

# **THE CASE FOR THOUGHTFUL SOCCER BOOK 1: THE PLAYGROUND DIMENSION**

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# FOREWORD

**M**y journey through soccer, and soccer coaching, has had twists and turns, ups and downs, successes and failures. Now, I'm at a place that doesn't change much from year to year, team to team. The destination of this journey, as it turned out, was to make quality soccer more accessible to newer coaches and players. And the major mode of transportation on this journey has been what I now call *the playground dimension*. In fact, if you were to watch me coach, you might think, "He's a playground director, not a soccer coach!"

The playground dimension of sports was a big part of my childhood. Our side yard with tall hedges hosted touch football games and a baseball game called hot box. My dad put up a basketball hoop in the driveway and converted the garage into a tennis backboard. And in the backyard, a whiffle ball hit through the broad maple tree and over the fence was a well-deserved home run. Any tree, fence, or brick wall could figure in the rules for one invented game or another.

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Two blocks away was the elementary school where pickup football, basketball, and baseball games thrived. Many of my childhood hours were spent recruiting players, forming teams, fine tuning rules, and inventing strategies. No matter how many players showed up, we found a way to compete.

Most of my athletic development came from these playground experiences rather than from specific things I was taught. And although I played on my dad's baseball and football teams, the only practice activity I remember fondly

was playground-like. My dad would hit ground balls, some players would run the bases, and we infielders would try to get outs and prevent runs. All the scenarios from a real baseball game arose, the activity did most of the teaching, and the competition was exciting and fun. That's when I began wondering. Why couldn't entire practices be that way?

Youth soccer hadn't yet arrived in my hometown of McLean, Virginia, which is now a hotbed. I fiddled with the sport in physical education classes and a friend's back yard, but only after college did I compete in real matches through an adult league. The teams included ex-college and high school players but filled in their rosters with newer players like me. Competing every week without the help of coaches, I had to figure out the sport on my own.

When my son was old enough to play, I became one of those infamous parent volunteer coaches. Not realizing there were coaching courses and books that might help, I took my behavior management background and my appreciation of the playground dimension and began inventing. By the time my son left for college, I had my own picture of what soccer should look like and my own method for getting players to play that way. Essentially, I was compensating for my lack of soccer pedigree by relying on the playground dimension.

Convinced other newer coaches could and should do the same, I began writing *Thoughtful Soccer: the Think-First Approach to Playing and Coaching*. Published in 2002, it was fashioned as a training manual for newer coaches. Humorous fables convey each chapter's wisdom, the steps are easy to follow, and philosophical confrontations with the established model are tactfully avoided. I eventually realized, though, that such confrontations can't be avoided. By attending coaching courses and participating in an online soccer forum, I bumped into the infamous coach pyramid.

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The coaching courses began pleasantly enough in the mid 1990's, when I took the United States Soccer Federation's "D" License course. I learned to teach some basic skills and tactics and to use the coachable moment teaching style that would later figure so prominently in my method and my book. I even passed the course.

But in January, 2001, I drove to Orlando, Florida, for the week-long "C" course offered by the USSF. I figured I would be learning a more advanced way of coaching that might replace my own way. Due to the playing demands and the inclement weather, the week was a difficult one. As it progressed, I sensed my

mediocre playing skills were influencing perceptions of my coaching potential. There was a “What are you doing here?” aura, but I dared not scream, “I’ll soon have a book published!”

After surviving the week and, I thought, the licensing test, I drove back to Maryland. A month later, I learned by mail that I had *not* passed. At the time, this seemed like a rather expensive disappointment. But I had gained something more valuable than a coaching license. I still preferred my own method. My confidence in the playground dimension, enhanced now by the teaching dimension, was at an all time high.

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I eventually switched to the National Soccer Coaches Association of America (NSCAA) courses, hoping diplomas might be more hospitable than licenses. Although I did earn their National Diploma and Advanced National Diploma, and although these courses made me a better coach, my pyramid impressions solidified. My lack of playing skill again influenced perceptions of my coaching potential. And although the NSCAA was less interested in failing students who had paid \$1,000, one could still get a “Pass and proceed to next course” or “Pass but stop right there”. The coach pyramid had ceilings, and mine was far from the top.

Then there was the soccer forum at which I spent far too many hours during the 1990’s and 2000’s. My opinions—that practices can have multiple themes, skills can be learned by trial and error, scrimmage rules can lead to possession, and the middle fullback in a back three can operate in front of the other two—contradicted the established model and the coaches who were invested in that model. Mutually respectful debates usually gave way to heated arguments, personal attacks, and negative book reviews at Amazon. The forum moderator eventually suspended me for a month, perhaps to quell the angry mob.

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I’ve thus far spared the forum participants a return visit, but there was a silver lining. I experienced every possible objection to my model and learned to pinpoint why those objections weren’t valid. This revised edition of my book had found its philosophical spine.

Contemplating the pyramid’s power, I realized I needed more than a training manual for newer coaches. I needed a more philosophical version for

experienced coaches. That book would more boldly address the established model's weaknesses, and offer solutions to those weaknesses. It would also clarify the reasoning process that pointed so clearly to the playground dimension, with the teaching dimension being an enhancement.

I needed a new book title. *Thoughtful Soccer* suggests soccer that is filled with thought and thoughtful to others. It's what I and my players first called the approach when we realized it was intelligent and considerate. But it implies the established model results in thoughtless soccer, which was never my intent. That model just has accessibility issues, because it's based mostly on the teaching dimension. For accessibility, nothing beats the playground dimension.

That's why I rewrote my book and called it *The Case for Thoughtful Soccer*

# INTRODUCTION

This book presents an argument about how to improve youth soccer, and soccer in general, in America. To make that argument, I'll introduce some new terms like *playground dimension*, *teaching dimension*, *the coach and player pyramids*, *high impact skill activities*, *possession scrimmages*, and *multi-variable practices*. The argument is primarily about ways to coach youth soccer, but how to organize things at the club and societal level is also addressed.

When possible, I'll sort the argument into premises and conclusions. That way, people can more easily decide if the argument is a valid one. For example, I'll try to establish the premise that coaches of all levels, by using the playground dimension, can develop really good soccer players. And from that premise comes a conclusion, as indicated by the word therefore: *Therefore, all youth soccer coaches and clubs should understand the playground dimension and add it to their tool box.*

I won't argue that all youth soccer coaches and clubs should drop what they are now doing and do things my way. What they are now doing might be based on the teaching dimension, which also has great value. And soccer opinions aren't usually based solely on scientific evidence or solid logical arguments. They are influenced by our values, preferences, and past experiences. Hopefully, though, coaches and clubs will understand the playground dimension clearly, think critically about it, and make up their own minds.

**What they are now doing might be based on the teaching dimension, which also has great value.**

American Soccer

The Coach and  
Player Pyramids

Three Coaching  
Dimensions

Values and  
Accessibility

Chapter Overview for  
Book One

Chapter Overview for  
Book Two

## AMERICAN SOCCER

American soccer has made great strides over the past few decades. But from top to bottom, it's not yet where we would like it to be. The usual explanations and solutions aren't working yet. Should we give them more time, or might they be flawed?

**The usual explanations and solutions aren't working yet.**

At the top, American soccer lags behind that of soccer-obsessed countries like Germany, Spain, and Brazil. Our major professional men's soccer league lags behind football, basketball, baseball, and even ice hockey in attendance, television ratings, and player salaries. We produce few soccer superstars. And World Cup success still seems a long ways away.

Things aren't so good near the bottom either. Many of our youth coaches, having faulty pictures of what soccer should look like, let their players play bunch ball and straight-to-goal soccer where barely a pass is completed. Many of our youth players, receiving flawed coaching, aren't reaching their potential.

Obviously, there is a connection between what happens at the bottom and the top. Those coaches who don't understand or coach soccer effectively pass on their misunderstandings to their players and provide too little practice at the important items. Their players, regardless of their athletic potential or devotion to the sport, then have little chance of reaching the top.

The usual explanations of what ails American soccer fall into three categories.

First are the societal explanations. Soccer doesn't permeate our entire culture like it does in other countries. Our best athletes gravitate toward the money and fame of other sports. NCAA rules prevent our college players from receiving year-round professional training.

**The usual explanations of what ails American soccer fall into three categories.**

The second category involves our youth soccer clubs. They provide too many matches and tournaments and not enough training sessions. They place kids on teams and fields that are too large, resulting in too few touches on the soccer ball and too little goal mouth experience. They don't require their coaches to take all the coaching courses.

The third category involves our youth coaches. Overly concerned with winning, they impose adult tactical concepts onto kids. They stifle creativity by correcting the players who dribble too much or who only want to score

**And most importantly, they fail to provide the skill instruction believed to be absolutely essential.**

goals. And most importantly, they fail to provide the skill instruction believed to be absolutely essential.

Although all these explanations have value, hiding within them is a questionable assumption. Rather than being able to develop on their own at the playground and in the backyard, youth soccer players must depend largely on adults. That assumption, as we'll see, is contradicted by the playground dimension.

**Rather than being able to develop on their own at the playground and in the backyard, youth soccer players must depend largely on adults.**

Such explanations also shape our solutions. Most youth clubs, for example, now increase field size and team size gradually as kids get older. They also require their coaches to pass coaching courses before coaching at various levels. And in those courses, skill instruction is the top priority. Such solutions, though, haven't yet transformed American soccer.

## **THE COACH AND PLAYER PYRAMIDS**

American soccer does have a top and a bottom, and this brings a pyramid shape to mind. Actually, we can speak of two intertwined pyramids: one for coaches, the other for players. And these pyramids suggest a very different explanation for what ails American soccer.

**And these pyramids suggest a very different explanation for what ails American soccer.**

The coach pyramid is based to a large degree on the licenses and diplomas earned at coaching courses. At the bottom are the coaches who haven't taken any courses yet—the parent volunteer helping the local recreational team, or the teacher taking over the high school junior varsity because nobody with soccer experience was available. Above them are the coaches who have taken a course or two on site at their clubs, followed by the coaches who have passed some but not all of the residence courses. And the smallest group—the coaches with soccer backgrounds who have passed all the courses and perhaps coach for a living—occupies the top.

Then there is the player pyramid for our youth players, which is based on age and ability level. Once players reach a particular age, such as 8, their club begins sorting them into different competitive levels: recreational, recreational plus, travel, and higher. At the top of the player pyramid are the players selected for the state and national pools. Anyone can play in the recreational division. For the higher divisions, tryout and selection systems—elaborate but not always valid, reliable, or fair—have been developed.

The coach and player pyramids, naturally, are intertwined. The coaches with the best credentials usually coach in the higher divisions. The coaches with fewer credentials usually coach in the lower divisions. And the coaches who mostly are in the dark are relegated to the recreational divisions. The danger is that the weaker coaches and the weaker players will get marooned together at the bottom of the pyramids.

Pyramids of some kind will happen in any sport, because the more competent coaches at the top will be outnumbered by the less competent coaches at the bottom. But there are bad pyramids and good pyramids (Figure A).

We currently have the bad kind, as shown in the first pyramid. In quality, there is quite a distance from the top to the bottom. At the bottom, a lot of poor coaching is happening. The recreational mom and pop coaches there don't understand what soccer should look like or how to get players to play that way. One rung up, there is a lot of average coaching by all those coaches who have some playing experience or a coaching course or two but aren't putting it all together yet.

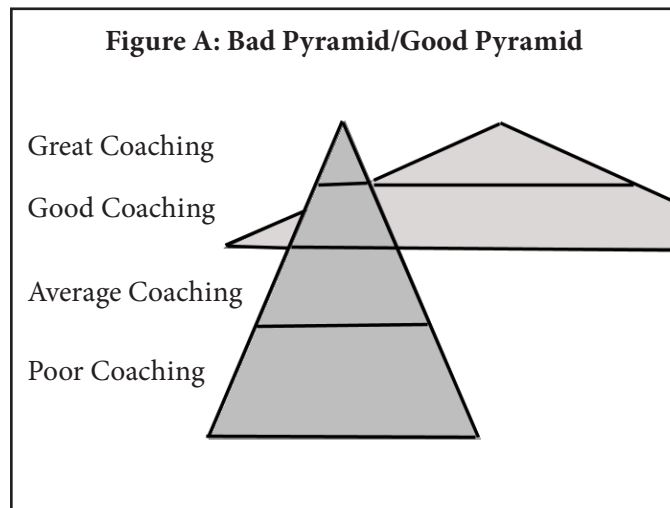
Here is the book's major conclusion. What we would like to see is the pyramid to the right. Even at the bottom, where newer coaches are working with newer players, the coaching quality is pretty darn good. Such a pyramid becomes possible with the playground dimension.

### THREE COACHING DIMENSIONS

Allow me to hypothesize three coaching dimensions which together account for player development. Each comes with a catch phrase.

The *teaching dimension* refers to how well the players are taught the skills and tactics, and the catch phrase is: *You have to be taught correctly.* The *saturation dimension* refers to putting in the hours and getting enough repetitions, and the catch phrase is: *You have to put in 10,000 hours with a soccer ball.* And the *playground dimension* refers to the instinct and creativity developed at

**The danger is that the weaker coaches and the weaker players will get marooned together at the bottom of the pyramids.**



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the playground when no coaches are present. The catch phrase? *You have to practice and experiment on your own.*

Currently, our coach and player pyramids are shaped largely by the teaching dimension. Soccer, it is believed, consists of many items coaches must teach their players. First come the physical items, like passing and dribbling, and then come the mental items—the tactics. Supposedly, if the coach doesn't teach an item, the players won't learn it. The coaches must learn to teach all these items by attending day-long and then week-long coaching courses, the latter spread a year apart. And the players must be taught all these items gradually over the years, in accord with an age appropriate curriculum.

**Currently, our coach and player pyramids are shaped largely by the teaching dimension.**

Next is the saturation dimension, for which the teaching dimension is usually believed to be a prerequisite. Mustn't players be taught the skills correctly and *then* be saturated with hours of practice? Otherwise, won't they just be practicing the wrong things? Hold on a second.

The teaching dimension is important, but putting all our soccer eggs in that basket has had unforeseen consequences. If coaches absolutely must provide expert instruction in soccer skills, those who can't will have little to offer.

Their players won't be able to put in the necessary hours of correct skill performance. And that's why those coaches and players get marooned together at the bottom of the pyramid, where the quality is so poor.

**The teaching dimension is important, but putting all our soccer eggs in that basket has had unforeseen consequences.**

Enter the playground dimension. The term isn't meant to romanticize all playgrounds everywhere, but to refer to the best qualities of playground sports. The players get together on their own, without coaches. No matter how many players show up, they compete—not only at the sport itself, but at games pertaining to different parts of the sport. The players sort out the rules, keep score, and resolve conflicts. They invent their own strategies and techniques. And they experience a level of fun that isn't possible when being taught by a teacher.

Most coaches sense the playground dimension. They want their players to practice on their own, and they realize competing is more fun than listening to a coach talk. But few coaches capitalize fully on the playground dimension in their own coaching. Why

**Why not pinpoint the qualities that make the playground valuable, and incorporate those into organized practices?**

not pinpoint the qualities that make the playground valuable, and incorporate those into organized practices?

There is a simple formula for doing so. First, picture soccer as consisting of fewer items: some things players must do individually like dribbling and shooting, and some things players must do collectively like keeping possession and breaking through the defense. Then, devise an enjoyable game or two for each of these items. I call *these high impact skill activities* and *possession scrimmages*. Finally, pack the same activities into practice after practice, season after season, using what I call *multi-variable practices*. When I use the term playground dimension, I'm referring to this formula.

It's the formula that lets newer coaches provide a soccer experience that is pretty darn good. Rather than learning to teach, they just have to learn to organize and facilitate the practices. The teaching dimension, which takes more time and money, can be added later. And all the while, the players will be getting those 10,000 hours in. The saturation dimension is embraced in a way that is not teaching dependent. Surely that is better than what is now happening at the bottom of the pyramid!

**Surely that is better than what is now happening at the bottom of the pyramid!**

## **VALUES AND ACCESSIBILITY**

When I'm criticizing American soccer or praising the playground dimension, I'm letting my values show. For example, one of my values is helping *all* soccer players reach their potential. I believe American soccer, based as it is on the teaching dimension, is falling short with that value at the pyramid's bottom. And I believe the playground dimension will lead to great improvement with that value. Your reaction to my ideas will in turn be influenced by your values. Perhaps your highest value is seeing America win the World Cup, in which case helping the elite players might be more important than helping all players. Or perhaps you value compliance with a coaching plan passed down from above, in which case my ideas will seem subversive.

**When I'm criticizing American soccer or praising the playground dimension, I'm letting my values show.**

I can't prove that my values list is the right one, or that it is better than your list. But if we state our values clearly, we can better understand how they are influencing the conversation. Here are some of the values that sway me toward the playground dimension:

## 1. Helping all players reach their potential

Anything that helps players reach their potential, such as giving them a lot of tries in a competitive setting, is a good thing. Anything that prevents players from reaching their potential, such as standing in lines or being relegated to a recreational division, is a bad thing.

## 2. Giving players equal opportunities

If players of all ages and ability levels can get equal or similar opportunities to reach their potential, that's a good thing. If players who are less athletic are relegated to recreational divisions where they'll have weaker coaches and practice less often, that's a bad thing.

## 3. Enabling players to control their own fate

If players, by practicing long hours, can control their own fate in the soccer world, that's a good thing. If that fate depends too much on the division or coach to which they are assigned, or on an ineffective tryout process, that's a bad thing.

## 4. Doing our best to win

This one is worded to put winning in its place. We can't ultimately control whether or not we win, for that will depend a great deal on which team assembled the better players. But we can work very hard to win, we can put in longer hours, we can leave no stone unturned, and we can refuse to give up. Such things are within our control.

**We can't ultimately control whether or not we win, for that will depend a great deal on which team assembled the better players.**

## 5. Loving what we're doing

Soccer practice should be enjoyable. If coaches and players absolutely love working at soccer together, that's a good thing. If they're just going through the motions, if they'd rather be doing something else, or if they're just using soccer to be popular or make money, that's a bad thing.

## 6. Competing against other sports and activities

Like it or not, soccer must compete against other things our coaches and players could be doing. If players get so much enjoyment from soccer that they don't have time for computer games, that's a good thing. If players drop soccer

for baseball or tennis because such sports depend less on biased tryouts, that's a bad thing.

## 7. Creativity and Innovation

If coaches and players are discouraged from thinking outside the box—from inventing a new formation or dribbling move, for example—that's a bad thing. If coaches are encouraged to think critically or to invent new activities and strategies, and if players are encouraged to play creatively or to invent new dribbling moves, those are good things.

## 8. Simplicity

Complicated isn't necessarily bad if it can be pulled off. But all things being equal, simplicity is a plus. If a complicated plan is needed to teach coaches to teach players all they need to learn, that is a bad thing. If soccer can be reduced to fewer parts, or if newer coaches can get great results without years of coaching courses, those are good things.

## 9. Cost effectiveness

All things being equal, cheaper is better. If coaches must attend expensive coaching courses to provide costly soccer experiences to their players, those are bad things. If coaches can get great results after a two-hour workshop, or if players can reach their potential with less driving time, those are good things.

## 10. Humility

Comedians shouldn't laugh at their own jokes, and soccer people shouldn't boast of their accomplishments. When coaches and players step on their neighbors to climb pyramids and then act superior, that's a bad thing. When the successful coaches and players humbly help those who aren't so successful, that's a good thing.

## 11. Accessibility

If there is one value word that summarizes all the others, it is probably *accessibility*. If great soccer is accessible only to the coaches with soccer backgrounds or to the players with wealthy parents, that is a bad thing. If great soccer is accessible to everyone, that is a good thing. And that's what the playground dimension can offer.

**If great soccer is accessible only to the coaches with soccer backgrounds or to the players with wealthy parents, that is a bad thing.**

## CHAPTER OVERVIEW FOR BOOK ONE

The two books were designed to be read in sequence. *The Case for Thoughtful Soccer Book One: The Playground Dimension* explains how the newer coach, though lacking a soccer background and the ability to teach, can capitalize on the playground dimension to develop skillful, intelligent players. *The Case for Thoughtful Soccer Book Two: Beyond the Playground Dimension* explains how the playground dimension can be enhanced by adding the teaching dimension.

Chapter 1, *A Two-Level Picture*, makes the distinction between picture and method. Coaches need a picture of what soccer should look like, and that is the desired end. Coaches also need a method to bring that picture to life, and that is the means to the end. The picture advocated by coaching courses has serious accessibility issues, while the playground dimension benefits from a simpler picture.

Chapter 2, *Organizing Soccer Practices*, examines some organizational options. The single-theme practice organization emphasized in coaching courses has accessibility issues. The playground dimension turns instead to multi-variable practices. Coaches should eventually learn both ways of organizing practices, but the multi-variable approach should be learned first.

Chapter 3, *High Impact Skill Activities*, explains how these unique activities form the building blocks for multi-variable practices. A detailed example is provided.

Chapter 4, *A Guided Tour of Hisa's*, provides high impact skill activities for the individual skills of dribbling, receiving, chipping, and heading. Controversies surrounding this approach to skill development are also examined.

Chapter 5, *Shooting, Playground Style*, explains how even newer coaches can develop talented shooters. Fourteen different shots to practice are described.

Chapter 6, *Possession, Myths to Keys*, presents an accessible picture of soccer's Possession Part. Bunch ball is explained. Possession myths are debunked. A new way to measure possession is proposed. And the eight keys to a strong Possession Part are provided.

Chapter 7, *Scrimmage Rules for Possession*, presents an accessible method for the Possession Part. The players compete regularly at possession scrimmages, which use special rules to strengthen the possession keys. The arguments for and against this method are considered.

Chapter 8, *Working With Brand New Players*, makes the important distinction between younger brand new players and older brand new players. Stepping stone activities are provided for players who are too young or unskilled to compete at the core games and scrimmages. A plan for getting possession started is discussed.

Chapter 9, *Large Scale Playground Dimension*, envisions how the playground dimension can be implemented on a large scale—in high school soccer programs and youth soccer clubs.

## **CHAPTER OVERVIEW FOR BOOK TWO**

Readers who have a grasp of the playground dimension are encouraged to proceed to *The Case for Thoughtful Soccer Book Two: Beyond the Playground Dimension*. That book explains how the teaching dimension, rather than being at odds with the playground dimension, can be added to it. Here is an overview.

Chapter 1, *Teaching Along With the Games*, makes the coachable moment teaching style more accessible. That style is viewed as a behavior change method consisting of thirteen steps. The three essential match chats are also discussed.

Chapter 2, *The Offside Rule's Impact*, explains how the offside rule impacts many of the items coaches must teach.

Chapter 3, *Breaking Through Simplified*, examines the Breakthrough Part, whereby players must break through the last line of defense to score. Even newer coaches, with the right activities and a little teaching, can develop that part.

Chapter 4, *Teamwork in the Finish Part*, argues that finishing has a subtle teamwork dimension. The chapter also shows how coaches of all levels can strengthen the Finish Part.

Chapter 5, *Defending, From Words to Games*, is the book's longest and most philosophical chapter. It argues that if soccer principles are to be accessible, they should consist of complete sentences and clearly defined terms. A picture of, and method for, important defensive principles are then provided.

Chapter 6, *Systems of Play Simplified*, proposes that a system of play consists of a formation and a responsibility plan. The chapter then shows how newer coaches can capably manage a system of play by understanding logical criteria.

Chapter 7, *A System of Play Example*, presents the Triangle Three as a detailed example of how a system of play can meet logical criteria. Misunderstandings about this system followed my first book, and these are addressed.

Chapter 8, *Anyone Can Coach Keepers*, argues that even newer coaches with no keeper experience can effectively develop keepers by strengthening the four critical keeper roles: Possession Helper, System Organizer, Extra Fullback, and Save Maker.

# 1

## A TWO-LEVEL PICTURE

Capitalizing on the playground dimension is like a puzzle with three major pieces, each explained in the next three chapters. Our picture of what soccer should look like must be simplified (current chapter), each soccer practice should strengthen more of the total picture (Chapter 2), and the activities in those practices should be competitive and enjoyable (Chapter 3). Each piece of the puzzle needs the other two.

This chapter's major argument goes like this. Coaches who have an ineffective picture of what soccer should look are unlikely to develop players who play in accord with an effective picture. Nor are coaches who are learning an effective picture little by little over many years likely to develop players effectively. Therefore, one of the first things new coaches need is an effective but simple picture of the entire sport. And that picture should address the individual level of soccer as well as the collective or team level.

### PICTURE AND METHOD

Coaching soccer is often made out to be a very complicated thing, requiring a soccer background plus years of coaching courses. But really, only two things are required: an effective picture and method. The picture, a visualization of what soccer should look like, is the desired end. The method, a way to bring the picture to life on the pitch, is the means to the end. If you don't have those two things, the soccer background and coaching courses on your resume won't save you.

**The picture, a visualization of what soccer should look like, is the desired end.**

Picture and Method

Soccer's Parts

A Playground  
Friendly Picture

Coach and Player  
Conduct

Summary

There isn't one best picture or method. If there was, all coaches would coach the same way and know what to expect from every other coach. Instead, coaches try to outdo each other by continually improving their pictures and methods. But some pictures and methods are better than others.

The picture should somehow break soccer into its important parts so that these can be evaluated during matches and strengthened during practices. Here, two problems are typical. Newer coaches might arrive at an oversimplified picture with too few parts. For example, they think soccer is just one attack after another where the ball always goes forward. And experienced coaches might arrive at an overcomplicated picture with too many parts. For example, they think soccer consists of a large number of skills and tactics to teach, one per practice. The playground dimension relies on a picture that addresses the entire sport, but simply.

**The playground dimension relies on a picture that addresses the entire sport, but simply.**

The method should successfully bring the picture to life. In other words, it should work. Some methods, unfortunately, provide too little experience in soccer's parts. Some involve too much talk and too little competition. And some are too complicated for newer coaches and players. The playground dimension relies on a simple, competitive method that regularly strengthens soccer's important parts.

## **SOCCER'S PARTS**

Every sport has parts that can be identified and practiced separately. Soccer's parts just happen to be difficult to see. Everything can look like a jumble, because the players aren't confined to positions, the action is continuous, and the exact same situation rarely occurs twice. So here's what soccer coaches and players need to do. Group all the possible situations according to their essential qualities, give each group a name, and figure out how to respond to these different situations. There are your parts. But there isn't one correct way to do this.

Newer coaches, as noted earlier, tend to see only two parts: an offense part in which the team with the ball tries to move the ball forward right away, and a defense part in which the team without the ball tries to prevent a score. But this picture has a serious problem. If the ball always goes forward right away, players from both teams will clog the forward path because that's the only way to get in on the action.

**If the ball always goes forward right away, players from both teams will clog the forward path because that's the only way to get in on the action.**

The congestion makes passing and teamwork impossible, and everything really is a jumble.

To be fair, newer coaches aren't the only proponents of this picture. It is prevalent in American soccer at all levels. U-little bunch ball often evolves into straight-to-goal soccer, even for high school and college teams. Players then turn to speed and aggressiveness to solve the congestion rather than intelligence and teamwork. How could so many coaches buy into a faulty picture of the sport? Perhaps they've never experienced a better picture, or perhaps they see everyone else playing the same way.

Our major coaching organizations advocate a more effective picture of what soccer should look like. That picture includes individual skill as well as teamwork, direct attack as well as patient possession. But it breaks soccer into several different skills (which I agree with) and many, many tactics (which I disagree with). That has accessibility issues.

Why are there so many parts to this picture? It might have to do with what I call the level of analysis, which for the tactics as well as the skills is the individual player. Skills, obviously, are physical things that individual players must learn and apply. They must learn to dribble, pass, shoot, and so on. But what about tactics? These are defined as decision-making skills that players must learn and apply. In a match, players must interpret the situation in front of them using various cues and principles, decide what to do, and then apply the physical skills. Not only are there a lot of cues and principles to consider. These vary with how many players are involved. So there are tactics for 1 v 1 situations, 2 v 1, 3 v 3, 6 v 6, and so on up to 11 v 11. And all these skills and tactics must be taught to the players, one lesson at a time.

Do you see the accessibility issues? Coaches must be taught to teach all these parts, which might take years of coaching courses. Newer coaches must begin with the basic skills, followed by the simpler tactics, rather than with a picture of the whole sport. Whatever lessons the coaches can't provide will be out of reach for their players. And when players have so many lessons to learn, one after another, how can they improve continually at any one thing?

**And when players have so many lessons to learn, one after another, how can they improve continually at any one thing?**

## **A PLAYGROUND FRIENDLY PICTURE**

Here is a picture that is just as effective but a lot more accessible. This picture depends a bit on an adjustment to our vocabulary.

There are two levels of analysis: the individual player and the group or team. I will call what happens at both levels *skills* rather than skills and tactics. The individual player has a few skills to improve at, such as dribbling, passing and shooting. I will call those the *player skills*. And the group or team has a few skills to improve at, such as keeping possession, breaking through the defense, and preventing the other team from doing the same. I will call those the *team skills*. Figure 1-1 shows the part by part breakdown.

**There are two levels of analysis: the individual play and the group or team.**

These skills aren't things that can be taught once and then left behind, like academic lessons. I will call them *variables*. If they are practiced continually, they'll get stronger. And if they are left behind, they'll get weaker.

The player skills are well known, but some important skill variations are often overlooked. Players must pass the ball on the ground and through the air, receive it, and head it. There are three variations of dribbling to practice: dribbling past defenders, dribbling for possession (also called shielding), and dribbling through open space (also called speed dribbling). And the variations really pile up with shooting, where at least fifteen different shots deserve practice time. Why bother with these skill variations? Players who can dribble past defenders might not do well at shielding, and players who can make volley shots might not do well with breakaway shots. Ability with one variation doesn't guarantee ability with the others.

The team skills are of a different ilk than the tactics from the established model. Tactics are decision-making processes at the individual level. To visualize the team skills, we must look beyond the individual players to the group and its major tasks. The resulting picture consists of interlocking, mutually influencing parts or dimensions.

**Figure 1-1: Player Skills and Team Skills**

	Attacking	Defending
<b>Player Skills (Individual Level of Analysis)</b>	Receiving	
	Passing	
	Chipping	
	Dribbling (3 types)	1 v 1 Defending
	Shooting (15 shot types)	Making Saves
	Heading	Defensive Heading
<b>Team Skills (Collective Level of Analysis)</b>	Possession Part (keeping the ball)	Pressure Part (regaining the ball)
	Breakthrough Part (breaking through the defense)	Contain Part (preventing breakthroughs)
	Finish Part (shooting or passing to score)	

At any moment of a match, each team will be in one part or another. The team with the ball must keep possession and move the ball forward (Possession Part), break through the other team's defense (Breakthrough Part), and deposit the ball in the other team's net (Finish Part). The team without the ball must prevent breakthroughs (Contain Part) and win the ball back (Pressure Part). We could also picture a Deny Part, whereby the keeper and defenders attempt to thwart impending finishes. A Restart Part, consisting of free kicks and corner kicks, requires practice time. And that's about it!

**At any moment of a match, each team will be in one part or another.**

We could tinker with the chart's details, by adding or deleting player skills or breaking up the team skills differently. For example, we could include a Transition Part or a Move the Ball Forward part. But that's not necessary if we practice transitions and moving the ball forward within other parts. We want to have a manageable number of parts so that we can practice them regularly, using fewer practice activities.

Where have all those other tactics gone? No slight is intended. They can be listed under the various team skills and coached along with those skills. Because every tactic one can think of is a tool for success in one or more of the team skills! For example, the principles of pressure/cover/balance are tools for the Contain Part. The principle of support is critical in the Possession Part. And penetration is what happens in the Breakthrough Part.

**Because every tactic one can think of is a tool for success in one or more of the team skills!**

This two-level picture has three big accessibility advantages. First, it helps even newer coaches pinpoint what's not working at the match—like a camera that zooms in to the individual level or out to the team level. Second, the picture creates fewer items to practice regularly—six team skills rather than sixty tactics. And third, newer coaches can acquire the whole picture very quickly—in a few hours rather than a few years.

How might coaches be taught such a picture? While showing video clips from professional matches to illustrate each player skill and team skill in action., the instructor provides commentary such as this.:

“What kind of dribbling is that? Yes, dribbling for possession! Here comes a sequence of 19 passes. Note the direction of each pass: east, south, west, north, south, east, and back to the keeper. Now that's a strong Possession Part! Here comes the Breakthrough Part, a pass through the last line of defense. But instead of shooting, the player passes to a teammate who has a better shot—the Finish Part at its best!”

## COACH AND PLAYER CONDUCT

How should coaches and players conduct themselves? That's another important part of what soccer should look like. Skillful play won't mean much if the coaches berate officials or the players get in brawls. And while skill mistakes during a match can be quickly forgotten, mistakes in conduct can have serious long term consequences.

The important thing is to have the right values in the right order. Winning makes a poor top value, because it isn't entirely within our control. Maybe the other team was just too good, or maybe the referee blew a call. And when winning is the top value, players might be unsporting in order to win. They might also lose their composure when they lose. A better value, moved somewhere lower in the values hierarchy, is doing all we can to win,

What if the top three values are playing safely, respecting others, and improving? The players will be less likely to lose their composure or get into fights and more likely to welcome and learn from hardships. And as a bonus, they'll be more relaxed and focused—qualities that facilitate winning. Humility should also be somewhere on the list. After a win, don't boast or do a victory dance on the other team's home field.

What role should aggressiveness play in a picture of soccer? Some coaches would turn their players into human torpedoes who aggressively win the ball and speed it forward no matter who is in the way. The all-too-familiar coaching pleas are "Win those fifty/fifty balls!" and "Put a shoulder on him!"

I like to distinguish between aggressiveness with regard to the ball, which is usually good, and aggressiveness with regard to opponent's bodies, which in youth soccer at least is usually bad. We want to close in on the ball to prevent open shots and win it back. But while running into opponents can disrupt and intimidate them, that's rarely worth the cost in yellow cards, penalty kicks, and injuries. And when soccer is played well, the ball moves quickly to open spaces—where there are no opponents to get aggressive with.

**And when soccer is played well, the ball moves quickly to open spaces—where there are no opponents to get aggressive with.**

If the picture contains good sportsmanship and a limited role for aggressiveness, the method should support that picture. When I speak to a team before a match, my first words are not about soccer but about conduct. "The most important thing today is to play safely, respect the officials and our opponents, and keep our composure no matter what." If those things go well during the

match, I praise the team afterwards. I mention good sportsmanship before many practices. And instilling a possession style, where the ball moves quickly to open spaces, also helps tone down the aggressiveness.

## **SUMMARY**

In order to coach soccer players effectively, we must distinguish between picture and method. Everything in coaching is one or the other. And we should come up with a picture that covers the entire sport in a simple way.

The picture of soccer that now informs our coaching courses and clubs consists of skills and a large number of tactics. Although this picture might be an effective one, it has way too many parts. That has led to accessibility issues such as difficulty strengthening each part regularly.

For accessibility, nothing beats a two-level picture of soccer. There are a few player skills to see at the player level, and a few team skills to see at the team level. This picture facilitates insight and allows all the parts to be strengthened more regularly.

Next, we need a method for bringing that picture to life.

