

The Great Leap Forward

Five Concepts to Move Your Youth Program from Basic Skills to the Next Level — Part II

BY KEVIN SHEEHAN

In the last issue of *Lacrosse Magazine*, I introduced the first two of five concepts to help youth coaches move their programs from a basic skills level to the next step, more advanced team play. Last time I focused on ways to refine players' stick skills and on how to build a regular

offense out of transition strategies. In this issue, I present the third and fourth concepts of "leaping forward" with your youth program. To read last issue's article, and my 2003 series "Finding Space," visit the US Lacrosse web site at www.uslacrosse.org/coach/sheehan.phtml.

Concept 3: Changing Defenses and Changing Tempo and Confidence

I am not sure if there is more fun that you can have as coach than changing defenses. In the same vein, I am not sure that is more effective way to turn around a game than switching defenses. The trick with youth players is not to over-coach players. The basic rule is a simple one. If they have to think about where they go, they probably won't go there. More importantly, if they have to think too much, they stop playing. As a result, here are three basic defensive schemes that you can employ with one strategy simpler than the next.

Basic Defense

When we teach defense in a ball back 3-on-2 progression drill, we teach that there are only two positions on defense, "ball" and "back" ("Steal This Drill," *Lacrosse Magazine*, May 2002). Therefore, in our basic defense, the first position is on the ball. Everyone else is in the back-up position identified by the word back. The one most basic rule on defense is that everyone must see the ball. If they don't see the ball, they can't

possibly be back. Second rule, no lying. If you say you are back, you must mean it. You can't say back and be playing your man without ball outside the offensive box. You must have one eye on your man and one eye on the ball. Most importantly, you must have your toes pointed at the man you are backing; otherwise, you are lying about being back. Finally, and most importantly, you must know who you are backing. If the adjacent man goes to the ball, back for you means that you take his man.

The easiest way to teach this is to have everyone not on the ball say back. Then, begin to challenge players out of position, asking them if they were lying when they said back. Adjust their field position so that they are actually in back up position. You can begin quizzing other players if they know who they are backing. Can they see the second slide? I would love to make a computer game similar to the baseball one that is out entitled "Where is the Slide?"

What I have described above is our basic defense. That's it, ball and back with three simple rules, see the ball, don't lie when you say back, and

know who you are to back. What I mean by making defense too complicated is what I did. At Adelphi and Australia, we had players call out one if they were the first slide and two if they were the second slide. Sounds simple enough, right? It is, if no one passes the ball. Once they pass the ball or move, the numbers change. My 10-year-olds were so busy trying to figure out who was one and who was two, they forgot to play defense. We all broke up laughing and abandoned the one-two rule as quickly as we installed it. If they can understand ball, back, they can play exceptional defense. The truth is, exceptional defense is that simple.

Purple or Mad Dog

We had a defense that we used at Adelphi called Purple, which stood for pressure. When we used this defense, we might say Purple and a number. The number stood for the player on their team who was guarded by our best defender. When it arrived at that player, everyone locked on their man, no matter where they went and the defender on the ball played hard but not recklessly. We teach the purple defender that the offensive

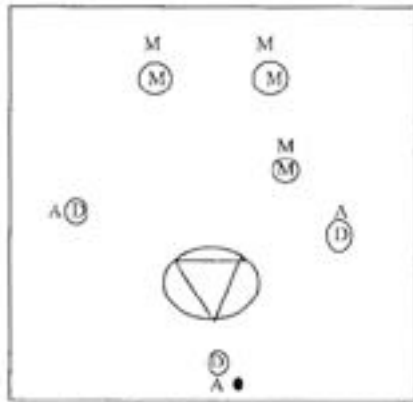


Figure 9 Purple Pressure Defense (Mad Dog)

player will probably crack when he has no one to pass it to. Other times, when the opposing coach calls a timeout with the ball behind the cage to set up a play, we go Purple with our best defender on the ball (Figure 9). This works really well because the player bringing the ball in is usually thinking about who he is supposed to pass to and not expecting that there will be no one to pass it to and someone is his face. My youth players love this defense and they renamed it. They call it Mad Dog. The truth is, whatever you call it, it works just as well with 10-year-olds as with college players.

