Module 2: Mesoplane analysis

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2.1. Mesoplane contextualization

Group, sector and intersector analyses are used to observe certain behaviors, which are generally standardized. By standardized behaviors, we refer to behaviors that we establish as priority solutions to certain situations of play. Due to the complexity of the game, where chaos and organization are two sides of the same coin and are interrelated, it is difficult to standardize situations (specific behaviors) when there are so many variables that make up a situation of play (the game is open).

To standardize behavior, some of these variables must be established as priority. When making a decision, the player takes into account all these variables in order to fully adjust to the context of the game. Having to pay attention to so many variables may cause player errors. Setting some variables as priority facilitates the player's interpretation (he/she will know what to focus on and make fewer errors), but by ruling out some variables, less adjustment to the context is needed. It also facilitates the player's execution since he/she can better adjust the timing of his/her interventions and pay attention to executing the movement or technical gesture.

As we said before, in order to standardize behaviors, it is essential to have a thorough understanding of the game that allows us to develop more successful solutions to certain situations and to identify key variables to focus on when determining behavior. In addition, situations of play that can be standardized should be as specific as possible (within the openness of the game). We cannot standardize a team's kickoff because there are many elements that greatly influence the resolution of that situation and many possible valid solutions. However, we can standardize the continuity support of the 1st center back P4 when fullback P2 is in possession, since there are fewer key variables.

Standardizing behavior on the micro and mesoplanes is easier than on the macroplane. Plus, micro and mesoplanes work as grounds that lead to effective resolution on the macroplane. Understanding that the ball is the element that generates the most uncertainty in the game, it will be easier to standardize behavior in moments without the ball (w/o ball) than in moments with the ball (w/ ball).

The mesoplane analysis focuses on the observation of game behavior (with and without success) that, once transformed into *clips*, can become

audiovisual learning tools. These tools, together with training, help the players acquire certain behavior.

We will analyze specific relationships in which more or fewer players participate, which can be applied to different systems of play. The following are some examples:

- Interaction between two P9s (two points).
- Interaction between P2 and P7 (outside full back/mid fielder).
- Double pivot (two P6s).
- Corridor and line behavior.
- Interaction between corridors and lines.
- Participation in mutual assistance space (behavior of nearby players).

In order to develop aspects related to the mesoplane with a high degree of specificity, we think it's more useful to focus on a specific example instead of talking in general about the whole mesoplane without going into any depth. Due to its applicability to different systems of play and the possibility of standardizing behavior, we will focus on the **4-player defensive line during moments without the ball (w/o ball)**.

2.2. Line analysis

2.2.1. Defensive line (of 4) during moments without the ball (w/o ball)

The defensive line must behave as a functional unit and constantly adjust its position. Beyond the different situations that must be mastered, there are a number of fundamentals that must always exist in order to maintain the balance of the line:

- Angled position, turned according to where the ball is, ready to run back or jump between lines.
- Defensive pressure with active feet (adjusting the supporting foot) to be able to react first to the stimuli of the game.
- Constant perception of blind spots, turning his/her head, even though his/her neighboring teammate is responsible for the "blind" spot. P2/P3 full backs multiply the responsibility from opposite sides (they defend two gaps, as well as the blind spot).
- Monitoring references, adjusting distances of opposition and communicating with teammates about opponents who try to go unseen.
- Watching the rest of the players on the line in any group movement to control the distances for width and depth, avoiding misalignment of any defender, etc.

Shifting, spaces within lines and gap defense

The speed of lateral movements (shifting) allows us to reduce distance between players on the line and to close in on the strong side. Moving at maximum intensity becomes a necessity, but the intensity of the movements is relative depending on certain behavior that must be maintained during shifting:

- Continually monitor references (assigned and non-assigned opponents) and master the concept of swapping opponents between players on the same line (defensive line) after the team in possession makes a horizontal pass, which involves horizontal movements of the advanced defenders. This only affects the defensive line (for this reason, avoid vertical interactions after horizontal interactions or against shifting).
- Pace of shifting depends on whether the opponent advances past his/her neighboring players (avoid there being useable penetration gaps).
- Combine horizontal movements (shifting) with vertical movements (forward/backward) depending on the situation of the possessor/receiver.
- Crossover running in adjustment shifts at a medium/high pace. Running technique where stride is not sideways (jumps where both

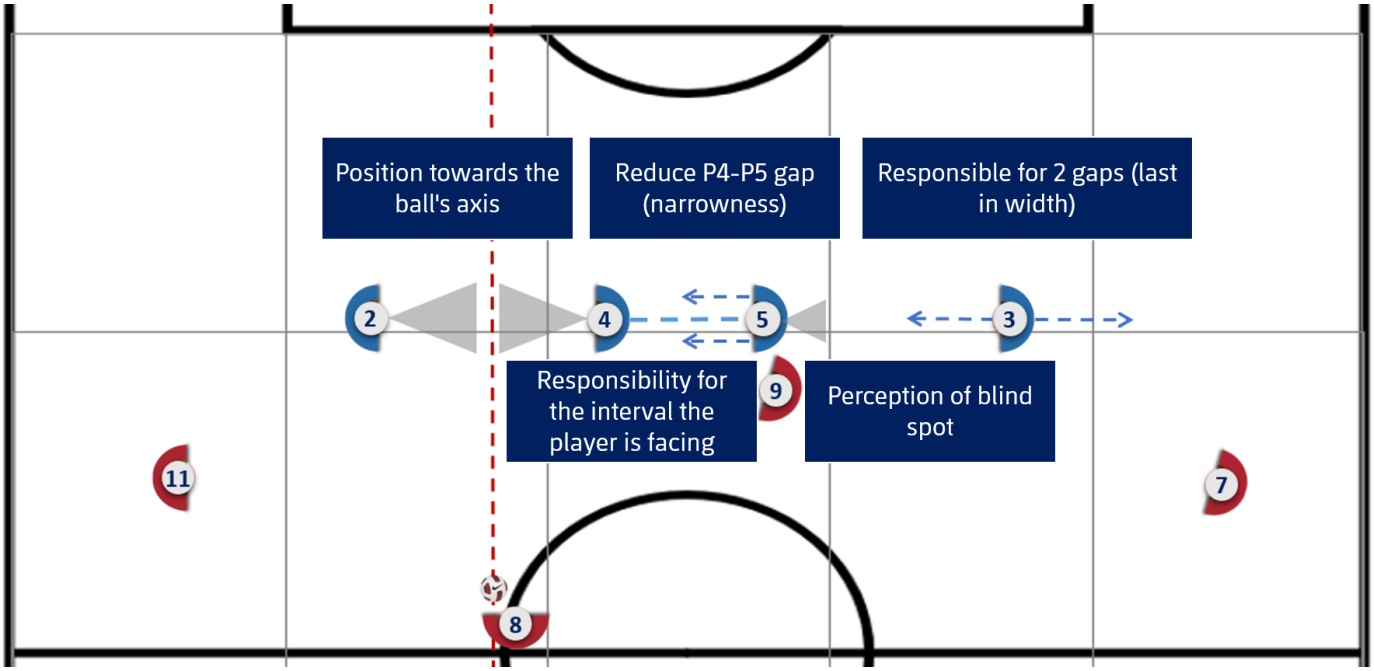
feet are off the ground or both feet are "planted" in the ground, as this hinders response capacity), but where steps must cross (this increases speed, one foot on the ground almost always improves response capacity).

