

# PREMIER SOCCER

*Skills, tactics, & strategies for winning play*



**Michael Parker**

# Premier Soccer

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**Michael Parker**



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*This book is dedicated to my wife, Ginger, my sons, John and Patrick, and my dog, Guinness, for their sacrifices and support over the years, which have allowed me to put my energies into the game of soccer. Thanks a bunch, guys.*

# PREFACE

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I started coaching in the United States a little over 30 years ago, and the changes in the game since then have been unimaginable. In my own state of North Carolina, the quality of the club programs and their players have improved tenfold in the last few years alone. I believe this acceleration of the game's development is due not only to increased interest among and opportunities for young players, but also to huge improvement in coaching quality. When I first arrived in the States, good coaching was very difficult to find. Now it is everywhere.

This book draws from my experiences as a head coach at many levels, ranging from U8 youth soccer (under 8 years old) to Olympic development, on to college, and finally the professional ranks. Most of my experience has come in the college game, including all NCAA levels, with national championships in Division III and Division II and a number one ranking in Division I at the University of North Carolina at Greensboro. I also have two boys who have come through the youth ranks, so I am very aware of the challenges found at that level.

It is my hope that this book will provide information for older youth players—middle school through small college—and for coaches working with those age groups. Soccer involves huge complexities in areas such as strategy, set plays, sport psychology, physical fitness, nutrition, and game preparation. Yet I have always said that, at its core, it is a simple game and must be played that way. Thus this book is an attempt to simplify even the complexities and cover the topics most needed for everyday players and coaches.

When I first started coaching at the more basic levels of youth soccer, I quickly realized that much of what I had done with elite college scholarship athletes and Olympic development players did not immediately apply. There is obviously a need to develop a base of technical ability before one can go further, but with a careful and systematic approach, and with the natural increase of age and maturity, it is surprising how far one can take a team at any level. Players *will* learn—things just have to be done in the correct sequence, and in the right way. It is my hope that this book will help coaches and players do just that. Repetition with variety is crucial. This may sound odd, but players must have key coaching points reinforced over and over again, without making practice mundane and boring. The challenge is always to find new and enjoyable ways to make the same point. Players themselves must be prepared to practice, practice, and practice some more.

As a young coach just beginning my professional career in the States, I was greatly influenced by my roots as a typical Englishman. I leaned heavily on the coaching certifications I had received in the UK, and in particular the English FA (Football Association). At that time, the director of coaching for the English FA was Charles Hughes, and I initially gravitated toward his philosophy; even today, I feel his influence, though I would also like to believe that I have branched out into my own philosophy over the years. The game has changed enormously, both physically and tactically, but the fundamentals stay the same. Players must be sound with the fundamentals before they will experience success. If you are a player, attend to the fundamentals in this book and work hard to make yourself better. There is no easy solution and no quick way to success, but your hard work will pay off in the end.

In our young adult soccer programs, we seem to be continually struggling with the issue of developing players versus winning games. At what point and age does winning become the main priority for the club coach? When should player development stop and winning begin? Should everybody get equal playing time, regardless of ability? What about playing different positions? For classic or select soccer, winning games should become a priority at about age 14 or 15 (possibly later in recreational soccer). However, a winning attitude for the individual player should always be there. I believe it is healthy to play to win, and I get annoyed with my college players if they do not know the score of the game in a practice session, especially during small-sided game play. What does that say about their attitude toward practice?

I have coached many years now but still like to believe that I will get better each year. There is so much to learn as a coach. Since 2003, I have kept a log of all my practice sessions during the regular season.

I have always made a point of preparing every training session by putting pen to paper—no matter how long one has been coaching, there are no shortcuts to that process—but for years I did not keep those records of past sessions over the weeks and months of the season. Now I am shocked at how much I have forgotten. Things that I used to do are often gone from the memory banks. It took me a lot of years to make myself begin keeping these records, and in fact I now bind them at the end of season and file them as a permanent record. If only I had done that from the beginning . . . One of the best pieces of advice I can give is to keep a record of what you do as you read this book. It will help you in the future.

To those young players who are still learning the game (though I guess we all are always learning the game): Please have a *passion* for the sport. Read and watch all you can. There is no substitute for just watching the game being played at the highest level. You need to have idols you want to emulate; you should play pickup games when you can. (I fear that young players in this generation spend too much time in organized coaching sessions, thus missing out on the fun, challenge, and learning that comes from self-organized games.) Much of the game can be learned without coaching, especially in the early days. It is also

extremely important that you go to each and every practice session with the right mental attitude. It is important that in each session you always give your best. It is easy to just go through the motions, especially when you are well into the season and practices are no longer as fresh, but you must try to put any and all personal issues aside and always give your best. It is my hope that this book will help you become a better player. Read the book, and go out and play this great game.

