

**Coaching From the Game:
Using Coaching Tools to Facilitate Learning the Principles of Play
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It is not uncommon to find training sessions where coaches use cones and corner flags to mark-off so many zones of play that the practice area looks more like an airport runway than a soccer field. Such training often consists of contrived, artificial and isolated drills and choreographed coaching. In reaction to this, perhaps, US Soccer recently published a manual entitled “Best Practices for Coaching Soccer in the United States.” The main thesis is one we have long espoused in Virginia -- that young players “require a certain amount of uninterrupted play” to experience soccer first hand in order to “successfully recognize and solve the challenges of the game on his or her own.”

Effective coaching requires at least three components. First, coaches must be students of the game. They have to spend the time required to learn to read the game, and to be able to recognize situations as they arise in the flow of play. Second, they must also be able to create training environments that replicate the game and encourage players to better understand the principles of the game for themselves. Third, they must coach! By this third statement, I mean they must show and guide players to discovering how, when and where to play. The focus of this article is really on the second component – the tools coaches use to facilitate learning. This does not mean that the other two components are unnecessary or less important. Without the first, there is no purpose for using the tools, and without the third there is no focus, and players will only haphazardly, if at all, begin to understand and successfully apply the principles of the game.

We must never lose sight of why soccer is the most popular sport in the world, both for players and spectators. It is free flowing over a large space and players are constantly adjusting and making decisions without input from coaches. It is the only sport that truly allows the players to express themselves in their play. Hence, a German team looks different from a Brazilian team, and neither looks like an Italian team. The players’ cultural and individual personalities come through in the flow of the game, and determine how the ball moves down the field. No other sport allows, or depends upon, the problem-solving attributes of the players themselves to the extent that soccer does. It is a game that reveals the genius of the athlete.

Since the very essence of the game involves free flowing, multiple split-second technical skills and decisions, coaches must learn to “read the game” and devise dynamic, free-flowing practices. While breaking the game down, removing pieces and training in statically isolated exercises may provide some apparent progress, it does not allow players to develop the technical or tactical skills to play the game at speed and under pressure. It is only through years of being in actual game-like environments with effective guidance, but where they are permitted to experiment, succeed and fail, that players truly become soccer players. In order to properly guide players’ discovery, coaches must understand the differences between principles of play (from which we develop coaching points) and the training environments (coaching tools) that provide realistic repetitions of game situations.

The principles of play from which coaching points derive are manifested in various components of the game – technical, tactical, physical and psychological. When coaches devise training activities they must consider what they are trying to achieve with any given training session. Once they have determined this, coaches can use numerous “tools” to help players in those areas.

The “tools” should replicate the game and encourage and focus upon the areas to be stressed. Just as a carpenter would not use a hammer to cut wood, coaches must be aware of how the tools they use shape the environment for the players. Coaches must have more than a general notion of areas on which they want to focus. For example, a coach should not just say, “I want to work on passing; therefore I will restrict play to two-touch.” Rather coaches must recognize that there are many factors that go into successful passing, and that there are various “coaching tools” that will help them manipulate the training environment to create opportunities for players to pass, but also to recognize when, how and where to do so.

Small-sided games are tremendously effective as training tools. The smaller sides provide situations to repeatedly occur in game-like environments, with much greater frequency than in a full-sided game. Additionally, smaller sides give all of the players more opportunities to play on both sides of the ball.

Replicating the game usually, though not always, means that there will be a defined field, opposition, directional play and goals to attack and defend. The demands of the game, not some artificial goal or reason, should dictate when and how to players play within the training exercise. Otherwise, players learn to succeed at the exercise, but cannot translate what they have learned to the game.

For example, consider a warm-up exercise for dribbling. Many coaches have players line up, show them a move and then have them dribble across the field attempting the move. In such an exercise, there is absolutely NO connection to the game itself, other than the fact that the players have a ball at their feet. On the other hand, if players were each given a ball and had to play within a defined area (suppose 12 players in a 20 x 20 yd area), and they were all dribbling trying to reach as many different boundary lines as possible within a certain amount of time (example 30 seconds), and were given a goal for every line they reached and also a goal for every time they dribbled between two other players, the warm up would replicate the game much more. When, how, where and how fast to dribble are dictated by the movement of the other players, and the opening and closing spaces, as well as the boundaries of the field. In essence, the game presents the problems each player must solve, and players’ decisions, speed and skills used are based upon the space available, the movement of other players, and their location on the field.

This example uses a number of “coaching tools” that help create a more game-like environment for players’ learning. The coach, however, should understand the purposes and limitations of each tool, and that a particular tool used in different ways will provide different types of playing environments. Here are a few more examples for you to consider.

