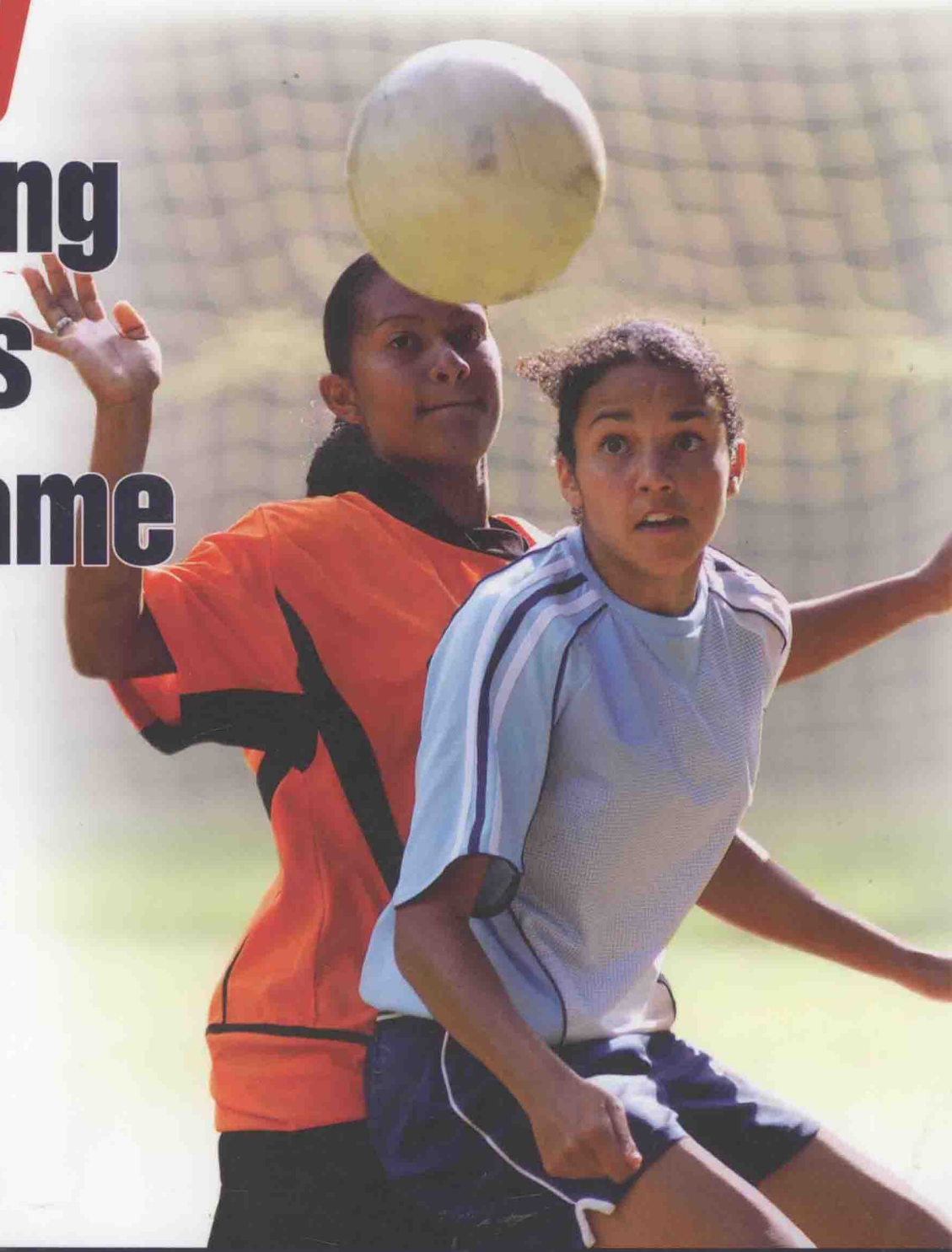
# Transforming Play

## Teaching Tactics and Game Sense



Dennis Slade

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Transforming play: teaching tactics and game sense

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Web site: www.HumanKinetics.com

*United States:* Human Kinetics
P.O. Box 5076
Champaign, IL 61825-5076
800-747-4457
e-mail: humank@hkusa.com

*Canada:* Human Kinetics
475 Devonshire Road Unit 100
Windsor, ON N8Y 2L5
800-465-7301 (in Canada only)
e-mail: info@hkcanada.com

*Europe:* Human Kinetics
107 Bradford Road
Stanningley
Leeds LS28 6AT, United Kingdom
+44 (0) 113 255 5665
e-mail: hk@hkeurope.com

*Australia:* Human Kinetics
57A Price Avenue
Lower Mitcham, South Australia 5062
08 8372 0999
e-mail: info@hkaustralia.com

*New Zealand:* Human Kinetics
P.O. Box 80
Torrens Park, South Australia 5062
0800 222 062
e-mail: info@hknewzealand.com

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To the memory of George E. Slade and Rosina M. Slade, with respect for all that I learnt from them. To my wife, Philippa, and my children, Andrew, Richard and Caroline, for their unremitting encouragement and support.