# 2

## ORGANIZING SOCCER PRACTICES

**H**ow should soccer practices be organized? That is a method, rather than a picture, question. In other words, practice organization is not an end in itself. It is a means to the end of creating well played soccer and helping players improve. There isn't one best way to organize practices. Each way should be evaluated by how well it meets the desired end.

Coaching courses, I fear, might create the impression that every soccer practice should have one skill or tactic as its central theme. As the official playing and coaching manual of the USSF stated in 2007, "To try to work on several things at once is virtually to guarantee failure on several fronts."<sup>1</sup> But if every practice should have one central theme, accessibility issues arise. Working on several things during one practice isn't such a bad idea after all, once the playground dimension is understood.

### FOUR ORGANIZATIONAL PROBLEMS

The organization of a particular practice might depend on how well the coach can teach, how old the players are, the skill level of the players, and how many practices are available per week. It might also depend on whether the coach wants to fix one particular weakness, or make several things stronger. But regardless of the situation, there are four organizational problems to avoid.

Four Organizational Problems

Single-Theme Practices

Multi-Variable Practices

Concerns Regarding Multi-Variable Practices

The Circuit Approach

Hybrid Possibilities

Summary

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<sup>1</sup> Dan Herbert, *Soccer, How to Play the Game: The Official Playing and Coaching Manual of the United States Soccer Federation* (New York: Universe Publishing, 2007) Pg. 108

## **Problem #1: The players don't get enough touches on the ball.**

A great way to evaluate any soccer practice is to watch one player closely and count how many touches she gets on a soccer ball. If players get too few touches, they won't improve continually at soccer's important parts and they won't have as much fun.

There are two organizational ways to rob players of touches. The first is to mismanage the time. The practice doesn't start on time, minutes are wasted setting up the activities, the players stand in long lines, the fitness work doesn't include a soccer ball, and the coach talks too much. The second is to have only one ball in play rather than dividing into smaller groups. Suppose all 18 players participate together in one activity, with one ball in play at a time. That will deliver far fewer touches than three smaller groups, each with its own ball.

**There are two organizational ways to rob players of touches.**

## **Problem #2: The activities don't zero in on something important.**

Another way to evaluate any soccer practice is to notice the parts of soccer in which the touches are occurring. Does each activity zero in on an important player skill or team skill? Is anything critical, like possession, neglected?

An activity can provide touches on the ball and even be fun without zeroing in on something important. An example is a popular activity where players weave toward the goal and pass the ball in various patterns, leading to a shot on goal. The players get a little experience in the Breakthrough Part. But the activity doesn't zero in on that part, because there are no opponents or offside lines to contend with. And that same configuration of teammates and open spaces will never arise in a match.

To zero in, an activity should replicate the challenges of a particular player skill or team skill. With chipping, the challenge is to loft the ball over a barrier. With the Breakthrough Part, the challenge is to get the ball behind the offside line. Could players improve at the activity without improving at some aspect of a real match? If so, the activity might not be worth the practice time.

**To zero in, an activity should replicate the challenges of a particular player skill or team skill.**

### Problem #3: Too few of soccer's parts are strengthened.

Next, evaluate how *many* important parts of soccer are strengthened during the practice. If most of the touches pertain to only one of the player skills or team skills—for example, if the players dribble or shoot the whole time—too little of the sport will be strengthened that day. The disastrous long term consequences will be discussed in a moment.

To capitalize on the playground dimension, one practice should strengthen several different player skills, including a few different shots. One or two of the team skills, such as the Possession Part, should also be addressed. And yes, that directly contradicts the 2007 USSF quote.

### Problem #4: Too few of the minutes are spent competing.

When evaluating a practice, notice the practice activities that are used. Are they enjoyable competitions, or are they noncompetitive drills?

To capitalize on the playground dimension, most of the practice activities should be competitions. They should have clear boundaries and rules and a way to keep score, and they should produce winners and losers. Competitions breed better competitors. They also invite strategies and innovations, provide an objective way to earn playing time, and make practices more fun.

**Competitions  
breed better  
competitors.**

## SINGLE-THEME PRACTICES

Our coaching courses currently emphasize the *single-theme practice*, which has three defining qualities. One skill or tactic serves as the practice's theme. The activities supporting that theme are arranged in a logical progression of some kind, ending with a match-like scrimmage. And the coach does some teaching about the central theme.

Suppose the central theme is the skill of shielding (Figure 2-1). The activities could gradually include more players, more active opposition, or more decision making. During these activities, the coach could teach the players by demonstrating and making corrections. The last activity could be a scrimmage where shielding was applied in

Figure 2-1: A Single Theme Practice

Phase	Activity	Time
Warm up	Warm up introducing shielding	20 min
No Opposition	Drill plus shielding instruction	20 min
Passive Opposition	Drill where defenders apply a little pressure	20 min
Active Opposition	1 v 1 competitive shielding game	20 min
Increased Complexity	Scrimmage, shielding required	20 min
Match Environment	Free scrimmage, shielding optional	20 min

match-like circumstances. And the next practice would either continue with shielding or move on to another theme.

On the positive side, such a single-theme practice is based on solid behavioral principles—the italicized words below. The coach *models* a new behavior for the players, and gradually *shapes* correct performance. Artificial elements like grids, scrimmage conditions, and passive opposition are gradually *faded out*. The complexity and decision-making of a real match is gradually *faded in*. And once correct performance occurs in that final scrimmage, it is more likely to *generalize to* (carry over to) a real match.

The negative side arises when coaches believe every practice *must* have one central theme, that the coach *must* teach the theme, and that any theme introduced *must* be applied in a final scrimmage.

Here is why those *musts* are accessibility killers. First, practice planning becomes quite a chore. Not only must the plan be written down. For each practice, the coach has to come up with a unique logical progression and some new activities, because the progression and the activities for one theme won't apply to the next one. Second, the players must continually learn new activities. That gobbles up valuable practice time. Third, the coach must learn to teach each theme correctly. That requires expensive, time consuming coaching courses. Fourth and most importantly, there will be no way to regularly strengthen the important parts of soccer.

**Fourth and most importantly, there will be no way to regularly strengthen the important parts of soccer.**

That fourth point needs to be clarified. If the practice's theme is shielding, the next practice must either continue with shielding or move on to another theme. If shielding is again the theme, the players might improve a lot at shielding but at the expense of other themes. If a different theme is selected, shielding might get left behind and begin to fade. Either way, the players lose out.

Whenever I raise that concern, here's the typical reply. Players will continue getting practice on the first theme during the activities for the next theme. For example, if the first theme is shielding, the players will still do some shielding as the team moves on to another skill or tactic. But that argument doesn't hold up, and nothing makes the point like shooting.

Suppose the team has shooting problems, so the coach sets up an excellent single-theme practice on shooting. During that practice, the coach provides

expert shooting instruction. The players even practice several different shots: shots of a stationary ball, shots of a rolling ball, and volleys. To cap it all off, the coach gets all those shots happening in a scrimmage of some kind—no easy task. And at the very next match, one player converts a free kick and another converts a volley. Mission accomplished!

Even in this best possible scenario, what happens next? Three different shots were practiced, but there are still twelve others. The coach could stick with shooting for a few more practices, but then will have to move on. Shooting opportunities will arise now and then while other themes are practiced. But unless the coach deviates from single-theme practices, there will be no way to regularly give all the players enough tries at all fifteen shots.

**But unless the coach deviates from single-theme practices, there will be no way to regularly give all the players enough tries at all fifteen shots.**

## MULTI-VARIABLE PRACTICES

It’s important to understand how our picture of soccer can influence our practice organization. If our picture consists of a large number of teachable themes, we have little choice but to teach one theme per practice. After all, players can absorb only so much new information at once. And with so many themes to get through during the season, players must move on to the next one quickly.

With the playground dimension, that changes entirely. If our picture breaks soccer into a smaller number of variables, the name of the game is to strengthen each variable as often as possible. That’s the idea behind *multi-variable practices*. The coach selects several different player skills and team skills to strengthen during the practice: ball control, chipping, dribbling past defenders, and the Possession Part, for example. For each, the coach facilitates one or two competitive games by laying down the cones, forming the teams, and enforcing the rules. Teaching is welcome but not required. And subsequent practices are organized the same way, often using the same activities. The

Figure 2-2: A Multi-Variable Practice		
	Activity	Time
<b>Player Skills Half of Practice</b>	A receiving game (Soccer Volley)	10 min.
	Stretching, warm up passing	10 min.
	A chipping game (Air Control)	12 min.
	A dribbling game (Run the Gauntlet)	12 min.
	Three different shots	16 min.
<b>Team Skills Half of Practice</b>	Breaking through (Space Cowboy)	15 min.
	Keeping possession (Three scrimmages)	30 min.
	Free scrimmage	15 min.

coach might look more like a playground director than a coach or teacher, but the means reaches the desire end.

Figure 2-2 shows a typical multi-variable practice, in this case for a high school team. A few player skills are strengthened first, so that these can make the team skills go more smoothly. Why doesn't the player skill of passing get its own activity? Because so much passing will occur during the scrimmages. And although no defensive skills are listed, some will be strengthened during the offensive oriented activities. For example, any activity for dribbling past defenders also strengthens 1 v 1 defending.

How do multi-variable practices make well played soccer more accessible? Since the activities are competitive, strategic, and fun, players don't mind competing at them over and over. The coach and players have fewer activities to learn. Practice planning is simplified. While improving at the activities, the players can't help but improve at the variables targeted by the activities. Since the practices don't require teaching, any coach can use them. And players can even practice this way when no coaches are present. Multi-variable practices make full use of the playground dimension.

**While improving at the activities, the players can't help but improve at the variables targeted by the activities.**

## **CONCERNS REGARDING MULTI-VARIABLE PRACTICES**

Two typical concerns about multi-variable practice should be addressed.

First, won't the players be confused by all the topics thrown at them and end up learning nothing? That dire prediction doesn't come true, because the players are not absorbing new information. They are competing at games they are already familiar with. That's the kind of thing that happens all the time at the playground, particularly when fewer kids show up. They play one game for a while and then another, and nobody seems to mind.

**First, won't the players be confused by all the topics thrown at them and end up learning nothing?**

Second, since a skill is practiced in isolation rather than as part of a logical progression and final scrimmage, won't it fail to carry over to the match? No, because multi-variable practices do use a logical progression of sorts. Player skills are strengthened and then applied in scrimmages. Also, a logical progression is only one of the ways to get something to carry over to the match, as discussed in detail in the next chapter. For now, consider one of the fifteen shots.

The *One Hopper Shot* arises occasionally in matches. A ball bounces high in the penalty area, defenders are closing in, and the shooter must shoot with the first touch. Players who never practice this shot usually sail it over the cross-bar. But while a team can ill afford an entire single-theme practice for the shot, it can easily afford five minutes of every third multi-variable practice! All the players will then improve continually at the shot. And by the end of the season, someone will make one in a match—even if no instruction was provided and the shot wasn't part of a logical progression.

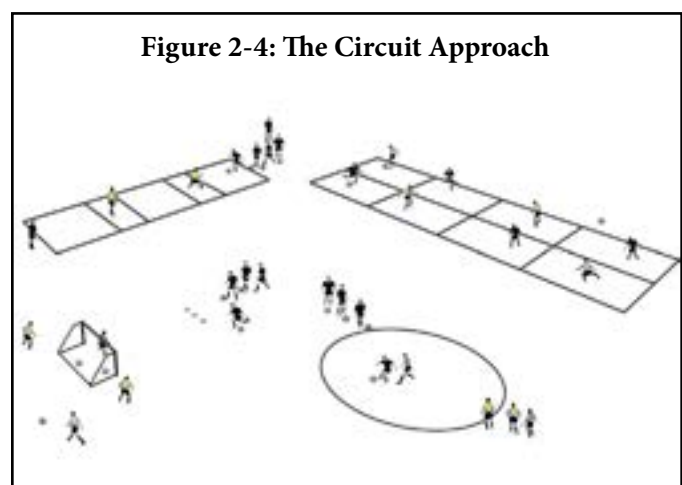
## THE CIRCUIT APPROACH

The circuit approach is another way to organize practices. Most experienced coaches, even those critical of multi-variable practices, are familiar with it. Surprisingly, it can itself *be* a multi-variable practice.

Suppose the coach of 32 players wants them to get through four different skill activities during a practice, but doesn't want more than 8 players working together at one time. If the coach divides the players into four groups of eight, and has each group competes at the same game at the same time, the coach will have to set up four identical fields—and a total of sixteen for the practice. That's a lot of cones to lay down and pick up!

With the circuit approach (Figure 2-4), the coach sets up only one field for each of the four games, preferably before practice starts. The players again divide into four groups. But each group begins at a different activity and then rotates to the next one. It's a great way to simplify the field setup, save time, and get players more touches. And as the example shows, it allows a high player/coach ratio.

Coaches who believe every practice should have one central theme don't usually object to the circuit approach. Yet that approach contradicts their belief. Each activity in the circuit might address a completely different skill or tactic. And even if the activities do add up to a logical progression regarding one theme, each group will get to those activities in a different sequence. One group might experience a logical progression, but all four won't. Clearly, the circuit approach has a multi-variable flavor.



## HYBRID POSSIBILITIES

Which way of organizing practices is better: single-theme or multi-variable?

The correct answer, of course, is neither. If the coach is able, some practices can be single-theme to teach something new or fix one team weakness. Others can be multi-variable, to keep everything equally strong.

Then what is the best mix between the two? That might depend on practice frequency. If there are only one or two practices per week, I believe multi-variable practices will allow more improvement in more of the sport by season's end. But if there are three or more practices per week as with a high school team, I might also use the single-theme approach as the need arises.

What might make even more sense is to combine the two approaches within the same practice. For example, after a logical progression of activities related to a tactic or team skill, the team could practice three shots that have nothing to do with that theme. Or after four activities that strengthen different player skills, the team could learn a new item via a logical progression of activities as in the practice to the right (Figure 2-3).

Figure 2-3: A Hybrid Practice		
	Activity	Time
<b>Multi-Variable Half of Practice</b>	Soccer Volley, a ball control game	15 min.
	Air Control, a chipping game	15 min.
	Run the Gauntlet, a dribbling game	15 min.
	Three different shooting games	15 min.
<b>Single Theme Half of Practice</b>	Instruction related to shielding	15 min.
	Ride the Bronco, a shielding game	15 min.
	Small sided scrimmage using shielding	15 min.
	Free scrimmage using shielding	15 min.

## SUMMARY

Rather than learning only one way to organize soccer practices, coaches should learn several. With single-theme practices, one theme can be covered thoroughly. But repeating themes often, and getting to enough of the total sport, are made difficult. Multi-variable practices get to more of the total sport in each practice, but less thoroughly. Both approaches have a place, and they can be combined in various ways.

Newer coaches should first learn the multi-variable approach. It doesn't require a soccer background, and the training can be finished in a few hours. At that point, the coaches would be able to provide quality practices to their teams, harnessing the playground dimension. Later, they could embark on the coaching courses which single-theme practices require.

# 3

## HIGH IMPACT SKILL ACTIVITIES

The next piece of the playground dimension puzzle is the practice activities. Not just any activities can be plugged into those multi-variable practices. The activities should meet a few criteria such as being competitions and enjoyable. I call them *high impact skill activities* or, for short, *hisa's*. There are hisa's for each player skill and for some team skills as well.

This chapter looks at how hisa's work, by dissecting a detailed example. But first, there is an important question to consider.

### MUST COACHES TEACH SKILLS?

The following argument is currently a cornerstone of American soccer. In order to play soccer well and execute any tactics, players must first have the physical skills—the correct body mechanics. Players can't arrive at the correct body mechanics by trial-and-error. The coach must therefore teach players the skills.

If that argument holds up, both accessibility and the playground dimension take serious hits. All coaches would first have to learn to execute each skill since you can't teach what you can't do yourself. Then, they would have to learn to teach each skill—to demonstrate it, spot player mistakes, and make corrections. To learn all that, they would have to take some coaching courses or at least immerse themselves in some soccer videos. Until then, their players would not be able to progress.

**If that argument holds up, both accessibility and the playground dimension take serious hits.**

Must Coaches Teach Skills?

A Hisa Example

Five Hisa Criteria

Stepping Stone Hisa's

Why Hisa's Work

Why Hisa's Carry Over

Summary

In the face of these grim implications, the U.S.S.F. coaching and playing manual recommends two stopgap measures for coaches who can't yet teach the skills. The first is to facilitate free scrimmages without teaching.

“You can do a great service by allowing for loosely organized free play during which time you (and other adults who may be present) supervise but refrain from instructing.”<sup>1</sup>

The intent seems to be to muzzle the less competent. But how could loosely organized free scrimmages alone do a great service? They provide too few tries at important skills like chipping, heading, and shooting. The skills that are tried will come out all wrong, if teaching is a prerequisite. And such scrimmages will likely consist of straight-to-goal soccer with little passing or teamwork.

**But how could loosely organized free scrimmages alone do a great service?**

The second stopgap measure is to recruit an assistant who can demonstrate the skills.

“During the skill development phase of practice, it is very important that players are given the proper visual image for the performance of a skill. You need to have command of all the game's primary techniques to be able to demonstrate them for the team. If you do not, recruit a player who can perform these skills to ‘paint the picture’.”<sup>2</sup>

Coaches without soccer backgrounds usually can't provide the proper visual image, which doesn't help their chances at coaching courses. And if an experienced player is available to demonstrate, shouldn't that player just run the entire practice?

Clearly, the teaching of skills can be downgraded from necessity to advantage. Players who are taught the correct body mechanics usually learn those mechanics more quickly. But players surely acquire skills in other ways as well. Were it not so, we should discourage players from trying skills at the playground until those skills have been taught correctly. We don't do that, of course, because workable skills can arise at the playground as if from thin air. The coach-must-teach doctrine is also refuted by high impact skill activities, as we'll now see.

**Clearly, the teaching of skills can be downgraded from necessity to advantage.**

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1 Dan Herbert, *Soccer, How to Play the Game: The Official Playing and Coaching Manual of the United States Soccer Federation* (New York: Universe Publishing, 2007) pg. 35

2 Herbert, op. cit., pg. 37

## A HISA EXAMPLE

*Run the Gauntlet* is a hisa for dribbling past defenders, one of the three major dribbling variations. Figure 3-1 shows the boundaries as lines drawn on the field. Normally, though, the coach would represent the lines by laying down disc cones where the lines intersect.

In this game, a dribbler must get through a gauntlet of two defenders, each of whom is confined to a narrow defensive zone. Those zones restrict how far the defenders may backpedal. Each dribbler therefore gets many tries at pushing the ball past a defender and gathering it in on the other side—the essence of this dribbling variation.

Every hisa has rules explaining the setup, the scoring system, and how the game proceeds. The rules minimize player arguments and make the game like a sport. *Run the Gauntlet*'s rules are shown to the right.

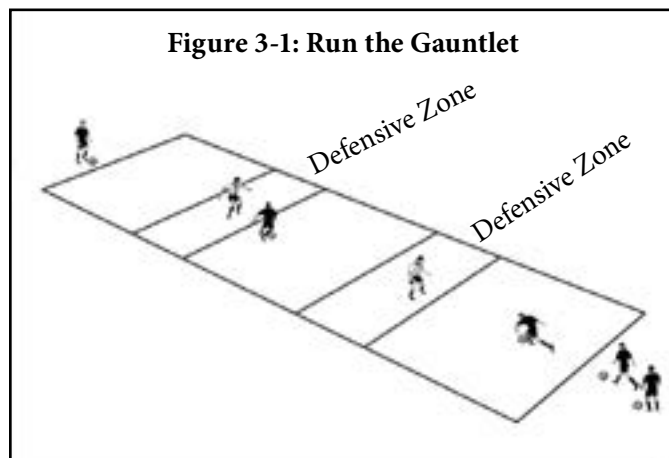
## FIVE HISA CRITERIA

To be considered a hisa, an activity must meet five criteria. Once understood, those criteria can be used to create new hisa's.

### **Criteria #1: The activity must be like a sport-unto-itself.**

Just like any sport, a hisa has clear boundaries, unambiguous rules, and a scoring system. It produces winners and losers. Like *Run the Gauntlet*, it could theoretically be played in a stadium with paid referees and screaming fans. This quality makes a hisa competitive, strategic, and enjoyable. It means a hisa can never fully be mastered.

Figure 3-1: Run the Gauntlet



### **Rules for Run the Gauntlet**

**Setup:** The course is about 40 paces long and 15 paces wide, with two narrow defensive zones.

**Starting Positions:** Two players begin as defenders, one inside each defensive zone. The others begin in a short line as dribblers at either end of the course. The defenders face them.

**Object of the Game:** The dribblers earn points by dribbling past both defenders.

**How a Try Works:** The first dribbler dribbles toward the first defender, who tries to tackle the ball away or kick it off the course. The defender may not leave the defensive zone. If the first defender is beaten, the second defender is taken on. If both are beaten, the dribbler earns one point.

**How the Game Proceeds:** As soon as the first dribbler has gotten past the first defender, the second dribbler begins so that two balls are in motion at the same time. After their tries, the dribblers reform a line at the other end and dribble back in the opposite direction. Dribblers who are thwarted also get back in line. Once the dribblers have had two tries, dribblers and defenders begin rotating. Once the players have had the same number of tries, the player with the most points wins.

## **Criteria #2: The activity must set up a barrier for players to surmount.**

The barrier in Run the Gauntlet is those two defenders in their defensive zones. In other hisa's, the barrier might be a box to chip over, a defender to shield the ball from, or a keeper to shoot past.

Such barriers challenge players to experiment with different body mechanics until something works. And players who overcome barriers many times in practices become confident they can do so in matches. After regularly getting by two defenders in Run the Gauntlet, getting by one defender in matches doesn't seem that difficult.

## **Criterion #3: The activity must provide each player with many tries in a short period of time.**

Tries, a deceptively simple term, are different from repetitions. A repetition can be a rote performance of some action in a noncompetitive setting. A try means having a go at one of those barriers. And the more gos players get in a short period of time, the better. Less practice time is used, several such activities can be packed into one practice, and the skill evolves more quickly.

**A try means having a go at one of those barriers. And the more gos players get in a short period of time, the better.**

Different hisa's might meet this criteria in different ways. Several balls can be in motion at the same time. Ball retrieval time can be minimized. And player lines can be kept short. Run the Gauntlet adds another time saver. The dribblers don't have to trudge back to the start of the course, because the line reforms at the other end.

## **Criteria #4: The activity must enable trial-and-error learning.**

Tennis is an example of a sport that is not conducive to trial-and-error skill development. There are countless ways to wield a tennis racquet, including some wrong ways that might seem to be working. A player probably won't arrive at a topspin forehand just by getting a lot of tries. But there are only so many ways to chip, shoot, or head a soccer ball, and the wrong ways rarely work at all. As players compete at hisa's, they receive what is called intrinsic feedback. Body mechanics that get the desired result stick around and evolve. Body mechanics that don't are abandoned.

I know from experience that this works well, but here's the best argument for skeptics. Players who compete regularly at Run the Gauntlet will gradually improve at dribbling past the two defenders. Players who improve at dribbling past two defenders can't do so without coming up with some workable dribbling moves. Therefore, players who compete regularly at Run the Gauntlet will come up with some workable dribbling moves, with or without instruction—like at the playground.

**Players who improve at dribbling past two defenders can't do so without coming up with some workable dribbling moves.**

### **Criteria #5: The activity must accommodate players of different levels.**

This quality enables a hisa to escort players to higher and higher skill levels. It lets variables be variables, improving continually over long periods of time. Without it, each age group and level of play would need its own activities.

Some hisa's work for all levels of play. For example, even professionals could compete at Alligator River, a hisa originally designed for very young players on their first day of soccer. Run the Gauntlet, on the other hand, will work for professionals but not for very young players. Try getting 5-year-olds to stay in their defensive zones! But somewhere between the ages of six and eight, most players can compete at the game.

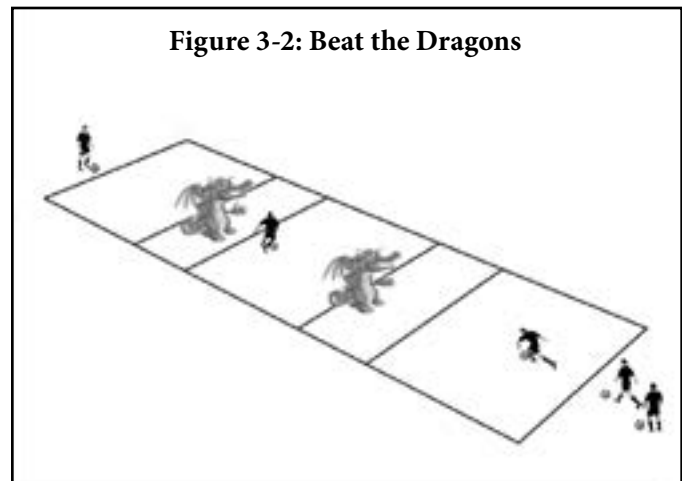
When players can't compete at a hisa yet, they can be moved in the right direction by a *stepping stone hisa*.

### **STEPPING STONE HISA'S**

For players who can't yet manage the rules or skills of a hisa like Run the Gauntlet, a stepping stone hisa provides a simpler version. It might resemble a drill more than a true competition, and be couched in playful terminology about alligators or dragons. But the intent is a serious one. Move the players as quickly as possible toward the target hisa.

**But the intent is a serious one. Move the players as quickly as possible toward the target hisa.**

*Beat the Dragons* (Figure 3-2) is a stepping stone hisa for Run the Gauntlet. The course for the two is the same. But rather than dribbling past other children who are trying to stop them, the players dribble past coaches or parent volunteers who are offering token resistance.



The adults in the defensive zones move menacingly back and forth and make dragon-like noises. Occasionally, they might even steal the ball. But most of the time they let the ball by so that the dribbler can understand the course and experience success. The line then reforms at the other end of the course, the dragons face that way, and the players dribble back.

As the dribblers improve during the practice or the season, the dragons can gradually provide more resistance and stop the ball more often. The players, in the meantime, are learning the boundaries, rules, and skills for Run the Gauntlet. Soon, the dragons can be replaced by child defenders and the target hisa can take over.

## WHY HISA'S WORK

Let's pause again for the skeptical. Any coach who uses hisa's for a while will realize they circumvent the need for formal teaching. But what, exactly, is the mechanism by which this occurs? I believe it has to do with two things: the nature of a soccer skill and the stages players go through when acquiring a skill.

What does a player skill like dribbling or chipping consist of? There is obviously a physical component, the correct body mechanics. And that component is obviously very important. The correct body mechanics for chipping absolutely must happen at some point or the chips won't reliably get up in the air and land where intended.

Two other components aren't so obvious. There is the aforementioned barrier to overcome: the space to chip over, the defender to dribble by, or the keeper to shoot past. And there is a mental component, as when a dribbler tricks a defender into lunging the wrong way. Hisa's get so much mileage from the barrier and mental components that the physical component can't help but follow along.

**Hisa's get so much mileage from the barrier and mental components that the physical component can't help but follow along.**

What stages might players go through when learning a skill? Most players first go through an experimental stage. For whatever reason, they haven't received instruction yet but try the skill anyway. Maybe they are at the playground with friends, or maybe they are too young for formal instruction. The body mechanics won't be ideal, but the stage has immense value. The players become more comfortable with the ball. They benefit from that intrinsic feedback stuff. And there is something very motivating about improving without the help of adults! Next comes what coaching courses emphasize, the stage of

formal instruction. The players receive instruction in the correct body mechanics and when to use them. We can then say the players have been properly taught, but another indispensable stage awaits: the stage of continual improvement. Recall the saturation dimension. A skill must be practiced regularly and strengthened continually or it will gradually weaken.

Hisa's get so much mileage from the experimental and improvement stages that the formal instruction isn't so sorely missed. Yes, formal instruction is an advantage. But a method relying heavily on experimentation, trial-and-error learning, and massive tries has some advantages of its own. The players become remarkably enthusiastic, confident, and creative.

**Hisa's get so much mileage from the experimental and improvement stages that the formal instruction isn't so sorely missed.**

## **WHY HISA'S CARRY OVER**

The next argument against hisa's usually goes like this. The players might improve at Run the Gauntlet, but they're not learning when to use the skill, and they're not applying the skill in a free scrimmage at the end of practice. Therefore, the skill won't carry over to the match.

That argument forgets there are more ways than one to get carry over from practice to match. One way is to teach players the match cues for when to use a skill. Another is to make the practice gradually resemble the match. Single-theme practices rely on those two carry over strategies.

But there is an entire research-based behavioral literature on getting things to carry over from a training setting to a natural setting. Two other ways are: make the training setting (the practice activity) more difficult than the natural setting (the match), and provide massive tries in the training setting. Players who dribble past two defenders a massive number of times have little trouble dribbling past one defender in a real match. I've seen this over and over, including with my son. We could prove it by setting up an experiment, but a simple thought experiment should make that unnecessary.

**But there is an entire research-based behavioral literature on getting things to carry over from a training setting to a natural setting.**

Imagine three coaches starting out with three different youth teams of the same skill level. Each gets three practices per week.

Experienced Coach A teaches her team the major dribbling moves and then includes Run the Gauntlet for ten minutes of every practice. That's ideal.

The players learn the skill from an expert, and waste less time trying things that don't work. Five years later, they're regularly dribbling past defenders in matches.

Experienced Coach B teaches his team the major dribbling moves during a few single-theme practices, but then moves on to other themes. What a turkey! The players only get additional 1 v 1 dribbling as other themes allow and during matches. These players have an initial growth spurt with the skill, but five years later they are not the 1 v 1 threats that Coach A's players are.

Parent Volunteer Coach C never played soccer and she can't teach the dribbling moves. She just has her players compete at Run the Gauntlet for ten minutes of every practice. Could her players not at least keep pace with Coach B's players? Might they not even surpass Coach B's players in five years, and rival Coach A's players? Of course, and that's a stunning victory for accessibility and the playground dimension!

Most of us don't have five years to resolve such empirical questions, but two things are certain. Coach B needs a better way to help his players improve continually. And Parent Volunteer Coach C can accomplish a lot more than facilitating loosely organized free play!

**And Parent Volunteer Coach C can accomplish a lot more than facilitating loosely organized free play!**

## SUMMARY

Hisa's are what make multi-variable practices possible. The two are inseparable. Only fun competitions that strengthen something important deserve ten minutes of one practice after another.

All coaches, regardless of their experience levels or philosophical persuasions, should learn a hisa or two for each part of soccer. The coaches just need to watch videos of the games, review the rules, or compete at the games as their players will. As a minimum, the coaches will have learned great activities for their single-theme practices. During a single-theme practice on dribbling past defenders, for example, Run the Gauntlet can be the centerpiece.

Players should compete at hisa's as soon as they are able rather than waiting until a particular age. If they're not yet able, they should compete at stepping stone hisa's. Hisa's and their stepping stones give players access to a higher skill level in spite of the coach or when there is no coach. They in effect let the game be the teacher—a topic we'll explore more fully in Chapter 10.

# 4

## A GUIDED TOUR OF HISA'S

**W**ith the playground dimension, coaches don't need a lot of practice activities because there are not a lot of things to strengthen regularly. Receiving, dribbling, chipping, heading, shooting, keeping possession, breaking through, finishing, containing, and pressuring. That's about it. The same activities can be used over and over because they allow trial-and-error learning, they escort players to higher and higher levels, and they are enjoyable.

The previous chapter explained a high impact skill activity for dribbling past defenders. This chapter provides a quick tour of other dribbling hisa's, followed by hisa's for receiving, chipping, and heading. The next chapter shows how to make fourteen different shots into hisa's. And stepping stone hisa's, for players who can't yet compete at the core activities, are covered in Chapter 8.

### DRIBBLING TIMES THREE

Since our picture of soccer identified three dribbling variations, each needs a practice activity or two. Players must dribble past defenders, particularly in the Breakthrough Part. They must dribble for possession, particularly in the Possession Part. And whether possessing, breaking through, or finishing, they must dribble efficiently through open space. These variations mingle together in matches, as when a player dribbling past a defender must also keep possession and move through space efficiently. But they can be practiced separately.

[Dribbling Times Three](#)

[Receiving, By Ground or By Air](#)

[Chipping Over the Crowd](#)

[Crossing and Heading](#)

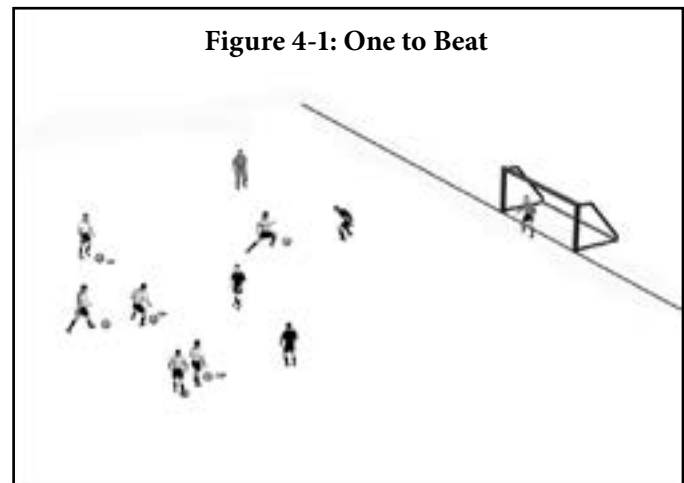
[Summary](#)

## Dribbling Past Defenders: Run the Gauntlet, One to Beat

With this variation, the dribbler makes a move on the defender, pushes the ball past the defender, and gathers the ball in behind the defender. The barrier, then, is the defender. There are two really good hisa's for this variation, and each sets up the barrier differently.

With *Run the Gauntlet*, explained more fully in the previous chapter, the dribbler must take on one defender and then another. The defenders can't backpedal very much because they are confined to defensive zones. On each try, the dribbler gets two chances to push the ball past a defender, and that push must be a controlled one. But two elements of a real match are missing. In a match, the defender *will* backpedal. And if that defender is beaten, a keeper awaits.

*One to Beat* (Figure 4-1) adds those two elements. The barrier consists of a defender who may backpedal plus a keeper. The coach or keeper yells "Go!" after which the dribbler has eight seconds to score. The setup and the rules transform the game from a standard 1 v 1 drill into a time efficient



### Rules for One to Beat

**Setup:** The rectangular field is about 40 paces long and 20 paces along the goal line, where a regulation-size goal or facsimile sits. At the other end, cones mark the starting spots for one, two, or three lines of dribblers. A cone along each sideline marks the starting spots for the defenders. A keeper guards the goal.

**Object of the Game:** A dribbler tries to score within 8 seconds by dribbling past a defender and shooting. Once all the players have had the same number of dribbling tries, the player with the most goals wins.

**How a Try Proceeds:** One of the defenders steps onto the field and moves to within five paces of the first dribbler, who then dribbles in and has 8 seconds to score. The dribbler may shoot from the outside or try to dribble past the defender, who tries to tackle the ball away or stall away the 8 seconds. The coach or the keeper times the attempt by counting to 8, silently or out loud.

