

## Coaching Defensive Play in Gaelic Football

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Before outlining the format, we must reiterate what was mentioned to coaches who attended. We feel that too many still see a session on defensive play as an opportunity to simply pick up a dozen tackling drills. If this were the case why would the Ulster Council run a separate CPD night called ‘Coaching the Tackle’? Of course, tackling is at the core of good defensive work, but so are principles like delay, control, balance, concentration and depth.

With this in mind we made a conscious decision to be different and link exercises [drills and games] to observation of real play. Whether it is through watching live football or a video recording, opportunities exist where coaches may glean information about individual players or groups of players and their defensive frailties.

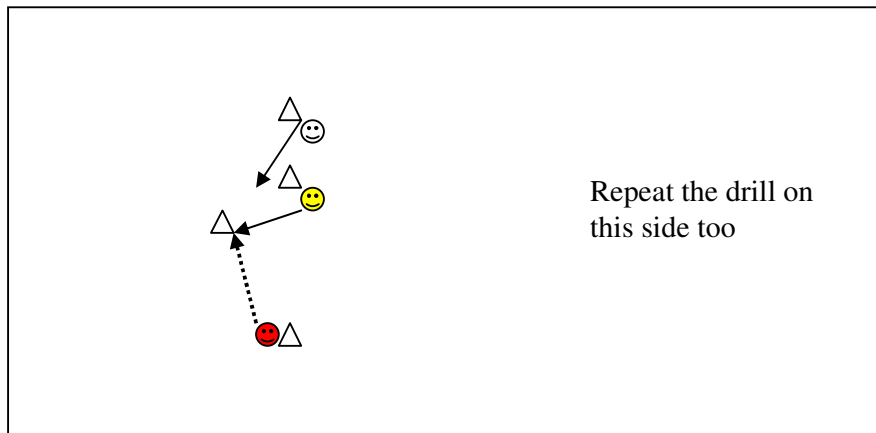
As you read the transcript of the session, think how you might observe some matches this coming season and use aspects of them design drills and games in order to improve one or more players in your squad.....and remember...  
**DRILLS ALONE will not solve your problems!**

### The Session

1. Sixteen players from O’Donovan Rossa U16 squad acted out the various drills and game situations during the session.  
We gave out cards to a small number of coaches. Each card identified a team and a particular player within that team [see the sample at the foot of this transcript].  
We asked each coach to watch his nominated player during the short game [5 minutes] and look for any defensive shortcomings he might have. Each card had a short check to prompt the coach.  
We asked all other coaches to choose a player or two to focus on during the game and think about the advice they might give.
2. At the end of the game we invited each ‘**card holding coach**’ to take his player aside [one-to-one situation] and point out to that player **ONE** aspect of his defensive game that he should work on.  
Other coaches were reminded that they had just been watching with a particular focus. Would it be worth doing this back at the club?

3. The game resumed [for a further 3 minutes] to allow players to follow some of the advice. One player, for example, was told that he had got drawn towards the ball on two occasions while his opponent moved behind him and received a lobbed pass over the top. It didn't happen in the second part of the game.
  
5. As players got drinks and moved off to help set the first drill, we talked to coaches about how they should make more use of observing aspects of games to spot and fix problems. We said that that we had done just that with the **Tyrone v Dublin** drawn game and had chosen a selection of defensive situations from that particular match to help us design some practical exercises for tonight's session.
  
6. The first two match situations were run as drills. We split the coaches to watch two situations
  - a. The '**Sherlock v McMennamin**' play – it happened twice in the first half [8<sup>th</sup> and 29<sup>th</sup> minute] and Sherlock scored on both occasions. Instead of playing the ball from a 30m kick pass, we shortened the delivery into the one-v-one drill to reduce the chances of the ball going astray. Main coaching points were about footwork, focus on midriff, knowing if he favours a particular foot.

