

# Development Manual for State Cup Winners Preparing for US Youth Soccer Far West Regional's

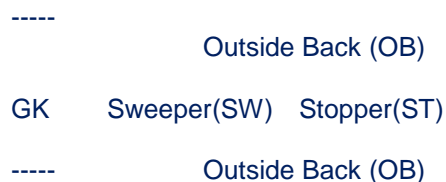
**Following Analysis at FWR 2007, Las Vegas, NV, the following are Areas of Focus for Alaskan teams to improve overall performances:**

1. Shape of the Back Line in Defending – Diamond versus “Flat” Zone
2. Eliminating Breakaway Opportunities
3. Keeper Connection
4. Attacking the Goal at the Right Time
5. Attacking the Front Post as a First Option
6. Playing the Street Game
7. Switching the Point of Attack - Choosing where, why and when

## **Tactical Back Line Defending – The Evolution of the Diamond Defense shape to the “Flat” Defensive shape**

The evolution of defending from a diamond zone to a “flat four” is now very apparent at the regional level at both FWR and regional ODP camp. It is also the main defensive method with most collegiate, professional and national teams.

Many of the Alaskan teams played a 4-4-2 system with a diamond shaped back four defense, consisting of two outside backs, a Stopper/Defensive Midfielder, and a Sweeper, looking like this:



This idea of diamond shape of the back four has been used for many years and by many teams' at all levels. The conceptual idea was to generally have three marking or zonal defenders, the two Outside Backs and the one Central Back/Stopper, leaving the Sweeper to free roam behind them, provide cover/support for any of the three backs, clean up play, and to start attacks. This system allowed coaches to push forward the Central Back/Stopper if the opposition was only playing two true attackers.

Modern offensive tactics at the advanced youth level have presented significant problems to those teams who still employ the diamond defense. Smart attacking teams position a Forward next to or in front of the Sweeper, forcing one of the marking defenders to drop to cover the offensive player. Now there are two defensive players covering one attacker. This position has negated the freedom of the sweeper both

defensively (to cover the other defenders) and offensively (sweeper cannot distribute with as much precision with the increased pressure of the close opponent). This evolutionary positional tactic by offenses has changed defending tactics at the advanced level for good.

In many scenarios, this tactic eliminates the Sweeper's ability to provide free consistent cover for the defense and ultimately if the Center Defender/Stopper doesn't come back and help, this forces the Sweeper into a one vs. one game with the opponent's best forward in the middle of the field. From an attacking perspective when this happens, a forward who is positioned near the Sweeper can run to either side of the Sweeper, making things very unpredictable in the middle of the field. Very little cover is provided by the two OB for the Sweeper, as the OB's must position themselves to cover the wide attacker, which is usually their prime distraction. This spreading of defenders allows yards of space for the center attacker to run.

It is also the result that the CB/Stopper is usually ahead of the OB's and is disconnected from the Sweeper and Outside Backs, leaving the back three to do most of the back line defending.

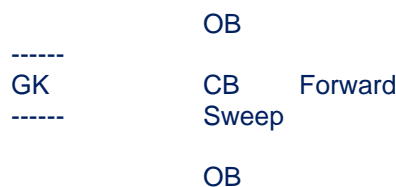
Those Alaskan teams at FWR who employed the diamond defense many times looked as if they were playing a flat zone of three players rather than using all four defenders in the back line. This was specifically apparent when defending the counter attack.

Four true backline defenders are essential to defending the advanced teams at the regional and national levels.

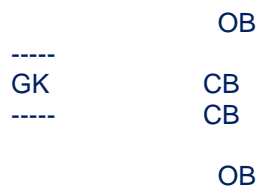
**How do current coaches and players solve this problem of wide open lanes through the middle of the defense and overall lack of cover for the sweeper when playing the diamond defense?**

The normal response by advanced coaches is one of two ideas; one is play three player tight zone defense to avoid central runs, leaving open the outside lanes for significant penetration.