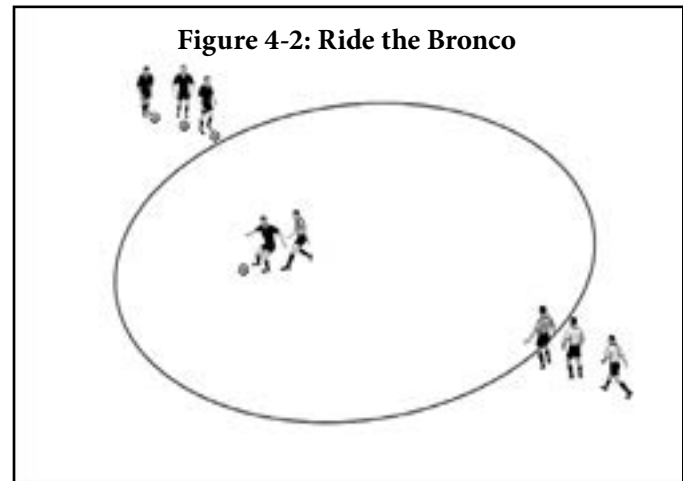
**How the Game Proceeds:** The dribbler then returns to the same dribbler's line and the defender to the same defender's line. A dribbler from another line immediately dribbles in to take on a second defender, followed by another attempt from another line and so on. Once each dribbler has had three tries, the dribblers and defenders begin rotating. When each player has had the same number of dribbling tries, the player with the most goals wins.

hisa. If there are a lot of dribblers, they can begin in two or three short lines as in the diagram. And the eight second rule prevents dawdling, eliminates controversy, and makes the game into a sport.

One to Beat illustrates another typical hisa quality: killing two or more birds with one stone. As the dribblers practice dribbling past a defender, the defenders practice 1 v 1 defending and tackling. And the keeper practices communicating with the defender, charging out of the goal when the defender is beaten, and making the save (see Book Two).

### **Dribbling for Possession: Ride the Bronco**

The next dribbling variation requires a word clarification. I take *shielding* to mean keeping one's body between the ball and a defender, usually by turning ones back to the defender. But I call the current variation not shielding but *dribbling for possession*. It can include shielding the ball but



#### **Rules for Ride the Bronco**

**Setup:** The playing area is a circle about 25 paces in diameter, represented by cones. The players divide into two teams of 2-5 players each, and the teams begin in lines on opposite sides of the circle. The players on one team each have a ball and begin as dribblers. The players on the other team begin as defenders. The coach keeps time.

**Object of the Game:** Each dribbler keeps the ball in the circle for as long as possible, by shielding it from the defender or dribbling in different directions. When each dribbler has gone twice, the teams switch roles. The team with the longest cumulative dribbling time wins.

**How a Try Proceeds:** As the first dribbler dribbles into the circle, the first defender enters the circle to give chase and the coach starts the time. The dribbler normally attempts to shield the ball, but may also dart about the circle or dribble past the defender. The dribbler attempts to end the try by getting two consecutive touches on the ball or kicking it out of the circle.

**How the Game Proceeds:** When the try ends, the dribbler and defender return to their lines as the second dribbler and defender take each other on and the time continues running. When each dribbler has had two tries, the coach announces the cumulative time and the teams switch roles. The team with the best cumulative time wins.

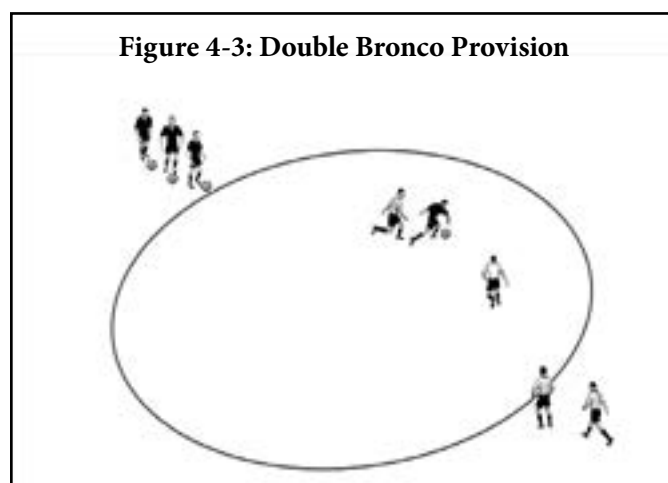
**Double Bronco Provision:** If a defender is taking too long to dislodge the ball—20 seconds or more, for example—the coach yells, “Double Bronco!” The next defender in line then joins the first in pursuit of the ball.

also dribbling around or away from the defender. *Ride the Bronco* encourages all these dribbling maneuvers (Figure 4-2).

The dribblers begin in a short line on one side of the circle, the defenders await on the other side, and the coach keeps time. The first dribbler dribbles anywhere in the circle as the first defender tries to steal the ball or knock it out. Those players then return to their lines to await a second try as the next dribbler and defender go. Once all the dribblers have had two tries, the teams switch roles. How make the game a sport unto itself? The team with the longest cumulative dribbling time wins.

With this game, the coach must emphasize safety and forbid fouling. The *Double Bronco provision* helps. If a defender hasn't dislodged the ball after 20 seconds or so, the coach yells, "Double Bronco!" A second defender then jumps in to help (Figure 4-3). With more experienced players, Double Bronco can itself be the hisa, with each dribbler having to fend off two defenders. And dribblers who can survive for more than twenty seconds can be awarded the Double Bronco Certification. When practice is more difficult than the match, carry over to the match is more likely.

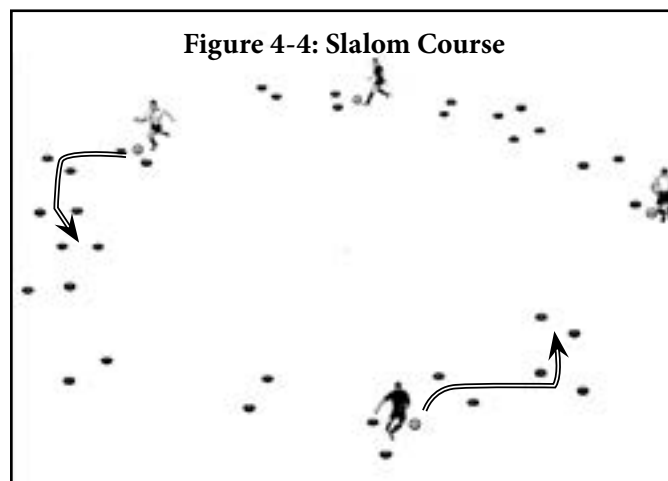
Professionals can compete at Ride the Bronco if so inclined, but very young players can't. A stepping stone hisa, Guard the Butterfly, is provided in Chapter 8.



### **Dribbling Efficiently Through Space: Slalom Course**

This variation usually goes by the shorter name *speed dribbling*. The dribbler is speeding through open space or speeding in on the keeper. Unwanted deviations in the direction or distance of a touch can turn a scoring chance into a turnover. I prefer the longer term *dribbling efficiently through space* because it includes darting about in tight spaces.

What should a hisa for this variation look like? The dribblers could just race each other straight to a finish line. But that wouldn't require them



to precisely control the distance of each touch. The game *Slalom Course* does require that, because the players must navigate through gates like skiers (Figure 4-4). The course should include straightaways that demand raw speed plus rapids that demand vision, controlled touches, and darting about. Because the course is circular, the players dribble continuously without waiting in lines.

Coaches can use their imagination to make the game a competition. Figure 4-4 shows the team approach white versus black. The players dribble until someone catches up with an opponent, earning a point for the team. The players then spread apart evenly for the next round. In the time trial version, each player is timed separately while dribbling twice around the course—a great activity for tryouts or the back yard.

Activities that involve dribbling around cones have gotten a bad rap, rightfully so in many cases. But *Slalom Course* captures the dribbling variation perfectly, and it carries over to the match. For u-littles, *Big Game Hunting* is the stepping stone (Chapter 8).

### Rules for Slalom Course

**Course Setup:** Create the first gate by placing two cones about 2 paces apart. Walk about 5 paces and create the next gate. Continue creating gates at different distances from each other so that they zig zag back and forth, resulting in a large circular course. A series of 5 or so gates can be fairly close together, creating rapids. Or 2 gates can be placed far apart, creating a straightaway.

**Team Version/Starting Positions:** 4 or 6 players divide into two teams. The players spread evenly around the course. Each player has a ball and is in between two opponents.

**Object of the Game:** Players earn points for their teams by catching opponents from behind.

**How the Game Proceeds:** The players all begin dribbling clockwise, quickly but under control, trying to catch the opponent in front of them. A player who misses a gate must return and dribble through it. The round continues until any one player overtakes and dribbles past an opponent. The players then spread evenly around the course for the second round, dribbling counter clockwise this time. The first team to 5 or some other agreed upon score wins.

**Time Trial Versions:** One player dribbles around the course twice as the coach keeps time. If a gate is missed, the dribbler must return and go through it. The time doesn't stop until the player dribbles through the last gate and brings the ball to a halt. 2-4 players may also be timed together, each beginning at a different gate and going around twice. As the players near the end, the coach begins announcing the time out loud so that players can note their times.

## RECEIVING, BY GROUND OR BY AIR

In a soccer match, players might receive balls that are flying through the air as well as balls that are rolling on the ground. *Soccer Volley* is a hisa for the former, and *Knee High* is a hisa for the latter.

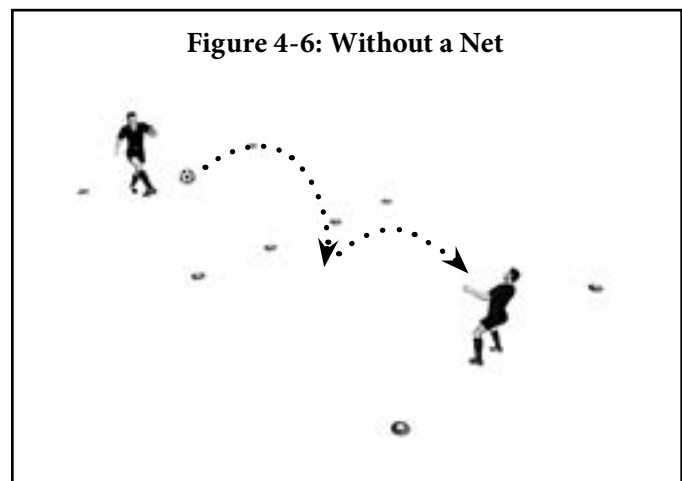
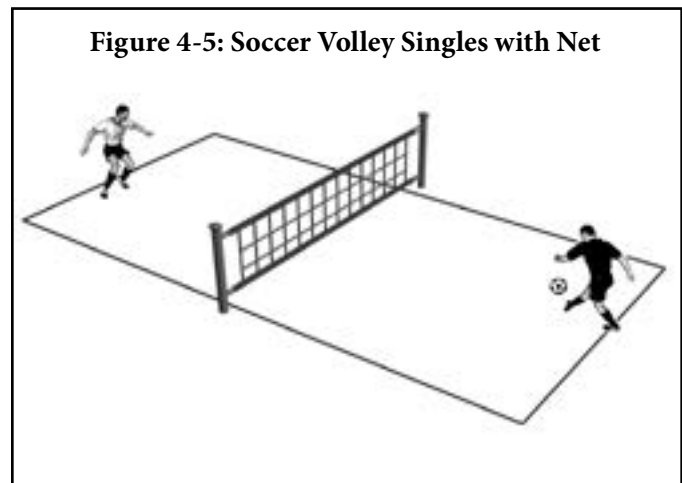
### Soccer Volley Singles

When the ball arrives through the air, the receiving player usually makes a first cushioning touch with the chest, thigh, or foot. That first touch brings the ball under control for the second touch, which is usually made with the foot after the ball has bounced one time.

How might this skill be translated into a hisa? Juggling isn't quite what we're after, because it's not like a competitive sport unto itself and the ball isn't supposed to bounce. What about traditional soccer tennis, where players send the ball back and forth over a net without letting it bounce? The activity requires a very high skill level, and once again the ball isn't supposed to bounce.

*Soccer Volley* is the hisa of choice. It is like soccer tennis in that players send the ball back and forth over a net. But here, the ball may bounce three or four times, depending on the variation. That creates match-like situations and longer rallies, and makes the game more accessible to newer players. The 2 v 2 variation works best, but 1 v 1 and even 2 v 1 also have value. A stepping stone hisa for younger players, *Settlers*, is explained in Chapter 8.

Figure 4-5 shows the singles variation of Soccer Volley on the ideal court, which has lines and a waist high net. One player serves by kicking the ball over the net. The other player may use up to three touches, and let the ball bounce up to three times, before sending the ball back over. The bounces and touches can occur in any order. The



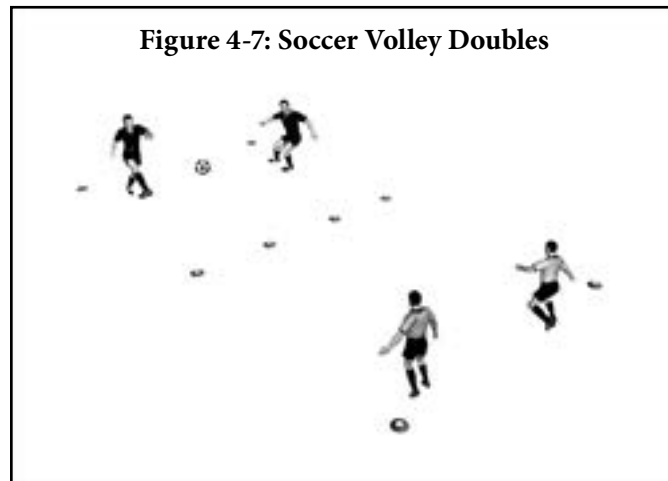
players continue sending the ball back and forth, using up to three bounces and three touches, until someone goofs up.

Fortunately, the boundaries and net can instead be represented with disc cones (Figure 4-6). Enough courts for the whole team can then be set up quickly. On such courts, balls sent over the dividing line must have some loft to them.

## Soccer Volley Doubles

If enough players are available, the doubles variation is more valuable and more enjoyable (Figure 4-7). In addition to passing the ball over the dividing line, players must pass the ball through the air to their partners.

Here's how a doubles match works. A player from one team serves the ball over the net. The other team now gets four bounces and four touches before sending the ball back, and both players must touch the ball at least once. Play continues, with four bounces and four touches, until one team goofs



### Rules for Soccer Volley Singles and Doubles

**Setup:** The court is like a miniature volleyball court, 16 paces by 8 paces with a knee-high net or line down the middle. One (for singles) or two (for doubles) opponents begin on each side. One player holds the ball, preparing to serve it from the back.

**How Points Proceed:** The server drops the ball and lets it bounce once before kicking it over to the other side. The returning player or team lets the serve bounce at least once and then plays it back, using up to three touches and three bounces (for singles) or four bounces and four touches (for doubles). Opponents continue sending the ball back and forth without exceeding the bounce and touch limits and using only soccer-legal body surfaces (foot, chest, thigh, and head). The point ends when the ball lands out or begins rolling, or when too many bounces or touches are used.

**Keeping Score:** The serving player or team, after winning a rally, registers a score and continues serving. The receiving team, after winning a rally, only takes over the serve. Games are played to ten or until the time runs out.

**Other Rules:** Players may retrieve the ball far off the court to keep it in play. When a dividing line rather than a net is used, a kick over to the other side may not be spiked. In doubles, both teammates must touch the ball at least once before sending it back over. However, a player may head the ball back over without first getting it to the teammate.

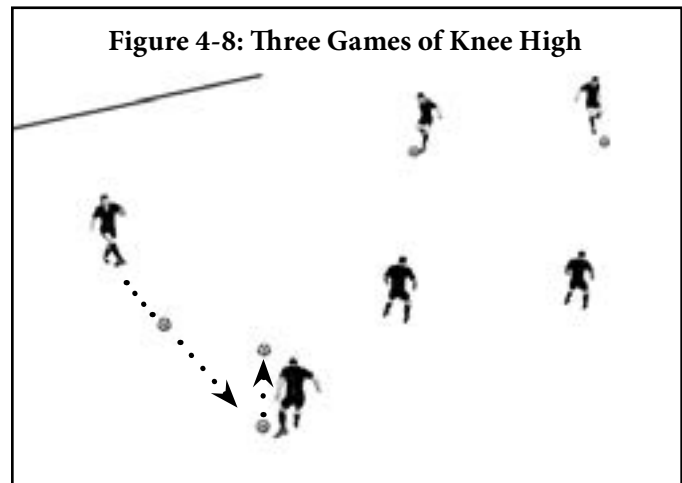
up. Amazing retrieves and rallies are typical, because players may run far off the court to keep the ball in play.

As players become proficient at Soccer Volley Doubles, interesting variations can be worked in now and then. For example, the receiving team can be required to make the first touch without letting the ball bounce. Or the team sending the ball over can be required to do so with the head or with the weaker foot.

## Knee High

The player receives a pass that is rolling, and after the first touch the ball bounces above the player's knee or even the player's head. A precious moment, and maybe even the ball, is lost. *Knee High* is a quick and easy game for changing that habit.

No field setup is required. The players pair off, and each pair passes the ball back and forth on the ground with pace using two touches. The receiving player must cushion the first touch without letting the ball bounce higher than the knee. Figure 4-8 shows a rule violation, after which the passing player earns a point.



### Rules for Knee High

**Setup:** The players pair off, one soccer ball per pair. One of the groups may have three players if necessary. The players begin about 15 paces apart.

**How a Try Proceeds:** The player with the ball sends a push pass to the other player, who tries to settle it with one touch and then pass it back. A pass may have some pace on it, but must bounce at least twice before reaching the opponent. If the receiving player's first touch allows the ball to bounce above knee height, the passing player receives a point. Errant passes and passes that don't roll along the ground are do-overs.

**How the Game Proceeds:** The players announce the score after each point, and then resume passing the ball back and forth. The game continues until the time is up or some target score is reached. The players may gradually move further apart.

**Tournament Version:** Four or more pairs compete at once. New matches begin every three minutes, with winners then playing each other and losers entering a consolation bracket. If a match is tied when the time is up, one sudden death point determines the winner.

Knee high is a nice game to include in a warm up. It requires no cones or lines, everyone can compete at the same time, and it only takes a few minutes. The results also carry over to the match, where those annoying knee high bounces will happen less often.

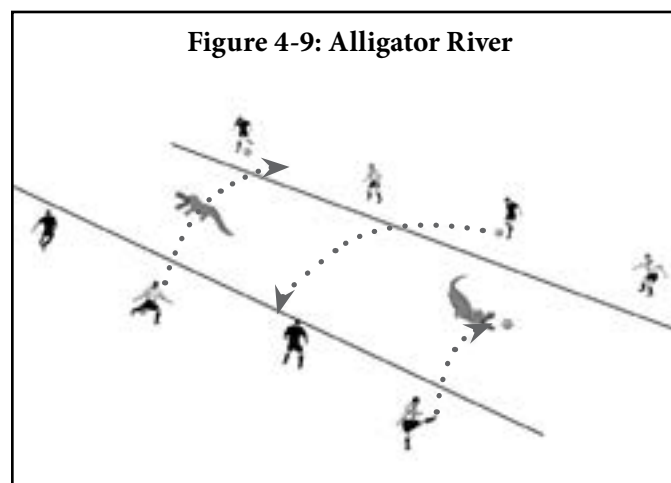
There is one more component of receiving balls on the ground that is begging for a hisa. The first touch might need to propel the ball in any of the four directions. If anyone can think up a hisa for this, please let me know. I'll add it to this book and credit the inventor.

## CHIPPING OVER THE CROWD

Chipping the ball through the air is an important skill that newer coaches and players tend to neglect. It's important because it can preserve possession, launch a breakthrough, or set up a finish. Why is it often neglected? Single-theme practices on other topics might not provide any chipping tries. The same is often true of unstructured free scrimmages. Here are two chipping hisa's, each providing a different barrier to chip over.

### Alligator River

The easier of the two, *Alligator River* has the distinction of being the hisa with the most reach. It originated as a stepping stone activity to get



### Rules for Alligator River

**Setup:** Two parallel lines of cones, 10 to 30 paces apart, represent a river to chip over. The width depends on the leg strength of the players. The players pair off into teams, with one teammate on each side of the river and one ball per pair. Younger players may be told that the river is infested with alligators that will eat chips that land short.

**How the Game Proceeds:** All the teams begin chipping for points at the same time. The ball must be moving when it is chipped, must reach the other side in the air, and be settled there with two touches before it stops rolling in order to score a point. After each successful chip, a team must loudly announce its score. The first team to an agreed-upon score, or the team with the most points after three minutes, wins. To strengthen the weaker foot, require that half the tries or the last two points be made with that foot.

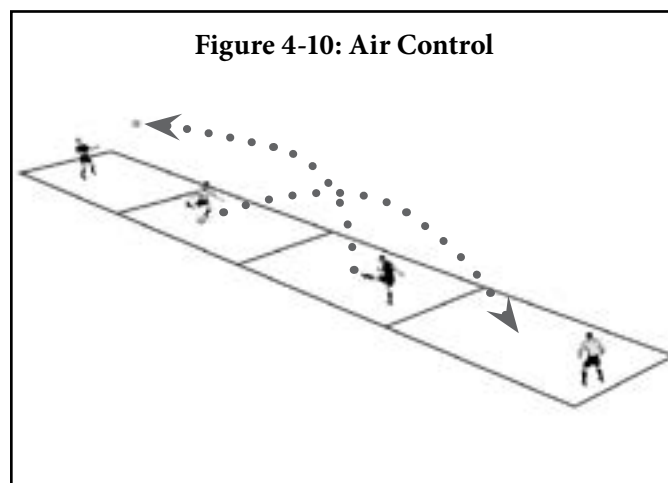
younger players chipping. But it's also perfectly suited for more experienced players—with or without the alligator theme.

A river, the width of which depends on leg strength, is represented by cones (Figure 4-9). The players pair off, and the pairs all begin chipping at the same time. Chips that don't make it over the river are devoured by alligators. Chips that are settled with two touches after making it over the river earn a point. As players improve during the season, the river can be widened.

## Air Control

For *Air Control*, a player must chip over an opponent to a distant teammate (Figure 4-10). The barrier, therefore, is that opponent. The game requires a higher skill level than Alligator River, because unskilled chippers will clunk each other from behind.

In the figure, the players in white are chipping back and forth for points while the players in black are doing the same. To count, the chip must reach the teammate's box in the air and be successfully settled there. Since both teams are chipping at the same time, many tries are provided. Players in the middle boxes may also pause to snatch a chip from the other team and prevent a point.



### Rules for Air Control

**Setup:** A court consists of four boxes in a long row. Each box is about 10 paces wide and 15 – 25 paces long depending on the skill level. Players pair off into teams, with two teams competing on each court. Each player occupies a box two boxes away from a teammate, with an opponent's box in between. Each team has a ball.

**Object of the Game:** Teams score points by chipping back and forth over the opponent's box. The first team to 10, or the team with the most points when the time is up, wins.

**How the Game Proceeds:** Both teams begin chipping at the same time. The ball must be moving when it's chipped, reach the teammate's box in the air, and be settled in that box with two touches using only soccer-legal body surfaces. The opponent may prevent a point by reaching up to grab or punch the chip, but must give the ball right back. Players must alternate left-footed and right-footed chips. Each time a point is earned, the team must loudly announce its total.

Air Control is trial-and-error at its best. Players are very motivated to get their chips up into the air to avoid the embarrassment of clunking an opponent on the backside. They quickly learn to approach the ball from the side and to get the instep under the ball. If the coach provides such tips, all the better. As the players improve and age, the boxes can be enlarged to require longer chips.

I've never seen a player suffer pain or injury due to an errant chip during this game, but it's theoretically possible. Players who can't yet get loft on their chips should therefore chip over alligators rather than humans.

## CROSSING AND HEADING

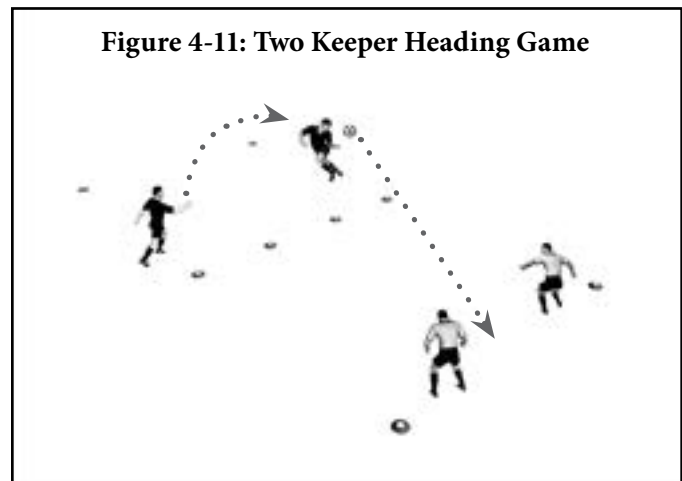
Teams that can cross balls through the air into the penalty area and head them on goal have an important way to score goals. But practicing that is a challenge. Heading can lead to headaches or even concussions. As precautions, players shouldn't head at all until they are old enough. Once they begin heading, the balls shouldn't be over inflated. And often, the balls can be tossed from in close rather than kicked from a distance—a feature of the next two hisa's.

### Two Keeper Heading Game

This safe, efficient game fits well after Soccer Volley, because it uses the same court (Figure 4-11). The two players on one side try to score with a header while the two players on the other side act as keepers. Players must stay on their own side of the dividing line, and the two cones at either end represent the goals.

Here's the gist. One player tosses the ball out in front of her partner, who runs forward and heads the ball toward the goal. Scoring on two keepers is difficult, and one of them will usually make the save. That player then tosses to her partner for a heading attempt in the opposite direction. Little time is wasted retrieving balls, players get many heading tries, and each goal is cause for celebration.

During a soccer match, a few different heading variations might arise. Rather than standing, the player might have to leap in the air or dive on



the ground in order to head. And rather than heading a line drive, the player might head the ball down into the ground—a difficult shot for any keeper to handle. Each of these variations can be added to the Two Keeper Heading Game.

### Rules for the Two Keeper Heading Game

**Setup:** The two cones at each end of a Soccer Volley court represent a large goal. The goals may be widened to allow more scoring. Two teams of two compete from opposite sides of the dividing line.

**How the Game Proceeds:** One player tosses the ball out in front of a teammate, who tries to head it through the goal where two opponents act as keepers. Either keeper may catch, punch, or kick the ball to prevent a score. The keepers then become the heading team, one tossing the ball out in front of the other for a heading attempt, as the other two are keepers. Each heading attempt must come from behind the dividing line. The teams continue taking turns heading until the time runs out, and the team with the most points wins.

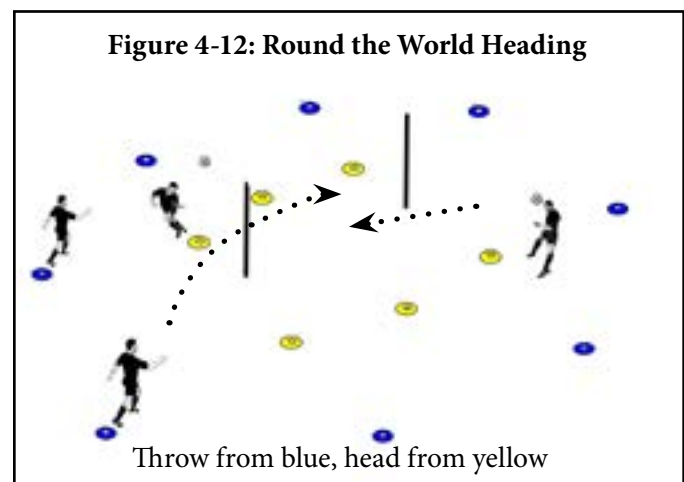
**Other Rules:** Two-points are awarded if a keeper, instead of making a save, heads the ball directly back through the other team's goal. Two-points are also earned by heading the toss back to the tossing player, who then heads it through. Other conditions can be added, such as leaping headers only, diving headers only, or a condition that a header must bounce before going through the goal.

### Round the World Heading

During a soccer match, the ball to be headed might arrive from any direction, requiring different angles of deflection off the head. *Round the World Heading* provides practice with all these angles (Figure 4-12). Players again toss to their partners from in close. But this time, several teams are heading at the same time on one court and there are no keepers.

Tosses from different angles are required. The blue cones are throwing spots while the yellow cones are heading spots. In other words, a player at a blue cone tosses to a teammate at a yellow cone.

They keep doing so until the teammate puts a header through the goal. Then, they quickly rotate through the other possible tossing and heading spots, scoring a goal from each. A player must therefore make 12 successful headers, after which the teammates switch roles. The first team to



make all 24 headers wins. One team's headers of course go over to teams on the other side, simplifying ball retrieval.

### Rules for Round the World Heading

**Setup:** Two cones or poles, about 12 paces apart, represent a goal that can be scored on from either side. Players pair off into teams, with 1-3 teams heading from each side of the goal. Headers that miss therefore go over to teams on the other side. On each side, three cones represent the heading spots (H in the figure), and four cones represent the tossing spots (T in the figure). There are no keepers.

**How the Game Proceeds:** All the teams begin heading at the same time, with one player tossing from a tossing spot and the teammate heading from a heading spot. The toss may be out in front of the heading player a bit. The teammates must continue tossing and heading from the same spots until a header goes through the goal. The team then moves on to the next tossing and/or heading spots. Each player must convert 4 headers from each heading spot—1 per throwing spot—for a total of 24 goals per team. The first team to do so wins. The tossing and heading spots may be covered in any order.

### Bombs Away: Crossing and Heading Combined

*Bombs Away*, a player favorite, combines heading and crossing into one game. It recreates those heroic penalty area moments when the ball comes flying in. And since it doesn't require much running, it's ideal for hot days and match warm ups.

The setup will seem confusing at first. There are two stations for chipping from the corner (also known as crossing) and two for heading. There is also an arc-shaped protected area that only the keeper may occupy. In Figure 4-13, a player in black crosses from the right corner to teammates at the far post and then gets back in line. Any of the teammates may score with a header or a one-touch shot. A header counts as two points while other shots count as one. The white team then crosses with the left foot from the left corner, the black team goes again, and so on, the tries following each other in quick succession. If a cross is short, which often happens with newer players, the other team may head or shoot the ball for points.

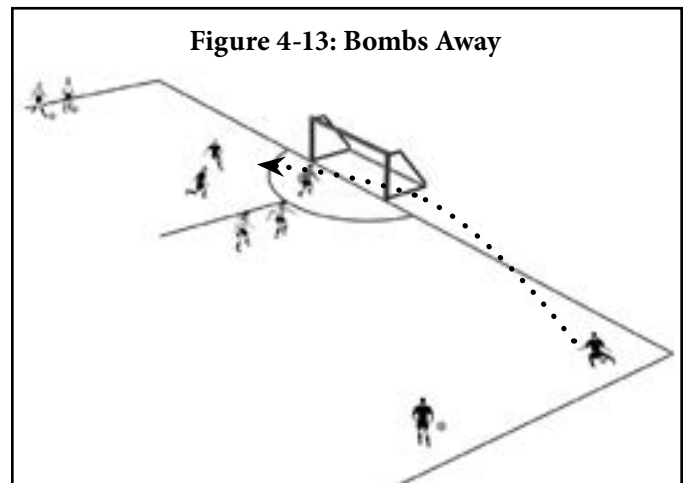


Figure 4-13: Bombs Away

The players rotate to a new station every two minutes, so everyone crosses with both feet and gets heading attempts. After the four rotations, the team with the most points wins. The keeper, in the meantime, practices saving shots and snaring or punching crosses.

Bombs Away has some elements that are not match realistic. The keeper is confined to the protected area, the chipping and heading players are not opposed, and the heading players might just be standing in one place rather than making runs. The tradeoff is that everyone gets so many tries at crossing and heading with little risk of injury.

Coaches who prefer can use the more match realistic version. Just remove the keeper zone and the line down the middle, and let the keeper, the shooters, and defenders go where they please. When one team crosses and tries to score, the other team practices defensive headers. The tradeoff here is that the game isn't quite as safe, and players get fewer heading attempts on goal.

### Rules for the Bombs Away

**Setup:** The field consists of a goal, two shooting stations in front of the goal, and two crossing stations in the corners. The players divide into two teams of 2 to 8 players. Half of a team's players begin at one of the crossing stations, crossing balls in to the penalty area. The other half begin in the heading station at the far post. A dividing line separates the two shooting areas. The keeper, from within the are-shape protected area, tries to prevent either team from scoring. Shooters may not cross the dividing line or enter the keeper area.

**How a Round Proceeds:** A player from the right corner gets the ball moving, crosses it with the right foot into the penalty area, and then gets back in line. Ideally, the cross makes it to teammates at the far post for a header or one-touch shot. But if the cross is short, an opponent at the near post may shoot it. Headers count two points, while other successful shots count one point. If a shot is successful, a team shouts out its current score. A player from the left corner then immediately crosses with the left foot, and so on for two and a half minutes.

**How the Players Rotate:** When a round ends, the players rotate to the next station. First, they swap places with their teammates. Then they rotate to the two stations initially occupied by opponents. After all players have been to all four stations, the team with the most points wins.

## SUMMARY

Thanks to high impact skill activities, it should be obvious that several different skills can be strengthened equally during one practice. Players have

no problem playing Soccer Volley for ten minutes, followed by Air Control and Run the Gauntlet. Rather than receiving three different lessons, which might be confusing, the players are competing at three different games, which is enjoyable. That means three or more of these games can be packed into multi-variable practices. And how could players improve at a skill without improving at the targeted skill once the match arrives?

To reach an adequate skill level, players need to put in many, many hours with each skill. Like a spoonful of sugar, hisa's help that medicine go down smoothly. All players, regardless of age and skill level, prefer enjoyable competitions to noncompetitive drills.

**Like a spoonful of sugar,  
hisa's help that medicine  
go down smoothly.**

I'm not saying that all coaches should use these exact same activities, with the exact same rules. Activities have a way of evolving in unpredictable directions when in the hands of different coaches and players, and that is fine. Also, coaches will hopefully invent new high impact skill activities and share these with the soccer world. But if coaches hope to capitalize on the playground dimension, they should get a handle on the hisa criteria explained in the previous chapter. The activities must provide many tries, allow trial-and-error learning, and escort players to higher and higher levels.

# 5

## SHOOTING, PLAYGROUND STYLE

**T**he teaching dimension and the playground dimension both have value. Multi-variable practices and single theme practices both have value. But with the player skill of shooting, the playground dimension and multi-variable practices are indispensable even for experienced players. There are a lot of different shots to practice, players should practice them regularly, and the playground dimension makes this possible.

Here's the problem. Many of our youth players don't get enough shooting practice. They practice too few of the different shots. And they rarely if ever practice shooting with the weaker foot.

There are two major reasons for this neglect. First, since shooting takes up a small percentage of the match time, coaches give shooting a small percentage of the practice time. That's a mistake, because shooting is disproportionately important. One shot missed or made will often decide the match. Second, our coaching doctrines contribute to the neglect. If every practice must have one central theme, there will be no way to give all the players enough tries at all the different shots during a season. And if every coach must teach correct shooting technique, those who can't will be unable to develop shooters effectively.

