

**The Coaching Hierarchy**  
**Part II: Spacing and Roles**  
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In the June issue of Ohio Soccer, a 7-step hierarchical approach to coaching was suggested as an alternative to the traditional technical and tactical models. These traditional models emphasize a simple to complex approach with the scrimmage as the final part of the progression. Both models are grounded on the assumption that technical and tactical concepts, first practiced in isolation or in small groups, and then in lead-up activities, are “learned” during the early part of the practice and therefore ready to be applied in game situations at the end. In reality, the learning between the stages of these progressions is tenuous, at best.

With the hierarchical approach to coaching, playing various forms of soccer is always the focus of activity at practice. Practices that featuring appropriate small-sided games provide both technical repetition and tactical development, and, from a coaching and playing perspective, are a more effective and fun ways to organize and motivate young children. There are no neat and tidy progressions and no cute soccer-related games or drills. “Coach, can we scrimmage?” is a plea never heard from the players. The practices feature activities that present realistic tactical problems in realistic soccer settings, with the coaching focusing on fundamental tactical ideas. For young players under the age of 10, the most basic tactical ideas are trying to score goals, trying to win the ball back, and the development of a transition mentality. As players move beyond 10, understanding how to create and utilize space in small groups becomes important, understanding basic positional ideas becomes important, and the development of combination ideas becomes important. Finally, as players advance through their teen years, coaching is concerned with the development of team play and “big picture” tactics.

On one level, then, the coaching hierarchy is concerned with players competing in different game activities that are appropriate for their age and skill level. For the youngest players, that may mean only 2 or 3 players per side; while, for advanced players, highly structured games with large numbers, offside lines, and positional responsibilities would be more appropriate. On a second and complementary level, the coaching hierarchy provides a consistent methodology for analyzing the structure of all soccer games and identifying the source of any tactical breakdowns.

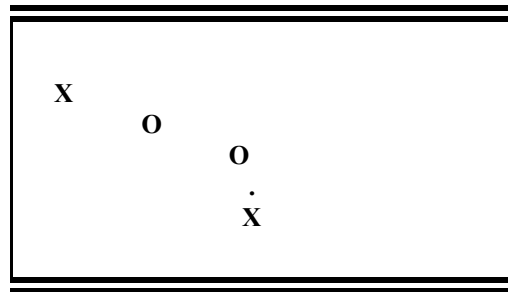
If the game truly is the great teacher it is purported to be, then the ability to organize players and coach within the game must be improved. To do so, an understanding of the technical and tactical demands of each game form (1v1 through 11v11) is an important step in coaching development. This hierarchical methodology was introduced in Part 1 and continues here with the second article discussing spacing and roles.

Appropriate Games

The main task in coaching from the hierarchical perspective is to select soccer games that challenge players to apply their range of techniques in solving tactical problems. The selected

games must be observed to ensure that a balance exists between success and challenge; otherwise, overall motivation will be affected. With very young or inexperienced players, the number of players must be kept small to provide success at keeping the ball and scoring goals. Goals are soccer's candy, and more is generally always better! For young players under the age of 10, positional coaching is unrealistic, so the practice organizations must reflect their lack of sophistication. Too often, 5 and 6 years-olds are asked to play games with five, six, and even seven teammates, which can only be described as counterproductive at best, and bordering on child abuse at worst. At this level of the hierarchy, simply asking young players to think about locating open space is enough to lay the foundation for later progress. The majority of players under the age of 10 should not compete in games with numbers exceeding 6 and, at the beginning levels, the form of soccer that works best in practice may have only 2 players on each "team" (Figure 1).

Figure 1.

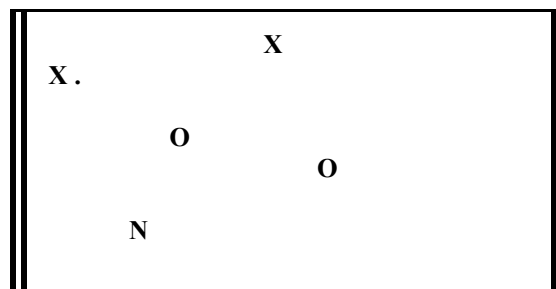


In figure 1, the game is 2v2 and the goal lines are 25 yards apart. The objective is to dribble the ball across the long line to score.

Using neutral players.

Some players need more time and space to make better or faster decisions. Utilizing a neutral player to help the team in possession circulate the ball and score goals is a sound coaching practice (Figure 2). With very young players, the neutral player could be the coach or an older player. In figure 2, there are only 5 players and so it is unnecessary to organize positions, regardless of age or ability. While the 2v2+1 game may be conditioned as 2-touch for more accomplished players, it is more important to simply encourage young players to try to score by dribbling or passing the ball, or by first moving into open space to receive passes from teammates.

