

**The Coaching Hierarchy**  
**Part IV: Developing Speed of Play and Teambuilding**  
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**Introduction**

This article seeks to describe the timing and process of teambuilding and how speed of play is developed as a function of age, ability, the soccer environment, and coaching. Speed of play is generally defined by a team's ability to circulate (pass) the ball; and by their ability to penetrate by passing or dribbling as fast as possible in a constructive and controlled manner. Teambuilding is defined as the process of creating a cohesive style of play for formal 11-a-side competition. Teambuilding can be broadly interpreted as a long-term and multifaceted process of player development or, more immediately, as the process of organizing and training players by position (functionally) for competition.

Three themes are important for this discussion. First, individual players are the foundation of every assessment of team play. Second, speed of play within a team structure is reflective of individual skill and tactical familiarity. Third, in the context of this article, the teambuilding process is viewed as a long-term commitment to individual growth and development.

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

Devoid of a youth-team-to-full-professional pyramid, player development in the United States at almost every level has become synonymous with formal, final-stage teambuilding in order to win games and be regarded as "successful." Money plays no small part in youth soccer and winning attracts many gullible customers chasing fool's gold! Direct play is ubiquitous when coaches unfamiliar with the sport make tactical choices, and size and strength are routinely valued over skill and cunning. Even accomplished coaches can be equally cynical in their choice of tactics, with side-to-side play admonished as too dangerous. Unfortunately, when the physical dimension is removed or reduced as a significant indicator of winning potential during the mid-teens, achieving victory demands skillful players who are often conspicuous by their absence. At this point, there is no possibility of recovering the critical periods for skill learning and the majority of players are rendered as technical-illiterates.

## **The Nature of Learning**

Before providing specific ideas on how speed of play is developed on the field, it is important to present a developmental framework for those who might fall into the trap of trying to “build the roof before the foundation.” This framework seeks to incorporate ideas from child development and the psychology of learning.

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

Many of the hundreds of tasks we perform effortlessly in our daily lives are accomplished with a minimum of thought because we have generated what Piaget called “schemas,” or more colloquially, automated or canned responses through years of recognition and repetition and refinement. We have learned to dress ourselves without fretting over zippers or buttons or shoe laces; we can feed ourselves without the mess and frustration and dexterity problems of our youth; we drive highly dangerous automobiles, often while making phone calls and enjoying the radio or conversation or scenery, and seemingly without paying attention to the many sources of danger that our brains are processing every second. We have “grooved” responses for virtually every physical and mental action we perform on a regular basis and this allows us to multi-task at very high levels. Experience and reflection have allowed us to draw from the past to meet the demands of the present and future. When tasks become automated our brains can focus on other thoughts. Rarely, for example, do we have to think about the inherent difficulty of lifting and holding a pencil! However, think about using chopsticks for the first time or the frustration of taking up a new sport or hobby as an adult!

Every new action becomes a challenge until the muscles and brain learn how to work together to coordinate and learn the timing and “feel” of the movements. Our untrained thinking becomes fixated on the details of any new mental or motor pattern and, at these moments, the “application” of the task is the farthest thing from our minds; our thinking is highly technical, just like young soccer players fighting the ball during their early experiences. Novice learners pay attention to only one or two relevant details at a time and must build motor patterns piece by piece, and sometimes over the course of a lifetime. As we become more proficient, we perform skills without requiring the high level of attention demanded when the details were not learned and the feel was unfamiliar. Over time, we may develop from “novice” to “competent” to “expert” status as our skills and understanding improve. Only when a challenge is quite novel or stressful must we consciously assume a more deliberate mental focus. As we become more automatic, we think less and less about “how” we do things, and more and more about how we apply our skills to meet familiar demands. It was not so long ago that many adult learners labored to appreciate the logic of inserting a floppy disk into a boot drive to start a computer; now we have grandparents effortlessly surfing the web and conversing around the world via e-mail.

### Piaget and Vygotsky

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

Outside of the former Iron Curtain, the work of the Russian psychologist Lev Vygotsky (1896-1934) had been quite understated in explaining the anecdotal evidence underlying the development of young children in natural social environments. Vygotsky showed that when young children are helped with challenges they cannot solve on their own, they become surprisingly capable of achieving at levels above those predicted by Piaget. Vygotsky observed that children are capable of producing a range of higher-order knowledge and skills in the company of older or more experienced helpers than would be seen during interactions with same-age peers. Over time, this exposure to more skilled performers and the subsequent production of more skillful responses serves to accelerate learning and development; much as an apprenticeship remains the most effective means of mentoring new generations of skilled artisans.

