



Setting a defensive trap

From individual to small-group to team defending

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The main focus of this article is what to do when the opposition has the ball. The better organized your team is, the better your chances of gaining possession. By taking the right defensive measures, you can predict your opponents' game. Then you can outnumber them near the ball, put pressure on them and ultimately win the ball.

Modern defense tactics involve three strategies:

- Making play predictable by channeling the ball into certain zones of the field (this is usually the duty of the forwards).
- Flooding the zone around the ball with players to create compactness and a “num-

bers-up” advantage (midfielders have an important role here).

- Blocking penetration by clogging the passing lanes to the opposing forwards. Essentially, the opposing forwards are “sandwiched” between defenders who mark them from behind and midfielders who position themselves in front of them. Alternatively, opposing forwards may be sandwiched between two defenders.

These three strategies, when used in combination, form the basis for modern team defending. When properly executed, these strategies can cause opponents to play the ball into a “dead-end trap” and ultimately lose possession.

How can we teach these strategies to our players? We can introduce the concept via individual and small-group activities before moving on to the more functional 11 v. 11 team defending. In fact, some aspects of the above strategies are better taught in individual and small group settings, while others are best taught in the context of the 11 v. 11 game on the whole field (or as close to it as possible).

Individual defending

For a single defender, the first objective is to quickly close the distance between yourself and the attacker while the ball is en route. You can accomplish this by sprinting towards the attacker immediately after the pass and slowing down to a balanced stance just before the ball arrives at the attacker's feet.

This closing run should be a bent run towards the inside of the field. This trajectory communicates your intention to channel the attacker down the sideline. Body position should be sideways (“boxer stance”) and inside the attacker's position. The attacker should never be able to cut inside towards the open field. This enables you to keep play predictable.

Be patient and stay on your feet, tackling only when the opponent shows too much of the ball. If the attacker succeeds in cutting inside, refrain from tackling unless you are sure you can win the ball. If at all possible, readjust your body position and try to force the attacker outside again.

Small-group defending

In this situation, (two defenders against one ball carrier), the first objective is to put immediate pressure on the ball while attackers



Anticipation and the ability to read the game are two essential tools for a good defender.

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interpass, in order to deny a scoring attempt and/or win the ball. The first defender channels the ball toward the nearest sideline. Both defenders should tackle any time an attacker shows too much of the ball, regardless of location on the field.

The main objective is to corner the attacker and then win the ball, or at least tackle it out of bounds. The covering defender needs to tell the first defender when to tackle. The covering defender must also maintain a consistent distance and angle, in order to provide cover and pounce on a loose ball or a ball played behind the first defender.

The two defenders must choose the right moment to commit themselves to winning the ball (“point of no return”). Practicing small-group defending impresses on defenders the advantages of numbers-up defending and the potential damage of letting attackers off the hook.

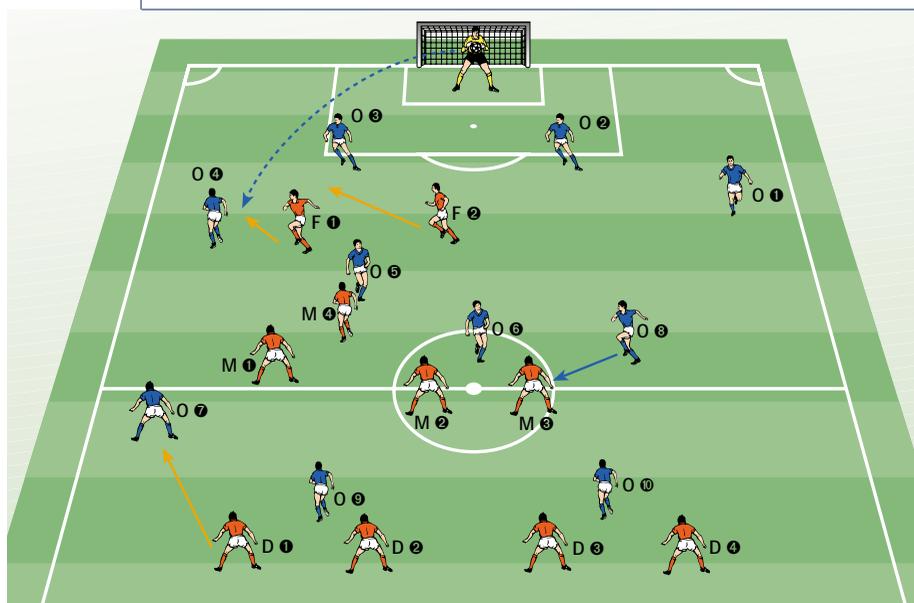
Team defending

Here, the whole team works together to win the ball. As before, each team will try to steer the ball away from its own goal and set a trap to win it.

Figure 1 shows an example of how a team using a 4–4–2 formation would channel the ball into a defensive trap:

- The two forwards are expected to apply the first pressure on the ball whenever the opposing defenders are in possession. The forwards will usually try to force the ball towards the flank area and keep it down on that flank to make the next pass predictable.

