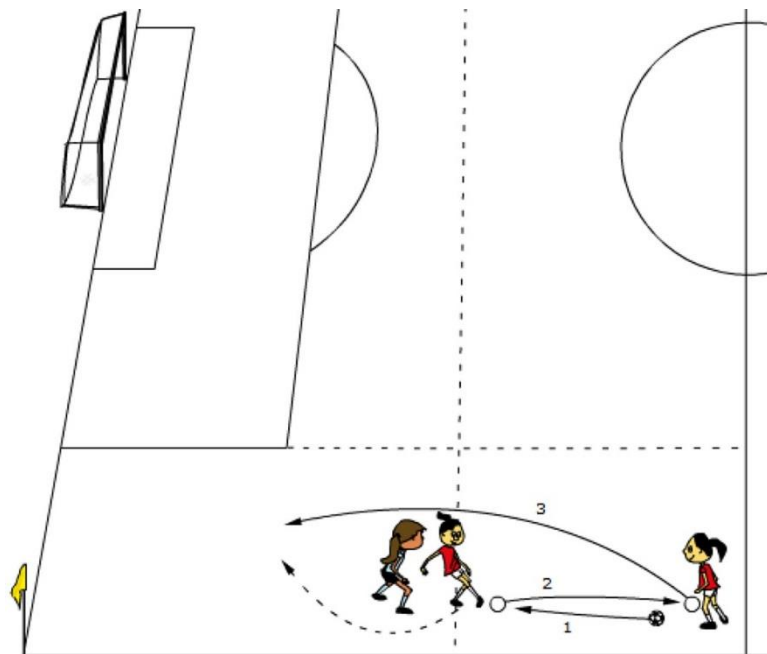


FIGURE 22 DOUBLE PASS TO ATTACK SPACE BEHIND THE DEFENSE

An option within a flank channel to move from the midfield third into the attacking third is the double pass (Fig. 22). Pass number 1 is to the feet of the forward attacker. An immediate return pass, number 2, goes to the feet of the supporting attacker, who then makes a bent pass (or perhaps a chip), number 3, behind the defender. The forward attacker should then make a bent run onto the pass. With the pass going to the inside of the defender and the run going to the outside of the defender, indecision by the defender, might take place thus giving an advantage to the attackers. Pass number 3 must go to the inside and the off-the-ball run must go to the outside so that the attacker receives the ball facing forward and inside to the field of play.

A space in front of goal with imaginary lines going out at roughly a 45° angle from the goalposts is the vital area (Fig. 23). From these distances and angles the attack is in very good position for shots on goal. For exactly that reason, this space is a danger zone for the defending team. By using the Principle of Defense of concentration, think of this space as an 'arc of concentration' (Fig. 24). The pie-shaped arc of concentration may be likened to an imaginary funnel, within which shots on goal have the best chance of going into the net. The principle of concentration provides heavy defense in this danger zone, allowing the opponents only narrow angle shots with a poor chance of succeeding. A further advantage of concentrating the defense in this area is that ball-possession passes by those on attack will take place in front of the defenders, and opportunities for regaining possession will be more frequent.

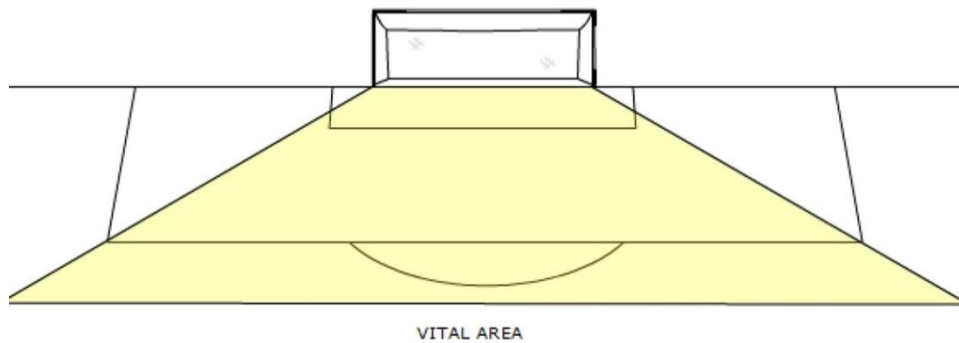


FIGURE 23 BEST SCORING SPACE FOR THE ATTACK AND THE DANGER ZONE FOR THE DEFENSE

The tactic has been called funnel defense (Fig. 24). While it is not an ideal way to defend, it does give young players a picture in their minds of the space they ultimately should concentrate their defending.

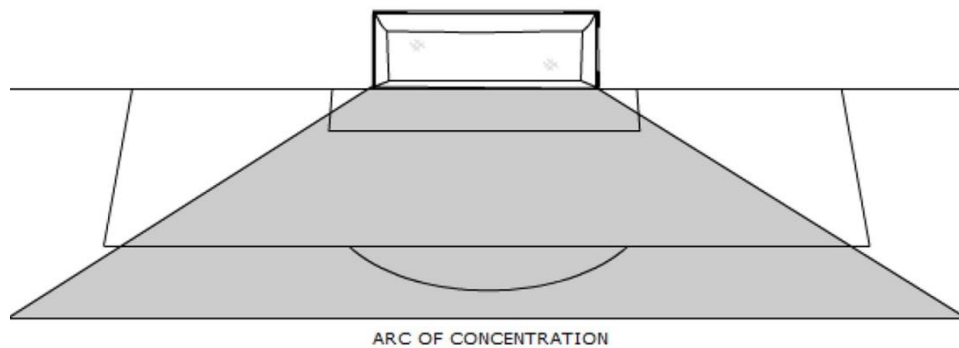


FIGURE 24 FINAL DEFENDING SPACE

Falling within both the vital area and the arc of concentration is the space of a second goal area. This unmarked space on a field is of importance to both attackers and defenders (Fig. 25).

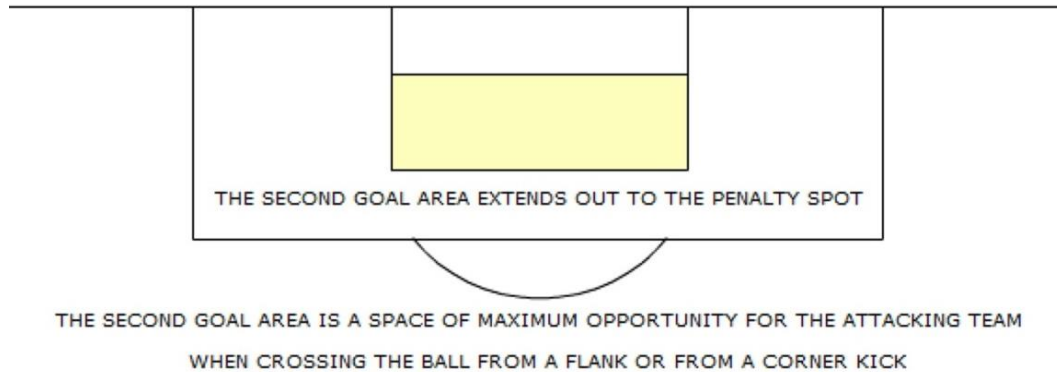


FIGURE 25 EXTENDED GOAL AREA

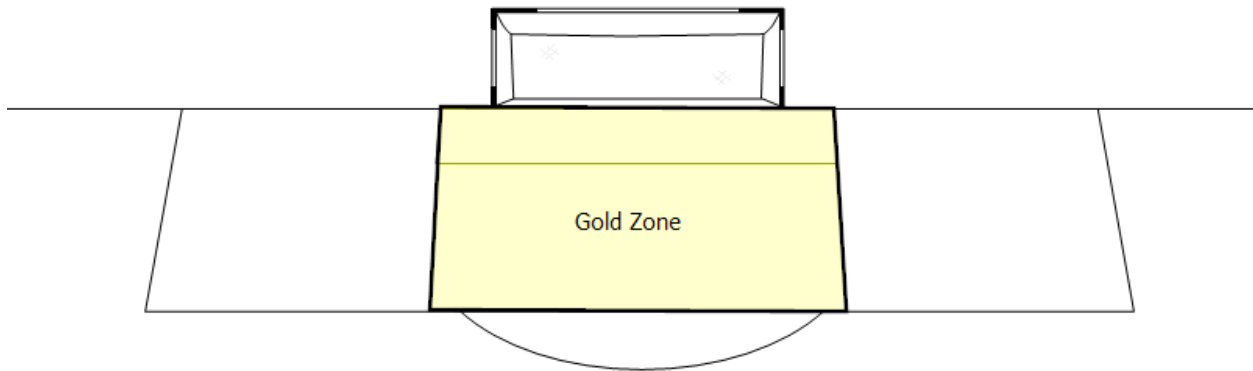


FIGURE 26 GOLD ZONE FOR SCORING GOALS

The second goal area falls within the “Gold Zone” in which there are a high number of goals scored (Fig. 26).¹⁵

Attacking Third in Thirds

A concept of space on the field is that the attacking third can be subdivided into flank and central thirds (Fig. 28). In that central third basic options include knock-offs and wall passes as well as turn and shoot (Fig. 27). In the flank thirds of the attacking third look to dribble or collect the through pass or wall pass or overlap pass and then cross the ball into the central third or cut inside and dribble toward the near post. From that move the options are a shot on goal or a pass across the goalmouth.

¹⁵ As a result of analyzing thousands of matches and plotting strike locations at all levels it was found that around 80% of all goals are scored in a zone designated as the Gold Zone as defined by John Bilton and Dr. Peter Usher in the publication Sports Path World Cup Technical Report 2014, page 4.

