

20 EASY WAYS



TO

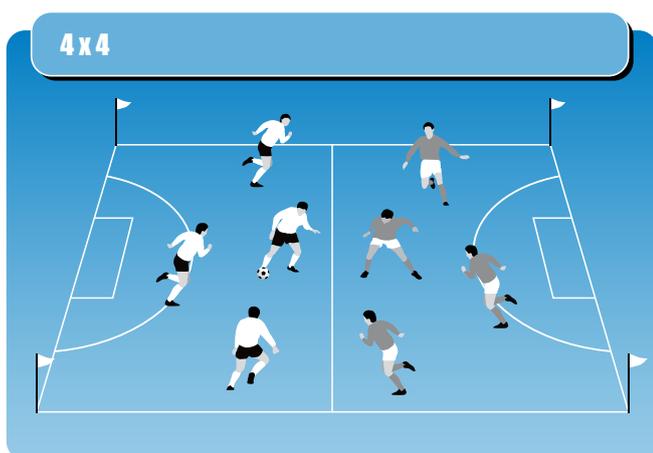
**IMPROVE
YOUR SOCCER
COACHING**

Tip 1

Play 4v4 games

4v4 is the smallest sided game you can have that has all the elements of a real soccer match without any of the confusions that surround learning the game. You will improve young players' technique through a far greater number of ball contacts. The emphasis on control, passing and shooting provides the fundamental building blocks of football. It accelerates the development of technical ability and game intelligence.

Brazil, Holland, France, Spain, Germany, Italy – they all play small-sided games at young ages. Adopting this approach is probably the single most effective change you can make. It will particularly benefit those players who have fewer opportunities to practice between training sessions. You will see your players visibly grow up during these games and you will feel a great sense of achievement as your players respond to the freedom that this system gives them.



Tip 2

Coaching the swarm

When you first start coaching youth players right down at the under 4 age group, you can expect the players to be like bees round a honey pot. But let most of them be part of this swarm (call it the collective “midfielder”), and choose one or two to stay a bit further forward as attackers and one or two to follow behind as defenders.

Because the midfield bees are charging all over the place, you need to give them the option to switch places with the front/back players if they get tired. You also need to give the front/back players the option to ask for a switch if they notice that somebody is getting tired.

By adopting these rules, you introduce the idea of automatic observation and support for team mates. You need to watch that you don't have one player who is always trying to be the back or front player (and, if needed, you may need to make a rule that everyone else must get a turn before he can go back – or place some other limits which require that the bulk of playing time be spent in midfield).

Until you develop good passers, most of your goals are likely to come from individual efforts or simple short passes to a team mate. So, let the best midfield players dribble it upfield but try and get them to pass to the ones hanging around the goal. Of course, once one midfielder breaks rank, you need to have someone else to run with the ball until he can get back. Often, the best approach is to find a reliable observant player to act as Captain, and have this player keep a lookout for when someone else needs to take this job and get him to nominate players.

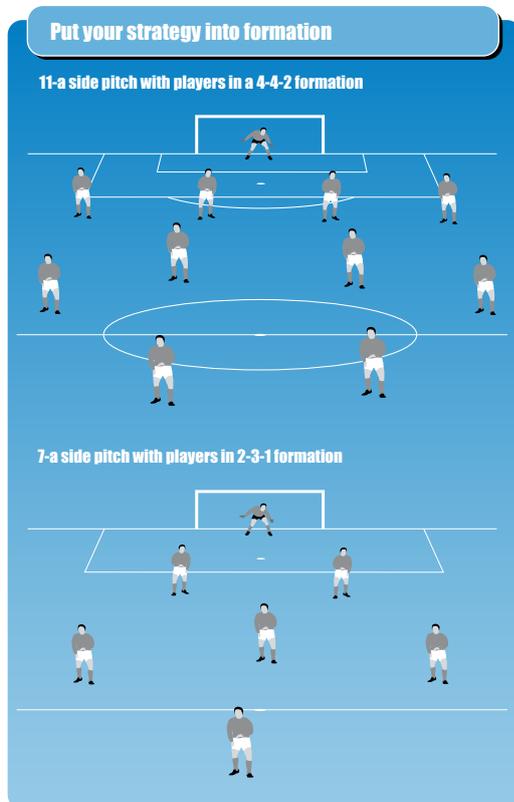
Tip 3

The 4 corners

Make sure that your training sessions cover the four corners of player development (as espoused by the English Football Association):

- technical (skills, passing, dribbling, shooting)
- physical (power, running, change of direction, strength in 1v1)
- mental (decision making and choices)
- social (communication, combining with team mate)

If each of the exercises that you give your players fulfils these criteria, you can be confident that you are giving them all the tools they need to be effective team players.



