

## Principles of Play Stand the Test of Time

In the late 90's, at a staff training weekend for the National Soccer Coaches Association of America in Allentown, PA, a significant decision was made for the upgrading of the NSCAA Academy program.

Jeff Tipping, who was the part-time Director of Coaching at the time, made a proposal to the senior staff instructors that a new course, the Premier Diploma, be initiated and that the content be based almost entirely on Systems of Play. What is the 4-3-3, the 4-4-2, the 4-5-1, etc.? How does one differ from the other? How does one system with the same numerical arrangement vary from one team to another? How do you counter a 4-5-1 if your system normally has 3 or 4 players in the midfield area?

Certainly this was the stuff of a high level course.

Several of us - notably Jack Detchon, formerly an FA staff coach, Peter Gooding, AD at Amherst College, and myself - argued that the Principles of Play, not Systems of Play, were more important and that should be the focus.

In spite of our suggestions, Jeff (now full time DOC with the NSCAA) went ahead. The result? The Premier Systems of Play Diploma Course has been outstanding success. All courses since inception have been full and have been held in England and Brazil, as well as the US.

So Jeff was right.

But Peter, Jack and myself, in part because we had been brought up with the focus on "Principles" in England, will continue to argue that the Principles of Play are an essential component of tactical thinking for all players and coaches.

the first to formalize the "Principles" in the late 60's in the manual, "The FA Guide to Training and Coaching." A few years back, I asked Allen's permission to use the "Principles" in a video I was directing and developing on behalf of Soccer Learning Systems.

Allen had no hesitation in doing so, but was quick to point out that these "Principles" were not a personal invention. Others in Continental Europe, in South America and most noticeably, Sir Walter Winterbottom, Alan's predecessor at The FA, had begun the process and clarified the most important "Principles of Play" before Allen put pen to paper.

In his own modest way, Allen only took credit for summarizing them in a comprehensive, but easy-to-understand section, in this visionary coaching book.

So what are the Principles of Play? There are 10 of them. The 5 Principles of Attack are countered by the 5 Principles of Defence.

I'm only going to identify them here without going into much detail, but if you are a serious student of the game I would encourage you to do some research and I will give a list of resources at the end of this article.

## The Principles of Play

ATTACK  
DEFENCE

Penetration

Delay

Support

Depth

Width

Concentration (Compaction)

Mobility

Balance

Improvisation/Creativity

Discipline/Patience

Attacking Principle No.1 -  
Penetration

As soon as the ball is re-possessioned, 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 and so and preventing the forward ball. 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 Defence (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 defence 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 defence back as far as they will go, but the other important way of stretching the defence 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 defence, it behoves 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 defence 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 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 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 opening 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.

## Transition

The word "Transition" has become a key buzzword in today's game - although "Transition" has been around the soccer world for ever (Counter-Attack!).

What happens after possession has been re-gained, or after the ball is lost, can often determine the result of the game. This is when a fast, positive response can catch teams off-balance and in poor defensive shape.

Good teams have a double persona. They are Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde. They play both ways - immediately they have to. So one moment they are free running, expressive and creative. The next moment they are mean, determined and task-oriented.

So was Jeff Tipping right about the Premier "Systems" course? Of course, he was.

Were we wrong?  
No! Principles and Systems are inextricably intertwined and work together. But a coach who does not fully understand the Principles of Play will always be tactically challenged.

Books:

The Principles of Team Play - [www.reedswain.com](http://www.reedswain.com).

Coaching the Team. [www.worldofsoccer.com](http://www.worldofsoccer.com)

DVDs:

Systems of Play. [www.soccervideos.com](http://www.soccervideos.com) & [www.worldofsoccer.com](http://www.worldofsoccer.com)