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Making Soccer Drills Work

By Alan Maher

The major emphasis at most soccer conventions and workshops is the presentation of drills. Coaches collect drills like souvenirs, returning home with their new-found prizes. For many coaches the problem is that the newly-acquired drills do not work for their teams. What to do? How can drills be adjusted to the local situation or the specific team? Where does one begin?

The solution is to consider the basic elements of a drill. Any drill for any sport. There are common elements for all. Knowing and understanding the common elements will help a coach adjust a drill to work in the local situation or at least help make it work.

Let's examine the common elements of all drills in some detail.

No. 1 - TIME

There are two aspects to time. How long does the drill last and how often should the coach use it? In soccer any situation creates two basic questions. How long can one group of players hold and control the ball? One minute? Two minutes? Or can they hold it longer? The other aspect is, how many passes in a row can one team make before losing possession of the ball? Ten? More? Time is a basic element of any drill.

No. 2 - VELOCITY

This also has two aspects. First, how hard do you want the ball passed? A soft pass to space or a hard pass to feet? The harder the ball is struck, the harder it is for the receiving player to control it. The second question is, how hard does the player run? Run hard? Jog, then change pace? Jog? Keep moving, even if only walking? Jog in place? Standing is not an option on a soccer field. The Dutch say, "move now; rest later."

No. 3 - HEIGHT OF THE PASS

Do you want the ball delivered on the ground? Under the armpits? Over the heads of the opponents? Three choices, all of which are critical. The players must decide which is best.

No. 4 - DIRECTION

Where is the ball to go? To feet? To space? This is related to the velocity of the ball. A hard pass to feet or soft to space? Each pass has a different degree of difficulty. What degree of difficulty does the coach want and need in the drill?

No. 5 - SPACE

What is the size of the space to be used? Large or small? Small space is more demanding, as players must pass more accurately and react more rapidly to the pace of the drill. A large space gives more time to react and conceals passing errors. There is more time to run after a bad pass in a big space. Also, is the space to be wide or long? Along, narrow space forces long axis passes, while a wide space forces more square and back passes. Both kinds of space serve a purpose, but what is the purpose of the drill?

No. 6 - DISTANCE

Short passes need to be more accurate, as the time for a player to get into a position to receive the ball is also short. Long

passes give the receiving player more time to get in the path of the ball. Short passes often transfer pressure from one player to the next, while long passes deliver the ball to a place where there is less pressure.

No. 7 - RULES

What are the rules to be observed? Two-touch passing? Ignore the offside law? Wall pass before shooting? What are the rules? And change the rules if they are not working. Rules should be simple and few in number.

As the coach begins a training session, there are three basic rules to keep in mind. First, from the beginning the coach must make it work. Whatever it is that the coach wants out of the drill must be the outcome. Give a clear statement of what is to be done, why it is important and show how it should be done. Give concrete examples and proceed in small steps that all can follow and understand. But make it work. If it is not working, the coach can manipulate the elements mentioned above to make it work. For example, the coach can add more time or more space if needed.

Second, the coach must make it better by making it harder for the players. This can be done in a variety of ways. Limit the touches on the ball. Go from unlimited touches to two touches of the ball. Then try one-touch passing. Then back off and change the rules again. Try one touch or three touches, no two-touch. What does this teach? How? And why?

Maybe the coach can reduce the amount of space that the players can use. This will put more demands on both passing and running off the ball, much more demanding of all concerned. Adding players will fill up the space and put more demands on the passing and running off the ball. Does everyone know what to do? Where to go? How to help? Try it. Finally, introduce opposition. This is a simple change that should come as the last step, not the first. Players must develop confidence and courage in what they do before they face opposition on the field of play. One opponent even just walking around causes players to lower their heads and focus on the ball, not on the field of play. The level of passing is lowered. Players feel pressure, real or imagined.

So only at this point should opposition be considered. Also, the opposition should be at a ratio of two attackers to one defender if the players with the ball are expected to execute tactical options with their heads up, viewing the field of play. Thus, two on one is acceptable; two on two is not. Keep the two-to-one ratio at all times. Include three on one, four on two and five on two. This can be increased to include six on three or eight on four.

To review: Any drill, if done correctly, might help any team, but only if it is worked correctly from the beginning. Knowing and understanding how to manipulate the basic elements of drills can help a coach to make proper adjustments to assure success. In addition, the coach should be aware of three simple steps for training.

1. Make it work.
2. Make it better/harder. It is important to add that when Step 3 fails, go back to Step 1. The first rule of soccer is simple: make it work!

Editor's note: Alan Maher, a long-time high school coach on Long Island, took a team to Holland one year and fell in love with Dutch soccer. Since then, he has been a proponent of soccer the Dutch way. A longtime Soccer Journal contributor, he is the author of "The Soccer Handbook."

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