

# CONSTRAINING FOOTBALL

A VISION FOR PLAYER AND COACH DEVELOPMENT



**BEN BARTLETT**

# **Praise for Constraining Football**

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“Once again, thanks for your book. I think it’s a really good way of looking at player - and coach development. The responsive and holistic approach to support and enable learning is key! As a consequence, the more traditional way of coaching and behaviour of working on a constructed programme/curriculum could be avoided in the future. In the end, this means the players will be able to develop themselves as a person and a player in the best possible way they can.”

- Jorg van der Breggen  
Head of Football Development, KNVB

“Thought-provoking”

- Gareth Southgate OBE  
Manager, England

“In your coaching journey, you will come across many people that will help shape, influence and nudge your thinking. Ben is without doubt one of the best thinkers in the football coaching world, and I class myself as very fortunate to have spent time in Ben’s company. For those people that haven’t been able to experience this, this book is the next best option. In simple terms, if you are a football coach and want to improve your coaching, read this book; it will provide food for thought for any coach at any level.”

- Nick Levett  
Head of Coaching, UK Coaching

“I’ve long been an admirer of Ben’s work on a constraints-based approach to football. This excellent book dives further into the details of this approach and is an absolute must-read for coaches on all levels of the game.”

- Adin Osmanbasic  
U17 Head Coach, Houston Dynamo

“Ben is, without doubt, one of the brightest critical thinkers in British football. This book combines a clear definition of his approach to broad philosophical concepts such as learning and environment design, with practical training examples for use at any level. A must-read for coaches, teachers, developers and parents who want the best for those in their care.”

- Iain Brunnschweiler  
Coach & Player Developer, Southampton FC

“A hugely valuable asset for developing players and coaches”

- Rene Maric  
Assistant Manager, Borussia Dortmund

“Having coached on both sides of the Atlantic, in development football and now in the senior elite game at Angel City; regardless of the context, a human, responsive approach in supporting players to grow and the team to win are cornerstones of my approach. Constraining Football fuels this commitment and reminds us of the importance of understanding what motivates the people in our care and enables us to coach effectively.”

- Freya Coombe  
Head Coach, Angel City FC

“One of the brightest coach educators”

- The Independent

# **CONSTRAINING FOOTBALL**

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For Poppy; embrace life's constraints

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# Foreword

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By Rene Maric, Borussia Dortmund

Football means searching. Searching for solutions, as a player and as a coach. Searching for the right situation, for the environment, the best session or the best game model. Rarely, this search ever finishes. Even if we find something, we still strive for more, as it should be.

When I started to coach at my village in 2010/11, I was 17 years old and searching for many, many things in my life and my style as a coach and person. Back then I would have never expected that search to lead me towards the German Bundesliga, yet the process is the same as it was from the beginning: Think about what you can do to support your players and staff colleagues, look for problems and search for solutions.

Whilst I studied Psychology and a lot of scientific research papers regarding coaching, I rarely felt fulfilled with one of my findings for longer than a short amount of time. Yet, all these small fulfilments added up to a body of work and experience that, I hope, have improved me as a coach and human being.

What stayed with me in all these years, however, were seldom specific sessions or drills, but ideas, concepts and, most importantly and most frequently, people.

And this is exactly the main reason why I have enjoyed this book by Ben. Ben does not describe his learnings over all these years from a conceptual point of view firstly, but he always comes from a Human perspective. Anecdotes and explanations are used not only as introduction but as motivation, intention and reason for the What and How of his book.

It's a collection of his findings and fulfilments in his search over these years and, thus, can help the reader on their journey. It took me back to my first deeper research of Differential Learning and, recently, to the realization that in the end, a Human and Team Centred Approach are the most important, besides knowing for which constraints of Human Behaviour, as in the Game of Football, we are preparing our players for.

There is a lot to digest in an easy to digest way, which in turn makes it an enjoyable read and a helpful tool. The book is logical, easy to follow and describes a useful and useable approach for all levels and different stages.

Personally, "Design and Demands" was a very interesting concept for me, but there are a lot of smaller pieces of information that are at least as helpful, for instance, the notion that, in the end, everything "is just a way of thinking about learning" for us coaches, but also for the players.

Or, that constraints are a restriction, but in the same way, they are an opportunity. Utilizing this principle, Ben gives us a hugely valuable asset regarding the application of this methodology.

Concluding, I would like to thank Ben for all the work from him that I was able to use for myself in the last years which, partly, culminated in this book. Developing coaches, in the end, means ultimately developing players, too.

That's my personal connection with Ben, sharing a dream through different ways, and the main reason why I am grateful for the inputs I was able to take from him.

And yet, I hope you, dear reader, will not be 100% happy with Ben's book, for he too probably will not finish his search for the best possible approach(es) to coaching, learning and just (continue) being a great person.

So, never forget, "all of our environments are learning ones" and enjoy your journey.

Best wishes,

Rene

Assistant Manager Borussia Dortmund  
(Previously Assistant Manager at Borussia Monchengladbach  
& RB Salzburg)

# About The Author

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Having been released as a youth player from Colchester United, Ben commenced coaching in the early 1990s at the same Club. He invested 10 years tentatively learning how to coach within both boys and girls Excellence programmes; programmes which supported the development of players who have won multiple Premier League titles and competed in the latter stages of both International Tournaments and The Champions League.

The growth, particularly, of the women's programme that Ben led at Colchester United generated some attention and he progressed to spending two years at Chelsea laying the strategic and footballing foundations for Chelsea Women's Football Club. Numerous full and youth Internationals developed through this programme as The Club progressed to being a leading force in World football.

Ben's attention shifted, in 2007, to being a leading figure as part of a small team in transforming coaching and coach development in England. This included supporting many coaches from

grass-roots, professional football Club Academy programmes, National Coaches and coaches within the senior professional game to further enhance their coaching practice; enabling both the players in their care and themselves to develop into football's elite. This long-term work also coincided with England being recognised as a leading nation in World Football.

A key part of this support included innovating within the field of a constraints-led approach, influencing the design of curriculums for both player and coach development programmes, ensuring they respond to the nature of each individual and away from standardised, teach-to-the-test processes that previously prevailed.

Currently, as Head of Academy Coaching at Fulham, Ben continues to focus attention on supporting coach and player development to be aligned and connected whilst supporting the development and progression of professional footballers and coaches at The South-West London Club. This is part of a continued, life-long commitment to enabling each person to derive the best for themselves and the people in their care, developing an environment where learning is self-motivated, critical to positive change and an enjoyable, challenging pursuit.

This book draws together Ben's collection of experiences and learnings with the intention of supporting coaches, teachers, mentors and educators to continue to make sense of their practice, moving towards a more responsive, holistic and context-relevant approach to development.

# **Introduction**

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This is a book about learning.

Learning can often be forgotten or fringe in the pursuit of other fruits. When these fruits are practice books, formal and standardised education and easy to digest, saccharine infused niceties there is a risk that we overlook one of the fundamental human needs; to develop, change, grow and learn to master crafts.

The mastery of crafts such as coaching takes time, earnest commitment and many challenging, chastening experiences that leave us feeling a little less than skilful. However we overcome these challenges, they are likely to be enablers that support our learning and growth towards becoming a better coach than we were yesterday.

This book is intended to support that exploration; generate and guide your thinking whilst ensuring the gestation of those seeds of thought. We will encourage and enable a deeper understanding of the people or players in our care and provide some

illumination on how to guide our decisions in designing environments that are responsive to both you and your players.

There will be no coaching prescriptions, simply because the general nature of a constraints-led approach is at odds with prescription focussed approaches to coaching. A constraints-led approach encourages us to take account of, better understand and integrate what we understand about the player (person), the game of football (task) and the specific conditions on any given day (environment) into every interaction, coaching session, game-day, tournament and any other activity we might engage in within player development. There will, however, be some probing into alternative ways for coaches to eschew the traditional practice book or formal curriculum and scaffold player and coach development towards a unique, bespoke, responsive eco-system that keeps rhythm with the beating heart of our own football club.

Taken together, this can support the experiences we are exposed to and build to be unique, individual and reflective of what collectively we have agreed and understand to be important in our world. The characteristics of our context should be coupled to our commitments.

The backdrop to the way of thinking expressed in this book has been supported by a generation spent within coaching and development; fortune has favoured the opportunity for me to support in a sustained fashion the development of players who have been top scorers at The World Cup, multiple Premier League winners and coaches who coach and manage across some of Europe's top leagues. However, these perceived successes must be allied to the players within those same development programmes whose opportunity has been curtailed by serious injury and coaches who have fallen foul of some of the vagaries that the industry can perpetuate.

As such, no development system is universally successful or unsuccessful and we should be careful, thoughtful and willing to as readily 'research' the graveyard as we do the top table. That mirror may be unpleasant to stare into at times, yet it is an impor-

tant reflection of our fallibilities and an important reminder to ensure that whatever outcomes our coaching and development programmes facilitate; supporting them to be as humanly supportive yet challenging as is consciously achievable is a worthy and important goal.

The aspiration for this book is that it provides a map of some of the landscape that coaches may wish to explore in developing their own constraints-led approach to development both for the players in their care and for themselves as a coach. Illuminating this fertile land sufficiently to support discoveries that are purposeful, personal and personable.

Thanks for your interest.

Ben



## Chapter 1

# **Environment Design**

The purpose of coaching is to support and enable learning. Learning isn't something that coaches, teachers, educators or webinar distributors control. Our learning is impacted in every single moment of every day, influenced by the things we care about, the interactions we have with the environments we occupy and the other people who co-exist in those environments.

Whilst who our friends are, the job we do, our intimate partners, children, colleagues, where we live, and the transportation we use to travel are not exhaustive lists, they are in each living, breathing moment influencing, both consciously and unconsciously, how we think and behave as our human system responds to each situation.

Additionally, our behaviour is not on its own a response to the experiences that we have garnered. Our genetic constitution will impact quite significantly how the body and all the intertwined, dynamic elements move and behave. This includes the personality stamp we are born with and the accompanying inherent con-

straints of our intelligence and physical composition.

Hence all of our environments are learning ones.

Whilst we can and purposefully and positively should socially construct aspects of our environment to enable and encourage the development of certain skills; this will be constrained by and be continuously contending with the cares and characteristics of the other people within any particular environment.

Consider this carefully in the way we approach coaching; learning is not something we should 'do' to someone, it is perhaps better thought of as a consequence of the things we are exposed to. Hence the urge is for us to consider our responsibility to design and afford people experiences that enable the things that are important to them (their cares) and the person that they are (their characteristics) to be central to our thinking.

## **Defining a Constraints-Led Approach**

A constraints-led approach isn't a complicated science. It's just a way of thinking about learning.

The dictionary defines a constraint as a limitation or restriction. This is true. However, whatever it is that constrains each of us is also an opportunity. It supports us to find a solution within those limitations.

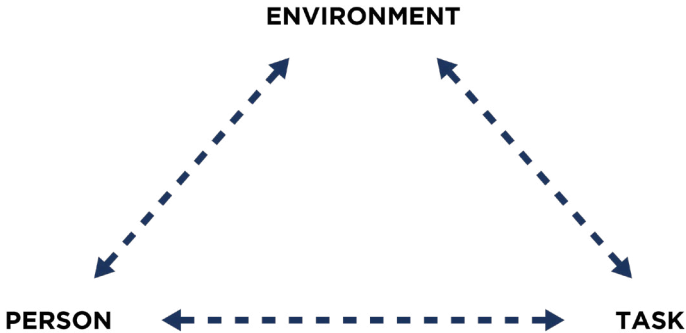
We are constrained as a person, like being a slow runner. The game of football is constrained by its laws, such as offside, and we are constrained by the environment each person plays football in, an example could be the noisy nature of some parents!

This suggests that if we genuinely aspire to support learning, we should think about, understand and plan for the players in our team, the ways we would like those players to play football and the environment that those players and that game of football are contending with.

Further, a constraints-led approach considers the ways each person interacts with the task they are engaging with and the environment that surrounds that task. This is Karl Newell's back-

drop on how learning happens which is illustrated in figure 1.1.

**Figure 1.1** - Karl Newell's backdrop on how learning happens



*Newell (1986)*

To make this more relevant to football, coaches might consider this through figure 1.2 where we have replaced:

1. Person with player - who is the player in our care?
2. Task with football - how does the game of football look?
3. Environment with situation - what circumstances are the player playing the game of football in?

**Figure 1.2** - Adaption of Karl Newell's backdrop on how learning happens



*Adapted From Newell (1986)*

These figures are principally a representation of what has been described earlier and reflect the traditional constraints triangle:

1. Each person is constrained by their own genetic and experiential footprint – explained as the Player
2. The game is constrained by its laws (there are 17 of them) – explained as Football
3. The particular environment that any of us find ourselves in, whilst playing football, will be a constraining factor on the behaviour we exhibit – explained as the Situation.

## **The Role of The Coach**

We have taken the liberty of adding coaching to the centre of figure 1.2. Whilst the coach doesn't originally exist in this diagram, it is a conscious contribution to encourage us to think about the deliberate position we, the coach, assume in coherently connecting what we believe we know about any player in our care, the player development activity we might organise and the environment which those players and that activity occurs in.

If we intend to separate any of the above three aspects from each other, for example delivering an off the shelf 'playbook' session without considering the people who will be participating in that session, then it is perhaps necessary to rationalise why we are doing that.

We should also be mindful of the consequences that those decisions are likely to have on 'learning' if the cares and characteristics of our players are not key considerations within the design of the experience.

That is how a constraints-led approach might be explained; the person responding to the agreed task within some environmental conditions. Also be aware that, as the coach, our cares and characteristics are also constraining the way learning occurs too.

It is impossible for us to separate the things that are important to us from the way we think about the players and see the game of football. This isn't a bad thing, just another constraint to be aware of.

If we accept this as a responsive, holistic approach to supporting learning; we might decide to eschew the traditionally constructed curriculum which often drives coach behaviour. Whilst there is much to think about and be in awe of in the way teachers in more academic environments educate, we would do well to be careful about separating subjects from each other, detailing the specifics of what will be universally taught and then creating a mapped timeline of those specifics across a year or season.

We often do these things in the mistaken belief this type of certainty helps the players. However, it reduces our ability to respond to how people change and grow over time. This is because we've already decided what we are going to do in, for example, week 34 of the season even though we don't know how the players might change over time.

If our environment intends to respond to the perceived needs of the individuals within a team; the experiences we agree with players that we will share together may be more impactful on learning if we build them:

- a. As a conscious, coherent consequence of discovering the things that people care about;
- b. With careful consideration of each person's current characteristics;
- c. Having thought about and discussed the influence of previous experiences

This may require us all to see coaching more as a flexible, pliable skill and less as a pre-defined, paint by numbers process that can be picked up and planted onto people.

Enabling reflexive environments provides the opportunity for the game of football to be a fluid, engaging and luminous experience for everyone. However, supporting football skills to be learnt and to emerge in response to the context can be a challenging task for coaches. The comfort and certainty that is derived from the playbook can only be contended with by a viable alternative.

## **Vision Focussed; Values Driven**

The alternative is to agree as a group on what it is we're trying to achieve and then aim at that target. We should also ensure we underpin this pursuit with how we intend to behave whilst achieving our intentions.

This means that before deciding on how our curriculum and games programme will look, it is important to consider what it is that our team and club cares about, what it is aiming to achieve and the shared values that underpin these cares and intentions. This should, as a matter of course, involve the players.

Without these agreed commitments, guiding our approach we risk being hijacked by shiny distractions that fleetingly, or in a more sustained fashion, catch our attention. For example, important principles of player development can be overlooked by the arbitrary pursuit of trophies and whilst holistic player development doesn't need to be an aside from winning games of football, leagues or cups; it is quite feasible for good intentions to be side-tracked by the seduction of score-line success.

## **Short-Term Success or Long-Term Development**

A personal, notable experience supported clarity to be developed on this when coaching an under 18 team in a league-deciding game relatively early in my coaching career. Our team needed to win the game to be crowned champions; our opponents required a draw. We were level at 1-1 early in the 2nd half of a competitive

game when one of the opposition's most talented players kicked out at our midfielder terrier off of the ball, which was missed by the officials (although not by the opposition coach).

The opposition coach instantly removed the player from the game, resigning their team to play the remainder of the game, which we eventually won 2-1, with ten players.

On approaching their coach after the game and asking what informed their decision to remove the player from the game and consign their team to a tougher challenge; they explained:

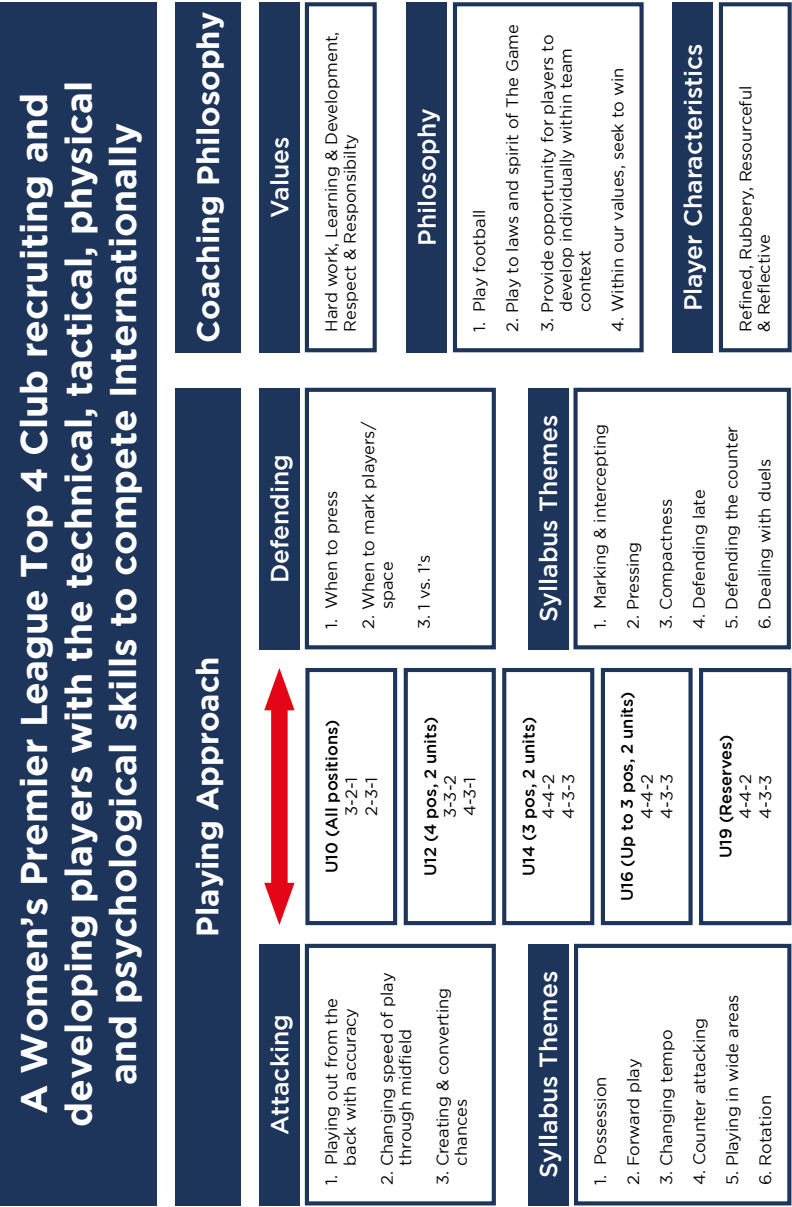
“That player will play in The Premier League and for their country. If they behave like that at the top level, they will cost their team. Developmental football is an opportunity to learn these types of lessons, and we cannot miss the opportunity to support them with that.”

The player in question has had a sustained Premier League career and represented their country multiple times. The coach in question is now a Champions League finalist. This is an example of strong values within a developmental culture where short term success was sacrificed for long term benefit. Whilst we won the game, the ‘wins’ for the opposition player and coach continue to accrue.

