

Rediscovering a Lost Art

Extra-man offense counters overaggressive mentality

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Take the Body: The Sport's New and Overaggressive Battle Cry

This article is designed to bring together two themes of youth lacrosse.

There is no doubt that youth lacrosse is proliferating in this country in numbers and an intensity that are staggering.

For years, we complained about the yearlong hold that youth soccer has had on our players. Let's face it: we are soccer. Our kids play lacrosse all year long, compete in elite leagues, travel to youth tournaments all over the nation and begin at ages before formal school. With this greater participation has come a heightened competitiveness and a sometimes unhealthy emphasis to win in players, coaches and parents.

More and more spectators and coaches are newer to the game. What frightens me about these new levels of competitiveness is the cry that I hear all too often from the sideline. The cry, which emanates from both parents and coaches, is this one: "take the body."

In one youth game this spring, I heard over and over again: "Why is that player standing after he scores a goal?" Does this fit with youth lacrosse?

The answer to this problem, I believe lies in the rules of the game. This is the second theme in my ancient brain. As I watch the NCAA tournament, I am in awe of how hard players can shoot the ball in the extra-man setting. Although I am impressed when I see a midfielder in a three-three extra-man set deliver a sidearm rocket at 90 miles per hour to the upper corner of the goal, I am here to tell you that is not extra man. It is pure power and maybe it works, but in the end, the team that scores the easier goals is more likely to win than the one that scores the most spectacular goals. The goal of extra-man today seems to be getting your hands free so that you deliver that crank shot no matter how far you are from the cage. The purpose of this article is to suggest that this type of cannon crank should not be the aim of extra man.

We can do better.

Extra man is a lethal art designed to make the defense pay for a penalty by exploiting the extra man and getting a shot as close to the goal as possible. Get a lay up off the crease. Extra man is an art of six players moving in synch so that the defense is forced to make a choice between two players equally dangerous in front of a goal.

On a youth level, we have to be successful for a more important purpose: to protect players from the increasing level of aggression that is coming with this heightened competitiveness. The only way to make a team pay for a penalty is not with an equally violent penalty, but by sticking the ball in the cage. My answer to the take-the-body mentality is an extra-man offense that is unforgiving of illegal body and stick checks. In this way, the rules of the game control the excesses that arise from intense competitiveness and the overzealousness of parents. When their team begins to suffer on the scoreboard, the illegal checks will stop.

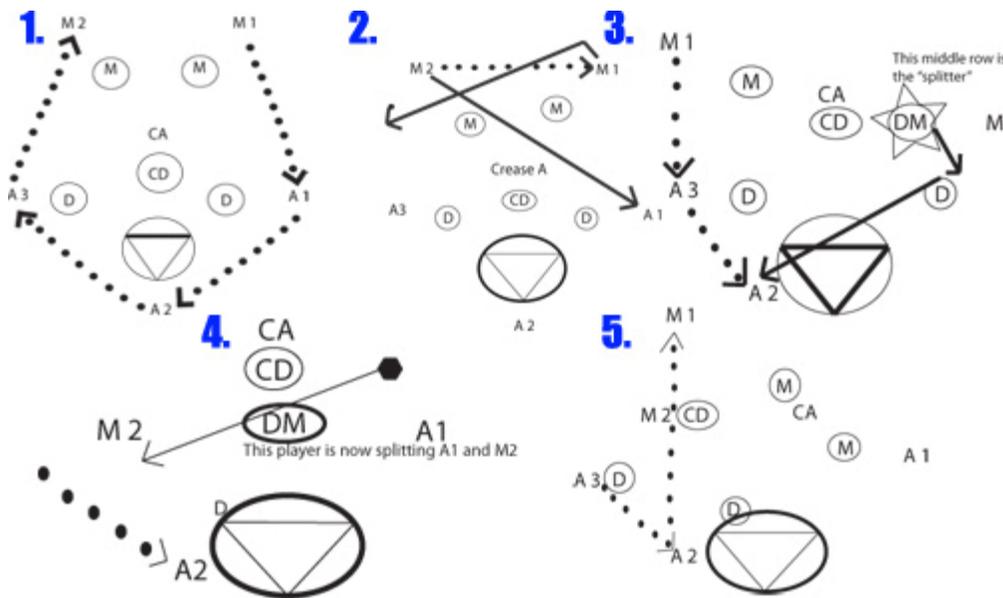
Attacking the Splitter: The Lost Art of Extra Man

The real reason for teaching extra man as an art of finding the open man and attacking the splitter is that you are in effect teaching the game as it should be played. You are moving the ball unselfishly and reading the defense. You

are finding space without the ball.

