Good Technique is Not Enough

By Lang Wedemeyer

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On several occasions I have heard U.S. National Team coaches Bruce Arena and April Heinrichs mention that one of the biggest problems with our rising youth players, boys and girls alike, is that they do not have the ability to play effectively under pressure. The players' technique breaks down when under pressure and their speed of play is not fast or accurate enough to create a flow in high-level games.

This raises a question: "What is the youth coach's role and responsibility in teaching technique that leads to better speed of play and the development of more creative and skillful players?"

We constantly preach "technique, technique, technique" to our younger players, but are coaches truly helping them develop efficient technique under pressure? Or are we constantly setting up unrealistic situations for them? Take for example the "Coerver Craze." Fast footwork is wonderful; I do it with my players all the time.

But what are the situations in which coaches are training their players to use these technical skills? Are we having them make moves against phantom defenders? What happens when they are faced with a real live defender coming at them at different speeds or different angles or in different parts of the field? Are we doing enough to help prepare and develop our players to deal with these types of situations? Often, we are left with technical repetition without tactical context.

What is the coach's responsibility in relation to training technique? The responsibility is three-pronged:
• Giving the players tools with which to practice on their own;
• Repetitively putting players in a pressured environment in training sessions, and
• Emphasizing the important coaching points during the games.

Defining technique and skill
Technique is the mechanism with which the body maneuvers itself to be able to complete an objective. If the objective is to pass the ball 15 yards to a teammate, the brain informs the body to maneuver itself in order to kick the ball in that direction. How well the body adjusts to the demand determines how good the technique is, while how quickly the brain interprets the cues and the message sent to the muscles determines the speed of play. The better the technique, the greater the likelihood that the ball will go where we want it and how we want it played.

Then what is the difference between technique and skill? As taught to me by the late Mike Berticelli in my first NSCAA National Course, technique is the mechanics behind solving a problem and skill is being able to solve the problem regardless of the mechanics. Skill is basically getting the job done no matter how it looks. But with better technique, the player's success rate is heightened.

In the early stages of the coaching schools, we teach youth coaches about progression in their training sessions. The first progression in a technical session is referred to as fundamental. This is placing players in an environment in which they are receiving lots of repetitions without initial pressure. Then pressure is added progressively, judging by the success rate of the players. Most coaches still organize technical training based on this format.

What I am proposing is using these ideas to help players start to practice on their own outside of the team training sessions. Youth coaches need to instruct players on how to effectively self-train. Most coaches give our youth players "homework" to practice between training sessions, and that is a good start. The problem is how to get these players to really self-train when there are so many other things that they want to be doing? Coaches have to compete with Nintendo, birthday parties, other sports, watching TV — the list goes on and on.

The only real way that I see is to continually stress the importance of ball work to the players and their parents. The ones who are practicing on their own will naturally be the more motivated and usually emerge as the best players as they develop at a faster rate.

The rest are the players whom coaches have to motivate in terms of self-development. There is an unlimited number of exercises that coaches can give their players to practice on their own — everything from the Coever techniques to passing against a wall to juggling, etc. But there is still a problem. Tom Turner, Region II DOC, talks about a girl at one of the regional camps who had unbelievable technical ability. This youth player could juggle forever and do Coever moves faster than anyone in camp, but was lost and ineffectual on the field. Here is where the role of the coach must emerge to place these players in environments where their technical ability is under pressure. If they are successful in a more challenging environment, they will turn each technique into skillful play.

Evaluating technical progress
How do coaches evaluate players' technical progress? The coach could test them with how many Coever moves they execute in a minute, how many juggles in two minutes, how many correct receptions out of 10 tosses, etc. But that all takes too much practice time, though such testing might be a worthy self-testing mechanism for off-field work. Such testing is quantitative as opposed to qualitative.

The coach's responsibility is to create the environment in which players are placed under immediate pressure. The role of the coach is to help players understand the cues that allow them to apply the proper technique in game-like situations. We always hear there are no tactics without technique. Well, there is no technique without tactics. The use of the proper technique comes from decision-making ability in pressure situations. This will help the speed of play while also enforcing a higher level of technical ability, but all within the context of the game.

