PREMIER SOCCER

Skills, tactics, & strategies for winning play

Michael Parker

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Premier Soccer

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Michael Parker

Human Kinetics

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This book is dedicated to my wife, Ginger, my sons, John and Patrick, and my dog, Guinness, for their sacrifices and support over the years, which have allowed me to put my energies into the game of soccer. Thanks a bunch, guys.

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PREFACE

I started coaching in the United States a little over 30 years ago, and the changes in the game since then have been unimaginable. In my own state of North Carolina, the quality of the club programs and their players have improved tenfold in the last few years alone. I believe this acceleration of the game's development is due not only to increased interest among and opportunities for young players, but also to huge improvement in coaching quality. When I first arrived in the States, good coaching was very difficult to find. Now it is everywhere.

This book draws from my experiences as a head coach at many levels, ranging from U8 youth soccer (under 8 years old) to Olympic development, on to college, and finally the professional ranks. Most of my experience has come in the college game, including all NCAA levels, with national championships in Division III and Division II and a number one ranking in Division I at the University of North Carolina at Greensboro. I also have two boys who have come through the youth ranks, so I am very aware of the challenges found at that level.

It is my hope that this book will provide information for older youth players—middle school through small college—and for coaches working with those age groups. Soccer involves huge complexities in areas such as strategy, set plays, sport psychology, physical fitness, nutrition, and game preparation. Yet I have always said that, at its core, it is a simple game and must be played that way. Thus this book is an attempt to simplify even the complexities and cover the topics most needed for everyday players and coaches.

When I first started coaching at the more basic levels of youth soccer, I quickly realized that much of what I had done with elite college scholarship athletes and Olympic development players did not immediately apply. There is obviously a need to develop a base of technical ability before one can go further, but with a careful and systematic approach, and with the natural increase of age and maturity, it is surprising how far one can take a team at any level. Players *will* learn—things just have to be done in the correct sequence, and in the right way. It is my hope that this book will help coaches and players do just that. Repetition with variety is crucial. This may sound odd, but players must have key coaching points reinforced over and over again, without making practice mundane and boring. The challenge is always to find new and enjoyable ways to make the same point. Players themselves must be prepared to practice, practice, and practice some more.

As a young coach just beginning my professional career in the States, I was greatly influenced by my roots as a typical Englishman. I leaned heavily on the coaching certifications I had received in the UK, and in particular the English FA (Football Association). At that time, the director of coaching for the English FA was Charles Hughes, and I initially gravitated toward his philosophy; even today, I feel his influence, though I would also like to believe that I have branched out into my own philosophy over the years. The game has changed enormously, both physically and tactically, but the fundamentals stay the same. Players must be sound with the fundamentals before they will experience success. If you are a player, attend to the fundamentals in this book and work hard to make yourself better. There is no easy solution and no quick way to success, but your hard work will pay off in the end.

In our young adult soccer programs, we seem to be continually struggling with the issue of developing players versus winning games. At what point and age does winning become the main priority for the club coach? When should player development stop and winning begin? Should everybody get equal playing time, regardless of ability? What about playing different positions? For classic or select soccer, winning games should become a priority at about age 14 or 15 (possibly later in recreational soccer). However, a winning attitude for the individual player should always be there. I believe it is healthy to play to win, and I get annoyed with my college players if they do not know the score of the game in a practice session, especially during small-sided game play. What does that say about their attitude toward practice?

I have coached many years now but still like to believe that I will get better each year. There is so much to learn as a coach. Since 2003, I have kept a log of all my practice sessions during the regular season.

I have always made a point of preparing every training session by putting pen to paper—no matter how long one has been coaching, there are no shortcuts to that process—but for years I did not keep those records of past sessions over the weeks and months of the season. Now I am shocked at how much I have forgotten. Things that I used to do are often gone from the memory banks. It took me a lot of years to make myself begin keeping these records, and in fact I now bind them at the end of season and file them as a permanent record. If only I had done that from the beginning . . . One of the best pieces of advice I can give is to keep a record of what you do as you read this book. It will help you in the future.

To those young players who are still learning the game (though I guess we all are always learning the game): Please have a *passion* for the sport. Read and watch all you can. There is no substitute for just watching the game being played at the highest level. You need to have idols you want to emulate; you should play pickup games when you can. (I fear that young players in this generation spend too much time in organized coaching sessions, thus missing out on the fun, challenge, and learning that comes from self-organized games.) Much of the game can be learned without coaching, especially in the early days. It is also

extremely important that you go to each and every practice session with the right mental attitude. It is important that in each session you always give your best. It is easy to just go through the motions, especially when you are well into the season and practices are no longer as fresh, but you must try to put any and all personal issues aside and always give your best. It is my hope that this book will help you become a better player. Read the book, and go out and play this great game.

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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Professional success does not come easy. It takes a lot of hard work, luck, and help from other people. I have been very fortunate in being surrounded by good people throughout my career, which not only have helped enormously in forming my style, character and philosophy, but also in my success as a coach.

Thanks to my wife, Ginger, for her love, support, and understanding in what can be a very difficult profession. To my sons, John and Patrick, who most definitely provided the insight into youth soccer that I would not have otherwise had. To my mother and father, Eileen and Tom, who gave me the support, love, and guidance growing up in postwar Britain. I do not think my father ever missed a game in my young career.

To all my assistants over the years: Barry Gorman, Mike Corney, Angelo Zalalas, Alan Dawson, Peter Broadley, Pat Barrett, Steve Harrison, Russell Scarborough, Darren Powel, and especially to the current ones, Scott Brittsan and Justin Maullin. Justin gets the privilege of working harder than any of them as the old man begins to slow down. To James Shipp, head athletic trainer at UNCG, for his help with the Nutrition and Physical Conditioning section. I could not have managed without any of them. Thanks, guys. You all made me look good.

I want to acknowledge the two universities I have worked at, Lock Haven and UNC Greensboro, for giving me the opportunity to be a head coach. And last but not least, to all the athletes who have played under me. It has been a privilege to work with you all.

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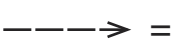
KEY TO DIAGRAMS

X = defender

O = attacker

S = support

 = player movement

 = ball movement

numbers on arrows indicate sequence of movement

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CHAPTER 1

Winning Attitude

Some soccer players look great in the easy games but do not show up and put out the effort when it counts. Others are so driven to win that they lose all perspective on what the game is about. Most successful soccer players are driven to win, but some bring an attitude that sets them above the rest. When the going gets tough, these players bring their A-game with hard work and a positive attitude. Good play, in fact, starts with a winning attitude, so it's important that players and teams cultivate one from the start.

This chapter covers creating and contributing to a winning attitude. It addresses the essentials both for individual success (positive mental attitude, practicing with variety, and learning through both success and failure) and for team success (developing chemistry through leadership, practicing with enthusiasm, and communicating) and puts winning into the greater

context of the game of soccer. The chapter discusses how to set both individual and team goals and explains why goals are essential to developing strong players. It also covers the traits required for becoming a big-time player, including how to handle pressure, prepare for games, and focus on performance. Everyone can get better—much better. This chapter will help both players and coaches work toward the attitude needed to achieve success. Let's get to it!

Create a Winning Atmosphere

A winning atmosphere, from practice sessions to games and everything in between, is essential for individual and team success. A winning atmosphere creates an infectious enjoyment and motivates players to get better so they can have even more success, and that self-reinforcing process benefits the entire team. This section covers the individual and team factors that contribute to a positive atmosphere in which everybody gains and succeeds.

Individual Success

Players need to realize that if they put in enough effort, success will follow. They hold the key to success in their own hands, and their mental attitude plays a major part in their development. If players work to improve every day; if they look, listen, and learn; and if they experience even the smallest measure of success, then wins, losses, promotion, and relegation become secondary. As a player gets better, so will the team, and a better team will begin to win more games, become more successful, and become more confident. Here are four elements essential to player effort and success.

Have a positive attitude First and foremost, a player must be enthusiastic, interested, and keen to play the game. People who are enthusiastic want to do more, and enthusiasm helps get better performances from the team because it is infectious. Everybody has been involved in practices that are quiet and "dead." It is difficult to get anything useful from these practices, as players drift into slow and uninspired activity. Enthusiasm improves players' focus, determination, and effort. It draws in other players who might not have been quite as prepared to practice and play. It creates a far better learning atmosphere, and the coach can get much more from his or her team. If a player does not like the training or playing atmosphere, he should not always leave it up to the coach to change. The player can do something about it herself. Individual players can make a difference.

Most successful players do have positive attitudes. They believe they are going to be successful and win. It is necessary to believe in oneself, one's teammates, and one's coach. Good players let each other know how they feel. They talk about good things, and it affects other players positively. I have yet to meet a successful player who thinks she's poor and is going to lose whenever she steps on the pitch. Invariably, good players bring positive attitudes and confidence.

It's important, however, to remain realistic with positivity. It can be detrimental to performance for a player to believe he is better than he really is. Players must set realistic goals for themselves and for the team (see the section on goal setting later in this chapter) then remain positive within those goals.

Players also like to listen to a coach with a positive attitude. A good coach can make players believe they are going to win, and if she has managed the right game preparation, both physically and tactically, and if the approach to the game has been positive, then the team might just win it!

So, for players and coaches, work hard and have fun while you are doing it. You cannot be serious all the time. Be organized and focused while maintaining a sense of humor. Fun creates better team chemistry and just makes the whole experience better. Enjoyment can make the difference between winning and losing. Keep winning and losing in perspective and focus on the positive in the face of adversity.

Practice with variety When players are learning new skills, repetition is critical. Players need to perform skills over and over until they become second nature. Unfortunately, repetition can quickly become mundane, so players and coaches should be creative in trying fresh ways of doing the same things. Variety will help individual players maintain their interest in practice and will ensure that the practice is appropriate for players' current needs.

A coach can present technical skills in different and challenging ways. For example, a team might work on improving passing skills by playing a game of keep-away, in which one group makes as many passes in a row as they can without the other team intercepting the ball. Then the other group does the same. This skill can be practiced in many ways, each one catering to a player's changing abilities and needs. It is important that players have some success in repetition, so initially the drill needs to be set up in favor of success. One option is to give the team with the ball more players than the defending team; the activity might begin with an area measuring 40 by 30 yards (about 37 by 27 meters), in which a group of six attackers or passers works against only three defenders. (For good players, this would be too easy, but it makes a good starting point.) Attackers and defenders should rotate at regular intervals so that everybody gets equal time in passing the ball. Once success has been achieved, the ratio can be changed to, say, five attackers against four defenders, or the ratio could be kept the same while the playing area is decreased to, say, 30 by 20 yards (about 27 by 18 meters)—or both factors could be adjusted. These changes immediately inject variety into a practice, making it more challenging, more interesting, and certainly more difficult.

While much is done in organized, formal practice sessions, the more successful players usually practice by themselves as well. They become soccer "junkies" and cannot seem to get enough of the game. They work individually on skill and technique, and they play pickup games just for the enjoyment of it. Players should go out and play the game. They must put time in by themselves; it adds invaluable variety to their practice routine.

A player also needs to see examples of good play on a regular basis. There may be teammates he can look up to and respect, but he is more likely to home in on a professional player seen on television, or a local club player he can see in person. In any case, it is important that players have idols they can look up to and imitate in order to improve their tactical awareness. Players can learn an awful lot by just playing the game and watching it being played at a high level.

Many coaches prefer for players to work on weaknesses, but another source of variety is to work on strengths. In this modern era of soccer, coaches look for specialist players: Is he a good crosser of the ball? Can she win balls in the air? Is his tackling tenacious? What is her work rate? Can he score goals? Coaches who ask these important questions motivate players to bring something to the table that is better than what other players bring. Thus each player needs to find out what he does well and work on it, make it better than anybody else's, and make himself special.

Set goals All successful athletes need to set goals, both individual and team oriented. A forward who scored 7 goals last year might aim for double figures this season, and a goalkeeper who had 4 shutouts might try for 6. Perhaps a player who has not worked as hard as possible will set a goal to improve his or her fitness. The section on goal setting later in this chapter explains what goals should include, why they are important to individual and group success, and how players can set goals for individual and team performance.

Learn through success (and failure) Success motivates people and makes them want more. It's habit forming. The more a player sees himself progress, the more he feels encouraged to practice. Success is crucial to motivation; it keeps players coming back for more, and it makes the whole experience far more enjoyable. Success rarely comes straightaway, however, and often it takes a measure of failure to help players go forward in the right direction. In playing the game, a player rapidly finds techniques she can use, but only by experimenting to see if they help her improve specific skills. It is a trial-and-error process, and the player must filter out what does or does not work and change her game appropriately. Success and failure teach the fundamentals of the game, and every player should use each instance as a learning opportunity.

Team Success

Good chemistry is crucial to creating team success. Very rarely do teams win without it. When players enjoy being around each other, they tend to take criticism better, work harder for each other, enjoy themselves, and generally improve the quality of everything they do. Good chemistry leads to successful seasons. Practices are enjoyable, and teammates are fun to be around, even when the team is not winning. Thus plenty can be learned even in a loss, and players are able to improve and achieve better results.

Develop chemistry through leadership A good starting point for developing team chemistry is to establish excellent leadership. The team should choose one

or two captains. They do not have to be the best players, but they do need to have positive attitudes, be respected by the team, and be prepared to lead by example. A likable, positive approach by team captains can have an enormous effect on team performance. Remember, team chemistry is merely another way in which players mesh their personalities with each other. A captain with a negative personality can provoke dislike and unrest, but one with a great sense of humor and friendly demeanor can be invaluable, creating a relaxed and pleasant atmosphere, especially during difficult training sessions.

Every player must recognize that he has a role to play in team chemistry and in helping the leaders maintain positive energy, especially when a training session goes flat or a game is in the balance and needs a final renewed effort for victory. All players must step forward and take some responsibility. It takes players and coaches helping each other in any way they can to achieve true team success.

Coaches must be aware that many club teams include players who attend the same middle or high school, or live in the same neighborhood, and these players may form cliques. Before a coach knows it, there may be two or three different groups within the same team. I have seen this happen many times. At the college level, older players (juniors and seniors) often do not associate with first-years. Players do not necessarily have to be friends off the field, but division within a team can single-handedly destroy chemistry. Leaders can facilitate positive feelings between teammates, and team members should make a concerted effort to get on well with each other on the field.

Practice with enthusiasm Players need to play and practice in a winning atmosphere, and everybody has to work to achieve this. The old adage "you play like you practice" may be overused, but it is also valid. Practice has to be important to each player. A good practice needs a good atmosphere—it needs character, and it needs personalities. Activities need to be interesting, challenging, and as varied as possible. A flat practice is quiet, without apparent enjoyment. It will happen at times, even with teams that enjoy great leadership and chemistry, so coaches and players alike need to be prepared to do something about it. Activities should be as gamelike as possible, and it should be important to players that they win. They should keep score and know at all times whether they are winning or losing.

Sometimes extra motivation is needed in the form of reward or punishment to help the player concentrate more on the task at hand. Many coaches often finish their sessions with some form of fitness activity. Care must be taken, but coaches can consider using this activity as part of a reward-or-punishment system. For example, players might play 30 minutes of small-sided games (five or six members per side), with the rule being "one goal and you're off": A goal wins the game, and the scoring side stays on the field to play the next team. Each team might be asked to do 12 shuttle runs at the end of practice, but every time a team wins a game its total number of runs is reduced by 1. Thus a team that wins 5 games will have only 7 runs to do at the end of practice. This always works so long as

it's not overused. Coaches should not expect to do this every day—it should be reserved for sessions where a coach suspects performance and effort might be down a bit and a little extra encouragement is all it takes.

Physical climate can also play a big part in the quality of a practice session, and this problem can be rather acute in the United States. The higher the temperature, the more difficult it is for players to put maximum mental and physical effort into a training session. I always see much livelier sessions on cool, damp days than on hot, humid ones. Not much can be done about this, except for both players and coaches being aware that hot days call for extra motivation.

Communicate with teammates Though overlooked by many coaches and players, constant communication is essential to team success. It acts as a second pair of eyes for every player. When a player receives a ball, his head is normally down and his vision very limited, and it's an enormous help for him to be told what is happening around him. This is often a problem in the very early stages of a player's career, especially if the player is quiet by nature. Thus communication may need to be worked on intensively. Coaches need to demand that players communicate on the field of play. A player needs to get used to thinking like a coach, understanding the game well enough to verbalize what is happening—or, better still, verbalize it *before* it happens. With practice, this tactic becomes second nature. Many times I find myself shouting instructions to players, only to realize that the *players* should be the ones shouting.

Photo courtesy of Willis Glassgow/WG Sports Photos.

Chemistry, enthusiasm, and communication boost player morale and lead to team success both on and off the field.

Communication can be put into two different categories: informational (imparting information about the game to each other) and encouraging (boosting confidence by complimenting each other on a good performance). Informational communication is difficult for many players—perhaps because they lack confidence or do not understand the game well enough—so it's essential to address this type of verbal communication in practice sessions. For example, the passer of the ball might be required to *always* say something to the player who is receiving the pass. This might seem somewhat comical at first, but players will soon get the hang of it. Even just calling out the name of the pass recipient is a beginning. That exchange will soon develop into meaningful communication that helps the player receiving the ball make good decisions.

Communication that encourages can motivate. It should be easy to congratulate a teammate when he has done something well—made a good shot, a nice pass, or a great effort. Not only do these words boost morale, they also give more space to comment constructively on things not done so well. A player needs to know if he has just missed a wide-open teammate inside the penalty box, or if he is dribbling too much, and critical comments are much easier to accept if they are given in a context that is positive overall, especially if coming from the same person who made the positive remarks.

Putting Winning Into Context

What is the importance of winning to a team? Does being a successful program or player always require winning? Not necessarily! Not everybody has the same competitive drive, and winning games can mean more or less, depending on the individual. For some players, playing for a successful team that gets a lot of exposure is vital. To get a college scholarship, for example, one has to be not only good but also seen. Such a player needs to play for a team that not only wins but can get good tournament exposure and possibly advance toward a national championship. Teams that win are invited to the better tournaments, and the better tournaments are more likely to be attended by college coaches.

Conversely, many players are also playing in recreational leagues formed to allow players at all levels to just enjoy the game. Many of these players have needs and goals that are quite different from those of the "classic" or "select" player. For them, the game may be social, or played just for the love of it. These players are often not interested in college soccer scholarships, and winning is less important to them.

Everybody should want to win the game, and successful players need to be competitive and be placed in competitive environments. It usually brings out the best in them. But players also need also to understand that there is far more to playing soccer than just winning, and that not all players want to play in a winning-focused environment.

Thus players need to prioritize how important winning is to them. The team, the individual player, and the coach should consider how to measure success. What constitutes success? There are many issues to consider besides winning.

For players: Has a practice session been fun? Have they felt confident in all the situations the coach put them in? Do they understand what they are supposed to do every time they get the ball, and do they have the confidence to attempt to do it? Can they fail in a particular task and still keep their confidence high? Do they have the confidence to try different things without the fear of failure?

Success in such areas will increase a player's belief in himself, and with it his ability. The longer I have been involved in the game, the more I have begun to understand the major role that confidence plays. It's not uncommon for a striker who has regularly scored goals to suddenly have difficulty in finding the back of the net. This is known as a dry period, and it will likely be compounded by a drop in confidence. She is still the same player, with the same ability, yet now she cannot score goals. She must find her confidence again for her game to return to its previous high level.

Win or lose, players should behave with class and dignity. Winning should be important, but not at all costs. There is a fine line here that can easily be crossed, especially if a player is very competitive. I have seen far too many players who are poor losers. It may sound difficult, but a player should at least try to act the same way after a win as after a loss. He should try to avoid the emotional extremes of overcelebrating after winning a game, especially a big one, or falling prey to devastation after losing. He should try to say something positive to a losing opponent, and if he cannot then he should say nothing at all.

Set Appropriate Goals

It is vital to set both individual and team goals at the beginning of each year. Goals provide direction, keep players positive and motivated, and help measure progress and success. Being successful does not necessarily require winning all games, or even finishing in first place; in some cases, it may be a success just to win half the team's games. Regardless, goals are vital because they provide a destination, give direction, and elicit drive and motivation. They should be set both by individual players and by the coach. It may be helpful to use the SMART acronym: specific, measurable, attainable, realistic, and timely.

- *Specific.* A specific goal is clearly defined—for example, scoring 20 goals this season, versus a nonspecific goal such as "improving our goal-scoring opportunities."
- *Measurable.* A measurable goal can be assessed in terms of tangible indicators of progress—for example, "I'm going to practice five times a week for the rest of the season," versus a nonmeasurable goal such as, "I'm going to practice more often."
- *Attainable.* Goals should be achievable by the player or team. Sometimes this requires flexibility. If the player or team is failing to reach goals, the targets should be modified until they are within reach; otherwise, frus-

tration will set in. For example, a player might set the attainable goal of running 2 miles (3.2 kilometers) in 12 minutes for the Cooper fitness test, rather than the unreachable goal of 10 minutes.

- *Realistic.* It would be unrealistic for a 13-year-old to try running 2 miles in 12 minutes. Players (and their coaches) must understand what they are capable of and set goals that are challenging but achievable.
- *Timely.* Assign the goal a time frame—for example, one might aim to run 2 miles in 12 minutes by the start of August preseason camp, or to score 10 goals in 10 games.

If goals are to help players improve performance, they must be challenging and specific. More difficult goals—so long as they are not overly difficult—tend to improve performance more than easily attainable goals do. Similarly, a vague goal is not likely to enhance performance, but a specific goal will. At the beginning of each season, I sit down with my team and discuss general goals for the season—normally, my expectations for the team. These goals are always challenging but realistic. It may be appropriate to talk in terms of individual wins and losses, as well as the team's expectations. Should we win the league? If not, what target should we set? I also talk with individual players about their goals. How many goals should we expect our striker to score, and how many shutouts should our goalkeepers have? I may ask a key midfield player to make a certain number of assists. Another player may be asked to have a successful pass rate of 75 percent. We may ask our wingers to make 10 crosses into the opponent's penalty box per game. Coaches can use computer software to record and analyze each player's game or simply ask a coach or parent with a notepad on the sidelines to record the numbers. Setting measurable goals that players can use to track their progress will create opportunities for improved play and, in turn, higher chances of winning.

Short-term goals serve as stepping stones to long-term goals. Short-term goals provide immediate feedback as to whether a player or team is making progress, which is an important motivational factor. Returning to the example of the Cooper run, a coach might ask players to run 2 miles in less than 12 1/2 minutes. If this time is not immediately attainable, a series of short-term goals can be set to motivate and measure progress toward the long-term goal (e.g., 13 minutes, then 12 3/4 minutes). If a player can already run 2 miles within the coach's allotted time, she can set her own goal to challenge herself with a time she thinks is attainable. She might also set a series of short-term goals to help her track progress toward her new target time.

I often talk with high school soccer players whose ultimate goal is to play professionally. That is their long-term goal—sometimes very unrealistic, sometimes not. In many cases, they are unaware of the obstacles facing them, and certainly unaware of what will be required of them in pursuing their goal. Even if it is an acceptable long-term goal, achieving it will require the player to set many shorter-term goals along the way. It would be more appropriate to set the goal of

receiving a soccer scholarship at a major Division I institution. This shorter-term goal might require a still-shorter-term one along the way (e.g., becoming the top player on the local club team in order to attract the attention of college coaches). Another example is a player wanting to play for the top local team in his area. It might be unreasonable to expect being selected and immediately playing for that team, so the player needs to set up an achievable strategy, such as playing for another local team that is not as strong but that provides a stage for increasing one's stock in the eyes of the top club.

It's important for each player to have individual goals, no matter how simple or complex. Individual goals tend to be skill oriented: goals scored, tackles made, or passes delivered. Each player needs to set her own goals, and, in keeping with the SMART method, they need to be clear and understandable so she knows what to do and what not to do. They need to be challenging enough that she will stay engaged and achievable so that she is unlikely to fail. It is also necessary to have a long-term goal in mind. What does he ultimately want to achieve as a player? At what level does he want to play the game next? What does he want from the game? Once he has decided on this, he can begin the task of setting short-term goals to get there–his ministeps. Many players, for example, would like to play in college. Each must identify his desired level of college play (i.e., her long-term goal), then forge a strategy for getting there. It might consist of the following steps:

1. Play for the very best local team I can join. Be involved in the Olympic Development Program or the newly formed academy teams to gain the best exposure to college coaches.
2. Play in top youth tournaments with my team to be seen by college coaches.
3. Select several schools I might be interested in. Research them to narrow the list to five or six.
4. Contact the schools' coaches no later than my junior year to express interest in their programs.
5. Visit the schools and coaches no later than spring of my junior year in order to personalize the recruiting process early on. (Spring break is a popular time to do this.)
6. Stay in regular contact throughout the process, updating the coaches on my progress.

Team goals are equally important. I stress regularly to players that individual success is often a by-product of team success. If a player's goal is to become an All-American, his chance of success is much higher if he plays on a successful team. Conversely, the player's individual success contributes to that of the team. The two go hand in hand (or, in this case, foot in foot!). At the same time, team goals differ from individual goals in that they can be much more focused on tactics. Such goals may change day by day, or game by game, especially the

short-term ones. For example, in facing an opponent with a dangerous forward who does most of the scoring, a team might set its goal as stopping that player from doing well. More often than not, team goals are set by the coach, but that does not prevent players from setting their own team goals. A SMART team goal might be to win 75 percent of the games or to score 50 goals for the season. Team goals require cohesive play, enabled by the molding together of individuals. Key questions include: How can we play as a unit? What style of play shall we have? What formation can we play? This type of goal-oriented organization allows a team to come together and achieve overall success.

Become a Successful Player

Becoming the best player one can possibly be takes commitment and true passion for the game. This section discusses the kinds of discipline a player must have in order to be her best: developing a successful mode of daily living, taking a positive attitude, and handling pressure and preparing for games, especially the big ones. It also addresses the importance of consistency in one's play and looks at how a player must focus on the task at hand. This section is written directly to players.

Commit to the game First and foremost, to be a successful player, you must commit yourself to a disciplined manner of daily living. Not everybody is going to be a professional player, but even good amateur players need to pay significant attention to the way they live, especially during the season. This discipline requires many sacrifices, and very often you cannot do the things your friends are doing. It may mean committing to stay behind when all your friends are going out. It certainly requires a training regime that is often painful, demanding, and time consuming. You must take care of your body, eat correctly, and get enough sleep. By living this way, however, you set yourself up to become a successful player.

Think and act positively Big-time players normally focus on positive thoughts and keep the negative ones out of their minds. For example, when faced with injury, the player with a positive attitude is determined to get back to playing again as soon as possible and does not dwell on the injury. She does what it takes in the training room and works hard on the rehabilitation prescribed by the training staff. This athlete wants to be as ready as possible when opportunity comes again, and she uses this interim period to work on fitness areas she would normally not address. An athlete with a negative attitude, on the other hand, may get gloomy or even depressed. This athlete dwells on the injury and can't seem to focus beyond it. Without a doubt, the first athlete is going to be back on the field sooner.

The trick to a positive attitude is to learn how to recognize your negative thoughts and replace them with positive and productive ones. Realize, though, that positive thinking alone won't make you a successful player. A positive attitude must be combined with hard work in practice in order to achieve positive results.

Handle pressure If you want to be a successful player, you have to learn how to handle pressure—how to stay cool when it counts, especially in big games. There is an optimal level of excitement caused by adrenalin, but if it gets too high it can detract from athletic performance. Most people dislike the sensation of nervousness, and many do not know how to handle it, which leaves them vulnerable to performance anxiety. Some people respond by trying to avoid the stressful task, but the soccer player sitting in the dressing room before a big game must learn to deal with it. If he does not, he starts to make bad choices, the game begins to seem rushed, and he feels out of control. His confidence may drop, and he may begin "hiding" in order to avoid the ball, thus becoming unavailable for other players when they need him. (We have all been there and know what it feels like.) In this situation, you face a mental battle to get yourself back into the flow of the game. For the benefit of the team, you must try. For hugely important games, it's often best to downplay the moment and keep stress as low as possible. Do not overthink the task at hand; wait until an hour or two before kickoff to begin visualizing the game.

How do top soccer players learn to handle pressure? First, you must understand that it's okay to be nervous; it is, in fact, normal. I get concerned when my players are not nervous before big games, as it usually indicates a lack of pregame concentration and preparation. Normally, the more experienced a player is, the better she is able to handle nervousness, but even the most experienced players should feel anxiety before a big game. I have found that handling nervousness well can actually improve your performance, since it brings your adrenalin level to an optimal point.

Nervousness can be decreased by muscle relaxation and deep breathing. Some players find it helps to sit and visualize the task in front of them. Others like to listen to a certain type of music and shut themselves off from the world. Some prefer to talk a lot, and others prefer complete silence. In any case, routine definitely helps, because it provides familiarity and comfort. Maybe a player likes to walk on to the pitch upon arriving at the facility, or sit in the locker room cleaning his boots. Many players follow superstitions, such as which boot they put on first, or the order in which they leave the locker room. (I had an All-American last year who just had to be the last player out.) So, find a routine you are comfortable with and stick with it. It will help.

Prepare for big games Preparing for a big game requires far more than just pregame mental preparation. It begins days before, both on the practice field and at home. Training sessions need to be sharper, quicker, and more intense. I sometimes notice an irritability creeping into the team, a lack of patience with each other. This is normally a good sign, as heightened tension means focus and preparation are well under way and the team is getting ready to play. Players must recognize, however, when the tension becomes detrimentally high. In this case, you may need to step back, take a deep breath, and calm down. You also need to get a good night's sleep for 2 nights before the game; sleep is vital preparation. Meals and routines are also important. Keep distractions to a minimum and try

to focus on the task at hand. (See chapter 7 for information on pregame meals and chapter 9 for in-depth coverage of how to prepare for a match.)

Focus on performance This process is critical. It gets you thinking about your task and the importance of it, which in and of itself should get your adrenaline flowing. If you start this process too soon, it could have a negative effect, causing a type of fatigue and a possible decrease in performance. It's normal to think about a big game on the night before, but your *concerted* focus on the task at hand should begin an hour or two before game time. Sitting at breakfast worrying about the game that day will not help. Game focus can take many forms, depending on the individual player. It's a good idea to go through a mental checklist before the game. What is your role as designed by the coach for this game? It is vital that you recognize your role and responsibility to the team. Hopefully your coach has helped you with this one. What do you know about the opponent, and how do you plan to play? Think about your own strengths and weaknesses. What are you going to do today to enable a good performance? Believe in yourself, because confidence is essential, and do what you can to convince yourself that you are going to make a difference in this game. Focusing during the game tends to be less of a problem, especially for the higher-level player. Once play begins, most players naturally get immersed in the complexities of the game. The competitive spirit comes out, and the focus at this point is just on playing well and winning the game.

Achieve consistency A key to all team and individual play is consistency. Most players, and especially coaches, would be very happy to see the same performance, effort, and intensity game after game. Unfortunately, many factors make this difficult. Early in the season, things tend to be fine, with most practices quite fresh, but as the year progresses the mundanity of practice tends to set in and players can become unmotivated and sluggish. Also, day-to-day living brings daily stresses (e.g., schoolwork, lack of sleep, relationship problems, even problems at home) that can result in subpar performances.

Nevertheless, with the right type of preparation, it's possible to be reasonably consistent in performance. Consistency has to do with mental strength, focus, and determination to be successful. The trick is to come to practice every day and, for 2 hours or so, put personal problems into the back of your mind. Concentrate on the task at hand and always try to play with a good attitude and a smile on your face. I have coached several players who have gone on to play in the MLS (Major League Soccer) even though their natural talent is not necessarily the best. They all have one thing in common: a natural drive to be successful and a determination to do well in every practice and every game. This is not to say that they do well every time, but they always try.

Consistency is improved by getting into a routine—including eating, sleeping, and getting up at regular times. It depends on coming to practice focused on the task at hand and *always* trying to do your best. This attitude eventually becomes a habit, and in the long run you will become a consistent player. It takes sacrifice, patience, and hard work, but it is worth it.

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CHAPTER 2

Roles of Players and Coaches

Team sports challenge athletes to understand their team roles as well as their individual ones. A player's individual responsibilities are likely to be specific to the position he plays on the field, while the team is made up of individuals who each have unique responsibilities and attributes that must be molded together into a precise and well-organized effort. Each player must be on the same page as the rest of the team. This chapter covers the roles and responsibilities of specific positions on the field. It also discusses the coach's role in developing a strategy that combines these separate parts into a whole that works.

Positional Roles

Before addressing specific positions, it's important to note that a given player should not initially focus too much on one position. Players should give themselves the flexibility of trying various positions; it will help them greatly down the road. This generalist approach allows a player to see how his strengths and weaknesses fit into the different positions in the game. All positions require players to both defend and attack, so the general principles of attacking and defending (discussed later in the book) will always apply.

Good soccer teams are looked upon as a complete unit, meshing everybody's roles and responsibilities. However, the four distinct positions within that unit—goalkeeper, defender, midfielder, and forward—require varying talents, and each position involves further subdivisions with their own skill sets.

Goalkeeper This is the only player on the team who is legally allowed to use his hands, though only inside the specific area of the penalty box, or 18-yard area. He is the last line of defense and the first line of attack. He is expected to save the ball from entering the goal as the last defender, but can also begin the attack by catching the ball and feeding it out to one of his teammates. A number of years ago, the main skill of the goalkeeper was to save the ball with his hands. Today that is not so, since rule changes have required goalkeepers to use their feet with far greater frequency, especially as defenders need to pass back to the goalkeeper when under defensive pressure. The pressures on goalkeepers are enormous. A mistake in this position is far more amplified than in any other, often making her a hero or a goat. It takes a specific type of personality to play this position, and many goalkeepers are outgoing and self-confident. Size can also play a role: Small goalkeepers (under 6 feet [1.8 meters] tall at the adult level) are at a disadvantage. This does not mean that there are no good goalkeepers this size—there are—but it does mean they have to compensate and be very good at catching high balls.

Defender The primary responsibility of a defender is to stop the opposition from scoring goals. There are normally three or four defenders. They must be brave and use good tackling technique. There is a physical aspect to playing this position, since blocking shots from opposing forwards with one's body is not a great deal of fun, and it does require courage. Defenders can be put into two subgroups—wide defenders (fullbacks) and central defenders. The wide defenders (i.e., the right and left backs) need to be quick, agile, and capable of getting up and down the field with relative ease. They need to be able to react and change direction quickly. They must be good passers as well as good defenders, and they do not necessarily have to be big. Central defenders, on the other hand, usually do need size. They must play in the middle of the defense and often have to deal with high balls played down the middle or crossed from the flanks. They need to be good headers of the ball, as well as strong all-around defenders, since teams are more likely to attack down the middle.

Each position requires unique talents and traits. As the team's last line of defense, successful goalkeepers need to be agile, quick, and athletic.

Midfielder Midfielders have distinct roles. They play in the middle of the field and normally are responsible for linking the defense with the attack. These roles vary greatly, depending on a team's tactics and formations. Often there are four midfielders, and they can have three different responsibilities. The two outside or wide midfielders need quickness and good dribbling skill. They are required to unlock defenses with good one-on-one play and to go "at" and "by" their marking defenders. They also need to be good crossers of the ball, because it's critical for them to deliver it from their wide positions to the forwards in the penalty box. The two central midfielders often play two different roles. One needs to be more defense oriented, while the other should be a better attacking player. The defensive one should operate mostly in front of the defensive group, whereas the attacking midfielder plays just behind the two forwards. All midfield players must have very good technical skills and be excellent passers. Size is not critical to any of these midfield positions.

Forward Forwards are required to score goals. If they can do that on a regular basis, many other weaknesses can be forgiven. This skill is perhaps the most difficult to master, and it is one that many teams lack. Goals win games, and a team

with a forward who can score goals is well on the way to victory. Forwards tend to be very confident individuals who are more selfish and less team oriented than their mates. Most forwards are asked to operate mainly in the attacking penalty or 18-yard box. It is a frequent mistake for young forwards to wander well away from the penalty box and be unable to get back into it when they are needed for a pass or cross. Size is useful in these positions but not essential. Mobility and quickness, however, are required, and good forwards have a knack for being in the right place at the right time. The most difficult aspect for young forwards to master is appropriate movement without the ball. Most young players can quickly be aware of what they are supposed to do when they have the ball, but struggle to understand playing "off" the ball—that is, when they do not have the ball. They need to understand that part of their responsibility is to make runs (without the ball) to pull defenders away from good defensive positions (defenders normally have to follow the run of the forward so that he does not break free), which gives teammates a chance to run into the resulting holes or spaces in the defense, thus possibly creating a scoring opportunity. They are also required to be good headers of the ball.

Several variables affect which position a team member will play: size, strength, and athleticism. Size is not critical in soccer, but it is helpful to goalkeepers, central defenders, and center forwards. Teams like size down the middle of the field. This preference notwithstanding, I did coach a college team that went to number one in the nation in Division I with *both* central defenders in the back four standing only 5 feet 8 inches (about 1.7 meters) tall. Quickness, intelligence, and bravery countered the height deficiency to the point that it was never really a problem.

An athletic player can play just about anywhere on the field. For those who are less athletic, lack of pace can be hidden in certain positions. A central defensive midfielder can compensate for lack of pace and athleticism by anticipating the play before it happens, enabling him to be in the right place at the right time. So can a forward, although if a team has one slow forward then it probably needs a quick one next to him in order to have sufficient ability to get behind the defense. It is important to make the opponent's defenders worry constantly about letting the play get behind them; otherwise, they will press from the back, shorten the field, and make life very difficult in the midfield. The wide players, wingers and defenders, normally will need pace. An attacking midfielder needs to be crafty with skills that can break down the opposition's defenses. A goalkeeper should be quick, agile, and, if possible, big.

A high school coach whose players bring limited ability should try to put the best talent in the middle positions, regardless of size. She should try to find at least one player who can score goals and is quick enough to get behind defenses, and use her as a forward. The team will thus be able to play balls over the top of the defense and let the dynamic forward chase them down. Speed is always a threat, especially if it is used correctly. For instance, a quick forward can be always "sitting on the shoulder" of the last defender—that is,

as far upfield as the defense will allow without being offside. From this position, she will have a good chance of being first to the ball when it is played over the top of the defense.

Many players can be one-dimensional. They are either good at attacking or good at defending, but not both. Defenders must be encouraged to get forward, and forwards must get back. Failing to follow this principle can lead to problems in team shape: For example, a right back goes forward into the attack, and nobody fills in behind him. The ball is turned over, and now there is a big hole in the defense. Inexperienced players find it difficult to "sit" in the correct part of the field to maintain proper team shape, but this is crucial to team success. If one were to look at the field from above, there should be no huge spaces between positions and players. Forwards, midfielders, and defenders should all be connected. Another example: A young defender clears the ball forward, well into the attacking part of the field, but stays back to defend, creating a big gap between him and the midfielders and forwards. Team shape is now ineffective, and it can be corrected only by having the defenders follow the ball out, enabling them to stay connected with the rest of the team.

Regardless of the position played, the ideal player possesses the following tools and characteristics:

1. Diverse and sophisticated ball skills
2. Agile, deceptive, and efficient feints and body movements in order to beat an opponent
3. Very quick play-combinations based on superior speed of reaction and thought
4. A good mixture of short and long passes in order to penetrate the opposing defense
5. Multifunctional tactical capability to attack and defend with ease (including the goalkeeper)
6. Determination and goal orientation
7. Recognition of depth and width when in possession of the ball
8. A positive attitude toward all aspects of the game

Team Roles

An effective team needs players to serve in many roles, all complementing each other in a cohesive whole. Some roles—such as starter, substitute, and role player—are defined by a team member's playing time in a game, and a group of 11 starters will include many roles within its subgroup. Other roles, such as the vocal leader and the quiet leader, are defined by how a player interacts with the team, and anyone on the team can play these roles, regardless of how frequently they get game time. This section details some common roles.

