

HOBBIT WEEKLY

FOR YOUTH COACHES

The week in youth football, picked for coaches



ISSUE

03

Cover story

Coaching · ジュニアサッカーカレッジ

Add the messy version

5 Oct to 11 Oct 2026

Coach Kazu on making practice look like the game

30 seconds

Change the organization, not your voice

5 phases

What young players feel after a defeat

90 seconds

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Make Practice Look Like The Game

A coach blows the whistle. The kids line up for a cross. No defender. The ball sails in. Every time.

We see it across this issue. Training that doesn't look like the match. Drills where success comes too easy. Sessions that ignore what the game actually asks.

“ **This isn't professional football.**

You can change the organization. Add a defender. Make the space smaller. Give the players a signal to press. Then check your own footage.

“ **What one thing will you change at your next session?**

The Hobbit editors

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FOR COACHES

Check your next session plan for one drill where the structure hands players success, then add the messy version: press, equal numbers, mistakes included.

COVER STORY

Coaching ・ジュニアサッカーカレッジ

01 【Youth Soccer】 Two reasons why players can do it in practice but not in matches

Hello, this is Kazu, your instructor. Things go well in practice, but when it comes to matches, players cannot do it. I think this is something that happens very often on the field.

For example, some of you may feel the following.

- We did it in practice, but in matches they cannot do it at all
- We told them, but when it comes to matches they cannot do it
- In practice the ball circulates, but in matches the build-up does not go well

I myself have felt in the past, in the same way, "we did it in practice but they cannot do it."

In this article, I will explain the causes of the gap between practice and matches from two perspectives: "representativeness" and "mismatch of assumptions," and I will also talk about how to think about incorporating things into practice when they are not going well. I think your perspective will change when you think about practice menus, so please read to the end.

1. The common on-field situation: "we practiced but they cannot do it"

They can do it in practice, but they cannot do it in matches. What kind of scenes do you have on your field?

It may be an individual play, or it may be that the build-up does not go well. We did this kind of practice, but it does not go well. This is, so to speak, a common occurrence on the field, and I was the same in the past.

2. The cause is often in the structure of the training

Even if you put together a very detailed practice menu and do it exactly as planned, there are times when it does not go well. On the other hand, you can also see it as a problem in the structure of the training itself.

In this article, I will deal with the latter. These are the causes that soccer coaches from beginners to intermediate level tend to fall into: it goes well in practice, but in matches they cannot do it. Broadly divided, I think there are two: "representativeness" and "mismatch of assumptions."

1. Representativeness means how close it is to a match

First, what is common is the problem of representativeness. The term representativeness is an expression used in the ecological approach and so on.

Simply put, it means how close to a soccer match itself the state of the practice is. If the image of practice and the image of a match are far apart, then even if they can do it in practice, they cannot do it in matches.

2. A cross with no opponent, and a cross with an opponent

For example, let us think about training for shooting from a cross. I think this is something that is also done with older junior players and junior high school students.

When practicing shooting from a cross with no opponent, and when finishing a cross in a match with an opponent. The view that the players see from their perspective is completely different. Even within the ecological approach, it is said that these two are on completely different dimensions.

With no opponent, shooting from a cross goes in. But in a match, the cross goes up, but they cannot get to the shot. That is because they are practicing in a state where there is no goalkeeper, no defender, and no pressure on the player delivering the cross.

In a match, pressure is applied, and accuracy drops. I think one major cause is that they are training in a state without reality.

If you actually want to score from a cross, then for example, like a shooting game with 5 versus 5 plus free players on both sides, you need training in a state where crosses keep coming in and there are opponents.

3. Practicing without opponents is not necessarily bad

However, doing cross practice without opponents is not a bad thing. This gets a little deep, but there are also cases where you do not necessarily want to bring out in a match exactly what you do in practice.

When I do shooting from a cross without opponents, it is when the team does not have the awareness to deliver crosses in the first place. I do it as technique training, and as awareness building. Much of shadow training is also that kind of image building.

It is not that they will score because of it, but the aim is for them to first have the image.

Drill training also involves repetition without opponents, and there is a part where it presents how to use a technique.

However, whether it is technique-based or shadow-based, training without opponents ends up being only a closed skill. If the use is to deliberately share the image now, and whether they can score is the next stage, then I think there is no problem.

4. In possession with no direction, one-twos are easier to complete

Another one is, for example, when you want to practice a combination to break down the opponent with one-twos or passing work. In a possession format like 5 versus 5 plus 1 free player, there are times when you do training with no direction.

Possession with no direction is a very hard form for the defense to defend. Because there is no direction to defend. Conversely, for the attack, they can attack either way, so one-twos and so on also become easier to complete.

But as soon as direction is set, there is an aspect where defending becomes advantageous. Combinations like one-twos and lay-offs (in Spain I think it is called *descarga*) are difficult plays precisely because there is direction. Having direction is also one aspect of representativeness, I think.

5. One-on-one with two goals, and dribbling in a match

The same thing happens in 1v1 dribbling. For example, suppose you set up two goals, one diagonally forward to the right and one diagonally forward to the left, and run a 1v1 where the player can dribble toward either one. The aim is not so much beating-your-man dribbling (regates) as developing the 1v1 technique of carrying the ball into whichever space is open.

But once it's a game, the child moves toward the goal, so they can't dribble that way. I myself used to feel that the image in games and the image in practice weren't linked. You head toward the goal, there are opponents, there's a direction.

This is soccer's typical appearance, and when that is missing, you get a situation where a player can do it in practice but can't do it in a game.

① In possession with a numerical advantage, of course the ball circulates

The second issue is the problem of mismatched assumptions. I think this often happens in build-up play.

For example, a progression-oriented possession drill of 4v4 plus 3 free players.

It's a training exercise where you carry the ball vertically from server to server and then turn back, and when the ball is won, attack and defense switch and you do the same thing. The free player in the middle enters between the lines and receives, creating a numerical advantage, so in practice you can progress the ball.

But that's only natural. Because there's a numerical advantage, the ball is circulating.

② In a game, the opponent comes with a high press

This is something I often fell into in the past. I thought the ball would circulate because it did in practice, but once it was a game, the opponent pressed high with everyone and it became almost man-to-man. There was no moment where a numerical advantage could even be created in the first place.

Especially in 8-a-side, there's no space left at all.

The goalkeeper will be free, so the center backs will be free, so we can build up. If that's what you're thinking and then pressing comes all the way to the goalkeeper, you're in trouble. This is the problem of premises and assumptions being mismatched.

③ The structure of the training is encouraging success

You can't say that because you do a 4v2 rondo, the ball will circulate in a game too. That's because in this kind of training, the structure itself encourages success.

When the structure of the training is set up in a way that draws out good play and solutions, a gap between game and practice easily arises. So what should you do? Even in possession, I think it's very important to ask whether you can ultimately do it with equal numbers.

① Start from a state where you can't create a numerical advantage

From here on, this is talk I think will be a hint for those coaching juniors. I believe it's better to practice what to do when things aren't going well.

When you want to build up, when you want to create a numerical advantage and progress the ball, the question is whether a numerical advantage can really be created. In junior 8-a-side, I think the opponent comes with a high press in most cases. At least, my region is that kind of region.

That's exactly why I think you should start from practicing how to build up in a state where the opponent presses high and you can't create a numerical advantage, where there is no passing lane and it's also narrow.

② Team building should start from finishing, not from build-up

What coaches of build-up-style teams and position-based teams often do is start training from build-up.

They start team building from the part where you connect passes well, and then once it's a game, the high press comes from the start and they get stuck. The children fall into a state where they don't even want to build up anymore.

That's exactly why I think the iron rule is to start from finishing. Starting from what doesn't go well is, I think, very important in building a team.

③ How to handle it when a mistake happens

To go one level deeper, the same applies at the level of technique. When you want to work on the first touch, what do you do when the first touch doesn't go well? With switches of play and control-oriented, too, what do you do when they don't go well?

If the control is cleanly settled, the play after that goes smoothly. But if the control bounces up, it's not, okay, we're done. It's about how you handle it when a mistake, an error, or noise occurs.

If you break things down into too many elements, like drills or shadow play, or if the structure is premised on things going well, you drift further away from the game. I think that by practicing including the times when you can't do it well, it becomes training that is closer to the game.

④ Practice that doesn't need results right now is the domain of planning

However, training doesn't go that smoothly. It's also necessary to not yet expect things to go well in games, but to build the image as a stage before that.

Doing now, toward three months from now, things that don't need immediate results. This enters the domain of planning. I think it's important to think about both the practice in front of you and the plan looking ahead.

Summary

- The reasons a player can do it in practice but not in a game are broadly two: "representativeness" and "mismatched assumptions"
- Representativeness = how close to a game the practice state is (there are opponents, there is a direction, you head toward the goal)
- Unopposed drills and shadow play are not bad. However, they become closed skills, so use them for building imagery
- Possession with a numerical advantage: the structure encourages success. In matches, the numerical advantage may not be there against the press

- If you practice from a state where things are not going well (pressing, equal numbers, when mistakes happen), it gets closer to the match
- Practice that does not need to produce results now should be considered in planning toward three months later

When you think about your practice menu, reviewing once, "How close is this to the match?" and "Are we able to anticipate what happens in the match?" will, I think, reveal the gap between practice and the match. Please try it at your own coaching sites too!

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

THIS WEEK

02

Coaching

【Youth Soccer】 When practice is not going well, change the organization right away

For coaches Before your next session, write down one fallback: what you will change about numbers, space or rules, and which drill you drop if the play still does not appear.

Hello, this is Kazu, your instructor.

When you start practice, sometimes it doesn't go as you expected. When you're coaching, I think everyone has days like that.

For example, some of you may feel the following.

- You tried the practice, but the play you were aiming for doesn't come out at all
- You try to fix it by talking to the players, but in the end you let it run for 15 minutes as is
- You want to change the menu, but you don't know how to change it on the spot

In this article, from the perspective of the "quantity" and "quality" of training, I will explain the importance of immediately changing the organization (settings such as number of players, space, rules) when the phenomenon you are aiming for doesn't appear, using the examples of tag and 1v1. At the end, I will also talk about the "second plan" for when things still don't go well, so please read to the end.

1. Quantity = amount of movement, number of plays, intensity

I believe there are broadly two important elements of training.

One is that the training proceeds without stagnation. Securing the amount of movement, securing intensity. Whether the players are moving their bodies properly and securing the number of times they touch the ball and the number of plays they make.

For example, if it's 15 minutes, are they completing one 15-minute menu in a fulfilling way. This is the relatively quantitative side.

2. Quality = whether the phenomenon you are aiming for is occurring

The other is whether the phenomenon the instructor is aiming for, the phenomenon for linking to the game, the phenomenon you want the players to learn, is occurring well. This one is qualitative.

3. If either one is missing, it's not very good

I think that if either one is lost, it's not very good.

Even if you lower quality to a minimum, if there is quantity, there are things that can be covered to some extent. But conversely, if there is quality but no quantity, I think the players won't improve very much.

Of course, reducing quantity while considering the physical aspect is important. But when that's not the case, by being too particular about detailed coaching and phenomena, you can't secure the amount of movement or number of plays. When you want to teach, want to teach, I think that kind of thing can happen.

So, my belief is that you need to satisfy both the quantitative part and the qualitative part.

1. The quality of practice is determined by the "phenomenon"

What is important in the quality aspect is the phenomenon.

When you do some kind of training, what kind of phenomenon is occurring. Good plays are one example, and errors and mistakes are another. For that phenomenon, you improve it or develop it further.

How to make this phenomenon occur is also a major theme of practice. In the coaching practicum of the license course, I think you are told to "make the phenomenon occur" and "focus on the phenomenon," but this is the same in daily training.

2. Don't try to force it out through coaching

Quite a lot of people get this wrong, but what is important is whether the phenomenon you are aiming for is occurring. Therefore, the organization basically has to be changed flexibly.

I think there are quite a lot of times when you set up the organization and start, but think, "Huh, it's not coming out the way I expected." At that time, if you don't change the organization and try to force the phenomenon out through coaching or something, it mostly doesn't go well. This is my experience.

3. It's fine to stop in 30 seconds

Rather, I think instructors have to be prepared to change the organization from the moment practice starts.

Rather than pushing through a practice that isn't going well for 15 minutes, change it immediately. At worst, stop it in about 30 seconds by saying "Stop," widen the court, add a touch restriction. By judging quickly like that, you can avoid wasting that 15-minute practice.

Even in situations like a coaching practicum done in front of people, if the phenomenon you expected isn't occurring, there is no need to leave the organization as it is.

This is also something a Spanish person told me long ago. If you try a rondo and the phenomenon you expected doesn't occur, immediately widen or narrow the court, or change the rules. In order not to waste one training session, do things flexibly.

At each moment, change your methods and change your approach. That is exactly why observation skills, analysis skills, and a large repertoire of training menus become important. Is the court narrow, or is it wide.

Is it a matter of the number of players. Is it the number of free players. You look at those things.

1. In tag, if there is a child standing still at the edge

This is an easy-to-understand example for younger age groups.

Play tag inside a grid. The player holding the bib is it, and when they tag someone, they switch being it by handing over the bib.

When you start, suppose there are one or two children standing still at the edge of the court saying "hey hey, over here" and staying in the same place for about 30 seconds. Is that ideal training? I think not.

What you are aiming for in tag should be that they run away from the tagger well, or chase immediately when someone is tagged, and move their bodies in the areas of agility and coordination. If there are children standing still at the edge waiting for the tagger, that means the phenomenon you are aiming for is not occurring.