Incentives vs. Restrictions

Through the “guided discovery” method of coaching coaches help players understand and see for themselves the principles of play, and allow the players to make decisions, and provide an environment where these decisions are based on the demands of the game itself. One mistake many coaches make is to place restrictions on players. For example (keeping with the dribbling theme), to encourage dribbling, a coach might require players to beat an opponent on the dribble before they can score on goal. Such a restriction, however, is artificial. Not only does it not replicate the demands of the game, it actually hinders the players. In this scenario, what happens to a player who receives a ball with a clear shot on goal, but has not beaten an opponent on the dribble? Instead of doing what the game demands -- scoring -- he or she must find a player to beat before shooting.

A better approach would be to reward players for achieving certain objectives, but not restrict play. For example, a coach might state that shooting and scoring counts for two points, but a team can also obtain a point if a player with the ball beats an opponent on the dribble in the attacking half of the field. This way, players are still looking to meet the ultimate objective of the game -- to score goals -- but are also encouraged, through incentives, to look for opportunities to try the things the coach wants to emphasize.

Delineated Areas of the Field

Two of the principles of play concern taking chances and playing safely on different parts of the field. A line made of cones is an effective tool for helping players recognize different parts of the field. In the example of rewarding players for beating opponents on the dribble, the reward was only given if players beat opponents in the attacking half of the field. A line made at midfield can help players recognize more readily where they should take the risk of dribbling by an opponent, and where they should play safely. This is an example of a coaching tool helping players recognize when, how and where to play.

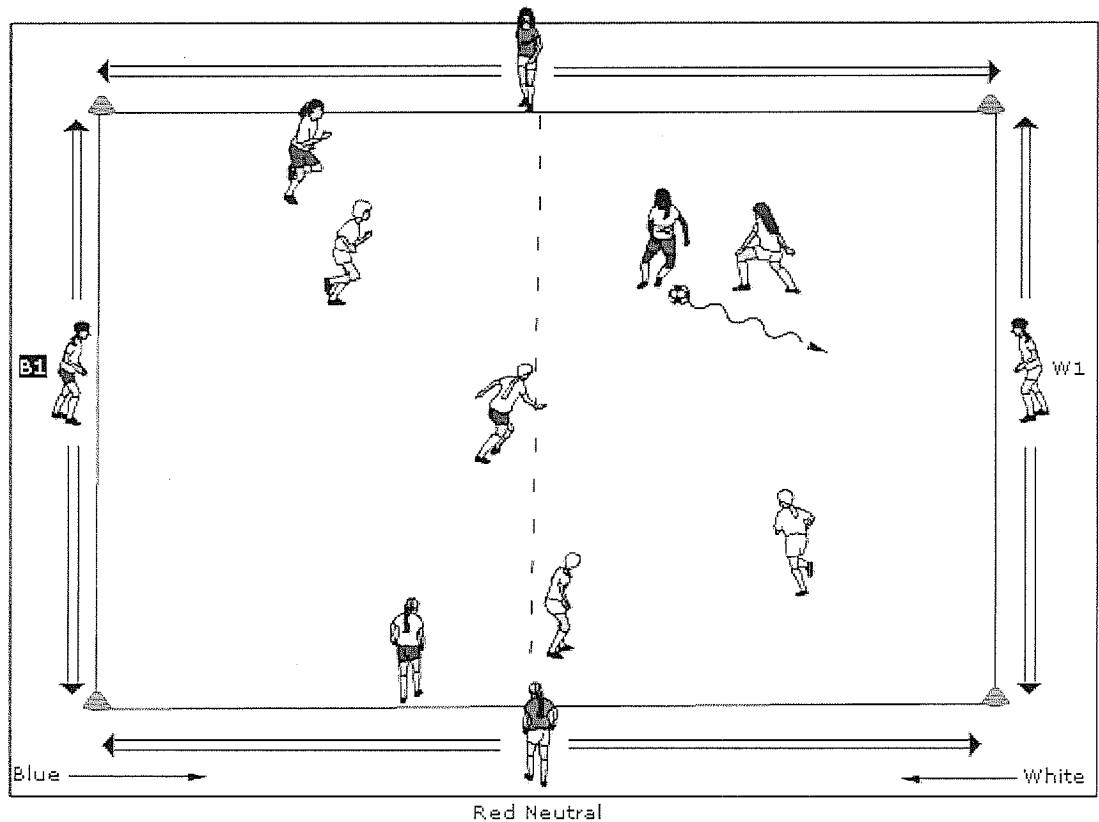
Delineated areas may also help players speed up their transition when gaining or losing the ball. For example, for immediate high-pressure defense, a coach might reward a team with three goals if they score after recovering the ball from the other team in the attacking half of the field. Another use might be to emphasize the need for good quick attacking support around the ball. In this instance, a coach might reward an attacking team with two goals if they score and the whole attacking team is in the attacking half of the field, whereas they score only one goal if one or more of their teammates remain in the defensive half. There are many ways to use delineated areas, and the incentives a coach uses must be tailored to the attributes and make-up of his particular team.

