

Positional and Relational Football Methodologies: Implications for Coaching and Practice Design in Football Academies

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Positional and relational football methodologies: Implications for coaching and practice design in football academies.

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Introduction

Professional football clubs have a dual purpose of developing players and preparing them for competition at all levels of experience. When a new head coach arrives, there may be a tendency to implement a blanket strategical playing style, requiring all teams (from youth to first team) to play with the same methodology or philosophy. This would ensure that junior players can step up smoothly to perform at senior levels since all teams are coached to play with the same system. While this approach ensures that all players are familiar with a playing methodology that a coach brings to a club, it is not aligned with the development needs of academy learners. They need to experience an extensive variety of tactical approaches, skills and systems in their professional training.

Coaching for learning and development and coaching for competitive success

Practice designs for player development have a longer-term focus, whereas preparing for competition has specific objectives in winning an immediate fixture. The EPPP is clearly development focussed, with an overarching aim of producing world-class players.

Nevertheless, development and preparation for competition are inter-twined in the programme. “Learning how to win” has a greater emphasis in the youth and professional development phases. In the foundation phase, the main emphasis is on player development, with winning becoming more important from 12 years onwards. The EPPP has a strong focus on techniques and ball mastery at the foundation phase. The assumption is that, once basic skills are acquired, coaching can focus on learning how to use these techniques to win games. For example, ball carriers are coached to play ‘heads up’ and aware of the co-positioning of opponents and teammates to develop decision making. Consequently, one of the authors (PS) is exploring coaching practice outcomes, seeking to include many more 2v1 situations in games at the youngest ages to integrate more decision-making opportunities, requiring perception of where an immediate opponent is located and a supporting teammate.

These are relevant advances to coaching practices, foreshadowed by observations by Ford et al. (2010) of coaching in UK academies. They reported that, in the youth phase, coaching is largely drill-based for reproducing idealised techniques through prescriptive instructions and augmented feedback. These practices take 65% of session time, with just 35% spent in active

decision-making, games-based activities. Contrastingly, Spanish and Portuguese youth teams spend more session time (67-68%) in active decision-making activities (Roca & Ford, 2020), highlighting an obvious imbalance in time spent in problem-solving activities and developing adaptive decision-making skills between youth development programmes.

Related evidence shows that nonlinear methods of coaching provide a 66% benefit in tactical skill development in team-invasion ball sports compared to linear pedagogies (Bromilow et al., 2025). Interesting questions concern the impact of implementing a blanket strategical approach on player development. For example, if a child has only learned to play in one type of system, what is the likelihood of them later becoming an adaptable player who can perform successfully at any club, in any system?

Next, we consider how different playing philosophies may challenge player development in youth academy programmes, examining the example of positional and relational playing football methodologies.

Trends towards positional and relational football playing methodologies.

A prominent football strategy is formed by a continuum of positional and relational football approaches (Hamilton, 2023). At one end there is positional play, and at the other a relational approach. Football theorists refer to these strategic playing approaches as a coach's 'methodology', aligned with a preferred game model. Juanma Lillo noted that a football methodology provides 'a lens through which the game can be theorized, practiced and developed' (Barcala, 2023).

Positional Football

According to Hamilton (2023), a positional methodology positions players in related zones of the playing area in a 'rational occupation' of space onfield. The rationality of space occupation by players, on attack, emerges when individuals are positioned in a specified area of the field and wait patiently for the ball to arrive. A positional methodology is used to dominate time on the ball by dominating space. It conceptualises space in symmetrically-ordered dimensions of the field (covering the wide areas of play, the central zone and the half spaces between wide and central areas; broadly) (Gagliardi & Bordin, 2024).

Using a positional methodology, a coach directs the players' attention to space onfield that they want the team to strategically dominate to undermine the opposition defence, using a top-down approach to verbally direct the positioning and movement of individual players in the collective team effort. Occupying a designated space onfield, attacking players contribute to a team's effectiveness by 'pinning' defenders to specific areas. This tactic prevents defenders from moving to close distances and gaps between each other to prevent space being exploited between and behind each other. In possession of the ball, the planned location of players in specific positions can spread the opposition and pin them down, opening up space to exploit elsewhere onfield.

