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This article was published in the November/December, 2004, issue of the Soccer Journal. Used by permission.

Thinking Outside the Keep-Away Box

by Russ Carrington

For many soccer coaches, possession work isn't possible without some form of Keep Away. They believe Keep Away replicates the possession challenges of a match. They use Keep Away in the pre-match warm-up, as well as most practices.

There are 3 v 1, 4 v 2, and larger variations of Keep Away. One team keeps the ball from a smaller team in an enclosed area. The attackers must create good passing angles and pass quickly. The defenders must close down the passing angles and pressure the ball. Different team sizes, field setups, and rules are possible, but the variations have this in common. Because no goals are used, all directions are equal.

Thoughtful Scrimmages, or Thoughtscrimms, are an alternative to Keep Away. These small-sided scrimmages always include goals and four directions. Their special rules teach critical possession secrets. Thoughtscrimms can be included in every practice and pre-match warm-up, for players of any level.

What's Possession?

To think outside the Keep Away box, let's start with possession itself. Soccer people have many different definitions and theories of possession. Simply put, possession means keeping the ball regardless of where it is on the field.

Soccer can be thought of as having a possession part, as well as attacking parts and defending parts. The possession part is where your team is just trying to keep the ball. It strongly influences the other parts. Only when your team keeps possession is an attack possible. When your team keeps possession, the other team gets tired and frustrated. And when possession is eventually lost, your team can more easily defend.

We can think about possession at the player level or the team level. Both are important. The player who can control, shield, and pass the ball under pressure won't usually turn the ball over. Keep Away is great for developing these skills.

At the team level, possession depends on six secrets. The secrets enable players to think together as a team. You'll see the secrets in any professional match, yet brand new players can learn them. For the secrets are mental skills rather than physical skills.

Four of the secrets can be learned and practiced with Keep Away:

- 1) Vary the number of touches used, from one to many.
- 2) Move the ball quickly to the player with the most space.
- 3) Pass to open space as well as directly to teammates.
- 4) Pass long as well as short. (The Keep Away field must be fairly large to practice this secret.)

The other two secrets, though, involve directions:

- 5) Move the ball in all four directions, rather than always moving it forward.
- 6) When about to lose the ball, retreat from the attacking zone if necessary.

These secrets are arguably the most important ones. They separate thoughtful soccer from thoughtless bunch ball. For if the ball is always moved forward, the forward path will always be crowded and possession will be impossible. Keep Away isn't much help with direction-based secrets. Here's why.

Response Generalization

A coach will sometimes say, "My players did it well in practice but not in the match." The coach wants better response generalization. That's where a response learned in one situation (the practice) generalizes or carries over to another situation (the match). We practice possession so that better possession will occur in the match.

Response generalization has its own secrets. Here's one. If you want something to carry over to the match, make the practice situation as much like the match situation as possible. A practice situation that includes goals and directions might thus be advantageous. If players rarely deal with directions in practice, how can they deal with directions in the match?

This 4 v 2 game of Keep Away (Scene A) suggests the problem. The field has no goals or directions, so there is no temptation to move the ball forward. The attacking players are all facing each other, so the player with the ball never has to consider the situation to his rear.

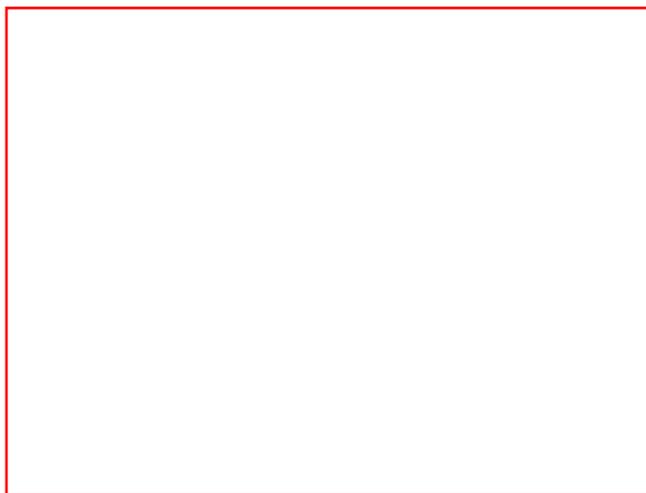
The absence of directions in Keep Away isn't necessarily a fatal weakness. Another secret to response generalization can save the day. The practice situation can gradually be made to resemble the match situation. That's the idea behind logical progressions. Directionless Keep Away is used early in the practice. Later activities include goals and directions. And the final activity is plain old soccer. What's learned during Keep Away might carry over to the match after all.

That's a perfectly sound way to practice possession, but not the only way. If goals and directions are included from the start, the possession secrets can be covered more quickly and thoroughly. The extra finishing work is a bonus. Players will even have more fun, for they love to score goals. That's the reasoning behind Thoughtscrim.

The Thoughtscrim Alternative

A Thoughtscrim is a small-sided scrimmage with special rules. The rules get players thinking together about the possession secrets: ball direction, number of touches, passing distance, and so on. The field has goals at each end, creating a north, south, east, and west.

Here's a 3 v 3 game of Side-to-Side. Teams up to 7 v 7 also work fine. Before scoring, a team must work the ball within a few steps of each touchline. This can be achieved by passing long or dribbling, but a series of shorter passes usually works best. The official rules follow.



