

Module 2. Mesoplane analysis

Unit 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 prioritized 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; when the game is open, for example.

To standardize behavior, some of these variables must be prioritized. When making a decision, the player takes all of these variables into account in order to fully adjust to the in-game situation. Having to pay attention to so many variables may cause player errors. Setting some variables as priority makes the player's interpretation easier and they will know what to focus on and make fewer errors. However, by ruling out some variables, less adjustment to the situation. It also facilitates the player's execution since they can better adjust the timing of their play and pay attention to executing the movement or technique.

As we said before, in order to standardize behaviors, it is essential to have a thorough understanding of the game allowing 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 how to solve that situation and there are many possibly valid solutions. However, we can standardize the continuous support by the 1st center-back P4 when fullback P2 has 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 foundations 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 (successful and unsuccessful) 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 detail. 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)**.



Unit 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 line balance:

- Angled position, turning 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 in-game stimuli.
- Constant awareness of blind spots, turning their head, even though their 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 distance to opponents and communicating with teammates about opponents who try sneak in.
- 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:

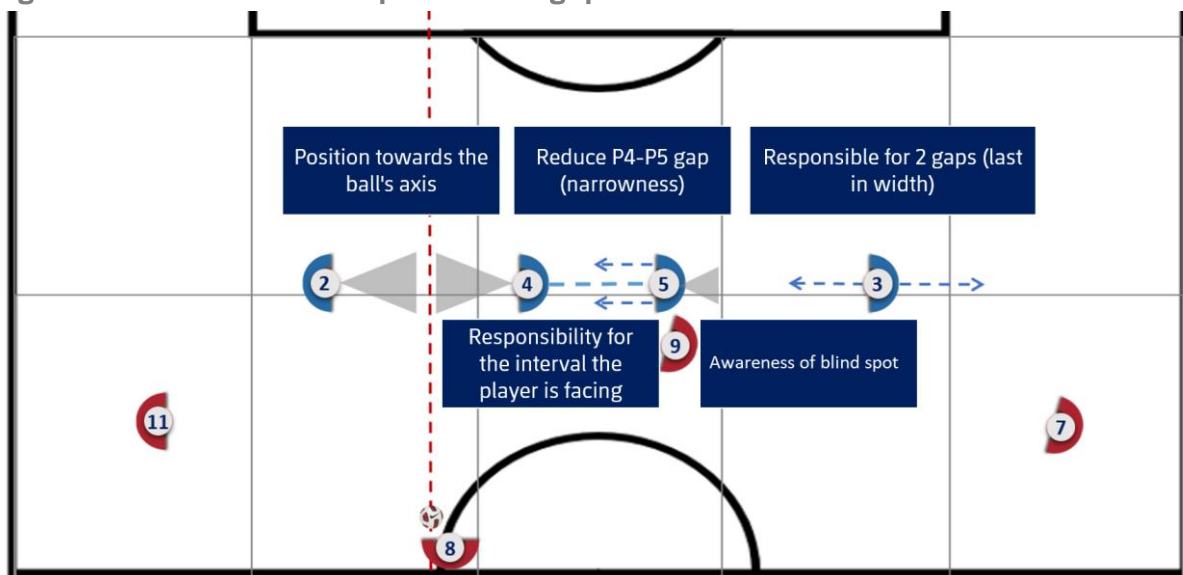
- Continually monitor references, assigned and non-assigned opponents, and master the concept of swapping opponents between players on the defensive line after the team in possession makes a horizontal pass, which involves horizontal movements from advanced defenders. This only affects the defensive line. For this reason, avoid vertical interactions after horizontal interactions or against shifting.
- Pace of shifting depends on whether the opponent advances past their neighboring players; avoiding that gaps are left for penetration.
- Combine shifting, horizontal movements, with vertical movements, forward/backward; depending on how the possessor/receiver is situated.
- Crossover running in adjustment shifts at a medium to high pace. Using a running technique where the stride is not lateral—jumps where both feet are off the ground, or both feet are “planted” in the ground, as this hinders response abilities. Rather, steps must cross which increases speed. Having one foot on the ground almost always improves response abilities.

- Sprints that are perpendicular/diagonal to the sideline for long stretches at a high pace. A 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 their responsibility for the gap that they are facing. They are responsible for: the gap in front of them, 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, the 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 their location and the wing is their responsibility. This requires constant awareness of blind spots and an adjustment in distances to keep both gaps balanced. The "blind" gap is also influenced.
- When facing the axis of the ball, two players will double up to defend the gap. This hinders the chance of an inside 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.
- Awareness of the adjacent gap for which they are not responsible, mainly while making adjustments. Monitoring the "blind" spot.

