

Simple Soccer: 30 Vital Tips to Help Coaches and Players Excel

Paul Spacey

Copyright 2014 by Paul Spacey

No reproduction without permission.

All rights reserved.

Smashwords Edition.

CONTENTS

Introduction

- 1 - Practice as often as possible.
- 2 - Practice in small spaces.
- 3 - Practice anywhere, regardless of the facilities.
- 4 - Practice in fun, sometimes unstructured environments.
- 5 - Learn by feel and repetition.
- 6 - Practice at high intensity.
- 7 - Record when things go well (and when they don't).
- 8 - Don't hold back. Give everything (even if you look foolish).
- 9 - Spend long periods practicing just one skill.
- 10 - Frustration is necessary for improvement; enjoy the struggle.
- 11 - Watch, listen and learn from top players & coaches.
- 12 - Correct mistakes immediately before they form into habits.
- 13 - Focus on improvement over winning.
- 14 - Work on the small number of most important skills the majority of the time.
- 15 - Promote positive, attacking soccer.
- 16 - Have a clear goal in every practice session.
- 17 - Encourage the use of both feet. It is hugely important.
- 18 - First touch/control is probably the most important skill you can learn.
- 19 - Practice with older/better players to speed development.
- 20 - Stop screaming from the sidelines. It is pointless.
- 21 - Player communication; why it is so important.
- 22 - If you keep possession, you can't lose.
- 23 - Where can you move to help your teammate?
- 24 - Keep the ball 'live'.
- 25 - Throw the ball to feet. Every single time (almost).
- 26 - Perfect the basics, the fundamentals.

27 - Don't hesitate; restart play as quickly as possible.

28 - It is a team game. Contribute and sacrifice for the team.

29 - Formations - they are not that important.

30 - Make every minute of practice count.

About the Author

INTRODUCTION

"Football (soccer) is a simple game based on the giving and taking of passes, of controlling the ball and making yourself available to receive a pass. It is terribly simple."
- Bill Shankly (Legendary Liverpool FC Coach).

Bill Shankly could not have put it in terms any simpler and I agree with him. I believe that coaches, players, the media and many other people involved in the game are over complicating analysis, delivery of coaching and actual play on the field more and more nowadays. Why? Playing 'simple' actually turns out to be the most effective way of playing the game in my opinion.

The ideas and advice contained in the following chapters are straight forward, to the point and will enable you to develop and improve your coaching style to ultimately deliver more beneficial sessions for your players. If you are a player reading this book, the ideas and tips will enable you to deliver better performances on the field.

You might be just starting out as a new soccer coach or player or you may already have been involved in the game for some time; either way, you will be able to take a lot away from this book.

You have 30 vital and easily implemented tips at your disposal. You don't need to spend hours reading through chapters (each chapter is an average of 500 words so you can read one chapter in five minutes or so), you can just get straight into the material and start improving your delivery as a coach and start improving your game if you are a player.

The great thing about soccer is that you don't become a great coach or a great player simply as a result of inherited genes. You become great by dedicating yourself to practice and improvement. Make today the first step on your road to being the best coach or player you can possibly be.

This book is intended to be used as a mini-manual; something you can quickly pick up and get ideas ahead of your next practice or game. You can even use it during practice or games to remind yourself of the simple concepts you should be applying.

I am always interested in hearing from coaches and players and getting feedback on the tips provided in this book. Please let me know how you get on by emailing paul@paulspacey.com. You won't get a standard response from a customer service staff member; you will get a personal response from me.

Enjoy the book!

Paul



This book is dedicated to my girlfriend, Claire, who patiently endured endless late nights while I researched and wrote the material. Thank you for putting up with me!

1 - PRACTICE AS OFTEN AS POSSIBLE.

Whether you are a soccer coach or player, the importance of regular practice cannot be underestimated.

The longer the time between practice sessions, the more likely we are to forget what we have learned. Practicing regularly allows the brain to process the skills and information we learn during training and retain that information more effectively. This is exactly the same for coaches; the more often you take team practices, the better you will become at delivering effective sessions.

If you are a coach and only able to practice with your players once or twice a week, that doesn't mean *they* can't practice more often. Encourage your players to practice on their own on days between your practice sessions. Juggling, ball control, dribbling, passing against a wall; there are so many things they can do on their own without the need for anyone else to help them. It is your job as a coach to encourage and convince them that individual practice is worth the effort and they will get their reward as they improve more rapidly than those players who are not prepared to put in the extra time.

The relationship between regular practice and success is captured in this quote from American self-help author, Robert Collier:

“Success is the sum of small efforts, repeated day in and day out.”

When you practice soccer regularly, it becomes a habit. Remember though, it is not just about practicing for the sake of doing it; whenever you practice, it needs to be done with maximum intensity and focus (more on this in a future chapter).

Excuses to skip soccer practice are not acceptable; “It's too cold” or “I'm too tired” are common excuses. If you feel like giving one of these excuses, remember the importance of practicing regularly and push yourself to attend practice anyway, even if you really don't feel like it. Most of the time, once you finish practice and realize the benefit you have got from it, you'll ask yourself why you even considered not going in the first place. Push yourself. Don't miss practice.

I love this fantastic quote from Eric Thomas, one of the best motivational speakers on the planet, which relates to practice and perhaps not feeling like doing it sometimes:

*“The most important thing is this; to be able at any moment, to sacrifice what you **are** for what you will **become**.”*

If you don't feel like going to practice, sacrifice what you **are** right now and get yourself to practice anyway. Think about what you will **become** as a result of not skipping practice.

It is a simple concept; *the more regularly you practice, the quicker you will learn and improve.*

If you are a player, remember this and focus on practicing as often as possible. If you are a coach, push this point home to your players and encourage them to practice every day.

The US Olympic Training Centre doors are covered with the message below so that everybody (particularly the athletes) sees it every single day:

Not Every Four Years. Every Day.

The simple message reminds athletes that excellence comes from things practiced and mastered in every training session, **every day**.

2 - PRACTICE IN SMALL SPACES.

Practicing in areas smaller than a normal soccer field is hugely beneficial for players and this is something you should do as often as possible. As a player, if you do not already use small spaces for at least part of your practice, speak to your coach about doing so. As a coach, practicing in small, tight spaces should be something you do regularly with your team.

One of the main reasons for using smaller areas is that you get more touches on the ball (sometimes called repetitions) and this is one of the fundamental requirements to develop skill and technique in soccer.

Increased number of touches = increased skill development.

Another benefit is that players are forced to think quicker as they have less reaction time in a smaller area of space. Your players will have to react urgently to what Daniel Coyle, in his brilliant book *The Little Book Of Talent*, calls 'struggle-filled crises'. It is a struggle to try and keep possession of the ball in a very tight area of space with opponents pressuring you and this struggle helps players develop quicker reactions over time.

The ultimate goal for any soccer player is to eventually progress to a level where you are able to relax in tight spaces under pressure like teams such as Barcelona and Arsenal. This level of competence will take many years but improvement will be noticeable within the space of just a few practice sessions so if you are a coach, think about immediately employing games and exercises in small areas of space.

"In small space, a player has to be capable of acting quickly. A good player who needs too much time can suddenly become a poor player." - Johan Cruyff, famous Dutch player and coach.

There are plenty of options; 1v1 in a very small square or area with players trying to keep the ball away from each other. The same thing can be done 2v2, 3v3 and so on. The more players involved, the more options are available (in terms of passes) and so the difficulty decreases slightly as you add extra players but the concept remains the same.

Sometimes, in larger spaces, it is easier for players to 'hide' in practice (and games) or lose focus. When the space is small it gives the coach chance to keep a close eye on everyone and everything that is going on. Players will be focused on the goal (whether that is an actual goal to score in or just a goal of keeping possession for example) and are more likely to work harder and smarter with the coach overseeing them from close-quarters.

If you are a player, you should **want** to do extra practice on your own and one of the best ways to increase your reaction speed is to work against a wall or rebound surface. Get very close to it and use both feet to pass the ball against the surface and control it as it comes back. Experiment with harder and softer passes and vary the different parts of your foot that you use to pass and control the ball.

A fantastic training exercise to use in a small space is known in Spanish as '*Rondo*' (sometimes known to younger ages as 'piggy in the middle'). The game involves two groups of players (attacking and defending groups) with one group having the ball while in numerical superiority (3v1, 5v2, etc) over the other group. The basic objective of the

group in numerical superiority is to keep possession of the ball while the objective of the smaller group in numerical inferiority is to win the ball back.

Here is another great quote from Cruyff, this time about the 'Rondo' exercise:

“Everything that goes on in a match, except shooting, you can do in a Rondo. The competitive aspect, fighting to make space, what to do when in possession and what to do when you haven't got the ball, how to play 'one touch' soccer, how to counteract the tight marking and how to win the ball back.”

If it's good enough for Cruyff, it should be good enough for you.

3 - PRACTICE ANYWHERE, REGARDLESS OF THE FACILITIES.

Everybody would like a perfect field on which to practice. Grass that looks like it has been cut by scissors where the ball rolls perfectly along the surface; if only we could all have that.

It is worth remembering that you don't need a perfect grass or artificial surface to practice effectively; it all boils down to effort and focus on the practice session rather than the surface you are playing on.

In some ways, having a fantastic playing surface can be detrimental at times. It sometimes makes players unconsciously feel as though they have 'made it', especially if there are other luxurious facilities surrounding the field.

Practicing on an uneven surface or field that looks like cattle just grazed there might not actually be a bad thing; it forces players to focus their efforts on control and first touch which is more difficult on a poor surface. The benefit is that when they return to a better surface, their touch/control will have improved.

Many of the world's best soccer players came from backgrounds where they didn't even have a blade of grass on which to practice; some just had cobbled streets or their back yard with bricks and dirt covering the ground. Brazilian legend Ronaldinho grew up playing mainly on fields of dirt and sand "*with a bit of grass in the corner.*" It certainly didn't do him any harm.

As a coach, you just need to find somewhere with roughly a 30x30 yard area of space. Much of your practice should revolve around small sided games and working in tight spaces anyway (as referenced in the previous chapter) so you don't need to go hunting for fantastic facilities with huge areas of space.