# Introduction

As a child growing up in a small seaside town in New Zealand, I eagerly cycled home from school as fast as I could to play games with the community of kids of all ages and sizes in our immediate neighbourhood. The beauty of being home first was that you got to pick what game would be played—unless you were the smallest! Game contributions from my family were field hockey in the winter and cricket in the summer. Games from other families were football or rugby. One family had a badminton net; playing badminton with tennis rackets under the carport was great on wet days. One family that moved into the neighbourhood had a table tennis table and wooden bats, and this too quickly became a favourite game. There were also lots of cycling games including polo on cycles with a soccer ball as the chuck and hockey sticks as mallets. Because the street was a cul-de-sac and there were few cars, that particular game traversed the entire street!

Teams were chosen by a pick-up method. The two best players of the game (decided by general group consensus), starting about 2 metres apart, made alternate heel to toe foot placements, bringing them closer together. The player who was the last to be able to place his entire foot within the remaining space was the winner and had first pick. (Yes, we weren't particularly sensitive to issues of self-esteem; if you were good at the game, you were an early pick!) There were standard rules about what to do when the ball went over the fence or was lodged in gardens, but, with such a range of abilities, ages and experiences, game rules were always modified. For example, when we played rugby, our biggest players tackled the opposition's biggest players. If chance had it that a small player was left to tackle a big player, the unstated rule was that the big player did not knock the smaller one senseless! Only infrequently did smaller players ever stop bigger players— occasionally, the bigger player would fall over laughing at the smaller one's attempt, but no one ever got hurt beyond a bruise or a scratch.

We learned tactics through constant play and imitating older siblings or neighbours. If we mucked up, as we trudged back to restart the game, we were given advice—generally politely—on how to avoid making the same mistake next time. Team leaders or captains changed tactics based on who turned up to play. Occasionally, those tactics required rule changes if the rest of those playing thought the tactic unfair.

In our playing of games we never did drills. We never went for training runs. All games were self-umpired, and we seldom had cheats, though occasionally if players got too upset about some aspect of the game they would take their ball and go home! When that happened, the rest of us either sat down hoping they would come back or went home too. The games were competitive. We kept the score, and it was only darkness or being called home that ended the games. Importantly, we always came back the next day for more games.

Growing up and learning games within this community transformed our understanding of game tactics from a basic to a quite sophisticated level. Our techniques evolved because we were always playing and because the environment in which we played (a long, narrow lawn on two levels) required us to master techniques that would work well in that situation. Our understanding of game play was also transformed through the socialisation process of cooperative and relational play. We adapted how we played based on whose team we were in, the opposition and the game we were playing.

## GAMES MODEL INSTRUCTION: THE TEACHING GAMES FOR UNDERSTANDING (TGFU) MODEL

My approach to game instruction in sport and physical education, especially for novices, is to try to capture aspects of the context of game learning I experienced as a young boy. I have found that non-specific games—games made up for teaching tactics or skill techniques or just because they are fun to play—very effectively achieve that outcome. I have also found that such games are also excellent ways to introduce novices to specific sports.

In a formal schooling context I believe that game model methodologies (e.g., the Bunker-Thorpe [1982] Teaching Games for Understanding [TGfU] model) and more recent derivatives of that model (e.g., Kirk and MacPhail's rethinking of the

Bunker-Thorpe method [2002] and Alan Launder's Play Practice model [2001]) provide templates for instruction that are able to replicate the game learning contexts I experienced as a child. My belief is supported by a growing worldwide acceptance in the literature of teaching games in this manner to the extent that Kirk noted: 'If we want students to learn to be good games players we must use TGfU or a comparable approach' (Kirk, cited in Griffin & Butler, 2005, p. 224).

The original TGfU model proposed by Bunker and Thorpe (1982), also encapsulated in the Kirk and MacPhail (2003) model shown in figure 1, advocated that novices start to learn games by actually playing them at their own level of competence and in a manner that promotes enjoyment, satisfaction and fun while they are learning. This approach to game instruction perhaps best addresses the inherent desire to play games and is a move away from a single skill-based teaching structure.