Figure 1: Defensive line of 5 penetration gaps



Source: prepared by the author.

It is essential to maintain balance while 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, in both in width and depth; as well as the

situation and possibilities of the player in possession like their position, directions of interaction, distance and pursuit of the first defender, among others:

- Defensive funnel: as close as possible to the goal, narrower gaps are prioritized between center-backs, and that they stay in the central/inside corridors. In high-pressure situations, the shifting of the defensive line can allow the first center-back to move to the outer 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 intra-line 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-back 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 direct 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:

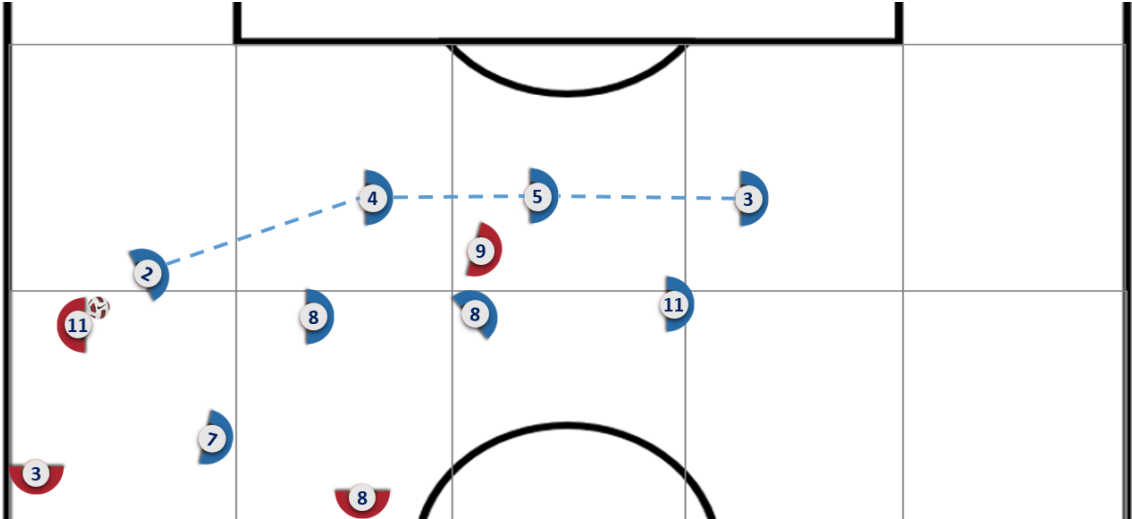
- It is possible to continually alter the depth of the playing space. This variability of the space limitations in depth allows the defensive line to take the initiative with regard to the offensive players, who will have to constantly check that they are still in play. This is why we want the defensive 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 to mark the height of the defensive line. This allows other players on the line to correct their position and align themselves with them.
- In general, the **height reference** player, to whom 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 line.

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. Different situations of play will be described below. These establish the roles of the player with best ability to correct and intervene. The **line leader** is the one with more quality and quantity of information gathered from their extended field of vision and the **height reference** is the player that marks the height of the line with the rest of players adjusting themselves to their 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

