



## The Goldilocks Games Dr. Tom Turner. May 2018



For more than 40 years, coaching education in the United States has followed the physical education model of training candidates to build progressions. We have evolved through technical progressions and tactical progressions and technical-functional progressions and technical-tactical functional progressions and shadow play progressions and progressions built around the Five W's. We have also nibbled around the use of the Teaching Games for Understanding (TGfU) model and the Street Soccer model and the Whole-Part-Whole model, but never as national coaching philosophies. We have even plodded through "Lead-Up" games for children in physical education. The most recent arrival on the national stage is the Play-Practice-Play approach; a close relative of Whole-Part-Whole.

The long-term consequence of progression-building has been a perpetuation of soccer practice as a collection of contrived or managed exercises, often featuring mind-numbing repetitive drills that, at best, have left little time for players to experience the enjoyment of playing the game; and, at worst, have destroyed individual personality and left both players and coaches devoid of any concept of how the game of soccer actually works.

This article advocates for a different perspective on coaching development – Understanding the Game.

Coaching soccer is a process built around three foundational layers...

First, the ability to help players understand the concepts of attacking and defending between two goals; second, the ability the help players operate in a designated area within a team structure as they attack and defend between two goals; and third, the ability to help players improve their speed of play by expanding and honing their technical range.

The key lesson of street soccer is that concept games are the most important developmental experience for young and entry-level players. Any small-sided game – to two or more goals - that provides for technical repetition without the need for positional structure is defined as a concept game. Generally, game-forms through 4v4 constitute the universe of concept games.

Until younger and less-experienced players develop foundational skills and ideas about the game - specifically the concepts of supporting around and away from the ball, and developing the associated skills required for purposeful ball movement, there is little benefit to training in more-complicated game forms designed to improve positional awareness. Think of any 6U game!

In contrast, for players displaying the ability to solve the challenges of conceptual games – and for older players who need direct transfer between practice and competition, the benefits of training in positional structures broaden the training options and provide coaches with the opportunity to improve speed of play by expanding tactical awareness.



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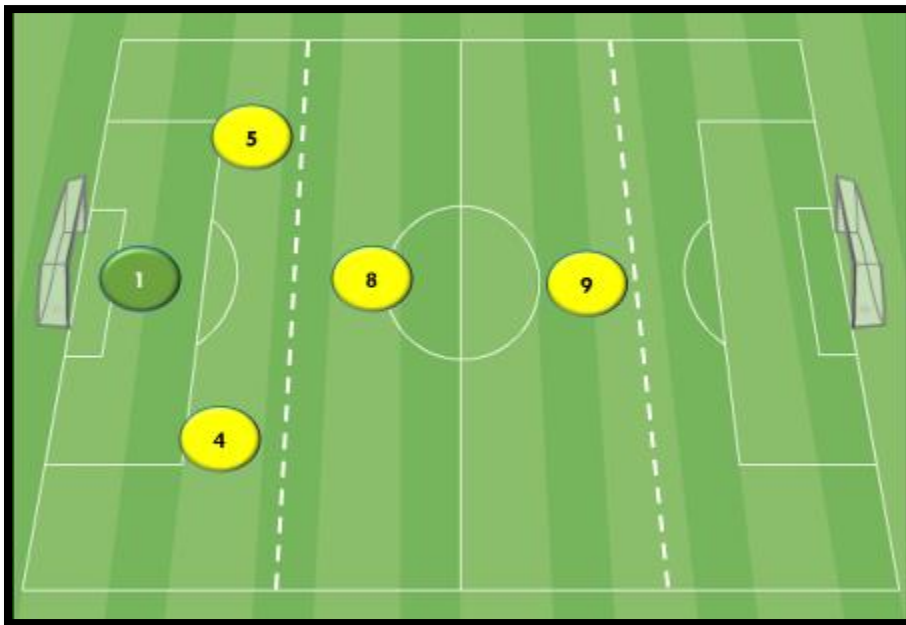
The game forms between 5v5 and 7v7 provide a “Just Right” balance between positional clarity and tactical reality. These “Goldilocks” games challenge the coach to attend to: 1) the structure of the team; 2) the inter-related movements of the players; and 3) the individual decision-making of the players. These three starting points serve as the basis for game observation, for player assessment, for practice planning, and for player development.