Starter At the beginning of each year, most coaches and teams try to be open-minded about which players will be starters. Tryouts and preseason games will help determine the answers, which is a critical reason a player must come into each preseason physically and mentally ready to play. First impressions are always important. A coach will typically experiment during the early part of the season, trying players in various roles. It is vital that players do their best when given their chance during this time period; otherwise, the opportunity to start may pass them by. As the season moves on, coaches try to settle on a starting team in order to achieve consistency, and it's difficult at that point to break into the starting 11. It might, in fact, take an injury to a starting player. At the same time, if a starter becomes lethargic or takes the starting position for granted, someone may just take it from him. Players should go into every game as if it is their last, taking nothing for granted.

Substitute I would like to believe that no player is satisfied with being a substitute (thus often seeing little or no playing time). If that is a player's role on the team, he should be doing everything within his power to change it and become a starter. This begins in practice. Too many times have I seen bench players lose motivation and go through the motions, especially in practice. They may see very little opportunity to play, with those in front of them doing better. But this deflation only makes the situation worse, as the coach is then even less likely to play them in an upcoming game. Thus substitutes must practice hard and be ready to contribute when the opportunity presents itself. The picture can change quickly. A starter may get injured or red-carded. So, a word to subs: Be ready! Play your hardest (in practice and in games) and leave no question about whether you are giving your best.

Role player This is a must for every team. It can be fun to imagine a team of superstars, but it's very unlikely to happen, and even if it did there would be the stiff challenge of molding them together as a team. Almost all teams have role players; in fact, that is what most players are. So, what exactly is required of these players? Most of all, it takes consistency and reliability: someone who rarely misses practice, who arrives on time, who puts teammates ahead of himself, and who can be depended on to give a steady performance every time he plays. These players tend to know what is expected of them by both the coach and their teammates, and they often have very good attitudes. They are just as important to the team as the superstar.

Vocal leader One difficult skill to learn is to be a good communicator on the field of play. Coaches should insist that all players be capable of good, intelligent communication that helps teammates make better decisions during the game. This may be difficult for players who are by nature quieter than others or who have difficulty verbalizing the game as it is played, but it is important to team motivation and success. The vocal leader not only communicates good soccer advice to her teammates but also constantly encourages them. These players are

invaluable, especially when the going gets tough and the game is on the line. They can fire up their teammates to give that little bit extra that might just be enough to win the game.

Quiet leader This player leads by action and example and is every bit as important as the vocal leader. I believe there is nothing more inspiring than a teammate who goes the extra mile, especially when the game is at stake. This kind of player often intimidates the opposition and brings out the very best in his teammates. He is always in the mix of the action, running harder than the rest, tackling tougher than most. He is a gold mine on any team.

Coach's Role

Being a successful coach is about more than winning games, and it requires certain personal qualities in addition to performance of specific duties. A good coach is a mentor, an advisor, a psychologist, and a parental figure. She is a tactician and a motivator. She is an administrator and an organizer—and, above all, a leader through the example of her behavior.

Qualities

A coach must be proficient in the skills and techniques of coaching, and have an equally sound knowledge of all skills and techniques of playing the game itself. He will be capable of demonstrating, or arranging for the demonstration of, these skills and techniques at a high level.

The coach must be strong but not an overbearing disciplinarian. He must set high standards of behavior and appearance and instill in every player a respect and concern for the game and all those associated with it. His best assets are optimism, enthusiasm, patience, and a sense of humor. It is also important for the coach to be a good communicator—verbally, visually, and through the written word. He needs to be a good manager of people, and, like all good managers, he will be a diplomat, a psychologist, and at times a philosopher. Coaches need to be accessible to both players and parents and, rather than being aloof and separate, must try to be empathetic in responding to team and player problems whenever possible.

A good coach is also a motivator, able to inspire an individual player or the team as a whole. Possibly the most difficult task of all is to motivate the team. The coach must understand that, even though soccer is a team game, individual players' needs are important. While pregame motivational talks can be effective, they will not meet all individual needs. It can be quite effective to approach individual players and have a quiet word with them before a game. The coach can remind them what is expected of them and how he sees them making a difference in the game. Thus he can be a confidence booster for them. And while some players need to be stroked, others respond better to a tough approach. A coach has to be

flexible, understanding when to be tough and when to be sympathetic, especially in the somewhat stressful environment of game day.

A good coach will be a sound administrator—sometimes an underrated aspect of her job. Recording information efficiently allows her to properly monitor a player's performance and progress. He will also be a capable technician, which is increasingly important in our technological age, where sophisticated video equipment has become an accepted part of the coach's inventory. (A team manager can help enormously with such responsibilities.)

Duties

The process normally begins with some sort of tryout where the coach evaluates players and decides who will be part of the squad for that year. In some cases, the coach must recruit players and thus needs the ability and personality to attract prospects.

Squad sizes vary in number, depending on the funds and other resources available to run the team, or even on the number of players who come out for the team. At the college level, 24 to 26 is a good size, as it allows periodic intersquad play of 11 versus 11, taking into account that there will often be one or two players injured or missing for various reasons. For many teams, however, these numbers are unrealistic due to facility size or lack of coaching assistants. In that case, 16 to 18 is a good target, since it allows realistic play during practice, gives a cushion in case of injury, and is manageable for one coach. Participation time for the individual also needs to be considered. The larger the squad, the less time each player is going to get, especially if the coach is trying to provide equal playing time for everybody on the squad. A typical club coach is often inundated by parents complaining that their child is not getting enough playing time. The player themselves often feel the same way. This is a difficult issue for a coach to manage, especially when trying to win a game. Which comes first? Player development, with equal playing time? Or winning games? There is no easy answer.

Once a coach has selected a team and is ready to begin practice, there are four areas of focus: technical, tactical, physical, and psychological. Each is a constant concern (in varying degrees) throughout the year. The age and level of the team will determine how much time should be spent on each aspect. Younger players should spend more time on technical training, as the fundamentals of the game need to be established as early as possible. For example, a player who cannot pass a ball correctly cannot be expected to perform the more advanced tactical task of keeping possession of the ball, especially in combination play. In contrast, an older, more experienced player's needs tend much more toward the tactical and physical. The psychological aspect applies at all levels, but it will be a more pressing concern with older players, where winning and its attendant pressures are more important (and player development less so). Managing these several broad needs can be a challenge for coaches as they plan training sessions. Very often, facilities are crowded and the training window for a specific team is tight,

probably 90 minutes. Understanding that all facets of the game must be covered, the coach has to make sharp decisions about how much time to spend on technical, tactical, and physical aspects. The focus will likely shift as the season progresses, moving further toward tactical and away from physical as the season nears its completion.

Technical This area is sometimes overlooked during the regular season, when much time tends to be given to the other three areas, but neglecting it can exact a price. Players must be able to pass a ball, control it, dribble it, head it, and shoot it. Defenders must be able to tackle. If players are deficient in these skills, then time needs to be spent improving them. Coaches must avoid the temptation of neglecting them, and players must realize that although these practice sessions can be somewhat mundane, they are essential to gaining the technical ability to progress. The off-season, with its reduced demands and greater time available, provides a better opportunity to work on technical aspects of the game.

Tactical Every coach must ask: How is our team going to play? What formation are we going to use, and what is our style of play? This is a very complex area, but the more experienced the coach, the easier it can be. Individual players and the team as a whole must understand what is involved in trying to win a game. They need to understand the opposition's strengths and weaknesses and how to mitigate or take advantage of them. They also need to know their own weaknesses and how to hide or minimize them, but above all each team must understand how it is going to play to its own strengths. Should a team play from the back defenders through midfield and then to the forwards? The answer depends on the abilities of the midfield players; it may be necessary to bypass them and go directly to the forwards. Should the team attack down the flanks, or more directly down the middle? How is the team going to get the ball to the feet of its best player as often as possible? Does each player understand his or her role in the overall scheme of things? Tactical planning is complicated and time consuming, but it often makes the difference between winning and losing.

Physical This area includes physical fitness, mobility, flexibility, and strength training, and it needs to take the form of a program that continues year-round at varying intensities. This can be tricky for both players and coaches, especially understanding how much time to commit to it. If a player is committed to being as successful as possible, then she can adjust her lifestyle to encompass the physical aspect of being a player. She can work on fitness, flexibility, and strength in her own time. As a college coach, I am constantly disappointed by the lack of physical preparation apparent in first-year players as they arrive for the first time on campus. They are not close to being ready for the physical demands of the game at the next level. Players can and must do better in this area, and club coaches need to be more aware of how to prepare their players for this next level.

Psychological This aspect can have a huge influence on the success of the player and the team. The psychological part of the game is one of those intangibles that cannot be measured, but it's every bit as important as the rest, if not more so. A coach who is strong in this area can take a team further than expected. It's important to understand that a team consists of individuals, each with different needs. By being positive and well prepared, a team can generate enormous confidence and belief in itself. The coach can encourage such an atmosphere through individual meetings with players to offer positive suggestions, as well as pregame and halftime talks in the locker room.

A successful coach should be always providing feedback to players to let them know just how they are progressing. Day-by-day communication is a must, and I can suggest a few practical ways of doing it. First, a coach should realize that his perception of a given player's roles and responsibilities is rarely the same as the player's own perception. In fact, they may be operating on quite different assumptions. How many times has a player believed she had a good game, only to find out that the coach disagrees? A coach and player can learn about each other's perceptions by each filling out a questionnaire (tailored to the position played) about the player's performance in a game. For example, a defender might be asked to rate his performance as a 1v1 defender or in terms of whether he helped keep proper team shape. The player and coach can independently rate the player's performance on a scale of 1 to 5, then discuss the results. Their perceptions and scores may or may not be the same, but in any case the resulting discussion will give the player food for thought and identify specific areas to improve on.

Another tool I have often used is to post the team roster in the locker room after a game with ratings (1 through 10) for each player in order to indicate how the coaching staff evaluated his or her performance in their last game. I encourage players to come and ask about their score if they do not like it. This method provides good feedback for players in a nonconfrontational environment, but I do not recommend using it with young players, since it requires that players be mature enough to handle its public nature.

A coach might also consider testing an individual player to evaluate his will to win, especially in relationship to the rest of the team. This can be done by arranging small-sided games in which the teams are randomly selected for every new game. For example, we may spend 15 minutes per practice session, two or three times a week, splitting our group into teams of perhaps four or five that play for 5 minutes a game. A player may play 3 games during practice twice a week for 4 weeks, totaling 24 games, each on a different team with different players. This variety means that a player's success or lack thereof cannot be attributed to playing on a strong or weak team, as every team is different. Every player must record the score of each game he plays, and points are awarded accordingly: 3 points for a win, 1 point for a tie, and none for a loss. The coach might also consider giving a bonus point if a team wins by more than 3 goals. At the end of the month, if the coach compares each player's point total, it will be evident who

the more competitive players are. He will have a list from top to bottom, and the players will have ranked themselves.

So, coaches, how can you get the best out of your players day in and day out? Consistency in attitude and expectations is crucial. Try to be motivated and upbeat for every session, as players take their cue from you. Always demand—and accept—nothing but the best in training sessions. This can be difficult, but it is crucial in order to stay on top of the game.

Team Tryouts and Selection

One of the first jobs for a coach is selecting the team. College coaches have the major responsibility of recruiting players to fit their system and team needs. Middle school and high school coaches are far more likely to work with players who are from the area and have not been recruited; in short, they have to work with what is available in the area.

Players should prepare physically for weeks before the tryout, so that they can go into the session confident of performing their best. There is nothing worse for a player than being unable to show the coach his skills because his legs have gone and he can no longer run. Getting good sleep on the 2 nights just before the tryout will help a player feel well rested.

Players should get to the tryout early so that they do not feel rushed or pressured. The extra time can be spent getting physically and mentally prepared. It is imperative to stretch and warm up well during this time, as players may not get an appropriate chance to do so once the tryout begins. Players should dress in appropriate soccer clothing, with a clean pair of cleats, shin guards, long socks, and soccer shorts and shirt. I have known players who dressed distinctively (e.g., wearing different-colored socks or a bright top) in an effort to stand out. With luck, this might work, but if it is overdone it may look out of place and elicit a negative reaction from the coach.

Once the tryout has begun, players should act as confident as they can. They should be vocal, when appropriate, and seek the ball. If they are not getting it, they must go looking for it. It's best to keep the game simple, and do simple things quickly and efficiently. Players should work hard physically to show the coach they are individually fit *and* prepared to be good team players, not just individuals.

Once a coach has selected players, he must slot them into positions and determine their roles and responsibilities. It is important for the coach and players alike to understand that soccer is first and foremost a team game; each player's philosophy should be to play not as an individual but as part of a team. Each player must buy into the system and fully understand her role and responsibilities. Players will be asked to fulfill certain roles and perform in specific ways, and this approach may initially be somewhat foreign to some players. For example, a player might be used to dribbling the ball in a certain area of the field, and now

the coach requires him to pass it rather than dribble from this area. How quickly can he adapt?

If a player is less successful than he had hoped in the early stages and is not selected for the starting 11, he should not give up. A lot can happen as the season progresses. Starting players get injured, go through periods of poor form and low confidence, and have to miss games as a result of getting carded. It is more than likely that a substitute will get her opportunity to play more, possibly even in the starting group. When the chance arrives, she must be ready to take advantage of it. Many coaches tell players to work on their weaknesses, but if you are a player I suggest to you the opposite: Work on your strengths. Try to find an area in the game where you might excel—such as heading the ball, tackling, or shooting. Then concentrate on getting better in that area so you can specialize. Coaches are always looking for players who can fulfill a specific role, and if you can do it better than someone else, you might just win yourself a position. You should still work on all areas, but being better than someone else at one specific job is going to help you win a place.

CHAPTER 3

Attacking Skills and Tactics

Teams that play attractive, attacking soccer are always a joy to watch, and players who possess flair and good attacking skills are in high demand. Good attacking skills pay high dividends, and, even for players who eventually end up playing as defenders, it is advantageous to spend considerable time working on attacking skills. These skills require sound technical ability, and, in combination with creativity and good physical and tactical sense, they create a very good attacking player.

It is always difficult to score goals, especially against good teams, and we have all had the experience of missing chance after chance and wondering when, if ever, we will score the goal that wins the game. This chapter begins with the fundamentals, then suggests ways to develop skills and incorporate

them into a tactical approach to game play. The chapter also discusses how to use attacking soccer in order to not only create goal scoring opportunities but also *finish* them. Finally, it suggests both individual and team drills to improve attack capability.

Individual Attacking Skills

A well-coached team attacks on many fronts. It is fun to watch combination play, in which several players cooperate to create a goal-scoring opportunity. However, before a team can succeed at combination play, players must develop their individual attacking skills, and they need to be comfortable with the ball at their feet. This takes practice—lots of it—and much of it can be done in one's own backyard, without involving a coach. This section covers all of the essential individual attacking skills: dribbling, passing and support, ball control, and goal scoring.

Dribbling

To attack successfully, a team must be able to penetrate the opposition's defense, but it is not always possible to open up and penetrate a defense by means of combination play. It often requires the skill of an individual attacker dribbling in order to take on a defender in a 1v1 situation.

Dribbling is fun to watch and exciting to do. There is no single correct way to dribble, though there are some fundamentals. Almost anything can work, and it depends greatly on the confidence and skills of the individual player. Moves can be joined together in many ways, thus creating the dribbler's own unique style. Effective dribbling requires a confident player who is prepared to try new things without fear of failure. In turn, dribbling builds the player's confidence and makes him more comfortable with a ball at his feet. Even juggling practice—keeping the ball off the ground with different parts of the body—is good for building this comfort and confidence, as it helps a player develop "touch," a "feel" for the ball, and increases her confidence in handling the ball.

When dribbling, the player must maintain close control of the ball in relationship to his body and be able to use the various surfaces of both feet. Good body control is also required, since the dribbler must have the ability to stop quickly, change direction, and accelerate quickly. There are two basic types of dribble: In a crowded area, a dribbler needs to keep the ball close to her feet, but a player running in open space (especially down the wing) can and should get the ball well out in front of herself (speed is more important here than close technique). No matter what the technique or individual style, three basic principles always apply:

1. *Run directly at the defender.* This makes the defender commit to the tackle. Most good defenders do not want to engage in a tackle, knowing that if they are beaten the space conceded behind them is far more dangerous than the space in front. In fact, one defensive principle is for defenders to keep the play and the ball in front of them, and this principle is directly contradicted by being drawn into a tackle by good attacking dribbling (figure 3.1).

Figure 3.1 Dribbling at the defender.

2. *Take the ball as close to the defender as possible.* The attacker can tempt a defender with the ball in order to prompt him to try to win it (figure 3.2 *a-c*). If the attacker "shows" the defender the ball by taking it close to him, he may be tempted to put his foot forward in an attempt to win the ball. If he fails, he is now off balance, with his weight forward, and he will be much slower in turning to try to retrieve the ball after it has gone by him.

3. *Knock the ball past the defender and accelerate.* The most basic attacking principle of all is to get the ball behind the defender. It doesn't take anything fancy or complicated—just good timing and enough speed at the correct time. The attacker plays the ball past the defender, then goes to get it. The closer she is to the defender, the easier it is. She *might* be able to knock the ball behind the defender from 3 yards (2.7 meters) away, but chances are slim that she will have enough

Figure 3.2 Dribbling with outside of foot using body swerve and acceleration: *(a)* attacking player runs at the defender; *(b)* attacking player drops his left shoulder and makes the defender commit; *(c)* after faking left, the attacker moves quickly to the right using the outside of his right foot.

speed to get to it before the defender does. She has a much better chance from about a yard (or meter) away.

The key to successful dribbling is to get the ball behind the defender and be quick or crafty enough to get to it first. Normally, the more touches the attacker has *in front* of the defender, the better it is for that defender, because he is successfully protecting his most vulnerable area—his back. A naturally quick player may not need sophisticated dribbling skills in order to attack successfully. With good technique, speed will enable her to just go at and by the defender. Slower players have to be craftier, deceiving the defender with quick feet and trickery, such as body feints and movements that get the defender off balance and allow the attacker to go by (figure 3.3).

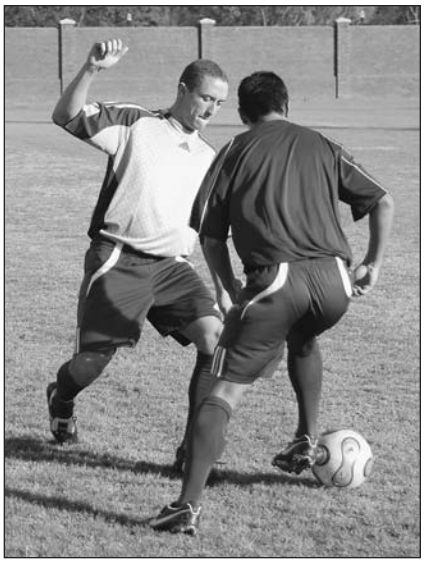


Figure 3.3 Making a defender commit by getting him off balance

Passing and Support

Passing and support are probably one of the most important aspects of the game. Soccer is a game of possession, and games are often won by the team that keeps possession of the ball longer. When under pressure, the player who passes rather than dribbles generally has a better chance of succeeding. Indeed, without being able to pass, one cannot successfully play the game. Thus it is vital that all young players learn to be good passers of the ball, and it is especially important that they realize when and where to pass the ball. Good support play helps answer the "when and where" questions that can plague young players. It is very difficult to pass the ball if no one is there to receive the pass, and it is the teammates' responsibility to support the passer by being at the right angle and distance to make a good target.

The difficult part for coach and player is to know when to stop encouraging dribbling and start encouraging passing. Probably as soon as a player is comfortable with the ball at his feet, passing should be encouraged. There are numerous ways to pass the ball, which can be made to do different things depending on the kind of contact made with it. For example, a ball struck on its inside with the outside of the right foot will move from left to right in the air. If struck with the inside of the foot on the outside of the ball, it will move from right to left. If the ball is hit dead-center, with the instep imparting very little spin, it will "knuckle." Players need to practice such techniques over and over again, with both the left and the right foot.

Figure 3.4 First touch to side and out of feet: *(a)* player concentrates on the ball with her head down and contacts the ball with the outside of her foot; *(b)* touches away from her body at an angle; *(c)* lifts her head up and is now in a position to do anything she wants with the ball.

Quality of the first touch when receiving the ball is critical. Upon first touch, the ball should move about a yard (or meter) to the right or left of the receiving player's feet (figure 3.4*a-c*)—any closer and it will get caught underfoot (which will inhibit the ability to pass, dribble, or shoot), requiring a second touch to correct the matter, followed by a third touch to progress with the ball. If, on the other hand, the first touch is too far from the body, then a defender may step in and take the ball. It is vital to remember that soccer is always played better with speed and quickness: The more touches on the ball, the slower the team's play and the less effective the attack. Most teams include players who cannot play quickly enough because they take too many touches on the ball. These players must be encouraged to play one- and two-touch soccer, and the coach may have to put that limitation on them in practice.

Three factors contribute to a skillful pass:

1. *Accuracy.* A player must be able to strike the ball correctly and accurately, often with a teammate's feet as the target. The most accurate technique is to use the side of the foot, with the toe rotated outward (figure 3.5). This kind of pass should be used for shorter distances of 5 to 20 yards (about 4.5 to 18 meters). For longer passes, the instep of the foot should be used (figure 3.6 on page 32). This type of pass is more powerful but more difficult to do accurately.

Figure 3.5 Side of the foot pass.

Defenders try to read the pass so that they can quickly get into position to intercept it or quickly close down the player receiving the ball. Thus the attacker needs to disguise the pass as well as possible—for example, by running in one direction and passing in the other, by changing direction quickly, or by faking or delaying the pass.

Figure 3.6 Instep pass.

2. *Timing*. The ball must be released at the right time. If it is released too soon, the receiving player may not have had time to get into good position to receive it; if it is released too late, players may have run offside or into positions where they can no longer receive it. A rule of thumb: If the pressuring defender is farther away than the player who is the target of the pass, then it is too soon to make the pass.

3. *Pace and power*. The speed of the pass makes a huge difference. During keep-away sessions in practice, it is critical to put good pace on the ball in order to create a better rhythm and make it harder for defenders to intercept the ball. In game play, however, good judgment is essential: If a pass is too slow, it will be intercepted. If it is too strong, the receiving player may have difficulty controlling it. Thus passing speed should be adjusted to the conditions of the field, the particulars of the game, and the ability of one's teammates. In general, the better the receiver, the faster the pass should be. Passers must work hard to put good pace on the ball, and the player receiving the ball must work even harder to control it. The passer knows he has done well when the receiver can do anything he wants with it on the first touch.

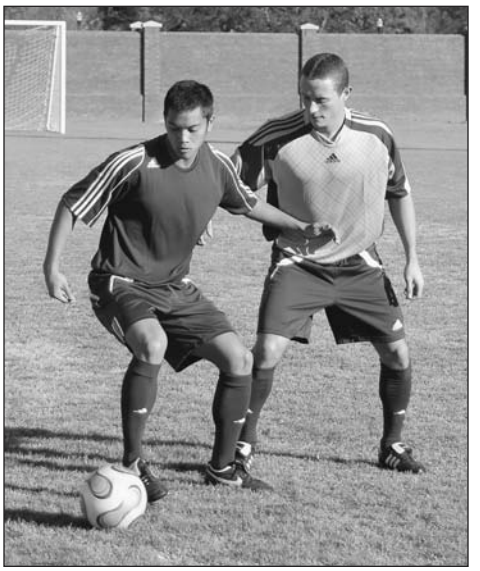


Figure 3.7 Receiving pass on the correct side.

Before striking the ball, the passer should give special attention to the position of the defender marking the receiving player. The pass should arrive away from defensive pressure. If the defender is standing to the receiver's left, then the pass should be to his right, and vice versa (figure 3.7). The receiving player will then be able to protect the ball with his body, making it more difficult for the defender to get to it.

Players without the ball should move into good positions to receive it, trying always to create wider angles, away from

defensive pressure. In figure 3.8, the player receiving the ball is moving *away* from the defender to improve the passing angle. The player who has just passed the ball now needs to move quickly into a different position, to create more passing options for the receiving player and thus more difficulty for the defensive team. Players should avoid passing and standing (i.e., watching the pass). They should pass and *move.*

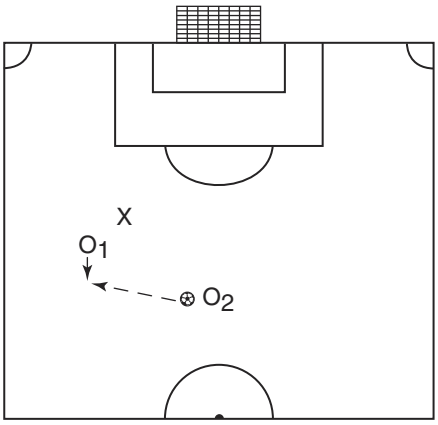


Figure 3.8 Player O1 improves the angle of the pass by moving away from X and toward the ball.

Players also need to consider when to support a teammate who has the ball, and when not to. This can be a very difficult decision for many players to make. Most players who have progressed beyond the elementary levels of the game tend to go toward the ball to support the player with the ball. If all players do this, however, the team will have too many players moving toward the ball and not enough making space away from it. The opposite problem can arise with beginning players, who tend to just run upfield, toward the opposition's goal and away from the ball. If nobody is coming short for the pass, the result will be a version of kickball rather than true soccer. Teams must achieve balance, with the appropriate number of players moving both toward the ball and away from it.

If a player is already in a support position when her teammate receives the ball—and if the receiving player is *not* under immediate pressure from the defender—then the support player should attack forward, beyond the ball and into the back of the defenders. Thus he should be moving away from the ball, because there is no need to provide support. In figure 3.9*a*, O3 can make a forward

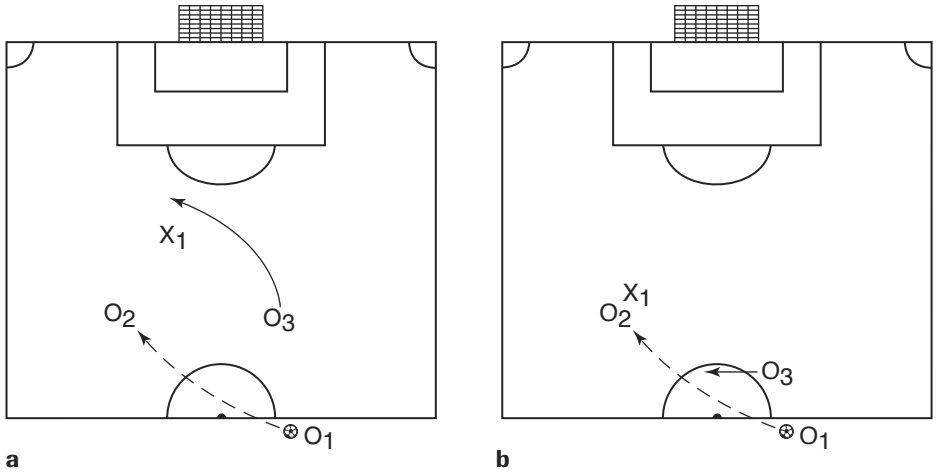


Figure 3.9 Supporting a teammate who has just received the ball: *(a)* player O3 makes a forward attacking run, since O2 is not under immediate pressure from X1; *(b)* player O3 remains in a support position as O2 is under pressure from X1.

run into the back of defender X1, since O2 does not need immediate support. In figure 3.9*b*, O3 holds to provide support since O2 has come under immediate pressure from X1.

When possible, it is usually better to play forward balls rather than backward or square balls (a square or flat pass goes straight across the field, parallel to the end line)—that is, it is better to use positive rather than negative passing. Players are always encouraged to switch the field of play from left to right, or right to left, and get the ball wide, because such movement can wrong-foot the defense and create more space and time for the attack. This should not, however, be done at the expense of neglecting a forward ball. If the angle is good and the target is available, the ball should be played forward to that target, rather than wide to the wingers.

Players should look as deep as they can and pass the ball to the deepest target available. This type of pass is more likely to draw defenders to the ball and therefore out of position. Ultimately, soccer is a game not of side-to-side movement but of forward penetration—a difficult skill requiring much practice. As the old adage says: "Look deep first. If you can't go deep, go wide." In figure 3.10, O1 has two options: the easier (more obvious) pass to O2 and the longer (more difficult) pass to O3. The play is more likely to produce decisive results if O1 chooses the longer option to O3. To do so, he needs to get his head up and look for the deepest target he can find, in this case O3.

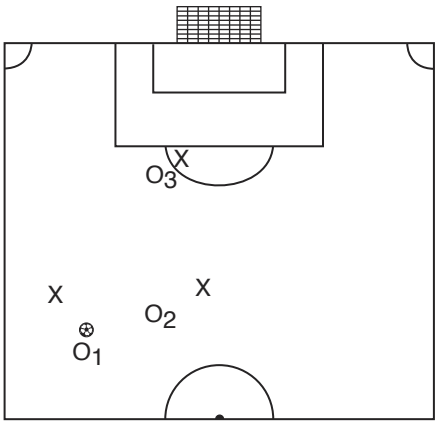


Figure 3.10 With two options available, O1 should play deep to X3 rather than short to O2.

Eventually, the various types of passes and movements have to be put into a game situation. Small-sided games are ideal for all skill development, as they allow players to practice their skills in a scaled-down game and gradually progress to using them in a full-sided game. It is best to start with more space and smaller numbers, then move toward using less space and higher numbers. The ratio of defenders to attackers should start low, then increase as players' skills develop. The more quickly a player can perform these skills, the more effective both he and his team will be. Decreasing space in any drill will decease the time a player has to work with, thereby forcing him to play quicker soccer. The same is true for increasing the ratio of defenders to attackers, but this approach will succeed only with advanced players. Once players are succeeding—and not before—the coach can also decrease the touch limit for the attacking players. One- and two-touch soccer quicken the play. Coaches can adjust several conditions as players develop: space, number of defenders, and touch limit.

It is not advisable to play keep-away games with a large number of players. The larger the number, the fewer touches on the ball for each player and the less

effective the practice. If group size goes much above 12, then players who are not especially confident will tend to hide, see very little of the ball, and therefore miss out on the benefit of the practice. For a squad with 18 players, two groups of 9 will work much better for keep-away than the full group. It is okay, however, to play with the full squad on occasion.

Ball Control

It is legal to control a soccer ball with any part of the body other than the arms and hands, but certain parts of the body are easier to use than others. The feet, of course, are used most often, but the thighs, chest, and head are also important. Players should understand four principles of ball control.

The first principle is to move the controlling body surface into the ball's line of flight (figure 3.11*a*), which requires moving one's feet quickly. It is very difficult to control a ball when stretching for it with the foot, and it is almost impossible using any other part of the body (figure 3.11*b*). When using their feet, players should develop the habit of controlling the ball and creating a better passing angle in one movement. This approach normally requires the receiver to control the ball to the left or right of his body in order to widen the passing angle. Players should be able to use both the inside and outside of each foot. They should keep their head up and look for teammates before the ball arrives, but must get their heads back down to control the ball. Their heads should come back up as the players look for a pass.

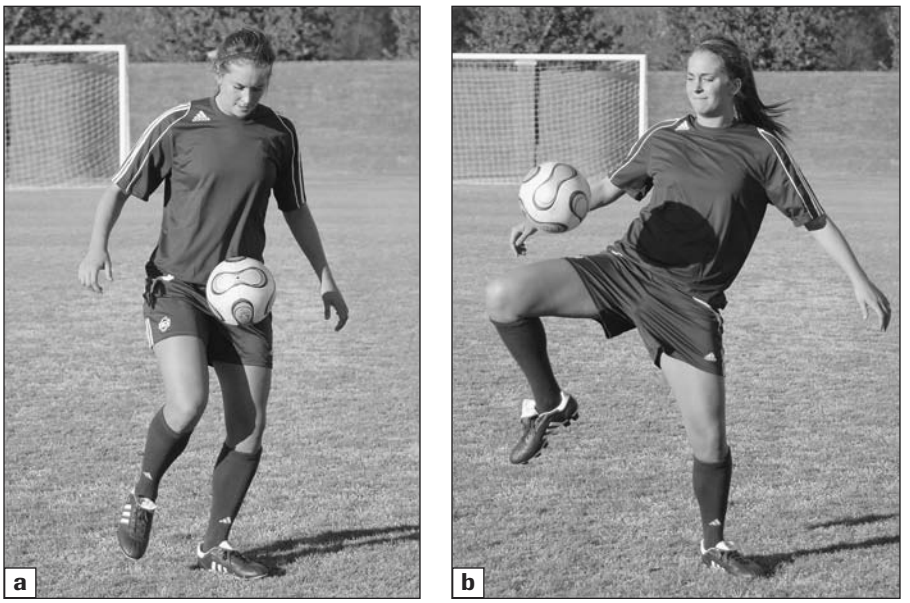


Figure 3.11 Staying behind the flight of the ball: *(a)* her body is directly behind the ball, and her feet move to stay underneath the ball; *(b)* her feet have not moved quickly enough to keep her body behind the ball, and she must stretch to reach it.

Next, the player must select the controlling surface. The flight of the ball will probably determine which surface the player chooses, but it is generally best to use the feet whenever possible. Two main techniques are the wedge and the cushion. The wedge control involves trapping the ball between the foot and the ground, using either the sole or side of the foot (figure 3.12); it is also possible to use the chest by moving the chest down to force the ball quickly down. The cushion control involves withdrawing the controlling surface from the ball immediately on contact (figure 3.13). The idea here is to absorb force with the body, thus taking pace off the ball so that it falls lightly at one's feet.

Third, the receiving player should be sure to relax. If the body goes stiff—not uncommon due to the stress of the situation—ball control of any kind will be difficult to achieve. Players should try to relax and be as confident as they can throughout the process.

Finally, the player must keep her head steady (figure 3.14). The head acts like a rudder on a ship: If it moves, so does the rest of the body. Thus, holding one's head steady is a good principle to follow in almost every aspect of the game, especially when controlling the ball.

When controlling the ball away from defensive pressure, the first touch of the attacking player should be at an angle away from the defender. The ball is then played away from the defender and out from under the attacking player's feet (figure 3.15*a-b* on page 37).

Ball control should initially be practiced in pairs, so that each player can learn the techniques, but as soon as possible, pressure from another player should be incorporated to make the exercise more gamelike (it is a completely different

Figure 3.12 Side of the foot wedge trap.

Figure 3.13 Thigh trap using thigh as a cushion.

Figure 3.14 Head position for correct ball control.

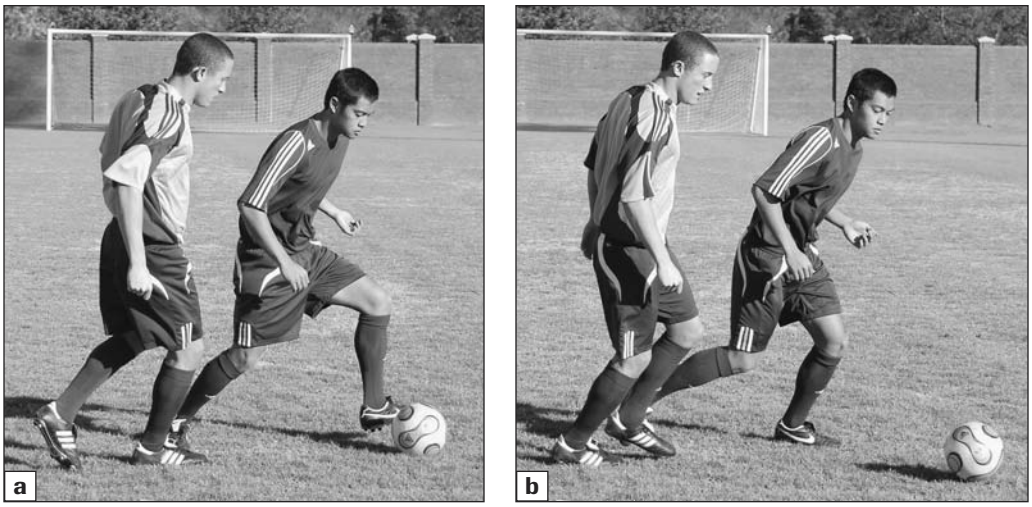


Figure 3.15 Controlling ball away from defensive pressure: *(a)* the attacking player's first touch; *(b)* the ball is played away from the defender.

skill when performed under pressure). This activity can be done in threes, with one player serving the ball, one receiving it and working on control, and one defending by moving toward the controlling player to pressure her.

Goal Scoring

Scoring simply means putting the ball into the back of the net. In most cases, it is done with a shot—striking the ball with the instep in much the same manner used for the instep pass—but goals can also be scored in many other ways. If, for example, the ball bounces off a shin bone and into the net, it can hardly be considered a shot, but it still counts. Goal scoring is more about being in the right place at the right time, and it is probably one of the most difficult tasks in the game. It is necessary to learn the skill of shooting—striking the ball with one's foot—and forwards in particular had better be good at it!

To some degree, shooting is more an attitude than a skill. Players need to be prepared to shoot at any given opportunity, and most certainly need confidence in their ability. It is often said that goal scorers are born, not made, and there is some truth in that. It certainly helps, however, to use good shooting technique. The mechanics of shooting are very similar to those of passing, and in some cases shooting is in fact as simple as passing the ball past the goalkeeper into the net. Thus players should hold good passing technique in mind when shooting the ball, rather than thinking they have to break the net every time they shoot.

The shooter should always know where the goal and goalkeeper are in order to shoot into the most open part of the net. Goalkeepers are often taught to cover their near post (the post closest to the ball), so as a rule of thumb it is a good

idea for players to shoot for the far post. This also opens up the possibility that a mis-hit shot will turn out to be a very effective cross.

The shooter should generally concentrate on accuracy rather than power in order to at least make the goalkeeper save the ball: An off-target shot never scores, whereas an accurate one always has a chance. The shooter should keep his head down and steady, keep his eyes on the ball, concentrate on the center of the ball, and hit through that point. He should avoid lurching, trying instead to remain calm and strike the ball smoothly. An overly quick kicking action ("snatching") is often caused by slight panic, which leads the player to overfocus on getting the shot away quickly. Certainly this is sometimes necessary, but more often than not the shooter has more time than she thinks, so it is best to remain calm and smooth in her kicking action. It will produce better contact on the ball.

In game play, shooting requires the ability to strike the ball from different heights and directions. The ball may be on the ground, bouncing, or on the fly. It may be moving directly toward or away from the shooter, or coming in from the side. Each scenario requires certain techniques and needs to be practiced in and of itself. When the ball is moving away, the shooter should step into it with the nonkicking foot (figure 3.16). This can be a difficult maneuver—it is hard to catch up with a ball moving away from one's body—and the resulting shot may lack power. In addition, if the nonkicking foot is too far behind the ball, the shot will rise and probably sail over the bar. Ideally, then, the nonkicking foot should be placed next to the ball, and with a ball that is moving away from the body this requires extra effort.

Figure 3.16 Stepping into ball with nonkicking foot.

When the ball is moving *toward* the shooter, the problem often lies in keeping the shot down. It is very easy to get slightly under the ball and hit it over the bar. The shooter should concentrate on keeping her head and knee over the ball and kicking through the middle of the ball (figure 3.17*a-c* on page 39). In addition, when the ball is moving toward the shooter, it is easier for her to generate power (through the rebound action), so she must take care not to try and hit it too hard.

When a ball is coming in perpendicularly, or from the side, it requires more of a sweeping action than a powerful strike. The shooter must concentrate simply on redirecting the ball toward the goal by placing the closest foot against the ball and using a sweeping motion of the leg.

