

CARL WILD



THE INTELLIGENT SOCCER COACH

PLAYER-CENTERED SESSIONS TO
DEVELOP CONFIDENT, CREATIVE PLAYERS

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The Intelligent Soccer Coach

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INTRODUCTION

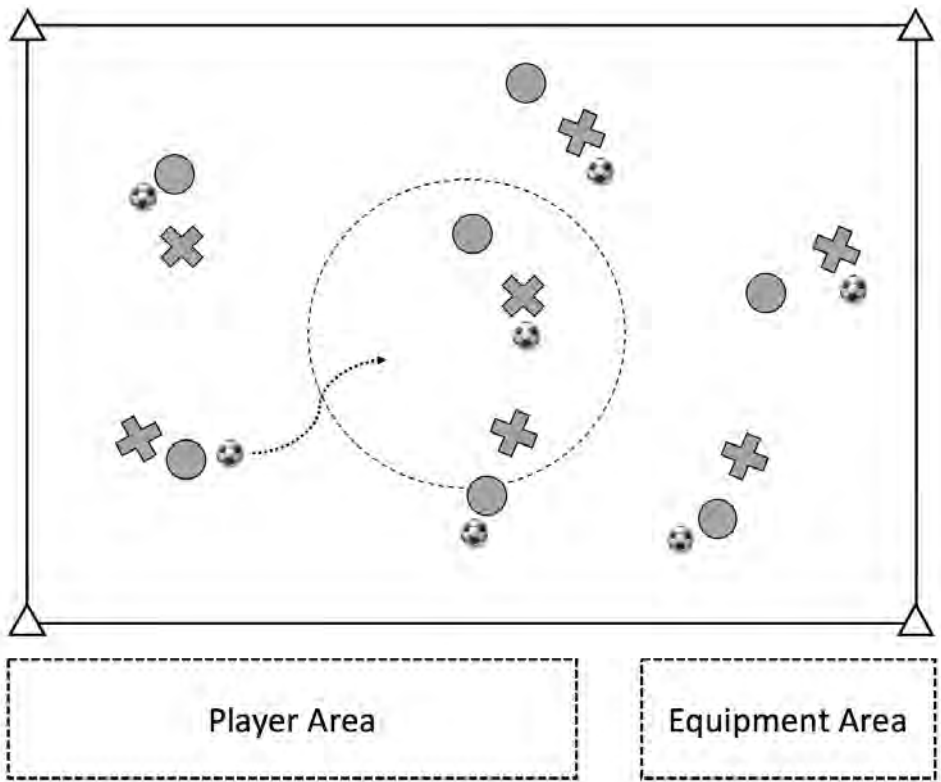
For many of us, our coaching journey begins because we have volunteered to help out with a team. It may be that our son or daughter plays for the team or we know someone who is already involved and we just want to help give this group of players an opportunity to play soccer. Therefore, the reason that we have entered coaching is a completely unselfish act; we have done it to allow young children the chance to play a game that they love to play, most likely with their friends. There is also a good chance that we have had some attachment to soccer already, whether this is playing the game ourselves, watching it as a spectator or even taking on the role of an official. And through this involvement, the game has provided us with an endless amount of enjoyment that we now want these young players to experience. This involvement would also have allowed us to gain and increase our knowledge of the sport, which we are keen to pass on to the players to help them develop and improve and become better players. In short, we enter coaching with all of the right intentions and these usually stay with us throughout our journey as a coach. However, what we might not fully understand is the correct approach that we need to apply, to be able to achieve these intentions. And this is merely because we only know what we know and therefore we will rely on our previous experiences and what we perceive to be the right thing to do.

These former experiences and beliefs will often lead us to the full version of soccer, as well as the professional game. For instance, when we watch the professional game, we will look to identify what the successful teams do well or the new trends that characterise the modern game. So we see tactics such as the high press and we will look to introduce this to the young players that we are working with, or we are influenced by the statistics that show the total distance that a professional player will run during a game and we will look to get the players 'fitter' so that they can run more when they are playing in a match. And though these observations are correct, in that they are key characteristics of the modern game and it is how we would want or like the players to be able to play the game, what we do not necessarily recognise or fully understand is that the players we are observing are adults and professional athletes and that they are in a completely different place in their journey as a soccer player compared to that of the players that we are coaching. We therefore need to recognise what is right for adult players and professional players is completely unsuitable for the young players that we are working with.

The chapters of this book will, first of all, provide a clear outline of what the game of soccer actually involves and consists of, specifically the format of the game that young children play. It will then go on to provide you with a more in-depth understanding of what your role is as a coach and the qualities that are needed to achieve this, many of which you probably already have, but you either did not realise were needed or you were just unaware that you actually had them. The remaining chapters will then concentrate on what the players need at this specific stage of their journey as soccer players. This includes the types of practices that they need to participate in; how we support them whilst they are involved in these practices; the different areas of performance that need developing; and how we can do this, not only throughout training but also on match days as well. This new information can be used, alongside the existing knowledge that you already have, to provide the players the best possible experience whilst playing the game that they love. To support your understanding of each of these areas, a range of different practices will be used, not only to show how it can be easily achieved, but to provide you with ideas as well that will hopefully inspire your own creativity and encourage you to produce stimulating and fun practices for the players to play and learn from.

