



# How to teach tactics

## Part 6: Psychological aspects of tactics training by **Stefan Lottermann**, research associate, German Sport University

**“He’s got an incredible understanding of tactics, but he can’t teach it.” Have you ever heard one of your fellow coaches described this way? How is it possible that someone who instantly sees almost every tactical detail from the sidelines and can produce an expert analysis of any game still struggles with tactics training as a coach — and frequently loses games as a result?**

**In the sixth and final installment in his series on tactics training, Stefan Lottermann lists the qualities and abilities a coach must possess or develop in order to teach tactics successfully. Instead of describing an “ideal” coach, though, he shows how a coach’s individual strengths and inclinations influence his teaching methodology and his personal appeal.**

**We conclude with a special bonus feature: On page 38 you’ll find a checklist you can use to find out more about yourself and your role as a coach.**

### Tactics and psychology

It’s well-known in soccer that the game is typically won not by the best players, but by the best team. When both teams are at more or less the same level, it’s usually team tactics that make the difference, and those depend to a great extent on the coach.

The impact of psychological factors on tactics is immense. The tactical decisions made by coaches and players are determined by the situation and by internal factors such as self-awareness, self-confidence and emotional stability, which are influenced in turn by external factors such as spectators, media and the score.

Can psychological factors be trained? The question is part of an ongoing discussion. Some coaches take the attitude that there’s no point in trying to prepare players for penalty kicks, for example, because the psychological

stress of such moments cannot be reproduced at practice. Others are of the opinion that for most players, practicing penalty kicks is the only way to build self-confidence and learn to execute the kick reliably.

To a certain extent, both groups are right. It’s true that it’s impossible to recreate a 100 percent realistic penalty-kick situation at practice. However, by simulating the mental and physical stress players experience during 120 exhausting minutes, you can train the ability to execute a penalty kick successfully under pressure. If, after 45 minutes of physically intense stress training (lactate values over 10 mmol/l), a player succeeds in scoring on mul-

tiply penalty kicks (or in learning how to score reliably), then the stress and pressure he experiences during a real penalty kick situation will probably be significantly lower, making his chances of scoring significantly higher.

### Players have to want to learn tactics

The willingness of players to subscribe to a tactical objective for a match or a season, often expending considerable amounts of physical and mental energy in pursuit of it, depends largely on two factors:

1. the coach’s influence over the team, and





**FIG. 1** TACTICS TRAINING: THE FEEDBACK CYCLE



You can accomplish a lot just by talking to players one-on-one.

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2. the team's success in the match or season. As a coach, your powers of persuasion derive from your behavior and your charisma, your experience and your record of success, and the soundness and clarity of your methods. In particular, there are two essential qualities or characteristics you must demonstrate to each player and to the team as a whole:

- sensibility (reasonableness), and
- credibility (authenticity).

Without these qualities, you will face obstacles that will prevent you from implementing the model for optimizing tactical ability shown in Figure 1. In this model, the steps in the inner circle lead to the results in the outer circle. If, from your perspective, there are problems with the team at any point on the circle, then optimal tactics will be very difficult if not impossible to achieve.

For example: If most players (or a majority of the top performers) do not accept a tactical concept, then whether they respect their coach is irrelevant: The team will not engage with the concept, though they may appear to be doing so.

Or: If a player has not mastered a particular element of offensive tactics in certain situations, then he will avoid those situations. If the coach then insists that the player demonstrate that element, a conflict becomes unavoidable.

The solution, and thus the way to improve individual and collective tactical skills and

abilities, is to accept the tactical solutions that fit players' capabilities, encouraging and insisting on them.

With regard to developing tactical abilities on an individual or team level, discipline, determination and continuity are essential qualities that combine in unique ways with each coach's experience and personality.

### Don't overemphasize your own strengths!

A quick review of international soccer over the last few decades reveals that not every coach fits every team — although this is sometimes a question of timing, and therefore a question of the team's situation. It's important for you, as a coach, to know your own abilities so you can use them on behalf of your team in the best way possible.

