

Soccer Coach 101

**A Beginner's Guide
To Running Successful
Soccer Practices**

PAVL WILLIAMS

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by

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Cover Design by Better Football Ltd

Book Design by Better Football Ltd

Introduction

So you 'volunteered' to coach your son's soccer team this summer. Now what?

This book will help you to answer that question. We have prepared this handy little guide to bring together all of the most essential points to remember when coaching youth soccer players.

In fact - whether you're completely new to coaching youth soccer, or going strong into your 15th season - it's always useful to consider the fundamentals of successful and effective soccer coaching:

What's Inside?

Chapter One deals with the youth soccer coach's biggest decision - determining your coaching philosophy.

Chapter Two helps you to develop a coaching syllabus so you know in advance what to coach and when.

Chapter Three will talk you through designing the perfect soccer coaching session plan. And finally...

Chapter Four will help you to run sessions like a pro.



CHAPTER ONE

Your Soccer Coaching Philosophy

In This Section You Will Learn To:

1. **Know Your Coaching Priorities**
2. **Make Soccer Fun**
3. **Determine Your Order Of Development**
4. **Make Coaching Age & Gender Specific**
5. **Learn Faster Than Your Players**
6. **Get Your Coaching Badges**

Know Your Coaching Priorities

It's important that you think about how much importance you are going to put on having fun, developing technique, fostering teamwork, winning games etc because these decisions affect all others.

For example, if you firmly believe in winning every match then you will field your strongest available side at all times. If, however, you believe that the game should be about developing player confidence and skill, then you will make sure every player has equal playing time (and perhaps even rotate positions).

It's also important to tell parents about your philosophy and get them on board. Justify your decisions in advance and you'll neuter most complaints about your calls.

When you have decided on rules you are happy with, follow them!

You'll see too many coaches who believe in equal playing time... until they're team has a narrow lead with ten minutes to go. Don't be one of those coaches.

Results aren't nearly important enough to sacrifice your principles or players' trust for.

Make Soccer Fun

Remember why kids come to soccer practices in the first place; the number one reason is to have fun with their friends.

Because this is the prime motivation for our players, it's got to be the prime motivation for us coaches as well.

If your session isn't enjoyable why should the players return? They have lots of other activities competing for their energy and attention.

A major part of a player's enjoyment will arise from developing their skills and responding to challenges. But if these are the only areas the coach emphasises, players won't stick around long enough to see these benefits.

Consider soccer practice from a child's perspective. Think about what sort of activities you enjoyed when you were younger, and which bored you stiff. Throughout your session look for signs that players are having fun, and if they're not; change it up.

Inject your personality into your session, engage with your players and make sure you have fun yourself!

Determine Your Order Of Development

The skills required to play soccer effectively are like building blocks, without a broad strong base players can only reach so high.

With the youngest players focus on core physical literacy (running and jumping, twisting and turning, stopping and reacting). These are sometimes called FUNdamentals or 'ABCs' (Agility, Balance, Co-ordination, Speed).

With school-age children give them opportunities to develop excellent technical skills (close ball control, fast dribbling, precise short passes and accurate shots).

Once these key skills are in place, your players can work on match-related scenarios like 3v3 attack and defence.

It's important that you have a long-term development plan that covers all of the core skills your players will need to become accomplished footballers.

Too many coaches simply react to whatever problem area they identified in the most recent match. But such firefighting is an inherently flawed enterprise.

Make Your Coaching Age & Gender Specific

Coaching is about individuals first and therefore you have to determine the individual character of each of your players before you can truly coach them effectively.

Expect different players to react differently to the same situations.

For example, pre-pubescent children (and especially young girls) aren't typically as competitive as teenagers.

Therefore, the amount of emphasis to put on winning and losing has to be dependent on the player's profiles.

In this case you should respect the nature of the game and do your best to win, but don't project your own competitive streak onto your team if they aren't that bothered about a particular result.

When you are coaching, find out the interests of your players and relate your coaching points to these areas. If your players watch a certain TV programme, use the characters in your games. If half your team play FIFA, reference it when explaining a new formation.

