

Article Title: Exploring 'the right spaces' to penetrate and goal-scoring scenarios

By Jed C. Davies

"We want to dominate the game between our midfield and our attack, and we want to dominate the game [in these spaces] to get behind their defensive line...it is always about that attacking style and finding the right spaces to penetrate"

- Pepijn Lijnders, First Team Coach at Liverpool FC (Formerly FC Porto)

This article has been written using sections from the book 'The Football Philosophy: In Shadows of Marcelo Bielsa' by Jed C. Davies and looks at a key idea of getting behind the opposition back four, taking the quote from Pepijn Lijnders above to explore '**the right spaces to penetrate**'.

Article Terminology

Strong-side: sometimes referred to as 'ball near' or 'near side'. The strong-side is the side of the field whereby the defending team have concluded is the side to organise and defend against (the side with the ball). Strong-side has been used throughout this article to refer to differentiation between positions. For example, your strong-sided central defender will often be the central defender who is nearest the side of the field that has the ball.

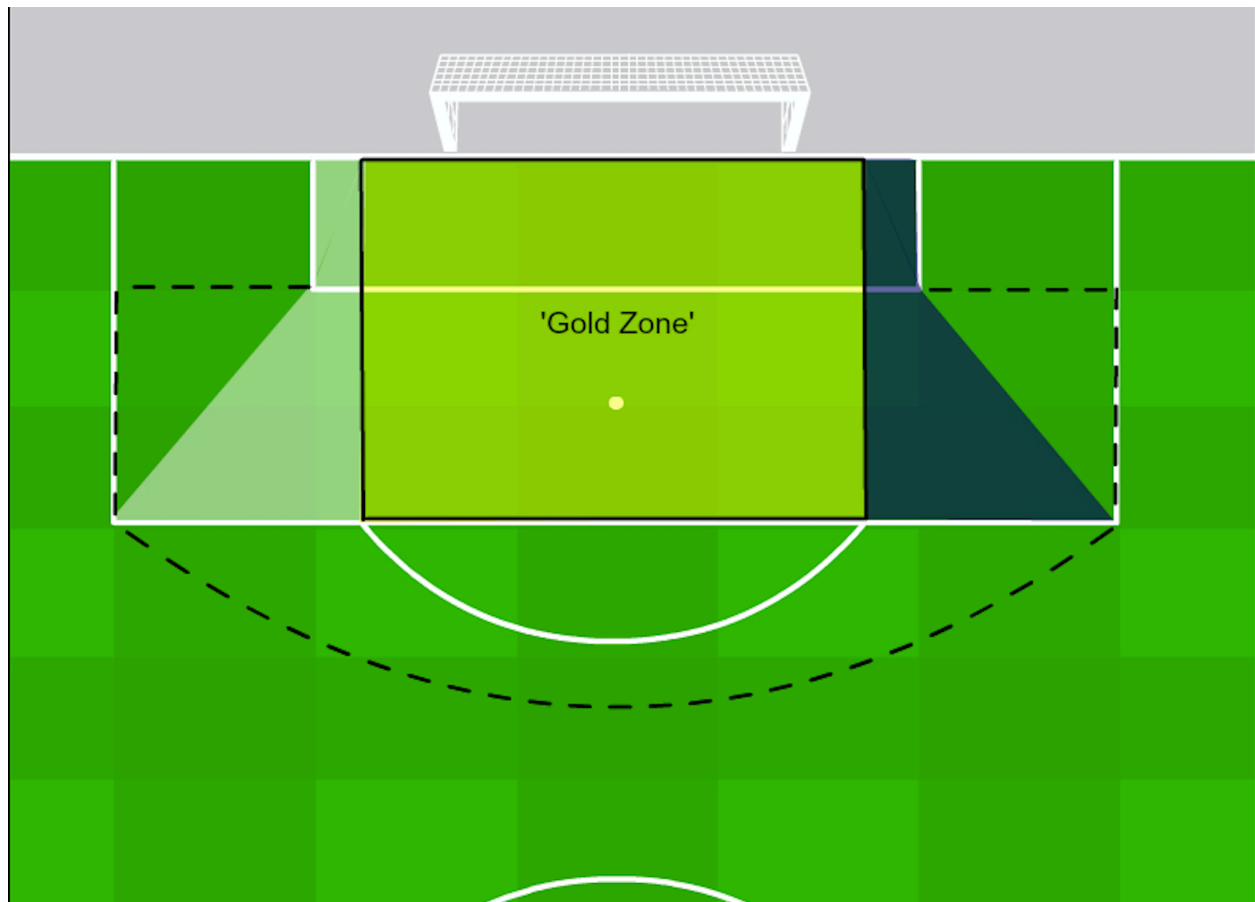
Weak-side: sometimes referred to as 'ball far' or 'far side'. The weak-side is the side of the field that the opposition are not necessarily organised to defend against and is often the side without the ball. A 'weak-side central defender' is simply the central defender furthest away from the strong-side of the field (in relation to his partnering central defender)