The reason is probably that there are too few oni. If there are 10 people running away and 3 oni, only about 3 or 4 get chased. The rest get bored, and some children end up never moving at all and never getting tagged.

So we increase the number of oni. Conversely, if there are 7 oni and only 3 running away, this time the oni are the ones who stop. It comes down to how to balance the number of oni and the number of players who are not oni.

If you play for one minute and this kind of phenomenon occurs, immediately add more bibs and increase the number of oni. If you think it is happening because the court is too wide, immediately shrink the court. And vice versa.

This too is a change of organization.

② In a 1v1 on a court that is too small, there is no need to beat the opponent completely

Because tag is simple in terms of the phenomenon it produces, I think you can change things right away. But once it becomes something more tactical, more soccer-like, it can be hard to change the organization.

I once joined another coach's training session as an assistant. The theme was 1v1, specifically attacking regate (beating your man with the dribble). At that time, the court was extremely small.

When we actually did it, what happened was that because the court was small, the attacking player did not need to beat the opponent completely. A defender comes, and the attacker feints from right to left to get past him. After advancing 1 meter, 2 meters, he is already at the goal.

In an actual match, the defender would follow. But the court is too small, so you cannot judge whether the attacker actually beat him cleanly. The defender also gives up on defending because the goal is already right there.

If that happens, in training the offense wins, and it looks like they are beating their man well. But in a match, the opponent comes after them, so they cannot beat him completely. There is a possibility that the phenomenon of regate not working well will appear.

③ If the phenomenon is not appearing, you can just widen it immediately

Of course, if the only aim is to burst out to the right or left for an instant, there is no problem. But if you are asking for regate all the way to beating the opponent completely, then as organization it is a mistake. It becomes harder for changes of speed, or for the softness of the ball touch after starting to beat the man, to emerge.

That coach was calling out "Nice offense," but from my point of view, the phenomenon did not seem to be appearing. Even so, he did not change the width. If you think, "Ah, it was a bit too small," you just widen it immediately. That is all there is to it.

This can also be called a lack of preparation. If you are not prepared with "If it does not go well like this, let's change the organization like this," I think it is quite common for your hands to stop.

① The simpler the practice, the more clearly you can see the phenomenon

Tag and 1v1 are practices whose phenomena are easy to understand. When it comes to how to create entrelíneas (between the lines) in a possession game with equal numbers, it suddenly becomes much harder.

Simple does not mean bad. The simpler it is, the more clearly the phenomenon shows up in the organization. That is why I think it is important for coaches to get into the habit of grasping the phenomenon, even in everyday training.

Even in a 1v1 practice, the phenomenon that occurs changes depending on where you start and what kind of distribution you use. Where in the organization is the problem, and where should you tweak it so that the phenomenon you want appears? First try it, and change it immediately.

② If changing the organization does not work, change the menu itself

Even if you change the organization, there are times when it still does not go well. In that case, you have to boldly change the training menu itself.

If you keep forcing it while the phenomenon you want is not appearing, you may secure quantity but quality will not rise. If that is the case, changing the training menu entirely is also a very important point.

This too was said to me by a Spaniard long ago. In order to produce the phenomenon, change the organization immediately, even if it is only 30 seconds. If it still does not go well, switch to a different training menu.

③ Preparing even a second plan trains your imagination

That is exactly why, when putting together a day's training, you should plan in advance to the point of: "If this menu does not go well, let's change to this organization. If it still does not work, let's stop this menu and switch to this one."

I can now do it improvisationally in my head, but in the past I properly made a second plan, a second menu. On site, I did it with a fair amount of tension.

Even if you prepare that far, there are times when it does not go well. Even so, by preparing, you train your imagination for "If we do this kind of training, this kind of thing might happen." And you also train your ability to change things flexibly on site.

Summary

- Training satisfies both "quantity" and "quality"
- Quality = whether the phenomenon you are aiming for is appearing
- If the phenomenon does not appear, do not force it through coaching, change the organization even if it is only 30 seconds
- If it still does not work, change the training menu itself
- If you prepare even a second plan, you train your imagination and your ability to change things flexibly

If you have never done this kind of thing, please take this opportunity to try it!

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

03

Coaching

How to manage defeat in youth soccer: The 5 psychological phases

For coaches Next time your team loses, keep your own reaction short: three sentences in the dressing room, no match video that night, no long messages in the team chat, and use the first session of the week to show correctable details with concrete solutions.

The referee blows the final whistle. You lose 1-0 against the bottom team. On your bench there are faces of frustration, a kid crying in the corner and two teammates blaming each other for a bad pass. Knowing how to manage defeat in youth soccer is the line that separates a developmental coach from one who destroys his players' confidence after an unexpected setback.

When you lose a match you had marked in red, the locker room turns into a powder keg. Emotions overflow. If you respond from the gut, you multiply the problem. Today you are going to learn how to decipher the psychology of the young player after losing, what to do in each age group and how to turn a bitter Sunday into the best training session of the season.

The 5 psychological phases of the player after a defeat

A kid's mind processes a bad result with reactions very similar to the stages of grief described by Elisabeth Kübler-Ross. They do not always occur in a fixed order, nor does everyone experience them the same way, but you will see these patterns repeat often in the locker room.

If you want to lead your team with judgment, you must know how to identify which of these boxes your players are in as soon as they enter the locker room.

1. Denial

It appears in the first five minutes after the final whistle. The player accepts the score, but rejects the reality of the performance.

You will hear phrases like: "They were dead on their feet, they beat us purely by luck" or "If we play them ten times, we beat them nine." Your player tries to protect his self-esteem by denying that the opponent competed better.

2. Anger and the search for external culprits

Accumulated frustration looks for a quick outlet. The mind needs to discharge blame far from its own responsibility.

Here they point to the referee, the state of the artificial turf, the wind or the opponent's rough play. If you do not intervene, the anger shifts toward their own teammates: the fullback who missed his mark or the goalkeeper who conceded the goal.

3. Bargaining

The player begins to process what happened, but through unrealistic hypotheticals. "If the referee calls the penalty for us in the tenth minute, the match ends four to zero."

It is a dangerous phase because it distorts tactical analysis. As a coach, you cannot allow your squad to analyze the game based on phantom assumptions.

4. Discouragement or emotional slump

Reality sets in. The team realizes that the three points have flown away and that the standings are getting complicated. It is the moment of heavy silence in the locker room.

Heads down, eyes on the floor and boots being untied in slow motion. In young age groups like benjamín or alevín, this phase translates into direct tears.

5. Acceptance and rebuilding

It arrives when the player accepts the result without looking for excuses and understands which collective and individual mistakes caused the fall. Only from this step can you return to training with intensity on Tuesday.

Cognitive dissonance: why your pre-match talks ruin the response to defeat

Leon Festinger defined cognitive dissonance as the mental conflict generated when your beliefs clash head-on with the facts. If during the week you tell your infants that the opponent "is very weak" or that "we have to thrash them," you are building a deadly trap.

If the opponent parks the bus, goes 0-1 from a corner and time flies, your player's mind short-circuits. The gap between what he expected to happen and what is happening generates anxiety, haste and excessive aggression.

Treat every opponent with tactical respect during the week. Prepare your players for the worst-case scenario. If you expect a tough match, defeat will not catch you mentally unarmed.

How to manage defeat in soccer according to age group

You cannot speak the same way to an eight-year-old as to a seventeen-year-old. Maturational development completely changes how mistakes are managed.

Benjamins and Alevines (7 to 11 years old)

- Focus on effort: At these ages, defeat hurts because of the fear of disappointing the adults (parents and coaches).
- No tactical analysis after the match: Their attention span is overwhelmed by emotion.
- The sandwich rule: Normalize the situation quickly. Shower, water, something to eat and a smile. Soccer is still a game.

Infantiles and Cadetes (12 to 15 years old)

- Manage ego and social pressure: Here defeat affects them because of their image in front of others. They tend to look for culprits within the group.
- Cut off reproaches between teammates: If you detect finger-pointing in the locker room, stop it cold. We all win, we all lose.
- Apply the 24-hour rule: Save the video or the notebook. Do not analyze individual mistakes in the heat of the moment.

Juveniles (16 to 18 years old)

- Demand responsibility without destruction: They are capable of serious self-criticism.
- Data before feelings: Talk about lost duels, second balls and tactical fouls, not about a "lack of attitude".
- Involve them in the solution: Ask them what they felt on the pitch and what solutions they propose for the next training session.

The 24-hour protocol for the coach

You are also on edge. You also want to reproach the lack of intensity. Hold on. Your composure in defeat teaches your players more than a hundred tactical talks on the whiteboard.

Follow this step by step right after hearing the final whistle:

1. Minutes 0 to 10 (On the pitch): Greet the referee and the opposing coaching staff politely. Force your players to shake hands with the opponent. Politeness is never negotiable, even less so after losing.

2. Minutes 10 to 20 (In the dressing room): A short message of three sentences maximum. Acknowledge the group's pain, accept your share of responsibility as coach and call them in for Tuesday's training session. Close the door to outside noise.
3. The next 12 hours: Do not send endless messages on the team's WhatsApp group. Do not watch the recorded match again that same night. Disconnect.
4. The first training session of the week: Open the session with a five-minute talk. Show the correctable aspects with concrete training solutions, never with empty reproaches.

How to neutralize the impact of the stands after stumbling

Managing defeat does not end in the dressing room. It continues in the car on the way home, where many parents destroy in fifteen minutes the psychological work you have done in the dressing room.

Comments like "The coach got the substitutions wrong" or "That referee robbed you" feed the player's phase of anger and victimhood.

At the start of the season, make clear to the parents what role they play after matches. Ask them that on the way back they only ask: "Did you have fun?" or "What do you want to eat?" The analysis work is up to you.

3 Training Drills to Rebuild After a Defeat

On Tuesday you cannot do a punishment training session. Making the squad run without the ball because they played badly on Sunday only generates resentment and useless fatigue.

Design drills that restore confidence with the ball and solve the real problems from the previous match:

1. Passing rondo with easy finishing

Start the session with exercises where scoring is constant. The player needs to feel success again. Lift the group's morale from the first minute of practice.

2. Small-sided games with adjusted high pressure

If on Sunday the team was soft in duels, design 2v2 or 3v3 situations in reduced spaces. Demand defensive density and aggression after losing the ball within a controlled context.

3. Simulated scorelines when behind

Play a small-sided game where one team starts losing 0-1 with eight minutes left. Teach your players to maintain tactical order, patience in circulation and not to rush by hoofing balls forward like crazy when the clock is ticking.

Learn to manage defeat in youth soccer with serenity. Your job is to teach your kids to take the blow, get up quickly and use Sunday's stumble to bite into every ball in the next match.

Source: [Aprende Entrenando](#) · Translated from Spanish [aprendeentrenando.com](#)

04 Coaching U7

How to gain authority with young kids as a dad volunteer

For coaches Cap your talking at about 90 seconds, skip lines and lectures, and start each session with a scrimmage to burn off energy.

I got pressured into being a volunteer coach this year and am struggling to get the group of u7 boys to listen. I have little soccer experience so went through the training and watch plenty of YouTube videos.

The session are chaotic and kids are running all over the field. I got the help of a pro coach last week and somewhat reassuring, he struggled too. I still noticed the following:

- he didn't let anything slide but remained very calm throughout
- he tells them what to do, not what not to do. This doesn't come naturally to me, especially when they start hitting each other.
- he gets them to sit down and listen, even if it takes a good 10 minutes before they are while I would rush it to get through the chaos

I have more golden retriever energy so kinda let the kids walk all over me. I see I might not be a strong fit for a coach but how do I make the most of it this season?

What are some practical tips you can give to someone who struggles with authority.

Top replies, most upvoted first

- (+10) Honestly thats a really good start. Keep them moving. Get a parent to help.
- (+7) If you figure out how to kid a bunch of little boys to listen let me know. I've been coaching 3 years and haven't figured it out! 😊 The key is limit how much you're talking, limit how long they're standing in lines, and keep them moving and active as much as you can. As much as we want to tell them verbally, and as much as we're used to transmitting ideas to other adults that way, it just doesn't work for kids. You've got maybe 3 minutes max to talk. And realistically probably more like 90 seconds.

- (+5) My favorite coaching philosophy is no lines, no laps, no lectures. Soccer is fun. Soccer balls are fun. Being around your friends is fun. Listening to a coach is not fun. Every kid should have a ball, or be engaged in a fast paced, clear cut game of some kind as much as possible for the entire duration of the practice. Make it your goal to absolutely wear them out. Bring a speaker and play music, keep the energy high Let them arrive and mess around and play World Cup or take shots at the goal (or coach!) or do some kind of scrimmaging, and when you get critical mass or it's 6 minutes past the...
- (+4) Our club espouses the play-practice-play model. As they arrive, throw them into a scrimmage. That gets out some of the energy. Then work on a specific thing or two in the practice session, then go back to scrimmage. Though at the end of the day, U7 boys gonna U7 boys.
- (+3) As a mom helping coach u8 I struggle with this too. I have some dads help but we have a big group of boys who practice together (10-13 boys)and split up two teams worth of games. I have no advice, just sympathy! I had my husband do practice last night and his only comment afterwards was "they don't listen".
- (+3) Consistency. Kids respond well to what they see often. "1,2,3....eyes on me", the kids will finish this for you if they know it. They'll finish it regardless after a few weeks. Find your own style too. Don't copy the pro coach fully. Keep instructions simples. I often ask the kids why we're doing this exact drill, why it's important etc.
- (+2) I think it's also important to understand that they're 6 years old. Six. One of the hardest lessons I learned when coaching youth was that you can't do the same things you would with a bunch of U18 Academy kids and expect the same results with, for example, a group of u7 boys. For me, I found leaning more into my "golden retriever" worked A LOT better with kids. I think with kids that young, framing practice in a way of "we're all having fun together" vs a "session" is a good start. Be goofy, teach them the game, let them be goofy and chaotic. Obviously, I'm assuming this a is a rec league...
- (+2) I coach u7s too. I spend very little time doing things where the kids need to sit and listen. We're jumping straight into activities where I'm periodically stopping play to show them different things. Most of what I do is doing and showing.
- (+2) Putting hands on each other like that gets one warning from me and then they're off to the side sitting down for a few minutes. They're U7, they just sat in school all day they're going to be insane. It's just how it is. Put a couple pop up goals up and let them play 3v3 or whatever for 10 mins so they can hopefully wear themselves out a bit. You don't need to coach it. Name a couple captains who are there first and let them go at it. With that age you need to bring twice the energy they have to practice. The crazier you are the more fun they'll have and they'll start listening more. You can...

