

MY FOOTBALL / SOCCER PHILOSOPHY

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Introduction

In this paper, I will describe my football / soccer philosophy. It is a document that will define how I want my team to play football / soccer. I will also explain the formations I prefer in both defense and attack, which method we should use in the various stages during a game, the roles each player has, for what purpose I have chosen my philosophy and so on.

This football / soccer philosophy document is an update on what I wrote in September 2015. Since then I have discovered many new aspects of the sport, new perspectives that in some ways have changed my view of football / soccer completely. It has been an equally exciting and transformative journey where many old truths have been put to the test. Some of these myths have fared better than others, but I am convinced that Johan Solinger today is a much better football / soccer coach than he was some time ago.

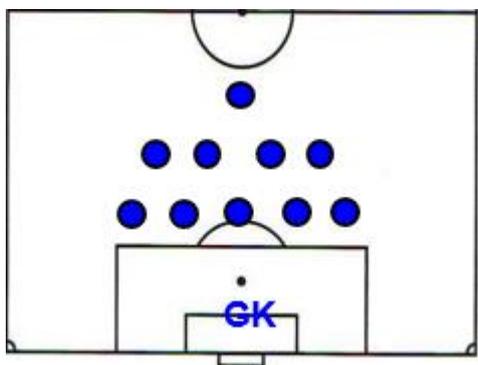
Formations

There are different ways to think when starting positions within a formation shall be selected. One way is to describe what kind of player types I would like to have in my team, after that I can either buy these players to my club or coach my current squad to play the way I want them to do. In my everyday life, however, this is a mere utopia, I rarely have the time to really teach the players into embracing a whole new way to play and recruiting the player I want is out of the question. The clubs I have worked with hardly have those amounts of money. Instead I customize my formation after which player types I have available, which sometimes means that I compromise with what I would like to do on the pitch, but on the other hand, the players will feel natural in the roles I have given them. I want to get as much quality as possible of the squad I have at my disposal, which means that I get to do some compromising in order to get results.

However, this document will not focus on the reality, but what I would like to do if I had free hands. I do know that a working day for a football / soccer coach is filled with challenges, but this paper's main focus is to describe what I want to achieve in an ideal world. Normally, I choose tactics based on what kind of players I have, but in this document there is no such limitations.

See this document as my manual on how I would like my team to play football / soccer if no limitations exist, but be aware that I am not naive. A good football / soccer coach has a well-written philosophy, but a great one understands when he need to adjust the idea to get most out of his squad.

In my team, I like to use a 5-4-1 formation in defense, as you can see below:



When we have the ball and want to attack, our formation is transformed into a 3-4-3:



Defense - Roles, player types and methods

In our defense, which is when we do not have the ball, we use a 5-4-1 formation. If our opponents have the ball in our half of the pitch, we all line up in a 5-4-1 system with straight lines. The flat back five have a straight line, the midfield and of course also the lonely forward. The reason it is not a 1:4-4-1- or 5-1:3-1 system or the like is that it becomes difficult for the players to keep the right distance between the lines when a player is between these lines. Distance between these lines tend to be larger than it is supposed to be, so we try to keep the lines intact. In our defense game in our own half of the pitch, I want at most 10 meters between each line. That means if our flat back five line up outside the penalty area line, the striker at the top have his starting position just outside the center circle on our half of the pitch. The team is therefore at most 20 meters long, from the back line to forward. The distance between the players in every line is at most 8 meters, which means that the width of the midfield will be 24 meters and the back line is 32 meters. Note that these distances are what it is like to be on our own half, but depending on the situation, the team may need to adjust this to be tighter, but this is the guidelines.

In our 5-4-1 formation, we use a method that we in Sweden call a positional defense (which is similar to zonal defending, with some adjustments). This means that it is the ball and our teammates who are the reference points of our defense and the opponents are not quite as important. The idea is that the opponents cannot score if they do not have the ball in between our lines, so we allow them to have it in front of and around us, but never in between us.

In our positional defense, we work with four kinds of collective movement methods that is called *side-to-side*, *centering*, *advance* and finally *retreat*. We maintain our distance and relative positions between each other and want to achieve straight lines in every part of the team, and also the correct distance (see above) between the lines that we have created. We always move our team to the side where the ball is in order to reduce the time and space for the opponents. We want, with the defensive techniques press and coverage, the opponents to play in front of us and around us but never in between lines of our team.

