

Possess the ball - a new philosophy by Craig Foster

One of the challenges facing this country, and particularly the FFA in their quest to make improvements in the long term to Australian football, is to develop a culture of football, which is almost the complete opposite to where we are at this point in time.

A culture, which values the ball over the athlete, skill over strength, and football intelligence over graft and effort.

We will need to develop intuitive players who are adaptable during a game by instinct not input, and the natural precursor to this of course is first to develop intelligent coaches.

As Johan Cruyff once said, how can the student be better than the teacher?

So, to produce outstanding players we need excellent coaches who have an understanding at the highest technical level.

This is indeed a long-term project requiring tremendous improvement in our licences and methodology, but in the meantime one area that can be addressed is to continue to advance the understanding of the football community, particularly at the grass roots level, of what represents 'good football', and of the importance of a philosophy of play based on possessing the ball.

Yet when we talk about a culture of the game and particularly a philosophy of play, all those reading this with a good understanding of the game will know that all around us are signs that at present our national philosophy is deficient.

For instance, visit any junior club around the country and you will see more running than playing, and most players being encouraged to play the ball forward as soon as possible, regardless of the quality of the pass or any evaluation of the option chosen.

In other words, there is a predominance of lumping the ball forward for big, quick and usually strong kids to chase, to the detriment of players who prefer to hold the ball and build up play in a slower and more intelligent manner.

This is a by product of a poor football philosophy inherited from England, which values fast play over good, and which manifests itself in poor youth coaching.

But this is a short sighted strategy which is anti player development since, whilst this may win games for now, this style of play produces technically deficient players who will be learning nothing about how to play the game which is precisely, and only, what junior football is for!

And not only is it boring for the players, enforces results over fun and enjoyment and therefore arguably produces a larger drop out rate of youngsters in the early teens, it is in fact also ineffective once the players mature and their physical strengths converge as adults.

Every junior club in the country should be teaching their coaches to appreciate that until the very late teens, the total focus must be on producing players who understand and can play the game, that is to say they can control and manipulate the ball with great skill, maintain possession both individually and collectively, intelligently construct an attack and respond well in defense, and that teaching these principles of play fundamentally must take total precedence over results.

And we will only be starting to improve when every youth coach is judged on the quality of players he produces, not on the amount of trophies he wins.

We must all recognize that effort and running alone don't win football matches, technique, skill, and intelligent players do. That is why Brazil and Italy have nine World Cups between them, Germany three and Argentina two. Because their football cultures, and their philosophy of play, are based on these characteristics.

If you want absolute confirmation of the need for change, this year take a look at the Under 14 or 15 National championships where our best juniors come together, and you will see that I am right.

These championships are shockingly low on teams that are both technically (that is the individuals are capable), and tactically (the team works together, demonstrates good cohesion, and can solve problems collectively), competent at keeping the football for long periods.

Or, better still, take a look at our national teams.

Both the Joeys and Young Socceroos who failed at even the earliest Asian pre-qualifying stage could not keep the ball, clearly neither could the 17 girls. In fact the only team that played with any reasonable tactical skill was the Under 20 Young Matildas, as yet our only youth age team to qualify though Asia, who were intensely trained to do so and proved, as did the Socceroos, that when our teams are well coached they are capable of adaptation.

This inability to play to a high level is a factor of both culture and philosophy.

And it remains a fundamental problem even at the highest senior levels of our game.

In the last few weeks you might have noticed Sydney FC struggle for long periods to keep the ball against pressure, likewise Adelaide United against the Vietnamese, and the best sign of what our poor philosophy of football and no insistence on playing from defense at junior levels produces, is to see Australia struggle to play under defensive pressure against China in the second half of the recent international.

So, enough of where we are, let's explore some key elements of a good philosophy of football.