Players practicing on their own need literally just a wall or surface from which the ball will rebound. Let's face it, regardless of where you live, anyone can find a wall or surface at which to kick a ball so there is no excuse to not be practicing every day.

If you want to be playing on better surfaces with better all-round facilities; see it is a reward for your effort. The higher you progress in soccer, the better teams you play for, the better facilities will usually be so if you want to play on pristine fields and be surrounded by luxurious facilities, you need to first work hard on the bumpy fields and see the cold showers as something to motivate you. Be motivated!

Zinedine Zidane, one of the world's greatest ever players, established his early feel for the ball in the government-built projects of Marseille, playing in the town's central square and in the living room of his family's apartment where he proceeded to smash all of the lights...talk about practicing anywhere!

This quote by Joyce Meyer is very repetitive (overly so perhaps, but that's the point) and definitely true:

"The way anything is developed is through practice and more practice."

Do not be concerned with the facilities where you or your team practice. Be concerned only about practice; that is your key to improvement. Make the most of your practice time.

4 - PRACTICE IN FUN, SOMETIMES UNSTRUCTURED ENVIRONMENTS.

There is a time and place for structured, formal practice. It is necessary for coaching specific soccer skills and techniques so formal practice is a vital part of any coaching plan or player development program.

There is also however, an important (and equally necessary) part to play by learning in unstructured, fun environments without the formality of structured practice. This might be in the form of a simple 5v5 game which lasts the entire duration of a practice session or it may be in the form of multiple games with different rules to normal soccer (such as being able to use your hands). The important thing is that it is unstructured and players are generally left to 'get on with having fun' whilst the coach just observes.

One of the key components for learning and improving in soccer is *enjoyment*. The reason for this is simple; the more players enjoy what they are doing, the more motivated they are to work hard and subsequently learn quicker. Unstructured environments and fun games are the perfect way to foster enthusiasm and enjoyment among players.

As a player, there is nothing better than throwing down some jackets to use as goalposts and breaking into a game with friends or even people you do not know.

The good thing about soccer is that it helps to bring people together and enjoy the game. Impromptu games like these are often competitive with everyone desperate to win and the nature of this approach means that players give everything they have got to ensure their 'team' wins. Players do not need a coach or referee for these kinds of games; they just need a bunch of people to form two teams and get the game underway.

Unstructured environments take away some of the pressures that players might feel when doing exercises which have a specific outcome in mind and the coach looms over their every move. If you are a coach, remember this and look to incorporate unstructured games and fun exercises into your practice. Just observe; don't go shouting and stopping the game every 5 minutes. Encourage creativity and allow your players to express themselves.

Practice doesn't always have to be unstructured of course; it is about finding a balance. Continuous structure and an overly regimented environment will not allow a child to fall in love with the ball and with the game. This is important, as Roy Keane, ex Manchester United captain, once said:

"I don't believe skill was, or ever will be, the result of coaches. It is a result of a love affair between the child and the ball."

5 - LEARN BY FEEL AND REPETITION.

Repetition can sometimes seem boring but it is probably the most powerful way of improving soccer skills. Performing a single skill or move over and over again ingrains the technique in our minds and the more times we do it, the quicker it becomes and the quality also improves.

As a player, you should consider using spare hours to practice kicking a ball against a wall hundreds of times using both feet, controlling it from different heights and angles and learning simply via feel and repetition. You will be amazed at how quickly you improve when you do this.

Coaches should give their players 'free time' to practice their own moves, dribbles, skills and ball control during practice sessions. Players will often compete to see who can perform the most impressive move or the quickest turn and this friendly competitiveness will push players to work harder and consequently improve their technical skills.

The quote below is by Norman Vincent Peale and while it was not intended as a direct reference to soccer, the link is fairly obvious:

"Repetition of the same thought or physical action develops into a habit which, repeated frequently enough, becomes an automatic reflex."

This is an important point for players and coaches to remember; once a skill or technique becomes 'automatic', it can be done without thought which allows players to concentrate on other aspects of their game. This is the level that professional players reach; the skills and moves for them are literally done on 'autopilot' so they can be planning their next pass or shot whilst they are subconsciously performing a skill or move without even thinking about it.

Touching the ball hundreds of times during every practice session is vital if you want to improve quickly. Individual ball skills are the best thing for this and you can find literally hundreds of them online via YouTube and various websites. One of the best sites for individual ball mastery is www.beastmodesoccer.com. The founder, David Copeland-Smith, is considered one of the best individual skills specialists in the United States. Check out their videos on YouTube and practice the ball mastery and skills which can be done alone; all you need is a ball and a few yards of space.

Coaches should be looking to incorporate individual skills into every practice session. Instead of having a boring warm up run around the field, get your players performing individual skills in a relatively small area of space.

Bells (left to right touches), toe taps (on top of the ball), dragbacks (using sole), touches with the outside of each foot and different turns like cruyffs, stepovers and outside hooks are all good for getting players warmed up whilst touching the ball literally hundreds of times. Using these skills, a 10 minute warm up will see a player typically touch the ball upwards of 500 times.

Don't look at repetition as boring, look at it as a necessary and absolutely vital tool in the development of any soccer player. Bruce Lee's quote is perfect:

"I fear not the man who has practiced ten thousand kicks once, but I fear the man who has practiced one kick ten thousand times."

6 - PRACTICE AT HIGH INTENSITY.

Practice how you play - it is a saying that should be repeated regularly by soccer coaches.

If you can't perform a soccer skill in practice, at speed, then you certainly won't be able to do it in a game situation. Whether you are a player or a coach, you need to approach practice with the same focus, energy and intensity as you approach a game.

Do you think the world's best soccer players made it by accident or by not working hard? All top players, without exception, become top players by working hard in practice. They practice with maximum effort and high intensity.

Practicing with maximum intensity and effort is not just some kind of belief; there is science to back it up. When you push yourself beyond your comfort zone during soccer practice, your brain forms new connections and these connections are strengthened the more you practice (providing you push yourself; it doesn't work if you practice half heartedly without effort).

By pushing yourself (or your players if you are a coach) to practice with maximum effort and intensity, it is a **guarantee** that mistakes will be made. In fact, mistakes will probably be made almost half of the time, especially in the early stages of learning a new skill or technique. The good thing about making mistakes when working at maximum intensity is that this shows players are pushing themselves and therefore they are forming new connections in their brain which, as they practice more, will mean fewer mistakes are made and the technique/skill is performed better and faster.

Consider this; if you are a player, how do you expect to be able to perform skills during a game at high speed, with opponents in your face, if you haven't practiced these skills at high speed during training? As a coach, the same thing goes for all of your players. You must encourage and push them to work with maximum intensity and effort to replicate the demands and speed of a game. You can never perfectly replicate a game situation during practice but with maximum effort and intensity, you can get very close to it.

Maximum effort and intensity from just one player has a positive effect on the players around them during practice. If one player is going at it with maximum intensity, this will likely inspire at least one other player to do the same...the cycle continues until you have all players working at maximum intensity.

As a coach, encourage your most influential player (the one who the group look up to) to set an example by working at maximum effort and intensity. As a player, make a choice to be the influential one and bring your teammates along for the ride.

By working at maximum intensity during soccer practice, players push themselves beyond their current ability. This is very important, as mentioned above. If you (as a player) or your players (as a coach) are not working at maximum intensity with total effort, it is a guarantee that you will not improve. At least, you won't improve very fast.

Remember this quote before every soccer practice:

*"What counts is not the number of hours you put in, but how **much** you put in the hours."*

7 - RECORD WHEN THINGS GO WELL (AND WHEN THEY DON'T).

Top coaches and players (not just in soccer but in other sports also) keep a notebook where they record the successes (and failures) of daily practice sessions.

Whether you are a coach or a player, you should be doing the same. It doesn't have to be perfectly written or noted; just something simple recording what was good/bad about practice so that you can think back to it whenever you re-read the note.

What was good about today?

What ideas do I have for tomorrow?

What are my short and long term goals?

The important thing about keeping notes is that you actively use them to improve future practice. As a coach, you know when practice has gone well. You can sense it and you will often get feedback from players saying they enjoyed the session.

Record what you did and ask your players what exactly it was that they enjoyed during practice. Make a note of this and use it to adapt future practice sessions. Conversely, when you feel that things didn't go well (players will also give you feedback, although more reluctantly), again make a note of it and adjust future practice by not repeating exercises that were not beneficial.

As a player, if you are practicing certain skills, you want to know how much you are improving and whether your practice is actually helping you. Make a note every time you practice of how well you have performed certain skills (you might not even be able to perform the skill yet if it is something new) and this will allow you to track your progress to a point where you are comfortable performing the skill at high speed. You'll know how long it took you to learn that particular skill by using your notes.

It's not just practice notes that you should be keeping; you need to keep notes on games as well. If you win a game comfortably and feel that, as a coach, all of your players performed well, try to record the circumstances in order to replicate the performance again in future matches. Perhaps it was a case of extra motivation (playing against local rivals for example) or the fact that players linked up in certain positions.

The important thing is to make notes and try to pinpoint the things that you feel helped your team play well; you can then work on further developing these positive aspects to improve your players.

If you are a player and have a particularly outstanding game; record how you felt during the game. Record what you did right (and wrong) and record why you feel you had such a good game. Were you motivated against a previous team you have played for? Did you rest and get enough sleep the night before and eat the right foods? Did you do the basics well and not try to complicate your game?

Whatever you feel helped you perform well (or poorly, as the case may be), make a note of it and use it to improve your approach and performance in the next game.

The saying goes, *"That which gets measured gets improved."*

You need to measure your progress if you are a player and measure the progress of all of your players if you are a coach.

8 - DON'T HOLD BACK. GIVE EVERYTHING (EVEN IF YOU LOOK FOOLISH).

You can't worry about looking foolish or being embarrassed if you want to improve as a soccer player. If you are a coach and want your players to improve, you have to convince them that they cannot worry about being embarrassed or self-conscious during practice or matches.

The key to improvement lies in pushing yourself (or your players) just beyond their limits. By doing this, players will make mistakes and occasionally look foolish as they fall over or completely mess something up. But mistakes are not really *mistakes*; they are absolutely necessary in order to improve.

