

# A closer look at pressing

An essential part of team defense tactics: Attacking-third pressing

by Ralf Peter, coach, German U17 girls' national team

## Pressing: What is it?

Modern defense systems are based on limiting the space available to the attacker who has the ball and then outnumbering him with defenders (usually 2 v. 1). Any other opponents near the ball should be tightly marked so that the ball carrier can't pass to them. The defending team shortens the field by spreading out along its length (to a maximum of about 40 yards).

"Pressing" is what we call a planned attempt by the defending team to achieve all of the above objectives. While pressing is not linked to any particular defense system (man-marking, zone defense) or formation (3-5-2, 4-4-2, etc.), running paths are easier to follow, and therefore easier to teach, in formations without a sweeper.

All players need to understand the importance of team defense tactics. So your first step is to teach them that pressing is a way of defending that requires every player, even the ones farthest away from the ball, to participate. They have to coordinate their movements across the entire field so that the ball carrier has no one to pass to and nowhere to dribble.

## Types of pressing

In distinguishing between different types of pressing, we mentally divide the field into three different zones. This division is a way to help our players orient themselves on the field.

However, these zones are flexible, not rigidly defined, and the boundaries between the

different types of pressing are fluid as well. Figure 1 shows the zone used in attacking-third pressing, which will be the subject of this article.

## Attacking-third pressing

Attacking-third pressing is the most aggressive form of pressing. Its object is to completely trap opponents inside their own half, in order to either win the ball or force opponents to play long, uncontrolled passes.

## Advantages

Your opponents are constantly under pressure, without time or space to build a systematic attack. One misplaced pass in front of their goal can create an opening for a shooter.



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## Info: Types of pressing

### 1. Attacking-third pressing



### 2. Midfield pressing



### 3. Defensive-third pressing



### Disadvantages

At the same time, your own players are also under constant (if self-imposed) pressure, with no time for recovery. The usual alternation between exertion and rest is virtually nonexistent. Mistakes are frequently punished with a goal for the opposition, thanks to the wide-open spaces behind your inside defenders (who typically move up to the centerline).

Permanent attacking-third pressing is neither practical nor feasible; over 90 minutes the risks would far outweigh the benefits. Players would be overtaxed, and their ability to concentrate would decline dramatically. There would be literally no space for creativity or intuitive play.

Therefore attacking-third pressing should only be used periodically, e.g. at the start of the game, immediately after the halftime break or when your team is trailing. (More situations appropriate for attacking-third pressing are described on page 33.)

### Basic tactics and running paths

On the following pages we'll begin by with a description of the basic tactics players need to master in order to execute any type of pressing. We'll describe how to steer the opposition's attacks in a given direction, how to outnumber opponents at the right moment and how to successfully attack the ball carrier.

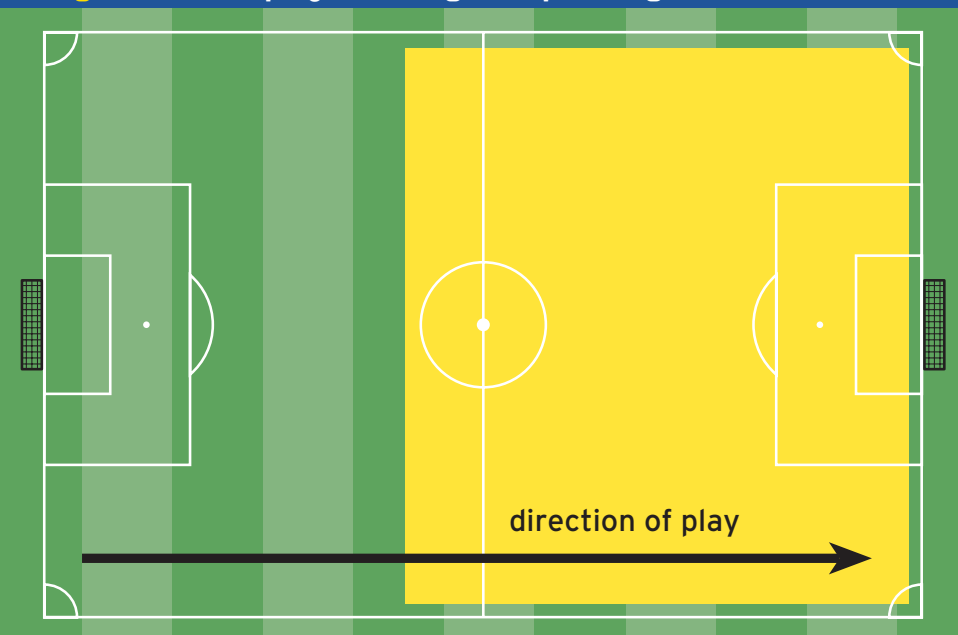
Next, we'll define the role of the goalkeeper in attacking-third pressing and explain how