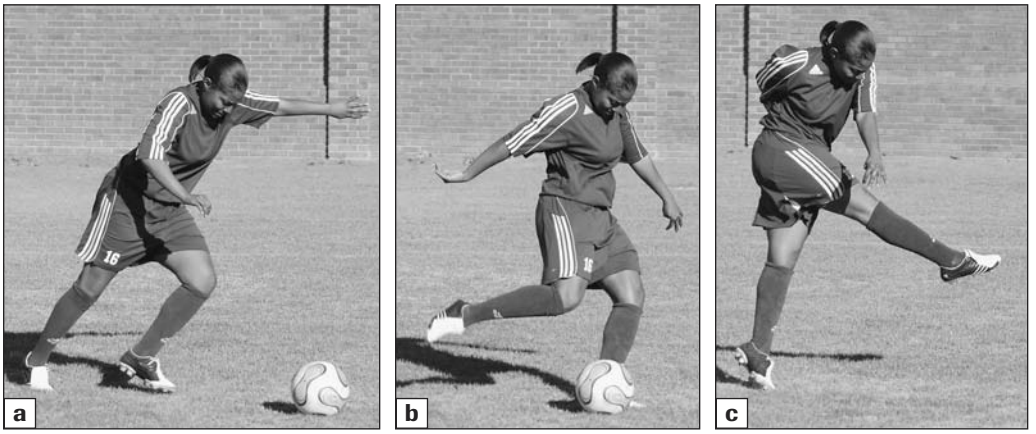


Figure 3.17 Shooting with the ball moving toward the shooter: *(a)* approach at a slight angle; *(b)* step into the ball with the nonkicking foot while keeping the knee and head over the ball; *(c)* kick through the center of the ball.

Team Attacking Tactics

The individual attacking skills needed in order to create goal-scoring chances must be worked on continually. They are never truly mastered, no matter the level of play; there is always room to improve, and players must be prepared to do some of this work in their own time. Beyond individual skills, however, coaches need to prepare players to incorporate individual skills into team play to form an effective attacking unit. This section covers team tactics for attacking, including attacking from wing or flank positions, blind-side runs, crossover plays, and wall passing.

Attacking From Wing or Flank Positions

It is normally easier to penetrate a defense from wide or wing positions than it is down the middle. Organized defenses tend to concentrate their players in more central positions to protect their goal. It is impossible, however, to cover the whole width of the field with defensive players—there is just too much space—so defenders are taught to protect the middle and "give space" away in the wide or flank positions. Thus attacking teams should try to take advantage of this space; whatever defenders try to accomplish tactically, attackers should do the opposite.

Crosses are more dangerous—and more successful—if they are played into the back of defenders, between them and their goal, where it is very difficult for them to clear the ball. Players and coaches should be aware that defenders are most comfortable when they are facing forward, with the ball in front of them. They are

much less comfortable when a ball is played behind them, forcing them to turn and face their own goal. So, whenever possible in crossing a ball, players should try to play it into an area that will make defenders turn toward their own net.

The two positions most likely to cross a ball from the wide flank into the opponent's penalty box are the two wingers and the two fullbacks. Most good crosses are played into defined areas or spaces in the penalty box and are not necessarily direct passes to teammates. It is the responsibility of the attacking player to understand where these spaces are and to recognize that the ball is going to be played into them rather than directly to a player. From the coach's perspective, if a cross is played successfully into such a space and no attacker is there to meet it, then the problem lies not with the crosser but with the forward. Wide players should be prepared to play or cross the ball into four basic areas: the near post, midgoal, the far post, and the edge of the penalty box.

Near-Post Crosses

The post nearest the ball is the one area of the field where defending teams are most vulnerable. The goalkeeper's advantage of being able to use hands is often negated because he cannot get to this space in time; nor, likely, can defenders. Attacking this area, more so than any other, is a matter of timing. Initially, the crosser of the ball must determine whether he has enough space to play a ball around the pressuring defender. If there is no defender at all, then it is easy, but if there is good pressure from the defender then the winger needs to create enough space to be able to cross the ball into the near-post area. His main job is to put the ball into the front space. The ball needs to be played quickly, with as much force as possible, and should arrive no higher than head height.

It is sometimes easier, though more dangerous, to play the ball on the ground, and in this case the attacking player inside the box must time her run so that she meets the cross in the right place at the right time. It is *not* up to the player crossing the ball to pass it directly to the forward—she is simply required to put it in the right space, and the attacker in the box must get to the ball ahead of the defender. This requires good timing, commitment, and determination. Forwards should start the run into that space as late as possible, then move as quickly as possible, thus leaving the covering defender with less reaction time.

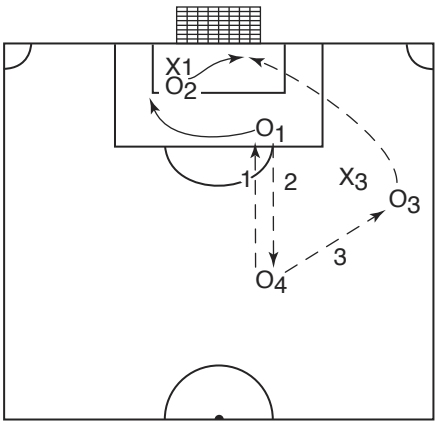


Figure 3.18 O3 creates room to play the ball past X3 and inside the 6-yard box level with the near post.

A near-post cross is illustrated in figure 3.18, where O4 begins with the ball, plays it into target player O1, then receives it back. Next, he passes to his wide player O3, who responsibly gets enough space past defender X3 to cross the ball into the near post. O1 spins, turns, and attacks the far post in hopes of taking the defender with him and clearing out the space at the near

post. O2 has the responsibility of attacking the near post and winning the space in front of defender X1.

To be successful, near-post runs must be made at the correct angle. Players should run in the same path as the flight of the ball. In figure 3.19*a*, O2's run to the near post is nearly perpendicular to the flight of the cross. At this angle, O2 has little margin for adjustment; therefore, unless the cross is made right to her feet, her chance of scoring is low. In figure 3.19*b*, on the other hand, O2's run is much closer to the angle of the cross, giving her a much better chance to adjust on the run and correctly meet the cross.

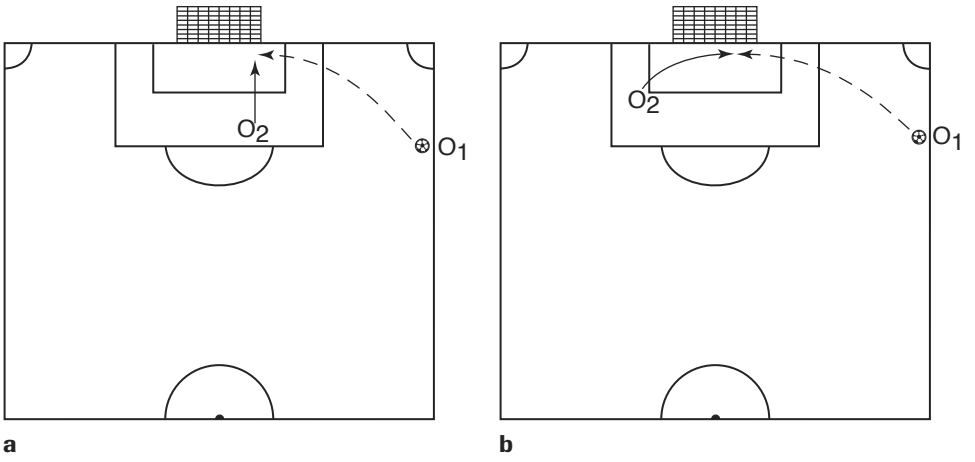


Figure 3.19 Meeting a near-post cross: *(a)* O2 attacks the cross from O1 at a 90° angle, allowing little room for error: *(b)* O2 attacks the cross at an angle almost directly behind the flight of the cross, giving O2 a better chance.

Midgoal Crosses

Ideally, the ball should be crossed to the middle of the goal at about the edge of the 6-yard box. This cross is usually made in the air; otherwise, it will not clear the first defender, who will be positioned toward the near post in front of the midgoal space. In order to attack this space, teams need to attempt to clear it of defenders. Intelligent runs by the forwards will pull defenders from these good defensive positions. In figure 3.20, O1 drifts away from the ball, toward the back post, and O2 makes a near-post run. O4 should then make a late run into this cleared space in hopes of meeting the cross at the

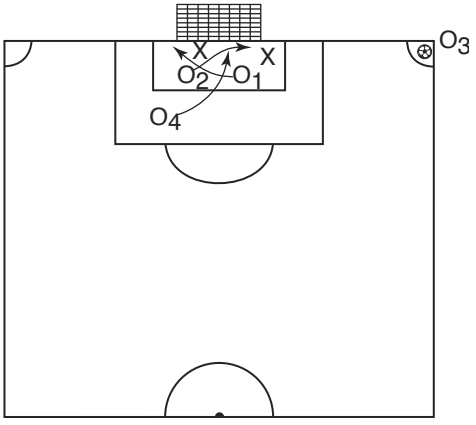


Figure 3.20 O4 attacks the midgoal space created by the movements of O1 and O2.

perfect time. Crosses played into this area have to be slightly more precise than in other areas, and they can be more difficult to complete since the opposition is likely to have more defenders in the area.

Far-Post Crosses

These crosses must be lofted in order to get past the goalkeeper and the defenders in the box. This can be done in two entirely different ways. The first is to loft a floating ball that needs to clear the far corner of the 6-yard box. This type of cross requires the attacking team to win the space with a good jumper and header of the ball. This type of cross is often fairly ineffective. The second type of far-post cross involves "pinging" or driving the ball. The crosser must make sure not to kick underneath the ball, because in that case it will float. Thus the ball must be driven through its center to get sufficient height but move faster and with a flatter trajectory. This is a much harder cross to hit, but if successfully played it is easier to win—and far more dangerous to the defense—than the lofted cross. In order to get a good forward run at the ball, as well as more height on the jump, the player attacking the ball on the far post needs to begin well away from the 6-yard box and back post.

Crosses into the box can be either in-swinging (moving toward the goal) or out-swinging (moving away from the goal). A ball delivered to the near post or midgoal can be very dangerous when played as an in-swinger. Since the ball is already moving toward the goal, all that is required is a minimal touch to direct it into the goal. This slight change in angle is often enough to fool the goalkeeper, and even if not touched, the threat of the challenge to the cross may be sufficient to freeze the goalkeeper and allow the cross to score directly. Crosses to the far post are more likely to be out-swinging, taking the ball away from the goal and the goalkeeper. This requires cleaner contact on the ball by the forward, who will have to generate power on the header through his own technique in order to direct the ball toward the net.

Balls Pulled Back to the Edge of the Box

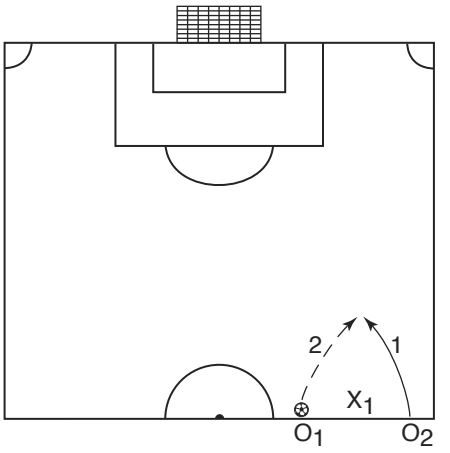
If a winger has penetrated deep down the opposing flank and gotten close to the goal line, he will find it difficult to cross into the 6-yard box, and especially hard to get the ball in behind the defenders. The angle of the pass—not to mention the number of defensive players likely to be in the 6-yard box—simply will not allow it. Thus he needs to consider pulling the ball back toward the edge of the 18-yard box, which requires that a teammate pull away from the 6-yard box, back toward the 18-yard line, or that a player be holding on the edge of the penalty box. Balls pulled back into this area need to be struck firmly; otherwise, defenders will have time to close down the pass or the resulting shot.

Blind-Side Runs, Crossover Plays, and Wall Passing

Blind-side runs, crossover plays, and wall passing are all similar types of off-the-ball movement that allows attackers to either lose their markers or get

into the back of a defender. Players that stand around with little activity are easy to mark defensively. Good movement away from the ball is much more difficult for the defender.

Blind-side runs are made by a player who, without the ball, runs behind defenders into a position where they are unlikely to see and react to him. In figure 3.21, O1 begins to run downfield with the ball, prompting defender X1 to come and challenge for the ball. At this point, O2 can make a blind-side run behind X1 to make himself available for a pass from O1.



3.21 O2 makes a blind-side run behind defender X1, and makes himself available for the pass from O1.

Crossover plays occur when two players of the same team with one of them in possession of the ball, run across each other's paths. The player with the ball may release it to his teammate, who simply takes the ball from him, or keeps it himself using that player as a decoy. The defenders are not sure who is going to keep the ball and are momentarily confused. This split second can be enough for attacking players to lose their markers. Figure 3.22 *a-c* shows the technique used in a crossover play.

Figure 3.23 on page 44 shows the player movement involved in a crossover play. X1 runs toward teammate X2 and either releases the ball to X2 (who accelerates away) or uses X2 as a decoy while keeping the ball and accelerating away on her own. Thus the players cross over each other, leaving the defender unsure of who is going to keep the ball.

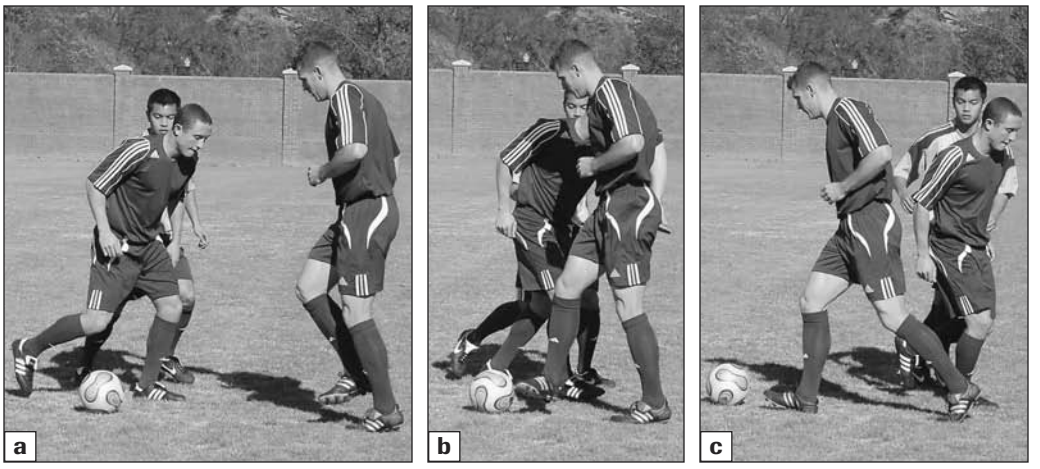
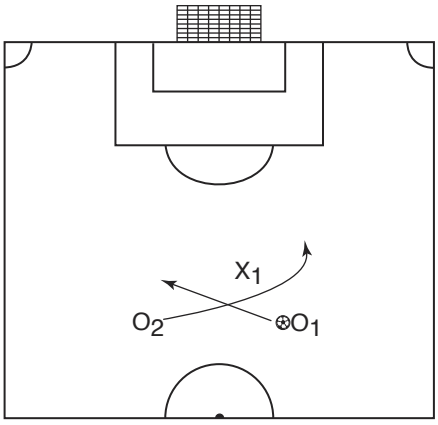


Figure 3.22 Crossover play protecting the ball from the defender with the furthest away foot: *(a)* the player with the ball protects it by keeping it on the foot furthest from the defender; *(b)* a teammate takes the ball; *(c)* the player accelerates in the opposite direction.



3.23 A crossover play where O2 takes the ball from O1 and accelerates away from defender X1.

The wall pass is one of the most commonly used passes in the game, and when done properly it is difficult to defend. It is a very effective way of losing the defensive marker and also allowing penetration to the back of defenders. A defender who goes to pressure the ball that is passed at the last moment will typically turn to look where it has been passed to. This often allows this same attacking player time to run by him and receive the ball back from the player he has just passed to, and he will have effectively lost his marker. Figure 3.24*a* shows a successful wall pass, where O2 dribbles the ball toward X1 and makes him commit. Attacking player O2 should dribble the ball as close to defender X1 as he dare in order to make X1 commit. Otherwise, as seen in figure 3.24*b*, the defender, who has stayed well away from the player with the ball, will likely be able to stop the wall pass because he is already standing in the area where O2 is likely to want to run. Thus there is no penetration, and defender X2 still has the players and the ball in front of him. Teammate O1 can help by quickly moving closer to O2, thus decreasing the distance of the pass and speeding up its execution. When O1 releases the pass, he must accelerate as quickly as he can to the back of X1 to get the return or wall pass from O2. Figure 3.25*a* and *b* show an alternate view of a succesful wall pass.

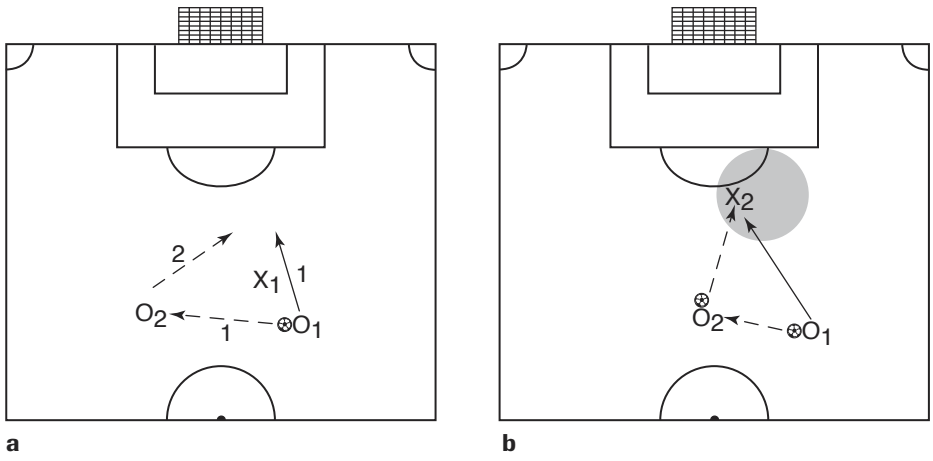


Figure 3.24 Wall passes: (a) O1 and O2 complete a wall pass around defender X1; (b) O2 has not taken the ball close enough to defender X2, and has not created enough space behind X2 for O1 to run into.

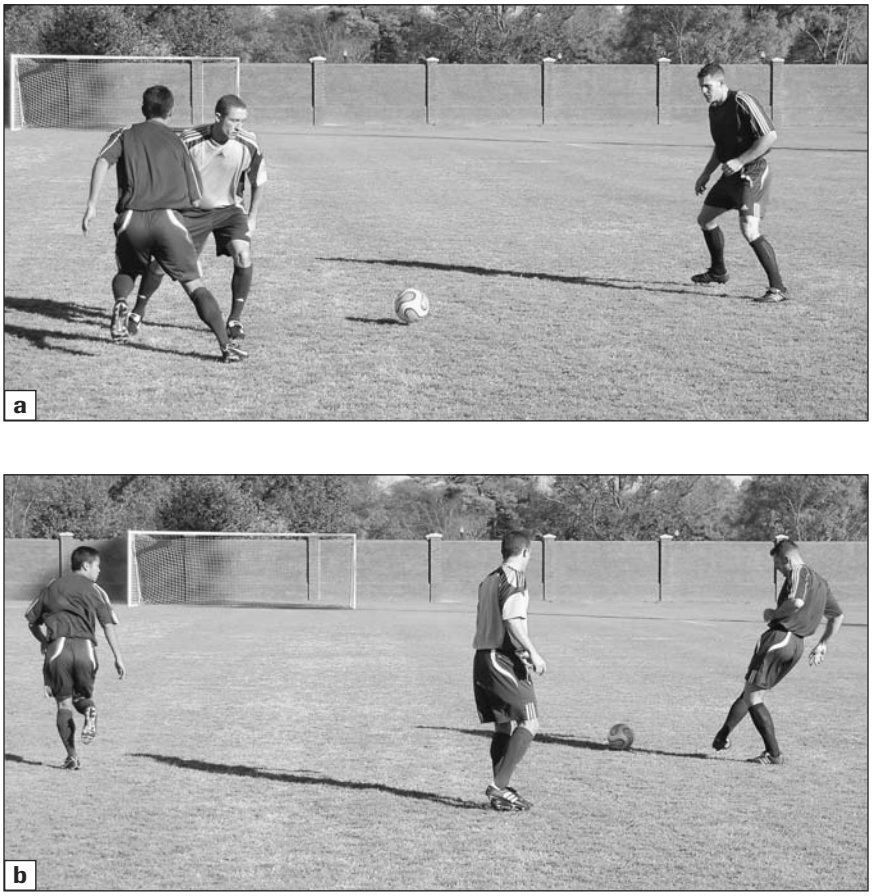


Figure 3.25 Wall pass making the defender commit: *(a)* the attacking player runs directly at the defender and makes him commit to the tackle, while the support player stays square to the ball; *(b)* the attacking player passes to the support, or wall, player and accelerates past the defender for the return pass.

INDIVIDUAL DRIBBLING

FOCUS

Helping players become comfortable with a ball at their feet.

PROCEDURE

This drill is performed in a series of 8-by-8-yard (7.5-by-7.5-meter) boxes—or bigger if the players' skill level is poor. Each player has a ball and practices a specific move or moves in his individual box. The moves can vary widely, using different parts of both feet: inside of right to inside of left, or outside right to inside right, outside left to inside left, stepover right, stepover left, and so on.

MIRROR DRIBBLING

FOCUS

Creating a gamelike distraction by introducing a second player to the dribbling drill.

PROCEDURE

After a player is comfortable dribbling individually, She can pair up with a partner to do mirror work. This drill practice uses a 16-by-16-yard (about 15-by-15-meter) box formed by combining two of the 8-by-8-yard boxes used in the individual dribbling drill. The partners practice the target skill by simultaneously dribbling at each other, then each going to her right with the outside of the right foot, thus passing each other at the halfway point without colliding. Mirror work can be used to practice a wide variety of moves, as long as the players go to opposite sides so they do not collide.

1V1 DRIBBLING

FOCUS

Developing the skill of dribbling past an opponent.

PROCEDURE

Setup is similar to that for mirror dribbling. Each player stands in his own box, with one player as attacker and the other as defender. The attacker tries to dribble through the defender's square without losing the ball. Initially, the defender should exert merely token or partial defense, while the attacker improves his dribbling skill, but he can quickly move to regular defending in order to make it more realistic for the attacking player.

FIRST TOUCH

FOCUS

Receiving a pass and creating a first touch that gets the ball out from underneath the feet.

PROCEDURE

Working in pairs in 10-by-10-yard (about 9-by-9-meter) boxes, partners practice the push or side-of-the-foot pass with two touches while moving throughout the grid. The first touch must be made about a yard (or meter) away from the player's feet. Play should progress to one-touch, with both partners still moving within the grid. Remember: The fastest soccer one can play is one-touch soccer.

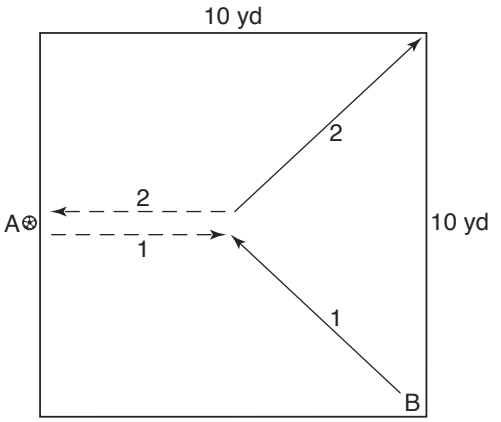
ONE-TOUCH PASSING

FOCUS

Passing with the use of both feet and an angled approach.

PROCEDURE

Working in a 10-by-10-yard (9-by-9-meter) box, partner A begins with a ball at her feet, standing outside the box. Partner B lines up in the corner of the box on the opposite side.



1. On the coach's command, partner B checks diagonally toward partner A, who serves her the ball.
2. B plays the ball back to A with her right foot, checks back to the opposite corner, then checks back at an angle, this time passing back with her left foot.
3. This pattern continues for about 1 minute.Then the partners switch roles.

The players should focus on using both feet, checking back at an angle to create space, and playing the ball back at a good pace (too fast and it will be hard to receive, too slow and it may never arrive).

PASSING FROM AN ANGLED APPROACH

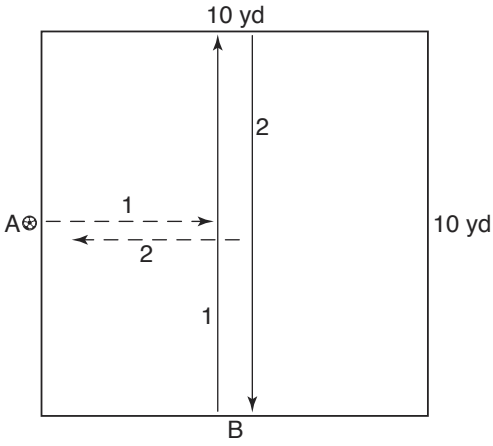
FOCUS

Passing with both feet while approaching from different angles.

PROCEDURE

Work in a 10-by-10-yard (9-by-9-meter) box. With partner A outside the grid and a ball at his feet, partner B lines up in the middle of the grid adjacent to A.

1. On the coach's command, A plays the ball into the middle of the grid.
2. B runs straight across the grid and plays a one-time ball back to A, then repeats the process from the other side.
3. This continues for about 1 minute, then the partners switch roles.



The players should focus on accuracy and pace of the pass, as well as changing speed after the pass has been made. They should pass the ball across the body, using the instep.

SUPPORT PLAY

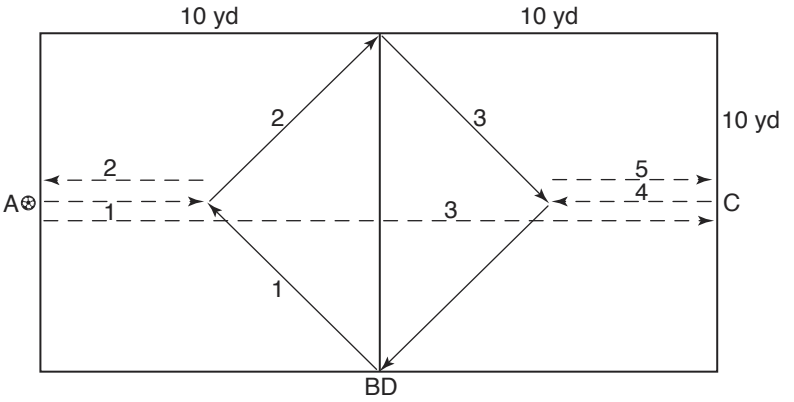
FOCUS

Showing correct support play.

PROCEDURE

This drill involves four players working in a 20-by-10-yard (18-by-9-meter) area. Player A starts with the ball outside the grid.

1. Player B checks diagonally to receive a short pass from A, passes back to A, and then continues to run until exiting the grid on the other side.
2. Player A now plays a longer, first-time pass to player C at the very opposite side of the grid, 20 yards (18 meters) away.
3. B supports this pass, and C lays the ball to B, who in turn lays it back and runs out of the grid to the side she started on.
4. D begins the same process by receiving a ball from C.
5. This should continue for about 2 minutes, at which point the outside players switch with the players in the middle.



CONTINUOUS SUPPORT PLAY

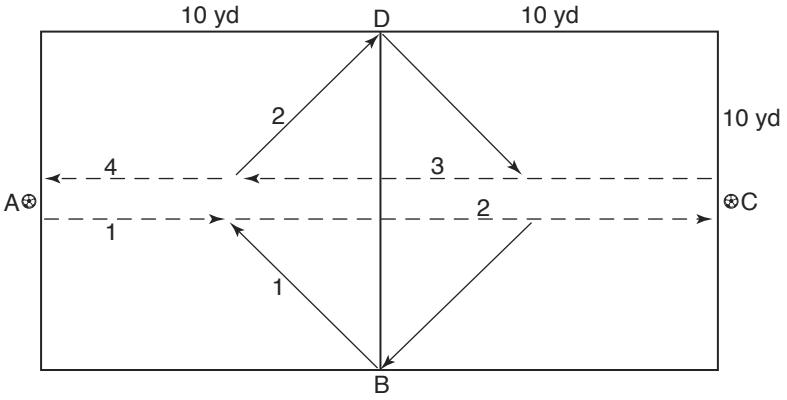
FOCUS

Making support play more gamelike by having continuous movement.

PROCEDURE

This drill also involves four players working in a 20-by-10-yard (18-by-9-meter) area, but this time all four players work at once, two in the middle and two on the outside. Players A and C begin with balls on the outside.

1. On the coach's command, players B and D check to the appropriate partners to receive the ball, then turn with the ball, using a pivot-and-turn technique (making a half-turn with the ball so that they are facing the opposite partner on the outside of the grid).
2. Once they have turned, they make a longer pass to the opposite partner on the outside of the grid.
3. They continue to support this pass, receive it back, then turn and play another ball to their original partner. (Note that for clarity, only B's passes are shown in the diagram.)
4. This should continue for about 2 minutes. Then the outside partners change.



4V2 GRID

FOCUS

Improving passing skills under defensive pressure.

PROCEDURE

This is a possession or keep-away drill and begins to put passing into gamelike situations. If players' ability levels are low, it might be necessary to begin 5v2, thus providing the attackers with more passing options. The drill is performed in a 20-by-10-yard (18-by-9-meter) area.

1. On the coach's command, the attacking team tries to complete a set number of passes without turning the ball over to the defending duo.
2. If the ball is lost, it is given back to the attackers and the process begins again.
3. After 2 minutes, the two defenders should be changed. They will join the attacking group with two of the attackers becoming defenders. In this way everybody gets a taste of both attacking and defending.

The coach should emphasize passing skills and good support play. Speed of play can also be stressed by putting a two-touch limit on each player.

VARIATIONS

Coaches can initiate progressions by changing the numbers (e.g., adding defenders), the playing space, and even the rules to cater to the team's current needs. To increase the team's passing speed, the coach might put one player on a one-touch limit (and have him wear a different bib color), while the rest are allowed two touches. Another interesting variation is mandatory two-touch—the player receiving the ball must touch it exactly twice—which works well when a player needs to work on his first touch. He should make sure his first touch is smooth, away from the pressuring defender, and quick enough to get the pass or second touch under way before being tackled.

4V4 PLUS 2

FOCUS

Adding extra players to make passing more difficult.

PROCEDURE

This drill requires 10 players, divided into two teams of 4 each, along with 2 extras, in a 20-by-30-yard (18-by-27-meter) grid. In this keep-away drill, the two extra players are always on the team with the ball, so that in reality the drill is always 6v4, with the advantage to the side in possession of the ball. Remember the "plus two" always play with the four players who have the ball. When it is lost to the *defending* four, that defending four then become the attacking team, and are joined by the same "plus two" players again, providing six players against four. Periodically, change the "plus two" players; otherwise, they never have an opportunity to defend. The attacking six should try to complete as many consecutive passes as possible without turning the ball over to the defensive unit. The coach can change conditions or rules of the game to meet the team's needs.

4V4V4 DRILL

FOCUS

Working on passing skills and quick thinking.

PROCEDURE

In this drill players have to constantly recognize which team is on their side and who their passing targets are. This is quite a difficult drill—thus not a good one for beginning players. It is a variation of the keep-away drill, and in this case *three* teams (four players each) wear differently colored bibs. To accommodate the larger number of players, the playing area or grid needs to be extended slightly.

1. The coach determines which two teams first combine to form one team that attempts to keep possession of the ball.
2. The game begins with eight attackers facing four defenders and trying to get in as many passes as possible before losing the ball.
3. When the defending quartet finally wins the ball, they combine with the attacking four who did not lose the ball to form a new attacking team. In other words, when a player loses the ball, his quartet becomes the defending team. A ball kicked out of play is considered a lost ball.

FULL-FIELD KEEP-AWAY

FOCUS

Integrating passing skills with large numbers in order to practice getting numbers and getting into support positions around the ball; working on decision making about when to play short and when to play long.

PROCEDURE

The drill uses the whole game field, with the full squad split into two equal teams. A row of cones is placed 10 yards (9 meters) from each goal line across the field to mark the areas where the goalkeepers stand. If the team has two goalkeepers, then one is placed in each 10-yard zone; if the team has four, then two are placed in each zone.

1. The aim is to strike the ball from one's own half of the field to the goalkeeper *at the opposite end.* If he catches the ball before it bounces, the team is awarded 2 points. (This is difficult, as the pass will be at least 40 yards [37 meters], and it should not be attempted unless the player with the ball has plenty of time and space. The coach needs to work with players on correct decision making. The team should not be constantly forcing long passes down the field.)
2. If a team gets the ball past the halfway line, then puts together five consecutive passes in the opponent's half, it scores 1 point. The team should keep passing, since another point is awarded for each set of five consecutive passes.
3. When the opposition wins the ball back, the first team must now defend.

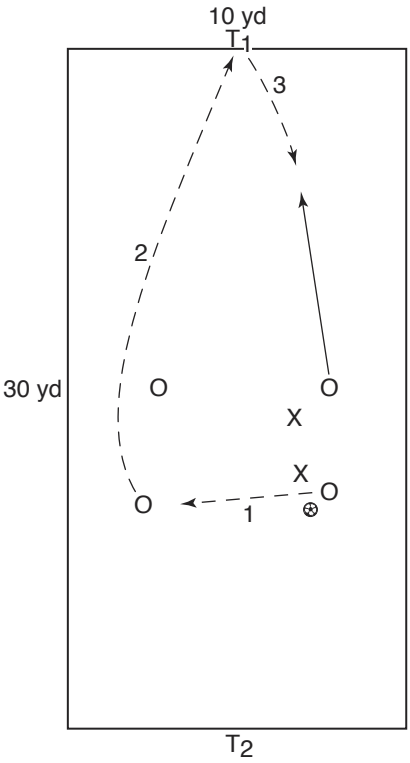
TARGET PLAY

FOCUS

Practicing passing skills involving a specific target.

PROCEDURE

This drill is executed in an area measuring 30 by 10 yards (27 by 9 meters) with either a 4v2, 2v2, or 3v3 game in the box (numbers depend on ability levels). Two additional target players, T1 and T2, are placed at the end and outside of the box. The aim is simply for one side to keep the ball by passing, and to get the ball into targets T1 and T2 as quickly and as efficiently as possible. A team should not use four passes if two will suffice. Players must make good decisions about when to play short and when to play long into the target. Once a target player has received the ball, the team should go in the opposite direction, toward the other target player. If the defenders win the ball, the game can be restarted by simply playing the ball to a target, and the game begins again.



VARIATIONS

The numbers and spacing of this activity can be changed depending on ability level. It can work just as well in a 30-by-15-yard (27-by-14-meter) area with a 5v3 attack-to-defense ratio. Normally, defenders are rotated and changed after a set period of time so that each player gets an equal amount of time defending and attacking.

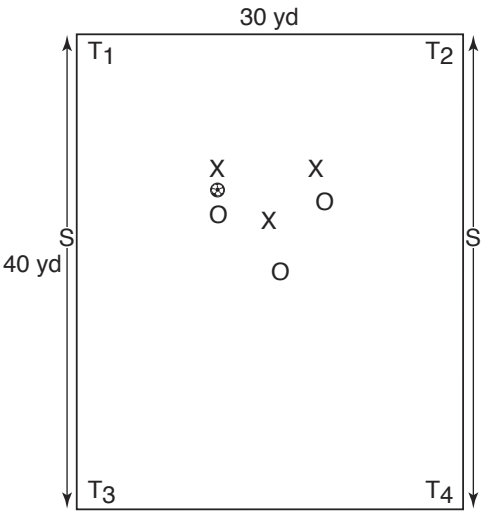
FOUR-TARGET GAME

FOCUS

Developing decision-making ability—whether to make a shorter or longer pass, and whether or not to support the ball.

PROCEDURE

The area of play measures 40 by 30 yards (37 by 27 meters). The drill works well with 12 players, with 6 working on passing and the remaining 6 acting as targets and support players. The object is to get the ball to the target's feet without making her move more than a couple of yards (or meters) from the corner.



1. The Xs play toward targets T1 and T2, and the Os move toward T3 and T4.
2. The support players (S) stay outside the playing area but move up and down the sidelines, always supporting the team with the ball. Thus the game always pits five attackers against three defenders.
3. If T1 receives the ball from the Xs, a point is scored and the ball is then played by T1 across the grid to T2, who puts the ball in play to the O team.

VARIATION

One variation of this drill allows the team scoring the point to keep the ball when it is put back into play by T2. They now attack in the opposite direction, toward T3 and T4. The purpose is to ask players to be technically capable of playing a 30-yard (27-meter) ball into a target player rather than always playing the easier and safer ball of 10 yards (9 meters) to a support player—and especially to practice making good decisions about when to play short and when to play long.

ATTACKING THE DEFENSIVE WEAK SIDE

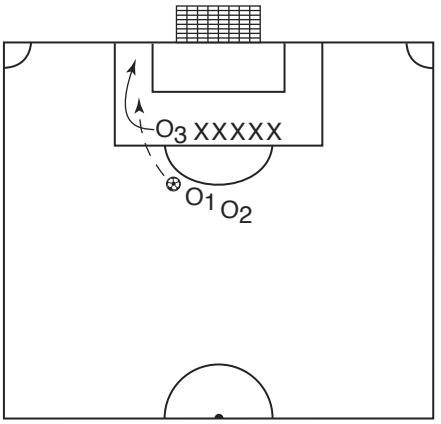
FOCUS

Practicing freeing a player by spinning off the wall.

PROCEDURE

O1 and O2 stand next to the ball for the free kick. O3 stands on the end of the wall farthest away from the goal, on the weak side.

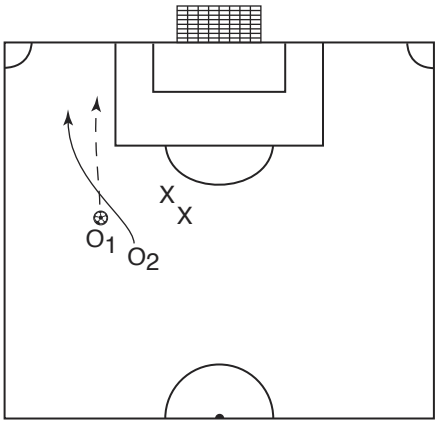
1. O3 spins off the wall and runs into the weak side space.
2. Either O1 or O2 plays the free kick into that area.
3. O3 can either cross or shoot.



FLANK OVERLAP

FOCUS

Practicing overlapping from a free kick.



PROCEDURE

A similar concept to the previous drill but from a wing position.

1. O2 runs over the ball on the free kick and runs into space instead of crossing into the box as expected.
2. O1 passes the ball into this space. O2 can cross or shoot.

DECEPTIVE METHODS FOR FREE KICKS

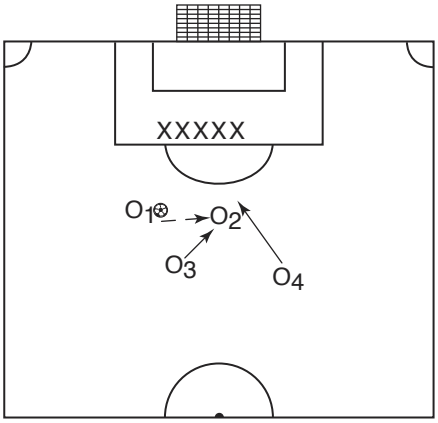
FOCUS

Complicating free kicks.

PROCEDURE

It is best if this type of drill (or set play) is practiced on the game field itself, using its normal markings. This drill should be practiced a few yards outside the penalty box and slightly to the left or right of center.

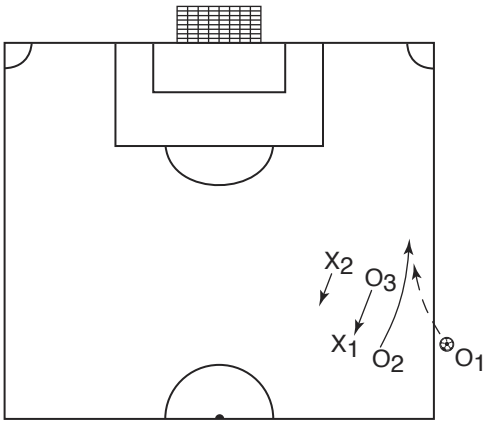
1. O1 passes ball to O2.
2. O2 stops the ball with the sole of his foot as if to suggest that O3 will shoot the ball.
3. O2 rolls the ball backward with the sole of his foot to O4 who comes in late to shoot the ball.



"PICK" THROW IN

FOCUS

Practicing releasing a player free to receive the ball from a throw in.



PROCEDURE

Start on the game field with three offensive players: One to throw the ball, one to receive it, and one to defend. After successfully practicing the drill this way, it should then be performed in 11v11 game play.

