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Learning how to keep the ball

The importance of possession

by Brett Thompson, Technical Director, Ohio South Youth Soccer Association.

This article is part of the US Youth Soccer youth coaching education series.

How many times have you watched a youth soccer game where you feel like you're watching a tennis match, with neither team keeping possession for more than two or three passes? As youth coaches, we have to do a better job of stressing the importance of possession with a purpose. The exercises in this article are designed to illustrate the purpose of keeping the ball. They should be conducted in a way that emphasizes team shape (width and depth), communication (both verbal and non-verbal), and movement off the ball.

Three major benefits

What are the benefits of keeping the ball? The first is that you can patiently create opportunities to penetrate the opposing defense and score. Second, opponents cannot score without the ball, so the best defense really is a good offense. Keep in mind that most teams score on about 10 percent of their scoring opportunities. If your team keeps the ball for the greater part of the game, then you'll probably have more opportunities to score, and your opponents will have fewer. Finally, keeping possession causes your opponents to do a lot of running, resulting in fatigue, frustration and mental breakdowns. As your opponents start taking chances to get the ball back, they create opportunities for you to capitalize on!

Technical skills

Maintaining possession depends largely on technical skills related to passing:

- keeping the ankle rigid (flexed or extended) while passing
- passing with the inside of the foot, or with the instep over longer distances
- making contact as close to the center of the ball as possible
- allowing the shooting leg to follow all the way through in the direction of the pass (using momentum instead of force)
- allowing the ball to simply bounce off the foot when passing directly (for solid passes) or giving it an additional push (for less forceful passes)
- playing accurate passes to the feet of teammates (to the correct foot) or to spaces for players to run onto
- other technical skills: passing over varying distances and with varying weights, receiving balls on the ground and in the air, turning with the ball, shielding

General abilities

Other keys to being able to maintain possession include:

- passing and moving with a minimum of touches
- dribbling into open space created by off-the-ball movement
- having support available for combination play (in front, on the side and possibly behind)

A good first touch and excellent passing techniques are essential to maintain possession.

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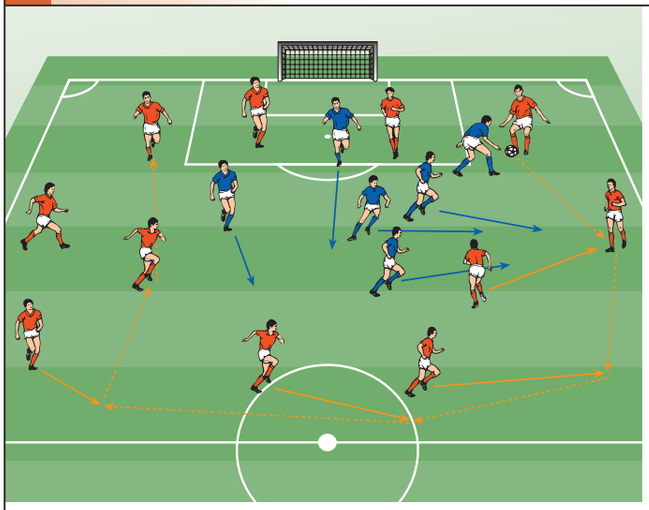
- not playing the ball back into pressure (square and back passes usually indicate pressure in an area), i.e. to teammates who have defenders on them or into areas where there are a number of opponents
- receiving the ball with body position open to the field of play whenever possible (this gives the receiver the best view of the game)
- movement off the ball: not just running around, but movement based on ball movement
- good team shape (width and depth)

Sample practice session

So how do we teach our young players the value of possession and patience when they want to go forward all the time? The practice session outlined below should provide a good picture.

WARM-UP

Drop the vest



Setup

- Field is the area between the penalty box and centerline.
- Ten to 13 attackers play against four to six defenders holding vests.

Sequence

- Attackers try to keep the ball away from defenders.
- If a defender wins the ball, he drops the vest he was carrying. The attacker who gave up the ball then picks it up and becomes a defender.

Variations

- Turn it into a competition by keeping track of passes for the attacking team.

