

The Philosophy of Football: In the Shadows of Marcelo Bielsa by Jed Davies

Pre-Interview with Jed Davies

- The highest order of objectives when in possession is to score a goal, the next best action is to assist goals. After these two objectives, we are looking at 'assisting' the assist.
- In order to assist the assist it is important to "break lines"- which means get the ball into the following key spaces:
 - 1. behind the opposition central defenders
 - 2. behind the opposition fullbacks
 - 3. In front of the opposition central defenders
 - 4. In front of the opposition fullbacks
 - 5. Behind the opposition central midfielders
 - 6. Behind the opposition wide midfielders
- Should we not be able to (a) score (b) assist (c) assist the assist (d) get into key spaces, we are now looking at creating conditions the objectives listed above
- Bielsa's 4 playing principles are about playing vertically through using: 1. movement, 2. rotation, 3. concentration, 4. improvisation.... Bielsa is simply a mediator between THE PHILOSOPHY OF THE GAME and the players
- There is a scale all coaches appear somewhere on. The scale is one side a strict, ordered script and game model vs. total freedom and decision making for players. In the middle of this scale is allowing for player ownership over their game but within an agreed style of play.

Chapter 1 Bielsa: The Legacy

- Influenced coaches include Mauricio Pochettino, Gerrardo Martino, Jorge Sampaoli, Pep Guardiola, Mariano Soso, Diego Simeone, and Louis Van Gaal.

Chapter 2 The common Idea

- The essence of a team and its coach is the synthesis between a particular belief system and the group's stated mission
- Common Idea: "The objective is to move the opponent, not the ball" -Pep Guardiola
- Common Idea: "It is not about the opponent, it is not about the ball, it is about the space the ball may be played into and the opponent that may come into it" - Louis Van Gaal
- Football is a game of 2 vs. 1... how to penetrate and play forward
- Terminology: Qualitative Superiority, Quantitative (numerical) Superiority, and Positional Superiority

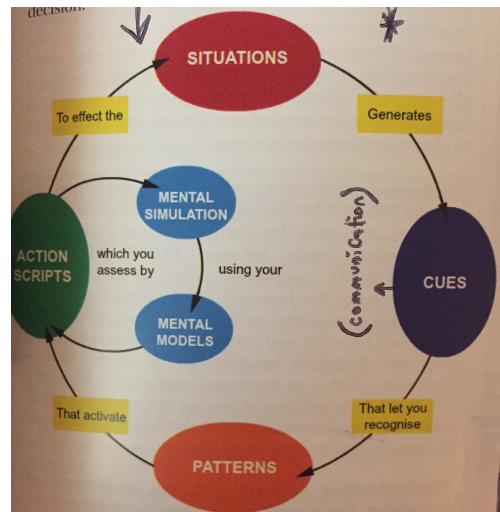
Chapter 3 Advanced Area Actions ("AAA")

- What is the value of each pass?
- The communication that shines brightest for Bielsa is the form of communication that facilitates 'verticality' the idea the oppositions lines
- AAA (Advanced Area Actions)- the term suitably given to any pass or dribble (take on) that enters into or takes place within the midfield-defensive lines of the opposition (in-between) and those that go beyond the defensive line (behind). My interpretation- any pass or reception that breaks the midfield line or defensive line.
 - The goal is to create an Advanced Area Platform- a player in space with the ball facing forward (a platform) that is in between lines of behind the defensive line
- This is a tool or reference only for the coaching process to implement The Philosophy
- Important questions:

- How many AAA's per minute is considered to be the best practice for the team? Should this be an objective?
- How many AAA's should each position strive to get? What should be their completion rate?

