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# Fundamental Transformation



The preface mentioned the necessity of a Fundamental Transformation, but why is it necessary to change the way we play (and coach) football?

After all, in the not too distant past Australian football produced many great players who played in the top leagues of Europe, while the Socceroos qualified for the World Cups in 2006, 2010 and 2014 and the Matildas were crowned Asian Champions in 2010.

The players and coaches involved have brought football to where we are now in the FIFA Rankings: about 40th in men's football and 10th in women's.

This is a great achievement in a country where historically football has not been the number one sport.

But for some reason Australia has not produced the same number of top players in recent years and fewer Australians are starters at clubs in the European top leagues.

There are many theories and opinions about the cause of this, but what is not in doubt is that top football has developed physically - but especially **technically** - to a breathtaking level over the last 10-15 years.

The modern game at the highest level is a fast, high intensity, possession-based game where 'special' players with match-winning qualities make the difference.

Another reality is that the changing dynamics of the football landscape force us to adjust in order to stay competitive with the rest in the world.

What worked for us 20 years ago, doesn't necessarily work anymore. Today, for example, more players go overseas at ever younger ages. Also, the introduction of the A-League forced us to revise the AIS program where the career of many of the 'golden generation' started.

Since the AIS program is aimed at Australia's best young players, and in order to avoid competition with the A-League clubs for the same players, we had to significantly lower the age of the AIS program from Young Socceroos age (U/19-20) to Joeys age (U/16-17).

The responsibility for the development of the 17-21 year old players rests now with the A-League clubs through the National Youth League teams.

The connection between the programs of State and Territory Member Federations that underpin the National programs also required reviewing and adjustment.

The government-run State Institutes of Sport have in recent years moved away from the football programs to primarily focus on 'Olympic' sports.

In order to safeguard this important layer of the talented player pathway, FFA and the Member Federations have taken over the ownership of these National Training Centre programs.

Every Member Federation now has an identical Football Department structure with a Technical Director and coaches for the male and female National Training Centre (NTC) and Skill Acquisition (SAP) programs.

These programs as well as the National Youth Teams and AIS have already been applying this Curriculum over the last couple of years.

At these levels the positive effect is already becoming visible, especially in the brand of football these teams are playing and the type of players that are being developed.

There have also been encouraging signs in the A-League. Ange Postecoglou, one of Australia's top coaches, has seen evidence of 'footprints in our football landscape' and 'an impact at A-League level', especially reflected in the success of Brisbane Roar's high possession, technical brand of football.

Where the change hasn't yet fully happened and the National Football Curriculum still has to make a real impact is at the level underpinning these elite programs.

The National Football Curriculum is therefore primarily aimed at the thousands of children and youngsters who are playing football at grassroots level as well as their coaches and parents.

It is at this level that a fundamental change in mentality and approach must take place and the National Football Curriculum should have its biggest impact

## From 'fightball' to football

What exactly do we mean by a fundamental change in mentality and approach?

Generally in Australian youth football far too much emphasis is placed on results and this hinders the development of skill, creativity and tactical cleverness - characteristics we currently lack compared to the best of the world.

Of course everyone wants to win when playing football, that's the purpose of the game.

But in youth football we should primarily teach young players the proper skills and allow them to play without negative pressure, to express themselves and be allowed to make and learn from mistakes.

In other words, there needs to be a better balance between results and development.

Is this some sort of woolly opinion?

Consider the field research study (2011) by Chris Sulley of Europe's most renowned youth academies (Bayern Munich, Ajax, Barcelona, the French National training centre at Clairefontaine, and others). Sulley states:

**“All the organisations focused on development above and beyond winning on match day”**

Apparently the best in the world share the same point of view.

Doubters should also read the book 'Coaching Outside the Box' by Mairs and Shaw.

'Winning at all costs', which is often the traditional Australian way, has a number of very negative side effects for youth development.

If winning is made too important in youth football, coaches automatically tend to select physically and mentally more developed children. These so-called early developers are usually children born early in the year, for being 10-11 months older usually makes a big difference at a young age.





# Fundamental Transformation



This phenomenon is universally known as the Relative Age Effect (RAE) and results in overlooking large numbers of kids who may potentially be more talented than the early developers.

