The Progression from 4v4 to 11v11

The 4v4 game is the smallest model of soccer that still includes all the qualities found in the bigger game. The shape of the team is a smaller version of what is found in the eleven-a-side game in that there is width, depth, and height to the team. The shape is dynamic in that the players are able to combine and work together as team mates in order to be successful and there is the potential for a constant interchange of positions and roles. A solid understanding of the principles of play, found in the basic 4v4 form allows for continued advancement as the players adapt to the added demands placed on them when more players are added to the tactical picture. From this number, we can begin to examine the qualities of the game that remain constant as we continue to add players up to 7v7. We can also examine the challenges that are introduced as more players are added into the mix.

4v4:

The basic attacking shape should create enough space to allow the players to find options in every direction, with the essential purpose of creating quality goal scoring opportunities. The most basic shape that allows for this space is the "diamond", with a deep player who supports the attack from behind, two wide players who give the game width, and a high player who stretches the game forward and offers himself as a target for balls to be played into. Attention should be given to how the 4 players adjust as the ball and players move into the attack. Players must be prepared to move to different spots on the field, based on the movement of their teammates and the ball. For example, if the deep player steps forward with the ball, someone must replace him in the spot that he has just vacated, so that there continues to be support from behind.

The most effective defending shape should slow the opponent's movement forward with some form of collective defending. The need for quality pressure on the ball remains an essential part of the team defensive effectiveness. Added to this pressure is the ability of the group to supply good "cover" for the pressuring defender in case the quality of that pressure is not sufficient to stop the forward progress of the ball. Finally, the group must keep its compact shape, not allowing the team to become too "spread out". This limits the time and space that the attacking team has at their disposal and maximizes opportunities for the defending players to work collectively. At the same time, individual and group defending can also discourage the first ball forward by dropping and filling space closer to their own goal, rather than stepping and pressuring closer to the ball. These decisions, by the players closest to the ball, as well as the covering players, need to be made based on the principles of defending, and what makes the most sense on any given play.

5V5: (4 field players plus the goalkeeper)

As the team progresses to 5v5, the added dimension to the team's "shape" is that there now emerges a central midfield role for the team. The goalkeeper has the added responsibility of being the "last" player in the attack, allowing the "central back" to step more in to a midfield role. This, in essence, allows for another option for playing the ball forward out of the back, a role that serves as a "link" between players in the back and those up front. This further complicates the game as it demands that a player serve in a role that has pressure coming from all around him/her, rather than just basically from one direction. Now the basic shape remains a "diamond" but has a player serving in the "middle" of that diamond. At the same time, as the central player becomes more competent, the attacking team now has a player who has the potential to play the ball in many directions, thereby making the attack less predictable and therefore more effective.

6V6: (5 field players plus the goalkeeper)

Again, the basic "principles" of play are still present in the 6v6 form, but in a more complex manner than with the smaller numbers. The added player affords the opportunity for the team to add another player in the "back". This makes the play of the opposing forward that much more difficult as there now are two defenders that must be dealt with (the goalkeeper and a field defender). One possible form for play at this stage is a GK plus 1-3-1. This allows for a continuation of the relationships that were present in the 5v5 model, especially the potential for combinations between the players down the middle of the field. For example, the 5v5 model included balls from the deep player to the high target, and back to the supporting central player. In the 6v6 model, there are now two sets of this combination (GK to central player and back to the defender, and defender to high target and back to central player). Another possible form of play could have the wide players' starting point be more defensive, so that they would be providing width coming from a deeper position.

7v7: (6 field players plus the goalkeeper)

The 7th player added is the second field defender. This allows the attacking team to have several options for getting players forward out of the back, further complicating the problem for the defending team, and adding to the visual complexity of the environment. At this point, there are also the beginnings of a line of defenders and a line of midfielders. At an elementary level, there will now be some attention to how the players share responsibilities for defending and attacking, in their line as well as between lines.

There are two basic developments which allow the team more flexibility in the "system" that is chosen, based on the qualities found in the players, and attention to the basic attacking and defending principles of soccer. Common forms of play might include: GK plus 3-2-1 and GK plus 2-3-1. Regardless of the starting positions of the players, any "shape" that the group has always requires that the players are mobile in the interpretation of their role, and understand the essential importance of maintaining the proper principles of both attacking and defending. There will be a constant demand on the players to effectively read what their teammates are doing. Now there is always more than one option in every direction to be able to play the ball to. Defensively, there should always be "cover" provided, wherever the ball is. There is a more complicated understanding required of defensive shape as a team as it involves more players. At the same time, essential goals in attacking and defending remain unchanged from those discussed in the 4v4 model.

9V9: (8 field players plus the goalkeeper)

With the addition of the 7th and 8th field player the lines of either defense, midfield or attack can be varied. Now more flexibility is added to the system. The ability for players to "interchange" with each other and share the responsibilities through the various thirds of the field arises. The coach can/should create a formation that best suits the capabilities of the players.

