

Conditioned Games: The Missing Link in Youth Soccer

Pat McCarry

As a coach involved in youth soccer I have increasingly seen the value of using conditioned (restricted) games in successfully coaching technical and tactical themes.

In the past a youth training session has often comprised a warm up, a series of drills or activities (often unrelated and not progressive!) followed by a regular game. Even when the earlier activities have been related to a coherent theme there has often been little transference of those skills to the 'real' game itself. The former activities lacked relevance in the eyes of the players and were seen as something to endure before playing a 'proper' game. At this point the players would revert to old habits and very little improvement and learning, in relation to the theme, would be witnessed in the game. The **conditioned game** as a bridging activity provides this vital missing link.

The progression for an effective technical practice might be:

- Warm-Up - on related theme
- Technical /Skill development - of specific theme
- Conditioned Games - highlighting the specific theme
- Game - emphasising the specific theme

There are a variety of conditions that can be placed on any game depending on the aim of the practice. These can include:

- Limited touches
- Man to man marking
- Use of zones to restrict /or encourage movement
- Extra goals
- Extra balls
- Minimum number of passes before moving to a different zone (or scoring)
- Time limits
- Passive defending
- Modified playing area

Each condition is used to 'force' the players to repeat certain skills/patterns of movement (which they do not currently use appropriately) over and over again in a game like setting. The skill of the coach is selecting which conditions to apply and then to adapt them if they are not working. If done successfully the coach will create many perfect opportunities to coach the theme of the day (e.g. 5 v 5, with man to man marking in a relatively small area, to re-enforce individual defending technique). It's as if he or she has 'fixed' the game to enable the coaching points to be clearly made in **context**.

As well as being game related these activities are fun. The players are active, easily engaged and enthusiastic which means they are better able to learn and progress. The use of these games is also a useful strategy for working with youth players or teams who may be attending practice for reasons other than a burning passion for the game of football.

At U.K.Elite we use the conditioned game as an integral part of most sessions - whether technical or tactical. However, in certain team tactical areas our curriculum promotes exclusive use of conditioned games once the warm up has taken place.

In the USA huge strides have been made in the quality of youth soccer and the general technical improvement is very evident. Improved technique can be seen throughout the youth playing community. In fact we firmly believe that the main weakness in the American youth game at all levels is still tactical - and that the best way to address this is within the game itself.

An effective tactical practice may develop as follows:

- Warm Up
- Conditioned Game 1: More restrictions
- Conditioned Game 2: Fewer restrictions
- Game

If a tactical concept is to be coached successfully in a 1.5 hour session there will be little time to work on the technical aspects. With this in mind, the related techniques will be delivered in the preceding session and revised in the warm-up e.g. 'opening the body' to receive the ball when switching the play. To coach both the technique and the tactical understanding of this theme in one session would be to overload the youth player.

Sound planning (short term and long term) and an understanding of child development are thus essential if the players are to receive a balanced curriculum which includes technical and tactical (and as they get older, functional) elements.

Switching the play is a good example of team tactical play suited to conditioned games and is particularly relevant to coaching American children, as their traditional games are very direct. Passing backwards, sideways and diagonally **with patience** are not natural patterns of play in American football, basketball and ice hockey and therefore need to be **conditioned** within the game situation so that they become considered options.

This is no easy task in the one or two sessions devoted to the theme during a particular season. The coach needs to be very focused on the desired result as time is limited. The early part of the session will involve rules that 'coerce' the players to switch play so that the pattern of play is established, and then conditions will gradually be removed as the session unfolds. Ultimately the coach needs to give the players a tangible **reason** to switch the play.

It is important that the concluding game involves 'free' play so that the tactical (decision making) aspect is focused on. This is the part of the session that allows us, as coaches, to assess learning and to see if the players are switching play at the right time and providing the team shape which enables this i.e. width, depth and length.

At this point some players will resort to old habits and attack directly in straight lines whilst others will adhere rigidly to the recently enforced habit of changing the angle of attack even when direct penetration is the most appropriate option.

This is where **effective coaching** takes place, however the interventions should be timely. To stop the game too often will prevent flow and is sometimes unnecessary as some errors are of an individual nature and could be addressed with a quiet word. An effective test of our coaching skills could simply be to observe the results of our work (Simply put, are the players demonstrating the theme correctly and appropriately?)

Technical weakness will inevitably cause the games to break down, especially at a younger age. This will have implications for variables such as size of area and the number of players on each team. In our example the field should be short and wide to encourage the exploiting of space out wide, and the attacking team will be initially overloaded to promote success. These additional considerations will be critical to meeting your objectives.

The session plan over page is part of U.K.Elite's U12 unique residential camp curriculum and its essence is modified as the players get older. At this young age teams will have varying success in initially applying this tactic to a 'real' game situation but will hopefully understand the concept. As educators our aim is to provide them with an understanding of the game as well as the technical tools necessary to play it well. Of course, we are mainly concerned with

technique and individual tactics with 5-8 year olds. However, as they mature physically, mentally and psychologically we can address team concepts.

