HOBBIT WEEKLY

FOR YOUTH COACHES The week in youth football, picked for coaches



01

21 Sept to 27 Sept 2026

U10 read the next play

Direct play before two touch

U8: swarm or shapes

Two routes out of swarm football

U11 one v one

Defend with the whole body

Cover story Coaching · 28 comments

Talk first, then warm up

The order that ends your team's flat starts

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More Touches, Less Talk

A nine year old keeper looks to roll the ball out and hears two coaches shouting where to pass. At the other end, a shooting queue waits thirty seconds for one touch. On the sideline, a team arrives an hour early, talks tactics, and starts flat.

We see the same thing across this issue. Too much talking, too much waiting, too many directions. The method, not the topic, is what we overteach.

Here is the change. Count the seconds between touches. Limit in-game shouting to questions and praise. Talk first, then build to game speed with short, intense drills.

What is one thing you can cut from your next session so your players get more touches and more play?

The Hobbit editors

16 stories

7 sources

6 coaching discussions

217 replies read

8 languages



FOR COACHES

Talk tactics first, then warm up from slow to game speed, finishing intense right before kickoff.

COVER STORY · Coaching · r/SoccerCoachResources · 28 comments

01 First Half Slump

My boys' team is expected to arrive 1 hour prior to kickoff. Within that time, they stretch as a team, go through their warmups, and we go over game-plan/lineup.

We've played two games and came out flat in both of them. Halftime comes, I yell, they become a whole new team second half.

I have never been a coach that yells and I hate to think that me yelling at them is motivating them, but the difference is night & day.

I'm sure others have dealt with this before, but what have you done to combat this issue? Do I need to just yell before kickoff?

Top replies, most upvoted first

- (+10) Do you do it in this order? Stretch, warm up then discuss the game plan? If so, you are slowing them down right before the game. Start with talk then build the speed and intensity of prematch drills etc from slow to game speed with the latter finishing right before kick off. Imagine a line. Doing it how you are doing it is going up from zero to a peak then back to zero. What I am suggesting goes gradually up from zero to game speed then they play.
- (+7) Maybe they're arriving too early? Or could be a nutrition issue, eating a bunch of protein right before gametime? Sounds silly but sometimes that makes a big difference early in the game.

- (+6) What age? I laugh to my wife that coaching u9/u10 is exhausting because i feel like i have to bring a level of energy that is WAY outside of my normal state of existence. I usually get them going with a dribbling activation, then move to something like a rondo to get them thinking, then we do some basic shooting.
- (+2) This is how I've run 14 y.o +warm ups and have never had an issue with start of game slumps. A trick I've always had is also write it on a whiteboard where everyone can see it so it's no surprise. All are before kick off -1 hr - arrive, greet coach and teammates (personal stretch, taping, foam rolling to be completed in this period) -40 minutes - prepped, ready to go, team talks (game focus, line up etc) -35 minutes - all players on grass moving ball (small rondos, short passes, individual juggling) -30 minutes - start initial warm up (short passing. 10 yards apart. Two touch, one touch,...
- (+1) How old are they? An hour is a long time. You don't have to yell, but energy is contagious. I do hype them up big time, and I use high energy language and antics. I'm not berating them, I'm telling them I believe in them and know that if they focus and play hard they can play with anybody. Coaches yell in all sports especially at older ages, most of the time just to get players attention. Sometimes there's this idea that soccer coaches need to be zen masters and calmly observe. Yes you need to guard against over instruction, yes guard against yelling too much, and yes guard against any...
- (+1) What's your play style, and what's your definition of flat? This happens to us often and we have our definition of flat. Just wondering what you mean more precisely.
- (+1) Too long of a warmup in my opinion. An option is to hype up the kickoff. Get excited for who gets the first big tackle or if you have the kickoff, PSG it and high pressure from the throw in!
- (+1) your warmup sucks. High energy and game like. I watched a state championship HS team run thru warm up the other day - it was 11v11 half field.
- (+1) FWIW you framed your post around the fact that your team is arriving 1 hour early and it seems like you might think that is the reason for a flat 1st half performance (entirely plausible). Is the reason for having them arrive 1 hour early due to parents/kids traveling from all over the place & you want to make sure everyone is there "on time"? Or, is the reason bc you have a pretty structured & lengthy warmup/progression to kickoff? I wonder if halftime works because it's short, most are already warmed up, and there is momentum from the team bench/tent/sideline to the start of the 2nd half?...
- (+1) How intense is the warmup? I've seen a lot of teams where the warmup is half-hearted at best. So the match starts and no-one's mind or body is in gear yet. They flounder about trying to build to a game tempo, meanwhile now down 2 goals in the first 10 minutes. I think serious warm-up should begin about 20 minutes before the whistle and be at game tempo, with intensity. The players should have elevated breath and maybe a slight sheen of sweat. I watched a slow-to-start U13 team become a powerhouse team. They switched to a short but intense warm-up then started completely demoralizing the...

- (+1) What is your warmup? If they're a pre-teen team then play a SSG as warmup that contains elements of how you want them to play. There was a research paper I read that said physically the SSG outperformed traditional warmup, and I used to use it with rec futsal teams. It always made a difference in the beginning of games against better teams, and conversely it's easy to predict when teams are going to start poorly simply by watching their warmup.
- (+1) Kind of, yeah. Not angry but I bring the energy. Id say Im more animated than yelling. When we do our team break I want them yelling though. I tell them straight up I want the other team to hear how loud and fired up they are and be nervous. I want them to be animals. If you're calm and laid back they will follow that tone too. Not always because the first goal of course change the mood and talent differences overcome any "hunger" but you can effect that first passage of play, or you may as well try.

Source: r/SoccerCoachResources · 28 comments reddit.com

THIS WEEK

02 Coaching U10

You cannot predict the next play, so you receive and then look for someone to dribble past or pass to. How can you learn to predict and move?

> **For coaches** Try his sequence in your next session: direct passing toward goal first, then two touch, and keep asking your U10s where the next pass should go.

Children who are not good at predicting the next play and moving. After receiving the ball at their feet, they look for someone they can dribble past or pass to.

A dad coach worries: I want them to be able to control the ball while predicting the next play and moving, but how should I teach that?

Jun Ikegami, who has served as a development coach at JEF United Ichihara Chiba and as home town academy director at Kyoto Sanga F.C., and who has coached more than 600,000 children of all ages in total, explains the order of training. (Composition and text: Yuko Shimazawa)

<Question from a dad coach>

Hello, Mr. Ikegami. I am a parent and coach who coaches at a sports boys club.

My worry is that they always receive the ball at their feet. I am in charge of U-10, and they cannot move while predicting the next play, so after receiving the ball they look for someone they can dribble past or pass to.

I want them to learn to control the ball while moving and to make their first touch while predicting the next play. What kind of practice menu is good?

<Advice from Mr. Ikegami>

Thank you for your question.

U-10 is fourth grade in elementary school. First, as for the practice menu in your question, what I often do is a scissors pass while advancing.

At the end, either side shoots and finishes. I tell them that this kind of thing also happens in matches, and I ask them: in order to get to the goal as quickly as possible, where should you play the pass?

Or I set conditions like "Let's try to get there with five passes before shooting" or "We're going with three passes next." What I often talk about then is "reading ahead."

Where should you play the ball so the receiver can get it easily, where should I receive it next so I can get it easily, or can I shoot? I have them read ahead like that.

I tell them, "If you can do that, you can get to the goal smoothly and quickly." In that way, I have them deepen their understanding of "playing while moving."

■Order of training 1: First do it directly

As for the order of training, first I have them do it directly.

The reason is that if I say, "Try doing it with two touches," the children become fixated on controlling the ball and forget the biggest goal, which is to move forward quickly.

First, they start from the halfway line and move toward the goal while passing. How should they pass so they do not stop the receiver's speed? Where should they play the ball so the receiver can carry it without slowing down? I have them develop that feeling.

It is fine if the passes do not connect smoothly. I have them learn how far forward to play the pass.

■Order of training 2: Make it two touches and pass without losing speed

Next, when it becomes two touches, because they understand where to play the pass in order not to lose speed, they become able to play it into the space where the receiver is running.

The receiver understands that if they do not control the ball into the space ahead of where they are running, their speed will drop, so when they focus on that, they become able to do it well.

Control while moving, and pass while moving. They gradually come to understand doing these things while carrying their speed.

Also, when they become cautious, their speed tends to drop. To prevent that, for example, I say, "Let's try to do it in eight seconds," and count "1, 2, 3," or sometimes I have two groups compete. Please use that kind of training as an entry point.

■Order of training 3: Do rondo with 3 vs 2

In addition, I devise ways of doing rondo.

For example, in the case of 3 vs 1 rondo, the three players pass the ball around so the defender does not take it, but often the three players do not move. I even think that doing this too much may prevent them from developing the feeling of playing a pass into space.

So I make it 3 vs 2. Then, more than in 3 vs 1, the three players have to move or they cannot receive the pass. Concretely, because the pass will not connect unless they play it into where the opponent is moving, the children begin to play while moving.

When controlling the ball too, in order to play the next pass they try to move away from the opponent and play the pass, so they control while moving. In other words, it becomes more match realistic.

I recommend this 3 vs 2 rondo in many places. Modify it, and if the practice field is large, call out to them, "You can use plenty of space and move."

Furthermore, you can also make it a game format. For example, make it 3 vs 3 and place two target men on each goal line to play a match. If the three players hit their target, then they can attack in the opposite direction.

I think it is also fine to add a restriction that dribbling is not allowed, but first let them do it freely.

Source: サカイク · Translated from Japanese sakaiku.jp

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03 Coaching U8

From swarm soccer to positions: two ways to make the transition 【U-8】

> **For coaches** Try 4v4 plus 3 free players and ask where the start position is the moment the ball is lost, then coach the action after taking up the position, not just standing there.

Hello, this is Coach Kazu.

In coaching younger age groups, how to move from swarm soccer to play that is aware of positions is a struggle for many people. On defense they swarm and get beaten through the middle. You want to graduate them from that soon. But when you teach positions, then the pressure on the ball becomes lax.

For example, some of you may feel as follows.

- When you teach starting positions, the children get confused and go back to swarming
- When you make them hold positions, their pressure on the ball and their duels become weak
- At U-8, you do not know how far you should teach positions

Previously, I received this kind of question on X. "I am in charge of U-8 (second graders). On defense they swarm and get beaten through the middle, so I tell them their starting positions and urge them to return to their own spots on defense. But confusion arises among the children, their pressure becomes lax, and they go back to swarming. How would you approach this, Kazu?"

In this article, I will explain the two ways to transition from swarm soccer to positional play, what I would do if I were coaching U-8, and the way of thinking about training for that transition. If you read this article, I think you will see how to balance "organizing the shape" and "keeping the players' strengths," so please watch to the end.

1. Two Ways to Transition from Swarm Soccer to Positions

To get straight to the conclusion, there are two ways.

1. Half-forcibly drill the starting positions into them

The first is, as in the question, the method of telling them the starting positions and drilling in "when it becomes attack or defense, stand in this position." It is a method of starting with the shape, half-forcibly.

The merit is that the visible shape quickly becomes beautiful.

However, there is a demerit. Intensity (the intensity of play) drops. Because they are too conscious of positioning, their duels become weak, and they become unable to go to press.

This is the same on attack. When you try to make them hold positions, they come to choose only passes, and the sharpness of their dribbling often disappears. The "pressure becomes lax" in your question is, I think, exactly this demerit appearing.

2. Keep the swarm, and gradually bring them toward positions with key factors

The second is the method of letting them play swarm soccer while using small key factors to gradually lead them to play that takes up positions. This one is more difficult.

You observe how the players move when they play naturally, and apply corrections there. For example, for a child who goes toward the ball, you tell them the support key factor, "When a teammate has the ball, move a little away and receive a pass." It is an accumulation of that kind of thing.

The merit is that intensity does not drop, and instinctive dribbling, etc. does not disappear. However, coaching is extremely difficult, and it takes time.

3. Which to choose depends on "what you want to keep"

If you want to organize the shape immediately, it is 1; if you want to keep the players' strengths, it is 2. 1 is fast but intensity drops. 2 keeps intensity but takes time. Knowing these two natures, I think it is good to decide which one to lean toward.

1. Teach the starting positions. But do not stick to them

If I were coaching U-8, I think I would teach the starting positions. However, I probably would not stick to positions that much.

More than that, I prioritize the technical parts that will be necessary when they become third and fourth graders.

2. Individual technique that can be polished precisely within the swarm

For example, when the ball comes in the jumbled swarm, carrying it into a wide space with "controlled oriented (directional control)." Or techniques such as "regate (breakthrough dribbling)," "carrying dribbling," and one-twos.

On the premise that swarming is unavoidable to a certain extent, I think I would take the approach of polishing individual technique. In a swarm there are many situations of handling the ball in tight spaces, so in that sense it is also an opportunity to polish individual technique.

3. If you absolutely want them to graduate from it, start from the moment of transition

Even so, if you absolutely want them to graduate from swarming, first you start by thoroughly instilling awareness of immediately taking up their starting positions in "transition (switch between attack and defense)." Rather than making them memorize the positions themselves, you make "where to return to at the moment of transition" the first step.

1. With 4v4 plus 3 free players, "Where is your starting position?"

As training, for example, in a possession practice such as "4v4 plus 3 free players," asking "Where is your starting position?" the moment the ball is lost and making them quickly take up positions is effective.

2. Do not make standing in a position the goal

However, care is necessary so that standing in a position does not become the goal. "After you take up a position, you can move out freely." "When a pass is played, go in and win it with all your might." In this way, it is necessary to instill the actions after taking up a position as well.

If they memorize where to stand and stop moving, the downside of ① (loose pressing) shows up exactly as described. "Return, then win the ball from there" is one complete set.

③ Defensive practice comes after the attack is circulating

There is one more important precondition. To train defense, you need a state where the ball is circulating to a certain degree.

If the level is such that the ball does not circulate in a rondo or similar, I think it is better to prioritize organizing the attack before defense. Once the attack can take its starting positions and the ball starts circulating, defensive training against that naturally becomes viable too.

The more you want to do something about a clump of defenders, the more you should first sort out the attacking shape, even if it looks like a detour. I think that is the order.

