

Introductory Soccer Coaching Guide for Very Young Players

The following is intended to introduce beginning coaches to coaching four and five year old soccer players. The goal is for players this age to enjoy themselves, want to keep playing soccer in the future, and along the way learn some good soccer techniques. There are many books, videos, web sites, and coaching clinics available - some targeted at this age but many others dealing with more sophisticated techniques and tactics more suitable to older age groups. This is just intended as some beginning advice for coaches new to the game.

At the U5 and U6 level, soccer is a Saturday only experience, with the first 45 minutes or so dedicated to practice, technique, and drills, and the second 45 minutes dedicated to a game against an opponent. For the practice part, coaches should have a plan prepared, with some options in mind if something in the plan isn't working. For example, you might have planned the "perfect" drill that requires 6 players only to have only 5 show up that day. Or, even more likely, you might be teaching a particular skill/drill, but despite your best efforts the particular exercise just isn't working. Rather than hammer away at that exercise, have another option available to move to. More about this below.

The CYSA coaching director Karl Dewazien has devised an approach to organizing a practice that is taught in all CYSA coaching classes. While some might argue it's a little too sophisticated a structure for 4 and 5 year old players, the principles are very sound. The structure starts with observing the players in a game and figuring out what needs to be improved. That then leads to your developing a theme for practice - at this age that might be dribbling skills while at an older age the theme might be something like maintaining zonal defensive shape. The point is though to have a theme (not several themes), and have the activities in the practice all support that theme. Once you have the theme, the next step is small warm up exercises that reflect the theme. The next steps are to teach the desired improvement - first with slower motion demonstration type of activities, then a game related faster activity. For example, with dribbling, you might first demonstrate instep dribbling - everyone with a ball. The next step might be a game of follow the leader, where everyone dribbles using their insteps and one person leads them all over the place. The next step might be a relay race where you divide the team, set up some cones for people to dribble around and tell them the only type of dribble they can use is instep dribbles. Very important to the teaching part of the game is not talking too much, but instead demonstrating what you are after. The next step in Dewazien's structure is to have a controlled game - where you have rules to enforce the theme. For example, you might have a game of 3v3 keepaway but require a player to touch the ball 3 times before passing. The next step is to have a free game - that's the second 45 minutes of the Saturday sessions, where hopefully you see the players put into use some of the techniques you've taught in the earlier part of practice. This is not the time for lots more coaching - let them play - this is the time you observe in order to decide what theme to use for the next week. The final step is then to cool down. Physically at the U5/6 level, this isn't as important as at older ages - however, it is a perfect time to get in the habit of doing a proper cool down, stretches etc. Good habits formed early last a lifetime.

Some comments on techniques.

Many coaches at this age level have not played soccer themselves before, so some words on basic technique are appropriate.

1. Striking the ball (passing or shooting). Unfortunately, at this age, usually players can kick the balls the farthest by kicking the balls with their toes. That is poor soccer technique. Kicking or passing the ball should be done by first locking the ankle and then using either the instep of the foot, or the laces of the foot (top of the foot with toe pointed down), or even the outstep of the foot (usually players at this age don't have enough leg strength for this particular type of kick). Coaches should devise exercises to use all these kick types - in games, lots of kids will revert to toe poking but in the exercise part of the session, emphasizing proper technique is critical.
2. Using both feet. Left to themselves, kids this age usually use only one foot to kick the ball, taking extra steps to reposition themselves so they can use their "best" foot. Soccer is a two footed game. As an example, in some of the exercises or small sided games, you might place a "left foot only" restriction on a player if that needs correcting. Use the restrictions in the exercises and drills - not in the actual game. Hopefully if the exercises worked, the player will use both feet on his own.
3. Dribbling. All sides of the foot can be used for dribbling and should be taught. Rows of cones where first pass you dribble around all cones using the outside of your right foot only, the next pass the outside of your left foot, etc are the types of exercises that get kids using their entire foot. Or just have them dribble forward 40 yards with one particular dribble type and then back with another. Another example is using the bottom of the foot - have a player dribble forward then step on the ball to stop it and in the same motion use the bottom of the foot to pull the ball in the other direction and resume dribbling is a very good technique to teach.
4. Faking. Even at this age faking with the ball should be taught. Feinting like you're going left then pushing the ball with the outside of the right foot to the right (and then of course reversed) is a great technique to push at this age.
5. Heading. You should not do a lot of heading at this age. Players this age usually don't have the leg strength to hit the ball very far in the air, but even at this age players should be taught not to be afraid of hitting balls with their head. A couple of gentle and easy exercises would be to have one player sitting on the ground, and another player gently (underhand) toss the ball towards the players head - have the player then bounce the ball off top part of his forehead. Another technique is simply for a player to toss the ball to his own head and see if he can bounce it straight up in the air two or three times.
6. Throw ins. Restarts for balls kick out the sidelines are done by a player using both hand, holding the ball behind his head, and then tossing the ball with both hands equally while keeping both feet on the ground.
7. Juggling. Juggling obviously doesn't play much of a part in a real game, but it is a very important tool to learning ball control. Have players try to alternate juggles from one thigh to the other, or one foot to the other, or get people in pairs and see if they can move the ball from one player to the other in the air. At this age, at first a player might only get two or three repetitions in any of these. Have them keep track and try to set a personal record each time you do this - if one player can do ten juggles, have

