

Planning Practices & Drills

How you approach practice and the skill session you choose can make a world of difference for your soccer team. I've experienced success in coaching by:

- Selecting the session for practice a day or two in advance of practice
 - Communicating to assistant coaches and the skills for the practice, I do this through email as I attach the drills
- Arriving at practice 10 to 15 minutes early to setup the field
- Setting goals with assistant coaches just prior to starting practice

The goal is to give players as much time with the soccer ball as possible while improving or learning their soccer skills. I'll provide some soccer drills on this website and post others that are recommended by others. As the focus is on quality time spent handling the soccer ball no time is devoted to scrimmaging. For teams that practice a few times a week scrimmaging might be more of an option. Be prepared to answer parents' questions on why scrimmaging isn't part of the practice plan. Better yet talk to the parents about your practice philosophy at the kickoff meeting prior to the first practice.

Having discussed not scrimmaging at practice it's important to work through some game mechanics. Funny story, "My team focused on passing, kicking and some other skills before our first game. We were the team to start the game by kicking the ball and my players had no idea what to do!" You bet I took the opportunity at the next practice to go through some drills for the kickoff.

As a coach one of your goals will be to develop a practice deck from which you can quickly select the drills for your team practice. If you are new to coaching soccer or been doing it for years, the goal stays the same: keep looking for better more effective drills for your team. The second part of having a practice deck is the ability for you to use different drills to keep your players interest. If your players' are bored running through the same drills, the opportunity for learning is diminished. Fortunately, there are many different drills that teach the same soccer skills.

At practice and during games a coach will learn what skills his team needs to build upon. Pick the drills from your practice deck that will best improve the skills your team needs most. As discussed in other articles, one approach I like is to have the team split into three groups so your players can get more individualized coaching. This approach works well with you as the coach and two assistant coaches to run the other groups. I talk a lot about running the players through different drills as the groups move from coach to coach. Another approach to consider is having all the groups practice the same drill so that the entire team can focus on one core competency. For example, having all the groups going through the same passing drill will allow the team to focus on that skill while still benefiting from more individualized coaching. Play with this approach of grouping players and make it work for the team. For example, having two coaches running drills and the other working with individual players have worked great too. For example, there might be a player(s) having trouble with attacking the ball. By working with these players on being "brave" and challenging other players your team play will improve. Let us know what works for you so that we can share with other coaches.

Wrapping up practice should be about having some fun time. Playing a team game like "sharks and minnows" allows everyone to have fun while still using their soccer skills. Finally, putting hands in a circle and doing the team yell is a great way to send them home. When the players are packing up their

stuff take the opportunity to remind parents when the next game is. Never leave the practice field until all your players have a ride home. I hope you use some of these ideas and share some of your own.

Name Game

Activity Level: High (Everyone is involved)
Difficulty Level: Low (Easy for everyone)

This is a great game to get players to learn each other's names. Have the players and coaches form a circle.

- Coach tells the players that everyone is going to yell their name going around the circle
 - Show the players which direction we are going to yell our names
- Coach starts by yelling their name, "Coach <your name>"
 - Point to the next player that is suppose to yell their name
- Next time go the other direction around the circle but do it faster!

The kids love this game as they enjoy trying to say their name as fast as possible. Do this as many times as necessary to get the players familiar with each other's names. As an added step walk into the middle of the circle and tell your players that everyone has to yell the name of the player you point too. Make sure you point to all the players and coaches!

Passing Pairs Game

This is a very good soccer drill that teaches passing and blocking of the soccer ball. Run the drill by:

- Having two more players per team
- On one side players have a soccer ball that they must dribble down to a set of cones
- Once the players reach the cones the ball must be passed to their teammate
- The teammate must stop the ball and dribble back to the other side
- The team that finishes the drill first wins

As a coach run through the drill once or twice showing the players how to pass and block the ball. Using an assistant coach to show the entire drill is a great way for the kids to understand the game.

Key skill building points include:

- Helping kids with dribbling
- Showing kids how to pass
- Learning how to look up as part of dribbling and passing the ball
- Stopping / blocking the ball

Watch the players as they run through the drill. If you like stop the drill to show a player how to improve as it's more important that they learn than win the game. If one team seems to be winning every time then move the players around to form different more balanced teams.