Coaching points

- Attackers should spread out and find/create space (width and depth).
- Receivers should always take their first touch away from pressure.
- The player with the ball should always have a couple of potential receivers.
- Whenever an player loses the ball, the attacking team must adjust its shape to maintain possession.

TRAINING TIPS FOR ADVANCED PLAYERS

The SUCCESS IN SOCCER series of training manuals gives coaches, trainers and physical education teachers a solid foundation for specialized training at every age and ability level. In Vol. 2 of the series coaches of 14- to 18-year-olds and amateur adults will find all the information they need for their day-to-day coaching . With practice games and exercises that are up-to-date, motivational and appropriate for a range of playing levels, this book shows how you can make your players physically stronger, tactically more versatile and techically perfect.

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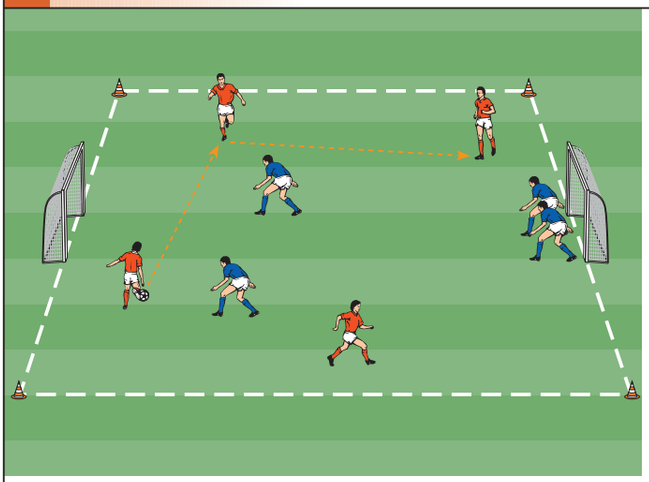
MAIN SESSION

4 v. 4 - 2 to 4 v. 4 - 1 to 4 v. 4



Setup

- Field is 40 x 30 yards (or smaller, depending on players' age) with a four-yard-wide goal at each end.
- Run the game on two fields at once, so everyone can play.
- Divide players into two teams of four on each field.

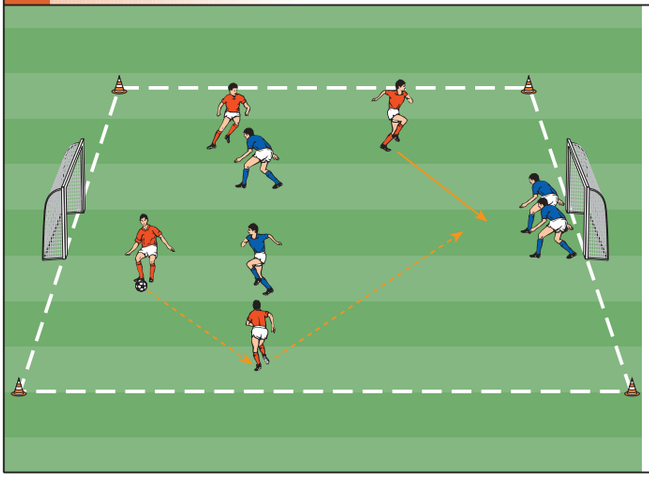
Sequence

- The two back defenders retreat to their goal and link arms inside it. They must remain linked and cannot come off the line.
- The offside rule does not apply.
- The attacking team tries to keep possession and score.
- When possession changes, the two "goalkeepers" rejoin the attack while two of their opponents drop back into their goal and link arms.

Coaching points

- When the game starts, just let the players play and get used to the game.
- Watch their team shape, patience and movement off the ball.
- Allow attackers to solve the problem and use their 4 v. 2 advantage.
- Attackers should use width and depth (diamond shape), create space, and provide support behind the ball.

Restriction 1



Players must always pass the ball to the most open player on their team; if not, they lose possession.

- Remember, the offside rule does not apply, so make sure players maintain depth and width. They will want to come towards the ball, especially the player playing forward.
- In this part of the exercise, you'll need to stress the importance of passing to the most open player. Force players to keep their heads up and look for the passing lane that goes past the fewest opponents.
- Make sure they keep their shape and move off of the ball to create passing opportunities. Players must start thinking two passes ahead.

