

Assessment for the FIH Coaching Seminar Mönchengladbach 2006

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Topic : Midfield dynamics, movement in building up towards attacking play

Introduction

As a coach in The Netherlands, involved with a women team at the highest level and the U18 national girls team, I see a lot of high-level matches. When I coach and watch these matches, and international matches of the national teams like at the Champions Trophy, I'm seeing clearly a decrease in 'space to play'. To a coach like me, who prefers to attack and play a high-speed game, this isn't an enjoyable development of the game. In analysing this problem it became clear to me that long passes or high balls aren't effective when your opponent is closing down their own half of the pitch. Therefore I began looking at ways to move for the midfield players in order to create space and possibilities to build up the game from defence, through the midfield, towards the attackers. To me the midfield players should (again) become the connecting link between defenders and attackers. The focus I have chosen for this presentation is on movement with and without the ball, individually and together.

Key points

As stated in the introduction, the focus will be on *movement*. It is my firm belief that players can create more space, and therefore more possibilities to attack, when they move together. I call this "dynamics".

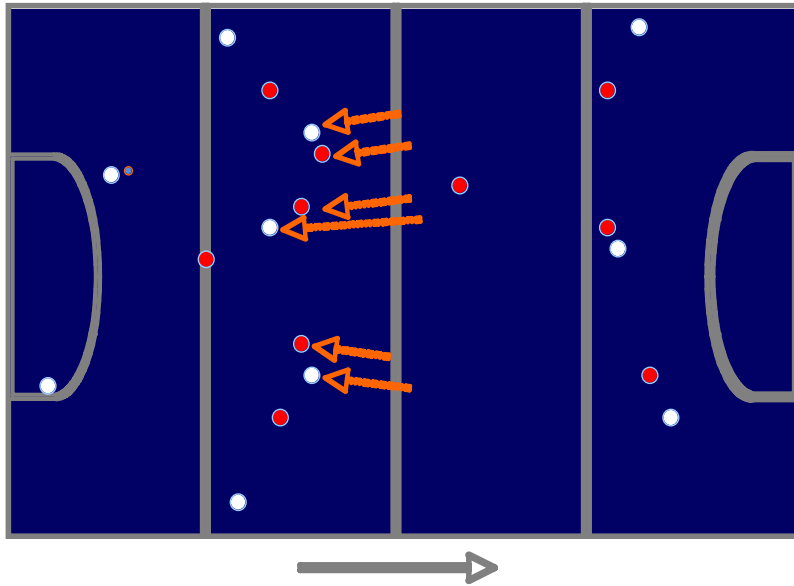
In the context of movement, I will focus on three (3) key points:

1. forward motion
2. high-speed action
3. tactical set-up

Forward motion

When a player is moving towards the opponent's goal, he gives his team a lot of advantages. He is of a bigger threat as when he is moving towards the sidelines. Going forward makes the distance to goal smaller and will give your team the opportunity to create a higher level of speed. At the same time the risk when losing possession of the ball, is smaller. This is because there will be more 1v1 actions in contrast of moving towards the sidelines, which I now will call *wide*. When moving wide, or even more when moving back to your own goal, it gives the opponent more time to create a pressure situation and get a 1v2 or worse 1v3 action in working order.

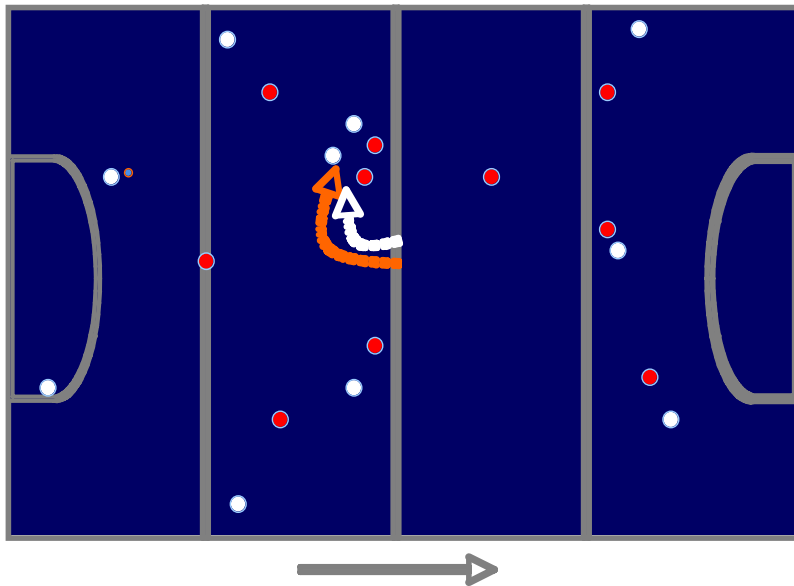
The following pictures will show what happens when midfield players run backwards (picture 1), run wide (picture 2) and when they run forward (picture 3).