Who cares if you look bad? Who cares if you get embarrassed? Nobody will remember next week or next year. In fact, nobody will probably even remember tomorrow. Go ahead and push yourself (or your players) beyond your limits and risk making mistakes; it will allow your brain to form new connections which is the foundation for your improvement.

As a coach, you should plan some exercises for practice which actually **require** your players to make mistakes as a result of pushing themselves. You can call these '*mistake exercises*'. In these exercises, you should make it a rule that if your players are not making mistakes, they are clearly not doing something fast enough or with enough effort.

Take dribbling for example; zigzag dribbling between cones is not that difficult for most players. However, if you push your players to literally go as fast as they can possibly push themselves, chances are they will not be able to go through the cones without making a mistake. This is a good thing because by pushing themselves beyond what they are currently capable of, the movement of the ball between their feet will become quicker and they will improve over time. This is a guarantee.

This is a great quote from American Baseball legend, Lou Brock, which relates directly to holding back or being afraid to look foolish:

"Show me a guy who's afraid to look bad, and I'll show you a guy you can beat every time."

Being prepared to take risks is a necessary part of improvement in soccer. This applies to both players and coaches. Players need to be prepared to take risks in practice to push themselves beyond their limits and current ability. Coaches need to be prepared to take risks in trying new exercises and doing things that are not seen as 'normal' or 'standard practice'. Players and coaches need to be prepared to get things wrong, to look foolish, make mistakes; this is how you learn and improve.

You want to be a better player or a better coach otherwise you wouldn't be reading this book, right? Are you going to let something as trivial as occasionally looking a bit foolish stand in your way? No, of course you're not.

Now get out onto the field and go make a fool of yourself. See how quickly you improve.

9 - SPEND LONG PERIODS PRACTICING JUST ONE SKILL.

Don't rush onto the next skill or technique when you do something well just once. Once is not enough. You need to continue practicing individual skills and techniques until you perfect them. As a coach, you need to ensure your players continue practicing, even when they think they have got a specific skill/technique right.

“Good players practice until they get it right. Great players practice until they don't get it wrong.”

This is a fantastic quote which is absolutely spot on. Great soccer players still practice the basics every day to ensure they can do the simple things perfectly, every time. Do you think the Barcelona players don't bother working on their passing skills because they are already masters of it? No, they practice simple, short passing every single day and that is why they are so good at it.

We know that doing the same thing for long periods can get boring but it is **necessary** to improve. Your job as a coach is to keep practice interesting and fun by coming up with tweaks and changes to exercises to retain the enthusiasm of your players.

When players do something well, especially for the first time, they often want to try and do it faster, immediately. This is not ideal; they should be focused on trying to **master** the skill they just performed well and to do this they need to continue to practice it, over and over.

Some of the great coaches (not just soccer but other sports) ensure that their players sometimes work for a whole practice session on just one skill or element of their game. As a coach, you need to do the same thing. Not always; this doesn't mean every practice session should focus on one skill and nothing else. However, it does mean that you should not be afraid of just working on one skill every now and then during practice and you should explain this in advance to your players so they are prepared for it.

Learning to play soccer or master all of the skills involved is not something that happens quickly. It takes time, patience and dedication. As a player, you need to be patient in learning and mastering all of the skills and techniques required to be a good soccer player. As a coach, you need to be patient with your players and explain to them that they also need to be patient and thorough in their understanding of the game and the skills required to be good at it.

Having perfect soccer technique really is a thing of beauty and it only comes from a total commitment to practice. Consider Zinedine Zidane, the French ex-soccer player we mentioned in a previous chapter; he is one of the greatest players to have played the game and had such amazing technique, with both feet, that watching him play was literally a joy. If your players need someone to aspire to in terms of developing their technique, Zidane is one of the finest role models you could choose.

Zlatan Ibrahimovic is a modern day player with fantastic technique. One of his funny quotes involves another professional player, John Carew, who once criticised him. Zlatan said the following:

“What Carew does with a football, I can do with an orange.”

It is a funny quote, perhaps a little tongue-in-cheek, but there is likely some truth in there as Zlatan is so confident in his own ability and technique that he likely believes that he actually **can** do with an orange what someone else can do with a soccer ball!

If you are a player and want to be an expert passer of the ball; you will need to spend long periods (very long periods actually) practicing your passing technique. The same goes for shooting, dribbling, ball control and any other technique. It requires hours and hours of practice, often doing the same thing over and over again, before you will see noticeable improvement.

Once you see improvement, you have inspiration to continue practicing and **perfecting** your technique.

10 - FRUSTRATION IS NECESSARY FOR IMPROVEMENT; ENJOY THE STRUGGLE.

In your journey to improve your skills as a soccer player (or your delivery as a coach), you are going to have many moments of frustration and struggle. This is inevitable, so prepare for it.

What you need to recognise is that frustration and struggle is absolutely necessary in order to advance your soccer ability/knowledge.

Frustration is not permanent; it applies while you are learning a new skill or technique and evaporates once you master the skill. Of course, it rears its head again when you move onto another new skill or technique but the point is that frustration and struggle is only temporary, it doesn't last forever. It's like pain in that respect.

Below is a brilliant quote from Lance Armstrong which relates to pain but also applies to frustration and struggle:

“Pain is temporary. It may last a minute, or an hour, or a day, or a year, but eventually it will subside and something else will take its place. If I quit, however, it lasts forever.”

The great thing about frustration is that when you have the look of struggle on your face (or on your players' faces) during soccer practice, you know that you are pushing yourself, reaching to improve. Without that frustration, effort and struggle, you are not going to improve so you need to start to actually **enjoy** the struggle. Enjoy it because you know it is taking you to a better place. It is improving you.

It's easy to understand why we sometimes avoid frustration and struggle during soccer practice; it is not a comfortable feeling and we instinctively want to feel comfortable and safe. We want to change or stop anything that makes us feel uncomfortable. You (or your players) need to change your mindset and approach to frustration and struggle. You need to begin to embrace it and actually relish it, welcome it. The more you do this, you will condition your brain to accept and tolerate the frustration and struggle for improvement and it will become easier over time.

While you (or your players if you are coaching) are struggling, it is worth reminding yourself that even professional soccer players and coaches (without exception) had to go through frustration and struggle to get to the top level. They didn't get there by accident on a magic carpet; they weren't 'blessed' with skills or knowledge that didn't require hard work, effort and struggle. They had to go through the same struggles and frustrations that you (or your players) are going through right now. They got through it and so can you. Believe in yourself/your players and keep pushing forwards.

If the frustration ever becomes literally too much for you or your players to take, it's not the end of the world if you switch to another skill or exercise and come back to the original one in a future practice. There still has to be an enjoyment in what you are doing so don't let yourself get too frustrated with any one single issue; move onto something else and return to the frustrating issue again later in the practice or during a future practice.

Remember that when you (or your players) are learning a new skill, you are pretty much 'experimenting' in one way or another. If you do enough experimenting, you will inevitably get some negative results/outcomes. However, scientists don't treat negative

results as failures or get frustrated; they use them as data points to help guide the next experiment. Use your (or your players') setbacks and mistakes as learning points to help you move forward and progress with a new skill or training exercise.

Enjoy the struggle. Welcome frustration. You know they are ultimately leading you to improvement. It will be hard, yes, but it will be worth it.

Arnold Schwarzenegger sums it up nicely with his simple quote, "*no pain, no gain.*"

11 - WATCH, LISTEN AND LEARN FROM TOP PLAYERS AND COACHES.

As far as improvement goes, there is nothing better than **doing**, actually performing soccer skills/techniques. However, the next best thing is watching top players/coaches do things perfectly (or close to perfect since actual perfection is hard to define!)

Don't just watch; stare. Look deep into the movements, actions (and words) of the player or coach that you are observing. **Players**, ask yourself some questions:

How do they hold themselves in terms of their body shape?

What does their body shape look like when they pass/strike ball?

How do they interact with their teammates?

What do they do when they don't have the ball?

Coaches, ask yourself questions like these:

What is their tone/approach to players?

How do they interact with players?

How do they carry themselves (confident, assured)?

How do they get their message across during practice?

What kind of things do they spend the most time talking about or focusing on?

When you have an interaction with or feel as though you have a connection with a soccer role model or player/coach you look up to, your motivation automatically increases. This is a fact which has been scientifically studied.

If you want to mould your game on Leo Messi's dribbling ability, stare at him and watch him intently during games (if you happen to live in Barcelona, you can probably watch him practice). If you want to base your management style on Jose Mourinho or Pep Guardiola, search out YouTube videos of their practice sessions, interviews and comments or better still, go and watch them in live action if it's possible for you to do so.

Everyone needs role models to aspire to; entire countries have developed into soccer loving nations following success for individual players who became role models. Hidetoshi Nakata was the first Japanese player to have real success abroad (in Italy mainly) and back in the late 90's, soccer was still not a particularly professional/popular sport in Japan. Nakata's success was one of the catalysts which helped change that.

No doubt, hundreds of thousands (in fact millions) of kids saw Nakata on TV, playing this game of soccer in one of the best leagues in the world and thought, *"If Nakata can do it, why can't I?"* And so in time they began producing more top quality players which helped the national team and meant more players could move abroad to play in the 'big' leagues. It also helped to create more interest among fans/supporters which fuelled the expansion and improvement of the J-League (Japan's equivalent of the English Premier League).

Ultimately, you want to be your own player or your own coach and not a carbon copy of someone else. You need to find your own identity as a coach and your own style/skills as a player.

The great thing about watching experts is that you can pick out the best bits of their game if you are a player and learn their technique whilst adding your own touch. Beckham's free kick technique can indeed be copied (watch his standing foot placement and where he strikes the ball) and although it is very difficult to copy **exactly** what he does, you can copy the basics and work your own touch and feel for the ball into it.

As a coach, you have so much opportunity to watch and listen to different top coaches around the world (and closer to home if you live near to any top coaches' club training facilities) that you can again pick out the best traits from many different coaches and work them into your own style and approach.

Find top players and coaches who inspire you. Watch. Listen. Learn. Go out and practice. Repeat.

