The Coaching Hierarchy
Part IV: Developing Speed of Play and Teambuilding
Tom Turner, OYSAN Director of Coaching
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Introduction

This article seeks to describe the timing and process of teambuilding and how speed of play is developed as a function of age, ability and coaching. Two themes are important for this discussion. First, individual technique is the foundation for every assessment of team play. Second, speed of play within a team structure is reflective of individual skill and tactical familiarity. Before providing specific ideas on how speed of play is developed on the field, it is important to present a developmental framework for those who might fall into the trap of trying to "build the roof before the foundation."

The ultimate goal of coaching is to help players win important games. However, defining when games are important often determines the structure of an organization and the values and quality of its leadership. At the youth levels "winning" should be very closely associated with the process of long-term individual development and the concept of delayed gratification. Success at the youth level cannot be myopically viewed through the lens of game-to-game results, and all technical, tactical, physical, emotional and financial decisions should be made with an eye to the future. At the professional level, striving to win drives judgments on personnel decisions, tactical decisions, financial decisions and, frequently, moral and ethical decisions; every organizational action is based on creating the best opportunities to win games. Period!

Devoid of a youth-team-to-full-professional pyramid, player development in the United States at almost every level has become synonymous with teambuilding in order to win games and be "successful." Direct play is ubiquitous when coaches unfamiliar with the sport make tactical choices, and size and strength are routinely valued over skill and cunning. Unfortunately, when the physical dimension is removed or reduced as a significant indicator of winning potential during the mid-teens, achieving victory demands skillful players who are often conspicuous by their absence. At this point, there is no possibility of recovering the critical periods for skill learning and the majority of players rendered soccer-illiterates.

The Nature of Learning

Stepping back from soccer for just a moment may help shed light on the advantages and permanence of slow, purposeful learning and the value of developing automated responses through trial and error. These ideas are presented to draw parallels between the slow development of techniques and tactical understanding in small-group play and the ability to later apply these skills within a sophisticated team organization.

Many of the hundreds of tasks we perform effortlessly in our daily lives are accomplished with a minimum of thought because we have generated what Paiget called "schemas" or

programs through years of recognition and repetition and refinement. We have learned to dress ourselves without fretting over zippers or buttons or shoe laces; we can feed ourselves without the mess and frustration and dexterity problems of our youth; we drive highly dangerous automobiles, often while making phone calls and enjoying the radio or conversation or scenery, and seemingly without paying attention to the many sources of danger that our brains are processing every second. We have "grooved" responses for virtually every physical and metal action we perform on a regular basis and this allows us to multi-task at very high levels. Experience and reflection have allowed us to draw from the past to meet the demands of the present and future.

When tasks become automated our brains can focus on other thoughts. Rarely, for example, do we have to think about the inherent difficulty of lifting and holding a pencil! Think about using chopsticks for the first time or taking up a new sport or hobby as an adult! It was not so long ago that many adult learners labored to appreciate the logic of inserting a floppy disk into a boot drive to start a computer; now we have grandparents effortlessly surfing the web and conversing around the world via e-mail.

Every action becomes a challenge until the muscles and brain learn how to work together to coordinate and learn the timing and "feel" of unfamiliar movements. Our untrained thinking becomes fixated on the details of any new mental or motor pattern and, at these moments, the "application" of the task is the farthest thing from our minds; our thinking is highly technical, just like young soccer players fighting the ball during their early experiences. Novice learners pay attention to only one or two relevant details at a time and must build their schemas piece by piece, and sometimes over the course of a lifetime. As we become more proficient, we perform without requiring the high level of attention demanded when the details were not learned and the feel was unfamiliar. Over time, we may develop from "novice" to "competent" to "expert" status as our skills and understanding improve. As we become more automatic, we think less and less about "how" we do things, and more and more about how we apply our skills to meet familiar demands. Only when a challenge is quite novel or stressful must we consciously assume a more deliberate mental focus.

