

# Off the Ball movement



## Off-the-ball Movement in Touch

Our game is played in two halves of around 20 minutes and if we have about a dozen players in the team, each player would have possession for less than 60 seconds. But we all know that possession is not shared equally amongst a team and some players have possession more than others! Therefore players need to clearly understand that our game is played mostly with the ball in one of your team mate's hands. Approximately 95 percent of the time in any one game you don't have the ball. What you do with this time has a direct relationship to your influence on the team's success, perhaps more so than when you actually have the ball.

Coaches tend to develop defensive policies and processes for players when they are in defence but we also need to consider what we do when we don't have the ball – in attack. While one player can only be the “player-in-possession”, we usually refer to the other five on field players as “off-the-ball” players and the general role of these “off-the-ball” players should be to drag the defenders away from the ball. Players need to learn how to attract defenders, especially when they don't have the ball. Quality support attacking players are able to move defenders around and position them in the way in which they want. This effective “off-the-ball” movement all starts with fundamental body position.

If a player is standing straight up, with their hands on their hips for example, that player is not ready to make an effective supporting, split-second move. Unless such a stance is done for a special reason, for example attempting to convince the opposition that you are NOT about to do anything quickly, players should always try to move in a balanced manner. While at first glance correct body positioning may not seem important when a player does not have possession it is the prime foundation of the “off-the-ball” game.

“Off-the-ball” players should normally be moving in a somewhat crouched position so that their knees are slightly and comfortably flexed. When players keep knees flexed their leg muscles are physiologically “loaded,” that is ready to provide both the power and quickness necessary for the pending acceleration. When a player stands or slowly moves straight-legged that player loses the ability and potential for quickness, because leg muscles are stretched out and not ready for a fast contraction. Only when they then first contract and then stretch out again will that player be able to move with any speed and power. And that takes time . . .

To make any rapid move properly and with suitable surprise a player must also start with good foot positioning. How and where your feet are positioned has great influence on how the rest of the body will move. Therefore, feet position has a strong emphasis on the quality of an individual as a support player. When moving around, players should try to keep their feet about shoulder's width apart, or just slightly further spread, which tends to be the best for immediate acceleration. Players also need to train so that either foot can be placed forward in this staggered, anticipatory position. Most people can only (naturally) accelerate rapidly with a particular (either left or right) foot out in front. Generally,

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right-handed players will lead with their right foot and pivot on their left whereas most left-handed players lead with their left foot and pivot on their right. Just stand with your feet together and try accelerating quickly – which foot goes first? Now put that foot out in front and accelerate. Then reverse the feet and go again . . . try this when you next get to training.

One school of thought suggests that a player's body weight should be distributed over the full length of each foot and that a common mistake is to put all body weight only on the balls of the feet. The suggestion is that weight-bearing on toes or the balls of the feet will tire the calf muscles and will also slow you down when you begin to make a move. Others believe, in line defence for example, that it is best to move on the toes or balls of the feet. More research is needed here. However, what is for sure is that players who either don't move in a balanced and anticipatory way will not be able to quickly react to changing circumstances, either in supporting attack or in defence.

When moving in support players should keep their arms and hands held close to their chest. The wrists and the elbows must be flexed so you are ready to receive the ball. This will also help the body to remain balanced and ready to make any required quick moves. Fingers should be spread out. Remember too that how a player holds their head will also affect rapid and balanced movement. If you hold your head either too far backward or too far forward, your entire body is out of balance. For proper balance, imagine a straight line running through the middle of your head and body to a spot on the floor exactly between your two feet. Your head needs to sit right in the middle of this invisible line at all times. Your head is really the most important factor in body balance. Where it goes the rest tends to follow!

When a player needs to make a movement to the right side, they should start by turning their head to the right. At the same time the player should move their weight over to their right foot as the movement begins. It's extremely important that players in this position keep their centre of gravity low. Acceleration in a direction will be assisted by pump the arms to develop a powerful drive. Those first initial steps must be short and fast and the acceleration required in the game is initially enhanced by not taking any long steps. It's how fast a player can move their feet that is more important than the distance they cover with each stride.