



ESSENTIAL SOCCER DEFENSIVE DRILLS

19

FUNDAMENTAL DRILLS
FOR A DOMINATING DEFENSE

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INTRODUCTION

You've heard it before, "offense wins games but defense wins championships," but even with this famous defensive mantra, the art of defense is often overlooked and under acknowledged by fans, coaches, and players alike.

However, it's the truth - if you score, you might win the game, but, if your opponent never scores, you can never lose.

A good coach will spend the necessary time teaching all players to understand that the art of defense isn't just for defenders but also for attackers and every other player on the field. Everyone should work as a defensive unit to try and win the ball back for the team.

Coaches who don't spend time on developing sound defense will discover that they have less attacking opportunities and that they have defenders who make poor decisions in games.

It's very important that you coach your players to play solid defense both individually and as a team. They need to be able to control the game at the back, support each other in transition, and keep the ball in front of them at all times.

In order to do all those things, one key element must be present in practice and in games. That key is communication. A good defensive team has loud practices and is even louder during the games. This is one of the best weapons a defense has.

The 19 drills found in Essential Soccer Defense Drills focus on everything a team needs to know to play fundamentally solid defense. The drills will help your players work on: defensive footwork, conditioning, slide tackling, communication, clearing the ball, playing good team defense near the goal, playing good individual defense near the goal, defensive positioning, and many other important facets.

DRILL #1 – KEEP FROM TURNING

Skill Level: Beginner

Setup:

Position four offensive and four defensive players on the field. Provide each of the offensive players with a ball. Offensive players will line up along the 18 with their backs to the goal extending from one goal post to the other.

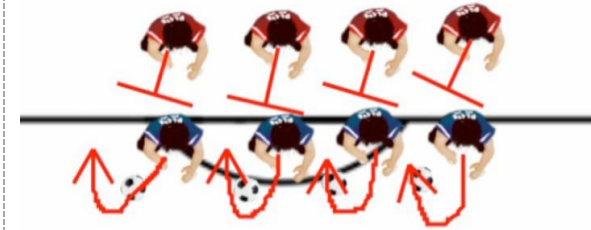
The defenders will each mark one attacker and will be about a yard from their player facing the player's back. So the defenders will be inside the 18 and have their backs to the goal too.

Execution:

1. On the whistle, the offensive player will try to turn with the ball and shoot at the goal.
2. The defender will try to stop the offensive player by first taking the ball away and clearing it or by blocking the shot.
3. Repeat several times rotating the attackers so each defender gets a chance to mark each offensive player.

Coaching Tips:

- With practice it will help defenders learn to steal the ball, block shots, and clear the ball, especially near the goal.
- In addition to helping the defenders, many times offensive players have their back to the goal and they need to turn and fire a shot, so it helps offensive players get effective practice as well.



This drill will help defenders learn to stop the shot from being taken.

DRILL #2 – SIDE ALLEY DRILL

Skill Level: Beginner

Setup:

Place four cones on one side of the field. One cone will be placed where the side of the 18 yard box meets the end line. The other will be placed in the corner. Two other cones should be placed about 40 yards up field and even with the other cones.

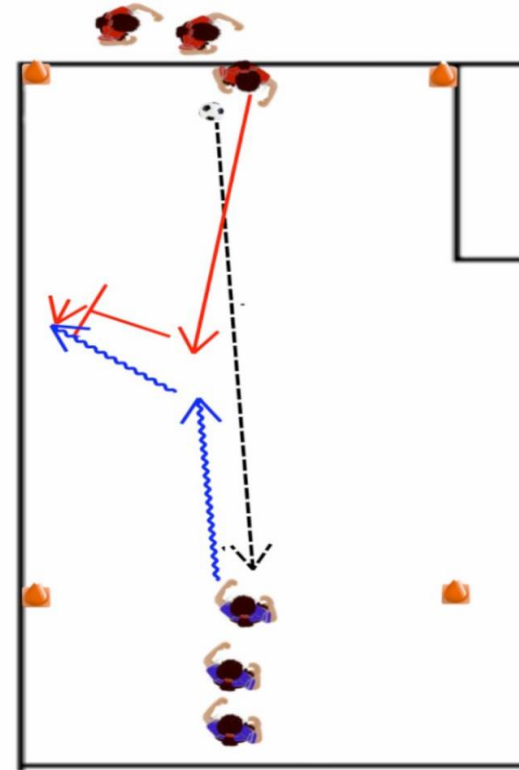
Have your players form two lines. One line beginning at the end line with the ball, this will be the defensive line. The other line will begin near midfield where the cones are and will be the offensive line.

