



Teaching Team Shape & Field Awareness
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When ever I conduct a Kentucky Youth Soccer Association Coach Education course one of the most popular questions I am asked by the candidates attending is.

“How can I make my team spread out? They are always bunched up and follow the ball”

This is a familiar pattern with players that are U8 and below, which should be expected. At this young age children are just learning the concept of sharing and in the majority of team sports the child wants the ball. Even if you were to throw or hit a baseball into the outfield the likelihood is that more than one or two children will chase it down.

As these young players mature they will gain more understanding of the game, but as coaches we can help them gain a better understanding of team shape and field awareness at an early age. Children can sometimes take your word to the extreme, we throw different terminology out there that has no meaning and the players get lost, consequently the sessions will lose its purpose.

I observe coaches during games or practice session that when the ball is out of play they will instruct for their team to spread out. A young child can take this in any context and you observe players running in any direction in anticipation of receiving the pass; consequently the team fails to really obtain any shape or position. It may be a quick fix to the problem, but as soon as the ball is returned in on to the field the players will retreat back to chasing the ball.

Building from the basics should always be a priority when planning your season, meaning majority of your practice time should focus on technical issues. Although team shape maybe considered a tactical topic it is an issue that needs to be covered.

The best time for a coach to work on team shape and field awareness should be during the final Match Condition activity. Remember this is also a time for the players to play with-out to much instruction so keep all your points sharp and simple starting with Goal-Keeper or back line building through to your strikers.

Whether the final player is a Goal-Keeper or a Defender their first outlets have to be looking for a teammate in a wide position. Majority of the youth soccer players do not use the full width of the field as a fear that they may not even receive the ball, this is a false understanding as they are more likely to receive the ball without pressure.

The opposing team will probably have been instructed to remain compact by remaining centrally, therefore allowing the receiving player more time and space to move forward when they receive the ball.

If the opposing team become smart to this occurrence and move out wide to stop the players receiving the ball, this will open up space down the middle. Once this space has opened up it can be filled by midfielders or strikers, but it is important that these players have also created their open space by going wide and deep.

Once the midfielders have created this space they can check back into this area with pace, still providing them more time to receive the ball without pressure from their opponent. If you are coaching a team with older players, there may be times when you don't want your midfielders to go wide. Depending on the style of play your team plays, you may have the midfielders remain in the middle allowing the wide defending players to overlap into the attack.

If the midfield players are wide and remain in this position, it can also allow the opportunity for the strikers to check back in to this area. Young players who like to play as a striker are very blinkered and continuously look for the ball over the top. Encouraging them to start in a deep position can help break this habit as they are then forced to come back and receive the ball allowing the midfielders space to go in behind them.

There will be times when your team will lose their shape, especially when they are not in possession of the ball, but when the ball has successfully been regained continuous positive reinforcement of encouraging them to regain shape and utilize the space by going wide and deep will help your players understand the concept more.

If you can effectively work with your team to utilize the space by going wide and deep at an early age, you will find it easier to build on this concept as the players mature. Teams that are effectively coached to play with better shape and use the full width of the field are very difficult to beat and more enjoyable to watch.

For some great lesson plans and activities to help work on team shape and field awareness please check out the Lesson Plans in the Coaches Corner of the Kentucky Youth Soccer Association website, www.kysoccer.net