



New York State West Youth Soccer
Association

Learning by doing!

-Diana Groth, Assistant Technical Director-

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Age group: 6-14

A soccer coach can influence the learning process in two ways. They can influence the learning process by providing training session exercises or by instructions. The learning process takes place either implicitly (through a practice session) or explicitly (through instructions). Research has showed that implicit practice is better suited for beginners and young soccer players¹. Let's take a deeper look into the implicit learning process in youth soccer.

What is implicit learning? Implicit learning is the subconscious or playful acquisition of skills and knowledge through performing an exercise. The player learns by sensing and processing a complex environment of stimuli without she/he perceiving it consciously or intentionally². As we mentioned in our October Newsletter “Soccer through”, soccer is very complex, and it is impossible to predict every situation in a game. That is why we should create a complex situation in a practice session to prepare them for the game.

The coach can influence the learning environment and confront the players with new game situations of varying complexities. This can be accomplished by modifying game rules/game goals, team and field size, field layout, and limitation of time and touches. This will always lead to the players consistently facing a new situation. Therefore, they will always have to adjust to the new game situation, process the new information, develop a solution, make a decision and execute the decision on the field. Through this the players will develop the ability to adjust to new situations, make decisions quicker, and develop/improve their technical and tactical skills.

“A coach can instruct his players to play directly or together or he can create situation where the players are forced to play directly and together.” *Christoph Biermann*

¹ Tielemann, 2008 (dissertation about implicit in youth basketball).

² Volker Finke (German pro soccer coach).

Here are some suggestions on how to modify a practice session:

Limitation of ball contacts/touches

If the coach limits the amount of ball touches by each player, the players without the ball are forced to offer support and solutions off the ball quicker, while the player with the ball is forced to find a solution for a passing option quicker. This limitation will impact the passing game in a tactical way (getting open, choosing a passing option), in a cognitive way (perception of passing options), and in a technical way (executing a pass). It requires the players to move quicker and more often to be in a good position to receive a ball. This exercise will impact the speed of the game and the condition of each player also.

Time limits

Time limits for certain goals can require a player to make quicker and find more straight forwarded decisions due to the time pressure (mental). For example: after winning a ball, the team has 10 seconds to finish. With this rule, the transitioning skills (of both teams) will be forced, and the attacking team will look for quick passing options (vertical) into the attacking third. It requires excellent technical passing and ball control skills, as well as, the willingness to run. The players will train their passing skills and their conditioning simultaneously without realizing it.

Another session option is to instruct the team that they have 5 seconds to win the ball back after losing it (counter-pressing). If they win the ball back within 5 seconds = 1 extra point. If they don't, they must retreat.

We can also modify the length of time of each game. For example, a game of 2-5min will impact the speed. In a longer game the players must economize their conditioning. They have to adjust their speed and rhythm to have a recovery phase during the game.

Field size

The game intensity will increase with increasing the size of the field, due to the players having to run more to cover a larger area of play. The narrower the game field is, the more pressure the defending team can put on the attacking team. It will improve their defending and pressing skills. On the other side, the attacking team must play quicker and more direct to bypass pressuring defenders. This will promote the development of passing technics both in tight spaces and over distance.

Whereas in bigger spaces the players will develop their skills to interpret space and the situation. For example, the team in possession of the ball can stretch the field (vertically and horizontally), play keep away, thus tiring defenders and forcing them to chase/cover an expanded area.

Field layout

A coach can change the layout of the fields. The coach can make the field wider but shorter and the players will work on their wide play. Making the field narrower and shorter teaches them to play more vertically and promotes quick finishing under pressure. You also could create forbidden zones on the field. For example, if you want your team to play from the back using the outside zones, you can mark a field in the middle which they are not allowed to play through. How about round or diamond fields? Here are some examples:



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Set up:

- Circle with a diameter of 30 yd
- 3 mini goals

Performance:

- 4v4 on 3 goals, teams can score on any goals

Coaching points:

- Improvement of orientation ability
- Quick transitioning
- Communication
- Nice change, more fun

**Set up:**

- Set up the field like a diamond as demonstrated in the picture

Execution:

- 6v6/7v7 (adjust field size)
- Player can play within the diamond only

Coaching points:

- Player will play through the center vertically
- Automatically more low passes
- Players will look for the shortest and quickest way to the goal (for the receiver: open playing position towards the goal important)

Game goals

Games with 2 goals but without direction of play will improve the possession and passing skills with permanent switch of play. If a team loses or wins a ball, they will improve on their transitioning skills. Games without goals but with direction of play will improve the skills to bring up the ball or winning space on the field. Here are a few samples

Sample 1



Set up:

- 4 18x15 yd squares
- 2 teams: 6-7 players (blue), 3-4 players (red)

Execution:

- the blue is always in possession of the ball.
- Goal is to play in as many squares as possible > “play” means that at least 2 players must pass to each other once > pass into the square does not count
- 3 blue players and one defender (red) can be only in the ball-zone square.
- If the team “plays” one square = 1 point
- If the defending team wins the ball = 1 point (winning means the defending team has to have control of the ball (kicking the ball out of the square does not count as winning.))
- If one team has too many players in one zone than allowed > the other teams gets a point
- Game time: 5min, then switch/mix up the teams