Piaget and Vygotsky

For decades, the child development theories of Swiss scientist Jean Piaget (1896-1980) provided the preeminent framework for explaining how, when and why children learned to think and problem-solve. Piaget's model described the gradual and predictable evolution of children's thinking from birth to the mid-teens. Piaget viewed children as incapable of performing at more advanced levels until their brains became "wired" for higher-order learning as a function of maturation. While some aspects of Piaget's theory have floundered under scrutiny in recent years, his influence on education remains strong and his mapping of human development remains important in understanding the capabilities and limitations of children and young adults.

Outside of the former Iron Curtain, the work of the Russian psychologist Lev Vygotsky (1896-1934) had been quite understated in explaining the anecdotal evidence underlying the development of young children in natural social environments. Vygotsky showed that

when young children are helped with challenges they cannot solve on their own, they become surprisingly capable of achieving at levels above those predicted by Piaget. Vygotsky observed that children are capable of producing a range of higher-order knowledge and skills in the company of older or more experienced helpers than would be seen during interactions with same-age peers. Over time, this exposure to more skilled performers and the subsequent production of more skillful responses serves to accelerate learning and development; much as an apprenticeship remains the most effective means of mentoring new generations of skills artisans.

While understanding Piaget is helpful because he tells us there are maturational limitations on children's ability to comprehend complex challenges, Vygotsky's theory is also important to any discussion of player development because it helps explain the value of learning through participation with more experienced and skillful performers, such as friends, siblings, parents and coaches. In free play sport environments where multiple-age configurations of teams are the norm, the youngest learn from the oldest. Vygotsky's work also strongly suggests that the strict age grouping of youngsters in sport is contrary to an efficient and effective learning environment.

Developing Independent Thinkers: Empowering versus Authoritarian Coaching

In Developing Decision Makers, Lynn Kidman provides observations and examples of player-centered coaching at the professional level. With this empowerment strategy, the players are active participants in their own development and fully active in planning practices and discussing game strategies; in effect, they take ownership in and responsibility for the team's performances and their own learning. The coach's main objective is to expand ownership and leadership to the players, rather than simply serving as the source of all knowledge and direction.

With this empowerment approach, teambuilding is achieved by team members through active participation, with questioning regularly used by the coach as a strategy for eliciting thinking about individual and team problems and their solutions. One of the great benefits to be derived from this method is thoughtful players. By changing the problem-solving onus from the coach to the players, the net result is a more intelligent and committed player. Ultimately, players who understand the game make better decisions and play with more confidence and purpose.

Emotional attachment plays a crucial role in the learning process. Simply, if we are actively engaged in our own learning, we are more likely to think about what we are experiencing and what it means to us and how we can improve. The movie "Sandlot" is a wonderful example of neighborhood kids learning from each other and competing for hours each day because they loved their sport. When kids are fully engaged in relevant activities, they will persevere and take ownership. Conversely, when they are "given" things to do that they don't enjoy, they are often quick to plead boredom and become disruptive.

The worst examples of missed learning opportunities are, "Coach, can we scrimmage, now?" comments. Kids love to play sports. They love to compete. They love to have

chances to be successful. They love to be active participants. One important element of a positive coaching environment is choosing relevant activities; or better yet, asking the kids what they want to do. Ninety nine percent of the time, they will respond that they want to scrimmage! To ignore this plea is to ignore one of the fundamental motivation for sport participation.

Soccer Training: Improving Speed of Play

Individual Elements

Improving technique is clearly the most important ingredient in the quest for more effective and creative young players. Here are some examples:

- A soft first touch helps ensure that the ball stays close to the body when received.
- The confidence of a soft first-touch helps develop tactical thinking, or pre-control vision.
- Pre-control vision helps ensure the first touch is positive and used as a means to an end.
- Faking and feinting skills, and the ability to "wriggling" out of pressure ensure more success in keeping possession of the ball and beating opponents.
- Being two-footed doubles the number of surfaces available to kick, control and dribble the ball.
- Passing range is closely related to kicking technique.
- Goalscoring skills are related to kicking techniques.
- Heading opportunities are directly related to the range of kicking skills.
- Sliding skills are important for passing improvisation.
- Sliding skills are integral to defending.

