

The Art of Coaching - Principles of Play

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Coach, trainer, physiotherapist and manager all rolled into one. For most of us at club level we have to do it all. We don't have the luxury of assistant coaches; we do it all, right down to washing the jerseys. But each of these roles is very specific. The trainer gets the team physically fit, the physiotherapist treats injuries and provides advice on rehabilitation, the manager manages the process the players, the media and has overall control. The coach well he coaches. But how well do we coach?

Too often I am asked by coaches for drills to run with their team. Drills are fine but players need to know the reason for the activity and to make progress the coach needs to communicate this message clearly to the players. The GAA now has in place an excellent coach education and development programme. This has been updated for a new round of courses in Ulster for the Autumn. But coach education is not a one off process. It is continuous and builds on the personal experience learned through games, preparation of teams, coaching sessions, coach education courses and our own research. Reading magazines and journal articles, speaking to coaches from other sports, planning our sessions to be innovate; varied and challenging is all part of the coach development and coach education process. These are the building blocks - the challenge continues to motivate your players, improve individual technique and skill, and develop tactical awareness and team play and educate your players about the ingredients for success.

Technical proficiency, tactical awareness and team play have slowly been eroded in the personal coaching manuals of some coaches as fitness, fitness and more fitness takes over. Club coaches at the grassroots levels can redress the balance between player development and fitness. The modern game does demand a high level of personal and team fitness but as a coach we need to establish the balance between fitness levels and technical and tactical astuteness. The subsequent articles during the winter issues of Ulster Gaelic concentrate on coaching in Gaelic games.

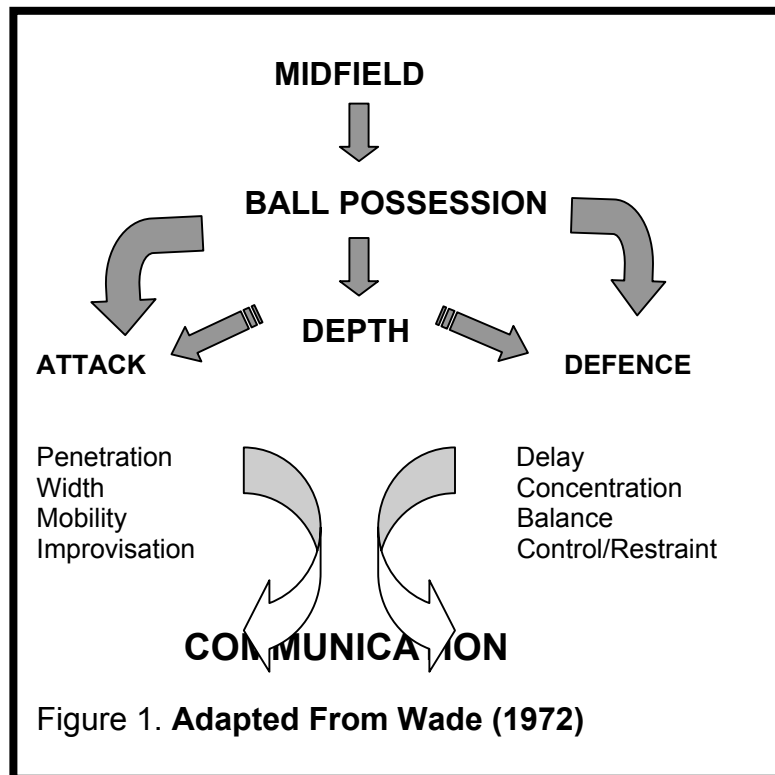
Coaches identify the problems in games and take these back to the training pitch where they coach to minimise or solve the problem. To be successful effective communication in a language that the players understand is essential. The coach needs to highlight the problem with players or team and then through drills and small-sided games break the problem down and help the players refine technique and adapt more competently to the situation. The starting point for every coach of team games is to develop a thorough understanding of the *Principles of Team Play*. These are outlines in the GAA coaching manual and are

similar to those outlined by Wade (1976). This article focuses on these principles on the basis that if we understand them then the activities that emerge in our coaching sessions are a reflection of these principles. There are three phases of most team games Attack, Defence and Mid field play. In the latter phase the team in possession is in transition and preparing to attack. So often we hear the phrase the game will be won at midfield.

