

Zonal Defense by Damager

A game of hockey can be separated into 2 phases:

- 1. When your team has possession**
- 2. When the opposition has possession.**

It is crucial that to be a successful team you have to be able to control the game during both of these phases. When the opposition has the ball the objective is to win the ball back as soon as possible without allowing them to create goal scoring chances.

For many years teams have adopted a method of defense which players are assigned to opposition players in their area of the field and they are to mark them as tightly as possible.

A defender would be required to run where ever their opposition player ran.

This method i.e.: man to man marking requires a lot of running around all parts of the field and the huge problem arises when 1 player is eliminated through skill and all the other players are marking their players and no one can now meet the ball carrier. Situations like this will develop all the time and one of your players will have to leave their player to meet the ball carrier therefore creating a free pass for the opposition.

The trend in the modern game is to employ a zonal system of defense. This system will generally be used when you have the opposition in their own half and preferably on one of the sides of the field. e.g... 16 yard hit. When employing a zonal system the entire defensive team will align themselves up according to where the ball is and in relation to the most dangerous pass that the opposition could use.

For example, if the opposition had a free hit on the top of the circle the defenders would align themselves in the line of all the passes down the centre of the pitch as well as any diagonal passes. They would however allow a free pass square to either the right or left back on the touch line.

Once this pass is made the angles and lines of the defenders will be adjusted as quickly as possible to close in on the player with the ball as not to allow the player any option to make an effective pass. It is crucial that the entire defensive unit i.e... 10 field players are aware of their specific positions as any gap in the system could be disastrous.

In employing such a method the defensive unit can push forward closing the passes without too much concern about the opposition forwards

movement behind.

If the system is done correctly and the lines and angles of the defensive unit are correct the ball should not be able to get through.

The biggest key to this method is communication from the players behind. This starts with the goal keeper moving up the pitch. The players behind must call the players in front into the correct lines as they can see if the player in front is not standing in the correct position.

The centre midfield and the centre back playing higher in the field are really crucial in the alignment of players.

These 2 players will often end up being the players who will intercept the ball or step up to make the tackle.

The players up front must also place the opposition player who is in possession of the ball under as much pressure as possible to ensure they cannot make an effective pass.

Often these players up front try and win the ball off the opposition but this often results in the player with the ball being fouled and a free hit is given away needlessly. Forwards must realize that their pressure will result in an errant pass and the defenders and links behind in the lines will intercept it and begin the counter attack.

This system will bring about many chances for attacks as you are winning the ball in higher positions in the field with the opposition very stretched as they tried to move your defenders around.

One of the keys to a successful team is to attack by using the full pitch and defend by condensing the space the opposition has to play i.e. attack in big spaces defend in small spaces. By closing the opposition's space the angles they had to make passes are closed.

If the opposition player choose to try and dribble out of the situation it is important that the 1st defender in the line realizes that he does not need to make the tackle but instead just needs to channel the opposition player onto another defender who will step up and make the tackle.

Often the 1st defender goes for the tackle and fouls resulting in a free hit which is just what the opposition want, time and space. The 1st defender must get close to the ball carrier to make sure they have their head down on the ball and cannot look up to make a pass or to see the 2nd defender advancing. It is basically a double defense with the second defender winning the ball. Again it is crucial that the 2 players involved are aware

that this is the plan, if not the result could be costly.

Reasons for zonal defense

- 1. to place the opposition in areas of the pitch with very few options**
- 2. to be able to win the ball higher in the pitch**
- 3. To avoid your defenders chasing needlessly after the opposition forwards.**

A coach once told me that by using a small bit of mental energy you can save yourself a huge amount of physical energy. I.e. the more you think the less you have to run. In the long term when you do win the ball you will have more energy to use for the attack that follows.

This system does take some time to perfect but the teams who communicate best and react to situations the quickest will find it very successful. This method is what I call an all play... all 11 players are involved and if 1 player is not aware of his role and does not do it properly the opposition may find a way to get out of a tight situation.

Teams must also realize that by using this method does not mean there is no place for man to man defense. As the opposition move up the field and are behind the first line of defense a lot of teams will switch to a man to man system as the field becomes spread and it is difficult to place the opposition under the same pressure.

This is crucial as the play gets nearer to the circle. At this stage it will generally be the centre back who is not marking who will step up quickly to meet the ball carrier or alternatively take over the player the centre midfielder is marking and push that player forward to meet the ball carrier, again the communication is crucial.

When a team decides to use this method of defense the best way of starting off is to make sure all the players are confident in the positions they will be taking up on the pitch. By running through various scenarios and situations slowly at practice on the pitch or on a coaching board at a team meeting the players will learn where to move and the effectiveness of such a system if the fundamentals are in place.

Key issues:

- 1. 11 player defense with all aware of their specific roles**
- 2. Pressure from the players up front**
- 3. Alignment from the players behind**
- 4. Stepping up of the players behind to make a tackle or intercept pass**
- 5. Communication**