

Progression 1:

Winning the Ball

Here are six tools necessary to enable young players to defend effectively and transition to attack. Each requires a rudimentary training construct that can and must be modified and enhanced using a variety of coaching methods.

1. Marking goal-side, deny the ball and the turn

How closely should defenders be to their “man?” Where should fullbacks position themselves? It’s simple: “Johnny, I want you to stay between number 6 and our goal, and stay close enough to beat him to the ball.” That’s it. Forget the lines on the field. Forget some arbitrary distance. And then, “Johnny, if number 6 gets the ball because you weren’t able to get to it first, then don’t let him turn so he’s facing our goal with the ball.”

2. Delay

“Amanda, if a player is dribbling toward you, delay (don’t “dive in”) until she messes up and lets you take the ball away.” Of course delay means staying goal-side and running with the ball carrier. It means staying close enough to seize the ball when the opponent loses control for just a second, yet not so close the dribbler can blow past with a single touch. More advanced concepts of differing degrees of pressure, forcing opponents wide, and cutting off passing options can be explored depending on ability levels.

3. Shoulder charge

Even at the youngest ages, we must teach our players how to run shoulder-to-shoulder alongside an opposing dribbler pressing for the advantage and to win the ball. When chasing a ball carrier, defenders must “get a shoulder in” – make legal contact, rather than running helplessly in parallel.

4. Balance and cover using a sweeper

“Timmy, read where it’s going to come through.” A sweeper or free back (with no specific man-to-man responsibility) is a must and with just a couple of instructions can manage the role – and the function of providing essential cover and balance in defense.

The sweeper cannot be responsible for any forward player, but back-up (cover) to all the other defenders. His job is to win balls played through ... to the spaces between those defenders and their men. Balls played to the feet or head of an attacker are the business of the marking defender. And the instruction to that sweeper is simple: “Move from side to side, into the slots (between those marked attackers), read (anticipate) and move to where the ball is going to come through.”

5. Chase and double at the front

Front players, when their team is not in possession of the ball, must chase (put pressure on) opponents as they try to bring or play the ball out of the defense.

The player closest to the ball must immediately chase, and force the play into a predictable direction. If a teammate is nearby, the two of them may have the opportunity to double (“double team”) the opponent with the ball. Remember, don’t dive in.

6. Force it wide, play it wide

The final step in the progression is quite simple. Defenders must position themselves to force attackers wide, away from the center. If the ball is within shooting distance, defenders must clear it high and wide with their first possible touch. (Later, as we explore the progression called, “Advancing the Ball,” we can integrate the transition to attack and holding possession. This element refers only to loose balls in danger of being shot to goal.)

That’s it. It’s that simple. That’s the progression for winning the Ball! And that’s the “body of knowledge” necessary for very young players – from age 6 to about age 12 or 13 – to be effective defenders! With each of these come a handful of techniques that are necessary in order to be able to execute the principle. But the techniques are far easier to grasp when they are “applied” to a simple, yet sophisticated tactical purpose; a job to do.

Can young players remember six “tasks?” Of course! Yet they won’t even need to do that, because one is role-specific: to the sweeper. A second (chase) is typically role-specific to midfielders and forward players. And marking goal-side, while used by all players at times, is especially important for back players. So, in order to succeed in their defensive role, young players may only need to be focused on three or four jobs or principles.

Yet from this very simple foundation, we can build: high and low pressure defending; stopper roles and defensive midfielder roles; offside traps and counter attacks; and on up to the most sophisticated ideas and techniques.

Equally important, on these four-to-six principles we can build all the necessary technical skills of a good defender. And each skill will now have a purpose, an “application,” to the real world of the real game. There will be no need to manufacture reasons to practice technique that doesn’t seem to be immediately helpful in a real game. And when players understand that doing something a particular way will help them succeed – *win* – they won’t object to learning it.