Summary

- There are two ways to shift from a clump to positions. ① Teach the shape first (fast, but intensity drops) ② Keep the clump and press using key factors (intensity remains, but it is difficult and takes time)
- If I were coaching U-8, I would teach starting positions but not insist on them. I would prioritize the individual skills that become necessary in 3rd and 4th grade
- Even inside a clump, you can sharpen control oriented, carrying dribbles, breakthrough dribbles, and one-twos
- If you want them to graduate from the clump, start with awareness of returning to starting positions at the moment of transition
- In practice, use 4v4 plus 3 free players and ask "Where is the starting position?" Drill it down to the action after standing still
- Defensive practice becomes viable once the ball is circulating in the attack

In the U-8 age group, please approach with balance so that defending positions does not erase the players' instinctive strengths. Please try it at your own coaching sites too!

Also, for practice like 4v4 plus 3 free players, if you draw the board and visualize the "starting positions," it becomes easier to ask questions of the players.

Source: ジュニアサッカーカレッジ · Translated from Japanese junior-soccer.college

04 Coaching U10 to U12

Coaching kids who can't make practice【Youth Soccer】1v1 defending and body use

> **For coaches** If your defenders jab with the toes only, let them grab a shirt in a 1v1 drill; many discover their arms were never involved.

Hello, this is Coach Kazu.

In youth soccer coaching, one-on-one defending is something many people struggle with. I myself, every time I change teams or age categories, find myself concerned about one-on-one defending, and honestly, I struggle with it too.

For example, you might feel like the following.

- There are players who can't go to press when the opponent has the ball
- They improve in one-on-one practice, but in matches they can't do it
- Against stronger or same-level opponents, their close-down is too loose and they can't win the ball

Previously, I received the following question from a reader.

"I'm a dad coach for a 5th-grade boys' club team. What kind of advice should I give to a player who can't go to press, can't win the ball, and has low defensive intensity? In one-on-one practice I tell them, 'It's okay if you get beaten, just put pressure on them first and take away their freedom,' and 'Go at the opponent, not the ball,' but against stronger or same-level opponents it doesn't work. Their off-the-ball positioning and awareness might be low, and their press might be delayed."

That I can't say anything for sure without seeing the match situation is always true, but it was a very thorough question.

In this article, I'll explain how I coach one-on-one defending in the junior age group, from the angles of "body use," "benchmarks," "team-wide pressing," and "player psychology." If you read this article, I think you'll see several reasons why "we practice one-on-one but can't do it in matches," so please watch until the end.

① Is it that they only stick out a leg and get beaten, or that they can't get their body close?

One-on-one defending for elementary schoolers, I think there are roughly two patterns. Either they only stick out a leg and get easily beaten. Or they can't get their body close in the first place.

Of course, there are also kids who go in hard but dive in too much and get beaten. However, in many cases, I think the problem lies in "not being able to use their body." That is, they can't use their whole body to stop the opponent's body.

② Approach, stop, close down

The basic idea is to approach, and if the opponent makes a control error, go for it in one go. If the ball settles properly at the opponent's feet, stop once. From there, close down.

It's a three-step process: approach, stop, close down.

They approach, dive in at the moment of control and can't stop, and get taken out with one touch. This also happens a lot. For those players, I focus on "once you approach, stop."

After stopping, if the distance is too far, it won't be pressure. Close down to a certain degree, and either go to stop them by putting out hands and feet at the same time and pushing their whole body, or when the opponent comes to beat you with a dribble, get your body close and win the ball. I think this area is the basic key factor.

③ Secret trick: during practice, it's okay to grab arms or uniforms

There are quite a few kids who still can't do it even after being told that. When many kids defend with only their toes, without using their arms or hips, I change the way we practice.

In one-on-one practice, I say, "You can pull the opponent's arm or uniform, so try to stop them." Of course, this is not to say it's okay to do it during matches. Only during practice.

When you do that, they can't stop them. Even when told they can commit a foul, they can't stop them. Because their arms aren't coming out in the first place.

There's long been an expression that "soccer is combat using a ball," but in Europe and South America, it's normal for kids from childhood to use their whole bodies and bump into each other. On the other hand, I feel that many Japanese kids think soccer is something you do with your feet.

At first they can't stop them. But as they somehow manage to stop them while pulling and such, they naturally develop the habit of using their arms to block. I sometimes intentionally do this as a phase, even with junior high schoolers.

④ When they shield the ball, say "Go kick the ball"

There are also kids whose bodies end up too far away when the opponent shields the ball and gets their body in. In that case, rather than pushing from behind, I say, "Go kick the ball."

When you go to kick the ball, your hips naturally go in deep, and you also make contact with the opponent's body.

It may sometimes look like a foul, but I often use the expression that if you don't go in that much, you're not putting pressure on the opponent. If it's becoming a foul during matches, I correct it by saying, "Use your arms a bit more like this."

① The "dangerously" high intensity I felt in Spain

Before I went to Spain, there was an era when Japanese kids were said to have low intensity (intensity of play). When I actually went to Spain and saw it, the intensity was truly high. If you have the chance, I'd like you to see it live once, but you'll understand in an instant.

They come in quite dangerously.

What was interesting in a class during my study abroad was that one of the demerits of dribbling listed was "there is a risk of injury." This is because when you dribble, the opponent comes in to cut your legs down with full force. I think there's a premise in their culture that it's that intense.

② When those around you are low, that becomes the norm

When I was coaching at a Barcelona school, we practiced in Japan and then went on a tour to Spain. Even though the school in Japan was coached by Spaniards, once we got to the tournament, the intensity was still low. When we got back to Japan, we decided we were going to push the players much harder.

When the intensity around them is low overall, that becomes the norm. It is not about whether fouling is good or bad. Even if it might turn into a foul, that is the level of commitment you need to make in duels. I feel that for Japanese children, the baseline for that sense is low.

I think it comes down to where you set the standard in the everyday environment you create.

1. "Jega tarde" = arriving late

Regarding your question about whether off-the-ball positioning and awareness of danger are low, and whether the press is late, I think that is a possibility.

In Spanish there is an expression "jega tarde." Literally translated, it means "arriving late." It refers to the phenomenon in defensive pressing where the approach is late, the player gets played around, and the defensive shape gets pulled out of alignment.

It is used almost like a noun, it is a phenomenon that happens often and that you must not do.

2. Are you only coaching details?

In my experience, there are very few junior teams that properly do team-wide pressing.

If you listen to coaching during matches, there are often scenes where coaches give details about how the forward should chase, saying "cut off the vertical pass" or "cut off the inside."

However, after that, when a pass goes out and the next player is late, and the team's coordination is not working well, there is not much focus on that. In other words, I think the idea of team-wide pressing is not being instilled in the players.

I do not say "cut off the vertical" or "cut off the lateral" much. My feeling is to create the overall organization, the overall coordination. Around 4th grade, we do the basic overall pressing idea, and when they become 5th and 6th graders, we do switching between different pressing approaches depending on the opponent's formation.

3. Attacking problems are in defending, defending problems are in attacking

I think soccer is a complex system. When Guardiola was the Barcelona manager, he said, "Attacking problems lie in defending, and defending problems lie in attacking," and I think that is exactly right.

By coordinating team-wide pressing, 1v1s become stronger. Conversely, by focusing on 1v1s, other areas improve. That is how it works, so I am sure all of you have experienced "we practice 1v1 defending, but in matches the players cannot commit at all."

Surprisingly, it might work out if you try thinking about it from the opposite direction.

1. "There might be a pass" makes them unable to commit

By doing 1v1 practice, defending responses can improve. In matches too, in situations on the side where players can recognize "this is a 1v1," their responses improve.

But for example, when a defensive midfielder goes to approach the opponent's top player. It looks like a 1v1, but it is part of a larger situation. In 1v1 practice, the defender knows "there is no pass," so it is always defending against an opponent who will dribble.

However, when defending in a 4v2 rondo, it becomes "I do not know if it is a dribble or a pass, so I cannot commit hard."

This may also be happening during matches. Inside the mind of the player who approached, there is "a pass might come out," so they cannot close down well, and they end up sticking out a leg trying to intercept the pass, get played around, and are beaten.

2. It is fine if the pass is played. Think only about winning the ball

In that moment, I say this to the player who approached: "Sure, there might be a pass, but it is fine if the pass is played. Do not try to intercept the pass." "First, think only about winning the ball from that player."

The ones who try to intercept the pass are the second and third players behind. So the player who approached should press their body firmly against the opponent, and it is fine if the pass is played. Think only about winning the ball completely.

That is how I coach it.

3. Do not create contradictions. In rondos and possession, "play it as a 1v1"

The 1v1 in 1v1 practice and the 1v1 situation inside a rondo are a little different, so I think training should be considered separately. However, if a contradiction arises there, the players get confused.

In a rondo they are told "do not dive in," and in 1v1 practice they are told "go." That creates a contradiction in the players' heads. Whether it is a rondo or a possession game, the player who approaches the opponent's ball carrier should "play it as a 1v1."

I think coaching that provides that kind of consistency is necessary.

Summary

- For elementary school players, 1v1 defending falls into two patterns: "only sticking out a leg" and "cannot press the body in." The problem is that they are not using their body
- The basics are approach, stop, press in. For children who cannot stop and get beaten, focus on "stop"
- During practice, if you tell them it is okay to grab an arm or a jersey, they notice that they are not using their arms. If they get held off, tell them "go kick the ball"
- The baseline for intensity is determined by the environment. If the people around them are low, that becomes the norm
- Delayed pressing (Jega Tarde) may be because the team's collective pressing has not been fully instilled. Attacking problems lie in defense, defensive problems lie in attack
- 1v1 drills and 1v1 within rondos feel psychologically different. "It's fine if the pass is made. Think only about winning the ball back completely." This keeps things from becoming contradictory

To be honest, I like pressing, but I am not that good at teaching 1v1 defending. I prefer attacking, so I also have the bad habit of not doing much defending. That is exactly why, if you have a method that has worked well for you, please do tell me.

Please try it at your own coaching sessions too!

Also, for team-wide pressing, if you draw it on a tactics board and share with the players "who goes and who is the second man," it becomes easier to instill.

Source: ジュニアサッカーカレッジ · Translated from Japanese junior-soccer.college

05 Coaching

【Soccer Drill Practice】The Pitfall of Drills With Long Waiting Times | Once Every 6 Seconds

> **For coaches** Next session, time one player through a drill: if the wait runs past 10 seconds a touch, split the group or add a second ball.

Hello, this is Coach Kazu.

In youth soccer practice, many teams incorporate drill training. But even with the same drill, the number of times kids touch the ball changes greatly depending on how it is run. I myself often watch other teams doing drills and feel that the waiting is long.

For example, you might feel the following.

- In shooting practice the line gets long, and the kids get bored waiting their turn
- While you are correcting their kicking form or body orientation, the practice does not move along
- Even though you are doing drill practice, you do not feel the kids are getting better

In this article, I will explain how to secure the amount of activity in drill practice, and the measure of whether a player touches the ball once every 6 seconds, including my own experience from when I was young. If you read this article, I think it will become clear where you should look in tomorrow's drill practice, so please read to the end.

1. Set aside the talk that drills have no decision making for now

It is often said that drill training has no decision making. Here, I will set that talk aside for now. What I want to convey this time is not whether drills are good or bad, but how far you can pursue and execute a drill.

When you do drill training, you can generally tell the coach's ability. To put it a little more, you can tell how they nail down the details. I think many people know about drill training, but I think this is surprisingly a pitfall.

2. What matters is the amount of activity and intensity

Regardless of drill training, there are several important elements in daily training. First is the amount of activity. It means the amount of moving, the amount of touching the ball, and the amount of being involved with the ball.

And another one is intensity (the intensity of play). These two are very important. Beyond that, elements such as doing it in short, concentrated bursts also come into play.

How to secure this amount does not change between global training and drill training. Of course, it is different when they are tired after a match, or when their bodies are not moving yet after a day off. But in daily practice, I think you need to be conscious of this.

3. Making them practice and making them do it well are different

Soccer practice can technically be set up with any menu. Making them do drill training itself is something anyone can do. But whether that drill is efficient, whether the amount of activity is secured, and whether the intensity is raised are separate matters.

Including whether the players' motivation is up, this is a part you cannot do unless you properly make them do it.

1. Shooting practice with a long line

Drill training is mainly a training method for developing technical actions. There is some off-the-ball work too, but I think the basis is technique. At that time, it is very common for the amount of activity to be insufficient.

A common example is shooting practice with a long line. About 10 people line up in a row, receive the pass, lay it off, and shoot. It is practice where the waiting time until your turn comes around is very long.

When you have just started coaching, I think you tend to do this kind of practice.

2. You end up watching only the player who is playing

A common thing is that the coach, wanting to observe the players in various ways and tell them to kick more like this, ends up watching only the player who is playing. Even people with long coaching careers do this quite a bit.

Thinking they have to develop technique, they focus only on the player touching the ball. They call out, step in more, orient your body more. But because they are not watching the players who are waiting, the players who are not playing, they do not notice that the wait for their turn has become long.

I think this kind of thing happens quite often.

3. Structurally impossible cases are surprisingly few

When I watch other teams' training, I sometimes feel that the waiting is long. But cases where it is structurally impossible no matter what are fewer. Most of the time it feels like, it would be fine if they just split the group in two, or it would be fine if they just used two balls.

In the first place, their awareness does not turn toward things like turnover rate and efficiency. I think this is a common experience for coaches in the early days.

1. For pass and control type drills, once every 6 to 10 seconds

So how should you check? When I do drill training, I time it. For example, with pass and control type training, I measure it as whether each person touches the ball about once every 6 seconds.

The reason it is once every 6 seconds is that it was based on something a French person said long ago. Efficient drill training generally involves touching the ball at about that frequency. Of course it changes depending on the menu, but at the longest it is about once every 10 seconds.

Shorter than this, once every 3 seconds is difficult for pass and control drills. I have done it until now too, but touching the ball once every 6 to 7, 8 seconds, or 10 seconds at the longest, is probably about efficient. If you touch the ball much more than that, it becomes a dribbling type menu.

② In the same 10 minutes, 100 times and 20 times

If it is once every 6 seconds, that is 10 times per minute. Over 10 minutes, you can touch the ball 100 times.

Conversely, if you can only touch the ball once every 30 seconds, that is 2 times per minute. Over 10 minutes it becomes 20 times. It is an extreme example, but even in the same 10 minutes, 100 times and 20 times.

That much of a difference comes out in drills.

③ Look at the places without the ball

If you do not notice that the waiting in a drill has become long, you are mostly focused on the ball.

Whether training is going well or not is everything, including moments other than when the ball is moving. What the waiting time is like, if there are 3 groups, what all 3 groups are doing at the same time, whether there is anything dangerous around.

It is a feeling of looking at the technique actions too, while looking at various things at the same time.

This is the same for game analysis in matches. It is often said that you look at the area around the ball with indirect vision and look at the places that are not that. During matches too, I am always conscious of looking at the places without the ball.

