

Coaching Teenage American Players: Rhythm, Decoys and Combinations

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There is a maxim in the professional leagues in Europe: "Urgency in soccer is an unreliable friend." This is extremely relevant to US teenage soccer, but I would change it a bit: "Urgency in youth soccer reliably creates a predictable and frustrating game."

I recently had the opportunity to watch our U17 and U20 National Teams train and play against each other over a two-week period. It was interesting, especially in light of my observations over the past few seasons of a number of teenage games and training sessions, both in high school and club settings.

Technically, for most teenage players the most glaring needs concern the abilities to make crisp, smooth passes with pace that do not bounce or skip, and to receive balls cleanly, especially when running at speed directly towards the passer, most often when "checking" for balls. Even with the U17 and U20 National Team players, over half the time their first touch popped balls up to their waist or two or three feet away from them in an unplanned direction.

Coaches of teenage players would do well to create more practice environments where players are constantly making and receiving hard, accurate passes under the pressure of limited time and space, but maximum movement. Over the past few years, I have seen thousands of "keep away" and two-touch exercises designed to reinforce good passing and receiving. The reality, however, is that most often the spaces used are unrealistic, the passes too soft and the players move very little. While they may keep possession for three or four passes, the players virtually move nowhere, and coaches generally do not demand crisp, accurate play. In essence, there is no replication of the pressures of the real game. Consequently, when the players do actually play in the game, their lack of tight control and balance while playing and running at speed lead to constant battles for the ball, where, more often than not, most players' second touch is a tackle.

While there is a tremendous need for teenage players to spend much time passing and receiving under pressure, the tactical issues presented in most teenage games require attention. The most prevalent tactical characteristic of these games is a direct foot-race type of play that more often resembles a ping pong match rather than good soccer. This is true even at the highest levels. When the U20s played games against the U17s, they tended to physically dominate the younger players. Faced with this pressure, the U17s' primary response was to try to speed the game up, play longer more direct passes, hoping for a crack in the defense somewhere – and they were increasingly frustrated and rebuffed.

There are at least three areas coaches could address to dramatically improve the level of play: (1) establishing a rhythm, (2) using the ball as a decoy and (3) combination play. In this article, I will only generally discuss these concepts. In a following article, I will give some examples of training sessions designed to encourage and promote them.

This tendency towards "urgency" is partly due to the age, where the predominant response to pressure is to impetuously fight back harder. There is another more subtle,

yet pervasive, factor. Most, if not all of the U17 players were selected for "elite" teams when they were 11 to 14 years old, ages when there are often noticeable differences in physical maturity. The touchstone for success for most young "elite" teams is that their star players can outrun opponents. The most used "tactic," therefore, is direct play – unimaginative long balls, with no attempt at guile -- where the physically precocious player most often prevails. While this tactic apparently is "successful" through the early teen years, its effectiveness diminishes significantly later, when there is more physical parity among players. This early emphasis on direct play, however, becomes ingrained in these players, and they rely on it more heavily as they grow and the pressure of the game becomes more intense. Unfortunately, as a result, the vast majority of these "elite" players become one-dimensional, cookie-cutter players, unable to solve the problems of the game differently, imaginatively or creatively.

There appear to be at least three tactical areas upon which coaches can focus to help teenage players overcome this "direct play -- foot-race" tactical barrier. Each requires that players learn to play collectively in groups, cooperate around the ball to create numbers-up situations, and find and exploit weaknesses in the opposing side.

1. Establishing a Rhythm

A hallmark of great players and great teams is the ability to control and change the tempo and rhythm of play as the game requires. Rhythm has many facets both in attack and defense. Here I will only address a few attacking ideas. The concept of establishing and/or controlling rhythm is woefully lacking in most teenage games. Almost every time teenage players gain possession, the immediate result is a one vs. one battle. Even when they make successful passes to hold possession momentarily, these seem to erupt from a series of one v. one contests, rather than through coordinated group play. There is rarely any sense of collective effort beyond a couple of players who may be immediately around the ball. Most often the second or third player to possess the ball is overtaken by the urgency to make a long searching pass, and possession changes hands once again.

Establishing rhythm requires collective play. There has been much general emphasis on small-sided play as a developmental tool, yet often when players move into a larger game they become disjointed, with only one or two players actively engaged around the ball. This is primarily because there has been little conscious focus on helping players recognize the need for establishing a rhythm every time they gain possession and moving together in groups, constantly adjusting as the ball moves around the field.

Some of the most illustrative examples of using small-sided play to teach collective cooperation among players occurred with the US National Team between 1990 and 1994. During this period, the US had the resources to keep players together to train consistently for four years. The vast majority of the practices during that time involved small-sided play, with repeated emphasis on what the player with the ball saw, and how the three, four or five teammates without the ball moved and opened avenues for maintaining possession. In the 1994 World Cup, for the first time at that level, the US was able to effectively mount attacks and defend in collective groups of four or five players at a time.

Coaches of teenage players in the US should focus much more on this concept of groups of four or five players, and establishing a rhythm, direction and tempo of play

every time the players gain possession of the ball. Players both on and off the ball must learn to see their role as part of a collective group to help maintain possession, and create and exploit opportunities to score.

