

YOUTH SCENE

(continued)

Make Good Use of Time and Equipment

By David Carr

Youth soccer programs dominate the park and school fields of America during both spring and fall seasons. Any day of the week, all across the country, children of various ages, shapes, and sizes are playing soccer under the direction of adult volunteers. Most youth teams only practice once or twice a week for 60 to 90 minutes and play a game on weekends.

The goal of this article is to help coaches use these few minutes of practice as effectively as possible. How do you conduct your soccer practice? Do you have a plan? What do you do when you get to practice? I will propose a number of strategies that hopefully will help make your practice with your team both more enjoyable and more effective. We will take a look at the youth soccer practice and the establishment of "protocols" that will allow you, the youth soccer coach, to conduct more successful practices. Before protocols can be established for your practices, there are four areas that need to be addressed as you begin your first day of practice. These areas are the practice setting, planning for practice, "enough" appropriate equipment, and waiting time.

The practice setting

Most youth soccer teams are assigned or claim a practice site in the community where they live. This site might be a soccer field with fixed goal posts or it may be a field with no dimensions or goals. Many coaches find themselves sharing a field with one or more different teams. You will need to work with these other coaches so that it is clear who practices where. Once you have established your practice space, it is important to get the maximum use out of it

Part of this effective environment includes having "enough" appropriate equipment.

Every player should have a ball.

Planning for practice

Coaches need to be ready to meet the challenges of practice from the very first day. Successful coaches design and implement effective learning environments. These provide an atmosphere that is pleasant and conducive to learning. Children can learn to adjust to the environment you create. There is no magic formula or single definition for creating a pleasant atmosphere at practice. The decisions that are made, however, are made by the coach and he/she must determine how the practice will be conducted, what behavior is acceptable, and what is unacceptable.

Your plan should include an overall emphasis for practice (objectives), what skill work players will concentrate on and how the sessions will be structured, what small-sided games will take place and what the emphasis of those games will be, and if you scrimmage, how long will it take.

The process of teaching and learning what behavior is appropriate takes time but will lead to a much more enjoyable and effective practice session. Establish rules for what is expected of the players when you are talking and conducting practice. Plan for what happens when players break the rules. Fairness is very important.

Appropriate equipment

Part of this effective environment includes having enough appropriate equipment. Every player should have a ball. Most experienced coaches support the use of hand-stitched balls of appro-

priate size (3, 4, or 5) for the age of their players. Many of the synthetic panel balls don't "give" much when kicked. Often, kids say it is like kicking a rock. Stitched balls lose air faster but your players will have an easier time practicing skills, especially when it is time for heading practice. Have each player bring his or her own ball to practice or carry a bag or two of balls in the trunk of your car so that you always have enough for each player. Put a bicycle tire pump in the trunk also so the balls that have lost air can be quickly reinflated. Your players can be taught to inflate their own balls.

Other equipment also can enhance a practice. Cones help delineate space, can be used as targets, and can serve as goals. Disc cones are inexpensive and are easy to carry and store. Colored vests allow for multiple small-sided games and allow for exercises that feature offensive players vs. defensive players run much more smoothly. Many coaches suggest a dozen vests of one color and half dozen of two other colors. Vests and cones can be obtained from most soccer specialty stores or sporting goods stores and are relatively inexpensive.

If goals are available, nets that are put up in advance of practice will enhance the practice experience for your players. Kids get a thrill out of seeing the ball "hit the back of the net." Nets are often available from youth league directors. If they are not, a pair of nets can be purchased for less than \$100. If goals are not part of the practice site,

portable goals certainly can help. These are somewhat expensive (over \$500) and although there are a number of companies that make them, they require a pickup truck or station wagon to get them to and from practice. Some coaches have developed their own portable goals by using PVC pipe. You can run a very effective practice without goal posts, but to enhance instruction in scoring, defensive tactics and goalkeeping, some of your practices should be conducted with goal posts of some type.

