



**COACHING SCHOOL
LECTURE**

Establishing a Rhythm of Play

David Hughes



As soccer coaches and fans we frequently marvel at the ability of professional teams to play the game attractively. Many coaches

wonder how to accomplish this with their own teams. There are obviously many factors that come in to play when a coach considers implementing a particular style of play, among them: the technical ability of players, tactical understanding of players, weather conditions and size of the field.

A rhythm of play refers to the passing sequences, combinations and speed of play a team uses to attack the opponent's goal. Many of these patterns are pre-planned and are practiced and perfected prior to incorporating them into the team's tactical game plan.

In this article I will introduce a series of patterns and combinations that can be used in various areas of the field in order to get behind defenses. These combinations will enable teams to play an attractive possession style of play. I will conclude with a training session that can be used to incorporate the tactics into the team's system of play. The system of play will be a 4-4-2. For the purposes of introducing the patterns I will use shadow training and play with four midfielders and two

forwards. When considering attacking tactics a coach must keep in mind the principles of attack. These are depth, width, mobility, penetration and improvisation. Keeping these principles in mind is critical as they enable the attacking team to stretch, move and open holes in the defense.

Pushing and Pulling

Pushing and pulling refers to the movements of the two forwards as they prepare to receive the ball. The pushing and pulling encourages mobility, support and depth in the attack. As the ball is moved across the midfield the forward closest to the ball moves away and then pulls to the ball to receive it as the other forward pushes away in order to create depth (Figure 1).

Figure 1



Switching the Point of Attack

Once the forwards have learned to push and pull the team can work on switching the point of attack. This is an area that creates a great deal of frustration for high school coaches. Players are tactically unaware of the importance of switching the point of attack. They frequently attempt to

force the ball through the most heavily defended areas of the field as opposed to drawing the defense to one side of the field and then quickly switching the ball to the other side.

The movements introduced here will facilitate this for coaches and will make the need to switch the point of attack more obvious to players (Figure 2).

Figure 2



As can be seen in Figure 2, this sequence begins with the ball being played to one side of the field. The two midfielders and the forward on that side of the field play the ball in a rapid sequence making at least two passes. This draws the defense to that side of the field. The forward on the other side, who has pushed away, moves toward the middle of the field moving defenders and creating space for the midfielders to switch the ball. The ball is switched with one long pass to the outside midfielder on the other side, who is wide and square to the ball, or through a series of two or more passes.

Forward runs

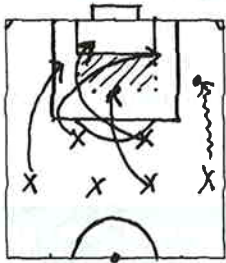
As the ball is played wide to the



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midfielder the forwards make looping runs to the posts. These runs must be timed well so they are explosive and so that the forwards arrive at the time the ball is delivered to the second six. The second six is an imaginary six-yard box between the goal box and the penalty spot (Figure 3).

Figure 3



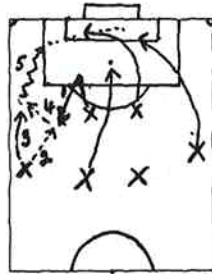
In addition to the runs by the forwards to the posts, the attacking midfielder should make a run to the "slot area", the area around the penalty spot.

Wall Pass

Any ball that is played to the outside midfielder on either side can result in a wall-pass combination with the forward on that side. The midfielder dribbles the ball at the defender in order to create space on the flank. The forward on that side times his run to the ball and plays the ball into space for the midfielder. The opposite forward pushes away and prepares for a run to the front post. The outside midfielder on the other side will make a run to the back post. This is different from the previously mentioned runs, because the forward who was involved in the wall pass

cannot get to the back post as it is too far to run. He instead runs to the edge of the penalty area. The attacking midfielder again runs to the slot (Figure 4).

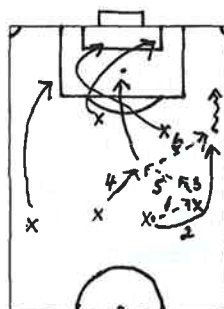
Figure 4



Overlap

The overlap is a very effective move in this scheme, as the movement of the ball deceives the defense and creates space to attack down the flank. The sequence begins with the right central midfielder who plays wide to the right outside midfielder and follows his pass overlapping the outside midfielder. The outside midfielder who is now in possession of the ball plays the ball to the left central midfielder who has stepped up and toward the outside midfielder. The central midfielder now plays the ball to the overlapping player who attacks down the flank. The sequence should be executed with the fewest passes possible, ideally all one touch. The forwards make looping runs. The left forward runs to the front post and the right forward to the back post. The left central midfielder attacks the slot (Figure 5).