If your primary strength is identifying technical errors, for example, you probably tend to overdo the corrections. It may be helpful for you to analyze and correct a team's technical weaknesses after you first take it over, but over time you run an increasing risk of spending too much practice time rooting out tiny technical flaws that have no real effect on performance.

### The success of tactics training depends on the coach's behavior.

This type of coach makes too many corrections at practice and during matches and will come to seem like more and more of a perfectionist to his players. His excessive demands for technical perfection will come at an equally high price if his methods fall out of favor with his team or the majority of his top players: He will lose influence, and if he starts losing matches as well, he faces a dangerous combination.

Table 1 on page 36 lists some typical combinations of strengths and weaknesses. Much like players, coaches too tend to structure their training and their relationships with the team along the lines of their own strengths while trying to suppress or hide their weaknesses.

As a rule, players are happy to have a coach who explains things to them and shows them how to improve. However, a coach who is overly critical and whose criticisms lack justifications or alternatives ("Instead of A, give B a try") will accordingly be seen as a nag by those around him. Players often take criticism personally, and the mildly abusive tone common in soccer ("Wake up and pass already!") doesn't help — it puts stress on coach-player relationships and makes players less open to tactical changes.



**TABLE 1** A COACH'S STRENGTHS — AND THEIR DOWNSIDES

Strength	Corresponding or probable weakness
<b>Corrections:</b>	Technical shortcomings are overemphasized and overestimated.
<b>Game analysis:</b>	A team's game (or, more often, the opposition's) is presented in too much detail: Players are overwhelmed with more information than they can process.
<b>Strategy:</b>	Players get too much direction (too many tactical constraints) and not enough freedom of action.
<b>Practice planning:</b>	No time is set aside for spontaneous and individual practice activities.

On the other hand, a coach who is seen as honest but fair will be held in high regard by his players and will undoubtedly be better able to compensate for his weaknesses. But the danger for this coach is that he will go on too long tolerating problems that only become apparent later on, usually at a point when alternatives are few and far between. Some professional coaches, especially those who were once professional players, tend to hold an extremely (if not excessively) high opinion of their own abilities. This tendency, too, significantly diminishes their chances of future development.

The best way to improve performance is to take certain aspects of learning and motivation into account in your training program (see Figure 2 on page 37). For example, players are motivated when the demands placed on them increase appropriately, help-

ing them improve their abilities without taking away their opportunities to be creative. They become more involved in practice when the coach succeeds in awakening their curiosity about an interesting training objective and providing a comfortable, cooperative learning atmosphere in which to pursue it.

### Help your players grow

For a team to develop tactically, it's important that coach and players agree on the basic approach:

- which tactics to use,
- how to teach tactical concepts (in what way), and
- how to deal appropriately with disagreements when they arise.

In the process of teaching and learning tactics, therefore, there are certain elementary

principles to consider. These are explained in more detail below.

### Experimentation increases tactical flexibility

To improve, players need to be able to explore the limits of their abilities not just on the field, but also in relation to their coach and his tactical concept. Getting stuck in a rigid tactical format limits their options and makes them and their game predictable for opponents. And one of the keys to winning, after all, is mastering tactical patterns and then implementing them in surprising ways.

**Teach the basic sequence, then let players experiment.**

Players need to know how much they can and should risk, individually and as a team, in order to win. But they also need to know their options for acting and reacting in any given situation. Therefore it's a good idea for you to direct their experimentation as much as possible while tolerating the things you can't direct. At a minimum, though, 80 percent of players' experimentation should be directed, to avoid undermining your authority and leadership role. The best way to do this is with practice games in which you stand back and validate correct actions.

### Clear instructions call for clear corrections

In the early stages of training you should use exercises rather than practice games to give players a precise initial model for the basic tactical sequence. Immediate corrections on the basis of this model make it easier for everyone to develop an understanding of the tactical ideas, sequences and connections involved.

