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**Back to the Basics in Soccer:**

**An emphasis on passing and trapping**

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Deciding on the units to be taught in physical education can often be challenging, depending on many different factors or influences which can impact teachers’ decisions. The philosophy of the program, the interest and motivation levels of the students, facilities and equipment needs, and the content knowledge or competence of the physical education teacher must all be considered. However, because of the growing popularity of the sport in the United States (Mielke, 2003), the minimal amount of equipment needed, and the potential benefits of participation in the sport (Figure 1), soccer should be considered for inclusion in any physical education curriculum. This article provides practical fundamentals and teaching strategies for passing and trapping a soccer ball. Physical educators can easily use the material provided and immediately incorporate it into a soccer unit in their programs. The content described is most relevant for middle and high school physical education teachers, but elementary teachers might also gain valuable information to use in their programs. In addition, the information presented in this article can be used and applied by all teachers, but the content provided will be especially useful for teachers who are unfamiliar with the content and the fundamental skills in soccer.

**Basic Skills**

Two basic skills students need to begin experiencing success in soccer include: 1) passing and 2) trapping. These skills are used more than any other skills during game play, and are easy to learn. It is essential that the skills are taught effectively, students observe accurate demonstrations, and have ample opportunities for practice. Many times soccer units in physical education neglect skill development and move too quickly into organized game play. Students are often provided too little practice time to improve in the fundamental skills. In addition, students can first learn the skills in the most basic form, as closed skills, and later practice them as open skills (Rink, 2005). This article provides progressions for the important skills of passing and trapping. First, relevant performance cues are presented. Next, common mistakes are described, so that early recognition may prevent these mistakes from becoming habits. Last, suggestions for implementing a soccer unit with appropriate content development are provided. These suggestions include extensions (manipulating task complexity), refinements (improving the quality of performance), and applications (opportunities where students are challenged to use the skills in game-like settings).

*Passing.* Passing the ball is the most effective way for a team to move the ball down the field, while maintaining possession of the ball. Teammates need each other to make effective plays and wise decisions for increased success (Mielke, 2003). In order for a pass to be successful, the accuracy, pacing, and timing must be appropriate, according to the game situation. Poor performance in passing can lead to a loss of possession of the ball, as well as missed scoring opportunities (Luxbacher, 2005).

There are three fundamental ways to contact the ball for effective passing. First, students must learn to use the inside of the foot to pass the ball along the ground. This pass is commonly used when passing to teammates who are standing close to the passer, and when the ball needs to stay on the ground. It is the most accurate method of passing the ball.

Second, students can use the outside of the foot to pass the ball along the ground. This pass can be used when an opposing player is approaching and the player with the ball needs to pass it right or left, quickly, and on the ground. It is necessary because players may not have enough time in a game to use the inside-of-the-foot pass. Further, inexperienced players may not have developed the ability to strike the ball with their non-dominant foot.

Third, students can learn to use the instep (shoelaces) of the foot to pass the ball. This pass is typically used when players have more time to make the pass, or want the ball to be kicked with force either on the ground or in the air. This pass is not as accurate as passing with the inside of the foot, but has the potential to generate more power in the kick, similar to shooting on goal.

In addition to learning and practicing each type of pass, students should have the opportunity to practice passing the ball with both the right foot and the left foot. Many times players become one-dimensional and do not fully develop the ability to strike the ball with either foot. This type of player will have fewer options and will be limited in the type of pass that can be made. It is similar to basketball players, who need to be able to dribble the ball with either hand, or shoot lay-ups from both the right and the left sides of the basket.

Students should also learn to use the one- and two-touch methods when passing. If a player will not have time to control (trap) the ball prior to making the pass, the one-touch method must be used. A one-touch pass is when a player, upon receiving the ball, immediately passes it to teammate, without first attempting to trap the ball. One-touch passing makes defending the team with the ball much more difficult. Players can also learn to quickly distribute the ball using a two-touch method. A two-touch pass is when a player first traps the ball, then quickly passes it to a teammate. Opportunities should be provided for students to practice passing the ball using both the one- and two-touch passing techniques. (Figure 2)

*Trapping*. Making an effective trap in a game situation means the player controls the ball in an efficient way, in order to quickly dribble in a certain direction, pass to an open teammate, or shoot the ball on goal (Mielke, 2003). Many teachers often think an effective trap is simply stopping the ball, or keeping the ball under the foot. However, trapping the ball in a controlled manner, while simultaneously preparing for the next move, is more effective. One factor needing consideration when preparing to trap the ball is whether or not the ball is approaching on the ground or in the air. At beginning levels of play, teachers should encourage students to make all passes on the ground, later progressing to more advanced passing techniques.

