

Making Practices Fun and Practical

Games vs. Traditional Approach

In the past we have placed too much emphasis on learning skills and not enough on learning how to play skill-fully—that is, learning how to use those skills in competition.

The games' approach, in contrast to the traditional approach, emphasizes first learning what to do, then how to do it. Moreover, the games approach lets kids discover what to do in the game not by you telling them but by them experiencing it.

It is a guided discovery method of teaching that empowers your players to solve the problems that arise in the game, which is a large part of the fun in learning.

The games approach, in time, helps to develop a soccer-savvy player. Being soccer savvy means that a player has an innate understanding of what is going on around her/him on a soccer field and helps develop the talent to influence the game.

Such an outcome can only occur if the soccer environment in which the player is trained is a rich one.

The use of guided discovery by coaches will be a positive influence on this healthy soccer experience.

Disadvantages of Traditional Approach

On the surface, it seems to make sense to introduce soccer using the traditional approach, by first teaching the basic skills of the sport and then the tactics of the game. This approach, however, has disadvantages. First, it teaches the skills of the sport out of the context of the game. Kids may learn to control, shoot, pass, dribble, and head the ball. But they find it difficult to use these skills in the real game, because they do not yet understand the fundamental tactics of soccer and do not appreciate how best to use their newfound skills.

Second, learning skills by doing drills outside of the context of the game is downright boring.

The single biggest turnoff in sports is overly organized instruction that deprives kids of their intrinsic desire to play the game.

The games approach is taught using a four-step process:

1. Play a modified game.
2. Help the players discover what they need to do in order to play the game successfully.
3. Teach the skills of the game.
4. Practice the skills in another game.

Step 1: Play a Modified Game

It's the first day of training; some of the kids are eager to get started, whereas others are obviously apprehensive. Some have rarely kicked a ball, most don't know the rules, and none know the positions in soccer.

What do you do? For example, if you used the traditional approach you would have players practice kicking by lining them up for a simple kicking drill.

With the games approach, however, you begin by playing an even-sided game, such as 4v4, that is modified to be developmentally appropriate for the level of the players and is designed to focus on learning a specific part of the game (such as kicking).

Modifying the game emphasizes a limited number of game situations.

This is one way you guide your players to discover certain tactics in the game.

For instance, you have your players play a 2v2 game in a 20-by-15-yard playing area.

The objective of the game is to make four passes before attempting to score.

Playing the game this way forces players to think about what they have to do to keep possession of the ball.

Step 2: Help Players Understand the Game

As your players are playing a game, look for the right spot to freeze the action, step in, and ask questions about errors that you're seeing. When you do so, you help them understand the objective of the game better, what they must do to reach the objective, and what specific skills they must use.

Asking the right questions is an important part of teaching. You'll be asking your players (usually literally), "What do you need to do to succeed in this situation?"

Sometimes players simply need to have more time playing to discover what they are to do, or you may need to further modify the game to make it even easier for them.

This approach may take more patience on your part, but it's a powerful way for kids to learn.

For example, assume your players are playing a game in which the objective is to make four passes before attempting to score, but they are having trouble doing so.

Interrupt the action and ask the following questions:

- What are you supposed to do in this game?
- What does your team have to do to keep the ball for four passes in a row?
- What do you need to do when you pass the ball to help your team keep the ball?
- Where would you move to when your teammate has the ball and you need to help him keep the ball?

If your players have trouble understanding what to do, phrase your questions to let them choose between one option and another. For example, if you ask, "What's the fastest way to get the ball down the field?" and get answers such as "Throw it" or "Kick it," then ask, "Is it passing or dribbling?"

Asking the right questions may seem difficult at first, because your players have little or no experience with the game.

If you've learned sport through the traditional approach, you'll be tempted to tell your players how to play the game rather than wasting time asking questions.

Resist this powerful temptation to tell your players what to do. Instead, through the modified games approach and skill-full questioning on your part, your players should come to realize on their own that accurate passing and receiving skills are essential to their success in controlling the ball. Rather than having told them what the critical skills are, you will have led them to this discovery—a crucial process in the games approach.

Although it takes longer to teach a ball skill or tactic to players in the discovery games approach to practice, what they learn sticks more permanently and develops more self-reliant players.

Step 3: Teach the Skills of the Game

Only when your players recognize the skills they need to be successful in the game do you teach specific skills through activities that focus solely on the skill at hand.

Step 4: Practice the Skills in Another Game

As a coach, you want your players to experience success as they are learning skills, and the best way to help them experience success early on is to create an advantage for the players. Once the players have practiced the skill as outlined in step 3, you can then put them in another game situation—this time an uneven numbers game (e.g., 3v1, 3v2). The prevailing notion is that this concept makes it more likely that, for instance, in a 3v1 game, your three offensive players will be able to make four passes before attempting to score.

We recommend first using even-sided games (e.g., 3v3, 6v6), as discussed in step 1, and then uneven-sided games.

The purpose behind this method is to introduce players to a situation similar to what they will experience in competition and let them discover the challenges they face in performing the necessary skill.

Then you teach them the skill, have them practice it, and put them back in another game—this time using an uneven advantage to give them a greater chance of experiencing success.

As players improve their skills, however, you may not need to use uneven-sided games. A 3v1 or 6v3 advantage will eventually become too easy and won't challenge your

players to hone their skills. When this time comes, you can lessen the advantage. You may even decide that they're ready to practice the skill in even-sided competition.

The key is to set up situations in which your athletes experience success but are challenged at the same time. This method will take careful monitoring on your part, but having kids play uneven games as they are learning skills is a very effective way of helping them learn and improve.

The ultimate goal, of course, is to develop more soccer-savvy players who are more self-reliant during a match. Players consistently coached with the games approach will be more adaptable to the demands of the game, and this coaching method is also more likely to produce creative players. When the atmosphere at a training session is permeated with positive interaction, creativity, and well-timed questions, players will arrive at training already mentally alert.

Conclusion

That's the games approach. It immerses players in the fun of playing soccer, thus motivating them to learn the skills that will help them play the game better. Consider the difference between reciting verb conjugations in a language class but not being allowed to try to communicate in the language versus trying out some brief social communications in the language (e.g., where's the bathroom, how do I get to the restaurant) and thereby understanding that getting the form of the verbs right matters.

Learning skills in the context of playing modified games lets players discover the whys' and the how's of soccer in the same fun environment.

Your players will get to play more in practice, and once they learn how the skills fit into their performance and enjoyment of the game, they'll be enthusiastic about working on the skills you teach them.

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