

Tips and techniques: How to coach passing

In a series looking at building on basic skills, **MORITZ KOSSMANN** discusses the secret language of transferring the ball, in conversation with **STEPH FAIRBAIRN**.

SCW's consulting coach Carl Wild has looked at the [basics of passing](#). Now, Moritz Kossmann takes up the baton and digs a little deeper.

Passing is more than just transferring the ball from one player to the other.

At the elite levels, in particular, it is like a secret language, full of non-verbal signals and triggers, underpinned by players' ability to see the bigger picture in their heads.

Moritz – formerly involved at Ubuntu Football Academy and Cape Town City in South Africa, but now assistant coach at Austrian second-tier side SV Ried – sat down with Steph Fairbairn to discuss how passing can be used as a form of communication, the decision-making that goes into it and why the actions after a pass are so crucial...

SCW: How important is communication between team-mates when it comes to passing?

MK: We can look at our team-mates and communicate with them verbally. We can also communicate with body language.

When we have played together with a team-mate for several years, it becomes much easier to read one another.

Let's go to the highest level of the game and take, for example, the partnership between [Manchester City's] Kevin De Bruyne and Erling Haaland.

When they play in a stadium of 60,000 people, who are all roaring and screaming, I don't think there's massive amounts of verbal communication going on, compared to the amount of non-verbal communication.

I think that is where, at a high level, it becomes key for your strongest eleven to play together as much as possible, because you learn to communicate in ever more subtle ways.

The more subtle this communication becomes, the more likely it is to create small space and time advantages over our opponents.

Perhaps what some would call intuitive understanding is really non-verbal communication.



Manchester City's Kevin De Bruyne is recognised as one of the best passers in the world. His supply to prolific striker Erling Haaland is referenced by Moritz as a good example of how non-verbal communication works between players at the top level

When De Bruyne does certain things, Haaland might understand that the ball is going to come here, or go there, and that gives him the chance to start his run slightly earlier than the opponent [is able to] and gives him enough space to finish the chance.

"What some would call intuitive understanding is really non-verbal communication..."

How we pass is also communication. If I pass to your furthest foot, and I'm a skilled player who is able to pass the ball accurately, then I might be communicating to you to make a forward action. I've passed to your furthest foot because I am trying to tell you to attack with your first touch.

But if I'm passing it to your nearest foot – the one closest to me in relation to the opponent's goal and where you are on the field – then I might be communicating to you that there's quite a large amount of opposition pressure behind you, and you might be better served just controlling the ball and passing it backwards again.

That is a very simple way of using passing for communication.

A more prominent example is to pass the ball into space. Then, I'm communicating to you to go forward. [But by] passing into feet, I might be communicating to you to pass to a team-mate again.

It could also be the spin I'm putting on the ball, or the power on the pass. For example, if I'm passing it quite hard to you, then I might be suggesting you use one touch only. If I'm passing softer, I might be trying to draw out opposition pressure. If I'm passing it medium-hard, I might be suggesting not to use one touch.

It's crucial to interact efficiently on the football field and that is where football actions start, really.

SCW: How important is our action after the pass?

MK: Crucial. I think there is a lot of talk about actions before receiving the pass – receiving, open body positions, scanning – but the action after passing is just as crucial, because we are looking at creating dynamic situations. In order to do that, we need to have movement.

What we don't want is American Football quarterbacks on our team. What I mean by that is a quarterback might stand in the pocket and pass the ball, but then their contribution to that play is finished. Football [soccer] is a dynamic sport – after I've passed the ball, I become a team-mate that needs to move into open space.

Passing and moving was the most crucial principle to a team like Liverpool in the 1970s and 1980s, when they won the European Cup several times.

We can even see that in the modern game, where teams like [German second-tier team] Hamburger do a lot of passing and moving, even in the build-up [defensive] third, where a centre-back might pass to a full-back, but then moves into space in front of the ball.

This action, after making an action on the ball, is underrated but very important. We want more dynamic situations in attack and that is one of the best ways to create them.

It is also a great individual coaching point for our players to understand that, once they have given the ball to a team-mate, they again become an off-the-ball team-mate.

We can greatly increase the amount of useful actions our players make by coaching this aspect.

SCW: When a player is on the ball and they are thinking about what to do next, what might their thought process be? What kind of pictures are they seeing? What might lead them to make certain decisions?

MK: As the level of the game increases, the space and time to make decisions decreases.

We can also, through analysis, see that in the last 20 to 30 years, the amount of time that players have on the ball before they are put under pressure by the opponent is becoming less and less.

So, at the highest level, it becomes key to already have a good idea of where to pass the ball *before* you receive it – not *when* you have already received it.