Learn Faster Than Your Players

Regardless of your past experience, you will only be a good soccer coach for as long as you are still learning about soccer.

The rate at which innovative new ideas are springing up is accelerating. If you are behind the curve you will quickly lose respect and credibility in the eyes of your players.

Subscribing to [Better Football's soccer coaching newsletter](#) is obviously a fantastic idea :-) but also read as many books, and watch as many DVDs as you can.

Go to live games (amateur and professional) whenever you have the chance and try to identify the teams' formations, strongest players, areas of weakness and strategies. Try to guess what the coaches have told the players before the game and at half-time.

Ask nearby academies or centre of excellences if you can watch their coaches work and go to grassroots pitches on a Saturday morning to see how other youth coaches take their practices.

You will improve your own coaching as much by watching bad coaches as good!

Get Your Coaching Badges

This follows on from the point above but deserves it's own emphasis : “Get Qualified!”.

It doesn't matter if that means taking an FA Level 1 Certificate in Coaching Football, NCAA Youth Level 1 or US Youth Soccer National Youth Licence. Whatever the course you will benefit from meeting and working with other coaches and from the guidance of expert coaches.

Gaining a nationally recognised qualification will also give you, and your players and parents, confidence in your abilities and methods.

Once you have a basic qualification, explore your options for further badges - the UK needs far more Level 2 and Level 3 coaches working in grassroots football and there's no reason a smart person like you can't be one.

Both the UK and US authorities offer a huge range of courses so you can specialise in anything from Goalkeeping to Futsal to Disabled Football.

By taking the next step up the coaching ladder you will be putting yourself into the top 10% of soccer coaches in your country.

TASKS

Before you move on to the next Chapter, take a look at these tasks:

- ✓ **Decide on your coaching priorities and write them down somewhere memorable.**
- ✓ **Schedule a visit to a nearby academy, development centre or centre of excellence.**
- ✓ **Find out what the coaching licence structure is in your country and book a place on an upcoming coaching course.**

CHAPTER TWO

Deciding What To Coach

In This Section You Will Learn To:

1. Choose Your Session Topics
2. Pitch At Your Players' Level
3. Have SMART Long-Term Goals
4. Use The Echo Coaching Method

Choose Your Session Topics

As we discussed in the previous chapter, you will be a much more effective coach if you have a long-term development plan for your players.

This is a much more effective system than simply reacting ad-hoc to whatever deficiencies you happened to spot in the previous game. It ensures your players learn new skills in a logical order and that an appropriate balance can be struck between different skill areas.

Most importantly it puts you in control instead of your opposition.

To create a long-term plan you will need to assess your player's current ages and abilities.

List everything your players can and can't do at the moment and consider how would you like that picture to change in a year's time?

Pick the three areas which would make the biggest difference to your player's confidence and success - usually these will be the 'building blocks' we talked about in the last chapter.

Have SMART Long-Term Goals

For each of your chosen areas you should create a Specific, Measurable, Achievable, Relevant and Time-bound (hence SMART) goal.

For example, if my players would benefit most from being able to cushion aerial balls then my goal would be:

In 4 weeks (Time) players will be able to control more than half (Measurable) of all falling balls with their thighs and feet (Relevant).

Control will mean stopping the ball within 5m (Specific and Achievable) with their first touch, without letting the ball bounce first.

Once I have this SMART goal in mind I can design practices which will introduce the key coaching points (such as getting in line with the ball, keeping eyes on the falling ball, using the correct part of the leg etc) and give my players lots of opportunities to practice the action.

Planning a session then only requires putting some of these practices into a sensible series of progressions.

Pitch At Your Players' Level

As mentioned earlier, players require a strong foundation of co-ordination and technique before they can be reasonably expected to succeed with complex tactical manoeuvres.

Before jumping into a topic look at the coaching points and identify antecedent skills.

For example, you cannot coach a “one-two then shoot” drill effectively if your players don’t know what a “one-two” is. You cannot coach a “one-two” (a.k.a “Wall Pass” / “Give-and-Go”) if your players cannot pass accurately with their first touch etc.

