Prof. KÖNIG, H.: Man-to-man Defence/Man Marking¹. An Effective Means to Develop the Physical/Mental Capacities and Technical/Tactical Competences of Young Handball Players

**Preamble**

An analysis of the male and female World- and European Championships of the past five years shows, apart from various tactical collective defence and offence systems, a new type of handball player in accordance with the development of the game over the past years. The question whether it was the nature of the game which brought about significant changes, or the influence of highly competent players upon the game, which ultimately changed the way handball is played nowadays, is difficult to answer. Probably both elements had a stimulating effect upon one another. One thing, however, seems to be quite obvious: new breeds of handball players have emerged who have the following characteristics in common:

- Top physical condition
- Extreme flexibility
- Well developed decision making
- High tactical competence
- Perfect technique – even under stress and with oxygen deficit
- Smooth transitions between various zone and man-to-man defences
- Flexible approach to combined zone and man-to-man defences
- The ability to switch quickly between offence and defence
- Action instead of reaction in defence
- High capability of anticipating opponents’ and own players’ actions
- And last, but not least, top speed in executing attacks and retreats.

¹ Since the difference between the two terms in our understanding is only a question of distance between the attacker and the defender, the term will be used synonymously.
If one subscribes to the idea that players are not simply born but made, youth training must orientate itself to the qualities and capabilities of today’s top world players. Top performance at the age of 22-25 is, however, the product of a long and carefully planned and supervised training process.

“Result” is the synthetic and statistic description of the competitive ability [of an athlete] and the outcome of the periodic training. “Process” is the dynamic description of the development of competitive ability and the analysis of the reason of outcome”\(^2\).

Since “training process” is the key-word, it is obvious that the target group must be the youngsters, and this is where to initiate necessary changes. Accepting long-term thinking as the basis for youth training instead of going in for quick results is not easy, often impossible for many trainers.

Understanding that fundamental changes in our youth training philosophy would not be accepted readily, the Methods Commission in the Austrian Handball Federation imposed a man-to-man/man marking defence competition system for the 11 and under on the clubs. Each participating club in the Austrian Championships of that age category had to play a 1:1/man marking defence of all six field players over the whole playing time of two halves of 15 minutes each. This, consequently, had an enormous impact on training methodology, structure of teams, positions/roles in teams (there were none any longer). This had an even greater impact on referees, as the traditional way of refereeing could no longer be applied.

Referees, who in youth handball matches refereed alone, could no longer take their position of observation in centre court. They were forced, similar to

basketball referees, to move along the outline. The space which had to be controlled was much bigger; actions on/off the ball had also to be checked – fouls or no fouls, correct number of steps, was the dribbling or the way the ball was attacked correct etc. Action took place much farther away what had been the referees respective stand points and very often happened behind their backs. Thus the understanding of the process which was set in motion by the referees in the young age categories and their co-operation became instrumental in the working of the new system.

Discussion

Man-to-man/man marking is basically a confrontation between two opponents with or without the ball, a confrontation between offensive and defensive players with the aim to exert power, applied on all six players on the court, to form obstacles which have to be overcome, and finally, to get into possession of the ball, thus starting their own attack.

Man-to-man/man marking is also about responsibility. The individual player cannot hide behind others, he must take his stand against his opponent, must accept the challenge and in this way, whether he likes it or not, becomes a new type of player. He becomes a player who constantly has to orientate himself, who again and again must gauge his own and his opponent’s intellectual, physical and technical-tactical capabilities. Courage is the key word, courage to make decisions, to use shooting chances firmly, or to execute risky passes.

Furthermore, players must be educated in such a way that they understand that the individual physical-mental capacities and the technical-tactical skills they develop man-to-man in the under 11 age category will contribute to a

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better understanding of the various elements of the game, and will enable them to execute zone defences more effectively.

We, however, would like to carry our observations one step further. Defence, in any ball team sport aiming at scoring a goal or winning a point, is the basis constant of success in play. In handball, particularly in youth handball, it seems to be an annoying duty only, a necessary but unavoidable stage before the “real thing”, attack play, provides all possible opportunities for a player to fulfil oneself.

The first step towards a “new youth handball player in defence” must be a change of attitude. Defence play, be it man-to-man, zone defence, or combined defences, must be seen in a different light:

**Playing in defence must become attractive, must be understood as an integral part of the game, and, in the long run, provide joy and satisfaction to the same extent (maybe even greater?) than attacking does.**

This understanding can be reached, when the way defence is played generates various satisfying attacking and shooting opportunities for the individual players, or gives them the chance to show how skilled they are, or even provides situations which permit them to “show off” to their peers. The means to achieve this is man-to-man defence.

