

LWYSA
Training Program
Crossfire Book 1
Building a Style of Play



Written by Jimmy Gabriel

Lake Washington Youth Soccer Association
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WELCOME TO THE LAKE WASHINGTON YOUTH SOCCER ASSOCIATION FAMILY OF PROGRAMS

In 1967, a group of individuals got together and formed an Association for our youth, centered around the game of soccer, which has endured and developed the following organizational philosophy.

VISION

To be recognized by our membership and soccer community as a world-class provider of youth soccer services.

MISSION

To promote the game of soccer and to provide opportunities for all youth under the age of nineteen who register with us, to play affiliated soccer at a level commensurate with ability and interest. We will emphasize the development of self-esteem, good sportsmanship, fitness, achievement, teamwork and skill through the playing of the game; and provide educational opportunities to further develop all players, coaches, referees and administrators.

The Vision and Mission statements above are our creed. Following in this thought, the Association takes great pride in its approach of teaching life's lessons to our youth. This environment is intended to create an enjoyable soccer experience as well as develop young athletes.

Many individuals have contributed to the success of the Association Programs over the years. To all those individuals, the Association is truly grateful for the contributions and sacrifices they made in behalf of our youth.

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Crossfire Book 1

Building a Style of Play

A style of play is a selected method of playing the game that can be installed gradually by applying the right coaching methods in practice. After witnessing some of the best boys and girls teams in the 2003 Hawaii Regional championship I felt that we as a club should look at adopting some of the main features that went into their style of play so that our teams could have an equal chance of beating them and advancing to the Final Four on a regular basis.

The performances by the various Crossfire teams were good and the coaches did a great job of getting the best out of the players, but there was no basic pattern to these performances that could be pinpointed as a typical Crossfire way of playing. Dick McCormick's team defended especially well in most of the games I saw and was unlucky to be eliminated after an outstanding effort against an extremely strong team in the quarterfinals. Dick's team's strong points were all around effort and defensive discipline. Alan Hinton's team gave some rounded tactical performances to reach the quarterfinals where they were beaten by a Colorado team that had a difference maker in the shape of an extremely fast wing forward who could also score goals. (That description reminds me of Alan when he played for Derby County). Strong points were attacking, build up, and general defending. Bernie James's U14 boys were tactically sound using young Kyle Montgomery's speed and classic finishing skills to round off some direct attacking play which was supported by some tight marking defensive play. Strong points were attacking penetration and overall defending. Bernie's U13 boys also played well to reach the quarterfinals but they ran into a young team of extremely talented Mexican/American players who I was told dominated the game. The strong points that I saw were defensive and build-up play, although I must admit that I didn't see this team play a full game. As it now stands, we have teams finding ways to win because of the tactical shrewdness of the coaches, and although this should continue, I would like to see a basic style of play introduced that would show our teams as technically polished and more rounded in their tactical awareness.

The fact that all four teams qualified for the 'Regional Quarterfinals' and Bernie's U14 Boys became the first Crossfire team to win a 'Regional Championship' was extremely exciting. But my thoughts were that to improve our team play in general, we need to develop a style of play that matches the

big clubs from Colorado, Cal South, Cal North and any other State that gets their teams to the National Championship on a consistent basis.

Rules of Risk

As I watched the better teams play, I realized that their general style of play had a tactical flow that was based on the rules of risk. The extremely risky plays, where there was a good chance of losing possession of the ball, were attempted in the attacking third of the field. The less risky plays were reserved for the midfield areas of the field, and the no-risk plays were apparent in the defensive third of the field.

Defensive Strategy

All of the good teams knew that they should have at least nine players goal-side of the ball when defending with two forwards attempting to delay the opposition attack by pressing the ball. The good teams were also quick to drop defensively to clog up any spaces that would otherwise be available for the attack and showed great awareness of when and where to hold their defensive lines before their forwards and midfielders applied pressure to the opposing attackers. Once they had delayed the opponents attack the two strikers on the defensive team dropped back until they were instructed by the midfielders to first hold their positions and then to advance to the ball. This was the signal for all defending players to work as an organized group in order to apply pressure to the ball carrier and supporting teammates. The success of this method of defending allowed the team to regain possession of the ball and spring forward onto the attack. However, if the defensive strategy failed, the defenders were ready to drop back once again before resetting their back line in a deeper area of the field. Throughout these defensive actions the team shape was compact and closed, allowing their opponents as little attacking space as possible.

Transition

Immediately after a defending team regained possession of the ball, the tight defensive team shape was re-arranged into a much more open, spread out type of shape. Players who were defensively supporting their colleagues from five yards or less opened up that distance to ten or even fifteen yards to secure more attacking space for their team. The quicker the change happened the more effective it was at catching the opponents out of position. Good players can take advantage of moments like this and defending teams that were slow to get back paid a heavy toll in goals conceded. However, if

the quick counter-attack was not available, the midfielders were expected to slow the tempo by engaging in some short safe pass routines.

Build-up

Good soccer is not only about quick attacking breaks on an opponent retreating in disarray, it is also about a team advancing the ball under control from the defensive area to the midfield area and eventually into the attacking area to pose a threat to the opponents goal. The combined movement and ball control skills involved in this type of attacking thrust is one of the main coaching points in soccer. Most coaches spend a large part of each practice session teaching the players how to possess the ball while moving it towards some sort of target. Many attacking moves start with the goalkeeper collecting the ball and advancing it to one of the back line players. If the opposing defenders do not press these back line players, the keeper should feed the ball to one of them by rolling it into an area that allows an easy collection enabling the player to start the attack. The ball can then be advanced to the midfield and beyond by players combining passing and dribbling skills according to the choices presented to them by supporting team mates and their own awareness of the rules of risk.

Should an advancing player feel pressure, either real or imagined, while possessing the ball in the defending third of the field, then the ball should be transferred out of that area immediately by clearing it over the midfield and into the attacking area. However, if a player feels comfortable while advancing the ball, that player should be allowed to move forward as far as possible and a teammate should drop back to cover the vacated position. Also, any player who can change the point of attack by passing the ball long and accurately can help this type of controlled movement by switching the play to the weaker defensive areas.

In general, the midfield stage of the advancement is at best a controlled possession stage designed to open up entry into the attacking third by probing for openings. If openings cannot be found down the middle of the field, then perhaps they can be found down one wing or another, but whatever happens the attacking team does not want to give the ball up easily by attempting to force the play through one area or another.

Attack

Entry into the attack zone can be greatly helped by coordinated attacking movements involving a forward player dropping back into midfield to open up space to collect the ball while leaving space for a teammate to move into.

This backward movement of the forward can also create space for an attacking midfielder to break into. That, combined with accurate through passes, will almost always create trouble for the opposing defenders.

If the attack down the middle is blocked by sheer numbers of defending players, the play should be switched to attack the wing areas to provide the central attackers with goal scoring opportunities from cross balls. This area is made for the dribblers and the 'give and go' passers who terrorize defenders with their speed, quickness, and general elusiveness, using these assets to provide goal-scoring chances for themselves and their teammates.

Summing-up

The basic ingredients that go into good attacking and defending plays are the use of simple tactical guidelines based on the knowledge of the rules of risk and the execution of simple techniques like tackling, stealing, and intercepting on defense, and controlling, dribbling, passing, crossing, and shooting on attack. The time has also come for coaches to identify the playmakers and give them roles that allow their influence to affect the team's performance by controlling the offensive and defensive flow of play and taking full advantage of their intelligence, tactical awareness, and technical superiority.

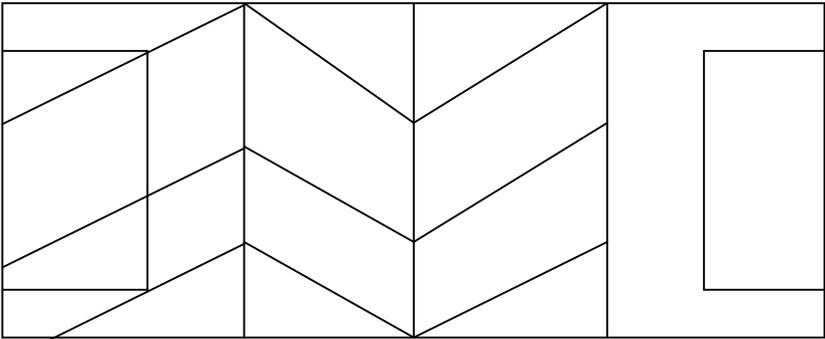
Our Crossfire style of play must involve a basic style of defending that the coaches agree on as the style that, when learned by the players, will allow our teams to deny opponents easy access to goal. We must also find a way of encouraging our players to build attacks by controlling the ball in the midfield so that they can enter the attack zone in a more controlled and balanced manner. In that attack zone, we must show that we can be dangerous by creating central and wing attacks that involve aggressive dribbling, coordinated player movement, finely targeted penetration passes and crosses, along with accurate, cleanly hit strikes on target.

Of course all of this looks great on paper, but the real hard work involves installing a series of drills and games that will allow Crossfire coaches to train and teach our players to play soccer the way we want them to. With some patience and lots of hard work, the Crossfire coaches can help to create a soccer program for youth players that has the capability of teaching them to understand why the great Pele called soccer the 'beautiful game'.

The Tactical Rules of Risk

Area 1 Defense (Low Risk)

The first risk area is from the opposing goal line out to the thirty-yard area. This area is called a 'low risk' area because the defenders should have enough time to get into their defensive positions to stop any quick counter-attack by their opponents. To ensure that the defense has time to form their defensive shape, as soon as the ball is lost in this area, a forward is required to immediately pressure the ball carrier, delaying any attempt of a quick counter-attack.



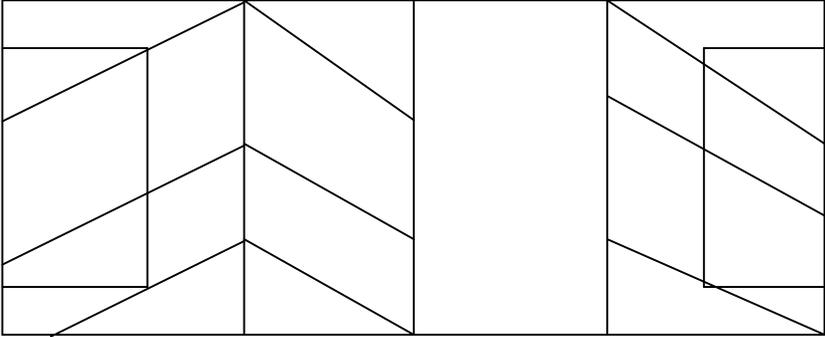
The Defense

Defensive preparation starts with the forming of a watchtower group of defensive minded players who can support the attack from a deeper position while also being in position to counter any quick attacking moves. The forming of the watchtower, combined with the alert forward pressuring the opponent on the ball, allows the other players to retreat and regroup to form the defensive team shape. Once the back line and midfield line have combined to form their defensive shape, the two forwards can retreat to link up and complete that defensive shape.

Area 2 Defense (Medium/Low Risk)

The second risk area is from the half way line to 30 yards from the opposing goal. This area is thought of as a 'medium to low risk' area because by the time the attackers enter this area the defensive shape should be formed and ready to apply defensive pressure to the attack. Defenders should be a bit

cautious about engaging too high in this area because some teams like to spring their speedy forwards with long penetration passes over the defensive block if the back line can be drawn high enough to allow space for such a pass.



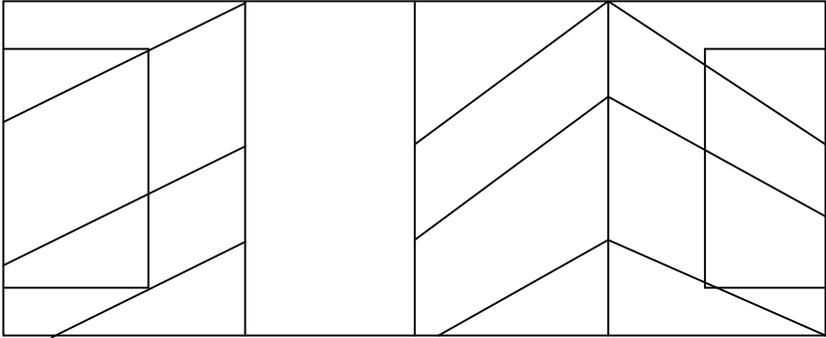
The Defense

This area of the field usually sees the start of the real competitive action when forwards on the defending team start to engage the back line players by attempting to apply defensive pressure to the ball carrier. The main body of the defense (made up of midfield and back line players) is still in a solid block behind the forwards when this defensive action begins, but is ready to support the forwards at the first sign of a passing, dribbling, or controlling error by the players possessing the ball. Also, as a tactical maneuver, a team that is down a goal may decide to press forward into this area in larger numbers to attempt to force a turnover.

Area 3 Defense (High/Medium Risk)

The third risk area extends from the half way line to 30yds from the defenders goal line. This area is described as a 'High to Medium risk' area because when the opposing team advances the ball into this area the defending team is one through pass or penetrating dribble away from giving up a goal scoring opportunity. It is also a dangerous area to lose possession of the ball while trying to start an attacking build up because the team shape will be spreading out to accommodate that build up and that would give the opponents easy access to dangerous attacking spaces. As a precaution, midfielders should limit their passing range to short safe passes between

themselves and their supporting teammates until it is deemed safe to attempt to change the point of attack.



