



A wicked game it is | No situation is the same.

Soccer is a wicked game...and this has consequences for how we train.

Nikolai Bernstein (1896-1966) saw that Pavlovian motor control theory rested on the stability of two correlations: nervous stimulation must correlate with a muscle's contractile force, and the muscular forces exerted must correlate with the motion of the body. Bernstein also saw that neither correlation is valid. Nervous stimulation and contractile force correlate only if the muscle starts from the same state (place, tension ...), and muscular forces correlate with motions only if no external forces influence the body. Because few real-world situations involve the same motions made from the same initial positions with no external forces involved, Bernstein rejected the Pavlovian theory. Now consider soccer where external forces (opponents specifically, but also, for instance, flight of the ball, curve on the ball and so on) will always create new (motor) problems to solve. Linear practice designs will not prepare for that. If we practice passing



Nikolai Bernstein, pic retrieved from internet.

patterns through and around mannequins and that is the bulk of our practice, we are in deep trouble when these mannequins come to life and turn into moving and unpredictable opponents.

Therefore, in our practice design we need to embrace the concept of repetition without repetition, a way of training that allows players to solve problems opposed to repeating the one and only solution. Solving problems is something players need to do consistently in games, so making that the essence of our training will enhance the transfer to the game in meaningful way. Designing our conditioned, constraint-led games is an art form and most effective when players are set up to solve these problems in similar situations. The key being that the solutions will differ, but players still get to repeat solving a similar problem.

Most academics agree that creativity is, at the same time, novel and useful. In other words, it is not just frivolous experimentation, the creativity must have a functional quality as well. David Epstein, in "Range" stresses that training should allow for a broad attention for the players. It is in that kind of environment that players solve problems presented and develop abstract models of learning. The cool thing about abstract models of learning is that these will actually transfer to situations that have never been encountered before, which, in essence, says Epstein, is creativity.



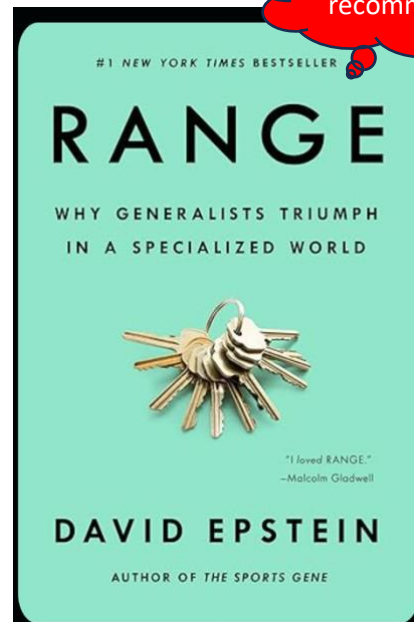
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In other words, players become more adaptable as they will be able to solve soccer problems that they have not really trained for (even though they have with broad attention practice designs), managing to pull off surprising solutions, possibly to themselves as well. Skillfully designed game-based learning in our practice design is therefore vital!

Soccer is a wicked game, a game where no situation is the same.

If we had to train every potential situation that may occur, we would need an infinite number of hours. That's why the training environment has to resemble the game, in which players are constantly stretched to solve problems, and through this process create conceptual models of learning that will transfer to divergent but alike situations. We could compare this to the wicked environment of traffic. The only way we prepare ourselves for becoming competent and confident drivers is by actually solving live problems in that traffic. To prepare ourselves for the road we get on the road. And still, when we continue driving and pile up the kilometers, we will encounter situations that we have never dealt with before. But, through proper training, being on the road and solving problems, we prepare ourselves for situations that we have never particularly practiced. We may take out our 16-year old teenager for a spin in the parking lot to get familiar with the instruments, but the sooner he/she gets on the road the better the chances to become an accomplished driver. Rounding big cones in the parking lot is just not going to do it.

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