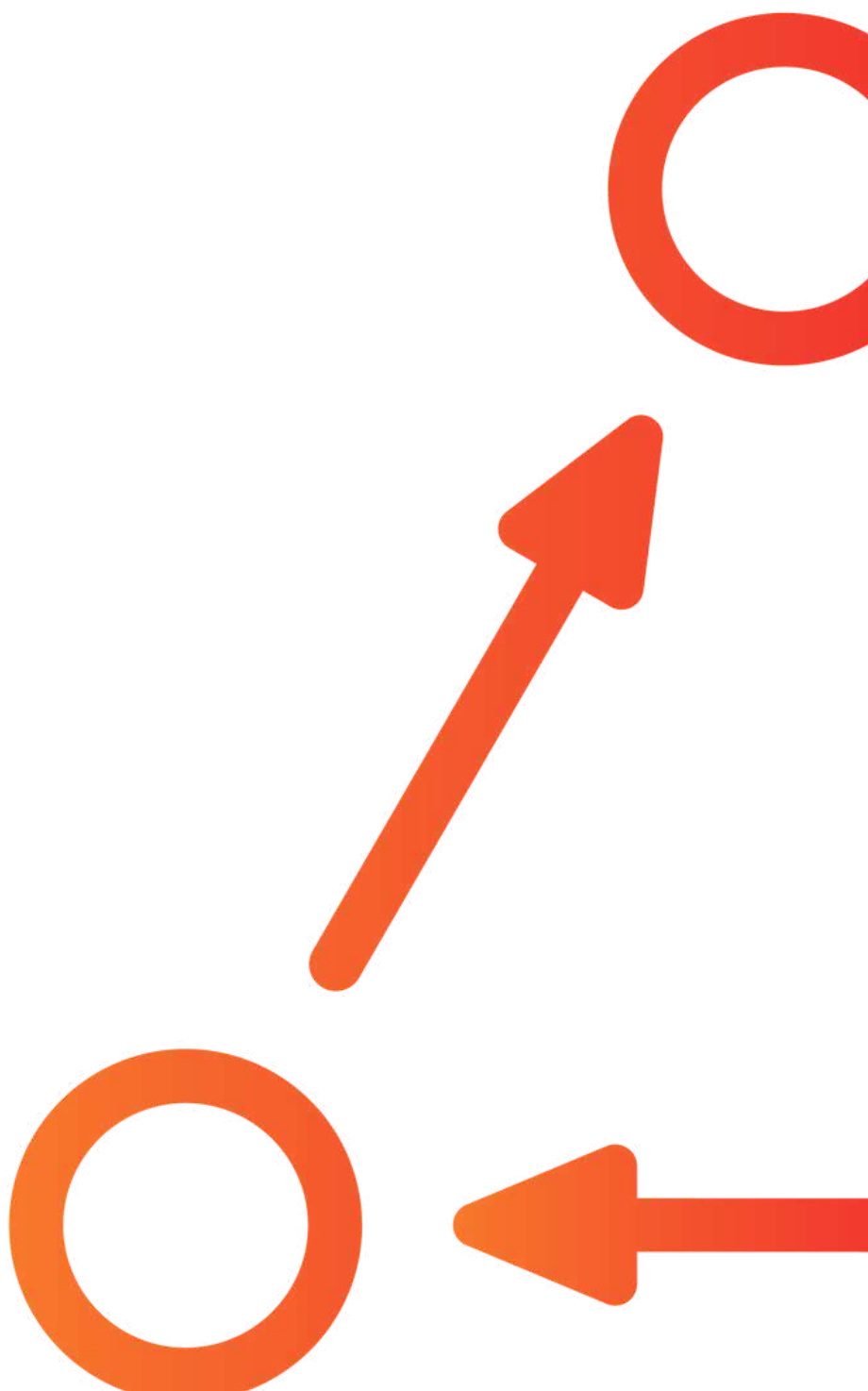


TACT^{OLYSE}

The complete guide to the perfect center-back



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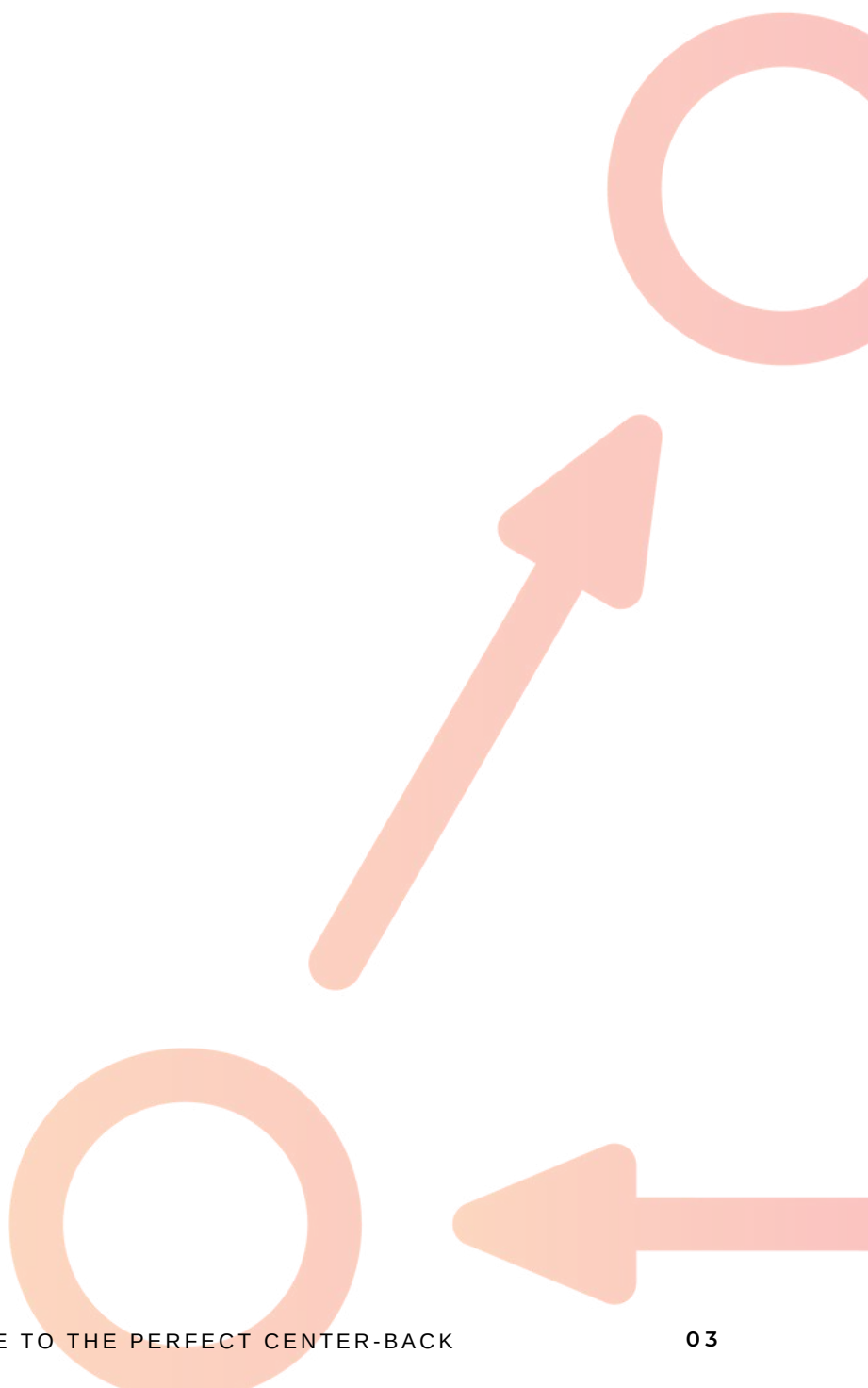
Chapter 4: How to become the best center-back

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INTRODUCTION

Tactalyse stands for everything surrounding football tactics. Our goal is to create tomorrow's tactical football players. We do so by using our own unique methodology to highlight the impact of (individual) tactics on the beautiful game of football.

