

The Lost Art of Juggling

An article by Sarah McClellan,
Head Women's Soccer Coach, Binghamton University

At the youth level, I've noticed that not many kids have learned how to juggle. This is most likely because they are not spending time practicing on their own. The caliber of juggling skills is most often directly correlated to the amount of time a player spends practicing on their own. While juggling skills are not an absolute necessity to become a strong player, there are numerous advantages and benefits to developing this art. Spending the time required to master the ball and control the ball in the air with all surfaces of the body equates to building a player's confidence and composure on the ball. It also improves first touch and ball control. Juggling can also be a great tool to introduce goal setting to young players. Players can chart their progress by means of how many consecutive touches they make on the ball before it drops to the floor (using their feet, thighs, chest, and head). Again, players who spend time practicing repetition will most certainly show improvement.

To get your players started, demonstrate yourself (if able) or have them watch a YouTube clip of juggling tricks to get them excited about the activity. Beginners can start with the ball in their hands, drop the ball to a thigh, and catch. Then, try two thigh touches and catch, and so on, building up. Once players have some success with thigh juggling, have them practice foot juggling. The ball may start in hands, drop to foot, volley to self and catch. Then two volleys and catch, and so forth. Foot juggling is much more difficult than thigh juggling and requires much more skill and control, so let your players know that it won't be easy right away and will develop over time. Foot juggling may be done with some backspin on the ball, which will keep the ball height at shin level, or may be done with no spin on the ball, which brings the height of the ball from the foot to hip level. I like to challenge my players to juggle with feet only and no spin on the ball because this forces the players to maintain body balance and proper striking technique on the ball (using the laces with ankle locked). Coaches can give players various challenges such as reach 20 feet only juggles, or juggle in a pattern of right foot, left foot, right foot, left foot... or right foot, right thigh, left foot, left thigh, etc.

Once your team has developed a sound basis of juggling, coaches can incorporate partner or group juggling competitions in practice. These may include games such as counting the highest number of transfers in your group within a given time frame, or the first pair to 20 juggles, or first group to have everyone get a juggle without the ball dropping. We need our players to spend time working on their individual skills. Juggling is a fun way to get players to develop the habit of practicing on their own outside of organized training sessions. Coaches can utilize individual or group juggling in the warm-up or cool-down portion of team practice. Let's get our youth excited and goal-oriented about their individual ball skills and training on their own. The art of juggling is limitless. Get creative and have fun!