

Soccer Practice Guide  
Silver Lake Soccer Club  
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The purpose of a good soccer practice is to best help youth soccer players learn to play soccer and develop long term enjoyment of the game. This soccer practice guide will provide do's and don'ts, with some examples. Towards the end, several book references will be provided.

1. Design practices that allow lots of ball touches for each player, AND mimic game-like situations.

What this means is:

- a) We want players to play soccer as much as we can. We don't want players to stand in long lines waiting for their turn to dribble or pass the ball.
- b) We want lots of soccer actions like real games, with opponents: dribbling, passing, shooting, and defending.
- c) We want to use Small Sided Games, for example 2v2, 3v3, 4v4, 5v5, or unbalanced (1v2, 1v3, 2v3, 3v4 etc.).

Explanations:

- 1.1. Team practice time is very limited. The more time players can practice through play, the faster they will learn. Actions can happen in parallel. Example: 6 players play 3v3 in one area, and 4 players play 2v2 in another area. No waiting for their turn.
- 1.2. We don't want players to dribble around cones; cones don't move; we want players to dribble around their opponents. We don't want players to pass around mannequins, they need to pass around the defenders. Players will lose the ball when dribbling or passing against defenders, and that's how they'll learn to get better. Meanwhile, the opposing players learn how to defend. Also important, players learn to transition from offense to defense, and defense to offense. Most importantly, players learn to make decisions when faced with opponents, and have a lot more fun in small sided games, in contrast to static drills.
- 1.3. In 11v11 games, a player doesn't get to touch the ball much. In small sided games, the number of touches increases manyfold, and players get to dribble, pass, and defend many more times. There is a lot of variability and ever-changing scenarios, which have been shown to improve player learning.
- 1.4. Small sided games design: a) coaches use cones or lines to define the boundary of the play area, or use existing field lines. b) The games should be directional, with small or big goals or using the "endzone" concept on opposite ends. Players can shoot, dribble through goal, or pass into endzone. c) Option to have multiple small goals, so players learn to switch field (i.e. transition attack from left side of the field to the right). d) Adjust the size of the field depending on the number, age, and

ability of the players, and practice purpose. A field too big for young players will lead to too few soccer actions. A smaller field can provide more challenges. A wide field can encourage switch field or overlapping. A long field can encourage build up through midfield.

- 1.5. We reject the notion that players must master certain techniques before they can play. Techniques are developed within the context of play, and isolated techniques are not effective without players learning the game context. Unlike certain sports that require learning more precise techniques (e.g. golf swing), soccer fosters creativity and encourages players to find solutions on the fly. While some basic points on techniques should be offered to young players, for example encouraging the use of sides rather than the tip of the cleats to pass, team practice should focus on dynamic activities and creativity. Technique focused activities like lofted pass can be added in between small sided games.

## 2. Design practices that will amplify the desired soccer actions.

What this means:

- a) Any activity should have a purpose in mind. Instead of just picking something from Youtube, plan and think about the key areas for players to improve. For example, for beginning young players learning to dribble and control the ball, use fun games like sharks and minnows, and 1v1, 2v1, and 2v2 small sided games.
- b) Small sided games designed to amplify desired actions. Use incentives, rather than restrictions, to encourage such actions. Here is a small list of actions that coaches can encourage to happen:
  - i) Give and go
  - ii) Switch field
  - iii) Through ball
  - iv) Up-back-through
  - v) Overlap
  - vi) Back pass (drop)

For example, to encourage give and go combinations, we can double the number of goals scored through such actions. On the contrary, if coaches instruct that players have to switch field before they can score, defenders will simply focus on such actions only and make it difficult to execute. Make sure to recognize success when desired actions occur.

- c) Use neutral players as options. For example, 2 additional neutral players can enhance passing in a 3v3 game (which becomes 3v3+2). A neutral player near the sideline area can be used to help attacking through wide passes and switch field. A neutral player in the middle of the field can help passing combinations such as up-back-through.
- d) Don't over constrain. If we have too many rules, it can be difficult to implement, and also discouraging for young players. For example, a 2 touch limit could take away the opportunity for player to dribble into wide open space.

