

Introduction to Zonal Defending

Youth soccer needs to start to move away from relying on a sweeper/stopper system and begin to teach our players zonal defending concepts earlier. Most high level teams are playing with a zonal defending system either with 3 in the back or 4 in the back and we must prepare our players better for this at the youth level. Does this mean you may lose some games without that deep safety valve? Yes but remember development should be more important than winning at the younger ages!

What are the three major benefits of zonal defending? The first benefit is it is more practical and efficient than man to man marking. The second benefit is it can be implemented with any type of attacking formation. Last, it can be a relatively simple concept.

The keys to being able to defend zonally are:

- Communication
- Shifting together as a unit
- Recognizing dangerous players
- Cohesiveness between the defenders and goalkeepers
- Goalkeeper able to play of his or her line

So the question is how do we begin teach our young players zonal defending?

Warm Up – 4v4 up to 9v9 Man to Man

Setup

- Field size depends on numbers of players and age/ability. 2 goals with goal keepers.
- Two teams of 4 (Team A and Team B) in different color pinnies.

Sequence

- Team A attempts to defend 1 goal and score on 1 goal while Team B does the same thing.
- Players on Team A are given a player on Team B who they can only defend (no other player can help) and players on Team B are given a player on Team A who they can defend (no other player can help). Players will try to cheat and leave their assigned player to help a teammate who has lost their 1 vs 1 battle, **DO NOT ALLOW THIS!!!**
- Play for about 10 minutes only coaching the player assignments nothing else allow the score to rise, say nothing here about defending. Keep track of score

Coaching Points

- None just make sure the rules of the game are following

Main Session

1. 2v2 in a Diamond

Setup

- Field 12 by 12 with goals in 2 corners of the field
- Have as many fields as you have groups of 4
- Divide players into teams of 2.

Sequence

- 2v2 Game – Team A vs Team B
- No goalkeepers
- Attacking team attempts to keep possession and score.
- At the end of a 2 minute game, team that wins moves up a grid and team the loses moves down a grid. Do rock paper scissors for a tie or be creative on how you wish to break the tie.

Variations

- Give the grids names to make it more fun for the players. An example would be World Cup, National Cup, State Cup, and Urawful Cup
- All of the grids need to have 2 sets of two colored pinnies in them (i.e. 2 blue and 2 red) except in the first place grid. In this grid we want 2 yellow and 2 blue or another color that is used in the other grids. The players in yellow are the World Cup champions and can only wear these if they are the winners of the game in their grid. If they lose they remove the pinnies and move down and the winners who were in blue now wear the yellow. The purpose of this is to create a psychological passion to win by scoring goals but also defending correctly.

Coaching Points

- Immediate pressure on the ball
- Communication
- Distance and Angle of covering player
- Not following the player but instead having the other player step up to pressure when a pass is made. Not crossing in front of your partner defensively.

2. 4v4 to 3 Goals Zonal

Setup

- Field is 30 yards by 35 yards with 3 goals from cones on each side. Goals are 2 yards apart
- Two teams of 4 (Team A and Team B) in different color pinnies.
- Field divided into thirds (left third, middle third, right third)

Sequence

- Team A attempts to defend 3 goals and score on 3 goals while Team B does the same thing.

- Players now defending in a zonal system.
- Keep track of score
- Only coach 1 team at a time.
- When ball is in right third, all defenders must be in right third or middle third.
When ball is in left third, all defenders must be in left third or middle third.

Coaching Points

- Pressure
- Cover
- Balance
- Shifting as a unit

3. 4v4 to 9v9 Zonal

Setup

- Field size depends on numbers of players and age/ability. 2 goals with goal keepers.
- Two teams of 4 (Team A and Team B) in different color pinnies.

Sequence

- Team A attempts to defend 1 goal and score on 1 goal while Team B does the same thing.
- Players employ zonal defending
- Keep track of score

Coaching Points

- Only coach one of the teams
- Pressure, cover, balance
- Shifting
- Communication

Cool-down

Juggling in pairs/Stretching