If the premise is accepted that all games above 6v6 are designed to develop team play because they can feature at least one complete line from an 11v11 system, the “Goldilocks” games provide the platform to apply all the building block concepts (discussed later in this article) within repetitive positional organizations.

In short, coaches – and players - can learn the game’s skills and tactics by playing structured games of 5v5, 6v6 and 7v7. Adding additional players will certainly add layers of complexity for both players and coaches, but the basic building blocks for explaining how the game of soccer works will have been established and will remain constant.

### The Goldilocks Games

**5v5 @ 50 x 35 yards with an offside line at ~12 yards from each goal.**



In the 5v5 game, the positions are goalkeeper (#1), two defenders (#4 and #5), one midfielder (#8) and one forward (#9). The “depth” is provided by the goalkeeper and the striker; the width by the two defenders; and the balance in the central area is provided by the midfielder.

In the 5v5 game, the players can dribble the ball, pass the ball to one of four players, or shoot the ball at the goal. This is the totality of individual possibilities.



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With the players operating in recognizable and predictable roles, the number of tactical permutations is constrained by the number of players; therefore, the opportunity to increase speed of play by improving familiarity with decisions based on the games' tactical cues is significant.

From this coach's perspective, there are two structural issues that underpin the organization of players in a full-sided team. First, there must be a four-player diamond in order to play out of the back. Second, there must be positional balance in the central areas to provide the midfield player(s) with the opportunity to join the attack as the game's tactical cues dictate. In the Goldilocks games, the first concept is present in all three game-forms, while the second is present only in 6v6.

Ultimately, the quicker a player recognizes what the game is telling them, the more likely it is they will produce a positive solution to a familiar tactical situation. At times, they will fail to react soon enough and lose possession... at other times, they will read the situation and their

technique will let them down. These eventualities should be regarded as normal to the game; how the players react to these tactical failures is more important than the root cause of the turnover. Soccer is a game of turnovers, a game of transitions, a game of changing and interacting phases. Normalizing mistakes is essential for learning and essential for developing trust between coach and players and between players and players.

What follows is a tactical breakdown by position during the build-up phase of play in a 5v5 game. The build-up is defined as any situation where a team has possession and is trying to advance the ball into the attacking half. As a coach development exercise, the process outlined below should be expanded to include the assessment of decisions during the defending and transition phases.

Of significance... The player-assessment points offered below are age and ability neutral and no suggestions on how to apply the ideas to training are provided. It is the coach's challenge to determine how to adapt their observations and their coaching to the level of player in their team.

### **Assessing the Understanding of the Goalkeeper During an Organized Build-up**

1. When in possession, do they recognize the tactical cues to pass to the defenders?
  - Opponents have dropped off and moved inside to protect the middle of the field and left open space on the sides.
2. When in possession, do they recognize the tactical cues to pass to the midfielder?
  - Opponents have matched up in the front and left open space through the middle.
3. When in possession, do they recognize the tactical cues to pass to the forward?



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- Opponents have matched up in the front and the midfielder has moved to create an open space to pass to the forward.
- 4. After passing to a teammate in the defensive third, do they recognize to follow their pass to provide a supporting option?
- 5. When in possession, do they recognize the tactical cues to dribble forward with the ball?
  - Opponents have matched up at each position, leaving an open space in the center of the field.
- 6. When not in possession, do they recognize the tactical cues to support their teammates?
  - The defender is in possession to the side of the field.
  - The defender is taking a throw-in to the side of the field.
  - A teammate is about to be closed down by an opponent.
  - A teammate has been closed down by an opponent.