Tip 4

Do you have a strategy?

Every coach, whatever age group, has to decide which formation best suits his team. If it's 7-a-side should you play 2-2-2 or 3-2-1 or 2-3-1, or at under 11 and 12 when you have gone to 11-a-side you need to decide between, say, 4-4-2 or 4-3-3.

When that's decided, you need to think about strategy. At the most basic level, you have two choices:

- a counter-attacking style; or
- a play-making style.

The counter-attacking style depends on your opponents carrying the game forward and for your team to react to their mistakes, which at youth level will be quite often. Discipline and patience are key. It is not as effective when your team is losing or if the other team is sitting back waiting for your team to do the work. The downside is that it can lead to lack of initiative by your players so that they cannot turn the match in their favour.

The play-making style means that your team controls the pace of the game and the atmosphere it is played in. It requires confident players who have a good command of the basic skills. Your team must work hard and be able to communicate with one another because if you lose control of the ball you will be hit hard by a counter-attacking team.

Of course, in reality every game ends up being a compromise between the two approaches. The style you adopt is largely dictated by the talents of the players you have at your disposal. When you have decided how your team should play, your job is to communicate each player's role within that strategy.

Tip 5

Play to your strengths

How important are coaches anyway? Look back to the 2006 World Cup semi-final between Italy and Germany for a great example of coaches making a difference. Marcello Lippi had a team of good defenders but raw forwards. Jürgen Klinsmann, unpopular with the German fans before the Finals, had a strong midfield and strong forward line but the defence had struggled.

They each had a plan which played to the strengths of their respective squads. Klinsmann's team played a very attacking game. Playing 4-4-2 they used wide midfielders and full backs to support the forwards.

Lippi played strong football and had the best player on the pitch in Cannovaro. He exploited Germany's attack by not letting them get behind his defence. With that solid platform the Italian midfielders had no need to hang back and Lippi unleashed Totti and Pirlo into attacking midfielder roles. Both teams playing to their strengths made for a very watchable game.

Look at your team, work out your strengths and play to them. It works – Italy won the World Cup doing just that.

Tip 6

Other ways to beat a player

A winger doesn't always have to dribble past a defender to beat him. A one-two is effective, or if, for example, your full back has the ball, the winger can drag their marker with them towards the ball, and spin off behind the marker into the space vacated for your full-back to play the ball over the top.

Alternatively, if there's space to run into and they're quicker than their opponent, a winger can just knock the ball past and give chase.

Finally, sometimes there's no need to beat the defender – David Beckham has made a career out of taking one touch to control the ball and with his second touch bending dangerous crosses into the penalty area.

“There are many things I want, and the only way I will get them is to keep my head down, listen to the right people and work hard.”

Thierry Henry, footballer, France and Arsenal

Tip 7

Don't over-coach

Read this list and be honest with yourself.

- Do you coach in absolutes? (“never do this, always do that”)?
- Do you constantly yell orders at your players rather than let them make their own decisions on the pitch?
- Are your players receiving conflicting advice from coaches and parents?
- Do your players look nervous and uncomfortable on the pitch, looking to you and others for help?
- Do your players sometimes ask to be substituted?

If the answer to any of these questions is yes, you are possibly guilty of over-coaching. Try the following tips to get you back on the right track:

- Avoid “never” – ask your players what they think, then tell them what you think and why.
- Give your players the space to make their own decisions and let them make their own mistakes – they will learn.
- Don't shout so much – if they can solve their on-field problems by themselves you've done a good job.