Waiting time

Now that you have a defined practice space and you have planned how you will conduct your practice, it is important to effectively make use of the time you have for practice. Structure your practice so that children are actively engaged in appropriate soccer activity for as much of the practice time as possible. A number of research studies in physical education state that the amount of time students spend practicing (either



Good practices make good players; great practices make better players. Here a Montgomery (Md.) youth player concentrates on controlling the ball under pressure. Placing players under pressure in practice settings allows for success in matches under the same circumstances. (photo by Tony Quinn).

measured by time or the number of skills trials) at an appropriate or successful level is positively related to student achievement (Silverman, 1991). Your players need multiple quality touches of the ball (the skill should be performed correctly and often) in all of soccer's techniques in order to become skillful.

There are too many instances in which children stand around waiting to touch the one or two balls the coach has brought to practice. An extraordinary large amount of time is wasted when after every kick the goalkeeper or other field player has to chase the ball into the parking lot. Time is also wasted putting children in lines waiting for their "turn". If all of your players can be working with a ball (dribbling in defined space, passing with a partner, ball juggling, shooting at multiple goals, etc.), waiting time can be greatly reduced and active involvement in practicing soccer technique is increased.

By developing content that can be made easier or harder, skills can be acquired more quickly and efficiently. Utilize small-sided games to engage more players with a ball. Four groups of four will involve more children in positions of play than two groups of eight. Organize drills that involve all of your players and put them in areas that will minimize balls being out of your practice space.

Establishing protocols

With the space for practice identified and the equipment readily available, you are now responsible for the soccer education of over a dozen young athletes. The first thing that the coach needs to know is that children can learn to understand and follow directions. The coach needs to be able to expect that children will listen, follow directions and basic rules, not push and shove, and understand within a framework of instruction what your players are to do. This framework is referred to as establishing "protocols" for your practice (Graham, 1992).

The word protocol refers to established norms or courtesies that have been predetermined and put into action as an accepted method of operation. They are routines and courtesies that are practiced (Graham, 1992). By teaching and practicing protocols, you can develop a more

effective context that will foster learning and enjoyment for you and your players. Establishment of protocols in the following areas will be discussed: players arriving to practice, starting and stopping activity, the use of equipment, and selecting partners, groups and teams.

Arriving to practice

As I travel around the country and observe children and coaches in youth soccer settings, I have been able to paint an internal picture of how these coaches conduct their practices. Children under the age of 16 rely on someone to bring them to practice. Parents usually fulfill this responsibility but sometimes brothers, sisters, grandparents, or neighbors drop off and pick up these players. Some kids live close enough to the practice site to walk or ride their bicycles. The point here is kids arrive at practice by different means and at different times.

What do these kids do once they arrive at practice? In many cases, the coach waits until he/she has enough players to begin the practice. While waiting to begin, some players sit and talk, some kick balls as hard as they can into the goal, and others sometimes choose to participate in non-soccer related activity (i.e. wrestling, throwing soccer balls at each other). What can you as a youth soccer coach do to create a more effective atmosphere for teaching the game of soccer to your players?

The beginning of practice gives you a perfect opportunity to work one-on-one or in small groups with the players who arrive first. There is an endless supply of individual ball skills that players can work on, under your direction, when they get to practice. Dribbling skills, juggling, feints and fakes, receiving and controlling air balls are just the beginning. This "instant activity" also serves as an effective warm-up, clearly more effective than running laps around a field.

Once a second player arrives, he/she can be challenged by individual skill work or can work with the first player on attacking and defending skills. Passing and receiving and 1 v. 1 keepaway are examples. Coaches have an opportunity here to work directly with their players. As more players arrive, they will be responsible for knowing and understanding what the protocol is. They can get a ball and begin ball skill work, play

1 v. 1, 2 v. 1 keepaway or possession games. These activities can continue until all your players arrive and you determine the point that formal practice will begin.

Starting and stopping

You must develop a signal for starting and stopping that your players will hear or see. The context you are in may determine what is best. Many practice sites may not be that quiet. If there is a busy road nearby or other teams practicing on the same field, you need to establish a personal signal that your players will recognize immediately.