Another negative factor is that an unhealthy level of psychological pressure at a young age suffocates creativity and initiative. The result is that you develop **reactive** instead of **proactive** behaviour: out of fear of being criticised when making a mistake, children start looking at the coach for solutions instead of trying to solve football problems themselves.

Finally, fitness is made far too important in youth football because many coaches think that is what is going to make their team win. Interestingly, analysis shows that fitness was not a decisive factor at the 2010 FIFA World Cup. The fittest teams were not the most successful, but rather the technically best teams containing the 'special' players had the greatest success!

More importantly, by having young players running laps around the park and doing push-ups and sit-ups, we waste a lot of very valuable **football** training time.



By the age of 12-13 the basic skills and right techniques need to already be imprinted. After that age you can only catch up and patch up to mask or modify bad habits and technical deficiencies. So skill and technical development should be our focus, especially given the fact that in Australia we only play football 6 months of the year while in most of the world football is played year round!

This (and much more) is what is meant by a **fundamental transformation** and that's what the National Football Curriculum is essentially about. We have no more time to lose because football does not stop developing to wait for Australia. Not only is the development of the world's best nations accelerating to a breathtaking level, also some Asian countries are catching up with us rapidly.

However, we have to realise that only a consistent and structured **long term** approach will deliver the necessary changes and improvements.

A good example of that approach is Japan which started their football development plan 20 years ago with the results only now starting to become visible.

Sir Trevor Brooking puts it this way in his foreword of the English FA's new Technical Guide for Young Player Development.

**“Developing young players who are capable of excelling on the international stage is not an issue which will change in the short-term and it is crucial that a long-term development mindset is adopted”**

# Vision & Philosophy

FFA's Football Vision and Philosophy is not just one individual's preference or opinion. It is based upon extensive analysis of (top) football and scientific research, taking the Australian circumstances and characteristics into account.

In this chapter we explain the rationale of:

- FFA's playing philosophy
- FFA's coaching philosophy
- FFA's vision on how to bring the theory to life.

## FFA's playing philosophy

Although football is a very difficult game for players to master, the essence of the game can be very simply expressed:

'Two teams of 11 players try, within the rules of the game, to win by scoring at least one goal more than the opponent'.

**In other words, the purpose of the game is trying to score goals when we have the ball and prevent the opponent from scoring when they have the ball.**



Any game of football, regardless of formation or playing style, can be divided into 4 phases:

1. Ball Possession (BP) : this is the phase when our team has the ball and we are attacking;
2. Ball Possession Opponent (BPO) : this is the phase when the opponent has the ball and we are defending;
3. Transition to defence (BP>BPO) : this is the phase when we lose the ball and must switch from attacking to defending;
4. Transition to attack (BPO>BP) this is the phase when we win the ball back and switch from defending to attacking.

We call these phases the 'four main moments'





## **‘Proactive’ or ‘reactive’?**

There are many successful playing styles in world football. Some teams take defending as their starting point. Their first priority is not to concede goals and their playing style and team organisation is attuned to that. They allow the opponent to have a lot of possession and defend as a compact unit in their own half. When the opponent loses the ball in these tight areas, they try to strike on the counter attack. We call this a reactive playing style and some teams have been and still are very successful playing the game this way.

Other teams take attacking as the starting point and their first priority is to score goals. Their playing style and team organisation is attuned to putting the opponent under so much pressure that they will make defensive mistakes and concede goals. These teams take the defensive risks of this playing style for granted, counting on the fact that they will always score more goals than they will concede. This proactive playing style is generally more attractive but also more difficult to apply successfully.

Between these two extremes there exist of course also many successful ‘hybrids’.

In defining FFA’s Football Philosophy and Playing Style we looked closely at the Australian mentality and psyche, both in general life and in sport. It’s obvious that a **proactive** playing style corresponds best with the Australian mentality: the fighting spirit of Australian teams and athletes is renowned all over the world and Australians always want to ‘go for it’.

