

**COACHING SOCCER IS EASY**

**. . . OR SO YOU THOUGHT!**

**My insights into this beautiful game**

**Carlo Cornacchia**

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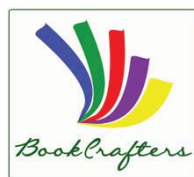
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**Note:** The beautiful cover photograph has recently come into the author's possession and portrays him and some of his fantastic teammates. Attempts to locate the original photographer have failed. If the reader knows the origin of this photograph, please contact the author of this book so that full credit can be assigned.

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***“Niente ti turbi, niente ti spaventi, tutto passa, solo Dio resta.  
La pazienza ottiene tutto, a chi ha Dio niente manca, solo Dio basta.”***

***“Do not be concerned, do not be afraid, everything in life  
comes and goes; only God stays.***

***Patience obtains everything, having God there is nothing else  
you need; only God is enough.”***

— St Theresa of Jesus



## **DEDICATIONS**

Dedicated to God, my Mentor, my Comfort, my Father

and

To Rosa and Gioacchino, Mom and Dad whom, I am sure,  
are very proud of me

and finally,

To Debi, my lovely wife, and to Jamie and Grace,  
our wonderful daughters.

You are my light, my courage and my love.



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# INTRODUCTION

## IF I EVER BECOME A COACH, I WANT TO BE LIKE COACH DALLA RIVA!

*“Passion is a pure emotion that sometimes is barely controllable.”*  
– Carlo Cornacchia (CC)

In 1974, the World Cup was played in Germany. At that time, I was nine years old and just starting to really enjoy all of the beautiful expressions of the game of soccer. The final match was between Holland and Germany. The Dutch national team played impressive soccer, but their opponent played more pragmatic soccer and in the end, won the Cup.

Through my nine year old eyes, I witnessed the crystal class of Johan Crujff and Franz Beckenbauer. I also started to notice another figure that was rarely caught on the camera. He had a stiff facial expression and sat on a bench just off the field. This figure was the coach. The Dutch national team coach was Rinus Michels and the German national team coach was Helmut Schön. They were majestic and solemn in their posture. They instilled a kind of awe in me and I am sure, in many other viewers. Since then, the figure of the soccer coach started intriguing me.

During the many years of my soccer career, both as a young player and as a professional, I had many coaches. Some of them were good, some of them not. The good coaches were the ones from whom I learned the most. They were self-confident, but also humble. They were coherent in their words and deeds and very knowledgeable about soccer matters. They had different soccer philosophies and different

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managerial styles, but they possessed a common fundamental factor that (in my opinion) made them highly appreciated and followed by their players. **They had an insane, genuine passion for the game.** Everything they did, from setting up the field for training, to the last speech before the game on Sunday, was sweating passion. Their passion was infectious. Training sessions were learning experiences. Every day you learned something that you could actually implement successfully on the field.

The harmony on our team was almost surreal. We, the players, became very connected; not only on the soccer field, but also off the field. We were a family. The results inevitably arrived in the 1989-90 season when, to cite one example, we won the Serie B Championship with Cagliari Calcio. The following year we avoided the relegation in Serie A. In those years our coach was Claudio Ranieri. The passion of my coaches created a chain of events that led their team to unexpected success. I find this amazing in its simplicity!

So, is passion then the key to success in sport and in life?

With regard to soccer, we all know that it is not simply the game alone that ignites the fire of passion; there is more under the surface.

Soccer is an emotional expression of a social culture. It is the voice of the people who want to be heard. In some cultures this voice is very strong. I heard this voice when, as an 11 year old lad, I started to play competitive soccer with the AC Torino Academy. Among all the coaches that I was fortunate enough to have at the AC Torino Academy, I want to mention, with gratitude and respect, Mister (this is how we address the coach in Italy) Matteo Dalla Riva.

Mister Dalla Riva was a man of soccer. He had a unique ability to keep us focused for the duration of the training. His teaching style was simple and direct. Our training was based on playing. When the fields were not available, we trained in the parking lot or even below the cemented stands of the old "Philadelphia stadium" in Torino. Every word he said contained a motivational

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message. He had given each of us a nickname; mine was "Carletto" which means "little Carlo."

He made each of us feel like an absolutely important part of our team. It was a great feeling; the feeling of belonging to something special. Every time I wore the AC Torino jersey, I had butterflies in my stomach. Was that passion? Definitely, yes! I have the same excited feeling now as a grown man every time I step on the field to train or coach my team.

The years went by and, one day thinking back on the good old days, I realized (to my great shame) that I never thanked Mister Dalla Riva for what he did for me. But, in 2005 after 26 years, I finally paid my tribute to this great man. I knew that I would find him at the old soccer facility of US Vanchiglia, an old soccer club in Torino's suburb. Sure enough, he was there. After a long emotional hug and with tears in my eyes, I was only able to say... "thank you, Sir!"

