

Finding Space:

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

Part II: Translating Finding Space to Your Offense

BY KEVIN SHEEHAN

This is the second part of a two-part series written by Kevin Sheehan for Lacrosse Magazine. The first article appeared in the April issue of the magazine. Both articles are available on the US Lacrosse web site at www.uslacrosse.org. Visit the magazine link to find the articles.

If this concept of this finding space is to move to the next level, players must now formally execute it as they run your offense. We introduced the concept of the motion offense at Adelphi University to teach the concept of finding space to our players. (*Lacrosse Magazine*, February, 1986) Richie Speckman, the most successful coach in the history of college lacrosse, uses it every year at Nassau Community College to teach the concept of finding space to his teams. His task is an extremely difficult one. He has to blend an extremely talented pool of players from all over Long Island into a cohesive unit within only one to two years. He uses it, because it incorporates the basic principles that guide every good offense. Wherever Richie's players continue their education after Nassau, he is sure that they will have the basic skills to blend in immediately. Division I coaches know that Richie's track record is second to none, because his players are so sound fundamentally. What I now suggest is that you, as a youth coach, should use these same motion concepts with your players. It will teach them everything that they will need to learn about offense in the first stage of their development. It is always much easier to learn correct habits than it is to undo incorrect habits. It will not be easy to teach these actions but it will leave your players better able to play and understand any offense that they will run in the future.

My problem is that I often see the motion offense taught as a pattern with players dodging to the sideline rather than dodging at the goal. Worse yet, I often see it taught with players blindly running this pattern rather than finding space. In truth, we want them to function as a unit, but it is maybe more important that they understand how the unit works than that they can run a pattern. If they do not understand the offense, they are just clearing out for each other. If your players understand the concepts of finding space that you have developed in the first part of the progression in the article, it is a natural progression to teach the motion offense as the second phase of finding space.

Even if you chose not to use this offense or your players fail to run the exact pattern you teach, you will find your players finding their own space because it is now how they play.

Progression One: Motion Offense-- Teaching the Triangles

The Attack Triangle

To teach motion offense and its concepts, begin with only one triangle at a time. Here is what the traditional attack diagram looks like on paper. The diagram may be the biggest part of the problem.

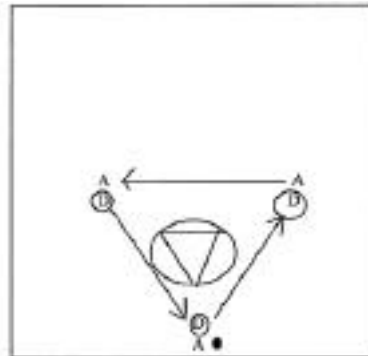


Figure 10 Traditional Motion Diagram

In real life, for you to effectively teach the offense, you must also teach the appropriate back up defense at the same time. Start with three attackmen covered by three defensemen with the ball starting behind just as the diagram suggests. Have the attackman get a step on his

defensemen, even if you have to fix it that way, and push the corner. Although the tendency is to cut blindly towards the far sideline, teach this corner attackman to find space in the middle as he cuts behind his defensemen. Too many times, I have watched this attackman blindly sprint to the opposite side of the cage when he would have been open, if he stopped in the middle.

In all probability, you will also have to teach the attackman coming from behind to veer in order to get out of the way of a runaway freight train double, and free his hands to make the feed. The far attackman hangs the

Fig. 11



back pipe for an important second, and then finds space behind in his backup the cage role. This is how it looks in real life.

