

Game Analysis

Breaking Down the Key Aspects of the Game
Sporting KC Asst Coach - John Pascarella



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An Interview with

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by

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Edited by Tom Mura



Tom: Our guest today is John Pascarella. John is the Assistant Coach with Sporting Kansas City of Major League Soccer here in the United States. He played professionally for 9 years before starting his coaching career as an assistant at the University of Maryland. John went on to work in Northern Virginia as a high school coach and in the Olympic Development Program before taking over as Head Coach and Technical Director at the Northern Virginia Royals in the USL's Premier Development League. John is also a voracious reader and student of the game. He has shared his knowledge previously with World Class Coaching members in blog posts, in magazine articles on coaching methodology. Thanks for joining us today John.

John: It's great to be here Tom. Thanks and the lead in there was very complimentary. I haven't had that many good things said about me at one time in one place in a long long time, so thank you.

Tom: No problem. I've asked John here today to discuss game analysis, what to look for in the game and how to help our players understand what to do about it. So when we're looking at game analysis we're talking about looking at both our team and the opponent, but what's the first thing that you look for when you look at the other team?

John: The first thing I generally look for is the shape of the team that we're playing against and how they're set up. Were they playing a back 3 or back 4? What are their numbers in midfield and what's that shape in midfield? How many lines are there to that team, is it a 4-3-3 but it's set up more like a 4-1-4-1 where there's four lines. Those types of things are the first thing that I look at and really the most obvious initially. The thing that comes next I think is what that shape looks like then in attack and in defense, so how open is it when they have the ball. Are they spread from sideline-to-sideline? Is there a lot of space from front to back or is it a more condensed team?

Same thing defensively, what is that shape look like? Does it change after they have attacked and they've lost the ball to their defensive shape. You notice it all of a sudden if there was 4-3-3 become a 4-5-1 and where's that line of confrontation for them. So those are some of the first things and most obvious things that you can see in the first few minutes of the game because generally those first few minutes are a little bit hectic and frantic especially at the MLS level and the ball turns over and enough times you can see the opposition in attack and in defense and kind of see what that shape looks like both ways.

Tom: That's interesting. What you said about looking forward at the holes as well, I mean looking at are they spread wide, are they spread long? When you're looking at that like let's say for example you see a team that is spread very wide and very high and you're looking at gaps in the areas, how does that affect what you're going to do with your teams?

John: We'll, you know we have a certain way that we want to play a certain style that we want to play a certain pattern to our play here in Kansas City and some teams are easier to play against than others but I would say generally speaking that you can take any team that's wide open and they're going to be more easy to play against than they would be if they were very very compact. So you want to see where those spaces are. Is it available as you're playing out at the back to play into your central midfielders and play directly through the middle and up the gut. Is it more open out wide and what are their numbers like out wide.

Again, generally speaking there's going to be more space out there and fewer numbers with the opposition, so there's maybe more room there to play. But all of that comes in, in that initial glancing and first looking at the team and seeing what that shape is and where those spaces are and again how they react to your playing in to those spaces because as I said you could be playing out of the back, you play into central midfield but all of a sudden they do a very good job of collapsing into the center of midfield and they're starting to win the ball there. So you've got to think of other options or maybe even the next step. You play into the center of midfield where is it going to next.

If they're collapsing essentially do you want to just lay that ball or set that ball back again and I'll spray the next one wide? Do you want to play that next one further forward depending on what their back 4 or back 3 were doing? So all of that comes into play.

Tom: So really when it comes down to it, it sounds like for you is what are they taking away and what are they giving? I mean because defense in soccer is often been described as a short blanket. You cover the head and you expose the feet, you cover the feet you expose the head. So what are they giving you and what are they taking away?

John: The analogy is absolutely perfect and that is exactly right. There's always something that they're going to be giving you. The field, especially ours is one of the bigger ones in MLS, so there's space to play which is how we want it. And so the opposition isn't going to be able to take everything away. Now, what we've seen happen a lot at Sporting Park is the teams once they lose the ball and often times when they lose it they haven't committed a lot of numbers forward, they're just kind of sitting back in a shell. So although there may not be spacing gaps to get in behind them or even some space wide, there is space to possess the ball in that middle third of the field.

And so if that ends up happening it's just the matter of us being patient and keeping it in that middle third, but to go back to what you said it really depends on what they give you because they're going to give you something. Now the question is can you exploit it? Can you be bright enough as a team to see what it is they're giving you and take advantage of that?

Tom: That makes sense. Now, obviously the starting point like you said is you're looking at formation and once the ball is moved then everything changes with formation but then you're looking at style of play next. Which do you think it more influences your reaction to a team either their formation, their style of play, obviously it's some combination of the two but how do style of play come into it?