Here is a start for any youth coaches and parents interested to know where they now stand, and in what direction they should be heading:

1. To play the ball on the ground at all times, which requires both supporting play and good technique;
2. To play short passes, which requires players to support each other in attack and defense, and is harder to defend and anticipate;
3. To play only longer balls in response to a movement by a team-mate not in the hope of one - to move and ask for the ball after which the pass is delivered;
4. To play longer passes, and particularly those in the air, predominantly only when there is no closer option and always into the feet of an attacker, never just into space for them to chase;
5. To discourage young keepers in kicking the ball long unless there is no other option (and even here one can almost always be manufactured) and at all times have the keeper roll the ball to a team-mate so the team can begin to play immediately from the back;
6. If, at any time, a youngster has no option to find a team-mate, they should be encouraged always to keep the ball. This may mean shielding it, keeping it moving to wait for a pass, or to dribble forward to attack an opponent. At no time should they be told to kick it away regardless of the position they play or where they are on the field, and if the child loses the ball they should be encouraged to try again;
7. To encourage players to express themselves through their football and recognise that everyone is not the same, and shouldn't play so. Some play fast, others slow, some play simple, others read situations and find more complex solutions, and some have enough skill to individually dominate a game, while others can only dream of doing so, but all should be allowed to find their own game not forced to conform to a uniform way of playing;
8. And, to SLOW DOWN, or more specifically, vary the speed of play during a game, which requires a team to hold the ball. After working to recover possession, every young team should break forward only if they have an advantage in attack, otherwise they should slow the play down and possess the ball, back and across the field, resting and starting to position themselves in attack to take advantage of overloads in numbers, or weaknesses in defense. Youth coaches need to understand that the object of football is to keep the ball and to score goals through breaking down a defense with passing and skill, not by booting the ball forward hoping for a defensive mistake.

And of course a change in philosophy has ramifications for youth training.

It means that at youth levels, the only suitable training sessions should be completely with the ball, with every player touching the ball between 500 and 1000 times, refining technique and 1 v 1 skills, learning the game principally by playing in small games of 2 v 2, 3 v 3, 4 v 4, 5 v 5 and overload practices such as 4 v 2, 4 v 3, 5 v 2.

In this way good coaches can coach the key moments when in possession, the opponent in possession or the changeover, build awareness in the players to aid understanding and decision making, and allow the players to develop a feel for the game that comes only from thousands of hours playing it.

But at the same time the uneducated coach - such as the voluntary parent supervisor - can, by playing these games, give the players a structure, which aids their learning process without having to coach specific points of play.

All fairly straightforward, but a long, long way from where the bulk of our young teams are at right now.

So, how do you know where your club or coach stands from a philosophical point of view? One of the best ways is by their instructions to the players.

If the coach encourages players to slow down and relax on the ball, to take their time, to possess the ball, to support each other, to play together, to take opponents on, to take up positions at angles to each other, to circulate the ball quickly around the team, to play one and two touch football, to create triangles and diamonds in their play, to pass backwards when no forward option is rational, to use the goalkeeper to maintain possession, to read game situations and play away from pressure not into it, and to recognise and create numerical overloads, they are on the right track.

If you hear a coach telling players to 'get rid of it', 'clear their lines', 'get it in the box', 'get stuck in', 'don't play at the back', 'don't take risks', telling a keeper to kick the ball long or players to 'hit the channels', run a million miles.

Your child is in danger of becoming a boring and uninventive player, and is most unlikely either truly to discover the joy of playing the ball, or to even excel in the game against other players who have spent a decade or more possessing the ball.

And as to the physical aspect and all those coaches who want to make their young players run instead of learning to manipulate the ball and the game itself, yes, at the elite level players are very strong and often gifted physically like Thierry Henry and Kaka, but just like these two the best are footballers before athletes, and value technique over physique, because they recognise that runners don't make it to the top any more in football.

And don't forget that Australia has always been physically strong, but we only started to improve when Guus Hiddink finally told the players to keep the ball, to play out from the back (or in his words, 'to start the attack from defense'), to use space more intelligently through better positional awareness, to stop hitting the ball forward in hope or desperation, to understand how to utilise the team's spare man to keep possession, to support the ball possessor in attack, and to be patient and play in all directions in the build up phase until in a position to strike at the opponent.

These are the principles, which underline the correct philosophy of football, and the very ones every junior club and coach should be required to teach