

The Great Leap Forward

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

BY KEVIN SHEEHAN

For the last five years I have been exhorting coaches in Lacrosse Magazine to impart perfect fundamentals through a series of terminology, games, drills, and teaching techniques rather than too quickly move onto more sophisticated game strategies. I agree that I have been somewhat missionary in my zeal, suggesting, if perfect skills are in place, the game will take care of itself. I am here to confess that this year, coaching a fourth grade, under-11 team, at 0-2 in league play, I realized that some change was in order.

Now I know that our last concern in youth lacrosse is supposed to be winning.

I follow the creed and play everyone their fair share even when it means the game. However, I am here to confess that despite the fact that we were exhibiting some very impressive skills, I still had to look into those long faces at the end of each game. The real problem was that my coaching was not evolving to impart the team skills that the kids needed to compete as their level advanced. It was time to move beyond fundamentals and purely fun games to more refined and game-like skills as well as game strategies. This is an article to share with you five strategies or concepts that completely turned around our season.

More honestly, I share these thoughts with you because as a coach a bit of a panic can take over. The changes that you need to make to move your team to the next level, I came to realize, were not the implementation of the 56 variations of Bill Tierney's slides from adjacent, the crease and God knows where. However, there were five fundamental changes that we made to bring our program to the next level. They are built directly as part of a learning progression on the skills foundation that I have encouraged for the past five years. They turned our season around completely. It is my hope that they can do the same for you.

Concept 1: Refining Stick Skills – Building Transition Passing Ability and Shooting, Shooting, Shooting

The first thing that became apparent to us was that the passing that our drills instilled in our players was not game-like enough to provide us with the skills we needed for success in a real game. In the game, at any level, if you make the pass, it all works. You miss the pass and it's just good intentions.

When we analyzed our practice, we realized players rarely had to make a pass over seven yards. They really don't need perfect pull on the bottom hand, working the stick as a lever, because they can push the ball with the top hand just fine to make this short pass. Secondly, we realized that their mechanics in catching the ball on the run were nearly non-existent. Many of our newer players stopped to catch the ball and sadly, even some of our experienced players, stopped to pass it. As far as catching the ball over the shoulder on the dead run, we didn't have many players even thinking of it. Without this level of sophisticated stick skills in place, transition lacrosse, the essence of the game will never evolve.

Four Corners

We installed a drill we run every day for at least 7-10 minutes. It turned around our season and I think it can turn around yours. It's not a major innovation; colleges run it all the time in preseason. Simply send your players in even numbers to the four corners of the offensive box. Starting with a ball in one corner, pass to the adjacent corner and replace to the corner they passed the ball to (Figure 1).

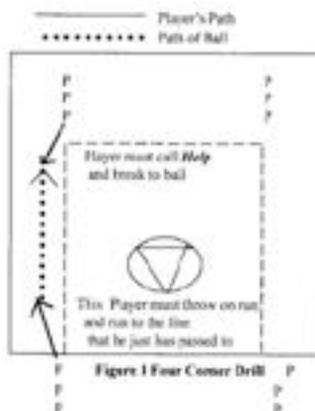


Figure 1 Four Corner Drill

The player receiving the ball calls help, hopefully catches it, and now moves it on the next corner (Figure 2). With 10-year-olds, I let them use their strong hand to catch the ball and pass the ball. By the time summer rolled in, I had them use their off hand entirely. Place yourself in the middle and you can see and direct every player. It's unbelievable how much you can coach from this spot. Here's why I think players improve dramatically with this drill:

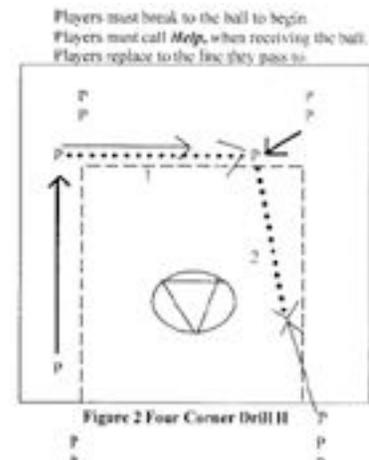


Figure 2 Four Corner Drill II

First, players have to throw properly or the ball won't travel far enough. You can't just push the ball 25 yards with your top hand. If your hands are low, the ball hits the player you are throwing to in the kneecap or worse. The drill has a built-in incentive to keep your hands up.

We begin the drill by having players move to the ball. You will be surprised at how difficult it is for them to judge the trajectory and speed of the ball, at first. Then they will get it. They will learn touch in passing and angles in going after a ball in the air. Assistant coach Jamie Shand attributes their success in this drill to the fact that the team is counting on them and watching them, there is a pressure not to fail. In a line drill, they can miss it and almost anonymously give the next man in line the nauseating "my bad" explanation. Here, the drill stops as the team watches. The drill builds in its own intensity.