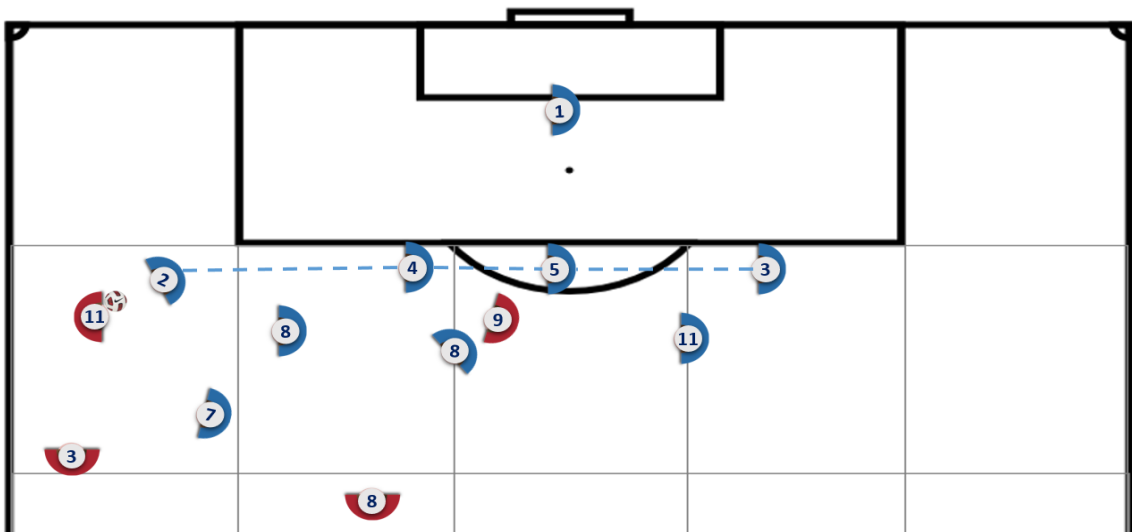


Source: prepared by the author.

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

- Ball in outer corridor near the box:
 - Height reference: lateral 1st defender (P2).
 - Line leader: 2nd center-back (P5).

Figure 3: Ball in outer corridor near the box



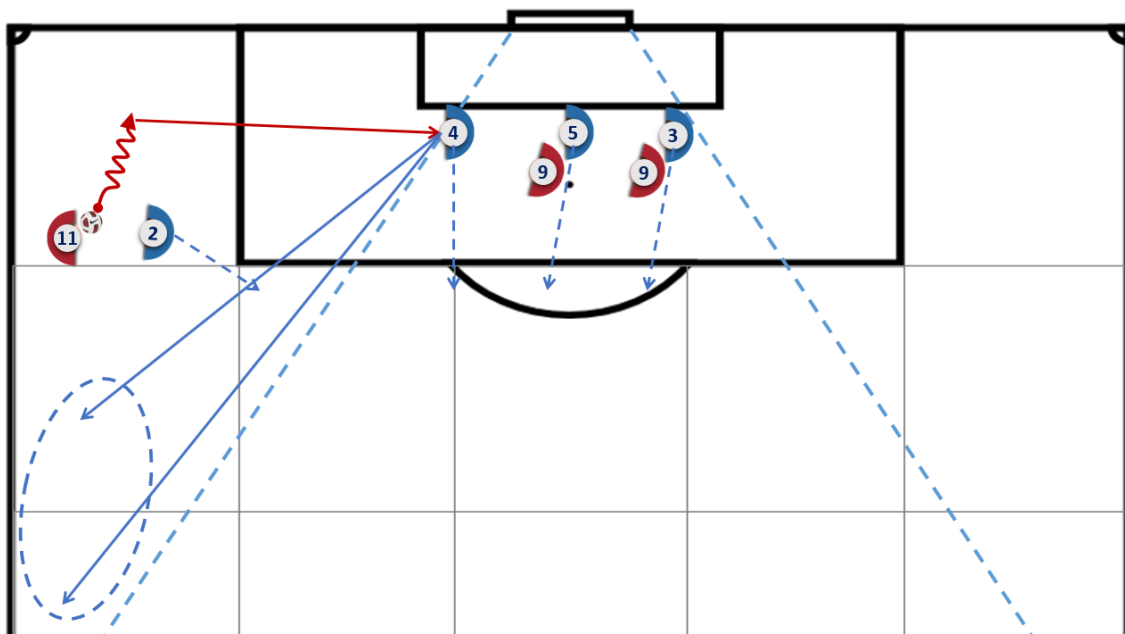
Source: prepared by the author.

Depending on the crossing possibilities, the line could also behave as in figure 2, with 1st center-back marking height within the area (finishing zones). Priority must be decided between the advantages of removing strikers from finishing zones and taking the initiative, and the danger of a divided center—the space between goalkeeper and the extended line, and dynamically superior strikers who are headed toward the goal. The GK (Goalkeeper) must participate in defending the middle 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



