



THE PRINCIPLES OF PLAY

THE ESSENTIAL GUIDE TO THE FUNDAMENTAL
BUILDING BLOCKS OF SOCCER



FEATURING CONTENT FROM UEFA PRO
LICENCE COURSE TUTOR MARTIN HUNTER

INTRODUCTION

The Principles of Play are perhaps the most fundamental components of a coach's understanding of the game, yet we find ourselves in a situation where many do not learn about them until far too late in their educational journey.

This guide is focused on helping coaches to develop a deep knowledge of the Principles of Play and pass that knowledge on to players.

During the vast research project we undertook during the last 5 years to understand what level of knowledge coaches had of the Principles of Play, it became very apparent that Level 1 Coaches in the USA and Europe had almost no clear understanding of the Principles of Play.

Level 2 had, at best, rudimentary knowledge and even many level 3 Coaches have serious gaps in their knowledge. It's not until coaches are taking professional qualifications that their knowledge of - and ability to teach - the Principles becomes well established

On the flip side, most coaches have a good level of understanding of tactics and formations, especially those tactics made fashionable by successful managers like Jurgen Klopp and Pep Guardiola.

The issue is that Klopp and Guardiola both apply their tactical approach on a solid foundation of how the Principles of Play are applied. Guardiola has said this on many occasions. For these coaches, the principles come first, the tactics second.

Therefore, it's concerning that the majority of coaches who are teaching the game are doing so without this foundation and the risk is that young players are not actually learning the game, they are just learning about tactics.

This has serious implications for players when they get to 13 and start playing 11 a side football, because suddenly they feel like they are playing a game they don't understand. The consequence of this in the USA and Europe is that we have more young teenagers leaving the game than ever before.

WHAT ARE THE PRINCIPLES OF PLAY?

Simply put, they are the fundamental truths for how the game can be played within the boundaries of the pitch. They remain constant whether you are playing a small sided format or the full sided game.

This is different to laws and tactics. Both laws and tactics change on a regular basis. Laws perhaps less so than tactics, but neither are fixed. Laws and tactics also have a direct correlation with one another. A change in a law (such as Law 12 Section 2 - the back pass rule) can create a new tactical approach (i.e. pressing from the front).

There are 10 Principles of Play.

5 for attacking...

...and 5 for defending.

Why are the principles so important?

The Principles of Play, along with technique, are the two primary fundamentals which players must learn if they are to reach their potential. One (technique) dictates their ability to perform the actions required in the game and the other (the principles) dictates their game understanding. If either of these components are missing, the game will not be enjoyable, because you won't be able to play it properly.

Once they have these foundations in place, then the rest of the things which players require such as tactical/strategic understanding, physical training, resilience, courage and attitude can be added to help them become the best they can be.

The problem is that coaches can build successful teams in the early years, without helping players properly understand the principles or develop proper technique. This is mainly because big, strong physically-capable players, with some simple tactics and some rigid positioning can overcome the deficiencies they have in technique and game understanding.

However, by the time players hit puberty and the 11 a side game, these physical and tactical advantages start to wane and their ability to perform correct technique whilst understanding all aspects of attacking and defending become essential to their continued success and enjoyment.

WHO NEEDS TO LEARN THE PRINCIPLES OF PLAY?

All coaches should be well versed in the Principles of Play. You may have noticed that we recently changed our practice and session templates to give coaches help on which principles they can focus on in their sessions.

All your players need to understand all the Principles of Play. Your defenders need to understand and apply the attacking principles as well as the defending principles and, likewise, your attackers need to understand the defending principles as well as the attacking ones.

To this end, you should be mindful of the Principles of Play and they should be the bedrock of the sessions you deliver, even if you are working on tactical sessions. In fact, there's a very strong argument to say that any good coaching point, as you'll see in this content, is always based on the Principles of Play.

Summary

The Principles of Play are perhaps the most fundamental components of a coach's understanding of the game, yet we find ourselves in a situation where many do not learn about them until far too late in their educational journey. Without a proper grasp of the Principles of Play and their applications, coaches are at an automatic disadvantage - and so are their players. Coach Education without the Principles of Play is like learning a new language without understanding the concept of sentence structure.