Such behaviours (as exhibited by the coach in question) are unlikely to be evident if we cultivate a win at any cost mentality. If we aspire to enable a powerful learning environment, then carefully and thoughtfully designing our eco-system to reflect the cares, intentions and values of our people is a cornerstone

These cornerstones need to be just that, foundations that form who we are, which are universally embodied. Any misaligning behaviour, whether intentional or misplaced, should be challenged supportively not only by the coach but by the entire nature of our programme. This requires fortitude, belief and self-confidence to hold the line, ensuring we consistently exemplify the qualities that will support the growth and positive change we are aiming at.

Figure 1.3 - Philosophy and Developmental Programme





## Embodying Our Vision and Values

In a previous role, back in the early 2000s, my colleagues and I were charged with developing a performance plan for an elite Premier League football club to support the first team to succeed. This success was to be underpinned by a philosophy and developmental programme for young players from age eight upwards. The one-page embodiment of this agreed plan is shown in figure 1.3.

Our vision contained elements associated with performance goals for the senior team, accompanied by targets for player development, ensuring we combined the importance of senior success with an internal player development pathway.

We agreed on some broad characteristics we intended to support the players to develop to enable them to be successful – these were to be refined, rubbery, resourceful and reflective.

These characteristics were considered holistically. People can be technically and socially refined, tactically and physically rubbery, and psychologically and socially resourceful.

Alongside the player characteristics, we outlined a playing approach, or what might now be called a ‘game model’, that contained three elements for ‘in possession’ and three for ‘out of possession’.

This guided the coaching programme as coaches intentionally encapsulated these playing elements within both sessions and game experiences to support players flexibly to learn to play football. For example, there were three considerations for the ways we wanted to play out from the back with accuracy, which were known as the ‘Box’, ‘Bowl’, and ‘Basin’. These are shown in figures 1.4 - 1.6.

**Box** - Some, most or all of the defensive players drop within the depth of the box to receive. This would encourage us to play short to draw the opposition on and stretch their press out or enable the goalkeeper to drive the ball past the press.

**Bowl** - The traditional shape associated with playing out from the back. This provided the opportunity for Centre Backs and Full Backs to receive and either 'Start' the attack or 'Support' it with attacking movements.

**Basin** - In this situation, the full-backs start in a very high position, generating space for the team to either play 'In Between' (the space created by the full-backs being high) and for the wide forwards to come 'In Field'.

Figure 1.4 - Box

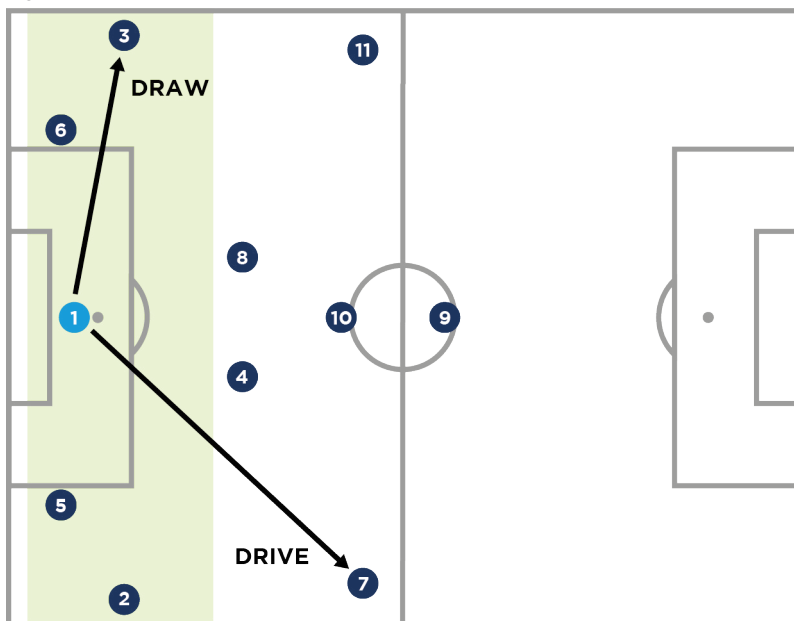


Figure 1.5 - Bowl

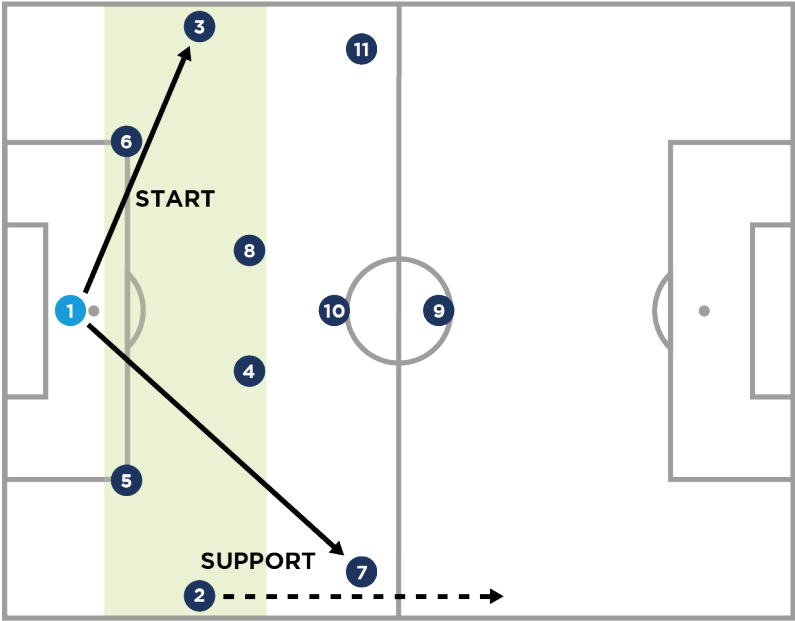
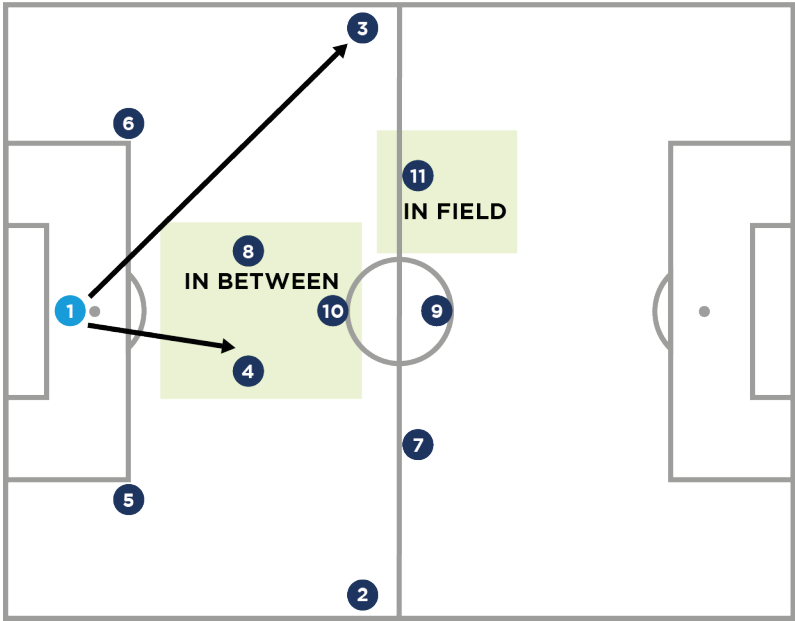


Figure 1.6 - Basin



These were our principles of the way we wished to play football - the Task. Our coaches worked with our players to practise each of these and supported them in making decisions about when each was appropriate.

Naturally, the decisions that the players within the team made were informed by the situations they found themselves in. At times, defenders would drop deeper than the line of the box (this was when the laws required the ball to leave the penalty box before outfield players could touch it) to draw pressure, stretch the pitch vertically and generate space for us to play through the opposition.

This was as part of an aspiration to be less focussed on specific patterns of play and more on providing some considerations of how players may combine to solve game problems. Hence, players were afforded the opportunity to learn how to attack the opposition's goal and defend ours within an agreed, loose framework that players self-organised within.

This approach of freedom of decision making within the example of the infrastructure explained, for that elite Premier League football club, was layered across the player development programme, which included the ways the teams were organised.

When the older groups played 11 v 11, we adopted a two-system approach (4-4-2 and 4-3-3), with the plan of playing both systems equally so that the players experienced playing out within different systems. The systems were chosen based upon one which our first team played and one which our home International squads played at that time.

This supported some variability but within structures that the players were likely, if we achieved our vision of our young players being able to play Premier League and International football, to experience as they progressed.

This was supported by a player rotation policy, allowing players to experience up to three different positions in the 11 v 11 formats, with an even more flexible approach in the younger age groups.

This is an example of how the player development programme aligns with The Vision and ‘game model’. If your vision is for tactically adaptable players able to perform on The International Stage, then the experiences the players are exposed to should provide the opportunity for development to reflect this.

There is no suggestion that the game model is more important than the individual players.

The game model should respond to and be coherent with the individual players. Some of the subtleties of how each team sets up and plays each game should be agile and flexible, moving and flowing with what we understand about the players rather than shoe-horning the players arbitrarily into our fixed game model.

## **Enhancing Decision-Making Skills**

Research can support this approach; Pam Richards’ work on decision-making in elite sport suggests that to generate enhanced decision-making skills in complex environments of which football is an example, it is valuable to:

1. Establish and agree with those involved a relatively flexible view of what you want the game to look like. This can be construed as a ‘game model’.
2. Off the field; define roles, common language along with the cues and patterns that you would like the team and the individuals within it to respond to.
3. On the field; create opportunities and situations which allow players to practise making decisions in relation to 1 and 2.

The suggestion here is that 1 and 2 feed information forward to 3. The experiences within 3 provide information that is feedback to support the players to think about and improve their decision-making process in relation to the developmental model.

This approach implies greater ownership for the players to understand and make decisions within a shared idea of how the game can be played. It also enables individual players to be attended to within the structure of a team.

## **Individual as Part of the Team**

We supported the development of an attacking player - the Person - who joined our club at age ten and, from our initial profiling, was quick, strong and powerful with the ball at their feet, particularly when facing towards goal. The player's technique and decision-making, particularly when playing between the opposition's midfield and defensive lines, were areas to improve.

Initially, as coaches, our eyes were drawn away from the areas to improve, principally because this player was effective – scoring many goals and impacting upon games. However, to support The Club and the player to succeed, it was important to not ignore this player's struggles in playing with their back to goal and between the lines, as in doing so, we may be failing to support them to achieve their potential. This player, understandably, often resisted the decision to come short to get on the ball as it often didn't go particularly well.

Our commitment was therefore three-fold:

1. Spend time with both the team and this player to reinforce the 'game model' for changing the speed of play through midfield and creating and converting chances; one way was for central forwards to come short and wide forwards to drive in off the line.
2. Provide opportunities in both practice and competition for players to practise this to be able to get better at it, and generate an environment where the players could trial and error.

3. Support the players through off-field discussion to develop a deeper understanding of when and how to execute certain decisions.

The players' involvement in this process was crucial, both to empower them to drive and lead their development and to support their understanding of its value in their growth.

We utilised video analysis, notational analysis, which is assessing how often certain players made certain movements, and player-to-player feedback to build visual examples, numerical statistics, and player-led qualitative discussion.

This generated a picture of behaviour that we could analyse or measure and, over several seasons, supported the development of a hugely effective, multi-faceted player. This player has consequently progressed to, currently, having amassed over 200 Premier League appearances, winning two Premier League titles alongside playing Champions League and International football. Most of these senior experiences have been in deeper positions and not as a centre forward.

This player's challenge was individual to them; however, it was necessary to share this with the other players and link it to the 'game model' to make sure that as well as our collective ideas being shared, the individual developments were too.

While this requires an environment where individual and collective trust are key principles, these are key psychological and social aspects of the process.

## **Aligning Our Vision**

Like the player above, every person will have some things that they're practising – the challenge for us as coaches is to seek to align and support the management of individual player needs within a collectively agreed model.

As an aside, recently, I was speaking to a club development officer at a grassroots club near to me, who has spent a consider-

able amount of time establishing a club ethos and a development framework to support the adults' and children's behaviour.

Their vision was quite different from the one stated earlier. Theirs was: "To provide equality of opportunity for our children to become well-rounded people."

As a result, they tracked whether every player got fair playing time across the season; examples of supportive and collaborative behaviour by players and coaches, which they rewarded, instead of top goal-scorer, league winners etc., and had coach meetings and rotation of coaches to share experiences and work with each other's teams.

This was excellent. They had a clearly stated vision that aligned with their behaviours and development principles. To be in with a chance of achieving your aims, first - agree on what it is that you want to achieve and then second - build a development programme and behaviours that are commitments towards achieving this.

When all align, we're less likely to just be rolling the dice as we will be more inclined and better positioned to achieve our goals and to know the types of behaviours that we should reinforce or challenge. The aligning of our Vision with our developmental principles and coach behaviour are the drivers for the design of our environment.

This is likely to inform learning and the tenets or principles that underpin the curriculum. Motor learning can be explained as changes in the way we move, for example, when we are playing football. To reflect beliefs about motor learning our curriculum needs to be shaped as a response to what our environment values, rather than just be arbitrarily and generically constructed.

How we then learn to move when we are playing football will be a representation of what is important to us. This won't only reflect the ways we play football but also the more general ways we learn to exist together.



## **Chapter 2**

# **Learning**

Wherever you may be sitting or standing reading this is a learning environment; when you put this book down you'll still be in a learning environment. We don't control the fact that we learn; that is inevitable. However, we have some control over the environments we decide to exist in, the things we expose ourselves to within those environments and how we decide to interact with the other people existing in those environments to influence the way our and other people's human systems change and adapt.

### **Beliefs About Learning**

Many dictionary definitions of learning refer to terms like 'knowing' and 'acquisition' which is possibly true when we consider the ways that we have all been educated. Consequently, learning and education can be synonymised as the isolated ability to remember and verbalise information, although knowing the name of something does not mean you understand it.

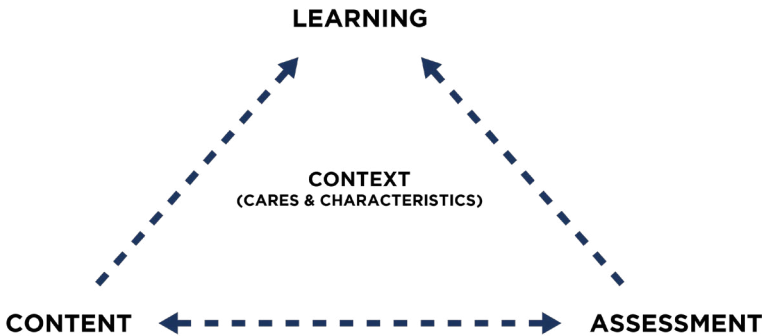
So, if our human systems adapting and changing in response to the things they have been exposed to is perhaps a way to think about learning, being thoughtful and considerate of how we support that growth and change within each individual is likely to be a worthwhile pursuit.

This infers that how you respond and adapt the way you move when playing football will be different from the way that I respond and adapt the way that I move when playing football (motor learning). As such, there likely is no universal or ‘perfect’ technique that can be copied and repeated identically by different people simply because your genetic constitution, movement experiences and human interactions have been subtly or significantly different from mine.

If we accept this, then it can impact significantly upon how we think about learning and the implications for the design of the environment.

Figure 2.1 is a reflection of how traditional approaches to learning have been and, in many cases, continue to be constructed.

**Figure 2.1** - Traditional approaches to learning



First, coaches, teachers and educators agree on the content that people are going to be exposed to, and second, those educators align the things that people are going to be assessed against with the content that we have been exposed to - assessment is just a perspective from which we form an opinion or judgement;

it's no more than that. This content is then imposed by educators onto students, who are then assessed against the degree to which they can reproduce that content in one form or another.

Whilst this is no doubt a convenient way to construct programmes of learning, it is at best misguided, or worse, hugely damaging to the way human beings conceptualise learning and their education. We can become socialised to the notion that we wait to be taught stuff we haven't grown to care about or believe to be important and over time become sceptical or even cynical about learning, particularly if we are marginalised or stigmatised for not being 'a good learner', or we appear to be 'disengaged'.

## Assessment

Often the fear of failing assessments, or the perceived rewards associated with passing tests, drive us to remember what we have been taught so that we can be socially accepted as a consequence of passing that assessment. This can be unhelpful.

If this assessment takes little or no account of who we are and the things that are important to us, it risks damaging our self-perception. This is because it can create an alternative, misrepresented view of who we are and possibly further isolate us from our learning.

In these examples, learning does not consider the aspects of life that a person cares about nor their current characteristics - the things they might already know or be able to do. It can also miss the other people that knowledge or ability has been developed with; for example, part of my enjoyment of football has been by playing with my sibling; when my sibling is removed from the environment, the nature of the environment changes.

Context is the critical consideration. Who are the people that populate the environment, and what are the things that are important to them individually and collectively? That should act as the map – encourage people to bring to the surface the things that are important to them and the person that they are. Once

we have a collective and shared understanding of these elements, we are likely to be better equipped to decide on how to behave.

What are some tactics that might support us to begin or develop this?

1. As a start, coach some sessions and match-days.
2. Reflect on what we, the coach, and the players did. Video and audio can help this, as can discussing with the players at those events. This is probably a reflection of what we are currently doing and whether what we are doing is 'who' we want to be.
3. Speak with the players about the type of team and players we would like to be. Some key questions could be:
  - a. How do we want to play football? Why is that important to us?
  - b. What are we going to do when things are going well or less well?
  - c. How do we intend to respond to each other? This should probably encompass both individual player answers and collectively agreed ones.
4. This map characterising the surfacing of each person's cares may then become our 'philosophy' or way of doing things.
5. Our behaviour should then, as much as is achievable, be a commitment to aligning what we do with what we agreed.

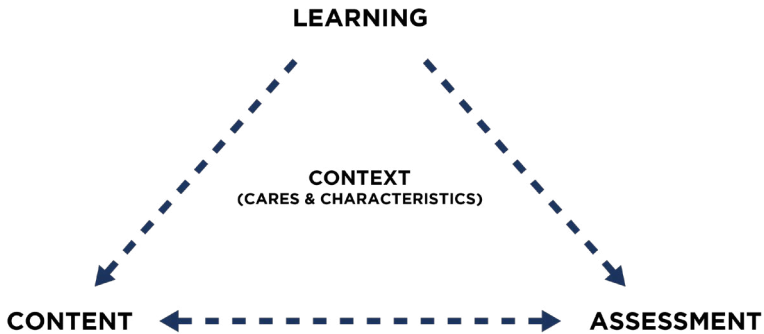
As a consequence, our personal coaching philosophy may then need to flex and adapt when we are dealing with different players, playing in different teams within different environments rather

than our philosophy simply being imposed upon the players.

## Progressive Approaches to Learning

The way content and assessment are decided upon could then be a reversal of the previous image to the one in figure 2.2.

**Figure 2.2** - Progressive Approaches To Learning



Instead of content and assessment being imposed onto the person, by surfacing each persons' cares it affords us the opportunity to:

- a. Build a picture of what is important to them and generate an assessment that reflects this illustration.
- b. Decide on which content to expose people to. This can be informed by what they would like to attend to and the environmental factors that they might need to contend with. This combines the things that are interesting to them with the way their situation is challenging them. It is important to say that the things people find challenging should be navigated sensitively yet shouldn't be ignored.

Hence, in a football sense, coaching philosophies that are arbitrarily applied to people, top-down with a very specific, season-long, week-to-week periodisation, can be guilty of applying

the conventions of education to the beautiful game and tarnish-  
ing its beauty to people who want to be free to enjoy experienc-  
ing football.

Further, if this periodisation process atomises and separates  
parts of the human system intending to train them separately, it  
is unlikely to attend to the way motor learning occurs.

The human body is a collection of systems (neurological sys-  
tem, cardiovascular system, muscular system etc.) that are deeply  
and unequivocally connected, e.g. my breathing is affected by  
anxiety, my decision making by fatigue. As such, our develop-  
mental programme should plan for and commit to being con-  
siderate of the whole human system and fundamentally ensuring  
that football activity integrates our connected human systems  
with the other people functioning in our environment. This is  
perhaps better known as holistic.

