

More than just Shooting

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Picture the typical U10-U12 pre-training scenario..... teammates standing around the penalty area, waiting for a turn to pepper a shot at the goal. It's a medley of celebration when they score and frustration (or bruised egos) when they don't. In this game, there's little room for anything in between. The play is over when the shot is taken.

Admittedly, I'm always distracted by this activity. The coach in me sees it as a waste of time as the majority of the kids are standing around; bad habits being reinforced! Watching a player take a shot and then wait for another turn. Watching goalkeepers just knock the ball to the side and not fully clear or control the ball as he gets set for the next shot. I recently watched a U10 team do this. Leaders on the team definitely got more than their share of shots as there was no clear *order*. I even saw one boy follow his shot (that deflected off the coach who was standing in as goalkeeper) and attempt to take a second shot but the coach stopped him and told him that he couldn't do that (because the coach was now focused on another shooter and most likely didn't want to get nailed with the ball!) So, who am I to take this *fun* activity away from the players? They obviously love it!

I don't want to take it away.....I just want to *modify* it! I find myself mumbling "follow" or "finish" when I see a ball ping off the goalkeeper or the post and there's no reaction from the shot taker.....like that U10 player whose instincts were to follow his shot but the activity set up restricted it! Or a shot is going wide and another player doesn't move in to knock it in the net (because they're patiently waiting *their* turn to shoot!).

This isn't much different than many shooting "drills" we put our players through during our training sessions. We're teaching them *how* to shoot. (Whether they spend enough time perfecting the technique is a whole other topic!) The play might involve a shot off the dribble or a shot off a service or combination play (cross, overlap run, through ball, wall pass, etc.). It might even include receiving a ball out of the air and volleying it in the goal. Regardless of the activity, the focus is usually on whether that first strike went in or not. Just like that pre-training ritual, the play is often over when the shot is taken. Game time.....when you see a shot go wide, over the net, straight at the goalkeeper, you might be right to tailor your next training session around Shooting. Or the support players are slow to move into position to put away that second chance ball; could be a fitness issue. But chances are that neither of those is the full answer. Chances are that your team needs to work on *Finishing*.

Finishingthe ability to complete the attack by scoring; i.e. convert a scoring opportunity into a goal. It can involve a kick or touch from virtually any (legal) body part (or it could even be done without touching the ball if the attacker realizes he doesn't need to touch it and dummies it; lets the ball pass through his legs.) We need to set up our Shooting sessions so it's more of a Finishing session; more

game-like. After all, the team that gets the most shots off doesn't win the game. It's the team that scores the most goals!

We need to train our players to follow the shots, even when they're confident it's going in. We need to train them to recognize what the game is calling for (power or finesse, low driven ball or a chip over the goalkeeper, when/where to move to support player with the ball, when the shot is on/off). And the only way to get our players to make better, faster, smarter decisions is through repetitive activities in training. Activities where players have to make decisions under pressure (ball, space, opponents, score, time) – just like the *real* game where the play isn't over until the ball is out of bounds, is in the goalkeeper's hands, a goal has been scored, or the referee has blown the whistle.

Many youth coaches struggle with this.....or don't even realize that this is lacking in their sessions. You can take your favorite shooting "drill" and turn it into an effective finishing exercise. Make it game-like and when you assess why a play broke down (in this case, why the team didn't score), was it because of the technique of the shot.....was it because the player should've struck the ball with a different surface; maybe it only needed a flick on by the outside of the foot to re-direct it by the goalkeeper..... Should the player have just toe-poked it in rather than take another step to adjust his body position and then lose the chance to finish? Are the players using the right tools at the right time to get the goal?!

Sample Session

- Playing field is the penalty area ("18 box") – 3 attackers vs. 2 defenders and a goalkeeper. Coach or teammates pass a ball into 1 of the attackers and play is live until the ball goes out of bounds (or is scored). Once play ends, another ball is served in. Attackers have to move and support each other (create space, supporting angles, opportunity to shoot). Make it a real competition and keep track of how many goals these attackers score in a round of 5 balls served in. Rotate the roles and let the defending team have a go at it – we need our "defenders" to be attacking players (and our attacking players need to know how to defend)! Keep it as continuous as possible so they can learn through the game! (Hint: if you want to work on their ability to finish off a flighted ball, the server could chip or toss the ball into one of the attackers; in the early stages of your sessions, manipulate it to re-create what your players/team need to work on!)

- We can progress this onto a directional game for both teams. Move the large goals in so your playing field is the space of two penalty boxes (36x44); make the space smaller or larger, depending on your numbers and skill level. Play 2v2, 3v3 or 4v4 with goalkeepers distributing the balls. Add a neutral player to create more attacking opportunities ("numbers up on attack"). Are players creating opportunities? Are they seeing opportunities early? Are they following shots? If play breaks down, could they have made a better decision to finish?

As you're putting together your training session to work on Finishing, remember that this cannot be successful without good technique (passing, shooting, receiving, heading). As technical competence improves and players are given game-like training environments, you'll see improvement in their ability to solve the problems the game presents.....and score more goals!