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

### Developing Independent Thinkers: Empowering Coaching

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

With this empowerment approach, teambuilding is achieved by team members through active participation, with questioning regularly used by the coach as a key strategy for eliciting thinking about individual and team problems and their solutions. One of the great benefits to be derived from this method is thoughtful players. By changing the

problem-solving onus from the coach to the players, the net result is a more intelligent and committed player. Ultimately, players who understand the game and play with commitment make better decisions and play with more speed, confidence and purpose.

The empowerment approach supports the already strong evidence that emotional attachment plays a crucial role in the learning process: For a more detailed explanation, interested readers will enjoy Brooks and Brooks' The Case For Constructivist Classrooms. Simply, if we are actively engaged in our own learning, we are more likely to think about what we are experiencing and what it means to us and how we can improve. The movie "Sandlot" is a wonderful example of neighborhood kids learning from each other and competing for hours each day because they loved their sport. When kids are fully engaged in relevant activities, they will persevere and take ownership. Conversely, when they are "given" things to do that they don't enjoy, such as non-competitive, meaningless and repetitive drills, they are often quick to plead boredom and become disruptive. Kids love to play sports. They love to compete. They love to have chances to be successful. They love to be active participants. One important element of a positive coaching environment is the relevance of the activities. In an empowerment approach, input is sought from the participants and most young soccer players will respond that they want to scrimmage at practice! To ignore this plea is to ignore one of the fundamental motivations for sport participation; to act on the suggestion is to begin to create a successful play-based and child-centered soccer environment.

### **Soccer Training: Improving Speed of Play**

#### Reading the Game

Dressing children up to look like adult soccer players and asking them to perform in team-oriented games in the United States was most likely influenced by immigrants who knew nothing more than organized eleven-a-side soccer in their homelands. While the thought of young children's physical and emotional needs was likely part of the discussion, the upbringing of most immigrants would not have included formal 11-a-side soccer until around the age of ten or eleven. In the meantime, they would have played informally with friends and siblings in small-sided games, frequently for hours each day. As the sport has become Americanized in its administration, people with sometimes very limited soccer backgrounds have fought to perpetuate "team" play, while the rest of the world has moved to smaller versions of children's soccer. The sad irony is that after ten or fifteen years of team play, there is very little "team" play of any quality for most American kids, because the basic skills and understanding required of the individuals -- and their coaches -- have never been developed. At its core, soccer is about technique, creativity, and combination play; it is definitely not about kicking, running and banging bodies together.

An international soccer game is essentially contested by small groups of between two (1v1) and eight players (4v4), with the ball passed between different small groups in order to find an open or less congested route to goal. Winning the one-on-one duals has long been cited as an important factor of "team" success, and it is the ability of related

small-groups of players to solve their immediate tactical match-up that often determines the outcome of games. In the team context, speed of play is highly dependent on individual skill and the ability to combine passes and movements within a small group. The first challenge of coaching is to build the necessary skills and understanding; the remaining challenge is to create an environment where high speeds of recognition and execution become habitual and ingrained.

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

ESPN’s “Outside the Lines” recently profiled young Ghanaian-born soccer phenom Freddie Adu, revealing that his foundation as a quick-footed creative and visionary player was derived from playing in tight spaces on bad surfaces with older players. Adu’s mother surreptitiously aided his inclusion by providing the game with its soccer balls; without which, young Freddie would not have been invited to play! His arrival in the United States as a 9-year-old in 1997 signaled his first foray into organized play. How good is America’s first potential world-class male? US U-17 National Team Coach John Ellinger has no doubt that he is well ahead of his time.

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

When asked for his reaction to beating six Guatemalans en route to scoring a goal for the USA in the U-17 World Cup qualifying group in 2003, Adu responded with the bewilderment of a master craftsman unaware of the depth of his own artistry: “ When the adrenaline gets flowing, sometimes even I don’t know that I’m doing it.”

### **The Youth Training Continuum**

As Piaget described, children become more capable of higher-order thinking as they mature through childhood and into adolescence. Significant for the small-sided games debate and observations on young players’ inability to create and use space, Piaget’s four stages of development span the years from birth to two; from two to seven; from seven to

twelve; and from twelve to fifteen. The following continuum of player development roughly parallels Piaget's second, third and fourth stages and is designed to provide a roadmap for youth training themes.