**‘After the World Cup in 2006, we decided to concentrate more on ball possession and on initiating play. We set out to change our footballing culture and to move away from reactive play’**

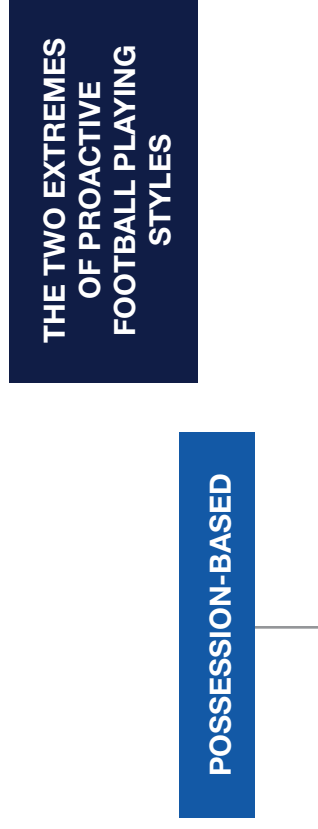
**Joachim Löw, National Team Head Coach, Germany**

# Vision & Philosophy

## ‘Possession-based’ or ‘Direct Play’?

A proactive playing style can be applied in various ways.

- One extreme is the possession-based style of football made famous by FC Barcelona.
- The other extreme is ‘direct play’, which involves playing long passes from the back to the front, thereby taking the shortest route to the opponent’s goal. This version of ‘proactive football’ is the traditional approach to the game in Australia, perhaps because of the influence of the other Australian football codes.



| Possession-based  | Direct Play  |
|---|--|
| Dominating the game by controlling possession                                   | Putting the opponent under pressure by aiming long passes towards the strikers as quickly and as often as possible |
| Patient build-up  | Aerial and physical power to create scoring opportunities  |
| Break down compact defences with individual skill and creative combination play | ‘Long ball – second ball’ approach   |

Having expressed Australia’s natural preference for ‘proactive’ rather than ‘reactive’ football, we then had to decide which end of the above ‘proactive spectrum’ would be the wisest choice for our national technical direction: ‘possession-based’ or ‘direct play’?

In itself, there is nothing wrong with the more physical ‘direct play’ style of football, as historically some teams and countries have had a certain amount of success with it, but is it the right playing style for us to adopt if our aim is to challenge the best in the world?



The English FA adopted a 'Direct Play' approach in the 80s and 90s, based on some statistics that showed most goals were scored following moves of 3 passes or less. If that was true, it was argued, then why bother with patient build-up and controlled possession? Why not simply launch continuous long passes towards the strikers, hope for the 'second ball', and then score in 3 passes or less?

This approach led to some short-term success for teams who adopted it (Wimbledon, Norway, Republic of Ireland) but did not lead to any real success for England at international level; in fact, one might suggest that the opposite has occurred.

Many have questioned the validity of the '3-pass rule', as the data didn't distinguish between three-pass moves resulting from long passes and those from winning the ball in the opposition half, set plays, etc. Obviously, many set plays or quick regains that led to 3-pass goals may have been gained after a multi-pass phase of possession.

It was also apparent from the data that at the higher levels of football, moves involving a higher number of passes are more successful.

The English have long since abandoned their 'Direct Play' policy, and those responsible for it have been accused of 'poisoning the well' of English football.

To gain further information on 'possession-based' versus 'direct play', we took a close look at the best in the world, using FIFA's analysis of the 2010 World Cup, and the UEFA Technical Report on the Euro 2012 tournament.

FIFA's expert analysis of the top three teams in South Africa in 2010 (Spain, Holland and Germany) was as follows:

| Spain (1st)   | Holland (2nd)   | Germany (3rd)   |
|---|---|---|
| Patient build-up play from the back through the midfield  | Patient build-up play from the back through the midfield  | Patient build-up play from the back through the midfield  |
| Excellent passing game  | Excellent passing game  | Excellent passing game - Good options for the player in possession                                |
| Influential individual players (INIESTA, XAVI, VILLA)   | Influential individual players (SNEIJDER, ROBBEN)   | Influential individual players (SCHWEINSTEIGER, OEZIL, MUELLER)                                   |
| Comfortable in possession when under pressure   | Disciplined, well-organised defence   | Disciplined, well-organised defence   |
| Disciplined, well-organised defence   | Dangerous at set pieces   | Dangerous at set pieces   |
| Immediate pressure after losing possession  | Winning mentality   | Winning mentality   |
| Winning mentality   | Good links between the team lines   | Excellent team spirit   |
| Good links between the team lines   | Width of the pitch used well - wingers attack the goal, are able to cut in, good 1 v 1 situations | Width of the pitch used well - wingers attack the goal, are able to cut in, good 1 v 1 situations |
| Width of the pitch used well - wingers attack the goal, are able to cut in, good 1 v 1 situations | Midfield pressing   | Rapid transition from defence to attack   |
|   | Immediate pressure after losing possession  | Effective use of full-backs   |