12 - CORRECT MISTAKES IMMEDIATELY BEFORE THEY FORM INTO HABITS.

It is important firstly to recognize when you are making a mistake with a particular skill or technique. As a player, you will often rely on your coach to point this out. As a coach, you need to observe your players closely and be prepared to act immediately if mistakes are being made regularly.

This is not the same as a previous chapter where we discussed encouraging mistakes to help develop skills; this is more about technique and body shape. If a players' technique and body shape are not right and they continue to practice in the same way, it will quickly become a habit.

This quote from US physician, Alexander Lowen, simplifies the role that error recognition plays in improvement:

"No one is exempt from the rule that learning occurs through the recognition of error."

Habits are very difficult to break; especially those involving soccer moves and skills. Your brain and muscles become used to doing things a certain way and if this is incorrect (such as striking the ball with the toe instead of the laces or stretching the leg out when passing instead of being upright) it will be more and more difficult to fix, the longer it is left unchecked. Our brains are extremely good at building connections and circuits; however, they are not so good at breaking or unbuilding them.

Scientists have looked at brain scans to find out how quickly mistakes need to be recognized and it is less than half a second after the mistake is made. If the person making the mistake doesn't recognize it within this time, they will usually ignore it and continue making the same mistake. As a coach, your job is to recognize mistakes very quickly and show your players the correct technique before they perform the skill or action again.

Ask yourself these questions when watching your players make a mistake. If you are a player, ask yourself these questions when something doesn't 'feel' right and you know it is not being performed correctly.

What was it exactly they did wrong?

What do they need to adjust to make it better?

Players should not be frightened to admit it or pretend you didn't make a mistake. Recognize it and act on it. As a coach, you should not be hesitant about fixing mistakes with technique; you don't need to go over to players and say things like, "no, no, no that's all wrong." Often, it will just be something subtle like asking them to bend their standing leg a little more when passing or receiving the ball. Be positive and encourage your players to enjoy the process of adjusting their technique and approach so that they can continue to improve and enhance their skills.

One of the techniques you can use to help your players learn new moves is to exaggerate the movement or technique. If a new move or technique requires one of your players to plant their standing foot next to the ball and strike the middle of the ball for power, ask them to exaggerate the movement and also slow it down. They can plant their standing foot firmly next to the ball and slow down the kicking action to connect their laces right in the centre of the ball. By slowing it down in this way, they get to learn the correct technique and appreciate every aspect of the move whilst also giving you chance to notice any mistakes because it is almost done in slow motion.

As always, fix any mistakes by giving your players necessary guidance and suggestions for minor 'tweaks' to their technique, then ask them to perform the move again very slowly. Once their technique looks good, they can improve the speed gradually until they reach a point where they are comfortable performing the move or technique at high speed.

Your aim as a coach is to give correction without upsetting your players. Coach Wooden summed it up perfectly and he outlines exactly what you should be striving for:

"A coach is someone who can give correction without causing resentment."

13 - FOCUS ON IMPROVEMENT OVER WINNING.

Win at all costs. That's what it's all about, right? Actually no, it shouldn't be (things are slightly different at a professional club of course where the focus and mentality is very much solely focused on winning). Your number one priority as a coach should be the development of your players, without the worry of feeling as though they **have** to win hanging over their heads.

It doesn't make sense at grass roots level (particularly kids soccer) to place a big emphasis on winning and ignore the fact that individuals may not develop and improve, even if you win every week, if your methods and approach ignore the fundamentals like passing, ball control, movement, communication and working together as a team.

Digest the quote below from American Football coach, Mike Singletary:

*“Do you know what my favourite part of the game is? The **opportunity** to play.”*

You should relish the **opportunity** of coaching (or playing) the game of soccer. Be grateful for every single practice (or game) and put your effort and focus into improving and developing yourself and your players.

As a coach (or a player), there is nothing wrong with disliking losing. In fact, it is built into our psyche; we don't like losing at soccer or anything else in life. It's normal. Your job as a coach is to ensure your players do not **worry** about losing or place so much emphasis on winning that it negatively affects their performance.

A good measure of a coach doing his/her job effectively is how they manage their players and motivate them to perform well, regardless of whether they are in a winning or losing situation. Can you motivate and inspire your players to perform well, express themselves and actually **enjoy** playing, regardless of the result? That is a challenge that should motivate you.

As a coach (or a player) it is worth remembering that effort and giving everything is more important for development than winning. American motivational speaker Zig Ziglar got it right with his quote:

“Winning is not everything, but the effort to win is.”

If you leave everything on the soccer field (in terms of effort) then you've done all you can to influence the outcome of a game or a practice session. In a sense, you've already won.

The ironic thing about winning is that if your focus as a coach is on truly coaching your players the right way and helping them to improve and develop, winning will be a natural progression anyway. If your players improve and grow as a team through your coaching methods, it is inevitable that they will win more games as they develop.

Focusing on **winning** *will not* always result in improvement and development among individual players or the team as a whole. Focusing on **improvement** and **development** of individual players and the team *will* result in winning more matches over time.

Surely the simplicity of this concept makes it easy to recognize the importance of focusing on development and improvement over winning at all costs? Just stop and take a moment to think about that.

Losing and failing in soccer is **inevitable**. No player or team remains unbeaten forever; it is impossible to play the game of soccer without failing during practice and losing matches.

Ensure you instil into your players the importance of *getting up and keeping going*, despite the defeats and failures. If they can do that, success is just around the corner.

14 - WORK ON THE SMALL NUMBER OF MOST IMPORTANT SKILLS THE MAJORITY OF THE TIME.

You may have heard of the 80/20 Rule (also known as Pareto's Principle) which basically states that roughly 80% of the effects come from 20% of the causes. This principle can and should be applied to soccer practice, particularly with junior and amateur players. It is likely that 80% of your (or your players') soccer ability comes from 20% of skills/attributes.

Your practice should focus on what are the foundations for a good soccer player; *ball control, passing and movement*.

This doesn't mean you completely ignore skills like heading, tackling, shooting, turns and 1v1 moves. It just means that you place more emphasis on what are the most commonly used skills during games.

As a coach, if you are able to help your players develop their ball control and passing skills along with their movement, they will have a great foundation on which to build from.

All players love shooting exercises but very often these kind of activities result in players standing around waiting for their time to shoot. That time could be spent getting vital touches on the ball to improve technique and feel. This takes us back to the point made in a previous chapter on 'repetition' and its importance for skill development. Work on activities and exercises where your players get as many touches on the ball and as many passes as possible.

As a coach, you want all of your players (and if you are a player you should also want this) to be exceptional passers with a great first touch and good overall ball control. You want them to be able to receive the ball comfortably, pass it again with confidence and move into space. Pass. Move. Receive.

Of course, to truly excel in soccer at the highest level, you need to be a well rounded player (in fact, you need to be as perfectly rounded as possible) and in order to do this, you need to be comfortable and competent in all areas of your game (passing, dribbling, shooting, movement, communication, tackling, heading, turns and even the odd fancy move or trick).

However, if you watch professionals on TV, you will notice that the large **majority** of their game consists of passing, control and good movement. Naturally, forward players do more dribbling and shooting whilst defensive players do more heading and tackling but the principles of *passing, ball control and movement* remain key.

Small-sided games (3v3, 4/4, 5v5 etc) are without doubt the best way to develop the most important attributes required to be a competent player and so you should incorporate SSG's into your practice as much as possible. You can adjust numbers (so that one team is at an advantage with 6v4 for example) and introduce touch limitations (3-touch, 2-touch etc) to keep things varied and challenge players both mentally and physically.

Any soccer player who can do the following with confidence and competence is already on their way to being an accomplished player:

Pass. Move. Receive. Repeat.

If you are a coach, ensure your players focus on those attributes by planning your practice around them. If you are a player, do your own individual work on those attributes and watch how quickly you improve on game-day.

15 - PROMOTE POSITIVE, ATTACKING SOCCER.

Ask any player, young or old, if they seriously enjoy playing defensive, negative soccer with the emphasis solely on trying to prevent the other team from scoring and hoping for a breakaway goal. You'll find it difficult getting many "yes" answers.

Having a good defence is beneficial of course - it is an obvious comment - but it is worth remembering that to win any game, you do need to score goals at some point and the more chances you can create, the better your chances of scoring one of them.

Defensive play, whilst a necessary aspect of the game, is essentially boring to watch. It is not a great representation of the game and unfortunately has become a big part of professional, amateur and even junior soccer nowadays with 'caution' being the most important word. "If we don't concede any goals, we can't lose". True; but bear in mind that this negativity also stifles players' attacking instincts and desires and removes much of the enjoyment from the game.

Johan Cruyff offers this insight which explains the basics of the game of soccer:

"To win you have to score one more goal than your opponent."

Playing attacking, positive soccer should be your approach as a coach (it should also be your approach/desire as a player); of course, it is a cliché to call it 'beautiful' but that is exactly what fluid, attacking, positive soccer looks like - it is a joy to watch and even more of a joy to play.

The fantastic thing about attacking soccer is that whilst you have possession of the ball, the other team don't have it and they can't score against you. Therefore, what better argument for promoting possession and attacking, positive soccer than the fact that by doing this, you are actually 'defending' at the same time as the other team can't possibly score whilst you have the ball and are attacking. Sure, they can counter-attack but to do this they need you to allow them to have possession of the ball. You have the advantage. Your team is in charge. Given the choice in any match, you should always want to be the team in charge.

Players want to enjoy soccer. They want to enjoy the fluidity and beauty of passing, moving and creating chances. They want to embrace the fundamental reason that the game is enjoyed by billions around the world; *scoring goals*.

In practice, you should encourage your players to focus on attacking with speed and intelligence. Attacking soccer is not about mindlessly ploughing forward in the hope that a goal will come; it is about insightful, confident passing with an emphasis on creating goal scoring chances.

Working on small-sided games with multiple goals (four small goals in each corner of a small field) is a great idea and promotes positivity and attacking soccer with teams able to 'score' in any of the four corners. The emphasis is always on scoring goals and players love it.