The motivation for Thorpe and Bunker to develop another approach to teaching games came from their dissatisfaction with the highly structured, teacher-directed, skill-based approach to teaching motor skills they observed in physical education classes. They did not believe that this method of game instruction provided a context of learning that represented the authentic nature of game learning, namely a combination of tactics and technique. The wide range of ability found in physical education classes meant that for some students the technique-based instruction was too easy and not necessary, while for others it was too difficult and they required more basic instruction especially focused on why you need to develop these techniques. They observed that either way both groups found the experience frustrating and unmotivating in terms of developing any desire to play games and sports.

Bunker and Thorpe believed that a superior approach to game instruction would be to allow students to play the game with basic tactics and techniques until the game broke down, and then, and only then, would teachers or coaches introduce additional skills to advance the players. Instead of developing skills in isolation from the game, this approach advocated setting out some very basic rules, getting the game going and providing specific motor skill instruction when students asked questions about techniques, for example 'How do you do that?' or 'How can you get the ball to travel that far?' This allowed students to play the games at various levels of ability and interest. It certainly eliminated the 'When are we going to play the game?' plea from the class. Importantly, it recognised the seemingly inherent desire in children to play games.

In Bunker and Thorpe's TGfU model, instruction starts with a very basic, or modified, game and some clear rules adapted to the needs and level of the students. Games then develop; for some, games might not progress much beyond the introductory game, whereas for others, they could become very sophisticated adult versions of the sport. But game instruction is based on a continuum of student ability within the class, and the outcomes are honest and transparent. For example, within a class playing badminton the teacher might structure the instruction so that some students might be playing on half a court with a modified version of the game focusing on learning the basic play long or short strategy of the game. On other courts students might be playing the full adult version of doubles badminton.

The TGfU model advocates the following principles to enable students to discover tactics and, to a limited extent, techniques for themselves:

- **Game form.** Use a variety of games that encourage thought about the shape of the playing area and the fundamental problems associated with finding space when on attack and denying space when on defence. The adult version of the game is not necessary, but a close approximation is frequently developed.
- **Game appreciation.** Ensure that students know and understand the rules. Rules define the game and the tactics and strategies needed for successful play.
- **Tactical awareness.** Place students in situations that direct them to consider the tactics to be used in the game (e.g., creating and denying space, fast breaks, observing weaknesses in the opposition). For students to be able to observe and understand these concepts, you must have considerable skill in establishing the game and recognising the teaching moment of when to ask the right question. Pragmatically, games must be modified to reflect the learners' development so they can divide their attention between the primary task of executing technique and the secondary task of employing tactics.
- **Decision making.** Create opportunities for students to develop the anticipatory skills associated with when to attack, defend, or perhaps be patient and keep possession.

These outcomes are achieved by modifying the games. The modifications must ensure that all students, regardless of technical ability, can participate and make tactical decisions about how the game is played.

- **Skill execution.** Motor skills should be developed within the context of the game. Skills or techniques are taught in response to the individual's or the group's needs to achieve a desired outcome within a game. Motor skill learning is therefore driven by progress in the game; motor skills are not taught in isolated technique drills. Some students' skills may be immature versions of those executed in the adult game, but measured against the context of their development and the opposition, their skill level may still be acceptable.
- **Performance.** Performance is measured by the observed outcome of the previous processes against objective criteria that are independent of the learner. Is the student a good or bad player, school champion or international? Within the context of a physical education class, providing feedback to the learner on his performance should not necessarily be measured against some absolute standard of, for example, badminton performance but based on their previous experience and what progress he has made in understanding and playing the game. A less obvious but not less important measure for feedback to the student and to the teacher would be how much he appears to enjoy playing the game.

At all times the sequence of instruction (as set out in figure 1) requires starting the lessons with a modified game that, while reflecting the ability of the participants, also mirrors the basic strategies and tactics employed in the actual adult version of the game.

## Using TGfU to Teach Techniques and Tactics

Some might argue that the ultimate outcome of motor skill learning is to reduce the level of mental processing needed to perform a skill at the automatic level. Skill repetition in the form of drills will achieve that outcome. Indeed, either through drills or games, the repeated successful and correct performance of a technique is necessary at some stage of learning to achieve automatic performance. Unfortunately, in games that are performed in open-skill environments, performance of the technique is only one part of the successful game equation.