Unequal Numbers

Using different-numbered sides is a good way to assure successful repetition of technical play, but also provides opportunities for players to make and experiment with numerous tactical decisions. Many coaches, however, do not realize that the way they use unequal numbers can have a significant effect on what they are trying to achieve. The coach must first consider what technical and tactical principles and visual cues are involved in what he or she wants to emphasize. Then, the coach must determine how the

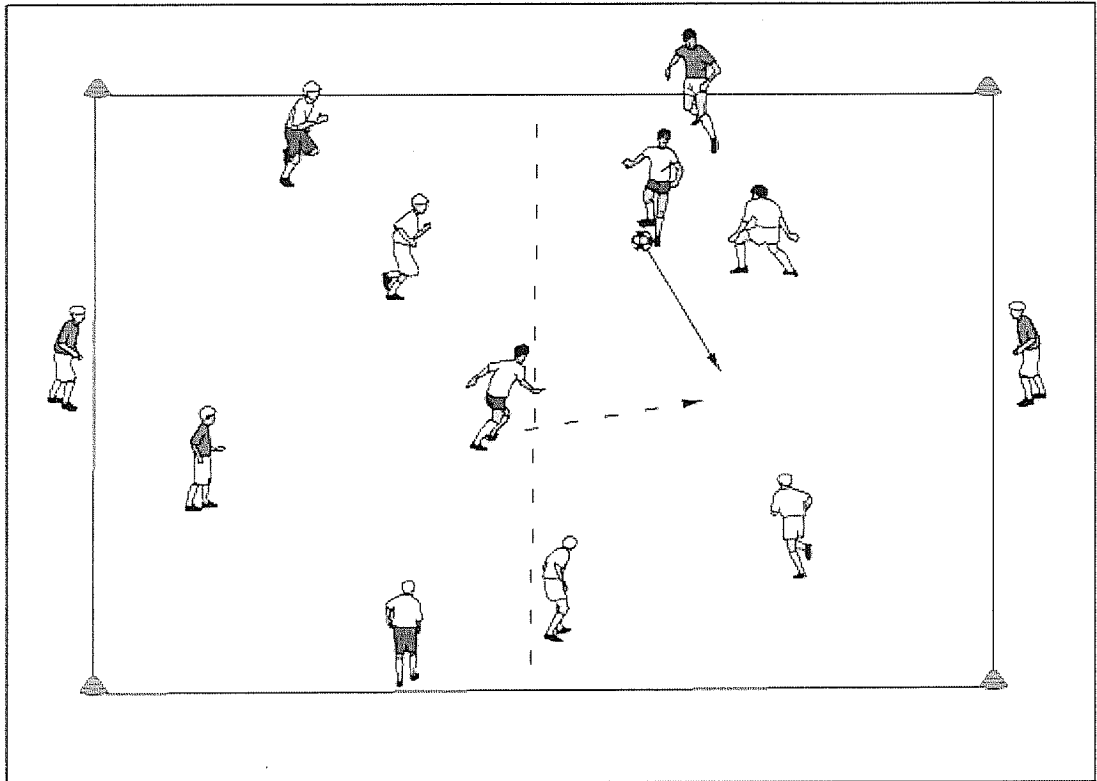
use of unequal numbers in a particular way provides or restricts opportunities for those principles or cues to arise. Following are some examples:

4 v 4 to end lines or goals + 4 neutral players (1 on each side line who play with whichever team has the ball, and 1 extra player behind each end-line for the team in front of them to use for support passes, but do not play defense)