What is inspiring about the drill is how fast your players will get better at it. We never have one ball going. Once we have one in the air, we move to two balls, maybe even three. At this point, the drill also becomes a conditioner. Once the catch is mastered moving to the ball, we now move to throwing the diagonal lead pass (Figure 3). We create

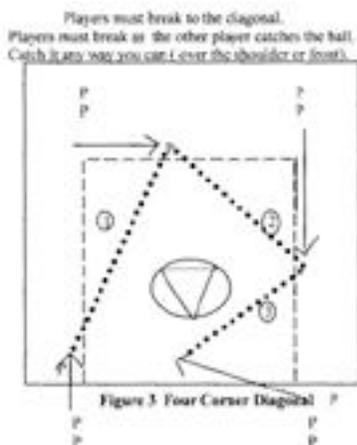


Figure 3 Four Corner Diagonal

a metaphor that the passer is an NFL quarterback and must lead the receiver. I never mandate how they catch the ball, simply that they catch it on a full run.

What was most rewarding for us was how much progress some of our weaker players made in this drill. However, the

real magic comes in, not only when you make these same passes in transition in the game, but when your more traditional seven-yard passes on offense become easy.

Probably the greatest benefit is one I never thought of until I recently watched an indoor youth game. Unsophisticated or beginning players pass to where a player is at that moment in time. Players never really move to the ball, because it is most often passed to where they are. Sophisticated players pass to where a player will be as the player breaks. What is involved in the sophisticated pass is a reading of the speed of the player breaking, the angle the player is moving at and an educated guess at the timing needed to have the ball arrive at that spot.

When we run this drill, I realized that all the passes we make in this drill require moving in space and catching in space. The drill moves your players to that next more sophisticated level of understanding of how to play this game.

Shooting, Shooting, Shooting

At some point in your practice, you need to arm everyone with a ball in their stick and simply shoot the rock. In 1998, when I decided to help coach Australia, Tony Seaman of Towson University gave me a lecture on shooting and how little time we as coaches devote to it, even though it the most important determinant of the success or failure of on offense.

He was right then and he is right now. Tony contends that nothing is more important than whether or not the ball goes into the cage, but most of us only find time for disciplined shooting practice in pregame warm-ups. We started arming everyone with a ball for at least 10 to 15 minutes a practice and asking them to split dodge us, come from behind the cage and roll and simply crank the rock. We asked them to shoot hard, shoot at cones, shoot behind the back, but simply shoot the heck out of it, with all of the knowledge of shooting that we have gained.

However, here's a concept that I think can bring your team to a new level. Coaching Australia in 2002, after a

disheartening and convincing loss to America in the opening game, our fundamentals and shooting started to go downhill with our confidence. Our shooting drills started to look anemic. We changed our shooting drills by

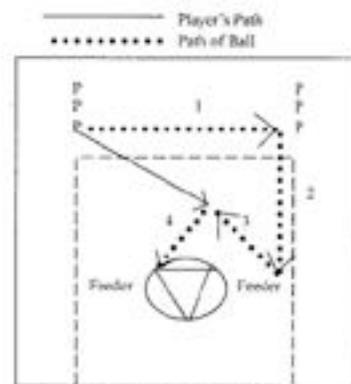


Figure 4 Shooting Drill

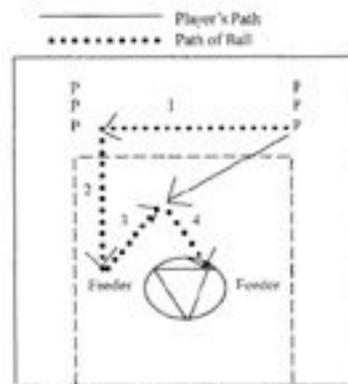


Figure 5 Shooting Drill

asking players to shoot the ball overhand at each other rather than pass it to each other. Don't get discouraged if it doesn't work at first. However, practicing at a more difficult level than you need to execute in the game, makes the game easy. I recommend you have the coaches at the feeding positions in the beginning, but gun the ball at the players cutting (Figures 4-5).

With Australia, I believe it made the drill more intense and rebuilt our confidence to a large degree. Not a great shooting team, we jumped all over Canada in the first quarter by a score of 7-2 in the semifinals, starting the game with some shots that were absolutely rockets. Unfortunately we didn't sustain the momentum and the professionalism of Canada won out by a goal in the end.

However, shooting the ball rather than passing it at each other builds in new levels of confidence, skill and once again makes the real game seem easy.

One Last Shooting Drill

I have one last shooting drill that I will share with you when we cover goalie play. I am not going to give it to you now to make sure you read the whole article. (Even if that means getting next month's article.)

Concept 2: Creating Transition as Part of Wing Play – Building Your Regular Offense Out of Transition Concepts

I have to confess that I was not really of a fan of the shot clock at first. As a coach who scribbled way too many plays on napkins and preached controlling tempo, I favored the more traditionalist point of view that the beauty of the game is in the ability of the coaches to create offenses and scoring patterns.

