

CLEATBEAT.

The Magazine

TIME TO TRAIN TACTICALLY.

Every coach has to make their players transition to the next level of the game – that of training to execute tactics. However, very few coaches actually pay attention to the things that require their attention – **Are Your Players Ready?**

In this issue, we talk about the things coaches need to keep in mind when they decide to take the leap into tactical training sessions!

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FROM THE EDITOR.

Welcome to a whole new world of football here at Cleat Beat, where the views are changing and life is getting better by the minute!

We are back with Issue 42 but more excitingly, we are back with a brand new website.

All the old elements are still there – the articles, the technical and tactical games, and even the magazine.

However, the most exciting bit is the brand new online channel for football – the Cleat Beat Network!

For the first time, we will see a channel dedicated to football, especially the way the game is played, coached and observed at the grassroots level.

We will be bringing on some of the best youth coaches on the planet to talk to us, tell us about their views on the development process and talk to us about their philosophies and more.

There will also be a lot of work done on the tactical side of things, with a host of white-board sessions from some of the top-coaches on the planet.

We will also try to bring you information on events happening, for grassroots football, from around the world although our budgetary limitations might adversely affect our ability to cover each and every event.

The magazine will remain true to itself and will continue to bring you articles on the training and development side of the game.

Articles on the website will mimic the magazine in terms of content-focus i.e.

We will not be covering news-events, not even at the grassroots level, although we will be visiting various events in search of coaches and players who catch our eye as something special.

Basically, the entire game-plan is being upgraded and we will attempt to bring you, within our budgetary constraints, a whole new experience in the world of youth football training resources.

We hope that these new changes excite you as much as we are excited to work on them.

We know that, like the magazine, these too will take time for us to improve and enhance, but the key element that we need to focus on is sustainability.

That will take time and, ideally, the right personnel, but the key is to focus on creating a sustainable model that lasts a really long time.

So enjoy everything that's coming your way because we are heading into a whole new chapter here at Cleat Beat and as Sherlock Holmes said, "The game is afoot!"

Sportingly Yours,

Asit Ganguli

Chief Editor

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A DYNAMIC TRIANGLE.

At FC Bayern Munchen, the youth academy is given considerable weightage even though the team is known for buying some of the best players in the world. The club's first-team is a mixture of youth academy products and world-stars, but the likes of Bastian Schweinsteiger and Thomas Muller stand shoulder-to-shoulder with the likes of Arjen Robben and Franck Ribery.

It all comes down to the training process and this week, our training game is one of the many passing-pattern games from the Bayern academy that involve player movement to create the right angles of attack.

This game emphasizes on the **Triangle-Passing Game** but unlike a regular triangle pass-and-move game, this one is about creating scoring chances in the final third.

The passing needs to be fast and accurate as the final third rarely offers enough time for players to dwell on the ball. Work your way through this and you will also find your players moving intelligently in other parts of the pitch.

The Bayern Munich FC youth academy has thrown up some incredible players like Bastian Schweinsteiger, Owen Hargreaves, Holder Badstuber and David Alaba, amongst others.

Their training techniques are considered amongst the best in the world so there's no reason for us to doubt their training techniques.

One of the key elements of their training methodology is the introduction of dynamism in something that most tend to use in static-mode.

This game is also based on introducing dynamic movement into the game and also focuses on another key element – body positioning.

Without the right kind of body-shape and movement, this game can really become a problem.

By focussing on this as a warm-up, you prepare your players for the remainder of the session with the right mental-focus and the right preparation.

THE OBJECTIVE

In essence, this is just a triangle-passing game but when it comes to movement,

there is a lot more happening here.

On the outset, it seems like any other game with players preparing themselves to pass the ball around in a triangle-formation.

However, there is no triangle as such and players need to constantly move around to make that triangle.

This also creates a situation where the players need to open up their body to receive passes, thereby ensuring that their body-shape is ideal for moving the ball up the pitch and, eventually, creating a shooting chance at goal.

Appropriate Age Group: 08- to 16-years

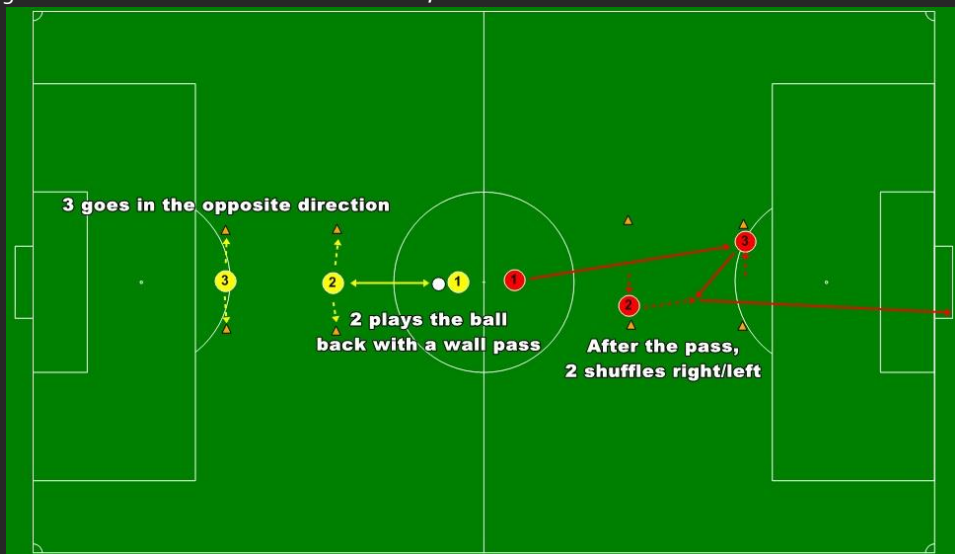
THE SETUP FOR THE GAME

The playing area setup is as follows:

- The playing area is about 20 x 10 yards
- 3-players (1, 2 and 3)
- 4-cones placed in a square – each 10-yards apart from the other
- A set of balls to keep the game going
- A goal placed about 10-yards from one-set of cones, on the far side of the move-initiator

THE RULES OF THE GAME

- Player 1 stands about 10-yards from the





first pair of cones while 2 and 3 stand in the middle of the cones, all three in a straight line

- The game begins with 1 passing the ball to 2
- 2 returns the ball to 1 with a wall pass before shuffling sideways to one of the two cones
- 3 has to shuffle to the cone on the opposite side as 2 does, so if 2 shuffles to the right, then 3 needs to shuffle to the left
- 1, upon receiving the wall-pass from 2, passes the ball all the way across to 3
- 3 lays off the ball for 2 to take a shot at goal
- At the end of, say, 4-moves, the players switch positions to play in each aspect of the sequence

Total time: 05- to 08-minutes

PROGRESSIONS FOR THE GAME

- Move the game into only-first touch – players are only allowed to pass with their first touch and time their movement accordingly

KEY COACHING POINTS

- Passing technique
- Quality of movement
- Timing passes to meet players at the right place, when they are ready

- Body shape to ensure that they can pass the ball in the right direction, appropriately
- Shooting technique – improve this by putting targets on the goal and making players focus on finishing technique

As a coach, focussing on the movement is more important because timing is crucial here.