- Sprints perpendicular/diagonal to the sideline for long shifts at a high pace. Running technique where, in situations of emergency, the normal sprint is prioritized over crossover running.

Within the 4-player defensive line, we will identify 5 penetration gaps (wing - P2 - P4 - P5 - P3 - wing). With regard to gap defense, we have to pay attention to some fundamental aspects:

- The defender's positioning determines his/her responsibility for the gap that he/she is facing. He/she is responsible for the gap in front of him/her (position towards the ball's axis), protecting the space behind them (the "blind" spot of the neighboring teammate with respect to the ball's axis).
- Defenders on opposite sides (P2/P3) are responsible for two gaps when the ball is closer to the longitudinal axis than they are (inward facing). The "blind" gap, between his/her location and the wing is his/her responsibility. This requires constant perception of blind spots and an adjustment of interaction distances to keep both gaps balanced (the "blind" gap is also influenced).
- When facing the axis of the ball, responsibility will be doubled (two players will defend the gap). This hinders the chance of an interior pass, as there are two players defending.
- Prioritize a narrow gap between center backs (P4 - P5) to force attempts to get open to the outside, away from the goal.
- Perception of the adjacent gap for which he/she is not responsible, mainly while making adjustments. Monitoring the "blind" spot.

Figure 1: Defensive line of 5 penetration gaps



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It is essential to maintain balance in shifting and avoid situations of both over-shifting and open and useable penetration gaps. The width of the defensive line will very much depend on the location of the ball (both in width and depth), as well as the situation and possibilities of the player in possession (position, directions of interaction, distance and pursuit of the first defender, etc.):

- Defensive funnel: as close as possible to the goal, narrower gaps are prioritized between center backs, and their maintenance in central/interior corridors. In high-pressure situations, the shifting of the defensive line can allow the first center back to move to the exterior corridor, closing off the short path.
- Possibilities of merging with midfield line: a reduced distance between lines facilitates merging with the defensive line in order to shorten running distances. It is essential to perceive in which gaps a merge can occur, and then make adjustments within the line. Linking a merge after an intraline adjustment may cause moments of divergence where the opponent can achieve positional superiority. For example, a pivot that can merge between center backs so that the 1st center provides coverage to the outside full back is usually more unbalanced than a pivot merge in the central-lateral gap, even though the path of that merge is longer. The defensive line players should guide the merges of the players on the midfield line.

Elasticity of the line (covered and uncovered ball). Line leader

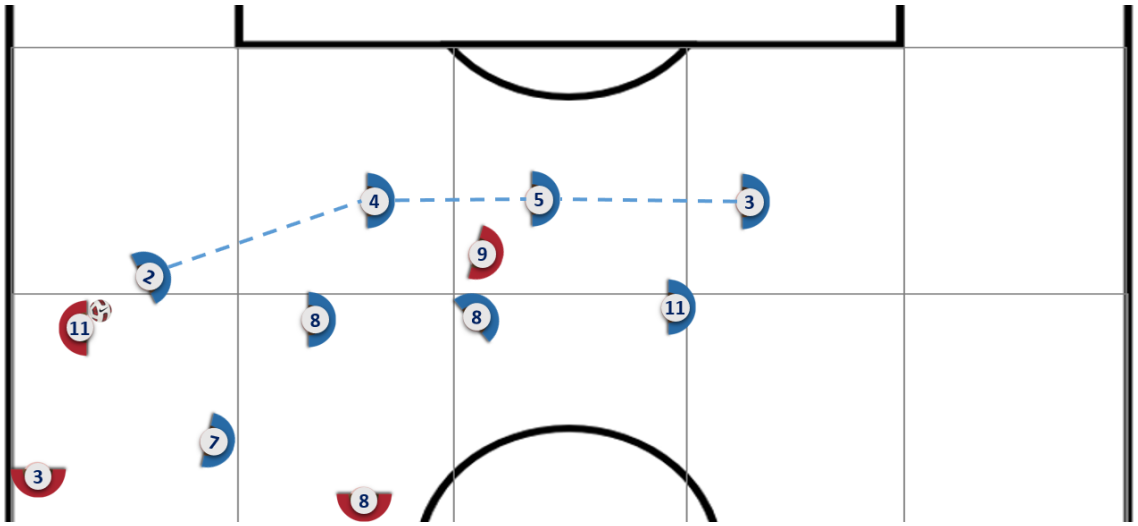
The height of the defensive line is affected by the offsides rule. That is why we must take a few considerations into account:

- It is possible to continually alter the depth of the playing space. This variability of the space limitations in depth allows the defensive line to take the initiative with regard to the offensive players, who will have to constantly check that they are still in play. This is why we want the defensive line to work flexibly, constantly modifying its position according to the demands of the game.
- It is essential to establish a player within the defensive line that marks the height of the defensive line. This allows other players on the line to correct their position and align themselves with him/her.
- In general, the **height reference** player (who the other players look to in order to adjust their position) will be on the strong side, so it is important that the intermediate/far away players (weak side) don't enable the close opponents and therefore break the offsides.
- One player must be established within the defensive line to lead the movements as a functional unit. The line leader is not usually the same player as the **height reference**. The line leader will have to be able to intervene and cover several defensive linemen and have a broad field of vision. It is the player who offers information to the others through his/her messages (communication) and uses his/her extended field of vision (more information and possibility of intervening with the rest of the players). This is also the player who can most easily intervene to correct any imbalances generated by the rest of the players (mainly close to the ball).