# Vision & Philosophy

There are several striking similarities between these three successful teams at the 2010 World Cup, but in terms of answering our questions about 'possession-based' football or 'direct play', the answer is clear. All three employed a 'patient build-up from the back through the midfield' and an 'excellent passing game', and no mention of long forward passing can be found. So direct play does not appear to be the way to gain success.

The UEFA report on Euro 2012 also states that the 'trend towards possession-based football is undeniable', especially in comparison with Euro 2008.

| Euro 2008   |     | Euro 2012  |   |
|---|-----|--|---|
| Highest no. of passes in one game                         |     | Highest no. of passes in one game  |   |
| Spain   | 510 | Spain  | 929<br>(almost double the record in 2008) |
| Highest Team average, passes per game, was Spain with 450 |     | Every team except Ireland averaged more than 450 passes per game (which was the tournament high in 2008) |   |

Detailed data shows also that 'the trend is away from a long-passing game' (a 'long pass' is defined as one of 30 metres or more; a 'medium pass' is between 10 and 30 metres and 'short passes' are those which cover less than 10 metres)

- Long passes by the finalists throughout the tournament: Spain 8%; Italy 11%
- Most long passes: Ukraine (equal bottom of their group) 18%; Republic of Ireland (bottom of group, 0 points) 19%

The only teams that were described in 'direct play' terms were:

- Republic of Ireland (bottom of their group): 'Frequent use of long passes'
- Ukraine (equal bottom of their group): 'Attacks sometimes based on direct passes to Shevchenko'
- Sweden (equal bottom of their group): 'Blend of direct passing and combination play'

(The Czech Republic who lost their quarter-final to Portugal, are described as employing 'regular use of direct, back-to-front passes to lone striker Baroš', however, they were also analysed as having 'a possession game', 'clever combinations' and 'fluent, incisive middle-to-front passing')

The evidence from Euro 2012 seems to add more weight to choosing the 'possession' end rather than the 'direct' one. 'Direct play', based on frequent long forward passes, does not appear to be a policy of the top-performing nations.

The analysis of these major tournaments in 2010 and 2012 clearly shows that with a direct playing style it is very difficult, if not impossible, to be successful in modern top football, and that the most successful nations can be categorised as preferring the 'possession' end of the spectrum.



Barcelona, one of the world's leading club teams, appear to be the extreme in 'possession-based football', consistently averaging around 68% possession in the Champions League.

Spain, however, averaged 54% when they won Euro 2008, with only 48% in the Final; they averaged 59% at Euro 2012, and in the Final had 47% in the first half but thanks to Italy being a man down finished with a marginal 52%-48% advantage.

What is important to stress here is that we should not start an 'obsession with possession': the crucial point is this:

### **Possession alone is not the key**

It is foolish to believe that all you need to do in order to win football matches is end up with a higher percentage of possession than your opponent. We are all aware of matches in which the winning team's possession statistics are inferior to those of their beaten opponents.

At Euro 2012, Russia and Holland averaged 56% of the possession in their three games, but went home after the Group Stage. England, despite only 36% (25% during extra-time) against Italy, could have won the quarter-final shootout.

Possession is not an end in itself: it is a means to an end. What is the point in keeping possession in your own half for minutes on end, if there is no end product? The only statistic that matters is the scoreline!

What appears to be the difference with the really successful teams is how possession leads to scoring chances.

The Euro 2012 report puts it this way:

**'As in the UEFA Champions League, the challenge was to translate possession and inter-passing into a positive attacking game'**



# Vision & Philosophy

When one looks closely at the statistics from Euro 2012, one finds an interesting point: a key difference between the top teams and those eliminated in the Group Stage is the number of passes made in the attacking third of the pitch (and successful completion of those passes).

Spain, Italy and Germany had 50% more passes in the attacking third on average than those eliminated.

Spain averaged 217 passes in the attacking third (80% successful), Germany 200 (80% successful) and Italy 135 (70% successful).

