

## COACHING



## DEVELOPING SELF-LEARNERS THROUGH GAME-CALLS AND GAME-BASED COACHING

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### THE IMPORTANCE OF PRACTICE-DESIGN

Prior to discussing communication, the foundations of practice-design must be established. The question is this: Do coaches know what a great player looks like? Messi, Cristiano Ronaldo, Xavi, Iniesta, and Scholes are a few obvious names but it is essential as a coach to identify what it is about these players that makes them great. If you cannot explain this then you don't know what you're working toward. Without this knowledge, a coach will be unable to provide the essential skills that aid players in attaining greatness. Having this vision of what a coach is working toward will help produce the next generation of players that excite and entertain, across all playing positions.

We live in an era that has seen so many changes to the game of soccer, with goalkeepers like Neuer demonstrating high levels of technical excellence, bravery, and skill that not many goal-

keepers before him have demonstrated on the world stage. So how do we develop these players? Well, what we don't do is train them using lines and drills where they only make decisions in an unchanging environment. Unfortunately, for many years in most countries around the world soccer has been shadowed by a belief that techniques must be mastered before progressing into game-play situations (Cassidy, Jones, & Potrac, 2009; Williams, Yates, & Ford, 2007). This produces players who make decisions (action) with no perception skills due to the environment not changing, which, in turn, creates ineffective game players. Expert soccer players use their knowledge of situational probabilities to predict where the player and ball are likely to go next (Ford, Yates, & Williams, 2010). They use their superior knowledge to control their eye movement to seek and pick up specific pieces of information needed to respond quickly to the situation (Williams

& Ford, 2008) based on postural orientation. This process requires players to audit a rapidly changing and random environment in order to know what appropriate response can be made (Williams, 2000; Future Game, 2010). Therefore, the more players are exposed to environments that require them to think about what is happening and could happen in a changing environment, the better the learning experience will be for the player (Cartwright, 2008).

Put simply, players make decisions in limited time and space with full or partial opponent pressure. In order to develop better decision-makers with skill, we need to place players in environments that allow them to make decisions under these conditions throughout the whole of their developmental years (Cartwright, 2008; Jones, 2015; Williams & Hodges, 2005).

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**"A coach who teaches his players the correct technique using special, frequently repeated drills is neglecting to teach them why, when and where they need to use technique to deal with a given game situation"** (Wein, 2004, p.5).

The solution is for coaches to create training practices that offer direction, choice, challenge, competition, and opponent pressure with a purpose (Jones, 2015), where the practice constraints such as the area size, the gradual increase of opposition players, and the focus of the activity can be manipulated to bring about different decisions and player solutions. Players will also find the practices more enjoyable than they would lines-drills (Renshaw, Oldham, & Bawden, 2012; Vallerand, 2004) as these practices demonstrate "real-game" play.

### WHAT IS PLAY?

Play is self-chosen and self-directed. It is something the players want to do. Play is not something they have been "made" to do, therefore, it is fun. Play allows for freedom to make decisions and is an activity in which the means are more valued than the end (Cote, Baker, & Abernethy, 2007). In order for players to practice the way the coach wants them to play—by making decisions on time and space—the coach needs to let them have enough time "playing" the game. Often, coaching involves long lectures, with the coach stopping the practice every minute and only coaching mistakes. This isn't enjoyable for players and fails to give them enough practice time to "practice playing the game."

Play and practice are two vital components to coaching future great players—you can't achieve anything without both. There has to be a balance of the two. Play-practice methods of teaching are useful in developing decision-makers as they are often delivered in games or game-like activities where players learn in a fun environment (Laundor, 2001). What traits are needed to empower decision-makers with skill? Creativity! Coaches who place pressure on players to perform well on tasks that are mentally habitual, meaning non-changing and repetitive like a line-drill practice, induce a non-playful state that may improve performance on the task but worsen performance on tasks that require creativity, conscious decision-making, and learning new skills in a changing environment (Gray, 2008). Clearly soccer is the latter.

**"With decision-making you need to let it evolve and grow."** (Rene Meulensteen)

### COMMUNICATION IS VITAL

Within the practice-design and environment, players will receive feedback on performance. This is the most critical aspect of coaching as

mentioned in the highly regarded soccer communication book *Let's Talk Soccer: Using Game-calls to Develop Communication and Decision-Making in Football*. Through performance feedback, the coach is able to encourage players to communicate with each other in a way that paints pictures in the minds of the players of what to do, when to do it, and why. This develops players who can play ahead of themselves (play in the future) with increased anticipation and response skills.