Different situations of play will be described below, establishing the roles of the **line leader** (player with the best correction and intervention capacity, with more quality and quantity of information perceived from his/her extended field of vision) and the **height reference** (player that marks the height of the line, rest of players adjust themselves to his/her location). Players must be aware of these roles and assume the individual responsibilities that will allow the defensive line to properly behave as a functional unit.

- Ball in outer corridor with a staggered advance by P2:
    - Height reference: 1st center back (P4).
    - Line leader: 2nd center back (P5).

Figure 2: Ball in outer corridor with staggered advance of P2

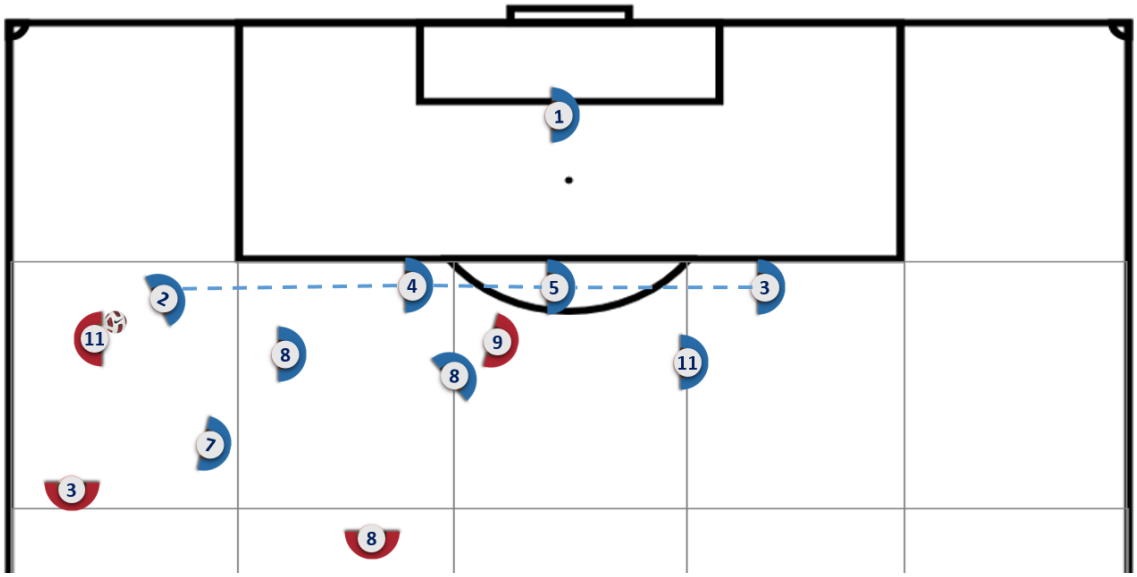


Source: prepared by the author

In this situation, it is essential that the 1st center back (P4) remains within the defensive funnel and prioritizes the interior areas over the lateral coverage (P2).

- Ball in outer corridor at the height of the front area:
  - Height reference: lateral 1st defender (P2).
  - Line leader: 2nd center back (P5).

Figure 3: Ball in outer corridor at the height of the front area



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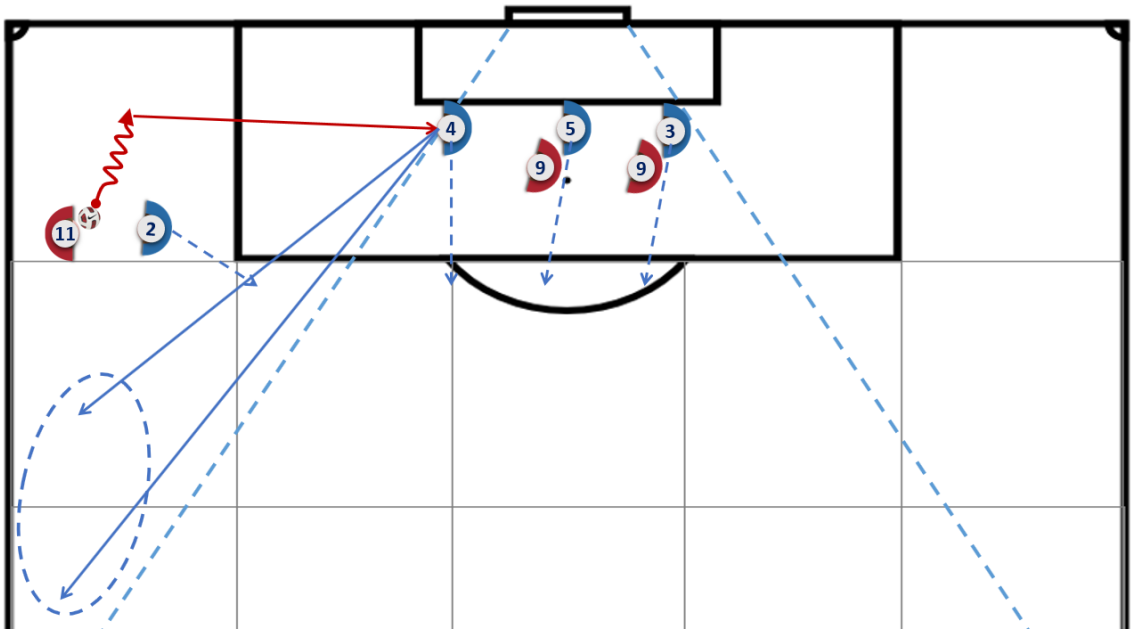
Depending on the centering possibilities, the line could also behave as in figure 2, with 1st center back marking height within the area (finishing zones). Priority must be evaluated between the advantages of removing

strikers from finishing zones and taking the initiative, and the danger of a divided center (space between goalkeeper and extended line, and strikers with dynamic superiority, who are headed toward the goal). The GK (Goalkeeper) must participate in defending the intermediate space threatened by a divided center.

