

**The Better Team Lost!: Exploring Soccer's Phases of Play**  
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**Introduction**

Anyone who has been around soccer for any length of time will appreciate that the better team doesn't always win. In no other sport can a team dominate possession, dominate the number of scoring chances, dominate the number of attacking restarts, and yet fail to secure a worthy result. In soccer, goals count, meaning inferior or tactically disciplined teams can often find ways to succeed against steep odds.

When the soccer match is over, knowledgeable fans and participants will offer their judgments on the quality of play and how lucky, unlucky, or deserving their team was that day. But how subjective are those opinions? While the unschooled observer will barely see beyond the final result in qualifying the value of a contest, the more sophisticated pundits will take the ebb and flow of the game and the quality of the tactical choices into account.

Soccer, like all invasion sports, can be objectively broken down into "phases" of play, with the team that demonstrates competence in most of these phases, by and large, having the better opportunity to emerge victorious. By definition, a phase of play involves at least two lines of a team, such as the defensive and midfield lines, or the midfield and forward lines; very often at least part of all three lines are involved.

The purpose of this article is to explain the phases of play. The intent is to help coaches, and any others associated with the game, appreciate how soccer can be systematically dissected; and, ultimately, how players can be helped to value and participate in a more constructive game. Inherent to the discussion is the assumption that players have achieved a level of technical competence that allows the coach a range of strategic (big picture) choices in his/her selection of tactics.

In the reality of soccer, the transition between phases can often occur very quickly and many times untidily, particularly when the technical level of the participants is not conducive to keeping possession. Soccer is a game of mistakes, and result-oriented coaches often employ tactics designed to reduce the risk of conceding goal scoring chances. In the extreme, this mentality results in a form of "soccer-tennis" with both teams playing the ball as far forward as early as possible in the hope of cashing in on defensive errors. This style of play is both basic and frenetic, and invariably hard on the eyes of the soccer purists who savor a more cohesive tactical landscape.

It is also true that a team's strategic choices may minimize or eliminate the utilization of one or more phases. For example, a team that "presses" is unlikely to also "bunker;" and a team that routinely punts the ball from the goalkeeper is unlikely to risk building out of their own end.

When the savvy soccer-watcher offers their opinion on whether the “better” team won, or not, they are consciously or unconsciously evaluating play as a reflection of their appreciation for the phases of play. Naturally, not everyone sees the same game in quite the same way, so, even for neutrals, deciding upon the “better” team can be very much a relative decision based on personal bias and an appreciation for the success of any chosen match strategy. For example, while Greece’s victory in the 2004 European Championships was begrudgingly applauded as a triumph for defensive organization and counter-attacking soccer, Red Star (Crvena Zvezda) Belgrade’s castigated 1991 European Cup penalty shootout win over Marseille following 120 minutes of bunkering defense could only be appreciated by their own supporters.

For the purposes of this article, a “good” team is defined as one that demonstrates a high degree of tactical organization, one that plays with controlled changes of rhythm in both attack and defense, and one that displays tactical versatility. While there is no such thing as a “perfect” game, good teams have the ability to efficiently and effectively change their tactical stripes to meet the demands confronting them.

**The Phases of Play**

In figure 1, “Game Strategy” is divided into attacking and defending options, with a breakdown of the associated phases of play attached to the appropriate side.



**Figure 1**

In the interest of clarity and flow and to help the reader clearly distinguish between the different phases of play, the information in figure 1 will be discussed in three parts.

#### Part I: The Attacking Phases

- Attacking and Building-up
- Transitioning From Build-up to Attack
- Building-up in the Defensive Half
- Building-up in the Opponent's Half
- The Moment Of Transition
- Counter-Attacking

#### Part II: The Defending Phases

- Defending Against the Counter-Attack
- The Pressing Dilemma
- Defending From Behind a Line of Confrontation
- Bunkering

#### Part III: Restarts

- Restarts

### **Part I. The Attacking Phases**

#### **Attacking and Building-up**

Soccer is a game of passing and dribbling, with the objective of scoring more goals than the opponent. In terms of individual decision-making, the first thought any player should consider when in possession is whether they can score a goal. How often, for example, do we see young players creatively attempting to beat the goalkeeper from distance? If scoring is not possible, the player should assess whether an assist is possible. If an assist is not possible, they should look to move the ball forward towards the opponent's goal.