Chapter 4 Principles of Play

- In football, every action has 3 elements: 1. collect/provide communication 2. the decision making 3. the technical execution (The Football Action)
- Teaching people (players) procedures helps them perform tasks more successfully... example a checklist of what to do before receiving the ball
- The Recognition Primed Decision Model (see below)



- “Totally mechanized teams are useless because they get lost when they lose their script. But I also don’t like ones that rely on the inspiration of their soloists, because when God doesn’t turn them on, they are totally at the mercy of their opponent”- Marcelo Bielsa
- Mechanizing play for Bielsa is about recreating the situation that players will be in over and over again, with each situation revealing various cues and therefore action scripts to be employed. In repeating the action scripts over and over, the player would eventually be able to execute these actions with intuition and feel comfortable in a situation that would otherwise feel uncomfortable with great pressures on the player.... functional situations breed confidence
- Two training methods for performing under pressure:
 - train under pressure and recreate many of the same sensory experiences the player may come under during performance
 - ‘Quiet-Eye Training’: that of breaking the action script into procedures or key checkpoints or cues so that the player can move away from the subconsciously controlled decision making part of his brain and towards a rational mindset that focuses on the process of the action rather than its end product
- There are two types of situations out on the field: those that are complex and those that are well-ordered
 - In complex situations, people need judgement skills to follow procedures effectively and go beyond them when necessary, meaning that in complex situations we must promote an element of improvisation and freedom to break the procedure if necessary

- **Principles of Play: Situation to Action Script**
 - **1.** Penetrate- the highest order is to create an AAA in order to best give us a chance to score, assist, or assist the assist
 - **2.** Movement to create Penetration- If an AAA is not possible then we must look to use movement to:
 - Spread the defense horizontally (create gaps)
 - Spread the defense vertically (stretch the spaces behind defense or between lines)
 - Draw the opposition into a position in a straight line
 - **3.** Switch the point of attack- If principle 1 is not possible and then principle 2 is not possible then we are looking to switch the angle of the attack on the field so that we can then look to find new AAA
 - **4.** Retain possession- if 1-3 is not possible, the player must simply focus on “playing their way out of pressure” and with each new class in the sequence offering an opportunity for principles 1-3

Chapter 5 Advanced Area Actions (“AAA”): Further Detail

- This chapter looks at Principle 1. because penetration is our number one goal (besides scoring, assisting and assisting the assist)
- The space in front of the opposition CB’s
 - If a player can receive the ball and face forward in this space then possibly they will draw out a CB... and now there is space behind that CB for a through ball for the CF
 - If a player can receive the ball and face forward in the space then possibly the back four will keep dropping to protect the space behind them... and now the player can drive forward
- The space in front of the opposition FB’s
 - If a player can receive the ball and face forward in this space then possibly the FB will step to pressure, near side CB comes across to cover and far side CB slides to balance... and now CF can look to make penetrating run in front or behind balancing CB
- The space in behind the opposition FB’s
 - If a player can receive the ball and face forward in this space (from having dribbled past the fullback or received it on the switch) then possibly the near side CB will come out to pressure on the flank... and now the CF can run into the near post vacant area (1vs.1 in goal mouth area)
 - If a player can receive the ball and face forward in this space (from having dribbled past the fullback or received it on the switch) then possibly the DCM runs diagonally back to cover... and now a cut back ball is on to the trailing ACM in the vacant area at top of the box
- Terminology: “mixed position”- any position taken up between opponents at an angle... for example the ACM picking up the ball up between the two CB’s but also deep enough to be considered in between the opposition midfield line and defensive line.
- Liverpool FC Academy two attacking requirements: 1. players are to work off a 70-75% success rate in their AAA score (passing and receiving actions between the mid and def lines or beyond) 2. 70% of their possession should be inside the opposition half