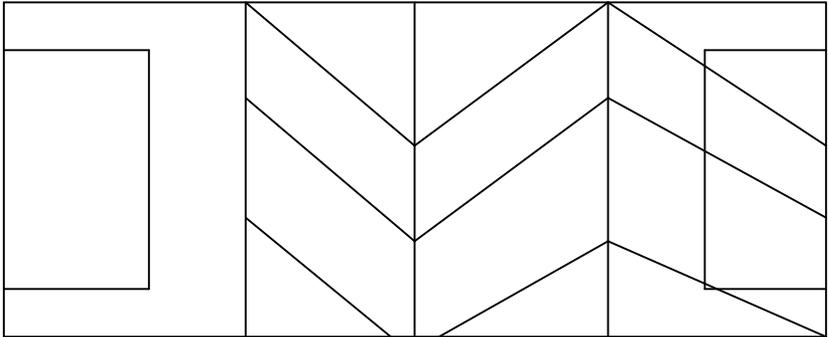
The Defense

Most teams start defending as a team when the ball is advanced into this area because their main defensive force will have gathered there ready to apply pressure to the opposing ball carriers. When the opposing attack arrives in this area, the midfielder and back line defenders take over the main defending operation from the nuisance type of defending supplied by the two forwards. Now we see real defensive action as the two lines of defense (three when you include the keeper) start to engage with the attackers. This is the main show as the strengths of each team come together. The defenders show a solid front wherever the attackers have the ball while the attackers try to out-manuever the defenders by continuously changing the point of attack. They also use their ball control skills to retain possession of the ball in their attempt to penetrate into the final attacking area. In this area, the defensive team must be organized, informed, and mobile so that they can retain their defensive balance and shape no matter what form of trickery or tactical alertness the attacking opponents show. That mobility will have the defensive block moving north, south, east or west according to the direction to goal the attacking side takes.

Area 4 Defense (High risk area)

The fourth risk area is the area stretching from the goal a team is defending to some thirty yards out from that goal line. This area is titled 'high risk' because when the opposing team advances the ball into this area, the defenders goal will be in an extremely dangerous situation. Also, should the

team choose to start their build-up from this area and lose possession of the ball, then their goal would again come under the 'high risk' of being scored upon. Almost all goals scored and a huge percentage of the passes or crosses setting up these goals come from this area, so you can see how important it is for the defending team to guard the area well.



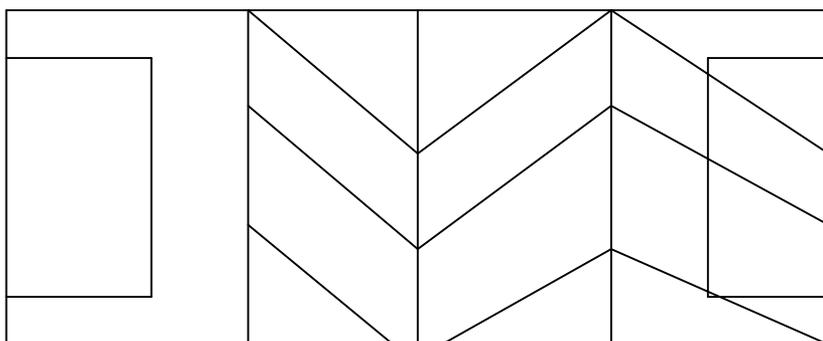
The Defense

When under attack, the 'high risk' area of the field will normally be defended by a goalkeeper and a retreating block of players that should provide the defense with more players than the attackers have in this area. This should help to limit the goal scoring chances sought after by the attacking team. The defenders jobs are based on denying the attackers time and space to attempt to cross, head, volley or shoot on goal. Blocking goal bound shots or crosses and clearing any loose ball blindly up-field or into touch are acceptable ways of defending this high risk area. Players who are clearing the ball, whether it is a head or foot clearance, need to get height and distance on the ball if possible. This will cut down the chance of the clearance being intercepted by an opponent in this dangerous area. It is also important that each defender has the discipline to stay with a mark whether the requirement is to mark a dangerous area of space or an opponent. In this area, especially when the defensive block has retreated into the penalty area, communicating with, listening to, and supplying cover for your nearest teammate is an essential part of top caliber defending.

Area 1 Offense (High Risk)

This area of the field is usually uncontested by opposing defenders when the attacking team has established control of the ball. Most teams do not attempt

to build from the back preferring to deliver the ball long into attacking areas where their players can vie with their opponents for ball possession. However, as we climb the soccer ladder, many teams in those higher brackets do start their ball control tactics in this area of the field. I believe that there are more pluses than minuses for the team whose coach lets them start the attack from the back, especially if the players have reached an age when they can be responsible for their actions. At the regional tournament, most of the better teams encouraged their players to play the ball out from the back and this set up a style of play that allowed them to dictate the tempo of the game.



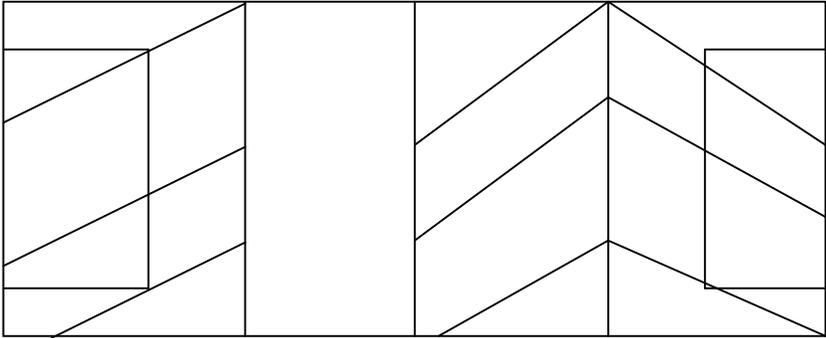
The Attack

An attacking team that prefers to build-up from the back starts their attack when the keeper throws or passes the ball to a back line player. This player uses the extra space (given up by defending forwards dropping back to get in line with their teams defensive shape) to gather and turn with the ball. Even if the defending team leaves a forward or two to contest this type of build up, there are enough back players and enough space to allow ball possession without too much difficulty. Some back line players use any uncontested space to pass the ball around to each other in an attempt to get comfortable on the ball, especially in the opening minutes of a game.

Area 2 Offense (Medium/High Risk)

This is the area where the team's midfield playmaker should attempt to take charge of the attacking flow according to tactical arrangement for this game.

When possible, the playmaker should exchange short simple passes with other midfielders and perhaps a forward to allow the team time to spread from a defensive shape to an attacking one. Once the team shape has spread out, the playmaker can move the team on by changing the point of attack either directly forward or sideways seeking to take advantage of any positional mistake made by the retreating defenders.



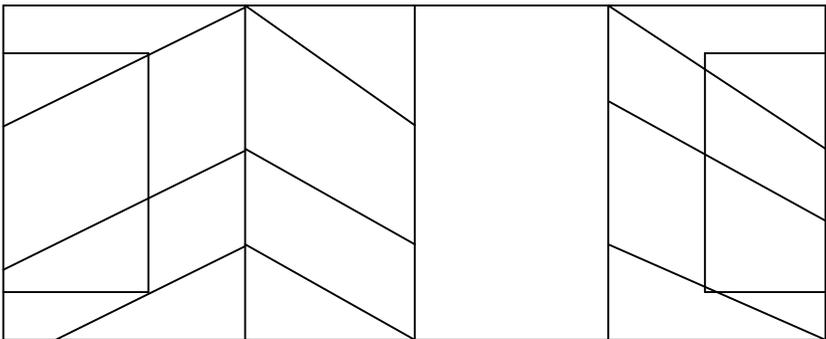
The Attack

Offensively, the team possessing the ball is looking to deliver it into the opponents half of the field to set off the attack. Teams who possess the ball in this area usually have some fast, slick forwards who are capable of out-running their opponents to get to any type of through pass. (Liverpool's Michael Owen is a good example of this style of forward). The tactics involve midfield and back line players moving the ball around the deeper area to attract the attention of the defending team and to hopefully lure one or two defenders out of position. They can capitalize on the situation by having a forward race into the gap that's been created to collect a through pass. Possessing the ball in this area takes some passing and control skills, but as the opposing defenders are usually reluctant to break their defensive shape, the team in possession of the ball can outnumber their opponents by about a two to one ratio. This will allow the midfielders time to set up any tactical approach they might be working on, like forwards or midfielders breaking into penetration space.

Area 3 Offense (Medium/Low Risk)

This is the area where the attacking team must work hard to retain possession of the ball before attempting to deliver entry passes into the main

attacking area. It would be wonderful if all entry passes penetrated the opponents back line either through the middle or down one of the wings, but that is not realistic, especially if the defense has formed into its solid block shape. In such circumstances, we must show less ambition and be content to work our way into the attacking area by probing for openings. As we attack in this area, it is still advisable to show some caution because the team shape will be stretched across the field and any square pass that is intercepted by the opponents could set them up for a quick counter-attack before those open spaces can be closed.



The Attack

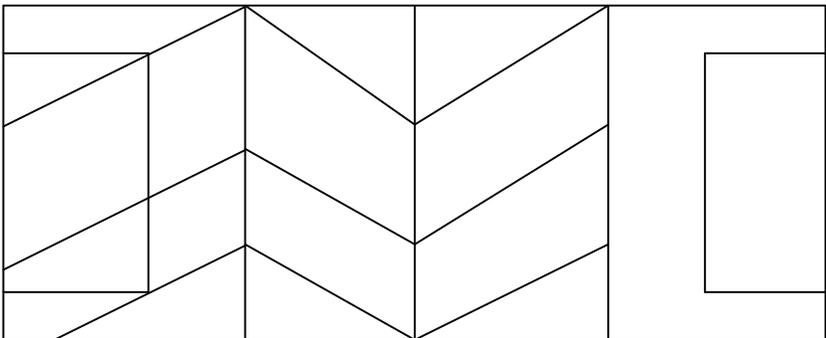
The attacking team must show patience in controlling the ball by moving it around and by using their natural playmaker's passing skills to find runners breaking forward. It is in these tight circumstances that forwards should coordinate their runs with midfielders. This may be done by having one or more forwards move back into the midfield while the midfielders move forward into the holes created by the runs of the forwards. When a forward makes a run back, unmarked, into the midfield, space will have been created for that player to receive the ball and turn or, if that run attracts a marker space will have been created in the attack zone for another forward or midfielder to run into. These types of moves are necessary to help the attacking team gain passing or dribbling entry into the attacking area to threaten the opponents' goal.

Area 4 Offense (Low Risk)

This area is called a low risk area because there is little or no immediate danger to the attacking teams goal if they lose possession of the ball in this

area. This allows the attacking players to risk losing the ball by attempting to dribble or shoot using elaborate or fancy soccer moves like a dribbling drag-back or step-over move or by attempting an overhead bicycle kick or in fact anything that could cause the ball to end up in the back of the opponents net.

Attacking players are selected to play the position because of the natural talents they possess. These talents can range from the ability to cross a ball with great accuracy to the ability to shoot or head the ball into the goal. Players are also selected to play forward because of their exceptional dribbling and passing abilities that allows them to penetrate the opponents' defense to set up goal scoring opportunities. This is the area where the attacking forwards and midfielders are expected to do their best work by making and scoring goals and by so doing reward the team for their hard work.



The Attack

This is the area where the attacking players can use their imagination and wonderful ball skills to create goal-scoring opportunities for themselves and their teammates. They must also keep the pressure on the defense by retaining possession of the ball while they probe that defense for weaknesses. This area is where the game is won or lost according to the accuracy of the finishing and the high or low standard of defense on display. Certainly it helps to be able to enter the attacking area with the ball under control more times than your opponent does but it will be the excellence shown in the finishing of chances that will determine the winner not the number of chances created.

Summing-up

Once the players recognize that the laws of risk are the key to understanding the basic tactics of offense and defense, they will have taken their first huge step in understanding how to play the game. As basic as the rules of risk might appear, ignoring them can lead to costly mistakes by individual players and that could reflect badly on the result of the game. Players do not want to let their team down, especially by making a naïve type of mistake simply because they do not understand the rules of risk. It is therefore up to us, the coaches, to educate the players in the rules of risk as early as possible in their soccer career, and to reinforce the advantages of using this knowledge as the solid base of their tactical awareness.

Defending Strategies for Crossfire Teams

Full field defensive strategies arise from the ability of the players to defend as a team by using the three groups of outfield players to form themselves into an organized 'team-block' of defenders. This 'team-block' can then be positioned by the coach to move forward, backwards or sideways in order to meet the tactical demands of any given defensive situation. The forming and organization of this 'team-block' is a necessary part of building a competent defensive structure through which the coach can apply the tactics needed to disrupt the opponents attacking plans.

There are many strategies for defense that can be adopted to restrict goal-scoring opportunities for the opposing team. These strategies range from dropping back to defend around the edge of the penalty area, to pressing high to deny the opponents easy passes from deep in their own half. There are times in a game when either of these two strategies might be used successfully to gain an advantage over the opponents, yet both are tactically poles apart. One calls for a deep drop in order to apply a low pressure situation to protect the space in front of or even inside the penalty area and the other calls for early and advanced defending to apply a high pressure front to the opponents in their own defensive half of the field. Inside the boundary line of these two strategies is the 'let's give some ground but no more than they deserve' strategy that has the defensive block positioned in the central area of the field. This is the most common strategy used by teams on defense. Coaches using this strategy are saying to their opponents "You have our permission to use your deep space to begin the attacking build-up but we will battle you in the midfield space and in our own defensive space."