Tactalyse was founded by Loran Vrielink in February 2016. Since that date, we are proud to have been able to coach, develop and improve lots of players and trainers in the football world.

We have extensive experience with workshops, team analysis, scouting, and tactical guidance for (youth) professional players and clubs. In addition to that, we also provide a service that consists of a platform intended to aid football players with the topic of tactics. Here you can find the link to this exclusive service. (platform.tactalyse.com)

We at Tactalyse always strive to deliver the best quality for our customers. Therefore, we continuously improve our services and methodology. We deliver new ways of tactical knowledge into the football world.

In this e-book we will write about the center-back position. Often the last player in defense to stop a goal. Center-backs always have to be alert to neutralize the opponent.

In this e-book we will write what types of center-backs there are and how coaches use center-backs differently within a team. After this we will discuss which defensive and offensive game situations often arise for a center-back.

At the end we will give a detailed plan on how to train like a center-back and improve the most important game situations for a center-back.

Team Tactalyse.

CHAPTER 1: "THE BASICS OF A CENTER-BACK"

The center-back position is one of the building blocks of a team. A good center-back can be crucial for the overall team performance, not by being in the spotlight, but by making sure everything goes smoothly. A center-back is responsible for stopping the opponent from scoring and is often the last player before the goalkeeper who can do so. A mistake at the center-back position can have big consequences, as there's no one there to save him.

The center-back position has evolved a lot, just as all of football. Going from a position that's only there to defend, kick balls away, or give them to a midfielder, center-backs are now expected to start attacks or buildups as well. Generally speaking the center-backs have the most passes in a game, there are some game tactics where this is not the case, like with many teams in the Championship. But overall center-backs have the most passes in a game. This is why the position went from not only being about defending but also about being the first line of attack.

There are different types of center-backs, and the old school thought that a center-back can only be 1.90+ and only heads balls away is long gone. In modern-day football there's a variety of center-backs, you have the tall strong defenders that are known for their physicality, like Virgil van Dijk, John Terry, and Harry Maguire, but you also have the more ball-playing type of center-backs, for example Marquinhos, Presnel Kimpembe and Jurriën Timber. We can make many other types of center-backs based on appearance, qualities, and playing style. Others could for example be, the leading center-back, like Chiellini, or the fast center-back like Varane. A fun fact is that the last center-back to win a Ballon d'Or was Fabio Cannavaro in 2006.

What you usually see is that certain leagues/cultures have a way of thinking about football, and this results in a certain type of players that mostly go to these leagues. England has long been known for having big strong heading center-backs, because a lot of teams played with crosses, Italy is known for the tactical smart leader type of center-back, while the Netherlands and Spain are known for technical gifted center-backs that can help teams in attack.

There are also different strategies for center-backs, with the most obvious one being that some teams play with two center-backs and some with three. This has changed the center-back position as well, you now have hybrid center-backs, that can play full-back and center-back, like Kyle Walker and Nathan Aké. But there are also team tactics for center-backs, some teams play a more pulled-back, waiting type of defense, which automatically makes a center-back defend with less space, but has to probably defend more in his own box. But on the other end, you have the high press teams, which leads to center-backs having a lot of space in their back and having to deal with more 1v1 situations and duels higher up the pitch. You also have different strategies in the transition phase to defense, some coaches want their center-backs to step in and press and some coaches want their defense to drop and delay the opponent so that other players can come back.

So there's a number of possibilities with types of center-backs, and strategies that center-backs have to manage. But the overall theme in recent years is, that the center-back position has become more complete, there's still teams that rather have center-backs that don't want their center-backs to pass too much and just play easy. But most coaches nowadays want a center-back who can do most of it, defend well and build the game from the back. Of course Pep Guardiola taking it to the next level by having a center-back in midfield (John Stones).

