

Coaching the Swarm - a guide to teaching formations and positional 'sense'.

Most teams (and new coaches) are thrown into games after just a few practices - well before the coach has had any real chance to teach the players anything. Thus, new coaches often feel intense pressure to "perform" and may take early losses personally. This is silly - and it is important to address this issue with the parents and players at the start of the season. The first few games simply show the skills (if any), which the kids had been taught by any prior coaches - and show their natural athletic talent (if any).

So, the last thing on the mind of a new coach should be concern about early wins. Instead, the focus properly should be on long-term skill development. When this happens, the wins have a way of coming to the most skilled team on the field. Aha, but how does a new coach who knows nothing about soccer get these kids trained and organized, so that they will be the most skilled? The first thing is to use the natural instincts of the players to your best advantage, while working on improving those instincts/skills.

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 soccer"). Why? Because they all like to be together and to stay where the action is.

Is the swarm a "bad" thing? Not really. The swarm actually tends to be very effective at shutting down attacks by an opponent - at least until the opponent has learned to spread out on its attacks and has developed the skill to accurately pass the ball to open players. Kids adjust automatically as the swarm becomes less effective, so the size of the swarm becomes smaller over time - even without coaching intervention. In the meantime, there is no harm whatsoever in swarming an opponent when it gets the ball, if the opponent does not have the skill/sense to use the available field space to move the ball around your players.

Thus, the trick is to get your players to learn to spread out on attacks, and to learn to make quick passes to get rid of the ball before they can be swarmed. Simple keep away games are one of the best tools available to show players that it is easier to keep the ball away from the other team if you spread out. But, before players can be successful at keep away, they will need to be introduced to basic passing and basic shielding/ball- control. Obviously, no player can hope to move the ball around successfully until he has basic ball control skills, including the ability to stop or slow down/redirect a ball sent to him, shield the ball with his body/feet to keep it from being stolen, get his head up long enough to find an open target, and then have the skill to pass it with reasonable accuracy. Thus, the very first job of the coach is to develop these essential building blocks - as players simply cannot hope to be successful without them..

So, what are you going to do while you are developing these basic skills - especially when your first game is next weekend? The first thing which you probably will be tempted to do is to assign fixed positions on the field in order to increase your scoring chances and minimize the risks of counter-attacks (and then to prod/cajole/fuss until the players stay in those positions). You need to avoid this temptation - at least until you understand the risks inherent in fixed positioning. Before addressing how to handle this issue, it is critical that you know the risks involved.

Even though some very good coaches do use positions as a temporary tool to help players to make decisions until they learn fundamental offensive and defensive skills and learn the principles of defensive/offensive support, they are very careful in how they use these tools. As a result, they set positional "rules" to coincide/complement fundamental offensive/defensive support principles, and regularly rotate players through all parts of the field so that they gain experience in applying these principles. Why? Because soccer is a fluid game - and the ultimate goal of any good coach is to develop players with enough knowledge, skill and flexibility to play "position less" soccer.

Of course, as the age and skill of players increases, it will become clear that some players are better ball-winners than others, while others are better scorers. As a result, by high school age, it is likely that a player will "specialize" in one or two particular areas of the field, which best suit his talents. At this stage, coaches will pay greater attention to adopting a formation and style of play, which capitalizes on the special skills/talents available, while masking any weaknesses. Even at this age, however, coaches must be mindful of their obligation to work on correcting those weaknesses, instead of merely trying to cover them up.

1. Understanding The Principles of Support and Positioning

a. Basic Defensive Principles and Positioning

The basic job duties of a defender are: "No Get; No Turn; No Pass; No Shoot". This means that the first job of a defender is to keep his mark from ever getting the ball; then to keep his mark from turning if he gets the ball;

then to keep his mark from passing the ball off to a more dangerous attacker; and, lastly, to prevent any shot on goal.