Qualitative Superiority - one player being better than another player in the given scenario due to specific objective of that scenario. For example: an excellent winger who excels in isolated one vs one's due to his Player I.D. which might be made up of excellent dribbling ability (technical), agility, speed (physical) and confidence (psychological) compared to opposing defender's ability to nullify those attributes in the scenario

In this article, 'The Castle' approach to dividing the spaces up in the 18-yard box has been used (white, yellow and blue combined). Depending on the research paper you study, 80-92% of all goals are scored from within 'The Castle' with most of the remainder scored in the outlined area (dotted line) around 'The

Castle'. During the 2014 World Cup, Germany scored 88.2% of all their goals from the 'Gold Zone' alone (Usher and Bilton 2014).

The white and blue areas (highlighted in the diagram below) have a 20-25% chance of going into the goal for every shot on target, while 15-30% of all shots on target result in goals scored from the outlined area (within the dotted line, excluding the highlighted areas). In the 'Gold Zone' the chances of a goal from a shot on target increase the closer to the goal we get, ranging from 40-50% around 18-yards from goal to 60%-85% within the 6-yard box.



If we work our way backwards from these positions and consider three of the key spaces on the field, we can bring about a framework for which the book 'The Philosophy of Football: In Shadows of Marcelo Bielsa' serves within a framework of 'superiority'.

The '*right spaces to penetrate*' explored in this article are: (a) in front of the opposition CB's, (b) in front of the opposition FB's and (c) behind the opposition FB's.

A. IN FRONT OF THE OPPOSITION CB'S



If the objective of the space in front of the opposition central defenders is to lead towards creating clear cut goal scoring opportunities, then we must consider the dynamic response we might get by getting into this position. One response is for one of the central defenders to come towards the player on the ball, out of slot, and in turn creating space that is now available to exploit. This space can be exploited either by the player on the ball if he should beat the central defender in his 1 vs. 1 scenario (defender behind), or this space can be exploited through movement of his team mates (as shown in the diagram above). Applying the theory of the 'up-back-through' language we can see how third man movement can exploit this space after pulling a central defender out of slot.

"If we can go in the final third and we are playing between our midfield and our attack, so between their defence and midfield. We have to dominate in that space there and see how their defensive line is opening up or closing down so there is no space. It is about the calmness in turning and playing inside this space" - Pepijn Lijnders

An example of 'Up-Back-Through' in practice - Tottenham Hotspur goal:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1HreNzJ7ptA>

B. IN FRONT OF THE OPPOSITION FB's



In my analysis of 'chains of reaction', upon the fullback moving forward to put pressure on a player ahead of him, the nearest central defender comes across to cover the fullback should he get beaten in a 1 vs. 1 scenario. The next logical step in the chain of reaction is for the next central defender to come across and cover the space left by the other central defender (to provide balance). However, even at Premier League level, there are weekly examples where the third reaction in this chain is either delayed or inadequate.

Jamie Vardy (23:25, Leicester vs. Manchester United 28th November 2015) and Batetimbi Gomis (65:15, Swansea vs. Manchester United 30th August 2015) provide perfect examples of how best to exploit this chain of reaction upon inviting the fullback out of slot. Both strikers move over onto the weak-side central defender and wait for the other central defender to move across to cover the fullback. In this moment, the space between the two central defenders creates an opportunity for exploitation.

Video of Gomis goal: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=V7uMsRx4bAc>

PRECEDENT: JAMIE VARDY GOAL vs MANCHESTER UNITED (28th November 2015)



Video of Jamie Vardy's goal above: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nl0z36uVi6w>

Jamie Vardy's record breaking eleventh goal in eleven games was a result of a common attacking scenario: engaging the fullback, provoking the supportive relationship with his nearest central defender and as a consequence creating space between these two players and the off-side line.