John: Well, it is a combination of the two and the style of play again you could take a simple shape. Let's take a 4-2-3-1 and there's a million ways to play it stylistically. So if that team likes to play long out of the back what you may see from that 4-5-1 is maybe their wide players are pinched in or maybe even their wide players are inverted. Where their right-footed guys playing on the left and their left-footed guys playing on the right so that they have a little bit more narrow shape and the reason why they would have that more narrow shape if they were a direct team is that they want to be able to pick up second ball as in the midfield. Or you could take that same 4-2-3-1 and you can have them be very spread out and have them be a team that builds up from the back and they're looking to play through the lines.

So the shape is important. The formation for me is the first thing you really look at but then the next most important thing is how are they playing within that formation, is it a direct style? Are they trying to play out of the back? As they're playing out of the back who were they looking for? Are they looking to release wide players? Are they looking to get a certain central midfielder on the ball so that he can dictate play. So style of play I think goes really hand-in-hand with that formation.

Tom: That makes sense. Now, do you believe that you should change your formation or your style of play based on the opponent that you're playing?

John: Philosophically I believe that you need to do it at times. Sometimes you can prepare the team that way, sometimes there's tweaks you need to make it half time or during the course of the game. But generally speaking I think that you should have a way that you want to play, a formation you want to play, a style that you want to play and stick to that otherwise I think it becomes very very confusing for the players. But with that said, I can tell you even if you look at last weekend's game against D.C. United, we changed the way we played a little bit from what's the norm and if you watched our team and you've watched us over the last few years what the one thing you'll notice is our formation doesn't change much. We play 4-3-3, usually with one holding guy, occasionally with two holding guys but usually one holding guy and two attacking central midfielders.

And we play that 4-3-3 very aggressively especially when we lose the ball. We're often pressing high, we're pressing immediately. We won't drop off and we'll look to win it back as early as we can and play as much of the game as we can in the opposition's half. And we do that whether we're at home

or we're away. But there is times when we'll have to change that a little bit, and that D.C. United game at RFK Stadium last weekend was a perfect example and the reason is if you look at the strengths of D.C. they let teams come on to them. Even when they're at home they don't feel obligated to have the ball and to have the most possession in the game.

They don't feel the need to keep it, to dictate the pace of the game but they're set up in a way where they're in two blocks of four and they're very very compact defensively and they will often times leave either Espindola and Silva or Espindola and Rolfe or Silva and Rolfe or whoever their two front runners happen to be. They leave them pretty high up the field and cheating. And what I mean by cheating is that they're not honest in their defensive duties. They might do some passive defending and as the ball gets by them they go and look for soft spots so that they can get the ball as soon as their team has won it and they can start on the counter.

And if you look at a number of their goals that they've scored this year and last year, they've scored the majority of them that way. Compact and defense. They win the ball, they instantly play forward into Espindola or Rolfe's feet and then they flood numbers forward. And so they counter other teams to death. Well, ours normal style going against them would have put us in jeopardy I think, we think more than it would have been worth it. So we decided yes we're still going to go and play the same expansive type of attacking game that we normally play.

But when we win the ball instead of pressing immediately or anytime they had a goal kick or a deep free kick in their end, instead of stepping high and pressing, we drop off and reduce the space in behind us and force them to have to dictate the play and to force them to have to try to make the game, and they were very very uncomfortable in doing that. You could see it and anybody could see it in watching the game.

So to answer your question I know it was kind of long winded but I believe there are times when the stress and the importance of winning the game and getting points is there that you do have to or should change your style a little bit. With that said I think you've got to practice it as well. It's not just something that you say hey this is what we're going to do and now you go out and roll the ball out and expect your team to do it. It was something that we've obviously worked on, it's something that we've done a number of times not only this year but last year. But I would say probably 10% to 20% of the matches played that way, whereas the majority of the time we have our style and our way of dictating play and pressing high.

Tom: Right, and it sounds like that change in style also kind of fit your team's personality and style anyway in terms of being able to make those adjustments. So you made those in the previous weeks coming up to the game and then you kicked off that way?

John: Correct. We made that plan after having studied the way D.C. played, the way they create their chances, the goals that they'd scored when they're most dangerous. We decided as a staff this is how we want to play against that team. This is what we think is important in the game and then we set ourselves up the whole week in terms of our training. Whether we were working on attacking, whether we were working on defending, whether we were working on countering, whatever it was that we were doing we were focusing on the idea of having our line of confrontation be a little bit deeper and then making the decision once we've won it.

Can we go immediately and try to counter them or should we hold it here and try to keep it a little bit and dictate the pace of the game and where we want to play it. So yeah, it was something that we had prepared for all week.