So we have three main defensive strategies to think about when setting out our defensive tactics for each game. One calls for a deep drop by the combined defensive forces, the second calls for a high press in the opponent's defensive half of the field, and the third calls for the defending to commence in the midfield area of the field. How do we decide which one to use? When opposed by a team that I felt might want to use up their attacking energy early in the game in an attempt to over-run us, I would use the deep drop strategy to ensure that my team covered as much of the attacking space as possible in and around the penalty area to make it harder for the attackers to create goal scoring opportunities. The obvious reason behind these tactics is to guard against losing a couple of early goals. As the energy leaves the attackers, I would ask my defensive back line to advance their holding line to somewhere in the midfield area so that we could use our

players freshness to apply defensive pressure higher up the field. Eventually, I could advance the defensive front to apply high-pressure tactics in the opponent's defensive area of the field, especially if the defensive tactics used in the low and middle pressure areas had not produced enough attacking control to allow us to score a goal. So we see that in one game a coach can apply three different tactical forms of team defense. This is made possible by keeping the defensive team block together as a solid unit regardless of the areas of the field you want the team to defend. However, when our team is in the high press mode, it would be to our advantage to remind our back line (especially in the younger teams) that the furthest they can advance as a defensive line is the halfway line because the offside rule begins and ends at that point. I believe that once we have our 'team-block' of players defending together as a large unit, we will have a force that will be most difficult to break down. So it's important that coaches know how to position individual defenders within that defensive shape and council them in such a way that they are aware of the importance of these positional duties. The forming of the defensive shape can make a team defensively strong, but that is only true if the players know their individual and collective responsibilities. The total shape is made up of four players groups;

Goalkeeper---Back line---Midfield line---Forwards

Each line of defenders has different responsibilities that they must adhere to if the defending purpose is to be fulfilled successfully. Also, each individual defender has a job to do. Part of that job is to supply cover for the nearest defending partner should that partner need some assistance.

The Goalkeeper and Back Line Defenders

The goalkeeper, apart from his normal job of saving shots and collecting crosses, must organize, direct, and 'sweep' behind the back line. The back line and goalkeeper are responsible for the penetration space shown to the attacking team. If they show the opponents too much penetration space, then a long ball over the heads of the back line defenders can provide an opportunity for any fast attacking forward to go one on one with their goalkeeper, and that's making life too easy for the opponents. However, if they drop back too far, the opposing attack can move the ball close enough to fire shots on goal or send crosses into the penalty area without having to penetrate behind the back line defenders. Knowing how much penetration space to show the attackers without providing easy penetration opportunities, and holding the back line at that point, allows the defending team shape to apply pressure to the attacking team by closing in on the ball carrier and the

nearest support players without feeling threatened by a long penetration pass over the back of the defense. The back line defenders are the players who must retain a cool calculating approach to be absolutely sure that they have a distinct advantage over the attacker before challenging for the ball. When a goalkeeper or back line defender makes a mistake, the team usually pays by losing a goal, so they must make good decisions.

The Midfielders

Once the back line establishes the holding position, the defending forwards and midfield players are free to pressure the attackers by hunting down the ball carrier and applying a blanket style of pressure on the attacking team. The midfield defenders are referred to as the hunters of the soccer team because they hunt in packs of two or three when closing in on a ball carrier and his/her supporting players. When the attacking team attempts to play the ball through midfield, the defending midfielders will combine forces to squeeze their attacking space. Some players get into position to pressure the ball carrier while others stay with their marking assignments and everybody communicates to each other. When this is done they are all in position to challenge their opponents to regain possession of the ball.

The Forwards

As the first line of defense, the forwards are given the task of forcing their attacking opponents to start their attack down one or the other of the wing areas, or in certain circumstances down the central area. Once the ball has been advanced beyond the position of the defending strikers, they should look to deny any easy pass-backs to the opposing center backs from the attacking midfield players. Also they can keep an eye open for any available attacking space to be ready to assist the next attack should their team regain possession of the ball.

So we see that the team defense is a collection of players who have different job assignments according to the line they are in. Once these lines learn how to combine together in a united front, we can apply some 'team block' strategies to our defending tactics. Let's take a look at some of these strategies and see how we might coach them to our teams. To examine those responsibilities, we should have a look at the individual and group tactics that are involved in the make up of the defensive block. Within the shape of the defensive block, the coach can apply such strategies as dropping, pressing, channeling, holding the back line and trapping players' off-side, and to be honest, most really good defensive teams know when and where to apply each of those strategies in any one game. When we examine

these defensive team block strategies, we see that there are five separate methods of defending that involve coordinated movement by all team members. Even the two strikers who have less defensive responsibility than the other players are required to play a role in each of these strategies. Let's look at the five defensive block strategies and see if we can find some sort of order to what comes first then second etc.

In my experience, full team defensive block tactics follow this order:

Dropping---Holding---Pressing---Trapping---Channeling

Dropping as a Team (Group Responsibilities)

As soon as a team clearly loses possession of the ball, the players should drop back to form a more condensed shape by positioning themselves closer together. That shape should be made up of players dropping back into the defensive positions that have been assigned to them. (There are times when an advancing fullback may be caught out of position when overlapping onto attack and the vacated position needs to be covered by a teammate who is in a better position to do so.) This drop, added to the condensing of the team shape, is needed to deny the attacking team the space they seek, first for a quick counter-attack and second for an uncontested series of passes, dribbles and the eventual shots on goal. The drop is also designed to deny the attackers easy penetration space from a long penetration pass being hit over the back of the defense to some breakaway forward. Once the initial attacking threat is thwarted, and the attacking team has settled for a more controlled buildup, the defending team will form into a condensed team shape made up of a back line, a midfield line, and a front line, to move forward, backwards, or sideways as an organized unit attempting to deny their opponents playing space as they try to recover the ball.

Holding (Condensing the Defensive Space)

By holding the line, the back four or back three players are setting the offside line for the opposing forwards. If the forwards go beyond this line of defenders before a forward pass is sent to them, then they will be ruled offside. This rule forces the forward players into staying in front of or level with the defensive line. The back line now has the advantage of stopping the forwards from using the tactical maneuver of pushing their line back. This maneuver has been used to create space between the defensive back line and their midfield line allowing the forwards the opportunity to go back to collect the ball in that undefended space. Holding that line and using it as an

offside tool needs a central player with vision, character, and a good strong voice so that the other back line defenders are in no doubt when and where to hold the line.

Pressuring the Ball (First Second and Third Defender)

The first defenders go directly to the ball carriers, stopping about a yard and a half away to prevent the ball carriers from having an easy opportunity to dribble the ball directly past them. The yard and a half distance should be close enough to the ball carriers to force them to focus on the ball, taking their other visual choices away from them. These first defenders should be positioned so that the weight is on their back foot, enabling them to retreat explosively if the attacker knocks the ball past their position. If the dribbler continues to run the ball forward without attempting to dribble it directly past, the defender should backtrack, retaining the yard and a half distance, and wait for a chance to tackle or steal the ball away from the dribbler. When possible, second defenders should support the first defenders, directing them to force the dribbler towards their position so that they can combine forces to double up on the dribbler. The third defenders in the area should mark up on any supporting attackers to limit the choices of the ball carrier.

Trapping

This method of defending involves the back line moving forward as a group to catch the opposing players in an offside position. Defending players can trap when a ball is passed back by an attacking player whose teammate is put under pressure as the ball is received and is forced to clear it first touch into the penetration space behind the back line. A two or three yard step up by the back line as the ball is rolled back will almost certainly catch the opposing forwards in an offside position.

Other times to trap are:

- When an attacker runs towards the ball to deliver a free kick into the defenders penalty area
- When a ball has been headed or punched clear in a corner kick situation.

The times not to trap are:

- When the attacker on the ball has his head up and is under no pressure to play the ball
- When a midfielder is making a forward run from a deep position

- When a forward is making a run across the back line of the defense
- When the opponents take a throw-in.

Trapping becomes an individual decision only when the last defender is clearly isolated with a lone forward behind the back line of defense and a timely step up will catch the forward in an offside position.

Channeling the Opponent

Channeling the opponent means that the defender approaches the ball carrier in such a way that the opponent is directed towards the outside or inside of that defender's position. By blocking one side off with controlled/restraint positioning, the defender can force the dribbler outside down a wing or inside to the middle area of the field, wherever that defender feels the attacker can be least effective. Some coaches prefer to keep the opposing play out wide while others want the attackers to compete against the center of their defense. It is also tactically possible to combine both methods of channeling by showing the back line players to the outside channels and as the play advances up the field showing the midfield or wing ball carrier inside towards the central strength of the defense.

Younger players can begin to learn about channeling by being asked to channel opponents onto their weaker foot. This simple tactical move will accomplish two things. First, it will give the defender an advantage as the opponent is forced to play the weaker foot against the defender's stronger foot. Second, it will help the attacker to realize the importance of developing both feet. This will help all of the players, especially when this method of defending is practiced in training sessions.

Recovering the Ball

The ball is recovered by tackling, stealing, intercepting, or by forcing the attacker to play it out of bounds. These moves have the defender winning the ball so that they can play it again. This is extremely important in a player's development because it allows the player to instantly change defense into offense. Other defensive moves have the player blocking or clearing the ball away from the danger area. That generally leads to the opponent regaining control of the ball usually somewhere far away from the critical defensive area. As a coach, I would much prefer that my players use their defensive skills to regain possession of the ball, but that can be dangerous at times in the high risk areas of the field. However, it pays to know which of these ball-winning methods are most effective when applied to the defensive strategies used at the highest level. If we were to ask any

normal spectator how a team wins possession of the ball, in most instances they would say, "by tackling the opposing player." However, if we study the defending habits used in any top professional game, we will see that the majority of time the ball changes possession is due to a player intercepting the ball or forcing the attacker into an error that causes the ball to go out of bounds. The tackle has in fact become a huge cause for concern in that most tackles are slide tackles where the defending players leave their feet to slide at the ball carrier in an attempt to knock the ball away. If the defenders make contact with the attacking players the result is usually a yellow or red card caution to the defenders and an injury to the attackers. Because of this, I prefer to teach my players to tackle for the ball without ever sliding and whenever possible to try to steal the ball rather than charge into a tackle. Stealing the ball makes players aware that the ball can be won by stealth. This means out-thinking opponents rather than out-muscling them. Also, the good thing about stealing the ball is that the defender recovers the ball to use it to set up the next attack. Nevertheless, the defender who steals or tackles for the ball needs to get into the control/restraint defensive position when confronting the dribbler and needs to be ready to adjust that position quickly if the opponent attempts to dribble past. I believe that players slide tackle because they do not know how to apply the control/restraint position or because they are too lazy to do so. Either way they find that they can make up for this discrepancy in their game by launching themselves at their opponents without regard for their own or their opponent's safety. We, the coaches, have to discourage this type of play.

Summing-up

Teaching players to defend as a team can make the team very difficult to beat, especially if the coach includes tactics that will limit the influence of the better players on the opposing team. I have tried to show that there are several ways of defending as a block of players. When used properly, an organized group of players can choose to use any one of several different tactics to slow down the opponents until they can be stripped of the ball. The defensive tactics should be shaped to deprive the opposition of the time and space needed to set up an attack or to block off the penetration space needed to create one v one goal-scoring opportunities. When perfected, team defending is a powerful weapon that can be adjusted to match your team's strengths against the opponent's weakness, a tactic that can deprive the opposition of goal scoring opportunities regardless of the different attacking styles of play the team might use.

Transition Onto Attack

Transition is a word used to describe the tactical and physical reactions of the players when a change of ball possession from one team to the other has occurred. When a team loses ball possession, the attacking mind-set of the players must instantly change to a defensive mind-set, and the forward movement of the attackers becomes the backward movement of defenders. Every player has a role to play on offense and defense, and each player has to be able to ditch one of those roles immediately in order to take up the other role when the situation demands it. The speed of the mental transition from defense to offense and vice versa is also important if that transition is to move smoothly from one aspect of team play to another, for it is in this tactical area that the players are asked to respond in certain ways.

There are four different responses that I favor, two on transition to offense and two on transition to defense. Let's look at defense first. The attacking team has lost possession of the ball in the opponent's defensive area of the field. The first thing the forwards have to do is to immediately try to close down the player with the ball while the other players drop back to form the condensed defensive team shape. If the forwards do a good job, they will cause the player on the ball to delay any forward attacking movement that could turn into a quick counter attack against an unformed defensive outfit. What the forwards do is give their teammates time to form their defensive shape. Once that is done, they drop back to take up a position as the first line of that defense. The second response is that of the midfield and back line players who drop back as quickly as possible as soon as the opponents secure possession of the ball. Their job is to form and hold two lines of defense with the back line positioned across an area deep enough to make the opponents think twice about attempting any long penetration passes. Once the defensive team has performed both of these maneuvers and have forced the attackers into a holding pattern for the moment, they should be ready to match their defensive tactics against their opponents attacking tactics on even terms. What they have done is to stop any quick counter attack by the opponents that could sweep through an unprotected midfield and expose the watchtower group of defenders before they can regroup as a team to form a defensive team block.

On the other hand, let's look at the team that has just gained possession of the ball to see what they should have in mind while starting their attacking moves. Their first thought should be to try to counterattack their opponents at speed. Accurate long to medium range forward passes to space that find

their mark will allow the forward and midfield players to collect the ball and dribble quickly at the back line defenders exposing them to more attacking numbers than they can handle. However, most teams prepare for this possibility by leaving a watchtower line of three or even four defenders whose job is to prepare for the possibility of a counter attack if ball possession is lost while their team is attacking. Even so, a well-executed counter attack that springs forward quickly and in good numbers can overrun the watchtower. The second tactical move on offense is to keep possession of the ball until the attacking shape has been formed by players taking up more advanced and wider positions before moving the ball forward onto attack. Two or three central midfield players, one of whom would be recognized as the team playmaker, usually conduct this delay process. The ball control exhibited by these players and the subsequent forward attacking thrust that is developed from using it as a control base is essential to providing balance to the attacking movement. It is also important that the playmaker takes charge of the final delivery pass that should provide the quality needed to start any potentially deadly attack.