# **ACKNOWLEDGMENTS**

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Professional success does not come easy. It takes a lot of hard work, luck, and help from other people. I have been very fortunate in being surrounded by good people throughout my career, which not only have helped enormously in forming my style, character and philosophy, but also in my success as a coach.

Thanks to my wife, Ginger, for her love, support, and understanding in what can be a very difficult profession. To my sons, John and Patrick, who most definitely provided the insight into youth soccer that I would not have otherwise had. To my mother and father, Eileen and Tom, who gave me the support, love, and guidance growing up in postwar Britain. I do not think my father ever missed a game in my young career.

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I want to acknowledge the two universities I have worked at, Lock Haven and UNC Greensboro, for giving me the opportunity to be a head coach. And last but not least, to all the athletes who have played under me. It has been a privilege to work with you all.



# ***KEY TO DIAGRAMS***

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X = defender

O = attacker

S = support

————→ = player movement

-----→ = ball movement

numbers on arrows indicate sequence of movement



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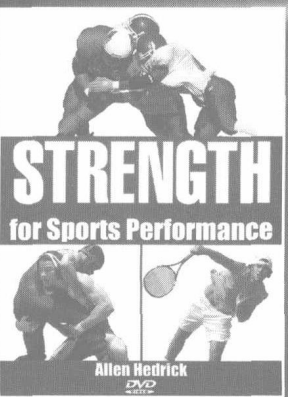
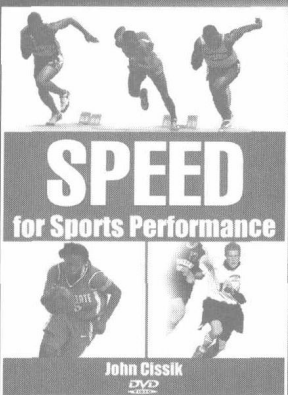
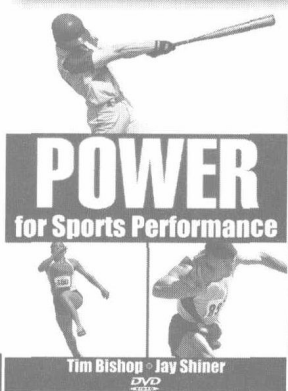
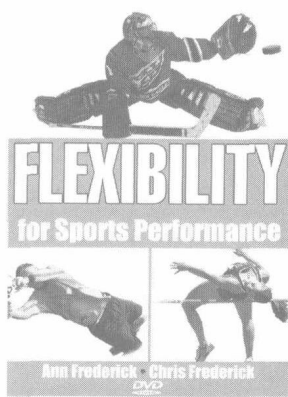


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# Winning Attitude

**S**ome soccer players look great in the easy games but do not show up and put out the effort when it counts. Others are so driven to win that they lose all perspective on what the game is about. Most successful soccer players are driven to win, but some bring an attitude that sets them above the rest. When the going gets tough, these players bring their A-game with hard work and a positive attitude. Good play, in fact, starts with a winning attitude, so it's important that players and teams cultivate one from the start.

This chapter covers creating and contributing to a winning attitude. It addresses the essentials both for individual success (positive mental attitude, practicing with variety, and learning through both success and failure) and for team success (developing chemistry through leadership, practicing with enthusiasm, and communicating) and puts winning into the greater

context of the game of soccer. The chapter discusses how to set both individual and team goals and explains why goals are essential to developing strong players. It also covers the traits required for becoming a big-time player, including how to handle pressure, prepare for games, and focus on performance. Everyone can get better—much better. This chapter will help both players and coaches work toward the attitude needed to achieve success. Let's get to it!

## **Create a Winning Atmosphere**

A winning atmosphere, from practice sessions to games and everything in between, is essential for individual and team success. A winning atmosphere creates an infectious enjoyment and motivates players to get better so they can have even more success, and that self-reinforcing process benefits the entire team. This section covers the individual and team factors that contribute to a positive atmosphere in which everybody gains and succeeds.

### **Individual Success**

Players need to realize that if they put in enough effort, success will follow. They hold the key to success in their own hands, and their mental attitude plays a major part in their development. If players work to improve every day; if they look, listen, and learn; and if they experience even the smallest measure of success, then wins, losses, promotion, and relegation become secondary. As a player gets better, so will the team, and a better team will begin to win more games, become more successful, and become more confident. Here are four elements essential to player effort and success.

**Have a positive attitude** First and foremost, a player must be enthusiastic, interested, and keen to play the game. People who are enthusiastic want to do more, and enthusiasm helps get better performances from the team because it is infectious. Everybody has been involved in practices that are quiet and “dead.” It is difficult to get anything useful from these practices, as players drift into slow and uninspired activity. Enthusiasm improves players' focus, determination, and effort. It draws in other players who might not have been quite as prepared to practice and play. It creates a far better learning atmosphere, and the coach can get much more from his or her team. If a player does not like the training or playing atmosphere, he should not always leave it up to the coach to change. The player can do something about it herself. Individual players can make a difference.