The other response is to bring the CB/Stopper back to cover the attacker placed on the sweeper, resulting in two central backs instead of one. Pictured below:



This system adjustment has led to the change in defending shape philosophy. This reaction by defenses and coaches, leads to four player flat zone defense, specifically designed to handle teams with a strong and fast forward playing centrally on your Sweeper. The adjustment has led to the shape below which has two players playing side by side providing each other with unlimited covering ability. Pictured below:



This shape of the defensive unit is now compact in the center of the field with the additional player in the back line. This eliminates the large open lanes down the middle of the defense which will result in a

significant reduction of breakaway opportunities. The weakness is that the space in front of the back four will be open unless the defensive midfielder(s) drop to fill that space.

The advancement of offensive tactics has led to the change in shape of the back four. The Diamond of old has been transformed into the Flat Back Four as a natural adjustment to smart attacking strategy. The teams at FWR from Alaska and other states who utilized the flat four defending system were better able to contain the high octane attacks of our region's best.

### **Patience in Defending in the Middle Third of the Field, Goalkeeper Connectivity to the Back Line**

Picture this scenario: Our team is attacking a corner kick. Our attackers, most of our midfielders and tall defenders are in the opposing team's penalty box to try and score. The ball is delivered. The defending team wins the head ball and clears it directly to their forward who is in the middle of the field, the forward turns with the ball and looks up. What does he/she see? The forward sees the defenders move centrally to protect the straight route to goal. The forward sees that the majority of open space on the field is now behind our defense. The opposition is looking to attack into that space.

This scenario plays out again and again in games not only in corner kicks situations but also in regular play as teams try to score and the opposition counter attacks. These are transitional moments in the game.

A main pattern identified from the Alaskan teams in general, is that the initial reaction by the defending players in this situation is to try and win the ball back right away, sometimes recklessly, from the forward.

One of three things would happen:

1. We would win the ball back and then go on the attack into a pack of their and our players.
2. We would commit fouls, resulting in free kicks for the opposition.
3. The attacker would be successful and either dribble past the rushing defender or combine with other players to attack all of the opens spaces in our defense. Regularly this would give the opposition even or numbers up situations on the counter attack resulting in breakaway opportunities against us.

When our defending players were are too eager and defended recklessly in the middle third of the field on counters it resulted in an inordinate number of counter attack opportunities and many of them resulted in goals against the Alaskan teams.

Patience in defending in the middle third of the field when defending counter attacks is essential to preventing the opposition from scoring breakaway goals at the regional level. Our players should pressure the ball but the goal should be to delay the forward progress or pass of the opposition. This delay tactic is designed to allow for other players to track back and join the defending structure. Closing down and delaying but not diving in this transitional moment will minimizing breakaway opportunities against very refined regional level teams looking exactly for these counter attack situations.

The goal of the defense is to not allow any breakaway opportunities, keeping all play in front of the backline, not to just use our recovery speed to solve a lack of organization. Goalkeepers (GK) at the higher levels much prefer shots from the outside or even crosses rather than breakaways.

As our teams are learning how to better prevent break away opportunities our GK's positioning becomes very important. The modern GK helps cover the space behind the backline, when the backline is pushed forward providing indirect and sometimes direct support of the attack. GK are like any other player on the field they must constantly adjust their position both offensively and defensively to the play in front of them. As our team clears a cross and our defense moves up to support, the GK too should move up as well. The distance of how far a Goalkeeper should play behind the back line is dependent on the mobility and size of the GK. However even slight movement is very important. If a GK stays on his/her goal line and the defense pushes up to the middle of the field and our team get's counterattacked on as described above, the attackers usually play a pass behind the defense for another attacker to run on to. If our GK is playing too low, the attacker will get to the ball first, which is a breakaway and a 1v1 with our GK. If our GK is close enough to cover the space behind the defense and is close enough to the goal to prevent a shot over his/her head then that is a good position to be in. If a Goalkeeper is still growing and relatively short in relation to the goal, he/she is more vulnerable to the shot over the head and will play a little closer to goal than a tall GK. It is best for this GK to play closer to home and have the defensive line play a little lower as well, again with the idea of keeping the play in front of the backline.

Goalkeepers serve in important offensive ways as well. They must provide support to any player on the field who is facing him/her and has pressure on their back. The Goalkeeper must move sided to side with play to be available if a teammate needs immediate support for clearance. Normally the goalkeeper plays it long with a clearance or serves as a playmaker and changes the point of attack. Goalkeepers who help the team keep possession through accurate passing and distribution can make a difference in a game.