Chapter 6 Pre-Advanced Area Actions

- This chapter looks at the Principle 2. because penetration to an AA is not on immediately and thus we need movement. Principle 2 Movement to create Penetration- If an AAA is not possible then we must look to use movement to:
 - Spread the defense horizontally (create gaps)
 - Spread the defense vertically (stretch the spaces behind defense or between lines)
 - Draw the opposition into a position in a straight line
- “We don't get frustrated if we can't get it forward (penetrate) immediately, we aim to be comfortable on the ball and if it's not a case of going forward straight away, we keep it”- Marcelo Bielsa
- We jump to principle #2 because penetration immediately to create an AAA isn't possible, so there we must use movement....
 1. Can we spread the opposition out laterally and therefore create gaps (lanes/ corridors) that we can play through?
 2. Can we spread the opposition out vertically and therefore create a large midfield-defense channel/pocket for we can create an AAA?
 3. Can we remove their defensive layers by: a.) pull the opposition midfield into a flat line b.) find pockets of space to move into for which the opposition midfield are flat in this specific direction
- Section 1. Looking at three areas of spreading the opposition out horizontally and therefore creating gaps/corridors to play through
 - Principle of the diamond (sectoral level communication)
 - 1st Line pass: the pass that stays in front of the opposition in the diamond
 - 2nd Line pass: the pass that goes around the opposition in the diamond
 - 3rd Line pass: the pass that goes through the opposition
 - You can teach the bounce pass (1st Line pass) which creates the through ball
 - Overload to Isolate (team level communication)
 - The tactical approach of overloading one side of the field and look to isolate a 1vs.1 on the opposite flank, preferably of qualitative superiority or to an overload of 2 vs. 1 and quantitative superiority
 - “We will find Gotye with a switch but only after five or six passes... when the opponents come and there is pressure here, we go to the other side!”
 - Overload to Isolation can also have the intention of increasing opportunities for central penetration
 - Overload to Isolation can cause pressing triggers and take advantage of defensive strategies
 - Positional Movement or ‘animation’ (transitional formations) (animation of the formation)
 - This can be a defensive shape that transitions to an attacking shape that pulls players horizontally out of a slot to create a passing channel.
 - For example, a team defends in a 4-4-2 with diamond midfield... when it transitions to offense the LM and RM in the diamond expand high and wide to wingers looking to stretch the opposition laterally and thus creating penetrating spaces through the middle
- Section 2. Looking to spread the opposition out vertically and therefore create a larger midfield/defense channel pocket for which we can exploit
 - The first question to be asked is if the opposition's defensive line is at an advanced height for it to be exploited beyond easily
 - For a short 1st Line pass to be considered valuable, they need to be done with a non-verbal communication structure whereby players understanding that as soon

as a space has opened up, that space should be exploited through movement of the receiver and any future players for a pass made thereafter

- Ways to create vertical space:
 - 1st Line passes draw the opposition out and create a bigger midfield-defensive channel gap to exploit... a similar theory can be attached for the idea of going backwards before coming forwards again, to pull apart the vertical compactness of the opposition
 - Driving with the ball to invite pressure for purpose of creating space for another teammate
 - La Pausa, to invite pressure and allow for time to change the situation
 - Playing beyond the opposition defensive line with forward runners only if its a high probability success rate
 - Dribbling past a player to change the situation and drawing others around you
 - The positioning of forwards to stretch the field and ensure the opposition defensive line is pinned back
 - Rotation and movement
 - Provoking the opposition by presenting pressing triggers
 - Pressing triggers exist with four categories:
 1. The attacking team are not yet organized
 - Team has yet to transition from defense to attack
 - six second rule implies it takes this time to make transition
 2. The conditions for 'control' are not yet present
 - bouncing ball, poor first touch, ball yet to arrive to player, slow or long backwards pass, player receives ball without checking his shoulder (square, flat body shape), long floated pass in the air, any central player looking to receive a ball and switch the field, poor pitch conditions, player on the ball is on his weak foot, or square-short passes
 3. Set pressing traps
 - non-verbal structures that players have learned as an objective to shape and manipulate the opposition's passing into an area or situation desired
 4. Pressure in relation to risk
 - where a high-press is not a high-risk
 - After winning the ball, have six seconds to find a "free man" who can create an AAA or switch the field
 - Ultimately we can create vertical space through: 1.) individual actions 2.) understanding how the opponent responds to various actions and triggers
- Section 3. Looking to remove layers of the opposition midfield and find ways to pull the opposition flat into a straight line and find pockets of space to move into for which the opposition midfield are flat in this specific direction
 - Removing layers in four ways:
 1. attracting and targeting the player from the opposition responsible for the layering by receiving the ball within a pressing distance from them through a wall pass for another teammate to then receive the AAA pass
 2. same scenario only the player playing the wall pass must then make the immediate movement behind the opponent back into the space created for himself