- (+1) Here is something that a high level coach taught me to put things into perspective. on a timeline of life kids are at the start of that line. They still have all this issues adults have but with less experience on how to deal with them. 1 NO LINES. Young kids don't do well when they have to wait in a line for their turn. Keep things active. 2 Learn something about each kid. What they like, what they don't like, what's going on in their lives. Ask them about that. 3 Get 1 or 2 parents to help. Depending on how many kids you have, you want a ratio of 5 kids to 1 coach. This allows for station...
- (+1) So...I'm a touch confused...what advice are you looking for? It seems more like you're interested in how to manage a group of kids than anything soccer related...this is called classroom management and what "works" is different by age... If you're looking for soccer specific things to manage the session... I'd say you just need to take sessions from other ppl that have already done it. I think you're asking about authority and what you mean is engagement. There's a saying "they don't care what you know until they know you care" and for kids that's really important. If you have this golden...
- (+1) At U7, the focus should be on having fun. They'll listen if you're doing something fun. The other dude might have had them sitting quietly, but that doesn't mean they heard anything. Keep your golden retriever energy. Do less sitting around and make things more simple than you think is necessary.

Source: [r/SoccerCoachResources](#) · 40 comments · [reddit.com](#)

05

Coaching

U6 to U18

A practical guide to managing minutes in youth soccer: rotations, methods and peace in the locker room

For coaches Write your rotation on paper before the match and keep the same plan whatever the score, so parents see a transparent rule instead of a reaction to the result.

On Friday night you do not usually dwell on the short corner or on the pressure after the opponent loses the ball. What keeps you awake is managing minutes in youth soccer. You think about how you are going to explain to a boy's father why his son only played a quarter, or how you are going to look in the face a ten-year-old kid who spent almost the whole match shivering on the bench. Distributing playing time is the true weekly exam of a coach. If you do not use a transparent and planned system, intuition will betray you, the locker room will end up divided and the families will fill the messaging groups with reproaches.

In this article I am going to show you how to design a rotation model that works on the field, respects your players' development and saves you unnecessary arguments every weekend.

Why playing time conditions everything in development soccer

A kid who does not play, does not learn. It is that simple. No matter how good your weekly planning is, competition is the laboratory where the player tests decision-making under real pressure. Depriving a child of minutes is equivalent to abruptly halting his motor and cognitive progression.

In addition to the individual impact, the perception of injustice destroys group cohesion. When the squad detects that substitutions respond to the result or to friendships, trust in the coaching staff breaks down. Cliques appear, reproaches between teammates and a lack of commitment in training sessions.

Initiation stage (Prebenjamín to Alevín): Equal distribution without excuses

In 7-a-side soccer and 8-a-side soccer, winning is not a methodological objective; it is a consequence of learning. In the categories ranging from Prebenjamín to Alevín, the distribution of time must be mathematically equal.

The myth of the «minute earned in training»

It is common to hear coaches argue that minutes are earned during the week. In children from 6 to 11 years old, this approach is mistaken. The level of attention, emotional maturity and family environment vary enormously at these ages. An inattentive child does not need the punishment of the bench; he needs a training context that engages him and minutes on the field to consolidate his self-esteem.

The system of the 4 quarters in 7-a-side soccer

If you play matches divided into four periods, the calculation is very simple. For a usual squad of 12 players named for a match:

- Everyone plays a minimum of 2 complete quarters (50% of the match guaranteed).
- No one plays the 4 complete quarters except in case of injury or absence of substitutes in a specific position such as goalkeeper.
- Goalkeeper rotation: In initiation categories (Prebenjamín and Benjamín), goalkeepers must alternate minutes on the field to develop their overall motor competence.

Plan the substitutions before leaving home. Carry the sheet printed in the coaching staff's folder. If you modify the plan in the heat of the moment according to the score, you will make mistakes and end up harming the same kids as always.

Performance and development stage (Infantil to Juvenil): Competition with justice

From the move to 11-a-side soccer in the Infantil category, the reality of the game changes. The tactical component becomes more complex and roles within the team begin to be defined. However, competing does not mean abandoning development.

The guaranteed minimum percentage

In Infantil and Cadete, the objective is no longer to distribute exactly 50% every Saturday, but to ensure a guaranteed minimum percentage of playing time throughout the season.

Set a clear threshold: no named player should play less than 30% of the total time of a match, except for a prior disciplinary sanction. «Garbage minutes», sending a player on in the 88th minute with the match already decided, undermine the athlete's dignity. Give your substitute a continuous block of at least 20 or 25 minutes so that he can get into the rhythm of the game.

Managing call-ups in large 11-a-side squads

If you have a squad of 18 to 22 footballers, the problem is not only rotation during the match, but the call-up. Forcing the presence of all the players in every matchday squad means that 6 or 7 kids barely warm up.

- Rotating call-ups: Leave 3 or 4 players off the list each weekend in an organized way.
- Call-up criteria: Whoever is left out one matchday must know in advance that the next one he will be a starter or will have a large volume of minutes.
- Cumulative record: Keep track of the overall minutes played in the month, do not focus only on an isolated match.

Practical systems for organizing squad rotation

To avoid improvisation, it is advisable to use a visual control method. You can use traditional spreadsheets or specific mobile apps for tactical management.

Category | Distribution Criteria | Minimum Minutes per Match | Squad Management

U9 / U10 | 100% Equitable | 2 full quarters (50%) | Everyone available plays

U11 / U12 | Equitable with tactical nuance | 2 full quarters (50%) | Rotation if there is an excess of players

U13 / U14 | Formative-Competitive | 30% - 40% of total time | Squads of 16 players

U15 / U16 / U17 / U18 / U19 | Collective performance | Minimum block of 20 min | Squad selection based on performance and attendance

Managing expectations with families

The vast majority of conflicts over minutes management in youth soccer arise from a lack of initial communication. If parents do not know your criteria, they will draw their own conclusions, almost always wrong.

The preseason meeting

Before playing the first friendly match, call the parents together. Explain your working model without beating around the bush:

- Show the club's philosophy and yours as a coach regarding time distribution.
- Detail how absences from training for academic or personal reasons will be managed.
- Clarify that the starting lineup and substitutions are the exclusive responsibility of the coaching staff.

The 24-hour rule

Establish a strict protocol for addressing parents' questions about playing time:

Never talk to a family member right after a match. Emotions are running high and objectivity is nowhere to be found. If a parent wants to ask for explanations about their child's minutes, they must request a private appointment through the club's official channel at least 24 hours after the final whistle. That margin of time cools emotions and allows the real participation data to be analyzed.

Discipline and absences: When it is correct to reduce minutes

The pedagogical criteria must be coherent. If a player does not attend training sessions without prior justification, their playing time will be affected, regardless of their individual talent.

However, you must differentiate the cause of the absence:

- At the initiation stage (U9 to U12): Absences are usually the responsibility of the parents (work shifts, travel). Do not punish the child by taking away minutes because of the adults' logistics. Talk to the family in private.
- At advanced stages (U13 to U19): The player must take responsibility for their punctuality and attendance. If a boy misses 2 of the 3 weekly training sessions without a force majeure reason, he should not start that matchday. The rule must apply equally to the top scorer and the usual substitute. If you make exceptions for the decisive player, you will lose your moral authority in front of the group.

Planning, data and coherence

Keeping track of playing time demands extra work off the field, but it guarantees social peace inside the locker room. Use a notebook, an Excel file or a specialized app, but record the data every matchday. When you have objective statistics on the minutes played by each footballer, subjective opinions fade away.

Remember that your impact as a developer will not be measured by the trophy you won in the U10 category, but by the number of players who continue to play this sport when they reach adulthood. And for a boy to keep loving soccer, he needs to feel that the bench is only a temporary stop, never his permanent habitat.

Source: [Aprende Entrenando](#) · Translated from Spanish · [aprendeentrenando.com](#)

FROM THE COACHING COMMUNITY

06

Coaching

U7

Coaching U7 girls team is the worst sports experience of my life

For coaches Tell parents they must stay for the session, then make practice high energy, playful and full of positive reinforcement.

Half don't want to play, at practice 3 out of 8 of them just get dropped off and left by their parents. We got beat by at least 10 goals today, demoralized, and the mom that was supposed to bring snacks didn't, so the girls felt terrible and blamed me. I feel bad for the girls on the team that want to learn but can't because the others are walking problems and dragging everyone else down. Their parents are not present and there's no team morale because I'm treated as their babysitter. We have 3 games left, should i just focus on teaching/playing the ones that actually want to learn and ignore the rest? Because i kinda want to.

Top replies, most upvoted first

- (+13) We tell the parents that they have to be there for bathroom breaks. That's an immediate fix. Your session plan is good and age appropriate, so I think part of it may be resetting your own expectations. At this age, your job is to teach the girls to love football (or to help they find out if they can) more than it is to teach them how to play it. That means high energy and relentless positive reinforcement. Being silly with the group helps. Joining in gives them a positive role model and letting the sharks steal the coaches ball (or whatever) might help too. You can also try a bit of...
- (+10) You need to set expectations with parents, both for their level of involvement and their kids' level of engagement. I've coached that age group multiple times, and drop off simply isn't ok at that age. Kids routinely need mom or dad to sort them out (which is normal and fine at age freaking 6!) and you cannot do that and run a practice. This season might be a wash but next one, if you do it, start with clear expectations and requirements for parents.
- (+5) I would send an email/text that a parent must be there to help their child at that age. You shouldn't be treated like a babysitter. Start there, then make the rest fun! Unfortunately, you haven't weeded out the kids that just don't want to play yet. Thank you for stepping up. It's a hard age.

- (+5) It's a cliché, but all you can do is try to have fun. Let the ones that want to pick flowers pick flowers, focus more on the ones who want to learn. It's likely parenting, you don't really teach with your words, you just model with your behavior.
- (+5) Focus on the fundamentals
- (+3) First off, I feel like you're taking your job too seriously (which is a positive reflection your character). At this age, you really can't push or develop players the way you think you can. You only have one practice per week right? That's nowhere near enough to build skills. That is enough to give them an hour to have fun, and more importantly, to work on *your own* ability to interact *positively* with all kinds of kids, especially the ones that frustrate the living hell out of you. Treat this as your own character building experience. You have the opportunity to be a positive presence in...
- (+2) At this age girls just wanna have fun :) There were over the limit like I forget maybe 13-14 girls in my daughters K rec team. Out of that group there are only 2 incl my daughter now u15 in GA/RL. There's another 1-2 who play travel low lower level but my point is the ones who are interested are going to be very very few indeed. My daughter joined to play, she fell for soccer immediately, not to socialize but pretty much everyone else did for the latter. You gotta sorta manage your expectations. As a side hustle she also refs and she's always saying the u9 girls just totally suck and it's so...
- (+2) At six they can either focus or not. I let young kids wander if they need space.
- (+2) He means just focus on the basics
- (+1) There is a difference between rec soccer and competitive soccer. If the goal is simply to give parents a place to send their kids so they can say they are playing organized soccer, then you have to work with what you have and adjust your expectations. As a coach, you have to ask yourself what you really want. Are you just there to run practices and keep the kids occupied, or do you want to develop players and change their attitudes toward the game? The second option is much harder because you cannot force kids to have passion, discipline, or the desire to improve. Another option is to find a...
- (+1) So I'd say your coaching style has to change. Maybe ask a parent to volunteer to assist if you need help. My son has done two different soccer programs. Lil kickers with a professional highly engaging and motivating coach and an u7 rec team which we went to 3 practices before quitting and going back to lil kickers. The style of the practice was completely different. U7 was terrible and lil kickers is so much fun and my kid gives it his best. At lil kickers each kid is constantly with the ball, everything is gamified, no waiting in lines, no waiting for the ball, the coach is very animated. At...

- (+1) This is how I would handle it. - I would send out communication to the parents and walk them through things. Set guidelines and parameters and most importantly, expectations from both parent and player side. - My U6 team is very similar. I have 4 kids that show up wanting to do anything and everything to get better. 3 are hit and miss and 3 are so challenging to manage. I run my drills as expected and if the kids want to be kids and do their own thing, let them. I always give multiple warnings but I cant slow down practice for kids actively disengaged. As long as they are being safe and...

Source: [r/SoccerCoachResources](#) · 52 comments · [reddit.com](#)

07

Coaching

U12

What do I do about a bad goalie?

For coaches Blame the team, not a 12 year old. Rotate the keeper into the field, and coach positioning and decisions during scrimmages while standing beside him.

U12 club team and this goalie just can't stop a ball. All of our losses fall on his shoulders because he just didn't have any strength to stop a shot or it fell out of his hands. The defense does their best to get the shooter in a position that best helps the goalie.