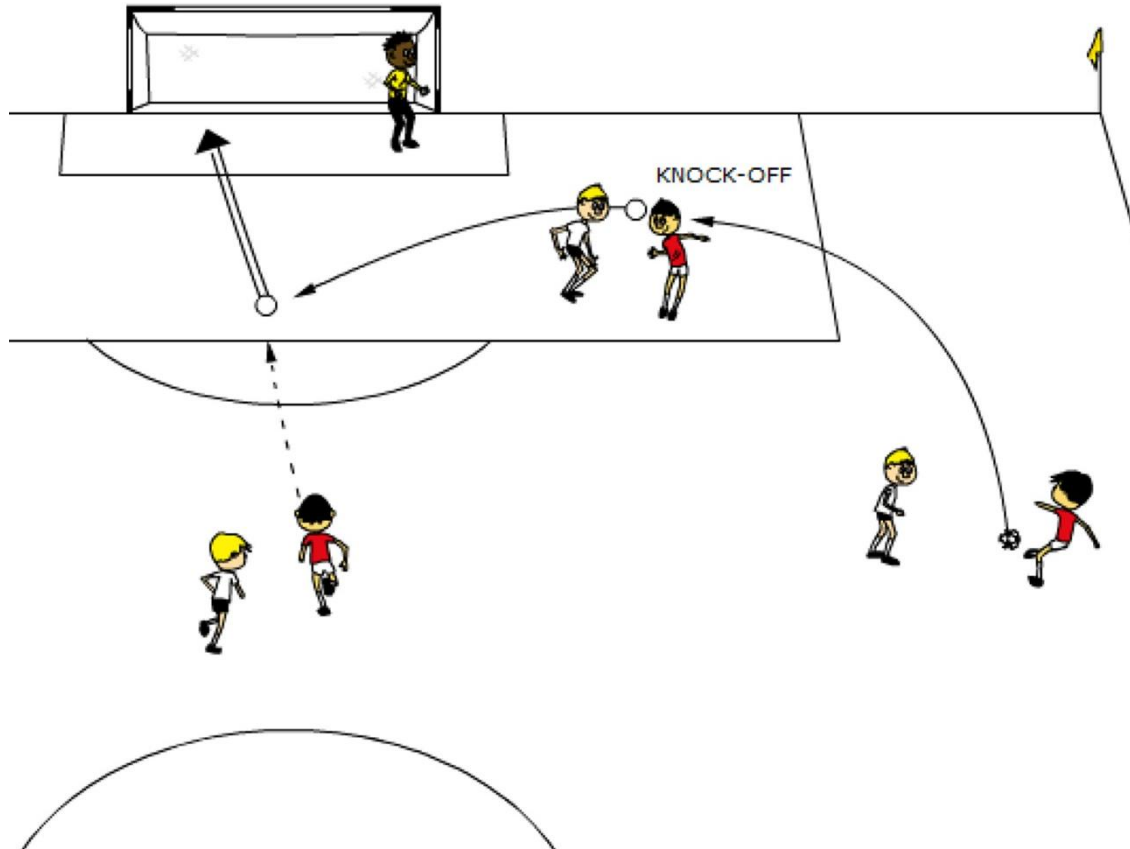


FIGURE 27 KNOCK-OFF OPTIONS: DRIBBLE OR SHOOT

Combination play, such as the knock-off depicted above, requires proper judgment of space to provide suitable distance and angles of support to both make and receive passes (Fig. 27). The three player combination shown above builds off the classic triangle shape in soccer that should be introduced in the 10-U age group (Fig. 27). Three shapes within the game should be taught and reinforced with players from 12-U onward. Those shapes are a straight line between two players, triangles between three players and a diamond between four players. In all cases, the distances and angles of those shapes will depend on the players' recognition of space on the field, their location on the field and the presence of the ball, opponents and teammates.

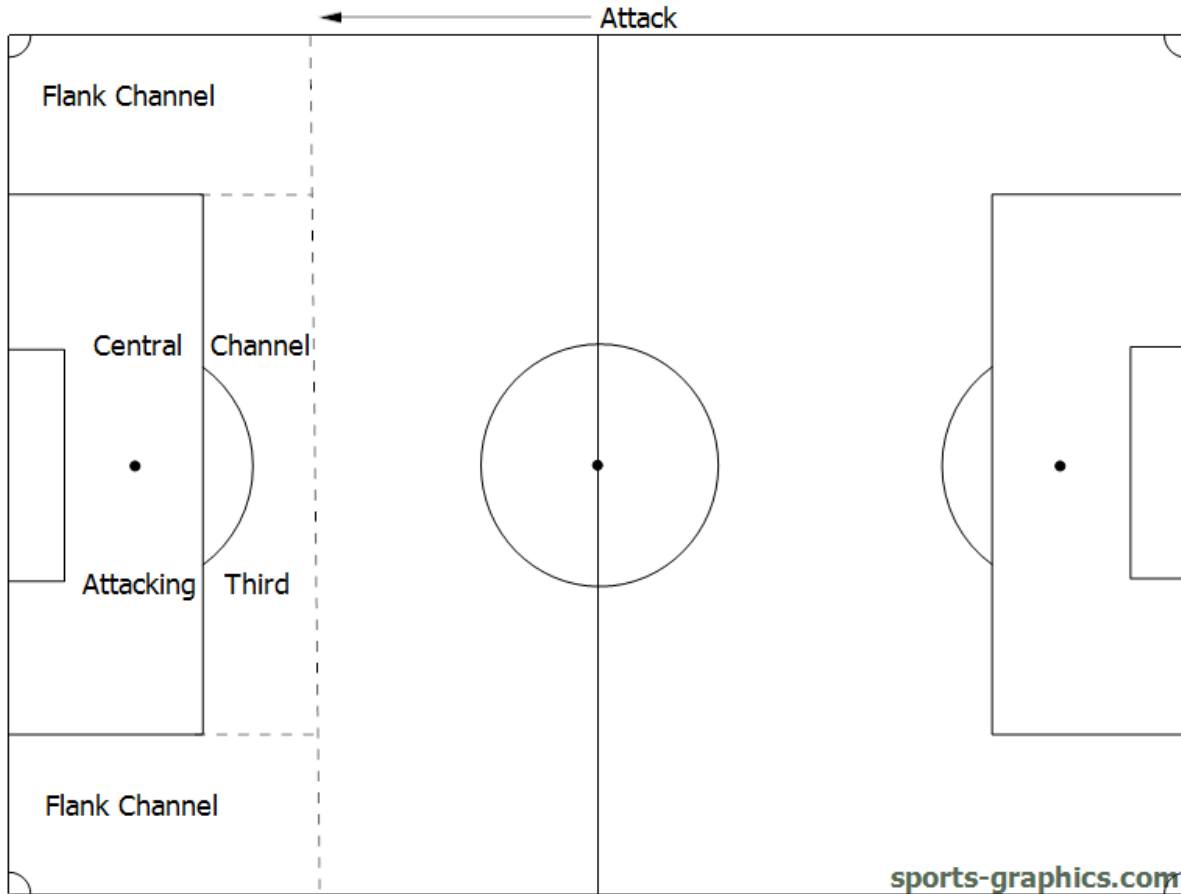


FIGURE 28 TACTICAL USE OF THE ATTACKING THIRD

Once an attacker who is in possession of the ball is able to move into a flank channel in the attacking third then he or she should look to:

- ☞ 'Turn the corner', that is cut inside with the ball (thus shielding the ball from the recovering defender) to attack at the near post space of the goal (Fig. 31 – primary [yellow] zone {Fig. 29})
- ☞ Turn the corner, dribble to the goal line and then pass the ball back toward the top of the penalty area for oncoming teammates (Fig. 31)
- ☞ Cross the ball from the flank space into dangerous spaces in the penalty area (Fig.29)

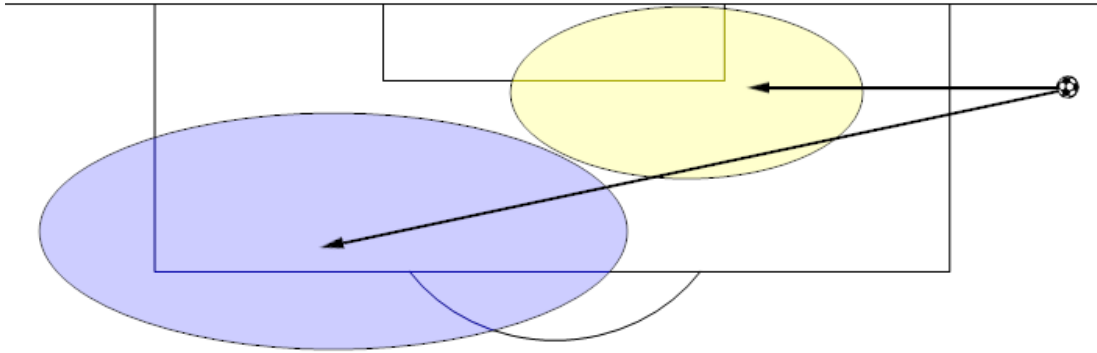


FIGURE 29 PRIMARY AND SECONDARY SPACES INTO WHICH TO CROSS THE BALL

These spaces offer the best scoring opportunities from a crossing pass (Fig. 29). The yellow space is the primary choice. The blue space is the secondary choice. As players mature physically, technically and tactically other spaces in and around the penalty area become possible target zones.

In the attacking third the attacker in possession of the ball should get to the inside space of the flank channel. In this way, the defender just beaten cannot catch up and block the path to goal (Fig. 30). Get into space B if possible.