Relational Football

Relational football strategies differ from positional methodologies because players are not tied to specific locations onfield. Instead, they are free to move to different areas of the field and form synergies with teammates, prompting overloads and sudden counter-attacks to outnumber opponents in key locations. The licence to move between spaces and places onfield is not random, with coordination emerging from relations formed by players through experience, practice and learning. Hamilton (2023) noted that "Relationism is not just players standing close together nor can it be reduced to players 'being friends' with one another.". Players' intentions may be guided by a basic set of principles, framing collective aims, interchanges and rotations, usually centred around the movement of the ball onfield.

In relational football, a player's role in the team is hybridised, needing to be *functional* (e.g., play as an attacker, defender or midfielder when needed). Unlike the positional approach, the occupation of space is not the primary rationale for players' transactions with the performance environment. Instead, relational football draws on individuals' capacity to form meaningful synergies (small combinations) to suddenly overload the opposition in critical areas of the field. In a relational approach, the same player could function in different ways as opportunities (affordances) emerge during play, despite their initial position onfield. The tendency towards 'role hybridisation' in modern football has been influenced by the relational performance methodology. In relational football, the same player needs the skilled adaptability to perform different functions, when needed (e.g., the same player tackling to

regain possession, covering defensive colleagues, marking and tracking key opponents, or attacking space through dribbling, passing to break a defensive line or shooting at goal).