In comparison, Ireland averaged 90 passes in the attacking third, with around 54% success.

These 'successful passes in the attacking third' figures also translate to the real measure of effective football: shots on goal and shots on target:

Spain, Italy and Germany = >25% more shots on goal on average than those eliminated.

Spain, Italy and Germany = almost 60% more shots on target on average than those eliminated.

Recent data from the English Premier League supports this evidence.

## **'SUCCESSFUL PENALTY AREA ENTRIES'**

- The Top 4 EPL teams were approximately 40% better than the teams placed 9th-20th

## **'TOTAL TEAM SHOTS'**

- The Top 8 EPL teams were approximately 25% better than the teams placed 9th-20th (a reflection of significantly higher 'successful penalty area entries')

## **'TOTAL TEAM SHOTS ON TARGET'**

- The Top 8 EPL teams were approximately 40% better on average than the teams placed 9th-20th (a reflection of the two points above)

The evidence therefore leads us to believe that the 'possession-based' end of the spectrum is the wisest choice.

**However, the emphasis must be on EFFECTIVE possession.**

## Individual Skill and Combination Play

In modern football, more and more teams are able to defend effectively, and most have the ability to form a 'defensive block' of eight or more players in a compact unit. Therefore, successful teams have had to develop exceptional ability in breaking down these defences.

A key factor in defeating the 'block' is creativity. Teams need to have skilful individuals who can 'pick the lock' and find a way through the tight defences. The top four teams at the 2010 World Cup all had more than one of these special 'match winning' players:

| Match-winning Players – FIFA World Cup 2010 |                                |
|---|--------------------------------|
| Spain                                       | Xavi, Iniesta, Villa           |
| Holland                                     | Sneijder, Robben, Van Persie   |
| Germany                                     | Oezil, Mueller, Schweinsteiger |
| Uruguay                                     | Forlan, Suarez, Cavani         |

As well as creative individuals, teams also need quick and clever combination play. This involves two or more players working together to produce unpredictable inter-passing and mobility in order to penetrate the 'block'

These individual and combination qualities are also key points in UEFA's analysis of the top four teams at Euro 2012. They are also mentioned in the reports on Croatia, Czech Republic, England, France, Holland, Russia and Sweden.

Australia must work to develop more players like these in order to improve performance.

## Counterattacking

What can also be deduced from World Cup 2010 and Euro 2012, is that top teams need to have the ability to launch quick counterattacks. One can also observe the potent use of counterattacking in successful club teams such as Real Madrid. However, UEFA point out the 'declining effectiveness of the counter': in Euro 2008, 46% of the open play goals were from counters, but in Euro 2012 only 25% of goals from open play were derived from counters. This decline is also observed in the UEFA Champions League, where the percentage steadily fell to 27% in the 2011/12 season.

The evidence suggests that the ability to counterattack quickly and successfully is a 'weapon' that successful teams have at their disposal. Even 'possession-based' teams will look for the opportunity to do so when their opponent is disorganised or slow in transition.

We must ensure that this 'weapon' is also developed. The danger of over-stressing 'possession and more possession' is that players may not look for counterattacking opportunities, and if they do, may not be equipped to exploit them.

## Mental Strength

In the UEFA report on Euro 2012, reference is made to a theory that 'teams can be measured by their reactions to adversity.' Asked to name the factors that can make a difference in a contest between evenly-matched teams, Gérard Houllier responded: 'Heart, commitment and mental resilience.'

Croatia's coach, Slaven Bilić, echoed this opinion. 'We are not as strong mentally as teams like Germany or Italy. We need to improve this and we are working hard to do that.'

It is well-documented that Australia has always possessed this 'never-say-die' quality. Indeed, our National Team players themselves, in 'The Way of the Socceroos', singled it out as a major strength of Australian football. Whereas countries like Croatia apparently need to develop this attribute, it seems to be an in-built component in Australia. Therefore, we must ensure that we maintain this valuable asset of our players.

However, it should be stressed that 'mental strength' alone will not make us a world leader. It is a quality that supports good football, but it doesn't replace it. Houllier's words above define this 'X Factor' as something that will give an extra edge to one team, not as the only ingredient required for success.

UEFA's analysis of the teams at Euro 2012 gives special mention of mental strengths when describing Poland and The Republic of Ireland.