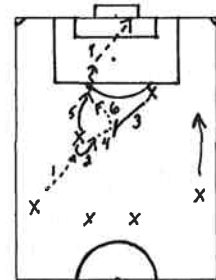
Figure 5



Forwards linking up for a wall pass

So far we have seen examples of attacking play down the flanks. This is a combination that allows forwards to link up through the center of the field. As has already been mentioned the forwards must constantly push and pull in order to try to unbalance the defense. When a ball is played into a forward he can turn to face the defense. Once he has turned, the other forward can move toward him to offer support for a wall pass and the opportunity to get behind the defense (Figure 6).

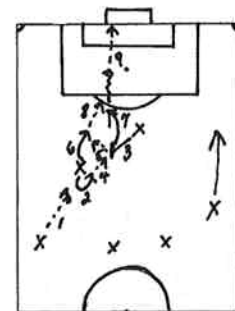
Figure 6



Double Wall Pass

The double wall pass is a continuation of the previous combination. After the forward who was pushing away plays the wall pass, he spins off behind the defender and receives a return pass from his teammate. This combination is frequently more effective than a simple wall pass (Figure 7).

Figure 7



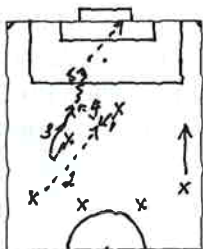
Ball played to the pushing Forward

Another option is a ball that



bypasses the pulling forward and is played to the feet of the pushing forward. As the ball passes the pulling forward, he spins off his marker and sprints past the other forward who can play him the ball or go it alone (Figure 8).

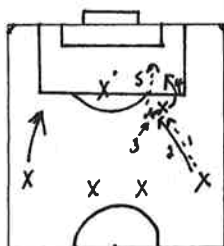
Figure 8



Underlap

The underlap is an option that can be used by an outside midfielder but can open attacking space for an outside back. The underlap begins with the outside midfielder playing the ball into the forward's feet and following his pass. The forward then leaves the ball to the midfielder, who penetrates the defense. The forward can also spin off his defender and receive a return pass from the midfielder (Figure 9).

Figure 9



Another option for the underlap is that as the midfielder follows his pass, the outside back can overlap into the space created by the midfielders run (Figure 10).

Figure 10



Practice Organization

Warm Up (speed of play and rhythm)

- 6v6v6 in a rectangular space approximate 40x50 (adjust according to player's ability).
- Identify each group of 6 with a scrimmage vest.
- Play a 12 v 6 possession game; the team that loses the ball defends.
- Add requirement that the teams must play in a sequence of 1 touch, 2 touches, 3 touches, 1 touch, 2 touch, etc...

Player A begins by playing to player B who is required to use two touches to play to player C who is required to use 3 touches. C then plays to another player who must play 1 touch. With an interception the sequence begins again.

- 6v6v6 - quickest possible pass.

Small Group (shadow training)

- Play 6v0 to goal on a half field practicing the combinations.
- Cover two-three in a session and continue to review them before adding others.
- Gradually add pressure - two defenders and two midfielders to add pressure to the attackers (6v4). Add counter attack goals (Figure 11).

Figure 11



Large Group (Team)

- Play 8v8 in a 2-4-2 or 3-3-2 formation.
- Emphasize the team looking for opportunities to play the combinations you have introduced.
- Give a goal for a regular goal and two goals for a combination you have used in your session.
- Freeze play when you see opportunities to play combinations that

players are not recognizing from the session.

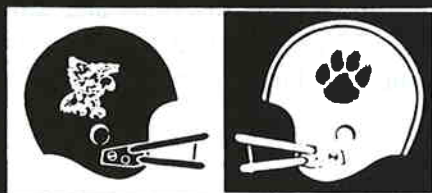
Free Play

- Allow players to play freely without coaching.

Conclusion

Introducing these patterns has worked well for me. It has provided a framework that the whole team can recognize. When the ball is in a certain part of the field all players will understand the options that have been taught in training. This does not mean that players should not play directly, take players on, or improvise. In fact, creativity should be encouraged of all players under the proper circumstances. When introducing the combinations coaches must be patient and realize that this will take time to become a part of the team's scheme. I suggest working on the first three or four for one season and then gradually adding the other patterns and combinations.

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