

### Programmed or adaptive Players

A very current debate among technical experts concerns development of the game and player preparation. Without entering into the argument about styles of play, analysts of the game regularly promote their preference for play that relies on players being able to “read” the game, or for so-called “programmed” or scripted play. These two notions are often perceived to be incompatible, if not contradictory.

The apparent opposition between these two views, say coaches, affects the development of the young player, and also development and preparation for high performance play.

Without going into semantics, it seems appropriate to offer an explanation, if not a definition, of these two notions:

**“Reading the game” infers that players act and relate to indicators and reference points they perceive in the simultaneous actions of teammates and opponents.**

**“Programmed play” infers that players act (typically in a pre-determined situation) in ways that are prescribed by the particular system of attack or defense adopted by the coach.**

Without making any judgment as to the relative validity of these two definitions, we need to assert up front that we believe the merit of any particular phase of play is relative to the outcome of the initiative and the individual and collective decisions taken by the players.

In every phase of play there is an obvious connection between the various actions of the players. There may be several reasons for this:

1. It may be the outcome of a set of instructions or prescriptions for each player or group of players which defines a pattern of movement and positioning designed to ensure continuity in subsequent phases of play, with no reference to how defenders may act or react. This kind of programming may extend to several phases of play, meaning that players have to be patient and not rush to complete the play. The assumption is that by repeating or reproducing certain types of play, the defense will either reveal some weak point, or simply break down, without there necessarily being a logical link to the outcome

of successive phases of play. Generally speaking, the retention of possession over time remains the primary criterion of effectiveness.

*Too often we see teams create conditions for effective attack in a first phase of play, but then forget how to exploit the situation. It seems difficult to validate the decision to play in such a way as to kill all creativity, stifle initiative, and limit the freedom of the player, especially when the inability to attack is generally blamed on one player or another being out of position.*

*Players involved in “programmed” play who are overly concerned about executing the pre-determined play may forget to read the most obvious and, therefore, most pertinent signs - primarily the reaction of opponents - which should be conditioning their actions. The worst being when players on the attacking team don't realize that the opposition are right on the point of cracking under the pressure of the play being developed.*

*The Australians, and, to a lesser extent, England, suffer from this type of play. For some time the French copied this system, but seem to have abandoned it, preferring to return sometimes but not all the time to a more appropriately adaptive style of play.*

*Programmed play is a closed system of play. The players resort to the safe haven of a series of coded instructions with no tactical component. Team play is articulated around multiple combinations and patterns of play. What is sacrificed is the full potential of players' and consequently their ability to play.*

2. The link between phases of play may be the outcome of a plan that articulates where, how and when to attack the opposition, what outcome to achieve and what to do next, once the particular play has had the desired effect on the defense (this is when all the players know how the play is meant to unfold);  
or, the attack has the best possible effect on the defense (the defenders react in the way that the attacking team wants), so the mismatch that is created enables the play to go forward as planned;  
or, the defenders do not comply, so the programmed play is abandoned in favour of some other tactical decision relative to how the defenders react at any given moment to what the attackers are doing.

For most coaches the second option is generally the one that prevails. This is fine, providing, however, that all the players are free to change what has been planned, if and when necessary. This is only achievable when all the players act and react relative to a common reference point. So the players function within the framework of an open tactical system offering several possible options.

*However, despite less organization and more tactical flexibility given to the players, it is most often the players known to have better tactical sense (recognized to be the stars of the game) who always adapt better and quicker to what happens as play unfolds. The other players are less receptive to opening up the options and tend to stick to the plan. Once they find themselves in unknown territory, they are less able to anticipate what will happen next and they react more slowly.*

3). The link between phases of play may be the outcome of the individual quality of tactical thinking (no common reference point) of each player. Each player is left to sort through the range of tactical possibilities generated by each sequence of play. This would mean having players in every position on the team tactically equipped to use their initiative; despite the rapid-fire, chaotic nature of play, teammates would recognize what is happening, and this would enable them to do whatever they need to in order to get into the action.

*In an ideal world one could imagine that the formation of the player would produce more of this type of play which relies on all the players being able to take sound tactical decisions. Certain phases of play involving just a few players with tactical and technical abilities suggest that it is not completely out of the realm of possibility. Unfortunately, the pressure to get results causes coaches to be more cautious. Players with less tactical skill don't object, as they are inclined to prefer a modest but much more reassuring tactical repertory.*

So there could be two categories of players;

- Those who follow the programmed approach
- Those who have more tactical skills

How to prepare the player seems to be the question on the table. The challenge is to learn to what extent the players we could call “well prepared” would be inclined to respond to a game in which the pre-established

organization would give them licence to coordinate team play yet still take the individual initiative to determine, and even reorient, how play unfolds.

It is worth pointing out yet again, however, that to acquire such freedom of decision-making, the player needs to know how to “read” (see and understand) the interaction between attack and defense, which means that the player must be able to rely on his teammates having the same reference points to guide his decisions.

We believe that this is possible, but to achieve freedom in decision-making the player must still know how to read how the relationship between attack and defense is evolving. This, we repeat, means that he must share some common point of reference with his teammates, which will guide his decisions.

When this is the case, it means that the player is able to understand why he is doing what he is doing, that he will know how to modify the planned move on demand. Programmed play will become the means, rather than the end.

Being able to read the game as part of a programmed game only becomes relevant when in his initial preparation the player has been given the opportunity to experience all aspects of play and enjoy plenty of freedom to assess what’s happening in play, take decisions and act on them. This total investment in the context of the game will mobilize all dimensions of his being (vision-understanding–physical–emotional, etc.); this is the only way of enabling the player to progress towards a high level of play equipped with the necessary tactical tools to perform effectively.

Given that the initial preparation of the player may take in the order of 6, 7 even 8 years (before the age of 15-16 years), the well-formed player should emerge from this phase equipped with everything he will need to help him acquire new, position-specific skills.

So the player should not be made to specialize too soon. It would be better to build a strong foundation for his play within the framework of a broad, multi-purpose approach. In this way the player can develop the ability to adapt his play as needed, by working through a variety of increasingly demanding game situations. This will enable the player to learn how best to react to the movement and ever-increasing speed and commitment of the

game. This means that the coach must equip the player so that his potential is expressed in the best way with the right motivation in mind.

If the preparation of the future player is shortened, he will find himself thrown into a game in which the system will rule, which would run counter to the game of the future. The player's effectiveness will be relative to his mastery of situations of play, in other words his ability to adapt to the needs of the moment.

So the challenge for the player is to learn how to improve his ability:

- to anticipate successive phases of play
- to make the right connection between appropriate reading of the situations and sound execution of appropriate technical skills
- to balance the need to produce effective, coherent team play with the individual freedom of initiative and action of each individual player

For the coach, the challenge is to gauge how to match his needs with the player's activity:

- to know how to create just the right level of practice to help the player evolve by creating learning situations that meet his immediate and future needs;
- to know how to create learning situations in his practice sessions that help the players acquire the necessary skills, useful tactical and technical skills, and awareness of the possible choices of action.

By organizing the proposed situations in practice (number of players – how to launch the practice and position of the players – equipment needed)

- defining the objectives of the practice
- giving clear instructions to the players
- defining successful performance

The coach's task (when, why, how, to intervene) changes according to how well the players manage the situation of play presented by the coach.

Ongoing assessment of how well the players are doing will determine whether the learning situations need to be made more or less demanding.

Today, more than ever, the same three questions remain on the table:

- What kind of game do we want?
- What kind of player do we want to play this game?
- What training for players and coaches do we need?