**POLAND:** 'Strong team ethic, fighting spirit and character'

**IRELAND:** 'Energetic and highly competitive; mentally strong; never-say-die attitude'

Both these teams, however, finished at the bottom of their respective groups, highlighting the fact that these qualities alone are not sufficient to bring success.







Here, it is interesting to look at some of the main points of the analysis of Ireland at Euro 2012.

### Ireland Euro 2012 (last place)

- Defence well equipped to deal with long balls and high crosses
- Frequent use of long passes
- Good 'second ball' mentality
- Emphasis on quick deliveries to classic twin strikers
- Heroic defending: blocks, interceptions, tackles
- Energetic and highly competitive; mentally strong; never-say-die attitude

Now consider the fact that Ireland played three matches, lost all three, scored one and conceded nine! What use is all that heroism and competitiveness when you finish bottom of your group? What use are all those long passes and a 'well-equipped' defence, if you rank 15th or 16th in all the key attacking statistics?

FIFA's analysis of Australia at the 2010 World Cup consisted solely of the following points:

### Australia FIFA World Cup, 2010 (21st place)

- Deep defensive block
- Attacks using the width
- Immediate pressure after losing possession
- Strong, hard-working players
- Determination

Clearly, we too are noted for our physical and mental qualities and must never lose this strength. It is also clear, however, that we must work to ensure that future analysis of Australia at major tournaments also includes more prominent mention of technical strengths and that our key statistics reveal a more successful attacking threat.

## Approach to Defending

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FFA's philosophy is that it is preferable to be in possession of the ball as that will allow us to dictate what happens in the game. Obviously, if we have the ball then the opponent cannot score.

Logically, therefore, when we lose possession our objective is to get it back as soon as possible. This does not necessarily mean that we must continuously press the opponent high up the field and close to their goal. However, it does mean that we should defend in an intelligent manner, finding the best way to win the ball back according to the situation.

At Euro 2012, UEFA's Technical Report states that the priority for most of the teams was to transition quickly into defensive positions. At the same time, though, their intention was to put pressure on the ball carrier.

It was noted, however, that whenever it was possible many teams would engage in collective high pressing, based not only on pressurising the ball carrier, but by using additional players to cut off the short-passing options. In this way, they were able to restrict the game within small areas, with the players on the far side pushing across towards the ball to complete a back-to-front and side-to-side squeezing operation.

This ability to high press was closely linked to an attacking philosophy: those teams who were prepared to push a larger number of players forward to join in the attack were the ones who had players in place to immediately exert high pressure and win the ball back quickly. By contrast, teams with a more 'direct play' approach, using long passes from back third to front third, were less able to utilize a high-pressing game.

Spain, the Champions, often used the high-pressing practices of FC Barcelona, but like many of the teams at UEFA EURO 2012 did not attempt to sustain this high-intensity pressure for long periods.

The FIFA Technical Report from the 2010 World Cup also identified a trend towards 'early pressing'. A link was suggested between this quick pressure and limiting opponents' ability to counterattack.

There is no evidence from the last World Cup and most recent European Championship that 'retreat defence' is a tool used by leading football nations.

In other words, top teams do not seem to react to loss of possession by ignoring the ball carrier and immediately retreating to defensive positions deep in their own half to wait for the opponent.

FFA's philosophical preference, then, for a 'proactive' style of defending seems to be matched by trends at the top level of the game, while also fitting perfectly with Australia's traditional competitiveness and winning mentality.

## Summary of key points:

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- 'Proactive' rather than 'reactive'
- 'Possession-based' rather than 'direct play'
- 'Effective possession' is the key
- Creative combination play is required to break down defences
- Unpredictable individuals are the match winners
- Ability to counterattack quickly
- Commitment and mental resilience
- Proactive defending

The challenge now is to define a successful 'modern' Australian playing style, which incorporates the analysis of the world's top teams and top-level football, while maintaining Australia's unique strengths. We clearly have to make **realistic** changes and adjustments to our traditional playing style while preserving our own identity. It's not realistic to try and make Australia play like Spain, Brazil or anyone else.





