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Coaching in the Foundation Phase using England DNA

Master the Ball

In the Foundation Phase, we must promote a real connection between the player and the ball.

Young players want to improve and develop their skills so they are ready for this intervention. Mastering the ball includes building the capability to manipulate and manoeuvre the ball in any direction, at varying speeds and by using any part of the foot or body.

This capability can then be utilised when dribbling, travelling with the ball, turning, receiving, shielding or screening the ball during any subsequent practice activity or game. This kind of practice cannot be skimmed over, rushed or (at worse) overlooked. Developing these fundamental skills will form the basis for all of the development that follows and the Foundation Phase provides the perfect starting point as young players are primed and ready to explore and experiment.

Coaches should encourage this exploration: use a wide range of small-number activities and games to ensure that the players have lots of opportunity to spend time on the ball and make decisions.

A wide spectrum of methods can help to begin the process of ball mastery: from isolated ball-familiarity exercises that promote touch, feel and manipulation aspects (but require very little decision-making capability), to small-number activities, games and formats that will bring returns in all four corners (Technical, Physical, Psychological and Social).

As a coach, your position on this spectrum should be determined by the needs of the group and within that, where possible, the needs of each individual player.

Futsal must be included as a game format during this phase whenever possible. The game will provide massive returns in all areas of development, and the repetition involved in lots of situations that are similar (but never the same) is exactly what is needed at this stage of development. Please make sure you visit the Futsal section to learn more.

Stay on the Ball

It is difficult to say which part comes first - master the ball or stay on the ball - because, in promoting one, you are almost certainly working on the other. However, once players grow in confidence because of their improving ability on the ball, then we need to encourage them to stay on the ball for longer. This does not mean "hog the ball" or dribble until possession is lost.

This headline is about the player knowing that they are able to keep the ball for longer regardless of the pressure from the opposition or from the lack of space available.

Once you develop a confidence in your own ability, time can be spent on thinking about how you might attack and score for yourself or help others do the same. For our under 5-8 players this must be established in such a way that their technique is still good even though there's more pressure. This could take years of practice, so ensure you give the players lots of variety and opportunity to begin to develop these important fundamental techniques.

A greater technical capability means that you can look for more attacking, threatening and creative options, rather than the easy or predictable ones. More time on the ball means that the game may change whilst you still have possession; supporting positions could change into more attacking ones, or the player on the ball may suddenly turn or dribble out of pressure and the whole pitch could open up before them.

These situations never occur if the player is told to pass the ball early and to the easiest option.

This is probably the hardest part for the adults to deal with let alone actively encourage and promote. This is because we may feel frustrated as we wait for these skills and abilities to develop. It's vital that we adopt a patient and consistent approach so that players feel supported when developing this aspect of their game.

It will be well worth the wait. Remember that development is a long-term process and by staying on the ball players will develop their dribbling skills, their turns, twists and their spins away from pressure.

The young players will have to become good at "hiding" the ball away from opponents, and brilliant at not only knowing when to release the ball, but who to release it to. This capability will stay with them for the rest of their playing time as the DNA aims to promote this aspect of development right through the phases.

The part you play is important because you will start the whole process off and, if done with real passion and enthusiasm, will be your legacy and your massive contribution to the development of our young players.

To summarise, stay on the ball when:

- you have no positive or threatening passing options, and you're prepared to stay on the ball and see if one appears
- there is space in front of you/to the side/behind you and you can change the situation in the game to a more positive, attacking one by travelling with the ball
- you have recognised that the situation is 1v1 and you are going to dribble with the ball
- you are under pressure, passing options are compromised and you are willing to relieve the pressure and change the situation by screening, shielding or turning with the ball
- all of your options are sideways and backwards and staying on the ball may allow the situation to change and present a forward, positive more attacking option.

There is no particular order to these points - they are all equally important.