



Team Shape

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I have been associated with soccer as a player and coach the past 25 years, the last 5 years as a high school coach in Texas.

Now I am spending my first year as an assistant coach at the University of Dubuque, where I have had the opportunity to observe and talk with other coaches, plus foreign players, on one of the biggest problems in American soccer. I believe the biggest tactical (decision-making) problem in today's soccer is players watching during the game. Compared to countries that are surrounded by soccer every day ... where they eat, sleep and die for the sport, we as a country have fallen behind in our development. Our athletes have more decisions on sports to play and the majority of our society could tell you the history of American football or baseball (myself included), because we were raised up on those sports. As a coach, you have to ask yourself what you can do with the limited time you have with your athletes.

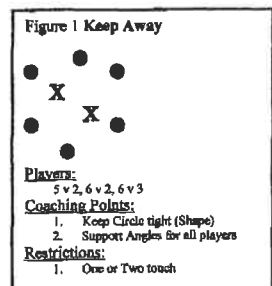
Many coaches have trouble getting their teams to move as a unit, and one metaphor I use for my players that they might understand is dancing (waltz). I would suggest something the kids can

relate to so they will work at it. The whole team must move together as an entire unit. If not, you are going to step on your partner's feet as I do with my wife. The team will leave gaps and passing lanes in your defense, which can lead to trouble. The following practice schedule will hopefully encourage all coaches to begin making your players think during the game by working off each other, keeping mobile, and improve as a tactical team.

The 3 key points to look for as a coach are support, shape and transition. Having your practice progress smoothly from the warm-up (Fig 1) through the end of the day will improve your athlete's ability to transfer their knowledge onto the game field. In Table 1, there is an example of an outline for a day. One of the ways we start the practice at the University of Dubuque is having our kids begin immediately with ball movement. We want our players to move their feet and warming up with the ball on an activity that we will be practicing that day. You can use this practice schedule either for attacking or defensively. In this article I will be examining the attacking side. Team shape on all aspects of the game is key to a successful day, so the players will begin with a game of Keep Away (Fig 1). Make sure players are moving their feet, staying mobile when the ball is passed, and communicating. The circle will need to stay tight to prevent your players from losing their shape. If they were to stretch or widen out they begin to create gaps, and players will have a hard time recovering to support

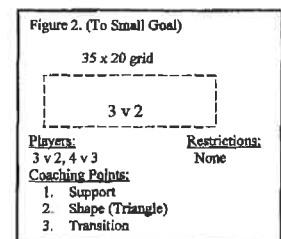
on a proper passing angle.

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| I. Warm-up Stretch | 20 min. |
| II. To Small Goals Big Goal / Counter Goal | 55 min |
| (II). 2 Big Goals | 30 min |



To Small Goal:

After stretching, your players are warmed up with plenty of touches, you will then progress to attacking small goals or end lines (Fig 2).



Rules are as follows:

1. You must stop the ball on the end line to score a goal.
2. After scoring a goal, the team that scores, transitions back to receive a new ball and attacks again. Two new defenders will come onto the field.
3. If the defense wins possession they will have to attack with 2 players



until they score. If they score, the two will transition back to receive a ball and one player jumps in to attack with 3 players. Two new defenders join in immediately.

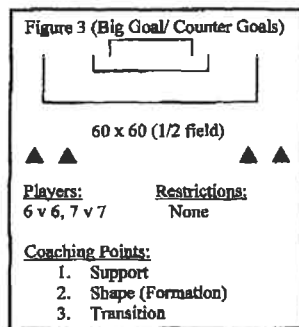
4. When the ball is kicked out of bounds or the attacking team does not stop the ball on the end line, then you have 5 new players step into the grid. The coach has to keep track of alternating which side is attacking.

The practice needs to continually move rapidly so you do not have a long down time for players waiting to be in the grid. If you are blessed with 18 plus players including goalkeepers, then I would suggest going with 2 grids. This way your players can play more in the practice, which in the long run will improve their awareness of the game. The coach will need to remember the 3 points you are working on in the practice. (Support, Shape, Transition) If at any point during the 3v2 you observe a coaching point, then stop the game and correct the play. Remember these four steps on correcting your players:

- Discuss the problem
- Demonstrate the correct way
- Have the players reenact the correct way
- Have them restart play with the player who made the mistake

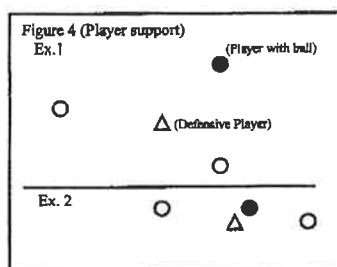
Big Goal/Counter Goals:

Once your progress to big goal plus counter goals, the coach needs to increase the number of players. During this part of practice, the game becomes more realistic. The players have more freedom with the length and width of the field, enabling coaches the opportunity to visually see the team transferring what they learned in the previous exercises. In Figure 3, the coach begins to set up a formation, and your desire of play will determine how the players will be set up.