Even though we have more than likely volunteered or requested to become the coach of the team with which we are working, we should not forget or take for granted that we are in a privileged position. We have an opportunity to work with a group of young children that have chosen to come to training and play matches because of their love for the game and their desire just to play. They will look up to us as role models, whilst also looking to us for guidance, support and help. They will be willing to listen and learn and will have a real yearning to become better players and reach their full potential. So not only are

we privileged to be able to have such a positive impact on these young lives, but we also have a great responsibility to do our very best for these players. The experience that we give them will undoubtedly stay with them for the rest of their lives, whether it is a good experience or one that they would rather forget. We must therefore, make it a positive one and one that they will always remember and will use in other aspects of their lives as they get older. We need to make sure that when they think back on the times that they came and played soccer with their friends and teammates, that they look back on them with fondness and joy; they need to be priceless memories which they would not change for anything. So what we must not and cannot do as a coach is let them down.





CHAPTER 1

UNDERSTANDING THE GAME

As coaches, if we are going to help the players that we are working with reach their full potential, then we need to make sure that we actually fully grasp the game itself and what actually makes it 'soccer'. Without this understanding, the practices that we use and the support that we provide may not be relevant or actually helpful in helping the players develop. And when we are talking about understanding the game, this is not just limited to the different tactics that can be used or the individual requirements needed for each different position. It is more about the different elements that, first of all, make it a game and then also the unique characteristics that are found firstly within invasion games and then soccer itself. If we can gain this awareness, then it will enable us to be able to put the players into an environment that is both relevant and realistic to the game, whilst also providing them with the support that will allow them to develop a much deeper game understanding that is essential to their development.

The main attraction of playing soccer, for most players, is the fact that it is a 'game' and children enjoy playing games. There is a concept within youth soccer that there should not be any form of competition and that young players are not bothered about winning. This is not necessarily true. Children usually enjoy winning, and whether this is a game of soccer, a board game or a school playground game, they will play the game and they will

try to win it. However, what we do not always understand or recognise is that if they do not win, then it is quickly forgotten and that it is not that important to them. Children will try to win a game of soccer, as the format of the game makes it competitive, but they are not overly concerned if they are not successful, it is usually the adults who are the ones that find it harder to accept. Children will very quickly forget about what happened in the game that they just played in, including the result, and they will move onto and focus on whatever happens next in their day-to-day lives. If a child decides to stop playing soccer, it is very unlikely that they came to that decision because they are not winning games. The reason a child will no longer want to play soccer is because they are no longer enjoying it or because something else comes along that they want to do instead.

This desire to want to play the 'game' is reinforced within the training environment. The most common question a coach will be asked by the players is usually, 'When are we playing a game?' Children will not start playing soccer because they want to take part in a passing practice or learn how to improve their defending; they start playing because they want to play the game. It is not that they do not enjoy training or learning, it is just that the biggest attraction is to actually play the game of soccer. It is therefore important that as a coach we utilise and capitalise on this desire to want to play games and whilst we cannot just constantly allow them to play in a game, as this will not support their development as a player, what we can do is design our practices so that they contain the characteristics of any game, whilst also resembling as many aspects of the game of soccer as possible.

As a coach you would never deliberately design or deliver a practice that is unrelated to the game. The perception will always be that the activity is relevant for the group of players that you are working with and that it is something that they need to practice and improve. What we do not always remember to do is to include essential components that when joined together make the practice both realistic and applicable to an aspect of the game of soccer. To start to include these essential components within our practices, we must first of all identify and understand the characteristics that are needed to make any activity a 'game'. After this, we must break this down further into the distinguishing factors of the game of soccer.

What Is a Game?

When we consider the games that we used to play as children growing up, whether this was on the playground during school or after school on the street or in the park, and the games that children play today – board games or even computer games – it is possible to ascertain key characteristics that they all have in common. Games are basically a form

of 'play', and playing an organised game just provides structure to this play. To achieve this structure, there need to be a number of specific features which then differentiate a game from random play.

Every game has a set of rules, which all players need to understand for the game to be played correctly. These rules, however, can be changed or adapted provided everyone understands and agrees to them. When we play a game of rock, paper, scissors, among the first questions we will ask before the game starts are, 'When do we show which option we have chosen?' and 'Is it on "scissors" or is it on "shoot"'? We are basically clarifying the rules of the game to ensure that both players understand how the game is to be played. Similarly, if we buy a new board game, we will usually read the rules that come with the game before we start to play it, because if we don't, we are unable to either play the game at all or we will play it incorrectly. If we do decide to play without reading the rules, we usually end up referring to them at some stage because something has come up in the game and we are unsure what it means or what happens next. Therefore, if we are going to play some form of game within our sessions we need to ensure that there are clear rules to the game and that everyone understands them. The easiest way to achieve this is by making sure that there are as few rules as possible and that these rules are simple to follow. If need be, further rules can be added as the game is played to make the game more challenging, and by adding them later on, this allows the players to grasp the game quickly which in turn allows it to get started more quickly.