In the places where there is a ball, you can mostly understand what the problem is. The places without the ball are difficult to analyze, and surprisingly large problems are often there.

The same goes for drills: if you look at the players who are not playing, you can see whether they are able to concentrate, whether the waiting is not long, and whether the players are not bored.

① For 5 or 6 years, it was only drills and games

When I was young, there was a period when I really did only drill training and games. I think for about 5 or 6 years, I did only drills. During that period, I learned a lot of things: "if you do it this way, it goes well," "if you do it this way, it does not go well."

After that, I thought it was not enough to only develop technique actions, so I thought about tactical things and came to lean toward global training and Spain.

② Even in the same amount of time, 3 or 4 times the results came out

At that time it was a boys' club, and it was not an environment like now where there are practice matches every week. The number of players was not large either, but we did drill training thoroughly and got results. Every year there were players selected for the city or prefectural training center, and 1 or 2 advanced to the youth setup of a J.League club.

In city tournaments too, we were always in the top ranks, and we also won.

However, I do not think that was simply because it was drill training. It was about 25 years ago, around the 3rd to 5th year of my career. At that time, I think the training of other teams was not very efficient.

Both the amount of movement and the intensity were low.

Even though it was the same 3 times a week, the same practice time, and a similar match environment, our team, thanks to leaning toward drills, had a considerably higher number of ball touches, amount of movement, and intensity.

Simply, even in the same amount of time, there was 3 or 4 times the training effect. Looking back now, I think that was the background.

③ The children started morning practice on their own

And one more thing, this is a very important point. It is how to raise the players' motivation.

At that time, the children said "we want to do morning practice" and started practicing on their own.

I was told, "Coach, please come and watch in the morning," and there were times when I joined the morning practice. From the parents too, there were voices saying "they started waking up early and practicing," "they completely stopped playing games," "they became absorbed in soccer."

If you raise their motivation that much, the players start doing it themselves.

Playing with the ball every day, kicking the ball with friends in the park, makes you better. Drills are training that tends to lower motivation, but even so, I think there is a way of building them so that the children do not get bored, concentrate, and start practicing on their own.

① First, entrust drills to the assistant coach

For example, suppose an assistant coach is attached to me. Probably at first, I think I would entrust warm-up type things, or drill type things like the pass and control in training 1, to them. If I see that and think "this person can do it," then it is the next step.

Suddenly entrusting the assistant coach or second coach with the main training, such as the final 5 vs 5 plus 2 servers small-sided game, is not something I do first. I think this is the same not only in Japan but overseas too.

② Drills are simple, so they should be easy to watch

Drill training should be easier for a coach to watch than global training. Easy means simple. The technique action to focus on is decided, and other problems do not come out.

The structure of the training itself is not that difficult either.

In global training, many phenomena happen at the same time. Is it a tactical issue, a technical action issue, a cognitive issue, or a decision-making issue? The elements multiply and it becomes complex.

That is exactly why, if players cannot do drills well, they probably will not be able to do global training or game analysis very well either. Leaving aside whether a drill is good or bad, I think being able to do drills well first is the foundation.

Summary

- Watching drill practice shows how thoroughly a coach builds in the details
- What matters is volume and intensity, and this does not change in any practice
- Waiting time gets long because you are only watching the players who are playing
- For pass and control type practices, measure by time how often one player touches the ball, once every 6 to 10 seconds
- Even in the same 10 minutes, once every 6 seconds means 100 times, once every 30 seconds means 20 times
- If you watch the areas away from the ball and the players who are not playing, you can see the state of the practice
- If you raise their motivation, the children start practicing on their own

In your next drill practice, time it once and try measuring how many seconds it takes for one player to touch the ball once. Splitting into two groups, using two balls, just that alone can greatly change a practice, I think.

Please try it at your own coaching sessions too!

Source: ジュニアサッカーカレッジ · Translated from Japanese junior-soccer.college

FROM THE COACHING COMMUNITY

06 Coaching U12

Tips for keeping boys focused

> **For coaches** Keep talking under 30 to 60 seconds, start with small sided games, and use a two clap cue to refocus.

I coach a u12 boys rec team. They are nice boys and I'm glad they all get along with each other. The thing is, they talk a lot which leads to unfocused practices and not enough time to get through what I want to get through.

I takes me a few times to get all

Of their attention. Sometimes i blow My whistle.

I've started having them run a lap whenever they aren't listening.

Is this a good option or is there any better way?

Top replies, most upvoted first

- (+5) Talk less. Play more. Have them playing small sided games as soon as they arrive. Burn off some energy right away. Roll into a practice event but keep instruction very short. Short pauses to emphasize the key points. More than 30 seconds to a minute and you lose them again. Find an attention tool to refocus them when talking, "if you can hear me give me two claps". Then scrimmage at the end but re-emphasize your focus points periodically or 1v1 as opportunity comes up.
- (+4) I think you need to go in with reasonable expectations. They are a rec team, make sure practice is fun. Just for comparisons sake, I have a son playing u9 on a top team in the top flight of our regional league. The coach never has to make the kids run during practice and rarely gets on them about focusing or getting back on track. These are 8 and 9 year olds who are serious about the sport. The expectations and experience are (and should be) different.

- (+3) Don't be boring. Turn practices into a game, and use the Whole-Part-Whole method so that they feel like they're playing natches too. Also, here's a mantra that I was taught by my UEFA A tutor, "no lines, no laps, no lectures". If you use any of those then your sessions are boring and/or counter-productive.
- (+3) I watched and learned the “two claps” technique from another coach. Whenever I need their attention, I ask everyone for two claps 👏 and clap my hands twice. If not everyone claps, I ask for two claps again, and again, and again until I have everyone’s attention. Once they get used to it, the kids usually do it the first time. Two claps followed by “touch your nose” or “touch your ear if you can hear me” also works very well with younger kids.
- (+3) U12 boys might be the hardest group to coach because you expect a bit of focus, and it's really hard to get. Things I did that seem to be better (I do have 1 really sever ADHD kid on my team which makes it harder). I do the same run through warm up every time, practice and game. I no longer start with anything that has lines for more than a few seconds after warm ups. Rondos are a great start as it gets them thinking about soccer asap and avoid lines. But really anything group oriented to get them going. I do foot skills and passing drills after that, but once again trying to avoid lines or...
- (+2) My current team is well over half boys and what Ive found is that if there is no downtime in our practice, they do great. The minute I talk more than 40 seconds I’ve lost them. Boys need to do. Even our water breaks I literally yell “water break one minute!” so that the water break is just one of the many things that they’re doing at high intensity. u12 here also
- (+2) I like to use laps and up downs as needed. Sometimes you just have to. The best method is prevention: don't put them in situations where they're standing around waiting. Constant motion, limited lines, not much down time. But sometimes they're also just going to want to goof off. Some of that is acceptable but if they miss their turn or mess up the drill then you have to correct them. Other times the whole team is going to be in a goof off mood even if there are no lines and lots of motion. That's when you have to kind of flip the script on them. This is what I've had to say a few times and...
- (+1) I’ve had the exact same challenge. I found books about classroom management to be very helpful. I picked tools for teachers from Fred Jones. Summary is consistency is key, and get the kids to ‘fear’ you while still being caring and dedicated. I’m certainly not fully there yet but found the approach to be effective for me
- (+1) Simple rule we’ve always worked with is 2 minutes max. 2 minutes before practice to explain, walk it through and tell the focus. Then ball starts rolling. Then add layers to the practice for what youre trying to do

- (+1) What I've done is tell them that whenever we do a new drill I will explain it once and then demonstrate it. Then I'll ask for questions. Then we do the drill. If you're unable to attempt the new drill you'll sit and watch until you've got it. If more than 2 players get pulled from a drill we start over from scratch. The time for that comes out our end of practice scrimmage time. When going through repeat drills I end one and immediately start putting players in position(lines) for the next. No more than 30 seconds to transition from one drill to the next.
- (+1) If you really need to talk to them, have them go into the plank position. It will strengthen their cores and it makes it very difficult for them to chit chat.
- (+1) Highly recommend USSF Grassroots online course - has lots of similar suggestions to the thread but the big one is PLAY-PRACTICE-PLAY. More time with small sided games, a few moments spent on simple stuff like offense or defense (break it down SUPER EASY), then back to playing more with encouraging them to implement what you just worked on. Set expectations before each training session - make it a team goal. If they can make it thru a session with good focus (not perfect because that won't happen), then they get INSERT BLANK e.g. their favorite game, drill, etc. Making them run laps only makes...

Source: r/SoccerCoachResources · 30 comments reddit.com

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07 Coaching U8 to U11

Too much in-game direction?

> **For coaches** Ask the coaches to hold specific pass instructions and instead ask her what she sees, then let her decide.

My daughter is in u9 travel. She's a GK (although she is a good defender and will reluctantly play striker if asked). She pours her heart into the position and is the only one on her team who wants to play GK and the only one with her own equipment. I coached her team last year with another parent and we let the kids self-direct game play. We never told them where to pass or when to shoot during the game. That was all done pregame or at half time. Club trainers did it during training sessions (parents only coach games, club trainers are certified coaches). This season 2 other parents are coaching. When my daughter makes a save and the kids retreat to the build out line, or if it's a goal kick, they immediately start shouting at her where to pass it or kick it. Am I crazy to have it bother me that they aren't letting her make the decision herself and make mistakes? Both last years coach and I were keepers so we both respected that she had to learn herself. Neither coach this year has even stood between the sticks as a GK. My daughter isn't thrilled that she is being shouted at where to pass it when she only has 6 seconds. She isn't scanning like she did last year and her roll out has become sloppy because she's so rushed. Am I wrong in feeling this goes against the way youth soccer should be coached?

TL;DR

U9 keeper getting told by coaches where to pass or roll the ball out every time she's in possession. Should they back off?

Top replies, most upvoted first

- (+7) You're 100% right but laying it on a little thick that your 8 year old isnt scanning anymore and is upset shes not being coached properly. Same with that the coaches have never stood between the sticks. What does that even mean? You should step up and coach next season. Why didnt you this year?
- (+3) My U11 son's coach doesn't say anything (or very little) during the games and it drives me (and other parents) nuts. I feel there are game specific scenarios that were likely not covered in practice where the team needs guidance from their coach. My U9 son's coach seems like he's joysticking the kids. Telling them where to dribble or pass. For younger I don't see the issue with helping more as they need some repetition to learn but I'm hoping he dials it back as the season progresses. My point is either approach you're going to have a variety of opinions on less is more or the coach isn't...
- (+3) It is best to not treat players as is they are on the otherside of a joystick. Some direction is ok...like, "what do we do when we are being pressed high?", or "where is the space", or when they do something right yell "love it", "great idea". Your current coaches should take some courses. I did not like the level of coaching my daughter was getting, so I joined the staff next season and we convinced the parents to have the trainer at all practices and games to get consistency
- (+3) I praise coaches with your mentality. I always tell parents that a game is like a test in school and practice is like class/homework. In a test you have zero help, it's your chance to apply everything youve learned and make mistakes you will learn from. I know people get excited and want the best for the kids, but, like you said, if you don't let them make the decisions, how will they learn. You have every right to be upset and I would maybe talk to the other parents about this, at the very least, to not give directions to your child. It's not fair to the children that parents actions I hibit...
- (+2) I'm curious what kind of "travel" team has parents coaching? Are you meaning from the sidelines? If that's the case, they need to shit up and let the coach do the coaching. If you are paying for a "travel team" and it's parents coaching the games then ask for a refund because thats the equivalence of a rec league. You need one voice leading them on the field and no extra voices from the sidelines, if parents are the ones being charged with coaching then I'd look for a better environment. Also, youth GKs need specialized training to be successful, learn the proper foundations and correct way...
- (+2) I'm very against that sort of specific in game coaching. Once they hear and process, the situation has changed.

- (+2) At the age level it it's important to learn not just technical skills but game awareness and decision making. You don't coach that in-game. Oftentimes it just overloads a kid at that age and doesn't let them learn from their mistakes. That's a coach wanting to win not teach.
- (+1) 8 seconds not 6, and they aren't calling that at this age. However, speak to coach about it. I think it's a reasonable request to explain it's something you are working on with her and ask for his support
- (+1) Yeah Hard choice to make I coach U9 but most of my players are U8 and my kid is U7 Our league makes fans and team stay on same side, so we are on opposite side of other team and have free reign of sideline I admit that I only stay on our defense side and give obstruction to our goalie (who has never played before) and our defense Once we get it over midfield I let them fly
- (+1) Are you on good terms with the coaches? If you are, they might be willing to listen to feedback from you. If you're not, good luck getting them to listen. But one thing you can control is getting your daughter to be more open to playing other positions. Even if your daughter will eventually be a GK, having the ability to play with her feet is something that'll be important in the future.
- (+1) Travel team coached by parents?

Source: r/youthsoccer · 32 comments reddit.com

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08 Coaching U4

Encouraging U4 players to participate in game

> **For coaches** Have him help you with cones and kicking on the game field before anyone watches, then sub him on together with a practice friend.

First time coaching U4 boys and I'm trying to make everything as low pressure and fun as possible. Lots of games in practice and positive encouragement. I fully understand at this age that sometimes kids just won't play or won't participate for whatever reason (tired, hot, hungry, scared, etc...).

I've been able to coax most of my shy guys into participating to some degree, but I have one boy who is still too shy to participate in our actual games. He is very into practice and has some skills already. He doesn't hesitate to participate in any drills and even scrimmages, but he has so far been extremely shy and refused to come onto the field during games. I've tried lots of encouragement, asking for minimal participation (having him do our kick ins or just standing on the field) and I've been unsuccessful.

I understand he might just not be ready to play in the games and that's ok, but if anyone has any tips or tricks that has worked for them in the past I'd love to hear it. I think if I can get him to come try in the games he will have a lot of fun. Thanks in advance.

EDIT: Youth soccer looks different in different places. Where I'm at its parent volunteer "coaches" with "practice" once a week and games once a week. It's not that serious. People acting like I'm trying to get them to do some kind of hard core training. It's just a series of silly 5 minute games that teach different basics at practice. At games they all mob the ball and run up and down trying to kick it in the goal. The point was to see if anyone had any success getting a shy child to want to participate, not to solicit critiques of the entire youth soccer program in my area that I didn't see up lol.

