

3.

The Building Blocks



3.

Skill Acquisition Phase



- In the Skill Acquisition Phase the coach must focus exclusively on providing a solid foundation of **technical skill**
- If the player does not gain this **skill foundation** during this phase it will be very difficult to make it up later
- No amount of fitness or competitive spirit will ever compensate for deficiencies in **functional game skills**

The Skill Acquisition Phase (U/10-U/13)

The characteristics of children this age are:

- They are highly motivated and enthusiastic
- They are competitive, like challenges and want to show they're the best
- They are well balanced and coordinated
- They are very adaptive to learning motor skills
- Although still self-centred, they start to learn how to work together
- They are sensitive to criticism and failure (praise is important)
- They are physically and mentally ready for a more structured approach to training

As mentioned above, in the period before entering the growth spurt that goes hand in hand with puberty, children are well balanced and coordinated. This makes them very adaptive to developing motor skills (techniques) especially since this is one of the brain's key development periods.

The Japanese call this phase of 'turbo charged' technical development the 'Golden Age of motor learning'. In no other development phase in life will motor learning happen faster than here. As a logical consequence of the above, it makes sense that we make optimal use of this period to lay a sustainable technical foundation.

TECHNICAL SKILLS MUST BE DEVELOPED NOW

(if we miss out here it will hamper us for the rest of our playing career).

Hopefully it now makes perfect sense why we call this phase the 'Skill Acquisition Phase'. The focus during this period is on the development of the 'functional game skills'.

These are the technical skills you need to perform effectively during a game.

The word 'functional' emphasises the difference to 'un-functional' tricks, which may be fun to see and do but useless during the game.

The 4 Core Skills:

The FFA Skill Acquisition training program focuses upon developing four core skills when in possession of the ball.

1. Striking the ball

This includes all forms of striking the ball such as short/long passing; shooting and crossing

2. First touch

Controlling the ball with all allowed body parts

3. 1 v 1

All moves, feints and accelerations to get past and away from an opponent

4. Running with the ball

At speed (with a lot of space) or 'dribbling' (in tight areas), this includes techniques for protecting the ball and changing direction.

These four core skills cover 95% of the actions of any outfield player when in possession of the ball during a game of football. The other 5% consists of actions such as heading and throw-ins.

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Skill Acquisition Phase

Of course we can also distinguish defensive skills such as various tackling techniques and it goes without saying that the defensive 1 v 1 skills are equally important and must be properly developed too.

We made the practical choice to develop the defensive skills as part of the 1 v 1 practices. Although the emphasis is on the attacking skills, we are not ignoring the defensive ones. So, in the 1 v 1 Model Sessions, coaches will find the box below with coaching tips for the defender as well the attacker.

1 v 1 Coaching Tips	
ATTACKER	DEFENDER
"Go at the defender with speed"	"Show the attacker one way/force them away from goal"
"Use a feint to put the defender off balance"	"Bend your knees and stand on your toes so you're able to change direction quickly"
"Threaten to go to one side then suddenly attack the other"	"The best moment to commit is when the attacker takes a heavy touch or slows down"

As far as heading is concerned, the advice is to start developing this specific skill at the start of the Game Training Phase. At younger ages heading is a 'scary' activity and not much heading takes place anyway since most players lack the power to play aerial balls.

If heading is practised during the Skill Acquisition Phase we advise the use of so-called super light balls (specially devised for youth football).

As we've explained earlier it takes many hours of practicing and lots of repetition to properly develop the four core skills with both feet and 'automate' the techniques. Automate means that we've practised the techniques so often that we can execute them without having to consciously concentrate on the execution.

We can compare this process with learning to drive a car: in the beginning we have to consciously think of every act in the process, we even tend to look where the pedals are. But after some time we drive from A to B while having a conversation, thinking deeply about something or making a (hands free) phone call. We arrive at our destination totally unaware of the driving acts we have executed on the way: driving a car has become an automatism.

The same principle applies for mastering the core skills: many hours of purposeful practice will eventually lead to automatism and we execute the skill 'unconsciously'. When this happens we will, as a consequence, have more time for scanning our options and making decisions. With top level players the ball is 'glued' to their feet while they look around and check the options.

The principle of thousands of hours of practice leading to automatism applies to everything, from playing a violin to playing golf or football. Football however differs from golf because the technical skills must be executed under constant pressure of football-specific resistances (opponents; space; time; direction), in ever-changing situations.

Scientific research (Daniel Coyle, 'The Talent Code'; et al.) shows that in football the most educationally effective way is to develop technical skills (execution) and perception skills (decision-making) **simultaneously**.

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This 'holistic approach' is one of the essences of the FFA Coaching Philosophy which is explained in depth in chapter 4.

So, herein lies the huge challenge for anyone working with players in this important age bracket: your primary role is that of a 'skills teacher' focused on individual technical development as opposed to being a 'team coach'.

Your mission is to 'automate' the core skills through lots of repetition, but at the same time avoid 'drill' practices, where there may be repetition but no decision-making.

It's not easy to get this right!

**You'll find the Skill Acquisition Phase Model
Sessions on page 127.**



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Skill Acquisition Phase Model Sessions



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Skill Acquisition Phase

Model Sessions

At this age the children are ready for a more structured approach to training. In every session the focus is on one of the core skills, from the beginning until the end of the session (“theme based sessions”).

The Skill Acquisition Phase sessions consist of 3 components:

1. Skill introduction, this is the warm-up as well as an introduction to the designated core skill for this session. This is the only part of the session where drill-type exercises should be used, but the creative coach can include elements of decision-making.

- Flow, no ‘stop-start coaching’.

2. Skill training, this is the part of the session where conscious teaching and learning of the designated core skill takes place.

- Lots of repetition in game realistic scenarios!
- Task-based coaching
- Effective feedback
- Use of questioning (ask players ‘why did you choose that option?’, ‘where do you think there might be more space?’, etc)

3. Skill game, a game where as much as possible all the elements of the real game are present but organised in a way that the designated core skill has to be used regularly.

- Skill games are preferably **small sided games** to stimulate the number of repetitions/touches!
- The players play, the coach observes if learning has taken place.