There are 3 basic positions in defense, which 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 (as his job is to immediately become the pressure person if the attacker gets by the First Defender). In addition, the Second Defender frequently will have the additional job of guarding (called "marking") another off-ball attacker to whom the ball might be passed for a shot. Typically, the Second Defender will choose to mark ball-side of his mark if possible (but will mark goal-side if he cannot provide proper support for the First attacker or if he knows that his mark is much faster than he is, so that he needs a lead to keep from being beaten).

The defender who is in the deepest position (closest to goal) if a line were to be drawn from the attacker to the goal is called the Third Defender, and his job is to provide balance to the defence. 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.

Regardless of which educational approach is taken, all players should be taught these basic principles, and how to apply them in a game setting. If formations/positions are taught, it is very important that players understand their supporting duties to those players who are immediately around them (e.g., that someone who is a midfielder understands that they will be the pressuring defender if closest to the ball, and that they must loop around to provide cover for the defender behind them - and pick up his mark - if beaten by the attacker). Sometimes, young players mistakenly believe that, unless they have the job title of "defender", they do not have defensive duties. Thus, it is very important that they clearly understand that these concepts apply to everyone, including those who are "forwards".

b. Basic Attacking Principles and Positioning

In the attack, there are 3 basic positions. 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 through 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 ultimate goal of the attackers is to get the ball past all of the defenders and into unobstructed space within scoring range of the goal. Thus, as the ball moves within scoring range, the role of the single Second Attacker switches from a "safety-first" orientation of keeping possession (which may even mean moving the ball away from goal in order to keep it) to the more active role of setting up a shot on goal by himself or the First Attacker. At this point, the Second Attacker's objective is to move into a position, which 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, which 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 (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 often will 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 goalmouth, 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 keep away) 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.

2. Incorporating These Principles Into Your Training

With just a little direction, your 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 (and, besides, this would be boring).

Ask them for their solutions for the defensive problem. One of the first suggestions, which you probably will 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?

Well, 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 concept 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)? 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 relearned) constantly. However, man-marking may be unsuited for players below u10s, as they tend to be very distractible. In addition, because of smaller player size/strength, most opposing players tend not to be scoring threats until fairly close to goal - so it may be a waste of defensive manpower to mark players outside of scoring range.

Another defensive solution is available which may be easier 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 time for everyone else on the team to get back and make a swarm in front of the goal area. This is called "low-pressure defense," and is an approach, which can work well with junior teams IF the pressuring players know how to do their jobs and IF the retreating players remain alert to the need to become the pressuring players themselves if the ball is played to an attacker who is close to them. Once attacking players are within scoring range, of course, they must be marked - particularly when opposing players have developed the leg strength to make lofted shots on goal.

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 system overall). Bear in mind, however, 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 already will 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, steadily dropping back as slowly as possible - and not making any attempt to win the ball until cover has arrived. This is a job which anyone can do with practice, so do not allow your slower players to avoid learning these vital skills because of their lack of speed.

Once you have decided on how you will defend your own goal, then you are ready to decide the best way to attack the goal of the opposing team. At least initially, your best bet probably will be to permit most of the players to swarm (i.e., to play like midfielders), and choose one or two to stay outside and a bit ahead of the swarm ("Lead Bee" - or forward) and one or two to follow behind the swarm ("Ball Eater" or defender). Because the regular Bees tend to do the most running, you need to give them the right to switch out with the front/rear players if they get tired. Additionally, you need to give the front/back players the right to require a switch if they notice that somebody is getting tired. By adopting these rules, you introduce the idea of automatic observation and support for teammates - which is always a good idea. Of course, you need to watch that you don't have one player who is always trying to be the back or front player (and, if needed, you may need to make a rule that everyone else must get a turn before he can go back - or place some other limits which require that the bulk of playing time be spent in midfield).