These are the defensive and offensive tactics that I see being used by the better teams so that they can take advantage of any hesitation shown by opponents who are not as tactically prepared for the transitional process as they are.

Summing-up

I cannot overly stress the importance of transitional responses. They are the backbone of tactical awareness in soccer. The ball changes possession consistently during any soccer game and players need to switch their tactical mindset each time it happens. If our players are exposed to more drills than games they will not pick up the importance of transition as quickly as they would if they spend most of their practice time playing games. Yes it is important that they learn to execute the techniques properly, but they must also be taught to become gamers, and most gamers use the transitional parts of the game to their advantage all the time. Also, any weakness shown by a player's lack of understanding of the rules of transition will eventually handicap the whole team.

Attacking Strategies for Crossfire Teams

Whenever possible, I would like to see the attacking strategy for our teams begin with a controlled buildup starting at the back and advancing through the midfield onto the attacking zone. Obviously, this method of moving the ball forward will not always be available to the attacking team and at some point the ball might need to be hit long, but the players should be taught to attempt the controlled advance option whenever possible. In Hawaii, I witnessed both of the boys and girls teams attempting to control the flow of the play by using the available space in the build up and attacking areas to change the point of attack from east to west or from north to south. This style of play was not only appealing to the eye, it was also extremely successful in opening up time and space for the forwards to operate in.

While watching Man Utd, Barcelona, Juventus, and Celtic to name but a few of the teams competing this Summer in the USA, I witnessed the same style of play that I had seen from the better teams in the Regional Championships. Of course the play of the professional players was of a higher quality but their method of approach was almost identical to the young players I saw in Hawaii. The ability of the players to control the ball by passing it around or dribbling directly at opponents created a balanced front that enabled them to spread the attack to give the midfield playmaker opportunities to switch the point of the attack. Also, the entrance into the attack zone was almost always initiated by a forward moving back into the midfield to receive a pass. The tactic of moving back to the midfield creates space for the forward to receive the ball especially if the defender chooses to mark space it will also open up pace for an attacking teammate to move into if the defender chooses to mark the player. Either way, the decision of the forward to move back towards the midfield created personal attacking possibilities or opened up space for mobile attackers to take advantage of. If these principals of attacking play are practiced both by professional players and the best youth players, then it goes without saying that we should start to adopt the same type of tactical movement and teach it to our players.

Building from the Back

The back line must have at least one player who is confident enough to drop back and collect the ball from the goalkeeper in order to start the attacking build up. Most teams do not expect their forward players to apply pressure to the opposing sweeper except when the game circumstances (ex; a goal behind with little time left) calls for full field pressure by the defending team. In that case, the laws of risk and safety demand that the keeper clear the ball

as far up the field as possible. However, let's say that we are playing under normal circumstances and there is no pressure being applied by opposing players in that area of the field. This creates the ideal opportunity for either the sweeper or a fullback to drop back to open up space to receive the ball. If the opponents do decide to apply some pressure, the receiver can return the ball to the keeper. However, if there is no pressure the receiver can control the ball on the turn and look to pass it forward. It is important to note that the receiving player should be 'side-ways on' to be able to see if any opposing player is capable of applying pressure. The player receiving the ball from the keeper needs to have some passing options. That calls for the closest teammates to create space for themselves to receive a pass. In most circumstances, that would necessitate them moving back towards the passer so that they would be assured of collecting the ball before a defender could apply pressure. It would also mean that they adopt the sideways stance to protect the ball from opponents and to give themselves a better view of potential play options before they collect the ball. Executed properly, this method of using a numerical advantage to keep possession of the ball while moving it forward can create problems for the defending team because it denies them access to the ball. That can test the patience of some defenders who may get pulled out of position if they lose their patience. The main thing about back players advancing the ball is that it can be done without taking too many chances, and as this form of build up falls directly in line with the laws of risk and safety, it should be okay.

Possession Through the Midfield

Possessing the ball in the midfield area serves two distinct purposes. First, it gives the players transition time to take up their attacking positions giving the team shape more width and depth. Second, it gives the playmakers time to recognize the defenders weaker positional areas allowing them to change the point of attack to one of those areas. If the opposing defensive shape opens up too much in an attempt to cover both wing areas, there should be attacking space available down the middle of the field. If the defenders are bunched down the center of the field, there should be attacking space down either of the wing areas. However, if the opponents have provided a balanced defensive front, the attacking team, led by their playmakers, should probe the wing and central areas, attempting to create some defensive imbalance by retaining possession of the ball. This style of attacking play is designed to draw defenders to the ball, forcing them to constantly change their positions and hopefully upsetting their defensive balance to create dangerous attacking space. Quite often this type of probing strategy works

because the defenders impatience draws them out of position exposing them to the attacking skills of the forwards.

Attacking Through the Midfield

Having studied some of the best teams in the world, I have noticed that some teams prefer to possess the ball in the back area of the midfield before sending the entry pass that allows the forwards to penetrate the attacking area. Other teams prefer to possess the ball between the halfway line and the opponents' back-line before attempting to break into the attacking area. These strategies are based on the different types of forwards the teams have playing for them. The teams who attempt to hit their entry passes from deep midfield have forwards with 'break-away' pace who need the extra penetration space given to them by the team-tactic of possessing the ball deeper in their defensive half of the field. This tactic draws the opponents' defensive back line closer to the half-way line. This gives the faster forwards enough penetration room to break quickly past the defensive line and onto the long penetration pass before the keeper can sweep up behind the back line.

The teams who like to possess the ball over the halfway line usually have an attack that is made up of a mixture of tall power forwards, elusive wingers and attacking midfielders who combine their skills to apply pressure to the opposing defense. The power forwards ability to become a target for forward passes or to head flick the ball on to their speedy partners, the wingers ability to dribble past defenders and cross the ball accurately and the midfielders ability to pass and dribble the ball deep into the heart of the defense helps these teams to take advantage of their ability to possess the ball in the opponents half of the field. When the possession play opens up an opportunity by presenting a midfield player with some attacking space that player should immediately seize the opportunity to dribble the ball aggressively forward in order to take full advantage of the situation. Quick aggressive forward dribbles can catch defenders on the back of their heels allowing the dribbler to sprint past them into open territory. This type of play will force the other defenders to leave their normal defensive space to cover for their beaten teammate. This positional shift will create opportunities for attackers to break forward into unguarded space to receive the ball.

Attacking Through the Attack Zone

Once the attacking team has advanced into the 30 yards from the goal area, the players should be aware that they are expected to take a high degree of risk to attempt to create goal-scoring opportunities for themselves and their

teammates. This risk will involve trying to penetrate the defense by dribbling past an opponent, trying some 'give and go' passes, trying to thread a pass through the opposing defense to an advancing teammate or trying a shot on goal from an awkward angle in an attempt to surprise the goalkeeper. The most opportunistic area for the attackers to penetrate is the central attacking area of the field. This area can be described as the extended width of the six-yard box from the goal line to an area some 30yds out from the goal line. It is the most dangerous because shots hit from anywhere in this area can be aimed directly at specific areas of the goal. Shots hit from wide of this area give the shooter a tighter goal to shoot at because the angle of the ball to the goal is more acute and the keeper can advance to make the angle even tighter. Somewhere around 80% of all goals are scored from this central position. This should tell the strikers that looking for attacking space in this area is a good investment in time and energy. Of course, goals are also scored from wider areas but most of the time these areas are used to set up dribbling, crossing, and passing situations that lead to goal scoring opportunities. The biggest fear for defenders is that the attacking team will penetrate the central or wing areas of the attack zone. Such penetration will leave the attacking team either one on one with the goalkeeper, if the penetration comes in the central area, or will provide the attackers with a dangerous crossing situation if it comes in either of the wing areas.

However, there are more ways to score or set up scoring opportunities than creating penetration space. Shots and headers can be directed towards goal by being hit through or over the group of defenders attempting to block the attackers route to goal. The main object of the attacking team is to create dangerous attacking moves that give a player enough time and space to take a clear shot or header on goal. Mixing creative dribbling, passing and crossing plays with direct, powerful and accurate finishing on goal can do this. The players who are most successful at scoring are the ones who study the art of finishing used by top class players in the many professional leagues around the world and make a point of copying their actions. They will see that these great goal scorers try to redirect cross balls towards the goal and don't try to blast the cross ball by swinging at it full force, a very difficult play to accomplish. Also, they will see players who attain their balance by using stutter steps when approaching the ball and a shortened back swing that is designed to hit the shot cleaner and to direct the ball more accurately towards goal. This preparation adjustment helps to create accuracy to all shots and invariably turns crosses, dribbles, or penetration passes into goals.

Possession in the Attack Zone

Amidst all the dribbling, crossing, shooting, and other high-risk tactics going on in the attacking zone, there is also room for some heads up playmaking. Even though we have talked about the added risk the players can take in the attacking area of the field, that doesn't excuse players who cough up the ball by making dumb decisions. If the defensive pressure has stymied the player on the ball, it is not excusable for that player to attempt to dribble the ball into the massed defense or for a player to try to score a goal from a shot hit from some ridiculously narrow angle to the goal. It would be much more beneficial to the team if players who find themselves in these circumstances would choose to retain possession of the ball by shielding it from the defensive opponents or by turning out of the defensive trap to deliver a pass to a supporting teammate. In the case of the player preparing to shoot, it would be a better play selection to turn back out of the tight angle position to pass to a teammate in a better position to shoot at goal. That way the team still has possession of the ball and is therefore still on the attack. This type of heads up play can put the defenders under continued pressure rather than giving them an easy way out by the attackers attempting 'moon shots'. The better teams probe for ways to open paths to goal by keeping possession of the ball until a good opportunity presents itself. They know the power of ball possession and the openings to goal that can be provided by probing patiently and by continually switching the point of attack.

Summing-up

The attack comes under two descriptions, the build up and the finishing. Each is as important as the other in creating successful attacks because they combine to provide those attacks with balance and thrust. There are many forms of attacking moves, some of which I have tried to describe, but few of these moves are successful without the balance and thrust combination.

Additional Information That Players Need to Know

As an ex-professional player, I have gathered a number of tactical tips on how to play soccer in a more 'savvy' way. As a young player in the Dundee reserve team, I was subjected to coaching advice from some of the best coaches around, namely the older players who were coming to the end of their careers. In the three years that I was at Dundee, and the first three years at Everton, I received advice from some of the greatest players in Britain at that time. All of the advice was tactically very easy to understand and I found all of it invaluable in helping my continuing growth as a soccer player.

Once I reached the age of 23, I was able to figure out most tactical things for myself. But I would never have been able to perform at such a high level (Scottish Premier League and English Premier League) had I not been helped towards my soccer maturity by the advice those players gave to me. This advice was given in short statements that I could usually figure out for myself, but if I couldn't, the advice giver would take the time to explain it in more detail. Let me share some of it with you.

Defending Advice

When in Doubt, Clear it Out

This advice saved me from giving away unnecessary goal scoring chances to the opposing attackers because it made me aware of the dangers of trying to dribble or pass my way out of trouble when defending in my own penalty area. Quite often defenders have no idea of their surroundings when the ball comes to them in their defending penalty area, and if they try to control the ball and dribble or pass it out of the danger zone, the attackers might strip them of the ball and get a goal scoring opportunity. The advice tells the player to immediately clear the ball (long and high) out of the penalty area or clear it into touch when there is the least chance of danger to the goal.

When Tackling for the Ball, Stay on Your Feet

All players need to be taught how to apply the defensive control restraint position on the opponent with the ball. This requires the defender to approach the dribbler quickly but to apply the brakes at a distance that would make the dribbler think twice about trying to dribble beyond the defender. The defender would then be able to approach the dribbler cautiously by having the weight on the back foot, allowing a speedy recovery should the dribbler try to suddenly sprint past. Defenders who come charging in on the

ball carrier will be easily sidestepped by the dribbler. Defenders who charge in, leave their feet and slide towards the dribbler run the risk of injury to themselves and the dribbler as well as running the risk of being booked or sent off for a serious foul. Another problem is that once you leave your feet, there is little chance of recovering should the attacker dribble past.

Anticipate Your Teammate Making a Mistake

When the teammate positioned nearest to you challenges for the ball, always anticipate that he/she will make a mistake. This trend of thought will get you to apply a precautionary cover position just in case your fears become fact and you have to plug the defensive hole.

Follow Up on All Opponents Shot Attempts

As a central back line defender or a sweeper, you must follow up on all shots and crosses just in case the ball rebounds back into play from striking the frame of the goal or from rebounding off the goalkeeper. By following up quickly, you will be in position to clear any rebounds out of the danger area.

After Sprinting Forward, Sprint Back Into Position

Every defender likes to get an attacking opportunity either from overlapping a teammate or from being involved in an attacking dead ball situation. However, it is extremely important to the team that once the attacking play breaks down you get back into position as fast as you can. Many defenders love to sprint forward and jog back but the real team player sprints both ways.

Show the Ball Carriers to Their Weak Foot

Every attacking player has a preferred foot with which to dribble or strike the ball. Defenders must try to get the attacker to play the ball with the weak foot.

This can be done by showing the opponent space where their weak foot is and closing down the space where their strong foot is. This can also work well in practice because it will force players to play the ball with their weak foot and by so doing improve that foot.