It is also advisable to ‘wrap-up’ the session at the end, summarising the main points of the session to enhance learning.

Since the Skill Games are games in which all the **Game Specific Resistances** are present (team-mates; opponents; goals; direction; etc) they also provide an ideal opportunity to gradually establish the basic principles of the team tasks during the main moments of the game (e.g. ‘make the field small’ when defending; ‘try to face forward’ when attacking).

In other words: the emphasis in the Skill Acquisition Phase is on **Skill Development** but this can/should not be separated from developing insight/game understanding at the same time.

If this approach is applied properly, it will provide a seamless transition into the **Game Training Phase**.

This principle also relates to the concept of Small Sided Football and appropriate coach behaviour (refer to chapter 3):

During the Skill Acquisition Phase, 2-3 sessions of 60-75 minutes plus a game is a safe weekly workload, with the following session planning guidelines:

- Welcome: 5 minutes
- Skill Introduction: 15-20 minutes
- Skill Training: 25-30 minutes
- Skill Game: 20-25 minutes
- Wrap up: 5 minutes

On the next pages you will find three consecutive 6 week cycles (18 weeks program) and 12 Skill Acquisition Phase Model Sessions, 3 for each core skill with increasing difficulty. The 6 week cycles are based on the assumption that the weekly training sessions are on Tuesdays and Thursdays with a game on Saturday.

During the first cycle, Model Session 1 of each core skill is repeated every two weeks. Each time we repeat the Model Session we try to make a step-up (make the session more challenging) but only if the players are ready for it. During the second cycle, Model Session 2 of each core skill is repeated every two weeks and during the third cycle Model Session 3 of each core skill:

Skill Acquisition Phase CYCLE 1	Tuesday	Thursday	Saturday
WEEK 1	First touch MODEL SESSION 1	Striking the ball MODEL SESSION 1	GAME
WEEK 2	Running with the ball MODEL SESSION 1	1 v 1 MODEL SESSION 1	GAME
WEEK 3	First touch MODEL SESSION 1 Step up (if possible)	Striking the ball MODEL SESSION 1 Step up (if possible)	GAME
WEEK 4	Running with the ball MODEL SESSION 1 Step up (if possible)	1 v 1 MODEL SESSION 1 Step up (if possible)	GAME
WEEK 5	First touch MODEL SESSION 1 Step up (if possible)	Striking the ball MODEL SESSION 1 Step up (if possible)	GAME
WEEK 6	Running with the ball MODEL SESSION 1 Step up (if possible)	1 v 1 MODEL SESSION 1 Step up (if possible)	GAME

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Skill Acquisition Phase

Skill Acquisition Phase CYCLE 2	Tuesday	Thursday	Saturday	Skill Acquisition Phase CYCLE 3	Tuesday	Thursday	Saturday
WEEK 1	First touch MODEL SESSION 2	Striking the ball MODEL SESSION 2	GAME	WEEK 1	First touch MODEL SESSION 3	Striking the ball MODEL SESSION 3	GAME
WEEK 2	Running with the ball MODEL SESSION 2	1 v 1 MODEL SESSION 2	GAME	WEEK 2	Running with the ball MODEL SESSION 3	1 v 1 MODEL SESSION 3	GAME
WEEK 3	First touch MODEL SESSION 2 Step up (if possible)	Striking the ball MODEL SESSION 2 Step up (if possible)	GAME	WEEK 3	First touch MODEL SESSION 3 Step up (if possible)	Striking the ball MODEL SESSION 3 Step up (if possible)	GAME
WEEK 4	Running with the ball MODEL SESSION 2 Step up (if possible)	1 v 1 MODEL SESSION 2 Step up (if possible)	GAME	WEEK 4	Running with the ball MODEL SESSION 3 Step up (if possible)	1 v 1 MODEL SESSION 3 Step up (if possible)	GAME
WEEK 5	First touch MODEL SESSION 2 Step up (if possible)	Striking the ball MODEL SESSION 2 Step up (if possible)	GAME	WEEK 5	First touch MODEL SESSION 3 Step up (if possible)	Striking the ball MODEL SESSION 3 Step up (if possible)	GAME
WEEK 6	Running with the ball MODEL SESSION 2 Step up (if possible)	1 v 1 MODEL SESSION 2 Step up (if possible)	GAME	WEEK 6	Running with the ball MODEL SESSION 3 Step up (if possible)	1 v 1 MODEL SESSION 3 Step up (if possible)	GAME

With 3 sessions per week our advice is to limit the duration of the sessions to 60 minutes and rest the players the day before as well as the day after the game. So, with a game on Saturday, we recommend a training session on Monday, Tuesday and Thursday.

Factors to consider:

- Performance of the players in previous training sessions
- Performance of the players in matches (NB: matches should only be assessed in terms of core skill performance, not 'team tactics'. That way, training and matches are closely and logically linked)

Observation may lead you to conclude that one core skill appears to be especially deficient in most of the players, while another is generally strong.

Possible Cycle Planning changes:

- Replace the stronger skill with the weaker one every second rotation
- Move to a 5-session rotation in which each skill is focused on once, except for the weaker one which appears twice

The best advice for a coach working with players in this age group would be to attend the **FFA Youth C Licence course**.

This will give coaches a much better understanding of the why's and how's of session planning and season planning, while developing their ability to design their own practices.

Important:

- When the kids start playing 11 v 11 while they are still in the Skill Acquisition Phase, (U12/13) there is a common tendency for coaches to become totally obsessed with results, and forget that the players are still in the skill acquisition phase. This has a very negative effect on training session content as well as Match Day behaviour.

Training must remain focused on skill development; it is poor practice and detrimental to the players to sacrifice critical skill training time in order to conduct unnecessary 'tactical' coaching.

Match Day is when the coach can start developing the players insight and understanding of the basic team and player tasks. This involves reinforcement and elaboration of the basic tasks introduced at training during Skill Games ('Get between the lines', 'Can you face forward?' 'Look for the killer pass', 'Make the field big', etc)

It is also disadvantageous for young players' development to specialize for a specific team position too early; let them experience the various positions and aim for specialisation during the Game Training phase (the rationale for this is excellently explained in the book 'Coaching Outside the Box' by Mairs and Shaw).