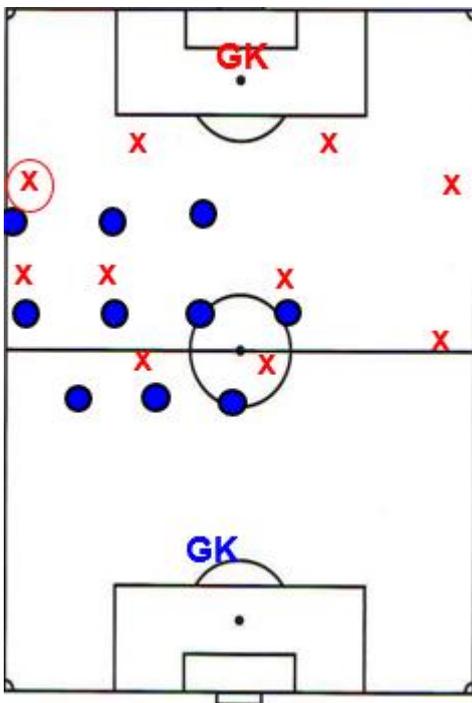
It could look like this when we, for example, make a side-to-side-movement:



The team has moved over to the left side and deliberately leave the right side open. We are trying to achieve redundancy where the ball is so the opponents will find it difficult to get out of the situation without either play a very problematic pass or pass it back.

With the method of press and coverage (the primary priorities in a positional defense), we get the opponents to the space we want them to in order to get the ball in the next phase. The closest player presses the ball holder, the other team members cover the space behind.

When we are on the opponent's side of the pitch, we still work in a positional defense, but this is time the distance between the parts of the team are a bit larger. Instead of preventing the build-up play, we wish to recapture the ball on their own half, which means that we want to pursue a higher defense line. We control them so they play the ball inward instead of outward, because now we are many players in the center of the pitch, and will most likely get a very good scoring chance if we recapture the ball centrally here.



Note that the distance between the back line and midfield is a bit larger than before and that the wide forward remain high up in the pitch. The reason for the greater distance between the back line and midfield is that the back line should get a head start if the opponents choose to play the ball long behind our back line. If the opponents succeed with this, it means that we have failed in our press-work and need our forwards and midfielders to retreat to our own half as well.

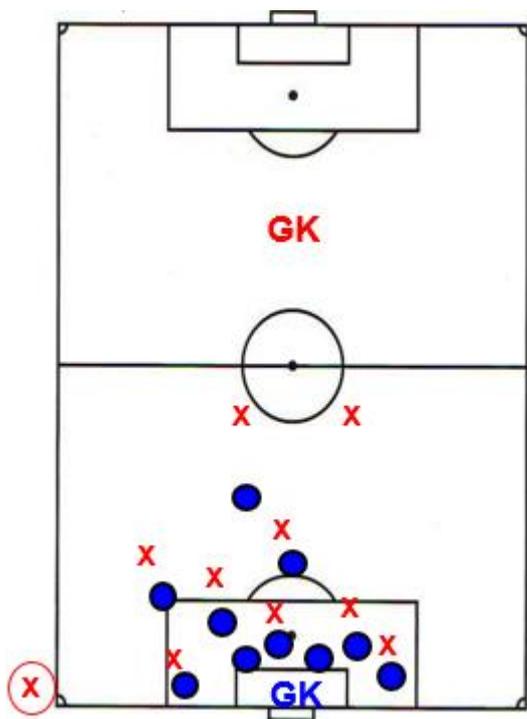
We can still have high starting positions on the opponents half if they play the ball into the playing space #1 (i.e. between our forwards and midfielders) because we are so many players here, but if they have the ball with the face towards our goal without pressure from us, or even worse, can pass the ball directly into the playing space #2, we need to retreat with our whole team to our own half of the pitch. The same thing applies if the opponents have reached the playing space #2 (between our midfield and back line) with the ball or succeeded with a cross ball to a player without pressure, the whole team need to retreat and reorganize to the 5-4-1 formation. It is important that every player is disciplined enough and that all of them retreat to the correct side in the defensive work, which means to have the ball holder in front of or around us. This is key in a

positional defense. With this way of defending, we will minimize the time and space for the opponents so they do not get clear scoring chances.

