



MICHAEL CURLESS

COACHING POSITIONAL SOCCER

Perfecting Tactics and Skills

**MEYER
& MEYER
SPORT**

Coaching Positional Soccer

For Opal and Audyn, my children, whose love of soccer inspired me to improve my coaching

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INTRODUCTION

"Football is theatre."

–Jurgen Klopp (Honigstein 2018, pg. 166)

QUESTION #1:

"HOW WOULD YOU SCORE THE PERFECT GOAL?"

Imagine your team wins the ball. A defender then plays the ball back to the goalkeeper, who looks up and scans the field. What does your goalkeeper see, and where is the first pass made? If you wanted your team to score the ideal goal, what would happen next? Can you imagine all your players' initial movements when the opponent applies light pressure to the defense, versus moderate or heavy pressure? What are the skills required by the players after the goalkeeper plays the ball out? A variety of tactical movements and individual skills will provide the scaffolding to carry the ball directly and quickly, or indirectly and patiently, up into the midfield where more choices await. Does your team patiently probe, trying to set up high-percentage attacking opportunities? Or does it skip directly to attack, which can be done centrally or through wide positions, by dribbling or passing?

First, you need the ability to see the game played out in your mind before you can effectively coach your players. This visualization exercise can reveal your level of understanding of the game. If you struggle to identify the specific tactics and skills required to bring the ball forward under various circumstances, then this manual will be helpful to you regardless of the level of soccer you coach. This manual was written to help both novice and elite coaches create practice sessions that improve their players' tactics and skills so that their teams can play in a modern, adaptive, and effective style.

Designing a practice plan can be difficult because soccer is challenging to understand and thus difficult to teach. The fluidity of the game, combined with a large assortment of skills and fitness requirements, can confound the coach. Practice planning is especially difficult in light of the conflicting needs of meaningful repetition to solidify learning and variety to ensure team development and adaptability.

Just as a cathedral can be built of individual bricks with the right blueprint, a sophisticated soccer style can be developed by learning singular skills and tactics organized together in a complex design. Brick by brick, skill and tactic by skill and tactic, your team can learn to play an advanced style as displayed by your favorite professional and national teams. Though mesmerizing, when broken down into bite-size units, even Barcelona's passing style can be understood and taught to your team. Soccer has a certain mystique, but it is not unfathomable once you understand the phases of play, coaching elements, and player principles. Focusing your coaching on these core building blocks will make it easier for players to learn what they need to accomplish during a game, whether defending or attacking.

The coaching approach of this book is "positional" because players are expected to frequently change their positions to dominate the fluctuating spaces on the field. This manual will help you ensure that your players develop diverse skills and tactics, allowing them to better adapt to the rapid changes within a game and be capable of playing multiple positions. The "universal player" is an essential component of a modern team (Whitehouse 2014).

AN ANSWER TO SOCCER'S COMPLEXITY: "PUT A BOX AROUND IT"

The insights for this book came from an assortment of learning experiences, including analyzing soccer games. One thought experiment I conduct regularly is to freeze a game in my mind and put imaginary cones around the game play to mark out a pretend practice field. Then I ask a series of questions:

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"Where on the field is the play?"

"What players are within the practice field?"

"How many players are involved?"

"What is the objective of the team's play?"

"What problems are the players trying to solve?"

"What skills and tactics are used to solve the problem?"

"What type of endurance, speed, strength and agility are needed to solve the problem?"

"How does one transition to the next play?"

"Can other problems or solutions occur in the same area of the field?"

"What happens if the players fail at solving the problem?"

This mental exercise has helped reveal the underlying structures and dynamics of top teams.

STYLES OF PLAY: PLAN B

"It's always harder if you are forced to play through opponents rather than to concentrate on the transition."

—Jurgen Klopp (Honigstein 2018, pg. 268)

A style of play can be defined as the team's general approach to moving the ball from one end of the field to the other, along with the team's approach to defending. The complexity of the game allows for multiple styles of play. A team can play long or short, defend high or low, swarm or sit back, play quickly or patiently and still be successful. Some approaches are better in certain circumstances—for instance, counterattacking teams can do better against teams that push many players forward to retain numbers around the ball, but leave open space behind them.

A style of play can thus cut two ways—perfecting ways to play well in some circumstances but making a team potentially vulnerable in other circumstances. Although a distinct style of play can help a team achieve success, it can be argued that a style of play can be

potentially limiting at times and that an even better goal is to have styles of play—a viable Plan B or even Plan Bs. A Plan B is an alternative way for the team to attack and defend that is different from their dominant playing style. Assimilating a wide variety of skills and tactics makes a team less predictable and more able to adapt to their opponent's strengths and weaknesses.

A PLAYER'S GAME

"The influence that the coach can exercise on players during a match is really very limited. That's why I teach players to think for themselves and to subjectively make judgements."

—Guus Hiddink (Meijer 2006, pg. 97)

"A good footballer is somebody who can offer the perfect solution in an unpredictable situation."

