

Zonal Defending

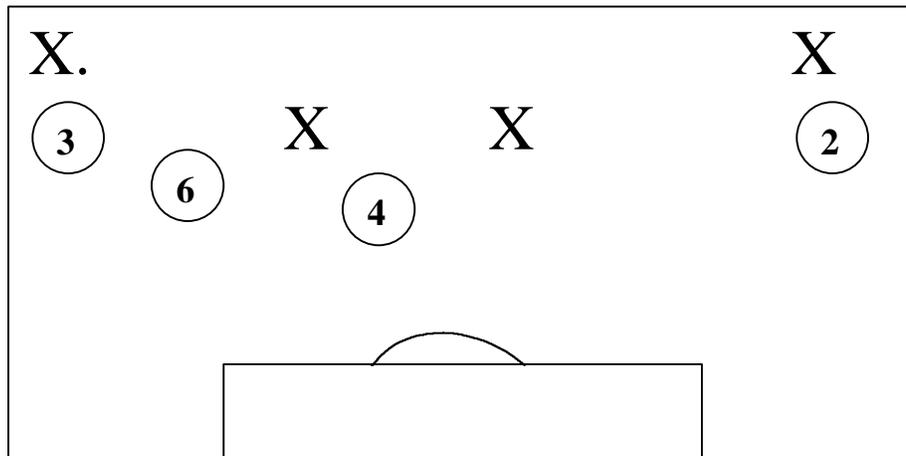
The evidence from the first month of 2001 MYSA league play and the Snicker's State Cup suggest that more and more teams are trying to play zonal in the back than in recent years. While this is an encouraging trend it is important that players are coached clearly how to do this and not simply instructed to do so.

Playing with man markers and a sweeper many yards deep is an extremely effective defensive system in youth soccer. It is easy for players to follow and easy for the coach to identify individual breakdowns. It provides obvious assignments and obvious cover. It is, however, a system that can hamper individual player development if players are given very limited roles. It also has more potential for leaving a team in poor shape to transition into attack when they do win the ball.

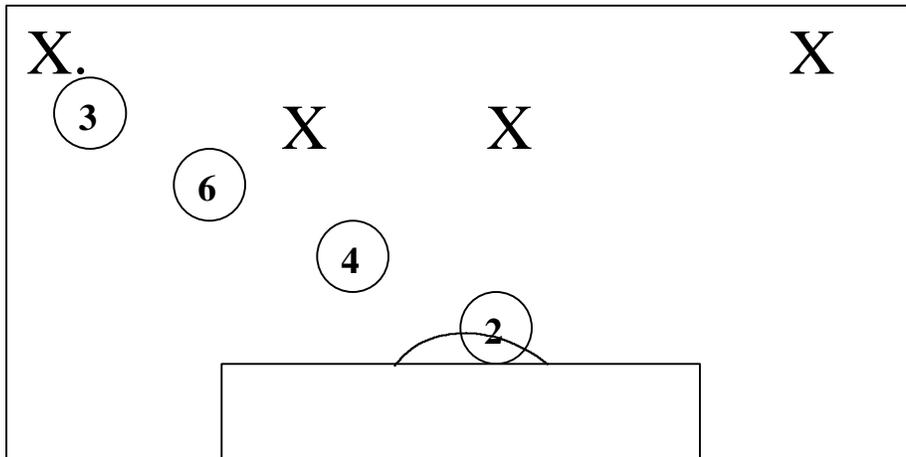
The man marking system works because it requires little independent thinking and decision making on the part of the player and more importantly because the attacking ideas of most youth teams cannot attack the system effectively. The reasons for youth players to learn to play in a zonal system are to expand the required decision-making for each player, increase the technical demands on each player, prepare players for more sophisticated opponents, and to help a team maintain better shape for transition. Because zonal defending is in vogue it seems a good time to offer some thoughts about how to improve players understanding of the system and its' effectiveness as a team tactic.

1. The Importance of the weak side defender

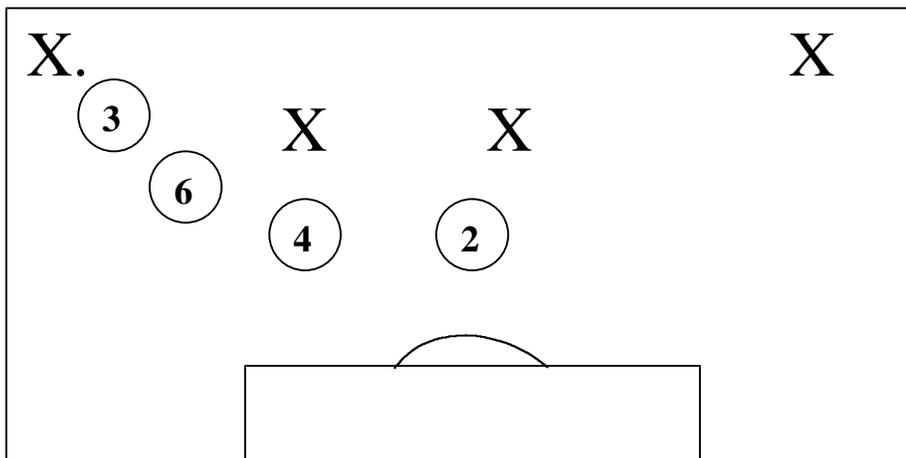
The positioning, vision and communication of the weak side player in a zonal defending system is essential.



In the first diagram as #s 3-4-6 shift toward the ball carrier #2 continues to man mark the wide midfielder on the weak side. While fulfilling the role of marking the opponent #2 allows the defensive shape of the team to breakdown. The failure to shift with the other three defenders does not provide balance and so the two central attackers gain more freedom, the attacking channel between #2 and #4 becomes very big and #2 is too far removed from the play to be effective.



