

## Coaching Youth Soccer

### A Little Philosophy and Twelve Basic Soccer Drills to "Keep It Interesting"

I am no expert in soccer. I did not grow up playing the game; though I did play in an adult coed recreational league. I do, however, have a lot of experience with coaching children, and did coach youth soccer for about twelve years. I also have experience as a parent and grandparent watching well-meaning parents coach children and grandchildren.



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#### General Thoughts:

**Stretching.** Youth soccer players need to stretch and warm up, though I've never seen an injury in any youth league from failure to stretch or warm up. So tell the players' parents how to warm up their players and that you expect their players to be stretched and warmed up before practice starts. Don't waste valuable practice time on this; get parents to do their part.

**Repetition.** Players get better with repetition. In baseball, sometimes it gets down to one player throwing the ball, one player trying to hit the ball, one player catching the pitched ball, and the other players waiting for something to happen. If you are one of the "other players" you might not be having any fun at all and you are certainly not learning anything. But in soccer, there are many opportunities for numbers of players to handle lots of balls and get in the "reps" needed to build confidence and skill. Want a right-footed kicker to improve his or her left foot kicking? Then use drills that require a left foot kick.

**Drilling vs. Scrimmaging.** Many coaches I have seen have been good, but some have been – well – not so good. I suspect that most weak coaches began by being drafted as a coach for a sport while their children were just beginning to take an interest in the sport and coach (1) like they were coached, or (2) like they *think* they should coach. In the specific case of soccer, too often practice time consists warm up exercises (see above) followed by of some short period of boring drills such as dribbling balls through cones followed by the balance of the time in a scrimmage. Scrimmages can be fun, and they certainly take the pressure off the coach to have an organized practice. But with the whole team on the field, at any one time only a few players are handling or actively defending the ball. And scrimmages often result in the better players handling the ball while the weaker players are left to fend for themselves. How often in a soccer scrimmage do you see a right-footed kicker try to use his or her left foot? Summary: Kids like scrimmages, but a practice where scrimmaging consumes 40-50% of the practice time is a cop out.

**Rewards.** Good coaches encourage players. Do that by always bringing wrapped hard candy to practice for rewards. For example, put some cones on top of an ice chest that is set inside the goal. Not only get the ball in the goal for right and left foot kicking, but knock down a cone and get a reward. So on many the players cannot only building skills, but try to earn some candy. The one rule should be that players are not to leave wrappers on the ground – that I would take the wrappers if they didn't have pockets. Did the good players get much more candy than the developing players? Of course not; find ways to reward all the players about equally.

**Parent Help.** Unless prohibited by the league, use parents to help in all your practices. Why let them sit on the sidelines with their cell phones when they can help with the drills and with retrieving balls. At worst, they can retrieve balls.

**Balls.** Every soccer player needs his or her own ball, and the players should bring their balls to practice.

**Juggling.** Show – or talk about - some basic juggling . . . as in dropping the ball, letting it bounce, then kicking it to chest height and catching it. Then dropping the ball, kicking it with the other foot to chest height, and catching it. Do this cycle three times and players are Level 1 Jugglers. For Level 2, once the ball is kicked to chest height, it is allowed to bounce and then kicked with the other foot to chest height to be caught. Three times to earn Level 2. Level 3 might involve something like dropping the ball, kicking it with the right foot to waist height, then “kneeing” the ball with the left knee to chest height to catch it. Then the same but starting with the left foot and then using the right knee. Three successful repetitions makes a GO for Level 3. Make sure parents know about this so they can get their players to practice this at home. Award prizes (see above)

**Show Time.** When you are handed the schedule for games and practice fields, quickly take all the copies and destroy them. Remake the schedule with all times moved up 15 minutes. This will help get your players to practice and games on time, and you won’t be wondering five minutes before game time if you can field a team.

**Snack Schedule.** While you are at it, add the drink and snack responsibilities to the schedule and tell the players that if they can’t make their scheduled time to switch with another player. Do this and save wear and tear on the Team Mother.

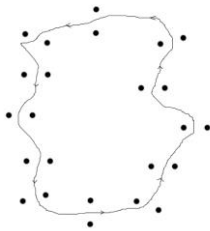
Given my philosophy above, below are twelve drills suited mostly for recreational youth league soccer players ages 11-14, though most may be used by any age group. The intent is to provide a number of activities that build soccer skills and keep players engaged with interesting activities that fill a practice time. With all this in mind, here are the drills I have collected and/or developed to “keep it interesting.” The drills require that a coach should have about as many soccer balls to practice with as there members on the team – the more balls the better.