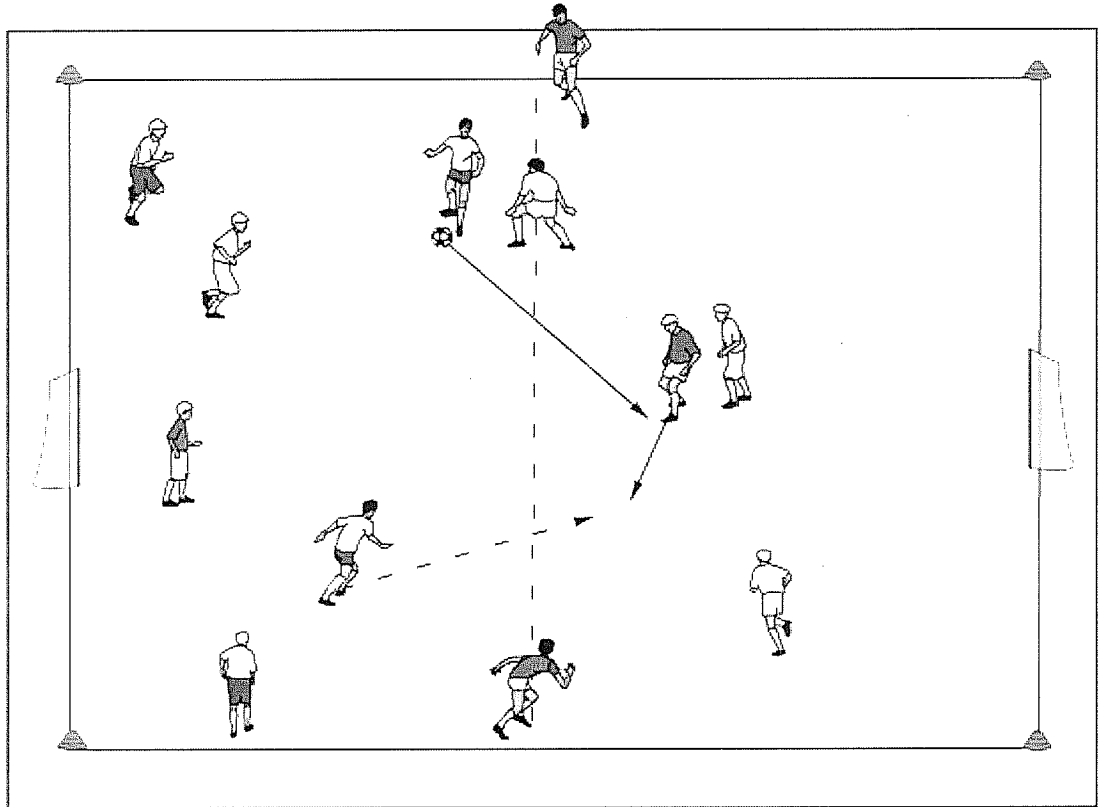
Using the dribbling theme, let's discuss how using outside, sideline neutral players can help players create more opportunities for players to dribble. One of the visual cues for a player looking to dribble is the amount of space beside and behind his immediate opponent. By placing neutral players on the sidelines, passes there create automatic width. The extra player behind each team (B1 and W1) creates automatic depth. Therefore, defenders' natural movements in relation to the ball create spaces between and behind them, giving attacking players within the field opportunities to take on opponents by dribbling in the attacking half of the field at the proper times. Using different sized fields is another tool. In this instance the coach might make the field slightly wider and longer than normal to further promote opening spaces beside and behind defenders for opportunities to dribble.

4 v 4 + 4 neutral players (2 inside the playing area and 1 extra player on each end line, again who do not play defense. The team in possession can use all four)



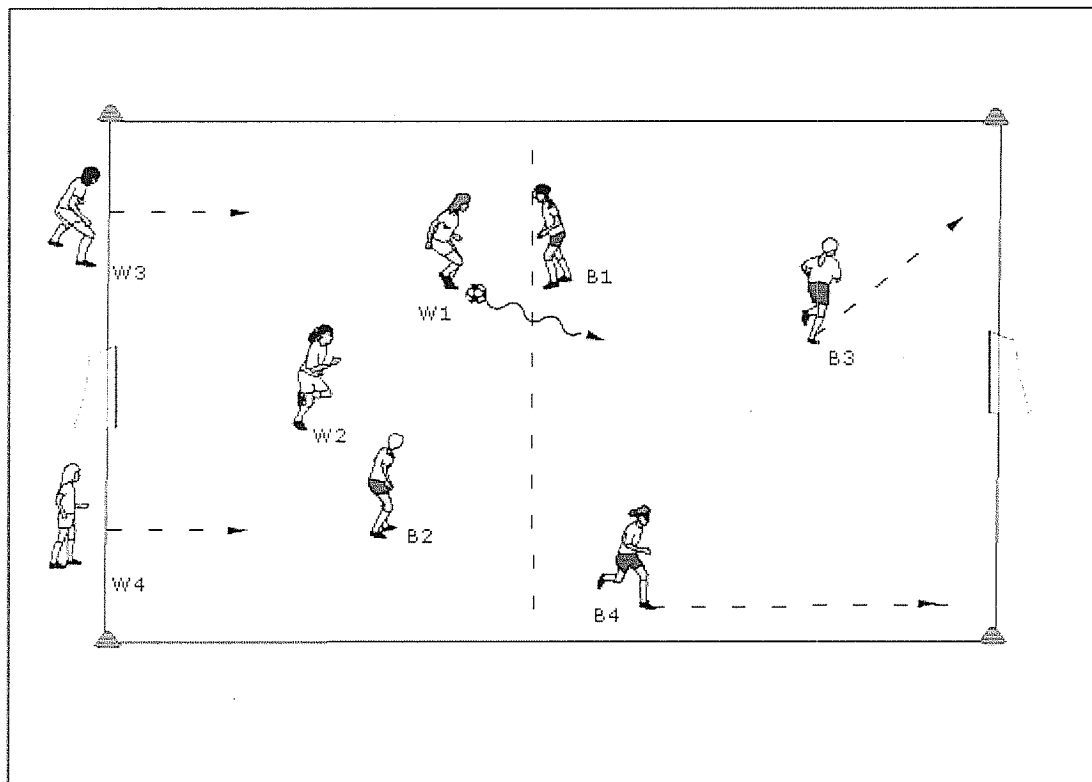
The focus shifts when the sideline neutral players move inside the playing field. Without the automatic width, there may not be as many opportunities to dribble. However, the attacking team will outnumber the defending team inside and will have automatic depth, now both behind and in front of play, because of the end-line neutral players. There may now be more realistic opportunities for passing. Players can use the neutral player behind them for support to maintain possession as they did before, but now that two of the neutral players are inside the field, the attacking team must create its own width. The attacking team can also use the neutral player on their attacking end line to find opportunities to penetrate with passes behind the defenders and make runs to get balls back, either from their own passes or their teammates' passes, to be in a position to score.

