

Games that teach skills

A game-like training session to improve passing technique

by Sam Snow, coaching director, US Youth Soccer

As coaches, we know two different approaches to teaching skills. First there is the drill-based approach, which takes one piece of the game, practices it and then puts it back in the puzzle. Then there is the games-based approach: Here, technical skills are learned in the context of playing.



YOUTH U6–U10

The drill-based approach

For many decades team sports have been taught with a drill-based approach—for example, in teaching ball skills. Let's say a coach wants to teach the push pass to young players. The typical practice would be to put players in pairs and have them stand 10 yards apart and pass back and forth. The intent is to work on body mechanics and get repetition for muscle memory (rote repetition).

The player is then put into a match and expected to perform the trained pass. The problem is that the pass that needs to be made is different in different game situations. Also, the decision as to when to pass is not addressed in rote repetition drills. In other words, the trouble with the drill-based approach is that the skill is taught out of context.

The games-based approach

The aim of this approach is to structure a progression of situations that develop players' ability to play soccer. Players are taught how

to make tactical decisions, and they learn technical skills as solutions to problems on the field. The games-based approach uses the word "game" to emphasize the idea of playing rather than reproducing a technical model. Everything the coach teaches must be transferable to matches. So for players to learn when and why to use a particular skill, the contextual moment must be realized. This can be accomplished through game-like activities in training sessions (dynamic repetition).

Game-like training

Using activities that are "game-like" in training sessions helps to develop skillful, physically fit, tactically aware and passionate players. Using drills stifles development, contributes to player dropout and dulls player creativity.

A coach can tell the difference between a drill and a game-like activity by using the activity checklist. Whenever you put together a lesson plan for a training session, ask yourself these questions:

- Are the activities fun?
- Are the activities organized?
- Are the players involved in the activities?
- Are they being creative and making decisions?
- Are the spaces appropriate?
- Is the coach's feedback appropriate?
- Are there implications for the game?

The great advantage of the games-based approach is that players attach greater value to skill development after they see the need for it in real game situations. As they come to understand how better skills can help them play better, many young players begin to practice more with the ball, either on their own or with friends. Pick-up games, in particular, are an excellent way for players to develop game awareness and become better decision-makers.

Meanwhile, coaches can use a variety of game-like activities to create a challenging environment involving learning, excitement and imagination. On the following two pages, you'll find a game-like training session designed to teach the skill of passing.



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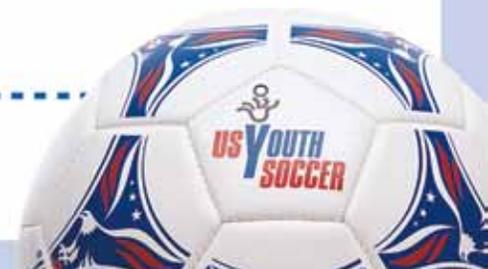
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Games that teach skills