It may seem a bit harsh to spring on the other team, but I will tell you when we have used it. We were losing one game 6-1 and went into our Mad Dog defense. It not only caused something of a panic in the other team, but it woke us up and got us going again. We scored the next six goals. It is also a good remedy when you are losing by four and they have to make three passes before attacking the goal. In this case, you will wake up the pride in your players and in all probability, they will never make three passes.

A tamer version of this is called Black. If they have that stud player, shaving at 10, who already has three goals on you in the first minute of the game, we try to black out that player by shutting off that player without

the ball. We simply yell "Black 24," or whatever his number is. Of course, we practice face guarding and denying the ball. If it seems again, harsh, it is not. Let's face it, it isn't too nice for the other players on the stud's team to watch him go to the cage 20 times a half.

Rest or Zone Pizza

I am not a great believer in zones on the youth level or really even the

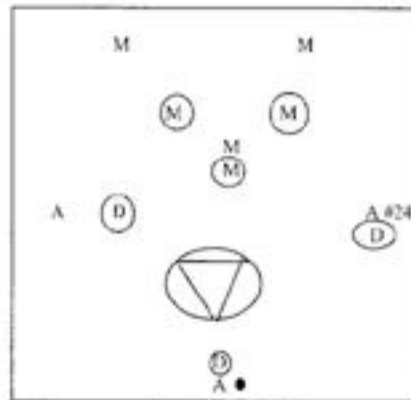


Figure 10 Black 24

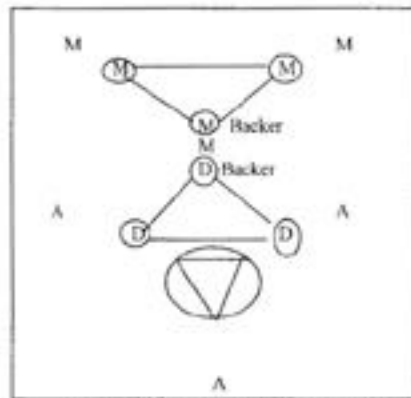


Figure 11 Rest Zone (Two Slices of Pizza)

college level. They may work, but in the end players never really learn to properly play defense. However, I do like introducing the concept as part of this idea that on defense we are in control and can alter the tempo of a game by changing defenses. The truth is you can be physically overmatched and a zone may be the only way to protect your goalie. The one thing

that a zone does is to alter the offense. They generally abandon all the things that they were doing that were working even at the mention of the word zone. At Adelphi, there were times we would yell zone and not really go into one. It was amazing how the opposing offense would freeze. Here is a zone you can install in one practice.

The reason that the defense is so easy to install is that it is basically an extension of your basic defense. You can visualize this defense for youth players as two slices of pizza (Figure 10). The trick is that at the point of the pizza facing the goal is the backer for the middies. When the ball goes behind, he plays tight on the crease. The point on the pizza facing away from the goal is the backer for the attack. He plays the crease when the ball is up top and backs the side attack, when they have the ball but he alone always picks up the ball coming from behind at just behind the goal line extended (Figure 11). There is always a backer top (Figure 12) or bottom.

The reason we call the defense "rest" is that defensemen don't like to play zones, but they do like to rest. I was amazed to hear my captain and All-American defenseman Andy Seal say in the second half of a Division II national championship game, "Coach, let's go Rest." I am not sure

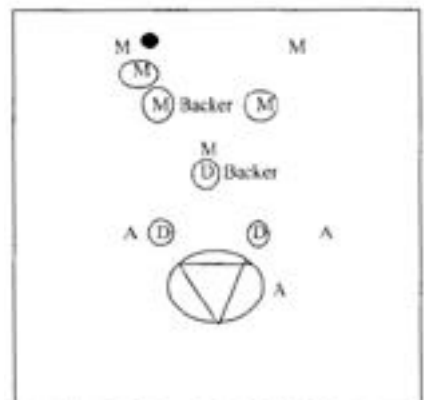


Figure 12 Rest Zone-Ball Up Top

that the word zone could have come out of Andy's mouth as easily. We had installed the Rest zone only that week. It is that easy.

