

Improving Your Team's Speed of Play

Speed of play can indeed be defined as a tactical concept. Getting your team to play with speed without sacrificing quality of play is a worthy coaching task and certainly one not difficult to accomplish.

Speed of play relies on five (5) principles:

- 1) Movement off the ball;
- 2) Short, accurate passing;
- 3) Creative runs forward;
- 4) Quick touches;
- 5) Clean first touch.

Movement off the ball: While the player in possession of the ball is the most important speed of play attacker, the remaining attackers must be in constant motion. The third and fourth attackers need to make runs that move away from the ball or in the path forward of the player in possession of the ball.

Short, accurate passing: Speed of play is not the same thing as Direct Play; that is, speed of play does not require long passes behind the defense. Rather, speed of play requires short passes, some of which may not always be in a forward direction toward the goal. And, of course, the passes must be accurate to maintain speed of play consistency.

Creative runs forward: As the ball makes its way to goal, it is important for some players to open up some space. This is done with creative runs -- diagonally or bending, straight with a quick, lateral cut, etc. Once the ball reaches the scoring area, players -- specifically the forwards when not in possession -- need to make "check to" and "check away" runs. Checking toward or away from the ball can unbalance a defense.

Quick touches: In order to maintain quality speed, attackers need to restrict their amount of touches. Dribbling is secondary to 1-, 2- and 3-touch passing and receiving. One-touch play, or wall passing, is the key weapon in speed of play.

Clean first touch: A clean first touch enables the attacking player to play quicker. A clean first touch can result in an effective 1-touch combination play. At the very least, a clean first touch allows for better decision making.

Emphasizing these five speed of play principles can be done during the technical and tactical phases of a practice session.

In the technical phase, start by putting players into pairs and conduct the "3-2-1" passing and receiving drill: Players start with simple 3-touch passing -- receive with the first touch, set the ball up with the second touch, pass with the third touch. Start this segment by having the players pass with either the right foot or left. Run for 60-90 seconds, then switch to the other foot. Next, have the players alternate the three touches -- receive with left foot, set with right foot, pass with left foot, or vice versa. Lastly, have the players perform all three touches with the same foot. Do each segment for 60-90 seconds. In the 2-touch P&R segment do the same as with the 3-touch. Use alternate touches and same-foot touches and again going for 60-90 seconds. End the drill with simple one-touch passing and receiving.

In the tactical phase, begin with a simple warm-up drill -- 3-team "Numbers-Up" Keepaway. One team defends against the other two teams for a certain amount of time -- 2-3 minutes is adequate. Within this game limit the "Numbers-Up" teams to touch restrictions. Start with a 3-touch restriction. After each team has served as defender, go with a 2-touch restriction on the attacking teams. Then finish with a 1-touch restriction game.

Keep the small-group teams together for the next segment and in a tight grid -- perhaps 40 yards long by 30 yards wide for a 5v5 match -- and play "Line Soccer". Start with a basic 2-team game, with the winning team staying on to play the idle team. Progress to a 5v5 "Line Soccer" game with touch restrictions. Start with 3-touch, move to 2-touch and then to 1-touch.

The last segment of coaching Speed of Play would be a regular two-team match. This, however, starts with touch restrictions -- 3-touch to 2-touch to 1-touch and then finishes with a regular match with no restrictions but with the emphasis on quick touches.

This kind of training session should be conducted as often as possible, especially in preseason.