



Grassroots Education: Play, Practice, Play



Ian Mulliner
Technical Director

As the Technical Director for Massachusetts Youth Soccer, one of the privileges afforded to me through this position is that I regularly get to attend meetings and events hosted by our US Soccer Federation. The focus for most of the meetings is in regard to changes to the coaching education pathway and specific to the courses therein. What I can tell you is that for 2017 US Soccer is planning to implement their new Grassroots Coaching Education Courses targeted specifically to coaches who coach players playing 4 v 4, 7 v 7, 9 v 9 and 11 v 11. The reason that I am telling you this is that our session plans for the past several years have tied in directly with US Soccer's coaching education courses in terms of topics covered and theories presented and we fully intend to continue that process moving forward.

Here in the Massachusetts Youth Soccer Technical department we pride ourselves on providing the best session plans available anywhere on the planet. A lofty statement but one that is backed up by the 750,000+ hits our Session plan page has had over the last 2 years. We strive to be on the cutting edge for creating plans, plans that we distribute and use with our members in every town that we service throughout the commonwealth.

On a personal note, I have been honored to be part of the coaching group tasked with creating the Grassroots courses. My role is being part of the team creating the 7 v 7 on-line and in-person courses for and with US Soccer's Coaching Education department.

It is with that experience in mind that we have designed and created the 2017 Spring Session plans. The first thing you should notice about our latest session plans is that they are now formatted quite differently from previous years. The major difference is that we will be transitioning from the traditional 4 stage session plan: 1. Warm Up – 2. Small Sided Activity – 3. Expanded Small Sided Activity – 4. Game format into a 3 stage session plan with the following titles for each stage: 1. Play – 2. Practice – 3. Play.

Why the Change?

The (Initial) Play Stage – Considered “Deliberate Play”. Empirical data has shown that children learn best when they get to experience periods of unstructured play where they can experiment on their own, it promotes enjoyment, inclusion and development. These three factors have been proven to increase motivation to continue playing. The coaches role during this Play stage is to ensure safety, monitor the games and “take the pulse” of the players. Monitoring the games includes making sure the games are not lopsided and providing adequate stoppages to allow the players to stretch and rehydrate. During the



stoppages the coach is encouraged to ask guiding questions to lead the players towards the goal and objectives of the session. “Taking the pulse” refers to checking the players involvement and gauging their emotional state through active or in some cases avoidance of participation. In short showing the players how much you care about them right from the start of a practice.

The Practice Stage – Considered “Play – Practice” using activities to create game-like situations that create problems for the players to solve and the coach to assist with the problem solving process. A simple checklist (provided in the session plans) includes questions such as: Does it look like Soccer? Is it organized? Is it challenging? Are there repetitions? (Of the topic being worked on) and Is there coaching? (Consisting predominantly of positive reinforcement) but should also include the normalizing of errors. (Mistakes are an essential part of the learning

process). During this stage coaches are encourage to set up small group activities that focus on the topic being worked on that day. We have also provided a set of Guided Questions that the coach can refer to throughout the practice session.

The (Final) Play Stage – Considered “Contextual Learning” – In this stage we are checking to see how much if any of the practice stage has transferred with each player into the game. It is recommended in this stage that the coach sets up 2 teams of equal numbers and that one team is set up as close to the starting line up for the upcoming game as attendance at the practice permits. In ideal circumstances (which rarely occurs) the coach should play in the game format 4 v 4, 7 v 7 e.t.c. that the players will experience in the upcoming game. The players should experience extended periods of uninterrupted play with the coach just monitoring the safety of the players and reviewing the checklist and guided questions to empower the players to solve problems on their own.

As the season progresses we will be uploading our Grassroots Practice sessions alongside our regular practice plans. The most noticeable difference between the 2 sets of plans will be the addition of Less Challenging and More Challenging activities including the diagrams and organization. This will enable coaches to adjust the Core Practice session based on the success of their players with the Core Practice activity. Of course, coaches can simply run through each of the 5 activities diagrammed to enhance the learning process to see which approach is more effective with their players. IM



Ian Mulliner

Before coming to Massachusetts Youth Soccer, Ian Mulliner served as the Director of Coaching of Illinois Youth Soccer Association for over ten years. Originally from Manchester, England. Ian has been coaching in the U.S. since 1992. Ian has served as a member of the National Coaching Committee for US Youth Soccer and is currently working with US Soccer to develop the new Grass Roots Coaching Licenses. He holds the USSF “A” License and National Youth License, F.I.F.A Futuro III certificate, F.A. Preliminary Coaching Award as well as the Dutch KNVB Coach's License.

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