Rules for Side-to-Side

Field Lines *The field requires two side zones. A side zone extends the length of the field, three paces in from a touch line. It may be marked with cones along the goal lines, but this is usually unnecessary. Players may guess at the zone's location instead.*

Touch Rule *Players are allowed an unlimited number of touches. However, if a player dribbles excessively, or misses the chance for*

a quick pass, the coach may call a violation. The other team gets a free kick at the spot.

Side-to-Side Rule *Before scoring, a team must escort the ball into each side zone. To reach these zones, any combination of passing and dribbling may be used. A player may dribble from one side zone to the other, although this is not recommended. Side zones may be reached more than once, and in any sequence. Once a team has reached both side zones, two consecutive touches by the other team erase the accomplishment. A single touch does not.*

Why play Side-to-Side? It gets players moving the ball in different directions, particularly east and west. The play begins spreading out, without pleas from the coach. And possession becomes much easier.

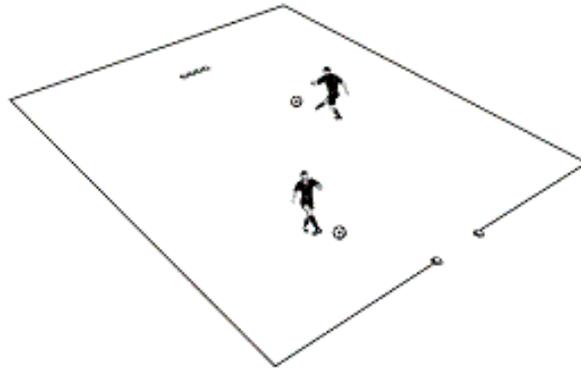
Why not play Side-to-Side? Here are a few of the misguided arguments. In a real match, the ball doesn't have to reach each touchline; forcing this with rules isn't match realistic. In a real match, players must make their own decisions about directions; forcing decisions on players will harm their decision-making faculties. Worse yet, negative habits—like dribbling toward a touchline for no reason—will carry over to the match.

Actually, players have no trouble telling the difference between Side-to-Side (or any Thoughtscrim) and a real match. The scrimmage simply plants an option, like moving the ball laterally, in everyone's mind. Once in the match, players decide for themselves when to apply these options. Players don't begin dribbling toward touchlines for no reason.

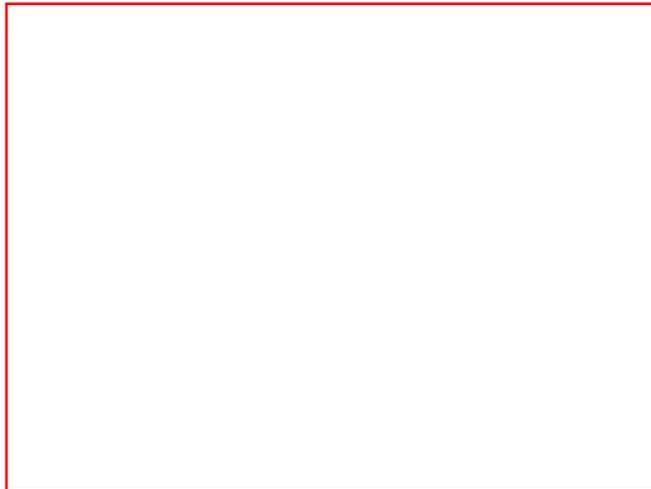
The Convenience Factor

Keep Away requires only an enclosed space. Thoughtscrimms seem to require large goals and Keepers. What if you like Thoughtscrimms but don't want to hassle with the setup? No problem. You can use small goals rather than large goals, and Keepers are optional.

Here are two quick ways to create small goals. To score on the lower goal, the ball must bounce at least once before going through and must not contact either cone. To score on the upper goal, the ball must contact one of the side-by-side cones. Both setups encourage controlled shots from in close, but give a field the required directions.



What if you prefer more realistic shots, but don't want to bother with Keepers? The Big Goal/Small Goal setup is ideal. Each team can score on a small goal of disc cones or on the larger goal behind it. The small goal can be scored on from anywhere, at any time. But to score on the large goal, two conditions must be met: 1) the shot must be a one-touch shot, and 2) the pass leading up to the shot must come from the final zone. There are no Keepers.



The conditions for a shot on the big goal are challenging. Although it's unprotected, that goal doesn't undergo a continual barrage. The setup also encourages players to take the indirect path to goal. Rather than going directly to the small goal each time, they move the ball to a corner for a crossing pass.

It's About Time

If Keep Away is valuable, why not include it in practice? Can't the directional stuff be practiced in other ways? And shouldn't possession and finishing be practiced separately?

Those are time management questions. Every minute of Keep Away is a minute during which players aren't dealing with directions or scoring goals. Suppose Team A spends thirty minutes of every practice on Keep Away, while Team B spends those minutes playing Thoughtscrim. The math is easy. All other things

being equal, Team B will improve more quickly at choosing directions and scoring goals. Each season, team B's lead will widen.

Suppose both teams use Thoughtscrim, and Team A sneaks out each morning for some Keep Away. Team A might then have the edge. And if Team B sneaks out for extra Thoughtscrim, we'll have to hire a research team. So include Keep Away if it meets a particular need, but remember time management. There's something to be said for killing two birds with one stone.

American soccer develops fast, fit, skillful players. It doesn't yet develop dominant attacking players—the kind other countries covet. We have no soccer equivalents of Michael Jordan. Goalless, directionless Keep Away might be part of the problem.

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