Tactical Principles of Soccer: concepts and application

Tactical Principles of Soccer

Israel Teoldo da Costa 1
Júlio Manuel Garganta da Silva 3,4
Pablo Juan Greco 2
Isabel Mesquita 3,4

1 Centre of Research and Studies in Soccer, Universidade Federal de Viçosa, Viçosa, MG, Brazil
2 Universidade Federal de Minas Gerais, UFMG, Belo Horizonte, MG, Brazil
3 Faculty of Sport, University of Porto, FADEUP, Porto, Portugal
4 Centre of Research, Education, Innovation and Intervention in Sport, CIFTD, Faculty of Sport, University of Porto, Porto, Portugal

Abstract: There is scarce research about tactical knowledge of soccer players based on game principles. This can be explained by the difficulty of observing and evaluating tactical knowledge during the game. Moreover, authors have used diverse terminologies, references and characteristics to define them, which makes definitions still confusing in the literature. The aims of this paper are to provide a review about some concepts regarding soccer tactical principles, to propose the addition of two more principles and to show their practical applications in the offensive and defensive phases.

Keywords: Soccer. Tactics. Game Principles.

Introduction

In Soccer, tactical skills and cognitive processes underlying decision-making are considered essential requirements for excellence in sport performance. Numerous situations arise during the game which frequency, chronological order and complexity cannot be predicted. This demands players and teams a great ability to adapt and respond immediately according to the concepts of opposition that are present in each phase of the game (GARGANTA, 1997). These situations of opposition are so evident in a Soccer match that one can observe tactics through the spatial organization of the players in the field upon the movements of the ball and the alternatives of action both teammates and opponents have (DUPRAT, 2007). Understanding tactics this way gives special emphasis to movements and positioning on the field and highlights players’ ability to occupy and/or create free space, and, accordingly, perform the most suitable tactical principles in a given situation.

Tactical principles are defined as a set of norms that provide players the possibility of rapidly achieving tactical solutions for problems that arise in the situations they face (GARGANTA; PINTO, 1994). They need to be understood as well as observed in players’ behaviour since they

are intended to facilitate the achievement of objectives that lead to score or to avoid taking goals. Their execution helps the team to be better at controlling the game, maintaining ball possession, performing variations in the circulation of the ball, changing the pace of the game and materializing tactical actions aiming to break up opponents' balance and, consequently, to score a goal more easily (ZERHOUNI, 1980; ABOUTOIHI, 2006). Therefore, the better a player or a team executes tactical principles, the better his tactical performance will be in the match.

The authors in literature about soccer have used different names and definitions to characterize tactical principles that are equivalent most of the time (ZERHOUNI, 1980; TEODORESCU, 1984; WRZOS, 1984; BAUER; UEBERLE, 1988; MOMBAERTS, 1991; BAYER, 1994; GARGANTA; PINTO, 1994; CASTELO, 1996; PERENI; DI CESARE, 1998; ABOUTOIHI, 2006). Even though the concepts presented by different authors vary, there is a certain congruence of ideas around four theoretical constructs relating to the tactical organization of the players on the field, which are: general, operational, core and specific principles.

Thus, this paper aims to revise all the definitions of the tactical principles for soccer both conceptually and operationally, and to propose the addition of two core tactical principles, highlighting their practical application in the offensive and defensive phases of play.

**The Tactical Principles**

The tactical principles arise from the theoretical construct regarding the logic of the game, and are operationalized by players' tactical-technical behaviours. Therefore, the players need to be aware of such principles in order to simplify the transmission and operationalization of concepts and help in the selection and execution of the necessary action. Tactical principles have a certain degree of generalization of movements and are closely related to players' actions, motor mechanisms as well as tactical awareness and knowledge (CASTELO, 1994).

The soccer literature presents different designations to mention and describe tactical principles. Amongst the variety of concepts presented by different authors (ZERHOUNI, 1980; TEODORESCU, 1984; WRZOS, 1984; BAUER; UEBERLE, 1988; MOMBAERTS, 1991; BAYER, 1994; CASTELO, 1996; GARGANTA; PINTO, 1994; PERENI; DI CESARE, 1998; RAMOS, 2003; ABOUTOIHI, 2006; DUPRAT, 2007), it is possible to notice a certain agreement of ideas of three theoretical constructs that relate to players' tactical organization in the field of play. These constructs are identified as general, operational and core principles.