Top replies, most upvoted first

- (+9) U4 playing games against other teams??
- (+3) In my experience you pretty much can't. Your best bet is to use games that don't involve the ball being taken away because that's their biggest hang up sometimes. You can ask the parents what they are into and tailor the games to that. If they love space, we are playing meteors but if they like Spiderman its web slinging through the city or whatever. If parents push them and force them they go in the opposite direction. Only time Ive coaxed a kid out of their shell in the same season is when parents are supportive about them not participating. Then they're willing to keep coming back and...
- (+2) You're already doing the right things, and the fact that he scrimmages at practice is the tell: it's not the soccer, it's the audience. Practice has ten kids and you. Games have a sideline of parents, an unfamiliar field, and a whistle. Three things that have worked for me with that kid. First, shrink the game to look like practice: have him be your assistant at warm-up on the game field, carrying cones and kicking with you, so he's already on the grass before anyone is watching. Second, put a buddy on it. Pair him with the friend he sticks to at practice and sub them on together, for two...
- (+1) Just keep trying! Sounds like they aren't ready yet. Keep up the encouragement. I have 6 year olds who don't want to play sometimes. Just keep doing what you're doing.
- (+1) I think just being positive and keeping it fun is key. You could try having them pretend they are dragons trying to take their dragon egg home, or making up some other silly game within a game. Truth is that kids develop differently and at different times (physically, emotionally, socially, and mentally). I think the goal at this age is just make sure they have a positive experience and want to come back next season, which it sounds like you're already doing.
- (+1) Too young

- (+1) u4, as in Under 4? And you have practices? That doesn't make any sense, they are still learning how to move their bodies much less play the game. Our rec league has what they call School Yard Soccer which is for 5U (4 and 5 year olds) but they just separate all the kids into 4 "teams" and the parents stay with them. They go over basic skills for the first half of the season and then the second half they play "games" which is just as many kids of one color as you can get to kick the ball around on the field, usually with a parent holding their hand. And even with all of that, it sucks and...
- (+1) Can parents be on the field with them? In AYSO we have the schoolyard program which is parents and kids and mostly activities with lots of story telling. We end with a short scrimmage with 4 goals, and parents are allowed at all times.

Source: r/SoccerCoachResources · 20 comments reddit.com

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09 Coaching U11 to U12

At my patience limit with our BU12 coach

> **For coaches** Ask the club director whether the coach has the time to manage all his teams, and judge training, not the bench, by whether he corrects and guides during play.

My 11 year old made the leap this year from select to premier/RCL. He is playing on the B team for his new club and wants nothing more than to make the A team next year. His new coach holds a national B license and has a ton of experience across age groups. At first I was excited about the development he could bring to the boys. However, after watching him all summer, losing nearly every game in every tournament, and seeing no improvement, I'm very concerned.

This year, my son decided that soccer is his thing, and he wants to focus 100% on it. He's giving up basketball (which he loves), because he wants to be a high performer on the pitch. He works hard, does the extra skill work, and brings a super positive attitude to his teammates. He's mature enough to know that at this age, winning and losing is not nearly as important as improving as a player.

I feel like his coach is letting him and the entire team down.

Some parents call his approach "hands-off". I call it lazy. He runs the same practices over and over. He'll setup a scrimmage or drill, tell the boys what to do, and provide absolutely no instruction during play. He's constantly scrolling his phone DURING practice in front of the boys. He shows up right at practice time and rarely is early. He's also coaching 3 other club teams and a high school team. He just flat out looks and acts like he doesn't care. My son notices and I'm sure the other boys do too.

In our first league game last week, we gave up 3 goals in the first 15 minutes. The coach sat on the bench the entire time, arms folded, legs crossed, like he didn't have a concern in the world.

I don't want to be "that parent", but it turns out that I'm not the only parent seeing this. As someone who played in college and has coached select teams for years, I cannot understand this behavior. None of us know what to do. I don't want to jeopardize anything for my son. He continues to put his head down and work his tail off, and I don't want to ruin his playing time or his reputation in this club because of my complaining and issues with the coach. I feel like his work ethic is being wasted because he's not learning anything new. I'm sure the other parents feel this way too.

If I could wave a magic wand, he would quit and I would take over as the head coach. But that is not likely to happen.

I feel like we've all heard it or said it before: I'm paying a lot of money for this, and it feels like a total...

Top replies, most upvoted first

- (+17) I'm a college coach that has coach multiple teams. That particular point of having multiple teams is on the club and if you are going to blame the club for having a coach with multiple teams then you are going to have to blame club soccer (which in most cases is 100% fair) The part that's on the coach is having the phone out at practice. That's BS and would end immediately if I was your club director. For you, I'm not sure exactly what is going to help. I can hear the frustration through the keyboard. If you really don't like the teamisuggest the old standby "controlling what you can control"...
- (+15) Different parents want different things. In modern youth coaching pedagogy, a coach who steps back, avoids constantly barking instructions during play, and sits quietly on the bench is letting the game be the teacher. That is developmentally ideal for your son's age. Avoiding over-coaching, or performance coaching, allow kids to build their own perception to decision to action cycles and on-field communication. The trouble with this is it doesn't look like coaching in the classical sense, and some parents simply know better that lines, lectures and drills are what works because that's how they were...
- (+12) Kind of sounds like he has too much on his plate. Coaching 5 teams isn't really viable for one person I don't think. There just isn't enough time to do things properly. Edit: I have seen this happen year after year to younger coaches that are good. Because they are good, the club wants them everywhere, but somehow fail to see that the more teams he handles, the less impact he can have. For instances I know a gk coach who just this past season had 9 different agegroups under him. I know the person very well and he is very good. But if some age groups get him for like once a month or something...

- (+10) This might be a situation where it's appropriate to ask the club director if your current coach has the "resources" to properly manage all the teams he's in charge of. It could lead to a shift in responsibilities for other coaches in the club who may have more time for your team.
- (+9) I agree with this during the game. We had a parent upset with my son's coach (A Level) because he isn't up yelling instructions during the game. He doesn't think that's productive and I believe him. However he's coaching during training. If there's a small scrimmage he's providing direction, correcting mistakes, giving the players different ideas they could have tried. Scrolling your phone during training is hard to defend.
- (+8) What does modern coaching philosophy have to say about being on your phone for the entirety of practice?
- (+6) As a parent and a Coach, it's so hard for me to judge these posts because i have seen the lazy bad coaching and the bad parents that only complain about coaches. But coaches here are some things you should take away from this post that are just not good looks. - Being on your phone, i don't care if you are using it as a stopwatch (get a watch) or if your session plan is on it (Put it in a book or on a note card). It's a terrible look and if parents aren't happy with your coaching they will default to "look coach isn't paying attention"; they will not assume good intent -Be Early, 10 to 15...
- (+6) Is there a case for someone abusing the modern youth coaching philosophy? If this were the case, can you give your opinion on what the difference looks like? What are the signals that separate a laissez faire style coach from one who is legitimately mailing it in?
- (+5) I'd add that having the B license doesn't mean you're a good coach, just that you can check the US soccer boxes. The phone thing is annoying and shouldn't be happening, if I'm the DOC there I'm saying something about it as it's an "easy win" optics wise. It does also sound like the guy is burnt out though too. The US youth soccer landscape doesn't value good coaches, it values people it can rinse for a few years, 7 days a week, evenings and weekends. One of the biggest reasons I stopped. Not a defense if the coach but happens all the time.
- (+3) My son had a coach who was very chill and didn't correct the way I would have, we had a losing record with a lot of talent on the team. I changed my mindset for the season and focused on the individual growth and development. It helped so much. I saw my sons IQ grow, we had more conversations on him being a teammate, positioning, we rerouted the convo from Wins and losses and what we could control and be his best. Sometimes we just got weather a shit season and find the silver lining. This season so far has been fantastic with our new coach.
- (+2) Welcome to the world of pay to play soccer

- (+2) The most important thing is the coach at your son's age. It's really hard to find the right fit, often because the larger clubs are very cagey about who will actually be coaching the teams. In this case, you can suffer in silence or at a minimum, speak to the coach in private about the phone stuff. Depending upon how that goes, you can decide to escalate. But to me it looks like you may want to supplement with individual sessions and training to account for the lack of it at the club level.

Source: r/youthsoccer · 77 comments reddit.com

10 Coaching U8

Should I move my 8-year-old down a flight so he can develop better?

> **For coaches** Pick the team where he has the most fun and gets plenty of playing time; if he is a winger, he needs the confidence to take defenders on 1v1.

My son is 8 and has a lot of natural ability with the ball at his feet. He has only played club soccer for about eight months and soccer overall for roughly 14 months, but he progressed quickly and made a Flight 1 team.

The issue is that he doesn't really fit their style yet. They want quick passing and a tiki-taka type of game. My son usually needs to dribble first before deciding what to do. I think part of the problem is that he watches the ball instead of scanning and reading the field before receiving it.

I'm wondering what would be better for him next season. Should he stay at Flight 1 and learn to adjust, or move down a flight where he might get more freedom and time to learn the game?

I also hear coaches talk constantly about development, but sometimes development seems to mean pass, pass, pass. I thought creativity, confidence and taking players on were also important at this age. Many of the other kids understand the passing game better because they've played since they were four, but they aren't nearly as comfortable dribbling or taking defenders on.

I don't want his creativity coached out of him, but I also understand that he needs to learn when to dribble, when to pass and how to see the field earlier.

What would you prioritize at this age: playing at the highest flight possible, or finding a team whose style gives him more freedom while he develops his awareness and decision-making?

Top replies, most upvoted first

- (+19) Whatever team he has the most fun on and he gets plenty of playing time.

- (+12) Let me guess, first kid in soccer? :-) You're over thinking it. No U9 team tiki taka well unless they're playing a totally overmatched opponent. To answer your questions: -Play the highest flight possible as long as he gets minutes and is productive. -Quick passing and rondo drills are important. When it comes down to it, you're just trying to do everything a little quicker, cleaner, faster, and more precise than your opponent. -You son will figure out when to pass and when to dribble soon enough. If he is a winger, he'd better have the confidence to take on the defender 1v1. He'd better not...
- (+7) Let's get one thing straight; teaching kids to make quick passes and move off the ball isn't tiki-taka. That's just basic possession soccer. And teaching kids possession soccer doesn't mean it stifles creativity. Go watch a video of Sergio Busquets playing CDM for peak "tiki-taka" Barcelona. There is plenty of creativity involved with receiving the ball under pressure, spinning the defender on your back, and playing a clean pass. Not all creativity means attempting to do 500 stepovers while trying to dribble through an entire team. All that said, is your kid getting 50%+ play time? And are...
- (+4) He should learn to pass and keep his eyes up
- (+3) I have a ten year old. When she was eight, we made that decision. She played for the top team at a large local club that was known for producing a lot of good teams. Everyone played one (sometimes two) positions, everything was "joysticked", and the main focus was building a team to win games.....not building a player. They were destroying everyone, even playing up an age group in that highest bracket.. She moved to a different team that REALLY focuses on individual development but had to move down a level. Tons of 1v1, 2v1, 3v1, footwork, etc. They say that they would rather you see a move...
- (+3) highest (within reason) competition possible, granted good playing time. My two cents many years into youth coaching...passing, looking to pass, understanding space is something kids fall far behind their peers if not subjected to it. I understand building confidence and mastery on the ball, but my experience has been that there's a wide spectrum of growth & aggression in the younger years that either helps or hinders individual play. Then, at some point (12-14), the more timid grow out of it. The very best youth players dominate with the ball on their foot. The other 99.99% would do very well...
- (+2) it's 100% dependent on if the coach is expecting that style of play, or is teaching that style of play. at u9 this tends to be the start of learning how to pass and move the ball, but if the coach is expecting that without developing it, your kids will be left behind. are they doing rondos in practice? is he talking about scanning and explaining when to scan. if the coach on a lower team is teaching that there may be an argument, however your kids will get better by playing with better kids as long as he doesn't get frustrated. fwiw, we're on a well regarded F1 team u12 and scanning for the...
- (+2) If a team of 8 year olds has a "style" then the coach is teaching the wrong things.

- (+1) I wish I would have let my child play down longer to develop individuality first. Flight 1 teams at such a young age are all about the pass and win. Let him play on a lower level team where he can learn to dribble through opponents and procure the confidence to perfect a little razzle dazzle. American soccer is so boring because we tiki taka them to death at 8 yrs old and don't let their personality form first.
- (+1) Based on what you described, I'd probably keep him at the higher level. The coaches evaluated him and felt he belonged on that team, and the area you're describing sounds like something he can learn while playing there. At eight, I would absolutely still encourage the creativity and willingness to take players on. One of the phrases I've used coaching my son is: "1v1, go have some fun. 1v2, a pass will do. 1v3, come see me." It's obviously an oversimplification, but I like what it teaches. When you get a defender isolated 1v1, have the confidence to go beat him. When the second defender comes...
- (+1) My son usually needs to dribble first before deciding what to do. Hm no, that's not what a proper first flight team should be accepting. Your son needs to decide what to do BEFORE getting the ball.
- (+1) I don't think teams of eight-year-olds run a particular style of play.

Source: r/youthsoccer · 30 comments reddit.com

ON THE PITCH

11 Coaching U7 to U11

Dribble or pass, how do you decide? 【Youth Soccer】 Teaching by principles

> **For coaches** The next time a player's choice puzzles you, ask which lane the defender closed, and say that out loud instead of just calling the pass wrong.

Hello, this is Kazu, your instructor.

I received the following question from a reader. Below is the content of the question.

"There are situations in possession and combination drills that involve decision making where dribbling comes into play. At those times, I sometimes do not really understand my own judgment of whether dribbling was the right choice or passing was the right choice for a player. How do you make that judgment, Kazu? I would also like to hear about the priority of dribbling versus passing in matches."

Thank you. Indeed, I have not touched much on dribbling until now.

For example, some of you may feel as follows.

- During practice, you think "that should have been a pass," but you cannot explain why you thought so
- You do not know how far to let a child who is good at dribbling take on opponents
- You do not know how to teach the "carrying dribble"

In this article, I will explain how I divide dribbling into two types, the reason I say "do not do 1v1" in zone 3, and the principles for deciding between dribbling and passing, while giving several situations as examples. If you read this article, your criteria for judging players should become a little simpler, and you should become able to put into words "why dribbling was the choice just now," so please watch until the end.

1) Do not have the debate of dribbling soccer versus passing soccer

A debate that is common in Japan is dribbling soccer versus passing soccer. I basically think that words like passing soccer and dribbling soccer are not soccer terms. It is normal to play while using dribbling and passing differently depending on the situation.

2) Breakthrough dribbling and carrying dribbling

In Spain, dribbling is divided into two: regate and conduccion. Regate is breakthrough dribbling, dribbling that tries to beat an opponent. Conduccion is often translated in Japan as the "carrying dribble," and it is dribbling that carries the ball into space or escapes from an opponent.

