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Everything You Need to Know About Coaching Youth Football

Part 6 Practice Organization



The following is Part 6 of Coach Illustrated's series on "Becoming a Youth Football Coach." This segment will focus on organizing your practices. The series takes a person through the process of becoming a coach at the youth level. More and more players are signing up for youth football programs around the country, but there is a tremendous shortage of coaches, both head coaches and assistants. This series shares a basic outline of the necessary points that you need to cover in order to move into the ranks as a head coach.

The series will be broken into eight parts. Each issue will feature a new segment. If you happen to miss a segment, you can go to the Youth Series outline (linked below) and view the previous installments. You will also be able to access the first five parts of the series. (continued)

[Click here for the outline of the entire series.](#)

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Everything You Need to Know About Coaching Youth Football
Practice Organization**Practice Schedules**

One of the keys to having a successful practice is to be organized and have a well thought out practice routine that will allow the players to get in as much preparation as possible for the upcoming game. There are certainly many different types of practice schedules and I will show you a schedule that has worked for me at many different levels of the game. I have found that being consistent in your practice schedules allows the players to know what to expect and when they will be practicing certain things at various times of the week leading up to a game. I will spend time with you in the next part of the series detailing some key points to consider on game day so I won't deal with any game day issues in this discussion.

The first issue to be dealt with in practice scheduling, is how long to practice. Generally, the younger the players, the shorter the practice time. From my experience you must focus on keeping the practice upbeat and also teach as much technique as possible. There are two key issues: teaching players proper technique and also spending enough time in group work and team work to execute what you are doing at the highest level of proficiency.

Here is a sample practice schedule to consider. It is set up in five-minute blocks and based on a two-hour practice, which includes meetings on the field and a post practice report where announcements and handouts are given to the team. This is a general schedule that can be used each day of the week, with the only change being the length of time you will spend in each major segment.

The major segments of practice will be Individual Position Time (time spent doing drills that will make the players better at individual techniques), Group Time (time spent in groups of more than one position) and Team Time (time spent with the entire offense, defense or special teams working on execution and timing in a team setting).



In youth football, it is important that players learn both sides of the ball - so each day should rotate between an offensive emphasis day and a defensive emphasis day. Special teams can be worked on everyday, with different aspects of special teams being focused on each day. Each block on the schedule is five minutes of time and someone should be assigned to call out the periods on the practice schedule so everyone is on the same time period. (continued)

[Click here to see a sample practice schedule.](#)

[Click here to print a blank copy of a practice schedule for your use.](#)

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Here is a checklist of major areas to be covered in a week leading up to game day, assuming you have a limited number of days to practice each week and your game day is on a Saturday. This is based on practicing four days prior to a game. If you use a different practice pattern, just adjust to yours. Remember: if you don't practice as many days, just cut back your offense, defense and special teams so the primary focus is on getting better executing the techniques you are teaching.



Day 1: Offense Emphasis, Special Teams (Kickoff return, Point(s) After Touchdown Team)

Day 2: Defensive Emphasis, Special Teams (Punt Return, Punt Team)

Day 3: Offensive /Defensive Emphasis, Special Teams (Kickoff Team, Point After Touchdown Rush)

Day 4: Review Offense, Defense, all Special Teams with special emphasis on onside kick team and onside kick return team.

You must remember that this is a game week schedule and sometimes different areas need to be emphasized because of lack of execution or position changes caused by injuries that will force you to spend more time on certain areas. Be sure you get your systems taught during preseason practice when you have more time because school hasn't started and you don't have a game to get ready for at the end of the first several weeks. This is the time to teach all special teams schemes and basic offensive and defensive plays. During the season is not the time to install new schemes. Above all else, remember this: **ADJUST ACCORDINGLY!** That's why they call you coach! (continued)

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Everything You Need to Know About Coaching Youth Football Practice Organization

Drills and Safe Techniques

One of the most important roles you have as a youth coach is to be sure your players are being taught the proper and safe way to execute the fundamentals of football. They need to know that football is a contact sport and there will certainly be collisions. They should also be told that blocking and tackling must be done correctly or they could be seriously injured. The fundamentals of blocking and tackling must be done every day by every player on the team. Everyone who plays the game needs to know how to safely execute these techniques. I have seen quarterbacks, who were never taught how to block, injure themselves when blocking on a reverse play for the wide receiver.

The fundamental coaching point with young players is to teach players to **never initiate a blow by blocking or tackling with the head**. The head will inevitably make contact with an opponent during a regular tackle, but it should not be used to initiate the blow. The shoulder and arms should make initial contact with the opponent. You have a responsibility to preach this over and over to your players. Don't lead with the head. And never use the top of the helmet - the crown - to make contact. A player must always keep his face forward, so if contact is made to the head area, it will be with the facemask first. That's why facemasks were added to helmets years ago!

Drills are what make each player better at performing the techniques needed to play as a team. Be sure to make a checklist of every technique your players must learn and then be sure you are doing drills to make them better at those techniques. Throwing, catching, blocking, tackling and kicking must be worked on everyday in drill situations, to insure that your players will become more proficient and confident in what you are asking them to do.