SAMPLE TRAINING SESSION: WARM-UP

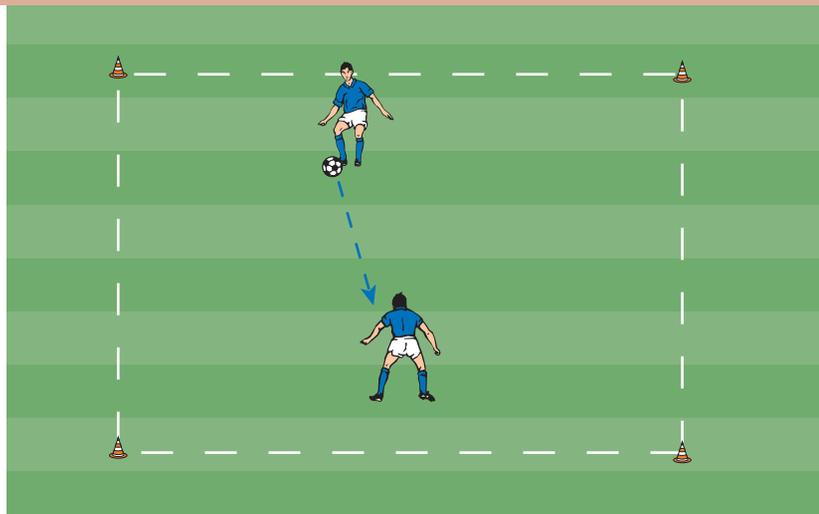
Paint the grass

Setup and sequence

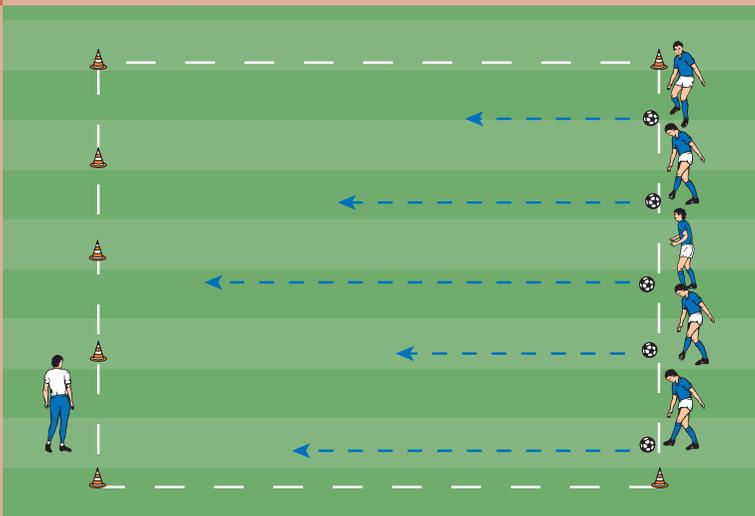
- Mark out several 15 x 10-yard grids.
- Position two players with one ball in each grid.
- Players pass the ball back and forth on the ground (“painting the grass”).
- Contest: Which pair of players can “paint” more of the grass in one minute?
- Play approximately six rounds.

Coaching tips

- This activity teaches correct technique for playing ground balls.
- Give players corrections individually as needed.
- All passes must stay on the ground.



Cliffhanger



Setup and sequence

- Players start at the end of a 20 x 15-yard grid with one ball each.
- Mark the opposite endline with large cones or corner flags.
- Each player passes across the field. The object is to have the ball stop on the opposite endline without going out of the grid.
- Which ball stops closest to the far endline without going out?
- Play five rounds.

Variation

- Players use different parts of the foot for passing.

Coaching tips

- This activity teaches passing with proper pace.
- Balls may not be retrieved until everyone has played a pass.
- Impose a time limit for passing if needed.

Kiss the cone

Setup and sequence

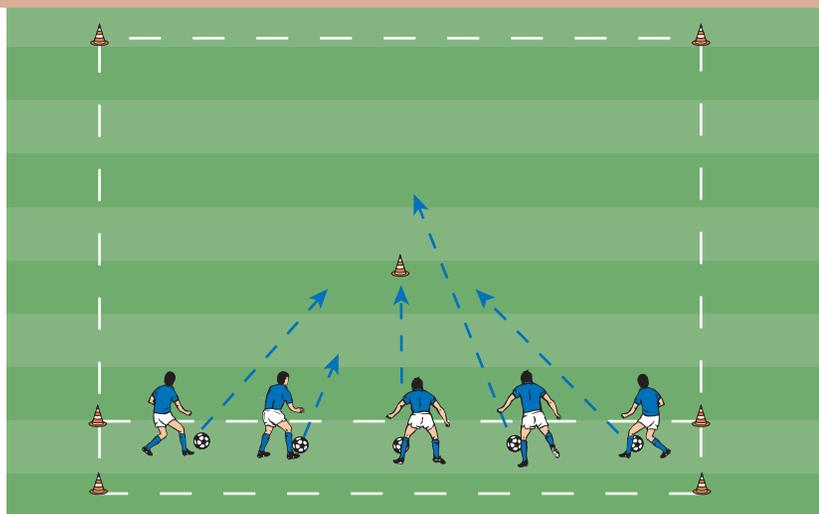
- Place a large cone in the center of a 20 x 15-yard grid.
- Players line up behind a boundary line with one ball each.
- On the coach's command, players pass toward the center cone. The object is to touch it with the ball.
- Contest: Who can score the most touches on the center cone?
- Play five rounds.

Variation

- Players use different parts of the foot for passing.

Coaching tips

- This activity teaches passing with proper pace and accuracy.
- The distance from boundary line to center cone depends on players' skill level.