#### Entry Level Players: Fun and Freedom

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

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

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

By the end of this stage, the more talented players will have learned that:

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

Improving the speed with which players recognize and solve tactical problems is a function of exposure, repetition and maturation. Some of the basic tactical benefits players derive from smaller-sided play during this period are:

- ❖ Recognition of open space for speed dribbling and dribbling out of pressure
- ❖ Recognition of available space behind a defender for 1v1 dribbling
- ❖ Time to assess supporting spaces beside and behind the ball to help teammates keep the ball
- ❖ Time to assess supporting spaces ahead of the ball to help teammates penetrate
- ❖ Time and space to encourage off the ball movement
- ❖ Time and space to recognize combination possibilities
- ❖ Quick ball circulation (inter-passing)
- ❖ Good communication - verbally and non-verbally - with teammates
- ❖ An attitude towards attacking and controlling the ball in the air before it bounces
- ❖ Opportunities to develop individual and small-group defending skills
- ❖ Opportunities to quickly transition to attack and defense when the ball is turned over
- ❖ Opportunities to develop ideas about changing and controlling the rhythm of play

#### Young Teens: Refining and Expanding

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

#### Late Teens: The Polishing Years

If a soccer player arrives at middle-teenhood without a sound skill base, they will be severely limited in their potential to reach the upper competitive levels. Consistent technique allows players to solve tactical problems under pressure and, during this period, the training focus is geared towards developing season-long fitness, improving collective speed of play, and building understanding of 11-a-side systems. During these later years, player-management and the psychology of teambuilding become the critical coaching issues.

#### The Coaches Role in Developing Speed of Play

If players have been provided with a soccer-friendly beginning and can dribble and control the ball with a basic comfort level, the youth coach faces the challenge of improving speed of play by balancing technical drills with live and pressured soccer

activities; and balancing challenge with success. To accomplish this, the coach must manipulate the variables under his or her control during practice. These variables are listed and detailed below:

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

- ❖ Entry-level children do not think in terms of teams and teammates; often, games of 3v3 are actually games of 1v5 or 2v4.
- ❖ Nine and ten year olds often struggle to maintain possession in games of 4v1; games of 3v1, 4v2 and 5v2 can pose significant technical and tactical challenges.
- ❖ If there is no success (controlled flow) in an activity, one problem may be too many players.
- ❖ U-9's can understand neutral players (i.e., 2v2+2) and 360-degree possession games.
- ❖ U-9's can understand "bumper" (perimeter support) games, such as 1v1+4.
- ❖ The larger the teams, the more difficult the challenge for younger players, regardless of the number of neutral players.
- ❖ Even number games, such as 5v5, make possession and controlled flow more difficult, but increase the challenge for accomplished players.
- ❖ Uneven games, such as 4v4+2, encourage passing technique
- ❖ Older players understand 3-team possessions games such as 2v2v3
- ❖ Solving small-group possession challenges is a prerequisite to advanced team play.

2. Playing Space and Shape: The playing space and shape impact technique, tactics and decision-making.

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

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

- ❖ Limited touches promote better vision and body preparation

- ❖ Limited touches increase decision-making speed
- ❖ Limited touches increase anxiety
- ❖ Limited touches encourage more off-the-ball movement
- ❖ The better the players, the fewer the touches.
- ❖ Not letting the ball come to rest increases speed of play
- ❖ One-touch play is only realistic for very talented players
- ❖ Limits on touches may not be necessary for all players
- ❖ Different conditions can be imposed on different players in the same game
- ❖ Conditions should always make sense to the game; the game should always “look like soccer”
- ❖ “X before Y” restrictions, such as a requiring five passes before a goal can be scored, can often lead to unrealistic activities and decisions

4. Method of Scoring: Changing the way goals are scored impacts technique and decision-making.

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

5. Game Time: Knowing the time remaining is important for the psyche of the players and the quality of an activity.

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

### **Improving Physical Speed**

The purpose of this section is not to present a fitness plan, per se, but to make the case that speed of play is as much a product of physical training as technical or tactical training. It is well known that genetics play a significant role in determining the extremes of athletic potential. However, the science of physical fitness has provided opportunities for more average players to reach their potential of playing at high levels through purposeful assessment and targeted training.

Not too long ago, soccer fitness training would simply incorporate calisthenics and running. Today, no modern club is without its professional fitness trainer who uses an

array of measuring devices and modified playground objects, such as hoops, rubber balls, and small barriers to maximize every player's potential. The everyday language of today's fitness world includes terms such as intermittent beep test, periodization, peaking, recovery training, acyclic aerobic endurance, speed endurance, work-to-rest ratio, and so on. Given current knowledge of sports science, players can be trained to improve in the basic fitness components of agility, balance, coordination, speed, power, flexibility, and strength; their cardiovascular systems can become highly developed through targeted training activities that are appropriate to the demands of a 90-minute soccer game played under FIFA substitution rules; diet, nutrition and water intake can be closely regulated to maximize training benefits, enhance performance, and speed the recovery process; and rest and recovery are now planned as seriously as physical training. In the competitive world, every physical edge is maximized to increase the likelihood of success over failure.

