

For lacrosse . . .

A Coach's Manual on the Art of Dodging

by Kevin Sheehan

All too often coaches expect that a few instructional minutes spent on dodging at the beginning of a lacrosse season will create a sufficient impetus to generate a season's offense. Before you berate the general offensive instincts of your players, ask yourself how much time you have spent in trying to develop that "offensive instinct" in your team. One mathematical equation all coaches have come to understand is that the efficiency of an offense is only as great as the individuals that make up that offense.

Dodging skills (gaining steps on your man) can make up for a multitude of sins that we as coaches contrive. You can improve the offensive instincts and dodging ability of your players if you are willing to take the time to analyze and understand the factors that prevent your players from becoming successful dodgers. For the purpose of this article, I have taken the liberty of cataloguing dodging ineffectiveness under three headings—general lack of stick-handling ability, fear of the opponent's check, and a general lack of field sense. The article presents an analysis of each of these problems and suggestions for overcoming them.

Lack of Stick-Handling Ability

The first major factor that will limit the offensive instincts of your players is limited ball-handling ability. Players practice what they do best, be it right-handed or left-handed. When a forced situation demands a quick switch of hands, or carrying the ball with the opposite hand, many players cannot handle it. Some players will refuse to make the necessary switch of hands while others will lose the ball during or after the switch. Not only is dodging inhibited by the actual inability of the player to work with the op-

posite hand, but many times it is more greatly restricted by fear, indecision, and lack of confidence than a quick switch of hands will demand.

Fear of an Opponent's Check

The second factor that restricts the dodging effectiveness of your players is the factor most overlooked by coaches. That factor is physical fear of the stick that the opposing player wields. More than any other factor, this can destroy the offensive instincts of your players. For the purposes of identification and clarity, the fears that players harbor have been broken down into three stages—acute, natural, and anxious.

In acute cases, players will consciously or unconsciously shy away from the dodge because of an unspoken fear of being pummelled by an opponent's crosse. It is unfortunate that this natural fear is often sensed by experienced defensive players and many times results in a greater beating for the gunshy player.

A less obvious case of fear, but in all probability more destructive to your total offense, is a fear I call natural fear. This fear causes a player to veer in his dodge. Instead of the efficient action of going at and by a defensive player, players waste time and steps in an attempt to circumvent the defensive player. The veer is disastrous for reasons that will be discussed later.

A final factor that inhibits dodging is anxiety. Anxiety about the defensive player covering him, the act of carrying the ball, or the act of dodging, often causes a player to concentrate only on the player covering him. This occurs to such an extent that anxious players become oblivious to other players and developing situations.

Lack of Field Sense

The third factor that will inhibit offensive instincts is what I refer to as lack of field sense. This is most demonstrably seen in players who successfully dodge and leave themselves with no angle to shoot at, or in the player who dodges right into a double-team and is immediately tied up and disarmed. Though most coaches feel field sense is a God-given talent, it is not. It is a conditioned skill that must be drilled as much as is passing and catching.

Correcting the Problems

Most coaches can now identify with at least one of the problems mentioned above. However, the purpose here is not to mull over the common failings of developing players, but rather to correct them. The following presents some specific corrective strategies.

What is important is that you as a coach realize that one player is not necessarily a "natural" dodger, while another player is a "natural" feeder. Coaches must learn to recognize where it is that the offensive player has broken down, and provide him with the prescription to remedy that breakdown. You may find that the big player you are hiding in the crease is really an all-American.

Stick-Handling Drills

The game of lacrosse has progressed to a point today that demands successful players handle the stick with both hands. Holding the stick in the opposite hand is not a natural condition, nor is it something players will normally practice on their own. Coaches must realize this and constantly work on it in the course of their drills.

Mundane drills, such as the necessary groundball drills, can be enhanced by simple deviations. For instance, a groundball drill can be made more meaningful by asking players to scoop the ball right-handed, switch it to the left-hand and cradle it left-handed, then switch it back to the right hand to roll it out for the next player. By demanding that the player not only scoop the ball, but also switch it to a specific hand, we can condition an athlete to react automatically to a forced switch of hands.

NOTE: To further condition a forced

switch of hands, try the following simple modification of warm-up catches. It can provide startling results.

As your players warm-up by casually throwing the ball around, demand that after they catch the ball, they quickly switch the ball to the opposite hand and throw with the opposite hand (front change). This will reinforce the quality of going with the opposite hand, because a player is always dealing with a particularly successful action. By this I mean an action that relies on his strong hand for part of the action, and his weak hand for part of the action. Aside from encouraging and developing the opposite hand, you are conditioning players so that switches in game situations become automatic.

As players develop the confidence and ability to master the front change, have them catch the ball and turn away from the passer, change hands with their back to the passer, and follow through by throwing with the opposite hand (back change). These conditioned switches, if done correctly, can make the critical and forced switch of hands in a game situation a natural reaction.

