

# Understanding Low Pressure Defense and Counterattack

Jonas T. Holdeman, Jr.  
Knoxville, Tennessee  
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In certain circumstances, a low-pressure style of defensive play is effective. The tactics of low-pressure defense and associated counterattack, and conditions for successful use are discussed.

**Motivation.** My team recently decided to enter a post-season tournament. The tournament rules provided for preliminary round robin play in groups of three, with group winners going on to the final rounds. Group winners were to be determined by a point system of 6 points for a win, 3 points for a tie, 0 for a loss, with an additional 1 point for a shut-out.

Many don't like these rules because they encourage "negative" defensive play rather than an open, creative style. But just as it may be necessary to adjust the style of play to accommodate field or weather conditions, it may be desirable to adjust the style of play to accommodate peculiar rules of competition. Under the rules above, if your team is able to go ahead early with one or two goals without your opponent scoring, use this style to earn 7 points instead of possibly 6. If your two opponents play first to a 1-1 draw, your team can advance to the final rounds without ever scoring a goal if your opponents can't score against you. I will discuss one style of play which may prevent an opposing team from scoring, even when that team is stronger.

Although other systems of play may be used, I will describe a particular system with 5 backs, 3 mid-fielders, and two strikers. You can still score from this formation if you have the right attacking talent. In fact, the threat associated with the ability to mount a credible counter-attack without weakening the defense is an important factor in the success of this system.

**Defensive styles.** Two extreme styles of defensive play can be described by the terms "high pressure" and "low pressure" defense, with the former style being more common in youth teams. With high pressure defense, when the ball is lost, passing targets are immediately marked and an attempt is made to win the ball as soon as possible. The advantage of this is that if your team can win the ball near the opposing goal, they have the chance to score immediately. This style is very effective when the opposing team has low skills, when they don't have the strength for long passes, when they can't pass accurately and can't control the ball quickly and closely, when teammates off the ball don't support by moving quickly to provide targets for a pass, and when their confidence is low so pressure on the ball can force a bad decision or misplay by the first attacker. The disadvantage is that if the opposing team is fast and can make accurate, penetrating passes, they can bypass many of your players and counter-attack with superior numbers through your open defense.

**Advantages and disadvantages.** When playing against a skillful team, the low pressure defense offers several advantages. Upon losing the ball, the defense seeks to delay penetration, giving teammates time to recover goal-side of the ball and concentrate numbers goal side. This allows depth and width in the defense, providing superior numbers in small-group encounters. To counter this, the opposing team must bring players forward, frequently leaving open space behind them. Upon winning the ball, the defensive team plays the ball long into the space behind the opposing team, where a fast striker can challenge the now weak opposing defense.

On the downside, the attacking team may maintain possession of the ball for a long periods of time in technical range, or one pass away from technical range, so there is continual risk of a goal being scored. This can result in mental and physical fatigue of the defensive players.

**Team organization and position requirements.** The *goalkeeper* must be tall and agile enough to stop shots just under the bar, and quick enough to stop shots coming out of a crowd. The goalkeeper must have a good tactical understanding and good command of the defense. We will use *five backs*. The center back will be a sweeper, and must be quick and fast. The other backs, playing in front of the sweeper, need not be exceedingly fast, but all must be strong, determined tacklers. They must be able to play long, high balls from deep defensive positions over the crowd to the wings. The central backs must be tall and strong in the air to win balls served over the top. We will use *three midfielders*. The midfielders must be quick, good dribblers, must be able to make long, accurate passes, and the wing midfielders should be good shooters from central and wing positions. We will use *two strikers*. The strikers must be fast, excellent dribblers, willing to take on defenders. They must be good shooters with a strong, accurate shot from outside the penalty area. Finally they must be able to control a long lofted pass quickly and accurately, even when under pressure. These then are the qualities to look for in the different positions. The goalkeeper, sweeper, and attackers are very important.

**Team strategy.** The team prime defensive strategy is to always outnumber the opposing attackers around the ball when within shooting range of the goal. This is achieved in several ways. There will seldom be more than three players in the opponent's half of the field, even when attacking. The two attackers were chosen to be very fast, good dribblers, and good shooters. As good dribblers, they should be able to beat a single defender reasonably often. Because of the danger of being beaten by the dribble on counterattack, the opposing defenders must have support; they must keep three or more defenders back. Thus they are already outnumbered when they attack.

**Defensive flow.** Suppose the opposing team has won the ball in their own third. One of the two strikers exerts low pressure on the ball, seeking to make play predictable. To this end, he approaches the first attacker in such a way as to force play to the wing. If the pass goes to the wing, he then moves to put pressure there, but his path is such as to discourage play back to the center. He does not attempt to win the ball unless the opposition makes a bad mistake. As the ball moves down the touchline, the striker does

not pursue into his half, but positions himself to deny a pass back, while being ready for a counterattack if his team wins the ball. As the ball crosses the halfway line, the midfielders do not attempt to tackle immediately, but jockey the ball toward the wing while the whole team drops back.

The first danger will come when the first attacker gets within a range that he could serve the ball to a central attacker who could shoot immediately. In this case, the midfielder may allow advance, but must deny the long pass to the center. He must not allow himself to be beaten on the dribble as this would allow his opponent a chance to get the pass off. At the same time, the central defenders must mark the central attackers and be prepared to be first to the ball if it is served into the center. As the ball advances, the defense gets more compact. Passing channels close down. The defense gets compact enough that each defender has support. Understanding of small group attacking tactics and how to defend against them is important. With defensive support, the ball may be tackled.

