

Pressing From The Front

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Pressing

Pressing and attempting to regain the ball has always been a part of football. Footage of the 1974 Holland team hunting down the ball shows how teams at the top level pressurise opponents into making errors and turning over possession.

Changed rules = altered strategy

However, before the introduction of the backpass rule in 1992, pressing in the final third often resulted in players passing back to the Goalkeeper (GK) to relieve the pressure, because the GK could pick the ball up. The pass back rule (a clause within Law 12) now prohibits the goalkeeper from handling the ball when a team-mate has deliberately "kicked" the ball to them or thrown it from a throw-in. The big innovation in football this spawned, was 'Pressing from the Front'.

What was football like before the backpass rule was introduced?

In this article we discuss the benefits of pressing from the front to win the ball back as high up the pitch as possible. When pressing from the front, we need to address a number of key points for players to recognise.

Pressing Triggers

Pressing Triggers are specific events which provide a cue for players to close an opposition player in possession down, to try and regain the ball with a tackle or interception.

If the team chases after the ball without restraint, it can have a negative impact on their play and actually allow the opposition to get forwards, because space or gaps can appear behind those pressing the ball. Therefore, players out of possession need to read the game and understand the pressing triggers which indicate when to close the ball down.

There are many cues to be aware of when attempting to press the ball as a team. These include:

- Poor touch
- A slow pass
- Ball is passed to the players weak foot
- Backwards pass
- Player doesn't expect the pass (slow to react)
- Player next to the byline or side line
- Player is facing towards their own goal or away from the opposition player

Once players recognise a pressing trigger in the game, they should press immediately and at pace.

Starting Positions - Pressing from the front

When pressing from the front, starting positions may vary however there are 2 main approaches in terms of where to position players;

- Player for player
- In-between players

Player for player

Player for player is when players mark (stand near) opposition players. This limits passing options for the opposition as they won't want to take the risk of passing to a player who is covered by an opposition player, especially so close to their own goal.

In-between players

This is when players take up positions in-between opposition players, either to the side, in front or behind.

This allows players to potentially cover two spaces or players and also block passing lines, depending on where the players position themselves.

Communication

Communication is one of the most important components of the game when your team is out of possession. We may categorise communication into verbal and non-verbal communication.

Verbal communication when pressing

Verbal communication is an important factor when pressing and coaches generally encourage all players to talk and provide specific instructions. With that in mind it is important that players talk from back to front with the Goalkeeper speaking to the defenders, defenders to the midfield unit, and midfielders to attackers. This layer of verbal communication is important because the players positioned further back are able to see more of the field and the 'bigger picture' when the ball is in the final third.

Non-verbal communication when pressing

It is also important for players to recognise non-verbal communication (body language) and cues to determine when and where to initiate the press.

As demonstrated in the above image, if the Striker (#9) shows the defender to the left touchline, the supporting players need to mark players to their right and be prepared to intercept the ball and win headers/tackles.

Strategies to press from the front

We can also divide pressing from the front into two different strategies:

- Sliding and screening to press
- High Pressure

Sliding and screening to press

This strategy involves players recognising and waiting for one of the pressing triggers to occur, before the team presses aggressively. The 'front line' (attackers) will slide and screen in an attempt to prevent the opposition playing forwards, or to force them in to a specific area of the field. The defenders are also prepared for any long balls if the opposition try to relieve the pressure.

If the ball is played forwards beyond the first line of pressure the midfielders then initiate the press in the middle third with the attackers recovering to provide pressure from behind, making it difficult for the opposition to pass or play out of the space.

A great example of this is RB Leipzig and how they wait for specific moments in the game (pressing triggers) before pressing and closing down the ball aggressively. The video below demonstrates how their defending qualities can lead to goal-scoring opportunities;

High Pressure

The strategy of the 'high press' is to force the opposition into constantly make quick decisions in order to force a mistake and regain possession close to the opposition goal. Sometimes, regardless of pressing triggers, teams may press aggressively. However, this needs to be well coordinated, or it may allow the team in possession to break the lines of pressure and advance forwards.