he can defuse flighted balls played over the heads of his defenders. We'll also show why it's often a good idea to start attacking-third pressing by having your players take positions in the midfield and then waiting for your opponents to initiate the attack they're planning.

Finally, we'll examine the running paths used in attacking-third pressing by individual players and by the team as a whole: first against a back three, then against a back four.

Our study is based on the 4–2–3–1 formation, but its basic principles can be applied to other formations as well. If you want to do that, you'll need to analyze the model sequences shown here and reassign responsibilities according to your players' locations on the field.

**Fig. 1: Where to play attacking-third pressing**



### Trapping the opposition

- The zone for attacking-third pressing extends from the centerline (or just in front of it) to the opposition's endline.
- All players should move up far enough to trap the opposition inside its own half.
- The object of attacking-third pressing is to quickly win the ball as far as possible from your own goal.

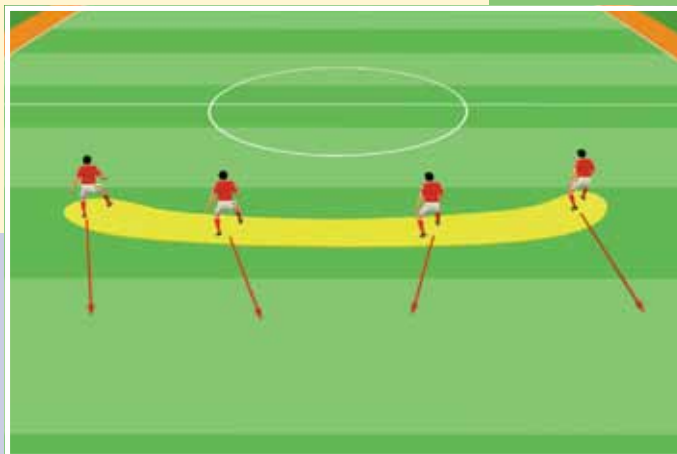
## A closer look at pressing

### BASIC PRESSING TACTICS

#### Dropping back on flighted balls

##### Don't let the ball get past you!

Flighted balls are an extremely common attack tactic against attacking-third pressing, putting a lot of pressure on defenders. However, flighted balls are easy to anticipate. The player with the ball (yellow circle) usually repositions the ball, looks up one last time and then winds up before actually kicking the ball. This should give alert defenders (yellow arc) plenty of time to drop back and get behind the ball (detail below left). It also gives defenders close to the ball carrier a chance to prevent or intercept the pass by aggressively attacking him. The goalkeeper stays well out in front of the goal and intercepts the longest flighted balls as a sweeper would.



##### Detail: 50/50 ball against opposition's forward

The back four drops back as a unit (above left) to keep the ball from landing behind them, where the opposition's forward might be able to receive it on a penetrating run. The defender closest to where the ball



lands (here, the left inside defender) should move up to knock it out. The other defenders cover him (yellow triangle above right) in case the forward manages to relay the ball to a teammate.



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## Steering the opposition's attack

### Driving a wedge between the inside defenders

- To successfully steer the opposition's attack to a particular side, forward ⑨ runs in an arc toward the ball carrier, inside defender ④ (yellow oval at left; see also detail below).
- At the same time the winger closest to the ball, ⑪, moves inward, intentionally leaving ② open and apparently unmarked on the wing. By doing so he blocks ④ from passing into the middle while encouraging him to pass onto the wing.



### Detail: Dividing the opposition and blocking back passes

With his arcing run toward the ball carrier, the forward cuts off the second inside defender (yellow oval above left), making him unavailable as a receiver. If ④ then passes to outside defender ②, the

forward starts marking ④ to keep ② from passing back to him.