Once the kids master the skills in this drill consider using a stopwatch and have them compete against time. By competing against time we hope to improve the speed at which they can run through this drill. Be careful to watch the kids closely so that they maintain good ball control.

Pass, Pass and Score

Activity Level: High Everyone is Involved!

Difficulty Level: Low, Easy for everyone!

This drill helps players understand field position as part of playing soccer. Create three columns of players and explain to the players that one column is fullbacks, the middle column is midfielders and the last is forwards. Each row of players is a team meaning that a fullback will have to pass the ball to the midfielder and the midfielder to the forward working together to move the ball down the field. Once the ball reaches the forwards have them shoot in a goal protected by a goalie. Our focus to start with is:

- Kids gaining an understanding of passing the ball up field
- Looking up as part of passing the ball to your teammate
- Passing the ball accurately to move it effectively down the field
- The forwards touching the ball once or twice for a quick shot on goal
- Forwards looking up when shooting to make a goal

The first time running the drill with younger players we focus on keeping position and passing as accurately as possible. If a pass is off the mark encourage the players to chase down the ball and pass it to the next person. One important rule is that each player must pass the ball to the next player. Sometimes fullbacks like to be clever and pass to the forwards skipping the midfielders. Once a team have moved the ball down field and shot on goal they can get another ball to repeat the same drill. Each team tries to race through three balls to complete the exercise. The team that wins passes all the balls down field and scores the most goals.

Once done with this drill do it the other way so the players are moving the balls back to their original starting position. Reversing direction also gives players a chance to be forwards and fullbacks. Once the players learn the drill and improve upon their passing skills then have the fullbacks and the forwards take two steps away from midfielders to increase the length of the passes.

Monster Corner Kick

In practice when possible try to combine a skill like kicking with how to play the game. With monster corner kick we teach how to kick the ball and where to place the ball when doing a corner kick. Play around with this drill:

- Place target cones for your players to kick at

- Make an assistant coach an obstacle for the players to kick around
- Have some player ready to kick the ball in the goal

Make sure to have an assistant coach watching how the players kick. Our goal is to create a powerful kick to the center of the field that enables your players the opportunity to score.

First Defender, Second Defender

The way this drill works is two have to players defending a goal. No goalie is necessary as our focus is on having the players learn how to defend against an attacker. Using two defenders name one the first defender and the other the second defender. Instruct the first defender to take the ball away from the attacker by kicking the ball to the side of the field.

If the attacker makes it past the first defender then the second defender should take the ball away. Talk to the second defender about positioning himself or herself far enough behind the first defender to know where the ball is so that they can take it away. Sometimes I use the example of a long shadow to help the second defender get the idea of the proper position.

As the coach watch closely how the defenders are working together and stop the game if your players are bunching up. It might be helpful to explain that it takes one good kick to clear the ball away from the goal. If the defenders work together and are successful then cheer them on as this is a very import lesson for them to learn. I've noticed that his is a good practice for kids that might shy away from an attacker as they earn how to be a good defender.

Some other key points of the drill include:

- The second defender must follow (watch) the ball and position themselves properly.
- Build upon defensive skills by showing how to take the soccer ball away.
- Provide some guidance to the attackers too.

This drill can be played with one or two attackers against the two defenders. When playing with two attackers passing becomes a way of moving the ball. Having the defenders learning to anticipate a pass builds upon their defensive skills and improves their position awareness. Also with two attackers the defenders will learn how to switch from being the first defender to the second defender as part of the game. It's recommended that once your players can effectively defend against one attacker then introduce two attackers.

Double Dribble around the Cones

This drill is a looking up as part of dribbling. Every player should have their own cone to dribble around. Take half of the cones and make a "L" or crisscross pattern so that one team of players has to watch out for the other team as they all dribble around their cones. See the drill image for a better understanding of how this is laid out. With this drill we focus on all the same skills as dribbling around the cone but add "looking up" as a big part of the drill. Talk to your players about how looking up is important for:

- Avoiding the other team
- Knowing where to go on the field
- Knowing who to pass too

This drill will improve your players looking up as part of dribbling and hopefully enhance their field awareness as part of the game. Now here is the great part of the drill that coaches and kids really enjoy. As with all teams some players are faster dribblers than others which can make it hard for one team to win. For your faster players move their cones further out so that they have to dribble more as a way of balancing the teams. This allows you the coach to easily adjust the drill so that every player is challenged to do their best.

