

The Coaching Hierarchy
Part III: Possession, penetration, creating space, and combination play.
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This series of articles has introduced the concern that coaching which separates the technical aspects of performance from the tactical in most American coaching settings is counterproductive to learning. The idea that only technical corrections be made during a “technical” practice and that only tactical corrections be made during a “tactical” practice is seen as impractical because, in reality, it is “skill” which is developed during active play, not just technique and not just tactics. Skill is defined as the application of technique relative to the tactical demands of the game; at its core, soccer a game of decision-making, limited by vision and technique. To play fast and with purpose, players must quickly recognize their tactical options and possess the technical ability to complete the action. Because pure technique is one of the key elements in skillful performance, it has mistakenly become the *raison d’être* for youth coaches. Sadly, those coaches who then seek to develop technique through drills and other soccer-related activities do so at the expense of building a context from which young players can begin to understand the game. This series of articles has addressed those coaches who seek to develop more “skillful” players by focusing on how to better use small-sided and large-sided games as a basis for teaching soccer.

Scenario #1

Picture this scene at a typical soccer field. The teams are made up of 7 and 8 year olds. The youngsters have been playing for 2 years, on average. The playing space is 70 yards by 40 yards. There are 7 field players and a goalkeeper on the field from each team, and each team has 6 substitutes. A cadre of vocal parents lines the field. The coaches are in the middle of the field giving directions to the players.

As the game begins, the players swarm around the ball. Periodically, a player dribbles out of the mass and heads goalward until their skill level or an opponent catches up to them. After a few minutes, the coaches stop the game and begin to organize the players into positions. The defenders are told to go back to the top of their penalty box and the forwards are sent to the top of their opponent’s penalty box, leaving the midfield space momentarily open. When the game resumes, the swarm reappears! Only by constantly demanding that players hold their positions can the coaches create space for the game to proceed without crowding. However, this coaching approach essentially results in the three lines (defenders, midfielders, forwards) becoming distinct and separated rather than connected, rendering constructive play virtually impossible. Sadly, this is all too familiar a scene in youth soccer, and one that is unlikely to develop the skills and understanding that sustains interest and inspires a passion for the sport over a lifetime.

Placing young children in positions will never create “soccer” while the youngsters lack the experience to connect passes together and move to support teammates. With young players, this “foundation” is only gained by playing freely in unstructured small-sided games with enough time and space to pass, dribble, or shoot as they see fit. Only once players have developed a basic feel for the ball in their formative years can they be expected to think about “teammates” and “lines” in the way adults expect of them. Until that point, there is only futility and frustration in trying to organize young players into larger-sided games with organized positions.

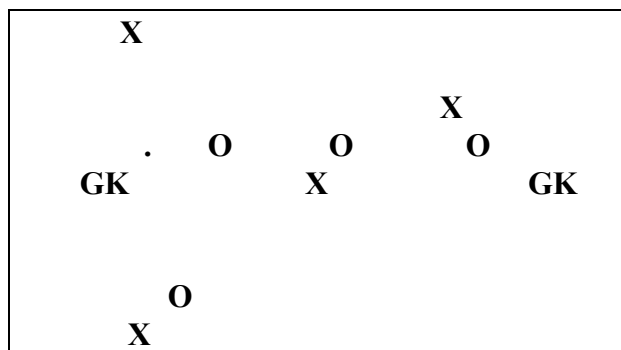
Scenario #2

Two teams of 10 and 11 year olds are playing 5v5, with 4 field players and a goalkeeper. The playing space is 40 yards by 30 yards. The players have 5 years experience, on average. As the coaches observe the action, they also notice congestion in the middle of the field. However, their chances of creating “soccer” are much better in this case because there are fewer players to organize and the players’ experience level allows for some complicated concepts to be developed over time.

In this scenario, the coaches begin the process by addressing the space issue. With 5 players, the goalkeeper needs one player to open up on each side of the goal, one to stretch the game towards the opponent’s goal, and the fourth to find space somewhere in the middle. By doing this, each player has been given a role in the team.