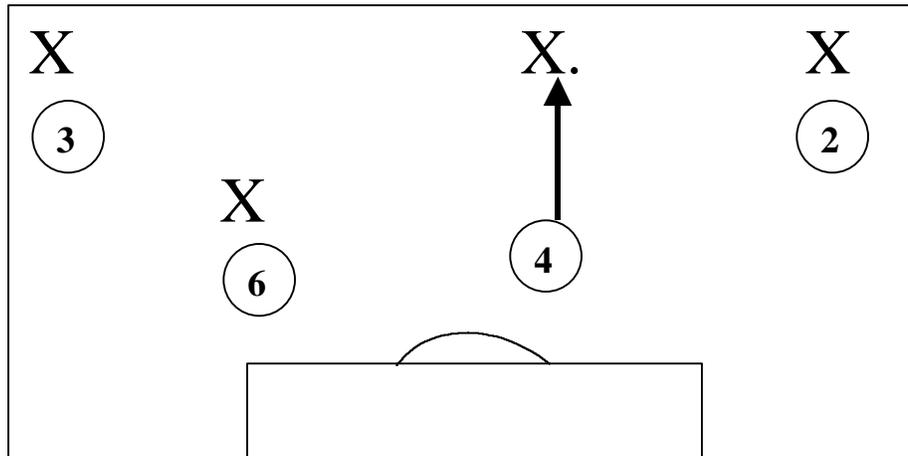
In the second diagram as #s 3-4-6 shift toward the ball carrier #2 now shifts also, but drops deep of #4 rather than dropping into line. Now the distance that #2 must make up to get to the wide midfielder in the event the ball is switched is very great and it becomes difficult to pressure effectively. Also #2's depth gives the opponent considerably more viable playing space without fear of being offside both on the weak side of the field and in the space behind the pressure of #3.



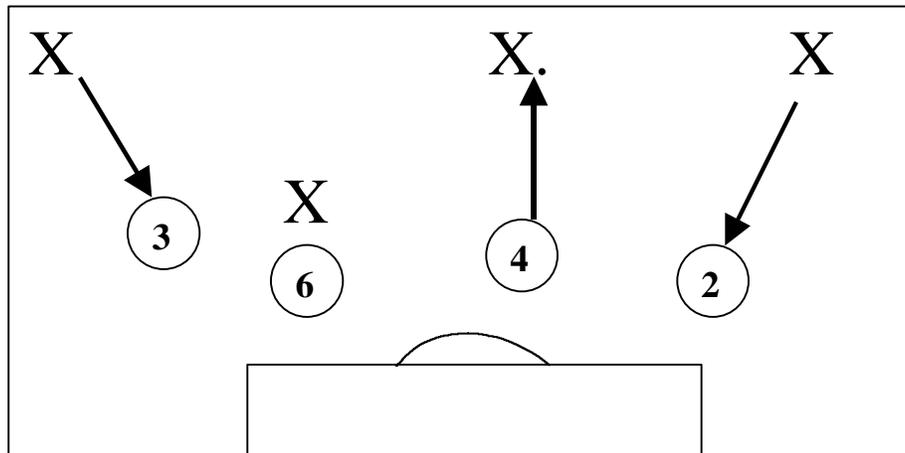
In the third diagram as #s 3-4-6 shift toward the ball carrier #2 shifts also, but does not drop significantly deeper than #4. This is a very good position. #2 can cover the central attackers, is close enough to step out to the wide midfielder on the weak side if the ball is switched in order to give immediate pressure, has kept the attacking space of the opponent tight and is able to communicate to #s 3-4-6 when to step up or drop if necessary.

2. The importance of remaining compact centrally

In the first diagram as #4 steps up to confront the ball carrier #s 2-3 remain wide defending space. This creates a great deal of viable attacking space between #6 and #2, to the right, and #3, to the left. It leaves #6 the potential of a 1v1 duel with a central attacker with no clear cover.



In the second diagram as #4 steps up to confront the ball carrier #s 2-3 immediately retreat diagonally in toward the center of the field. It is appropriate to leave their “marks” at this time as the greater threat to the goal is coming centrally and their position is such they can get back out to their marks as the ball travels. #s 2-3 now close up the opponents main attacking channels and give adequate support to #6.



3. Why zonal defending is ineffective.

From the examples of the 2001 season there are two reasons why zonal defending is ineffective. First players must understand their individual roles and responsibilities change constantly in this system. If a player is not coached where to be, when to be there and how to shift as the play dictates huge holes appear in the defense and goals flood in. Coaches must thoroughly instruct players on positional play in game like situations.

As important as the role of the coach in making zonal defending effective is the individual contribution of the players. In youth soccer the man marker and sweeper system gives each player very simple, well-defined roles. Either follow someone around the field and stop them playing or stand deep of everyone and clean up the trouble. Zonal defending requires players to identify the movement of the ball, opponents and teammates. It requires players understand when to be a ball winner and when to be responsible for covering space. Most importantly it requires **communication**, the willingness to talk to teammates, to organize and take responsibility. The inability of our young players to communicate ideas with each other on the field coupled with the failure of coaches to adequately teach the system makes zonal defending ineffective. If improvement can be made in these two area zonal defending will make for better, well rounded, thoughtful players, give your team better shape defensively at all times and allow for transition into your attacking system much more smoothly.

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Postscript

Two of the best resources for teaching zonal defending are Arrigo Sacchi's video "Coaching the 4-4-2" and Marziali and Mora's book "Coaching the 4-4-2". Both resources are in the MYSAs library.