Execution:

1. The defensive player will pass the ball out to the offensive player.
2. The offensive player will take the ball and run forward dribbling the ball.
3. The defender will run out and try to force the ball carrier toward the sideline.
4. Then the defender should attempt a slide tackle to take the ball away or at least knock it out of bounds.
5. The offensive player should try to dribble all the way to the end line.

Coaching Tips:

- This drill helps players work on slide tackling to take the ball away. You can make players use their off foot to slide tackle if you want a variation of this drill and to add a level of difficulty to it.



Players will learn to steer their opponent away from the goal and instead to the outside.

DRILL #3 – 1v1 AROUND THE GOAL

Skill Level: Beginner

Setup:

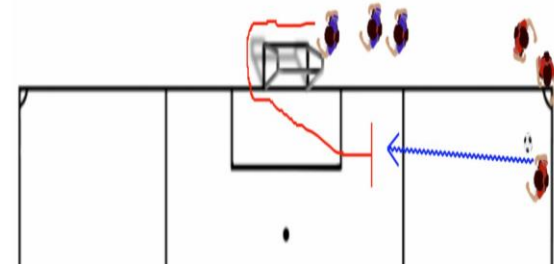
Form a line of defenders out of bounds from behind the near goal post. Form a line of attackers about five yards from the corner starting on the sideline.

Execution:

1. On the whistle, the defender will run around the back of the goal and come around to guard the offensive player.
2. The offensive player will begin dribbling toward the goal on the whistle.
3. The defenders must stop the offensive player from getting to the goal with the ball.

Coaching Tips:

- This is an exercise that teaches the defenders to move quickly and to make crisp cuts (since they need to run around the goal).
- Remember that the main point of this drill is to teach defenders to defend the end line and not let players dribble the ball down the line toward the goal. Remind your defensive players to always protect the goal.



This is a great conditioning drill for the defenders.

DRILL # 4 – 1v1 RUN TO DAYLIGHT

Skill Level: Beginner

Setup:

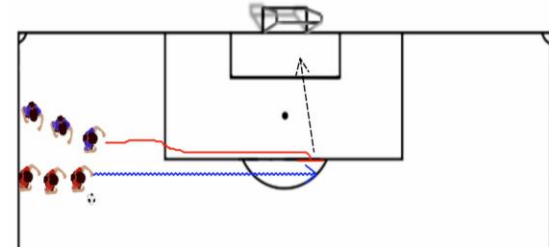
Set up one line of dribblers on one sideline just outside the 18. Create a line of defenders parallel but closer to the end line.

Execution:

1. The first player in the dribbling line will dribble the ball across the field from one sideline toward another sideline.
2. The first player in the defending line must stay with the dribbler.
3. The dribbler should vary speeds by slowing down and bursting forward.
4. The defender must stay between the dribbler and the goal at all times. The ball should not be stolen.
5. When the dribbler gets about halfway across the field, it can be slightly before or after, then a shot should be taken.
6. The defender should block the shot.
7. The next players in line should begin once the players in front of them are about 10 yards away so that the drill is run quickly.

Coaching Tips:

- This drill will help defenders learn to stay between their opponent and the goal. It will also help work on footwork and a defender's ability to handle changes of pace.



This drill is pretty basic but defenders will benefit greatly from it.

DRILL #5 – TACKLE/DRIBBLE

Skill Level: Beginner

Setup:

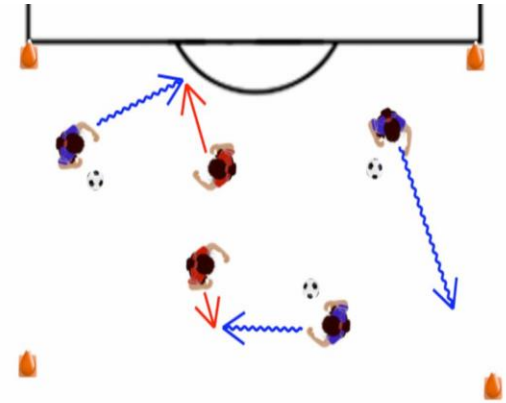
Mark off an area with four cones that is about 20 yards wide and 20 yards long. Put five players inside the coned area. Three will have balls and will be dribblers and the other two will be defenders.

Execution:

1. The two defenders will go after the dribblers.
2. The defenders need to slide tackle and take the ball away from one of the dribblers.
3. Once the ball is taken away, the defender becomes the dribbler and the player who lost the ball becomes a defender.
4. Continue this for 3-5 minutes or any desired length of time.