Technique can be taught and in this case, the technique should be something the players are familiar with.

However, you want them to believe that they are in a situation where they are being marked by defenders.

That way, they need to pass/wall-pass the ball while trying to hold-off a defender and then make space by moving away from the defender.

Shuffling is just a way of warming up and players can resort to quickly-taking up space so as to make the entire move quicker and more precise.

As always, focus on slowly building up speed as this is still a part of the warm-up.

You can, however, use this as a technical part of the session as well, preparing them for a triangle-combination that can be used in the final-third of the pitch too. **CB**

WINGERS TO WING BACKS.

The game of football rarely stands still. Every day, new elements are coming in and every single day, a lot of things are getting outdated. The playing style of an average top-division side is quickly changing into a build-up based playing style rather than the traditional direct-passing way.

Attacks are being created through the middle and midfielders are starting to play through the inside. Does that mean that the wings are going unused?

Absolutely not!

One of the many interesting changes the modern game has brought about is the [Role of the Wing-Back](#). As teams build attacks, the wing-backs are coming forward to support the attack, almost as a midfielder. Midfielders are not staying out on the wings as these wing-backs provide support.

We look at a development that has transformed the modern game!

As the game of football evolves and new playing styles are coming to the fore, a lot of new positions are being created or old methods being abolished.

The traditional striker, in some cases, has given way to the false-9 position – made famous by the likes of Lionel Messi, but also applied in clubs like Manchester City FC, Borussia Dortmund and even FC Bayern Munchen.

In other cases, the Sweeper-Stopper combination to form a defensive diamond has given way to a flatter back-four.

However, the biggest change has been the gradual decline of the role of the traditional winger-position.

The winger was a common feature of the 4-4-2 and 4-5-1 formation but the recent switch to a modern-style of play has led to increased short-passes and lower dependence on the crossing game.

Teams are beginning to favour the 4-2-3-1 or the 4-3-3 formations, resulting in a narrower midfield but wider, more attacking, strikers/midfielders who often choose to stay out wide, up front, or play on the inside..

However, to understand why the change is becoming evident, we need to dwell deeper into formations and systems of play.

FORMATIONS TO REALITY

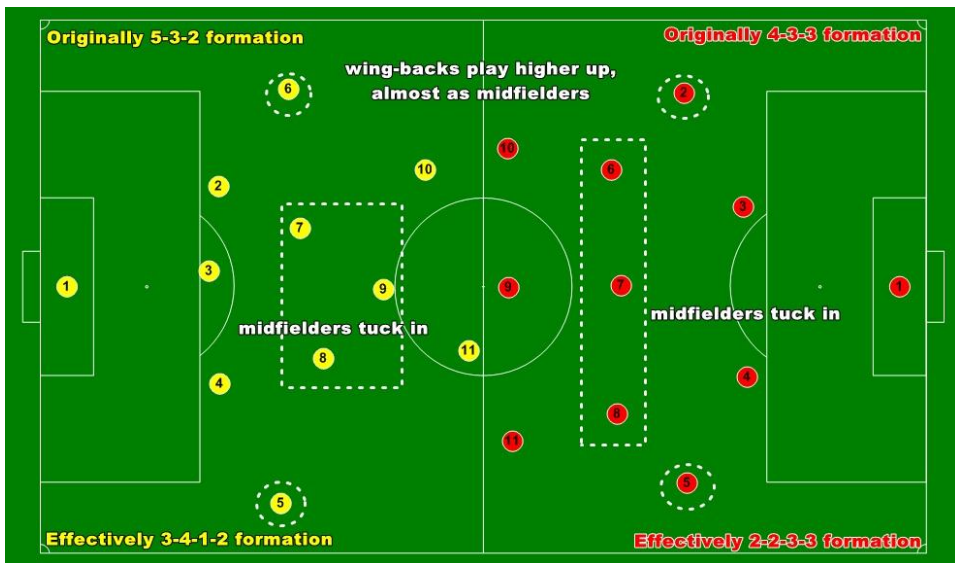
The way a team decides to play, i.e. a 4-4-2 or 4-3-3, has nothing to do with the way the game is played out eventually – something we have stressed on time and again.

The way players move around the pitch decides exactly how the formation changes shape to become, what we call, reality!

So, even though you might have a 4-4-2, which effectively says that you have a flat-line running across the midfield and defence, you might actually be playing a sweeper-stopper combination or have a midfield diamond but only when your team has possession.

Basically, you will find that players might have a basic starting formation, but during the game, their natural positions might change as they move laterally or linearly to counter/modify their approach.

Also depending on where you are attacking from or where the opposition is attacking from, you might change your positioning on the pitch.





In the past, it was quite common to notice a striker falling deeper, either to collect the ball or just to use the space between the opposition's defensive lines.

Not only did this help them run at defences but also gave them the chance to create space to break up the defensive lines.

In terms of wing-play, the traditional winger tends to take on wing-backs, who are considered the more-offensive minded defenders of the lot.

Generally, their defensive skills aren't as good as centre-backs as they are also required to move up in support of attacks – thereby dividing their training time into offense and defence as compared to centre-backs who are mostly focussed on defending.

Players like Ryan Giggs (at his peak), Angel Di Maria, Mesut Ozil, Alexis Sanchez and others are becoming scarce as the midfielder is the style of play is shifting to a 4-2-3-1 or 4-3-3.

The midfielders are playing narrower than usual and the wing-backs are taking over the task of moving up the pitch and sending in crosses.

That, of course, does not mean in any way that midfielders are not going wide and are not sending in crosses.

It merely means that the frequency of midfielders getting into crossing positions has gone down drastically.

In fact, wingers like Arjen Robben and Franck Ribery (ideal examples) are keener to cut inside and penetrate through the inner lanes rather than focus on staying out wide and cross.