## H



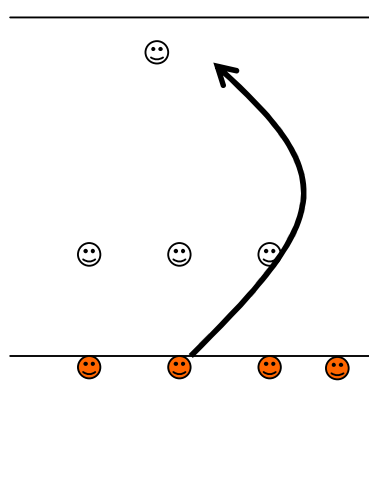
Red player is the feeder [shortened to 5m from the action]. Yellow is Sherlock and the white player is McMennamin.

Yellow starts the drill by moving quickly to the cone set at an angle to the rest. White responds to close yellow down. Yellow turns to feint and side step, trying to throw white off balance and make room for the shot. The action all takes place on or about the 20m line. Players rotate to suit. The main coaching point is that the defender [white] should stay balanced and focused on his opponent's midriff rather than follow the feint.

- b. At the same time, Paddy ran the ‘**Over the Top**’ game - across the pitch and with 3v3, 4v3, 3v4 and 4v4 combinations to replicate the first-half long pass in from **Paul Casey**, which flew over the Dublin forwards and was swept up by **Chris Lawn**. Players [both forwards and defenders] found themselves chasing towards Lawn – how do the backs work it out? Are forwards drawn to the ball? Where will the extra man go?

### OVER THE TOP [GAME]

A 4v4 exercise where 4 attackers [red] line up along the halfway line and 3 defenders [white] face them 5m away. [Defenders may even start in press-up position]. The final defender stands some 20m behind his team-mates. The width of the playing area is set at 30m-40m [use multimarkers and one sideline].

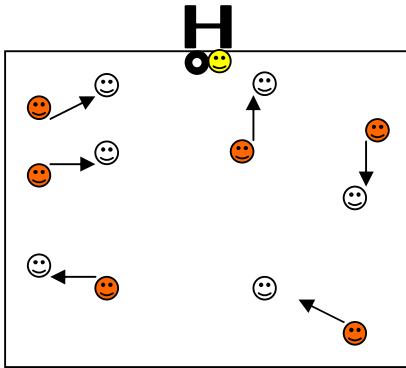


One attacker has the ball and lobs it over the line of defenders towards the lone player. Defenders are forced to turn and find support positions. The attackers close down the defenders who must work it out over the halfway line to earn a point. Should the attackers win the ball back, they must work it over the 20m line to score. Swap roles, repeat, give players the chance to work out moves etc.

7. From here we moved to set up a game play called ‘**Lose It, Win it**’ to make the link between Paddy’s game and the situation that existed for the **Dublin goal [14 passes etc. 36 minutes]**. Brian McGuigan’s shot had landed in the goalkeeper’s hands and Dublin moved the ball upfield to score a goal. We set up the exercise and ran it 3 times for reds and 3 for whites – we asked coaches to look for any players who found themselves drawn to the ball when they had little or no chance of reaching it – leaving an opponent free to continue the move.

### LOSE IT/WIN IT [GAME]

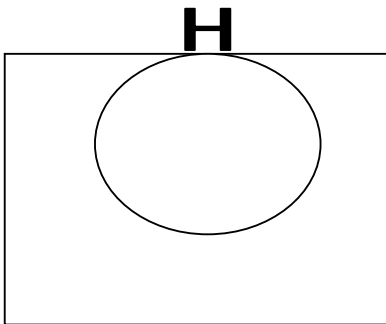
Simulates those match situations when forwards have made good runs to get a pass from midfield but the pass has been misdirected and ended up with the opposition goalkeeper 😊 . To properly copy this, force forwards to stand at multi-markers at least five or six metres away from any backs. 😊 The ball starts with the goalkeeper. He throws it in the air and catches it to signal 'game on'. The forwards immediately try to stop the backs getting the ball out easily and carrying it over the halfway line. Do this over and over to work on suppressing a forward's instinct to simply watch where the ball goes and to improve his ability to close an opponent down.



8. The next game **Pay the Price** – we introduced this through reference to a number of situations where both Tyrone and Dublin ran at opposition defences – one in particular – 47 minutes gone – Dublin 1-11 Tyrone 0-10 - Dublin kickout, ball broken down to **Sean Cavanagh** – he runs at Dublin and is forced wide - all other players are picked up - he is 25m out and posing no real danger – **Paul Casey** shoves him in the back – **Stephen O’Neill scores** Pay the Price is designed to make players do their jobs and refrain from fouling in the scoring zone.

