

Ask The Experts



Putting action into your youth soccer practices

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Q: I'm coaching 10-and-under soccer for the first time this spring. I played every sport imaginable growing up – except soccer. So I'm concerned how to run an effective practice. Can you share some key points I should keep in mind while working with the kids?

A: Consider that having played the game does not necessarily make one a good youth coach. You are working with children and you have been given the title 'soccer coach' and your job is to teach the children how to play the game of soccer. Rather than looking for soccer related games to teach your players your duty is to learn and teach them our wonderful game.

Here is how you can put **ACTION** into your practice sessions:

A – Activity must be one of your main goals when dealing with young players. You must understand that players come to practice to play soccer. Therefore, any activity that does not involve a moving soccer ball and a goal to attack, plus a goal to defend, may become disruptive.

C – Clarify your practice session rules and expectations through individual and team discussions. That is, having the team decide what is appropriate and inappropriate behavior. It's actually fun to have them vote on their own practice session rules. Then you must act firmly, fairly, consistently and matter-of-factly when their actions go against their own established rules.

T – Teach less! When the players and the ball are moving either toward the opponent's goal or away from one's goal, soccer learning is taking place. However, when players and ball stop moving then soccer learning stops!

So ask yourself: Does it happen in the game? If the answer is yes then do it in practice. If the answer is no (standing in line, for example) then don't do it in practice.

Remember, they come to you to play soccer and the objective of the game is to defend one's own goal while attacking the opponent's goal.

I – Interest in playing soccer needs to be developed. You may be faced with players who are not interested in playing our wonderful game and you must adjust accordingly. Give appropriate attention to the disinterested players but not at the expense of the rest of the team. Then, make the practices so much fun that the disinterested player may want to join. Remember that when you are working with your players you must be as helpful, understanding and patient as you are with your own children when they are learning other skills in life.

O – Organize the practice session in such a manner that it becomes apparent it is a rehearsal for the game day routine. This can only be accomplished through a consistent, sequential routine that allows your players to learn what is expected. It is wise to avoid -- variety. If they are introduced to something different at each practice session this will lead to some confusion and confusion can lead to disinterest. It is, also, important to remember that all games must have a goal to attack and a goal to defend.

N – No Laps. No Lines. No Lectures! Running around the field may be considered punishment. They already know how to stand in a line. It is a fact that their attention span is less than 15 seconds. You must create a practice environment that minimizes listening and lecture time and maximizes touches with the ball and playing time. In other words, allow them to play the game of soccer, which forces them to make decisions and learn on their own. Allow them to experiment and fail their way to success as they attack the opponent's goal while defending their own goal!

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