4 v 4 + all 4 neutral players inside the playing area.



Because all the players are now in the field the coach could make the playing area larger. This environment is more complex for the players than in the previous examples. They now have to create their own space, their own width and depth, and they also must use their passes and runs to create opportunities to isolate defenders for dribbling, or for support and/or penetrating passes. Coaches can also use different incentives in this environment to help players look for the right times to do certain things. For example, players could still be rewarded with a goal if they beat defenders in the attacking half. They might also be rewarded with a goal if they can maintain possession of the ball for a certain number of passes or make penetrating passes between defenders.

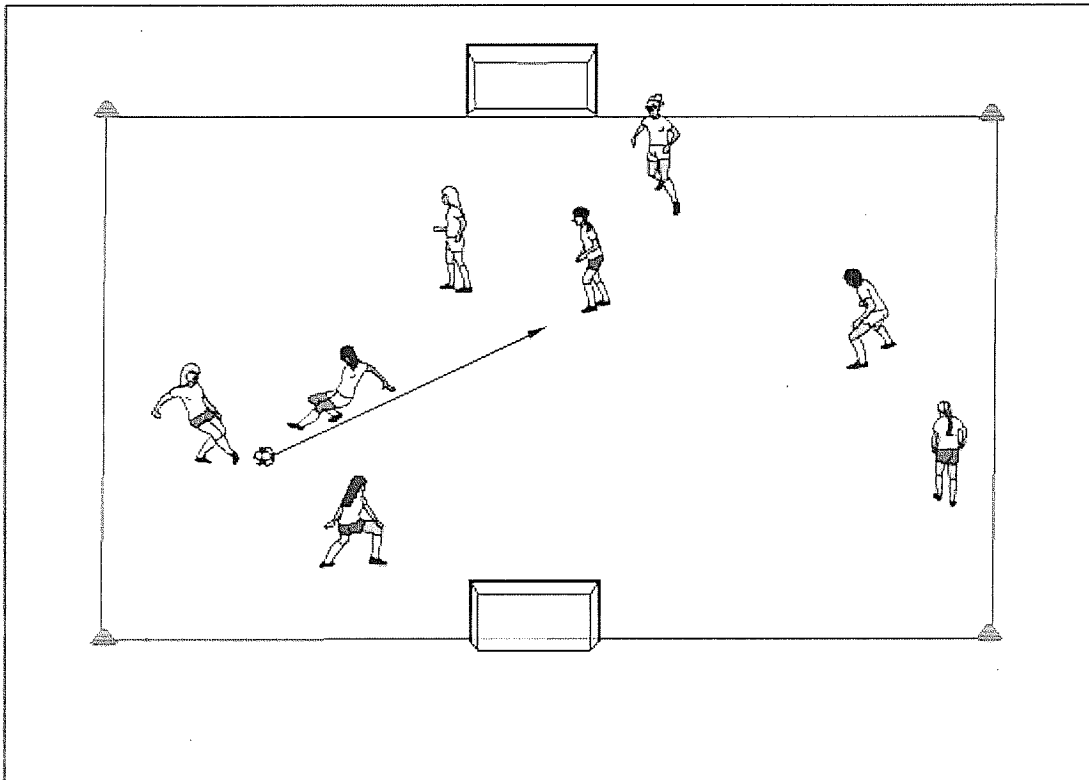
Dropping Player Off to Create Unequal Numbers



In this scenario, W1 has just stolen the ball from B1. W3 and W4, who had dropped off when the W team was defending, now come on, and B3 and B4 drop off their defensive end line.