Here are the rules for the positions other than the backer. If the ball is in your area, you play the ball, hard, but you do not go out too far. If they score from out far, that is the coach's fault. If you do not have the ball, you close down the middle. The players not on the ball are like a fist around whoever is in the middle. If they score from the middle, that is the players' fault. If they score from the outside it is the coach's fault. We do not rotate or teach rotations. As simple as it sounds, we used this same zone many years ago when Adelphi played Syracuse and lost, 8-5, giving up the last two goals when we had to come out of the zone in the final minute. If we had played man for the entire game they might have scored 30.

The real fun in installing these three options is just that. It is having options. It is the ability to do something as a coach that can turn a game, reinvest your players in the game, or adjust to a superior team.

Concept 4: Extra Man – Fighting Back and Attacking the Splitter

There is a school of thought on Long Island that we should not install specific man-up teams or formations. The philosophy is that everyone should get to play extra-man and that to otherwise script extra-man or have an extra-man team would be less than politically correct. I want to go on record as saying that I am diametrically opposed to that politically correct sounding philosophy.

In my town, we barely had a player on our 10-year-old team who exceeded 70 pounds. Unfortunately, we have other towns on our schedule where football-type players predominate. In the spirit of the

game, we were following the philosophy. Whoever was on the field was extra-man. Since at least a third of our players are first-time lacrosse as refugees from successful or unsuccessful soccer careers, this was the equivalent of declining the penalty. More significantly, the better players on our team were learning bad habits, and they were certainly not learning extra-man. The travel football types were giving my 70-pound brutes an awful beating.

It was then I realized that the purpose of extra man was to control the game. Even at the collegiate Division I level, the only thing that keeps the stick from being a lethal weapon is the fact that teams can get hurt on the scoreboard they get a little too physical. Teams playing us were brutalizing us without the threat of us scoring.

As I watch women's lacrosse get more and more physical, I have come to the conclusion that the only way to effectively control the physical play will be to have fouling players sit as their team now plays with one less man. Actions not words.

I confess. I did it. I put in an extra-man team with an extra-man play. The play is based on these concepts. First, try not to give youth players new formations or positions. We run a 1-3-2 motion so we run a 1-3-2 extra man. Players, at this age, have a hard enough time knowing where to be. Second, make players on the right side be righty and on the left side be lefty. I was amazed to learn that Darren Lowe was a natural righty, but his dad, lacking lefties, put him behind on the left side and made him play lefty. I guess for four years when I told my Adelphi teams to force him to his right, I was forcing him to his dominant hand. Anyway, if playing lefty could do this for Darren Lowe, one of the best players in the game for the last 10 years, then I guess you

