

Can Systems assist in the development of players? Anson Dorrance's Semi Flat 3-4-3 Coaching Philosophy for the Women's Games

In our coaching evolution one of the critical areas of expertise that we all feel is a part of our personal fabric is our ability to develop players. If we did not feel that this coaching quality was a part of our makeup we would not coach. And yet, with this as a given, it is interesting how rarely we address, at any level, whether systems can develop players. Usually when systems are addressed they are discussed within the context of maximizing the unique talents or hiding the deficiencies of our player pools: what system should I play to take advantage of my strength? What system should I play to hide and protect my weaknesses? Also, if we sing the praises of a system it is



because, for most of us, that is the system we feel most confident coaching. Or, in the international arena, that is the system that is mandated by the country's coaching leadership to be followed by the national teams on down.

We have a wonderful advantage when it comes to systems here in the United States. We have no historical tradition that traps us into one particular way to play, no nationally consistent weather

condition that would guide us towards a direct game to avoid playing on the ground (because of rain and muddy conditions) or an indirect game to survive the heat and conserve energy. Since we are a melting pot of cultures, we have passionate and persuasive advocates for every style within our borders. These influences can be seen at every level and I feel it is very healthy for the continued development of the game. It forces us to think and evaluate what we do on a regular basis. Even the evolution of our U.S. Women's National Team reflects ideas stolen from respected opponents as we try to continually improve our level of play.

So, with the goal to constantly improve the player as an objective, let's seriously address the question; can systems develop players? Or more pointedly, does playing one system do more for player development than another system? Or even more specifically is the semi flat back 3-4-3 the best system for the player development of our girls and women here in the United States?

The Premier Course of the NSCAA has begun this dialogue and course materials about the 3-4-3 system are outlined below:

Advantages of a Three-Front

Defending

1. The three-front system allows a team to apply pressure closer to the opponent's goal. The three-front does not steer the opposing team's attack as a two-front does, but attempts to intercept the ball immediately.
2. This system puts tremendous pressure on a weak opponent. It is particularly effective against a team that cannot serve long balls to strikers. It is also considered to be a good system against players who cannot hit long passes that get behind defenses.
3. The system encourages opposing teams to play the ball forward predictably – making it difficult to play the ball sideways and change the point.
4. The system tends to force opponents back players into smaller spaces.
5. A three-front can mask a slow player both offensively and defensively.
6. A three-front forces an opponent to adjust. Few teams are willing to play 3v3 in their defensive third and are not used to the additional pressure, even if they are in a four back.
7. Changing into a three-front can frequently change a teams' rhythm and makes a team more aggressive.
8. When playing against a 4-4-2, the back three in a 3-4-3 can play man-to-man with a sweeper or in a zone (which for the purposes of this paper is the defense of choice).

Attacking

1. The front line is already positioned to attack when the ball is won.
2. It is easier to play directly with three targets rather than two.
3. A three-front evenly spreads physical demands on strikers. The runs of the strikers are shorter defensively and offensively compared to a two-front.
4. It is easier for a three-front to attack near, middle and far post spaces because of numbers in the box.
5. The three-front creates immediate width as forwards going wide have a shorter run to make. The width provided by a three-front makes it effective against low-pressure defenses since width is a fundamental building block in breaking down bunkers and packed defenses.
6. A three-front sweeping to one side can pull a man-to-man defense to one side, exposing an opponent's weak side and with the same concept of "flooding zones" can cause zonal defenses "numbers down" issues.
7. The team is psychologically in an attacking mode when structured with three forwards. That is a powerful mentality to take into every game.

Negatives of a Three-Front

1. Three players can be played out of a game immediately with one forward pass.
2. Three players receive the ball with their back to goal.
3. Team can be out numbered in midfield if opponents play with five.
4. Less effective against players who have the ability to hit the ball over the top of the back three.
5. Team generally defends with seven rather than eight field players.
6. Three-back system is vulnerable on outside corners.
7. Tends to pull more opponents defenders back into the vital area, thus compacting more defenders into important attacking spaces.

The Three Front

We can make this conversation gender specific and culturally specific by stating that the women's game has not evolved technically to the point where early and high pressure with numbers does not benefit you. It is also a part of the American cultural fabric to go after opponents with a high work rate and maximum pressure from our players all over the field thus playing with three high and compacting the game compliments our aggressive and hard working style of play. The semi flat three in the back works for the same reason that early pressure with three works. Technically and tactically the women's game has not evolved to a point where beating an organized flat three is easy to do when there is pressure all over the field. And, this is the beginning of why playing the semi flat 3-4-3 is so good for player development. In this system everyone has to play, no one can take a mental or physical break, and everyone is stretched offensively and defensively. Basically, everyone has to defend or you will be picked apart and everyone has to have the skills to attack because you don't have a traditional numbers up zone (the back) where you can hide your technically deficient players to start your build up.



Additionally, this system mandates that the goalkeeper have the courage to play high off her line, and that she has the ability to play with her feet and read the game like a sweeper as well as have all of the traditional qualities of a line goalkeeper. In this system, the goalkeeper must stay totally focused and make constant positional adjustments. The demands on the goalkeeper and additional responsibilities require the

ability to come out quickly to cut out through balls or drop back quickly into goal if opponents are played in behind the defensive line. These increased playing demands and additional responsibilities will take goalkeepers to another level of ability.