In addition to rules, every game needs some form of scoring system so that there is not only the element of play but also some form of competition. Scoring systems can come in a wide range of formats. Whether it is a board game that requires the accumulation of monetary value or the number of bibs that you can grab in a game of 'tails', a game needs a scoring system that allows for the identification of a winner. This scoring format could be where the opponent/opponents are in 'direct' opposition, i.e., the actions of the other team or individual, directly affect you, and as a result of this, the score in the game. An example of these types of games are racket sports (tennis, squash, badminton, etc.). Or it could be a scoring format where you are competing against other individuals or a team, but their actions and the 'points' they obtain do not directly affect you, such as in a game of golf. Scoring systems can also be adapted to challenge players or to influence a particular outcome. For example, if you are doing a session that has a narrow focus on passing, when you play a game within the session, whether this is a normal game of soccer or some other form of game, the passing that takes place within the game influences the number of points scored. It could be that to score a point a player has to pass the ball to a teammate in an 'end zone' and that the number of passes made by the team before the final pass into the 'end zone' is the number of points awarded.

When we look at scoring systems, it is a good opportunity to start to consider how we implement a new form of game that is now commonplace for this current generation of player, i.e., the computer game. There is a clear argument that the evolution of the computer game has had a major impact on the amount of time young children participate in physical activity, which will subsequently have an impact on their physical literacy and motor skill development. But it also needs to be recognised that this form of play is not just a fad that will eventually disappear; instead it will continue to develop and will remain popular with young children. Therefore, though we should persist in encouraging children to spend less time playing these games, we should also identify that we can take concepts from these games and use them for our coaching that will then make the environment for the players more recognisable and also more fun. One of these concepts involves the scoring systems found within computer games. Quite often progression through computer games involves the player 'leveling up' and they often also have an opportunity to complete a 'bonus round'. Therefore, where possible, when planning our practices we should look to incorporate opportunities for players to 'level up' or obtain 'bonus points' within the scoring systems.

When we refer to games we also need to consider where they are played, i.e., the boundaries in which the game takes place and the equipment needed to play the game. Even in the games we played in our childhood in the local streets, there were restrictions in the form of the boundaries in which the game was played, whether this was the road kerb, a lamppost at the end of the street or a specific tree. Therefore, a game needs to have boundaries and we need to consider what happens if the game goes beyond these boundaries, whether it is a player in a game of tag or the actual ball in some form of ball game. We also need to consider the size and shape of the area that is formed by these boundaries, as this will have a major impact on how the game is played and the outcome of the game. How we manipulate an area and the effects this has on a practice will be discussed further in chapter 3.

The equipment needed for the game to be played and the purpose of this equipment also needs to be considered. The main consideration is: Do we have the required equipment to play the game? And if not, can we be resourceful and creative with what we do have available, so that the game can still be played? We also need to ensure that the equipment is both safe and appropriate for the age, ability and experience of the players. It could be that the game being played is some form of catching game, where the players have to catch and throw a ball. The ball that is used for the game needs to be appropriate so that it allows for achievement and success, whilst also supporting the safety of the game. Therefore, instead of using a ball that the players usually use, a smaller ball could be used such as a size 1 training ball or a tennis ball. The important thing to remember

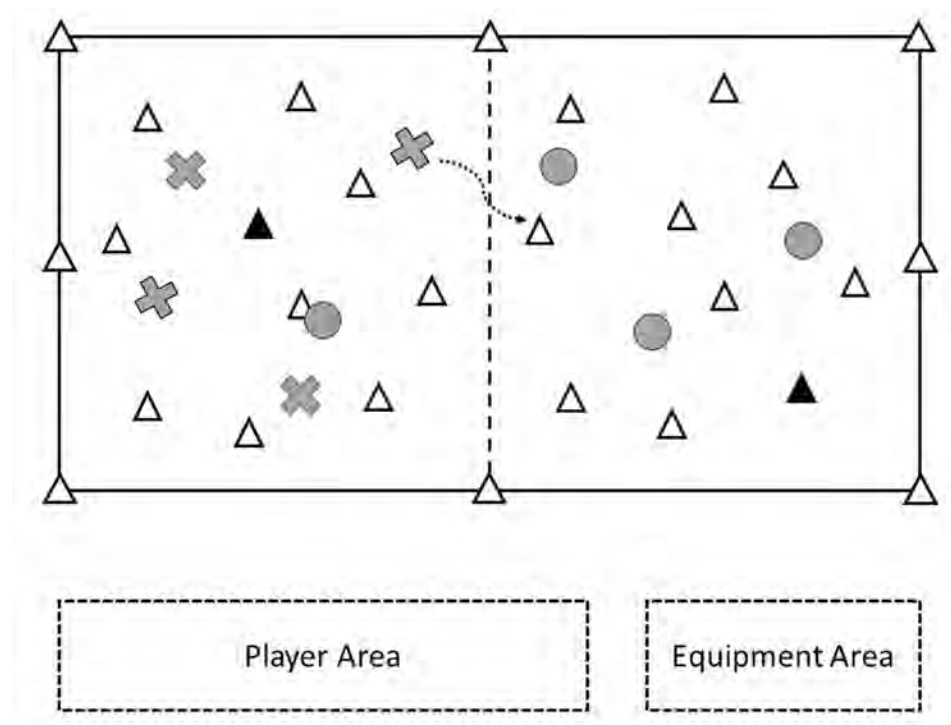
is that without the relevant equipment the game cannot be played, or it will need to be adapted so that it can be played with the equipment that is available. It is quite often the equipment, alongside the rules that make the game; badminton without a shuttlecock is no longer badminton.