Give Your Teammates Information

Defending relies on coordinated positioning and movement. Because of this, the players need information from the most informed defender, which is usually the sweeper, or a central back line defender. I call this organizer 'the voice' because the surrounding players need to hear the advice or information that he/she is giving. If you could land by parachute into the

penalty area of a World Cup game, you would be deafened by the noise on the field not off it. Every one of these players knows the value of passing information and they don't mind shouting it at the top of their lungs. I like to encourage the players to communicate by playing a scrimmage where I select a captain for each team and only the captain can talk. This encourages the two selected players to communicate with the other players. When the rules are changed so that all players can talk, most of the players like to talk it up.

Decide After Opponent's First Touch

When marking a player who receives a pass, don't try to anticipate what that player will do with the ball. Instead, hold off by about a yard and watch what happens with the first touch. By defending in this way you will give yourself a chance to make an easy steal if the receiving player miss-controls the ball or if the controller attempts to turn you with the first touch you will be in position to win possession of the ball. What you don't want to do is to attempt to anticipate the direction the controller wants to move into and end up getting turned and left behind.

Cover the Far Post on Corner Kicks

When your team is defending a corner kick, make sure defending players cover both goal posts. The easiest header to make off a corner kick is a glance header because the player heading the ball has only a split second of time and an inch or so of space to get a head to the ball. This makes the far post area an inviting target for the player heading on goal. Time and again I've seen goals being scored because somebody forgot to mark the far post. One of these times was in a European Cup final where a single flick in to the unattended far post area of the goal was the games only goal. Imagine if you were the head coach and had to explain to the fans why you didn't instruct your players to position somebody to defend the far post!

Advice on Keeping Possession

If the Way Forward is Blocked, Turn and Shield the Ball

While possessing the ball and making forward progress, an attacking player might run into a logjam of defenders who are blocking the path forward. Instead of attempting to take on the defenders, the attacker should double back by turning with the ball and moving away from the defensively clogged area. This move will allow the team to retain possession of the ball and allow the ball carrier to pass the ball to a teammate situated in less troubled waters who can continue the controlled forward movement of the ball.

Short Safe Passes Allow the Team Time to Open Up

When the ball is first recovered from the opponents somewhere in the midfield, it would be wise to have two or three midfield players combine with some short safe passes so that the other players on the team can spread out to give the team a more open attacking shape. This series of passes also allows a playmaker the time needed to choose to either switch the point of attack or to attempt an entry pass directly through the middle of the opponents defense. Team transition from offense to defense takes time to take shape and these short safe passes will give the players that time.

Don't Try Risky Square Passes During the Team's Transition

During the transition from defense to offense, the defending team is always on the lookout for any miss-hit square pass that can be intercepted. These types of interceptions catch the opponents at their weakest because they are spreading their shape to an offensive one which means there will be gaping holes for the new attacking team to take advantage of. This situation happens quite often when a player takes a throw-in and throws the ball laterally to a teammate. If the ball bounces awkwardly to the receiver, an opponent can step in and win possession of it and immediately spring a counter-attack.

In the Rain, Hit Long Passes Diagonally

When the ground is wet, any long straight penetration pass will zip off the wet surface and skip on through to the goalkeeper. Players using the long ball in this type of weather should hit the pass diagonally so that the ball will skip into the wing area where a forward can retrieve it without any interference by the keeper. Of course a forward will have to recognize the need to make the run into the channel. This allows the passer to hit the diagonal pass.

Support the Ball Carrier by Moving Into Open Passing Lanes

The player looking to pass the ball to a teammate should not be required to search for the teammate because he/she is standing behind the nearest opponent. The supporting player should move into a passing lane that gives the player on the ball a chance to pass the ball without it being intercepted. Don't ask the passer to make a difficult chip over the head of your immediate opponent in order to get the ball to you when all you need to do is step to the side of that opponent to open up a passing lane.

Learn to Hit Target Passes so the Ball Drops Softly

Target passes are longer types of passes that are used to allow a back player hit the ball over the midfield players straight to a front player. However, if the passer hits the ball and follows through, the ball will reach the forward at rocket speed making it almost impossible to control. For this type of play to be successful the passer must hold back on the follow through when striking the ball, this will cause the ball to rise quickly over the midfield and, because of the backspin the passer has imparted on the ball, drop softly in front of the forward. Practicing this play would entail hitting the ball thirty yards causing it to rise some ten feet in the air and drop in the space directly in front of the striker.

Changing the Point of Attack From One Wing to the Other

When a midfield wing zone becomes overcrowded, the player in possession needs to try to change the point of attack from the attacking side to the open side. The execution of this type of pass is not as difficult as one would imagine because the open side gets its name from the lack of defenders in that area. However, once the attacking player on the open side receives the ball, the objective is to control it forward and dribble quickly into the space that is available for only a few seconds before the defensive shape forms to close down the attacking spaces. If the wide attacker moves forward with speed and control then a good crossing or finishing opportunity could become available.

Passing the Ball by Heading It

The midfield area is traditionally a crowded place where players compete to gain control of the ball. Quite often the pressure being applied to the ball carrier will force players to help the ball on to a teammate, and quite often the receiver is faced with the choice of controlling the ball by using the chest control method and inviting immediate pressure from opposing defenders or flicking the ball on with a header. As a midfielder for Everton and Southampton in the English (Premier) League, I knew the dangers of chest controlling the ball in such a tight area and I was never content to just help the ball on so I used the heading skills I had developed as a young lad to pass the ball. I found that with practice I could cushion the ball off my head and drop it at the foot of a teammate as easily as I could pass the ball to him with the inside of my foot. All it took was a bit of practice using a ball and a wall or just heading back and forward with a playing partner to allow me to get comfortable with the idea of head passing. Most players use headers to

clear the ball or to direct it towards goal. However, it won't take players long to learn to head pass and they will find the technique extremely useful.

Hit the Midfield Area Crosses Into the Penalty Area Early

If a player is in a wing area some twenty to thirty yards out from the goal when receiving the ball, a first touch diagonal cross into the penalty area can wrong foot the defense and provide one of the forwards with a goal scoring opportunity. The cross should be targeted to a back post area somewhere between the back line defenders and the goalkeeper to give an alert forward the chance to head for goal.

When Hitting Long-range Shots, Aim for the Keeper

This advice may sound strange but the great England captain, the late Bobby Moore, gave it to me when he was a guest player for the Seattle Sounders in the late 70's. Bobby reasoned that most players would find it difficult to hit the keeper with a power shot from 30yds out so they should purposely aim the shot at the keeper hoping it would miss its mark yet still remain on the goal target.

Using Your Vision

Bobby also told me that when he was a reserve player for West Ham a first team player named Malcolm Allison approached him at half time and gave him this tip on how to use his vision. "You have to ask yourself two questions when you're playing" he said. "One, 'Can I get the ball?' and if the answer is yes, two, 'What will I do with it?'" As soon as Bobby asked himself the second question he looked around to see what his options were. Malcolm's advice stuck with Bobby throughout a brilliant career that saw him captain England when winning the 1966 World Cup. Malcolm Allison also went on to have an extremely successful career in soccer coaching and management.

Finishing Advice

Learn to Stutter-step Before Shooting

It would be nice if every shot taken came at the end of a normal run with the player able to time the shot so that it is hit in full stride, but that seldom happens apart from free kicks. Most top strikers know that the best shots result from the striker of the ball being in a balanced position and more often than not that calls for the shooter to prepare to adopt that position while moving towards the ball. By using the stutter-step feet movement while approaching the ball, the striker can get the necessary balance to hit the ball cleanly. Developing the stutter-step routine should stop all the wild shots

resulting from the ball and the player connecting in mid or three-quarter stride.

On Crosses ‘Own’ the Space Between the ball and Your Defender

When a cross is about to be played, the striker who is marked must look to move into a space directly between the crosser and the marking defender. The move will need to be timed with the arrival of the cross. But if the cross lands in that space, the forward will have the huge advantage of getting the first touch to the ball. By getting to the space in front of the defender the striker should have a chance to score no matter how high (up to seven feet) or how low the cross is. On the other hand, if the attacker stays behind the defender the defender has access to all that space while the striker hopes that the cross will clear the defender and land on his/her head.

Follow up on All Shots

Good strikers know where to get goals for very little effort on their part. One of these goals for nothing deals is to simply follow up on all shots and crosses that go towards goal. The first thing the striker looks for is a goalkeeper mishandling the ball in such a way that it rolls out from the grasp, giving any alert striker an easy chance to score. Another aid to easy goal scoring is the frame of the goal that deflects the ball back into play usually right in front of goal. Goal scoring is one of the hardest things to do consistently so most strikers agree that the rewards they get from following up on all shots are well worth the extra effort.

As a Cross Comes in, Run Across the Keeper

The number of times in a game that a stray cross finds its way directly to the goalkeeper never ceases to amaze me. I believe that if a forward took the chance of running between the crosser and the keeper there would be an extra four or five chances for that player or the other forwards in the course of the game or perhaps even the half. Even if the forward can't get a flick header on goal the ball can be deflected across the goal, setting up an opportunity for an attacking teammate. At a time in soccer history when tactical defensive practices have made goal scoring more difficult than ever before we should be looking for weaknesses in those defenses and this, in my opinion, is one.

Make the Opponent's Goal Bigger

Whenever a player is about to shoot from an angle to the goal, another attacker should take this opportunity to make the goal bigger by moving into

a position on the far post. This means that should the player shooting the ball pull the shot across the goal, and wide of the far post, the follow up striker should have the easy task of scoring. Of course the second striker doesn't actually make the goal bigger but he does enhance the teams' chances of scoring by taking up that position.

Anticipate the Cross is Coming to You

Whenever you move into attacking space to challenge for a cross ball, you must anticipate that the cross is coming your way. This gives you a chance to view the goal area you want to direct the shot or header towards, and it cuts out all areas of surprise should the ball arrive in your space. Too many chances are missed because the players receiving the cross do not anticipate that the ball will arrive in their attacking space and are therefore unprepared to deal with it when it does.

Strikers Should Position Themselves Sideways to the Goal

The reason strikers should take this sideways position is to allow them to see their shooting options while also allowing them to strike the ball first touch towards goal should that shot be an option. The first touch shot has more chance of scoring because it gives the keeper little or no time to set before diving, and that takes away the power of the legs and the speed of the dive. The first touch shot also makes it difficult for defenders to get into position to block the shot and a late block can easily result in a deflected shot on goal, which is even tougher for the keeper to save.

Jump Early and Lean for Extra Height

When I played in England, I was asked to be one of the main targets on corner kicks and free kicks and as most of the defenders were like giants compared to me, I had to find an edge so that I could get to the ball first. My favorite move was to change positions at the last second with a teammate who was being marked by a smaller player giving me some height advantage, or to jump early and lean into the giant that was marking me. The early jump and lean allowed me to hang up in the air as the giant tried to rise, and if the cross came my way, I was able to power head the ball or flick it towards goal or even head it back across the goal to an open teammate.

Strikers Should Stay Central to the Goal

The strikers' main job is to score goals. This will not happen consistently if the strikers are busy running all over the field. Goals are mainly scored from shots and headers hit from an area in front of the goal. This should be the

strikers work area. Ruud Van Nistelroy of Man Utd is an example of the perfect striker who, when his team is on attack, almost always ends up lingering with intent directly in front of goal. If all of the great goal scorers in the world score their goals from central positions, then we should encourage our strikers to do likewise. Strikers shouldn't waste their talents chasing balls down the wing all game long. We have wide players who can do that. Strikers are there to score goals so the team can win the game, so lets encourage them to do that.

Have a Short Back Swing Before Shooting

If your strikers are having trouble with getting clean shots off, or displaying inaccurate shooting, get them to shorten up on their back swing. By shortening the back swing, strikers find that they get a cleaner strike at the ball especially on some of the bumpy surfaces they play on that tend to move the ball about quite a bit. When a striker shortens the back swing before striking the ball, there may be a small loss of power, but the placement accuracy and cleanness of the strike more than makes up for that.

Redirect Crosses Towards Goal

The hardest thing for most young players to grasp is that you don't have to blast crosses towards goal whether you're using your head or your foot to do so. The great thing about crosses is that they already have their own power. all we have to do is to redirect that ball and that power by deflecting it towards goal. I know that sounds too easy, but it's true. When your players play at a higher soccer level where they are given a fraction of a second of time and a centimeter of space to redirect a cross on goal, they'll be glad you stopped them swinging wildly at those crosses in practice and taught them how to redirect them towards goal in the proper manner.

Summing-up

Giving something back to the game comes naturally to most ex-soccer players mainly because as their careers were ending they were recognized by the younger players as the 'go to guys' if they needed direction. I can remember several times when young players stopped to ask my advice on their game or on a particular part of their game. I felt a sense of pride that they would seek me out to help them resolve their problems. Most of the time, the advice I gave was the same advice I had been given by one of the old players in my youth. But I was also able to speak from personal experiences. This section of the booklet reminds me that that the fundamentals of yesterday still apply today. Long may that continue to be so.

Diagrams for Soccer Practice

When I was coaching at Everton FC, I was lucky enough to see the Italian National team practice their defensive strategies before they played their first game in the European Nations Cup competition. The subject of the training exercise was defending and the sequence of defending games went something like this.