**If every coach must teach correct shooting technique, those who can't will be unable to develop shooters effectively.**

Thanks to the playground dimension and multi-variable practices, shooting can be the most accessible of skills. Although there are many different shots to practice, three or four can be included in every multi-variable practice. That only takes fifteen minutes, and any coach can facilitate. The youngest players

The Shot Food Groups  
Turning Shots Into Hisa's  
Shots While Dribbling  
One-Touch Shots  
Two-Touch Shots  
Summary

can try some of the shots right away. Older players can practice all the shots season after season. And how could players practice all these shots regularly without one day making them in matches?

## **THE SHOT FOOD GROUPS**

The number of different shots that could arise in matches is huge. The shooter could be at any distance or angle relative to the goal. The keeper could be close to the goal or further out. The shooter could be dribbling the ball or receiving it. And multiply all these by two, because either foot could be called upon.

Fortunately, the possibilities can be distilled into a more manageable number such as fifteen. By practicing those regularly, players will be prepared for whatever shots the match might throw at them. The shots can be sorted into three groups: shots while dribbling, one-touch shots, and two-touch shots. I call these the shot food groups to help with practice planning. Players need a balanced diet from all three groups. Here's the breakdown:

### **Shots While Dribbling:**

1. L-Shot
2. Drive By Shot
3. Breakaway Shot
4. Chipperoo Shot
5. Mighty Moe Shot
6. Gate Shot

### **One-Touch Shots:**

7. One Hopper Shot
6. Grounder Pounder Shot
9. Volley shot
10. Wall Pass Shot
11. Penalty Shot Game
12. Free Kick Game

### **Two-Touch Shots:**

- 13.Box Shot
14. Chest Trap Shot
15. Wide Receiver Shot

Why practice all fifteen regularly? Each shot has a novel feature, so skill with one doesn't guarantee skill with the others. Why practice only these fifteen? Every shot that could arise in a match will closely resemble at least one of the fifteen. And if we define too many shots, we'll have trouble practicing them all regularly.

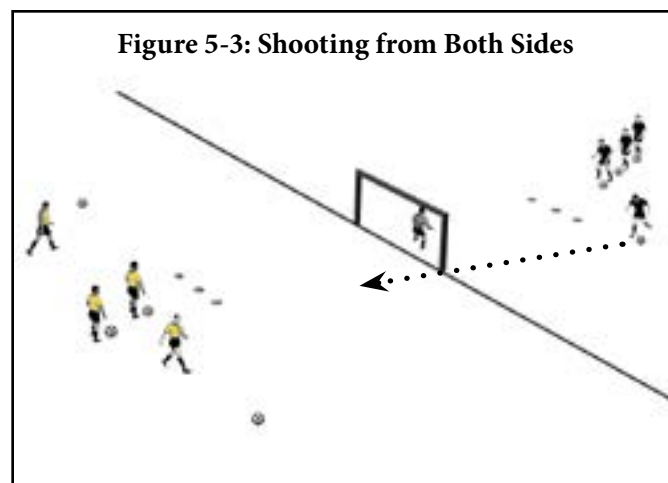
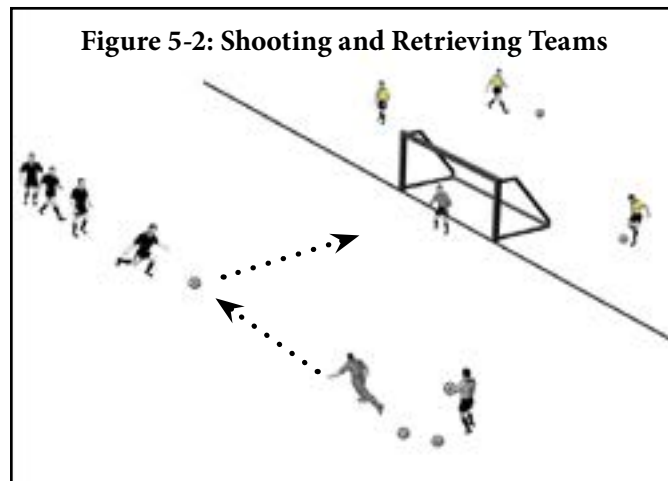
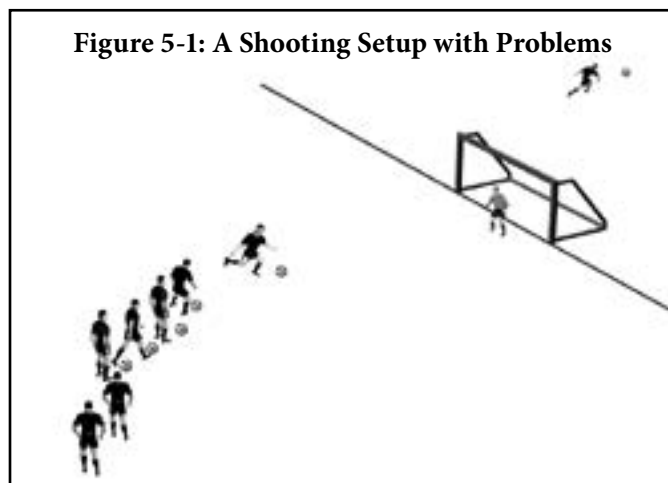
## TURNING SHOTS INTO HISA'S

Most players love shooting practice of any kind, be it a drill or a competition. But the best way to get all the players to fully focus is to keep score. The player or team with the most goals wins. The shot being practiced then becomes a high impact skill activity.

Shooting practice must be efficient if players are to get enough tries at each shot. There must be a way to set up the goals, feed balls to the shooters, and retrieve the shots that miss. Here are some organizational options.

Figure 5-1 shows the approach to avoid. The players are in a long line, which means they get fewer shots. The balls they shoot are just sitting there, which means less match realism and less carry over to the match. If a shot misses high or wide, the shooter must retrieve it, which wastes time. And nobody is keeping score, which eliminates the competitive element.

The next few organizational options are far better. In Figure 5-2, the eight players divide into two teams to practice *Grounder Pounders*, a match realistic shot. One team shoots while the other retrieves the shots that miss. A player from either team or the coach tosses the balls in, and one player on the retrieving team is nearby to help prepare the balls for the server. The players try three shots with each foot, the teams swap roles, and the team with the most goals wins.



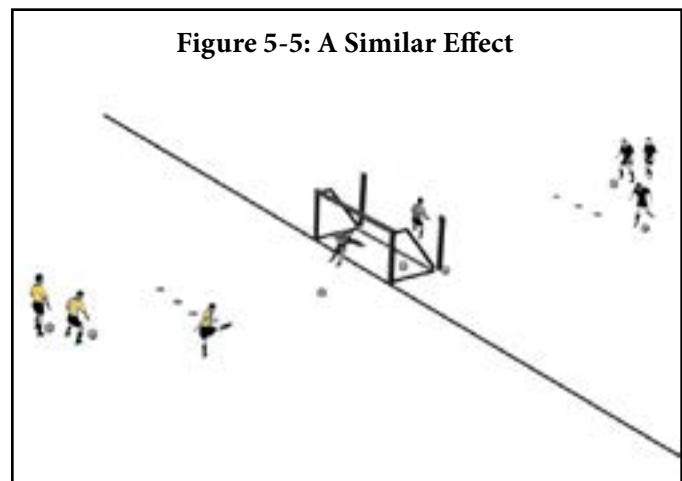
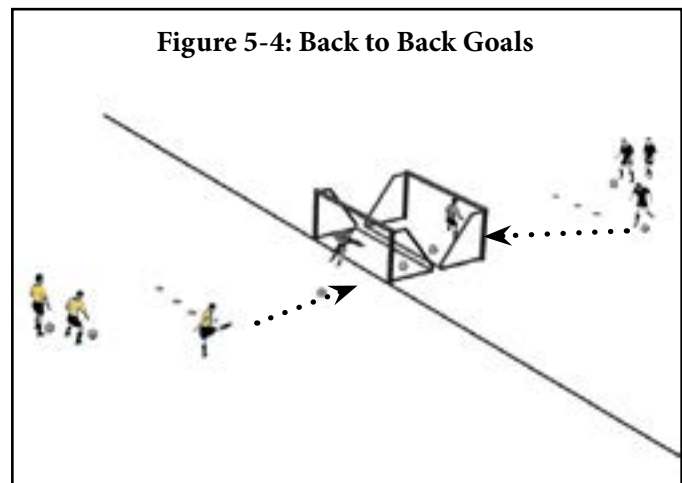
Another clever option is possible if the goal has no supports in back and no net (Figure 5-3). Here, the players divide into two teams to practice the L-Shot, a shot while dribbling. But now each team shoots from a different side of the goal. Each player on the first team takes one shot with the right foot. The keeper then turns to face a right-footed shot by each player on the second team. Left footed attempts happen next, and so on. Missed shots go over to the other team, which reduces ball retrieval time.

Goals with no supports or nets are rare. But the same effect can be achieved by using two poles or even two cones to represent the goal. The challenge then is deciding whether or not a shot was good. I like to say that shots higher than the keeper's head are no good. Skill developed while shooting on such goals will carry over just as well to the match. A shortage of real goals need not interfere with shooting practice.

Figure 5-4 shows the most efficient setup of all: two goals with nets placed back to back. The two teams can now shoot at the same time against different keepers, since the shots that get by the keeper on one side won't hit the other keeper on the backside. Missed shots again go over to the other side, minimizing ball retrieval time. Were it not for occasionally retrieving balls from the net, the players would get nearly twice as many shots as with the other setups.

A similar affect can be achieved if only one real goal with a net is available (Figure 5-5). On one side, players shoot on the real goal. On the other side, players shoot through two poles or through the side supports. More players are shooting at the same time, ball retrieval is simple, and the players get many tries.

The playground savvy coach looks over the terrain and decides which organizational approach will work best. Any of the approaches can be used for the fifteen shots that follow.

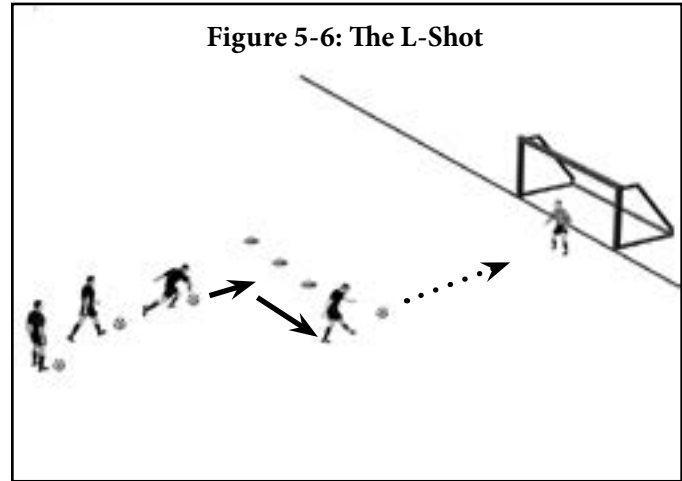


## SHOTS WHILE DRIBBLING

Sometimes in a match, a player has possession of the ball and propels it somewhere before shooting. That's what makes the first six shots into shots while dribbling. When practicing them, the ball about to be shot must be in motion.

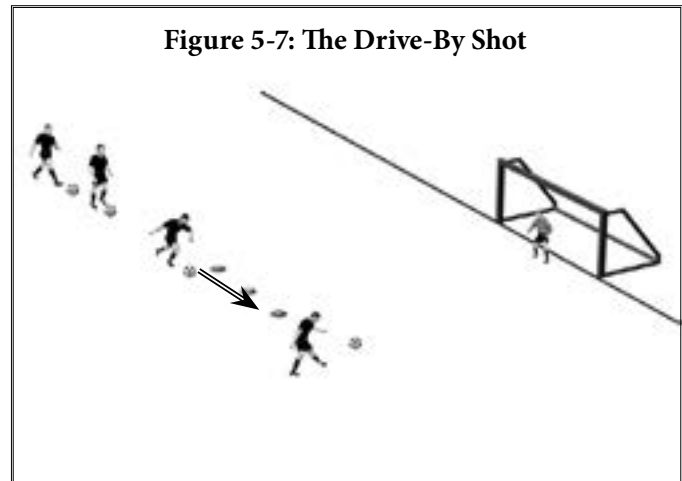
### Shot #1: The L-Shot

In a match, a player might dribble toward a defender and then cut to either side to create some space for shooting. The *L-Shot* (Figure 5-6) replicates that scenario. The three cones represent a defender, sparing a real person from standing there, but either approach is fine. The first shooter dribbles to within two feet of the center cone and then cuts sharply to the right, creating the L-shape after which the shot is named. The ensuing shot must come from behind the cones. The next time through, the players cut to the left for a left-footed try.



### Shot #2: The Drive-By Shot

In a match, a player might be dribbling parallel to the goal before shooting—a *Drive-By Shot* (Figure 5-7). To practice it, the three cone setup is the same as with the L-Shot. But the line begins to one side of the cones as shown. The first shooter dribbles parallel to the goal, passes all three cones, and shoots with the right foot. The line then reforms on the other side for tries with the left foot. Coaches opposed to the shot's name can instead call it a Dribble-By.

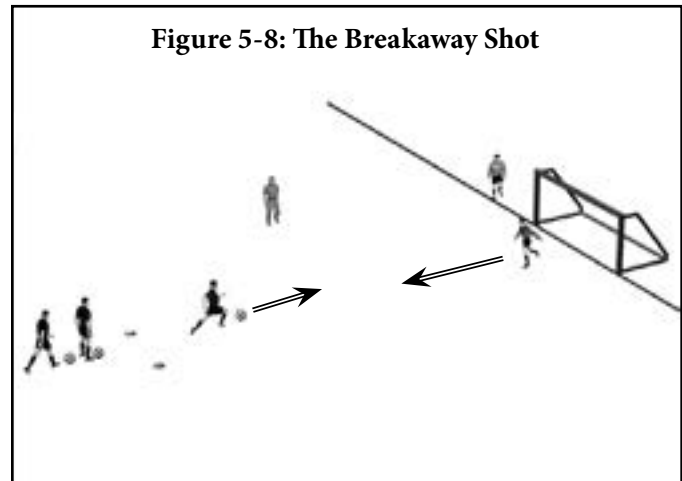


### Shot #3: The Breakaway Shot

This shot arises all the time in matches. A player dribbles in alone on the keeper, who charges out to cut off the angle. Rather than always shooting from the outside, the shooter should choose cleverly between three options: shooting from the outside, chipping over the keeper, or dribbling around the keeper. Shooters capable of all three options are more likely to fool the keeper and score. And that's how the *Breakaway Shot* should be practiced.

The keeper begins on the goal line and the shooters begin behind two cones about forty paces away (Figure 5-8). At least one other player alternates as keeper so neither gets burned out. At the coach's signal, the first shooter dribbles in quickly and the keeper charges out. The shooter then shoots from the outside, chips over the keeper, or best of all dribbles around the keeper into an open net. The game continues until everyone has had three or more tries.

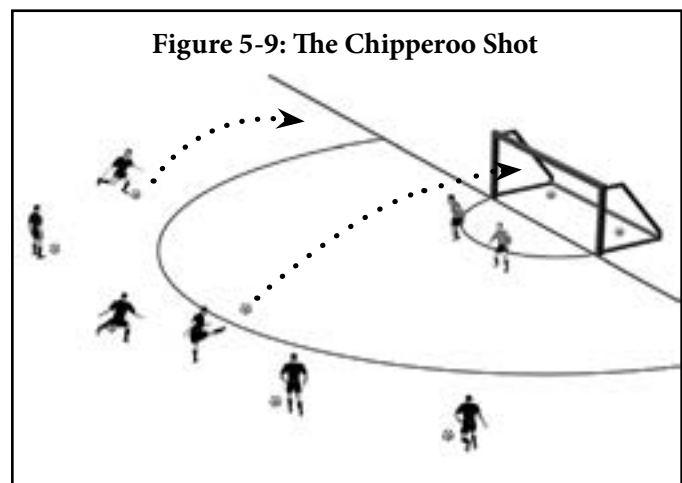
An initial practice round is helpful. The players practice one of the three options at a time, without keeping score. The coach then announces it's time for the Real McCoy, and reminds the keepers and shooters not to injure one another. The shooters now choose options on their own and keep the keeper guessing as the teams keep score.



#### **Shot #4: The Chipperoo Shot**

When the keeper has moved off the goal line, a *Chipperoo Shot*, or chip over the keeper, is possible. Figure 5-9 shows the time efficient way to practice this shot. Two arcs, as shown, are represented by laying down cones. The keeper must stay outside the arc closest to goal, and a second keeper may help as in the picture. The shooters must chip from beyond the more distant arc.

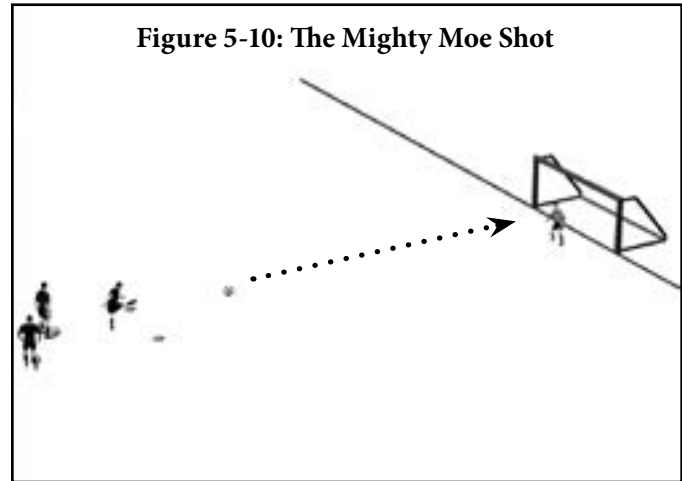
Rather than taking turns, each shooter chips as soon as a ball is available. The keeper(s) try to snare, punch, or tip as many of the chips as possible. Two or more shots will occasionally be in the air at the same time. But since they'll have loft, the keeper(s) can react to them without getting clunked. A second team can be recycling the shots that miss, and after two or three minutes the teams can switch roles. For more realistic keeper practice, a keeper may retreat inside the arc for a particular chip once it is in the air.



## Shot #5: The Mighty Moe Shot

As players mature, their shooting range should gradually increase. That's the point of the *Mighty Moe Shot*, a shot from further out. How far out will depend on the leg strength of the players, so the shot can be practiced by young players as well as professionals.

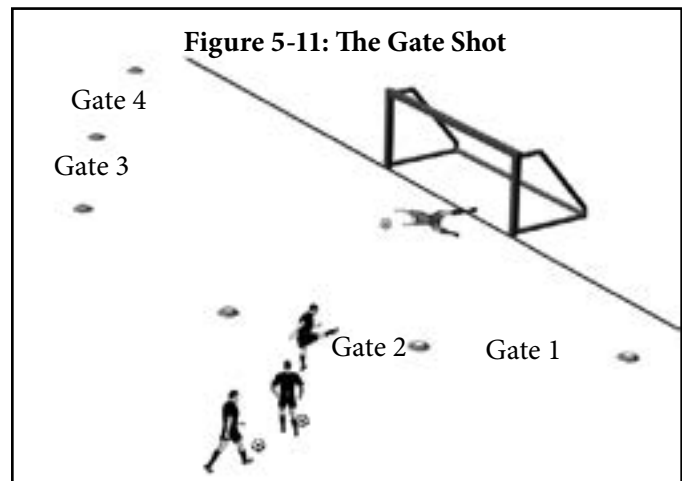
The coach sets up two cones just at the brink of everyone's shooting range (Figure 5-10). One by one, the players dribble forward a few steps and shoot with the stronger foot. The ball must be in motion when shot, be shot from behind the cones, and be driven rather than lofted. Mighty Moe's with the weaker foot, for which the cones must be moved closer to goal, are optional.



## Shot #6: The Gate Shot

In matches, players might sometimes shoot from different angles. That's the point of the *Gate Shot* (Figure 5-11). Cones off to either side of the goal create four gates for the players to shoot through. A short line of shooters begins at the first gate for a shot from an extreme angle.

One by one, each shooter gets the ball moving, shoots with the right foot, and then gets back in line for a left-footed shot through the same gate. The line then moves on to the second gate for two shots at a less extreme angle. The line then proceeds to the two gates at the other side of the goal, until each player has tried two shots from all four gates. Trying to curve these shots around the keeper and in is a lot of fun.



## ONE-TOUCH SHOTS

One-touch shots arise when the ball is in motion, defenders are closing in, and there is no time to settle the ball before shooting. These shots are often taken before the keeper is in the best position, so they have the advantage of surprise.

The ball in motion might be rolling, bouncing, or flying through the air.

When practicing these shots, the setup is a bit more complicated. The coach or a player must feed balls to the shooters. A ball retrieval system is needed to get the balls to that coach or player. And someone must be beside that coach or player to help.

### Shot #7: The One Hopper Shot

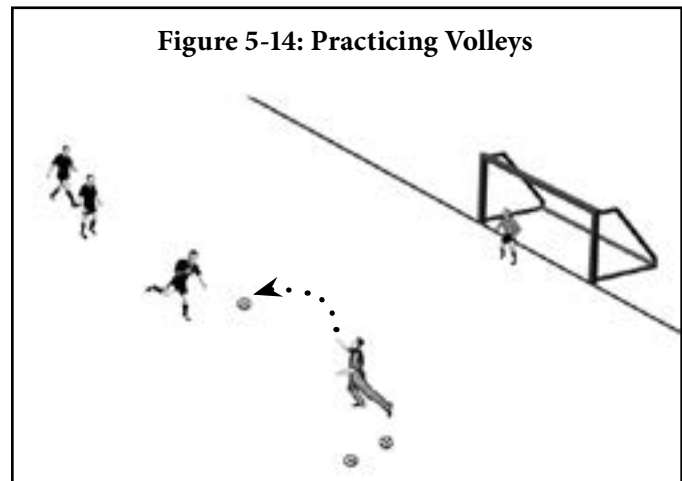
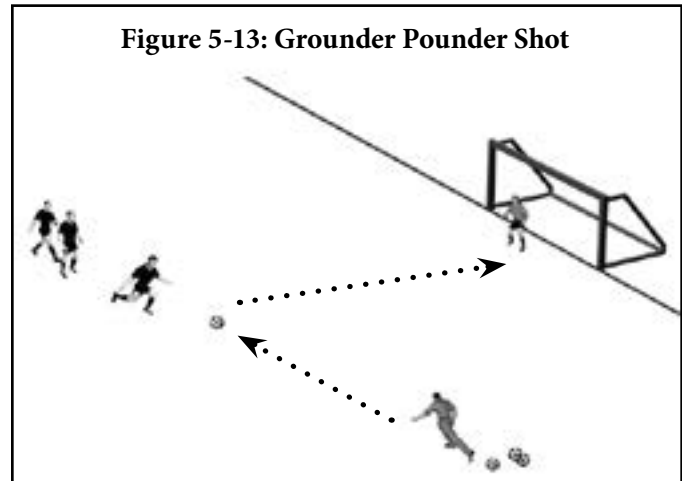
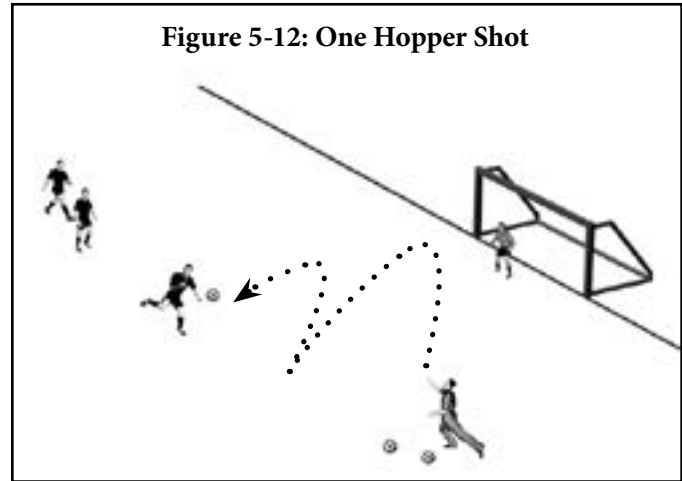
The *One Hopper Shot* arises when a ball bounces high in the penalty area and there is no time for a settling touch. To practice it, the coach tosses a ball in the air so that it bounces straight up. The shooter reads the bounce, closes in, and shoots before the ball bounces a second time (Figure 5-12).

The main challenge for the shooters is to keep the shot down. They can accomplish this by either contacting the top half of the ball or by letting the ball fall closer to the ground before striking it. They'll eventually figure this out on their own, but tips from the coach can speed up the process.

### Shot #8: The Grounder Pounder Shot

The *Grounder Pounder Shot* (previously the Holy Roller Shot) arises when the ball is passed on the ground to the shooter, who then shoots with the first touch. The ball could be arriving at any speed and from any direction, with varying degrees of bounce. Player who don't practice the shot will often whiff on it.

Practice consists of kicking or rolling balls to the shooters, who shoot with the first touch (Figure 5-13). The balls may be sent in from either side and from different angles, and either foot may be required. The faster and bouncier the feed, the



more challenging the shot. Two cones can create an imaginary line behind which the shot is taken.

### Shot #9: The Volley Shot

A *Volley Shot*, or just plain *volley*, is the one-touch shot of a ball that arrives through the air. To practice the shot, the coach tosses balls to the shooters who then shoot without letting the ball bounce (Figure 5-14 on previous page). Initially, the tosses should come from in close and from the side. Over time, the ball can arrive from different angles and from further out.

It's another shot that gets sailed over the crossbar at first. The valuable coaching tip, which I learned at my first USSF coaching course, is, "Nice composed strike through the top half of the ball."

### Shot #10: The Wall Pass Shot

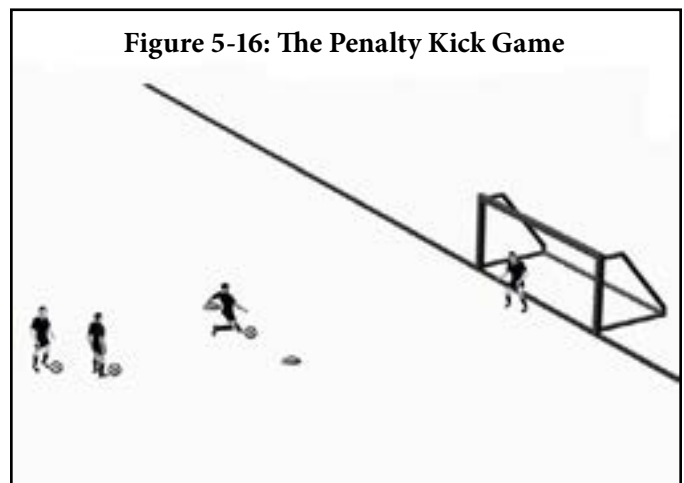
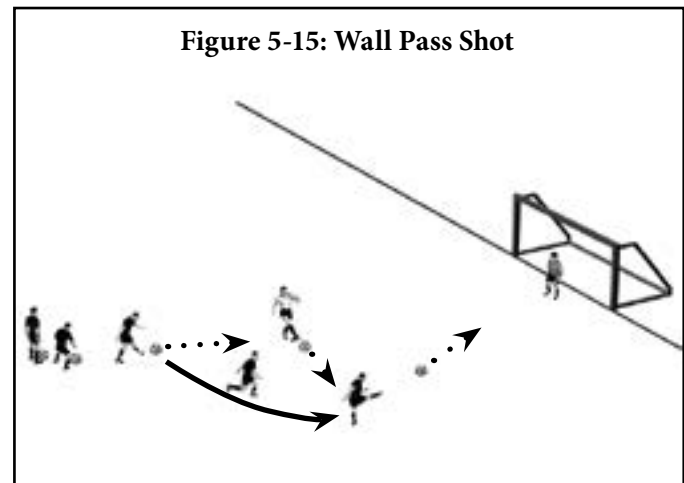
The Wall Pass Shot uses a simple wall pass combination (Figure 5-15). The shooter passes to either a teammate or the coach, who one-touches the ball to the shooter's right. The shooter closes in on the ball and shoots with the right foot. The next time through, the shooters receive a pass to the left for a left-footed shooting attempt.

Conceptually, this shot is a bit different. Because it involves a combination and an assist, it could be viewed as an activity for the Breakthrough Part or the Finish Part (see Book Two)".

### Shot #11: The Penalty Kick Game

A penalty kick is essentially a one-touch shot of a stationary ball. Players should practice penalty kicks regularly from an early age. Why? A penalty kick will decide many matches, players who can convert penalty kicks are in demand, and experienced players will at some point find themselves in a nerve wracking penalty kick shootout.

The *Penalty Kick Game* is a time efficient way to practice the shot (Figure 5-16). One player begins as the keeper. The others begin in a short

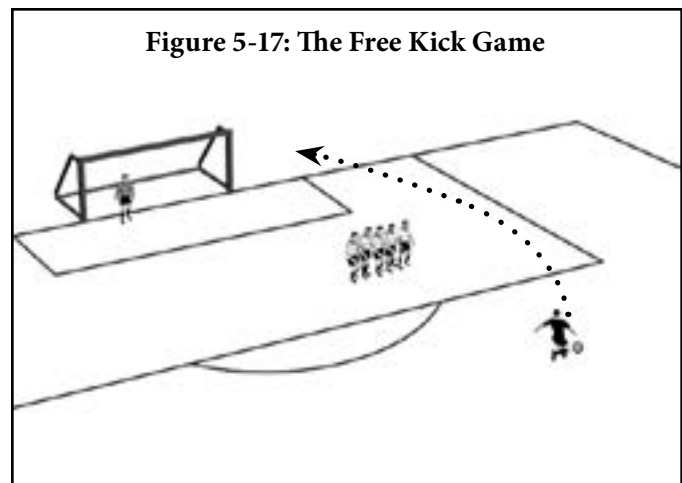


line behind the penalty shot spot, represented by two cones. The first shooter places a ball between the two cones and shoots. If the shot is good, the shooter gets back in line for another try. If the keeper makes a save or the shot is missed, the keeper joins the shooting line while the shooter becomes the new keeper. The first player to convert six penalty kicks (some other number can be used instead) is the winner. The game also provides a fair, enjoyable way to decide who will take penalty kicks in the next match.

## Shot #12: The Free Kick Game

A free kick is another one-touch shot of a stationary ball, and another match changer. In addition to beating the keeper, the shot must usually circumvent some defenders arranged in a wall. A *Free Kick Game* can provide the match realistic experience.

Figure 5-17 shows one way to set up such a game, for six players and a keeper. Five of the players begin as a wall, while the other selects a spot outside the penalty area for a free kick attempt. That player then attempts a free kick. If the shot is missed, the shooter becomes the wall guy to the left while the wall guy to the right tries a free kick from the same spot. The players continue rotating this way until one makes a goal from that spot. The successful player then selects a new free kick spot and goes again. Once the time is up, the player with the most goals wins.



## TWO-TOUCH SHOTS

In a real match, the shooter receiving a pass might have time for a first settling touch. A rushed one-touch shot might not make sense in that case. So players should regularly practice two-touch shots. With the first touch, the shooter places the ball in an advantageous spot for the second touch, which is the shot.

## Shot #13: The Box Shot

When the ball comes rolling to the shooter, the shooter uses the first touch to place the ball just the right distance away. The *Box Shot* is the primary way to practice this.

Four cones create a box or square about eight paces long on each side (Figure 5-18). The shooters begin a few steps outside the box. The coach rolls or passes

balls across from the other side. The shooter taps the ball into the box with the first touch, and shoots with the second touch. To count, the shot must come from inside the box. After a minute and a half of shooting with the right foot, the passes come from the other side so that the shots can be taken with the left foot.

With this shot, the passes can come from any angle. The turn-and-shoot variation is one of my favorites. The shooter begins with back to goal and to the box, and receives a pass from up field. The shooter must therefore figure out how to touch the ball into the box, turn, and shoot.

### Shot #14: The Chest Trap Shot

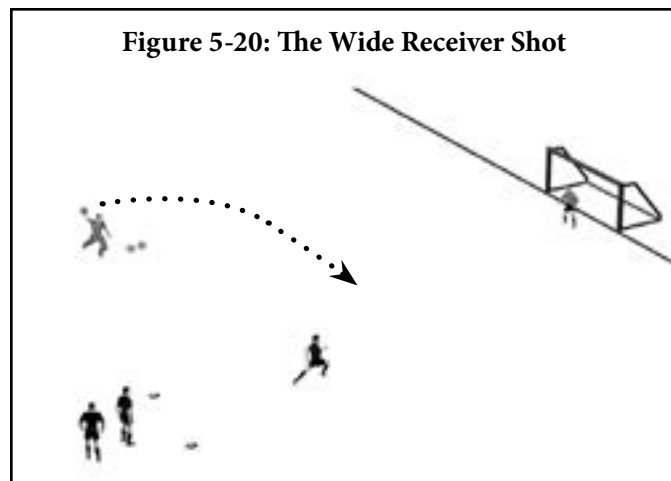
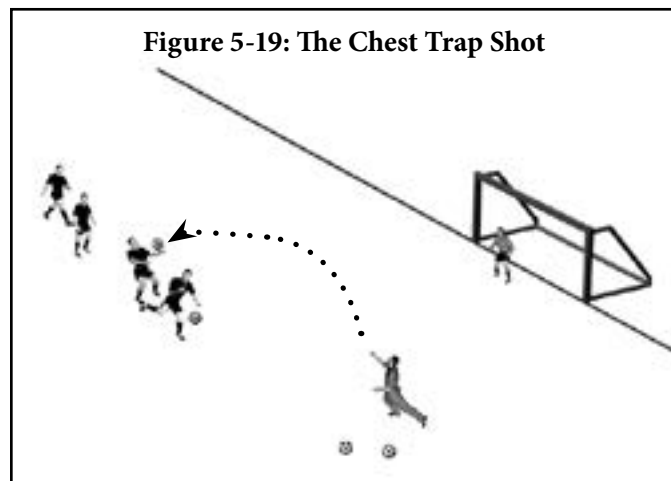
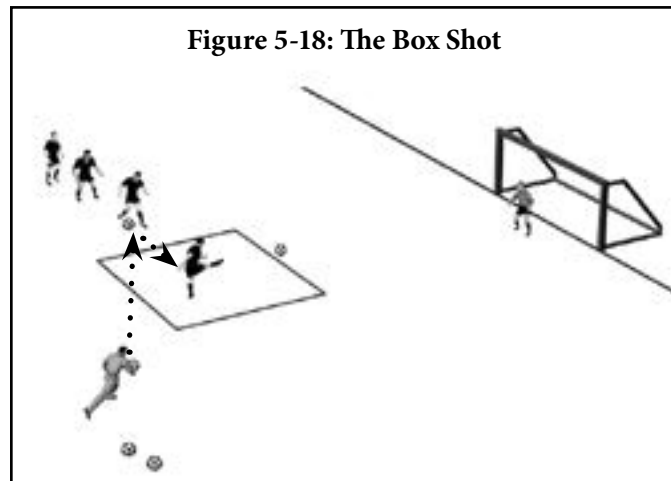
Upon receiving the ball in the air, pros occasionally pull off the crowd pleasing *Chest Trap Shot*. The shooter chests the ball up into the air and then shoots.

To practice the shot, the coach tosses ball through the air from in close (Figure 5-19). The shooter makes the first touch with the chest and then shoots without letting the ball bounce. The tosses can eventually come from further away or be replaced with chips. In another version, the shooter settles the ball with the chest and then let's it bounce once before shooting.