Refer to the Archives of Coach Illustrated (Youth Skills and Drills section) for a comprehensive list of drills for all positions. Video is included, so be sure to have your staff and players watch these drills and then incorporate the appropriate items into your practice routine.

I would like to add one note here. Many coaches down through the years have played for coaches who believed in exercising the neck before practice. This is not a good idea. Loosening the neck as part of a basic flexibility program is fine, but strengthening exercises before practice is not good. Don't fatigue the neck muscles before you practice. It's dangerous. Young players do not have strong necks to begin with. Take some time after practice to do some strengthening exercises. Simple forward to back movements with partners providing some resistance is a good way to finish practice and always emphasize neck exercises as part of an overall off season strength and conditioning program.



Here are some articles, found in our archives, that will help in your practice plans.

San Diego State's Flexibility Program - Ted Tollner
 Neck Extension - John Thomas
 Neck Flexion - John Thomas
 Fumble Recovery Drill - Ron Turner
 Interception Drill - Ron Turner
 Form Tackling - Sonny Lubick
 Ball Wrestling Drill for Running Backs - Joe Paterno
 Offensive Line Fundamentals: Stance and One Step Starts - Joe Paterno
 Nutrition and Feeding Plans for Athletes - Dr. Rod Walters (continued)

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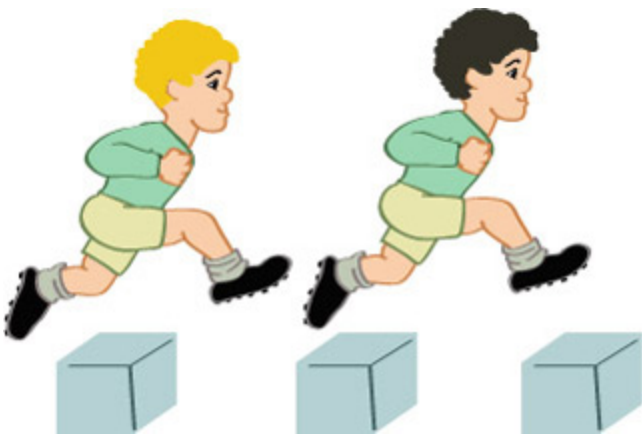
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Everything You Need to Know About Coaching Youth Football

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Equipment Needs

An organized practice requires proper equipment in order to allow for maximum development of your youngsters in the time allotted. Be sure you have the following available, and reinforce to the players how important it is to take care of team equipment, as well as their individual equipment such as helmets, shoulder pads and mouthpieces (always needed when a helmet is being used).



Team equipment includes

1. **Blocking sleds** for all offensive players to learn shoulder-blocking techniques.
2. **Blocking shields** for the defensive team to hold when the offense is practicing. There is no need to

block live every play. Shields are a good way to practice full speed with out hitting "live" everyday.

3. **Marker cones.** Markers are needed for various drills and to mark simulated end zones if practicing on a non-regulation field.

4. **Step-over bags.** These are long padded rectangular bags to be used in agility drills.

5. **Dummies.** These are bigger versions of the padded hand shields that are also good to use by the defense when the practice emphasis is for the offense.

6. **Other field equipment,** such as down and distance markers, pylons to mark end zones, colored pinnies to identify the offense and the defense during practice, and a snapper (ball on a stick) for the defense to react to, are all useful in running an efficient practice.

7. **Balls and tees.** Be sure to have enough footballs and keep some balls just for use by the quarterbacks. Don't practice kicking balls that will be used when the quarterbacks throw. Keep them separate and the balls that are used for throwing only will last much longer. Some general equipment suggestions: have a place to store all practice equipment each night that is easily accessible. Have players rotate responsibility of getting the equipment out and putting it away at the end of practice. Also, at the end of the season, be sure to secure and inventory all your equipment. If anything needs to be reconditioned or replaced, do it then. Your equipment budget will go a lot further. (continued)

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Everything You Need to Know About Coaching Youth Football
Practice Organization**Field Space**

Any discussion on field space focuses on the fact that most youth teams operate on a far from perfect arrangement for practice fields. With the explosion of youth teams across the country, one of the problems that arises is lack of good practice fields. Do the best with what you have but make sure the playing surface is free from holes and glass or cans that could injure players. This is a great way to incorporate parents into your program. Have a field crew made up of parents and make them responsible for keeping the practice fields in good order.

One of the best ways to insure a smoother running practice is to have areas of the field assigned to the same groups of players every day. If the quarterbacks always know where they will be doing their drills, they can go right to that spot and your practices will organize faster and run much better. The same goes with all other periods of practice. Get the players into a routine and they will go to the right location as each period in practice changes. This is called good practice



organization. If the players know where to go and what is coming next, the practice time is much more efficient. Go over the practice schedule before each practice while the players are stretching. You'll be surprised at how smoothly things go! (continued)

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Everything You Need to Know About Coaching Youth Football Practice Organization



Parents and Practice

As a coach, the subject of parents at practice was always a delicate one. I was always concerned about parent coming to practice and trying to coach their youngsters from afar. This is not good. At the first meeting of the parents prior to the season, I addressed

this issue carefully. I made it very clear that we would welcome all help from parents, but once the coaching staff was finalized, parents were not permitted to holler out instructions during a practice or a game. In the few times that parents forgot, I quickly reminded them: It is very disruptive to a kid to try and listen to his coach and to keep one ear out for what his dad is yelling to him from the sidelines.