At the same time, it is crucial to play with your head up; to be scanning the situation. As you are looking up, you might be better able to react to small changes in situations.



It is crucial to play with your head up, scanning the situation, to be able to react to changes in situations – as New York City FC midfielder Keaton Parks is doing here

Where to pass the ball is related to a few factors: Firstly, the opponent – If I am free in space, but you are marked by two opponents, it might not be a very good idea to pass to you; but, because two opponents are close to you, another team-mate might be completely open and I can pass there.

The second factor to consider is the position on the field. If I have the ball in my own half, and you are completely free in the

completely isolated? Then it might not be such a good idea to pass to you, because you might find it difficult to make a successful follow-up action.

Of course, there are other subtle factors that also play into it, such as the situation of the game. Does it make sense to pass forward if we are leading 2-1 in the 89th minute?

Actions that you have made [can also be considered]. Perhaps you just made a run, lost the ball, then had to press the opposition and now you are completely out of breath. You might be in a good position on the field, but maybe I shouldn't give you the ball because you are going to struggle physically to make another action.

It may sound a little mean, but another factor that definitely plays into the decision-making process of players is the success that their team-mate has had.

If that team-mate has lost the ball six out of seven times in the last five minutes, I'm less likely to give the ball to that team-mate because we don't lose it as individuals, we lose it as a team. Players will definitely factor the success of team-mates into their passing decisions.

"Have a good idea of where to pass the ball before you receive it – not when you have..."

opposition half – closer towards the target we're trying to go to – it makes sense for me to give you the ball.

The third factor is your team-mates. If I'm giving you the ball in the opposition half, and there's enough space for you to receive, that's good. But what if there are no team-mates close to you? What if you are



Passing in training must be for a purpose – to encourage players to find team-mates who are in better positions

As I say, there are many small factors, but the ones we should focus on are the position of the opponent, position of team-mates and position on the field.

We want to make passes to team-mates in better positions than us. That means either they are closer to our target, or they are less likely to lose the ball – ideally both.

SCW: Any final thoughts on passing?

MK: Don't practice passing purely for the sake of passing. Make sure players understand the main point of passing is to give it to a team-mate in a better position.

I'm not saying don't use it, but using a passing-count for points is something to be a bit careful with.

If you say, for example, '15 passes is a point', then you might have situations where you are encouraging passing for the sake of passing.

The same goes for overusing a one or two-touch maximum. Again, you are forcing players to pass. Players need to understand that passing the ball is a key action, but they need to understand the 'why?' of passing,

"If you say '15 passes is a point', you might encourage passing for the sake of passing..."

not just pass because it's something they will have to do a lot of in the game.

The more they understand it – implicitly on a deeper level – the more likely they are to make good passing actions when they get to 11v11.

PASSING PRACTICE

Pass around and across

PRACTICE Encourages a variety of passes and demonstrates how movement can create options. By MORITZ KOSSMANN

WHY USE IT

Encourages different types of pass – short, diagonal, through balls and direct passes over the top – while emphasizing the need to move to create passing options.

SET UP

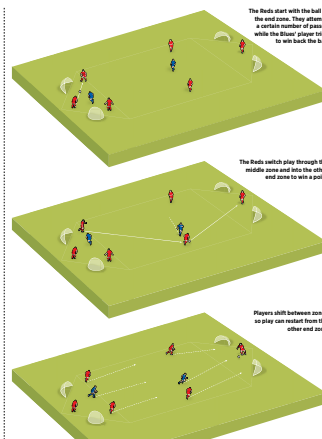
Set up a rectangular area, relative to the age, ability and number of your players. Add two triangle areas to each end. Place a mini goal on each side of the two outside edges of each triangle.

HOW TO PLAY

Reds play 2v1 in one end zone, 2v1 in the middle zone, and have one player in the other end zone. The ball starts with the Reds in the 3rd zone. They look to achieve a certain number of passes, relative to their ability, before switching the ball to the other end zone, either directly or through the middle zone. The team gets one point for making the switch. Play then starts from the other end – the two Reds from the middle zone move into the end zone, two Blues from the end zone move into the middle zone and the Blues drift across. If the Blues win the ball back, they look to score in one of the mini goals to score a point.

COACHING POINTS

• Can you identify the opportunity to switch play?



Now use Moritz's [passing practice](#) on p8 >>



"A big part of teaching players, at all levels, about passing is the idea of why they're passing and when it makes sense..."

HEAR THE FULL INTERVIEW WITH MORITZ, INCLUDING THE TECHNICAL AND TACTICAL CONSIDERATIONS WHEN COACHING PASSING, ON OUR PODCAST – [CLICK HERE TO LISTEN](#)