



US Women's National Teams Program

"NEEDS OF THE YOUTH GAME" 2004

Introduction

It is appropriate at this time to put together a summary of our observations concerning the needs of the youth game. These thoughts come from a year of observing play on the girl's and women's side at the club, state, regional, and national team levels ages U14 through U19. Watching play at the various youth tournaments and youth national team events demonstrates to us an exciting and continuing trend on the women's side: players and teams are becoming more technical and athletic at an earlier age. Certainly evaluations at our U14, U16, U17 and U19 Youth National Team camps bear out the fact that the players are more technical, athletic and tactically sophisticated than previous generations. However, as we aspire to continue to develop national and international caliber players and teams, we must find ways to consistently develop all aspects of the game. Watching the 2003 Women's World Cup, we have identified several aspects of our game that we will spend the next 2 years addressing at the state, club, regional and national levels.

What follows is a short list of the areas that we feel are of the most urgent concerns:

A. Quality and timing of runs by forward players.

To define the two moments that are of particular concern:

1. ***When the midfielder player is looking to play a pass.*** Here, a forward needs to be able to read the action of the opposing team's back line. Are these backs "dropping"? In this case, a checking run back into the midfield is appropriate. Are the backs "holding or stepping"? If so, a serve in behind the backs is appropriate. The forward is then looking to run in behind the backs, through a different "seam" than the ball comes through or over. A run laterally across the field is needed in order to keep on sides, if the back line is holding firmly. Too often, the forward just runs with the back line, always looking to get in behind. The forward's focus needs to be not only on the ball, but also on what the opposition's back line is doing. Similarly, the forward also needs to be able to read the quality of pressure on the ball. If the midfielder is not able to serve a longer ball, the forward needs to check back for the ball to get the ball in front of the backs.
2. ***When the midfielder player is dribbling forwards and is not under pressure.*** Too often, in this scenario, the forward player runs centrally, in the way of the unpressurized midfielder. This run draws defenders into the open space and often results in a turnover and unsuccessful attack. In general, in this situation, a bent run wide is the appropriate run. This forces a choice on the opposition's defender: she

must either stay with the runner, or she must attempt to stop the dribbler. The wide bent run also allows a better angle to attack once the dribbler has made the decision to make a penetrative pass when the defender commits. Then, the forward receiving the ball is able to run directly at the goal with her first touch, since she is coming from a wide spot to begin with. A “wide” or “unbalancing” run on the weak side is a particularly effective run, when the ball is coming down non-central locations.

‘Run’ or ‘positioning’? Players often get confused when they try to figure out what ‘run’ they should make when a midfielder is advancing toward them with the ball. Describing this using a term like ‘re-positioning’ rather than ‘making a run’ is often helpful. A player makes a run to receive a pass. Here she is just re-positioning herself, trying to find the best position either to receive a pass or from which to make a run (if it’s needed). The player might have to reposition at a dead sprint, but that happens in every field sport. The terminology doesn’t change the action, but it might sometimes help to clarify things for the player. One thing we feel that helps clarify roles is naming the runs. Here we have named the 8 runs in the game of soccer. These are not to be confused with the quality of a run (such as bending or wide runs).

8 Runs in the Game (without the ball):

1. **Checking:** a run back towards the attacker who is in possession of the ball, and not being pressured. Made in front of the defender and into passing channels. Timing is critical – check as the player on the ball is about to look up.
2. **Supporting:** a forward, backward or square run that puts you in a position to receive a high percentage pass, thus enabling your team to maintain possession. Usually in the immediate area of the ball, behind, square, or in front of the player in possession of the ball.
3. **Unbalancing:** a run made with the intent of “stretching” the defending team. Usually made wide, in advance and on the weakside of the ball.
4. **Withdrawing:** a run made with the intent of pulling away from the goalside defender, to receive a high percentage pass faced-up, (usually wide) and able to run at the defense with the ball. Similar to checking but made sideways on so as to see the pressure.
5. **Clearing:** a run made to create space for a teammate, or to put a defender in the dilemma of having to chose to stay with the runner, or defend the space cleared.
6. **Penetrating:** a run made at the opposing team’s back line (a.k.a. restraining line) and/or in behind defenders in order to be able to receive a pass behind the back line. A run that puts you behind the defense without being offside (timing is critical).
7. **Overlapping:** usually a wide run made around a teammate with the ball, who is faced up. The intent is to receive a penetrative pass. Creating a 2 v1 to get played in directly (overlap), or indirectly (3rd player combination, or to pull the defender wide with the runner creating space for the player on the ball to pass or dribble.
8. **Slanting:** a lateral run made in front of the opposing team’s back line with the intent to be played in or “slipped” behind the defense, with the perfect timing so as not to be played offside.