Initially, until you develop good passers, most of your goals are likely to come from individual efforts or a simple short lateral pass to a teammate. So, when a Ball Eater gets the ball, it is usually best to simply allow him to try to dribble it up field (although you can ask him to try to pass the ball to the Lead Bee if he thinks that this will work). Of course, once a Ball Eater has gone ahead of the swarm, you need to have someone else become a Ball Eater until he can get back. Often, the best approach is to find a reliable observant player to act as Captain, and

have this player keep a lookout for when someone else needs to take this job (either by doing it himself or asking someone else to do this).

As soon as possible, start to introduce your players to keep away games. Once they can achieve 5-6 passes in 4v1 or 5v1 keep away, start playing 3v3 games where everyone on the team must touch the ball before they can score. If one player starts dominating ball possession, add a restriction of no more than 5 touches before the ball is passed.

Once your players competently can play these games (meaning that they can pass/receive/shield), they are ready for training on 2-man attacking patterns. In the meantime, of course, they should be spending considerable time perfecting their individual dribbling skills, and learning how to take-on and beat defenders with basic cuts/feints.

3. How To Make "Fixed" Positions Work

The ideal format in which to teach fundamental principles of offensive/defensive support is 3v3 or 4v4 soccer, and to use the basic principles of offensive and defensive positioning to introduce players to the concept of "positions". However, many coaches will find that their new team is playing 7v7, 8v8 or 9v9 soccer - even though their players lack the fundamental background and skills to be able to handle the complex decisions presented by such a large group.

Furthermore, many coaches will discover that their opponents rely on 2-3 big/fast players to dominate the game; relegate 2-3 slow/small players to the job of guarding the goal; and tell everyone else to just feed the ball to Johnny or Timmy if it comes to them. And, worse yet, these teams win lots of games - so it is likely that some parents will mount a campaign to take this same approach (especially if they see their own child as a potential superstar)!

As a result, one of your first tasks as a coach may be to explain to your parents that such coaches are merely using these players to feed their own egos - and are not doing any favours to any of their players. Over time, most of the non-superstars will quit soccer because of lack of fun (and those who want to stay in soccer will not have developed the skills which they needed to be successful, since they only got to touch the ball maybe 3-4 times in the entire game). Even the superstars are likely to face problems in the long haul, both from an emotional standpoint (when they finally face real competition from other stars) and from a skills standpoint (since they usually do not know how to pass or defend, and only know how to dribble/shoot).

But, unless you have solid credentials as a coach, many parents and players may start questioning your abilities if your team starts losing its games by big margins. And, your job of player development may be complicated by the fact that your team is blessed with at least 1-2 players who have little athletic talent/interest, or who have physical/mental impairments which make learning more challenging (so it is unlikely that these kids will become soccer players even if you spent every waking hour on the task). Sometimes, the kids on the team may have lots of overall athletic talent, but may be smaller/younger than average and cannot expect to win footraces or pushing contests with kids who are one foot taller and 50 pounds heavier, so you may 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). Here are some suggestions.

For the first few games at least, consider putting your best players on defense. While you probably will not score, at least you will avoid getting quite as badly clobbered. As quickly 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 no 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).

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 will set positional rules which allow maximum flexibility to participate in the play. For example, those players who are assigned to act as wing defenders will be given positional "rules" to cover the

opposing attackers - but they will not have their feet nailed to the midline. Instead, they will be permitted to follow the opposing attackers anywhere (so, if their mark drops back to his own PA to try to get the ball, your defender will be on his heels trying to steal it back and put it in the net). Similarly, the sweeper will act like a trailing Ball Eater (and play around 10-15 yards off of his wing Ds - so he also can become a goal-scorer). Your centre mid will be assigned to act as the fill-in for the sweeper, and assigned 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.

Additionally, you will 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 spend considerable time teaching the fundamental principles of support and defence (as well as the skills at their foundation). As a result, as your players gain the knowledge and skill to apply these principles, their "positions" ultimately will 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 are covered in the Advanced section, along with a discussion of various common types of formations. However, regardless of the formation which is chosen, 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.