We also need to consider players. How many players are needed and how they are divided has to be decided. The number of players playing a game is significant in terms of whether the game can actually be played and how much we enjoy playing the game. Every game will have a minimum number of players necessary for it to be played. More often than not this will be two, but quite often the game will become enjoyable if there are more than two players, but at the same time it can be less fun if there are too many players. If we look at a game of 'tag', it can be played with just two players but becomes much more enjoyable if we add further players. Part of the fun within tag is being chased. But enjoyment also comes from the unpredictability and anticipation of when you will be chased; therefore, if there are just two players then this element of the enjoyment you get from the game is lost. These parts of the game that provide enjoyment can also be reduced if there are too many players, increasing the number of players will mean that the likelihood of being chased is less likely and we spend more time being inactive.

How we divide players within the game can also be significant in how it is played and the experience the players gain from playing it. If we return to the game of tag, how we divide the players between those who are trying to avoid being tagged and those who are attempting to tag other players will affect the involvement the players have within the game, the difficulty of the game and therefore the enjoyment of the game. We may also need to consider whether the players are playing the game individually or whether they are in teams, and if they are in teams how do we organise the teams in terms of numbers? Are they equal or is there a deliberate overload towards one team, and is this because they have different tasks within the game? Again, all of this can be seen within the game of tag; the players attempting to tag the other players can be working alone or they could be working in a team; or the players could be split into two teams with both teams attempting to tag each other in some format; or it could be that there are three teams and each team takes turns being the one that is tagging; or all three teams are trying to tag each other at the same time. The important part is that the players are organised to maximise their involvement and enjoyment of the game.

The final and most important element is obviously the fun factor. If a game is a structured form of play, then we need to remember that the main purpose of play is to provide enjoyment. This is usually taken for granted. Because it is a game, we automatically assume that the participants will enjoy it. However, to ensure that it is fun, a number of

specific components of the game need to be carefully planned. The game needs to be simple to understand and simple to play. Progressions can be added to the game step-by-step to make it more difficult, while allowing it to continue to be easy to understand. The game itself needs to be challenging, but also achievable for the participants to remain interested and motivated; if it is too easy or too difficult then the game will quickly lose its appeal. The enjoyment of the game can be increased further if within the game the



Practice One

Players are split into two teams, with each team defending the cones in their half of the pitch whilst also trying to steal the cones from the other team's half of the pitch. Players can stay or leave their half of the pitch when and as they please. If a player is 'tagged' in the opponent's half whilst in possession of a cone, they must drop it where they were tagged and return to their own half and touch the far end line before returning to the game. Each cone is worth one point apart from a number of 'bonus' cones (these are a different colour to the rest of the cones), which are worth extra points (the exact number can be decided by the players). After a set amount of time, the game ends, and the team with the most points in their half wins.

participants have different options for scoring points, with the level of difficulty linked to the value of the points awarded.

All of these elements can be found within our first practice: *Practice One*. The game has clear and simple rules and boundaries that are easy for the players to understand. The players are divided into two equal teams and there is a clear purpose for the equipment that is being used. There is a scoring system that will ensure some form of 'result' in that there will be either a winner and a loser or a draw. It also allows for different levels of challenge, which helps with the fun element for the players. And as will become clear later in the book, this particular game has clear and significant links to soccer and through playing it, the players will be developing key skills that they can transfer over when they are playing the actual game of soccer.

