Basic Defending - Pressure, Cover, Balance

If you're leaking too many goals, mastering this simple tactic will, without doubt, dramatically reduce the number of goals your team concedes and might even increase the number of games they win!

What's it all about?

With young players, the hardest, and in my opinion, the most important single aspect to get across is that the closest person to the opponent with the ball does not have the responsibility to win the ball! Once defenders understand this, about 90% of diving in is eliminated and the attacker's job becomes much harder.

It also reinforces the next most important concept: that somebody had better be moving to cover the space behind the closest defender! That is the player who will, most often, end up winning the ball.

You can demonstrate this quite easily by selecting the best defensive soccer player on the team, placing that player isolated out on the pitch, point to a goal for him or her to defend, and then tell them to "get the ball" from you.

Then simply dribble up to the player, push the ball past them into space and run onto it. If you can get the defender to step towards you, you will do this quite easily.

Ask the team why this was so easy. Now ask how you can prevent it from happening.

Somebody should come up with the idea of having a team mate behind the pressuring defender.

Now repeat the demonstration with another opponent who has been instructed to cover the space. Also ask the closest (pressuring) defender to not win the ball unless a mistake is made by the attacker. Run it again and you should see a huge improvement.

What to tell your players

1. The player closest to the ball

- Your job is to slow the attack, not win the ball;

- Slow the attacker down;

- Apply just enough pressure to get the attacker's head down;

- Make the attack predictable and push the attack to the least dangerous part of the field (the sidelines are your friends!);

- Only attempt to win the ball if the attacker makes a mistake and you are sure to win it; and

- Be patient

2. The next closest player to the ball

- Your job is to back up the pressuring defender;

- Cover the space behind the pressuring defender;

- Adjust your distance based on the speed of the attack, and the skill and speed of the attacker;

- Communicate with the pressuring defender, let him or her know that you are there, tell them which way to push the attack, if necessary.

3. The rest of the players on the goal side of the ball.

- Your job is to watch the rest of the attackers and stop them getting the ball;

- Mark any attackers who could receive the ball;

- Watch attackers who are moving or could move into threatening positions;

- Cut out any passing lanes;

- Talk to each other - point out any unmarked threats or any opponents making runs;

- Be ready to assume the role of pressuring or covering defender if the situation changes;

If you work on this simple defensive tactic your team will concede fewer goals, your players will grow in confidence and ultimately you will win more matches!

Yours in soccer,

Steve Watson