

Finding Space:

Teaching Youth Players (or World Team Players) the Secret of the Game

BY KEVIN SHEEHAN

You have now succeeded in teaching your youth players the fundamentals and basic skills to a level that has far exceeded your own development. (Hopefully, this is due in some measure to the fact that you have instituted some of the drills and skills suggested in previous *Lacrosse Magazine* issues.) You can only marvel at your players' ability to switch hands, roll dodge and pass and catch with both hands to a proficiency that you may have not reached in your college days. Thanks to Gary Gait, some of your players can now pass behind their backs, and with Casey Powell as inspiration, some of your players can toss a stick in the air and catch it without losing the ball.

Now, with much excitement and bated breath, it is time to scrimmage. Much to your dismay, as the game progresses, you continually witness seven to eight players struggling to pick up a ball in what looks more like a rugby scrum than the game you dreamed that these advanced stick skills might enable your players to enjoy. Even more sadly, when your player finally gets the ball on offense, his most difficult obstacle in getting to the goal may be the fact that his own players cut off his route to the goal or stand and watch as he tries to beat his defender. Tragically, when you insist that your players move the ball on, you may be permanently damaging their chances of scoring as there seems to be no one to pass to or worse yet, the only pass they can make is the one that moves your team further from the goal.

In this nightmarish apparition of the game you love, your frustration leads you

to yell out coaching clichés that are contained in your own lacrosse memory bank. These stored memories are the words that you remember your own frustrated coaches screaming in desperate situations. Frantically, you exhort your 10-year-olds to move without the ball, find a lane, or cut to the goal. These commands do not remedy the mess that the game has become. The players not only do not understand what you want them to do, but they have not been trained to do any of these very sophisticated offensive techniques.

The statement that it is "all Greek to me" comes to mind, as you may be speaking a language your players do not understand. Your plaintiff commands may as well be spoken in Greek. The sophisticated individual stick and dodging skills that the players possess are not really able to be unleashed as the understanding of the game trails far behind these advanced individual skills.

This article is an attempt to remedy that situation. You cannot expect your players to develop understandings that you have not taught. Even more powerfully stated, you cannot expect your players to execute understandings that you have not instilled by drilling. Drilling so many times until they can be executed without thinking. The skill that you have not instilled is a skill that I refer to as *finding space*. Without this skill, it is not only difficult to run an offense; it is almost impossible to play the game. However with this skill, a player, any size player, can destroy an opponent.

B.J. Prager may have been one of the smallest players on the field for Princeton, but his ability to *find space* often made him the most dangerous player on the field. If you translate that to a team, the ability to *find space* may enable a team that is smaller and less talented physically to completely dismantle a physically superior team. This holds true for lacrosse at any level.

Teaching Players to Find Space

Firstly, begin to use the term, *find space*. Understand that unless you drill it to the point that it is instinctive the words will mean nothing. Once the understanding is in place, players will know exactly what you mean and move in ways that will always increase your team's effectiveness. If players can find space, your offense will work. If they can't find space, the best pattern or plays in the world will not help you.

The way that you must teach youth players, and I believe all players, is in a progression. The progression must teach the skill in isolation without pressure, move to a situation with pressure that approaches game like intensity, and finally the skill must be practiced with full intensity in a drill that totally simulates the game situation. The progression that you use to teach finding space must be practiced at every practice with the same effort that you practice individual skills with the ball. The good news for you is that this progression is often more fun and engages more players than your traditional one-on-one ball drills.

Progression One: Three-on-Two Drill

This first drill was shared with you in the November/December 2001 issue of *Lacrosse Magazine*, Steal This Drill. I will review this drill in detail, because it is the pivotal part of the progression that will teach your players to find space.

Begin by lining the three players up on three of four cones arranged in a square. The players are lined up in an L (Figure 1) and must keep the L. They must always be adjacent. As player 1 passes to player 2, player 3 must run to keep the L and be adjacent to the ball. (Figure 2) The game begins without defense and players learning to move adjacent and keep the L.



Fig. 1



Fig. 2

Understand that in youth lacrosse you must always be covering multiple concepts. As you are teaching players to move adjacent to the ball, you are also reviewing the basic fundamentals of throwing and catching. Insist that young players catch with a tight stick (Top hand on the plastic, bottom hand in the middle of the stick—lacrosse's equivalent of choking up on a bat). When they throw, insist that they point their fist at the player they are throwing to and that they hold the stick with their top hand above their ear and that they pull on the bottom hand as they throw. They must understand that the stick is a lever and their top hand is the fulcrum.

Quickly add two players on defense. One player on the ball starts the drill by screaming **ball or I got ball** (English teachers forgive me, but **I have ball** doesn't sound right). The second player who is stacked behind the first player must call **back** before the pass is made. (Figure 3) Once the pass is made the back player screams **ball** and he moves to pass, as the **ball** player moves to the **back** position and screams **back** (Figure 4). In this drill, you are teaching players to move to the right offensive places in a rote way, but at the same time, you are teaching the basic defensive rotation that will drive your player's entire careers. (Figure 5)



Fig. 3

for the **FUN** of it



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Fig. 4



Fig. 5

Players will not love this drill. It is too staged for them. However, just as you must master the alphabet before you can enjoy reading, you must master these movements and defensive reactions before you can enjoy the game. As soon as they

master the drill with cones, remove the cones. Now they must make the adjustment to *finding space* without a cone to guide them. You can guide them by yelling *find space* and exhorting them to *stretch the defense*. You can guide your players even more by bringing a super soaker to practice and soaking them a little if they do not find enough space. They will like this drill better as they master the concept and they will love it if they get soaked (They are still kids!)