SUPPORTING WING-PLAY

With a narrower playing style, teams suddenly find themselves with the wing-back far up the pitch and during transition of possession, there are gaps left behind on the flanks.

As a result, the attacking full-back needs support from the inside players, who need to cover for them as the wing-backs recover.

The more an attacking side decides to play with one or two strikers, the more freedom there is for the wing-back to move up in support of the attack.



Playing with five in the back-line (5-4-1 or 5-3-2) gives greater security at the back while something like a 4-4-2 or 4-4-1-1 or 4-2-3-1 provides security in the midfield and defence!

If you have high quality inner midfielders and central defenders, then the full-backs can really push up the pitch and provide the kind of support the strikers need from wide.

Practically speaking, a full-back cannot run up and down the pitch for the entirety of the game.

As a result, managers tend to start them off in the middle-third, in a slightly defensive position, but still quite advanced as compared to the rest of the defence.

So, a 5-4-1 or 5-3-2 is converted into a 3-3-2-2 as the full-backs or wing-backs are playing higher up the pitch.

THE TRANSITION OF POSITION

Everyone knows that it is easier for an attacking player to convert into a defender rather than have a defender transform into an attacking player for one simple reason – clearing the ball when defending on your goal-mouth is easier than playing

intelligently in the crowded final-third of the pitch.

As a result, it became natural that wingers, especially at the youth level, are being converted into full-backs who support the attack – a logical progression!

These full-backs have some defensive qualities but in terms of attack, they are much more potent.

They are better at dribbling, crossing and supporting play in general.

The likes of Daniel Alves, Philipp Lahm, Sergio Ramos and Jordi Alba immediately come to mind.

All these players are better at attacking play than playing the classic role of a defender on the flanks.

Sure, some of them are exceptional defensively as well, but that is more a flash in the pan than a general norm.

They attack as much as a winger would, creating goals with their crossing and support-play.

In fact, the likes of Alba and Alves are notorious for taking on opposition full-



backs, beating them and putting in stellar crosses that result in goals – much like a winger would be expected to.

The wings allow teams to get behind defensive lines and force defenders to defend while facing their own goal or to the side, instead of facing the opposition goal.

This kind of movement and playing pattern is always more threatening than the average winger-on the flank simply because the inside midfielder (originally the winger) ensures that there are other sources of penetration through the middle, for the opposition to take care of, to allow

the wing-back to move up the pitch into space.

The more players there are on the inside, the more space there is on the flanks and the more space there is for wing-backs to run into.

This results in what we see as the modern style of attacking-play where wing-backs are constantly overlapping or under-lapping on the flanks and in case of a turn-over of possession, the inner players are offering cover on the flanks as these advanced wing-backs recover.

This creates more attacking options on the inside while maintaining those crossing options from wide as well.

Have all the wingers disappeared truly?

Not quite!

There are still teams that are focussing on playing with traditional wingers

but the fact remains, full-backs are constantly becoming the first-choice when it comes to crossing balls in rather than putting midfielders out on the flank.

In the end, the objective is to overload the flanks and by pushing wing-backs further up the pitch, the traditional winger is becoming more of a “cut-inside” or “inner” midfielder rather than one who hugs the touchline.

You can thank this change in mindset for the wonderful attacking style of play you see, every day, on football pitches around the world.

CB

BRING ON THE TACTICS.

Every coach has a particular way of training their players but in general, the best way to plan your sessions is to focus on technical training for younger age-groups and then, as the players grow older, work on the tactical side of the game.

However, most coaches make the mistake in the “when” and the “how”, rather than the “what”!

Almost every coach knows what they need to train when it comes to tactical development and those who don’t, they can find thousands of resources on the Internet to fill in their training manuals.

However, it is the **When and How of Tactical Training** that coaches tend to falter at. Not only is it important to introduce your players to tactics at the right time, it is probably more important to make sure that the introduction process is gradual and natural. Here are some ways you can really make your tactical training better!

Football is a team sport.

By that we mean just one thing –if every single player is not on the same page, shit will hit the fan!

There needs to be a sense of team-work in everything a team does, including spending time together off the pitch.

However, on the pitch, the most important thing is for them to be on the same page when it comes to playing style.

That, in a long, round-about way, is what we know as “**Tactics**”!

The most crucial element about teaching tactics is not what to teach – that can vary from coach to coach, but when to bring tactical work into the training sessions.

Most coaches feel that this is an age-group thing and by the time players are twelve or thirteen years old, they can be introduced to tactical aspects of the game.

We, on the other hand, believe that its’

completely a natural progression, nothing to do with age.

We have had groups of 10-year olds, in our school program, who are capable of playing as well as any team of 14-year olds.

However, the introduction of tactics has always been a gradual process, where we have tried to build it into a technical training session and started adding greater challenges with a tactical aspect in mind.

We are probably not the only ones doing this and this method is probably not unique or special, but we feel that it is the best way to let players move onto the next level, of serious tactical play, with this kind of gradual, natural progression.

Basically, tactics can only be introduced if you are willing to take the time to help your players think about the game as a whole and not just focus on technical skills and execution.

Training the mind is an essential part of tactical development and if you feel that



your players are ready for it, then that's when you introduce these aspects into their sessions.

To do this, we divide our tactical session planning into three distinct parts, again, not a unique way of dealing with this aspect of the game.

BREAKING UP TACTICS

The first aspect that we deal with is training players on the concept of **Time and Space**!

This is a concept where players are required to overcome football-problems where the objective of the game revolves around time and space.

For attacking, this involves using the ball in a team-format to overcome the opposition or a certain obstacle that poses a time and space issue for them.

When it comes to defending, this involves closing down spaces or delaying attacks to introduce a time and space issue for the attacking side.

In both cases, the objective of the game is to overcome the opposition although in the defending phase, this might mean getting possession of the ball only (once you have possession, you are the attacking side).

The other aspect deals with **Gathering Information** on the pitch about what the opposition is doing/planning to do and what we are doing, in terms of positioning, marking, off-the-ball movement, etc.

This relates to both the attacking and defensive side of the game as players need to constantly scan the pitch to know where they are in relation to the pitch as well as in relation to the ball, their teammates and the opposition players.

Finally, we break up tactics into the concept of **Organization**.



This is not about maintaining a shape or moving forward as a unit – these are part of it though – but is about planning collectively and communicating with each other to ensure that the plan is carried out through individual actions that are part of the bigger-picture.

Tactics, we believe, is all about mental ability!