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### BASIC PRESSING TACTICS

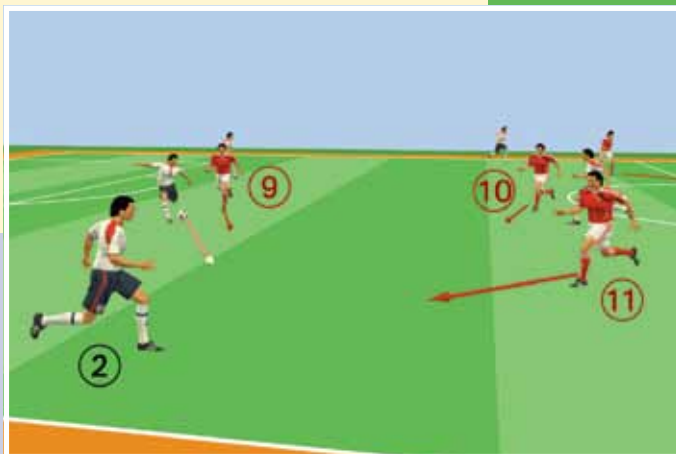
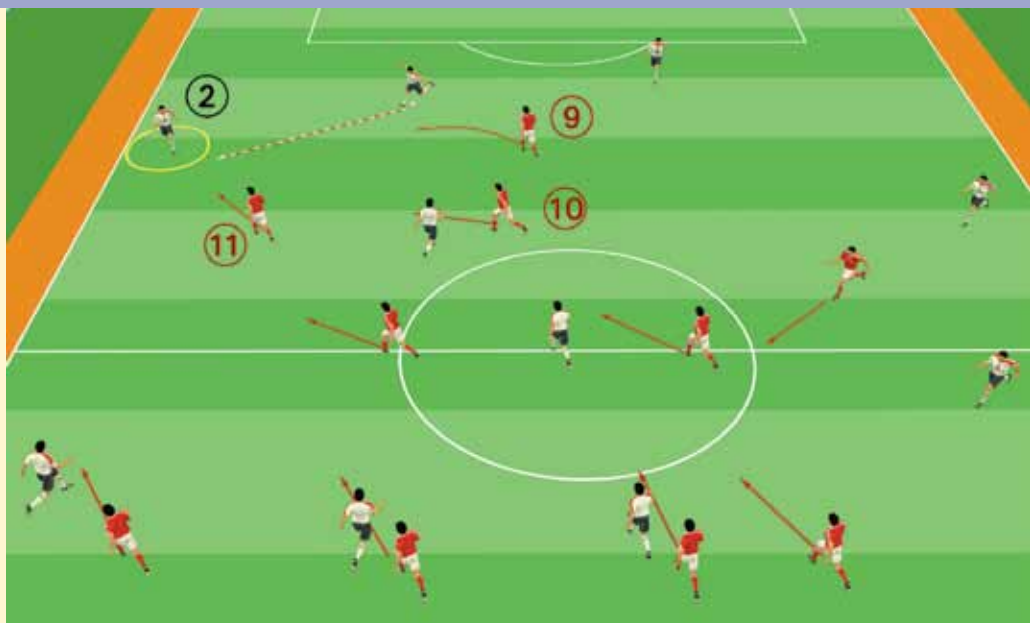
#### When to attack the ball

##### ② is showing for a pass

- As soon as the inside defender passes onto the wing, ⑪ sprints toward the outside defender and tries to attack while he is still receiving the ball. ⑩ moves over to cover the space behind ⑪.
- If the outside defender starts to retreat, his opponents need to follow and stay on him to make sure he doesn't break free.

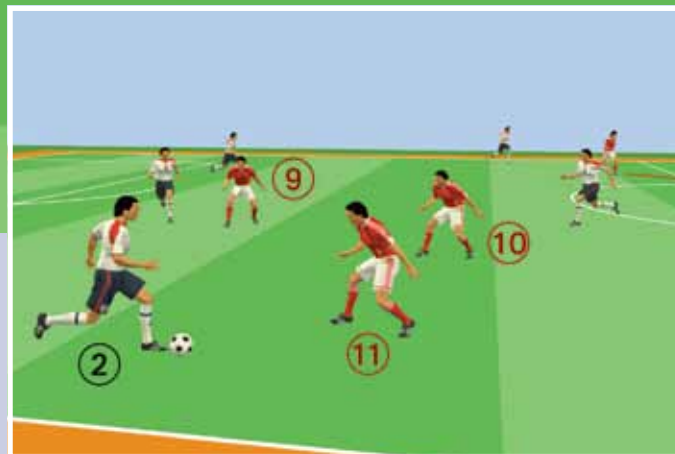
##### ② already has the ball

- In this case ⑪ and ⑩ should simply stop ②, as there's a high risk that he will play the ball past them.
- The best option now is to let ② play a pass and then try to attack the next receiver.