In most circumstances, looking to advance the ball forward is preferred to moving the ball square or backwards. However, when a forward option is not available, the objective is to keep the ball in possession until a forward dribbling or passing option, or a shooting opportunity, becomes available.

As the options to attack the goal become more limited, either because the ball is too far away, or the opponent is too well organized, the better teams will look to circulate the ball and maintain possession. This is called building-up, or the build-up, and it is the phase of play most lacking and perhaps least understood in American youth soccer.

#### **Transitioning From Build-up to Attack**

At any moment during the build-up, a pass, dribble, or shot may signal that a goal scoring opportunity is available and the tactical phase has changed from build-up to attack. When an attack on goal is possible, the speed of play will often increase significantly as

individuals take initiative, or a small group of players attempt to gain a numerical advantage around or behind a defender(s).

Given these definitions of building-up and attacking, the distinction between the two can often be quite blurry. For example, the build-up may be as simple as a long throw from the goalkeeper to a forward when the opponents are caught in a poor defensive posture; to a long pass over the top of a flat back line by a quick-thinking full back; to a quick transitional pass by a midfielder to a forward following an interception close to the opponent's goal.

More likely, the formal building-up phase will involve forward and backward and side-to-side passing and dribbling. It is also true that the build-up will take two very distinct forms depending on the position of the ball.

### **Building-up in the Defensive Half**

In cases where the goalkeeper or a defender has secured possession and the opponent is not pressing, the better teams will take the opportunity to slow the game down and circulate the ball into attacking positions. This tactic of building from the back helps save energy and, as the ball is advanced, provides the attacking team with shorter distances to run with the ball or play penetrating passes.

The tactical advantage is simply a function of numbers, with the vast majority of system match-ups providing for the defenders and the goalkeeper to outnumber the attackers. For example, when both teams are playing 4-4-2, the four defenders and the goalkeeper often play against only two forwards, ensuring a high probability of maintaining possession and successfully advancing the ball.

When building out of the back against a retreating defense, the flank players will create space by moving as wide as possible; the forwards will create space by getting as far down field as possible; and the central midfielder(s) will provide the defenders with time and space by initially moving forward. If this space is not created, the team that attempts to build out will find themselves under pressure and in danger of turning the ball over in a very dangerous part of the field.

Playing out from the defensive half does not always include a formal choreographed build-up. Many times, the goalkeeper can initiate open play with a quick release to a teammate in space; the same is true of any player who gains possession in the defensive half. Sometimes these passes result in a counter-attack; most often they simply force the defense to retreat into their own half and allow the build-up to take place further forward.

### **Building-up in the Opponent's Half**

When a defending team deliberately bunkers in, or is otherwise pegged back in their own end, the attacking team is faced with a very difficult problem, as there will be very little space behind the defense and very little space between the defenders. Even on a regulation-width field of 72-75 yards, the challenge of creating goal-scoring chances demands skill, mental patience, and a high degree of tactical discipline. The team that

possesses good dribblers may succeed; the team that possesses the ability to pass the ball with pace and accuracy and length may succeed; the team that can quickly combine in tight spaces may succeed; the team that can score with shots from outside the box may succeed; the team that can score from wing play may succeed; the team that can score goals from restarts may succeed; the team that can change their formation and style may succeed; the team that can add a “dimension” player, such as a tall striker, may succeed. But nothing is assured, and history is replete with examples of courageous defensive performances resulting in famous results being secured against very long odds.