2. Use the Ball as a Decoy

I once heard Rene Simoes, the then-current Brazilian Women's Olympic Team Coach, asked to describe the Brazilian style of play. He laughed for a moment and said, "I'll bet you think I am going to say 'Samba.'" Then he said, "That is the answer for journalists, but if you really want to know what is at the heart of Brazilian success, in addition to the level of skill of every player, it is that we use the ball as a decoy." This concept is the key to understanding play at the highest levels.

When one thinks of this concept in areas in front of the goal, so jealously guarded by defenders, it makes perfect sense. It involves making defenders leave the protected areas or run the wrong way immediately before the ball is played into those spaces. It is based on the fact that the ball can move faster than the players can run. The aim, as Simoes declared, is to make the other team chase the ball, something they can never catch. Besides the great Brazilian teams, perhaps the two greatest teams to do this so simply and effectively were the Hungarian Team of the 1950s and the Dutch Team of the early 1970s. Both had three, four and five players at a time combine, using the ball as a decoy to draw opponents to one place, only to play it quickly to other players running into the spaces left by defenders chasing the first or second pass. By contrast, the predominant play in teenage games involves no decoys, no guile – it is to launch the ball directly into the most heavily-defended spaces in hopes that a teammate will win the foot race with the opponent.

Coaches should do much more functional work in the area between the center circle and the top of the penalty area. Some coaches have called this area "negative" space behind the front players. It is called "negative" space because it is often left sparsely defended in lieu of defending the space inside the penalty area. A foundational concept would be to teach players to first make decoy passes to teammates' feet in front of defenders (i.e., in the "negative" space), rather than attempting to immediately make killer passes directly into predictable and shrinking areas behind defenders. Defenders very rarely guard the "negative" space, but passes played to feet to forwards or midfield players coming back into the "negative" space can lure defenders into that space, creating opportunities to play into the newly-opened spaces behind the defenders. This was the predominant tactic used by the great Hungarian Teams of the 1950s. Often their most effective passing began with passes to the feet of players coming back into negative spaces for balls, followed by a pass backwards, and then forward to a third player running into the space left by the "decoyed" defenders. These types of decoy passes can occur both in the center and on the sides of the field.

Players should also be taught to think of playing the ball wide as a decoy to draw defenders and open up larger spaces between the defenders. Playing passes as decoys, using both the depth and width of the field will provide many opportunities to isolate defenders and exploit the spaces created through combination play.

3. Combination Play from 40 Yards Out to Isolate Defenders and Break Attackers Free

One of the most underutilized and misused areas of the field in the teenage game is between the center circle and the top of the penalty area (the "negative" area). Whether they start with the ball at their feet, or with a free kick, teenage players most often ignore and try to bypass this valuable real estate by playing directly into the limited and highly-contested space within 20 yards from the goal line.

It is in this area of the field that creating a rhythm is so important, using the ball as a decoy is most effective, and where learning to isolate defenders, once we have possession and are facing them, is so important. This is especially true because many teenage teams attempt to play "flat back four" types of defense without really understanding how to play it. Unfortunately many teenage forwards help the cause of even the flattest of back four defenses by acting as if they are at a track meet, sprinting towards goal, seeking the killer pass.

Using collective group play to isolate defenders should directly follow a pass played wide or forward to feet as a decoy. Many youth coaches practice switching the point of attack: an extremely important concept for creating spaces between defenders. However, they often stop there and do not then focus on what happens after the ball is switched. They ignore collective combination play to isolate the defenders and exploit the spaces they have created by switching the point of attack. For example, shifting the point of attack often creates a one v. one situation and a defender without immediate cover. The advantage gained by switching is often lost when teammates without the ball consistently run away from the player with the ball, looking for the killer pass without first setting it up with a decoy. First, the player with the ball still has to deal with the immediate defending opponent, and second, the space in which he can play a through pass becomes smaller with each of his and his teammates' steps. Although there are situations when a quick through pass to a breaking player may be appropriate, it is often much more effective after a switch if two or more attacking players without the ball immediately seek to help the player with the ball create a numbers up advantage against the immediate defender and draw in nearby defenders. Then, a pass to a breaking player may be on. Players need to recognize when and how to execute certain combinations, such as give and gos against aggressive defenders, overlaps for retreating defenders, take-overs for tightly marking defenders who may force the attacking player to move sideways, or checking runs ahead of the ball that create opportunities for double passes or passes to third players running diagonally or from behind the ball.

Although many coaches incorporate "checking" in their training, they do not focus on the purpose of checking – to create space behind the defenders and to make defenders run out of that space immediately before a ball is played into it. For this reason, most forwards do not recognize that a checking run is not an end in and of itself, but merely the first run of a combination, allowing attacking players to outnumber isolated defenders and draw other defenders into the "negative" space. This creates the opportunities to play passes through to third attacking players running without involving a foot race with defenders. Players must constantly be looking to use the ball as a decoy, coupled with collective combination play to isolate defenders, to break attacking players free, and get the ball into effective scoring positions.

This article is only meant to scratch the surface, and merely cite a few ideas for coaches of teenage American players: general concepts of creating a rhythm, using the

ball as a decoy, and using combination play to isolate defenders, break attackers free and exploit spaces created. Hopefully, some of these concepts, if implemented, will help change the US teenage game from one of frustrating urgency to one of increasing, interesting and effective opportunities.