There are plenty of jobs that parents who attend practice can help with. Assign an equipment crew, a field maintenance crew, have a water crew, and an officiating crew that helps check off sides during team periods. Be creative. If you assign parents to jobs, they will focus on that and won't be as inclined to "coach on the run." After practice, always have a brief announcement period and welcome parents to then come on the field and listen to the daily announcements and to get handouts that you want the players to have. I've found that if you take control of parents and their practice participation, it can make your job much easier in the long run. (continued)

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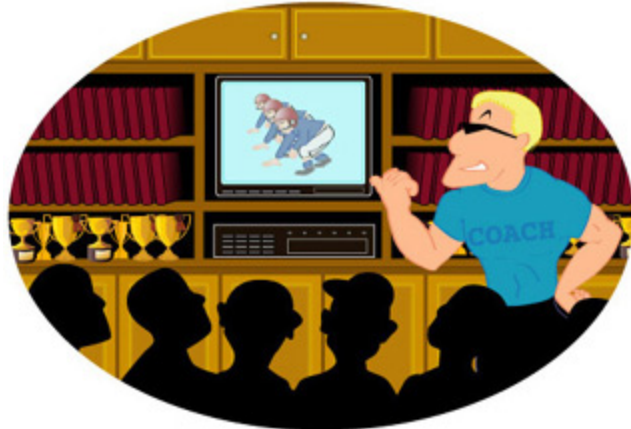
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Practice Organization

Teaching with Video

While we are discussing ways to involve parents in your program, here is a great one! Find out which of your parents has a camcorder and ask them if they would like to head up your video crew. They can video your games from a good vantage point and give you the tape after the game. There is no better way to teach kids football than to show them what they did correctly, and to show them where they need to improve. I had one evening a week scheduled for video. I was fortunate enough to be practicing at a school where there was a room available to watch video. I was sure that only the payers were there - no parents - and it was a very positive meeting. We took some time off the practice schedule that day and watched the pervious game tape. Never belittle or over criticize a player. Brag on them when they do well but go easy when they don't. Youth football is not the time to over analyze a game. Make it a fun session. Another idea. At the end of the season, find one of the many companies that make highlight



videos and take orders for highlight tapes of the season. Use it as a fundraiser. It's a great way for all the kids to be on video and parents love it. They won't have to video if they know there will be a video highlight of the season available. Have your video man be sure to get all the players and coaches and team moms etc. in the video.

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Everything You Need to Know About Coaching Youth Football Practice Organization

Well, that's Part 6. Be sure to check back next issue to see the next segment in our series. I will share information with you about **Game Day Organization**. Be sure to visit our Archive, found below the Coach's Manual section on our Table of Contents page. You will find drills, plays and coaching information to help you become a better coach, no matter what your level of expertise. Share this site with your staff:
www.coachillustrated.com



Key sections of Coach Illustrated:

Youth Skills and Drills

Basic drills for all positions

Coach's Manual

In-depth football information focusing on plays, advanced drills, offensive and defensive systems, and philosophies of some of America's greatest coaches.

Camps and Clinics

A collection of some of the finest camps and clinics near you.

Athletic Training

Helpful information to share with your players on staying healthy and preventing and treating injuries.

Strength and Conditioning

Some basic exercises that can be adapted to beginners.

Equipment

Located on our Table of Contents page under the In Every Issue column, you can order best-selling instructional videos, books and equipment directly from Coach Illustrated in the [Coaches Choice store](#) and the [Rae Crowther store](#).

About the Author:

In-house Coach Illustrated staff coach Nick Gasparato's years of dedication to the game of football came in handy when he authored this Youth Coaching series. Coach Gasparato has coached players at nearly every level of the game of football and has an extensive background in youth football. His first coaching position was head coach of the Sacred Heart Cardinals CYO football team in Jeannette, Pennsylvania in 1972. From there he moved into high school football at national power Central Bucks West High School in Doylestown, Pennsylvania. He then moved into the college ranks and was an assistant at the University of Pittsburgh, Michigan State, Penn State, the University of Virginia, Temple University and the University of South Carolina. Even while serving as a college coach, Coach Gasparato remained actively involved in youth football as a consultant in the various communities where he was coaching. His two sons, Michael and Gregory, have benefited from their experiences in youth football in South Carolina and New Jersey, and his wife Jean is also active as a "Team Mom." His oldest son, Michael, is currently a member of the Penn State football team. Following a stint at Dutch Fork High School in Irmo, South Carolina, Coach Gasparato accepted a position on the staff of CoachPaterno.com in State College, Pennsylvania.

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