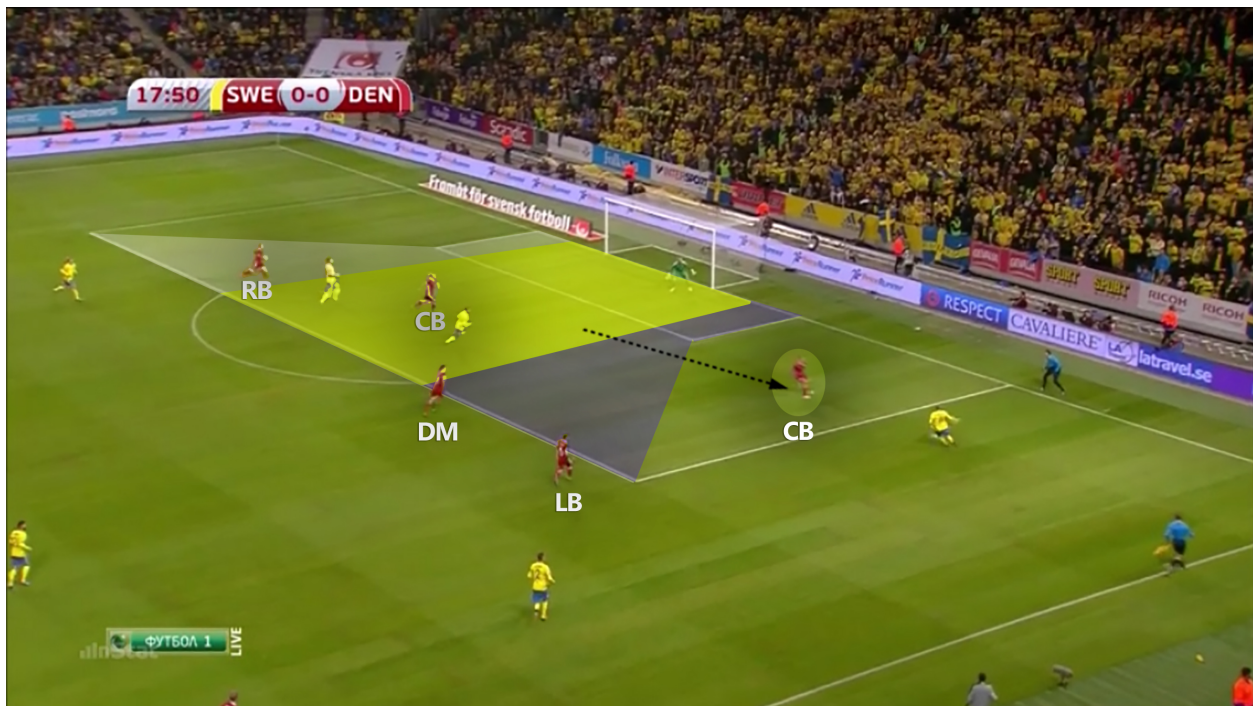
Vardy moves across behind the weak-side central defender who sets the off-side line and moves into the space he can clearly see between the off-side line and the marking defender who is often reluctant to cover across with much commitment, particularly with other forward running players attacking the central areas.

This common attacking scenario is one that should be explored with the often predictable pressure and cover patterns that exist between the fullback and central defender relationship.

There are many great examples of goals and attacks that can be found to follow this same predictable behaviour from the opposition.

C. BEHIND THE OPPOSITION FB's

Upon getting behind the opposition fullback, we pose a problem for the opposition of who will come to pressure your player. There are many ways to get behind the opposition fullback, through winning a 1 vs. 1 scenario, a player overlapping or underlapping, through an attacker running into the space behind the fullback and so on. After successfully getting beyond the fullback there are typically two responses from the opposition.