If a ball is Eve slightly above his head, not full extension of his arms, the ball is in. If it is outside of his side step, the ball is in.

I am not a goalie coach but I keep watching videos trying to help but I cannot spend an entire practice on training just him. I just don't know how I can constructively talk to him to get him better. A large majority of the goals scored against him at his lack of effort or strength.

What can I do?

Top replies, most upvoted first

- (+57) "All of our losses fall on his shoulders." This is not true even with the worst goalie in the world.
- (+23) That statement about "All of our losses..." is saying a lot more than you probably think it is.
- (+15) Put him in offense and get a different player in goal. At least half the game. Maybe he's better at something else. I make my U14 switch positions because I think they are too young to be stuck in one slot because they played that spot in 4th grade.
- (+15) Honestly? Quit and hand over the team to someone who doesn't whine and blame 11 year olds.

- (+13) What can you do to avoid these losses? Have your field players score more and not lose the ball. You're making a better keeper. Give it time and appreciate the kid that sits between the posts. My kid let in 5 goals and they lost 1-5 last year. Parents bitched about how the keeper sucked. They ignored my kid had over 30 saves in the game. A friend of theirs is a keeper who won their game 5-4 but only had like 10 shots on goal...who's the better keeper? Keepers are never measured solely on their goals allowed.
- (+11) I actually believe you when you say you have a goalie problem. But I don't believe that is your team's only problem. In fact I wouldn't be surprised if it wasn't even your team's biggest problem. I think your inability to understand what this comment thread is trying to tell you says a lot. Even on the surface level you could concede on poor phrasing. Admit you worded it wrong and move on. Instead... And what's more important is the way you actually think. It will come out in ways you might not suspect. Your team can pick up on this stuff. 12YOs are surprisingly perceptive. If that happens, the...
- (+11) Lord. Even my U11 girls know "We win together, we lose together". It never ever rests on one person. How many times has your striker taken a shot and missed? How many times have your midfielders failed to win the ball? How many times have your defense stabbed at a ball and missed, allowing the attacker to get past? The goalie missing the ball is something everyone notices, but there were a lot of "misses" by the entire team to get to that point.
- (+6) 100% It had to get through 10 other players to get to the keeper. This is just common coach knowledge
- (+6) Yep. We could also start with whomever selected him at tryouts, said he was qualified to play goal, keeps putting him there, the offense, defense, and so on. To say it's this kid's fault is somewhere between lazy and ignorant.
- (+6) I had a kid like that and discovered that what they lacked was an understanding of what their position should do based on what was happening in the game. So we scripted when the keeper should come out of the goal, when they should back up when they should shift, when they should charge an attacker. Once those cues were there, this keeper played better and actually made saves. I think at 12 you might still have kids who really don't understand the game. It might not be that he is lacking Drive, but it's just lacking an understanding of what he should be doing in or out of the goal depending...
- (+5) This was my thought. Why aren't you changing him out then and getting him in the field? With a coach who is saying the losses are entirely the goalies fault, I imagine this kid is demoralized.
- (+5) I should add that I had an assistant coach that would help me run the scrimmage and I literally stood by this keeper during the scrimmage and talk through what they should be seeing what they should be doing as it was happening, shifted together, etc. etc. I think that really unlocked some of the decision-making latency that myself and other others could easily misinterpret as no drive or skill

Source: [r/SoccerCoachResources](#) · 57 comments · [reddit.com](#)

08

Coaching

U12

U12 struggling with coaching tactics

For coaches Use their favourite scrimmage and add one rule at a time: width for a goal, everyone past halfway to score, or a pass-and-move condition.

I've got an awesome group of u12 girls I coach. They are strong, fast and have more endurance than just about every other team we play. They generally have good attitudes, save some grumpiness here and there. They are pretty lackadaisical in practice and I struggle to get them moving, but on game day, they spark

We've played teams that have higher skill level, but we win because of speed, endurance and aggression. And we have decent skills.

I am having a hard time finding fun, engaging tactical practices. I realize it's on me and my fellow coaches to get them moving in practices. So just looking for some drills that will help us with field spacing, pass and move, positioning.

Thanks !

Top replies, most upvoted first

- (+9) Fairly strong of the opinion that most kids just need to play 1v1 2v1 3v2 It's easy to use those formats to recreate different in game scenarios. Put them into two teams, keep score, make it competitive.
- (+7) Make training as game focussed as possible, no cones, no gates, just intense small burst matches with different variations: uneven teams, 5 pass minimum before a shot, two touches only etc. this can be done as a whole squad or broken down into smaller groups. Forwards vs Backs is always fun
- (+2) This sounds fairly similar to my group at that age. Two things. Low practice effort - if they have a poor practice week and in turn have a poor game - jump on that and use it. Only briefly mention at the end of the game (so they hear it but don't linger on the negativity of it) and then at your next practice hit on the point harder. This may help deliver the message that practice and effort at such matter. Also, deliver the message that as they get older and play better teams, that they will be just as fast, just as aggressive, etc. So if they don't develop their skills, they won't have the...

- (+2) I think something that you may be struggling with in your practise is that it's potentially to stop start. The issue with tactically sessions, especially for young players, is that they struggle to engage as it's to "thinking" heavy over doing. Now that's an assumption so I could be wrong. The key with 'tactics' at this age is to make it as basic as possible. What is your shape, what is your role and where you are in that shape, how do you create space in that shape and how do you deny it in that shape. You don't need crazy detailed sessions about the striker does this, wingers do this,...
- (+2) Sounds like the girls groups I had when they were at that age. We always built in small sided games like 3v3 so nobody can hide and put in low effort. They all loved power and finesse, so we made variations on that to focus on certain skills like striking the ball certain ways, more time less time, more space less space, kick it over the bar kick it hard on the ground, and so on. My favorites were somewhat random group challenges we did after warmup or at the end of practice. Some you could classify as plain team building with a soccer theme, but others made them use their heads and their...
- (+2) interesting, we have 2 kids that are great 1-1, look like a million dollars-come game time they constantly try to keep the ball themselves doing their footwork that works 1-1 and they lose the ball everytime
- (+2) I have trouble with all them crowding together in scrimmage so I use cones for 75% to force them to stay spaced run to open lanes, etc
- (+1) Here I do 90 min training for u12 boys. Let them kick around some, so they have some fun and talk. Then start with cardio, not same things, try different variations. Let them race, time their laps, do duos etc. Then passing, dribbling variations, or in game style like monkey in the middle, foot volleyball, and scrimmage with coaches playing too. But you gotta see needed practices, that's the key I think. When I watch their game, I see some mistakes and a practice idea pops up im my mind. This requires some creativity, watching shorts, insight, knowledge to combine. I never replicate shorts,...
- (+1) Rondos, numbers game, conditional scrimmages, 1/2 v 1/2 are my go tos.
- (+1) From your replies, tactical means three things here. Staying spread out, moving after a pass and getting up the field together. Each one can be a single rule added to the scrimmage they already like, so nobody stands in a line. For spacing, a goal stands only when your team has somebody out near each sideline as the shot is taken. They workout fast that two players have to hold the width. For moving up together, a goal stands only when every outfield player on the scoring team is past halfway. That one cures defenders who watch from the back. For pass and move, once you pass you can't have...
- (+1) What do you mean when you say tactical?

- (+1) I also coach 12u boys/girls mixer. I keep my practice 45-60 minutes long depending on how the practice is going. We do things like dribbling between 4-5 cones ending with a goal shot, place same 4-5 cones in a u-shape and have some start on 1 side and others on the other side going at the same time to get comfortable in traffic; set 2 rows of 4 cones about 10 yards or whatever apart going down the middle of the field-i am defense in the middle, I have to stay in between 2 rows of cones, partners are each side of cones and have to play keep away from me and make it down the whole field. main...

Source: [r/SoccerCoachResources](#) · 20 comments · [reddit.com](#)

ON THE PITCH

09**Coaching**

Youth soccer as an educational tool: A practical guide to transforming your real impact on the bench

For coaches Review your next session plan for one guided question that lets players find the solution instead of you calling it from the touchline.

You have been sold the idea that your job as a coach is to win your district league or get your U13s into the top division. You have been deceived. When you focus your energy solely on the scoreboard, you destroy the value of your work and give away the opportunity to use youth soccer as an educational tool to transform the lives of those kids. If your only legacy at the end of the season is a ten-euro plastic trophy and three children who quit the sport burned out from not playing, you have failed as a youth developer. Look at yourself in the mirror on a Tuesday at seven in the evening in the rain: there are no spotlights or television there. There is only you, your whistle and fifteen players waiting for you to teach them something useful for the field and for their lives.

The paradox of results: Are you developing footballers or accumulating junk?

I have spent more than fifteen years stepping in mud on dirt and artificial turf fields. I have seen U9 coaches screaming like maniacs on the sideline, stalling for time or demanding that an eight-year-old hoof the ball upfield to avoid risk. That is not coaching. That is using children to soothe your own adult frustrations.

Understanding your role as a youth developer requires changing your mindset at the root. Winning a match on Sunday is a consequence of work well done, never the primary objective. When you prioritize immediate victory over the learning process, these three everyday atrocities occur:

- The permanent bench syndrome: You leave the kid who needs the most minutes to develop without playing just because he makes technical mistakes.
- Rigid early specialization: You condemn a U11 to play right back for his entire formative stage because he is tall, depriving him of understanding the game from other positions.
- The shortcut culture: You reward cunning, cheating or covert insults if that earns you a foul in the eightieth minute.

From the academic model to the mud: Pedagogical methodologies in your training

University theory speaks of multiple teaching models, but you need to know how to apply that pedagogy when you have twenty U15s dying to touch the ball.

Analytical model vs. global model in initiation stages

The traditional analytical model divides the game into isolated repetitions: a line of kids, a pass, a cone and a shot. It generates automatisms, but it shuts down the player's mind. If you truly want your players to learn to think and understand the game, you must prioritize the global or integrated model.

Kids learn to make decisions when the environment is uncertain. A 3v2 plus a neutral player exercise in a small space generates more neural connections and more emotional learning than ten lines of static passes. Mistakes must be welcomed as the only path to autonomy.

The Tactical Games Approach

In U13 and U15 categories, the game must ask questions, not give pre-chewed answers. Instead of shouting from the sideline "pass it to the left!", use guided discovery during the breaks in the session.

Ask your team direct questions:

- "Where was the free space when your teammate pinned the center back?"
- "Why have we lost possession three times in a row playing out from the back?"
- "What solution do you propose to beat their high press?"

When the player discovers the solution for himself, he takes ownership of the game. That builds judgment, critical thinking and maturity.

Three extreme situations where you prove whether you are a youth developer or just a lineup filler

The true test of a coach is not on the tactics board. It appears in moments of tension where your values come into direct conflict with the result.

1. The star player breaks the locker room rules

It is Friday. Tomorrow you play against the leader of the youth category. Your top scorer arrives late to training for the third time this week without justification, or he disrespects the team delegate. What do you do?

If you start him because "you are playing for the league," you are destroying your moral authority. You are teaching the other seventeen footballers that individual talent excuses uncivil behavior. If you sit him in the stands, you will truly be educating. You may lose the match, but you will have won your group's respect forever.

2. Managing mistakes in your U11's build-up play

Minute 25 of the second half. One-one tie. You have asked your U11s to take risks and play through the middle from the back. Your central midfielder attempts a through ball, the opponent intercepts it and they score the winning goal against you.

Your reaction in that exact second defines your philosophy. If you put your hands on your head, sigh or complain to the bench, the child will be destroyed inside. If you applaud the intention, correct the technical gesture or the body orientation calmly and ask him to call for the ball again on the next play, you will be shaping a person who is resistant to frustration.

3. Unfavorable refereeing in youth soccer

The referee awards a nonexistent penalty against your youth team. The opposing bench celebrates it and your players rush at the referee full of rage. Your attitude here is critical.

If you protest, confront the referee or justify a defeat because of the refereeing, you are shaping future victimist players. Your duty is to calm the group, demand that they focus on what depends exclusively on them and show absolute respect toward the referee.

The 4 methodological pillars for structuring your season

To educate from the bench, good intentions are not enough; you need a rigorous and planned work structure.

Pillar | Methodological Objective | Human and Social Impact

1. Co-creation of rules | Design the locker room's internal code together with the players at the start of the year. | Encourages individual responsibility and collective commitment without impositions.
2. Rotation of roles | Vary captaincies, positions and equipment tasks among all members. | Develops empathy, eliminates harmful hierarchies and teaches players to value every role.
3. Formative feedback | Replace destructive shouting with specific corrections based on effort. | Builds solid self-esteem and reduces anxiety levels in competition.

4. Third sporting half | Greet the opponent and share a common space at the end of matches.
| Humanizes the opponent, banishes the idea of the rival as an enemy and consolidates fair play.

How to manage families without turning the stands into a war

You cannot educate your players if you ignore the environment around them at home. Fathers and mothers are not your enemies, they are indispensable agents in the formative process. The problem arises when they lack clear methodological guidelines.

Hold an in-person meeting before the first preseason training session. Do not talk about tactical systems or minutes. Establish the non-negotiable limits for the stands:

1. No remote-controlling the children: Shouting "pass!", "shoot!" or "run!" from the stands creates serious cognitive interference. The child does not know whether to listen to his father, his coach or his own instinct.
2. Absolute respect for the opposing locker room and the referee: Any insult or violent behavior from the stands will mean the immediate withdrawal of the team from the field or the substitution of your child.
3. The car ride back home: That return trip is not a press conference or a value judgment about the coach's approach. It should be a safe space where the child speaks if he wants to, or enjoys silence without pressure.