The great part of this drill is that as your season progresses you can toss a ball to five players and tell them to *find space* in a corner of the field. If you have 25 players toss a ball to the other four groups of five tell them to *find space*. In a matter of minutes, the field is taken up with your entire team moving in a way that instills passing and catching on the run, defensive reaction and talk and *finding space*. We were given only two minutes to warm up before a tournament game and rather than a line drill we tossed out three or four balls and said the words, *three on two drill*.

Players came in after those two or three minutes, warm, sweating and, most of all, ready to play the game.

Progression Two: Good Guys, Bad Guys: Three on Two Groundballs

Although the first progression drill will not be loved, I guarantee that your players will love this drill as they master the concepts driving it. Our players love the competition that drives this drill and never want to leave the drill. The drill begins with five players lined up for a traditional groundball drill. We never balance the lines but insist the players do this for themselves. We simply say the words, *five lines*. We will not begin the drill, until the lines are balanced. Balancing their own lines allows leaders to emerge and fosters the understanding that the players are a team and responsible for each other. They must all be on the same page. Players one, three and five raise their stick and are identified as the *good guys*. The players two and four are identified as the bad guys. (Figure 6)

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Fig. 6



Fig. 7

For some reasons, players love the concept of good guys and bad guys as much as they love playing cops and robbers. To pump them up, simply ask them who is going win, good guys or bad guys? Ask them a second time and hold your ears. The only rule is that if the good guys get the ball, **to win the game**, they must successfully pass the ball to each of their good guy brother or sisters. Bad guys

have an advantage in that they need only pass it to their brother or sister bad guy. What you must now bring to life is the three-on-two drill you taught in the first progression. Insist that the drill does just that, or stop the drill and demonstrate to players that they must *find space* and play *ball-back* defense just as they did a few minutes ago with the cones. Stress the offensive and defensive talk. It takes no athletic ability to say *here's your help* or *I got ball*. It does take understanding of what is going to happen next! To have some fun, and to avoid the cheating or ball jumping that often seeps into the drill, try having the players lay on their back or bellies to start. They will love this craziness in ways that will make them exponentially enjoy the drill.

When the drill first begins you will probably find all five players chasing the ball. Be patient. Don't lose your super soaker, as you may have to sprinkle a few players to keep them from ball chasing. The most amazing part is when the lagging good guys realize that they would be better off *finding space* than they would creating a rugby scrum on the ball. This understanding is the lacrosse equivalent of seeing two moves ahead in chess. When your players can see the next pass before it happens, they have learned the secret of the game. In order for the drill to work, players must *find space*. Our fourth grade team now has 10-year-olds who are mastering this concept. (We do these drills every practice.) We all have watched lacrosse at much higher levels where players do not have these skills.

Progression Three: The Box Drill (Boston Drill):

Three-on-Two

Fast break Drill

You are now ready to bring the skill to the game level. Probably the best drill for this concept is the drill that I stole