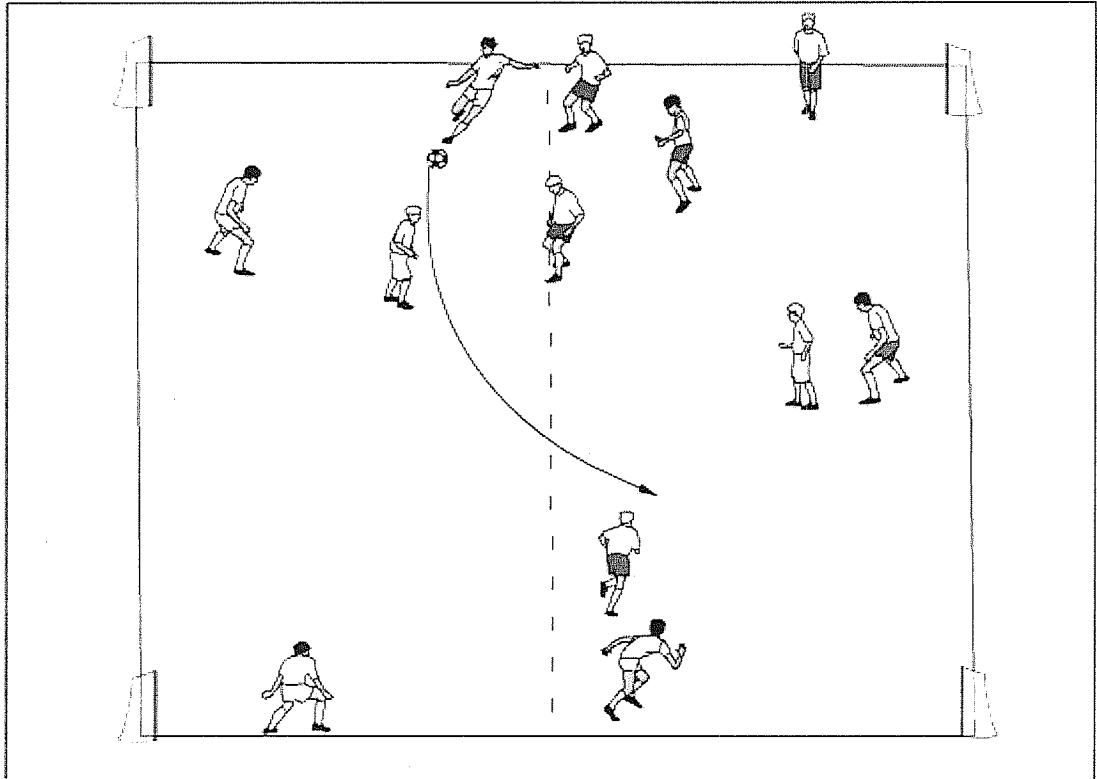
One of the drawbacks to using neutral players in the field is that it often creates unrealistic transition situations. For example, if a neutral player loses the ball, since he or she is always playing for the team in possession, he or she will not try to win the ball back, and, in fact, will suddenly be trying to get open to help the player that just dispossessed him or her of the ball. Another way to create unequal numbers is to drop players on one team (usually the defensive team) back over their defensive end line when their team loses the ball. This immediately creates a numbers up situation for the team with the ball. When the defending team alternates the players who must drop back, the team that just gained possession of the ball is faced with different scenarios to exploit.

Size and Shape of the Field



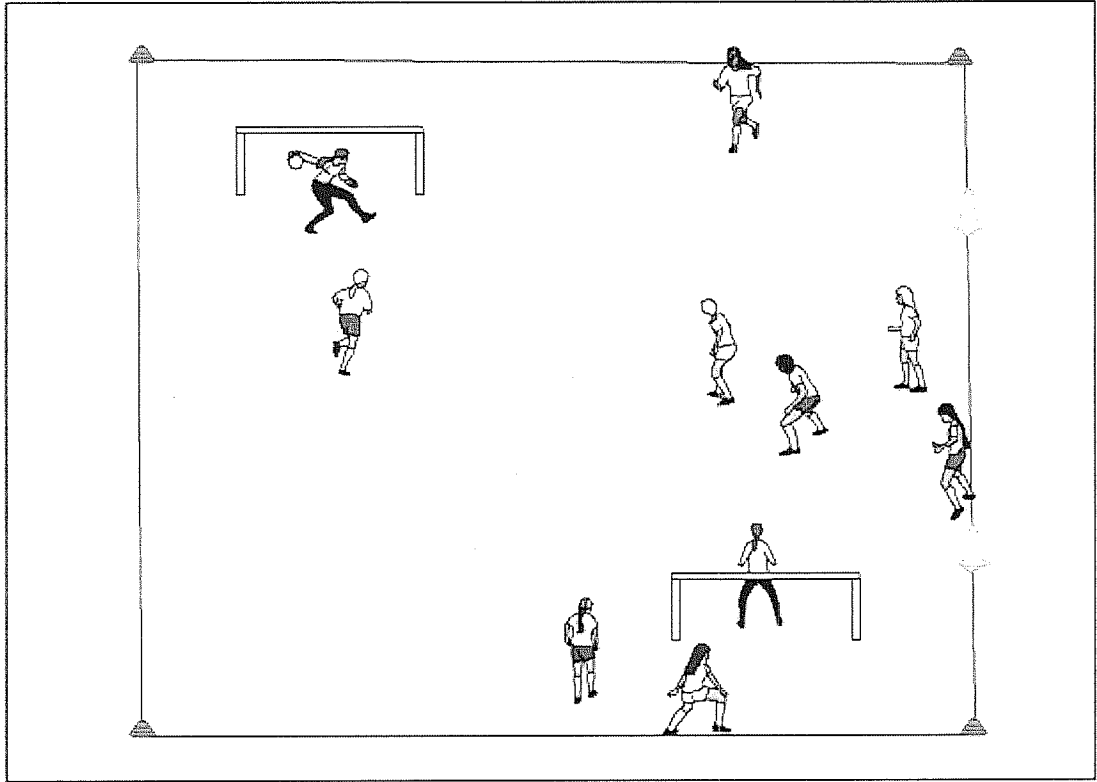
Different shaped fields, other than the normal shape of a soccer field, help emphasize different principles. For example, making the field wider than it is long (above), provides an environment that rewards players when they use the width of the field to switch the point of attack, create spaces between defenders, and exploit these spaces by making runs and/or moving the ball quickly to penetrate and score. Wider fields also give players off the ball more opportunities to adjust their body positions to achieve better vision of the field. Adjusting the size of the field (as noted above in 4 v 4 + 4 neutral players on the sidelines) can also provide certain desired effects. For example, a premium can be placed on tight control with a smaller field while using a larger field will allow players to try to exploit open space with runs and/or passes.