FIG. 1 4-4-2 FORMATION



- As the ball is passed to O4, F1 challenges at an angle of approach that encourages O4 to play it down the flank. F2 closes down on O3 to keep the ball from going around the back to the other flank. This type of pressure on the ball by the forwards makes it easy for the rest of the team, because O4's options are limited and predictable.

- Now D1 can close down the wide midfielder in anticipation, and M3 can slide inside because O8 will not be able to get the ball from O4.

- M1 is now free to double-team on O7 or O9 or O5, depending on where the ball is passed.

- M3 can double-team with M2 on O6, or on O10.

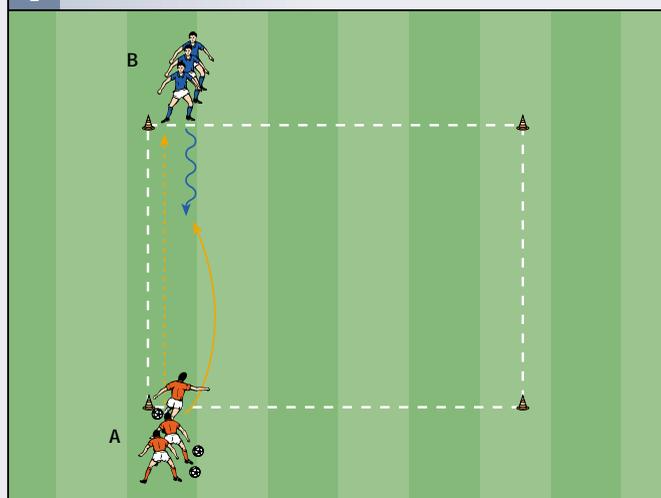
All these permutations were made possible because the forwards applied the first pressure and forced the ball to one side. With play condensed to a small area and players so close to each other, the ball is pushed into a “dead end” where players can win it more easily.

Sample exercises

The following activities illustrate one way to progress from individual to small-group to team defending while teaching the three strategies outlined above.

INDIVIDUAL CHANNELING AND DEFENDING

1 Basic exercise



Setup

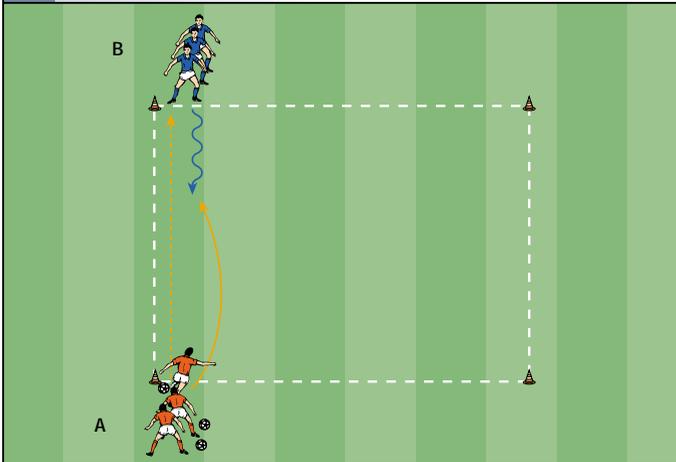
- Mark out a 20 x 15-yard field.
- Divide players into two groups of equal size (A and B), one on each of the long sides of the field.

Sequence

- A passes to B and then comes out to pressure the ball.
- B dribbles toward A's goal line.
- A stays between B and the goal, within tackling distance, but does not attempt to tackle or win the ball.
- Players switch roles and positions after each round.

INDIVIDUAL CHANNELING AND DEFENDING

2 1 v. 1



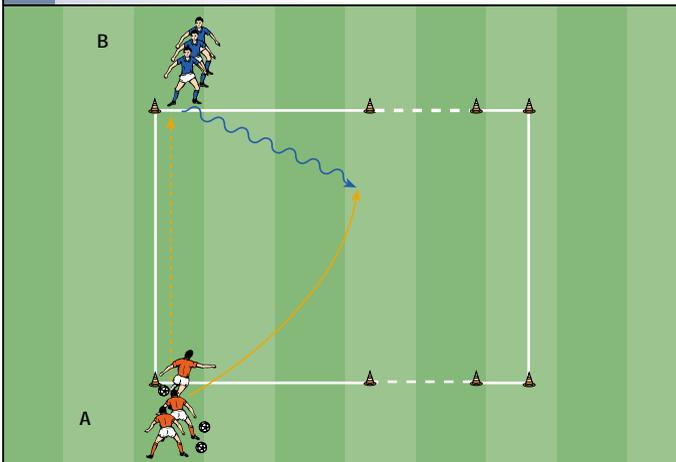
Setup

- Setup is the same as above.

Sequence

- A passes to B and then comes out to pressure the ball.
- B dribbles toward A's goal line.
- A tries to win the ball: First, A must stop B from cutting inside towards the far corner of A's goal line. Then A tries to tackle the ball towards the outside ("conceding a throw-in") and win it.
- Players switch roles and positions after each round.