Figure 2.



In figure 2, the game is 2v2+1 and the field is 30 yards x 20 yards. Goals are scored by dribbling the ball over the

short line. The neutral player (N) always plays with the team in possession.

Whether the magic number to create adequate balance between success and challenge is 1v1+1, 2v2+1, 3v2+1, or 3v3+2, the objective in coaching young players is to create an environment where they can receive the ball, kick the ball, run with the ball, dribble away from opponents, and score goals. As players get more experienced and skilled, games utilizing a neutral player(s) are more likely to feature larger numbers, larger playing spaces, and be used primarily for warm-up.

### Scoring

Scoring goals is the most motivating aspect of playing soccer at all levels. In general, dribbling the ball across a goal line (15+ yards wide) or kicking the ball through a large goal (6-10 yards wide) are the most convenient ways to encourage scoring for 4-6 year-olds, and there is no need for sidelines with these players as they will always find their way back toward the goal, eventually! For players of 7 years and older, dribbling the ball across a line (line soccer), passing the ball to a target player standing on an end line, or shooting at a goal, with or without a goalkeeper, are the most common methods of scoring in small-sided play. Players under the age of 10 should play games that encourage defending one goal and attacking another. Keep-a-way games, in contrast, are more appropriate for older, more skilled players who can appreciate the value of “possession” for its own challenge.

### Ability grouping

Mixing and matching players by ability should also be considered in organizing training groups. For example, keeping the stronger and weaker players segregated for part of the practice will ensure the weaker players experience some success. Alternatively, playing 2 of the stronger players against 3 or 4 of the weaker players also increases the probability of success, while maintaining a competitive environment. Finally, matching the strongest and weakest players together in teams can help players learn to adjust to each others' capabilities. There is no hard and fast rule, except that every player should experience successful contacts with the ball at every practice.

## **Level I: Spacing and Shape**

As players approach the age of 12, and have gained a technical and tactical foothold, the use of more complicated training and competitive games should be matched with the development of basic functional (positional) ideas. However, soccer's tactical paradox must always be kept in mind.

At the top level, each player has a position and a role in the team and, to create space, the players must stay away from each other when it is not their turn to play. While soccer is played with 11 players, only a small number are directly involved in the attack at any one time. At the point of attack, one dribbler, or between 2 and 4 players connecting passes together, create scoring chances. As an attack enters the last 40 yards of the field, the emphasis on positions that allowed an attack to progress, somewhat predictably, gives way to individual instinct and collective insight. In this attacking area, it is more important that players recognize who to play with, and when, than to stay in positions. In other words, the ability to recognize and utilize space under

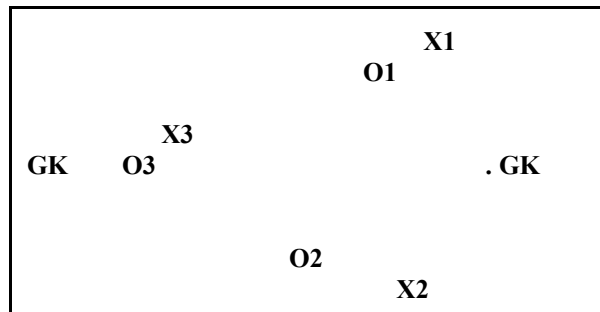
pressure determines the sophistication of a team in attack, not the organization of its players into static positions. It is in this aspect of soccer, in particular, that the lessons of small-sided games from youth label a player as either tactically astute or tactically naive.

In terms of the tactical hierarchy, most players under the age of 10 should not be placed in large number games where the assignment of positions is necessary to artificially create space. Young players should be free to explore space only from the perspective of width and depth, and the role of the coach is simply to help young players appreciate where to move to receive passes. For the remainder of this discussion, it is assumed that players have reached the age of 11 and can understand positional coaching.