Picture 1

When running backwards to their own goal, players:

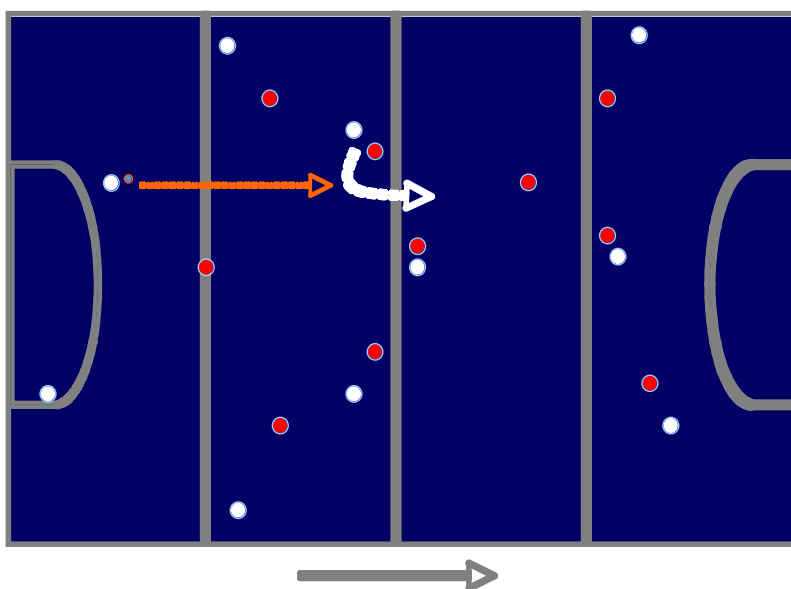
- decrease space to move or play
- run into the attackers of the opposition
- create possibilities for double or triple defence situations
- decrease their passing options
- loose the view of the game



Picture 2

When running wide, towards the sidelines, players:

- run into other defending midfield players
- will loose speed
- decrease their space to play, especially when they get close to the sideline
- create possibilities for double or triple defence situations



Picture 3

When moving forward, players:

- can maintain a high speed level
- create 1v1 actions or are directly in free space
- can keep their view on the game
- get closer to their opponents goal

High-speed action

In order to be able to stay out of pressure situations, it is important to keep the speed of play as high as possible. When maintaining a high speed level, it is difficult for the defending team to create channelling opportunities or double defence actions. The defenders will have less time to act and react to the constantly rapid changing of the situation.

There are five (5) aspects of speed:

- ball speed, the speed the ball has when being passed to another player
- running speed with the ball, dribbling
- running speed without the ball, off the ball movements
- speed in handling the ball, the time needed to receive and play the ball away
- circulation speed, the speed of the ball going constantly from player to player (rhythm)

In order to be able to meet these demands, a sixth aspect could be added, that is needed in all five areas and it is *communication*. Because everything is going so fast, it is crucial all players know what their team-mates are doing or are planning to do. This decreases the amount of time needed to make the next move, because the decision-making process takes less time.