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Skill Acquisition Phase Model Sessions

First touch Model Session 1

1. Skill introduction

Players in fours (fives is also fine, and is a way of reducing intensity, if required) with one ball between them. 2 pairs facing each other 5m-7m apart. The yellow player starts by passing the ball to the orange player and following their pass at speed.

The orange player uses their first touch to move the ball away from the yellow player, and with the second touch passes to the blue player. The orange player follows their pass and jogs to the back of the opposite line.

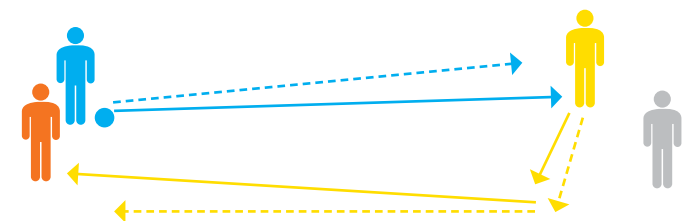
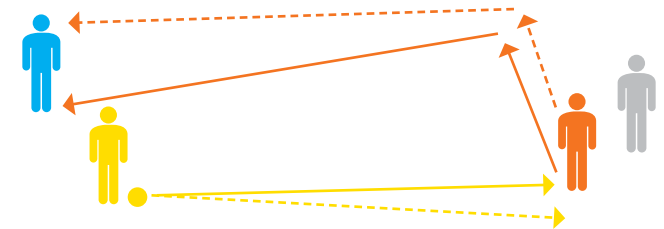
In example A, the orange player has moved the ball to the right because the yellow player approached him/her slightly to his/her left side.

In example B, the yellow player has moved the ball to the left because the blue player approached him/her to his/her right.

The coach can also direct the passer to follow the pass by running **directly** at the receiver. Therefore the receiver has the option of going left or right, ideally the receiver will fake to move the ball in one direction, and then with his/her first touch move the ball the other way.

Concluding Competition:

Which group can complete 10 passes first?



First touch Model Session 1

2. Skill training component:

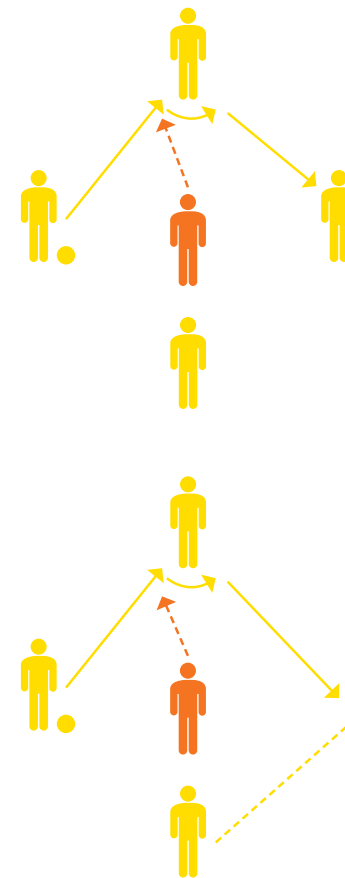
Positioning Games with **two touches** as a **mandatory** requirement (i.e. first touch = control the ball, second touch = pass the ball).

Disallowing a direct pass forces the players to have a good first touch in order to move the ball away from the defender(s) and keep possession!

Which positioning game to use depends on the level of the players and ranges from 4 v 1 (easiest), 3 v 1, 5 v 2 and 4 v 2 (most difficult).

The grid size also depends on the level and capabilities of the players with 15m x 15m as a starting point (15m x 20m for the 5 v 2).

The coach can make the exercise more challenging for the players by simply decreasing the space or easier by making the grids bigger.

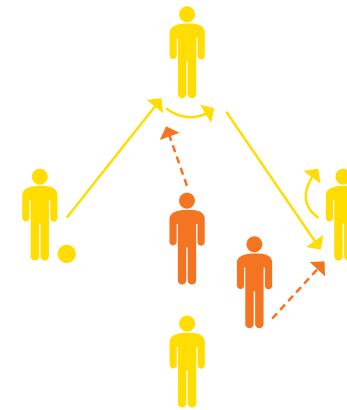
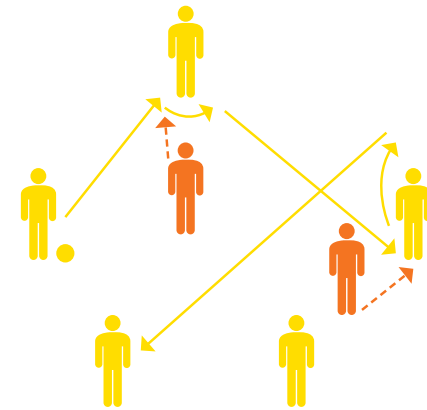


Skill Acquisition Phase Model Sessions

First touch Model Session 1

Possible Coaches Remarks:

- “Move to support as the ball moves”
 - “Make angles (do not stand in the corners)”
 - “Keep your body open to the field”
 - “Move the ball with your first touch away from the defender(s) “
 - “Use body feints to disguise your intention”
-
- Competition: which defender(s) forces most mistakes in 1 minute



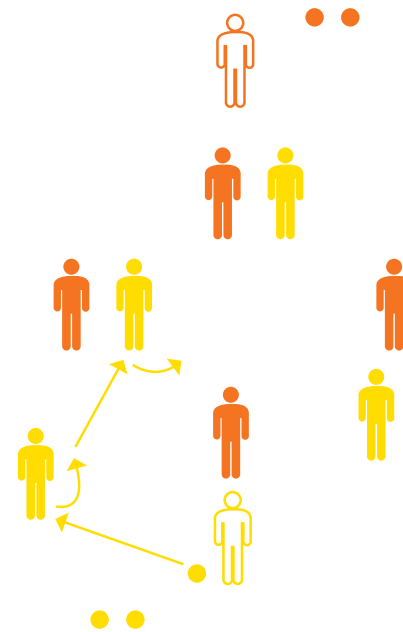
First touch Model Session 1

3. Skill Game:

5 v 5 with the restriction that with every ball contact each player **must take two touches**.

