
THE POWER OF PASSION

A team from the U.S. learns valuable lessons from the Brazilians

By Graham Ramsay

How lucky can a team of teen-agers get? Bethesda (Md.) United traveled down to Sao Paulo last spring to learn about *jogo bonito*, or as Pelé calls it, “the beautiful game.” The boys were immersed from day one, playing *futsal* at the University of Sao Paulo well into the night in various pickup games.

These informal games were in addition to the five organized matches against junior teams of pro clubs, ending with a game against a select team from Oscar’s Soccer School (he’s a former World Cup player for Brazil and played for New York Cosmos in the old NASL). It was *futebol*, *futebol* and more *futebol*. A former Brazilian World Cup coach talked about Brazil as the only country with over 150 million coaches; everyone has an opinion about the game and especially “their” team. This is what the boys experienced for the first time in their lives — the greatest soccer culture in the world.

The passion knows no barrier of any kind. We met brilliant people who love *futebol* for the purest reasons. Their joy comes from a hundred or so years of living in a culture that cherishes soccer skill like no other. How many countries can win a World Cup, like Brazil in USA ’94, and yet have millions of Brazilian experts consider it a hollow victory because they had to lower their standards by using European-based tactics? This feeling goes down to the roots of the sport.

We met an amazing man, Jose Maria Magalhaes. He had nothing going for him by our values — no house, no car, no real amenities, no education as he could not read or write. He lives in a two-room hut with his wife and eight children (three of their own and five parentless children). He was not related to these orphans but believed he had a moral duty to take them in. A very special man.

His job in this small town was the *cara do campo*, the man of the field at the local stadium. Like his family, he has nurtured, cared and loved “his” field for over 28 years. He constantly paced on it looking for weeds or divots. He would chase youngsters off if he thought they were abusing the privilege of playing on the field.

You could not find a fault or a dirt spot anywhere. He alone was worth the trip because of his warmth, his gentle humility and pride in his daily life. He thought a lot of our

Bethesda United team and its competitive spirit, so he adopted another family for just a morning, saying that he would support Bethesda in its last game at the soccer school. He was our No. 1 fan and the first one in line to get on the bus that game day.



One of the thrills of the tour was witnessing Sao Paulo FC playing Palmeiras. One of the soccer lessons at every level of play in the country was “Don’t give the ball away.”

Brazilian soccer lessons

So what soccer lessons did we learn? We had to think of our sanitized game of looking good, subbing when you get tired, coming out for a rest to “doing my thing” when I get the ball — which often means turning it over. In Brazil’s soccer world, possession is prized and fitness is taken for granted. If you give the ball away you’ll have your teammates chewing you out and if you’re unfit the choices are simple — on the bench, in the reserves or selling programs. They expect everyone to compete the whole game.

We have too many unfit players in my team and across our state. The players are part of the problem, but the major culprit is the system that encourages laziness and poor training attitudes. Players will do what they have to do to play. In the U.S. that means getting semi-fit; in Brazil you have no choice but to get fit, as there are many players who want your spot and are ready to compete for it.

The power of fitness — To remedy our attitudes we need to review the use of substitutions, especially from U-15’s on, and bring that rule in line with that of the rest of the world. It is also important for coaches to become more sensitive to the game and develop a feel of when to put in a sub to impact a

game. That can only be learned when there are fewer subs allowed and once off, they stay off. We have to change from the recreational mindset with our better players. Soccer is a running, dynamic sport.

When parents and administrators worry about exhaustion and physical problems due to dehydration, they should examine the cause, not the effect. The greatest antidotes for these ills are the same for every sport — better skill and superb fitness. Skillful players rarely get injured and if youngsters are fit they can evade poor challenges and so avoid injury.

The power of team spirit — Fitness and team spirit are close friends. If you are fit you always think about winning and how to win a game. If all the individuals within a team are fit that is an incredible weapon if geared to a team effort. Such teams never know how to quit and are dangerous into injury time. Think of Manchester United in the UEFA Champions Cup Final in 1999 against Bayern Munich. They were a goal down in the 90th minute and not playing well, but came back to win 2-1 in the 93rd minute. That belief and commitment to the team cause make up a brilliant example of winning team spirit.

