Drill less, play more!

Practice games for teaching dribbling by Hermann Bomers

In this article, Hermann Bomers draws our attention to a common problem in youth soccer training and argues that a good training program must be fundamentally play-oriented. Taking dribbling as his example, he shows us how practice games with special rules can be used at any age level to promote and develop desired skills.

Cristiano Ronaldo, Arjen van Robben, Wayne Rooney, Philipp Lahm, Sebastian Schweinsteiger: These young players have impressed spectators at recent international championships with their aggressive high-speed dribbling. Again and again, they dribble past multiple opponents at the same time to get into shooting position. No doubt these players practiced isolated dribbling and faking techniques in their younger days. But drills alone could never have taught them how to use their skills appropriately in a match situation. We youth coaches would like to cultivate our players' skills so that they too can compete with the stars someday. But how do we do it? Slalom dribbling parcourses are not enough by themselves, because they do not require players to pay attention to opponents' actions — which has a significant impact on the timing, speed and execution of dribbling runs and fakes. We need to rethink this training method (which is still quite popular) and make a transition to a more play-oriented approach. Players need to learn skills under simulated match conditions so they can use them in match play.

The object is to integrate the positive aspects of "street soccer" (e.g. general movement training in a variety of practice games, constantly changing game situations with teams of different sizes) into organized soccer training. By continually making slight changes to the setup of games, we can simulate all aspects of play under varying levels of opposition pressure. This approach improves players' soccer ability because it requires realistic responses.

The exercises that follow show how to teach dribbling at all age levels under realistic match conditions. As the legendary German coach Hennes Weisweiler said, the most important part of training is to "play, play, play!"
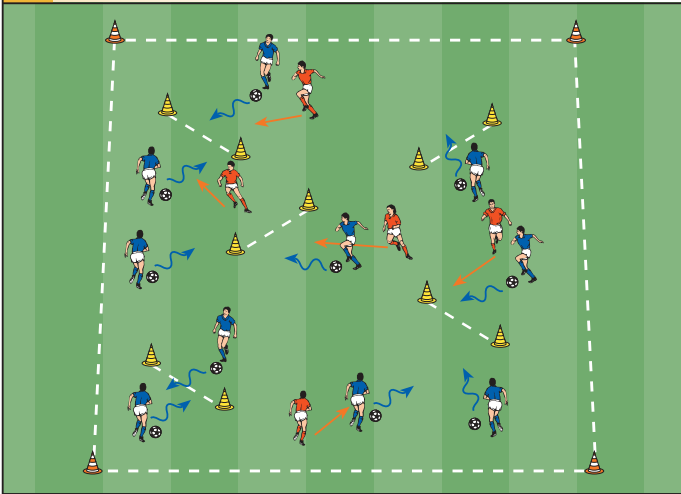

Practice games are an ideal way to prepare for the demands of match play.
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EXERCISES FOR ALL AGE LEVELS

1 Goal hunters (ages six to 10)

Setup
- Distribute five small goals (1.5 yards wide) on a 10 x 15-yard field.
- All players take the field; about one-third of them have soccer balls.

Sequence
- The players who have balls try to dribble through the goals. The others try to stop them and win the balls from them.
- Players are not allowed to dribble through the same goal twice in a row.
- Which player can dribble through the most goals in two minutes?

Note
- This exercise constantly creates new 1 v. 1 situations that require one player to outplay another. Players must learn to look up from the ball repeatedly so they can know when to try to break through.

2 Shooting circle (ages 10 to 14)
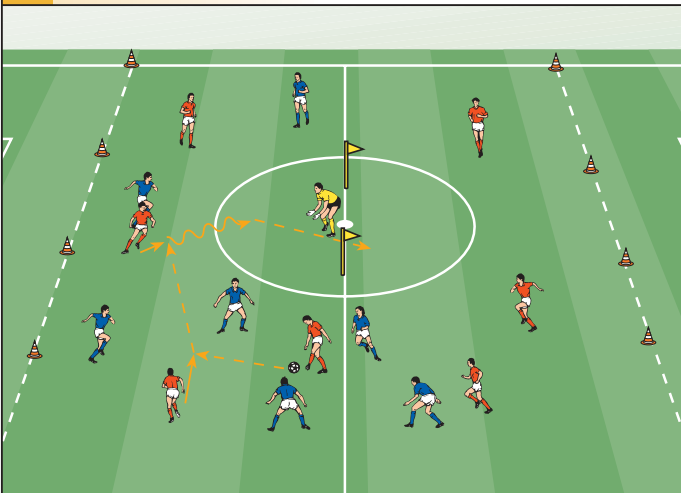
Setup
- Set up a five-yard-wide goal on the centerline inside the center circle (mark clearly!).
- A neutral goalkeeper stands in the goal.
- Divide players into two teams.

Sequence
- Teams play on the goal.
- To score, attackers must dribble into the circle and get past the keeper.
- All other players must stay outside the circle ("no-go zone").
- If the keeper stops a shot, he throws the ball to a "neutral" spot on the field.
- After scoring, the attacking team keeps possession and resumes play at one of the sidelines or endlines.
- If defenders cluster around the center circle, attackers may also score by completing 15 passes in a row without letting defenders touch the ball.
- Variation: Use two or three balls.

3 Solo run for forwards (ages 14 to 18)
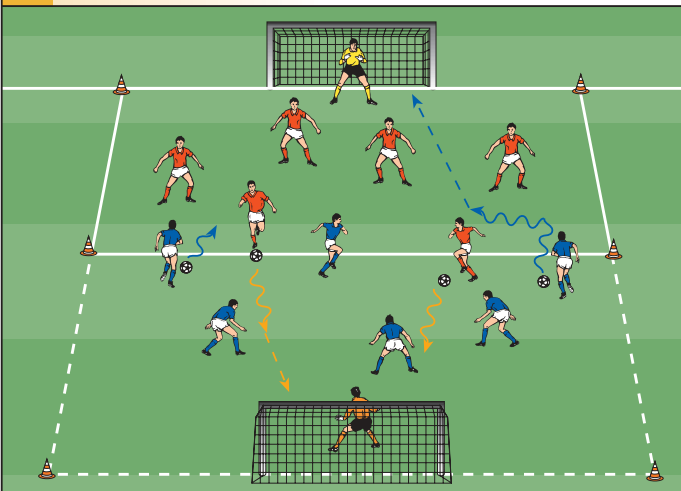
Setup
- Mark out a field with a centerline and one goal with goalkeeper on each endline.
- Divide players into two teams.
- Distribute an equal number of balls (about one-fourth the number of players) to each team.

Sequence
- Teams play on two goals with multiple balls.
- To score, an attacking player must dribble into the opposition's half and finish on a solo run.
- The player with the ball may not be attacked within his own half.
- If an attacker loses the ball or plays it out of the field, he must return to his own half.