### **Ability and patience to possess the ball through the Middle and Front thirds as a lead up to attacking the goal**

A significant area of improvement to be successful at FWR is increased ability to possess the ball and understanding of patience in possession as we gain ground. Many times our teams were so eager to score we gave the ball to the opposition far too easily. Our teams were regularly trying to attack the goal from the middle third of the field through breakaways and the result was to give the ball away to the opposition.

These regular turnovers led to the opposition possessing the ball more and building confidence from that possession which resulted in goals against during the tournament.

Our team focus should be to calmly, quickly and patiently move the ball up the field through possession, dribbling and passing through the open spaces available to us. As we gain ground and possess the ball, the pressure on opposition's defense builds, resulting in a heightened state of anxiety for their defending players and goalkeeper for extended periods of time. When we let the opposition off the hook by easily giving the ball to them as we try to directly score each time, the pressure builds on us instead of them as they get more possession of the ball and then the advantage in the game.

Establishing this ability takes technical training, patience, organization and more patience. First and foremost, close organization around the player with the ball and in a diamond shape is a requirement to play a possession game. Easy explanation to players is the phrase "Right, Left, Split." As the ball moves to a new player, that player needs three short passing options, one to their right, one to the left and a split option. Teaching our teams to adjust each and every time the ball moves to a new player with

this diamond shape is fundamental to our team possession. Defending teams rarely are able to cover all three options, usually can cover two. If only one or two players form around the ball instead of three, let us say a right and split option for example, the opposition much easier reads this, runs into the few passing lanes and isolate the ball carrier. This isolation then leads to a higher percentage of turnovers. By providing these three short passing options around the ball the door opens for consistent regular team possession. Possession must occur into the front third of the field before attacking the goal.

The speed of the pass to feet must be increased. A pass that has a high level of pace, gives the receiver has more time and space to make another connecting pass, gain speed to take someone on 1v1 or shoot on goal. This element is one of the main differences between soccer in the US and in the rest of the world. Passes to feet need to be over played in terms of pace. The residual benefit of this direction and philosophy is improvements in receiving player's technical skills. At the regional level the pace of the pass must be at a high level to expose gaps in the opposition's defense who are trained to shift quickly. Passes into space for players to run on to are different and need to be weighted as to not be in reach of defenders or out of play.

On the whole, Alaskan teams tended to attack through the breakaway far too often, many times when we out numbered. The result of taking too many breakaway opportunities, particularly when it is not on, is giving the ball to the other team too many times. Teams at the regional level know how to score and if given enough opportunities they will score. Part of good defending is being able to keep the ball under pressure and make the opposition chase us, thus limiting their time with the ball. Ultimately good teams stamp their identity on the game through possession while waiting for good goal scoring chances.

Our teams tended to have the general mindset of attacking the goal from the back and middle thirds, through these attempted breakaways. As we develop our ability to possess in the middle and front thirds of the field, our teams will enjoy more time with the ball and ultimately more confidence and consistent opportunities to score.

### **Attacking the front post- keeping the opposing team's defense and GK committed**

Picture this; you are a GK, a wide attacking player has beaten your outside defender on the end line and you have this attacker dribbling at you along the end line. You are positioned right next to the closest/front post to prevent the direct route to goal. All of your defending players who are in the penalty box are forced to turn and face their own goal. All of the attacking players are turned toward your goal. So both teams are facing you, and the attacker is bearing down on you, what can you do? GK will tell you not much, stay there, step toward the ball to close the angle down as much as possible, and force the player to pass and hope for a deflection from the defenders away from the goal.

This attack, at the front post, puts GK's in one of the most vulnerable positions they can be in game. Dribbling at the keeper and front post from the wide angle, like dribbling at any defender, commits that player, leaving others open. Commit their GK at the front post and with a quick central pass the goal is open. Because the attacker is dribbling at the GK and the front post, a GK is locked into position to prevent the front post shot. A smart attacker will dribble relatively close to the GK and then play the ball into the six yard box, sometimes as a pass for an attacker, but also sometimes as a driven cross, knowing that all players are facing the goal and a deflection is likely.

