TEAM PLAY AND
GAME PLANS
INTRODUCTION
Football has undergone rapid change over the past 10 years. The rules of the game are continually being updated. Players too, have become more versatile with fitness and skill levels continually improving. Advances in the coaching area have seen an increased emphasis on tactics as coaches strive to gain an edge over their opposition. Before the start of a season, a coach should analyse the previous season, setting down the team’s strengths and weaknesses and assessing new players before to developing the team plan.

In considering the development of a game plan and tactics, it is useful to have a basic understanding of some of the concepts and terminology commonly used to describe areas of the playing field and roles of the players.

ANATOMY OF TEAM PLAY

Zones
The ground is divided into three separate playing zones.

The Corridor
The Corridor is the area of the ground running from end to end, approximately the width of the centre square. It is the area within which most of the play occurs. It is of strategic advantage whether defending or attacking.
**LINES**
- **Goal to Goal Line**
  Line that splits the ground lengthways into two equal halves

- **Contest Line**
  A line across the ground in line with the ball.
  Support players should start behind this line ready to create or defend.

- **Work Line**
  Imaginary line between the ball and the goals at either end.

**FAT & THIN SIDE**
- **Thin side**
  The side of the ground between the ball and the closer boundary line

- **Fat side**
  The side of the ground between the ball and the further boundary line

**SCORING ZONE**
The area of the forward zone from which most goals are kicked.
It includes the “hot spot” approximately 10-15 metres out from the goal square.
The “no go” areas are the most difficult areas of the forward zone from which to score goals.
**DANGER ZONE**

The reverse of the scoring zone from the defending team’s perspective.

**TEAM SET-UPS**

Traditionally, football has been played with five lines of three players plus three players running on the ball. The increased versatility of footballers today combined with the importance of the midfield area has led to a move away from the more established line-ups.

One such variation is the five-man forward line.

This formation allows extra space for a key forward while relocating an extra player in the mid-field area.

**DEVELOPING A PATTERN OF PLAY**

Following is a simple approach to developing a pattern of play which can form the basis of a team plan. A pattern of play should be recognisable and applicable to all game situations and is generally developed in a series of stages.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Stage</th>
<th>Emphasis</th>
<th>Key Terms</th>
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| Stage 1 | The development of the basic skills with an emphasis on taking time to balance and kick the ball longer | • Goal-to-goal line  
• Scoring zone  
• Danger zone |
| Stage 2 | Winning the ball when it is in neutral or when the opposition has it. And then having a pattern for giving it on to a teammate | • Contest line  
• Contest set-up  
• Playing the corridor |
| Stage 3 | Longer kicking to marking targets and the organisation of numbers at ground level to rove these aerial contests | • Work line  
• Straight-running kickers  
• Roving a contest |
| Stage 4 | The setting up in general play and the use of straight-running kickers | • Switching the play  
• The line out  
• Creating space |
BASIC PATTERN

To move the ball, out of or across, the Danger Zone and then work it directly and efficiently into the Scoring Zone through the use of straight-running kickers.

**Danger Zone**
- Man on man.
- Ball cleared out of this area, not into it.
- No risks.
- Disciplined and predictable.
- Into a wind, the Danger Zone will extend to the centre of the ground.

**Scoring Zone**
- Kick goals.
- Move forward to create space behind.
- 10-second zone.

THE GAME SET-UP

**Goal-to-Goal Line**
Play your side of the ground because it will provide a target for the switch of play.

**Contest Line**
Push up to be on the defensive side of the Contest Line, with the contest between the player and the goal. From this position, the player can attack when appropriate. The player is positioned to:
1. Tackle opponents.
2. Get back to help in defence.
3. Shepherd for a teammate.
4. Cover opposition spoils.
5. Provide extra vision for teammates.

**Work Line**
Once out of the Danger Zone, this is the direct path into the Scoring Zone.

CONTEST SET-UP

This basic set-up around a contest is relevant to:
- Centre bounces.
- Boundary throw-ins.
- Marking contests.
- Pack situations.

BASIC PATTERN

This provides the weight of players to cover the defensive side by getting behind the Contest Line. The offensive side is taken by a “handballing” player looking to feed to a straight-running kicker.
**CENTRE BOUNCE**

Specific roles

**Ruckman (R)**
Stands to face 12 o’clock. Using preferred (e.g. RH) hand, the target areas are:
1. 9 o’clock.
2. 3 o’clock.
3. 6 o’clock.
4. 12 o’clock.