Probably the most common and easiest system to transfer from the 6 field players is the 3-3-2. This continues the three defenders development and adds the third midfield player. The central midfield player can have the added responsibility of dropping into the defensive line when they recognize the need. An additional role of the midfield players that will become more apparent is that of tracking opponent's forward runs. If, as may often be the case, the defenders when regaining possession should be encouraged to play out from the back. They will probably be faced with only two attackers and so should learn how to combine with the midfield players to advance forward with good possession through good shape.

The additional forward player creates an opportunity to teach the roles of the two central strikers. Opportunities of how to combine with each other, play back to goal [posting up] and creating space for forward runs by midfield players will be numerous. In addition, the timing of the release of the pass to supporting midfield players will also become apparent.

Another option would be to add one of the two additional players as a defender so playing 4-3-1. This encourages the “zonal” or “passing on” methodology between the back four. Example: the sliding across the field to cover areas of space to prevent penetration either by runs or by a pass. The other factor that this allows is the forward runs of the outside backs to offer both width and numbers up situations in midfield. The same could also be said of the central defenders, they also should recognize moments to step into midfield and create those numbers up situations. This in turn allows for a midfield player [or two] to push forward to support the lone striker.

At this stage in a teams [players] development the introduction of a game plan can be used. Simple, easy to understand methods such as:

- First look should be forward, then sideways then backwards
- High or low pressure defending
- Effective execution of set pieces and restarts
- Affecting the attitude to shoot

11v11: The Game

The addition of two more field players completes the progression. Where they are added it may depend on what has been developed in the 7v7 and 9v9 component. The tasks or challenges are the same as the 9v9 but now there are two extra players to try to accomplish them. This is not to say that various different systems can not be utilized, on the contrary, a good team will have the ability to adjust not only per game but sometimes during a game. However time on the practice field must have been spent learning both.

The important thing is that the formation is based on the capabilities of the players. During the progression from 4v4 to 11v11 players are given the opportunity to develop and learn roles. If a team consists of a group of players that not only understand their own role but also that of a team mate, the chances of success increase. The experimenting of players playing different roles/positions through the small sided game process will pay dividends in the 11v11. The importance of understanding the safety and risk factors are increased in the 11v11 game. The choice and speed of decisions is now also greatly increased.

The transition to the 11v11 game is much easier for the player that has been gradually introduced to the complexities of it. The midfield player that has been educated on how to combine, support and cover their two team mates will ease into doing the same for three team mates.

As in the 9v9, a game plan or style of play should be practiced and implemented. Challenges both for individuals and lines can be set. Example: regain possession in the middle or attacking third.

- Keeping possession from restarts
- Developing a rhythm of play
- Changing the point of attack

Irrelevant of the formation, 4-4-2, 3-5-2, 4-3-3, 4-3-1-2, diamond midfields, stoppers, sweepers, anchors or hole players, none will be successful without the application of the basic principles of the game. All four are important, but it is technique and tactics that are the keys to success. The ability to choose the correct technique on demand and then execute that technique quickly, accurately and effectively should be the goal of every player.

It is important to remember that the 11v11 game is merely a collection of 3v3, 1v1, 2v1 or 4v3 etc, competitions all over a large area. The connecting together of those groups through the length and breadth of the field is paramount to success.

This is the most difficult of all challenges for the coach and requires effective coaching. Knowledge of the game is important, but on its own is not sufficient. It is the adherence to the principles of effective coaching that maximizes the coach's ability to pass on knowledge.

Coaching in the Game:

The ultimate test of a coach's skill will be put to the severest test when coaching in the 11v11 game. Coaching in the game is the culmination of all that has gone before. It is the final progression and the place where we can measure the performance of the team, and so the effectiveness of the coach.

It is the piecing together of the smaller components that have been taught through the 4v4 to 7v7 progression. The same principles apply, however, now the addition of more players and a larger area also add to the amount of options available to each individual player, hence the term, "Soccer is a game of decisions". The larger area and greater numbers challenge the underpinning knowledge of the coach in both the role of the individual and game understanding.

Coaching in the game needs to be directed toward the factors by which the players must perform well as a team. This includes the roles of the individual within a small or large group. The factors divide into two groups:

Defense:
Restricting time and space
Challenging and covering
Defending at set plays
Starting the attack

Attack:
Creating and exploiting space. [Penetration]
Passing and movement [Possession]
Attacking at set plays
First line of defense [Delay]

In addition the calculation between safety and risk needs to be understood by the coach. Then taught and practiced by the players in each of the thirds of the field.

How to Coach:

The coaches “tool box” provides the coach with all the necessary methods to teach effectively. Just as the game dictates players decisions it will also give the coach “visual cues” as to which method is required. Coaching in the flow, at natural stoppages, coaching the individual and the tried and tested freeze method will all be effective if used correctly. The competent coach will use all of them sparingly and effectively.