

The X-Ray Of Possession Soccer

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On November 8, 1895, Wilhelm Roentgen was hard at work in his laboratory in Würzburg. He was working with a Crooke's Tube, a glass tube filled with gas that produces a fluorescent light when a high-voltage electrical current is passed through it. That's when Roentgen noticed something unexpected. A paper plate near his work area began to glow with an weird greenish color.

Roentgen figured something produced in the Crooke's Tube was shooting out and affecting the paper plate. He tried the experiment again, but this time he asked his wife to put her hand in between the tube and the paper plate. Now, the paper plate had a picture of her hand on it! The picture revealed the bones in her hand as well as the large wedding ring she was wearing. Roentgen had accidentally discovered X-Rays!

X-Rays let us see inside things. They provide information and perspective. And that kind of inside information is critical, especially if your goal is not only figuring out the problem, but also finding the solution.

At Eagleclaw, we've discovered our own "X-Ray machine" to assess young soccer players. Its called the **4v1 Rondo**. Actually, it was less of an accidental discovery than a realization by us that the 4v1 rondo is a terrific coaching tool. It provides coaches a unique "tide pool" that recreates a somewhat common game moment, requiring players to use a collection of fundamental skills and abilities that are

necessary to solve the problem presented in that game moment and allowing coaches to assess each player individually.



If you watch an Eagleclaw Primary Academy training session, you'll notice something right away. For at least the first 10-15 minutes of training, every training group is playing the same game: 4v1 rondo. From our 6 year olds to our 13 year olds, the kids all begin training with the same game. Why?

It's simple. At Eagleclaw, our primary objective is **developing players** who are comfortable playing a possession style of soccer. That means we need to focus on developing the crucial habits and abilities such a player must have. For example,

- the quality of the first touch,
- receiving across the body,
- being two-footed (receiving with one foot and passing with the other),
- moving to provide support,
- anticipating direction and flow of play,
- vision and spatial awareness,
- technical skill with the ball,
- creativity,
- defensive intensity and anticipation,
- and the satisfaction that comes from helping the team keep the ball.

But in order to create positive developmental change in a player, we first need to diagnose the player. We need to see the player's level of basic possession soccer skills. We need to see the player's instinct, awareness, anticipation and mentality. More importantly, we need to see all of this **quickly and up front** in order to know which skills or abilities need work.

The 4v1 is a nearly perfect **diagnostic game**. Some coaches treat the 4v1 as merely a warmup. That is short-sighted! I challenge you to look at it differently, and more seriously. This game will give you valuable inside information about each of the 5 players involved. In 10-15 minutes, you can easily assess your

players' fundamental skills and develop a checklist of what they need to work on and what you as a coach can focus on in raising the level of each player.

The Game Moment

The 4v1 Rondo simulates a game moment where the team in possession has the opponent emphatically outnumbered. In our "Positional Play" game model, the key is seeking numerical superiority, and that is obviously achieved in a 4v1 scenario. It is most likely created when a team is in possession in their own half and the "1" defender is the opposing team's center forward. It is less likely to appear higher up the pitch where lines are more compressed.



But the 4v1 can be encountered anywhere and the defender in the middle can be any of the opposing team's players. In the photo below, the rondo is happening at about the same place on the pitch, but the "1" defender is an outside midfielder.



The Set Up

The ideal set up for a 4v1 rondo is an 8' x 8' square. This size of space will really test the players' abilities and technical skills because it gives the defender a smaller area to defend, so we don't recommend it for players with lesser developed abilities. Consider enlarging the space to 10' x 10' or even 12' x 12', but you'll need to remember a few things.

- The larger the area, the lower the technical demands on the players. Look to shrink the size of the square to increase the defensive pressure and the technical challenge for your players.
- The larger area will more quickly tire the lone defender. You may need to call for the defender to switch with a player outside the box rather than waiting for the defender to win the ball.

The Mentality

To get the most value and information out of the 4v1, set it up purposefully. ***Don't treat it as a warmup.*** Demand effort and intensity from the players. Make sure the players around the square know their #1 job is to maintain possession and do not allow them to stand still; keep them moving. Tell the defender to work at maximum effort. Lazy defending does not provide enough pressure on the attacking players and dulls the mentality of the defending player.

The Ground Rules

To get the most information out of the 4v1 rondo, establish a few ground rules and make sure the players comply.

- Always require two-touches - receiving on the back foot (ball comes across the body) and passing with the other foot.
- No passing through the middle of the square, only to diagonally adjacent players
- Have the defender hold a pinney in their hand. When they win the ball, they should immediately drop the pinney, forcing the player replacing them to pick up the pinney before beginning to defend.

The Coaching Points

Obviously, the coach should remind during the game about the technical ground rules, especially the two-touch rule. There is legitimate controversy about this. Some believe, with good reason, that players in this game should be given freedom to decide whether, based on positioning or defensive pressure, a particular moment requires one or two touches. In general, we agree with this principle as it drives development of a player's decision making. On the other hand, at Eagleclaw we've made the decision to focus, especially at the younger ages, on developing two-footed players and insisting on two-touches allows our coaches to diagnose the level of that particular ability.

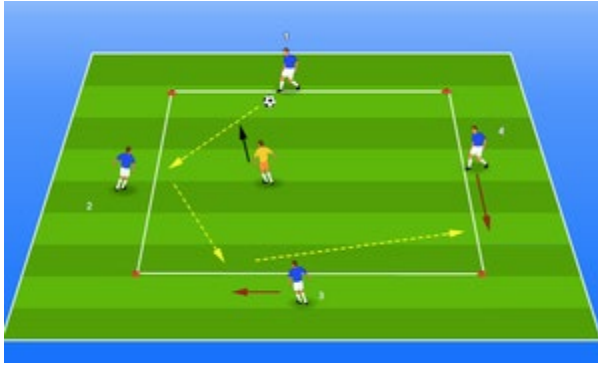
One way to enforce the two-touch rule is to make one-touch play the trigger for switching out the defender. If a player plays the ball with one-touch or more than two-touches, they become the new defender. In the same way, the coach should enforce the rule against passes through the middle of the square. The player passing through the middle of the square becomes the new defender.

