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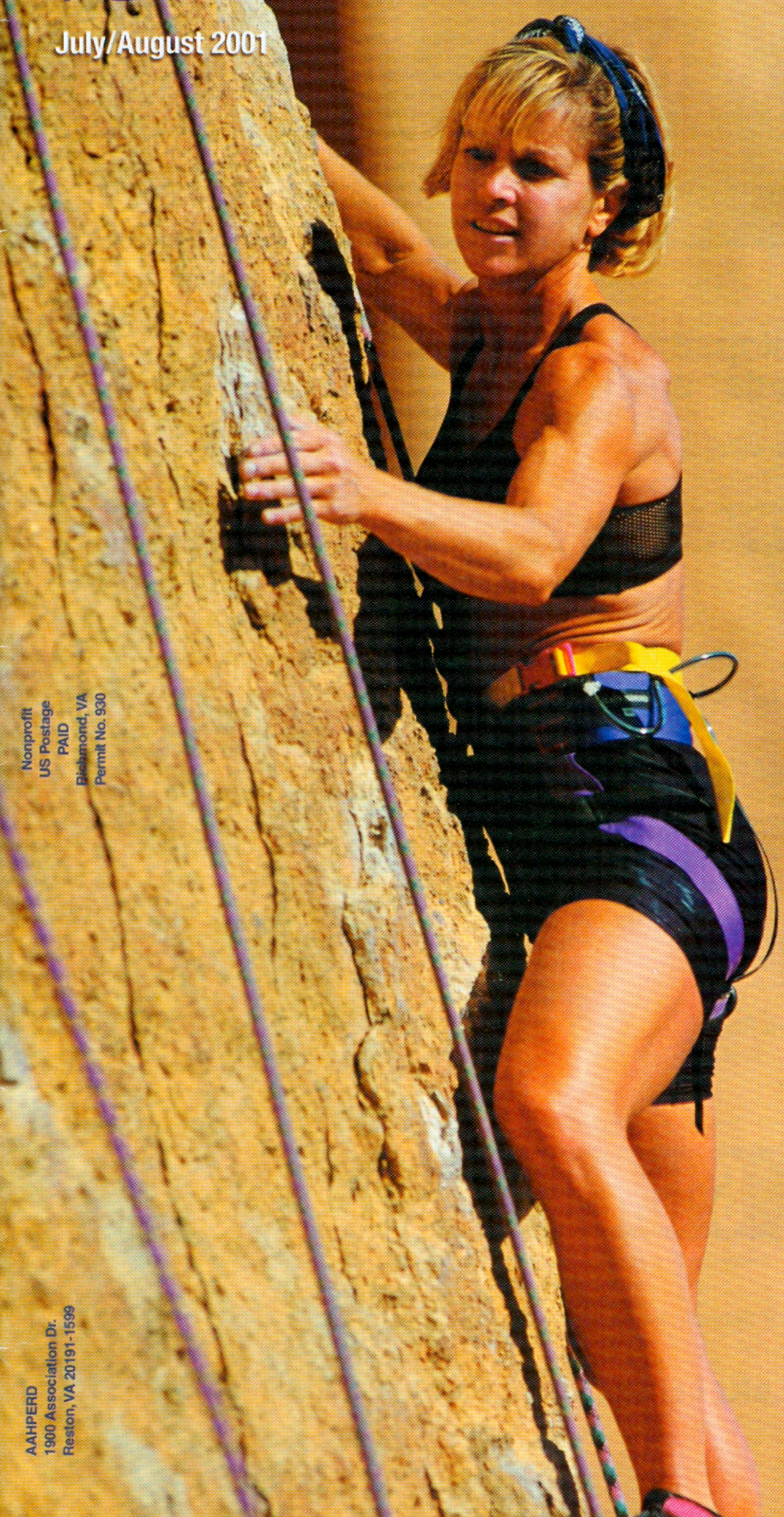