Be prepared to instil transferable broad concepts (like getting in line with the ball) rather than isolated movements (like repeatedly volleying a pass to partner).

Coaching the reasons for a movement is at least as important as coaching the movement itself.

We want our players to make correct decisions in a game and they can only do this if they understand the concepts of football.

Use The Echo Coaching Method

Having chosen 'what to coach' you want to know 'when to coach' each topic for maximum efficacy.

Coaching one topic a week will help you get through that long list of things your players can't do, but the problem with this approach is twofold.

First, new skills take time to propagate as player's muscle memory can only be developed over a series of weeks and not in a matter of hours.

Second, players forget most of what they are told if they are only told it once - their brains decide the information mustn't be important if it is only given once.

The 'Echo Coaching' Method repeats key points and movements over a series of gradually increasing intervals.

This gives players the chance to develop specific skills over a longer period and pushes the key points towards their long-term memory.

You can read a full introduction to Echo Coaching at:
[<http://betterfootball.net/?p=377>]

TASKS

Before you move on to the next Chapter, take a look at these tasks:

- ✓ Assess your players' current abilities to pass, control, dribble, shoot and defend.
- ✓ Decide on the three most important areas of development and develop SMART goals for each one.
- ✓ Read 'Be A More Effective Soccer Coach - The Echo Method' in Better Football [<http://betterfootball.net/?p=377>]

CHAPTER THREE

Designing Coaching Sessions

In This Section You Will Learn To:

1. Create The Perfect Session Plan
2. Start With An Intelligent Warm-Up
3. Choose Age & Ability-Appropriate Games
4. Structure Your Coaching Points
5. Know How & When To Increase Pressure
6. Set Individual Challenges
7. Get Into Small-Sided Games
8. Cool Down, Debrief & Evaluate
9. Have A Fail-Safe Plan-B

Create The Perfect Session Plan

Hopefully you've already found a number of things to think about in this guide.

This chapter will walk you through the design of the perfect session plan, but first make sure you have really absorbed the previous chapters.

If you haven't already, get on with developing your soccer coaching philosophy and a plan of action for what and when you are going to coach your players. You will need to know these things before you can really plan some sessions.

Once you have them to hand, we'll move on to creating a great soccer coaching session:

This chapter will cover what goes into a session, how to arrange your games, how to decide on times, secrets of rapid transitions and what to do if it all goes wrong!

Start With An Intelligent Warm-Up

Warming-up at the start of every session is crucial. It reduces the risk of injury, prepares your players for activity (by raising their heart-rate, loosening muscles and gradually increasing their energy production) and it focuses their minds on the football games ahead.

There are four parts to the perfect soccer warm-up:

Mobility Exercises, Dynamic Stretching, Individual Ball Manipulation and Team Ball Work.

Check out our article 'How To Plan The Perfect Soccer Warm-Up' for a full warm-up routine: [<http://betterfootball.net/?p=54>]

To run through a complete warm-up requires 15-20 minutes and about half of this can also be used to practice technique and go over coaching points from previous sessions.

The warm-up should be fun for your players and, as it doesn't need to change every week, you can teach your players a warm-up routine and then get different players to lead it each time.

Coach Technique Through Relevant Skills Practice

After the warm-up we need to explain the main topic of our session - whether that means introducing new skills or concepts, or expanding on the coaching points from a previous session.

Each session should therefore include a skills practice which emphasises a very specific problem and allows players lots of opportunities to try out techniques and tactics to solve it.

Use your equipment and the position of your practice on the pitch to make it very clear how the session relates to a situation in a match.

If you are coaching short passing for example, is it to be used on the edge of your team's own penalty box or to unlock an opponent's tight defence? Position your goals appropriately and offer realistic incentives and risks for successful or unsuccessful passes.

The skills practice doesn't have to last very long. In fact, you want to move into a game as soon as your players have grasped the concept and had a few practices.

Choose Age & Ability-Appropriate Games

Of course, the games and practices you choose will also depend on the age and the ability of your players.