One of the complaints we often hear from national coaches is how few players, even high level ones, can defend one v. one. Surely part of the problem is because so many of our youth defenders are used to playing in a 4-4-2, where they have such numerical superiority all match, that their 1v1 requirements are few and rarely exposed. The 1v1 responsibility in a flat three are greater because the players are more often isolated in these 1v1 duels, forcing them to develop a tackling capacity to just survive the match.

Defensively the flat three also forces all three defenders (and the goalkeeper obviously)



to read the game and anticipate service. There is so much space behind and to the sides of the flat three defenders they are in constant motion stepping up when the opponent plays the ball square or back and getting side on and sprinting straight back when the opponent is serving over the top or through. Beyond reading the game there are wonderful leadership requirements for all three players in the semi flat three. The central player is constantly moving the line left and right, forward and back . . . based on ball position and pressure. The weak side flank players are organizing the flat line and taking over like a sweeper verbally since this weak side defender is the only one able to see the ball, the line and the opponents running at or through the line . . . “ordering” people into the correct shape and warning teammates of blind side runs spreads the leadership responsibility to all three back players. Like the 1v1 exposure of these three backs, the organizational requirements are “lead” or “die”.

And anyone that is involved in women’s soccer development knows the challenge of finding verbal leaders. This system not only needs it, it can’t survive without it.

Another critical element of the system is a commitment from all the players to play “hell bent for leather” defense because of the huge risk of a flat three and all the space you are giving up behind your defensive line. EVERY player has to pressure, work hard and tackle. The classic condition of the “I will attack but not defend” front runner has no place in this system because the system collapses if the opponents backs have time to pick you apart with balls played forward accurately and with the correct texture and pace. So even though theoretically all players are expected to defend, and all coaches ask all their players to, this system forces every player to defend or you get shredded. The system is designed to encourage the players to work and the team is punished immediately when they don’t.

Offensively this system is designed to allow everyone to go forward and get maximum numbers in the attacking box (if any of the back three go, the holding midfielder sits in the middle of the flat back). Ideally, five people can be committed to the attacking box with all the front runners expected to be committed on every attack along with the weak side midfielder and the attacking midfielder, leaving a defensive midfielder and the flat three ready for the counter if the strong side midfielder is bypassed. It becomes six in the attacking box if a flank midfielder gets end line. Another fringe benefit of the three up high is that you will always have at least one player attacking the restraining line to get in through or over the top. Many systems have little balance between the direct and indirect game because the only consistent options are indirect and short permitting defenders to over-commit or get lazy with everything forever in front of them. Like the individual defending issue, another consistent issue is our technical problem with serving the ball accurately over distance. How could this be a surprise with 90% of the running in our most popular systems to check and play the ball to someone's feet 20 yards away or closer? When in a game do our young players have a chance to serve the ball long? Usually our flank midfielders do have the energy early in the game when we change the point to make that death run over the top in the 4-4-2, but as the game wears on we see that run less and less. It is too long of a run in the women's game to be made for the entire game. If you think about it, our women are playing on a field originally designed for men, so a 120 yard by 75 yard men's field feels like a 129 by 80 yard field for the women. After a while, it becomes physically demanding for the players sprinting on the flank. So should any of us be surprised that no one can serve accurately over distance? It is not a required skill for the way most of us are playing.



Last but not least, one of the greatest elements about the semi flat back 3-4-3 system is the number of players who have opportunities to face players and run at them 1v1. Let's face it, the best teams always seem to have many of these talented 1v1 artists, so why not play a system that gives the highest number of players these 1v1 opportunities. In the semi flat back 3-4-3, you have five players that are called upon regularly to run at defenses including all three front-runners and both flank midfielders. One interesting development was to read in Soccer America last year that the English youth national teams changed to a three front. Through Jack Detchon former FA staff coach and now

an NSCAA staff coach we found out this decision was made by the English national staff to encourage more 1v1 play on the flank.

Developmentally, there is no mystery to the positions in our game that require the greatest technical mastery and challenge. The attacking positions and the players that are played further forward are the ones that game in, game out are “developed” the most. Those are the areas that players have the least time and space and are dealing with the most pressure. So, why not play as many players as forward as possible. And, if you want to develop your defenders offensively, why not challenge them by not giving them numerical superiority so they too have an opportunity to experience the stress of even numbers when defending. This system also puts wonderful pressure on your midfielders to go forward because sometimes passing backwards with a three back is not such a safe haven of numerical superiority or ball possession. In this system you prevent your opponent from having a staging area to begin attacks comfortably but since “soccer is a poor man’s blanket” you take away your own as well.

Furthermore, the scrimmage training environment for this is a competitive caldron of pressure with a minimum amount of time and space. Your 1st team scrimmage units of your 3-4-3 when matched up against your second team 3-4-3 unit creates so much constant pressure all over the field that when you finally get to a game against an opponent who plays a more classical 4-4-2 you feel like you are on vacation and so do your players. The advantage becomes that your players train in this system everyday and are prepared for it and your opponents are usually required to make an adjustment.