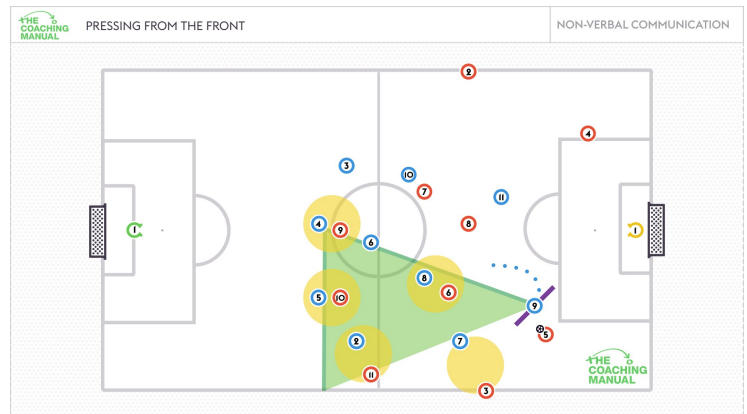
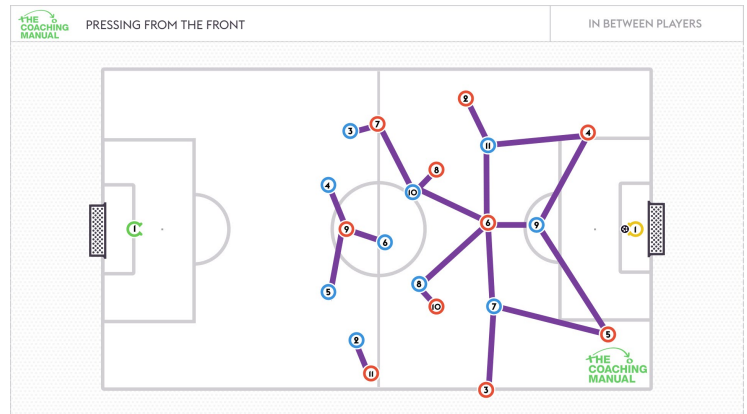
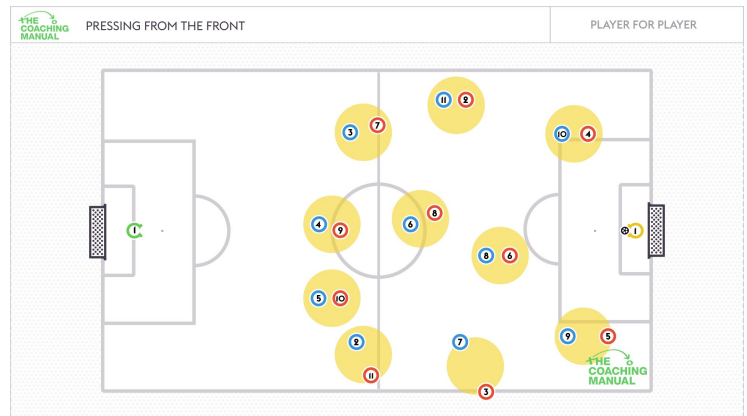
When the attackers are pressing the opposition defensive unit, midfield and defending players of the pressing team need to be marking player to player or be in a position to block passing lines (in-between). This prevents the opposition from playing the ball forwards or combining, and often forces the opposition to play a long ball.

Here, we can see how teams like Napoli relentlessly press in all areas of the field to win the ball back;

Balance

It is important that when a team adopts a pressing strategy, balance is also provided in the centre of the field in order to provide cover in the event of the opposition beating the press.

Setting Traps



Setting traps to press takes collaborative team work and collective reading of the game. By setting a trap, the team out of possession let the opposition believe that they have controlled possession or a free player available. Once the ball is played to a specific player or into a certain area of the field, the press is activated and the team attempt to regain the ball quickly and aggressively.

The team out of possession may concede a spare player, meaning they mark player for player and leave one player free.

When the ball is passed to the free/spare player, the team activate the press as the ball travels, whilst team mates close down advanced opposition players and block passing lines. Another strategy to execute a pressing trap can be as simple as an angled run to close down the player in possession, forcing the ball into a specific area of the field where team mates can press.

Pressing traps may also be worked on in training to identify and expose specific patterns of play from the opposition team.

In the pressing strategy above, we can see how the Wide player (#7) sacrifices their position to let the opposition Full Back (#3) receive the ball. The team recognise this trap and also use the touchline to block the player in and press aggressively.

Here we can see how an opposition player (#6) is left free to receive in a central zone. As the ball is played the press is executed from behind and in front. Pressing traps such as this need to be performed at pace and be a coordinated effort, as a number of players may be leaving their position to close down the ball and this is always a risk.

In the below clip we can see how Manchester City set traps in an attempt to win back the ball.

In the related content section of this article we have highlighted a number of defending practices to allow your players to understand the principles and concepts of pressing from the front.