

SYSTEMS OF PLAY

How to Organize Your Team

Developing the System of Play Most Suited to Your Team

Although most systems are described by numbers, numbers are only one part of the team organization. One team playing a 3-5-2 formation may be very different to another. One might be a very aggressive attack minded team, whereas another team could employ the same numerical arrangement in a predominantly defensive manner.

As a coach, what should be your first consideration? Number one, look at your own players first and foremost:

- Who are your key players?
- Who will score the goals?
- Who will stop the goals?
- Who will create the scoring chances?

The team then, should be built around these key players.

Then-

- Who will compliment and compensate for your best players?

Team balance is essential. It is a question of creating the right mix of creative players together with committed, get the job done players, perhaps having less skill.

Also you should team up players to produce effective duos. For example, a tall target-man striker teaming up with a smaller, skillful, quick player. Or a creative midfield player, who can quarterback the team could be helped by a lesser, but more aggressive ball winning player to give a well balanced midfield duo.

- What would be the best way to set up your team organization to take advantage of the Principles of Play? For instance, how best to exploit Width in Attack.

And another key consideration-

- How will you take advantage of attacking at set plays, such as free kicks and corner kicks, and how will you defend at set plays? This may well involve moving players out of their normal positions to increase their chances of scoring or preventing goals.

And then-

- How will you re-adjust back to your normal team formation after a set play?

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Long-Term Plans and Short-Term Goals

The coach, the assistant coaches and the players need to have a long-term plan. What do we hope to accomplish this season? The answers will vary with every team. One might be to win the State Championship. The other might be to just have a fun season. Another might be that in four years time, we want to have maximized the skills development and game savvy of every player. To accomplish the latter will most certainly jeopardize short-term results.

Once you've established your long-term plan-

- First, you must look at the numerical arrangement for your players.
- Second, what are your expectations for the season, or a tournament, etc?

If you have highly skilled players the overall philosophy might be a very attack-minded mode of playing. On the other hand, if you were an inexperienced team, not yet the quality of the other teams you normally play against, it might be more expedient to play a more cautious, conservative, defensive type of game.

So, having developed an overall philosophy, and converted that into a system of play, (remember, the system is only the starting place) you are now in a position to start putting the detail into your system of play.

- How will the back players operate? (that's not just numbers, it's the tactics of play) A sweeper, man-marking system, or a zonal system with a flat back line?
- How will the midfield players arrange themselves? Who will be the playmaker, the ball-winner, the player(or players) making the forward runs from midfield?
- Who will be your front players and how will they interact?

Then you must look at-

- How are you going to develop the understanding within the team to allow interchange of positions, particularly on the attack so you don't become a predictable and easily-defended-unit?
- Where are you going to attempt to put in your line of confrontation and the line of defense?
- Are you going to be a high-pressure team or a low-pressure counter-attacking team?

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And, as an aside to this stage, talking about overall philosophy, what is your team policy with regard to playing time? Do you try to get everyone in the game for at least half the game, or do you go with your strongest line in order to maximize your chances of winning? If you're making frequent substitutions, or even occasional substitutions, everyone must know the team requirements. Finally, we need to look at what would cause you to change your system of play.

Obviously, a lack of success, a lack of cohesion and team balance, but also the loss of players through injury or other circumstances may cause you to re-think the team system. As well, a new player joining the team may require an adjustment in the system of play, particularly if he or she had some special qualities that needed to be maximized.

And then we come to the real short-term factors that could influence you to adjust your system of play.

- The type of game you are playing- is it a must-win or a must not lose ?
- The expectations of a particular game

If your team has already won the league title, is this a good time to experiment before the playoffs? The same goes for a pre-season tournament.

So, on a game-by-game basis, you need your checklist for change.

- What do we know about the opposition?
- Who are their key players and their weak players?
- Are they smaller, fitter, faster, slower?

Other reasons to change your system of play-

- The field conditions. Is the field narrow, bumpy, big, wet, muddy?
- Your own team's fitness as well as the opposition's fitness. Can you sustain a high pressure game for 90 minutes?
- Weather conditions such as altitude, heat, humidity, rain and wind
- Forced or unforced substitutions. An injury or a red card?

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- The state and stage of a game. For example, if leading 2-0 with 10 minutes to go, it might be a good time to pull an extra player into the midfield. On the other hand, if you're losing 1-0 with 15 minutes to play, is that the time to throw another player forward or replace an attacker with a defender?
- Are you playing home or away?

There can be many other factors as well.

Finally, how important is winning for your team? In the World Cup, coaches don't experiment. They are out to win, or at least not get beaten. Would that be your philosophy if you were coaching a U13 team? We can't answer that question for you, but your answer will certainly effect your system of play.

Any questions regarding these documents please feel free to contact me.

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