

Modeling the National Style of Play at the State Level
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In virtually all successful soccer countries, the national teams' style of play is a reflection of the quality of play in the top professional league and sets the standard for all other levels to emulate. Whether the evolution of the national teams' style is a reflection, or the result, of the top leagues' play is always an interesting debate, particularly in this era of global transfer markets and freedom of movement. In either case, the outcome is a collective national uniformity in the way members of an educated soccer society, both players and spectators, view "good" soccer.

The issue of style can be separated into two distinct approaches. On one side are those who play the ball forward as early and as often as possible and who rely on combative players to harry opponents and cause turnovers: The DIRECT STYLE. Norway is the most visible and rigid proponent of this style today, and Ireland successfully played direct in the 1980's and early 1990's. It is a style closely associated with the northern European countries, and British coaches in particular. No country has ever won a men's World Cup using this style, and on the entire American continent only Canada, as a result of its' British coaching influence, has periodically played this way. Norway is the only women's team to win a World Cup (1991) or an Olympics (2000) playing this style.

The alternative approach is to build the ball forward through the midfield third whenever possible: The INDIRECT STYLE. The United States men's and women's national teams play an indirect style, as do all U.S. youth national teams. Countries as diverse as Brazil, Italy, Portugal, France, Argentina, Holland, Iran, Japan and Korea all play indirect. The indirect style certainly does not preclude players from passing the ball directly past the midfield, or directly into space behind the opponents' defense, but there is a distinctly slower, more purposeful rhythm to the passing movements when an obvious route forward is not available. Players are challenged to make intelligent decisions, utilize space effectively, and solve tactical problems with skill and insight, and those players who can keep possession in a purposeful way, often under pressure, are prized for their skill. Men's World Cup winners Uruguay (1934 and 1950), Italy (1938 and 1982), Brazil (1958, 1962, 1970 and 1994), Germany (1954, 1974, 1990), Argentina (1978, 1986), England (1966), and France (1998) all triumphed playing an indirect style.

Application and characteristics of the National Style.

Since the United States national teams have, for years, adopted indirect soccer as the national style of play, there is an opportunity, a cultural obligation perhaps, for those of us involved in youth soccer to emulate the national team heroes and train players in the national style. There are two significant obstacles that must be overcome if Ohio is ever to succeed in evolving an educated soccer population and a more cultured average player: the knowledge base of coaches and the support of parents.

Coaching

Indirect play is risky. There is no question that young players will lose goals trying to pass or dribble the ball out of the back and play through the midfield, and that fewer chances will be created in attempting to intelligently possess the ball in the attacking half. Soccer is a game of

mistakes, and young players must be allowed to learn slowly by taking technical and tactical risks and by expanding their ability to recognize and solve basic tactical problems. Possession of the ball is the most important aspect of indirect play and young players must be challenged to find ways to break pressure by dribbling and passing the ball rather than simply whacking it as far downfield as possible. Before age ten, the emphasis of player development programs must be to improve individual skills, with particular emphasis on improving dribbling skills. Only during the teen years should coaching begin to seriously emphasize the development of team play and winning as a key element of participation. Sadly, however, as long as our youth coaches at all levels continue to place winning above player development and resort to direct play under even minimal pressure, learning through risk-taking and experience will never allow us to develop a future generation of players who are comfortable with the ball and able to play constructive soccer.

Coaches who work to develop intelligent soccer players in the indirect style understand that:

- The players must be given the initiative to make decisions in games, not the coaches or the parents.
- Technical skills must always be developed in a tactical context.
- There are risks inherent in trying to keep possession that will result in the loss of goals.
- Mistakes are a positive aspect of learning to play soccer and the best learning environment is one that balances success and challenge.
- Winning is more important to vicarious-living adults than to their young children. Young players quit soccer because they don't get to play, they don't have fun, they don't get any better, and they feel they are under too much pressure to perform. While young players do enjoy competition and winning, winning, per se, is not very important to young players.

Coaches working to develop intelligent soccer players in the indirect style appreciate that the decision-making hierarchy for under-10's:

- Encourages players to try to score goals, if possible.
- Encourages players to dribble the ball forward into space, if available.
- Encourages players to fake and feint and dribble the ball into open space if they are under pressure and cannot go forward.
- Encourages players to move to open spaces to help teammates connect passes.
- Encourages players to turn and pass the ball backwards to the goalkeeper, or to a deeper-lying player when they cannot dribble or pass the ball forward or sideways out of pressure.
- Encourages players to recover the ball as soon as possible when it is lost.
- Encourages players to "hang out" when their enthusiasm looks to be waning; with small-sided teams, they will soon find themselves involved again.

Coaches working to develop teenage players in the indirect style appreciate that:

- Players should be competent in dribbling the ball away from pressure and into space, controlling the ball on the ground, and kicking and dribbling the ball with a number of

different surfaces. Many competent teenagers will also be proficient in dribbling past opponents.

- Players should also be competent at heading the ball, slide tackling, and controlling the ball with a number of different surfaces out of the air.
- Players should turn their bodies sideways-on whenever possible when receiving passes, and should always look backwards and forwards before receiving the ball in order to “read” the game and make faster decisions to pass, dribble or shoot.
- Players should be encouraged to either penetrate forward with the ball, or possess the ball, based on the movement and position of defenders and the likelihood of gaining territory or creating scoring chances.
- Players should view the goalkeeper as a crucial link in the build-up out of the back.
- Players should understand when and how to change the rhythm of the game by passing the ball to penetrate or possess.
- Players should understand when and how to change the rhythm of the game by running the ball to penetrate or possess.
- Players should understand how and when move into new supporting positions in order to help the team penetrate forward or circulate the ball and keep possession.
- Players should understand how to create space away from well-positioned defenders when playing with their back to goal.
- Defenders should be comfortable playing even-numbers in the back in order to add numbers to the attack.
- Players should understand how to function in organized positions, and how to play in relation to small groups of players linked by long or short passes.
- Players should understand when and how to interchange positions in order to unbalance defenses.
- Players should understand when and how to arrive in attacking spaces.
- Players should understand when and how to combine with other players in a variety of ways.
- Players should understand how to defend individually.
- Players should understand how to defend in a zone
- Players should understand how to attack and defend offside space.