#### Game situation 1: Outside defender showing for ball

⑪ runs toward the outside defender and tries to attack while he is still receiving the ball.



#### Game situation 2: Outside defender already has ball

⑪ and ⑩ simply stop ②, keeping him from dribbling forward. If he passes, they attack the receiver.



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## Initiating attacking-third pressing from the midfield



### Don't just blindly run forward!

Toward the end of the game, a team that's behind will often start pressing in an attempt to catch up—and then simply stay inside the opposition's half, never dropping back even for a moment. In doing so, they run the risk that the opposition's keeper will punt the ball over the entire team, launching a fast attack that ends up putting them even further behind. Unless both of your inside defenders have excellent heading skills, this style of pressing is not recommended.

Instead, we suggest players initiate attacking-third pressing from the midfield (yellow area) and then wait for a (prearranged) signal before pushing farther forward. A successful pressing attempt could

begin when the opposition makes one of the following moves:

- pass to a player on the wing (above left and right)
- back pass
- mistake while receiving, controlling, dribbling or passing
- pass to a technically unskilled player
- throw-in deep inside the opposition's half
- ball carrier facing away from the direction of play
- ball carrier on his own endline.

The diagrams above show how players can close down space around the ball and put pressure on the ball carrier with the help of the sideline. Now all they have to do is force an error, win the ball and go for the goal!



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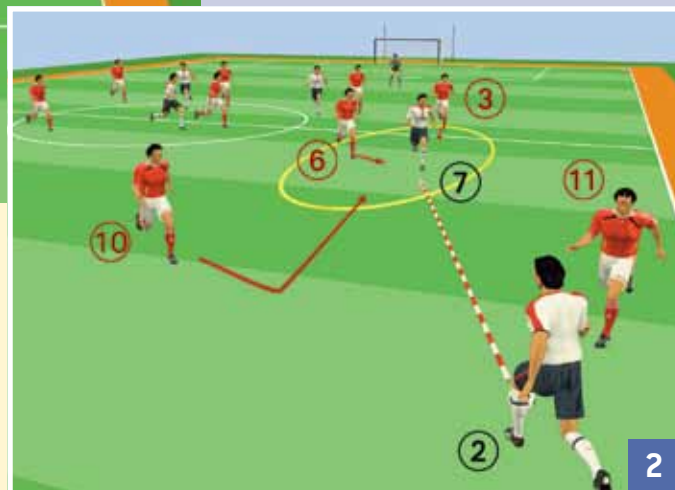
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## A closer look at pressing

### ATTACKING-THIRD PRESSING IN THE 4-2-3-1 FORMATION

#### Against a back four



#### Attack the first or second pass!

As also shown on page 31, ⑨ attempts to steer the opposition's attack outside while ⑪ gives outside defender ② some space on the wing. Together, these two actions provoke a pass to ②. ⑪ then tries to attack the outside defender and win the ball while he is still receiving it, with ⑩ covering the space behind him (attacking the first pass). But if ② has already received the ball and turned around to face them by the time they arrive, all they can do is stop him (see also page 32) and keep him from dribbling forward. Now ② has three options for advancing the ball—but in both cases his opponents' task is the same: The next receiver must be attacked while receiving the ball (attacking the second pass).