1. O3 throws the ball down the line; O2 runs to the ball.
2. O3 checks back toward O2 and sets a "pick," or blocks defender X1, thus releasing O2.

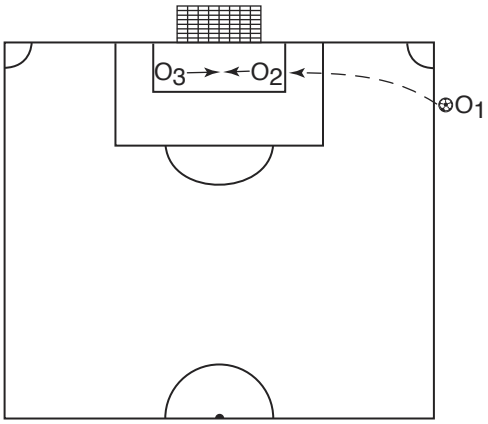
LONG THROW IN

FOCUS

Providing a goal-scoring opportunity from a throw-in situation.

PROCEDURE

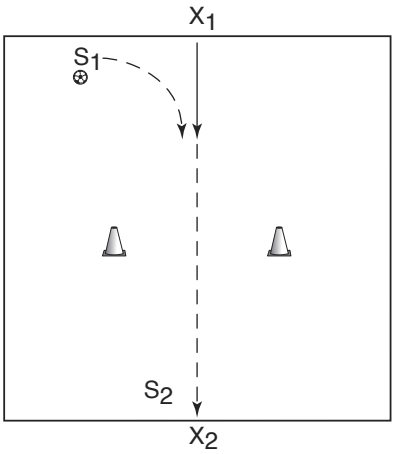
1. O1, who needs a long throw capability, throws the ball as close to near post distance as he can.
2. O2 posts up at that point and flicks the ball on toward the goal with his head.
3. O3 begins outside the far post and runs midgoal late and fast to receive the "helped" ball from O2.



BALL MOVING AWAY FROM AND TOWARD SHOOTER

FOCUS

Practicing shooting technique with maximum efficiency.



PROCEDURE

Players stand in pairs on either side of a mini goal marked by cones or flags. The distance away from the cones may be determined by the ability of the players. The better the player the further away. A distance of about 20 yards (18 meters) might be a good starting point with the cones or "goal" about 2 yards apart. One support player stands near each goal.

The support player serves the ball. The X player approaches the ball and shoots through cones or corner flags stuck in the ground to form a goal. This allows players to get plenty of shooting practice, and each can stop the ball after his partner has shot, thus shooting the ball back in his direction.

VARIATIONS

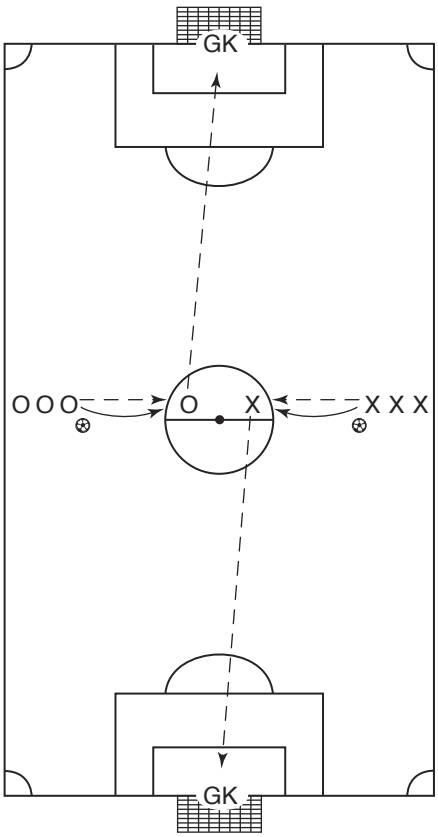
The drill can be made harder by adding defensive pressure or varying how the ball is served (e.g., on the ground or on the bounce). Players may also proceed to shooting at a full-sized goal with goalkeepers.

PRACTICE SHOOTING WITH MINIMAL STANDING

FOCUS

Practicing shooting technique.

PROCEDURE



Balls are fed from players who are lined each up at side of the field about 15 yards (14 meters) away from the shooter. The player who is in the front of this line will pass the ball to the shooter who is in front of the goal approximately 15 yards from the goal. He will then follow his pass so that he becomes the next shooter, and the player who has just shot the ball will join the end of that passing line. Both sides can go simultaneously as each shooter is going to opposite goals and should not get in each other's way. This will keep the practice moving, minimize standing, and offer every player plenty of shooting opportunities.

VARIATIONS

The easiest ball to handle is one received with the back foot (farthest from the passed ball, ensuring that the receiver is opened up). This would always be the right foot, since the ball is being served from the left side. The receiver should open up and shoot with her right foot. The drill can be reversed by keeping everything the same but asking the shooter to turn with the ball and shoot at the other goal. Many variations can be made by asking players to use different feet and turn in different directions (e.g., cutting the ball back with one foot and shooting with the other, or letting the ball roll past and then turning with the ball to shoot at the other goal). Balls can be passed on the ground, on the bounce, or in the air.

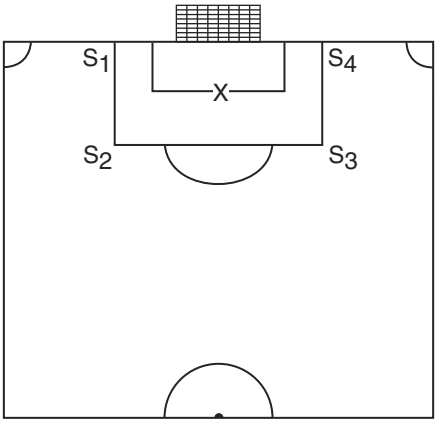
PRESSURE TRAINING FOR SHOOTING

FOCUS

Performing skills quickly, with no rest between serves of the ball, to encourage players to react instinctively.

PROCEDURE

Four servers stand in the corners of the penalty box, each with as many balls as possible. It helps to have ball retrievers standing behind the goal to get balls back to the servers efficiently.



1. S1 begins the process by passing a ball to X, who receives it and shoots after one or two touches.
2. S2, S3, and S4 each pass the ball to X in turn. The timing is such that X never has the opportunity to stop or rest, and the drill does require a good number of balls to keep it going for any length of time.

Depending on the age and fitness level of the player, 2 minutes in the middle will likely be more than enough.

VARIATIONS

The drill can be varied by changing the height and speed of the passes and making the receiver use different parts of the body to control the ball.

GAME TRAINING FOR SHOOTING

FOCUS

Putting shooting into a realistic game situation.

PROCEDURE

This drill is played 5v5, with goalkeepers and full-size goals in a 30-by-20-yard (27-by-18-meter) area. Each team has three defenders and two attackers, none of whom can cross the halfway line (defenders must stay in their half of the box, and attackers must stay in the opponent's half). The sides play a regular game, with every player encouraged to shoot at every opportunity. Forwards can turn and shoot, but the game is more successful if they act as target players and drop the ball back to a teammate in the defensive half, who then tries to shoot. Players should work on angles and quick play. Defenders need to close quickly on the ball in order to prevent unrealistically easy shots. The coach can add conditions such as one- or two-touch limits.

MIDDLE THIRD GAME

FOCUS

Passing balls through different parts of the field.

PROCEDURE

The length of the field of play is from the edge of each penalty box (about 80 yards [73 meters] long), with the width 44 yards (40 meters) marked by extending the edge of penalty box outward parallel with the sidelines. Cones are used to divide the field into equal thirds, and two teams are formed for 8v8 play, with each team placing three players in the defensive third, three in the middle third, and two in the attacking third. Players are not allowed to leave their designated areas.

1. The goalkeeper throws the ball out to one of the wide defenders.
2. The defender is required to play the ball "down the channel" to the feet of the nearest forward in the attacking third. It is sometimes necessary to allow the forward to receive the ball by coming into the middle third (the defender is not allowed to follow) to stop the defender cheating by getting in front of the forward too early denying service to his feet. However, she must *begin* in the attacking third when the ball is played.
3. The forward plays the ball into the middle third to a supporting midfield player, who then plays it back into the attacking third.

As the play develops, it is often necessary for the coach to encourage players to switch the ball from side to side in both the defending and middle thirds before playing it forward.

VARIATIONS

1. To make this game a little more realistic, the coach can allow one attacking player to move from one third into the next, but only when he does *not* have the ball. The drill will not work well if a player is allowed to dribble through zones as this will defeat the object of the drill, which is to pass into the zones. This is excellent work for the two forward ("target") players, who have to learn how to play with their backs to the goal and hold the ball to allow support to arrive.
2. Ask the goalkeeper to throw the ball out to her defenders, but this time to any one of the three. The ball must be played into a target in the middle third of the field, switched, then played into the attacking third. This will force players to work on developing a play directly through the middle third. It is not a bad idea to stress a short-short-long philosophy when playing out of the back.
3. Open up the game to allow creativity and improvisation, with players asked to work the ball through any third they prefer, in any order. The coach should keep encouraging players to switch the play from side to side and play balls forward into targets.

MIDDLE THIRD PASSING

FOCUS

Developing the skill of playing through crowded areas in the middle part of the field.

PROCEDURE

An 8v8 game is played in an area measuring about 80 by 40 yards (73 by 37 meters). The playing area is divided into thirds, and all 16 players begin in the middle third.

1. The goalkeeper starts with the ball and either throws it out directly to his team in the middle third or gives it to a player who has come out of the middle third into his defensive area (no attacker is allowed to follow). Everybody else must remain in the middle third, with the exception of the defender getting the ball from the goalkeeper. If play begins this way, the defender who first receives the ball must pass it to a teammate in the middle third; the defender is not allowed to dribble into the middle.
2. Once possession is gained, the team with the ball needs to pass it in the middle third, attempting to play it to an open player—a difficult task in this crowded area.
3. Once a player has received the ball in the middle third with enough space and time, he should pass it into the attacking third. If the pass is too direct, the goalkeeper will easily intercept, so the ball should be played diagonally where possible. No attacking player is allowed into the attacking third until the ball is passed into it.
4. One attacker may then run to the pass and be joined by a teammate. At this point, no defenders are allowed to follow, and the attackers should attempt to score a goal against the goalkeeper. No more than two attackers are allowed.

A touch limitation is recommended here—possibly one touch, or at least a one-touch finish Otherwise it becomes too unrealistic.

SHADOW PLAY

FOCUS

Developing a team style of play; teaching patterns of play, so that each player recognizes variations of when and where to pass the ball, how to attack and defend as a team, and, in general, what style of attacking play the coach wants the team to execute.

PROCEDURE

The drill involves all 11 players on a full field, with no opposition.

1. Play begins at the back, with a ball played to the back defenders. The coach then goes through the various ways in which the team is going to play the ball forward and attack the opposition's goal. It is sometimes helpful to work in thirds of the field, focusing first on how players are going to play the ball out of their defensive third (and to whom they are going to try to play it), then moving to the middle third, and finally the attacking third. In this format, the coach can show players where to run, where to support, when to play short passes, and when to play long, without the disruption caused by defenders.
2. The team should then go down the field and try to score a goal by incorporating all the patterns of play encouraged by the coach. At some point, it will be necessary to bring in defenders, which of course makes the task considerably more difficult, but the attacking players will at least have developed an idea of what they are trying to do as a team.

CHAPTER 4

Defending Skills and Tactics

Good defensive play is a must. Neglect this area of play at your peril! Many very good attacking players are eventually unsuccessful at a higher level because they have neglected the defensive side of the game. Very few teams have room for one-dimensional players; even a creative attacking player will be called upon to defend. Manchester United star Cristiano Ronaldo, recognized by many as the most exciting attacking player in the world, struggled initially because he was not good enough defensively. At the higher levels of soccer, games and championships tend to be won by well-organized defending rather than good attacking. Coaches are happier with a 1-0 win than a 2-1 win.

Good team defense requires all players to defend and to be proficient at both individual and team defense. Becoming a truly accomplished defender requires

strength, courage, and discipline. It is unrealistic to expect all players to have all of these qualities, especially being brave in the tackle, but everyone on the team has a part to play. All players should at least be able to pressure the ball and shape the play so that defending becomes easier and more predictable for the defensive specialists behind them. Simple defensive pressure applied at the right time and place can often force the opposing team to give up the ball. Indeed, efficient defenses regularly win the ball by taking advantage of the other team's mistakes, without ever having to win it in a tackle.

This chapter covers the fundamentals of individual defending, then puts them in the context of team defending. This chapter stresses the importance of sound defensive principles for all players, not just defenders. (Note: Goalkeeping is not covered because it is such a specialized topic. I suggest *The Soccer Goalkeeper, Second Edition*, by Joseph A. Luxbacher and Gene Klein, 2002, Human Kinetics.)

Individual Defending Skills

Individual defending requires good 1v1 play and a good understanding of basic defensive principles. Defending requires far more than being tough and determined; it also demands intelligence and tactical awareness. Good positioning is crucial—the ability to pressure the ball at the right place and time will often suffice. Another vital role for defenders is to block crosses and shots. This requires no great technique—just being brave enough and close enough to block the ball—but it is sometimes difficult to encourage right and left defensive backs to get close enough to the ball to prevent it from being crossed into the box. Defenders who can do this are already well on their way to being successful. If this skill is combined with sound tackling ability and tactical awareness, then a player has the ingredients to be a good defender. If he is athletic to boot, then he is probably going to be a great defender.

The rest of this section looks first at individual defending skills (tackling, making recovery runs, pressuring, and tracking and marking), then at defensive principles, which apply to all defensive situations regardless of the technique used.

Tackling

The skill must be mastered by anyone who wishes to play effective defense. It is not always essential for attacking players, but even they need to be somewhat efficient. It is not the technique of tackling that is difficult, but the when, where, and timing of the tackle. To tackle successfully, a player must do as follows:

- Tackle from the front (figure 4.1 on page 71).
- Keep body weight low.
- Avoid stretching for the ball (the nontackling foot should be kept relatively close to the ball).
- Tackle through the ball with the side of the foot.

Figure 4.1 Front block tackle.

Tackling requires patience. It is normally a big mistake for defenders to go flying in at the first opportunity, because a good attacking player may use the defender's excessive forward momentum to play the ball by him. This approach also risks unnecessary fouls, since the defender cannot control his tackle.

Two developments in contemporary soccer put a premium on using prudence in tackling. First, as soccer has evolved in this country, the level of play has gotten better and better, with many more good youth players coming through to the higher ranks. This evolution has created more parity between teams and, as a result, much closer games. Second, many teams in today's game gear their attack to set plays, which provide their best opportunity to score. Thus it is crucial that defenders do not give away silly free kicks due to poor tackling technique. Defenders need to be absolutely sure they can win the ball before trying to tackle, and even then they should do so only if they have defensive support behind them in the form of a covering defender. Poor decision making by defenders who are impatient in trying to win back the ball often leads to free kicks being given to the opponent in a dangerous area of the field. Players should try to win the ball in a tackle only if they are in position to get a clean strike at the ball. Any contact with the opponent's body before striking the ball will normally result in a free kick.

Defenders also need to take into consideration numerical advantage before deciding to tackle. The rule of thumb for defenders is this: If there are more attackers than defenders, don't tackle; simply retreat toward your own goal and protect your back. For the most part, defenders should not be drawn into tackles far upfield. Defenders who are in the opponent's half of the field should be thinking more of getting back to their own half than trying to win the ball in a tackle. That area of the field should be left to other players to defend.

A defender's angle of approach to a tackle is also vital; ideally, it should be from the front. Tackling from the side is very difficult, and from the back it is almost impossible without giving a foul away. Players must position themselves appropriately on the field so that they can approach from the front, and they need to do so as early as possible—*before* the ball is played to their opponent.

Recovery Runs

Most players understand that the closest player to the ball is the one who should challenge for it. But what about the rest of the players? What are they supposed to do? Clearly, standing and watching is not the answer. Once a player understands that she cannot effectively defend unless she is goalside of the ball, she will then grasp the necessity of recovering from a position on

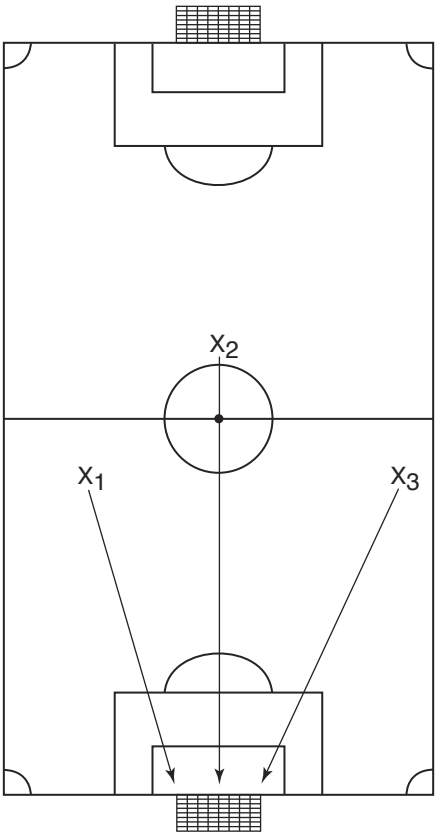


Figure 4.2 Recovery runs at an angle toward their own goal.

the wrong side of the ball. Recovery runs require effort, discipline, vision, and fitness. A player's inability to do them is often the reason that teams defend poorly. If the ball has been played past a defender, then his first responsibility to his team is to get into a position behind, or goalside to, the ball so that he can defend. If out on the wings, he needs to run back toward his own near post. If in the middle, he needs to recover toward the middle of the goal. He needs to recover downfield at these angles only until he has gotten to the goal side of the ball. At that point, he should stop and assess the situation, then decide how best to help the team defend. Figure 4.2 gives ideas for how and in which direction to recover.

Pressuring

This technique needs to be mastered by *all* players. Although forwards and midfield players are not necessarily expected to be able to win the ball in a tackle, they do need to be able to effectively pressure the ball. One must first get in behind the ball to be able to defend it. So the requirement is this: When out of position and not involved in the play, a player should recover backward toward her own goal, where she will be in a better position to pressure the ball.

Ideally, defenders should attempt to pressure the ball as soon as the opposing player receives it. To be able to do this, the defender needs to position himself near enough to his opponent that he can arrive at the same time the ball does. The attacking player will have his head down to receive the pass and quick pressure on him prevents him from getting his head up to look for teammates to pass to. The defender must be careful, however, not to get too close to the attacking player *before* the ball arrives. Though this may seem like a good idea—making it easier to defend and pressure the ball—in reality the ball is likely to be passed beyond the defender, allowing the attacker to run past the defender and on to the ball.

Once the opponent receives the ball, good pressure then requires being close enough to the ball so that if the opponent mishandles it, the defender can take it. More often than not, this is sufficient, negating the need to tackle. Good pressure also denies the attacking player an easy opportunity to play the ball forward.

Tracking and Marking Players

This work requires discipline, concentration, and physical and mental maturity. For any player to track an opponent, he needs good vision and awareness of activity away from the ball. It takes hard work and much coaching for players to develop constant awareness of what is happening away from the ball and to be capable of tracking attackers who are making good runs off the ball.

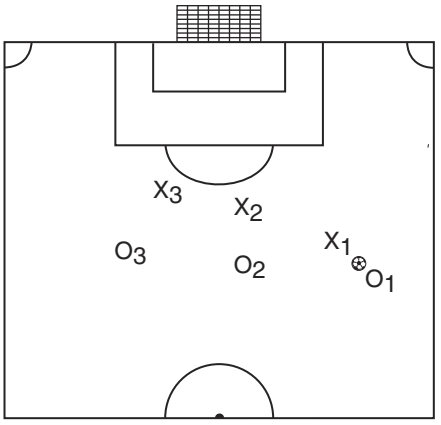


Figure 4.3 Correct marking placement.

Marking principles are relatively easy to master. Defenders should be goalside of the opponent, and *between* the opponent and their own goal. In figure 4.3, X1, X2, and X3 are all in this relationship, and the farther they are from the ball, the farther they are from the opponent they are marking. Hence X1 is close to O1, X2 is farther from O2, and X3 is still farther from O3.

Tracking players is not so simple. Even when defenders are goalside of the ball, good attacking play and movement is likely to make their job difficult. It is the job of defensive players to mark their immediate opponent by positioning themselves so that they can quickly move to him should he receive the ball. Most young players understand how to mark their opponent but can quickly become confused when that opponent runs in behind them or makes diagonal runs across the field. Should they follow or should they stay? Have they even seen the run in the first place? Defenders who watch the ball at the exclusion of their opponent are likely to fail to see an opponent's forward run. Thus they must avoid exclusive ball watching and try to see both ball and opponent. An open body position facing downfield will help. Ball watchers tend to close their body and turn toward the ball, limiting their field of vision and often allowing them to see only the ball.

A defender will always feel comfortable when his opposite number remains in his set position (e.g., right wing, left midfield), but once the attack moves away from these positions the defender needs to understand how to mark his player, especially if the attacker is making cross-field or penetrating runs. Marking players who make runs without the ball requires defenders to be capable of tracking opponents. It will normally be necessary to follow or track the opponent until she moves into a position where she will no longer be able to receive the ball—in most cases, the wide areas of the wing. It is often possible to "pass on" the player you are tracking to another defender who does not have an opponent to mark, especially if the opponent is making a diagonal run. Good verbal communication is a must. Runs to an area in the back of defenders are more dangerous and much harder to track. Defenders dare not let attackers go unmarked. For defenders to track attackers effectively, they must keep goalside of the attacker, and in order to do this they must keep their opponent and the ball in view. Doing this while running at speed is difficult and requires much practice.

Marking players who have possession of the ball is, in many respects, much easier for the defender. Once a defender has taken responsibility and pressurized the player he is marking, he must stay with that player until the player either loses or passes the ball. The defender cannot allow the opponent to get away; he must stick to the task of following him, always remaining close enough to take the ball should he lose control.

Individual Defending Principles

There are four main principles a defender needs to understand in order to become a more accomplished defender. Ideally, the defender should deny the attacking player the opportunity to get the ball in the first place by intercepting it. Since this is not always possible, the defender must position himself to stop the attacker from turning with the ball and facing forward to run at him. Should this not be possible, then he must at least position himself to quickly pressure the ball. Finally, the defender needs to consider sending the attacking player in a defined direction, most often away from goal.

Deny the attacker the ball Wherever possible, a defender should try to intercept the pass so that the attacking player never receives the ball. This is the simplest way to win the ball back. However, a defenders must be sure he can get to the ball first. If he miscalculates and misses the ball, the forward will be through on goal with little worry about the defender getting back to help. Thus he must be absolutely positive he can intercept the pass.

Stop the attacker from turning with the ball If a defender fails to deny the attacker the ball, he may receive the pass with his back to the goal. The defender's job then is to stop that player from turning with the ball and facing forward (figure 4.4). Once the defending player has positioned himself to challenge for the ball, he must be sure to watch the ball and not the player—that is, he must react to the movement of the ball rather than that of the player. In his challenge he must neither get so close to the attacking player that he cannot see the ball nor stand so far away that he cannot get a foot to the ball when the attacking player turns. Ideal position is usually 2 to 3 feet (about three-quarters of a meter) away from the attacker. The defender's body position should be low, with legs flexed or comfortably bent. Maintaining a low center of gravity helps not only in the tackle but also in balance and body adjustment, which is often necessary to counter the feints and deceptions of the attacking player.

Figure 4.4 Stopping the attacker turning with the ball.

When the attacking player has received the ball and the defender has moved into the

correct position, the defender should concentrate and be patient, waiting for the right time to challenge. If he challenges for the ball too quickly, he is likely to foul the attacking player or overcommit on the tackle. The correct moment to tackle is when the attacker attempts to turn with the ball, because this is when he is most vulnerable. He can no longer protect the ball with his body, and his balance is not at its best.

Keep the play in front of oneself If an attacker does manage to turn with the ball, the defender's next task is to keep the player and the ball in front of him. Patience is needed to resist trying to win the ball too soon. When keeping the play in front of himself, the defender must decide when and where to put correct pressure on the ball, thus preventing the opponent from playing forward passes, crossing, or shooting on goal. Positioning is crucial. The defender not only needs to be goalside of the attacker, but also positioned in a direct line between the attacking player and the goal or passing target (figures 4.5 and 4.6).

The defending team can often win the ball back without tackling, simply by pressuring the ball. Defenders can apply good pressure by being quick to the ball and making up most of the distance to the forward who is receiving the ball while the ball is still in flight. As the defender approaches the player receiving the ball, he should take an angle that places himself between the opponent and his potential target, especially if the target is the goal. This helps deny the opportunity for that player to have an easy pass or shot on goal. When the pressuring defender is within a couple of yards (about 1.5 meters) of the attacker, he should slow down and creep forward. Failing to do this will probably result in overcommitting and being unable to stop in time. The defender should also watch the ball, as good attackers will try to wrong-foot defenders with swerves and feints. The defender should keep body weight low, which makes for a better

Figure 4.5 Correct position for tackle in relationship to the goal or potential passing target.

Figure 4.6 Incorrect position for tackle in relationship to the goal or potential passing target.

Figure 4.7 Sending a player down the line.

tackling position and allows the defender to turn more quickly should the forward knock the ball beyond him. He should have one foot forward and the other back, again allowing for a quicker turn and also helping him send the forward in a preferred direction.

Send the play in a certain direction When a defender cannot keep the play in front of him, it may be necessary to force the play to keep going in one direction, often down the sideline and away from the goal, but sometimes across the field (figure 4.7). By forcing the ball in a defined direction, the defender makes the play more predictable for the rest of his team. Support players and covering defenders then have a much better idea where the ball is going to go and can move into better position to help defend their goal. It's normally better for defenders on the wing to send the play down their sideline, which makes a direct attack on goal much more difficult since the ball is being forced away from goal. It also limits the attacker's passing options, and the defender can more easily receive help from teammates since they can better predict the attack.

Team Defending Tactics

Once a player is behind the ball and understands the fundamentals of defending—when and where to tackle, pressure, or force the play—the team is ready to defend. Correctly positioned players will be able to challenge for the ball, intercept passes, or pick up "loose" or "free" balls. The next concern for player and coach is putting these defensive skills to use in tactical team play. There are many different ways a team can defend, and these decisions are left up to the coach. The important thing is that all players understand their roles and responsibilities in the coach's tactical approach so that they are defending as a unit, not just in ones and twos.

This section covers team shape and the defense of key areas of the field, as well as how a coach should create a defensive system. One principle of team defense that doesn't need its own section is the numbers game, which is pretty simple: The defending team needs to have at least as many players around the ball as the attackers do, and preferably one more. Defending with numbers is vital and cannot be done unless players make the required recovery runs to stay compact rather than being overstretched. The numbers game is also integral to the other principles of team defense.

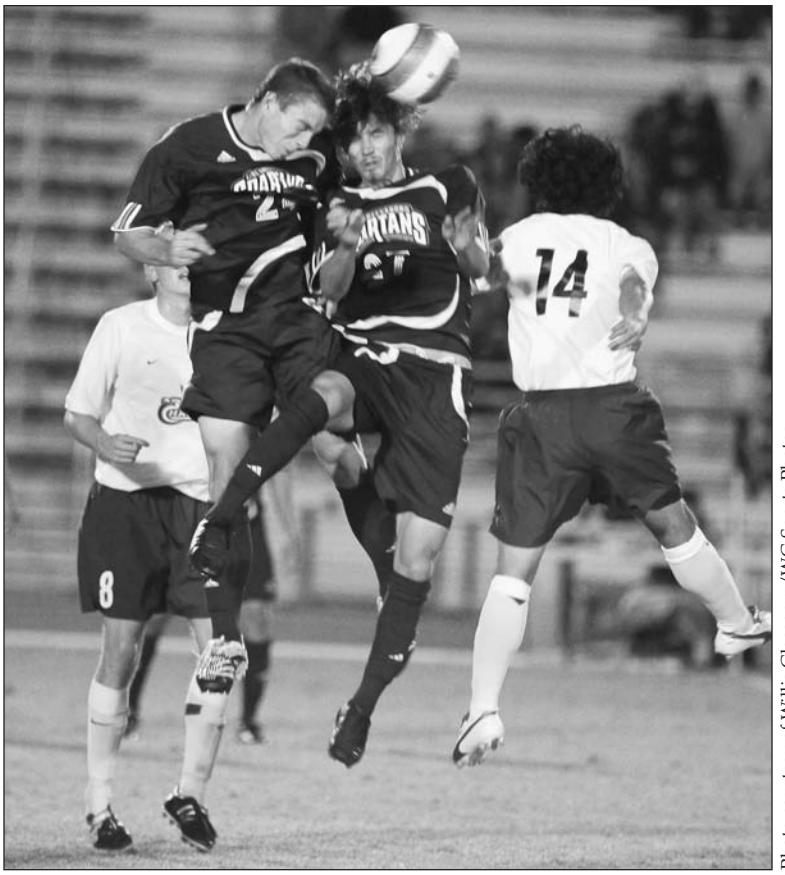


Photo courtesy of Willis Glassgow/WG Sports Photos.

Becoming a truly accomplished defender requires strength, courage, discipline, and determination to win the ball.

Team Shape

Good defending requires the team to be compact, with players spaced evenly over the field of play, especially around the ball. It's impossible for players to cover all of the field all the time—there is just too much space—and if they try to do so the team will get stretched, leaving large spaces between defenders and making it easier for attacking players to get positioned between them with enough space to avoid being quickly pressured. This, in turn, enables them to pass the ball out of trouble with relative ease. The correct positioning of the defending team's players is known as team shape. Good shape enables defenders to apply quick pressure as an opponent gets the ball and to pick up loose or second balls (i.e., balls that rebound unintentionally off of a teammate or an opposing player), and also allows them to limit the space between themselves, making it difficult for opponents to penetrate.

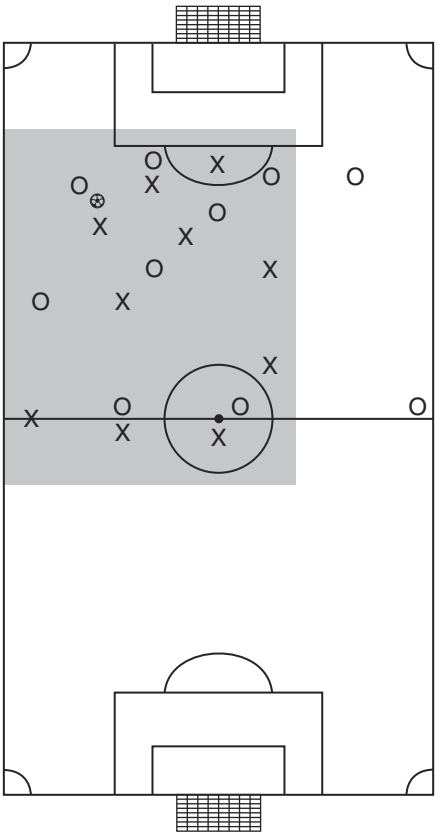


Figure 4.8 Sectional defending allows the defenders to cover less space.

Even with the best-laid plans, good team shape is not always a simple matter. Good attacking play and movement off the ball will often pull defenders out of position and make it very difficult to remain compact. If spaces develop between defending players and become too big, the defending team will have problems. The key is to have players recognize such spaces and fill them so that problematic holes do not develop. Defenders must not ball-watch! It makes recognition of shape problems even more difficult. Defenders must pay attention to what is happening "off the ball" and try their best to fill spots vacated by defenders who are tracking opposing forwards.

Figure 4.8 shows that by pressuring the ball as a team and remaining compact, the X defenders need to defend only the shaded area. The areas of the field left open are those that are least dangerous and would be most difficult to get the ball into. The shaded area shifts in relationship to the ball. As the ball moves downfield or across it, the shaded area moves as a block in the same compact manner along with the ball. Thus it is always very difficult for the opposition to play successfully out of this block. The key to success in using this method is to ensure that there is always quick pressure on the player with the ball, preventing him from ever getting his head up quickly enough to find passing opportunities outside the defensive block.

Key Areas of the Field

It is necessary to defend all over the field, but certain areas are most important. Defending the penalty area is a must. To do so, defenders need to be first to the ball, and when the ball is played into the box, they must know where the opponent is, concentrate on winning the space *in front* of him, and positively attack the ball. Determination and courage are essential, and when there is no teammate available to pass to, defenders should play the ball long, high, and wide.

When playing the ball long, a defender should always try to get distance on the clearance. Playing the ball well down the field will always relieve a team from pressure, if only temporarily. If the ball cannot be played long, then it should be played high. Defenders are much better off getting height on their clearance than trying to clear the ball on the ground. Playing a ball as high as possible

gives defenders time to get into position regardless of where the ball goes. When all else fails, at least get the ball wide. Any poor clearance into central positions will increase the opponent's ability to score, whereas it is very difficult to score directly from a wide position.

In addition to defending the penalty box, it's critical that a team defend in its own half of the field. This is where defenders must get quick pressure on the ball and make sure that they mark and track any opponents in the area. The defending team needs to get as many players as possible back in behind the ball when it is in their half of the field, then keep the ball and the play in front of themselves. Many teams will try to defend in the opponent's half of the field, but the higher up the field they defend, the more difficult it is to remain compact, especially if the defensive unit stays back.

Creating a Defensive System

Creating a defensive style is both difficult and time consuming, with both players and coaches needing to contemplate many different factors before deciding on how best to defend. A team's system will depend on what formation it is playing. For example, playing with three forwards would require a much different defensive approach from playing with only one. Using three forwards might encourage a team to defend much higher up the field, since there are enough players available to put pressure on the defenders and perhaps deny them the opportunity to pass the ball upfield. Playing with only one forward, on the other hand, would likely require defending more toward the halfway line.

A team's system might also depend on the ability of the players—their level of play and their athleticism. A quick, athletic team might be encouraged to play a high-pressure game, trying to force opponents into errors. The system might even change in relationship to the opponent's skill level. A team might defend much higher up the field against a weak opponent in an attempt to force mistakes in their half of the field. Here are three factors that coaches and players need to consider in deciding the team's style of defending:

Should the team use high or low pressure? High pressure involves going after the ball in every part of the field, especially in the opponent's defensive third immediately after they get the ball. This type of defending requires all players to be active, especially those in the immediate vicinity of the ball. It will not work if only one or two players are quickly pressuring the ball, while the rest of the team is back watching from a distance.

If a team can make this style of defending work, the rewards are extremely high, because the ball can often be won back in great attacking position with a good opportunity to score a goal. High-pressure tactics are recommended when the opposition is technically fairly weak and can easily be forced into mistakes that create goal-scoring chances for the defending team. In addition, a team that is losing as time grows short might find it necessary to high-pressure the opponent in order to win the ball back well up the field. Even a low-pressure team has to make this change if down a goal late in the match.

Low-pressure defending is, of course, the opposite approach. This method gives opponents their half of the field, letting them bring the ball up the field toward the halfway line without pressure. The responsibility of the defending players here is simply to retreat goalside of the ball until they are in their own half of the field and get numbers behind the ball. This pretty well ensures that the defense is compact, with all 11 players in their own half, which makes penetration very difficult for the opposition. It also prevents the defensive unit from coming too far up the field and thus limits the space behind them, which makes it very difficult for opposing forwards to attack and create goal-scoring opportunities. The low-pressure approach might be used when facing an opponent that is technically superior but might get easily frustrated. It's extremely difficult to break down this type of defense when it is well executed.

Teams usually use a combination of high and low pressure, which means letting the opposition come up the field about 30 to 40 yards (27 to 37 meters) with little opposition, then defending the remaining two-thirds of the field with high pressure. This compromise allows benefits from both styles.

In which direction should the team force the play? As mentioned earlier, defending begins with the forwards. They do not need to be ball winners, but they do need to shape the play and send it in certain directions so that teammates behind them know where the ball is likely to be played. This is referred to as making the play predictable, and it lets teammates anticipate where and who they will need to defend next. Whenever players have to defend smaller segments of the field, it is easier for them.

Forwards typically have two choices: sending the play either outside or inside. In figure 4.9*a*, forward O3 is forcing right back X1 to the outside. This result could also be accomplished by having forward O1 do the same thing. The remaining defenders, especially left back O5 and central defender O6, squeeze the play to the left, anticipating that the ball will be played there. In figure 4.9*b*, O1 sits in the passing lane between X1 and X2, denying the pass and forcing the ball inside. The remaining defenders can react accordingly.

Should the team use zone or man-to-man marking? Man-to-man marking requires a defender to follow her opposite number and defend against her movement in all areas of the field. A coach can clearly define to the defender who she is supposed to mark. This simplifies defending but can easily allow the team's defensive shape to be disrupted as good attacking movement creates holes or spaces in the defense. Defenders will then be pulled into parts of the field they really should not be in as they follow their assigned attackers. A central defender, for example, should not be defending in the wide flank positions. If he is, there is sure to be a gap in the middle that may be exposed by a forward.

Zonal defending requires much more sophistication and player maturity and thus is much more difficult to apply. As the name suggests, a zone is a part of the field where it is the defender's responsibility to mark players who

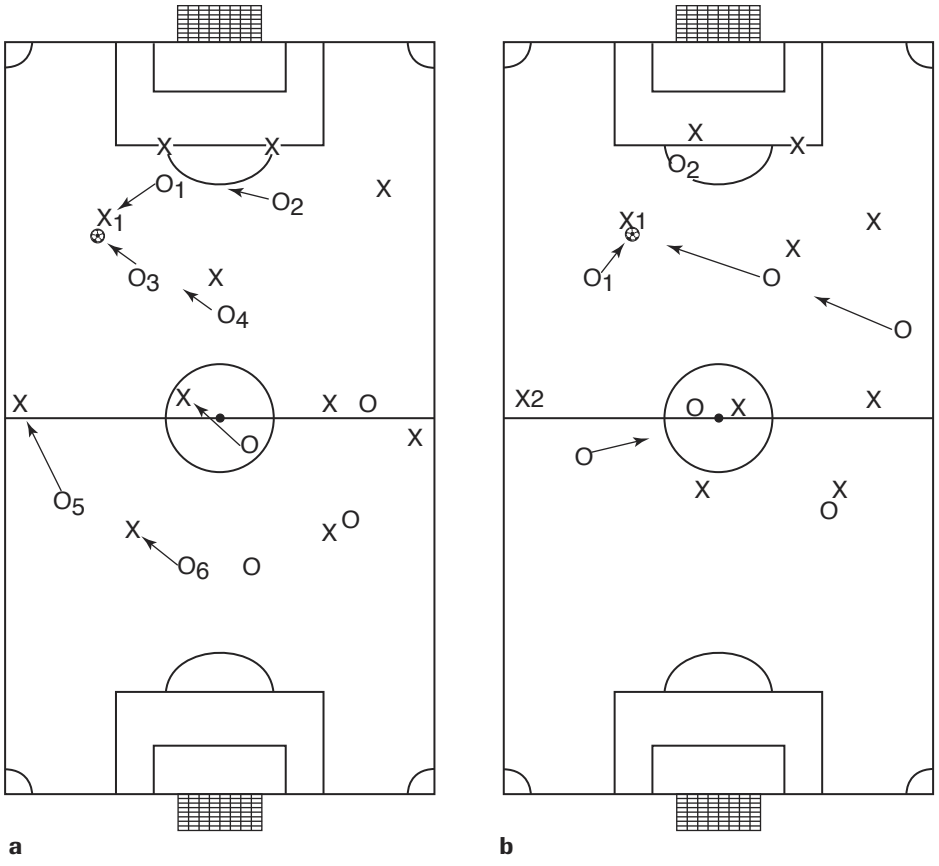


Figure 4.9 Forcing the play: *(a)* forward O3 forces defender to the outside; *(b)* forward O1 forces defender to the inside.

come into his area. It is unnecessary to follow an opponent all over the field, as the defender can release a player to a teammate once he moves out of his zone. The attacker will be picked up by another defender in the next zone. This approach clearly has the advantage of maintaining team shape, but is much more difficult to play, as it requires greater understanding of the game, greater organization, and excellent communication skills. It is also somewhat vulnerable in the seams of the zone and in the split second in which an attacking player is being passed on to her codefender. However, teams that learn to play zonal defense properly are likely to enjoy more success than those playing straight man-to-man.

