

Why game like activities are more appropriate to teach soccer than drills

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There have been some interesting conversations lately. What is the best way to train your player's?

One of the methods being put forward is through the block practice method. More often called drills. You know the ones where the players line up and dribble in and out of cones and then the next person starts. Another example would be two players standing 10 yards apart and passing the ball to each other trying to build up a rhythm.

So what is my problem with this type of training? It does not replicate the game. Where in a soccer match do you see players dribbling in and out of cones or passing the ball back and forwards to each other facing each other square on?

Technical training needs to be better than that. It needs to replicate the challenges the players face in a game. So what should a training session look like?

When setting up a training session there are certain criteria we need. The how, when, where and why.

How: this is the warm up portion of the session where the technique is introduced. Let's look at passing. As stated before just standing facing each other is inappropriate. Better to have the players in groups of 3 or 4 and pass and move in an area. Now the players have to look for the next player to pass to, is there a passing lane, how far is the player away (how hard do I need to hit the ball) and where is the player running to. What have we introduced here, the decision making that takes place in a match but now they are working on the skill in a random environment with-out pressure. This is the time for the players to experiment and learn how to make a quality pass.

When & Where: the second and third stage of a training session should be game like. A simple second stage activity of 2 vs. 2 to targets would be appropriate.

One of the Principles of Learning motor skills: Principle of Transfer

"The more identical two tasks are the greater the possibility that positive transfer will occur. Practice conditions should match the conditions in which the motor skill is going to be used."

So if we look at what they are saying the small sided activities should replicate the match they are going to play in. Can you pick up your small sided activity and drop it into the bigger picture of a match and then ask yourself does it fit. So in this activity they are not only working on their techniques of passing the ball but also the decisions of when to pass but also where in the small sided game should I do this. Most importantly we are introducing pressure to make it look more like the game.

A gradual progression (third stage) would be to introduce more players 4 v 4 to 2 goals in the corners for example. Again the players are still working on the passing technique but also the decisions of when and where to pass.

Finally we would finish up with a game and this would depend on the numbers you have (12 players then 6 v 6).

What would be my coaching points, start off with the technique of passing and then work in the decisions they are making and a really good question to ask the players is "why". What made you make that decision? Remember there is no such thing as "never" in the game of soccer.

Too often we get caught up in drill activities which are okay to introduce the skill but please move on to greater challenges for the players teaching them technique in game like activities.

Here is a breakdown of drills versus game like activities:

Drills	Games
Static	Dynamic
Lines	Free movement
Regimented	Unstructured
No decision making	Decision making
Boring	Fun

Now tell me what environment would you prefer your child to learn in?

Despite some popular beliefs the game is unstructured (maybe a little bit chaotic), it is based on the decisions that the players make and if they are not allowed to have this freedom to make decisions in training, but stuck in drills, then how are they going to make good decisions under the pressure of the game. In good training activities there is free movement and this movement can be based on the decisions of the players, how can I support my teammate, where can I run to now, do I dribble or do I pass, what type of pass do I make now? So there are a lot of interesting decisions that the players have to make.

Motor skills can be defined as open or closed and as we can see from the references below soccer (referred to as Football) is an open skill and variable practice will benefit our players more so than fixed practices.

The Open and Closed Continuum (Galligan 2000)

This continuum is concerned with the effects of the environment on skills (Knapp 1967)

Open skills: sports such as Netball, Football, and Hockey involve open skills. The environment is constantly changing and so movements have to be continually adapted. Skills are predominantly perceptual and externally paced, for example a pass in football.

Closed skills: these skills take place in a stable, predictable environment and the performer knows exactly what to do and when. Skills are not affected by the environment and movements follow set patterns and have a clear beginning and end. The skills tend to be self-paced, for example a free throw in Basketball, and serving in Squash or Tennis.

Knapp (1967) suggests that skills can fit on a continuum between open and closed.

Variable and Fixed Practice (Galligan 2000)

A major factor influencing the development of a skill is practice of which there are two main types:

- **Variable** - practicing a skill in a variety of different contexts and experiencing the full range of situations in which the technique or tactic might be used in competition. The skill is applied to a number of different environments in practice, **allowing both the development of the skill and the ability to adapt the skill to a range of possible situations. This is vital for open and interactive skills**
- **Fixed** - a specific movement is practiced repeatedly, often referred to as a drill. This type of practice is ideal for skills that are always performed in the same way. Closed, interactive and coactive skills tend to require fixed practice to allow the motor sequence to be perfected

Referenced Material

1. KNAPP, B. (1967) *Skill in Sport: The Attainment of Proficiency*. Routledge & Kegan Paul
2. GALLIGAN, F. et al. (2000) Acquiring Skill In: GALLIGAN, F. et al., *Advanced PE for Edexcel*. 1st ed. Bath: Bath Press, p. 102-108
3. DAVIS, B. et al. (2000) The Nature and classification of skill. In: *DAVIS, B. et al. Physical Education and the study of sport*. 4th ed. Spain: Harcourt Publishers, p. 284-285

Soccer is an open skill sport with an unpredictable environment. Therefore the players need to be trained in a variable environment so they can better learn the game.

So parents when you are looking for extra training for your child please consider how they are being trained and in what environment, you might be just wasting your money!