Playing attacking soccer won't guarantee that your team will win every time you play. However, win, lose or draw, it will ultimately be more enjoyable for players, spectators and even you as the coach. Don't put yourself first and worry about your 'coaching record' or whether you will look bad if you lose a game. As always, put your players' enjoyment

and development first. There is no better way to develop than learning the beauty of free flowing, attacking soccer.

Not conceding goals isn't the name of the game. *Scoring goals* is the name of the game. Remember that.

16 - HAVE A CLEAR GOAL IN EVERY PRACTICE SESSION.

Going into any soccer practice session without a goal or an objective is a mistake, whether you are a player or a coach.

As a coach, you should approach every practice with a clear objective and the simpler it is, the better. If you are running a session based on passing, instead of just saying “I want you to improve your passing skills,” have a clear goal such as “I want you to be able to pass the ball accurately on the ground over twenty yards.” To make it even more specific, you can set a target of 8 out of 10 passes going to feet without the receiver needing to move more than a yard either way to collect the pass.

The good thing about a clear objective is that it can be measured at the end of the session. If your players make 8 out of 10 passes successfully, they have achieved the goal you set. If not, they still have work to do.

If you are a player, you should go into every practice with a clear goal; again it should be simple and focused. “I am going to finish first in every sprinting exercise we do tonight.” If you are not the fastest player on the team, you might not achieve the goal but by giving yourself that target, that clear objective, you have something to focus on and to push yourself for.

The quote below from Rick Hanson, a prominent neuropsychologist and bestselling author, encompasses the importance of realistic goals and objectives:

“The goal you set must be challenging. At the same time, it should be realistic and attainable, not impossible to reach. It should be challenging enough to make you stretch, but not so far that you break.”

When coaching, you can't expect your players to perform miracles; any objective needs to be realistic and manageable. Obviously you can't expect your players to master the art of perfect short and long range passing in one practice session lasting just an hour or even a couple of hours. You can, however, push them to work at mastering individual aspects of passing. As they learn these aspects one by one, their overall passing ability will improve and they will become passing masters over time.

You need to give your players specific advice and instructions to help them achieve the objectives you set during practice. If their objective is to pass the ball accurately along the ground over twenty yards, you want to give them a couple of things to really focus on such as, “keep your knee and body over the ball and don't lean back” and “ensure the inside of your foot connects with the middle of the ball whilst keeping your ankle locked.” This advice will help to ensure the ball stays on the ground and the pass is straight.

Merely completing exercises or activities is not good enough to encourage continuous improvement and development. Your players need to practice with focus and intentionality with an emphasis on successful execution of a particular skill as opposed to just ‘doing it’.

Planning is such an important part of successful practice that it cannot be overstated. There is a great story about a hugely successful teacher who spent 70% of his time planning a clear objective from classes and just 30% of the time actually doing activities related to the objective. For most teachers, a common split would be maybe 10-20% of

time preparing an objective and then 80% of time doing it. The key here is that the teachers' objective was absolutely clear and achievable.

As a coach, you should approach your team or private practice in exactly the same way. Make sure you have an absolutely crystal clear objective for your practice, something that your players will have to push themselves to achieve but ultimately something that is realistic. The clearer and more precise the objective is, the better the chances of your players achieving it.

Pep Guardiola (formerly coach of Barcelona and now Bayern Munich), sets a clear, measurable goal for his players during practice and matches. Any time they lose possession of the ball, they must do everything they can to win it back within six seconds. After six seconds, they return to their normal defensive shape. Instead of your players just wanting to get the ball back, they now have a clear goal, "Win it back in 6 seconds."

Set a clear goal.

17 - ENCOURAGE THE USE OF BOTH FEET. IT IS HUGELY IMPORTANT.

The importance of being able to comfortably use both feet as a soccer player cannot be overstated; from a coaches' perspective, to have a squad of players comfortable with both feet is fantastic. Unfortunately, it hardly ever happens outside of the professional level (even then, many players are not entirely comfortable with their 'weaker' foot).

One of the biggest reasons players do not use their weaker foot is that they lack confidence using it. Therefore, as a coach, you should be encouraging your players to use both feet **every single time** they practice. You should be putting together exercises where players use only their weaker foot.

As a player, you need to be committed to using both feet regularly during practice if you want to improve to a level whereby you are comfortable using either foot. It won't just make you a better player if you can comfortably use both feet, it will make you a **much** better player.

Improving your players' weaker foot is simply about commitment, practice and persistence. You need to focus on encouraging the use of both feet and continually remind your players about the importance of it. The quote below from Patrick Rothfuss is simple but true:

"Practice makes the master."

If you (or your players) want to be a master with both feet (and significantly better as a result) then you need to practice, practice, and practice using **both** feet.

Zinedine Zidane, who has already been mentioned earlier in the book, is potentially the finest example of a two footed player you are likely to see. He is not only comfortable with both feet; he is a master and a genius with them. Check out his YouTube videos, in particular his 2002 Champions League Final winning goal 'volley' with his left foot (considered his slightly weaker foot) and you will see technique of the highest quality. Although he is now retired, watching his videos is a joy. The skill and grace with which he moved the ball between both feet really was something to behold; it must have been a nightmare for opponents, as you will see from watching his clips.

Many young players grow up using one foot and completely neglect their weaker foot; this is very common in soccer. The earlier players learn how to use both feet comfortably, the better they will be as they progress through the age groups and the easier they will find it to play and showcase their talent. Effort and a commitment to using both feet as a young player really is a priceless investment; *potentially the best investment you can make in yourself as a player or in your players as a coach.*

There are many reasons why being able to use both feet is an advantage to players; it keeps defenders off balance, it opens up the field in terms of passing options and it allows shots to be taken quickly from any angle on any side of the body (one of the things you will regularly see is a striker bringing the ball back onto their dominant foot before shooting, potentially wasting the opportunity completely).

You may be surprised to know that it is about actually training your brain (or your players' brains) to use their weaker foot. It is not necessarily a physical issue but a mental one. If players continue to use poor technique with their weaker foot, the brain will remember

this and reinforce the poor technique, making it even more difficult to improve the weaker foot.

Conversely, if your players are shown the correct technique for passing and striking the ball with their weaker foot, repetition and practice over time will result in the actual circuitry of their brains changing. Therefore, it is not just about repetition and quantity but also about **quality**. This is where your job as a coach is important to spot and rectify errors in technique.

*Ability to use both feet = **double** the options. You (or your players) must remember this.*

18 - FIRST TOUCH/CONTROL IS PROBABLY THE MOST IMPORTANT SKILL YOU CAN LEARN.

As a coach, you should focus on your players' ball control/first touch above everything else. That doesn't mean neglect everything else; it just means that you need to recognise the huge importance of a great first touch for your players.

In terms of how often different skills are used during the game, first touch/control has to be the most commonly used and therefore it should demand more attention and practice time. If your players do not have a good first touch, they won't even get the opportunity to use their other skills as they will lose possession too easily, especially when under pressure.

Control the ball competently with your first touch and the game of soccer becomes so much easier.

This is something you should be stressing to your players during every practice. If you are a player, you need to recognise how much easier the game will become for you if you can perfect your first touch.

The concept of working on ball control/first touch is very simple. There are two things players need to do to improve their ball control and first touch; firstly, they need to be shown the correct technique and secondly, they need to practice and control literally thousands of balls to get the 'feel' required to make the process of controlling the ball automatic.

As a player, there is a very easy way of improving your ball control and first touch dramatically. It involves you, a wall and a ball. Your aim is to pass the ball against a wall (or other rebound surface) and control the ball when it comes back to you. You can adjust the distance between you and the wall and adjust the speed at which you kick the ball. Use different areas of your foot and body to control the ball and you will see very noticeable improvements in a small space of time, simply because you can perform hundreds of repetitions in less than half an hour.

Having a hard shot or being able to head the ball well does not differentiate a good player from a bad one. However, having a fantastic first touch will often make the difference between being a good player and an exceptional one. Certainly it is impossible to be an exceptional player without possessing great control and a very good first touch.

The first touch is the most important touch. It leads you to the rest of the play. It can all change with one small mistake. Don't get the first step wrong.

There are many world class players with a fantastic first touch and close ball control but two players worth watching are Zlatan Ibrahimovic (Paris St Germain striker) and Xavi (Barcelona midfielder). Both players possess an unbelievable first touch and close control.

As a coach, encourage your players to watch these superstars (remember a previous chapter on the importance of watching top players and coaches to study their technique) and dedicate themselves to practice. That is exactly how top players get a fantastic first touch; practice.

Getting lots of touches of the ball (repetitions) is a vital part of improving your players' first touch and you should refer to previous chapters on learning by feel and repetition and practicing in a small space to remind yourself of these important principles.

19 - PRACTICE WITH OLDER/BETTER PLAYERS TO SPEED DEVELOPMENT.

Playing soccer against older players is something you should consider for your team (or for yourself if you are a player) as it can help speed development, no question about that.

As a coach, you need to be sensible of course; you can't have 10 year olds with 16 year olds for example, but an age gap of up to a few years works.

The good thing about having older players mixed in with younger ones is that the older players are not only able to practice their skills but at the same time they can show and teach the skills to the younger players. All players enjoy showing off their skills and technique so you will find that most players are happy to help a younger player and demonstrate their ability. By communicating a skill to another player, you understand it more deeply yourself so the older players benefit from that whilst the younger players also benefit from having someone else to show them skills and techniques so they have something to aspire to.

There are lots of benefits to training with older players and they include things like; improved strength and 'toughness' (due to size difference), more intense work/effort (to compensate for difference in speed) and learning new skills and techniques (as older players will do things with the ball that the younger ones likely haven't experienced before).

If you have a number of different age groups in your club or setup, you should consider organising practice matches between different age groups and also having them train together. This doesn't have to be every week but perhaps just every couple of weeks you put two different age groups together for practice and ask each older player to partner up with a younger one for the session. The older players will enjoy the responsibility and the younger players will benefit.

It doesn't always have to be older players however; the process of speeding player development also works with players of different abilities. Put a group of players of lower ability together with players of better ability for practice over the course of weeks and you will naturally see an improvement in the players of lower ability as they adjust to practicing and working with/against the better quality players.