For an extensive review of modern fitness principles, the books by Jens Bangsbo ([The Physiology of Soccer and Fitness Training in Football](#)) and Ronald Verheijen ([Conditioning for Soccer](#)) are regarded as the game's leading publications.

### **The Psychological Dimension**

Pure talent aside, the single-mindedness required to practice and train and make social sacrifices while striving to reach a difficult goal often separates those who succeed from those who fall short. Regardless of whether the goal is high school soccer, Premier or ODP soccer, college soccer, or the US World Cup team, any serious discussion of player development must include the psychological dimension and the perseverance demanded of those pursuing a dream.

In 2001, Davie Williams, a former Manchester United Youth Academy coach spoke at an OYSAN Coaches Symposium in Hudson. Amongst his many interesting comments and observations was that Youth Academy teams in England do not play a formal league schedule until U-18. Between U-9 and U-16, the Manchester United Academy teams play "friendlies" against the likes of Leeds and Arsenal and Liverpool, but no standings are kept until the players turn professional and compete in the U-18 league. The motivation to one day become a full professional and don the first team jersey to play in front of packed stadiums apparently serves as incentive enough for these boys. However, Williams also noted that this motivation can wane quickly if the young starlets perceive their chances of first team soccer as diminishing after a couple of seasons without the carrot of a reserve team or first team appearance. Particularly in the world of professional soccer, the long climb to the top flight requires periodic reinforcement that the goal is both realistic and attainable.

For youngsters in a professional environment, the demands and tangible rewards of someday winning a contract are displayed every weekend when they sit in the stands to watch the first team compete for points. During the week, these youngsters train at the same venue as the club's other teams, often including the first team, and become socialized into the club's culture. This enculturation process includes the development of professional playing and training habits; behavior towards teammates, opponents and officials; dress code rules; eating habits; club rituals; and even the climate of locker room

language and social behavior. There is a status associated with being “on the books” of a professional club that brings unique opportunities while presenting mature demands. Failure to develop steadily or comply with club rules, however, can quickly end the dream of a professional career and there is no guarantee of continued association when the youth contracts are renewed each spring.

To be regarded amongst the best developers of talent, three basic elements must be present at a professional club: the players must be coachable and mentally strong; the club must create and maintain a positive, focused, and successful environment; and the coaching must be excellent. While clubs in the USA do not have the structure or resources of an Ajax or a Manchester United, it is possible to build many of the key elements that create a successful youth development program. Some thoughts are offered below.

#### Individual Traits: Attract or recruit strong-willed players

Talented players who failed to make the grade are a frustrating reminder of the importance of mentality; many top class players have succeeded where others with more innate ability have failed because they had the passion and determination to reach and perhaps exceed their potential. These players are focused on their goals and have a force of will that will not be denied. Clint Mathis (NY/NJ Metrostars) and Kate Sobrero (Boston Breakers) epitomize this type of late-blooming player who have pinnacled for their respective US National Teams. Other players have the drive and character to raise the level of an entire team!

One of the most storied competitors in US Soccer history was April Heinrich, the current Women’s National Team Coach. Her arrival at the University of North Carolina in the fall of 1985 (?) was greeted with near revolt from the senior class, who viewed her as far too pushy and aggressive for their liking. As a freshman, she has upset the established comfort level of the team by raising the performance expectations for both practices and games. In a “crisis” meeting with Coach Anson Dorrance, the senior class asked what he was prepared to do about Heinrich’s influence on the team? Recognizing the potential in his young star and with classic Dorrance win, he quickly responded, “Clone her!” The rest is history.

#### Parent influences: Minimize parent involvement in team and club affairs

Amongst the most important influences on a child’s career are their parents. Genes aside, parents are usually the ones who influence their child’s initial sporting choices; parents are usually the ones responsible for providing financial and logistical support for their child’s continuing participation in sports; and parents are usually the ones responsible for influencing their growing child’s attitude towards commitment, training, competition, perseverance, and dealing with setbacks and successes.

If the parents appreciate the very tenuous line between “making it” and simply being a talented young prospect, they will be guarded in their plaudits as they provide quietly steadfast support. All too often, however, proud parents see their child as a genuine future star to be coddled and protected and given every opportunity and advantage, not realizing that success is more often attained through personal growth and hard graft, and from the

toughness learned from adversity and experience. When parents are overprotective and deny their offspring the opportunity to become responsible independent thinkers, they become obstacles to their own visions of grandeur. Equally damaging is the lack of internal motivation that can result when pushy or over-bearing parents drive their child's goal setting and make important career decisions. Simply, parents must not be empowered to make important soccer decisions that impact individual or collective player development and they must be educated and reeducated on a regular basis as to the long-term and multi-faceted nature of player development.