With our latest series of broadcast-quality video sessions, The Coaching Manual is setting out to equip coaches with the knowledge that will not only help them understand the game better, but understand the reasons and benefits behind every training session, practice progression, and coaching point they'll ever deliver.

Get the first Principles of Play session: [Creating Space](#)

ABOUT MARTIN HUNTER

The man behind the educational content in this guide is UEFA Pro Licence course tutor Martin Hunter. He is the former Technical Director of Southampton FC

The Coaching Manual's Technical Director Paul Bright said: "Martin's worked at every level of the game, he's been there, seen it and done it. Martin delivering the sessions on The Coaching Manual is a fantastic advert for how to deliver the Principles of Play in a simple and effective way. If you can transfer terminology and information into its simplest form for your players to understand then you're an effective coach and I think Martin does that very very well."

The Coaching Manual's Terry Barton said: "Martin and as his contemporaries Dick Bate (the legendary FA coach educator who passed away in 2018) and Les Reed (currently the English FA Technical Director), are part of a lineage of football knowledge that includes some of the finest minds the game has produced; including Sir Bobby Robson, Howard Wilkinson and Sir Alf Ramsey."



"The principles of play are the foundation to everything we do on the training field and in games. If we don't understand the fundamentals of the game, it is almost impossible for us to implement a footballing philosophy"

- Martin Hunter
UEFA PRO Licence Tutor



THE ATTACKING PRINCIPLES

CREATING SPACE

Creating Space is a key attacking principle in football as we look to create time and space when in possession of the ball. Also, as the defending team want to deny space, the attacking team should look to create space to unbalance the opposition, creating large or smaller spaces all over the field in order to advance forward.

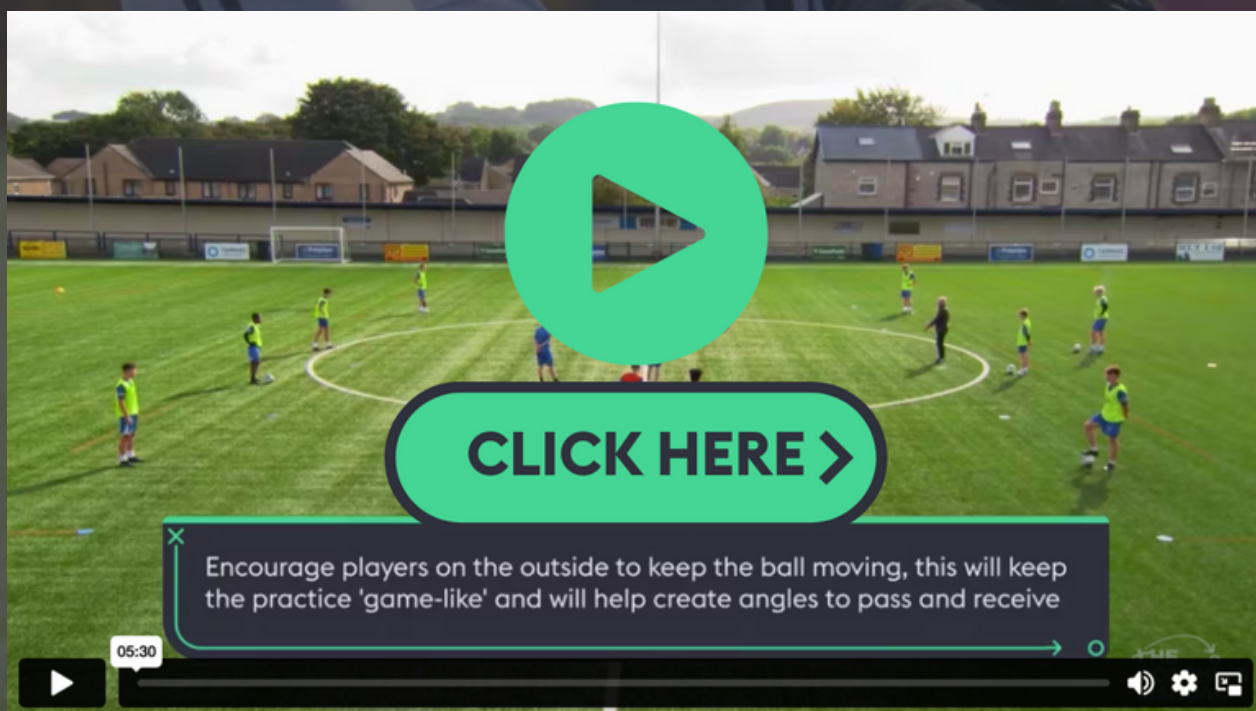
GUIDE: CREATING SPACE

[CLICK HERE >](#)