Coaching Tips:

- This drill teaches dribblers to keep their heads up while handling the ball. More importantly, defenders will get to practice slide tackling and taking the ball away from attackers.



This drill helps defenders work against the odds to steal the ball.

DRILL #6 – 1v1 JOCKEY

Skill Level: Intermediate

Setup:

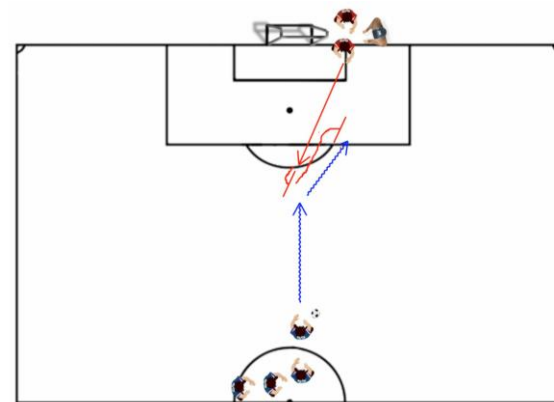
Organize a line of defenders at one goal post and a line of attackers near midfield.

Execution:

1. The first player in the line of attackers will dribble toward the goal.
2. The coach will tell the defensive player which way to jockey the attacker.
3. So as the attacker dribbles toward the goal the defender will run out and put pressure on the attacker so that they are forced to dribble to the left or the right.
4. The defender should continue to jockey the attacker one way and the attacker should try to score the ball.
5. Before the first set of players finish this drill the next pair should begin the drill. This drill should be run crisply and quickly.

Coaching Tips:

- It's very important for defenders to learn to steer or jockey their man in one direction. This drill will help with that. The drill will also help with conditioning since it'll be run at a fast pace. It will also help defenders learn to defend in the open field.



Defensive players learn to steer and force their man to dribble in a certain direction.

DRILL #7 – QUICK CLEAR

Skill Level: Intermediate

Setup:

Form a line of defenders just outside the goalie box even with the goal post. Form a line of passers about 15 yards from the end line, just outside the 18 yard box.

Execution:

1. The first player in the passing line will step out onto the 18 yard line and be about even with the defenders.
2. The first player in the defending line will step out a couple steps.
3. The passing line will send a ball, either on the ground or through the air, to the player at the 18.
4. That player will one touch the ball to the defender.
5. The defender must use any means necessary to clear the ball quickly and effectively. This means the clear should go far and to the outside.
6. The player passing to the defender shouldn't one touch the ball too hard to the defender but it shouldn't be soft either. As the defenders get more experienced the one touches should get harder.

Coaching Tips:

- Often defenders need to be able to clear a ball quickly and effectively. If they don't they may very well surrender a goal. This drill helps teach defenders to clear the ball quickly and to the outside. It simulates a ball being sent toward the goal with a fair amount of velocity.



This drill helps players learn to clear the ball quickly and effectively.

DRILL #8 – CATCH UP

Skill Level: Intermediate

Setup:

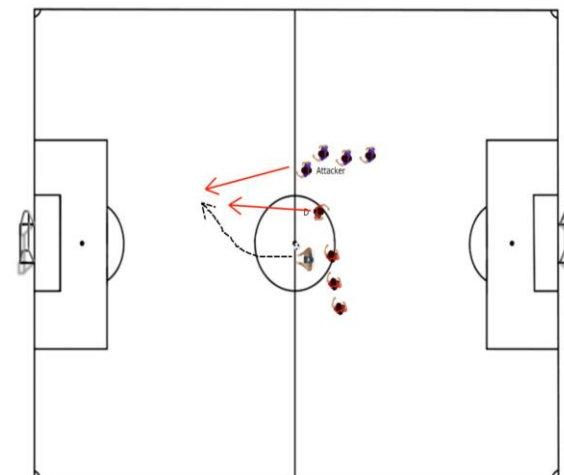
Take your team to midfield. Have your attackers stand to the right of the center circle directly on the midfield line. Set up your defenders three yards farther back than the attackers and a few yards closer to the center. Position a coach with a bunch of balls at midfield.

Execution:

1. With the attacker facing the goal and the defender with their back to the goal, the coach will throw the ball toward the goal and yell “Go!”
2. Both players will sprint toward the ball.
3. The attacker will try to get it and score.
4. The defender will try to get to the ball and kick it out of bounds.
5. If the attacker gets to the ball first then the defender must try to take the ball away and prevent the attacker from scoring.