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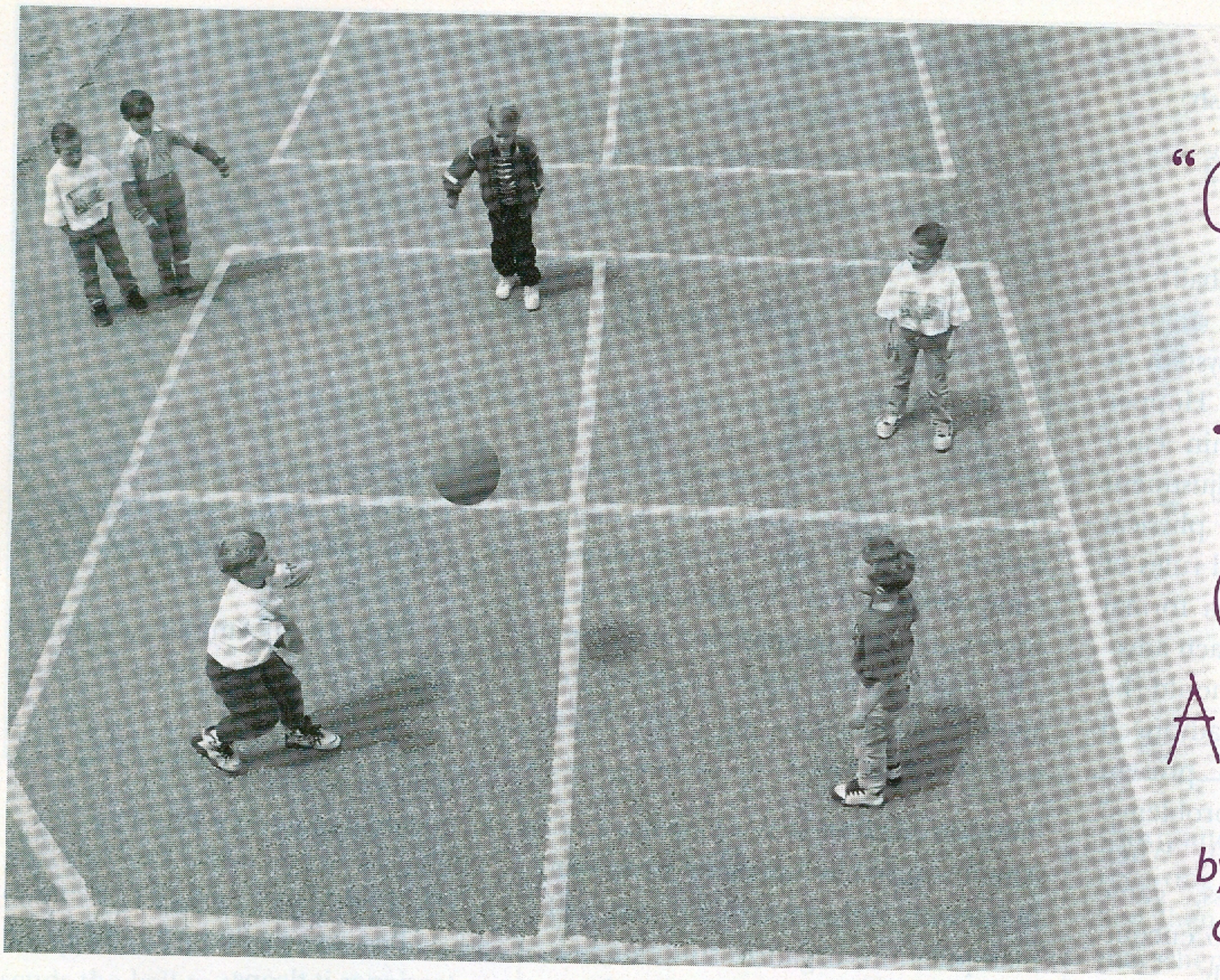


"Can We Play THAT Game Again?!"

by Tim Hopper and Rick Bell

Most children would rather play a game than practice. When they ask, "Can we *play* instead of practice?" the teacher will normally reply, "Not now. You need more practice. At a later time, perhaps." Such a response does not encourage children. Children need to play games early in their introduction and participation, but the play needs to be modified to suit their physical, mental and social abilities. Unfortunately, modified games seem like poor substitutes for the 'real' games they see on television. It is important to promote and reinforce excitement in the game modification based on the understanding of how to play tactically and learning game strategies.