The coaches ask the players to defend man-for-man during this particular practice, leaving the goalkeepers staring at 4 marked teammates when in possession. The coaches also, wisely, encourage the goalkeepers to dribble the ball out with their feet when they have time and space, thereby creating the tactical situation necessary for attacking soccer to succeed: force defenders to choose between marking passing lanes or players. As the goalkeeper dribbles cautiously forward, a defender moves away from her opponent to challenge for the ball (figure 1). At this point at least one teammate will become open and the attack can progress forward.

Figure 1.



In figure 1, the game is 5v5 and the field is 40 yards by 30 yards. The goalkeeper advances the ball until a passing option develops.

In this scenario, the players might succeed in regularly creating scoring chances, or the play may become erratic and bogged down because of either poor technical ability (kicking, receiving, or dribbling) or a lack of tactical understanding

Technical solutions

If the problems are mostly technical, one solution is to practice with fewer field players and a more experienced player to help both teams (4v4+1). With this practice, the goalkeeper always has at least one free option, and the attacking team always has an extra player to build forward with. The role of the extra player, who may be an adult or a more experienced player, is to offer support to the player in possession and to give fellow attackers additional time to recognize and move into open space. By running with the ball, the extra player can also create frequent numbers-up situations.

Another option for improving “skill” would be to play 4 field players against 3, or 4 field players against 2, with some of the better players on the numbers-down team. This will encourage more dribbling opportunities for one team (numbers down) and more passing opportunities for the other (numbers up). Adding a +1 player would also be a viable possibility.

For all players with limited technical ability, practices should consist of various small-sided games with no more than 4 field players and a goalkeeper. Options include 1v1 and 1v1+1, 2v2 and 2v2+1, 3v3 and 3v3+1, etc., and the playing spaces should be larger rather than smaller to compensate for poor technique. Only once they have become comfortable with the ball, can players ever begin to contemplate the tactical nuances required to play in larger numbers.

Tactical solutions

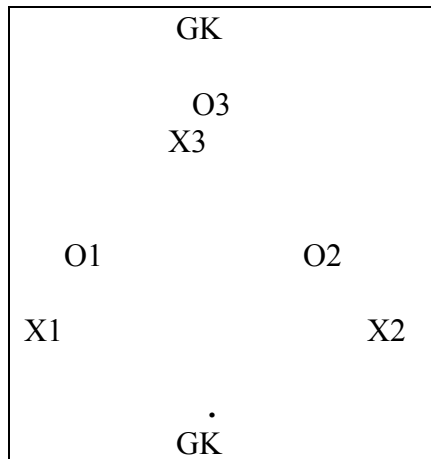
There are a number of possibilities if the game is breaking down through tactical shortcomings:

- The players might not have the vision to see the field quickly enough to receive and pass before being closed down.
- The players might not be creating space for themselves to receive passes.
- The players might not understand when it is their turn to play and when they should stay away from the ball.
- The players might not support each other quickly enough.
- The players might not understand where to run.
- The players might not understand the timing of runs into open spaces.
- The players might not be thinking ahead and running off the ball.
- The playing space may be too small for the skill level.
- The players may not understand when to play backward and when to play forward.

All these problems, and others, are will be present in games as small as 3v3. These are the tactical nuances players will never learn through drill work. By working with young

players to help them understand these basic ideas, the tactical foundation for team play can be laid. Let's look at how to address these issues beginning with the following example.

Figure 2.



In figure 2, the game is 4v4 and the field is 40 yards by 25 yards.

Level III: Possession vs Penetration

In figure 2, the game is 4v4. The goalkeeper provides support behind the team in possession. When players do not see an open passing lane forward, they should look to play the ball back to the goalkeeper and move into supporting positions, as shown. In this way, the game can establish a shape and a more controlled rhythm, and decisions on whether to possess or penetrate can be tested out through repetition. Not encouraging players to take the risk of playing backward has consequences that linger into the teen years and beyond. At the youth level, goals will often be lost by encouraging this tactic, but, to move away from a “kick ball” mentality, players must first learn that it is OK to turn around and play backwards when there is no space to play forward.