Coaching Tips:

- This drill helps teach defenders to go at the ball. It also helps defenders learn to sprint back into the play when they’re beaten.



This is a good drill to help defensive players learn to hustle back on defense and to not get caught too far forward.

DRILL #9 – DEFENSIVE FORM

Skill Level: Intermediate

Setup:

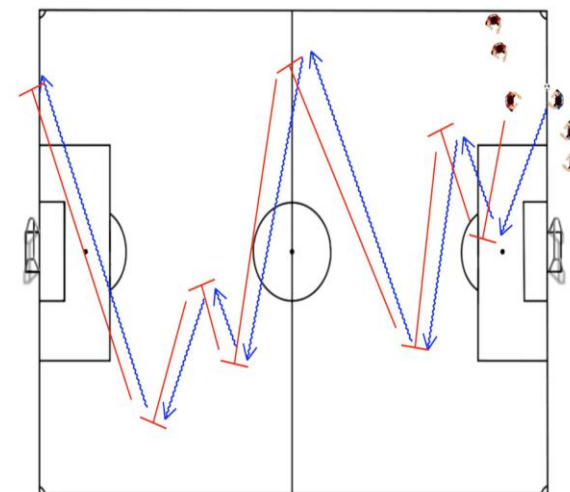
You will need to make sure you have the entire length of the field for this drill. Set up an attacker at one end line and a defender to mark them.

Execution:

1. An attacker will begin at one end line and dribble all the way to the other end line.
2. The attacker should weave from one side to another side.
3. The attacker can change directions whenever he or she wants to do so.
4. The attacker should go across the field more than going up and down the field.
5. The defender will play defense being sure to change directions when the attacker changes directions.
6. The defender should concentrate on proper footwork and on staying in front of the attacker, between the attacker and the goal.
7. The defender should not try to take the ball away and defense should be played for the entire length of the field.

Coaching Tips:

- This drill is great for teaching defenders proper footwork. It also teaches defenders to stay with the attacker and it helps get the defender in the proper condition to play good defense.



Players learn both conditioning and footwork in this drill.

DRILL #10 – DEFENSIVE ROTATION

Skill Level: Intermediate

Setup:

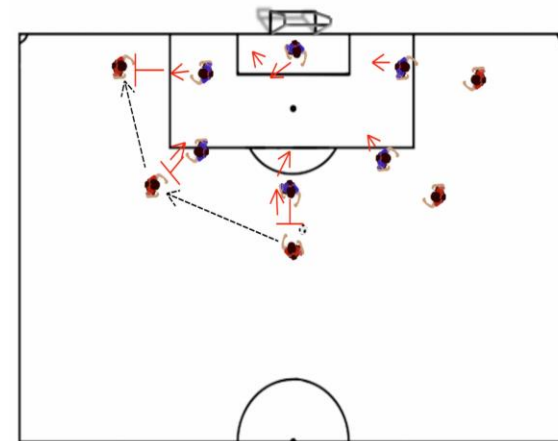
Place a goalie in the net. Have your attackers form a semi-circle just around the outside of the penalty box. Have one defender mark each attacker. The ball will start with the attacker at the top of the semi-circle, directly in front of the goal.

Execution:

1. The defender will put pressure on the attacker starting with the ball.
2. Defenders who are one pass away from the ball will be close to their men but give some room.
3. Defenders more than one pass away will stay with their attacker but play more toward the middle to give support.
4. The attackers will pass the ball around the outside.
5. They shouldn't try to score and the defense shouldn't try to steal the ball.
6. The defense should just continue to rotate closer to their mark or closer to the middle as the ball is worked around the outside.
7. The goalie should also move around the goal as the ball is moved.

Coaching Tips:

- One of the keys to playing great defense around the goal is to keep the attack away from the middle of the field. Once the ball gets into the middle, often extra defensive help is needed. Therefore, direct pressure should only be put on the ball and the other defenders should stay with their marks but also provide support in the middle of the field.
- This is also a good drill that helps the goalie learn to stay in position to stop shots and direct the defense.



This drill teaches the defense how to cover their men and protect the middle of the field.