A starting signal can simply be the word "go" or "begin." Stop signals that I prefer are the words "freeze" or "stop." Whatever you choose to use, make sure your players clearly understand what you want them to do. Players should stop within one or two seconds of the signal, the first time they hear it. They should also prepare to listen for directions from you as to what to do next.

This needs to be practiced until learned. Practice starting and stopping in a dribbling drill where all players are working with a ball in a defined space. Use the word "freeze" or "stop" and insist that they stop their activity immediately (within one or two steps or have them put their foot on the ball). The ball should also remain on the ground, as many young players develop the habit of picking it up in their hands.

Players also should practice staying on their feet when they hear the stop signal. There always seem to be a few who fall and roll on the ground. These protocols will save time and allow for more practice opportunities which in turn will help each player improve.

The use of a whistle by a coach should only be used when players are participating in actual game conditions that need to be controlled by a referee. Teach your players to respond to a normal, controlled tone of voice.

Use of equipment

As I mentioned, every player needs to have a ball. Players should each have their own balls and bring them to practice. Players need to be taught to keep track of all equipment and help collect it at the end of practice. If a player strikes a ball out of the practice area,

he/she should retrieve it immediately. Care must be exercised if a ball goes in to the road, parking lot or other potentially dangerous area.

A pet peeve of mine is seeing players carrying soccer balls during practice. Players should use their feet to move the ball from one place to another—always. When you have a signal to stop activity, players should stop with the ball between their feet or with one foot on top of it. Again, this protocol needs to be taught. Have your players move the ball from one practice area to another by dribbling, not carrying their ball. Have a specific area where equipment is stored during practice (i.e. behind a goal, at midfield on the sideline). Equipment not being used should be placed in that area and your players must practice retrieving and returning equipment from that area. This will help keep you from misplacing one or two balls at the end of practice.

Selecting partners, groups and teams

A well-structured practice will involve players with partners or in a small group, playing in small-sided games, and performing skills in a team environment. The days of selecting two captains to "pick" teams is over. Too many children have suffered blows to their self-esteem to allow this process to continue. It is embarrassing and emotionally damaging to be chosen last.

Kids can be given the task of quickly getting a partner or getting in groups of three or four. Care must be taken to have a strategy to deal with odd numbers of players. If you want your players to get into groups of three, what happens if you have 14 players at practice? You need to have a plan readied in advance to deal with situations like this. Design your drills so that four groups of three and one pair of two can participate or two groups of three and two groups of four.

Often coaches will have groups of players pre-selected for play in certain structured sessions. Small group activities give everyone a chance to continuously practice in game-like conditions. Forwards can play with other forwards in attack, defenders can play with other defenders or midfielders on both offensive and defensive tactics, etc. One key is

to teach all of your players basic offensive and defensive concepts. Avoid situations where some players are always defenders and some are always forwards.

The protocol that you need to practice with your players is teaching them to form pairs or groups quickly and without excluding anyone. Any player who wants to be part of a group is to be welcomed not rejected. An important point to remember is to take care of children's feelings and still remain fair to everyone involved. One way to accomplish this is by having players change partners often and foster an attitude that every player on your team needs help to become a better player.

Conclusion

Protocols will help you have a more enjoyable time at practice. Your players will learn what is required of them and will benefit by having to spend less time getting organized or having your requests repeated. Less management time means more time to be actively engaged in learning how to play soccer. By providing more engagement time, your players will spend more time "playing" soccer. ☺

References

- Graham, G. (1992). "Teaching Children Physical Education: Becoming a Master Teacher." Champaign, Ill.: *Human Kinetics*.
- Silverman, S. (1991). "Research on Teaching in Physical Education." *Research Quarterly for Exercise and Sport*, 62 (4), pp. 352-364.

Editor's note: Dave Carr is currently completing his doctorate in physical education pedagogy at Virginia Tech in Blacksburg, Va. He is currently the men's coach at Virginia Tech and holds the NSCAA Advanced National Diploma. Dave is also interested in the effectiveness of coaching education programs and intends future research in that area.



David Carr