Communication is, as Sullivan (1993) suggests "the most critical element in the success of sporting teams" due to "a positive correlation between enhanced interpersonal communication skills and higher levels of team performance" (p.90). The current problem, however, is that players rely more on the voice of the coach than their own brain! In training and in games, coaches are constantly shouting instructions on what to do, where to go, and when. Instead, we should be developing the players' "inner voice" so that they understand what to do, when to do it, and why. The game is the assessment of the learning that's taken place during the week. Therefore, as coaches, we should be observers during the game to see what has been performed well and what needs to be improved further.

How often do coaches use jargon or fancy buzzwords that confuse the players and have no relevance to the game-style they want the team to play? I would argue that answer is very often! What we need to do is create a soccer language specific to our club identity, game-style, and vision for how we want to develop the future player!

### SOLUTIONS:

#### SOCCER LANGUAGE

Coaches must use words that directly link to the team's game-style so that when used with players, they instantly understand what you mean. These words (game-calls) are not only words you use, but the concept is for the coach to "say less but achieve more" while the players speak more than the coach by communicating with each other. For example, if the player can't



play forward, he may shout, "Start again!" to his teammate, which instantly tells his teammate on the ball that there may be a risk going forward, but there's an opportunity to play the ball back and retain possession. This method helps create independent-thinking soccer players who can make decisions with skill in response to the changing environment, creating unity, not separation. What is the relevance to "practice-design"? Game-calls are game-specific words that make reference to decisions that can be made only in game situations. The best way to teach game-calls and, consequently, game understanding, is to involve players in game-like activities (Jones, 2015).

The words used can relate to all aspects of soccer performance, from "Press" or "No turn" to "Play round," "Balance," and "Two's" – and many more! These are examples of just a few of the words that players say to each other to retain or regain possession of the ball. What does "Balance" or "Drive and slide" mean? Unless the coach shows the players when to use these terms and how they relate to the game-style, they won't know.

### SELF-LEARNERS

Players who are empowered to make decisions and learn by doing will become better thinkers and reflectors, and, therefore, better at finding solutions to problems on the field without having to look at the coach for the answers all the time. The future player will be a great "self-learner," meaning they direct their learning by themselves, becoming highly skilled at self-talk, reflection, communication, and action—all skills that are paramount to playing soccer successfully (Jones, 2015). This will see the role of the coach, like Mourinho, Guardiola, and Wenger, et al., becoming more "facilitators" of knowledge rather than directors. Their role as the coach in

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I describe what a great player is! As famous youth coach John Cartwright explained, "Soccer isn't simply a team game, it's about individuals combining where necessary" (Cartwright, 2008).

The fundamental importance for all coaches is to develop individualism in every player by encouraging dribbling, skill, ball mastery, and passing variations. Players like Messi and Ronaldo are excellent self-learners; their hunger to be the best they can be drives their learning. They commit hours and hours of practice to maximizing their strengths.

By underpinning our coaching methods with innovative methods of communication (Future Game, 2010) such as game-calls, we will see an increased level of team cohesion, understanding, skill, and unity as players move toward the "transcendence" stage of knowledge. The decisions players make become more autonomous (instinctive) as they communicate with each other. All of these topics are discussed in more detail in my book *Let's Talk Soccer*, where there are practical resources and session ideas on how to develop communication to create the next generation of independent-thinking soccer players who are great self-learners.

the modern and future game will become more of a "significant other" (Vygotsky, 1978).

### MENTAL MODELS

It's all about pictures! The mental pictures (models) of knowledge that players draw upon during games to respond appropriately to visual cues are vital ingredients to the success of sporting teams. The best way to develop these mental models is by encouraging players to talk to each other through use of game-calls as these "trigger words" help the player develop these mental images related to game scenarios.

Coaches should program their work over a period of time, specific to each individual player's needs. They need to know their players (learners) in terms of their strengths and areas for development, and design individual-specific programs for each player to maximize their strengths. Coaches should see every player as an individual project.

We can't develop highly skillful self-learners who drive their learning to advanced levels without acknowledging the importance of "individualism." This is where my belief about soccer and how it should be played links to what I see when

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