

Three Rules of Defense

First Rule of Defense: Always stay between your man and the goal.

This is the basic tenet of defense whenever the other team has the ball. So many times our players play adjacent to, or in front of the man they are covering. Other times they are just plain out of position. The most basic fundamental of defense is that they should be positioned between the man they are covering and their own goal. Drill this into their head! I know it seems simple and obvious, but new players don't always know, and even if they do many have not developed a "field sense" yet and lose track of where they are on the field.

If we can get them to remember the First Rule of Defense, it will help them know where they need to be on the field. I think this rule is especially helpful in riding situations (so it is important that attackmen know it, too). How many times do you see a player positioned in front of his man on the ride, and while he is watching the ball, the opposing player he is "covering" quietly moves farther behind him into open space, takes a pass, and starts a fastbreak. If our players stay between their man and their goal, this will not happen.

Second Rule of Defense: Feet first, stick second.

Those guys just can't wait to swing that stick at the other player. But that only leads to bad defense and costly penalties. Defense is played effectively by moving your feet. We must teach young players to play defense with their feet, and prevent them from relying on their stick. Do this in practice by doing one-on-one dodges to the goal—but take the defenders' sticks away from them. Emphasize the ready position (knees bent, on your toes, squared up to your opponent, good balance, low center of gravity—just the same way you would defend the dribbler in basketball) and the drop step (take one step back as you move left or right mirroring the offensive player, allowing you to keep your body between your man and the goal and preventing him from blowing by you; the defender gradually gives up ground, but always stays between his man and the goal, again similar to guarding a driving player in basketball).

A nice bonus of this drill is that it gives young offensive players a chance to practice their dodging and carrying techniques more successfully when the defenders don't have a stick in their face. Emphasize to the offensive players keeping the stick tucked away and protected as they dodge, and having their hands positioned on the stick so that they can pass or shoot quickly. Once you are satisfied with your players' ability to defend by moving their feet, then you can give them their stick back (they really want to get those sticks back, so this is a good motivator in getting them to work hard at using their feet!)

When we give the sticks back, we must instruct the players how to use them wisely as defensive tools. A lacrosse stick is not a baseball bat and should not be used as one! A slash is defined as "swinging a crosse at an opponent's crosse or body with viciousness or reckless abandon... or striking an opponent in an attempt to dislodge the ball from his crosse, unless the player uses some part of his body...to ward off the thrust of the defensive player's crosse." Any time a player hits another with his stick and it was not legitimately directed at the stick, it should be whistled by the referee as a slash. My own opinion is that referees at all levels—from youth and high school right up to Division I NCAA—allow defenders to get away with far too many reckless stick checks these days. I voice my opinion whenever possible, but in the meantime I instruct my players to play the games as the rules state.

Our first priority is to remind players to play with their feet first, stick second. It's amazing the memory loss that occurs sometimes when they get that stick back in their hand. If this happens, take the stick away from them until they regain their good defensive footwork. Next, the stick should be out in front of the defender's body, pointed towards the offensive player. Too many times the defender holds the stick close to his body with the head pointing towards the side. The only thing he can do with the stick in this position is earn a cross check penalty. Make sure they keep those sticks out front.

The proper hand positioning on the stick is important, too. If the offensive player is driving to his right (the defender's left), the right hand should be higher on the stick closer to the head. If the offensive player is driving to his left (the defender's right), the left hand should be higher on the stick. By positioning the hands this way you can drop step to stay between the man and the goal and still keep your stick in front on his hands. This also creates a V-hold (it is called a V-hold because the defenders forearm and the stick form a V angle in front of the offensive player) which gives the defender the optimum leverage to push the offensive player out. Ideally the defender will switch hands as the dodger switches directions, but this is difficult moving at full speed. It takes practice!

Finally, we teach our players to focus on their opponents' hands. If they can harass their opponents by poke checking their hands, or lifting the hands and arms with their stick, the offensive player will be stymied. They cannot catch, pass, or shoot if a defender is keeping pressure on their hands. And by poking and lifting, we avoid the potential slashing penalties that could put us in a man-down situation. Don't forget FEET FIRST, STICK SECOND. It is easy for a player to get so focused on poking and lifting that he gets off balance and lets the man get past him. Then we're in trouble!

Third Rule of Defense: Always protect the hole.

The hole is the area on the field inside the restraining box roughly within an 8-10 yard radius in front of the goal. Probably over 80 percent of scoring in youth and high school games occur in that area. Players must understand this, and defend the hole intensely. In an unsettled situation, defenders must get back inside the restraining box, defend the hole, and play defense from inside out. In other words, get back into the hole as quickly as possible first, then “mark up” on defense by finding an uncovered opponent, calling out his number so your teammates know you have him covered, and employ Rules #1 and #2!

My philosophy is that once the ball crosses the midline, I want my midfielders to sprint back inside the restraining box to the hole. They will want to contest the ball, or cover their man out there in the middle of the field, but my feeling is that it’s better teaching them to get back and play solid fundamental defense rather than potentially having a fastbreak goal scored against us because our middies are caught out there behind the play. If the ball is down on the ground and my player is near it, certainly that player should go for the ball. But if the ball is down on the far side of the field, the player is better off getting to the hole and being ready to defend.

I don’t even really want my midfielders to throw a check out there, because most times the check is unsuccessful and the opponent is past my defender. I have seen so many goals scored this way while coaching at the high school level that I believe getting to the hole first and foremost is the best strategy.

It is worthwhile to practice this. Start out in a mock clear or face-off and roll the ball out in the midfield area. Call out loudly “To the hole!” (It’s good to have your goalie learn to recognize and call this, too.) Make sure your midfielders hightail it as fast as they can back inside the box to the hole, and then turn and mark up on the offensive players as they come down field entering the offensive zone.

Again, if a middie is near the ground ball he should go after it, but the others should sprint—not jog—back into the box. I also call out “to the hole” any time I have the players run sprints in practice. I want them to associate that sprint with getting back on defense, instead of just getting to the goal to try to score.

If your team has a fastbreak goal scored against them, you can use it as an opportunity to really illustrate the importance of Rule #3. Ask your defenders to think about where they were on the field when the goal was scored. If they were covering their man way outside of the box or away from the hole, it should be clear to them how they took themselves out of the play by being too far away. They need to follow Rule #1 and be between their man and the goal, but they also need to be in a position where they can help out if the hole area is assaulted.

I constantly ask my players “What’s the First Rule of Defense?!” “What’s the Third Rule of Defense?!” My expectation is that every player answer loudly in unison. I ask them over and over, five or six times over the course of practice, before games, during time outs. Sometimes even in one-on-one conversations about how their parents are, or how school is going, I’ll interject “What’s the Second Rule?!” They all roll their eyes and answer—sounding annoyed like only teenagers can! If they don’t say it loud enough, or they don’t all answer, I ask again until I get a 100 percent response. Making them say it out loud constantly really helps it to sink in. No matter how many games we win or lose this season, or how many goals our team scores, I know these guys will come away at the end of the season with perhaps the most valuable lesson of all ingrained in them—how to play sound, fundamental defense.