In figure 4.10*a* on page 82, defender X1 goes to pressure the ball. Attacker O2 makes a diagonal run and is tracked by defender X2. As O2 continues his run, defender X2 must pass that player on to X3, who then continues to track him, allowing X2 to remain in his defensive area and possibly support X1. Communication is a vital part of this process, making sure that O2 is being watched

and tracked by somebody at all times. In 4.10*b*, winger X7 is tracking opponent O1 down the left flank. It is not necessary for X7 to follow O1 all the way to her defensive third, because she can release her to defender X2 and thus be available to help defend in the midfield. This principal of passing on opponents to teammates applies mostly when defenders are tracking players who do *not* have the ball. If a defender picks up an attacker who does have the ball, she normally must stay with that player.

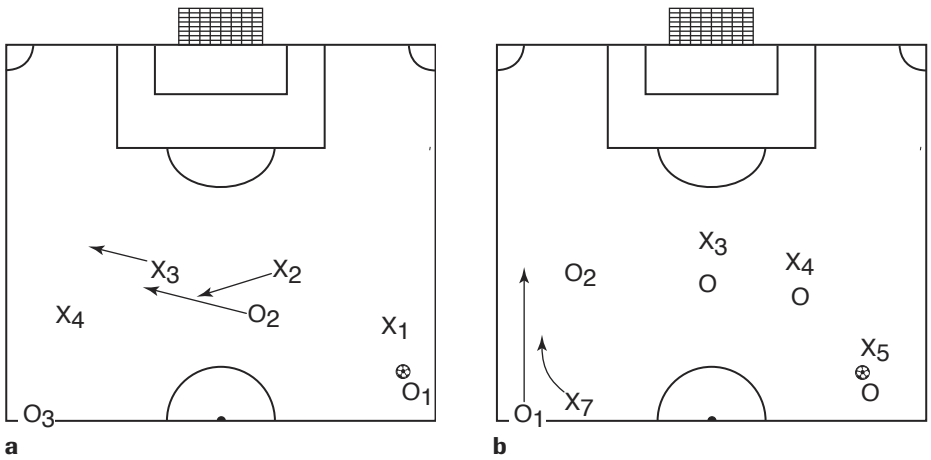


Figure 4.10 Playing zonal defense: *(a)* X2 passes O2 to X3, allowing X2 to support X1; *(b)* X7 tracks O1 down the left flank and then releases to O2.

Without question, it is much easier to play the man-to-man system of marking; therefore, it is more appropriate for most levels of soccer. I believe the advantage for most teams and players is that it assigns each defender a simplified role. At a high level, however, man-to-man marking can cause significant problems, as it leaves gaps that better opponents will exploit. A good compromise is to combine the two systems, playing man-to-man only in certain areas of the field. It can also make sense to make one defender responsible for man-to-man marking while others play a zonal scheme—for example, if the opposition has one especially good player who requires constant attention to limit the damage he might cause then a defender can be assigned to follow him all over the field. Another compromise is to have midfield players man-mark while the defenders zone-mark. This approach simplifies marking for the midfielders, who each match up with their opposite number with a clear directive about their defensive responsibility, and the risk is limited, since gaps created in the midfield are easier to cover and less serious than those at the back of the defense. For the defenders, however, the zonal approach is better since it is more important to avoid being pulled out of defensive position by good forward play. Gaps created here are much more serious than in the midfield.

STOP ATTACKER FROM TURNING

FOCUS

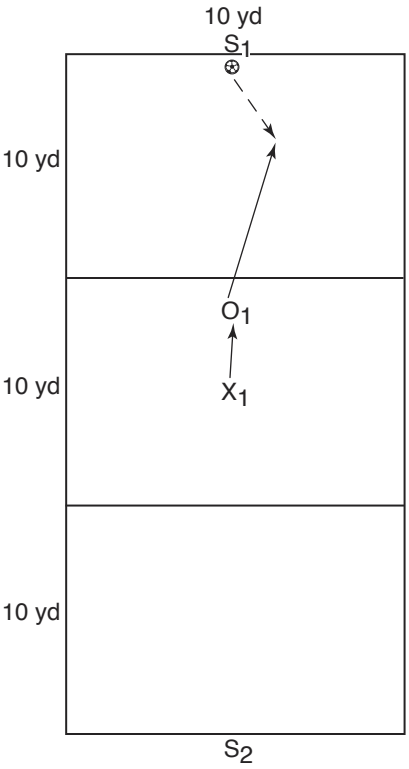
Stopping the attacker from turning with the ball.

PROCEDURE

In a 30-by-10-yard (27-by-9-meter) grid, O1 begins in the middle, with his back to defender X1.

1. S1 serves the ball to O1, who is checking toward the server.
2. X1 tracks and attempts to stop O1 from turning with the ball.
3. O1 attempts to turn with the ball and pass to S2.
4. If he is successful, S2 will now put the ball in play and the roles in the middle are reversed, with X1 checking the ball and O1 stopping him from turning.

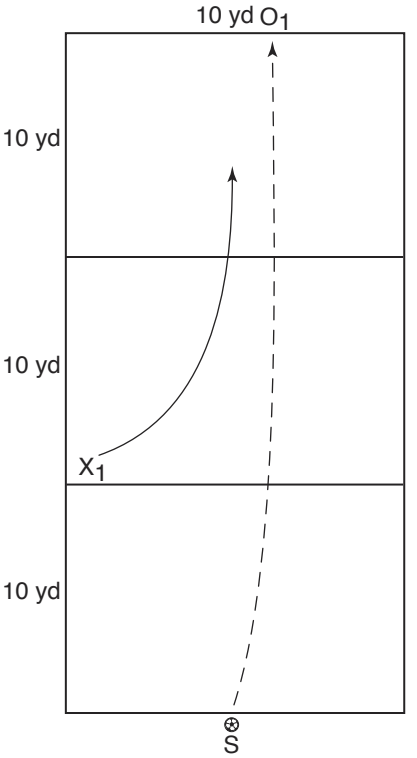
Play continues for 2 minutes, then players change roles, with S1 and S2 taking a turn in the middle.



PRESSURE AND TACKLING

FOCUS

Putting quick pressure on the ball; denying the opportunity for attacking players to pass forward.



PROCEDURE

In a 30-by-10-yard (27-by-9-meter) grid, S serves the ball on the ground to O1.

1. As soon as the ball is served, X1 moves to pressure and tackle O1, attempting to get to O1 at the same time the ball arrives.
2. O1 attempts to pass the ball back to S, with X1 trying to deny him that opportunity by either tackling or blocking the pass. X1 should attempt to place his body *between* the ball and the target S as quickly as possible. (This is referred to as getting into the passing lane.)

Players rotate roles every 90 seconds.

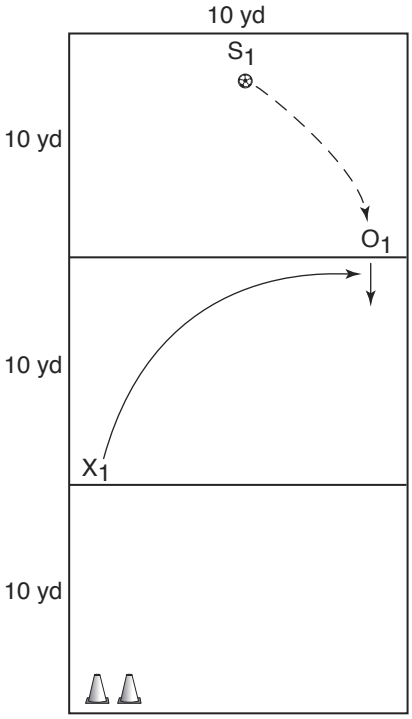
SENDING AN ATTACKER DOWN THE LINE

FOCUS

Sending an opponent away from the goal and into defined areas of the field.

PROCEDURE

1. S1 serves the ball to O1.
2. X1 approaches O1 at an angle designed to force O1 in one direction only—down the line.
3. O1 attempts to cut back inside so he can dribble the ball through cones placed 1 yard (or meter) apart in the opposite corner. X1 attempts to stop him.



SUPPORT PLAY

FOCUS

Correctly supporting a defender who is pressuring the ball.

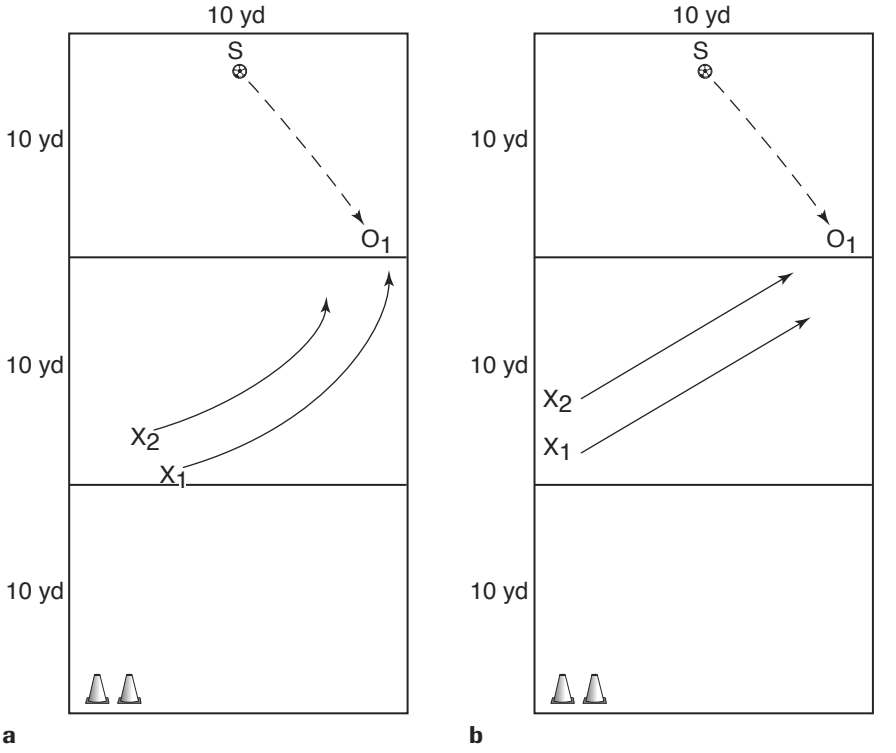
PROCEDURE

1. S passes to O1 *(a)*. O1 attempts to dribble the ball through cones placed one yard (or meter) apart in the opposite corner.
2. X1 pressures O1 at an angle that will force O1 down the line and is supported by X2, who positions himself to help X1 by supporting at a near-vertical angle so that he can pressure O1 if necessary.

VARIATION

In step 2, execute the drill so that the support position and approach of X1 and X2 are aligned across the field *(b)*, thus forcing O1 across the field.

Communication between X1 and X2 is vital: X2 should let X1 know which way to send O1.



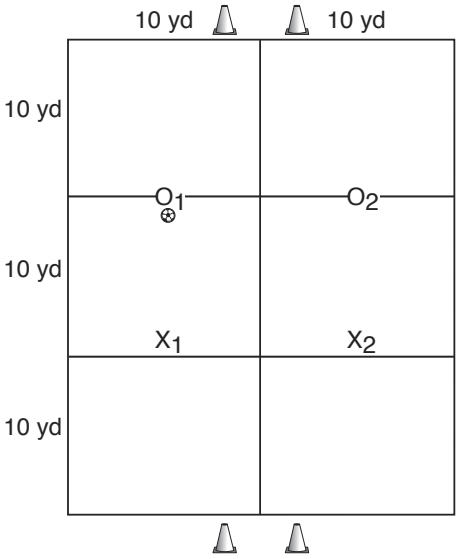
2V2 DRILL

FOCUS

Working on both good pressure of the ball and support play.

PROCEDURE

In a grid measuring 30 by 20 yards (27 by 18 meters), cones are placed 1 yard (or meter) apart on each end line. O1 and O2 play a game against X1 and X2, applying all defensive principles learned. Teams score by passing through the cones. The ball has to be on the ground to score. This drill should then be increased to 3v3 in an area measuring 35 by 25 yards (32 by 23 meters).



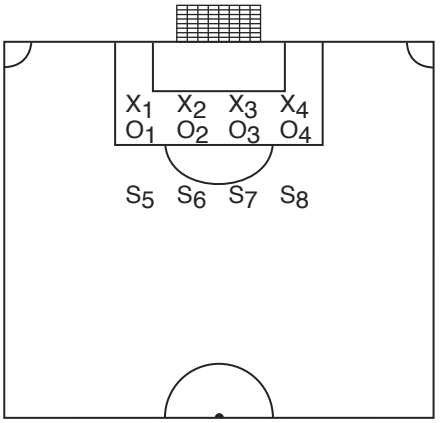
DEFENDING THE PENALTY BOX

FOCUS

Defending the most important area of the field, the penalty box; working on defensive principles to deny the opponents' goal scoring opportunities.

PROCEDURE

This drill requires 12 players, with 4 defenders and 4 attackers lining up inside the penalty box and 4 support players lining up outside the box.



1. The support players are not allowed inside the box and they cannot shoot; they are responsible for passing to the 4 attacking forwards (O1–O4).
2. Defenders X1 through X4 are responsible for defending against the attackers inside the penalty box only.
3. The attackers (O1–O4) can pass the ball back outside the box to the support players (5–8), who then will pass it back into the box to an open forward.

Plenty of balls should be available for the support players outside the box.

VARIATION

Support players S5 and S8 can be placed into wide positions so that defenders will have to work on defending crossed balls.

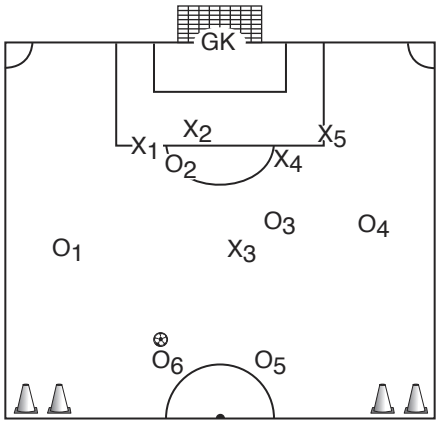
ATTACK VERSUS DEFENSE

FOCUS

Applying all defensive principles.

PROCEDURE

This drill begins with 6 attackers against 5 defenders and a goalkeeper. Another defender can be added later. Attackers O6 and O5 begin with the ball and are restricted to two-touch soccer so as not to allow them to dribble the ball. Every other player has unlimited touches. If a sixth defender is added, the two-touch restriction on O6 and O5 is removed. The drill proceeds with a 6v6 attack. When defenders (X) win back the ball, they attempt to score through 2 sets of cones (2 minigoals 1 yard or meter apart) placed on the halfway line.



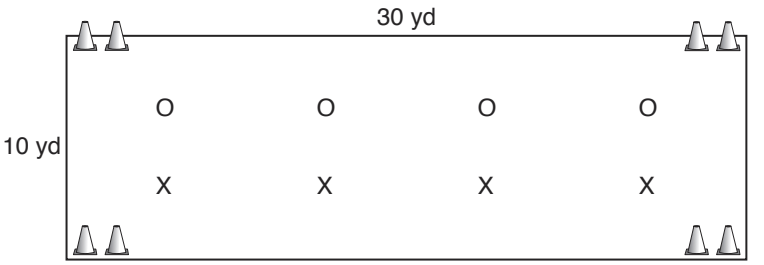
4-GOAL GAME

FOCUS

Adjusting to attacking play, which switches the ball quickly from side to side; understanding zonal play.

PROCEDURE

This game is played in an area 30 yards (27 meters) wide and 10 yards (9 meters) deep, with cones (1 yard or meter apart) serving as minigoals in each corner of the grid. Play a 4v4 game, with each team attacking two goals. This drill can be used defensively for pressure on the ball or offensively for switching the field of play.



MIDFIELD GAME

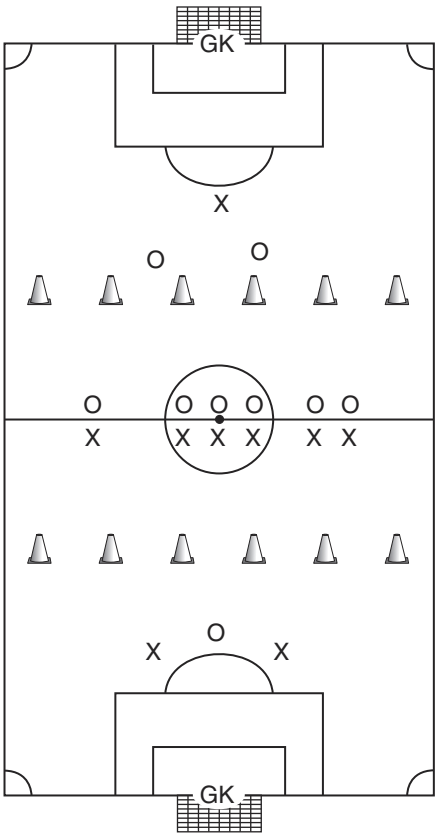
FOCUS

Defending and correctly pressuring the ball, thus denying the easy option of attackers playing forward balls.

PROCEDURE

This drill uses the full playing field (though, depending on the number of players, it might be shortened by 10 to 20 yards [9 to 18 meters]). The playing length is divided into thirds, and play proceeds 6v6 in the middle third, with two defenders and a forward in each of the two attacking thirds.

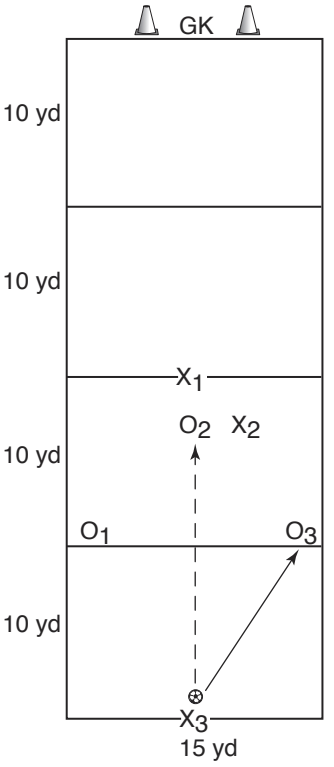
1. Play begins with the goalkeeper laying the ball to one of her two defenders, who must then pass it into the middle third. It is mandatory at this point to stay in one's third.
2. In the middle third, play is 6v6, with each team trying to deny the opposition the ability to play the ball forward to their target player in the attacking third.
3. If a team succeeds in getting the ball to its target player, one player is allowed to join her from the middle third, but no defenders are allowed to follow her from the middle third. The team with the ball now has a 2v2 situation in the attacking third with an opportunity to play for a goal.
4. Once this play is over, the midfield player in the attacking third must retreat back to her middle third. The ball starts with the goalkeeper again.



RECOVERY RUN

FOCUS

Practicing recovery runs to positions where defending can begin.



PROCEDURE

In a grid measuring 40 by 15 yards (about 37 by 14 meters), place three attackers (O1, O2, and O3) and two defenders (X1 and X2) in the third zone.

1. X3 begins the drill by passing to Os. O1 and O2 defend, but are outnumbered three to two.
2. Os attempt to take advantage of this numerical superiority by scoring between the cones past the goalkeeper.
3. X3 is allowed to recover the moment O receives the ball. He attempts to get goalside of the ball while X1 and X2 delay to give him time.

CHAPTER 5

Systems of Play

A system of play is a coach's plan for how he is going to use his 11 players. Formations are listed from the back in three basic groups: defenders, midfield players, and forwards. How many defenders, how many midfielders, and how many forwards does a coach believe he needs? For example, 4-4-2 indicates four defenders, four midfield players, and two forwards. This chapter covers some of the many options a coach has in deciding who plays where and, ultimately, what system is going to be used. It also discusses the pros and cons of different systems of play and how a coach can find the system that works best for the team.

Common Systems

Modern-day soccer can include any numerical formation adding up to ten (goalkeeper not included), but the most common formations are 4-4-2, 3-5-2, 4-3-3, and 3-4-3. This section explores the setup and the pros and cons of each system.

4–4–2

From a defensive point of view, this system has obvious advantages. It features eight potential defenders who can easily get behind the ball, and with four assigned defenders the full width of the field can be covered more easily. These four defenders can also easily match up with three attackers if playing against such a system. This system provides good team balance and fits naturally with playing zonal defense. It also works well for applying high pressure.

The system does, however, have its disadvantages. I will have fewer players in the midfield if playing against a 3-5-2 system using three central midfielders. Also, if either of the two central defenders go forward the team is left quite vulnerable to a counterattack, and the two forwards can become isolated as the mid four fall back to defend. But perhaps the most difficult problem is that oftentimes four defenders are marking only two forwards, leaving two defenders inactive. This can get confusing since young defenders are never quite sure whether to stay back and defend, or get forward into the attack.

This system's main attacking strength is that the team can attack out of the back with the two outside defenders, and also the two wide midfield players can be released to go forward with far less concern about defending, as the two backs are covering behind them. Attacking through the flanks is a key to success in using this system, and, even for the two forwards, a space is always available for running from central positions into wide positions. Switching the field of play is also relatively easy in this system. With four players across the back or midfield lines, the system's width means there are more options available for switching the ball from left to right, or right to left.

3–5–2

One of this system's main strengths is the number of players in the middle of the field, which gives a team great flexibility both for going forward and for defending. Games are often won or lost in midfield, and this system frequently allows a team to outnumber the opposition in that area. It allows midfield players to combine easily with the forwards; the proximity of three central midfield players allows constant and close support for the forwards. One or two attacking midfielders can also be given total freedom to attack without fear of being caught by a counterattack if the ball is turned over.

This system also has some disadvantages. Many high school coaches use it despite the fact that their teams often play in the school's football stadium, which

typically houses a smaller field than is standard for soccer. On a narrow field, having too many players in midfield can cause them to get in each other's way. It's just too crowded. It should also be noted that some of those high school players will go on to play in college, where as many as three-quarters of the teams play with a flat back four, more than likely out of a 4-4-2 system.

The 3-5-2 system also creates problems for defenders. Playing with a back three rather than a back four requires certain capabilities, especially speed. It's quite dangerous to try to defend and cover with only three defenders, unless they are all quick. If the three defenders are playing with a sweeper back (a quick player assigned to provide roaming defense between the defenders and the goalkeeper), then the team is giving up one marking player, and the opposition is likely to have a numerical advantage somewhere else on the field. The sweeper is usually a purely defensive cover or support player, uninvolved in much else, which can lead to problems in other areas of the field. The system of three defenders can also be exposed defensively on the wings, especially if the ball is quickly switched by the opposition from one side to the other. Naturally, three defenders cannot cover the width of the field as well as four can. The space they have to give away is in the wide positions, allowing much room for the opposition to play a ball. It's also very difficult to use this system against a team playing with three forwards, since three defenders against three forwards is not a matchup any team would normally want.

4-3-3 and 3-4-3

Playing three forwards has definite advantages. It allows a team to pressure defenders who have the ball, making it very difficult for them to get the ball away. Attacking with three forwards can also force opponents to adjust, since very few teams are prepared to handle three attackers especially if they have only three defenders. Teams using this system can pressure and defend very high up the field, thus keeping the opposition pinned in its own half. The system is especially effective against weak opponents who have difficulty playing long balls up the field. It also makes it hard for opponents to play the ball sideways, thus encouraging them to play forward balls, often with little effect. The 4-3-3 system is much better suited to the size limitations experienced in high school football stadiums since the players are more evenly spread in the tight confines of this type of facility.

It is important to understand that this type of system must change in relationship to which team has the ball. A team will attack with a 4-3-3 formation, but is likely to have to defend with a 4-5-1 shape. This is done by withdrawing the two outside forwards back into midfield when the opponents win back the ball. These two forwards will join the middle three to form a group of five to defend the midfield thus creating the 4-5-1 shape. This system can be very effective but does require the two wide forwards to be disciplined enough to recover defensively.

Like all systems, playing three in the front has its disadvantages. Three players can be played out of the game with one successful pass by the opponent from the back, forcing a team to defend with only seven. Even more serious, teams can be easily out numbered in midfield if opponents play four or, worse still, five in that area (obviously, it is difficult to play three midfield players against five). This problem can be addressed by using a 3-4-3 system, which retains the advantage of three attacking forwards but gets an extra player into midfield to help with the numbers problem there, or as mentioned in the prior paragraph, by withdrawing the two outside forwards into midfield. This extra player is critical, because teams that control midfield tend to win games. The downside of using the 3-4-3 is that the team must defend with only three players.

A coach needs to choose systems that work with players' strengths and the team's style.

Choosing Systems

Since each system has its pros and cons, it is impossible to generally recommend one over another. The choice of system depends on criteria including the types of players available, the formation used by the opponent, the tactical approach to a game, and the field conditions. What is most important is to use a system that fits the strengths of the players. A coach should get the best 11 players on the field, then find a system that meets their needs. Sometimes this requires moving a player to another position, and certain positions are easy to adapt to. For instance, most forwards can be taught fairly easily to play on the wing, and a midfield player can typically serve as a defender.

Next, the coach must consider team style. To play direct soccer and get the ball forward quickly with longer passes, it may be best to use more forwards. To focus on shorter passing through midfield, the coach might want an extra midfield player. To defend well, an extra defender might be the key. Whatever the case, the coach should play to the team's strengths, not to her own preference or comfort zone.

A coach may also consider changing a system to match up effectively with a particular opponent, but care must be taken in doing so, since teams should not regularly change how they play the game. The coach should be more concerned about preparing his own team to play to its strengths than about reacting to those of the opposition. Nevertheless, some consideration does have to be given to the opposition.

If pressed, I would say that the best system to use is generally the 4-4-2. Many coaches would disagree, but it's probably fair to say that this system places players across the field more evenly and covers the field better than any other. We have talked about team shape and its importance, and the 4-4-2 system is better suited than most to maintaining good shape.

Once a system has been chosen, there are many other considerations about how to play *within* that system. The following diagrams show some possibilities. In both the 4-4-2 and the 3-5-2 systems, the shape of the back unit is much the same. In both cases, defenders have to support each other, and the diagrams show how this is done. In the middle units, whether using four or five players, there are more options for team shape—again, as shown in the diagrams—and as with the back four unit, they still require depth in their shape.

Figure 5.1 on page 98 shows the Os lining up for the kickoff in a 4-4-2 formation, with the Xs in a 3-5-2. Figures 5.2 and 5.3 show that the 4-4-2 formation is used in two ways. Once play has begun, the formations change. Figure 5.2 on page 98 shows that the middle four players basically mirror the shape of the back four defenders when right back O has the ball. This is very much a zonal formation for both the middle four players and the back four. In figure 5.3 on page 99, the shape of the back four remains the same, but the middle four are different,

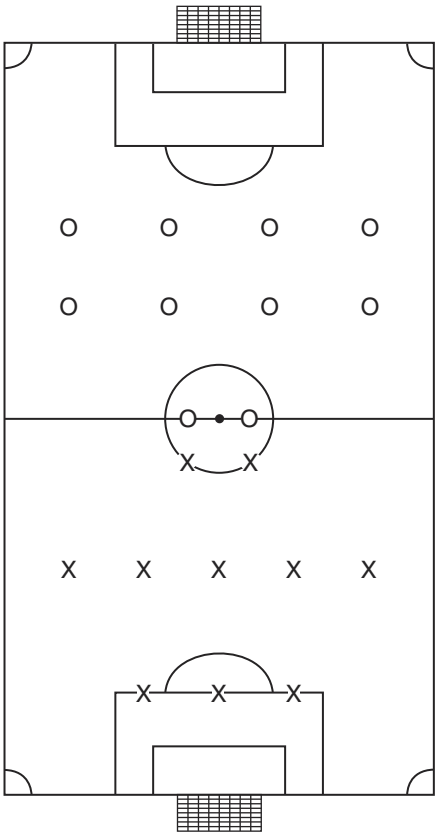


Figure 5.1 4-4-2 (Os) line up against 3-5-2 (Xs).

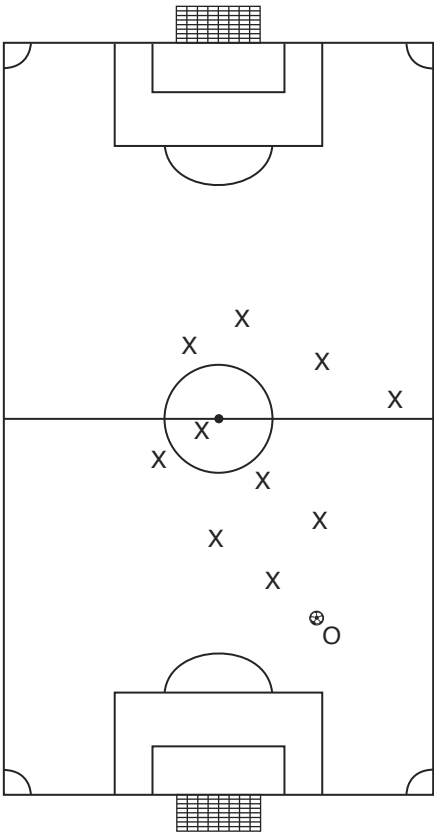


Figure 5.2 The defensive four and middle four both have an "L" shape.

giving the look of a diamond. This can make both defending and attacking a little simpler for the middle four. Players X7 and X11 are designated as the two wide players (wingers), with X8 being an attacking midfielder and X4 being a defensive or holding midfielder. Each player can mark and defend against his opposite number. This will only become a problem if the opposition is using three central midfield players, creating a numerical disadvantage, three against two. In this case teams may have to adapt by adding an extra midfield player.

Figure 5.4 shows a different look with a team defending in the 3-5-2 formation. X6 at the back is the sweeper or covering player, who normally has no direct marking responsibilities. X5 and X4 are man-marking the two forwards. The five defending midfielders could use many different looks, but in this case X8 has been given a holding or defending role, making the defensive unit at the back look like a diamond, with the remaining four midfielders playing in front and either man-marking their opponents or playing zone.

Regardless of the system used, the coach must consider how to defend and attack within that system. He can begin with defending and address the back four

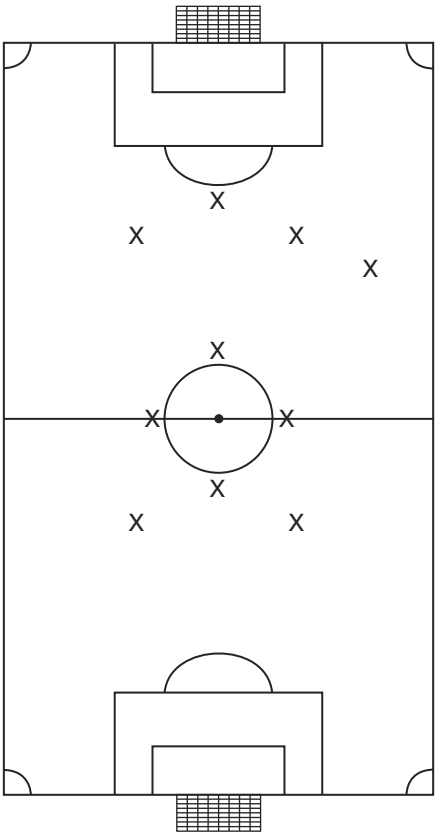


Figure 5.3 The back four have an "L" shape formation, while the middle four make a diamond.

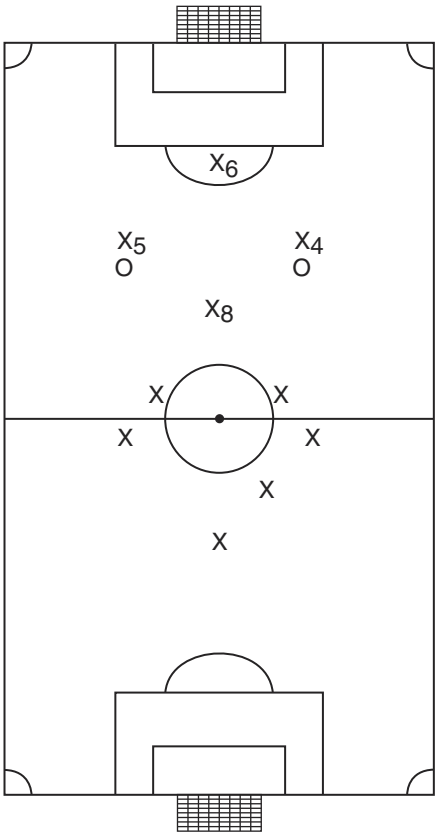


Figure 5.4 A 3-5-2 formation with a diamond shape at the back.

only, working on shape, compactness, and defensive cover, both with and without attacking players working against them. He can then move to the midfield players, and finally the forwards. When satisfied with the defending of each unit by itself, the coach can put it all together, coordinating the three units to defend with all 11 players. The same process can be used for attacking—starting with concepts, then working in the three separate units before putting it all together. This part-to-whole method helps enormously in the early stages of system play.

Systems of play can be distracting, time consuming, and often frustrating. It is absolutely necessary to develop a system, but not at the expense of working on fundamentals of the game. The coach's time is well spent on teaching players to "sit" in the right part of the field at the right time and to recognize what is happening on the field—that is, to read the game and understand it. These points takes precedence over learning a system, as a smart soccer player will do well even when not taught a system.

Teams need to choose wisely when deciding on a system. The choice should always be based on the playing abilities of the team, but the system currently used the most, worldwide, is the 4-4-2, and adaptions of it. We have considered two shapes that can be used in the 4-4-2 system, but there are many variations. For example, a team may wish to hold one of its midfield players back in a defensive role to help protect its back four. Thus the 4-4-2 may look like a 4-1-3-2, with the middle unit of four split into a 1-3. Formations can also change depending on whether a team is attacking or defending. In the 4-4-2 formation, a team would attack with the two forwards, with midfield players coming forward to support them. However, when the ball is turned over a team may withdraw a forward toward midfield to help the middle unit defend. Technically, the formation then would look like a 4-5-1. A team playing in a 3-5-2 may defend with that shape but attack with a 3-4-3 formation by pushing a midfield player into the attack. Formations should be very fluid.

Once the team has chosen its formation and decided how it is going to play, players should be made aware of adjustments, if any, that they may have make when playing a team with a different formation. One key question is this: Should the team stick to its default mode and let the opposition worry about making adjustments, or should it change its system to counter the opposition? Making such decisions effectively will distinguish the good team and coach from the average ones, but there are no easy answers. The coach can begin by considering whether hers is the better team. If so, then it might be best to make no adjustments at all—to let the opposition worry and make their own adjustments. If the opposition is stronger, however, or if, say, the team is incapable of handling the extra player the opposition may have in midfield, then the coach might want to consider tactical changes designed to disrupt or upset the opponent's system. In its simplest form, this might mean just adding an extra midfield player if, for example, the opposition holds a numerical advantage or happens to be particularly strong in that area. If a team is using a 4-4-2 system and the opponent plays in a 4-5-1, options include the following:

- Withdraw a forward to match the opposition's 4-5-1.
- Withdraw a defender and play in a 3-5-2.
- Continue to play in a 4-4-2, but ask the weak- (opposite-) side midfield player to come inside toward the middle and mark one of the opposition's central midfield players. (This approach leaves a defensive gap that must be covered by the outside back on the same side.)
- Continue to play in a 4-4-2 formation, but since the opponent will likely have three central midfielders (thus overmatching the two central midfielders in the 4-4-2), the coach can compensate by trading one wide player (winger) for an extra central midfielder to even the numbers. In this approach, the outside *back* on the side with no winger must come forward in attacking situations to give the necessary width of play on that side.

- If a team plays three at the back and the opposition's strength is wing play or diagonal passing into the corners, then the coach should probably compensate by adding an extra defender and playing with four at the back.

Teams playing away from home often adjust their formation to a more defensive approach. It is more difficult to win on the road, which tends to make coaches more cautious in their approach to the game.

It is essential to remember that systems of play and specific formations are static concepts that often bear little resemblance to the fluidity of the game itself. They are merely starting points, designating potential positions for players to retreat to when defending or attacking to maintain good team shape. It can be effective to interchange positions, but players must understand that to retain the basic shape of the formation they are playing in they need to move fluidly to fill spots left by teammates who move elsewhere. These adjustments require excellent understanding of the game, and it usually takes a good deal of time and experience before players truly grasp the concept. Thus coaches have many decisions to make, and many options to choose from, and how they handle them can make the difference between winning and losing.

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CHAPTER 6

Set Plays and Restarts

A set play can be defined as any start of play following the stoppage of the game by the referee. Examples include center kickoffs, goal kicks, throw-ins, corner kicks, dropped balls, and direct and indirect free kicks. The rewards can be enormous for developing an efficient and well-organized series of set plays. This is the only time in the game when the ball can be played without pressure from the opposition, and with the nearest opponent 10 yards (about 9 meters) from the ball. Set plays are also the only times in soccer when a team knows for sure what is going to happen, and they must take advantage of these chances, since a well-orchestrated set play often leads to a goal-scoring opportunity. This chapter addresses direct and indirect free kicks, corner kicks, and throw-ins from both the attacking and the defending perspectives.

I recommend devoting considerable time during practice games to set plays—both the attacking and the defending aspects. A full-sided practice game can be periodically stopped in order for the team to perform a set play. Doing this during practice game sessions feels more real than asking players to practice a set play in isolation from game play.

Attacking Set Plays

No matter where the restart is on the field, and no matter what type it is, teams should always be encouraged to play a positive ball, which usually means playing a forward ball. It is often a waste to play a ball backward, and it can even play a team into trouble. Several years ago at the Dallas Cup (the biggest youth tournament in the world), I saw a team take a one-goal lead in the first 12 seconds of the game without even touching the ball. Unlikely as this sounds, the opposition kicked off to begin the game and passed back to a midfield player. This player immediately came under pressure and passed back to one of his defenders, who also came under pressure and so passed back to his goalkeeper, who, unfortunately, was coming out too quickly and missed the ball. The ball entered the goal and his side was down 1-0 in an extreme example of negative passing.

Teams should attempt a direct shot on goal or at least play the ball into the danger zone inside the penalty box. Free kicks and corner kicks can and should be very productive. Most throw-ins are simply a method of putting the ball back in play and keeping possession, but still require some practice. This section covers several attacking set play situations: free kicks around the opponent's penalty area, corner kicks, and throws.

Free Kicks Around the Opponent's Penalty Area

Of all the set plays, direct and indirect free kicks around the opponent's penalty area are the most likely to produce goal-scoring opportunities. (That means this is also the most dangerous part of the field for a defending team to give away a free kick, and players need to be careful about how they tackle in this area.) As a result, players and coaches should spend a good deal of time on these plays in practice sessions. Players can also work on these kicks by themselves before or after practice.

The referee will determine whether an awarded free kick warrants a direct shot on goal or an indirect kick, wherein the ball must first be touched by a teammate before a goal can be scored. This can involve as little as touching the ball just enough to move it a yard (or meter) or less. With minor adjustments, the same set play can be used for a direct or indirect free kick. In some cases, a coach may want to consider taking an indirect kick even if a direct kick has been awarded. Moving the ball sideways just a bit changes the angle of the shot, possibly making the defensive wall and the goalkeeper's positioning less effective. Defensive walls are generally set by the goalkeeper so that they are protecting his near post. The

angles are determined in relation to the placement of the stationary ball for the free kick. When the indirect free kick is taken, if it is now rolled a couple of feet to the side, and then struck at goal, the angle has been changed from that assumed by the wall and the goalkeeper's position, perhaps providing a better opening for the shot. Thus I will consider direct and indirect free kicks as the same thing for the purpose of this section.

Since most of these free kicks are easily within shooting range, it is realistic for the kicking team to anticipate a scoring opportunity with proper execution. The opposition will put up a wall that is likely to be set by the goalkeeper, and if the opportunity arises and the referee allows it, a quick shot on goal should be taken while the goalkeeper is out of position. Most referees will not allow such a quick shot, but it's worth trying. Taking the free kick before the defensive wall is properly set gives the shooter a much clearer look at the goal and thus a better chance of scoring.