Measure your real success: The coach's checklist

Forget the federation standings for a moment. If you want to know whether you are truly doing formative work of substance, ask yourself these questions when closing the facility every Sunday:

- Have all the called-up children played a significant amount of time for their development?
- Have my players made their own decisions on the field without looking fearfully toward my bench?
- Have we sincerely congratulated the opponent after the victory or the defeat?
- Have I kept calm and emotional control throughout the match?
- Do the kids go home with more desire to train next Tuesday than they had today?

If you answer yes to these questions, you are winning the only match that matters. Tactics pass, age groups change and trophies fill with dust in the corridors of clubs. The only thing that endures in the memory of a fourteen-year-old kid is how you made him feel and the values of effort, overcoming and companionship that you burned into him on the training field.

Source: [Aprende Entrenando](http://aprendeentrenando.com) · Translated from Spanish aprendeentrenando.com

10

Coaching

Parent and Coach in Youth Soccer: A Guide to Supporting Your Child Without Pressure

For coaches Try the 15 minute rule after training: once it is over, you are only their parent, and let them lead whether football gets discussed at all.

Taking on the dual responsibility of being a parent and a coach in youth soccer requires a practical guide so as not to destroy your child's enthusiasm or burn out the relationship at home. Demanding twice as much from him as from the rest, turning the car ride into a video session or justifying every minute he plays in front of the stands only manages to distance you from the kid. If you sit on the bench and your child is in the squad, you need to set emotional and sporting boundaries from the first day of preseason.

The invisible mistake: projecting your expectations onto the kid

The main problem when coaching your child is not choosing whether he plays as a winger or a central midfielder. It is emotional. Unconsciously, many coaches project onto their children their own unfulfilled desires, their fears of failure or the need to prove to the club that the child is not there out of favoritism.

This dynamic generates crushing pressure. The child stops playing to have fun or learn; he starts competing so as not to disappoint you. When a player feels that your approval at home depends on his performance on the field, soccer turns into a bitter obligation.

If you notice your child stiff on the grass, afraid to take the initiative or making absurd excuses not to train, stop. Analyze what messages you are sending him in the warm-ups, on the bench and in the locker room.

The 15-minute rule: set boundaries between the field and home

To survive this situation without eroding the family relationship, you must build an invisible wall between the field of play and your home. You cannot be the coach 24 hours a day.

Apply the 15-minute rule when the match or the training session ends:

- Minute 0 to 15: You have fifteen minutes after leaving the locker room to talk about the match, analyze plays or correct mistakes. Only do it if the child brings up the subject voluntarily. If he prefers to talk about something else, respect it.
- From minute 15 onward: The tactics notebook is closed. You go back to being only his father.

The car ride back home cannot become a summary court-martial. If you turn Sunday lunch into a detailed analysis of his mistakes in the first half, you are going to burn him out mentally.

The "anti-favoritism" bias: the trap of punishing your child

Many coaches, out of panic that the stands or the other parents will accuse them of favoritism, fall into the opposite extreme: they unfairly penalize their own child. They yell at him louder, substitute him first or leave him on the bench when he deserves to play.

That is just as destructive as gifting him a starting spot. Your child is not to blame for you being the coach. He must receive exactly the same treatment, the same minutes by merit or rotation and the same corrections as any other teammate in the squad.

Apply objective evaluation criteria for the whole group:

- Attendance and commitment in training.
- Effort and attitude on the field.
- Respect for teammates and the coaching staff.

If you base your decisions on transparent rules communicated at the start of the season, you will not have to over-demand your child to silence the murmurs from the stands.

Managing the stands and the team environment

The relationship with the other families usually becomes tense when the coach's child plays in a coveted position or takes the set pieces. Transparency is your best shield.

At the start-of-season meeting, address the issue head-on in front of all the parents. Explain your working philosophy, how you are going to manage rotations and make it clear that your child will be evaluated by the same standard as the others.

If a parent comes up to ask you for explanations about his child's minutes, keep the conversation in the purely sporting sphere and never use your child as a point of comparison. Avoid phrases like "my child trains more" or "look how my child runs." Talk about objective data and the individual performance of the player in question.

Adapting the role according to the age group

The level of demand and the player's autonomy must evolve as he gets older. You cannot manage the situation the same way in 7-a-side soccer as in 11-a-side soccer.

U9 and U11 (7-a-side soccer)

At these ages, the focus is 100% recreational and developmental. Your only goal as a father and coach is for your child to love the sport and learn the basic concepts. Ensure that he plays in different positions and do not burden him with complex tactical concepts at home. Let him play freely.

U13 (Move to 11-a-side soccer)

The change of field, offside and the first peaks of competitiveness arrive. Here the child begins to seek the approval of his peers above that of his parents. Give him space in the locker room. Allow his teammates to interact with him without feeling that the coach is watching every conversation.

U15 and U17

The tactical and physical demands skyrocket. If you continue coaching your child at these stages, the relationship must be absolutely professional within the sports facility. On the field he is one more athlete competing for a spot; at home he is your child. If you cannot separate both roles at these ages, the healthiest thing for his progression is for him to change teams or for you to step aside.

Warning signs: when you should step aside

Sometimes, despite good intentions, the formula does not work. You must be mature enough to detect when your presence on the bench is harming the boy's development.

Watch for these indicators:

- The child is irritable or sad on training days.
- He looks for physical excuses (headaches, dubious discomfort) before matches.
- He does not relate naturally with his teammates in the locker room for fear of breaking the distance with the coach.
- Discussions about soccer continue at home hours after the session has ended.

If you detect two or more of these signs, sit down with him alone. Ask him honestly whether he prefers you to leave the role or whether he prefers to change groups. His emotional well-being and your affective relationship are infinitely above any victory or youth soccer title.

Survival decalogue for the parent-coach

Keep these ten points and review them before starting each week of work:

1. On the field you are the coach; in the car you are his father.
2. Do not correct your child with a louder tone of voice than the rest.
3. Never use dinner to do a tactical analysis of the match.
4. If your child misses a goal or commits a penalty, give him the same support you would give any teammate.
5. Do not use your position to give him undue advantages, but do not punish him either to appear impartial.
6. Allow him to resolve his own conflicts with teammates without intervening as a father.
7. If the stands criticize your child, filter the comments and do not take them to the bench.

8. Encourage your child to make his own decisions on the field, even if he makes mistakes.
9. Celebrate his personal progress, not only the scoreboard results.
10. Remember that his time in youth soccer will end, but your role as a father is for life.

Source: [Aprende Entrenando](#) · Translated from Spanish [aprendeentrenando.com](#)

11

Coaching

U6 to U18

How to plan youth soccer training sessions: a practical guide for coaches

For coaches Next session, run your main block as two or three linked tasks from small to full game instead of separate drills, so the day's objective carries through to the final match.

I have been on the field for more than fifteen years and I still see the same scene every week: coaches who arrive at the municipal field five minutes early, throw three cones on the grass and decide on the fly what they are going to do. Or worse still, coaches who copy a complex drill from social media to use it with eight-year-old children. If you want your kids to truly progress and bring order to your sessions, you need to learn how to plan youth soccer training sessions with judgment, structure and adaptation to each developmental stage. In formative soccer, individual and collective development must always come before the Sunday result.

Planning is not filling a notebook with flashy drawings or restricting the player's freedom. Planning is drawing up a logical roadmap so that every minute on the grass responds to a real learning objective. I am going to show you step by step how to design your programming so that your sessions are dynamic, intense and truly formative.

The developmental stage: the mandatory starting point

A seven-year-old child does not process information the same way as a fourteen-year-old. Treating the little ones as miniature adults is the most recurring mistake on formative soccer fields. Before drawing the first drill, you must adjust the content to the developmental moment of your squad.

1. Initiation Stage (Prebenjamín and Benjamín: 6 to 9 years old)

The ball is the center of the universe. In this phase, the absolute focus must be the individual relationship with the ball, motor coordination and discovery of the game through game-based forms in reduced spaces (1v1, 2v2).

- Priority: Ball mastery, dribbling, feints and basic decision-making.
- Methodology: Modified games and drills with many touches per minute.
- Avoid: Complex tactical explanations and rigid fixed positions.

2. Development Stage (Alevín and Infantil: 10 to 13 years old)

It is the golden age of motor learning. Players begin to understand space, the notion of collectivity, rational occupation of the field and essential tactical references (keep possession, progress, finish).

- Priority: Passing and oriented control, body shapes, support and passing lanes.
- Methodology: Positional games, structured possession drills and rondos.
- Avoid: Excessive specialization in a single position on the field.

3. Perfectioning Stage (Cadete and Juvenil: 14 to 18 years old)

Greater decision-making speed, tactical richness, integrated physical preparation and position-specific work are introduced. Competition carries more weight, but player development remains the priority.

- Priority: Fast transitions, line behaviors, set pieces and advanced tactical reading.
- Methodology: Modified matches, sectoral drills and real match situations.

How to structure an effective training session

A poorly organized session generates dead time, boredom and discipline problems. To maintain attention and intensity, divide your 75 or 90 minutes of training into three very clear blocks.

Phase 1: Activation and dynamic warm-up (15 minutes)

Forget about having them run two laps of the field in a line without a ball. Activation must prepare the mind and the body for the day's main objective from the first minute.

Use simple passing wheels, chasing games with a ball or dynamic rondos. Include joint mobility exercises and small reaction-speed stimuli at the end of this phase.

Phase 2: Main part (45-50 minutes)

It is the heart of the training session. This is where the tactical or technical objective programmed for the day is worked on. The ideal is to design between two and three connected drills of increasing complexity.

- Drill 1 (Introductory): Possession or positional game with numerical superiority to establish the key concept (for example, finding the third man).
- Drill 2 (Applied): Reduced game situation (4v4 or 5v5 with neutrals) with provocation rules that force the objective to appear.
- Drill 3 (Global): Match in a reduced or conditioned space where what has been learned is applied in a real game context.

Phase 3: Cool-down and reflection (10 minutes)

Lower the heart rate with gentle stretches or light jogging while picking up the equipment collaboratively with the team. Use these last minutes to give quick feedback: ask your players what they have worked on today and what it will be useful for at the weekend. Make them think, do not give them all the answers.

Periodization: from the Macrocycle to the Microcycle

To master how to plan youth soccer training sessions professionally, you must connect the global vision of the season with day-to-day work.

The Macrocycle (The complete season)

Define the general objectives by age group. In U9, your macrocycle should focus on individual technique and coordination. In U11, it should focus on collective tactical principles.

The Mesocycle (Blocks of 3 to 4 weeks)

Divide the season into thematic blocks. Each mesocycle should have a clear common thread. For example:

- Mesocycle 1: Introduction to playing out from the back and creating passing lanes.
- Mesocycle 2: Counter-pressing after losing the ball and defensive retreat.
- Mesocycle 3: Organized attack and occupying the finishing area.

The Microcycle (The training week)

It is the distribution of the content across the two or three weekly sessions you have with the team. Example for a U11 age group with two training days:

Tuesday (Technical load and individual concepts day):

- Warm-up: Dynamic rondo with changes of direction.
- Main part: Oriented control tasks, receiving body shapes and 3v3+2 positional play.
- Closing: Small-sided game with a maximum of three touches.

Thursday (Tactical application and mental speed day):

- Warm-up: Passing wheel with finishing into a small goal.
- Main part: Possession with progressions and attack-defense in a wide space.
- Closing: Real game applying the playing out from the back concepts worked on during the month.

Five serious mistakes you must avoid when planning

Even well-intentioned coaches fall into common traps that slow down their players' progress. Keep these mistakes in mind so you do not repeat them on your field:

1. Endless lines: If you have six children waiting their turn to shoot on goal, you are giving away practice time. Divide the group, set up two goals or use active passers.
2. Endless speeches: A child does not retain a five-minute explanation. Give clear instructions of 30 to 45 seconds, get the task going and correct on the fly or during hydration breaks.
3. Copying without context: An exercise designed for a high-level youth team will not work with your first-year U9 group. Adapt the distances, the number of players and the rules.
4. Overusing isolated physical preparation: In youth soccer, physical condition is developed by playing soccer. Eliminate continuous running sets around the field.
5. Changing the objective halfway through the session: If you have planned to work on counter-pressing after losing the ball, do not waste 20 minutes correcting how a corner is taken. Stay focused.

Evaluate your training at the end of the session

Your planning does not end when you pick up the cones. Take five minutes in the changing room or on the way home to write down three key aspects in your notebook:

- Did the main task have the fluidity and intensity you were looking for?
- Did the players understand the concept or was the task too complex?
- What percentage of the total time were they really playing and moving?

If a task has not worked, do not get frustrated. Adjust the field dimensions, add neutral players to give the attacker an advantage or simplify the rules for the next session. Planning is not a document set in stone, it is a living tool that adapts to the daily needs of your team.

Source: [Aprende Entrenando](https://aprendeentrenando.com) · Translated from Spanish aprendeentrenando.com

12 Coaching

How to Record Football Training Sessions to Analyse and Improve Your Sessions in Youth Football

For coaches Filming one of your sessions costs almost nothing and shows you the dead time and the space sizes you cannot see from the sideline while you coach.

You design an impeccable task in your notebook, you arrive at the training field and you feel that the session is not flowing. You are so focused on blowing the whistle, correcting the U12 fullback or demanding intensity from the U10s that you completely lose perspective on what is happening across the whole space. I understand you perfectly because it has happened to me for years. That is why recording your training sessions to analyze them afterward is the fastest and most direct way to audit your work on the grass, adjust real playing times and correct mistakes that you do not see live.