Mister Dalla Riva didn't have the same success and glamour of Rinus Michels, Helmut Schön, or the other coaches that I proudly served during my playing career, but he shared the same passion and love for the game. Most importantly, he was able to transmit those values to me and to the other kids of my generation. Now it is my turn to honor this commitment.

*This book talks about the art of coaching. I call it art because the coach, like an artist, feels the pain and the struggle of the creation, but at same time feels the indescribably good feeling of the achievement. Each of us, as coaches, have a personal relationship with the game. It is like a perpetual conversation that sometimes leaves you satisfied and sometimes leaves you desperate for an answer.*

*In this book I humbly share my interpretation of coaching in all its facets and contradictions. I hope you will find, in my writing, inspiration for new ideas and solutions.*

Enjoy the reading!



# **THE ROLE OF THE SOCCER CLUB IN THE PLAYER DEVELOPMENT PROCESS IN THE USA**

## **THE ORIGIN OF MY PASSION**

I was born in Altamura, a small town in southeast Italy on May 4th, 1965. I am the youngest of seven children. When I was seven years old, seeking a better life after my father lost his job, my family moved to Torino in northwest Italy.

In Torino, like most Italian kids of my generation, I started to play soccer on the streets of my neighborhood, St. Giulia, in the late 70s and early 80s. The density of the population in St. Giulia was very high due to all the working class families that were living in the area. Those years were hard due to an economic recession that hit our country. People worked very hard to make a living, including my family.

My father, Gioacchino, was a mall cop and my mother Rosa, worked as a housekeeper. Money was never enough to get to the end of the month. Although food was never missed on our table, there was never an abundance of it. At school, to my great embarrassment, I could not participate in the PE classes because I didn't have running shoes.

Some of my friends were more fortunate than me. They lived in nice houses and they had their own rooms. They always wore nice clothes and their parents came to pick them up at school. My childhood was not easy. At times I was mad and frustrated, but I always believed that things would change. Thankfully, I was able to release the energy contained in my frustration by playing with my friends on the street, where we often ended up fighting for the right to play or just to gain the respect of our peers in the neighborhood. However, fighting was

not our primary occupation. Playing soccer was what we loved the most. We played soccer all day long, especially during summer.

There were only a few parks in the St. Giulia area and they were always very crowded, so we played anywhere we could in the neighborhood; streets, squares, even in the front yard (in Italian “sagrato”) of St. Giulia Church. The St. Giulia church was a majestic neo-gothic style building, built in the 19th century by a noble lady named Giulia Colbert Falletti, Marchesa of Barolo. It’s from here that I have the best memories.

The sagrato was, more or less, 35x50 meters of large flat basalt stones on the ground surrounded by streets with high traffic and huge glass showcases of the businesses located across those streets. In addition, there were habitual attendees of the church functions who were mostly old people. Unbelievable, but true, we used this space to play our games. As far as I can remember, the ball hit only one lady during one of our games. This lady was very upset and promised us retaliation. She kept her word. After a couple of hours she came back and after she got possession of the ball, she pulled a huge knife from her large purse and she “popped” the soccer ball! The ball owner was obviously distraught, but the rest of us were not scared at all... just disappointed that our soccer day had ended!

As a coach I realize what an important factor, for my development as a soccer player, the games played on the St. Giulia’s sagrato were. Due to the limited space, we played 3v3 or 4v4 small-sided games. My technical abilities and my understanding of the game’s dynamics improved tremendously due to the fast pace of the actions and the quick tactical decisions I had to make.

Also, good agility and coordination when performing my moves was a necessity. The opponents were not very “nice.” If you were better than them, they would try to hurt you to get you out of the game. To avoid bad fouls, I learned how to play fast with only a few touches. The right to keep playing was guaranteed only by winning games. The motivation to keep our spot on the field was always very high. We always had to come up with the best performances. Winning became a habit, because it was necessary. We learned how to cope with the pressure of winning. We knew that, one way or another, we would have to find the way to win. Our self-confidence grew greatly.

The more we played, the better we became. The better we became, the more respect we gained in the neighborhood.

It was then that I realized the impact that my soccer abilities would have in my life. I would become a respected and famous person. I soon entered the AC Torino Youth Academy. In 1985, I started my professional soccer career which would last 12 years.

If you compare my personal life story to the life stories of other famous soccer players of my generation, you will notice a commonality of events and situations. In most cases there is misery, frustration, tears, and anger in the life of those people. It's a kind of a common life pattern that repeats itself over and over.