# Vision & Philosophy

## National Playing Style Statement

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FFA's Football Philosophy can therefore be summarised in the following statement of a national playing style:

**A proactive brand of football, based on effective possession with the cutting edge provided by creative individuals.**

**Defensively the key components are quick transition and intelligent collective pressing.**

**The Playing Style is underpinned by a strong 'team mentality', capitalising on Australia's traditional strengths.**

This means we must focus on developing teams and players that are able to execute this playing style and we therefore looked at the main prerequisites.

| Key Elements  | Prerequisites  |
|---|--|
| <b>Dominate and control the game through effective possession</b>                         | Quality positioning play   |
| <b>Get the ball and our players into goalscoring positions in a structured manner</b>     | High technical level (all players must be comfortable on the ball)   |
| <b>Break down compact defences through individual skill and creative combination play</b> | Special players  |
| <b>Strive to possess the ball (the more we have the ball, the less we have to defend)</b> | A suitable playing formation   |
| <b>Win the ball back through quick transition and intelligent collective pressing</b>     | Willingness and ability of all players to immediately transition from BP>BPO and BPO>BP for 90 minutes (high-intensity football) |
|   | High level of football-specific fitness (the essence of the Football Conditioning methodology)                                   |

To explain further, a characteristic of possession-based football is to dominate and therefore control a game by retaining the ball. **Effective** possession means that keeping possession should not become an aim in itself but that it should be a means to getting the ball and our players into goalscoring positions in a controlled manner (as opposed to 'trust to luck'). Effective possession should also lead to a higher number of successful entries into the attacking third, more shots on goal and more shots on target.

To be able to do that **all players**, including the goalkeeper, must be technically proficient and **all players** must understand and be able to execute quality positioning play.

What is also important in breaking down compact defences, as well as combination play and individual skill, is stretching the opponent's defence and using the width of the pitch. The FIFA analysis mentions this as a characteristic of all of the top 3 teams of the 2010 World Cup. All three had creative and fast wingers, which is one reason why we have a preference for a 1-4-3-3 formation. Another reason is that pressing an opponent's defence is easier with three attackers who are spread across the width of the pitch rather than with two.

A high-intensity playing style like this is only possible if all players are able and willing to consistently execute the team and individual tasks during the whole game. Whether players are able to do that depends on their **football-specific** fitness while their willingness to do that depends on discipline and perseverance: traditional Australian characteristics.

In Chapter 3 we will explain when and how to develop the main elements of our preferred playing style through the Building Blocks methodology.

# Vision & Philosophy

## Further lessons from the 2010 World Cup

### Clear Attacking Strategy

FIFA reports that 'the most successful teams had a clear attacking strategy'. We believe that the processes that have been put in place in Australia as a result of the National Football Curriculum will provide our National Teams with this attribute. A 'clear attacking strategy' is much easier to achieve when you have a clear philosophy on football and the vision to make it happen. We look forward to the day when football experts look at our teams and easily recognise the 'Australian style' and our specific brand of attacking football.

### Solid Youth Development Work

A link was observed between those countries who have been very proactive and successful in Youth Development, and the countries who performed well in South Africa.

Australia aims to enhance and extend its Youth Development programs and educate more Youth coaches in order to achieve similar success at senior national team level. One can already see how Japan have demonstrated the value of such a policy.

## What does the future look like?

**'The football of the past we must respect;  
the football of today we must study;  
the football of the future we must anticipate'**

In projects such as this National Football Curriculum, the first two of the above should not pose too many problems. However, the third one is not so easy.

We have used an evidence-based approach to identify trends and patterns in current top-class football. But where is the evidence of the future? Of course, it doesn't exist.

Therefore, FFA plans to constantly monitor world football, regularly review the journey we have set out upon, and where necessary re-adjust the compass.

We feel, though, that football in the future will always require technical players who make clever and creative decisions quickly, which is our stated focus in Youth Development.

We also feel that the Australian culture will not shift away from the proactive, never-say-die, winners mentality, and therefore the fundamental philosophy is well-positioned.

Perhaps one could say that a true 'proactive' nation will be one of those that actually shapes the future rather than react to what others are doing: because if you are always trying to copy others, you will always be at least one step behind.



## FFA's Coaching Philosophy

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So, we've outlined FFA's specific philosophy on how football should be **played**, but FFA also has a specific philosophy on how football should be **coached**. In Chapter 4 (Coach Education) FFA's coaching philosophy is explained in detail, but the essence of **FFA's coaching philosophy** is this:

Traditionally, it has been accepted that football has four main components (Technical, Tactical, Physical and Mental). Based on this, coaches and coach educators have tended to distinguish these four elements and develop them separately. We call this the '**isolated approach**'.