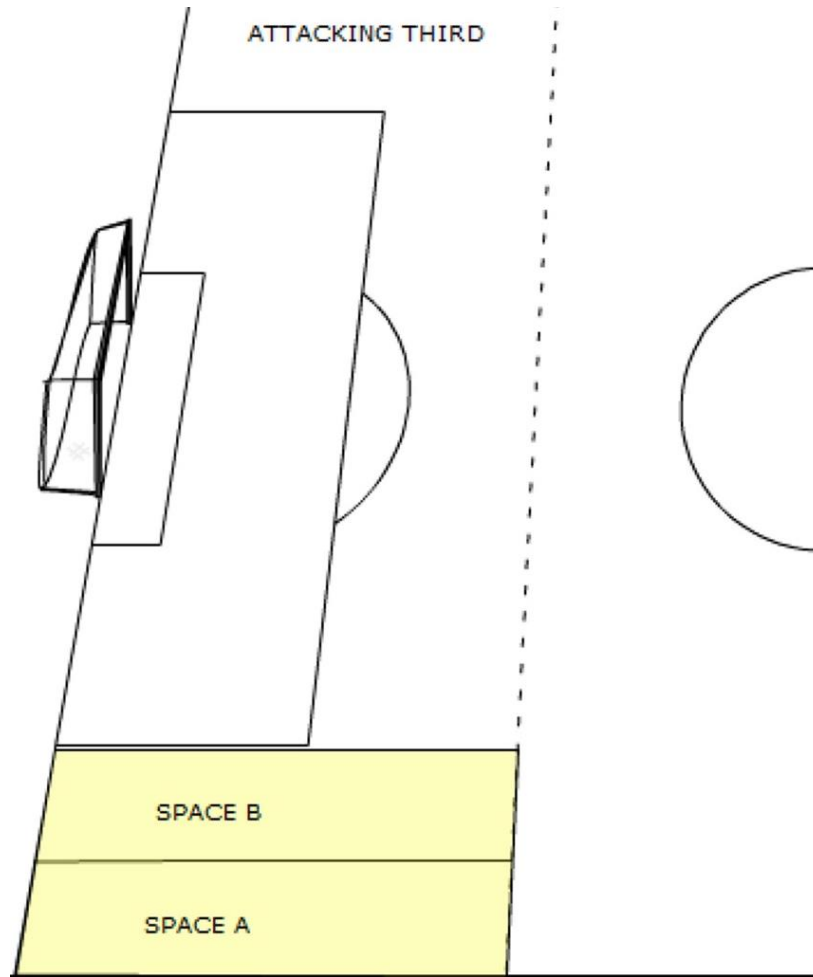


FIGURE 30 BEST ATTACKING OPTION: TURN INTO SPACE B

When possible an attacker should turn the corner and dribble into space B. Then attack the near post space by dribbling toward it to shoot or to pass the ball (pass 1 in figure 31) across the goal to an oncoming teammate (Fig. 31). Another option is to dribble diagonally toward the goal line and then pass the ball diagonally back (pass 2 in figure 31) toward the top of the penalty area for oncoming teammates (Fig. 31).

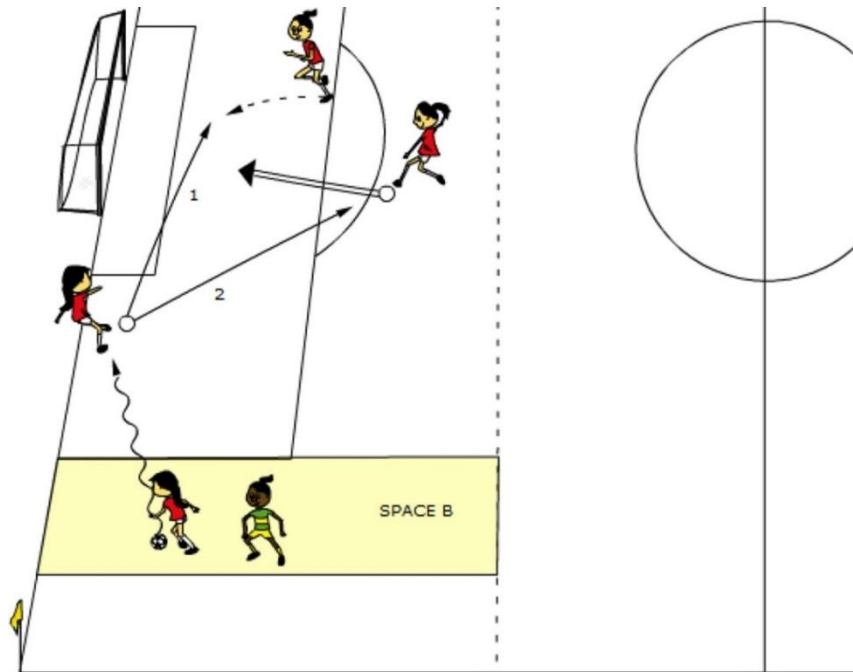


FIGURE 31 CUT INSIDE AND ATTACK THE NEAR POST

Spaces between, behind and in front of players are harder to recognize since players are constantly moving (see attacking run # 3). Therefore, those spaces constantly change. For the attacking team in particular being able to see the space between defenders is important. That space is the seam. A seam is between zones that defenders cover (Fig. 32). A seam could also be between an opponent and a boundary line. Young players do recognize the space between opponents and typically call it a gap. The gap to players is a seam to coaches. Teach players how off-the-ball runs could be made through seams. They should also know when to shoot (seam between the goalkeeper and the post), dribble or pass (passing lane) through the seam. A seam (the space between defenders' zones) is tactical and therefore more abstract. The notion of a passing lane (see Fig. 7) is slightly more concrete as a concept for players younger than 11 or 12 years of age.

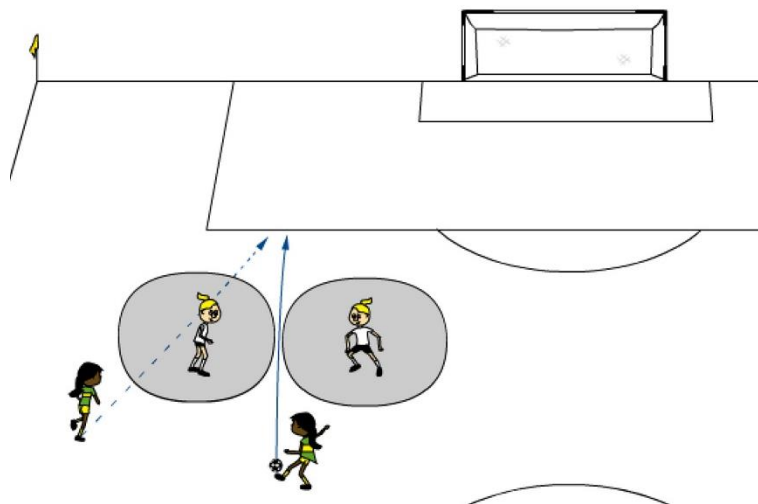


FIGURE 32 SEAM BETWEEN OPPONENTS

Defending

Coming into the tactics of the game now for the defending team is to have balance. That is to have one or more defenders on the off-the-ball (far) side of the field in case the attacking team play the ball across the field. Balance requires a cognizance of distance and angle. It also requires some emotional control to not drift in toward the ball too much. Defenders on the far side of the field must play with their body on a slight turn so that they can see the ball and the far side of the field too. They do need to pinch in toward the central channel (see defending run # 6), but not too much. The balancing defender will then make the choice to stop penetration or squeeze space (concentration) and perhaps to then intercept, jockey an opponent or tackle for possession of the ball.

Sometimes to apply defensive pressure on the space around the ball the defending team should ‘step up’ (see defending run # 7). The movement is done by the covering defenders. In this way, the defending players stay in a compact group shape near the ball. In general, there should be collective movement of the defensive line to compress the attacking space.

When the team is not in a good group shape to apply pressure or they are numbers down then it makes sense for the defender applying pressure and the covering defender to ‘drop off’ (see defending run # 8). Dropping off is a delay tactic to give time to other defending players to make recovery runs back into goal-side space.

Consistently coach the players on how to mark opponents from a ball-side position from this stage of development onward (Fig. 18).

Goalkeeping

In addition to using the goal area markings to know the distance and angle to the goal the 12-U goalkeeper should play out as far as the penalty mark and use that marking to know his or her distance from the goal. Begin teaching the 12-U goalkeeper about ebb and flow¹⁶, which are about positioning and therefore a spatial concept.

Goalkeepers should come out of the goalmouth (Fig. 33). The distance out from goal and the angle to the goal is the idea of ebb and flow. To better comprehend distance and angles in training sessions use a long rope with one end staked in the center of the goal and the coach with a ball at the other end. The goalkeeper straddles the rope. The coach changes the angle of the rope in relation to the center of the goalmouth and the distance of the ball from the goal. The goalkeeper then adjusts his or her position based on the angle and distance of the ball to the goal (ebb and flow). During a match the ‘keeper imagines that rope running from the center of the goal through his or her navel to the ball. Moving to keep that imaginary straight line between the ball, the keeper’s navel and the center of the goalmouth will aid in positioning (spatial awareness) for the goalkeeper.

By having used the rope, an abstract concept of distance and angle is made concrete.

¹⁶ Ebb and flow: the goalkeeper’s movement back and forth; i.e., North, South, East or West from the goal line while varying both distance and angle based on the location of the ball.

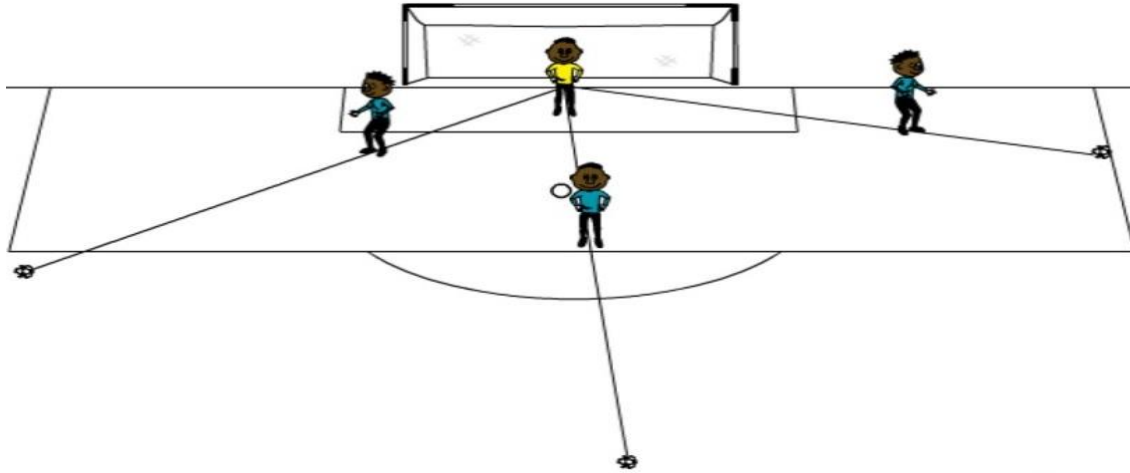


FIGURE 33 GOALKEEPER EBB AND FLOW

For the ease of understanding, the diagram above shows the goalkeeper’s primary position with the ‘keeper in the yellow jersey. Examples of possible secondary positions based on the distance and angle of the ball to the goal are shown with the goalkeepers in the blue jersey (Fig. 33).

