

Observations from the 2009 NSCAA Coaches Convention with an Eye toward the Future.

By,

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On January 14 to 18 the National Soccer Coaches Association of America (NSCAA) held its annual convention in St. Louis. The convention brings together some of the finest clinicians in the world to present to youth, club and collegiate coaches throughout the country. It is always a fantastic event and this year didn't disappoint. The featured presenters included Jorge Barcellos- Head Coach Brazilian Women's National team, Pia Sundhage- U.S. Women's National team H.C., Dick Bate- English F.A., Kelly Cross- Australian F.A., Enrique Hrabina- Argentina F.A., Mike Forde- Performance Director of Chelsea FC, and Hans Schrivjer- Netherlands U-21 Coach. The NSCAA staff complimented the featured clinicians with many outstanding sessions and lectures of their own. It is impossible to attend all lectures and field sessions, but here are some observations from the 2009 convention that I'll take home with me.

Before leaving frigid St. Louis for the balmy climate of Boston, I attended Dick Bate's lecture "Where is the Game Going?: A look to 2020". Throughout the lecture several interesting observations about current trends in the modern game were discussed and insight into where the game might be in 10 years was put forth based on these observations. Bate's analysis was a great way to wrap up the convention since many of the presentations and topics I observed touched on the themes he discussed.

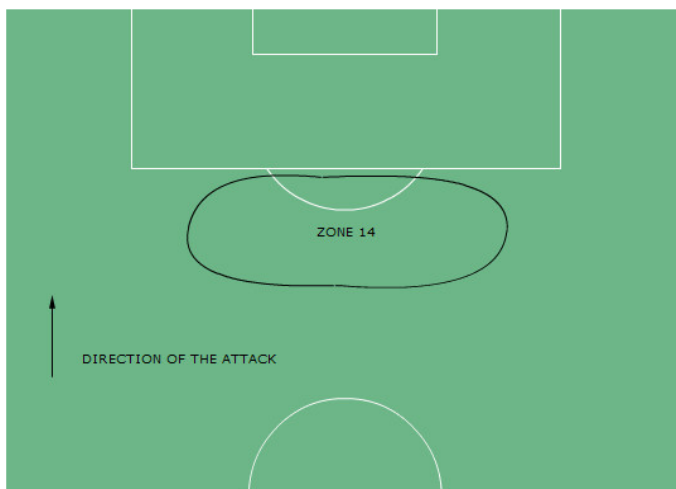
Sessions on Speed of Play have become a staple of every convention and they will continue to be. Data presented by Bate showed that the number of sprints in a game has doubled in the Premier League since 2002. Players are covering more ground at a higher speed than ever before. In a normal fixture versus Middlesbrough, Arsenal midfielder Mathieu Flamini (now with AC Milan) was shown to cover just under 9 miles over 90 minutes. Looking at the movements of various strikers through pro-zone analysis (computerized tracking of players' movements), it shows forwards coming deeper and tracking back more than ever before. This is not unique to the forward position since the modern full back is now an accomplished player on the ball and is often the person responsible for the build up of an attack. There is a constant interchange of positions and more wrong footed players playing on the opposite side of the field. Even the position of goalkeeper is evolving dramatically. The keeper now uses his feet seven times more often than he uses his hands. In essence, at the highest level, there is the emergence of Total Football being played.

What can we gain from this information? That's for each coach to decide, but I firmly believe that at the youth/club level it is a call for player rotation. We need to expose our players to the various positions on the field where they not only learn to see the game from various perspectives, but also gain a better appreciation of the roles and responsibilities that each position requires. We need to develop players that can solve problems. Understanding the distinct tasks of each position can only aid this process.

This sounds simple enough, but reflecting on the many of the field sessions one observes at each convention, players largely try to solve the problem they are presented with through effort. As coaches we need to appreciate this effort, but also make it our responsibility to guide players to find solutions which solve the challenges the game presents through tactical understanding and technical ability. I believe this process is underway, but will become more and more important as the game continues to evolve.

Returning to Bate's lecture, the ability to pass the ball and keep possession is vital in modern football and directly correlates to the success level of the team. This was seen in the last Euro with Spain's dominance in the ability to connect passes, as well as in EPL analysis. Chelsea, Arsenal, Liverpool and Man U. all rank in the top 5 in pass completion percentage. Longer pass sequences are now leading to goals and the majority of these passes are being played with one and two touches on the ball. At the highest levels if you can't make decisions instantaneously you won't make the grade.

One area of particular interest to Bate is Zone 14.



In Euro 2004, just over 50% of passes entered into the penalty box came from this area. Further analysis of 10 EPL games showed that 73% of goals came either from this zone or off of a final pass delivered from this location. Arsenal was charted as the best team in the EPL playing in Zone 14.

How do we improve in Zone 14?

Anson Dorrance, head coach of North Carolina's National Championship Women's team and NSCAA staff member, spent a session on running various patterns out of this zone. Each coach can create their own movements, but the important thing is that if we know goals are being created out of this area at a disproportionate rate, we must train our teams to excel in this area. The overwhelming majority of teams now play without a sweeper so it is crucial that we develop players that can see seams open up within a zonal defense and be able to deliver a well weighted accurate pass in the final third of the field. Bate believes that the ability to play balls with deception and from all surfaces of the foot will be a hallmark of players at the highest levels in the upcoming years.