However in doing this, the holistic process of **perceiving** (a football situation), **deciding** (how to act) and **executing** (the acting itself) is being separated. Football is a game of constantly quick-changing situations. Not one situation is the same as the one before or after. The complexity of football situations is determined by what we call the 'football-specific resistances'.

This means that I have to do 'something' with the ball (which requires 'technique') but that 'something' depends on football-specific resistances such as: how much time do I have; how much space do I have; in what direction must I go; where are my team-mates; where are the opponents and what do they do; etc. The football-specific resistances activate the holistic PERCEPTION-DECISION-EXECUTION chain. In the traditional isolated approach, the focus is often only on the EXECUTION link of the chain.



## ISOLATED APPROACH

Here is a visual to explain this point:



In this example dribbling/running with the ball is being practised but there is no real football context since most of the game specific resistances (space; time; direction; team-mates; opponents) are missing. From the chain PERCEPTION-DECISION-EXECUTION only the execution part is being practised.

This player will probably get very skilful at 'dribbling through cones' but the question we have to ask ourselves is:

**“How much does this drill help the player to get better at running with the ball in a real game, or are there better ways to achieve that goal?”**

Scientific research shows that the most **educationally effective** way to develop football players is to leave the PERCEPTION-DECISION-EXECUTION chain as much as possible intact. This is FFA's philosophy on coaching football and we call this the **holistic approach**. The rationale and detail of FFA's coaching philosophy is further explained in chapter 4.

Another important aspect of the holistic approach is that we believe it's not only the most educationally effective way, but also the most **time effective** way. This fact is very important since we play football only 6 months of the year in Australia! In most of the world football is played year round. In many cases also the quality and frequency of practice is higher. This means that we have to be very conscious in deciding what we do with our precious practice time. We cannot afford to waste one minute of valuable training time on non-football-specific practice.

**How else will we ever be able to become good enough to challenge the best in the world?**





# Vision & Philosophy

## Holistic vs Isolated approach

**Rest of the world:**  
**year round**  
**quality football**

**Australia:**  
**6 months**  
**other sports**

**Wasted time?**  
**6 months**  
**football**



'Wasted Time' is time spent on non-football-specific activities, such as isolated technique training or isolated fitness training. Because of this, the season of 6 months may only be 4 months of actual football!



In Australia there is an especially strong tendency to regard fitness training as something exclusive and therefore separate ('isolate') it from football training. But by doing that we again lose valuable time of which we are short as it is!

Of course you need to be fit to be able to perform optimally but it is perfectly possible to get fit for football by **playing football**. Football-specific fitness and conditioning are therefore also a part of FFA's holistic coaching philosophy.

All the generally accepted physiological training principles are being applied through the Football Conditioning Methodology that is part of this Curriculum: the players acquire high **football-specific** fitness levels without wasting valuable football training time!

### Bringing the curriculum to life

So, we have now outlined and explained FFA's football and coaching philosophies. The next question is: "how can we bring the theory to life?" In the vision of FFA, **Coach Education** and **Youth Development** are the primary strategic spearheads to realise the Curriculum's objectives.

### Why Youth Development?

Well, youth development in Australia is presently inconsistent in both quality and approach due

to factors such as the diversity and self interest of clubs; coaches; agents; private academies; schools; etc. The quality of youth coaching is generally still very poor and the competition structures are of insufficient duration and quality. If we are serious about one day challenging the best of the world, we have to make considerable changes and improvements in our approach to youth development. What specifically needs to be done, and how, is explained in Chapter 3: The Building Blocks.

### Why Coach Education?

The reason why Coach Education is the other strategic spearhead in bringing the Curriculum to life is obvious. The only way to really bring about change and improvement is to better educate coaches, especially the ones that work with youth players. Better coaching will inevitably lead to better football.

That's why we have developed the FFA Coaching Expertise Model and re-structured all of the FFA coaching courses. However, it is important to understand that this is a long term process and will take a couple of generations of coaches going through the new coach education pathways before the effect will become visible. The FFA coaching philosophy and the Coaching Expertise Model are explained in detail in Chapter 4.