One approach, called Teaching Games for Understanding (TGFU), places the child's concept of a game as the central concern before refining skills. Thorpe, Bunker and Almond (1986) popularized the TGFU approach in the United Kingdom in the 1980s, and it is gaining wider interest in the United States (Rink, French, & Werner, 1991; Werner, 1996; Griffin, Mitchell, & Oslin's (1997) as well as in Canada (Hopper, 1998). TGFU enables students to conceptualize that what to do, and how to do it, creates the pre-requisite for learning a skill. In this approach, rather than show pupils how to perform a skill required to play adult games (such as volleyball and soccer), the teacher introduces the pupil to a modified game that focuses on a skill or strategy that students need to develop in order to play successfully. Through a series of guided discovery questions the teacher allows students to recognize the strategic (ways of playing), tactical (how to beat an opponent) and technical (effective skill performance) aspects of playing a game. In the TGFU approach the teacher explains the *why* of playing a game, before the technical *how* of performing the skills. This focus allows children to understand what it is they are learning.

Creating a modified game that all children can play and find challenging is difficult, but not impossible. The progression from modified games to adult games is a complex and long-term commitment. Too often teachers leap from simple tag and ball manipulation to adult games that overwhelm all but the most able students. An essential characteristic of the TGFU approach is that games develop from within a classification system. The system enables low-organized, simple-focused games to develop into lead-up, modified games that eventually become formal adult games (Wall & Murray, 1994). This paper uses a game classification system (see Figure 1) that identifies four game forms. They are:

- target (curling, lawn bowls, golf)

- court or net/wall (volleyball, tennis, squash)
- field or striking/fielding (baseball, cricket)
- territory or invasion (rugby, football, basketball).

A more comprehensive analysis of how this classification system is developed can be found in Hopper (1998). All the games within each category evolve from the adjustment of the object, equipment, physical space, number of players and rules of play. In developing toward a formal adult game the TGFU approach advocates that 'game forms' should be modified to represent the advanced form, and exaggerated to present students with tactical problems" (Thorpe & Bunker, 1989). When teaching tactical awareness, game forms should be modified to encourage students to think tactically.

In this article we follow Hopper's principles for developing modified games for the net/wall category using a TGFU perspective. The first principle for a net/wall game is "consistency." It is the initial intent in net/wall games to get the ball in the play area more often than an opponent. This skill can be developed with co-operative games where students work with partners to keep the ball in play as often as possible. The next principle is "placement and positioning." In this principle students make it more difficult for opponents to get the ball in play by placing the ball in areas where opponents will have greater difficulty returning the ball. If the opponents are doing the same, then they need to take positions to cover the play area more effectively. The final principle is "spin/power," and refers to how students hit the ball to make it more difficult for opponents to return. The "spin/power" principle requires refined technical skill for appropriate spin and to control the power transferred to the object. This principle develops more in advanced game play, but a foundation can be set with modified equipment such as transition balls and short-handled, lightweight racquets. The game lesson below, suitable for students eight years or older, illustrates the concept.

Figure 1. A List of modified games developed with a TGGU approach. (References as noted)

- Target games (Thorpe & Bunker)
- Batting and fielding games (Hopper; Thorpe & Bunker)
- Net/Wall games (Hopper; Thorpe, Bunker & Almond)
- Territory or invasion games (Doolittle & Girard; Spackman; Thorpe & Bunker; Mitchell & Griffin)
- Principles for tactical teaching and assessment, along with 169 lesson plans (Griffin; Mitchell & Oslin)

The Line Game

After a suitable warm-up of movement with active stretching and ball manipulation, organize students into pairs. Ask them to use two pylons to make a line approximately one and half meters apart. Preferably, the pylons are placed on a line marked on the ground (Figure 2a). Instruct as follows: "When you throw the ball it must bounce once on your side of the line between the pylons. Your partner must catch the ball after one bounce on his or her side of the line." Once the students start playing a cooperative simple throw, a bounce, and catch game develops. At this point, it is important to have an array of different size and textured rebounding balls available so that partners can select one that as a pair they can throw and catch consistently. If students cannot keep the ball going with the skill refinements taught, they may need to practice simple throw, bounce and catch tasks individually against the wall, and then as they move about a space. In this way they can practice and improve their skills, then return to the game.