### **Level II: Evolving Roles**

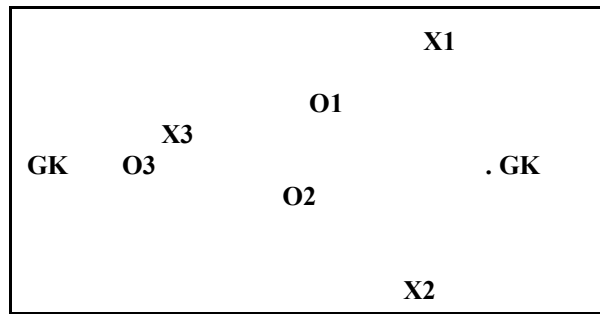
While practice games with neutral players, such as 3v3+2 to targets, provide more opportunities to maintain possession, the real game is not played with uneven teams. Games with even numbers complicate the tactical solutions and put a premium on creating and exploiting space between defenders. Additionally, the role of the goalkeeper becomes paramount in controlling the rhythm of play. For example, in the 4v4 game shown in figure 3, at least one “X” player must take the role of the forward and at least one “X” player must play to the side of the goalkeeper. If each attacking player is marked, the supporting player is always the goalkeeper. The scenarios explained in figures 3 and 4 represent the basic tactical problem of soccer: Spread out far enough to force the defenders to chose between defending passing lanes and defending against passes to feet.

Figure 3.



In figure 3, the game is 4v4 and the field is 40 yards x 25 yards. The attackers (X1, X2, and X3) have opened up space by moving away from each other and forming a diamond shape. This forces the defenders (O's) to decide between defending the space through the center or denying possession to the wide players (X1 and X2). In this case, the GK should pass the ball to the forward (X3) because the wide defenders (O1 and O2) have denied their immediate opponents space to receive the ball.

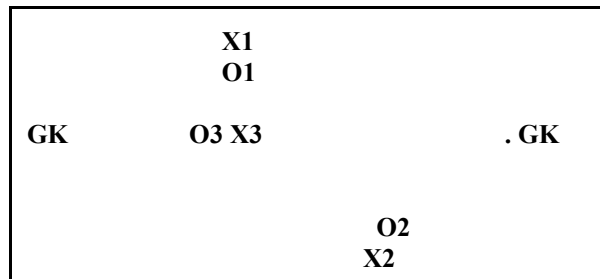
Figure 4.



In figure 4, the defenders (O's) have positioned themselves to deny the GK a passing lane to X3. By doing so, the wide defenders (X1 and X2) are now open and the ball should be played short.

In figure 5, the shape of the team is poor and it is unlikely that these players will succeed in controlled the rhythm of play. The goalkeeper is left with the choice between punting the ball or dribbling the ball forward, and most goals will be scored from counterattacks rather than through thoughtful, constructive soccer.

Figure 5.

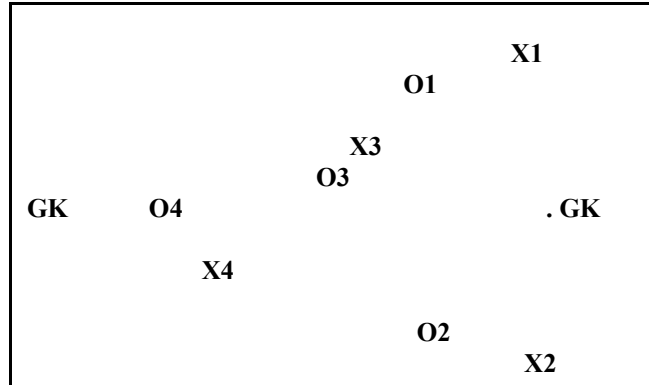


In figure 5, the attackers (X's) have not opened up space between the defenders (O's), giving the goalkeeper poor passing options.

When the game becomes 5v5, the attacking team needs to establish width of both sides of the goal, and depth between the goalkeeper and the striker (Figure 6). To truly develop tactical insight, it is vital that young players begin to understand the concepts of width and depth and how these ally with movement on and off the ball to create chances during an attacking sequence; however, the question of an appropriate age to begin this kind of instruction remains open to debate. Each player's intellectual and technical maturation and the competence of the coach can influence the rate of progress. Some players become spatially aware as early as 9, while most others must wait until closer to 11 or 12. As a general rule, there must be basic comfort level with the ball before players can become "tactical" in a group sense, and the players must be mature enough to appreciate the purpose of the instruction. Asking 6 year-olds to play in positions in a 5v5 game is unrealistic, but demanding the same of 11 year-olds with 5 years experience is not. In working with players between the ages of 8 and 11, coaches should observe the point at which "swarm ball" develops. If the swarm appears at 4v4, positional coaching may be irrelevant because the age of the players may a limiting factor, or because poor technique may be a limiting factor, or because the coaching has not addressed the most pertinent element from the hierarchy. If the swarm only appears when the numbers reach 6 or 7, positional coaching is

probably appropriate for that group of players.