REMEMBER: If a dodger must think about switching hands, if that switch is not a conditioned response, in most cases the switch will be a less than effective offensive weapon.

Finally, develop in your players the ability to carry the stick in either hand. Stress the fact that although their ability to pass and catch with their weak hand may be inferior to their strong hand, they must still carry and protect the stick equally with both hands. There are two ways to go around a defensive player, to his right, and to his left. If your players can handle the stick with only one hand, they are at a distinct disadvantage.

Overcoming Fears of the Opponent

One of the great problems potential dodgers succumb to is that of viewing the problem of dodging from a singular and selfish perspective. Most see only that they must somehow get around this monstrous ogre wielding a giant club. Very few see that the problem of stopping the dodger is infinitely more difficult than the problem of going around the defensive player. To demonstrate this, have a defensive player

and an attackman run a 25-yard race. The only stipulation is that the defensive player run backward and the offensive player run forward.

Think about it. The defensive player runs backward or sideways. The defensive player must run and check at the same time. The defensive player has his back to the goal. The defensive player has no idea what the offensive player is going to do. Where then do the problems come in?

The problems start with a failure to hold the stick properly and confidently. Players are plagued by latent fears—fears, not only that they will lose the ball, but fears that they will be painfully struck by an opponent's crosse. Defensive players do nothing to lessen these fears. These conscious or unconscious fears are the heart of many dodging problems.

To properly overcome these fears, start out by having players rotate pads, so that when players extend their arms at a 90-degree angle from their body, an opponent's check will be born entirely on the pad. Have them check each other to overcome the fear of being checked on the free arm. Teach them that the pad and arm are a shield, which when properly used, can render an opponent's checks harmless.

Once you have taught players to use their free arm safely as a shield, you can begin teaching stick protection. Have players keep the arm on the stick about 6 inches from the head, with the thumb raised parallel and guiding the shaft. This grip insures that the stick is held perpendicular and offers the least target. This handgrip also provides the attacking player with an immediate feel for the direction of the head of the stick. Have your players always carry the stick, pass, and catch the ball in an imaginary box that starts at the shoulders and extends upwards about 3 feet. Most importantly, carry the stick in front of the shoulder, close to the ear, and protected by a raised, outstretched, free arm.

This posture exposes the stick but offers several advantages. It gives the offensive player the ability to pass instantly, rather than lose time by having to set up. It forces the defensive player out of position by tempting him with the stick. Most importantly, it puts the offensive player on the offensive. The conventional posture with the crosse behind you, hidden by your body, tends to deaden offensive instincts and

provides a field day for check-happy defensive players.

Will this posture be readily accepted? No! To tell your players to face their defensive players with shoulders almost parallel is similar to telling them to face a firing squad. You can sell your players on a stance that dictates offensive potency only by work, on your part, and theirs. Players must work in pairs until all fears of losing the ball or being struck by an opponent's crosse are dissipated.

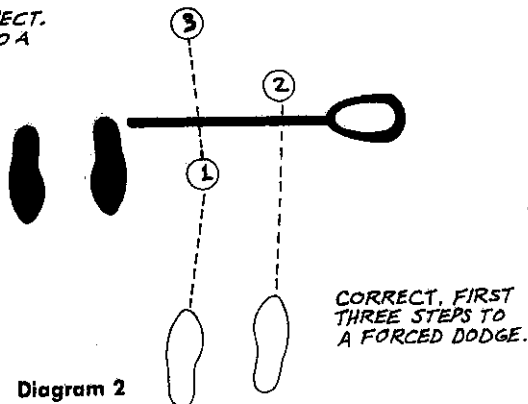
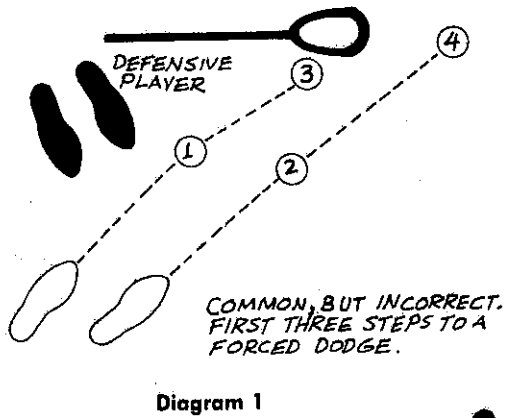
Finally, players must learn through experience that the easiest way to go around a player is to go right by him. Most players veer away from the defensive player out of a latent fear. It is unfortunate that this route takes them further away from the goal, exposes them to painful checks, and often gives the defensive player the time and steps necessary to render the dodge ineffective.

To demonstrate the proper way to go around a defensive player, simply step with your protected crosse about 12 inches to the outside of his stick side hip (Diagrams 1 and 2). Ask him to check you. Embarrassingly, you are too close for him to check you. Now veer away about 6 feet and ask him to check you.