Please note that 9 vs. 9 for 12-U players is not a small-sided game. It is the BIG game for them. It is the 11 vs. 11 version of the game for 12-U teams. For this age group 6 vs. 6, 7 vs. 5 or 8 vs. 4, as well as the combinations from the 6-U, 8-U and the 10-U age groups, is a small-sided game. Spatial awareness is partially developed by using small-sided games.

Reinforce:

- ☞ All field markings
- ☞ The balance between safety and risk
- ☞ The conceptual center line designating the east and west sides of the field
- ☞ Channels and thirds of the field
- ☞ Passing lanes
- ☞ Goalkeeper position near the center of the goal and one or two steps forward from the goal line
- ☞ Goalkeeper distance and angle to the near post
- ☞ Goalkeeper’s visual use of the goal area to improve positioning

14-U

Coach all of the principles of play from this age group onward. When players can grasp a principle and execute it then coach them. If the players are not ready for a tactical idea then wait until the next season.

Although, at its best, soccer is played mainly on the ground, techniques to put the ball into the air and to take it out of the air are vital to tactically using that space. All previous spatial concepts must be continually reinforced plus subdivide the defending third into thirds (Fig. 34). From the Principles of Play (see Table 1) now emphasize defensive balance.

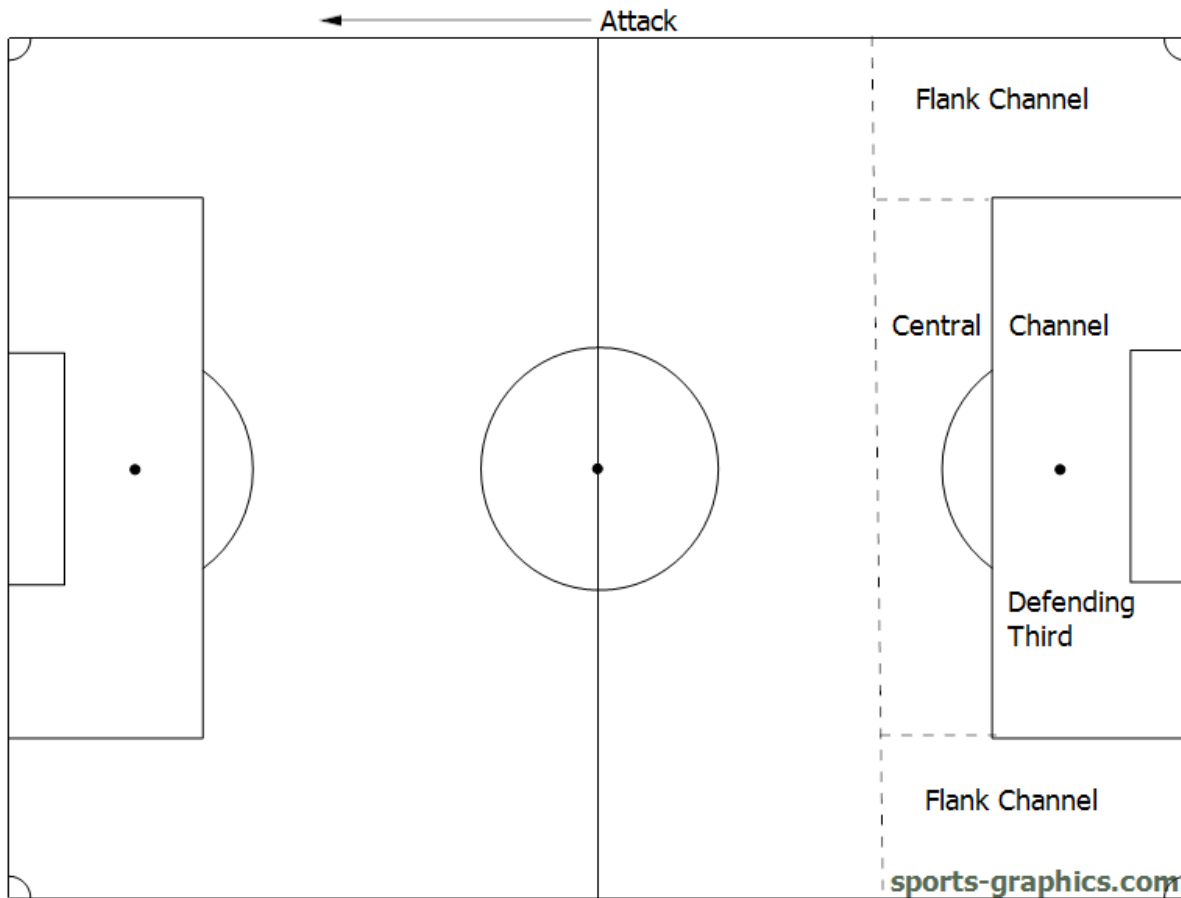
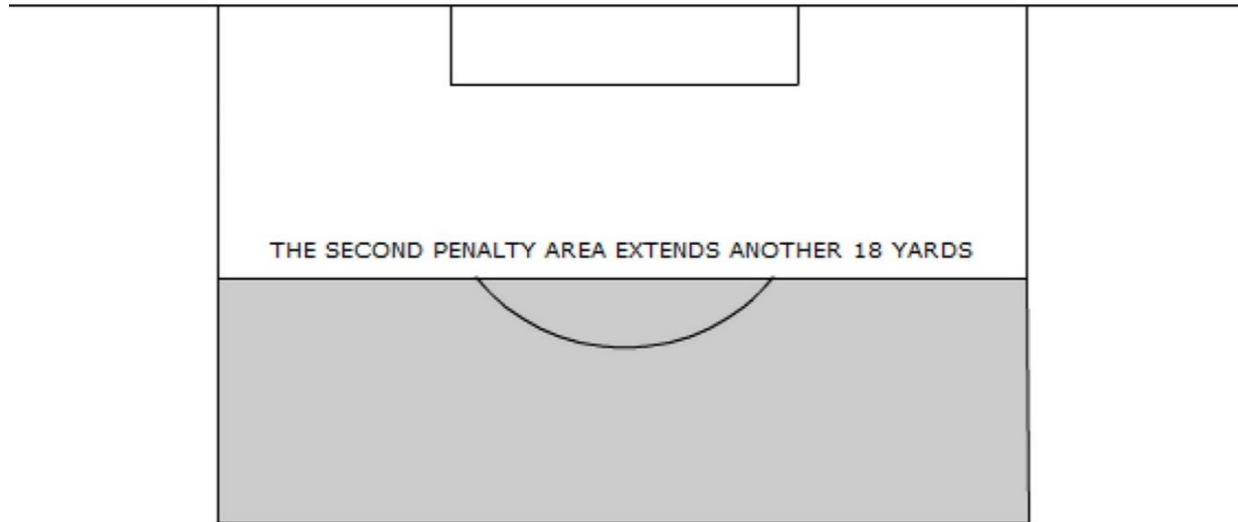


FIGURE 34 TACTICAL USE OF THE DEFENDING THIRD

Attacking

An imaginary second penalty area extends another 18 yards (Fig. 35) from the top of the penalty area. Attackers should consider the space as a final build-up zone to create scoring chances. Older players in Zone 2 of the player development pyramid, as well as Zone 3 players, could also use this space for long-range shots.



THE SECOND PENALTY AREA IS A FINAL BUILD UP SPACE IN THE CENTRAL CHANNEL OF THE ATTACKING THIRD WHERE ATTACKERS SHOULD TAKE RISKS TO CREATE SCORING CHANCES

FIGURE 35 EXTENDED PENALTY AREA

The central attacking zone encompasses the “second penalty area” and it extends out to the edge of the midfield third (Fig. 36). Along with the spaces just to the sides of the central attacking zone upward to 47% of passes from those spaces into the gold zone are far more successful.¹⁷

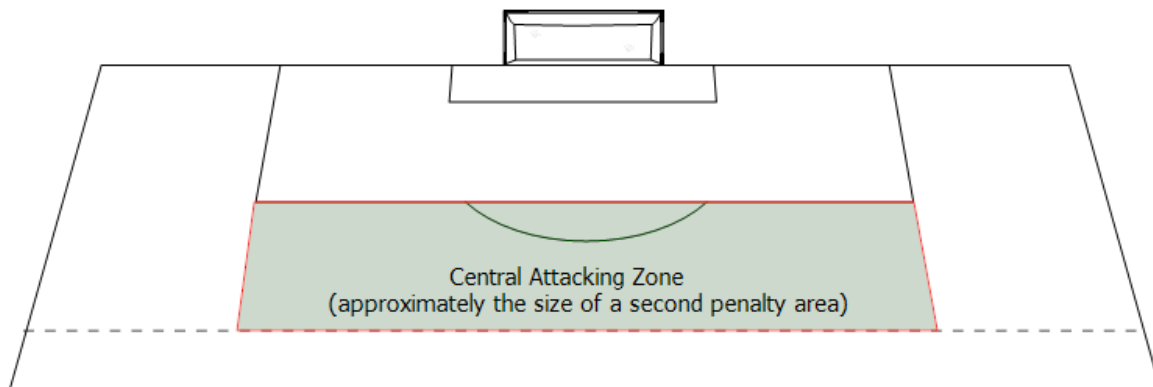


FIGURE 36 CENTRAL ATTACKING ZONE

Players at this stage should have a good feel for the conceptual spaces of thirds and channels. When in possession they should now be making better choices of when to dribble, pass or shoot based on their location on the field, among other factors. Other attackers should now make decisions on when to support near to or far from the ball and when to support from behind, square to or in advance of the ball based on their locations on the field, as well as the positioning of opponents and teammates (Fig. 37). As players mature tactically they should know at all times where they are on the field regarding both thirds and channels.