**Ruck-rover (RR)**
Takes the prime defensive role behind the ruckman. The RR is never to get in front of the ball, but must always remain behind the Contest Line to:
1. Assist the defence, or
2. Present as a straight-running kicker.

**Rover (Rov)**
The primary target for the ruckman’s tap work

**Centre (C)**
Covers the forward side of the contests to:
1. Create a pathway for the rover.
2. Be a target at 3 o’clock.
3. Use handball to find a straight running kicker.

**Wingers (W)**
Behind the Contest Line to defend when they have to and attack when they can.

**Half-back flank (HBF)**
At the back of the square supporting the defence.

**Half-forward flank (HFF)**
Up the ground creating space in the forward line.

Over time, teams can develop more detailed game plans based around specific situations such as which team has the ball (or is it neutral), which zone the play is in (forward, midfield or defensive) and variables related to desired player and ball movement such as direction, distance and speed.
GAME PLANS

Game plan refers to a recognisable/predictable standard or style of play adopted by the coach that suits his/her football philosophy. A game plan is simply a plan for a match consisting of a few major parts. A good generic game plan is based on a direct flowing game, focused on player movement and control of the ball in both offence and defence and should incorporate the following elements:

• Clearly defined style of play.
• Team rules (as determined by the players/coach).
• Area rules (backline, midfield, forwards, on-ballers).
• Strategies/tactics.
• Encouraging ‘smart’ risk-taking.
• Specific match plan (suited to explore opposition team).
• Set match plays.
• Accountability.

1. Team rules or guidelines – rules that do not change.

Every coach should have his/her own set of basic team rules. Listed below are a few examples of these team rules:

• Play in front.
• Guard the mark.
• Punch from behind.
• Centre the ball from the forward pockets.

A coach should clearly outline a collection of basic rules to be followed by the team. This is particularly important of junior and youth teams. Not only should these basics be clearly explained, they should also be reinforced both at training and on match-day. Basics form the foundation of the team plan.

2. Tactics – measures or changes made to team play. These can vary from week to week depending on a variety of factors, e.g. the opposition, ground size and condition, weather and players available. The implementation of set plays on the football ground generally revolves around ‘dead ball’ situations (stoppages), e.g. out of bounds, centre bounce and after a behind has been scored.

Sample club team guidelines and area principles

Theme: “Take them on and run, long and quick.”

Defence: “Low risk, ruthless, miserly – play the percentages”

Responsibilities:

• Always in front of your opponent.
• Touch and feel, know where he is all the time.
• Back yourself to win the ball on every occasion.
• Look to switch play, change direction (smart risk taking), remember to play the percentages.
• Strong punching of the ball when behind.
• Strong, vice-like tackling of all opposition players (no easy frees through high tackling).

Midfield: “Hard working, accountable, creative”

Responsibilities:

• Must get to as many contests as possible.
• Create an option mid-field when ball comes out of defence.
• Push back into defence to assist backline to fill holes and man-up (especially if your opponent runs forward). Remember to have at least one midfielder (where possible) ready for transition play.
• Be a crumbing or another marking option up forward (don’t be stationary inside the attacking 50m).
• When opposition has the ball or when we lose the ball, everybody is accountable – everybody becomes a defender.
• Be an option for kick-in plays.
**Forwards:** “Kick goals, keep ball alive inside 50m, exciting!”

**Responsibilities:**

- Always create and recreate space by leading in different directions (sacrificial leads).
- Adopt front position and work hard to keep it.
- Lead in “Red Zone” to kick goals, back yourself. This may mean you need to start wide to lead into red zone rather than vice-versa.
- If you can’t mark, bring the ball to the front of the pack.
- Be ready to crumb front-and-square off each pack (picture the training drill where you run off in fives, hitting the pack with speed and kicking the goals).
- Keep “Red/Danger Zone” as free as possible – (don’t be flat-footed).
- Be the team’s best chasers and tacklers, be ruthless and strong to keep ball alive.

