



Challenges of Coaching Youth Lacrosse: Expectations vs Reality

Written by Brian Langtry

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Most of the information that I am sharing in this e-book focuses on the importance of fundamentals – both team and individual. Both are essential in order to have individual and team success, but ultimately, without strong individual fundamental skills, no team can have success. Never underestimate the great importance of individual fundamental skills.

Do your players have a plan outside of practice to get better? Do they know what they should be working on in the off season? Who is guiding them from a lacrosse learning standpoint when they are not in the team setting? I speak to coaches all the time who say it's pretty much up to the player to get better in the offseason, with little or no guidance from the team or organization and even less personalized instruction. That makes it tough for youth players to know where to focus their efforts to improve...

I've teamed up with Exaro Sports, and we have the solution to the lack of personalized training available to youth players today. We have perfected personalized remote coaching for youth lacrosse players through the use of cutting edge technology. The same technology platform is used by NFL, MLB and NCAA teams. **Exaro Sports provides youth players with consistent, ongoing and interactive personal coaching that allows the players to go from Point A to Point B to Point C.** We evaluate each player on an individual and ongoing basis and determine the best approach to helping that player to improve. Our



nationwide network of coaches all have high level playing and or coaching experience ensuring that our subscribers are getting expert level personalized instruction.

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In this write up I'm going to share my experiences that I've had as I transitioned from a professional lacrosse player to a youth coach. I thought it would be an easy and seamless move, but I quickly learned that the expectations of the players and coaches varied significantly from the realities of the situation. I'll share some of the ways I attacked the problems and some methods I now use to train my youth players and teams. Hopefully you can take something from me and apply it to your situation!

If you have any questions about what is contained in this paper or about Exaro Sports, I can be reached at brian.langtry@exarosports.com



Transitioning from Pro Player to Youth Coach

When it comes to lacrosse, I've been involved in the game in some capacity for my entire life. I grew up on Long Island playing youth ball, played high school at St Anthony's and then on to Hofstra University. After college, I played in the MLL and NLL for over a decade, and was a member of Team USA for the World Indoor Championships.

In the professional setting, everything was pretty cut and dry; the coach outlines to the team and players what to do, and then the players go out and execute. Practices at the professional level were primarily focused on installing sets, plays or concepts that needed to be run during the upcoming game or season. There was no focus on fundamentals, because let's face it; once you get to the pros you have a pretty strong set of skills and fundamentals are assumed. Players are executing high level skills and making the extraordinary seem ordinary.

Every player I played with in the pros was ultra-competitive and accountable to himself as well as the team. The desire to be great was intrinsic to each player and his success in the league. Everyone worked hard to be the best, and everyone played hard all the time, with little or no exception. All of the guys I played with were good players because they had put in the time and effort *away* from practice starting at the youth level and then through high school and college.

Now fast forward to a few years removed from playing professionally, and I was ready to take on the challenge of coaching youth players and teams. I knew the game of lacrosse inside and out, and had the playing resume that spoke for itself. I figured I would easily be able to translate my knowledge of the



game and impart it to youth players. Well let me tell you about my experience! The best way I can describe to you how I felt on the first day of coaching youth lacrosse was, “HOLY COW!! What have I gotten myself into??”

I could see immediately that there was a serious disconnect between both the players and coach’s (mine) expectations vs the reality of what was going on. I knew that there would be a whole new set of challenges for me to overcome as I tried to wrap my head around coaching youth lacrosse. I had not anticipated the challenges that the players face when playing lacrosse or that the coaches face when dealing with youth.

Expectations vs Reality - Players:

After just a few practices, I was able to ascertain the expectations of the players. First, for many of the players, there seemed to be the feeling that by simply showing up to practice, they would improve. This is partly true, in that by attending practice each player should gain a better understanding of team concepts and how to play the game. Where they were wrong though, was in the individual improvement department! To see real improvement, players must put in time outside of practice, whether it is against a wall, shooting on a goal, practicing footwork, etc. Putting in the work outside of practice allows the player to get countless reps at a skill, while at practice these reps are limited or nonexistent.