Disallowing direct play forces the players to have a good first touch in order to move the ball away from the defender(s) and keep possession!

The coach can make the game more challenging by simply decreasing the space or more easy by making the field bigger or creating a numerical advantage for the team in possession of the ball by adding a 'joker'.

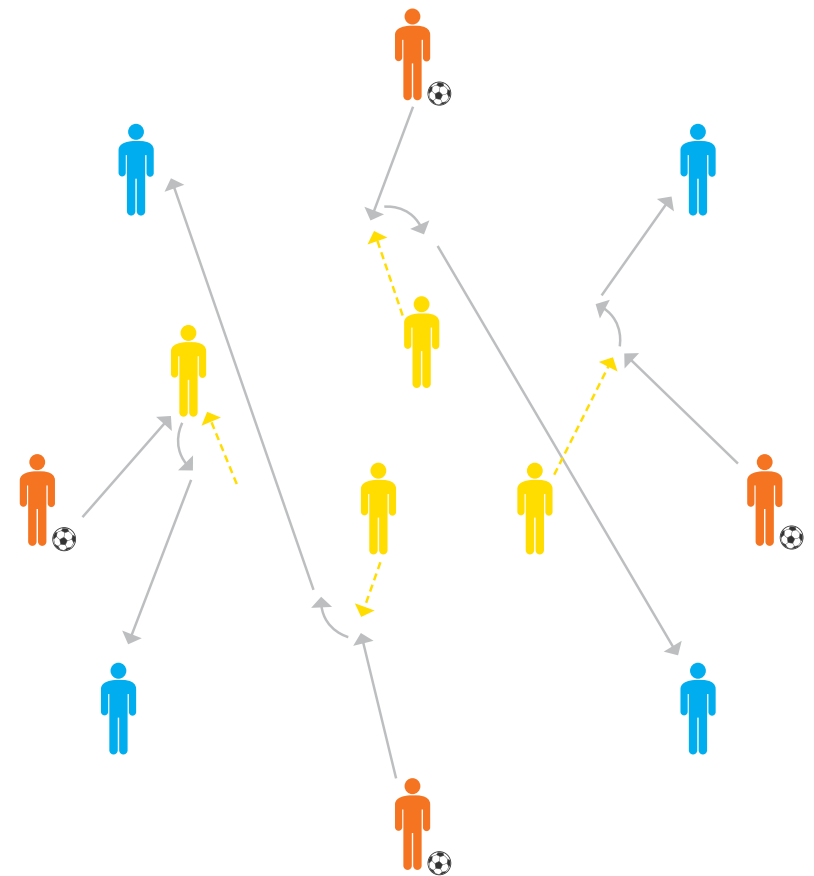


Skill Acquisition Phase Model Sessions

First touch Model Session 2

1. Skill introduction

- In and around the centre circle 3 groups of 4 (or more) players with different colour bibs are positioned as follows:
 - a. The orange players outside the centre circle with a ball each
 - b. The blue players outside the centre circle without a ball
 - c. The yellow players inside the centre circle without a ball
- The yellow group moves around the circle calling for the ball and moving it with their first touch to pass it with their second touch to a player outside the circle who does not have a ball (anticipation, communication and awareness)
- Change roles after 1-2 min
- Only use left/right foot
- Only use inside/outside foot
- Serve out of hands to thigh/chest
- After passing the ball servers follow their pass to (passively) pressure the receiver on their 1st touch



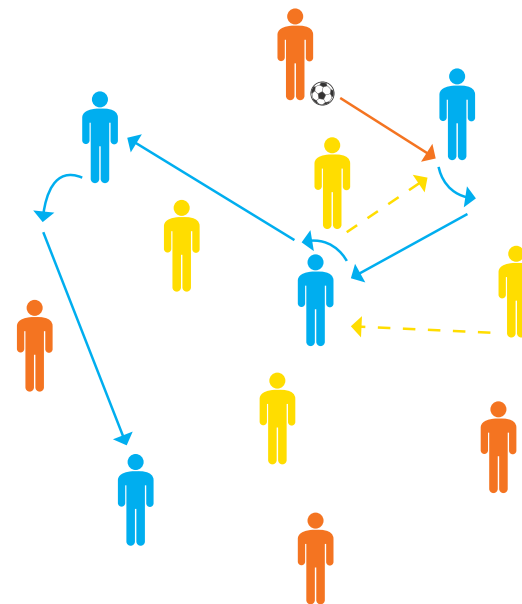
First touch Model Session 2

Possible Coaches Remarks:

- “Know beforehand to whom you are going to play the ball”
- “Try to use 2 touches only, the 1st touch to receive the ball and the 2nd touch to pass it”
- “Do not just move the ball side-ways, try to make a full turn sometimes”

Concluding game:

- 8 v 4 in centre circle, **mandatory** 2 touches to emphasise a quality 1st touch.
- Blue and orange try to keep possession with yellow defending
- Always position 1 or 2 ‘link’ players centrally
- How long does it take for yellow to make 5 or 10 interceptions? Now blue defends and then orange
- Who is the winner?



Skill Acquisition Phase Model Sessions

First touch Model Session 2

2. Skill training component

Positioning game 4 v 4 with 4 'wall' players (8 v 4) in a 20m x 30m grid (depending on player's ability).

Mandatory 2 touches for all players including the 'walls' who must keep the ball moving (i.e. not allowed to stop the ball with their 1st touch). This simple restraint sees to it that each 1st touch must be perfect every time the player receives the ball.

