

Warning: Curriculum can be a hindrance to learning.
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The purpose of this article is to promote the idea of individualized instruction, and caution against the use of a pre-determined curriculum in training soccer players. With many club programs now employing full-time and professional coaches, there is often pressure to produce an age-appropriate curriculum. Over the years, many of us have probably attempted the exercise of planning “What soccer players should know” at various ages, only to be thwarted by images of players who exceed the “standards,” such as seventeen year-old National Team members Landon Donovan, DeMarcus Beasley, Nandi Pryce and Alesha Cramer. Significantly, all these excellent young players have some technical and tactical flaws when compared to the elite National Team members. There are also those who have succeeded without ever having attained some of the “required” competencies. Shaquile O’Neil’s free throw percentage is always a wonderful example of the futility of a competency-based approach to learning. What Shaq can do as a player far out-ways what he cannot, and so he is successful. There is no question he would be a “better” player if he could consistently shoot three-pointers and free throws, but he can’t.

Have you ever been in a situation where the instruction and learning activities catered directly to improving the knowledge and skills you demonstrated at that moment in time? Consider the following continuum.

In an individualized learning environment, what you learned would be determined by what would help you improve most rapidly; the pace of learning would be dictated by how quickly or slowly you grasped concepts; the depth and breadth of your learning would be dictated by how quickly or slowly you appreciated related information; your questions would take the learning process in a different direction if you felt that information was important to know; and your motivation for learning and your contribution to the process would be at least as important as that of your mentor. If other people were added to your group, it is likely that the instruction would begin to center more on the group than the individuals, and the pace of learning would become more programmed. It is also likely that, as the number of learners increased, the teacher would take more responsibility for planning what you should know and when it was taught. Typically, as “education” moves in the direction of larger numbers, curriculum programs determine what is taught, how much time is allotted to instruction, and, very often, how information is presented. The content is predetermined and packaged into neat units, which may have very little connection to the needs of individual learners, and, as a consequence, the motivation to fully engage may drop significantly. In many school programs, for example, the curriculum for the entire year is written before the first student walks through the door in the fall and teachers are expected to be on-track to “cover” their content by the end of the school year. Teaching is equated with learning, and “learning” is often measured by how much information students can remember for the test.

Coaching soccer is about individuals, not groups. Even at the World Cup, the success of the each team is determined by the collective strength of the individuals. At any level, the role of the coach is to understand the potential in their players and help them improve as far as possible in the time available. With entry-level players, this may be as simple as helping them understand which direction they should dribble the ball, and providing as many opportunities to experience the ball as possible in the typical ten-week season. At the other extreme, with professional players, the challenge is much more complicated. They must be helped to continually refine and expand their range of techniques; they must be coached to understand their role within the team; they must be conditioned to meet the physical demands of a nine-month season; and they must be psychologically prepared to train and compete at an elite level, often while pursuing personal financial opportunities and meeting media obligations.

The most common flaw in developing a soccer curriculum is not the process of thinking about what to teach, but in excluding the components of the game from the top level. Every soccer “expert,” consciously or otherwise, works from a menu of curriculum possibilities, and each individual player is compared against the elite standard. On an ability continuum, all players will fall somewhere between walking with the ball as a toddler and achieving “World Class” status. For every skill, each player will have strengths and limitations that are exposed under varying degrees of pressure. For every tactical application, each player will have strengths and limitations in what they perceive and can execute, based on their processing speed and overall technical range. Each player also has psychological characteristics and physical dimensions that may hinder or improve their ability to compete at a higher level. When soccer players are assessed, it must be against a universal standard. And when a “curriculum” is considered, it must be based on individual performance and potential, with the goal of moving players as far as possible towards the top of the player-continuum. Even at the local level, the goal of every soccer program should be to foster life-long participation and produce more adults who are competent in playing the game.

There has been national momentum created over the past few years for leagues to play appropriate small-sided games for children under the age of twelve. “Appropriate” calls for the youngest children to play games in which they have enough time and space to pass, dribble, or shoot the ball as they see fit. Technical competence is developed between the ages of six and twelve and, as players mature, the games should naturally become more complicated numerically, with ability rather than chronological age considered when determining what the appropriate game might be. The national recommendations are; 3v3 or less for U-6’s; 4v4 or less for U-8’s; 8v8 or less for U-10’s and 9v9 or less for U-11’s. Recreation and club programs can be regarded as player-centered if their “curriculum” addresses issues that are relevant to individual needs, and players are competing in spaces and with numbers that complement their ability level and emotional maturity. For example, it would be inappropriate to teach heading to five-year-olds. It would be inappropriate to teach low-pressure defending to seven-year-olds. It would be inappropriate to train ten-year-olds by running laps or sprints. And it would be inappropriate to make winning the motivation for competing at age twelve.