Tip 8

The age/size thing

A recent report showed that 70% of players currently playing in the English academy system are born between September and December. Does this tell us that the best players are born in these months? Or does it tell us that the older children have had more time to develop both technically and physically?

A 14-year-old player born in September will be on average 7 cm taller and 5.7 kg heavier than a player in the same class born in August. The next time you are making a judgment between two players, consider those numbers. When selecting or releasing players in your club would these figures be useful? If two players are on the same level and you have a choice, would you pick the one that is six months older or younger?

Size isn't everything and given a further six months, the smaller player could well become a greater asset to your team.

Signs of the overbearing coach



Tip 9

30 minute warm-up

Time well-spent before kick-off will be rewarded when the players take the pitch. Make sure that all your players arrive in good time for this 30-minute countdown.

30 minutes: Meet and greet, socialise, check kit, laces etc. and make sure your players keep their tops on over their shirt.

25 minutes: Have a chat with each of your players as they arrive. Take them to an area where they can pass a ball around in groups of two or three. Keep them moving, perhaps play a keep-away game. Most of all, keep them focused on football.

20 minutes: Get your captain to lead dynamic stretching – jog, backwards, side-to-side shuffle left, right, kick open hands behind back, bend and touch grass with left, right and both hands.

15 minutes: Everyone get a drink of water. Do some calm static stretching. Sort out the starting line-up and don't change it for any late arrivals (if your star player turns up with 2 minutes to go, bring him on at half time). Encourage defenders, midfielders and strikers. Keep your remarks to two minutes.

10 minutes: Get the team into game mode. Have an assistant warm up the goalkeeper. Decide on a passing/shooting exercise that your players are happy with. Encourage good technique, low shots and rebounds.

5 Minutes: Captains are called for the toss. When they return have a quick pep-talk, a huddle, a great big cheer. Send your players out to their positions.

Tip 10

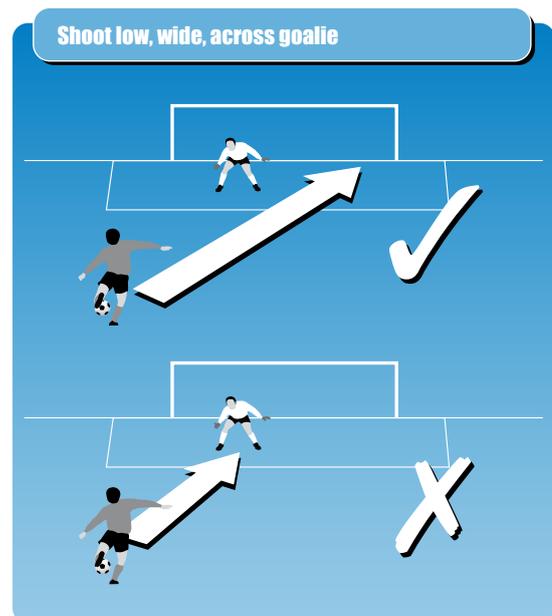
Shoot!

All of the good build-up play in the world is useless if your strikers don't shoot. Here are three points to think about:

- It's *your* job as coach to encourage your players to shoot from short range, from long range – wherever and whenever they can.
- It's *their* job to have a go – to have as many attempts as they can muster at getting the ball on target.
- The more often your players shoot, the better and more finely tuned their radar becomes – allowing them to get attempts on goal from every angle.

Some things to say to your players:

- “Most strikers don't lose possession enough. You've got to let the ball go...”
- “Stop trying to walk the ball into their net. Just send the ball on its way.”



Tip 11

How to coach shielding the ball

Start with two equal-sized players with a single ball in a 3 metre-square grid and have them work on holding the ball by using simple rolls, pull-backs and other touches to shield the ball. If they can't do this, you might suggest they practice at home by leaning on a wall with one arm for balance whilst practising the roll, pull-back etc.

Position of feet for the step over

Ball unshielded from opponent



Ball shielded from opponent



Three tips for shielding:

- Your players must keep the shoulder pointed at the defender at all times.
- Your players must be in control of the situation. If a defender is coming in hard the ball must be moved quickly to make time to hold defenders off.
- Tell your players not to use hands to push opponents away. Use arms, shoulders, body and legs to prevent an opponent from winning the ball.