**General principles** took this name because they are common to the different phases of play and to the other categories of principles. These are based on three concepts that come from spatial and numerical relations, between teammates and opponents, within the zones of challenge for the ball: (i) do not allow numerical inferiority, (ii) avoid numerical equality and (iii) seek for numerical superiority (QUEIROZ, 1983; GARGANTA; PINTO, 1994).

**Operational principles are**, according to Bayer (1994, p.145), "... the necessary operations to deal with one or various categories of situations". Therefore, they are related to attitudinal concepts for both phases of play. In defence these include: (i) neutralize shooting situations, (ii) regain possession of the ball, (iii) prevent opponents' progression, (iv) protect the goal and (v) decrease effective play-space; and in attack these include: (i) maintain ball possession, (ii) build up offensive actions, (iii) progress through the opponent's half, (iv) create shooting opportunities and (v) shoot on goal.

Finally, **Core principles** represent a set of ground rules that guide players' and team's actions in both phases of play (defence and attack) in order to create imbalances in the opponent's organization, stabilize the organization of the team and lead to an adequate intervention in the
"centre of play". In the literature, there are propositions with four principles for each phase of play that are suitable with their respective objectives. In the defence phase, the principles are: (i) delay, (ii) defensive coverage, (iii) balance and (iv) concentration; and in attacking phase: (i) penetration, (ii) depth mobility, (iii) offensive coverage and (iv) width and length (WORTHINGTON, 1974; HAINAUT; BENIOIT, 1979; QUEIROZ, 1983; GARGANTA; PINTO, 1994; CASTELO, 1999).

Besides these principles, we propose the addition of two more, named "defensive unity" and "offensive unity". These principles are related to the concept of tactics of play and to the functional collective coordination. They are based on cohesion, effectiveness and functional balance between the team's longitudinal and transversal lines in order to transmit confidence and endurance to teammates, and to enable indirect intervention in the "centre of play" from players in distant zones.

The addition of these principles emphasizes on the importance of the interactions of elements inherent to the game as well as the idea presented by Garganta (2005, p. 181) that states the following: "...each team facing another behaves as a unity whose relations between its elements transcend individual values". According to the concepts of tactical principles and through the playing model advocated by the team, it is assumed that the players should rationally occupy the field of play in the different configurations during the match, thus avoiding stretching and breaking the balance of the action lines. This would then result in allowing the team to play as a homogeneous block (HAINAUT; BENIOIT, 1979).

In practical terms, the execution of these principles is manifested in situations in which the player feels that his own team provides a basic organization. This organization allows the occurrence of compensation or support of actions in the "centre of play", ensuring effectiveness and organization. Indeed, when a player takes on another specific position or function in a momentaneous configuration during the game, it is expected that another teammate covers his/her duties and his/her position according to the system of play (CASTELO, 1996). Also, there are situations in which the players distant from the "centre of play" would provide conditions to their teammates directly involved in the action close to the ball in order to press the opponent both defensively and offensively. However, Castelo (1994) states that this requires each player to understand his/her teammates' functions and to be ready to help them in any game situations, by supporting or taking on their duties.

The execution of these principles forces the opposite team to play under a strong technical-tactical and psychological pressure because the block may compact. This may increase the possibilities of mistakes in game situations and lead players to directly interfere in the "centre of play" at any moment or circumstance, whether it is due to the displacement of the player towards the ball or for the fluctuation of the position of the "centre of play" (TAVARES; GRECO; GARGANTA, 2006).

Figure 1 schematically presents the general, operational and core tactical principles, as well as their objectives in each phase of play. It can be observe that the core principles have a dialectic relation, which means each attacking principle has its opposite in the defending phase,

---

2 The "centre of play" is a 9.15m radius circumference around the position of the ball. This measure of the "centre of play" was conceived based on the official laws of the game of Soccer (FIFA, 2008), since it is assumed that players who are positioned further than 9.15m from the player in possession are not able to directly interfere in the actions of play.