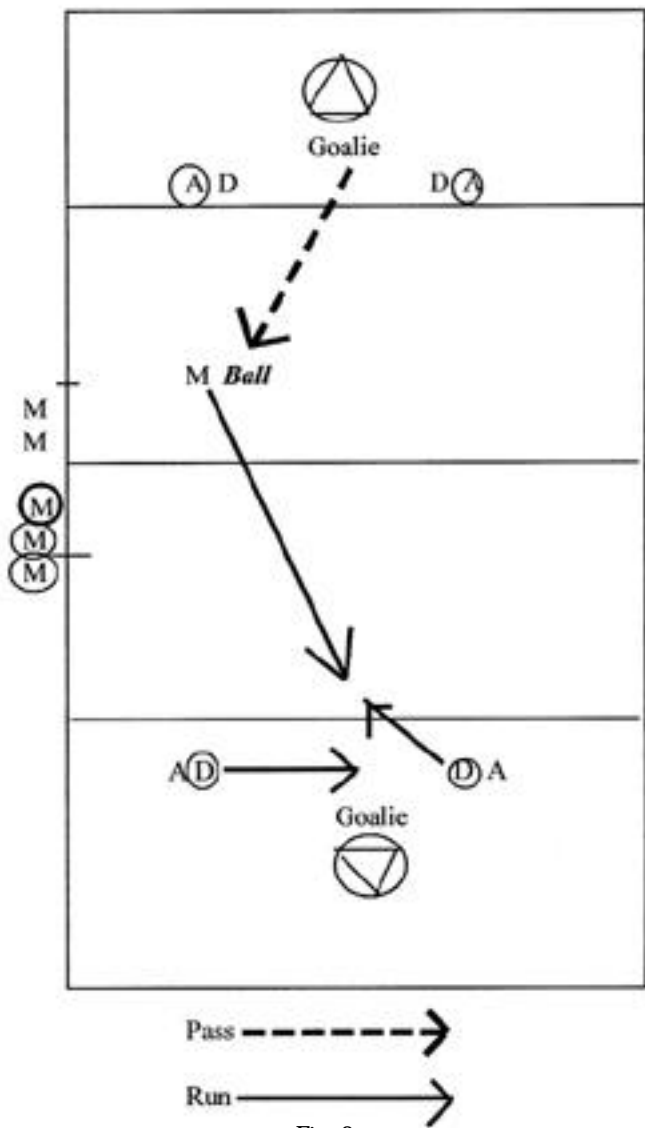


Fig. 8

from a Hofstra presentation at a clinic. I have run this drill at every level of lacrosse. Rich Donovan of the Bridgeport Barrage calls it Boston Drill for a very funny reason. Ask him the reason and you will get a very funny lacrosse story. Me, I call it the *Box Drill*, because I want goalies and players to be conditioned to pass to the substitution box when they hear the word, *box*. This may be the best and most authentic fast break drill in the game. It is simple to teach, but a real test of endurance for players to execute.

First of all, in order to not confuse youth players, set up only two attackmen and two defensemen at each end of the field. Use two attackmen rather than three so that you build on the three-on-two drills that you have just conditioned in the first two stages of the progression. Older players can do the four-on-three break. At the midfield, line up three midfielders of a team on one side of the line and three midfielders of the other team on the other side of the line in the opposite color.

The drill begins with first midfielder breaking back to the

goalie yelling, **box**. Insist that the player yell loud enough for the goalie to hear. The goalie throws the outlet and the midfielder is off on a break to the other end of the field employing the same three on two fastbreak concepts you have conditioned when you began with the cones drill. (Figure 8) As soon as that break concludes, whether it be with a save, a goal or a turnover, the midfielder (in the other color) going to



Jamie Shand, John Lynott and Kevin Sheehan of the Massapequa (N.Y.) Youth Lacrosse Program.

the other end breaks onto the field and yells, **box**. The goalie throws the outlet to this midfielder and he is off to the races for another a three on two break at the other end. What makes this drill authentic, messy and a real conditioner is that the first midfielder who started the drill must chase back on defense. In fact, all the midfielders stay in the drill *throughout the entire drill* and must chase back to the defense as the drill progresses.

We will all pity the midfielder who started the drill as he has run the field six times. In order to share the joy of the drill (and conditioning), we now run it again with the third midfielder going first. The third midfielder now shares the joy of running the field six times. What happens hopefully is that your players learn to run the field, look up as they run, find space in the three-on-two at each end, not to mention stop the break and play in messy unsettled situations.

Just so that players on the attack and defense do not miss out on the fun, be sure to run the drill with positions switched. Attackman will now learn firsthand what it means to a midfielder when they throw a thoughtless or hurried pass that requires the midfielders to run back on defense. As a coach, you will never need to run sprints at the end of a practice if your players run this drill with heart. More importantly, the skill of finding space will now become an integral part of how your team plays the game.

If you have very young, inexperienced players, you can stop reading right here. To condition these instincts will take the whole year. It did for us. Don't worry about teaching elaborate patterns or plays on offense, let them find space on their own. You can further condition them by having them run basketball

weaves sideline-to-sideline instead of line drills. These drills too will teach space and discipline. However, if you have older players you will need to integrate these same concepts to your formal offense. There is no better tool for accomplishing that than the motion offense. I'll go over the concepts of the motion offense in the second part of this series in the May issue of *Lacrosse Magazine*. ○

Author's Note: I cannot take credit for the understandings in this article on my own. In truth, I discovered most of them along side my co-coaches on the third grade level. I am pictured above with Jamie Shand (left) and John Lynott (middle) of the Massapequa (N.Y.) Youth Lacrosse Program (MYLAX). These are two of the finest coaches that I have had the pleasure to work with on any level. The second secret that I will share with you for reading all the way to the end of this marathon article is that my coaching brothers, John and Jamie, work with girls' as well as boys' teams. Guess what? All of the same drills and understandings apply to the women's as well as men's game. Gary Gait told me the two games are virtually the same game in 1998. He was right. ○

(The photos in this article were taken by Jamie Shand.)

—Kevin Sheehan coached in various lacrosse coaching capacities for 16 years at Adelphi University. In his tenure at Adelphi, he was part of the University's winning three Division II-III National Championships and receiving four NCAA Division I bids. Kevin left his head coaching position at Adelphi in 1993. In the 1998 and 2002 World Games, he served as a consultant and assistant coach to the Australian National Lacrosse Team. Currently Kevin runs clinics for the throughout the USA (Atlanta, New Jersey, Phoenix, Connecticut) and Australia. (Perth, Melbourne and Adelaide) In 2002, Kevin served as an advisor and assistant to the Bridgeport Barrage. He was received an award from the Youth Council of US Lacrosse at its annual convention in 2003 for his innovative coaching techniques.