Possible Coaches Remarks:

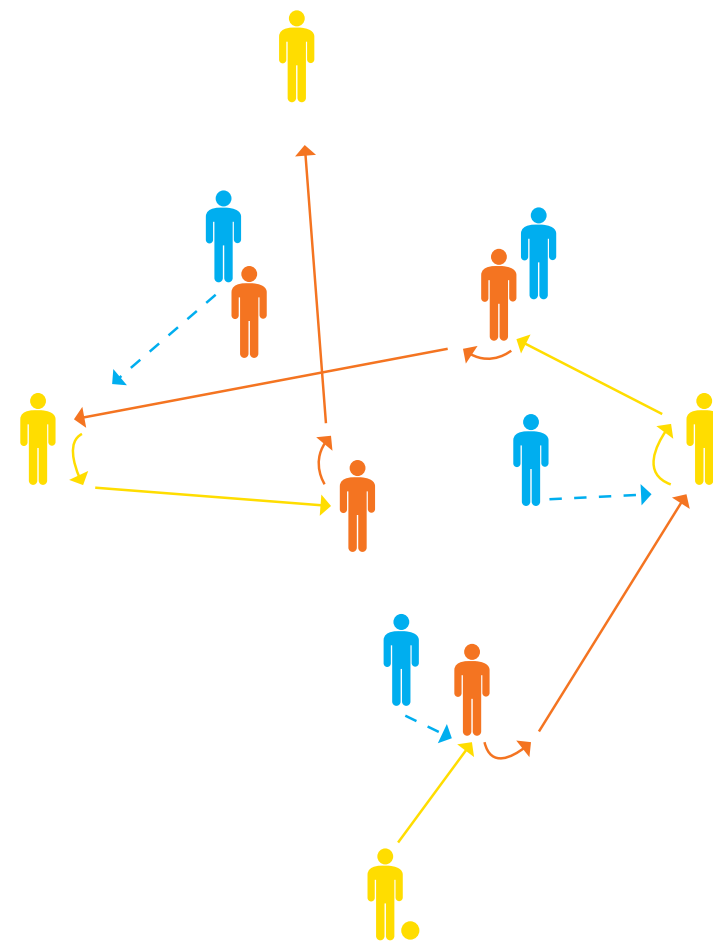
- "Move the ball with your 1st touch away from the defender(s)"
- "Use body feints to disguise your intention"
- "Make an angle when asking for the ball"
- "Try to position yourself in such a way that you can see as much of the grid as possible"
- "Scan your options before receiving the ball"
- "Walls: help the players in the grid by coaching them"

Step up

- Reduce grid size

Step down:

- Increase grid size or go back to an easier positioning game (4 v 1; 3 v 1 or 4 v 2)



3. Skill game

- 4 v 4 with 4 walls (8 v 4) in a 20m x 30m grid with two 2m goals and a 5m-7m scoring zone at each end (see diagram)

Game rules:

- Mandatory 2 touches for every player (MUST touch the ball twice)
- Walls not allowed to stop the ball or play to each other
- Inside the scoring zone one touch finishes are allowed if the ball comes from the wall player between the goals
- Change teams every 2-3 minutes or after a goal is scored

Skill Acquisition Phase Model Sessions

First touch Model Session 3

1. Skill introduction

Players in threes, positioned as shown. Both players at the sides with a ball; the player in the middle stands in a 2m x 2m grid without ball.

The exercise starts with a player on one side passing the ball to the player in the grid. They must move the ball with their first touch side-ways out of the grid and pass it back with their second touch.

Then they receive the next ball from the player at the opposite side, etc. (see variation 1) Rotate positions after 10 repetitions. Use various techniques i.e. right/left foot only; inside/outside foot only.

In variation 2, the central player receives the ball, turns in the grid (one touch) and passes to the player at the opposite side with their 2nd touch. This player receives the ball and passes it back again to the player in the grid, etc. (so here we temporarily use one ball only!). Again: left and right; inside and outside foot.

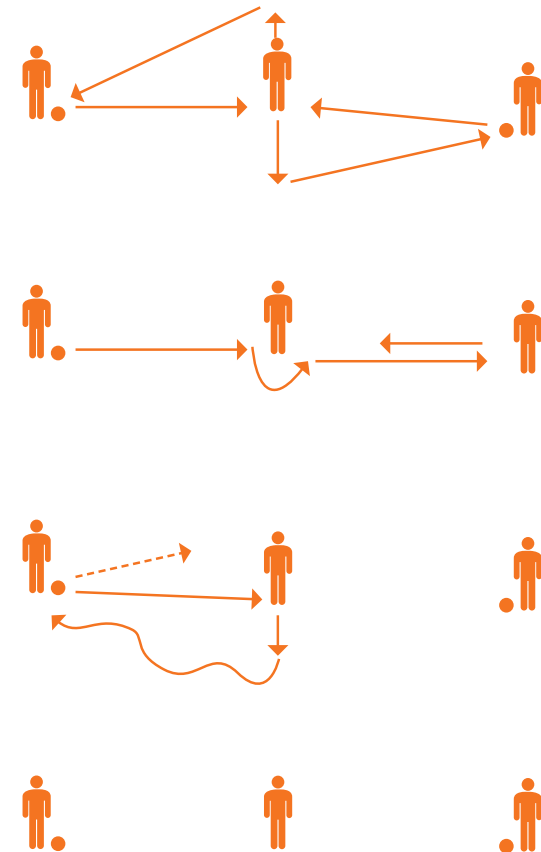
In variation 3, the outside players follow their pass, sprinting to the left or right cone of the grid. The player in the middle must now move the ball out of the grid in the opposite direction with their 1st touch and dribble the ball to the empty cone. The new middle player now receives the ball from the other end and the pattern is repeated.

Concluding competition:

Use one of the 1st touch techniques for a relay:

“which group has concluded 10 perfect repetitions by all 3 players first”

“OK, one more time and now(other technique).