### Assessing the Understanding of the Defenders During an Organized Build-up

1. When not in possession, do they recognize where and when to support the goalkeeper?
  - Move to a space at the side of the penalty area where an opponent cannot defend both the pass to the defender and the space through the middle of the field.
2. When in possession, do they recognize the tactical cue to dribble forward?
  - There is open space ahead of them.
3. When in possession, do they recognize the tactical cues to combine with the players ahead of them?
  - They see a teammate moving into an open space for a pass.
4. When not in possession, do they recognize the tactical cues to combine with the players ahead of them?
  - They are the next closest player to the teammate receiving the ball or coming into possession.
5. When not in possession, do they recognize the tactical cues that the ball can be switched from the other side of the field?
  - There is an open space ahead of them and the midfielder or forward is about to receive the ball.
6. When not in possession, do they recognize the tactical cue to balance the back line?
  - When one defender moves forward, the remaining defender should stay back and move to the center of the field.
7. When in possession, do they recognize the tactical cues to use the goalkeeper?
  - There is no open space ahead of them and they are not comfortable dribbling the ball 1-on-1.
  - They are under pressure and facing their own goal.



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**Assessing the Understanding of the Midfielder During an Organized Build-up**

1. When out of possession, do they recognize when and how to create a diamond with the goalkeeper and the two defenders?
2. When in possession, do they recognize the tactical cues to turn and dribble forward?
  - There is open space around them
3. When in possession, do they recognize the tactical cues to combine with the forward?
  - The forward has made eye contact and has open space around them to receive a pass.
  - The forward has made eye contact and is moving to an open space.
4. When out of possession, do they recognize the tactical cues to combine with the forward?
  - The ball is traveling to the forward and there is open space available to run into.
  - The forward is in possession and there is open space available to run into.
5. When out of possession, do they recognize the tactical cues to combine with the near-side defender?
  - The defender has passed the ball and is moving into open space.
  - There is open space ahead of the defender.
6. When in possession, do they recognize the tactical cues to circulate the ball to the far-side defender?
  - There is no open space to pass or dribble forward.
  - The weak-side defender is available in open space.
7. When out of possession, do they recognize the tactical cues to change roles with the forward?
  - The immediate opponent is in a good defensive position.
  - The forward is moving towards the ball.

**Assessing the Understanding of the Forward During an Organized Build-up**

1. When out of possession, do they recognize the tactical cue to stretch the field?
  - The goalkeeper is in possession.
2. When out of possession, do they recognize the tactical cues to change roles with the midfielder?
  - The midfielder is closely marked by an opponent and moving away from the back line to create space.
  - The goalkeeper can play the ball directly forward.
3. When in possession, do they recognize the tactical cues to combine with the defenders?
4. When out of possession, do they recognize the tactical cues to combine with the defenders?
  - The defenders have an open space available to play the ball forward.
  - The defenders make eye contact.
5. When in possession, do they recognize the tactical cues to combine with the midfielder?



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- The midfielder is moving into an open space.
  - The midfielder calls for the ball or makes eye contact.
6. When out of possession, do they recognize the tactical cues to combine with the midfielder?
- The midfielder makes eye contact.
  - There is an open space available to pass the ball.
  - There is an open space available to run into.
7. When out of possession, do they recognize the tactical cues to combine with the goalkeeper?
- The midfielder has created space for a forward pass.
  - The goalkeeper makes eye contact.

### “Building Block Concepts”

The genesis for this article is grounded in self-reflection of a process - the process of mentoring and assessing inexperienced coaches as they struggled to create training activities for effectively transferring soccer concepts and positional understanding to their players in an enjoyable and natural environment.

The prevailing logic has suggested that “progression” leads to improved game play. The argument made here is that the reverse is more likely to be true.

When observing live games, the eyes of inexperienced coaches often follow the ball. As a result, their “instructional” comments mostly relate to individual decision-making in possession. Their processing works outward from the player because they struggle to appreciate how the shape and rhythm and roles and tactics, and the influence of the opponent, are impacting the broader picture.

Coaches who can learn to read the game through a more systematic methodology will be better able to help their teams improve how they perform on the field (a set of observable constants) and “perhaps” will then learn how to create more meaningful practice activities as a result of better game understanding - a more creative challenge requiring broader structural knowledge.

The following Building Block Concepts provide a semi-hierarchical checklist for game assessment.

#### 1. **Formation**

Does the team have a recognizable structure?

The formation designates which player operates in which area of the field. Given that the field must be a rectangle, there is need to position players at the front and back of the team (depth) and also on the sides (width). There is also a need to fill the middle





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spaces in order to provide both vertical and horizontal passing options (positional balance).

### 2. Roles

Do the players understand their areas of operation?