To illustrate the importance of tactical knowledge in game play, I offer the following example from a rugby competition. In the Super 14 rugby competition played between elite teams from Australia, South Africa and New Zealand, I observed a match between a New Zealand (Hurricanes) and an Australian (Brumbies) team. In that match one of the Hurricanes' players, Ma'a Nonu (also a full New Zealand representative-All-Black), scored three tries. To score a try, one has to carry the ball and force it over the try line. In this match Ma'a Nonu's game statistics indicated that he had carried the ball for 120 metres (130 yd). For this player this would have meant no more than 30 seconds (if he ran slowly) with the ball in hand. Yet the game—and he played the full game—lasted for 80 minutes. So what did he do for the other 79 minutes and 30 seconds when he did not have the ball? Well, he obviously was involved in other techniques of the game, such as tackling, but he also constantly positioned himself and adjusted his position to assist to the defensive and offensive tactical plays of his team.

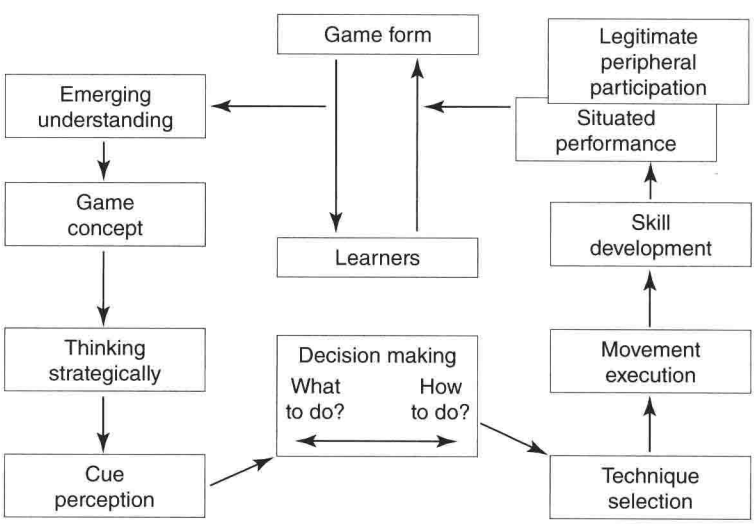



**FIGURE 1** The Kirk and MacPhail TGfU model.

Reprinted, by permission, from D. Kirk and A. MacPhail, 2002, "Teaching games for understanding and situated learning: Rethinking the Bunker-Thorpe model," *Journal of Teaching in Physical Education* 21(2): 177-192.

Assisting tactically during the part of the game that took up 99 percent of Ma'a Nonu's playing time is not learned through drills of catching, throwing and running with the ball outside of a game environment. No matter how automatic his technique is, without an understanding of tactics, Ma'a Nonu's contribution to the game would be quite limited.

Learning the tactics of a game occurs best through playing the game (or modified scenarios of it) and receiving feedback on one's performance. Developing the performance of technique to the level of an automatic response enables players to better divide their concentration between the primary tasks (e.g., kicking the ball) and the secondary but more important tasks (e.g., kicking the ball appropriately to advance the score).

Helping players to know both how and when to perform a technique requires a methodology of instruction that does more than have them merely repeat technique in drill sessions. At an elite level understanding the tactics and strategies of the game is crucial to achieving success. This understanding is what often separates elite performers and teams of similar technical expertise.

The appeal of the TGfU approach for instructing novices in games is that the introduction requires the use of both techniques and decision making. It is the novice's desire to better affect the tactical outcome within the modified introductory game that provides them with the motivation to want to learn to develop their techniques.

## Capturing the Learner's Interest

I have noticed in my own playing experiences that if I do not feel that I have made a contribution to the team, I do not usually enjoy the experience—regardless of whether my team wins or loses. When I do feel that I have made a contribution, I am eager to play again. To capture the interest of young players so that they want to play games and sports, you have to provide a context in which they feel that they contribute to the team performance. The TGfU, with its use of modified games and tactical approach, can provide an extremely positive introductory game learning experience for novices.

A study I conducted (Slade, 2007) that used a TGfU-designed field hockey programme (Slade, 2003) to introduce 58 novices to field hockey indicated quite conclusively that players perceived the TGfU approach as positive and motivating. Before the programme, students were asked whether they believed they would contribute to their teams' performance. Only 12 percent of the students predicted that they would. After the programme, the data indicated that 91 percent believed they had contributed to their teams' performance!