### **Twelve Drills:**

1. **Right and Left Foot Kicking.** Usually the first drill of practice. Within the goal area, set up another target in the center, about one third the width of the goal. You could stack water containers and some equipment boxes as the target, usually in a pyramid so that hitting the bottom would knock down the target. Set up two cones on the 18 yard box, centered on the goal and about twenty feet apart. Players form two equal lines, on each sideline just about ten feet closer to midfield from the 18 yard box. (I general marked the sideline points with a cone.) Each side would alternate shooting from the right and left. To begin with, a player of the right would begin running towards the center of the cones on the 18 yard line. Another player on the right side, generally the next player in line, would roll the ball smoothly on the ground with enough pace that the ball so that the advancing player get to the cones about the same time. A player coming from the right strikes the ball with his or her right foot, and then gets in the line coming from the left. Players in the left line strike the ball with their left foot. Any player striking the target gets a prize. For older or better players, rather than smoothly rolling the ball to the kicker, the “roller” may propel the ball in bounces.
2. **Right and Left Foot Kicking – On One Bounce.** Same as above except the sideline player tosses the ball towards the cones using the throw-in motion. The objective is to have the ball and the advancing kicker meet at the center of the cones so that the kicker strikes the ball on the first bounce. More difficult. May also award a prize to the thrower as well as the kicker when the target is struck. Watch to ensure the throw-in is clean.

3. **Space Raiders.** Place four cones to make a square, about 30 feet a side, more or less depending on the age of the players and their numbers. Every player but one has a ball and starts inside the square. One player without a ball starts outside the square, this is the Space Raider. At the whistle the Raider moves inside the square, attacking the various players. The objective of the player is to retain control of his or her ball and not let it go outside of the square. The objective of the Raider is to knock the ball away from a player so it goes outside the square. When a player has had his or her ball kicked from the square, that player becomes a Raider. The drill progresses until there is but one player left with a ball. That player is declared the winner, wins a prize (candy), and becomes the Space Raider for the next round. The one rule is that any Raider may not attack a player for any more than two seconds – this prevents a raider from essentially picking on one player until the Raider can knock away the ball. This drill promotes ball control skills for the players and defense skills among the Raiders.

4. **Gates!!** Set up cones in pairs to form a circular path of gates. Have the width of the gate be three feet to begin with, and narrow the width as skills increase. Start players spread out at various locations around the course. Go clockwise. At the command of *GO*, players see how many gates they can get through in 30 seconds, with the coach counting down from thirty. Players announce out loud the number of gates they have passed through; 1 ... 2 ... 3 ... 4 ... Cautions: Watch to ensure that more skilled players don't pass less skilled players. This may require a bit of strategy in determining where various players start the course. After they do it once, get a feel for about how many gates the players are achieving, and then say that you are going to do it again, and anyone getting three more gates than the first time – honor system - will get a prize. Note that counterclockwise will involve more of the right foot. Now go counterclockwise, and have them see how many gates they can get. Maybe keep notes to see if there is improvement from practice to practice.



5. **Red Light – Green Light.** Players all have a ball and begin at the midfield line. Set up a target within the goal box. The coach faces the players and says, "Green Light" while turning away from the players towards the goal. As soon as the coach's back is turned, players advance their balls toward the goal area and the target. After a few seconds, the coach blows the whistle and then makes two arm signals (similar to basketball referees) signifying two seconds. At the instance of the second arm pump (two seconds) the coach turns and faces the players. Any player whose ball is moving is sent back to the start line. The objective for each player is to move the ball under control so that at the whistle the ball may be brought to a stop before the coach turns to face him or her. When a player feels that he or she is close enough to the target to shoot, then the player does so while the coach's back is turned. Hitting the target wins a prize, missing the target means the ball is retrieved by the player and returned to the midfield line to begin again.
6. **Trap and Shoot.** Put four cones out in a square about 15 feet on a side. The square of cones should be just outside the penalty box/18 yard line. One player at a time enters the box. The coach or an assistant throws the ball in the air with a high arc and targeted to land about in the center of the square. The player in the square must trap the ball and in one smooth motion shoot it towards the goal. If the ball gets outside the circle then the shot – if taken – does not count. As an alternative, the ball may be rolled at a fairly good pace towards the player inside the cones and the objective is the same: trap the ball and in one smooth motion shoot it into the goal. Of course the higher the ball is thrown in the air or the

harder it is rolled on the ground, the more difficult is the ball to trap. Generally, to win a prize takes three successful "trap and shoots." The coach should ask players to announce how many scores they have as they enter the box. More skilled players get more difficult throws, and a player with two scores may also get more difficult throws. This builds good game skills and in ages 11 and up can be played until about half of the players have earned prizes. Option 1: Make the better player shoot with their weaker foot.