Positional roles define how each player operates within the formation. For example, some defenders are never encouraged to join the attack, while others move forward at every opportunity. Some midfielders have clearly defined areas of operation while others share attacking and defending responsibilities. Some wide attacking players operate only in vertical channels, while others utilize any available space.

Formations and roles are flexible and open to interpretation, based on each coach's vision and philosophy. What is important is that the coach organizes a structure

(formation) and that players understand what the coach wants from their position (roles).

### 3. Role Duplication (Spacing)

Are the players trying to fill the same role?

When attacking players are too close together, particularly during the build-up, the tactical advantage is conceded to the defending team.

In the 5v5 game, there are two common situations where role duplication is problematic.

First, when the two "attacking" players show into the same space at the same time, the team will lose its depth and the opportunity to pass opponents out of the game.

Second, when the weak-side defender moves to the center of the field during the build-up in the defensive half, there is often a duplication of roles with the goalkeeper. By recognizing and encouraging the goalkeeper's role as an active participant in the build-up, the weak-side defender becomes the most likely outlet for circulating the ball away from the opponents.

Helping each player understand when a tactical situation suggests passing to the forward, or to the midfielder, or to the goalkeeper, or to the weak-side defender – four passing options - will, in time, improve both spacing and decision-making.

### 4. Rhythm and Ball Circulation

Does the ball flow between players and to different spaces?



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Rhythm relates to a team's ability to penetrate towards the goal or circulate the ball within the team until a new opening to shoot, pass or dribble forward is created. When there is no open space ahead of the ball, the game's tactical cue suggests passing or dribbling the ball to another area of this field. Ultimately, the message to, "Go forward when possible; otherwise look to keep the ball in the team by playing backwards or sideways" is a concept based on individual decisions. There will be turn-overs. There will be conceded goals.

### 5. The Goalkeeper as an Attacking Player

Is the goalkeeper involved?

The modern goalkeeper participates up to seven-fold more with their feet than with their hands and is often the most open "attacking" player on the field. Teams that utilize the goalkeeper as an integral part of their ball circulation will have significantly more success in possessing the ball building the game out of the defensive half.

### 6. Vision and First Touch

Do the players react or plan?

Players are frequently unaware of the tactical situation facing them as they come into possession because they look up only after the ball has been received. For weaker players, this relates to technical thinking preceding tactical decision-making. For more experienced players, the lack of pre-control vision is more a reflection of their training.

The quality of the 1<sup>st</sup> touch relates closely to tactical awareness.

Players who are in open space and half-turn their body to receive passes will play forward earlier or control the ball into a space where the next action requires fewer touches.

Players who are being closed down by an opponent may be able to use the 1<sup>st</sup> touch as a pass; or may control the ball into a space that can be defended; or may control the ball away from the defender to create forward attacking options.

Training for pre-control vision is the first, and perhaps the most important detail after the structural issues have been addressed.

### 7. Non-Verbal Soccer Communication

Is passing purposeful?

Soccer at every level breaks down because of poor non-verbal communication between





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two players. “Soccer communication” involves 1) the player in possession - or coming into possession - making eye contact with a teammate to signal that a pass is about to be made; and 2) movement by the receiver to signal where and how the pass should be delivered.

A player in open space can communicate “readiness” to receive a pass by simply half-turning their body to the passer.

Stressing the need to communicate in a specific sequence of actions serves to increase the number and volume of successful passes and, by extension, contributes to an improved rhythm of play.

### 8. **Mobility (Movement)**

Do the players move within and between the lines?

All modern soccer teams kick-off with more players designated as defenders than attackers. As a related aside, the original soccer formation was 1-1-9!

Removing any strategic considerations, coaches who routinely encourage their defenders and midfielders to join the attack – by reading the tactical cues - will certainly improve their players’ enjoyment; will certainly improve their players’ understanding of how to build the game in a constructive way; and will likely create more scoring chances.

### 9. **Verbal Communication**

Do the players give each other direction?

Calling for a pass is more likely than providing information when passing. Verbal communication does not come naturally to most young players and therefore must be trained. In the early stages, it is likely that inexperienced players will pass the ball and say nothing. When they do start to speak, the information is often incorrect to the tactical situation, or given after the ball has been received, or both. Inexperienced players do not read the game quickly, nor do they know precisely what they are expected to say. This “skill” is part of player development.

