



# WINNING STRATEGIES FOR THE UNDERDOG

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A bonus book from Coach's Advantage



## **What is an Underdog?**

An underdog is a team that is not expected to win a particular game or series of games.

If you are the second place team in a league of 16 and you are playing the first place team which has one every game by a convincing margin, then in that particular game you are the underdog. In games against the rest of the league you may be the favourite.

If you are the winless team in a league of eight teams, you will be the underdog in every game until you win a game.

You may never have played a game this season, but the history of past seasons ranks your team lowest.

You may be entering a tournament and all the other teams come from higher level leagues. You will be the underdog in each game.

## **What makes an Underdog an Underdog?**

The reason you are an underdog in a particular game against a particular team is because you are weaker in any or all of the following areas:

- Technical skill
  - Stronger shots
  - Better dribblers
  - Better ball control
  - Better tacklers
- Physical fitness
  - Individual speed
  - Team speed
  - Endurance
  - Strength
  - Taller players
  - Bigger players
- Mental fitness
  - Toughness
  - Desire
  - Enthusiasm
  - Preparedness
- Tactical understanding and readiness
  - More experienced players
  - Players know/play their positions better
  - Organization during the game
  - Switching positions and play

There are more characteristics, but these are some of the key ones.

## **The Building Blocks for Winning**

The key to winning for an underdog is the realization of what you can and cannot improve in a short period of time. Do not be concerned about or frustrated with what you cannot improve, rather focus on what you can impact and target to be better in those areas than your opponent.

### Difficult to Improve: Technical Skills

Technical skills are formed since the first touches of the ball of children combined with a natural ability. In younger kids, the natural ability dominates. As they get older, training and experience enhance those natural abilities. If your team is low on skill compared to the opponent, accept it.

### Takes Time to Improve: Physical Fitness

This is a bit of a mixed bag. You can make significant progress in building endurance in a short time, sometimes in as little as two weeks. Physiologically, every player can improve aerobic endurance.

Speed is more difficult to develop and typically only after the aerobic base has been developed. Marginal improvements are possible for everyone with extensive repetitive sprint exercises. Significant improvements require further professional coaching.

Strength can be developed in a reasonable timeframe, about four weeks if the proper equipment is available.

### Quick Improvements: Mental Fitness

This is an area the coach can impact very quickly through fostering team harmony, goal setting and expectation sharing. Tools such as visualization can be of help. Team toughness can be improved through exercises which at the same time help foster harmony and cohesion.

### Instant Improvements: Tactical Understanding

Tactical improvements are entirely within the control of the coach and the team. The keys are:

- Recognition of strengths of own players
- Designing a system of play and game plan
- Understanding the opposition's strengths, weaknesses & strategy
- Fine-tuning own system and strategy to incorporate learning from opponents.

## **Basic Approach**

**The key is Tactical Understanding because it is the quickest area to improve and the one most controllable by you, the coach.**

If your team skill is equal to or better than your opponent's and you are an underdog due their superiority in physical fitness, mental fitness and tactics, then you're prognosis is good. Develop all deficit areas to at least the level of the opponent and then excel in the tactical area.

If your team skill is below your opponent's, then you need to excel in all other areas.

Start with an analysis of your players' skills, physical and mental fitness. Develop a system of play based on team strengths. Create the line-up putting the right players in the right positions. Scout your opponent(s) and modify game system and line-up if necessary. Develop practice plans to teach individuals, units (defense, midfield, attack, goalkeeping) and the entire team their roles and responsibilities. While the drills are focused on the system and tactics, make sure you incorporate technical and fitness elements where possible. This maximizes your practice time.

At the same time, start with team and individual meetings to get everyone prepared mentally for the competition.

Separate from regularly scheduled practices, schedule endurance building training units.

Establish a baseline of performance and develop measurements to track progress and improvement. If possible, schedule at least one exhibition game against a team of similar quality as your best opponent.

Be absolutely sure to provide your team with positive progress reports showing their improvement. This is the part that will build confidence and toughness.

## **System of Play**

The overriding strategy is to stop the opponent from scoring. Develop the tenacity and patience to play a defensive game relying on fast break counterattacks to score the one or two goals you need. The score you are playing for is a 1-0 win. Against a superior team, 0-0 or 1-1 ties will feel like wins and are also desirable results.

Develop your system and line-up from the goalkeeper to the attackers.

