

# ATTACKING CONCEPTS & THEORIES

In order to coach tactical soccer, coaches should first learn all there is about the many concepts of both attacking and defending. In this, the first of a 2-part series on tactics, attacking soccer is going to be discussed as I feel that teaching defense is easier than teaching attacking.

In addition, too often in youth soccer, both at the club/travel and recreation level, coaches are more concerned about their team yielding goals than in their team scoring goals. While a 3-0 triumph is indeed a perfect outcome, given a choice, I'd rather be on the winning side of a 6-3 contest than a 2-0 result.

Scoring goals is, after all, the object of the game. Actually, scoring MORE goals than your opponent is the object of the game. And from the start coaches should concentrate on attacking soccer.

So let's get started on my attacking theories and concepts. We begin with the principles of attack.

## THE FIVE (5) PRINCIPLES OF ATTACK

Indeed, before teaching the "how to" of attacking it is a good idea to understand the "why" of attacking. And that begins with the five (5) principles:

**1. Penetration:** moving the ball forward toward goal immediately upon gaining possession.

**2. Support-Depth:** player or players not in possession of the ball, moving into spaces behind the ball to become a passing or finishing option.

**3. Support-Width:** player or players not in possession of the ball, moving into spaces on either side of the ball to become a passing or finishing option.

**4. Mobility:** player or players not in possession of the ball making creative runs off the ball to unbalance a defense.

**5. Finishing:** scoring a goal.

The five principles obviously have to be performed by the players. And to get them to understand the principles it is important for them to know their roles.

An attack can be performed by 1 to all 11 of the field players and thus knowing what each role of each of the attackers is, players will get a better idea on how to organize an attack.

## ROLES OF THE ATTACKERS

**1st Attacker:** the player in possession of ball, moving forward toward goal immediately upon gaining possession...first option should be a dribble.

**2nd Attacker:** player in immediate support of the player with ball either behind, in front of, or on either side but with enough space away from the first defender.

**3rd Attacker(s):** player or players in support in front of, behind or on either side of the player with the ball, all making creative runs to unbalance a defense.

Whenever a team gains possession of the ball the immediate thought of the player with the ball should be: Go to goal! Getting the ball going forward toward the opposing goal should always be the first option upon possession. This is "penetration" and is the most important of the attacking principles. The player in possession of the ball thus becomes the First Attacker.

The keys to getting the ball going forward are the next three (3) principles: support-depth, support-width and mobility. The player with the ball should optimally have support behind (depth) and on one or both sides (width). The person closest in support -- either behind or on the side -- becomes the Second Attacker. All others are Third Attackers.

Of the two (2) support players, the depth support could be viewed as the more important since this player can also provide covering defense should possession be lost.

Coaches of youth teams should preach depth support as much as possible. This support player can be directly behind the player in possession or on an angle, diagonally behind. The decision of where to be -- directly

behind or diagonally -- is up to the second attacker and obviously depends on the placement of defenders. It is important for youth coaches to teach the attacking principles as part of training and this holds true for all age groups. This does not mean, however, that you want the players to act like robots on the field. Soccer is not a choreographed sport.

Creativity is what makes soccer such a beautiful game.

The attacking principles are there as a means to an end -- scoring goals, which is, obviously, the object of the game.

And the attacking principles **do not** restrict creativity in any way.

In fact, creativity could be a “sub-principle” within any of the main principles.

Creativity is definitely a part of Attacking Principle 1 -- penetration.

With the idea being to get the ball going forward toward goal as immediately as possible, a creative dribble past the first defender opens the field for the remaining attackers while causing defenses to scramble about in an effort to get support and in proper balance.

Creativity is also featured with the second and third attackers by virtue of their decision making process.

To get into optimal and optional passing lanes, attacking players must make creative runs -- diagonally, bending, overlapping, flat, rotating, etc., all of which will be covered and described next.

The final attacking principle, finishing, can be a culmination of all of the above --

- a creative dribble to beat a defender +
- two or three creative runs by support players +
- a creative pass from the first attacker =
- a creative goal such as a header or volley off a cross, a cracking shot into the top corner of the net.

Call it “**Creative Attacking!**”

## **PLAYING THE POSSESSION GAME**

Often you hear youth coaches talk about ball possession:

“We need to possess the ball more, team,” they say. That is good. Coach possession. Possession is what makes the Brazilians so much fun to watch. They make the game look easy with their flair, with their creativity with the way they dribble and pass and move. Possession is their objective. But they do what all youth coaches must teach:

**THEY POSSESS WITH A PURPOSE** -- The purpose being to score a goal.

Stringing together five or six passes in the midfield without the ball going forward toward goal may seem good but it is certainly not purposeful. This is where the **Attacking Principles** come in. Penetrating the defense via a dribble or pass to a supporting player is possessing with a purpose.

Most importantly, the movement of the supporting players is what makes possessing the ball seem so simple. An outside back (defender) passing the ball forward to a midfielder and continuing his run down the flank will unsettle an otherwise organized defense as it puts more attackers into the scoring zone sometimes creating what is known as a numbers-up situation.

Constant movement wreaks havoc on defenses which is why youth coaches should teach “attacking” soccer. In youth soccer, too often you see the two or three defenders in an 8v8 game, hanging back by their own penalty box, while their teammates -- the midfielders and forwards -- attacking some 40 yards away from them. It is this “coaching not to lose” mentality that hurts soccer.

The best advice here is to tell your players this:

“No matter what position you play -- Everyone defends and everyone -- and I mean EVERYONE -- attacks.”