Soccer was the only option for my moments of happiness. While playing, I was able to forget all the frustrations in my life and just enjoy the moment. In those soccer moments I was able to do things better than others. The more I played, the better I became. I developed a superb technique and my decision making was excellent. Thankfully, those years playing on the streets of my neighborhood forged my character. I wanted to win... always! I was a fierce competitor, a paladin of my team's cause. It was not only my soccer technical abilities, but my character that helped me to go through all the selections during my years at AC Torino Academy where I learned to discipline myself and how to funnel my aggressive energy in a positive way. I felt like a part of something special.

I was able to play everywhere on the field, but I became a defender due to my aggressive nature and because I hated to lose. My coach at that time, Mr. Dalla Riva, understood my competitive attitude and put me in a position where I could express myself completely. I was comfortable starting all my actions from the back as I could see the game's dynamics better from the back line. I was able to provide tactical information to my teammates in front of me. I became a strategist very early in my soccer career.

## **THE CLUB CULTURE AND ITS STRUCTURE**

Based on what has been said so far, you may ask yourself, must a kid go through all the "intense experiences" described above to become a successful soccer player? I do not think this is necessary,

even though the poor countries are still the major producers of soccer talent. Those players are definitely technically gifted, but I believe that their best quality is what I call “mental toughness.” This mental quality, in my opinion, is what supports them in reaching success.

Technical abilities, tactical insight, and physical strength are nothing without a strong mental attitude. I firmly believe that the soccer club, professional or not professional, should play a prominent role in the mental educational process of the young players.

The soccer club has to recreate the conditions that, safe from the danger of the streets, would develop the potential of the young player. The club has to be a microcosm that embodies both the family and social environments that have so much influence in our development as human beings and as athletes. Like the school system, the soccer club’s main objective is to grow the minds of the youngsters and prepare them for life’s challenges through the game of soccer.

The club’s structure/operations and its “educational system” are based on the club’s beliefs and customs, which form the club culture. It’s through this important cultural factor that the players are educated and developed.

The club facility (with all the training fields) and the club house are fundamental factors of a solid club culture. They embody a safe place where the soccer educational process is implemented and monitored. It is at the club facility that the young players train, side by side, with “the players of the first team” if they are a professional club, dreaming of being one of them some day.

It is at the club facility where the families meet to support the youth teams for games and for social events. It is in the “sanctuary” of the locker room where the team spirit is built and where the games are prepared in observance of the “team rituals.” Here is where the passion, pride, and feeling of belonging are built.

The club must have solid moral and ethical foundations. It has to be both a humble servant and a strong educational point of reference for the social community. The club has to proudly represent the community/city in order to earn its support (emotional and financial).



The club must have a compelling mission statement supported by solid core values such as: VISION, COMMITMENT, INDUSTRIOUSNESS, HARMONY, HONESTY, LEADERSHIP, HUMILITY and DISCIPLINE. This will define and support any decision or activity aimed at achieving the long and short term goals of the club.

Selection of the coaching and administration staff must be based upon their moral integrity and professional abilities. Each staff member should be aware of the club goals and have a significant part in its achievements. Each staff member should execute their duties in a timely manner in accordance with the club belief and procedures.

Like in the corporate world where companies are judged by the quality of their product, the club will be judged upon the quality of the players/individuals it produces. For this reason, the club's ultimate goals must always be "player/person development." This process is always long and quite challenging. There are several characters that participate directly and indirectly in this process and each of them plays an important role.

The coach is one of the main characters in this process. Coaches are passionate educators and role models. They have to conceive, create, and implement a training system that, with respect to the club soccer culture, is compelling, enjoyable, and implemented in a safe environment. Their training will always encompass these four soccer parameters: TECHNIQUE, TACTICS, PHYSICAL and PSYCHOLOGICAL. These parameters, when implemented in a unique way by the players, create a style. This style is always sustained by the players' abilities and their soccer intelligence. The foundation of every style relies on the team organizational principles that, although well known by the soccer coaches, are intended and implemented in unique ways.

# COACHING SOCCER

## WHAT IS COACHING?

This question is open to many possible answers and all of them are related to the various social and soccer cultures. It's generally agreed that coaching is teaching, therefore it is influencing the way the players see and play the game. The player's development process should be based upon this important concept.

To influence somebody who already has beliefs about soccer requires the coach to possess two important qualities; **Soccer knowledge** and **proven ability to relate this knowledge to his players**. Basically, the coach has to show that he knows "his stuff" and he has to really make the players perform better!

The way the coach relates his soccer knowledge to the players constitutes his **method of coaching**. This is a key point in positively influencing the player development process. When this happens, the players are able to express their soccer in a unique way that can be called style. Not to be confused with the tactical module/system nor with the pure esthetic form, style is a way to express how the players interpret the game in all its components. It is always sustained by the players' abilities and their soccer intelligence.

Coaching is a **structured process** that takes time, patience, and belief.