3) The dribble you use changes depending on the zone

When you enter zone 3 (the opponent's half, the finishing zone), breakthrough dribbling naturally becomes important. Conversely, the carrying dribble is used to advance or keep the ball, so it is often used in midfield or at the start of build-up (salida de balon).

Put the other way around, I believe that a situation where a center back does breakthrough dribbling in front of your own goal should never happen. It may exist as a last resort when you are cornered, but basically the image is to escape with the carrying dribble as much as possible.

1) Beating someone in 1v1 just means you were superior in ability

In zone 3, I think it is very important to actively take on dribbling. However, the thing I am most careful about when coaching elementary school age groups is "do not do 1v1."

You beat an opponent in 1v1 and scored a goal. That is a very good thing, but if the opponent defender's ability is higher, it will not come off. In other words, I think you beat them because you were superior in ability. Improving ability is also important, but rather than only that, I value the part of how you use dribbling within relationships with teammates, such as in 2v1.

2) Beating an opponent while trying to use a teammate is a good decision

The player with the ball beat an opponent with dribbling while trying to use a teammate. I think this is a very good decision. Because the action of trying to use a teammate is included, the opponent is wary of the pass. That is why you can break through with dribbling, and if the opponent commits to the dribble, then the possibility appears of breaking them down with a one-two.

Conversely, when support was available but the player did not notice and took on the opponent alone, and as a result beat them and scored. In this case, I think I quite often point out, "You did not see that support had arrived just now, did you? You were doing 1v1, right?"

3) Encourage the opposite of what they are good at

Of course, depending on the context, there are times when I say "take them on by yourself." With third graders and fourth graders, for players who immediately look for a pass when they get the ball, I say "take on the dribble more yourself." Looking for a pass itself is not bad, but if that is all, there is no breadth to their play.

Conversely, for players who always just dribble by themselves, I urge them: "If it is your strength, you can go, but if you charge in twice in a row and lose the ball, then next time pass and use combination play." With the second and third graders I am currently coaching, I have them do quite a lot of 1v1, and with the U-11 group, where there are many children good on the ball, I tell them, "Because you have the option of passing, your strong dribbling comes alive."

In addition, dribbling within combination breakdowns (whether it is dribbling while pretending to do a one-two, or dribbling while pretending to use the space behind) is summarized in the key factors of the 2v2 attacking article.

1) If the passing lane is cut off, dribble; if the dribbling lane is cut off, pass

As a broad way of thinking, the one I find simplest is this. If the passing lane is cut off, use the dribble. If the dribbling lane is cut off, use the pass.

What often happens at the junior level is a player who, despite having the passing lane cut off, plays the pass anyway and gets it caught on the opponent's foot. So you give them criteria for judging, like: "Why did you dribble there? The passing lane was open," or "It was good that you dribbled because the passing lane was cut off." I think having this is one thing.

② When you are free and a teammate is marked, dribble

In a situation where you are advancing, you are free, and there is a teammate ahead who can advance freely. In this case, it is better to prioritize the pass. That is because dribbling slows things down.

Conversely, you are free and a teammate is marked. In this case, you dribble to attract the opponent and then play the pass. In Spanish this is called fijar, "to fix," and this is the carrying dribble. When you are free and there is no chance of losing the ball, yet you play a pass into a marked teammate and it gets taken, that is a mistake as an option (playing a wedge into the top is a separate matter as a play model).

③ Do not play the pass before a teammate has taken their position

What you often see in possession training is the phenomenon where, after winning the ball, a player plays a pass before a teammate has taken their position. In my case, I say quite a lot, "There, create time with the dribble." The dribble creates one second, two seconds of time, and during that time a teammate takes their position, so you can play the pass after that. That is the idea.

④ Example with center backs: if the passing lane is cut off, carry the ball inside

There are two center backs, the right center back has the ball, and the right side half is open. You try to play the pass to the side half, and the opponent's forward cuts off the outside. At that moment, you eliminate them with a dribble carrying the ball inside. This is also a concrete example of "if the passing lane is cut off, dribble."

Conversely, if you are under pressure from two players, there are two players supporting nearby, and you still force your way through and get caught, then it becomes "prioritize the pass." Which of the two is the better option. I myself have the image that this becomes the principle.

⑤ Organize with logic the reason you thought, "There, it should be a pass"

The judgment depends on the situation, but I think it is better to speak as close to principles as possible. When a coach thinks, "There, it should be a pass," they should organize with logic why they thought so. If you do that, I think you can notice that the same phenomenon comes up again and again.

I myself now think that principles are the key factors in everything, in other words, the knack for making a play succeed. If the passing lane is cut off, the dribble opens up; if the dribbling lane is cut off, the pass opens up. This is a principle of soccer, and in teaching decision-making at the junior level, I think defining and understanding things like this is very important.

① Do not particularly set priorities for the whole team

I do not particularly set priorities between dribbling and passing in matches. That is because there are situations where it is better to dribble and situations where it is better to prioritize the pass.

② Set priorities only for players who are struggling

However, depending on the player, I set priorities during the match. For example, at the start of build-up, a center back searches too long for a pass, and during that time they are targeted and the pass is intercepted. In a situation like that, I have them prioritize: "First, carry the ball up with one dribble." If setting priorities reduces the player's burden and removes their anxiety, I think it is fine to do that.

③ If they get caught twice, next time use a teammate

Previously, there was a boy who was extremely good at dribbling. When he cut inside and got caught twice in a row, I said this to him. "Cutting inside is not bad at all. But after you cut inside, next time use a teammate once. The opponent will start to be wary, thinking there is a pass. Then, if one combination comes off, the dribble comes alive next. Put in one buffer."

Rather than priorities for the whole team, it is about, for the problems each individual is facing, which one they should prioritize if they are to solve it. That is the approach of having them prioritize that.

5. Summary

- Dribbling has two types: "breaking through" and "carrying." In zone 3, break through; in your own half or in build-up, carry
- For elementary school players, "do not do 1v1." Trying to use a teammate while beating your man is a good decision
- Prompt the opposite of what they are good at. For a child who searches for passes, dribbling; for a child who only dribbles, using teammates
- The criteria for judgment are principles. If the passing lane is cut off, dribble; if the dribbling lane is cut off, pass
- If you are free and a teammate is marked, attract the opponent with the dribble. Do not play the pass before a teammate has taken their position
- Priorities in matches are set not by team, but by each player who is struggling

In this article, I explained how to decide whether to dribble or pass, and the criteria for judging players. First, try starting in your own coaching sessions by putting into words, with a single principle, why dribbling was the right choice in that moment!

Also, when I incorporate situations like "if the passing lane is cut off, dribble" into practice, I keep the practice menu as a diagram.

Source: ジュニアサッカーカレッジ · Translated from Japanese junior-soccer.college

12 Coaching U8 to U10

How do you improve your kicking power?【Youth soccer】Repetition and form over muscle strength

> **For coaches** If your U10s pass over short distances, stretch the distance so weak or crooked strikes show up, and count how many touches each player actually gets in your shooting drills.

Hello, this is Coach Kazu.

I received the following question from a reader. Below is the content of the question.

"I have a question about kicking power in the elementary school age group, especially U-10 (4th grade). What kind of practice is effective for increasing shooting power, or for making it possible to kick the ball far? On my team, there are many players who cannot kick well, but is the cause simply a lack of repetition in shooting practice or practice kicking long balls, or is it unavoidable because they have not developed muscle strength? Will they naturally be able to kick properly once they develop muscle strength in the upper grades? Until muscle strength develops, would it be more efficient to focus on practice such as inside passes?"

Thank you. Your question is specific and logical, so the key points are clear and that is very helpful.

For example, some people may feel as follows.

- In the lower and middle grades, many children cannot make the ball fly
- I do not know whether it is fine to put off practice for strong kicks until muscle strength develops
- Even when we do shooting practice, it feels like we are spending all our time picking up balls and lining up, so there is not enough repetition

As for kicking power, I myself am currently in charge of U-9 and U-8 and am thinking about this as well. In this article, I will explain the relationship between distance and muscle strength, the "repetitiveness" that is the key to acquiring technique, the reason for having even lower-grade players kick with the instep and the key factors, and ways to practice at "distances that cannot be faked."

1) The problem of muscle strength naturally exists

First, as a broad trend, the reason kicking distance does not come out around 2nd, 3rd, and 4th grade is naturally also a matter of muscle strength. No matter how good the form is, if there is little power, distance will not come. I think the basic idea is that as height increases and muscles increase, kicking distance extends.

2) Even so, I have even lower-grade players kick strong balls

However, regarding the point of whether repetition practice is lacking, I have even 2nd and 3rd graders kick long balls and strong instep shots. This is because even if distance does not come, whether they can kick with correct form is important.

There may be a way of thinking that says "until muscle strength develops, focus on inside passes," but I believe that even in the lower grades, practice kicking strongly with the instep is necessary.

1) If there is a reason they cannot kick, it is the frequency of repetition

The key to improving technical actions such as shooting, passing, and control is, after all, repetitiveness. Repeated repetition is the point for improvement.

If there is a reason they cannot kick, it is conceivable that the frequency of repetition is simply low.

2) Shooting practice makes it hard to rack up repetitions

However, due to the structure of training, it is difficult for shooting practice and long kicking to rack up repetitions. You shoot, pick up the ball, and line up again. With this flow, the time not touching the ball inevitably becomes long.

3) The number of balls and goals, and how to use the return path

So, prepare the environment by increasing the number of balls and goals. Or, insert another training activity into the return path after shooting. I think it is necessary to increase the repetitiveness of the practice as a whole through such measures.

1) Organize the key points

If I list some key points, that is, key factors, for being able to kick an instep kick well, they include the following.

- The position where the standing foot steps in (beside the ball; if moving, slightly in front)
- The angle of the approach run (enter slightly diagonally)
- Use of the upper body (raise the opposite hand just before kicking and twist the body)
- Bending of the knee (bend the knee of the standing foot slightly, and draw back the kicking foot so the heel comes close to the buttocks)
- Fixing the ankle (point the toes downward)
- Follow-through (do not put the kicking foot on the ground immediately, but direct it toward the goal)

Even if distance does not come, I think you should have players practice kicking with correct form while being conscious of these key factors.

2) Which key point to convey first is where the coach's skill shows

Where the coach's skill shows is in judging the priority of which key factor to convey first depending on the individual player. If you suddenly say 5 or 6 things, children get confused.

I think it is good to first give advice on large movements such as "raise your hand, twist your body, and kick," and then move into fine details such as how to extend the ankle.

3) Like carving a sculpture, from the whole to the details

"Do not suddenly start from the details" is something that can be said about training for tactics and technique in general.

Long ago, Naoto Muramatsu, who became the first Japanese school coach at FC Barcelona, expressed in a book that "soccer coaching is like carving a sculpture." I think that is a very good expression.

In sculpture, you do not suddenly carve the fingertips in fine detail; first you create the rough overall shape. While maintaining the overall balance, you gradually increase the precision of each part. Soccer coaching is the same, and I think it is important to have the image of starting from the big design and gradually increasing the precision of the details.

Even for the instep kick, it is fine if accuracy is low at first, so have them do various kicks at the same time. By doing so, accuracy gradually improves as they grow.

① Precisely because you want to connect with short passes, you practice long kicks

It is also important to have the opposite way of thinking. For example, the idea that "precisely because you want to connect with short passes, you practice long kicks."

Precisely because there is the threat of getting in behind with a long ball, the opponent becomes wary, and short passes come alive. It is the same as teaching a child who is good at dribbling to do a one-two, which makes the opponent wary of the pass, and as a result, their specialty dribbling becomes even more effective.

② When the distance is short, mistakes are covered up

There is one important point about the practice environment. When doing inside-pass practice, if the distance is short, even if they are not kicking correctly, the pass gets through "somehow," and technical mistakes can be covered up.

To prevent this, try deliberately increasing the distance. For U-10, have them do passing practice at a boldly increased distance. When you do this, players with bad kicking form cannot play a strong pass, or the deviation becomes large, and the issues become clearly visible.

③ The same goes for 1v1. Dynamically on a wide pitch

This is the same for 1v1 practice. In a narrow area, if you beat your opponent a little and carry the ball a few steps, that counts as a win, but an actual match is much wider. By incorporating practice in which they move dynamically on a wide pitch, I think they will acquire skills that can truly be used in matches.

5. Summary

- The reason second to fourth graders cannot achieve flight distance is partly a matter of muscle strength. However, whether or not they can kick with correct form is important
- The key to acquiring technique is repetition. Shooting practice makes it hard to accumulate repetitions, so be creative with the number of balls and goals, and how you use the return path
- Even in the lower grades, practice kicking hard with the instep is necessary. Teach the key factors (standing foot, run-up, upper body, knee, ankle, follow-through) in order, starting from the large movements
- Like carving a sculpture, from the whole to the details
- Precisely because you want to connect with short passes, you practice long kicks
- Increase the distance and make the issues visible in an environment where covering up does not work

In this article, I explained the way of thinking for improving elementary school students' kicking ability. Please be creative with the distance and space in practice, and have them take on challenges in an environment where covering up does not work. Please try it at your own coaching sites too!

In addition, if you keep the practice setup, including the number of balls and goals and the return-path training, as a diagram, it will be easier to rearrange it next time.

Source: ジュニアサッカーカレッジ · Translated from Japanese junior-soccer.college

13 Coaching

Children's sport is great at keeping them busy, but are they learning?

> **For coaches** When you watch a session or plan your own, count how long each child waits in line, and try shrinking one drill into a small-sided game with a decision to make.

When families look into getting their children involved in sport and physical activities, there is often a lot to consider. For some, this means choosing between clubs and activities. For others, cost, transport or availability can make organised sport harder to access. But there is another question we might rarely ask. What will my child actually experience and learn when they get there?

Picture a familiar sports session. Children arrive, warm up, and then the coach sets up a drill. They form a line. One child goes. They perform the skill, perhaps retrieve the ball, and go to the back of the queue. The next child goes.

There is nothing inherently wrong with practising skills this way. Repetition has a role in learning. But children's sport has become remarkably good at the art of queuing. Children can be busy and apparently engaged, while having little to think about. The coach tells them where to stand, what to do and how to do it. If they make a mistake, the coach corrects them. Then they try again.

Match play rarely works like this. When children actually play, the situation is constantly changing. A teammate moves. An opponent closes down space. The ball goes somewhere unexpected. Players have to look, interpret, decide and adapt.

Knowing how to perform a pass is different from knowing when to pass, where to pass and why. That difference is about whether a skill is learned in isolation or in context, with the child treated as an active problem solver rather than a passive recipient of instructions.