At Tactalyse we work with fundamentals, a fundamental is an optimal response in a game situation (If you don't know exactly what a fundamental is, please read more about it in this [article](#)). After watching 1000s of matches and making analysis for many different center-backs such as Stefan de Vrij (named best Serie A defender in 2019) and William Troost-Ekong (Former PL, Serie A, and Nigerian National team), we identified that that are 15 defensive fundamentals and 6 attacking fundamentals for center-backs. Within a fundamental, you have a sub-fundamental, which gives more clarity about what the fundamental is. Within each fundamental, there are options/steps, that a center-back has to go through when executing a certain game situation/ (the fundamental).

In the upcoming chapters we will tell you what fundamentals are in our eyes most relevant for a center-back. We will explain them and tell you how to execute them. We will also give you examples of how to develop and train these fundamentals.

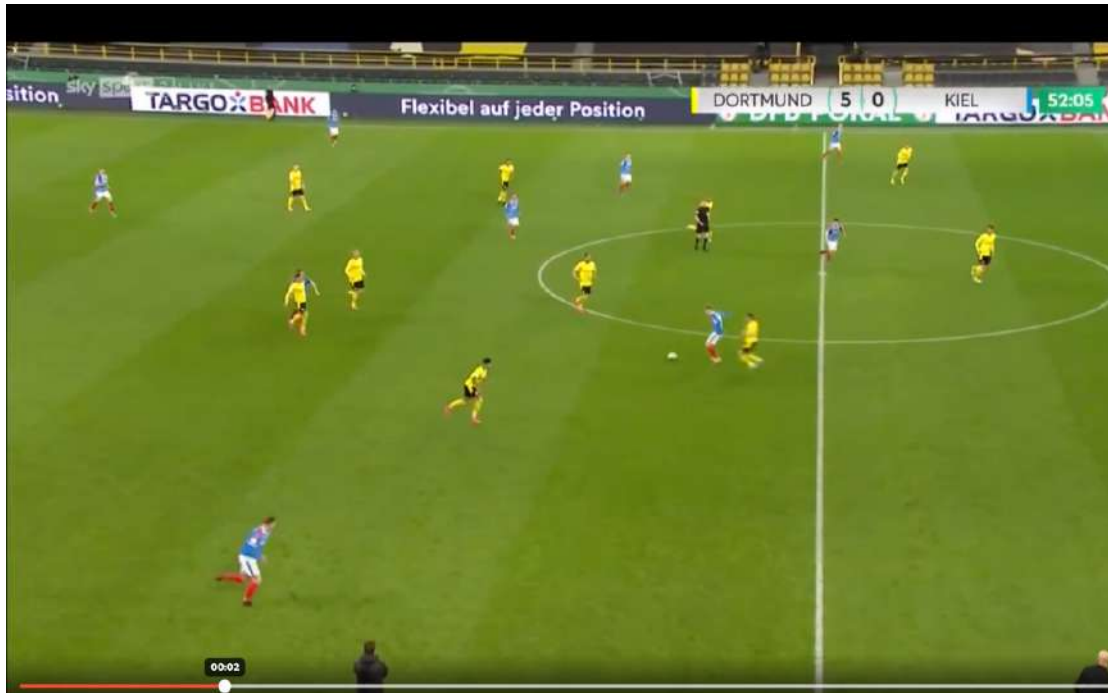
CHAPTER 2: "THESE ARE THE MOST IMPORTANT DEFENSIVE FUNDAMENTALS FOR A CENTER-BACK"

In the introduction of the center-back we talked about the different types of center-backs and the different strategies that a center-back has to deal with because of team tactics. In this chapter, we will discuss what defensive skills are most important for a center-back in our eyes. We base this on many years of analyzing different center-backs in different leagues. Just to name a few of the names that we worked with or are working with, Stefan de Vrij (Best Serie A defender 2019), Jurrien Timber (Former Ajax player and now Arsenal), and William Troost-Ekong (Nigeria National Team Captain and played in the PL and Serie A).

There are a couple of different game situations that a center-back is encountering most. This changes with the team tactics, so we will discuss all possibilities. The basic game situations a center-back is in most of the time are duels, covering, depth runs, and crosses. We will now give a basic description of what these game situations are.