To build-up effectively when an attack has stalled, or patience is required, individual players must have the dribbling skills to keep the ball and the passing skills to warrant teammates spreading out from back to front and from side to side. With the offside law restricting how far forward a team can expand, the onus is often on the defensive line to drop off from the midfield to create time and space at the back of the team. This is often achieved in the defenders own half of the field and is one of the primary reasons why the lingering practice of positioning “goalie guards” – those who are required to stand on top of the penalty box -- is so abhorred by youth soccer observers. By restricting the forward movement of defenders to support the team during the build-up, coaches are destroying these players’ natural and necessary connection to their teammates and to the most enjoyable phases of soccer.

### **The Moment Of Transition**

In any soccer game, teams will find themselves in and out of possession, and the most dangerous moments during open play are often found when the ball transitions from defense to attack and from attack to defense. When a team is building up, the players are usually spread out from back to front and from side to side. The opposite is true of the defense, whose organized shape will be very compact, as players move towards the ball from the sides and from the front and back. While a good attacking team will have wide players as much as 75 yards apart, and will have committed defensive and midfield players forward for attacking support, a good defending team will try to move as a tight block in order to help create layers of help around the ball.

### **Counter-Attacking**

In the seconds immediately following a change of possession, two opposing dynamics come into play: The counter-attack and defense against the counter-attack.

The team that has just regained possession will look to exploit the spaces between and behind their opponents before the defensive block can be organized. At the higher levels, the team that can effectively counter-attack is often the more successful and therefore a premium is placed on speed of recognition and speed of play. The counter-attack can be carried out with any combination of dribbling and passing movements, with the point of origin generally impacting the likely tactical solutions.

Because attacking spaces are more available when counter-attacking, under-pressure defenders are often forced to take greater risks with offside tactics. This, in turn, pressures attacking players to better appreciate how, where, and when to run into

shooting or crossing positions. Players who understand the value of lateral and diagonal running in these situations often become the game breakers; conversely, players who run in straight lines often become offside.

Sometimes, what starts as a promising counter-attack opportunity quickly peters out as defenders recover goalside, or technical/tactical lapses kill the impetus of the moment. While the initiative for an attack may still be regained, it is more likely that teams must abandon the counter-attacking phase and revert to formally building-up.

## **Part II: The Defending Phases**

### **Defending Against the Counter-Attack.**

Knowing that the counter-attack is a pivotal tactic, good teams will look to develop transition skills that slow or stop an opponent's immediate forward progress. This is achieved by immediately pressuring the ball to force sideways or backwards passes; and by keeping the midfield and defensive lines well balanced positionally and numerically. Importantly, this continual defensive organization takes place during the building-up or attack. Teams that wait to defend until after the turnover are much more likely to be punished for their ball watching by good counter-attacking teams.

At the moment of transition, players in attacking positions are often on the wrong side of their immediate opponent and out of position to cover their own teammates. This is why immediate pressure on the ball can be so critical. However, where the turnover occurs on the field and whether the risk of counter-attack is high or low, will, in part, dictate how a team should react to a loss of possession.

### **The Pressing Dilemma**

In addition to factors such as weather, fitness, field conditions, and technical range, the time remaining, the score, and the importance of the match situation to any competition impact where teams start to defend. Counter-attacking situations aside, if, for example, a team is losing, or needs an additional goal, the onus is on that side to increase their defensive tempo and chase the ball. This results in pressuring the ball closer to the opponent's goal.

When a defending team chooses the right tactical cues, pressing can be a very effective tactic; however, it does bring risks. Pressing can be perilous because the defensive block must move forward and towards the ball. If this movement does not happen at the right moment and with the players reacting together, there will be attacking spaces left open within the block, or behind the block, or on the flanks. With defensive players committed forward without being organized, a quick build-up may produce dangerous attacking opportunities and break-a-way situations for the opponent. The defensive application of offside tactics also becomes important, as pressing teams can't also effectively protect the space behind their back line. This is one reason why goalkeepers must play out of their goal in pressing situations.

