



Field Hockey Canada Coach Resource: Principles of the Offensive and Defensive phases of play

Field hockey is a game of invasion, meaning the purpose of the game is to invade the opponent's territory and try to score goals, while keeping the opposing team's points to a minimum (that is, stop them from scoring goals).

As a coach, it's important that you understand some of the basic tactical elements of the sport. Once you have knowledge of these skills, you can better coach athletes in learning the 4 phases of play (offence, defensive transition, defence, offensive transition) and making decisions when faced with tactical problems in invasion games.

Here is more information on **offensive** and **defensive** principles.

Offensive Tactical Principles

Athletes should develop the ability to control the ball, remain comfortable on the ball under pressure, protect the ball under pressure, and make the appropriate decision regarding attacking space, eliminating or passing. None of these options is the correct decision in all situations.

Keep in mind that this sport is fluid, and offensive situations are constantly evolving. Athletes need to explore all options with the freedom to make mistakes and turn the ball over in order to learn. As a coach, you can help athletes cultivate their offensive skills by providing them with opportunities to reflect and learn in their decision-making.

Here are some of the offensive situations athletes might face in play:

Time and space

Athletes need to be aware of the space surrounding them. Receiving or running into free space creates time and changes the role of a defender. The more space an athlete finds, the more time they have to execute an appropriate skill and search for the correct dribble, pass or shot. Changes of direction and changes of speed assist in creating space on the field and force the defence to change shape.

At the community level, athletes should be encouraged to have their eyes up, scan the field, and move, carry the ball or pass into open spaces on the field.



Engaging a 1v1

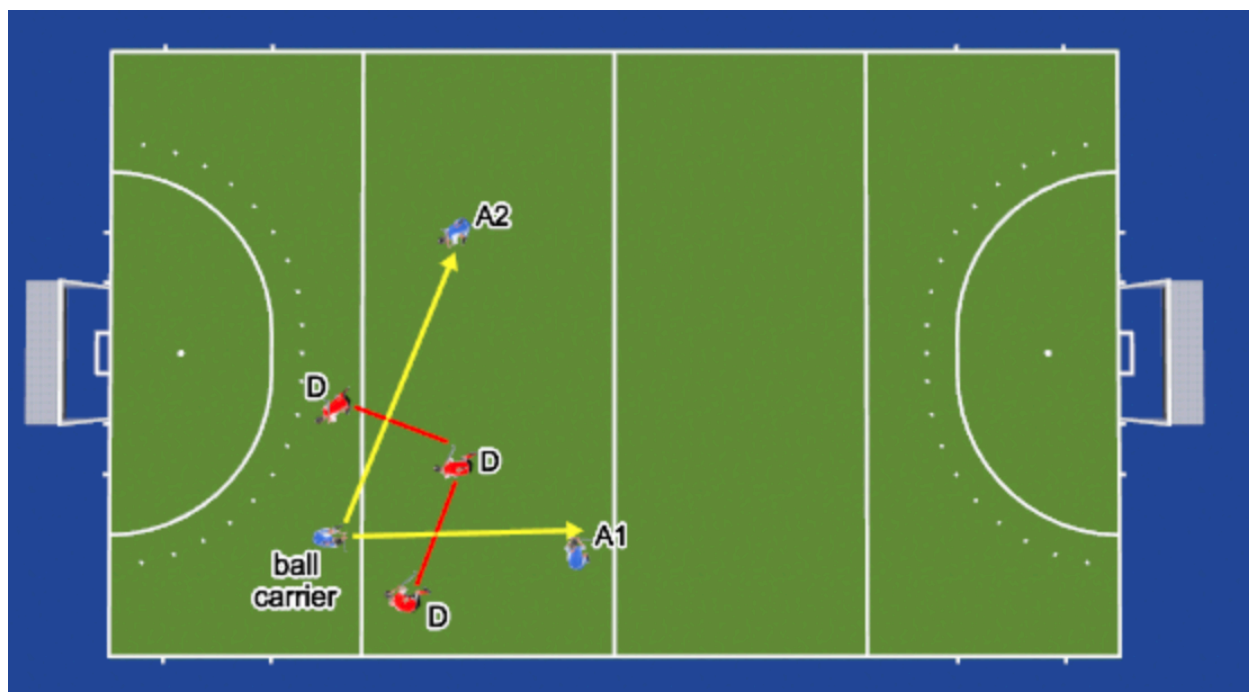
Hockey is a game of equal numbers, usually played 5v5, 7v7 or 11v11. Engaging and eliminating defenders is one of the ways in which you can create a numerical advantage for the offensive team. With limited time and space on the ball, athletes also need to be able to eliminate their defenders.

The foundations for eliminations are much the same as creating time and space. Athletes should be able to engage a defender by carrying the ball toward them and using a change of speed and direction that will cause the defender to change their footwork or positioning or place them off-balance and eliminate them from the contest.

At the community level, athletes should be encouraged to engage in 1-on-1 situations by moving at angles with speed and by experimenting with individual ball control skills (pull left/right, lifted skills) to gain advantage on the defender and move into the space behind the defender.

Passing

When choosing the pass, athletes should “play to space and not through the face” of a defender. Space can often be found by passing through the line between 2 defenders. This is the pass line shown in the diagram below as a red line.



Passes played through the face of a defender will be at risk of interception and/or earning a free hit, which will slow down play. If there are no passing options available, it is the responsibility of supporting team members to make themselves available.



At the community level, athletes should be encouraged to look for possession passes in open areas of the field. This requires athletes to begin to use their technical skills in competitive situations, combining their field and space awareness with decision-making and skill execution.