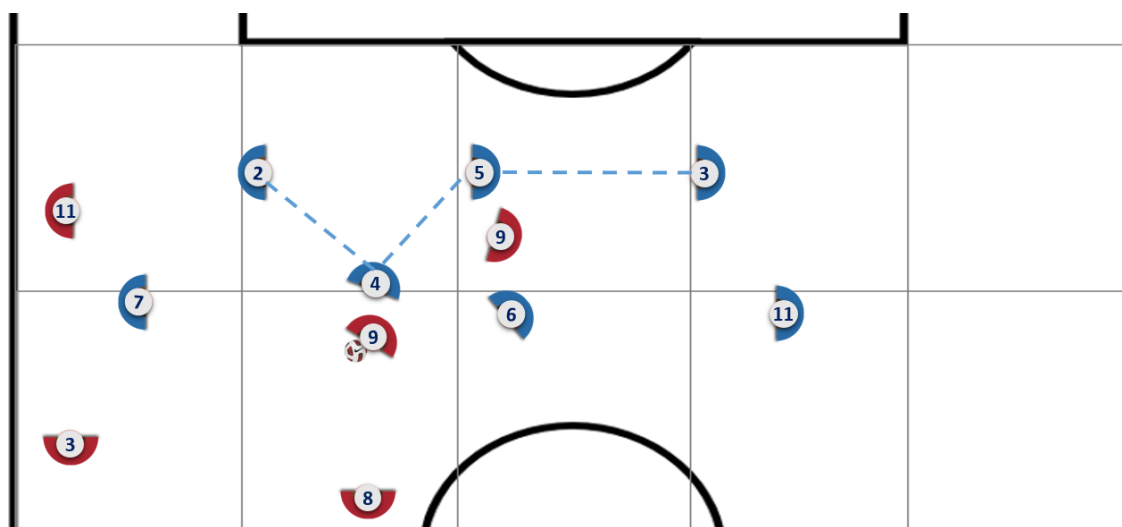
Source: prepared by the author.

In situations after clearing, the greatest danger is usually a 2nd cross after recovering the clearance, and the biggest mistake is usually that the player who clears it (1st center-back P4, in this case) “hangs back” and breaks the offsides line since they are 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 they have stabilized themselves after hitting the ball; 1-2 seconds after clearing 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 an entire line advance when the player who has cleared it 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 cross, in case an opponent recovers the clear. The P2 full-back—who was 1st defender at the moment of the 1st cross, prior to clearing the ball—closes inward to reduce the central-lateral gap and remains in an intermediate position that allows them to also intervene on their opponent P11 assigned man. In cases where the cross 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 inside 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 inside corridor after advance by 1st center-back (P4) to receiver



Source: prepared by the author.

In situations of an incomplete line or misalignment due to an advance, the height reference and the line leader will be the same—generally 2nd center-back, P5—if the ball is in the center corridor or inside. It will be the central player of the temporary line of 3, when they are able to cover their two neighboring players. In turn, it is essential that they are not in the same axis as 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. Let's 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 a covered ball; but not necessarily. If a short movement is performed at a fast pace, we describe this as elastic or individual offside. This depends 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 recovery limit established or the needs that each situation of play may require.
- Backward shift: 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 an 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, meaning a 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, mainly, will be in the opponent's possibilities of passing back and/or an inside pass in progression—which involves getting past a line, elimination of players, among others. 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.

Covered and uncovered ball situations 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 are dominate. But it will mainly exist if developments such as: transitions, sub-phase changes or context within the same phase of game that do not imply change of possession, are dominate between the conditions of covered and uncovered ball, and between the different vertical movements, adjusting the timing in each change of direction/movement; while 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.