ATTRACTIVE TECHNIQUE TRAINING

These videos present interesting and **effective training tips for 11- to 14-year-old players** and can be used seperately as teaching material to build up motivational and age-appropriate pratice sessions or as supplement to the second part of the SIS book "Basic Training". **Contents:** Ball coordination training; individual training in soccer basics: dribbling, combination play, ballcontrol; 1 v. 1 attack and defense tactics, shooting variations; technical-tactical exercises for small groups; moving from the 4 v. 4 pratice game to the 11 v. 11 match formation; exercises for strengthening and flexibility and much more. **Part 3: 85 min., part 4: 85 min**

To order these videos please contact: for America: phone 1-505-889-3680, fax 1-505-883-4577, for GB: phone 0208 658 2007, fax 0208 658 1314, Australia: phone 02 9241 6199, fax 02 9241 7331 and for other countries: phone +49-251-23005-22, fax +49-251-23005-99

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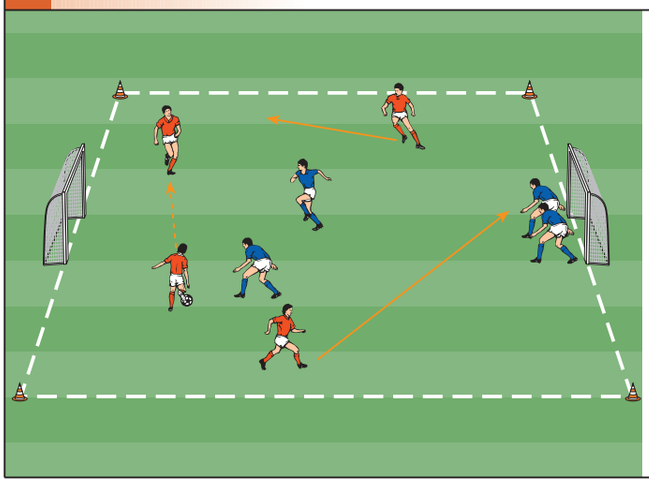
MAIN SESSION

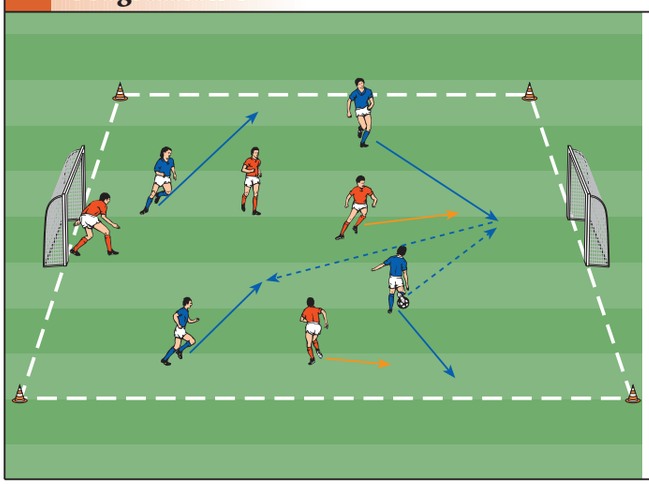
Restriction 2



There must be an attacker behind the ball whenever appropriate.

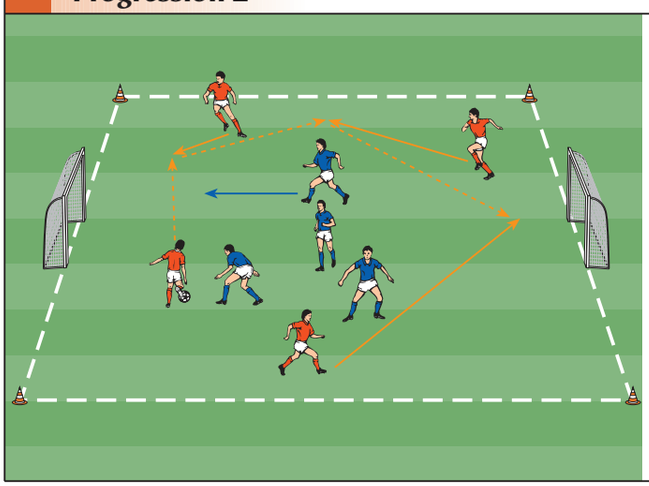
- When defenders put close pressure on the ball, one attacker should drop back behind the player who has the ball, enabling a back pass. This relieves pressure and allows attackers to maintain possession.