Atmopsphere: Create a successful environment

At the very top level, players' technical speed often predicts who is most likely to win, but the psychological dimension of the teambuilding process can never be overlooked. In the World Cup in France 1998, the host country realized the benefits of a gifted and well-prepared team to become World Champions; four years later in Japan/Korea, a more disjointed French team, which was arguably more talented and certainly more experienced, failed to score a goal in the group matches and was eliminated. Brazil, which has always been credited for producing many of the world's most technically gifted players, was psychologically strong in 1994 and 2002 when they were World Champions, but failed at the final hurdle in France with a team reeling from uncertainty and self-doubt. The psychological dimension has also worked for and against the United States women. Attitude was to blame for the USA's poor showing at the World Cup in Norway in 1995 when the defending champions were unceremoniously dumped by a hungrier Norwegian team in the semi-finals. While most Americans are unaware of the grit and determination behind the 1991 World Cup win in China, most will never forget the drive and perseverance that took the team to glory four years later in USA '99. Superior technique always raises the possibility of success, but never the guarantee! The psychological fortitude to strive for success can be developed from an early age.

Successful clubs create a pyramid structure whereby players are rewarded for progress by playing on higher-level teams. Young players may be given "experience" through the occasional appearance for an older team, or they may be assigned to "play up" or train on a permanent basis. Ability, rather than age, is seen as the main determinant of playing level. Conversely, those who stagnate or regress can be released at the end of their contracts. Ironically, while strong community spirit is vital to a successful club, the vulnerability to being released is integral to sustained growth, and complacency is regarded as a blight on development: David Beckham's demise at Old Trafford is a reminder that even high profile players can be moved on, if the interests of a well-focused club are compromised. The use of FIFA substitution rules (no reentry) and the allocation of playing time can also be used to send messages to players, as can changes in positional assignment.

Being regarded as a talented prospect often brings peer and press attention, and as recognition grows, internal and external expectations and pressures grow accordingly. Petty jealousies and envy can also magnify growing ego or insecurity tendencies that a good club will help players mollify through the use of sport psychologists. Excellent insights into the role of the sports psychologist in the player development and

teambuilding processes are Catch Them Being Good, by Dr. Colleen Hacker and USA 99 World Cup winning coach Tony DiCicco; and Focused for Soccer, by Dave Beswick.

The training factors: Coaching quality is key

When we think of the best professional environments, we often conjure up images of lush soccer fields and immaculate training facilities and impressive stadia. But when the glamorous wrappers are removed from the core, coaching quality is left at the very heart and soul of successful clubs. Typically, professional trainers remain with an age group rather than with a team, meaning familiarity with 9 and 10-year-olds or 14 and 15-year olds has been gleaned from years of practical experience. Freshness comes from young players working with a new coach every year or two, and care is taken to match the skills and personality of the adult with the developmental stage of the players. For example, while a highly demanding and more aloof coach might work well for U-18's, the same personality would likely be quite alarming to the youngest children: Fear and pressure are inherent to the cauldron of professional competition; fear and pressure are antithetical to youth development.

In the professional coaching world, the only way to establish good playing and training habits is to establish good playing and training habits! Good coaches understand this; most miss the point entirely. First and foremost, good coaches are positive role models who understand their function in the player development hierarchy. Over time, players who respect their teacher will adopt their habits and suggestions. If the coaches' advice is well grounded in technical and tactical reality, the player's personalities will reflect playing habits that help them play with more efficiency, creativity, urgency and purpose.

Recovery from physical exertion aside, coaches in the professional world understand that it is more important to train than to play, because repetition is realized more from practices than matches. An adult match lasts 90 minutes and the ball is typically out of play for approximately 30 of those minutes. Assuming no substitutions, and assuming each of the 22 players shares the ball equally, the average time of possession is 2.7 minutes per player. With the FIFA maximum of 14 players used, each player has possession for 2.1 minutes. In a youth soccer game with 18 players, and assuming an equal percentage of active time, average individual possession time can range from 1.3 minutes for a 70-minute game to 1.5 minutes for an 80-minute game. Obviously, players do not improve technically when they are only in contact with the ball for 2 minutes per game.