—Arsene Wenger (Honigstein 2015, pg. 211)

Coaching styles can be divided between those focusing on the game's flow (e.g., motivators) and those that focus on the game's structure (e.g., tacticians or strategists). However, during a soccer game it can be difficult for a coach to motivate or organize a team, given that soccer has few natural breaks during which coaches can speak directly to players, games are long in duration, play is fluid and unpredictable, and games are played over a large area. A soccer coach's inability to directly influence a game once it has started is why soccer is often described as a player's game. The best strategist cannot plan all the players' movements, and the greatest motivator cannot shout instructions on every play. Once the game begins, players must make split-second decisions on their own.

This manual explains the key principles that players need to use to solve problems in the game. Players who learn these principles will be less dependent on coaching strategies or sideline direction.

"My two qualities were great technique and insight, which happen to be two things you can't measure with a computer."

–Johan Cruyff (Meijer 2014, pg. 255)

QUESTION #2:

"IF YOU WERE WATCHING A TRYOUT FOR 10-YEAR-OLD PLAYERS, WHAT DO YOU THINK WOULD BE THE NUMBER ONE DETERMINANT OF FUTURE SUCCESS FOR THESE PLAYERS?"

Typical answers would include athleticism (strength, fitness, speed), skill level (dribbling, passing, shooting), and mentality (competitiveness, leadership, game intelligence). It has become clear from research and experience that none of these traits can perfectly predict which youth player will be most successful. One reason that predictions are so poor is that children change so dramatically through adolescence in their athleticism, attitude, coordination, and skill level. There is another factor, perhaps not stressed enough, which is not related to the qualities or experience of the players, but instead to the quality of the child's coaching.

The essential role of coaching in a player's development could be a primary reason why soccer scouts can struggle to pick the next great player, since so much of player development depends on the abilities and attributes of the player's future coaches. The importance of coaching is not limited to youth development. Even top professional players can show improvement or have sudden downturns when exposed to different styles of coaching.

Although it can take time to learn, with patience and perseverance and even with limited soccer experience, you can master the ways to coach that give each player the chance to achieve full potential.



CHAPTER 1

PHASES OF PLAY, COACHING ELEMENTS, AND PLAYER PRINCIPLES

Your team's tactics will be dictated by the type of challenges faced by your team at different points of the game. The primary tactical challenges are described here as "phases of play." There are three distinct phases of play when in possession of the ball: building up, probing, and attacking, and two phases when defending: block-zonal defending and pressing. The challenges of each phase of play are solved by specific playing styles taught as "coaching elements." Each coaching element provides a unique solution to overcome the tactical challenges of a phase of play. The coaching elements are taught through "player principles" that describe the specific tactics and skills essential to each coaching element.

PHASES OF PLAY: TEAM CHALLENGES

"The space on the pitch is the essential factor."

–Johan Cruyff (Cruyff 2016, pg. 267)

Practice planning is organized around the phases of play. These phases of play present unique challenges that teams must solve in a soccer game and are dictated by where the ball is on the field. For example, moving the ball from the team's defensive half into the midfield is a different challenge than keeping possession of the ball in the opponent's half, which is typically more crowded with opposition. Creating chances for a goal poses

its own unique set of problems to solve. By understanding these tactical challenges, you can design your team's practices with a more nuanced understanding of the game. There is no "one shoe fits all" scenario with coaching soccer—very specific practices need to be created to address the unique dynamics of each phase of play.

The three phases of play that occur when a team has the ball are dictated by the changes in circumstances as the team advances up the field, where a higher technical ability is required as space tightens and a faster speed of play is required. The defending phases of play are defined by where the team is trying to win the ball—in the opponent's defensive half through pressing or in their defensive half with block-zonal defending. Descriptions of each phase of play are presented here.

PHASE OF PLAY #1: BUILDING UP

"Bring the ball out well, and you will play well."

—Pep Guardiola (Winter 2014, pg. 119)

"The aim was to create numerical superiority to win the ball, then spawn out, like a fist that opens."

—Wolfgang Frank (Honigstein 2018, pg. 57)

In build-up, the challenge is to move the ball forward within a space that is too far away from the other goal to score or set up an attack directly, but can be made very large when players "spread the field" and stretch their opponents from side to side and front to back. In other words, while the team in possession is at a disadvantage because it cannot apply direct pressure on the other team's goal, at the same time it has the advantage of large areas of space available for play.

The team in possession has room to run into space to receive a pass, dribble and pass away from pressure, and often has more time on the ball than in other areas of the field. Player movements and touches on the ball must be precise and predictable. With all the space, there is little need for riskier dribbling and passing that can more easily go wrong. Well-rehearsed and inherently-safer supportive positioning, checks (a sudden and quick dash) to the ball, and protective half-turns across the body will be the more reliable means to advance the ball into the midfield.

PHASE OF PLAY #2: PROBING

"The basic idea is to set up camp in the opposition's half."

–Juanna Lillo (Perarnau 2016, pg. 86)

Probing becomes necessary when the attacking team cannot directly attack the goal after bringing the ball up to the halfway line. Probing is the only phase that is optional—and thus sometimes skipped over in training.

The goal of probing is to move the ball quickly around in the opponent's half until an attack on goal can be created. Players in the probing phase are under pressure and in tight areas of the field. Players use either one- and two-touch passing or unsuspected turns to unsettle and disorganize defenders. Whereas in the build-up phase the possessing team will make the field as large as possible, in probing the attacking team will need to bring several players around the ball to ensure numerical superiority—while still keeping a player wide to provide an escape from the pressure.

