

Chapter Forty-Two

Teach Crucial Roles Not Conventional Positioning

This section describes the essential process of teaching “crucial positioning” and the role of the 1 v 1 & 2 v 2 in this process.

The “Training Soccer Legends” philosophy is unique in many different ways. One of the totally novel ways in which the Legends approach differs is the belief that the optimum practice ratio of players to ball at the youth level, (till age 18), should be either 2 to 1 or 4 to 1. It is our conviction that anything involving more players than 1 v 1 or 2 v 2 reduces the technical and tactical challenges and benefits to unjustifiable levels. This is because of the obvious cost to ball touches involved in match ups greater than 1 v 1 and 2 v 2 but also because the “essential positions” of the game of soccer are best taught in the 1 v 1 and 2 v 2 game.

Soccer has many conventional positions. Some of these are:

- Right back
- Left Back
- Center Back
- Sweeper
- Outside right midfield
- Center midfield
- Defensive midfield
- Offensive midfield
- Outside left midfield
- Center striker
- Right wing
- Left wing

Within these conventional positions most traditional coaches teach players to play to their strengths and hide their weaknesses so that conventional positions become ever more rigid and inflexible in challenges and demands.

The Legends philosophy completely rejects that any practice time before age 18 should be spent on learning the limited roles and responsibilities of specific conventional positions. This is because players trained in this manner end up with extremely limited roles and responsibilities like the positions they are trained for. Because of this they do not learn to display any versatility or improvisational ability in their play and are lost when they attempt the skills, tactics, physical and psychological challenges inherent to other positions.

As opposed to the above list of conventional positions the “Training Soccer Legends” philosophy trains advanced understanding and performance in four “essential” or “crucial” positions that must be mastered in order to play at the very highest level, these are:

- First attacker
- Second attacker
- First defender
- Second defender

Let’s examine why these are the only essential positions in soccer.

First we need to understand that each and every choice of practice content has a benefit versus cost relationship. There are many “benefit versus cost” evaluations that go into the establishment of a great practice or coaching philosophy.

For example, practicing the “off-side trap” may have great benefit in helping obtain a win in the short-term. However, the cost to development might be devastating because the players involved may never again play in a system that uses the “off-side trap”. In this example the pursuit of the short-term win may have a totally detrimental, (time wasted), impact on the ability of the players concerned to subsequently perform brilliantly at the highest level.

A great developmental coaching philosophy is one that maximizes the essential learning components needed for a player to attain and perform well at the very highest level (World Cup Final). With this in mind every developmental purist should select all practice content with the question, “What does this session need to teach for it to best prepare my players for the World Cup Final?” i.e. the very highest level.

For a field player to be able to play at the very highest level that player needs to very good at 4 things. In priority order of importance these four things are:

- Dominate the ball under pressure and have the ability and confidence to create penetrating opportunities for ones-self and the team. This component is the “Quarterback factor”. Every high-level soccer player has to be able to perform an equivalent role to that of the talented football quarterback who alternately fakes, passes and runs to create penetration for his team.

We call this role or position “The first attacker”.

- Understand, set up and execute key combination plays with the first attacker. This position or role involves making deceptive runs at full speed to get open to receive the ball. It also requires the ability to do something skillful and deceptive with the ball and in combination with a teammate to create penetration. The key combination plays are:
 1. Wall Pass
 2. Wall Pass Fake

3. Overlap
4. Overlap Fake
5. Take Over
6. Double Pass.

We call this position “The second attacker”

- Prevent penetration or meaningful distribution by the man with the ball. Objectives here include denying the shot, preventing the penetrating dribble and severely restricting the options for the forward pass.

We call this position “The first defender”

- Prevent penetrating support for the opposition ball carrier by players on the opposing team. Objectives here include always being able to see ones’ 2nd attacker and the ball, providing cover to the first defender, matching up with the 2nd attacker, preventing the penetrating dribble if the first defender is beaten and always severely restricting the options for the penetrating pass.