3v7 Possession (Diagram 1)

The area used was approximately 25yds by 40yds

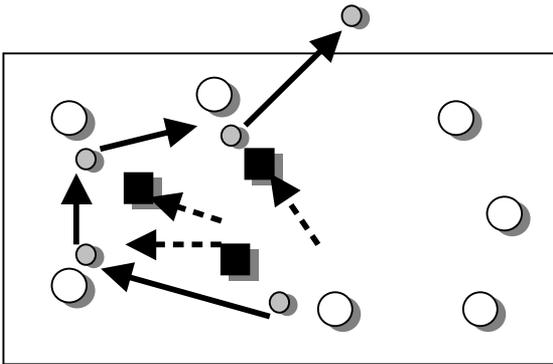
Seven players positioned themselves around the playing area

The three defenders positioned themselves in the middle of the playing area

The group of seven attempted to possess the ball inside the playing area

The three defenders attempted to get a touch of the ball to score a point

The players worked for 2 minutes before the defenders were changed



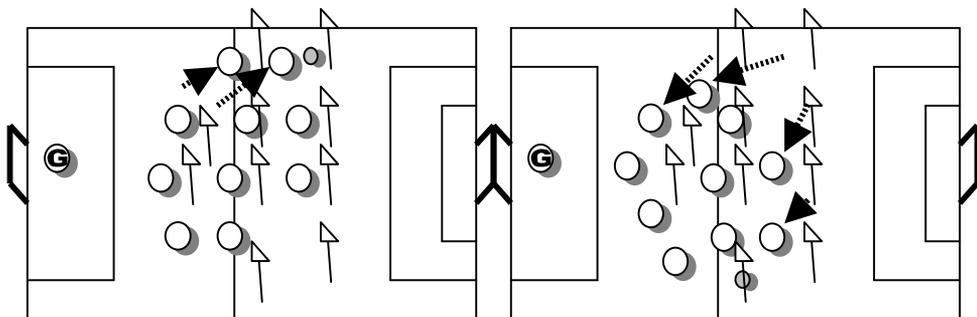
Coaching Points

The three defenders work together to force the possession players into making hurried decisions. When they trap a possession group like they did in the diagram, they close in on the ball carrier and the immediate supporting players to get a touch of the ball or force a wayward pass in order to score a point. The object of the exercise is to pressure the ball carrier to concentrate on the ball and lower that player's visual capability.

Using Flags to Show Team Defensive Positions

Before moving on to the next exercise, the Italian coach brought all the players onto a field that had corner flags placed in a variety of positions.

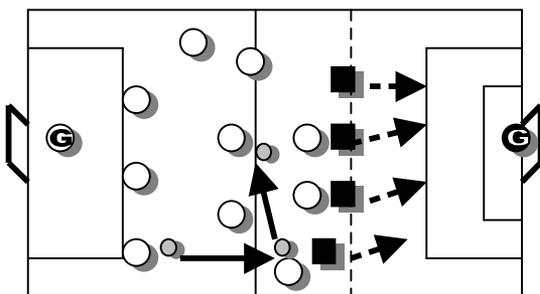
The poles had different colored flags on them and the coach had placed them in an attacking 4-4-2 formation. The coach instructed the players to take up their normal position on the field facing the flags, which meant that there were two players filling the same position. All of this seemed strange to me until the coach shouted out a color and both teams moved quickly towards the colored flag being sure to stay in their defensive team shape. The coach varied his calls for about 20 minutes, each time sending the large group of players running towards a colored flag being sure to stay in their defensive team shape. This was the coach's way of bringing the team together as a mobile defensive unit. Here they were the full Italian National squad of players coming to grips with the coach's preferred defending shape by using this drill partly as a recovery period after a hard session of work. However, I thought it was a very simple way of teaching the players the defensive shape and how that stays together when the ball is switched around the field.



In the first diagram, the right fullback flag has been nominated by the coach as the player with the ball. The team shape closes in on that player by both strikers remaining central and the left mid and left back converging on the ball carrier and the immediate support player. As the positioning is deemed correct, the coach calls out the left side midfielder and the defending players immediately change positions to confront the left side mid. This time the forwards move over to cover the left back and the nearest center back leaving the defending right side mid and the right back to double team the attacking left side midfielder. The defenders on the weak side recover by dropping quickly to balance up the defense on the weak side.

Eleven Versus the Back Four and Goalkeeper (Diagram 2)

The next game the Italian coach played was a full field session with a goalkeeper and back line of defenders facing a whole team of eleven players. As the eleven were made up of Italian International players, it seemed to me that the smaller group was in for a huge hiding, however, that was not the case. Much to my surprise, the defenders and their goalkeeper kept the team of eleven under control by dropping deep and holding the line on the top of the penalty area denying the attacking team any penetration space and forcing them to shoot from distance. Any move by the eleven to penetrate the penalty area was defended ferociously as the group of four plus keeper closed down the attacking space by combining their defensive movement to protect the danger areas. When they gained possession of the ball they rolled it back to their keeper who kicked it far up the field to allow the back line time to move to the starting defensive line which was some thirty yards out from their end line.

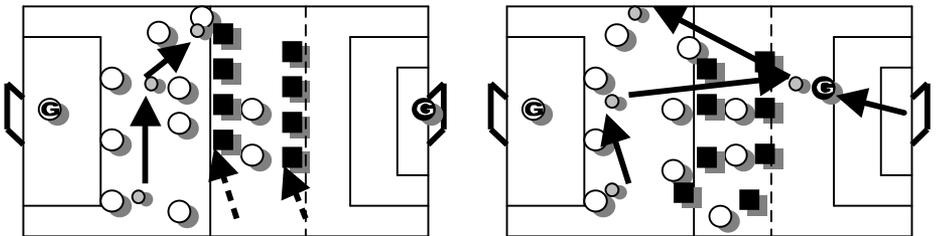


Coaching Points

- Teaching the back four to drop, hold, and step up at the appropriate times
- Teaching the back four to apply pressure to the ball, support that pressure on the strong side and give cover on the weak side
- Teaching the back four to coordinate their movement whether that movement takes them north to south or vice versa or east to west or vice versa
- Encouraging communication between the goalkeeper and the back four.
- Using the keeper as a sweeper to clean up behind the back four

Eleven Versus the Middle Four, Back Four and Goalkeeper

The coach's next move was to add four midfield players to the back four and keeper team. This allowed the defending team to engage the attackers further up the field causing the attacking team to work harder for entry space in their attacking third of the field. The back line still made the decision on when and where to hold the line allowing the midfielders to hold their own line of defense some 10 yards in front of the back line. The defense could then show a solid team shape of eight players in two lines of four ready to protect their chosen defensive zone as soon as the attackers attempted to penetrate into it. If the attacking team moved the point of attack from one side of the field to another, the defensive block of players would move accordingly. If the attacking team played the ball backwards, the defending back line had the option to move the defensive block further up the field. If the attacking team tried to play through the defensive block, several defenders would combine their efforts in an attempt to strip them of the ball. If the attacking team hit the ball long and over the back of the defensive block, the keeper would sweep up protecting the penetration space behind the back line.

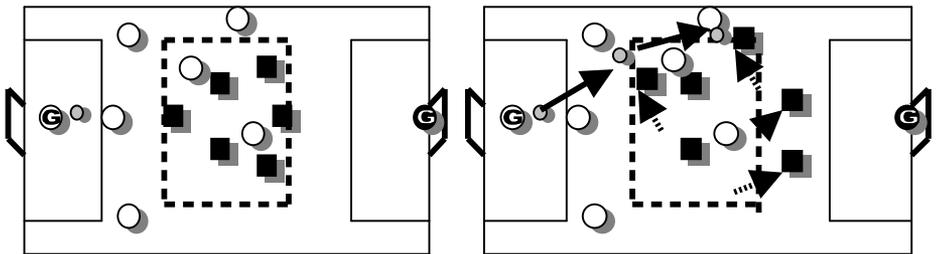


Coaching Points

- Holding the lines as a defensive block
- Moving the lines as a defensive block
- Pressure on the ball when it is played inside the defensive block
- Good communication between the keeper and defensive players
- The keeper sweeps up behind the defensive block
- The block moves forward, backwards, or sideways through coordinated movement by the defenders

Defensive Team Shape

I have found that the easiest way to teach players how to drop back and get into their defensive positions is to mark out a grid using cones. This gives the players a specific area to retreat into, and as they do, the coach can advise them on where to position themselves. Once the players get used to retreating into the grid and forming the defensive team shape, the coach can dispense with the coned area and allow the leaders to dictate where the defensive block should be positioned. As I have said before, the defensive block can be positioned high, middle, or low according to the defensive tactics being used at that moment. The important thing is that the players are capable of forming that defensive block. By using the coned area in the middle of the field, this game will give the players a specific gathering point and a chance for the coach to explain exactly where each player should be positioned.



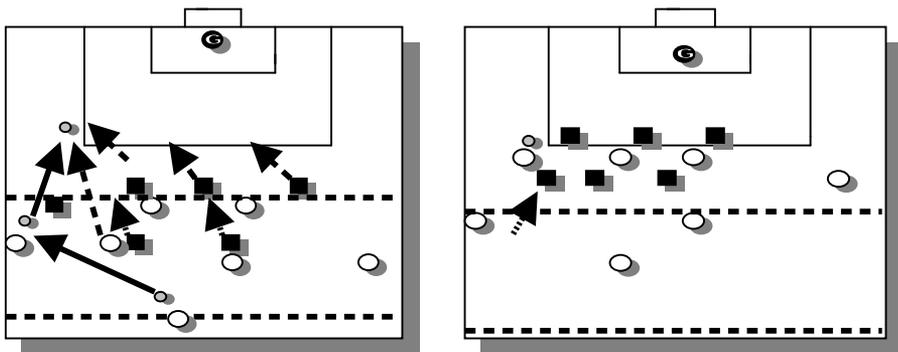
In the diagram on the left we see how the black team have positioned themselves in a 3-2-1 formation in the center of the coned central area.

This defensive shape allows them to go forward, backward or sideways depending on where the keeper delivers the ball. In the diagram on the right, the keeper has passed the ball to the back player on the left and that causes the top defensive player to move over to confront that player. As that happens, the right side back player moves closer to the left side attacking player, and when the ball is delivered to that player, the right back is in good position to challenge. Also, the other two backs have moved backwards out of the coned zone to give the challenging back some cover and support. Obviously, it would be more helpful if we could coach our full team to do this, but we must start with what we've got and this game will teach the players the discipline of gathering centrally as a group.

Defense Versus Attack on Half Field

Using six defenders and a goalkeeper to compete against seven attackers is a neat way of coaching the defending players to combine their efforts to stop the attack from scoring on them. This game can also give the defenders a target to hit so that they can compete on a points basis against the attack.

The attacking team will receive three points when they score on the defenders goal, and the defenders will get one point for dribbling the ball into the marked zone 5 yards from the half way line. The object of the exercise is to play the best defenders against the best forwards by challenging those defenders to combine their technical and tactical abilities in a game that resembles the real game as closely as possible. The back line defenders will position themselves across the field on a coned line some 30 yards from their goal line with the two midfielders about five or ten yards ahead. The attack begins with the ball in possession of the central midfielder playmaker while the rest of the attackers position themselves as directed by the coach.



The playmaker starts the game off by passing wide to the attacking midfielder who spots an early forward run by a central mid and attempts a penetration pass into the attack zone. The near side central defender reads the play and immediately leaves his/her mark to cover the more dangerous situation. The covering back line players and the midfield players drop back quickly, attempting to shore up the defense by restoring the balance. The second diagram shows how the balance is restored, although the right back may need to stay with the wide left side attacker rather than come inside to support the first defender if that attacker gives support down the wing.

Coaching the Playmaker

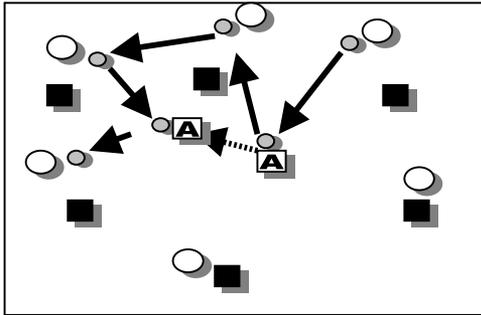
When I coached the Everton reserve team, I was fortunate enough to have a young player who was a natural playmaker. Even so, I felt that I had to put on sessions to highlight his ability including holding the ball in tight space, passing and moving for a return pass, changing the point of attack with timing and accuracy, bending shots over and around the keeper, and all the other talents that those special types of players have. The individual attention came because I believe that these player types need the coaches' support so that they can use the soccer field much like an artist would use a canvas. Unfortunately, there are not too many of these player types jumping up to grab your eye in American soccer, but if we look a bit deeper we'll see plenty of potential playmakers around out there. Just keep your eye open for a tricky winger who doesn't have enough speed to get away from the fullbacks once he/she has beaten them but has really good technical ability and is a great striker of the ball and you might have a player that can be developed into a central midfield playmaker. Look again and see if you have a player with a classy left foot who controls and passes the ball well and never seems to be hurried but seldom gets caught on the ball. If you do, you have a potential playmaker. Also look for a dribbler who can draw a crowd of defenders yet manages to beat them or retain ball possession more times than he/she loses the ball to them and you may have discovered a potential playmaker.