Any exotic shot the pros try—bicycle kicks come to mind—can be practiced in a similar way, time permitting. Just figure out what the shot consists of and translate that into an activity.

### Shot #15: The Wide Receiver Shot

The shooter is sprinting forward, pulls the ball out of the air with the first touch, and shoots with the second touch. I call this the *Wide Receiver Shot*.



To practice it, the shooter sprints forward like a wide receiver in the NFL (Figure 5-20). The coach throws a ball across through the air, leading the shooter like an NFL quarterback. The shooter's first touch pulls the ball from the air, and the second touch is the shot. The throws can gradually come from greater distances or be replaced by chips. This shot can also be added to the one-touch food group by requiring the wide receiver to shoot with the first touch.

## **SUMMARY**

Some very different shot types arise in matches. Practicing one type won't necessarily help with the other types. Therefore, all the types should be practiced.

A player's proficiency at different shots is very important for the team's success in the match as well as for the player's success in the soccer world. That proficiency is a variable. It can get stronger or weaker over time. Therefore, the different shot types should be strengthened regularly in practice after practice.

This cannot be pulled off with just an occasional single-theme practice on shooting, no matter how effectively the coach teaches. It can be pulled off with multi-variable practices and the playground approach, even if the coach can't teach shooting technique at all. Once again, the coach only has to facilitate.

Coaches of all levels should learn how to efficiently organize these fifteen shots. At some point, they should also learn to provide simple shooting tips like, "Nice composed strike through the top half of the ball" for volleys. Later, they should learn to demonstrate correct shooting technique and to fix incorrect technique. But the first order of business should be organizing the different shots.

# 6

## POSSESSION, MYTHS TO KEYS

**T**hus far, I've argued that the playground dimension helps with the player skills—the individual level of analysis. High impact skill activities packed into multi-variable practices make the player skills like dribbling and shooting accessible to even newer coaches and players. But might the playground dimension also help with the team skills—the collective level of analysis? Absolutely!

If we picture the collective level as consisting of a few interlocking parts, the Possession Part is the one to begin with. When that part goes well, the other parts are helped. And when that part goes missing, the other parts are hurt and the soccer is an unsightly mess. Can newer coaches make the Possession Part happen without first taking coaching courses or teaching correct techniques? Absolutely!

The chapter after this one will explain a method for bringing the Possession Part to life. That method consists of *possession scrimmages*, which are scrimmages with special rules. But to understand those scrimmages, you should first understand the possession theory behind them. That theory centers on eight easy-to-practice keys—the topic of this chapter.

### SEVEN POSSESSION MYTHS

A high percentage of our youth soccer coaches and players never experience the Possession Part. Instead, they get sidetracked by bunch ball and its

Seven Possession Myths

Measuring the Possession Part

Eight Possession Keys

Are the Keys Valid?

Summary

**Can newer coaches make the Possession Part happen without first taking coaching courses or teaching correct techniques? Absolutely!**

offshoot, straight-to-goal soccer. Even experienced coaches and players might view possession skeptically, having fallen under the wicked spell of seven possession myths. Let's unravel those myths in order to embrace possession without reservation—which doesn't mean direct attack isn't also important!

### **Myth #1: Possession follows inevitably once the players can pass and receive well.**

The players are turning the ball over rather than keeping possession well? Just help them with their passing and receiving techniques and everything will be fine! That qualifies as a myth by failing to distinguish between the individual level and the collective level.

When the individual players use good passing and receiving technique, that's obviously helpful. But it doesn't automatically produce good possession at the collective level. Players with great technique might not have a clue about the teamwork side of possession, preferring instead to go straight to goal every time. And players with poor technique might do very well with the teamwork side if the coach has utilized the playground dimension.

**Players with great technique might not have a clue about the teamwork side of possession, preferring instead to go straight to goal every time.**

### **Myth #2: Possession work should be postponed until passing and receiving technique is at a particular level.**

This myth follows from the first one. If possession depends on passing and receiving technique, it shouldn't be worked on until the players have such technique. And shame on those coaches who try!

The underlying plan isn't so bad. First help players pass and receive well, then help them keep possession as a team. The danger is that possession will be postponed indefinitely, particularly if the coach can't teach technique well. In that case, a handy excuse comes into play. Of course our players aren't working on possession yet; just look at their weak technique!

But if newer coaches and players could work on possession, wouldn't that be a good thing? We distinguish player skills from team skills so that both can be practiced separately and developed simultaneously. We just need to know how.

**We distinguish player skills from team skills so that both can be practiced separately and developed simultaneously.**

### **Myth #3: If possession is introduced to young players too soon, their 1 v 1 ability will be stifled.**

Here's the typical argument. Possession means passing and sharing the ball. If our young players are always passing and sharing, they're avoiding 1 v 1 confrontations with opponents and won't develop 1 v 1 ability. Therefore, it's okay if young players always dribble at their opponents throughout every match.

That argument falls apart once we distinguish between the match and practice—the desired end and the means. What should soccer in the match look like? Most of the time, the players will pass the ball quickly and avoid 1 v 1 confrontations. Periodically, though, 1 v 1 confrontations must be embraced. Maybe a player has one opponent to beat in order to score. Or maybe no teammates are open, and a player must shield the ball from opponents.

Those are the moments that demand 1 v 1 ability, and players must develop that ability continually. But the 1 v 1 work should happen in well run practices, not in poorly played matches. That's why half of every multi-variable practice should develop player skills like 1 v 1 dribbling and shooting.

**But the 1 v 1 work should happen in well run practices, not in poorly played matches.**

### **Myth #4: Teams that believe in possession don't believe in direct attack.**

This myth implies that possession and direct attack are two different playing styles between which coaches may choose. Possession is therefore optional rather than essential.

Professional soccer discredits this notion. Some teams might lean a bit toward direct attack while others lean a bit toward patient possession. But every team must develop both capacities and choose according to the situation. Attack directly if an opening arises, possess patiently if it doesn't. Attack directly if trailing at the end, possess patiently if clinging to a lead.

**But every team must develop both capacities and choose according to the situation.**

Also, direct attack and patient possession are mutually enhancing. When our team can attack directly, opponents might hang back near their goal—making patient possession easier. When our team can possess patiently, opponents might leave their goal area to come after the ball—creating openings for direct attack.

## **Myth #5: Possession is easy when opponents don't pressure the ball well.**

This myth rears its ugly head when players with weak passing and receiving technique do *well* with possession. “They’re only able to keep possession because their opponents aren’t pressuring the ball,” says the critic.

The thinking there is confused. If effective pressure by the defending team could always trump effective possession by the attacking team, teams would pressure the ball all the time. But that would be exhausting and risky. The defending team must choose wisely between protecting its goal and pressuring the ball, as we’ll see in Book Two.

Soccer’s parts lead to clearer thinking. One team’s Possession Part is always inversely related to the other team’s Pressure Part. When our team’s possession looks good, the other team’s pressure looks bad. And when the other team’s pressure looks good, our team shouldn’t abandon possession but embrace it more fully. Once we string a few passes together and move the ball continually to open space, the pressure will begin to ease up.

**One team’s Possession Part is always inversely related to the other team’s Pressure Part.**

## **Myth #6: Newer players shouldn’t try to keep possession in the back, because they’ll commit turnovers that lead to goals.**

Behind this myth is a truth. For a strong Possession Part, the fullbacks and keeper must receive a lot of passes because they’ll often have the most open space. And when newer players pass the ball back there, they sometimes lose possession near their goal and allow embarrassing goals.

Why the myth label then? With newer players, development should be more important than winning. If experienced players pass in the back, so should newer players. Who cares if a goal is given up now and then from passing in the back? That’s no worse than a goal allowed from sending every ball forward. And as players get used to passing in the back, the disasters will occur less often.

## **Myth #7: Possession must serve a purpose.**

This mother of all possession myths implies that there are two kinds of possession. With the purposeful kind, which is good, the players keep possession in order to create scoring chances.

**This mother of all possession myths implies that there are two kinds of possession.**

With the purposeless kind, which is bad, the players pass the ball continually with no interest in scoring or winning.

We need not be concerned about purposeless possession, because it's just not happening anywhere. Keeping possession for long stretches of time is very difficult, even at the professional level. Keeping possession for even a pass or two is very difficult for newer players who think every ball should go forward. Any team that is sophisticated enough and clever enough to keep possession can surely attack when the chance arises.

**We need not be concerned about purposeless possession, because it's just not happening anywhere.**

Purposeless possession seems even less likely due to the multiple purposes that possession can serve. Better possession means more chances to break through and finish. It builds team morale while demoralizing and exhausting the opposition. It helps a team preserve a lead at the end of a match. And possession always serves a defensive purpose, since a team can't be scored on while it has the ball. Possession that isn't serving at least one of those purposes is hard to imagine.

Yes, a team with great possession can still lose. Sometimes, the Possession Part goes well but the Breakthrough Part and Finish Part don't. That doesn't mean the possession served no purpose. Rather than abandoning the Possession Part, find a way to improve the other two.

## **MEASURING THE POSSESSION PART**

If soccer really has a Possession Part, there should be a way to identify or measure it. The traditional way to measure each team's possession is with a percentage. If one team had possession 55% of the time, the other team had possession 45% of the time. The numbers always add up to 100%, and that's the problem. Both teams in a professional match could have great possession yet achieve scores of only 50%. Both teams could turn the ball over constantly, yet one could achieve a score of 60%. A percentage is just not that revealing.

Or consider the typical youth recreational match. Usually, the ball will be bouncing around randomly with neither team having possession. Even if possession could be calculated amidst such chaos, a team with dominant dribblers could have possession 70% of the time without completing a single pass!

That's why I prefer the statistic *Average Number of Passes per Possession*, or ANPP. Each time your team gains possession, count how many passes occur before the

**Each time your team gains possession, count how many passes occur before the ball is lost.**

ball is lost. Next, add up all the passes your team completed during the match and divide this by your team's total number of possessions to get the ANPP. If your team had 50 distinct possessions and completed 200 passes during the match, it averaged 4 passes per possession. That's pretty good. If your team had 100 possessions and completed only 10 passes, the ANPP was .1. That's pretty bad, even if your team had possession 50% of the time.

A few conventions for counting must be agreed on. Suppose your team strings 5 passes together, my team clears the ball out of bounds, and after the throw in your team strings 8 more passes together. Did my team's clearance count as a possession? Did your team have 1 long possession of 13 passes, or two separate possessions of 5 and 8? Our answers will influence the ANPP, but that won't matter as long as we all go by the same answers.

I first calculated ANPP from Barcelona's 3-1 win over Manchester United in the 2011 Champions Cup Final. Manchester United averaged a very respectable 5 passes per possession. They had some very long passing sequences, but they also trailed most of the match and had to attack more quickly. Barcelona led early and embarked on longer passing sequences, for a remarkable 10 passes per possession. Some of those sequences lasted 20 or 30 passes and culminated in scoring chances. Talk about domination!

**Barcelona led early and embarked on longer passing sequences, for a remarkable 10 passes per possession.**

Most coaches will not have time to count possessions and passes or to calculate ANPP. But once attuned to the concept, coaches can watch any match and make an educated guess. If I tell my players they are averaging less than one pass per possession, they might realize I haven't actually kept statistics. But they will get the point.

## **EIGHT POSSESSION KEYS**

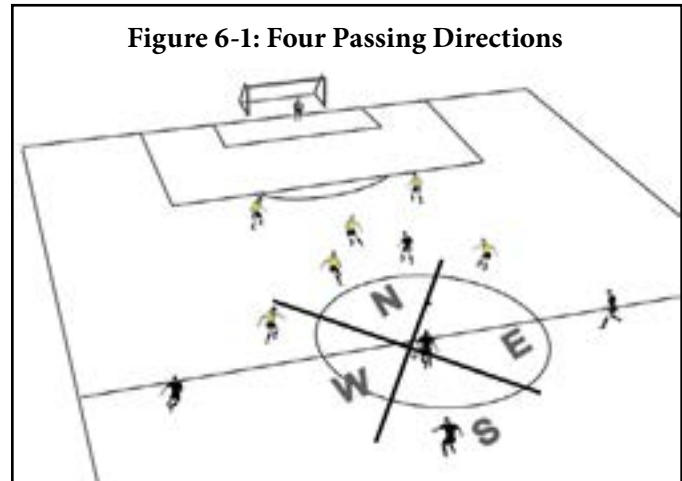
Coaches and players who have never experienced effective possession tend to form the wrong picture of it. They visualize stationary players passing the ball back and forth as opponents just watch. That's not going to work. If opponents pin down the ball's location so easily, they're going to quickly win the ball back. In the right picture, opponents can't pin down the ball due to eight possession keys that move the ball dynamically around the entire field.

These keys could instead be called possession secrets or possession principles. After describing them, we'll address the important question of whether or not they are valid.

## Possession Key #1: Vary the ball's direction.

If we imagine a large X over the passer as in Figure 6-1, each pass can be categorized as going north, south, east, or west. For effective possession, passers must be aware of and use all four directions. Put differently, they must choose the direction that best fits the situation. Remember that Champions Cup Final? Only 25% of Barcelona's passes went north, toward goal. The other 75% were divided evenly between east, west, and south!

Regardless of the level of play, this directional unpredictability is essential for a high ANPP and a strong Possession Part. If the passes only go north, the longest passing sequences will only be five passes or so since the goal will be reached by then. And usually the ball will be lost before that, because opponents will clog the north direction. No disrespect is intended for the north direction, because it's essential for breakthroughs and finishes. It just happens to be the direction most susceptible to turnovers, even at the professional level.



## Possession Key #2: Vary the number of touches on the ball.

Newer players typically use either too few touches or too many. Either they boot the ball aimlessly with the first touch, or they dribble into a crowd using multiple touches—losing possession in either case.

Instead, players must be capable with different numbers of touches, and choose the right number for the situation. Dribble if a breakthrough might result or there are no open teammates. Otherwise, move the ball quickly from player to player using as few touches as possible. And one-touch play is the possession ideal. By the time opponents arrive on the scene, the ball is already somewhere else.

## Possession Key #3: Find a player with more open space.

This is the no dawdling rule. Given a little open space, newer players tend to hang onto the ball even when teammates have more open space. After all, it's fun to have the ball and dribble it around. But the spaces quickly disappear and the ball is lost.

The player with a little open space should instead pass to a teammate who has more open space (Figure 6-2). Once again, the ball is gone by the time opponents arrive. And teammates will be more motivated to find open space when they know they might then get the ball.

**Possession Key #4: When the ball is about to be lost, reset it to the back.**

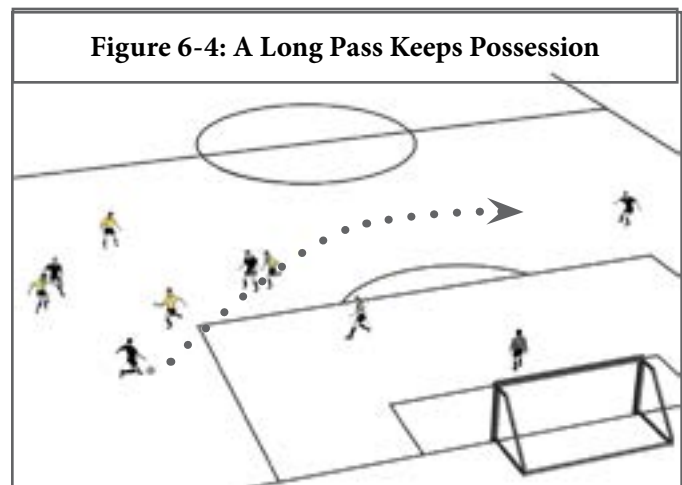
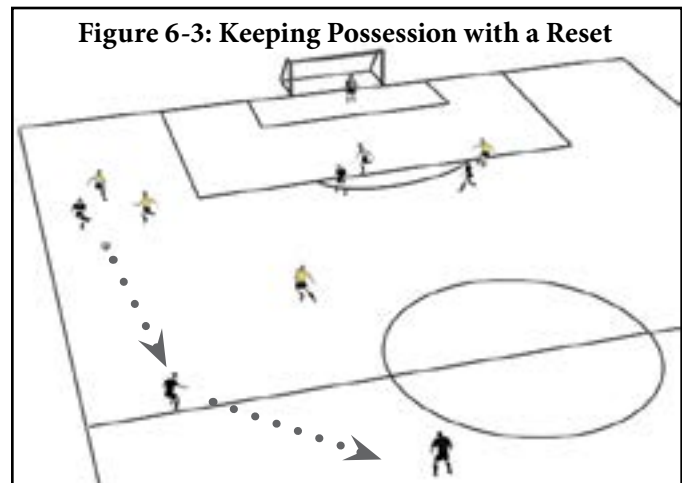
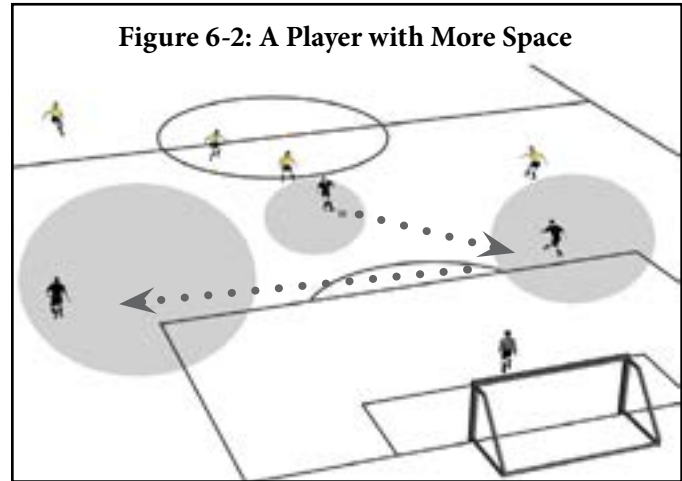
When newer players advance the ball to near the other team's goal, they try to score right away. If too many opponents are in the way, the attempt fails and possession is lost. Newer players never attempt a drop pass in this situation, let alone a sequence of passes moving the ball toward their own goal.

But such a sequence makes perfect sense if possession is about to be lost. The ball can be moved backward to the fullbacks or even all the way back to the keeper (Figure 6-3). Such a maneuver, called a *reset*, almost always secures possession and increases the ANPP. And a better scoring chance might arise later in the possession. Without an occasional reset, those 30-pass sequences wouldn't be possible.

**Possession Key #5: Pass the ball long as well as short.**

Long passes are usually thought of as a way to attack rather than to keep possession. But while short passes are the mainstay of possession, the team that only passes short is at a possession disadvantage. The other team only has to shut down the short passes in order to win the ball back.

Instead, the player with the ball should see teammates close to the ball *and* teammates further away. When the pass might go long or short,

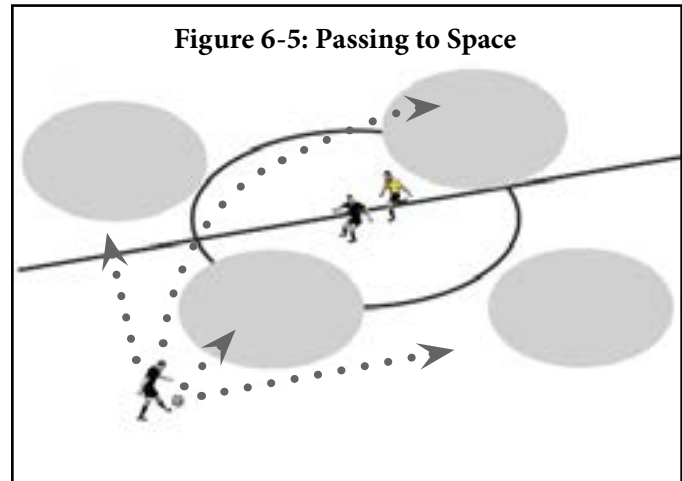


opponents must worry about both. In Figure 6-4, no short passes are possible but a long pass keeps possession.

**Possession Key #6: In addition to passing to a teammate, pass to space as a teammate runs there.**

Newer players might be under the illusion that passes should always go directly to teammates. But a pass can instead go to any of the spaces surrounding a teammate who then runs there (Figure 6-5). That creates more passing options than opponents can keep track of, so possession becomes easier.

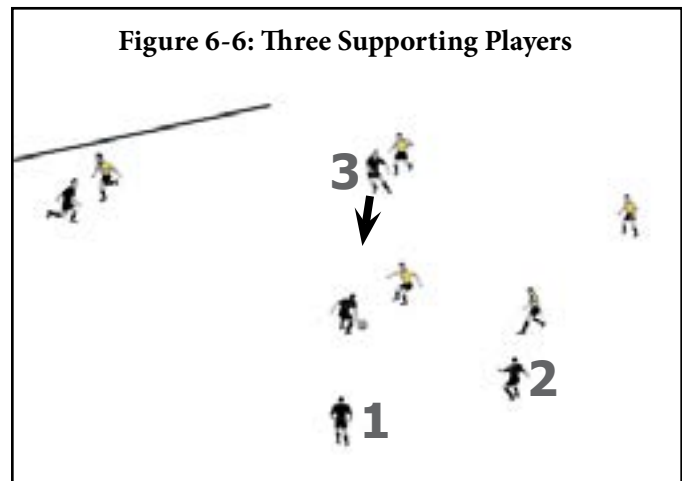
As we'll see in Book 2, passes to space are also helpful in the Breakthrough Part. As a pass is sent into the space behind the defenders, a teammate runs there.



**Possession Key #7: Provide the player on the ball with at least three supporting players.**

The first six keys treat the player with the ball as the prime mover. For example, since that player uses the backward direction now and then, teammates begin getting open in that direction. Or since that player passes long occasionally, teammates begin getting open long.

Teammates away from the ball can also be the prime movers though, by providing several passing options and communicating their whereabouts. The traditional term for this is *support*, which three teammates are providing in Figure 6-6. One is behind the ball, one is to the side, and one is checking back to the ball from up field. Only one of the three can receive the pass, but the other two are just as important. They're creating more options than opponents can keep track of.



## Possession Key #8: Avoid the northward tick-tack-toe square.

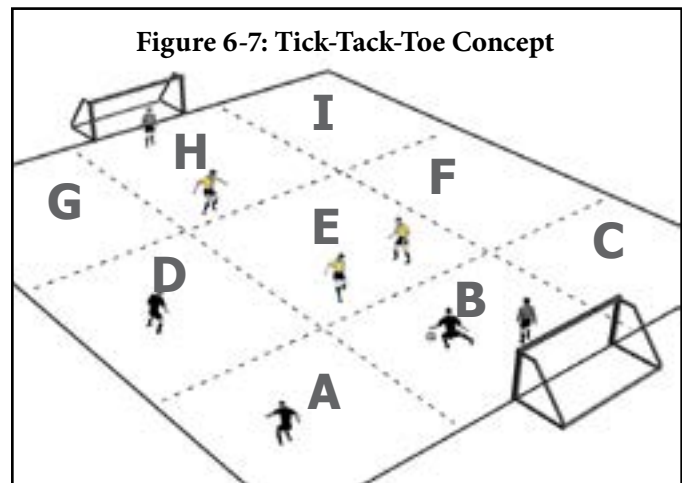
Imagine a soccer field as a large tic-tack-toe board with nine squares. The concept applies to a large match field, but also to a smaller scrimmage field as in Figure 6-7. Squares A, B, and C represent the defending third of the field; D, E, and F the middle third; and G, H, and I the attacking third.

Newer players always move the ball directly toward the northward square. If the ball is in A, they dribble or pass it to D. From F, toward I. And from H, toward the goal. As a result, teammates in the other squares aren't involved, opponents congregate in the northward square, and the ball is lost.

The powerful possession alternative is to move the ball to any square except the northward one. If the ball is in A, move it to B or E but not to D. If it's in E, move it anywhere but H. The player with the ball then begins seeing more options, players in the other squares get more involved, opponents scatter to all the squares, and possession is much easier.

But don't professional players often pass to the northward square? Yes, when that square is open. And often, the player receiving the ball in the northward square checks back to the ball and one-touches the ball right back so that possession won't be lost. Once players are able to resist the northward square, adding that square makes possession even better.

**The powerful possession alternative is to move the ball to any square except the northward one.**



### ARE THE KEYS VALID?

Are such keys a valid way to understand possession? In other words, will the team that applies those keys be more successful at keeping possession, avoiding turnovers, and achieving a high ANPP? Is teaching players such keys worth the time?

One argument against the possession keys could be called an argument from authority. The top possession teams like Barcelona don't think in terms of the possession keys. Nor do our coaching experts. Therefore, those keys can't possibly be valid.

Arguments from authority aren't necessarily flawed, but we can chip away at this one with a few questions. Since Barcelona's players do move the ball in all four directions and reset the ball to the keeper, how do we know they're not thinking in terms of the possession keys or something similar? Since America tends to be weak on possession, what makes us think our experts understand possession correctly? Might there be more than one effective way to think about possession, each producing the same results? And if a new way of thinking about possession is more accessible to newer coaches and players, isn't that better than booting every ball forward?

**And if a new way of thinking about possession is more accessible to newer coaches and players, isn't that better than booting every ball forward?**

The possession keys are a valid way to understand possession, and the argument in favor is simple. Imagine two teams playing a match. The skill levels of the individual players are comparable. But the first team can only move the ball forward, while the second team can move it in all four directions. The second team will surely average more passes per possession and have the stronger Possession Part. Plug any other possession key into the argument and the outcome is the same. The team that can use the key will have better possession than the team that can't. And if each key enhances possession, a team using all eight keys must be better off than a team using only one or two of them.

**Plug any other possession key into the argument and the outcome is the same. The team that can use the key will have better possession than the team that can't.**

## SUMMARY

Possession is often misunderstood due to several possession myths. As a result, soccer for newer coaches and players often has no Possession Part to speak of. The ball always goes straight to goal and is quickly lost. The problem can even afflict high school and college teams.

We should debunk those myths and view possession as something completely good. The Possession Part is just one dimension of things—the team's ability to keep the ball rather than commit turnovers. That ability serves many different purposes, from trying to score goals to trying to hold onto a lead.

The Possession Part depends on at least eight keys that players can improve continually at. Vary the ball's direction. Vary the number of touches. Find a player with more open space. When the ball is about to be lost, reset it to the back. Pass the ball long as well as short. In addition to passing to a teammate,

pass to space as a teammate runs there. Provide the player on the ball with at least three supporting players. And avoid the northward tick-tack-toe square.

That's the picture of possession that youth teams should pursue. And that picture can be brought to life with an accessible, playground friendly method.

# 7

## SCRIMMAGE RULES FOR POSSESSION

The previous chapter presented a picture of what the Possession Part should look like: eight possession keys producing a high Average Number of Passes per Possession. By applying those keys, the team can keep the ball when it wants to rather than turning the ball over. That's the desired end, so the means-to-the-end comes next—an accessible possession method.

The traditional method for teaching possession is to devote some single-theme practices to the topic once the players possess the correct body mechanics for passing and receiving. And the traditional method for practicing possession is to include keep-away games—*rondos*, to the Spaniards—frequently in practices and pre-match warm ups.

Such methods work of course, but there is a more accessible and efficient way for newer coaches and players to embrace the possession keys. Translate those keys into different scrimmage rules, such as a rule that players must use the backward direction or play with one touch. It's accessible because the coach facilitates, teaching is optional, and there is no need to wait until players possess the correct body mechanics. It's efficient because players at the same time practice scoring goals.

The typical objections to this playground inspired method hinge on three interesting questions. What should change first, player thought or player behavior? How can players make their own decisions if scrimmage rules are controlling their behavior? And how will behaviors brought about by scrimmage rules carry over to the match? Our case for Thoughtful Soccer must address those questions in a satisfactory way.

The Cause of Bunch Ball

Why Not Keep-Away?

Setting Up the Scrimmages

Three Quick Start Rules

Three Bread and Butter Scrimmages

Those First Two Questions

Five Advanced Scrimmages

That Carry Over Question

Summary

First, let's look at a phenomenon that plagues just about every newer coach and player.

## THE CAUSE OF BUNCH BALL

Newer coaches and players almost always get caught up in bunch ball. It's the antithesis of possession, because passing is absent. Why do young soccer players bunch around the ball, and what should be done about this? A possession method for newer coaches and players should provide answers.

The typical explanations of bunch ball address the mental functioning of young players. They're not cognitively developed enough for abstract concepts like possession. And since they're egocentric, they want to keep the ball to themselves rather than share it with teammates. That's why the swarm follows the ball toward one goal and then the other.

**The typical explanations of bunch ball address the mental functioning of young players.**

Though they might seem psychologically informed, such explanations are circular. Why don't players share the ball? They're egocentric! How do you know they're egocentric? Just look at how they refuse to share the ball! Why don't we just require them to share the ball? That would violate their egocentric nature! Rather than leading to bunch ball solutions, such explanations imply a bunch ball phase is inevitable and that *nothing* should be done about it.

The possession key about ball direction suggests a simpler yet more powerful explanation. Brand new players, regardless of their age, assume the ball should always go north toward the other team's goal. After all, the shortest distance between the ball and the goal is a straight line. But if the ball always goes north, the only way players from either team can touch the ball is to occupy the northward corridor. That produces congestion around the ball, and the congestion makes passing and teamwork impossible.

**The possession key about ball direction suggests a simpler yet more powerful explanation.**

Unlike the circular explanations, this one is easily tested. Implement scrimmage rules requiring that the ball move in all four directions. If the players begin spreading out and passing, the explanation might be valid and a solution might be at hand. And that's exactly what happens.

## WHY NOT KEEP-AWAY?

One way to work on possession is with keep-away games. In a rectangular or circular playing area, the attackers pass the ball quickly to keep it away from

defenders who give chase. Many team sizes are possible, such as 3 v 1, 4 v 2, 6 v 3, and various large sided versions.

Keep-away certainly has value. The attacker with the ball must control it efficiently and play it quickly. That attacker's teammates must provide good passing angles. The defenders must cut off those angles and pressure the ball. And everyone gets a lot of touches. Add a clear cut, convenient way to keep score—I can't think of a good one offhand—and keep-away becomes a high impact skill activity for passing and receiving.

My issue with keep-away is that it doesn't tie in that well with my possession theory. There are no goals to score on during keep-away. Goals give a soccer field the four directions that figure so prominently in the possession keys and the bunch ball solution. Without goals, all four directions are equal. There is no temptation to go forward, because there is no forward. So the coach can't teach the players to resist that temptation and consider the other directions.

**There are no goals to score on during keep-away. Goals give a soccer field the four directions . . .**

Scrimmages with special rules provide all that keep away does but more. Since the goals at each end create four directions and tempt the players to go forward, the coach can challenge that temptation. Keepers can be included, every possession can lead to a breakthrough and finish, and the players even get shooting practice.

**Scrimmages with special rules provide all that keep away does but more.**

## **SETTING UP THE SCRIMMAGES**

The coach who is facilitating must set up the teams, the field, and the goals. Each comes in different sizes. For team size, anything from 3 v 3 to 11 v 11 will work. Smaller sides provide more touches, while larger sides recreate the complexity of a real match. I use 5 v 5 when possible, with each team in a 2-1-2. That sets up a microcosm of a real match, with fullbacks, forwards, and a middle halfback, yet the players still get a lot of touches.

The size of the scrimmage field will depend on the team sizes and the coach's objectives. A smaller field emphasizes quicker decisions under pressure. A larger field emphasizes fitness and allows longer passes. A wider field emphasizes the importance of width. And a longer field works well if the offside rule is included.

Rather than worrying about specific field dimensions, the coach can just mark out a field with cones and begin the scrimmage. If the play seems too

congested, the field can be enlarged. If the play seems too spread out, the field can be made smaller.

Goal setups are a balancing act between realism and convenience. Regulation size goals with keepers replicate a real match and provide realistic shooting practice. But if there aren't enough keepers or real goals to go around, small goals like the two seen in Figure 7-1 can fill in admirably.

One player is shooting on two cones set two paces apart. To count, the shot must bounce at least once before going through. The other player is shooting on five side-by-side disc cones set inside the field. To count, the shot must make contact with one of the cones—something that will be seen or heard. Shots that bounce over the cones are no good. Both setups require a controlled shot from in close, which simplifies ball retrieval and forces the players to work together.

Once the field, the goals, and the teams are in place, the scrimmage session can begin. The coach declares which scrimmage rules are in effect, and yells, "Play!" Either the coach or the players may officiate. A new scrimmage begins every 5-12 minutes or so, until the teams have competed at 3 or more. Afterwards, a free scrimmage can take place, using just the regular rules of soccer.

Over the course of player development, scrimmages can be introduced in three phases. In the initial session with newer players, three *quick start rules* can be introduced first to sort out the chaos. Thereafter, three *bread and butter scrimmages* can become a staple of every practice. And once players have a handle on those three, five *advanced scrimmages* can be included now and then.

Let's look at the scrimmages and their behavioral impacts, and address those three interesting questions.

### THREE QUICK START RULES

In the initial scrimmage session, the coach should first facilitate a free scrimmage using just the regular rules of soccer. This gives the coach a baseline of where the players are starting out. If the players aren't familiar with possession, three possession-destroying habits will quickly surface. Players will

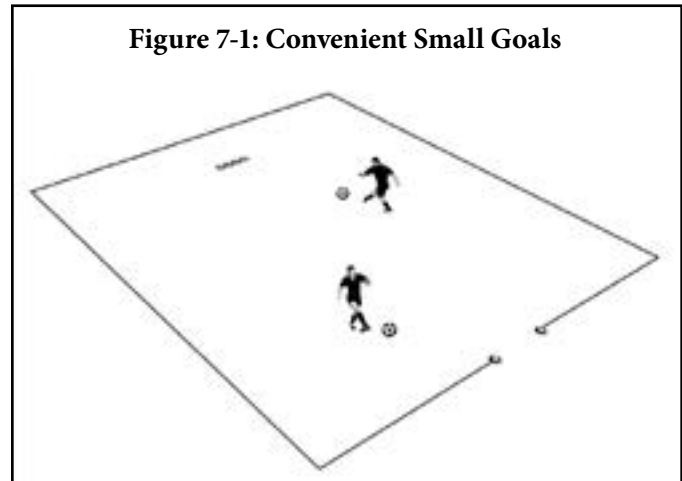


Figure 7-1: Convenient Small Goals

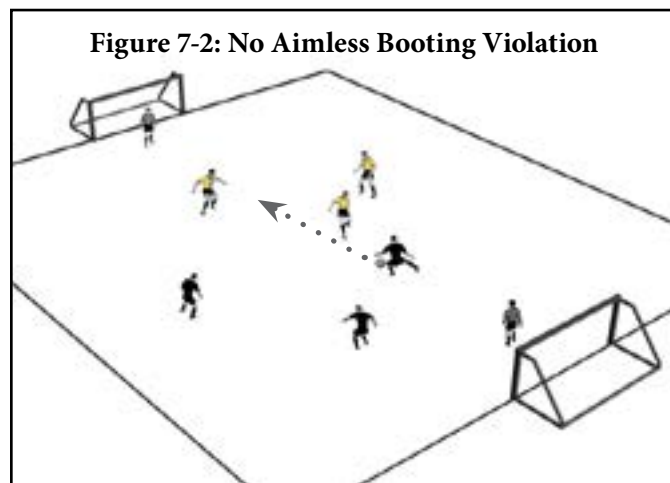
boot the ball aimlessly, without first looking for a teammate. Two or more players from the same team will hover over the ball and compete for it. And every first touch will propel the ball forward toward the other team's goal. The three quick start rules can now interrupt and change those habits.