### **Goalkeeper:**

Your goalkeeper needs to be solid. If you already have at least an average keeper, identify the most vulnerable areas and have your assistant or volunteer work on them. If you have nobody with any idea of how to train goalkeepers, seek out other coaches from teams you have a good relationship with, look for goalkeeper clinics or weekend camps, look on the internet for resources you can apply (there are many good ones).

Your defense will do its best but you must expect at least 3-5 quality scoring chances by the opposition and your goalie needs to be up to the task. If you do not have a keeper at all, recruit someone from your players. Look for the player who is not afraid to dive for low balls, has reasonable agility and good reaction/reflexes. They must have some sense of catching the ball. Then teach them about angles and positional play. Basketball and Volleyball players are always good prospects.

Identify and develop a back-up keeper at the same time, even it means extra practice sessions for a player so they don't miss their regular practice time.

### **Defense:**

Play with one more defender than the other team has forwards. That defender is a sweeper, covering behind the man marking defenders. Do not get fancy with flat back systems and off-site traps. Proper man-marking is difficult enough.

A mixed zone system is recommended. This is a system where defenders mark the opponent's forward on their side of the field. For instance, in a pure man-marking system the defenders each are assigned a forward and stay with them at all times (marking). The problem with that is that if the other team switches positions (pulling forwards into midfield and pushing midfielders up front), then the defenders can get confused and lose their mark.

In the mixed zones, defenders are assigned space (left and right against two forwards; left, center, right against three) and mark whoever comes into that space.

The sweeper covers in behind the defender (distance varies depending on where play is) who is challenging the opponent in possession of the ball.

Your sweeper should be your fastest and toughest players with a good sense for reading the game. The sweeper must understand defending principles of closing down, jockeying, tackling and slide tackling. The sweeper must not be afraid to talk during the game and direct the defenders if they are out of position or hesitating. The sweeper must have a strong kick.

Your defenders must have the same qualities as the sweeper but do not need as much ability to read the game or to communicate. A strong kick is an asset.

Tactically, your marking defenders need to understand that they may need to step up to challenge an overlapping midfielder or defender from the other team whom the midfielder in front of them did not follow. In that case, the sweeper picks up the defender's mark. At that point you are playing 1v1 in the back. It is therefore critical that the beaten midfielder tracks back as fast as possible to pick up the player they lost thus allowing the defense to get back into their positions.

Midfield:

The main role of your midfield is to neutralize the opponent's midfield. It's in midfield where games are decided, it's the engine of the team. If you are able to prevent the opponent from developing scoring chances (which is the midfield's job), you are well on your way to shutting them out.

The number of midfielders depends on your opponent's system. Let's match up systems:

From left to right are defenders, midfielders and forwards.

Opponent:	Your Team:	Comments:
4-4-2	3-5-2	extra defender, extra midfielder (defensive)
4-3-3	4-4-2	extra defender, extra midfielder (defensive)
3-4-3	4-4-2	extra defender
3-5-2	3-5-2	extra defender

More on how to manage the game under different scenarios will be explained in the Game Management chapter.

Your central midfielders need to have good defensive skills as their main role is to mark and neutralize the opponent's central midfielders who typically are the creative nerve center of the team. They must also have the ability to read the game and play a good pass after winning the ball. If you have a defensive midfielder, they must have qualities similar to the sweeper with the added requirement of passing ability. Central midfielders need to have endurance, but not necessarily be the fastest players on your team.

Your outside midfielders need to be two-way players having endurance and speed as well as dribbling, crossing and shooting skills. They in fact would likely be your most versatile players.

Forwards:

Speed, 1v1 skill and shooting are the critical skills here.

Since you are almost always playing with two forwards, they would both play centrally with either one quite often making diagonal runs to the wing. You will have opportunities for an outside midfielder to play down a wing in which case the two forwards play central awaiting a cross. To change up the play, one may move wide to create a numerical advantage on the wing with the objective to work the ball into the penalty box for a pass or a shot. Forwards need to be aware of the number of defenders staying with them if the other team is in possession. They need to make sure that the other team always has at least three defenders with them. If they only keep two back, then one of the forwards must track back with a defender.

Team Balance:

There are two issues to consider (numbers are for field players, do not include keeper):

1. you have 10 fairly equally skilled starters but no bench strength.
2. you don't have 10 starters.

