

Movement Off Ball

This is our sixth post in the Possession Series here. This is a follow on from our Playing from the Spot installment.

A popular coaches' mantra you might have heard is: "Who is the most important player on the field? The player withOUT the ball."

If you want to play a possession style of soccer, movement off ball will (or needs to) become your single biggest topic you work into almost every session. As we learned from the previous post about playing from the spot, if we're encouraging players to not automatically advance the ball on their own, guess how your team has to advance the ball: Yep, playing the ball to an available teammate.

What sounds easy (e.g. "just get OPEN") is actually a dozen+ skills/tactics that ALL your players have to master for your possession game to be effective. Because this topic is a never-ending rabbit hole of skills development, we need a place to start. Though there is much overlap, there are both technical and tactical aspects to movement off ball. This article will focus on the technical aspect. Once your players become masters of the technical element you can start slowly introducing the more tactical aspects that will have to be covered elsewhere.

Let's simplify down to the primary technical skills involved:

- Peeling away from marking opponents during a transition
- Moving to available space
- Signaling availability to your teammate
- Preplanning your next pass

Peeling Away

Senior coaches like to say some variation of "games are won

and lost in the transition". That means many things, but for our purposes the important element to possession is that your players need get good at the mental switch of possession. Once possession is gained, players must convert from a Cover mindset into Width and Support. I will tell you right away, however, that in your early days of teaching this, your players are going to get run ragged because of the frequency of possession change in youth soccer. As your team gets better at possession, the less transition they have to do = less running = happier players. Use this as a coaching point.

The hardest element to teach is actually the simplest: instilling the habit of actually moving off ball. Few things frustrate a coach more than a player that passes the ball, then simply stands there watching. A new mantra I want you to adopt: 3 steps!

3 steps will be shorthand for your players to understand that after transfer of possession or any pass that they make, all players need to immediately and quickly take a minimum of 3 steps somewhere to support their teammate. The next question is where should those 3+ steps take them, which leads us to...

Available Space

For the sake of simplicity, at this stage of training, available space will mean three things:

1. Not immediately next to an opponent
2. Within passing distance of your teammate
3. In a passing lane or "seam"

Once you get into the discussion of which seams or spaces are better than others under different scenarios, I would label that as "tactics" and something to introduce much later after they are having success with possession in small sided games. When you start talking about positioning/spacing outside of passing range you are then talking more about the principles of width and penetration, thus I consider that more tactical

in nature as well. For the sake of learning, if your players can get really good at generically taking good advantage of available space you'll be way ahead of the competition at this level and you can slowly build from there.

Signaling Availability

While not directly associated with "movement", you'll want to work on your signaling during your position exercises to maximize their adoption. First, there aren't 100% correct or incorrect ways to signal, but some are better than others. I'm going to introduce you to a few of my recommendations that are intended to be very clear, as well as allows for the addition of more complicated signals as they progress.

Verbal Signals

Verbal signals should only be used in a manner in which they cannot help an opponent. Commands to the player on ball should be short and relevant to their environment, but typically not instructional. So "man on", "turn", "behind", "support" are all good verbal signals because they feed succinct, relevant information to the ball carrier without conveying useful information to the opponent. Conversely, yelling "open" or "pass back" or "through ball" are not ideal because it immediately draws the attention of the defense. It's better to teach players on the ball to scan the field with their head up looking for nonverbal signals which are much harder to spot and leverage by the opposing team.

Nonverbal Signals

- Pass the ball to my feet – Both arms in front of your body pointing down toward your feet, palms open
- Pass a leading ball – One arm pointing downward at 45 degree angle, palm out. Pointing in direction you want the ball
- Pass to me in space – Arm up, pointing upward 45 degrees in direction you want, palm out

- Don't pass to me -or- pass to other player – Arm straight out to side 90 degrees, palm/fingers closed. Pointing in direction of better option. Stand straight up, chest out. Your body language should reinforce that you are not in a position to receive the ball

Nail these four before progressing to anything more complicated. I like the verbal command “support” as a catchall term for conveying a safe passing option that the player on the ball can use while their head is down under pressure—generally behind the ball carrier. This generally does not help the opponent as they are likely to be facing in a manner to see your open teammate already.

You can check here for other options to introduce in the future.

Next Pass

A critical skill to start developing young is teaching players that as soon as they arrive in a seam and are ready to signal for the ball, they take a quick sideways glance in either/both directions to spot 1) an open teammate upfield, and 2) if they have a closing defender that will prevent them from turning with the ball.

While you can create drills to work on this specifically, you're just as well to simply incorporate 1 touch restrictions in other teaming drills you run which force the player to pre-evaluate their options.

Activity – Keep Away

You can leverage all the other drills I've covered in this series to focus on these aspects. The focus of your coaching simply shifts to the off-ball players in each activity. You can start with the Keep Away progression from Playing from the

Spot with a couple of slight modifications:

- Players who don't take three steps after a pass move is the same as losing the ball. Start by having coaches call this out. After a time, consider placing a bounty on recognizing this infraction. Any player who sees a player standing still can yell "no 3 steps" and they receive a "get out of jail free card" so if they lose possession the other player goes in in their place
- Incorporate signaling. Use the same rules above such that if they don't signal, it's the same as losing the ball
- Incorporate touch restrictions that will help the players get better at shielding and will encourage players to plan ahead for their next touch

Our next post in the series Importance of Width and Spacing, will provide you some additional coaching points for those off ball.