Vision

A related concept to the possession-penetration decision is vision. Good players assess their options BEFORE they get the ball, while beginners concentrate on the ball because they have not yet developed the comfort level or, perhaps, the intellect, to think ahead. For players who have reached the age of 11 and who are comfortable in possession, coaching the concept of vision can be very simple. In the 4v4 game above, when players do not open their body to see the field, or they do not look to see where space, teammates, and opponents are before receiving the ball, the game is stopped and an indirect free kick is awarded to the opponents. This “penalty” must be reinforced in practice for as long as the players’ natural instincts are otherwise!

Decision-making hierarchy

A second element of the possession-penetration concept is the decision-making process. The rule of thumb is that players should always look to score a goal as their first thought when in possession. Scoring is the object of the game and players need to think about this possibility from any position at any time. Certainly, as the playing numbers get larger, this may not be a realistic possibility, but how many 30-yard chips do we see from today's average player? If a goal cannot be scored, the next best option should be to pass the ball to someone in a better position to score. The third thought should be to play the ball as far forward as possible to a teammate who can maintain possession. And the final constructive option should be to pass the ball to any teammate in any position that allows the team to maintain possession. Only when players perceive themselves to be under severe pressure should they be verbally reinforced for kicking the ball to safety, which is the final option in the decision-making hierarchy. In all cases, the players must learn to assess the tactical probability of success relative to their technical level: seeing a difficult pass is one thing; having the skill to deliver the ball is another!

By building on the concepts of vision and decision-making, players can be challenged to assess their options to possess or penetrate more quickly and choose the best course of action relative to the possibilities presented by the game.

Level IV: Creating space

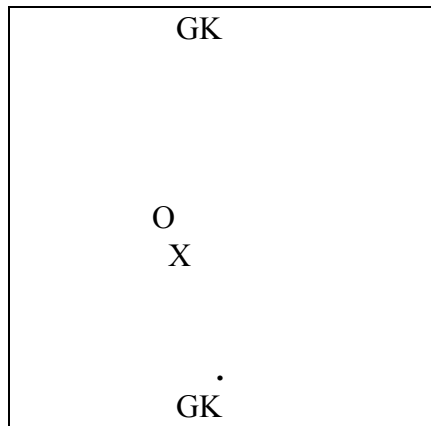
So far, players have been organized into positions, given roles, and guided to make better decisions on how to play with more purpose. At this point, if they cannot appreciate why, how, and when to create space for themselves, their soccer progress will stagnate. Young players are often given advice on "where" to move to be in good supporting positions, but not "when" and "how." If players cannot learn to create space for themselves at the right moment, their ability to help connect passes will be severely limited. In many ways, this is the watershed skill in small group tactical understanding. While we can always get players to spread out and stand in a position, to get them to appreciate how and when to find an open seam to help a teammate connect a pass ultimately separates the players from the non-players.

As an example from figure 2, when X1 and X2 succeed in creating space for the goalkeeper to pass to X3, a connection will only be made if X3 has kept the receiving space alive. If he is standing still, the defender will intercept the pass. If he starts too close to his own goal, there will be very little space or time to turn or combine with his teammates, leaving only the improbability of a lofted pass from the goalkeeper to retrieve the situation. Only by thinking about where he wants to receive the ball, initially moving somewhere else to take the defender away, and then moving to the ball at the moment when a teammate is ready to pass will a connection be made. This is a complicated series of decisions upon which the ability to combine at speed in small groups is grounded. If players are not allowed to develop this understanding through repetitive play early in their careers, the learning curve becomes an Everest by the teen years!

In games such as 4v4 and 5v5, it is always possible to get the defenders to open up beside the goalkeeper and stand still. However, it is the movement of players with their backs to goal that is most telling in assessing whether the concept of space is understood. The following examples with one player and a goalkeeper underscore the significance of the broader challenge facing individuals playing with a group in a confined space.

In figure 3, the goalkeeper in possession is playing with X. If X remains in this position, she will have to receive the ball with her back to goal, hold off the challenge of O, and find a way to beat O to score.

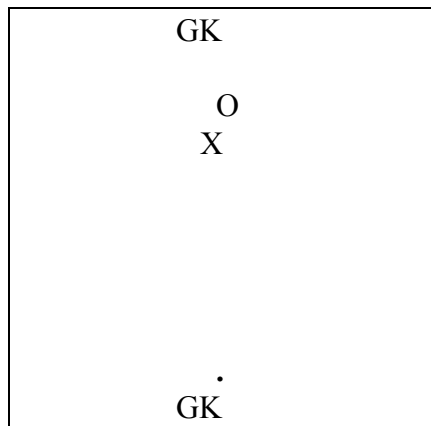
Figure 3.