In the immediate vicinity of the area, the height of the defensive line will be determined by the established line of recovery (area limit, 20-25 m, etc.).

- Clearance (deep, allows encroachment) of 1st center back P4 after full back:
    - Height reference: 1st center back (P4) that clears.
    - Line leader: 1st center back (P4) that clears.

Figure 4: Clearance (deep, allows encroachment) of 1st center back P4 after full back



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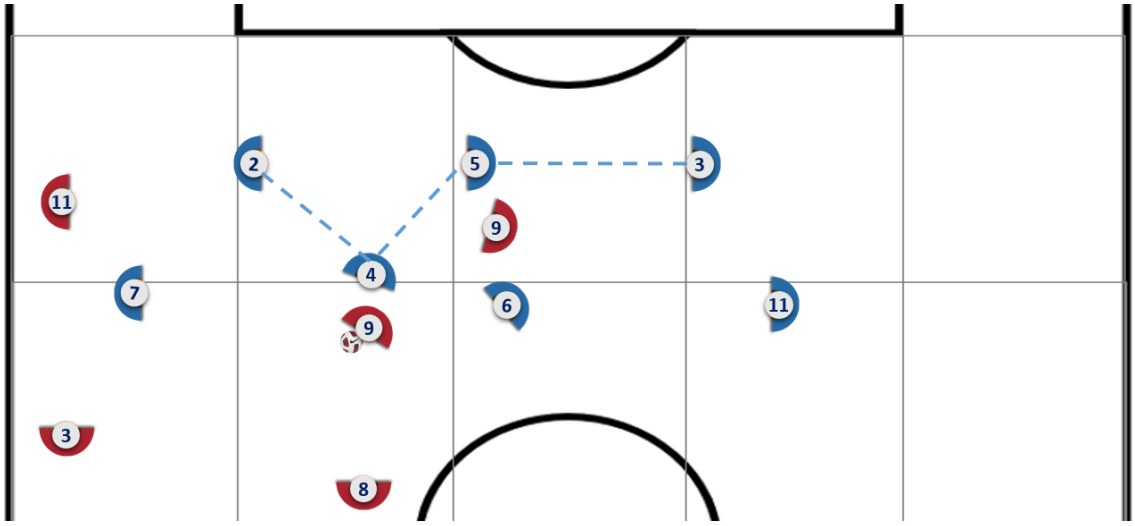
In situations after clearing, the greatest danger is usually a 2nd center after capturing the clearance, and the biggest mistake is usually that the player who clears (1st center back P4) "hangs back" and breaks the offsides as he/she is misaligned. This error occurs because the players on the defensive line advance at the moment the ball is cleared while the player who has made the clearance moves forward once he/she has stabilized after hitting the ball (1-2" after sending it). This is the reason why the player clearing the ball (1st center back P4) marks the height of the line and leads it, initiating the entire line advance when the player who has cleared is activated to encroach.

In the pull back/push forward movement, the two players closest to the clearing zone (full back P2 and 1st center back P4) would not close in on the ball, but would look for other trajectories that would maintain a better balance in the defensive line. The 1st center back P4 advances completely vertically (not closing in on the ball) to be in better position to defend a possible center, in case an opponent captures the clear. The P2 full back, who was 1st defender at the moment of the 1st center (prior to clearing the ball), closes inward to reduce the central-lateral gap and remains in an intermediate position that allows him/her to also intervene on his/her opponent P11 assigned man. In cases where the center is avoided and the opponent who captures the cleared ball plays with a teammate in offensive cover (pass back outside-inside), the P2 full back that has closed inwards will balance the line at a higher speed, and will enter the defensive funnel first.

- Ball in central or interior corridor after advance by 1st center back (P4) to receiver:
    - Height reference: 2nd center back (P5) who stays on the line.
    - Line leader: 2nd center back (P5) who stays on the line.

Figure 5: Ball in central or interior corridor after advance by 1st center back (P4) to receiver



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In situations of an incomplete line or misalignment due to an advance, the height reference and the line leader will coincide (generally 2nd center back, P5) if the ball is in the center corridor or interior. It will be the central player of the circumstantial line of 3, when he/she is able to cover his/her two neighboring players. In turn, it is essential that he/she does not coincide in the axis with the possessor.

Once the roles of height reference and line leader have been established, the vertical movements of the line can occur in a coordinated and balanced manner. We distinguish the following movements:

- Encroachment: forward movement at a fast pace and considerable distance. It occurs in very obvious covered ball situations. We recommend executing it with a crossover run (fast, angled position, and ready to run forward-backward).
- Adjustment Advance: forward movement at a slow pace and short distance. These are situations in which the height is adjusted and the player is ready for the next movement (depending on the pass). Situations more associated with covered ball (but not necessarily). If a short movement is performed at a fast pace, we describe this as elastic or individual offsides (depending on whether the behavior is individual or group).
- Hold: the line remains at the height it is at, with optimal defensive pressure to facilitate their next intervention. It is also important to recognize when you must stop, depending on the limit of recovery established or the needs that each situation of play may require.
- Backward adjustment: backward movement at a slow pace and short distance. These are situations in which the height is adjusted, positioned to make the next move (depending on the pass). Situations most associated with uncovered ball (but not necessarily).
- Pull back: backward movement at a fast pace and long distance. It occurs in very obvious uncovered ball situations. We recommend executing it with a crossover run (fast, angled position, and ready to run forward-backward).

These movements are determined by the concepts of covered and uncovered ball. It is essential not to confuse a covered ball with a pressured ball, or an uncovered ball with an unpressured ball. The key will be in the opponent's possibilities of passing back (mainly) and/or an interior pass in progression (which involves getting past a line, elimination of players, etc.). Forward movements are associated with the covered ball, while the backward movements are associated with uncovered ball. However, it is important to note that, depending on where the defensive line is positioned, one or the other movement can be used, so each situation must be contextualized. In this regard, there may be adjustment reversals in situations of covered balls.