PHASE OF PLAY #3: ATTACKING

"When in doubt, go back to basics: Attack, Attack, Attack."

–Pep Guardiola (Winter 2014, pg. 84)

In build-up, the challenge is to use the large space in the defensive half to safely move the ball up to the halfway line. In probing, the challenge is to keep possession of the ball while under pressure and in tight spaces in the opponent's half. In both situations, the team challenges (i.e., phases of play) are defined by how the opponents pressure the attacking players with the ball. The team in possession must now assert themselves by attacking spaces between them and the defenders by dribbling or passing.

PHASE OF PLAY #4: DEFENDING

Defending is a phase of play that focuses on protecting the goal. The defensive approach is generally based on whether the team seeks to win the ball in their defensive half or in the opponent's half.

BLOCK-ZONAL DEFENDING

"So that was (98 World Cup winners) France's back four defenders.

Solid, tight and well-disciplined."

(Gray 2000, pg. 261)

Block-zonal defending typically occurs in the team's defensive half and consists of two groups of three to five players—a midfield line in front of a defensive line. The aim is to squeeze the space around the ball with defenders in tight formations. The limited space around the goal allows the defending team to mark areas of the field rather than just individual players, since the defenders know where the attackers are headed (i.e., the goal). Defensive players in lines shift side to side and up and back to stay in front of

the ball and block dribbling and passing lanes to the goal. Individual players step up to pressure the ball before dropping back when the ball has been passed.

PRESSING

"We need to go step by step, all of us in unison. Lose the ball and—pam!—we win it back quickly because our positional play has us all tightly linked."

—Pep Guardiola (Winter 2014, pg. 231)

"Gegenpressing being 'the best playmaker'."

—Jurgen Klopp (Honigstein 2018, pg. 224)

Pressing typically occurs in the opponent's half while they are trying to build up. If the pressing players fail to win the ball back immediately, there is little threat of the opposition creating an immediate attack on the goal. Defenders need to be organized in block-zonal defending, whereas pressing players sprint about trying to catch the opposing team off guard and win the ball deep in the opponent's half, where one or two passes can lead to a shot on goal. To press in such a large area, players need to swarm as a pack, create pockets to funnel play, and put pressure on the ball while simultaneously cutting out passing angles.

COACHING ELEMENTS

"They broke football down into its constituted parts: the small movements, right positioning, the concentration needed to control and play a ball properly."

–Matthias Sammer, German FA (Honigstein 2018, pg. 146)

"It is a type of attack that needs structure and continuous geometrical formations; triangles, rhombus etc. This is why it is positional, because we need the combination of various players in specific tactical positions in order to accomplish it."

(Basile 2015, pg. 15)

"Our players had four reference points: the ball, the space, the opponent, and their own teammates. Every movement had to happen in relation to these reference points. Each player had to decide which of these reference points should determine his movements."

–Attributed to Arrigo Sacchi

The eleven coaching elements are the essential tactical lessons that should be taught to your players. The coaching elements provide your team with a cohesive set of skills and tactics to solve the problems posed by each phase of play. Each phase of play has a variety of solutions. Your team's "style of play" results from the particular coaching elements used to solve game challenges. The specific skills and tactics introduced in each coaching element are listed in the practice plans in chapter 5 and summarized in the appendix.

The style of play best suited to the build-up phase is dictated by the type of pressure of the opponent's team on the defensive backline, which can be described as light, moderate, or heavy:

- With light pressure, the optimal strategy is to work the ball back and forth from side to side, safely easing forward around the pressure.
- In moderate pressure, the opponent will push additional players forward, leaving more open space in the middle of the field to play through.
- Under heavy pressure, when the opponent commits players forward to press both the defenders and midfielders, the best option can be to pass directly to the forwards, who will have space in front of them to receive the ball.

Probing, which involves keeping possession of the ball in the defending team's half in order to set up attacking opportunities, is accomplished either by:

- surrounding the ball with several players and using short passes to keep possession near the opponent's goal, or
- creatively turning to get free of pressure.

These two approaches often occur rapidly in succession, because quick passing puts a player in a position to make a sudden turn that creates the space needed to pass or to dribble forward.

Goal-scoring opportunities can be created from 1v1 dribbling, combination passes, through balls, crosses and counterattacks. As in the build-up phase, the type of attack most likely to create goal-scoring opportunities will depend on the way the opponent defends:

- An opponent who keeps the defenders up closer to the halfway line is more vulnerable to the through ball.
- Teams that keep their players close together (i.e., narrow) will be more vulnerable to wide play and crossing.
- Teams that drop off and defend with most of their players positioned close to their own goal are more vulnerable to combination passing.
- Teams that push many of their players forward into the opponent's half to press are vulnerable to counterattack.

Defending requires flexibility in different game scenarios:

- Teams can drop back in a block-zonal defense when defending in their half to reduce the amount of open space in front of their goal.
- To set up quick chances to score, teams can press the opposition to win the ball in the opponent's defensive half.

PLAYER PRINCIPLES

"Transform 'know-how' into a 'knowing about know-how.'"

–Vitor Frade (Tamarit 2014, pg. 56)

"You play football with your brain...If you just play intuitively, you perform your tricks at the wrong moments."