**Establishing core team guidelines and on-field area principles**

It is essential that coaches lead the development of a set of club core values and principles, which everyone can follow. In addition, coaches should develop a game based on the characteristics, including strengths and weaknesses of the playing group. All players and coaches have ownership of the rules/guidelines and these are constantly reinforced.

Before being able to develop a particular style of play, a coach must ascertain the strengths and weaknesses of players in the team. The following factors should be considered in this appraisal:

- Strong midfield.
- Two key forwards.
- Tall, strong-marking side.
- Small, quick and skilled.
- Aggressive, particularly in close.
- Very fit.
- Very quick (may have two or three explosively quick players).
- Slow, but very skilled, etc.

Once coaches have worked out their team’s strengths and weaknesses, tactics and processes can be developed aimed at maximising the potential of the team. Coaches must then decide how to structure the team guidelines or rules, set plays, etc.

The coach and a flexible team should to be able to adapt quickly to a number of different styles of play, including long and quick, possession-based, flooding and breaking etc. These should be practised at training and refined so that, depending on the nature of the opposition, ground size, weather etc, they can be implemented quickly and with minimal confusion.

There have been some very successful clubs, which have five team rules, which work very effectively as all players are fully aware of these and these become automatic throughout the game. Another very effective strategy, which could be adopted, is to establish the rules as a collective unit (players and coaches) where everyone has ownership of the rules. This can be done in an open brainstorm situation following training.

**Training to reinforce stated rules/guidelines**

The next step once all players have established club core values/principles and learnt these rules, is to reinforce these through practice. Practice allows learning to occur, and given football is played outdoors, if you structure training around your game plan and team rules you increase your players’ chances of truly understanding team rules.

Following is a simple example:

**Be front and square of all contests.**

To reinforce this rule, a lot of training drills will incorporate players running to the front and square of contests in order to gain possession of the football. As the coach, the drill may be stopped periodically to reinforce smart positioning of a player, which highlights front-and-square positioning.
TACTICS

Tactics are an important part of the coach’s plan and must be used to serve a number of purposes:
- To increase the chance of improving team and individual performance or outcome by building on the team’s strengths and advantages.
- To increase the chance of improving team performance by exploiting the opposition strengths and weaknesses.
- To increase motivation and enthusiasm of players as a result of trying new processes and set team processes.

There are a range of tactics that a coach can develop and use including:
- Forward line set-ups in general play.
- Forward line set-ups at centre-bounces (e.g. horse shoe).
- Centre-bounce set-ups (all player roles).
- Ball-ups inside forward 50m.
- Ball-ups inside defensive 50m.
- Ball-ups in midfield.
- Boundary throw-ins (inside 50m, defensive 50m, midfield).
- Defensive set-up against opposition kick-ins (zone, man-on-man, combination).
- Kick-ins after opposition score a behind (designated kicker, screens, blockers, breakers, second phase considerations).
- Style of play which may be determined by team guidelines, area guidelines, your team personnel, opposition personnel and their style, ground conditions, weather conditions etc).
- On-ball or midfield rotations (time, positions etc).
- Attacking plays from a midfield stoppage, moving ball inside attacking 50m.
- “Flooding” defence.
- Coaching against “flooding” tactics.
- Attacking through a “go to” defensive player, to whom your team may release the ball to gain an advantage or to exploit a weakness of a particular player.
- Creating obvious mismatches to your team’s advantage.
- Rotating the number of forwards within a quarter.

Whatever tactics coaches adopt, there are a few key guidelines that should be in place:
1. Tactics must be practised frequently at training so all players are aware of their implications in a practical sense.
2. They must serve a purpose which should be clear to all personnel (players and coaches).
3. Every player must understand the tactics, signals and their roles.
4. They may be supported by being written as a handbook for all players to study and learn.
SET PLAYS

Set plays are part of a team’s tactics and must be rehearsed and familiar to all players. Listed below are some examples of tactics which can be used, and the guidelines which should be adopted to assist the team.

Opposition kick-ins

After your team has kicked a behind or the opposition has rushed a behind, your team has basically three options:

1. Play man-on-man accountable football. Every player has one opponent to which he/she is accountable. This will require lots of communication and discipline.

