

## Shadow Training and Patterns of Play

*by Robert Parr*

One of the great challenges of the game lies in the fact that offense requires everything to go right, whereas defense simply needs to make one thing go wrong. To create a single goal-scoring opportunity, the attacking team must be able to get one (or more) of its players in open space in front of the goal, with the ball, at the same time. If the ball arrives early or late, or if the runs off the ball don't materialize, or if the defense stays organized and eliminates all the passing and shooting lanes in front of the goal, then the offense won't likely find much success. Good defenses dedicate themselves to limiting attacking options so they can anticipate where the ball will go next, and then move to win it. This is why goals are so difficult to score!

To solve this problem, we must find ways to make our attacking play predictable to ourselves while remaining unpredictable to opposing defenses. One way to accomplish this objective is to define a set of **patterns of play** that represent ways to advance the ball down the field in "real" game situations. For example, to work the ball out of the back, you might want an outside defender to look for a passing lane to a posting striker, who would then drop the ball back to a central midfielder who could then play the ball to another striker. While this is certainly not the only way to build the attack from your defensive third, this pattern of play does represent a useful attacking sequence for the full-sided game.

When you are ready to rehearse your attacking patterns, you'll likely want to introduce them using **shadow training**. What is shadow training? In the most general sense, it is any functional exercise that requires a team to compete against an imaginary opponent. You can use small-sided numbers (3v0, 4v0, etc.) in a confined area, or play 11v0 to goal on a full field. Regardless of your numbers, you'll need to consider a few key points to get the most from this type of training:

1. **Use restrictions that reinforce your learning objectives.** Some examples of this include limiting everyone to just one touch, requiring a specific pattern of play, requiring a minimum (or maximum) number of touches in different thirds of the field, or moving the ball down the field in a specified period of time.
2. **Have your patterns of play written down on your training plan.** You will need to define specific patterns for your players to get your exercise going quickly. Once your players acquire a good understanding of the attacking rhythm you are seeking, you can expand the patterns by adding "decision points" into the activity. For example, you could insert options like "pass to any central midfielder" or "either drop the ball back or use a wall pass" at specific junctions in each sequence. These decision points are crucial for success, as they are the mechanism that allows your team to link patterns together. Decision points also give your

- players the freedom to adjust their passing patterns so that your play doesn't become too predictable for the defense.
3. **Demand technical precision.** Since you don't have pressure from an opponent, you must raise your expectations for technical execution. Shadow training provides an excellent opportunity to focus on passing to the receiver's correct foot, or giving proper weight and spin to passes, or striking the ball properly when finishing on an empty net. If your players become lazy or unfocused with their touches, stop play and have them begin the play again until you see the technical quality you expect.
  4. **Focus on the timing of runs, and practice "at speed".** To make patterns work under game conditions, you need to have players recognize the precise moment to initiate each run off the ball. Shadow training can help your players read the cues provided by their teammates so they know when--and where--to make their runs. Again, if supporting players arrive too soon or too late, the attacking opportunity will be lost. Further, if players only work at "half speed" in practice, they'll tend to be late with their runs once the pace picks up in the game, so you must push the tempo in training.

To examine this teaching method further, consider the following activity:

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#### 448: 11v0 Shadow Training



Distribute 11 players in their positions and place a ball in the keeper's hands. Using a full field, start play by having your keeper throw the ball to a supporting defender. Players are only allowed one touch, and must play the ball through all 11 players to move down the field and score with a shot on goal that hits "net first". If any player takes more than one touch, or the ball goes out of play before a goal is scored, the team "loses" and must do 5 "hops" before sprinting back to start again with a ball from the keeper. Be sure to enforce the offsides rule so that your players must use overlapping runs to stay behind the ball when attacking in the opposite half.

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As your players begin to achieve success, increase the difficulty of the activity by (a) adding decision points to your patterns of play, and then (b) adding defenders to the activity (progressing from 11v0 to 11v4, then 11v7, and finally 11v11). If you have

enough players, you can start with two full teams on the field (two 11v0s) playing in opposite directions. Alternate which team "attacks" so that the ball moves up and down the field with each team taking turns rehearsing attacking patterns and then providing passive defensive resistance (tracking players but not seeking to win possession of the ball). From here, you can progress by making the game "live" (so that defenders play at full speed) whenever the ball enters the final third of the field.

Why does this approach help? First, shadow training is functional by design, placing players in the same types of situations they'll face in games when playing their normal positions. Second, it is both visual and tactile, helping players to see and experience how you want them to move about the field and interact with each other. Third, it is progressive, starting with no pressure from an opponent before gradually building to full-sided game play. Finally, by rehearsing specific patterns of play, you provide your players with a complete attacking framework that should simplify their collective decision-making while still allowing for individual creativity, both on and off the ball.