
Offside

Hey, why don't we just camp a couple of our strikers down by their goal-keeper to try to make it easier to score goals?

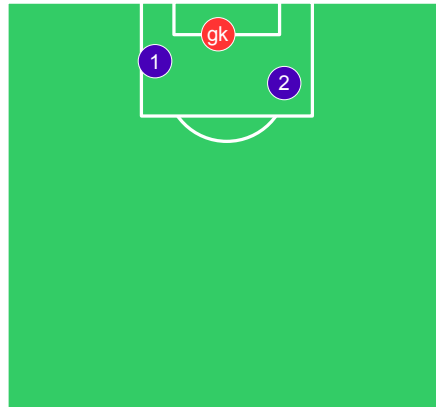


Illustration 1: Strikers hanging out by the goal waiting to score.

Well, if there wasn't a rule to stop it, they might do something similar to us. Then we'd have to have our defenders stay back to cover their strikers. They'd get some of their defenders to hang back and cover our strikers. The art of piercing the defence and challenge of containing an attack would be less. The game would stop flowing and become uglier and less fun.

To stop this football has the offside rule. It makes the game better.

The idea is simple. Strikers are not allowed to camp out *behind* the defence waiting for the ball. The strikers have to use their brains a bit more. The game becomes more strategic, more interesting and more fun.

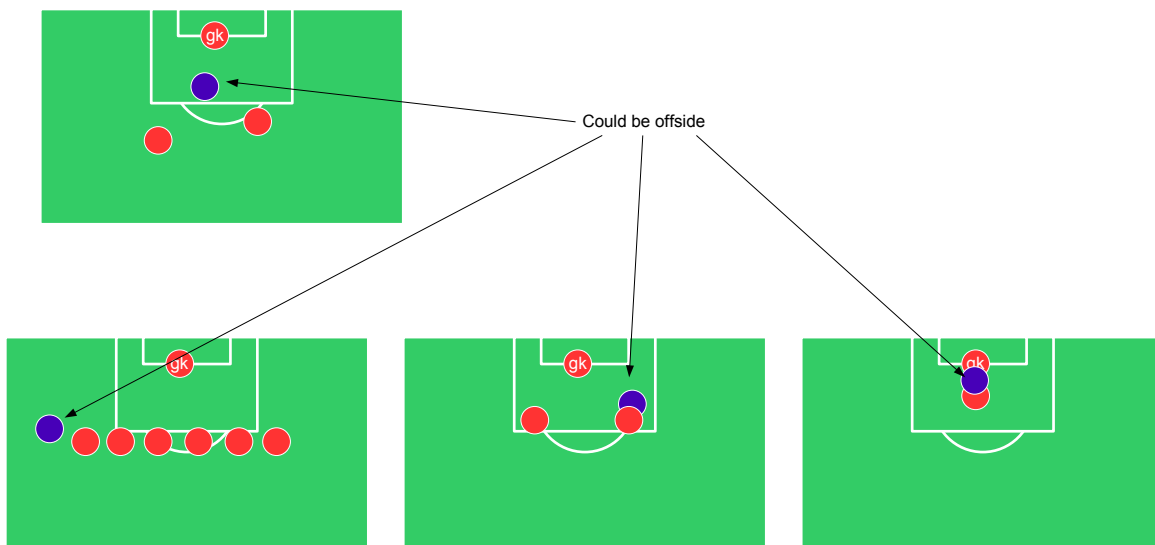


Illustration 2: Blue dudettes just asking for a whistle.

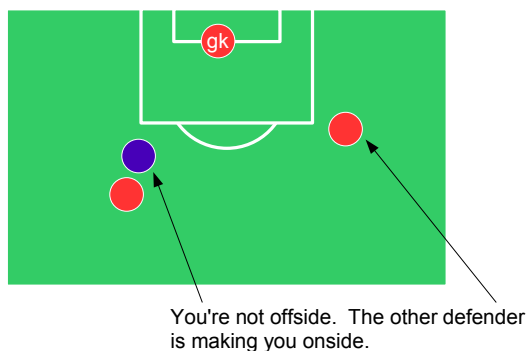


Illustration 3: It's not just the defender nearest you.

Does this mean you can not ever get the ball behind their defence without having to dribble it past? No!

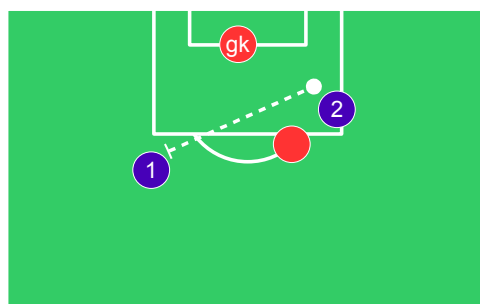


Illustration 4: Offside?

This is not OK if striker 1 kicks the balls to striker 2 whilst striker 2 is waiting behind the defence for the ball. This is OK if striker 2 was not offside ...

WHEN THE BALL WAS KICKED by striker 1.