Work by Light (2003) and Light and Georgakis (2005) also supports the view that the TGfU approach captures student interest in playing games and can make them feel, even with minimal technical ability, that they have contributed to the team performance. Following the teaching of an undergraduate primary teacher trainee course on game instruction, Light (2003) and Light and Georgakis (2005) surveyed students on their impressions of the game sense methodology compared to their previous traditional experiences of learning games. Female respondents stated that they enjoyed the structure of the TGfU approach because any lack of technical ability was not exposed, and that they liked the inclusive nature of the games that involved everyone and not just the elite (Light & Georgakis, 2005, p. 72).

One student noted that learning games using a tactical approach meant that, although she was still not especially 'great at throwing or catching . . . she could still contribute strategically in defence or in attack'. The student continued, 'Learning basketball this way gave me a feeling of achievement and satisfaction that I have never experienced in sports' (Light, 2003, p. 98).

Another student from Light's (2003) study noted the following about learning games at school:

> I never knew what was going on or what I was supposed to do. I had no idea but here with the games we did I actually understood what was going on and felt like I actually contributed to the team, and that was enjoyable for a change. (Light, 2003, p. 99)

## Transforming the Learner

In teaching games, you need to remember what motivates children to want to play games. Before children take part in formal games or sport, they experience play, which is the first building block of games and sports. For children play is mostly a social, fun experience that requires very little in the way of techniques. Playing games is another chance to be with friends and have fun, so you need to keep these motivating factors (play, fun and friendships) at the fore of any instruction.

The learning environment should give every student a chance to make meaningful contributions to team efforts.



Transforming play into formal games and sports requires that students learn tactics and game sense, but the real transformation occurs within the students themselves. To transform students, you must create a learning environment in which they can make team contributions that they experience as legitimate and authentic. Having them play team games contributes to the creation of a social construction and transforms them from legitimate but peripheral novice participants to full members of the team, game or sport. Ensuring that the games have a tactical focus also increases students' tactical knowledge, allowing them to make tactical and legitimate contributions even without great expertise in the techniques of the game.

The approach to teaching games used in this text addresses the socialisation process of learning because games typically require cooperation. Even in individual sports such as singles tennis, players need to have a shared and accepted understanding of the rules and conventions of the game. Although the rules of tennis can be learned without even playing the game, the conventions—especially the moral dimensions such as calling opponents' shots in or out and the behaviour associated with on-court play—must be learned through participation within the community of tennis players.

Learning games and transforming learners is therefore as much about socialisation as it is about technique. Consequently, teaching games must start with playing games. Children demand it, as the following enjoinder that echoes in the gymnasiums and playing fields of all countries testifies: 'When can we have a game, Coach?'

When you use the TGfU model, ensure that the game is appropriate for the learners and that it emphasises both technique and social interaction (i.e., how one plays the game and all of its social nuances). By addressing all of the components of game play, not just the motor techniques, you offer all of your students—not just those with the already developed physical attributes for games—the chance to become immersed in the lifelong community of those who play and enjoy games.

## HOW TO USE THIS BOOK

Easy-to-use games that teach fundamental movement skills and basic tactical and strategic concepts are the heart of this book. The first two chapters offer detailed activities for technique development (chapter 1) and tactical learning (chapter 2). In these opening chapters I have avoided introducing specific sports. Even quite young children have ideas about how major sports should be played including the social and cultural components. The use of non-specific games is my attempt to wipe the slate clean of any prescribed views they might have about playing a game. This will help them construct their tactical and strategic knowledge based purely on the game's nature and merits and how they and the other players interact in playing them. Less detailed activity ideas based on the same TGfU concepts are given in chapters 3 and 4 to develop greater proficiency in sports. Chapter 5 offers valuable information about authentic assessment of students' progress in games. A more detailed description of the chapters follows.

- **Chapter 1** uses the TGfU approach to teach some of the generic fundamental movements found in games. Running, dodging, catching and throwing are used almost exclusively in these games. Suggestions are made for further practice of specific movements as well as expanding students' sport language vocabulary.
- **Chapter 2** uses the same TGfU approach to develop a more specific focus on game tactics and strategies such as man-to-man marking, zone defences and fast breaks. The various sections include brief introductions to and overviews of the tactics and strategies covered by the games.
- **Chapter 3** illustrates the potential of the TGfU model to promote game learning in the context of specific sports. Game fundamentals, tactics and basic game declarative knowledge are taught in the sports of badminton, basketball and netball. The chapter also addresses the potential of this model of learning to capture students' interest and motivate them to play sports.
- **Chapter 4** further illustrates the potential of the TGfU model to introduce novices to a major sport. It illustrates through a series of games how players who are still exhibiting immature techniques of the game can learn aspects of football's declarative knowledge and tactics. It also illustrates how the philosophy of the approach allows competitive participation among players with quite diverse ranges of playing ability.
- **Chapter 5** discusses and demonstrates how authentic assessment can be easily integrated into game sessions without disturbing—but rather, enhancing—both game sense and the playing experience.