DRILL #11 – 1v1 DEFEND THE WALL PASS

Skill Level: Intermediate

Setup:

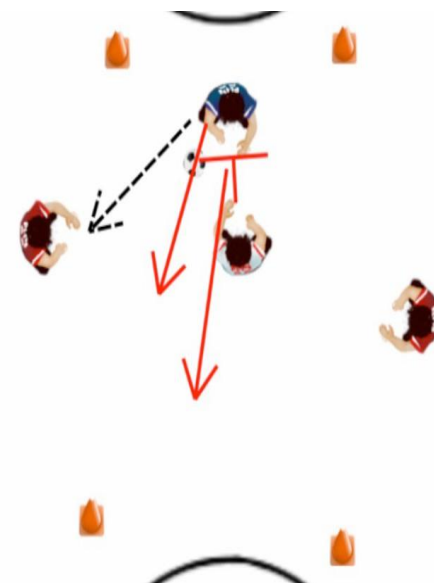
Set up four cones so they form a rectangle that is about 10 yards wide and 20 yards long. Two players will be inside the rectangle and two players will be on each side of the rectangle.

Execution:

1. The players inside the rectangle will play one-on-one.
2. One player will begin with the ball and try to dribble through the cones on the opposite end.
3. The other player will try to steal the ball and score by dribbling through the cones at their opposite end.
4. The players on the outside can be used for support but they can only one-touch the ball.
5. The defender needs to be aware of getting beat by a wall pass and allowing the opponent to score easily. Therefore, when a support pass is made the defender must drop back to stop the breakaway.
6. Every time a player scores that is one point.
7. Then the other player gets the ball and tries to score.
8. The first player to three points wins and stays on to play against one of the support players.
9. The loser becomes one of the support players.

Coaching Tips:

- A great offensive play is using a wall pass. The attacker passes to another player then sprints forward, losing the defender, and receives a quick pass back. This drill helps teach defenders to stop this play. The defenders also learn to drop back quickly.



This drill is great because it teaches defenders not to relax and get caught flat footed when their mark passes the ball.

DRILL #12 – DELAY THE ATTACK

Skill Level: Advanced

Setup:

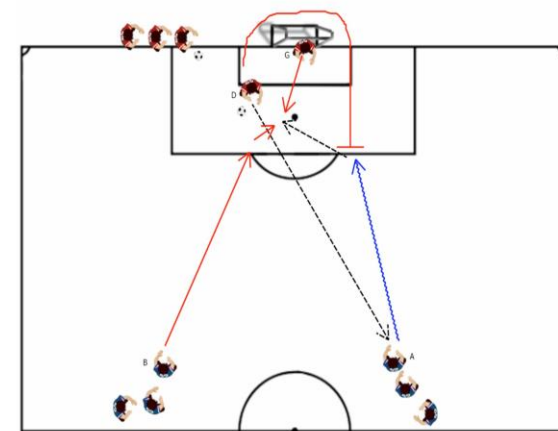
Create a line of defenders near one goal post and two lines of attackers at midfield, one line on either side of midfield. Place a goalie in the net.

Execution:

1. The first defender will step out a couple steps with a ball and kick the ball to the first player in the line of the right side of the field.
2. Then the defender will run around the goal and come back into the field to play defense.
3. The player with the ball who received the pass will dribble forward toward the goal.
4. The first attacker in the other line will sprint down the field at the same time.
5. The defender's job is to delay the attack as long as possible.
6. The defender will defend the ball and try to slow down the play. Once pressured, the player with the ball can pass to the other attacker.
7. The goalie will then be responsible for stopping the pass.

Coaching Tips:

- One of the worst things that can happen for the defense is for there to be more attackers than defenders. When this happens the defense has to be able to slow down the attack so that more defenders can get back.
- Practicing this drill will not only help defenders slow down the ball but it also teaches them and the goalie to work together.



This drill teaches defenders to slow down the attack as long as possible.

DRILL #13 – STAY WITH YOUR MAN

Skill Level: Advanced

Setup:

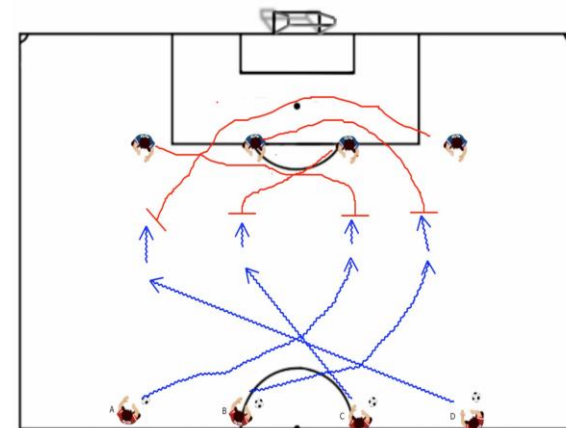
You will need four defenders and four attackers for this drill. Make sure each attacker has a ball and that they spread across the midfield line. Each defender will mark one attacker and will start on the 18.

