

FUN FOR THE LITTLE ONES

Thoughts on how to structure U-6 practices

By George Perry
NSCAA Senior Academy Staff
Monmouth College

U-6 players are a unique group. They are shy, outgoing, very honest, inquisitive, quiet, loud, energetic, passive and, most important to me, extremely bright. And this is just the tip of what they are like, which is why they are so enjoyable to work with.

When I meet with this age group for the first time, I like to sit on the ground with them. I introduce myself, making sure they know what to call me. I prefer Coach or Coach Perry but you use whatever is comfortable for you.

While we are sitting there, I explain my rules, how I like to run my sessions. I tell them that there are three rules they have to pay attention to:

- When I am talking, they have to listen.
- When I call on them, I promise I will listen to them
- They cannot just kick a ball.

What do I mean by “you cannot just kick a ball”? What can you do when you play soccer? Where I lead them in the discussion is that I want them to understand that you can dribble, shoot and pass the ball. I always want them to try to do something constructive with the ball. With this age group, I am particularly interested in them learning how to be comfortable with the ball (dribbling), controlling the ball (receiving), and how to score (sometimes that is shooting and sometimes they dribble the ball into the goal). Passing is not something I emphasize at all with this age group. Their egocentric mentality has them wanting to keep the ball and not share it. That can come later.

Too often I hear from the sidelines (from both coaches and parents), “kick it,” “send it,” “great kick” and even “pass it.” I would prefer to hear “great turn,” “good job controlling the ball,” “great dribbling,” “that’s the way to go to the ball,” “great shot,” “what a great goal,” “that’s the way to help your

teammate” and many more. I am not sure teaching these young players to pass the ball is in their best interest. At this age we want them to learn what they can do with the ball and feel more comfortable with it. Certainly some will pass the ball and it is good to reinforce that, but it should not be a high priority with this age group.

group. After helping me for a season or two, I hope the coaches will be ready to take a group (not as large as I do) for themselves.

For the first 25-30 minutes, I run a “clinic” for the players, working on the various skills previously mentioned. All of the coaches, and sometimes some of the parents, would be my assistants.

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In the last couple of U-6 programs I have run, I organize the session like a clinic. In one program, the Boys & Girls Club in Crawfordsville, Ind., I had about 80 players. We had it set up so there were 10 teams of eight, with each team having a coach (volunteer parent). We would meet once a week. I currently work with the YMCA program in Monmouth, Ill. Here I have about 35 players, with ages ranging from pre-kindergarten to second grade. When they play the games each day, they play with different players of similar age and/or ability. The programs ran for eight to ten weeks.

The purpose of running the “clinic” is that I am the only one who has to prepare activities for each session. The coaches (my college players, parents or other volunteers) just have to show up and follow my “lead.” Since we do the program for eight to 10 weeks, this offers the coaches eight to 10 30-minute clinics on how to interact with the players and hopefully they learn from me how to let the players be individuals, to explore the game for themselves. More often than not, they take me to a different path of what they are capable of doing. Every group has been similar and yet unique. That is another reason I never tire of working with this age

After the “clinic,” they would go to their field and play games. In Crawfordsville, we had 10 25x15-yard fields set up and they would play a game consisting of four six-minute quarters. In Monmouth, I have three fields, one each for the pre-kindergartners, the kindergartners and one for the first and second graders. The “coaches,” parents and my college players would oversee the games. I would move around during the games, sometimes helping out if needed but mostly watching and enjoying the players having fun with the game. I encouraged the coaches to be supportive but not to do too much coaching during the games. Let the game do the teaching now.

For the 25- to 30-minute clinic, I like to have every player with a ball or at least a ball for every two players. The space I use is two or three of the playing fields that I have set up for the Crawfordsville program and one field for the program in Monmouth. I put cones on the outside of the area, one every four or five yards. After I am done talking with the players at the beginning (something I do every time we meet for consistency), I have the players pair up and go sit between two cones. This takes a little bit of time the first session or two, but with the help

of the coaches and parents, it goes very quickly. By the second or third training session, the players, with a few exceptions, can do it on their own.