Types, Placement and Numbers of Goals



Using two or three goals at each end is also a way of emphasizing the importance of switching the point of attack when one area becomes too congested. This is a principle with which all US youth through college players need work. Multiple goals can also help defending teams learn to read attacks to lock the ball in one area of the field, and requires balance elsewhere in case the point of attack is switched. For younger players, end lines themselves can be goals. The notion is to encourage players to maintain possession, but to exploit defenses by penetrating wherever there is an opening. For example, a team might receive a point if a player successfully dribbles over the attacking end line or passes a ball to a teammate running into space across the end line.

Goals placed in different parts of the field can be used as tools to emphasize different aspects of the game. For example (below), goals placed inside the field with 20 yards difference across from each other with goalkeepers in them can provide numerous opportunities for teams to score off of crosses. In this exercise, teams can score on either goal from either side.

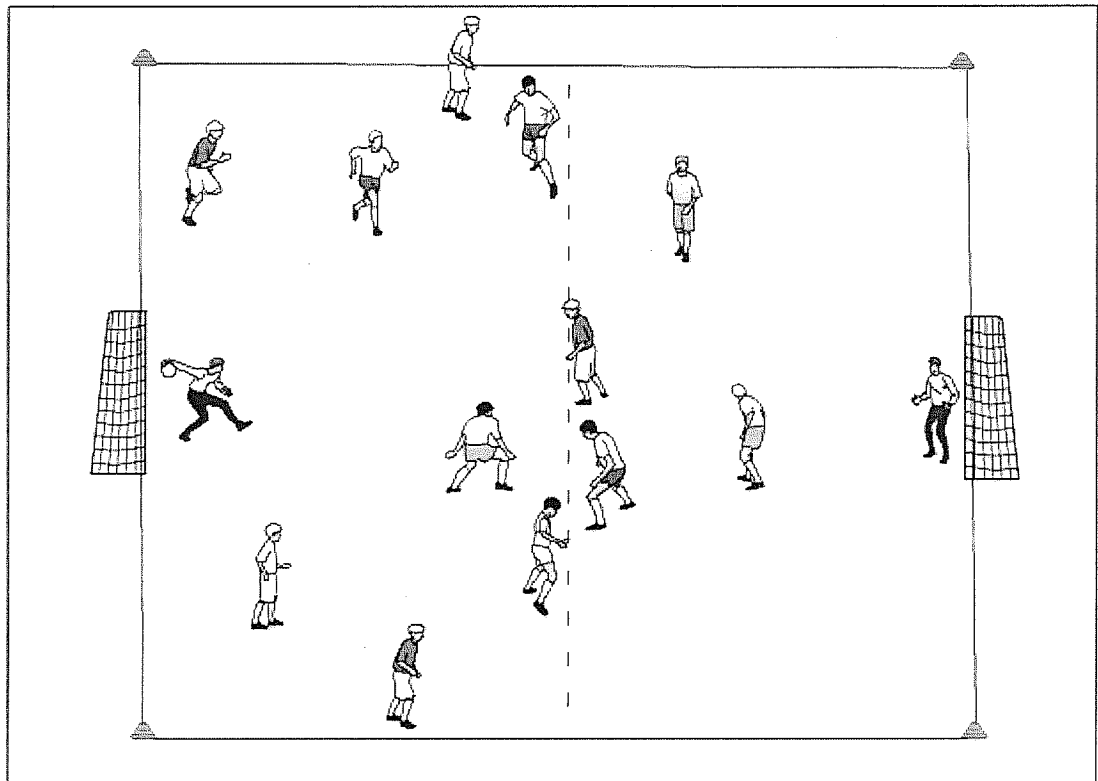


Number of Touches

Coaches often misuse this “tool.” They require players to play one, two or three touch, hoping to promote quicker play. The problem is that such restrictions may cause players to use only two or three touches when the immediate demands of the game dictate something else. It would be better to reward a team by stating that once a team makes five or 10 two touch passes successfully (cumulatively, not necessarily in order or on a particular possession) a team receives a point. Touch incentives can also be effective on an individual basis with particular players. For example, to help a player who always holds the ball too long, a coach might state that when that player makes five or 10 passes in three or fewer touches (again, not necessarily in the same possession string by his team), then his or her team receives a point.