Arrange games that are going to be easily understood by your players, and pitch them in a manner that appeals to their age-group's sense of fun.

A group of five year olds will respond to a game in which they play 'Sharks' and 'Dolphins' but ten year olds will respond to the same game if they play 'Rio' and 'Rooney'.

Try to avoid drills which are contingent on a different skill, for example finishing drills which require accurate support passes or pinpoint crosses. You will spend a lot of your session coaching these topics instead of the topic you had intended to focus on.

Similarly you can plan a whole series of beautifully constructed team pass and move drills, but if they fall to pieces after an errant pass they aren't appropriate for players still developing their technique (or you will spend your entire session chasing balls and blowing whistles!)

Structure Your Coaching Points

Prioritise your coaching points before the session so you know what are the most important key points you absolutely must get across.

Then consider what else you can prompt from your more advanced players once they are up to speed with the basics.

Consider whether the topic you are coaching is best suited to 'chaining' (learning each movement in a sequence accurately) or 'shaping' (aka moulding - making gradual improvements to a compound movement).

A double-scissors feint is an example of a skill best taught through chaining because there are very obvious stages that the body moves through in performing the action.

An attacking header is an example best coached through shaping because it's impossible to step-in and correct the attacker's body-shape whilst the ball is in mid-flight.

It's also important to stagger your coaching points throughout your session so that players aren't given too much to think about at once and so that each point is given opportunities to manifest in the practice.

Know How & When To Increase Pressure

When players first learn a technique they might need to practice it with very little pressure or no pressure at all.

A practice must be able to accommodate this where appropriate.

But for the most part, set-up your practice with as much pressure as your players can cope with and still successfully complete their task about half the time.

Always start at the lower end of the scale, because reducing the challenge after starting dents your players' confidence.

When your players start to complete the task frequently increase the pressure.

There are five main types of external pressure you can use to increase the challenge: number of touches or amount of time, size of playing area or target zone, number of decisions to make, number and skill of opponents and the current game-situation (the scoreline, position on the field, time-left etc).

Get Into Small-Sided Games

The logical end of ramping up the pressure is to get into a real game situation so that your players will feel comfortable using their skills in the melee of a competitive matchday.

Incorporating Small-Sided Games into your session is the ideal way to strike a balance between a realistic full-pressure challenge for your players, and the need to control the practice and influence the development outcomes of your coaching session.

As The FA's expert Coach Educator Peter Glynn explains:

In small sided games players get an opportunity to pass, receive, dribble, tackle, shoot, make saves and make decisions like they do in a game.

Children love to play in games, so try and create practices which closely mimic aspects of the game, allow the children to make decisions like they do in the 'real game' and tailor your outcome accordingly.

Check out our free ebook “SSG Attack” for a number of great games you can use in your sessions.

Set Individual Challenges

Coaching sessions run a lot more smoothly when every player feels involved and sessions are much more effective when every player is challenged at a suitable level.

You can ensure both by planning ways to vary the pressure on an individual level.

Whilst you can not be sure which of your players will be strongest, nor whether any players will struggle, with the practices you plan; you can build in a range of measures which allow you to increase and decrease the pressure on individual players on the fly.

You can use the same five main variables we talked about above and you can even play different scenarios within the same game (e.g. a 3v2 within a 2v1 practice).

Here's a list of things you can adjust to increase or decrease the challenges for individual players:

Players (teammates, opponents, overloads, neutrals, targets, interference, goalkeepers); Area (size, shape, directional/non-directional, markings, zones); Goals (number, size, shape, location); Balls (size, shape, number); Rules (scoring, time, touches, restarts).

Cool Down

An oft-neglected area, the cool-down offers a number of physiological benefits to your players:

- **Cooling down improves players' stamina.**
- **Players leave feeling fresher when they've had a cool-down.**
- **Cooling down can reduce the time needed between sessions.**
- **The likelihood of injuries can be reduced by cooling down.**

A cool-down can be as simple as slowly walking around an area and performing some simple stretches. It needn't take more than 5 minutes.

It can also offer an opportunity to reflect on the session, discuss the key coaching points and allow players to ask questions about the topic.

