

Back 3 Defending

Playing with three defenders has become of common use at the youth level. A closer look at what that implies, using as an example the 3-4-3 system of play



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More and more I have noticed youth coaches adopting systems of play where their back line is made up of three players, rather than the classical four. The natural question that comes to mind is: Does this happen as a result of trends coming from the pro levels or is it based on justifiable rational technical choices.

Playing 3-4-3, 3-4-1-2, 3-4-2-1 or 3-5-2 is a clear signal of a coach that wants to play an attacking brand of soccer. Moving a man from the back line to the midfield or attacking line, clearly could benefit the attacking phase of a team. The common denominator remains playing with three in the back.

I must clarify that in this article I will refer mostly to teams playing a zonal defending system, rather than man to man. I'll use the 3-4-3 system of play to illustrate some examples of back three play.

My personal belief is that teaching youth players to play with three in the back is a little too complex and demanding. It would be a better approach, to teach young defenders to play zone in a back four formations, and later when they have assimilated the basic concepts of zonal defending, try to introduce the back three defense.

One of the reasons for this approach, is that the back four zonal defense is easier to learn, as the width of the field is better covered than the back 3 defense. **(Fig 1,2)**

It is also important to understand that unlike the back four training, where players are taught as one independent defensive unit, in the back 3 defense, the three defenders need to train together with the midfielders. **(Fig 3)**

This article is my personal attempt to discuss this topic, illustrate scenarios, and propose exercises for all those coaches that use or are thinking about using a back three line. It is important to remember that before starting any formal zonal defending training, each player must have a solid individual defending base.

That means comfortable on the various 1v1 situations, and having a good understanding of the basic principles of pressure, cover, and



balance in a zonal defensive system.

Before deciding on which system of play to choose, the coach must assess the overall characteristics of his players on the roster. It is senseless to try to use a system of play that reflects a coaching philosophy, if the coach does not have the right players to execute it.

In the 3-4-3 for example, three central defenders must be very good in the various 1v1 situations, physically strong, with speed and good aerial abilities. As the width of the field is too wide for them to cover it, it will be the outside midfielders that when needed, will take on this responsibility to become the fourth defender. Covering that much territory implies that the outside midfielders must have great aerobic endurance and decent speed.

Basic defending situations

Basically in the 3-4-3 the team actively defends with 7 players compared to the eight players used in the 4-4-2. As I mentioned before, to train the back three line we need to include our midfielders.

All players will move together in reference of the position of the ball, their teammates, and the opposition.

In **Fig 4** with the ball in a central midfield position, players 5, 6 and 3, are compacted centrally creating numeric superiority (3v2) in front of the goal.

The four midfielders will cover the whole width of the field with 2, and 11 minding the wide areas and providing support to the two central midfielders.

In **Fig 5** the ball is played wide to a winger. All players react by moving from their zone towards the ball, setting up diagonally in relation to the ball.

The closest player to the ball is 2 which moves to challenge the ball carrier. The central midfielder 8, and 4 also move towards the ball, creating numbers up around the ball, with 8 having the possibility to double up.

The three central defenders 5, 6, and 3, move accordingly diagonally to the ball, in a line leaving the far side of the field open.

Midfielder 11 might slide down to fill the space left open by 3, or take a little more advanced position in case of turn over. (**see Fig 10 and 11**)

In **Fig 6** one of the strikers shows and receives the ball from a central midfield. In this case the central defender 6, responsible for that zone, comes out to challenge the striker. Defender 5 (is covering and at the same time marking the other striker) while 3 gets in line with 5 forming a defensive triangle in front of the goal.

Wide midfielders 2 and 11 drop back balancing the defensive line which becomes a back 5 line.



Fig 3



Fig 4



Fig 5



Fig 6

Attacking when playing with 3 in the back

On the attacking side, the challenge of playing with three in the back is to find the correct balance in the build up phase.

A slow build up can allow the team to come up together, and to keep good supporting distances on the field in order to create numeric superiority.

(The overall team technical abilities must be high in order to keep possession)

On the other end, if a team or coach decides to have a more direct approach in the build up phase, than the danger might come from the wide players not being able to support both the defensive and attacking phase, as the team might get stretched.

That is why it is vital that players are trained physically and mentally to read the various game situations and recognize the necessary adjustments in each situation.

Balance is the key word, as well as a basic principle for any system of play.

In this particular system (3-4-3), a team attacks with 3 strikers making it an offensive system.

If, when in possession the two outside midfielders, take a ultra offensive position (fig7,8,9) and the ball is lost, there is the risk that the team could be outnumbered in the defensive phase.

Likewise if the two outside players are too defensive minded, they might transform their back three defense in a back five.

When the team regains possession, there are not enough players in the midfield zone for properly building an effective attack.

(Fig 10-11)



Fig 7

Fig 7 With 4 in possession of the ball both 11, and 2 take a ultra offensive position in relation to the ball flattening up the attacking line too early



Fig 8

Fig 8 When the ball is intercepted by an opposing player, 11 and 2 are in front of the line of the ball leaving the wings vulnerable to



Fig 9

Fig 9 Shows a more conservative approach from 2 in the build up phase. This could allow the team to be in good defensive shape if possession was lost .



Fig 10



Fig 11

Fig 10 With the ball wide, 11 takes a position in as a fourth defender in line with the other defenders. However if the team regains possession, 10 is not in a good position to support an attacking play.

Fig 11 shows a more appropriate defensive position from 11 that can set up a good positive transition.

Conclusion

Playing with 3 in the back can offer a variety of solutions to a coach, on both sides of the game. Ultimately it boils down to personnel, and balance.

Youth coaches of teams U13 to U16 should probably stay away for any systems that plays with 3 in the back, and concentrate on teaching good team defense with 4 in the back.

As players get older, and get a better understanding of defending within a team concept, and its principles, then it could be appropriate to try playing with 3 in the back if necessary.

In future block, we will be looking on some exercises that a coach can use when playing with a back 3 line...stay tuned.