



Anton Janssen NEC U19 coach, on possession play:

“You must keep looking when you do not yet have the ball”

“What I believe the most important aspect of coaching is? There is not just one element that comes to mind, but for me possession play is extremely important. This stems from my playing years. Even then I was particularly interested in this. An important condition of possession play is good field organization. Only then can you arrive at good possession play.” This is Anton Janssen, U19 NEC coach, a Dutch first division team from Nijmegen.

By: Paul van Veen

“In an ideal situation when one player has the ball the other ten players should know exactly what this player is going to do. If they know this, they will also have to react at the right moment and in the right way. This is of course not always the case, but this is the core of possession play and therefore also football. When you are watching a football match you will quickly notice whether or not the players understand each other. You often see teams in which players have to touch the ball three or four times and must look for passing opportunities whenever they have the ball. This decreases the pace of the match and everyone knows how everyone else is going to move and where they will be positioned. Due to this you cannot play at a high pace.”

Looking

“These things are hard to teach. Of course there has to be movement off the ball, as you have to create space for your-

self and for your team mates. When you are, for example, working with a one touch rule in a possession play exercise, everyone will be forced to move. One of the important aspects is that you must think ahead and therefore also look ahead. A lot of players are focussed on the ball and will only start to look after they receive it. They then look around for a free team mate and pass. A big mistake, as a player you should not only look at where the ball is, but also at how the rest of the team is positioned. When you see that the striker is positioned in a 1 v 1 situation and you receive the ball you can immediately pass it to the striker and join in or have a third player join in the attack. If you see the striker is positioned in a 2 v 1 situation you will know when you receive the ball that you must wait and lure the opponent out of position or look for the space on the flanks. But in practice it shows that a lot of players will not look at this, or think about it, until they receive the ball.”

Organization

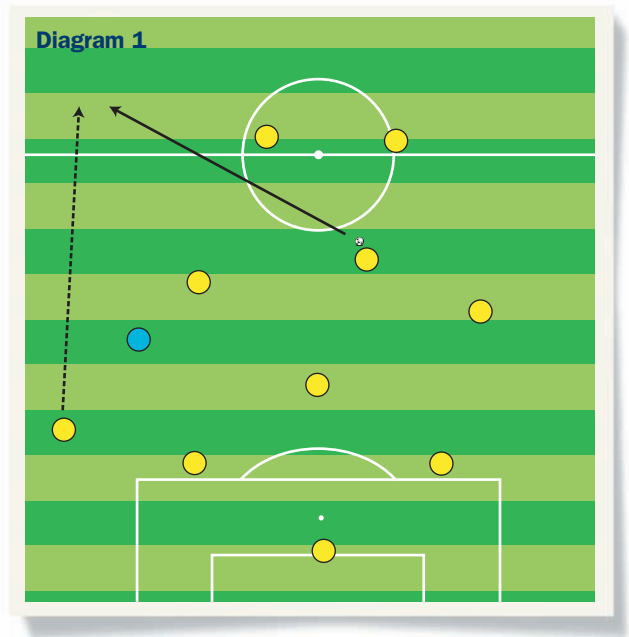
“Teaching this does, obviously, not start as late as in the U19s. Attention is paid to this throughout the entire academy. It starts as early as the U10 and 11’s, where they are taught how to make the field wide when in possession. We then progress with teaching the organization on the field; how should they be positioned in relation to one another, always creating triangles on the field. You then take it another step further and start to talk about movement off the ball a bit more, creating spaces for each other, passing the ball at the right moment and to the right place, etc.”

Triangles

“You are still dealing with triangles in with the U19s. When you make sure this is done correctly you are already well organized on the field. It is then a must to execute your possession play well. You then start to make them think, when should they play the ball forward and when should they be patient. I expect them to look around, so they can see where the space is and where they need to pass too. This means looking before you receive the ball. Just think ahead a bit. If you are on the flanks, you will know that the opponent will shift to the ball and make the field small. You will seek the moment to switch the play, deep or to the other side. You try to teach them this realization. Something you achieve by conditioned coaching, for example in an exercise in which they only allow one or two touches. This will force them to think ahead.”

Movement

“Besides the triangles and trying to ensure that there are always two or three passing opportunities, we are also very focussed on movement. In this respect you must think of overlapping, creating spaces and the likes. We started to play 4:4:2 to realize a better fit with the first team (instead of 4:3:3). This creates some problems, as we therefore have space in offense besides the two strikers, and this space must be filled. This can be done by the strikers or by players moving up from the back. This has to be trained.”