–Louis Van Gaal (Meijer 2014, pg. 63)

"Football is played with the head. Your feet are just tools."

–Attributed to Andrea Pirlo

The "phases of play" describe the problems that need to be solved based on the positions of the players and the ball on the field. The "coaching elements" describe the solutions to these phase challenges, and the "player principles" represent the essential concepts players need to understand to make the right decisions on the field. Players are taught these principles so they know why they should use certain tactics or skills in a particular drill. This insight will make it easier to later apply the learning to the actual game environment. These player principles are listed in the practice plans in chapter 5 and summarized in the appendix.



CHAPTER 2

THE ESSENTIALS OF PRACTICE PLANNING

"(The coach) must recognize the team tactic aspect, analyze it, make it trainable in an exercise that makes that team tactical aspect come to life."

–Rinus Michels (Michels 2001, pg. 29)

"My secret is practice."

–David Beckham (Syed 2010, pg.62)

PRACTICE PLANNING: AN INTRODUCTION

Teams will play as they practice, so practices need to mimic the actual game as much as possible while still honoring the need to break the game into parts for ease of learning. The "unbreakable entirety" of the game will not be forgotten in practice if you ensure that all elements of the game are included during each drill (Tamarit 2014, pg. 21).

Tactical, technical, psychological, and physical components are typically expressed together in soccer game moments. When a player dribbles to make a crossing pass to a teammate, the acts of dribbling and passing are skills that are used within a tactical strategy, say, a run behind the defense. The sprinting of players to get to the cross is a

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physical requirement, and the mindset to beat the defender to the ball is a psychological component. Coaches need to ensure these four components are addressed and encouraged in every drill, even when the drill focuses more on one component than another.

The learning objectives of a practice should correlate with specific game requirements. Even popular two-touch passing drills are not always tactically specific enough to generalize to the game. For example, only allowing players to use two touches in an attacking drill can prevent players from practicing 1v1 dribbling.

A practice plan guided by a cohesive tactical vision will have a bigger impact on player learning. Practice drills that are not connected and do not have an overarching plan are much less effective. The specific tactical orientation of the practice knits together the skills and tactics so they can be more easily reproduced in the game.

THE PRACTICE PLANNING DILEMMA

There are two competing processes at work when designing a practice plan. The first is the need to teach players specific tactical lessons and technical skills, and the second is the need to keep a sense of the game's continuity intact. If coaching overemphasizes one side or the other, the practice's effectiveness will be reduced, and your team will not achieve its potential. For example, when a practice is mostly structured around learning specific tactics or skills, then players do not learn how to quickly and correctly adapt to constantly changing game challenges. On the other hand, coaches who focus mostly on game play will not provide their players with the appropriate training to perfect a variety of essential skills and tactical movements.

A practice plan should be structured to balance "whole-learning" with "part-learning" so players can effectively play in a variety of styles in a game.

A TEMPLATE FOR PRACTICE PLANNING

"Tactical behavior is not like riding a bike, unfortunately. You have to practice again and again."

–Jurgen Klopp (Honigstein 2018, pg. 88)

To ensure players can develop a whole-game understanding and improve specific tactics and skills, I recommend that practices be divided into three main sections: the warm-up game (consolidation), technical and tactical development (acquisition), and the ending standard game (incorporation). Since the players' feel for the continuity of the game should be a priority at every practice, it is important that an actual soccer game begins and ends the practice.

PRACTICE PLANNING SECTIONS

1ST SECTION: WARM-UP "CONSOLIDATION" GAME (15-20 MIN)

Practices should start with a game—a game with standard goals and positions. In this warm-up game, several important objectives are accomplished. First, the team is given a fun activity that motivates players to show up for practices on time. Second, this warm-up game offers an opportunity to reinforce previous learning, so earlier tactical and technical development is not forgotten. Lastly, playing the game helps develop in players a sense of how the parts of the game are integrated. We practice to play the game, which is fluid and dynamic and requires constant transitions and adaptations. During this game, I suggest that you use the "CPS Team Progress Rating Form" found in the appendix to assess the team's development.

The warm-up game is focused, structured, and active. Nothing new should be taught in the initial game. The lack of formal coaching will make the game more fun and allow players to be more expressive.

2ND SECTION: SKILL AND TACTICAL DEVELOPMENT "ACQUISITION" STAGES (40 MIN)

In the second or middle section of practice, the focus is on teaching new skills and tactics. The best method for teaching a complex skill and tactic is for the player to initially learn in a low-pressure environment and gradually perform the skill and tactic under increasingly more pressure. Incremental loading of pressure helps build confidence and ensures skill and tactical learning can be applied in an actual game. Step-by-step instructions on how to incrementally add game-like pressure to drills can be found in the appendix.

There are three essential stages of skill and tactical learning. Each stage has unique fitness and psychological components.

STAGE 1: PERFECTING SKILLS AND TACTICS

In the first stage of technical and tactical development, the essential skills and game movements are learned and rehearsed without pressure from an opponent or pressure to score a goal. The specific body positions for each skill can be isolated to improve player learning through neuromuscular training. It is important that you or an advanced player demonstrate the drills the correct way. Any deficiencies in skills and tactics not resolved at this point in the training will typically get worse as game pressure is increased. Be both patient and insistent at this stage of training to ensure player development. There is no shortcut to perfecting technique. It can be helpful at this stage to have more than one coach in the practice area so that all players get enough attention. Vary the drills to keep players engaged.