¹⁷ Sports Path World Cup Technical Report 2014, pages 7 and 8.

Consider the distances shown as a rule of thumb (Fig. 37). In a match the distance and angle of support will be judged based on the pressure from opponents, the space available, field and weather conditions and the abilities of the attackers.

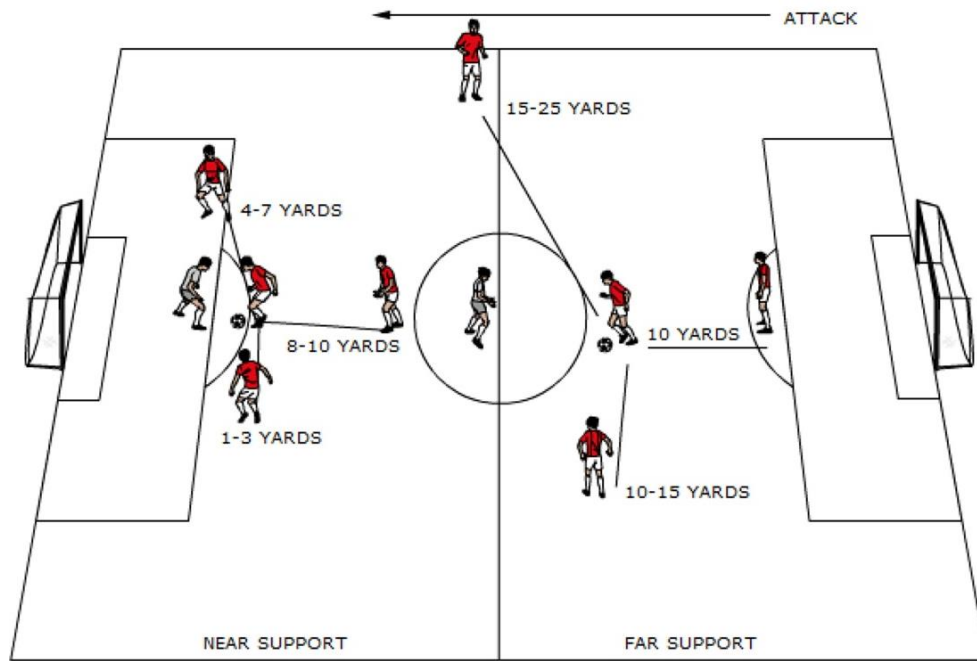


FIGURE 37 ATTACK: ANGLE AND DISTANCE OF SUPPORT

Mobility in the attack and the use of space should be more sophisticated for 14-U players (Fig.38).

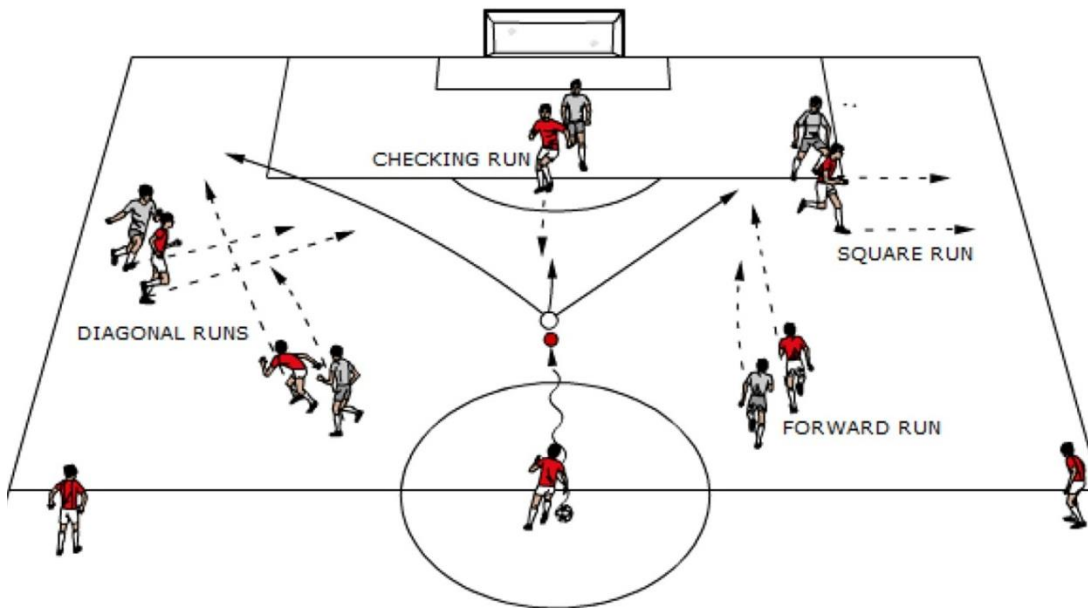


FIGURE 38 RUNS TO CREATE SPACE

Penetrating from midfield into the attacking third should involve off-the-ball runs as well as passing combinations (see attacking run # 4).

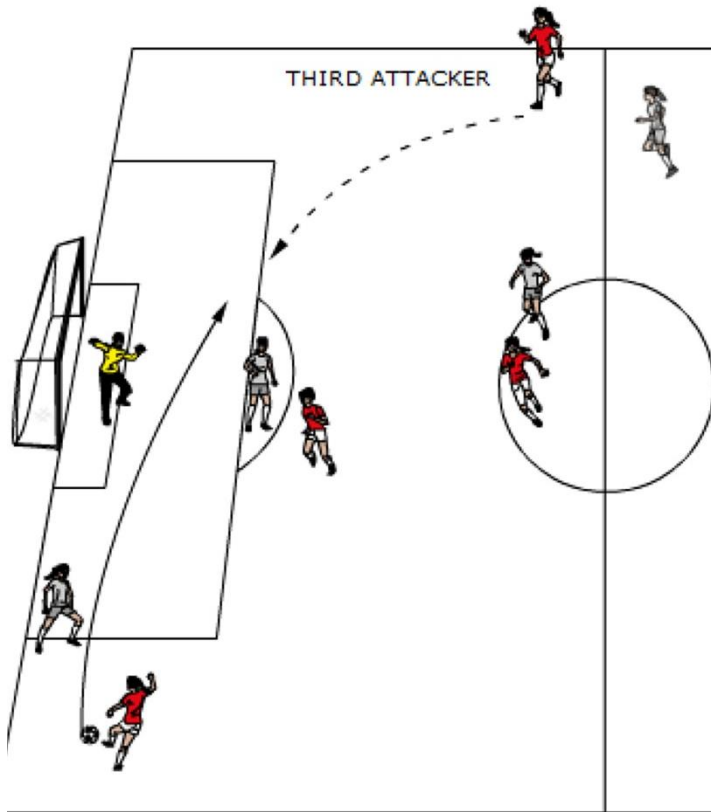


FIGURE 39 FAR POST RUN FROM THE OFF-THE-BALL SIDE

There is an adage in soccer that the team in possession attacks space, specifically the space behind defenders. Attacking players should look to move into the space between the lines of the opposing team (Fig. 40). From this stage onward players should be experienced enough to play in the gaps between their opponents and in the seams between the opponent's lines – back to middle or middle to front. Of course, these spaces are fluid with ever-changing shape, so attackers must be on their toes mentally and physically.



FIGURE 40 ATTACK BETWEEN THE OPPONENT'S LINES

Defending

The role of third defender (see Table 2) requires good judgment of distance and angles in order to position correctly to balance the defense on the off-the-ball side of the field (Fig. 41).

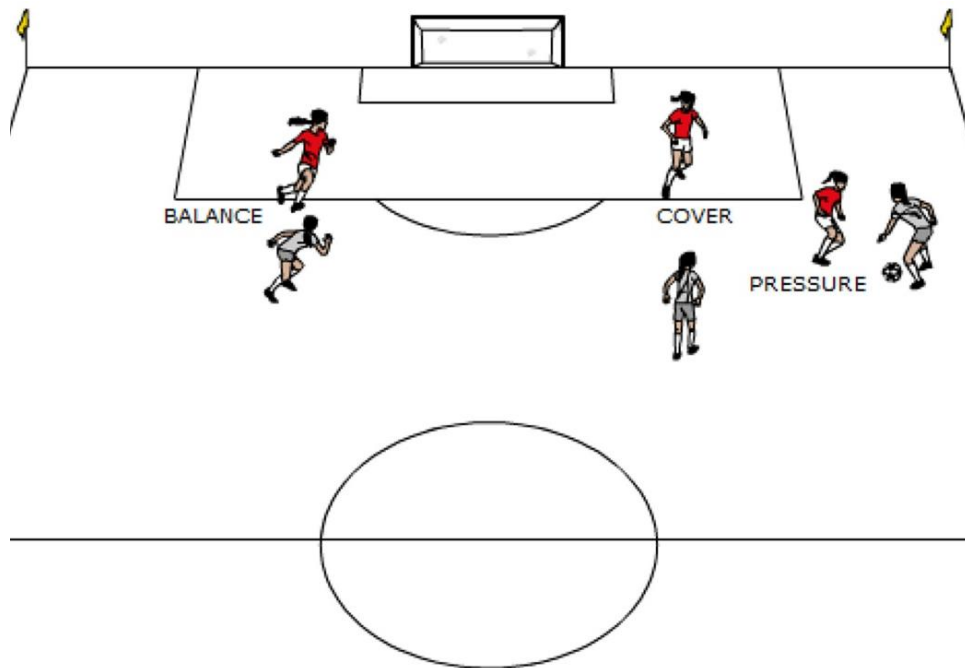


FIGURE 41 THIRD DEFENDER PROVIDES BALANCE AWAY FROM THE BALL

When pressuring in the defending third look to force the first attacker {1st} (see Table 2) square and away from the danger zone or at least square when in the central channel (Fig. 42). When defending in the flank channel of the defending third take the first attacker forward to the goal line or backward toward the midfield third or outside toward the touchline to compact (squeeze/concentrate) the space (Fig. 42). Do not let the attacker dribble or pass to the inside.