Let's have a look at the action in slow motion ;-)

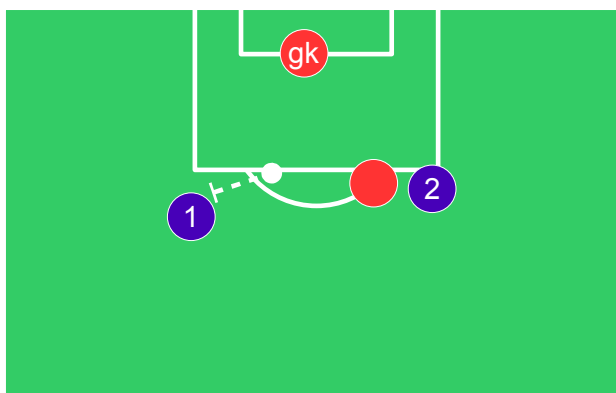


Illustration 5: Striker 1 kicks the ball whilst striker 2 is on side. Striker 2 is making a run because she understands what striker 1 is doing.



*Illustration 6: Striker 2 runs on to the ball.
Striker 2 was on side
WHEN THE BALL WAS KICKED!*

Now, that is a nice move. It's all about the timing. One of the great arts in football is team work to set up situations like the one above where striker 1 sees striker 2 running at the defence to make a break. Striker 1 is smart and waits and times her kick to be just before striker 2 gets into an offside position so that striker 2 has her speed and momentum at full tilt to help her run behind the defence and get to the ball first.

Remember, it is all about being on-side **when the ball is kicked**.

It is important to understand the offside rule. It is the reason for a lot of the strategies we employ in football.

The defence tries to push up to the centre line to keep the attackers away from goal. The attackers try and niddle away at the defence to push them back and find themselves more space. If the attack is starved of space it is harder for them to score goals. The defence works at “compressing” the attack to stick them on a space diet.

There are four other main rules concerning offside you should be aware of:

1. You can't be offside when receiving a throw-in.

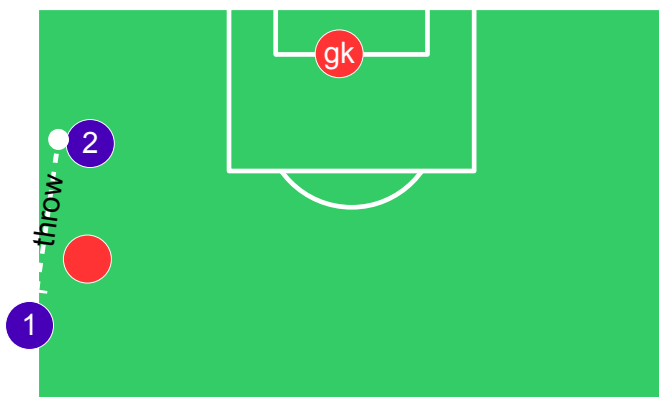


Illustration 7: Striker 2 can be in an offside position to receive a throw-in.

This makes throw-ins quite powerful especially if we can throw a fair distance. It can be a good idea to make a break behind the defence, especially down the line, call for the ball and be ready to receive it.

2. You can't be offside in your own half. If you've been left alone and the defence has wandered up to attack. You can't be offside if you're in your own half of the field.
3. Level with a defender is OK. Level is not offside.
4. What about this one? Two of you have made a clever break and managed to find yourselves with the ball behind the defence.



Illustration 8: Clever break!

Can 1 kick to 2?

Yes, as long as 2 is **not in front of the ball** when 1 kicks it.



*Illustration 9: Danger! 2 is in front of the BALL.
Could be called offside.*

Conclusion

The offside rule is important to football. It allows the defence to apply pressure on the attack by trying to push them up field. It makes the game a lot more fun due to the tricks and strategies attackers work on to pierce the defensive line. It makes soccer a smarter game. Appreciating the nuances of strategy needed to hold attackers out and break down defence makes the game more beautiful to watch. Just sometimes when you see such play unfold you may be taken by surprise as you see years of hard training, perspiration, skill, technique, intelligence and wise strategy peak in a fleeting moment that may leave you in awe of the magic of this beautiful game.

A team makes these moments happen. The fellowship of being part of a team that makes this magic is the true pleasure we all seek.

Understand it. Enjoy it.

Appendix A: Complexity and confusion

Interpreting the offside rule is hard enough for referees and linesmen. Being able to notice if the attacker was offside when the ball is kicked is hard as you have to be aware of two things at once. The ball being kicked and the position of the attacker. When it is a big long kick, there is a considerable difference in time and place between the participants and this is particularly difficult for any official. It's hard to watch two things at once.

Remember, the referee's opinion is final. Also, the referee and linesman may differ in opinion, if the linesman's flag goes up to "suggest" offside the referee may chose to interpret it differently, especially when you consider the next bit of complexity.

The offside rule as previously described is about how it was played for many years including the early world cups. However, some aspects were seen as unfair.