A glossary on page 127 provides simple definitions of the sport-specific language used in this text. References used in the text, as well as further suggested reading, are listed on page 129.

The activities in this text are designed for upper primary, intermediate and junior secondary school children (ages 10 to 15 years). They can also, with some imagination, be easily adapted to older and adult-level sport teams.

It is important to develop learners' understanding of and performance in games in a progressive manner. The games and strategies taught in this text are arranged in incremental steps to reinforce that process. Where you start in the text will depend on the composition and experience of the group or class you are instructing. Chapter 1 might be a good place to start with younger students; the games in this and all chapters can contribute to students' tactical understanding of games. You can adapt the games to a specific sport once your students grasp the concepts, although this may be done more easily within a sport team context than within a general class environment such as a physical education class.

## Activity Format

A lesson plan–type format is adopted in this text to provide explanations of the games or activities with an emphasis on the tactics or fundamental movements involved. Activities are illustrated with diagrams that clarify positions, paths and play (see key to diagrams in figure 2).

- **Introductory comments:** The comments provided before listing the learning outcomes of the game provide an overview of the intent or form of the game both in terms of movement fundamentals and tactical considerations. In some instances references are made to other games and how previously taught techniques and concepts might be reinforced in teaching the current game.

The TGfU model offers great potential to capture learners' interest and motivate them to play sports.

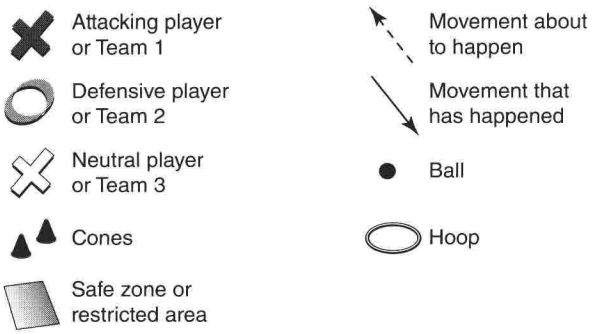



**FIGURE 2** Key to diagrams.

- **Learning objectives:** These are the specific learning outcomes of the game or activity.
- **Equipment:** This is a list of what is required to play the games. The list generally covers only what is required to play with one group, although in some instances it includes the equipment needed for large groups of learners.
- **Formation:** This provides the basic management instructions for assembling equipment and preparing the players for the games.
- **Recipe:** The recipe describes the game form and aspects of game appreciation referred to in the Bunker-Thorpe TGfU model. It provides a picture of how to conduct the game from both attacking and defensive perspectives.
- **Rules:** This section explains the basic playing conditions of the game that also contribute to the game's shape. Rules also give players an opportunity for critical reflection and decision making as they consider what they are and are not allowed to do. Where necessary, rules for both attackers and defenders are provided.
- **Variations:** These are progressions that you may use to challenge your students to more sophisticated understandings of the tactics, strategies and techniques used in the basic game.
- **Movement skills:** These are listed in the lesson plans for chapter 1 to reinforce the TGfU concept associated with skill execution.
- **Tactics and strategies:** This section provides a brief explanation of the tactics and strategies associated with the game. It highlights the decisions the players must make when playing the game and what they have to do to achieve those outcomes, and of course, promotes questions about how to execute such techniques.
- **Attacking and defending skills:** This section places the learning outcomes in the context of the specific attacking or defending skills that are emphasised in the game.
- **Sport language:** This section lists terms players will be introduced to in the game. Membership of any community requires an understanding of the language of that group. Knowing specific sport language helps players share with other players an understanding of terms and outcomes, facilitates communication during games and brings players into the wider sphere of game players.
- **Questions and answers:** A key philosophical component to the TGfU approach to game instruction is constructivism. To construct their understanding of games, learners need to be asked how they thought things happened, what they might do next or how they should play in specific circumstances. The questions and answers provided are not exhaustive but guides to help teachers and coaches new to this approach to game instruction.

## Using the Activities

The first step in using these activities is to have the students understand the rules and play the game. Next, introduce the questions that will lead the students towards considering the tactical implications associated with the game. Questioning is the key to achieving that outcome. Student responses will provide you with feedback on how successfully you are teaching the attacking and defensive concepts associated with the game. The questions and answers provided are not meant to represent an exhaustive list of what you could ask; they provide some direction and do relate to the tactical outcomes associated with each game.