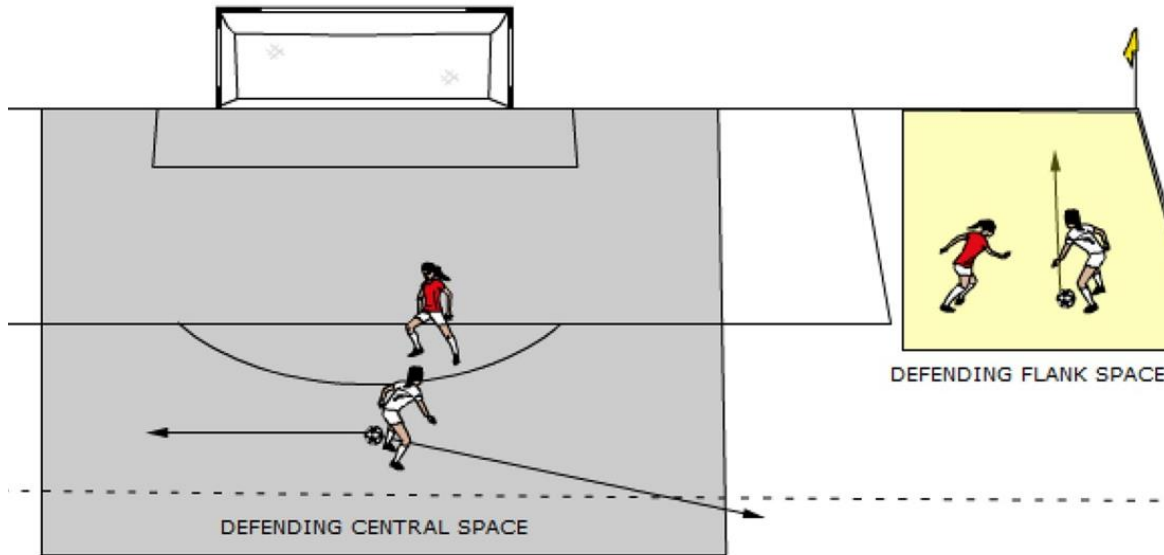


FIGURE 42 DEFEND TO FORCE THE ATTACK AWAY FROM THE DANGER ZONE

Goalkeeping

One of the changes for the 14-U age group is the use of a senior size goal at 8' x 24'. For the goalkeeper in particular it will take some time to adjust to the larger goal. This is a normal part of the stair step approach in youth soccer moving into the senior level game. The field gradually moves from the 25 x 15 yard size to the 120 x 75 yard size and the goal increases in size from the initial Zone 1 size of 4' x 6' to the Zones 2 and 3 size of 8' x 24'.

The goalkeeper at this stage is emerging from the shot stopper phase of development and is becoming an actual goalkeeper. That is – the last line of defense and the first line of attack. Details of defending the goal such as angle play are important spatial concepts to teach 'keepers (Fig. 43). On the attack the goalkeeper needs to recognize good attacking spaces to distribute the ball as well as teammate options. Properly judging distances and angles for both defending and attacking decisions is a key ability from this time forward.

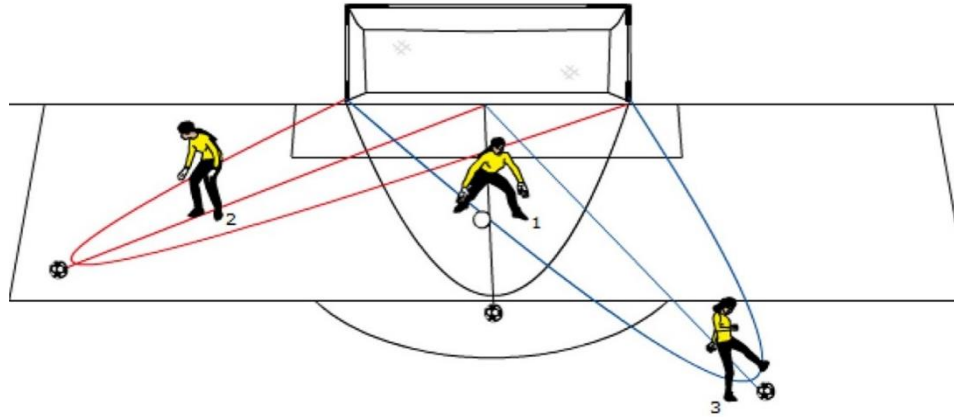


FIGURE 43 ANGLES TO THE GOALPOSTS

Again, a visual way for novice goalkeepers to learn about angles is with a length of rope. Tie the ends of a rope to the goalposts. Then loop the rope out with the ball at the endpoint. Vary the distances and angles for a concrete picture of the angles of the ball to the goalmouth.

The goalkeeper in position number 1, with the black rope, shows angles to the goalposts and the straight line from the center of the goalmouth to the ball as does the goalkeeper in position number 2 with the red rope (Fig. 43). The 'keeper in position number 3 with the blue rope emphasizes the fact that the modern goalkeeper must play with the feet too (Fig. 43). Being able to accurately judge the distance between the ball and him or herself greatly affects the goalkeeper's ability to dominate the penalty area and beyond.

Reinforce:

- ☞ Thirds of the field
- ☞ Playing in the center of the attacking third
- ☞ Playing in the flanks of the attacking third
- ☞ Passing lanes and seams
- ☞ Goalkeeper's use of the goal area lines to improve positioning
- ☞ Goalkeeper's use of the penalty mark to improve positioning

16-U

Players in this age group and older should make sound decisions on when to use space on the ground or in the air. All previous spatial concepts must be continually reinforced plus subdivide the midfield third into thirds (Fig.44). The Principles of Play (see Table 1) at this stage now include compactness of the team shape both when defending and attacking.

Attacking

Players in this age group should now be making decisions in the center (Fig. 44 yellow zone) and flanks (Fig. 44 grey zones) of the midfield third about when to play possession and when to penetrate via a dribble or a pass. They should recognize when to use possession dribbling or passing in one part of the midfield third in order to create space in another part of the midfield third to then penetrate into the attacking third.

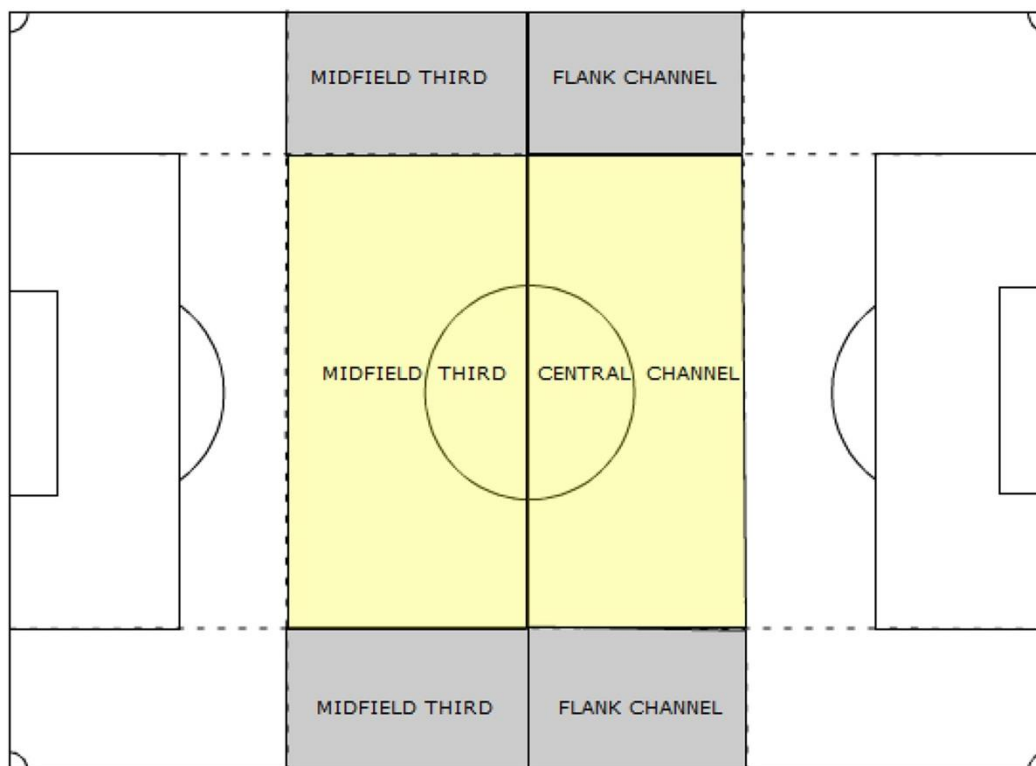


FIGURE 44 THE SUB-DIVIDED MIDFIELD CONCEPT OF THE SOCCER FIELD

This level of savvy soccer requires the players to understand the tactical use of the part of the field they are in while executing the Principles of Play (see Table 1). The possibilities for buildup play include on the flank a diagonal run to open space by a forward, a diagonal dribble by a midfielder to further open flank space, an overlapping run by a fullback to meet a diagonal pass from midfield. The diagonal pass is made from the inside to the outside so that the receiver is facing forward (toward the goal line) and inside (toward the central channel) on the run (Fig. 45).

In the center of the field a take-over to shake off tight marking is a good option (Fig. 45). After the ball is exchanged by the two attackers, their ensuing dribble and off-the-ball run are noted by the blue arrows in figure 45. This maneuver utilizes the space available to either side of the attackers while in the center of the field.