I am going to give you one play. When it is run properly, it is art. It is my hope that you steal this one from me and become inspired to create your own plays exploiting the splitter.

Here, it is diagrammed in five frames, with a detailed explanation below:



The essence of all extra-man offenses should be the idea that there is a splitter, a man covering two men at the same time. Successful man-down defense is built on the idea that the defense must rotate in order to insure that the splitter is splitting the two men furthest from the ball. The goal of extra man should be to try to maneuver the defense so that the splitter is splitting two men right in front of the goalie.

The set I favor most is 1-3-2 and this play originates from that set. We call the play "Sweep Right," because it features a player sweeping to the right side of the field with the ball. You can call it anything you like. It works best and is designed to work against a rotation, but it works equally well against zones at the youth level, because an unsuspecting formation change usually finds the offense more prepared than the defense.

The best way to pass is in a clockwise fashion (Figure 1). If the ball is never passed to the man behind, you are not extra man.

The man behind must always be involved, or you are basically all even. As the ball arrives back to M1, he begins the play by sweeping right. His job is to take his middle defenseman all the way to the right. It doesn't matter if he is passed on the other defender or played man-to-man. His primary role is to take a defender out to the right of the cage. As he sweeps, his fellow middle (M2) cuts underneath to a spot that will most magically make him invisible to the defense, just above A1 (Figure 2).

The key to the play is that the ball must move now quickly with passes to A3 and then A2 (A2 and A3 should be able to play lefty). The passes must be crisp and quick, and there should be no cradles.

Defensemen should have to scramble and should not have time to recover back to the play. If you think about it, there are five defenders and you have now occupied three of the five with your sweeper, the goal line-extended attackman and the feeder.

If the creaseman is locked on, the splitter is now the DM below. As the ball goes behind, he is now suddenly splitting

two players in front of the cage.

The first time we run it on a youth level, teams don't always cover the feeder. If that is the case, he should come around and score. Most teams will play the creaseman in a man-to-man fashion and as a result, we place him slightly higher -- especially when he is played tightly as most teams will do. Now you have accounted for four of the five defenders. The remaining defender is playing two men on the back pipe. He is the splitter, but he doesn't know it. Timing is everything on this play. As the ball is passed to the feeder behind, M2 is in motion on his cut so that the splitter is faced with this choice (Figure 4).

His cut must be timed, sneaky and down to the goal. He must be open on the left pipe at the arrival of the ball to A2. If the splitter splits the two, the cutter has a quick stick to the opposite corner. What makes the play so devastating is that the goalie is looking at the feeder and not the shooter. If the splitter somehow covers the cutter, A1 on the back pipe is wide open. If the crease defenseman slides down to cover the cutting middle, the crease attackman splits the vacated space and has a direct cut at the goal (Figure 5).

If they slide down with the sweeping middle's defenseman and cover it perfectly (Figure 6), well now you have that top middle's crank shot that we see so much of in college lacrosse. But you have it with a turning goalie and a shot closer to the cage than the defense might ordinarily give.

Final Thoughts

The real challenge and beauty of the game is that the feeder must learn to read and find the open man. The players learn that the open man gets the shot, and it might be a different teammate each time it is run. At Adelphi we once scored on this play 10 of 11 times against a team that you would easily recognize as one of the elite teams in the history of lacrosse.

Of course, "Sweep Left" is just as easily run and translated to our offense. It is a simple reverse of what we have done in this play. I do not guarantee immediate success with the sweep. It is built on timing and knowing one another's cuts. Mostly, it is built on reading the defense and exploiting the best option.

On all levels, you will get that coach who prepares for our play so well that his players actually know the play better than your players do. That was the case at Adelphi, when we played quality coaches who studied our every play. It is not farfetched to think that will be the case for you if you have success with this play on your level. There are variations of this play that will be effective against a smart defense, but those will have to wait for another issue.

When a designed play attacking the splitter works, it makes scoring look too easy. These plays demoralize a defense and hopefully lead opposing coaches and players to replace the "take the body" chant with a more conservative "don't foul" or "control our sticks." They also teach our players how the game should be played, with an understanding of attacking the splitter.

More importantly, as you teach your players on extra-man to function as one unit, each player equally valuable in executing his specific role, each unselfish in understanding that every role is as vital as the role of the scorer, then you have taught players the beauty of our game.

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