

Making Adjustments in Training

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Good coaches do their best to prepare for each session in advance so that things will flow smoothly once they get to the field. Unfortunately, rarely will you have a "perfect plan", in which every detail from your written practice plan translates flawlessly, without adjustment, throughout your actual session. There will be times when you've set up an activity that focuses on a specific learning objective, but realize that the activity "just isn't working" once you set things in motion with your players. For example, you might be using a keep away activity to emphasize possession, but your attackers can't seem to string even three passes together before losing the ball. Similarly, you might be playing a half-field game to work on your defensive organization, but keep having to restart after the attackers have scored yet another goal.

In these moments, you need to make adjustments on-the-fly if you are to help your players achieve success. To examine this point in more detail, consider the following training activity:

594: 3v3 Target Player Transition



Using cones, set up a 25x15 yard field, split into two halves. Divide your players into two teams of three, and give a ball to one team. Play 3v2 keep away in one half of the field, and have the third player from the defending team waiting at the opposite end of the field. As soon as the defenders win possession of the ball, they must switch the play with a pass to their target player and then immediately join him in the other half of the field. Play continues 3v2 in the other half, with two of the new defenders applying pressure and a third defensive player staying behind as the new transition target.

Imagine that the attacking players (for both teams) keep losing the ball quickly to the defenders or are unable to keep the ball in play for any length of time. As a first response, you stop play to make a coaching point or two, but the players continue to struggle even after these interventions. If you are to achieve your objectives from this activity, you'll need to make one or more adjustments that favor your target group and that allow your theme to develop within the exercise. Once you recognize this, what should you do next?

The first option to consider is to adjust the dimensions of your playing area. In general, a larger space favors the attackers; a smaller space favors the defenders. You should also consider adjusting the shape of your training area. If your theme emphasizes vertical space (such as

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"passing for penetration" or "creating and finishing breakaways"), then you may just need a longer playing area. If your theme emphasizes horizontal space (such as "changing the point of attack" or "defending against crossed balls"), then you may need to widen your area.

Sometimes, the challenge posed by one group of players simply overwhelms the other. This may be due to technical limitations, poor tactical awareness, or inadequate fitness, relative to the task. In this case, you may need to impose a new restriction on the dominant group, or reduce (or remove) an existing restriction on the group that is struggling. As you consider your options, you must be mindful of how your adjustments will alter your overall expectations for your players. Whenever possible, look for a solution that raises expectations, rather than one that lowers them. For instance, rather than asking your defenders to "play at half speed" (to make things easier for the attackers), you might impose a restriction on the defenders that will force them to work harder to maintain the same degree of success (such as having to play with their hands behind their backs). Both of these restrictions will favor greater success by the attacking team, but the former change lowers expectations whereas the latter change raises them. Asking players to "not try hard" reinforces undesirable behaviors, and thus represents an unwise request from the coach.

Returning to the training scenario above, you might try one or more of the following adjustments:

- You can **lengthen the playing area** to create a larger, more vertical area. This change expands the space used for the 3v2, which lowers the ability of defenders to close down space and thus favors ball possession. It also increases the distance that the defenders must cover as they transition from attack to defense, offering a little extra time for the new attacking team to control the ball and initiate the first pass.
- You can **require the players to do two sit-ups** immediately after their team loses the ball. This is another way of delaying the arrival of defensive pressure, and it adds a psychological benefit in that players may be motivated to be more focused and give greater effort on offense to avoid the sit-ups.
- You can **require two defenders to remain behind** while only one presses for the ball. This instantly reduces the pressure on the ball for the attackers (favoring them) while increasing the difficulty on the defender who must work much harder now to win the ball back.

These are just a few examples you might try, and you will want to experiment with a variety of approaches over time to see what works best for you and your specific group of players.

Finally, if the overall work rate in your session is less than you expect, this may indicate that your activity lacks an adequate competitive motivation. Have you provided a realistic way for each participating player to win the game? If not, adjust your exercise to include some method of scoring, or establish a timed performance standard (such as the total number of passes completed, balls won, or combinations used) that challenges your players to train with a heightened sense of urgency.

When an activity clearly isn't "working", the coach must intervene. Initially, your intervention may simply be to make a coaching point, or to clarify some aspect of the activity. If that still

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doesn't lead to better results, then the time has arrived to adjust the activity itself. Finding the right adjustment is arguably more "art" than "science", but there are some clear concepts to assist you in your decision-making. Having the opportunity to fail, and the experience of failure, is a prerequisite to all learning. In the end, though, we must find a way to guide our players to success without lowering our expectations of them or ourselves!