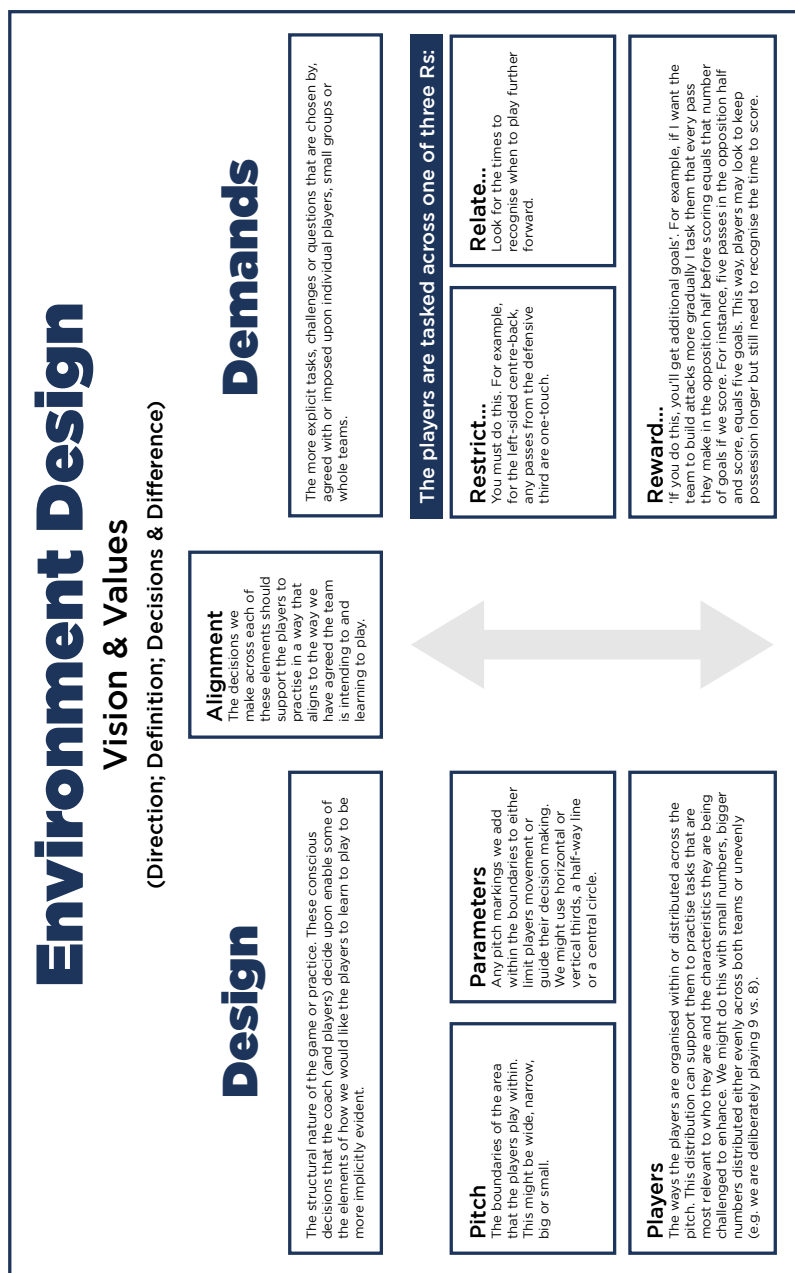
That is a challenging task. We must understand each person's  
cares and characteristics, psychologically, physically and socially,  
relative to football, and then decide how best to build experi-  
ences that afford each person the opportunity to experience the  
game of football in a way that is a reflection of them.

## **Environment Design Principles**

In 2014, an alternative approach to designing football environ-  
ments was proposed within The (FA) Boot Room (Magazine).  
This promoted a way of thinking about environment design,  
moving away from prescriptions towards some key, football  
relevant ingredients that could be combined in different ways  
to support a more responsive, bespoke approach to player and  
coach development.

This approach can enable us to be considerate of how the  
environment is designed for both training and game-days to sup-  
port the development of the whole person instead of isolating  
the football. This is illustrated in figure 2.3.

Figure 2.3 - Environment Design



Whilst this framework may have specific factors that other developers decide to reproduce, the intention was then and continues to be to encourage coaches to design experiences that align with their own Club Vision and Values and respond to what we understand about the players in our care.

It is also important that this recognises that our players' input into this is possibly as valuable as our own.

## The 4 D's

Four D's guide my beliefs about football activity which enables it to represent the nature of football and the demands it places upon our human system:

**Direction** – Teams/players attack and defend some form of a goal so that the basic laws of football are inherent to play.

**Definition** – Geographically positioned where the activity that we are affording players the opportunity to practise might most likely occur in football, e.g. an area of the pitch.

**Decisions** – Players have situations to perceive that inform the action performed; rather than narrowly following a coach's direction to, for example, pass to the same person arbitrarily positioned on a mannequin in the same position.

**Difference** – That those decisions are challenged both for each individual and in each situation by some relative difference, e.g. not repeating the same cross from the same position to the same target with the same 'technique' every time.

The adoption of these environment design principles guide the football activity to enable and ensure players couple the things that they perceive within the environment with the actions that they perform (known as perception-action coupling).



If, for example, we remove direction from the game or practice and task the players to ‘make ten passes to score a goal’, we remove a lot of relevant information that players may need to practise perceiving within the situations they encounter. The players arbitrarily chase a pass count rather than recognising that the purpose of passing the ball is to move it towards the opposition’s goal or to stop the opposition from having it (for example, because we are winning 2-0). The attempts by the team that doesn’t have the ball to win it should centre around pressing to stop the team with the ball moving towards their goal.

Removing direction and some form of a goal from the game often leads to players playing the condition outside the context of the actual game of football (e.g. ‘make ten passes’ rather than use possession to move the opposition around to increase our chances to score in their goal). This is unhelpful if we aspire for players to learn the game of football.

Further, those guiding principles are supported by a collection of ingredients that can be combined to design specific experiences which generate some reciprocity between our team and individual aspects:

**Design** – The architecture of the environment that perhaps more implicitly affords the players opportunity to focus attention on specific team or individual intentions. This architecture includes the shape and size of the pitch, the way the players are organised to play and any parameters or markings we add to the field of play.

**Demands** – The intentional and more explicit tasks that the players and coach decide upon and furnish the design of the session with. These might be conditions or challenges that we agree with individual or small groups of players or teams.

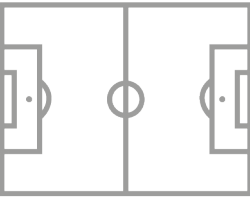
## Design - The Pitch

I work from four pitch types that the players can become familiar with and understand. This familiarity reduces the time the players spend trying to learn how the practice works and increases the time for them to practise and learn football.

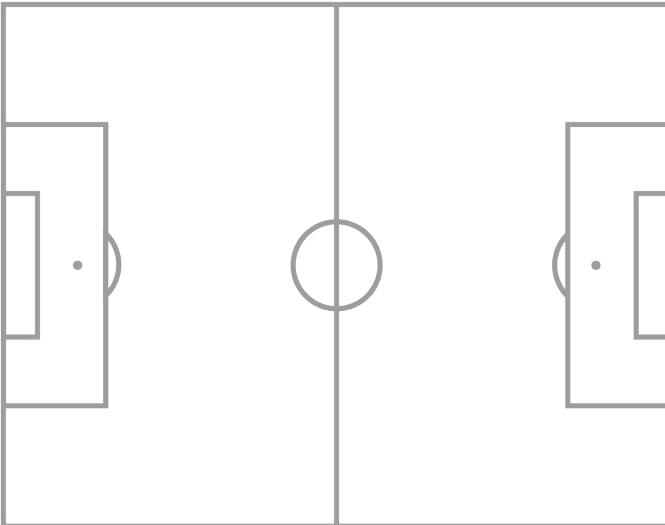
Additionally, the considered choice of pitch type can implicitly help the players develop important game elements.

A small pitch is a great way to test touch and release skills along with the associated speed of thought and decisions to put the players under strain to stay with the ball. Small pitches are also excellent ways of encouraging agility in our movement as we have to navigate our body nimbly within tight areas (figure 2.4).

**Figure 2.4** - Small Pitch



**Figure 2.5** - Big Pitch

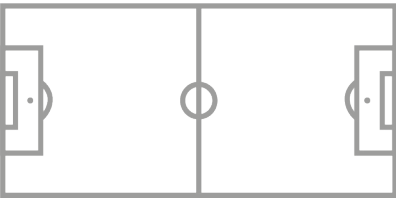


A big pitch (figure 2.5) is useful if you are looking to test defending skills or if you want to create space between units to play through or behind the opposition. Similarly, big pitches are effective at generating full-game pictures with realistic distances.

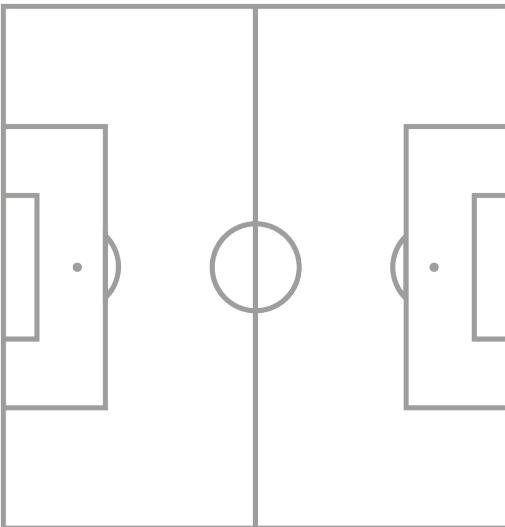
Narrow pitches (figure 2.6) challenge the players to play forward as there is limited width to play around the opposition. Narrow pitches help the players practise themes such as playing through the opposition and breaking the block.

Using a wide pitch (figure 2.7), a pitch wider than it is long, can provide a focus for switching play, attacking and defending in wide areas and crossing and finishing.

**Figure 2.6 - Narrow Pitch**



**Figure 2.7 - Wide Pitch**



## Design - The Players

After selecting the pitch type, I would consider the best way of organising the players.

The organisation of the players is intended to consider two things.

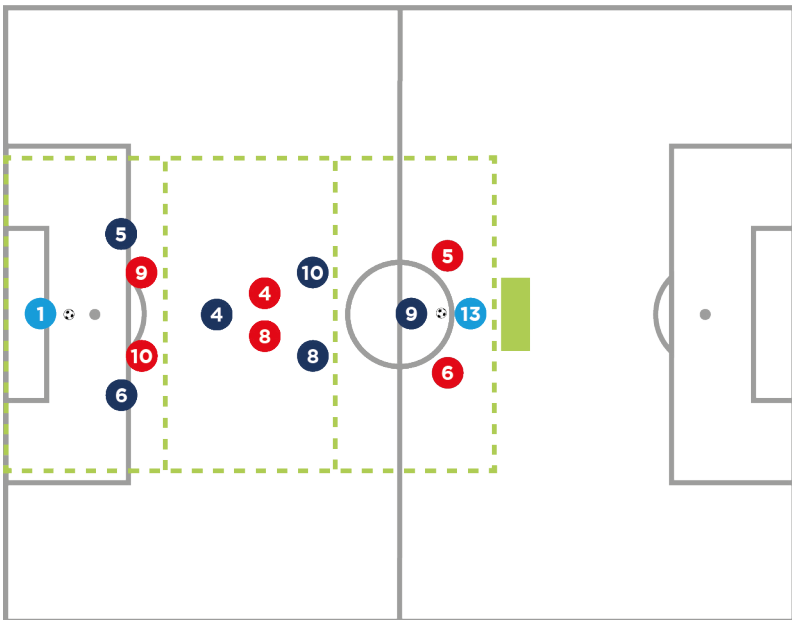
First, the ways we rationalise what we understand about the player and the things that are important to them. This consideration should be central to our thinking as perhaps it has the capacity to distinguish the personalised nature of the experiences within our player development programme from the generic nature of standardised practices. Casual observers might look at what principally appears to be the 'same' session and miss some of the subtleties. Some examples of subtle differences that we may utilise in the design aspect to attend to the cares and characteristics of individual players might be:

- a. Making the pitch longer at one end to provide space for our central forward who is practising running in behind to have more space to practise this. This can challenge them physically to repeat it, like they may have to do in a game. This might be coupled with a midfielder on the same team who is practising playing through passes.
- b. Playing two central forwards against two centre backs when our centre backs are practising both 1 v 1 defending and working out how to provide cover when they're the farthest defender from the ball. These might be referred to as 'games within games' as they are smaller, more specific tasks for certain players within a larger game.
- c. Keeping score to generate intensity and competition in games as a conscious tactic to challenge a centre midfielder who detests losing (what a great quality to have!)

This is not an exhaustive list.

Second, organising the players to be positioned to reflect both certain playing systems and to generate some team problems to be solved. In figure 2.8 we have 14 players for training; organising one team with a GK-2-3-1, representing the central spine of a 4-3-3 – the two central defenders, three central midfielders and one central forward, and the other team into a GK-2-2-2 as a reflection of the central spine of a 4-4-2 – the two central defenders, two central midfielders and two central forwards. This provides both some varied representation of how teams and players might be organised in football matches and can establish some problems for certain players, such as how the midfield two work out how to overcome the opposition's three-player midfield.

**Figure 2.8** - Players for Training

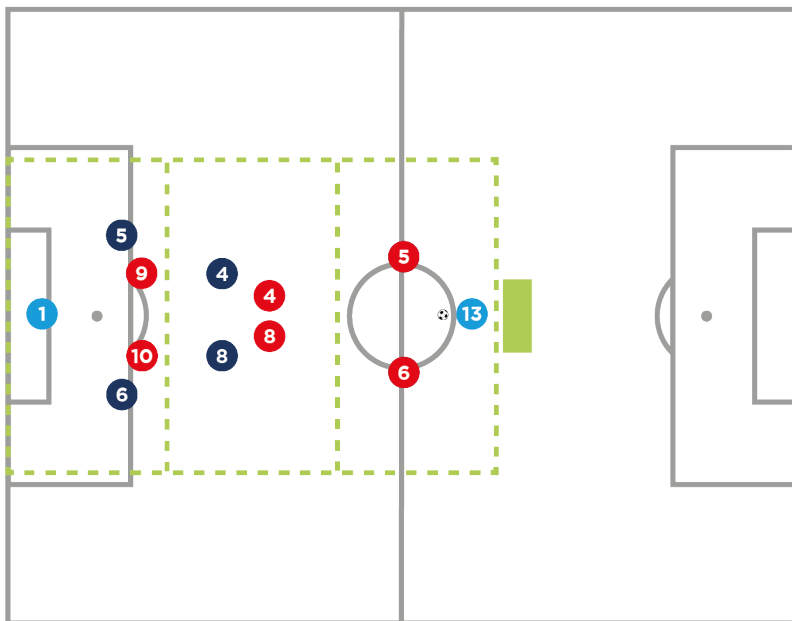


Reds reflecting central spine of the 4-4-2;

Blues reflecting the central spine of a 4-3-3

Alternatively, out-numbered teams can provide a 'hostile environment' for practice (figure 2.9). For example; play 5 v 7 with the team of five defending the goal and trying to maintain a clean sheet, or as clean as possible, for as long as they can.

**Figure 2.9** - Players for Training - 'Hostile Environment'



Blues playing with a significantly outnumbered five players versus the Reds seven players trying to break them down

Additionally, 5 v 8 with the team of five attempting to keep possession from the eight can increase the opportunity for players to practise maintaining individual possession.

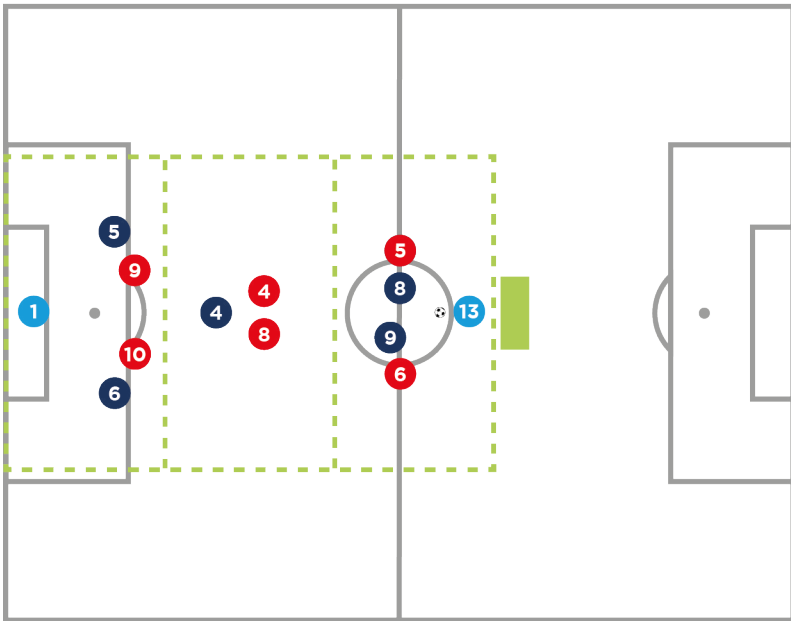
If we see value in this way of thinking, odd numbers arriving for training can be an opportunity, not a problem.

Further, if the goalkeepers are available for the full duration or part of the practice, it is important to consider what we want them to practise and how we are going to build them into the session.

For example, we might set up a 6 v 5 possession practice with the goalkeepers acting as additional support players (figure 2.10).

The team of 6 (8 including the goalkeepers) tries to keep the ball, uses the goalkeepers to do so, allowing the goalkeepers to practise playing with their feet as they receive back-passes from the reds. Goalkeepers then have the opportunity to save counter-attacking shots from the blue team of 5 players, who are challenged to counter-attack and score in either goal when they regain possession.

**Figure 2.10** - Build or Counter?



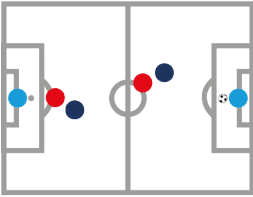
Blues try to win the ball and score in either goal.

Reds try to keep possession using the goalkeepers. Work the ball from GK to GK to score.

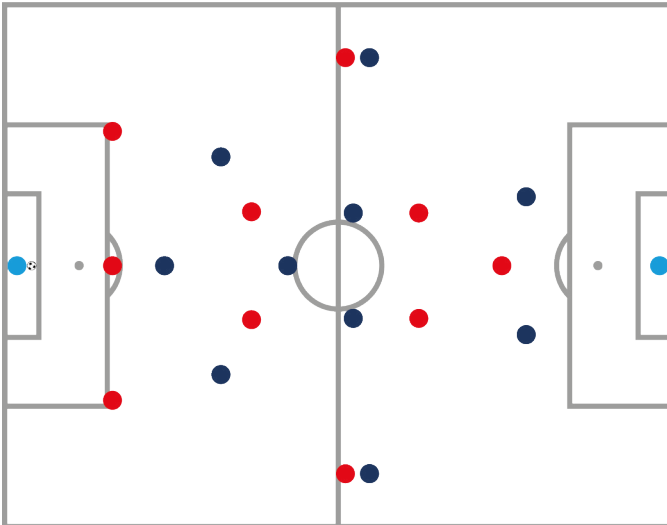
The type of player organisation illustrated above enables the practice to retain its direction whilst offering the opportunity for teams to get greater exposure to practising certain game elements. For example, the reds are likely to spend more time having the ball, controlling possession and working it up the pitch, whilst the outnumbered blues focus on pressing and attacking quickly on the regain.