At the end of the drills that focus on perfecting skills and tactics, a simple competitive game can be introduced that links this stage with the competitive games in Stage 2. This game can reveal how well players have learned the skills and tactics and is also a fun reward for their hard work.

PSYCHOLOGY

“Practice, practice, practice” is your mantra, as your players need to perform skills and tactical movements repeatedly to ensure they develop perfect technique. The lack of competition in these drills can reduce player fun. The coaching challenge of Stage 1 is to instill in players the motivation to do repetitive exercises with full energy and focus.

FITNESS

Stage 1 drills should focus on agility and sprinting form. Begin this stage with agility drills that prepare the player for specific skill and tactical exercises. For example, ladder work is effective at helping players improve their ability to learn dribbling moves, and zig-zag running drills are a useful introduction to defending practices which require changes of direction. Player speed can be improved in drills that require quick changes in position from one line to the next.

STAGE 2: COMPETITIVE GAME

Next, players will use these essential skills and tactics under pressure from an opponent—but often without a standard goal as a target. Competitive games are generally small-sided, so players have ample opportunities to practice what they have just learned. Since these games tend to be inherently more fun and game-like, they require less variety than skill drills in Stage 1.

PSYCHOLOGY

Small-sided competitive games are an ideal time to discuss the psychology of winning and losing—how to identify with the effort but not the result. While there are winners and losers in games, no player is an actual “loser.” You want to be appropriately supportive with players who seem to take losing too personally.

FITNESS

Three-to-five-minute small-sided games improve a player’s conditioning. The intensity is high for the duration of the drill, which improves player readiness to perform high-energy work for an extended amount of time.

STAGE 3: POSITIONAL GAME

In Stage 3, the positional game should be performed on half a standard-sized soccer field. Typically, this stage will involve the attackers playing against the defense toward a goal, with the defending side scoring by passing the ball through small goals. The Stage 3 exercise is a crucial step toward helping players integrate what they've just learned. If you cannot help your team improve at finding opportunities to perform specific skills and tactics in a Stage 3 exercise, then it is unlikely your team will generalize the skill to the standard game.

You may consider doing Stage 3 positional games that first have the attacking team play toward an end zone before playing to score on a standard goal. In an end zone game, a team scores by passing or dribbling into a marked-out area rather than shooting on a goal. The end zone game allows your attacking and defending teams to play in standard formations, but without the added dynamics and pressure of scoring on a standard-sized goal.

PSYCHOLOGY

Stage 3 is the litmus test for your team to demonstrate whether the skills and tactics learned in the previous two stages are good enough to be used in a standard game. Players need to separate foreground, i.e., the dynamic play occurring right around them, from the background, i.e., the movements of the other players and the position of the goal. For example, players can create the perfect wall pass without seeing that the best option at that moment is not to pass but to shoot on goal, an option that is open directly in front of them.

FITNESS

Stage 3 drills require players to play on a standard field, which is typically much larger than the playing area used in small-sided games. Players will run longer distances at faster speeds. Short periods of game play will introduce your team to the physical requirements of a standard game. You can increase the intensity of the drill by having players sprint back into their starting positions at the start of every new play.

3RD SECTION: STANDARD "INCORPORATION" GAME (25 MIN)

The practice ends, as it began, with a standard game. By the game's conclusion, your team should be able to demonstrate how they combine new learning with previously taught skills and tactics to expand their playing ability.

PSYCHOLOGY

An important aspect of the final game is the focus on transitions between attacking and defending. Players must be mentally focused in order to transition quickly and correctly. For example, it is not uncommon for players to drop their heads (sad) once they lose the ball, hang back (happy) once their team wins the ball, or freeze (panic) in transition rather than focus on the next task at hand. When these common psychological dynamics surface, encourage players to stay involved with the game's changes.

FITNESS

In a standard game, players require both physical and mental fitness so that the "head and body are closely linked" (Jankowski 2016, pg. 145). Maintaining a high level of game intensity will help players improve their ability to stay mentally alert over an extended period of physical exertion. Teams will need to overcome "tactical fatigue" in order to transition between multiple playing styles (Bordonau 2018, pg. 57).

Do not expect players to initially be able to maintain focus over long playing periods. When tactical fatigue is affecting team performance, evidenced by players making good decisions initially but poor ones as the game goes on, then the players should be provided more breaks during the game.



CHAPTER 3

COACHING: THE ART OF CHANGING BEHAVIOR

"The wall of frustration: (derives from) excessive importance of winning, excessive criticism, and lack of communication."

—From *The Principles of Brazilian Soccer* (Goncalves 1998, pg. 44)

"There should be no unnecessary yelling of instruction."

—Rinus Michels (Michels 2001, pg. 250)

Your mood and tone will directly influence how players react to your coaching instruction. It is important that you treat players well. The use of shame, guilt, anger, fear, and harsh physical punishments to motivate learning will decrease player motivation and contribute to player burnout if players take your tone personally and see themselves negatively. A player with a negative self-identity will have a lower tolerance for stress and thus be more easily overwhelmed by challenges. An encouraging, respectful coaching attitude is essential for players to develop self-efficacy, that is, confidence in themselves to overcome obstacles.

