

HOW TO PLAY SOCCER WITHOUT A BALL



It takes skill to dominate the game with a ball. It takes talent to dominate the game without a ball.

PERCENTAGE PLAY

There are thousands of skilful Soccer kids who look great on the ball. It's the other 95% of their game that they need to improve.

The average Soccer kid plays with the ball for five minutes in each game. Every kid could improve their value to the team by learning how to play without the ball. On the ball they're pretty good. Off the ball they're lost. Some strikers even follow their markers when they change position. Kids need to develop the complete game. New and inexperienced coaches who learn about striking and receiving the ball can understand the importance of moving and calling without the ball.

Possession is the most important element in any game of Soccer. It consists of control and support. Each one depends on the other. The most skilful player can't win a game on his own without support from his team and enthusiastic support play won't help a team that lacks a high level of ball technique. Kids will control a lot more on the ball when their team mates learn how to support a lot more off the ball.



SUPPORT PLAY

The keys to effective support are angles, space, range and calls.

Tim, the centre midfielder, has the ball and is looking for at least one team mate to make a run and a call. Three forwards stand in position waiting to see where Tim passes the ball so that they know where to run. They shout out 'Tim! Tim!' Tim's a great player on the ball but he can't do much if the support players don't know where to run or what to call. These kids are just waiting, hesitating and spectating.

Australian Soccer is based on the ball and ball player. We ballwatch. We spend so much time teaching kids what to do with the ball that we never get to learn what they do or how they play without the ball. The coach follows the bouncing ball so he can monitor technique and look for mistakes. Forwards watch the ball and they get caught offside. Defenders look at the ball and they overlook the blindside run.



NATURAL SKILLS

Kids need their Soccer skills for the 5% of the game when they have the ball. They need to develop their natural skills for the other 95%.

We teach Soccer skills so that teams can win games. If we learned about the natural skills that all kids have, we could help every player to achieve their full potential of intelligence, talent and creativity.

Natural skills include looking, thinking, calling, listening, learning, understanding, remembering and moving. These aren't Soccer skills but they're critical to the development of technical ability. Kids can't strike the ball correctly if they don't know how to move their feet. They can't strike the target accurately if they don't know what to aim for or what to look at when they kick the ball. They can't distribute penetrating balls into space if nobody knows where to run. Support players can't gain possession of a ball if they don't know what to call.

Kids can't think for themselves if we keep telling them what to do and where to move. They can't practice if they're sitting in the car waiting for the coach to arrive. All Soccer kids have minds and bodies of their own and they need to exercise them if they want to improve skill and develop talent. Kids who teach themselves learn about themselves.



POSSESSION

Soccer is straightforward. Ordinary kids run and kick straight forward. Intelligent kids look, think and play in any direction.

If you tell your team to score goals, they will rush forward and lose possession. If you tell your team to keep possession they will pass the ball around until they can score goals. Ordinary players think 'ball and goal'. They chase the ball till they catch it and then they rush towards goal till they lose it again. Freestyle kids think 'space and possession'. They create space so they can receive the ball and then they pass it around until an opening occurs and they can take a shot.

Ordinary players play up and down the field in straight lines. They run straight ahead where the defenders just wait for them. Freestyle kids look and think 360 degrees. A lot of their training drills are held in circles so they're free to move in any direction where options are. Freestyle kids not only look for space to receive the ball but they also improve their position by finding the most effective angle and range.



CALLING

Intelligent calling is the communication of useful information.

Calling can turn eleven individuals into a team. There are at least 20 intelligent calls that support players can use to help the ball player. Most kids have no idea what to call. The two most common calls are 'mine' and 'leave it' and if kids want the ball they all shout the name of the ball player. Two team mates will often run into each other because neither of them bothered to put their name on the ball. The most common call from the sideline is 'Big kick' which tells kids exactly what is expected of them by over-enthusiastic spectators.

It's easy to make a list of calls that kids can use in a game and if you set up a small grid, you can explain when and how to use these calls and why. The next week, you can give kids a test to discover which calls they remember. Start with 'time' and 'man on' and gradually add informative calls like 'square right', 'left wing' and 'near post'.



