

Ball control - the basics

Every time your players make a poor first touch in a game they are likely to give the football away to the other team.

So in every activity in every practice session you need to observe how your players react to the ball as it arrives.

Do they choose the correct part of their body to control the ball?

Is their first touch nice and soft? Are they relaxed?

Does their first touch move the ball away from pressure and in the direction they want to pass, dribble or shoot?

Remember: The basics of ball control are the same regardless of whether the ball is being controlled with the foot, head, thigh or chest.

General coaching points on ball control and first touch

Encourage your players to get into line with the flight of the ball as quickly as they can and decide how they are going to control the ball.

Work on practising control with your players' feet, thigh, chest and head so they can receive the ball at any height.

If they are controlling the ball with their thigh then get the full face of it in line with the ball. Similarly, if they are using their chest they should receive the ball square on.

As they make contact with the ball they should relax the part of the body they are using so that it drops quickly and close to their feet so they can dribble, pass, shoot or shield the ball to give their team-mates time to take up supporting positions.

What to say:

"Get into line with the flight of the ball quickly."

"Get the area of the body you're using behind the ball."

"Relax that surface area as the ball arrives."

You can practice ball control skills and first touch with this very effective game:

Criss Cross

Objective: Criss Cross is a simple unopposed practice designed to improve the push pass and first touch. It allows the coach to work with a number of players in a fairly small area.

Set up: Place four flat cones in a cross pattern 10-15yds apart from each other.

Two or three players stand at each of the cones.

The players at two adjacent cones have a ball.

How to play: Players pass - two touch (one to control, one to pass) - to the player opposite and then run to the cone on their right.

Coaching points

- Tell your players not to let the ball stop at any time.
- Once mastered, this exercise should be played at a fast tempo. Do not let your players walk to the cone on their right after they have passed the ball.
- Challenge your players - how many passes can they complete without making a mistake?
- Then, if you have two groups, they should compete with each other.
- Competition will show your players why it is important to have a good first touch. If they lose control of the ball they will not be able to pass quickly and their team will lose the game.
- Older players should be able to recognise and correct their own faults.

Tip: Encourage players to aim for a high standard - never allow sloppiness to creep into your training sessions. If you tolerate players who give less than 100% in practice, they will give less than 100% in matches too.

Key skill - shielding the ball

Coaching points

Shielding the ball is perhaps the most important skill your players can have.

Confidence in the ability to hold onto the ball for a few seconds when under pressure will transform your players' game and enable your whole team to play composed, attractive soccer.

On the other hand, if your players aren't confident that they can keep the ball away from the opposition they will try to get rid of the ball as soon as they can. Any thoughts of passing go out of the window - some players begin to panic before the ball even reaches them!

But shielding the ball is not a difficult technique to teach.

It's simply a case of positioning the body and legs between the ball and the opponent, and then, using the foot farthest away, keeping the ball as far from the opponent as possible while keeping it under close control at all times.

- Get side on - Ideally, have one shoulder pointed at the opponent to see what they are doing.
- Crouched posture - Knees bent, bottom lowered, feet about shoulder-width apart to provide a stable base and balance.
- Arms out - To help with balance and to keep the opponent away.
- Be aggressive - Use arms, shoulders, body and legs to keep an opponent from the ball,

and body weight to push them away.

- Head up - To see what options are open.
- While shielding the ball, encourage players to play the ball with the inside and outside of the foot, and to try using the sole of the foot to roll the ball from side to side. It's also important they constantly readjust their body position to counter pressure from the opponent, and that they practice using both feet.

Practice shielding the ball with this simple 1v1 exercise

Set up: Place two players in a 10x10m grid with one ball.

How to play: The first player starts with the ball. When you give the command to begin the player with the ball has to shield it, for say, 5 seconds, from the second player who tries to win it. If the second player wins the ball, they try to shield it for the rest of the 5 seconds.

To make it more competitive let each player start with the ball 5 times and see who has possession the most at the end of the 5-second periods.

Putting it all together

Now it's time to put your players' ball control and shielding skills to the test with this fun and challenging SSG (small-sided game).

The 1-0 game

Basically this is keepaway by another name and with a real purpose. It's my favourite small sided game.

The 1-0 game is a possession game, played like a standard 4v4 game but with a twist.

Because of the nature of the game I limit each match to 5 minutes, but may play 2 or 3 games one after the other.

Age Group - U8 to adults

Set up

Pitch Size 40 x 20 - or at the discretion of the coach, but basically a standard 4 v 4 pitch

Number of teams - 2

Team sizes - 4-6 players

Bibs optional

Goals - 5 a side or mini soccer goals

How to play

The basic rule of the game is that you can only win by one goal.

The game begins as a normal 4 v 4 game with the usual rules.

When a goal is scored, the team that scored must just try and keep possession and can't score into the goal. If they do, the goal is disallowed and a goal kick ensues.

If the other team then equalise and make it 1-1, either team can then score to make it 2-1. The team leading then just has to keep possession.

This is an excellent possession game and also allows a team to play out time by keeping possession, which is why I limit the game to just 5 minutes.

Finally, have the usual warm down and ask them what they have learned. Hopefully, they will go into their next game with more confidence in the ability to receive and hold onto the ball.