

How to Design and Run a Soccer Training Session

- An Article by Gary Curneen, Head Women's Soccer Coach, CSU, Bakersfield

When asked to identify the secret to the success of his great Manchester United teams during the Premier League era, Sir Alex Ferguson went directly to the source.

“The most important aspect of our system was training. What happens on a Saturday has already occurred on the training ground.”

You can't really argue with him. Observe any practice session at any level and you can tell more about a team than you can by watching them in a number of games.

What attention goes into the details?

How seriously do players approach it?

Who holds who accountable?

Almost every coach would agree that training is important and should be taken seriously by everyone associated with the team.

Where teams differ however, is what actually goes into the session and how it is organized.

It is no secret that preparation plays a crucial role in winning games, but it is crucial that coaches place the same amount of focus and energy into planning training so that they can maximize that valuable time with their players.

I believe the first step in designing an effective training session should always be the identification of a clear goal and a purpose of the session.

Understanding both what the team and specific players need at a certain time is a critical skill that every coach should be aware of and look to continually refine.

Although it is not difficult to find good training sessions online today, effective coaching involves consistently providing every player with the correct type of technical, physical, tactical and mental challenges every day.

So how do would a coach do that?

I believe step one is to have a clear playing style or 'playing model' that defines your team.

A playing model is similar to a coaching philosophy but is slightly more practical and goes into a little more depth, identifying crucial areas and taking a number of factors into consideration which can impact philosophy.

The primary purpose of a playing model is to define exactly what the team intends to become over a period of time. It is neither a set of formations or tactics, but instead contains detailed principles that the team will adopt throughout their training and games. Barcelona coach Luis Enrique believes in the basics when it comes to identifying the playing model;

“It’s the coach’s job to decide his team’s style of play, how they attack and how they defend. They have to be effective at both ends of the pitch.”

Without a plan or model, the team is essentially rudderless, handing over responsibility to luck and excuses.

In the book ‘Pep Confidential’, Guardiola’s assistant coach, Lorenzo Buenaventura commented on the consistency between Guardiola’s model and his training methodology.

“Each exercise incorporates an aspect of Pep’s football philosophy.”

Once the playing model is established, it will drive the session planning and make it much easier to prioritize work.

The higher the level, the more complex the game can become and therefore the need to become more specific with our exercises.

For example, instead of targeting possession as an area to improve on, a playing model allows the coach to look at exactly where, what, and how this area requires work.

Is it possession in transition, organized possession in a certain phase of build-up, or the creation of chances in the final third?

In the book, ***‘Tactical Periodization’ by Pedro Mendonca***, he challenges coaches to be more specific about what we want to achieve in our sessions.

“The players must understand the objectives of the exercise, in relation to the whole game.”

I also believe one of the biggest strengths of organizing training sessions alongside your playing model is that it allows the coach to give players practice in the key areas that they need.

For example, if you want forwards to reduce their thought process in front of goal and enhance technique under pressure, they must be exposed to those situations every single day. No player ever improves an aspect of their game by doing something once a week or by doing it for ten minutes in the warm-up before a game.

To remain consistent with training sessions, by mirroring the challenges that our players will face in the actual game itself, my personal goal is to drive tempo and intensity from the first minute of the session.

Although, slow training sessions may result in fewer mistakes and can sometimes be more aesthetically pleasing, I don’t want mistakes to eventually come out under the pressure of competition.

Therefore, the two biggest psychological factors constantly present in my training sessions are decision-making and mistake management. Quite simply, I want players having to continually deal with both problem-solving and reacting positively to the game, along with their role in it.

I am also a big believer that of the 3 C’s driving intensity:

1. CLOCK – Every game and/or exercise is on the timer, usually in increments of five minutes or below. I am a big believer that time should be used to challenge and stimulate players’ thinking, instead of as a guideline to how close they are to be finished. If exercises or sessions go on for too long, tempo and quality will typically drop.

2. COMPETITION – If you want to have a competitive team, they must practice winning every single day. When there is an urgency from everyone to win, players will hold each other accountable and you have a chance of replicating the pressure of performance that they will experience in a game.

3. COMMUNICATION – If there is volume and energy in the training session, the chances are the tempo will be quite high. Then you can channel that enthusiasm into positively impacting performance. For example, what type of information are we sending to each other?

Overall, session planning is vitally important to the success of your team when you step on the field. It also has a direct impact on your team culture because it communicates to the players exactly what is important and how seriously the staff view and respect the preparation process.

As a coach, you cannot expect players display intensity, desire, and quality, if you do not demand it on the practice field. In addition, if they are working hard and getting better, they will want to come in every day and give it their all.

Then, when you have a team that embraces hard work on a consistent basis, you have a good chance of producing the desired level of performance at gametime.