What is important is that players begin to form the habit of adding a verbal detail about the tactical situation after they pass the ball. In time, verbal communication will also be offered by players in proximity to the receiver. When the coach can stand on the sideline and, without prompting, hear the players helping each other, the barrier has been crossed.



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### 10. Use of Space / Timing of Runs

Do the players “arrive” on time?

Players in open passing lanes do not need to reposition; while those who are marked by a defender must move into the right space at the right moment in order to receive a pass.

For players in space, being aware of their tactical advantage will allow them to prepare their body and exploit the space they have found.

For marked players, typically those operating in positions with their back to the opponent’s goal, the solutions can include moving to the ball as late as possible; pulling the defender away from the passing lane before moving for the ball; positioning on the inside shoulder of the defender and attacking offside space; and using their body to shield the defender from passes played directly into their feet.

Above all else, learning how non-verbal communication informs the timing of runs is a watershed hurdle for developing players.

### 11. Speed of Play

Is the tempo generally fast or slow? Does the tempo change?

In many ways, speed of play is a mindset, based on technical efficiency, familiarity with tactical cues, and on playing habits.

Improving speed of play relates to a number of factors, not least of which is a coaching philosophy that it is OK for players to turn away from pressure, or superior numbers, and actually slow the game down.

When faced with no immediate forward options, inexperienced players tend to dribble into cul-de-sacs, kick the ball away, hope to get lucky by kicking the ball in the direction of the opponent’s goal, or take additional touches without changing the tactical situation. Playing faster requires possession of the ball and it is not always possible to possess the ball in a forward direction, so the tempo will change when there is no immediate option to go forward.

Speed of play is increased when the ball is dribbled into open space; when a dribbler attacks their immediate opponent; when individual players take fewer touches; when the team makes more passes; when the team makes more shorter passes; when the ball circulates quickly to open spaces; when the ball is played forward or towards space and supporting players move to outnumber the opponents; and when the ball is



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purposefully played behind defenders or into offside space. If combination play is defined as any interaction between two or more players that serves to advance or maintain possession of the ball, any assessment of speed of play necessarily relates to how and how well the players combine.

Purposeful speed of play directly relates to the coach's vision, messaging, and training.

### 12. The Influence of the Opponent

What is the opponent's strategy?

For inexperienced coaches, the influence of the opponent is often one of the last details observed in live games.

In the 5v5 game, the opponent can defend against the build-up by routinely closing down the goalkeeper; they can defend with even numbers in the front (1-1-1-2) and leave the goalkeeper free to start the build-up; they can defend with an extra player in midfield (1-1-2-1) and leave 3 vs 1 in the front; or they can defend with an extra player in the back (1-2-1-1) and leave 4 vs 2 in the front. They can also decide to defend further forward or a little further back.

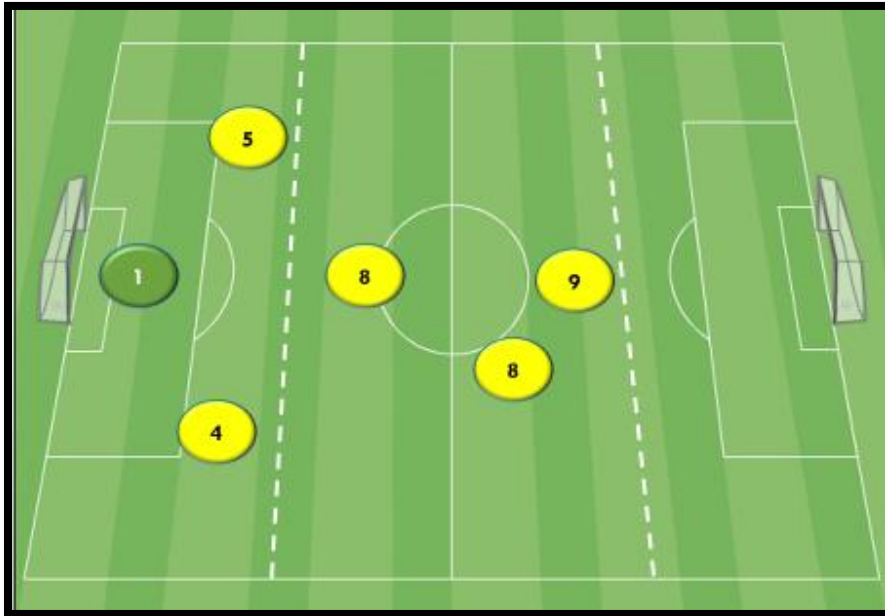
When attacking, the opponent may leave even numbers in the back or no players in the back; and in the midfield, they may leave a player to help circulate the ball and defend against the counter-attack or they may push forward in numbers and lack any team balance.