Some further illustrations of how the players can be distributed or organised are shown in figures 2.11 - 2.14. The four examples illustrated reflect different ways we can combine and integrate the shape and size of the pitch with the distribution of the players. These examples enable us to embody practices with smaller numbers (figure 2.11), larger numbers (figure 2.12) alongside considering the value of medium numbered practices like the 6 v 6 (figure 2.13) and, consciously and strategically, working with uneven numbers as articulated (figure 2.14). These reference points provide the platform for us to expose the players to a variety of different types of practice whilst enabling the

**Figure 2.11** - Even Numbered (3 v 3)



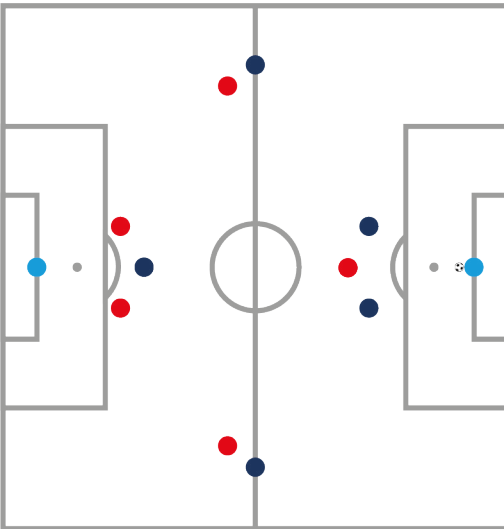
**Figure 2.12** - Even Numbered (11 v 11)



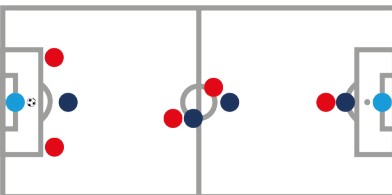


principles that underpin how we would like our players to learn to play to remain integral. Smaller numbered practices such as the 3 v 3 in figure 2.11 don't need to lose tactical focus. This example enables a central forward to practise working out how to create and convert shots onto the goal in partnership with an advanced midfielder (such as a 'number 10') and for the opposing team (reflecting a central defender and a deeper midfielder) to practise defending against them. This backdrop supports us to ensure that every event we design and support the players to practise in is nested within the vision of the game we have agreed with our players.

**Figure 2.13** - Even Numbered (6 v 6)



**Figure 2.14** - Out-Numbered (6 v 5)



## Design - The Parameters

I use four pitch marking methods to guide or restrict movement and decisions:

**Horizontal Thirds** - An effective reference point to help the players play through the thirds, develop their movement 'between the lines' and to recognise when to join the attack. Horizontal thirds can act as a reference point when trying to win the ball back using early, mid or late pressing techniques (figure 2.15).

**Halved Pitch** - Similar to a standard football pitch, linking well to recognising different ways to play in both your own and the

Figure 2.15 - Horizontal Thirds - Attacking & defending wide

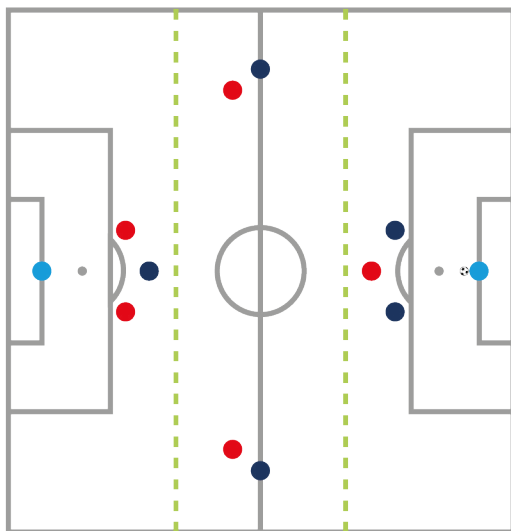
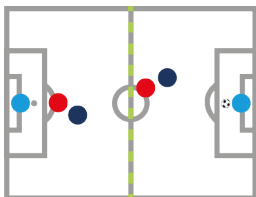


Figure 2.16 - Halved Pitch - '9' & '10' finishing practice

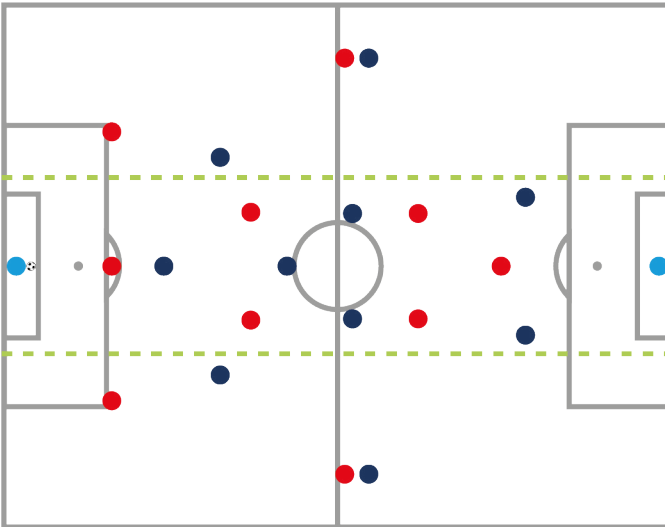


opponent's half both in and out of possession (figure 2.16).

**Vertical Thirds** - Supportive of wide play, overlapping, crossing switching play and defending wide areas as the pitch is marked or sectioned lengthways (figure 2.17).

**Central Circle** - Probably my favourite pitch marking as it generates more of a 360-degree perspective of the game than horizontal or vertical thirds. Additionally, if coaches wish to restrict players to areas, it still provides an opportunity for defenders to advance to the halfway line (figure 2.18).

**Figure 2.17** - Vertical Thirds - Match-play defending



**Figure 2.18** - Central Circle - Defending midfield combinations



The different parameters might be used to lock players into certain areas of the pitch. For example, if you are using horizontal thirds, the defenders and forwards may be restricted to their own third whilst midfielders are able to move freely.

Likewise, in a session using vertical thirds, the full-backs and wide players may be locked into wide areas. Preferable though that the parameters act as guidelines for the demands you place on the practice rather than restrictions. For example: use the central circle to set up attacks. This ensures players are afforded the opportunity to play the game of football without over-constraining their movement.

## **Demands**

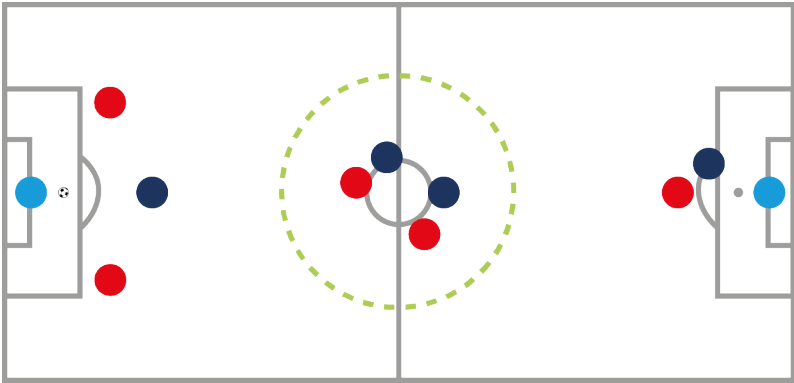
Once the pitch and parameters have been decided, and the players' needs are considered and organised, there are a variety of different ways in which I instruct, challenge or brief the players to work. The examples in the diagram below show how to structure and build tasks for teams, units or individuals.

There are three ways I build challenges in order to combine our team and individual intentions and to allow the players to practise within both the pitch and parameters selected.

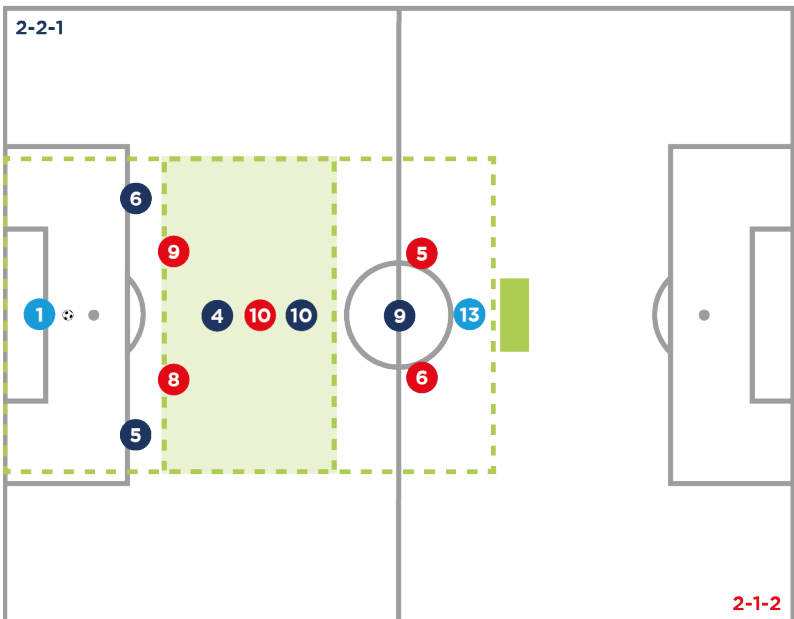
## **Restrict**

A traditional way to constrain practice is to restrict the ball contacts, movements and/or decisions a player or team can make. Adopting this method is an effective way to ensure lots of repetition of the affordances generated by the restriction.

For example, you must play forward when you receive. This method can, however, reduce the realism of the practice as it restricts opportunities for decision-making and chances to learn from cues and triggers. This is because the constraint reduces the responses the players can make – and removes perhaps, at times, the appropriate response – to the unfolding situation (figure 2.19).

**Figure 2.19 - Restrict - Narrow**

Must play through central circle before attacking the goal  
(Reducing the available options for players)

**Figure 2.20 - Restrict - Big**

First pass from GK cannot be played into mid-third (find other ways)

- E.g. play into & through pressure (draw the opposition onto you)
- Play past pressure (straight into attacking third)

## Relate

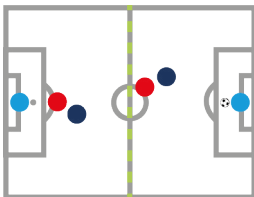
Challenging players to relate a particular task to the situation occurring – such as ‘Recognise when to play forward’ - is an effective method to help support players to build situational awareness and respond to what is going on in the game. By using the ‘relate’ method, the coach plants a seed about the desired outcome without making it mandatory. The intention is that the players relate the task to the situation they find themselves in.

This very much supports players to trial and error. When supported by effective questioning, the players can continue to review their decisions which in turn may help them make sense of the situation:

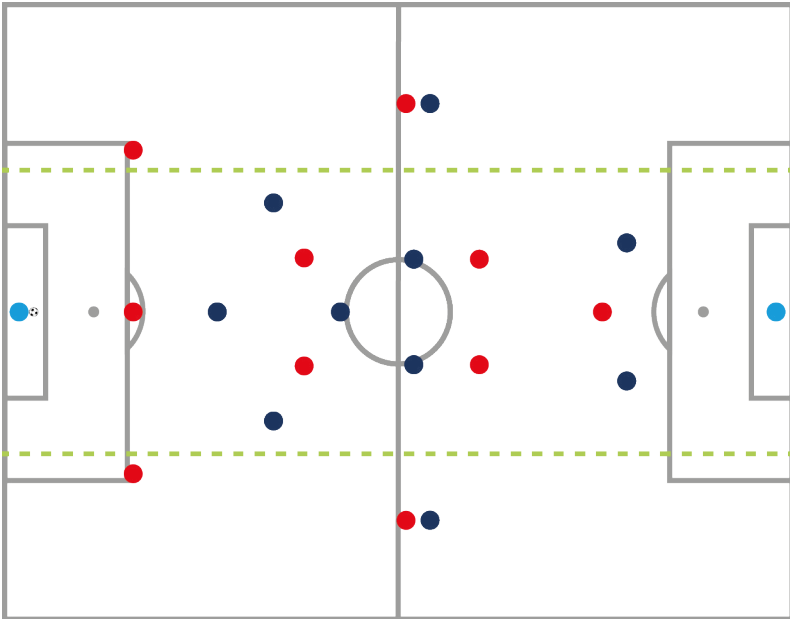
- Tell me about some of the times you played forward? What things helped you to play forward?
- Why did you find it tough to play forward in those situations?
- What can you try that may help you to solve that problem?

It is important to recognise that using the ‘relate’ method may mean the decisions the players have at their disposal are so broad that we limit the focus of their attention (which might be a good intention at times). However, it is an effective mechanism for supporting the development of genuine understanding as players begin to recognise when to do something.

**Figure 2.21 - Relate - Small**



Identify when to play in attacking half  
(Relate the decision made to the situation)

**Figure 2.22 - Relate - Big**

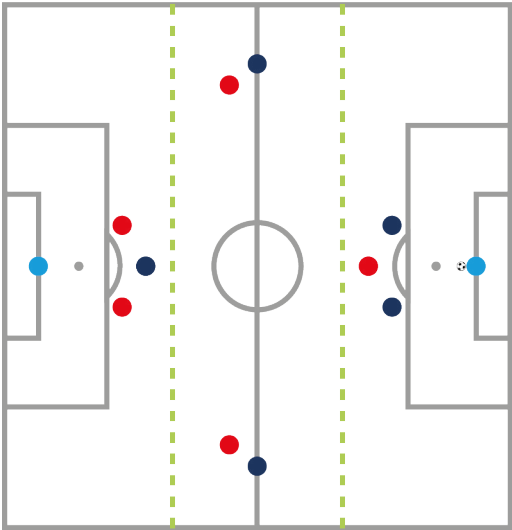
Blue - work out how to win the ball back in wide areas  
(Relate the decision made to the situation)

## Reward

Coaches can use the idea of a 'reward' to encourage aspects of play linked to our agreed intentions. For example, to encourage an early press, you may use a halved pitch and task the players to win the ball back in the opponents' half and then score. If they do so, they are rewarded with three goals.

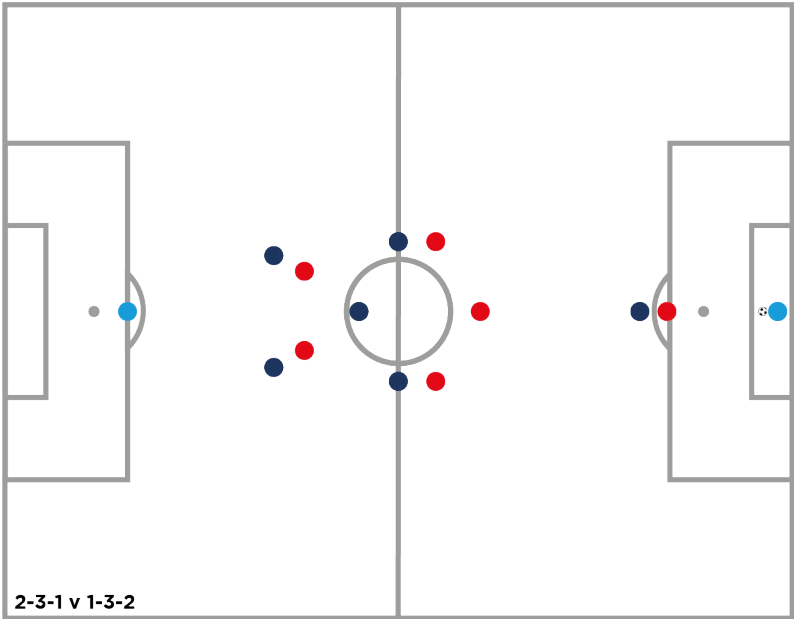
The reward method can act as a middle ground between the 'restrict' and 'relate' methods as the players aren't mandated to perform a certain action but are likely to commit to it as the reward is greater. This can also take on the form of game situational challenges. For example, you are winning 2-0, there are 10 minutes left, win the game using a late defending tactic. Time-defined and score-focussed challenges similar to this one can be good for generating the intensity and competition associated with football.

Figure 2.23 - Rewarding Crossing



Double goals if scoring from a cross  
(Additional reward for certain intentions or outcomes)

Figure 2.24 - Reward - Playing Quick On Transition



**2-3-1 v 1-3-2**

In possession - regain & score within 3 passes = 2 goals  
Defending - stop them scoring - be fierce



The use of these more explicit conditions that coaches impose upon and agree with players can be blended, enabling more of an individual approach to player development. At times, some players may be restricted, others rewarded whilst challenging a few to relate the decision they make to the situation they find themselves in. The decisions we make in deciding and agreeing on how to apply this is likely to be nuanced and informed by what we understand about the players and the ways they respond to particular tasks.

In using restrict, the intention is, typically, to ensure the player has more than one choice on offer. I would very rarely enforce a one-touch condition onto a player as it reduces their decision making to a single option. However, restrictions such as ‘Play 1 touch or 4 or more touches’ constrains players in such a way that if they take a second touch, they must stay on the ball for at least 4 touches. This has the impact of increasing the amount of time they stay with the ball and develop both dribbling skills and the physical capacities to hold off opponents who can have a tendency to increase pressure the longer a player stays with the ball.

It also increases the amount of one touch play and, likely, the amount of looking around (or ‘scanning’) players engage in before receiving the ball as they seek to understand the one-touch options available to them as a consequence of not being able to play using two or three touches.

Whilst the examples illustrated across the ‘Demands’ aspect aren’t universally appropriate; they illustrate how principles of environment design can be combined to generate tangible, purposeful experiences that enable coaches and players to enjoy football within a responsive, bespoke backdrop. The tables across the next two pages provide some additional examples of how the environment design ingredients shared through this chapter can support learning.

Figure 2.25 - Design & Demands Examples Table - Out of Possession

Out of Possession		Parameter	Restrict	Relate	Reward
Early Press		Halved Pitch	Must win ball back in opponent's half to score	2-0 behind; 7 minutes to snatch a draw	Win ball back in opponent's half and score = 3 goals
Mid Press		Horizontal Thirds	2v1 in their third (their favour) 3v4 in mid third (our favour) 2v2 in our third (equal) Locked in to zones	Use a team strategy to apply pressure & regain in the middle third	10 seconds to score on regain; Number of seconds left on clock when scoring = that number of goals (e.g. 3 seconds left = 3 goals)
Late Press		Halved Pitch	Win ball back in own half and finish within 7 seconds of regain to score	8vs7 - Establish a counter-attacking strategy against a team with 1 additional player	You are 2-0 up - play a 5 minute game - win the game using a late defending tactic
Defend Wide Areas		Vertical Thirds (Pitch wider than it is longer)	Locked into channels 2vs2 in wide areas 3vs3 central Must score from a cross	Recognise when to show inside & when to show outside	Gk - every cross claimed = 1 goal Full backs/wide midfielder - every regain in final third & maintain possession = 1 goal

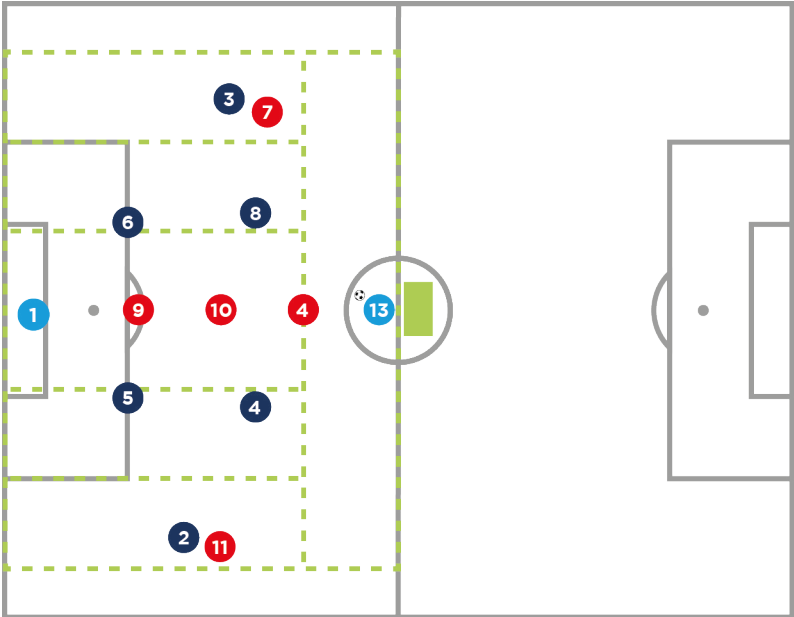
**Figure 2.26 - Design & Demands Examples Table – In Possession**

In Possession		Parameter	Restrict	Relate	Reward
Managing Momentum		Big Pitch	Must win tournament - 3 points for a win; 0 points for a draw; 0 points for a defeat (10 minute games)	Play a double header; Score from game 1 is flipped for game 2 (e.g. win first game 2-0; Begin return fixture 0-2 behind)	Number of passes in the attacking half before scoring = that number of goals (e.g. 5 passes & score = 5 goals)
Playing Forward		Horizontal Thirds	All forward passes into next third must be 1 touch	Try to inject speed into attacks (if it's the right thing to do)	However many 1 touch passes used in attack = that number of goals when scoring (5 x 1 touch passes = 5 goals)
Attacking Wide		Vertical Thirds (Pitch wider than it is longer)	Must enter wide area before scoring a goal	Use wide areas to set up attacks. FB - recognise when to join the attack	Goal from a cross = 2 goals Goal from overlap/underlap = 3 goals
Combination Play		Halved Pitch Small	1 touch or 4 touches (free kick to opposition if using 2 or 3 touches)	Use quick combinations in the opposition half	1-2 & score = 2 goals 3 <sup>rd</sup> man run & score = 3 goals Round the corner & score = 4 goals

## Environment Design Example

The examples shared across this chapter are all games with two teams, two goals and one ball. A constraints-led approach isn't only delivered through games; however, personal preference is that the environment is designed to be representative of the game of football and that this is often best done through games. This type of representation can be perceived as just 'letting the game be the teacher'. Whilst the unfettered game has some natural propensity to support learning, how we as coaches consciously construct and constrain some additional aspects of the environment can further support learning in line with our and the players' beliefs.