## COACH'S ROLES AND QUALITIES

*“A good leader is not the one who has more followers, but the one who helps the others to become leaders as well.”*

— Neale Donald Walsch

The coach is a figure of several facets, each one with specific responsibilities.

The coach is a **guide** and a **leader**. In order to lead, the coach must have **experience** upon which his soccer **philosophy** is built. His philosophy tells clearly what the goals are and how to achieve them with **passion and optimism**. Being a leader, the coach is also a role model. He is respectful of the rules and all the people he is interacting with. It takes a great **personality** to influence the way the players see and play the game. The personality and character of the coach are based upon his **vision, belief, courage**, and **coherence** of his decisions and actions.

**The coach is a good observer and therefore a good team builder.** Observing the team dynamics on and off the field, the coach is able to identify the potential of the team and to decide the team's seasonal goals. Also, he has to set up a plan to achieve the team's goals in which the players have a huge part.

The coach has to convince the players that **each of them has an important part in achieving the team's goals**, regardless of their different abilities, cultures and personal goals. In this regard, the coach has to be a good **communicator**. He must be able to transfer his knowledge, wisdom and emotions to his players to motivate them in crucial moments.

The coach is an **organizer**. He has to decide the goals of the season and create a seasonal plan to achieve it. Considering the length of the season, the seasonal plan is divided in stages or cycles (weekly and monthly) in which the coach will focus training on specific topics relevant to the development of his players.

Fundamentally, the coach is a **teacher**. This is true in youth soccer as well as in professional soccer. He must be able to set up a challenging, positive, training environment where the players can gain first hand experiences from the game and learn from their mistakes.

He has to **facilitate** the players' learning process by modulating the complexity of the game scenarios from simple to complex and providing the necessary positive feedback to the players.

*“L'abito, non fa il monaco.”*

*“Wearing monk's clothes, doesn't make you a monk.”*

— Italian saying

When I was a student in high school, I had good grades in all of my classes, except in math. My math teacher was an old man with a complicated and boring method of teaching. He used to go into the classroom, give his lecture, and leave or just talk endlessly about his new suits. This gent didn't care at all if we were learning or not. He was full of himself and he enjoyed showing off his knowledge of math. Only a few of my classmates passed the class. The majority of us had to attend summer school.

In preparation for the final test, I wanted to get some one-on-one tutoring. For \$5 per hour, I found a young teacher (whose name I don't recall) who was living in my neighborhood. This guy didn't look like a teacher, but I immediately felt comfortable with him. His explanations were simple and clear. When I didn't get it, he was able to explain it in a completely different way. His tone of voice was calm and resolute. He used analogies that pictured the problem perfectly and that helped me to solve it. I really started to love math, because suddenly it became simple. This young teacher was a good teacher because he helped me to not only learn, but become passionate about math!

Having knowledge doesn't make you a teacher. It is the way the knowledge is taught and ultimately acquired by the student that gives value and credit to the teacher.

## WHAT DOES THE COACH TEACH?

The ultimate goal of a soccer coach is to develop good soccer players!

*“A good soccer player is technically sound, with a reliable insight of the game, very well-conditioned, and highly motivated to succeed!” — CC*

This transcends the mere sphere of soccer and applies to both young and senior players. The moral values such as discipline, respect, commitment and leadership that the players learn and live by through their development process, will lead them in whatever walk of life they choose.

In order to accomplish this task, the coach will introduce the players to the components of the game and their intrinsic connection: **Technical; Tactical; Physical; Psychological**. These components are expressed in every game’s action, both in defense and offense. As they are interrelated and dependent on one another, it would be wasted time to train them separately. It is said that, **“The game is the best teacher.”** Therefore, training must always be based on games and game-related drills that encompass all of the game’s components.

When creating the session plan (and the seasonal plan), the coach must always consider **the age of the players, their physical and cognitive maturity, and their overall soccer ability**. Using these parameters, the coach will choose the most suitable tactical system that would enable the team to achieve its realistic goals.

It is important to reiterate that each player is different; therefore, each of them has different potential and different ways to learn. The teaching quality of the coach manifests when he understands the potential each player has and creates a training environment where they can develop it at their own pace.

## DIDACTICAL PRINCIPLES TO APPLY WHEN TEACHING SOCCER

Teaching has meaning only if the students learn! In soccer, this applies to every level of player. Whatever style of teaching/coaching, it is valuable as long as the following didactical concepts are met:

- **Active participation.** The coach has to create compelling activities to keep the players engaged so they will be more inclined to fully commit to learn. If players are not engaged, the activity needs to be changed.
- **Progression.** This principle applies to every learning process. The activities introduced to the players must progress from simple to complex and general to specific. The rules must be clear and, as young players learn by imitation, the coach must be able to correctly show the technical gestures.
- **Age appropriateness.** The activities must always be pertinent to the age of the players and their cognitive and biological development.
- **Freedom and creativity.** The soccer activities must allow players to experience the game on their own with freedom and creativity.