3 Functional collective coordination refers to the capacity of the team to move according to the exploitation of the skills and competences of each player.

4 The team's longitudinal and transverse lines originate from the position of the players in the field of play. It is based on imaginary lines conceived between players' positions that, if conceived perpendicularly to the goal line, are designated longitudinal, while if conceived alongside this same referential are designated transverse.

5 In this context, the idea of "homogeneous block" should be reported as a dynamic homogeneity, in respect to the purposes of the group, i.e. a unitary collective coordination. It designates a systemic phenomenon typical to the collective behaviour, such as occurs with shoals, flocks, and swarms when they move as one single body. In the search for organizational homogeneity, teams seek for positional balance, to ensure the identity and integrity of the collective system, while seeking for opponents' imbalance/disorganization.
with contrary objectives. The specifications, guidelines and typical actions of each of these principles for each phase of play are presented in the next sections.

Figure 1: Phases of play, objectives and general, operational and core tactical principles of the game of Soccer (based on GARGANTA; PINTO, 1994)

### Tactical Principles of Soccer

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>General Principles</th>
<th>Phases</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Attack (with ball possession)</td>
<td>Defence (without ball possession)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Seek for numerical superiority</td>
<td>Prevent opponent's progression</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Avoid numerical equality</td>
<td>Decrease opponent's playing space</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Do not allow numerical inferiority</td>
<td>Protect the team's goal</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Maintain ball possession</td>
<td>Avoid shooting opportunities</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Build up offensive actions</td>
<td>Recover ball possession</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Progress through the opponent's half</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Create shooting opportunities</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Penetration</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Destabilize the opponent's defensive organization;</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Directly attack the opponent or the opponent's goal;</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Create advantageous attacking situations in numerical and spatial terms.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Offensive Coverage</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Support the player in possession by providing options to give sequence to the play;</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Decrease opponents' pressure on the player in possession;</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Create numerical superiority;</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Imbalance the opponent's defensive organization;</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Ensure conservation of ball possession;</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Width and Length</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Use and enlarge the effective play-space of the team;</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Expand the distances between the opponents' positions;</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Facilitate the offensive actions of the team.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Move to a safer space;</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Win time to make adequate decision for a better subsequent action;</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Seek safe options through players in defensive position to give sequence to the play;</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Depth Mobility</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Create actions to disrupt opponent's defensive organization;</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Position oneself in a suitable space to score;</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Create in-depth passing options;</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Achieve ball control to give sequence to the offensive action (pass or shot on goal).</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Offensive Unity</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Facilitate team dislocation onto opponent's midfield;</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Allow team to attack in unity;</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Make safer the offensive actions performed in the epicenter;</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Allow more players to get in the game epicenter.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Diminish play-space in the defensive midfield.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Operational Principles</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Defence - Attack transition and/or Attack - Defence</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Defensive Unity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Enable team to defend in unity;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Ensure the spatial stability and dynamic synchrony between longitudinal and transversal lines of the team in defensive actions;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Decrease the offensive amplitude of the opponent team in width and depth;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Ensure basic guiding lines that influence the players' technical-tactical behaviours positioned outside the game epicentre;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Constantly balance or rebalance the relative strengths between the defensive organization according to the playing situations;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Avoid obstruct possible passing options for opponents that are in the epicentre of play;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Decrease the playing space using the offside rule;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Enable involvement in a subsequent defensive action;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Enable more players to get in the epicentre of play;</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Core Tactical Principles of the Offensive Phase

The core tactical principles of the offensive phase of play help all the players to guide their technical-tactical behaviours according to the team's objective, that is to take the ball to vital areas of the field and score a goal (CASTELO, 1996). The compliance to these tactical principles allows the team to obtain favourable conditions in terms of time and space to fulfil the tasks. For instance, a higher amount of players in the “centre of play” eases to perform offensive technical-tactical actions and increases the possibilities to create instability in the opponent's defensive organization (CASTELO, 1994).