2. Play a zone. This can be a basic 3, 4, 5 zone (12 players) or a 15-player zone, which includes the half-back line. The coach can construct the zone anyway, but must ensure all players know their roles in the zone and follow these exactly, e.g., work their area, all players calling opposition designated kicker’s name to create confusion, waving arms, punch ball back to goals if ball is kicked into your area, etc.

3. Allow short possession to 30m and then play man-on-man or a zone, particularly focusing on shutting down or stopping the second-phase kick. Quite often the first kick is well protected by a majority of coaches using either man-on-man or a zone, however, if there is a clear possession within this structure for the opposition, then the next kick (second kick or phase) can be very damaging.
Your team kick-ins
There are basically two approaches or types of set plays the team needs to know:
1. Kick-ins against an opposition zone.
2. Kick-ins against an opposition playing man-on-man.

1. Kick-ins against an opposition zone
Points to consider:
• Designated kicker – who? Are they there because they kick the ball long or because they are very accurate and able to pin-point a target over a shorter distance?
• Will your team run screens and if so where?
• How do you want to structure your second-phase (pre-second kick)?
• Can your team score quickly from your kick-in? If so, what roles do the forwards play?
• What assets does your team have which can be used as a set play to the team’s advantage – e.g., a player with explosive speed may be the receiver against a man-on-man set-up, a strong-marking ruckman may be the preferred option for a long kick in the corridor.
• Will you rotate the kicker? Will the kicker play on and carry the ball?
• If using a screen, how can you ensure players are acting within the rules and not penalised by the umpires? Infringements inside 30m could be very costly.

2. Kick-ins against opposition playing man-on-man
Points to consider:
• Will your team play a huddle or other method?
• If playing a huddle, which players will break and present as options and which players will block and act as screens?
• Who will be the second-phase receivers and where?
• Will you create space and where?
• What do your players do if the opposition surrounds your huddle with a ring and picks off breakers?
• Do you have a player who is explosively quick who can be used to your team’s advantage?
• How will your forward line set up and are the players familiar with their roles?

Listed below are two examples of set plays against a man-on-man configuration. Training is the best place to practise all set plays and often it is beneficial to play a game of 12-on-12, where teams have 10 kick-ins each and have to maintain possession into their forward line. Players in their teams have the opportunity to design their own play and decide who breaks as receivers, who blocks or screens and who will run hard as a second phase option or crumber.

Forward line set-ups
As a coach, your forward line set-up and structure will depend on a number of conditions including personnel, opposition defenders, any mismatches which can be created to your team’s advantage, area guidelines and principles and ground size. This will include how your forward line is set up at centre bounces as well as in general play.

Many times forward line set-ups will be left to the forwards following basic guidelines such as:
• When leading, make leads of 50-70m to create and recreate space rather than 20m leads, which result in congestion.
• Be prepared to work in team plays such as fat-side and thin-side.
• Be prepared to work hard in high reward areas such as front and square of all pack contests which might emerge inside 50m.
• Treat the 50m arc like a basketball key, get in and get out.

Centre bounce tactics
Similar to kick-ins and forward line set-ups, centre bounce tactics must be carefully developed and frequently practised. All midfield players must know each set play and their roles to enable effective execution in a game situation. Specifically, communication and practice is the key. All set plays in the centre square must have:
• Clear instruction as to what play is to be used (can be the ruckman’s call).
• Early nomination of player receiving, players blocking and protecting and area ball is to be hit (knocked or tapped).
• Process for a bad bounce favouring opposition.
• Process for a bad bounce favouring your team.
This process should be adopted at all stoppages around the ground and at boundary throw-ins where clear communication and nomination is important.

Examples of set plays:
1. Ruck hits ball to ‘2’ or ‘10’ o’clock where rover collects, ruck-rover plays a protecting role.
2. Ruck hits ball to alternate side ‘2’ or ‘10’ where rover collects, ruck-rover plays a protecting role.
3. Ruck hits ball directly over opposing ruck’s head, ruck-rover collects and either gets a quick kick or feeds to rover.
4. Ruck hits ball long to space at centre half-forward, ruck-rover and rover run on to the ball.
5. Centre plays a sweeping role and if ruck grabs ball, handballs to centre.

These are only a few examples of centre-bounce set plays. Other tactics play a role, such as if one of your players is being tagged or all players inside the centre square have been told to play with man-on-man accountability.

