

The Offside Trap

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What Is the Offside Trap?

To understand the offside trap, you first need to understand the offside rule. In broad terms, an attacking player is judged to be in an offside position if he is nearer to his opponents' goal line than both the ball and the second to last opponent. In effect, this means a player is in an offside position if he is between the last defender and the opposing goal.

But only if he is in an offside position at the moment a ball is played to him will the linesman raise his flag for the referee to award a free kick to the defending team. This only applies if the attacking player is in the opponents' half of the field.

The offside trap, then, consists of defenders stepping higher up the field at the right moment, leaving attackers in an offside position just before their teammates pick out a pass to them. Properly executed, the offside trap allows defenders to win the ball back without having to make a tackle.

How Does a Team Run the Offside Trap?

Effectively using the offside trap is considered one of soccer's hidden arts. Breaking it down is quite straightforward; executing it is not.

The first step is to keep the back line (3 or 4 defenders) straight across the field. This means that they should be in a line parallel to the halfway line and move up and down the field in unison in defensive situations (during attacking play, some may venture forward).

When the opponents play a forward ball, it should be up to one defender — usually one of the center fullbacks — to decide whether or not the line will step up or drop back. The player must make that decision based on the position of the attacking players.

If a few steps forward would suddenly put the striker offside, then he will move the line up and possibly win a free kick. If he believes the opponents will play the ball before the defense can step up, then he will likely tell his teammates to drop back and take a different defensive approach.

And really, it's that simple. Yet it still befuddles even the most seasoned professionals. The difficulty lies in coordinating, timing, and identifying those moments when the opposition is ready to play the ball.

Why Use the Offside Trap (Or Not)?

The offside trap can be a fickle mistress. While some English and Italian sides have used it to great effect, it is also an easy way for defenders to get burned. The slightest error can result in a breakaway.

But there are certain opponents who can be particularly vulnerable to it. Sides who play a lot of long balls are the easiest to contain with an offside trap since it is fairly obvious when they are about to play one. It can truly frustrate a team by breaking up its rhythm and forcing them to look for different approaches.

Against teams that prefer short, quick passing, however, the offside trap is riskier. With a lot of ball movement, it's far more difficult for defenders to stay on the same wavelength and to decide whether to step up or chase the runner. It is especially dangerous against quick strikers. They have a tendency to toe the line and use their speed to run away from it, even if they began in an onside position.

Keys to Running a Successful Offside Trap

- The back line needs to have **constant awareness** of three things:

(1) Where the other defenders are;

(2) Where the opposing forwards are;

(3) When the opponents are likely to play the ball forward.

That's why the offside trap is best reserved for experienced teams with a back line that has played together before.

- The critical importance of **communication** cannot be overstated.

The fullbacks and goalkeeper need to keep a constant eye on each other's positions and keep each other informed by shouting loudly and crisply. Usually, one of the more experienced center defenders will make the decision to step up and when they do, the others need to follow instantly. The slightest delay could be the difference between a goal and free kick.

- Defenders need to **pick their spots**.

It's very difficult to keep an effective offside trap going for 90 minutes. There are times when defending deeper is simply a safer tactic.