**The three quick start rules can now interrupt and change those habits.**

### No Aimless Booting Rule

The *No Aimless Booting* (NAB) rule reads as follows. Rather than just looking down at the ball and kicking it forward, players must first look up for teammates to pass to. If a player kicks the ball without first looking up or without having a teammate as the target, the other team gets a free kick at the spot. Figure 7-2 shows an obvious NAB violation.

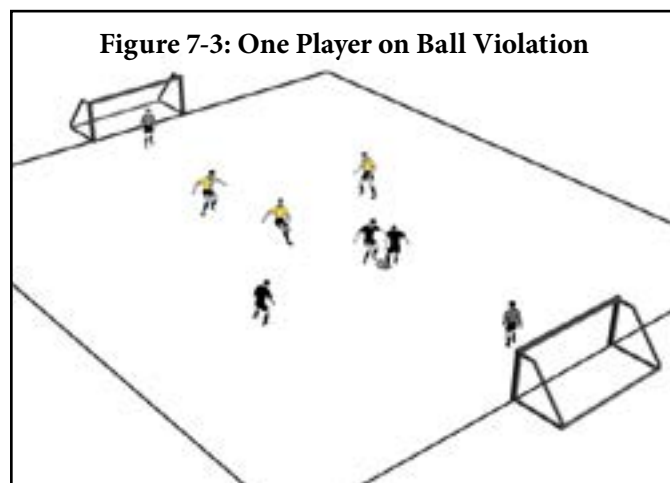
How does this rule change player behavior? The habit of booting the ball aimlessly is interrupted. To avoid giving the other team a free kick or having the fun constantly paused by the coach, players begin looking up for teammates—replacing the negative habit with a positive one. And that habit is rewarded in various ways: fewer interruptions by the coach, more praise from the coach, more completed passes, and happier teammates. Every scrimmage in this chapter uses the same pattern of interrupt, replace, and reward.



### One Player on the Ball Rule

Possession won't get off the ground if players from the same team fight over the ball. With the *One Player on the Ball* (OPOB) rule, only one player per team may be within one step of the ball at any given moment. If two players from the same team are caught within one step of the ball as in Figure 7-3, the other team gets a free kick at the spot. Instead, one player should deal with the ball while the others get open for a pass.

Once this rule is enforced a few times, two players from the same team will rarely fight over the ball



or steal it from one another. At that point, the rule can be permanently retired.

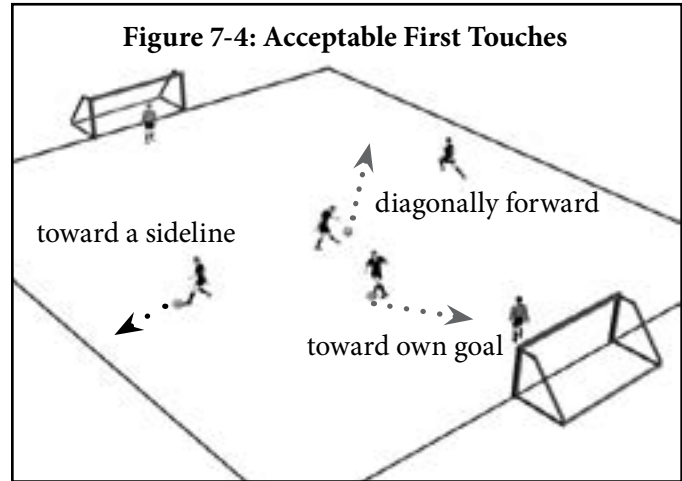
## Touch It Back Rule

If the player receiving the ball always pushes it immediately forward toward the other team's goal, the ball will usually be lost before any possession keys can be considered. Hence the *Touch It Back* (TIB) rule. Upon winning or receiving the ball, a player may not propel it toward the other team's goal with the first touch. As Figure 7-4 shows, that touch may propel the ball to the rear, to the side, or diagonally forward. And the second touch may propel the ball in any direction, including forward. But if the first touch goes forward, the other team gets a free kick at the spot.

This rule isn't as clear cut as the first two, and many borderline violations can be ignored. But once the coach calls a few obvious violations, players begin trying the other options rather than pushing the ball forward. The play spreads out even more, the possessions last longer, and everyone gets more touches. It's a powerful rule that helps players of all levels commit fewer turnovers. In other words, the rule has reach.

Those are the quick start rules. Here's the likely objection. In a real match, there will be times when a player *should* boot the ball away aimlessly or make the first touch forward. There is even a combination where two players from the same team *must* be within a step of the ball for a moment. Therefore, the quick start rules are harmful.

Up until the conclusion, this objection has merit. The exceptions to the rules can be coached later. The first priority is to get some possession happening, and the quick start rules do that. Also, the coach can choose to ignore rule violations that were actually good soccer—such as clearing the



## The Three Quick Start Rules

**No Aimless Booting Rule (NAB):** Upon receiving or reaching the ball, a player must look up for a teammate before passing or kicking the ball. If player passes or boots the ball with no clear target or without first looking up for a teammate, the other team gets a free kick at the spot

**One Player on the Ball Rule (OPOB):** Two players from the same team may not contend for the ball at the same time, hover over the ball, or be within one step of the ball. Instead, one player should go to the ball while the other gets open. Otherwise, the other team gets a free kick at the spot.

**Touch It Back Rule (TIB):** Upon receiving or reaching the ball, a player's first touch may not propel the ball in the forward direction—i.e. toward the other team's goal line. The first touch may propel the ball toward one's own goal line, toward either touchline, or diagonally forward. And the second touch may be in any direction, including forward. However, if the first touch propels the ball forward, the other team gets a free kick at the spot.

ball to prevent a goal or sending the first touch forward once the last defender has been beaten.

## THREE BREAD AND BUTTER SCRIMMAGES

After getting through the quick start rules, I introduce the next three scrimmages as soon as possible. I also include them in every practice and pre-match warm up regardless of the level at which I'm coaching. Why? They get players varying the ball's direction, varying the number of touches, and moving the ball quickly to open space—the most essential possession keys. And those keys are variables that can improve endlessly.

**They get players varying the ball's direction, varying the number of touches, and moving the ball quickly to open space—the most essential possession keys.**

I'll sometimes call the scrimmages with special rules *possession scrimmages*, because they focus mostly on possession. They could also be considered high impact skill activities—for passing (since they require so much passing) or for the Possession Part.

### Three-and-a-Drop Scrimmage

The *Three-and-a-Drop* scrimmage combines a touch requirement with a directional requirement. At some point during each possession, a team must pass the ball backward, in the direction of its own goal. And each player may use only three or fewer touches at a time.

Upon first hearing about this scrimmage, coaches sometimes picture it incorrectly. The rules do not dictate a particular passing sequence, such as making a drop pass after every third touch. Nor do they dictate when the first drop pass must occur or limit how many drop passes may occur. The players must make such decisions. The two requirements could have been divvied out to two different scrimmages, but combining them is more time efficient.

Typically, the first drop pass happens at the beginning of a possession. In addition to satisfying the requirement, that pass moves the ball away from

#### Rules for Three-and-a-Drop Scrimmage

**Three-Touch Restriction:** A player may use one, two, or three touches on the ball. After using three touches, a player may not shield the ball. If a player uses a fourth touch or shields the ball after three touches, the other team gets a free kick at the spot.

**Drop Pass Rule:** A team must complete at least one drop pass, a pass toward its own goal line, per possession. This pass may occur at any time during the possession, and additional drop passes may also occur. But if a team scores without having completed any drop passes, the goal doesn't count. A corner kick is considered a drop pass and may result in a shot.

**Defining a Possession:** Once a team completes a drop pass, a single touch by the other team doesn't erase the accomplishment or end the possession. But two consecutive touches does both.

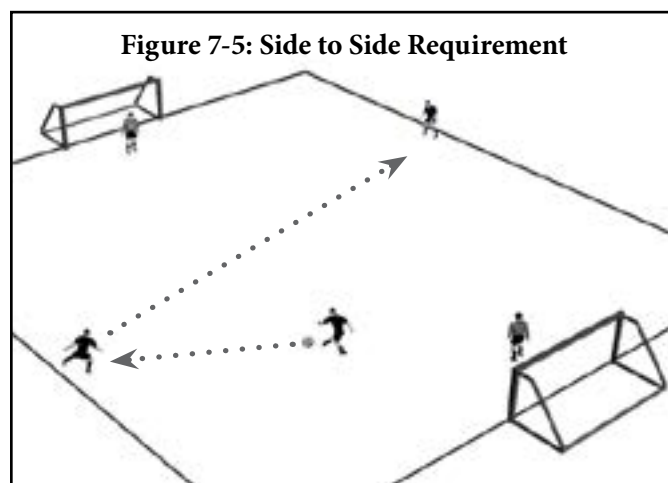
opponents and prevents the ball from being lost right away. Other drop passes might then happen during the same possession, whenever the ball would otherwise be lost or the forward direction is congested.

Here's how Three-and-a-Drop changes player behavior. The three-touch limit gets the ball moving quickly to open space, and begins the process of varying the number of touches. The drop pass requirement begins the process of varying the ball's direction, by activating the backward or south direction. And communication increases, as teammates behind the ball begin yelling, "Drop!"

## Side-to-Side Scrimmage

The *Side-to-Side* scrimmage continues the process of varying both the number of touches and the ball's direction. The players may now use any number of touches, from one to many. In other words, they may dribble. But at some point during the possession, they must escort the ball at least once to each touchline or sideline as in Figure 7-5.

When first competing, the players might try to meet the side to side rule by sending one long pass across the middle of the field. That rarely works, because long passes are more difficult and the middle is more congested. Eventually, the players learn to drop the ball back to a fullback who then switches it to the other side. This safe, reliable drop-and-switch maneuver is an example of playing the ball out of the back.



### Rules for the Side-to-Side Scrimmage

**Touch Rule:** Players may use as many touches as they like and may dribble. However, they should be encouraged to pass quickly when possible. If it is deemed that a player has dribbled excessively, the other team may be awarded a free kick.

**Side to Side Requirement:** During each possession, a team must escort the ball to within two steps of each touchline or sideline at least one time. To reach a touchline, any combination of passing and dribbling may be used. The touchlines may be reached in any order, and more than one time. But goals scored without first reaching both touchlines don't count.

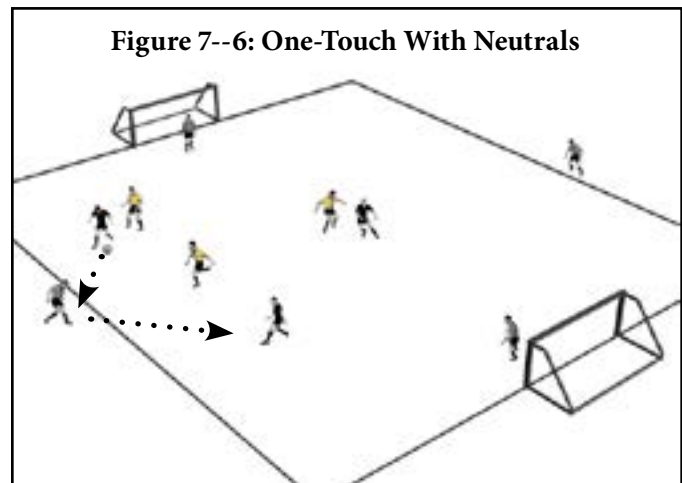
**Defining a Possession:** Once a team has reached one or both touchlines, a single touch by the other team doesn't erase the accomplishment or end the possession. But two consecutive touches does both.

Here are some other behavioral impacts. The players must now choose between one touch and many touches, since dribbling is permitted. To the backward direction, activated by the previous scrimmage, is added the east/west or lateral direction. And as the player with the ball begins seeing the situation to either side, teammates begin getting open there. In traditional lingo, the team begins using the field's *width*.

## One-Touch Scrimmage

The *One-Touch* scrimmage limits each player to one touch at a time. That touch must be a pass to someone or a shot rather than an aimless boot. To give the team with the ball more passing targets, neutral players may patrol one or both touchlines as in Figure 7-6. Also using one touch, they attempt to pass to whichever team passed to them.

Here are the behavioral impacts of using the scrimmage regularly. The players will now be practicing the full range of touches, from one to many. The only way to avoid an aimless booting violation and succeed at the scrimmage is to look up while the ball is still arriving—a habit that



### Rules for the One-Touch Scrimmage

**Setup:** Team sizes from 3 v 3 to 11 v 11 may be used. The teams try to score on the goals at each end.

**One-Touch Rule:** A player is allowed only one touch at a time. That touch must be either a pass to a teammate or a shot. If a player touches the ball twice or kicks the ball without having looked up for a teammate, the other team gets a free kick at the spot. A team must complete at least one pass before scoring.

**No Shielding Rule:** For safety and to keep the game moving, a player who has used one touch must get out of the way rather than shielding the ball. Otherwise, the other team gets a free kick at the spot.

**Optional Neutral Players:** One or two neutral players may be positioned along one or both touchlines. These players may move up and down a touchline but may not come onto the field of play. Players from either team may pass to a neutral player, who has one touch to play the ball back to the same team. An errant pas to a neutral player results in possession for the other team.

contributes to speed of play. And the one-touch play will carry over to all the other scrimmages as well as to matches.

Will newer players really be able to compete at this One-Touch scrimmage? That might depend on their age and experience level. But if they can understand the rules and count to one, it's worth a try. Typically, the players struggle with the scrimmage the first time but improve continually thereafter.

## THOSE FIRST TWO QUESTIONS

Before continuing with the advanced scrimmages, let's ponder those first two questions of interest.

What should change first, player thought or player behavior? This behaviorally oriented scrimmage method clearly sides with the latter. The rules require the players to try the desired behaviors and experience the rewarding consequences. Player thinking changes later. For example, the drop pass rule requires players to try the backward direction. When they do so, they experience better possession and more enjoyment. So eventually, they begin thinking, "For better possession and more enjoyment, use the backward direction."

**What should change first, player thought or player behavior? This behaviorally oriented scrimmage method clearly sides with the latter.**

But how can players learn to make their own decisions if scrimmage rules are controlling their behavior? A scathing but unsound criticism is implied here. If the players perform a possession key because the rules mandate it, they can't be deciding to use the key. Nor can they be learning the correct times for a drop pass or one-touch pass. They might make such passes out of habit at the wrong times, as when they could have been going forward or shooting. They'll play like robots, under the control of the autocratic coach and the oppressive rules. The argument is of the slippery slope variety.

**But how can players learn to make their own decisions if scrimmage rules are controlling their behavior?**

The decision-making skill of robots aside—there are some tough computer chess programs out there!—here are three reasons why the argument is unsound.

First, if it was sound, many widely accepted practice activities would have to be trashed as well. A heading activity taught in advanced coaching courses has the players run around the field throwing and catching with their hands to set up heading attempts. Why don't they also begin using their hands in real matches? Because they can tell the difference between an activity that permits

use of the hands and a match that doesn't. By the same token, players can tell the difference between a scrimmage that requires drop passes or one-touch passes and a match where these are optional.

Second, the scrimmages most definitely do not prevent decision making. Consider a particular possession during Three-and-a-Drop. One could argue that the first drop pass during that possession happened because it was mandated by the rules. But what about the second and third drop passes that often occur during a possession? Clearly, the players are voluntarily choosing those for some reason. They're learning the why and when of this important possession tool. The scrimmages actually enhance decision-making by giving players more options to decide between.

**The scrimmages actually enhance decision-making by giving players more options to decide between.**

Third, the criticism fails to distinguish between the desired end and the means to that end. My desired end—the picture of soccer I want to see in real matches—is for the players to choose creatively between different possession keys and between possession and attack. Each scrimmage is a means to that end, a way to help players improve at one or more of the keys. Eventually, the players will be in a free scrimmage or match where only soccer's regular rules apply. Even if the players wanted to obediently follow one of the special rules, which one would it be? The drop pass rule? The side to side rule? The one-touch rule? Obviously, they'll have to choose between the options at their disposal. It would be a strange thing if I was using a particular means in every practice, season after season, even though it was undermining my desired end!

## **FIVE ADVANCED SCRIMMAGES**

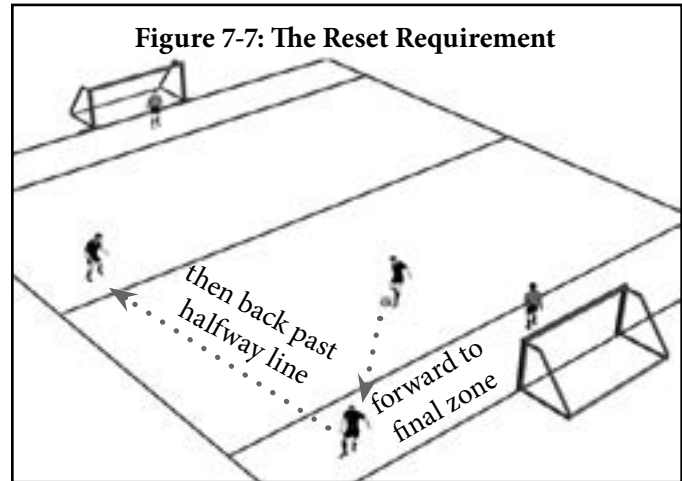
The bread and butter scrimmages allow all the possession keys but don't specifically target a few of them—passing long and short, for example. That's where the advanced scrimmages come in handy. For one reason or another, these scrimmages aren't as easily included in every practice. But each has value and can be included now and then.

### **The Reset Scrimmage**

The attacking team has the ball near the other team's goal but is about to lose the ball. Rather than continuing with a doomed attack, the team resets the ball back to the fullbacks or even the keeper. The possession is prolonged, and a better scoring chance might arise when the ball is later moved forward.

The *Reset* scrimmage translates this possession key into a scrimmage rule. It's in the advanced group because the field layout and rules are a little more complicated. Before scoring, a team must work the ball close to the other team's goal and then work it back behind the halfway line (Figure 7-7). A three-touch limit can also be included, forcing the players to work together on the resets.

The first reset during a possession might happen just to satisfy the rules, giving rise to that robot concern. It might also happen at a time when it wouldn't in a real match, such as when a scoring chance was available. But the players experience a useful possession tool and its impact. Each reset maintains possession, increases the ANPP, and tires out the opposition. That's why additional resets might happen during the same possession.



### Rules for the Reset Scrimmage

**Setup:** The teams may be any size between 3 v 3 and 11 v 11. Cones along each touchline designate a halfway line and two *final zones*—the final eighth of the field in front of each goal.

**Touch Restriction:** Players may use one, two, or three touches at a time. If a player uses a fourth touch, the other team gets a free kick at the spot.

**Reset Requirement:** During each possession, a team must escort the ball forward into the final zone and then back past the halfway line at least one time. The team may do this reset maneuver more than one time if it desires. But if a team scores without having done at least one reset, the goal doesn't count.

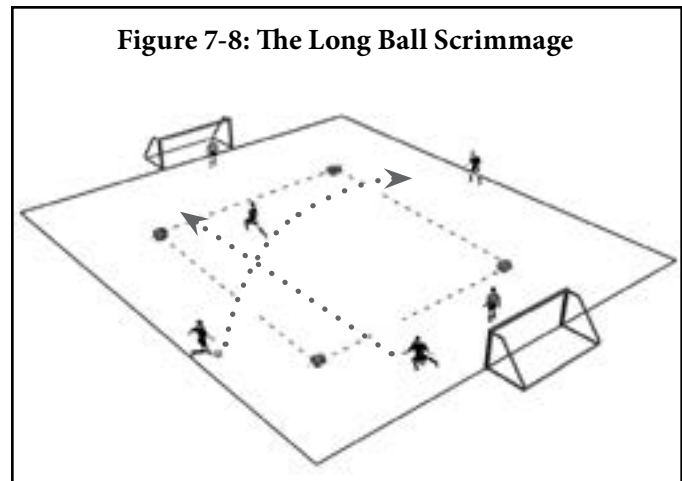
**Defining a Possession:** Once a team has reached a final zone or accomplished a reset, one touch by the other team doesn't erase the accomplishment or begin a new possession. Two consecutive touches by the other team does both.

### The Long Ball Scrimmage

Another possession key is to pass long as well as short. How could that be translated into a scrimmage rule? The short passes aren't an issue, because so many happen in the other scrimmages. The *Long-Ball* scrimmage provides a way to define and require long passes.

The field must be larger and the players need more leg strength, placing the scrimmage in the advanced group. A large rectangle is created inside the field by laying down four t-shirts or something else safe to step on (Figure 7-8). To be considered a long pass, a pass must traverse two parallel sides of that rectangle on the ground or through the air. For a goal to count, at least one such long pass must have occurred during the possession.

What is the impact? Not only do the players get a lot of practice passing long. The player with the ball begins seeing the situation far as well as near. Players far from the ball, having a good chance of receiving a pass, begin getting open and communicating. And opponents begin guarding those distant players, reducing congestion near the ball and making possession easier.



### Rules for the Long Ball Scrimmage

**Field Setup:** The field is larger than for other scrimmages. Four t-shirts inside the field create a large rectangle for passes to traverse.

**Long Pass Rule:** Passes of any length may be used. However, a team may not score until it has at some point completed at least one long pass through the air or on the ground. A pass is defined as long if it traverses two parallel sides of the large rectangle. If a team completes two or more long passes during a possession and then scores, the goal counts double.

**Defining a Possession:** Once a team completes a long pass, a single touch by the other team doesn't erase this accomplishment or end the possession. Two consecutive touches do both.

### The Pass-to-Space Scrimmage

Another possession key in need of strengthening is passing to space as well as directly to teammates. Simple. Just make passing directly to teammates a rule violation as in the *Pass-to-Space* scrimmage. The ball must instead be passed to space as a teammate runs there. Figure 7-9 shows a rule violation as well as an okay pass. If the ball is passed directly to a teammate who then receives it, the other team gets a free kick at the spot—unless the teammate lets the ball run by first. In a variation of the scrimmage, the player who has just passed the ball must immediately make a run also.

It's an advanced scrimmage because the rules are a bit more difficult to understand, execute, and enforce. Was that pass directly to a teammate or to open space? Whoever is officiating should call the obvious violations and ignore the borderline ones.

It's another scrimmage that robot-phobic critics might object to. For the entire time, every pass must go to space, even when a pass directly to a teammate would have been easier or produced a goal. But the behavioral payoff justifies the temporary lack of realism. Passers and receivers begin communicating where the passes to space should go, by shouting or pointing. Receivers learn to let the pass run by now and then. And the players begin seeing open spaces as passing targets, which also helps in the Breakthrough Part.

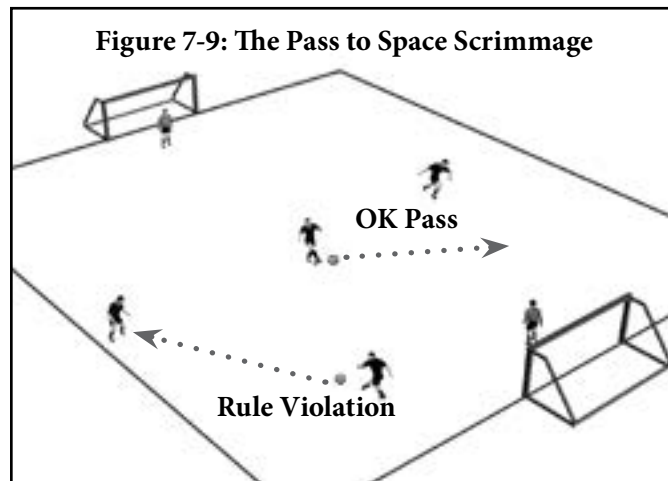


Figure 7-9: The Pass to Space Scrimmage

### Rules for the Pass to Space Scrimmage

**Pass to Space Rule:** If a player passes the ball directly to a stationary teammate who then receives it, the other team gets a free kick at the spot. Instead, the pass must go to an open space as the teammate runs there. The teammate may be running in any direction, including toward the passer.

**Run-By Clause:** If the ball is passed directly to a stationary teammate, that teammate may avoid a violation by letting the ball run by and then running after it.

**Officiating:** Many rule violations will not be clear cut. Calls may be made by the coach or by each team's captain. If no call is made, play continues.

**Touch Restriction:** A three-touch limit is recommended but optional.

**Optional Pass and Move Rule:** The player who has just passed the ball must immediately move at least three steps in any direction. If that player passes the ball and then stands in the same spot, the other team gets a free kick at that spot. This rule forces players to continually swap positions.

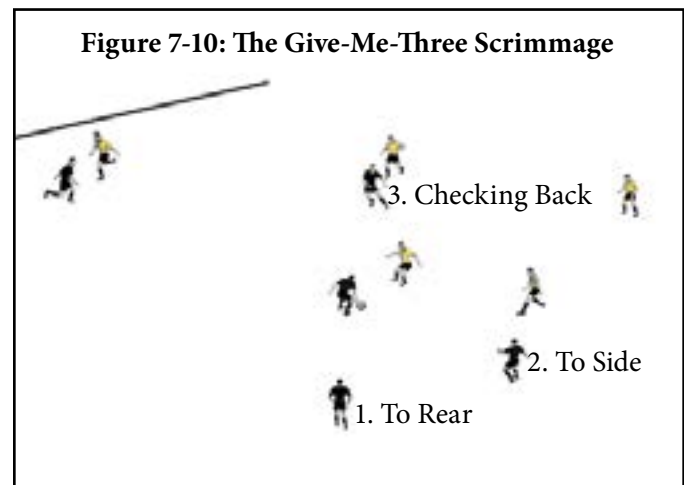
### The Give-Me-Three Scrimmage

All the previous scrimmages treat the player with the ball as the prime mover. Since that player must execute one option or another, the teammates without the ball respond accordingly. But one of the possession keys calls upon the teammates without the ball to be the prime movers, by providing at least three passing options. The *Give-Me-Three* scrimmage brings that key to life.

When one player has the ball, at least three teammates must provide passing options: one to the south, one to the east or west, and one to the north (Figure 7-10). The player to the north should normally be checking back to the ball, making a stolen pass less likely. The player with the ball, in turn, must see all three options before deciding what to do with the ball. The coach determines this by watching the player's eyes. If the three passing targets aren't given or the player with the ball doesn't glance at those options, the other team gets a free kick at the spot.

This scrimmage works best as an occasional coaching tool rather than as a frequent competition. Catching all the rule violations is impossible, and many of them shouldn't be enforced anyway—like the smart one-touch pass that happens before three teammates are in position. Hence the advanced designation.

But when the coach explains the rules and calls a violation or two, a behavioral purpose is served. The players away from the ball begin providing three options, and the player with the ball makes a show of glancing in three directions before deciding what to do. Those behaviors enhance possession, even if they're initially performed to satisfy the rules.



### Rules for the Give-Me-Three Scrimmage

**Setup:** The scrimmage may be used with team sizes from 5 v 5 to 11 v 11.

**Give Me Three Rule:** Upon receiving a pass or regaining the ball, a player must immediately look in three different directions or make eye contact with three different teammates. The coach or referee determines this by watching the player's eyes. Additionally, teammates must get open in at least three different directions: behind the ball, ahead of the ball, and to either side of the ball. If the player with the ball dribbles or passes without first looking around, or if three passing options aren't created, a violation may be called. The other team then gets a free kick at the spot.

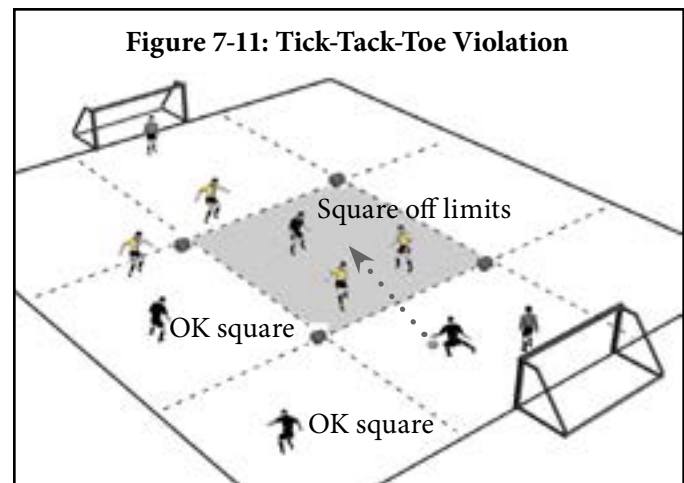
**Exceptions to the Rule:** Occasionally, the Give Me Three Rule will be violated in an appropriate way, as when a player makes a quick one-touch pass before three options can be provided. Also, many borderline violations will occur, and the referee may let these slide. All calls are at the referees discretion. If no call is made, the players must play on.

## The Tick-Tack-Toe Scrimmage

If there is a tick-tack-toe possession key, there has to be a *Tick-Tack-Toe* scrimmage! The field setup is like that of the Long-Ball scrimmage, and the two can happen back to back. The four t-shirts now transform the field into a giant tick-tack-toe board of nine squares. When the ball is in a particular square, it may be moved to any other square except the northward one. In Figure 7-11, the ball is moved from the square in front of the player's goal to the central square—a rule violation. The other team therefore gets a free kick in the central square.

The challenging field setup and rule enforcement merit the advanced label. The major rule isn't a black and white thing, and many of the violations can be ignored. The violations that are called might even have an ironic quality. The ball has gone directly into the northward square, and the other team has therefore stolen it before the coach can call a violation. The coach calls a violation anyway, and the offending player complains about the call! The coach gets to point out the irony: "But you lost the ball anyway! That's why we avoid the northward square!"

The possession impact can be dramatic. Realizing the northward square is off limits, the player with the ball begins looking to other squares. Teammates therefore begin getting open in those



### Rules for the Tick-Tack-Toe Scrimmage

**Field Setup:** Team sizes from 5 v 5 to 11 v 11 may be used. By laying down t-shirts or other objects that may be safely stepped on, the field is divided into a large tick-tack-toe board of nine rectangles. These rectangles should be similar in size but need not be identical in size.

**No Northward Movement Rule:** When the ball is in one rectangle, it may not be passed or dribbled into the rectangle to the north. It may be passed or dribbled into a rectangle to the rear, to the side, or diagonally forward. If it is passed or dribbled into the northward rectangle, a violation has occurred and the other team gets a free kick in that rectangle. Once the ball reaches one of the three rectangles in front of the other team's goal, it may be taken directly to that goal for a scoring attempt.

**Optional Check Back Rule:** With this optional rule, the ball may be passed to a teammate in the northward square if that teammate is making a run toward the ball—i.e. a check back run.

squares. The action spreads out over all nine squares, there is less congestion around the ball, and one possession can last an eternity. Even after removing the t-shirts and moving on to the next scrimmage, the players continue visualizing that tick-tack-toe board. The rule then becomes a rule of thumb, to be applied as the players see fit.

## THAT CARRY OVER QUESTION

That third interesting question remains. Even if these scrimmage rules get players behaving differently, will that carry over in a positive way to matches? The answer, unfortunately, is maybe.

For one thing, the coach or the players might not appreciate all this possession stuff. Once the match arrives, they might think, “Thank goodness we can go straight to goal now!”

**Even if these scrimmage rules get players behaving differently, will that carry over in a positive way to matches?**

For another thing, getting practice to carry over to the match is always a challenge, even when the coach and the players want that to happen. Behaviors that are happening because of the scrimmage rules must somehow happen when those rules aren’t around. In other words, the rules must transform into rules of thumb—options the players choose at the proper match moments.

Fortunately, there are a few good reasons why the changes are likely to carry over to the match. The practice environment is very similar to the match environment, in that both have goals to score on, four directions, and players who can run where they please. The scrimmage rules that make the practice environment different are eventually faded out, by moving on to other rules or having a free scrimmage at the end. And the same rewards that happened in practice will be available in the match: attention from the coach, fewer turnovers, more touches, and more fun.

**Fortunately, there are a few good reasons why the changes are likely to carry over to the match.**

A few coaching interventions can further enhance the carry over. The coach can include the scrimmage rules in every practice so that they’ll become more ingrained. The scrimmage rules can be applied to the same team sizes used in matches, such as 11 v 11 if that’s what the team plays. The bread and butter scrimmages can be part of the pre-match warm up, imprinting them on everyone’s mind right before the match begins. The coach can even impose a particular scrimmage rule during the match, such as the side-to-side rule or the drop pass rule. That can get the possession ball rolling at the start of a match, or keep the team from running up the score against a weak opponent.

And as a last resort, the coach can limit the playing time of players who insist on booting every ball forward.

## SUMMARY

Most American youth players endure a bunch ball phase. That phase undermines possession and must later be unlearned. Many players never get to the unlearning part, and evolve instead toward straight-to-goal soccer. If there is a way to circumvent bunch ball entirely, this should be of great interest to American soccer coaches and coaching organizations.

**If there is a way to circumvent bunch ball entirely, this should be of great interest to American soccer coaches and coaching organizations.**

Eight possession keys obviously help teams keep possession. Small sided scrimmages with special rules, also called possession scrimmages, are an accessible method for practicing those keys. Newer coaches can easily organize those scrimmages, and newer players can easily compete at them. And the improved possession has a good chance of carrying over to real matches.

Therefore, all youth soccer coaches should become capable with possession scrimmages, and all youth players should be introduced early on to the Possession Part. A bunch ball phase isn't necessary after all.

# 8

## WORKING WITH BRAND NEW PLAYERS

**H**ow should the development of soccer players *begin*? In other words, how should we work with *brand new* soccer players? The teaching dimension and the playground dimension lead to different answers. And the playground dimension's answers have some important advantages.

The term *brand new players* is an important piece of the puzzle. Such players are often very young players—4 or 5 years old, for example—but not necessarily. Players could instead begin playing when they are 8, 13, or 30 years old. Surely brand new players of all ages deserve the chance to reach their potential. And one of those late bloomers could be an outstanding athlete who helps the national team someday! So let's make a distinction between *younger* brand new players and *older* brand new players, and treat both as if they matter.

### THE TEACHING DIMENSION AND BRAND NEW PLAYERS

If we're not careful, the teaching dimension can have three negative impacts on brand new players. We might marginalize the older brand new players. We might miss a great opportunity for multi-variable practices. And we might accidentally perpetuate straight-to goal soccer rather than possession soccer. These impacts tie in with age-by-age curriculums, and that's where we'll begin.

### Age-by-Age Curriculums

If we believe players must eventually be taught a large number of soccer items,

The Teaching Dimension  
and Brand New Players

From Lessons to Activities

Some Stepping Stone  
Activities

Shots for the Very Young

Possession Beginnings

A Season for Very Young  
Players

Summary

an age-by-age curriculum, charting out the ages at which players are to learn different soccer items, becomes necessary. Players are to learn some items between the ages of 5 and 8, some between 8 and 10, and so on. The skill items are to come before the tactical items. And the team sizes are to gradually increase, from 3 v 3 to 6 v 6 and so on, with the tactics for 11 v 11 play coming last.

