

Guide to Rec Soccer Coaching (an amateur's guide for amateurs)

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Four years ago I found myself serving as assistant coach for my daughter's 1st grade soccer team. I'd never coached youth sports before, and I'd never played soccer, or any other organized sport. Turns out the head coach didn't have any experience either, having been drafted by the club, so it was a case of the blind leading the blind. We had no idea how to guide a bunch of 6 year olds to learn a sport. Having never played, I didn't really even know the basic skills, much less "drills" to teach them. Well, we survived the season, the girls had fun, and so did I, returning the following year as a head coach. I discovered, as have many before me, that coaching is fun and rewarding. It also requires preparation, in order to provide your players with a quality experience. I tried to learn as much as I could about coaching soccer by searching the internet for ideas, talking with other coaches, and trying different things.

Maybe you find yourself in a similar situation and feel over your head. Or maybe you've had some experience coaching and are just looking for some good ideas to make it fun and exciting again. I'd like to share some of the things I've learned during my short time coaching.

When approaching a season of practices, I think it helps to have an idea of what you're trying to accomplish: what do you hope the kids take away from the season? As far as practices go, I focus on three things: agility, fundamental skills, and having fun.

Agility: many of our kids no longer have the unstructured outdoor play time that we had when growing up, time to jump, run, kick, and tumble. All that play helped develop muscle and bones, eye-hand coordination, balance, and general athletic ability. Since kids today often lack these experiences, we need to provide them opportunities to work on their general athletic agility. Try to incorporate games and activities that promote balance, body awareness and control, eye-hand-foot coordination and the like.

Fundamental skills: You will be doing your players a great service if you help them learn a small, focused set of age-appropriate fundamental skills. Examples include, how to kick the ball properly, how to trap the ball, how to dribble the ball. Learning to do the basics well sets the foundation for future progress. Coaches of older players always speak approvingly of the new player who has strong basic skills.

Having fun: Especially for youth athletics, the central mission is that the kids have fun. Your most important goal is to have the kids want to come back next year! Having fun motivates a player to practice harder and get better. If you have fun playing the sport, you may adopt it as a lifelong passion.

These three things are interrelated. Improving your fundamental skills allows you to do more on the field, like scoring goals, which is fun! Improving your agility allows you to be better and faster on the field, which allows you to have more fun!

One thing is absent from the list: winning. Winning isn't that important, especially for younger players. Having fun and playing well should be the focus. Improving throughout the season is more important than which team scored more goals. I also want to help players develop good sportsmanship, teamwork, and personal resiliency.

We all know practice makes perfect. What that means is the more opportunities you get to perform a skill, the better you're going to get. In practice, we can make sure our players get lots of reps on basic skills. But this idea also applies to playing the game: the more you play in game situations, the better you'll be at playing the game. Not just fundamental skills, but also things like "game intuition" and strategic thinking. In order to provide youth players with as much in-game playing experience, Youth Soccer in America has generally adopted "small sided games", that is they play games with a small number of players on each team. That's why 1st graders play 4v4 and not 11v11. In a small sided game, everyone is much more actively involved in the game, and there's less opportunity for "spacing out". Youth Soccer is way ahead of other youth sports in recognizing the value of keeping players active and getting everyone lots of meaningful playing time. (Compare to Youth Softball, where most players are standing around most of the time.)

One side effect of small sided games is lots of scoring. This is a good thing. Why? because scoring goals is fun! It's a great motivator. We should arrange things so everyone gets to score lots of goals. It keeps kids coming back.