At the start of the game, we start with a low defensive line, but during the game we can change this in order to trick our opponents. For example, when we start the game with a low defensive line, we will trick the opponents that they have lots of time with the ball in their back line. But when we change to a high defensive line, they will be caught by surprise and hopefully loses the ball to our pressing player. We change the level of the defensive line according to the football / soccer physics formula L (low) – H (high) – L / L – H – H. In this way, we will save our energy for the right moments and also tricks the opponents to play the way we want them to.

At set pieces (especially corner kicks), we work, unlike in the open play, a kind of man-marking defense. We use a combination of zonal defending and man-to-man-marking. Our two best heading players stand in line in front of the goal area and have their responsibility for their respective zone, then they mark the most offensive player that enters that area. All other players are marking an opponent. It is not always possible that we can prevent them from heading the ball, but our aim is to make clear that they do not get a good scoring opportunity with this method. If the opponent always is marked and on the correct side of the defender, they will not get a clear shot.

Note that two defenders in the picture below is standing in a line in front of the goalkeeper, while the other players have their respective man-man-marking.



At central free kicks that is close to our goal, we use a maximum of four defenders in the wall (GK decides where the wall shall stand and which players). All other players have a man-man-marking (the most dangerous players are being marked). At free kicks from the side we have a maximum of two players in the wall, all other players have a man-man-marking. Same procedure, but we fewer players in the wall, with other words.

Below you can see an example of how we would defend ourselves on a central free kick close to our goal.



At throw ins, however, we use a positional defense with elements of marking defense. This means that we have our formation intact, with the exact distances between our lines and between the players in the respective line, but if an opponent, on purpose, are standing in an offside position, we react on that and lower our defensive line.

In the first picture below, you can see that we use a positional defense but without elements of marking defense, which result in a player with lots of space. In the other picture below, you can see when the team has adjusted the positional defense to have elements of marking defense, which results in a much more solid defense at this kind of set piece.

Note that we also have adjusted the distance to be tighter between the lines since the opponents have a set piece close to our goal.



These types of players are required for this type of defense:

Goalkeeper

TYPE: A player who dare to communicate loud with his back line. Must also be quick when it comes to rush out and clear the space behind our backs and have a good understanding of the game. The latter and psychology (courage) are strong priorities.

ROLE: Responsibility to communicate with the back line so the GK is satisfied with the way we defend our goal. Rush out if the ball reaches the space between the back line and goalkeeper. Especially important to be prepared for a long ball from the opponents' half of the pitch so the GK can act as a kind of central defender libero behind the central defenders in his own half.

Central defenders

TYPE: At least two of them need to be explosively rapid. They should have good heading ability and, like the goalkeeper, be comfortable communicating with the midfielders in front of them and the wing backs. Understanding of the game, physics and psychology are major characteristics of the central defenders.

ROLE: On our own half to communicate with the wing backs and the midfielders in front of them. On the opponent's half of the pitch to determine when we need to come back to our own half. If the opponents hit a long ball, use a heading clearance so we prevent the counterattack attempts.

Wing backs

TYPE: Rush both back and forward at the flank. Need to have good football / soccer endurance. Important to have a decent pressing technique. Understanding of the game, technical skills and physics important key characteristics for the wing back.

ROLE: Keep the five back line intact and straight in our own half. Constantly be prepared to go out and press the opponent outwards. On the opponent's half, keep the line with the midfield, but the retreat if the opponents is unmatched in the playing area #1 or if they reach the playing space #2. Lots of rushes up and down alongside the flank.

Central midfielder

TYPE: Important to have good pressing technique, but speed is not equally significant as it is for the wing players. Good positioning. Likes to communicate loud. Understanding of the game, technical skills and psychology is the main characteristics.

ROLE: Provides instructions to the forward if they are pressing without cover from the midfield. Retreat to our own half if the opponent has the ball in playing surface 1 without pressure.

Wingers

TYPE: Likes to run up and down alongside the flank. Important to have good press technique. Be able to read the game and understand when it is time to advance or retreat. Understanding of the game, technical skills and physics is the most vital characteristics.

ROLE: Needs to rush a lot up and down at the flank. Keep the forward line intact when we are on the offensive half of the pitch and press the opponents inwards where we are redundant. If we got

outplayed, retreat to the midfield line and reorganize in the 5-4-1 formation.