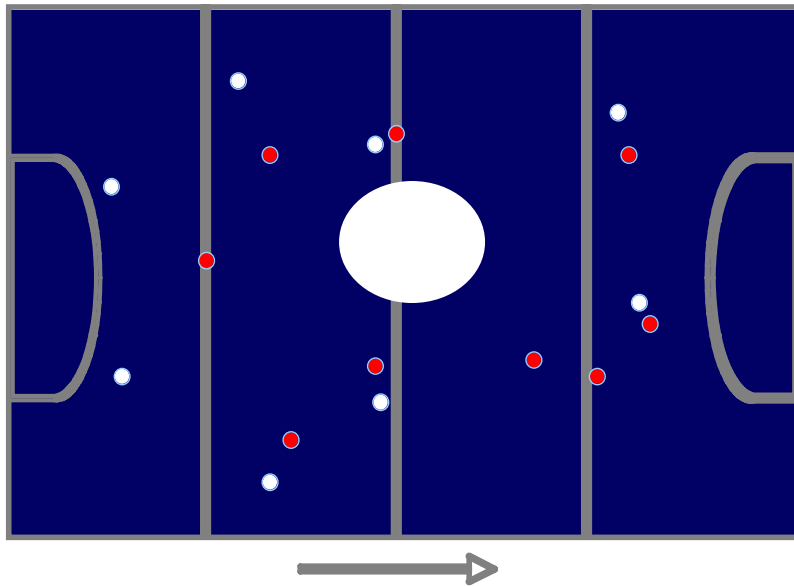
Finally programmed running lines can speed up the game, but I do not prefer using them. It limits your possibilities and minimizes your players' ability to be creative. I prefer players to 'read' the game and make their own choices. In the end your opponents will read your fixed running schemes and will turn it into their advantage.

Tactical set-up

This third and final key point is about how your team wants to play the game. What is the tactical plan to be able to use the midfield as the interconnection part of the team?

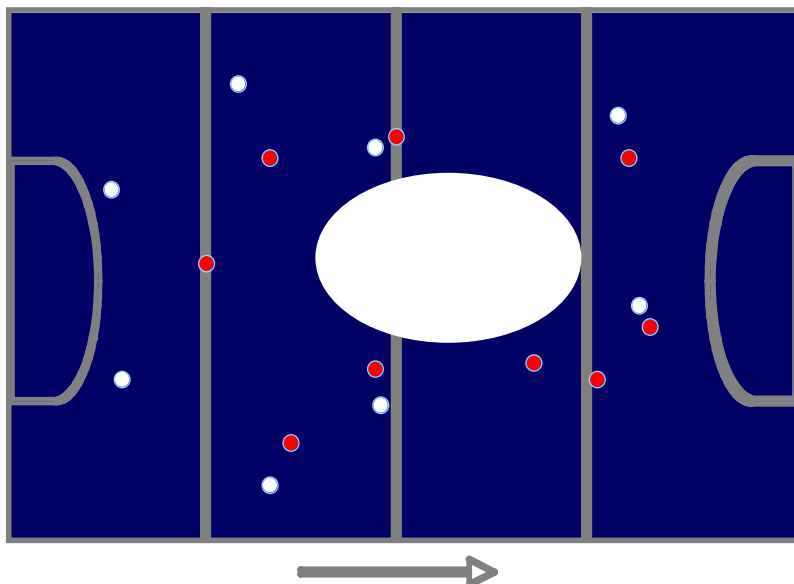
First of all players should move coherent and therefore are able to react to each other. There have to be certain agreements about the way players with and without the ball move. These should not be fixed patterns, as I stated before, but the players should know what the intentions of their team-mates are, to be able to plan their next move.

Secondly players without the ball should keep enough distance to the ball carrier. This gives the opponents fewer possibilities to play double defence or to cover each other's back. It is also impossible for 1 defender to cover 2 attackers. When players keep a minimum distance of approximately 7 meters from the ball carrier, the defender can't intercept when the players are wide and he can't tackle back fast enough when the players are positioned deep, in a vertical line. Pictures 4 and 5 show the difference.