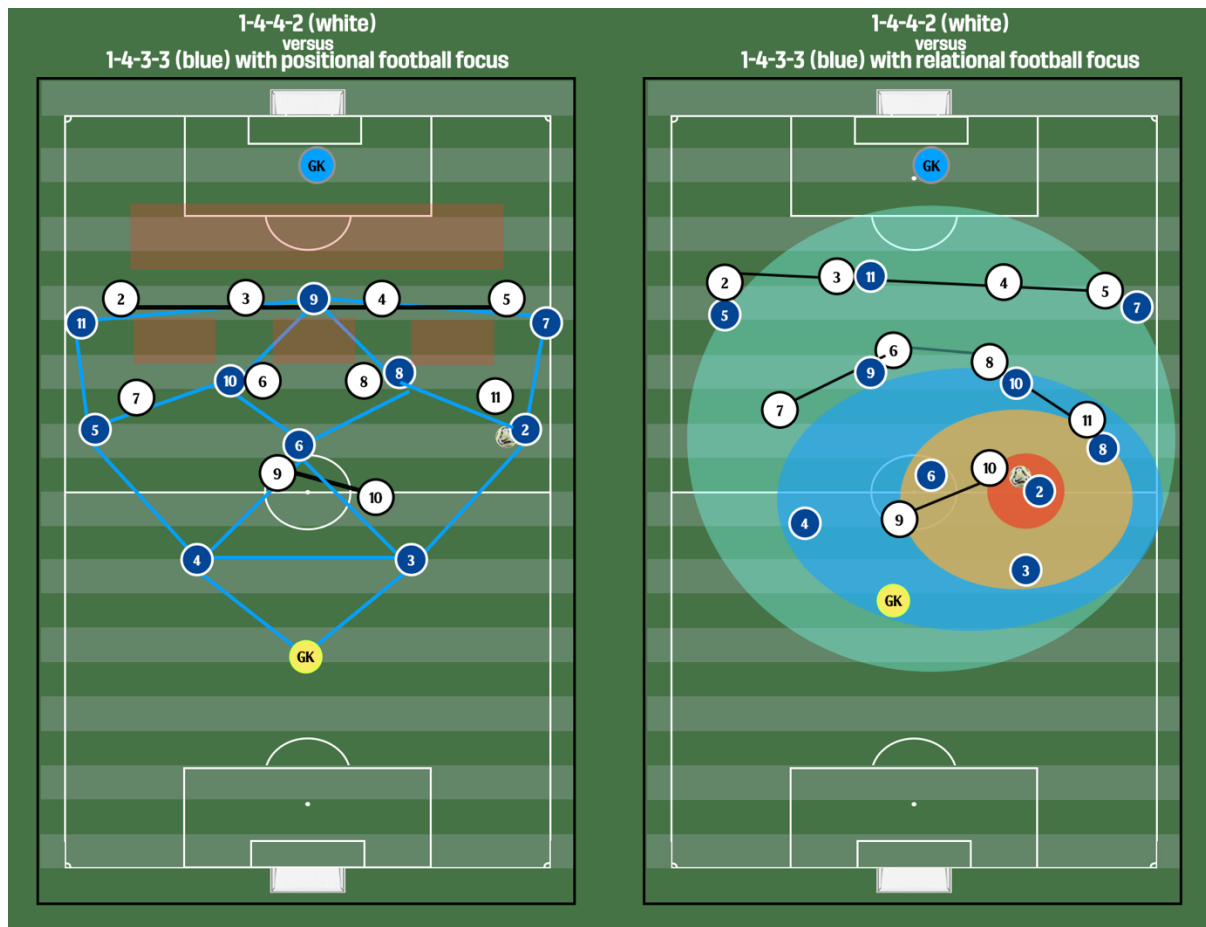


Figure 1. Illustration of two contrasting football approaches of i), a positional football methodology (left) and ii), relational football strategies (right).

On the left, in Figure 1, the positional methodology of the blue team attacking in a 1-4-4-3 structure against a 1-4-4-2 (in white) highlights clear player positions to 'fix' the opposing team's midfield and backline and create pockets of space to attack in front and behind the backline (i.e., marked in red). Player tasks are directly instructed, such as for the blue number 9 to pin and stay between both opposition centre-backs (i.e., white numbers 3 and 4) or for the blue number 6 (central midfielder) to remain as pivot between the blue team's centre-backs (i.e., blue numbers 3 and 4) and the attacking midfield (i.e., blue numbers 8 and 10).

In contrast, a relational strategy may provide individual players with greater freedom of movement, based on individual strengths, adapting to opportunities offered up by the opposition's (in white) tactical approach in a similar 1-4-4-2. The coloured circles around the

inverted blue fullback (i.e., blue number 2) on the ball, display different relational synergies that emerge between players. Players in the blue team are encouraged to move into spaces to threaten an attack or support ball possession. For example, while blue number 5 (left fullback) and 7 (right winger) maintain width high up the pitch to stretch the backline, blue numbers 6,8,3,4, 9, 10 and the GK aim to provide effective passing angles and distances to the ball and surrounding teammates/opponents.

Mixed Methodologies: Integrating Positional and Relational ideas in a football strategy

A mixed methodology involves a team playing a strategic system where some players hold set functional positions onfield, providing an overarching framework in attack, build-up play and defence. Other players in the team are free to form sudden synergies that can emerge in strategic areas of the field. In this mixed approach, key players may be given licence to move between areas of the field as gaps emerge and distances between opponents increase or decrease, seeing this information as affordances (opportunities or invitations) that solicit combinations in tight spaces or in strategic field locations. This mixed-methods playing strategy combines the essentials of an established framework for the team, while supporting the functionality of key players to form creative synergies to open up the opposition or close down space, as affordances emerge during play.

What do these football methodologies imply for coaching in football at different levels?

A top-down, positional game model is externally imposed by the external feedback and instructions of a coach, dictating the tactical patterns in performance. In contrast, a relationist football methodology supports self-organising, synergy formation as opportunities to attack or defend in numbers emerge between teammates during play.

