

Keep It Moving

By Steve Sampson with Dan Herbst

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In part one of his series on Teaching Player Mobility, former U.S. National Team Head Coach Steve Sampson focuses on introducing this vital concept at a young age, coupled with suggested warm-up activities for players/teams of all ages.

Soccer is about movement. A huge part of youngsters' development is teaching them how to move, when to move and proper timing. Players who play at the same speed throughout a game are easily marked. The most dangerous attackers are creative and unpredictable. An attacker off the ball can make a run to create space for a teammate. Players make runs to help the attacking team keep the ball or to show a target for a pass that penetrates the opposition.

While there is no doubt that today's players are more skillful than those of past American generations, one of the challenges still facing U.S. soccer is the lack of youth coaches who understand how to organize training so that players are consistency in motion. As a result, even many professional players are not nearly as clever and proficient at moving without a ball, as are foreign stars. Young players must be trained so that mobility becomes second nature. Coaches who rely on drills where players wait in lines are not only wasting time, they are reinforcing the bad habit of standing still.

It is essential that good habits be instilled early on. Warm-up exercises should be realistic. In a game, the movements of the attackers off the ball are what initiate the pass (and not the other way around!). So off-the-ball runs should be present at the start of your training session.

Teach younger players to run with and without the ball. It's vital to have players control the ball while they are moving. A drill allowing a youngster to receive a ball while stationary is not match-like. Let's say you are working on receiving and passing. The wrong way is dividing up your team into two facing lines. The player in the front of one line passes to the other side before running to the back of that line. The receiver then does the same. Instead, I recommend you use two or three balls within a large grid. The entire squad passes and moves. This drill requires off-the ball movement for support and involves the match-like demand of moving to the ball when it is played in one's direction. Our emphasis in this exercise is mobility with the ball. Coaches should be constantly reinforcing the importance of moving toward the ball to bring it under control. After playing the ball, the player positions himself to receive a return pass.

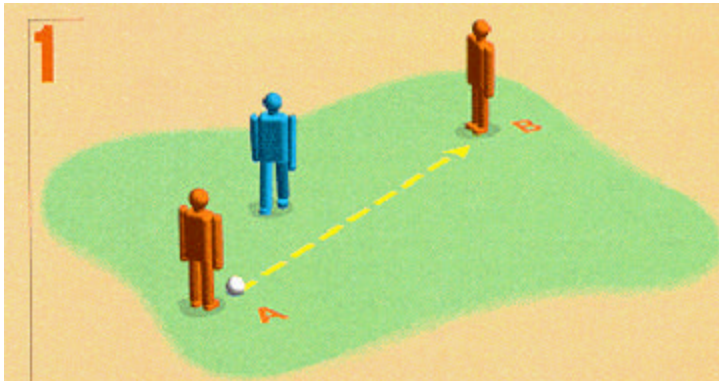
Your role is to observe and correct. One point to underscore is that a great opportunity exists for a player to free himself from his defender as soon as that attacker has played the ball. At that moment, the defender's eyes will naturally gravitate toward where the ball has been played. In that brief instant, a quick run by the attacker can pay dividends. Provide verbal reminders for participants to open themselves up for a play, to obtain good peripheral vision and to be aware of the location of all of the balls as often as possible.

This will also instill a trait of top-class players: exceptional vision. By being aware of his surroundings, the player will learn to assess his options before receiving the ball. Coupled with good technique, this allows the game's best players to play meaningful passes before the defense can adjust. Every pass must be reinforced with proper movement. It can be a 10-yard sprint into space or dropping a few yards and opening up one's body in support of the receiver. It's important that the passer makes a decision and moves as soon as he plays the ball. At this age it is vital that players are granted the freedom by coaches to express themselves with the ball. No player should ever fear punishment or criticism from any adult. This is the critical developmental stage for players to learn how to control the ball and to beat opponents' one-on-one. Players who have the ability to penetrate defenses by dribbling are at a premium. When coaching 8-10-year olds, stress the speed of off-the ball movement. It's at this stage that their habits are formed. The first three steps both when coming to the ball and after having played the ball are critical. This helps players learn how to change speeds to keep possession or get behind the defense. At this age, better players are capable of playing three-on-one or three-on-two in a restricted space. A 12 x 12-yard grid is about right (use a smaller size for more advanced players). The objective is to maintain possession. When a turnover occurs, the defender switches with the attacker who gave the ball away.

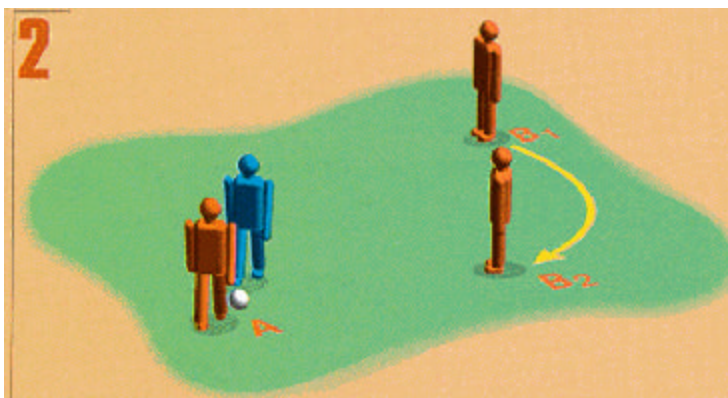
A three-on-one demands that attackers constantly move to maintain a triangular shape to support the ball. The player in possession should always have the option of passing to either side. Also teach the concept of drawing the defender to the player with the ball. As that defender commits, players should pass to expose the defender on the wrong side of the ball. Passing too late allows the defender to challenge for possession, while passing early could put the receiver under pressure quickly.

As players become comfortable with this drill, move to a four-on-one, adding an attacker who provides diagonal support for a penetrating pass. Later, add a second defender. Your coaching points are for attackers to constantly keep their bodies "open" to the field so they can see their options before the ball is played to them. Generally, players should pass the ball to the receiver's foot furthest from the defender to provide more time to make good decisions. Please don't beat an exercise into the ground. Also, rotate players quickly so they are fresh and can put realistic pressure on the attackers. U.S. Soccer has labeled the "golden years of learning" as ages 10-14. At this time, the concept of the timing of runs is introduced. While I will get into that topic later in this series, I must add that coordination of movements throughout the squad is a key element and allows for the best teams to play free-flowing soccer.

As a coach, you need to recognize the roles of players off-the ball and understand the nature of soccer means an individual's responsibility often changes instantly. The first visual key involves a lack of defensive pressure on the attacker in possession. When there is a defender right to the player with the ball, the offensive team must provide immediate support. The angle and depth should be based primarily on the pressure on the ball (see Diagram 1). Off-the ball attackers must provide their teammate with as many options as possible.



Ideally, there should be support to either side of and behind the ball. There should be player(s) in advanced position(s) in a space or passing lane between defenders providing for a penetrating pass to split the defense.



Of all the coaches in the 84-year history of the U.S. Men's National Team, only Steve Sampson produced over 20 wins (26-22-14) coupled with a winning percentage (.532). He is currently serving as the Technical Director for California-South. Veteran writer and nationally licensed coach Dan Herbst is the editor of the critically acclaimed official coaching book of U.S. Soccer, Soccer: How to Play the Game.