As coaches you can join the fun as sometimes an odd number of players' means that one team plays with one less person. Jump in and join the fun but put your cone further out to make it fair to the other team. You will find that kids up the level of play during drills when coaches join in.

Animal Act

Activity Level: High Everyone is Involved!

Difficulty Level: Low, Easy for everyone!

This is a fun drill that will motivate your kids to come back to practice, learn dribbling and improve their kicking skills.

- Coach explains to the players that they are going to try hit you with the soccer ball
 - This really gets the kids attention!
- The only way they are allowed to hit you with a soccer ball is by kicking it at you
- If they hit you with the soccer ball you must act like any animal they choose
- As the coach you never stop moving, usually a fast walk works best
- Use two coaches to make sure all the players are involved and get the opportunity pick an animal

Go over with your players how to dribble, turn the ball and kick the ball accurately. Our goal is for the kids to learn these skills as part of playing this drill. Give the kids some ideas for animals like: dog, cat, tiger, elephant, snake, bear, owl, butterfly and kangaroo. As the coach what I find fun is that acting like each animal presents some new challenges to the kids. For example, as the butterfly I skip around and flap my arms which sometimes makes it a bit harder for the kids to hit me. That being said I always try to pace this drill so that everyone gets the opportunity to hit the coach and pick an animal. Finally, this game can be exhausting for the coach as you are constantly moving and talking so, consider using two coaches!

Pirates of the Pugg Game

This soccer drill is a great soccer drill using the pugg goal that can be tweaked to focus on many aspects of the game. For younger players ages 8-11, the primary focus should be on good dribbling technique in traffic which requires vision and awareness. The coach can also focus on transition from offense to defense if the ball is lost, or recovering from a tackle and finding safety. Defensively, this allows defenders to steal the ball from attackers and play to a particular goal or target.

Setup

Build a circle approximately the size of the center circle with a pug goal in the middle of the circle. The actual size of the circle will vary depending on the age and skill level of the players. With all players in the playing area, dedicate 9 players with the ball, and 3 players without a ball will be the "Pirates".

Instructions

Instruct the "Pirates" without the ball to defend the players with the balls. Once the Pirate wins the ball, they attempt to score on the pug goal in the middle of the circle. If the Pirate scores the goal, that player too becomes a Pirate. Play continues until the last player with the ball wins. If the pirates have a hard time getting started, the coach can help the pirates at first.

Coaching Points

Attacking: keep the ball close with head up so the players are aware of defenders and safety areas (space). If the ball is lost, recover quickly and fight to win it back.

Defending: Transition quickly from defense to offensive and stay focused once the ball is won, and find the target.

Guard the Castle

Setup

Set up a grid that is 12 X 12 yards. Organize the team into groups of four. One of the four players should wear an alternate jersey and be the designated defender (guarder of the castle). Take a ball and place it on the top of a disc cone in the middle of the grid, this will become the "castle". If you do not have disc cones, a tall cone will work just as good.

Instructions

It will be up to the 3 attackers to pass the ball around the defender in the grid in attempt to knock down the castle with a pass. The castle is considered knocked down when the ball is knocked off the cone or the tall cone is knocked down with a pass.

Variations

- Depending on the age level and skill of the players, you can remove the 12 x 12 grid limitations, or make the grid smaller for very skilled players.
- If players are standing next to the cone, you can build a 3x3 grid and not allow players to step into that small grid.
- Require players to complete a certain number of passes before they are allowed to knock down the castle.
- Play 1v1 and focus on dribbling skills.

Coaching Points

- Instruct players to get their heads up to find the pass.
- Make sure the players are passing the ball with proper weight on the ball.
- Make sure players are moving about the grid in order to find open space. Make sure players know it is ok to dribble the ball to space or beat the defender before making the pass.
- Make sure players are making the easiest decisions when passing.

North & South or East & West Dribbling Game

Setup

Start by making a grid approximately 20X20 yards. Split the team into two groups. Each player should have a ball. Instruct each group of players to line up outside the grid facing inward on two adjacent sides of the grid (half of the group on one side, the other half on the side next to the other group).

Instructions

On the coaches command, instruct the players to dribble to the other side of the group and back to the starting position (down and back). The first player back in each group gets a point. The first player to 5 wins that set. Play 3-4 sets.