Problems arise here when the coach is only critical of the shot, for example, or the cross that goes behind the goal (in an exercise on attacking on the wings) and fails to comment on the key junctures in the tactical sequence. This allows errors to creep in that will make it significantly more difficult to execute the entire sequence successfully — including the shot — in an actual match situation under opposition pressure.

Therefore you need to clearly convey the various demands of each sequence — athletic (speed), technical (ball control) and tactical (tactical coordination and variations) — and then make equally clear corrections in accordance with what you've taught. When both aspects are functioning properly, players understand why the sequence is important to winning the game, how it works and how



**It looks like this Brazilian drill was not entirely successful. Some players are harder to reach than others, and even the pros have their weaknesses — the trick is overcoming them!**

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they can implement it using their own particular skills.

**Understanding takes time**

The players on a team learn at different rates of speed in different areas. This includes learning and understanding tactical concepts. You can speed up the process by “addressing” your players in different ways, with different types of games and corrections and always with plenty of repetitions. You must also keep in mind that the pace of learning depends in part on players’ mental fitness.

**Teach new concepts when players are fresh, then reinforce the concepts under pressure.**

Thus tactical creativity is significantly increased when players are thoroughly rested. When players are tired, corrections are often less effective because one or more players are not fully able to concentrate. The many losses all teams experience during the preseason are a measure of how hard it is to strike the right balance between physical exertion and tactical freshness (i.e. mental fitness).

On the other hand, you can increase exertion levels as long as players’ understanding of the sequences involved is sufficiently well-developed. That way players learn to execute the sequences under time and opposition pressure.

**Timing: The key to success — especially in a crisis**

In previous installments in this series we have repeatedly stressed the importance of timing in soccer (see also Figure 3). The quality of players’ individual and collective tactical abilities depends to a major extent on the proper temporal coordination (synchronization) of the individual movements that make up a play.

Doing the right thing in the right place at the right time is a key to success for players, teams and coaches alike. During the preseason, for instance, the coach develops a strategy that will work even under massive opposition pressure at the start of the season. Given these circumstances, you should avoid activities that slow players’ development during this phase. If it takes a team too long to understand a tactical concept, the pressure on the coach usually mounts after just a few regular-season games.

Of course, pressure is often what reveals the character of coaches and players. If you’re firmly convinced you’re on the right path, then you’ll be able to get through the period before you really start functioning as a team.

**FIG. 2** FACTORS IN MOTIVATION AND LEARNING



In crisis situations, coaches and players fall back on their experience. Young players can only build on their experience as youth players, and young coaches often have only their playing careers to draw on. Both pools of experience tend to be less than helpful in finding one’s way back onto the road of success.

The behavior of coaches in this situation is determined in large part by chance; whether their training activities succeed (e.g. intensive condition training, training camp, one-on-one discussions) is also a matter of chance: They might be right, or they might be wrong. The situation improves considerably when the young player gets help from a coach experienced in talent promotion, and when the young coach can rely on a manager or mentor with experience in “coach development.”

Without experience and support, uncertainty and/or frequent changes of course can cause a coach to be viewed as bad when in fact the prob-

lem in many cases is simply a lack of confidence. But a coach who shares his confidence with his players, who helps them overcome their anxiety about the potentially negative outcomes of their tactical experiments, is a stable positive factor in his team’s tactical development.

**Classifying coaches**

To find out what your tendencies are as a coach, you can take the self-test on the following page. On the last page, we’ve tried to include suggested alternatives for each type of coach.

This classification scheme is relatively broad, of course. However, if your answers are more or less equally distributed over multiple types, then you probably have a very flexible leadership style that should make it easier for you to coach different teams in different situations, especially with regard to tactical objectives and activities.

**FIG. 3** TIMING IN SOCCER





## WHAT KIND OF COACH AM I?

Understand your personal leadership style as a coach: Read through the statements below and quickly mark the ones that apply to you, without thinking too much about your answers.