Most successful players do have positive attitudes. They believe they are going to be successful and win. It is necessary to believe in oneself, one's teammates, and one's coach. Good players let each other know how they feel. They talk about good things, and it affects other players positively. I have yet to meet a successful player who thinks she's poor and is going to lose whenever she steps on the pitch. Invariably, good players bring positive attitudes and confidence.

It's important, however, to remain realistic with positivity. It can be detrimental to performance for a player to believe he is better than he really is. Players must set realistic goals for themselves and for the team (see the section on goal setting later in this chapter) then remain positive within those goals.

Players also like to listen to a coach with a positive attitude. A good coach can make players believe they are going to win, and if she has managed the right game preparation, both physically and tactically, and if the approach to the game has been positive, then the team might just win it!

So, for players and coaches, work hard and have fun while you are doing it. You cannot be serious all the time. Be organized and focused while maintaining a sense of humor. Fun creates better team chemistry and just makes the whole experience better. Enjoyment can make the difference between winning and losing. Keep winning and losing in perspective and focus on the positive in the face of adversity.

**Practice with variety** When players are learning new skills, repetition is critical. Players need to perform skills over and over until they become second nature. Unfortunately, repetition can quickly become mundane, so players and coaches should be creative in trying fresh ways of doing the same things. Variety will help individual players maintain their interest in practice and will ensure that the practice is appropriate for players' current needs.

A coach can present technical skills in different and challenging ways. For example, a team might work on improving passing skills by playing a game of keep-away, in which one group makes as many passes in a row as they can without the other team intercepting the ball. Then the other group does the same. This skill can be practiced in many ways, each one catering to a player's changing abilities and needs. It is important that players have some success in repetition, so initially the drill needs to be set up in favor of success. One option is to give the team with the ball more players than the defending team; the activity might begin with an area measuring 40 by 30 yards (about 37 by 27 meters), in which a group of six attackers or passers works against only three defenders. (For good players, this would be too easy, but it makes a good starting point.) Attackers and defenders should rotate at regular intervals so that everybody gets equal time in passing the ball. Once success has been achieved, the ratio can be changed to, say, five attackers against four defenders, or the ratio could be kept the same while the playing area is decreased to, say, 30 by 20 yards (about 27 by 18 meters)—or both factors could be adjusted. These changes immediately inject variety into a practice, making it more challenging, more interesting, and certainly more difficult.

While much is done in organized, formal practice sessions, the more successful players usually practice by themselves as well. They become soccer "junkies" and cannot seem to get enough of the game. They work individually on skill and technique, and they play pickup games just for the enjoyment of it. Players should go out and play the game. They must put time in by themselves; it adds invaluable variety to their practice routine.



A player also needs to see examples of good play on a regular basis. There may be teammates he can look up to and respect, but he is more likely to home in on a professional player seen on television, or a local club player he can see in person. In any case, it is important that players have idols they can look up to and imitate in order to improve their tactical awareness. Players can learn an awful lot by just playing the game and watching it being played at a high level.

Many coaches prefer for players to work on weaknesses, but another source of variety is to work on strengths. In this modern era of soccer, coaches look for specialist players: Is he a good crosser of the ball? Can she win balls in the air? Is his tackling tenacious? What is her work rate? Can he score goals? Coaches who ask these important questions motivate players to bring something to the table that is better than what other players bring. Thus each player needs to find out what he does well and work on it, make it better than anybody else's, and make himself special.

**Set goals** All successful athletes need to set goals, both individual and team oriented. A forward who scored 7 goals last year might aim for double figures this season, and a goalkeeper who had 4 shutouts might try for 6. Perhaps a player who has not worked as hard as possible will set a goal to improve his or her fitness. The section on goal setting later in this chapter explains what goals should include, why they are important to individual and group success, and how players can set goals for individual and team performance.

**Learn through success (and failure)** Success motivates people and makes them want more. It's habit forming. The more a player sees himself progress, the more he feels encouraged to practice. Success is crucial to motivation; it keeps players coming back for more, and it makes the whole experience far more enjoyable. Success rarely comes straightaway, however, and often it takes a measure of failure to help players go forward in the right direction. In playing the game, a player rapidly finds techniques she can use, but only by experimenting to see if they help her improve specific skills. It is a trial-and-error process, and the player must filter out what does or does not work and change her game appropriately. Success and failure teach the fundamentals of the game, and every player should use each instance as a learning opportunity.

## **Team Success**

Good chemistry is crucial to creating team success. Very rarely do teams win without it. When players enjoy being around each other, they tend to take criticism better, work harder for each other, enjoy themselves, and generally improve the quality of everything they do. Good chemistry leads to successful seasons. Practices are enjoyable, and teammates are fun to be around, even when the team is not winning. Thus plenty can be learned even in a loss, and players are able to improve and achieve better results.

**Develop chemistry through leadership** A good starting point for developing team chemistry is to establish excellent leadership. The team should choose one