CHAPTER 11: READING AND WRITING THE GAME: TACTICAL SKILLS IN TEAM SPORTS

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INTRODUCTION

Several team sports can be categorized as invasion sports, in which players compete at the same field of action as their opponents. The sports are time dependent and can be sub-categorized into goal-throwing (e.g., basketball), try scoring (e.g., rugby), and goal-striking games (e.g., soccer, field hockey). They are characterized by the need for players to constantly adapt to opposition by rapid adaptation to changing play configurations and to the movement of the ball. In such games, players have to deal with a complex and rapidly changing environment while invading the opposing team’s area of the field in order to score (Almond, 1986; Hughes and Bartlett, 2002; Williams, 2000). Success requires that players of all ages have well-developed physiological and technical characteristics in addition to cognitive skills as well (French and Thomas, 1987; Helsen and Starkes, 1999; Nougier and Rossi, 1999; Starkes, 1987; Williams et al.,1993). The integration of physical, technical and cognitive skills is generally apparent in studies showing that many talented athletes not only perform well in sports but also in school settings (Jonker et al., 2009).

Playing at a high level of performance in invasion sports means choosing the right action at the right moment and performing that course of action efficiently and consistently throughout the match (Baker et al., 2003a; Gréhaigne et al., 2001). To perform the right action at the right moment, with a successful performance or outcome, proper understanding of the game is necessary. Reading the game and reacting in parallel can therefore be viewed as a key characteristic for high level of performance. However, what is the meaning of reading the game properly and reacting at the same time with the appropriate action? A number of terms have been used to describe successful performance, for example, game intelligence, implicit knowledge, tricks of the trade, practical intelligence, tactics, tactical knowledge and tactical skills (Bjurwill,