The Principles of Play

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**Attacking Principle No.1 - Penetration**
- As soon as the ball is re-possessed, the first thought should be, "Can we score?" If not, is there a forward player in an unmarked or advanced where the question then is, "Can we play the ball to him or her"?
- The best, and most free-flowing, teams in the world always look forward first even though they won't necessarily play forward if it means just "Hit and Hope!"

**Defending Principle No.1 - Delay**
- The defending team must do everything possible to prevent a quick counter-attack after losing the ball. Often, this is accomplished by one player going to the attacker with a ball, applying pressure to prevent the ball from moving forward. Or it might be accomplished on a team basis by bringing in some of the other defending principles we summarize below, e.g., the team "drops off" and concedes space away from the goal while filling in the dangerous attacking areas in front of the goal.

**Attacking Principle No.2 - Support**
- To keep possession and to be able to move the ball down the field, the player on the ball needs support. Forward support, back support and side support, will allow the player with the ball different close supporting options, and put doubts in the minds of the defending players.
- The player with the ball is sometimes referred to as the "1st Attacker" as opposed to our delaying 1st Defender. The player or players giving immediate support are called the "2nd Attacker" or Attackers as there is usually more than one giving close support.

**Defending Principle No.2 - Support in Defense (or Depth)**
- As the attacking team seeks to support their 1st attacker, the defending team in its cat and mouse persona, supports their 1st defender - the delaying player.
- The defensive support by the players nearest the challenging player attempts to give close support. Their distance of support will depend on the situation and what part of the field they are supporting the player on the ball, but generally speaking, the defensive support is much tighter than the attacking support, as attackers are trying to create space and defenders are trying to restrict space.

**Attacking Principle No.3 - Width**
- Stretching the defense is always in the minds of the attacking team. A team can be stretched vertically and laterally. The front players will try to push the defense back as far as they will go, but the other important way of stretching the defense is to use the width of the field - either by having players in wide positions or by making runs into wide positions.
- Players in wide positions are often away from the ball, sometimes on the "blind side" of the opposition. As such they are called 3rd Attackers.
Defending Principle No.3 - Concentration

- If attackers are trying to stretch the defense, it behooves defenders to concentrate themselves in the most vulnerable areas. Concentration and the next defensive principle, Balance, work closely together, as do Delay and Support. If a defending team is in any way unsure of itself, it should fall back to cover the goal, stay compact, and give away space in less dangerous parts of the field (this another way of effecting "tactical delay").
- Some coaches call this "Compaction."

Attacking Principle No. 4 - Mobility

- Individual speed and the ability to interchange positions are so important in the modern game. As an attacker moves forwards, sideways, or diagonally, with or without the ball, the opposing team has to adjust and this can unbalance the defense and adversely affect the defensive "shape" and create attacking opportunities.

Defending Principle No. 4 - Balance

- If mobility is being used to unbalance teams then that principle of maintaining balance must be exercised to counter the attacking runs. Now the picture is becoming more complex as all players are involved give the team Balance. Usually it is the players away from the bail - not the 1st & 2nd defenders - who give "Balance" and they are called the 3rd Defenders.

Thirds of the Field

Before covering the final two Principles of Play, we should quickly look at the importance of thinking in "thirds" of the field, rather than the more conventional halves. While the rules of the game and field markings split the field into two, the tactical considerations are better viewed in thirds.

- In the **Defending Third**, the general philosophy is that of caution.
- The **Middle Third** is the battleground for dominance and the build-up area for successful attacks.
- The **Final Third (Attacking Third)** is where 99% of all goals are scored from.
- For that reason, the thinking in the Attacking Third must be very different than in the Defending Third.

The **Defending Third** is the no-nonsense zone where any danger is met by playing for safety - perhaps by a long clearance kick, even playing the ball out of play to concede a throw-in.

The **Middle Third** is less-dangerous and is the build-up zone, but any mistake made in that area of the field can also be costly.

Whereas in the **Final Third (Attacking Third)** taking risks is what good attackers are looking to do by using dribbles, fakes, back-heels - in fact, anything that is going to create an opportunity for getting a shot at goal, or for making an attacking for an attacking team-mate. So that sets the scene for our final two principles of play.

Attacking Principle No. 5 - Improvisation/Creativity

This is the most exciting principle. Improvisation is not exclusively reserved for the attacking third, but this is where it is most effective. Twists, turns, back-heels, dribbles, volleys, overhead kicks, all kinds of creativity have a place here with only limited risks. If the ball is given up in the Final Third, the opposition still has to penetrate through two-thirds of the field to even get a shot on goal - so that "risks" are worth taking.

Defending Principle No. 5 - Discipline & Patience (Control and Restraint)

If a defending team has observed all the previous four defending principles, it will find itself, for the moment, in good shape to deal with most, if not all, contingencies.

In which case, the defending the team should remain patient and exercise Control and Restraint and not "sell the jerseys" by reckless defending. Of course, the situation will change as soon as the ball is moved, or an attacking player moves into a new position and then all defending principles begin again.