

Reflections of a walking football team manager

The Winter Nations Cup of the International Walking Football Federation took place in Cardiff, Wales, on December 2, 2023. The Australian Walking Football Seventies committee entrusted me with the responsibility of leading and managing the national Over 70s team for the tournament.

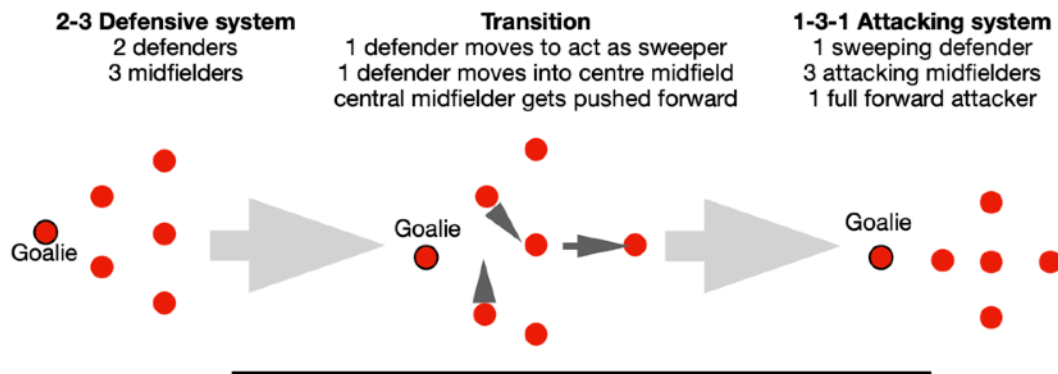
A week before the event, our team of 9 players arrived in UK. Five days of practice against local teams had been organised prior to the competition, including 3-4 matches of 20 minutes on each of the days. There were 6 matches of 25 minutes in the Nations Cup and our 70s division included three national teams - Wales, England, and Sweden.

Considering the significant investment made by players to attend the tournament, part of my role was to ensure equitable playing time, allocating individuals to play in a position they were comfortable in and make changes based on fitness levels and fair rotations.

From the outset, I communicated to the players that while our team boasted a wealth of experience, someone needed to take ultimate charge. I emphasised that negative comments and alternative strategies offered during a game were discouraged. Fortunately, the team respected this directive, and any suggestions or discussions occurred well before games and then afterwards during post mortems.

To organise the team, I initially asked each player about their preferred position on the field. During practice sessions, I observed players to see where they naturally gravitated. Players were then assigned positions and asked for their feedback about how they think they fared after each game. While there were minor changes in positions during practice games (including a successful switch between a forward and a backline player), overall, players accepted and tolerated their designated positions.

The next focus was on the team's formation during matches, including a defensive stance during transitions, and an attacking strategy. Although the team had been using a 1-3-1 system introduced by the original coach over the previous six months, with a sweeper, three in the midfield, and one up front, I slightly modified the system to strengthen our defensive posture. When defending, I advocated for a 2-3 system with two in defence and three in the midfield. When we attacked I suggested transitioning to the 1-3-1 system, where one of the two defenders in the 2-3 system would move up to the centre, pushing the middle player further up to become a full forward.



It took several practice games for players to become comfortable with the intricacies of each system. An interesting observation was that when the ball went out of play players who had been shuffled out of position quickly reset by returning to their designated position in the formation. Although there were many instances when the team temporarily lost its shape, players generally understood their responsibility during different phases of the game.

The primary reasons for employing the 2-3 formation were to fortify the defence. Transitioning to the 1-3-1 offensive system involved having three players strategically placed in the spine – one sweeping across the back, one controlling the middle, and one advancing as far as possible towards the opposition goal. Additionally, two players positioned wide had to cover substantial distances along the line, moving both up and down the field.

Despite having no time to practice playing the systems, transitions and other strategies such as free and corner kicks away from competition we did play reasonably well in patches during the practice matches. These 14 practice games were against very spirited, mainly local teams in their 50s and 60s who were hell bent on beating the Australian representative sides. With regular substitution of 3 players each game to ensure equitable playing time, the composition of each team was very dynamic but we secured more wins and draws than losses.

A strategic shift occurred during the Nations Cup when I decided to change only one player per game. While the outcomes may have appeared disappointing, considering the fierce competition from opponents who had no doubt trained and played together for many months, with most players living close by compared to our Australian team that had to grapple with the tyranny of distance, our performance was commendable. Despite losing our first three games, we were not outplayed - our opposition were more ruthless in front of goal and we had few opportunities to score against their spirited defence. Later in the tournament injuries to two players added additional pressure but we managed to secure a victory in our fourth game (against the formidable Welsh team), only to lose our last two matches.

Despite the games being played under cover, the weather conditions during the Nations Cup, with temperatures reaching -3°C , were the coldest any of us had ever experienced. The ground really consisted of an outdoor field under a covered dome! None of us could have planned for such freezing conditions. Even when playing with layers of clothing, including fleecy long johns, a tracksuit tops, a beanie, scarf, and snow gloves, we were still bitterly cold. The resilient Swedes even voiced their complaints. This was in stark contrast to last year's tournament in Florence when the temperature reached 42°C !

Key Learnings from the Tournament:

While the Over 70s team was formed with the goal of winning, few players were overly disappointed with the outcomes. The opportunity to represent Australia in the sport we all loved and particularly at our age, is something we will cherish. Friendships were forged, stories were shared, and memories of a lifetime were created. The highlight was undoubtedly our victory against Wales.

Ensuring everyone received equitable time on the field was a significant responsibility for me. Each player had invested heavily to attend the tournament and deserved their fair share of game time. Constantly recycling the team with numerous changes made it challenging to establish a cohesive unit but in general everyone appreciated the need for each player to be given a fair go on the field.

European teams that bring together players from a relatively small local area have the advantage of being able to have frequent gatherings for training and playing. Australia, with its vast distances will always struggle to assemble and bring players from many states together to practice. The Over 70s team that played in Cardiff did have members from South Australia, Tasmania, New South Wales, and Queensland - some of whom had not played together previously.

Selecting players for international competitions is a crucial process that requires individuals to be exceptionally fit (for their age), free from injuries and possess the necessary ethos and skill to compete at the highest level. It was uplifting to observe that all of the teams we faced acknowledged the remarkable fitness, health, and positive attitude displayed by our Over 70s team. They were impressed that we were able to bring players together from all over our vast continent.

The persistent challenge of substantial travel and accommodation expenses for participating in European tournaments will endure until sponsorship is secured. Budget constraints for representative players are a major limitation for taking part in these events.

To attract top-tier players who are both willing and able to attend international competitions, Australia should redirect its focus to the local area, particularly the Asia Pacific region. Closer proximity to tournaments results in more manageable travel and accommodation expenses, offering all in our area a great advantage. National teams from the Asia Pacific are likely to reciprocate by visiting and participating in our tournaments.

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