NOTE: Teaching players to step directly at a defensive player is not a natural reaction. Again, it is a reaction that you must condition and drill for. When your players go right at their defensive players, you will be amazed at the increase in their offensive ability.

The most successful and direct dodge is right at and by the defensive player's stick side. This dodge should be employed at the beginning of a game to both the defender's quickness and to alarm and upset the defender. Should the defender react to your drive by charging to your extreme stick side, he is in perfect position for a roll dodge. Should he not react, you are by him.

What if a player cautiously lays back playing stick-on-stick technique? The defensive player is now susceptible to a quick front change, and a movement toward, and at, the defender's stick without the stick. If you have drilled properly, this front change will be instinctive. Encourage dodgers to go at the defenders employing simple moves. Discourage complex moves or moves that encourage backing into a defender.



Teach fundamentals that not only stress the protection of the crosse but that confidently implant the idea of offensive potency and imminent score. When your players overcome their latent fears and deal from a position of confidence, the employment of the dodge and the entire game becomes fun.

Developing Field Sense

Field sense is a trait many coaches feel their players should come inherently equipped with. However, it can be developed in your players if you are willing to devote the time to it.

To start with, demand that your players catch the ball properly. Players must learn to operate with the stick close to the head, and to see a pass all the way into their sticks. A low pass must be caught by lowering the shoulders as well as the stick. Once the ball is caught, players must be conditioned to turn and face the goal while protecting the stick. This turning and challenging toward the goal allows the offensive player to look for the pass for an immediate score, before the defense is totally set.

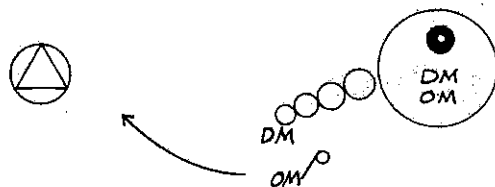
Offensive players must be taught to initiate

all play from a position high on the balls of the feet, rather than flat-footed. The offensive player must then set about the task of disorientating the defensive player. Since the defensive player has his back to the goal, this should be a relatively easy task. A general rule that holds for attack players and midfielder is that you should position the defensive player so that he thinks the goal is to his back, when it is actually to his side (Diagrams 3 and 4). Learn to disguise your dodges and feeds by making your feed look like a dodge, and your dodge look like a feed.

Aside from deceit, timing is an offensive player's best friend. The best time to dodge is upon receiving the ball, before the defense is set.

NOTE: The longer an individual player holds the ball, the more time it gives the defense to focus in on stopping that individual.

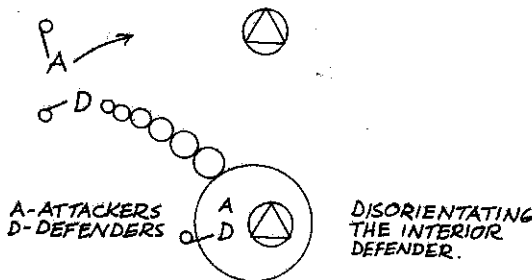
When you receive the ball, immediately turn toward the goal to check for an open man. If there is no open man, instantly institute a challenge to the goal. The protection and confidence you have drilled into your players will enable them to protect their stick



DM - DEFENSIVE MIDFIELDER
OM - OFFENSIVE MIDFIELDER

DISORIENTATING THE
MIDFIELD DEFENDER

Diagram 3



A - ATTACKERS
D - DEFENDERS

DISORIENTATING
THE INTERIOR
DEFENDER.

Diagram 4

and survey the field simultaneously. Recognize when there is no opening and quickly pass to another player around whom the defense is not set.

Finally, anticipate the worst. When you learn to drive a car, you are taught to anticipate the car unexpectedly backing out of a driveway, or the child carelessly running between two parked cars. This anticipation actually improves your reaction time to crisis.

When you are dodging, learn to visualize and anticipate the back-up. This will enable you to react as the back-up occurs, not after you are tied up. Like driving, this takes practice. You can improve back-up recognition and pressure passing only by constructing and employing specific drills. The suggestions presented here are only a start. The real enhancing of the magic quality we know as field sense will come only when you as coach condition those specific reactions that you desire.

Develop Your Team

Offensive instinct is not something your players bring to practice with them. It is something you must give to them. You must

drill and condition their offensive instinct as much as you would any basic skill. You must diagnose their individual weaknesses and correct them. When you have developed a positive attitude on your team concerning stick-handling confidence, elimination of personal fears, and improved field sense, you will find the game more exciting for your players. More importantly, it will be more fun for you. ●

About the Author

Kevin Sheehan began his coaching career as freshman lacrosse coach at Albany State University (Albany, New York) in 1971. From 1972-74 he served as freshman coach at Oceanside High School (Long Island, N.Y.), rolling up a 23-7 won-loss record. In 1975 he became the assistant varsity coach at Oceanside. Presently Coach Sheehan is the assistant varsity coach at Adelphi University (Garden City, N.Y.) in charge of offensive midfielders.