Ribeiro et al. (2019) noted that a coach imposing a strategic playing model in a *global-to-local* (top-down) direction, with related tactical principles of play to shape synergy-formation in players, is more congruent with a positional methodology of football performance. This is because coaches dictate which pitch areas need occupation as part of their specific game model. Ribeiro et al. (2019) also highlighted a *local-to-global* (bottom-up) direction as a playing strategy, preparing players to exploit opportunities to form synergies with others

onfield. A local-to-global direction of influence on synergy formation tendencies is congruent with a relational methodology for football performance.

Ribeiro et al. (2019) proposed that a mixed methodology could exploit the continuous interplay between these two co-existing tendencies (top-down and bottom-up approaches for team organisation) for player development and performance.

What may coaching look like when teams operate with a positional or relational methodological approach? Historically, practice in team sports like football has been dominated by repetition and rehearsal of movements (stepping and sliding movements to mimic defensive postures, endless rehearsal using unopposed drills, perfecting pre-determined routines and manoeuvres in a skill acquisition process; Otte & Davids, 2023). Technique repetition and choreographed rehearsal of tactical movements (by individual players) and patterns of play (by team players) has dominated skill acquisition for decades. This aspect of skill acquisition is characterised by practice in isolated, predictable contexts, with unchanging affordances available for players to explore and exploit. For example, when practising collective actions by an attacking or defensive unit of players, different types of shadow play are often used to repeat and rehearse tactical formations. The key aim of coaching in traditional skill acquisition is to consolidate techniques and patterns, enhancing ‘automaticity’ in players through *repetitive practice*.

While repetition is important for consolidating learning, it is much less useful than ‘repetition without repetition’ (Bernstein, 1967) for *skill adaptation* (Otte & Davidas, 2023). Stability may be most useful for learners very early in the coordination stage of skill learning (Newell, 1985), where it is still important to gradually challenge the synergy-formation process that characterizes motor learning.

Minor instabilities and perturbations to action can be introduced as soon as learners achieve some coordination stability which they can rely on to progress along their skill adaptation journey (Otte & Davids, 2023). Learners should be continually encouraged to (re)calibrate actions, seeking optimality and refinement (Newell, 1986). Synergy formation in a movement system is the biological engine of skill adaptation, helping players to continually re-organize system components (e.g., muscles, joints, limb segments) in football practice. One of the hallmarks of skilled performers is a capacity to (re)organise muscles, limb segments and joints to support the adaptation of actions with a performance environment (varying due to weather

conditions, different pitch surfaces and ball properties). Highly skilled individuals can continue to seek movement optimality by refining and adapting coordination patterns to enhance their continued transactions with the dynamic performance environment.

To summarise, an ecological dynamics rationale supports a mixture of the two playing methodologies, emphasising structured and unstructured play, with a bias towards coaching that exploits synergy formation in players with a relational methodology.

A positional methodology emphasises repetition and rehearsal to support top-down, coach-led, structured synergy formation between players at the positional end of the continuum, providing knowledge about the tactical positioning of teammates. At the relational end of the continuum, 'repetition without repetition' supports more opportunities for synergies to emerge between teammates as they seek affordances for attacking and defensive actions (e.g. exploiting gaps, imbalances and defensive weaknesses in different locations onfield). Combinations that emerge between players in competitive gameplay, structured as a flowing affordance landscape, can be developed through practice as 'repetition without repetition'.

Practice methodologies and player behaviour

The EPPP aspires to develop players who are tactically intelligent, adaptable, and capable of thriving in elite contexts. However, if young players are trained to *reproduce* collective behaviours under specific instructions (e.g., positional play), rather than to explore the affordance-rich landscape of the game, their perceptual attunement, decision-making, and creativity may be stunted. This approach could lead to a generation of players who may excel in structured drills, but falter under the emergent demands of elite performance: an age-old issue when observing players in practice and performance (See Gary Neville on differences between coaching and micro-managing players:

<https://www.bbc.co.uk/sport/football/articles/c74zkrx7zzgo>).