*I have personal experience of being the best player on different teams and then moving to play with better players in the later part of my career. The group of players I played with in the last 3 years of my career were the best I had ever played with. What happened? After training with these guys every week and playing against better opposition than I was previously used to, I improved my game immensely. Aside from the science behind this process and the evidence to suggest playing with/against older players is beneficial; for me at least, my actual **experience** is more than convincing enough.*

If you are a player, don't be content to simply be the best player on your team; think about finding another team where the players are better than you, where they can push you to improve. You will not improve quickly by playing within your comfort zone and to get outside of your comfort zone and improve more rapidly, you ideally want to be alongside and against better players.

As a coach, consider running small-sided games during practice with different ages and/or abilities mixed in each team. 4v4 or 5v5 for example; have touch limitations (3-touch is

ideal) and encourage all players to work together with rules such as **all** players needing to touch the ball before a goal to ensure everyone is involved.

The quote below from Jim Rohn can certainly be applied to soccer practice.

“You are the average of the five people you spend the most time with.”

No doubt, if you (or your players) spend a lot of time practicing with and against five really good players (of course, it will be more than five but the same principle applies) then you will likely reach a level which is the average of those players put together.

20 - STOP SCREAMING FROM THE SIDELINES. IT IS POINTLESS.

It happens every week from grass roots and amateur soccer right up to the professional game. Coaches scream and shout instructions (and sometimes insults) at their players in the hope that they will respond positively.

Have you ever done this? If you are a coach, it is pretty likely that you have at some point. Three words of advice; stop doing it. You won't find many (if any) players who will respond positively to having instructions or criticism screamed at them from the sideline. This makes the act of doing it pointless, even harmful to your players and team, so why would you do it?

Players generally do not listen (whether intentionally or just because they can't hear you) when you scream from the sideline so you are literally wasting your time. Your time would be much better served making some notes on what is going well and what is not going so well on the field; you can then use these notes during the next interval to actually give some constructive and helpful instructions to your players.

If the ball is bouncing towards one of your players and you (or parents) are shouting from the sideline "*trap it*" or "*control it*", is this verbal instruction likely to actually help the player **physically** control the ball? No, so don't do it.

If one of your players makes a mistake, don't get carried away and scream "*Andy, what on earth are you doing?!*" Do you think this is going to help him? Of course not; so again, don't do it.

As a player, you should be mindful that screaming and shouting at the coach (whether or not they have screamed first) is not advisable and definitely not beneficial for you. At best, it will only serve to annoy and frustrate you even more and take away your concentration from the game; at worst, it will result in the coach substituting you and so your game is over.

Do not forget that constant instructions deny your players the chance to make their own decisions, particularly younger players who are more easily influenced. You want your players to be creative and imaginative when playing soccer; after all, it is a free flowing game. By screaming and shouting instructions, you stifle their creativity and fill them instead with tension and frustration.

Split second decisions are a huge part of the game; if you do not allow your players to make their own split second decisions, how can you expect them to develop their instincts and make the right decisions the majority of the time? Let them learn and express themselves without fear of you, their coach, screaming at them from the sideline.

There is no doubt that in many countries (the US and UK in particular) there is a lack of 'creative' players; one of the reasons for this is that as younger players, there are too many instructions, too much of being told exactly where to run and when to pass. You don't want your players to be dependent on yours or other coaches' instructions to know what to do during a game; you want them to be able to make the decision on their own, using their experience and instinct.

Encouragement and positivity, as opposed to negativity and screaming, is definitely something that can be beneficial to your players. If you were playing and your coach shouted "*great work Dan, keep that effort up,*" ask yourself, is that likely to be well

received and give you a confidence boost? Most likely yes, it is. It then has a positive knock on effect for you as a player and the rest of your team.

*Positivity, encouragement and praise **will benefit** your players. Negativity, screaming and criticism **will not benefit** your players. It defies logic that anyone would choose the latter. Make sure you don't.*

21 - PLAYER COMMUNICATION; WHY IT IS SO IMPORTANT.

Surprisingly, the art of communication is not something that many coaches focus on in terms of getting their players to communicate with each other, yet it is a hugely important part of the game.

Consider the following quote from Mike Krzyzewski, legendary basketball coach, which highlights the importance of a coach teaching and encouraging communication among players:

“Communication does not always occur naturally, even among a tight-knit group of individuals. Communication must be taught and practiced in order to bring everyone together as one.”

Short instructions like “man on”, “to your left” or “one-two” (referring to a wall-pass) are simple but very effective in giving the player in possession of the ball as much information as possible to make the best decision. It is your job as a coach to encourage your players to do this every time they practice and every time they play, so that they get into the habit of automatically giving information to the player in possession.

If your players fail to communicate with each other, what often happens is that they operate as individuals just running around doing their own thing. By encouraging communication and making it a necessary part of every practice, you are helping your players to naturally work better together and operate as more of a ‘unit’ rather than as individuals.

If you are a player, being decisive is very important in terms of verbal communication. As a coach, you should be encouraging all of your players to be decisive, even if sometimes it means kicking the ball out of play. Ultimately, you want your players to keep the ball ‘live’ and in play as much as possible (this is discussed at length in a future chapter), however, given the choice between indecisive players leaving the ball for an opponent to nip in and take it or one of your players being completely decisive, shouting “my ball” and smashing it off the field, the latter is **always** the best option.

During practice, make it a rule that your players **must** call the name of the person they are passing to and give them a simple message when possible; “time”, “man on” or “turn” for example. You’ll be surprised at how quickly this communication spreads throughout the team as players begin to realize that everyone is trying to help each other and this naturally builds confidence.

Obviously, all of your players have different personalities; some will be naturally louder and want to ‘lead’ while others will be happy to just get on with their job. Regardless of personality types, your players should all be prepared to communicate the basics described above as an absolute minimum; without them, it is difficult to be a successful soccer player or a successful team.

A quick but important point regarding your goalkeeper; he can see everything on the field and therefore their communication is absolutely vital, especially for your defenders. Ideally, your goalkeeper should be vocal and confident; if not, you need to really encourage more communication or potentially find another keeper who is comfortable communicating with defenders.

Consider the quote below from Sydney Harris before reading the next paragraph:

“The two words, information and communication, are often used interchangeable but they signify quite different things. Information is giving out; communication is getting through.”

All teams have natural leaders and it is your job as the coach to pick out a natural leader as captain and a number of other natural leaders to communicate more and organise their teammates. Make it clear to your players that this does not mean barking out orders like an Army general; their job is to lift teammates, inspire them to play with confidence and equally to communicate as much as possible.

It is not about simply screaming information; it is about actually **communicating**, which is a different thing and definitely much more effective.

22 - IF YOU KEEP POSSESSION, YOU CAN'T LOSE.

This is a perfect quote from Johan Cruyff to start the chapter:

“If you play on possession, you don’t have to defend, because there is only one ball.”

It is absolutely true. If the other team do not have the ball, they cannot hurt you and so your coaching approach should be one of possession based soccer if you want to have not only a successful team but one that players enjoy being a part of and one that provides entertainment for those watching.

The emphasis on possession doesn’t mean that as a coach, you should simply neglect defensive work; it means that it pays to focus more on exercises in practice that will help your team keep possession by improving your players’ passing skills (along with movement and ball control of course). One of the best ways to target these skills is via small-sided, touch limitation based games (2-touch and 3-touch are ideal).

Simply passing for the sake of passing is not what you should be teaching your players; there is no need to make five horizontal passes when you can make one forward pass which is more effective. At the same time, you should discourage players from **always** looking for a killer pass. This is something that comes with practice and experience; knowing when to make an incisive pass and when to simply keep the ball moving and retain possession, even if it is occasionally sideways.

Minimal touches are a very important aspect of a successful and effective passing team; you should instil into your players the importance of taking as **few** touches as possible. If they can make a pass first time and keep possession, they should make the first time pass. If they can do something in three touches instead of two, it’s pretty obvious that they should use two and not over elaborate or worry about different options when a simple pass is available.

Speed of passing is absolutely vital. As a coach (or a player), you should place a big emphasis on encouraging your players to do things at speed. This doesn’t mean rushing, which is a result of panic and a lack of composure; the opposite of what you should be teaching your players. Doing things at speed means making quick passes and quick decisions.

Ultimately, players need to recognise that **nothing** on the field can move faster than the ball; even Usain Bolt running at full pace could not intercept a firmly hit, well directed pass.

If you have talented players, you don’t want to take away their creativity and imagination; however, you do want to discourage them from dribbling twenty yards if there is a simple pass available instead. The ball will move much quicker over twenty yards than anyone dribbling possibly could. *Move the ball quickly.*

Another pearl of wisdom from Johan Cruyff captures the essence of losing possession and not having the ball:

“Without the ball, you can’t win.”

Again, it is simple but absolutely true. When you give up possession to the other team, you cannot win the game. With that in mind, your players should build their game around **not** giving possession to the other team and keeping it as though their lives depend on it!

Your practices should focus on lots of (quick) passing and sharp, intelligent movement. Small-sided 5v5 (or less, 4v4 and 3v3 for example) games are fantastic, especially with touch limitations which force players to pass quickly and move more as dribbling is not a viable option when you only have 3 touches maximum.

All of your players need to be comfortable in possession so that means involving everyone, including your goalkeeper(s), in small-sided games and passing exercises. There's no secret to this simple game; improvement comes about as a result of practice. Intentional, targeted, hard working practice.

Don't lose possession. Protect the ball.

23 - WHERE CAN YOU MOVE TO HELP YOUR TEAMMATE?

Most of the time in soccer, the players **without** the ball are actually more important than the player **with** the ball. Why? One player can only do so much on his/her own so they require movement, assistance and communication from teammates in order to keep possession and make good decisions for the benefit of the team.

You should ask your players this question (if you are a player, ask yourself the question) often so that they can work on it during practice and remember it going into matches:

Where can you move to help your teammate?

Players without the ball can either move into space to give teammates an option of a pass or they can move into space and take members of the opposing team with them to create space for the person with the ball. Ultimately, they are giving the person with the ball **options**.

This is a great quote from basketball star LeBron James and it hits the nail on the head in terms of doing things that are unselfish to help teammates:

“To all the positions, I just bring the determination to win. Me being an unselfish player, I think that can carry on to my teammates. When you have one of the best players on the court being unselfish, I think that transfers to the other players.”