Since this is usually not possible, a team needs to have a series of well-practiced direct and indirect kicks. If practice time for working on these kicks is limited, then I recommend keeping the number of options to a minimum, maybe three or four, and practicing them very well. This approach will be more efficient and less confusing for players. (In fact, one option may be as simple as shooting straight at the goal.) With this in mind, how can a team improve its chances of scoring?

Players should spend a good amount of time improving free kicks around the opponent's penalty area, as these kicks are likely to produce goal-scoring opportunities.

The goalkeeper will set a defensive wall of four to five players protecting one of her posts. She will then stand off-center toward the other post. The kicking team might want to start by considering whether to try blocking the goalkeeper's vision. This can be done in several ways, but basically they would be attempting to place their own players between the ball and the goalkeeper, in his direct line of sight (figure 6.1). Players' options for where to stand are limited, however, by the offside rule; obviously, they cannot stand directly in front of the goalkeeper. Here are a couple of options:

In figure 6.2, O2 and O3 are standing on the end of the defensive wall in front of the goalkeeper to block his vision. The kicker then shoots at these two players, who move out of the way as soon as the ball is struck. This ploy can also be used with just one player on the end of the wall. The opposition must stay 10 yards (about 9 meters) from the ball until the free kick is taken, but the attacking players can stand as close as they want. The advantage of putting players on the end of the wall is that they can both block the sight of the goalkeeper and, when the kick is taken, spin off the wall and thus be close enough to goal to look for any rebounds from the initial shot.

The disadvantage of putting the vision-blocking players at the end of the wall is that, at 10 yards from the ball, they will only partially block the goalkeeper's vision. The closer they stand to the ball, the more difficult it will be for the goalkeeper to see it. This limitation can be addressed by placing the two vision-blocking players immediately in front of the ball. They may also be involved in the play, either as part of a decoy or in the kick itself. An example is shown in figure 6.3.

At least two players should be placed on the ball in order to confuse the defending team, who will then be unsure which player is going to take the kick. The kicking team can augment this advantage by placing both a left-footed and a right-footed player on the ball, thus increasing the options for the angle of the kick. If the ball is to the right side of the goal, then the shot angle is better for the

Figure 6.1 Use an extra player to block the goalkeeper's vision.

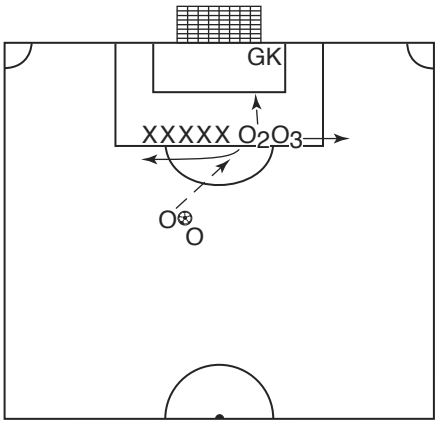


Figure 6.2 O2 and O3 are positioned on the end of the wall to block the goalkeeper's view of the ball.

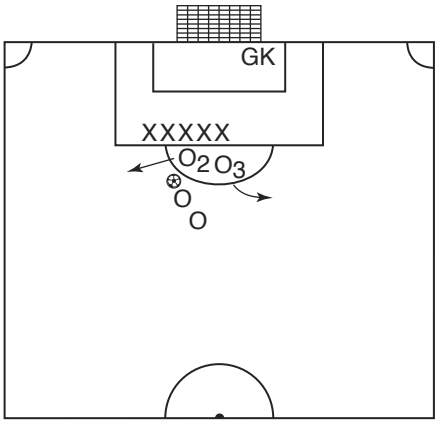


Figure 6.3 O2 and O3 are positioned directly in front of the ball.

left-footer, and vice versa. The opposition may realize this, so it is advisable for the kicking team to mix it up occasionally.

No matter how players are positioned for the free kick, certain fundamentals must be honored. The team must maintain good shape, which means considering what might happen should the kick fail and the opposition regain the ball and begin to counterattack. It's important to have enough defensive players behind the ball to protect in this case; thus the kicking team cannot send all players forward. Another consideration: What if the shot is partially saved or hits a goalpost and rebounds? Are enough players positioned to take advantage of a rebound? Does the team have the right *types* of players in the correct positions? Are the best defenders back from the ball, the best kickers around the ball, and the quickest in good position to corral a rebound?

Figure 6.4 shows one way to "set" players for the direct free kick. O11 and O8 are blocking the goalkeeper's view, along with O7, and should quickly move out of the way as the shot is taken. Any one of three players—O7, O6, and O5—can take the free kick (as predetermined by the coach), with O2 spinning off the wall and attacking the goal with an eye toward a rebound. O9 and O10 will do the same. O4 and O3 will remain back to maintain team shape and help protect against any counterattack. The free kick options in this scenario are limited only by the imagination of the coach and players, but it is worth remembering to *keep the free kick as simple as possible*. The simpler the kick, the more likely it is to succeed.

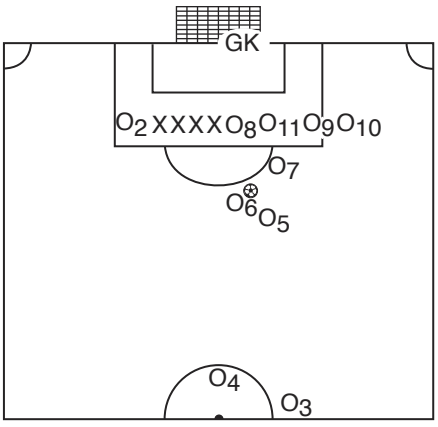


Figure 6.4 O7, O8, and O11 block the goalkeeper's view of the ball.

Corner Kicks

Though a bit less likely than free kicks to produce a goal, corner kicks still provide good scoring opportunities; in addition, they occur much more frequently (as many as seven or eight times a game, versus one or two free kicks outside the box), so they should be practiced on a regular basis. As with free kicks, the team's best dead-ball strikers should take the corner kicks. There is nothing more frustrating than having this set play fail due to a poor kick.

Corner kicks should be designed to play to the team's strengths, with the correct players in the correct positions. The best headers of the ball should be positioned in the penalty box to receive the cross from the corner kick. If these players are defenders, they should be brought forward for the corner kick (and replaced by an appropriate number of players remaining back to defend). Typically, the bravest of the headers should be placed in position to attack the corner kick.

In-Swinging Corner Kicks

The in-swinging, near-post corner kick appears to be in vogue in modern soccer. Successfully taken, it is very difficult to defend, since with an in-swinging cross the flight of the ball is already heading toward the goal and may need only the slightest of touches to direct it into the net. This type of cross is especially difficult for goalkeepers, who are already unsure of the ball's path due to the threat of a deflection, and thus are often deceived. Sometimes, just the threat of a player deflecting the cross is sufficient to confuse the goalkeeper. In addition, this type of firmly low-struck ball (preferably about head high), quickly whipped into the box with several players obstructing the goalkeeper' view, is very difficult to get to.

Another huge advantage with this type of kick is that success does not necessarily require great headers of the ball. The team needs to find a player who is brave and is good at winning the space in front of defenders. Winning this space is the key. The player must be first to the ball, which requires determination and courage. If she is first to the ball and the corner kick is well struck, it may well be that a mere touch from the attacker's head will produce devastating results for the defending team.

Once a coach has decided to use an in-swinging corner kick, the next step is to find the two best crossers of the ball. Both a right-footed and a left-footed player are needed, with the left-footer taking kicks on the right side of the field, and the right-footer taking those on the left side.

Like all good things, this approach does have its drawbacks. Consistently striking an in-swinging ball with the correct trajectory is difficult, and it can be hard to find a capable player. Another challenge arises when (as is not uncommon) the defending team places a player in front of the near post; it is difficult for this type of kick to clear that defender, but it must be done if the kick is going to be successful.

No matter what type of corner kick is used, a team should not become predictable. It's best to keep the opposition guessing where the ball is going to be

played. One option is to make the first corner received in the game a short one (see figure 6.5). When the team receives its second corner kick, the opposition may expect another short kick, which makes it a good time to go with a longer one (see figure 6.6). In figure 6.5, O7 will play the ball on the ground firmly to O9, who is coming quickly off the near post. O9 will play the ball back to O7 at an angle, and O7 will whip it into the far post as a cross or shot. The far post is attacked by O6, O8, and O4, and all it will take is a deflection for the ball to end up in the back of the net. Easy! Figure 6.6 shows an in-swinging, near-post corner kick.

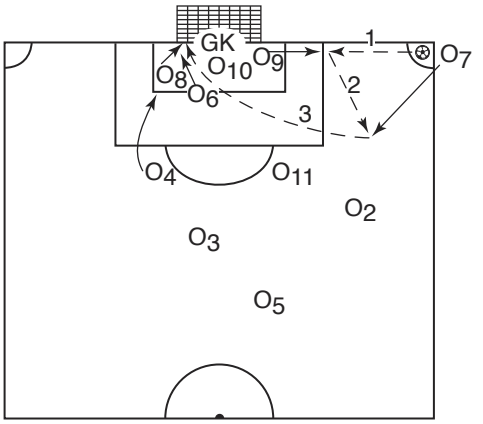


Figure 6.5 A short corner kick.

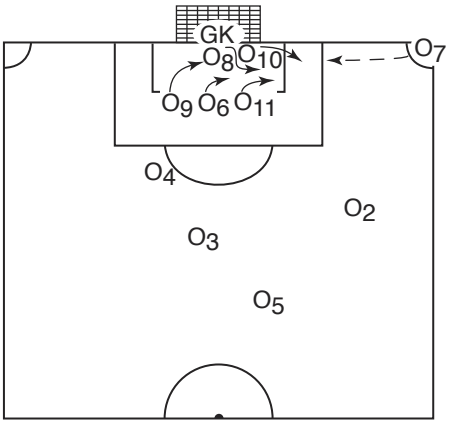


Figure 6.6 An in-swinging near-post corner kick.

Out-Swinging Corner Kicks

Out-swinging corner kicks can be just as effective as in-swinging kicks, but they require technically better headers of the ball. The ball will usually have to be played into a deeper part of the penalty box, either midgoal or toward the far post (it's difficult to play to the near post since the ball is curling away from the goal. In order to direct the ball into a deeper part of the penalty box, the kicker will need to give it more height on the cross, which means it will be in the air longer and tend to hang more than the firmly driven near-post ball. Heading this type of cross requires good technique, as well as the ability to jump high, time the jump correctly, and make excellent contact on the ball with the head. Central defenders are often the best bet for this role, since they tend to be big and to be good technical headers of the ball by the very nature of their position.

To make life more difficult for the defending team, all attacking players should be constantly moving inside the penalty box, checking in and checking out before the corner kick is even taken. Timing of runs is critical to the success of this approach, as the players need to be moving forward, toward the ball, at the moment it is kicked. Each player should be assigned a defined area of the penalty

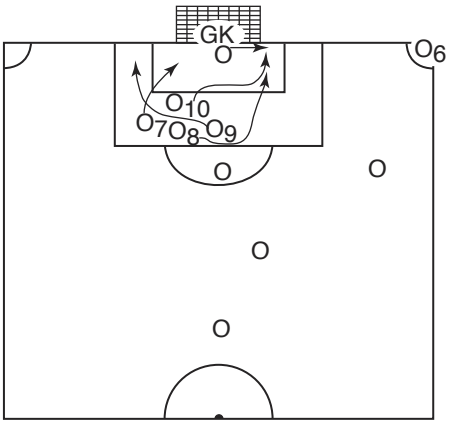


Figure 6.7 Attacking players begin in a cluster.

box to run into, and these runs should cover the most likely areas for the ball to be delivered into—namely near, midgoal and far post. The attacking players should arrive at the same time the ball does. Figure 6.7 gives an example of an approach to a corner kick where all players begin in the same part of the penalty area, then spread out and attack, making it very difficult for defenders to mark and track them. Os 7, 8, 9, and 10 will quickly attack near-post, midgoal, and far-post as the ball is served.

If the team is weak at heading, and therefore unlikely to be effective on corner kicks, the coach must consider how to compensate. He might consider making a short corner kick by bringing two players over to handle the kick; now, instead of playing the ball directly into the box, the team can play it short to the second player. If the opposition is slow to recognize and adjust to what is happening, the ball can be quickly kicked to the second player, who dribbles toward the goal before crossing or shooting. The opposition will probably wise up quickly to this ploy and send a defender over to stop it; by rule, however, she must be 10 yards (about 9 meters) from the ball until it is kicked. The attacking team still has two attackers on the ball for the corner kick, which creates a two-on-one advantage. The attacking team can play the ball short, draw the defender to the ball, then pass quickly to take the defender out of the play. The player receiving the pass can dribble and then shoot or cross.

Should the opponent position *two* players 10 yards (9 meters) from the ball to match the attacking two (and they should), the attacking team can simply play the ball short (perhaps 1 yard or meter in), thus slightly altering the angle of the cross, then immediately cross it into the penalty box before the two defenders can close on it. Thus if facing a well-organized defense that has had to send two defenders out to protect against the corner kick, the attacking team will have pulled two defenders away from the penalty box, which causes reorganization problems for the opponent and creates more space in the box for attacking the corner kick. This tactic helps a team that is not strong in the air, since it provides more space and time to operate, with fewer defenders in the box.

Throws

Since they usually do not produce immediate goal-scoring opportunities, throw-ins are probably the least important of all set plays. They should not, however, be totally ignored. If nothing else, a coach must make sure that players can put the ball into play in keeping with the rules of the game. Nothing is more frustrating than having the referee stop the game for an illegal throw and award the retake to the opposition. Both feet must be on the ground and *behind* the sideline when

the ball is released. The ball should begin behind the head and be released in front, with equal pressure from both arms. The player making the throw-in should quickly pick an open teammate to throw the ball to. Opposition players tend to lose concentration momentarily when the ball goes out of play, and the attacking team can take advantage of this lapse by throwing the ball in a way that makes it easy to control, either with the head or feet. After the throw, the thrower should immediately become involved as a support player.

Where possible, the ball should be thrown forward, and on a throw-in that is close to the opponent's penalty box, a strong thrower might even consider a long throw-in to the box, which can lead directly to an opportunity on goal. A team can use this option like any other set play by organizing inside the penalty box so that players know who the target player is and where the other players should stand in relationship to the target. I recommend keeping this play very simple by asking the target player to flick the ball on with his head from the near post toward the far post, with players behind him ready to meet it on the far post.

Defending Set Plays

Set plays must be defended mostly in the defensive third of the field, and it's uncommon for teams to practice defending free kicks in the middle third, since a ball in this area poses limited threat on goal and is therefore deemed less important. Most good teams, however, will try to take quick free kicks in this middle area, and it is imperative to be quick in getting a defensive player in front of the ball to slow it down. Quick free kicks are less likely to be taken in the attacking third of the play, since teams will usually set up their practiced free kick and may more likely require the referee to restart the game with his whistle, but the defending team must be alert even in this area.

When the ball is whistled dead, many players on both sides of the field will lose concentration and stop playing (many players use this bit of time to rest). Either team can take advantage of this lull by reacting quickly to the restart of play, catching the opposition in a moment of disorganization . The most crucial defensive efforts always happen in the defensive third of the field, which can be subdivided into two areas: the middle or central positions (a very dangerous area), and the wide or wing positions (including corner kicks and throw-ins).

Defending Free Kicks in Central Positions Outside the Box

Teams should do their utmost to avoid giving away free kicks in this area, which is both the most dangerous and the most difficult to defend. The rules of the game require defending players to stand 10 yards (about 9 meters) from the ball while the free kick is being taken. It's a good habit to initially stand players closer than that and let the opposition ask the referee for the 10 yards. If necessary, the referee will then mark out the 10 yards, which will delay the free kick and give the defending team more time to get organized, especially in setting the wall.

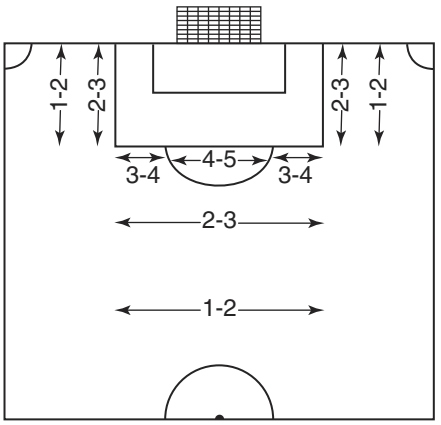


Figure 6.8 The number of players a goalkeeper should place in the wall depends on the ball's position.

Many teams have the goalkeeper set the wall, but a coach can use any player, especially a forward, from the upfield position. The wall should be positioned to cover one side of the goal, with the goalkeeper covering the other. It is the goalkeeper's responsibility to call out the number of players he wants in the wall. This number will be determined by angle of the free kick and its distance from the goal. Figure 6.8 suggests how many players to put in the wall in relationship to the distance and angle of the kick: the farther out and the wider the free kick, the fewer bodies are needed in the wall. The wall must be predetermined so that each player knows exactly where to stand.

It is not a good idea to put the team's best defenders in the wall, since its only purpose is to block shots, which anyone can do. It is better to leave the better defenders free to defend the kick. A coach might, however, consider placing an extra defender on the end of the wall closest to the goalkeeper to act as a "crusher" or "rusher," charging the ball the moment it is about to be struck, while the wall remains stationary and tightly packed. The wall should be set with one player overlapping the post (figure 6.9) and with the tallest player on the outside end of the wall (covering the post) and the remaining players arranged in descending order of size so that the smallest player is on the other end. This arrangement puts more height where the goal is most vulnerable, on the post furthest from the goalkeeper, and less height toward the middle of the goal in the area that is easier for the goalkeeper to see and cover. Figure 6.10 shows where the rest of

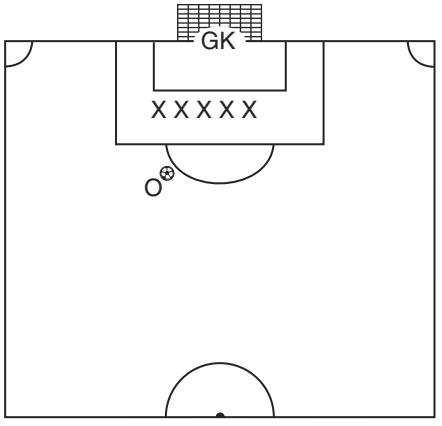


Figure 6.9 Wall set with one player overlapping the post.

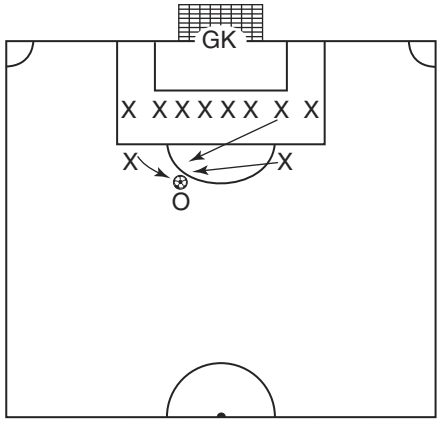


Figure 6.10 Remaining players sealing off the field.

the players should stand, sealing off the vital spots on the field. Two defensive players stand 10 yards (about 9 meters) from the ball on either side of it in order to challenge should the ball be played to the left or right. One can challenge the ball from the end of the wall, and the remaining two players stand in the space to either side of the wall to pressure any player or pass in this area. All players should be alert to the shot and to possible rebounds in the area behind the wall. Another option: Instead of positioning the two defenders to either side of the ball, they might be placed in positions to mark attacking players to the side of the wall.

Players need to be brave in the wall and stand tightly together for as long as possible as the shot is made. The worst thing that can happen is for the wall to split apart too soon, leaving holes for the ball to go through, which defeats the very purpose of the wall. Once the ball has been struck, these players should be alert and simply react to where the ball goes.

Defending Corner Kicks

Corner kicks are the most common restarts, so it's best to have that shop in order. As in most set-play situations, the critical elements are organization, discipline, and determination to be first to the ball. There are three ways to defend a corner kick: zonal coverage, man-to-man marking, and a combination approach. Each is covered later in this section. No matter which system is used, the positioning of the goalkeeper is crucial. If he stands too close to the far post, he risks being beaten at the near post; if too close to the near post, he will struggle to cover the back of the goal. In determining the best position, the keeper needs to anticipate how the kick is going to be taken, either as an out-swinger or an in-swinger. For an in-swinging kick, he needs to be tight on his line, favoring front of center. If anticipating an out-swinging kick, he needs to be off his line and slightly back of center.

Each team must also decide whether to put one or two defenders on the line to help the goalkeeper protect it. Most teams incorporate two defenders on the line, with one standing on each post, but some teams withdraw the player on the far post if the goalkeeper is strong in the air and can cover the back post without help. Having two players help the goalkeeper protect his goal line has obvious advantages—a shot or header on goal has to beat three players rather than two or one. The disadvantage lies in having fewer players available to help defend the cross, and it can be very problematic if the attacking team has more players in the penalty box than the defense does. If necessary, a team can bring all 10 players back, including the outlet forward, to defend the kick. (Normally, it makes sense to leave one player forward by the halfway line to pick up the ball should it be effectively cleared by the defenders.) In this way, a team can always leave two defenders on the goal line to help the goalkeeper (figure 6.11*a* and *b* on page 114).

Figure 6.11 Positioning of defenders to protect the goal line on a corner kick: *(a)* prior to a corner kick; *(b)* after the corner kick has been taken.

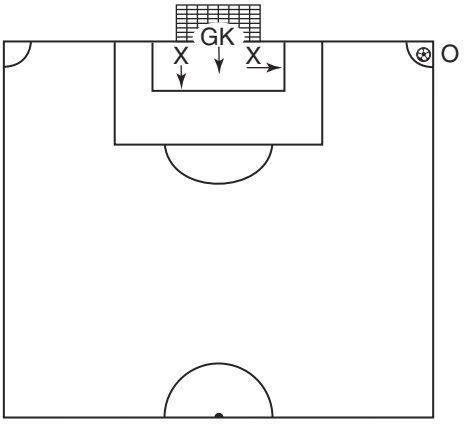


Figure 6.12 The goalkeeper and two defenders positioned on the line for a corner kick.

These players on the post should be positioned as follows: Figure 6.12 shows the goalkeeper shading slightly toward the front post. The goalkeeper must establish good foot position, with both feet on the goal line facing forward. This position requires the goalkeeper to look over his shoulder at the corner kick but gives him better vision of the total box. The defender on the near post needs to be off the line facing the corner kick, so that he can react to an in-swinging kick targeted for an attacker making a run past the near post. Attacking teams sometimes stand a player on this post in front of the covering defender. In

this case, the defending team can consider bringing another defender to stand in front of him, thus covering his front and back.

Man-to-Man Marking

Other than the two players on the goal line, man-to-man marking means every defender matches up with a player on the attacking team. This straightforward approach is the simplest to organize and is probably the most effective for teams that do not have much time to spend practicing in these areas. Wherever possible, defenders should be matched in size to the attackers they will mark. This system is the easiest to learn and requires far less decision making than the others. It does have its problems, however, especially in trying to match up players, and it takes only one player who is insufficiently determined to win the ball in the air for the whole thing to break down. The system can also get confusing if the opposing team starts with all its players in one area, packed tightly together, before quickly dispersing to attack the ball. Where should defenders stand in this case? They have no choice but to gather with the attacking team and make sure they are extremely alert in deciding where to go and who to mark when the attacking team splits apart.

Zonal Coverage

In zonal coverage, aside from the goalkeeper and the two players protecting the goal line on each post, there will be seven or eight other players to help defend the corner. In most cases, a team will leave one player forward to be available if the corner kick is effectively cleared, meaning seven players are available to defend. Each defender is responsible for attacking the space in front of her. The defender must be alert and first to the ball. Some teams like to put one of the defenders in front of the ball, 10 yards (about 9 meters) from the corner kick, in order to disturb the kicker's service. I recommend against this, however, since that player can often be put to better use elsewhere.

In the case of a short corner kick, the defending team needs to send *two* defenders quickly out toward the corner flag to defend 2v2. The coach can take his pick as to which two players to send (not good headers of the ball), but whoever it is, the team will need to adjust its zonal coverage accordingly by moving players into slightly different areas and filling the areas left open by the players covering the short corner kick. In the situation shown in figure 6.13, I would suggest placing the two closest players, X2 and X3, 10 yards (9 meters) from the ball on the corner kick, thus matching two defenders with the attacking two. The two areas left by X2 and X3 now need to be covered, perhaps by moving X1 from the back post to the near post (leaving the back post for the goalkeeper and X5 to cover) and moving X8 into X3's zonal area. The attacking team

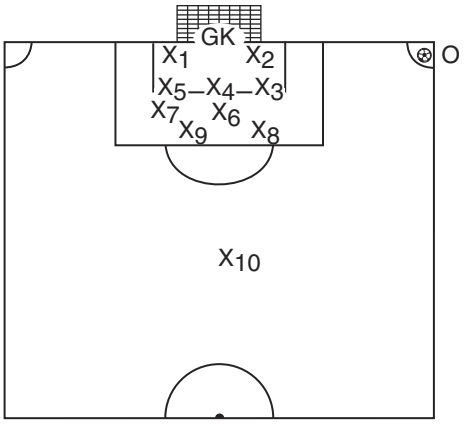


Figure 6.13 Team zonal coverage for a corner kick.

will often consider an in-swinging corner kick and put a player in front of X2 on the near post. The defending team might react by placing an extra defender (perhaps X3) in front of that player. Owning the space in front of the attacking player is always critical. It really does not matter which players are moved, so long as it is done quickly, efficiently, and in such a way that the key zones in the penalty area are still covered.

The huge advantage of zone coverage is that a team can effectively block off all the dangerous areas a ball may be crossed into, giving the opposition little chance to find space in which to attack the corner kick. The disadvantage is that this coverage is very difficult to master. In my experience, there have never been enough defenders with the ability to be effective in their designated zone area. They have to understand exactly what area they are responsible for and be first to the ball within their zone. In addition, it's very difficult to defend an attacking player who comes quickly and late into a given area. Nevertheless, this is a very effective system if done correctly.

Man-to-Man and Zonal Combination

I prefer a combination of man-to-man and zonal defense, which offers the best of both worlds by having players who *can* zone-cover play that way, and using the rest to man-mark. It is easier to find this combination of players, and the zonal coverage should help compensate for breakdowns in man-to-man marking in the key areas of the box, as an extra zone player can be placed in that area.

The combination approach requires the coach to find two good zonal players, who are placed on the 6-yard box, covering the area of front post and mid-goal—perhaps the two most dangerous areas for the ball to be. The job of these two players is to attack the space in front of them if the ball is played into that area. If it is played long into the space behind them, it becomes the responsibility of another player, either the second zone player or one of the remaining players marking man-to-man. Beyond these two, the rest of the team is responsible for marking man-to-man and following any attacking player inside the penalty box. Of course, the two zone players have no such responsibility. This approach provides double coverage in the most dangerous area of the goal—a much better situation than before. In figure 6.14, X11 is left as a forward for the defensive clearance, and X1 and X2 protect the goal line as before, with X4 and X5 acting as zonal players just inside the 6-yard box. The remaining five players will then match up man-to-man with the opposition. If for some reason there are not enough players to match up man-for-man, the defending team can always take a player out of zonal coverage.

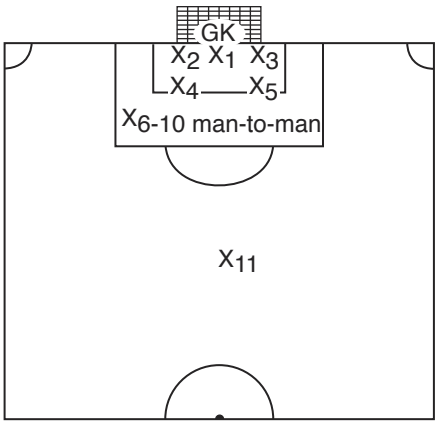


Figure 6.14 Positioning for a corner kick using both zonal and man-to-man coverage.

Defending Wide Free Kicks in the Defending Third

Free kicks from this part of the field are extremely dangerous and must be defended well. Unlike corner kicks, which are taken from the goal line, these free kicks have a much better angle toward the goal, and if the defending team is careless the attacker can score directly on the kick. The same principle applies to this kick as to the corner kick: An *in-swinging* ball struck at pace to an area toward the far post can cause chaos for the defense, especially the goalkeeper, who on many occasions may be guarding against the rush and possible deflection of the ball to the goal by a forward. This distraction and threat to the keeper can be enough to allow the kick to score directly from the free kick, with nobody else touching it. A ball struck as an *out-swinger* does not pose quite the same threat, as its flight is *away* from the goal.

Another danger is that of the attacking team setting all players toward the far post, leaving the area at the near post empty. This is a sign that the ball may be served into this empty area, with attacking players moving toward the near post at the very last second, making it difficult for the defense to react in time. To negate this problem, a team should place a defender in the near-post area before the kick, with no other responsibility other than covering this area.

Placing two defenders in a miniwall 10 yards (9 meters) from the free kick, between the ball and the goal, can distract the attacker and interfere with the free kick. For example, in figure 6.15, O7 is taking a free kick from the wide right area of the field. It would be prudent to put two players 10 yards from the kick to prevent attacker O8 from overlapping and attacking the space in the corner. Either X4 or X3 can go with that run, and the remaining player can try to alter the flight of O7's free kick. Most of the remaining players in the penalty box can mark man-to-man. It would be necessary to cover the near post area of the field with a zonal player (X2).

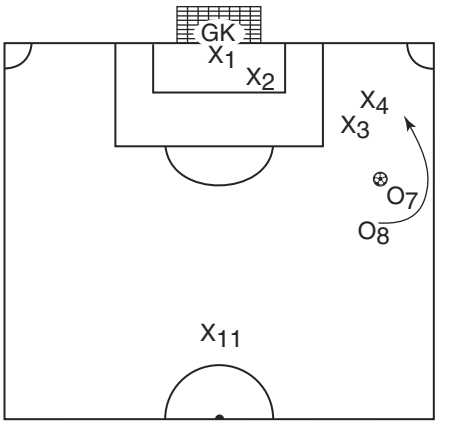


Figure 6.15 Key player positioning for defending wide free kicks.

Defending Throws

A throw-in is the most common restart of the game and therefore should not be neglected. Defenders must not lose concentration when the ball goes out of play. This is not the time to rest or "tune out." Instead, defenders should take the opportunity while the ball is out of play to mark the opposition, especially around the throw-in area, where marking needs to be very tight. Man-to-man marking is all that is required.

Long throws in the attacking third of the field need special attention. Many teams have players who can throw a ball into the opposition's 6-yard box, and if the defense is not careful this can be very dangerous. It's important to have a

sense of the length of the throw, as well as the target player the thrower is aiming for inside the 6-yard box. Once this player has been identified, she should be marked from the front and the back. The goalkeeper should also be alert, normally beginning in the front half of her goal. As with all set plays, when the ball is launched into the penalty box, the key is to be alert and be first to the ball, then react quickly to all situations.

CHAPTER 7

Physical Conditioning and Nutrition

There is more to soccer than attending practices and games. In order to attain goals and maximize success, players must be willing to commit fully to a strength and conditioning program. The game of soccer has changed over the years, becoming much more athletic, with speed and strength playing big roles. To succeed at the higher levels, players must work on all aspects of their fitness. Training for strength and conditioning should be combined with a healthy, sensible diet to attain the best results. This chapter lays out a program for developing speed, strength, explosion to the ball, and fitness on the field, as well as nutrition guidelines for maximizing performance.

Elements of a Physical Conditioning Program

Excellent physical conditioning is necessary for excelling at high-level soccer. It must become part of a player's lifestyle, something he is prepared to work on every day, both in practice and in his own time. Physical conditioning involves six main components: warm-up, flexibility, agility, speed, cardiorespiratory fitness, and strength. The following sections detail each component and include drills that athletes can integrate into various phases of training. The drills are meant as starting points, and coaches and players can easily substitute their own activities. The key is to understand which types of activity can improve which facets of conditioning, then include them in one's workout.

Warm-Up

A warm-up should be performed daily to prepare the body for activity by elevating the heart rate and raising body temperature. A warm-up stimulates blood flow to the muscles, getting the body ready to perform high-intensity activity. Players should always begin with a vigorous warm-up; skipping it increases the risk of injury.

I recommend using dynamic stretches and movements to warm up because they mimic the types of movement used in soccer. Stretching with movement (as compared with static stretching) prepares the muscle more readily for activity. The following subsections offer suggestions for dynamic warm-up activities. After stretching, I recommend doing 5 to 15 minutes of ball work to get the heart rate up: Individual ball work, small-sided games, and keep-away all work well. Ball work can also involve technical and even tactical aspects.

A-SKIP

Start on your toes. Bring one leg up, so that your heel is tight to your buttocks, your thigh parallel to the ground, and your ankle locked, with your toes up. As you bring your heel to your buttocks, briefly hop off the ground and land (in a skipping motion) with your standing leg. Lower the raised foot back to the ground. Alternate sides.

B-SKIP

Start on your toes. As in the A-skip, bring one leg up, so that your heel is tight to your buttocks, your thigh parallel to the ground, and your ankle locked, with your toes up. As you bring your heel to your buttocks, briefly hop off the ground and land (in a skipping motion) with your standing leg. Now, however, rather than lowering the leg back to the ground, as in the A-skip, extend it out in front of you so that it is relatively straight. Finish by pulling it back down to the ground from its extended position. Alternate sides.

CARIOCA

Stand with your knees bent, back straight, and shoulders and hips square to your head. Start by moving to the right, crossing your left leg in front of your right and reaching for maximal distance. Now bring your right leg out from behind the left and reach farther to the right side of your body. Then cross the left leg behind the right and again move your right leg to the right of your body. You should cross left over right, then right over left. Do the opposite and move from side to side.


a

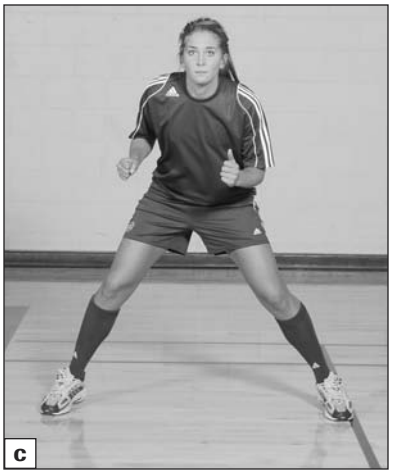

b

SIDE-TO-SIDE SHUFFLE

Stand with your feet a little more than shoulder-width apart, heels over your toes, knees slightly bent, torso straight, and head up. Start by sliding your right foot toward the left until it is centered under your body. Then drive off of the right foot and move your left foot until your feet are a little more than shoulder-width apart. Repeat. It will look like a side-to-side shuffle, leading with the left leg on every step. Alternate leading legs. Over 10 yards (9 meters), do 5 repetitions leading with the left, and 5 leading with the right.


a


b


c

HIGH-KNEE

Move slowly down the field, driving your knees up to your chest, with a slight forward lean of your body to propel you forward. (This will look like running in place.) Make sure that your ankles are locked, your toes up, your heel close to your buttocks, and your arms swinging from the shoulder, not the elbow.

SPRINT

Sprint at 75 percent of your maximum speed from the end line of the field to the edge of the penalty box. Repetitions can vary from 5 to 10, and they can also be added at the end of a fast footwork drill as a 10-yard (9-meter) run. You can also sprint at 100 percent of your maximum speed, with jog-recovery back to the starting point.

Flexibility

A flexibility program involves a series of stretches intended to increase range of motion in order to prevent injury, improve performance, and prevent muscle tightness after workouts. Flexibility is crucial to obtaining maximal speed and jump height, as well as preventing the tightness that can compromise proper performance. Integrating flexibility training into a conditioning program also greatly reduces the chance of injury. Flexibility exercises should be performed before any other activity and after every workout. It is particularly important to stretch after working in the weight room.

Each athlete needs a partner to perform the following stretches. Each stretch should be held for about 10 seconds. The first five stretches should be performed in order, using one leg, then repeated in order using the other leg. The quad stretch and hip flexor stretch should be performed in this way as well.

HEEL CORD

Lie on your back and have your partner grasp your foot. Your partner should raise your leg to a 45-degree angle (with your knee fully extended so that your leg is relatively straight), then push your toes toward your shin until you feel a good stretch.

FRONT OF SHIN

Lie on your back and have your partner grasp your ankle. Your partner should raise your leg to a 45-degree angle (with your knee fully extended so that your leg is relatively straight), then pull up on your toes until you feel a good stretch.

HAMSTRING

Lie on your back and have your partner grasp your ankle. Your partner should then raise your leg while you keep your knee fully extended (with your leg comfortably straight). Your partner should then push the whole leg back until you feel a good stretch in your hamstring.

SOFT KNEE

From the hamstring stretch position, have your partner put his or her thumb into the crease behind your knee. Your partner should push your knee to your chest with a bent leg, then extend your ankle outward until you feel a good stretch. Maintain the bend in your leg, and push your ankle toward your partner's chest.

KNEE ACROSS

Lie on your back and keep your shoulders flat on the ground. Bend one leg, grasp the knee with your opposing hand, and pull it across your body. Your opposite leg should remain straight on the floor.

FIGURE-4

Lie on your back and place the ankle of your stretching leg on top of your opposite knee, so that your legs form a 4.

BUTTERFLY

Begin in a seated position, with your feet together on the ground and your heels pushed as close to the inside of your thighs as possible. Relax your legs so that your knees move toward the floor. Your partner should put light pressure on your knees to push them toward the floor.

QUAD

Lie on your stomach, with one leg straight on the ground and the other leg bent at the knee so that your ankle comes toward your buttocks. Your partner holds that knee up to 6 inches (15 centimeters) off the ground and pushes your ankle toward your buttocks.

HIP FLEXOR

Lie on your stomach, with one leg straight on the ground and the other leg bent at the knee so that your ankle comes toward your buttocks. Have your partner put one hand into the small of your back and pull up on your knee with the other hand. Whereas pushing the ankle (in the quad stretch) stretches the quad, pulling the knee here stretches the hip flexors.

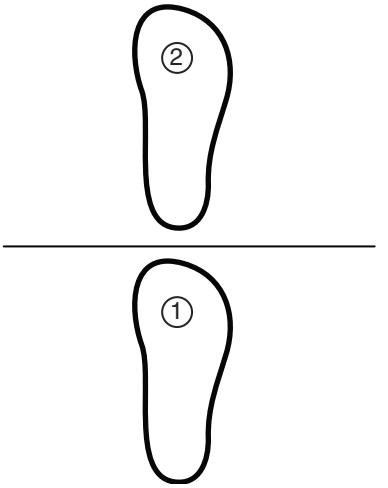
Agility

Agility is one of those characteristics that soccer players *must* have if they are going to be successful. By the very nature of the game, physical contact occurs constantly, and players who can stay on their feet and "ride" tackles when being physically challenged are at a big advantage. It also takes great agility and mobility to wriggle out of tight situations when surrounded by opponents.

The agility drills in this section are of two types: quick-feet drills and field agilities. The first eight drills in this section are quick-feet drills that should be performed as a series. In each one, the player jumps over the line as many times as possible in 10 seconds, resting for about 30 seconds between exercises. The remainder are plyometric drills—exercises that increase explosiveness by enabling muscles to achieve maximal quick contraction to increase vertical and lateral movement. They are intended to link maximal strength with maximal speed of movement. At the completion of each rep of a plyometric drill, players should sprint 10 to 15 yards (9 to 14 meters). Players should rest about 35 seconds between sets and get about 1 minute of rest between exercises.

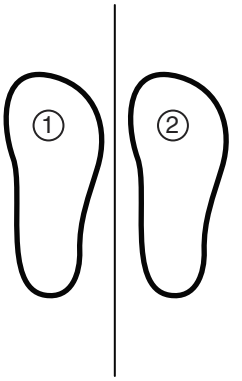
SINGLE-LEG FRONT-TO-BACK

Hop forward over the line with your right foot. Then hop back across the line as quickly as possible. Do as many reps as you can in the given amount of time. Repeat with your left foot.