The influence of practice methodologies on player performance was profiled in the work of Henrik Rydström at Malmö FC (Bate, 2024). He deliberately rejected the orthodoxy of positional play, instead embracing a fluid performance model, rooted in emergent relational interactions between players and their immediate environments. His team's attacking movements are less about occupying pre-determined zones and more about 'real-time' co-

adaptation to opponents, space and teammates. This approach resonates strongly with ecological dynamics, where functional behaviours arise not from the internalisation of abstract tactical models, but from skilful engagement with affordances that arise in match play. For Rydström, football is less a machine to be engineered than a living ecology to be navigated. This philosophy challenges the atomistic view of the player as an isolated unit to be 'filled with knowledge'. Players drilled in fixed positional patterns may struggle to adapt when a game departs from the pre-rehearsed script. By contrast, teams nurtured in relational, affordance-rich environments are better prepared to improvise, innovate, and co-adapt under pressure. Malmö's dynamism lies not in pre-planned moves, but in players' capacity to continuously perceive and respond collectively.

The perspectives of Rydström (2024) and Hamilton (2023) imply a profound rethinking of academy coaching under the EPPP. First, the success of academy programmes cannot be measured simply by an individual's technical proficiency or adherence to predetermined game models. Instead, academies should be judged by the extent to which they nurture adaptive, intelligent players, who are enskilled at seeking combinations with teammates. This requires designing practice tasks that are affordance-rich, game-like, and open-ended, encouraging exploration and self-organisation rather than rote compliance. Training must be designed to enhance players' ability to perceive, interpret, and respond to information surrounding them within this relational web, rather than simply to reproduce decontextualised techniques.

For example, rather than drilling passing sequences in unopposed practice, coaches might manipulate task constraints (field size, player numbers, rules) to invite players to discover novel passing lanes, combination patterns and synergies with teammates. Second, these methodologies highlight the need for cultural change within academies. Deeply entrenched *forms of life* rooted in disciplinary practices can stifle creativity. For the EPPP's aims to be realised, organisations must critically reflect on their inherited coaching traditions and ask whether these align with values of player adaptability and intelligence. Coaches, often socialised within the same reductionist traditions, must be supported to experiment with ecological and relationist approaches, even when these initially appear messy or unstructured.

Case Example: Relational play in elite professional football – Paris Saint-Germain FC.

Many elite teams, such as Barcelona, Manchester City or Bayern Munich, use some sort of positional structure to start a football game. One exceptional example is the strategic style of the 2025 UEFA Champions League winners, Paris Saint-Germain (PSG), under Spanish head coach Luis Enrique.

In build-up phases of play in possession, PSG displays a range of solutions in a relational strategy to drive the ball forward and disrupt and challenge the opposition's press. For instance, building up in 3-2-5 or 3-1-6 formations, with several attacking players occupying and rotating positions to threaten the opposition defensive line, positional strategies on a superficial level are often superseded by a relational approach (BTL, 2025). In addition to both centre-backs (e.g., Marquinhos and Willian Pacho in the Champions League final match against Inter Milan), an extra player often rotates into the build-up to create a three-man overload. While this extra player may be one of the defensive midfielders, such as Vitinha, in other instances the full-back Nuno Mendes may drop lower to support build-up play. At the same time, midfield rotations allow players, such as João Neves or Fabian Ruiz to slide lower or transition higher into attack (UEFA.com, 2025). Other examples of synergies emerging in play may include central attackers, like Dembele, dropping back as a 'false nine' or rotating into wide areas on the wing. Full-back movements (e.g. involving Hakimi) transitioning high into the front attacking line further support unpredictability and fluidity of PSG's build-up play. These emergent adaptations to player positioning and movement exemplify how relational interactions facilitate numerical overloads in critical areas to instigate synergies, while freeing up other spaces onfield which afford sudden exploitation with deep runs and penetrative passes.