GUIDE: EXPLOITING SPACE

[CLICK HERE >](#)

THE SESSION



PASSING & SUPPORT

It is vital that you are able to coach your players to pass over different distances whilst also offering supporting angles to advance forward. Passing & Support is an essential attacking principle that enables us to move through and around our opponent.

GUIDE: TECHNIQUE

[CLICK HERE >](#)

GUIDE: KEY FACTORS

[CLICK HERE >](#)

GUIDE: DEFENDING THIRD

[CLICK HERE >](#)

GUIDE: MIDDLE THIRD

[CLICK HERE >](#)

GUIDE: ATTACKING THIRD

[CLICK HERE >](#)

THE SESSION



MOVEMENT & MOBILITY

Statistics show that the average player will spend no more than 90 seconds to 2 minutes on the ball in any one 90 min period. This obviously depends on the position and style of play, meaning it could be less but generally no more. This highlights the importance of what players are doing off the ball for the rest of the time, especially when their team is in possession. This is why the principle of movement and mobility is a huge part of the game - and must be taught to all players.

GUIDE: TECHNIQUE

[CLICK HERE >](#)

GUIDE: KEY FACTORS

[CLICK HERE >](#)

GUIDE: DEFENDING THIRD

[CLICK HERE >](#)

GUIDE: MIDDLE THIRD

[CLICK HERE >](#)

GUIDE: ATTACKING THIRD

[CLICK HERE >](#)

GUIDE: COMBINATIONS

[CLICK HERE >](#)

THE SESSION



CREATIVITY & PENETRATION

Creativity is one of the most difficult things to coach in football. This is due to the unpredictable nature of the individual footballer, their ability to read and see the game, and their ability to decide what they can do to escape the pressure or produce a bit of magic to score goals.

GUIDE: HOW TO CREATE

[CLICK HERE >](#)

GUIDE: KEY FACTORS

[CLICK HERE >](#)

GUIDE: DEFENDING THIRD

[CLICK HERE >](#)

GUIDE: MIDDLE THIRD

[CLICK HERE >](#)

GUIDE: ATTACKING THIRD

[CLICK HERE >](#)

THE SESSION



THE DEFENDING PRINCIPLES

PRESSING & SUPPORT

Pressing is one of the most talked about facets of the game. However, with professional teams setting new trends of how and where to press, we need to consider the fundamental Principles of Play and the reasons why we press.

GUIDE: HOW TO PRESS

[CLICK HERE >](#)

GUIDE: WHERE TO PRESS

[CLICK HERE >](#)

GUIDE: WHO AND WHEN

[CLICK HERE >](#)

GUIDE: SUPPORTING PRESS

[CLICK HERE >](#)

THE SESSION



RECOVERY & DELAY

Pressing is a very fashionable term within the game, though it has been around for many years. However, it isn't possible to press the ball all the time. The next Principle, after Pressing and Support, is Recovery and Delay. This refers to our attempts to stop the opposition from progressing any further by either delaying the attack to regain our shape, or win back the ball.

GUIDE: HOW TO RECOVER

[CLICK HERE >](#)

GUIDE: DELAY

[CLICK HERE >](#)

GUIDE: WHEN, WHO, WHERE

[CLICK HERE >](#)

THE SESSION



COMPACTNESS, COVER & BALANCE

All principles of play are intertwined together. Often when discussing principles, one principle will have a knock-on effect on another, and so on. This is no different to compactness, cover and balance. Due to the close relationship between the two, if compactness is done correctly, cover and balance will follow.