In the top youth training programs, five training sessions per game, with one day of rest, is regarded as the ideal ratio; with four training sessions assigned when a second game is scheduled for the same week. In the professional world, young players compete in fewer than 40 games in a year, while the top professionals typically compete in around 60 matches. For the youths this equates to 10-12 hours of soccer each week for approximately forty weeks. At 500 hours per year, these players are very much on track for meeting the 10,000 hours that are estimated for players to reach elite status. Summer vacation can be up to six weeks and often a winter break of up to three weeks divides the competitive season into two halves. The annual schedule is organized before the pre-

season begins with different points of emphasis built into the calendar to mirror the stages of competition and fitness. By comparison, young Americans routinely compete in over 100 matches per year and rarely have significant blocks of time away from the game to rest and recover. Technical training aside, it is this understanding of the “periodization” process that separates those who truly understand the annual cycle of development from those who merely think they do.

### Summary

It is not yet financially feasible for America’s professional soccer clubs to build a player development system from the top down, but it is possible for amateur teams to borrow from the lessons of the professional game and establish a reasonable approximation of the professional environment. Those lessons would include the following:

#### Technical Areas

- ❖ Establish a club-wide periodization plan for games, training and rest
- ❖ Create a consistent playing and training philosophy
- ❖ Establish age-specific training objectives
- ❖ Hire the most competent and qualified coaches available and match them with appropriately-aged players
- ❖ Provide for continuing coaching education
- ❖ Create a club identity through uniform colors and club merchandise
- ❖ Train as a club
- ❖ Wear common training uniforms and insist on polished shoes and inflated soccer balls.
- ❖ Insist that players do not play on additional outside teams
- ❖ Create multiple level teams to provide for competition within an age group
- ❖ Create internal mechanisms for moving talented players to appropriate training and playing levels
- ❖ Create an elite level training program for the very top players
- ❖ Develop relationships with medical centers and sports psychologists and provide opportunities for special services to players
- ❖ Develop a pre-season fitness testing program and establish individual fitness goals, training objectives and periodic testing procedures
- ❖ Develop periodic fitness testing plans
- ❖ Work with the professional medical staff on remediation programs
- ❖ Provide regular player evaluations and include parents in the discussion
- ❖ Build a “home” field complex with a clubhouse and trophy area
- ❖ Designate a “first team” stadium field in the complex
- ❖ Develop fun-based programs for entry-level players with two-year increments.
- ❖ Align with men’s and women’s amateur teams or create a senior level at the club

#### Marketing Related

- ❖ Create a marketing image with a club mascot and logo
- ❖ Create a club website
- ❖ Develop marketing literature that clearly explains the club’s soccer philosophy and development approach

- ❖ Establish club-wide fundraising projects
- ❖ Establish on-line player profiles for high school age players
- ❖ Develop an intra-club communications process for both players and parents
- ❖ Hold quarterly or semi-annual club-wide educational and informational meetings
- ❖ Develop contacts for future college and professional level players
- ❖ Create club-wide social events, including an end of season honor awards banquet
- ❖ Honor those players who have gone onto higher levels

## **The Final Teambuilding Process**

### From Practices to Matches

Tactical training themes from the earliest soccer practices will constitute a significant portion of a players' lifelong tactical diet, even in very small-sided games where technique is the primary focus. These themes will include directional play, possession, rhythm of play, transition to attack and defense, and ball recovery. As players mature, and their competitive matches become numerically more complicated, these basic themes will form the foundation of group and team play.

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

When players have developed a level of technical proficiency and have evolved a soccer personality, the formal teambuilding process can begin in earnest. At the youth professional level, this phase is often delayed until the end of the technical development phase in the mid- to late-teens; while, at the amateur level, the process often begins much earlier. In the United States, formal teambuilding is occasionally the focus of training programs with players as young as six, and routinely with players as young as eight.

In the youth professional environment, the formal (11-a-side) teambuilding phase is signaled by changes in the practice activities; specifically, the use of large group tactical functional training activities designed to build and reinforce positional play and team understanding. At this final stage, developing collective understanding of systems of play and increasing situational familiarity and decision-making under pressure are the main elements of teambuilding. The practice organizations are always based on the team's system(s) of play, such as 4-3-3 or 3-4-1-2

Underlying the teambuilding process are the following assumptions and knowledge

- ❖ Players must be technically proficient to be effective team players
- ❖ Players must be capable of maintaining possession individually
- ❖ Players must be capable of supporting and possessing the ball in small-groups
- ❖ Players must have some basic understanding of their individual role within their line
- ❖ Players must have some basic understand of the role of their line within the team
- ❖ Players must be capable of reading the tactical cues for the phases of play (see below)
- ❖ Players must be physically prepared to compete in competitive matches
- ❖ Players must be psychologically prepared to compete in competitive matches

### Phases of Play

Formal teambuilding is accomplished by training eleven players to understand their individual and collective responsibilities over eight basic phases of play. These eight phases are listed below with their associated tactical cues. A tactical cue is the “live” trigger within the game that a new phase of play is under way. One of the goals of coaching is to help players better understand these tactical cues and therefore make better individual and collective decisions. The phases of play are present to some degree in every soccer game from 2v2 to 11v11, but, as playing numbers grow past 6v6, the need to arrange players into a formal structure, vis-à-vis positions, becomes more pressing.