Technique merely helps you execute what you have in mind but it is what you have in mind that makes the difference, when it comes to team-play.

To do this, there is a lot of focus on players' ability to think about the game and therefore, we need to focus our training methodologies on improving their cognitive ability as well as educate them about the game.

The training environment, playing conditions, player-capabilities and even infrastructure have a great say on when and how you can introduce tactics to your team.

The plan, to start training tactics, has to revolve around these aspects while allowing players to use their technical and physical skills to accomplish the objectives.

So, in general, we like to think of tactics as the way the entire team thinks, at any point of time, rather than the way a team acts, at any point of time.

BREAKING UP PLAYER ACTION

To be able to teach players the right way of thinking about the game, there are three aspects that you need to focus on.

Perception is the first aspect and, probably, the most important of the lot.

Building the ability of perception, in players, means to make them understand the process of information gathering.



When a player looks around on the pitch, what they see is what they know.

Our job, as coaches, is to help them identify the things they need to see and make sure that they are looking for those things over and over again.

This practice needs to be repeated, in different game-situations and scenarios, so that the process of gathering information becomes second-nature to the player.

Without complete information on what is happening around on the pitch, the second aspect is completely useless – **Decision Making!**

Once a player knows exactly what is happening around them, they have everything they need to know to make a decision.

If they have the ball, they need to know what to do next – dribble, pass or shoot – and if they don't have the ball, then they also need to know what they need to do next.

The process of making decisions is constant – it does not end once the player with the ball has passed it; it merely moves onto the next moment where the player needs to decide what they need to do now that they have released the ball.

The process of passing the ball (in this case) is the third aspect of tactical training – Execution!

Once the player has gathered the information from their environment and decided to make the decision they feel is the best, they need to execute it.

This is, of course, also dependent on technical ability, which is why the tactical way of thinking can be introduced into any technical game with ease.

Now, if you notice any game of football and you see errors on the pitch, it is always because of a failure of one or more of these three components.



If a pass goes off-the-mark, it is probably because the player didn't execute it properly.

If a shot is blocked, it's probably because the player didn't make the right decision!

If the player is dispossessed as soon as s/he gets the ball, it's probably because they didn't know that they had a player on them!

If a pass is under-hit or over-hit, it is either because of a technical fault or because of a lack of communication (incomplete information was gathered).

BRINGING IN TACTICAL INTELLIGENCE

Teams, even professional teams, do this over and over again – they work on building a set of tactics that they will employ in the game, and players run plays over and over again to create a mental map of how the situation will be and how they will execute the plan.

This is, in essence, the process of developing tactical intelligence.

Now, don't misunderstand us – we are not talking about set-plays like they run in American Football.

We are talking about playing patterns!

Identifying a through-run, identifying an overlapping run; identifying the right moment to change the direction of attack; identifying the right player to pass to in order to maintain possession – all these are examples of what we mean when we say "run plays over and over again".

You don't put players on a chess-board and then run the same move over and over again, but you create situations where players need to try and re-create that opportunity to run onto a through-pass or change the flank.

This is not just an individual-centric process, it is also a team-centric process.

In the case of, say, a through pass, it is not just the player who is passing the ball who needs to identify the moment – it is also the player who will run through the gap as well as the players who's movement will create the gap, who need to identify the opportunity of setting up a through pass.

As a coach, training becomes a process of allowing players to create situations where players can begin to identify these moments at an individual level, a team level as well as in terms of understanding the game itself.



STRUCTURE YOUR TRAINING CONCEPTS

The big question is: How do we create training sessions that teach these concepts?

The answer is like any kind of planning that you have to do as a football-coach – work your way back!

You start with the global concept of how you want your players to play or understand the game.

Then, you start breaking it down into smaller and smaller segments, until you reach the most basic component – this is where you start the process of teaching the tactical way of thinking.

As players begin mastering this aspect, you move them onto the next aspect, and the next, thereby creating a natural progression for them.

For example: In the case of a through pass (and this is classifying it extremely broadly), we would work with the technical ability to pass; then move onto the concept of a basic through pass; then let players try to create

through-passes in small-sided games with passive defenders; then let them work on the concept of creating space for a through pass, and so on – you get the idea, right?

Basically, you start by working on the principle objective, which is what each player should be doing when they have the ball and when they don't have the ball – both in attack and defence modes.

In attack, we normally follow the path of: Maintain possession -> move the ball up the pitch -> create scoring chances and finish!

In defending, we normally follow: Regain possession -> try and delay or block the opposition attack -> and end with defending the goal.

THE BASIC PRINCIPLES

Whether attacking or defending, we believe that the sole objective of any team needs to be to maintain numerical superiority around the ball or the active area of the pitch.

How does that encompass everything?

Well, it's quite simple really!



If your team has the ball, numerical superiority will allow you to maintain possession, move the ball up the pitch and create scoring chances.

If your team is defending, then numerical superiority will allow your team to win the ball back, block or delay the opposition or defend the goal.

If you cannot maintain numerical superiority, then the next objective has to be to maintain numerical equality or have the same number of players around the ball as the opposition.

The main objective is to try and ensure that your numbers are never lower than your opposition teams', around the ball.

In terms of **attacking** tactics, you can easily break up the thinking process into the following headings:

- **Constant movement:** This is to ensure that your players are always looking to change positions, create passing lines, maintain possession, create space or disrupt the opposition's defensive lines, amongst other things

- **Supporting the attack:** this is quite self-explanatory where the player with the ball needs to be provided support in the form of passing outlets while maintaining defensive balance
- **Creating Space:** This is about things like adding width or depth to an attack by pushing players wider or pushing more players up the pitch to support the attack, respectively. Basically, you make the field as wide as possible and even if the ball has to be played backwards, you maintain the pressure on the opposition
- **Creating Chances:** This is about gaining a numerical advantage and moving the ball towards the opposition goal and trying to create scoring chances by penetrating their defences

Remember, we are only talking about the tactical principles of attacking play, not the technical aspects, which is why we are broadly classifying them rather than talking about specifics like, and we say it again, through passes.

In terms of **defending**, the basic principles are:

- **Maintaining Balance:** This involves ensuring that the defending lines are tight, not giving the attacking side room to roam; cutting out passing lines; covering gaps and more
- **Narrowing the Field:** This is about forcing the opposition to play in a narrow space, thereby limiting their outlets and forcing them to play in tight spaces by denying width and depth in attack
- **Containing the Opposition:** This begins on the individual level by marking players or putting pressure on the ball-carrier and denying passing options
- **Covering Support:** This is about providing support to the player who is marking or pressurising the ball-carrier, denying the attacker the opportunity to dribble past the defender

Now, these are not in order of priority, but just a list of things that you need to remember when introducing your players to the tactical way of thinking.