him try for eleven----if another can only do two, have him try for three. That's the way every single player who ever lived started.

Following are some exercises or games that might be useful. Some of these exercises require cones for outlining the exercise. Importantly the coach needs to adjust the size of the area to be effective for the level of players.

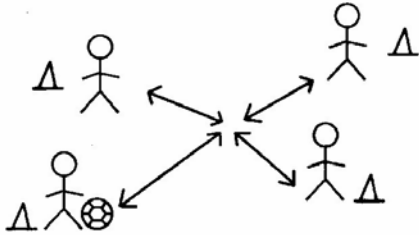
1. Obstacle course
2. Soccer boxing - player has a ball at his own feet on on his toes taps the ball back and forth between his own feet. Varieties - use side of foot to tap back and forth, use laces to tap back and forth, use bottom of foot to roll to other foot.
3. Follow the leader
4. Simon says
5. Ball hops. Everyone with a ball at his feet. "Go" and in one minute touch the top of the ball with toes as many times as possible, alternating feet, and keeping count
6. Crabs. Set a small square of cones. Half the players attempt to dribble through the square, while the other half do a crab walk and attempt to kick the balls out of the square. Winner is last player with a ball.
7. Keep away. Endless varieties. One is for each player to have a ball within a defined square. Each player attempts to keep his own ball within the square but kick his opponent's balls out of the square. Once a ball is kicked out, that player sits out until exercise is done. Often this is called "Cat and Mouse"
8. A variety known as "Jaws" has all players with ball in square except one--that one tries to kick the other players' balls outside the square - once a players' ball is out, he too becomes a shark and kicks the other balls out. Winner is last player with ball
9. 5v2 or 4v2 or Piggy in the Middle. This is actually the most common soccer exercise in all soccer at all levels though not many world cup teams call it Piggy in the Middle. Basic keepaway. Inside a grid, one or two people try to win the ball away from a larger number of people. If a person in the middle wins or touches the ball, he moves to the outside, and the player who made the mistake moves to the inside. If one player makes a bad pass to another player so the ball leaves the grid, the player making the bad pass goes in the middle. Lots of small varieties - if team outside makes 5 or 10 successful passes without a person in the middle touching it, the people inside have to remain inside an extra turn.
10. Tag - player who is "It" has a ball and must keep dribbling the ball while trying to tag other players who are also dribbling the ball.
11. Another cat and mouse - divide team in half and for two lines of cones--one team outside each line. One player is cat in the middle. "Go" and each team dribbles to the other line where they are then safe - cat tries to steal the balls from the players as they cross. Once a player loses his ball, he becomes a cat too.
12. Relays. These are great at this age. Mix them up. Left foot only, right foot only etc. Throw in other requirements - like once you get to the far end you have to do a somersault and then dribble back. Or have a set of cones spaced out - dribble to first cone and do two pushups - dribble to second cone and do two situps - dribble to the third cone and do two jumping jacks.