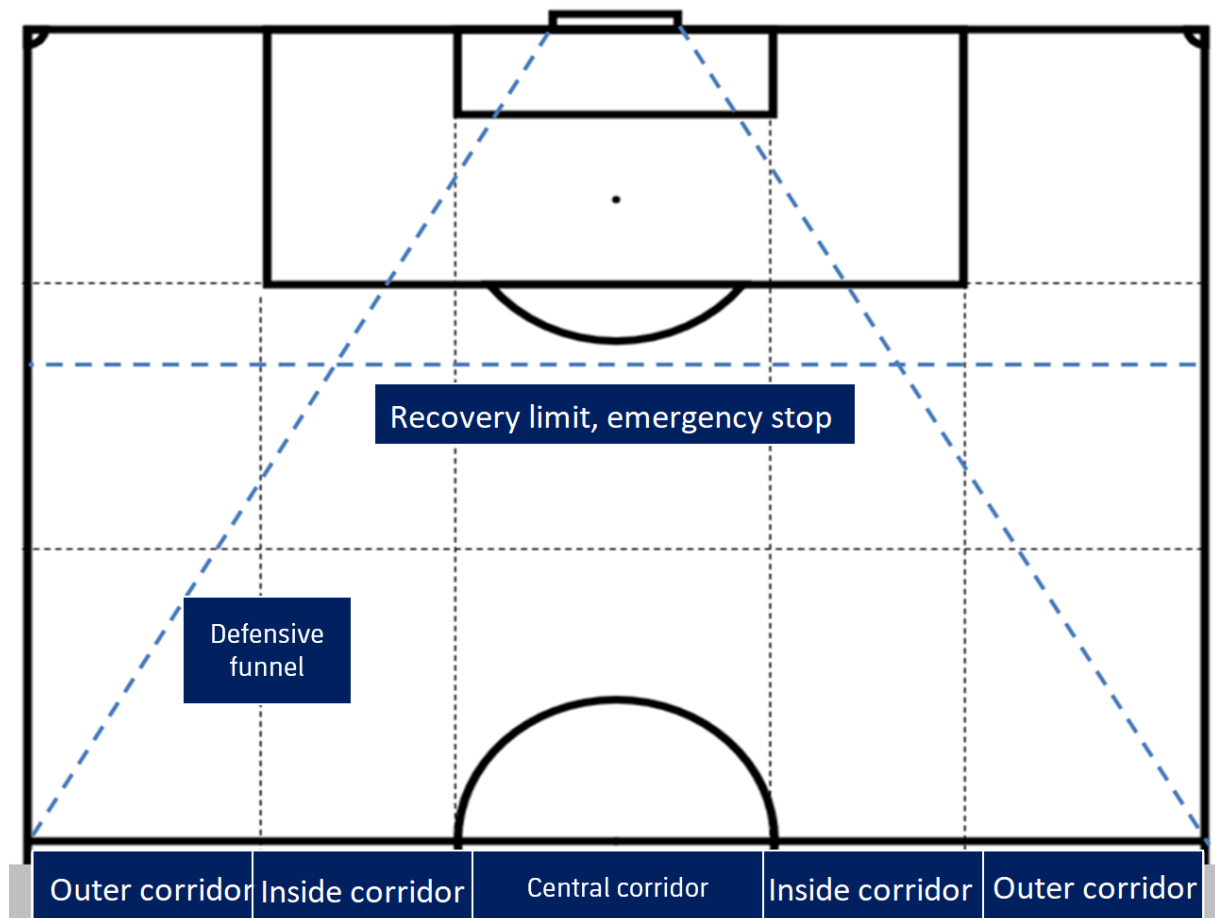


However, some aspects already mentioned will be fundamental, such as the roles of line leader and height reference or looking at each group movement of the line.

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.

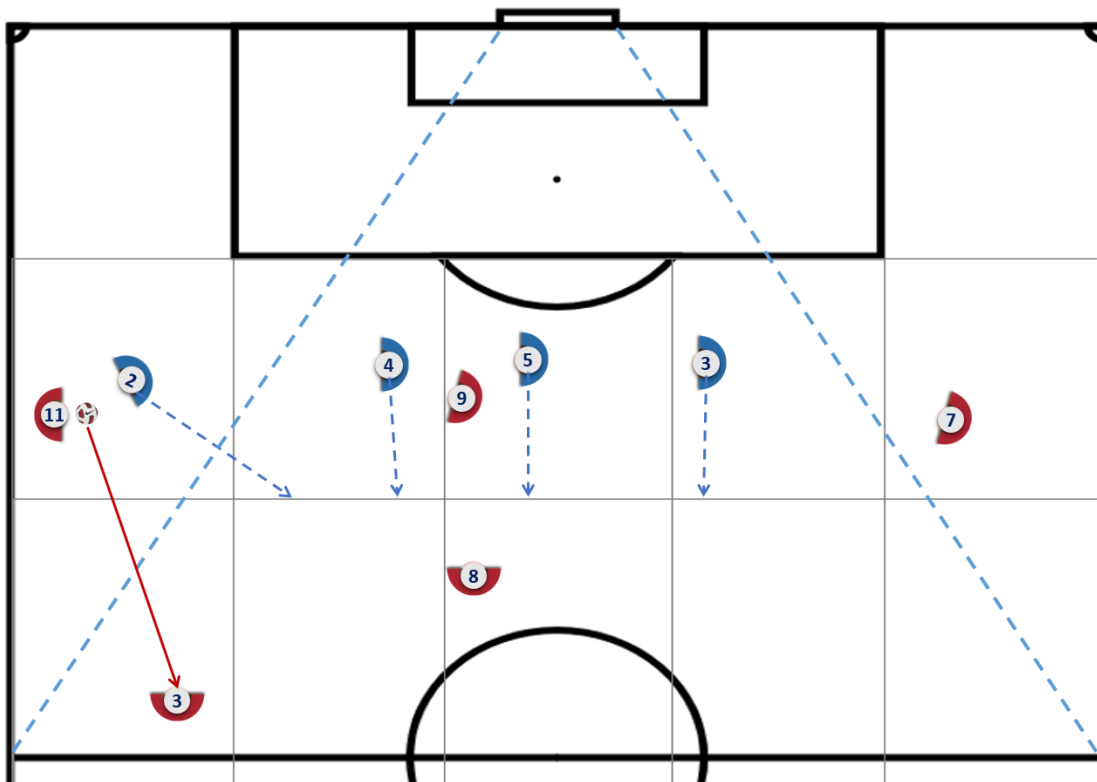
- Defensive funnel: imaginary line joining the point formed by the midfield line and the sideline, next to the goal posts. They are two lines that converge and serve as a reference for the width of the defensive line—which is reduced according to the distance from the goal itself.
- Recovery limit: imaginary line established at the edge of the area, 20 or 25 meters. Each coach sets it at the height they consider most effective. It is a useful reference point 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 outer, inside 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 outer, inside and central corridors specifically enough. Thus, they are references that can generate greater uncertainty.