This is the idea behind what coaches and researchers call game-based approaches to coaching. Rather than always giving children the answer, coaches create problems for them to solve within realistic games.

Take a simple example. Instead of running an isolated passing drill, a coach might shrink a game down to three attackers against one defender. They have to decide when there is a passing option and when there is not. Rather than dictating the answer, the coach might ask why an option worked, or what else the child could have tried, turning the moment into a conversation rather than a correction.

The same underlying idea applies in all sorts of sports. Gymnastics, for example, does not involve reading an opponent. But it can still be taught as pure repetition of a set routine, or as an invitation for children to make their own choices within a task, such as composing a sequence. The broader principle, that children learn to think when they are given real problems to solve, applies much more widely.

This does not mean coaches play a smaller role, or that every session should become a free for all in which children work everything out alone. If anything, the coach's role becomes more demanding. Asking a good question at the right moment takes as much skill and judgment as demonstrating the right technique.

The purpose of youth sport

This matters because the purpose of children's sport is surely bigger than producing technically proficient athletes. We want children to become physically competent, but we also want them to become confident decision-makers, good communicators and effective collaborators. We might want them to learn how to deal with mistakes, take responsibility and work things out for themselves.

None of this is guaranteed simply because a child participates in sport. Research on youth sport suggests the quality of the coaching environment can shape children's motivation and development.

This also changes what we might think makes a good coach. A coach who keeps 20 children moving continuously might look highly effective. But it is worth asking what those children are thinking about and what decisions they are making.

These are not easy questions to ask when completing a sign-up form. Cost, convenience and location will always matter, and children should have a say in what they enjoy. But, if possible, watch a session before committing. Look beyond whether the children are running around. Are they being challenged to think and given real decisions to make? Are they encouraged to try things and make mistakes? Do they seem to be enjoying themselves?

Ask what the coach believes their role is. Is it to provide children with all the answers, or to create experiences in which children gradually become capable of finding some of those answers themselves?

Getting children into sport is important. But getting them into the right kind of sporting environment may matter just as much. The question is not simply whether our children are doing sport. It is what the sport is doing for them.

Source: The Conversation theconversation.com

14 Coaching

Managing Expectations in Youth Soccer: How to Avoid Frustration and Maintain Motivation

> **For coaches** Use the start-of-season parents' meeting to say results may take time and that comparing children with last year's team only adds pressure.

As youth soccer coaches, reality puts us in our place quite often. Managing well what we expect from the season completely marks the mood of the kids. Especially after a successful year or when changing age groups, how we approach the new course makes the difference between a group that pushes forward together and one mired in frustration. We always tend to think that on other teams everything runs smoothly, but what really matters is taking care of and enjoying what we have ourselves each week. Here I tell you how to help your players focus on the present and value what they have in front of them.

The trap of looking to the past: why do we get frustrated?

When a team comes off a brilliant year, where everything went smoothly, or when it moves up an age group, it is natural that both the players and their families get their hopes up. They think: "This year will be just as good" or "Now that we are in this age group, we are going to crush it." And there lies the trap. Those expectations, although well-intentioned, can work against us. If we do not manage them, at the slightest difficulty, at the first stumble or the first difference compared to the previous year, frustration sets in. "It's that last year was better," "It's that this year is not the same."

This mindset puts us in a negative loop. The enjoyment of the present is overshadowed by comparison with an idealized past or an unreal future. What we experience with a team one season is unique. The opponents, the age of the kids, the group... everything changes. Trying to replicate exactly the same thing makes no sense. Each season starts from zero, with different challenges and its own joys. Our job is to help the kids understand this and focus on what is in front of them today.

Erase the previous course: put the focus on the present

My advice is clear: you have to wipe the slate clean. Nor should you deny what was achieved last year, but you should put it in perspective. Yes, it was great, it was enjoyed a lot and a ton was learned. But this year is another story. And that difference does not have to be bad; it is simply different. It is time to reset and focus the team on what they have in front of them, without constantly looking in the rearview mirror.

The coach's role: set the tone

The first barrier against unrealistic expectations is you. Your own expectations, how you communicate them and how you act, set the path. If you yourself expect a U9 to play like a U15, or that a newly promoted team wins all its matches, you are laying the first stone of frustration. You have to be the first to focus on the day to day.

Be transparent from the first training session. Talk with the team about the new challenges. Make it clear that each season serves to learn and improve, regardless of the scores. Your calm and your focus on daily work will spread on their own.

Involve players and families

Managing expectations is not only the coaching staff's job. The players and the families have to be in the same boat so that we all row in the same direction.

With the players: change the idea of success

Helping your kids understand what it means to be successful in youth soccer completely changes how they approach training sessions and matches. It goes far beyond the score: what we seek is for them to grow as footballers and as people.

- Learn from mistakes: Teach them that failing is part of the game. What counts is effort, perseverance and continuing to try, not perfection. If a pass does not come off, we analyze why and try it again.
- Day-to-day objectives: Help them set short-term challenges that depend exclusively on them. Instead of obsessing over winning the league, set objectives like improving the press after losing the ball, talking more on the field or daring to use the weaker foot. Tangible things they can work on and notice each week.
- Value daily work: Reinforce effort, attitude and teamwork over the result. When you see a defensive help, a brave recovery or a gesture of support for a teammate, acknowledge it instantly. That generates real desire for self-improvement, the kind that comes from within.
- Learn from defeats: Stumbles are part of development. Turn every difficult match into a useful talk: what did we do well? what can we correct in the next training session? That way frustration goes down and they learn to get back up without drama.

With the families: reduce the pressure

Parents support the team every weekend, but sometimes, without meaning to, they add a demand that weighs too heavily on the kids. Speaking clearly with them prevents hopes from getting out of hand.

- Kickoff meeting: Right at the start of the year, explain how you work. Make it clear that in youth soccer the priority is for the kids to learn, compete with values and have fun, not to win matches at any cost.

- Transparency: Keep families informed about the group's progress. If we have moved up a category or there are many first-year players, explain to them that the level of demand changes and that results may take time to come.
- Zero comparisons: Ask parents not to compare their children with other teammates or with what they did the previous year. Each kid matures at a different pace. What deserves applause is the commitment and the desire they put into every session.
- Prioritize enjoyment: Remind families that children play to have a good time with their friends. When the pressure from the stands goes too far, the kid gets blocked and stops enjoying it.

Practical guidelines for day to day on the field

In training you have very direct tools so the group does not go off track with unrealistic goals:

- Zero-based talk: At the start of preseason, spend some time closing the previous stage. We remember the good moments, but we draw the line: this season starts from zero and we have new challenges.
- Evaluate based on the weekly work: Instead of just looking at Saturday's score, go over with them whether what was trained was carried out. Did we press in an organized way? Did we dare to play the ball out from the back? That way they see real progress every matchday, whether they win or lose.
- Specific praise: Avoid the generic "well done!" Tell them exactly what they did well: "I liked how you held your position before stepping in" or "You saw that pass into space perfectly." That way the player understands which actions really add up.
- Manage anger when it comes: Because it will come. When a player or the team gets frustrated, do not look the other way. Let them get it off their chest and then ask them the question: "Okay, it went wrong, what do we do on the next play?" Focusing on the solution takes the drama out of it.
- Close communication: Make the kids feel confident enough to tell you what worries them or what they feel. Listen to them one on one in the locker room.
- Commitment first: Respect, camaraderie and not giving up are worth much more than winning a match on inertia. When the locker room has those values clear, the group competes much more calmly and with more desire.

Real success in youth soccer

Success with kids is not about trophies or promotions, even though we all like to win. True success is seeing how a player who arrived shy comes out of his shell and gains confidence with the ball. It is seeing a group that does not hang its head when it concedes a goal, or seeing them leave training joking with each other after having given everything. When you get your players and their families to understand soccer that way, expectations stop being a burden and become the desire to improve every week. That is what truly leaves a mark on a locker room.

Source: Aprende Entrenando · Translated from Spanish aprendeentrenando.com

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15 Coaching

Are drill practices no good? 【Youth Soccer】Thinking about how to use them from history

> **For coaches** Drills are not the same as repeating one action: before your next session, pick one drill and be able to say why it is there and what you are watching for.

Hello, this is Kazu, your instructor.

In youth soccer practice, how to handle drill training is a theme that many coaches probably struggle with. When you hear "soccer is best learned by playing soccer," you might feel a sense of guilt about doing drills at all.

For example, some of you may feel as follows.

- Are drills something we must not do because they lack situational judgment?
- I heard Spain does everything globally, so are drills an outdated practice?
- My team's coach does nothing but drills, but is this okay?

I myself, when I was young, had a period when I did only drill training.

In this article, I will explain the historical background of why drill training has been debated, its positioning in Spain, and when and how to use it on the ground. Once you understand the essence of drills, I think you will naturally be able to judge "let's use them in this situation" and "let's not use them in this situation," so please read to the end.

① "Soccer is best learned by playing soccer"

This is something you still hear often today, but there is a way of thinking that soccer is best learned by playing soccer. In that context, drill training is sometimes said to be not very good because it strips away too many of the elements necessary for soccer.

On the other hand, there are coaches who actively do drills, saying "aren't drills actually great?" Some people see them negatively, and some see them positively.

The reason this kind of debate arises is that there is a major background behind it.

② The debate that happened in the Netherlands, and the original Coerver Training

In the Netherlands about 30 years ago, there was a way of thinking that used drill training alone to develop players from the individual level to the group level and then to the team level, turning them into high-level players. That was turned into a method and systematized, and at the time I think it spread quite widely.

This is Coerver Training. Today there is also Coerver Coaching in Japan, but this was its origin.

The original Coerver Training analyzed and extracted the play of the world's top technical players of the time, and first systematized at the individual level how to dribble, how to turn, and how to feint. Furthermore, it compiled group combinations such as one-twos, overlaps, and switches, and created a method for how to install all of that from kindergarteners to about junior high school students.

As far as I know, I feel that it is vastly different from the current Coerver Coaching curriculum and training methods.

I remember being extremely shocked when I saw this video in high school, thinking that a third-grade elementary school student could do such things. When I was young, I had the footage given to me and dubbed it, and more recently I found the original VHS online and bought it. It was an extremely well-made drill training program, and I think it was quite revolutionary for its time.

③ The idea of complex systems, and element reductionism

On the other hand, the Dutch Football Association took the position that "that is not the case. Soccer is best learned by playing soccer," and it seems a debate arose there. So why did that way of thinking emerge?

As far as I can tell from reading books published in Japan about 30 years ago, I think the idea of complex systems was already present in the most advanced European training thinking at the time. Vitor Frade also proposed tactical periodization 30 to 40 years ago.

Until then, soccer had been reduced to elements such as tactics, technique, physical, and mental, and trained that way. For technique, drill training; for physical, running and sprints outside the pitch, and so on. The representative example on the technique side was drill training (analitico).

Then came the emergence of a way of thinking that captured soccer as a whole and dealt with it as it is, without reducing it to elements. I am not a researcher, so this is only the flow as I see it from my own experience and the context of the books I have read, but I think the soil in which drill training came to be debated originally lay in this kind of history.

① Analitico, Global, Sistemic

In Japan as well, about 10 or 15 years ago, there was a period when people said, "Drills have no opponents and no situational judgment, so they are not playing soccer itself. Therefore, we must do training that involves situational judgment, such as small-sided games." Because of that, some of you may have thought that drills should not be done.

However, drill training depends on how you use it. At coaching schools in Spain, you are taught that there are three teaching methods for soccer training: analitico (drills), global, and sistemico.

- Analitico: things repeated with no opponents or teammates
- Global: things done with opponents and teammates present
- Sistemico: that plus a play model added

In short, it is a matter of organizing whether there is context or no context. Within that, there are training formats such as possession format, oleada format, and circuito (circuit format), and the classes on methodology theory and training theory proceed.

In other words, even in Spain, drills are clearly positioned as one of the teaching methods.

② The problem of ball mastery not showing up in matches

In Japan's case, it tends to happen that ball mastery, for example, raises the technical level through drills, but it is not demonstrated much in matches.

In Spain, within the definition of technique, ball-handling skills are considered to be demonstrated together with situational judgment, so they cannot be separated. For example, juggling like keepie-uppies is clearly said not to be soccer.

③ "As much as possible" is in quotation marks

That is precisely why there is a flow of trying to do training accompanied by situational judgment as much as possible.

However, what is important here is that "as much as possible" is in quotation marks. It does not mean that you must not do drills.

① When you want to raise the technical level

In coaching at the elementary school age, there are situations where players still cannot kick the ball well and you want to raise their technical level. You want them to be able to stop, kick, and carry the ball a little more solidly.

In those times, I think drill training is effective.

② Putting it into warm-ups or the first half of training

There is also a way to insert drills into warm-ups or around Training 1 or Training 2, and then do pass control (pass and control) and so on.

Also, shadow play is practice close to a drill. For example, it can be used to build an image of overlapping on the side and then delivering a cross.

③ For those interested in the ecological approach

Recently, I think many people are interested in the ecological approach. Even so, it is also said that for beginner soccer players, drill-like training has a certain degree of effect, more than constraint-led approaches. Also, even within drill training, it is possible to use ecological approach-like methods.

What is important is not whether drills are good or bad, but when and in what context you use them. For that purpose, I think it is necessary to know well the merits and demerits of drills.

① It is a mistake to think of it as "just repeating the same movement"

Previously, I received a question from a reader: "Kazu-san, you say you build technique through global training, but don't you do drills?" My answer is that there are times I do not do drills, and times I do.

From my experience, I feel that people who struggle with drills often do not understand drill training well. If you think drill training = just repeating the same technical action, you are greatly mistaken.

Because they discuss it without understanding the essence of drills, they end up never being convinced, wondering, "Are drills good, or bad?"

② You can do it by following the menu, but it shows from the outside

Drill training itself can be done by following the practice menu. However, if you do not understand the essence of drills, it often shows from the outside that you are not doing it well.

You cannot see why you are doing this drill, or whether it would be better to do it this way. It means you do not understand the merits and demerits, the coaching points, or what should be done.

For people who have 10 or 15 years of coaching experience but are not confident about drills, or for people who have just started coaching, I think it is very important to first properly understand drill training.

③ Drills are easier than global

I believe drill training is easier than global training. For example, compared with focusing on something within global training such as 5v5 + 2 servers, drills have fewer elements to analyze. Because there are fewer elements to focus on, even beginner coaches can grasp the phenomena they should look at more easily.

At the same time, it contains all the basics of coaching: the timing of freezes, how to coach, how to proceed with the menu, and so on. The easiest version of that is drills, and global and systemic are more difficult: that is my view.