Duels is self-explanatory, these are 1v1 with another player, within duels there are two different types, ground duels and aerial duels. Ground duels are everything where the ball is on the ground and aerial duels are all duels where the ball goes through the air. The most common mistakes in duels are body positioning and gambling. Players go into the duel with their bodies unbalanced, or they gamble for the ball without being sure that they can win it. Duels are also an important data point, scouts will look at the duell win rate of a player both over the ground and through the air.

Here you see an example of a ground duel, the player in front of you gets the ball in his feet. As a center-back you have to make several decisions here, there's no right or wrong, that depends on what the coach expects as team tactics and also what your own skills are. The possibilities are here to go and try to win the ball, to stay in his back and hold up, or to back up completely and stay in your zone. As said all is possible and it depends on what the coach wants and his team tactics what you decide to do.



2 THESE ARE THE MOST IMPORTANT DEFENSIVE FUNDAMENTALS FOR A CENTER-BACK

This is an example of an aerial duel, again there are choices like in a ground duel that depends on team tactics. But here they are more limited, you either go in the duel or not and stay in your zone.



With covering we mean all the situations where a center-back has to cover a teammate, this can be a full back, the other center-back, a midfielder, or even the goalkeeper. With covering, a center-back provides a safety net for the player he's covering. The most common mistakes with covering are that the player is not aware that he has to cover a different player or that when he comes for cover he's too close, which then opens up space elsewhere.

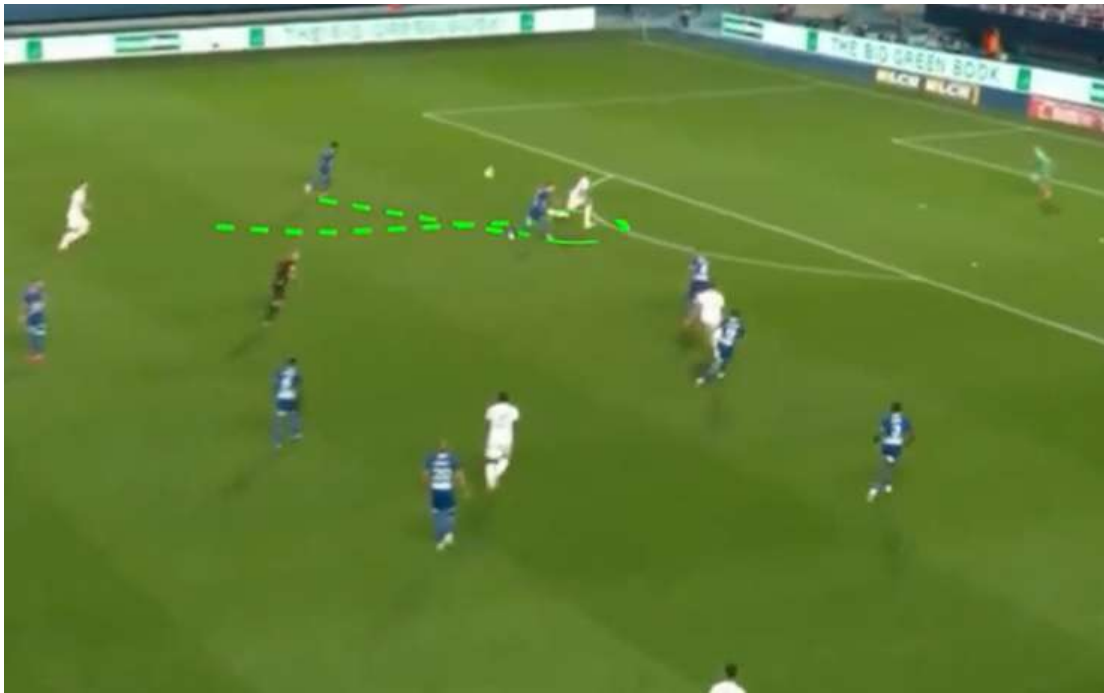
Here you see an example of a center-back covering another center-back after an aerial duel, but you can of course also cover after a ground duel. There's also covering your full back, covering your midfielders, and even covering your goalkeeper, think about when the goalkeeper comes out and you take a spot in the goal. This is a covering goalkeeper game situation.



