

# FA Staff Coach Colin Jones on possession football – but first master the skills and techniques that are fundamental.

BY FA STAFF COACH COLIN JONES

In a recent *Insight* (Vol. 1, No. 6) Polish team manager Jacek Gmoch commented that 'the decisive thing is possession' and we often hear the term 'possession football' used.

It is most often applied when a team is keeping control of the ball and building up attacks fairly slowly, thus ensuring that without the ball the opposition will be unable to score against you.

In the late stages of a game the team in the lead will often increase the number of passes played backwards and across the field in recognition of this fact. This is a somewhat negative and restrictive use of an important aspect of the modern game. If we are to be more positive in our approach what does possession football offer us?

With an increase in the tempo of the game and the physical demands made of players the ability to control the play becomes a key factor and can be demonstrated in several forms. With possession we may dictate both the quantity and the quality of the running to be performed by:

- (a) Our team as a unit. Do we attack quickly on the break or build up more slowly and so perhaps gain a breather after being under pressure?
- (b) Individuals in our teams. We are sometimes thoughtless in demands we make of players in attack when they may have been involved in some taxing defensive work.
- (c) The opposition team. By increasing the facing, distance and tempo of passes, or perhaps by quick switching of play, the running required by the opposition can be increased both in terms of distances to be covered and in the speed at which it must happen.
- (d) Individuals in the opposition. Deliberate mounting of a series of attacks in a certain area can make taxing demands on specific opposition players. Bobby Robson recently commented how his Ipswich central defenders were 'bloody pleased to get into the bath' after the pressure exerted by Aston Villa's Andy

Gray, who significantly scored three goals. 'Our centre backs were completely shattered when they came off the field at the end' may not necessarily reflect a deliberate attacking policy but gives a salutary message to all. After all, centre-backs are not normally noted for their supreme fitness!

This latter example is also an indicator of how possession permits a team to control how AGGRESSIVE it will be. Other factors will mediate here, such as the state of the game and the amount of play left but the team with the ball have control of their own destiny to a greater extent. The recent England v Ireland international was a fine example. Here the Ireland team kept possession in the midfield much of the time and thus denied England the opportunity to be aggressive.

Control over the area of play is a further bonus of possession in football. The team with the ball have the opportunity to control where the play will be developed, thus enabling them to:

- Use their better players more often (playing to strengths).
- expose weaker members of the opposition more often (playing on weaknesses).

Coaches sometimes overlook one or more of these positive aspects of possession football in their relief at gaining possession. Certainly regaining possession as soon as possible is of vital importance and teams must have the knowledge and ability to PRESSURE, COVER and TACKLE in all areas of the field.

Having won the ball is merely the first stage, however, and so often we see teams who, having worked hard to gain possession, lose it again very quickly and thus lose control of the play once more. If this is to be avoided - and it must - then players must understand and

master the skills and techniques fundamental to possession.

These include:

- Passing techniques—the ability to pass over long and short distances both high and low; to chip passes; to swerve the ball; to pass with both feet and with different parts of the feet as well as other parts of the body like head or chest.
- Passing skills—correct pacing and timing of passes, including single touch passing to destroy pressure, disguising passes; correct choice of pass.
- Ball control—the ability to receive the ball from almost any height, distance and pace even when under pressure and to be able to play it away at anytime after you receive it.
- Support play—the ability to play under pressure and to make yourself available for a pass even when closely marked; to know how and when to support behind and in advance of the ball; supporting distances and angles.

The game of football should be a thrilling spectacle. Possession football can have negative overtones and suggest an uninspiring performance. By looking at its positive aspects we may understand its importance in the modern game and employ it with flair and imagination to the benefit of the game as a whole.