**Figure 2.27** - Attack v Defence Game



Playing 4-3-3 - creating & converting against a 'block' - 4 x 10 minute games

Controlling the game - score in the first or last 2 minutes of the 10 minute game = 2 goals (1 goal any other time)

Deciding game - move the ball across three zones (or more) & score = 3 goals

Figure 2.27 is an example of a session that some coaches delivered to a group of teenage boys reflecting how coaches can practically utilise the framework shared in chapter 2:

1. The positioning of the players, both their position on their team and who they were positioned against, reflects the perceived needs of both the team and the individuals playing within that team. For example, the red number 7 is a skilful winger who finds it challenging beating defenders and delivering crosses when there is limited space behind the defensive line as he was less likely to be able to push the ball past the defender and run onto it. The coaches provided less space behind the opposition defence to afford him the opportunity to solve the problem.
2. The nature of the task, size of pitch and positioning of the goals afforded the players certain opportunities, for example, defend the full width of the pitch; stretch the pitch in attack and be patient when building attacks whilst protecting the space that might be exposed in transition.
3. The way the coaches parameterised the duration of the games and the scoring challenge. Score in the first or last 2 minutes of each game, and it's worth two goals, supported the players to practise across all their human systems as they were able to practise scoring at key moments.
4. The organisation of the players is representative of systems that the players are learning to play in and continues to layer many of the commitments into everyday practice that are agreed upon within the longer-term planning for player development.

## Planning for Development

If we have developed longer term plans and agreed commitments to support player development, this backdrop then acts as a map to enable us to collectively seek to integrate all of the experiences we design for the players along the player development pathway (e.g. connecting a player's U14s experiences to what went before and what may come after), and through what might be known as 'disciplines' (sports science, psychology, recruitment etc.)

These longer-term commitments support discussion as to how both players and coaches build experience that may best support us all to adapt and respond to the demands of 'The Game of Football'. This concept will be returned to and explored in greater depth in chapter 4.

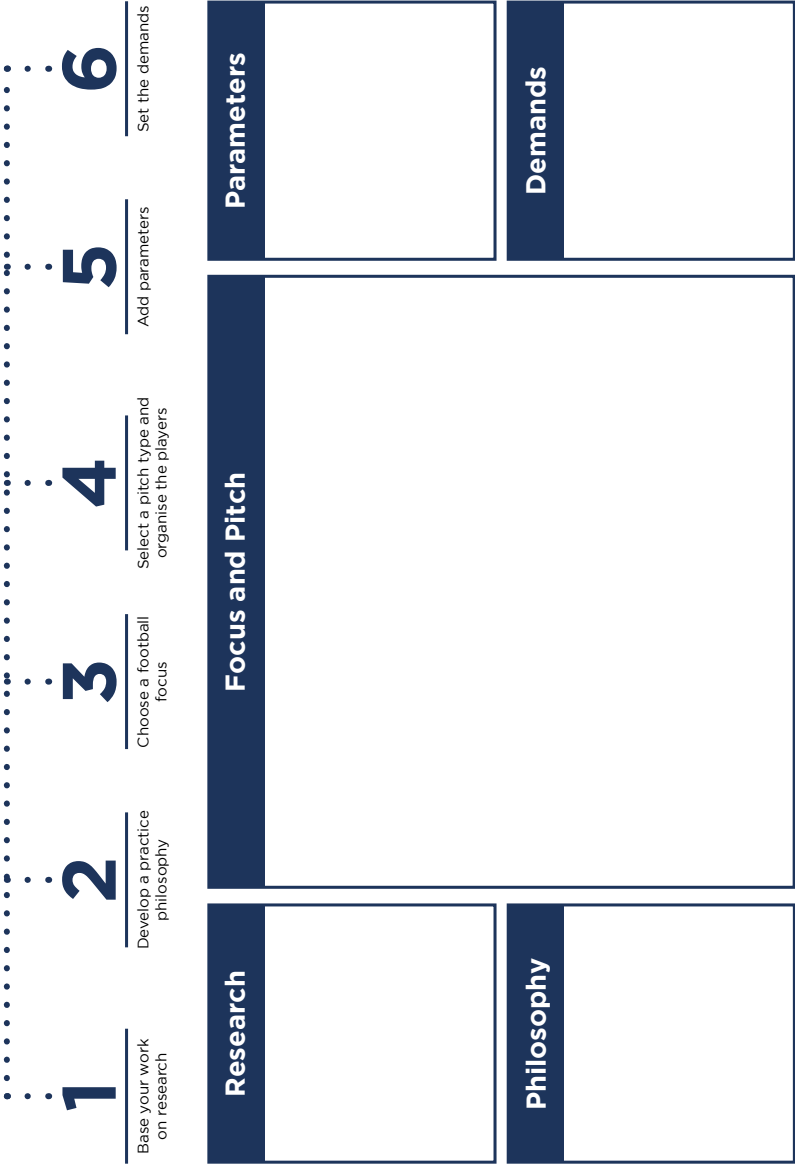
These ideas on environment design from early in the last decade prevail in my approach to coaching. Whilst, principally, my beliefs around learning and development have been resolute, it is necessary for authenticity that the application of these principles occurs in response to the environment that we populate. This is because it will be populated with other human beings who have their own beliefs.

To ensure the framework articulated through this chapter is responsive and bespoke, the environment design ingredients included in this chapter can be mixed and blended infinitely, enabling each event to be unique and novel.

The relative simplicity of the framework and its available ingredients supports the perceived vastness of that infinity to be tangible and workable for both more novice and experienced practitioners alike.

Figure 2.28 can support coaches to blend the ingredients detailed in this chapter in designing experiences that align with the cares and characteristics of their players.

Figure 2.28 - Session Template



## Chapter 3

# **Our Development As Coaches**

Integrating the ideas of environment design and their connection to learning provides a platform for us to support our players' development. This is also terrific terrain for coach development. Industry efforts to atomise coach development from player development have perhaps been well-intentioned commitments in demonstrating the importance of coaches and coach developers, yet have been unhelpful in placing the focus too greatly on the coach.

This can over-emphasise the role of the pedant coach as central to the development of the player. Consequently, coach development can become disproportionately concerned with the wants and needs of the coach rather than attending to and contending with the cares and characteristics of the players being the identified needs of the coach.

This is risky. If coaches have any value, it is in supporting the development of players. Our learning and development as coaches are then immersed in purposefully supporting them.



In England, there has and continues to be a tension within governing organisations as to how we can:

- a. Support coaches to better understand the demands of their context
- b. Design and enable environments and more formal coach education to flex in response to the contextual factors

The constraints-led approach can be a helpful way of thinking about our growth as coaches as well as that of the players.

## **Progressive Coach Development**

Rather than standardised content offers and universal assessment frameworks, we would be better served by mapping our own cares and characteristics before deciding on the most appropriate content to be exposed to and how to assess, in the broadest way we might think about assessment, how we are getting on.

To repeat, assessment is principally a perspective from which we form an opinion or judgement, no more or less than that.

The development of coaches has evolved in England across recent years, and the contextual factors that underpin some of these changes can provide a backdrop of how we might support coaches and coach educators to learn in a way that responds to their needs within a universal framework.

It isn't necessary for there to be a tension between these beliefs where we either have to choose between an individually responsive approach, which can be argued as meaning 'anything goes', or a universal 'DNA' that everyone 'gets on the bus with'.

Sceptics of the former suggest that without a strong, clear steer, it's difficult to establish a cultural identity. However, a cultural identity that is governed by the same conditions and where decisions are made within a narrow bandwidth can be hugely limiting for the qualities of creativity, unique brilliance and diver-

gence. These are reasons why many people are excited by the relatively unpredictable nature of football.

## Context is King

Each Country, particular regions of each Country and even certain Towns, Cities and smaller parts of those populations, such as football clubs, have established and continually evolving environments that, hierarchically, value some things greater than others.

That is likely to be as different from Japan to England as from The North East of England to The South West. Recognising, being aware of and respectful of the things that are culturally significant to different people within their community are important factors in considering how we coach.

Our understanding of both our-self and the environment we coach in, both of which are constraints, are solid bases on which to develop our coaching.

In 2014, at The Football Association, a prototype for supporting coaches to inform their learning and to build their assessment within formal FA qualifications was established and over the ensuing years refined.

This emerged amongst the traditional tension of coach educators delivering what have often been referred to as exemplar sessions on courses, conferences and at coaching conventions. Typically, an audience watched a perceived expert deliver a session and then deduced whether they believed it to be good or not. As these sessions were frequently delivered as isolated events with players who often weren't familiar to the expert deliverer, these constraints often led to:

1. The coach educator stopping the session for significant periods to coach the players and the audience as a means of seeking to effect learning,

2. The audience deciding whether they liked the session based upon how assured and effective the coach educator was at projecting their personality.

Naturally, yet unhelpfully, these behaviours transcended coaching. Many well-intentioned coaches, me included, decided to stop sessions frequently to tell the players exactly how to do certain things, concerning themselves with projecting a very visible, eminent perception of themselves. Under these constraints, coach became King. This was, and still can be, a problem for a game that is FOR players, played by players.

However, it isn't enough to tell people the way they are doing things isn't helpful; we can't set fire to traditions, even if it's unclear why we value those traditions in the way we do, without a viable alternative.

## **Context Informed Assessment**

The prototype was used as the context for both the coaches delivering the session on a course at St. George's Park and as the perspective for the observing coaches to view the session from (figure 3.1).

Instead of the coach educator being the centre piece, one of the peers of the coaches attending the course delivered a session with the group of players they coached as their job. This generated a situation where the observing coaches were watching their peers coach a group of players they knew deeply.

Rather than the observing coaches looking only or mostly at the technical detail that the coach delivered, they were challenged to uncover the backdrop to the following five areas.

### **The Club**

Find out what cultural elements were unique to 'The Club', such as geographically where 'The Club' was located and what were some of the historical factors that led to them being 'who' they

**Figure 3.1** - Understanding a coaching context

were. These might be known as socio-cultural constraints – the social and cultural aspects that influence how we behave. An example of this might be a community built in industrial times upon an industry like mining that values hard work and personal sacrifice.

### **Club Playing Philosophy**

What is the playing philosophy of The Club? How do they believe the game should be played, and how was this articulated into a curriculum?

### **The Individual Players**

Who are the individual players under the care of the coaches? What are some of their characteristics, and how has the coach come to understand the players?

The observing coaches were challenged to glean this information from the coach who had come with their players to the

central venue to deliver the session that they would have been delivering that day with their players back at their training ground. That backdrop then provided some context for how:

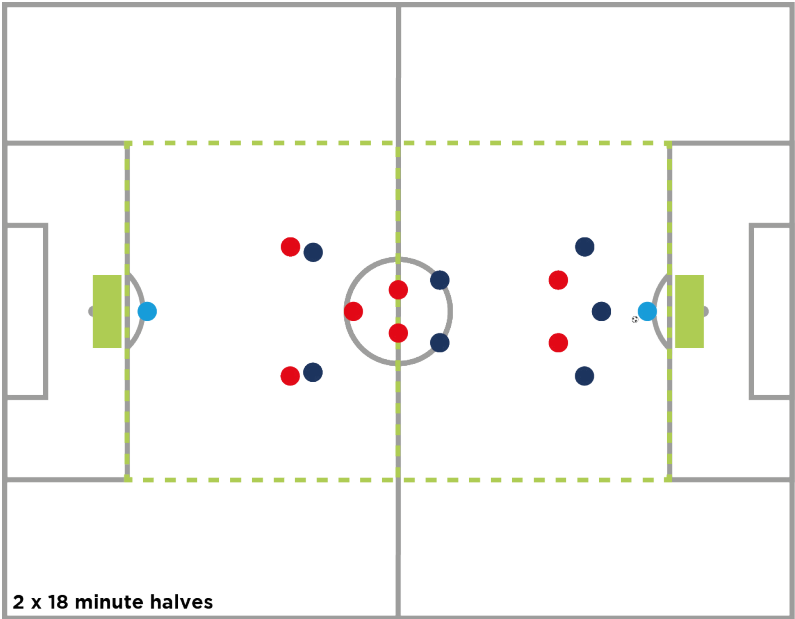
**Coach Behaviours**

The coach behaved. The subjective views of the coaches observing have a greater opportunity to be tempered by the background of why the coach is doing what they were doing. This may enable less ‘I don’t like that’ or ‘I wouldn’t do this’ with a more inquisitive ‘They’re doing that because of this’.

**Constraints of the Game**

The constraints of the game enabled the players to play football, an example of which is shown in figure 3.2.

**Figure 3.2 - Coach Education Example**



Maintain possession in opposition's half for 25 seconds (or longer) & score = 3 goals

Look to keep possession in opposition's half to support good possession & be positioned to press on turnover

The rationale for the design of the session was:

### **Player Organisation**

The group of players practise playing two systems of play; a 4-Diamond-2 and a 3-5-2. In part, this was because the group contained three good centre backs in addition to two centre forwards who were relatively under-matured. Playing with a front two supported both of the players to generate more match-time than if they played, for example, a 4-3-3 and to be less likely to be isolated against opposition centre backs with a significant physical advantage, currently. It also enabled the three centre backs to switch between playing in slightly wider areas when in a back three, which led to them defending the channel more and also, at times, being more advanced in possession.

This had some subtle differences from when playing with a back four. The practice design reflects those systems, reds 2-3-2 to reflect aspects of the 4-Diamond-2 and the blues 3-2-2 to reflect aspects of the 3-5-2, ensuring that the practice retains some representation of the ways the players will be organised on game day whilst being positioned in positions that were familiar to them.

### **Playing Approach**

The group had a tendency in matches to play in transition; they attacked quickly, became quite stretched out, and were vulnerable when they lost the ball. The coach and players agreed on a condition that would reward them for successfully maintaining and sustaining possession in the opposition's half – 'Keep The Ball In The Opposition's Half For 25 Seconds Or Longer and Score = 3 Goals'. The longer we keep possession, the more likely we are to increase the opportunity for us to be organised around the ball and better positioned to press to win it back when we lose it. As the practice developed, the coach allowed the timer to stay where it was when the ball was lost if we could win it back before the opposition got out of their half. I.e. we've kept

it for 18 seconds and then lost it; if we can win it back before they enter our half, we can continue our attack on 18 seconds. This rewarded the players for quickly winning the ball back after losing it.

### **Player Needs Out of Possession**

The two red centre backs were boys who the coach explained were working on improving their 1 v 1 defending and managing the space both behind and in front of them. The organisation of the players enabled them to practise playing a direct 2 v 2 (2 centre backs against 2 central forwards) with a screening midfielder in front for them to communicate with.

### **Player Needs in Possession**

The three blue centre backs were matched against a front 2. This enabled players when in possession in the opposition's half to move into advanced positions and practise playing passes to the front players. There were also opportunities because the blues were outnumbered in midfield, for the centre backs to have to release themselves into midfield to press.

### **Constraints of Time**

The game was played for two periods of 18 minutes (with a half-time). This afforded players the opportunity to:

- a. Practise for a sustained period without stoppages. It is helpful for them to spend time trying to solve the problem in varied ways before discussing, at half-time, with their team-mates and both their coach and some of the observing coaches, remember this session was in a coach education context, how things were going and how we might approach the second half. The uninterrupted play lasting for 18 minutes also challenged players to physically keep going for a relatively long period and ensure they practise complex skills like looking after the ball as a team and indi-

vidually in the opposition's half when they are beginning to tire. This might be something we want our players to be able to sustain late in a game, seeing a game out or calmly sustaining pressure in the opposition's half when we are trying to score an equaliser.

- b. Practise for a big chunk of the hour that was attributed to this particular coach education experience rather than it be stopped for long periods for coach educators to talk. This meant the delivering coaches and their players spent sustained time practising and learning in one practice rather than jumping from practice to practice. These changes and transitions can be unhelpful as they limit the opportunity for coaches and players to layer in more challenging progressions. Staying with one practice for longer supported players to spend a significant period of time adapting to and deepening their understanding of how to play football in a way that aligns with the clubs' beliefs and playing approach.

## **Constraining Coach Education**

This backdrop to why the coaches were delivering what they were delivering was the rationale from which the observing coaches observed, reviewed and reflected on the experience of the session. Rather than arbitrarily deciding whether they liked the session or not, there was an opportunity for a more sophisticated discourse about the degrees to which the coaches aligned their practice and behaviour with both their intentions and the perceived needs of the players.

This is a constraints-led approach to coaching, considered and articulated through the context of formal coach education. The observing coaches were challenged to return to their own environment and plan, deliver and review their own work as a consequence of thinking about their own club history, playing philosophy and the needs of the players. Any experience they



then design for and with their players should align their behaviour and, as much as we have control of anything, the constraints of the activity with their understanding of the Club, its playing approach and who the players are in their care.

This approach to and thinking within formal education experiences for coaches evolved to become a central element of the coach education terrain. Across the last seven years, in tandem, what became known as the England DNA evolved and emerged to enhance the clarity and coherence around England's football identity and the associated ways that England coaches might best assimilate some of the principles of this perceived identity into the way England teams play.

We coupled this with a commitment to supporting each coach across The Nation entering formal coach education environments to realise an identity that best aligned with the nature of their context.

This was a critical duality. Support the development and embodiment of the future England player whilst helping coaches up and down the country to do the same without enforcing a central disposition onto the population.

The diverse nature of England and its population is a strength to be celebrated, and establishing a methodology that supported coaches to respond to their own diverse population within a centrally recognised framework was our challenge.

The reader may wish to follow this process and answer the questions whilst it is explained.

The England DNA covered five main headers from which The Federation defined its beliefs:

**Who We Are** – What do the people in your care value and believe is important - why do they come to football?

**How We Play** – When our parents, the opposition, and any other observers watch us play football, how do we want to be known - what is our style of play?

**The Future Player** – What qualities do we wish to support the development of in the players? These may not just be football qualities – being kind, challenging, competitive or aggressive may be important to us.

**How We Coach** – How will we bring the answers to questions 1-3, above, holistically, into our curriculum design - what will we coach, and how will we do it?

**How We Support** – How will we interact with players and parents and support their development over time to enable us to strengthen ‘Who We Are’?

Introduced at the beginning of each course from Level 2 to UEFA A, coaches could begin to populate the standard head-lines with their context. Coach educators were challenged to:

- a. Respond to the things that coaches brought to bear in their answers to the five questions with content that responded to whole groups, small groups or individual coaches,
- b. Ensure coaches were challenged to align the way they coached and supported their players and teams with the things they understood to be important to their context by observing and supporting them in their context.
- c. Assess coaches against the criteria they established, rather than a central ‘checklist’.

