



New York State West Youth Soccer
Association

Possession Play or Positional Play?

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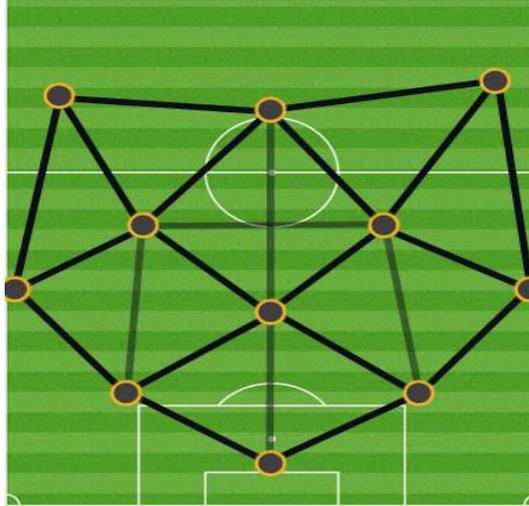
Newsletter May

Age group: 10-18

In this newsletter we will talk about the basic principles of positional play. Recent examples of this style are Ajax, Barcelona, and Manchester City. But let us start by once again by restating what the purpose of soccer is ... win by scoring more goals than the other team. Otherwise, it is meaningless. We all understand that to win we need to score. To score, we must shoot on the goal, and the closer we are to the goal, the higher the chances of scoring.

First, positional play is not the same as possession football. Positional play is a philosophy of play that seeks to create an advantage over the opposition by a focus on the positioning and the movement of players to generate superiorities. You can have a phenomenally successful possession-style soccer without positional play, e.g. long distance passing from side to side, it keeps the ball in possession of the team.

Teams playing this style move the ball forward one step at a time in search of superiority, with an emphasis on possession, positioning, and passing. This associative style allows the team, the players, the positions, and the ball to travel together. We move the ball forward together, away from our own half of the field and allows us and the ball to move closer into the other team's box, where our chances to score a goal are higher. The overriding objective of positional play is to find, or create, the free man (spare man) who will carry the ball forward to start a new 2v1 situation. With the result that the free man will gain space and will get closer to the goal to score. After each pass the players need to create new supporting and passing options. All the players need to be connected as a unit through all positions, so that they cannot be isolated by the opponent. Consequently, the players must position themselves in relation to the position of ball, opponent, and teammates to create numerical advantage around the ball. This occurs through staggering positions by creating triangles and diamonds shapes. The position of the ball and consequently of the player move continually. This requires the opponent to change and adapt their positions. This way we want to create 3v1, 4v1, or 4v2 situations as well as gaps in the defensive wall to get closer to the opponent's goal or to create chances to score. In the following picture you can see the diamond and triangle shapes that can be created in a 4-3-3 formation.



These shapes can also support the defense if there is a turnover. The players have the immediate opportunity to win the ball back as they are consistent in numerical advantage (counter-pressing). However, this style of play is guided by principles and concepts, meaning that the style of positional play can fit any formation. Guardiola once said, “formations are just telephone numbers”. The goal is to control the game by applying the game principles of our game model. Controlling the game does not simply mean having more time on the ball to move it around on the field but making everything more difficult for the opponent. We want to take the initiative to control the game and to impose our soccer style on our opponent with the objective of winning.

“If you have the ball, you don’t need to defend because there is only one ball” **Johan Cruyff**

The relationship and interactions are vital here. As we mentioned earlier all players must be connected on the pitch in order to control the game and to move the ball towards the goal as a unit. The social-affective relationships influence the associations within in a team as much or more than tactics. When we talk about the social-affective dimension we are referring to the work ethic of the team to cooperate and attack together (good passes, making yourself available for a pass, creating space for a teammate, etc.) and cooperate defensively (pressing, closing down space, covering and exchanging positions, etc.). The social-affective dimension would therefore be the spirit found in all practice sessions and games. *“I will defend my teammate from an attack”*. The coach should be very open to creating good relationships and synergies between the players. He should stimulate and reinforce their sense of unity, not just the tactical interdependency but the team spirit: having a common objective and the knowledge that they can achieve only together.