We call this position “The second defender”

As you can see we have broken down the traditional position based approach to soccer into 4 more effective developmental units. Simply put; players who learn to perform excellent 1st and 2nd attacker, plus 1st and 2nd defender roles and tasks, are going to be better prepared to achieve “clutch play” excellence and be successful at the very highest level.

Traditionally coached teams who train their players in narrow, task specific individual or team roles, (i.e. “Sweeper” or “Off-side trap”), will probably win more at the earlier ages and stages of development, but will inevitably limit the future horizons of their players. This is because the development of individual dribbling brilliance involves “high risk” and high-risk play guarantees that a multitude of mistakes must be made and paid for, before the acquisition of fantastic skill can ever occur to a degree that ensures regular successful performance.

If you're not making mistakes, then you're not doing anything. I'm positive that a doer makes mistakes.

John Wooden

In the “Training Soccer Legends” ethos we prioritize logically as follows:

- Firstly, we spend years training the first attacker capabilities because this responsibility is the crucial one. Without the ability to be a brilliant deceptive ball carrier a player will always be likely to lose out to the defender. By comparison to offense, defense is very easy. Destruction by its very nature is the quickest and easiest way to make a difference. Creation takes far longer and is extremely difficult. This is why the creative technical

training and 1 v 1, (first attacker v first defender), stages are so very time consuming. It is interesting to note that the 1 v 1 stage has a double benefit because while we are training the “first attacker” we are also training the very best “first defenders”. This is because the first defenders in our program have to be able to nullify the best prepared deceptive dribblers and finishers (first attackers). Therefore, because our practice philosophy involves a tremendous amount of 1 v 1 we train a far greater ability in the “crucial” or “clutch”, creative offensive and destructive defensive responsibilities than more traditional coaching philosophies. As a consequence a simple exercise in logic will result in the realization that the Legends program trains the best “first attackers” while simultaneously developing the very best “first defenders”.

"There is no greater joy than that of feeling oneself a creator. The triumph of life is expressed by creation."

Henri Bergson

- Secondly, after a number of years when our players have developed into tremendous first attackers and first defenders, these talented individuals are ready to develop expertise in the 2 v 2 situation. This is where they learn to utilize their 1 v 1 skills in combination with others to create a devastating two player offensive unit.

No player who hasn't spent the significant time and practice on the essential 1 v 1 skills needed to dominate an opponent, can ever be a truly effective 2 v 2 player. This is because the “on the ball” skills needed to set up and execute a “passing” or “combination” play at the perfect moment are those of the incredible deceptive dribbler. This is why the Brazilians are the world's best deceptive dribblers and also the world's best “wall passers”. If the ball carrier has the ability and confidence to hold the ball until the perfect moment to pass and “set up” the defender, the “wall pass” play is virtually unstoppable. In the “wall pass” the ball carrier must be able to “commit” the first defender. “Committing” a defender involves deceiving him into thinking that he can win the ball by using it as bait. Once the defender has “committed” to the ball it is then possible for the ball carrier to pass it quickly and accelerate into the space behind the defender for the return pass.

"Offer the enemy a bait or lure him; feign disorder and strike him."

Sun Tzu, (The Art of War)

A great ball carrier is truly able to set up and execute all the combination plays of soccer far more effectively than someone with little dribbling training. Coaches who have failed to train their players to be great deceptive dribblers spend many a frustrating practice trying to get their players to execute a well timed “wall pass”. Even when they get some limited practice success, all their efforts come to naught in the games because their players can't perform effectively under game pressure and fail to “commit” defenders before initiating the “wall pass”. An inability to dribble the ball effectively will lead to the breakdown of all the crucial combination plays and the consequent failure of the coach's offensive scheme.

“There are many people, particularly in sports, who think that success and excellence are the same thing and they are not the same thing. Excellence is something that is lasting and dependable and largely within a person’s control. In contrast, success is perishable and is often outside our control... If you strive for excellence, you will probably be successful eventually... people who put excellence in first place have the patience to end up with success... An additional burden for the victim of the success mentality is that he/she is threatened by the success of others and resents real excellence. In contrast, the person fascinated by quality is excited when he/she sees it in others.”