Next, we will describe several game situations where spatial references heavily influence solving the problem:

- Passing back, during a covered ball situation, in the outer corridor; influenced by the defensive funnel. Encroachment of the defensive line in which fullback P2 that was 1st defender outside the defensive funnel, encroaches diagonally inwards to enter the defensive funnel. Their path is longer than that of the other defenders so, in order for the position balanced, the instant the ball becomes undefended, they must run faster.

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

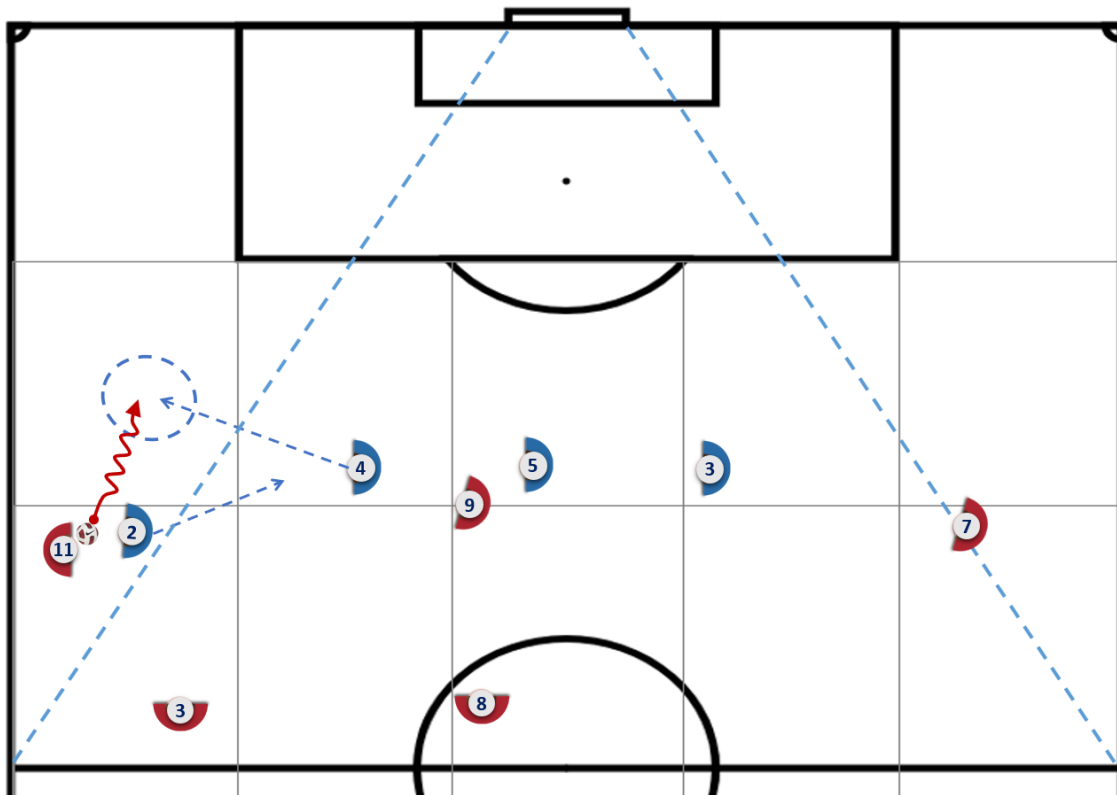


Source: prepared by the author.