First touch Model Session 3

2. Skill training component

- Positioning game 4 v 4 + 2 'rescue' players (6 v 4) in a 30m x 30m grid
- The 'rescue' players of both teams are positioned opposite each other (as shown in diagram)
- **Mandatory 2 touches** for all players, including the 'rescue' players (this simple restraint sees to it that each 1st touch must be good!)
- If someone passes to a rescue player, both players (passer and 'rescue' player) must immediately swap positions

Possible Coaches Remarks:

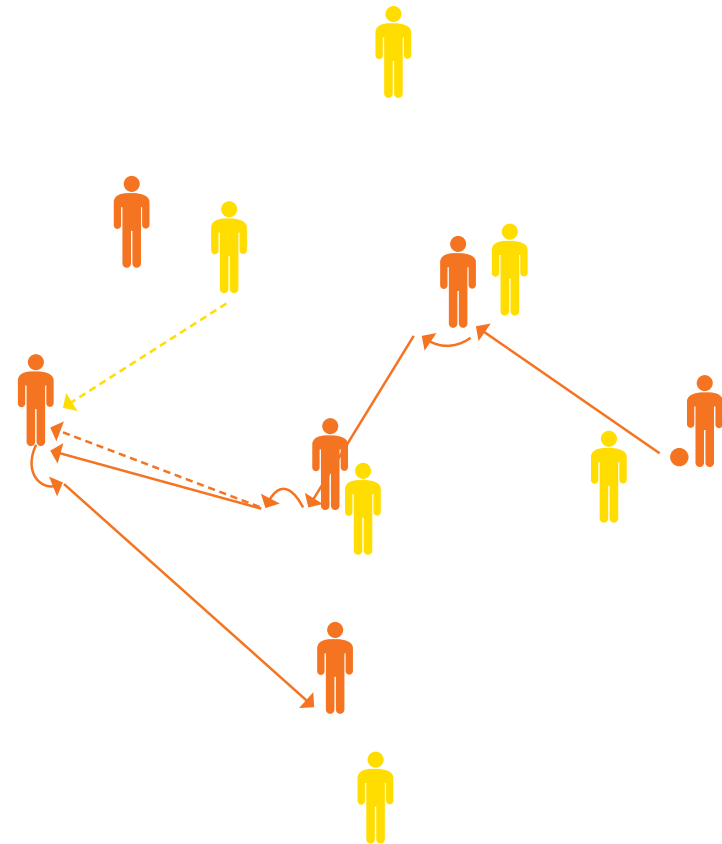
- “Move the ball with your 1st touch away from the defender(s)”
- “use body feints to disguise your intention”
- “make an angle when asking for the ball”
- “try to position yourself in a way that you can see as much of the grid as possible”
- “scan your options before receiving the ball”
- “rescue players: help the players in the grid by coaching them”

Step up:

- Reduce grid size
- Game: one point for every successful interchange passer-rescue player (NB the rescue player must continue possession)

Step down:

- Increase grid size
- Use a 'joker' or an easier positioning game



Skill Acquisition Phase Model Sessions

First touch Model Session 3

3. Skill game

4 v 4 in a grid of approximately 35m x 35m with five 3m gates positioned as shown.

The team in possession scores a goal when one of their players passes the ball to a team-mate through one of the gates.

Mandatory 2 touches for all players

If the defending team wins the ball, the roles change without stopping the game.

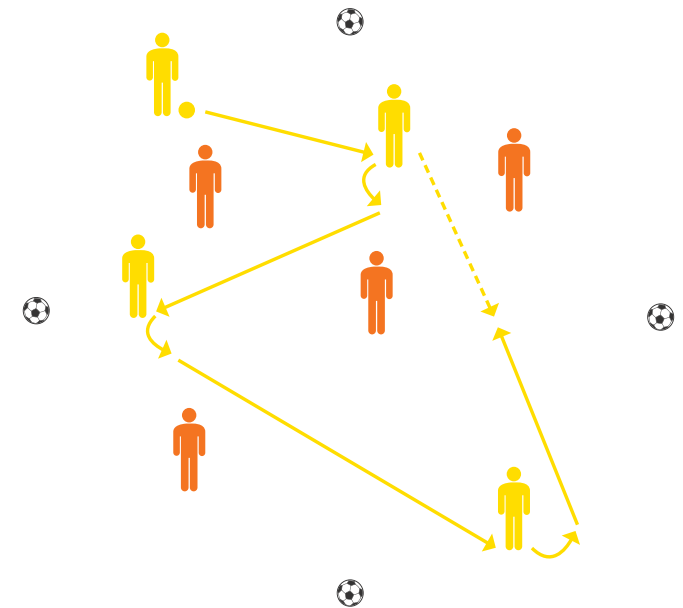
“Which teams scores most?”

Step up:

- The attacking team must make an effort to score within 30 seconds, otherwise the possession goes to the opponent
- Decrease the goal size

Step down:

- Increase the goal size
- Add another goal
- Introduce a 'joker'



Striking the ball Model Session 1 (short passing)

1 . Skill introduction

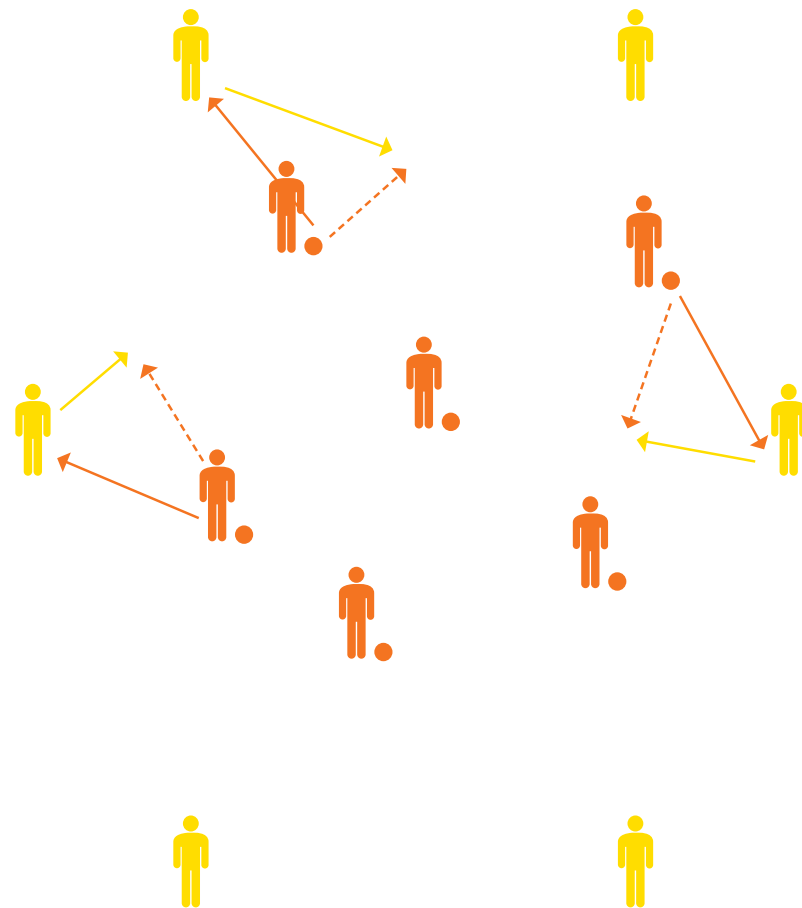
In a grid of approximately 20m x 20m (dependent on group size) half of the players position themselves outside the grid without a ball and the other half with a ball inside.