Engaging a 2v1

Because field hockey is a game of even numbered teams, to create an offensive advantage athletes need to understand how to create numbers advantages.

One way to do this is by carrying the ball and engaging a defender who is individually accountable for (marking) a teammate. By doing this, the ball carrier forces the defender to either tackle the ball carrier or retreat and continue marking their assignment.

Understanding how to manipulate a defender through ball carrying and engagement is critical to creating a numbers advantage. For example:

Diagram 1: No pass available.

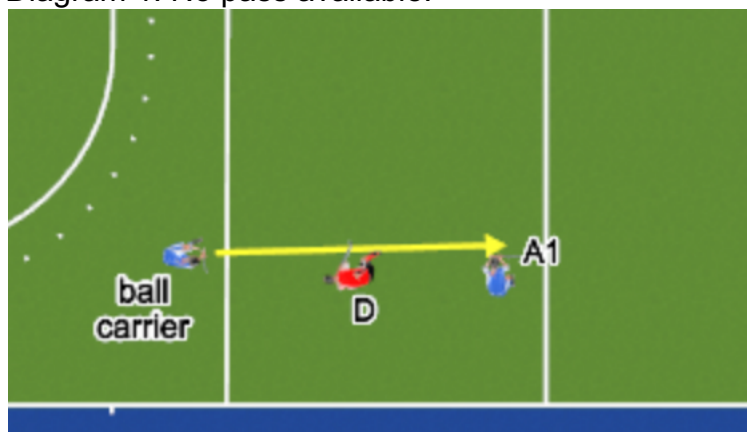
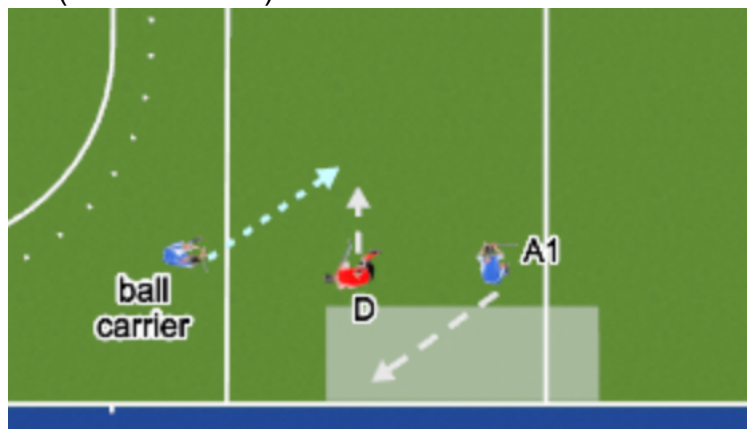


Diagram 2: Ball carrier runs at an angle to engage the defender and create space to the left (non-stick side) of the defender.





At the community level, it is necessary to introduce the concept of “move your defender to create space” and to encourage the supporting athletes off the ball to lead into the space that is created as the ball carrier moves.

These off-ball leads are important to create numbers-up situations. Athletes off the ball should not stand in the space they want to receive the ball in. Rather, encourage them to move into the space as the ball is passed.

Defensive Tactical Principles

Here are some of the defensive situations athletes might face in play:

Primary defensive role

Each athlete has a basic task within a structure. This task is generally based on 1v1 accountability and marking.

Tactical roles can vary between person-to-person and zonal marking responsibilities within a set system.

Person-to-person accountability is the first progression in teaching athletes tactical principles, and as athletes develop they should learn distance and zonal accountability principles.

This image is an example of the Canadian women’s national field hockey team’s pressing structure against Argentina at the Pan American Games in 2019:



RED: Zonal marking athletes, marking in front of their opponent, directly accountable for intercepting long balls to their opponent in behind.

YELLOW: Zonal marking athletes covering:

- direct line to goal and applying immediate ball pressure
- obvious and largest passing channel

REMAINING: Person to Person marking, directly accountable for applying pressure to receive and playing 1v1s.

Danger line

The danger line is the direct line to goal.

As you can see clearly in the following images, a primary defensive responsibility is protecting the danger line or the direct line between where the ball is and the goal you are defending.

Free hit is in the middle of the field. Here Canada has set up with their centre striker and free athlete (#4) on the danger line.



The danger line is critical in defending, and athletes should defend this as a priority. By defending the danger line, an athlete forces the opponent to carry or pass away from goal, thereby reducing the likelihood of a scoring opportunity.



Individual defensive decisions

In a defensive structure, an athlete's primary task will be 1v1 accountability. There are 2 ways in which a defender can win the ball and regain possession for their team:

Intercept:

- The Goal: To intercept the ball before it reaches its intended target
- Athlete makes the decision to step across the passing line and in front of the opposition to receive the ball

1v1:

- Athlete is marking from behind the opponent and unable to intercept
- The Goal: Apply immediate pressure to the opponent as they receive
- Opponent has been able to receive the ball, and the defensive athlete is then required to engage the attacker in a 1v1 contest
- In a 1v1 contest, the athlete should aim to not be eliminated in an attempt to win the ball, by:
 - matching the pace of the attacker
 - staying mobile and not being caught stationary ("channelling")
 - applying consistent pressure and appropriate tackling technique when mobile (jab or block tackle)

Decision-making:

As a coach, you need to encourage athletes to reflect on their marking positions and failed attempts at intercepting. Early positioning and understanding of ball speed and opponent receiving position will allow the athlete to decide whether they should intercept or apply pressure to receive.