

SOCCER SHORTS

*A collection of brief articles
of interest to soccer coaches.*

Building a Successful Practice Starts with the Coach

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In previous articles I have given examples of games that help players to improve their skills. However, it must be understood by coaches that while the games themselves will help to teach players, they do not complete the total development picture. Players must apply themselves within the practice, and coaches must help the players solve their problems.

How does the coach interpret the game and help the players solve their problems?

METHOD

- With young players, all aspects of the game will require a great deal of work. Coaches should select one part of the game that they believe requires attention and use that as the theme for practice.
- Devise a realistic practice situation where that aspect of the game can be highlighted. For example, if control was the theme of the practice, the coach should ensure that, within the framework of the practice, the players have the opportunity to control the ball a great deal.
- The practices shown in previous articles are examples of the "frames" that coaches should use to highlight the themes of their practices.
- Observe the performance of the players within the practice to identify their mistakes and successes.
- Guide the player(s) to successful responses to their problems by:
 - a) Stopping the play after the mistake,
 - b) Pointing out the mistake to the player,
 - c) Demonstrating the correct method of execution to show the correct "picture" to the players.
 - d) Allowing the player to correct his mistake under similar circumstances in which the error occurred.
- Allow play to continue if the error is cor-

rected. If the player continues to make a mistake, the coach should remain with the player to give him opportunity to succeed. However, the coach should ensure that the challenge that is being presented to the player is not too difficult. Players will not be motivated to learn if their tasks are too difficult.

ORGANIZATION

The coach should spend a little time before each session preparing the practice. In preparation, the following points should be considered:

- The theme of the practice
- How many players are available
- How much equipment is needed (e.g., balls, bibs, goals, cones, Frisbees, etc.)
- How much area is available in which to work
- How the practice would progress ideally
- Approximately how much time is going to be spent in each segment of practice

If the coach is not prepared before practice, too much valuable coaching time will be wasted on organization during the practice. If the coach looks disorganized to the players, credibility could be eroded.

DEMONSTRATION

"A picture paints a thousand words." In practice, the coach should demonstrate exactly what is being sought from the players rather than trying to provide lengthy explanation. It is important, however, that the coach has an understanding of his/her own abilities before attempting to demonstrate. Not only would a poor demonstration affect the credibility of the coach, it also would not represent a true "picture" of the technique being demonstrated. If a coach does not feel comfortable in demonstrating a particular technique, one of the team's better players should be used to perform the demonstration.

OBSERVATION AND INFORMATION

The skill in coaching is to observe the mistakes of players as individuals, or as a team, and to provide the information to correct the mistakes. There may be times when individual players or the team make mistakes that the coach has observed but is unsure of the information to correct them. In those cases it is much better for the coach to say nothing and allow the practice to continue rather than confuse the players and him/herself. The coach should be clear and precise with information. A drawn-out explanation of a mistake will cause players to lose attention.

Naturally, many mistakes occur in practice games. However, it would be poor judgment for the coach to stop the game every time a mistake is made; the players must be allowed to play. Too many interruptions will cause players to lose attention. One of the arts of good coaching is to know when to stop play and when to allow play to continue.

POSITION

The coach should ensure that the practice is observed from "outside" the activity and not in the middle of play. In a practice session where there is more than one group working, the coach should be positioned to see all the players. When speaking to the players, they should be facing away from the sun and away from all other activity on the field. Any distraction will cause players to lose attention.

PERSONALITY

It is most important that a coach's own personality is reflected in the practice sessions and at games. A coach should not try to copy anybody else. A person is the best at being him/herself, but at best the second-best at trying to be somebody else.

The former USSF Director of Coaching Education, Howe was serving as Director of Coaching for Washington State Youth Soccer Association when this article was first published in the WSYS newsletter in 1996.