Situations of covered and uncovered ball are specified below. It is important to note that the table is designed under covered ball conditions, adding the uncovered ball situations that may arise from each of them. Any covered ball condition that occurs, even if there are also uncovered ball conditions, will turn the situation into a covered ball context.

Table 1: Covered and uncovered ball situations

Covered ball (inside/back pass impossible)	Uncovered ball (inside/back pass possible)
Pressure on the player in possession	Getting past 1st defender
Pass behind (unloading, mainly long)	Face receiver with space and time
Defensive line numerical superiority (mark/cover)	Equality/lower defensive line (protect)
Ball times (pass transfers)	Moments prior to reception with space and time
No threat of breaking through the defensive line	Threat of breaking through the defensive line
Possessor far from line, difficulty activating behind	Possessor close to line, possible to activate behind
Imprecise control, not based on tactical intent	Precise control, based on tactical intent
Handling with supporting foot distanced from the ball	Handling with supporting foot close to the ball (pass)
Receive from behind (possessor pressured, no turn)	Receiver from behind is able to turn (face the ball)
Possessor not oriented to be able to progress	Possessor oriented to be able to progress (look)
Last 20-25 m (encroach in event of possible outside shot)	Situation to arrive before 20-25 m (without outside shot)

Source: prepared by the author

The defensive line will be able to function flexibly if covered and uncovered ball conditions and the various vertical movements that can be performed as a functional unit dominate. But it will mainly exist if developments (transitions, changes of sub-phase or context within the same phase of game that do not imply change of possession) dominate between the conditions of covered and uncovered ball, and between the different vertical movements, adjusting the timing in each change of direction/movement, and maintaining the behavior of the line as functional unit.

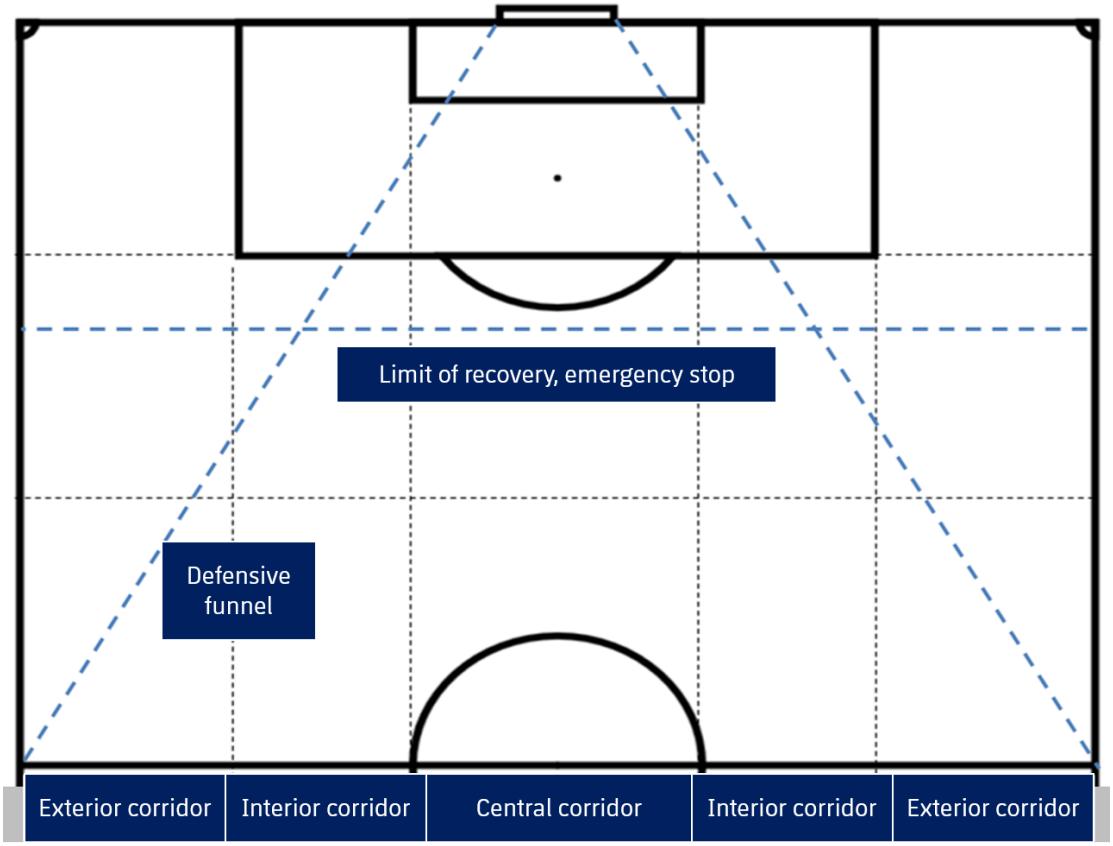
Covered and uncovered ball conditions are visual stimuli that can be identified by all members of the line; this facilitates coordinated behavior and timing in movements. However, some aspects already mentioned

will be fundamental, such as the roles of line leader and height reference or looking at each group movement of the line.

Spatial references to facilitate defensive line functionality

In order to facilitate the behavior of the defensive line as a functional unit, we can establish a number of spatial references that must be interpreted by all the players on the line in the same way.