During recent years tactical changes in the pattern of play have incorporated an increased amount of short passing. Midfield has taken on a new importance as the area to prepare to launch the attack. They still challenge for kick-outs but competing for breaking ball and vital possession at midfield is essential. Midfield is responsible for getting ball possession and the attack relies heavily on good possession from midfield and backs for success. To achieve this the broader principles of play must be understood by both players and coaches. Lets begin by looking at some of the Principles outlined in figure 1.

Depth in Defence: is essential as marking defenders are relying on covering defenders if they make a mistake. Covering defenders move into position to provide this support in case of a slip. This is depth in defence.

Depth in Attack: is required to give a variety of options for passing. Midfield players and backs need passing options both in the half-forward and full- forward positions. The coach has to ensure such options are available.

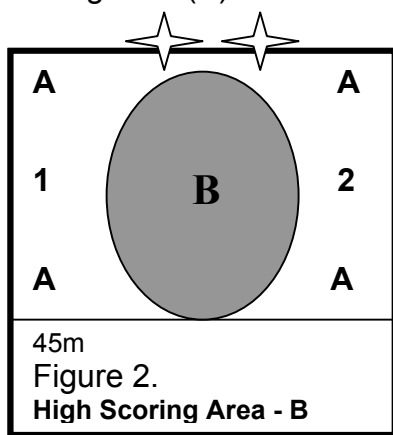


Attacking principles include Penetration, Width, Mobility and Improvisation. Penetration requires teams to be competent at moving the ball through the defence as quickly and accurately as possible. It can also involve a player, perhaps a halfback or midfielder, moving in possession of the ball through the opposing defence. Many teams have tried to develop a possession football approach. If possession football is taken right into the heart of the opposing teams half then support play has to be at pace and forwards have a requirement

to make space for penetrating players. This brings into play the principle of Width. Isolating defenders wide on the pitch gives the forwards more space to utilise. Ball retention is a good tactic but with many teams there is a tendency to overplay the short passing game. This often results in the ball being played across the pitch or in many cases short passing so far into the opposing half that they have to come back out to get any space for a shot at goal. Width and penetration of the ball creates options and can help avoid excessive short passing in the forwards. The risk however is a longer pass that can be contested!

Attacking units need Mobility and Improvisation. Defensive play lends itself to easy organisation (Wade 1972) but for forwards too much organisation can be restrictive. And stunts creativity. Mobility or player movement can achieve disruption in a defence. Defenders must deal with the same player but in a different and often unfamiliar area of the pitch. A player can often be mastered when they play in the one position and within one area. Mobility in attack creates the need for Improvisation and creativity by forwards. Their level of skill and ability is key to their decision on how to try and beat the defender in a given situation. Creative forwards and a mobile creative forward unit are difficult to defend.

Defence principles include Delay, Balance, Concentration and Control or Restraint. These principles are used to help counteract forward play. In Gaelic football most teams play a rigid individual marking system. Experienced defenders know when to release from their player and help out the defensive unit. Depth has already been highlighted but of equal importance is Delay, Balance, Concentration and Control or Restraint. Too often defenders commit to or lunge in to the tackle without knowing what is going on behind. Delay and Control focuses the defenders mind on what he has to do. Close enough to avoid a score being taken but not too close to allow the forward to dummy or side step. Waiting for the right moment to make the tackle or force the forward on the ball into a potentially low scoring area (A) of the pitch. For the forward the high scoring area (B) is where they want to go.



Balance, as a principle of play in defence is essential. With forwards being mobile and moving defenders around the pitch pulling them out of position it is essential that the defence maintain balance through depth and cover. Although coaches normally advocate individual marking, as players becomes more experienced at reading the game they can be utilised more effectively to provide depth and cover. Maintaining balance in defence is about communication, vision and good decision-making by the defender.

Concentration builds on the other principles of defence. The coach will advocate ultimately a concentration of defenders in the high scoring area B. Getting players behind the ball and in times of crisis getting bodies into the area to provide cover and depth. Concentration of mind all over the pitch is also essential. Talking sports psychology to our players can create a stir. The language of sports psychology must be simple and well defined to be effective. Although not a principle of play the individual player that is focused and can concentrate for sixty minutes on their role and helping out their defensive unit is a more effective team player.

Knowing and understanding the Principles of Team Play is the corner stone of successful coaching. Most coaches will be aware of these but building on them becomes difficult for most club coaches. Transferring the knowledge into a training session that focuses on a problem is difficult. Referring back to the basic principles of team play can solve many problems. The challenge for the coach is how to be creative in solving the problems. Coaching is described somewhere as an art and the coach has to paint the picture!