Your players need to realise that being unselfish and moving into space won't always mean that they receive the ball. They should not get frustrated about this; the idea is that they are giving their teammate options and helping them, being unselfish for the **team** and not just making decisions for their own benefit.

During practice, particularly in small sided games and possession based exercises, you should regularly repeat the question to your players *“Where can you move to help the person on the ball?”* Repeated enough times, your players **will** begin to appreciate the concept of unselfish movement to assist teammates and once they start to see the benefits that this offers the team as a whole, they will embrace it even further.

Your job, as a coach, is to convince your players that making a run or movement when they know for certain they will not get the ball is contributing something to the team and not simply a wasted run. Experienced, intelligent players understand this and how important it is.

Put it as simply as possible; ask your players if they would be prepared to sprint 40 yards into space, knowing that they won't get the ball but that their teammate will definitely get a clear shot on goal. The majority of players will answer “yes” to that question and you can then emphasise the importance of the “yes” answer, as that is exactly the kind of unselfish mentality you are trying to nurture among the players in your team.

A great training exercise that focuses on movement for the benefit of the player in possession of the ball is known as ‘rugby’ (basically playing with the hands instead of the feet). Setup four goal ‘areas’ using four cones (one area in each corner of the field which is the same size as you would use for a 5v5 small-sided game) and your players can only use their hands to catch the ball. When they receive the ball, they can only take one step and then they have to stand still, so they cannot simply run along with the ball in their hands. This exercise is fantastic because it forces players without the ball to continually move and give options to the player in possession who cannot move more than one step. A

goal is scored by receiving a pass (throw) inside one of the four corner goal areas (which are approximately 3-4 square yards in size).

Keep repeating to your players:

Where can you move to help your teammate?

24 - KEEP THE BALL 'LIVE'.

When the ball goes out of play, time is lost. If one of your team touches it last, you have also lost possession as well as wasted time.

You need to teach your players the importance of keeping the ball 'live'; meaning the ball is in play. Once it is out of play, it is considered 'dead'. It is very common to watch matches and see players smashing the ball as far as they can out of play and giving possession back to the other team.

There is only one reason your players should intentionally kick the ball out of play - if they have literally **no other option** and trying to keep the ball in play would potentially cost your team a goal or give up possession in a dangerous area of the field.

It is also common to see players hammering the ball out of play if they are winning and there is not long left in the game. Why? By doing this, you are just giving possession back to your opponents and allowing them the chance to build another attack and potentially get an equalising goal. Your players should have a desire to keep the ball live...just keep the ball. We touched on this in the last chapter; *if your team have the ball, you can't lose.*

There is a skill element to keeping the ball live, particularly in tight situations where players are under pressure from opponents but it often comes down to whether or not teammates are quick enough and smart enough to get themselves into a position to assist the player with the ball. If you can encourage your players to do that and support the ball carrier (especially when they are under pressure), there is a much better chance that they will be able to keep the ball live and retain possession. Simple stuff but nonetheless worth repeating to get the message across to your players.

How often do your players take a shot that you (and probably they) know is not going to go in because they are off balance or at a crazy angle or perhaps 40 yards from goal? It happens very often at all levels of the game, even in professional soccer. As a coach, you must instil into your players how important it is not to take 'pointless' shots; those which are mostly speculative and have very little chance of scoring a goal. The only thing shots like these do is give possession back to the opposing team. In practice (and during matches), make a note of when your players commit this error and give them a simple message during the next break, *"don't do it!"*

"If in doubt, kick it out."

This is a common saying in soccer and something many players subscribe to. What would be more appropriate is the following:

"If in doubt, with literally nothing else available and imminent danger from an opponent, consider kicking it out."

Defenders put the ball out of play more than any other players so it is worth spending more time with your defenders working on this. There is nothing more frustrating for midfielders and forwards than a defender needlessly putting the ball out of play and giving possession back to the other team. If your defenders work at this and focus on keeping the ball live whenever possible, not only will it mean you keep possession more often but your midfielders and strikers will be much happier.

After a while practicing this and getting used to it during matches, your players will realise how beneficial it is to your team and will wonder why on earth they ever used to kick the ball out of play in any moment of slight doubt.

Good players keep the ball live.

25 - THROW THE BALL TO FEET. EVERY SINGLE TIME (ALMOST).

“Throw it long.”

“Throw it down the line.”

“Throw it as far as you can.”

These are three of the most common shouts you will hear from coaches and other players during matches. *“Throw it to feet”* is certainly not heard or thought about enough by players and coaches, despite being the most effective way of taking a throw in almost 100% of the time.

If your players throw the ball to their teammates' head, throw it long down the line or pretty much throw it anywhere else other than to feet, there is a 50/50 chance, at most, of your team retaining possession of the ball.

There are times when a throw in to space or long is beneficial; if your players have the option of creating a quick breakaway by throwing the ball into space for one of their teammates to run onto unchallenged, they should of course take it.

To be clear, your players do not have to throw the ball to feet every single time. The important thing is that they go to feet *almost* every single time. This gives your players and your team the best possible chance of keeping possession.

There are two important elements to a successful throw in, aside from throwing to feet.

Speed - The quicker your players get the ball and take the throw in when it leaves the field of play, the better chance they have of finding a teammate before your opponents have chance to react.

Movement - Running towards the thrower seems like the sensible thing to do to give them options but it is actually more effective if players run **away** from the thrower as this creates open space which teammates can then run into and receive a throw in to feet, possibly unchallenged.

Work on these two aspects of throw-ins during practice; have your players recover the ball from the sideline as quickly as possible and throw the ball immediately to a teammate. If there is not an **immediate** option open for a quick throw in, they should revert to the 'movement' aspect and generally run **away** from the thrower to create space, allowing others to come back into those spaces and receive the throw. It is important that all of your players practice and get used to the procedure so they are all on the same page when it comes to matches.

The idea of initially moving away from the thrower is pretty straight forward; take away the marker/defender to allow another player to go back into the empty space to receive a throw in without too much pressure.

The other benefit of throwing the ball to feet is the ease of control for your players. Throw the ball to chest or thigh for example and a player will often find it more difficult to control than if it is throw to their feet. Not only that, they will generally have to take at least two touches if it is not thrown to feet, removing the option of a quick, one-touch return pass to the thrower.

Long throw ins around your opponents' penalty area can be beneficial and cause problems for the defenders while potentially creating chances for your team, however outside of this, in other areas of the field, a long throw is often just a 'sling' in the hope that it finds a teammate.

Don't rely on 'chance' and 'hope' that a throw finds a teammate. Encourage your players to be bold and throw the ball to feet, every single time (almost).

26 - PERFECT THE BASICS, THE FUNDAMENTALS.

Do exactly as the title suggests if you want your players to improve rapidly; stop asking them to perform skills which don't relate to a game or exercises with long lines and kids waiting around for their 'turn'.

Professional soccer players are absolute masters of the basics, the fundamentals of the game. Sure, many of them can do impressive tricks and come up with silky skills but the majority of the time during games they are focused solely on performing the basics perfectly.

As a coach, you need to educate yourself and regularly evaluate whether the skills and exercises incorporated into your practices are actually helping your players to improve. Your players might enjoy taking shots from 30 yards at goal or doing 'backheels' to each other but things like this is not going to improve their game a whole lot, if at all.

Remind your players regularly of the philosophy below:

It is a commitment to mastering the fundamentals, not the fancy skills or tricks, which ultimately makes the difference.

There is a reason that professional players do the same, simple exercises and skills every single day; they recognise how important it is to be able to perform the simple skills and they want to perfect them.

On the odd occasion, you can let your players just have some fun and enjoy performing some special moves or fancy tricks but ultimately you want them to focus the majority of their time on mastering the fundamentals of the game and repeating the same skills over and over. After all, they want to improve don't they? You want them to improve don't you? Both answers should be yes.

Your practice should incorporate exercises based on ball control, passing and movement above everything else, with an emphasis on good technique and playing at speed when possible.

You should encourage and support your players by explaining that they will get things wrong and have 'off days', both at practice and in games. However, the important thing is that they don't dwell on it and bounce back ready for the next practice or game. The only way to improve over time is to go through lots of training, put in the repetitions and show up over and over again at practice.

Performing below average or getting things wrong is not your players' goal; neither is it yours. Remember though, that you have to give your players (and yourself) permission to push through the occasional days of below average performance because that is the price they (and you) have to pay to achieve excellence.

If your players ask why they are doing the same exercises as they did in the last practice, explain that you need to monitor their progress and track their improvement. The only way this can be done accurately is by comparing performance in the same exercises (under the same conditions as far as possible). If you are a good communicator and have the respect of your players, they will listen to you and appreciate the need to focus on continually performing the fundamentals in practice to improve their game.

Get rid of the pointless games and exercises that do not serve any purpose. Narrow the number of exercises/skills you use during practice so that your players can focus on perfecting the basics. They will thank you for it as they improve more rapidly.

27 - DON'T HESITATE; RESTART PLAY AS QUICKLY AS POSSIBLE.

Taking into account the time that the ball is out of play (throw-ins, corners, free kicks etc), an average soccer match has just over 60 minutes of action on the field. The ball is out of play for almost a third of the game so this means that your players don't have 90 minutes to affect the outcome of any game, they only realistically have 60 (give or take a few minutes).

Why wouldn't they want to firstly keep the ball 'live' and in play as much as possible (see previous chapter) and secondly, retrieve the ball quickly when it does actually go out of play?

If you're 1-0 up with a few minutes to go then of course, it makes sense for your players to take their time retrieving the ball and restarting play.

At all other times, your players should be hungry to get the ball back into play as quickly as possible, not only to make use of the time remaining in the game but also to get an attack going before the opposition has time to react and get back into position.

There is an average of 60+ restarts (including throw-ins) in most soccer matches and so there are **plenty** of opportunities for your players to *grab the ball and restart play as quickly as possible*. In doing so, they may catch your opponents unprepared and off guard, creating an opportunity from nothing.