### **Defending From Behind a Line of Confrontation**

Pressing makes sense when the ball can't easily be played over or through the defensive block. When pressing doesn't make sense, teams can either force the issue by pushing players forward and taking greater risks, or they can drop back a little and start to defend closer to their own goal. When this strategy is employed, the team may still press when the right moment presents itself, but will otherwise drop back behind a pre-determined "height"-- such as 25-30 yards from the opponent's goal, or to the top of the circle on the opponent's side, or behind the half-way line -- before attempting to regain possession.

When a line of confrontation is established during the match preparation, the basic strategic approach is for the team to drop back in transition and begin defending when the ball reaches the confrontation line. However, the moment of transition creates a few more tactical dilemmas for players to assess. What if the closest defender doesn't pressure the ball and a counter-attack results? Or, if the closest defender correctly pressures the ball, should his/her teammates still drop back to the line of confrontation? Or, what if two defenders are in the vicinity of the ball and both are needed to eliminate a counter-attack or a quick forward pass. And, how do these decisions affect the reorganization of the defensive block?

### **Bunkering**

At the extreme, a team may simply defend "en masse" behind the ball in their own half and attempt to score goals with as few passes and as a minimal number of players committed to any attacking foray. This strategy of "bunkering and counter-attacking" is often chosen when one team is significantly overmatched by their opponent; are playing numbers down because of a red card, fitness, or injury; are playing to protect a lead; or attempting to keep a clean sheet. Ironically, this strategy can also work well for a good team playing against a tactically naive opponent, or a counter-attacking team that must secure a result.

### **Part III: Restarts...**

Given the paucity of goals in soccer, restart situations often present some of the best scoring opportunities in close games. Accordingly, it is almost standard for the top teams to utilize live and still image technology in their scouting to prepare for upcoming opponents. Nothing is left to chance, particularly at the club level, where time will be appropriated to restarts prior to each game.

There are five formal restart situations and three special situations that must take into account. The five formal restarts are goal kicks; corner kicks; indirect free kicks in the defensive, middle and attacking thirds; direct free kicks in the defensive, middle and attacking thirds; and throw-ins. The three special situations are drop balls; "ceremonial" restarts, following an injury or other non-foul stoppage; and the goalkeeper's punt or kick from open play when a quick release is not desired or possible. Obviously, each situation requires more or less training time, with restarts inside and around the penalty requiring considerably more preparation than, for example, drop balls, which may never feature in a formal training session.

### **In Closing...**

The purpose of this article was to explain soccer in terms of its tactical phases, or parts. It is hoped that the descriptions can impact both spectators and coaches.

For the casual parent-spectator, the intent is to help cultivate a more mature youth soccer crowd that can better-appreciate the developmental value of “good” soccer. In striving to replace “kickball mania” with an appreciation for Pele’s “Beautiful Game,” the “better” teams may still lose a few contests to tactically limited opposition, but the overall quality of the soccer spectacle, and the passion of the participants will surely be elevated above today’s average fare.

For coaches, the natural extension of this article relates to team preparation and the degree to which their players are capable of understanding and executing a sophisticated tactical approach to soccer. By helping each player understand their positional role and responsibilities within a system during each phase of play, the obligation to think and act under pressure can be transferred from the coach to the players... Ultimately, if coaches work towards developing independent thinkers who understand the game, we will all enjoy some relieve from the prescription coaching that is a demotivating plague on our youth.

One final thought. As Rinus Michels pointed out in *Teambuilding*, the process of molding a competent team starts with the preparation of young players many years earlier. Good technical players who can solve small-group tactical problems will always be capable of playing different styles of soccer, as we can observe from the global nature of the top professional leagues. It remains a truism that the goal of youth soccer is to produce generations of passionate, insightful players with a comfort level for the ball in the hope that a few special players with exceptional individual qualities will emerge. As Jay Hoffman would take pains to remind us, talking tactics is important, but the three most important cornerstones of any tactical discussion will always be technique, technique, and technique!