

## DEVELOPING SPEED OF PLAY – Part 2

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This second part of an article about developing speed of play will focus on the types of things coaches should look for within particular game-like activities, rather than simply provide a series of activities.<sup>1</sup> For this reason, I am going to use typical practice activities that progress from simple to complex, and discuss finding the various components of speed within them.

Speed of play should be a continuous touchstone for all youth coaches, yet it is often overlooked. One reason is that many youth coaches focus primarily on the exercise itself, rather than on the elements of speed within it. As a result, in many cases, they create “coach-directed” or “coach-centered” activities, rather than activities that encourage problem-solving speed by the players themselves.

An example of this could be an exercise involving dribbling where every player has a ball and is dribbling freely in a delineated area. Many youth coaches will condition the game by saying something like “When I say ‘change’ then you should change direction.” Their aim is to train players to react quickly to direction changes. What they miss is that the very decision to change directions is dictated arbitrarily by the coach, rather than what the players see happening around them. While such exercises might help develop technical speed, they are divorced from other important components of speed, such as visual speed (what the player sees and when he sees it), anticipatory speed (anticipating when, where and how fast to move), and reactive speed (movement of others around him create new openings and block others). Only game-like environments nurture these types of speed. Therefore, coaches would do much better if they provided problems for the players to solve and aims for them to reach, rather than directed how players should react to commands.

For example, in the same type of exercise described above, the coach might say, “See how many times you can move the ball between two other players without touching anyone or their ball.” There will be plenty changes of direction, but it will be the game itself, and the environment around the players, that will dictate where and when openings occur. Success will be dependent upon each player’s ability to recognize, find, react and technically move into those openings.

#### **Moving from Simple to Complex**

The exercise described above is a very simple environment because there are no opponents and there is no prescribed direction to move or goals to attack or defend. The size of the space and the other players provide the complexity. Following is a sample progression of activities that will provide a canvas for discussing the development of different aspects of speed. This is just one example, and the

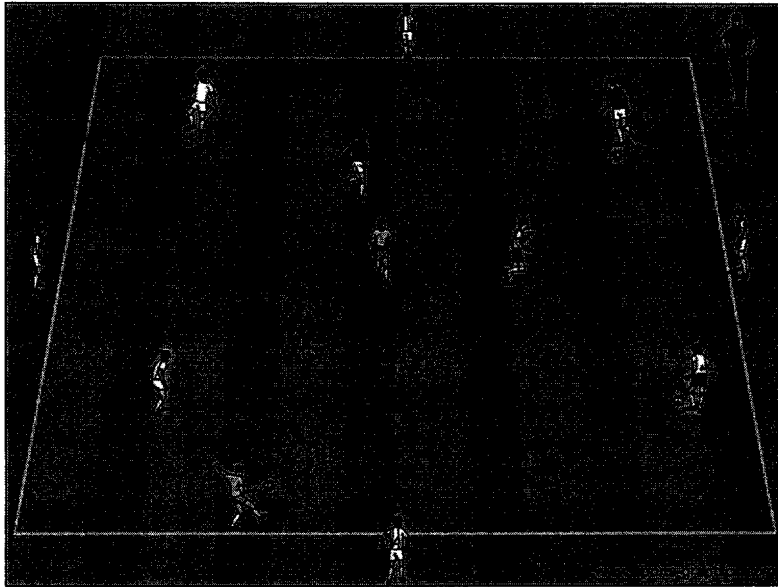
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<sup>1</sup> For a more detailed view of the use of various coaching tools see my earlier article entitled Coaching from the Game, Soccer Journal, Jan.-Feb. 2009, Vol. 54, No. 1.

concentration is limited to the development of speed for one type of decision-making. Coaches should seek to find ways to help players develop different components of speed in every activity they perform.

For continuity, the technical aspect in these activities will be passing and receiving ground balls. The activities will gradually become more complex, moving from a warm-up phase, then a 4 v 4 + 4 (windows) non-directional activity, then 6 v 6 +2 to three goals, and finally 6 v 6 to goals.

**Warm-Up – Windows w/ four pairs passing inside and four (window) players outside**



**Technical Speed**

The technical speed of play focus is the players' first touch. Generally, players should be encouraged to never stop the ball dead. Instead, they should always move the ball somewhere with their first touch. This general concept provides a technical foundation for speed because it immediately puts opponents in the posture of chasing, rather than dictating, the direction of play.

In the Windows format, the spaces that open for moving the ball with the first touch are created by the movement of the other players in the area. Players can be encouraged to find these spaces *before* they receive the ball to determine how they should approach the ball, as well as the speed, direction and distance of their first touch. Furthermore, communication among the players can be encouraged as part of technical speed. This is especially crucial for young players who may be self-conscious about talking.