## Cultural Change

This approach to the development of our coaches was piloted within a grassroots setting in Cumberland, within a Level 2, as part of a UEFA B course at a Professional Premier League Clubs Academy on The South Coast and on a National UEFA A course

at St. George's Park. This enabled these fringe approaches to be tested before becoming more mainstream. These initial experiences were consumed by volunteer parent coaches, computer illiterate ex-professional footballers and experienced, articulate career coaches, which was the aspiration; devise a process that can be, with the right balance of skilful support, universally adopted and utilised.

The ex-professional player who was computer illiterate isn't intended to be a generalisation or a criticism; it's a statement of fact. However, the rationale for highlighting this coach's skill-set is that an ability to use a computer isn't a factor that limits a person from being a hugely skilful coach or from being able to complete a formal qualification. This coach wrote all of his work out by hand, beautifully and with great distinction.

Coach education and development moved towards a more responsive, individualised approach and communicated a clear message of the importance of coaches doing the same with the people in their care.

The pressure for coaches to coach an arbitrary theme, like running with the ball, to a group of players they'd never met before, which was usually the other adults on the course, for a defined period, e.g. 35 minutes, was razed and replaced by an approach embedded in each coach's ecosystem.

Hence the historical arguments surrounding whether there is enough technical detail or individually 1 v 1 focussed practice included in a coach education programme becomes redundant and is replaced by a commitment to respond to each individual or group of coaches through content that is aligned with their needs and those of their context.

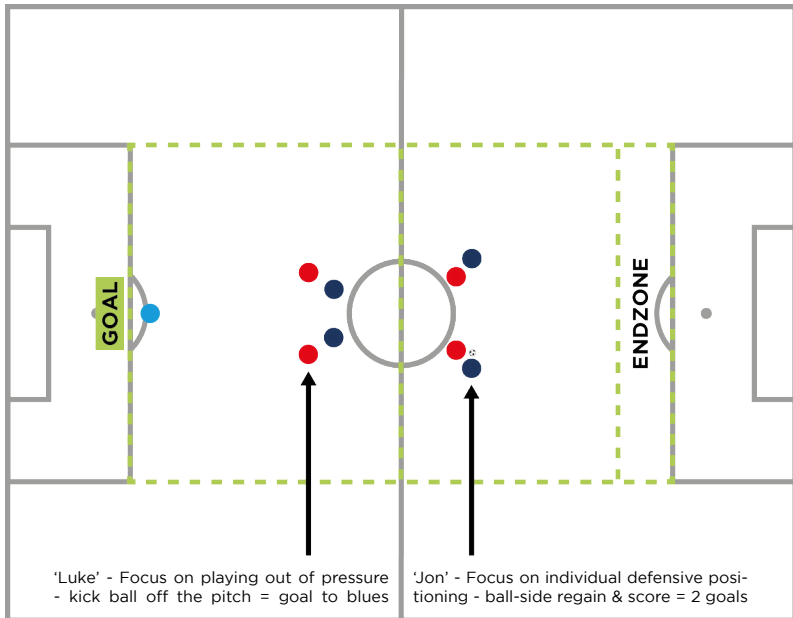
The notion that we are more attuned and likely to learn when the content attends to our cares and characteristics is fulfilled within a generic yet specific process of support.

## Individualised Coach Development

The session in figure 3.3, co-constructed by a coach and me, is intended to exemplify this approach to a coach's education.

This was as part of an under 13s coach's formal education. This coach had a group of skilful players in an Academy setting where the focus was on the individual development of players within a team. The coach explained that players had been finding it tough at that point in time as they had played a number of games in recent weeks where they had been beaten by physically more mature opposition.

**Figure 3.3** - Small Numbered Game Example



Temporal constraint - 4 x 5 minute periods

Task constraint - red's score in end zones (dribble & runs off the ball); blues score in the goal - shots

Environmental constraint - score kept; win the game

The coach and I spoke about the importance of trusting the process of development over time and recognising that the play-

ers confidence in both themselves and the programme when things were challenging was critical.

The building of the session illustrated was informed by:

1. The desire to support tactical understanding with smaller numbers. This was achieved by matching central forwards at both ends of the pitch against central defenders. Smaller numbered practices needn't trade-off tactical benefits.
2. Opportunity for the players to practise defending and attacking with some variety. The Reds defended a goal hence needed to focus on getting tight, blocking shots and preventing players from getting turned to face them. The Blues were defending an end-zone that the attackers needed to run into or receive in to score; this supported them to practise defending against dribbles, give and go's and runs behind. The nature of reverse constraining is important here. If we constrain the attackers in the ways they can score, as described above, we naturally afford the defenders the opportunity to practise defending those types of attacks. Understanding and being thoughtful about how we design our environment to support this is key.
3. One of the red defenders 'Luke' had a focus on regaining the ball and finding ways to get away from pressure. He was a fiercely competitive individual, so we conditioned him that if he kicked the ball off the pitch, the blues would get a goal – we wanted to develop a disdain for unnecessarily kicking the ball off the pitch.
4. One of the blue defenders, 'Jon' was physically struggling to compete with physically dominant, bigger boys. We were working on his defensive positioning and interceptions to help him succeed through other means than physical dominance. If he regained the ball with a ball-side interception,

sneaking in front of the attacker on the side the pass came from, and his team scored, it was rewarded with two goals.

5. A time constraint of 4 periods of 5 minutes. This is quite a long period of time within a 4 v 4. Stay physically and mentally in the game when we fatigue.
6. An environmental constraint of needing to win the game. Don't get beat!

Taken together, the coach and I intended for the longer-term commitments that The Club and the boys had made ('Who We Are') to be aligned to the nature of the players ('The Future Player') and the way the team were intending to play ('How We Play'). This was embodied within a single session ('How We Coach') and was delivered as part of this coach successfully completing their A-Licence.

The coach was exposed to content and consequent discussion with focuses around:

- a. What 1 v 1s looked like in the senior game
- b. Growth and maturation across the whole human system
- c. How to integrate bio-psycho-social aspects of learning into environment design

This enabled the content offer to the coach and his learning to be at 'A-Licence' level yet in tune with the needs of him and his players.

## Discovering your DNA

We would now urge you to take some time to piece the aspects of this chapter together. Answer the five questions below and design a session that integrates those answers into practice.

**Who We Are** – What do the people in your care value and believe is important - why do they come to football?

**How We Play** – When our parents, the opposition, and any other observers watch us play football, how do we want to be known - what is our style of play?

**The Future Player** – What qualities do we wish to support the development of in the players? These may not just be football qualities – being kind, challenging, competitive or aggressive may be important to us.

**How We Coach** – How will we bring the answers to questions 1-3, above, holistically, into our curriculum design - what will we coach, and how will we do it?

**How We Support** – How will we interact with players and parents and support their development over time to enable us to strengthen ‘Who We Are’?

## Chapter 4

# **Curriculum Development & The Experience Builder**

Single, individual sessions are critical aspects of supporting players to learn how to play football. Working out and identifying how to stitch each of these individual events into a broader tapestry of player development can enable coaching to become deeper than the episodic delivery of single events. This can guide us towards a more focused, intentional developmental journey for both players and ourselves as coaches.

As referenced previously, uncovering ways to achieve this without replicating the traditional approaches to curriculum design, which appear to largely have evolved from the structure of school, is a worthy pursuit.

We can eschew and escape from a world where topics are separated and taught with limited integration as part of a standard content offer that helps us memorise information to pass a test. We can replace this with a responsive, context-rich framework, supporting players and coaches to practise solving the challenges that the game of football presents.



This can generate useful reciprocity between what we do today, what has been before and what might come in the future.

The constraints-led triangle introduced in chapter one is a good reference point to which we can add further layers of detail as a means of developing this richer, responsive resource from which we can shape our sessions.

**Figure 4.1** - Adaption of Karl Newell's backdrop on how learning happens



*Adapted From Newell (1986)*

Remember; we are constrained by:

1. Our own genetic imprint and ability – we are the sum of what our parents gifted us and how these gifts have developed through our experiences,
2. The 17 laws of football. For example; off-side as a law constrains the ways we move when playing football,
3. The environmental conditions we are exposed to. The pressure I feel when my dad watches me is an example of this.

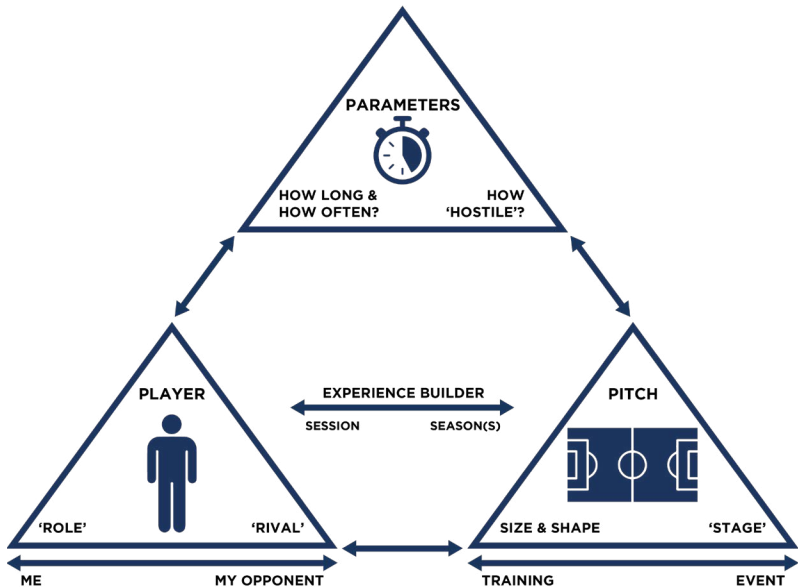
These constraints interact in enabling or affording us ways of playing football. Constructing some additional detail and scaffolding around these quite abstract aspects can support us to develop our curriculum.

There are four aspects to the curriculum builder explored throughout this chapter which we intend to navigate with the reader.

These are:

1. Considering the Player,
2. Pitching the Football Experience,
3. Parameterising the Environment (How long? How often? and How hostile?),
4. Experience Building over time – supporting a development journey.

**Figure 4.2** - The Curriculum Builder

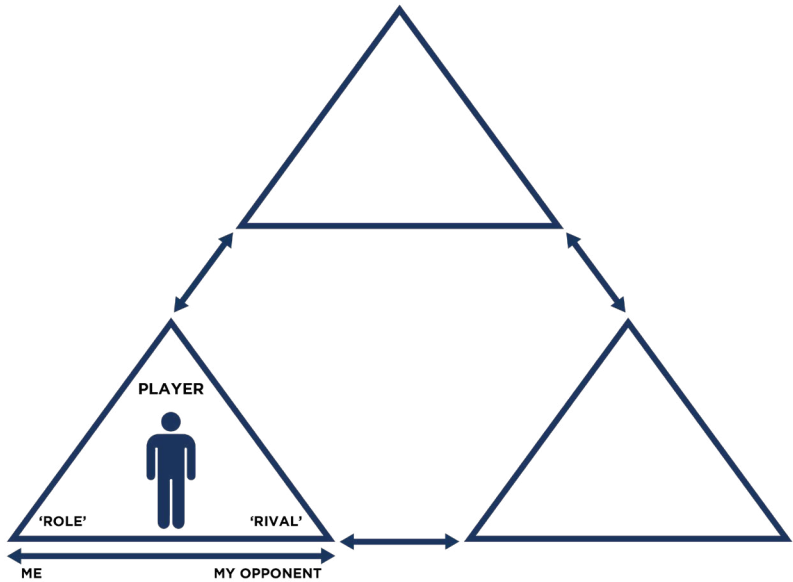


## Aspect One – Considering The Player

Where a coach commences their thinking may just be a reflection of the hierarchy of what they value. The intention here is to start with the person as it promotes the notion that the human being is the most important factor in the curriculum and that the nature of the tasks and environments we consciously expose the player to is aligned with what we understand about them.

Stealing from another coach (a gentleman named Dan Thomas) can help us consider the human constraints as ‘Role’ - who am I and what are my responsibilities in the game? - and ‘Rival’ - who is my opponent, and how does what they can do challenge the way I play?

**Figure 4.3** - Aspect One - Considering The Player



We will use central defenders as a means of articulating this. The capabilities of a player will inform the way they play.

Early in my coaching career, I had the privilege of supporting

two centre backs to develop from U12 players through to our first team. They played the same position, as centre backs, but were very different individuals:

## Role

**‘Jay’** – Prolifically quick (National sprint competitor), relaxed and light-hearted with good technical ability and inclined to mark opposition forwards very tight.

As an inexperienced coach, the tendency was for me to coach them to position themselves to protect more of the space behind. Jay would challenge me that they could win the race to the ball behind but found it harder if the forward got turned and faced them up.

The one size fits all problem emerges again. My understanding of defensive positioning was that Jay was ‘wrong’. This player, rightly, corrected me on what was ‘right’ for them.

**‘Kal’** – Hard-working, spirited, difficult to defeat, in any aspect, and a player who took great pride in being their best every day and would be hurt if they ever felt they could have done more or if questioned as to whether they had given their all. Not blessed with pace yet could position themselves cleverly and read the game to counter opponents with speed.

Kal was easier for me to coach as many of their characteristics were like mine. At the time, this bias wasn’t something I was hugely aware of, and it constrained me from challenging them optimally; please recognise that our understanding of the players in our care is also a ‘constraint’.

These two centre-backs played together as a pair for a significant portion of their journey to first-team football. This was also a constraint. Kal and Jay benefitted from their differences.

They were also both right-footed; we attempted to balance how frequently they played on their favoured side and challenged them to find alternative ways to succeed when playing on the left.

It is important to add that this wasn’t a great help for the left-

back who played significant periods of their development career with centre backs inside them, as part of a team that liked to play from the back, who rarely opened up on their back-foot, their left, to play to them.

However, this full-back often came deep to receive the ball from the right-footed centre back (remember the ‘box’ example from chapter 1) and was able to become proficient at stretching the opposition’s press out and finding passes into the feet of advanced midfielders and forwards.

This is intended to highlight the point that the entire development journey is, with the necessary forethought, a constraints-led approach. This doesn’t only include training sessions as game-day is as valuable an environment for us to consider the ‘design’ of as training sessions are.

## Rival

This is where the ‘role’ and the ‘rival’ aspects interlink. Inevitably in training, we matched Jay against a player, a year older, who was a quick forward who liked to face forward and run at defenders to challenge some of Jay’s constraints.

Kal was also constrained, more naturally, by:

- a. Two very strong London-based opponents who we faced within our games programme. One of whom had a centre forward who was a future World Cup semi-finalist playing for them,
- b. A goalkeeper who was late maturing and, relatively, small. We could be vulnerable and concede goals; this placed additional pressure on defenders to block and prevent certain types of shots and crosses,
- c. The nature of their personality, which was inherent, being hugely conscientious. Whilst all aspects of our genetic

make-up are influenced by experience, our personality traits are significant human constraints. Being high in conscientiousness appears to be a strong predictor of success across many disciplines and can influence the degree to which people work hard.

These are all ‘rivals’ that Kal faced and can be considered as person constraints, things Kal brought to the environment and challenges that Kal faced both on their team and who they played against.

The point articulated in ‘c’ is something coaches may wish to be aware of. Not only are our physical capacities constrained by our genetic print, the adage of if you want to be an Olympic sprinter, choose your parents carefully is relevant here, so is our personality.

These aspects of our nature play strongly into our behaviour, and as coaches we ignore these at our peril if we aspire to understand the players in our care. Jerome Kagan’s historical work on personality is worth diving into.

## **Integrating ‘Role’ and ‘Rival’**

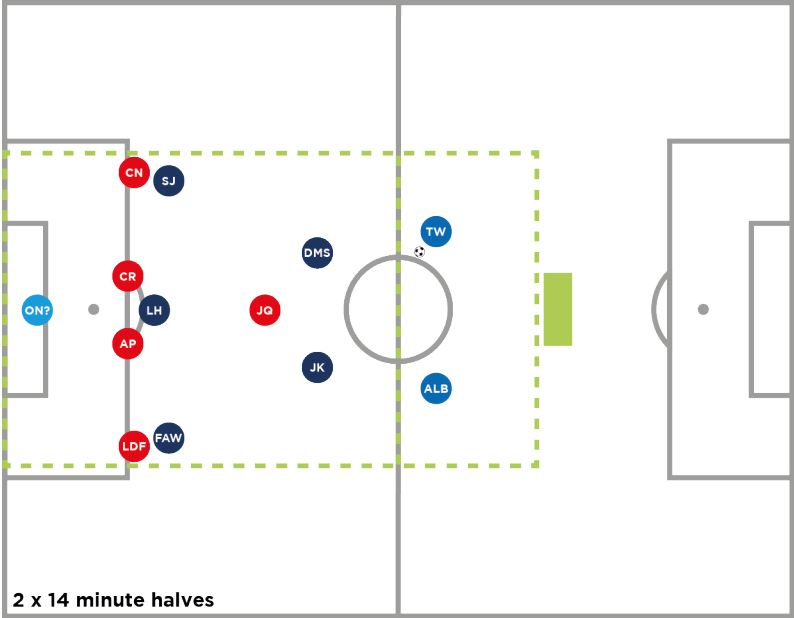
Kal and Jay were two players within a much larger player development programme. Generating, developing and deepening the understanding of each player amongst the staff, with the players themselves, to support greater self-awareness, and with the players’ parents, to enable us to understand differences in players from the context of football to other contexts the player populates, are rich investments and critical factors in player development that extend way beyond session design. The deeper we think about and understand the players in our care, the more sophisticated our coaching can become.

It’s necessary to then draw the considerations of what we understand about our players together, shaping how and where we position players relative to their ‘role’ and to account for what

we intend for them to be ‘rivalled’ against.

This should be a fundamental consideration in every experience we design for players, an example of which is shown in figure 4.4.

**Figure 4.4 - ‘Role’ & ‘Rival’ Session Example**



Blues - 8+ passes & score = 2 goals

Reds - regain, play off of TW and ALB 1 touch & score = 2 goals

Blues - switch & build possession to score

Reds - work out when to release centre back onto a '10'

The practice, for older teenage players, was a 6 v 5 (6 reds which include a GK and 5 blues) with 2 light blue players who supported whichever team had the ball. These two players were returning from injury and were required to be non-contact. One was a midfielder, initialled TW, who had the opportunity, when playing for the Blues, to work on forward passes. The other, initialled ALB, was a forward who had the opportunity to work on receiving with his back to goal when playing for the Reds, who were playing out from the back.

1. The 'roles' were relative to each player as they were each positioned relative to where they play for the team within a shape reference that reflects the way they play.
2. The red team players were 'rivalled' against:
  - a. Being outnumbered in midfield. This led to them deciding when and how to release a centre back to help the midfielder press higher up the pitch. This linked to work with both of the centre backs on us being more aggressive with our pressing. This releasing of a centre back meant at times the back four became a back three and were defending against a blue front 3, therefore effectively defending 1 v 1. This enabled them to practise their 1 v 1 defending against a variety of opponents.
  - b. A centre forward who played for both their country and, for the majority of the time, in an older age group – a great challenge for the centre backs to train against.
3. The blue team players were 'rivalled' against:
  - a. A deep-lying defence that the front three players had to find ways to break past,
  - b. Having more numbers in midfield than their opponents. This afforded them the opportunity to slow and speed the game up based upon whether the red team released a centre back into midfield. This was a good constraint for their decision making – spot when their extra player in midfield was pressed and identify when and how to play forward to take advantage of the 1 v 1s that this created for the advanced blue attackers.

Many of these considerations are quite subtle and perhaps



don't always need to be explicitly articulated to the players. This supports them to practise in game-relevant situations with a range of considered problems for them to work at solving.

The literature that articulates dynamic systems theory and how this informs a constraints-led approach to learning encourages coaches to think about behaviour from players emerging as a consequence of the interaction between the person, the task, and the environment - the circumstances that the person and the task are pitched against.

As coaches, we have opportunities to shape the task and the environment for the players to contend with. The amount of freedom at our disposal in shaping the task and environment changes based upon the nature of the event; for example, at times, we can choose the opposition our team competes against; other times, the competition structure we are playing within decides for us.

However, whatever challenge elements like the weather and the opposition present, we have some freedom to decide upon our behaviour, such as how emotional we become or how consistent we are with our communication with the players. These decisions are likely to constrain the players too.