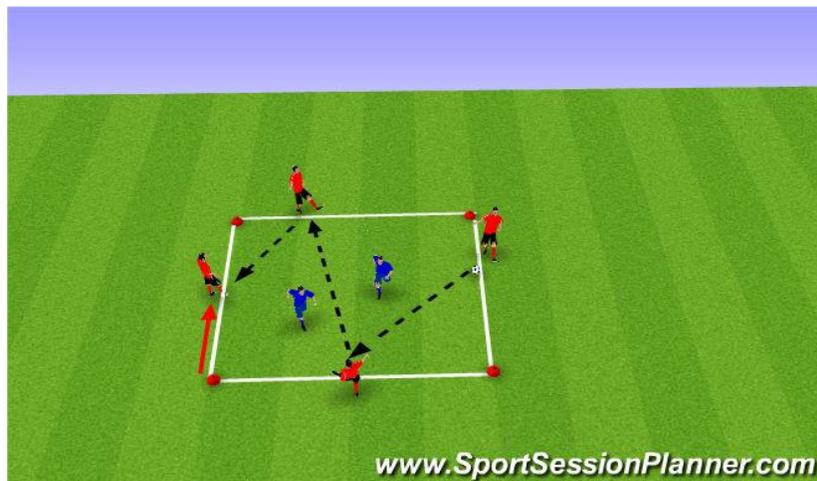
The more you work on the “spiritual aspect” of the team, the easier the tactical work become.

- ⇒ **Non-verbal communication**
- ⇒ **Emotion and Empathy**
- ⇒ **Relationship between coaching staff and players**

In this article we will demonstrate exercise samples for the tactical but also for the team spirit. The exercises are broken down into age appropriate exercises from simple basics to more complex and game related movements on the big field. It is crucial to teach the players to circulate the ball in little space with short passes, and under pressure by time and opponent. Therefore, it is highly recommended to use Rondos and small sided games for the practice of positional play. Enjoy!

Rondos

Basic form



Rondos: (age 10-18)**Set up:**

- 8x12 yds field for 4v1 or 4v2.
- 6x10 yds field for 3v1.

Execution:

- The attacking tactical objective is to create passing lines/angles and maintain possession. The defensive objective is to recover the ball quickly.
- The players are not in absolute set position but position themselves in triangles and rhombus shapes.
- When one of the defenders wins/intercepts the ball, they then play as if starting a counterattack. The player who lost the ball closes down the new ball carrier so they must demonstrate good decision making to quickly move the ball to start an attack > he should play the ball quickly to one of the outside players and switches then with the player who lost the ball. And the game continues.

Coaching points:

- For the attackers: The player with the ball should have always have two passing options (triangle) > the players off the ball always need to be a step ahead with the next position.
- For the defenders: the defenders are always outnumbered and cannot cover every attacker. But they can put lots of pressure on the player with the ball because the field is small and tight. It is crucial that the defenders defend ball-focused and space oriented > the defenders should work together, contain, and cut the passing pathway.
- Also, the body position of the receiver is important. Body position angle improves perception to exploit space and break lines of defense with impeccable timing.

Variations:

- The receiver cannot pass back to the passer.
- Limit the touches, one or two touches (always recommended).
- Players must touch 2 or 3 times before they can play the ball.
- Double round for the defenders if the attackers can pass the ball 10 times without an interception.
- 5v2 whereas one attacker can be in the middle as an additional passing option.

Three Teams



Three Teams I (age 12-18)

Set up:

- 20x20 yard field.
- 3 teams of 3-4 players (if 4 players adjust the field size to 25x25yards).

Execution:

- 2 teams play together and keep possession of the ball, the other team tries to steal the ball > here blue and red vs. green.
- If one player loses the ball, he and his teammates become the defending team, e.g. blue loses the ball, the blue team becomes the defending team, and the red and green team player together and keep the ball in possession.
- There is no stop or break when there is an interception.
- 5min with 2 repetitions > then switch teams.