When they realise they have the skill to keep possession they will develop the confidence to lift their heads and find a team mate to pass to. But first make sure that they can hold the ball in the grid for a count of around 7-8. Until then, they will not have the confidence to shield the ball in a match situation.

Tip 12

Five tips for quick throw-ins

- 1 Quick throw-ins increase the chances of your team scoring goals.
- 2 Make sure every player on your team knows how to take a throw-in.
- 3 Don't slow the game down by calling for a designated thrower.
- 4 Throw the ball towards the opposition goal "down the line".
- 5 Don't stop players who are first to the ball from taking quick throw-ins.

Throw-ins: Drag that back foot!



Tip 13

Get ready for half-time

Only the coach and one other person should be allowed to talk. The players should be sat down, quiet, with a drink. First, praise them for what they are doing well, then talk about only one or two areas that they need to improve. Use your whole body to communicate – positive body language is crucial.

Your players:

- Motivate – remember your body language
- Re-hydrate – water, not fizzy drinks
- Re-organise – remind them of positions

Tactics

- Substitutions – is it time to make a change?
- Strategy – defence or attack need strengthening?
- Planning – plan ahead so you are ready with two or three main points.

Make your speech clear and effective and restrict yourself to one or two points.

Tip 14

5 tips to create a winning mentality

- Training should be positive, fun and get everyone pulling in the same direction.
- The team should have a common goal but not one that is too ambitious or unrealistic like “our goal is to win the league”. Perhaps try “our goal is to play well for each other and give ourselves a chance to win every game”.
- Let the leaders lead and the others play out a secondary role – some are natural leaders and some prefer to be led.
- Put players who do not see the team as a whole on the bench. You may be tempted to play your prima donna but team spirit will suffer.
- Everyone accepts mistakes as long as players do their best. Encourage risks and let the players express themselves within the framework of the team.

Teamwork is the first step to winning



In a winning culture everyone works for each other, everyone enjoys it, everyone knows their role within it.

Tip 15

4v4 – make sure your players know their tasks

The 4v4 system is vital to helping your players understand their basic tasks in a match situation. Each player has at least two basic tasks. They **MUST** perform these tasks well or the whole team has to adjust for the deficiency.

When in possession

Defender:

- support team mates from behind the ball
- pass out from defensive situations

Midfielder:

- link between the defence and the striker
- establish width to pull the opposition defence apart

Striker:

- shield the ball in attack to maintain possession
- set up and take goal scoring chances

Opponents in possession

Defender:

- cover the striker
- fill in the space between the opposition striker and midfield

Midfielder:

- cover opposition attackers
- pressure the player on the ball

Striker:

- hassle back-players
- prevent long passes out of defence

Tips to help you coach basic tasks

- If a player fails to grasp the significance of ball possession they won't know if they are a defender or an attacker.
- The midfielder who thinks he is an attacker will neglect defensive duties.
- Kids who haven't been given responsibility in their positions, as in the 4v4 game, but come from the "drill" school will be waiting to be told what to do. Educate them.
- Players losing concentration will neglect their tasks. A stoppage in play, tiredness or a parent or coach shouting at them will put them off.

Tip 16

Surprise tactics

Here's a great idea for getting the opposition on the back foot from the off.

- Three players stand around the centre circle for kick off.
- Players one and two stand either side of the ball a short distance back looking at each other.
- Player three stands behind the ball some way back.
- Player one says the secret code word to player two – use your imagination.
- Player three runs up and kicks the ball as hard as he can at the goal.

The rules of the game allow this since to kick-off you only need to move the ball forward. Try it and see what happens but remember that players learn quickly and you will soon see the opposition trying this back at you.

The point, however, is to try something different. Take the opposition by surprise. Be creative.