Picture 4

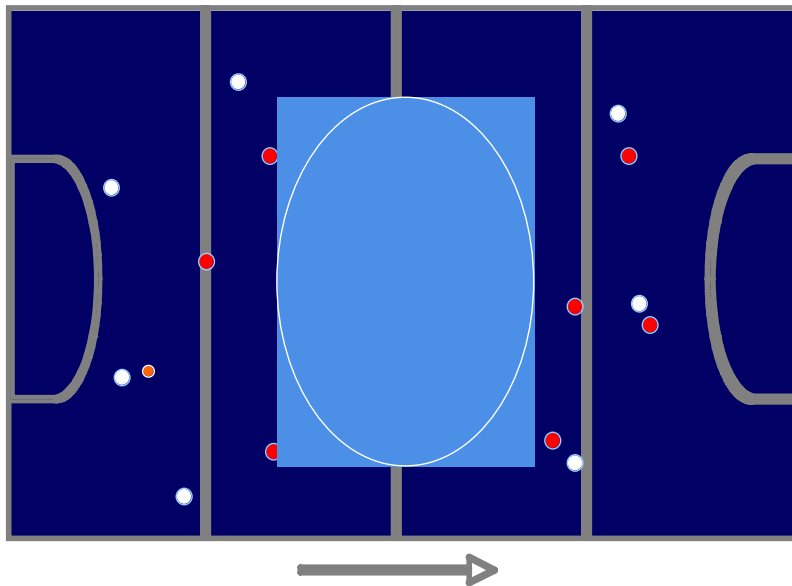
Picture 5



Picture 4: Distance between the 2 attacking players is less than 7 meters in both width and depth.

Picture 5: Distance between the 2 attacking players is more than 7 meters, which gives the defender no chance to intercept or run an effective tackle back.

The third tactical option concerns the way the midfield players are lined up. In order to give the opponents fewer possibilities to defend together and help each other, it is best to make the midfield players play on different levels or heights. This also makes it possible to play with more players on the ball side of the pitch and fill up the length of the pitch instead of the width. Picture 6 shows an example.



Picture 6

Picture 6 shows the attacking midfield players on different levels on the pitch. Now also the defending midfield players are further apart. This creates space and space is good for attacking, but also bad for defending as a team.

Case study

To see if my thoughts on midfield play are correct and to look for new angles and options, I've watched the following international matches.

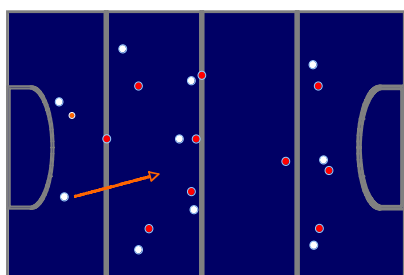
- Netherlands vs. Argentina on July 4th (women)
- Netherlands vs. Spain on July 7th (men)
- Netherlands vs. Germany on July 9th (women)
- Netherlands vs. Argentina on July 12th (men)

After analysing these matches I came to the conclusion that forward motion and high-speed action are indeed crucial for creating space and being able to go swiftly into attack. The extra information I got was especially on the tactical set-up and the way midfield players move together.

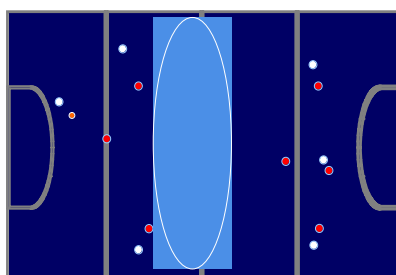
First I noticed the involvement of the defenders and the attackers. The Spanish team (men) for instance has some midfield player's, who also become attackers and vice versa. They almost rotate all the attackers and midfielders through their six positions. Also the Argentina team (men) had some moments they tried to do this. The women

teams were much clearer divided in three lines (defence, midfield and attack). Attackers stayed forwards and midfielders stayed on the midfield, at least when building up the game from the back. It is my belief the passing skills (less power and speed) of the women teams are preventing them to play the way these men teams are playing.