The second thing I noticed was that a lot of the players must have missed steps 1 and 2 when they first picked up the sport, and wanted to start at step 3. Or, steps 1 and 2 just were not emphasized enough. What I mean by this is, there was a real dearth of commitment to the most basic and fundamental skills. Players expected to be good while totally neglecting to commit themselves to the fundamentals. For example, playing with your head up and ground ball skills seemed like an afterthought to some players, while the newest “toe drag” or faking technique had become skill 1A that everyone wanted to master. Pump the brakes! Step 3 is worthless if you can’t consistently execute steps 1 and 2. The reality is that as a coach you can NEVER overvalue the importance and commitment to basic fundamental skills. This message needs to be relayed to the players constantly...those that can play with their heads up and pick up ground balls consistently will have a much brighter future in the sport than those players who undervalue those skills. I believe that to be fact.

Nobody, whether it be a youth player or a pro player, is ever too good to not cultivate their fundamentals. I know that I mentioned above how there was no focus on the fundamentals in the pros, but what I meant by that was simply that it was *assumed* everyone had their fundamentals in order and would execute them 99.9% of the time. Guys were still hitting the wall or dialing in their shots outside of practice.

The third prevailing expectation or line of thinking that I gathered from the players was that the act of winning was easy, or that the players would win because of the organization we played in. There was almost a sense of entitlement to winning, just because prior teams in the organization had won. Of course, certain organizations or teams can have a winning culture and that is great, BUT, each season each individual team has to actually go out and earn and do what is necessary to win. No teams are ever declared the winner just because they feel they are the best! That is why we play the games, and have practices, and work away from practice, etc.



I feel it is very important to speak to the players about winning; the sacrifices, hard work and team work that are necessary for it to happen. Having a winning mindset is important, but that is much different than an entitled mindset. Winning is difficult and must be earned.

Also, very important to emphasize is that sports are not all about winning. Losing is not the worst thing to happen, and it will happen to everyone. Losing offers learning opportunities, and players can learn very valuable lessons from losing. Win or lose, players will learn and get better.

Expectations vs Reality – Coach (me):

Now while I noticed that the players' expectations vs realities were skewed, as I mentioned above, so were mine! At the very first practice I was somewhat disappointed that the players' fundamentals were not further along. I guess this can be attributed to two things. One, I was used to playing and viewing lacrosse at the highest level. Dropped passes and throw aways were few and far between at the pro level, while they were the norm at the youth level. Secondly, I realized that *many* of the players did not touch their sticks outside of practice.

I had to temper my expectations once I realized what I would be working with. First, youth players are still learning and developing, and fundamentals will always be a huge hurdle for every team. In fact, I've noticed that at the youth levels, the team with the best and most consistent fundamentals will win the game majority of the time! So, focusing on fundamentals and improving them is huge.

Another expectation I had that I quickly realized to be unrealistic was the thought that all players want to be great and will put in the work to get to the top of the mountain. I always wanted to be the best, so why didn't everyone else? Again, I had to take a step back and look at the big picture here. In youth sports there are the kids who are super competitive and want to get better any way they can. These are the types of kids who always have their stick in their hands before and after practice, and when they're at home. Then there are the kids who enjoy playing, but don't do much if anything lacrosse related away from practice. Finally, you have the kids who parents signed them up to play, and they just show up because that's what mom and dad told them they would be doing that day.

The last observation I had was that I expected more of the players to "get it" when it comes to sports. As in spatial awareness on the field, and understanding basic sports concepts that can be applied across all sports. I played lots of sports growing up, both organized and unorganized. Basic skills like dodging, drawing a "slide" and finding an open man can be practiced and learned while playing any number of sports, organized or not. It was at this point that I realized not all kids play multiple sports (though it greatly benefits them on the lacrosse field) and it would be up to me to teach some of them the basic sporting concepts.

It was after the first week of practice that I sat down and was able to truly grasp what challenges I had in front of me and how I would attack them. The most glaring issue I saw with the entire situation was that there was a lack of commitment to fundamentals both individually and as a team.



Setting the Foundation of a Fundamentally Strong Team

Each individual player's fundamental skills are ultimately up to that individual to improve them. While some improvement can be gained from practice, the real progress will be done away from the team setting.

Here, I want to go over some fundamental team concepts and principles that I adhere to when coaching my youth teams. These are concepts I believe in and that have helped my youth players and teams to play fundamentally sound team lacrosse. I firmly believe that the fundamentals can never be mastered, *especially at the youth levels*, and so it is critically important to make a commitment to being as fundamentally solid as possible.