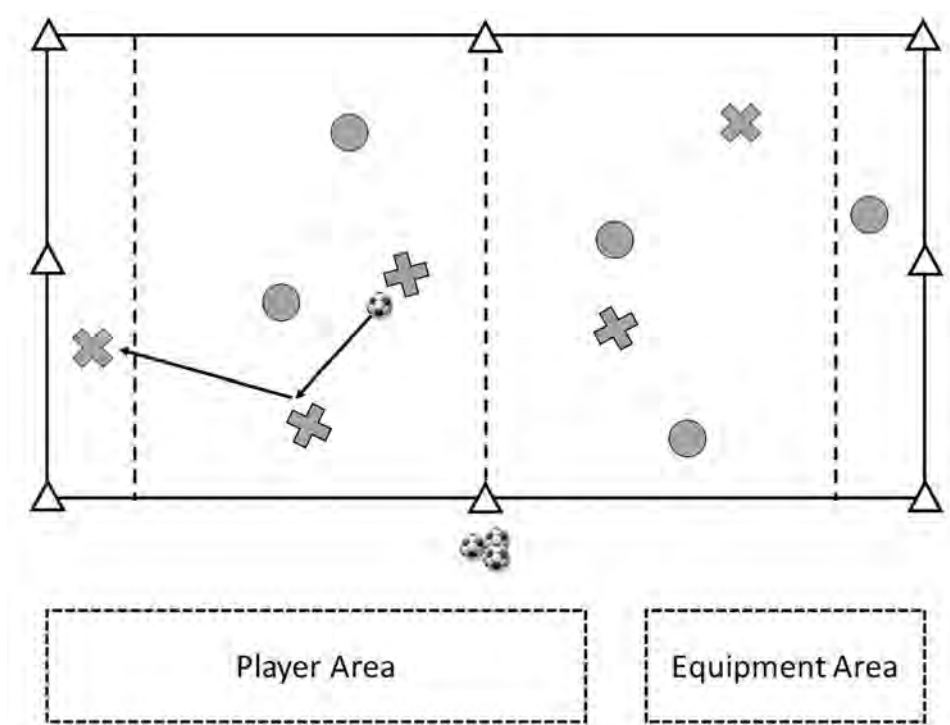
Invasion Games

Soccer is classified as an invasion game, alongside other sports, such as netball, rugby, hockey and basketball. The key characteristics of invasion games are that they are team games with an equal number of players where the overall aim is to attack the opponent's territory to score some a goal or point. Alongside these main characteristics, there are other fundamental factors that make a sport an invasion game. These include the game being played on some form of field or court that has clear boundaries as well as specific areas within it. In addition to this, some form of object is used to score a goal or point, these can be in a range of forms including a ball, puck and disc. As well as these key characteristics and factors, there are also three main concepts that are common to all invasion games: in possession, out of possession, and transition (this can be from possession to out of possession, or from out of possession to in possession).

Though soccer has its own unique characteristics (these will be discussed in greater detail later on in the chapter), because it is an invasion game, we can take key concepts of all invasion games or an exclusive concept from a specific sport and adopt these within our training to help the players in their development and learning process. For instance, in the majority of invasion games, a key skill that players have to learn is when to release the ball (or puck or disc) and when to retain it (i.e., dribble, run with it, or shield it). Therefore, we can either introduce these actual sports or similar rules from these sports into our training. Within netball, players cannot travel with the ball and must pass the ball. Therefore, we may use the concept of netball when we are delivering a session with an outcome that is focused on passing or receiving or something similar.

So if we look at *Practice Two*, the practice begins with the players having to transfer the ball between their hands and not being able to move when in possession of the

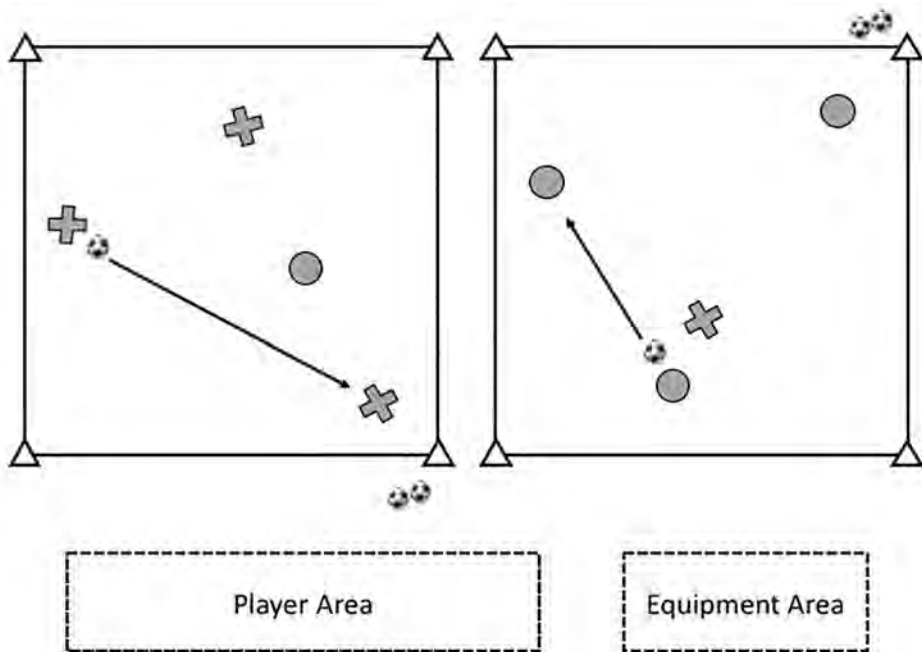
ball. This is very similar to the invasion game of netball, where passing and moving to receive the ball are key aspects of the game. This practice could then be adapted to make it similar to the games of basketball or rugby. It could be that you allow the players to dribble with the ball when they are in possession of the ball (basketball) or you could just allow them to run with it (rugby). The important part is that a rule is introduced where possession of the ball can be turned over if a player is caught in possession of the ball. This might be in the form of a tag, e.g., if a player in possession of the ball is tagged by an opposition player, then possession is transferred over to the other team.



Practice Two

Players are split into two teams. Each team has a target player in an end zone. Teams win a point by playing the ball to the target player. Players use their hands only to receive and pass the ball (similar to netball, when in possession of the ball, they cannot move). If a target player receives the ball, it is a point, and they pass the ball to the opposition.

A key characteristic of all invasion games and a factor that we often remove from our practices, especially when we look at retaining possession is direction. *Practice Three* is an example of a common rondo practice that is used regularly by most, if not all, coaches.