A sample practice
An example of this would be if a coach has a group of U-10s and wants to improve their passing ability. If the coach teaches them early on in the season how to practice passing on their own, then come practice time they shouldn't have to be lined up to practice that technique. Perhaps the warm-up might have some small group line drills (passing back and forth and exchanging line positions, etc.) but the session could move right into a 5 v. 2 game for warm-up where they are passing under some type of initial pressure.

In this situation the coach can now help players with understanding of the technical nuances of the weight of pass, deception, etc., which are all decisions that lead to the success of the technique of passing.

This must progress into a more game-like situation in which there is free movement and free decision-making on the part of the players. The technical aspects of passing along with the cues that lead to the use of those techniques would then be continually emphasized throughout the session.

A key point here is to still keep the numbers small, especially with younger players. In situations where they are placed in two goal games of 4 v. 4, players can't hide and are forced into pressure situations more often. So now we are getting the repetition of using the different techniques over and over. The players are also in an environment in which they are constantly making the choices based on cues from the game. This must be progressed into a biggergame, depending on the age group, so that more technical abilities come into play, such as long passes, crosses, etc.

Playing the game

But what do coaches do when it's game time? For younger players, U-12 and down, it is a good idea to set different goals for their games instead of winning and scoring. Set goals of completed passes in a row or everyone using the outside of the foot to pass the ball at least once or everyone chipping the ball at least once during the course of the game, etc. In setting these goals, coaches can emphasize the use of techniques in the game atmosphere. When the technique breaks down for a player, the coach can then make the decision whether it was a simple mechanical mistake or the decision to use that technique was not the right one for that situation. Hopefully the player has already decided what the problem was.

It is in the game environment, where players are under the most pressure to perform, that coaches can evaluate how well their training regime has prepared them. When evaluating their performance, the coach should make some notes on different situations that can be recreated in a training environment to help prepare the players to understand the technical cues. An example would be that if the coach has been emphasizing passing in the team's training sessions for a period of time, but realizes that the team is weak on shooting the ball, then shooting might be the focus of subsequent training sessions.

Problem solving

Having reviewed technical training methodology, we are still faced with two real problems:

• How do we get our players to practice and improve their technical ability so they are proficient enough to place them into games?
• How do we as coaches learn and understand how to give our players the proper combination of technique with tactics?

There are different ways of answering both these questions. The first one is up to the individual coach. Only you as the coach can determine what will inspire your players to go out and practice on their own. Maybe you have them keep a juggling record or rewards system for younger players or give homework sheets to the parents. But all in all, it will be the more inspired and dedicated players (even at that age) who want to practice on their own, who want to become better. The ultimate test is how they perform in the game under pressure. As these players progress, it will more than likely be the motivated players who will develop the fastest and go on to higher levels of soccer. Your job with these youth players is to try and inspire all of them, but also to nurture the ones who really have the desire.

As for the second question, if you are reading this article, then you are the kind of coach who will also learn on his/her own. You have taken a big step by just being a member of the NSCAA and reading the magazine. Another way is by attending coaching courses.

Also watching and evaluating games at every level as often as possible is a great way to enhance your knowledge. By watching an MLS or WUSA game on television, one can learn how and why players succeed by using their technical abilities. The coach must also watch other games at or just above his/her own coaching level to see how other players handle speed of play issues. This is not only for the coach. The players can also learn a lot by watching other players or by trying to emulate them.

Conclusion

The teaching of technique is very important. But technique without game application is worthless. Players must have the ability to match technique with tactics to be more successful in the game. A player who can juggle 3,000 times is not effective if the individual doesn't have an impact on the game. It is up to the youth coaches to help inspire in players to work on the fundamentals of soccer outside of regular team training sessions. It is also important for the coach to create a training environment where the repetition of application of technique is taught within the context of game-like situations. Having said all of this, players should always be encouraged to collectively play on their own. It is within the game that they learn the most.

"Creative, skillful players will develop in response to an environment where techniques and tactical awareness develop together," Tom Turner says. Wouldn't it be much nicer to coach players in the game as opposed to constantly setting up stagnant drills, not to mention more fun for the players? By expanding time spent by the players training technique on their own, coaches have a better chance to achieve this ideal.