The players inside the grid dribble freely until they can pass to a 'free' player on the outside who then passes the ball back to the same player (see diagram A)

Change roles every two minutes, players must use left / right foot on coaches call i.e. 2 min left foot only; then 2 min right foot only.

Possible Coaches Remarks:

- "Only pass the ball when the passing line is 'open' and make sure someone else is not passing to that player at the same time"
- "Pass the ball precise and with the right speed"
- "Look where you run when asking for the ball back and make an angle for the return pass"

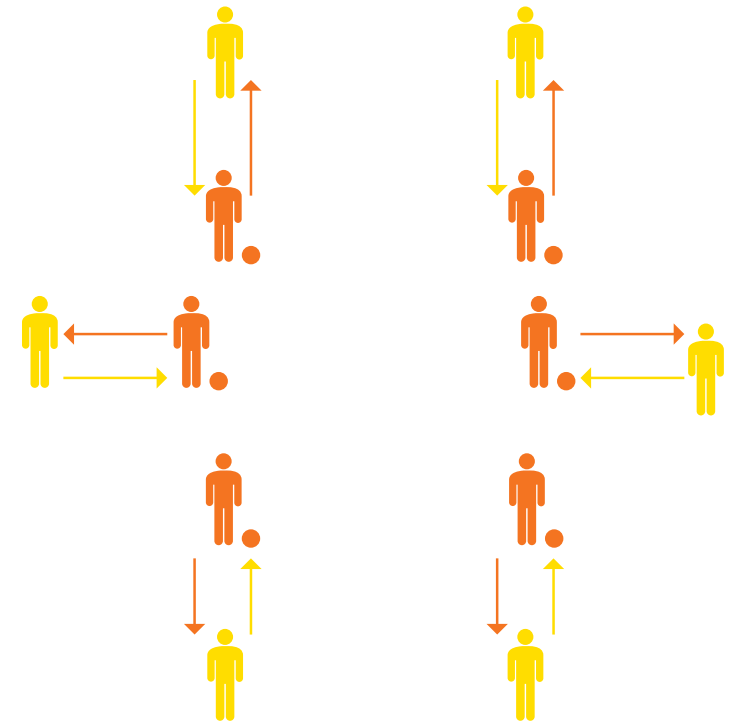


Skill Acquisition Phase Model Sessions

Striking the ball Model Session 1 (short passing)

- Next the players form pairs with one ball and position themselves at the edge of the grid, 3m on either side of the line (see diagram B)
- The players move towards each other while playing one touch passes until they have reduced the distance to 1m-2m. Then they move backwards again continuing to pass until they have reached their starting position
- Right foot only
- Left foot only
- Right-left alternately

This exercise challenges the players to work on the 'weight' and accuracy of their pass using both feet over varying distances



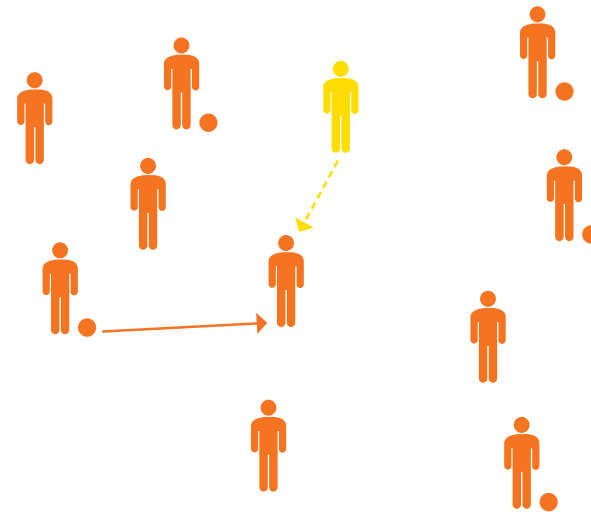
Striking the ball Model Session 1 (short passing)

Concluding tagging game

- All players go into the same grid we used for the previous exercises. Half of them have a ball at their feet, the others are without ball
- One player is appointed 'tagger' and carries a bib in their hand
- The tagger can only tag a player without ball. If the tagger succeeds in tagging a player without ball, both swap roles
- The players with ball can help their team-mates without ball by passing a ball to them when they are being chased by the tagger
- Any balls that roll out of the grid may not be fetched back, so the passes need to be accurate.

Variations to make easier or more difficult:

- 2 or more taggers
- More (or less) players with a ball



Skill Acquisition Phase Model Sessions

Striking the ball Model Session 1 (short passing)

2. Skill training component - Positioning games

Depending on the ability of your players, choose any of the 3 'basic' positioning games i.e. 4 v 1; 3 v 1 and 4 v 2. All have similar objectives but with varying degrees of resistance and complexity.