When the students are able to play the game, ask them tactical- and spatial-related questions, such as:

Q. Where should you throw the ball to make it easy for your partner to catch?
A. Aim for the middle of the pylons.

Q. Where should you stand to receive the ball?
A. About a step back.

Q. Why?
A. Because catching the ball is easier as it drops.

This initial round of questions helps students become more consistent, because they position themselves effectively in relation to the pylons and the bounce of the ball

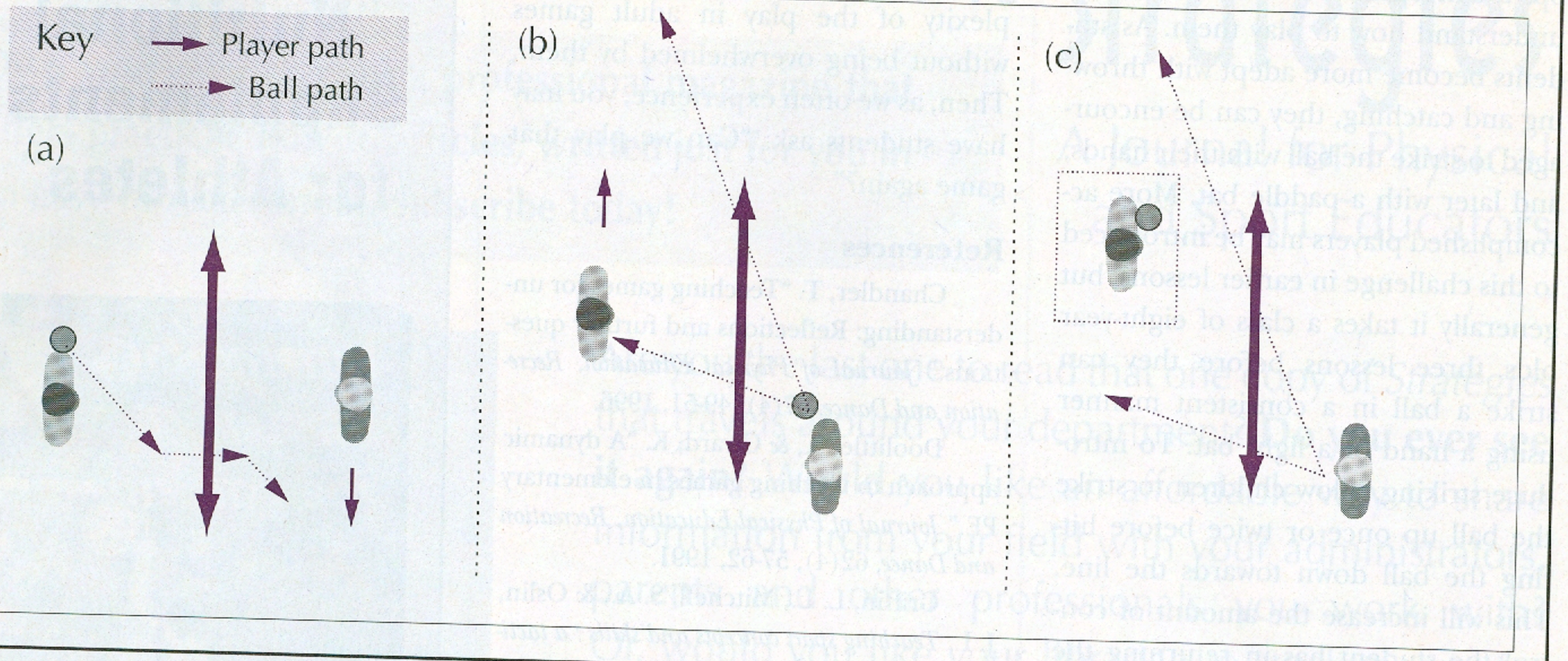
As the children start to play consistently the teacher can develop the second net/wall principle of placement and positioning, and a new rule is introduced into the game. Instruct as follows: "In the same game as before, try to send the ball so that your partner has to move. After catching the ball you must send it straight away from where you caught it." The game is still cooperative but the tactical- and spatial-related questions below are then possible:

Q. Where should you send the ball to make your partner move?
A. To the spaces on either side of her.

Q. Good. Now, where should you stand after sending the ball?
A. The middle.

Q. The middle of what?

Figure 2. A Diagram of Positional Play of Players in the Line Game



Usually students will have a puzzled look. Ask them where the middle is. Often it is the middle of the two pylons. However, once a student sends the ball to the side of his or her partner (who must then move sideways to receive the ball) a new target area is presented to the player. Figure 2b shows that this new target area creates a large space to one side of the receiving player. Therefore, as shown in Figure 2c, the receiving player will need to move to the middle of the target area, or else the sending player can send the ball to the open space where it may be too difficult to field.

As students start to move to cover their opponent's target area their ability to move sideways is challenged. From a basic ready position students comprehend the need to push off the outside foot with bent knees to move side-ways effectively. The teacher can get the students to refine the skill outside the line game, and then return students to the game. It is at this point that children are usually ready to make the line game competitive. This cooperative game can be the focus of an initial lesson, with students trying to catch as many in a row as possible, while making their partners move. In subsequent lessons this cooperative game serves to warm up students and get them ready for a competitive game.

In line game competition the teacher should ask students: "Keeping the rules we have established so far, how will you score your game, and how will you restart the game when a point has been won?" Remind them that when they play they should make sure to send the ball immediately after catching it. As they play, their games remind them to cover their opponent's target area. If the students are able to keep the ball going in a competitive rally (moving their opponent from side to side), they are ready for a tactical force-related question on the principles of spin and power:

Q. What happens when you send the ball hard, then soft?

A. I can make my opponent move backward and forward plus side-to-side.

Q. Good. Where should you stand if you make your opponent move forward?

Ordinarily students will need to play the line game to explore the answer to this question. Prompt their play by asking them to drop the ball short and then stay back. Ask the receiving player to send the ball hard and then soft. The players will notice that when they stand back their opponents can gain an advantage if they drop the ball short, because there is a space in front of the receiver. In addition, a low bouncing ball does not give a player much time to cover the space. If an opponent sends the ball hard, it will go high in the air, as they are so close to the line. A high ball gives the receiver plenty of time to catch. From this demonstration students should be able to see that when they drop the ball short they should move close to the pylons, for their opponent will likely drop the ball short, too. It will also add to their ability to play the line game and make simple throwing and catching challenging. As noted earlier students will need to work on their movement skills to play the game effectively. They must learn to automatically push-off with the outside foot or the back foot. This can be the focus of another lesson when students move from the cooperative game to a more competitive game.

The ability to use space in the simple line game enables students to develop the tactical awareness of

playing net/wall games, and it develops a conceptual schema for them to understand how to play them. As students become more adept with throwing and catching, they can be encouraged to strike the ball with their hands, and later with a paddle bat. More accomplished players may be introduced to this challenge in earlier lessons, but generally it takes a class of eight-year olds three lessons before they can strike a ball in a consistent manner using a hand or a light bat. To introduce striking, allow children to strike the ball up once or twice before hitting the ball down towards the line. This will increase the amount of control the student has in returning the ball. The strike takes practice, so should be taken out of the game and practiced against a wall. Then one player catches and throws while the other strikes the ball. After students learn to consistently strike the ball, they can develop the ability to spin the ball. This enables them to grasp that spin control regulates the force they apply to the ball to keep it under control. By the fourth or fifth lesson many children are able to hit a ball between the cones after one touch control. The line game creates a frame of reference for net/wall games where a net and a defined area of play challenge students to strike a ball up in the air, over the net, and into a court.

This example of a simple lead-up game is ideal for learning games such as tennis, volleyball and badminton. However, it can be easily adapted with a wall used to throw against with the two players standing on the same side of the pylons. This set-up becomes an excellent lead up to squash and racquetball from the net/wall games.

We have found that developing a modified game and guiding students' mental ability to develop a play attitude to a game, leads to dynamic game playing. The conceptual understanding in a modified game naturally progresses to the demands of more adult like games, helping students to appreciate and experience the complexity of the play in adult games without being overwhelmed by them. Then, as we often experience, you may have students ask, "Can we play that game again?"

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