Execution:

1. The attackers will begin dribbling toward the goal and will weave in and out of each other. So an attacker who starts on the far right side may wind-up on the far left side.
2. The defenders each need to stay with their attacker but wait near the 18 for the attackers to advance.
3. Once the attackers come in contact with the defenders they should each attack the goal.
4. The defenders must take the ball away or block the shot.
5. The attackers should try to score.

Coaching Tips:

- This drill teaches the defenders to stay with their attacker even when there is a lot of commotion. It also teaches defenders to stay between the player they're covering and the goal.
- Many variations of this drill can be created to increase the difficulty and force the defenders to work together. One way this can be done is by adding a goalie and removing a defender.



Players learn to take away the ball or block shots with a distracting environment.

DRILL #14 – DEFEND THE TRIANGLE

Skill Level: Advanced

Setup:

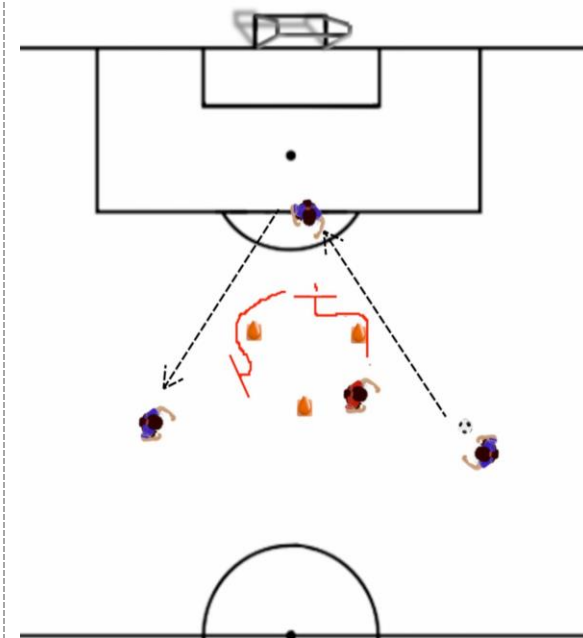
Set up three cones so that they form a triangle. Each side of the triangle should have a space of about four yards between the cones. Each attacker will be about 10 yards from one side of the triangle. The defender will stand beside the triangle.

Execution:

1. The attackers will pass the ball to each other and try to kick the ball through the triangle.
2. The defender must slide his feet and try to protect the triangle and not let the ball be kicked through.
3. The ball can't be kicked through the triangle in the air, it must be kicked on the ground.
4. The defender can't cut through the triangle and must stay outside the triangle at all times.
5. You can require the defender to go until they stop the ball a certain number of times or you can have them defend for any given length of time.

Coaching Tips:

- This drill is great for working on a defender's footwork and will also help with conditioning since the ball will be constantly moving around the outside of the triangle.
- In addition to strengthening the defender, it also improves passing and ground kicks as the offensive players work together to get the ball back in the triangle.



This drill will help with proper footwork and it will also help make footwork quicker.

DRILL #15 – DEFENSIVE PRESSURE

Skill Level: Advanced

Setup:

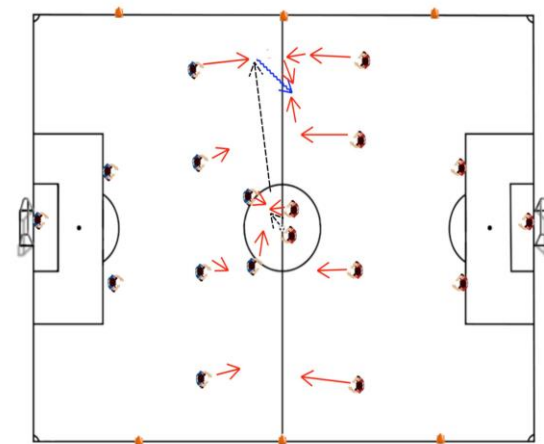
Place six cones on sidelines of the field to divide it into quarters. Divide your players into two even teams each with one goalie. If you have enough to do eight players plus a goalie on each team that is preferred.

Execution:

1. Instruct players that they will be playing a game.
2. Teams are awarded five points for scoring goals and a variety of points for stealing the ball.
3. A ball that is stolen in the last defensive quarter is awarded one point. A ball that is stolen in the next defensive quarter is two points.
4. A stolen ball in the farthest offensive quarter is three points. A ball stolen in the offensive quarter near the goal is four points.
5. Otherwise the game is played just like a scrimmage. However, since points are awarded for stealing the ball, players should try to steal the ball as soon as possible.
6. The first team to 20 points wins. You can set a time limit or increase the point requirement to adjust the length of this game.