Coaching points:

- The two team in possession are always in a numerical advantage > The players should create triangle and rhombus shapes so that the defenders' hunt for the ball is more difficult.
- Because there is a fluent switch of possession and defense, the game requires high focus and concentration.
- That also means that the defending team, that just intercepted the ball, must get in triangle/rhombus shapes very quickly in order to keep the ball in possession.
- The defending team must defend ball focused and with high pressure to intercept in a numerical disadvantage.
- This game also teaches the quick transition from defense to offense and vice versa.



Three Teams II (age 12-18)

Set up:

- 16x16 yards field.
- 2 teams of 4 players in the square.
- 4 neutral players on the sideline.

Execution:

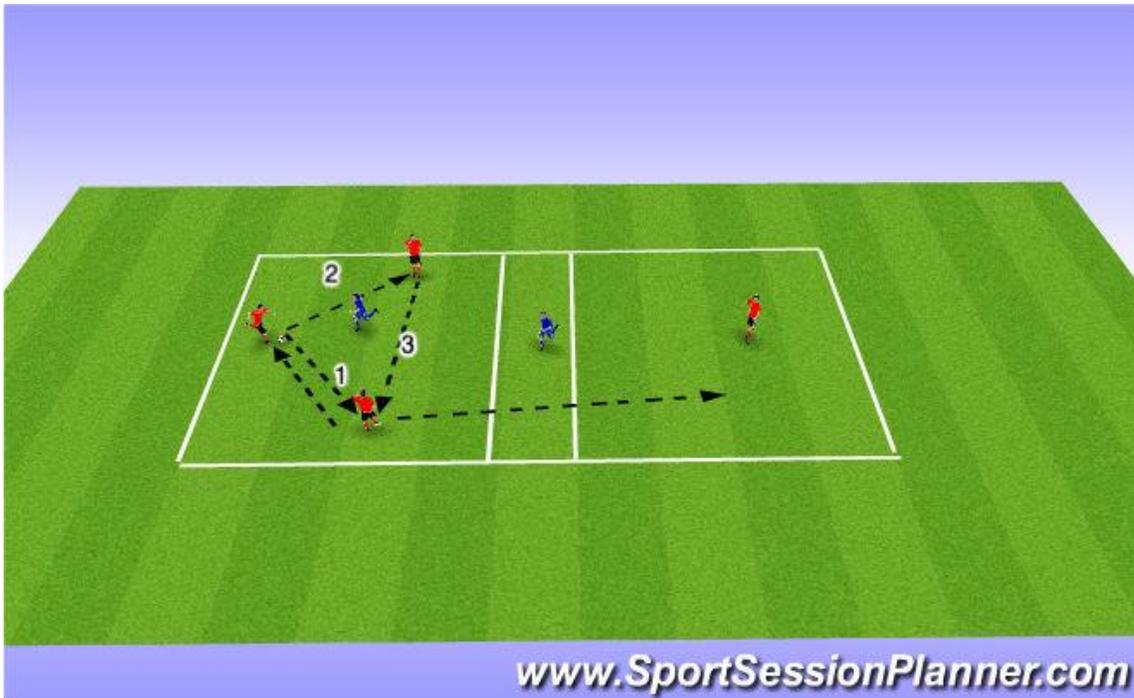
- 4v4 in the square.
- The team in possession plays with the neutral players (8v4).
- The goal is to keep possession of the ball and the neutral players provide additional support.
- The neutral players cannot be attacked.
- The neutral players should have only 1-2 touches to provoke a fast play of the neutral players.
- A neutral player cannot pass to a neutral player.
- Switch players and tasks after 5min.

Coaching Points:

- There is constantly pressure of time, opponent, and space due the narrowness of the field. The players must play fast and directly to avoid interceptions.
- It is important that the player scan the field and the next passing opportunity before they receive the ball.
- The players off the ball must make themselves available to receive the ball.
- The player off the ball can also draw a defender away to make a pass available to another teammate.
- The player with the ball should always have 2 options to pass to (create triangle/rhombus).
- The defending team must defend ball focused and with high pressure to intercept in a numerical disadvantage.
- This game also teaches the quick transition from defense to offense and vice versa.