### **Playing the "Street" Game**

The next area of focus is playing the "Street" Game. What is meant by this idea is to look for small situations where your team can take little advantages. For example;

## Long Throw In's

Consistent long throw-in's into the penalty box of the opposition creates many more pressure situations for the opposing defense. Each of these long throws are crosses/corner kick opportunities. Teams can increase their total number of crosses significantly by using each and every opportunity for a long throw into the penalty box. Identifying a tall target player is the next step. The target can head or shoot on goal, lay the ball off to others for shooting opportunities, or act as a decoy for supporting players.

## Looking for Good Attacking and Defending 1v1 Matchups

As the game progresses, the players and the coach should look for advantages in matchups. If we feel their left midfielder is their weakest link, we attack down the left more often than the right. If we feel their goalkeeper is weak on high balls, we will look for more crosses from wide positions than direct penetration. Man marking their best attacker with our dominant defender is another example. Matchup's become increasingly important on free kicks in and around the penalty box, look for advantages. Many little advantages add up.

## Choosing where and when to change the point of attack

Good defending teams at FWR will concentrate most of their players around the ball to try to prevent short passing and dribble penetration. As we move the ball from one side of the field to the other, their defense will shift with the ball and then again try to take away space around the ball first. Good teams will further pressure the space to play in by moving their back line up as well.

As we improve our offensive diamond shape around the ball we will have outlet options to successfully possess the ball. As a team we are first looking to go forward safely with the ball. When we can't go forward it is time for a switch of the point of attack. When we think about changing the point of attack we usually visualize our back line playing it from player to player until it reaches the far side defender or midfielder. There are three lines of players who switch the point of attack, they are:

Switching across the back four

Switching through the midfield three of four

Switching in the front third by the two or three forwards (includes early and late crosses)

Good decisions about which group is going to initiate the switch the ball is important. The visual cue to switch the ball is that we are outnumbered on the ball side or have little attacking space in which to play. So, the player with the ball looks up and sees that there is no space to go forward safely. Many Alaskan teams in this instance, particularly young teams, tried to force their way down the field resulting in many unnecessary give-aways. Instead, good, controlled switching will force the opposition to chase us and allow us time space on the weak side to advance or shoot. The distance between players switching the ball is dependent on the strength and skill of the players. The younger they are, the closer they will need to play to each other, the older the further.

Diagonal switching, that is switching the point of attack and going forward at the same time, is another form of changing the point of attack. Generally if defending teams over shift and have too many players on the strong side, a long diagonal switch will expose space on the weak side for an outside midfielder or forward. The short diagonal switching pass, is a pass that goes diagonally forward and normally splits two defending players. The shorter split is safer in possession than the long diagonals. Again spacing is relative to and dependent on the age and abilities of the players.

## Overachievers and Underdog Systems of Play

When planning for advanced match in a tournament setting a coach must first determine how they measure up against the competition. Variables that one can use to determine how we compare are:

- Level of event
- Scouting of opposition, visual and/or verbal
- Age of the players
- Record
- Area of the country
- Team Speed

After careful analysis a coach must decide whether the team is the:

Underdog – not as good as the opposition

Equal – equal to the opposition

Over Achiever - better than the opposition

Accuracy of self and opposition analysis is the basis for productive advanced tactical coaching.

If we feel we are the Underdog, the normal response is to play a lower defense, position a few more players in the defensive unit and use the counter attack as the main method of play. If we feel we are equal to or better than the opposition, we then employ an “Over Achiever” system, which is defined as an attacking system. This kind of system is designed to possess the ball more, send more players into the attacking half of the field, and keep possession and steady pressure on the opposition’s defense.

It is important that once a coach decides on the system of play or Game Plan for the game that they are very clear with the players about the players roles in it.

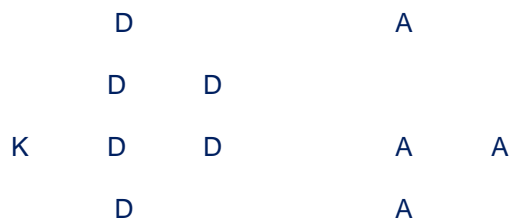
1. Players need to know how many players we are going to defend (the defensive unit) in our defending third and how many players we want to send in the attacking third of the field (the attacking unit).
2. Players need to know if they are playing a zone or man to man defense.
3. Players need to know if specific players are generally to do the defending or if only the closest players to our goal should do the defending in the back third.
4. Players need to know if specific players are designated to join the attack or if players closest to the opposition’s goal can run into the front third and join the attack.