Figure 6: Spatial references to facilitate defensive line functionality



Source: prepared by the author

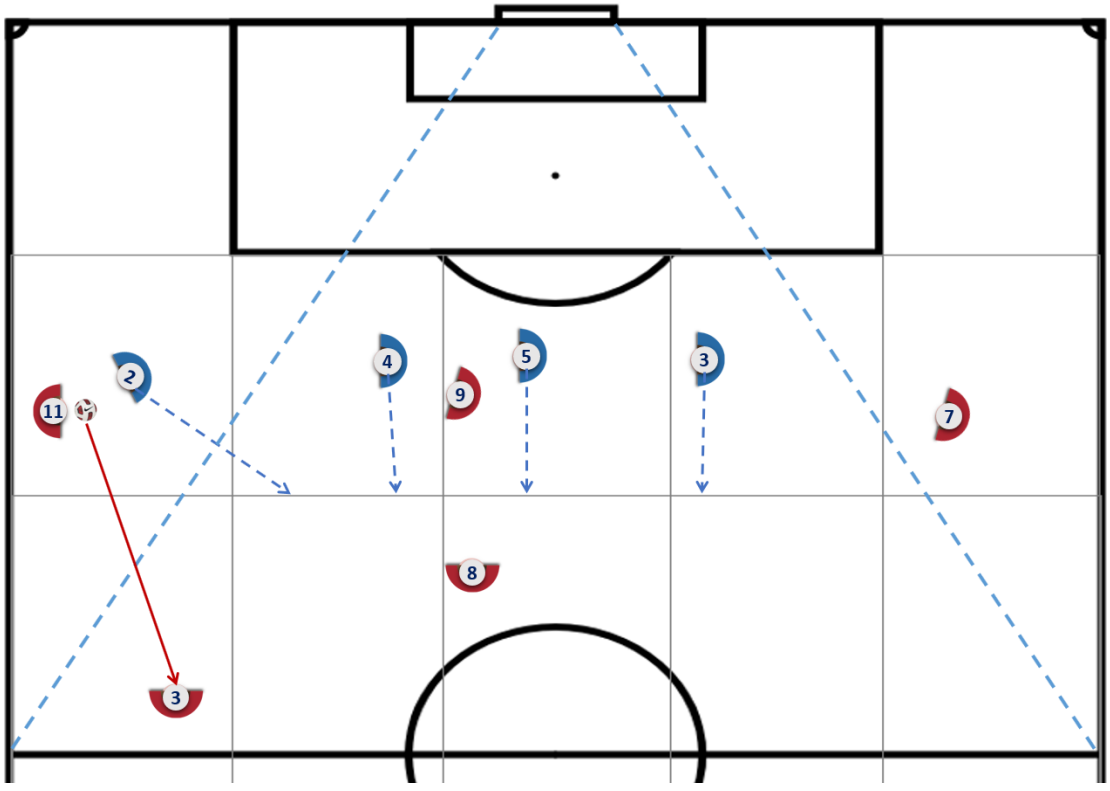
- Defensive funnel: imaginary line joining the point formed by the midfield line and the sideline, next to the goal posts. They are two lines that converge and serve as a reference for the width of the defensive line (which is reduced according to the distance from the goal itself).
- Limit of recovery: imaginary line established at the area limit, 20 or 25 meters (each coach sets it at the height he/she considers most effective). It is a useful reference to stop defensive shape recoveries and advance on the possessor when there is a chance of an outside shot.
- Corridors: 5 corridors are established in order to be able to differentiate between exterior, interior and central corridors, since the collective and sectorial demands (in the case of the defensive line) change according to where the ball is located. The use of 3 or

4 does not allow us to differentiate between exterior, interior and central corridors in such a specific way, so they are references that can generate greater uncertainty.

Next, we will describe several game situations where spatial references have a strong influence on their resolution:

- Passing back (covered ball) in the exterior corridor (defensive funnel influence). Encroachment of the defensive line in which full back P2 that was 1st defender outside the defensive funnel, encroaches diagonally inwards to enter the defensive funnel. His/her path is longer than that of the other defenders, so in order for the position to stay in balance, the instant the ball becomes undefended, he/she must run faster.

Figure 7: Passing back (covered ball) in the exterior corridor (defensive funnel influence).

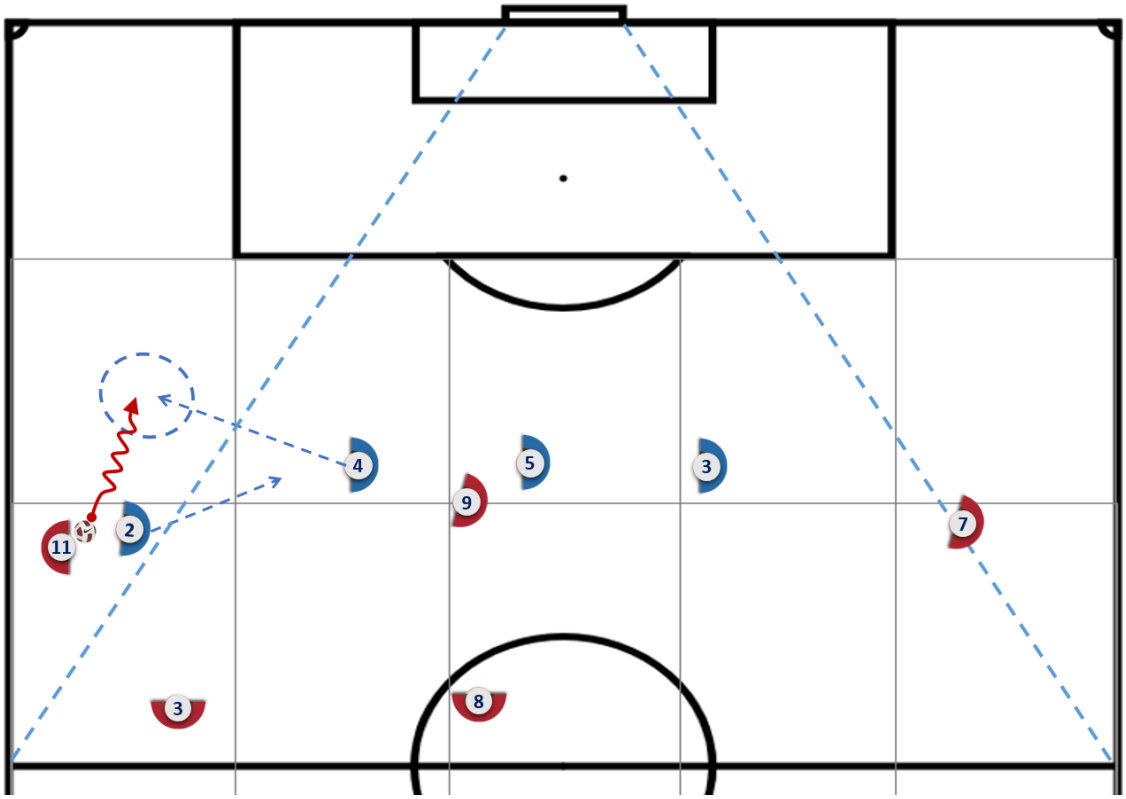


Source: prepared by the author

- Emergency cover of the 1st center back P4: If the ball is outside the defensive funnel, only the full back P2 1st defender will leave the funnel to defend the possessor. The P4-P5 center backs will stay in the defensive funnel. When full back P2 1st defender is beaten, priority will be given to help from a player from the midfield line to keep P4 and P5 center backs in the funnel. If this help does not exist, the 1st center back P4 will provide emergency cover if there

