Optimising practice activities in youth football
Dr. Paul R. Ford (p.ford@ljmu.ac.uk)
Me...

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Role: Senior Lecturer, School of Sport and Exercise Sciences, LJMU

Specialist area: Skill acquisition, expert performance, learning

Previous role: Part-time coach in Premier League Youth Academy
Aim

To have coaches critically reflect using research evidence on the practice activities they use and their effect on skill acquisition.
Today...

1. Example practice activities

2. Skill characteristics of an expert player

3. Effect of practice activities on the acquisition of those characteristics
Task...

Draw out or write down one of your favourite practice drills or games
Practice activity #1

X1 throws the ball to X2, who turns and passes to X3
10 reps to chest, 10 reps to thigh, 10 reps to feet
Practice activity #2

3 vs. 3 line ball
Skill characteristics of expert players

- Decision making
- Recognition & anticipation
- Visual scanning

- Movement skills
- Technical skills

Perceptual & cognitive skills
Motor skills
Practice activity #1

X1 throws the ball to X2, who turns and passes to X3
10 reps to chest, 10 reps to thigh, 10 reps to feet
Skill characteristics acquired...

- Visual – ball watching
- Movement skills - limited
- Technical skills
Training form activity...

e.g., technique practice; skill practice w/o active decision making; ‘drills’
Practice activity #2

3 vs. 3 line ball
Skill characteristics acquired...

- Decision making
- Recognition & anticipation
- Visual scanning
- Movement skills
- Technical skills

} Motor skills

} Perceptual & cognitive skills
Playing form activity...

e.g., SSG; possession games; phases of play; unidirectional games; skills practice with active decision making
Question

Q1: Is the practice drill or game you wrote down in the task categorised as Playing Form or Training Form?
An analysis of practice activities and instructional behaviours used by youth soccer coaches during practice: Exploring the link between science and application

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Abstract
We examined the practice activities and instructional behaviours employed by 25 youth soccer coaches during 70 different practice sessions. We evaluated the extent to which these activities and behaviors differ from those shown in contemporary research to best facilitate skill acquisition. Nine coaches worked with the under-9 age group and eight coaches each with the under-13 and under-16 age groups. Most of these coaches were employed at the elite level, nine at the sub-elite level, and seven at the non-elite level. Coaches had players spend more time in activities that were deemed less relevant to soccer match performance, termed "training form" (e.g., physical exercise, tactics and skill practice), than activities deemed more realistic, termed "playing form" (e.g., small-sided conditioned games and phase of play activities). Coaches provided high levels of instruction, feedback, and management, irrespective of the activity in which players engaged. Few differences in practice activities and instructional behaviors were reported across skill and age groups, implying the absence of any notable age- or skill-related progression. Findings are discussed with reference to recent research in the area of skill acquisition, motor learning, and expert performance.

Keywords: Coaching behaviors, systematic observation, time-use analysis
Ford et al. (2014)...

![The FA Logo](image)

![Bar Chart](image)

- **Session duration (%)**
  - Training Form
  - Playing Form
  - Transition

[Logos and Sponsors]
Question

Q2: Given the positive effect on skill acquisition of Playing Form activity, then why not use it ALL of the time?
Reduce the ‘challenge point’...

Table 7.2 Some examples of manipulations to the rules of small-sided games (e.g., 3 vs. 3) that may reduce the ‘challenge point’ of Playing Form activity (i.e., task simplification) for learners.

<p>| | |</p>
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Increase the size of the pitches</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Reduce the number of players on each team</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Include extra players who play for whichever team is in possession of the ball during the game (i.e., ‘floaters’)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Ban tackling – allowing only blocks of passes and pressure</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>Ban tackling in the middle half of the pitch only – allowing only blocks of passes and pressure in that area</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>Use unidirectional games in which there are more teammates than opposition (e.g., 2 vs. 1; 3 vs. 1; 4 vs. 2)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>Have the coach join in the play</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>Ban running – have the players walk only.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Increase repetition...
Table 7.3 Some examples of manipulations to the rules of small-sided games (e.g., 4 vs. 4) so that players practise specific perceptual-motor skills.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Motor skill</th>
<th>Adaptation</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Dribbling</td>
<td>Remove goals and have players score by dribbling across their opposition’s goal touchlines.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Passing</td>
<td>All small-sided games contain a lot of passing, although to encourage one- and two-touch passing, the coach can limit touches (e.g., ‘2-touch’).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Long passing</td>
<td>Make the pitch very long but not too wide. Alternatively, have two very small goals with no goalkeepers and a ‘no go’ penalty area.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Forward passing</td>
<td>Remove goals and replace with two relatively large American Football-style ‘end zones’. Players score by passing the ball into the path of a teammate, who runs into the opposition’s end zone. Use the touch line that marks the start of the ‘end zone’ as an ‘offside line’.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Switch-play passing</td>
<td>Make the pitch wide but short. Plus, remove goals and replace with two smaller goals at each goal line, which are placed on the goal lines extending in from both corners. Players must score by dribbling the ball through one of the two small goals.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Turning</td>
<td>Allow both teams to score at either end of the pitch.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Shooting</td>
<td>Place large goal nets at either end of the pitch.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Crossing</td>
<td>Place corridors along the touchlines from which players who play for whichever team is in possession can cross the ball without opposition. Limit the number of players allowed in the ‘penalty area’.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Attacking heading</td>
<td>Place corridors along the touchlines from which players who play for whichever team is in possession can cross the ball without opposition. Limit the number of players allowed in the ‘penalty area’. Goals can be scored only from headers.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Defensive heading</td>
<td>Make the pitch very long but not too wide.</td>
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1. Tag games (warm up)
2. Dribbling games in a square
3. Unidirectional games (e.g., 2 vs. 1)
4. Possession games
5. Small-sided games (e.g., 4 vs. 4)
6. Futsal
7. Shooting/crossing/penalties
Adolescent coaching session...

1. Dribbling games in a square
2. Unidirectional games (e.g., 3 vs. 2)
3. Possession games
4. Small-sided games (e.g., 6 vs. 6)
5. Phases of play
6. Full games (11 vs. 11)
7. Shooting/crossing/penalties
Summary

Playing form activity set to the appropriate challenge point and with more frequent repetition of key skills is greater for skill acquisition compared to Training Form (e.g., ‘drills’).