**Man-to-man/man marking defence**

Man-to-man/man marking defence is a type of defensive tactic used in American football, association football, basketball, and team handball in which each player is assigned to defend, to man mark, and follow the movements of a single player on offense [...]. The strategy is not rigid however, and a player
might switch assignment (to help out) if needed, or leave his own assignment for a moment. Shadowing is the key word, and one does not leave one’s man unless someone else has taken up that player – has his eyes on him and is now tracking the player.⁴/⁵

This general idea of man-to-man in basketball and association football has to be adapted and further developed in handball. If all six field players are covered offensively, particular basic principles in attack such as, for example, “give-and-go” have to be applied. Thus man-to-man also trains offensive play and vice versa.

**To defend offensively means⁶/⁷:**

1. Players use the depth and width of the court. As a consequence they have to open space without the ball. When space is opened it has to be used dynamically.

2. Since the whole court - and not only the area between 6 and 12 metres - is used for attack, there is much higher strain on condition, and orientation is fostered.

3. Man-to-man with or without the ball is an intensive learning process with your opponent providing a sense of achievement. Moreover, it gives the trainer the opportunity to pair suitable partners (physique, mental

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⁶ Cp Feldmann, Klaus: In der Manndeckung spielen lernen, phillipka verlag/DHB, Münster, 2003
⁷ KÖNIG Helmut: Offensiv abwehren: Manndeckung, Austrian Handball Association, C-Licence lecture notes, ch.10, pp1-13
capacity, technique, tactical understanding) in training and sometimes, if
the coaches are far sighted, even in competitions.

4. Man-to-man also means individuality, means duels. In order to
"overcome" his opponent a player must have quick legs, mastery of the
handling of the ball (dribbling, feinting whilst dribbling), and the capability
to run loose without the ball etc.

5. To defend offensively provokes speed. Players have to win the ball
actively, thus decisions have to be taken under time pressure, and a
quick switch between offence and defence is a must.

6. Another characteristic of offensive play (one-to-one, man marking) is a
frequent change of situations in play, necessitating action instead of
reaction, and a constant improvement of one’s peripheral vision.

7. One of many advantages of man marking is the chance to “create”
particular types of attacking players, who are courageous and ready to
take risks.

8. In addition, offensive play creates situations in which players can make
mistakes, can learn from them, and can show what they can already
accomplish, thus getting a sense of achievement.

9. Players are exposed to constant pressure for action: the attacking player
without ball must invest first – running loose – before he can get the ball.
In this way the defence determines the improvement and effectiveness of
the attacker.

10. **Man-to-man/man marking consequently also improves attack.**
Basic rules in attack:

- “Open” the central space for the player in control of the ball/your co-players
- Priority for the player with the ball
- Shift your area of attack constantly
- Safeguard the space behind the player in control of the ball
- Use give-and-go as one of the main attacking techniques/principles
- Be playable
- Move into free space
- Offer yourself to the ball carrier
- Run loose with the ball
- Free yourself with the ball

Basic rules in man-to-man/man marking defence

- Find the opponent you have been assigned to
- Keep your eyes on your man and the ball
- Keep your player in front of you. Your position must be between your opponent and your own goal
- Have your feet positioned beyond shoulder width with most of the weight distributed to the balls of your feet
- Your knees should be slightly bent
- Lower the centre of gravity of your body
- Position your arms in such a way that you are always ready to accept or accompany the player assigned to you
- Back up your team mate
- If attacking players cross in front of you, you must take the crossing player on and must pass him on to your co-player and vice versa
Conclusion

The introduction of a compulsory man-to-man/man marking competitive system for the ten to 11 year old can only be the beginning of a methodological way towards ball orientated open defences which offer plenty of individual physical, mental, and tactical opportunities of development to players.

Man-to-man/man marking fosters the development of a play-related positive aggressiveness which is undoubtedly necessary in order to fight for the ball or to close down fast towards the opponent when the ball is in the air. Moreover, man-to-man/man marking is also a mirror of one’s own capabilities and deficits and therefore a very important self-oriented learning tool.

On the psycho-social level man-to-man/markering defence is a way to foster the self-esteem of a player by confronting him with situations which are solvable. The decisive step for the up-and-coming handball players will be their being incorporated into group, and collective defence work in later years. The way from the individual man marking defence of all field players on the whole court to zone defences, even to defensive 6:0 ones, will be characterized by a brief transitional period in which semi-offensive defences (three players at 6m, and three players outside 9m) with clearly defined ways of operating will be stipulated by the federation. Only at the age of 16 -18 will the coaches be permitted to use any defences they can think of (zone defences, man marking, man-to-man, combined defences etc.) to reach their tactical aims in competitions.

The question whether the new methodological approach towards developing more competent young players, who will be better equipped to match the challenges of handball in the future, will be successful, can only be answered after a training-, and maturing period of about six to eight years has come full cycle, and a thorough evaluation process has been carried out.
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http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Man-to-man_defense


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