Small-Group Elements

Improving the speed with which players recognize and solve tactical problems is a function of exposure, repetition and maturation. The push for smaller-sided games for the majority of players below age thirteen is directly related to concerns over poor tactical awareness and overly direct play. Some basic tactical benefits derived from small-sided play are:

- Recognition of open space for speed dribbling and dribbling out of pressure
- Recognition of available space behind a defender for 1v1 dribbling
- Time to assess supporting spaces beside and behind the ball to help teammates keep the ball
- Time to assess supporting spaces ahead of the ball to help teammates penetrate
- Time and space to encourage movement off the ball
- Time and space to recognize combination possibilities
- Opportunities to develop individual and small-group defending skills
- Opportunities to quickly transition to attack and defense when the ball is turned over
- Opportunities to develop ideas about changing and controlling the rhythm of play

Reading the Game

Dressing children up to look like adult soccer players and asking them to perform in team-oriented games was most likely influenced by immigrants who knew nothing more than organized eleven-a-side soccer in their homelands. While the thought of young children's physical and emotional needs was likely part of the discussion, the upbringing of most immigrants would not have included formal 11-a-side soccer until around the age of ten or eleven. In the meantime, they would have played informally with friends and siblings in small-sided games, frequently for hours each day. As the sport has become "Americanized" in its administration, people with sometimes very limited soccer backgrounds have fought to perpetuate "team" play, while the rest of the world has moved to smaller versions of children's soccer. The sad irony is that after ten or fifteen years of team play, there is no "team" play for most kids, because the basic skills and understanding required of the individuals have never been developed.

ESPN's "Outside the Lines" recently profiled young Ghanaian-born soccer phenom Freddie Adu, revealing that his foundation as a quick-footed creative and visionary player was derived from playing with older players on bad surfaces. Adu's mother surreptitiously aided his participation by providing the game with its soccer balls; without which, young Freddie would not have been invited to play. His arrival in the United States as a 9-year-old in 1997 signaled his first foray into organized play. How good is America's first potential world-class male?

> "I can see why people are excited. I'm excited," (John) Ellinger (US U-17 National Team coach) continues. "Look at his awareness on the field and what's going on away from the ball when he's got the ball. You call it vision, perception, whatever. It's not just one time. I've seen him do technical things from both sides of the field that I've never seen done by a player that age or a couple years older. The ball will be coming from the left back, and Freddy's making a run into the left attacking space. The ball's played in with pace, and here comes the defender. Freddy looks and sees him, and now he brings the outside of his left foot and pops it over the defender's head. Then he runs around and gets it. In another game, he did it on the other side with his right foot. At full speed he's making these kinds of technical decisions, and he's successful with them."

When asked for his reaction to beating six Guatemalans en route to scoring a goal for the USA in the U-17 World Cup qualifying group in 2003, Adu responded with the confusion of a master craftsman, " When the adrenaline gets flowing, sometimes even I don't know that I'm doing it." Automatic!

An international soccer game is contested by groups of between one and four players, with the ball passed to different small groups of players in order to find an open or less congested route to goal. Winning the one-on-one duals has long been cited as a measurement of "team" success, and it is the ability of related small-groups of players to solve their immediate tactical match-up that often determines the outcome of games. In the team context, speed of play is highly dependent on individual skill and the ability to

combine passes and movements within a small group. The first challenge of coaching is to build the necessary skills and understanding; the remaining challenge is to create an environment where high speeds of recognition and execution become habitual and ingrained.

Playing soccer at a high level demands technical, tactical, physical and psychological skill. As a youth, the main challenge is to be skillful with the ball; as a youth, the main challenge is to understand the tactical possibilities of small-group tactics; as a youth, the main challenge is to "feel" the game. If these skills are in place by late adolescence, it will be possible to survive and flourish in a complicated soccer match with twenty-one other players. If these skills are not developed, there is no possibility of playing with speed or sophistication and no possibility of advancing to higher levels.

The Youth Training Continuum

As Paiget described, children become more capable of higher-order thinking as they mature through childhood and into adolescence. Significant for the small-sided games debate and observations on young players' inability to create and use space, Paiget's four stages of development span the years from birth to two; from two to seven; from seven to twelve; and from twelve to fifteen. The following continuum of player development roughly parallels Piaget's second, third and fourth stages and is designed to provide a roadmap for youth training themes.