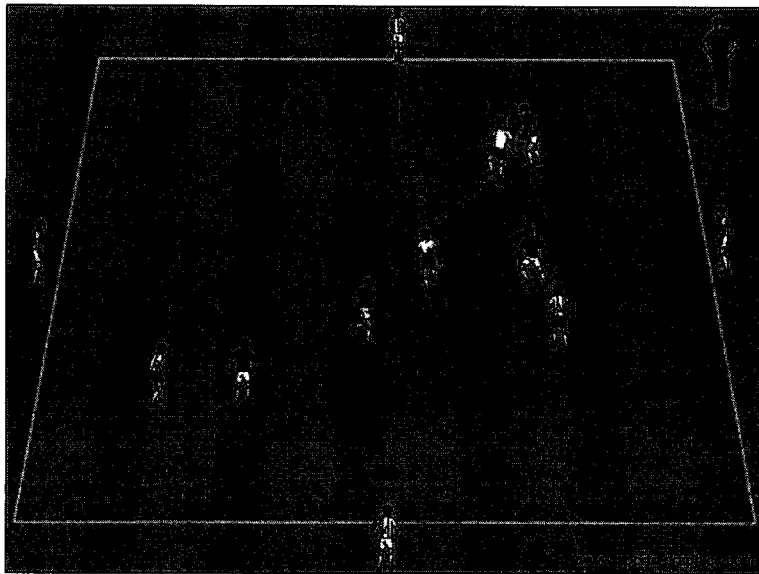
**Decision-Making Speed**

The warm-up phase also provides a simple decision-making environment for tactically applying the technical movements. Since there are no opponents, the technical and tactical aspects are readily recognizable, and the decisions of where, when, how to react and make or receive passes are affected

only by where spaces open and close and not the pressure of opponents trying to gain possession of the ball.

Some decision-making aspects include how players run to receive passes. Do they open their bodies before receiving the ball to increase their vision of the field? Do they come back towards the passer at an angle? Do they go away? Do they run diagonally? Do they burst into short sprints? Do they fake one way before going another? Similarly, issues for the passers include how hard they play the ball, whether they play it to feet or to space and to which foot. All of these actions and movements also involve technical development, but all are dictated by decisions about the immediate environment around the players.

#### **Windows – 4 v 4 + 4 (neutral window players)**



The introduction of opponents makes technical speed more complex because opponents are now trying to take the ball away. The outside targets, however, create a numbers-up situation for the team with the ball. The lack of directional play makes all of the real estate inside the playing area worth the same. This allows players to find space wherever it appears without worrying about where they are on the field. This is extremely important for developing speed because it introduces anticipatory and reactive speed based solely upon where opponents are located. This is an often overlooked foundational concept for players -- an understanding of the field in a 360 degree dimension. Not having directional play encourages players to seek out the spaces not occupied by opponents, regardless of where they are on the field. Its importance lies in the truth that the ball can move faster than the player. Therefore, when there is no particular direction to play, the possessing team will freely move *wherever* space is open, freezing opponents in certain places, or drawing them into those spaces when the ball is played.

In this environment, different aspects of technical speed become important. The direction of the first touch is still paramount, but fakes before receiving the ball, and the distance the ball is played

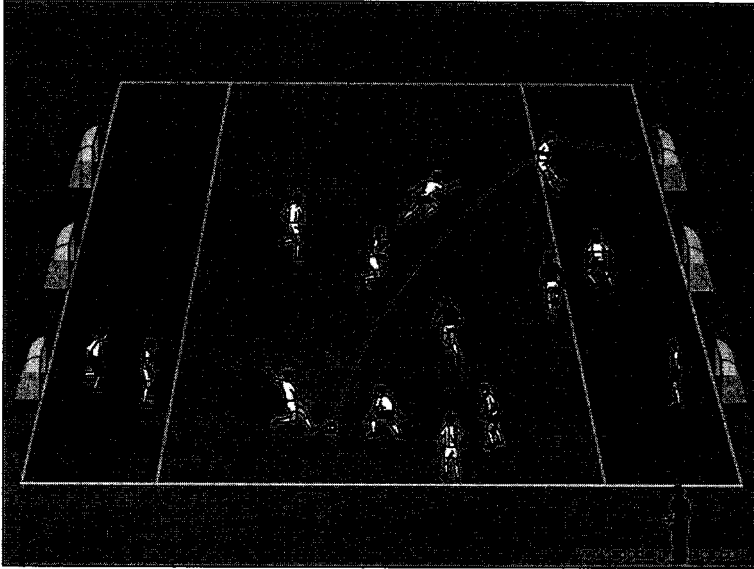
become more important because opponents are reacting to the passes. This involves the introduction of the concept of slowing down opponents as another aspect of speed. Therefore, coaches can help players develop the ability to make opponents go or lean the wrong way by focusing on what players do before they receive the ball. This might include calling for the ball to draw opponents towards them, even if they don't expect the pass to be made; or checking for a pass in one direction and then playing the first touch in a different direction. In each case, the focus helps players recognize how to wrong foot opponents and/or cause them to chase the ball.

With the introduction of opponents, the tactical and technical aspects of speed converge, but they also become more defined. Speed becomes more about recognizing how to use space and the ball to make opponents move where we want them to move. Using neutral players outside creates automatic space there. This gives coaches the opportunity to help the inside players create and recognize spaces in the middle of the playing area. Outside target players also help inside players recognize the importance of body position for increasing vision of the whole field, and, thus, visual speed, when receiving passes from outside players.