Refresh Your Coaching Points

Repeating coaching points is a key part of the learning process and you should therefore take every opportunity to remind your players of the outcomes of your session.

The cool-down is a perfect time to test your players' understanding of the key points, allow players to ask questions about the session and reflect on the ramifications of your learning focus on a game.

You might also need to do logistical things like make travel arrangements, collect money or hand out flyers before your players leave.

Evaluate Your Session

It's really important that you evaluate your session and you can ask your players for feedback which will help with this process.

The first test is whether players enjoyed the session and the second is whether you made progress in developing your learning focus during the session - did players understand the coaching points and improve throughout the session?

Bring It All Together

When you have decided which outcomes you want from your session, it's time to write down your session plan.

This will be different for every coach, use as many notes or diagrams as you need to be able to remember all of the rules, transitions, progressions and challenges.

As we have seen, the structure of your session should look something like this:

Warm-Up: Mobility Exercises and Dynamic Stretching

Warm-Up: Individual Ball Manipulation Movements

Warm-Up: Group or Team Ball Work Movements
(which could be a drill or small-sided game)

Skills Practice: Problem Setting and Key Coaching Points

Skills Practice: Progressions and Further Coaching Points

Small-Sided Game: Realistic Match Scenarios

Small-Sided Game: Progressions and Individual Challenges

Cool Down: Discuss Key Points & Evaluate Session

Timing

The time spent in each section will depend on your session length and considerations of player age and fitness ability.

Generally the complete warm-up should take 15-20 minutes and you should give as long as possible to your small-sided games.

The skills practice only needs to be long enough to deliver and demonstrate your key coaching points. Once players understand the problem and how you would like them to solve it you can get into your SSG.

Robotically repeating the same movement over and over isn't relevant to a soccer match and can be mind-numbingly boring!

Remember you will also need to allow for water-breaks every 5-10 minutes.

You can use half-time breaks in your practices to bring players together in small groups to discuss their strategies for the 2nd half. This self-guided learning is fantastic.

Have A Fail-Safe Plan B

Sometimes, no matter how well thought-out a session is, your plan just won't work.

The weather conspires against you, your assistant gets stuck in work or, simply, the games or drills you have carefully constructed just aren't getting the outcomes you hoped for.

In such a situation it's crucial to have a back-up plan so that your whole session isn't wasted!

The default 'Plan B' for most soccer coaches is a big scrimmage; half the players versus the other half on as big a pitch as you can find.

This at least will satisfy most of the kids' cravings for a 'match' but it means you completely lose control of the learning focus. In addition, big matches are dominated by the stronger players, with less able players shunted into wide areas where they don't get many, meaningful, touches on the ball.

It's far better instead to have a stock of go-to games which you can rely on to engage your players and still achieve some of your coaching goals for that session.

Through all your sessions - well, those that don't go south anyway - make a note of the games your players really respond to and put them in a dedicated 'Plan B' folder.

Then make sure you store them in your coaching bag or somewhere you'll always have access to whenever you take to the field.

I learnt this the hard way the first time I had a really disastrous session (long story short; the goal had been stolen!)

My painstakingly organised 'Plan B' folder sat, painstakingly organised, on my office shelf four miles away from the pitch.

Once you have a handful of games you can fall back on, if your session isn't running as smoothly as you'd like, you give yourself the freedom to experiment with new rule changes, challenges and ideas.

TASKS

Before you move on to the next Chapter, take a look at these tasks:

- ✓ Create a coaching session plan for one of the three key areas you chose in Chapter Two.
- ✓ Read 'How To Plan The Perfect Soccer Warm-Up' in Better Football [<http://betterfootball.net/?p=54>]
- ✓ Decide on a skills practice and a small-sided game relevant to your learning focus.
- ✓ Think of one way you could make your practices easier and one way you could make them more challenging.