### PAY THE PRICE [GAME]

What about a game to allow defenders to work on tackling without fouling? What if the same game gave forwards the incentive to get closer to goal and even draw 'frees' from the opposition?

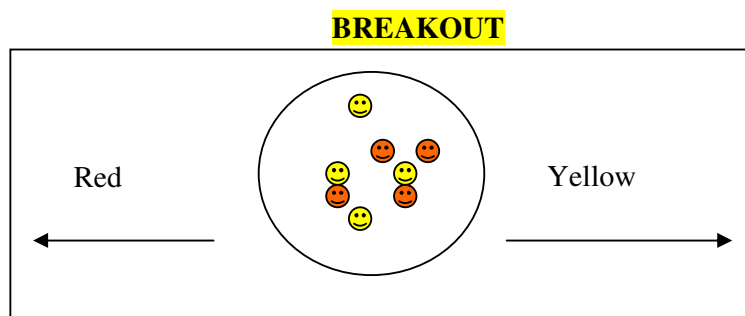


Set up a large circle [diameter 40m]. Play backs v forwards to the halfway or far 45m line. The goalkeeper plays for the defenders. Start each play with a kick-out. Let the forwards take possession and attack. Only points count.

Should the attackers shoot and score from outside the circle, they are awarded 1 point. A score from inside the zone earns 2 points. A 'free' scored from inside the zone earns 3 points.

Defenders must work to keep the scores to a minimum, so they must make sure they do not commit fouls inside the zone and that they mark tightly enough to keep down the number of 2 point scores. Defenders can earn scores for themselves, by winning the ball and working it up the pitch to cross the halfway line or far 45m line while still in possession. The coach can determine how many points should be given. Try it...show defenders that if they are too rash and if the defence lacks balance they will pay the price!

10. Having looked at defensive play from forwards and from backs, we then took a situation from the middle part of the field – from kickouts – the best example from the match came on 60 minutes – Dublin kickout on 1-12 apiece – **Brian Dooher** is under the flight of the ball but doesn't contest it – instead, he breaks free from the midfield bunch to take a pass – no Dublin player follows as all in the middle are still drawn to the ball– Dooher kicks a point.  
We used a 4v4 exercise called '**Breakout**' to work on defending against this.



Set a circle along halfway line. 8 players inside. Lob the ball in [instead of kickout]. Team that wins the ball must work it with max. two-touch football over the 20m line. Emphasis is on team that loses ball. Players must develop defensive instincts where they are NOT drawn to the ball player, but can switch quickly to mark another opponent and cut the ball player's options. Only one player needs to tackle the ball player head on. Once a play is finished, have 8 more ready to step in. Keep rotating.

11. We finished with the '**Two Players**' game. This allows most to take part in a normal game, while two players [in direct opposition – e.g. one midfielder from each side] are taken aside before the game and quietly given the following rules by which **only they** must play:

Should one or the other score during the game, the actual score will be trebled [e.g. 1 point = 3 points...1 goal = 3 goals]. Should either assist a score [i.e. final pass], the score will be doubled.

This is best used to force 'lazy' player who only likes going forward to work harder and learn the value of covering back.

**Remember, should any coach have two 'lazy' [but talented] players in the team and not address the problem during sessions, the chances of success on the pitch are minimal!**

The session finished at 9.30p.m.

See below for sample of 'Coaching Card' given to a selection of coaches at the beginning of the session.

## Coaching Card

During this short game you should watch.....

PLAYER NUMBER – ?

From the RED / WHITE team;

Make a note of any defensive frailties he may have.

Here is a short checklist to help:

Does he tend to rush into the tackle?

Is he easy to evade? [poor footwork]

Does he forget to cover back for his teammates?

Does he tend to follow the ball and lose track of his direct opponent?

Is he caught out of position very often?

At the end of the short game, you should talk one-to-one with your nominated player and give him advice on ONE ASPECT of his defensive play which needs improved.