Feelings lie: why the camera is your best assistant

Finishing a sweaty training session having shouted a lot does not mean the session has been a success. Many youth soccer coaches confuse personal exhaustion with the group's performance. Feelings are deceptive; video reflects reality with mathematical precision.

When you review the recording at night, you discover shocking data:

- Three-minute explanations for a task that required only thirty seconds of instructions.
- Endless waiting lines in U10s while two players take a shot on goal.
- Spaces that are too large in U14 rondos that prevent a real counter-press after loss.
- Your own tone of voice, which sometimes confuses more than it clarifies.

Watching yourself on video is a difficult pill for the ego, but it is the best shortcut to evolve as a youth soccer coach.

The necessary equipment: record quality sessions without breaking the bank

You do not need a television camera or to spend thousands of euros. In grassroots soccer resources are limited and editing time must be minimal. With three basic elements you can set up an effective recording system in less than three minutes.

1. Smartphone or action camera

Any current mobile phone records in HD at 60 frames per second. If you prefer to protect your phone, an inexpensive action camera will give you resistance against ball strikes and a native wide angle ideal for open spaces.

2. Tall tripod of 2 to 3 meters

Recording at ground level is useless. The players' legs and torsos block each other and you lose all tactical perspective. Invest in a lighting tripod or an extendable pole that reaches at least two and a half meters in height. The higher the shot, the better you will see the spaces between lines.

3. Clip-on wide-angle lens

If you use your mobile phone, buy a clip-on wide-angle lens accessory. For less than twenty euros you will be able to frame a full fútbol 7 pitch or half a fútbol 11 pitch without having to move too far from the touchline.

4. Wireless lavalier microphone (optional)

If your priority goal is to audit your verbal communication and your feedback during tasks, attach a cheap wireless lavalier mic connected to the phone. You will hear your corrections with total clarity above the noise of the field.

Where to place the camera according to the type of task and age group

Recording poorly is just as useless as not recording. The camera position must change depending on the task you are executing and the age of your players.

For reduced tasks (possessions, rondos and keeping the ball)

Place the tripod on the touchline, centered with respect to the rectangle marked by cones. Raise the pole to the maximum and point the camera slightly downward. It is vital that the four cones at the boundary remain inside the frame to assess whether the occupation of the space is correct.

For complex situations or fútbol 7 matches (U10 and U12)

Place the camera behind one of the goals if you want to analyze the recovery runs, defensive shifting or playing out from the back. If you want to analyze the overall offensive volume, place the tripod in the corner of the field at mid-height to cover the entire surface diagonally.

For fútbol 11 (U14, U16 and U19)

Take advantage of the stands if the field has them. Climbing six or seven steps gives you a perfect panoramic view. If there are no stands, place the tripod behind the bench or on the opposite touchline, away from the path of parents or onlookers.

Field tip: Always check the direction of the sun before pressing the rec button. A backlit shot will leave the players turned into dark shadows and you will not be able to distinguish the bibs.

What to analyze exactly when reviewing your recordings

Do not sit down to watch the entire session as if it were a Champions League match. Go directly to look for specific patterns that you can correct in the next training session.

1. Game density and unnecessary pauses: Time the time from when you stop a task until the ball is rolling again. If it takes you two minutes to explain the variation to a U19 group, you are giving away 10% of the total session time.
2. Adjustment of space dimensions: Observe whether the distances make the desired objective easier or harder. If you wanted to provoke quick steals and the attackers have five meters of margin before being closed down, the cone is badly placed.
3. Quality of feedback: Listen to how you correct. Are your corrections descriptive or explanatory? Do you constantly interrupt the game for minor details or do you let implicit learning flow?
4. Individual tactical behaviors: Pay attention to the body profiles of the central midfielder when receiving, the vigilance of the back four when the team attacks or the pressing runs of the striker.

Use your recordings to give visibility to your club or school

The value of video does not end in the coaching staff's office. We live in a visual culture and families demand professionalism. Keeping recorded material for your personal archive is wasting a brutal marketing resource.

Making clips of fifteen or thirty seconds with moments of maximum intensity, good ball control or celebrations of group tasks serves to:

- Show the families of U9 and U11 players the real methodology that is applied on the field.
- Feed your school's social media with dynamic and professional content.
- Send small individual video cuts to U13 or U15 players to reinforce positive actions or correct orientation profiles.
- Attract new players for the next season by demonstrating serious and structured youth development work.

Express analysis method: optimize your time away from the field

As a youth soccer coach, it is most likely that you have another job or are studying. You cannot afford to spend two hours every night cutting video. Follow this quick routine:

During the session, carry a small notebook in your pocket or note in your phone's notes app the approximate minute of the recording when you see that something fails or turns out perfect. When you get home, go directly to those key minutes, analyze the causes, write down the two main corrections for next week and close the computer.

Getting used to recording and reviewing your sessions is the definitive step to leave improvisation on the green behind. Place the camera at your next training session, eliminate doubts and start making decisions based on real data.

Source: [Aprende Entrenando](#) · Translated from Spanish · [aprendeentrenando.com](#)

13

Coaching

U7 to U16

Decision-making exercises in youth soccer: A practical guide to training intelligent players

For coaches If your players look sharp in drills and freeze on match day, these four small-sided games let you add real opposition and rules instead of shouting instructions from the sideline.

You have that typical kid in your squad who controls the ball like no one else in static drills, but then the match comes, he feels the opponent's pressure and gives away three balls in a row. It has happened to all of us. If you are looking for decision-making drills in youth soccer, it is because you know perfectly well that isolated technique is useless when your player's brain locks up when he has to choose quickly under pressure.

Soccer is a sport of constant decision-making. Putting a group of kids in a line to pass the ball against a wall or to dribble around cones without opposition produces executing players, but tactically illiterate ones. If we also spend the session remote-controlling them with shouts from the sideline ("pass it!", "shoot!", "turn!"), we are taking away the most valuable thing: the ability to think for themselves. My philosophy at AprendeEntrenando is clear: training must be a mirror of the complexity of the match.

The perception-decision-action cycle: The foundation of cognitive training

Before you dive into designing drills, you need to understand how a child's head works on the field. Each individual action is divided into three consecutive phases:

- Perception: The player scans the environment before and during the reception of the ball (where the teammates are, where the opponent is pressing, where the free space is).
- Decision: With the perceived information, the brain selects the best tactical response in thousandths of a second.
- Execution: Technique comes into action to carry out the decision made (a through ball, a directional control, a dribble).

If you eliminate opposition in your training sessions, you eliminate the perception and decision phase. The player only trains execution. That is why, when Saturday comes and an opponent running toward him appears, he collapses. To work on decision-making in youth soccer, all your tasks must contain uncertainty, changing stimuli and real opposition.

Variables to condition tasks and increase the cognitive load

You do not need to reinvent the wheel every week. To transform a simple drill into a mental challenge you only have to manipulate four variables:

1. Reduction of space: The smaller the area, the less time there is to perceive and decide. If an under-12 team dominates a task in 30x20 meters, reduce it to 20x15 meters to force them to think faster.
2. Limitation of touches: Restricting to two touches forces the player to know what he is going to do with the ball before it reaches his feet. You force him to scan the space in advance.
3. Neutral players and numerical superiorities: Superiorities (3v1, 4v3, 5v3) make decision-making easier by always generating a free man. They are ideal for under-8 and under-10 categories.
4. Provocative rules: Introduce rules that reward good reading. For example: "if the goal comes after a wall pass, it counts double" or "you can only switch the orientation after drawing the pressure to one lane."

1. 4v2 rondo with change of space and body orientation (Under-8 and Under-10 categories)

This drill teaches the youngest players to identify when to keep the ball and when to pin the defender to progress.

- Space: Two adjacent squares of 10x10 meters.
- Structure: 4 attackers against 2 defenders inside one square. Outside the square, a teammate attacker waits in the adjacent space.
- Development: The 4 attackers must make a minimum number of passes (for example, 4 passes) while the 2 defenders press. As soon as the condition is met, the player in possession must play a through ball to the teammate located in the adjacent square. Everyone moves to the new space except two defenders who enter to press.
- Cognitive objective: Lift the head to identify whether there is a clean passing line to the outside teammate or whether possession must continue to be worked.

2. 3v3 possession + 2 neutral players with acceleration zones (Under-12 category)

A task focused on detecting the exact moment to change the rhythm of the play from keeping possession to vertical attack.

- Space: Rectangle of 25x15 meters divided into three zones (starting zone, central zone and end zone).
- Structure: Two teams of 3 players with 2 neutral players outside (one at each end).

- Development: Possession is played in the central zone. To score a point, the team with the ball must connect with a neutral player at one end, receive it back and connect with the neutral player at the opposite end. The provocative rule is that no one can pass to the end zone if a teammate has not previously occupied the free lane with a run in behind.
- Cognitive objective: Evaluate whether the space is blocked to keep playing short or whether there is space behind the defensive line to accelerate.

3. Waves 2v1 to 3v2 in fast transition (Under-10 and Under-16 categories)

Defensive and offensive transition situations are pure gold for training the footballer's brain in back-and-forth situations.

- Space: 30×20 meters with two small goals or two marked zones.
- Development: An attacking pair comes out against 1 defender (2v1). As soon as the play ends (by goal, out of bounds or steal by the defender), the attacker who took the last shot is eliminated and 2 new attackers immediately come out from the opposite sideline, generating a 3v2 situation in favor of the team that was previously defending.
- Cognitive objective: Immediate mental reorganization. The player must switch from attacking to defending in a second and decide whether to delay or press the opponent while at a numerical disadvantage.

4. 5v5 positional game + 3 wildcards with switch-of-play gates (Cadete and Juvenil age groups)

Advanced exercise to work on drawing pressure on one flank to strike into the opponent's weak space.

- Space: 40×30 meters with two side zones marked out with poles as gates.
- Structure: 5 against 5 plus 3 wildcards (2 outside on the flanks and 1 interior wildcard).
- Development: The objective is to accumulate passes in a side lane to draw in the opponent's defensive structure. When the team with the ball detects that the defense has closed in, it must switch the play using the interior wildcard toward the gate on the opposite side. Crossing that gate with a driven pass scores.
- Cognitive objective: Reading the opponent's behavior. Discovering where the density of footballers is and where the free space is.

How to intervene as a coach: The secret of guided discovery

Designing the best task is useless if every time a kid makes a mistake you shout the solution at him. If you tell your central midfielder "pass it to the right," you are the one who has decided, not him. In Saturday's match you will be on the bench and he will be alone against the opponent.

Replace direct instruction with reflective questions during stoppages or hydration breaks:

- Instead of saying: "You got it wrong, you were closed off!", ask: "What information did you have behind you before receiving the ball?"
- Instead of saying: "You had to switch sides!", ask: "Where were most of their defenders concentrated?"
- Instead of saying: "Dribble faster!", ask: "What free space did you have in front of you when no opponent was coming out at you?"

Guided discovery makes the player analyze his mistakes, internalize the tactical answers and build his own learning. A kid who understands why he made a mistake will make a better decision the next time he faces that same situation on the field.

Progression of cognitive training by development stages

Don't ask a benjamín to interpret space and time the way a juvenil would. Adapt decision-making exercises in youth football to the maturational development of your footballers:

- Benjamín (8-9 years old): Simple decisions focused on the relationship with the ball and the direct opponent. 1v1, 2v1 tasks and small-sided games with a lot of variability.
- Alevín (10-11 years old): Possessions with numerical superiority (3v1, 4v2), introduction of body orientation and perception of unmarked teammates.
- Infantil (12-13 years old): Incorporation of the notion of the free lane, rhythm of play (possession vs. quick attack) and attack-defense transitions in medium spaces.
- Cadete and Juvenil (14-18 years old): Complex positional games, numerical equality, advanced tactical restrictions and quick reading of the game model in reduced spaces under maximum time pressure.

Start applying this approach in your next training session. Reduce the lines, eliminate analytical exercises without opposition and let your players make mistakes so they learn to solve them. That is the only real path to developing intelligent, autonomous and brave footballers on the field.

Source: [Aprende Entrenando](#) · Translated from Spanish [aprendeentrenando.com](#)

14

Rules and formats

National Refereeing Curriculum launched

For coaches If your club hosts or mentors young referees, the new curriculum and County FA resources give you a shared structure to point them to as they move up the pathway.

National Refereeing Curriculum launched to elevate education

National Refereeing Curriculum will ensure a unified education system across the entire grassroots game

We have today launched a new referee development curriculum to transform our approach to referee education across grassroots football in England.

Delivered through FA Learning, the new National Refereeing Curriculum creates a unified education system across the entire grassroots game, standardising delivery throughout the country.

Tailored to the demands of officiating at each level of the pathway, the curriculum will support match officials as they progress through the Foundation, Perform, Compete and Excel phases of refereeing, developing them as knowledgeable, confident, robust and effective managers of the game.

The curriculum uses online learning modules to cover essential subjects across each stage of the pathway - including Match Control, Handling Dissent, Foul Recognition, DOGSO (Denying an Obvious Goal-Scoring Opportunity), Tactical Fouls, Emotional Control and Wellbeing - providing targeted, accessible learning for referees of all levels. This is complemented by face-to-face workshops designed to enhance match officials' learning by putting their theory work into practice.

Our 'Grassroots to Greatness' webinars for our match officials will be focused on the new curriculum and will provide high-value continuing professional development (CPD) to our match officials, with expert guest speakers ensuring sessions are impactful.

