

ZONE DEFENSE

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Zone defense requires greater tactical awareness on the part of the players. This means the coach is obliged to teach the Principles of Defense and the roles of the first, second and third defenders to the players **before** team zone defense. A coach should hold at *least* a “D” license to be sure of understanding the Principles of Defense and how to teach them to players. The players must understand and consistently execute their individual and group roles in zone defense before they can be expected to intelligently and skillfully implement team zone defense. Here are some of the reasons to play zone defense:

1. **Team Shape:** It is easier to keep a good defending shape out of a zone. Players are less inclined to get pulled out of important positions.
2. **Fitness:** Players in zones generally do less running and tracking of opponents around the field.
3. **Weaknesses:** It is easier to hide a weak defender in a zone than in man-to-man.
4. **Attack:** Teams which have maintained a good shape defensively can attack more efficiently from an organized shape after gaining possession.

The disadvantages to zonal defending may include:

1. **Assignment Marking:** It is difficult to pull a player out of a zone to “assignment mark” an outstanding opponent.
2. **Demands Verbal Communication:** Talking is indispensable and yet many of our players do not talk.
3. **Square Back Four/Three:** The back four or three get caught flat, especially when the ball is in the middle of the field or with long flighted balls.
4. **Decision-Making:** Emphasizes the burden for defenders of deciding whether to pressure a player or cover for a teammate. This leads to looser marking than in man-to-man.

Here are the keys to proper zonal marking:

1. The work of the central defenders is vital. The entire team pivots around them.

2. Defenders generally do not cross in front of each other except in emergency situations. They may cross behind a teammate to cover for him or to cut off a through pass.
3. Teams must be compact (horizontally and vertically) and “travel with the ball.” Defenders must move as a block to close space.
4. The ball should be forced wide and kept wide.
5. There must be constant pressure on the ball to prevent penetration via the long ball.
6. If there is no pressure on the ball, the central defenders must decide whether to drop off or possibly step up to catch opponents offside.

Here are some final *tips* for defenders:

- ▶ Do not assume because a striker or forward appears disinterested that they no longer care. In an instant they can come alive and score.
- ▶ Do not assume the ball is going out of bounds. Wind, long grass, mud or puddles may stop it. Forward players who pursue that ball sometimes benefit in these circumstances. Take nothing for granted.
- ▶ Do not slide tackle unless you are 100% sure you will get the ball or unless there are no other options left.
- ▶ If an attacker you are marking breaks off and goes toward his own goal, follow him until you can pass him on to a midfielder or forward. If he goes square you can usually pass him on. If he goes diagonally behind the defense, track him or let him run offside. Be on your toes mentally and physically.
- ▶ Although we all like to play controlled soccer, never be afraid to clear the ball high, wide and long.
- ▶ Decide early on what you want to do, even if it’s a mistake you might then have a chance to recover.



Figure 1 Remember the objective of tackling is to gain possession of the ball, not to merely dispossess the opponent.

Please read ZONAL DEFENDING by Jack Detchon.