Entry Level Players: Fun and Freedom

Training youth populations with an eye towards the top of the soccer pyramid should best be viewed as a continuum that starts with individual play. The first period, from about ages five to eight, is a time for learning about the ball and learning about how the body moves with the ball. Fun activities with and without the ball that develop balance, agility, flexibility and coordination are all relevant for this age group. Coaching is only concerned with creating positive experiences and providing lots of dribbling, kicking and receiving repetition in small-sided games and other soccer-related activities. "Learning" is best achieved through active participation, observation, and listening to suggestion, and the goal of "training" is simply to promote player retention through fun and success.

The Dawning of Tactical Awareness: Building the Technical/Tactical Foundation

The years from approximately nine to twelve are considered the most critical period for technical development. Children in this cohort are sponges for direct and indirect learning and will take great satisfaction and confidence from expanding their range of skills. Spatial awareness will expand rapidly during this period, providing players with the tactical insight to spread apart, circulate the ball, and begin to appreciate positions. Coaching is still highly technical, but should be coupled with age-relevant tactical issues, such as movement and support, transitioning to attack or defense, and winning the ball back in small and larger groups. Balance, agility, flexibility and coordination remain important developmental dimensions. At this stage, ongoing skill development and refinement is still more important than building a team. Towards the latter half of this period, a conscious effort to improve individual speed of play becomes relevant to the coaching.

Young Teens: Refining and Expanding

Somewhere between eleven and fourteen, the majority of children experience puberty. This can have a detrimental effect on coordination and the resulting technical awkwardness can often be a source of frustration for previously agile and skilled performers. Psychological care must be shown to these players. Ironically, it is during this phase that the process of skill stabilization begins; a protracted process that will continue through the balance of the teen years. In a well-planned soccer club, training activities for young teenagers will focus on polishing techniques in both isolated drills and under increasing pressure in soccer activities. It is also during this period that players should begin to develop a basic understanding of positions within formal 11-a-side systems. Weight training, initially using body weight alone, should begin after the onset of puberty. Challenging players to increase their speed of play becomes fundamental to coaching during this period; however, conscious teambuilding, per se, is not a highly relevant focus.

Late Teens: The Polishing Years

If a soccer player arrives at middle-teenhood without a sound skill base, they will be severely limited in their potential to reach the upper competitive levels. Consistent technique allows players to solve tactical problems under pressure and, during this period, the training focus is geared towards developing fitness, improving speed of play, and, finally, building a team. During these later years, fitness, player-management and the psychology of team building are the most critical development issues.

Emphasizing Consistent Playing and Training Habits to Improve Speed of Play

The only way to establish good playing and training habits is to establish good playing and training habits! Over time, players who respect their coach will adopt their habits and suggestions. If the coaches' advice is well grounded in technical and tactical reality, the player's personalities will reflect playing habits that help them play with more efficiency, urgency and purpose.

Some basic individual habits that all top players possess are….

- Pre-control vision and positive body orientation
- Positive first touches
- Recognition of pressure
- The ability to maintaining possession
- Movement as the ball moves
- Anticipation of penetration and combination opportunities
- Movement (circulation) of the ball as quickly as possible
- Communication - verbally and non-verbally - with teammates
- An attitude towards attacking and controlling the ball in the air before it bounces
- Consistently recognize and implement basic team tactical themes, such as when to press, how to use of offside space, when to take quick restarts, how to defend with urgency and controlled aggression

The Coaches Role in Developing Speed of Play

If players have been provided with a soccer-friendly beginning and can dribble and control the ball with a basic comfort level, the youth coach faces the challenge of improving speed of play by balancing technical drills with live and pressured soccer activities; and balancing challenge with success. To accomplish this, the coach must manipulate the variables under his or her control during practice. These variables are detailed below:

Number of Players in Activities

As children move from self-centered (five through eight), to group-aware (nine through twelve), to team-aware players (thirteen and beyond), their ability to deal with complex practice environments grows correspondingly. Some thoughts to consider:

- Entry-level children do not think in terms of teams and teammates; often, games of 3v3 are actually games of 1v5 or 2v4.
- Nine and ten year olds often struggle to maintain possession in games of 4v1; games of 3v1, 4v2 and 5v2 can pose significant technical and tactical challenges.
- If there is no success (controlled flow) in an activity, one problem may be too many players.
- U-9's can understand neutral players (i.e., 2v2+2) and 360-degree possession games.
- The larger the teams, the more difficult the challenge for younger players, regardless of the number of neutral players.
- Even number games (i.e., 3v3) make possession and controlled flow more difficult.
- Solving small-group possession challenges is a prerequisite to advanced team play.