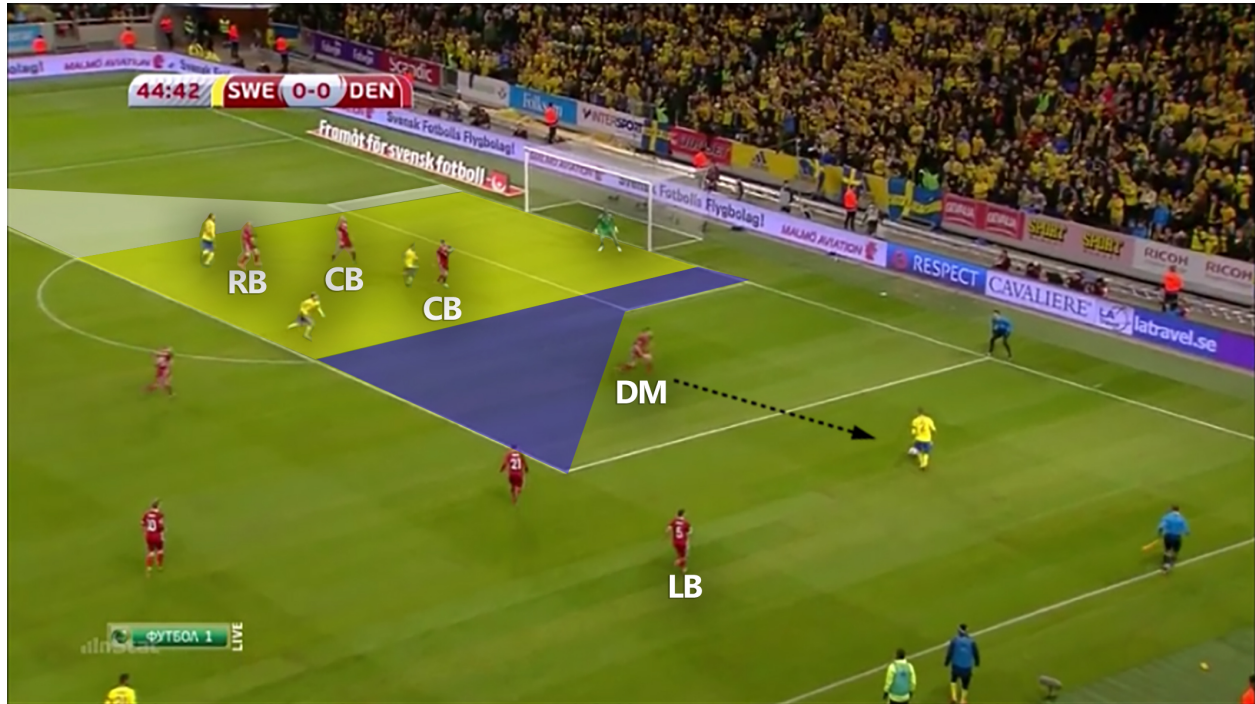


Response 1. The central defender moves out to put pressure on your player

Video: CB pulled out https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=P5i_7v07_js

When the central defender moves out we again refer to the chain of reaction sequence and look at who will cover and balance the scenario. In this scenario we also need to consider the qualitative superiority and who we have moved out of the central defensive areas. If the central defender we have moved out of the box is the opposition's strongest player at dealing with crossing scenarios then we have reduced the ability of the opposition to defend such a scenario.

Response 2. The defensive midfielder moves back to put pressure on your player



Video: DM moved out https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HW-_X05Xjoo

In the second scenario, the cover and balance in response to getting behind the opposition fullback is one whereby the defensive midfielder may come out to cover this wide area and the central defenders stay central. However, in doing so the opportunity for a cut back type cross increases. The cut back type cross is by far the most successful type of cross statistically at leading to shots on target and if the quality of the cut back allows for a first time shot, the objective of creating clear cut goal scoring opportunities has been achieved. There is a trade off in decision making for the opposition defence upon getting behind the opposition fullback that highlights the value in working out the best strategies in achieving such a scenario. The same scenario can be created (shown in the diagram above) should the central defender decide to go out wide and the defensive midfielder fills in for the central defender.

Research by analyst Samira Kumar details “statistically by increasing the distance between two defenders we increase the opportunities of scoring goals”. Kumar goes on to add that if we can find methods to draw the defensive midfielder away from covering the space behind the fullback then we increase our chances further still.

RELEVANT TRAINING SESSION

Training Session from the Book 'The Philosophy of Football: In Shadows of Marcelo Bielsa' available from www.rocketbirdlondon.com

8.5 Finishing Scenario C. Behind FBs Opposed (Type: Drill)

Set Up

A mannequin should be set up on the corner of the 18-yard box to represent the fullback we will get behind. Two poles are used to represent starting positions for players and a marked out white area is to be created at the edge of the 18- yard box.