CHAPTER FOUR

Coaching Your Session

In This Section You Will Learn To:

1. Prepare For A Coaching Session
2. Set-Up A Boot Room & Pro-Zone
3. Lay The Ground Rules
4. Deliver Coaching Points
5. Use VAK Cues To Accomodate All Players
6. Demonstrate Effectively
7. Coach During Small-Sided Games
8. Allow Mistakes To Occur
9. Intervene & Correct When Necessary
10. Transition Like A Pro

Coaching Your Session

Hopefully by this point you've got plenty to consider and you will already be scribbling great session ideas into your notebook.

In this Chapter we will conclude our guide by looking at the most important part of any session - the 'coaching' itself.

Now we're going to take you right through a session and dissect the most effective soccer coaching methods for creating fun sessions which, crucially, develop great players.

As we move into the training session itself we will look at some strategies for having more fun, getting more done and making your coaching more effective.

Before Your Session Starts

Preparation is key.

It's vital that you have decided on your session's theme and your desired outcomes before your session begins.

With this information you can properly target your drills and games and you can know when and where it is appropriate to concentrate your coaching advice.

Set-up earlier than you think you need to.

If at all possible you want to have everything for your session set-up before the first player arrives.

This shows your players you value every minute of training time and allows you to dictate what activities players are doing whilst waiting for the rest of their teammates.

Inevitably whenever you arrive latest is when the most urgent emergency will distract your attention from setting-up!

Give yourself a buffer-zone.

Set-Up A 'Boot Room' & 'Pro-Zone'

Your session will be a lot easier to manage if you have dedicated areas clearly identified for different purposes. Simply create a couple of small areas with markers.

Use the 'boot room' to store any unused equipment (such as balls, bibs or cones) and items of players' clothing they don't need for the immediate activity.

Whenever you need to add or remove things during a game there will be a single point of access.

Players don't have the opportunity to kick balls away or meander around having their own conversations, and so transitions are a lot faster.

A similar concept is the 'pro-zone' where you can deliver any coaching points that require visual assistance, or discuss a tactic within your group.

Creating a formal area keeps everybody close and focussed on the discussion. Leave water bottles in this area so you can easily combine your coaching with a water break, giving more time to actually playing.

Lay The Ground Rules & Remind Your Players Regularly

Whether you are coaching a group for the first or the thousandth time it is important to tell them what you expect from them in your sessions, and what they can expect from you in return.

It gives you credibility to be able to refer back to your ground rules whenever an incident arises, so expand and update them regularly as you learn more about your team.

Some of the key points of course will be the safety rules particular to your player's age group and training venue.

Also tell them what behaviour is unacceptable and what the punishments will be, whether there are any incentives up for grabs (such as certificates/skills badges) and what the criteria are to achieve them, etc.

Delivering Coaching Points

KISS your key points.

When offering coaching advice ‘keep it short and simple’ (KISS). Not only will this keep your players engaged but it will force you to be specific with your key points.

Your coaching point should relate to a specific moment in the game, a specific movement and be actionable.

Don't tell when you can ask.

There's a reason the socratic method of teaching is used in schools and universities around the world. People simply don't remember details when they are just delivered to them rote - it is necessary to constantly test them by asking questions and requiring them to figure out the answer for themselves.

This is especially true in a dynamic environment like a soccer game.

Set problems for your players to solve and do it frequently in all different areas of the field.

Your players will develop their creative side and, crucially,

come to understand the underlying reasons why we recommend certain actions at certain times.

It's far better that players learn 'why to do' something rather than just 'what to do' because this affects their decision making and allows them to transfer concepts to different scenarios and build upon their previous understanding much more quickly.

Demonstrations

Make sure you can demonstrate effectively.

When it comes to demonstrating techniques, the first rule is that you've got to be confident that you can perform it correctly in front of your group.

This is essential for your credibility amongst the players and because the players need to see what the positive outcome of this movement is. You can't sell a particular move as a solution to a problem if they don't see you getting the result you wanted from it.

If you expect the players to learn how to kick a ball in a certain way, it's reasonable to expect that you should be able to learn how to do it yourself. Practice in the

backyard in the days before your session if necessary.

When it comes to the demonstration in training, keep it as clear and simple as possible and remove any unnecessary element which adds to the difficulty.