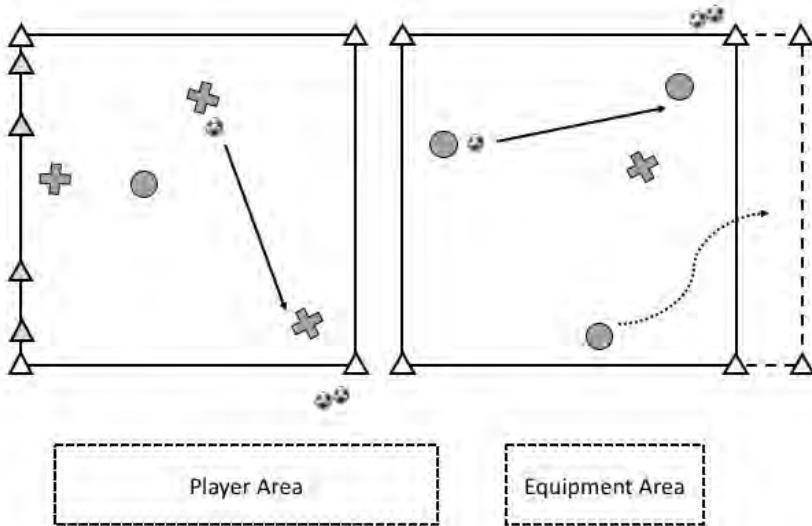
Practice Three

Three-versus-one practice, where the three attacking players look to retain possession of the ball. The player looking to intercept the ball remains as a defender for a set period of time or until they gain possession of the ball. During the practice, consider rotating the participants between the different grids so that they play with and against a range of players. Or you may want to organise the players so that they are playing with and against players that will challenge them.

Though there is absolutely a time and a place for these type of practices, as you will achieve a number of returns from them – such as touches on the ball, high intensity and development of the players' first touch – you will also lose key concepts, such as penetration and defensive principles. As mentioned earlier within the chapter, the main aim of an invasion game is to attack the opponent's territory with the aim of scoring a

goal or point. Whilst doing so, the opposition are attempting to regain possession of the ball (or whatever object is used) and at the same time protecting the area in which the goal or point can be scored. Therefore, if we look at the defensive elements of a rondo, the clear difference between the practice design and the game of soccer is that the defenders have nothing specific to protect. At the same time, the players in possession of the ball are attempting to retain possession for no specific reason or as a means to an end. This will usually result in the defending players chasing the ball around the area, whilst the attacking players make a number of passes until, finally, an error is made and possession is lost. As a coach, you would not want to see the team play in this manner, either in or out of possession, during a game. When the team has the ball, you would not want them to just keep possession for the sake of keeping possession; you would prefer them to make progress into the opposition's territory and attempt to create a goal-scoring opportunity. It could be argued that a team may look to just retain possession towards the end of the game if they are winning. But it would be hoped – due to the age and level of players that we are likely to be working with – that these types of tactics or thought processes would never be considered. Similarly, when the team is out of possession, we would not want the players to run around the pitch chasing the ball. Instead, we would want the players to retain the correct shape so that they are in the best possible position to protect the goal and win the ball back. However, the current practice design for the rondo does not allow for these key principles of the game to occur. The design of *Practice Three (b)* has the main components of a rondo, but by including direction as well, it allows the practice to incorporate more key principles of an invasion game and therefore makes it more like a game of soccer.

Another key characteristic of all invasion games, which was touched upon earlier in the chapter, is that they are played with an equal number of players on both teams. This is a fragment of the game that again we quite often move away from during training, apart from when we play a game or deliver some form of one-versus-one practice. The fact that we often use overloads or underloads within practices can, however, quite often be realistic and relevant to the game, provided that we have considered carefully the desired outcome of the session and how these situations look in the actual game. Though a game of soccer usually takes place with an equal number of players on each team, the actual areas on the pitch where the action takes place, i.e., where the ball is situated at that specific moment in time, are more often than not competed for between an uneven number of players, i.e., three-versus-two or two-versus-four. This may be seen when a ball is played forward to a striker and they find themselves up against two defenders; or when the ball is being competed for in the midfield area between an odd number of players; or when a wide player, who is in possession of the ball and is up against the opposition full-back, is overlapped by



Practice Three (b)

Three-versus-one practice, where the three attacking players look to retain possession of the ball, whilst attempting to achieve a set number of passes. On completion of the set number of passes, the attacking players then look to complete a given task. In the first practice, a player has to dribble through one of the two gates, whilst in the second practice a player needs to receive a pass within the 'target zone'. Similarly, if the defending player wins the ball they have to dribble through a gate or into the target area.

one of their teammates. Overloads and underloads occur constantly throughout the game and therefore players should be exposed to them regularly within training.

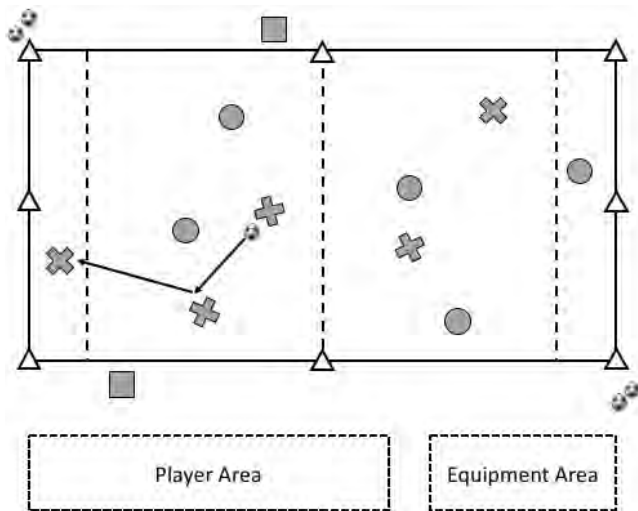
Overloads within a practice are usually achieved when we find ourselves with an odd number of players during training. To deal with this 'extra player' we will often designate a player as a 'floater' or the 'magic player'. There are most definitely arguments for and against the use of these types of players within practices. One reason not to use 'floaters' is that it is unrealistic and not applicable to the game; you would never play a game of soccer in which there is a player who plays for both teams, depending on who has possession of the ball. The argument against this is that unless you play the 'actual game' then there will be elements of the practice that are not realistic. However, it could be argued that the practice becomes very unrealistic for the player who adopts the role of the 'floater' as they will not experience being out of possession, nor will they have to react to transitions in the game. Therefore, instead of using a 'floater' it may well be more beneficial to play with uneven teams, in terms of the number of players. How the make-up of the teams is decided, i.e., which team has the extra player, can be dealt with