Tip 17

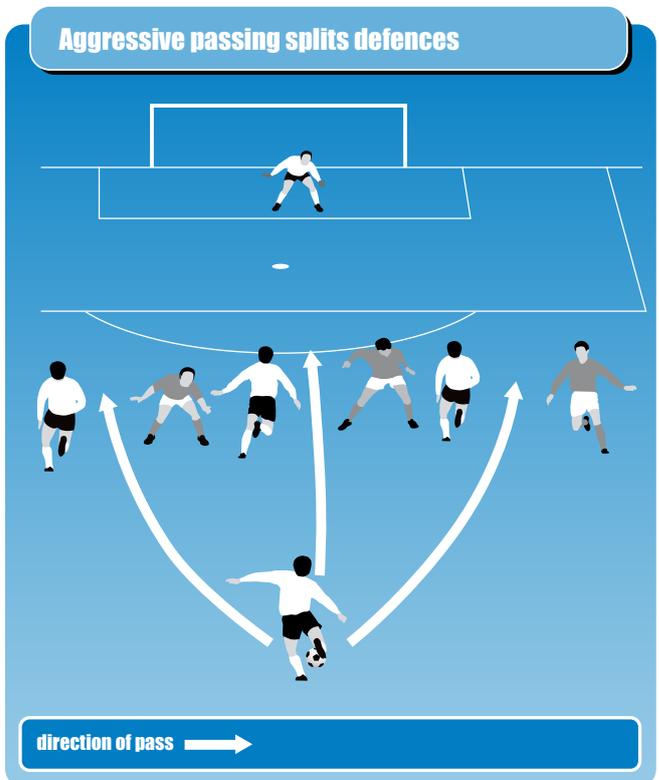
Coach aggressive passing

How often have you seen your players give away possession with an errant pass to “no one in particular”, or worse, to a player on the other team? The aggressive passer of the ball is the player who is constantly looking for opportunities to play opponents into positions of severe disadvantage. This type of player will always pass the ball forward if the

opportunity is there. Could you use a few players like that on your team?

The good news is that this quality can be coached. Obviously the better a player's technique (skill in striking the pass) the more likely they are to be aggressive in their passing.

There are players who show a high degree of aggression in winning the ball and then display a lack of aggression in their passing. It is, however, not entirely a matter of technique. Players need to be educated in their passing to know in which areas of the field they should calculate on the side of safety and in which areas to calculate on the side of risk. When players are educated in this way they balance aggression and responsibility. That is your job as the coach.



Tip 18

6 tips for refereeing kids games

As an occasional referee you will find that you learn a lot about your players by being in the thick of the action rather than on the touchline. But if you haven't refereed a children's match before it can be quite a nerve-wracking affair. No amount of advice can prepare you for the sheer terror that grips the pit of your stomach five minutes before kick-off. But the truth is, once you get the game under way, it's never as bad as you think it's going to be. Grit your teeth, gird your loins, concentrate on nothing but the play and remember these simple rules of thumb.

DO

- Give throwers the benefit of the doubt
- Stop the game for any injuries (drop the ball for restarts if necessary)
- Penalise violence

DON'T

- Change your decisions
- Let shouters put you off
- Show aggression towards players (or anyone else for that matter)

Tip 19

Give your players skills homework

Consider preparing "homework" for your players. This could be a simple matter of photocopying a session you've received from Better Soccer Coaching. This works well for skills which can be practiced in confined spaces, such as using a wall to practice shielding the ball as described in Tip 12 above.

This will help focus the minds of your players on soccer on the days between practice and matches. It will also provide you with a great way to get dads (and mums for that matter) more involved. It might be worth having a demonstration of the technique for their benefit when they come to pick up their kids from practice.

Tip 20

Use SMART techniques

If you want to make sure you're giving your players targets that they have to meet, do it the SMART way.

SPECIFIC

MEASURABLE

AGREED

REALISTIC

TIMED

Make the target **S**pecific. If a defender will not tackle his target might be to make 3 tackles in the first half of a match. Is it **M**easurable? Yes. Have you **A**greed it with your player? Yes. Is it **R**ealistic? Three tackles is not a lot but if he will not tackle at all maybe it is too much. You decide. And yes it is **T**imed because it must be in the first half. Taylor the SMART sessions to your individual players and get them to tell you if they have reached the target.

“Behind every kick of the ball there has to be a thought.”

Dennis Bergkamp, Ajax, Inter Milan, Arsenal and the Netherlands