The changes will provide a consistent matchday experience, with additional resources and assets available to our County FA network to support their local offering of referee development and education.

Marc Birkett, FA Senior Referee Manager - Grassroots Referee Development, said: "Referee development is a priority area of our work, and the launch of the National Referee Curriculum is a significant step forward to support our referees within the grassroots game.

"Following consultation with our referee workforce, it became clear that a more structured and accessible development journey was needed to provide every referee with a more consistent and supportive experience. To help us achieve this, referee and match officials' registration fees will be reinvested into our new curriculum to support this important area of our game.

"Through this coordinated approach, we will be able to link online education, face-to-face learning and practical delivery to help improve our education offering to our referees, which will positively impact them both on and off the pitch. We are looking forward to seeing its positive impact."

The new curriculum will be rolled out this year, with the Foundation and Perform phases the first to be delivered. The Compete and Excel phases will follow in November and December, respectively.

Source: [The FA](#) thefa.com

15 Coaching

How to build and drill a high press that can't be broken down, taught by the head coach of the Japan mini football national team

For coaches If you press high, the long ball behind is coming, so train your back line to stand where they can cover before the ball arrives, then work on winning the second ball.

This edition's theme, following the first part, is "How to Build a High Press That Can't Be Broken Down! 8 Points That Dramatically Change Defending from the Front Line." The instructor is Itaru Kato, who serves as head coach of SC Toyohashi Azalea in the Aichi Prefecture Adult League and is also the head coach of the Japan Mini-Football National Team.

In the second part, under the theme "Tactical Understanding of the High Press and Effective Training Menus," he introduced 4 points from "management" to "switching" and an example of a day's training. (Written by Tomoyuki Suzuki)

"Management" and "Recovery" to Prepare for Long Balls

If you apply pressure from the front, there will always be situations where the opponent, in desperation, kicks a long ball.

The fifth point, "management," continuing from the first part, is for the players behind to prepare to deal with long balls based on that prediction.

When you apply pressure from a high position, there is a vast space behind your own last line, so in a straight race, the faster player wins. Therefore, Kato says he tells his players the following.

"First, stand where you don't want them to run. If you stand where there is cover, it's fine even if they run. I tell them to prepare while eliminating the places where they don't want to be hurt, and to go hard at the ball that comes in front of them."

The sixth point, "recovery," is for the front players to press back against the ball that the back players have dealt with, creating a numerical advantage and picking up the second ball.

Kato says he has created a shared phrase, "if you're beaten, go back," and if the ball settles with the opponent's front line, he drills into them that they go to sandwich it from front and back.

Win It and Attack Quickly, Lose It and Switch. The Foundation Is the Ability to Keep Going

The seventh point is "quick attack." If you can win the ball in front of the opponent's goal, the goal is right there. Kato, citing a remark by Coach Klopp to the effect that "the mechanism of the high press is worth the same as acquiring one striker," speaks of the importance of preparing plays that lead directly to goal after winning the ball.

The eighth point is "switching." If you lose the ball you have won, you immediately return to defending and aim for an immediate recovery. If the opponent advances, you win it in midfield, and if they still break through, you form a block in front of goal, but depending on the phase of the game, you may also push them back and go to win the ball from a high position.

"What matters in executing the 8 points is concentration and the ability to keep going. In order to synchronize the team's awareness, everyone must maintain concentration and keep going. The will to keep going and the ability to keep going determine the quality of the defense."

Training to Instill the 8 Points

Kato structures a day's practice into four parts: warm-up, training 1, training 2, and game.

The warm-up is a 6 vs 3 possession game with three teams of three players each. The grid is divided into three sections, the attacking side may have up to two players in each area, and the defending side may enter with any number of players. The setting is that when the defending side wins the ball, the team that lost the ball goes on defense.

Here, they check the middle, containment, decision-making, and coordination. They look at whether they are eliminating both the man and the passing lane, and whether, after one player makes a decision, the players behind are coordinating with him.

Training 1 is a training session on a half court with 8 vs 9 plus a goalkeeper and a target, in which they win the ball from an opponent building up in a 4-4-2 and aim for goal.

If the attacking side passes to the target and breaks the line by receiving the drop, or if they can dribble through between the cones on the side, the high press is considered to have been broken down. It is a setting in which all 8 points, up to management, recovery, quick attack, and switching, are organized.

"The high press only works because there is an opponent building up. Therefore, an approach is needed not only for the defending side but also for the attacking side. On top of that, I tell the defenders to abandon the player on the far side, narrow inside, and try to create numerical equality or a numerical advantage near the ball."

Training 2 uses a full pitch, with the attacking side scoring 1 point for breaking through and the defending side scoring 1 point for winning a goal. Finally, they finish with an 11 vs 11 game.

[Instructor] Itaru Kato / Born in Nagoya, Aichi Prefecture. After serving as a teacher at an Aichi Prefecture public high school for 16 years, he transitioned to a professional soccer coach and individual analyst for professional soccer players. Currently, in addition to serving as head coach of the Japan Mini-Football (6-a-side soccer) National Team, he runs coach development and clinics as the representative of "Itaru Football Support." He has written 3 books, including "Introduction to Soccer Training from an Individual Analyst" (Heibonsha). On the ground, he serves as head coach and GM of "SC Toyohashi Azalea," and as an advisor (junior and junior youth) for the soccer club of Nihon Fukushi University Affiliated High School and for Seagrosso Chita. He has also served as head coach of the Aichi Prefecture Youth National Sports Festival Selection (U-16), head coach of the U-17 Tokai Selection, and coach of the Barcelona Academy Aichi school, and has worked widely both in Japan and abroad, including as director of Uganda's "KOMOREBI FOOTBALL ACADEMY." He holds the JFA-certified A-level General License.

Source: [サカイク](#) · Translated from Japanese [sakaiku.jp](#)

16 Coaching

When should you press in soccer? The 5 signals to teach your players!

For coaches Train the stop as much as the start: have your players hold their line when the opponent has their head up and passing options, then rehearse the five triggers in your next session.

You shout "Press!" from the sideline. Your team rushes forward... and the ball comes out cleanly, three players beaten at once. The problem is not your players' desire. It is that they do not know when to press in soccer.

The answer fits in one sentence: you press when a signal allows it. A signal is a precise moment when the opponent becomes vulnerable: his touch gets away from him, he receives with his back to the game, the pass is slow.

In this article, you will find 5 concrete signals to teach your players, the case where you must absolutely not go, and a challenge to test this weekend.

Key takeaway: pressing is not running more. It is running at the right moment, together.

Why pressing without a signal does not work

A pressing triggered at random is costly, and not only in energy.

- It exhausts your players. They run a lot, for a ball they almost never win back.
- It stretches your team. One player steps out, the others stay. Gaps open between your lines.

- It offers easy passes. The pressed player finds a free teammate, and you have one fewer man behind the ball.
- It discourages. From running for nothing, players end up not pressing at all.

On the field, this often translates into a forward who presses alone while the midfield stays in place. Let us take the example of a group of U15: the 9 sprints at the defender, nobody follows, and the ball is played into the space he has just left. The coach shouts "Press!" But nobody knows at what precise moment they should have gone.

The solution is not to shout louder. It is to give your players clear reference points, signals they can see and recognize together.

When to press in soccer: the 5 signals at a glance

These five situations have one thing in common: the opponent loses time, space or vision. That is where your team can gain ground.

Signal | What is happening | Why it is the right moment | Reflex to give

1. The ball getting away | The player's touch escapes him | He must catch up to the ball before playing | Go when the ball leaves his foot
2. The pass backward | The ball goes back toward his goal | His block drops, yours can push up | The whole team moves forward together
3. The player with his back to the game | He receives without seeing the field | He sees neither you nor his teammates | Arrive from behind, all the way to contact
4. The weak foot | Reception on his wrong foot | He loses a moment to adjust | Accelerate during his adjustment
5. The soft pass | A lofted or slow pass | The ball takes time to arrive | Go while the ball is in the air

Signal 1: the ball getting away

The opponent controls, but the ball escapes his foot. While he runs to catch up to it, he can neither pass nor lift his head.

On the field, the coach can observe the exact moment: the ball leaves the player's control zone, and that is when the presser starts. Not a second before. Going too early means getting eliminated by a player who keeps his ball close.

The reflex to teach: "When the ball gets away from his foot, I go."

Signal 2: the pass backward

The ball goes back toward the opponent's goal. Their block drops, yours can push up: you gain ground without running after the ball.

This is the collective signal par excellence. Concretely, during your session, ask your players to stop on every backward pass to check: has the whole team moved forward at the same time? If only one player pushes up, the signal is useless.

The reflex to teach: "Ball backward, we all move forward together."

Signal 3: the player with his back to the game

He receives the ball with his back turned. He sees neither your position nor that of his teammates: this is his most vulnerable moment.

A frequent mistake is to press from the front, where he can see you coming. Better to approach from behind, quickly, all the way to contact. In a group of U13, you can illustrate it simply: a player receives a pass with his back to the goal, the presser must touch him before he turns.

The reflex to teach: "He has his back to me, I go."

Signal 4: the weak foot

The ball arrives on the opponent's wrong foot, or on the wrong side. He hesitates, repositions his body, and loses a moment. That moment is your head start.

The coach can then observe a precious detail: players who press well accelerate during the opponent's adjustment, not after. When they wait for the player to put the ball back on his good foot, it is already too late.

The reflex to teach: "He has the ball on his wrong foot, I accelerate."

Signal 5: the soft pass

A lofted or slow pass leaves time to arrive. The ball travels, your player moves forward. He presses the ball before pressing the player.

This is the easiest signal for young players to spot, because it can be seen from far away. On the field, this can translate into a simple word that the team learns to shout, for example "Up!" as soon as a pass goes up in the air. The word triggers everyone to start at the same time.

The reflex to teach: "The ball is in the air, I go."

No signal, no pressing

This is the rule that changes everything. Learning to press is also learning not to press.

Your players must hold their line when:

- the opponent has their head up and several passing options;
- the player is alone in wanting to go;
- the team is stretched behind them.

In these cases, pressing alone amounts to offering one more pass to the opponent. The right reflex is to reposition, close the angles and wait for the next signal. Many coaches forget this second lesson, even though it protects the team as much as the first.

Common mistakes when learning to press

1. Shouting "Press!" without explaining when. The players execute, but they do not understand.
2. Pressing alone. Pressing is a collective action: if one player goes, the others must follow.
3. Going too early. Running before the signal means getting dribbled past.
4. Learning all five signals at once. It is better to master one before moving on to the next.
5. Never talking about the "no". Without the rule "no signal, no pressing", the team presses all the time or never.
1. Choose a single signal per session. Start with the most visible one: the soft pass or the ball moving away.
2. Show it at a standstill. Place the players, play the situation in slow motion, and ask: "What do you see?"
3. Give a keyword. A short word that the team shouts when the signal appears.
4. Make it collective. Require that all the players concerned move forward at the same time.
5. Play in a game situation. In a small-sided game, pressing is allowed only on the announced signal.
6. Finish with a discussion. Ask the players: "What signal did you see, and what happened?"

The goal is not to recite a list, but to develop the ability to read the game: your players learn to read the play before acting.

The challenge to test this weekend

No need to change everything. Here is a simple test:

- Before the match: announce a single signal to the team.
- During the match: observe how many times the signal appears and what your players do.
- At halftime: ask "Who saw it?" and let the players answer.

You will quickly see whether your team spots the signal, misses it, or sees it without reacting. This is valuable information for building the rest of your work.

From what age can these signals be taught?

The most visible signals (ball moving away, soft pass) can be worked on from the age groups where players play in an organized team, for example from U11. The vocabulary must be adapted and only one signal presented at a time. The others require more reading of the game and are addressed later.

Should you press throughout the match?

No. Permanent pressing exhausts the team. The idea is to press when the signal appears, and to reposition the rest of the time.

What should you do if your players press each on their own?

Go back to the collective: a common keyword, and a small-sided game where pressing is allowed only if several players move forward together.

How long does it take for the team to integrate a signal?

It depends on the group and the regularity of the work. A few minutes at each session is better than a single long isolated session.

A player often misses the signal. What should you do?

Ask them the question rather than giving them the answer: "What did you see just before?" They learn to observe for themselves.

Conclusion: pressing is first of all learning to see

Knowing when to press in football is not a question of intensity. It is a question of reading. Five signals, a keyword to trigger them, and the rule "no signal, no pressing": that is enough to give your players real reference points.

A question for you: which signal do your players miss most often?

Source: [Josselin Lebreton](#) · Translated from French [josselinlebretoneducateur.com](#)

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Safety and welfare

How Liverpool FC create space to hear young players' voices

For coaches Anonymous sticky notes and short discussion stations are a cheap way to hear from quieter children in your own age group, and feeding back what changed is what keeps their trust.

Following on from Play Safe Weekend in September, Liverpool FC hosted a series of activities within their Emerging Talent Centre and Academies in both the female and male game to make sure the players in their programme felt like they were really being listened to.

The aim was to give them an opportunity to share their thoughts on everything from how they want to receive information, to best practice for academy feedback.

Led by the Safeguarding Team, each activity was designed as a practical workshop that left the club with real feedback they could use to make change. It also allowed the children a chance to feel listened to, as Nicola Fryer, Director of Safeguarding explained:

Ensuring that children and young people feel listened to is a key part of Premier League safeguarding standards and of our safeguarding culture at Liverpool FC. When young people see that their opinions matter in the day to day aspects of their experience, they are much more likely to speak openly with trusted adults if they encounter a concern or need support. That confidence and trust can make a real difference. While Play Safe provides an important opportunity to highlight the voice of the child, this is something we are committed to embedding throughout the entire season, not just during Play Safe weekend."