If you are unable to properly demonstrate a move don't even try. It's better to ask a player who can to show the rest of the group, or even bring a laptop with some video clips on it.

Demonstrations and practice should be the same standard, speed and direction expected in a game.

The whole point of a demonstration is to illustrate how a certain type of movement can help to achieve a certain outcome in a game.

The movement itself is not the goal so simply walking through a technique in slow-motion will never help a player to perform it effectively.

By all means show just a part of a move or a specific stage of the movement in 'freeze-frame' but also show how that interrelates with the other movements to form the complete game-ready technique.

Not All Kids Learn In The Same Way

Another important point, worth touching upon here, is that current understanding suggests there are three different types of learners; visual, audial and kinaesthetic (VAK).

This sometimes gets kids in trouble with their coaches because they don't appear to have been listening when asked to recall a verbally given instruction or seem to just be staring at the ground when you are drawing a tactic on the board.

In fact they might be a visual learner who struggles with audial instructions, or an audial learner who is trying to concentrate on your words.

You should try to accommodate all by offering something to look at, something to listen to and something to do each time you present a new concept.

Some players will understand when they see the diagram on your tactics board, some when they hear your instructions and some will only understand once they are on the pitch doing it.

Develop Your Players' Physical Literacy

Soccer ultimately is a game played with the body.

No matter how deep a player's understanding of a technique is, they can not perform it correctly without training their body to move in the correct way.

Practice sessions should give your players as much opportunity as possible to run with the ball, dribble, turn, pass, shoot, head and tackle.

This is the only way to build up your player's muscle memory and improve their ability to perform a movement correctly in a match.

Confucius gave us a famous quote which you will hear a lot in youth development circles:

I hear and I forget.

I see and I remember.

I do and I understand.

Let your players 'do' as much as possible in your session.

Stagger Coaching Points Throughout Your Session

We touched upon this in Chapter Three, but it's worth refreshing and expanding on the point again here.

Consider how the most important coaching points for your session build upon each other and then spread them out.

Focus all your initial coaching on one very specific point and give it a chance to resonate with your players.

Slowly introduce additional points one at a time, allowing the power of each one to reveal itself to your players through the game, before moving on.

Sometimes it's tempting to cram as much information as possible into your coaching sessions and hope some of it sticks.

But it's almost always more effective to teach fewer concepts more thoroughly.

Constantly Check Understanding

Take every opportunity to ask your players about their decision-making and test their understanding of your coaching points.

Do they see the reasons for choosing one option over another?

Can they correct themselves when they make a mistake?

During water breaks allow your players to discuss what has been successful and what hasn't in the last part of the session.

Ask them what they might do differently if they played it again or what they will have to do to be more successful in the next part of the session.

As suggested earlier, you can include a dedicated 'half-time' in all of your games, which presents an opportunity for teams to discuss tactics, take on board your additional coaching points and develop an action plan for the second half; just like in a match.

Coaching Small-Sided Games

Make the rules clear and consistent.

When setting up a new drill or game always answer these key questions in your players heads: How do I score? How does my opponent score? How does the game end?

If the game is turn-based make it clear how many turns each team or player will have.

Avoid changing the rules in-between turns because young players are incredibly perceptive when it comes to spotting inequalities - you don't want to be accused of being 'unfair'!

Let the game flow.

Once you've introduced the game, get it running as quickly as possible and then just let it flow for a few minutes. You can address any problems that arise in the next scheduled pause.

Keep your players moving as much as possible once a game starts and give them the chance to correct mistakes themselves on the next turn before jumping in and stopping the game.

Allow Some Mistakes To Occur

Try to ignore mistakes which aren't either directly related to your session's topic or dramatically affecting your players' ability to practice the session's topic.

Aside from pulling you off topic down an infinite number of coaching wormholes, you can badly affect players' self-esteem when you spot every mistake they make.

Before stepping in, give players the chance to self-correct. Players frequently recognise their own mistakes and make a better decision the very next chance they get.

Also try to avoid dogmatism over what constitutes a mistake. A player who seems to be ignoring your instructions isn't necessarily acting erroneously. They might have come up with a creative new way of achieving the same outcome.