“Except me,” your goalkeeper may say. “I defend but don’t attack.”

“Wrong!” you will counter. “Because every time you make a save or take a goal kick or punt the ball you are beginning our attack.”

**>>>>>COACHING POINT: To teach “Everyone defends, everyone attacks” play games -- 4v4 to 6v6 to 8v8 to 11v11 without positions other than Goalkeepers. It’s what is called “Street Soccer.”**

## **SCORING GOALS**

Approximately 1/3 of all goals are scored off crosses:

- The best or most effective crosses come from the area stretching from the edge of the 6-yard box (*extend the line of the 6-yard box out toward each touchline*) to just outside the penalty area (*extend the line of the 18-yard box out toward each touchline*);

- The best or most effective crosses land in the middle of the penalty box, near the penalty mark/spot or between the penalty mark/spot and the top of the 6-yard box;

- The back or far post is a more potential scoring target than the near post.

A **key to scoring** is “creating” a scoring opportunity and scoring opportunities arise from:

- creative runs by attackers;
- attacking dribbling -- attackers taking on defenders in a 1v1 situation;
- maintaining width in the attack;
- having back support;
- drop passes to the top of the box to midfielders or defenders making runs.

**Finishing! Not Shooting!** When coaching shooting, refer to your session as “Finishing” practice instead of “Shooting” practice to get the players in the right frame of mind.

**Remember: The worst shot is the one not taken!**

**Coach players** to follow the shots and look for rebounds.

**Coach players** on close, angled shots to think: “FINISH HIGH TO THE NEAR POST or LOW TO THE BACK POST” because it is easier for a goalkeeper to move the entire body laterally toward the near post thus making it easier to block a low shot, so... Finish High to the Near Post; and it is more difficult for a goalkeeper to dive and/or get low toward the back post, so...Finish Low to the Back Post.

**>>>>>COACHING POINT: A major problem in youth soccer is players dribbling too much when in potential scoring opportunities. This is especially true of young girls who have a greater fear of failure -- that is, missing the shot or hitting a weak shot; whereas boys have less of that fear of failure. Players often try to dribble as close to the goal as possible. Coach players to shoot off their first touch.**

## **RUNS OFF THE BALL**

One of the most important things a forward can learn is to make runs off the ball, or, in other words, runs that are away from where the ball is or away from what may be a goal-scoring area, in order to free up space for another player to move into. These are called creative runs, made on angles, diagonally, laterally or straight forward or backward. Delayed runs are also a great weapon on an attack. A delayed run is when a second or third attacker either stands still while the ball is in play or slowly walks around and then...WHOOSH! -- a quick sprint to goal or toward the ball. Attackers can also make quick change of direction runs, going forward, stopping, angling to the left or right, etc. The more creative the runs are the more effective an attack can be and the more a defense can become quickly unorganized.

## **CROSSING THE BALL**

The first rule of thumb about crossing the ball is: “ELIMINATE THE GOALKEEPER” - That is, do not

allow the Goalkeeper to catch or block the cross

If the first defender is marking closely, the attacker should attempt to dribble to the end line and attempt to turn in toward goal. At that point, the attacker needs to cross the ball low and hard diagonally toward the top of the 6-yard box. A second attacker should be making a diagonal run toward the player in possession of the ball with third attackers covering the middle of the goal and the back post. If there is just one third attacker, this player should cover the area between the middle of the goal and the back post.

“**EARLY**” crosses are an excellent weapon. An “early” cross is taken from the area by either touchline, 18-30 yards from the goal line.

Early crosses should be attempted when the defending players are tracking back but have not yet entered the penalty area and are hooked behind the defenders. The early cross should be waist-high or lower. When crossing from the flanks, the ball should be struck in the following manners: 1) low to the near post; 2) high to the middle or back post; or 3) bent behind the defensive line, while also bending away from the goalkeeper.

When crossing from the end line, the ball should be struck: low and diagonally back toward the near post and/or penalty mark or chipped to the back post

## **FRAMING THE GOAL**

There are three (3) areas that need to be covered to effectively “**Frame The Goal**”:

- the Near Post (post closest to ball);
- the Middle part of the goal area;
- the Back or Far Post.

### **> The Near Post**

- The player covering the near post should aim his or her run to go past the post a yard or two and end up facing the player with the ball: this means that he or she will have his or her back to the field of play; should the ball go past the near post framer, he or she needs only to turn around and continue covering the post.
- The near post framer should be prepared to:
  - head flick the ball backwards toward the back or far post;
  - be prepared for a rebound or loose ball off a goalkeeper or defender;
  - be prepared to redirect a shot.

### **> The Middle Area**

This is the most important framer and often the one who gets to the ball:

- The Middle framer should never enter the 6-yard goalie box unless the ball is loose;
- The Middle framer must be prepared to head the ball.

### **> The Back (or Far) Post**

This framer should always make a diagonal or bending run toward the post, with his or her hips square to the goal posts. The Back or Far Post framer should think shot first and be prepared to finish with a header or volley. If there are only two (2) players (+ the player in possession) making the run to goal then the areas to be covered should be the middle and back/far post. The Middle framer can always move to cover the Near post.

**>>>> COACHING POINT:** *If there are less than three (3) players on the attack and inside the box and thus unable to cover all three goal-frame areas, the most important area to cover is the Back or Far post as it is easier for a player to move toward the ball (going from the back post to the near post, for example) as opposed to a player trying to back track from the near post to chase a ball that has been crossed behind him or her. So always -- ALWAYS! -- cover the back post.*

**NOTE:** *Part II will cover Defensive Concepts and Theories*