

SYSA Technical November Newsletter:

Winter Blues or Winter Cues

With the arrival of winter and the promise of a huge snow season, many of us may be thinking of a long obligatory break from soccer. While I enjoy a good day on the slopes as much as the rest of you, the winter weather is actually a great opportunity for different types of training.

The most obvious solution is the use of a gym. The indoor game and/or futsal is an excellent way to develop technical skill by simply playing. Confining your players to small spaces (no kicking off the walls) teaches them the ability to manipulate the ball and create space in the final 1/3rd. (Time and space are scarce when there is a chance to shoot at goal.) The five-a-side game (1 keeper and 4 outfielders) also emulates situations that might arise with one unit on the field in any 11-a-side game, such as a midfield diamond or combination play between central midfielders and forwards. Ultimately, there's a reason why youth players in countries like Brazil and Holland rarely compete in any other type of soccer before the age of 13 or 14. We have to teach our players to be comfortable with the ball and in small spaces before they can do so when the situation arises on a 100-yard pitch.

Here's an example of the game of futsal being played at the ideal level. Notice the perpetual movement and switching of positions, an element of the game that is often underused in the outdoor game:

<http://www.youtube.com/user/santostvoficial#p/u/60/j2eO1KqVvdc>

So you might be asking: how do I teach a game I've never played? The answer is what soccer scholars such as Horst Wein call the "let em play" model. Various uses of games (1v1, 2v1, 5v3, etc.) can use the players themselves as the teaching tools. For example: how many times will a player try to force the ball through two defenders without success before looking for another way? In futsal, that example is as simple as pulling the ball back and passing in a different direction. The game will teach them the right decision, assuming they are equal in size and keen to succeed.

The other opportunity emphasized by Wein and others is "coaching in the game". Often misunderstood as "screaming directions at players while they play a scrimmage at the end of practice", this method can be used to emphasize the theme of your practice in 1 or 2 coaching stoppages during their 25-30 minute scrimmage. In a 1-hour session, for example, where you are trying to teach defensive positioning (starting with activities like 2v2 or 3v2), the coaching in the game moment happens when the players on the pitch have demonstrated a failure (or success) in achieving the desired outcome. A player who dives in as the last defender, for example, would be a perfect example to "freeze" the team and remind them of how the earlier exercises may be applied to this game situation. It's not only a great way of connecting "drills" to "real games" but it also allows you to let them play while limiting the amount of topics they need to think about in one practice session. Less is more: you can accomplish thorough learning of one single key point in a 90 minute session by using a unique theme in your drills/exercises followed by a 25 minute game. It takes practice...but I know a guy who can help you with it!

The game as a model

So as it turns out, you don't need a sport psychologist to get your players to imagine themselves playing at a higher level. Simply encouraging them to watch games on TV or better yet, attending professional and semi-pro matches is great way to practice without being at practice.

The TV is an obvious choice and we have never had access to more soccer on even basic cable. Coaches like Anson Dorrance (UNC Women's Soccer) have argued that watching games of the highest caliber gives players a behavior they can directly copy. But it shouldn't always be the English Premier League or La Liga in Spain. Your girls can watch university level soccer or national team qualifiers and get all they need as a model athlete. More importantly, our local soccer (Whitecaps, university, Metro Premier) is something very accessible: these are levels of the game that are very attainable. The more they see their models as an achievable level (like Martina Franko, Martin Nash or even Mawuena Mallet), the more motivated they will be to work at it.

Live soccer is always the best model, allowing you to follow all positions from up above and use them to teach. Whether it's a Quest University game, the Whitecaps (men or women) or the North Shore Renegades (women's premier), seeing team execution with an emphasis on individual roles is ideal when the whole team can be viewed.

Lastly I will say be careful with video games as an influence. While they are more lifelike than ever before, there are still many elements (such as the turbo button) that give young players a false sense of what can physically be achieved. Hitting the "through ball" button and tapping turbo as your attacking player passes the defender over 20 yards on XBOX is even a tall order for the likes of Cristiano Ronaldo. It's just not a true-to-life model and can become a negative anchoring when they execute on the field.

For a real (and rare) treat in the next few months, I recommend the Women's Olympic Qualifiers coming up in January right here in BC. Tickets can be purchased here:

<http://www.ticketmaster.ca/CONCACAF-Womens-Olympic-Qualifying-Soccer-tickets/artist/1636595>

Last but not least, I will remind everyone that I'm still around for drop-ins on your practice, even if they are just one hour in a gym. Whether it's a specific topic you need help with or simply something different to try, just drop me an email.

I will be running my own Brazilian futsal camps up at Quest in the basketball gym on December 4th and 11th. Information on times by age can be found on the SYSA website.

Exercise of the month

Spice up your warm-up with 10-15 minutes of footwork. For your players that are of the right age (probably U11 and up), there are unlimited ways to practice ball

manipulation. Have a look at these exercises developed by my hometown team, New York Red Bulls, and their academy staff. There are loads.

<http://www.youtube.com/user/NYRBTrainingPrograms#p/u/38/h4wuVaOre5A>

For everyone in a gym or using half a pitch, try the four goal game in the 1v1, 2v2 and 3v3 format featured in this video. (Produced by my friend Vasco!) The two goals encourage players to not just play “north/south” or “goal to goal”: it opens their vision of the playing surface. If you find they are just booting it towards goal, add a “stop on the line” restriction (goal scored by actually stopping the ball in between the cones).

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nvC2BRxWRO0&feature=fvst>

Have fun and let's enjoy winter!

Yours in sport,

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