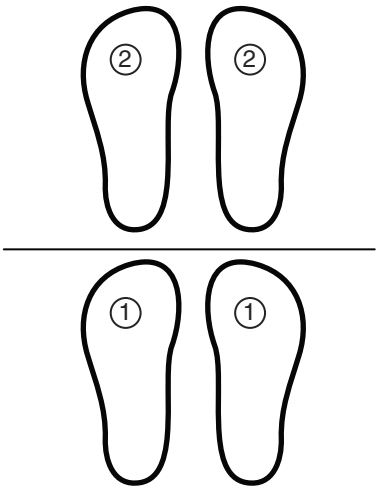
SINGLE-LEG SIDE-TO-SIDE

Hop sideways across the line with your right root. Then hop back across the line as quickly as possible. Do as many reps as you can in the given amount of time. Repeat with your left foot.



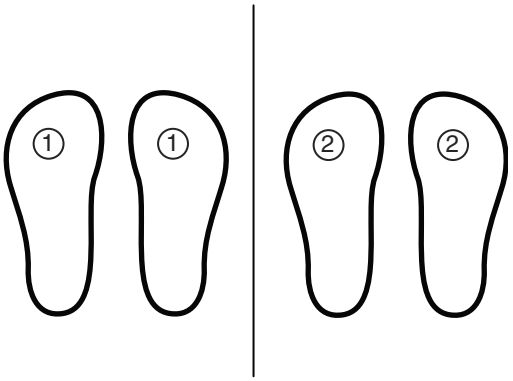
DOUBLE-LEG FRONT-TO-BACK

Hop forward over the line with both feet. Then hop back across the line as quickly as possible. Do as many reps as you can in the given amount of time.



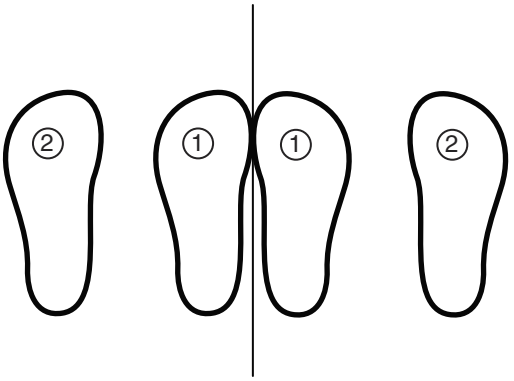
DOUBLE-LEG SIDE-TO-SIDE

Hop sideways across the line with both feet. Then hop back across the line as quickly as possible. Do as many reps as you can in the given amount of time.



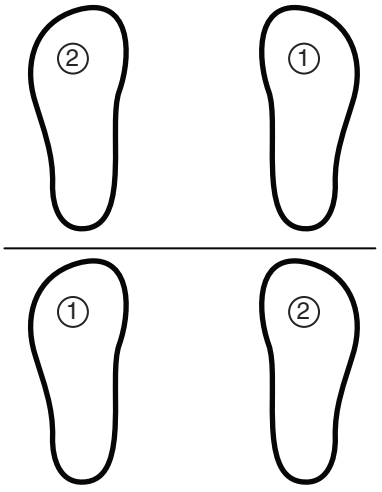
ON AND OFF THE LINE

Stand with both feet touching the line. Then hop and spread your feet apart. Upon touching the ground, quickly hop and bring both feet back together. Do as many reps as you can in the given amount of time.



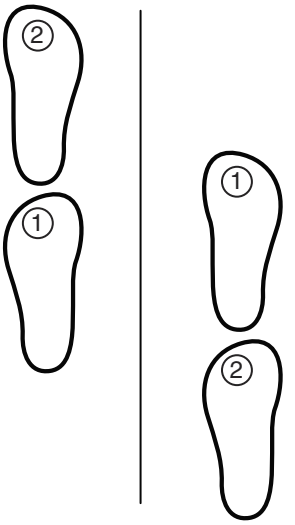
ALTERNATING FEET

Stand with your right foot in front of the line and your left foot behind it. Hop and quickly change foot positions, so that your left foot is in front of the line and your right foot is behind it. Do as many reps as you can in the given amount of time.



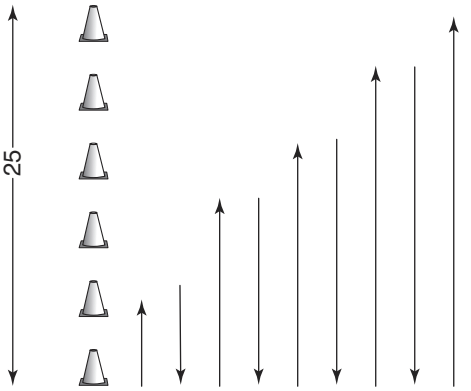
SCISSORS

Straddle the line with your feet spread apart. Quickly bring your right foot in front of your body and across the line, while your left foot goes behind you and across the line. Hop back to your beginning position, then reverse the activity so that your left foot goes in front of you and your right foot goes behind you. Do as many reps as you can in the given amount of time.



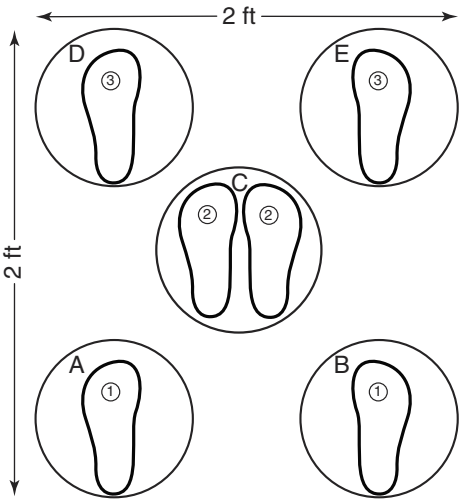
SHUTTLE RUNS A AND B

Place six cones 5 yards (4.5 meters) from each other in a line. For shuttle A, start at the first cone and sprint to the second, then backpedal back to the first cone. Next, sprint from the starting point to the third cone and backpedal back to the first. Continue in this pattern all the way through the cones. For shuttle B, start at the first cone and sprint to the second, then turn and sprint back to the first cone. Next, sprint to the third cone, then turn and sprint back to the first. Continue in this pattern all the way through the cones.



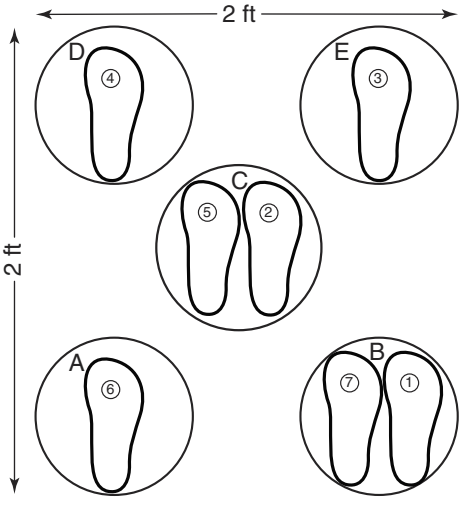
IN/OUT

Imagine five dots in the shape shown. Start with your left foot on dot A and your right foot on dot B. Hop and land with both feet on dot C. Then hop again and land with your left foot on dot D and your right foot on dot E. Hop back and land with both feet on dot C, then hop again and land with your left foot on dot A and your right foot on dot B. Repeat 5 times.



SINGLE-LEG HOURGLASS

Imagine five dots in the shape shown. Start with your right foot on dot B, then hop to dot C, to dot E, across to dot D, back to dot C, back to dot A, and over to dot B. This pattern draws an hourglass. Repeat 5 times, then switch feet and do the whole thing using your left foot. To execute a double-leg hourglass, hop from the dots in the same order but with both feet together.



SQUAT JUMP

Stand in a squat position, with your thighs parallel to the floor, arms up with your hands on the back of the head, and feet shoulder-width apart. Jump up and out. You are trying to achieve maximal height on your jump. Land with your feet shoulder-width apart and your knees over your toes, moving slightly forward with each jump. As soon as you land, get back into the squat position and go right back up. Perform 5 consecutive jumps, then finish with a short sprint of 5 to 10 yards (4.5 to 9 meters).

THREE-CONE HOP

Place three cones 2 feet (0.6 meter) from each other in a line. Starting at one end of the line, hop with your right foot (lifting your knee as high as possible toward your chest) into the area between the first and second cones. As soon as you land, immediately jump into the area between the second and third cones. Then jump again to the other side of the third cone. Turn (still on your right foot) and jump through the cones going the other direction. As soon as you finish with the right foot, go through the cones with your left foot. Then jump through with both feet. Perform five reps for each leg.

SINGLE-LEG, SIDE-TO-SIDE CONE HOP

Stand beside a cone. Jump sideways over the cone with one leg, driving the knee of the jumping leg toward your chest. Upon landing, immediately jump back over the cone using the other leg. Jumping over and back completes 1 rep. Do as many as possible in a given amount of time (e.g., 30 to 60 seconds).

SINGLE-LEG HOP

Perform 5 successive hops on one leg, then sprint 10 to 15 yards (9 to 14 meters). Jog-recover back to the starting point. Switch legs. Perform 3 to 5 reps on each leg.

Speed

Speed kills the opponent! This might be the most significant factor in the game of soccer. Many coaches would take an average soccer player with great speed over a great soccer player with average speed. Each person is born with a certain genetically determined capability for speed, and players who lack good speed must try to compensate in other areas and hope for the best. The good news is that speed can be improved within a given range, so it is very important to work at it. Players who do so will get quicker.

The best way to improve speed is to sprint, which differs from cardio training (covered next) in that the object of speed drills is not to cause fatigue. Sprinting works on the body's anaerobic system, where the energy is pulled from storage in the muscles. Plenty of rest can be given between runs, so that the athlete does not tire. Speed work thus consists of shorter distances with more rest between runs.

BASIC SPRINT

Sprint three different distances: 20, 30, and 50 yards (18, 27, and 46 meters). After each sprint, walk back to the starting point in order to ensure a full recovery before the next repetition. Each sprint must be performed with maximum effort!

I like to put a variation or two into these sprints. For instance, on a 20-yard (18-meter) sprint, we may have players begin with their back turned toward the direction of the sprint, thus making it a turn-and-sprint. We may ask players to jump up and down on the same spot, then sprint on the whistle, or even sit down so that they must get quickly to their feet before they begin to sprint. Such variations are intended to simulate game situations before the sprint.

7-BY-30 SPRINT

Place four cones in a straight line, spaced evenly over 30 yards (27 meters). Stand at the first cone and sprint toward the last one. Accelerate between the first and second cones, so that you are at full speed by the second one. Maintain full sprint until you hit the third cone, then decelerate until you reach the fourth one. Turn and jog back to the first cone in 20 seconds, then repeat the process 7 more times.

5-BY-10 SPRINT

Place two cones 10 yards (9 meters) apart. Sprint back and forth between the two cones 5 times, there and back being one time. This is explosive, short-sprint work that develops quickness of turn, an important capability for soccer players. Take plenty of rest between reps.

In order to attain goals and maximize success, players must be willing to fully commit themselves to a challenging conditioning program.

ACCELERATION RUN

Athletes stand at the end of the field. On the coach's signal, they perform a half-field run, increasing speed from 25 percent, to 50, to 75, and finally to 100 percent during each quarter of the run. This is excellent speed work because the gradual build up of pace enables the athlete to run at his or her fastest at the end.

Cardiovascular Training

All players need to be physically capable of playing a 90-minute soccer game. Unfortunately, the large squad sizes and frequent substitutions used in the United States do not always require players to be as fit as they should be. The time may come when one needs to play for a full game, and players should prepare for this eventuality. The cardiovascular training program is intended to build a baseline of fitness, then train the aerobic system to the level needed to play the game. Unlike speed work, where the athlete rests between drills, cardio training requires running for distance until fatigued.

Players must have a strong cardiovascular base before any other fitness gains can be achieved, and this base should be established during the preseason. Once this is done, it is neither necessary nor beneficial to continue to work at a high-level cardio program. Game play (along with occasional cardiovascular training for maintenance) is sufficient.

1:1:1 RUN

Run as hard as you can for 1 minute, walk for 1 minute, then jog for 1 minute. Repeat in this order for at least 10 minutes.

120

Sprint the length of the field (120 yards) in the specified time, then jog back to the starting point in the allotted recovery time. Sprint and recovery times should vary depending on age and ability level of the group. For older players (15 and above), I suggest an 18-second sprint with a 42-second jog-recovery, repeated 10 times.

2-MILE RUN

You will need to perform this run on a track. Coaches should set time limits based on quality and age of athlete. I suggest that college athletes complete the run in 12 minutes, and scholarship athletes should be quite capable of that. For high school players, I suggest 12 1/2 minutes.

15:15 RUN

Sprint for 15 seconds, then jog for 15 seconds. Repeat for 2 minutes. Next, backpedal for 5 seconds, turn and sprint for 10 seconds, then jog for 15 seconds. Repeat this sequence for 2 minutes. Then go back to the first pattern for another 2 minutes.

300-METER SHUTTLE

Place two cones 50 yards (46 meters) apart. Run from one cone to the other and back 3 times, for a total of 300 yards (274 meters). Coaches should adjust the allotted time according to age and ability, and I suggest test-running this sort of activity with a couple of the team's better athletes to get a sense of how much time to allow. The target for the whole group should be a little slower than the results of the test run.

Strength

The game of soccer has improved over the last decade or two. There are several reasons for this, most of which are connected to the improved athleticism of soccer players. The physical aspect of the game is very important, and the ability of an individual player to not only win a ball in a challenge but also maintain possession when challenged is enormous. This can be the difference in scoring or stopping a goal being scored, and will have a huge impact on the result of the game. Players cannot afford to be easily pushed off the ball.

Strength training for soccer should consist of total body activities that work all the major muscle groups in the legs, arms, back, abdominals, and chest. This program is done almost exclusively in the weight room. Most strength exercises can be adapted to the equipment available, whether barbells, dumbbells, or machines. Some strength exercises, such as push-ups and pull-ups, use body weight, with no equipment required.

In my program, weight training is very important. Not only does it provide our players with the necessary strength, but also it reduces the possibility of injury. We introduce some strength activities during the preseason in August to help new players learn our system, activities, and techniques, and we typically do three sessions a week for about 3 weeks. Once our season begins, however, we downshift into maintenance mode, lifting once or twice a week (and avoiding game day and the day before a game). At this point, the workout often consists only of light upper-body work, with no leg activity at all. Players' legs are tired enough from training and playing games.

Strength training is a complex subject, and safety is of the utmost importance. This section includes a sampling of exercises for both upper and body here to get you started. I recommend referring to *Encyclopedia of Muscle & Strength* by

Jim Stoppani (Human Kinetics, 2006) for exercises, complete technique descriptions, and safety considerations. It is also advisable to work with an experienced strength coach who can make sure that all safety measures are in place. Technique is crucial in weight training; if it is done incorrectly, the athlete risks injury. Athletes should never train by themselves, and they should always have a spotter when working with weights.

CALF RAISES

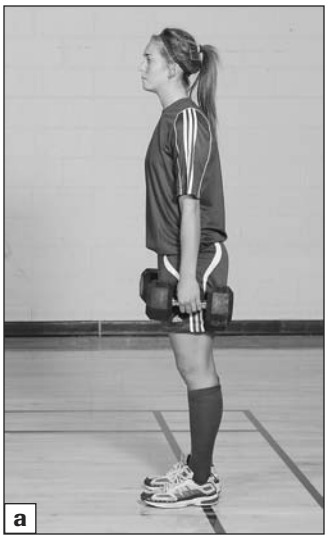
Begin standing on an elevated surface so that your heels are lower than your toes. Rise up onto your toes using only the strength of your calf muscles. Pause at the top of each rep and lower yourself slowly back to the start position until you feel a stretch in your calves. Do not bounce at the top or bottom.

STEP-UPS

You will need a 12-16 inch (1/3 meter) box for this exercise, or you can use the bottom row of a bleacher. Begin standing on the ground with a dumbbell in each hand with both arms hanging at your sides. Step up onto the box leading with the right leg and follow with the left leg until you are fully on top of the box. Step down with the left leg leading and the right leg following. Alternate which leg leads with every rep. Maintain erect posture throughout the exercise.

LUNGES

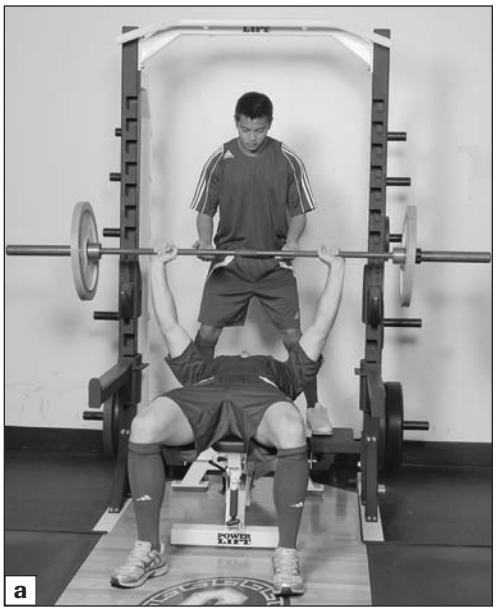
Stand upright, holding dumbbells in both hands with both arms hanging at your sides. Step forward with your right foot and bend your right knee until your right thigh is parallel with the floor. Maintain erect posture: torso near vertical, chest out and shoulders back, and chin up. Push yourself back to a standing position by straightening the right knee. Repeat the lunge with the other leg.


a


b

BENCH PRESS

This can be performed with a barbell, dumbbells, or nautilus type machine. Lie on your back on a flat bench and place your feet flat on the floor. Grasp the weight slightly wider than shoulder width with palms facing away from your body. Begin with arms extended so they are perpendicular to your body. Bend the elbows out to the side of your body and lower the weight under control until it almost touches your chest. Press the weight all the way back up so that the arms are back in the extended starting position. Be sure to keep your back straight throughout the exercise, and do not bounce the weights when lowering or raising them.



INCLINE PRESS

This exercise is the same as the bench press except it is performed while lying on an inclined bench. This can be performed with a barbell, dumbbells, or nautilus type machine. Lie on your back on bench that is inclined 30 to 45 degrees and place your feet flat on the floor. Grasp the weight slightly wider than shoulder width with palms facing away from your body. Begin with arms extended so they are perpendicular to your body. Bend the elbows out to the side of your body and lower the weight under control until it almost touches your chest. Press the weight all the way back up so that the arms are back in the extended starting position. Be sure to keep your back straight throughout the exercise, and do not bounce the weights when lowering or raising them.


a


b

SHOULDER PRESS

Use dumbbells for this exercise. Sit with erect posture on a bench with support behind your back and place both feet flat on the floor. Grip the weights with palms facing away from your body. Begin with the elbows bent by your sides and the weights near your shoulders. Straighten your arms and press the dumbbells straight over your head until your arms are fully extended. Slowly lower the weights back to the original position.


a


b

Nutrition

What we eat and drink plays a significant role in accomplishing our athletic goals and maximizing our quality of performance. Food provides us with energy, and water is the cornerstone of proper functioning in all of our bodily systems. Without these building blocks, our bodies have a hard time growing. Hard-training athletes must be properly fueled in order to reach their physical potential. With proper nutrition, all of the work that we do in our conditioning programs will pay maximum benefit.

Unfortunately, many athletes are not fully aware of what they are putting into their bodies, or they simply do not know what choices to make to best serve their needs. Misinformation and fad diets abound in magazines, and it can be difficult to tell which have merit. Perhaps the most important thing to know about nutrition is that there simply are no miracles or shortcuts. Good nutrition is about leading a healthy lifestyle and creating consistently proper eating habits. Athletes should not get caught up in the hype of supplements; they simply do not need the stuff. Much of it is unnecessary--just commercial hype. Athletes will achieve the most success by learning how to plan their nutrition and make the best choices possible. This section provides guidance on how to use water and food to optimize the internal environment that is the human body.

Water

The human body needs water to function properly and to grow. Water constitutes 55 to 60 percent of an adult's body weight. It provides the environment in which nearly all the body's activities occur, plays a part in almost all metabolic reactions, lubricates joints, and acts as a shock absorber. Drinking water is even the best treatment for fluid retention (retained fluid shows up as excess weight that players must carry in training and competition): The body tends to hold onto certain substances it lacks or is not supplied with, and as fluid, specifically water, is supplied through the diet, the body tends to let go of any excess it may have been storing. Water also helps maintain proper muscle tone by giving muscles their natural ability to contract.

Thus it is vital that an athlete stay hydrated. Thirst causes us to provide needed water, but it lags behind the body's need. By the time one feels thirsty, the body is already in need of water. As a result, it is important for athletes to include a large amount of water in their diet--6 to 8 cups (about 1.5 to 2 liters) per day. Preferably, the water should be cold, as cold water is absorbed into the system more quickly than warm water (Jane Pentz, *Nutrition Specialist Manual*, 6th edition, LMA Publishing, 2000). The easiest way to stay hydrated is to carry a water bottle and sip from it throughout the day, particularly following workouts. Intense workouts use a large amount of fluid that must be replaced. Caffeine should be avoided altogether. Soda, tea, and coffee are *dehydrating,* thus undercutting one's efforts to provide the body with sufficient water.

Diet

This section gives general guidelines on macronutrients, along with sample menus. Individual application will vary, but the section is intended to provide concrete examples of what and how an athlete should eat in order to optimize training and game performance. For more information, I recommend *Nancy Clark's Sports Nutrition Guidebook* (Human Kinetics, 2008).

Good eating should follow these general guidelines:

Grains (e.g., bread, cereal, rice, pasta)	6 to 11 servings per day
Fruits and vegetables	5 to 9 servings
Meat, beans, eggs	2 or 3 servings
Milk, yogurt, cheese	2 or 3 servings
Fatty foods and sweets	Use sparingly!

These guidelines form a useful tool in planning daily meal allotments. Athletes should remember that they require a higher caloric intake than sedentary individuals and will sometimes benefit from breaking down their diet into carbohydrate, fat, and protein requirements in order to optimize performance gains through nutrition. The following breakdowns are recommended:

Carbohydrate	55% to 60% of daily caloric intake
Fat	20% to 25%
Protein	12% to 20%

Carbohydrate is the first energy source the body will use, and there are two types: simple and complex. Simple carbohydrate is found in fruits, vegetables, and table sugar. Fruit and veggie sugar is different from table sugar in that it can consist of both simple and complex carbohydrate. Complex carbohydrate, which is more readily stored by the body for use as energy, is found in grains (e.g., cereal, bread, pasta, rice), vegetables, and fruit. Eating fruits and vegetables is a good way to get simple carbohydrate. Refined or processed food such as candy and sugar-coated cereals should be avoided as it will quickly spike your energy level, but then drop fast.

Although fat has something of a bad reputation these days, it is an essential nutrient in a diet. The key is to choose the right sources of fat. Examples of foods with high fat content are cheese, oil, butter, whole milk or ice cream, bacon, and sausage. Athletes should avoid fried foods and foods high in animal fat—that is, saturated fat and trans fat—and look instead to get their fat from cheeses, nuts, milk, and unsaturated oils such as olive oil. Be aware that many cheeses and whole milk contain animal fat, and if they are part of your diet, then you should choose reduced fat dairy products.

Protein is the third macronutrient. It consists of amino acids, considered to be the building blocks of muscle. In fact, protein is so essential for building muscle

that the body will break it down and use it for energy only if no other source of energy can be found. Good (lean) sources of protein are fish, chicken, lean beef, beans, and eggs.

Carbohydrate and protein provide 4 calories per gram of food, while fat provides 9 calories per gram. Athletes should be aware of their daily caloric intake. Though it may not be necessary to count calories on an ongoing basis, it is a good exercise to do when one first gets serious about nutrition as an important part of training. Reading labels of prepared foods is another important exercise.

Eating regular meals and snacks is essential to maintaining optimal energy and fitness levels. Skipping meals is *not* recommended, since it causes the body to begin using muscle as fuel. Breakfast is especially important, since skipping it forces the body to go 18 hours (from one evening to lunchtime the next day) without fuel. If a person does not have time to eat a complete breakfast, it should still be possible to eat 400 or 500 calories in fruit and bread. In addition to meals and snacks, it is important to consume a small amount of carbohydrate and electrolyte after a workout to replenish what was lost. Eating 200 to 400 calories of an energy bar, bread, or fruit will help the body recover and allow it to get on with building muscle.

Breakfast should generally consist of grains—that is, carbohydrate. A bit of protein in the form of eggs is not a bad choice, either. Lunch should be a more balanced meal, with some protein and some carbohydrate, and it should include fruits and vegetables. The contemporary American diet is woefully lacking in fruits and vegetables, and lunch is a good time to get them. Snacks should also consist largely of these nutrient-filled foods. Finally, dinner should involve mostly carbohydrate in the form of bread, potatoes, pasta, and vegetables, along with some protein. Table 7.1 offers good food choices for each meal and for snacks. Tables 7.2–7.4 provide sample daily meal plans that incorporate healthful foods. They should be used as a starting point for athletes learning how to plan their own meals. And it is worth remembering that eating a variety of foods keeps a person from getting bored and also provides a wide range of nutrients.

Table 7.1 Good Food Choices for Meals and Snacks

Breakfast	Lunch	Dinner	Snacks
Pancakes, waffles, or French toast with syrup but no butter	Baked potato (toppings limited to a little butter or low-fat ranch dressing instead of sour cream)	Rice	Fruits
Egg sandwich (egg on bread)	Green salad with low-fat or light dressing	Pasta with marinara sauce or light oil	Fruit juice (100% fruit)
Toast and jelly	Turkey, chicken, or lean roast beef sandwich (lots of veggies but light on mayo and cheese)	Potatoes (baked or broiled, with no fatty preparations)	Breads
Bagels (light on the cream cheese—honey or jelly can be used instead)	Pasta with marinara or meat sauce	Vegetables	Yogurt
Low-fat yogurt	Baked or broiled lean meats	Baked, broiled, or grilled lean meat	Pretzels
Cereal (in a bowl or bar)	Broth-based soups		
Fruit	Veggie pizza (cheese okay in limited amount)		
No bacon, sausage, or cheese	Pretzels		

Table 7.2 4,000-Calorie Sample Menu

	Serving	Calories	Carbohydrate calories	Fat calories	Protein calories
Breakfast					
Raisin bran	1 cup	139	120	5	14
Bagel	1	198	152	18	28
Cantaloupe	1/2 medium	92	81	3	8
Hash browns	1 cup	362	180	163	19
Poached egg	1	80	2	52	26
Wheat bread	2 slices	127	92	14	21
Jam	1 tbsp	115	112	2	1
Orange juice	250 ml (8 oz.)	111	100	4	7
Skim milk	375 ml (12 oz.)	131	75	3	53
Meal totals		**1355**	**914**	**264**	**177**
Lunch					
Orange juice	250 ml (8 oz.)	111	100	4	7
Diet soda	375 ml (12 oz.)	0	0	0	0
Fruit cocktail	1 cup	207	200	3	4
Green beans, cooked	1/2 cup	19	14	1	4
Mixed vegetables	1/2 cup	64	50	2	12
Spaghetti with meatballs	1 cup	334	155	105	74
Dinner roll	2	233	156	54	23
Reduced-fat cheese	90 g (3 oz.)	154	7	59	88
Sweet potato, baked	1	120	112	0	8
Meal totals		**1242**	**794**	**228**	**220**
Dinner					
Tea	375 ml (12 oz.)	3	3	0	0
Baked potato	2 medium	296	260	4	32
Peas, canned	1/2 cup	70	51	3	16
Steak, lean	150 g (5 oz.)	284	0	108	176
Whole wheat bread	2 slices	191	145	18	28
Gelatin with fruit	1 cup	194	115	68	11
Meal totals		**1038**	**574**	**201**	**263**
Snacks					
Apple	1	105	96	9	0
Chocolate pudding	1 cup	320	216	72	32
Meal Totals		**425**	**312**	**81**	**32**
Daily totals		**4060**	**2594 (64%)**	**774 (19%)**	**692 (17%)**

Table 7.3 3,000-Calorie Sample Menu

	Serving	Calories	Carbohydrate calories	Fat calories	Protein calories
Breakfast					
Scrambled egg	2	164	8	108	48
Oatmeal	1 cup	142	100	18	24
Raisins	1/4 cup	111	105	1	5
Orange juice	250 ml (8 oz.)	111	100	4	7
Bagel	1	198	152	18	28
Skim milk	375 ml (12 oz.)	131	75	3	53
Meal totals		**857**	**540**	**152**	**165**
Lunch					
Turkey, light	250 g (8 oz.)	142	0	30	112
Lettuce	1 piece	2	2	0	0
Tomato	3 slices	10	8	0	2
Mustard	1 tsp	4	1	2	1
Pita bread	1	165	132	9	24
Yogurt, low-fat	1 cup	230	172	18	40
Beef noodle soup	2 cups	274	114	97	63
Fruit punch drink	375 ml (12 oz.)	176	176	0	0
Meal totals		**1003**	**605**	**156**	**242**
Dinner					
Ham, lean	200 g (7 oz.)	290	0	95	195
Collard greens	1 cup	28	20	0	8
Cornbread	1 piece, medium	116	104	0	12
Black-eyed peas	1 cup	201	140	9	52
Wild rice	1 cup	223	191	5	27
Carrots, raw	1 cup	53	44	3	6
Water	375 ml (12 oz.)	0	0	0	0
Meal totals		**911**	**499**	**112**	**300**
Snacks					
Fig bars	4	212	168	36	8
Banana	1	107	100	2	5
Meal totals		**319**	**268**	**38**	**13**
Daily totals		**3090**	**1912 (62%)**	**458 (15%)**	**720 (23%)**

Table 7.4 2,000-Calorie Sample Menu

	Serving	Calories	Carbohydrate calories	Fat calories	Protein calories
Breakfast					
Grape-Nuts cereal	1/4 cup	104	92	0	12
Skim milk	175 ml (6 oz.)	69	38	4	27
Whole wheat bread	2 slices	129	94	14	21
Margarine	2 pats	70	0	70	0
Cantaloupe	1/2 medium	91	80	3	8
Meal totals		**463**	**304**	**91**	**68**
Lunch					
Corn tortillas	3	207	156	27	24
Ground beef, lean	90 g (3 oz.)	228	0	144	84
Lettuce	1/4 cup	6	6	0	0
Tomato	1 medium	40	32	0	8
Onion	1/4 cup	16	14	0	2
Spanish rice	1 1/2 cup	200	149	35	16
Root beer	375 ml (12 oz.)	155	155	0	0
Meal totals		**852**	**512**	**206**	**134**
Dinner					
Scallops, steamed	125 g (4 oz.)	120	0	14	106
Whole wheat roll	2	191	145	18	28
Broccoli	1 cup	57	32	9	16
Baked potato	1 medium	224	204	0	20
Corn	1 ear	97	76	9	12
Tea	375 ml (12 oz.)	3	3	0	0
Meal totals		**692**	**460**	**50**	**182**
Snacks					
Reduced-fat cheese	60 g (2 oz.)	102	4	40	58
Grapes	30	61	49	8	4
Meal totals		**163**	**53**	**48**	**62**
Daily totals		**2170**	**1329 (61%)**	**395 (18%)**	**446 (21%)**

CHAPTER 8

Practice Sessions

High-quality, interesting, and informative practice sessions are the lifeline for all programs. If a team does a good job in this area, good things are going to happen. I don't know how many times I've heard players complain about how boring practice has been (not talking about my own sessions, of course!). Naturally, players have to spend a lot of time improving their technical ability, which does require a lot of repetition, and for some players it's a tedious process. There is no reason it should be. With a little imagination, skills can be presented in different ways to create variety in a session. This chapter offers advice to both players and coaches on approaching practice, setting up a practice session, and organizing it. Practice sessions are seasonal and thus will change, sometimes considerably, depending on the time of year, so the chapter also addresses modifying a session to meet players' current needs.

Players' Attitudes Toward Practice

Even before they attend their first practice session, players have to realize they will get out of a session only what they put into it. It's all about attitude. Players have to maintain a positive attitude toward the session and work hard at whatever is being asked of them. It is the players' responsibility to go to every training session and attempt to make it the best one they have ever done—every time! They should not settle for second best.

Several years ago I was fortunate enough to coach an Under-16 (Olympic development) national team at an international tournament in France. A week before traveling, the team met for a 3-day coaching session at the IMG Academies in Florida. What impressed me about those boys was not so much their ability, though it was good, but more their attitude. It struck me then, as it still does today, that there was a reason those boys were representing their country, and it was far more than just their talent. I have seen many players who had more talent than some of those boys but were nowhere near as good. That group never had to be told anything twice. They listened intently to everything said to them; in fact, they were like insatiable sponges unable to get enough information. Every minute of every session was special to them. They cared and strived for perfection. That's why they were at the top.

Players should understand that it is the coach who picks the team, and that players need to make a positive impression on that coach in order to be selected. Again, this sometimes takes more than sheer ability. A coach can be very influenced by seeing a player always pay attention when he speaks. Players should look him in the eye when he talks. They should do their best to be in the top group in fitness sessions, and when the coach asks for help in setting up the field for the session, they should be available and eager. All these traits make a difference in how a coach perceives a player—perhaps even the crucial difference in getting selected.

It is possible to work very hard, yet retain the ability to be lighthearted and find amusing moments. Training sessions need a positive atmosphere, which is a major ingredient for successful learning. So how do we get it? It takes effort from both sides—player and coach—but having a sense of humor and a pleasant demeanor is a good way to begin. A session must include fun; it cannot be deadly serious the whole time. Players and coaches should be able to smile at each other and not take mistakes too seriously. In fact, players *have to* make mistakes to get better. I prefer players who are amused easily and play with smiles on their faces because it improves the atmosphere and makes for a more enjoyable session, and I believe players get much more out of it.

In the end, though, it is up to each player to get mentally prepared for the training session, and this requires effort, mental toughness, and focus. Players must not allow themselves to go into any session with a casual approach. Though it is sometimes difficult, they should approach each training session with the same focus they bring to a game. Coaches who demand nothing but a player's

best—and who see to it that everything is done well every time—will help players in this quest.

Elements of Practice

Most of the time, when I walk up to a training session and the players are there before me, it is a fair bet that one of two things is happening: Either they are sitting around doing nothing, or they are shooting on goal. At least with the latter, some soccer activity is taking place, but neither is what I really want. The easy way to ensure a productive beginning in a coaching session is for the coach to arrive early and have the session already set up so that it can begin on time. When players arrive, they can immediately change their shoes and be told by the coach how best to get ready for the session. Possibilities include jogging, stretching, and doing individual ball work. In fact, it is best if the coach puts a system in place so that players understand what is expected of them if they arrive early at practice. And coaches should have the session ready to go and begin on time!

Over the years, I have been asked to do many clinics for teams and players, and I am always shocked when asked to do a 3-hour session. I do not believe that even a highly motivated professional can concentrate for that length of time. Practice should be about quality, not quantity, and after countless training sessions over the years I have settled on 90 minutes as the optimal length. A coach should end a session even sooner if the practice quality has deteriorated and he cannot motivate the group to get it back. There is no point in training if players are getting little out of it—all that does is risk a silly injury. I would recommend a clinic last no longer than two hours. It may be necessary to go a little longer than ninety minutes during the pre and early season stages while players are building fitness and getting organized.

The same basic structure should apply to all training sessions: a warm-up segment, followed by a tactical and technical section, and, to end the session, some type of game. Depending on the time of year and the level of play, it might also be necessary to do a fitness session. Most of the time, this should be done at the very end of the training, but on occasion it can be done on the front end in order to simulate late-game fatigue in the practice game at the end of the session. Fatigue is the main cause of mistakes on the field, and a fitness session at the beginning will help a coach and player gain awareness of this problem and perhaps prepare better for handling it in actual games. However, since the quality of the practice will drop considerably when fitness is done at the beginning, it is not a good idea to take this approach on a regular basis.

The worst sessions are usually the ones where too much time (or even a whole session) is spent on technical drills. When this approach is coupled with the fact that coaches like to talk—which stops the session much too

often—players might be left feeling like they are getting very little out of a session, and they will most likely lose interest before the end. Thus it is advisable to allow time for game play toward the end of a session. Players love to play the game, and they will learn a lot just by doing that; in addition, they will at least get enjoyment from this segment even if the rest of the session has been a bore. Find time to play a game every practice session, even if it is only for a few minutes.

Warm-Up: 15 Minutes

The purpose of warming up is to increase the heart rate and get blood flowing to the muscles so they are loose and ready to perform. Players should not be fatigued by the warm-up, but they certainly should have a sweat on. Warming up can include stretching, jogging, and, if possible, an activity related to the main theme of the session. If you are not incorporating the dynamic stretching systems, and are using static stretches, then at least do some jogging before going into the stretches. Stretching cold muscles can be detrimental. Many coaches and players also like to incorporate "keep-away" games, where players are asked to complete as many passes as they can within a confined area (see chapter 3) in their warm-up sessions.

Static stretching involves stretching a particular body part without any movement, typically while sitting on the ground. In contrast, dynamic stretching, where the muscle is put through a range of movement while being stretched, has been found much more effective in preparing the muscles for soccer activity because it is much more explosive in nature. Whatever technique is used, players should make sure they have loosened their main muscle and ligament groups and raised their heart rates before proceeding.

Main Theme: 30 Minutes

The coach should select one topic for the session and focus on it exclusively. He should avoid getting sidetracked into other problem areas. It is always tempting to try to correct all problems at once, but this can lead to information overload and far too much stoppage of the game. I suggest that during the early season, coaches systematically go through the technical and tactical areas that they think need to be covered, perhaps beginning with passing and ball control, then moving through the various technical skills of the game.

As the season progresses, these sessions need to be related to correcting problems the team has encountered in the previous game. Sessions can also be used to help prepare the team for an upcoming game by making tactical adjustments. Themes can vary widely. Table 8.1 lists problems that may arise, along with possible session themes to help players solve those problems.

It is also helpful to use this time with the team to cover potential game scenarios: How would the team react if trailing 1-0 with 15 minutes to go? What would the coach want the players to do, and how would they play? What if they

Table 8.1 Suggestions for Themed Sessions

Problem	Possible themes
Not enough ball possession	• Passing: keep-away sessions or conditioned games such as two-touch • Technique sessions on passing • Good support play, creating angles to receive the ball • When to play long and when to play short
Too few goal-scoring opportunities	• Correct movement off the ball • Penetration down the flanks • Penetration down the middle • Crossing • Runs in the box • Shooting
Poor ball control	• Technical work on ball control • Quality of the first touch • Ball control both under and away from pressure • Mandatory two-touch (forces players to work on a good first touch)
Incorrect team shape	• Shadow play • Playing positions in mandatory segments of the field (players must play only within a designated area)
Weak defense	• Individual defending technique • Team defending in segments (back defenders, midfielders, and forwards) • Team defending as a whole unit • When to tackle and when not to • Heading

are reduced to 10 players? Or winning 1-0 as time winds down? Many times over the years I have regretted being less prepared for this last scenario than I should have been. Every player and every coach has had the displeasure of blowing a 1-0 lead late in the match by doing all the wrong things, only to see the other team tie or even win the game. It is well worth the time and effort to be prepared for *all* potential situations by covering them well in practice. Every player will know her roles and responsibilities for various scenarios, which allows a much better response in the game than having the coach scream instructions and try to make adjustments on the fly.

Game-Related Play: 30 to 40 Minutes

Players love to play the game, and I believe in allowing the team to play some type of game every day. This does not mean they simply play an unrestricted 11v11 game (though it is beneficial to do this once a week if the facility is available), but this activity should involve some form of competitive play, even if it is just a

small-sided 5v5 game. Small-sided games (using full-sized goals) are excellent for game development. The reduced player count allows for more touches on the ball, and players still get the full benefits of a regular game, both tactically and technically. The full-sized goals allow all players to practice shooting, and they can never do enough of that, since, in the end, the game is about scoring goals. The coach should be wary of spending too much time on keep-away drills, where there is often no direction or end product of the game.

Small-sided games can be used to develop almost any skill or tactic. Coaching can easily be done in this format (versus the often overly elaborate drill setup); this approach is simple but very effective, with plenty of learning going on. For example, the coach can integrate the theme of the day into 5v5 game play. The key might be something as simple as a two-touch regulation, if the theme is passing. Or it might be much more complex if the theme is a tactical issue from a recent game. Perhaps the team struggled to score goals, so the emphasis is on having wingers cross the ball into the goal mouth and having strikers make late runs to "get on the end" of the cross and put the ball in the net. Whatever the problem, it can be covered in the 5v5 game.