The higher the level the more complex covering becomes. There are more players that you have to take into account, and the opponent needs less space to create chances. You have to decide fast which one you have to cover.

Dealing with depth runs is another important fundamental for center-backs. Attackers will start running in behind the defense numerous times and it's the center-backs responsibility to deal with this. If this is not executed well, this will result in an open chance for the attacker. A common mistake is that center-backs have the wrong body positioning, which will make them a second late. They're not expecting the ball to be played in depth, and are surprised when the ball gets played. This makes them a second late, which can be crucial for conceding a goal or not.

Here you see an example of defending a depth run. A player runs in behind the center-back and the center-back has to deal with this.



2. THESE ARE THE MOST IMPORTANT DEFENSIVE FUNDAMENTALS FOR A CENTER-BACK

The last situation is crosses, while the number of crosses that are given in a game is less than what it was before. This is still an offensive tactic that a lot of teams use and that a lot of goals get scored out. So defending a cross is still a crucial fundamental for a center-back to be able to deal with. A lot center-backs make the mistake of only watching the ball and therefore not marking their direct opponent or they are positioned in the wrong space when there's no opponent to mark. There are also different types of crosses a center-back has to take into account.

Here you see an example of a crossing situation. In this situation, a center-back again has several options depending on team tactics. Some coaches want to play man against man in the box and some want to play zone. So if the coach wants to play in zonal defending, the center-back has to take the right zone, if the coach wants to play man-to-man in the box, the center-back should mark his opponent in the box.



It depends on the team's tactics what fundamentals a center-back has to deal with most. If a team plays a high-pressing game this will automatically result in more duels and more depth runs. But the number of crosses is less. If a team plays more often in a low block, the center-back has to do more covering and more defending of crosses. This is an important distinction, and being aware of team tactics can help you become aware of what fundamentals are happening most for a center-back.

These were the four most crucial fundamentals for a center-back defensively, in the next chapter, we will discuss the offensive fundamentals for a center-back.

CHAPTER 3: "HOW TO BECOME THE BEST BALL PLAYING CENTER-BACK"

Now you know what to do defensively as a center-back, it's time to discuss what to do with the ball. As said earlier, the days when a center-back could just kick the ball into the stands are over. It's expected that a center-back can make progressive actions with his passing or dribbling. The second thing that's important for a center-back offensively is to be ready for when his team loses the ball. The last thing we will discuss is not necessarily a center-back specific fundamental, but it is a possibility for center-backs to stand out, and that is scoring goals through set pieces.

Let's start with the making of progressive actions, this consists of passing to a teammate that's in a better position or by dribbling passed a line of pressure. Making these kinds of actions already starts before getting the ball. At Tactalyse we actually find that the positioning before getting the ball is the most important step in making progressive actions.

Example of positioning before receiving the ball.





Before the center-back receives the he should be aware of his opponents and teammates. Where is the pressure going to come from or where does the opponent leave space? Based on this he positions himself. It's also good to have an idea of where your teammates are, so you can make a faster and better decision on where to take the ball after you receive it.

After a center-back positioned himself right he has to recognize whether he has to receive the ball or not. If the center-back is free and should receive the ball, he should ask for the ball by communication, so he can make the progressive action. If he's not free to receive the ball but did position himself right, then he has made space for other players. Also, this has to be communicated to the player with the ball.

Here you see an example of asking for the ball by body language.



This is the preparation for making a progressive action and as everyone knows preparation makes half the world. So what makes up the other half of making a progressive action? Well when receiving the ball the body positioning of a center-back is important, this is important to make a good first touch and from there to dribble or pass.

Example of good and bad body positioning.



3 THESE ARE THE MOST IMPORTANT DEFENSIVE FUNDAMENTALS FOR A CENTER-BACK



Example of a bad first touch and a good first touch.