Some tips and suggestions for Practices

- Don't run drills, play games (which may be thinly disguised drills). Games = fun activities with simple rules that harness competition to strengthen and practice fundamental skills.
- Each game should last 5-10 mins, not much more.
- End practice with some scrimmage time (10-20 mins depending on age). For older players (4th and up) you can have the amount of scrimmage time depend on how focused players are during the rest of practice.
- Try to repeat a game or two from the previous practice.
- Try not to introduce more than 1 or 2 new games in any one practice (except for the first couple of practices, obviously.)
- Keep the players doing stuff, not standing around listening or waiting. That means avoid games or "drills" where players are standing in line waiting to take their turn. Well designed games and drills keep all players active. Any activity that has just a couple players doing something while the rest stand and watch is wasted time. Only a few players are getting anything out of it while the rest are getting bored.
- Take no more than 30 seconds (K) to 2 min (4th grade) to explain a game or drill. Really. The attention spans of little kids are short, really short. They will stop listening after an astonishingly short time. You've got 15-30 s to get your point across. Demonstrate as much as you can. If your great drill idea takes more than 30 s to explain than it's not going to work. I know from experience.

Warm-ups: start practice with some light warm-ups. A couple activities to get the players jogging, moving their arms and legs, get the blood pumping. A couple of activities to stretch. Some jumping activities to strengthen the knees -- see discussion of ACL prevention. Warm-ups help the players transition from where ever they've been to soccer practice -- mostly a mental transition, while also physically warming up the body. This helps prevent injuries. While young kids don't usually really need this kind of warm-up (unlike us adults), the biggest goal is to develop good habits. As they get older, any physical activity should be preceded by good warm-ups (and ended with good warm-downs.) You want to help develop this expectation for them.

You shouldn't lock players into positions. You have no idea what roles players will grow into in later years. Make sure everyone gets to play all parts of the field. In fact, you should minimize the role of positions and positional strategy until later years (4th grade and up.)

There are lots of resources for practice ideas, especially on the internet. You can find a huge number of games, drills, and activities to work on a wide range of skills. If you're not confident about how to perform the fundamental skills, you can find instruction online. There's also lots of material about how to best teach the skills to different age levels. A couple of sites I find particularly helpful are:

<http://www.footy4kids.co.uk>

<http://www.soccer-training-info.com>

The following documents from the recreation department of the town of Sharon describe lots of age-appropriate games and drills complete with excellent diagrams:

http://sharonsoccer.org/images/PDFs/Sharon_Soccer_U6.pdf

http://sharonsoccer.org/images/PDFs/Sharon_Soccer_U8.pdf

http://sharonsoccer.org/images/PDFs/Sharon_Soccer_U10.pdf

(if these are no longer available on-line, email me and I can send them to you.)

Another great resource is fellow coaches, who are usually more than willing to share their ideas. Also, the Tualatin Soccer Club hosts coaching clinics, some run by coaches from the Westside Timbers classic soccer league. Go to them, they are outstanding.

Some Tips about Administrating a Team in Tualatin Rec Soccer

Most coaches start practicing sometime in Aug. Realize many folks will be away on vacation sometime during the month and you probably won't ever have a full roster until Sept.

Most coaches practice twice per week. Once the season starts (in early Sept), most coaches continue twice per week, but some drop back to once per week, especially in the younger grades (K & 1st grade). Check with your parents and players. I found that my players always wanted to continue twice per week, although some parents weren't thrilled.

Make sure you identify someone to be Team Parent. I tell them their job is not to do everything, but to help organize the work so that everyone does a little bit. The chief

tasks are a) coordinating the fundraiser, eg. distributing packets and collected completed forms, b) coordinating pictures, again handing out packets, c) coordinating snack schedule for post-game snacks if your team chooses to do so, d) coordinating a team party at the end of the year if your team chooses to have one. You definitely want to get someone else to handle all this. But do make sure that everyone pitches in so that the Team parent isn't left doing all the work. The Team parent (or someone from your team) must attend the league team parent meeting in late Aug, where they get the various packets and learn what they have to do.

I like to send an email to my team right after the coaches meeting in late July introducing myself, telling them when practices will start, when and where they'll be, and begging for a team parent.

You need to remind your parents to be positive and supportive on the sidelines during games. Establish early on and firmly that parents should not coach from the sidelines; that's your job. They should cheer, clap, and encourage. Also, they (and you) should be respectful and grateful for the referees. They are mostly middle school and high school-aged soccer players who are just learning to referee. They probably know more about soccer than you do. Speak to them the way you'd want someone to speak to your son or daughter if they were referring.

