

Implementing the Flat Back Four

Making a change, even midseason!

You've read the articles. You've talked to other coaches. You've seen it on the playing fields. It's right for your team, and you want to make a change. How can you possibly do it midseason?

Well, I can tell you first-hand, it can be done. I heard many positive things about using a flat back four defense. You know the arguments. Improve decision-making. Increase technical demands, and therefore, technical ability. Improve the team's counter attack. And, in addition to all of this, it better fit the players that I had; that is, in comparison with using a single Sweeper deep in the back.

Before we started, I discussed the change at length with the team and at length with the parents. The conversation with the parents was particularly important. I had to set expectations for the coming weeks, as well as limit, the best I could, any sideline coaching.

In order to make the switch we needed to be well grounded in the basic concepts of 1st, 2nd, and 3rd defenders; that is, pressure, cover, and balance. My players clearly understood and executed the role of pressure (1st) defender, and had a basic understanding of covering (2nd) defender; however, we would need to work on this, as well as in the area of defensive balance (3rd defender).

We spent the next practice reviewing the role of the first defender and "introducing" the second defender. At the following practice we worked primarily on cover. This was a fairly easy concept for the players to understand; however, getting them to execute consistently and communicate effectively, was difficult. We were making progress, though.

The tough part of the change was teaching the role of the third defender. This is obviously a vital part of playing a flat four in the back since you lose the safety net of the Sweeper. "Balance" is a tough concept for U12's to comprehend. I found speaking in terms of "Shape" got the message across much more effectively. They understood the need to maintain shape, and could see how that related to what was going on in the field. Telling them to maintain balance meant nothing. Telling them to watch their shape made them aware of the space, their teammates, and the opponents they were trying to defend.

Making this change was obviously a difficult and risky task. We were a U12 Boys team fighting to earn Premier status. We could hardly afford to give away a game because the coach wanted to try something new. Fortunately, we were at a point in our schedule where we could take some chances. As luck would have it, we had a stretch of league games against teams in our district that were struggling a bit. Even with a new system, we should be okay.

Additionally, these games sandwiched a tournament we had entered at U13. Since we were playing up an age group, parental expectations were low. We could afford to try something new. This gave us a total of six games in which we could test the waters, certainly a long enough time to see if we could adapt this scheme.

So how did it go? Much better than expected. We've made great progress, but there are still mistakes. Several times along the way, we got caught too flat and gave up the breakaway goal. Many times our shape would break down, and we'd give up dangerous passes. Our covering defender still needs work. Too often, we get hung up on what part of the field we're playing, and leave our teammate all alone. Lastly, after much encouragement to make runs into the offense, we did...all at once leaving no one in the back to play defense.

Those are the downsides. Here are the plusses. Technically, everyone's game is getting better. We're playing smarter; more technically and tactically sound soccer. Overall, we're defensively much stronger. We ran off four straight shutouts during the season, and two straight shutouts in District playoffs to win the District tournament. And, we earned our Premier status.

Here's the bottom line. You can make changes. The players are way more flexible than we give them credit for. Certainly, in our case, the scheduling opportunity was a lucky break, but there's always a tournament upcoming you can use to test the water. Also, there's the Fall season. Fewer games. Fewer tournaments. Less pressure. Take that opportunity to stretch your players and teach them something new, even in mid-season. In the long term, you and your players will benefit greatly.

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