## **Aspect Two - Pitching The Football Experience**

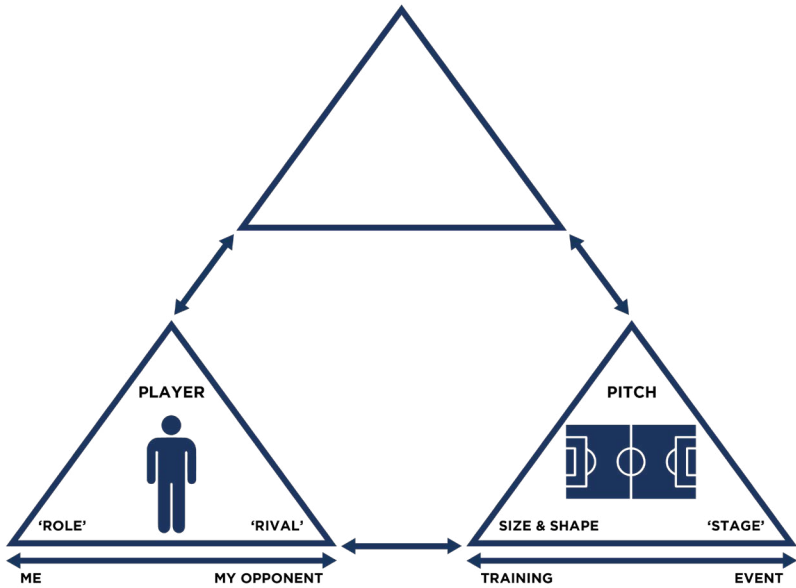
Naturally, there are flaws to illustrating this curriculum or experience builder in steps or stages as it can be seen to imply that one aspect is more important than another or that one aspect feeds into another.

It's important to highlight that all aspects are influencing each other continuously. When the person changes or when the nature of the task changes, referred to here as 'Pitch', it is likely that the solution to the problem changes.

Different people will find different solutions to the same challenge as each player will directly perceive the same challenge from the perspective of their previous experiences and their individual

constitution; think back to the examples of Kal and Jay.

**Figure 4.5** - Aspect Two - Pitching The Football Experience



The decision to follow a stepped process in articulating how this curriculum builder may be used is intended to explain and share an understanding of how each integrated aspect of a constraints-led approach interacts with the others.

## Pitch

This second aspect refers to how the task the players are to play within is 'Pitched'. This is intended to encapsulate at least two domains.

### Size and Shape

The football area that the players play on. This includes the size, shape and surface of the playing area, the type of goal, this might be a target player to find or a full-size goal with a net, and any additional pitch marking. These pitch markings can be used

to either restrict movement, such as a pitch separated into thirds where the centre forward is unable to drop into the midfield third, or to encourage certain behaviours. Instead, in the same example we might ask the centre forward to recognise when to drop into the midfield third to create space behind for others.

### Big Pitch/Small Pitch Contrast

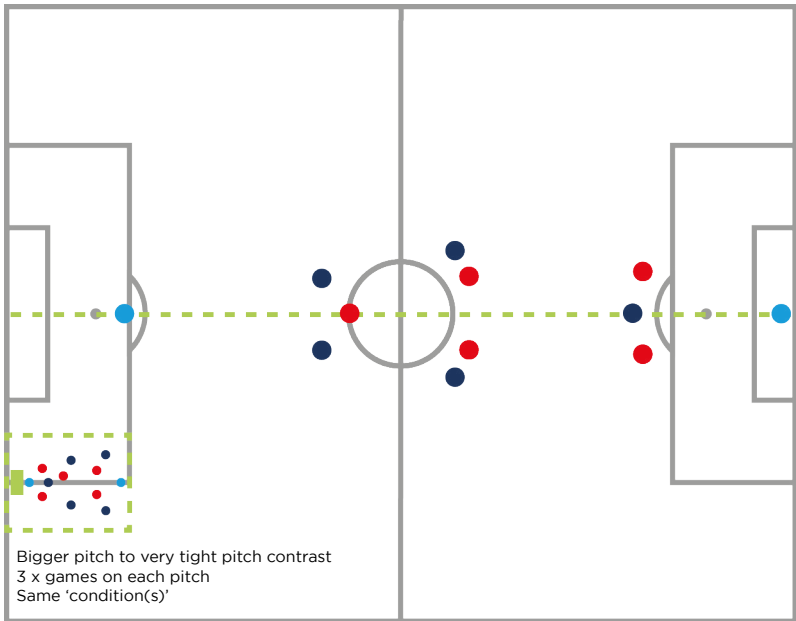
Figure 4.6 illustrates how we might ‘pitch’ football activity.

The practice works on a big to small pitch contrast. As described in chapter 1 the backdrop for exposing players to both tight areas and larger areas, in both 1 v 1/smaller sided situations as well as in larger sided games, is to support players to work out how to play ‘in the tight’ whilst also dealing with bigger spaces both with and without the ball.

In the illustrated example, we played six games of 10 minutes. Game 1 was on the small pitch, game 2 on the big pitch before back to the smaller pitch for game 3 and following this pattern for the 6 games. The teams remained the same, as did the design of the pitch along with the explicit conditions that we agreed to place upon the players. The conditions related to the line that ran vertically down the middle of the pitches, which were:

- **Games 1 & 2** - Switch play across the line and score = 2 goals
- **Games 3 & 4** - Switch play one-touch across the line and score = 2 goals
- **Games 5 & 6** - Defender pass to a forward on the switch and score = 2 goals

These conditions aided by the pitch markings supported the U13 players to practise switching play in a variety of ways to achieve success. This group of players was relatively new to 11-a-side football, and we’d spoken about the value of switching

**Figure 4.6** - Pitching The Experience Example

In Possession

- a. Switch play across line & score = 2 goals
- b. Switch play 1 touch across line & score = 2 goals
- c. Connect defender to forward (miss out midfield) on switch & score = 2 goals

Out of Possession

Work out how to defend against switches of play

play to make use of the pitch and to enable us to attack the 'weak-side' of the opposition, i.e. if we switch play quickly, we are likely to get the ball to where the opposition has the fewest defenders.

We needed to explore different solutions to this situation which were reflected in the rewards.

The vertical line down the middle of the pitch was a reference point for the players to identify what a switch of play might be, e.g. it doesn't always need to be a big switch that goes from one side-line to another but could be a simple reverse pass from one side of midfield to the other.

The third condition, if the defender finds the forward on the

switch of play and then we score, was a subtle lean towards encouraging the forward to identify the times to stand, just about, on the opposite side of the pitch from their deeper player who had the ball to fashion a diagonal through-pass. This caused a problem for the opposition midfield, who may have been trying to force play to one side.

The tight pitch placed the players under powerful constraints of limited time and space, which, if used regularly over time, may support players getting better at being able to deal with the ball when time and space are limited.

Sceptics argue that the players will never play on a pitch this small, so it's lacking in realism; whilst this argument has some relevance, it's also valuable in considering how overloading our human system in this way supports an adaptation in them that transfers to being effective in the larger game of football.

The contrast to a bigger pitch supported the players to, consciously and subconsciously, think about how to solve what might be perceived to be the same problem of the pitch marking and condition, when the pitch size changed.

Naturally, different players succeeded in different ways. Situations that seemed the same from small pitch to big pitch were significantly different based upon the distances the players were apart. This is an example of where the considerations from the role and rival elements from aspect one overlap.

Even though the small pitch game was frantic and chaotic at times, the players began to 'see' the pitch and behave more calmly as their awareness of how to play in such a tight area emerged. Sessions that appear untidy or unpleasant on the eye can be challenging for coaches as they can bring a feeling of uneasiness and discomfort. Finding it within ourselves to wait and hold our nerve through these feelings are important in enabling our players to emerge from these tight pitch experiences with enhanced skill and a sense of how to manage themselves when space and time are hugely constrained.

This type of approach or principle on how we pitch the foot-

ball experience doesn't only need to be a consideration in training sessions.

## **Stage**

The second aspect of how the task is 'Pitched', with the first being the 'Size and Shape' of the football playing area, is the 'Stage' it is played on.

## **Staging The Experience**

This second example came as a consequence of a conversation with a U16 coach whose team had entered an end of season tournament overseas in Portugal.

In this Portuguese tournament, teams played three games, of 20 minutes each, in a group that they had to finish in the top two of to qualify for the semi-finals. They then had to try to win the tournament by winning a semi-final and final. This isn't an uncommon tournament design.

They won the first game 5-0, continuing to play with purpose throughout the game, which on reflection, the coach and players thought, at the end of the tournament, was a mistake. Drew a tough physical 2nd game against the eventual winners 1-1 before qualifying for the semi-finals with a 4-0 win in which they scored two early goals and, similar to the first game, continued to attack with pace throughout the 20 minutes.

In the semi-final, they went a goal down early on. The players, within this tournament setting, had never been behind before. Time was limited as the games were relatively short. The players were fatigued, having played all the previous games at full-tilt, and struggled to establish an intense press to shift the momentum of the game and conceded a second goal late on to exit the tournament.

From the discussion emerged the thoughts that the players were inexperienced and unpractised in playing the games in different ways, to speed it up, slow it down, recognise how and

when to press with increased vigour.

As a positive, open and solution focussed coach, they wanted to look at some coaching tactics to deliberately support the players to practise different ways to what is commonly now called 'Manage The Game'.

## **Constraining Competition**

We organised a tournament, and the coach, along with two other teams from across the country, agreed to come to a National Football Centre with their U16s to play in the tournament, which was structured as follows:

1. Three teams; play each team twice; 3 points – win, 1 point – draw, 0 points – defeat. Win the league.
2. First 'round' of games - 30 minutes nonstop on a big pitch. Second 'round' of games 15 minutes non-stop on a smaller pitch.
3. The second 'round' of games begins with the score from the first game being flipped. For example, if in the first round of games Athletic beat Rovers 3-1, the second game starts with Rovers leading Athletic 3-1.
4. The only goals that are recorded in the table are the ones you actually score. After points, goals scored determines league position.
5. Play at a National Centre in front of a small crowd.

The conditions agreed in points 2, 3 and 4 asked the players and their coaches to consider how they adapted their tactics when the game situation changed. It also challenged teams to consider the benefits and drawbacks of, within this format, pushing for

additional goals when they were in front; and to think about how many goals is enough, how many will we start behind by when we play this opponent again and the game is shorter in duration? This included the notion of not only thinking about what is happening now in this game but also the consequences of this current game on future games.

The pitch constraints, combined with the task constraints, contributed to this. The coach and his team, who had been to the aforementioned tournament in Portugal, took an early 2-0 lead against their opponents who had played back-to-back games. They decided, on a big pitch, to use possession to conserve energy, frustrate the opposition and retain balance within their shape.

Subsequently, in the tournament deciding game, in which they started 2-0 behind, it was necessary to establish different tactics to come from behind, maintain those tactics when they conceded a goal, leaving them 3-1 behind and have the will and resilience, physically and psychologically, to stick at it in the last three minutes to score the two goals they needed to win the tournament.

This kind of approach to constraining the programme of games and staging it in such a way to generate specific learning opportunities typically meets with mixed feelings. Sceptics suggest that the game was designed in a particular way and presents its own challenges; adults should stop interfering. Advocates imply that subtle and more deliberate shifts within the way competition is structured supports players to practise certain elements that may contribute to the development of qualities that are valued.

Rugby Union has in recent years been considering the benefits of similar subtle changes that have been implemented within the Six Nations. One such law change was teams score a bonus point if they lose by 7 points or fewer. Ireland coach Andy Farrell identified how scoring constraints could help the players practise how they managed the game in preparation for The British Lions seeking to beat The All-Blacks in 2017. Whilst this is a



different sport and an example from the senior ‘performance’ end of this sport, he said:

*“We have been in front against them [New Zealand] with teams I have been involved with, and they are masters at the comeback, staying calm and being clinical,” said Farrell. “The way to score that bonus-point try is exactly like that – staying calm, being clinical, not being frantic, and going about your job as you should do rather than being too emotional. It will create excitement as it goes, you’ll know what you need to do along the way, but you still won’t get away from the fact that you need to win.”*

My beliefs around how we intentionally ‘Pitch’ both the ‘Size and Shape’ of the experience and the ‘Stage’ it is played on are grounded in the notion that it is difficult for any of us to adapt to an environment we haven’t populated.

The previous examples reflect how we might support player learning. It is important to recognise that this principle applies to coaches too. Coaches develop in association with the experiences their players are afforded.

## **The Pressure to Win**

In our first season in a previous role managing and overseeing the senior and youth development programme at a Premier League Club in England, our first team finished the season towards the bottom of the table and as a result were involved in a relegation play-off match, which was more fashionable in England then than perhaps they are now.

Played across two ‘legs’, away from home first and then at home, the aggregated score determined whether our opponents were promoted or if we retained our Premier League status.

This was a pressured situation beyond any experience that I had previously been exposed to as a coach. One that a defeat within would have a significant impact on the careers of the players, the staff and the wider programme.

Whilst I would like to, perhaps naively, think of myself as an organised and conscientious person, the preparation we embarked on for this particular two-game series was upgraded from our usual approach.

We travelled north for the first game in early May to meet a physical, hard-working opponent with some flashes of youthful brilliance on a difficult pitch. Our preparation had focussed in some detail on making it hard for their full-backs to play longer passes into their strong centre forward and for our centre backs to be aggressive in ‘doubling-up’ against an imposing centre forward within their 4-3-3.

The opposition’s left-winger was young, quick and lively, which resulted in us placing a big preparatory focus on our right-back’s positioning and tracking of movement, particularly with the way our centre backs were going to play.

Whilst we had lost more games than we had won that season, our work on how we played with the ball had been a consistent focus to support the team and the individuals to develop a pleasing style that we could become recognised for and, over time, would support us to establish both a positive identity and support the development of our young squad.

The players demonstrated significant grit and determination to lead early in the first leg and eventually gain a 1-1 draw. Our focus had been on not needing to chase the game in the second leg. We believed we had a better footballing team and that on our better home pitch with a home crowd, we could control the game in the second leg. If we had been beaten in the first leg, the capacity to control the game would be harder as the need to lead early would become more pressing.

A week later, we had too much for our opponents, controlled the game comfortably and secured a 3-0 victory to win 4-1 on aggregate. We retained our status and, in some small way, strengthened the platform for both The Club and its young players to progress from.

It’s important to recognise that had the outcome ended in

favour of our opposition, it would still have been a learning one; it is likely that it would have generated many challenging constraints for both the staff, me personally and the players to recover from, either in-situ at that Club or in pursuit of new work.

## **Competition as a Coach Developer**

That notable experience altered my perspective. Committing to the degree of preparation that we engaged in for the play-off, and resourcing it properly, became the ‘norm’ and there was recognition that had it previously been the norm we may not have been in such a pressing situation in the first place.

The ‘Stage’ for this experience was relatively significant. Players from that group have continued to succeed at the top end of European and International football and coaches have progressed onto International management.

There is no suggestion that those perceived experiences correlate to their continued success; only that if we want players and coaches to learn to manage themselves on the ‘Stage’ - however we define that - exposure to and support through those experiences is likely to be an important planning consideration.

How we, again, recognise the characteristics of each person and the role experience plays in enabling learning to emerge and develop may provide some insight into how experience is ‘Pitched’ for players and coaches. It will also need to be surrounded by an appropriate degree of support, enabling challenging experiences to be opportunities for growth.

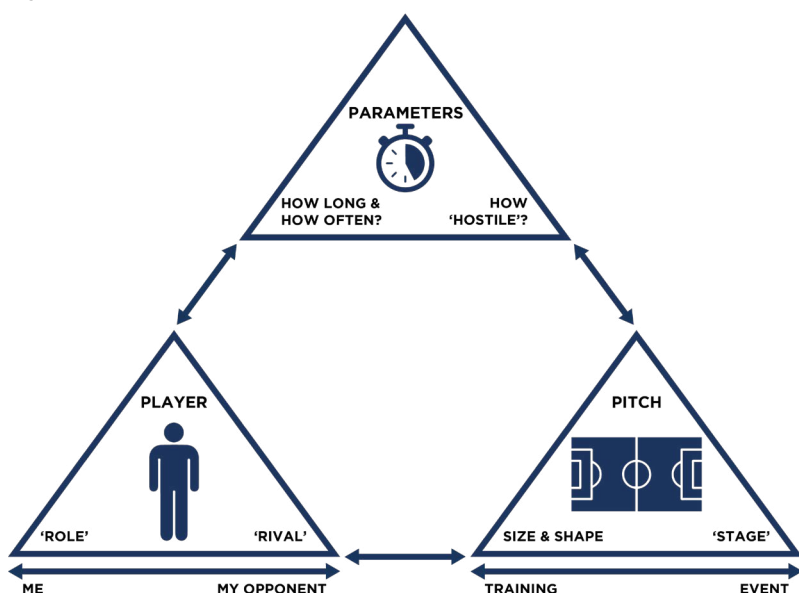
As explained through this aspect around ‘Pitch’; some of those experiences will occur more naturally, for others it may be worthwhile deliberately and intentionally planning them into the development programme to support us to prepare players and coaches for The ‘Stages’ they may encounter through the challenges of life and football.

## Aspect Three – Parameterising the Environment

The penultimate aspect of the experience builder that can support us to shape a responsive constraints-led approach is the ‘Parameters’ or within the traditional constraints triangle what are called the environmental factors.

This refers to how long the experience lasts, how frequently it is repeated and how hostile the environment is that the experience takes place in.

**Figure 4.7** - Aspect Three - Parameterising The Environment



### How Long?

It is important to highlight that this refers to:

**Within a session** - The duration of time the players play uninterrupted in a session; e.g. we'll play this game for 8 minutes. The traditional 4 periods of 4 minutes, or very similar, isn't without value although it has perhaps become too universal an approach to the way coaches periodise their delivery. Longer periods of

uninterrupted play are probably a useful constraint in challenging players from a physical perspective with the associated benefits of players learning to play football effectively. This can additionally influence, through training, their decision making late in games. There are also probably benefits for learning if the players are afforded the opportunity to play the same, or similar, games and practices for extended durations. Players may need to practise finding different ways to solve the problems the game presents without the coach stopping the game to talk about or work-out solutions.

Players also having time to explore different solutions ‘live’ and generate reflection ‘in-action’ may also be beneficial for, at times, enabling the players to play for 10, 12, 15, 18, 20, 30 minutes without a stoppage. If we aspire for players to develop what might be referred to as physical resilience and for them to contend with specific game problems, the environmental parameters can perhaps be helpful aspects to support this development.

**Within a game** - The agreed amount of time a game, or a half of a game, lasts for. Arbitrarily accepting standardised half or period durations that are imposed universally by leagues or competitions may be narrowly constraining the players. For example, playing 4 periods of 20 minutes has been widely utilised in several sporting contexts.

This isn’t a bad framework, although within the 5-minute break the players will get after every 20-minute period, they are likely to get interaction from their coaches. If we would like players to be able to self-manage, learn to adapt their behaviour within games and enable them to experience a more natural ebb and flow in their games, then periods of play or halves that last for 35, 40, 45 or perhaps controversially even 50 or 55 minutes may be worthwhile considerations.

**Within a competition** - How long a particular tournament or competition endures. In a festival that a league might organise

or at a World Cup or European Championships, players may be asked to play a number of games over a two-day, week or longer period. This may include being away from a normal home, being hot-housed with team-mates and staff members, sleeping in an unusual bed or room and eating food that is not common. Whilst for some, who are perhaps genetically more open to experience or have been exposed to broader experience previously, this may be a less stressful or even enjoyable experience. For others, it may bring stress, tension and uncertainty that requires managing.

Whether we aspire to use football as a means of enabling young people to be exposed to novel situations that support them to live even more meaningful and purposeful lives and/or we intend to support players to be able to perform in a World Cup competition in an uncommon environment - identify opportunities for players to live these experiences.