Games

Here's a description of some of the games and drills I've used in the past.

Red light-Green light

Have the players line up on the sideline with their ball. Coach stands on the other sideline. When coach says "green light", players jog forward dribbling their ball. When coach says "red light", players must quickly stop their ball by placing the sole of their foot on top of their ball. In addition to developing foot work, the idea here is to get players to keep the ball close to them and under control. Younger players have a tendency to kick the ball well ahead of themselves, then run and chase it down. Instead, you want players to develop the ability to keep control of the ball, and not give it to the defense. In this game, if the player kicks the ball too far in front of them, they won't be able to stop it in time if "red light" is called.

Fox and Rabbits

Mark out a square field. One player is it (the Fox). The rest of the players are rabbits with tails -- pinnies stuck in their shorts. The Fox tries to catch a rabbit by pulling out its "tail". Once caught, a rabbit becomes a fox. Last rabbit standing wins, and is the fox for the next game. Introduce the game without balls, then have both fox and rabbits dribble their ball while playing. They have to keep their ball near them and in control at all times. Make the field smaller for a harder game. Develops basic agility and ball control.

Traffic jam

Mark out a square. Have half your players line up on one side, and the other half line up on the adjacent side (not opposite!). Every player has a ball. On your signal, the players

have to dribble across the square to the other side. They will have to avoid colliding with the other half of the players who are moving across the square. Develops ball control in tight quarters.

Statue tag

Mark out a square field. One player is it and tries to tag the other players. All players dribble their ball. When a player is tagged, they must stand with legs shoulder-length apart and hold their ball over their head. Another player can free a frozen player by kicking their ball through the frozen player's legs. Make the field smaller for a harder game. Develops ball control and passing.

Knock-out tag

Mark out a square field. One player is it and does not have a ball, all other players dribble their balls. The player who is it tries kick the ball of other players out of the square. Once a player's ball is kicked out, they become it too. If a player goes out of bounds they lose their ball. Last player with a ball wins and is it for the next game. Make the field smaller for a harder game. Develops ball control.

Sharks and minnows

One player (or coach) is it (the shark) and stands mid-way between the sidelines. The rest of the players line up with their ball on a side line. On a signal from the shark, the minnows dribble with their balls to the other sideline, trying to avoid the shark. The shark tries to kick out minnows' balls. Any minnow who has their ball kicked out joins the shark for the next round. Last minnow standing wins and is the shark for the next game.

Circle name pass

Have your players stand in a circle with one ball. A player says a teammates name and then passes the ball to that person. Repeat. Develops passing and trapping, and also helps everyone learn each other's names.

Numbers

Split your players into two teams. For each team, assign players the numbers 1, 2, 3, ..., so that both teams have a "1", and a "2", etc. Have the two teams line up on opposite sidelines. Coach stands in the middle, tosses up a ball and yells out a number. Those two people run out to get the ball and try to dribble it back to their sideline, scoring a point if they do. This teaches players to sprint to the ball, beating their opponent, develops foot work and defense. Also develops focus and attention, since players have to listen for their number and be ready to sprint. You have to keep things moving along, since everyone else is standing around. Sometimes I call multiple numbers, or toss up multiple balls, just to keep people on their toes.

Soccer bowling

Use cones as bowling "pins". Split your players into two teams, with two sets of cones. Taking turns, players kick the ball towards the cones trying to knock them down. First

team to knock all their cones down wins. Make the game harder by having the players stand farther from the cones. Develops passing accuracy.

Triangle keep-away

Form groups of three players, one is "it", the other two pass the ball between each other keeping the ball away from the third player. In order to do this successfully, the players will have to move to places where their partner has a clear pass. This teaches players to move without the ball, and to read where to be to receive a pass. When the player in the middle intercepts a pass, she switches places with the passer.