Child's Guide Aim: To find out how children want to receive information about safeguarding. Method: Aided discussion around the symbols, words and pictures used in the Safeguarding policy, using coloured pens and sticky notes to capture thoughts. Key points: They wanted to see photos of staff looking smiling and looking approachable, so they knew who they should talk to. They also preferred simple words and instructions such as 'what to do best' and 'what it should look like' so they can more easily understand. Outcome: New guide created in the children's voice. Updating the website look and feel, including new photos, simpler language and different symbols to make it more relevant. More importantly it removed a cartoon image that the children all hated!

Play Safe Opportunity for Discussion Aim: To explain Play Safe and provide children with a safe space to talk about their academy experiences. Method: 15-20 minutes with each age group, four stations set up around the room based around four questions regarding the Academy: Do you feel safe? Who would you talk to? What's your biggest worry? What would you change? Answers filled out anonymously on post-it notes, with every child getting a chance to answer every question. Full summary presented to players and staff. Key points: Lots of suggestions especially around food and nutrition. Outcome: Changes to food and nutrition. This was communicated back to the children through a 'you said, we did' process, so they knew their feedback had been heard and changes were made.

Takeaways There's a lot to learn and adopt from Liverpool's approach. Here are some tips to take forward into your own club:

- Make listening practical and easy.

Use simple, accessible things like sticky notes, colourful pens, discussion stations and anonymous feedback boxes.

- Focus on the small things.

Children's concerns aren't always about big safeguarding issues. Make space to talk about food, WiFi on the bus, kit, breaks, communication and education.

- Give everyone a voice (not just the loudest children).

Use a mix of individual, anonymous, group and representative approaches so quieter children aren't overlooked.

- Let children shape how things are communicated to them.

Ask them how they want to receive information, as well as what they want to hear. Children will influence things like language, symbols and pictures, helping you to create guides that specifically appeal to them.

- Create safe ways to speak.

Questions like, "Do you feel safe?", "Who would you talk to?", "What's your biggest worry?" and "What would you change?" gives children straightforward openings to say what they really think.

- Be clear on what happens with feedback.

A strong approach Liverpool used was "you said, we did", summarising for everyone what was discussed, what could or couldn't be changed, and most importantly, why.

Keep up the convo And remember, you don't have to wait for a big consultation to hear what children think. Look for any moment where you can keep the conversation going by asking how things are, and if anything can be improved for them. This will help you build trust, identify concerns early, and create a stronger safeguarding culture.

Source: [England Football](https://englandfootball.com) englandfootball.com

VIEWS AND THE GAME

18 Opinion

The paradox of protection: rethinking challenge, wellbeing, and development in high-performance sport

For coaches Useful when you are weighing whether to soften a hard session: the test the authors offer is whether the demand is proportionate and supported, not whether it feels comfortable.

OPINION article

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1 Introduction: the growing emphasis of wellbeing in sport psychology

Stress and challenge are inevitable in high-performance sport. Athletes pursuing excellence routinely encounter uncertainty, failure, deselection, injury, competitive pressure, and emotionally demanding experiences. These experiences are rarely comfortable, yet are often central to learning, adaptation, and the development of expertise ().

Over recent decades, sport psychology has undergone an important and largely welcome shift towards athlete wellbeing, mental health, and safeguarding. International consensus frameworks have rightly emphasised the need to recognise psychological distress, improve access to support, and protect athletes from unnecessary harm (). This conversation has become increasingly sophisticated, recognising that athlete wellbeing is shaped by relationships, organisational cultures, and the broader performance environment (,). These developments represent important progress.

However, has this shift come with an unintended cost?

We suggest that sport psychology has become more sophisticated in identifying the risks of excessive challenge than the developmental risks of insufficient challenge. Because harm is often immediate and visible, while the costs of under-challenge may emerge only later, policy and practice may default too readily towards reducing difficult demands. This risks treating discomfort as a problem to be alleviated rather than a potential feature of ambitious development.

Discomfort, distress, and harm are not equivalent. Some psychological unpleasantness may be developmentally desirable because athletes cannot develop capacities for uncertainty, difficult emotion, failure, or pressure without encountering those demands. The task is therefore to distinguish legitimate developmental challenge from avoidable harm, recognising that the balance between protection, support, and challenge will vary across athletes, circumstances, and stages of development. Accordingly, this paper examines challenge as a central mechanism of development, stress as a principal way challenge is psychologically experienced, and the implications of both for psychological support. We argue that sport psychology should keep athletes safe from harm without making them safe from the challenges through which ambitious development occurs.

2 Challenge as a mechanism of development

Progress in high-performance sport requires athletes to adapt when their existing capacities no longer meet emerging demands. Development rarely occurs through uninterrupted success; athletes encounter uncertainty, failure, deselection, injury, competitive pressure, and emotional disruption that require them to reconsider and refine how they perform (). Here, development refers to an enduring expansion or reorganisation of psychological, behavioural, or technical capacities. Challenge creates the discrepancy between what an athlete can currently manage and what future performance requires. Without that discrepancy, there is little impetus for adaptation and limited opportunity for development ().

Challenge is not the same as unnecessary adversity or avoidable harm. Exposure to difficulty does not guarantee growth, and subsequent success cannot justify inappropriate practice, even in hindsight. However, high-performance development necessarily involves demands that are uncomfortable and sometimes genuinely distressing. When such demands are proportionate, developmentally relevant, and accompanied by appropriate support and recovery, the disruption they create can prompt learning and adaptation ().

Some forms of psychological unpleasantness may therefore be developmentally desirable, rather than merely unavoidable. Athletes cannot learn to tolerate uncertainty without experiencing it, regulate difficult emotions without encountering them, or develop the capacity to perform under pressure without practising under pressure (). In these circumstances, discomfort is not simply an unwanted by-product of development; it forms part of the developmental stimulus because it provides the context in which the relevant capacities are exercised. As such, removing the discomfort may also remove the opportunity for those capacities to develop. Its developmental value lies in what the experience requires of the athlete and how that experience is structured and supported ().

Intensity alone cannot determine whether a demand promotes development or becomes overwhelming. It also depends on how the athlete appraises the demand and the resources available to meet it (). Athletes' experiences of challenge are shaped by their existing capacities, previous experiences, and access to appropriate support (). Appraisal may also change through perceived control, relationships, and interaction with the wider performance environment (). The same demand may therefore be manageable for one athlete, overwhelming for another, or experienced differently by the same athlete over time.

Challenge is consequently best understood as a dynamic relationship between the athlete, the demand, and the performance environment. Development depends not on removing difficulty, but on enabling athletes to engage with, adapt to, and make sense of demanding experiences in ways that expand their capacities.

3 Distinguishing developmental challenge from avoidable harm

Recognising challenge as a mechanism of development does not mean that all demanding experiences are beneficial. Distress refers here to the unpleasant psychological experience that may accompany demanding circumstances, whereas harm involves a significant adverse effect on an athlete's health, safety, dignity, functioning, or longer-term development. The two may overlap, but they are not synonymous: athletes may experience distress without harm, while harm may develop without immediate distress. Wellbeing therefore means more than the absence of discomfort; it concerns athletes' capacity to function, develop, and pursue meaningful goals without unacceptable costs (). Safeguarding involves (or at least should) preventing practices and environments that threaten these conditions ().

The boundary between developmental challenge and avoidable harm is not fixed. It depends on the purpose and proportionality of the demand, the athlete's appraisal, available resources and support, and the consequences over time. A legitimate challenge may become harmful when demands are excessive or accumulate without adequate recovery, when athletes experience persistent helplessness or impairment, or when exposure continues despite deteriorating health. Research on burnout similarly highlights the interaction between demands, recovery, motivation, and the performance environment, rather than treating stressful experiences as inherently harmful ().

Power and agency also matter. Although athletes cannot choose every training demand, performance standard, or selection decision, they should understand the purpose of a demand, be able to express concerns, and be able to report inappropriate practice without fear of disproportionate consequences. How demands are imposed may matter as much as the demands themselves: controlling environments have been associated with psychological need thwarting (1) and athlete burnout (2). Younger athletes require greater caution, as their dependence on adults may limit their capacity to challenge demanding practices (3). Neither a coach's developmental intention nor an athlete's apparent acceptance is sufficient to establish that a practice is appropriate. Equally, temporary discomfort is not sufficient evidence of harm. It may require adjusting the intensity, timing, duration, or support around a challenge rather than removing it. However, when health, safety, dignity, functioning, or longer-term development are threatened, protection from harm takes priority.

4 Stress as the psychological experience of challenge

If challenge creates the conditions for development, stress is one of the main ways challenge is psychologically experienced. High-performance demands often generate stress because athletes pursue goals that matter deeply to them. Its presence does not therefore necessarily indicate dysfunction or that something has gone wrong. Indeed, for many it may be of long duration. The more important distinction is between the expected stress of engaging with meaningful demands and stress that becomes persistent, impairing, or harmful (4).

The significance of stress depends on how it is appraised and how it develops over time. Lazarus' (5) transactional model conceptualises stress as a dynamic relationship between the demands an individual encounters and their appraisal of the resources available to meet them. Apparently similar situations may therefore produce markedly different responses. One athlete may experience a selection decision, serious injury, or major competition as manageable and meaningful, while another may find it overwhelming. These responses may also change as demands accumulate, resources diminish, or capacities develop through experience.

Challenge and threat theory further supports this position. When athletes appraise their resources as sufficient to meet situational demands, they are more likely to experience a challenge state (6). In sport, challenge states have been associated with more adaptive physiological responses, attentional control, and performance under pressure, whereas threat becomes more likely when perceived demands exceed available resources (7). Neither response is a fixed property of the event or the athlete. Appraisal is continually shaped by previous experience, perceived control, relationships, and interaction with the performance environment (8).

Importantly, the aim cannot be to eliminate stress from the preparation for high-performance sport. Athletes are unlikely to develop the capacity to perform under pressure if training consistently protects them from experiencing it (). Appropriate exposure allows athletes to practise interpreting, regulating, and responding to stress before encountering comparable demands in competition. Removing stress indiscriminately may therefore reduce immediate discomfort while also limiting preparation for future demands.

The relevant question is not whether stress is good or bad, but what it signifies for this athlete, in this context, at this point in their development. For practitioners, this shifts the focus from routinely reducing stress to assessing and monitoring it. Psychological support should intervene when stress becomes overwhelming, persistent, or impairing, while helping athletes engage constructively with the pressures through which high-level capacities are developed.

5 Supporting development without compromising wellbeing

How psychological support is understood may shape whether athletes and coaches regard it as relevant to high performance. In cultures where toughness is associated with competence, seeking support may be interpreted as evidence of vulnerability or an inability to cope. Athletes may also worry that addressing distress will diminish their motivation, competitive edge, or capacity to tolerate pressure. Alongside concerns about stigma, confidentiality, and career consequences, these perceptions may discourage help-seeking ().

Such concerns may reflect uncertainty about the purpose of psychological support. If psychology is understood primarily as reducing discomfort, those who regard challenge as integral to performance may question its value. Psychological support should also help athletes engage effectively with demanding experiences by appraising challenges accurately and regulating difficult emotions (), recovering appropriately, and making meaning from disruption (). Practitioners can strengthen athlete agency and help coaches calibrate, explain, and support legitimate challenge (). They should also monitor whether stress is becoming cumulative or impairing (). Where there are signs of harm, maltreatment, or significant deterioration, protection and appropriate intervention take priority (). Where challenge remains proportionate, support should help athletes remain engaged long enough for adaptation and learning to occur.

The aim is not to eliminate stress or encourage it indiscriminately, but to help athletes engage constructively with legitimate challenge while recognising when intervention is required. Wellbeing and development should be advanced together, although they need not receive identical emphasis in every situation or at every developmental stage. Wellbeing is not synonymous with comfort, and discomfort is not, by itself, evidence of harm.

6 Conclusion: rebalancing wellbeing and development

The growing emphasis on wellbeing and safeguarding has delivered important progress. However, it has also left the developmental significance of difficult and unpleasant experiences comparatively under-specified. High-performance development involves uncertainty, failure, pressure, vulnerability, and emotional disruption. Although these experiences are not inherently beneficial, discomfort and distress are not necessarily evidence of harm. Some forms of unpleasantness are developmentally desirable because they provide the conditions in which athletes exercise and extend the capacities required for ambitious performance.

Rebalancing wellbeing and development requires more than asserting that both matter. It requires recognising that they will not always receive equal emphasis and that the appropriate balance will vary across athletes, contexts, and stages of development. There is also a need to acknowledge and redress the “concept creep” which has seen many psychological constructs uncritically expanded to incorporate completely different or more moderate forms of the original (). At times, protection and recovery should take priority. At other times, however, development may require athletes to encounter and work through demands that temporarily unsettle their wellbeing. Treating the reduction of discomfort as the default response risks protecting athletes from the very experiences high-performance sport requires them to be prepared for.

Sport psychology must therefore distinguish avoidable harm from legitimate developmental challenge by attending to the athlete, the demand, the performance environment, and the consequences that emerge over time. Protection from harm remains fundamental, but it should not become protection from difficulty. The future of sport psychology lies in keeping athletes safe from harm while preparing them for, rather than shielding them from, the challenges through which ambitious development occurs.

Author contributions

AB: Conceptualization, Writing, original draft, Writing, review & editing. DC: Conceptualization, Writing, review & editing. UK: Conceptualization, Writing, review & editing.

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Summary

athlete wellbeing, challenge, high-performance sport, sport psychology, stress appraisal, talent development

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