**Within individual player cares and needs** - The duration of time we enable players to be exposed to particular aspects identified in the 'Player' and 'Pitch'. If we would like a player to focus on running in behind opposition defenders, we may place a disproportionate focus on them:

- i. Playing in more advanced positions
- ii. Playing in larger areas where there is space to run behind
- iii. Playing against a variety of opponents who make it hard for them to succeed at running in behind
- iv. Playing with players who play the ball into advanced positions

Whilst we probably wouldn't only, narrowly, provide these experiences, they may for an undefined period, we could arbitrarily say '6 weeks' but any duration is arbitrary, get greater exposure

to the above elements than to other football ideas to support immersion in situations that relate to the things the player cares about and needs.

## **How Often?**

How Long referred to the duration of the activity and generating some flexibility in how we consider time. How often asks us to consider how frequently we expose people to particular environments.

In a natural sense, exposing players to football activity several times a week is frequency; some more discerning and key considerations within 'How Often' might be:

### **How Often There Is The 'Need' To Win Or Not Lose –**

Whilst sometimes controversial in youth sport, life and sport is inherently competitive and practising winning, caring about whether we win, how we behave if we win or lose and understanding what values we intend to uphold in the pursuit of victory are important ingredients in the sporting experience.

Several years ago we organised a tournament for some English Academy Clubs to compete against each other with teams of teenage young men. The tournament had a 'must-win' condition on it – 3 points for a win, 0 points for a draw or loss. It elicited some great behaviour of how teams decided to play, how they played when they were both ahead and behind and what the last few minutes of games were like, typically frantic. As explained earlier, when we adapt the laws or conditions of the game, notice the impact it has on the behaviour of the players and coaches.

### **How Often We Balance Smaller Sided With Larger Sided**

**Practice** - We can mistakenly refer to smaller numbered situations as more 'technical' and larger numbered more 'tactical'. I would urge us to consider that this separation is at best superfluous and, worse, misguided. The ability to work the ball indi-

vidually often perceived as technique, is inextricably connected and inseparable from the decisions we make, perhaps promoted as the tactics.

Playing smaller sided games is likely to reduce the complexity of the experience and increase the number of ball contacts. This isn't good or bad; it's just a likely consequence of our decisions. Similarly, larger numbered situations are likely to reduce ball contacts whilst supporting the players to experience the game with greater complexity. Both are probably useful experiences and whilst we might consider a greater diet of smaller numbered experiences, the younger the players are, you ignore larger numbered experiences at your peril. Some 11 v 11 experiences for children before the age of 11 shouldn't be prohibited, just used sensibly. The reverse is also true; older and adult players can still benefit from and enjoy smaller numbered practices.

### **How Often Players Are Challenged To 'Repeat' Perform -**

This may be a more relevant concept for older and more adult players, although it is a helpful consideration for coaches who are supporting players to think about making a transition from youth sport to the senior game. Many youth programmes, particularly within English Academy settings, provide one game a week with traditionally a week separating games, i.e. we play every Saturday. This typically means players are trained to be refreshed and ready for each Saturday. Much of the lower leagues and non-leagues of English football have significant periods where players have to play two and, on occasions, three games in a week, i.e. we play Saturday and then Tuesday, which at times will require players to play with and learn to manage yet still perform with some residual fatigue.

In a previous role, we worked at including, across 65% of the training weeks, a second game experience. Some of this was achieved through internal 11 v 11 games, which were still set up intentionally with players in kit and with referees etc. These were balanced with organising additional games against a range



of opposition. These additional ‘friendly’ games also gave us the opportunity to experiment outside of the constraints of traditionally organised leagues. We played games for 100 minutes, added extra time and penalties if the game was drawn, played with 10 players and against 10 players, and many other intentional constraints to challenge players to both adapt to a second game stimulus whilst also adapting to varying game experiences that whilst not necessarily common are relevant situations within football.

Players began to learn to adapt to this as they developed within this process and became more resilient in being able to repeat perform. Naturally, this raises the conversation about the risk of injuries and how this process was managed sensibly with an increase in exposure and demand as players adapted. It’s also important to say that without developing the programme in the ways we did, we may have put the players at increased risk of injury when they stepped into first-team football and were challenged to play two games a week. We can’t adapt to an environment we don’t populate.

## **How Hostile?**

The final element within this aspect surrounding ‘Parameters’ is about the hostility in the environment. Important to highlight that hostility is interpreted individually, i.e. what I find hostile might be different from the next person and is, like most facets of life, difficult for coaches to universally control.

Some examples of environmental factors that might be perceived to be hostile could be:

1. The weather (wind, rain, snow, cold, heat etc.)
2. The behaviour of the supporters, referees or observing parents. As every grass-roots coach knows, this is one of the many joys of running your child’s or a children’s team – every

other parent can do it better than us yet rarely volunteers!

3. The equipment used, our boots, playing kit and the ball are all constraining factors on how we feel about the experience.
4. The changing nature of the game itself or the perceived importance of the game.

These aspects are interrelated. The behaviour of supporters is likely to change as a consequence of the score-line changing, whilst changes in supporter behaviour can impact our perceptions of how hostile the environment is. Similarly, when the score-line changes, a player gets sent off, or the referee gives a contentious decision, it is likely to have an impact upon our emotions and possibly our behaviour.

Whilst we can't control the majority of these, we can learn to manage ourselves in hostile environments and enable sport to support us to manage the inherent nature of our personality to be able to better respond to hostility in the future.

How long, how often and how hostile aren't mutually exclusive considerations; they impact each other continually and converge. Somewhat hostile, relatively lengthy experiences perhaps shouldn't be repeated too often; although as players come nearer to what might be perceived to be performance focussed environments, the frequency might be increased.

Further, coaches spending time understanding the players in their care and the things that make them anxious or nervous can ensure that we share these experiences, reciprocally benefitting and growing as a consequence of willingly committing to football-related challenges.

## **Aspect Four – Experience Building Over Time (A Developmental Journey)**

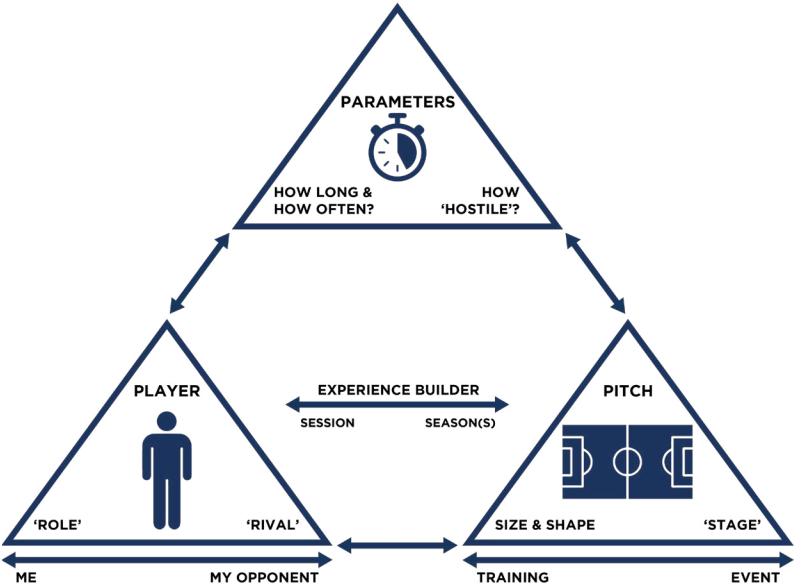
The fourth and final aspect in illustrating this experience or cur-

riculum builder is how we coherently stitch these experiences into individual player tapestries that develop, grow and change over time. Invariably, football coaching can be guilty of instigating a single session focus where we live from hand to mouth, constructing sessions that have limited relation to each other or the things that players feel is important.

Whilst navigating this experience builder can be complex and challenging, it supports us to consider the players, the nature of the football challenge facing those players and the associated environmental conditions within every experience we design or engage in. This is proposed as an alternative to ‘core’ practices which are set practices that all coaches within a Club or Federation work from.

Personal belief is that core practices erode expertise. This belief is grounded in the idea that such core practice recipes are good for simple tasks, like changing a tyre on a bike wheel, although less useful for complex tasks like player and coach development which are unlikely to be suited by a set of specific instructions.

**Figure 4.8 - Aspect Four - Experience Building Over Time (A Developmental Journey)**



These standardised recipes fail to take account of the nuances associated with human beings playing football.

Instead, I urge you to view coaching more ecologically by considering:

1. The game and players as complex evolving systems.
2. Understanding that change in one aspect will create ripple effects elsewhere.
3. To address these consciously and effectively.
4. Offering positive contributions of adjustment to the environment through external intervention.

Across time, weeks, half-terms, terms, seasons, multiple seasons, it may be valuable to keep a log of the experiences that players were exposed to and even at points include both the players and our own reflections on the perceived impact of those experiences. We can do this through video, audio or written notes.

This map of the terrain we've traversed together can then illuminate the territory we've explored, enabling us to examine the landscape with greater sophistication on future visits to similar turf whilst also supporting us to consider uncharted territory that our players and us would like to experience in the future.

Ensuring we generate a breadth of experiences that we deepen our understanding of is likely to stimulate the exploratory nature within human beings, eliciting excitement and enjoyment from our shared journey.

## Chapter 5

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### Coda

A constraints-led approach isn't only the act of a coach placing an arbitrary condition on a training session. Players aren't reliant or dependant on coaches being the only affordance or invitation to act, and as such, learning should be considered in much broader terms.

Whilst placing conditions on sessions, games, or tournaments are constraining factors, if our view is narrowed to a constraints-led approach being only the use of conditions, then we are at risk of missing so much more of the human and environmental architecture that supports learning.

Coaches developing this way of thinking into their arsenal has the capacity to extend and deepen the interactions we have with players. We are a combination of the constraints of our constitution and the experiences that our constitution contends with. Coaches have the opportunity to co-design, thoughtfully, environments and experiences that attend to the nature of the people in our care to inspire and engender both a continued love of

football and the development of skill. This love is in part shaped through the skills players develop, enabling each individual to grow purposefully through their life.

As briefly referenced in chapter 3, the final practical example offered is a game-play example with a focus on the impact opposing teams have on each other. The only conditions this game-play has imposed upon it are the 17 Laws of Football; these Laws of The Game of Football sustain its perpetual state of tension.

## 11 v 11

Each team and individual player seeks to impose themselves on their opponent. Each team and individual player are effectively applying forces to each other that stretch them. Each team and individual player is flexing in response to each other and are in a state of flux. That's one of the many facets that makes football such an enigma. Figure 5.1 is an example of this utilising game-play which, along with the accompanying backdrop, encapsulates this view.

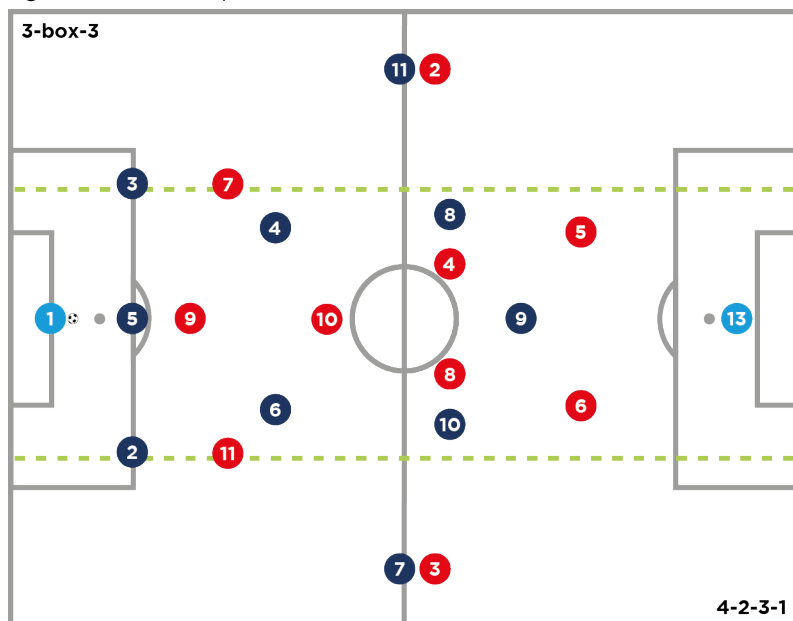
Whilst the example reflects 11 v 11, this game-play situation can principally be adapted for any format of football.

The blue team are set up within a 3-Box-3, and those players are 'pitched' against the reds 4-2-3-1. The pitch is 'parameterised' into vertical thirds, which act as reference points not to restrict any freedom of movement. This could reflect a game organised against an opponent or a training game.

Whilst game-play is a critical aspect of a player's development, within youth development, everything is practise, even the competition. Every event is an opportunity for growth and development, and whilst we should undoubtedly pursue victory fiercely, we should view each episode as part of a long-running, serial documentary with no single event having a critical endpoint. If we can view our football programmes in this way, it can support us to maintain a laser focus on the commitment to our players

rather than individual event outcomes.

**Figure 5.1** - 11 v 11 Example



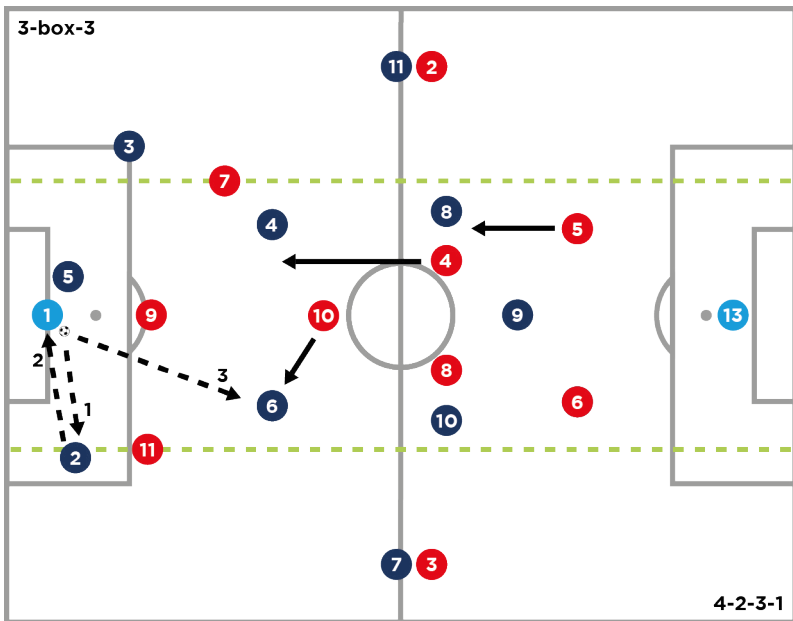
If we look at the game set-up, the blues have a numerical advantage in the centre of the field, which may imply that the reds can benefit by encouraging the blue team into wide areas. This is where the parameters can become useful guides as we might encourage the reds to seek to regain the ball in the wide channels. This also links to the notion that if we would like to win the ball back from the opposition, having some sense or idea about where we intend to attempt to win it is helpful. To help us to succeed, we need to solve a few problems:

### **Problem 1 - The Extra Player in Midfield**

Just suggesting we will force the opposition into the wide areas is nice, yet not easy as the blues are likely to attempt to play central to make use of their additional player. We'll probably need to tease and tempt the opposition in certain ways. For example, the blue goalkeeper may play to one of their defenders to draw

our red forwards up the pitch and create space to play into their deeper midfield players. Once this has happened, our red number 10 needs to decide on which deep blue midfielder is most likely to receive. One of our red deeper midfielders can then release themselves aggressively to press onto the other blue deep midfielder whilst simultaneously the centre back on that same side releasing to pick up the spare advanced midfielder for the blues (figure 5.2).

**Figure 5.2 - 11 v 11 Unfettered**



## Problem 2 – Being Ready to Take the Opportunity

Whilst our red team has allowed the blue team to play into their favoured central area, we have executed a defensive press that means we are well-positioned to win the ball back. The nature of the pass played by the Goalkeeper of the blues, into the blue number 6, is inviting the next pass into the outside vertical third occupied by the blue number 7 and the red number 3. If we can ensure our red number 3 is marking on the ball-side, which is



inside the blue number 7, and close enough to steal the ball, then we can feel confident that when they commit to regaining it that we are successful.

This early success will naturally influence what both teams do next. This is what we mean about each individual and team seeking to impose themselves on their opponent and that those impositions are forces that stretch and change.

If our red team succeed in regaining the ball, the blue may begin to seek alternative solutions, which our red team will need to respond to. If the blue team play past our defensive press, then it is likely to generate belief for the blues and perhaps some doubt for the reds. These are also constraints.

### **Problem 3 – What to Do When Our Red Team Wins the Ball Back?**

Our defensive work was a success, and our number 3 won the ball in the wide vertical third. We are emboldened and confident. How do we respond? If we attack quickly, we might score, or we might be at risk of giving the ball back to the opposition and being unable to control the game with the ball. Neither of these are bad choices; just choices that are informed by a collection of additional constraints:

**What's the score?** If we are ahead, do we make a different choice than if we are behind?

**Who is the player on the ball?** If they are a hugely creative, exciting player who we encourage to travel forward and beat players, that is likely to inform the choice.

**Where are the opponents positioned?** If they are slow to react and are still stretched, it may be that we make a different choice than if they have quickly transitioned into good defensive positions.

**How are we, the coach, behaving?** If we are animated and vocal, this might influence the choice of the player on the ball.

This game-play and the associated situations are not things we as coaches have control over. The situations that occur within and beyond the ones illustrated aren't things we are steering; they will emerge as a consequence of the players responding to what went before.

The idea that the game of football is a game of chess where we move the non-human pieces into position to place our opponent into check-mate is erroneous. However, we may play a part in the design of the environments with an understanding of the nature of some of the problems that the players will attempt to solve.

The players, however, will still, in the moment, self-organise and respond to all of the powerful constraining factors, of which we, the coach are, perhaps, a relatively insignificant, one. Critically important that we understand this and don't attempt to joy-stick the players through each experience.

## **Influencing the Future**

Our skill is to thoughtfully and carefully design experiences that afford the players the opportunity to experience particular problems, such as those articulated above. We should then decide if, when and then how we support them both within and beyond each experience to support each player's human systems to stitch the situations that they are exposed to into their being such that players can 'reference' it and draw upon it in the future.

This isn't the same as storing it. Our systems aren't computers or machines; we came into existence long before the technological age, and we should be careful about using hardware, store-house metaphors with human beings. It is likely, however, that our historical experiences shape the way we perceive situations we are exposed to in the future, and there may be benefit in coaches logging the nature of the experiences the players and

coaches have lived in order to provide some useful reference and guidance of how we may design the experiences in our future.

This becomes the curriculum. It can be hugely sophisticated and detailed, or it can be scribbled notes onto paper that we staple together. This curriculum isn't the future-mapped, standardised, topic focussed, subject narrowing script that has overly constrained our past; rather a living, breathing, ever-changing ecosystem that is continually adapting its shape and size based upon the feel of the human beings that enjoy existing within it.

This is what we measure, what we've shared and how it made us feel. This log of memories and its inevitable influence on what we do next is a more powerful measure of learning than some metric that 'tells' us that a player or coach has arbitrarily moved from the score of a '4' to a '5' or from 72% to 75% – these types of data references can be guilty of hitting the target and missing the point.

By all means, generate data that aligns with the things that are important to your context; just be careful about it defining whether we believe we've succeeded or not.

Football is effective; it elicits feeling and emotion. Whilst the collation of data, if approached thoughtfully, carefully and appropriately (particularly when adopted with young people), might support sense-making; it is critical that the aesthetic experiences associated with football aren't over sanitised and objectified through machine learning processes that are better suited to more mechanical, less human pursuits.

The emergence of the love and joy that football generates can be protected or better, cultivated to ensure current and future generations derive the wonder and excitement that has illuminated the game as a worldwide phenomenon. That responsibility is in our hands.

Keep that horizon in your vista; try not to lose sight of it...

# **Thank you**

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# EVERYTHING YOU NEED TO UNDERSTAND AND IMPLEMENT A CONSTRAINTS LED APPROACH TO PLAYER DEVELOPMENT

The mastery of crafts such as coaching takes time, earnest commitment and many challenging, chastening experiences that leave us feeling a little less than skilful. However we overcome these challenges, they are likely to be enablers that support our learning and growth towards becoming a better coach than we were yesterday.

This book is intended to support that exploration.

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