



The Principles of Play

Dr. Tom Turner

Ohio Youth Soccer Association North
Director of Coaching and Player Development

US Soccer National Instructional Staff
US Youth Soccer National Instructional Staff
US Youth Soccer Olympic Development Program

The Principles of Play

The game of soccer is a continuous series of small-sided games that connect different groups of players together as the ball moves around the field.

Individual players will connect with different small groups by passing the ball, by dribbling the ball, or by moving without the ball into other areas.



The Principles of Play

All invasion sports, such as soccer, break down into basic tactical principles that players learn to “read” as they gain experience with the game.

Understanding the basic principles of play also help coaches guide and appreciate the movement and decision-making of their players.



The Principles of Play

Soccer's principles of play are divided into Attacking and Defending concepts.

Young players should learn to apply the principles of play as a natural response to repeatedly experiencing typical game situations.



The Principles of Play

The most important tactical situations in soccer occur at the moments when the ball changes possession.

Because drills typically **STOP** at the moment of transition, the most critical tactical situations are often eliminated from the natural learning process.



The Principles of Play

Transition to Attack

In general, defenders try to position goal-side and inside of their opponents to protect the middle of the field. At the moment of transition, when possession is regained, the opponents are often spread out and in exposed defending positions.

Therefore, the first priority when coming into possession and transitioning from defense to attack is to look for counter-attack opportunities.



The Principles of Play

Transition to Defense

In contrast, when attacking teams lose possession, they may be caught open to a counter-attack and initially unable to defend effectively as a team.

Therefore, the first priority when losing possession and transitioning to defense is to minimize any immediate threat of losing a goal.



The Principles of Attack

Assessing Individual Decision-Making

- ❑ Whenever possible, players should look to shoot at goal.
- ❑ Players who can't score, should look to pass to someone who can.
- ❑ When scoring is not an immediate possibility, players should look to pass or dribble the ball forward and keep possession.
- ❑ When there are no immediate forward options, players should look to pass or dribble the ball sideways or backwards to maintain possession.
- ❑ Only when there are no immediate constructive options, should the players look to simply kick the ball away.



The Principles of Attack

Assessing Group Decision-Making

- ❑ Upon regaining possession, teams should look to counter-attack.
- ❑ If the counter-attack stalls, or there is no opportunity to counter-attack, teams should look to spread out, possess the ball, and wait for opportunities to go forward.
- ❑ To effectively keep possession, teams should create space between the front and back of the team, and from side to side.
- ❑ The goalkeeper is typically the most open supporting player on the field and should be the safety pass for anyone under pressure and facing their own goal. Otherwise, the players at the back of the team serve the same role.



The Principles of Defense

Pressure

Try To Win The Ball Back
Try To Stop Forward Progress

Support

Move To Help Defend Around The Ball
Follow Attackers Running Into Dangerous Spaces

Balance

Squeeze Towards The Ball From The Sides
Defend Space And Opponents On The Weak Side

Compact

Squeeze Towards The Ball From Back and Front
Manage The Depth Of The Team
Manage Offside Tactics



The Principles of Defense

Assessing Individual Decision-Making

- ❑ When dispossessed, players should first look to win the ball back.
- ❑ If winning possession is not possible, players should try to stop forward progress:
 - ❑ When close to goal, opponents will look to shoot.
 - ❑ When further from goal, opponents will look to pass or dribble the ball forward.
- ❑ When it is not possible to stop forward progress, defenders should try to “steer” the ball into teammates or into a more constricted space.



The Principles of Defense

Assessing Group Decision-Making

- ❑ Upon losing possession, teams should look to eliminate or minimize the threat of a counter-attack.
- ❑ If there are positive numbers in the immediate area around the ball, “pressing” forward provides the first opportunity to recover possession.
- ❑ If pressing is not possible - or desirable, players should recover behind the ball and squeeze in from the sides to form a defensive “block”.
- ❑ Once organized into the block, individual defenders can start to look for their opportunities to intercept passes, pressure opponents into mistakes, or win the 1v1 duels.



The Principles of Play

Assessing Individual Decision-Making

1v1 games naturally create basic attacking and defending situations and the critical transition moments between attack and defense.



The Principles of Play

Assessing Small-Group Decision-Making

2v2 games naturally create opportunities to support when defending and combine when attacking.



The Principles of Play

Assessing Small-Group Decision-Making

3v3 games provide for width and depth in attack; and the beginning of “block” (group) defending.



The Principles of Play

Assessing Small-Group Decision-Making

4v4 is the first small-group game that effectively incorporates all the attacking and defending principles of play.