It is important to note that although these few principles are observed rigorously by the coaches that work with young players, they are to be applied with senior players as well.

## TEACHING TECHNIQUE

*“Technique in soccer is the sum of the soccer motor abilities that allow the player to perform characteristic movements (with and without ball) with great ease and confidence and without control of the conscious mind.” — CC*

Given the rules and the dynamics of the game, the movements with the ball, called **technical foundations**, are of paramount importance. The technical foundations are: **ball management, dribbling, passing, receiving, trapping, shooting, heading, tackling, shielding** and **throw-in**.

From a developmental standpoint, the learning process of the soccer technical abilities develop through three progressive stages that are related to the physical coordination level of the young players as well as their cognitive development. The three progressive stages are:

1. **Rough coordination stage (5-10):** Due to lack of full control of their muscles by the central nervous system, the movements of the players are fragmented and stiff. At this stage, training is based upon fun activities with a ball, not necessarily related to soccer.
2. **Fine coordination stage (11-13):** At this stage the players are able to perform technical soccer gestures with good continuity, accuracy and speed. The players are able to apply the technical gestures during a structured game. Given their short attention span, the players are easily distracted by external factors and fatigue. Repetitions and appropriate rest are crucial.
3. **Solidified coordination stage (14-18):** The players are able to implement their technical ability in the game while considering tactical scenarios. This reflects the development of the central nervous system, which delegates to the inferior nervous centers the motor executions of the technical gestures while the conscious brain focuses on “reading the game.”

During these developmental stages the players learn how to “connect” with the ball first, then how to use this connection in the game. The “fine coordination stage” is very important as it is in those years that the basic technical abilities are built and solidified.

To facilitate this development, the **technical foundations** are classified as:

- **Individual Technique:** Is pertinent to the player-ball relationship and isolated from game scenarios. The focus of training is on the mechanical gesture (using both feet). The ball to player ratio is 1:1, one player, one ball. The following stage includes a teammate with whom they exchange the ball. The ratio is 2:1, two players for one ball. This will explore the basic technical foundation of passing and receiving in all its varieties.
- **Applied Technique (skills):** When the technical abilities are used in game scenarios. The player refers to his ability to “see the game” and its dynamics in order to use the appropriate technique.

Technique must always play a large part in the training session, especially with young players. Through opportune and well-conceived technical drills that contain the **technical foundations** and that recreate, as much as possible game scenarios, the coach is able to work on general/specific tactical topics as well as develop the players' soccer specific conditioning at the same time.

The technical drills/exercises implementation should follow a progression that must consider both the age and ability of the players:

- **1st stage**

The drills are simple and each player works on his own technique (individual technique). The movements are executed slowly, over and over. The coach corrects the technical mistakes until the movement is executed correctly. At this stage there is no pressure by the opponent.

- **2nd stage**

In this stage the technical drills have a simple tactical connotation where two or more players use their technique considering a specific tactical situation. The drills are executed at a slow pace. The coach corrects the technical mistakes as well as the tempo of movements which relates to the other players' actions. The player learns now that "he is not the center of the action, but just a small part." At this stage, even if there might be the presence of an opponent, there is still not any active pressure performed by the players.

- **3rd stage**

In this stage the drills are characterized by the match condition. There are attackers and defenders who have a task to accomplish in respect to a set of rules dictated by the coach.

- **4th stage**

This stage is the game. It is important to put emphasis on the importance of using **small-sided games** as the training method to develop the players' soccer qualities. While playing small-sided games (3v3, 4v4 in a relatively small area), the players have a



remarkable number of **touches on the ball**, perfecting their ball management and tricks. Due to the high speed of the game the players quickly have to understand the tactical dynamics of the actions enhancing **their positioning, communication and decision making**. These are the parameters of team organization or team shape (which will be largely discussed later in this book). For the same reason, their **soccer specific conditioning** is largely developed along with their **motivation** to succeed (scoring goals is always fun).

- **5th stage**

The final stage is functional training (technical and technical/tactical). This is a form training functional to a specific technique pertinent to a specific role. It is normally executed in specific areas of the field and in specific tactical scenarios. Given the developed ability to understand the game that this form of training requires, it is suitable for well-developed players.

## TEACHING TACTICS

*“Tactics is strategy. Strategy in soccer represents the decisions by an individual player, unit or the entire team, to act in a certain way to achieve a defined objective.” — CC*

In the game of soccer there are two phases characterized by the possession of the ball. The team in possession is said to be on attack, and its main objective is to create scoring opportunities and ultimately to score a goal. The opposing team not in possession is said to be on defense, and its main objective is to disrupt the opponent’s build up and regain possession of the ball. When the attacking team loses the ball possession it has to immediately regroup in order to start the defensive phase. At the same time, the defending team that regained the ball possession has to immediately implement attacking strategies. Those tactical moments of the game are called **transitions**.