Answering these questions will allow your team to establish and maintain an orderly transition between attacking and defending in the heat of these advanced games.

When identifying and playing an Underdog system the defense plays lower, taking away the space behind them and commits more players to the defense than the attack. Underdog systems will regularly hold 6-7 defending players while attacking with 4 or 3. Teams playing this kind of system are looking to prevent being scored on early or at all and are looking to win with a counter attack goal after absorbing the pressure of the opposition. When done successfully, opposing teams tend to get frustrated and send more players into the attack leaving them exposed to the counter attack. When playing a lower defense, the open space is then available behind the opposition's defense as they press and over press forward. As a general principle, the defending players in the underdog system stay home and primarily serve as ball winners and distribution players but do not all rush forward to help the attackers. Even when playing a counter attack style there will be moments in the game that our team will have time and can establish possession. In that moment teams can imprint their normal attacking style on game but upon transition should but should revert to the low defending game plan of the counterattack style. Teams using the counterattack system will need to rely also on attacking free kicks for goals, corners, free kicks within crossing or shooting distance of the oppositions goal.

Examples of "Underdog" systems:

6-4



7-3



"Over Achiever" Systems are those designed to apply pressure on the oppositions team in their half of the field. High pressure defending (defending in their half of the field) is also employed to prevent the opposition from gaining a playing rhythm and to limit their good service out of the back. Attackers should regularly double team the ball in an effort to win it in their end and go to goal. Over Achiever systems normally send 6-7 players into the attack while defending with 4 or three. Free kick are also important to the Over Achiever System as defending teams will give up free kicks within shooting distance if enough "no foul" pressure is applied. This kind of system is leaves the open space behind our defense as the defensive unit will play higher on the field and will be need to be organized and patient to avoid counter attack goals.

Good support around the ball and patience in possession is the key to game domination. Possession through dribbling and short passing is the safest way to advance the ball. This approach limits the amount of time that the opposing team can play offense. The less time a state championship team has

with the ball the less they can do with it. Anxiety and pressure increases in defending units and GK when attacking teams possess the ball in the front third of the field.

Examples of Over Achiever Systems:

4-3-3

	D			
	D	A	A	
K	D	A	A	
	D	A	A	

3-5-2

	D	DM	A	A
K	D	AM	A	A
	D		A	

The third option of system is a true balanced system 5 attacking players and five defending players. An example of this system is:

4-4-2

	D		AM	
K	D	DM		A
	D		AM	A
	D		AM	

Choice of system and analysis of opposition is important to a coach as they work through the advanced tournament at the regional level. Through the refinement process players and teams will learn how to play these systems and be even better prepared for future teams and events. Teaching players these types of system will later allow for coaches to change even during a match based on circumstances. Clear instruction will allow advanced teams to be flexible to what the game demands.

As we compare how the tournament falls in line with our schedule and other states with FWR, we will always be a different schedule. Our players, teams, coaches and parents get very geared on the run up

to the event, dreaming for glory and a national championship. As we get excited, we must always remember our Alaskan teams are essentially in the beginning phases of the outdoor season when this tournament begins. Our opposition will have played in a full season and multiple tournaments (including their state cup) in prep for the event. This must be factored in when evaluating the performances and results. We also must realize that when Alaskan teams have good performances it is a real credit to the perseverance and preparation by the coaches and clubs. We should never be overly disappointed with any performance at the tournament as this event is the most important event that will shape our players and coaches for the long term.

Far West Regional's is a magical experience in terms of development for all of the teams, players, coaches and parents. This is specifically true for those who do not get caught up in the emotion of the event. As adults our steadiness translates directly to the players who look to us to help them decide what the experience does and will mean to them. Help your players development by not buying into any negativity even if results aren't as you hope. A player's ability to gain experience and learn from it is far more important than any win. If a player maintains a learning attitude it will translate into all areas of their lives and then the sky really is the limit.