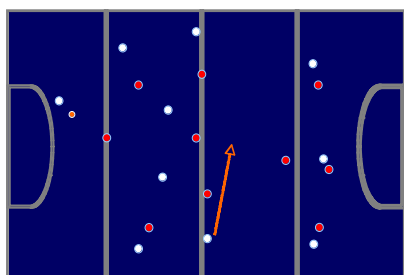
When playing against a team that plays a high-pressure game, led by the attackers, some teams change their set-up from a 4-3-3 structure to a 3-4-3 structure. Especially the women teams use this frequently. Men teams don't play so much high-pressure because of the passing power (long, hard drive hits and high balls) I mentioned before and therefore they don't have to change their set-up in build-up. They will do this further up the field, closer to the goal of their opponent. When changing their structure to 3-4-3 the midfield set-up will become a bowl shape of 4 players, soon followed by one of these 4 players moving higher up the field. This creates a parallelogram shaped midfield. Most of the time it was one of the outside players who would move higher up the field. Picture 7 (a, b, c & d) will show an example.



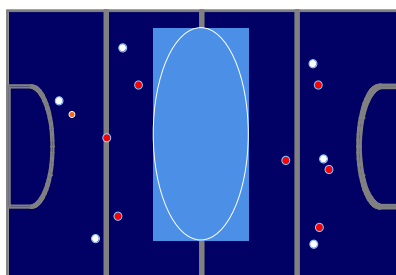
Picture 7a



Picture 7b



Picture 7c



Picture 7d

Picture 7a: One of the defenders moves up the field and becomes a midfield player

Picture 7b: A bowl shaped midfield set-up in created

Picture 7c: One of the outside midfield players moves higher up the field

Picture 7d: A parallelogram shaped midfield set-up is created

Playing this way the teams were able to cross the midfield with shorter, less risky passes. I also noticed an increase of vertical passes, instead of wide passes, because defenders have more players on their midfield they can pass the ball to. This resulted in more effective build-up situations, using the midfield, towards attacking play. The attacks created in this matter were also more dangerous and created lots of good opportunities for the attacking team.

Supporting information

As supporting information I have used my own experiences in coaching and training my club and the national girls U18 team. I will use video footage during my presentation to underline my key points and to show the actual use in play.

Other information

In order to be able to play according to the key points I mentioned, you'll have to train these aspects. But what does your team need to learn, before they are able to use it in play? For each key point I have some suggestions on what to do.

Forward motion: practice forward running lines
practice multiple running lines with changes of speed and direction
practice receiving skills, especially 'open' receiving (face forward)

High-speed action: practice ball-receiving skills (when running at high speed)
practice passing skills, especially the power of passing
practice on quick footwork and sprinting (short distances)
practice dribbling skills at high speed
practice all sorts of technical, ball handling skills
make rules on how you're going to move together (give options)

Tactical set-up: practice playing with 4 midfield players
practice playing on different levels or heights
practice playing with constantly changing positions

All 4 aspects of sports (technical, tactical, physical and mental aspects) are important in learning to get more result out of your midfield play in building up the game. To my opinion it is crucial to be physically in shape and to have quick moving midfield players on your team. Make sure the players are very well trained in handling the ball, by practicing all technical areas. Their ball skills have to be on the highest level possible. And finally I suggest using video footage as a feedback tool to show the effects and benefits of the changes in tactical set-up of the midfield.

Conclusion

It is my strong belief that playing a high-speed attacking game, will bring the biggest results. To be able to play this type of game, teams will have to play towards their opponents goal as much and as direct as possible. Running in the direction of your own goal, with the ball or when you want to receive the ball, isn't one of the options. Using the length of the field, instead of the width, is very helpful to be more dangerous to your opponent. Playing with depth will give the team the possibility to keep spaces open, space that players can use to receive the ball in at a high pace. And it will make defending as a team more difficult for your opponent. It will also give your team the opportunity to play more vertical passes, which creates more danger than using wide passes, because vertical passes will bring you closer towards the goal.

Midfield players are crucial to the success of this concept. Space to play in attack decreases rapidly. It doesn't matter if your opponents play a high-pressure game or they play compact on their own half. Midfield players will have to move together to

get their opponents in motion. They will have to *create* space to play by playing and moving forward, at high-speed and within a good tactical plan.

Finally I believe strongly in distance between the players. One of the reasons why I think players should minimize running towards the ball and midfield players shouldn't run towards their own goal at all when building up the game. When playing further away from your team-mates in attack, it will automatically mean everybody will have more space to manoeuvre. Space means opportunities, opportunities means chances, chances means goals and goals means winning!



Dave Smolenaars