

The Reality of High Pressure Defending

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The modern game has become a game of increasingly limited space and time. The combination of improved training methodologies, increased resources dedicated to individual players, and better understanding of human physiology has helped football players become bigger, faster, quicker, and stronger than ever before. One of the results of these improvements has been the development of players capable of covering ground quicker and applying pressure to the opposition higher up the field for longer periods of time.

Considering this, it is not surprising that an overwhelming percentage of goals at all professional levels are scored in 3 passes or less. This statistic underlines the obvious advantage that is enjoyed by a team capable of winning possession in advanced positions, and of doing so on a regular basis. Combining these facts, it becomes clear that, in the modern game, it is almost a requirement that players and teams be capable of applying high pressure defensive tactics to their opponent in order to be successful. This article aims to explain some of the basic principles necessary for playing with high defensive pressure, and the moments where it is most effective.

The myth of "low pressure" defending

Whenever discussing defensive tactics, it is important to differentiate between what is commonly called "high pressure" defending and what is commonly called "low pressure" defending. In many ways, these references are misleading, because the first requirement of defending in any tactical scheme is to apply good pressure on the ball. Within this principle, "good pressure" could be defined as a defensive presence close enough to the player in possession to: (i) force the attacker to focus attention on protecting the ball; (ii) eliminate the possibility of forward penetration, especially through a long forward pass; and (iii) allow the defender the opportunity to tackle and win possession upon the first technical mistake by the attacker. With this definition it becomes clear that defensive pressure is either good enough to accomplish the above objectives or it is not. In other words, "low pressure" in defending is an oxymoron; low pressure equals no pressure. As such, we need a different frame of reference to discuss the differences in these tactical schemes.

In describing the difference between "high" or "low" pressure defensive tactics, it is more accurate to discuss the location of the defensive line of confrontation of the team. The line of confrontation is where the defensive team begins to apply pressure on the ball, or in other words, the area of the field where the team really begins to defend. In general, teams that play in a "low pressure" defensive scheme usually begin defending (or set their line of confrontation) close to midfield. A team playing with a low line of confrontation usually concedes the attacking 40 yards of the field to the opposition, preferring not to step forward and contest possession in this area. Conversely, teams that play a "high pressure" defensive scheme begin defending far earlier on the field – often contesting possession in the attacking third of the field.

At higher levels, the defensive scheme employed by a team during the course of a game is far more varied, and the location of the line of confrontation often changes based on a variety of factors. So, while a team may be known to generally prefer playing with a relatively high or low line of confrontation, this line is not set in stone.

The Line of Confrontation

The line of confrontation set by a team is most clearly seen when the opposition gains possession of the ball in their own defensive third with time and space to play. At this point, the defending team will either attempt to immediately apply pressure on the ball where it is, or they will drop back to the area where the line of confrontation has been set. This decision may be based on many factors: (i) the score and the time remaining in the game (the team winning with little time left will typically drop deeper to prevent getting stretched out and conceding easy scoring opportunities); (ii) the field and weather conditions (a strong wind or poor playing surface may invite the opposition to apply pressure higher on the field); or (iii) the relative athleticism and skill of the teams (the more athletic team may apply pressure

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higher on the field because their speed advantage reduces concerns about space behind the defense).

The location of the line of confrontation is relatively independent of the team's tactical formation. While generally a team with higher numbers of forwards and midfielders will play with a higher line of confrontation, this is not always the case. For example, a team may play a 4-3-3 where the wingers are pulled back defensively and look to exploit counter-attack opportunities more often than opportunities to press. Similarly, a team with 2 forwards may play with a higher line of confrontation than a team with 3 forwards if the wide midfielders are aggressive in their defensive positioning and decision-making.

While the "typical" line of confrontation may be decided by the coaching staff prior to the game, the defensive quality of the team can be partially measured by the number of moments in which they are able to read cues in the game and play with a higher line of confrontation – thereby exploiting opportunities to win possession farther up the field and increasing goal-scoring chances.

Moments to Apply High Pressure

Even if it is determined that the team will play with a relatively high line of confrontation, in a 90-minute game played on a field 120 yards by 80 yards, it is impossible for players to defend the entire field for the entire game. Accordingly, players and teams must select moments to defend with the high line of confrontation, and moments when it is more effective or necessary to sit deeper with a lower line of confrontation. These decisions come down to determining when to commit numbers forward to defend in attacking areas of the field, and which spaces on the field are the areas where, once the ball enters them, the team commits to winning possession. The manner in which these decisions are made in the game will dictate whether the team is described as playing with the more commonly referred to schemes of "high pressure" or "low pressure" defending.

There are several different cues that aid in determining when playing with a higher line of confrontation is advisable.

1) Possession by Technically Inferior Players

A team may identify players on the opposition with a lower level of technical ability, who are therefore prone to making mistakes in possession, and determine to apply pressure on these players whenever those players are in possession – wherever they may be. When these players receive the ball, or even better, as the ball is traveling to these players, the defensive team may decide to commit numbers forward to attempt to force a mistake and counter from it. Occasionally, teams may even adopt a defensive shape that encourages the opposition to play to these weaker players, thereby allowing the defending team to press these players more frequently. For example, if the right back of the opposition is technically weak in possession, the defending team may shift their forwards to the opposite side of the field when the opponent gains possession in the defensive third – thereby forcing the build-up to come through the right back more often than not. (*Referred to as a pressure pocket*)

2) Long Square Passes

Long square passes provide opportunities for the defensive team to step forward on the field and get numbers around the player receiving the pass. This concept illustrates why angled passes are both more effective and safer than square passes; angled passes make it harder for the defensive team to get numbers around the ball. (Passes angled backwards provide more time and space for the receiving player to deal with defensive pressure, and passes angled forward beat defenders by playing them out of the game.) When long square passes are played, the defensive team can more easily get pressure on the recipient (taking away the ability to penetrate), and then push more defenders into the areas around the ball to take away short passing options. The longer the square pass and the therefore the longer it takes to arrive, the easier it is for the defensive team to step up the field and play with a higher line of confrontation.