In figure 3, the game is 2v2 and the field is 30 yards by 25 yards.

In figure 4, X has moved further away from the goalkeeper and created space to run back to the ball. However, she still has to hold off the challenge of O to receive the pass from the goalkeeper and then turn and beat O to score.

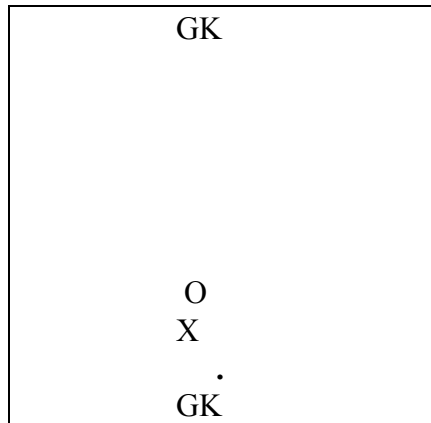
Figure 4.



In figure 4, the game is 2v2 and the field is 30 yards by 25 yards.

In figure 5, X is positioned in front of the goalkeeper and receiving a ball to feet would create a very difficult attacking situation. Only a throw over the head of O would provide an improbable chance at goal, providing X and the goalkeeper can read the option and X has the pace and strength to elude O on the way to goal.

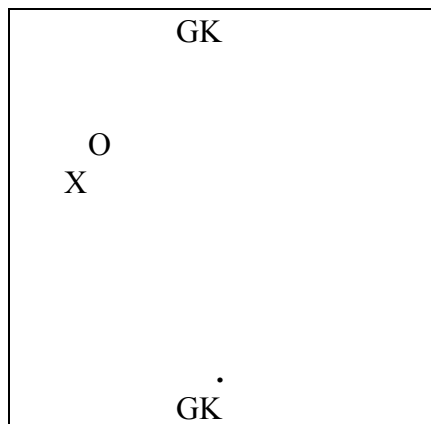
Figure 5.



In figure 5, the game is 2v2 and the field is 30 yards by 25 yards.

In figure 6, X has moved toward one side of the field and opened up space in the center. In this situation she will likely receive the pass while running towards the opposite sideline, and possibly towards her own goal line. O will still be goalside and well positioned to defend.

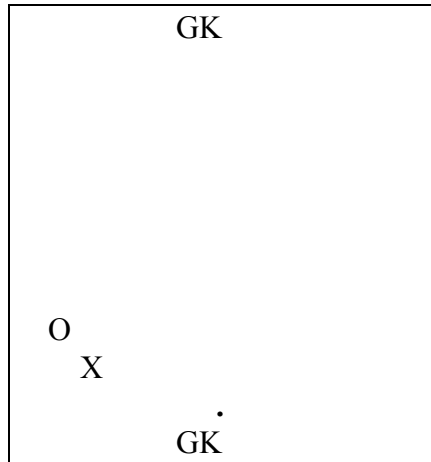
Figure 6.



In figure 6, the game is 2v2 and the field is 30 yards by 25 yards.

In figure 7, X has come deeper and to one side of the goalkeeper. In this case, a run across the face of the goal and diagonally forward will make it easier for the goalkeeper to connect a pass into space. In this example, X may only have to shield the ball from O in order to shoot at goal.

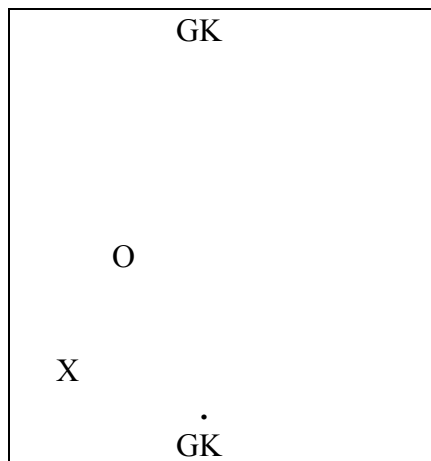
Figure 7.