Playing Space and Shape

The playing space and shape impacts technique, tactics and decision-making.

- Younger players need more space to assess and execute their tactical options.
- Weaker players need more space to assess and execute their tactical options
- The "correct" playing space provides a balance between challenge and success.
- The more talented the players, the smaller the space should be.
- Wider playing spaces can encourage wing play
- Narrower spaces usually encourage direct play
- Shorter spaces encourage more goal attempts
- In possession games, rectangular spaces encourage movement in support of changes in the point of attack.
- Supporting angles and distances are always relevant to pressure and the size and shape of an area.
- Longer or wider spaces encourage longer passing
- Larger spaces increase the demand for mobility in support of the ball

Imposed Conditions

Conditions can be imposed on an activity to increase pressure and urgency.

- Limited touches promote better vision and body preparation
- Limited touches increase decision-making speed
- Limited touches increase anxiety
- Limited touches encourage more off-the-ball movement
- The better the players, the fewer the touches.
- One-touch play is only realistic for very talented players
- Limits on touches may not be necessary for all players
- Different conditions can be imposed on different players in the same game
- Conditions should always make sense to the game; the game should always "look like soccer"
- "X before Y" restrictions can often lead to unrealistic activities and decisions

Method of Scoring

Changing the way goals are scored impacts technique and decision-making.

- Playing to a goal or target is motivating
- Line soccer goals encourage speed dribbling
- Bigger goals encourage more shooting
- Bigger goals encourage earlier shooting
- Playing to a target encourages earlier passes
- Playing to a target encourages vision
- Playing to a target encourages closer marking and pressing
- Bigger goals encourage better defending
- Multiple goals can encourage changes in the direction of play
- Multiple goals can encourage changes in the rhythm of play
- Smaller goals encourage faster counter-attacking
- Smaller goals often encourage possession in tight attacking spaces

Game Time

Knowing the time remaining is important for the psyche of the players and the quality of an activity.

- Smaller numbers (i.e., 1v1) play shorter games (i.e., 60-90 seconds)
- Energy expenditure is a function of motivation
- Game duration affects intensity
- Work-to-rest ratios affect intensity
- Score and time remaining impact tactical choices

Improving Physical Speed

Improving Psychological Readiness

Soccer Training: The Teambuilding Process

From Practice to Matches

The "SAID (Specific Adaptation to Imposed Demands) Principle" is an important reminder of how specific training and performance are inexorably linked. The SAID Principle points to the importance of relevant technical, tactical, physical and psychological training throughout a career and all players reflect the environments that have produced their specific skills and behaviors. Simply, in soccer, the closer training approximates the demands of the game, the more productive the training environment will become. At the youngest levels, the SAID Principle points towards individual issues, such as skill building as it relates to recognizing and solving small-group tactics. At the more accomplished levels, the SAID Principle is concerned with strategic and tactical understanding in team play, building soccer-specific fitness, and hardening individual and collective psychological resolve in the face of challenge.

When players have developed a level of technical proficiency and have evolved a personal and communal style of play, it is possible to begin the teambuilding process in earnest. At the youth professional level, this phase is often delayed until the end of the technical development phase in the mid- to late-teens; while, at the amateur level, this process often begins much earlier. In the youth professional environment, the teambuilding phase is signaled by changes in the practice activities; specifically, the use of "line training," "phase play," and large group tactical functional training games designed to build and reinforce positional play and team understanding. At this final stage, developing collective understanding of systems of play and increasing situational recognition and decision-making under pressure are the main elements of teambuilding. The practice organizations are always based on the team's system of play, such as 4-3-3 or 3-4-1-2

The teambuilding process encompasses technical performance, tactical understanding, psychological readiness and physical capacity. At the very top level, the technical speed of the players often predicts who is most likely to win, although the other components must be given due consideration in assessing the overall quality and potential of a team. For example, at the World Cup in France 1998, the host country realized the benefits of a gifted and well-prepared team to became World Champions; four years later in Japan/Korea, a more disjointed French team, which was arguably more talented and certainly more experienced, failed to score a goal in the group matches and was eliminated. Brazil, which has always been credited for producing many of the world's most technically gifted players, was psychologically strong in 1994 and 2002 when they were World Champions, but failed at the final hurdle in France with a team reeling from uncertainty and self-doubt. Superior technique always raises the possibility of success, but never the guarantee!