Why do we have such curriculums? The typical justification is that players of different ages, having different cognitive abilities and learning styles, need to be taught different things in different ways. But might that justification be a rationalization that arose *after* the curriculums were settled on? For if we believe players must eventually be taught a large number of items, one per practice, there is little choice but to distribute these items to different age groups. And then there is little choice but to distribute the skill items for small sided play to the younger age groups and the tactical items for large sided play to the older groups.

**For if we believe players must eventually be taught a large number of items, one per practice, there is little choice but to distribute these items to different age groups.**

The traditional term for such curriculums is *age appropriate* curriculums, which implies they are good and necessary. Who can argue against *age appropriate* in favor of *age inappropriate*?!

I'll use the more value neutral term *age-by-age* curriculums because I'm not convinced they are necessary and they get low marks for accessibility. The coach must learn to teach the items for each age group and each team size. The club must match coaches to the age groups for which they are qualified. And there are those three negative impacts on brand new players, explained next.

## **Overlooking the Older Ones**

Age-by-age curriculums first provide a plan for the youngest age group. Interestingly, a playground-like approach is usually recommended. Consider these two quotes about the youngest players, from the U.S. Soccer website. "Very young players from 6 to 8 years of age love to play. Therefore all practices should be based on fun games." (While I agree with that, I believe it applies to players of all ages.) "Players must spend the maximum time possible in contact with the ball and experimenting by themselves." (That also can apply to players of all ages, and doesn't it imply that players *can* acquire skills by experimenting?)

What happens, though, when the brand new players happen to be 8, 13, or 30? Are they supposed to jump on board the curriculum at square one along with the very young players, playing the same fun games and experimenting? Frogs and minnows, anyone? Won't those older brand new players have more advanced learning styles and cognitive abilities and therefore require a different type of coaching? And wouldn't that make an already complicated curriculum unbearably so?

I've never seen an age-by-age curriculum that provided a separate plan for the older brand new players. The temptation, I fear, is to relegate such players to the recreational divisions, treat them as less important, or pretend they don't exist.

**The temptation, I fear, is to relegate such players to the recreational divisions, treat them as less important, or pretend they don't exist.**

## Using Single-Theme Practices

With the teaching dimension, each practice is to have one central theme. How might this be applied to very young players who are playing at, and experimenting with, fun games? Well, one practice could consist entirely of fun dribbling games, the next could consist entirely of fun passing games, and so on.

Here's why that doesn't make sense. Single-theme practices came about in the first place so that coaches could teach one item thoroughly using a logical progression of activities culminating in a final scrimmage. Some of those activities might qualify as fun games, but some will probably be drills or instructional segments. If *every* activity is to be a fun game, with no instruction or final scrimmage, why stick with the single-theme approach? The dribbling games would only happen during a dribbling practice, the passing games would only happen during a passing practice, and so on. By season's end, the players wouldn't improve that much at each game or skill.

**If every activity is to be a fun game, with no instruction or final scrimmage, why stick with the single-theme approach?**

Wherever one stands on the single-theme versus multi-variable debate, multi-variable practices surely make more sense with very young players. If you have a great dribbling game and a great passing game, include them in every practice. Your players, rather than becoming confused, will improve much more by season's end.

## Introducing Scrimmages and Matches

With any age-by-age curriculum, the skill items are going to come first and the tactical items like possession are going to come much later. A few years later, probably. Yet very young players will nevertheless be allowed to compete at scrimmages and matches of some kind. The play will include small fields, small sides, and no keepers or offside restrictions but otherwise just the regular rules of soccer. For example, the practices U.S. Soccer recommends for the youngest players include twenty minutes of scrimmaging, during which “tactical intervention is to be limited to basic explanations about space distribution.”

Slippery slope arguments aren’t always sound, but here’s one that is. When players scrimmage and play matches without first appreciating possession, every single touch will propel the ball straight toward the other team’s goal. The players will all bunch up on the path to goal, because that’s the only way to touch the ball. Those basic explanations about space distribution will be exasperated shouts of “Spread out!” and “Don’t bunch up!” The wrong picture of soccer will be instilled, that picture must later be dismantled, and the right picture will at best get a very late start. At that point, the coach must say, “I hate to tell you this team, but the way you’ve been playing the past four years is all wrong!”

**The wrong picture of soccer will be instilled, that picture must later be dismantled, and the right picture will at best get a very late start.**

## FROM LESSONS TO ACTIVITIES

The playground dimension leads to a very different plan for the youngest players and for brand new players in general. Coaches don’t have to worry about the different cognitive abilities or learning styles of different age groups. They don’t have to learn to teach the lessons for each age group, or consult an age-by-age curriculum. It’s not that players of different ages have identical cognitive abilities or learning styles. It’s that the focus shifts from the lessons players must learn to the activities players must compete at!

Here’s the reasoning. The day players can compete at high impact skill activities like Run the Gauntlet or Soccer Volley, and at possession scrimmages like Three-and-a-Drop or Side-to-Side, is one to celebrate. The players need not compete skillfully at those activities yet, for the activities are what make the skill happen. The players just need to compete well enough to have fun with-out continually retrieving balls or colliding. From that day on, they’ll

**The day players can compete at high impact skill activities like Run the Gauntlet or Soccer Volley, and at possession scrimmages like Three-and-a-Drop or Side-to-Side, is one to celebrate.**

improve continually at soccer's major parts and the coach's teaching skill won't be such a limiting factor. So we want that day to arrive as soon as possible.

Suppose you are working with some brand new soccer players. Notice that I haven't specified their ages! They might already be able to compete at some of the playground-inspired activities, which can therefore commence immediately. For example, very young players can already compete at some of the shots, while older brand new players can compete at Run the Gauntlet and Three-and-a-Drop. But very young players usually can't compete right away at some of the activities, and there is a simple behavioral explanation. Those activities presuppose other abilities: to follow rules, to stay within boundaries, to tell the difference between opponents and teammates, or to control a ball somewhat.

When players can't compete at a key activity yet, there is a better solution than waiting until they are older. Get started right now, by devising a *stepping stone activity* that moves players in the right direction. The next section shows how.

## SOME STEPPING STONE ACTIVITIES

There is a simple formula for devising the stepping stones that lead to a targeted game. Make the boundaries and other logistics resemble the targeted game. Let coaches or parent volunteers rather than teammates provide the opposition, so that there are fewer collisions and more successes. For the youngest players at least, couch the game in animal, cartoon, or fairy tale terminology—by making the adults slow moving dragons or spiders, for example. Rather than keeping score, just shower attention on the players when they succeed or try hard. And have the dragons and spiders gradually increase their resistance.

How many stepping stone games will we need? We'll need a game leading to Run the Gauntlet, the targeted game for dribbling past defenders. Let's call it *Beat the Dragons*. We'll need a game leading to Ride the Bronco, the targeted game for dribbling for possession or shielding. Let's call it *Save the Butterfly*—from the hungry spiders, of course. We'll need a game leading to Slalom Course, the targeted game for speed dribbling. How about *Big Game Hunting* or *Dodge the Cow Pies*? We'll need a game leading to Air Control, the targeted game for chipping. Enter *Alligator River* and its simpler variations. And we'll need a game leading to Soccer Volley, the targeted game for controlling balls in the air. I call that one *Settlers*.

Those six activities plus a few of the shots, repeated frequently, can provide a great skill start for very young players. The players get to experiment

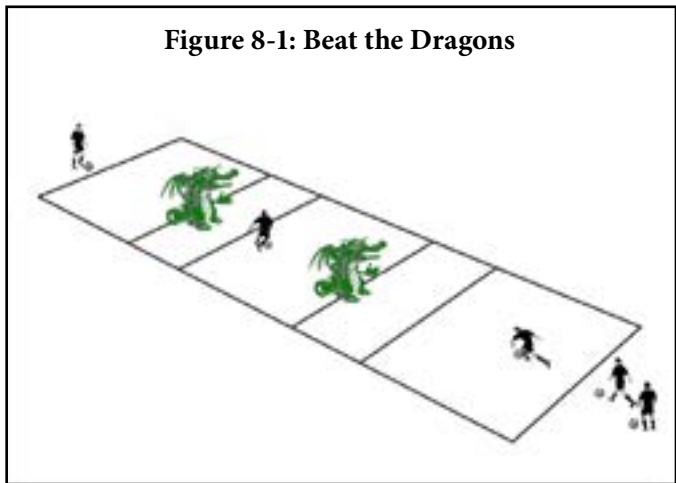
**Those six activities plus a few of the shots, repeated frequently, can provide a great skill start for very young players.**

during fun games, just like U.S. Soccer recommends, and the coach only has to facilitate. Here are some brief descriptions.

## Beat the Dragons

As soon as they are able, we would like our brand new players to compete at Run the Gauntlet (see Chapter 4), one of the target games for dribbling past defenders. But if we make very young players the defenders, they might not understand the defensive zones, they might collide with the dribblers, and the dribblers might not have much success.

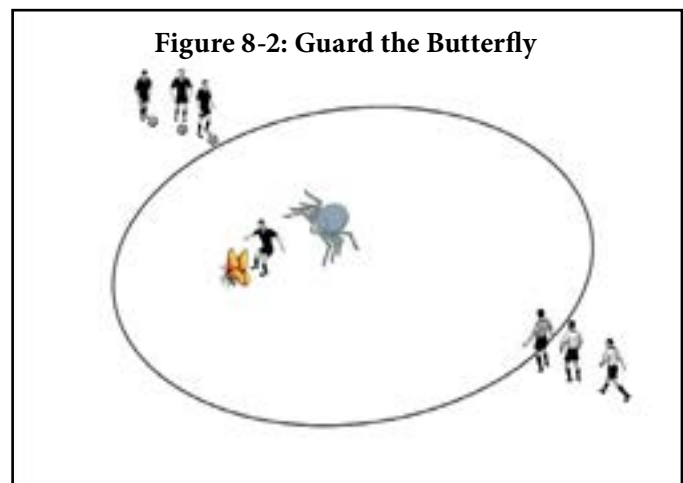
Beat the Dragons (Figure 8-1) is the obvious stepping stone solution. The boundaries are the same, but a parent or coach stands in each defensive zone pretending to be a scary dragon. One by one, the children dribble past the dragons, who move slowly and provide little resistance. The line reforms at the other end, and then the children dribble back in the other direction. The dragons gradually provide more resistance, and begin winning the ball occasionally—until one day the coach says, “Billy, let’s have you try being one of the dragons!”



## Guard the Butterfly

The target activity for dribbling for possession or shielding is Ride the Bronco (see Chapter 4). Having very young children compete at this game might be unwise. The defender might accidentally kick the dribbler, the dribbler might not have much success, and the children waiting in line might not pay attention. The stepping stone solution is *Guard the Butterfly* (Figure 8-2). The dribbler protects a butterfly (the soccer ball) from a hungry spider (an adult volunteer).

Even better, all the dribblers can go at the same time. Four or five children are inside a Ride the Bronco circle, each with a soccer ball representing a butterfly. A few parent volunteers or coaches are also in the circle, moving around slowly like hungry spiders. The players must shield their

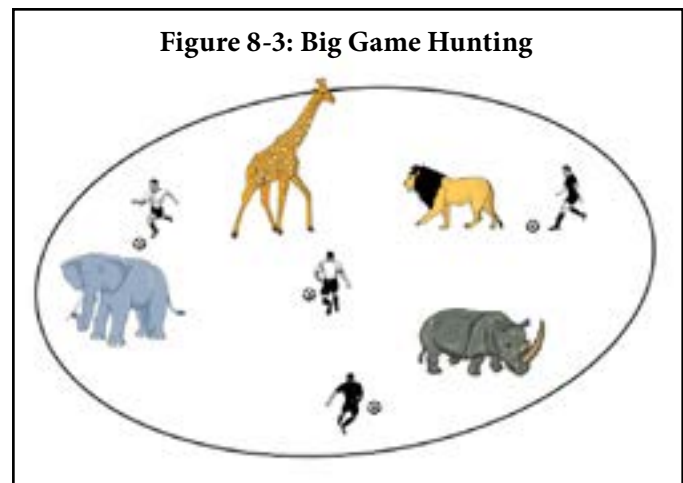


butterflies from the spiders while dribbling anywhere inside the circle. The coach may demonstrate how to turn one's back to the spider while staying between the spider and the butterfly—a nice metaphor for shielding.

## Big Game Hunting

What about dribbling efficiently through open space? The target game is Slalom Course, where players pursue each other through gates around a circular course. (Chapter 4) Very young children will have trouble staying spread out, and they'll continually knock over the cones, which makes competing difficult.

One stepping stone solution is *Big Game Hunting* (Figure 8-3). Inside a large circle or rectangle, three or four adults now represent wild animals—one a tiger, one an elephant, and so on. Avoid assigning animals known for their size to overweight adults. The players are also inside the playing area, each with a soccer ball. As the animals move in different directions, the players hunt them by looking up, dribbling, and shooting soccer balls at them. An animal that is bagged (hit by a ball) must leave the circle briefly before rejoining the game.

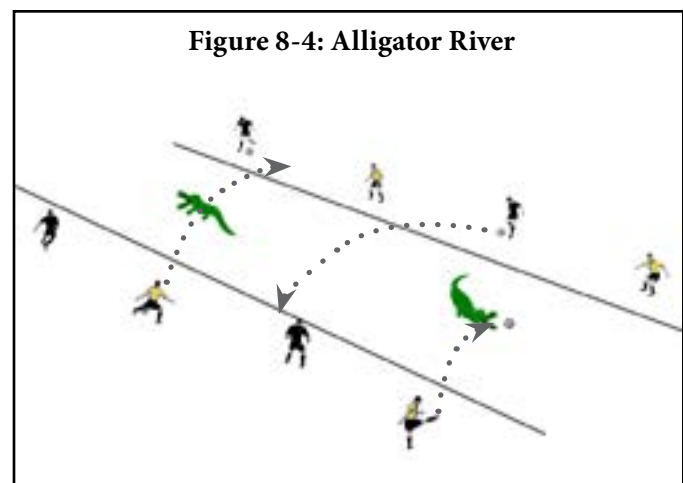


## Dodge the Cow Pies

*Dodge the Cow Pies* is another stepping stone for Slalom Course. Disc cones spread randomly around a circular playing area represent cow manure. (For more militaristic imagery with older players, the cones can represent land mines.) At the coach's signal, all the children begin dribbling through the enclosed space. A child who makes contact with a cow pie must leave the circle for a moment to wash up in the pretend sink.

## Alligator River Variations

The target games for chipping are Air Control (see Chapter 4) and Alligator River (Chapter 4 and Figure 8-4). Air Control involves chipping over other



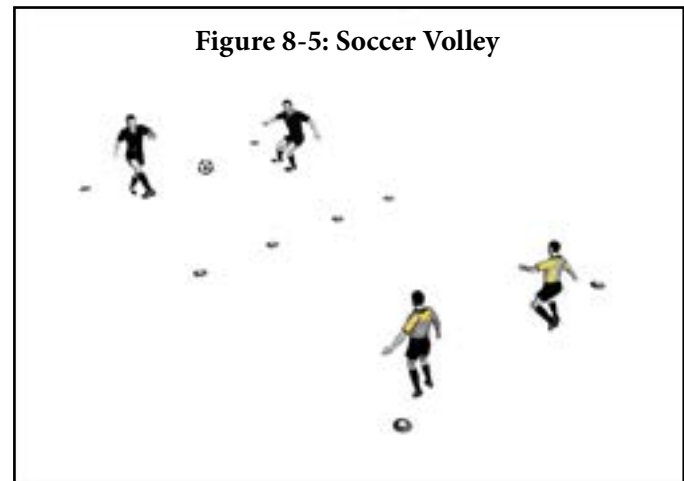
players, impossible for very young children. Although originally designed as a stepping stone game, Alligator River will also be out of reach at first. Two players try to chip back and forth over an alligator-infested river for points. Very young children will spend all their time retrieving errant chips. They need a stepping stone to the stepping stone.

One option is to create a river, narrow enough for players to chip over, from cones. But rather than chipping over the river to another child, each child chips over to a parent volunteer or coach who retrieves and returns the balls. When chips land in the river, the adult says, “Oh, no, the alligator got it!” When chips make it over, everyone cheers. Another option is to have the children chip over a bench, fence, or other barrier that happens to be available at the field.

## Settlers Games

The target activity for controlling balls in the air is Soccer Volley (Figure 8-5), for which players must play the ball back and forth over a net or dividing line. This game is way out of the reach of very young children, who would constantly be retrieving balls rather than having fun. It is out of reach for most older brand new players also.

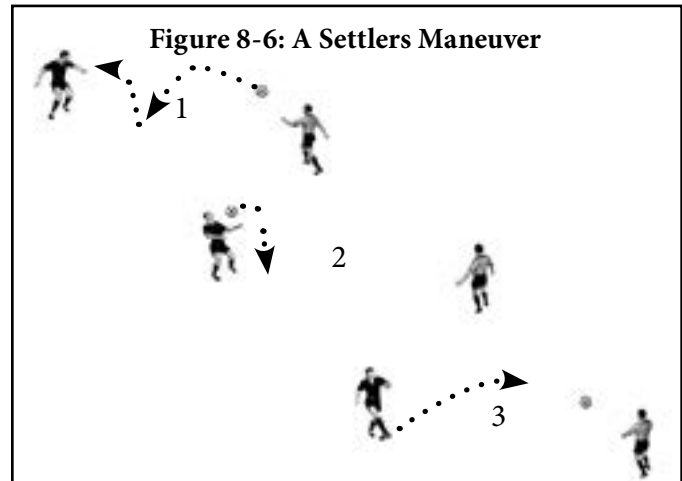
*Settlers* brings Soccer Volley within reach. It provides practice at some simple Soccer Volley maneuvers such as settling the ball with the chest or thigh and tapping it back through the air. With very young children, each child works with a parent volunteer or coach who tosses the ball through the air from in close so that a basic maneuver can be practiced. Each success produces a point and much fanfare.



Here are some of the maneuvers to practice, from simple to more complicated:

1. The adult tosses the ball through the air from in close. The child lets the ball bounce one time, arches the back and receives the ball with the chest.
2. The adult tosses the ball through the air from in close. The child lets the ball bounce one time, arches the back and receives the ball on the chest, lets the ball bounce again, and then catches it in the hands.

3. The adult tosses the ball through the air from in close. The child lets the ball bounce one time, receives the ball with the *thigh* this time, lets the ball bounce again, and then catches it in the hands.
4. The child holds the ball in his/her hands, tosses it gently in the air, lets it bounce one time, and then kicks it through the air so that the adult can catch it (serving maneuver).
5. The three-step process shown in Figure 8-6. The adult tosses the ball through the air from in close so that it bounces one time (1). The child receives the ball with the chest or thigh (2), lets the ball bounce one time, and then kicks it through the air (3) so that the adult can catch it.
6. The adult and child play the ball back and forth as many times as possible without using their hands, using any of the above maneuvers.



After experiencing a little success at one step, the child can give the next one a try. If the next step seems too difficult, just return to the previous one. Children engaged in this stepping stone activity regularly might be able to play Soccer Volley when they are seven-years-old rather than nine-years-old, and that's a big deal!

## SHOTS FOR THE VERY YOUNG

Of the 15 different shots explained in Chapter 5, brand new players who are *older* can quickly try every single one. So let them have a go at it! Even very young children can practice 8 of the shots right away without receiving skill instruction: penalty kicks and free kicks (shooting a stationary ball from different locations), Grounder Pounders (the ball to be shot comes rolling across), One Hoppers (the ball to be shot comes bouncing across), Gate Shots (the players shoot through gates that create different angles), Volleys (the ball to be shot comes flying through the air), Drive-Bys (players dribble parallel to the goal before shooting), and even those long shots called Mighty Moes (since the distance of a Mighty Moe varies with player age).

With very young children, the setup is the key. The adults in charge show the players where to stand, demonstrate the shot, send the balls across, cheer the

successes, and retrieve the misses. And one of the adults can serve as a slow moving, bumbling keeper so that the children get used to shooting past a keeper. The children take an equal number of shots with each foot.

The next two shots to introduce would be the Breakaway Shot (players dribble in on the keeper and shoot) and the Box Shot (players touch the ball into a box and shoot with the second touch). The logistics of these two are slightly more complicated, but within reach during the first season.

That leaves only four more shots: L-Shot (dribble in an L shape before shooting), Chipperoo Shot (chip over the keeper's head), Chest Trap Shot (settle the ball with the chest before shooting), and Wide Receiver Shot (receive a ball in the air while running toward goal before shooting). Might very young children practice such shots at some point during their very first season? That might depend on the ingenuity of the coaches, but it's worth a try.

## **POSSESSION BEGINNINGS**

I argued earlier that allowing very young player to compete at scrimmages and matches, using just the regular rules of soccer, is a bad idea. But what is the playground alternative? Postpone such scrimmages and matches until the players have a handle on the possession scrimmages like Three-and-a-Drop and Side-to-Side!

**Postpone such scrimmages and matches until the players have a handle on the possession scrimmages like Three-and-a-Drop and Side-to-Side!**

Older brand new players can enjoy possession scrimmages right away, regardless of their ability to control a soccer ball. I've seen parent volunteer coaches who lack soccer backgrounds compete at the scrimmages from the get go. I've seen brand new players trying out for the high school JV team—good athletes giving soccer a try—do the same. Why postpone possession work with such players until their skills are in order?

Younger brand new players, though, can't abide by the most basic scrimmage rules, which I consider to be No Aimless Booting, One Player on the Ball, Three-and-a-Drop, and Side-to-Side, all explained in Chapter 7. Those scrimmages presuppose abilities that most younger players won't have yet: to execute a push pass, count touches on the ball, look up for teammates, and know north from south. We need some scrimmage stepping stones that develop those abilities.

## Push Passes and Counting Touches

Getting children to execute push passes and count touches is the easy part. We want the children to contact the ball with the inside of the foot rather than the toe. The simple analogy is to make the foot like a putter in golf. That means some version of Putt Putt Golf can be the activity.

Picture two or more children working with a parent volunteer or coach, each with their own soccer balls. The first “hole” (a cone or soccer ball) is about ten yards away. One by one, the children putt their soccer balls toward the hole using the inside of the foot and using as few putts as possible. An entire miniature golf course can be laid out this way, and the distances to the holes can gradually increase. The child who uses the fewest putts, of course, is the winner.

Here’s an activity for getting children to count touches. Each child passes back and forth with a parent or coach using push passes. The adult calls out the number of touches to use, beginning with two. As the child settles the ball with the first touch, the adult counts, “One!” And as the child passes with the second touch, the adult counts, “Two!” Three touches can be tried next, followed by one-touch passing. This activity can also be made into a high impact skill activity, with each pair counting how many passes occur before a goof up. Before long, the players will be ready for a three-touch or one-touch scrimmage.

## Passing to Teammates in Different Directions

The next task is more difficult. How can we get young children passing to teammates in different directions such as back and to the side rather than just kicking the ball forward? Once they can do that, they’ll understand key scrimmage rules such as, “You must kick the ball to a teammate” or “You can use no more than three touches at a time, and one of the passes has to be a drop pass toward your own goal.”

**How can we get young children passing to teammates in different directions such as back and to the side rather than just kicking the ball forward?**

To be honest, I’ve not yet had to do this, but I can brainstorm a stepping stone solution. I’ll call it *Santa’s Helpers*. The field has a soccer goal at each end, but to the players one goal is Santa’s workshop and the other is Santa’s sled. Children who are spread around the field must try to get toys from the workshop to the sled. A few parents or coaches who are spread around the field are evil gremlins who want to steal the toys and ruin Christmas.

If the Christmas motif is politically incorrect, any motif with a destination will work. The knights must get magic acorns to the castle, dodging the jolly zombies, in order to save the princess. The beavers must get their food to the beaver lodge while dodging the hungry alligators.

Now the stage is set to teach the children about directional requirements, first allowing the children to use their hands. The first toy (a soccer ball) is handed to a child near Santa's workshop. The child must hand the ball to another one of Santa's helpers, but an evil gremlin stands in the way. So the child hands the ball to a helper who is to the side, as the adults cheer, "Yes, a helper to the side!" That helper in turn hands the toy to a helper who is in the forward direction, since no gremlins are in the way. But now two gremlins are in the way, so the toy must go back toward the workshop as the adults cheer, "Yes, back toward the workshop!" The toy continues being handed off in different directions until finally it reaches Santa's sleigh and the adults cheer, "Yes, one toy is on the sleigh!" In the meantime, another toy is already being worked forward, back, and to the side toward the sleigh.

Once the children have the hang of this, they can be required to pass soccer balls on the ground in order to reach the sleigh. The children remain spread out, and the children away from the ball may not move until the ball reaches them. Once again, the gremlins provide little resistance, force the ball in different directions, and cheer these directional changes. "Yes, back to the workshop!" or "Way to see that helper to the side!"

At some point after using such a stepping stone activity, the children will be able to scrimmage in two teams as the key conditions are imposed. They will be able to abide by the rules when the coach says, "You may only touch the ball three times", or "You must pass to a teammate rather than just kicking the ball", or "You must get the ball to each side of the field at least once". First, the No Aimless Booting (NAB) and One Player on the Ball (OPOB) restrictions are taught. Next, the players learn the Three-and-a-Drop and Side-to-Side restrictions. If all goes well, the Touch It Back (TIB) and One-Touch restrictions can eventually be introduced as well.

## The First Matches

As the children learn these scrimmage rules during practices, completed passes might still be few and far between. That won't matter, as long as the players are learning the scrimmage rules. The rules themselves will eventually work their magic, and the coach just needs to facilitate. Over time, the children will improve

**The next step is to get these possession roots transplanted into a real match.**

steadily at spreading out and completing passes to teammates in all four directions.

The next step is to get these possession roots transplanted into a real match. How? By using the same restrictions during the match! Suppose the children are playing a small sided match such as 3 v 3 or 4 v 4. Throughout this match, violations are called if a child boots the ball aimlessly forward or if two players from the same team fight over the ball. For the first ten minutes, the Three-and-a-Drop restrictions are imposed. For the next ten minutes, the Side-to-Side restriction is imposed. And for the final segment, only the NAB and OPOB restrictions are imposed along with the regular rules of soccer.

### **Would That Be a Good Thing?**

Let's pause to address the likely criticisms of this possession work with young children. Are we forcing children to pass the ball when we should be encouraging their 1 v 1 creativity? No! The 1 v 1 creativity is strengthened in every single practice. Players may also apply that creativity in each possession once they've met the scrimmage conditions. We're just discouraging that creativity from being applied when three opponents are clogging the forward path. Are we harming player decision making? No! We're equipping the children with different options, and requiring them to make countless decisions in order to navigate the rules and score goals. Are we causing players to misunderstand soccer's rules? No! We're using a few additional rules to instill some possession habits, but those rules can gradually be faded out. Surely that's better than instilling the wrong picture of soccer for years and then trying to undo it!

Opponents of such a plan simply don't understand the behavioral principle of fading. The special rules are artificial props that help the possession habits take shape. They are like the training wheels on a bicycle. Once the possession habits are in place, the artificial props can be removed.

**Opponents of such a plan simply don't understand the behavioral principle of fading.**

A simple thought experiment solidifies the argument. From a slight distance, you are watching six-year-olds compete 4 v 4 in a soccer match. To your surprise, whichever child has the ball isn't dribbling straight to goal every time. Instead, children are looking up for teammates, passing quickly after two or three touches, and moving the ball in all four directions as the parents cheer each completed pass. Every now and then, the referee blows the whistle for no apparent reason and gives the ball to the other team. You are greatly impressed by what is happening, but later you learn that the scrimmage was structured by a No Aimless Booting condition and a Three-and-a-Drop

condition. Would you not still be impressed, knowing that those restrictions could easily be removed in the future?

## **A SEASON FOR VERY YOUNG PLAYERS**

How might a youth soccer club organize these activities into a season for very young children? That might depend on how many children and coaches were involved, but a high player/coach ration would be possible if parents help out. One coach could then influence a large number of children as the parents learned activities for the backyard and gained an appreciation of possession.

Picture this example. One coach who is capable with the playground dimension is working with one assistant coach and 30 children under the age of six. The parent who brings the child to each session is expected to accompany the child on the field and help run the activities. The season will be 8 weeks long, with two 80-minute sessions per week.

The coach arrives early for the first session and sets up a circuit of seven activities. There will be two dribbling games, one passing game, one chipping game, and three different shots for the children to rotate to. Thanks to the circuit approach, the coach only has to set up each activity once. Note also that this is a multi-variable approach to practice organization, with dribbling, passing and shooting activities happening during the same practice.

**The coach arrives early for the first session and sets up a circuit of seven activities.**

As players arrive, they get started right away. The first four or five players are assigned to one of the dribbling games, the coach demonstrates and begins the game, and then the parents take over from there. As more players arrive, the coach starts the other stations in the same way. Once the official start time has arrived, the players have ten more minutes at their first game.

The coach then yells, “Rotate!” and everyone moves clockwise to their next station—except for one parent who stays behind a few minutes to teach the activity to the newcomers. Players and parents continue rotating every ten minutes until all seven activities have been experienced. The coach maintains order by keeping time, helping the confused, and even giving a skill tip now and then. But the parents do most of the heavy lifting. The session ends, and everyone leaves anxious to try the same activities in the backyard.

For subsequent sessions, the same activities are repeated often. That means less time will be spent explaining new activities and the players will experience

more improvement by season's end. But from time to time, new games and shots rotate in as well.

At some point in the middle of the season, a scrimmage-related station becomes a regular feature of the sessions. There, the players experience Santa's Helpers. The coach pays special attention to this station, for that is where possession habits will take root. And by the end of their first season, these very young children are able to scrimmage with some semblance of teamwork and possession.

**And by the end of their first season, these very young children are able to scrimmage with some semblance of teamwork and possession.**

Is that possession scenario realistic? Perhaps not, but there is no need for worry. Players don't move on to Santa's Helpers until they can execute a push pass. They don't move on to scrimmages with special rules until they can handle Santa's Helpers. And they don't move on to real matches until they can handle those scrimmages with special rules. The idea is to move through each phase as quickly as possible.

What are some of the benefits of such a season? The children get a lot of touches in important skill areas, score a lot of goals, have fun, and get hooked on soccer. The children improve gradually at each activity and skill, thus moving closer to the targeted games like Run the Gauntlet and Soccer Volley. The children get an early start on possession, circumventing bunch ball completely. The children and their parents learn ways to practice at home. And all this is accomplished with a high player/coach ratio.

## **SUMMARY**

There are younger brand new players and older brand new players. Both types are important and deserve a chance to reach their potential. The playground dimension easily accommodates both, because the focus is on the activities to experience rather than the lessons to teach.

The teaching dimension can have three negative impacts on brand new players, each related to age-by-age curriculums. The older brand new players might get overlooked. The brand new players might engage in single-theme practices when multi-variable practices would ensure more progress by the end of the season. And the brand new players might begin scrimmaging and playing matches before understanding possession—the slippery slope to bunch ball and straight-to-goal soccer.

With the playground approach, an age-by-age curriculum is less relevant, because the focus is on the practice activities. Brand new players of all ages can be moved quickly toward the target skill games and scrimmages using stepping stone activities. Team skills like possession can also get off to the right start with stepping stone activities like Santa's Helpers followed by possession scrimmages. Bunch ball and straight-to-goal soccer can then be circumvented entirely. And the coach need not have an age-by-age curriculum, prior soccer experience, teaching ability, or a psychology degree.

# 9

## LARGE SCALE PLAYGROUND DIMENSION

American soccer has made a large scale commitment to the teaching dimension. Our plan has been to teach all youth coaches to teach all youth players all the skills and tactics. That plan, though, is based on questionable beliefs: that coaches must first and foremost be teachers, that there are many soccer items to teach, and that players absolutely must have decent skills before embarking on any tactics. Such beliefs have led to our complex system of coaching courses and age-by-age curriculums. They have also led to our steep coaching pyramid, where the less competent at the bottom greatly outnumber the more competent at the top.

The teaching dimension is valuable. It can bring a picture of soccer to life more efficiently, with less left to chance. The problem has been our obsession with that dimension and our large scale commitment to it. When a lot of soccer items must be taught, one per practice, players are unlikely to reach their potential at dribbling past defenders, converting one hopper shots, keeping possession, or any other one item. When tactical items like possession are postponed until the skill items are in order, those items get an unnecessarily late start and the wrong picture gets ingrained. Newer coaches and players, in particular, are impacted negatively. Our preoccupation with the teaching dimension has dealt accessibility a crippling blow.

I might not be so critical had I not experienced the playground dimension for so many years. Originally a self-taught coach, I came up with some skill games and scrimmages that seemed useful. I began packing these into multi-variable practices and observing the results. My players were competing, getting touches on the ball, experimenting, and having fun, just like at the

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playground. And they seemed perfectly capable of competing against players developed in other ways. They won a few youth tournaments, and some went on to play college soccer. Obviously, there was something to the playground dimension, although I didn't call it that at the time.

Our commitment to the teaching dimension has been spearheaded by our coaching organizations and youth soccer clubs. The coaching organizations decide which soccer items should be taught, recommend the age-by-age curriculums, and provide the coaching courses. Our youth soccer clubs then apply the plan to our coaches and players. If we are to benefit on a large scale from the playground dimension, our coaching organizations and youth soccer clubs must see the value in doing so.

**If we are to benefit on a large scale from the playground dimension, our coaching organizations and youth soccer clubs must see the value in doing so.**

The playground dimension could also take root in high school soccer programs, where newer coaches traditionally struggle. Let's take a look.

## **HIGH SCHOOL SOCCER PROGRAMS**

A high school soccer program might have some issues that the playground dimension could solve. The tryouts might lack validity, reliability, and fairness. The practices might provide too few touches and too little competition. Time might be wasted rehearsing specific patterns rather than strengthening soccer's critical parts. There might not be daily competition for playing time. And the style of play might be straight-to-goal.

What is the teaching dimension solution to such problems? The NSCAA currently provides several resources for high school coaches. There is an online course called *NFHS Fundamentals of Coaching* that provides some rudimentary advice about how to teach the skills. According to the teaching dimension, after all, that's the square one without which nothing else is possible. The course provides nothing on tactics or possession, and it provides no specific practice activities or scrimmages. The NSCAA also offers three on-site coaching courses for high school coaches. One takes 21 hours, and the other two take 12 hours each. Those courses cover managerial issues and responsibilities, values, and team building. One course also provides an express lane to coaching 11 v 11. That topic might otherwise be beyond the reach of many high school coaches, coming as it does at the end of the NSCAA's regular coaching sequence.

That approach to high school soccer sets the bar very low for the playground dimension to jump over. An on line coaching course could just as easily train coaches in the playground dimension, and the impact would be far reaching. Rather than beginning and ending with skill instruction, the course would begin with a concise picture of what soccer should look like: a few player skills and team skills, with possession being the most important. The course would then provide video clips of activities that strengthen each part, and explain how to pack those activities into multi-variable practices. After such an on line course, even the Chemistry teacher with no soccer background could run a high quality soccer program.

**That approach to high school soccer sets the bar very low for the playground dimension to jump over.**

What about those on site courses for high school coaches? A segment on high impact skill activities, possession scrimmages, and multi-variable practices would surely be a valuable addition.

Here are four contributions the playground dimension could make to high school soccer coaches.