**If opposition plays man-on-man inside the centre square**
As coach, this can be a chance to break open a game, particularly if all players know their roles and practise this at training.

Process:
1. Opposition has decided to be fully accountable, hence forwards create space at centre half-forward by adopting a horseshoe set-up but centre half-forward is left free.
2. Centre, ruck-rover and rover all start behind or next to ruck with their opponents, who have been instructed to be accountable.
3. Ruck wins tap and hits ball anywhere over opposing ruck’s head towards free centre half-forward, where centre, ruck-rover and rover can run on to it and attempt to gain possession. Wingers play a role in blocking opponents from charging into the square.

**Tactics summary**
Most importantly, tactics need to be well planned and constantly practised by the team. Generally, a handful of set plays is enough for players to focus on, along with the team guidelines and themes. Tactics are exciting and provide coaches with the opportunity to be innovative and creative.

**OPTIMAL TEAM PERFORMANCE IN ADOLESCENT FOOTBALL**
Coaches of adolescent teams strive to find that elusive combination of individual playing talent that will produce the perfect team performance. Consequently, some of the variables that coaches choose to manipulate as part of their search for optimal team performance include:

**The position of players in the team**
Coaches usually organise teams so that the best players are in dominant roles and the other players in support roles. To also nullify a strength in the opposition or to counter an opposition strategy, coaches often choose to match their players against specific players from opposing teams. (see end of this chapter for a description of player positions).

**The selection of team leaders**
Team leaders are usually chosen for their ability to inspire teammates, make appropriate on-field decisions and to give concise on-field instructions. Occasionally, leaders are chosen because coaches hope that the status associated with being a leader will encourage a less-than-committed player to be more responsible.

**The style of play**
It is normal practice for coaches to assess the physical attributes of their team before deciding what long-term style of play would make the best use of each player’s attributes and maximise the team’s strength. This style of play may need to be altered when the coach is confronted with some of the dramatic effects of adolescent growth spurts.
A team may incorporate a mixture of all the following styles of play.

- **Long kicking to key forward**
  A team with high-marking mobile forwards will maximise scoring opportunities by moving the ball quickly out of the centre, kicking long into the forward line.

- **Running, possession game**
  The coach of a small-sized team will adopt a running game, with short passing/handballing to maintain possession.

- **Defensive game**
  A team with a strongly disciplined backline working together can move the ball forward into attack.

**Developing the individual within the team**

A variable that can have a significant effect on overall team performance is the development of each player within the team. Coaches devote many hours of a total training program to improving individual physical and psychological abilities in players. However, one of the most challenging aspects is how to coordinate this with the other variables mentioned above.

**In this regard, some of the issues that concern coaches are:**

1. It is more difficult to develop a player if the coach needs to assign the player to a support role with minimal participation rather than to a dominant role with maximum participation – e.g. player who sits on the interchange bench.

2. A team’s style of play will be based on the qualities of the better players. A coach who has an abundance of small, fast and skilful players may opt for a quick-running style of play. In this situation, a bigger, slower player may not cope with the team’s style of play and therefore lack opportunities.

3. Adolescent players may be small, fast players one season but become big, slow players the following season, or the reverse can happen whereby a big, slow athlete can become quick and agile. This adds to the complexity of team selection, program development and individual development.

Having taken this into consideration, there is one remaining quandary for coaches. Would the team perform better if the aim was to focus on improving lesser players rather than to focus on improving better players? Could a lesser player improve more significantly than a better player and would eliminating the lesser player’s weakness have a greater impact on overall performance than trying to improve a better player’s strengths or by biasing team strategy toward the individual strengths of the better players?

No doubt coaches have experimented with focusing their coaching on better and/or lesser players. While either approach could be deemed appropriate with adults, there is a major concern if this approach is adopted for adolescents. Adolescents have growth spurts which greatly affect their physical abilities and developmental theorists have argued for nurturing the less capable adolescent because their natural abilities may be yet to mature.

While the argument for equal participation in children’s sport is based on the understanding that children should play for fun, the argument in adolescent sport is that the team will perform better and players will be more likely not to drop out if players are given equal opportunities.