Forward

TYPE: The best player regarding press technique. Loyal to keep the correct distance to the midfield. Understanding of the game and technical skills is the most important characteristics.

ROLE: Has starting position on our own half if the opponents attack there. Starts to advance if the opportunity is right (communication from the midfield behind is important here). Press the opponent inwards on the offensive half of the pitch, outward on our own half.

Attack - Roles, player types and methods

When we have the ball and are supposed to attack, we use a 3-4-3-formation. Below you can see how it looks like on our own half when the central defender has the ball.



As you can see, the five back line has transformed. The two wing backs have advanced and are now in level with the central midfielders. The three center backs have widened considerably. The central defender in the middle has a slightly deeper position than the other two. The two wingers in the midfield have advanced to form a three-man offensive with the forward.

When we attack, an organized build up play is the highest priority. We want to play the ball through the opponents' lines. We want to advance with short passes and we want to have as much ball possession as possible in order to control the game. We want to play the ball forward when we can, but pass it back to the defenders and goalkeeper if we need to maintain possession. However, we need to have a varied passing game, so straighter, longer passes is obviously not prohibited even if it is not our primary method.

In our build-up play, our central defender in the middles is important because this player controls the whole method. This player controls the pace of the game, when we need to play it short or do a long ball, so this player needs to have a great understanding of the game. Our center backs and wing backs widen as much as possible because we want to attack the opponents through the flanks and then create scoring opportunities, either by *challenging* the opponents, *turn* the build-up to other side to find empty spaces, make a *wall play*, do an *overlap*, hit a *cross* into the penalty area or make a *breakthrough* in the middle.

We want our players to have their faces at the correct direction, which means we want to have their faces towards the opponents' net as much as possible. For example, this means that we do not want to pass the ball to a central midfielder who have the back against the opponents' goal, but if we do it we only do it because we in a later event wants this player to face at the correct direction. The only way to score goals is to have the face in the correct direction, against the opponents' goal, so we naturally want to have our faces in the correct direction as much as possible. We also have greater chance of collecting information about the game this way. It is also important that we pass the ball in front of the teammate that will receive the pass. Just as in the defense, we move as a unit back and forth over the pitch to create appropriate distances in our build up.



In the picture above, we have advanced with the ball in our possession. As you can see, we keep good distances between each other to make it easier to pass the ball to a teammate. Note the slightly lower position of the central defender in the middle. Central midfielders are welcome to come down and meet the ball, but only to splice the ball back so we in the next stage can have our wing players to face the correct direction. Regarding the wingers and the forward, we can at times pass the ball to them so they can wall play it back in the playing space #2 to a central midfielder. The goalkeeper should always offer a passing option if it is needed.

For example, it can look like this like when we want to reach the playing space #2 and #3 via a wall play:



In the example above, our right back passes a winger who has turned to prepare for a wall play. When he receives the pass, he wall plays it into the playing space #2 where a central midfielder is running in. Now the central midfielder has the ball with his nose towards the goal, and the winger takes a new rush into the playing space #3 to press the opponents down. With this method, the winger creates space for the central midfielder, but are also ready to receive a pass in the playing space #3.

If the opponents conquer the ball, we try to maintain our 3-4-3 formation in the transition to defense to put pressure on them in their build up structure. We want push them inward in the pitch to conquer the ball early and create a scoring opportunity. If they play through us and are unmatched in the playing space #1 or pass the ball to the playing space #2, we fall back to the 5-4-1 formation and retreats.

However, if we win the ball in our own half, we prioritize a methodical build-up play in the first place, but we can of course counterattack if the opportunity is right. But the focus is to maintain a systematic build-up play.

At the set pieces, build-up play is still important and we constantly try to play on the flanks to find players in playing spaces, but we are happy combine this with shots if we are close to the goal. If we are trying the cross, our aim is to reach the far post so that we get the opponents' to move backwards.

These are the player types and roles needed for our attacks:

Goalkeeper

TYPE: Likes to have the ball at the feet. Constantly offer a deep passing option. Understanding of the game and technical skills is important for the GK.

ROLE: Delivering the ball to the back line in general and to the key center back in particular. At the counterattack to pass the ball to the wing backs or the free player. Offers deep playable passing option to relieve the back line and contribute to turn the build-up play to the other side if needed.