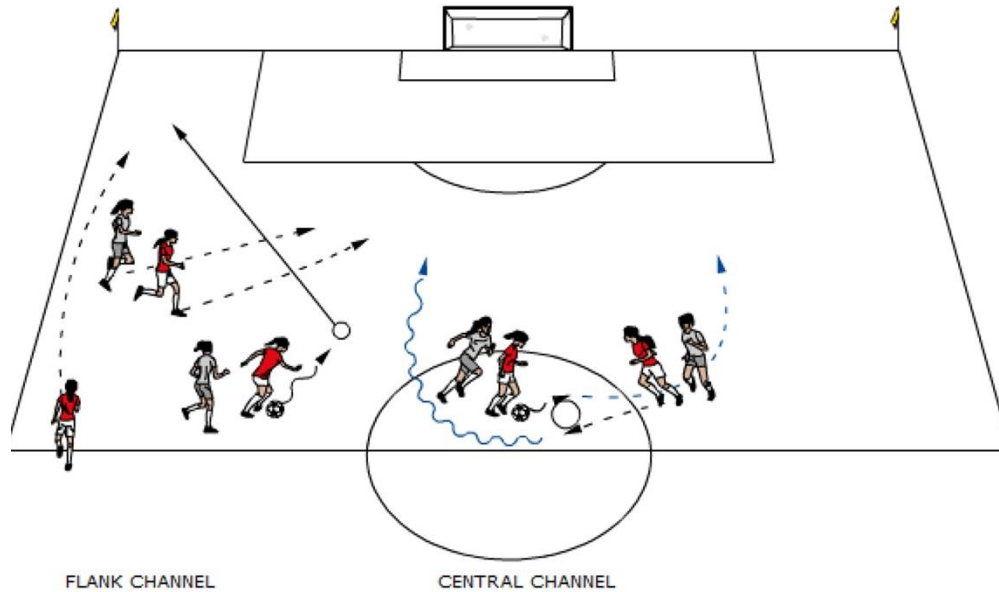


FIGURE 45 ATTACKING COMBINATIONS IN THE FLANKS AND CENTER OF THE MIDFIELD THIRD

The team in possession can be most effective by attacking the space behind defenders. The third attacker must recognize attacking space and properly time off-the-ball runs to ‘unbalance’ the defense, thus disrupting the defending shape. Whenever possible use blind space¹⁸ to get behind defenders. Often that off-the-ball run (blind side run¹⁹ or unbalancing run) by the third attacker is behind opponents, occurring in the midfield third in a switch the point of attack move or it could also be a classic far post run in the attacking third (Fig. 46).

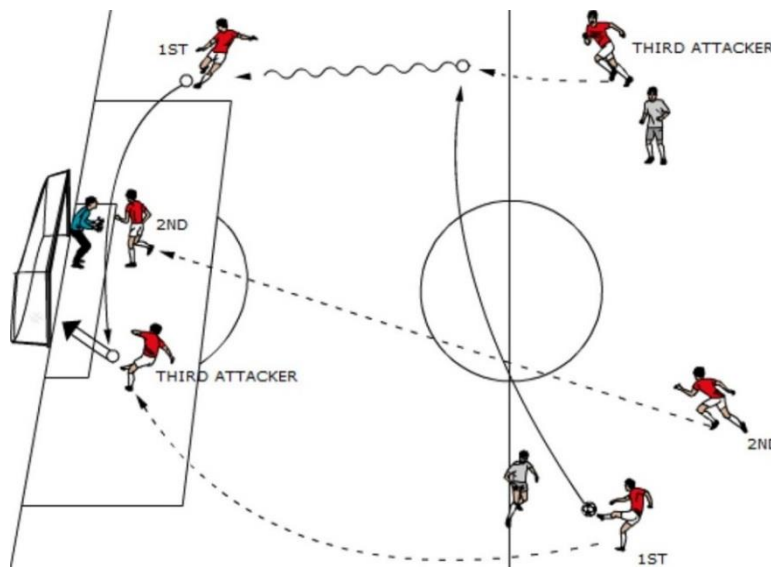


FIGURE 46 THIRD ATTACKER MOVEMENT

¹⁸ Blind space: the opposite side of a defender to the ball. At the moment the defender turns his or her head to look at the ball then the attacker runs into blind space; a.k.a., blind side.

¹⁹ Blind-side run: a run made away from the opponent’s field of vision.

In figure 46 the initial third attacker is in the upper right of the diagram. Once he receives the pass from the initial first attacker in the lower right of the diagram he then becomes the first attacker. The first attacker is always the player in possession of the ball. The new first attacker in the upper left of the diagram has dribbled to a position to cross the ball. The original first attacker has now made a run to the far post and is now in the role of third attacker. The original second attacker {2nd} (see Table 2) in support of the ball in the center right of the diagram continues his run to become the second attacker at the near post.







Defending

A defender knowing the third and channel in which he or she finds one's self at a moment in the match helps deciding, along with other factors, how to defend. The defender understanding the tactical space aids decisions on closing down and pressure or dropping off or moving to cover, etc. Intelligent defending relies on the scope of spatial awareness.

Goalkeeping

The goalkeeper starts to command first the goalmouth with lateral movement. Next comes commanding out to the top of the goal area. The next space to defensively control is out to the penalty mark. Gradually the 'keeper should move to control larger amounts of the penalty area. The objective is to eventually command out to the top and the sides of the penalty area.

Reinforce:

-  Playing through the 'seams'
-  Attack between the lines of the opposing team
-  The tactical use of the subdivided defending third
-  The use of Space A and Space B in the flank attacking third
-  The tactical use of the subdivided midfield third
-  Awareness of angles by the goalkeeper; improving ebb and flow

19-U

By this age all of the players should be capable of spatial management (see footnote # 6). All previous Principles of Play (see Table 1) and spatial concepts must be continually reinforced. Plus subdivide the full field into grids.

Full field grids at 19-U could conceptually be thought of as the game of tic-tac-toe (Fig. 47). This is an easy mind map for players of this stage to conceptualize and enact during a match. Just like the diagram below, how one plays in the smaller grids on the field will depend on their location on the field and the number of players in that space.

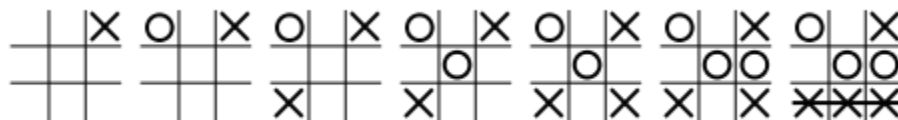


FIGURE 47 CONCEPTUALLY THE GAME IS THE MOVEMENT OF XS AND OS IN TIGHT SPACE

Another way to convey the tactical picture of the field is to subdivide the thirds as seen in figure 48. Taken a step farther the channels could be split in half.

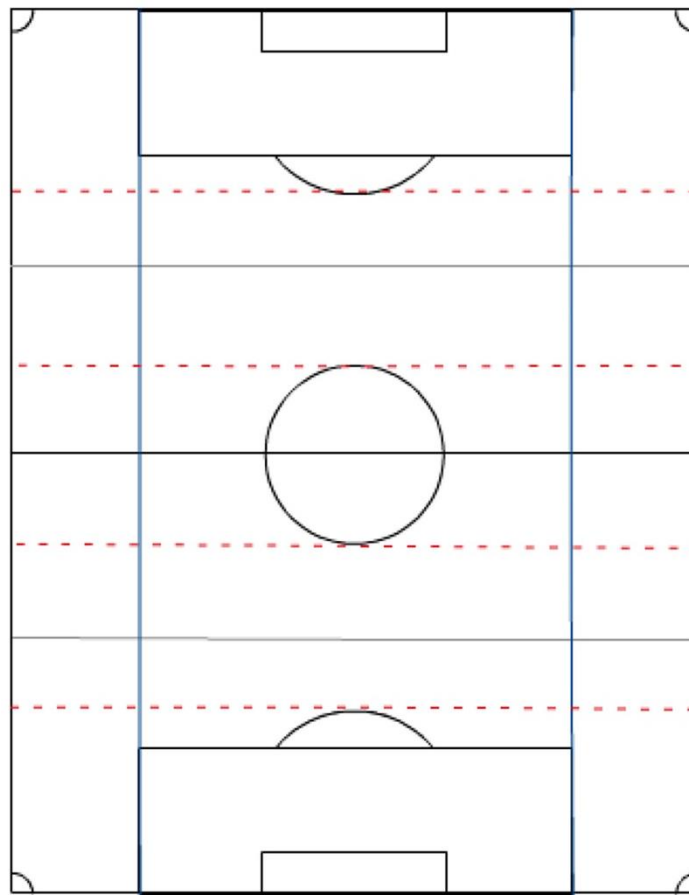


FIGURE 48 BOUNDARY LINES AND THE HALFWAY LINE ARE IN BLACK; LINES OF THE THIRDS ARE IN GREY; LINES OF THE CHANNELS ARE IN BLUE; DIVIDING THE THIRDS ARE RED DASHED LINES

Attack and Defend

More detailed tactical responsibilities can be given to the players as a part of particular roles in the team formation or as a strategy in the system of play. Players in the 19-U age group should be aware of all spaces on the pitch, including between the lines of the opposing team, while making quick tactical decisions in a free flowing match (Fig. 49). At this level of play the ball flows through ever morphing paths to the goal.