It is from these game scenarios, which continuously alternate with one another, that the game’s dynamics derive and all of the tactical decisions, that coaches and players have to make, evolve. The game

of soccer is a free flowing game. It is very difficult to predict what is going to happen. Regardless, the players have to be able to cope with any situation in an efficient way. For this purpose, we learn from the game and from our past experiences.

In the past 40 years, the domestic and international success of many famous teams inspired generations of coaches to develop systems of play that had solid **tactical foundations** allowing the implementation of the coach's strategies for both defensive and attacking phases. Those tactical foundations define what to do when defending and when attacking. It is while the players are engaged in their tactical tasks that the players express their creativity and motivation to succeed.

Those tactical bases are universally accepted and implemented in every soccer culture, so we call them **Soccer Tactical Basic Principles**. There are **tactical basic principles of individual and team defending**, and **tactical basic principles of individual and team attacking**.

### **Tactical basic principles of individual defending:**

- Insight of the game (what do you see happening?)
- Positioning
- Decision making (prioritize)
- Marking
- Anticipation
- Aggressiveness
- Immediate chase
- Confrontation
- Delay
- Tackling
- Block shots
- Smart foul

### **Tactical basic principles of team defending:**

- Collective insight of the game (what do you see happening?)
- Decision making (prioritize)
- Collective positioning (upon the tactical situation)

- Organized aggressive pressure (confrontation)
- Compactness (distances between defendants)
- Communication (body language, signs and verbal language)
- Balance
- Coverage
- Double team
- Switch
- Delay

### **Tactical basic principles of individual attacking:**

- Insight of the game (what do you see happening?)
- Positioning
- Decision making (prioritize)
- Communication (body language, signs and verbal language)
- Create the space with movement (mobility)
- Attack the space created (penetrate; peel out on the flanks)
- Ability to find the frame (finishing)
- Creativity

### **Tactical basic principles of team attacking:**

- Collective insight of the game (which kind of opportunity to attack do we have?)
- Decision making (prioritize)
- Communication (body language, signs and verbal language)
- Create space using width and length (make the field big)
- Constant movement of the players (to create numbers around the ball; create passing options)
- Distribution and support
- Balance (when attacking, be ready to defend, when defending, be ready to attack)
- Have more than one playmaker (different points of reference to build up)
- Participation of all the players in attack (depending upon the tactical situation)

Coaches and players need to be well acquainted with those tactical principles which will always be, along with the game's other components, the topics to develop in training.

There is a didactic progression when teaching the tactical basic principles of attacking and defending. In order for the team to defend and attack as such, it is important that the players know how to defend and attack **individually** and as a **small group or unit**.

There is also a progression for the choices of the tactical drills/exercises/games that will serve this purpose. The progression goes from simple to complex.

It is important to reiterate that attacking and defending are two sides of the same coin. Therefore, it is not advisable to train those phases separately. This means that even if the emphasis is on defending, the attacking player, group, or team has to be competitive and not passive, in order to create the game situation where the defense can be challenged.

## Teaching elements of individual tactics

The player is facing a tactical situation in which he is either attacking or defending, and he is alone against an individual opponent. This is the basic situation that is seen in every action. It is the blueprint of the game of soccer. The 1v1 duel tests the ability of the attacking and defending players to correctly implement the individual defending/attacking principles while expressing their **technical ability** as well as their **physical qualities** and their **motivation** to prevail.

The 1v1 situation forces both players to study one another. The players are induced to see each other's weak points and to take advantage of them as well as to compensate for their own weak points by efficiently using their other qualities. An attacking player that doesn't have good technique will consistently use his speed, while a defender that doesn't have great speed will be forced to use his insight in order to delay (or press-up) the opponent, depending upon the situation.

The players must instantly gather all the information that the tactical situation presents, in order to decide what to do. This is a process that takes time and can only be developed by players

through trial and error, patience and determination. The coach is the facilitator of this learning process. The rules of the drills, especially how to score, should be clear. The tactical complexity of the drills and exercises must be pertinent to the age and cognitive development of the players. The size of the grid where the drills are performed should be appropriate to the players' age and related physical ability.

Being that the 1v1 situation is a competitive tactical scenario where everyone is watching the two players competing, it is important that the coach facilitates the partner-up process when selecting players that have the same capabilities. This will avoid, especially at young ages, that the player "feels no hope" competing against a stronger athlete, or vice versa resulting in a lack of effort versus a weak opponent.