13. Traffic - divide team and have two boxes marked -one team in each box. Players are dribbling around in their own box during "red light" - coach yells "green light" and players dribble/race to other box - avoiding collision with other team.
14. Martan invaders (not sure where the name came from). Establish a pretty big box. Put as many balls in the center of the box as you have (even number). one player in each corner of the box - upon go, race to the middle and dribble a ball back to your corner - then get another ball and bring to your corner. Winner is first to get designated number of balls to his own corner. Adjust the numbers based on number of available balls. May need to divide team into two or three groups for this.
15. Dodge ball - in pretty restricted area, divide team in half - one half with ball, other without. Players with ball attempt to kick ball into legs of players without ball - players without ball attempt to avoid being hit. Winner is last player hit.
16. Numbers games. Assign each player a number. Divide team in half. Mark a box of cones and at each end of box mark two cones as goals - one team outside one goal, other at opposite goal. Call out one number from each team - when called player runs around entire outside of box, enters square through his own goal, coach rolls ball into middle of square, and then players tryes to win ball and score goal in other team's goal. Repeat by calling different numbers. Varieties - call multiple numbers - call uneven amount of numbers (one from one team, two from another etc). Numbers shooting - divide team in half 20 yards from goal - roll ball out while calling numbers and both players try to win ball and score in the same goal. Whoever is last to touch gets the goals. Variation here is sometimes you have one player who is much slower that others - call that player's number and pause before calling the opponent's number.
17. Pressure shooting. One player a little ways away from goal. Other players each with ball several yards away from target player. One at a time, the players pass their balls to the target player who then has two touches to shoot on the goal. Every body switches and winner is person who score most goals. Varieties include one or three touch, or tossing balls in air so player learns to volley.
18. Soccer golf. Set up course of cones spaced a long ways apart. Each player with ball. Kicks the ball with fewest number of touches until he hits the cone for a certain hole. Keep track of touches - fewest wins.
19. Soccer croquet. Set cones in croquet layout and players take turns advance their balls around the course.
20. Fox hunt. One player in the middle, players around outside have ball. All attempt to kick the ball and strike the fox in the middle (below the waist). Players keep trying - always from outside the box - fox is in the middle for one minute - keep track of how many times the fox is struck - then change foxes. Winner can be fox who is struck the least or player who hits the fox most.

Following pages contain some more exercises appropriate to younger players.

IN AND OUT

4 players in 10 yd. sq. area, one ball. Start wide, pass slowly, all move in toward middle and pass faster. Players move in and out together, continually passing.



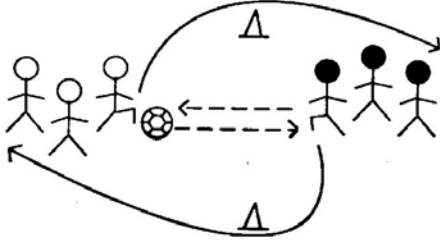
HEADING

Toss ball to sitting player, underhand & easy, five times, then change places.



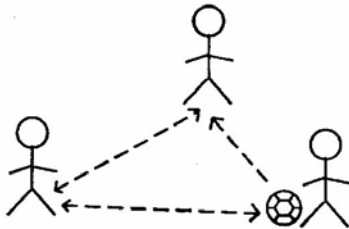
PASS AND MOVE

Two lines, one ball, two cones. Player passes to other line, then runs outside cone to end of other line.



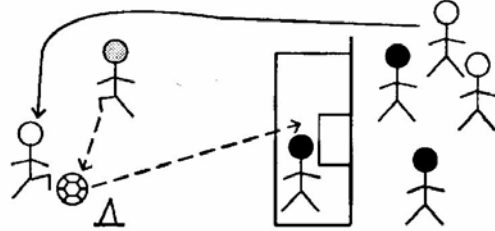
TRIANGLE PASSING

Player passes ball using "two touch" play and calls the name of the player for whom the pass is intended.



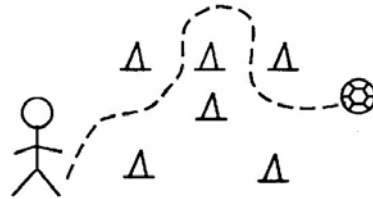
CIRCLE TO SHOOT

Two groups and keeper, many balls. One group is just a retriever. Attacking group circles from behind goal and receives ball from feeder at cone and shoots.