Other coaching points require a bit more intervention from the coach, such as reading the defender, anticipating movement/direction of play, supporting movement and general spatial awareness. Teaching these concepts will require more active intervention from the coach. Freezing play to demonstrate can be helpful here.

Consider the diagram below. Player 1 sees a passing option to Player 2 and decides to make the pass. The defender moves to close down the pass or possibly intercept it. As the defender moves, Players 3 and 4 should be making important observations and corresponding movements. First, Player 3 observes Player 1 and notes that the defender is moving closer to Player 1 than to Player 2. This observation suggests that if the ball is played to Player 2, the defender will be out of position, behind the play, making a pass to Player 3 a better option than a return pass to Player 1. To take advantage of the defender's poor position, Player 3 should quickly move down his line to provide a passing option for Player 2. Obviously, this requires Player 3 to be focused, making visual observations, quick decisions and anticipatory movements.

Simultaneously, Player 4 makes similar visual observations focused on Player 2 and the movement of the defender and anticipates the counterclockwise direction of the play. Player 4 moves down his line to provide a passing option for Player 3, even though Player 3 has not yet received the ball.

This kind of anticipation and movement is critical for the development of intelligent players who can anticipate actions and make quick, smart decisions. And it can be coached effectively within the framework of the 4v1 rondo.



The Diagnosis

During the course of the game, make mental notes about each player. Are they mentally and physically engaged? Is their head on a swivel? Are they on their toes or flatfooted? Are they standing like statues on their line or are they constantly moving. What about the quality of their receiving technique? Are they receiving across the body with a soft first touch? Is their passing on target, accurate and properly weighted?

The observations you make should form a preliminary "punch list" of skill development that you will need to help each player address.

Diagnosing Cognitive Development

Perhaps the most valuable information gleaned from the 4v1 rondo (and many other rondos and positional games) is the players' level of game cognition. By "cognition" we mean the players' ability to Observe, Orient, Decide and Act ("OODA"). The OODA sequence is a decisional loop. The successful player is the one who can execute this decisional loop faster than their opponents can.

Observation is mainly with the eyes and ears, but requires interpretation by the player's brain. Players need to observe teammates, opponents, the ball, open spaces on the pitch, body language, wind, rain, sun, shadows, the condition of the pitch and the time remaining in the game. Body language and positioning, even a slight forward or backward lean, can give away the decisions made by teammates and opponents who are about to act.

Orientation involves the interpretation or understanding the information a player takes in. The player must interpret the information by placing it into a context corresponding to the current game situation. Interpreting these visual

cues can help a player **decide** whether to move to close down a defender or to provide a passing option for a teammate, make a pass to a teammate making a run, or move for any other reason with or without the ball. Then the player must **act**. When we speak of a defensive player who read the attacking player's mind and stopped the ball, or offensive players who, without speaking, are "on the same page", its the result of successful OODA loop decision-making.



The 4v1 rondo will help you gauge which players are **cognitively engaged** and which are not. You will see how the players are taking in information, interpreting it, making decisions and acting. This information will give you the opportunity to coach cognitively engaged players to collect even more information and make even quicker and better decisions. It can also help you recognize which players are not cognitively engaged and begin instilling in them better habits.

Diagnosing Technical Abilities

The primary technical skills required for the 4v1 rondo are passing and receiving, though there is certainly some room for feints, pullbacks and other misdirecting skills. But passing and receiving are the core skills required.

- **Receiving on the back foot** - If the player receives the ball on the front foot rather than the back foot, their most comfortable play is back to the player who made the pass. This limits the player's options. Receiving on the back foot gives the player two passing options and will make the defender work harder to decide which option to close down.

- ***Soft, close first touch*** - If the ball rebounds long off the player's receiving foot, they will likely lose the ball to the defender. Even if they can somehow maintain possession, they will have lost time trying to regain control and the defender will have extra time to close down the passing options. Working on first-touch takes time and practice. "Ball and a wall" is one way to improve first touch. Consistent high-tempo rondo work is another.
- ***Passing with the instep accurately*** - Insist that players pass using the instep of their foot. You'll be able to see whether they can lock their ankle to properly pass and whether the passes are accurate and properly weighted. Under defensive pressure, a player may decide a toe-kick is the best way to get the ball to a teammate. This is fine as long as its not done with the receiving foot, since we want to enforce the two-touch rule. However, this is also a valuable coaching moment as you can help the players understand how such high pressure might have been avoided. Thinking ahead, moving sooner, better positioning, softer first touch, quicker passing - any of these could have helped the players stay more comfortably in possession and avoid the need for a desperate toe poke pass. And now, you have an ideal coaching/teaching opportunity!

There are many ways to assess players' abilities, but for us at Eagleclaw the 4v1 rondo is the best tool. It is a game realistic exercise that, if conducted properly, exposes strengths and weaknesses of possession-oriented players. It will provide you with a wealth of information, if you take the time to observe and collect it. But we all know information is useless unless something is done with it. That's the hard part - using all of that information to improve the level of your players. But then, that's your job as a coach! Teach your players, show them how to improve their technical and cognitive abilities, then come back to the 4v1 rondo at the start of each practice and re-assess the players. It's your X-Ray machine, but it only works if you use it!

<https://www.developingthefuture.club/post/2017/04/23/the-x-ray-of-possession-soccer>