The power of the pass — Positive possession is the key to the Brazilian game. They set you up all the time. It is like watching a skillful boxer destroy the opponent. They suck you one way and switch it the other way, jab, jab, with short passes and switch with a hook of a long pass to the open side. They also are patient, all the while waiting for the moment to strike. They are quite happy to make you run and run and run and chase that ball until you drop. Quite often the games are competitive for 50 to 60 minutes, then the hammer blow is delivered. The first team I took to Brazil was losing 2-0 at half time and lost 10-1, conceding eight goals in the second half.

You give the ball away in Brazil and the result will often be painful. Maybe because soccer balls are valued as a luxury item they treat them like precious stones. The ball is a jewel to them, whereas we treat it like any other disposable item that we can replace at WalMart. Players and teams that care how they pass to each other tend to become real teams.

The power of the passing angle — Teams that pass a lot tend to create constant passing angles, which are the source for keeping possession. Without them there will be turnovers and frustration. You can always tell the intelligent players and teams by their instant recognition to make angles early and often.

Our opponents put passing and passing angles together such that we were constantly chasing their shadows and moves. It's painful to be on the receiving end of teams that are cunning and patient, waiting for a defensive lapse and then bang! They strike for the jugular.

The power of angled play — Soccer is very much a game of opposites and this is the case when creating attacking moves. Defenders always will retreat in straight lines back toward their own goal. Attackers, on the other hand, need to travel on a different route to get free. This means pulling you away from your marker or creating a wide passing angle.

The great teams in soccer are full of angles; the player on the ball constantly is supported by teammates making several passing angles, thus offering several passing options. This is

even more vital up front, where space is at a premium and “pulling away” must be part of every striker’s game. Look at Romario, the “king of the pull-aways.” He will be making more than \$50,000 per game. It’s that important if you are a striker. Angled or diagonal runs often are the most difficult for defenses to close down.

Again, our thinking tends to be in straight lines, north to south approach, making it easy for defenders to see the oncoming move. Everything is in front of them — the ball and their immediate opponent. Romario was put on this planet to make defenders’ lives miserable. By “pulling away” on the far side of his marker from the ball forces the defender to make decisions he doesn’t want to make. “Do I go with the attacker or stay? If I stay he becomes open and if I go to mark him I leave an open space to be exploited?”

He also makes the unfortunate markers work overtime with their vision; the ball and Romario rarely will be in the same viewing frame. As soon as his marker ball-watches, he’s off, either pulling away or darting behind his marker, making a slash-type run. He nearly always wants the ball played behind his defenders, which again often forces them to turn and defend looking at their own goal.

In fact Romario, being a talented striker/mathematician, uses his magic formula to recognize what type of run to use.

Diagram 1

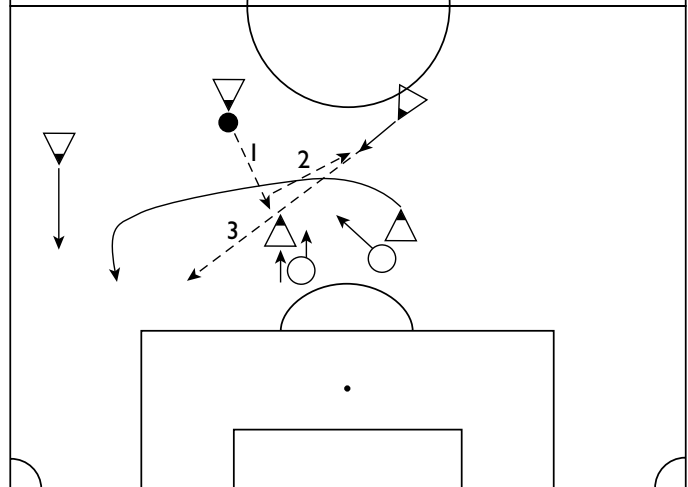
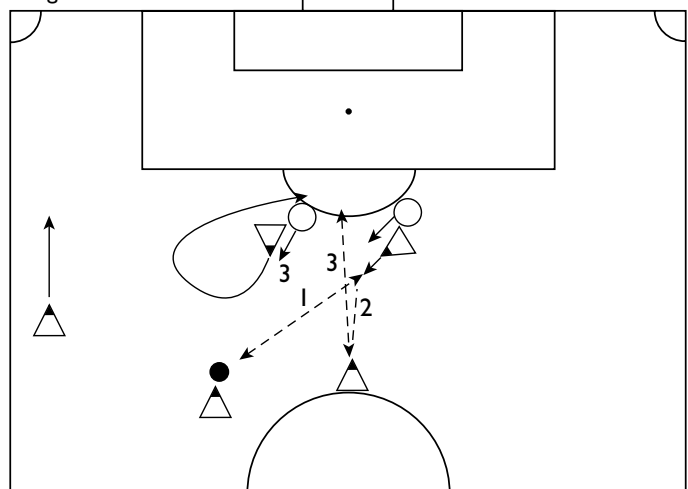


Diagram 2



Here the dark-shirted Brazilian players are supporting the ball at angles both from behind and in the middle of the field.

It is FORWARD PASS feeds a DIAGONAL RUN and DIAGONAL PASS feeds a FORWARD RUN.

The power of regained possessions — As soon as they lost possession their reply was to “press the ball” immediately. The nearest player to the ball holder is the key. If they are alert and thinking of regaining possession, winning the ball back is a reality. This is particularly critical in the opposing half. Think of the advantages:

- The nearer you win the ball to their goal, the quicker you can pressure;
- There will be fewer opponents behind the ball;
- The more pressure you put on defenders, the more mistakes are made. Often the weakest technical players play in the back.

Again there is a plan called the Maldini formula for regained possessions:

The nearest player pressures the ball with the supporting defenders ready to ambush the pass. The nearest player to the ball sets up the turnover and his covering teammates are ready to steal the ball. That’s the contract. Maldini’s speed of thought in these situations puts him ahead of many rivals. He would think interception and pass in the same breath. He knows the power of the counter-attack once the ball is won.

Unfortunately, to play this type of game you need to be fit. Not 20 minutes fit, but whatever level of fitness it takes to play well for the whole game. The best teams, when they concede goals, step up the pace of the game and don’t go into a funk. By the end of the game the team that scored such a goal wishes they had not. Fitness gives you the authority to dictate match tempo.

The power of the pack — The best teams we met all played in packs. They traveled everywhere in mini-teams of 3’s and 4’s. When they had the ball they always were establishing passing options/angles, so possession was easy to maintain. By playing in close proximity to each other, they immediately, upon loss of the ball, could pressure the ball handler in the same moment. Their motto was “where we lose it is where we win it back.” Again fitness gives you that choice and opportunity.

Note also how players away from the ball move to compact themselves and offer themselves in good covering positions in relation to the ball. Meanwhile the two central strikers stay as forward as possible, offering themselves as targets for the quick counter-attack resulting from an expected dispossession.

The power of passion — No other country loves a game like Brazilians love soccer. Wherever the boys went, soccer was close at hand. At the University of Sao Paulo there were games of all sorts and sizes. There was a Professors League, a Janitors League with *futsal* games that never seemed to end. There was the Panorama Hotel in Lindoia, where the manager would hire staff members based on their allegiance to his team, Palmeiras.

The boys flew back from Sao Paulo on Saturday night and we set off for Rio to see the Carioca championship game. We watched Vasco De Gama play Flamengo off the park to the tune of 5 to 1 in a half-empty Maracana. Half empty is just under a 100,000 fans cheering and chanting like no other on this earth. Then there is the media that swarm onto the field at any excuse to interview players. We reckoned there were over 100 of them near the respective teams’ dugouts. A