Joe Paterno

It is therefore indisputable that a truly great developmental program must spend a tremendous amount of time, (years!!!), on developing the first attacker skills of deceptive dribbling. Without developing an incredible ability to deceive and beat players with the ball it is, in the long run, impossible to become a truly effective “team” player. Team players must be able to respond when their teammates make good runs and deliver the ball at precisely the right moment. The ball must also be delivered in exactly the right manner for that player to make maximum use of the opportunity. Unless the ball carrier just happens by chance to be in exactly the right place with the perfect body position at the moment that their teammate makes a run, they will have to quickly adjust both body and ball position to make the pass possible. At the lower levels, where defenders are not so astute or experienced, it may be possible to adjust both ball and body position slowly and still make the play, however, the higher the standard of play the greater the defensive pressure and the greater the degree of touch and deception needed. At the upper echelon of the game defenders are all fast, powerful and experienced leaving no margin of error for even the very best of deceptive dribblers. This is why many teams who are effective in scoring at the lower levels of play fail completely when they compete against better and more experienced defenses.

Only when the “first attacker” skills of deceptive dribbling and finishing have been extensively developed can the coach work on the combination plays listed above with any hope of success. Therefore, in one of the great contradictions of soccer it can be seen that to penetrate a well marshaled defense by passing requires great touch and dribbling ability.

It’s ironic that the only way to develop a great “clutch” or “big play” passing team is to spend years training players to first be a great dribbler. One only has to look at the great Brazilian players from the last four decades to see the truth in this statement. For those more familiar with basketball the NBA provides a model where most of the greatest players were developed in the “dribble and shoot” environment of the inner city.

“To be a concert pianist, you need a tuxedo, a grand piano, a top-notch agent, and many other things, but it's all a waste without technique. You have to be able to play piano. Similarly, you need knowledge of the game, tactics, etc., but it's all a waste if you can't dribble and shoot the ball. Technique, technique, technique.”

Author Unknown

In his book “The Seven Habits of Highly Effective People” Dr Stephen Covey writes about the “Law of the Farm”. This is where the farmer has to first till, sow and fertilize his land in order to reap a bumper crop at harvest time. In soccer the coach has to first teach players to truly master the ball in order to eventually produce a team of brilliance. There are many short cuts to achieving the short-term team win but all of these “short cuts” come at the expense of individual development and long-term achievement. It takes years of constant emphasis and challenge to develop “first attackers”, (ball carriers), with the ability to create space with the ball and beat players one on one. Then, and only then, can the coach teach effective team play in the attacking third of the field.

The simple truth is that great coaches don’t teach “traditional positions”. They teach “crucial positions”. The “first attacker” is the most important position in the game and must be taught first because all else succeeds or fails with the brilliance or ineptitude of the ball carrier. The “second attacker” is the only other creative position that matters because even the very best first attackers will need support in order to penetrate in the attacking third of the field. Please note that all other teammates are second attackers in support of the ball carrier.

The “first defender” position is the third most important because the man defending the ball has the responsibility to nullify, or at least limit, an opponent’s attacking options making it unlikely that the other team will penetrate and score.

The “second defender” position is the last crucial one. Great second defenders take away an opponent’s forward passing options and provide cover to the first defender in case he is beaten.

The “Training Soccer Legends” philosophy maximizes ability in all four areas.

Important Quick Note: As in life where the ability to read and write expertly helps in the quest to reach the top in all vocations, soccer players need to learn to dribble and shoot, at speed, under pressure to be effective in any position and go to the very top. Yet in other programs the desire for instant gratification, (the win), leads coaches to pigeonhole players in conventional positions and thereby rob the young player of the opportunity to develop the great finishing and dribbling skills that will enable him to reach the summit. This pigeonholing also denies that player all the fun and positive self-concept that goes hand-in-hand with learning to dominate and master the ball.