Variation:

- The neutral player cannot play back to the player who he received the ball from.
- The neutral player must play back to the player who received the ball from.



Rondo with Zones (ages 12-18)

Set up:

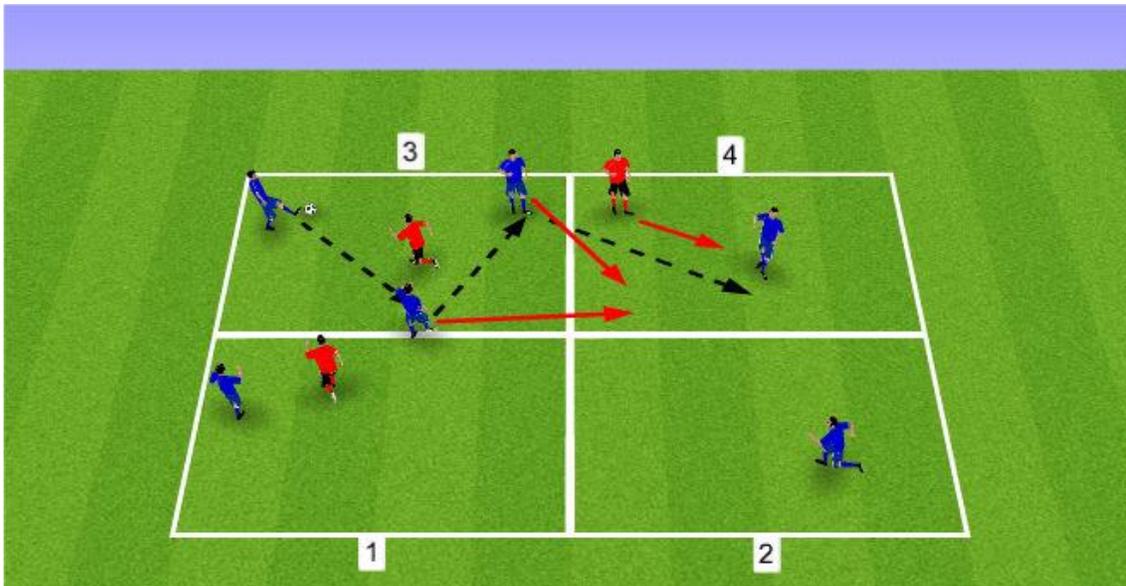
- 7x12yards field with a middle zone (0.5 yards wide).
- 3v1 in zone in the first zone, one defender in the middle zone, one attacker in the zone 2.

Execution:

- The attackers try keep possession of the ball by passing > the goal is to pass to the attacker into zone 2.
- The defenders try to steal the ball or try to intercept the pass.
- If the attackers pass into other zone, the closest attackers follow the pass, the other attacker stays in zone 1, the defender from the middle zone move into zone 2 and the defender from zone 1 moves into the middle zone > a new 3v1 begins in zone 2.
- The attackers must not dribble.

Coaching Points:

- The players should circulate the ball until a controlled and low risk pass to the attacker in the other zone is an option.
- Encourage the players to be patient > If the players circulate the ball with patience, the defenders will get tired and will lose focus and concentration which will make a pass easier.
- The field is small so that the players must play quickly and with precision.
- The players should make the defender move to gain space.
- After a successful pass, the attackers move quickly into the other zone to support and to create a numerical advantage.



4 Zones – Chess (ages 13-18)

Set up:

- 18x15-18 yards field with 4 identical zones.
- Attacking team of 6-7 players, defending team of 3-4 players.