Game coaching aside, perhaps the most important benefit of attending to the opponent is in practice planning. When the coach organizes the defending team to position and move as they would in a live game, there are two immediate dividends. First, the attacking team will have realistic tactical cues to play against; and second, practices become tactically efficient. As one team attacks from the goalkeeper, for example, the other team defends in accordance with the coach's strategy and style. Forming habits takes time, and repetition, and consistent coaching messages.

### **From 5v5 to 7v7**

Once the inexperienced coach gains confidence in attending to the twelve "Building Block Concepts" in smaller-number environments, the lessons can be carried over to 6v6 or 7v7 or 8v8 or beyond. For the amateur coach, the game will not change.

6v6 @ 60 x 40 yards with an offside line at ~15 yards from each goal.



In the 6v6 game, the positions are goalkeeper (#1), two defenders (#4 and #5), two midfielders (#8 and #8) and one forward (#9). The “depth” is provided by the goalkeeper and the striker; the width by the two defenders; and the balance in the central area is provided by the two midfielders.

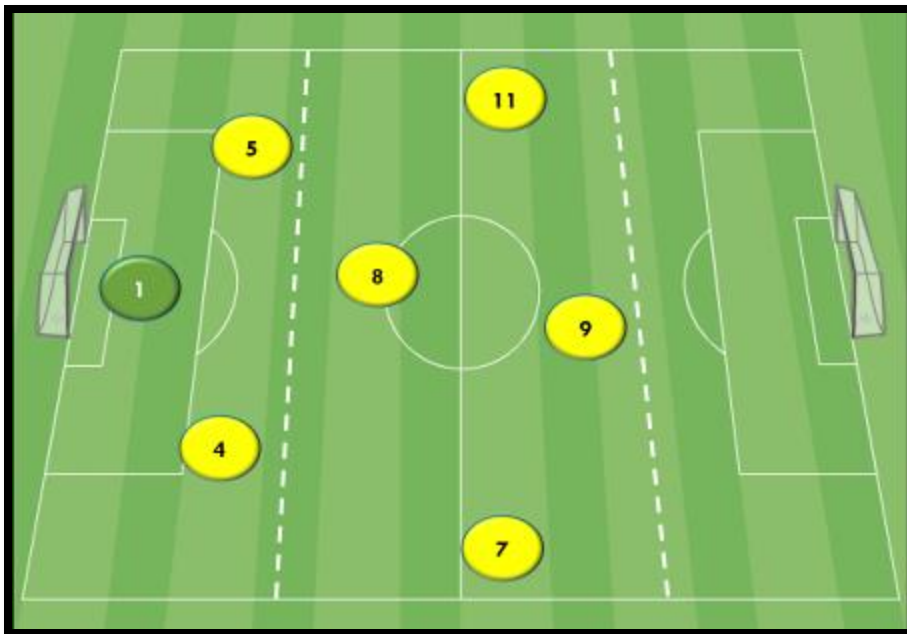
There is only one additional layer of tactical complexity to observe during the build-up when moving from 5v5 to 6v6. This layer deals with positional balance of the midfield line and their ability to combine through the central spaces.

### Assessing the Understanding of the Midfielders During an Organized Build-up

1. Do they recognize which player is initially responsible for creating the diamond with the goalkeeper and the two defenders?
  - One player is designated to play as the defensive-minded midfielder.
  - The second player is designated to play as the attacking-minded midfielder.
2. When the goalkeeper is in possession and dribbling forward, do the midfielders recognize the tactical cues to provide passing outlets?
  - The defensive midfielder moves to an open space.
  - The defensive midfielder moves to an open space to the side of any opponent closing down the goalkeeper.
  - The attacking midfielder moves to a space complementary to the movement of the defensive midfielder.
3. When the defensive midfielder is in possession, does the player recognize the tactical cues to combine with the attacking midfielder?
  - The defensive midfielder is aware of the attacking midfielder’s position and movement before coming into possession.
  - The defensive midfielder has made eye contact and the attacking midfielder has open space around them to receive a pass.