is a stolen or 50/50 ball, leaving the defensive funnel. If the defender is being beaten and the possessor controls the ball, the defender must avoid leaving the funnel, waiting inside. He/she will be able to cover (must assess whether more advantage is gained by this action or by staying inside the defensive funnel, stalling the situation) if balance remains on the line, the swap of the overcome P2 full back is guaranteed, and the distance to the goal is still long. The shorter the distance from the goal itself, the more priority will be given to keeping the P4-P5 center backs in the defensive funnel (and central corridor).

Figure 8: Emergency covers of 1st center back P4

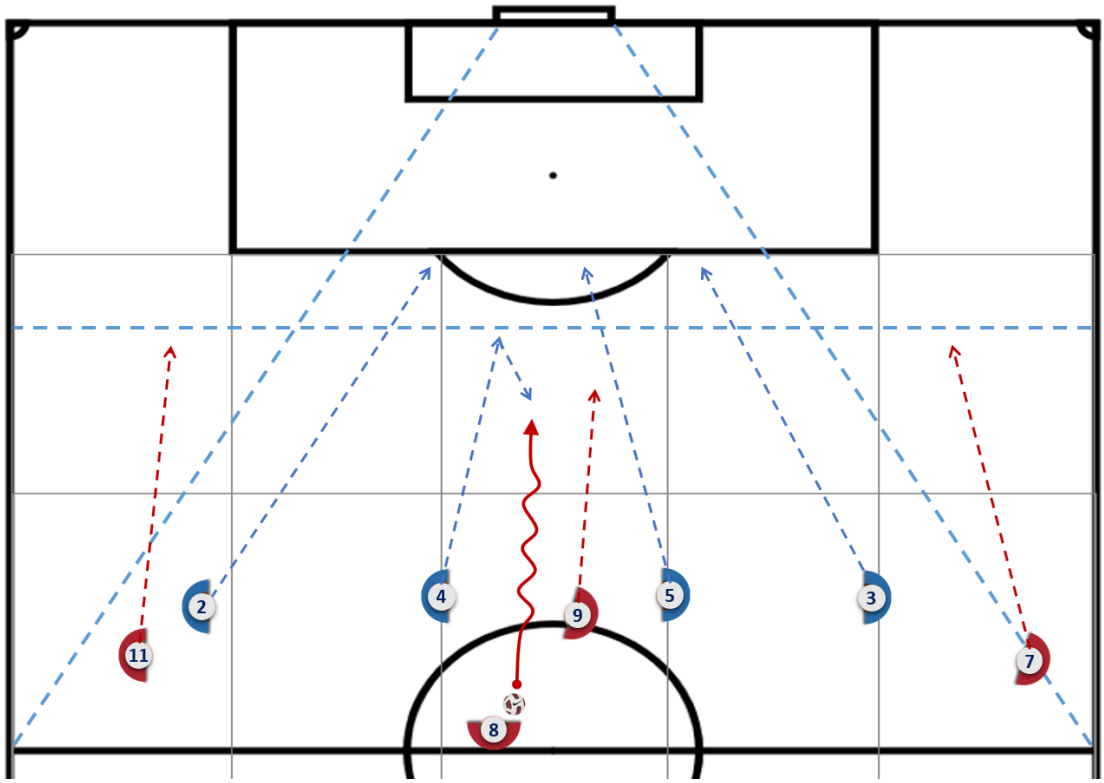


Source: prepared by the author

- Diagonal defensive-shape recovery trajectories (defensive funnel) + timing of the advance on the possessor (limit of recovery): in situations where the possessor progresses in handling inside the defensive funnel (central aisle or interior), the line recovers its shape, the players close to the axis placing the possessor and the last in width of the line (full back P2-P3 with complete line, one of the center backs, P4-P5 may be last in width if the line is incomplete) with a diagonal defensive-shape recovery trajectory in the direction of the longitudinal axis (remaining inside the defensive funnel). In addition, once the line reaches the limit of recovery, the nearest (or assigned) defender advances on the possessor to avoid the possible outside shot and generates a 3-1

stagger, where the 3 remaining on the line brake at the limit of recovery or the front area.

Figure 9: Diagonal defensive-shape recovery trajectories (defensive funnel) + timing on the advance of the possessor (limit of recovery)



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Coverage and adjustments along the line + unstable situations and incomplete line

The individual interventions of the players of the line of defense involve situations of intraline (between the players on the line) and interline (together with players on other lines) adjustments. We will focus on intraline adjustments, bearing in mind that achieving balance on the line depends on the intra and interline adjustments, and we cannot separate them, although we can distinguish them.

At the interline level, defensive line players must recognize the location of the midfield line players and their possibilities of merging with the defensive line (into which gaps, situations of change in opponent involved from one or more players on the line merging, which leads us to assume different defensive responsibilities, "picking up" some mark/reference once it is merged. Separation on 2nd line rival players, etc.). Players on the defensive line will communicate their needs to the midfield line so they may merge and help.

Within the intraline adjustments, we will discuss staggering caused after the advance of one of the center backs (P4-P5) and how the rest of the

players that remain aligned can maintain their balance. We will distinguish two types of line situations:

- Staggered line (if the advancing player has influence over the line from its shadow zone, what it covers).
- Incomplete line (where the players that remain on the line behave like a functional unit, since the advancing player has no influence on the line or the gaps from his/her shadow zone).