3 THESE ARE THE MOST IMPORTANT DEFENSIVE FUNDAMENTALS FOR A CENTER-BACK



After the first touch, the center-back can either dribble or pass. The center-back dribbles to either beat the press of an opponent or to give his teammates more time to get into the right space. If the teammate is already in a better position than the center-back himself, he passes the ball to this teammate. At this moment the progressive action is made and the center-back has done his job with the ball.

The thing that a center-back has to do after these actions is to organize the team for when it loses the ball. This is a crucial part of the offensive part of center-backs as well. Because a center-back has the complete overview of the pitch, it's often them who will take the lead in this. How it should be organized is dependent on the opponent and on what the team's tactics are.

A bonus fundamental for a center-back is set pieces. To stand out as a center-back, it's possible to score goals from set pieces. If a center-back makes 5-6 goals a year, he can be an enormous asset to the team. To score from a set piece the center-back either has to beat his marking or when playing against a zonal defense, he has to find the right space. One of the skills a center-back can use is doing a zig-zag. More about bit can be found in the masterclasses on our [platform](#).

CHAPTER 4: "HOW TO BECOME THE BEST BALL PLAYING CENTER-BACK"

In the previous chapters we discussed the most important fundamentals for center-backs. After identifying these and being able to understand them, you can now try to improve them. But how can you develop a center-back on these fundamentals? It's important that a player is aware of what game situation he's in because then he knows what he has to do in situations. So creating recognition is the first step, at Tactalyse we do this through video. Through online sessions, we show the player the situation and we teach them what he has to do. We also train with players on the pitch, when doing this we at Tactalyse believe in a three-level approach, the first level of practice is isolation of the execution without resistance, you train the fundamental without resistance, the second level is isolation of the game situation with resistance, what we mean by this is that there's no complexity, there's not a lot of decision making that has to be done. The only decisions that have to be made are directly related to the fundamental, and the last level is with a lot of resistance, think about full practice possession games or position-related games.

I will not write out all the fundamentals and how to train them, but I can give our framework for designing your own exercises. So like I said, at Tactalyse we work with three different levels of resistance. In the first level, you isolate the game situation and the execution of the fundamental.

The way to do this is to identify all the steps in a fundamental on how to execute a game situation. Let's say you want to defend a cross. Then you simply isolate a crossing situation, by letting the player run to the desired spot, after this, you can take it a step further and let him make a decision on if he has to mark or occupy a zone. This is how to train a fundamental in isolation, you simply train the pattern. A lot of people will say this is useless without resistance, but what we've experienced at Tactalyse is that the more things you can do automatically, the less the player has to think about these and the more brain capacity he can use in the complex stuff. In case of a crossing, this can for example be, crossing attackers that switch players and deciding which one of them to mark.

The next level is adding resistance, but not adding the complexity of different game situations. So what we mean by this is that we will only train a crossing situation. In this way the player doesn't have to think about different things, he knows there's a crossing situation and that he has to focus on executing the right way to defend a cross. The way to set this up is simple. One player on the side who's going to make a cross and one attacker. The player on the side and the attacker communicate before the cross, where the cross will come (1st or 2nd post). The job of the center-back is to mark the attacker or when he doesn't run into the box to occupy a zone. Within this 1v1 exercise, you can make several adjustments to make it harder for the center-back, for example, the attackers can wait just as long as they want to cross the ball. In this way, you ensure that the center-back has to keep his marking all the time.

In this level, you can also make it a step harder by making it two attackers vs. one center-back or three attackers against two center-backs exercise. This will still make it an isolated game situation training, but the level of complexity is going up because the center-back(s) have to think about more players at the same time.

The third level is real games in training or a real match. This is of course the ultimate training because then the game is flowing and a lot is happening. The center-back then has to recognize that he is in a crossing situation and that he has to execute this fundamental.