The Principles of Play

Assessing Group Decision-Making: Attack

Playing 4v4+1 to three small goals on each long line will help attacking players develop ideas on how to create and exploit width and depth.



The Principles of Play

Assessing Group Decision-Making: Defense

Playing 4v4 to two small goals on each long line will help defenders develop ideas on how to protect the most dangerous areas.



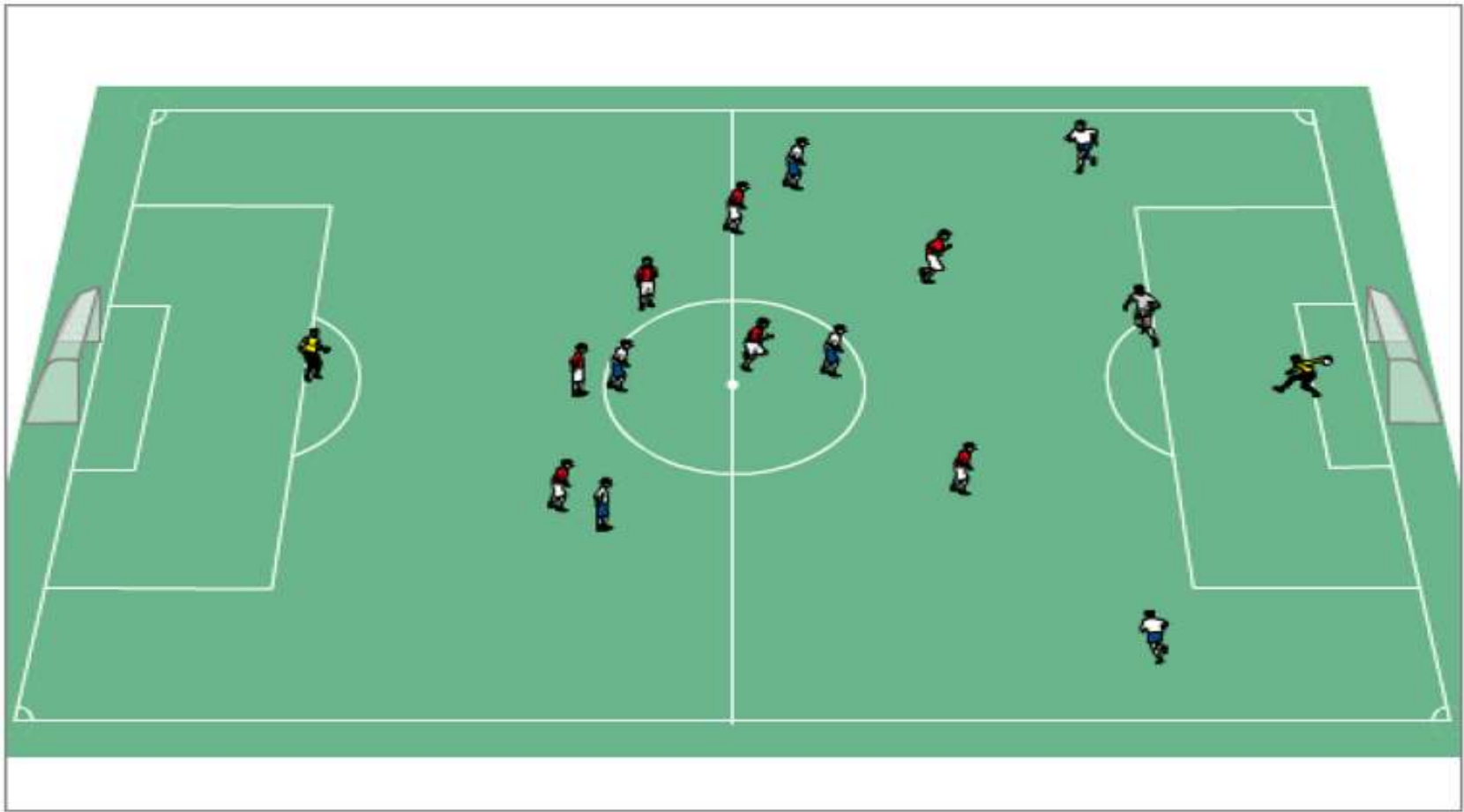
Applying the Principles of Play

Full-sided practice games provide opportunities for players and coaches to work on spacing and movement.



Applying the Principles of Play

The larger the numbers per side, the more complicated the solutions become for the players.



Applying the Principles of Play

However, from 4v4 through 11v11, the underlying Principles of Play remain the same.