Session Narrative

All players apart from the goalkeeper, defensive midfielder (white team) and central attacking midfielder and winger (blue team) are to start in the marked out white area at the edge of the box. The winger begins with the ball and should play a one-two with the central attacking midfielder to receive the ball behind the fullback (mannequin). As the ball is played through to the winger the play becomes free and players can leave their zones.

If no player comes out to put pressure on the winger, then he is free to finish. However, it is likely a player will come out to pressure the winger: either the defensive midfielder or the nearest central defender. It is these two scenarios this session highlights and looks to create.

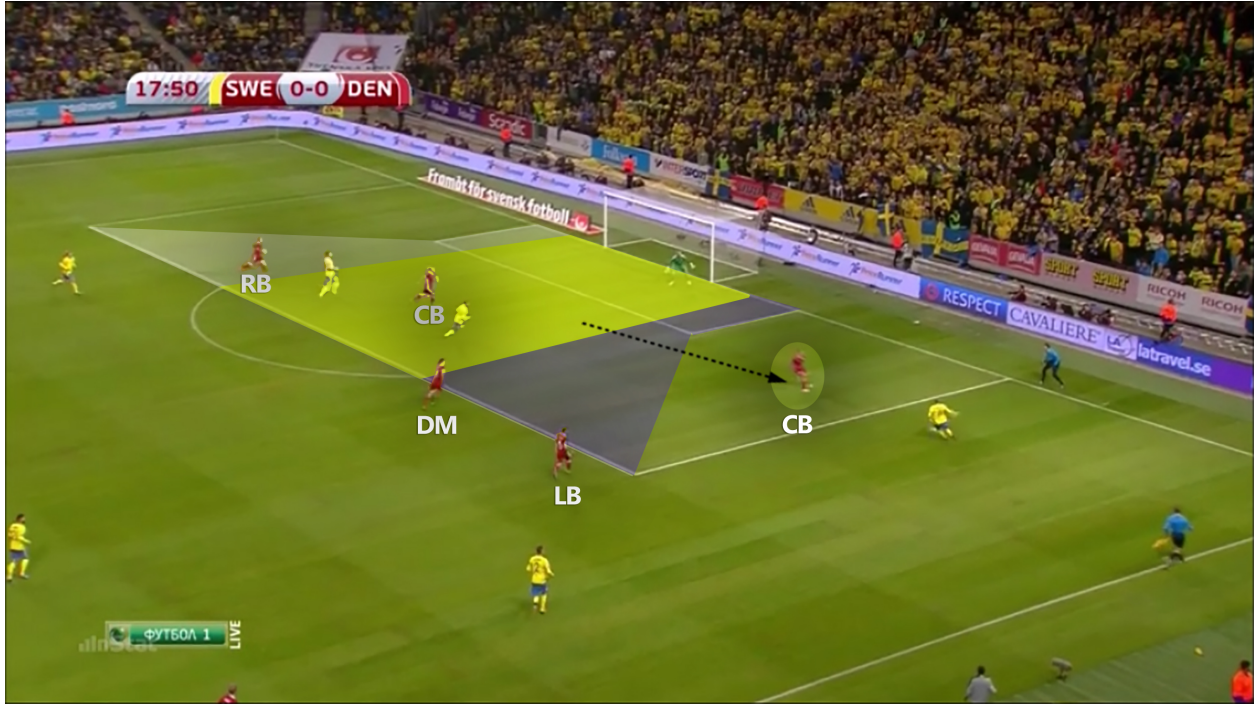
Coaching Details

The winger is to identify where space has opened up when he is pressed by a player and select the appropriate type of assist from the wide area.