This is how to design a defensive fundamental. Ultimately you can do this with all defensive fundamentals. I will now show you an offensive fundamental for a center-back as well. I will write out all the levels according to our three-level framework. Let's say you want to train support for a center-back, the positioning before receiving the ball, and when receiving the ball to have good body positioning and a good first touch to make a progressive action.

So the first level is again to isolate the situation without resistance, the way to do this is to play against zero opponents and for example put down two pylons that represent an opponent. The center-back then has to choose the right position in relation to the pylons, a ball gets passed to him either by the coach or another teammate, and he then has to make a progressive action. To make this a little harder you could change the pylons without him seeing it, and he has a couple of seconds to choose a position before the ball gets played to him. In this way, he has to adjust his position every time. In theory, all other passing drills without opponents are isolating this as well, because in every passing exercise, you train body position and first touch, most passing exercises don't have a component of choosing position though.

The second level is the isolation of the game situation but with opponents. What you could do here, is to play a defense against attackers, but the defense always has one player more. The goal for the defenders is to play through or dribble through the attackers. You can either let them play it in a goal or midfielders behind the line of attackers. In this exercise, you can also make variations on which part of the pitch you are, deep in your own half, around midfield, or on the half of the opponent. In this way, the center-back gets used to this on every part of the pitch.

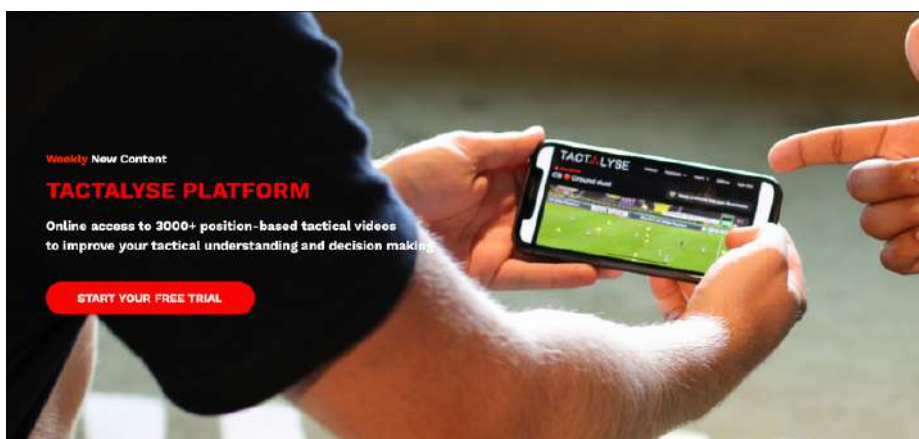
The last level is the level with the most resistance, all normal games and positional games in training are of course training this fundamental. But you can also do this in a 4 defenders against 3 attackers situation, but that the attackers always start with the ball. In this way, the defenders have to first do their defensive job, but then make the transition to attack. In this way, you train them to recognize when they have to be ready to receive the ball after winning it back. This is important to keep the ball in matches right after you've won it, and if your center-backs are able to make progressive actions right after winning the ball, there's the biggest chance of scoring, because teams are often still disorganized.

So this is how we train fundamentals the Tactalyse way. If you have questions about this please send a message. We've now talked about everything that involves a center-back, what defensive fundamentals are most important, what offensive fundamentals are most important, and how to train these.

Become a member of the Tactalyse Platform!

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Tactalyse created tactical fundamentals for each specific position. Reach your full potential by watching and learning from the best players out there.

 <p>GOALKEEPER 5/7 Def. fundamentals 3/7 Off. fundamentals</p>	 <p>CENTER-BACK 5/16 Def. fundamentals 3/6 Off. fundamentals</p>	 <p>FULL-BACK 5/16 Def. fundamentals 3/13 Off. fundamentals</p>	 <p>DEFENSIVE MIDFIELDER 5/15 Def. fundamentals 3/10 Off. fundamentals</p>
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Link to the Tactalyse Platform: platform.tactalyse.com

TACTALYSE

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“Center-backs don't just stop attackers; they stop entire attacks”.

”

Loran Vrielink - Founder of Tactalyse



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