- e) Add variability: small sided games are naturally variable, with situations constantly changing. Coaches can be creative and add new wrinkles to small sided games so that players will find engaging.
  - f) Communications: instead of just telling players to talk, implement some constraints in small sided games. For example, the side with ball can only use hand gestures; or the defending side can't talk but the side with the ball can.
3. A typical practice session in the play-practice-play model:
- 1) Brief warmup, players dribble the ball around the field (<5 min)
  - 2) Small sided games, for example 2 games of 3v3 (5-10 min)
  - 3) Dynamic stretch (for players 10 years and older) (5-10 min depending on age)
  - 4) Brief discussion of previous game, and theme for today's practice
  - 5) Small sided games with specific constraints to amplify the practice theme (give and go; crossing; communications by gesture; etc.)
  - 6) Full team scrimmage that emphasizes the theme of today's practice
  - 7) Brief recap of key points (1-2 min)
4. About playing style. We want to foster a ball possession playing style that encourages players to keep the ball through dribbling and passing until a shot on goal. This is in contrast to the very direct kick and chase style, which asks backs to boot the ball up the field as far as they can to bypass everyone and hope the fast / tall forwards will win the ball. Players with the ball learn a lot more over time. Playing the direct style in youth soccer may help win more games initially, but may stunt long term player development.

Possession style means playing out from the back when the GK has the ball, passing to backs or midfielders, then to forwards, back and forth if needed, and move up the field. Building out from the back can invite lots of pressure from the opposing team, and may yield some easy goals to the opposing team initially; however over time all players will learn more. Help the players recognize that if the opposing team press high and thus leave space behind or between the lines, then we can play direct with through ball / long ball. And the backs still have the freedom to clear dangerous balls in front of the goal when facing high pressure. We need to teach the young players when to clear the ball and when to keep the ball and start building attacks. Overall, we must balance the needs for player development and short term wins.

5. About Rondos. Rondos (basically monkey in the middle) have been used in many countries for all levels of soccer practice, mainly to practice passing (and defending). We previously recommended using it, but our thinking has changed. The reason is that the exercise doesn't mimic games enough.
- a) No dribbling.
  - b) Everything is in front of the players – ball, teammates, defenders. The area is relatively small. They don't need to check behind them or sufficiently scan the field. Research has shown that the time a player scans the field in Rondos is much reduced. Developing the ability to scan the field is critical.

- c) In addition, the exercise can expose weaker players in the middle and does not help with player psyche.

It's OK to do some Rondo as a warm up exercise if space is really limited (for example before a game), but most of the time coaches should implement small sided games in practice.

If the team needs practice on ball possession, small or larger sided games can still take place, except that players are instructed to keep the ball until the coach gives verbal instruction that they can now score. This way, players learn to circulate balls through various area of the field. It is helpful that players are assigned certain positions, so that the team learn to use back passes to backs or GK to keep the ball in possession.

6. About set plays: corner kicks and freekicks are relatively rare at a young age, and we can spend some time on it (but not too much) when players reach middle school age.
7. About soccer fitness. Soccer fitness is about sprints AND endurance. Players should get fit from playing soccer, rather than sprints or long distance running alone. Through small sided games, players get fit through game like conditions, while getting many more touches. If the practice is mostly static actions – pre-set passing routines or dribbling through cones, there is very little physical requirement; when coaches try to compensate for the lack of intensity and ask players to do sprint drills or long runs, it takes players' time further away from the ball and the game.

#### References:

The following two books provide research and evidence based studies on how people learn motor skills and become experts. "How We Learn to Move: A Revolution in the Way We Coach & Practice Sports Skills", and "Learning to Optimize Movement: Harnessing the Power of the Athlete-Environment Relationship", by Rob Gray, Ph.D. Some key ideas on learning to play sports:

- Learning through actions, not instructions
- Through perceptions of the environment (ball, opposition, teammates, external conditions), not mental calculations
- Perception and action are coupled; perceptions lead to actions, and actions create new perception, which lead to new actions
- Techniques and decision-makings go hand in hand: there is no perfect technique, every player is different, and every situation is different. Good technique is ineffective when applied to a bad decision.