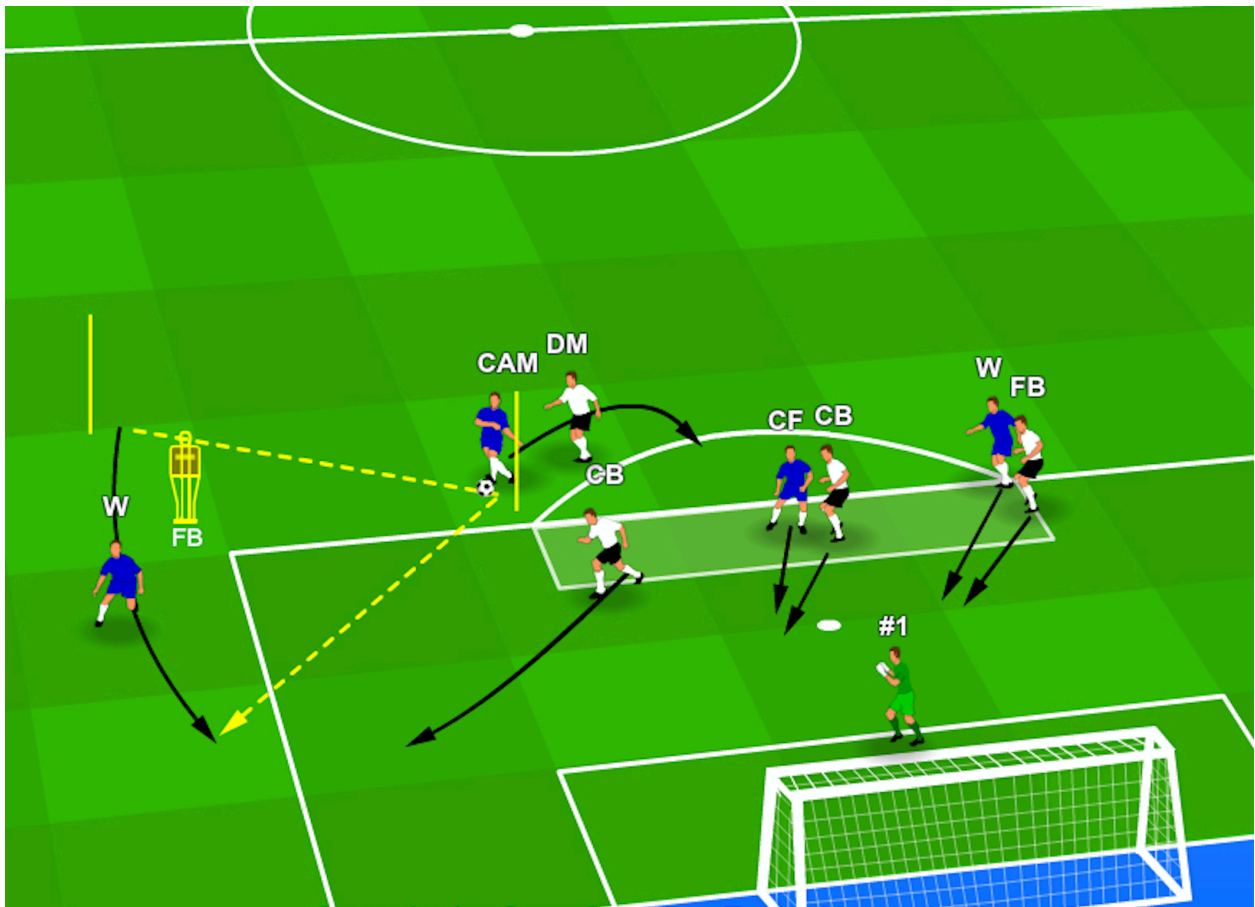
A variety of crossing types should be coached:

1. Whipped in behind the defenders into the corridor between the goalkeeper and defensive line
2. Driven at one height across the box
3. Cut back with disguise
4. Lofted into a deep area (into the weak-side winger perhaps?)
5. Curved into a back post area (Beckham)
6. Whipped into the front post area

Scenario:



Session:



Variations / Progressions

The coach can vary the starting positions and which play can go out to put pressure on the winger.

Key Learning Focus

Assisting goals from wide areas after getting behind the opposition fullback and drawing a defender out of his slot

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

First Team Assistant Coach at Ottawa Fury FC alongside Paul Dalglish, Julian de Guzman and Bruce Grobbelaar.

Speaker at several football events, including the World Football Academy (Raymond Verheijen) Expert Meeting South Africa 2014, Feyenoord Academy 2016 and a number of Inspire Football Coaching Conferences, UK

Previous: Tactical Consultant to Magnus Pehrsson (National Team Head Coach of Estonia), University of Oxford Football Coach and Youth Academy Coach in the UK and Canada

Jed C. Davies is also author of Coaching the Tiki-Taka Style of Play (2013) published by SoccerTutor.com Ltd. Coaching the Tiki-Taka Style of Play went on to be a best-selling publication at SoccerTutor, owned by many reputable coaches in the professional game such as Eddie Howe, Manager of AFC Bournemouth and Richard Bate, formerly the Elite Coaching Manager of the English Football Association among other high profile roles



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