**Principle of Penetration**

The principle of penetration is characterized by the evolution of the game, in situations in which the player in possession is able to progress towards the goal or the goal line, seeking for areas of the field that are susceptible to give sequence to the offensive action, to leave the opponent in a situation of risk and ultimately to take a shot on goal.

The guidelines of this principle seek for the disorganization of the opponent's defence by creating favourable spaces and numerical advantage. This allows the attacking player(s) to move to zones favourable to take a shot on goal.

We can consider dribbling and carrying the ball as typical penetration actions. Such action decrease the space between the player in possession and the opponent's goal line, enabling crosses or displacements towards the opponent's penalty area. Dribbling opposite player(s) allows the gain of space and guides the player in possession towards the goal, or allows the player in possession to perform a pass/assistance to a teammate to give sequence in the play or shoot on goal. Penetration can finally be a situation of 1 vs. 0 in which the player in possession "attacks" the space towards the opponent's goal.

**Principle of Offensive Coverage**

The principle of offensive coverage is related to the actions in proximity to the teammates of the player in possession. The principle gives offensive options to the player in possession to continue the play through passing or an action of penetration into the opposite defence.

The guidelines of this principle simplifies the tactical-technical response from the player in possession to the game situation, decreases pressure from the opponent, increases the time of maintenance of ball possession and, in a certain way, of the collective balance that allows a first defensive actions in the case the player in possession loses the ball to the opposite team.

The actions related to this principle can be noticed when the teammates of the player in possession are positioned in order to receive the ball and proceed with the play, performing, for example, “1-2 combinations” and/or triangle passing with the player in possession. We therefore consider that the player performed the principle of offensive coverage when he is positioned in the “centre of play” and enables a passing option to the player in possession, allowing him to pass the ball.

In practical terms, it is possible to verify that the distance between the player who performs the offensive coverage and the player in possession may vary according to the technical, tactical, physical, and psychological characteristics of the opposite team, their strategy for the game (midfield marking, pressing, etc), the weather conditions (wind, rain, snow, heat, cold, etc), the pitch conditions (grass, gravel, irregular, etc) and the position of the ball (defensive,
Players who perform offensive coverage have to be aware of these variables and to position themselves accordingly to the game situations. For example, the player performing offensive coverage can keep a greater distance to the player in possession when the ball is closer to the offensive third as it implies more pressure from the opposite team to regain the ball, or when the weather and pitch conditions are poor as higher ball control skills and time to control the ball are necessary. In contrast, when the ball is closer to the defensive third, where the pressure from the opposite team is lower or weather and pitch conditions are more favourable for the execution of pass, players can perform offensive coverage closer to the player in possession to provide more rhythm and speed to the game (CASTELO, 1994).

**Principle of Depth Mobility**

The principle of depth mobility is related to the initiative of the attacking player(s) without possession of the ball to search for optimal positions to receive the ball. Amongst the numerous movements performed by the player, we define depth mobility as the movement of the attacker "in the back" of the last defensive player in order to generate instability in the defensive actions of the opposite team, and substantially increase the number of chances to score a goal. Also, it is considered that these movements favour the creation of new playing spaces, which will provide better conditions to the player in possession to give sequence to the offensive action towards the opposite goal and/or to enable other teammates to move in the effective play-space.

The guidelines of this principle aim the variability of positions, the creation of options for deep passes, the rupture of the opponent's defensive structure, and the rise of the game pace.

The difficulties generated by the attackers without possession to their markers when they perform actions of depth mobility also include hampering the simultaneous perception of the ball and of the player. The spaces created by these movements, when properly explored by other teammates, make it harder for the opposite players to mark their respective attacking players and difficults mutual defensive coverage (WORTHINGTON, 1974).

Because it has such advantages, the aforementioned author considers that this is one of the most important principles to be developed collectively. Although, it requires that all players are able to comprehend the displacements of their teammates according to the position of the player in possession. In that sense, Depth Mobility does not simply and purely mean to move or change position, but rather to move with tactical meaning and organization.