The coach controls the "tempo and intensity" of the drill using the tone of his voice while coaching. He stops the drill only to address relevant tactical mistakes. He makes his observations and correction points quickly and steps out of the scene so the players are engaged again in the competition with more knowledge.

## Teaching elements of group tactics

While the 1v1 situation showcases the strength and exposes the weakness of both the defending and attacking player, a new tactical scenario, where more players are involved in the drill, introduces two new important tactical principles: **Cover** and **Support**. Covering and supporting simply means **helping** the defending player or the attacking player in his efforts. This brings in the most important concept in soccer as team sport: **Cooperation**. There are many definitions of this sublime concept, but the one that I like the most is: *"Together we stand, alone we fall."* **Cooperation is to bring into the team a useful asset that can compensate for (or complement) the teammates' weaknesses or strengths.**

It is important to reiterate the importance of small-sided games and group tactical drills (such as: 2v1, 2v2, 3v2, 3v3, 4v3, 4v4) as training means for the players to experience the value of cooperation in a team. This cooperation is also called **team organization** or **team shape**. It is based on: a clear understanding of the game, good positioning of the players and efficient distances between them,

positive and appropriate communication, and good decision making prioritizing the solutions. Given the fast pace of the action in small sided games and tactical drills, the tactical scenarios the players are coping with repeat over and over. This gives the players the chance to learn from the technical/tactical mistakes they have just made.

For instance, in a 2v1 situation, (which is the situation every player's actions should aim to achieve on both sides of the ball) the defending player should apply discretion in his decisions and **prioritize** his actions by positioning himself on the field in such a way that he can keep the ball carrier as well as the second attacker in sight. His correct positioning would enable the defending player to **delay** the opponent's attacking action and by doing so, favor a potential recovery by teammates.

In the same situation, the two attacking players have to quickly and wisely use their numeric advantage. While the ball carrier has a majority of the attention of the defender, his teammate has to move into the space available to provide a passing option (without going offside, when ruled) or just give more space to the other player to venture into 1v1 challenges.

In other tactical situations when more players are involved on both sides, such as 5v5, 6v5, the game's dynamics change. The more players involved in the game, the more details the players have to consider. There is more sectorial responsibility regarding covering the space, as well as more communication among players. In these situations, some players (usually the most skilled or physically stronger) take the role of leaders and direct the operations. The group's shape and the players' positioning reflect their ability to read the game and cooperate to find good solutions. Here again, the coach is the facilitator of the learning process by modifying space and rules of the drills and emphasizing which aspects (tactical/technical/motivational/physical) are more relevant than others. He must correct mistakes, but also be cautious not to stop the game too often, allowing the players to experience the game and to find their own solutions. The technical/tactical knowledge acquired by the players playing small-sided games and tactical drills will definitely help them to quickly adapt to the different and various tactical dynamics of the 11v11 format.

## Teaching the elements of team tactics

The 7v7, 8v8 and 9v9 formats introduce the last learning progression of the team tactics which will be concluded with the 11v11 format. At this stage of the development process, the players are instructed on **how to function as a team**. The players have defined roles and tasks to accomplish. The team tactics training format is characterized by the large number of players and their specific roles and tasks on the field and dependent upon the specific tactical system chosen. Specific tactical guidelines are given to the players regarding how to execute the game plan.

When choosing the 7v7, 8v8 and 9v9 game format, the length of a regular field is shortened while its width stays the same. The coach, by varying the rules of the game or introducing specific restrictions of touches, emphasizes specific team tactical aspects to be developed. These aspects include ball possession, pressing, winning the second ball, distribution, set patterns of movement, restarts etc.

The objective of this phase is to further develop a good **team tactical organization** also known as **team shape** in which each player is able to play his part in the tactical plan (both on attack and on defense). When the team is tactically organized there is a **good team balance**. This means that the team attacks in numbers and defends in numbers and does so with discipline and confidence. Also, the transitions between the two phases are quick and efficient. A well organized and balanced team is able to quickly adjust to the tactical variations adopted by the opponent.

Regardless of the tactical system the team implements, I believe a good team organization is based on just a few parameters that can be defined as the summary of the tactical basic principles we have largely described and emphasized:



**Finishing drills and crossing and finishing drills** have an obvious important part in the training routine. The goal of every attacking action is to create a chance to score by shooting or heading. Players create scoring chances usually by: **individual actions, combination play** and from **crosses from the flanks** (see Fig 7-8-9-10-11). These are the tactical situations the coach has to create in training in order to develop the finishing skills of his players. Finishing drills can stand alone as a training topic or, as usually happens, be included as a final part of a set pattern of movements and technical/tactical functional training. Here again, the repetitions are crucial.