Watching the Bridgeport Barrage and the MLL in an advisory capacity, I am here to suggest that I was wrong. The beauty of the game is when the ball flies in transition and moves defenses and offenses the way Jason Kidd runs the break for the New Jersey Nets. When you have it on offense, if you can't do it in 45 seconds, it probably isn't worth doing. The reality of transition is this: you try to get a player between his defenseman and the goal and react to the slides that the defense is now forced to make by finding the open man. In great transition, the ball moves faster than the defense can possibly slide. The beauty of the game comes from knowing who should get the ball and when they should get it. The object of our set offense is to create this same transition situation. When you are practicing these reads and feeds in transition, you are practicing the very best set offensive concepts at the same time.

In the May 2002 issue, I suggested a progression to teach transition from a 3-on-2 box drill, to a 3-on-2 ground ball drill, to a 3-on-2 to 2-on-1 break drill. In this article, I suggest that you should practice transition every practice and it

should be nearly a third of your practice. The drill below is one of the best that we do, because it accomplishes several things at once.

Wing Fastbreak Drill

It is my belief that Gary Gait has more skills in the game of lacrosse than any player who has ever lived. Watch him come off the wing on a faceoff. He knows exactly where to be and when. He knows exactly what angle to take to cut you off from the ball. If you should be lucky enough to get inside position on him, you are not yet finished as he has more moves in reserve when you attempt to scoop the ball. As genius he is in so many areas of the game, he is the absolute master in this area. How did he get that way? He has taken so many faceoffs in his career that he has become an expert at how to gain possession of the ball from the faceoff wing.

What kind of angles do your players take off the wings at the ball? How much attention do you give to coaching this area in practice? If your answers are anything like ours, they were not encouraging.

Our players often overran the ball or took angles that were more aimed at where the ball was than where it was going. We decided that we had to make this part of our fastbreak drill practice, because we had no other place to get this skill in.

We therefore begin our fastbreak drill with two lines on the wing line. The coach stands at the faceoff X and rolls the ball in the direction that it might come out in a typical draw. These two

players come off the wing as they would in a game and battle for the ball (Figure 6). When the winner picks up the ball, he must find space to free his hands and to pass it to a player on the offensive side of the far fastbreak line. This player calls help and on the pass he breaks to the goal.

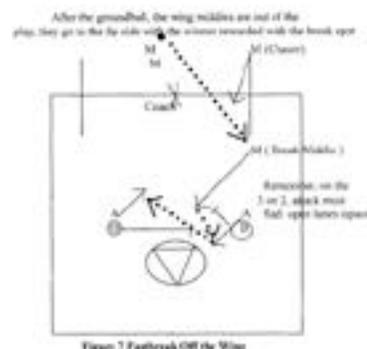


Figure 7 Fastbreak Off the Wing

On the far end of the far wing line is the chaser. This player now runs on for a 4-on-3 or a 3-on-2 drill (Figure 7). The incentive for winning the ball off the wing is that you get to be the player on the front end of the faceoff line who will run the next break. Groundballs off the wing now have the intensity of steel cage wrestling matches. A great variation of this drill is to begin teaching the skills or when you run the break drill inside is shown in Figure 7A. In this variation, start with one player with his back in the chest of the other player. Blow a whistle



Figure 7A

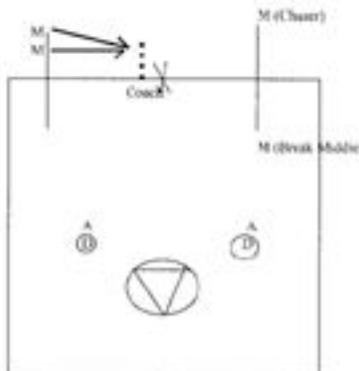


Figure 6 Fastbreak Off the Wing



Figure 7B

and have him box out the player behind him. Blow a second whistle and have the player now try to scoop the ball using a tight stick and shielding the other player with his body (Figure 7B). Run the fastbreak drill the same way as you did in the

wing drill. On possession, the player successfully scooping makes the pass across the field. You are conditioning your players to look up and pass as soon as they gain possession on a scoop on a faceoff. That's a pretty good idea.

Six on Six Offense

Most coaches spend way too much time orchestrating six-on-six offenses. The truth is that this type of scripted scrimmage is not all that transferable to game like situations. You are better off running six-on-six practice out of full field type drills. I suggest using six hula hoops as places for players to stand when there is a dead ball on the offense. This will give them the discipline they need to get into the right places. However, be sure to tell players that the only time they are in these hoops is before the ball is in play. Once the whistle blows, the magical areas are the spaces between the hoops. They must learn to find space in between their man and the open lane

to the ball. I am not going to dwell in this piece on how to build and develop an offense based on finding space since that was the topic of the piece that I did for *Lacrosse Magazine* in May 2002. The idea that I would impress on you is that players must learn that the idea of dodging is to get one step on your defender and turn settled offense into transition offense. ○

–The next installment of “The Great Leap Forward” will appear in the April issue of Lacrosse Magazine. Kevin Sheehan won the Most Innovative Youth Coach award from the US Lacrosse Youth Council in 2002. He is a former 17-year coach of Adelphi University, where he won three NCAA Division II championships. Sheehan and article contributor Jamie Strand are co-coaching a fifth-grade boys’ team and the Oceanside (N.Y.) girls’ varsity team.

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