If they understand the concept, when the attackman comes left side, they will find space in the same way. With just this understanding in place, your attackmen can now play offense as a unit. A better diagram looks like this:

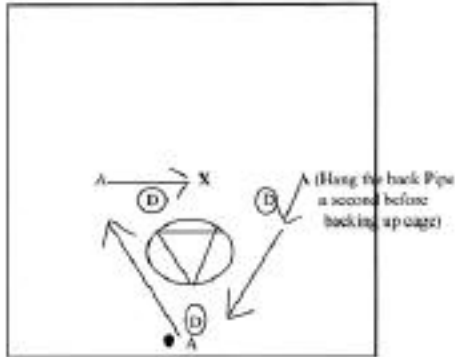


Figure 12- X marks the Spot (Prime Food)

The Midfield Triangle

With this triangle in place, in another station or on another day with younger players, you can now teach the triangle from the top with a three on three midfielder group. Have the first

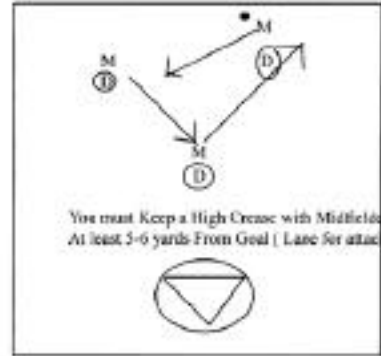


Figure 13 Traditional Midfield Sweep Diagram

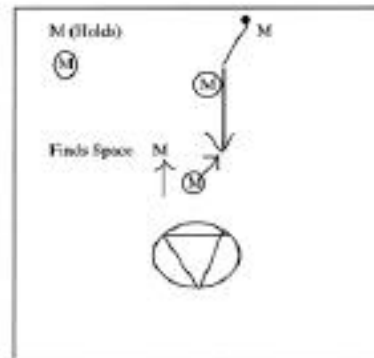


Figure 14 Midfield Movement if the Midfielder Splits

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midfielder sweep as the adjacent midfielder cuts to the open space in the middle and the crease midfielder finds his space away from the cage. The traditional diagram looks like Figure 13. When you have the midfielder split dodge instead of sweeping, if your players understand the offense, they should find space in different ways. The crease midfielder moves only slightly to find the lane behind backing up defensemen. The far midfielder holds (see figure 14 at left).

With these midfield concepts in place, a lefty sweep finds your players finding space in the opposite rotation. If finding space is conditioned, you should not have to teach it. Try running a lefty sweep and ask your players if they know where the space is and how they should move in reaction to the sweep. This is a good check to see if they are just running a pattern or if they understand the offense.

Progression Two: The Magic of Motion Offense-- Putting the Triangles Together—Finding Space without the Ball

After the basic rotations are in place, you have to condition the rotations without the ball. Start by placing your three on three attack and defense triangle in their formation around the goal, but this time start the ball from a one on one midfield dodge. Have the right-handed midfielder sweep and beat his defender (even if you have to set it up or remove the defender) and have the attack triangle find space in reaction to the space created by the defensemen who backs up (Figure 15). Now have the midfielder split dodge and the attack will find space in the opposite direction (Figure 16). Even if your

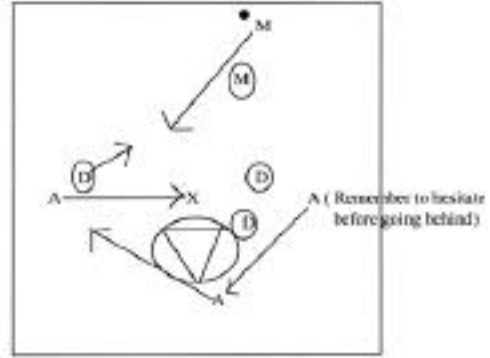


Figure 15 X is the Space on Backup on the Sweep

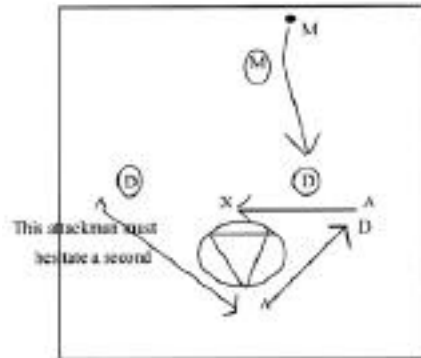


Figure 16 X is the Space on Backup After a Split Dodge

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attack never uses this rotation, the concept of finding open space should with stay with them for life in any offense they run.