Tom: Then you've got the advantage obviously of scouting reports and video and analysis and all of that with college coaches even, high school coaches certainly and definitely youth coaches. We're making it up as we go. If you have an opponent that you've seen a number of times sure you may know them just because you've played them often, but a lot of times you'll get on the field and there you're in a State Cup match with a team maybe you haven't seen before and you have to look for adjustments to make and things to change.

The question in my mind always comes down to how soon do you change what you're doing in order to try to take advantage of what they may not be doing or things you see in them. You get those coaches that will pull their trigger quickly and change your formation or drastically change a player's role or responsibility within the game. When do you think in general, I know specifics are tough to nail down in this kind of scenario but when do you look to make those kind of changes? Half time? Last 10 minutes? What are you looking for?

John: Well, I think it depends on the level that you're coaching as well but if you're talking about high school and youth soccer, ODP soccer and I've coached in all those environments. Generally, I would wait till half time and the reason for that is I may give bits of information during the first half but I think as a developmental tool what you want to do is to see how your players react to some of the scenarios that are put in front of them that might be different than what you either prepared for or what they've seen in the past.

So, you may want to give them some trigger words or some clues and ideas about what they want to do in certain situations. But for the most part I think it may make more sense to see how they react to it and then at half time go through that whole guided discovery process of what did you see? Why did you move this way? Why was your reaction as a group or as a line or whatever the

case maybe? Why was it this way? What did you see? What is it that you can tell me that you were trying to do or trying to achieve by moving this way or by implementing this style or this tactic?

Because I think what's most important at that youth level is that the players are thinking that they're able to solve problems. Because I can tell you at the professional level we can try to tweak things before half time but depending on where you're playing. When you're playing in our stadium, when you're playing in Portland, when you're playing in Seattle, when you're in the couple of these different places it's hard to get information out to your players because it's just too loud to relay that information.

Tom: True.

John: Now, you might be able to get it to someone that's closest to you on your sideline but maybe the information needed to go to the far side of the field. So now he has to give it to somebody and that guy is going to give it to somebody before it eventually reaches the point where you wanted that information to go and it becomes like the game telephone where you tell one guy, he tells the next guy, and then the information is changed a little bit by the time it hits the final receiver.

So, that all happens or I should say at the pro level if you want that to happen and you want them to be able to solve some of those problems and to understand some of those things they see then you have to give them those opportunities as youth players to learn, and then interject your thoughts and get a lot of your coaching points and your teaching across at half time.

Tom: That makes sense. Now, we've talked about looking at what the opponent does and how they're set up and what they're giving us and what they're taking away, but when you're evaluating your own team's performance and maybe we're talking. . . I guess we're talking every level but I'm thinking specifically at the youth level because they have horrible days and good days, I guess like everyone, but how do you look at your own team? What do you look for in your own team that says, "Yeah we're doing what we want to do well" and kind of what process do you go through looking at that?

John: Again for me it goes back to the shape of the team. Are they playing in a way and initiate, organize in a way relative to one another and aligns to how we prepare for that match? Is our 4-3-3 organized where our three central midfielders are close enough to one another where they can play together or are they so spread out that there's no support amongst the three of them? If we work on playing out of the back and trying to play through the lines are those central midfielders and the

wide wingers providing opportunities for our back 4 to be able to play out and get the balls into their feet? Are they showing in the places where they can get the ball?

Our people once we played into. . . Let's say we played from a right back into a right winger and that right winger is facing our own goal. Our central midfielder is getting in good supporting positions underneath him to receive the ball and I'll play forward again. We're going to switch the point of attack. So again, it goes back to the two things we talked about earlier, it's the shape of the game and the style of play. Is your team doing the things that you had worked on, the things that you had talked about in preparation for that game and the things that you've been doing all season.

I would assume that the things you're doing in preparation for that game are fairly similar to the stuff you've been doing the rest of the season. I don't know too many youth teams that changed their style from one way to the other.

Tom: Yeah, right.

John: So it's really about are we doing the things that we're good at? Are we doing the things that we're set up to do? Are players getting into the right places to be able to play that way?

Tom: Yeah, that's great. I think that we're all trying to set our team up depending on our philosophy and our style and they vary and thankfully they do, otherwise the big game would be boring if everybody approach at the same way but I'll try to get our players on that same page in working together that way. What are the mistakes that you've seen since you've coached at every level of the game? What are the mistakes you've seen coaches make tactically in their analysis of the game or the way they approach their players with that information?

John: Well, I think it's been a little bit different at different levels but just philosophically speaking if I am analyzing a game this weekend when we play Colorado versus when I was coaching in youth soccer or with an ODP team or even my PDL team. What I'm looking for this weekend against Colorado has a lot more to do with what Colorado's doing and then how we can exploit it. Now part of it has to do with is our shape good? Are we doing some of the things we talked about or are we causing our own problems? But a lot of it will focus on is Colorado set up the way we're used to seeing them set up? Can we do the things that we want to do and prepared for against this team, against this shape, against this style?