One of the best ways to achieve optimal performance in adolescent sport teams is to focus the attention of the coach towards the lesser players. Give them more dominant roles, assign them to leadership roles and include them in overall team strategies. The development of a lesser player should not only occur in the area of physical abilities but also in the area of confidence and self-worth. Teammates and coaches should ensure that all players feel equally important to the success of the team. This can manifest itself in the way team members speak to each other and encourage each other.
POSITION DESCRIPTIONS

The full-forward:
AFL footballers are so versatile that full-forward is about the only position on the ground in which a player may play exclusively and still play out a successful career. They must be able to take great marks, overhead and on the lead, kick accurately under pressure on both sides of the body and be able to cope with the constant attention of defenders. Their success depends largely on their capacity to kick goals, but also on creating marking options and collecting kicks further up the field.

The full-back:
The full-back is the team's last line of defence. Good players in this position don't give the opposition a moments rest. They will stand beside the full-forward, harass them, punch the ball away when it comes near them and generally attempt to spoil their opposition's day on the field. Full-backs generally enjoy running straight at the football, have good pace and are strong. They are also reliable and have a cool head in a crisis. Above all, full-backs are fearless and willing to put their bodies on the line. A feature of AFL full-back of the century Steven Silvagni's play was his ability to consistently beat his opponents in one-on-one contests.

Ruck:
The style and requirements of the ruck position have evolved over the years. The latest to emerge is the mobile ruckman, who is reasonably tall and has a good leap, great running power and the capacity to move forward of the action to provide another scoring option. The older style of rucking, which is still employed by some players, is to play a kick behind the play, using strength to mark strongly and give the ball off by handballing to running teammates. Ruckmen are also required to contest at the centre bounces, ball-ups around the ground and boundary throw-ins, either palming the ball to teammates or punching the ball towards their team's goals.

The midfielder:
Such is the expectation of constant running that is placed on midfielders (centremen, wingmen, rovers or ruck-rovers), many clubs rotate a group of up to eight players through the midfield to maintain the high intensity through that part of the ground. Midfielders must have great endurance, excellent disposal skills, pace, a good football brain and be capable of coping with the close attention from opposition players. Games can be won or lost according to a team's capacity to outrun the opposition in the midfield. Midfielders are expected to run deep into defence to flood or crowd the opposition's forward line which narrows the options for a team bringing the ball into its forward line.

Centre half-forward:
Centre half-forward is generally acknowledged as the most difficult position in football. Contesting for the football in the area forward of the centre circle and just in front of the 'hot spot' (an area 30-40 metres directly in front of goal) is no easy task. There are different methods of playing centre half-forward. Brisbane champion Jonathon Brown is renowned for his capacity to take a contested mark and use his strength to absorb opposition attention, allowing teammates to gather the loose ball. Port Adelaide's Warran Tredrea, the All-Australian centre half-forward since 2001, tends to get more of the ball at the true centre half-forward position and in the midfield. Extremely mobile for his size, he is hard to stop because he runs hard to get to contests and is skilled on both sides of his body.
Centre half-back:
Centre half-back is primarily a defensive role, with players in this position having the capacity to control a game. Theoretically easier to play than centre half-forward because the player can run straight at the ball to clear from defence, centre half-backs often play on the opposition's best player. Centre half-backs have good pace, mark and spoil well, are never intimidated and possess great strength.

Half-back flank:
The half-back flank is a position for players with the confidence to run with the ball and take on the opposition. Coaches will often give their half-back flankers the licence to attack in an attempt to catch out the opposition with a quick counter-attack. Half-back flankers need good pace and great kicking skills. If a team makes a turnover around half-back, they will often be caught out as opposition players have run forward anticipating the ball continuing to move in their direction.

Half-forward flank/forward pockets:
Smaller and medium sized forwards don’t necessarily play in set positions. Most clubs like to have “crumbing” type players at the fall of the ball when the centre half-forward or full-forward is contesting marks. The Brisbane Lions’ Luke Power falls into this category. The other type of half-forward is the mobile, smart player who marks well for his size and kicks accurately. Carlton’s Matthew Lappin and Sydney’s Michael O’Loughlin are both strong players who keep their feet well and are capable of kicking multiple goals. Players in these roles are extremely dangerous around the goal and opponents need to be diligent when they are assigned the task of keeping them quiet. Half-forwards and forward pocket players are required to make the most of limited opportunities.