With ten-year-olds, a left-handed sweep looks something like this:



To teach midfield movement without the ball, place your midfield in their three-on-three rotation and have the attackman come from behind the cage in a one-on-one or a staged one on one with the attackman gaining a step. Teach your midfielders to cut to find space in the traditional rotation.

The Maryland women use this as a time to introduce picks

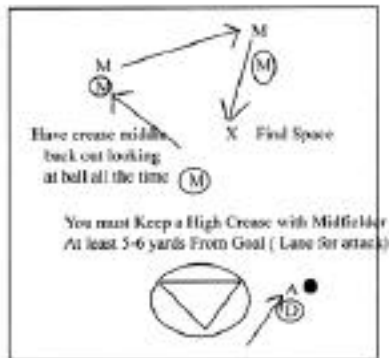


Figure 18 Traditional Midfield Sweep Diagram

from the crease in order to create midfield space. This is a tremendous adjustment as it adds picks to the sweeping motions of the offense.

When you put your triangles together, you have an offense

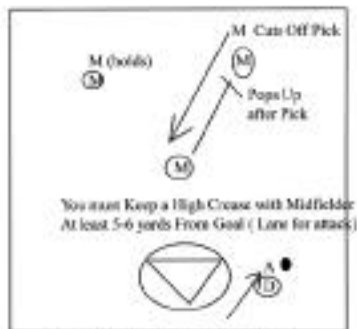


Figure 19 Maryland Women Motion

built on finding space without the ball instead of watching the one on one threat. If you have conditioned this progression in stages, when you put it all together, it is a beautiful thing. I warn you deep understandings don't come easy. When your players have mastered the motion concepts, they will have discovered the real beauty of the game is in the actions of the player without the ball. If this article has meant anything, the diagram below actually now makes sense to you. More importantly, it makes sense to your players!

Conclusion:

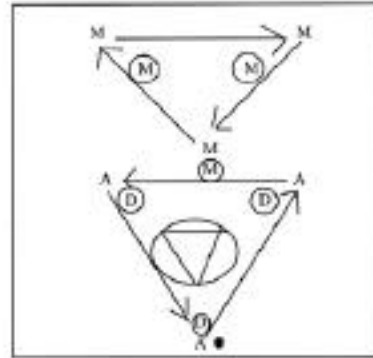


Figure 20 Traditional Motion Diagram

The concepts stressed in this article are at the heart of a game I see vanishing. Today's sticks are lighter with pockets that are deep, instant and shoot the ball at speeds where it may one day be possible for every player to shoot the ball over 100 miles an hour. Grudgingly, today's athletes are indubitably bigger, faster and more athletic. Players can sweep and shoot at speeds that baffle the imagination today. Physical skill improvement has transformed professional basketball into a one-on-one, or at best, a two-on-two game. If we are not careful, our game may evolve to this same level unless we better teach and stress these off ball skills. Lately, when I see some of the best Division I teams in the nation square off, I see a one-on-one battle attacking the short stick defender, while the role of the other five players has become that of spectator. This article is an attempt to insure that we never lose the best kept secret of the game. The player without the ball is always more dangerous than the player with ball. ○

—Kevin Sheehan coached in various lacrosse coaching capacities for 16 years at Adelphi. In the 1998 and 2002 ILF World Championships, he served as a consultant and assistant coach for the Australian National team. Sheehan credits his fellow coaches, Jamie Shand and John Lynott, of the Massapequa (N.Y.) Youth Lacrosse Program with helping to understand the points made in this article. Sheehan received an award from the Youth Council of US Lacrosse at its annual convention in January for his innovative coaching techniques.