You can use these basic principles to create training games that then work around concepts of counter-attack or build-up play

or zonal marking or man-to-man marking, and so on.

In each case, you need to focus on the individual as well as the global (team) aspects of the game situations that you are posing in the form of a problem for your players.

SOME FINAL GUIDELINES

Now, directing the team's efforts, on the tactical front, is the coach's primary job.

To achieve success in executing those basic principles of attack, here are some of the guidelines that a coach can use to direct players and create that mind-set, of tactical thinking, in their players:

- **Protect the ball:** Maintain possession by keeping it away from the opposition; control the distances between the ball carrier and teammates; pass quickly in ways your opposition least expects, and always look to create passing lines, amongst others
- **Create Space:** Move around the pitch to create space; occupy free space; draw defenders into a position and play the



ball into the empty space they left behind; attack where the opposition is weakest; switch angle of attack, and choose direct or indirect routes of attack depending on the situation, amongst others

- **Direct the Defence:** Create doubt in the mind of the opposition about what you are planning; mix up passing styles; draw players out of position; maintain numerical superiority; disguise moves, and make fake runs, amongst others

Similarly, on the defensive front, there are similar guidelines that you can use to train your team when the opposition has the ball:

- **Protect the Goal:** Get as many players between the ball and your own goal, as possible
- **Cover:** Provide cover to your teammates to maintain defensive integrity and reduce alternatives for the attacking side
- **Cut-Out Passing Lines:** Cover up space and limit passing options, especially those that will allow the opposition to move the ball forward
- **Minimize Space:** Force the opposition into tight spots and control the game, even when you don't have the ball, by pressurizing them and squeezing space

Tactical games played-out using the players' technical skills are all you need to introduce your players to the tactical way of thinking.

In the early years of development, introducing these elements will allow you to iron out mistakes and introduce the right

concepts for more complex tactical aspects that come on later in the game.

At a young age, we tend to focus on simpler aspects like widening the pitch by spreading out and occupying free space; supporting the attack from deep; switching play, changing the speed or tempo of the game; varying passing lengths; direct & indirect passing routes; covering teammates in defence; marking; delaying the opposition build-up play, and so on.

These concepts are simple ways to give your players a comfortable introduction to the world of tactics.



With such methods, they can easily use their technical ability to execute basic tactical aspects of the game.

However, it all comes down to the coach and their understanding of their players.

Knowing when your players are ready for this "upgrade" in training sessions is a judgement call that you can only make if you observe your players carefully.

Beyond that, these basic guidelines and concepts can help you build the right mindset in your players and get them to think about the game from the tactical point of view.

CB

ZONE OR MAN? THE DEBATE RAGES ON.

Last week, we carried an article, by Keith Scarlett, on the merits of man-marking as compared to zonal-marking. Keith took the time to nicely put his point across and spoke about the process of playing man-to-man with a free-sweeper to clean up.

The debate reached great heights, especially on Linked In, where a previous discussion on the same front took somewhat of a nasty turn even. No, we weren't throwing expletives around but the argument in the favour of **Mixed Marking – Zonal and Man-Marking Combined**, had a lot of supporters.

This week, we decided to look at some of the flaws of the man-marking style, even using the example of basketball, a sport that those who favour man-marking tend to use in support of their arguments, to counter the arguments of man-marking.

Remember, this is neither about zone- or man-marking, but both!

Last week, we wrote about the concept of man-marking with a sweeper and our guest columnist. Keith Scarlett, voiced his opinion about how it can become everything that the zonal-marking system is not.

This week, we decided to look at the other side of the argument, and how man-marking, with and without a sweeper, is not the ideal option.

The argument in favour of man-marking begins with a simple, but true, aspect of defending – it always comes down to a 1-v-1 situation.

Whether playing in a zonal format or man-marking format, the process of stopping the ball carrier or marking free players in a zone is always in a one-to-one ratio.

If more than one attacker enters a zone, then another defender needs to come into that zone to maintain numerical quality.

So in essence, zone-marking is nothing but man-marking in a specific area of the pitch.

So why is it that most teams still follow the concept of zonal marking and not man-to-man marking?

Well, that's what we are here to explain!

THE BASIC MAN-MARKING CONCEPT

What happens in a 1-v-1 small sided game?

There is one attacker, one defender and the game is just about who is better at attacking and defending.

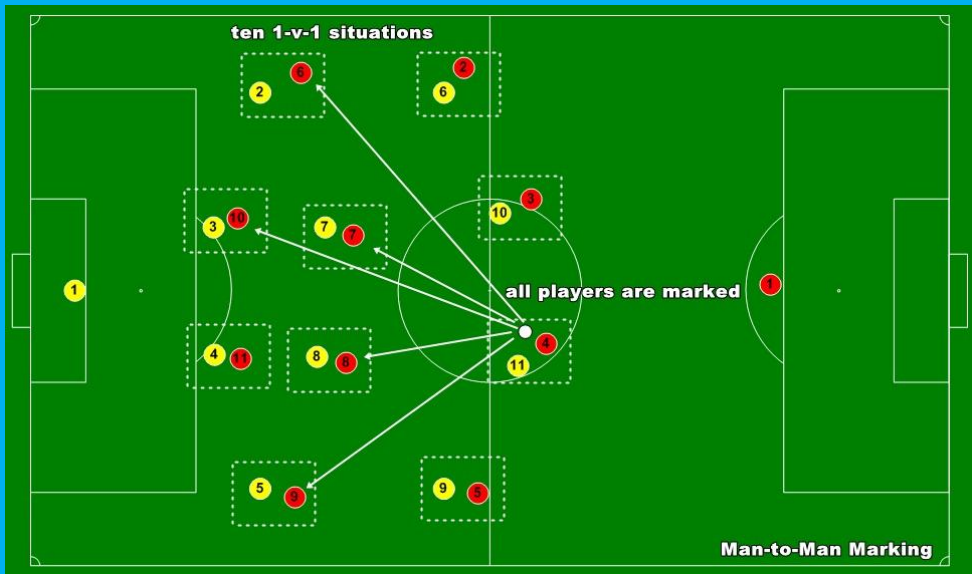
It is all about pitting one player's skills against the other.

If the attacking player is exceptional on the ball and the defender is pitch-perfect in defence, the duel is always hard-fought.

