A FORMULA SUPPORTING AGE APPROPRIATE SOCCER DEVELOPMENT

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“I’m Home!”

“Great sit down at the table and do your home work.”

“Is it math again? Let me know if you need any help.”

“Its just addition, again!”

 “Ok”

This same style of conversation has resonated with my seven year old for the past semester. How long is her teacher going to focus on the basics of addition and subtraction? Surely she can move on to multiplication or long division soon, that’s the area of math I enjoy, even basic algebra, she’s clever enough! Instead its units and tens of units, not even reached as far as hundreds of units, c’mon this is boring me!

Now think soccer: Any one get the picture yet?

Educators, psychologists and neurologists, amongst others, spend gargantuan amounts of time researching / implementing teaching practices and curriculums to support the cognitive challenges of a pupil’s age based development. So why do we as coaches often ignore it, structuring random, non-reinforced academy training sessions? Often making the player sit the exam, without reinforcement and review of the study guide.

The main age groups, these thoughts are looking to comment on, are the micro and youth academies 6-10 years. Along with the experience and educational development level of coaches, clubs place unsupervised in these positions. It is important that the limitations of the coach do not become the limitations of the player. (P2L) p46

As mentioned in the conversation, math again! Think back, how long did it take you to learn addition? How many different ways were confirmation and reinforcement sought in your day? Same topic, but different environmental and supporting factors, assisting in preventing boredom, utilizing sensory evolution to trigger thought and diversity?

Recently observing a clubs Academy U8 player development over a three week period, a week was spent on dribbling (3 hours), a week on passing (3 Hours), a week on shooting (3 hours) taking away the game at the weekend (the exam) that’s nine hours of teaching three different complex techniques with three different focuses and three differing technical/tactical environments, topping it with a possible rotational three weeks of coaching focus dissidence between topics!

I looked at my daughter’s school planner over a three-week period: 18x40 minutes math classes per week (12hrs) subject matter ‘Basic Addition’. In comparasome to the above: Same subject (addition), advancement and integration of subject variables, differing angles of educational approach both physical and mental (environment).

The point I am trying to make is roughly the same amount of time is taken teaching the strategic subject Soccer/Mathematics, but the educational pathways and planning management are different. The breakdown:

A: Soccer > **Technique** – dribbling – shooting – passing - receiving -tackling - heading

VERSUS

B: Math > **Arithmetic** – addition – subtraction – division – multiplication.

A

Dribbling 1 Week: 3hrs Training + Game

Technique

Soccer

To Beat a Man

Defensive

Speed

Change of Speed

/Direction

Fakes

Feints

Vision

Left foot

Right foot

Agility

Balance

Shielding

Surface

Vision

Left foot

Right foot

Upper Body

Agility

Balance

Touch

Surface

Vision

Left foot

Right foot

Changes of.

Agility

Balance

In the soccer curriculum model (A) limited short-term technical periodization is being used, (given credit, possibly on a programmed seasonal rotational basis). Often players are assessed/benchmarked at the weekends in games. Where possibly due to the lack of gained/retained training focus, or coaches confidence, some players are given roles in games due to their inability, rather than ability (P2L). Supporting a theory of damage control, rather than educated developmental confidence through a philosophy of technique mastery.

Due to the limited time on topic, the technique becomes more of an overview than a deliberate focus. The correct environment and teaching methodology also become factors. From personal research, coaches instructing on a short term concentrated basis, often focus through the use of drills for fast repetition and control, rather than planned, functional, small-sided games teaching through real time environmental activities, allowing the game to support in being the teacher.

Math

Arithmetic

Addition: 3 Weeks 12 hrs. + Testing/Assessment

B

Tens

10-99

Units

1-9

In the Arithmetic model (B) the same subject is taught for a continual basis of three weeks (or more), covering base areas (units) and moving to more complex areas (tens of units). The focus is of continual deliberate confirmation. Pupils, in the main, do not move onto subtraction until addition has been mastered. Sensory focus actions are mastered using physical (actual items), mental (procedurally written) and cognitive (in their head) as secondary or support methodologies, to retain the knowledge.

In this model specificity is based on a continual, progressive, reinforced methodology where momentum can be benchmarked either objectively or subjectively dependent on teaching styles, through the duration of consistent topical content.

Dribbling 3 Weeks: 12hrs Training + Games

Technique

Soccer

Speed Week 3

Speed

Week 2

Speed

Week 1

C

Touch

Surface

Vision

Left foot

Right foot

Changes of Dir./ Speed

Use of Space

Agility

Balance

Continue main focus from week one Utilizing secondary focus: Possibly When to Pass

Continue main focus from week one/two Utilizing Tertiary focus: Possibly When to Shoot

In model C the technique is transferred in line with Example B. Maintaining complete focus on the development of the specific technique, incorporating it into the basic skill and its evolvement through the game. Thus, allowing the players to keep knocking, until they discover how to open the door for themselves!

This could be a possible solution, to maintain a primary focus ‘Speed Dribbling’ with a secondary and tertiary focus of creating the pass or shot from the dribble. Offering all three playing principals. The next planned phase of training could pick up on ‘dribbling to beat a player’ using the same, or different secondary or tertiary techniques, expanding the players’ game further. A basic premise here through this extended time frame training is, ‘If the amount of information that the player has to process overrides the memory capacity, then learning will be ineffective and the training is likely to be counter productive” (P2L)

Age appropriately, on soccer models expressed; one (A) has possibly not been given enough continuity of invested time for players to ‘self solve’ problems from their efforts and positively learn from their opportunities (technique specific). The other (B) offers the ability for the player/student to trust in his or her gained knowledge and expand it into small sided games, allowing the exploratory nature of their age to celebrate the moments that show real learning and not just replication and modeling. (P2L)

This extended time frame system of teaching, if planned correctly, also quantifies complete neurological learning pattern research through the whole brain at the cortical level.

Often when coaches instruct, it is the development of technique, which boasts the aim of the session, through drills. This style of coaching is left brain focused (the area of our brain which analyzes the process of information on actions (skill) in to small components). Once taught the coach moves on. Leaving the right side (visual, perceptual and movement) disconnected from the technique. The training should be planned to allow the left side-right side to combine and work together, possibly through the simplest bridging actions of open small-sided games. Thus offering a global interpretation of the taught technique. As the player grows through the ‘tween’ and teen-age years the pre frontal cortex develops, supporting decision making and judgment. At this time age appropriate session and curriculum planning, should also incorporate this neurological growth period in to ours, and our player’s thoughts. (P2L)

Just writing this races my mind on the importance of the psychological pillar of many coach’s philosophies! All this in only 3 hours a week! And some organizations break their week down into teaching two technical subjects!!

In summation I would like to leave a quote from Jose V. Portoles Montanes:

* Head Coach in Real Madrid (2 years),
* Former Youth Academy Director at Valencia CF.
* Spanish Football License Level III (UEFA PRO)
* Degree in Physical Education and Sport Performance and Master in Sport High Performance

Current lecturer in “Master in Strength & Conditioning in Football”, with Spanish FA (RFEF) and CastillaLa Mancha University.

“We don’t plant a flower and then pull and stretch it to full height. We feed and water the plant, stake it when it grows tall to give it support and we patiently nurture it to blossom.”

Neil Hull

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References/Disclosures:

Where noted P2L: Many of the above areas have been paraphrased or directly quoted (page numbers allocated) from the book: Soccer: Play to Learn Learn to play by Mick Critchell.