

# Tactical soccer training: in praise of 4 v 4

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Training for all sports is a balance among fitness (physical and psychological), technique and tactics. The demands of the game must be understood, so that training can be directed specifically to that sport ? you don't train soccer or basketball players the same because the games are different.

Last time, I described some of the physical demands of soccer (10,000 meters for college/adult men, 8500 meters for college/adult women, mostly at a walk or jog with lots of short sprints and a change of speed or direction every five or so seconds).

This demands a player better have a good aerobic system so they can recover quickly after each sprint so they can sprint again.

The physical demands have some differences due to age, gender, cultures, level of competition, etc. But the game is fairly similar wherever it's played and there are some common tactical characteristics that can be included in training, so the player learns both physically and tactically in the same activity.

Over 30 years ago, a couple of English mathematicians observed hundreds of games, from pickup games in the park to World Cup matches. The main thing they counted was passing combinations and found that over 90% of all possessions were of 3 or fewer passes and nearly 40% of all possessions began and ended without a completed pass. Lots of work has been done since that first study. Here are some facts about shooting possessions that you may have known intuitively, but these are from research of both sexes, different levels and cultures of play:

- The ball changes possession about 240 times in a game. Divide this by the average score/game and you get about 180 possessions/goal. The most successful teams are the ones that lower this ratio.
- The shots:goal ratio is about 10:1 (not for any player or game, but over many games and players).
- Goals tend to increase with game time ? that is, most goals are scored late in the men's game, the last 15-20 minutes. Goals in the women's game are a little more evenly spread out. The better women's teams (USA, China, Norway) tend to attack from the start and score early.
- Used to be, over half of the goals were from a restart. From the latest world championships, around 2/3 of all goals came from free play.
- We teach players the wall (1-2) pass, but in shooting possessions, the same player is rarely involved in the play more than once? too much distance is covered too fast for a player to get the ball back.

- A typical shooting possession is less than 10 seconds long and can cover over 60 meters. The less distance to cover and fewer players involved can shorten possession time further.
- Most shots are one-touch shots. Obviously in the penalty area, there isn't much time to set up. About 1/3 of shots from outside the penalty area come off the dribble.
- Most shooting possessions begin in the offensive third of the field, from picking up a free ball. This is especially true for women. For men, shooting possession can begin fairly equally in the offensive and middle thirds.
- A typical possession involved 4 or fewer players and 3 or fewer passes.
- Few possessions that lead to a shot had any back or square passing.
- Few goals are scored from extreme angles. But the chances of scoring are best from inside the goal box (1 in 7), next in the penalty area (1 in 9) and lowest outside the area (1 in 33). These numbers are for men. For women, the chances are 1 in 4; 1 in 7; 1 in 19 respectively. The differences are likely to be due to the quality of goalkeeping.

So, what does this tell us about training?

First, it tells us that soccer is not an 11 v 11 game, but lots of little 4 v 4 games. What should be stressed in training then, is recognizing when a chance for a shot exists.

Coaching points should include aggressive defense that mostly likely leads to an errant pass, especially in the opponents defensive end of the field; the first run and pass of that possession should be penetrating to get both players and ball past defenders and practice 1-time shooting. If limitations are put on a 4 v 4 game, both fitness and tactics can be trained.

Many coaches have taken these kinds of data in support of 'direct play,' which is practiced by the Norwegians and Irish. However, possession soccer is an important factor in the game to force the defense to chase the ball and tire, so that when the opportunity does present itself, an attack can be recognized and be successful on a tired defense.

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