Underlying the teambuilding process are the following assumptions and knowledge

- Players must be technical proficient to be effective team players
- Players must be capable of maintaining possession individually
- Players must be capable of supporting the ball in small-groups
- Players must have some basic understanding of their individual role within their line
- Players must have some basic understand of the role of their line within the team

- ❖ Reading the game effectively is fundamental to efficient and coordinated team play
- ❖ Situational tactics are always related to the overall match strategy

Formal teambuilding is accomplished by training over eight basic phases.

- ❖ Build-up Play
- ❖ Attacking Play
- ❖ Transition to Defense
- ❖ Defending from a Line of Confrontation
- ❖ Pressing Defense
- ❖ Transition to Attack
- ❖ Attacking Restarts
- ❖ Defending Restarts

Line Training

Activities to train positional play can take many forms and it is often beneficial to plan coaching sessions that focus on the development of line tactics, such as the defensive line using offside tactics, or the forward line coordinating their patterning and movement ideas. These practices are designed to build "situational" understanding in a controlled environment that generally includes only a limited number of opponents and players from complementary or supporting lines. The activities start from a predetermined field position, such as midfield or the start of the attacking third, with players organized in positions; and end when a goal is scored, the ball goes out of bounds, or the ball is passed or dribbled to a prearranged target or outlet. The coach or other players often serve as the target (outlet) for the defenders in transition and as supporting players for the attackers.

In the defensive example above, four defenders and a goalkeeper might start the practice by playing against one opponent and two supporting midfielders. As numbers are systematically added, the final phase may include only six attackers (2 forwards and four midfielders from 4-4-2) playing against four defenders, a goalkeeper, and two defensive midfielders (from 4-4-2).

In the attacking example, the three forwards may start by playing unopposed against "shadows" with support from a midfield line of two or three. As the practice develops, up to four defenders might oppose the three forwards and defensive midfielders would be added to help maintain realistic pressure in the midfield area. In this example, the reference system is 4-3-3. Again, goals, target players or a target goal line should be used to provide a transition point for the defenders.

Phase Play

Phase play combines two or more complementary and opposing lines. For example, when helping teams build-up from the back, the goalkeeper and defenders must keep the ball until they can go forward. This can be achieved through dribbling or passing. To pass forward, midfield players or forwards must be included in the practice. To oppose their movements, opposing midfielders and attackers will be added to the organization. The team building up will have succeeded when they have crossed a designated line in

possession, or passed the ball through a target area or to a target player. When the opposition gains possession, they will attack the goal.

Phase play can include only the back and midfield lines, only the midfield and forward lines, or all or part of all three lines. The choice of players is determined by the problem being addressed and the selected starting point for the practice.

Large Group Tactical Functional Training

The last option for training team understanding is to play large-sided games of 8v8 through 11v11 with players organized into positions and with specific tactical goals in mind. In these practice matches, players can be charged with simply reinforcing team tactics that are foundational to the identity of the team, such as quick ball circulation and off-the-ball movement. Or they can focus on specific game tactics designed to deal with an upcoming opponent, such as positioning players to limit passing access to the forwards or developing ideas for breaking down a compact defense.

In closing…

Individual speed of play is the key to effective team performance. The American soccer community is proud to boast ownership of a vast wealth of soccer players, but our efficiency in producing merely average players on a wide scale would render most companies bankrupt. In terms of resource management, youth soccer is an Enron waiting to happen. So long as adults with limited soccer background and no real perspective of the soccer world are making key decisions about the youth soccer landscape, the chances of creating an American-born Freddie Adu are just about nil!