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# Make it a habit

A psychological trick that will make your team faster and more efficient

**Everyone believes in good habits, but what are they? Habit is a process in the brain that relieves us of having to make too many decisions. In this article, mental coaching expert John Daykin explains how you can harness the power of habits in your training and improve your team's play in all kinds of game situations.**



## Think less, play better?

If you consider the number of actions you perform in a day, then you can see that you would be overwhelmed if you had to stop and make a new decision before every one of them. Should I clean my teeth? How long should I brush for? Should I brush up and down or in circles?

Without thinking about it, we reach for the brush and clean our teeth. Sometimes when we think we're making a decision, we're actually just locating a "habit loop" in our brain, at which point automation takes over. The same thing happens to us when we play soccer.

When we ask players to think during a game in order to make better decisions, we can often be making an unreasonable request. Cognitive decisions can be impeded by an overload of sensory data (what the player is seeing, feeling, hearing) with too little time to assess, process into a desirable action and execute. Even if players are briefed for certain situations, memory can prove unreliable under pressure.

Neuroscientific research has confirmed that habit loops are formed in a different part of the brain than memory and can be effective even under pressure because people respond to habit loops instinctively, without thinking. In soccer, therefore, habits are crucial. Players and teams with good habits do well; without them, play falters.

All coaches unconsciously create habits in players, but by recognizing and understanding how habit works, coaches can control

## ► Habit loops in action: The Barca press

*Under Coach Pep Guardiola, whenever FC Barcelona lost possession of the ball (cue) the team developed a five-second press (routine). This frequently allowed them to recover possession almost immediately (reward). If the ball was not recovered, then the team fell back into defensive positions. This routine was rehearsed religiously in training so it became*



*automatic during games, and instead of having to stop and think what their response should be each time, players acted immediately in unison. This habit assisted fast repossession of the ball and contributed to Barcelona's high possession percentage against all opponents.*

player development more wisely by trying to create good habits. Training to build habit allows lots of repetition of all the skills needed for each habit “routine,” so training sessions to develop cues also double as intensive training sessions in other topics.

However, habits should only be trained when players have mastered all the skills necessary to perform a routine. If the players struggle to execute, they will not learn the habit and their confidence will be diminished.

“Habit training,” or training to respond to cues, does not mean that improvisational play should be ignored. In game situations, habit routines do not always work out as planned, so an attempted cue can actually set the perfect stage for an improvisational moment. Good improvisation should always be applauded and encouraged.

### The habit loop

A habit loop is made up of four elements: craving, cue, routine and reward.

**Craving:** The thing that drives the habit. In soccer, we assume that the craving for success (to win, to play better, to perform an action well) is what powers the desire to form good habits.

**Cue:** A signal that makes us go into our routines. For example, in soccer, it could be a prearranged action by a teammate, a particular move made by an opponent or a call by the referee.

**Routine:** A sequence of events that we act out in response to a cue. In a team setting, everyone can have a different routine for the same cue. For example, the cue may be: Player A gets the ball in space on the right flank. When the cue occurs, individual routines could be: A runs with the ball, B makes an overlapping run, C and D push onto the last defenders; E makes a diagonal run; F compacts the team from the back; and so on. Each player sees the same cue but responds with a different routine.

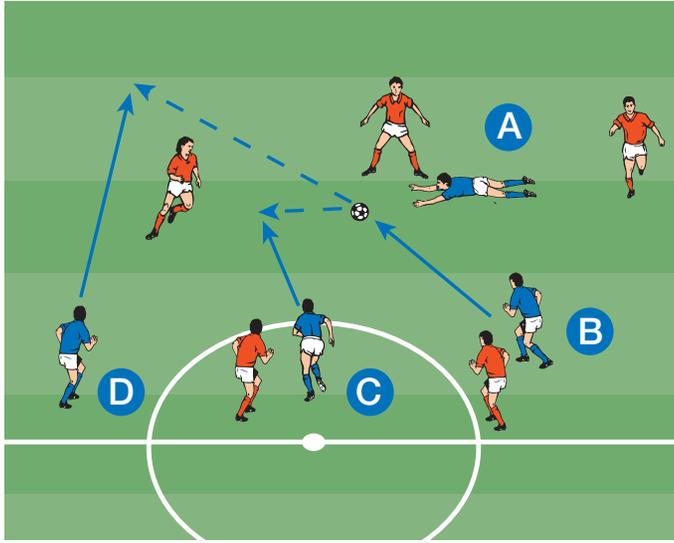
**Reward:** The end result of the habit that makes it all worthwhile. In soccer that could be a tactical reward, such as winning back possession of the ball, or a personal reward, such as pride in the play. The craving for reward is what drives us forward even without the guarantee that we will achieve it every time.