That is precisely why I think it is impossible to say that although you cannot do well with drill training, you are perfect at global.

④ The amount of knowledge and practice supports coaching

I feel that soccer coaches need a great deal of knowledge, amount of study, and amount of practice. It is not something you can do starting tomorrow just because you played soccer, or starting tomorrow because you studied for one month.

Even taking just drill training, there are times when it does not go well at all on the field. It is important to deepen various kinds of knowledge while accumulating experience.

Summary

- Drills are discussed because of the history of conflict between reductionism and complexity thinking
- In Spain, too, analitico (drills) are positioned as one teaching method
- The "as much as possible" in "in practice with as much situational judgment as possible" is in quotation marks
- Drills can be used when you want to raise technique, in warm-ups, in the first half of training, and so on
- Drills are not "repetition of the same movement." If you understand the essence, you can judge when to use them and when not to use them
- Drills are simpler than global training, and they contain all the basics of coaching

I don't think you need to feel guilty about doing drills. What matters is being able to explain for yourself what purpose today's drill serves and where it is placed.

First, in your next practice, choose one drill and review its aim and how you run it. Try it at your own coaching site too!

Also, if you write down and keep your practice menus, including drills, it becomes easier to review the aims and how you run them.

Source: ジュニアサッカーカレッジ · Translated from Japanese junior-soccer.college

RESEARCH AND DATA

16 Research U9 to U10

Enjoyment, Executive Functions, and Motor Efficiency in Youth Soccer Players: A 15-Week Observational Study

For coaches If you track how much your players enjoy sessions, keep it separate from what you expect it to do for their speed or thinking skills; this study found no such link.

Abstract

Highlights. What are the main findings? During the 15-week observation period, the young soccer players showed significant changes between the beginning and end of the study in terms of motor and attentional efficiency; the other cognitive measures remained essentially unchanged.Perceived enjoyment was not significantly associated with cognitive or motor performance. However, enjoyment scores were consistently high, showing limited variability. This may have hindered the identification of any associations. **What are the implications of the main finding?** Enjoyment and cognitive to motor performance appear to represent distinct, though potentially related, dimensions of the sports experience. They should be considered separately when evaluating training programs.An enjoyable training environment remains important for engagement and participation. However, enjoyment alone cannot be used as an indicator of attentional, inhibitory, or motor performance.

Abstract. Background: Enjoyment in sport has emerged as a key psychological factor influencing exercise adherence and cognitive and emotional development. This exploratory study examined pre to post changes in selected cognitive and motor variables over a 15-week observation period and whether average enjoyment during soccer training was associated with cognitive and motor performance indices. Fifty-six players (M = 52; F = 4; age: 9.98 ± 0.70) were observed across 30 soccer training sessions over 15 weeks. **Methods**: Enjoyment was rated after each session using an emoji-based visual analogue scale, and cognitive performance was assessed before and after the observation period with tablet-based tasks. **Results**: Pre to post analyses showed significant changes in the Motor Efficiency Test ($t55 = 3.15$; $p = 0.003$; $\Delta = -19.4\%$; Cohen's $d = 0.42$) and FlankTime ($W = 1345$; $p < 0.001$; $\Delta = -8.1\%$; rank-biserial correlation = 0.68). FlankAcc showed only a nominal, uncorrected distributional change ($W = 323$; $p = 0.015$; $\Delta = 0.0\%$). Enjoyment was not significantly associated with any of the cognitive or motor performance indices. However, enjoyment scores were clustered toward the upper end of the scale, indicating restricted variability that may have limited the ability to detect associations. **Conclusions**: These preliminary findings indicate changes in selected cognitive and motor indices over the 15-week observation period, without evidence of direct associations between perceived enjoyment and the cognitive or motor performance indices examined.

1. Introduction

Participation in both physical activity (PA) and sports during childhood and adolescence offers an ideal environment for motor, cognitive, and emotional development [1]. Regular PA is associated with benefits for psychological functioning and executive functions (EFs), including attentional control, inhibition, updating, and behavioral adaptation [2,3,4]. These processes are especially relevant during preadolescence, when EFs are still developing and remain sensitive to environmental, educational, and PA experiences [2,5,6]. Open-skill sports such as soccer require continuous adaptation to dynamic and unpredictable situations [7]. During the game, young athletes must select relevant information, ignore distractions, anticipate opponents' actions, make rapid decisions, and inhibit ineffective responses [7]. Soccer therefore provides an ecologically valid context for examining EFs in youth sport [8]. This is supported by evidence linking soccer-specific performance with technical and perceptual-motor components [9], and by studies showing that more skilled young soccer players may outperform less experienced peers or non-athletes on tasks involving executive control, attention, and inhibition [10,11,12,13]. Moreover, visual skills and EFs appear to contribute jointly to soccer performance [14]. The affective and motivational quality of sport participation may also be relevant to executive functioning. Enjoyment, defined as the subjective pleasure experienced during an activity, is a key factor associated with continued participation in sport and PA [15,16]. In youth sport, enjoyment may reflect positive affect, engagement, perceived competence, social relationships, and the personal meaning attributed to the activity [17]. The theoretical rationale for linking enjoyment with EFs lies in the effect of positive emotional and motivational states on attention and cognitive control. Positive affect can broaden attentional focus and promote cognitive flexibility, although it may also increase distractibility depending on task demands [18,19]. Moreover, these effects depend on motivational intensity: low-intensity positive states tend to broaden attention, whereas approach-oriented and goal-directed positive states may narrow attentional focus and support cognitive control [20,21,22]. In youth soccer, enjoyment may therefore indicate not only well-being but also attentional and motivational engagement during training. Accordingly, dynamic soccer activities such as small-sided games have been associated with higher attention and perceived enjoyment than less playful exercise formats [23], while motivation, enjoyment, and commitment appear closely related in young soccer players [24]. Direct evidence identifying fun as an independent predictor of EFs in youth sports is limited, but the existing findings provide a relevant basis for this hypothesis. Fun, game-like sports activities can increase children's engagement in cognitively demanding situations, thereby exposing them more frequently to contexts that require attentional skills, rapid response, effective action inhibition, and cognitive flexibility. In this sense, enjoyment should not be viewed merely as a general affective response, but also as a potential indicator of motivational engagement within activities that test executive control. Therefore, from an observational and exploratory perspective, and given the potential influence of affective and motivational states on attention and cognitive control, examining enjoyment in relation to measures of EFs could help clarify whether the subjective experience of sports is associated with individual differences in cognitive performance. Based on these considerations, and acknowledging the limited direct evidence on enjoyment as a predictor of EFs, this study had

2. Materials and Methods

2.1. Participants

The sample size was determined using G*Power software (version 3.1.9.6). The power analysis was conducted using a two-tailed paired-samples *t*-test with an α level of 0.05, a statistical power of 0.80, and an effect size (Cohen's d) of 0.57 [25]. The results indicated a minimum required sample size of 27 participants. A total of 83 young soccer players were initially recruited from four soccer clubs.

Although an attendance rate of ≥95% was set as the minimum inclusion criterion, all 56 participants aged between 9 and 11 years who completed the training and data collection protocol achieved 100% attendance and were included in the final statistical analyses (F = 4; M = 52; age: 9.98 ± 0.70; body mass [kg]: 34.66 ± 8.45; height [cm]: 138.58 ± 7.76; BMI: 17.86 ± 2.93). A total of 27 participants were excluded from the analysis for failing to meet the minimum attendance threshold (<95% attendance) due to flu/illness (*n* = 19), school-related commitments (*n* = 5), vacations (*n* = 2), or minor injuries (*n* = 1). A detailed participant flow diagram illustrating enrollment, exclusions, and final sample size is presented in Figure 1.

Moreover, to be enrolled in the study, participants had to meet the following inclusion criteria: (i) be free from any diagnosis of chronic, metabolic, neurological, or other pathology that could significantly influence their lifestyle, level of enjoyment, or psychological well-being; (ii) possess a valid medical certificate for competitive physical activity and train regularly at one of the soccer clubs involved in the study; and (iii) have been playing soccer for at least two years. To avoid bias in the results, participants were excluded from the statistical analysis if they had transient or persistent conditions that could significantly influence their psychological performance or level of enjoyment, such as pharmacological treatments, injuries, or particular family circumstances. The study was designed and conducted in accordance with the principles of the Declaration of Helsinki. As all participants were underage, written informed consent was obtained from their parents, and participants and their parents were informed about the confidential handling of the coded data. The participant-coding and data-linkage procedure was included in the study protocol approved by the Unicusano University Research Ethics Committee (code: CERA02/2025; date: 13 June 2025), prior to participant enrollment and data collection.

2.2. Procedures

A short battery of cognitive tests was administered before (assessment 1) and after 30 training sessions (assessment 2) conducted twice a week over a period of 15 weeks. Over the 15-week period, after each of the 30 consecutive training sessions, participants were asked to rate the enjoyment they experienced during the session. All athletes completed their training sessions during the same period of the season. Everyone followed structured training that included: a warm-up phase, an athletic conditioning phase (running, guided drills), a technical phase (age to dependent, but always including ball carrying, dribbling, shooting, receiving and controlling the ball), a small-sided game, 15-min match, and penalty kicks. We also requested that coaches and parents schedule the sessions at the same time of day (i.e., from 4:00 to 5:30 pm, at an average temperature of 19 °C). This procedure was used to examine pre to post changes in cognitive and motor performance to test whether average enjoyment during training was associated with the cognitive and motor performance indices considered in the study, without attributing the observed changes to training exposure or intensity. All cognitive tests and the methods used to assess participants' enjoyment are described in the following section. Session rating of perceived exertion has been proposed as a simple and ecologically valid method for monitoring training load in young athletes [26].

2.3. Cognitive Tests

The cognitive tests were administered electronically using a tablet with the CogniFit application v.4.7.8 (CogniFit Inc.; San Francisco, CA, USA) installed. Three tests were used: Eriksen's Flankers Test, Stop-Signal Test, and Visual Search Test. Each test generated two scores: (i) mean response time for correct trials (ms; lower values indicate better performance), and (ii) accuracy (% correct; higher values indicate better performance). All cognitive assessments were conducted according to standardized procedures. The tests were administered at the end of the training session, and after enjoyment assessments, in a quiet, enclosed room separate from the locker rooms, using the same tablet model and the same version of the CogniFit app for all players. Participants received the same standardized instructions before each task and completed the practice phase provided by the app before beginning the test phase. The order of the cognitive tests was fixed as listed above and remained consistent across participants, as well as between the pre-test and post-test assessments. The assessments were administered by qualified sports psychologists who followed the same testing protocol. During the tests, the children were assessed individually, and efforts were made to minimize external distractions and interactions with peers or coaches.

2.4. Eriksen's Flankers Test

Eriksen's "flankers" test [27] involves presenting a series of five elements. The one in the center represents the target stimulus, while the four elements on either side, two on each side, constitute the "flankers." The flankers may be congruent with the target (when they point in the same direction), incongruent (when they point in the opposite direction), or neutral (when they are not associated with either of the two possible responses). In each trial, the participant must determine whether the central stimulus is oriented to the right or to the left. After an initial familiarization phase, the test consists of 36 trials, evenly distributed across the three conditions: 12 congruent, 12 incongruent, and 12 neutral. The orientation of the targets and flankers is counterbalanced according to the criteria adopted during the learning phase, while the order of stimulus presentation is randomized. The task allows for the assessment of various cognitive components, including selective attention, executive control, inhibitory control, reaction times, processing speed, and spatial perception. Performance is summarized using two indices: (i) FlankTime, which measures efficiency in seconds; and (ii) FlankAcc, which corresponds to the percentage of correct responses.

2.5. Stop-Signal Test

In the Stop-Signal test [28], participants perform a series of trials designed to establish an automatic motor response. Two circles are displayed on the screen, and in each trial, one of them changes color to yellow. The task is to select the yellow circle as quickly as possible. Once this response pattern has been established, a stop signal is introduced: in some trials, the circle that was initially yellow turns red, signaling to the participant that they must stop the response and therefore avoid selecting it. After a preliminary learning phase, two gray circles are presented on the screen, one on the right and one on the left. In each trial, one of the two turns yellow, while the other remains gray. In some trials, however, the yellow circle subsequently changes color to red, signaling the need to inhibit the previously established response. The stop signal appears in 12 of the 36 trials, with three different time intervals: four times after 100 ms, four after 200 ms, and four after 300 ms. The distribution of these intervals across the No-Go trials is random. The test is primarily designed to assess response inhibition ability. The two scores provided by this test were labelled StopTime (efficiency in seconds) and StopAcc (percentage accuracy).

2.6. Visual Search Test

The Visual Search Test [29,30] involves identifying a target letter within a grid containing numerous alphabetic stimuli. The letter to be found is displayed on the left side of the screen and appears twice in the grid shown on the right. For each trial, the participant has 10 s to identify and select one of the two targets as quickly as possible, distinguishing it from distractor letters that vary in their degree of similarity. After an initial learning phase, the target letter is presented inside a circle on the left side of the screen, while a 10 × 14 grid appears on the right, consisting of a total of 140 black Latin letters. The composition of the grid varies depending on the target: when the target letter is "C," the distractors are G, O, and Q, while M, W, and Z serve as filler letters; when the target is "N," the distractors are M, W, and Z, and the filler letters are G, O, and Q. The task is primarily used to assess visual scanning ability. Performance is expressed through two indices: VisualTime, which measures time efficiency in seconds, and VisualAcc, which corresponds to the accuracy percentage.

2.7. Enjoyment Assessments

Enjoyment was assessed using an emoji-based visual Likert scale, adapted from child-friendly smiley-face rating methods designed to facilitate quantitative self-assessment in children aged 9 to 11 [31]. These emoji-based scales have also demonstrated psychometric acceptability for assessing affective responses in children [32]. The scale included six emojis representing increasing levels of happiness, ranging from 1 ("not happy at all") to 6 ("very happy"). At the end of each of the 30 training sessions, each child selected the emoji that best reflected how they had felt during the session and placed the corresponding slip of paper into a collection box. Each slip of paper had a unique participant code printed on the back, allowing the research team to link repeated assessments from the same participant across different sessions, while maintaining the confidentiality of the responses from peers and coaches. The final score was calculated as the average of the ratings collected across all 30 training sessions. Since only participants who completed the entire training and data collection protocol were included in the final analyses, each participant's score was based on the same number of ratings (i.e., all participants included in the final analyses provided a rating for each of the 30 sessions). The cited studies support the use of smiley-face and emoji-based assessment approaches as appropriate measures for children to evaluate affective responses [31,32]. However, this specific application, repeated session by session, has not been independently validated as a sport-specific measure of enjoyment. Consequently, the scale was used in the present study as a brief ecological indicator of perceived enjoyment during the session rather than as a validated measure of soccer-specific enjoyment.

