

The Coaching Hierarchy
Part I: Introduction
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April 1999
(Revised: December 2000)

At the recent OYSA-N State Coaching Staff symposium at Oberlin College, a *hierarchical approach* to coaching education was presented as an alternative to the traditional technical and tactical models. For those who have never taken a coaching course, both national coaching education programs, the United States Soccer Federation (USSF) and the National Soccer Coaches Association of America (NSCAA), stress the need to identify a technical or tactical focus for practice and then follow a standard coaching progression.

With the *technical model*, the progression begins with unopposed technical practice, such as passing in pairs; progresses to a game-related stage, such as a keep-a-way game; and ends with a game to two goals, such as 5 v 5. In the technical model, the coaching is expected to focus on the technical aspects of performance, such as body balance or the position of the ankle while executing a pass, without attending to the decision-making underlying why the technique may be more or less successful at that time. In addition, because the technical progression does not address the issue of player spacing, or the tactical decisions that are fundamental to understanding how to play the game, it is inherently flawed as a teaching model. Simply stated, at the point where an opponent is included into the practice there is a decision to be made, and that, by definition, becomes a tactical issue. If the tactical decision is not addressed, as it relates to either the choice of technique or the choice of action, the teaching is inappropriate (except, perhaps, with very young children) and learning does not progress quickly. A more realistic approach to technical development might be to simply view it as both individual practice time and homework, and very much the responsibility of the motivated player.

With the *tactical model*, the practice begins with the smallest representation of the tactic in question, such as 1v1 in a small area with emphasis on individual defending. The next level is the group tactics stage, such as 3 v 3 to one goal, where the tactic is practiced in a larger and more complicated context. Finally, the progression ends with a game, such as 5 v 5. With more experienced coaches, the tactical model can have significantly different looks; however, this article speaks primarily to youth player development which encourages the traditional tactical progression. While the traditional tactical model makes theoretical sense as a teaching approach, it is also grounded in flawed logic: the motivation of the game is always left until the end, and the players can only arrive at the point of play after somehow having “mastered” what has come before. In reality, every player has different starting points and therefore different problems, and every player learns at a different rate. Also, the fact that the problems “taught” at the earlier stages of the practice can often reappear with frustrating regularity in the final game, strongly suggests that the connection between the teaching, the progressive learning activities, and “learning” is not as strong as we would like to believe. Finally, because the bulk of the

practice time is not spent actually “playing” soccer, there is often very little transfer between what is performed in practice and what is demanded from the game.

By my definition, “playing” soccer demands goals and a direction, transition from defense to attack, and vice versa, and appropriate numbers to allow the players adequate time and space to decide whether to pass, dribble, or shoot. It is also becoming increasingly more obvious to me that players improve much more rapidly when they understand the context in which they are playing. Skill, by common definition, is the application of technique under pressure of an opponent. While technique generally improves slowly, players can quickly become more skillful by being helped to make better decisions about how to prevent and create goals. In short, we can quickly make players more skillful without making them significantly more technical.

Having said all this, it is important to stress that there is no substitute for players with both clean technique and sound tactical understanding: there are simply no competent players who do not possess both qualities. In a professional environment, players spend hours each week honing their techniques. The closest we have to a professional model in the United States is the Nike Soccer Academy in Bradenton, Florida. In contrast, the typical American youth team has one or two sixty to ninety minute practices each week, complicated by a league and tournament schedule that may well result in six or seven games and no practice at all. In this “more games is better” climate, there is little possibility of even top coaches purposely developing a wide array of techniques AND tactically savvy players over the course of a short twelve to fourteen week season.

Developing *generations* of competent American players must be viewed as the long-term goal of youth soccer and to meet that goal our player development approach must change. In order to even begin this process we need to address two fundamental issues: players need to become more responsible for developing a range of techniques outside of practice, and coaches need to understand and address the tactical hierarchy of small-sided and larger-sided games. This latter issue will be the focus of the remainder of this article and a number of subsequent Ohio Soccer editions.