First, the coaches could conduct tryouts that actually reveal who the better soccer players are. High impact skill activities and possession scrimmages are perfect for that, as we'll see under the club section below.

Second, the coaches could conduct very efficient practices without drawing up detailed practice plans and logical progressions. They would just have to know how to facilitate the games and scrimmages, by laying down the cones and stirring up the competition. Those activities will provide players with a massive number of touches and ensure significant improvement by season's end. An attractive, possession oriented style of play will also evolve. Add some teaching ability, of course, and the results will be even better.

Third, the coaches wouldn't spend so much time rehearsing specific patterns that rarely arise in a real match. They would instead strengthen general skills that can be applied in a wide variety of match situations, individually and collectively. That leads to players who can read the situation, think for themselves, and problem solve.

And fourth, the coaches could infuse every moment of every practice with competition. Not only do the players then become better competitors on match day. They must compete continually for playing time. The starters from Monday's match can't be complacent about Friday's match, because players from the bench

**And fourth, the coaches could infuse every moment of every practice with competition.**

might move ahead during Thursday's practice. Players welcome that competition, because it is fair, exciting, and enjoyable.

## **YOUTH CLUBS AND THE TEACHING DIMENSION**

Generalizing about youth soccer clubs would be wrong, because they all face different challenges and grow in different directions. But when clubs are based on the teaching dimension, they too might have issues that the playground dimension could solve.

### **Issue #1: The club must make sure a large number of soccer items get taught and in the correct sequence.**

According to the teaching dimension, no skill or tactic can come to life on the field unless it is taught by a coach who has been taught to do so. And each item requires at least one single-theme practice.

That makes things very complex for a soccer club. The club must come up with an age-by-age curriculum connecting the soccer items to different age groups. It must make sure the curriculum is followed, and that the skill items happen first and the tactical items later. It must make sure the coaches can teach all those items properly using single-theme practices. And it must somehow match its coaches to the age groups and team sizes for which they are qualified.

A playground inspired club, having fewer soccer items to strengthen, could be much simpler.

### **Issue #2: The club's players won't reach their potential with any one soccer item.**

When there are so many soccer items to teach, one per practice, each item can't be strengthened regularly. Either the coach must devote the next practice to a different item, at which point the item just taught will begin to weaken. Or the coach must devote a few practices to the same item, thereby covering too few items by season's end. Players are particularly unlikely to reach their potential with the tactical items like possession, which are supposed to be postponed until the skills are in order.

Here are two examples. First, if players are to become talented shooters, they should practice a few of the 15 different shots in every practice beginning at an early age. How can that happen when only one item is to be taught per practice? Second, if players are to keep possession together, they should practice

the possession keys regularly beginning at an early age. How can that happen when possession is taught like any item during just a practice or two, and not until the kids are older?

A playground inspired club could start on the important soccer items earlier and strengthen them more often.

### **Issue #3: Within the club, licenses and diplomas will be a big deal.**

A club based on the teaching dimension will want coaches who can teach effectively. Licenses and diplomas supposedly identify which coaches can teach effectively and which coaches are capable with different age groups and team sizes. So the credentials obtained at coaching courses will be a big deal.

Why is that a concern? First, it makes everything more complicated. Coaches must get through a lot of coaching courses: 6 if with the USSF, 13 if with the NSCAA, last I looked. And the club must match coaches to the age groups and team sizes for which they have the credentials. Second, it detracts from the club's real purpose of helping players improve. Credentials take time and money, but can't really predict who the effective coaches are. Coaches should be measured by their contributions, not their credentials.

**Coaches should be measured by their contributions, not their credentials.**

A playground inspired club could focus more on coach contributions than on coach credentials.

### **Issue #4: The club must set up different competitive levels for each age group.**

Clubs need a way to sort players into competitive levels, so that players can compete against players with similar abilities and learning needs. Clubs normally take the players of a particular age group and sort them into different levels, such as Recreational, Recreational Plus, and Travel, with the top levels requiring tryouts. Clubs then sort their coaches in a parallel fashion. The coaches with the higher credentials usually end up with the higher ability levels of the older age groups, while the coaches with the lower credentials usually end up with the lower ability levels and the younger age groups.

That setup means a wide disparity of soccer opportunities for the players. Players in the top divisions receive stronger competition, better coaching, and more practice hours. Players in the lower divisions are less likely to reach their potential and more likely to drop out.

A playground inspired club might come up with a different way to sort players into competitive levels, as explained below.

### **Issue #5: Player development will vary greatly with who the assigned coach is.**

The club based on the teaching dimension assumes its coaches will teach and coach as they've learned at coaching courses. But even coaches with identical credentials will probably coach very differently from each other.

Why? After taking coaching courses, coaches must come up with their own answers to some critical questions. What soccer items should I teach these players at this point in time? What practice activities should I use? How should I organize the next practice? At what point should I move on to another item? How will I get the players more touches in all the important soccer items? What style of play should I teach and how? Different coaches will come up with different answers, all of which can't be equally good. That means player development will vary greatly with who the assigned coach is.

**Different coaches will come up with different answers, all of which can't be equally good.**

A playground inspired club could provide a great soccer experience to all its players, regardless of who the coach is.

### **Issue #6: A club-wide possession style will be difficult to pull off.**

Teams that can keep possession by moving the ball in different directions are better off than teams that only kick the ball forward. A club should want all its teams to develop a possession style, and cringe at the sight of bunch ball and straight-to-goal soccer.

Here's why a club based on the teaching dimension will have trouble pulling this off. All the players will be allowed to go through a bunch ball phase, since tactical themes like possession aren't supposed to be taught until the skills are in order. Then, will a capacity for possession be instilled or will bunch ball simply turn into straight-to-goal soccer? That will depend on who the coaches are. And even coaches with credentials might not understand the multi-directional nature of possession.

**All the players will be allowed to go through a bunch ball phase, since tactical themes like possession aren't supposed to be taught until the skills are in order.**

A playground inspired club has an easy path to club-wide possession.

## **Issue #7: The coaches might feel pressure to accumulate talented players and win.**

Hopefully, most coaches realize player development should be more important than winning. Hopefully, they also realize that the development of all players, not just the talented ones, should matter. But in clubs based on the teaching dimension, coaches might feel pressure to accumulate talented players and pile up wins.

Here's the psychology. Coaches want to believe they are making a contribution, and they want to be seen that way by the club, the players, and the player parents. Licenses and diplomas aren't an adequate measure of a coach's contribution, particularly when other coaches have those same credentials. When the team wins a lot, everyone assumes the coach is making a contribution.

When the team loses a lot, people who don't understand talent disparity assume the coach is to blame. So the best way to get credit rather than blame, pleasure rather than pain, is to accumulate talented players and win.

**So the best way to get credit rather than blame, pleasure rather than pain, is to accumulate talented players and win.**

A playground inspired club could truly make player development more important than winning.

## **Issue #8: The tryouts might lack validity, reliability, and fairness.**

When player opportunities depend so much on who makes the higher divisions and who gets the better coaches, much is riding on the club's tryout process. That process should have validity, meaning it should accurately assess each player's playing strength. It should have reliability, meaning different observers of the same player should arrive at similar assessments. And it should be fair, meaning decisions should be based on thorough assessment rather than bias.

It's not easy to design such a process, particularly with the teaching dimension. Of all the soccer items players must eventually learn, which items should be assessed in the tryouts? Of all the possible practice drills and games, which ones should be used? And how should speed, strength, fitness, and attitude figure in?

If different coaches within the same club come up with different answers, there goes the reliability. All the answers can't be equally good, throwing validity

into doubt. And when the tryouts lack reliability and validity, biases creep in. A player who can convert 15 different shots is cut in favor of a player who runs faster, because those shots were not assessed. A player who can work with teammates to keep possession is cut in favor of a player who was on last year's team or whose parent is the coach.

A playground inspired club has a valid, reliable, and fair tryout process at hand.

### **Issue #9: Club resources might be strained by the gradually increasing team sizes.**

An outgrowth of the teaching dimension has been those gradually increasing team sizes. The youngest players are supposed to compete 3 v 3 or so, after which comes 6 v 6 and 8 v 8 and finally, at age 12 or so, 11 v 11. Coaches, of course, are supposed to take different coaching courses to learn to coach these different team sizes.

Players should experience smaller sided play and its advantages such as a simpler learning environment and more touches. Increasing team sizes gradually, though, hasn't been the hoped for panacea for American soccer. Straight-to-goal soccer is just as detrimental in small sided matches as in larger sided.

And the rigid adherence to team size guidelines can strain club resources.

More soccer field of different sizes must be created. More total coaches are needed, since the player/coach ratio is smaller with smaller teams. And talented coaches working with smaller team sizes can't influence as many players.

**Increasing team sizes gradually, though, hasn't been the hoped for panacea for American soccer.**

A playground inspired club could be more flexible with team sizes and introduce 11 v 11 soccer sooner.

### **Issue #10: The travel will gobble up a lot of potential practice hours.**

In the typical youth soccer club, teams in the higher divisions compete against teams from other clubs in leagues and tournaments. A lot of travel time is required.

The travel displays a dedication to soccer, builds comradery and provides great memories. But it takes time and money, and deters many families from getting involved in the higher divisions. More importantly, the travel gobbles up a lot of potential practice hours. Imagine how much more skillful players

could become with three extra hours per week of shooting practice or possession practice.

In a playground inspired club, the in-house competition could be so challenging that travel wouldn't seem a necessity.

### **Issue #11: The Director of Coaching will have an overwhelming job.**

In a club based on the teaching dimension, the Director of Coaching must somehow get all the coaches to teach. That could be accomplished by hiring coaches with the right credentials, getting the other coaches to coaching courses, or setting up trainings at the club. Ideally, the DOC would also monitor each coach and provide hands-on help as needed.

Why might that be an overwhelming job? Getting coaches to coaching courses, matching them to the age groups and team sizes for which they are qualified, and providing trainings at the club requires a lot of organizational skill. But even when these things are accomplished, there is no guarantee that the coaches will select the right items to teach or teach those items effectively. To ensure that, the DOC will have to observe a lot of practices and matches, step into help when necessary, and fire or reassign coaches who can't make the necessary changes. The arrangement might not be comfortable for either side.

**But even when these things are accomplished, there is no guarantee that the coaches will select the right items to teach or teach those items effectively.**

In a playground inspired club, the person working with the coaches would have a very manageable and rewarding job.

### **Issue #12: The club won't encourage innovation or critical thought.**

A youth soccer club should encourage innovation and critical thought in its coaches. Not only do those qualities make coaching more fun. They increase the likelihood that the club will see and correct its weaknesses and evolve continually in positive directions.

In the club based on the teaching dimension, innovation and critical thought can seem like negatives. The club will have a complex plan for getting all its coaches to teach correctly. Once that plan is in place, everyone must follow it. The coach who questions age-by-age curriculums, dabbles in multi-variable

practices, devises a new system of play, or deviates from the plan in other ways might not be welcome.

A playground inspired club could more easily welcome critical thought and innovation.

## **YOUTH CLUBS AND THE PLAYGROUND DIMENSION**

There hasn't been a playground inspired club yet, to my knowledge. Here are some ideas about how such a club might be designed so as to avoid the above issues.

### **Idea #1: Make the playground dimension the foundation to which the teaching dimension is added.**

Since the playground dimension quickly lets all coaches provide a great soccer experience, all players should receive a soccer experience at least that great. The club would therefore make the playground dimension the foundation. The teaching dimension, which takes longer to develop, would be an add-on.

What would that mean in practical terms? First, the club's constituents would make a commitment to the playground dimension. They would understand and support the arguments for that dimension. They would want all their players to receive a soccer experience at least that great. And they would be willing to part ways with those opposed to the playground dimension. Second, all the coaches would become capable with the playground dimension. They'd learn the picture of soccer on which the playground dimension is based. And they'd learn to pack high impact skill activities and possession scrimmages into multi-variable practices.

### **Idea #2: Help coaches teach effectively, without licenses and diplomas being the measure.**

Once the playground dimension is the foundation, the club might view the teaching dimension as unnecessary. That would be unwise. The teaching dimension can bring the right picture of soccer to life more efficiently.

The club should continue encouraging or requiring its coaches to take USSF or NSCAA coaching courses. It should help with the cost when possible. It should reward the coaches who have passed these courses. And it should provide the courses or additional instruction on site when possible.

The true measure of a coach, though, would change. Can the coach picture what soccer should look like, and bring that picture to life? Can the coach provide ongoing practice in soccer's critical parts? How many player improvements can the coach pull off and how quickly? Such questions about substance would become more important than questions about credentials.

**Such questions about substance would become more important than questions about credentials.**

### **Idea #3: Give the core practice activities an exalted status.**

Practice activities that strengthen soccer's key parts by way of the playground dimension deserve an exalted status. That includes the high impact skill activities and scrimmages in this book and any others the club might come up with.

How might the activities be given an exalted status? All the coaches would learn to facilitate those activities, preferably by experiencing them firsthand. The activities would be used in tryouts, as explained shortly, I promise. And when possible, the club's fields would simplify setting up the activities. For example, Soccer Volley courts could be built into the fields, shooting areas could be set up, or markings could be placed on fields for where the Space Cowboy (see Book Two) cones go. If the club had turf fields, markings or even lines for all the major activities could be permanently etched on those fields.

It won't work, though, to require coaches to use particular activities. Instead, emphasize the criteria which practice activities should meet. Are the players competing, overcoming obstacles, getting a lot of touches, learning by trial-and-error, and having fun? If the coaches can meet such criteria with other activities, let them have at it.

### **Idea #4: Have the players compete at the core activities as soon as possible rather than when they reach a particular age.**

Here, we're taking a jab at those age-by-age curriculums. If you can get six-year-olds competing enjoyably at the possession scrimmages, or get eight-year-olds competing enjoyably at Space Cowboy, by all means do so! The sooner players begin competing at such activities, the further they'll go with the targeted parts of soccer. And when the players can't compete at an activity yet, there is always a stepping stone activity to move them in the right direction.

**The sooner players begin competing at such activities, the further they'll go with the targeted parts of soccer.**

Note that this idea favors multi-variable practices. If we want players competing at activities as soon and as often as possible at ten or more activities with different themes, we must depart from the doctrine that each practice should have one central theme.

### **Idea #5: Get everyone in the club buying into a possession style of soccer.**

Left to their own devices, the club's coaches, players, and player parents might favor straight-to-goal soccer. That has to go. The club inspired by the playground dimension would take three steps to get everyone buying into a possession style, even in the recreational divisions and the younger age groups.

Step one would be coach training. Train all the coaches to see the Possession Part and the keys on which it depends, via videos of professional matches. Train all the coaches to use possession-related scrimmages like No Aimless Booting, Three-and-a-Drop, and Side-to-Side. Coaches rarely doubt the value of such scrimmages after experiencing them firsthand.

Step two would be to prevent players from competing with soccer's regular rules until they had a handle on the special rules, as explained in the previous chapter. And to ensure that the possession habits carry over to the first matches, those matches would include the special rules. For example, a player boots the ball aimlessly or dribbles forward into a crowd, so the referee awards a free kick to the other team. Such special rules can easily be faded out once bunch ball and straight-to-goal soccer have been vanquished.

Step three would be to evaluate each coach's practices and matches with possession in mind. During practice, did something happen to strengthen the Possession Part and the keys? During the match, were the players at least trying to move the ball in all four directions and to string some passes together? If possession is missing, the coach and players are on the wrong road and need some guidance.

**If possession is missing, the coach and players are on the wrong road and need some guidance.**

### **Idea #6: Consider a very different way of sorting players into competitive levels.**

When different competitive levels are created within each age group, the top levels get the better coaches and the better soccer opportunities. The top levels must also travel extensively to compete against the top levels from other clubs.

And upon arriving at those distant locations, there is no guarantee that the players will get enough playing time or that the teams will be even.

The United States Tennis Association has defined 12 levels of tennis competition, beginning at 1.5 for brand new players and progressing at .5 intervals to 7.0 for the best players. These levels determine which leagues and tournaments players may compete in, and players move up or down between levels based on the results. The system creates balanced matches, everyone feels important, and players can work their way up the competitive ladder.

A soccer club could do something similar. First set up a sequence of competitive levels. Twelve levels from 1.5 to 7.0 would work fine, or some other system could be used. Second, set up objective criteria for each level that tie in with the core skill games and scrimmages. 1.5 players have begun learning to compete at some of the skill games and stepping stones. 3.0 players can compete at all the skill games and scrimmages but the going is a bit rough. 4.0 players can compete skillfully at all the activities, and display a good understanding of teamwork and possession, and so on. Playing strength would be the major factor, and a team of 3.5's would most surely beat a team of 3.0's. But age and size could also be taken into account so that brand new adolescent players weren't competing against u-littles. Third, sort all the players into these levels through a tryout or assessment process as explained below. And fourth, set up leagues of at least three or four teams for each level.

What if there weren't enough players within a particular level for a league? This wouldn't be a problem, because the levels would provide the perfect way to create balanced teams. Suppose there are 72 players spread between the 3.0, 3.5, and 4.0 levels. Each team could include players from all three levels. As long as each team's *average* player rating is the same, the matches will be even.

Not only would this system create balanced matches. Leagues within the club would be as competitive as travel leagues and tournaments, even for the elite players, but without all the travel. All the time saved from travel could be devoted to extra touches on the soccer ball. Players would be motivated to practice on their own in order to advance to the next level. Older brand new players, rather than being marooned in a recreational division, could catch up with their peers by practicing with friends at the playground. Talented younger players, by competing alongside older players, could progress more quickly. And the club would have a

**Leagues within the club would be as competitive as travel leagues and tournaments, even for the elite players, but without all the travel.**

more objective way than wins to measure its effectiveness: the migration of players from one level to the next.

**Idea #7: For the player assessment or tryout process, use some of the core activities.**

Finally, that long promised tryout segment. Whether the players were trying out for the travel division or being assessed for the 3.5 level, the skill games and scrimmages would provide a valid, reliable, and fair way to decide who the stronger players were. The players would compete for twelve minutes at Run the Gauntlet (dribbling past defenders), Ride the Bronco (shielding) and Alligator River (chipping). They would also be timed individually on a Slalom Course (dribbling through open space), and compete at a few different shots. For the scrimmage portion of the tryout, small sided scrimmages would occur on several different fields. Three-and-a-Drop, Side-to-Side, and One -Touch would reveal which players had the knack for possession and collaborating with teammates. All the while, the coaches would be moving players from group to group and making ever finer distinctions between the players in each group.

Consider the advantages of such a process. One consistent, comprehensive tryout process could be used throughout the club. All the players and coaches would become familiar with that process. The process would validly identify who the stronger players were rather than giving too much weight to speed, aggressiveness, a lucky goal, or who was on the team last year. Different observers would arrive at similar assessments. And to prepare for tryouts and control their own fates, players would practice the activities in the backyard or at the playground.

**One consistent, comprehensive, tryout process could be used throughout the club.**

**Idea #8: Make improvements by the younger and less talented players as important as improvements by the older and more talented players.**

In the typical club, the older and most talented players get the coaches with the most credentials. They also get better opportunities for learning and improving. But in the playground inspired club, improvements by the younger and less talented players could matter just as much. Here's how.

If the same core activities were used from team to team and in tryouts, that would provide one clear way to measure player improvements. If players could migrate from one competitive level to the next—from 2.5 to 3.0 and so

on—that would provide another way. When there are clear ways to measure player improvements, everyone is more likely to focus on those improvements than on winning. The most highly acclaimed coaches would be not those with the most credentials or wins but those who accounted for the most player improvements—regardless of the age groups or competitive levels where those improvements occurred.

**The most highly acclaimed coaches would be not those with the most credentials or wins but those who accounted for the most player improvements . . .**

### **Idea #9: Make extra training opportunities available to every player.**

If a team from the highest competitive level practices six hours a week with an experienced coach while a recreational team practices two hours a week with an inexperienced coach, the opportunities aren't equal. But what if the club provided, in addition to team practices, extra training opportunities for every player?

The playground dimension is idea for that sort of thing. Players would still be assigned to one team, and prepare for and compete in matches with that team. But on days when their teams were not practicing, players could voluntarily attend club wide training sessions at a central location.

**But on days when their teams were not practicing, players could voluntarily attend club wide training sessions at a central location.**

Each session would be run by two coaches whose teams were not practicing that day. One session would accommodate a large number of players of different ages and ability levels. The coaches would set up a circuit consisting of a few high impact skill activities, shots, and scrimmages. The players would show up, divide up by competitive level or age, and rotate every fifteen minutes to a different activity. The coaches would step in to teach now and then, but mostly they would be organizing and facilitating the activities.

Here are some of the advantages. A high player/coach ratio would be possible for these club wide sessions, such as 30/1. The sessions, being competitive and enjoyable, would be well attended. The coaches who ran the sessions would be influencing more players, of all ages and competitive levels. All players, regardless of competitive level, could practice as often as they wanted to. And a player's development wouldn't depend so much on the team and coach to which the player was assigned.

## **Idea #10: Be more flexible with team sizes and who may coach them.**

Clubs these days are very concerned about team sizes and who may coach them. Younger players, so the belief goes, must not compete on larger-sided teams because that would be too difficult and reduce their touches on the ball. Inexperienced coaches must not coach larger sided teams because they haven't completed the appropriate coaching courses yet.

The playground inspired club would be more flexible. The long term goal, after all, is well played soccer in the 11 v 11 environment. Players are more likely to reach that goal when they experience the 11 v 11 environment sooner rather than later. And let's be clear. The earlier introduction of larger sided play will not somehow harm player development. Players do need a lot of touches, 1 v 1 confrontations, and goal mouth opportunities. But the playground dimension delivers those things in every single practice.

Rather than adhering rigidly to team size restrictions, the club would keep its options open. It would consider how many players, coaches, and fields were available. It might get players experiencing 11 v 11 soccer when they were eight rather than twelve, in addition to a lot of smaller sided matches. It might have players compete small sided in the spring, then large sided in the fall. With the playground dimension, team size in matches just doesn't matter as much—as long as the soccer has a Possession Part and players get touches during practices.

**With the playground dimension, team size in matches just doesn't matter as much—as long as the soccer has a Possession Part and players get touches during practices.**

Nor would the club restrict who may coach which team sizes. Coaches could capably coach 11 v 11 without having completed the highest coaching course. The coaching method—high impact skill activities and possession scrimmages packed into multi-variable practices—works as well for 11 v 11 soccer as for smaller sides. When the scrimmages are used 11 v 11, even very young players begin spreading out and knocking the ball to open space. The coaches just need a little skill with 11 v 11 formations and responsibility plans, and two chapters from Book Two should do the trick.

## **Idea #11: Move from vertical integration to criteria management.**

Clubs based on the teaching dimension are following the advice of the coaches at the top who run the USSF, NSCAA, and US Soccer. They are being

vertically integrated into the soccer pyramid. Unfortunately, vertical integration is often about conformity and pyramid climbing rather than critical thought or innovation, and it makes coaching soccer or running a club less enjoyable.

Here is the dilemma. A club based on the playground dimension could also get caught up in the vertical integration game. It could require all its coaches to use the core activities and multi-variable practices. Coaches aren't going to go for that, and it too would discourage critical thought and innovation. Meet the new boss, same as the old boss.

Criteria management provides a way out of this dilemma. The elements of the playground dimension have stuck around because they meet important criteria. High impact skill activities provide many touches, set up a challenge to surmount, allow trial-and-error learning, and are competitive. Multi-variable practices allow more of the total sport to be strengthened regularly and can be facilitated by newer coaches. The focus should be on such criteria rather than on one particular way of meeting them. That frees up the club and its coaches to consider other practice activities and practice formats that might better meet the criteria. Criteria management can also help with any issues the club encounters.

**The focus should be on such criteria rather than on one particular way of meeting them.**

Here's an example. Wanting all its players to experience the Breakthrough Part, the club teaches all its coaches to facilitate a game that meets the important criteria: Space Cowboy. Bucking the system, Coach A decides instead to conduct one single-theme practice on combinations before moving on to something else. The club determines this falls short of the agreed upon criteria, and notes that the team's players are not competent at breaking through. Coach A, at this point, should either be receptive to help or find another club.

Coach B, on the other hand, invents a new game for the Breakthrough Part called Jailbreak. The club checks this game out and determines it provides even more breakthrough tries per minute. It also more closely replicates a real match, and the players love it. Praise is heaped on Coach B. whose innovation quickly replaces Space Cowboy throughout the club. Hopefully, those Space Cowboy lines on the club's new field aren't permanent!

## **Idea #12: Hire a Quality Coordinator to nurture the playground dimension.**

In most clubs, a Director of Coaching tries to nurture the teaching dimension. Who would nurture the playground dimension? The Director of Coaching position could be redefined, or a new position could be created: Quality Coordinator.

The QC would make sure all the players received a soccer experience of high quality, including the newer players coached by newer coaches. That task would involve objective criteria. Are the players getting enough touches in the important parts of soccer on a regular basis? Are the players competing, experimenting, and having fun rather than standing in lines, listening to lectures, or rehearsing specific patterns that will never arise in real matches? Is there a possession emphasis in practices and matches, or is every ball just going forward? The QC would teach coaches how the playground dimension can meet such criteria. And when a coach fell short, the QC would tactfully intervene. Where do I apply?

**The QC would make sure all the players received a soccer experience of high quality, including the newer players coached by newer coaches.**

The QC job description might include:

1. Defines the objective criteria that make for a high quality soccer experience.
2. Ensures that all players receive a high quality soccer experience, in keeping with those criteria.
3. Trains all coaches to use high impact skill activities, possession scrimmages, and multi-variable practices as a method for meeting those criteria.
4. Evaluates each coach's soccer practices and matches and provides constructive feedback.
5. Coordinates the club's tryout process to make sure it is valid, reliable, and fair.
6. Coordinates the club wide practice opportunities.
7. Seeks out innovations from inside or outside the club, determines if these meet the criteria, and disseminates them to other coaches.
8. Develops and implements objective ways to measure player improvements throughout the club.

## COACHING ORGANIZATIONS AND THE PLAYGROUND DIMENSION

If high impact skill activities, possession scrimmages, and multi-variable practices—the staples of the playground dimension—really do work, the truth will some day win out. But that day will arrive more quickly if coaching organizations like the USSF, the NSCAA, and US Soccer help spread the word.

Why should they help do so? Newer coaches with a complete understanding of the playground dimension can surely outperform newer coaches who have only a partial understanding of the teaching dimension, and at less expense. And coaches experienced with the teaching dimension will perform even better if they add the playground dimension to their work. That could favorably impact a large number of soccer players, and the results could trickle up to our national teams someday.

I predict, though, that the coaches who lead such organizations will react sceptically at first to the playground dimension. Not only do they genuinely believe in the teaching dimension. They have spent a lot of time and energy on the current setup, they want to see it succeed, and they don't want coaching course attendance to decline.

Fortunately, coaching organizations can come to terms with the playground dimension through four low-risk steps. The first, analyzing the various arguments against the playground dimension, has been covered throughout this book. The other three are discussed below. Step two is understanding the history of how the teaching dimension rose to such heights. Step three is gathering empirical evidence to evaluate the playground dimension. And step four is testing the playground dimension on a small scale before committing to it on a large scale. With these steps, there is little to lose and much to gain.

**Fortunately, coaching organizations can come to terms with the playground dimension through four low-risk steps.**

### Historical Origins

How did the teaching dimension come to predominate? Nobody has written down the history, and I won't be doing that. But two historical possibilities come to mind, one idealized and the other cynical.

In the idealized version, open minded soccer coaches at the top of the pyramid set aside their vested interests and biases and use science to chart the course of American soccer. Studying the sciences of human development and learning, they discover that different age groups have different cognitive abilities and

learning needs; that athletes learn best when taught by experienced teachers; and that athletes must be taught skills before tactics. They then use this knowledge to devise age-by-age curriculums, single-theme practices with logical progressions, and coaching courses.

In the cynical version, coaches with power, authority, and an understanding of the world soccer scene rise to the top of the pyramid. They get together in conference rooms to negotiate the course of American soccer, and agree on a few teaching dimension beliefs such as “Coaches must be teachers”, “Skills before tactics”, and “One theme per practice”. They begin listing all the soccer items coaches can teach, one per practice, and realize an age-by-age curriculum will be necessary. Also needed, they realize, is an elaborate sequence of coaching courses. To get coaches to attend those courses, licenses and diplomas are devised. And to legitimize and sell the plan, it is bolstered with ideas from popular psychology: “Different age groups require different learning methods” and “Human beings learn best when one item is addressed at a time.”

**In the cynical version, coaches with power, authority, and an understanding of the world soccer scene rise to the top of the pyramid.**

The true history probably lies somewhere in between. But surely our current setup isn't based entirely on immutable scientific laws. It can be critiqued and revised. And surely the coaches who devised the plan didn't consider high impact skill activities, possession scrimmages, multi-variable practices, or the playground dimension. Such ideas hadn't been formulated yet!

## **Empirical Evidence**

Once an understanding of the unsound arguments and the history has opened our minds to the playground dimension, the next step is to seek empirical evidence. Can newer coaches really develop skillful, smart players without teaching the skills? Can coaches really succeed just by packing skill games and scrimmages into multi-variable practices? Can players developed by the playground dimension really hold their own against players developed by the teaching dimension?

The answers require evidence, not just arguments. And that evidence is readily available in the form of interviews, observations, and experiments.

You could learn a lot by interviewing coaches, players, player parents, and referees who have experienced this approach to soccer in St. Mary's County, Maryland. You could also interview some people who have been highly

critical of the approach, from St. Mary's County as well as a soccer forum. Such interviews will probably reveal the following facts:

1. High impact skill activities, possession scrimmages, and multi-variable practices originated and evolved in St. Mary's County, Maryland, primarily during the 1990's.
2. The players who experienced this approach typically outperformed the St. Mary's County players who didn't, winning starting positions on their high school teams and sometimes going on to college soccer.
3. The teams I coached displayed good sportsmanship, above average skill, and a willingness to knock the ball around to each other.
4. The soccer forum participants who were highly critical of the approach influenced each other a great deal (collaboration) and rarely if ever actually tried the approach.
5. There were many St. Mary's County coaches, players, parents, and referees who applauded the approach and its results.
6. The St. Mary's County coaches, players, and parents who were highly critical of the approach had in some cases been influenced by reading the soccer forum discussions.

You could also gather empirical evidence by observing the approach in action. You could watch me conduct a two-hour soccer practice, and count the number of touches each player received in important parts of the sport. You could participate in one of the practices as if you were a player, and notice whether this seemed useful or fun. Or you could watch a team that I've coached, and count the Average Number of Passes per Possession before and after.

You and I could also conduct an experiment. We'll find 30 youth players of the same age and ability level, divide them into two even teams, and work with them for a week. I'll coach one of the teams by myself, and you and two other A License coaches will coach the other team. On the first day, the teams will play each other and we'll take a baseline of each team's Average Number of Passes per Possession and anything else deemed relevant. During the week, I'll coach using high impact skill activities, possession scrimmages, and multi-variable practices. You and your crew can coach however you please. At the end of the week, we'll have the big showdown match and note which team has made the most progress.

**At the end of the week, we'll have the big showdown match and note which team has made the most progress.**

## Test Small Before Committing Big

One challenge remains. Why should coaching organizations commit to the playground dimension on a large scale without proof of the long term consequences? What if the playground dimension looks good in the short term, for newer coaches at least, but fails or causes harm in the long term?

**Why should coaching organizations commit to the playground dimension on a large scale without proof of the long term consequences?**

The long term consequences of the playground dimension, ultimately, can only be proven by a long term study. I don't have the time or money for that, but coaching organizations do. The idea is to test on a small scale before committing on a large scale. There are two possible ways.

One is to conduct a long term study of one team developed solely by the playground dimension, beginning when the players are six years old. Inundate them with high impact skill activities, possession scrimmages, and multi-variable practices but little skill or tactical instruction. It should come as no surprise that by age sixteen the players will play skillfully and intelligently.

The other way is to organize one youth soccer club around the playground dimension and follow its progress for a few years. I've explained what such a club might look like, and I would help set it up. For our guinea pig, we could select a club short on credentialed coaches and experienced players. What would such a club have to lose?

### **SUMMARY: THE UNDERLYING MESSAGE**

The teaching dimension of coaching soccer is very important. But a plan based entirely on that dimension is going to be complicated. Divide soccer into a lot of lessons, divvy those lessons up to different age groups, give players the lessons one per practice, and set up a lot of coaching courses so coaches can learn to provide the lessons. Such a plan is difficult to pull off consistently, because there are so many things that can go wrong. And even when pulled off as intended, that plan might not let players reach their potential. Important soccer items, from one hopper shots to possession, simply can't be strengthened often enough.

If the teaching dimension gave a pep talk to newer coaches and players at the start of their soccer journey, it might go like this:

“Coaches, soccer is a complicated sport, consisting of a few skills plus a large number of tactics. Until you can teach the skills properly, you

won't be able to do much for your players other than facilitate free scrimmages. And if you haven't played much soccer, your prospects for ever teaching the skills properly are poor. But if you take these days-long and then week-long coaching courses, you might someday teach the skills properly and, after that, the tactics. In the meantime, you shouldn't coach age groups or team sizes for which you haven't yet passed the coaching courses."

"Players, your journey to reach your potential is challenging and not entirely within your control. Unless you can execute the skills properly, there isn't much hope. And coaches who can teach the skills properly aren't that plentiful. If your parents lack money or inside connections, or if the adults running your tryouts don't know what they are doing, your journey will be further jeopardized. And if you ever find yourself in a recreational division, with a coach who can't teach the skills let alone advanced things like possession or breaking through, your odds of reaching your potential are close to zero. Sorry about that!"

The playground dimension turns this discouraging picture upside down. A plan based on that dimension is much simpler. Divide soccer into a few player skills and team skills, and strengthen these regularly in a competitive, experimental, creative environment. Once in motion, that plan can't fail. How could players improve steadily at the activities and scrimmages without also improving at the targeted parts of soccer—just like at the playground?

The playground dimension pep talk might go like this:

"Coaches, you can accomplish a great deal even if you can't teach the skills, even if you've never played soccer or taken a coaching course. Soccer is a simple sport, consisting of a few items players must do individually like dribbling past defenders and a few items they must do collectively like keeping possession and breaking through. There are a few enjoyable competitions that target such things. You only have to facilitate those competitions regularly and watch your players improve. Eventually, you should also learn to teach. But in the meantime, your players will be improving, regardless of the age groups, ability levels, and team sizes you work with."

"Players, nothing can stop you from reaching your potential at soccer. Even if you don't have a coach who can teach you, even if you don't make the higher division or the travel team. If you compete regularly

at the right activities, you will improve steadily at what matters, gain insight into the sport, and develop flair and creativity. Any coach can facilitate those activities, and you can even compete at the activities with friends in your backyard or at the playground.”

When the teaching dimension ascended to the throne of American soccer, the playground dimension hadn't yet been put into words. Coaches understood the advantages of street soccer and playground soccer, but had no way to incorporate those advantages into organized practices. Now, the playground dimension has been put into words. It continues to evolve. The arguments against it are bogus, and the arguments for it are strong. The supporting evidence is plentiful. Surely, American soccer should investigate the playground dimension with an open mind.