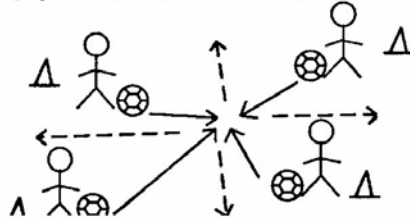
OBSTACLE COURSE

Use fakes to turn.



DRIBBLE AND EVADE

4 players, in 10 yd. sq. area, each with ball, continually dribbles while running at another player, fake, evade the player and dribble to a line of the area.



FOLLOW THE LEADER

Each player has a ball. Choose a leader, coach is ok. Leader dribbles all around field, with players following in a line.



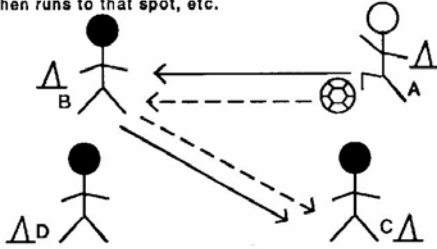
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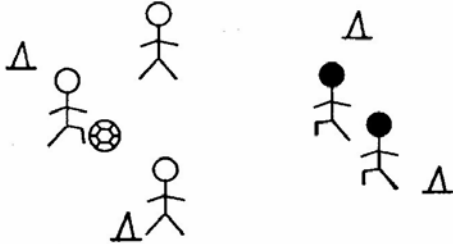
BEGINNING FOURS

Four players, one ball, four cones. A passes ball to B, then runs to spot where B was. B passes ball to C, then runs to that spot, etc.



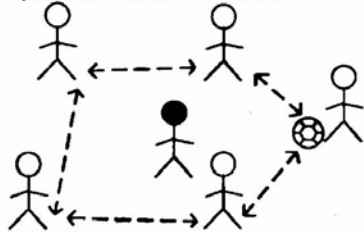
SHORT SIDED GAMES.

Always play with more offense than defense in a confined area. 3 vs. 2, 5 vs. 2, 2 vs. 1.



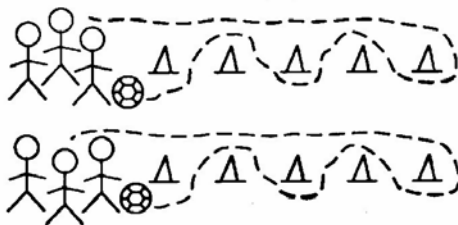
KEEP AWAY

Various number of players. Two and three touch play. Player in middle attempts to get ball. When defender gets ball, he or she moves to the outside.



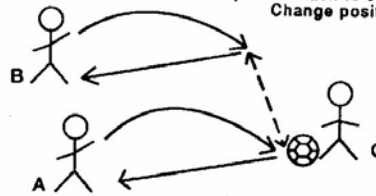
DRIBBLING CONTEST

Divide team into 2 or 3 groups. First team with all members dribbling through cones and passing to next player in line wins.



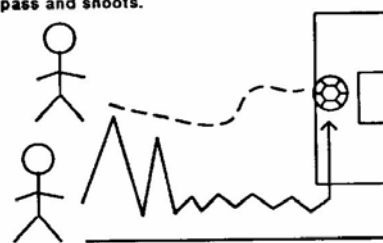
INTERMEDIATE THREES

Three players, 2 balls. Server A throws ball to C who traps and returns ball to A and then runs to repeat the sequence with server B. Throws should be high, low, soft, hard, etc. All types of traps should be used followed by 2 touch or 1 touch passes back to server. Change positions.



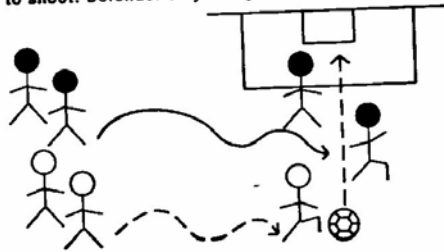
PAIRS

Two players, 1 ball, passing back and forth down either wing. Inside player breaks into penalty area and receives a centering pass and shoots.



CAT AND MOUSE

Two lines, one goalie. Attacker crosses goal area and tries to shoot. Defender stays on goal side and prevents shot.



VOLLEY PRACTICE

Coach throws ball up. Player must kick it on first bounce. Variation: Player must kick ball before it bounces.

