

# What is the Game Asking You to Do?

**Dan Wright**

**How do you communicate with your players? In this article PDP Technical Advisor, Dan Wright shares some fascinating reflections and advice for coaches on how to effectively question and communicate with players to make sure they genuinely think about solutions within the game.**

Over the last few months I have found myself using the question used as this article's title a lot. I've done so with an aim to challenge players to think about their game, or perhaps more specifically what they had noticed whilst playing the game.

Let me start from the start. I believe that football is played by the players. Coaches are just there to assist, guide and nudge them in the right direction. I believe our role is to help players to understand the game and how they interact with others to achieve, particularly in youth football.

I also believe, if we want skilful individuals who make great decisions, we have to expose them to random and dynamic situations where they can search, decide and execute. As a coach sometimes this means holding back solutions, so players can go through the messy and sticky "working it out" phase. Oh, and make lots of mistakes.

If we dive even deeper, there are key components to encourage skill development when designing a session.

- What is the intention of the practice. What is it we want the player to get better at?
- Has the environment been adapted to draw learners' attention to key information and important opportunities for action?
- Is the practice representative of the game. Does it feel like a game? Is there competition? Consequence? Whilst remembering "game-like" doesn't always mean a game.
- Does the practice allow for lots of repetition with lots of random variation?
- Does the coach's behaviour invite and encourage these interactions?

As coaches, we are constantly looking to improve and develop in all these areas. Part of the attraction of coaching is that you never really master all of these areas! There's always room for improvement. One component that I find fascinating is coaching interventions – both type and frequency.

I have become a big advocate of questioning and over the years and I'd like to think my questioning skills have improved. When I started I asked mostly closed questions which didn't really challenge the players to actually think or reflect on what happened.

This progressed, only slightly, to a scenario where players were asked questions which they could answer with generic replies like “Space”, “Width” or “Support”. This felt better, I thought, because players’ answers were slightly more specific. But in reality there were probably 10 different answers that players rotated session to session, as if they were spinning a wheel of fortune in their heads, they had a fair chance of guessing the right answer.

When tutors or senior staff asked if I used a variety of interventions, I was sure I was. In reality I was probably manipulating the wording of my questioning to get the answers I wanted to hear. “What do we need to do before receiving the ball?” would be met with “scan!”. Hmmm, if everyone knows this why doesn’t it happen?! I think there’s a significant link between session design and questioning. Perhaps, the sessions weren’t creating the need. Players telling me they need to scan and designing a practice where players actually scan, are two different things. Perhaps, the questions and manufactured positive replies pasted over the fact that players weren’t learning or developing skill. I don’t think this questioning approach was adding value for the participants, it was for show. Players were merely reciting or filling in the blanks.

The next step was to ask what I would describe as linked questions, for example “If X does this, what would you do?”. I still use this method and with some players in the right context it works well. I tend to use it for big picture stuff, with more focus on tactics and team stuff like 11v11/Phase of Play, video sessions or 1-2-1 chats, sometimes with a tactics board.

*ME: “The ball goes back to the goalkeeper, central defenders show me what you’d do?”*

*[Players answer and move]*

*[Coach could now paint a few different “What if.. or “What next?” scenarios]*

*ME: “Great. The goalkeeper chooses to play wide, into Full Back, what would you do next?”*

I found this approach particularly useful when reviewing game footage. After a few weeks, players can lead their own debrief and tell us what went well, what they would change, and the skills they need to go away and work on. Bingo!! We might be getting somewhere. Sometimes, I’d need to tease the answer out with “Tell me more” or “Can you explain more?”

This approach then evolved into asking questions but not waiting for the answer. I didn’t realise I did it until I recorded my sessions and watched them back. It was actually pointed out by one of my mentors, who said he loved it as it kept the kids engaged. “Is this a question Dan actually wants me to answer?”

This is something I find works when players are right in the middle of their stretch point so either there is a certain level of competency or they experienced this moment of the game before. The question might prime the players to think about the practice and their role within it.

This almost leaves the player hanging – hopefully with answers and ideas fizzing around their brain. This can be done on a group level or in a fly-by intervention, perhaps just in the ear of the individual. Examples below, these could be to check their understanding, challenge players or set an individual task constraint.