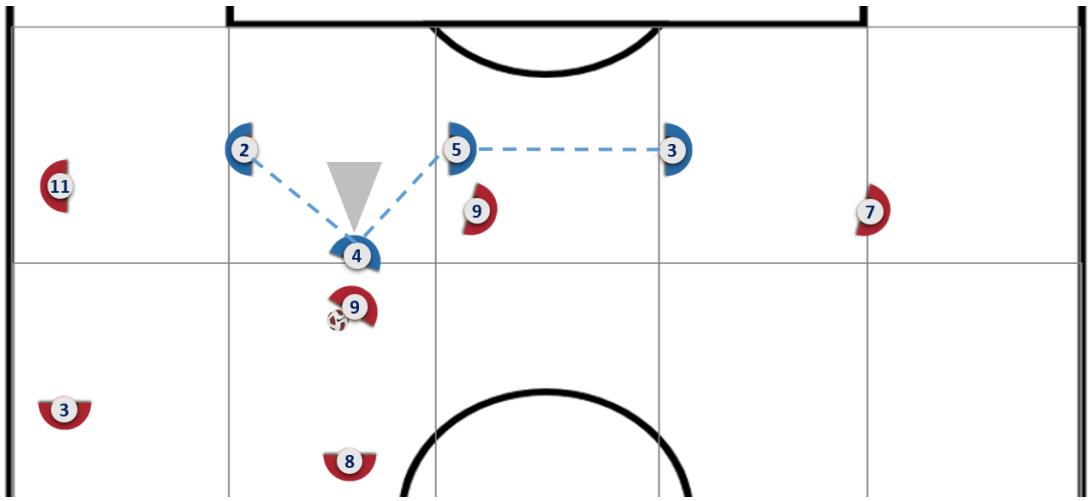
The situations of incomplete line are more unstable (3 players defend the whole width) and arise from the following situations:

- Very long advance of any of the players on the line. The greater the distance from the line, the less influence on it. If the advancing player loses influence over the line from his/her shadow zone, the remaining players on the line will behave as a functional unit in order to maintain the balance of the line.
- Situations of confrontation with any of the players on the line (mainly P4/P5 center backs). If extending the line is possible, the shadow zone disappears (it is possible to play on the axis of the player in confrontation). The 3-1 adjustment generated from the staggering should take into account the possibility of keeping P4 and P5 in line on the same axis (depending on the level of balance).
- Elimination/surpassing of the staggered player. These are the most unbalanced situations. These unstable incomplete line situations will be discussed later.

Next, we will discuss the differences that can occur in a situation when the 1st center back P4 makes an advance, depending on the influence its shadow zone has on the gaps between the defensive players that remain aligned:

- Staggered line 3-1: short advance of 1st center back P4, his/her shadow zone has influence on the widened gap formed by the two players adjacent to the 1st center back who is staggered. The adjustment made by the defenders who remain on the line depends on the 1st center back P4 that advances. The two neighboring players are located on different axes, so the situation is a staggered line 3-1 on 4 axes. Facing the two defenders adjacent to the 1st center back P4 that advances, doubling up on coverage.

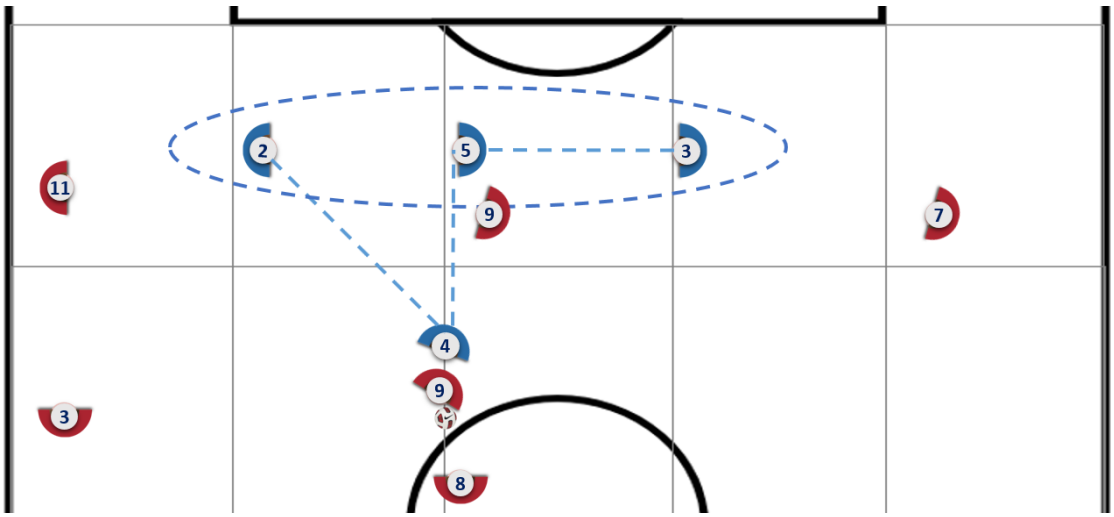
Figure 10: Staggered line 3-1



Source: prepared by the author

- Incomplete line 3+1: advance of the 1st defender P4 where his/her shadow zone has no influence on the defensive line (very long advance or situation of confrontation where there can be an extension on its same axis, shadow zone). In this situation, the adjustment of the 3 players that remain on the line will not depend on the location of the 1st defender P4 that has advanced (since he/she has no influence on the defensive line). Defenders who remain on the line will behave as an independent functional unit and try to achieve line balance from their locations and behaviors. It is an incomplete line situation 3+1 (3+0 if the 1st defense that advances is eliminated). In this case, the 3+1 situation can be structured on 3 or 4 axes, which will not depend on the staggered player, but on the 3 defenders who remain on the line and try to keep it balanced, managing to adequately defend the whole width, prioritizing spaces according to rival threats and game orientation. In order to achieve this balance, the P4-P5 defenders may or may not be on the same axis, but it will not be so important to be located on different axes as the 1st staggered P4 defender since the coverage distances (and consequently the return distances of the staggered one) will be long, and the interval distances of the players on the incomplete line will be prioritized.

Figure 11: Incomplete line 3+1



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