Coaching comments and their messages

Much of what players hear from the sidelines reinforces the “fear-soccer” of the direct style and moves them farther away from the playing habits that will help them grow as intelligent soccer players. There are some simple and obvious reasons why our average player in OYSAN has never developed the competence to enjoy the game and play into adulthood. Evolving a culture will be a slow group effort, involving educated coaches and parents. What follows, is a sample of typical comments heard at soccer games, and the underlying messages that are being subtly relayed to the players about their significant adults’ respect for, and understanding of the game.

Comments: *Get it out of here! / Great kick! / Get rid of it! / Boot it long! / Don’t pass it backwards, you might lose it! / Don’t ever pass the ball across the field!*

Message: Don’t take any chances in trying to keep possession. You are going to be under pressure, so get the ball as far downfield as early as possible so that the ball is away from our

goal. Don't take the time to look for a teammate and don't worry where the ball ends up. Just make sure you don't lose possession and risk conceding a goal.

Style conflict: If we never ask young players to take risks and try to play constructive soccer at an age when results don't matter, when will they ever develop the skills, insights and confidence to play in control, at speed, and under pressure?

Comments: *Don't play with it! / Too many touches! / Don't hold onto the ball!*

Message: You don't have the skill to dribble the ball to create space or buy time for a pass, and we might lose a goal if you are dispossessed. Better to play safe and clear the ball forward out of our end.

Style conflict: Dribbling is the most important skill a young player can learn because they will never have another chance to become a creative player.

Comment: *Never kick the ball like that! Always use the inside of your foot.*

Message: There is only one correct way to kick the ball and that is not the right way. I have all the answers and you must follow my direction because I am the coach and I am in charge. If you don't do as I say, you will sit on the bench.

Style conflict: Creative players solve problems in novel ways. They do the unexpected and use whatever insights they possess to arrive at solutions. A good pass, for example, is one that arrives at its target and can be used to the teams' advantage, regardless of how it was delivered. When we tell players they "cannot" use technique in a unique way, we are chipping away at their ability to think for themselves and perpetuating a culture where players have limited skills and no creativity.

Comment: *Always play the way you're facing.*

Message: I heard this maxim somewhere and I haven't thought through what it means, but you were just caught in possession when trying to turn upfield, and this seems like the time to make a coaching point.

Style conflict: This is a coaching contradiction. Players are often asked to receive the ball with their back to goal and turn against pressure. The most difficult opponents are unpredictable in their ability to receive passes and attack space behind and beside defenders. It is a difficult, yet necessary skill for forwards and midfield players. If we always ask players to pass the way they are facing, we make play too predictable and devalue the skills and insight necessary to recognize the opportunity to turn a defender or receive the ball into an open space. The most common reason why players lose possession is that they have no vision of the field behind them before trying to turn.

Comment: *Always look to pass the ball "Short-Short-Long."*

Message: I saw a coach demonstrate this drill at a coaching clinic once, but I haven't thought through what it actually means, other than you should play two short passes and then make a long pass.

Style conflict: Another coaching contradiction, usually featured in warm-up drills. In the real world of soccer, passes should be played short or long based on the position of defenders and teammates and the skill level of the player in possession. In the real world of soccer, players are

never required to play the ball long after a number of short passes, or vice versa. A more reasonable coaching comment would be to play short passes until there is a tactical advantage in playing a longer pass to a teammate in space.

Comments: *That's a card, Ref!* / *Offside!* / *Hey Ref, call it both ways!* / *Unintentional Ref; that's not a foul!* / *That's a handball!* / *Didn't you see that, Ref?* / *Ref, you suck!* / *What game are you watching, Ref?*

Message: "I know everything about the interpretation of the rules, and the referee, players and parents need to know it." By attacking the credibility of the official, we send the message to the players and the parents that referee abuse is acceptable. When we serve as a negative example, or condone a vocal parent or player's negative outbursts by not rebuking them, we are demonstrating disrespect for the game. We also send a strong message to the players that appealing decisions and questioning the authority of the official is an acceptable part of a soccer education.

Style conflict: Refereeing is a matter of opinion and many new referees are just learning to understand the nuances of officiating what can be a very fluid game. There are good and bad referees, good and bad players, and good and bad coaches. Everyone makes mistakes and everyone should be allowed to learn their craft without undue abuse. Coaching players to react to any call by taking a quick restart or by organizing the defense is a much more proactive and productive approach to dealing with refereeing decisions. Without a playing background, a refereeing license, and years of experience in soccer, questioning calls is usually the last action an inexperienced coach should undertake. Coaches who truly work from a developmental bias, view positive and negative refereeing decisions as an integral part of the game, and which present valuable learning opportunities for their players. Life is not always fair!

In summary, the safety-first, fear-driven, direct, approach to youth soccer develops players who are uncomfortable and, probably, incapable of playing constructive soccer. Only through more focused, less pressured coaching, and more appropriate small-sided games, can we provide an environment where our young players have the opportunity to play soccer as adults in our national style.