3 1 v. 1 with goals



Setup

- Setup is the same as above.
- Using cones, mark out small goals on the far corners of each endline.

Sequence

- Sequence is the same as above, except that B tries to score on A's goals, and A can counterattack on B's goals.

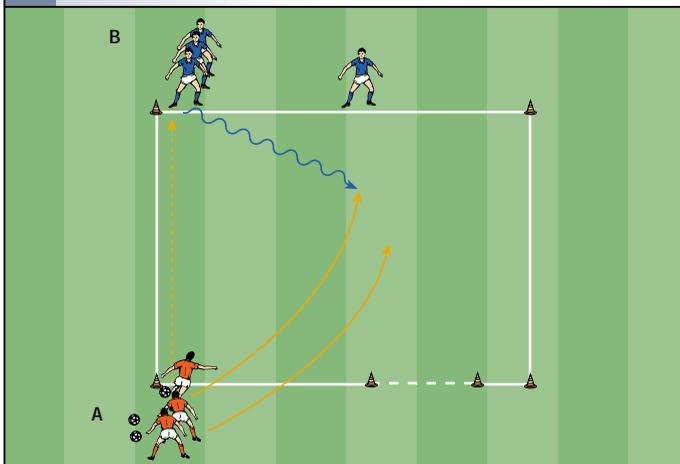
Coaching points

- A should get quickly into the line between the ball and the goal in order to block an early goal attempt by B.
- Focus on transitions: For example, B needs to defend immediately upon losing possession (unless the ball goes out of bounds).



SMALL-GROUP CHANNELING AND DEFENDING

1 2 v. 2 with one goal and one support player



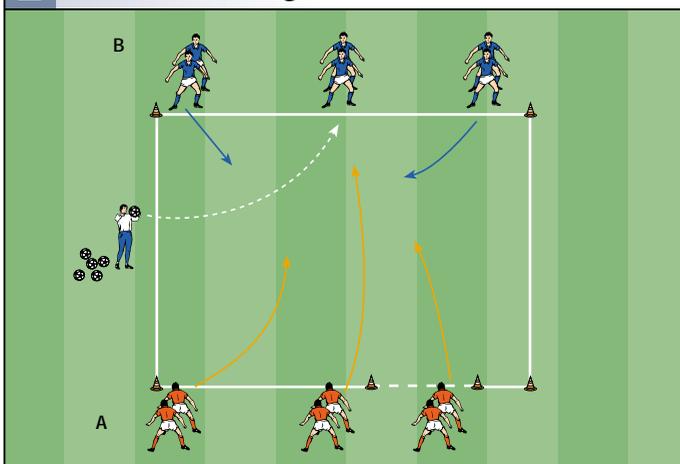
Setup

- Setup is the same as above.
- Place a small goal (six to eight yards wide) on A's goal line.
- Support player B2 stands on B's goal line.

Sequence

- Sequence is the same as above, except that B now cooperates with B2. B2 can shoot but is not allowed to enter the field.
- A defends together with second defender A2 to create a 1 v. 2 inside the field.

2 3 v. 3 with one goal



Setup

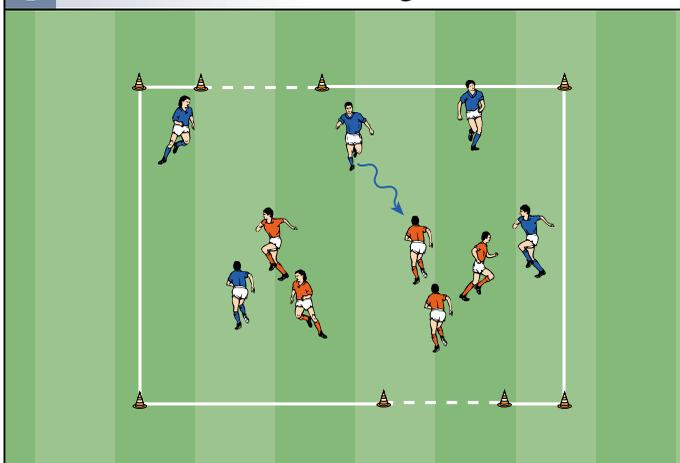
- Setup is the same as above.
- Subdivide groups A and B into groups of three.
- The coach stands on one of the sidelines and acts as the server.

Sequence

- The server begins by serving to any B team, who try to score on goal.
- As soon as the ball is served, the corresponding A team comes onto the field to defend.
- Play stops when the ball is won by defenders or goes out of bounds.
- Players switch roles and positions after several rounds.

TEAM DEFENDING

1 5 v. 5 or 6 v. 6 with two goals



Setup

- Increase the size of the field to accommodate 5 v. 5 or 6 v. 6 play.
- Set up two small goals (six to eight yards wide) on the endlines, diagonally across from each other.

Sequence

- Play a regular game of 5 v. 5 or 6 v. 6.

11 v. 11

Setup

- Field is a standard soccer field. Divide players into two teams.

Sequence

- Play a regular game of 11 v. 11.