

Switching Around the Back

Changing the point of attack can be an effective strategy

Switching Around the Back *By Lawrence Fine*

When the opponent is playing high pressure in its offensive third or packing its players behind the ball, switching the ball around the back to change the point of attack can be a highly effective strategy.

Let's look at each of these situations separately, first when the opposing team is playing high pressure in its offensive third of the field. As an example, let's assume the right marking back has the ball and one or two opposing players are applying pressure (with "pressure" defined as an absence of space or time). Many players respond to this high pressure by aimlessly kicking the ball down the field. Instead, one option could be for the back to send a cross-field pass to his or her counterpart on the opposite side of the field. Since it is impossible for the opponents to run as quickly as the passed ball, this will move the ball to a player who is not under pressure.

Another reason to switch the ball around the back is when the opponent is playing low pressure and packing their players behind the ball, what was referred to during the Women's World Cup as the "Bunker Defense." When an opposing team packs it in, an effective strategy is to quickly switch the ball from side to side. This forces the defenders to give chase, which will tire them and begin to create passing lanes for the attackers. Since switching the ball around the back is an effective way to combat both high- and low-pressure teams, it's important to be able to do this effectively.

The most effective way to switch the ball is play "behind square" balls. Instead of passing from back to sweeper to back in lanes that are perpendicular to the touchlines, the target player should step few yards back off the perpendicular line. If a perpendicular pass is intercepted, both the passer and target player automatically are at a disadvantage, since they are caught flat and already have conceded a step or two to the intercepting player.

If the intended receiver is behind square (a few yards behind the perpendicular) and the pass is intercepted (which less likely to happen since the pass is moving away from the opponent), the intended receiver still is positioned between the interceptor and the goal. For this reason, when the right back has the ball, the sweeper should immediately move into a behind-square position. If the sweeper is making a run, another player should take that space. As soon as the ball is played to the sweeper position, the player on the left side should drop behind square automatically to prepare for the next ball. If the opposing team is playing high pressure and the ball is switched with behind square passes, a bonus is gained: not only will the possessing team have switched fields, it also will have spread the opponent out at the same time.

At the recreational level, simply playing the ball behind square and to the player's feet is adequate, but at a higher level, success is measured at a higher level of detail. Here, balls must be played to a specific foot at a specific time. If the ball is being switched for the right side to the left, the ball should be played to the player's left foot. This will allow the players to keep their bodies opened up to play the ball in the direction they are facing.

While the backs are playing the ball behind square to switch the field, the stopper and center midfielders should be in constant motion, trying to create triangles to give the backs the option to go forward instead of behind square on each pass. By doing this, the opponents are "kept honest." If they decide to overplay the back square pass, the team can be split with a pass to one of the midfield players, beginning the attack. While trying to create triangles to support the backs, the midfielders can take their game to a new level of detail by finding a position with their hips opened to the field so they can see the field and take their first touch going forward.

While the backs provide depth in support and the central players are providing forward support, the outside players provide width. They must be wide enough to literally be on the touch line. One yard in is not acceptable – the idea is to create space in the middle by starting this player as wide as possible. They also must be willing to come back deep enough that when one of the outside backs has the ball they form the second part of the support triangle with one of the central players. Any ball played to this outside player should be played either to his or her outside foot or, if possible, slightly in front of it.

By switching the ball around the back, it is much easier combat virtually any type of defense.