### Creating habit loops in training

- Think of something you want to achieve.
- Figure out the sequence of events needed to make it happen.
- Decide what the cue should be. It should be an action that can be interpreted as a signal to start a routine. It should relate to a time during the game—for example, you might not do the same things if you were winning as you would if you were losing, or do the same things late in the game that you would early in the game, so be clear as to when you want the habit to kick in.

- The cue should also relate to a place on the field (you probably wouldn't want to try the same things in your defensive third as you would in your attacking third, for example).
- Create a training session around the cue and the routine.
- Explain the significance of cue and routine to players, as well as the benefits (speed of play, etc.).
- Be specific about the exact routine expected from each player so that it can be repeated accurately.
- Devise “cue words” that you and the team can use to let everyone know that you've identified a cue and a routine needs to start. Have the players use these cue words with each other during training games and matches to keep everyone alert and to reinforce the cues.
- Repeat the cue and routine many times in training without pressure until execution is faultless.
- Repeat the cue and routine with light pressure, artificially creating opportunities for the cue to occur.
- Repeat the cue and routine under match conditions.
- Follow up. Make sure that a trained habit executed in competition is praised, and that missed opportunities to execute a habit are pointed out and corrected in training shortly afterwards. Revisit the habits regularly during regular training with quick “refresher” sessions to keep them alive.

## Habit training for set plays



### Quick free kick

#### Cue

- Player A is fouled and a free kick is awarded (action) in an attacking part of the field (place). The team is losing by one goal late in the game and eager to score an equalizing goal (time).

#### Routine

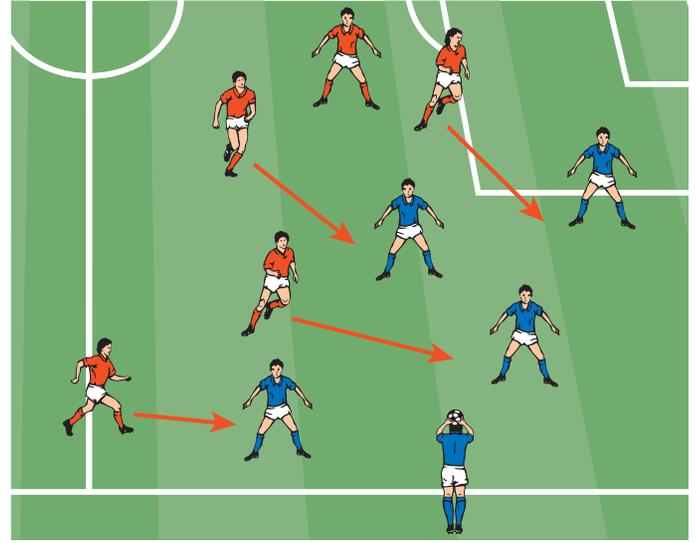
- Attacking players run forward when the whistle blows. The nearest player to the ball (B) touches and stops it with one hand, so the referee can see it is dead, and then instantly plays it to C or D. (A whistle is not required to restart the game unless called for by the defending team)

#### Reward

- The attacking team takes full advantage of players who are advancing into attacking positions before the defenders can respond.

#### Notes

- A coach can ask players to take quick free kicks, but a request rarely works unless the whole team knows what's happening. Unrehearsed quick free kicks are often wasted. Therefore, you should turn quick free kicks into a habit with lots of repetition, calling imaginary fouls during training games to practice a quick restart. As soon as a foul is called, players on the team taking the kick should shout a cue word such as "Touch!" to instantly let everyone know what's going to happen next and alert all players to move speedily into position.



### High press on throw-in

#### Cue

- A throw-in is awarded to the opponents (action) deep in their defensive half of the field (place) at any time in the game except when your team is defending a lead (time).

#### Routine

- Your team's players quickly flood the area and press the team taking the throw-in; defenders step forward behind them to compact the field, with one assigned to protect against a long ball over the top.

#### Reward

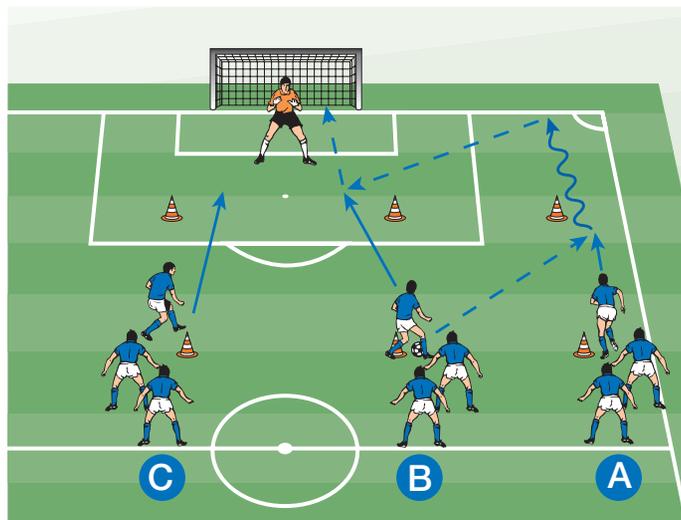
- Opponents are trapped in their defensive third with a good chance of losing possession close to their goal. (Statistically, throw-ins frequently lead to turnovers).

