

## Pattern- Play

It seems like every time I go to a dome these days I see kids training, which is a good thing, and more and more, I see coaches using patterns of play with kids as young as eight to ones as old as nineteen. I get it. The coaches are trying to impart very specific scenarios by assigning a place to something. Many of the coaches are even trying to out do their counterparts by creating even more complex patterns of play. These patterns I would think are created by the coach for the individual or the team to familiarize them with that facet of team-play. The more complex the pattern, the more knowledgeable, it seems, the coach is. In my opinion, this kind of coaching exercise has got so many flaws and the truth is practices like these are not likely to yield suitable progressions, in either the individual or team performance.

Pattern-play methods, to me, are too structured when a coach is working on skills and movements in the game. They boil down to the coach isolating a situation and then practicing it over and over again as a singular stage in play. This method of isolating a scenario and repeating it so many times with all the players of the team involved, does not satisfy the imperative playing components or the realistic continuity of the game. There are some very precise faults with this kind of coaching.

First, it consumes unnecessary time because there is so much standing with too many errand passes and if you have an hour and the half with the kids you end up spending an hour on this.

Second, not enough playing situations are involved prior to or beyond the actual pattern of play under scrutiny.

Third, the detection of the pattern of play circumstance and acting on it effectively in the spirited heat of a match is highly unlikely.

Staged dead ball restarts scenarios are more likely to prove successful from pattern play practice, though the players have to be more fluid in reading play situations so they could adjust to what the opposition gives them.

Spontaneity needs to be developed in training and I have always believed that one of the ways to achieve this is by making young players recognize on-the-ball situations. When there arises a teaching moment in training, the whole picture needs to be presented to the player. The area from which the ball came, the actions of the players in the immediate vicinity of the ball and the

actions of the players in the area(s) into which the ball may go has to be brought into the whole picture. This is what I call a full read of the game. What pattern play does is, it limits the practice in to a singular scenario, thus reducing a more expansive option the player may have available to him. Restricting the natural flow of the game, by making young players bore themselves with an hour of pattern play, stifles spontaneity, and stunts their ability to improvise and in the end you create players that cannot integrate their thinking into variable game situations especially in a very competitive match-play.

Yes we all know that the movement of the ball and players through the def/mid/att; areas of the field with the conclusion being the goal is what we all strive to do and honestly, that's what the game is all about. How we try to accomplish that is where the challenge is and that's where tactics come in. Movement of the players and the ball through these areas will obviously require ability, concentration, timing and game understanding.

How then can a coach train so the players can have a total look at all the possibilities, options and needs, since soccer is not a strait jacket. A training session that is based on realistic practice involving playing alternatives, options and a touch of street savvy that forces changes of decisions made as situations arise in games are of paramount importance. If a whole session goes by without these, it could quite easily be said that the practice time was wasted.

Development years fly by too quickly and if practice time is used unrealistically then talent is not developed and if you do not develop talent at those formative years, you become a conveyor belt of poor players. Should I dare then to say poor coaching produces poor players? Yes!.

As an analogy here, pattern play practice is like a method you'd use in theatre. The Director wishes to modify a section in a performance. He or she reconstructs the section in question. It's rehearsed many times and then included in the next performances. This may be suitable for theatre because the action prior to the newly learned slot and action after remains the same and unchanged. With soccer, this method does not satisfy the needs of a game that requires the immediacy of choices and responses to situations that are never exactly the same. The over reliance on predetermined patterns of play may make a coach look good but in the end this is just producing straight-line thinking players and if they cannot play that straight-line soccer because they find themselves under tremendous pressure they crumble.

I am beginning to see the use of this pattern- play method a lot and if this is the new norm, which to me falls under the category of unrealistic practice, then we are just watching the beginning of another era of decline. Pattern-play, an example of the orderly class room mentality should not

be brought to the fore front where organization and simplicity are preferred to spontaneity and skill. This kind of coaching of individual skill to group and team instruction, just takes the individual fantasy from the game and replaces it with combined futility.