Give your players the benefit of the doubt and if you're unsure ask players what result they are trying to achieve - often you will be surprised.

Remember that first and foremost the session should be fun for the kids, sometimes that means using your discretion and sacrificing great technique for a week.

Most Coaching Is Done 1-on-1

If a player is consistently making the same mistakes then it is appropriate to step-in and help them. However it is better to do this in private for two reasons:

Firstly, not every player is making the same mistake so your coaching will not be relevant to the majority of your players. It's better to leave them to get more practice touches in a live environment.

Secondly, many players are embarrassed about their mistakes being pointed out publicly. As a result players are often reticent to offer suggestions and it can appear as if they don't know what they are doing wrong.

In fact talk to them 1-on-1 and you will find that with the pressure off (and with a few guiding prompts from the coach), the same players can usually work out how to correct themselves.

Try to spend a short period of time 1-on-1 with each of your players in every session.

It can sometimes be difficult to achieve but frequently those few seconds will be the part of the session players remember most vividly.

Transition Like A Pro

Many coaching sessions are great when the players are engaged in a practice but quickly degenerate into a flurry of noise and surreptitious shots on goal as soon as the coach shouts 'stop'.

However there are two really simple techniques you can use to keep your session flowing smoothly and reduce the time lost on breaks and transitions.

Prepare the next practice before the current one finishes.

Coaching assistants were made for this! Have them lay out the areas and position the goals for your next exercise so that you can move your players straight over from one practice to the next. This will instantly remove almost all opportunities for irrelevant discussions or messing about.

One of the biggest headaches we face is trying to get all of our equipment back into the bags after a practice. Don't give players the chance to boot them all over the place whilst putting them away. Again it's much easier to leave the balls where they are and ask your assistant to collect them once the next practice has started.

Give Players Something to Discuss

When you do have to stop (for water breaks etc), your players are going to start talking. To preempt this, give them something constructive to discuss.

Whenever you interrupt the game for a break or to introduce a rule change ask your players to get together in small groups and have a 'team-talk'. In this setting they can decide which tactics are and are not working or discuss strategies for winning under the new rule.

The format is a fantastic coaching tool because it gets players thinking about the problems you present and developing creative solutions (that you might not think of yourself!). It also encourages communication between players, improves player confidence and builds team spirit and cohesion.

Another useful tip is to do the same thing at the start of your session to get players thinking whilst you wait for everyone to arrive. Set an engaging problem as soon as the first player arrives, and ask them to explain it to the next person who arrives. When a chain gets going, players will be occupied and you can sort out last minute ideas with your assistants (and impress any watching parents).

TASKS

Now you've had a chance to read the last Chapter, take a look at these tasks:

- ✓ **Coach your planned session with your team.**
- ✓ **At the end, ask your players what they enjoyed and what wasn't so much fun about your session.**
- ✓ **Make a note of their comments and add your own thoughts on how you would improve the session next time.**
- ✓ **Congratulate yourself on a job well done and prepare for your next session!**

Anything to add?

Soccer coaching is an incredibly rich experience and one which becomes even more rewarding the more you throw yourself into it.

I hope this guide provides a good starting point and you will continue to learn and develop as a coach.

One of the great privileges of editing [Better Football](#) is that I get the opportunity to interact with a huge number of soccer coaches from all different parts of the world and with wildly different backgrounds.

Every one of them provides a new perspective on coaching soccer and can offer fascinating insights that I can take and apply to sessions with my teams.

If you'd like to get in touch, ask a question or simply pass on your thoughts then please drop me an email on pavl@betterfootball.net

Alternatively message me on twitter [[@betterfootball](#)] or facebook [<http://facebook.com/betterfootball>].

I look forward to hearing from you!

About The Author



Pavl Williams is a professional soccer coach and editor of the online soccer coaching magazine Better Football.

In this role he has interviewed hundreds of expert soccer coaches including Alan Curbishley, Iain Dowie, Peter Taylor, Alfred Galustian, Graham Taylor, George Burley and many more.

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