See diagrams on the right:

A. 4 v 1 (grid size 10m x 10m – 15m x 15m)

B. 3 v 1 (depending on the level of the players)

Possible Coaches Remarks:

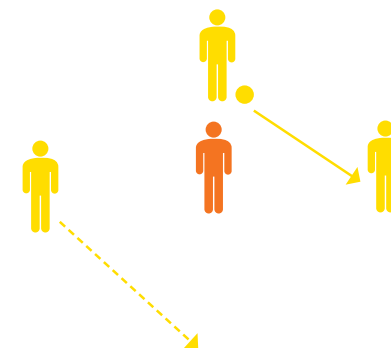
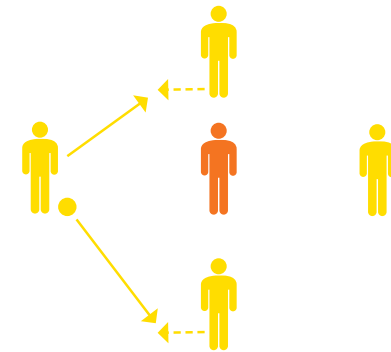
"The player on the ball must always have a player to their left and right that they can play to"

"But do not stand in the corners, your angle is much smaller if you do that"
With 3 v 1 this means that "you have to move each time the ball moves"
(see diagram B)

"Position yourself in a way that you can see the whole grid"
("with your back to the line")

"Play the ball to the proper foot of your team-mate (i.e. away from the defender) and with the proper speed and precision"

Please note that 3 v 1 asks for a lot of running and is therefore quite exhausting for players this age. Use regular drink breaks to allow for recovery



Striking the ball Model Session 1 (short passing)

4 v 2 (diagram C) grid size 12m x 12m – 15m x 15m depending on level of players

Possible Coaches Remarks specifically for 4 v 2:

“Now the player on the ball must always have a player to their left, right and in between that they can pass to”

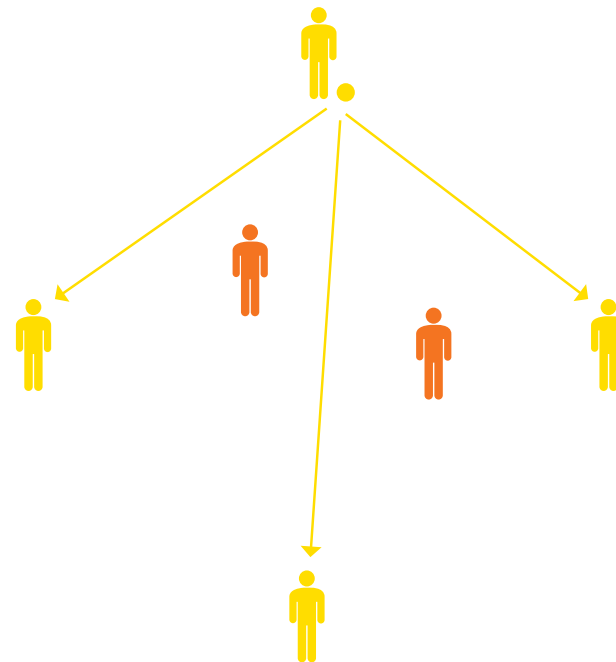
“Especially look to pass through the 2 defenders, that’s the most important pass! We call that the killer pass”

Step up:

Make the grid smaller

Step down:

Make the grid bigger



Skill Acquisition Phase Model Sessions

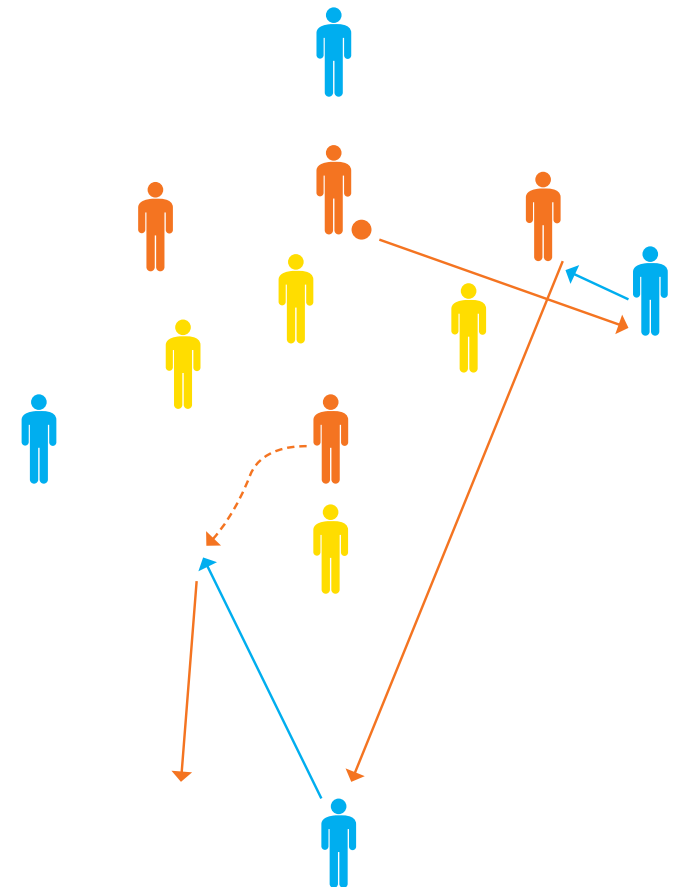
Striking the ball Model Session 1 (short passing)

3. Skill game

- 4 v 4 with 4 neutral players (walls) on a pitch of approximately 20m x 30m
- 4 small goals placed as shown (2m wide)
- The team in possession of the ball can use the wall players (8 v 4)
- Rotate teams after 3 min or after each score: scorers stay on
- Depending on level of the players: 2-3 touches max in order to get an emphasis on passing

Possible progressions:

- Wall players must play the ball direct
- Goals count as double if scored by a so-called **3rd man combination** (see diagram)



Striking the ball Model Session 2 (the 'killer' pass)

1. Skill introduction

6 players are positioned as shown, distance between the cones 7m-8m.

The passing exercise starts with player #1 at cone A passing the ball to the feet of the player at cone B (who moves away with a dummy run as if getting away from an imaginary defender, then checks back to the ball to receive it).

B bounces back to A1 who plays the killer pass to the first player at cone C.

C1 moves the ball (1st touch) and passes to the player at cone D (2nd touch) and the same pattern is repeated.

All players involved move to the next cone after completing their action/pass (from cone A to B; B to C; C to D and D to A). Every 2-3 minutes: change the direction (use other foot).

Variation for advanced players

- 2 balls, starting with A1 and C1 at the same time

Possible Coaches Remarks:

"More accuracy, play the ball to your mate's right/left foot"

"Play the ball with more speed"

"Communicate, time your action"