Good coaching is much more than setting up a drill for your players to do. However, even a perfect explanation and demonstration of a drill does not guarantee that players will learn how to do the skill or tactic well enough. Your coaching needs to change behaviors, and behaviors do not change easily. Your coaching should be deliberate and purposeful, attentive to every detail and focused on every mistake to assure the new behavior is correctly learned and remembered (Coyle 2009, pg. 51).

Coaching is two-fold. The coach's task is to stop bad habits and teach new behaviors, and this needs to be done decisively. Although learning and unlearning are separate processes, they go hand-in-hand, as one cannot be successful without the other. For example, if a player is trained to pass a ball perfectly, but there is no purposeful intervention to stop old ways of passing, the new learning may not be remembered. Under the pressure of a game a player is likely to return to old habits of passing.

The goal of coaching is to facilitate the right skills and tactics becoming deeply ingrained. However, reliance on verbal instruction alone is not enough to achieve this goal. You will need to use multiple coaching approaches. The right intervention at the right time can change the course of a season.

COACHING INTERVENTIONS

COACHING INTERVENTION: NEUROMUSCULAR TRAINING

"The great thing, then, in all education, is to make our nervous system our ally instead of our enemy."

–William James—"The father of American psychology" (James 1918, pg. 122)

"Strife inside the body equals strife with the ball."

–Marcel Lucassen (Honigstein 2015, pg.146)

"The goal is always the same: to break a skill into its component pieces."

(Coyle 2009, pg. 84)

Providing players with meaningful repetition is the most common approach to teaching skills and tactics. However, human behavior is resistant to change and prone to habits. Since correct soccer techniques and tactics can be counterintuitive, neuromuscular training should come before players practice skills with a ball. As described by neuroscientists, the general goal of neuromuscular training is to improve sensorimotor control and achieve compensatory functional stability.

In neuromuscular soccer skill training, each aspect of the soccer technique is broken down into specific body positions and simple movements in order to ensure the new skill is ingrained in the player's muscle memory. Neuromuscular training helps the player overcome the control and rigidity of the previous habits and correctly imprint the new behavior. Patiently insisting that a player hold the foot in a specific skill position can often improve player skill more than repeated verbal explanations and even demonstrations.

A player should be asked to do the skill with a ball only after the player can perfectly perform the skill positions and movements without the ball. The observant coach will notice that the specific problems not corrected in neuromuscular training will surface in the drills when the ball is introduced.

NEUROMUSCULAR TRAINING TEMPLATE

The coaching elements described in Chapter 5 conclude with specific neuromuscular training exercises. An advanced form of neuromuscular training to improve shooting can be found in the Appendix. There are four essential steps needed to complete the process for neuromuscular training of soccer skills.

1) SOCCER POSITION (ATHLETIC STANCE)

"Stand with your feet facing forward, knees softly bent, feet just wider than shoulder width, engaged at the core" (Fig. 3.1, *a* and *b*).



Fig. 3.1, *a* and *b*

COACHING POSITIONAL SOCCER

Asking players to drop into this athletic stance position will help prepare them mentally and physically to do the neuromuscular training.

2) GROUNDED SKILL POSITION

“Place your feet in the correct position for the skill and hold that position with the playing foot still touching the ground.”

Keeping the foot that will eventually strike the ball connected to the ground makes it easier for the players to hold the foot in the correct place. Connection with the ground is used to counter the pull of older, habitual body positions.

3) OPEN SKILL POSITION

“Lift the foot and hold it in the air in the correct skill position.”

The first two steps are relatively easy, but this step can be much more difficult. Once the players lift one foot from the ground, then the body can struggle to hold the correct position for a couple of reasons:

- The foot will not want to stay in the right shape without the ground as an anchor, but revert to a more natural, straightened position.
- As the foot lifts, the body also wants to lift, since the player will instinctively want the distance between the foot and the body to remain the same.

You might need to correct both problems before moving on to the next step. Not correcting the issues will likely lead to the players having difficulty performing the skill with the ball later in the practice session. Here are interventions to help correct the problems players might have with the open skill position:

- Have players place the foot back on the ground to regain the correct foot position before lifting the foot again. Give the players time to figure out how to engage the right muscle groups to balance on one foot in this awkward position. Model the correct body position for them yourself or have an advanced player do it.
- As the foot lifts, tell the players to “crunch” the center of their bodies like an accordion by tightening their stomach muscles. They should also bend their knees to counter the tendency to stretch upward as the foot lifts in the air. The distance between the foot and torso should be smaller than it was when the foot was on the ground.

In the open skill position the foot will sometimes shake as the player struggles to keep it in the right skill position without the ground as an anchor. Once players can show they are stable and poised in the “foot-off-the-ground” position, then the players are ready to move to the next step. You should remain calm and patient during this learning process since it is essential for “perfect” skill acquisition that players learn to do the open skill position correctly.

Once players can hold the open skill position, you should tell them to visualize doing the skill with an imaginary ball. Visualizing performing the skill will increase the player’s ability to do the actual skill in practice.

4) SKILL

“Perform the skill.”