The phases of play are:

- ❖ Build-up Play: Team in possession with no opportunity to attack the goal
- ❖ Attacking Play: Team in possession with an opportunity to attack the goal
- ❖ Attacking Restarts: Team in possession-play for continued possession or rehearsed restart to goal
- ❖ Transition to Defense: Team has lost possession-deny counter-attack and organize to defend as a team
- ❖ Pressing Defense: Team has lost possession or is out of possession-goal of earliest possible recovery
- ❖ Defending from a Line of Confrontation: Team is out of possession-retreat and organize behind the ball to a predetermined, or tactically feasible, depth
- ❖ Defending Restarts: Team is out of possession-defend quick restart or organize for standard restart situations
- ❖ Transition to Attack: Team has regained possession- counter-attack or circulate the ball

### Functional Training

Activities to train positional play (functional training) can take a variety of forms and can be achieved with an eye to the future or an eye to the present. The first approach attempts to broaden players’ understanding and thinking about the game; the second creates a rigid team structure with little room for creativity in problem solving. When coaches approach the issue of spacing and mobility with a long-term view, “mistakes” are viewed as opportunities for teaching and growth, which naturally evolve into some form of didactic interaction and discussion between player(s) and coach. When the “Here and Now” is

more important to a coach, players are told where to be, what to do, and when to do it; often without the important “why” information, and rarely with the expanded tactical growth of the player in mind. “Here and Now” coaches are very autocratic and invariably want to win games today! It is worth noting that in the Manchester United model outlined by Davie Williams, the only team that demanded success was the first team. The youth teams trained for development; the top team trained for glory.

Soccer is a game with often, multiple solutions to game situations and it is the vision of the coach in helping players to solve these challenges by both individual (dribbling) and collective (ball circulation and combination play) means that determines the true value of a functional training environment and the true value of a coach. Modern soccer is an on-going tension between individualism and organization. Better players must be allowed to express themselves; better players need to understand their responsibilities to the team. The most common approaches to positional training are technical functional training, tactical functional training, and large group function games. These are explained below.

### 1. Technical Functional Training

Increasing speed of play is synonymous with improved technical speed and increased speed of recognition; accordingly, players can be provided with repetitive technical training activities determined by positional demands. The key factors in planning these sessions are the degree of initial pressure and the eventual level of complexity, which are determined by the experience and needs of the players. For example, all young goalkeepers (and older ones, for that matter) need repetition in dealing with crosses. Their training environment can be as simple as the goalkeeper(s) and a server, who works from different heights and angles around the crossing area. The cut backs, drives, chips, floaters, spinners and skippers can be repeated and repeated again, helping the goalkeeper learn to recognize the form of the cross and to deal with the trajectory, pace, and spin of the incoming ball. In addition to the obvious technical elements of handling and footwork, the goalkeeper’s starting positions would be highly relevant to the coaching at this stage.

This practice could evolve to simply include central defenders, so that coordination between the goalkeeper and his or her back line can be developed or reinforced. A next step would be to oppose the central defenders with an attacker. As determined by the needs of the goalkeeper, the entire back line and forward line, and even elements of the midfield may become part of the session as it evolves. The final expansion may include some form of game, and it is here that the level of complexity must match the experience and needs of the goalkeeper.

For inexperienced goalkeepers, the game may be as simple as a 44x36 yard area (double penalty box) with two defenders and a striker at each end, and a crosser on the outside of each penalty area. The wide players would be neutral. Being a small field, the opportunity for repetition is high for the goalkeeper in this practice. At another level, the field may be 80x75 yards and the game 11v11. With this short, but wide field, the open space will likely be found on the flanks with more crossing situations expected. This game could also be conditioned to require crosses whenever the ball is played to open

players in the attacking halves of the wide channels. In this game, tactical complexity is highly game-like and therefore a high degree of transfer to matches is realized; however, the goalkeeper's technical repetition would decrease. As always, the goals of technical repetition and tactical experience often require different training environments.

[While purely a matter of methodological semantics, students of the game will note that when additional players are added to a setting, the practice becomes “tactical functional training” in both name and nature, because tactical decisions must be assessed during each repetition.]

