



U.S. SOCCER GRASSROOTS COACH EDUCATION

PLAY-PRACTICE-PLAY (PPP) MODEL:
AN EVIDENCE-BASED APPROACH



When children arrive at practice they have little desire to stand in lines, run laps, perform drills, or be lectured, they simply want to have fun, connect with their teammates, and learn through engaging and enjoyable activities. Therefore, it is important for coaches to keep these factors in mind when creating and designing their practice environments. As for practice design, the debate about the optimal quantity, quality, type, sequencing and combination of learning activities during Zone 1 development (ages between of 6-12), is ongoing within the athlete development and performance literature.¹⁻⁷

While there is no single best approach to practice design,⁵ athlete development research indicates that participation in different types of learning activities (i.e., child-led or adult-led, structured or unstructured) such as 'informal play'⁸, 'deliberate play'^{1,2,9-11} or more structured activities such 'deliberate practice'¹² are important influences in the athlete development process.⁵ Recent studies, specific to soccer, indicate that high levels of engagement in low structured informal play or soccer specific deliberate play activities are an important component in the athlete development process and practice pathway of high-level performers.^{4,8,13-14}

PLAYERS LEARN:	
what they like	intrinsic motivation as the driver for learning
what they need	transfer, no gap between the training and the game
to read, analyze and decide	how players perceive and explain a situation is the driver for their behavior
to be creative	looking for solutions
to reflect	thinking about experiences and how to use experiences
to learn	developing and improving learning habits
to be independent critical thinkers	independent/social and responsible/accountable adults



EVIDENCE-BASED PRACTICE DESIGN



At the Grassroots level, the U.S. Soccer Coach Education Department is committed to an evidenced-based approach to coaching education and player development. Evidence-Based Coaching (EBC) focuses on integrating three key components; 1. The best available research on player development, 2. Coaching expertise and, 3. An appreciation of the needs and values of the learner (i.e. player). With that, in an attempt to create a developmentally appropriate practice environment, U.S. Soccer has adopted a three stage practice plan model (i.e., 'Play-Practice-Play'). This approach aligns with the best available research on athlete development pathways and is designed with the intent of maximizing player enjoyment, intrinsic motivation, and skill development.^{2, 15-16}

THE 3 PHASE TRAINING SESSION: PLAY-PRACTICE-PLAY MODEL (ZONE 1 DEVELOPMENT)

TRAINING PHASE	PHASE 1: FIRST PLAY	PHASE 2: PRACTICE	PHASE 3: SECOND PLAY
THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Learning by playing • Deliberate play (Cote) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Learning and quality improvement through game like activities • Play-Practice activities (Lauder) • Teaching Games for Understanding (Griffin & Butler) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Contextual learning by playing the game • Let them play (Fonseca, Tamarit)
PURPOSE	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A fun introduction to practice • Games orientate players to the training goal (2v2, 3v3, 4v4) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Activities/game-situations focuses players on the training goal • Conscious learning 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Training goal in the game format (based on maximum roster size) • Opportunity to implement their learning
ACTIVITY CHARACTERISTICS	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Fun, inclusive, implicit learning, creativity 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Fun, actively involved, repetitions, challenging 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Fun, even numbers, position rotations, rules
TEACHING ACTIONS	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Monitoring ('the game teaches') • Five elements (1-5) • Key words • Guided questions • Positive reinforcement 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Active teaching • Five elements (1-5) • Key words • Guided questions • Positive reinforcement • Demonstration • Feedback • Learning circle 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Observation • Checking for understanding • Five elements (1-5) • Key words • Guided questions • Positive reinforcement • Feedback

STAGE 1: PLAY - 'DELIBERATE PLAY'



When players arrive at practice it is important that coaches create an environment that is engaging and enjoyable. One way to engage players is through low structured small sided games (i.e., 2v2, 3v3, 4v4) also referred to as 'deliberate play' in the athlete development literature.^{2,16} 'Deliberate play' refers to smaller, informal game-like representations (i.e. small-sided games) of the official game format and are designed primarily for the purpose of enjoyment¹. These 'deliberate play' games are ideally governed by the players while being loosely monitored by the coach, and focus on promoting enjoyment of competing¹⁹ rather than the outcome (i.e. winning).¹

The key point, for Grassroots coaches, is that 'deliberate play' promotes enjoyment, inclusion and development.