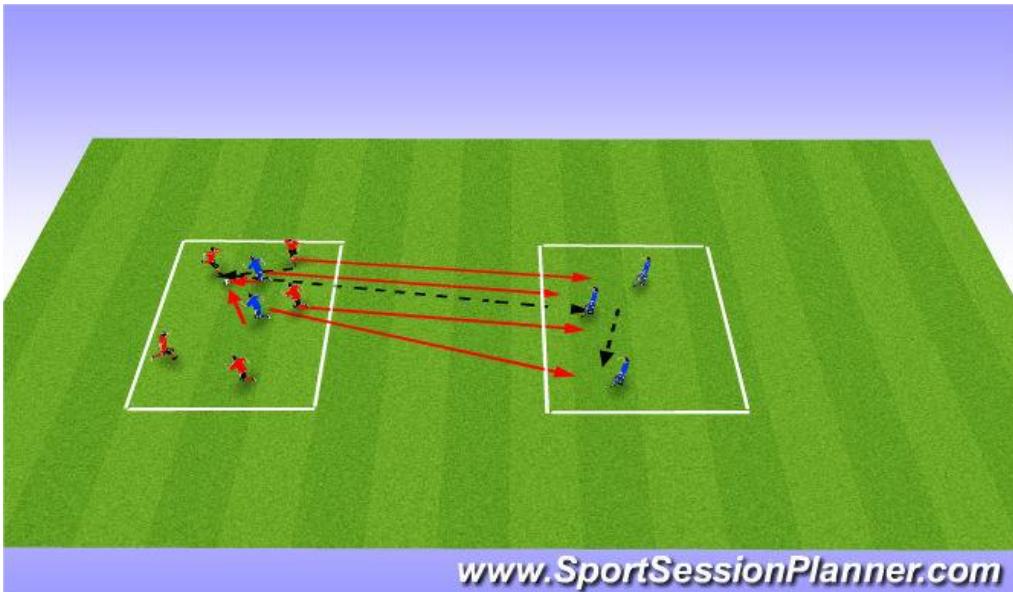
Variations:

- The ball can stay in one zone for 5 seconds only
- After 3 or 4 passes the ball has to be passed into the next zone
- They players have to pass 3 times before they can move to the next zone
- If the defending team wins the ball, they have to pass to a teammate to get a point

Coaching points:

- There will be many turnovers in the beginning because of many rules and because of time and space pressure
- It is important to pass the ball into the “open foot position”
- Improvement of passing and ball control skills
- Improvement of stress management, ability of orientation and speed of execution
- **This exercise might be mentally exhausting, give the kids a small mental break by playing small sided game, tag, etc. It will give the brain to process the new information. Then you can restart the exercise and you will see better results (*my personal experience!*)**

Sample 2:



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Set up:

- Set up 2 squares with 5yd space in between
- Two teams

Execution:

- 5v2 (3v1, 4v2 etc.)
- Red team tries to keep the ball in possession
- Blue team tries to win the ball, once they won the ball > they pass to their teammates into the other field and all blue players follow the ball
- 2 of the closest red players follow now as defenders > 5v2
- Now red must win the ball back and bring it to their teammates in the other field and so on...

Coaching points:

- Quick transitioning on both sides
- Switch of play after winning the ball
- Improvement of passing and ball control skills under pressure
- Make sure that the 2 closest defenders follow (shortest and quickest way for counter-pressing)
- It is important to pass the ball into the “open foot position”

Here is a sample for game with goals but no direction of play



Set up:

- Same set up as sample 1, just add 2 more squares and mini goals
- 2 teams, *see sample 1*

Execution:

- Goal is to play in 2,3 or more squares, then the team can score on any goal
- “play” means that at least 2 players must pass to each other once > pass into the square does not count
- if the defending team wins the ball they can score on any goal
- 5min > then switch/mix up teams

Coaching points:

- Quick transitioning on both sides
- Switch of play after winning the ball
- Improvement of passing and ball control skills under pressure
- Ball circulation with patience
- Improvement of stress management, ability of orientation and speed of execution

Number of Players

A coach can also vary the numbers of players by using neutrals or creating numerical advantage or disadvantage, like 5v2, 6v3 etc.

For example, in a 6v3 situation the defenders are not able to man-mark. They only can defend (or win the ball) through zone defending or ball focused defending (group defending). On the other hand the team in a numerical advantage can improve their passing skills, ability to create chances, combination and possession play.

These scenarios allow the players to work on their technical and tactical skills without giving the players theoretical instructions.

Summary

With these exercises the players will be confronted with many complex game situations that improve the concentration and stress management. The players will become more efficient with their decisions and quicker in making decisions on the field. The players will develop a better awareness of the field around them and they will demonstrate a better stress resistance under pressure because they are used to it from the practice sessions. With variation of player numbers, field size and limitation of touches the players will also improve their conditioning simultaneously with tactics and technics. This way you can teach your players more things at the same time, compared to isolated exercises. The information that the young players learned subconsciously will be remembered easier than isolated instructions.

A combination of instructions (explicit learning) and implicit learning can be applied for older players, 14 and up, as they already understand tactical basics and have gained a lot of experience already. As always, the complexity of the exercises should be adjusted to the kids' and team's age, skills and levels.

We will also publish a special holiday Newsletter soon! Stay tuned! If you have questions, feedback or if you need more information, please feel free to contact me: dgroth@nyswysa.org.