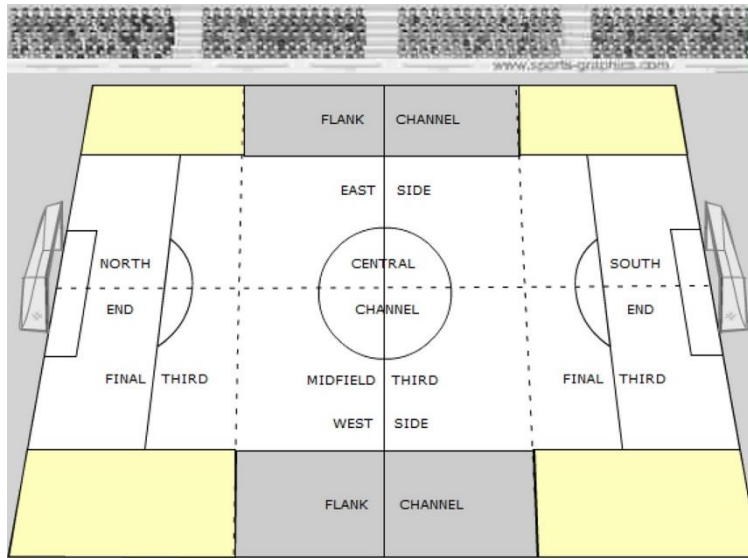


FIGURE 49 THE 19-U CONCEPT OF THE SOCCER FIELD

Finally, for high performance soccer the pitch can be divided into 30 zones, as theoretically noted in diagram 47. Note that the midfield third is split into the midfield third defending and the midfield third attacking (Fig. 50).²⁰

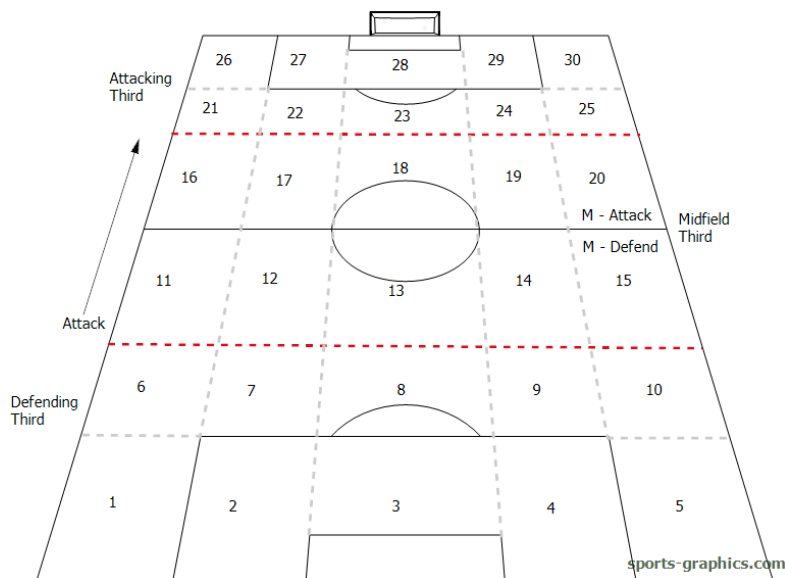


FIGURE 50 PITCH ZONES

²⁰ Sports Path World Cup Technical Report 2014, page 10.

Put it all together to attack or defend.

Goalkeeping

By the end of the youth soccer age groups the goalkeeper should command the entire penalty area and perhaps beyond (Fig. 51). Command is both physical and verbal presence either when defending or attacking. The progression is by 'steps' as illustrated in Figure 51. At step 1 the goalkeeper should command the goalmouth as indicated by the black arrows. For step 2 a goalkeeper should command out to the goal area as indicated by the blue arrows. By step 3 the goalkeeper should command out to the penalty mark as indicated by the grey arrows. Finally, at step 4 a goalkeeper should command the penalty area and play beyond that space as the game dictates as indicated by the red arrows.

In the graphic below the distance (depth) out from the goalmouth for the goalkeeper to command is indicated by the position of the 'keeper and the width of the space to command is indicated by the arrows.

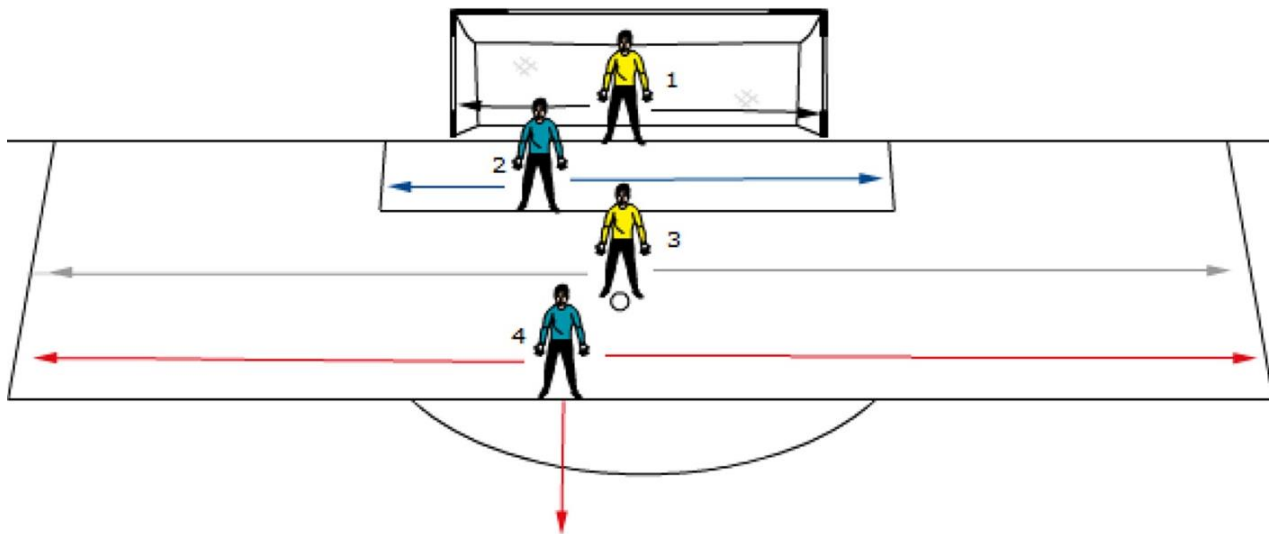


FIGURE 51 THE EXPANDING RANGE OF COMMAND FOR THE GOALKEEPER

Training Ground



FIGURE 52 TRAINING FIELD IN GRIDS

For developmental purposes consider the layout of this training area at Amsterdamsche Football Club Ajax in Amsterdam, The Netherlands. In these two photos note the grid or tic-tac-toe layout on a small soccer field. In training, coaches can teach players about the thirds to channels to precise sectors in each part of the field (Fig. 52 & Fig. 53).²¹



FIGURE 53 THE FINAL THIRDS ARE MARKED IN BLUE



²¹ Photo Credit: Sam Snow/US Youth Soccer

Conclusion

Soccer is classified as a territorial or invasion sport. That means the team in possession of the ball tries to gain territory or ‘invade’ the other team’s half of the field while attempting to score a goal. The other team defends their territory. Soccer is a game largely of the give and take of space (territory). Recognizing and utilizing space on the field of play is a continuous learning process for players at all levels of the game. Utilizing space on the field both when attacking and defending requires understanding and executing the codes of invasion sports. Those codes are embodied in the Principles of Play (see Table 1). The performance of the Principles of Attacking and Defending is done through the team formation within a system of play and the four components of the game:

1. Fitness
2. Psychology
3. Tactics
4. Technique

In the end, soccer is about the skills of a team fulfilling the Principles of Play.

“... the major deficiency in the bulk of Americans: problem-solving. Soccer, boiled down to its basics, is a dance of space. And unlocking that space requires an innate ability to quickly solve the spatial problems forever thrown at you on the field -- not so much geometry as improvisation.”

- Leander Schaerlaeckens has written about soccer for The New York Times, The Guardian, ESPN The Magazine and World Soccer

Principles of Play²²

ATTACK	DEFEND
Penetration Score Assist Make forward progress Keep possession in any direction	Pressure Deny counter-attacks Deny shots on goal Deny forward passes/dribbles Limit attacking field space
Support Help around the ball Combine with a teammate Take defenders out of position	Support (cover) Close passing lanes Double team Track runners
Width Create space side to side Move to unbalance the defense	Balance Pinch in toward the ball Track runners
Depth Create space front to back Move to unbalance the defense	Compactness Limit space front to back Track runners

TABLE 1 ACCOMPLISHED PLAYERS MUST EXECUTE ALL PRINCIPLES OF PLAY

Player Roles

1st Attacker Player in possession of the ball Decides between penetration or possession	1st Defender Closes down and pressures the 1 st attacker Attempts to gain possession via a tackle or jockey the 1 st attacker toward another defender or a boundary line or away from the defender’s goal or away from the attacker’s teammates or execute a dispossession tackle
2nd Attacker Player(s) in immediate support to the 1 st attacker Supports from a position behind, square to or in front of the 1 st attacker	2nd Defender Gives cover (support) from behind the 1 st defender Continually adjusts the distance and angle of support to the 1 st defender Communicates with the 1 st defender
3rd Attacker Plays on the off-the-ball side to make runs behind the opponents to possibly receive a pass from the 1 st attacker	3rd Defender Give balance to the defense by positioning on the off-the-ball side to guard against the ball and/or opponents moving into that space

TABLE 2 ROLES WITHIN THE TEAM

²² Principles of Play table by Dr. Tom Turner

The culmination of the progressive use of space on the field of play might be competing in the final for a national championship (Fig. 54).²³ The McGuire Cup, which has been played since 1935, is the example shown below.

ⁱ **Editorial Board**

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ⁱⁱ Model of Skill Acquisition (Dreyfus & Dreyfus, 1986)

- a) Novice
- b) Advanced Beginner
- c) Competent
- d) Proficient
- e) Expert

ⁱⁱⁱ Johan Cruyff is a former Dutch footballer and was until recently the manager of the Catalonia football team. He won the Ballon d'Or three times, in 1971, 1973 and 1974. Cruyff was one of the most famous exponents of the football philosophy known as Total Football explored by Rinus Michels, and is widely regarded as one of the greatest players in association football. After his retirement from playing in 1984, Cruyff became highly successful as manager of Ajax and later FC Barcelona; he remains an influential advisor to both clubs.



FIGURE 54 THE MCGUIRE CUP

²³ Photo Credit: John Dorton/US Youth Soccer