#### Notes

- You cannot press effectively if even one player fails to recognize and respond, so rehearse the high press during training by randomly awarding throw-ins and having the attacking team sprint into position immediately, using a cue word such as "Press!" to urge each other on. A designated midfielder or defender can call off the press when appropriate with a cue word such as "Drop."

## Habit training in practice

EXERCISE 1



### Ground ball to final seam

#### Cue

- Player A passes the last defender on the flank 20 or more yards from the goal.

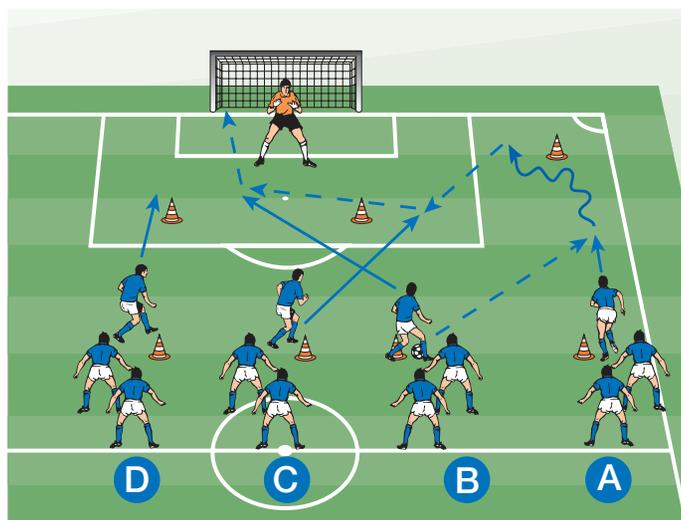
#### Routine

- Player A receives a pass from B and dribbles past the cone representing the last defender. B and C make attacking runs. Now A crosses the ball on the ground between the goal and the last line of “central defenders” (cones). B or C steps into the seam from an onside position and shoots on goal, against a goalkeeper.

#### Tips

- Have players rotate after each play (A to B to C to A).
- Replace the cones with semi-active defenders and repeat.

EXERCISE 2



### Pull ball back and pass

#### Cue

- Player A takes the last defender to the endline and cuts back inside.

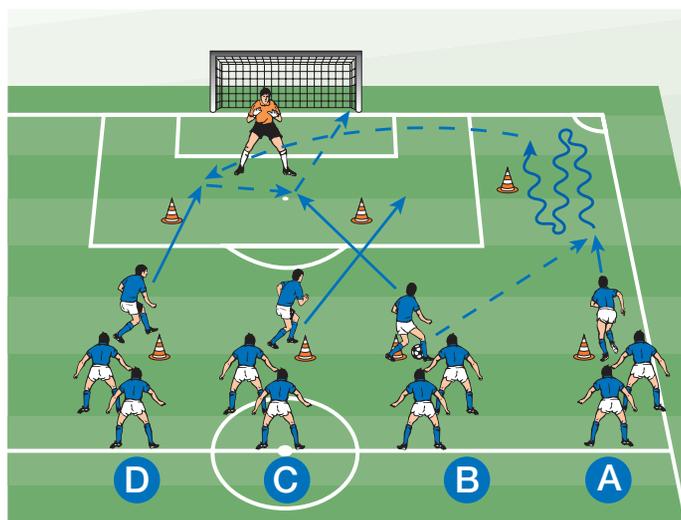
#### Routine

- B, C and D make attacking runs while A receives a pass from B and dribbles past the last defender (cone), then cuts back inside. Now A passes on the ground to B. B looks to shoot, or to play the ball to C or D. Practice with different finishes: a pass behind the line of cones, or a chipped ball for the head. If the ball is played to them, C and D look to score from an onside position.

#### Tips

- Have players rotate after each play (A to B to C to A).
- Replace the cones with semi-active defenders and repeat.

EXERCISE 3



### Cross in air to far post

#### Cue

- Player A takes the last defender to the endline, cuts inside, then cuts back to the endline again.

#### Routine

- B, C and D make attacking runs while A receives a pass from B and dribbles past the last defender (cone), cuts back inside and then cuts back toward the goal line. Now A crosses the ball in the air to the far post. D looks to score, or to knock the ball down to B or C. All attackers must remain in onside positions.

#### Tips

- Have players rotate after each play (A to B to C to A).
- Replace the cones with semi-active defenders and repeat.