What if you were taking a corner and the defence ran out leaving your team unable to move the ball forward as after taking the corner you would be in an offside position. Hardly seems to be fair as you'd no longer be anywhere near the ball nor participating in the next moves.

A similar situation exists when a player is down injured or walking back from a fast run down the wing.

So a new rule was invented and it causes much confusion. You are only offside if you are considered to be having an effect on the game. This is referred to as whether you are being passive or active. Thus, if you take your corner and the ball is miles away from you, you're OK. You're not likely to be considered actively involved.

However, whether or not a player is active or passive is up to the referee's considered opinion. The linesman is still required to signal offside, so the flag will go up, but the referee may chose to interpret the offender as passive, not really having an effect on the game, and thus not offside.

Being active, can be interpreted as unsighting the goal-keeper or affecting the play of defence. There are other nuanced aspects that change from time to time. This is why I kept saying earlier in the notes that the players *could be* offside. They aren't offside, even in an offside position, unless they are active.

Don't assume an attacker is offside when you're defending even if the linesman's flag goes up. Be careful and play the whistle.

Appendix B: The offside trap

You might hear about the offside trap from time to time. It is an old ruse that is sometimes effective and used at club to international level.

Basically, it means the defence makes a coordinated sudden move up field before the attacking team kicks the ball, often on a free kick. When they move up together they are hoping to leave an attacker or two behind in a offside position. They are trying to trap the strikers with offside.

To set up, usually, the defence is arranged in a flat line across the field. The attackers won't go past them as then they would be in an offside position. The defence suddenly takes a few paces up field at the same time. The attackers might be caught offside if they aren't quite switched on which is not unusually given that a striker is distracted by worrying about what they should be doing to make an opportunity to score a goal.

It can be dangerous. If the defence gets it wrong, their goal may be exposed to strikers on a rampage with little defence between the strikers and a shaking goal-keeper. Just one defender not moving will sink you. Getting the timing wrong and moving after the ball is kicked, will sink you and to make it work you want to move just before the ball is kicked if you can. Tricky and dangerous.

It also goes against the standard ploy of staggering defence a little so the next defender is covering the defender closest to the ball.

But, it can be fun to do every now and then if you think you can be a cleverly coordinated team. Flat line holding the attack. Wait for the player to start to move to take the free kick and jump up field leaving the strikers stranded offside.

Get it wrong. They should score a goal...

Appendix C: Pushing up on the defence

I will often ask a striker or two to “push up” on the last defender.

Think about it from a defender's point of view for a minute. Normally you will stand off an attacker a bit if the ball is far afield. This gives you a bit of space to be able to cope with a particularly fast striker and time to coordinate your actions and thoughts to closing down the striker if the ball comes your way.

What do you do if the strikers push up on you. Give yourself a little space. Then the attacker pushes up again. If you keep giving a bit of space you'll end up in the goal mouth. Eventually you have to stand your ground. If the striker goes past you? Let them if they will be offside. We don't want to allow them to keep pushing us back and provide themselves with more space. Space is a striker's friend and a defender's enemy.

Most teams are not clever enough to hassle the defence like this.

We should be this clever. If you are assigned to be a striker pushing up on the defence, then you should push up on the last defender and see if you can force them back. It is natural for them to follow and stay between the goal and you as any good defender has been taught.

Even better, go wide and push up on the last defenders position even though you are not near them.



Illustration 10: Pushing up on the last defender

If they cover you, move to the other side of the field and try pushing up again. It will drive them nuts. If two of you are assigned to pushing up on the last defender, push up on different sides to the field. Keep swapping sides with each other. Confuse them and drive them nuts.

Consider the long ball.

If we kick a ball behind the last defender. Who is going to get to it first?

Look at the blue striker in the above picture. Any ball kicked to her side of the field, she

owns. If you can see our player free like this, remember you don't have to pass to them. Pass into the space so they can run on to it. Find space we own and push the ball there. You don't even have to be that accurate. Anywhere to where we can get to the ball first and be running towards their goal can't be too bad. This is the essence of the long ball.

It is a race between the last defender and the foremost striker. If you push up on the last defender it makes the race closer. If one of our fastest players is pushing up hard on the last defender then it may be a very interesting and worthwhile race for us indeed! (Are you paying attention Maddy Duncan?)

This is also why I've tried to teach you to defend a little side on and to be on the balls of your feet ready to run. Sometimes it comes down to a simple race, and if you have to turn your whole body and race after the ball, you are giving too much of an advantage to a striker already facing the right way. Would you think it sensible to start a 50 metre race at school facing the wrong way? I didn't think so.

Also, if you are a defender, don't be frightened to give them a bit of space in the centre third of the field as often our opposition won't be clever enough to push hard up on you. That way, you have a head start in a race for the ball. Don't give them too much space near our goal though. In our defensive third we need to close them down.

Try to mix it up. Try to dribble past their defence sometime. Try a passing game through them. Try the long ball sometimes. Keep them guessing. If someone is always pushing up on the last defender the fast break with a well placed ball is often a good option.

Remember, good players are good with the ball. Great players are great when they don't have the ball.