In the first case, if you're required to play each player during the critical game, start with your 10 best players. Rotate your bench players through one of the forward positions so they get equal time, even if it is only 5 minutes a game. This is where team harmony and spirit coupled with your motivational skills will help tremendously. Rotate the forward you are pulling off with outside midfielders so that three players share the two positions. Your preference should be to keep your key defensive positions (defenders and central midfielders) occupied by the same players.

If you don't have 10 starters, you need to start your weaker players as follows, depending on the number of solid starters:

9 starters:

Start your weak player on a forward positions and share playing time in that spot with the other bench players.

8 starters:

Start your second weak player on outside midfield on the same side as your weak forward. Ask them to man-mark the opponent's outside midfielder. Rotate the bench players through the two positions. Put your better of the weak players in midfield. Your

team now knows its weak side. They should know to switch play to the strong side and keep it there. If the opponent attacks down the weak side, your extra midfielder and defender should already be prepared to provide cover on that side.

7 starters:

Start your third weak player in the other outside midfield position, also man-marking their opposing midfielder. At this point you have very limited option for scoring. You're essentially hoping for a long ball out of the defense and midfield setting up the lone attacker for a break-away play. You're likely playing for a 0-0 result. You still have a slight chance of pushing one of the central midfielders up for the occasional attack.

6 starters:

If you're playing with an extra midfielder, give up the extra midfielder and put the fourth weakest player up as a third forward. If you're not playing with an extra midfielder, put this player into one of the central midfield position marking the opponent's weakest central midfielder. You may be tempted to put this player up as the second forward. This leaves you with no offensive threat and the opponent is likely to ignore your forwards and push defenders up. A 0-0 tie would be an accomplishment, a one goal loss acceptable.

Less than 6 starters:

Keep your defense in tact and have everyone else mark the opponents everywhere on the field and just try to prevent them from scoring. Winning is now redefined as keeping the game within a 2-3 goal difference loss.

## **Mental Fitness**

Explain to your team that they are the underdog and depending on the number of starters, set the game expectation to a narrow win, a tie, or a loss within reason.

Share the line-up and game strategy with the team.

Ask them regardless of game situation or score, effort needs to be 110% and will be rewarded.

Tell them the pressure is on the opponent because they are expected to win. The longer they are held off the scoreboard, the more frustrated they will get and the better the chance for a positive result.

Build confidence by laying out the program and getting the team to believe that regardless of anyone's perception, you will be better prepared than the opponent. You will have a plan and execute it and success will be measured by how well it'll be executed, regardless of final score.

Put in one or two social events for the team to bond. Simple thing like pizza or doughnuts after a tough practice will be beneficial.

Relate practice drills to game strategy and compliment the team on progress and improved chance of success when a drill has been done well.

Ask players to visualize their role during a game, you may need to talk them through it.

Share your scouting report with them and show them the opponent on video if you have one. The more they understand why they are doing what they are doing the more commitment and the more discipline during the game.

## **Physical Fitness**

Be careful not to overtrain the team. Practices and games should not number more than four per week with 2 days rest between the last full practice and the game. A warm-up involving ball skills and a tactical review on the day prior to the game are beneficial.

During practice drills, keep the aerobic work rate high (by having small groups with little idle time) and incorporate sprints into the drills.

If possible, schedule a 5km run once a week as far removed from game day as possible.

## **Technical Skill**

Identify the skill strengths of each player to be able to assign a position for them.

Identify the weaknesses in each position and spend 15 minutes in practice on technical skills that are weak. Ask the players to do some homework using these drills.

Incorporate the technical elements into warm-up, tactical, fitness and scrimmage drill.

## **Game Management**

You will have your team prepared for the opponent based on what you know about the opponent. Be prepared for your opponent to have a different strategy/line-up than you thought or to change after the game starts based on their coach reading your game strategy.

You need to have trained your team to be able to adjust on the fly, switching systems of play to react to the opponent, but only if the opponent's changes put your team in more danger of being scored on. If not, stay the course.

This is where you, the coach, earn your keep. You need to teach your team at least two or three systems and the players multiple positions depending on what role they play in each system. You need to be able to recognize what your opponent is doing, decide whether or not to change your team around and get the instructions to your players on the field, **without telegraphing it to the opposing coach.** What you want to do is either send in a sub who will pass on the key message to the team or call a player to the sideline and provide instructions. The instructions must be very brief, ideally one word for the system change which then triggers positional changes players can do on their own based on their knowledge. You can always call in the name of a player who is missing an assignment without being specific.