



A Ball and a Wall



“I also played about 500,000 games of ‘Spot’ against the front wall of the house. You had to hit a particular spot and if you missed you got a letter and started to spell out the word ‘Spot’ You were out when you finally got the ‘T’.”

Phil Thompson – ex Liverpool & England

It is important that children learn the game, not just at organised training sessions but also on their own. Training sessions cannot be a substitute for the fun we had as kids with a ball and a wall, for that is where you learn about yourself and indelibly stamp your own identity of the player you want to be.

‘The World Cup (1966) wasn’t won on the playing fields of England. It was won on the streets.’ Sir Bobby Charlton

Waterloo

After the battle of Waterloo in 1815 when the Duke of Wellington’s allied army defeated Napoleon, the Iron Duke uttered the immortal words, “The battle of Waterloo was won on the playing fields of Eton.” Fast forward some one hundred and fifty years and another English legend, Sir Bobby Charlton said of England’s one and only football achievement, “The World Cup wasn’t won (in 1966) on the playing fields of England. It was won on the streets.” This probably says more about the class system than anything else, but at least it got the same result for the country albeit with vastly contrasting tactics. The 1966 side won the Jules Rimet trophy playing a 4-3-3 formation, (Sir Alf’s wingless wonders) where as the 1815 squad won it using a few more players, in fact some 55,000 infantry, cavalry and cannon.

Playing fields v the streets

There is a point to all this waffle and I know only too well that I have managed to bore many coaches who have logged onto the website’s discussion forum about the sorry demise of street football and the fact that all the greats in the game, Pele, Maradona, Zidane and Cruyff all learnt their trade on the streets and were polished and finished off on the playing fields of pro clubs. Children still practice on their own and play street/playground football, but nowhere near as much as the last generation. There is only so much you can do at group training, even if you have a ball per player

and lots of small-sided games and touches. Then when they are older and you are doing more tactical work, they will spend less time on the ball.

An hour a day keeps the defender away

It is often said that after the golden age of learning, which I think is up to about 14 or 15 years of age, the improvement in technique from then on is negligible, codswallop!

I am over half a century and my technique is better now than when I played (admittedly at the very, very bottom of the playing pyramid) because I touch the ball more now, with the odd kick about at training with the boys, staff football games, with my son and doing demos. My son is fifteen and over the last couple of months he has gone alone to a nearby car park for a minimum of an hour a day, nothing new there, but he does what he wants to do, with his favourite music playing through his ear piece. I would say that he has improved more as a player in these last couple of months than over the last three years. And it is not just his touch that has improved, but also his speed, his power, his co-ordination, his vision, his accuracy, his balance, he has quicker feet and naturally his confidence has grown. Of course I would expect him to improve but not by so much.

I think the key is not just the amount of touches but also that every single movement and every single touch is created because the player wants to do it that way. There are no interfering coaches, showing a better way and also no judgemental remarks from teammates. Everything is off the cuff and helps the player understand who he is and stamps his own individuality as a player away from both the team and coach. Sure football is a team game, and that is the part he learns on the playing field.

Games

If you give a child a ball and a wall he will inevitably make up his own games, whether it be, knock it against the wall with the right foot, one bounce and then against the wall with the left foot and so on. If there is a wall behind as well, it could be volleying a ball against the wall, taking the return with the thigh before flicking it over your head and volleying the ball before it bounces, shooting style, against the other wall, perhaps while you are listening to your favourite music on the ipod, be it The Who, Britney Spears or Perry Como, whatever takes your fancy and whatever works for you. There are countless games and little drills you can make up, the important thing is you make them up yourself and use your imagination, a word that has all but disappeared from the football language.

Creating the atmosphere

So what can you do as a coach to encourage your players to practice individually, away from the playing field? It is too negative just to set some homework and tell the kids if they don't do it they won't improve. The first thing is to create an atmosphere and culture of experimentation and creativity. Make it fun, make it beautiful, and make this game mystical. Yes we need to know about the 4-4-2 and the 4-3-3 and closing down an opponent but equally we must talk about the soul and rhythm of our beautiful game. Because of you and the experiences they have with you as a coach, the kids should want to get hold of a ball at every opportunity and dash outside.

You can also help practically by perhaps once a week taking any interested kids, never force them, to a car park or somewhere that is safe and has a wall, the outside of a prison is pretty good for that, (joke). Sit in your car, put on the stereo and play your latest CD, sit back and watch the magic show unfold and you will see your players as you have never seen them before

"When I played football," he says, "I just played. I didn't think about it. I found it easy. I taught myself how to play, knocking a ball about, up against a wall. You never see anybody doing it now.

Stan Bowles – QPR & England

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