B. Quality of defending in the midfield third.

To define various aspects of defending:

1. ***The quality of the individual defender.*** Too often, individual defenders continue to “lunge in” or “over-run” the 1 vs. 1 confrontation. When this happens, the defender, though appearing to work hard, allows the attacker to easily break pressure and place stress on the back line by dribbling at them. Conversely, often the player looks like she is in a solid defensive stance, but in fact she is not close enough to put any real pressure on the attacker, this allows the attacker to play the ball forward. Often, this shows up when the defender initially gets the attacker in a position where she is “back-to-pressure”, but the defender allows her to separate, turn and face the defender, thus becoming more dangerous via the pass or dribble.
2. ***The quality of group defending.*** (Specifically, the moments of transition from being a covering defender to a pressuring defender and vice-versa. Also known as roles of **pressure, cover** and **recover**). Players need to immediately “recover” into a good covering position once their attacker makes a pass. Also, the covering and balancing defenders need to do a better job of reading the visual cues of the pass. Many chances of interception are lost because players are not able to adequately read the cues of passes being made. Interception is the hallmark of a dominating midfielder. A successful midfielder thinks proactively about interception. She is ready to set a trap when playing as a covering defender. She lets the attacker think that she has a clear pass, only to step up quickly and intercept the pass that was easy to predict.

C. Keeping Possession on Throw-Ins.

In a recent ODP inter-regional event (players representing clubs from all over the country), the national staff tracked the success rate of the throw-in. It was found that a little over 75% of all throw-ins taken resulted in a loss of possession. Here are some principles that we have found to be helpful in improving the possession rate of the National Team’s off of the throw-in:

1. Get the ball in to play as soon as possible. This means that whoever is nearest the ball when it goes out of touch should quickly get the ball, step to the line, and get it quickly in to play if possible. This does not allow the defending team to “flood the zone”, making it more difficult to gain possession.
2. If a quick throw is not possible, the same principles of attacking play need to be put in to practice as if the ball were in play. For example, there needs to be a good shape to the support behind the ball. This may mean that the backs “back-up” and increase the distance away from the thrower. To create space, attackers need to “go away, then check back”. There needs to be one player “checking back” for the ball, and one player looking to get in behind the defense, not two players checking back in to the same space. Midfielders create space for themselves in a similar way. However, one particularly successful way for a midfielder to get involved is to threaten a forward run, only to check back at an angle to get the ball. Thus, the defender has to honor the penetrating run, taking her away from the open space created.

3. Encourage deception. Employ a fake throw or look to another teammate, then throw it to your first choice.
4. Consider the tactical issues of what third of the field you are throwing the ball in from? For example, in the attacking third, perhaps design a long throw-in to create an immediate shot on goal. In the midfield third, the main concern should be trying to penetrate or maintain possession. And, in the defensive third the focus should be to get the ball out of our half or play a safe and high percentage back pass.
5. Do not allow the ball to bounce up into the receiver's mid section. This does not allow for quick speed of play, and quite often results in a turnover. Practice bouncing the ball on the ground early, so that the second bounce arrives at your teammate's feet rather than mid-section.
6. Once the throw is taken, the thrower immediately steps on to the field to receive a return pass. Rarely do defenders "mark" the thrower.
7. Employ a one-touch restriction on receiving throw-ins unless the thrower tells the receiver to turn.

Of course, this should be trained during practice times. How often do we as coaches practice the technique of throwing? There are four targets for the thrower: head, chest, foot/quad and ground. How often do we as coaches restart a possession activity with a throw in? As they say, "practice makes permanent."