SAMPLE TRAINING SESSION: MAIN SESSION AND CONCLUSION

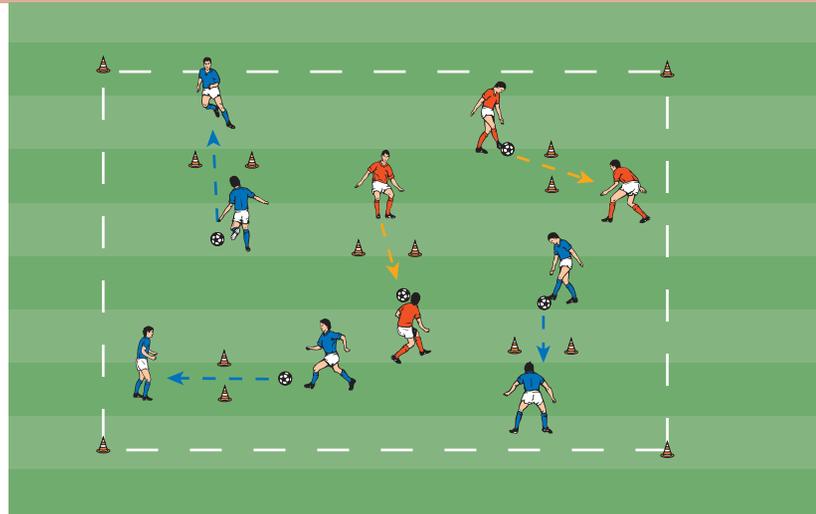
Gate passing in pairs

Setup and sequence

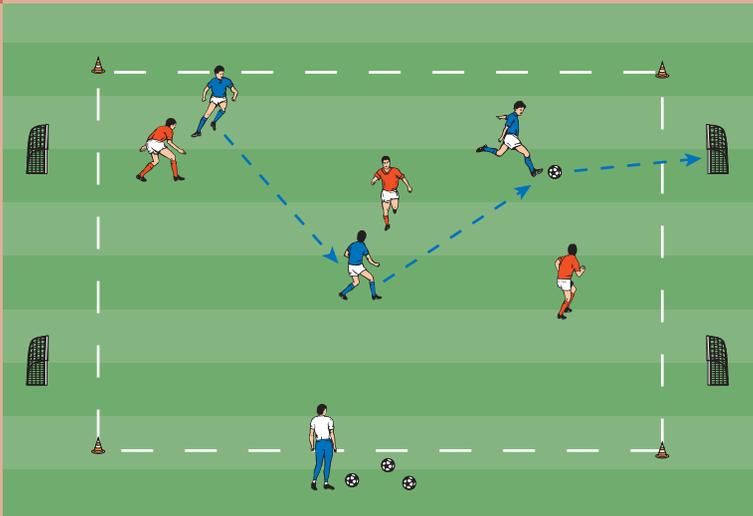
- Using cones, mark out several gates inside a 30 x 20-yard grid.
- Divide players into pairs with one ball per pair. Players move around the grid and pass to their partners through the gates.
- If a ball goes out of the grid, the player who played it out must do a kick-in to put it back into play.
- Which pair can pass through the most gates in one minute?
- Play six rounds.

Coaching tips

- This dynamic activity requires players to think about pass timing while moving. The gates make for realistic angles and distances.
- Players should practice passing with both feet, displaying accuracy and proper pace. Passes may be straight or bent.
- All pairs are in motion, so partners need to “read” when to pass.



Outside goals



Setup and sequence

- Teams play 3 v. 3 in a 30 x 20-yard grid.
- Set up two small goals five yards behind each endline.
- Each team defends two goals and attacks on the other two.
- Players can only score from inside the field.

Variations

- Teams play 2 v. 2 or 4 v. 4.
- Hold a tournament with up to four teams (four-minute rounds).

Coaching tips

- The outside goals demand greater accuracy on scoring attempts.
- Passes must also be made under opposition pressure.
- Players must decide whether to play a short or a long pass, depending on the game situation.

Concluding game: 5 v. 5

Setup and sequence

- Teams play 5 v. 5 on a field twice the size of the penalty box.
- Set up one goal with goalkeeper on each endline.

Variations

- Limit players' touches to two or three.
- Each player on the attacking team has to take at least one touch before the team can score.

Coaching tips

- This game provides an opportunity to practice making decisions and playing a variety of passes in realistic game situations.
- The coach should observe each player's level of passing skill. Have players improved since the start of the session?
- Finish with an age-appropriate cool-down.