Execution:

- The goal of the attacking team is to keep the ball in possession and to “play” as many zones as possible.
- “play” means that at least 2 players in one zone have to pass to each other at least once > a pass from one zone to another does not count.
- If the attacking team ”plays” three zones > they get a point.
- If the defending team intercepts the ball > they get a point and the attacking team has to start over again. Intercepting means the defenders must have possession of the ball > kicking the ball out of the field or just touching the ball do not count.
- Only 3 players of the attacking team and one defender can be in the zone with the ball.

Coaching Points:

- This is a mental demanding and challenging exercise, so it is not unusual that the players will have problems in the beginning (small field and many rules to follow).
- If the players get frustrated it might be helpful to pause this exercise with an easy and less challenging exercise. Then you can try the exercise again.
- The frequency of the exercise and the mental breaks will help adapting and learning the concepts of the exercise.
- The defenders in the other zones cannot are not allowed to attack but they can support the defending team by blocking passing ways.
- Due the small size of the zone it is crucial that the receivers open their hips and foot away from the defender and in the direction of the open space > The passer should pass into the open foot.
- The players should be patient with “playing” the zones > it is not about how quickly they “play” the zones, it is more about controlling the game with low risk passing and to prepare the open pass into the next zone.
- This exercise teaches accurate passing under high pressure of space and opponent as well as quick movement off ball and support.
- This stressful experience during practice will make it feel easy on the field during a game.



6-Zones Chess (ages 13-18)

Set up:

- Same set as above (4-Zones Chess), just add another two squares and a mini goal for each square.
- Attacking team: 6-9 players.
- Defending team: 3-5 players.

Execution:

- The attacking team has to “play” a certain number of zones (3-4) before they can score on the mini goal.
- If a defender wins the ball, he can score immediately on any goal.
- The players can only score on the goal that is in the same zone as the ball.
- Only 3 attackers and 1 defender can be in zone where the ball is.
- If the defending team wins the ball, they can have 3 players of their team. The attacking can still have their 3 players in the zone.

Coaching Points:

- Same as above.
- Patiently pass and circulate the ball until a low risk scoring opportunity rises up.
- This exercise combines several aspects such as ball control, ball movement/bringing the ball up, and preparing goals which are very game-like.
- Again, it is very crucial that everyone off the ball is moving and supporting the player with the ball by either making themselves available for a pass or by drawing a defender away and creating space.
- The player on possession should always have two options to pass to (triangle/rhombus).

Small Sided Positional Game



7v7 game with side zones (ages 14-18)

Set up:

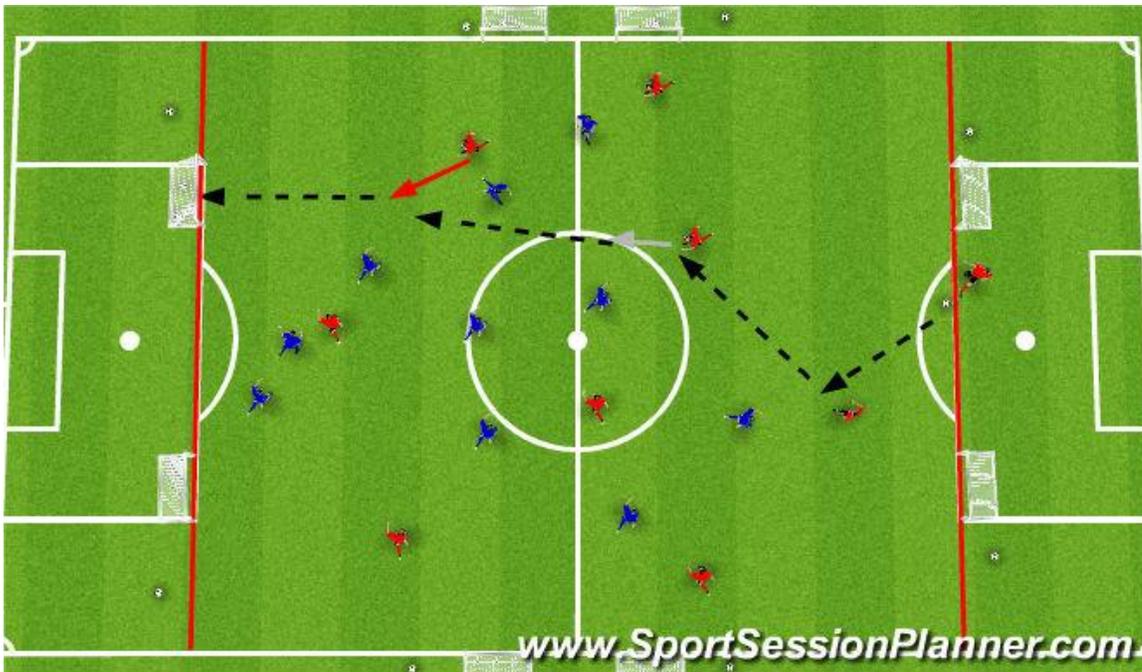
- Use half a full sized.
- Mark out a central area the same width as the penalty box.
- 2 side zones which the attacking's team full backs occupy.