- Emergency cover by 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 to help will be given to 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. They will be able to cover but they must assess whether more advantage is gained by this action or by staying inside the defensive funnel, holding up the play. If the line stays balanced, the swapping of the beaten P2 full-back is guaranteed, and the distance to the goal is still far. 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 coverage of 1st center-back P4

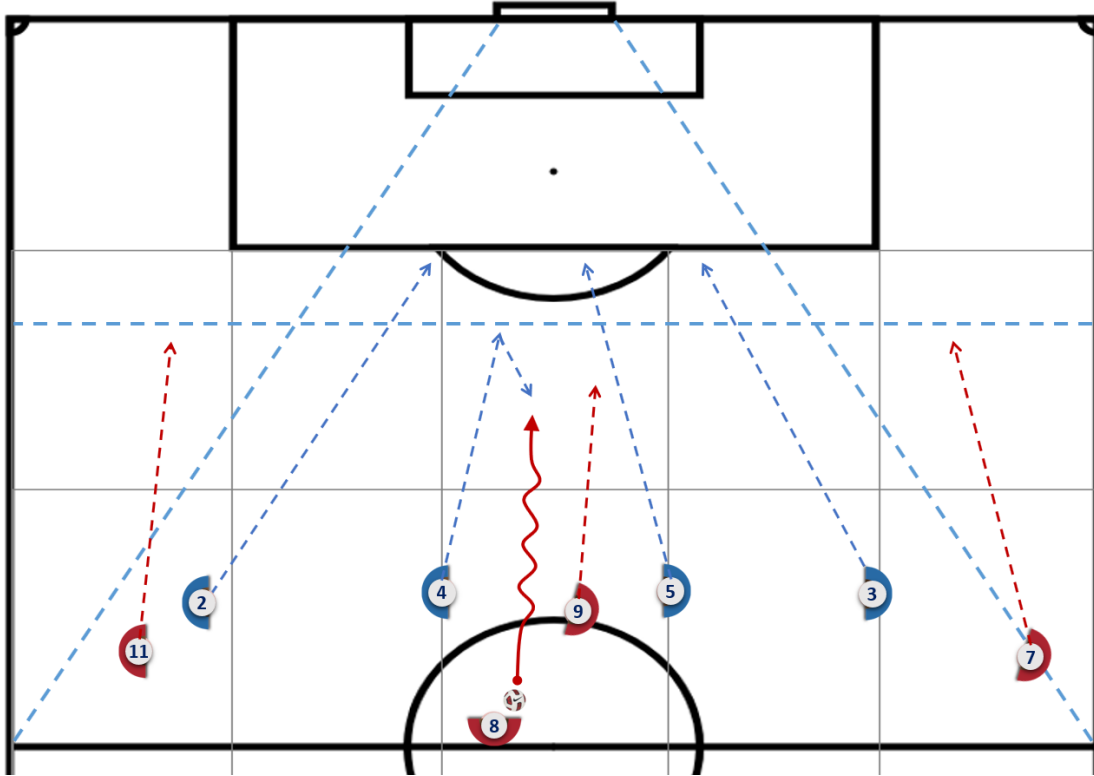


Source: prepared by the author.

- Diagonal defensive-shape recovery trajectories in the defensive funnel and timing of the advance on the possessor, recovery limit: in situations where the possessor handles the ball inside the defensive funnel, within the central or inside corridors, the line recovers its shape. Then, the players close down to the axis placing the possessor and the last defender along the length of the line—full-back P2-P3 with completed line, one of the center-backs, P4-P5 may be last in line if the line is incomplete—with a diagonal defensive-shape recovery trajectory in the direction of the longitudinal axis; while remaining inside the defensive funnel. In addition, once the line reaches the recovery limit, the nearest—or otherwise assigned—defender advances on the possessor to avoid

the possible outside shot and creates a 3-1 stagger, where the 3 remaining defenders on the line stop at the recovery limit or the front area.

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



Source: prepared by the author.

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

The defensive line players' individual interventions involve situations of intra-line, between the players on the line, and inter-line, together with players on other lines, adjustment. We will focus on intra-line adjustments, bearing in mind that achieving balance on the line depends on the intra- and inter-line adjustments, and we cannot separate them. Although, we can distinguish them.

At the inter-line level, defensive line players must recognize the location of the midfield line players and their possibilities for merging with the defensive line. These may include into which gaps or what opponent changes need to happen from one or more players merging into the line. These lead us to assume different defensive responsibilities, "picking up" some mark/reference once it is merged, separation on 2nd line rival players; among others. Players on the defensive line will communicate their needs to the midfield line so they may merge and help.

Within the intra-line 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 their shadow zone.