#### Passing option 1:

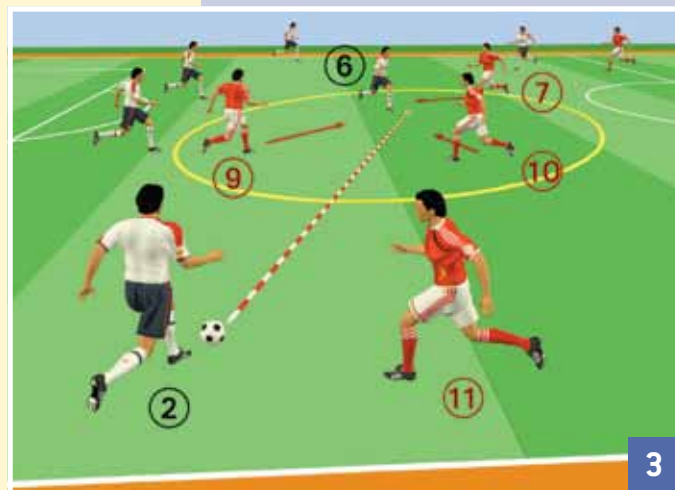
② can try to play a long flighted ball over the defenders to a forward making a penetrating run. The defenders should drop back while the keeper moves well out in front of the goal. Together they defuse the pass as described on page 30.

#### Passing option 2:

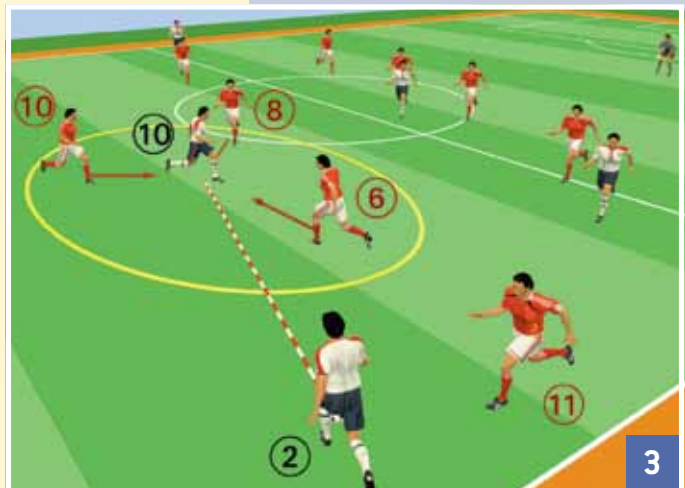
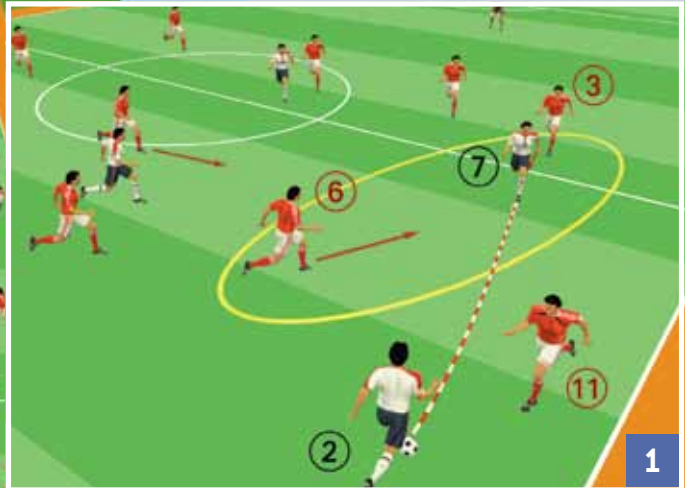
② passes to ⑦. ⑩ and ⑥ immediately double-team the receiver while ③ moves up to cover the space behind ⑥.

#### Passing option 3:

② passes to ⑥ in the middle. ⑩, ⑨ and ⑦ immediately surround the receiver and attack him.



## Against a back three



### Different paths, same principle

⑨ should also try to steer the attack when playing against a back three. This time he runs toward an outside defender, cutting him off from the inside defender. ⑪ initially drops back into the midfield and provokes a pass to midfielder ②. If possible, ⑪ then tries to attack and win the ball while ② is still receiving. If he arrives too late, he first waits to see what ② will do. As before, ② has three options for advancing the ball.

#### Passing option 1:

② passes to ⑦. ③ and ⑥ double-team the receiver.

#### Passing option 2:

② plays a long flighted ball. The back four drops back and tries to knock it out. Extremely long passes are intercepted by the keeper, acting as a sweeper.

#### Passing option 3:

② passes to ⑩. Defenders ⑥, ⑩ and ⑧ immediately surround the receiver and attack him.