You are responsible for deciding the time to allow for an activity, where you see it leading and how to integrate it with other games of a similar nature or specific team games that you are targeting.

Not all students will enthusiastically embrace this approach to teaching or grasp the concepts immediately. This process takes time, and some students will take quite a while to see beyond merely playing an enjoyable game. However, you could do much worse than provide an enjoyable game in a physical education lesson.

### Elimination

In some of the games in this text, players are eliminated from play for various reasons. In most sport activities, being eliminated is counter-productive to learning the skill. However, in these games, the design is that those eliminated provide valuable data and feedback to other players, which helps to develop their own and others' understanding of the concepts associated with attack and defence. Eliminated players also provide the score, suggest goals for improvement and reinforce ideas such as cooperation and sacrificing one's own chance to score for the good of the team. This might be compared with a sacrifice bunt in softball, in which the batter deliberately sacrifices a chance to get onto a base to advance a player already on a base. Note also that in all of these games those eliminated are not excluded from the game for any extended period of time.

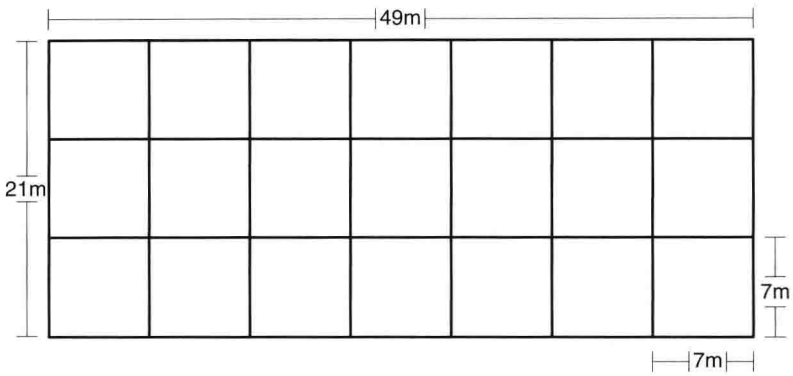



**FIGURE 4** Grid.

### Playing Areas

Netball courts are a very useful playing area because they are divided into thirds (see figure 3). The thirds can be used to reinforce the concept of defensive, midfield and attacking zones. They also provide three mini-fields across the courts for younger players. Most schools have more than one netball court, which allows games to be set up at either end, leaving the middle third free for instruction, observation and equipment. The use of low cones down the middle of the court quickly provides six grids.

Outdoors, a grid system marked out on grass is extremely useful (see figure 4). Indoors, volleyball or badminton courts provide ideal playing areas.

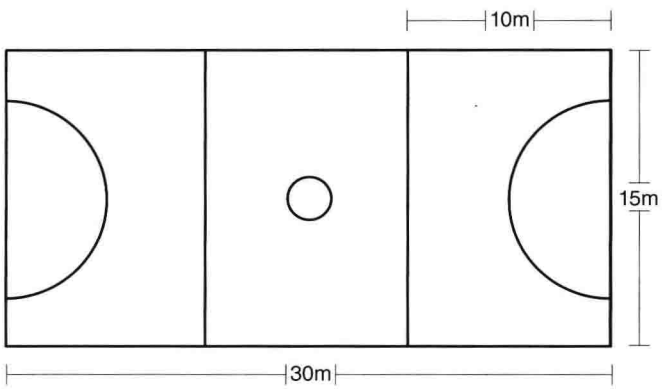



**FIGURE 3** Netball court.

## SUMMARY

I hope you enjoy as much as I do the experience of teaching games using game model instruction methodologies, especially the TGfU model. Judging by the level of enthusiastic responses and happy faces exhibited by the students I've instructed in this manner, they certainly enjoy and learn from the experience. I suggest that in teaching these games you first establish the games and have the students play them, at least to a rudimentary level, before you require them to apply tactics and strategies associated with attack and defence in team games.

Remember, too, in teaching tactics, that questioning is the key to taking these activities to a level beyond that of just a game. Enjoy!

# Contents

CHAPTER

# 1

# Fundamental Movements and Tactics

One of the great joys of playing a game or sport is implementing a tactic or strategy that results in one's team winning the contest. Talking about and devising such tactics, though, are often thought to be the preserve of the elite player or coach. Many believe that novices do not have sufficient technical skill to divide their attention between executing the technique and applying the tactic. This text turns that view on its head.