Coaching Tips:

- Too often during games when players lose the ball they either put their heads down and stop or they automatically sprint back on defense. Often the best thing to do is to actually try to steal the ball back immediately.
- Coaches should stress to the players that if they try to steal the ball and get beat then they need to sprint back until they get in front of the ball.



Players will learn to pressure the ball anywhere on the field rather than being content to let the ball get close to their goal before they apply pressure.

DRILL #16 – DOUBLE DOWN

Skill Level: Advanced

Setup:

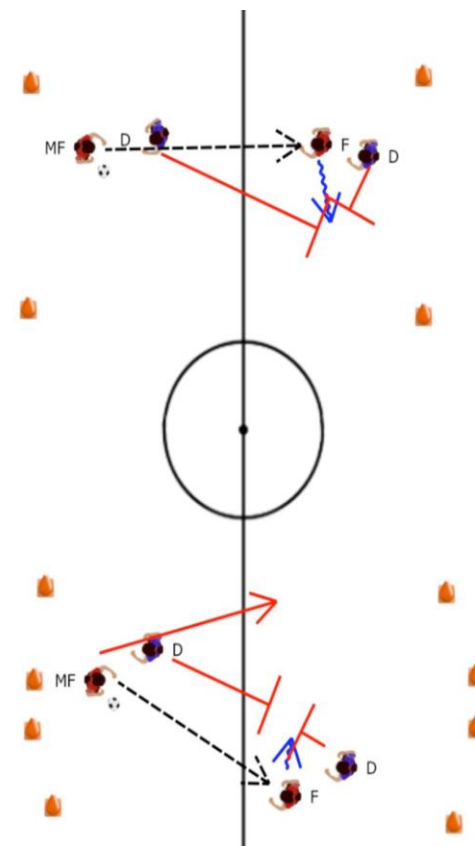
Set up four cones should to form a rectangle that is about 25 yards long and 10 yards wide with a line cutting the rectangle in half. Place a midfielder (MF) and a forward (F) at opposite ends of the rectangle, with a defender (D) marking each. The MF will have a ball.

Execution:

1. The MF will pass the ball to the F and then the MF must stay.
2. The D who was covering the MF should sprint into the other half of the rectangle and help defend.
3. This will create a 1 on 2 situation.
4. The F must touch the ball five times without losing control of it.
5. The D must steal the ball.
6. To make the drill a little more complex, the MF can be allowed to attack into the other end and a small goal can be set-up at the end of the rectangle.
7. When the drill allows the MF to attack too, the D must then make a decision to double or not. If they do double they better be able to steal the ball.

Coaching Tips:

- This is a great drill to teach strikers or forwards to come back and play defense. Too often offensive players don't come back into the defensive end to help play defense. This drill will help teach them to leave their own mark and double in the defensive end.



This is a drill for both defenders and strikers.

DRILL #17 – RUN THE LINE

Skill Level: All Skill Levels

Setup:

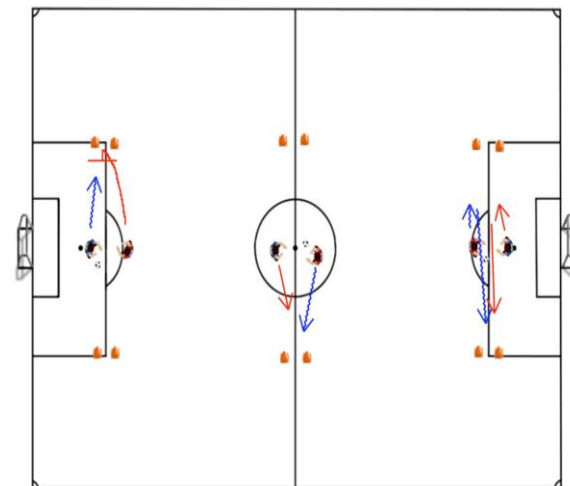
This drill will have several stations. Four players should be at each station. Each station needs one line and four cones to form mini goals. The end lines, sidelines, mid-field, and 18 yard lines can be used. Make two yard goals on each line. The goals should be about 20 yards apart. Each station will have 2 players competing and 2 players resting.