Execution:

- Normal side game with both teams trying to score but the team in possession has one full back positioned in each side zone. No member of the defending team can enter either side zone. They can enter the penalty area once an attacker has moved in there.
- The team in possession must pass the ball through each of the 3 zones (central zone, side zone, penalty area) before they are able to score. If the defending team wins the ball, they must then also pass the ball through all 3 zones before scoring.

Coaching Points:

- As the team in possession has a numerical disadvantage in the central zone, they must look to move the ball quickly to the side zones.



9v9 on 8 goals (ages 14-18)

Set up:

- Set up a field between two penalty boxes of full-sized pitch.
- 2 teams of 9.
- 8 mini goals.

Execution:

- 9v9.
- Each team defends the 4 goals on their own half (2 at the endline and 1 at each sideline in their own half) and score on the other 4 goals in the opponent's half. Both teams have the same aim, which is to build up play, create space and break down the other team's defense to score.
- A goal scored in the wide goals are worth 1 point and goals scored in the goals at the edge of the penalty areas are worth 2 points.

Coaching Points:

- If the play is congested towards one side, encourage the team in possession to switch the play to the other side.
- The need for the defenders to be aware of their positioning is increased as the team needs to defend all 4 goals.



Teamwork in a 4v4 small sided game (ages 10-18)

Set up:

- Field of double size of a penalty box.

Execution:

- We play 4v4 with a neutral player.
- The basis of the game is normal with both teams able to score.
- the neutral player plays with the team in possession but is not allowed to score.
- We start the game with a 4v1 (+1 neutral player, green).
- The defensive player (blue) will struggle against 5 opponents but he has teammates who will help him.
- The teammates waiting outside of the field can join the game after they performed 30 sit ups or 10 push-ups > when one player completed his exercise, he joins the game, and the next player starts with the exercise until all 4 have entered creating a 5v4 situation.
- If either team scores or if the ball goes out of bounds, the coach will kick in a new ball immediately.
- Switch the teams after two runs.
- If the blue team wins the ball, they launch a counterattack together with the neutral player and try to score.

Coaching points:

- The goal is to develop positional play, teamwork, dedication, and communication.

The keys of positional play are:

Angles: Rondos require subtle movements of the players to adjust their angle of support and their body angle to receive the ball ready to distribute it.

Distance: While restricted, the distances between players is critically important to maximize space in possession and close space in defending.

Timing: The right pass at the correct moment will keep the defenders off balance.

Lines: You have several lines of options while looking to break the defense.

Situation: Defenders and their positioning changes the situation immediately and requires a good response to maintain possession.

To sum up, Rondos and small side games are both fun and fundamental and should be part of each practice session. Rondos are a great way to start training the brain as the body gets going. Remember that it may take some time for lessons or concepts to sink into young brains. To keep possession requires speed of thought and impeccable technique. The most talented players in the world are challenged by this exercise as they perform in reduced space. These skills need some time to develop. This article only talks about the basics of positional play. If you are interested in more depths of positional play let me know.

As always please let me know if you have any questions, if you need more information or if you have any feedback. Please feel free to contact me: dgroth@nyswysa.org.