U.K.Elite's Residential Camps and High School Team Training Weeks have experienced tremendous growth over the past three years, mainly because both the American youth players and their coaches recognise that we are addressing more complex concepts and differentiating for the Elite player. The curriculum is customised for U10, U12, U14, U16 and U18, sometimes building on themes from a younger age group, and at other times introducing new concepts. Our aim is to take the players to a new level of technical and tactical understanding.

If we are as effective as possible in our coaching methodology then, even if American youth players only participate up to the High School stage, they will still be able to appreciate and understand the game fully. This should constantly ensure an even better informed and educated generation of soccer players and parents in the future.

Pat McCarry is a graduate of Loughborough University in PE and Sports Science and is employed as Director of Professional Development with U.K.Elite Soccer.

U.K. Elite Soccer is one of the largest and fastest growing professional soccer companies in the USA, celebrating its tenth anniversary this year.

U.K.Elite Soccer provides a comprehensive range of year round clinics and services for various soccer organizations. It caters for adult coaching development, club and school teams, and camps for players ranging between 3 and 18 years of age.

To find out more about U.K.Elite Soccer, including possible coaching positions, contact:


Pat McCarry

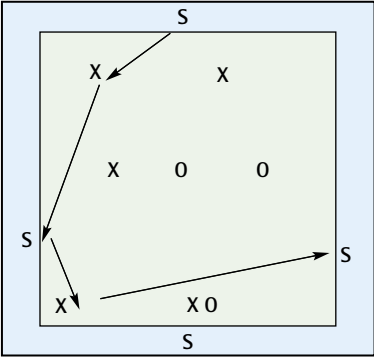
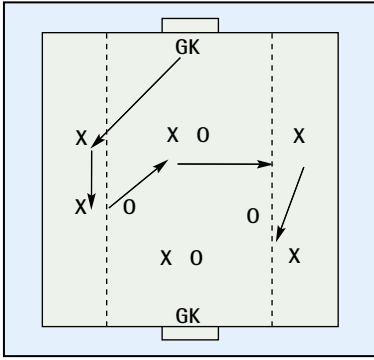
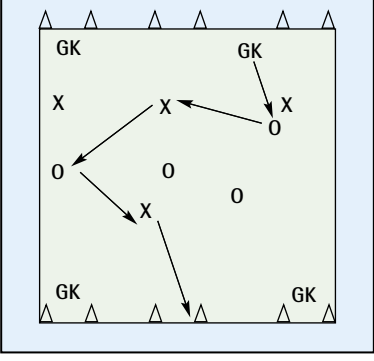
Director of Professional Development

U.K.Elite Soccer,

PatM@ukelite.com

Or visit www.ukelite.com

 SESSION PLAN	Club	Session	Date
	Session Title	Switching the Play	
	Objectives	To Switch the Ball Away From Pressure To Maintain Width and Depth in Possession	

PHASE and ACTIVITY	DIAGRAM	TIME	COACHING POINTS
<p>1. Warm Up: 5 v 3(+4 support) Keepaway</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> 5 v 3 (+4 support) keep away. Goal for getting ball to wide support. Support player must play ball back in to a different player who uses his/her players to switch ball to different side of field. Ensure quick rotation of outside players to ensure it is a warm up! <p>Alternative Warm Up: 9 v 3 keepaway: Developing Width</p> <p>Score a goal each time the ball is received by a player who has moved to the outside of the area, facing towards field. Defending team score by making 3 consecutive passes.</p>			<p>Open up body to turn away.</p> <p>Communication</p> <p>Movement to open area</p> <p>Awareness of other players</p> <p>Width and Depth</p>
<p>2. 6 v 4 with field divided in thirds</p> <p>Begin with numbers up and maybe designated wide players to ensure success (e.g. 6 v 4). Ball can only be passed twice (or once to make it more challenging) in each third before it must be switched to a different zone.</p> <p>The team with fewer numbers play without conditions. After a goal or a shot the GK plays back into the team of 6 players who turn and attack in the opposite direction.</p> <p>Variations:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Even numbers (5 v 5) attacking only one end i.e. as in a regular game Limit touches <p>Note: Fields Should Be Short But Wide</p>			<p>Awareness of opponents and team-mates</p> <p>Movement of support players.</p> <p>Keep ball moving away from pressure</p>
<p>3. 3 v 3(or 4 v 4) to Three Small Goals</p> <p>Regular scrimmage except teams can score in any one of the three goals. Two GK's protect three goals</p> <p>Variation:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Use two wide goals only and take out central goals Use support players instead of GK's 			<p>Look diagonally before attacking down channel</p> <p>Distance and angles of support</p> <p>Width and depth in possession.</p>
<p>4. Regular Game</p>			