At Practice:

To begin each practice, prior to jumping into team drills, I like to drill individual fundamentals for 15-20 minutes. Reason being, this may be the only skill work that some players get throughout the week. I've mentioned several times now just how important "practice away from practice" is, but the reality of youth sports is that some players just won't put in the time away from the team. So, I like to do high repetition skill drills that give the players lots of touches (catches, throws and groundballs). This gives the players who won't do anything outside of practice some much needed work on the basics.

Clearing:

The other thing I like to include in my practice plan every single day is a 10 minute session committed to clearing the ball out of the defensive end in unsettled situations. It's no secret that teams that can clear the ball experience much more success than teams who cannot. Clearing is vitally important because it gets the ball out of the defensive end and down to the offense, which puts pressure on the opposing team.

I've seen countless youth games where the strategy of the clearing team is to get the ball to the most athletic middle after a save and let him run it out. This works sometimes, for sure. But, when that middle can't get the ball, then what? Confusion, panic and then a turnover usually occur. I believe it's necessary to instill some clearing principles in the players that allow everyone to be a part of the process. By doing so, the team is much more dynamic and has multiple options to clear the ball up field. I've been around plenty of youth coaches who don't put much emphasis on clearing, and as a result their teams are awful at it!

When you boil it down, clearing the ball is really just a game of "keep away." The clearing team has one more player than the riding team, and the key to success is finding the open man. The most simple and basic way to teach clearing is to play "keep away." Set up a designated area that the players must stay within, and then play a game of 4v3 "keep away." The clearing players will learn spacing with each other (not getting too close to one another) as well as finding the open, uncovered man.

Now bump that "keep away" strategy up to the larger scale that is clearing in a game situation. There are countless ways and formations to employ when clearing the ball, but there are three main components that I believe must be used in any unsettled clearing situation.



1. **Breakouts:** After a shot and a save, the midfielders need to breakout going up field. Two low defenders need to breakout by banana cutting along Goal Line Extended (GLE) to provide an easy outlet. Between the breaking midfielders and low defensemen, the goalie should have an easy outlet to move the ball to.
2. **Working back to the ball after initial breakout:** Once the midfielders have made their initial breakout up field, if they do not receive the ball, they must cut back to the ball (whether it be with the goalie or a defenseman). Coming back to the ball creates shorter passes, and also helps the defenders and goalie if they are facing a pressure ride. Plus, working back to the ball enables the midfielder to get out from behind the player who is covering him.

One of the worst clearing failures I frequently see is when all three midfielders are just hanging out on the offensive side of the midfield line, hoping the defensemen and goalie will get the ball to them. The defenders and goalie don't stand much of a chance to successfully clear the ball that way. Teaching the players to work back to the ball will eliminate the scenario I just described from ever happening.

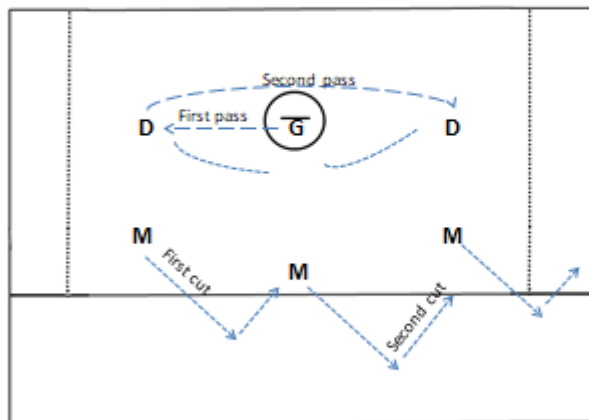
3. **Angles:** The final piece of clearing that must be applied to the previous two points is cutting on angles. The angles should be 45 degrees to the end line. Cutting and working on 45 degree angles gives the passer an easier target to throw to than if the cutting player were going straight away. Think of it like a football quarterback throwing to a wide receiver. It's much easier to throw to a player moving at an angle than it is to perfectly drop a pass over the receiver's shoulder as he is looking straight back.

As for the player receiving a pass, it's also much easier to catch a ball moving at an angle and being able to see what is in front of them as opposed to running straight away from the pass and into a possible sliding riding player.

Finally, it is harder to cover a player that is cutting on angles as opposed to running on a straight line. Cutting on angles adds the element of unpredictability to a cutters route.