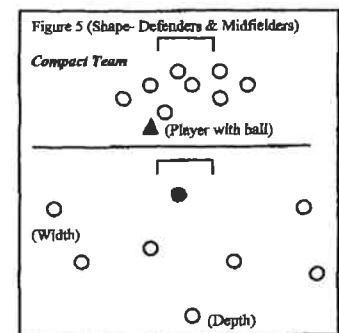
Either 4-2 (4 midfielders or defenders and 2 forwards or midfielders), 2-3-1, or 2-2-2. Some coaches do not believe in a set formation, but a coach needs to set parameters for the kids to follow. You do not want one of your defenders staying up top trying to score, because they then destroy the shape of your defensive team. Now that you have more players involved and the exercise is becoming game-like, let's discuss the three coaching points in more detail.

Support: At all times there needs to be a player(s) (without the ball) in the same area of the player with the ball. I do not mean they are shoulder to shoulder, but depending on the defensive pressure on the player with the ball dictates how close another player will be. Figure 4 shows where two players should be for support. Example 1 shows the player with the ball has low pressure, so his teammates can play farther away from him, whereas in Example 2 you see high defensive pressure. The players need to know when they see this in a game



that they have to come back to support their teammate, which will provide effective team shape.

Shape: For a team to be successful, you have to keep your shape defensively and attacking. When attacking, your team needs width, depth, and supporting players. We have discussed support from players, so dealing with team shape a coach will need to understand the position of width and depth players in the attack. Briefly, the defensive shape should always be compacted. Anytime an opposing team is in your half of the field there are two things a coach should discuss with his players. First, all midfielders should be behind the ball to defend and forwards are applying pressure from the back. Second, your defense needs to compact to prevent any through balls or passing lanes. After your team wins possession the team shape changes, and in Figure 5 you can see how the players move from compact to a more opened team. Outside backs and midfielders begin to widen out to the touchlines (width), and a forward will try to push onto the deepest defender creating team depth.



Transition: Without good team transition your game will be in trouble. For example, if the defense and midfield does not move up through the middle third into the attacking half, then the team will always be trying to score with numbers down. Either 1 v 3, 2 v 5, or so on, which creates a difficult opportunity to score. Defensively, the team is in danger without all midfielders transitioning back to defend. How can 4 players



effectively defend against 6, 7, or possibly 8 players? The last phase of practice will emphasize a 3 zonal game, where the players can visually see their position during the game.

Full Game (2 big goals)

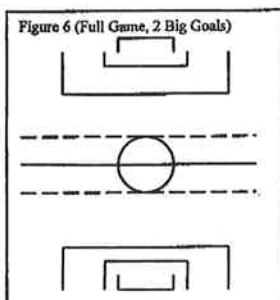
After building your practice up by adding more players in each exercise, the coach ends the day with a full game going to 2 big goals. Figure 6 shows a full field, 3 zonal game with 8 v 8 or up to 11 v 11.

Set up:

1. Divide the field into 3 zones (defensive, middle, attacking thirds)
2. Team formation (4-4-2, 3-5-2)

Restrictions:

1. You must have at least 4 players in a third where the ball is being possessed to advance to the next third.
2. Everybody on the team must be across midfield for a goal to count.
3. No limitations – Play regular.



As a coach, I would have the teams play briefly with no limitations. This way the coach can see where the mistakes are being made that you are working on that particular day (transition, shape, and support). As you begin to stop the game for corrections, I would then add the restrictions listed above. You should see your team transfer the knowledge from the previous exercises into the final game in which they begin to move like dancers. End the final game with no restrictions and limit your coaching corrections to major mistakes. You might try pulling

aside a specific player so the game keeps moving.

Overall, teams have to move constantly during the game to be successful. Coaches, we have to do our job by getting American players away from ball watching...if they want to watch the game, put them on the bench. With more players beginning to participate in club and ODP, we have kids playing year around. The level of play for men's and women's soccer is improving year by year. District play among the high school level is becoming a tighter race and more teams are receiving recognition in rankings. Hopefully, you can take this practice and work it into your schedule. I would love to hear from all the coaches with any suggestions you might have. You can contact me at plshins@dbq.edu. Good luck this season.



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