Consider the two curricula outlines below: two versus two to lines, and seven versus seven to goals. For each game, the technical and tactical possibilities are listed, in addition to some of the more obvious physical and psychological demands. In theory, a curricular approach would require each element to be broken down into sub-components, which would then become planned learning experiences with goals and objectives established and tests devised to measure learning.

Soccer content for 2 versus 2, line soccer.

Technical	Tactical	Physical	Psychological
<u>Attacking</u> Dribbling: into space; at an opponent; away from an opponent. Passing on the ground. Shooting at goal. Controlling the ball on the ground.	<u>Attacking</u> Recognizing attacking spaces. Recognizing supporting angles. Moving with the ball. Moving without the ball. Combination play in two's. Rhythm of play. Transition. Vision.	Aerobic base required, High anaerobic demands. Short recovery time. Short duration activity (2-3 mins). Must play at a fast pace.	Focus: win the game. Run for the duration. Play at speed. Battle local muscle fatigue. Recover the ball when lost. Find alternative solutions to game-problems.
<u>Defending</u> Individual defending. Tackling.	<u>Defending</u> Individual defending. Covering.		

Soccer content for 7 versus 7, with goalkeepers.

Technical	Tactical	Physical	Psychological
<u>Attacking</u> Dribbling: into space; at an opponent; away from an opponent. Passing: on the ground; in the air; from the flank Shooting. Controlling the ball: on the ground; out of the air. Heading: at goal; away from goal; for possession.	<u>Attacking</u> Small-group understanding: 1v1 through 6v6. Positional understanding. Creating space: as an individual; as a team. Support at the right moment. Timing of runs. Shape of runs. Combination play in two's and three's. Decision-making: to support, to create space; to combine, to penetrate with and without the ball; to possess. Ball circulation. Rhythm of play. Counter-attack. Transition. Vision.	Aerobic base required. Moderate to high anaerobic demands. Short to moderate recovery time. Longer duration activity (15-30 mins). Pacing is important.	Focus: win the game. Run for the duration. Play at speed. Recover the ball when lost. Find alternative solutions to game-problems. Time and space are limited by number of opponents. Must understand positional responsibilities within the team organization. Must make quick decisions.
<u>Defending</u> Individual defending. Recovering. Tackling.	<u>Defending</u> Individual defending. Covering. Balance. Compactness. Recovering. Relating to the goalkeeper.		

We can all appreciate that attempting to teach every element listed above is an unrealistic expectation, but that analyzing the content of small-sided games is an excellent way to develop knowledge and improve player-assessment skills. Once individual starting points

are determined for each of the four dimensions, the slow road forward with each player can begin on multiple fronts.

As players become more skillful and develop tactical insight, the games they play should feature larger numbers that naturally result in more complex tactical problems. The responsibility of the coach is to challenge the players to adapt to these new tactical problems, while reinforcing the lessons and habits of less sophisticated small-sided games. However, a note of perspective is warranted.

The form of the practice game selected and the performance expectations will be relative to age, ability, or purpose. For example, five year-olds playing 2v2 do not have the same capabilities as ten year-olds playing the same game. The goal of coaching five year-olds is to create an enjoyable learning experience without directly teaching anything, as virtually all the curriculum possibilities of 2v2, bar scoring goals, are irrelevant for this population. These children play 2v2 because they cannot compete successfully with numbers beyond two.

Conversely, the goal of coaching ten year-olds is to improve their ability to score goals and defend, which includes ongoing technical development. Many ten year-olds are capable of quite sophisticated play in numbers as high as 11v11, but 2v2 is a game that provides many possibilities for combination play and other creative solutions to tactical problems. Their skills and decisions must be assessed in terms of their speed of play, and the coaching should focus on improving decision-making and technical execution under pressure. Ten year-olds play 2v2 because it provides technical and tactical repetition and they are capable of understanding and applying every element contained in the 2v2 curriculum.

Thinking of the 11v11 curriculum as an all-inclusive menu rather than a recipe provides for a more player-centered approach to coaching, and one that provides room for Donovan, Beasley, Cramer, Pryce... and Shaquile O'Neil... to all succeed in their own way and at their own pace. Comparing each player to the top level allows for realistic individual assessments to be made. To do otherwise suggests that the ubiquitous "above average" player has nothing to aspire to.