Overall, PSG's adaptive build-up approach, and the team's deeper understanding of the affordances of space, illustrate how they effectively exploit sudden interconnections formed between players. This is a fundamental principle of a relational strategy, highlighting the importance of synergies, dynamic interactions and position interchange between teammates centred around the ball, numerical relations in critical areas and spatial structures of the opposition (see Hamilton, 2023).

A view from another sport: A Case Example in Rugby Union

As in Association Football (Soccer), an ongoing debate exists around the relative effectiveness of positional versus relational playing approaches in Rugby Union. Historically, both approaches have led to success (and failure), with cultures of countries and clubs leading to some teams adopting a bias to a relational approach, including Fiji and France, Toulouse, Wales in the 1970s, Randwick (in Sydney), Queensland Reds between 2009-13, and Harlequins. Other teams have a more positional tradition: The Brumbies, South Africa, New Zealand, England, Saracens.

On balance, it could be argued that positional, structured play is more traditional, due to a combination of historical factors, including: (i) the complexity of rugby union leading to junior players needing to be taught positions and specific roles, (ii) the limited time of each possession phase and (iii), the high numbers of 're-starts' via scrums and line-outs that appear in 'set-piece' rugby. However, rule changes have significantly changed the game, increasing unstructured play by 33%, passes by almost 50% and rucks/mauls by 89%. Scrums and line outs were down 37% and 35% respectively. The 1995 Rugby World Cup saw just 25 minutes and 45 seconds of ball in play time, compared to 34 minutes and 18 seconds in 2023 – a 33% increase (Mckay and O'Conner, 2018).

The shift in the way that the game is played has continued, revealing an average sequence length of play increased from 26 seconds to 30 seconds, whilst ball in play time per game (33 minutes and 6 seconds) has increased up to 36 minutes and 8 seconds in Super Rugby Pacifica 2020-25 (Stats Perform, 2025). The increased time of 'ball in play' emphasises 'playing what is in front of you' to solve problems creatively. The increased number of passes emphasises the importance of good decision making in rugby.

These data suggest that coaches may need to use a combination of the two strategical approaches, but increasingly, relational play is becoming more important. At present in the majority of elite level school, club, provincial and international teams, practice typically resembles a positional approach: reproductive practice to develop 'our' attacking structure and shape. However, these performance data suggest that more time should be spent adopting a relational approach, designing practice tasks with affordances for synergy-formation which solicit players to self-organise, adapt and exploit all types of possession (Mckay and O'Conner, 2018).

Coaches should consider developing a basic framework (attack model) underpinned by clear principles of play to develop fundamental game skills in context. For instance, players can be encouraged to pass, support and play to space. Through representative practice designs, coaches can guide players to search for key affordances, support interactions (synergy formation) and develop team coherence and understanding. Representative practice equips players to adapt to a range of playing styles they may be exposed to throughout their careers. A game-based, constraints-led pedagogy is an appropriate vehicle to develop these technical and tactical skills. Design of small-sided games and activities is ideal to achieve specific outcomes, aided by creative constraints such as manipulating player numbers, spatial index, practice game rules, keeping a score or time limitations. The coach could create representative games that are enjoyable, providing interactive contexts for players to problem solve by coordinating together to achieve desired outcomes.

Conclusions

While the EPPP is an important procedural advance, there is a critical need for a deeper understanding of the perceptual-motor learning and development process that is continuous from childhood to senior levels of performance. In this chapter, we discussed opportunities and challenges of imposed football performance methodologies, such as positionalism and relationism, for academy practitioners charged with developing young football professionals. We referenced the key distinction between performance preparation and player development, considering how adoption of a positional or a relational football methodology may impact on youth development in professional academies. We discussed some practice task characteristics that may address the challenges faced by academy practitioners. Through use of CLA in practice, to facilitate skill adaptation, players can develop competencies to undertake different game roles, enabling them to adapt to a wide range of dynamic affordances. Players trained in this way can be developed to fit into numerous styles of play, dependent upon which club or head coach they encounter throughout their careers.

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