However, the duel will only and only be hard-fought if the skills of the attacker, with the ball, are proportional to the skills of the defender, without the ball.

If the defending player is not the best defender but the attacker is superior in talent and physical ability, the defender will, almost always, get beaten.

Similarly, if the attacker is physically and technically weaker at attacking as compared to the defender (at defending), then the defender will, almost always, win the ball.





Now, take this 1-v-1 scenario and apply it to a 2-v-2 situation.

The equation hardly changes – if you pit a strong player against a strong player, the 1-v-1 duels within the 2-v-2 will be evenly matched.

If not, one side will hold a clear advantage, even if there is just one weaker player on any one of the two sides.

Now, add one more player to each team and make it 3-v-3, or three 1-v-1 duels.

Once again, the same principles will govern the game as the weakest player will become the route for attacking the opposition goal or winning the ball back.

You can ramp up the numbers on both teams all the way up to 11-v-11 and the concept will be the same – in man-to-man marking, unless every player is evenly matched with their corresponding opposition player, there will be weaker links that the teams can exploit.

Now, you need to remember that when we talk of “weaker” players, we aren’t saying that every striker will defend as well as a centre-back or that every centre-back will be as efficient in building-up play as a striker might be.

Each player has their own strengths and weaknesses and that is where the whole concept of man-to-man marking starts taking a tumble.

THE SIMILARITY TO BASKETBALL

Often it is mentioned, as even we did in our last issue, that other sports like Basketball can really help us learn about concepts of man-marking.

True!

You cannot deny the fact that basketball follows the man-marking principle to the hilt, especially when it’s a full-court press.

However, there are some differences that make this concept possible in basketball but not in football.

The first is the size of the court/pitch.

A basketball court is 28 metres long and 15 metres wide.

A football pitch is 90 to 120 metres long and about 45 to 90 metres wide – almost **six-times** the size of the basketball court!

Sure, there are more players but in terms of maintain proportion, each team would need to have 30-players on the pitch to maintain that 1:6 ratio.



A motion-tracking system was used to monitor professional basketball players, in 2012, and it showed that the most distance a basketball player had run was Luol Deng, of the Chicago Bulls.

The distance he had covered?

2.72 miles!

In football, players average between 7 to 9 miles per game.

Okay, so I hear you say that the intensity of a basketball game makes up for the lack of distance covered.

Well, here's the truth: The highest average speed of an NBA basketball player, in 2013-14, was 4.8 miles per hour, by Patty Mills of the San Antonio Spurs.

In football, the Journal of Sports Sciences published a study in 2010 where the Science Director at Lille FC conducted a two-season long study of their players.

The study showed that the average speed of the players from Lille FC was 6.4 miles per hours without the ball, and 8.01 miles per hour with the ball.

That's a lot more, isn't it?

What's more, the most minutes-per-game a basketball player has played, in 2013-14, is Chandler Parsons, of the Houston Rockets.

His average time on court: 38.6 minutes over the course of 36 games.

A football player, even those substituted-out in matches, usually ends up playing longer.



Now, all the NBA statistics were obtained directly from the official statistics website of the NBA.

Why do we go to such lengths to show the massive dissimilarities in the two sports?

Simply because most coaches who tend to favour man-marking always put basketball as their example of how well every player covers court-length to man-mark the opposition.

Fact is, the concept of man-marking, as successful as it is in basketball, can only be used to train football players about the concept of moving as a unit and marking players man-to-man in tight situations.

However, it cannot be used as an example of what football players should be doing – i.e. running up and down the pitch, marking every man across the pitch and playing in every single position.

It cannot, unfortunately, be used as an example of how complete a player should be.

In basketball, all players are capable of shooting but some are better at playing in the hole while others are better from beyond the arc.

Similarly in football, some are better scorers and others are better passers or defenders or crossers of the ball, so this argument doesn't work as well.

WHAT ABOUT MIXED-MARKING?

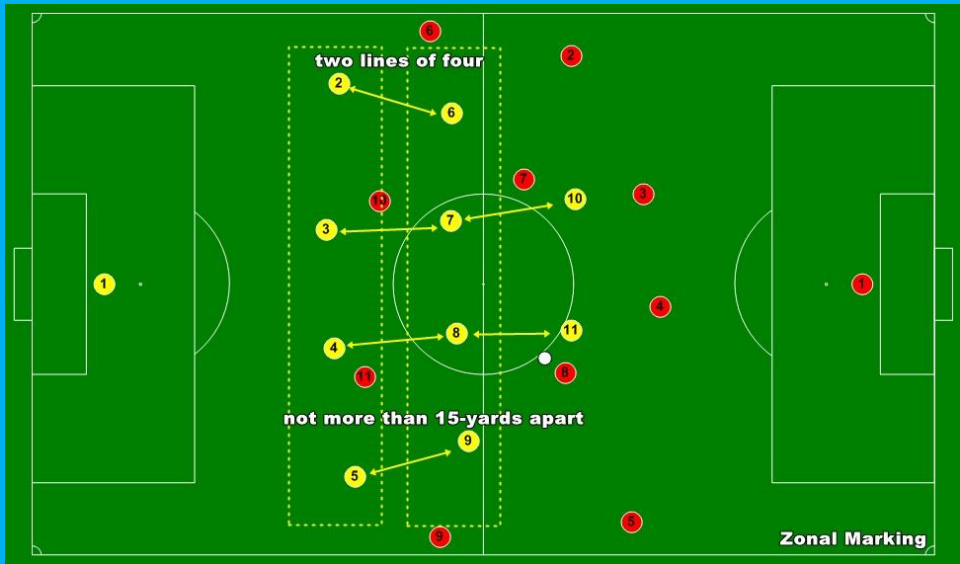
The key benefit of zonal marking is the two-lines of four that run across the pitch.