in a number of ways. It may well be that the players that are perceived as the 'stronger' players are put on the team with fewer players to challenge them. Or it could be that halfway through the practice a player is 'transferred' between the two teams so that both teams experience having one extra player versus being short one player. It could possibly be that the teams are just selected randomly or the players themselves decide which team has the extra player, giving you the opportunity to see how they react and deal with the different situations in which they find themselves due to the uneven numbers.

There is, of course, another side to the argument in that there are a number of returns you will get from using a 'floater'. There may be a particular reason why you select a certain player to be the 'floater', as it is beneficial to their development; why and how this can be done will be discussed further in chapter 5. Or it could be that you use a 'floater' or 'floaters' as they are needed to help the players find success within the practice, or to allow more players to be more active during the practice. An example of this can be seen within *Practice Two*, where two 'floaters' are now being used on the outside of the practice area, which makes it easier to retain possession of the ball. Instead of using 'floaters', two players from each team could have been used instead, with them supporting their teammates when they have possession of the ball. However, this would mean that the support players would only be active when their team was in possession of the ball.

Therefore, the decision about whether or not to use a 'floater' is the same as most decisions that are made with regards to the planning and delivery of your coaching sessions: the outcome should always be the same in that the option you choose is the one that is the most beneficial to the players.

All invasion games will take place within a designated area whether this is in the form of a court or pitch with clear boundaries as well as specific areas within it. The shape of the areas in which these games are played is usually in the form of a rectangle, which supports the main aspect of the game – to invade the opposition's territory – as it inherently provides direction to the game. The first point that we need to take from this is that the games are played within boundaries and that the dimensions of these boundaries are pertinent to the players within the game, the number of players and the age of the players, as well as the rules and distinctive elements of the actual game. Players therefore need to be used to playing within restricted spaces, to have the experience of coming up against boundary lines, and then working out what to do when they do. As coaches we can support players with this part of their development by ensuring that the practices in which they participate are within specified areas. It is not unusual for a coach to set up a practice that does not have a boundary, whether this is because it is a line drill, such as dribbling around a set of cones, or because we do not believe there is a need to have an actual area, in which case the players are allowed to go where they please. The importance of providing the players with



Practice Two

Players are split into two teams, with each team having a target player in an end zone, with an additional two neutral players on either side of the area. The neutral players support the team in possession of the ball and are limited to two touches. Teams win a point by playing the ball into the target player.

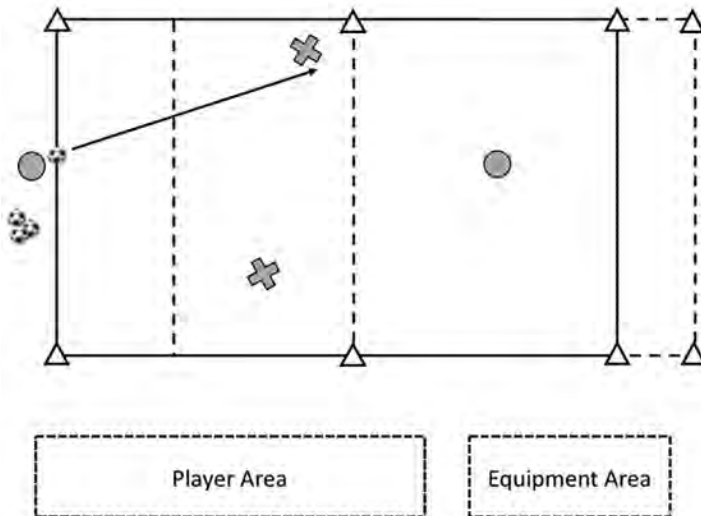
'freedom' will be stressed throughout the book, and therefore not providing the players with boundaries is considered far more preferable to restricting and forcing them to travel in exact patterns from one cone to another cone. As the game is played within boundaries, however, they need to be used to being restricted by these limitations. This is particularly important when they are playing some form of game. Boundaries need to be in place alongside rules that specify the outcome should a player go outside of the boundaries. For instance, if we look back at *Practice One*, if a player collects a cone from the oppositions half but then goes out of the area whilst avoiding being tagged, there needs to be a rule in place that outlines what happens if this situation occurs. It is also important that these rules are then enforced by the coach, so that the players get used to playing in this type of environment.