Okay, so if we do have somebody who fits the playmaker description, how do we train that person to take charge of the teams tempo and playing tactics? The first thing to do is to isolate that player from the rest of the group and explain that the team needs a playmaker and in your opinion he/she fits the description. The next step is to explain your idea of the playmakers role and what's expected of the player who takes that role. Then you have to coach the player to play that role. I would set up games that allowed me to isolate the playmaker as the extra attacking player on both teams. This lets the player concentrate on making attacking plays when either team has the ball while getting extra practice in the playmaking roles most special area, which is controlling the flow of the play. Once your player gets comfortable with the idea that he/she will initiate most of the attacking build-ups, you can explain the variety of jobs the playmaker needs to do. The first one is to control the play by controlling the ball through short safe passing combinations. These passing combinations will allow attacking players time to get into their attacking positions while also drawing defenders into the area in which the ball is being possessed. This should mean that there are attacking spaces left unguarded by defenders. Now is the time to change the point of attack to

find an attacking player in an unprotected area if possible, or to find a teammate with time and space to collect the ball and progress forward. Once the play has been switched, the playmaker should find a position that allows some level of support to the ball carrier in case the defenders find a way to block forward progress and the point of attack needs to be changed once more. That's two parts of the job done, but because the playmakers usually have great technical ability, most coaches use them to take shooting free kicks, most of the corner kicks, and if they show steady nerves, the penalty kicks also. Playmakers are also expected to defend, but their main talent is in the attack so it would not be wise to make them overly responsible for solid defensive duties like man for man marking. I remember the 1966 World Cup Final when England's Bobby Charlton and Germany's Franze Beckenbour man marked each other out of the game a tactic that in my opinion spoiled the game as a soccer spectacle but possibly won the game for England. Remember that the playmakers main job is to slow the tempo of the game down or speed the tempo of the game up and this can provide a cutting edge to the teams attacking play so we should cut them some slack on their defending duties.

Games to Teach the Playmaker

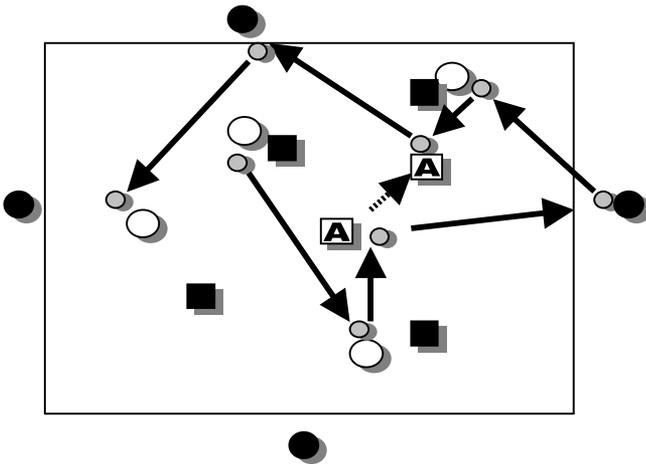
The first game I would use to teach my playmaker some of the required skills would be a possession game with a rule that the playmaker should always assist the team in possession using one or two touches only. This will allow the playmaker to concentrate on the main part of a playmaker's game, which is to keep possession of the ball using short, simple types of passes. The ability to keep possession in this manner in the real game will allow the playmaker to hold up the forward progress of the team until the attacking players have spread out and are in position to receive a pass that can change the point of attack. If the players are not given time to spread out, there is less chance of the playmaker gaining access to the type of attacking spaces needed to open up the opposing defense. The game itself is simple enough, starting with two equal teams plus one playmaker attempting to keep possession of the ball.



So we see that by keeping in an open position and by moving in support of the play, the free playmaker can get a lot of touches on the ball and keep possession with some short simple pass and move plays. This type of simple play might seem unnecessary to the players who would rather play a game that had them attacking or defending something, but it is necessary because it gives the team on the ball short and medium length passing practice. The playmakers must first be able to slow the tempo of the game down before they can speed it up with their long accurate passes. With games like this one they can practice their short and medium length passing skills while the other players work on their possession and defending skills.

Changing the Point of Attack

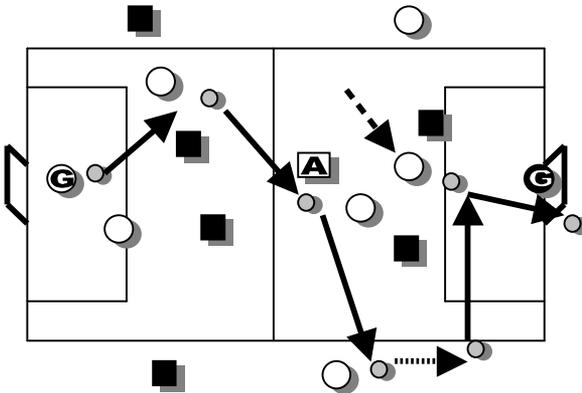
Once we get the playmakers feeling comfortable with slowing the tempo of the game down, we must work on the second part of their game which is to change the point of attack with long and medium range passes. Again this is not a difficult session to set up and can in fact be a follow up to the first session. All we need to do is change from two teams of six to three teams of four, plus of course the playmaker. This practice game requires one team to position themselves around the playing area, which is the same square that we used for game one, and the other two teams to remain in the square with the playmaker taking the role of the extra player on the the possession team. The rules are pretty simple in that the playmaker is the only player who can pass the ball to the players on the outside. Any player can receive the ball from the outside players who are, like the playmaker, restricted to a maximum two touches. All of the players, apart from the playmaker and the players on the outside, are allowed free play that has no touch restrictions.



The playmakers job in this exercise is to support the team possessing the ball and to change the point of attack by playing the ball to the players positioned outside the field of play. The coach can encourage the playmaker to hit longer passes by restricting the passing targets to either of the two outside players who are farthest away when the playmaker receives the ball.

Wing Attack Game

In this game we have two teams of equal numbers, with goalkeepers and of course the playmaker who assists the team on the attack. We also have two players from each team positioned outside the playing area in both the attacking wing positions. The rules of the game are normal except that a cross must initiate a goal and the playmaker is the only player who can feed the ball to the wing players. Another rule might be that the playmaker must always feed the pass to the farthest winger. The object of the exercise is to give the playmaker lots of opportunities to practice switching the point of attack, and the forwards and defenders opportunities to attack and defend cross balls.

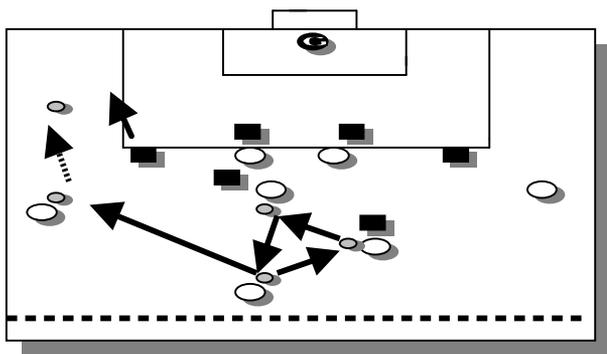


The playmaking exercise has become a bit more realistic with the playmakers efforts leading directly to scoring attempts on goal. However, although we are in the process of polishing the playmakers skills like changing the point of attack, we could also encourage him/her to exchange one or two passes with the forwards before releasing a pass to a wide player. This game is restricted to help the playmakers mix their plays using their imagination and artistic license to paint their own picture of how they see the game. However, there is a more realistic way to help them do that in the next exercise that hopefully will bring out all of the playmakers' skills.

Offense Versus Defense on a Half Field

This exercise is one of the most effective ways to coach either offense or defense because it allows the coach to match the teammates' strengths against each other. Also in that match-up, the coach can decide which part of the team needs to be coached in this session and can concentrate on doing that by stopping the play and discussing various coaching points with the players involved. Whether the coach decides to concentrate attention on offense or defense, it has been my experience that the game itself will be fiercely contested because the defense will not want to be beaten by the attackers nor will the attack want to be beaten by the defenders.

The rules of this game are pretty simple in that the defenders have the halfway line as a target to dribble the ball over and the forwards have the goal to score on. As the defenders have the easiest target, they will receive one point every time they manage to dribble the ball over the half way line while the forwards will get three points every time they score a goal.

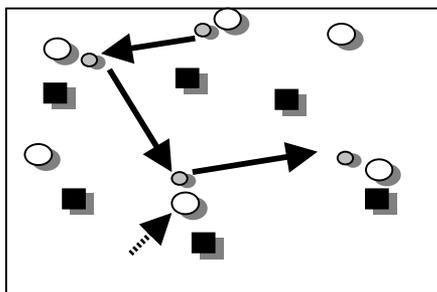


In this exercise, the playmaker can dictate the tempo and flow of the game by using short or long passes to keep the ball central or to attack down one wing or another. Playmakers should also be encouraged to use their shooting skills should they get within goal range, although it is important to the attack that they are almost always in position to support the attacking thrust rather than becoming a part of it by using overlapping tactics to get in front of their forwards. That's a job for the other midfield attackers who should be encouraged to break forward onto attack with some timely forward runs. The playmakers job is to see these runs and to deliver the ball to the runner.

Midfield Games

Coaching youth teams means that most of the time the coach has half a field or less to do their session. It is therefore important that we use our imagination to set up game situations that will target the practice towards defending, midfield, or attacking situations in drills or games. My experiences lead me to believe that the closer we get to the real game in practice, the easier it is for the players to advance their playing standards. That's not to say that drills have no value, but it I would think it is appropriate to start each practice with some technical warm up drills and advance to a game situation once the players have warmed up. The games could start quite simply by working on a particular technique that needs polishing. For example, working on control by making a rule that a player must 'touch the ball at least twice'. This rule forces each player to control the ball with the first touch. Another game would be 'one touch only' which would demand good vision and passing from the players. Yet another rule could be that players must 'touch the ball three times' so that they practice control, maneuvering, and passing the ball which is a preferred move of the top players.

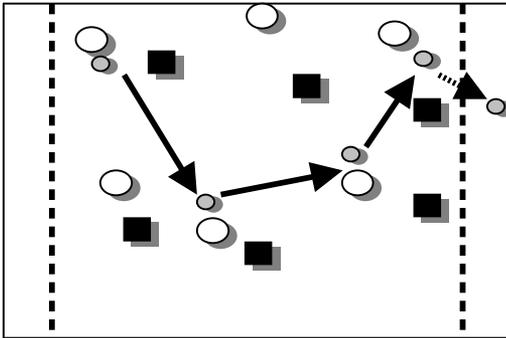
All of these games can be played in the same area of space allowing the coach to change the rules every 5 or 10 Minutes.



The good thing about this game is that because there are no goals or other targets to aim at, the players can concentrate on polishing their control, passing and dribbling skills, while trying to retain possession of the ball. If there were zones to dribble into, or goals to shoot at, the concentration on the singular skills would have to involve attacking and defending strategies also, and this would go further than the coach would want at this early stage of the practice.

Midfield Game to End Zones

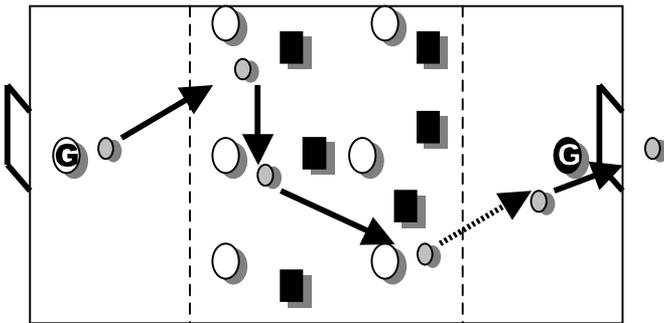
The game to end zones takes the players tactical responsibilities up a notch from the possession games. Instead of concentrating only on possession play, the players now have to attack and defend an area of the field as well. This extra duty means that the players now have to adopt positions and combine as an organized group of defending and attacking players while using the midfield area to do so. Also, the width of the zone makes sure that the defending players have a realistic midfield area to defend while the attacking players have that same realistic area to attack. The rules of the game give the attacking team a point if they dribble the ball into the opponents' end zone and touch the ball after it crosses into the zone.



The object of this exercise is to give the players a practice game that calls for the same type of decision making both on offense and defense that confronts them when they play a real game. Attacking and defending these end zones will keep the players concentrated on many of the tactics that go into midfield play. It has been my experience that players enjoy practicing in games that resemble match conditions because they recognize the realistic game type situations these practices afford them. I believe that players improve their game by being exposed to situations that need their instinctive reaction based on the knowledge they have acquired from former playing experiences. Practice games like this one will help build that soccer knowledge base.

Midfield Break Game

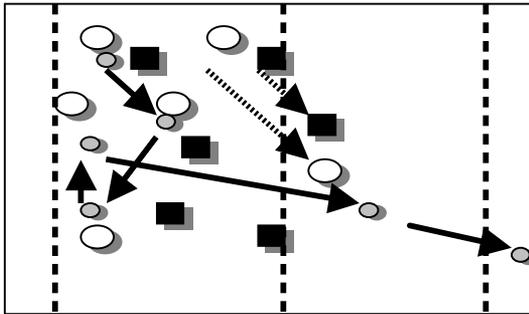
When Huskies men's coach Dean Wurzberger and I were looking for the ideal game to encourage midfielders to break into attacking space, we came up with this game. The field is split into three areas with a goal in each defending area and a central area some fifty yards long and forty yards wide. The players are divided into two teams whose objective is to dribble the ball into the attacking area and have five seconds to complete a goal-scoring attempt on the opposing keeper. No defenders are allowed in the attacking area but they can attempt to stop the attackers from entering that area. Also, the players cannot run onto a lead pass that crosses into the attack zone instead they have to dribble the ball into the attacking area and are allowed one shot to beat the keeper. The game rules make the midfield area a well-contested area that rewards skillful approach play with an opportunity to score.



We found that the players benefited from the realistic atmosphere supplied by the midfield play especially when we played 11v11 on a full field. At the same time I have played this game using teams made up of six or seven players plus a goalkeeper and experienced the same realistic midfield atmosphere. Apart from the midfield experience the strikers and goalkeepers benefit greatly from this game. The strikers get some practice at going one on one with the opposing goalkeeper and the keepers get the chance to show how they deal with a breakaway situation.

