

Good Planning – Perfect Practice: How to create an effective training session

by Jeff Vennell, NSCAA Academy Senior Staff and Former NSCAA President

Coaches at all levels need to develop the skills to plan a practice session to effectively prepare their team for matches. The NSCAA Academy courses provide a good framework when considering what to practice, why the main topic of the practice is needed and what methodology best presents a systemic approach to reaching practice goals to prepare their team.

It is assumed that coaches are cognizant of safety factors involved prior to every practice such as making sure the goals are secured and checking to be certain the field surface is ready for training.

Step 1 – Select the Topic:

Youth level coaches can select their topic from their adjusted seasonal plan. For instance if the team needs to work on dribbling this week, then the practice plan should include dribbling – because other than possibly alerting the team about “worrying about how fast Nicole is as the opposing striker,” what team will be the next opponent is not important. More experienced playing level coaches base their practices on observation of the team’s last match:

- What we did and did not accomplish in the last match;
- When the team plays their next match;
- Who the team plays next and what challenges do they create for their team?

The focus of the practice session should be as specific as possible. The clearer a coach defines their goal, the clearer it will be for players.

The coach should consider the following questions when choosing what topic to select for a training session: Is the focus of the training session on individual exercises, groups or blocks (backs + goalkeeper, midfielder, attackers) or team (11 v. 11 or a small sided exercises that mimics the team shape)? Should the focus be technical or tactical? What players are involved from your team? The opposing team? How will the coach start and restart the exercises to get maximum repetitions? Don’t try to accomplish too many targets during the practice; generally two to three is usually good.

Step 2 – Organize the Equipment:

Once a coach has decided on the focus of the practice, the organization of practice equipment is important (soccer balls, cones/discs/flags, vests, portable goals, etc). Practice should begin with areas already defined, soccer balls ready, vests ready for the team – and which players will be in

which group during the starting practice exercise.

Remember the mechanics:

- Are the exercises are appropriate to topic?
- Exercise details:
 - number of players
 - restrictions
 - number of touches
 - amount of time
 - number of goals
 - number of balls
- Proper use of space (approx. 10 yds./offensive player)
- Practice spaces – don’t share boundaries
- Logical progressions – increase pressure incrementally for technical topics; complicate the environment as the practice progresses
- Coaching position – generally outside

Step 3 – Creating a Learning Environment:

What makes up a learning environment?

- Players learn better by doing, not just hearing
- Teach, don’t talk: coaches should not lecture
- Show what you want vs. telling what you want (remember: retention is 70 percent visual)

Step 4 – Select your coaching methodology:

- Progressive technical – build pressure from none to full as quickly as possible
- Progressive tactical – possession, direction, counter direction, two directions with full pressure from opponents
- Functional technical or tactical – in the area where the player(s) are located in a match
- Phase play – play between two of the thirds of the field
- Shadow play – adding opposition as play proceeds

Step 5 – The Practice:

Warm Up:

- At 15-20 percent of allotted time related to topic
- Rehearses: physical and psychological preparation for the practice
- Team is ready to go at full speed when completed

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Main Activities:

- At 45-50 percent of allotted time; usually 3-5 exercises

Concluding Activity – Game:

- @ 30-35% of allotted time
- Implement topic in match environment
- Games with restrictions as needed

COACH – Observe – Stops

Warm Down:

- At 5% – Stretch; low-level activity; reinforce coaching points

Coaching Actions During Practice

Exercises:

- Don't forget that "catching the good" is an effective way to reinforce correct play and choices
- Identify the problem and the teachable moment
- Freeze the action
- Correct the fault with effective demonstration or review a correct picture

Painting the correct picture: focused corrections (30 second rule – remember that the longer a coach talks the less players listen)

- Rehearse – coach the player, not the exercise
- Restart with success "WHEN – ON"

Remember that feedback is the single most important variable in skill learning; it must be valid, precise, and specific vs. non-specific and focused on performance. Good luck!

The following is from Bill Beswick, a sports psychologist in England

Successful Coaches:

Successful coaches take players out of their comfort zone individually and collectively somewhere they have not been before – **REACH THE POSSIBLE**

A Good Coach:

- Coaches whole player
- Is organized – sell vs. yell
- Has focused practices
- Has challenging practices
- Players set individual goals
- Allows freedom to fail
- Facilitates learning
- Balances work, rest, relaxation
- Balances praise/criticism
- Has players take responsibility
- Establishes 2-way communication

PRINCIPLES OF PRACTICE by Richard A. Schmidt, Human Performance Research

Experimental psychologists, kinesiologists, and other scientists have been working for many decades trying to understand how it is that some people can perform at incredibly high levels of skill, and how to practice so as to maximize performance. This is of great interest in countless practical applications. In this brief article, I outline some of the fundamental principles that form our understanding of how and when to practice.

First of all, it should come as no surprise that the most important thing one can do to improve performance is to practice. Psychologists call this "deliberate practice." There is no doubt that the best performers in sport have spent incredible amounts of time at their craft. Be aware that the gains from practicing when one is already at a high level are small and difficult to achieve. I'm reminded of a study of industrial cigar makers

who were still improving in time/cigar even after 10 years or 7 million cigars! The key principle here is to practice--and practice lots.

OK, we all know that. But now the question is how to practice, what to do, when (how often) to do it, how to use teachers/coaches, and how to evaluate the products of your efforts. I think these questions are often best answered by understanding a few key points about performance and learning discussed next. I'd rather not give a list of do's and don'ts for practice. Instead, if you understand some of these principles, you can design effective practice for yourself.

The champions do it this way.

In discussing learning and sport, I often hear people say that so-and-so champion does it this way, so that must be optimal. After all, how did they become a champion if he/she did not practice nearly optimally? This kind of approach