Integrating a theme into game play can begin at a very basic level. The coach might break a particular skill or tactic into its fundamentals, requiring players to start with partner practice or even solo work. The intensity can then be slowly built up into more gamelike situations by adding numbers and conditions, so that players are performing it in the midst of more distractions. Begin with small numbers, achieve some success, and then increase the difficulty. As the numbers increase, so does the difficulty, and incremental increases in size may be best, perhaps from 3v3 to 5v5, to 8v8, to 11v11, always working on the same skill. Success in the small-sided environment will not guarantee the same progress and success in the full-sided game, so care should be taken to progress as slowly as needed.

Fitness

Finally, a session should address the issue of fitness. After all, a 90-minute soccer game played with effort requires a high fitness level. If a team trains and plays with intensity, the players will *maintain* their fitness level with minimal extra work. Preseason work, however, focuses on *achieving* the base fitness level; once game-level fitness has been reached, fitness work can then be kept to one or two sessions a week, depending on game schedule. Extra fitness work should not be done during the 2 or 3 days just before a game. Here are some fitness activities that can easily be incorporated into a practice session.

Shuttle Runs This activity works on endurance with speed. Place six cones 5 yards (about 4.5 meters) apart, for a total distance of 25 yards (about 23 meters). Two players can work together with this set of cones; thus, a group of 16 players will need eight rows of cones. One player is timed as he runs to each cone and back without stopping. The run should be completed inside 32 seconds. The

player then rests as his partner runs. The coach should decide how many reps each player does; I usually set a target of 10. If a player does not succeed in the allotted time, the coach decides what consequences should apply. The allotted time should be adjusted to the level of athlete.

Acceleration Runs This activity involves excellent speed work. The best distance is probably 60 yards (about 55 meters). Players should slowly accelerate to the 60-yard mark, running at quarter-pace for the first 15 yards, half-pace for the second 15, three-quarter pace for the next 15, and finally full sprint for the last 15. They should jog or walk back for recovery. Repetitions are decided by the coach but should be in the range of 6 to 12.

Full-Field Runs This is endurance work using the length of the soccer field, probably 110 to120 yards (about 100 to 110 meters). All players should run at once, with a target time of perhaps 25 seconds, then jog back to the starting point in 35 seconds. If they get back early, they may stop and rest. Each run will proceed on the 60-second mark, decreasing by 1 second each round. Thus the next run would be inside 24 seconds with a 36-second recovery, then 23 seconds with a 37-second recovery, and so on. Reps are decided by the coach or determined by ability level.

Pavlovs This activity involves endurance and speed work. It is a partner activity, with each partner standing on the halfway line, outside the field of play and on opposite sides from each other. The coach may wish to partner a stronger runner with a weaker one to make the teams more equal. This exercise is not timed. On the whistle, the first partner runs halfway around field on the outside of the lines (i.e., outside the field of play) until he touches his partner's hand on the other side of the field. The partner then takes off on her half-field run (again, outside the field), while the first partner jog-recovers across the middle of the field along the halfway line. He needs to be back at his original starting point by the time his partner (the second runner) arrives to touch his hand. The process is repeated, as partner 1 begins his second rep while partner 2 jog-recovers back across the middle to her starting point. Reps are decided by the coach.

European Drills This endurance activity is an all-time favorite used by many coaches. Paired up and running in two lines close to each other, the group runs on the outside of the field, constantly doing laps. The activity is controlled by the coach, who runs with the players. It is a timed run that should probably go for 20 minutes without stopping. The coach integrates a variety of activities into the run. He can slow the pace, increase it, or add push-ups, squat thrusts, piggyback runs, and so on. The point is to integrate many different physical activities and challenges intermingled with the run.

Lappers This is very much an endurance activity, disliked by players because it is tough to do, but quite useful. As in the European drills, players are partnered

and running in two lines, but here the group is also split in half at the middle point of the pack. At the coach's command, players in the front half of the pack take off as fast as they can go. They must stay outside of the field lines. The second half of the pack continues its jogging pace, also outside the field. The first pack continues to run as hard as they can until they catch up to the jogging pack a lap or two later. They will arrive into the back of the jogging pack. When the whole group is back together, the second group, now at the front, follows the same procedure the first group did, running as hard as they can until they catch up with the first group, who have been jog-recovering from their first run. Thus 1 rep is completed. Reps are decided by the coach, and 2 or 3 will likely be enough.

Cool-Down: 10 Minutes

A cool-down can consist of light jogging and stretching, which help remove lactic acid from the muscle groups (it is the buildup of lactic acid that causes muscle soreness the next day). It is important not to neglect this activity, especially after a particularly hard physical session. More experienced players should be capable of doing this cool-down themselves, but it is not a bad idea for a coach to direct this session too.

Coaching During Practice

To begin with, understand the difference between "coaching" and "directing" the session. Directing requires information to be given throughout the whole session about how to set up and do various activities. This is basic leadership and organization of the session by the coach. On the other hand, coaching is providing information to the player about how, why, and when to do an activity. This is normally provided in the theme section of the session but will likely carry over into the game play.

Once in the coaching phase of the session, coaches must be careful not to give too much information, and, in particular, not to try covering too many topics. Rather than giving in to the temptation of trying to correct all problems at once, the coach should focus a session on one or two predetermined topics. Overcoaching can be a huge problem. Many coaches simply talk too much, offer too much advice, and constantly stop the game so that there is very little flow. It is better to let the kids play the game, and the younger they are, the more they need to play—and the less they need to stand and listen.

A soccer player who is challenged can make only two kinds of decisions: good ones and bad ones. It is a coach's job to stop the game when necessary, *explain* to the player why he made a given decision, and, if it was a bad one, offer an alternative. This is coaching: being able to recognize a problem, then efficiently articulate and demonstrate a solution to the team or player. Any visual

Successful coaches allow players to play the game during practice but are also prepared to analyze drill performance and make corrections when necessary.

aid the coach can provide for the player will be helpful, and I have found that the "stop-and-freeze" technique works well. When the coach sees a situation that needs to be discussed, he stops the game with a whistle and insists that the players freeze on the spot. This is like taking a snapshot of the action, and it allows the coach to visually point out a specific problem. Used correctly, this is a great tool.

One common misconception is that coaching is all about setting up appropriate drills for a specific theme, then letting the drills *be* the session. If that were the case, coaching would be easy: Just buy a book of drills, explain them to the team, and let them work it out for themselves. In reality, coaches must be prepared to analyze performances in the drill, stop it when appropriate,

and make necessary corrections. With this in mind, it is best to resist the urge to spend long periods of time on drills, especially if they are repetitive. It must be understood that a specific drill is only a means to an end. It is just the beginning.

Many of the problems and issues a coach has to address in practice are game-related, but not all. Some problems emerge off the field, and if not corrected they can hurt performance on it. Fixing problems on the field is a multitask problem, but if a coach goes about it in a systematic fashion, it is not as difficult as it seems. A team's program should cover these basic needs: fitness-related, technical, tactical, and psychological. Problems will arise in any of these areas, and a coach should be able to identify problems and set forth a program for correcting them—one at a time! The type of correction is often determined by the level of play. Less experienced players will need more time on technical matters, whereas more experienced ones will deal with tactical issues.

Seasonal Practice Sessions

The season needs to be broken into four segments: preseason, early regular season, late regular season, and, if relevant, postseason. The material covered and the activities used in these segments will differ as the needs of players and of the team as a whole change throughout the season. Early on, the coach might think in terms of quantity of work so that players will have a workable base level of fitness, then shift toward a quality focus later on so that the team is sharp.

Preseason

The purpose of the preseason is to achieve two major objectives: build a fitness level that provides a good base for the season, and begin the on-field organization process for the season. In some cases, there will be the additional need to select and identify players. The length of the preseason depends on many factors, some of which are out of the players' and coaches' hands. The starting date for the preseason is typically affected by issues including availability of players and facilities, family commitments, coach's schedule, and rules of the relevant soccer association. Generally speaking, the longer the preseason the better, not so much to allow more fitness work but to be able to work at a slower pace. Crowding a preseason fitness schedule into a few days is an invitation to injury. If fitness work is too intense—if too much is done too soon—the body will break down. A good time to start training is 2 to 3 weeks before the season. Coaches might try to cram several sessions into a day, which, again is not a good idea. The maximum should be two sessions, with some days involving only one. (This number may have to vary due to individual circumstances.)

The preseason can be a brutal time of year for players. Physical demands are high, and sessions can be painful and fatiguing. The key is to come into the preseason prepared. It helps if the coach has posted or forwarded to players a fitness schedule to be followed in the lead-up to the preseason, but even if not, players can still prepare themselves for preseason with a fitness regime of their own. It should begin with distance running to work on aerobic capacity, then move toward interval training (shorter distances that involve changes of speed, intensity, and distance). These sessions may go as long as 2 hours; going longer typically diminishes quality and increases the risk of injury.

I am a big believer in fitness work with a ball, which serves well in two ways. First, it is easier to get more fitness work from players if there is a ball involved, because it tends to distract them from the unpleasantness of the work. Second, it provides some technical training, since the ball is involved. It will be necessary to do some fitness work without the ball, since using a ball can reduce the speed and intensity of the activity. I suggest that initially 50 percent of the work be done with the ball. Integrating the ball into fitness work is not hard; it just requires a little imagination. It can be as simple as doing 5 reps of a 20-yard (about 18-yard) run ending with a shot on goal, or 30 jumps heading a ball back to a partner on each elevation, which is great leg work. One activity my players dread, because it is quite fatiguing, is to place one player on the outside of each side of a 10-yard (9-meter) box, with two more players in the middle of the box. The two in the box play 1v1 soccer, using the players on the outside as passing outlets. The aim is for either player in the middle to keep possession as long as possible by dribbling or passing to the outside players, who are always supporting the player with the ball. The game goes for 60 seconds, after which two more players replace them. Doing several reps gives players a considerable workout.

This time of the season is also a perfect opportunity to put your players through a battery of physical tests to assess speed, agility, and endurance. This information can tell a coach a great deal: Who is the quickest? The fittest? The strongest? Such information can help the coach select players for the team. I tend to rank players with these scores and post them, so that players know where they stand in relation to the rest of the team and where they need to improve. I also file the scores, so that if a player returns I can compare results from one year to the next. I use a battery of five tests and do one of these every other day.

Cooper Test I use a simple adaptation of this test that is basically a 2-mile run within a given amount of time. We use 12 minutes as the target, but this would be too fast for younger players. Each coach should set his own target time based on age, but in the end the time is less important than who finishes where.

Stinkers Two flags are posted 40 yards (about 37 meters) apart. Each player teams up with a partner, and they time each other's runs. Each player runs

around the flags (there and back) 4 times, then rests while her partner runs. They alternate for 3 reps, and each player's times are then combined for an overall result.

4-8-4 Test A player runs 400 yards (about 365 meters) with a 5-minute rest, 800 yards (about 730 meters) with another 5-minute rest, then another 400 yards. The three times are combined for a complete score.

Beep Test This is a repetitive 20-yard (about 18-meter) run marked out by two cones and prompted by a repeating beep that begins slowly but gets more frequent with every 8 runs. The player runs from one cone to the other on every beep. Players are eliminated when they cannot complete the repetition on pace with the beep. This activity requires a prepared recording that is readily available via soccer catalogs and stores; it may be worth the trouble of finding one.

40 Yards Times 10 These are simple 40-yard (37-meter) sprints with no set recovery time. The coach records the player's quickest time and the combined total of all 10 times. As the fitness base is being established, the coach needs to begin preparing his team technically and tactically. This can be done simultaneously, although fatigue from fitness sessions limits the level of quality the coach can expect from a coaching or technical session. Time restraints for most coaches preclude sessions that are purely fitness-based, so a combination of fitness and coaching will probably be necessary. Once the fitness base has been established (about 2 weeks in), the coach's priority should switch to preparing the team for the season tactically and technically, with maintenance fitness sessions interspersed from time to time.

Early Regular Season

This period will probably last through the first five or six games of the season, assuming a 20-game season. It is a continuation of preseason work but with fewer fitness activities and less endurance work. Sessions during this phase should be limited to approximately 90 minutes, since the preseason work to build up players' base fitness levels has been completed. Each session should still be very intense.

This is the time to get players to play within the tactical organization of the team's system. This work probably began during preseason, but the bulk of team preparation should be done during this early part of the regular season. Players should work hard on team play, spending much time on both defensive and attacking principles. I prefer to begin with defending and spend as long as needed on this area before moving on to attacking principles. Game days will begin to interfere with coaching sessions, and it is best also not to do much on the day before a game. However, if the team is not fully prepared—and in the early season it is likely not to be—then some compromises have to be made.

An extra segment of the season, referred to as midseason, could be carved out after several games have been played. It would serve as an interim period

between the early and late regular season periods and would involve characteristics of both.

Late Regular Season

This period involves the last few games of the regular season. The exact number depends on how many games the team plays, but in any case it definitely refers to a time when the coach should have an established starting 11 and a settled team. These sessions should be tailored to the current state of the team. If the team is successful and winning games, then very few changes will be needed; the team should mainly keep doing things as usual. If all is not well, and the team is not firing on all cylinders, then changes need to be made. For the most part, tactical sessions will now be less frequent because it is more important to make sure players are physically ready for the next game.

It is important to make sure players are healthy and revitalized for the next game. Fatigue and injury will play a part, as long seasons do take a toll. It is more important to rest a player and allow him to recover than it is to ask that player to participate in a hard training session. Oftentimes, a coach might hold a light training session for some players and a more difficult one for others. During preseason and early season training, all players tend to be equally fit, but as the season progresses those who play less will go backward and fall behind the rest, especially in terms of fitness. The only solution is to do extra fitness and training sessions with this group. In my program, the day after a game, the players who played a significant part in the game are required only to jog, stretch, and possibly do some light ball work. The remaining group has a normal practice session, perhaps even including some fitness work. This split can be a challenge for the coach, because the motivation level of players in this group may well be down. They need to be challenged, not forgotten, and it is important to attend to their needs, because their participation at a competitive level is crucial during the latter part of the season. Their role is to help the starting team get sharp for possible postseason play, and they must be helped to realize that this role is every bit as important as anyone's in the starting 11.

Postseason

This is the time of year that everybody plays for. Being here probably means the team has been successful and is now playing for bigger and better things. This is the really fun part of the year, something I always look forward to. It makes all the hard work well worth it.

Interestingly enough, some teams get better as the season goes on and consistently do well in the postseason, while others seem to fail at this stage. Although the quality of players can have a lot to do with this dichotomy, training sessions can affect it as well. Some coaches are very good at getting their teams to play well at just the right time. It is important for coaches to try to peak

their teams at this time of year, to enable them to play their best soccer of the year in the postseason. The main principle is to avoid overworking them. Rest can be more effective than anything. The coach must decide carefully when to do a practice session, making sure that any higher-intensity work takes place well before game day. I would suggest that teams need at least 2 or 3 days of light workouts before a big game, with attention also given to lifestyle habits during this period.

When the team does practice, it is quality, not quantity, that is essential. The coach must demand nothing but the best from her players and stop the practice if she is not getting it. As soon as the quality drops, she should finish the session. Most of what can happen at this stage is bad, with frustration setting in, and perhaps a key player getting injured. The coach must help players stay sharp, alert, and focused on doing things well.

Speed work, not endurance, is needed at this point. After a grueling season, players' game fitness should be solid. Sharpness of play is now vital, because it can make the difference between winning and losing games. If the team is sharper than the opponent, it is more likely to win the game. The coach should insist that everything be done quickly, and quick short runs should be encouraged at the end of practice, with plenty of rest time between runs. This is not the time to fatigue the players. They will be tired enough from the long season.

Off-Season

This is always an interesting time of year, because each player has different needs and desires during this period, and it is impossible to suggest a general approach that is best. Without question, some complete rest from soccer is critical in order to avoid getting stale, and I believe players should have a few weeks of break time. This does not necessarily mean that they should do nothing physically, and playing another sport or doing another activity would be okay.

I do have a concern about today's youth players, particularly the better ones. I believe they are being forced to play too much. It is not unusual for a player to have high school soccer in the fall, with practice every night and games once or twice a week, plus possible weekend involvement with a local club team (which might include games). Typically, once the high school season finishes, club ball begins, often going from late fall through the spring. Throughout this time, some of these same players may participate in an Olympic development program (an extra activity involving representing one's state, region, or national team), which also involves more practice and games. That could then be followed by Super Y-League play, which runs all summer. This is too much soccer. It may be best to take a break in the summer and avoid the temptation to do everything. Players' needs vary—some enjoy playing almost year-round,

while others need a break—but no player should truly play year-round. It is detrimental in the end.

Depending on the length of the break, players should begin getting ready for the new season about 2 to 3 weeks before it begins. They will probably need to do this on their own, but their local coaches should be able to help them with suggestions.

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CHAPTER 9

Matches

After the hard work of selecting and preparing the team, match day finally comes around, and for most of us this is what it's all about. I don't think there is a bigger thrill than match day for either the player or the coach. With it, however, come all the pressures of feeling the need to win. While fun and enjoyment are integral to playing the sport, in the end it is about the result. All players, no matter at what level they are playing, go into each game with the objective of winning. I have not met a player yet that starts a game with the goal of losing. Match day is when a team's winning attitude and preparation are put into practice. This chapter covers game-day routine for both the individual player and the team, and it discusses how a coach can prepare a game-day strategy for her team itself, as well as one for playing against the day's opponent. The chapter also looks at

the types of adjustments that both the team and the individual player might have to make in order to win the game.

Game-Day Routine

Game-day routines can vary considerably, depending on the age and level of the team. They are also affected by whether the team is playing at home or on the road. But no matter what the situation is, some form of routine is necessary. Human beings are generally creatures of habit and feel much more secure when in a comfortable, regular environment doing familiar activities. Routine helps create a comfort zone and, without question, better prepares players mentally for the task at hand. Game-day routine has two facets: the individual's routine, which should begin at least the day before the match, and the team's pregame routine, normally set by the coach.

Individual Routine

An individual player's routine should begin with a good night's sleep for the two nights leading up to a competition. It's also a good idea to get game equipment packed the day before so that it doesn't become a stress factor immediately before leaving for the game. The pregame routine should be kept as calm as possible, with no surprises. Cleaning one's boots the night before gets the mind focused on the upcoming game. It might sound somewhat old-fashioned, but it does have a positive mental effect, and if nothing else the player will look good on game day! Players should also pay close attention to what they eat, even on the day before the game. It is best to stay away from greasy foods such as burgers and bacon and focus instead on lean foods that provide good amounts of carbohydrate and protein.

On the day of the game, players should do what feels comfortable to them. The idea is, if it works, stick with it. Each player has his own idiosyncratic ways of preparing psychologically for a game. Some players like to listen to certain types of music, whereas others prefer quiet. I have known players who like to sit by themselves and visualize how they are going to play the game. Some stay busy, while others like to rest. I coached an All-American player (later drafted to the MLS) who got upset if he could not fit in a nap 3 or 4 hours before the game. To each his or her own.

Sometimes a player's game-day routine is not working; she does not feel mentally or physically ready for the game. This often indicates a lack of mental readiness, but not always. It may be that the pregame warm-up (though for the most part this will be a team routine) is not quite right for the player and needs to be tweaked. She may need to stretch longer than the rest of the team, or do more sprints, or be on the field warming up earlier. Each player should find the routine that works best for her, even if it means experimenting a little.

Team Routine

A team's routine can start the day before a match. I have always encouraged teams to be close off the field as well as on it—this is great for team chemistry, and good team chemistry helps win games. Players might consider getting together as a team the night before a big game, whether for dinner or another activity. Teams do not necessarily need to do this for every game, but it's a good approach to use before a big game.

The team's game-day routine will normally be established by the coach, who of course has his own idiosyncrasies and team requirements, but it is also prudent for the coach to allow some flexibility in the routine for individual differences. The important thing is to be ready to play right from the whistle. Teams that start slowly will live to regret it. A good pregame routine should include the following features:

1. A tactical talk covering major issues for the game
2. Individual warm-up time (personal routine)
3. Motivational talk by the coach (if he is uncomfortable with this, it may be turned over to an assistant coach, guest, former player, or current player)
4. Team warm-up
5. A few minutes of personal time
6. Team sprints: 10-yard (9-meter) repetitions for about 60 seconds immediately before kickoff

My team's routine is as follows: Two hours before the game, we meet in a classroom to discuss game tactics. One hour before kickoff, we allow players to go onto the game field and do their own thing for 15 minutes. Most players stretch lightly or jog, then kick a ball around. The team returns to the field with about 35 minutes remaining on the pregame countdown clock for a formal warm-up with the coaching staff. We keep the warm-up routine consistent. It begins with team stretching and running, followed by two groups of players playing keep-away in a confined area—typically the starting 10 in one group and the rest in another group, while the goalkeepers do a separate warm-up by themselves. If the team has sufficient staff, I recommend having a coach involved with the goalkeepers' warm-up, as otherwise they will get neglected. Just before kickoff, time is allowed for players to collect their own thoughts. Finally, 60 seconds before the game begins, we finish with 5 or 6 sprints of 10 yards (9 meters) each.

It is easier for a coach to get teams ready physically than mentally. The coach has control over the physical side of the warm-up but may not be as successful with the mental aspect. Hopefully he has done a pretty good job of this in the locker room before the warm-up, but it's not a bad idea to get the team together one last time just before kickoff and, if nothing else, give a final

reminder of the keys to the game. If the coach is good at motivating, he can give it one more go.

Scouting

Modern-day game preparation has changed enormously in just the last few years. Though unlikely to be used at the younger levels, video cameras and computers are now widely used in upper-level programs. Many teams record their games or the opponent's games and have either the entire team or individual players watch the video. The coach can use it to analyze the opposition, identifying not only their style of play but also how and where they play. What side of the field do they tend to attack? Who are their key players, and who gets the ball in which areas of the field? Do they tend to attack with long passes or short ones? When the central defender has the ball, what are his passing tendencies? This kind of analysis can help a team enormously in preparing to face a particular opponent.

Computer software is now available to help a coach break down every aspect of the game. Coaches can record a live game and use the software to mark any area they are interested in. For instance, if a coach wants to look at all goal-scoring opportunities created by the forwards, he can use the software to mark or tag a player every time he receives the ball in the attacking third of the field, then call up these situations later for analysis. Such software tends to be quite expensive, and initially it can be difficult to use. It took many hours of trial and error for us to get comfortable with our system. Indeed, most teams do not have the staff or time to scout opponents in this way, so scouting is still much more likely to be done in the old-fashioned manner of physically scouting opponents and taking notes. However, for those who have the resources and wish to become the very best (player or coach), this type of analysis should be considered. It's beneficial for a player to see himself on a professionally prepared video tailor-made for analyzing his strengths and weaknesses.

Modern technology aside, most team situations will still be pretty basic, so it would be prudent to scout a game by going to watch your opposition play—the closer to game day the better (current information is, obviously, more valuable). It is always useful to have a handle on the opposition before the game. In particular, a coach should take note of who the opponent's key players are and generate ideas for how her team might play against them. I suggest using the following checklist for scouting:

- What formation are they using? (Chart the starting team as it lines up for the kickoff. Write down their shirt numbers in the formation they are play-

ing, and next to each number note any substitute that comes on to replace that player.)

- Who are the key individual players, the go-to players, and what are their tendencies when they get the ball?
- What are the team's tendencies? Style of play? Do they play through midfield or go more directly to the forwards? What do the forwards do when they get the ball? Does the team play balls over the top for the forwards to chase or do they play shorter, to the forwards' feet?
- Which side of the field do they like to attack? Do the wingers go down the line or cut inside? Cross to the near post or far post?
- Are they playing a flat back four, and if so do they hold a high or low line? Is there space to get into the back of the defense? Who are the weaker players defensively (thus indicating possible areas to attack)?
- How is their team speed? Is there a slow player who can be isolated and attacked by a quicker player?
- Who is their main playmaker, how do they go through him, and how can he be stopped?
- What does their main playmaker do when she gets the ball?
- Do their defenders attack and get forward, or do they tend to stay back? If one goes forward, can the space behind him be attacked?
- What do they do on their set plays and restarts? (Chart them.)

Once a coach has all this information, he needs to sit down and identify the most relevant parts for his team. He must take care not to use too much, since in the end he must prepare *his* team the way he wants them to play. If he over focuses on how to respond to the other team, his own squad may be overwhelmed, and it will almost certainly be disruptive to their style. A coach must focus on his own players and the way they play the game, then identify selected elements of the opponent's profile and consider ways to play effectively against them. This part may constitute as little as 10 percent of weekly preparation for very strong teams. Weaker teams may have to pay more attention to this area as they may feel they have to do something differently to win a game against much stronger opposition. They may have to spend as much as 40 percent of preparation time considering their opponent.

The coach's main job, then, is to get his team ready to play its next game. Once he has scouted the opposition and processed and applied that information, he needs to work on his own team's play. Experienced coaches sense the strengths and weaknesses of each player and of the team as a whole—especially the team tendencies. But even an experienced coach can use specific and detailed information about his team, and an inexperienced one will definitely need it. So how

should a coach go about getting such information? It's actually quite simple, requiring only a little help and a little time.

The coaching staff should write the squad list on a notepad and in practice begin to chart information in columns next to each player's name. If the team has had trouble keeping possession of the ball, one column might be designated for passing tendencies, and a checkmark could be added each time a midfield player makes a pass. Others columns might track balls passed forward, balls passed backward, balls passed longer or shorter than 20 yards (about 18 meters), and so on. The results might show something like the following: Nearly 7 out of 10 passes by the center midfield player went forward more than 20 yards, and 5 of 10 went to the opposition. This might suggest that she is forcing the ball forward too much, which could be one reason the team is losing so many possessions. Or perhaps 8 of 10 passes are going to the left side of the field, thus neglecting the right-side players and often allowing the opposition to anticipate the play. Or, if the coach wants to concentrate on midfield play, she need only have someone chart the passing success rate of the four midfield players by marking a check for a successful pass and an X for an unsuccessful one. This charting of players' performance can be done both in practice and in games.

The information gained can be used in practice and should in fact constitute the main material used by the coach to help the team improve: What do we do well? Keep doing it! What do we do poorly? Change it! This information can also be quite valuable to individual players, who are often unaware of their tendencies and thus can be enabled by this kind of analysis to identify and work on areas of need. If a coach is not available to do the charting, then a parent might do it, and the coach or player can take it from there.

Game-Day Strategy

Once game day arrives, it is time to put everything together like a well-oiled machine. The game day itself is broken into distinctly separate stages: pregame, the game itself, halftime, and postgame. Each stage requires different things from players and coaches.

Pregame

This stage varies depending on the team. Most middle school soccer programs report about an hour before kickoff, whereas high school and college teams likely gather earlier. Ideally, the coach begins with a meeting to discuss technical and tactical issues, rather than focusing on motivation. One of my assistant coaches brought the use of handouts to our program a couple of years ago, and they act as reminders of points we have talked about in the days just before the game: what the opposition may try to do against us, key opposing

players, issues we have been working on, and perhaps a mention of the importance of that particular game. This really is just a summary of what we have focused on in the past week. I have found it quite useful, and it is yet another strategy for getting the coach's points across to players.

As far as chalk-and-talk is concerned, I use it very sparingly and probably only in the meetings prior to kickoff or occasionally at halftime. I almost never use it in coaching sessions, as I believe the carryover value is not high and the time can be better spent on the field showing teams what to do rather than drawing it on a board.

A player's winning attitude, preparation, and determination are put into practice on game day.

During the Game

Once the game starts, coaches need to be extremely careful in how much they coach and what kind of coaching they do. They should observe the game closely and try to figure out what is working and what is not, and in particular what the opposition is doing to make life difficult. If things are not going well, then something needs to change, and it's the coach's job to figure out what. Many coaches get so caught up in yelling instructions to players that they miss out on what is really happening. The time to do most coaching is in practice sessions during the week before the game, not in the game itself. Players need to be able to think for themselves, and the coach must hope they have been adequately prepared. Some coaching from the sidelines is appropriate, but a coach should not have players relying on him to talk them through almost every game situation. Besides, during a game, by the time he shouts instructions and the player processes them, then physically reacts, it's probably too late. Game coaching from the sideline should generally be kept to the occasional tactical adjustment, in moments when it will not distract the players. The occasional motivational comment is sometimes also appropriate.

It is sometimes difficult for an inexperienced coach to identify her team's problems and generate suggestions to share with the team during halftime. Here are some points to watch for as the game progresses:

- Does the team have an adequate number of players *behind* the ball?
- Is there adequate defensive depth?
- Would the offside trap work better?
- Is tight marking necessary? Should there be more pressure on the ball at midfield?
- Do the midfield players need help in marking players?
- Would zonal coverage work better, especially if the opposition is sending a lot of players forward?
- Is the covering defender free?
- Are the front runners pressuring the opposition's defenders?
- Are chances being taken in the final third?
- Are available shots being taken?
- Is there adequate support of the ball?
- Are players overlapping when appropriate, thus getting forward?
- Would overloading help the attack?
- Are players too rigid in their positions or are they practicing fluid mobility?
- Is the ball on the ground enough?
- If the opponents are weak in the air, is that being exploited?
- Is more direct (or indirect) play needed?
- Are the midfielders supporting the strikers?
- How is the team's shape, and are the players "sat" in the correct parts of the field at the correct times?
- Need more high or low pressure?
- Does there need to be more communication between players?
- Does the attack need more diagonal runs?
- Is the timing of runs okay, or are players are getting forward too soon and taking their own space away?
- Is there a need for more combination play?
- Is the team sufficiently exploiting the goalkeeper's weaknesses?

Halftime

This is when a good coach needs to go to work. Once in a while, when things are going really well, I can go to halftime and simply tell the team to keep everything the same, but that does not happen as often as any of us would like.

Most of the time, adjustments need to be made, and it is helpful if the coach takes a small notepad to the game and makes a couple of notes about problem areas during the first half. The coach who relies on memory is likely to forget something important. Points should be specific and few—too often, coaches talk in generalities, and talk too much. Telling a player he needs to work harder doesn't get it done. He needs to know where and when he needs to work harder. Often, the problem is on the team level; for example, perhaps the opposition has an extra player in midfield who is causing difficulties. The coach must help her team know exactly how, and with whom, they can negate that player. The coach should hit three or four critical points. Any other problems will have to be taken care of the next day, on the practice field.

Sometimes the half-time talk needs to be more motivational than tactical. Every player, and every team, has experienced a first half of playing flat, with little emotion or effort. I've often wished I could figure the preparation level of teams before the game has started, and not have to leave the motivation until halftime, but I've never been able to come up with that secret. Motivational half-time talks are an art in themselves, with widely varying approaches (depending in part on the players' age) and varying results. Some coaches rant and rave, while others use cutting language and words. Some take a calm approach. It's difficult to recommend definitively how to handle this task, and much depends on the coach's personality. Negative criticism and personal insults rarely work, and I do not recommend this approach. The coach must be careful not to let his own frustrations get in the way of what should be said, and he must recognize the difference between motivating a team and motivating a single player. When dealing with a single player, he must decide whether to address the problem in front of the whole group or pull the player aside for a private talk. The player's age can make a huge difference here. Players who are 13 or 14 are still too sensitive for—and rarely would respond well to—any form of personal insult or negative criticism, especially in front of the team. Thus, half-time comments to such a player should be made mostly to that individual only. As the player gets older, the approach can change. I would expect an 18-year-old college player to be able to handle a rough half-time exchange with a coach, especially if it is justified. Players should try not to take these situations personally. I know this can be difficult, but almost always these comments are not personal attacks, which is well worth remembering when a coach is "having a go" at a player.

Postgame

I have always felt that postmatch talks should be kept to a bare minimum. Emotions are probably still running high, and match analysis (and especially individual player analysis) should probably be saved for the next day. A poor performance needs to be left as is and addressed later, when emotions have subsided and players are more receptive to criticism and better prepared to improve their performance. If the team has played well, it should be complimented on the

spot. Positive feedback always feels good, especially after an important win, and the coach should let players know they have done well. Even these comments, however, should be kept fairly brief. I have seen coaches keep a team for 30 to 40 minutes after a game, and believe me, players hate it and cannot wait to get off the field. A tired, unresponsive player is not who a coach needs to be talking to.

It is important, in the end, that everything be kept in perspective. Make sure that the highs are not too high, and the lows are not too low. Here, players may need guidance, and a coach's response to a big win or loss often sets the tone for the team. I can remember taking days, as a young coach, to get over a bad loss, and being unable to sleep for a couple of nights. Players may respond in the same way. Today, I am over it by the next day and take a much healthier approach. One should feel down after a bad loss, and excited after a big win, but neither should be overdone.

A coach should also attend to lifestyle habits and try to know what her team does before and especially after games. Most dedicated players realize that it is important to live correctly before a game, but some can get a little carried away after one. It may be necessary to set some rules. This is unlikely to be an issue for younger players, who are probably going home with their parents, but older players are going to go out, and guidelines may be useful.

Postgame Analysis

The next day is always a good time to analyze the game and meet with players to discuss their performance. In most cases, this can be done on the field during practice. This is not always ideal, since in this setting most information will be expressed in verbal terms, not always providing the clearest analysis. As discussed earlier in this chapter, video can be a great addition to the verbal analysis delivered on the practice field. The coach does not have to have software to do this; a simple game tape will do the trick.

This postmortem should be followed by light activity on the field—perhaps 40 to 50 minutes of jogging, stretching, and easy ball work (technical activities or keep-away). Players who did not play, or who played very little, need to do more, and it may be necessary to set up a separate practice for this group.

It is crucial to gear subsequent practices to the needs of the team as determined by the postgame analysis. Typically a coach should look for the following:

- Did the team perform in a fashion that resembled practice sessions leading up to the game? Did the team follow through on the game plan? If not, why? (It is important to practice in an environment as close as possible to the game situation in order to maximize carryover value.)
- Did individual players do the job expected of them? Either way, they will need feedback and guidance. This tactical analysis of a player's performance

is likely to result in a need for time in practice sessions to work specifically on problem areas. For example, the team may have had insufficient width and attacked down the middle too often. A likely cause is that the two wingers were not providing the width (were not staying out toward the sidelines). This problem can be corrected by perhaps setting a playing field with two channels about 10 yards (9 meters) wide from the sidelines down the length of the field. Participants play a normal game except for the requirement that each of the two wide players must play in the channel when her team has the ball. They may come out of the channel only to defend when the other team has the ball.

- Did the team look defensively weak? It is vital to pinpoint where the problem was. It may have been a midfield issue, with players failing to track their opponents' runs off the ball. Or perhaps there were not enough players to defend in midfield. It may have been a problem with the back four. Perhaps they were too flat, with very little defensive cover. Whatever the cause, it must be identified and corrected.

- Did the team play with too little energy and get outworked by the opposition? Is the team fit enough, or do they need more fitness sessions? Was the team mentally prepared to start the game? Often, the solution to this problem can be found in the stage of the game when the problem occurred. If at the beginning, it's likely to be a mental issue. If late in the game, it's probably physical. If for the whole game, then back to square one, beginning with the fact that it's simply not acceptable—period!

- Did the team create goal-scoring opportunities? If not, the coach may have a difficult problem to resolve, since it may mean the team simply lacks sufficiently creative players. Nevertheless good coaching and good tactics should allow the team to create scoring chances. Are players passing the ball into the back of the opposition's defense? Are forwards running into positions in the back of the defense? Are enough players making forward runs? Again, the coach must consider many possible causes, identify the real ones, and find ways to address them.

- Is the team failing to convert goal-scoring opportunities? Two words: Shooting practice!

Addressing any issues that were problematic in the previous game will help the team work on its weaknesses and start preparing itself for the next match.

Every coach and every player has their own unique style, and their approaches to coaching and playing can differ enormously. There is no absolute way to do anything in the world of athletics, but there are some time-tested approaches that are sure to work, and hopefully we have covered some of these in this book. There is no substitute, however, for enthusiasm and effort, and though

sometimes the best-run coaching sessions or most talented player will struggle, both coaches and players should bring their best effort to *every* session.

For many, winning is not what it is all about. Soccer is a great game, in my opinion the greatest game in the world. Enjoy it. It is a fun-filled activity that will challenge you. Accept that challenge, have fun, play with passion, and you too can consider that you have had success from this great game.

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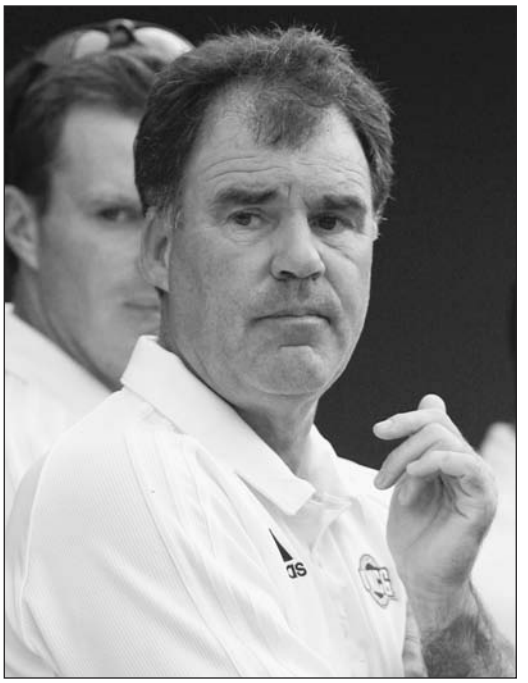
ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Michael Parker, the wins leader among active Division I men's soccer coaches, has won six national titles in 30 years of collegiate head coaching experience spanning all three NCAA levels. He has been at University of North Carolina at Greensboro since 1984, taking a club program and leading it to success in Division III (two national titles) and Division I (fourth among Division I active coaches with a winning percentage of .736).

His teams have made 19 NCAA tournament appearances, and in 1993 he became the first men's soccer coach in NCAA history to lead a team to the tournament in all three divisions. During his tenure, UNCG has won 10 conference titles, including six during its Division I era. Parker's 2004 team was ranked No. 1 in polls for much of the season. Parker also won three national titles while head coach at Lock Haven in 1977 and 1978 (Division III) and 1980 (Division II) and three national titles at the semipro level with the USISL's Greensboro Dynamo in 1993, 1994, and 1995.

Parker resides in Greensboro, North Carolina.

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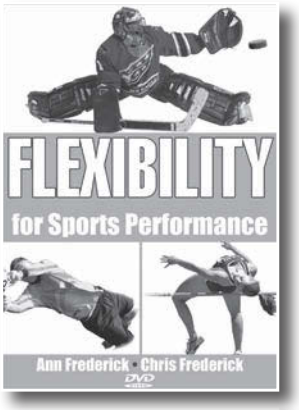

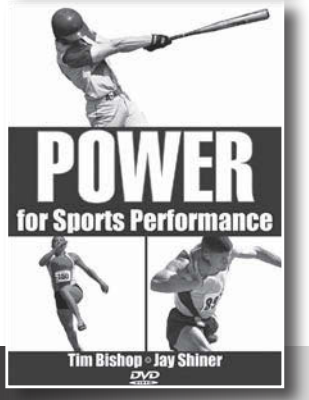

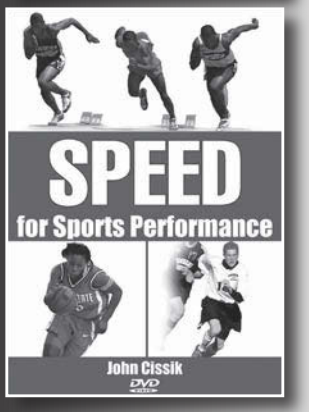

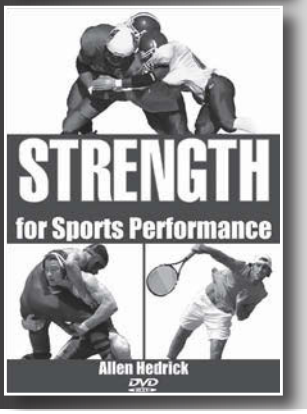

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