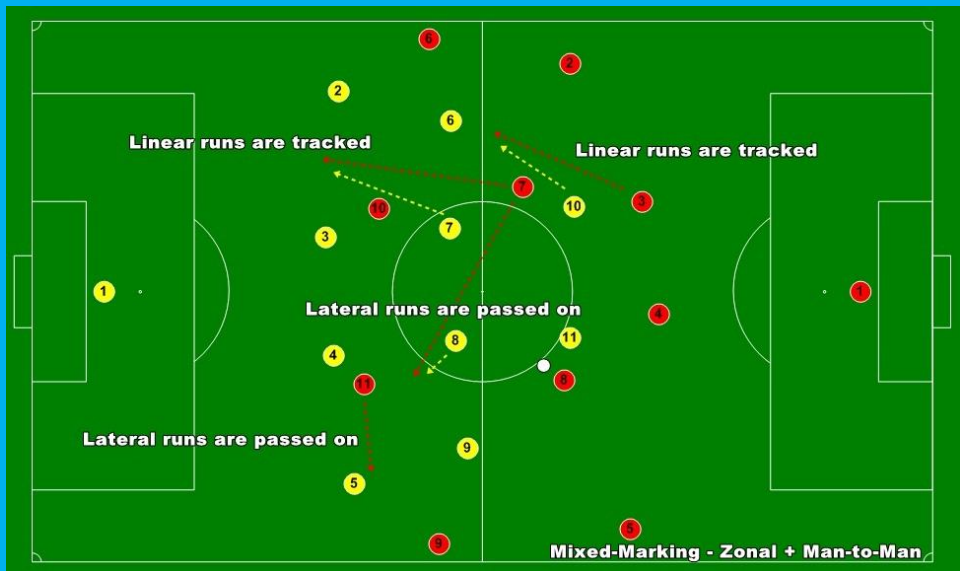
These lines offer excellent width-coverage and if maintained in closer proximity of each other, i.e. if both lines play 10 to 20 yards apart at all times, provide minimal space to the opposition between the lines.

The basis of zonal marking is quite simple – when an opposition player runs laterally, or across the width of the pitch, then their marking responsibility is handed over to the next zone's defender/midfielder.

However, if a player makes a linear run, or along the length of the pitch (through the middle or on the flanks), then the defender/midfielder from the zone where they begin their run needs to track their run.

Now, that might prompt you into saying that if a player has to track a penetrating run from the opposition player, how are they marking zonally?





Well, that's really the point – you can never truly play zonal-defending or man-to-man in isolation.

They have to be combined!

The benefits of combining zonal marking and man-marking far outweigh the benefits of either one of them separately.

The problems associated with residual defending can be avoided by setting a high-defensive line.

If you employ a zonal-defence higher up the pitch, while maintaining the tight-gap between the lines, the pressure height can be closer to the opposition goal.

This would also allow teams to put pressure on the opposition's ball carrier high up the pitch, with the entire team providing great defensive support without losing structural integrity.

What's more, if and when the ball is won back, the players would be in their preferred positions, or positions of strength, to launch quick counter-attacks.

In pure man-to-man marking, this would require players to have an exceptionally high level of fitness.

That could work in a game or two, but in a long season where you play two or three times every eight-days, this kind of workload and intensity level would take its toll on even the fittest players in the largest squads.

In pure zonal marking, where player-marking would simply be handed over to the next zone's defender/midfielder, the main problem would become overloading.

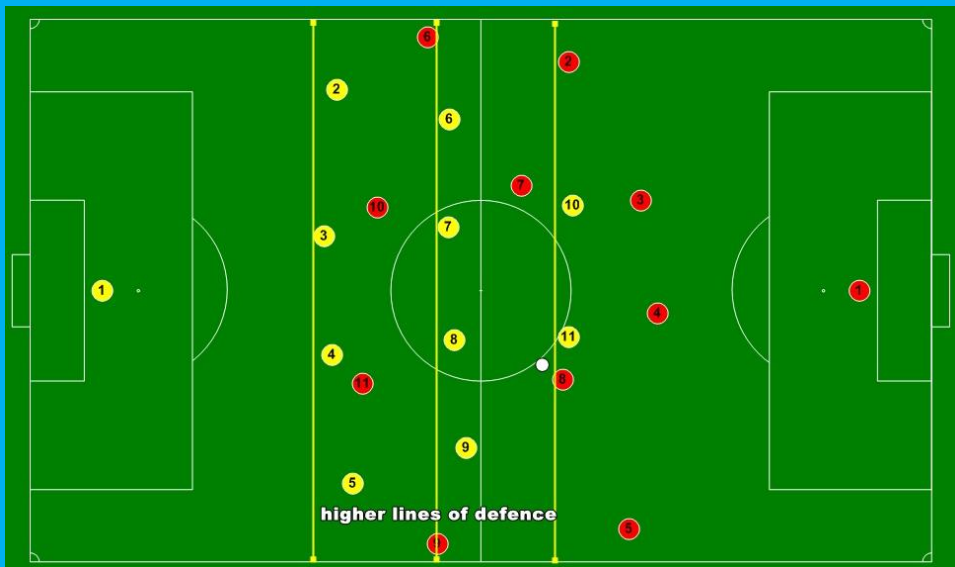
You can hand-over players laterally, but the moment they make penetrating runs, handing them over would simply overload your defensive line every single time.

That would mean, zonal marking and man-to-man marking just would not be an effective solution in isolation.

They need to be used in a combination with zonal-marking being used to hand-over players to the next zone's marker for every lateral-run and man-marking used to track penetrating runs along the length of the pitch.

THE IDEAL SITUATION

Now, here's the thing – every player has their own capabilities and in the end, it's



those capabilities that decide the outcome of every single 1-v-1 duel.

Think of attacking & defending skills, and now think of the number of players you know that are great at both.

If you think hard, you might find a handful of players who are exceptional in attack as well as in defence.

Edgar Davids comes to mind as one such player, as does Gaizka Mendieta.

Bastian Schweinsteiger, Steven Gerard, Xabi Alonso, Phillip Lahm are some of the others, but you will quickly run out of names.

The truth is, every player can defend and every player can attack, but very few players can attack really well and defend really well.

It's that thing about right-footed players and left-footed players – everyone should be two-footed but the fact remains, even players like Lionel Messi favour one foot over the other.

Heck, even Diego Maradona lived off of his left-foot and ended up winning a World Cup with it.

Once again, in an ideal world, we would bring up players with exceptional skill, both as attackers and defenders, but that would require a consistent form of training from childhood to professional-dom, something that is harder to execute than it sounds.

There are issues in every form of defending and even the mixed-form allows the opposition to put their best players against your weakest zones, or build-up attacks along your weakest zones.

However, the advantage of the mixed-form of defending is simply that the moment a defending player over-commits or gets dribbled out of the move, the structural integrity provides more security and lesser room for the opposition to take advantage.

To end this discussion, I would like to just add one thing: Try and imagine a situation where you are playing strictly man-marking or zone-marking (no run-tracking) and my team has a Lionel Messi or Cristiano Ronaldo?

How many times would they get past their marker?