RUNNING

Too many players go through the motions without actually moving.

Junior Soccer is like chess using kids as the pieces. They stand where the coach puts them and then move up in straight lines like pawns in a chess game. At about the age of 13, some kids develop a talent for space and possession. They make diagonal or square runs and the ball player picks them out straight away. Every kid reaches a stage where they start to think for themselves and create their own moves and it's essential that we recognise and support this first sign of innovation. We can't tell kids they're wrong just because their ideas are different.

Every player can lift their game and do a lot more than expected. The overlapping fullback can make runs and still sprint back into position. Achievement depends on mindset. The keeper is the first player in attack. The striker is the first man in defence. The game is that simple.



DEAD BALL MOVES

Defenders don't want to move. Mobility disrupts their stability.

At every corner, the attacking team go and stand in the 18 yard box with their markers so that any ball becomes a 50-50 ball. Defenders have an easy job because they can watch the ball and the attacker.

The intelligent striker will stand outside the penalty area on the opposite side to the corner taker. The defender can either watch the ball or the attacker but he can't watch them both at the same time. At a given signal, the attacker makes a run into the box as the corner comes across. He will have the advantage of running onto a moving ball while everyone else stands still and jumps. At throw ins, attackers stand with their markers and wait to see where the ball player throws the ball. We need to create smart support players who dictate the play.



DUMMY RUNS

The player who does nothing, creates nothing. The player who moves will either get into space or create space for a team mate.

The intelligent player doesn't need a ball at his feet to dominate the flow of the game. Just by running and calling for the ball, he will attract attention and disrupt the opposition so that they react to him.

The aim of defenders is to maintain a stable defence and mark tightly. The aim of the attacker is to make that role as difficult as possible. An intelligent attacker uses every skill available to disrupt a defence and take players out of their comfort zones. He gives them the runaround. The classic dummy run is to call clearly on a corner and make a run from the far post to the near post taking two defenders out of position and creating space for an unmarked team mate to shoot at the far post.



TALENT

Skill comes from the coach. Talent comes from the player.

We teach techniques and tactics so that Soccer teams can win games. We can take Australian Soccer to a much higher level just by learning about our players. All kids have talent. We won't recognise that talent if we teach all kids to look, think, move, kick and play the same way. If we teach, we can develop skill. If we learn, we can discover talent.

We have this inferiority complex about Australian Soccer kids. We choreograph kids because we don't believe they have the intelligence to think for themselves or the talent to create their own moves. If we give them the responsibility, kids can surprise us with originality and innovation. Each generation is smarter than the previous generations. The Next Generation already understands technology that leaves us behind. We need to give kids freedom to show what they can achieve.



SPACE

When kids understand space, the rest of their game falls into place.

We teach kids where to stand and they want to know where to move. We show kids how to kick and they want to learn how to pass. We tell kids to shoot and they need to learn how to score goals. A lot of kids become scared to move in a game in case they get shouted at for doing the wrong thing. We need to give kids the chance to believe in themselves so they can make mistakes and learn from them.

Australian Soccer kids don't want to stand around waiting to be told what to think or where to move. They want to think for themselves and make their own decisions. Freestyle kids want to run and take chances and try things even if they don't come off. They want to push their limits and tackle the hard challenges not take the easy way out. Space holds their game together. If their team has possession, they look for space. When they lose possession they close down space.



JUGGLING CIRCLE

Juggling Circle is the most effective way to learn support play.

If we put 8 elite players in a circle and ask them to juggle a ball, we can learn how these kids interact in a match situation. They stand dead still, remain dead quiet and look dead scared of getting it wrong. Soccer kids look great when adults are there to tell them what to do but they become lost when they have to think for themselves..

There's always one shy kid who stands back from the circle to give himself more time and space and avoid too much pressure. The talented kid usually drops the ball because he tries to impress all the other kids. You'll notice that most kids stand flat footed and don't talk to each other. How they behave in a juggling circle is how they play in an actual game. Kids don't know what to do because we've taken away the freedom to move, the ability to become innovative and the confidence to make as many mistakes as they like while they learn.

The Next Generation are already smarter than us. We can witness the future of Soccer just by encouraging kids to play their own game.