After learning the body positions and movements of the skill, players are asked to perform the skill with a stationary ball. Next, players perform the skill while dribbling or moving around the area. Finally, players can accelerate after doing the skill.

COACHING INTERVENTION: FREEZING

During soccer drills, a common intervention is to stop the practice, discuss the problem, demonstrate the solution, and have the players rehearse the correction before resuming playing. This multi-step process can take precious minutes from a practice, but can be very effective at improving player techniques and tactics.

Freezing the drill not only provides an opportunity to teach a new skill but perhaps even more important, can stop a bad habit. Players want to play, and when a competitive game is stopped in the midst of the action, players get annoyed and detest the break—which they experience as a negative consequence. Players will then try not to make the same mistake, not just because of the coach’s teaching during the freeze, but also because they want to keep playing.

Letting players play is the best reward. Freezing a positive moment can inadvertently lead to the extinguishing of a positive behavior that the coach wants to reinforce. It would be

COACHING POSITIONAL SOCCER

better to talk about a positive play at a natural break, or just praise players during the run of play.

COACHING INTERVENTION: COACHING DURING THE GAME

Coaches often instruct players during a drill or game. The timing of the coaching intervention should be clearly linked to what is happening on the field so that the player has little choice but to listen and obey the directive. If you speak too soon or too late, then the coaching intervention will not be nearly as impactful.

You should be very specific about what you are trying to improve, rather than directing every play. For example, in a drill working on build up under moderate pressure, the goal is for midfielders to check to the ball and do half-turns across the body that will protect the ball. If players continue to turn into the opponent and lose the ball, you can intervene by directing them to "turn across your body" right before they receive the ball. Once they accomplish the turn, then there is no more for you to say.

Coaching within the game can help players overcome entrenched habits. Non-specific continuous coaching, i.e., joy-sticking, should be avoided. You want to train your players to listen for your instructions. Joy-sticking will lead your players to either ignore your instructions altogether or become dependent on your advice, which can encourage players to second-guess their instincts.

COACHING INTERVENTION: DRILL CHANGE

It can be difficult to know exactly how players will respond to a drill prior to a practice. Change the field size, player numbers, and rules of a game to improve player learning. Players can benefit from cones placed in the field that mark where players should run. Drill alterations are important to ensure that players are appropriately challenged.

COACHING INTERVENTION: CONSEQUENCES

"The consequences of an act affect the probability of it occurring again."

–Attributed to B.F. Skinner—behavioral psychologist

"Hiddink accepts technical and tactical mistakes. But he does not tolerate mental weaknesses because they threaten the team effort."

(Meijer 2006, pg. 103)

Players have been given physical exercises ("consequences")—for example, push-ups, sprints, knee jumps, etc.—to get them to stop stubborn habits. *Consequences should only be applied as a last resort.* Before that, you will use neuromuscular training, explanations, demonstrations, rehearsals, coaching within the game, and drill changes to improve player learning.

Consequences should not be imposed when a player makes a mistake with skills, for example, with a bad pass or a poor shot. Players who are slow to improve their technique should be asked to do simpler drills or repeat aspects of neuromuscular training until the skills improve. Punishing a poor technique will often discourage players from taking chances on performing that technique in future practices and games. For example, punishing a player who misses a shot on goal will likely result in the player becoming less inclined to shoot, rather than eager to perfect shooting technique.

The best use of consequences is when the culprit is not poor skills but mental laziness. If, after you have used other more benign interventions, players still struggle to "remember," punishing them with a push-up at the moment they make an error may improve their decision-making. Waiting for the end of practice is not as effective in changing behaviors because the response is too distant from the mistake. If the problem is particularly stubborn, then the player can do progressively more push-ups each time the same "lazy" mistake is made: one push-up for the first mistake, two push-ups for the second, and so on.

BALANCED COACHING

Practices are organized so that drills that require intensive learning of new skills and tactics alternate with competitive games where the new ideas are integrated and consolidated. Here are recommended interventions for your practices that will balance learning with playing:

- The warm-up game should be uninterrupted so that players can demonstrate that they are consolidating previous learning. You should direct players at opportune moments during the run of play and offer explanations and brief demonstrations during natural stoppages.
- With a focus on perfecting new skills and tactics, Stage 1 drills require frequent drill interruptions, rehearsals, explanations, demonstrations, drill changes and neuromuscular training. It is imperative that you intervene as much as necessary for players to learn the new skills and tactics correctly, otherwise, ensuing drills with added pressure will be much less effective.
- The small-sided games in Stage 2 should be uninterrupted as players practice the new teaching in competitive play. When necessary, direct players during the run of play to promote learning. Provide feedback and briefly demonstrate corrections between games while players recover.
- To learn how to apply the new skills and tactics playing within a formation on a standard field, players will again need intrusive coaching interventions during the Stage 3 positional games. Freezing the game at important moments in order to rehearse corrections will help players integrate the new ideas. You have an opportunity to provide explanations and further demonstrations between plays, since the positional games can entail frequent restarts. Alter the drill to ensure correct learning and player success.
- The standard game, at the end of practice, should not be interrupted very frequently. Offer directives and explanations during the run of play and brief demonstrations at the break. Freeze the game one (or two) occasions to support the team's incorporating the learning from the practice with lessons from previous trainings.