**Fig 7. Finishing after a “one-two” combination**



**Organization:** Group A and group B are 15 yards outside the box as shown. Player A asks for a “one-two” to player in B, and then shoots on goal. Now, player B asks for a “one-two” from the next A player, and so on.

**Coaching points:** Accuracy of passing and finishing. Communication.



Fig 8. Finishing after an overlap run



**Organization:** Group A and group B are 15 yards outside the box as shown. Player A passes to player B and goes on an overlap run. Player B receives and passes back to player A on his run. Player A shoots on goal first intention. Now, player in B plays the ball to the next player in A, and so on.

**Coaching points:** Accuracy of passing and finishing. Timing of run and communication.

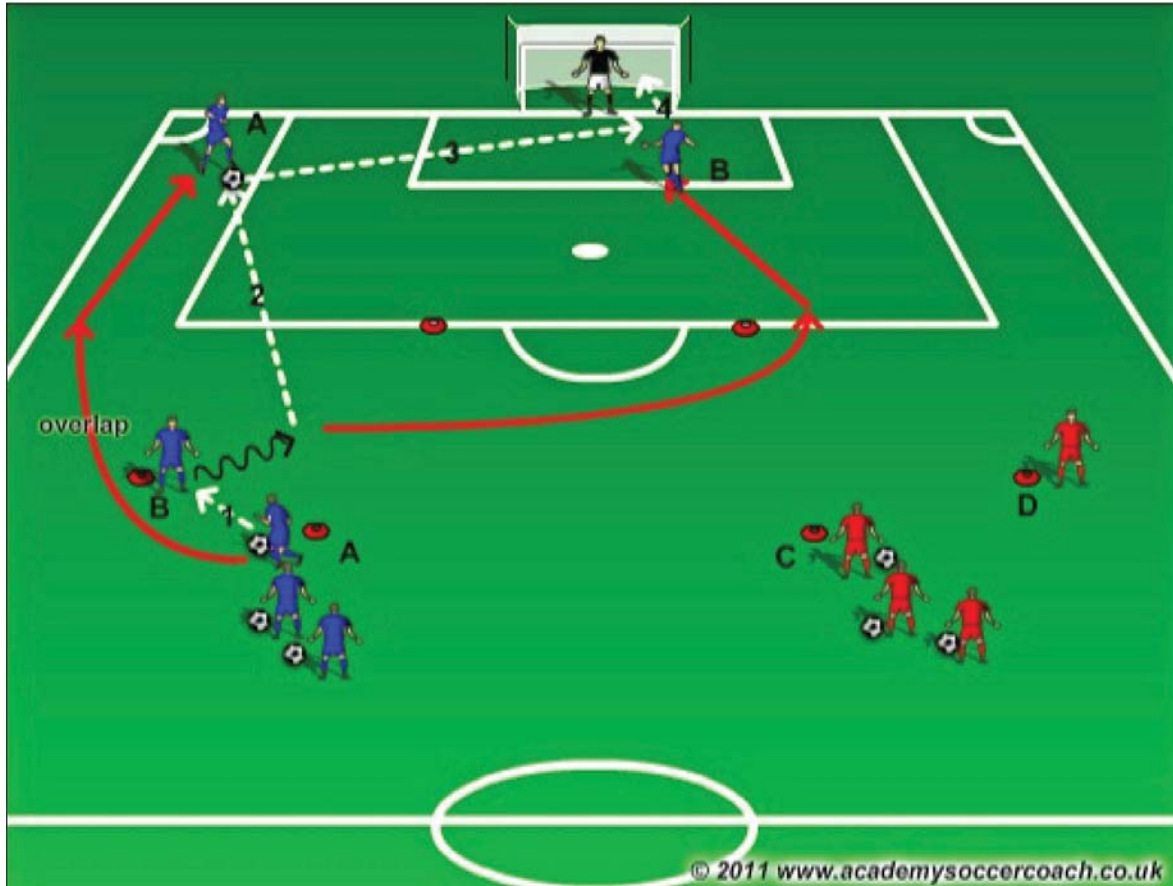
Fig 9. Finishing after penetration



**Organization:** Groups A, B and C are positioned on the soccer field as shown. Player A passes to player C, who lays off to the upcoming B player. Player B receives the ball, dribbles it and shoots on goal. Rotation of the players is at the coach's discretion.

**Coaching points:** Accuracy of passing and finishing. Timing of run and communication.

Fig 10. Crossing and finishing - 1



**Organization:** Groups A, B, C and D are positioned on the field as shown. Player A passes to player B and then performs an overlap run. Player B receives, briefly dribbles the ball towards the goal, and then passes to Player A on his run and attacks the space into the box as shown. Player A crosses the ball for Player B. While group A and B are resting, group C and D perform the same drill on the right flank.

**Coaching points:** Accuracy of passing, dribbling, crossing, heading/finishing. Timing of run and communication.