Different Color Vests

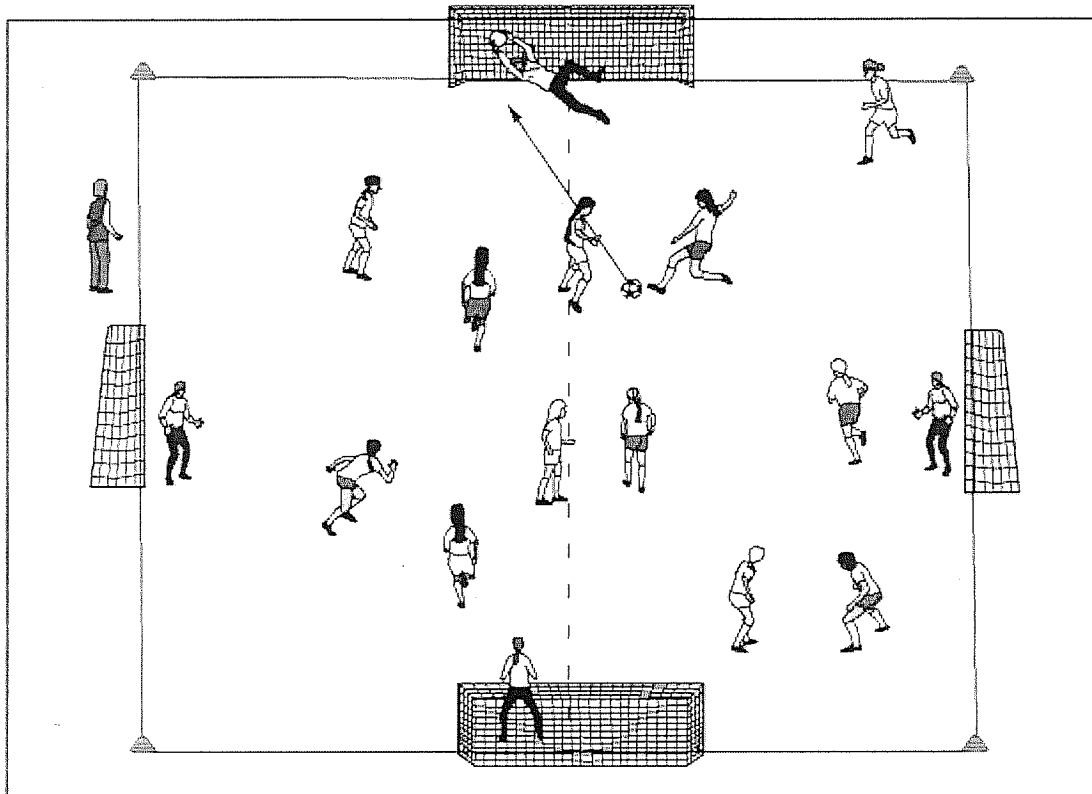
At least three different colored vests are required when using neutral players. However, different vest colors can be used in other ways.



For example (above), a coach might encourage players to get open for passes, recognize more quickly when to support the player with the ball, and to look off the ball by playing two equal sides against each other (example above of 7 v 7), with each side having two different colored vests (for example, one side with 3 players in white and three in red, and the other side with three in yellow and three in blue). On the first team, the red players try to pass to white players and vice versa. The other team tries to alternate passes between yellow and blue. Reward systems, like those already discussed, can be used.

Different colored vests can also be used for particular players. For example, a coach wanting to involve his or her central midfielders more as link players might put them in different colors from their teammates, and reward the team when the midfielders are involved in the play a certain number of times.

Different Directions



Requiring each team to play in different directions to two goals forces players to think more quickly about transition, both offensively and defensively. Instead of attacking a goal at one end and defending the other end, one team can be asked to attack going East/West and the other attack going North/South when they gain possession of the ball. For example (above), Ys can score only on GK1 or GK2, while Bs can score only on GK3 or GK4.

The foregoing examples represent just a few ways coaches can use “tools” to create dynamic, game-like environments to help their players recognize and solve the problems the game presents. Using the proper tools, however, is only one component to successful coaching. Coaches first must know what principles they are seeking to emphasize. Second, they must select the proper tools to help them do so. Third, they must coach the players, by guiding them, helping them focus, not choreographing or coercing them to play in a certain way. This will allow the players experiment with the guidance and within the environment the coaches have created. As we develop more and more dynamic, free-flowing, game-like training sessions, we can help our players learn to recognize and solve the demands of the game more quickly, efficiently, and most importantly, creatively.