Other than from set plays, there are three ways to score against a packed defense. 1.) Serve long balls from the wing to a central striker who will head to goal. 2.) Try to penetrate the defense with a series of short passes. 3.) Try to penetrate the defense by dribbling. The defensive strategy just described addresses each of these ways of attack.

**Counterattack!** When the defense wins the ball, a wing midfielder should move quickly upfield and to the wing. The defender winning the ball then plays to the wing midfielder. The midfielder receives the ball and moves down the touchline. At this point, one of the strikers moves wide to the touchline to receive a pass. The opposing wing defender must then move wide to exert pressure. This opens the center of the goal. At the same time, the weak side midfielder may make a run to the vicinity of the far post. The striker has the option to take on the first defender if he has no support, or pass to the center where now our team has even numbers. If he takes on and beats the defender, the striker should then try to shoot. His task is to beat the first defender and shoot. Don't waste time which would allow the opposing defense to organize. After even a few "close calls," the opposition will probably bring back another defender, which means they are even more outnumbered when they attack.

**Set plays.** The final danger to the defense comes from set plays, free kicks and especially corner kicks. Defense at set plays for various situations must be practiced.

**Conclusion.** As part of their general soccer education, players should understand the concepts of low pressure defense. They should understand it so it can be used where appropriate. They should understand it so they know the attacking options when the opposing team is using it. The inability to deal with tactical situations frequently leads to frustration and consequent unsporting behavior. This knowledge can lead to greater enjoyment for all.

[Return to my soccer page](#)

## **Picking A Defensive Style of Play**

With just a little direction, even very young players will be able to understand that if their team sends everyone to the opposing goal, their own goal will be wide-open and vulnerable to a counterattack. But, of course, if everyone stays back to guard their goal, they won't ever score or have any fun at all.

One good approach is to ask your players to think up some solutions to the defensive problem. One of the first suggestions that you'll probably get is to leave somebody by the goal. However, when you ask for volunteers, you are likely to find that everyone will want to be in the attacking group. Well, if nobody wants to stay to guard the goal, then what other solutions are available?

### **Option 1: Man-Marking**

One defensive solution is to have everyone pick one of the players on the other team to guard when the other team has the ball. Instantly, you have introduced the concepts of marking and following your mark. But, what happens if somebody loses his mark, either because he gets distracted or is slower than his mark or is simply beaten? Well, then you need to have the nearest available player jump in and cover for him, right? This is the second basic element of defensive support and needs to be learned and re-learned constantly. However, man-marking may be unsuited for players below U-10s, as they tend to be very easily distracted. In addition, because of the lack of size and strength in the younger groups, most opposing players tend not to be scoring threats until fairly close to goal so it may well be a waste of defensive manpower to mark players outside of scoring range.

### **Option 2: High Pressure Defense (Defensive Swarm)**

If young children are put onto a field with a soccer ball, divided into teams, and just told to use their feet to kick the ball into the goal of the opponent, they will instinctively play "swarm ball" (or "magnet ball" or take the "beehive" approach to the game. Why? Because they all like to be where the action is which, oddly enough, is where the ball is. As a result, they instinctively are applying a defensive style which is known as "high-pressure defense", in which several players try to surround the opponent and keep him from going forward.

Is the swarm a "bad" thing? Not necessarily so, at least from a defensive standpoint, as long as any attackers that choose to stay out of the swarm are

accounted for. The swarm actually tends to be very effective at shutting down attacks by an opponent until the opposition learns to spread out on its attacks and develops the skill to accurately pass the ball to open players. Moreover, kids tend to adjust automatically as the swarm becomes less effective, so the size of the swarm naturally gets smaller over time even without coaching intervention. Whether or not to permit a swarm obviously will depend on the number of players that you have on the field. In 3v3 or 4v4, it will be harder to swarm with more than 2 players, because you will leave your goal wide open. In 6v6 or above, it is possible to use a multi-person swarm fairly effectively.

### **Option 3: Low-Pressure Defense**

There is also another defensive solution available which is relatively easy for younger players to execute. In this solution, you can send 1 player to slow down the person with the ball and another one to back him up in order to give everyone else on the team time to get back and set up in front of the goal area. This is called "low-pressure defense," and is an approach which can work well IF 1) the pressuring players know how to do their jobs and 2) the retreating players are ready to become the pressuring players themselves if the ball is played to an attacker who is close to them. In fact, many top-level international teams use the low-pressure defensive system, so we weren't kidding when we said that a defensive "swarm" is not necessarily a bad thing. Of course, attacking players must be closely marked when they get into scoring range, particularly when they've developed the leg strength to make lofted shots on goal.

### **Handling Other Common Defensive Problems**

What happens if the other team has some really fast players? Well, if you also have some really fast players who are good defensively, one easy solution is to man-mark these particular threats even if you are using a low-pressure or high-pressure system overall. Also bear in mind that even a slow defender can be quite effective in stopping a speedy attacker once he learns basic defensive footwork and positioning. Lots of players who have had exposure to other sports such as basketball will already have been exposed to these concepts.

Essentially, the job of the initial pressuring defender is to slow the attacker down by getting in his way, giving ground as slowly as possible, but not making any

attempt to win the ball until cover has arrived. This is a job that anyone can do with practice, so don't allow your slower players to avoid learning these vital skills because of their lack of speed.