2.8. The Motor Efficiency Test (TEM)

The Motor Efficiency Test (TEM) was developed by the Italian National Olympic Committee as a field-based, game-like assessment of motor abilities in young athletes [33]. It consists of a structured circuit with four stations and four different locomotor tasks, each requiring specific motor skills. Performance is evaluated based on both the speed of task completion and the accuracy of movement execution. The test does not exclusively reward faster performance, as children who complete fewer stations with greater precision may receive scores comparable to those of faster participants. In this way, the TEM provides an integrated measure of both quantitative and qualitative aspects of motor performance. Because the task is performed against time and requires continuous movement across different stations, it can be considered a dynamic and ecologically valid assessment of motor efficiency in children. Its structure makes it suitable for youth sports contexts, where coordination, movement control, speed, and accuracy are important components of performance.

2.9. Statistical Analysis

Paired-samples *t*-tests or Wilcoxon signed-rank tests were used to compare pre-test and post-test values, depending on the distribution of each variable, which was assessed using the Shapiro to Wilk normality test. Cohen's d was calculated for paired-samples *t*-tests. Moreover, the rank-biserial correlation was calculated for the Wilcoxon signed-rank test. It should be noted that Cohen's d (based on standard deviation units, unbounded) and the rank-biserial correlation (ranging from −1 to 1) operate on different mathematical metrics and are not directly comparable in magnitude. Effect sizes were interpreted according to Cohen's conventional guidelines [34]. Percentage change (Δ) was calculated only for variables showing significant pre to post differences, using the following formula: (final value − initial value)/(initial value)*100.

In order to control for Type I error across the seven pre to post comparisons, a Bonferroni correction was applied, establishing an adjusted significance threshold of $\alpha = 0.007$. Spearman's rank correlation coefficients were used to examine the exploratory associations between average enjoyment across the 30 training sessions and all cognitive and motor performance indices considered in the study. For each cognitive and motor variable, the score entered in the correlation analysis was calculated as the average of the pre-test and post-test values. These analyses were exploratory and were intended to examine associations between overall perceived enjoyment and overall performance levels, rather than to model individual change from pre-test to post-test. To contextualize these correlational analyses, a post-hoc sensitivity analysis revealed that with a sample size of $n = 56$, $\alpha = 0.05$, a statistical power of 0.80, and two-tailed, the study was powered to detect minimum effect sizes of $|r| \geq 0.365$. Consequently, observed correlation coefficients below this threshold fall within a range that the study was not formally powered to detect.

Given the exploratory nature of these analyses, the results were interpreted cautiously, with attention to both the magnitude and statistical significance of the correlation coefficients. The presence of outlier values was checked using the interquartile range method to avoid unusual influences on the correlation analyses. No outliers were removed, as their exclusion did not change the correlation results. Furthermore, to check the robustness of the findings against potential sex-related confounds, a sensitivity analysis was performed by re-running the primary statistical tests on the male subsample alone. Data were analyzed using SPSS v.29.0.1.0 (IBM Corp., Armonk, NY, USA).

3. Results

The descriptive statistics (expressed as mean ± standard deviation or median [interquartile range]) of the variables considered for the pre to post comparison are summarized in Table 1.

The paired-samples *t*-test showed a significant pre to post difference in TEM score (t55 = 3.15; $p = 0.003$; $\Delta = -19.4\%$; Cohen's d = 0.42 [CI95: 0.15, 0.69]). The Wilcoxon signed-rank test showed a significant pre to post difference in FlankTime (W = 1345, $p < 0.001$; $\Delta = -8.1\%$; rank-biserial correlation = 0.68 [CI95: 0.51, 0.81]; Figure 2). StopAcc (W = 386, $p = 0.038$; $\Delta = 3.3\%$; rank-biserial correlation = −0.34 [CI95: −0.57, −0.05]) and FlankAcc (W = 323, $p = 0.015$; $\Delta = 0.0\%$, with 10 tied pairs, suggesting a difference in the tail distribution, Figure 3) showed nominal pre to post differences. However, after applying the Bonferroni correction for the seven pre to post comparisons, only TEM and FlankTime remained statistically significant at the adjusted threshold of $\alpha = 0.007$.

Spearman's rank correlation analyses did not show significant associations between enjoyment and any of the cognitive or motor performance indices considered. Table 2 summarizes the correlation coefficients and *p*-values.

Each participant's enjoyment score was calculated as the average of the 30 ratings collected across the training sessions. Descriptive statistics indicated high overall perceived enjoyment, with a median score of 5.26 (IQR = 0.79), suggesting that enjoyment scores were clustered toward the upper end of the scale. Table 3 shows the results obtained for the non-significant variables.

The sensitivity analysis excluding the four female participants yielded a pattern of findings consistent with the main analysis, with all remaining cognitive metrics and enjoyment correlations maintaining their previous results (detailed statistical outputs are provided in the Supplementary Materials). Specifically, the pre to post improvement in FlankTime retained statistical significance after Bonferroni correction, whereas the change in TEM did not reach the adjusted significance threshold ($p = 0.012$; adjusted $\alpha = 0.007$).

4. Discussion

Our study examined pre to post changes in selected cognitive variables over a 15-week observation period in young soccer players and assessed whether the enjoyment they experienced during training sessions was associated with cognitive performance. The results showed significant pre to post differences for TEM and FlankTime, indicating changes in these variables over the observation period. By contrast, the finding for FlankAcc should be interpreted cautiously, as it was only nominally significant and did not survive correction for multiple comparisons. These findings suggest that, in the sample analysed, certain cognitive indices changed over the 15-week observation period, but these changes do not appear to be directly associated with the level of enjoyment perceived during training sessions. This issue is particularly relevant because enjoyment scores showed evidence of a restricted range/ceiling effect, with scores clustered toward the upper end of the scale. Consequently, this limited variability may have reduced the ability to detect significant associations between enjoyment and the cognitive and motor performance indices examined.

4.1. Cognitive and Motor Performance Changes

It is important to emphasize that these differences between the pre-test and post-test phases should not be interpreted as evidence that soccer training led to cognitive improvement. Since the study did not include a control group or random assignment, the observed changes could also reflect developmental maturation, seasonal effects, regression to the mean, repeated exposure to the assessment protocol, familiarity with the cognitive tasks performed on tablets, greater familiarity with the assessment environment, nonspecific effects of regular sports practice, or other uncontrolled factors. From an exploratory perspective, these pre to post differences may be considered in relation to the cognitive demands of soccer, an open-skill sport in which young athletes must continuously adapt to dynamic stimuli, select relevant information, inhibit non-functional responses, and make rapid decisions under conditions of uncertainty. These demands involve executive processes such as selective attention, processing speed, and inhibitory control [35]. It is important to stress that the change observed in FlankTime concerns a task involving stimulus selection and interference control. Therefore, the present design does not allow this change to be attributed to soccer-specific cognitive demands. In particular, developmental maturation and test to retest or practice effects cannot be separated from changes potentially related to regular soccer participation. Moreover, the use of only two assessment points further prevents examination of the temporal trajectory of these changes or of any potential dose to response pattern. Previous studies have shown that young soccer players with higher levels of experience or skill may perform better on tasks involving EFs, attention, and inhibitory control [10,11,12,13]. However, these interpretations remain preliminary because the design of the present study does not allow causal attribution of the observed changes to soccer training. The result for FlankAcc requires particular caution and should not be interpreted as evidence of a general improvement in accuracy. Although the pre to post difference was nominally significant, it did not survive Bonferroni correction for multiple comparisons. Moreover, the median change was zero, suggesting that the statistically detected difference does not reflect a clear central shift in performance. Rather, the result likely reflects changes in the distribution of scores, particularly in the tails, or heterogeneous responses among participants. This pattern may also be consistent with restricted variability or ceiling effects, which are common in accuracy-based measures when performance is already high. Therefore, FlankAcc should be described as showing a nominal, uncorrected distributional change rather than a reliable improvement in attentional accuracy. In contrast, FlankTime appears to provide a more interpretable and sensitive index of change in attentional efficiency in the present sample. With regard to the sensitivity analysis conducted on the male subsample, the overall picture was fairly consistent with the analysis of the entire sample. FlankTime remained statistically significant after Bonferroni correction ($p < 0.001$; corrected $\alpha = 0.007$), whereas TEM retained a similar pattern of change but no longer met the adjusted significance threshold ($p = 0.012$). FlankAcc ($p = 0.034$) and StopAcc ($p = 0.026$) showed nominal, uncorrected differences between the pre- and post-phases, while StopTime ($p = 0.206$), VisualTime ($p = 0.431$), and VisualAcc ($p = 0.843$) showed no significant differences. Therefore, among the comparisons, only FlankTime passed the Bonferroni correction in the male subsample. Given the very small number of female participants and the resulting reduction in

4.2. Enjoyment and Cognitive and Motor Performance

In line with our exploratory objective, the correlation analyses revealed no statistically significant associations between enjoyment and the cognitive or motor performance indices examined (rho = 0.037 to 0.197). However, this finding should be interpreted strictly within the limits of the study's statistical power. With a sample size of n = 56, the study was powered to detect only moderate-to-large associations ($|r| \geq 0.365$). Consequently, these results indicate a lack of a statistically detectable moderate-to-large association at the available power, rather than a structurally established absence of any relationship.

Enjoyment is considered an important variable in youth sports, particularly as it supports motivation, participation, and continuity in PA [15,16]. Among young soccer players, enjoyment of the activity has also been linked to athletic commitment and the quality of the motivational experience [24]. However, the present findings suggest that the enjoyment perceived during training is not necessarily associated with performance on the cognitive tasks examined. The absence of significant associations should also be interpreted in light of potential individual differences in terms of exercise intensity, fatigue, and training requirements. This does not diminish the value of enjoyment in youth sports. Rather, it suggests that enjoyment may be more closely related to the subjective quality of the sports experience, persistence in practice, and overall engagement, while its relationship with specific measures of executive performance may depend on unmeasured factors such as exercise intensity, cumulative load, and fatigue. This interpretation is consistent with the broad and subjective nature of enjoyment, which can include satisfaction, engagement, a sense of competence, relationships with teammates, the relationship with the coach, satisfaction with one's own performance, and the meaning attributed to the session. This complexity makes enjoyment an ecologically rich construct, but one that is also difficult to link linearly to individual cognitive measures. The lack of significant associations may also be partly related to the measurement approach. Averaging a brief emoji-based assessment across sessions may have reduced intra-subject variability and may not have captured distinct components of enjoyment, such as affective enjoyment, perceived competence, social interaction, or task engagement.

For example, children might report the same level of enjoyment for different reasons. One might feel this way because they believe they played well, another because they had fun with the group, and yet another because they found the training less tiring or more rewarding. These components might have different relationships with attention, reaction times, and inhibitory control. This is consistent with the literature showing that the effects of positive affect on cognitive control are not straightforward. Positive affect can broaden the scope of attention and promote cognitive flexibility, but it can also increase distractibility when the task requires careful stimulus selection [18,19]. Other studies have suggested that the effect of positive states depends on motivational intensity: approach-oriented positive states may promote a narrower focus, while those less goal-oriented may broaden the scope of attention [20,21,22]. In this study, however, enjoyment was assessed at the end of training sessions rather than during the cognitive tests. Therefore, it is plausible that it reflects the overall quality of the sporting experience rather than the attentional state active during cognitive assessment.

4.3. Practical Implications

From a practical perspective, these results require a balanced interpretation. Youth soccer can provide an environment rich in cognitive stimuli, especially when sessions include dynamic situations, decision-making tasks, themed games, and activities requiring selective attention and action control. However, the enjoyment derived from the activity should not be considered a direct indicator of changes in cognitive performance, and although it remains essential for sustaining motivation, adherence, and the quality of the sporting experience, it cannot be used on its own as an indicator of attentional or inhibitory performance. From this perspective, coaches and professionals should view enjoyment and cognitive performance as distinct, although potentially interrelated, dimensions of the youth sports experience. Maintaining an enjoyable training environment remains important in its own right, particularly to foster engagement and continued participation, rather than because greater enjoyment necessarily corresponds to better performance. Consequently, the evaluation of youth training programs could benefit from considering subjective experience alongside measures of cognitive and motor performance, rather than as a substitute for them.

5. Limitations of the Study

This study has several limitations. First, the absence of a control or comparison group substantially limits its internal validity and precludes a causal interpretation of the pre to post changes. These changes could reflect soccer training, but they could also reflect age-related cognitive and motor maturation, which is particularly relevant in the 9 to 11-year age range, seasonal effects, regression to the mean, repeated exposure to the testing protocol, familiarity with tablet-based activities, increased familiarity with the testing environment, nonspecific effects of regular sports participation, or other uncontrolled factors. Second, the sample was predominantly male, with only four female players included, which limits generalizability to young female soccer players and precludes a meaningful examination of sex-related differences. Third, training intensity and accumulated training load were not directly monitored. Although the sessions followed a comparable structure, internal and external demands may have varied among players and across sessions, influencing both enjoyment and cognitive performance through fatigue, perceived exertion, technical engagement, or attentional demands. Future studies should include the session RPE scale, heart rate monitoring, GPS tracking, accelerometry, or other indicators of exercise load. Fourth, enjoyment scores were clustered toward the upper end of the scale, resulting in restricted interindividual variability. This may have reduced the ability to detect (oppure statistical power to detect) associations with cognitive and motor outcomes. This limitation is particularly relevant to the interpretation of the correlational analyses. Finally, potentially relevant psychological and contextual variables (including anxiety, stress, sleep quality, technical skill level, perceived competence, motivational climate, biological maturity, and rater blindness) were not fully accounted for. Future studies should include comparison groups, workload monitoring, more detailed psychological measures, and longitudinal or experimental designs to clarify the relationship between soccer practice, enjoyment, and EFs.

6. Conclusions

In conclusion, this exploratory study showed preliminary pre to post changes in selected cognitive and motor variables over a 15-week observation period, but did not reveal significant associations between enjoyment and cognitive performance, although the restricted variability in enjoyment scores limits the interpretation of these correlational findings. Given the absence of a control or comparison group, these changes should not be interpreted as evidence that soccer training produced improvements in EFs. Their relationship appears complex and requires interpretive models capable of integrating cognitive, motivational, emotional, and contextual factors.

Angilletta et al., Children, 2026, doi:10.3390/children13091204. Published under CC BY 4.0: https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/.

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