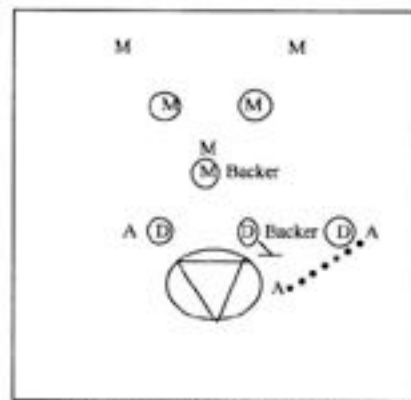


Figure 13 Rest Zone-Pass Behind

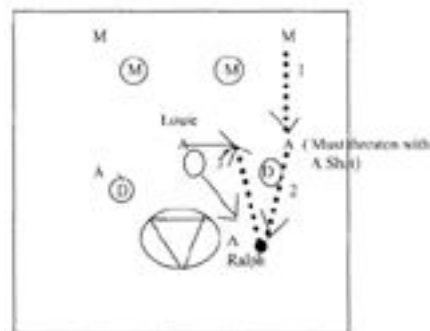


Figure 14 Ralph Against a Crease Slide

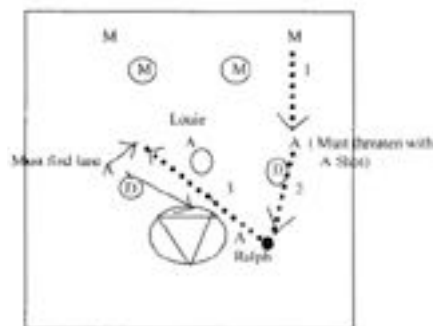


Figure 15 Ralph and Louie Against a COMA Slide

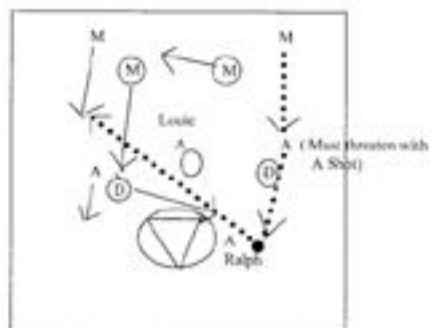


Figure 16 Ralph Against Perfect Rotation

should make your righty play lefty on that side on the left side of the cage. Third, and maybe most importantly, you are not extra-man until the ball gets behind. When it is out front in a 1-3-2, the defense is all even at 5-on-5.

Ralph and Louie

Let me introduce you to Ralph and Louie. Ralph stands for our best righty attackman and Louie our best lefty attackman. When we run Ralph, Louie is on the crease and we force the right side with Ralph behind the cage. When we run Louie, Ralph is on the crease and we force the left side from behind with Louie. The play is so simple that you can install it in a practice. It is so complex in depth that it is the heart of the game itself. The foundation of the play is finding the open man when you have the ball, and following the slide to find the open space when you don't have the ball.

Here is how it works when we run the Ralph play. As the ball arrives at the attackman on the right side pipe, he curls up high and threatens a high hard shot. As he does this, he throws to Ralph behind the cage. Ralph receives the ball at the point of the cage behind. He now makes a read. Probably the first time Ralph receives the ball, he can sneak around for a 1-on-1 with the goalie. The beauty of the play is that the second time you

run it, they will slide to Ralph. He must now become a lacrosse player and force the goal line extended and read the slide. The usual slide is right from the crease. Your creaseman, you remember, Louie, must move into space and follow the slider to the open space (Figure 13). Better teams will lock on the crease and slide from the far left side. That attackman must move to the open space and find a lane (Figure 14).

Only in Baltimore did I see the team make the perfect man-down slide and leave the midfielder open (Figure 15). This opposite top midfielder must now slide down to the open space and is open for a crank. This is the best news for that midfielder and maybe the worst news for the goalie. He is going to face our best shooting midfielder with time and space to crank that outside shot that he has spent his life working on. The best part of this entire series is that the attackman is becoming a sophisticated attackman and learning the very essence of the position.

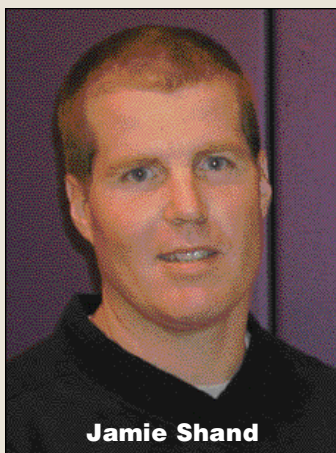
When we go Louie, we run the same play, with the same reads on the left side (Figure 16). I am not afraid to share this play with you, because I think we can make it work no matter how the defense reacts.

Once we installed this extra-man, teams stopped beating up on us or they paid the extreme price. I think

we scored 80 or 90 percent of the time. And although not politically correct, it forced more physical teams to play lacrosse. Do I think everyone should learn extra-man? Definitely, everyone should know it and practice it. If we are up 13-3, I don't want to run my first team out for an additional score. Extra-man B now runs the same play. However, I do want to reward those players who live and die developing their stick skills and I want to make sure that teams play a price for penalties. To me, that is in the best spirit of the game.

The essence of this play is something I see vanishing in extra-man. That concept is to run your play so that the man splitting two, the splitter, is faced with the decision to split two men who are both located in front of the goalie. What I do see more and more is players cranking from the outside in a 3-3. Maybe these 90 miles per hour cranks are the result of the new technology of the sticks and maybe it's due to the increased skill and power of the shooters. To me, it is not what extra-man is supposed to be all about. Though not the subject of this article, I think we can do better than that as coaches and players. In the future, I hope to share some ideas on attacking the splitter with you. ○

—The next installment of “The Great Leap Forward” will appear in the May issue of Lacrosse Magazine. Article contributor Jamie Shand developed much of the techniques and concepts discussed in this series. He is coaching the Massapequa (N.Y.) girls’ varsity team and co-coaches a fifth-grade boys’ team with Kevin Sheehan.



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