CHAPTER 4

INTRODUCTION TO THE PRACTICE DIAGRAMS

GLOSSARY OF PRACTICE DIAGRAM SYMBOLS

In the practice diagrams, the red players typically denote the players who are the focus of the exercise and the white players are their opponents. Players in yellow represent bumpers (Fig. 4.1).



Fig. 4.1

THE 4-3-3 FORMATION (11V11)

The practice plans are based around your team playing a 4-3-3, which signifies that your team will play four players in the defense, three in the midfield, and three in attack. The goalkeeper is assumed to be on the field and thus is not generally mentioned in the line-up configuration—otherwise it would be called a 1-4-3-3, since you start the numbering from the defense moving toward the forwards.

The 4-3-3 is adaptive to a variety of playing styles. As shown in Fig. 4.2, your team will have dominant numbers in the center of the field with the three midfielders (A), access to the important wide, forward areas with the wing forwards (B), and ample coverage in defense and support with build up with the four defenders (D). The center forward also provides an important target (C). Three forwards also allow your team to effectively press the opponent's backline. The defenders and the attackers are typically spread out across the field in a line, but the three midfielders can be placed in a number of different ways:

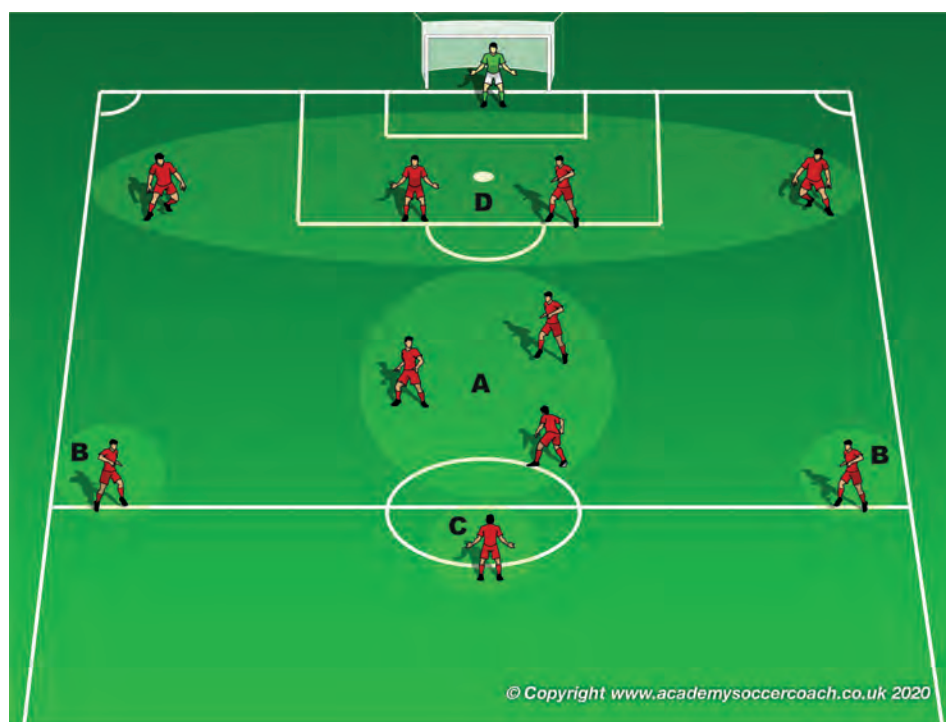


Fig. 4.2

- The three central midfielders in an off-set triangle, a dynamic formation (Fig. 4.2).
- The three central midfielders placed in a 2-1, a defensive formation (Fig. 4.3).



Fig. 4.3

- The three central midfielders placed in a 1-2, an attacking formation (Fig. 4.4).

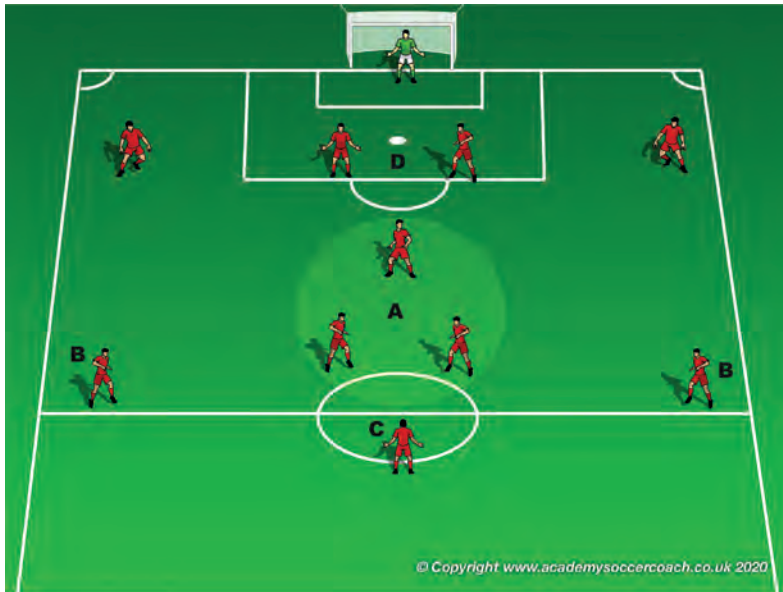


Fig. 4.4