

DEVELOPING SPEED OF PLAY

The first of two articles

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In the recent post-2010 World Cup game between the United States and Brazil, I was struck by the fact that the Brazilians, using many young players, seemed to move at a much different pace than the presumably more experienced Americans. The Brazilian players moved the ball in and out of space with pace and fluidity, often leaving US players stranded in unfortunate positions as they hopelessly chased the ball. The Brazilians were not physically faster than the US players. Something much more subtle occurred.

Throughout the World Cup, and in this game with Brazil, the speed of the US team appeared to be one-dimensional. It was a “fight back hard” undisguised full speed ahead type of effort. This embodies the American spirit, and it is an attribute that has no parallel elsewhere. It served us well against mainly physical teams like England, Slovenia and Ghana. However, the limits of its effectiveness were evident against the guile and intelligent play of Brazil. While this attribute is emblematic of our culture, its predominance to our detriment is also a direct result of our youth soccer programs, which I will discuss later.

Our coaching education programs have also contributed to our lack of development of speed. They have focused primarily on general concepts of *speed of play*, broadly addressing the areas of technical, tactical and physical speed. This analysis, however, has overlooked how different kinds of speed are truly developed and nurtured from the earliest stages. US Youth Soccer, through the work of Drs. Tom Fleck, Ron Quinn, Dave Carr, Virgil Stringfield, Bill Buren, Sam Snow and others, has begun to apply educationally-grounded concepts of learning by focusing on how players at different ages develop cognitively, socially and physically. These concepts concern the *process* of learning, an indispensable ingredient to developing speed of play. Unfortunately, many involved with youth soccer in the US only pay lip service to these new considerations. A disconnect still exists in our recognition of how the nature of the game and the process of learning work together in the development of *speed of play*.

The Game Defines Speed

Soccer truly is the only team sport that reflects the culture of its players. The game is free-flowing, presents myriads of situations and involves constant changes that require the players themselves to individually and collectively solve problems in spontaneous and natural ways. The problem-solving nature of the game makes the concept of “speed of play” much more multi-dimensional than our current coaching schemes allow. Sports trainer and author Vern Gambetta has defined different types of speed in sport. These concepts have been applied to soccer by Drs. Don Kirkendall and Joe Luxbacher. (See Dr. Kirkendall’s March 8, 2002 article in Active.com). In addition to physical speed,

they have described such aspects as speed of perception, anticipation, reaction, decision-making, and speed on and away from the ball.

These aspects of speed make perfect sense when we consider discussions about Pele or other great players. In addition to recognizing their superior technical ability, descriptions of them often focus on their ability to see two plays ahead, or having eyes in the back of their heads. They always appear to think and act more quickly than those around them. These descriptions concern their perceptual, anticipatory, and decision-making speed, as well as speed away from the ball. There is also another component to speed of play that few have recognized: that of *slowing down* opponents' perception, anticipation, reaction and other speeds. The way players use the ball, the runs they make, body and head fakes, all play a part in speeding up play by slowing opponents down. And slowing opponents down is a crucial part of speed at the highest levels of play.

In the youth game our quest to produce more efficient play from an adult's perspective has focused on physical speed, stifling the development of other types of speed. We have paid little attention to the fact that it is only through play, and the seemingly inefficient process of experimentation that players can develop these other areas of speed. Currently, we try to fit our young players into our adults' perception of what soccer should look like to win particular games, rather than provide training and game environments that *require, encourage and allow* the young players to think, act, and yes, make mistakes, for themselves, as the "culture" of their particular age group dictates. Most youth soccer programs, from early ages, are driven by adults who measure success by the creation and development of teams that will accumulate trophies, and achieve results at each age group level. Our young players are never really given opportunities to think, act and experiment for themselves. We have subordinated the *process* of learning to results that can be measured by objective adult standards.

Our Concept of Speed Is Too Confined

The development of the organized youth soccer programs in the US has no parallel anywhere else in the world. Although the British and Europeans have begun their Academy and other youth programs, they are all extensions of their professional leagues. At their core are financial considerations. While some of the latest iterations of the Academy programs in the US are based in MLS clubs for the same reason, the structures for organized youth development here commenced in the 1970s outside of the professional leagues and school-based programs, and have grown tremendously over the past 40 years.

Currently, because of our concern for results, our developmental programs focus on athletic prowess and physical speed. This has led us to search for *elite* players to create *elite* teams from eight years old on. We have mistakenly considered physical precociousness to be an accurate indicator of future success. We have compounded the problem by segregating these players from those less precocious to form elite teams. The team is the focal point, rather than the players. The success of the team governs, and, because games are won mainly through athleticism, speed of play is almost exclusively defined in physical terms. Furthermore, players at these ages generally lack the ability to think abstractly; therefore the central tactic is direct play, i.e. playing a ball into empty areas of the field for players of both sides to engage in a footrace. And because we select the biggest, fastest and strongest youth for

our *elite* youth teams, this tactic (read problem-solving) predominates throughout our youth players' formative, and throughout their teenage years.

This stress on physical speed has had extremely detrimental effects on the development of technical speed in our young players. We have selected younger and younger players based upon their physical development; we have cast them in specific roles that reward speed at the expense of tight technical play. This system has deprived our young players of many opportunities to experience the *process* of using multi-faceted technical skills in different situations and areas of the field. To compensate technically, we have tried many programs (such as the Coerver Method) that seek to isolate the development of technical speed outside of the game itself. Unfortunately, these programs treat technique outside the crucible of the game. But technical speed involves types of speed that can only occur in the game, such as perceptual speed, anticipatory speed, reaction speed, decision-making speed, and speed without the ball. These can only be nurtured and developed through the process of being in situations presented by the game itself. Furthermore, players must be allowed to solve problems for themselves through experimentation and failure: concepts that are anathema to result-oriented adults.