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3) Balls Played Behind the Defense

Balls played behind the defense are the most common cue for teams to play with a higher line of confrontation. Whenever defenders are forced to turn and face their own goal, there is an opportunity for the defensive team to step forward and make it difficult for the opposition to "face forward" again. When teams take advantage of this situation, they typically: (i) force the opposition to play the ball out of bounds and concede possession; (ii) force the opposition to play back to the goalkeeper who most frequently simply clears the ball and concedes possession; or (iii) force a mistake in possession that creates an immediate goal scoring opportunity. In general, teams that never make the opposing defenders face their own goal, or that do not step forward and press defenders facing their own goal, have a very difficult time scoring goals.

4) Transition Moments

It is often very productive to defend with high pressure immediately upon losing possession. Often, the player winning the ball is already in a tight space, with few options in support. If the team that loses possession can immediately put pressure on the ball, and quickly bring additional players into this defensive space, there is a much higher chance of quickly regaining possession. However, if the opposition is successful in quickly breaking out and finding a player with time and space, it may be inefficient or ineffective to continue to play with high pressure and fruitlessly chase the ball.

5) High Pressure Zones

There are often areas of the field where the defensive team tries to encourage the opposition to play the ball, with the aim of collapsing on the ball in numbers as soon as it enters these areas. For example, when the ball is played into wide spaces in midfield, the defensive team may work very hard to lock the ball against the sideline, eliminate the ability to switch fields, and bring multiple defenders into the space to gain a numerical advantage. Similarly, the space in front of the center backs and behind the central midfielders is often a space that immediately gets squeezed by multiple players when the ball enters it.

While these situations are not the only moments where playing with a high line of confrontation is appropriate, they constitute many of the most frequent situations when high pressure defending is likely to be successful.

Requirements to Play with a High Line of Confrontation

There are three main requirements for teams to play with a high line of confrontation: (i) a high level of fitness and athleticism; (ii) a high degree of coordination and communication on the field; and (iii) an aggressive and positive team mentality.

1) Fitness and Athleticism

The need for fit players with good speed and quickness is self apparent when playing with a high line of confrontation. A team without both of these qualities will either (i) quickly tire and get exposed in bigger spaces as the team gets stretched out, or (ii) constantly be in numerically inferior situations because of an individual inability to cover distance quickly enough to limit the attacking team's playing options. As such, the decision to play with a high line of confrontation will need to be considered when determining the fitness components of training, and when evaluating relative athleticism of your team and the opponent.

2) Coordination and Communication

There is a huge difference between intelligent and organized defending with a high line of confrontation and "organized chaos." Unfortunately, at lower levels of play, particularly in youth and collegiate soccer, defending with a high line of confrontation is, in reality, an attempt simply to create chaos on the field. The ability to make repeated and multiple substitutions to keep players "fresh", and the frequent break-down in technical execution of players in possession, allows teams at these lower levels to chase the ball all over the field attempting to force mistakes while being confident that even if their defensive shape is poor, the opponent will rarely be able to capitalize. This method of defending teaches very little

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tactically to the players, and fails to prepare them to play against skilled and organized opposition playing under FIFA substitution rules. As such, it is often a “quick fix” to maximize the chance to win games with little concern for long-term player development.

In contrast, intelligent and organized defending with a high line of confrontation requires a high degree of communication and coordination between the players on the field and between the different lines on the field (backs to midfield to forward). First, it is important that teams don't defend with a “lone ranger” who works hard to pressure the ball without any other defensive cover or support. Without support, this player will quickly get played out of the game, leaving their team with fewer players with which to defend. To insure the ability to get numbers around the ball defensively, the team must always defend together – either with multiple players stepping forward or multiple players dropping deeper. Second, the defensive line must be very aware of the quality of pressure on the ball when determining when and how to step up the field and compress space. If the defensive line steps forward too soon they will be vulnerable to balls played behind them. If the defensive line is late in stepping forward they will leave too much space for the midfield to defend and will allow the opponent to break-out of the initial pressure with quick combination play. In execution, the team shape will move almost like an accordion as pressure is applied; first the pressuring players step forward to eliminate penetration options, second, the back line compresses space as the penetrating threat is removed. Executing this movement requires players that can read the tactical cues of the game and constantly communicate with each other.

3) Mentality

Finally, defending with a high line of confrontation requires players with an aggressive and confident mentality. Because of the physical demands of this defensive tactic, the players must have the mental fortitude to do the work required to cover distance for the duration of the game. Similarly, the players must have a high degree of confidence in their individual defending skills – as they will be repeatedly attempting to confront opponents in forward areas of the field. Finally, and most importantly, the players must have the desire to play in this manner based on the belief that they will be successful doing so. Doubt or lack of confidence will show in players that are slow to make decisions to step forward, or that pressure half-heartedly (too far from the attacker to make an impact). These mistakes will make the entire team vulnerable.

Conclusion

In reality, no team plays solely with a high line of confrontation or with a low line of confrontation. The areas where a team decides to begin their defending will vary throughout the game depending on various tactical cues (as described above), and will certainly vary from game to game based upon opponent and other situations. Every team must have the ability to step forward and play with a high line of confrontation in order to maximize goal scoring opportunities. However, as a coach charged with developing players individually, particularly with youth and collegiate players, it is important to teach this concept in a manner that translates to the “real” game at the national level – not in a manner that simply capitalizes on bizarre substitution rules or technical mediocrity of a young and growing opponent.