Midfield Possession Plus Quick Break Attack

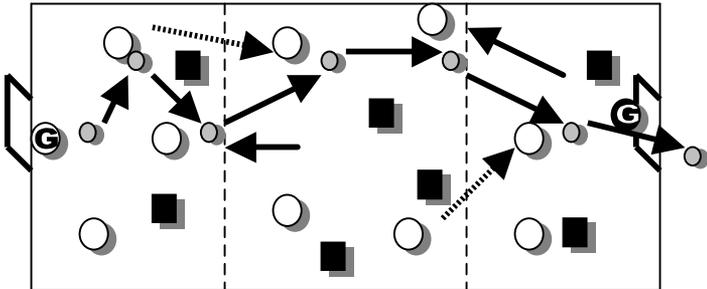
This next game is one that I thought up to get my Everton Reserve players to feel comfortable while possessing the ball and yet be ready to spark off the attack with a quick forward pass. The field is set up with two end zones and a half way line. The field size should be set according to the number of players on each team (10v10 could play across half a field 70 yards by 55 yards). Smaller team numbers would have a smaller size field (7v7 could play on a field size 60 yards by 40 yards etc). The rules are that a point can be scored by the team in their defending half of the field retaining possession of the ball for seven consecutive passes without the opponents touching the ball. Dribbling the ball into the opponent's end zone can also score a point. However, the ball must enter the opponents half of the field before an attacking player does so and that means the ball must be 'dribbled' into that half or a forward pass must 'lead' the attacking player into that half. Once the ball is in the attacking half, the attacking team can play normally by combining dribbling and passing moves before going into the end zone.



The idea behind this game is to encourage players to keep their eye open for the chance to release an attacking player, first by drawing the defenders close to attempt to stop the seven passes, then by serving a penetrating forward a lead pass into the attacking area. This game is similar to a team attacking in the midfield area by possessing the ball to give attackers the opportunity to break into attacking space. It also encourages the midfield players to keep in mind that they have two options, one to possess the ball and two to release the forwards.

Working the Ball From Back to Midfield to Front

When possessing the ball in the back, midfield, or front area of the field, the general tactic is to try to have more players than your opponents in that area of the field. If the team can accomplish that task, then the forward advance to the opponents' penalty area should be a smooth one, especially if the attacking players know how to take full advantage of the extra player. To educate the players on taking advantage of the extra man, we must design a practice game that allows them to work at getting an extra player or two in each field area and using those players to the team's advantage. The way I would do this is to first divide the playing field into three specific areas by marking two cone lines across the playing field. These lines should split the field into three equal sections or zones that I would call a defensive zone, a midfield zone, and an attacking zone. Each zone would have a specific number of players who, when on defense, must stay in their designated zone. But when the players are on attack, they can, according to the coaches game rules, advance and drop back to ensure their team has a numerical advantage in the zone that the ball is in. If the ball is in the back zone, a midfield player on the attacking team can enter the back zone to give the team with the ball a numerical advantage. When the ball is advanced to the midfield, a back player and the midfield player who dropped back can enter the midfield area; a forward player can also drop back which gives the midfield attackers a strong numerical advantage. As the play enters the attacking area, the attacker who dropped, and a midfield player can enter the attacking zone. This movement will become second nature to the players.

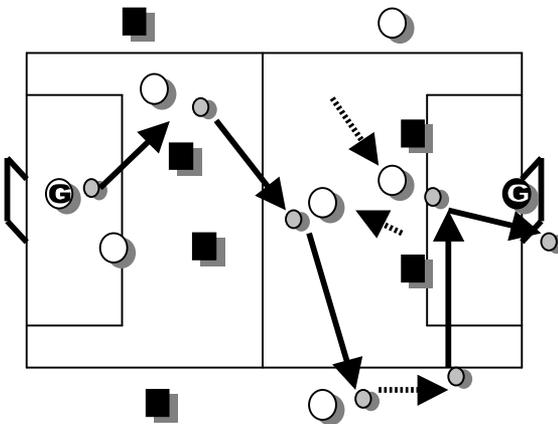


At first the rules of this game may seem too complicated but I found that my U13 boys team picked them up quickly. By consistently playing this game they became aware of the advantages of retreating to create a numerical advantage as well as advancing to do so.

Wing Attack Game

Wing attack games can be part of a practice no matter what age group or gender is involved, but I'm not sure that the younger age groups are ready to embrace the crossing and heading skills involved in these games, so, I would advise the coaches of younger players to introduce them gradually to the practice. For the older groups though, this should be a game that is played on a weekly basis, because as we advance our soccer skills, we'll find that scoring goals comes easier from crossing serves than from most other serves. Drilling the players on crossing and finishing will obviously help but I prefer to add the more realistic atmosphere of 'game-play' to the practice. The game I have in mind would allow the attackers, defenders, and goalkeepers to benefit from dealing with crossing situations.

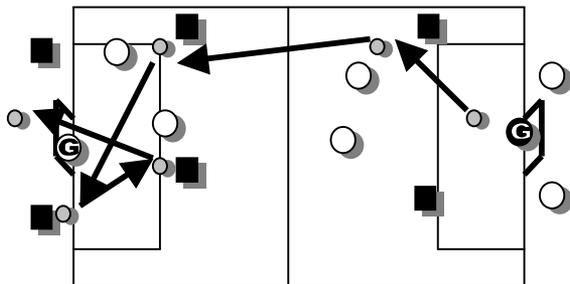
The field should be penalty area width and two penalty areas long. Each team would have a keeper and four or five outfield players with two wingers positioned outside the field on either side of the pitch. The keeper must deliver the ball to a player on the inside of the playing area who should look to play to a winger. The winger has one touch to control the ball and must attempt to cross it with the second touch. A goal can only be scored by a shot or header that comes directly from a cross or, if the coach deems it okay, from a first touch shot resulting from a touch back touchback pass from a cross.



In these games we are trying to teach our players how to attack the open space in the penalty area so that we can redirect the cross towards the goal should the ball land in that space. That redirection should come from the head or foot making clean contact with the cross ball.

Practicing Converting Rebounds

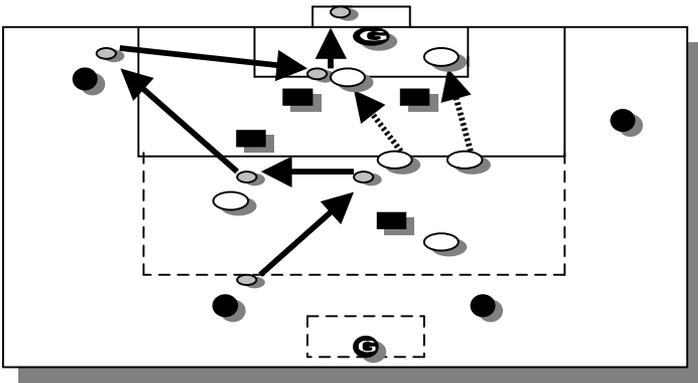
Most of soccer's great goal scorers have padded their goal tally with a large supply of rebound goals. Rebound goals are the ones scored from a fumble by the goalkeeper who has a hard time hanging on to a shot, or a rebound back into play from some part of the goal frame. Although the fans will rave about the great goals they've seen scored, the rebound goals are their equal when the referee counts the score at the end of the game. I scored a rebound goal for Everton against a German team called Nuremberg in a round of the UEFA Cup to win the game 1-0 and the tie by 2-1 to take us through to the next round. Sixty thousand Everton fans celebrated as if I had dribbled past five opponents and crashed a shot into the top corner of the goal. The celebrations were huge because it was an important score in an important game and the manner of scoring did not matter to those fans. In the media the next day my name was headlined and I was a hero for at least a few days until the next game started the process of success and failure all over again. By following up on a shot on goal and scoring off the rebound I had become the hero of that game and any attacking player who is in a position to follow up a teammates shot should do so instead of standing and watching like some spectator. To get players aware of these goal-scoring possibilities, I like to play a game that requires two players to stand by the side of the goal so that they are in position to rebound back into play any shots that are wide of the goal.



This game teaches players to be alert to the possibilities of balls rebounding back into the central striking area. Any shot that either hits or misses the target can be redirected back into the strike zone to give a wide-awake forward the chance to score. All great strikers rely on what some people call garbage goals and by continually following up on shots on goal they put the goalkeeper under pressure not to mishandle the ball. That type of pressure can lead them to do just that.

Attacking Area Game

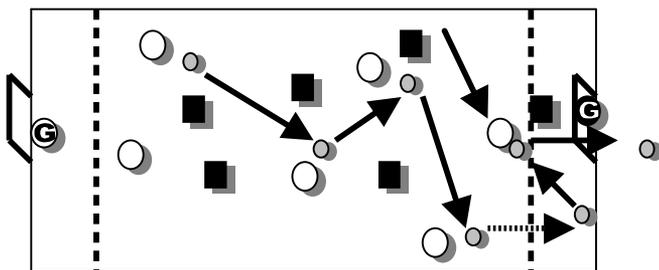
Goal-scorers and goal makers need to practice their skills in realistic field areas so that they can become used to these areas and the skills required to be successful in them. For forwards to work unopposed in the strike zone is not a realistic situation unless we're practicing breakaway strikes on goal. For the most part forwards will have opposing defenders marking them tightly. They must get used to this sort of defensive treatment if they are to figure out ways to be successful in the attacking area. To allow the attackers this type of challenge, I have a game that gives them service from either the central or wing areas while being opposed by a back line of defenders and of course a goalkeeper. The coach can also become involved by being a target for the defenders to clear the ball to. The scoring is as follows: a goal scored by the forwards is worth 3 points, a direct assist by a support player is worth 1 point, and a clearance that is caught by the coach is also worth 1 point. The game is played in five-minute periods with each team taking turns to attack, defend, and serve. Each team should be given two turns in each position.



This game should provide the strikers and servers with some realistic attacking problems while also providing the defenders with realistic defending problems. More than that it also provides them with the chance to polish their skills in a competitive atmosphere close to that provided by the game itself. Fortunately for the coaches we can condition games like these to provide our players with more repetitive challenges than normal game playing will allow. This will enhance their goal scoring and goal making potential.

Encouraging Direct Attacking Moves

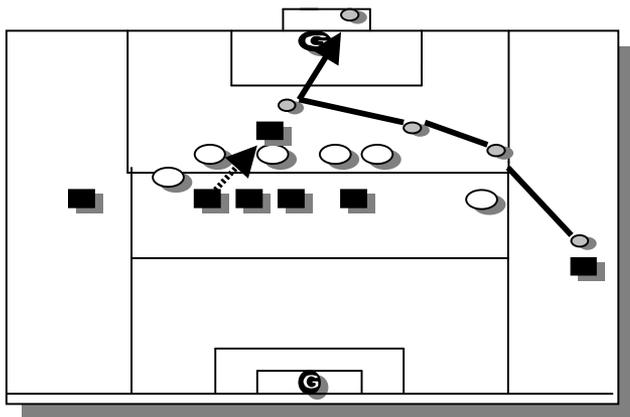
The best attacking teams are always on the alert for opportunities to aggressively attack their opponents by engaging them in 'one v one' dribbling or 'give and go' passing activities. The benefits arising from a successful dribble or return pass are penetration opportunities or creating a situation that forces the defenders to re-align in order to apply pressure to the ball carrier. The penetration opportunities allow the attacker to go directly toward goal or to have an open pathway to the end line to cross the ball into the goal area. Either of these goal scoring opportunities would be on top of the coaches game list of things that must happen if the team is to stand any chance of winning. When I was coaching at Everton, I had conditioned my team to keep control of the ball and to show their patience and skill by passing and moving as they searched for openings in the defense. This advice gave us lots of ball control but few penetration opportunities. So, I got together with the first team coach, Willie Donachie, to figure out how we could become more aggressive on offense. Together we came up with this game that encouraged the players to become more direct in their approach to attacking. The rules of our game allowed the attacking team to advance the ball by passing forward or side-ways but not backwards. However, they could dribble the ball in any direction. To give the attackers a chance to cross the ball backward, we marked a six-yard area from the end line to a coned line where the player in that area could pass or cross the ball backwards.



The effect of this game on my players was quite amazing. Where before they had taken their own sweet time to advance the ball, they now attacked aggressively and at speed. The number of attempts on goal rose dramatically and the accuracy in the finishing also improved. Although I didn't want my players to attempt to play at this pace for the whole 90 minutes, by mixing the practice sessions I could coach ball possession and attacking speed of play in the one 90minute session.

Coaching Dead Ball Situations in a Game

One of the ways to improve your team's goals for and against percentages is to practice dead ball situations. The problem with doing this is that it almost always bores the players enough to cause them to become distracted. This lack of attention to the details involved in these important situations can lead to costly mistakes during the game that can cause a team to lose a game they fought hard to win. To counter this boredom, we can play a game where the players are divided into two teams and the coach calls the dead ball plays every few minutes. The coach can then decide what dead ball situation is to be practiced and provide the teams with attacking and defending instructions so that the players become aware of what the coach expects from them if they are faced with a similar situation on match days. If this becomes part of a normal practice session throughout the spring, summer and fall season then the players should be tuned into their roles in dead ball situations going into the State Cup play-offs.



I like to play this game in the practice session that precedes the upcoming game so that the positional requirements by the players are fresh in their mind. Every Crossfire team has players that excel in one dead ball area or another whether it is taking free kicks, corner kicks or long throw-ins or conversely by getting into position to defend these dead ball situations and by using these skills we may turn defeat into victory. Practice is the key to excellence and it's up to the coaches to work with the players to achieve such excellence.

Notes: