

The Key question to be asked during the strategic Planning;

Can India defeat Germany, Holland and Belgium, by playing completely their style of hockey and not implementing their unique strengths of soft skills and finesse? Yes, once in a while, India can, but the odds are not entirely, in their favor. In the recent past, they have been able to match them for certain periods of the game. But in the end they have been wrestled down. The results in the major competitions Olympics and World cups are the true performance indicators. Think about it?

Quote:

“The player who is bigger, stronger and faster... may learn to solve football problems on the pitch with brute force rather than skill and finesse”.

Mark Upton, Coaching Science Manager, English Institute of Sports

Comparative Analysis:

When I look at the Indian Men’s national team’s performance, under the leadership of current Head Coach Roelant Oltmans, and his predecessors, namely Jose Brassa, Michael Nobbs, Terry Walsh and Paul Van Ass, **I see tremendous positive changes**, which were brought during the past 8 - 9 years. At the same time, some of the strategies, tactics, coaching philosophies, actions and decisions made by them, were not the wisest. As they **did not align with the Indian teams unique strengths**.

These principles were strictly followed by the highly **effective CEO, Meg Whitman**. No wonder she turned around the derailed and badly damaged Hewlett-Packard Company, in five years. Has Coach Oltmans, been able to do so? He is quite close, but not yet there. There is always a slip between a lip and a cup, especially, when you are not holding the cup the correct way.

Let’s see how Coach Oltmans, has applied these principles to the Indian team.

Principle # 1: Let’s identify what it does really well and do more of that as the anchor for the turn around.

What are one’s strengths?

Indian team's biggest strength was soft skills; ball control, play making moves, finesse, change of pace / direction, one on one elimination skills in a confined space, and playing first time, with one touch hockey. All the foreign coaches rather than recognizing, complimenting and building upon them, have sharply deviated from them. They have developed a different style of play, which does not completely facilitate the style of play, which was based upon India's unique strengths.

Quote:

In teaching, teachers will most likely teach in the way they were taught, rather than the way that is most successful and effective. Author unknown.

With all due respect, these world class coaches may know the value of the soft skills and admire them. Unfortunately, they don't understand them deeply. And know how to teach them effectively, either. Their coaching philosophy and training methods are different, which sharply deviate from developing soft skills. **There is nothing wrong with their training methods. As there are more than one way to do things. I acknowledge them.** One has to simply see that, do they fit into one's scheme of things, while embracing one's strengths.

My Views: Avoid following copy and paste strategy blindly. One size does not fit all.



Here is one of the very rare photographs of Coach Oltmans, demonstrating a skill, prior to the 2017 Azlan Shah Cup. It looks like he is demonstrating how to receive

a pass, in a neutral stance. **Which is different**, than what the former Indian hockey gurus, use to teach. Basically, this flat footed stance, **does not facilitate the optimum growth of soft skills**. Yes, it sure does promote to execute other vital skills of the game, adapted by the rival teams. Photo Courtesy K. Murali Kumar

Principle Lesson # 1: Has principle # 1 been followed strictly? You be the judge.

Principle # 2: You need the **right people in the right jobs** at the right time with the right attitude. That sounds easy, but it's very hard.

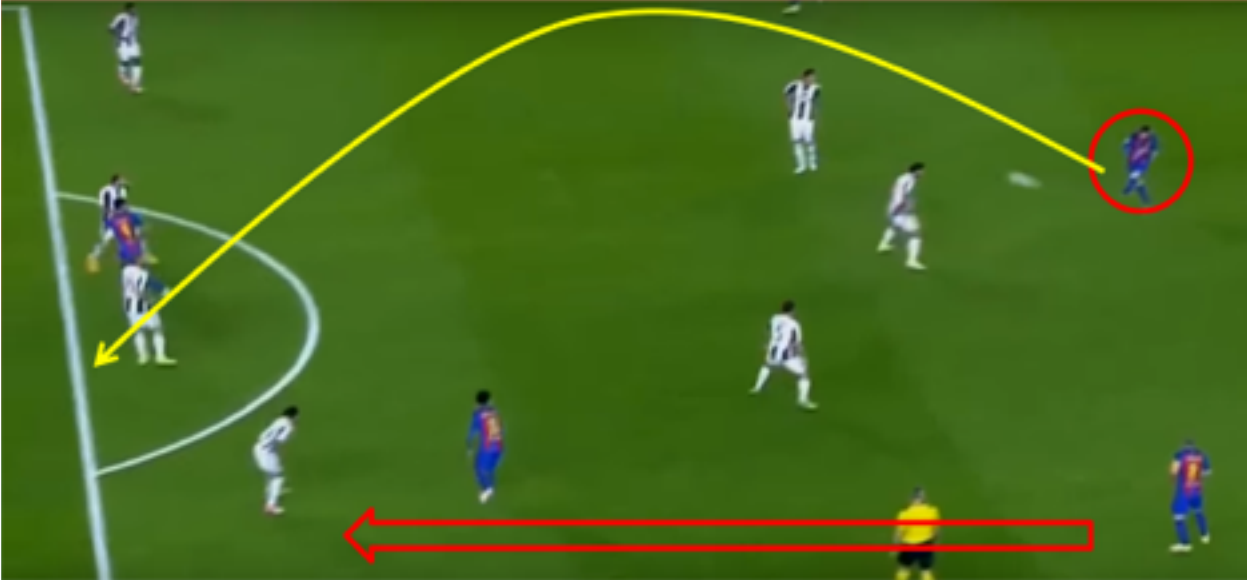
Is the right player playing on the right position?

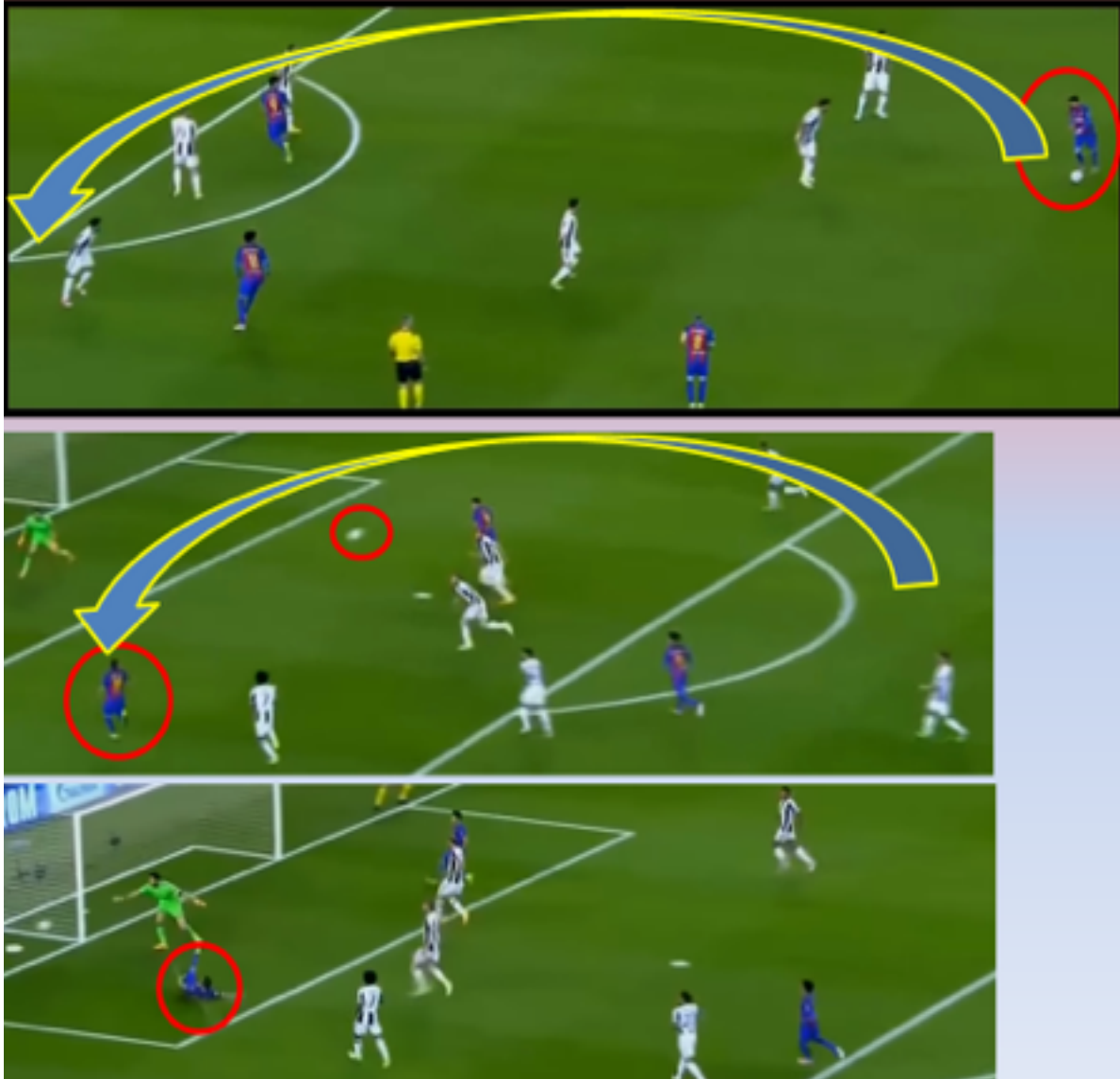
Let's take the example of Sardara Singh, although there are very many more in regard to this principle with the Indian team. Sardara had been playing as a Center half for a long time. Coach Oltmans decision to play him as a Right-Inner, during the 2016 Rio Olympics was not a step in the right direction. This resulted in a highly intelligent player like Sardara, under perform. He couldn't transfer his distribution skills, from the Center Half position to the play making moves / passes of the Right Inner position. I do remember, during his early part of the career, Sardara did play as a Right Inner. Now he was playing in a totally different system.

Please remember: In the Indian hockey system a Center half is named, as the heart of the team, and Right Inner its brain. They have entirely different roles and style of play, in the system, as do these organs have in our bodies. One distributes the blood (ball) and the other thinks, processes the information, to make wise decisions (Play maker). I know you knew this. 😊

Is this an old school of thinking? I know, some younger generation players and coaches may be thinking so. Feel free to do so. 😊 Nothing can be further from the truth. Think of Xavi as Barcelona Football Club's (BFC) Center half and Messi as its Right Inner. Their tactical thinking and strategic style of play are based upon this philosophy.

Please study the following photo sequences, from the BFC versus Juventus, 2nd leg quarter finals UCL match, dated April 19th, 2017. It will help you understand the point I am trying to make. Fundamentals and Basic tactical concepts never change. Isn't it wise to sell "old wine in a new bottles"?

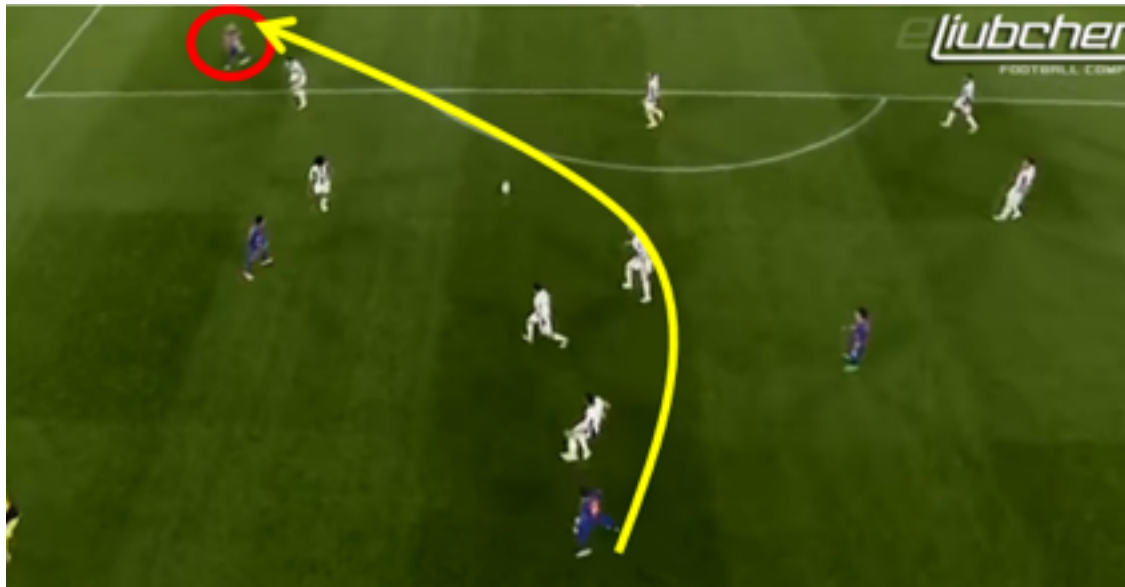




Explanation of the photo sequences; Messi has dropped back, from his Striker position, where he starts the game. He is playing more or less as a Right Inner and Left Inner, to make defense splitting passes, for his leading forwards namely Neymar, Luis Suarez and Andres Iniesta to score field goals.

Photo # 1 shows Messi being challenged by three Juventus opponents, while executing semi penetrating moves. Further, after reading the game situation, he calmly makes one aerial lob pass, to eliminate eight opponents. This has resulted in creating a one on one, goal scoring opportunity, for Iniesta, against the goal keeper. Isn't this magic, just like pulling a rabbit out of a bag? Yes, we do this too, in field hockey, but with such brute force, that often the rabbit is killed, even before it is pulled out of the bag.

Scientists call this **“Pattern Recognition and Recalling”**. Our – Patterns of play - in field hockey are of a different type. They simply kill the opponents with brute force, rather than softly with love.



Here is another aerial view of the same game situation, from a different angle.

Principle Lesson # 2: Has principle # 2 been followed strictly? You be the judge.

Principle # 3: The ability to **play defense and offense, to know your position, to know what you're accountable for.**

Does one know and understand their role and responsibility. ABC?

I have quoted Gurbaj Singh, former Indian National team player's, comments to elaborate this principle.

Background: When Terry Walsh, former Indian national team Head Coach, coaxed Gurbaj to play as a Center Forward, prior to the 2014 Asian Games. This is what Gurbaj had to say, “The right-half is a position where I am comfortable. I know exactly when I have to move forward, when to attack or when the team needs me in defense. I know exactly when to send a dummy pass and where to find the forward. If I had to suddenly play as a forward, I would have had to learn all this positioning once again. I already had that rhythm in my old position. **So I told the coach that I would be able to contribute better to the team if I played in my old position,**”

According to Jonathan Salvraj a journalist, who interviewed Gurbaj, “It would prove to be a wise decision. At the Asian Games, which India won after a gap of 24 years, much of the team’s performance can be credited to the midfield trio. **Gurbaj himself was one of the standout performers** of the squad, repeatedly creating openings on the right flank. But as intelligent as it was, Gurbaj’s choice to **back his ability against the coach’s – Terry Walsh - perception was equally brave.**

Further Jonathan adds, “Having finally made a comeback to the squad, Gurbaj admits he **owes a debt to Walsh**”.

Gurbaj adds, “It was a risk for Coach Walsh, to pick me in the side after a long gap. I felt that I needed to deliver on the trust that was placed on me.”

My Views: Gurbaj is a fine young man, courageous and dependable. He will put his life on the line for his coach, when the chips are down, as long as he loves and respects him. This trust bond has to be nurtured. **Coach Terry Walsh developed good coach athlete relationships!**

Further elaboration of Principle # 3: Coach Oltmans moved Sardara from his Center Half position to the Right Inner, during the 2016 Rio Olympics. In the same way Coach Nobbs moved Gurbaj from his Right Half position to Right Winger / Right Inner during the 2012 London Olympics. And this did not help these outstanding players to perform at their peak. But helped history repeat itself.

Current similar situation: I understand Sardara is an established Center Half and Harjit Singh, captain of the 2016 JWC winning Indian team, also plays in this position. It appeared during the 2017 Azlan Shah Cup, Harjit played as a Right Inner and appeared to be a bit lost? He has time on his side, as long as Coach Oltmans can show him exactly how to play his new position in the system.

Is this truly a fair criticism? We hear from foreign coaches that the Indian players have a big weakness, as they are not versatile. In theory this is correct, **but not really realistic?** Will Mark Knowles from Australia, be able to play as center forward from his deep defensive position or Jamie Dwyer, be able to play as a deep defender from his forward position? **Yes they can play, but not to the same degree of effectiveness. Think about it? Is this a fair criticism?**

I agree, every player needs to be versatile and be able to read the game, from different angles and positions, to shift their mental gears and make intelligent decisions, accordingly. Of course, this will depend upon the present and instant changing game situations. Especially when a player has overlapped or interchanged his position, to execute the game plan.

Principle Lesson # 3: Has principle # 3 been followed strictly? You be the judge.