

## **When? - Where? – Why? – How?**

### **Think About It**

What do these four interrogative words have to do with soccer, you might ask. Well, let's say they might be the difference between the good player, the very good player and the brilliant player. These four words may well be the cornerstones upon which simple, successful and brilliant soccer is built.

Just by chance, I met up with Don Popovic, the infamous, world-renowned, Director of the Lou Fusz Strikers Soccer Club in St. Louis, Mo. 'Pops' and I go back our days with the Kansas City Spurs (1969) of the North American Soccer League (NASL). We were talking, as soccer people do, and he mentioned these four words – and then we talked about them for awhile, and then conversation drifted to other topics. I could not let go of these words. After having coached for the past 40 years, I really appreciated the significance and the impact of these words. It stirred me to try to develop them into some kind of an article. So here goes.

With the number of registered soccer players literally off the charts, why are we not producing more at the top? Is it in what we are emphasizing or, possibly, what we are not emphasizing? Everyone agrees on the importance of technical skills, as they are the basis of playing. The game of soccer is centered on the skills of the game, however, the game itself revolves around the ability to use those skills, in the right way at the right time. When players are technically trained to perform the skills in the most efficient way without integrating those skills into the game situation, it leaves the player rather empty. It would be like a workman going to the job with a tool box full of great tools, but not knowing which tool to use in which situation. He has the tools, he just does not know how and when to use them.

Now we mix in our four words. The difference between the craftsman and the rest is knowing when and how to perform a certain maneuver. Timing is crucially important as is the mechanics of doing things in the right way. The ability to play a properly weighted pass to a specific spot as the player is arriving, separates many a player. Having total awareness of the entire picture, a radar type of sensing mechanism, allows the gifted player to make the right play, at the right time, in the right way.

**When** is the critical component. In watching the great players of the world, the most breathtaking moments are the most unexpected. Suddenly, from nowhere, a pass, a run off the ball, a shot – it is at the time that the situation dictates. The player must 'read' the game as it unfolds and anticipate or project, what might happen next. The really great players see things 2 and 3 plays before they happen. Changing tempo, speed of play, the sudden burst, these are the difference makers. Brilliance is something very few people can achieve, but we can all strive to

get closer. The Dutch, in their coaching philosophy, preach about the 'right moment'. Very difficult to explain, but the gist is that during the course of the game, and from play to play, there will always be a time to act, that is the right moment. Recognizing that and acting on it properly, creates the advantage that can make the biggest difference. It is when the opponent is most vulnerable and the attacker has the greatest advantage – and it can work from a defensive perspective just as well. It takes an educated eye to see it and an experienced coach to develop it. Playing small-sided games lends plenty of opportunities to play in the 'right moment'. Playing too soon or too slow, with and without the ball, leads to more ping-pong play than controlled soccer play. Coaches need to use the 'freeze' method in training and re-create the situation and point out to the players what was available to them in the way of the 'right moment'. **When** has everything to do with time – be 'there' at the right time – not too soon and not too late. Play the ball at the right time, shoot at the right time – and most of all, know when it is the right time.

**Where** relates to field position, it relates to support position, it is the important element that links the team. Where are you in the field and how should you play in that situation? **Where** can also relate to the direction of play – play forward, first and foremost whenever possible – play back and to the side when necessary. Do players understand the difference in playing out of their back third as opposed to playing in their attacking third? We have divided the field into thirds and established principles of play in each one. Do players show an awareness and an understanding of those principles in their play? Using the rectangle of the field, it is important to create a geometry within the field. Triangles and diamonds are the common soccer shapes, and in order to establish them, there must be plenty of work off the ball to be in the right place at the right time. The game of soccer is all about space and **where** is how you create that space. Do players know where to be in certain situations – are they supporting properly – is there a chance for overlap – do they need to retreat --- where do they need to be at that moment of the game? It is never about running just for the sake of running. It is running with a purpose – to the right spot, at the right time, and for the right reason. There are times that I tell my players NOT to run, that they are in the best position, don't leave it! I have also noticed players will over-run a space. Where 2 or 3 yards might be the best solution, players will run 8 to 10 yards and never realize what they just missed. And then it also gets to be about **when** to run – too soon tips your hand and too late, well, it's too late!! Now we have combined **when** with **where** – hopefully, we are getting creative, timely running and playing and combining good field occupation at the same time.

**Why** develops the soccer brain. Asking players for their response forces them to think and explain why they played in a certain way. When coaches simply tell them what to do, it stymies their growth and fails to stimulate their soccer brain. They become rote players who just follow orders and never think on their own. Every play involves a choice – you decide to do this or

that, and sometimes you have reasons why. Sometimes, maybe it's just a reaction or a conditioned response, but even then something has happened over time to cause a player to act in that way. In teaching the principles of play, players learn that soccer is a game of opposites. One team tries to score while the other tries to prevent it. In building the foundation of the player, it is important to bring these principles of play into small-sided games and allow the players to experience them as they are playing. Set up your games in a way that the objective of the game will be achieved only by playing in a certain way, thus guaranteeing a learning experience for the player. To develop depth in attack, play with deep target players near the goal, or on the goal line. The defending team must learn to play in an opposite manner and deny penetration, and force the ball to be played back or sideways. Every action taken by a player should be explainable, to some degree. The **why** is usually because it allowed for the greatest chance for success or maybe was the safest and easiest solution. The biggest challenge is for the player to take ownership of the **why** and play with an intelligent purpose. Is it *busy with brainless soccer* or as Giovanni Trapattoni said, "the action of the legs is determined by the brain and the heart". Now we have added the third ingredient to the mix – **when** with **where** and now the **why**.

You could make a strong case for tactical insight into these 3 components. And as a matter of fact, that is exactly the case in point. As was previously mentioned, the emptiness of not knowing how to use the tools. The tactical awareness, combined with the skills, allows the game to unfold.

**How** is the final part of the equation. The application of skill is the **how**. Once the craftsman has everything sorted out, then it is time to close the deal – to do the deed. Now is the time for the incredibly weighted pass, or the blistering shot, or the silky-clean first touch to put the final stamp on the play. It is the execution of the movement that successfully completes the play. Training must replicate the pressures of the game so that the player is as comfortable as possible when under pressure. The reduction of time and space and increased speed of play in training, will pay huge dividends in the game. In the player development model, the building of a solid technical base is the base of the pyramid. In age-appropriate ways, teach the skills and slowly add in tactical elements so the players can learn early on how and when to apply those skills. In the earliest stages of technical development, keep the pressures to a minimum, and only increase them as is appropriate. Creating too much pressure too soon will interfere with proper development. Allow the players to get comfortable with the skill and then start to add some pressure. Up to age 11 or 12, the primary focus should be on the technical development of the player. From then on, gradually start shifting the emphasis to a tactical development in combination with the technical aspects already developed. It is absolutely imperative that players develop both sides of the body equally – this is best done at the earliest ages and

continued throughout their soccer journey. The **how** add spice to the other ingredients – it brings the game to life.

In closing, the balance of all four ingredients is the key to a successful player. Overemphasis in any one area leaves a detriment in the others. Small-sided games allow the most economical way to train and develop these essential characteristics. Challenge your player to adapt and adjust to a wide range of soccer situations. Develop them to think on their own and play efficiently in the best interests of the team. With the great numbers of players, let's do our part as coaches to prepare them in the best way possible.