In this activity, I have chosen to develop the players' ability to immediately recognize and exploit spaces away from opponents. There are many different concepts for developing speed of play: some coaches focus on combination play, others on space in certain parts of the field. My method here is to provide a foundation generally based upon attacking principles, before defining particular methods of applying those principles. I usually begin by teaching players to look for "meadows" on the field, in which to run or play the ball as soon as they gain possession. A "meadow" is any space where there are no opponents or other teammates. The "meadow" concept can be contrasted with a "forest" (where players of both teams constitute the trees). We encourage players as soon as they gain possession to find "meadows" for playing and receiving the ball. Once they do so continuously, then we can show them that the tendency of opponents is to follow the ball into the "meadows."

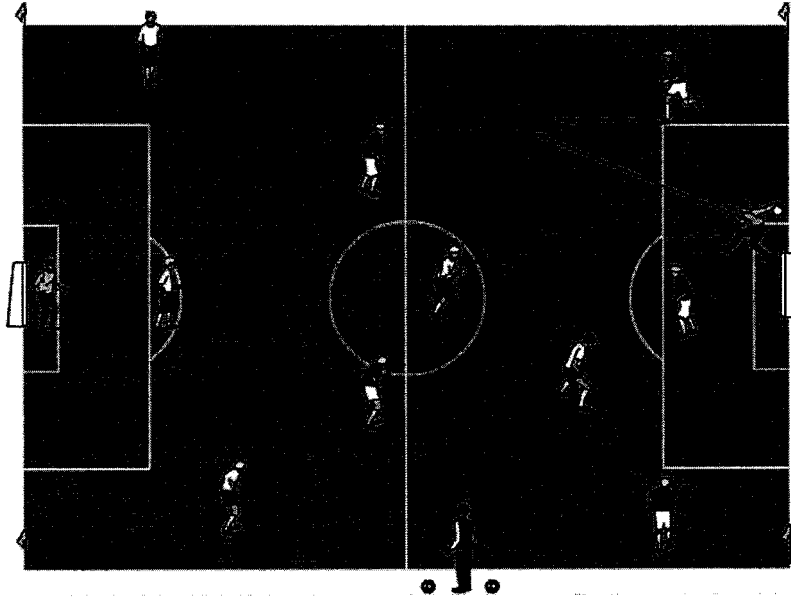
Once players understand this concept we can shift the focus to help players recognize the spaces they have created between opponents. Using the "meadows" and "forest" picture, we can show players how their movement and the movement of the ball into "meadows" cause opponents to move, thereby increasing the amount of space between the "trees" in the forest (we can call these spaces "doorways"). Now players can look to leave the "meadows," run into those "doorways, and to play the ball (which is faster than the opponents) through those "doorways." It may sound simplistic, but it is all about players continually recognizing and reacting to the spaces that exist around them, regardless of where they are on the field.

## 6 v 6 + 2 Neutral Attacking Players with 3 Goals at Each End



When we add direction (i.e., attacking and defending certain goals) the environment becomes much more complex, because now players have objective areas to attack and defend. Therefore, these areas of the field take on different values for both teams. Attacking teams want to score points, so they often “rush” into the opponents’ crowded goal spaces (forests) without creating the spaces between the “trees.” Defending teams protect the goal areas more intensely by increasing the number of “trees” in these areas. The focus now shifts more to using the ball to speed our own play up, and understanding how to use the ball as a decoy to slow opponents down. Where players before considered all “meadows” equal, coaches now can help see how to play the ball into and out of more and less important areas (i.e., “meadows” with different values) to draw opponents away from their own goals and thereby increase the size of the “doorways” between them. The three goals at either end encourage attacking teams to find “meadows” in other areas of the field when the “forest” gets to thick near a particular goal.

## 6 v 6 to Two Goals



Finally, we can play to two goals, building upon the same space concepts. More complexity is created both by having teams of equal numbers and only one goal to attack and defend, and the tendency for many coaches will be to choreograph play to show players “how” to find space. Guidance and choreography are two different things, and coaches must resist the latter. Players’ decision-making and problem-solving and the development of speed are all about adaptation. Within this more difficult environment the coach’s aim is to help players develop the ability to recognize for themselves where the “meadows” exist and how to use them to create “doorways” to penetrate to an opponent’s goal.

### **Speed – It is Player-Centered**

Using these progressively more complex environments provides opportunities for players to develop their own eyes and ways to solve the problems presented. Speed of play is intrinsically and comprehensively tied to each player’s recognition of, and adaptability to, what the game presents. Rather than focusing strictly on defining ways to move the ball to goal, guided discovery is a tremendous tool for coaches to help players recognize for themselves, within the free-flowing environment around, where spaces exist, and then, how to run and use the ball to open spaces where they want to go. These are the types of environments that will truly develop the different aspects of speed of play.