That philosophy for me is completely flip flop when I'm talking about a young team and anytime I've coached the youth team or ODP team, high school team it's always been about my team. I didn't care much what the other team was doing. Now there could be a couple of little tweaks that you would make if the other team was being very very direct. Do you want to drop off a little bit more so that you don't expose the spacing behind you? Some small little tweaks like that.

For the most part with younger teams I've always focused on us and what we're doing. Are we playing the way we want to play? Are we playing as quickly as we want to play? Are we dictating the play? All those things that involve our style of play, our tactics, our way of playing, are we doing those things? Because that's for me and again this comes down to my philosophy. I want to develop players that can dictate play. I want to develop players that are not reacted but are on the front foot and they're going after what they want.

They're trying to play in places and let's say that build up maybe is on the right hand side of the field with the thought of we're going to play down this right hand side but the objective really is simply to clear space on the left so that we can isolate our left wing or against their right back 1 v 1 and how often can we do that? That maybe a tactic that we worked on in the game because we know the local team that we happen to be playing this weekend and so I'm going to focus on those things and not necessarily how the other team is reacting to us building up on one side and then switching play out to the other.

Tom: So the mistake could be really looking too much at what the other team is doing instead of just focusing on playing your own best game.

John: In my opinion with youth soccer and when you're talking about the development of players it makes more sense to worry about your own game than it does what the other team is doing.

Tom: That makes sense. Now as coaches at every level that listen to the podcast and give us feedback we've got guys that are coaching U6 soccer all the way up through. We've had a couple of professional coaches that have given us feedback and I guess my question is to help those coaches that maybe are new to this and are just learning to become kind of tactically aware, are there good books or resources or methods that you would suggest that would help them kind of become more tactically aware and be able to see these things more easily?

John: I would suggest two things. I think reading is a great thing and then watching the games, any level games whether you're going to watch other youth games in your area or even high level games because sometimes in those high level games it's easier to see shape and style of play than it is in

some of the youth games that you watch but when we talk about books and there's a number of really good ones out there but David Platt the former player and coach has put out a series of books. In fact, I think it may have been through you guys the World Class Coaching.

Tom: Yup.

John: And I know it's maybe a shameless little plug here but it's not one that we'd actually talked about or thought about till now but when I read his books on How to Play Against, the 4-4-2 How to Play Against the 3-5-2, the 4-3-3, it gave me a better understanding not only of how to play against those systems but also how to set those systems up in a way that was a little different than the way I envision those systems to be played. Beauty is in the eye of the beholder. So every coach is going to see a system a little bit differently than the next but that series of books that he puts out gives you a pretty good idea of the three major systems that are out there and some of the variations within those systems and then how you can not only attack within those systems but also how to transition and defend within those systems.

So I think that's a pretty good series of books. There's a number of them out there that are very very good. And the other thing I would say is regardless of whether you coach at a U6 level or a U16 level or a PDL team or a pro team, I think the coaches have to go through continue education. Whether they don't have a license at all and they're starting with their very first won or whether they have their "C" license and they're pushing to go get their "B" or their "B" license and they're going push and get their "A."

I think that every coach should have that mentality of constantly trying to learn more and get better. And that process is an ongoing one. It's not necessarily that you have to go get your "C" today, your "B" next year and your "A" right after that. But as long as you're applying those principles of what you've learned in those courses and then digesting it and using it and processing it and trying to get something from it and then eventually adding on to that going to get the next one or going to do some other continued stuff or we're going to watch a pro team train or a college team train and pick up little tidbits here and there.

All of that stuff I think is great and it begins with the coaches because those are the guys entrusted with getting that information out to the players. If the coaches don't have that information, how are the players ever going to get it?

Tom: Sure, sure, and it sounds like one of the best ways is probably to sit, like you mentioned, sit and watch other games and break them down as if you were coaching them. Look at the shape, the

formation, look at the style, look at the lines, what would you do if you were coaching. So by watching those games like you said, I mean, I can see doing that at the professional level, watching the pro games. It's easier to do it in person I think that it is on TV.

So trying to get to the game whenever you can and just practice because the more you practice the better you get at it. And certainly how to play against and beat the 4-2-3-1 and 4-3-3 and 4-4-2 would be great, so I'd definitely put a link to those books in the show notes for people that are interested in them.

John: Yeah. I think that makes sense for you to do that for sure.

Tom: Well, I really appreciate your insight. It's been really helpful just in terms of getting that from a coach that's seen at every level of the game and hopefully our coaches can take information away from this and help them do a better job of analyzing their own teams and their opponents. So thanks a lot for joining us today John.

John: You're welcome. Tom, it was my pleasure. I appreciate it as always.

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