## 2. Training the phases of play through tactical functional organizations

Outside of general tactical games, formally training the phases of play is accomplished through tactical functional training. This is achieved by combining two or more complementary lines, opposed by active defenders. For example, when helping teams build-up from the back, the goalkeeper and defenders must keep the ball until they can go forward. This can be achieved through dribbling or passing. To pass forward, midfield players or forwards must be included in the practice. To oppose their movements, opposing midfielders and attackers will be added to the organization. In this practice, the team building up will have succeeded when they have crossed a designated line in possession, or passed the ball through a target area or passes to a target player. When the opposition gains possession in these games, they will attack the goal.

Phase play can include only the back and midfield lines, only the back and forward lines, only the midfield and forward lines, or all or part of all three lines. The goalkeeper may also be added as required. The choice of players is determined by the problem and the selected starting and ending points for the practice. For example, it can be beneficial to plan coaching sessions that focus specifically on the development of line tactics, such as the defensive line using offside tactics, or the forward line coordinating their patterning and movement ideas. These practices are designed to build “situational” understanding in a controlled environment that generally includes only a limited number of opponents and players from complementary or supporting lines. The activities start from a predetermined field position, such as midfield or the start of the attacking third, with players organized in positions; and end when a goal is scored, the ball goes out of bounds, or the ball is passed or dribbled to a prearranged target or outlet. The coach or other players often serve as the target (outlet) for the defenders in transition and as supporting players for the attackers.

In the defensive example above, where offside tactics are the focus for the back line, four defenders and a goalkeeper might start the practice by playing against one opponent and two supporting midfielders. As numbers are systematically added, the final phase may include only five attackers (three forwards and two midfielders) playing against four defenders, a goalkeeper, and one defensive midfielder. Supporting attackers stationed 40 yards from goal would also serve as targets for the defenders in transition.

In the attacking example above, where coordinated attacking movements are the focus, the three forwards may start by playing unopposed against “shadows” with support from a midfield line of two or three. As the practice develops, up to four defenders might

oppose the three forwards and defensive midfielders would be added to help maintain realistic pressure in the midfield area. In this example, the reference system is 4-3-3. Again, goals, target players or a target goal line should be used to provide a transition point for the defenders.

### 3. Large Group Tactical Functional Training

The final common option for training team understanding is to play large-sided games of 8v8 through 11v11 with players organized into positions and armed with specific tactical goals. In these practice matches, players can be charged with simply reinforcing team tactics that are foundational to the identity of the team, such as quick ball circulation and off-the-ball movement. Or they can focus on specific game tactics designed to deal with an upcoming opponent, such as positioning players to limit passing access to the forwards or developing ideas for breaking down a “bunker” defense. These large group games can also be used to develop changes in playing rhythm in different parts of the field by limiting touches for certain positions, such as the central midfielders; or limiting touches for all players in designated areas, such as the attacking third.

These large group activities can also be used to develop situational understanding, such as when a wide player is caught out of position and their immediate opponent is momentarily free to attack the defense; or when the back players are not finding the forwards early enough during the build-up. In these examples, the players are positioned to replicate the exact game situation the coach wants to improve and play is started from the same point each time. In the first example a wide midfielder is given the ball with a few yards advantage behind their opposite number; in the second example, the ball is played to the fullbacks who must look for early opportunities to play forward. In each case, the game continues to a natural stoppage point before the stage is reset and the scenario repeated.

### **In closing...**

Developing speed of play is a state of mind, an attitude. It starts with the creation of an environment that holds the end point in focus while tempering immediate expectations to the needs of young and impressionable minds. It is a long-term process of continually raising the bar for maturing players. The key to effective team performance is individual quality, and individual quality is always a matter of technique and tactical insight. Until we learn to be more patient in allowing cunning, creative, crafty, and confident personalities to grow and emerge from the dull sameness, we will be no less awed by the occasional emergence of a Freddie Adu.

The American soccer community is proud to boast ownership of a vast number of young soccer players, but our efficiency in producing merely average players on a wide scale would leave most Fortune 500 companies teetering on bankruptcy: In terms of resource management, American youth soccer is much closer to the failed Enron than the industry leading Wal-Mart! Developing a true soccer environment will be a difficult and protracted challenge. First, MLS and WUSA have to survive and flourish to provide a “top end” for the pyramid. Second, the balance of power in the soccer decision-making chambers must start to reflect the expertise of professional soccer people; however, that

evolution will remain tenuous for as long as top quality coaches continue to shun gravitation to leadership (and voting) positions. Third, developing an educated coaching fraternity is taking time, but the return of many former professional and college players to the ranks is certainly helping to increase the rate of growth, and our optimism. Finally, the development of passionate soccer players and fans is paramount for securing our desired place in American society and, certainly, a few more “Mia’s” and “Freddies” and “USA 3 Portugal 2” scorelines would do nothing to hurt that quest!