

Coaching & Training Constructs

Manipulating the Variables

Most of us have heard (and seen for ourselves) that training sessions dominated by line drills are to be avoided. Kids are bored. They're not active. Not working hard or getting many touches on the ball. And they're probably getting into trouble.

But how do we avoid lines? Especially when we have too many kids, not enough time, not enough coaches to help individual players ... maybe even not enough balls?

The simplest answer is to keep groups working simultaneously. That means you will need to begin with an explanation... a demonstration... and a very clear and precise directions about where each group should work and how to begin. Once the activity is underway, you must split your attention and move fluidly among the working groups.

Every training activity involves a handful of variables – all of which the coach manipulates to achieve the teaching goal of the session. As you create your activity, carefully decide how you will shape, manage, or change the following variables. And as you adjust, making the activity easier or more difficult as play dictates, you can manage the level of success the players enjoy.

Space: the tighter it is, the more challenging the play

1. Free space: players working without boundaries
2. Limited space: half-field, within the penalty area, even within the center circle
3. Grids: square areas about 10 yards by 10 yards and smaller, marked at the corners by cones or shirts
4. Channels: as though forming several grids edge to edge to create a long, narrow space
5. Combinations of these: for example, 2 v 1 in small space linked to a 1 v 1 across the field with the weakside attacker timing his run

Groupings: the key to avoiding lines

1. Individual work
2. Pairs
3. Threes (2 v 1, 1 v 2, or three in an activity together)
4. Small groups (2 v 2, up to 5 v 5)
5. Large groups (6 v 6 up to 11 v 11)
6. Substantially uneven groups (8 v 1 or 6 v 2, etc.)

Pressure/Pace: adjusted by changing the rules

1. Static and slow
2. Low or intermittent pressure
3. High pressure; playing at full speed

Teaching Technique

Teach technique (precisely how to strike or receive a ball) along the way (as you are working on the Power Tools) or introduce it with a demonstration at the beginning of the exercise. Show players which specific good techniques are necessary in order to accomplish the core concept or tactical task.

Technique is not an end in itself. A low, driven, 30-yard instep pass is a technique necessary for changing the point of attack, counter-attacking, or catching a defense napping. Pointing your non-kicking foot in the direction you want the ball to go is essential in cutting the ball back from the baseline or crossing from the wings. Waiting until your defender has turned his attention to the ball before making your off-the-ball run is key in breaking free and demanding the ball. But these ideas must be taught in the context of the Power Tools you are teaching.

A Word About Fitness

Make no mistake. Fitness training is a good thing. At any level.

But *unless you are with your team four or five days a week*, it is simply “expensive” in terms of time, inefficient in terms of producing immediate results in game play, and is no doubt the least fun for most children. The alternative is to blend or integrate fitness work within the ballwork or tactical session.

Eliminate the lines and static “drills,” and you will substantially reduce the need to waste valuable time watching your players do laps – or even sprints. In a recreation league or in-house league setting, and similarly in more advanced programs where you see the players only two or three times per week for three or four months of the year, the more fitness work that takes place within the construct of a physically challenging technical or tactical session, the more fun and efficient your session will be.

Warm-Ups

For the youngest children, a 5- or 10-minute warm-up activity is really your opportunity to gather their attention, bring them into your “world” and introduce or establish the teaching headline you will develop throughout your session.

Rather than using a fixed or repetitive set of activities, select the light technical work (specific techniques or even aspects of a tactical idea) that will be called for in the Power Tools or other session you’re about to begin.

Creating Your Own Practice Activities*

***(Please don't call them "drills." Drills are for Drill Sergeants.)**

As you're driving to the field and changing your clothes in the car, here is a shortcut to creating a useful and enjoyable training session.

1. Focus on a need; problem solve your last match

One core place to begin is to continue working through the progressions we've described. But if you've done that and are ready to focus more specifically, the key lies with your analysis of your last game. Couldn't score? Defensive errors? Giving the ball away? Trying to attack straight up the field into the strength of the defense? Whatever the principle failure, therein lies the "headline" for the upcoming session.

2. Select a headline

Stay focused on your headline – even at the frustrating expense of so many other teachable moments during training. Your test? At the end of training, ask your players what practice was about. If you don't hear your headline coming back, practice was probably not sufficiently focused. Address the core problem and then progress to the closely related problems or opportunities it causes.

Look for efficiencies. When you coach an attacking concept, coach the related defensive concept at the same time; e.g., if you're coaching dribbling to attackers, coach delaying to defenders.

3. Craft a progression

Create your own progression, with three or four different, but related activities of increasing complexity or technical challenge. In your warm-up, use techniques players will need in later activities. Make each activity relate and build. Keep in mind what your players will be thinking about, how tired they'll be, how long since they had a few laughs. Mix it up, keep it moving.

4. Trouble shoot and be flexible!

The players you wanted to focus on that day – maybe it was the stopper and the sweeper – didn't show up. The team at the other end of the field was finally available to scrimmage. The day was too hot or too wet or too dark.

The activity you carefully designed in your mind's eye just doesn't work. There's a technical breakdown or the idea is too complicated. A child is misbehaving. Find the problems. Find the answers. And be ready to change your plans. That's what makes it interesting and fun!