Speed in Soccer

In the mid 1950's the nature of the game changed forever when the great Hungarian National Team defeated England, 6-3, in Wembley - a game that was not as close as the score indicated. Observers of that game commented on the remarkable speed and work rate of the Hungarians, and the Hungarians had four or five players who could run the 100 meters in 11.5 seconds or less.

In the 1974 World Cup it was reported that all of the field players from the former East Germany could run under 11 seconds for the 100-meter - from four to five players in the '50s under 11.5 seconds to the entire team under 11 seconds 20 years later. Now, 11.5 seconds might not be fast enough for a decent high school track team. The game today is played so much faster than the game in the past.

Is that a result of a better athlete, better coaching, or something else? We would like to think it is the first two, but we also see coaches in high school and college using the free substitution rule to encourage players to run as fast as they can. Players are able to get tired and then be pulled for a rest. So players have the mindset to sprint whenever they are on the field. If you have watched recent NCAA men's finals you have seen teams that try to play at a fast pace all game against teams that play a more controlled pace and use speed selectively.

Speed is an elusive creature. Is it innate, or can it be developed? What goes into the concept of speed? The first player to the ball may not be faster than the opponent; some people just consistently get there first. The great Larry Bird was never going to be confused with a sprinter, but he always seemed to be in the right place. Was it speed afoot or speed of thought or both? Ajax, the storied club from Holland, uses their TIPS plan to evaluate 16 year olds: Technique, Intelligence, Personality and Speed, and they consider speed as the trait with the least potential for improvement.

The University of Pittsburgh's coach, Joe Luxbacher, describes speed as having seven components: perceptual speed (using the senses to decipher various elements of game), anticipation speed (predict what will happen before it happens), decision-making speed (making decisions in the shortest amount of time), reaction speed (ability to react to some action by teammate or opponent), speed without the ball (maximum movement speed), speed with the ball (movement with the ball at the highest possible speed), and game-action speed (make effective tactical decisions to changing conditions).

Physically, development of speed is largely based on improvements in a player's running form. From experience we can say that the running form of soccer players will never be confused with that of a sprinter in track. Speed specialists think running speed can be thought of as a combination of starting speed, acceleration, top-end speed, deceleration and matching speed with teammates (think of the running back that out runs his blocking).

In addition, remember that agility and speed are two different animals. The fastest players are not necessarily the most agile and the most agile may not be the fastest. Elements of agility and lateral speed involve recognition, reaction, decisions, balance, footwork, change of direction, and avoiding obstacles.