D. Technical Concerns:

1. *Playing a quality ball in behind the opposition's back line off of the dribble.*

There are many players that can hit a "textured" ball when it is not rolling, or when it is rolling back towards them. This allows the attacker to more easily put "spin" on the ball. However, it is much more difficult to do when the ball is rolling away from the attacker, off the dribble and under the pressure of trying to make the all-important 'final pass.' If every player and coach valued the importance of the final pass as highly as we value the ability to run, work hard, take on players 1v1 and score goals, then our country would develop more great final passers, like Aly Wagner. Aly takes pride in and has spent a great deal of time on her passing prowess.

2. *Heading punts and goal kicks.* This is particularly a concern for all girls and all ages. Reading the flight of the ball seems to be the biggest flaw. The only way for our players to learn the flight path is for them to see a lot of flighted balls. The second area of concern is the willingness to head the ball that has traveled such a great distance. Finally, we must continue to encourage youth players to develop the proper technique at a younger age so that they are comfortable and competent at heading punts and goalkicks.

3. *Flicking and Heading to Goal.* This is a particular technical concern for attacking players and their role in winning the air game. On goalkicks and punts, the attacker must get touch tight or side-on, control the space under the ball and battle with the defender while reading the flight of the ball. In heading to goal, we can all learn from the likes of Cindy Parlow and Abby Wambach during the 2003 Women's World Cup. These women made strong runs in the box, read the flight of the ball, got over the top half of the ball enabling them to head it downwards between the goal posts.

4. **Serving a moving ball long.** Many youth players can not serve a long ball. Those that can are often striking a dead ball in practice or a ball which is moving towards them thus engaging force on force. In training sessions, the focus to improve the ability to serve long balls should go hand in hand with receiving the ball and preparing it on the move, along with the requirement that the instep is the surface of choice. The preparation touch should always be away from the body or off the dribble. Each player's ability or inability to serve long balls under pressure with both feet directly impacts the team's ability to unbalance and stretch the defending team's tactics.
5. **Flank Service.** "A player needs to have several clubs in her bag". She needs to be able to serve a driven ball to the near or far post, a bending ball away from the goal keeper and the defender on the near post, and a lofted/floated ball to the far post baiting the goalkeeper. Additionally, players need to be able to serve a "cut back" ball to the top of the box for midfielders running in support behind the play. Finally, the standard should not be just to serve the ball in the box (that was good enough in the 1990's). The new standard puts the responsibility on the server to find the open runner.

E. Synchronized Movement of the Backline:

In particular, the ability of the back line to compact space as a unit when the ball is moving. This situation happens a lot when the opposition is in possession of the ball in midfield. When longer back or square passes are made, the back line can "step", in order to compact space (providing more pressure on the ball), as long as they are able to read the attacker's service options. This often requires them to stop and get "side on" in case the attacker looks to play the ball over the top. Of course, the goalkeeper needs to read this action and step with her defense in order to deal with this longer service. However, this compacting movement makes things difficult for the attack as it forces the opposition's forwards to focus on staying onside, instead of focusing on how they can make a penetrating run. It also gives the defense the opportunity to apply greater pressure in the area of the ball.

Defensive Organization 'Cues'

When to Squeeze?

1. They play a back pass.
2. When there is extreme pressure on the ball.
3. After a clear.
4. Long square (in the air) ball.
5. If we have the ball (i.e. ...countering).
6. If we are about to win it.

When to Hold?

1. When they "can't serve it."
2. When there is average pressure on the ball.
3. They square pass.
4. They square dribble.

When to Drop?

1. No pressure on the ball.
2. If they are “looking long.”
3. When they’ve played a user friendly back pass to someone who can serve long.
4. When their clear might result in a great long ball.

Conclusion

As we continue to aspire to improve the quality of play, no matter what the level, it is important to have clearly defined goals and objectives in mind. Hopefully, this discussion has allowed us to focus our efforts and thus become more successful. Observing the technical and tactical sophistication of other countries during the Women’s World Cup ‘03, we should all recognize how much work indeed lies before us. On behalf of the entire US Women’s National Teams Program, we give you these thoughts – “for the good of the game.” Each of us can make a difference one player, one team and one day at a time!

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