Progression 1



- Only one defender covers the goal, creating a 4 v. 4 - 1 situation.
- This puts more pressure on attackers by decreasing the playing space, but they still have opportunities for success.

Progression 2



- No defenders cover the goal, creating a 4 v. 4 situation.
- This decreases the playing space even more, putting maximum pressure on attackers and forcing them to really concentrate and look for open players as well as great movement off the ball.

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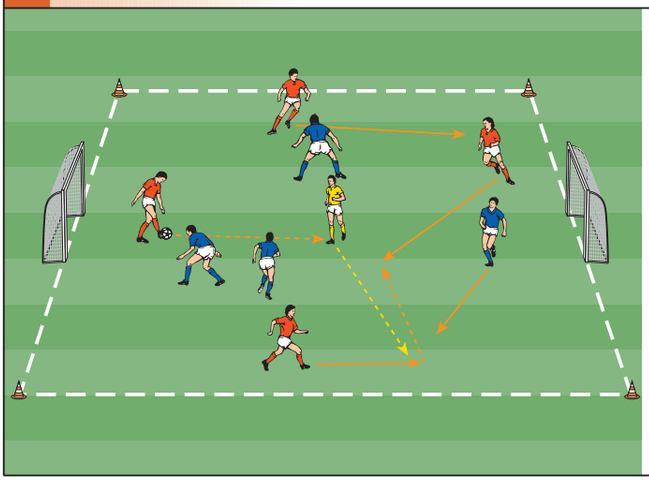
MAIN SESSION

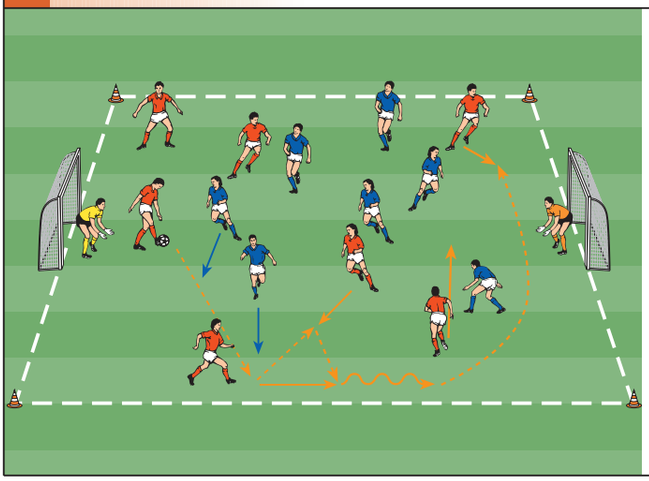
Variation



- Add a neutral player who assists whichever team has the ball (4 v. 4 + 1).
- Encourage the attacking team to have someone in the center at all times. This provides a central player who can receive the ball from the back, side and forward parts of the field.

COOL-DOWN

Match 8 v. 8



Setup

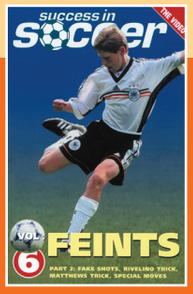
- Mark out a 70 x 50-yard field with a goal at each end.
- Divide players into two teams of eight.

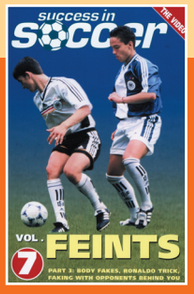
Sequence

- Teams play 8 v. 8 across the field to score.
- Make sure players maintain their shape around the field for optimum possession.

Tip

- To help with shape and possession, start with an offside line at each end of the field, approximately 10 yards away from each goal. This will allow the forwards to push high and create space in the middle of the field.





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