Incomplete line situations are more unstable (3 players defend the entire width) and arise from the following situations:

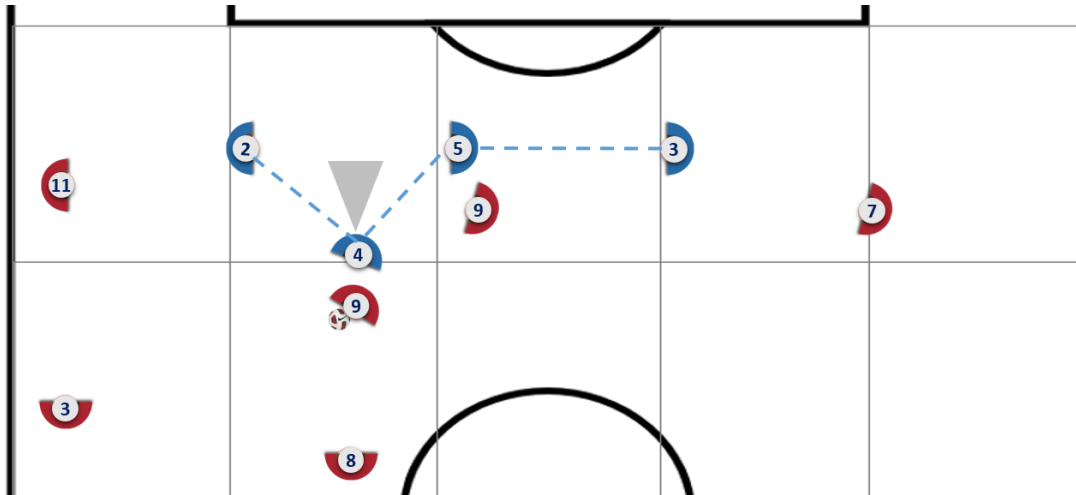
- Very deep advance of any of the players on the line. The greater the distance from the line, the less influence on it. If the advancing player loses influence over the line from their shadow zone, the remaining players on the line will behave as a functional unit in order to maintain the balance of the line.
- Confrontations with any of the players on the line; mainly P4/P5 center-backs. If extending the line is possible, the shadow zone disappears but it is possible to play on the axis of the player in confrontation. The 3-1 adjustment generated from staggering should take into account the possibility of keeping P4 and P5 in line on the same axis; this 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, their shadow zone influences 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.



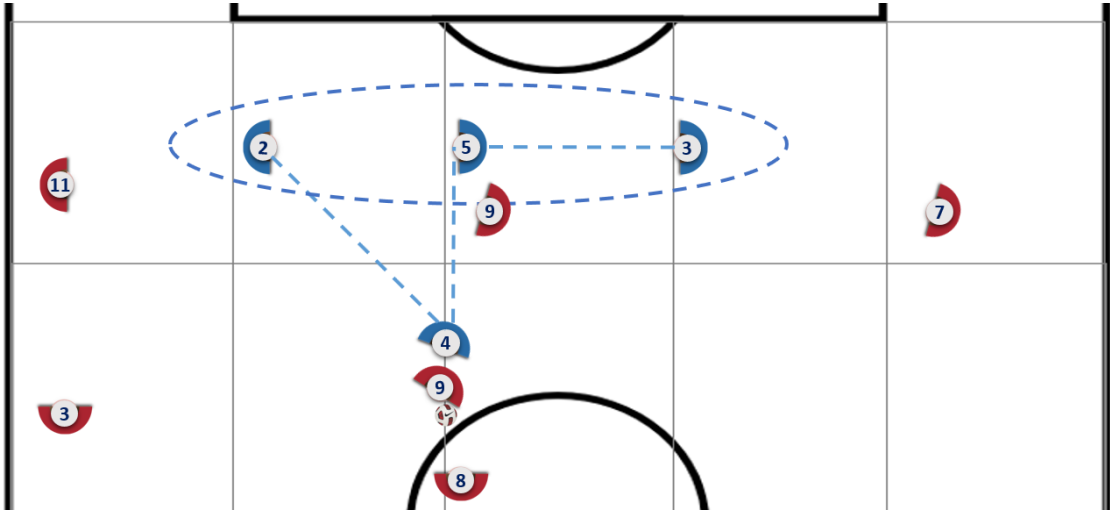
Figure 10: Staggered line 3-1



Source: prepared by the author.

- Incomplete line 3+1: advance of the 1st defender P4 where their shadow zone has no influence on the defensive line, where there is a very deep advance or confrontation where there can be an extension on its same axis or 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 they have 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, or 3+0, if the 1st defender that advances is beaten. 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 and 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



Source: prepared by the author.