Outlined below is a drill I like to run each practice that incorporates each of the three components outlined above.

Everyday Clearing Drill



1. Set up as if playing 6v6 defense
2. Coach shoots the ball to the goalie, the middies break up field at a 45 degree angle to the end line. The two low defensemen banana cut along GLE to provide an easy outlet for the goalie.
3. Goalie makes a pass to one of his low defenders
4. Low defender catches the ball and makes cross field pass to the other low defender
5. As the cross field pass is happening, the middies work back to the ball.
6. Once the 2nd low defender has the ball, he looks up field and passes to any midline. The other two middies who did not receive the pass break up field.

7. The midline with the ball looks up field and passes to one of the other middies, who then passes to the final midline, as all three work their way up field..

On Defense:

When I'm teaching team defensive principles and fundamentals to my teams, there are really three constants I focus heavily on. They are all important and easy concepts to teach. When done well, these team defensive fundamentals give any defense the opportunity to be very good as a unit.

1. **Get in the boat!:** The first concept I like to teach the team is that of protecting the "hole" or area directly in front of the goal. This is the area where the defense is most vulnerable to be scored on by a dodger or cutter due to the close proximity and favorable angle on the goal. The "boat" is defined by an imaginary line extending from the edge of the crease up field 10 yards and then arcing back down to the opposite edge of the crease.

As soon the ball comes into the defensive end, all players must "get in the boat" except for the player who is covering the ball carrier. Of course, no player will be stationary within the boat as they will need to adjust as the man they are covering moves around, but they need to stay "in the boat."

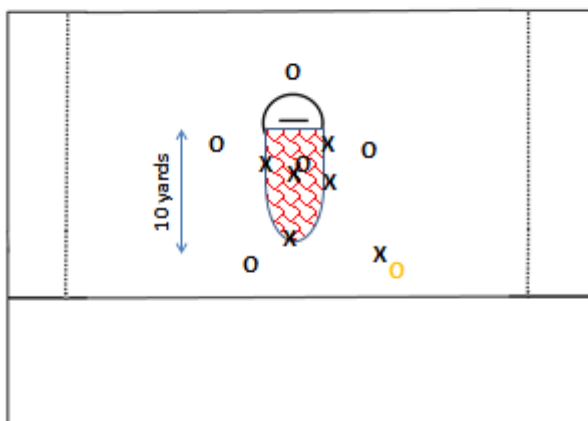
All defensive players who are off ball must be in the boat. Two feet in the boat is ideal, but at minimum each off ball player MUST have at least one foot inside the boat. What this does it keeps the defense from getting too spread out. A packed in defense leads to shorter slides and congests the middle making it harder for cutting players to get open or find space. As the ball is moved to a new offensive player, then that defender can leave the boat to go play the ball.

I've found that "the boat" is an easy concept for the players to remember and an easy message for me and my coaches to communicate. This concept is probably the easiest and most fundamental defensive concept you can teach your team.

I don't know about you, but I have seen so many youth games where the defense is way too spread out because the off ball defenders are following their guys all over the offensive end with no regard for where the ball is, or where they are in relation to the goal. This usually leads to the player with the ball dodging and then having a clear path to the goal with no contesting from the defense. Not good! If everyone would just "get in the boat" this scenario can be avoided.



The Boat



X = Defensive Player
O = Offensive Player
O = Offensive Player with ball

Defensive players who are not directly on ball must have at least one foot in The Boat at all times.

Being in The Boat helps to:

1. Keep the defense from getting too spread out
2. Clogging the middle of the field for dodgers and cutters
3. Protects the most dangerous part of the field

As the ball is moved, defenders will move in and out of the boat depending whether or not their man has the ball.

2. **Cut the field in half:** The second concept I like to teach is that of "Cutting the field in half" for the on ball defensive players. The on ball defenseman needs to know if the dodger is lefty or righty, and then wants to take away or overplay that strong side, thus "cutting the field in half" for the offensive player. Taking away the strong hand can be done by taking 1 step towards the direction of the strong hand, which in turn invites the dodger to the weak hand. Rather than playing directly in front of the dodger, we are asking our defenders to "shade" towards the strong hand.

I know it will be tough to determine the strong hand of every dodger on the opposing team, but it is usually safe to assume that the majority of players are right handed. Depending on where the dodge is occurring on the field, the defender will want to force the dodger either "top side," or "underneath," but to the weak hand regardless.