When players are more engaged, feel included and enjoy themselves it will likely increase motivation to continue playing. This is particularly important during the adolescent years where dropout is higher.¹³

When coaches design practices that promote opportunities to engage in 'deliberate play', it should be viewed as intentionally creating a fun and player-centered environment that contextualizes the development of technique and tactical awareness. When engaged in 'deliberate play' the game/environment is the primary teacher and the coach serves as a facilitator who, when necessary, guides players to find solutions as opposed to providing the answers. In this stage of the practice, the coach's goal is to help create the environment that orientates the players to the practice objective via 'deliberate play'. While there are clear benefits to having a coach instruct and provide feedback on performance, we must also appreciate that in the teaching-learning process we don't always have to instruct in order for learning and development to occur.

Benefits of 'Deliberate Play'

A growing body of athlete development literature suggests that engagement in 'deliberate play' is important and has a number of positive implications for the physical, social, cognitive, and emotional development of children.^{1,2,16-18,20} More specifically, research investigating the practice pathway of elite soccer players indicates that high levels of engagement in less structured soccer specific 'deliberate play' and practice activities are an important component for attaining high-level performance.^{3,4,8,13,14} The benefits of 'deliberate play' include:

- Increases enjoyment and intrinsic motivation
- Promotes motor and cognitive development
- Promotes game awareness
- Promotes inclusion
- Provides players with frequent ball contact
- Promotes social interaction and problem solving skills
- Promotes game-like decision making (i.e., tactical cues)
- Contextualizes technical development (i.e., skill = tactical application of technique)



STAGE 2: PRACTICE ACTIVITIES



During the second stage, known as 'practice', the goal is to create an environment that develops the player in relation to the practice objective and any related team tactical principles and key qualities of the player. While 'deliberate play' is a positive introduction to the practice and has an important role in practice design, it can only facilitate the learning process to a point.⁵ In order to facilitate learning further players must be engaged in different forms of learning activities such as 'play-practice' activities²¹⁻²², 'Teaching Games for Understanding' (TGFU)²³ or elements of 'deliberate practice'.¹²

Research shows that the practice pathway to maximizing development is dynamic, the acquisition of skill is non-linear⁷ and that there is flexibility in the types of training activities an athlete engages in to achieve optimal performance.⁵ The key is to create a practice environment that integrates a balance of developmentally appropriate activities that find the right challenge point for the learner.²⁴ 'Play-practice' activities refer to activities that are designed, and guided, by coaches to improve aspects of performance (i.e., technical skills, team tactical principles or key qualities) while emphasizing fun and enjoyment at the same time.²¹⁻²² The TFGU model, a games-centered teaching pedagogy, places emphasis on developing tactical awareness and decision making within the framework of modified games^{23,25} and facilitates the learners understanding of when, where, and how to apply their technique in a game context.²⁵ Deliberate practice is more highly structured and primarily focused on the goal of improving performance as opposed to just the inherent enjoyment of participating.¹²

One of the key qualities of a coach is the ability to design practices that incorporate developmentally appropriate learning activities that are enjoyable, educational, game-like, and challenging.

The characteristics of developmentally appropriate practice activities include:

- Frequent technical repetitions - improves ball mastery
- Activities are player-centered
- Activities are game-like in nature (i.e. problem-solving, decision making)
- Provide opportunities for instructional feedback to facilitate learning and development

It is important to reiterate that while some activities can be more structured, and coach-led, they don't have to be any less enjoyable. The goal of grassroots coaches is to find a way to create an engaging environment that incorporates activities that are educational, enjoyable and game-like.



STAGE 3: THE GAME - LET THEM PLAY!



During the final stage of every practice the players should be provided with the opportunity and freedom to play, without interruption, in a format (i.e., 5v5, 7v7, 9v9) that replicates the game. This is the time for players to express themselves, without being micro-managed, and work through the process of applying their technical and tactical skills within a game context. At this stage of the practice the coach is checking to see if the player is able to transfer the skills learned in practice into the game environment. The point at which the player is unable to find a solution, or make the necessary corrections, is an opportunity for the coach to engage, at appropriate teachable moments, in the learning process.

SUMMARY

In closing, the key ingredients of an effective grassroots practice environment is one that has a careful balance between 'deliberate play', a variety of learning activities, and regular game opportunities. These three components, when combined, create an effective practice environment that maximizes player enjoyment and development.





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