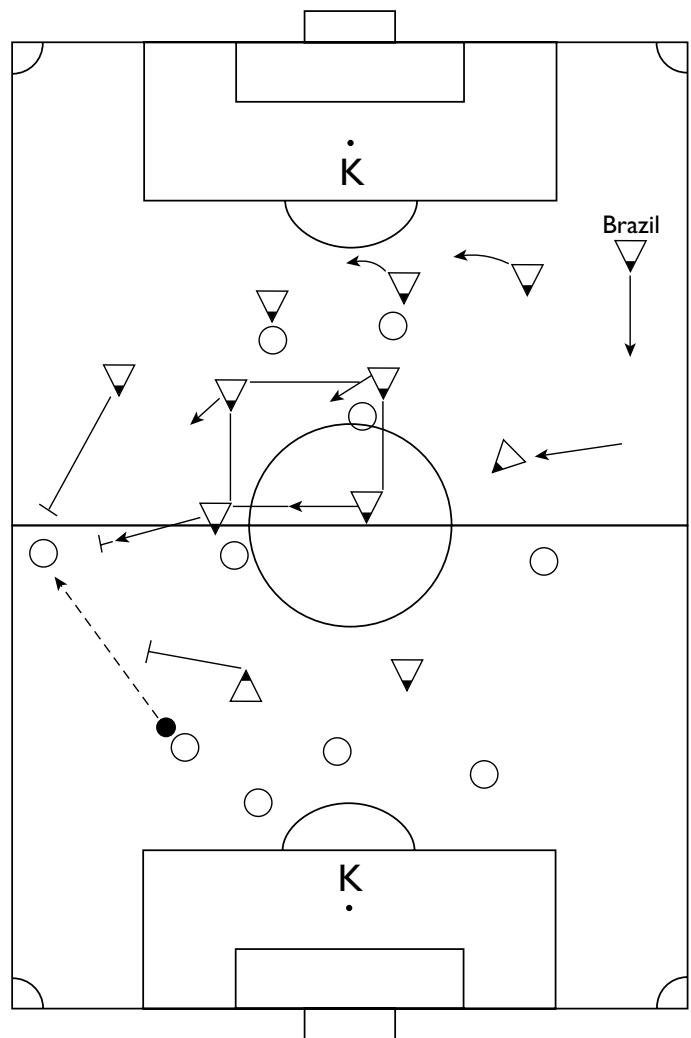


Diagram 3 — A ball is being delivered out of the attacking team’s back to an outside midfielder. While the receiver is turned, that is the cue for the Brazilian outside back to pressurize the ball as does the most forward of the four central midfielders. Note the block formation of the four midfielders. They stay as a “pack” and, in this case, move as a unit to pressure and/or cut off passing lanes for the player about to receive the ball.

sending off is their excuse to invade the field and find the truth. It's like seeing a remake of a Keystone Kops movie.

It was an exciting game if you were a Vasco fan, with the "king of the pull-aways" up to his old tricks, netting another hat trick. Many of Flamengo fans were looking to leave after the fourth goal. The Flam players probably would have liked to join them, but the jolt of this bad defeat was too much for the coach and the club president. The dressing room door was locked and they spent over two hours peeling the paint off the walls.



Graham Ramsay (right foreground) laid out his plan for the Bethesda team as it prepared to engage in one of five matches during the tour of Brazil.

Even the half-time entertainment is different, with a boy juggling the ball nonstop for 10 or 15 minutes and there was a person on crutches with half a leg missing doing the same thing, juggling continuously without the ball ever touching the ground.

Brazil is a special place. It becomes a magical one when any round object — soccer ball, tennis ball, rag ball, grapefruit or even a plastic bottle — meets the feet of a Brazilian. To most of the world it is an inanimate, lifeless object being aimlessly booted, boomed or chased into submission. To Brazilians the ball has a soul and special spirit.

They get passionate about soccer skill like we get excited about trophies and tournaments. Their way creates a Pelé or a Zico or a Romario or a Ronaldinho or a Rivaldo to name just a few of their run of the mill world class players.

Hopefully the boys of Bethesda United are smart enough to remember some of these lessons and, more importantly, apply them. If they catch some of the passion for a great game, the trip has been worth it. At times they surprised themselves but the secret is to do it as a daily habit. That's where the work comes in. That's the challenge. ⚽

Editor's note: Graham Ramsay is a longtime contributor to Soccer Journal. He is the director of coaching for the Maryland Youth Soccer Association. For information on soccer travel to Brazil look at WWW.SOCCERFUTURO.COM or contact mike.keohane@soccerfuturo.com Telephone 1-888 FUTURO-0.