The coach as leader

No.	Statement	Applies
1	I study a tactical concept thoroughly before discussing it with a player.	
2	I often give way in the interest of better relations with my team and my players.	
3	I make very clear what my players have to do to be really good.	
4	Sometimes I hold back criticism to avoid an argument.	
5	When I'm talking to one of my top players, I tend to be the first one to compromise.	
6	I make an effort not to hurt my players' feelings.	
7	I do whatever it takes to convince each and every player of my point of view, rather than dictating to them.	
8	I try to avoid conflict.	
9	I'm interested in outcomes that are satisfying to all involved.	
10	I deal with critical or controversial questions immediately during or after practice.	
11	Working on the basic tactical problem is a way to solve other tactical problems at the same time.	
12	I address my players calmly and politely.	
13	Sometimes I stop myself from showing my true feelings during practice sessions and matches.	
14	I don't like a lot of aggressive talk on my team.	
15	My openness encourages my players to open up as well.	
16	I make a fundamental effort to truly understand every single player.	
17	I want to make the most out of my players and my team.	
18	It can be worthwhile to yield to an important player every now and then.	
19	Concessions to the team need to pay off.	
20	Most players think: No pain, no gain.	
21	I'd like to get to know my players better.	
22	Friendship and coaching don't mix.	
23	I take the time to consider the consequences of my actions at practice and during matches.	
24	If you have too much time to think things over, you end up changing your mind a lot.	

## SCORING KEY

The Xs in the columns below show which type of coach each statement applies to. For example, if you said "yes" to 1, then you're Type B. Circle the X and move on to the next statement ("yes" = Type D), etc.

The coach as leader

Statement	A	B	C	D
1		X		
2				X
3		X		
4			X	
5			X	
6				X
7		X		
8			X	
9				X
10	X			
11	X			
12			X	
13			X	
Total				

Statement	A	B	C	D
Total from 1-13				
14			X	
15		X		
16				X
17	X			
18				X
19	X			
20	X			
21				X
22		X		
23		X		
24	X			
Total				



## INTERPRETING YOUR SCORE

Which column has the highest total score? Please keep in mind that this test is meant to describe your overall leadership style, not to provide a “final verdict” on your person-

ality as a coach. In the table below you may find some suggestions and inspirations for your future approach to coaching.

### The coach as leader

Letter with highest score	Your typical coaching style	What to do more often
<b>Mostly A</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● tough, proud competitor with good scores (“It’s points that count”)</li> <li>● clear ideas and a clear structure for practice and match play</li> <li>● if need be, relations with players suffer</li> </ul>	Be more diplomatic with your players and actively direct your relations with them toward a common tactical objective.
<b>Mostly B</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● good at planning and preparing for practices and matches</li> <li>● understanding of viewpoints of players and team</li> <li>● formal, orderly relations with players</li> </ul>	Show more of a personal interest in players. Knowing players better makes it easier to convince them of a particular approach to practice or match play.
<b>Mostly C</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● polite and friendly in public</li> <li>● top priority: good relations with players</li> <li>● good performance due in part to allowing players to explore their own options</li> </ul>	Focus more on teaching players one tactical concept. Stick with your topic and don’t move on to the next one until the team has truly mastered the current one.
<b>Mostly D</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● sociable, gregarious competitor (“The important thing is to play well”)</li> <li>● good performance dependent on good relations</li> <li>● compromises with players are to be expected</li> </ul>	Place your focus on moving toward your desired tactical objective in a structured way. Don’t waste time, and don’t change course too often.



## Sharpen Your Decision-Making Skills Online

Making the right choice at the right time is critical to success on the soccer field. Players and coaches now can hone their decision-making skills through the **NSCAA Tactical Situations Tests**, a series of online quizzes available through the **National Soccer Coaches Association of America**. Visit the “Educating Coaches” section of **NSCAA.com** to take the tests and learn more about the world’s largest coaches association, its coaching education programs and the many other areas where the NSCAA makes a difference at every level of the game.

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