- The attacking midfielder has made eye contact with the defensive midfielder and is moving to an open space.
- 4. When the defensive midfielder is out of possession, does the player recognize the tactical cues to combine with the attacking midfielder?
  - The pass from the defender or goalkeeper has been played directly to the attacking midfielder.
  - The defensive midfielder has made eye contact and is moving to an open space.
- 5. When out of possession, does the defensive midfielder recognize the tactical cues to change roles with the attacking midfielder?
  - The defensive midfielder's immediate opponent is in a good defensive position.
  - The attacking midfielder is moving into a space to receive a pass from the goalkeeper or defender.

**7v7 @ 70 x 45 yards with an offside line 25 yards from each goal**



In the 7v7 game, the positions are goalkeeper (#1), two defenders (#4 and #5), one midfielder (#8) and three forwards (#7, #9 and #11). The “depth” is provided by the goalkeeper and the striker; the width by the two wingers; and the balance in the central area is provided by the midfielder.

The front line will replicate the forward line of a 4-3-3 system, although It is also possible to structure the 7v7 team as the midfield and forward lines of a 4-3-3- system, providing the midfield is organized with two holding midfielders (#6 and #6).



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**Assessing the Understanding of the Wingers During an Organized Build-up**

1. With the goalkeeper in possession, do they recognize how to create space for the players at the back of the team?
  - Move to the front and side of the team.
2. With the goalkeeper in possession, do they recognize when to support the goalkeeper in central areas?
  - The space underneath is not occupied, or about to be occupied, by the midfielder or the forward.
  - Make eye contact and move into the open passing lane.
3. With the near-side defender in possession, do they recognize when to support in the wide areas?
  - The near-side defender has moved towards the center of the field and is being closed down.
  - The midfielder is supporting in the central area.
4. With the near-side defender in possession, do they recognize when to support in the central areas?
  - The near-side defender is in a wider area and is being closed down.
  - The midfielder is not occupying, or moving into, a supporting position.
  - The defender can pass the ball beyond the midfielder.
  - On a switch of sides, the near-side defender is running with the ball into open space on the wing.
5. With the far side defender in possession, do they recognize how to balance the forward line?
  - Move inside to attack the space behind the forward.
  - Move inside to support the midfielder, or the forward, as the ball arrives in the middle channel.
  - Move inside to help defend if possession is lost.

**Final Thoughts**

Over the past 40 years, the soccer community has viewed “juggling” as the answer, “Coervers” as the answer, “fitness” as the answer, “mentality” as the answer, “technique” as the answer, “progressions” as the answer. We have taken a simple game and found every excuse to skirt around the obvious... Our coaches aren’t trained to “see” soccer in a way that helps them help their players understand the game and so they perpetuate a culture based on “soccer-related” activities with the expectation that the standard of play will improve. It hasn’t! As a broad generalization, our game lacks shape, and rhythm, and creativity, and these are not mutually exclusive concepts.

At no point in the history of coaching education have we started with a detailed conversation about how the game actually works and then inched backwards. Yes, there is a place for juggling. Yes, there is a place for Coervers. Yes, there is a place for fitness. Yes, there is a place



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for mentality. Yes, there is a place for technique. There is even a place for progressions, in certain forms, but coach development must start with the game.

This article is not intended as a “How To” coaching manual. There is no intention that 5v5 progresses into 6v6 and to 7v7; these are all discrete games. There is no intention that every young player understands every detail of their role. There is no expectation that coaches attempt to push individual development beyond player readiness. A 5v5 game with four 8U players and an adult goalkeeper will have completely different expectations than a 5v5 game with elite teenagers.

What a coach sees and what a coach teaches must relate to what their players are ready to learn. What is important is that the coach sees the future - the end product, the ideal, and is always capable of raising the bar.