“What will excellent receiving look like?” This might get the individual to think about angles, body shape and distances of support.

“If Barcelona did this practice what would the ball speed look like?” This comparison seems to work well with teenage players. It’s almost like asking: is that your best effort?

To challenge the players to think about defensive balance: “What will happen if everyone runs forward?”

“How do you know whether to play to left or to the right?” To start players thinking about scanning to switching play. This would give you a platform to talk about overloads and creating 2v1 situations.

For a specific individual challenge: “Do you think you can beat your defender on both sides?”

And with the right age group, relationship and personality, you can use the “I don’t think you can…” strategy. So, perhaps with a confident forward “I don’t think you can score 2 goals in this game?”. Set a challenge and review it almost instantly.

As with all interventions, there is not a silver bullet or one-size-fits-all approach here. Some players don’t enjoy the uncertainty that questioning might present. They want answers and solutions. As we’ve discussed before, there are different times where other methodology might be better, be that command, guided discovery, trial-and-error or free play.

Think of these approaches on a spectrum, from certainty to uncertainty. Some enjoy the search and solve style, some will need more support and guidance. You might move up and down this scale depending on the context – your players in your environment. You might also consider;

- How much stress do we want the players to feel today?
- What is the current level of understanding around this area?
- Which individuals do we want to affect today?

Also in the mix is the lazy learner. The one who can’t be bothered and knows if they wait either a teammate will provide an answer or the coach will give up and share the answer. It’s important to try and distinguish between those who don’t know versus those that lack confidence or want to coast through sessions.

So, in sessions, game day or debriefs I've started using "What is the game asking you to do?"

### **I like this because...**

- There's not a one word answer, so it tends to start a conversation. The spinning wheel of answers won't work here.
- It works on the premise that the ideas are already in the players' heads. If practice has been representative of the game, we \*should\* have experienced something like this before.
- The question asks the learner to consider the opposition and the game; the opportunities and threats they pose and some strategies to overcome it!
- It encourages players to communicate without the coach. What are they noticing that they can share with their mates? You then hear conversations emerge, "If you played wider I think we could switch the ball to you quicker." When I hear young players communicate like this I get excited.
- It brings the individual back to their "super strength". What are they good at and how will they get into a position/situation to use it? For example, if I'm good at crossing the ball, what will I need to do to deliver the ball consistently? Answers could be endless, but might include: winning my 1v1, receiving the ball behind the line of pressure, playing with fewer touches...etc.
- If a player uses this approach game-to-game they will be able to draw on these experiences, self organise and "find a way" to get success, without a coach. As if, learning is cool and makes us better at stuff.
- In a stealth way, it can help the players learn the principles of play. With the ball – create and exploit space and without it – deny space and regain. If your team has a game model or game principles you can refer them to this. "Which principle is the most important today and why?"
- Another idea that has landed with me recently is "the opposition decides how we score". For example, If the space is behind the defensive line, how will we exploit it? If the opposition man mark in the middle third how will we play out? Again week-to-week we will build shared experiences and this will allow us perceive shared affordances – opportunities and potential opportunities for action.

### **What the research says**

"Questions that promote critical thinking require players to consider a number of responses before selecting an answer they feel to be most appropriate (Daniel and Bergmann-Drewe 1998; Wright and Forrest 2007). However, for players to be able to consider their responses, rather than expecting immediate responses, coaches need to allow time for reflection (McNeill et al 2008) and allow players the opportunity to discuss answers amongst themselves. Wiersema and Licklider (2009) talk about the need to provide opportunities for learners to ask questions of

themselves and others as this results in greater levels of learning; to think and reflect more deeply about their performance.

Time is required for critical thinking and reflection to happen (Chambers and Vickers 2006). The conversation analysis showed that coaches in this case rarely provided players with time to think about their responses. As already discussed, when an immediate response was not forthcoming, coaches filled the silence with an answer or re-initiated through a re-phrased question. McNeill et al. (2008) argues that inexperience tends to produce too many questions in quick succession, and this does not allow time to reflect on possible answers and their consequences.”

Are my players thinking “What is the game asking me to do?” And have they got the skills to do it. If not it’s probably down to me