Invasion Games – The Three Phases of Play

The three key principles of being in possession, out of possession, and transition have been touched upon throughout the chapter within the other key characteristics, which provides an indication of their importance to invasion games. When we are considering the outcomes of the session and the designs of the practice we must first consider which of the three

principles we are working on. It may be that you decide which of the three principles you want to work on and then from that select a narrower focus. For example, you may want to work on when your team is in possession of the ball and then you narrow the focus down further and you concentrate on passing or penetration. Alternatively, your planning may take you directly to your narrow focus. For instance, you may decide that the players need support in defending the ball in one-on-one situations and therefore this is your narrow focus; however, you must still take into consideration that this happens 'out of possession'.

Though there might be some small differences in the actual components of the three key principles across the various invasion games, they will on the whole be the same. In addition to this, the prominence of the three principles within each specific game does not differ, nor does the importance of understanding them. For example, one of the



Practice Four

Two-versus-two practice, with the area split into thirds (the thirds are not equal in terms of size and need to be set up to meet the needs of your players). The server plays the ball into the attacking players who enter the final third and look to score a point when one of them receives a pass in the 'target zone'. Once the attacking players have entered the final third, the server then becomes a second defender and makes a recovery run to support their team-mate who has been attempting to delay and prevent the attacking players from scoring a point. Should the defending players win the ball, they look to get the ball back to the first third by having either one of the players dribbling the ball into it or receiving a pass within it.

components in soccer when your team is out of possession of the ball is to 'delay'. As an individual player, and as a team, when you are out of possession you should look to delay or slow down the attack, as this will then allow the team to get organised, allow teammates to recover and get goal-side, and ensure that you are not outnumbered. This component of being out of possession will be found in most, if not all, invasion games – it may just look different. For instance, in soccer you would look to delay your opponent by forcing them backwards or out wide or by reducing the amount of time and space they have. Though this component of delaying will be evident in all invasion games, in some games it will look the same, such as hockey, while in other games, like rugby union, it will look different. So within *Practice Four* we are asking the first defender to try to delay the two attacking players long enough to give the other defender enough time to recover and support their teammate.

At this stage of your coaching journey it is helpful to have an understanding of the different components that make up the three principles of the game. Having a basic understanding of the three principles will provide you with the necessary knowledge when it comes to the designing and delivery of your sessions.

In Possession

Width: By having your players stretched across the full width of the pitch when your team is in possession of the ball, it is more likely that you will also stretch the opposition, making them less compact. This in turn will create larger gaps between their players which will make it easier to penetrate through their defensive 'lines'. In addition to this, you are more likely to isolate their players into one-versus-one situations or possibly even create overloads, i.e., two-versus-one. Finally, using the full width of the pitch will make the pitch bigger, which will make it easier to create gaps; it will allow players more time and space on the ball and it will make it harder for the opposition team to regain possession of the ball.

Depth: Similar to width, it allows the team in possession to make the pitch bigger and therefore it will produce similar outcomes of allowing players more time and space on the ball as well as making it more difficult for the other team to get the ball back. In addition to this, stretching the opposition team the length of the pitch will increase the distances between the defending team's units, i.e., defensive unit, midfield unit and attacking unit. Doing so will allow the players on the team in possession of the ball to find space in between these units.

Progression: If a team is to invade another team's territory, then it has to be able to make progression up the pitch. Whether they start with the ball from a goal kick, in the centre

of the pitch from a throw-in, or by winning the ball off the opposition in their own half, a team has to progress up the pitch to get into a position where they can have an attempt at goal. Progression can be achieved in a number of ways and is quite often the area of the game that generates the biggest discussion, with some coaches preferring the more direct and quickest option, whilst more recently the more popular option is for teams to get closer to the opposition's goal through short, quick, accurate passing. Whatever way a team chooses to move the ball up the pitch, the essential element is that they move the ball farther away from their own goal and closer to the opposition's.

Penetration: One of the main reasons to maximise the width and depth of the team when in possession of the ball is to create gaps in the opposition team, with a view to 'penetrating' the different units or lines, with the ultimate aim of penetrating the final unit/line of the opposition, i.e., the defensive line. Penetrating this final line can lead to turning the opposition players to face their own goal, crosses or cut backs and, of course, attempts at goal. Therefore, penetrating or playing through opposition lines is a crucial element of an invasion game, in terms of progressing into the opposition's territory and ultimately creating scoring opportunities.

Support: Providing support to the player on the ball is clearly important in retaining possession within the game. When providing support to a player, you may ask the players to concentrate on three guidelines that will help them be in a position that will support their teammate: distance, angle and sight. When considering distance, a player does not want to be too close to their teammate; if they are, it makes it easier for the defending player in terms of their positioning and decision making. Ideally, a supporting player will also position themselves so that they create an angle between themselves and the player on the ball. This should make it easier for the receiving player to see more of the pitch and to play forward because of their body position. In addition to this, an angled pass is not as risky or dangerous as a flat pass which is easier to block or intercept. Finally, the player looking to receive the pass needs to ensure they are in a position where they can see the ball, i.e., there is nothing blocking their view and there is a clear pathway for the ball to travel between the player passing the ball and the player receiving it.

Creativity: To be able to get through a defence and create goal-scoring opportunities, teams and players inevitably will need to be creative or imaginative in their play. They need to be able to find solutions and make decisive decisions within the situations in which they find themselves, whilst also reacting and adapting to the ever-changing environment that is a game of soccer. This is just one of the reasons why a key theme running throughout this book is the need for a coach to provide players with an environment that allows them freedom on the ball and encourages creativity. At the