To get started, I have one of the players in the pair come into the middle of the area with his or her ball. I will do an activity with that player for 45 to 60 seconds, then they will switch places with their partner. I have each group do the same activity. This way, you can get by with 10 activities but I like to have a few extra in mind in case one does not work with this group. Sometimes you will only get to eight activities. I always go with the flow of

- Now I will show them how to turn the ball by placing their foot on top of the ball and pulling it back, again, taking the ball back in the direction they came from.
- I will show them how to do step-ups, light touches on top of the ball, alternating feet each time. Make sure they do not step on the ball. For those having trouble, I do it with them on their ball so they can follow my feet. After they get that, I will ask them to do as many as they can in 15 seconds. The second time I have them do it for 15 seconds, I will ask them to do 2 more touches than the first time.

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but most important is that YOU HAVE FUN!*

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the players. They tell me through their actions if I should repeat the activity or go to a new one. Remember to give the players plenty of water breaks, especially in the heat. But even if it is cool, this gives them a break to get away from the working space. When they return, they can re-focus on what you are doing. Here is a sample of what I might do at one of these sessions:

- Every player in the middle has a ball and dribbles within the playing space. On my command “stop,” they put a foot on the ball. Once I have seen they all have their foot on the ball, I say “go” and they continue dribbling. They do this for 45 seconds and then switch with their partner.
- With every player dribbling this time I will call out a body part, maybe “knee” and they have to stop the ball with their knee. I will often say “left knee” to help them begin to learn, if they do not already know, their left from their right.
- I will show them how to turn the ball by using the inside of their foot and taking the ball back in the direction they came from. I will then ask them to do that every time I say “turn.” If I say “stop” they have to put their foot on the ball as they did before (teaching change of direction).
- I have them dribble within the space and then I will say “stop.” Again, they put their foot on the ball. I ask them to point to an open space near them and then I ask them to dribble as fast as they can to that space. If it gets crowded, just slow down. I repeat the “stop” but this time I ask them to continue dribbling and every time they see an open space to dribble as quickly as possible to that space. Hopefully this will get them to pick their head up while they are dribbling to find space.
- This next activity needs the help of all the coaches. We will play a game of tag. The players are to dribble throughout the playing area and try to avoid being tagged by one of the coaches. If they are tagged, they have to do five step-ups and then continue dribbling, trying to avoid being tagged again.
- Freeze tag. Again, the coaches are “it” and the players are trying to avoid being tagged. When they are tagged, they are “frozen” and have to stand still with one foot on top of their ball. Another player, who is not “frozen,” can dribble to them and tag them which “un-freezes” them. They can continue dribbling and try not to get “frozen.”
- Hospital tag. I use the same playing space but add a small square (the hos-

pital), about 5 yards square on the edge of one of the sides of the playing space. Again, an appropriate number of coaches are it. As the players dribble throughout the playing space, the coaches are trying to tag them. Every time a player is tagged, they have to put a hand on the body part that was tagged. So if I tagged your left shoulder, you would have to put your hand on your left shoulder. You still continue dribbling. If you get tagged again, let’s say your hip, you must put your other hand on your hip. If you get tagged a third time, you have to go to the hospital. Dribble to the hospital and perform a task, 10 step-ups. This “heals” you and you can re-join the dribbling with your hands free. Now the game starts over for you.

- Sharks and Minnows. Have the players (minnows) on one side of the playing space, each with a soccer ball. Have the coaches (sharks) in the middle. On your start command, the minnows try to dribble to the opposite side of the space. The sharks try to take the ball from them. If a shark takes the ball away, they have to dribble the ball to the side-line. The minnows try to get their ball back. This encourages the players to not just stop when they lose the ball in the game. The coaches should let the players win their ball back. As players do lose their ball, they do not sit out. They join the sharks in the middle and go after the minnows that crossed the water. Make sure you do not have too many sharks. When you have fewer, you will see that some of the players will learn to watch what is happening and time their runs when the sharks are busy going after others.

After the 25 to 30 minutes are up, organize the players into their games. Now it is all them – we just supervise to make sure it is a safe environment, encouraging them to have fun and let them be themselves, not what “we” want them to be.

As I tell all the coaches I have had the pleasure of working with in all the NSCAA Academies I have taught and programs I have been a part of, yes, it is important that the players have fun, but most important is YOU HAVE FUN! It is infectious.