DEFENDING TACTICS

In Part 1, we offered general guidelines for defending. In this article, we will focus on defending in a 4-3-3 formation, using zonal defending in a two-line block of players: the defending line and the midfield/winger line. Each of these two lines will defend zonally and will stay very close to each other to create compactness. One of the attacking midfielders (10) and the center forward (9) will position themselves ahead of the two-line block and often will apply the first pressure. The defending shape is shown in the diagram below: (note the use of the 4-3-3 numbering system)

As you can see in the diagram, the back line and the midfield/winger line are very close to each other with a distance between the lines of around 10 yards maximum.

Every time we lose the ball, we transition immediately into the defensive shape shown above. The wingers (7, 11) need to recover quickly into midfield and join the defensive block. The attacking midfielder (8) needs to quickly drop and join the line. The players in the two-line block do not man-mark and do not follow opponents. Instead, they maintain this two-line block and mark whoever comes into their zone. Once an opponent leaves their zone, they ‘hand him’ over to the next teammate with verbal communication.

The two-line block moves and shifts up and down and sideways, depending on the location of the ball. Imagine that the players in each line are connected to each other with a rope and so when one player
moves, the rest follows. For example, the location of the two-line block in the diagram above would apply whenever the other team has possession in their own half. When the ball is in the other team’s half, our keeper will be close to the edge of the penalty area, so he can intercept through balls.

If our opponents succeed in bringing the ball into our half of the field, whoever is closest to the ball must apply pressure.

**POSITIONAL ROLES AND RESPONSIBILITIES**

The #10 and #9 are responsible for applying pressure on the opposing center backs and defensive midfielder. Typically, the #9 will press the center backs and the #10 will mark the defensive midfielder. See diagram below where the opposing center back has the ball and our #9 is pressuring him while our #10 marks their #6. Note that our #9 is forcing the ball into our right flank, prompting the two-line block to start shifting to the right.

If any of the center backs steps up into midfield, our #10 or #9 must track and mark him. On occasions when the #8 made a forward run and we lose the ball and he has no time to recover into the line block, our #10 must drop in his place.

7 and #11 are responsible for tracking and marking the opponent’s wide defenders whenever they join the attack. The #7 and #11 should apply pressure if their opponent steps up on the flank into our half and
receives the ball. See diagram below how the whole block shifts right and stays compact as #7 applies pressure on the ball.

Our #6 must communicate with #8, #7 and #11 and make sure his line stays close to the back line, no more than 10 yards in front. Our #2 and #3 are responsible for pressing opponent’s wingers. Our #4 and #5 are responsible for marking and covering opposing center forward or double forwards. They are also responsible for shifting the two-line block up and down and sideways as the ball moves around the field. If an opposing forward drops into the space between the two lines, our #4 or #5 must step up and press him and deny him the chance to turn as shown below.
Our #2 and #7 must work together on the right flank and coordinate who marks the winger and who marks the overlapping defender. The same needs to happen with #3 and #11 on the left flank. See diagram below, where the winger slides inside and the wide back overlaps, prompting our #7 to track and mark the overlapping wide back while our #2 follows the winger inside.

![Diagram](image)

#6 and #8 work together to press and cover for each other. They must coordinate and communicate to each other who presses and who covers. If the other team’s midfielders make a penetration run, our midfielders must track them and stay with them. The #4 and #5 must work together to press and cover for each other.

**TRANSITION TO DEFENSE**

If we lose the ball in the other teams’ half, we either press the ball high to try to win it immediately or everyone quickly drops and takes up the defensive shape in the middle third as shown in the first diagram of this article. Pressing or dropping will depend on the situation and strategy of your team. Also, when the other team has a goal kick, we adopt the same shape in the middle third and allow the other team to bring the ball forward. But once the ball is in our half of the field, we start pressuring the ball.

If we lose the ball in our half of the field, the closest player to the ball must press the ball and prevent the other team from penetrating by forcing the opponent to play it back or square. This will give our team time to make recovery runs into the defensive block shape. See diagram below where a pass from #4 to
#8 gets intercepted, prompting our #6 and/or our #8 to press the ball to prevent penetration while everyone else recovers into the two-line block. In the diagram the #6 was positioned between 4 and 5.

DEFENDING AGAINST OTHER FORMATIONS (4-4-2 AND 3-5-2)

When playing against a 4-4-2 formation, our team will maintain the same two-line defensive block but our #6 will drop and be part of the back line which means it will be a 5 player back line and a 3 player midfield line block. The #2 and #7 will coordinate who presses the other team’s wide midfielder and who covers. See top diagram below.

When playing against a 3-5-2 formation, we will again use the two-line defensive block and the #7 and #11 will apply first pressure on the other team’s wide players, leaving our #2 and #3 to provide cover for #4 and #5. If our #7 or #11 do not have the time to recover and mark the other team’s wide players, our #2 and #3 will press and mark them. See bottom diagram below.
In closing, it is worth reminding your players that no matter what system we use, we must apply pressure on the ball. Otherwise, the defending system will break down. Loose marking will allow opponents time to pick our team apart. Pressure applied correctly, will increase our chances of winning the ball back.