3. same scenario only instead of a wall pass, he is able to beat him on the turn or dribble and then dribble into an Advanced Area
4. off the ball movement by dragging the layered defender to an area away from the desired space then losing him with a second movement back into the space

Chapter 7 Changing Angles of Attack

- This chapter looks at principle 3.
- Think about the field with 5 channels or lanes... Lane 1 and 5 are flanks, Lane 2 and 4 are “the inside channels” and Lane 3 is the biggest, central channel
- Switch and Slice! is the ideology... change the point of the attack with the purpose of finding new penetrating passing lanes
- There are four “play-rounds” (areas to switch the point of attack):
 1. Deepest Level: horizontal circulation in and around own 18-yard box, often through your goalkeeper (often vs. high block of opposition)
 2. Back Level: horizontal circulation through the defensive players in your own half (often vs. high block of opposition)
 3. Mid-Level: horizontal circulation around or just inside the opposition half (often vs. medium block of the opposition)
 4. Forward Level: horizontal circulation around the opposition 18 yard box (often vs. low block of the opposition)
- “The key with the play-rounds is keeping the ball by playing around the opposition pressure in order to ‘penetrate’ and break lines where possible- so there is a purpose”- Gerard Jones
- Q: How far does the ball need to move horizontally to typically find new angles against a compact opponent so we can penetrate?... A: one full lane! (see first bullet point)
- Fifteen yards minimum to change the picture and create new opportunities to achieve(AAA)... partnering center back is asked to receive the ball at least one full lane away from the ball as a minimum
 - CB → CB is most direct and desirable
 - CB → DCM (ahead of the ball) → CB is considered a bounce pass and is second desirable
 - CB → GK (underneath) → CB is to stretch the defense and invite pressure so that gaps can form to penetrate
- Many would consider the attempt to transfer through the GK as a “reset pass”, which then demands numerical superiority to be created by your players to ensure a platform to play forward from when building out
- The purpose behind horizontal circulation: to discover a new situation with different pressure from the opponent. To facilitate penetration and increase the ability of AAA... switch and slice!

Chapter 8 Retain and Play Your Way Out

- This chapter looks at Principle 4. because we can do principles 1-3 we must keep the ball with the purpose of then looking for back to 1, and then 2, and then 3.
- There is no denying the fact that a player who can dominate his one vs. one can change the picture of the game
- Football is a game of 11 one vs. ones
- There are six one vs. one scenarios:
 1. Defender in front
 2. Defender behind (75% of receiving scenarios in elite football are defender behind pressure)

3. Defender to the side
 4. Defender who is approaching you on a recovery angle
 5. No defender (due to movement)
 6. Aerial scenarios of the above
- “I strongly believe that the individual should serve the team, and the team should serve the individual. The reciprocal objective is to banish insularity and individuality, to empower and promote the team and to create cohesion and togetherness... The team training session (cooperation) helps the individual to develop and the individual training session helps to develop the collective” Pepijn Lijnders
 - With every pass asks the same questions of each player receiving the ball: are the conditions set for effective AAA- remembering the objective of AAA is to destroy and exploit the opponent’s structure in our quest towards the opposition’s goal, not simply to penetrate, but much more than that

Chapter 9 Communication

- Football is made up of:
 1. Communication- verbal and non-verbal
 2. Insight- the individual decision making within the game
 3. Technique- the execution of a decision
 4. Conditioning- football specific fitness
- Functional technique- focuses on the outcome of any action rather than what it looks like
- Communication
 - Individual Level- we interpret, provide, and receive the information around us... using a ‘common language’
 - Collective Level- our playing style is many individuals communicating through a set of preferences
 - Can be also be distinguished by verbal and non-verbal
 - communication also....
 - consists of a common idea which provides players with a theme or lens for which they interpret the game
 - clear principles of play give each player a framework to think two-three steps ahead of the opposition
 - Pre-Advanced Areas (platforms) gives understanding for what is needed to achieve AAA
- Studies have shown that players that scan more often are able to play forwards 73.2% of the time compared to those that do not scan at 38.2%. The top players scan their surroundings once every three seconds in the seconds leading up to before receiving the ball