You have probably seen this happen in a game you have watched at some point while playing or coaching; the goalkeeper picks the ball up from a backpass and the other team are awarded an indirect free kick. While the defenders are in a moment of panic, an attacking player grabs the ball and passes it quickly to a teammate who fires it into the net. A moment of quick thinking and quick action is all it takes to score a goal.

It is a common sight to see players switch off when the ball goes out of play for a throw in or the referee blows his whistle for a foul; some players will stand with hands on hips, some will even lose concentration completely and take their eyes off the field and the ball. This is where smart players take advantage and it is something that you need to constantly remind your players of; be alert at all times and restart play as quickly as possible, every single opportunity they get.

Restarting play quickly is also about momentum. If your team are attacking in the opponents' final third of the field and they kick the ball out of play, chances are they are hoping for a bit of respite and a chance to reorganise; ensure your players never give them that chance. If your players can get the ball back into play immediately, your momentum is maintained and you can continue to put pressure on your opponents' goal.

During practice, in small-sided 5v5 games (or whatever number you choose 3v3 or 4v4 etc) encourage your players to restart immediately when the ball goes out on the sideline. The best way to do this is to have spare balls surrounding the area in which you are playing and to allow 'kick-ins' on the ground instead of throw-ins. The idea is that when the ball goes out, a player quickly grabs another ball, kicks it back into play by passing to an opponent and the game continues.

There is no rest. No time to dither. Players should just grab the ball and get it back into play; do this **every time** you practice so that it becomes a **habit** for your players.

28 - IT IS A TEAM GAME. CONTRIBUTE AND SACRIFICE FOR THE TEAM.

Your players need to be willing to sacrifice themselves on behalf of your team. If any of your players are only interested in playing as individual, only scoring goals but not helping the team, then you need to either push them to change their attitude or drop them from your team.

You cannot build a successful team with selfish, individually motivated players.

Mia Hamm, one of the finest female soccer players of all time, brilliantly encompasses the team ethic with the following quote:

“I am a member of a team and I rely on the team; I defer to it and sacrifice for it because the team, not the individual, is the ultimate champion.”

You win and lose as a **team**. No one player is responsible for winning (even though they might score a brilliant goal) and in the same way, no single player is solely responsible for a defeat. Press home to your players in every single practice session and match, the importance of doing their job and helping the team, even if it is doing something that they don't necessarily enjoy (like strikers coming back to help defend for example).

During practice, occasionally rotate your players' positions and have strikers play as defenders and vice versa. The benefit is that players will be much more likely to appreciate each others' roles and the difficulties they face. For example, your strikers may feel that your defenders are not getting the ball forward quickly enough to them; by playing as defenders during practice, they will realise that it is not always easy to make long, accurate passes from defensive areas to forward players, particularly when under pressure from opponents.

Your players need to be willing to make runs even when they know they will not receive the ball (this was talked about in depth in a previous chapter). By making the run, they are assisting one of their teammates and ultimately sacrificing themselves on behalf of the team.

Vince Lombardi's quote about individual commitment is something you should repeat to your players:

“Individual commitment to a group effort - that is what makes a team work.”

It's no good having 10 players committed to the group effort; you need all 11 players on the field (in fact, you need everyone in the squad, even those on the subs bench) to be committed to working for the team and giving 100% effort in whatever role or position you ask them to play in.

Sacrificing yourself for the team is an important aspect of any team sport. Take baseball for example and the so-called 'sacrifice bunt' where a batter intentionally gives themselves almost no chance of making it to first base with a short 'bunt'; however, in the process of doing so, they give their teammate(s) a good chance of making it to another base. They sacrifice themselves in pursuit of team success.

How many of your players are prepared to make a 50 yard sprint into an area of the field where they know they are very unlikely to receive a pass but will take a defender with them to ultimately open up space for a teammate to exploit?

The answer should be **all** of them. If they are not prepared to do this, you don't really want them on your team. Your job as a coach is to encourage and push your players to recognise the huge importance of working for the team before working for themselves.

Legendary basketball coach, Phil Jackson, can close the chapter for us:

“The strength of the team is each individual member. The strength of each member is the team.”

29 - FORMATIONS - THEY ARE NOT THAT IMPORTANT.

4-3-3, 4-4-2, 3-5-2, 4-2-3-1...there are countless formations available and they all seem to be the 'best' one to use in particular situations or matches. However, you should not place too much emphasis on specific formations, especially for younger age groups.

Ultimately, your players should be comfortable moving fluidly into any area of the field; this allows your team to be flexible and adjust during the game, depending on the situation and what is happening at the time (in possession, trying to win the ball back, chasing the game while losing 1-0 etc).

Too much of a focus on a specific formation and sticking rigidly to 'positions' can often be detrimental to your team and with young players there is definitely an element of confusion as they worry about being in an exact position instead of moving with the game and adjusting accordingly.

It's not a free for all, obviously. You don't want your players charging around aimlessly with total disregard for the team, just as we talked about in a previous chapter on individuals sacrificing themselves for team. Having 'shape' when defending is a good idea; if your players can maintain a certain defensive shape, without having to be in exact positions, it is much easier to understand and stick to.

You need to encourage your players to work together and for each other; they need to be given the freedom to attack and move around the field to exploit areas of space and expose your opposition. Wingers shouldn't need to stick exclusively to the flanks and central midfielders shouldn't have to feel as though they can only patrol the middle area of the field. Interchanging positions is very important and so fluidity is the key word.

Regardless of what formation you decide to go with, remember ultimately that the game is 11v11 (unless players are sent off) and so the important thing is that your players work harder than the opposition; it is an obvious point to make but often overlooked by coaches who concentrate on formations and tactics ahead of ensuring their players are better equipped than their opponents by focusing on the things that matter most during practice.

If you spend a couple of hours during practice working specifically on a certain formation, you lose time working on the fundamentals like ball control, passing and movement which will always be so much more important than formations and tactics.

It is hugely important to allow your players to make their own decisions during the game based on developing scenarios and circumstances and this fact relates to formations. If one of your centre backs sees an opportunity to push forward into an open space and assist with an attack, you should encourage them to do so. You may feel that you know best while calling the shots from the sidelines, however you cannot 'see' things as players do while they are on the field, in the thick of the action, so give them the freedom they need to express themselves and make decisions without feeling pressure to be in a particular position all of the time.

Below is an excellent insight from Jonathan Wilson, soccer journalist for the Guardian newspaper:

"The designations we give formations are a useful starting point but that's all. They give a general idea of the structure of a team and a game and of the relationships of players

to each other, but the game itself is decided by the interaction of those bundles of attributes.”

In simple terms; the game isn't defined by formations; it is defined by how effectively your individual players work together.

With this in mind, improving the individual attributes of your players and enhancing their ability to work together should be of much greater importance to you than formations.

30 - MAKE EVERY MINUTE OF PRACTICE COUNT.

Dedicating time for your soccer practice is fine, whether it is 1 hour, 90 minutes or even 2 hours; however, you need to use this time as efficiently as possible.

You need to get your players' attention quickly when making points during specific exercises and when getting them all together before starting another exercise or skill.

The best way to do this is by using a whistle. No question about it.

Whistles aren't necessarily cool and some coaches prefer to shout instead. Here's a bit of advice; go out and get yourself a decent whistle (the Fox Classic or Fox Mini are excellent choices). By the time you shout "stop, come over here boys" about three times (which is what it usually takes for everyone to hear you) then you have already wasted 30 seconds or so. A quick blow of the whistle does the trick in around 1 second.

You don't need to blow your whistle every 2 minutes; use it when necessary to get the attention of your players all at once. Explain to your players that when you blow your whistle they should stop, immediately, and give their full attention to you. After a while getting used to this, you will find that players begin immediately responding to you as it becomes an automatic reaction when they hear your whistle.

Planning your practice session in advance is hugely important; in fact, it is absolutely vital and you should **always** plan your sessions in advance. You can even go as far as the breaks for water or rest; schedule 90 second breaks in your plan and get all of your players used to using the breaks efficiently to grab a drink and prepare themselves for the next exercise or skill.

If you plan your session down to the minute, there is a much better chance that it will run smoothly and your players will get more out of the practice. Circumstances will sometimes mean that slight changes are inevitable but as far as possible, try to stick to your plan and timings, including breaks.

If you need to setup cones or other equipment in between exercises and the 'break' is not long enough to do that, come up with a regular 'quickie' activity or exercise such as one or two-touch passing. Give it a name ('one touch passing' is easy to remember) and when you need some time to setup another exercise, simply tell your players "*four minutes of one-touch passing in pairs, go!*"

There you go, you now have four minutes to setup your next exercise and your players are not wasting time in between waiting for you.

Coaches often spend far too much time explaining the setup of complex exercises and there really is no need for complexity during soccer practice. Keep your exercises and skills simple and focus on the fundamentals of the game at all times. It should only take a very short time to explain what is going to happen and how things are going to work. Remember, giving out complex instructions not only wastes time but also confuses players; this is not what you want as a coach. Keep things simple.

You may find that your players will often have side conversations or bounce balls while you are talking; address this issue immediately in your next practice by letting your players know your expectations from the outset. Let them know that when you blow your whistle, they give their full attention to you and continue doing so while you are talking to them (as briefly as possible).

Don't allow too much discussion during your practice sessions; players can often get embroiled in discussion and debate over who was at fault or what the best way to do something is. Again, explain to your players that lengthy discussion during practice isn't necessary. You want to focus solely on the actual practice session and getting as much benefit as possible from it. You and your players can discuss any issues at the end of practice.

Legendary Basketball coach, John Wooden, often ran an exercise where he detailed not just which position players would be in but how many would be in each position *and* where the balls would be place *and* how many balls would be in each location *and* whose responsibility it would be to retrieve the balls so the exercise could flow without interruption.

Be as efficient as Coach Wooden by planning everything in advance.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

PAUL SPACEY is the author of *Simple Soccer*, *Youth Soccer Coach* and *Effective Communication For Referees*.

Having been involved in soccer for over 20 years as a player, coach and referee, he has a relatively unique perspective on the game.

Paul is an ex semi-professional soccer player from England and now a private soccer coach and referee based in Santa Monica, California, where he lives with his girlfriend, Claire.

Website - www.paulspacey.com

Twitter - @pauljspacey