The actions related to this principle can be noted through the players' displacements in relation to the opponent's goal or goal line. The movements towards the goal line can be designated by divergent depth mobility as it aims to create passing options, increase the width and length of the play space, and/or destabilize the opposite defence. In contrast, there is the convergent depth mobility, which characterizes actions in which the attacker dislocates towards the opponent's goal, aiming to find extremely favourable conditions to score a goal.

The success of the actions of depth mobility can be observed when the player can receive the ball in a more advantageous situation and can give sequence to the attack. First, his movements force the defender to follow him, as a consequence to be misplaced from his position of defensive coverage. Second, a pass is made to the space created by the action of depth mobility, enabling to threat the opponent's defensive system.
Principle of Width and Length

The principle of width and length is distinguished by the relentless effort to take distance of the player in possession in order to create defensive difficulties to the opposition. The transverse and/or longitudinal increase of the field of play forces the opponents to choose between marking a vital space of play or the opposite player (WORTHINGTON, 1974).

The actions of this principle begin after a team has regained the possession of the ball, when all players seek for and explore positions that allow increasing the offensive play-space. Positioning is realized on the base of the technical-tactical behaviours of the teammates and opponents according to the position of the ball. Therefore, the distance of some players from the "centre of play" create spaces for other teammates and provide free corridors towards the opponent's goal, or facilitates the occurrence of 1 vs. 1 situations with clear advantage for the attacking player (CASTELO, 1996).

The guidelines of this principle are directly associated to the theoretical knowledge about the tactics of the game as well as the comprehension of the space, particularly for offensive actions. This principle is crucial to help players occupy and explore vital spaces that provide a greater amount and quality of deep and wide passing options. Such options are important in the creation of a higher number of offensive tactical options (SOLOMENKO, 1982).

Since the space constrains the time to perform an action and to make a decision according to the transitory configuration of the match, it is important to control the typical actions of this principle to have success in the game. In that sense, the more space a team has to attack means more elaboration of its answers to the requirements of a situation.

The actions of the principle of width and length can be observed when players perform dispersing movements, both in width and in length, seeking to increase the effective play-space. For instance, if performed efficiently by the team, the individual movements performed immediately after the team has regained the possession of the ball enables the creation and exploration of free spaces in order to shoot on goal.

Principle of Offensive Unity

The principle of offensive unity is strictly related to the comprehension of the game and to the game model adopted by the team. This principle is established based on the knowledge of the players and reveals the importance of their movements, their limitations and their position in relation to their teammates, the ball and their opponents (TEISSIE, 1969; HAINAUT; BENOIT, 1979). Players should show a high degree of tactical understanding aiming not to break down the solidity of the team. Hence, to maintain the effectiveness and the functional balance between the longitudinal and transverse lines of the team in the offensive actions is a prerequisite to play as an indivisible whole (SILVA; RIAS, 1998).

The guidelines of this principle imply an organization that adapts to the play-space and to the specific roles of the players, in which they should fulfill a set of tactical-technical tasks during the offensive phase that clearly goes beyond the dominant mission of each player (CASTELO, 1996).

By considering the guidelines of this principle, the actions of a highly organized attack support preventive measures ensured by one or more players who position themselves and act in the rearguard of the attacking players. It is through such behaviours that the conception of team organization emerges. This conception is responsible to make the team execute organized transition to defence in case of unsuccessful offensive actions and/or a temporary defence
according to the situation, until all teammates return to their real positions according to the team's defensive system (TEODORESCU, 1984).

By playing according to this principle, the team acts as a structured block and is able to increase their lines of action without compensation and penetrate in the opposite block in order to solve momentary game tactical situations as a whole.

During a match, the representative actions of this principle can be observed through the position of the players favouring a continuous, fluent and effective circulation, and avoiding its interruption (loss of ball possession). Besides this, collective actions will instill confidence and safety to the teammates within the "centre of play", allowing the creation of continuous instability and resulting imbalances in the opponent's defensive organization.