Central defenders

TYPE: Likes to have the ball and always gives a playable passing option to the other players. The key center back important in our build-up play and needs to be one of our best passing players. Understanding of the game, technical skills and psychology major characteristics.

ROLE: Prepared to distribute the balls to the wing backs and wingers. The key center back starts our attacks and dictate the tempo. All central defenders need to be a playable deep passing option for the midfield and forward.

Wing backs

TYPE: Likes to rush a lot alongside the flank. Likes to challenge the opponent. Both understanding of the game, technical skills, psychology, physics major factors for these players.

ROLE: Go wide in the build-up play, because we want to attack through our flanks. Rushes often

and a lot of up and down and challenge the opponent.

Central midfielder

TYPE: Skilled in small spaces with the ball. Good to orient themselves around to know when to pass the ball back to the central defenders / GK our turn with the ball. Give the wing players options so that we can turn the build-up play to other side where the empty spaces have occurred.

Understanding of the game, technical skills and psychology is important.

ROLE: Comes down to the central defenders to pick up the ball and turn with it or pass the ball back to them. Always give alternatives to the wing players and forward. Enter the penalty area to shoot.

Wingers

TYPE: Just as the wing backs does this player like to rush alongside the flank and to challenge opponents. Manages to stand sideways to either turn with the ball or pass the ball back. Here are understanding of the game, technical skills, psychology and physics important, just like the wing backs.

ROLE: Taking a step forward on the pitch to form three-man offensive with the forward. Likes the wall play. Often plays with the back against the opponents' net, but do it to find a teammate in the playing spaces with the face against the goal.

Forward

TYPE: Often plays with the back against the opponents' goal and thus must be skilled at evaluating whether the player should turn with the ball or pass it back. Loves to have the ball and enjoy it even in small spaces. Understanding of the game, technical skills and psychology is important.

ROLE: A good passing option for both the back line and the midfield. Often plays the ball back or turn with it if it is possible.

SUMMARY

Key points in our defense:

- We play a 5-4-1 formation in our own half
- All players are on the correct side of the ball carrier so they cannot play in between us
- We embrace the positional defense with press and coverage as top priorities
- We work with straight lines
- Distance from the defenders to the forward is up to 20 meters long in our own half
- Distance to the closest teammate in the line is 8 meters maximum
- We change our defensive line from low to high and vice versa according to the football / soccer physics formula L-H-L / L-H-H.

Transition from defense to attack:

- A systematic build-up with short passing as our primary method if possible. Use the long ball to counterattack if we have a good opportunity.

Key points in our attack:

- We change to the 3-4-3-formation, with wing backs at level with the midfield and wingers at level with the forward
- Our primary method is the build-up play with short passes. If we have a good opportunity, try to mix the game with a long ball.
- Our central defender in the middle is important in the build-up play.
- We create appropriate distances between each other and offer alternatives to the ball holder
- We prefer to pass the ball in front of players who have the face towards the goal
- If this is not possible, we pass the ball to players who plays with the back against the goal.
- Our primary methods to come to scoring opportunities is to challenge the opponents, make crosses into the penalty area, wall plays, overlaps, breakthroughs in the middle or to turn the play to the other side.

Transition from attack to defense:

- If we lose the ball in the offensive half of the pitch, we stand with our 3-4-3 formation and press the opponents inwards in the pitch, where we have a numerical advantage. This is to win back the ball quickly and create a scoring opportunity when the opponents are not organized.
- If the opponents reach a player in playing space #1 without pressure or fins the playing space #2, we retreat to our own half and organize ourselves into the 5-4-1-formation

At set pieces:

- At defensive set pieces, we have a mixed the positional defense with the marking defense.
- At corners, we have two players in a line in front of the goal area. All other players have a man-man-marking.
- At free kicks close to our goal, we have a maximum of four players in the wall, all the others have

a man-man-marking.

- At free kicks at the side, we have a maximum of two players in the wall, all others have a man-man-marking.

- At throw ins, we have a positional defense with elements of marking defense. This means that we use the positional defense, but if the opponents stand offside on purpose we take notice to this and lower the defensive line.

- At offensive set pieces, we prefer a systematic build-up play. But if we have the opportunity to shoot on goal, we should to do so. If we are trying the cross, aim for the far post so we can make the opponents to move out of position.

// Johan Solinger, 3 November 2016, Hisingen.