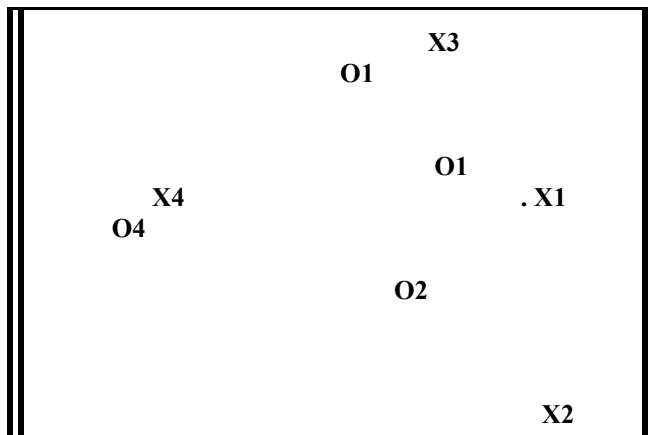
Figure 6.



In figure 6, the game is 5v5 and the field is 40 yards by 30 yards. The attacking players (X's) have established width at the back through X1 and X1 and depth at the front through X3 and X4. The goalkeeper must read the positions of O1 and O2 to determine whether to play long or short.

In figure 6, the defenders (X1 and X2) have opened up to the side to give the team width, and the forward (X4) and the midfielder (X3) have opened up the space in front of the goalkeeper to give the team depth. Assuming no counterattack possibilities existed, this starting arrangement gives the X team space to play out of the back and create scoring chances. By building a positional understanding, individual roles will begin to emerge within each team and the possibility of establishing a more controlled rhythm is improved. As playing numbers reach and exceed 4v4, defining individual roles for players older than 10 becomes an important part of the coaching process. The concepts of width and depth are best taught, not as one-time lessons, but as ongoing education through small-sided play. Even in 4v4 games without a goalkeeper, such as line soccer, players should generally organize with one in the back, 2 players wide and 1 player "long," as shown in figure 7.

Figure 7.



In figure 7, the attacking players (X's) have created space between the defenders (O's) and have the opportunity to connect passes and attack the goal line.

One final example of role definitions is important. Games with 7 field players are common for players under the age of 12. In this 8v8 game, two basic options exist for the arrangement of players. One is to play with 2 defenders and 3 midfield players; the other is to play with 3 defenders and 2 midfield players. In both cases, the teams have 2 forwards. When a team plays with three in the midfield line (Figure 8), inherent problems exist with the movement and balance of players in attack.

Figure 8.

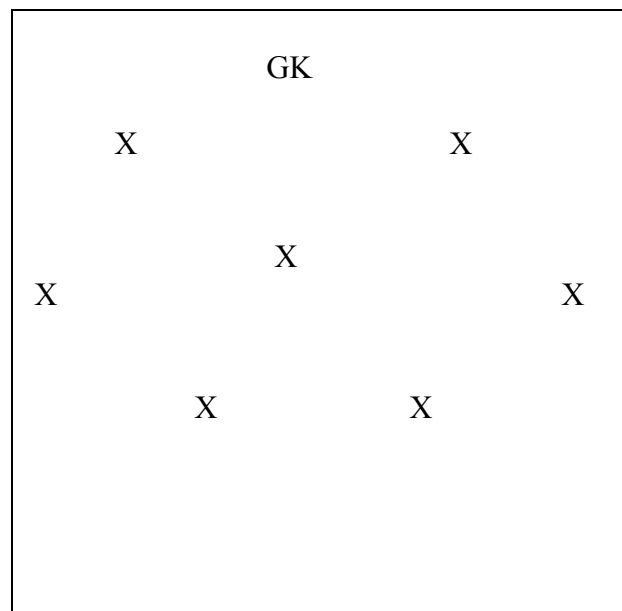


Figure 8 shows a team organized to play 2-3-2. The arrangement of players in defense and midfield often makes this a difficult formation for young players to understand.

If the coach is developmentally oriented and emphasizes playing out of the back when possible, the following coaching issues will undoubtedly emerge:

- The defenders will not open up to the side of the goal and, when they do, they will likely creep forward into the midfield when the goalkeeper has possession (positional and spatial awareness issues).
- The central midfielder is the key to building out of the back when playing 2-3-2. This player will struggle to move to the ball at the right moment and in the right way because they must learn when and how to show for the ball. The “why” question is also important to learn. This decision is based on the level of pressure on the defenders and the goalkeeper, and the availability of space (timing, vision, and spatial awareness issues).
- If the opponents are also playing 2-3-2, the “free” player in attack is the goalkeeper, as the two defenders are often “neutralized” by the two attackers. It is often the goalkeeper’s responsibility to “make the game” across or out of the back (technical and vision issues).
- There is a strong tendency at all levels to compact space rather than create space. Players need to learn when it is their turn to play and when it is their turn to rest and make space for teammates to play (spatial awareness issues). When building out of the back, the 2 forwards must create space by initially moving away from the defenders, and the 3

midfielders must also move out of the back area. By creating space between the lines in this way, and assuming the opponents are also playing 2-3-2, the 3 players in the back will be confronted by only 2 forwards with enough time and space to connect passes with players further forward.