Core Tactical Principles of the Defensive Phase

The specific tactical principles of the defensive phase help all players, both distant and directly involved in the "centre of play", to coordinate their actions and their tactical-technical behaviours according to the logic of movements preconized for the team's defensive method. This collective logic essentially seeks for rapid and effective execution of the defensive actions that lead to the achievement of both of the defensive objectives: defend the team's own goal and regaining possession of the ball (WORTHINGTON, 1974).

The fulfillment of these principles will help players to guide their behaviours and positions in relation to the ball, their own goal, their opponents, their teammates and the dynamic events of the match. This allows the defense to send opponent's attacking actions to less vital areas and also to limit the space and time available to the execution of attacking actions by the opponents (BANGSBO; PEITERSEN, 2002).

Principle of Delay

The principle of delay basically refers to an action of opposition realized on the player in possession by a defensive player, aiming to decrease the space of the offensive action. It consists to restrict passing options to another attacking player or impede dribbling moves that favour the progression towards the goal and, consequently, preventing a shot on goal (CASTELO, 1996).

The guidelines of this principle propose to rigorously mark the player in possession, to stop or delay the opponent's offensive action, to restrict the passing options and a shot on goal. Delay also prevents the longitudinal progression through the field of play, directs the attack towards a side of the field and allows to gain time for the defence to organize in order to increase the probability of defending effectively and regaining the ball (WORTHINGTON, 1974).

The typical actions of this principle are present in the frontal approach that usually occurs in the central corridor of the field of play and/or closer to the defensive area, where the defender should be positioned between the ball and his own goal. In another approach that usually occurs in situations closer to the sideline, the defender is positionned according to the ball, his own goal, the attacker with the intention to drive the actions of the opponent's attack to this side/direction.
**Principle of Defensive Coverage**

The principle of defensive coverage refers to the supporting actions of a player in the back of the first defender intended to strengthen defensive marking and avoid the progression of the player in possession towards the goal. By taking a position that avoids defensive imbalances opening favourable spaces for the progression of the opponent, the player who executes the actions of defensive coverage aims to act as a new obstacle to the player in possession in case this player overtakes the defender performing delay. The player performing defensive coverage can also guide the player in delay by impeding the opponent's tactical-technical actions, in order to stimulate him to take the initiative of opposing the offensive actions from the player in possession (BANGSBO; PEITERSEN, 2002). This facilitates the opposition against the attacking actions and also makes the first defender feel safer and more confident (WORTHINGTON, 1974).

When performed in a situation of defensive numerical superiority (ex. 2vs.1), defensive coverage facilitates the actions of support of the player who performs it because the action is focused on the player in possession. In contrast, the defensive coverage performed in situations of numerical equality (ex. 2vs.2) requires the player in position of coverage to pay attention to the player in possession, the teammate who performs Delay, and the movements executed by the attacker who performs offensive coverage.

Some factors related to the extrinsic and intrinsic aspects of the game should be considered by the players at the moment of execution of defensive coverage due to their influence on the distance and the angle between the player in delay and the player in coverage. These factors determine the efficiency of the actions performed. They include the zone of the field where coverage will be performed, the conditions of the pitch, the weather conditions, the communication between the players and the tactical, technical, physical and psychological skills that his teammates and opponents possess and present in the play (WORTHINGTON, 1974; BANGSBO; PEITERSEN, 2002).

The distance and angle of the coverage will vary according to two very important concepts implied and gradually stabilize according to the position of the ball, that are: the meaning of risk to goal and the allowance of space to offensive actions. Therefore, the closer the "centre of play" is from the defensive sector and the central corridor, the more risk there is for the ball to be shot on goal and the less space should be available for the attacker to perform offensive movements. When the "centre of play" is present within the central corridor and close to the goal, the player responsible for defensive coverage should approach the player in delay in order to reduce the chances of finishing from the opponent and provide more safety to the defensive sector of his own team. When the ball is played in the side corridors and far from the defensive sector, the player in coverage should stay distant from the player in delay, since the player in possession can pass both markers at once rapidly and in more available space. Nevertheless, the risk to goal is minimized on the sides of the field in comparison to other areas of the field of play.

In the case of wind, this relation is inverted. If the attacking team has the wind in their favour the coverage should be closer, while if the wind is against them, the distance between the players in coverage and delay should be increased.
adverse weather conditions, the player might keep distance in order to increase the time of the ball flight, which demands more time for reception control.

The communication between the players is another factor that also determines the success of the defensive coverage because it might serve as guide to create harmony between all defensive movements. Communications can be verbal and non-verbal. The verbal forms, which are consolidated through the hearing and vocal systems, are essentially expressed through the guidelines provided by the players with respect to their own and to the opponents’ positions. On the other hand, non-verbal communications, noted essentially by the visual system and sometimes by the tactical system, are expressed through body signals present in the actions of teammates and opponents. It can also be said that the degree of coupling and mutual confidence in communication is determining in the success of defensive actions.

Amongst the mentioned factors that influence the actions of defensive coverage, the last, although not less important, is related to the tactical, technical, physical and psychological skills that players present during the match (CASTELO, 1996).

This factor is related to the previous acquired knowledge and to the awareness of the player realizing defensive coverage, thus establishing a similar line of thinking for all situations in which there is prevalence of skills. It can be stated that if the player realizing defensive coverage is aware that the player in delay is weak in any of these skills, he should approach him. On the other hand, if the player in delay displays superior skills, the coverage can be performed at higher distance, as there will be more possibilities for the player in delay to regain the ball and therefore, this player who was performing defensive coverage becomes the first offensive option to give sequence to the play.

As an example of such variability of positioning in Soccer, it is possible to highlight a situation of technical prevalence in which the player in possession decides to dribble or pass. In that case, if the player is performing defensive coverage and has observed that the player in possession is a skilled dribbler, he should approach the player in delay since the chances of being passed are higher. In constrast, if a player is aware that he is performing the action of coverage towards a player who possesses better skills of passing the ball to dangerous zones of the field, he should be keep distance because the probability of executing a pass is higher than executing a dribble. Moreover, if the player in coverage is aware that the player in possession is not well developed in any of these skills, he can stay further away from the player in delay, which would result in increasing the probability of regaining possession, and therefore being able to support the new configuration of play.

The characteristics of the actions of defensive coverage in game situations can be noticed when the position of the player in defensive coverage (who should be positioned between the player in delay and his own goal) provides support and safety to the player in delay.

**Principle of Balance**

The principle of balance is assured from the players who comprehend the notions inherent to their structural and functional aspects. The first aspect is the premise that the team’s defensive organization should possess superiority, or at least ensure numerical equality of defensive players in the “centre of play” when positioned between the ball and own goal. The second aspect is associated with the actions of readjustment of defensive positioning in relation to opponents’ movements.

Through the execution of such notions, the aim is to ensure defensive stability in the “centre of play” through the support to the teammates who perform actions of delay and defensive coverage. By taking an adjusted position in relation to other teammates, the player who performs principle of balance is in better conditions to make teammates feel safer in creating
unfavourable conditions to the player in possession and other opponents. As a result, this increases the predictability of the opponent's offensive play and the possibility of regaining possession (CASTELO, 1996).

The guidelines of this principle therefore include the coverage of spaces and the marking of free players without possession, the coverage of eventual passing options and, in some cases, the decrease of game space that forces the opponent to cope with adverse conditions.

The actions of the principle of Balance can be essentially detected through the balanced configuration of defenders between the ball and their own goal while marking opponents without possession, and supporting other teammates who are in charge of performing actions of delay and defensive coverage.

**Principle of Concentration**

The principle of concentration is based on players' movements towards the zone of the field of higher risk to goal, with the aim of increasing defensive protection, reducing the space available to the player in possession to perform offensive actions and facilitating the regain of ball possession (BANGSBO; PEITERSEN, 2002).

The guidelines of this principle are intended to direct opponent's offensive play to less vital zones and to minimize the offensive amplitude in width and length, avoiding the creation of free spaces, specially in the back of the players who perform delay, coverage and defensive balance.