3. **Identify who will slide:** Finally, it's important to have a slide package established for your team. Maybe this is a coma slide, or crease slide or even an adjacent slide. It does not need to be complex and certainly don't overthink it, but you need to have a designated slide package so that everyone knows from where and when to slide. You can usually get away with having only one type of slide in your package, which will help keep things simple for the players. (The less thinking the better!)

I will say that almost any slide package will work at the youth level but **ONLY if all players are on the same page and communicating effectively**. With that said, it is important for each player who will be in on defense to understand exactly where the slide will be coming from (i.e. crease), and when to slide. You'll need to establish with your players how you define when someone is "beat" and thus making a slide necessary.

The last piece of the slide component is absolutely critical, and that is the communication amongst players. Establish a terminology that is easy to remember so that all players can communicate in those terms. For example, if a player is the slide man, he is "hot." If you can get all players on the same page and communicating effectively throughout a possession, your defense will have a great shot at being a solid unit.

On Offense:

When it comes to coaching offense to my youth teams and players, I try to keep things simple. There are just a few guidelines I like to stick to, and they can be applied to the offense as a whole, regardless of what set we are running or formation we are working out of. If the players can adhere to and play within these guidelines, things will usually go smoothly.

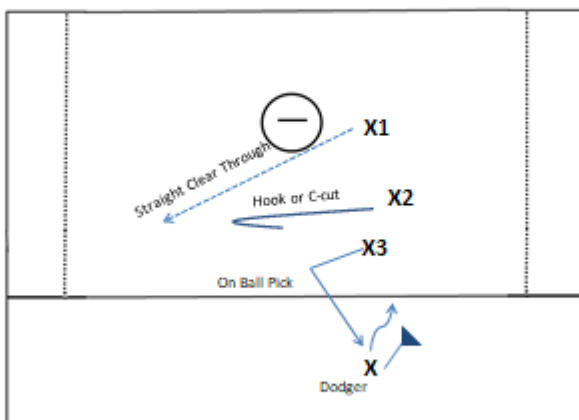
1. **Clear through or pick:** The offensive player who is in front of a dodger has two options when getting dodged towards: clear through or set an on ball pick. Clearing through creates space for the dodger to run in to while taking the defenseman out of the way. Setting an on ball pick can free up the dodger or lead to a pick and roll scenario. Of course the pick and roll needs to be taught so that the picker knows what to do *after* setting the pick. (Pick and Roll and the two man game are topics for another write up...way too in-depth to discuss here).

The bottom line here is that no player can ever stand and watch as a dodger is approaching – they have to do *something*. Pretty simple concept, and by giving the players two options, they should never get caught standing still if they are being dodged towards.



Clear Through or Pick Options:

- X1 – Straight Clear Through. Get to the other side of the formation and find space or pick on the backside
- X2 – Hook or C-cut. Clear through then turn back to see the ball if your defenseman slides.
- X3 – On Ball Pick. Step to the middle of the field and then approach the dodger and the back of the defenseman to set an on ball pick.



Notice that cut through players must go “underneath” or to the inside of the formation and dodger. In no instance can the cut through players go around or to the outside of the dodger. Cutting outside of the dodger invites an easy double team from the defense.

2. **Cutters or outlets:** This applies to all off ball players that are not directly in front of the dodger. Everyone needs to become either an outlet or a cutter if they are not dodging (or directly in front of the dodger). Players on the backside can cut the middle or to open space, while the players on the perimeter can provide an outlet.

It’s important to teach the players that they may be an outlet one instant and then the next they will need to cut through or pick as the dodger is coming their way. These roles of cutting through/picking and being an outlet or cutter will constantly be changing depending on where the ball is and what is happening on the field. Be sure to emphasize the importance of being aware of the play and not permanently assuming a role.

3. **Everyone has a job:** I really try to drill this point home with my players. Even if they are doing the “wrong” job, they are still doing something which will have a positive effect on the offense. Activity is better than inactivity. Whether it is as a dodger, clearing through, picking, cutting or being an outlet, there is something for everyone! At no point should any player be standing still and watching the play. Standing is not playing. If a player is not cutting through/picking, cutting or providing an outlet then they are not being an active participant in the offense.