In figure 7, the game is 2v2 and the field is 30 yards by 25 yards.

In figure 8, O is conceding space around X in order to avoid being beaten by the run shown in figure 7. By positioning to defend the most dangerous space, O has allowed the goalkeeper to pass to X's feet, who can face up and attack O with the ball.

Figure 8.



In figure 8, the game is 2v2 and the field is 30 yards by 25 yards.

The concept of creating space for players under the age of 11 simply involves moving to open areas to receive passes from teammates. Ten year-old defenders do not close down opponents as they will only a year or two later, and so it is important to help the U-11 player appreciate where they can move to gain possession and advance the ball. By the brink of the teen years, individual defending is much more aggressive and sophisticated, and the ability of attackers to find and create passing lanes becomes critical to combining with others. Making only one run directly to the ball is generally not good enough against the better defenders, and moving away from a potential receiving space is a

difficult concept for 11 and 12 year-olds. However, as they practice playing under pressure in small groups, the awareness of how to create space and move into supporting positions when the ball can be passed will improve. Learning to utilize space through 360 degrees is a day-to-day skill for good players and appreciating that it may be necessary to make two or three runs to connect one pass with a teammate is part of a life's soccer education.

Level V: Combination play

Once the concept of creating space as an individual has been developed, the key to evolving combination play is in identifying and cementing the functional relationships that exist between players. When combination play is defined as the interconnecting of passes between players, any sequence involving two or more players can be considered combination play. For example, in figure 2, when the ball is played to X3 from the goalkeeper only a limited number of options are available: X3 can turn and shoot, X3 can pass to either X1 or X2 moving forward in immediate support, X3 can pass to either X1 or X2 remaining behind in support, or X3 can pass the ball back to the goalkeeper. By understanding the finite number of options available to each player in possession in small-sided games, play can become quite predictable, and “combining” becomes easier as players are better able to read the game.

One goal of training children between the ages of 5 and 12 is to provide a foundation for 11v11 “team” play when it becomes important during the teen years. As has been said many times, the goal of sophisticated team play is only achieved when players have the opportunity to frequently experience the ball and naturally learn about the relationships that are possible between small groups of players. Crowded playing environments severely inhibit the technical and tactical progress of young players and serve only to stifle the likelihood of combination play emerging. Consider the impact of increased numbers on perceptual demands and the opportunities for repetition in the information below.

The evolution of group tactical awareness, i.e., the ability to purposely combine, does not begin to emerge in the most advanced players until around age 9. It is also worth considering that the typical social group for 6-10 year-olds is quite small. In figure 2, with 4 players on the team, and 8 on the field, each player has the option to dribble the ball or pass to 3 other teammates, which is quite manageable for most players under the age of 9. When the game is 5v5, the number of passing options for each person rises to 4, which is reasonable for the majority of players under the age of 11. With 7 players, the number of passing options rises to 6 and, with 14 players on the field, the tactical complexity has reached “large-group” status. This is an impossible challenge for players under the age of 8, very congested for most under the age of 11, and may even prove to be a challenge for some under the age of 12.

If this by itself does not seem particularly extreme, it is also important to appreciate that the level of statistical complexity increases dramatically in proportion to the number of

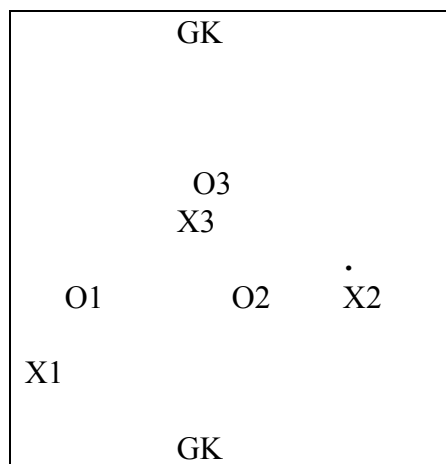
players. With 2 players on the field, they can only pass to each other, so the number of permutations they are required to assess is 2. With 3 players, each player can exchange a pass with 2 others, raising the complexity of possible connections to 6. With 5 players, the number of permutations rises to 20, with 7 players, the number is 42, and with 9 players, the number of possible passing permutations is 72. It is also significant that academic instruction in reading and mathematics, for all but the most gifted students, does not begin to feature material demanding abstract reasoning skills until junior high school, at around ages 12 to 13. Clearly, there are compelling reasons to be cautious in our expectations of pre-teens' tactical capabilities.