Therefore, the actions of concentration can be performed in any zone of the field by simply making all players who are involved in the action aware of the importance of their movement to reduce space and increase pressure in the "centre of play".

During the match, the typical actions of this principle can be observed when defenders positioned further away from the player in possession are able to "gather", thus adopting closer positions in order to limit the offensive options of the attack to a certain zone of the field.

**Principle of Defensive Unity**

The principle of defensive unity has a strong relation with the understanding of the game and the game model adopted by the team. The concept of unity of defence of a team goes through the awareness of all players in respect to the importance of their movements, their limitations and their positions in relation to their teammates, the ball and their opponents (TEISSIE, 1969; HAINAUT; BENOIT, 1979).

The guidelines of this principle aim to ensure the coordination of attitudes and tactical-technical behaviours of the players positioned outside the "centre of play". They also allow the team to constantly and automatically balance and rebalance the ratio of power of the defensive method according to the momentary configurations of the game (CASTELO, 1996).

In this principle, the offside rule is an important ally of the defending team since the last defensive line is able to decrease the opposite effective play-space and exert more pressure within the "centre of play" when effectively explored and executed.

Therefore, by performing effective movements that suit the offside rule and considering the characteristics of the principle of defensive unity, the team is able to pressure the player in possession and the teammates who help him in their offensive actions. Pressure and reduction of space decreases the time available for decision-making and execution to the offensive players can lead them to tactical or technical mistakes that benefit the regain of ball possession or the arrival of more defenders to help in the defensive actions.
To ensure cohesion, effectiveness and functional balance between the team's longitudinal and transverse lines in defensive actions, the players responsible for executing the principle of defensive unity need to be coherent in their displacements according to the variability of the momentary game situations, the knowledge of his teammates' skills and movement possibilities (PINTO, 1996).

During the match, the typical actions of this principle can be observed through the coordination of the movements of the players outside the "centre of play" in line with the position of the ball. This allows the development of a more harmonious and efficient play between the team's longitudinal and transverse lines, as for example the movement of the side player towards the centre of the field to help on team compaction when the game action is being developed in the opposite side.

**Concluding Remarks**

The tactical principles contribute to the organization of the players and their performance on the field of play. The knowledge of their guidelines, objectives and specifications constitutes an important support for physical education teachers, soccer school coaches and team managers in guiding the teaching-learning-training process in Soccer. The comprehension of these principles by the players also offers the advantage of structuring the actions with objectives, intentions and tactical meaning that help to regulate and organize the tactical-technical actions in the match.

Moreover, the knowledge of the tactical principles can support the process of tactical assessment of players' performance. Considering that the dynamic behaviours of a team as well as their effectiveness in a match can be appreciated by analyzing the quantitative and qualitative variables of players' actions in the relations of cooperation and opposition, it is assumed that the comprehension of the tactical principles represents a useful tool to support tactical assessment. The conception, development and validation of instruments capable of quantifying or assessing the application of the tactical principles of the game achieve a response or result that helps the comprehension of player's tactical behaviour.

As a result of the development and application of an instrument with such characteristics, it is possible to emphasize on the possibility of observing and studying the player in match and training situations, allowing the control of his playing performance and detect points of improvement.
References


______. Futebol a organização do jogo: como entender a organização dinâmica de uma equipa de futebol e a partir desta compreensão como melhorar o rendimento e a direcção dos jogadores e da equipa. s.l.: Jorge Castelo. 1996. 541 p.


QUEIROZ, C. M. Para uma teoria de ensino/treino do futebol. **Ludens.** v.8, n.1, p.25-44. 1983.


**Acknowledgment**
We acknowledge support from AlBan Programme, “high level scholarships” specifically addressed to Latin American citizens, scholarship number E07D400279BR.

**Corresponding author:**
Israel Teoldo da Costa
Centre of Research and Studies in Soccer
Departamento de Educação Física - Universidade Federal de Viçosa
Av. P.H. Rolfs, s/n – Campus Universitário
Viçosa – MG
Cep: 36.570-900
Phone/Fax: +55 (31) 3899-2251
e-mail: israelteoldo@gmail.com