Values

A team of youth players with good values can go a long way. The teams I’ve had that embraced the values I teach almost always see more success on the field than those teams who do not embrace the values. Outlined below are some of the values I like to convey to my youth teams year after year. The



values instilled in youth athletes can help the players as they grow into young adults, and the lessons offered through sports can be applied to real life situations, too.

1. **Never give up:** This one is easy. Teach the players to never give up, whether it is on a single play, or over the course of game or entire season. Perseverance always pays off in the long run. Giving up or quitting is never a good option.

Lacrosse is a fast paced game and teams can score a lot of goals in a short amount of time. Two years ago, we were playing in a summer tournament and my team was down 5 goals with just over 5 minutes to play in the second half of the game. At that point it would have been very easy to give up and start thinking about the next game. I kept reminding my guys to keep fighting and not to give up and good things would happen. Sure enough we ended up winning the game due to a nice 6 goal scoring streak combined with some timely faceoff wins. Of course, this type of result won't happen every time, but when it does it is the product of perseverance and not quitting.

2. **Play to the whistle:** Never stop playing until the official has stopped play! I can think of so many instances where something happens on the field, the referee does not stop the play because he does not see the need to make a call, but the players all look around as if the game should be stopped.

For example, we had a game where a loose ball rolled over to the sideline and appeared to go out of bounds (very close to the line). The opposing team stopped playing thinking it was out, stood around and then prepared to clear the ball. Meanwhile, one of my players had actually scooped the ball up just before it touched the line. As soon as he picked it up he looked to the front of the goal and passed to a wide open attackman for an easy lay-up goal. What made it even easier was that the defense had stopped playing altogether. While the other team had stopped playing despite no whistle from the referee, my guys kept playing and got a "cheap" goal as a result. I always remind my guys to play hard up until the whistle blows.

3. **Sportsmanship:** Good sportsmanship is always important. Play hard, but never dirty. Respect your opponent and the officials. I always want my players to be humble when we win and gracious in defeat; this shows good character.
4. **Know your teammates:** I always make sure that all of my players know all of their teammate's names. They certainly don't have to be best friends, but respect is important.

Getting to know each teammate goes deeper than just knowing their names. I always want my players to learn the tendencies of their teammates on the field so they can better anticipate plays developing and being in the right spot. This is as simple as knowing who is left handed vs who is right handed. Or, who is a good feeder and sees the field, vs know which players want to shoot more. Knowing what your teammates like to do on the field will make everyone better.



5. **No fear:** I apply this value to losing. Losing is learning, and learning is valuable. Therefore, I always tell my players “don’t be afraid to fail!” We stand to learn a lot more from a failure or loss than we do from a success or victory. While nobody enjoys losing, it will inevitably happen at some point. We can learn a lot about ourselves and our team from a loss. We can determine exactly what we need to work on and then go get better at it.
6. **Winning is Hard Work:** Nothing comes easy, especially winning. “Win each moment in time,” that is one statement I always like to tell my players. Each practice and game is broken down into “moments in time.” If we can win each moment, both individually and as a team then we will improve and also be successful.

Each ground ball, pass, catch, shot, play, dodge, etc. constitutes a moment in time. Winning that moment simply means being successful in that moment. Scooping up a ground ball, making a good pass, catching a pass, clearing through when a dodger is approaching, these can all be defined as victories for a “moment in time.” If our team can win more moments than the other team, then we have a good chance to win the game. Winning these moments comes from a commitment to fundamentals.

Winning these moments is difficult, and requires hard work, concentration and commitment to the task at hand. But, as I always tell my players, if we can focus on these small moments and be successful at “winning” them, then we have a chance to be great as a team.

Wrap Up

As you can tell from all that I have written, I firmly believe that there needs to be a great commitment to fundamentals both on an individual and team level. Perhaps during my professional playing career I took for granted just how important the fundamentals truly are, but once I made the transition to youth coach, I was quickly reminded and shown just how imperative they are to anyone who wants to excel at the game of lacrosse!

Hopefully I have provided some useful information that you can take from me and apply to your team or organization. I realize that what I’ve written is not earth shattering, but rather just a reaffirmation that fundamentals win games and creates great players based on my personal experiences with the game!

If you have any questions about what is contained in this paper or about Exaro Sports, I can be reached at brian.langtry@exarosports.com. Feel free to reach out to me!

-Brian Langtry