7. **Foot-Foot-Head.** Build a target inside the goal. Players stand about ten feet from the goal in two lines. Players from the front of each line become a team when it is their turn. The coach announces something like "foot-foot-head" and then lofts the ball towards one of the players. In this case the player must – on the first bounce – pass the ball to his or her teammate using a foot. In this example the receiving player must take the ball in the air with a foot and pass the ball back. The receiving player then uses his or her head to drive the ball into the goal, knocking down the target, winning a prize for each member of the team. Players switch lines so they will alternate times when they receive the ball first. The coach has many options, such as foot-head-foot and foot-head-head.
8. **Corner Kicks.** After a while you get an idea of who is your goalie, who are your defenders, and who are your attackers. Put your defenders in the goal area; have your attackers begin with a corner kick. You probably have an idea at some point on who will take the corner kicks. The drill consists of two sets of ten corner kicks. The attackers begin with a corner kick and play the ball trying to score. So long as the attackers control the ball they may continue to try to score. The attackers lose control when any of the following occurs: the kick goes out of bounds, a shot misses resulting in what would normally be a goal kick, or the defenders clear the ball. Note that the defenders are not required to launch the ball mightily towards the other end of the field or you will spend your time chasing balls. A defender just has to clear the ball away from the attackers. The offense gets ten kicks. If in playing the ball the defense kicks the ball past the goal line then this results in another corner try not counted as part of the ten - more like a continuation of the last try. If at any time in the ten tries the offense scores, the defenders get the pleasure of each getting a ball and dribbling it around the goal at the other end of the field. If the attackers are held scoreless for ten attempts they get the pleasure of the trip around the goal at the other end of the field. Corner kick situations are excellent scoring opportunities and the offense should be trained to make the most out of the situation. For the same reason defenders should have plenty of practice clearing the ball in corner kick situations.
9. **Penalty kicks.** Penalty kicks have to be practiced, at least once or twice. Both kickers and goalies need the experience prior to a "real game" situation. Incentives help. Perhaps two goalie stops in a row rate a piece of candy; perhaps any kicker who makes three in a row gets candy. This is the one drill where there was a true penalty – run a lap. (And I am against running laps.) The way to earn this penalty was for a kicker to kick the ball so it either bounced off the frame or it missed the goal box completely. Rationale: You may or may not score if you send the ball into the goal, but you will never score if the ball is sent outside the goal.
10. **Chase and Shoot.** As players get older, skills are improved, fields become larger the chances of a one player with the ball breaking towards the goal become more likely. How does a defender chase down this breakaway player? With a defender in pursuit, can the breakaway layer maintain control of the ball to the point of being able to get off a good shot at the goal? In my opinion, the defender, in this situation, must simply put down his or her head and sprint directly towards the center of the goal; the defender must not run behind the player with the ball as this just keeps the player's body between the ball and the defender.

But if the defender sprints for the goal, there is the likelihood that this tactic will result in coming up alongside of the player with the ball or maybe even ahead of the player, at which point the defender can then take action to block the attacker or perhaps even gain control of the ball.

11. **Penalty Action Drills.** Way too often in Rec League soccer and even in some high school soccer games that I have seen, when a penalty has been called against the other team that results in a direct or indirect kick, the team benefiting from the penalty takes way too long to put the ball back in play and the team defending takes too long to get itself into a defensive alignment (so you hear parents screaming from the sidelines, "Make a wall!"). Note that the field umpire signals the type of foul with his or her hands and arms and points to the location from where the ball may be put back into play. A whistle is to start play not unused. The team kicking the indirect or direct starts further play. In many cases, if the kicking can get the ball in play very, very fast, this creates the opportunity to catch the defender unprepared and that could even result in a score. A drill to get your team in the habit of putting the ball back in play quickly to gain advantage might be like this. Divide your team into attackers and defenders and start the attackers just outside the penalty box. Let everyone know that you're going to be calling a "penalty" even though one has not occurred. Until the "penalty" has been called the players are to scrimmage with the attackers trying to score and the defenders trying to keep this from happening. At some point when the ball is outside the penalty box, blow your whistle and call for a penalty, indicating whether it is a direct kick or an indirect. The attackers are to move quickly to get in position and put the ball back in play to their advantage. The defenders also move quickly to form a wall or do whatever is necessary they keep the attackers' quick start from turning into a score. By the way, this also applies to corner kicks.
12. **Scrimmaging.** Yes, teams need to scrimmage. When teams do scrimmage they can play offense against defense on a half field, but most kids like the chance to score, so two evenly divided teams probably works best. The field may have to be shortened and improvised goals may have to be used there are not enough players to fill two full teams. (Consider inviting parents to play in the scrimmages. Yes, there might have been a problem if a parent got hurt, but you may be able to "deputize" them all as assistant coaches.) In most cases parents are humbled, much to the delight of the kids. Scrimmages have two rules. Rule 1: The three touch rule. No one wants one or two players dominating the field, so each player gets only three touches, actually five. The first touch is called a settle, where the player brings the ball under control. The next three or less touches are for the player to advance the ball, shoot the ball, or pass the ball. The fifth touch has to be a pass. Begin counting on the first touch after the "settle." One, two, three... If the next touch is not a pass but another dribble, the whistle is blown and the other team takes the ball on an indirect. Rule 2: No passes over six feet off the ground with a couple of exceptions. Exception A: A defender taking the ball away from an attacker does what he or she can to clear the ball, and if that includes "launching it" than that's understandable. Exception B: A player with the ball can "call" his or her pass, and if the ball is sent towards the called player, that's okay. This would be for a long pass downfield or perhaps a chip shot into the penalty area looking for a header to score. Kicks or passes over six feet off the ground result in an indirect at the point of the kick. The 3-touch rule makes players keep their heads up and be thinking of passing the ball almost as soon as they receive it. The six foot rule emphasizes ball control.

**Have fun, and ensure that your #1 Goal is to have a team that gains some skills and learns to love the game.**