Execution:

1. For 2 minutes one player will try to dribble to one of the goals and put the ball in the between the mini cone goals.
2. The other player will play defense. However, the line will divide defender from attacker and the defender can't cross over the line to stop the goal attempt until directly in front of the goal.
3. The attacker will try to beat the defender to either goal.
4. If the attacker feels the defender has the edge then the attacker can change directions and go for the other goal at anytime.
5. The defender must sprint to whatever goal is being attacked and the defender must try to stop the attacker from scoring.
6. After 2 minutes the coach should blow the whistle and the defender and attacker should switch places.

Coaching Tips:

- This is a great conditioning drill. It also teaches the defender to sprint to always get between the ball and the goal.



Defenders learn to react to the marked player and sprint back towards the goal to maintain position.

DRILL #18 – PRESSURE SCRIMMAGE

Skill Level: All Skill Levels

Setup:

Set up ten cones into a diamond shape. At the tip of the diamond you will have two cones about a yard apart. These cones will be the goals. The diamond should be about 20 yards long from point to point and it should be about 10 yards wide at the middle. Use the other four cones to mark out the sideline as it angles in toward the points.

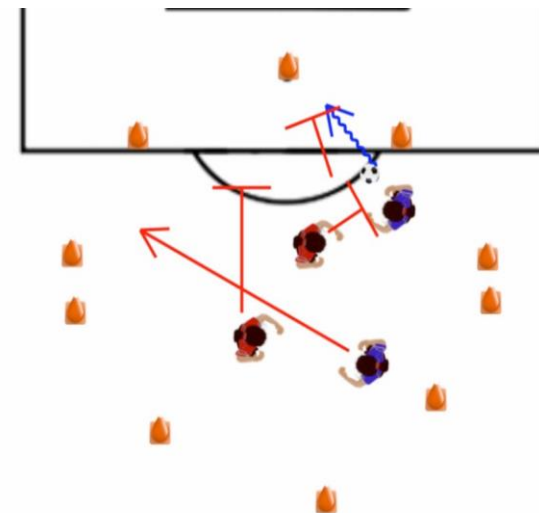
Group your players into teams of two and put two teams into the diamond.

Execution:

1. This game will be played like a scrimmage and it will be two on two.
2. The key is to steal the ball.
3. Often the second defender will have to come in to help take the ball away without allowing a pass to be made.
4. Assign each game four quarters lasting five minutes each. Whichever team has the most points at the end of the four quarters wins.

Coaching Tips:

- Since the sides of the diamond field come in from the middle, the best to instruct your players to play defense will be to force the attacker toward the sideline. This will be a lot easier because of how the field is arranged.
- The defender has to direct the attacker toward the outside in order to have the most success and this helps defenders learn to play together.



This drill teaches the defender not to let their mark dribble toward the middle.

DRILL #19 – ONE THIRD DEFENSE

Skill Level: All Skill Levels

Setup:

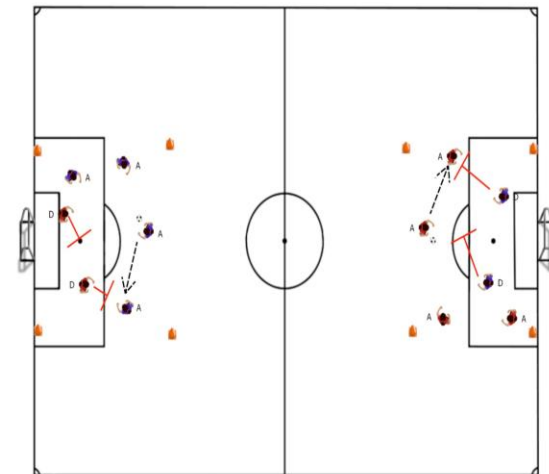
Use eight cones to make two smaller fields at each end of a regular sized field. The cones should make a play area that is about 30 yards long and 20 yards wide. Then divide the players into two teams of six players.

Execution:

1. Send two players on each team to the other side of the field to be defenders.
2. This will set up a four on two scenario on each of the smaller fields.
3. The attackers must try to score without a goalie.
4. Every goal is one point.
5. The defenders must try to steal the ball and kick it out of the play area.
6. Every time they do a point is deducted from the other team's total.
7. Let the players play for 5 minutes and then change defenders.
8. Make sure all players play defense at least once.

Coaching Tips:

- This drill teaches players to play good positional defense since they will be significantly outnumbered and have to play toward the middle. Defenders will also learn how to play together and they'll learn to position themselves to stop shots and stop passes to the middle of the field.



This is a fun game that requires the defense to work together to win.

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