GUIDE: PRIORITIES

[CLICK HERE >](#)

GUIDE: KEY FACTORS

[CLICK HERE >](#)

GUIDE: DEFENDING THIRD

[CLICK HERE >](#)

GUIDE: MIDDLE THIRD

[CLICK HERE >](#)

GUIDE: ATTACKING THIRD

[CLICK HERE >](#)

THE SESSION



CONTROL & RESTRAINT

Many coaches believe that control and restraint should be confined to the Middle or Defensive thirds of the field. However, this isn't the case, as we can still teach players how to have control and restraint all over the field.

GUIDE: WHEN TO CONTROL

[CLICK HERE >](#)

GUIDE: KEY FACTORS

[CLICK HERE >](#)

GUIDE: DEFENDING THIRD

[CLICK HERE >](#)

GUIDE: MIDDLE THIRD

[CLICK HERE >](#)

GUIDE: ATTACKING THIRD

[CLICK HERE >](#)

THE SESSION



COACH EDUCATION

No matter how long you've been coaching, or how many coaches are at your club, there are thousands of useful articles, guides, and sessions that will boost your understanding of the game and support your journey to becoming the best coach you can be.

The content on the Coaching Manual has been created by highly experienced and qualified coaches, including tutors on the UEFA Pro Licence, Pro Licence holders, Premier League Academy coaches, and more. Through our partnership with the Wiltshire FA, we are able to bring you:

GUIDES

Below is just a selection of the educational guides we have on The Coaching Manual, including guides focused specifically on particular positions, formations, stages of practice, and session formats.

- [Guide to running a session](#)
- [9v9 formation guides](#)
- [Positional guides](#)
- [Perception - Decision - Execution. What Is It?](#)
- [How to Use Play-Practice-Progress-Play](#)
- [Creating a State of Flow for Development](#)

SESSIONS

Among the 3,000+ pieces of content on The Coaching Manual is our series of Pro Masterclass sessions, delivered by the best coaches in the game. The Masterclasses feature a full session with diagrams and animations, as well as supporting guides and interviews to help you provide your players with the pro experience.

- [Rene Meulensteen](#)
- [Steve McClaren](#)
- [Stuart Pearce](#)
- [David Moyes](#)
- [Dean Smith](#)
- [Mike Phelan](#)
- [Gary Rowett](#)
- [Chris Hughton](#)
- [Mark Warburton](#)
- [Alan Irvine](#)
- [Aitor Karanka](#)
- [Michael Appleton](#)
- [Pep Clotet](#)

PLUS: OUR SERVICES

The Coaching Manual has developed a range of services designed specifically for football clubs at every level in Wiltshire. Let The Coaching Manual take the strain so that you can focus on what you are great at!

What we offer:

- **In-Person Coach Education:** We deliver informative and valuable on-field and classroom sessions delivered by top level coaches
- **Digital Assistant:** For club executives who don't have the budget to have a dedicated education lead. Includes:
 - Curriculum design and delivery
 - Philosophy and culture design and implementation
 - Monthly/Quarterly online coach education specific to your club
 - Usage data
 - Dedicated support for your club
 - Access to in-person education (optional)
- **Camps and Tournaments:** The Coaching Manual has a track record in producing best-in-class soccer camps and tournaments for their partner clubs. Using our player development app TopTekkers as well as the expertise of fully-qualified coaches, participating youth players of all ages benefit from being a part of our residential competitions.
- **Club & Team Management:** Do you need help overseeing the club-wide delivery of the world-class education you get with The Coaching Manual? We can help you organise everything from curriculums and philosophies, to individual coach profiles and season plans, to save you time and make your club run smoothly!



HOW WE CAN HELP

Our digital platform can help you get better at coaching and save you valuable time.

Key features for clubs

- **Club Admin:** Use your club admin panel to add your teams, coaches and players
- **Content Access:** Club packages will unlock all of our great content for you and your coaches, allowing them access to verified coaching resources from a world-leading academy.
- **Coach Upgrades:** Club accounts allow you, the club owner, to upgrade the coaches you want to upgrade and you can remove their access at any time too
- **Season Plans:** As club owner, you can add an age-appropriate season plan to any of your teams in minutes, saving hours of planning time for everyone involved in education at the club.
- **Folders:** As club owner, you can set ball mastery homework tasks for individual teams or for entire age groups in minutes.

[CLICK HERE TO ENQUIRE](#)

OR EMAIL US: SALES@THECOACHINGMANUAL.COM