Enough for me to opt for a mixture of zonal- and man-to-man marking, thank you very much!

CB

PREPARE FOR THE YEAR AHEAD.

Before the season gets underway and players get into their stride, there is the small matter of preparation for the entire season.

Training during the season is all about preparing for games and recovering from them – a rather short-sighted objective compared to the massive effort that needs to come before things even kick-off.

The need to have a solid **Preseason Training Plan** cannot be emphasized enough as players come in from a break and need to get back into their stride. This isn't about preparing for one match or one opponent – it is to get ready for a season-long battle on an individual and team-level.

This is that time of the season when teams are made or broken and if you get this part wrong, your season will quickly head south!

A preseason training session may only last an hour but a coach has to spend a lot of time planning out each and every session ahead of time.

The key to creating a strong and capable team is to pay a lot of attention to the preseason planning process because it is in this aspect of a coach's job that the real work is done.

The number of training sessions you will have, the matches and tournaments you will play, and, especially, the players you have will decide your entire training plan.

A preseason can be ideal preparation for your team but only if you plan well.

Only then will you see your players peaking at the right time, each week, and performing at the highest level.

Hopefully, we will be able to give you an overview into the world of preseason planning.

DIFFERENT KINDS OF PLAN

Well, to begin with, there are two major classifications for planning: General and

Specific.

To explain **General Planning (GP)**, we will need to explain **Specific Planning (SP)** first.

Specific Planning is all about targeting key areas that need attention as you go about training your players.

This could include elements like strength training, endurance training, technical training, etc.

Basically, it is the break-up of a general plan into smaller, more specific, segments – hence the name.

General planning is, in broad terms, the umbrella plan that covers all your specific plans and combines them into a season-long plan with a distinct objective.

By focussing on SP, you can easily figure out how to get to your objectives and in the end, add up all your SPs to make the overall GP.

The GP will be based on a team-objective and might revolve around the kind of fitness levels you want from your players or the kind of style you want them to play in.

The SP will help you isolate the areas where



your team/players lack the ability to achieve that final objective or perform as they need to, according to your GP.

Now, there are various elements that affect specific planning:

Preseason is a key factor in determining how you go about preparing for the entire season ahead.

This is the phase when you do a lot of observation to understand your players' condition and prepare your preseason plan to strengthen conditioning, mainly, through the process of tactical games.

What you are looking for is factors that signify when and where you need to make an **intervention**.

The intervention is nothing but a fancy term where you step in and tell the player what they need to do, maybe even differently from others, to improve in a particular aspect of their game.

This could mean a lot more strength

training for one player or more endurance training for another – however, the factors that you need to look at to identify these interventions may not be a direct connection.

What we mean is that you won't probably look for "a weakness" in one-on-one tussles to see whether the player needs strength training or not – it is not that literal.

You will look at things like range of motion and if the player seems to be limited in any way, strength training can help them improve.

Constantly monitoring players will help you understand their state and monitor progress to see whether your plan is working or not.

Now, another element that comes into preseason planning is the kind of preseason schedule you have.

Obviously, there will be practice games but do these games require you to travel?





Does your club have marketing commitments that require the team to go to distant places where the conditions are not like your local conditions?

Then, the SP for the preseason needs to be created on this basis.

THE STANDARD PRESEASON

A standard preseason calendar is about finding suitable opponents close to home, where the opposition quality, conditions and travel are ideal for your players to move into high gear as the season approaches.

Teams that go on long tours, staying on the road and playing tough opponents might seem like they are working hard, but they might not be achieving their overall objective of getting the players up to a particular standard.

The biggest problem with long tours is that the team spends a lot of time travelling and a lot less time on the training pitch.

So, when you see issues with the team, you don't get enough time to iron out those

issues because there just isn't enough time to work on them.

Studies have shown that the overall physical condition of a player, after a long tour-based preseason, is about 24% less than a standard preseason where the team is close to home and practices more often.

As a coach, you will often find yourself spending more time in deciding the logistics of your travel than the actual coaching of your players.

It might look great to see Manchester United FC or Real Madrid CF go on tours to North America and Asia, but if you are thinking about planning your team's preseason on their paths, then you will face a lot more issues, especially if you are small club where the manager or coach has to handle all the other aspects (logistics, stay, weather, food, etc.)

ACCOUNTING FOR PLAYER ABSENCES

Now, if you are big club like the two named above, you are likely to have players out on international duty and so on.

However, if you are a smaller club, missing players is still a problem.

Sometimes, players may be out on holiday and their schedules to return might be different.

This is especially true in the case of youth teams where players may head out with their parents on their holidays, coming back according to the school schedule and not according to your training schedule.

The result is that these players either start behind the others or require additional attention from the coach/training staff.

This is where knowing your players well will help!

The quicker you understand their deficiencies, the quicker you will be able to intervene and the quicker they will be able to reach the same level as their teammates.

Fatigue and the mental side of the game generally require the most effort, in preseason with youth teams, as players need time to overcome their holiday hangover and get back into training mode.

The lost sessions need to be made up for as quickly as possible, which is another reason why a standard preseason plan is better than one that requires a lot of travel.

You get more training sessions and, therefore, more opportunities to work with your players and bring them up to speed.

FINALLY, THE DREADED SCHEDULE

A couple of issues back, we spoke about how the schedule can affect player fitness.

There wasn't much difference observed in the way players perform in terms of distance covered or time-played, but there

was a marked difference when it came to high-intensity work on the pitch.

The more congested your training calendar, the more important it is for you to spend time working on your players' fitness levels and overall conditioning during preseason.

You need to prepare them for the rigours of the season ahead because poor preparation will not only mean lower performance, but also higher injury-rate.

Working on your players conditioning, at this stage, will slowly help them develop their fitness levels for the time when the season actually picks up pace.

This will also ensure that they are prepared for those tough weeks when they play three-times in 8-days and most of the mid-week time is spent recovering for the next game rather than preparing, physically, for it.

Once again, you need to know your players, the positions they play in; the rigours of playing in those positions, and where your players need greater focus.

Preseason is a time when you need to do a lot of evaluation and planning, making sure that you notice all the points of intervention for each individual player and identify the elements that you need to focus on to prepare the entire team for the season ahead.

The requirements of a lower-intensity position, like that of a centre-back, are extremely different from that of a higher-intensity position, like a central midfielder.

By identifying who your players are, in each position, and preparing them for the season ahead, you give your team the chance they need to enjoy a year of high performance and low injuries. **CB**



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