

Understanding the Pitch by Thirds

By Leo Komonchak

The field of play in its simplest form is a flat rectangular surface that is hopefully green with a bunch of lines or markings on it that determine where a player is on the pitch (soccer field).

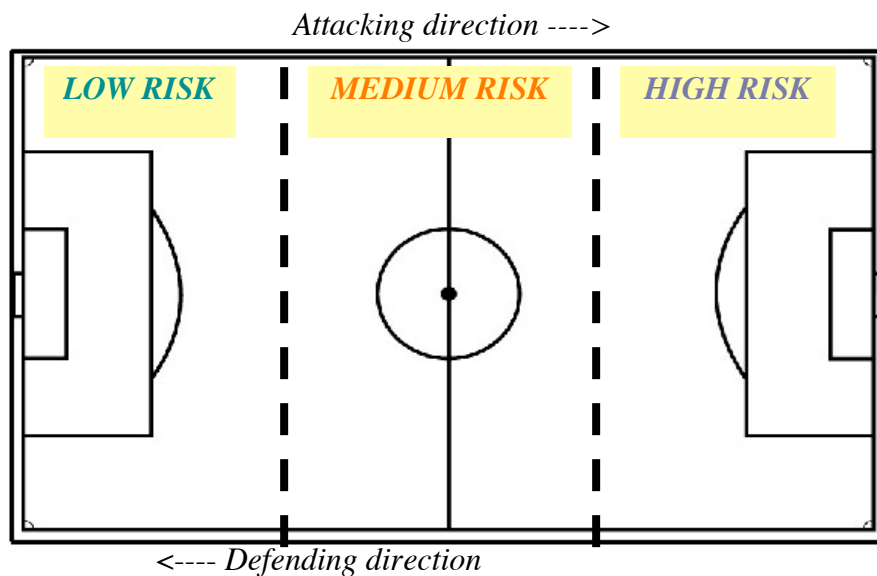
Well there you have it, we could be done right here but not so fast! The fun has only begun in understanding as a Coach, what this all means to our young players who are rip roaring ready to go.

Let's start with the objective of the game, which is to put the ball into the opposing team's goal. Simple enough, it is fairly easy to explain to the players as the Coach. In fact "the simpler the better" is always the best training method. It is your ability to communicate this concept that will help the players in their understanding of what is going to happen. It is key for the players to know why, when and where to do certain actions on the field of play to get the desired result. This is the tactical development of the player's game.

Let's take a look at how the importance of explaining of how these three-thirds to a soccer field go a long way in developing the player's awareness of field position during the game:

DEFENDING THIRD
MIDDLE THIRD
ATTACKING THIRD

Notice each "third" has it's own tactics or "significance in the game and this is basis for how the players are trained to apply the right "play" depending on where in the field the ball is located. It is the action the team takes in relation to what third the ball is located.



Let's go back to the thirds of the field to take a look at what players need to understand and as Coaches you will teach your players to make decisions based on these criteria:

DEFENDING THIRD – VERY SAFE/LOW RISK
MIDDLE THIRD – SAFE/MEDIUM RISK
ATTACKING THRD – LESS SAFE/HIGH RISK

DEFENDING THIRD: Safety is the team's primary focus here. This is where defense is applied and control of the ball is necessary since a ball lost here could result in the immediate scoring opportunity for the opposing team. Players need to make low risk passes, avoid dribbling in crowded areas and watch for your own players that may be marked. Again, train players to associate the level of play with the location of the ball on the field.

One possible positive result (advanced play) is the players recognizing the opportunity of the counter-attack, placing your team on the attack from the defending third. Now you see the strategy of soccer that can happen anywhere on the pitch!

MIDDLE THIRD: Players become a little more risky as they transition the ball from the defending third to the third of the field where the Mid-Fielders are key to the pushing the ball up and this may mean some risk in an attempt to penetrate into the attacking third of the field.

For example, in the middle third a player may pass to advance the ball; in this progress it could be intercepted which may prove that the opposing team still only has to beat a few players before a direct attack on goal.

In the end, by taking this measured risk it allows the player to learn from the experience and to develop the confidence to advance the ball through the Mid-Field the next time. It is a balance of sorts between dribbling and passing that will gain success in the middle third. Remember, teams who control the middle third control the game.

ATTACKING THIRD: Now the team can be creative and much more risky in the penetration by using speed and width to advance the ball into the attacking third of the field. Remember the caveat of simple soccer? Score a goal! Again, training the players to look to pass (into the space) and dribble is one thing. However, there is now another all-important element at this stage of the game and it is players must shoot the ball with the result possibly being a goal! Even if the opposing team regains control most of the opposing team's players will have come back into a defensive position between ball and goal. This means there will be time for your team to recover from this momentary failure (risk).

The lesson learned here is invaluable to these players as they learn to assess what to do in a risk-reward situation. Giving your players this experience of decision-making goes well beyond the soccer field. Encourage your players who are willing to take a chance to beat a defender. Instill courage and determination into your players by having them take the ball to the defender eventually this training will pay off as your team develops. By learning your own player's capabilities you will know the difference between the creative player and one who never gives the ball up every time they dribble with it.

The creative player must be positively reinforced and if it can be replicated in other players on the team then you have something incredibly special working for the team. As the coach and facilitator nothing could be more fantastic!

As the coach you will determine your best formation based on recognizing the ability of your players. Perhaps you may use a 4-4-2 or a 3-5-2 formation it all depends on the opponent, the players and strategy. Players can position and play for the 2 V 1. If you discover an opposing player's weakness it may be one of your players dribbling into 1 V

1 situation gaining the advantage then shooting. Meantime the supporting attackers take up position to finish a scoring opportunity knowing where to be once the shot is taken.

Okay, no worries you'll see this information again in a forthcoming article on attacking and defending principals of play.

Again, there is much more to cover but let this serve as a good starting point to your understanding and knowledge of the game. Develop your own coaching method to be able to communicate this knowledge to the players and how to observe and coach positive correction. Above all Coaches, please make sure to create an environment where the players enjoy the game by having fun.