



## A Message from NASPE Sport Structures

# Principles of Play for Soccer

by John Ouellette

Soccer coaches must understand the *principles of play* if they want to succeed. That is, they must understand the rules of action that support the basic objectives of soccer, because the rules are the foundation of any coaching strategy. Young players do not generally concern themselves with the principles of play. Their main interest is in scoring. As coaches, we need to help players understand the principles of play so they will appreciate the game in its entirety. The principles of play serve as a set of permanent criteria that coaches can use to evaluate the efforts of their team. There are no absolutely correct decisions in soccer, and coaches cannot always judge how well their team is playing based only on the results. Opponents may be strong or weak. From one moment to the next, the score may not be an accurate reflection of how well the team plays. There must be a moment-to-moment method of assessment, or a measuring stick. The principles of play are the measuring stick!

### Game Objectives

There are five attacking and five defending principles of play, but before players begin to understand the attacking and defending principles of play, each must understand the two objectives of play – attacking and defending:

- Attacking objective: score – advance – maintain possession
- Defending objective: stop scoring – delay the attack – regain possession

Which objective is most important: attacking or defending? It all depends on the relative position of a) the ball, b) the player, c) his/her teammates, d) the opponents, and e) the time. The principles of play support or help achieve the objectives of the game. Simply put, the end result will depend on how strong the coach's principles of play are, or how weak the opponent's principles of play are.

### Definitions of Attacking Principles

**Penetration** - Advancing the ball past opposing players by shooting, dribbling, running, passing or using 2 v 1 situations.

**Depth** - Supporting teammates by reading the game, providing strong communication, creating safe options and opportunities for advancement, and creating numerical superiority.

**Mobility** - Creating attacking opportunities through change in position, movement off the ball, and creating numerical advantage.

**Width** - Attacking on a broad front stretching the defense

and creating space, isolating defenders to 1 v 1 and creating opportunities for through-balls.

**Creativity** - Individual flair achieved by takeovers, overlaps, diagonal runs, and blind side runs.

### Definitions of Defending Principles

**Delay** - Slowing down the attack by closing the gap and denying space to allow the defense to get organized.

**Depth** - Assisting the defense by providing strong communication, reading the attack, and creating numerical superiority.

**Balance** - Reading the attack and providing an equal or greater number of defenders than attackers at the point of attack, while simultaneously covering the vital area near the goal.

**Concentration** - Compressing or restricting (shepherding) the attack into a confined area, making it more predictable and easily defended.

**Composure** - Patience to delay and wait for support, discipline to play ball-side or goal-side to take away shooting opportunities.

### Attacking principles are countered by the defending principles:

Attacking Principles		Defending Principles
Penetration	Countered by	Delay
Depth	Countered by	Depth
Mobility	Countered by	Balance
Width	Countered by	Concentration
Creativity	Countered by	Composure

All soccer coaches need to understand and ensure that the five attacking and five defending principles of play are practiced at every training session and at every match.

Remember, the principles of play are "the rules of action that support the basic objectives of soccer," and the foundation of a soccer coaching strategy.

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*This is the second in a series of articles from the NASPE sport structures. For more information on the contents of this and future articles in the series, contact NASPE Sport Program Administrator, Christine Bolger at 800-213-7193, ext. 417, or [cbolgerA@aahperd.org](mailto:cbolgerA@aahperd.org).*