The impact and importance of movement

Absolutely essential to constructive soccer is the idea of changing rhythm and pace. For those players approaching teenhood, purposeful combination play is only possible when they can appreciate when and how to move in support of the ball; in effect, learning how to change the rhythm of play. Changing the rhythm can be achieved through a change in pass length, a reduction in the number of touches between passes, or by dribbling the ball forward at speed. Each concept is based on the recognition of open space, and the willingness to attack space at speed by either passing or dribbling the ball.

When a player has space in front of them they should be encouraged to dribble at speed (Figure 9).

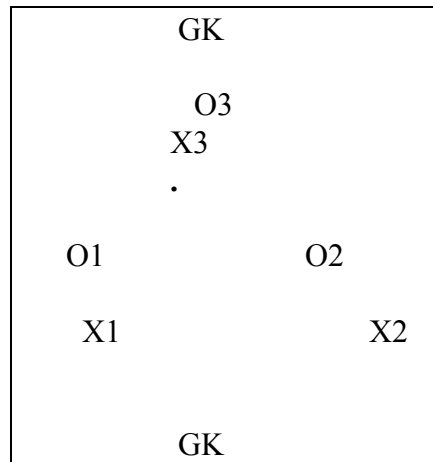
Figure 9.



In figure 9, the game is 4v4 and the field is 40 yards by 25 yards. The forward (X3) has passed the ball into the path of the defender (X2) moving to support. X2 should attack the space ahead of her and, if possible, shoot at goal.

When passing lanes is available and a connection is “on,” the player passing the ball must be encouraged to quickly follow the pass to reconnect with the intended target (Figure 10).

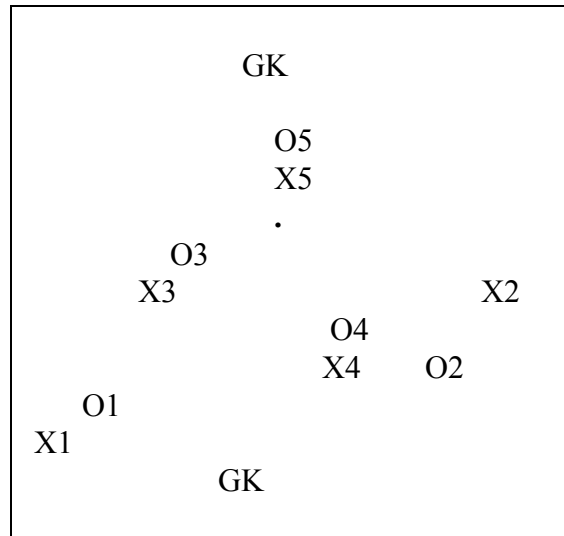
Figure 10.



In figure 10, the game is 4v4 and the field is 40 yards by 25 yards. X1 has passed the ball to X3 and the defender (O2) is positioned to concede space on the inside of the field. X1 should follow his pass and connect “underneath” X3. From this position, X1 can dribble forward, shoot at goal, reconnect with X3, or turn around and pass to X2 or the goalkeeper.

Another necessary and important feature of combination play is the anticipation of support between the lines. In figure 11, the defender (X2) realizes that the ball is about to be passed from the goalkeeper to the forward (X5) and has gained a step on her immediate opponent (O2) by anticipating the goalkeeper’s best option. By training players to read their options to combine based on the typical movement of teammates, the speed at which players can anticipate and read the game increases rapidly.

Figure 11.



In figure 11, the game is 6v6 and the field is 60 yards by 44 yards. X1 and X2 have opened up on the side of the goal and X3 and X4 have created a passing lane to the forward X5. The defender X2 has anticipated the pass from the goalkeeper to X5 and is moving past the midfielders and into a supporting position.

In summary, good combination play occurs as the result of four factors. The players must see the field (vision) and recognize possible options (perception). They must understand where, when and how to move (spatial awareness and anticipation), and they must have the technical range to keep the ball in their possession.

Next: Speed of Play and Team Building.