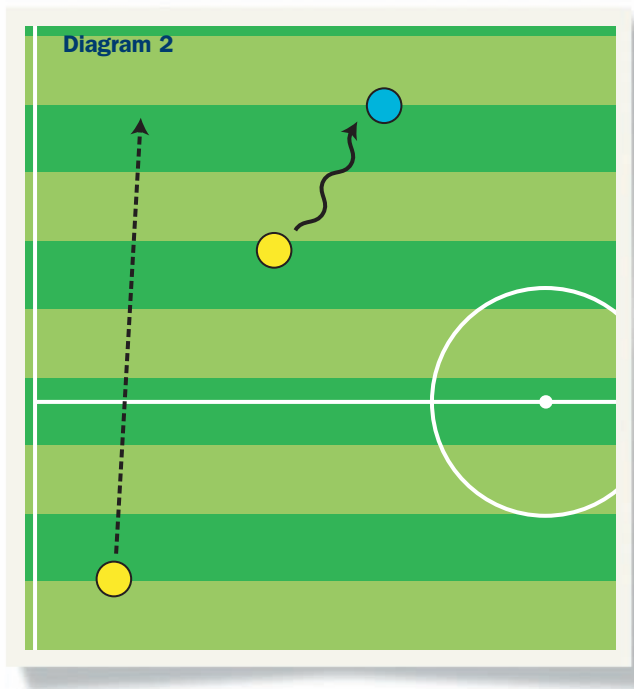
Overlapping

“Our midfielders can play a bit more inside, creating space for the backs to come up. This will leave a lot of space, so our wingbacks must not start running every time the central defenders get the ball. That is too early and easy for the opponent to see. A better moment to start the run down the flanks is when the midfielder receives the ball. The opponent’s right winger will be looking at the ball and the ball can therefore be passed in the run (diagram 1).”

2 against 1

“Another good moment to overlap is the situation in which the midfielder or the striker has the ball on the flank. Whenever a striker or midfielder is occupying the space on the flanks, the wingback can come from behind, thus overlapping. The player in possession does have to seek the defender in this situation. This defender will have to then choose, creating a 2 against 1





situation (see diagram 2). This is what it is all about in possession play: the player in possession must have choices to pass. And because of the movement the defending team will be left having to choose. It is however not just the wingback who will come into the free space. I want the strikers or the midfielder to go deep once in a while as well. This will create several ways to attack, ensuring you become unpredictable.”

Individual action

“Possession play is important, but just as important is to leave room within possession play for the individual action. A good time to teach this is with the U19s. When to play 1 touch? When to hold the ball? When to turn away from your opponent and when to make the individual move? This also makes you unpredictable in your game play.”

Boring

“What I hate is possession play for the sake of possession play. We had a phase of this in Holland. The ball is being played from left to right and back. You noticed that teams were only playing wide, nothing else. This may lead to a lot of possession, but I am not a fan. Plus, it is extremely boring to watch.”

Forward

“I may be stating the obvious, but I believe that whenever you can you should play forward. After all, you want to go to the opponent’s goal. This is also the reason you are looking for an opening and therefore passing the ball around, as finding an opening increases your chances of creating scoring opportunities. Not simply passing the ball around without any intention or aim. Look and think ahead and take initiative to play forward. For a midfielder this would mean that he must try to play forward by, for example, turning away. As when he is turned slightly he can, amongst other things, see what is happening in front of him.

Combination

“What I aspire to is, for example, Ajax that played a friendly match against Real Madrid and beat them 4-0 and got a standing ovation from the Real fans. They played great possession play during that time. The beauty was that whenever they were pressured they were capable of freeing the ball up, for example by beating an opponent on the move or by ensuring they held possession. I love that combination of possession play and individual technique. It makes you strong. Whenever you as a team are being cornered and you are unable to escape by means of possession play, you will have to beat the opponent on the move and make sure you maintain possession and look for space.”

Back pass

“When I was still coaching the U15s, I also did this. The players were not allowed to pass back to the goalkeeper, because in that case the goalkeeper would be stuck with a problem. They therefore had to make sure they maintained possession and they had to move off the ball. This way we also developed individual technique. Once during a game one of my wingbacks was being pressured every time he received the ball. He kicked the ball away every time this happened. At half-time I asked him: What else can you do? He replied with: beat him with a cutting move! The opponent approaches you at a high pace, all you have to do is initiate a cutting move. You really noticed the difference during that second half, which is great to watch.”

Complete

“This shows the relationship between possession play and individual technique. Of course everything is intertwined. You must, for example, also have good passing and receiving skills in order to play good possession play. This gives you just a bit more time and therefore a bit more space. When you have little time and space, you will have to hold on to the ball or have the ability to beat your opponent on the move. This is why we train these things.”