So what is a tactical hierarchy? Simply, it is a building-block approach to coaching which helps both players and coaches understand the game being played (see Figure 1). Because the various concepts of this tactical structure can be applied to the analysis and coaching of games ranging from 2v1 to 11v11, the likelihood of learning being transferred between any game is significantly enhanced. While the first two levels of the hierarchy -- the spacing of players and building an understanding of who does what and when -- are relatively stable, the next three -- decisions to possess or penetrate, how and when to create space, and how to combine -- are much more fluid. In practice, levels III through V often merge together; here, they are broken out simply as a means of helping less experienced coaches address problems as they are likely to surface with younger, developing players. With more experience in the game, different players will have different problems at different times; in coaching those players, the hierarchy serves more as a menu than a recipe.

Figure 1.

Level I Player spacing or shape as a group
Level II Definition of individual roles within small groups
Level III Decision making with regards to possession and penetration
Level IV Creating space as an individual.
Level V Developing combination play ideas.
Level VI Increasing speed of play .
Level VII Team building

Figure 1 lists the seven stages of the coaching hierarchy.

The seven stages of the hierarchy are summarized below:

Level 1: Player **spacing** as a group.

At the first level of the hierarchy is the notion that players in attack must create space between themselves to also create space between defenders. With smaller numbers, the idea of spacing simply addresses the issues of width and depth. With larger numbers, the playing shape of the team becomes an important first step in developing the flow of the practice. Please note that if the players are under the age of 11 and bunch around the ball, there are probably too many players on the field, or the space may be too small, or, most likely, the players simply may not be ready to understand the concept of creating space as a group.

Level II: Definition of individual **roles** within small groups.

At level II players should begin to understand what to do when they are at the back of the team and what to do when they are at the front of the team, even if the “team” has only two or three players. As the number of players increases, the definition of individual roles must be more clearly understood. Please note that this concept of roles does not preclude players from changing positions within the flow of a game, as this is always encouraged. However, the player who finds herself as a forward, for example, should learn to understand how being a forward is different from being a defender.

Level III: Decision making with regard to **possession and penetration**.

At the third level, players must understand ideas such as the best pass is one which scores a goal, the next best pass is one which leads to a goal, and the next best pass is one which

goes forward and keeps possession. Players should also clearly understand that if there are too many opponents blocking the way forward it is better to turn around and play sideways or backwards. Finally, kicking to ball to safety must be viewed as the last resort, not the first. Understanding this concept of when to possess and when to penetrate is crucial to learning to control the rhythm of play, particularly in small-sided games with young players.

Level IV: **Creating space** as an individual.

At level IV, the coaching addresses the understanding of when and how to support a teammate and when to create space by staying away from the ball. It is likely that young players will “play” soccer in quite sophisticated ways without fully understanding this concept. As players develop their skills and understanding, their ability to use space improves. Sensing when and how to move away from a marker is a natural skill in some players and coachable in most others. For combination play to be possible against skilled defenders, the creation and use of space is a crucial concept which must be understood if players are to progress beyond recreation-level play.

Level V: Developing **combination play** ideas.

When players understand a little about spreading out, creating space, and the timing of runs, combination play is much more likely. Combination play is defined here as inter-passing between two or more players. Teaching combination play as a natural extension of spreading out, creating space, and passing and supporting can make the players’ learning curve much steeper and the coaches’ role much more rewarding. Conversely, teaching combination play as a series of discrete actions isolated from the playing context (wall passing drills, for example) can be a frustrating activity for both players and coaches.

Level VI: Increasing **speed of play**.

At level VI, the role of the coach is to increase the speed of ball circulation and combination play within the group or team. It should be understood that speed of play is a relative term. “Fast” for a U-12 B team playing 8-a-side will not be the same as “fast” for a U-16 ODP team with three national team players in the side. Whatever the level of the team, there are a number of simple coaching options that can help improve a team’s speed of play. Those options will be outlined in the fourth part of this series.

Level VII: **Team building**.

Finally, at level VII is the idea of team building. The purpose of training players as they enter their teenage years is to continue their individual development and to win games. This involves refining skills and developing a strategic, “big picture” understanding. With players between 10 and 12, winning is not important and therefore technical development and “group building” through small-sided play should be inherent to any club claiming expertise in youth coaching. While group building involves the elements of

small-sided games described in levels I-VI, team building is concerned with how those elements relate to the big picture tactics of 8v8 through 11v11. Ironically, the degree to which players succeed or fail at this level is inextricably bound to two familiar elements: individual technique and understanding of small group tactics under pressure. This is why we must start to get it right at the youth level if we are ever to raise the standard of the average teenager. Without dreams.....

Next time: Spacing and Roles.