Another area that continues to grow in importance is the transition phase of the game. The ability to attack at speed the moment possession of the ball is gained is vital for success at the highest level. The opening presentation of the convention, by Jeff Tipping, focused on attacking transition. Coach Tipping presented several transition exercises and various scenarios where transition opportunities present themselves. This transition

theme continued throughout the weekend and was a major portion of Bate's discussion on where the game was heading. Defenses have become so structured and disciplined that it is increasingly more difficult to unbalance them once they are organized. The ability to eliminate lines of defenders with a quick ball forward and to transition instantaneously in support of the forward pass is crucial in the modern game. It is imperative that we train our players to recognize situations where they see the forward ball early while also helping them develop technically to the point that they can deliver this ball with accuracy. On the defensive front, to protect themselves against the attacking transition phase of the opponent, the game has seen the re-emergence of the holding midfielder. One of the most important tasks this player is assigned is the prevention of the counter-attack and denying the penetrating pass into the oppositions target players. How do we train for this situation? There are a number of ways, but Jose Mourinho often places a restriction on his team of keeping 5 players behind the ball at all times during training. Enrique Hrabina of the Argentina F.A spoke of his preference to have his teams build their attack along the flanks, not due to providing better attacking options, but to protect against transition on loss of possession. In the modern game, the elite teams throughout the world excel in transition. As coaches, we must train the transition phase as much, if not more so, than the attacking and defensive phases of the game.

Bate concluded that it was imperative that coaches devised ways to create practices that would challenge players to reduce the time between their first and second contact on the ball, to become more deceptive in their receiving skills and to design game like scenarios where players were being asked to move at a high rate of speed while receiving services of various heights, and to deliver balls with various bends. If we continue to put players through passing circuits that don't show the demands of the game in 2020, how are they going to get there?

Bate's forward looking approach to the game was shared by Kelly Cross of the Australian FA. Cross ran a session on finishing titled Exploding the Myth: Goalscorers Can Be Developed. Although the actual exercises Cross presented were straightforward, the information he shared was very insightful. Cross contends that the coach must always be working toward or back from the game. Text books and videos are behind the time. Instead of using these materials, Cross recommended that coaches analyze the best professional players and study their movements. The two players brought up throughout the field session were Ruud Van Nistelroy and Ronaldo (Brazil). Cross shared with the audience the tendencies that both of these players have, remaining central with a preference to hang around the D (arch on top of the penalty box), and tried to replicate these movements within his training session.

There were a few tips Cross shared that seem basic on the surface, but provide great teaching tools for strikers:

- **Arrive on time.** This is something every coach encourages their players to do, but Cross made a comment that stuck with me. He said to one of the players that

“if you have to slow down, you’ve gone too early”. Very simple and concise information for players to comprehend.

- **The last portion of the run should be the fastest!** This will help ensure separation from the defender. How many times do the great strikers’ score goals in the penalty box with a defender just a half step away? All the time!
- **See the ball, see the goal!** The best strikers are always taking up positions where they can score goals. They should be constantly asking themselves, Can I score from here? If not, they should be taking up a new position.

Cross took up coaching positions where he could best view the movement of his strikers throughout the session. He also noted that the game is too massive to cover everything at once and advised coaches to keep their sessions focused. There were other sessions over the course of the weekend that had some excellent patterns to goal and offered good insight into the game, but the commentary Cross relayed to coaches was very straightforward and can be easily transferred to the players.

Jorge Barcellos Head Coach Brazilian Women’s National team challenged coaches to be professional. He stated that players look to the coach as a “second father” and it is our obligation, as coaches, to be prepared at all times and to see and address our players’ deficiencies. Barcellos made a case for making coordination training at the youngest ages a top priority. He felt that one of the quickest ways to improve a player technically was to improve his coordination with and without the ball. Throughout the preparation phase as coach of Brazil, Barcellos focused on technical and tactical improvements with the results of the match a secondary focus. He felt that playing for results before the technical and tactical understanding were in place, would jeopardize the teams performance when results did indeed matter.

In closing, I often hear the remark that “anyone can run a good training session”. I don’t believe this to be true. I agree that many coaches can find good exercises to put a team through, but for a training session to be truly well run, the coach needs the ability to select the appropriate exercises (working to or from the game) for that particular group, be able to ask the correct questions which lead the players to solve problems on their own, and to provide enough repetition and challenge that the players will be better prepared for the next match. All this must be done with the players’ physical and mental well being kept in mind. As we look toward a game that is becoming faster and faster, with less room for technical deficiencies, and with more diverse tactical plans, the demands placed on a coach will increase. Understanding that kids are spending less time on their own with a ball, or even outside running around, it will become a greater necessity that all coaches are truly able to run a good training session. If this isn’t the case, we will have failed in our responsibilities to the players of 2020.

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