Variations

- restrict players to touches with a certain foot or part of the foot. (example: left foot only, or outside of the foot only)
- Have the player turn or cut when they reach the opposite side of the grid
- Place even groups on all four sides of the grid and play the same game. - Make the grid a bit larger and have the players dribble with speed

Coaching Points

- focus on the players getting their heads up while dribbling for awareness and to avoid collisions
- make sure players keep the ball at a close/safe distance. If the ball is too far in front of them they will most often hit another player or lose their ball.

Circle Keep-Away Passing Game

Setup

With cones, mark off a circle. Have each of the players position themselves just inside the circle, with 2 designated players in the middle holding a yellow penny (alternate colored jersey) in their hands.

Instructions

1. The two players in the middle will act as defenders while the rest of the players around the circle will play keep away from these defenders.
2. Start with the first pass being free, then as the defenders win the ball, they switch places with the player that lost the ball to the defender. In this case, the current defender would just drop their yellow penny and join the attackers. The new defender will grab the yellow penny and hold it in their hand.

3. If the pass goes outside of the circle, the player that made the bad pass, or the player that did not properly trap the ball will take the place of the defender that has been in the middle the longest.
4. If the attacking players are able to put together 10 passes make the defenders do a quick lap around the circle (Lap of shame as we call it) or some other form of quick and fun punishment.
5. The attacking players can move about the circle.

Variations

- Change the size of the circle to fit your players age and skill level. Make the grid smaller to make the game harder for the attackers to keep possession, or make the grid larger to make the game a bit easier for the passers.
- Make the circle smaller for tighter and quicker passing.
- Limit the number of touches.

Coaching Points

- Clean, crisp passes.
- Good first touch into space or towards the next pass.
- Good communication.
- Have fun.

Dribbling at the Cone

Setup

Build a grid that is 20X10 yards with a cone in the middle of the grid. This grid will be for 3 players, so build additional grids as needed depending on the amount of players.

Instructions

Position the players where 2 players are on one endline and 1 player is on the other endline. The first person in the group of 2 will start with the ball. This player will dribble at the cone, change the direction of the ball as he makes a move (fake) around the cone. After moving past the cone, the player should increase his speed to finish at the other side of the grid. He then

lays the ball off to the other player who performs the same fake on the cone. Play continues until the coach introduces a new fake at the cone.

Variations

Here are some moves to perform are:

- the scissors
- the swerve
- hard step, drop shoulder and change direction

Replace the cone with a defender.

Coaching Points

Make sure the players move towards the cone with the ball under total control. Make sure there is a good change of direction at the cone. Make sure they sell the move to the cone. After passing the cone, make sure the player has a burst of speed.

Across-Field Warm-Up, soccer warm-up

Setup

Players are divided into pairs with 1 ball for each pair. Player 1 stands along the touchline, while player 2 starts about 5 yards away facing their partner. Player 2 will start with the ball.

Instructions

The player 2 holds the ball in their hands and jogs backwards across the field making tosses to their partner. The player 1 jogs forward and receives the ball and returns the ball to their partner. When the players reach the other touchline, the roles should be switched and return to the other touchline. The players should work on one of the following skills each time across the field.

1. Volley the ball back to the thrower with the inside of the foot - alternating right and left.
2. Volley the ball back to the thrower with the instep (shoe laces) - alternating right and left.
3. Trapping the ball with the thigh and returning it to the thrower.

4. Trapping with the chest and returning it to the thrower.
5. Heading back to the thrower – should make the receiver do jumping headers as well.

Variations

- Reverse the direction of the thrower and the receiver where the thrower jogs forward and the receiver jogs backwards.

Coaching Points

- Good body positioning behind the ball.
- Controlled touches before playing the ball back.
- Getting a good warm-up.

Frogger

Setup

Build a grid 20X30 (may adjust if too large or small). Every player must be in the grid with a ball except for 2 players who will be the FROGS.

Instructions

All of the players will start on one side of the grid and try to make it to the other side. The two FROGS must hop and try to tag the other players as they try to get to the other side. When a player is tagged, they both become a frog. Play continues until only 2 players are left, who become the frogs for the next game.

Variations

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Coaching Points

- Start getting the players dribbling to get their heads up to avoid the frogs