Circle keep away

Players make a circle approximately 20' diameter w/ 1 ball. 1 or 2 players w/ pinnies in middle playing defense. Circle players pass the ball among themselves, keeping the ball away from the defenders. If the defenders disrupt the pass, one switches with the circle player most responsible for the loss. Promotes quick passing, focus, defensive closeout. Encourage circle players to move to the pass.

It's important for players to develop a facility kicking the ball with all parts of either foot. You can use an array of related drills to help players practice using the inside and outside of either foot. To introduce younger players to this idea, I start by having them line up with their ball and play a version of "follow the leader". I lead the team in a circle (the circle at midfield is perfect) at a slow jog, dribbling our balls. We start off moving counter-clockwise and use the inside of our right foot only. Then we turn around and I ask the players, "If you're going to continue to use your right foot only, which part of your foot will you need to use as we go around the circle?" They should be able to figure out that they'll want to use the outside of their right foot to do this. Go around a couple of times, and then repeat using the left foot only.

Once you've established the idea, you can have them do all sorts of things. You can incorporate footwork into games, for example "Fox and Rabbits, but with right foot only". You can also do drills, such as:
Dribble out to a cone and back, using a) inside right foot then inside left foot, b) right foot only, alternating inside/outside, c)) left foot only, alternating inside/outside, c) outside right foot then outside left foot

Another point that you'd like to emphasize with your players is that they should be up on the balls of their feet while they play games and do the drills. Being on the balls of your feet puts you in the best position to react quickly.

An obstacle course is a great way to disguise drills as a game, and the kids love them. You might have the players weave between some cones, pass the ball to a coach, jump over a cone, receive a pass back from the coach and shoot at the goal. Let your imagination run free as you make up your own. Make two identical courses. divide your players into two teams, and let them compete to finish the fastest.

To help players learn to race back on defense when an offensive player breaks free, I developed the game/drill called Chase: Split your players into two groups, the first will be offense, the second will be defense. Have the offense group line up single file behind a cone some distance from the goal -- far enough that they'll have enough distance to dribble and then shoot. Have the defense group line up single file behind a second cone placed 8-10 feet behind the offense cone. To start the drill, you roll a ball out to the first player in the offense line, who starts dribbling towards the goal. The first player in the defense line gives chase, trying to disrupt the offensive player and kick the ball away. After the ball is scored or kicked away, the offensive player goes to the back of the defense line and the defensive player goes to the back of the offense line and the next two players start. Alternatively, if you want to score points and have the two teams compete, you can score 1 point per goal for the offense, and 1 point to the defense for kicking the ball away. No score for a missed shot. To discourage the offensive player from kicking the ball far ahead of themselves (or even making a long kick into the goal), a coach can stand in front of the goal and kick away any balls kicked too far ahead.

Sample practices:

10 min: Warmups: jog around half field, high-knees, toe taps on ball, lunges, cone-jump,

10 min: Fox and Rabbits

10 min: Dribble drill: around cone and back, right foot only, then left foot only.

10 min: Chase

5 min: Traffic Jam (left foot only)

15 min: scrimmage

10 min: Warmups: jog around half field, high-knees, toe taps on ball, lunges, cone-jump,

10 min: Statue Tag

10 min: Dribble drill: Weave around cones, right foot only, then left foot only.

10 min: Give-and-Go drill

5 min: Practice pullbacks and reverses

15 min: scrimmage

10 min: Warmups: jog around half field, high-knees, toe taps, lunges, cone-jump,

5 min: Practice pullbacks

10 min: Dribble drill: Weave around cones, right foot only, then left foot only.

10 min: Knockout Tag

10 min: Give-and-Go drill

5 min: Bowling

10 min: scrimmage

10 min: Warmups: jog around half field, high-knees, toe taps on ball, lunges, cone-jump,

5 min: Circle name pass

10 min: Knockout Tag

10 min: Obstacle course.

5 min: Red light, Green light

10 min: Sharks and Minnows

10 min: scrimmage