Our primary focus on discovering and developing the *elite* player at younger and younger ages also ignores all of the prevailing educational expertise concerning how people learn and develop mentally, physically and socially. Instead of allowing the natural process of development to occur, we have all but extinguished it. There are numerous articles on this topic, so I will not repeat those points here but only cite one example of our skewed focus: the glaring contrast between initiating programs for discovering *elite* players versus our attempts to implement small-sided youth games. Despite the strong evidence that early identification is not reliable, in the space of 30 years, we have routinely developed local, state and National programs for Olympic Development, the Super-Y Leagues, U.S. Club Leagues, USYSA Regional Leagues, and now Academy teams and leagues for younger and younger *elite* players. In contrast, it took 15 years of debate to even begin small-sided play for younger players, then only sporadically and on a graduated basis over a number of years throughout the country. Yet, the tremendous benefits of small-sided play were made obvious by the dramatic increase in the US' level of play in the 1994 World Cup. For the four years preceding that Cup, the US team trained almost exclusively using small-sided play.

We Have the Framework, But Not the Art

In all earnestness, we have perceived a problem, sought to define it in terms we understand and overcome it through planning. In so doing, with our youth programs we have created an intricate framework for youth play. Unfortunately, we have tried to fit the players into the framework, rather than adjust the framework to fit the evolving needs of the players.

Similarly, our coaching education system has focused on the structures of activities and tools for imparting information to players. Like our youth programs, we have created a skeleton that does little more than state that "the game is the best teacher," and only generally defines principles of play. The system does not provide much substance as to what to see in the run of play, or how to use the structure of activities to develop the game's principles in a cohesive fashion. The system sporadically

addresses some of the aspects of speed in isolated technical and tactical areas, but there has been no concerted or cohesive effort to teach coaches how to incorporate them in every facet of play.

Over the years many have opined that if we could just be like Brazil, we would succeed. Unfortunately, these critics do little more than cite Brazil's "creativity" as the answer. Beyond describing the cultural influences that cause these traits, few have analyzed how Brazilians use each of the aspects of speed of play, individually and collectively. When they compare the US to Brazil, they liken the US' status as at the framing studs of a building, stating that it needs windows, walls, doors and architectural design, but provide no guidance as to how to obtain these things.

Despite the limited scope of the criticism, it does have some value. It recognizes that the US is stuck at the framework stage. We need to take the next step and focus on how our coaching education program can positively affect our speed of play. We can use the framework of activities and "toolkits" the coaching school curriculum currently provides to teach coaches how to recognize opportunities for developing speed. We can put flesh onto the bones of the framework of training sessions by seeking to provide coaches with a better understanding of the various components of speed, and how to recognize and nurture them within training activities. For example, how and where a first touch can speed up our play and slow down opponents, different ways to use the ball (the fastest thing on the field) as a decoy, also to slow opponents down, how and when to use width and depth to create spaces between opponents, how and when to run to see more of the field more quickly, how and when to use different combinations between players, etc. These are just a few examples that I will address in the second part of this article.

Soccer Speed, Like Art, Requires Developing Its Many Aspects Together

The aspects of *speed of play* are not isolated concepts. They define, and are defined by the environment in which our young players play. They are also only achieved through the *process* of play and experimentation. In essence, the *process* is the *end*. For us to develop players who can play with multi-dimensional quickness, we must focus more on the process for each player rather than on creating tiers of result-seeking teams at younger and younger ages.

It is like creating a painting in black and white without using any other colors. While it is still art, it has certain limitations. The different kinds of *speed* listed above are like different colors of paint for an artist to use to create a more vivid work of art. By themselves on the palette they are mere globs of paint. But when they are mixed and used in various ways by a skillful artist, they can become inspiring images. But it is *only* through the mixing *and experimentation* by an inspired artist that true art is produced. But we, the coaches, are *not* the artists! The players are the artists, and it is they who must learn the craft of playing. Our role should be to provide the problems to solve with playing and training environments (the canvas) that foster the process of learning – the *mixing, experimentation and inspiration* of the players themselves. Thus, our aim, especially before the age of 14, should be to provide as many of these opportunities for as many players as possible, not artificially create more elite teams for fewer and fewer with an immediate focus on winning.

The Game Of and By the Players Themselves Is the Best Teacher

Most of the different aspects to speed listed above relate to speed of vision, thought, and decision-making. These are concepts that require much more than mere repetition in controlled environments. Furthermore, they do not concern only individual speed, but that of the collective group. Since high-level play requires the development of all of these types of speed together, our training environments must incorporate all of them, in less contrived and dictatorial ways. The players' perceptions, decisions, anticipation, reactions, etc. must be in response to the problems the game itself presents. We are seeking "game speed," not just the ability to succeed in an exercise. Furthermore, while we create problem-solving environments in our training sessions, we must allow players to solve the problems presented.

Players also must be given time and opportunities to play in small-sided situations with and against different caliber players. These types of games provide increased numbers of touches, increased opportunities for decisions on both sides of the ball, and do not reward physical speed as much as larger sided games. Furthermore, playing with and against many different caliber and types of players requires each player to adjust and make differing decisions as to how to compete individually and in groups. It is the process of making these differing decisions that *is the process* of developing speed. In the second part of this article, I will address some practical methods of developing the different aspects of speed of play.