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SOCCERTALK

[The Joys & Frailties of One Touch Soccer](#)

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It's odd how the idea of entertaining soccer has become almost a dirty word, or a dirty two words.

Try mentioning it any soccer discussion and you're quite likely to get trashed as — take your choice — a romantic, a purist, a wimp, a know-nothing or just a plain idiot. Entertaining soccer, bah — the very idea!

Because a divide has grown up — a totally artificial divide I think — between entertaining soccer and winning soccer. It seems now to be widely believed that you can't have both at the same time. If you want to win, you'd better stop thinking about all that entertaining stuff.

So entertaining soccer comes to mean glitzy, show-off stuff, not *serious* soccer. Hot dogging. The image grows of players who are just out there to show off, who are not interested in being real team members, who want the spotlight always to be on some individual skill that they turn on, that makes the crowd ooh and aah.

It gets worse. The logical next step is that any sort of individual ball-brilliance is suspect. Any attempt to dribble is condemned as showmanship. The ball should not be dribbled, it should be passed, that is the way that *teams* play.

Of course, there's plenty of truth in all of that — but it is nevertheless a damaging truth, a damaging half-truth, rather.

Damaging because any soccer style based on the precept that the real essence of the game is conveyed by passing is going to turn, quite soon, into a style based on one-touch passing. Because that is passing *par excellence* — it means lots of passing, the more the merrier, sharp passing, short passing, accurate passing. And the quicker the passing the better — the more bewildering it becomes for the opponents to cope with.

One-touch soccer, it seems, is always associated with winning soccer. One-touch soccer is considered desirable. It is never questioned, it is always put forward as a good thing. It can also be highly entertaining soccer, though this is not an asset that is usually stressed. To describe one-touch soccer as entertaining soccer is to demean its seriousness.

The only criterion that is applied in the modern game is effectiveness. The one-touch game — played at speed, of course — is considered to be highly effective. Possibly, But there are a couple of enormous drawbacks.

Firstly, if passing is to be the aim of the game, where does that leave the dribbler, or the player who likes to take opponents on? In a word, nowhere. They are of no use at all in a passing game — indeed, are counter-productive. The skilled one-touch passer is almost the opposite of a dribbler. Where the dribbler is able to exhibit a unique soccer personality in his moves, feints, tricks, the one-touch passer has virtually no opportunity to exhibit any sort of style or personal flourishes. His main functions are quick and intelligent off-the-ball movement and the ability to pass the ball off quickly — and intelligently — as soon as he receives it.

Secondly, the one-touch game is at its best, and its most effective, when it is played at speed. The mental speed of the players is important, of course, but what ultimately matters is how quickly the ball is traveling. And that is a serious limitation, because there are obvious limits to the speed with which a ball can be controlled and accurately passed.

One-touch passing movements are always likely to break down because the players simply cannot maintain the control necessary for prolonged sequences of passing. Oddly enough, that is precisely one of the main criticisms of the dribbler — that the longer the dribble lasts, the more likely the player is to lose control of the ball.

A similarity that reveals a major objection to the proponents of one-touch soccer. Because no one that I know of has ever suggested that a team be composed entirely of dribblers — the idea is manifestly absurd. A balance is required, a style that allows both elements — dribbling and passing — to be used as and when the circumstances demand.

But the one-touch gang want only passing. They do not see dribbling as part of the sport at all. So they narrow the sport down, deprive it of one of its most exciting elements, and of its most colorful artists.

Yes, the one-touch game can be exciting, breath-takingly so on a few occasions. But it can also rather quickly congeal into the sterility of right-angled and backward passes — all made at speed, of course, but all going nowhere because the opponents, possibly with a massed defense, are simply cutting off the passing angles. A situation that calls for a player or players who can eliminate opponents by dribbling quickly past them — and *then* delivering a pass.

Beware the one-touch salesmen who will try to convince you that their way is the only way that the sport should be played. It isn't. One-touch soccer has built-in limitations. To be fully effective it needs to be part of a varied game that also features its opposites — the dribblers and the individualists.

The resulting combination has a much better chance of being winning soccer. And, though I hesitate to mention it, it also has a much better chance of being entertaining soccer.