Using games that require only four fundamental movement skills—running, dodging, catching and throwing—and consequently minimal attention from the players towards technical skills, you can teach players generic game tactics.

This chapter teaches fundamental movements within a tactical game environment. It also provides suggestions for further practice of specific movements while expanding students' sport language vocabulary.

# The Great Escape

This game dates back to the time children first played tag games. The simple objective is for defenders to chase and tag attackers. It is the first game in this text not because it is so simple or so old in concept, but because it allows you to introduce various terms and concepts that will be used throughout the text. For example, those doing the chasing are defenders and those avoiding capture are the attackers. The questions about the game introduce concepts such as finding space, or playing wide, on attack and congestion on defence.

## Learning Objectives

Players will do the following:

- Chase
- Dodge
- Change pace while running
- Swerve
- Maintain space
- Congest space
- Double-team

## Equipment

Three bibs

## Formation

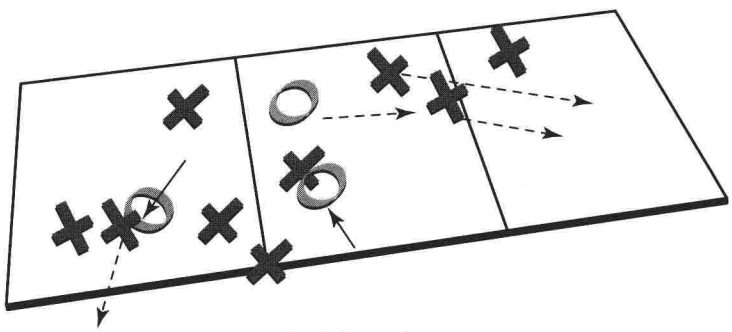
Use a netball court or similar-size area divided into thirds. Three easily identified defenders wear bibs, and the rest of the players act as attackers. All start inside the playing area that is divided into thirds. Players must stay inside the playing area unless they are tagged. Tagged players are out and must retreat to the nearest boundary line.

## Recipe

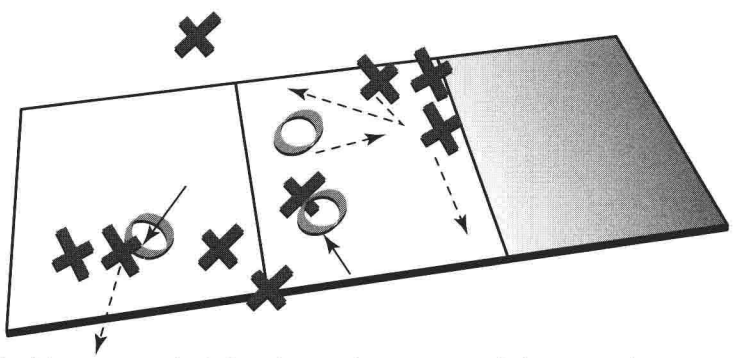
Three defenders are chosen and required to wear bibs. The attacking players disperse anywhere inside the full playing area. On a start command (e.g., whistle), the defensive players enter the playing area and have a set time (e.g., 15 seconds) to tag as many of the attacking players as possible (figure *a*). Attacking players who are tagged are out and move to the nearest boundary. At the end of the allotted time, the tagged players are counted, and that total represents the defenders' score.

After a short rest, with all players back in, the game is repeated, but play is confined to two thirds of the court (figure *b*). Tagged players are again counted as the defenders' score.

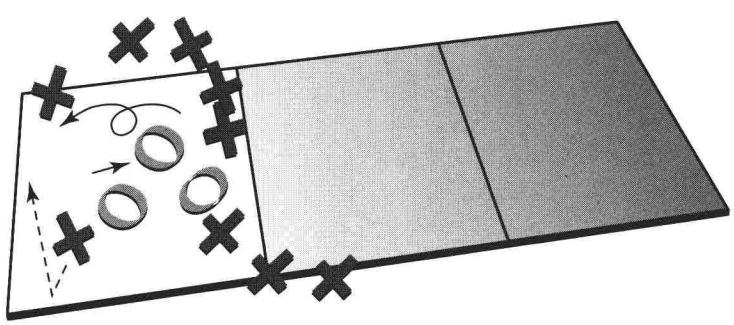
After another rest of sufficient duration for the three defenders (chasers) to have recovered, the game is played for a third time within the confines of one third of the playing area (figure *c*).



*a* Basic formation.



*b* It becomes easier to tag players when space restrictions are enforced.



*c* As the playing area decreases, players have to become more inventive with their escape methods.