Chapter 10 Languages of the Game: Non-Verbal Communication

- Principles behind non-verbal communication are to: engage a defender out of his position and then exploit the space he leaves through penetration runs
- 1. ‘Up-Back-Through’
 - Example, CB → ACM → DCM → Winger (in behind the opposition backline)
 - Play an angled ball through to a straight run or a straight ball through to an angled run
 - Guardiola’s favorite pass is one that uses disguise that penetrates between the opposition lines
- 8 ways to create space:
 1. Check away and then back towards the ball
 2. Checking towards, then away and then back towards the ball (triple action)

3. Moving beyond the eye line of your defender and as the defender looks back at the ball, you can then make your movement either side of your defender without being tracked
 4. Check towards the ball and then away from it
 5. Moving against the grain of the opposition... as the defensive block moves right, you move left in between the lines
 6. Dropping between two defenders (into a mixed position)... giving them a decision to make
 7. Peeling off your man in midfield should a deeper player drive with the ball towards your marker
 8. Rotation with players to find space between lines in advanced areas
2. 'Overload to Isolate'
- The principle for overload-isolate is to engage an opposition block to one side of the field, opening an advantageous scenario on the weak-side
 - The scenario of playing into an underlay and then switching to an overload to be more successful. That is to play into a pressing trap and then quickly back out of it before switching the ball
3. 'Weakside Fullback'
- When in possession, determine the position of the weak side fullback
 - His movement and positioning are cues for central players on the ball but also determine the movement and play of our weak side winger

Chapter 11 Rotations: Non-Verbal Communication

- The form of the team responds to the processes the team is going through rather than the functions of positions in the team. Form follows process
- Three reasons for rotation in football:
 1. To establish platforms (low, medium, or high) for players to penetrate from (achieving Advanced Areas)
 2. To create Advanced Area Actions through opening up passing channels
 3. To create a free man or add an extra man beyond the opposition midfield in Advanced Areas
- Rotations that are considered 'core movements':
 1. Central midfielder falling deep in between two center backs
 - This asks the opponent the question: do we follow this man out of our structure of pressure, cover, balance and now destroy our own organization? Do we allow them to add numbers to their low platform, giving them new playing angles to look to play from?
 2. Central midfielder pulling out wider than the central defender on the strong side
 - This then allows for your better ball player (#8) to be in a position to create Advanced Area Actions.
 - The idea is to create superiority behind the line of pressure
 - #8 goes to left back → #3 goes to left wing → #11 tucks inside behind midfield line of pressure
 3. Central midfielder pulling out wider than the central defender on the weak side
 - Same rotation as 2. only involving the players on the weak side of the field &
 4. Between two or more central midfielders (Over and under: towards the ball)
Between two or more central midfielders (Under and over: away from the ball)
 - Empty and then fill a space with players

5. Full animation of fullbacks pinned up against the opposition fullbacks, wingers going inside to pin the oppositions central defenders and the striker dropping into pocket of space
- Simplicity is key
 - Non-verbal communication prioritizes our decision making around a set of principles and guiding rules that relate to the spaces on the football field.

Chapter 12: The Environment

- The most valuable quality of success: the environment of the team
- 8 critical areas of the environment:
 1. High levels of focus from players
 2. Players who thrive in what others may consider to be uncomfortable moments
 3. Players that trust each other, their playing style, and themselves
 4. Players that play with high levels of intensity of action
 5. Commitment from the players to a higher level than winning
 6. A pursuit of excellence (a thirst for endless learning and perfection)
 7. An environment where players thrive upon reflection (safe environment for feedback)
 8. Leadership qualities demonstrated from the players in leading in the above areas
- Commitment to something is far greater than wanting to win
- You can divide tactics into insight, trust, and daring - Johann Cruyff
- Trust starts in our conscious with a rational decision making process and can be broken down into six factors: sharing integrity (honesty, values, and morals), consistent reliability, fairness, sharing commitment, empathy, and development of the hormone oxytocin
- Nothing matters more, not winning or losing but commitment to a process of a greater vision