- Because their thinking is quite technical, younger players have a difficult time creating space when playing with their back to goal. With 3 in midfield, the 2 wide players are also constrained by their respective sidelines (vision and spatial awareness issues). Teaching these players when and how to support their teammates is a challenge that requires much patience.
- The movement of the wide midfielders across the field must be encouraged. Too often, wide players are told to operate in only a narrow channel on their side of the field. This limits the teams attacking options and limits the creativity of the players (spatial awareness issue).
- Maintaining an attacking balance in midfield can be difficult with 3 players. The central player is invariably leading or supporting the attack, and the wide players also have a natural tendency to move forward with the flow of the game. The coaching challenge is in working with the players to read when it is time to move forward and when it is time to support the attack from behind (positional responsibility issues).
- Finally, the roles of the forwards can be broken down into two areas: the build-up and the attack. On one level, the forwards have a responsibility to help the team build the ball out of the back. This requires an appreciation of timing and space and the skill to play under pressure, often while facing their own goal. On the second level, their job is to score goals or help others score goals; this is achieved by dribbling and shooting the ball or by combining passes with teammates. Helping these players understand where, when, how, and why they should move in relation to the game is the most difficult aspect of coaching because it is the phase of play that requires the highest level of individual insight and skill.

In figure 9, the team is arranged with 3 players in the back and 2 in midfield. This arrangement creates different problems for the coach, but is often seen as more manageable by players for the following reasons:

- The team has up to 4 players in the back to help circulate or advance the ball.
- Defenders have more time and space to run the ball out of the back.
- Defenders supporting from the back of the team and are facing the game as they join the attack.
- The midfielders are not constrained by the sidelines and can move through 360 degrees to support their defenders and forwards.
- The defenders can often play directly to one of the forwards in the open space on the flank.
- The balance and movement of players in midfield is easier for the players to understand.
- The forwards play a much more involved role in the build-up.
- The supporting angles throughout the team are more recognizable for young players.

Figure 9.

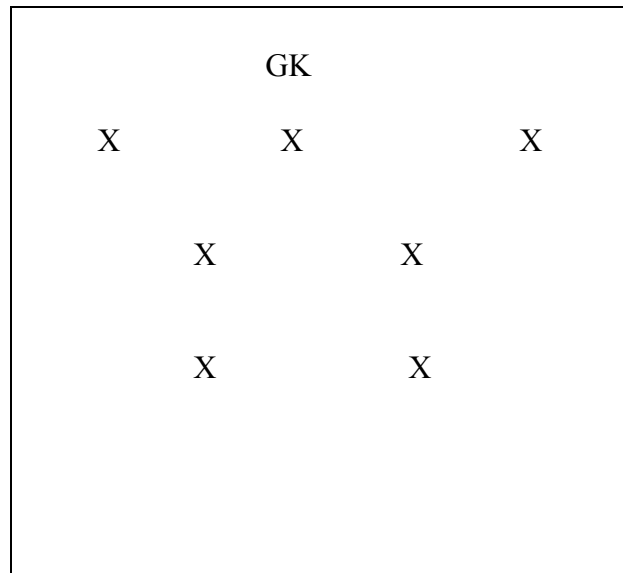


Figure 9 shows a team organized to play 3-2-2. This arrangement is often easier for young players to understand because the midfield is less cluttered.

Taking young players from the free play of the early years to the sophistication of professional soccer is a long and difficult task. In youth soccer, our aim should be to develop our players' skill level and also their understanding of basic tactics, regardless of whether they will become professional players or simply playing adults. To help them reach their potential, youngsters must play soccer in forms that are appropriate to their ability level and insight, and which provide a manageable soccer challenge. Unfortunately, too many of our young players are asked to play in positions before they develop the individual tactical understanding and skills necessary to succeed as teenagers. By failing to appreciate the slow nature of the developmental process, and by continuing to encourage competitive play and large numbers for young players, many of our communities and leagues in Ohio have inadvertently perpetuated a generation of underachievers.

Next: possession and penetration, and creating space for combination play.