There are three basic ways to trap the ball from the ground. First, trapping with the inside of the foot is commonly used, and is an effective way of controlling the ball. It is an excellent way to teach beginners how to have initial success when receiving a soccer ball. In addition, as players become more skilled with this method, they can learn to trap the ball in the direction of their next movement or intended pass.

Second, trapping with the outside of the foot can be used when a defender is closer to the ball and the offensive player needs to protect, or shield the ball from the opponent. This requires additional amounts of practice to perform the skill well, as it is more difficult of a skill to master.

Third, trapping with the bottom of the foot is used when players have time to control the ball, but do not want the ball to travel away from their body. This third way to trap the ball is also used when players need to control the ball and turn in the opposite direction of the received pass (180 degrees), or are standing close to the touchline (sideline). After the initial stopping of the ball, players need to quickly adjust their ready position, to make the next play on the ball.

In all three methods of trapping discussed above, the ball should remain relatively close to the body. Occasionally, the ball can bounce a few feet away and the player still maintains possession. However, as players advance in skill, they need to be able to trap and control the ball in crowded spaces, which requires not allowing the ball to bounce away from the body more than just a few inches.(Figure 3)

**General Principles to be Applied in Practice Settings: Hints for Teachers**

Provide enough practice time. Students need to spend more than just one lesson on each of the skills. If students do not have opportunities to practice the skills in simple settings, the skills will begin to fall apart during more advanced game-like situations, or students may never even be presented with the opportunities to practice the skills in a game situation. If possible, students should work in pairs, and each pair should have a soccer ball. Many times students are not provided with enough opportunities to respond, and students often stand in line waiting for their turn to practice. Passing and trapping a soccer ball should be practiced over several lessons and should be revisited on a regular basis.

Practice right and left foot. Students will naturally attempt to make all contacts on the ball with their dominant foot. Teachers should require students to use both feet during simple activities, and give the students plenty of chances to practice with each foot, so students can gain confidence in their ability to use either foot in a game-like situation. Having all students practice with their right foot, and then having all students practice with their left foot, can be an effective way to improve performance with both the feet. If a teacher only encourages students to practice with their non-dominant foot, it will be difficult for the teacher to monitor student actions, ensuring that all students learn to pass and trap with both feet.

Practice one- and two-touch methods. Teachers should require students to work on one- and two-touch passing techniques. Simple tasks of keeping score or counting consecutive one-touch passes can dramatically increase student motivation and passing abilities. Variations of one- and two-touch passing can be used such as: 1) one partner performs a one-touch while the other performs a two-touch; 2) partners switch roles; and 3) both partners practice using a one-touch.

Increase/decrease distance and speed. Students should initially begin passing and trapping activities from close distances (5 to 10 yards apart) where successful opportunities can be achieved. As students progress and become more advanced, they can increase the distance or the speed of the pass, attempting to still keep the ball on the ground. If some students are not able to progress at the same rate as others, allowing them to maintain, or decrease both distance and speed, may provide more successful experiences. Teachers should encourage students to keep their heads down, eyes on the ball, bend their knees, and lean over the ball for the most success.

**Game Stages**

Teachers can use application tasks to increase effort and student motivation during practice times. In addition, teachers should plan activities and instruction using the four games stages (Rink, 2005), instead of moving from basic skill instruction immediately to advanced forms of game play. Students must learn to develop the necessary skills and strategies through modified activities prior to using them in complex situations. Although there are numerous drills and modified activities to incorporate passing skills and strategies into a soccer unit, the following suggestions provide students with practice opportunities in each of the four stages. Stage One: (basic skills in relatively closed situations)

*Simple Contact.*  Students should be given the opportunity to practice striking the ball properly (inside, outside, and instep), and not necessarily worrying about the accuracy right away. Students should learn the proper mechanics of the skill, the full range of movement, and should perform the skill at a normal speed. This can often be done by kicking the ball against a wall, a fence, to cones, or up a hill.

*Partner Passing.* Once students begin to get a feel for the ball and the appropriate spot on the foot to strike the ball, they can begin participating with a partner by kicking the ball back and forth in a straight line.

In both simple contact and partner passing activities, teachers can incorporate the general principles discussed above such as increasing practice time, having students practice passing with both feet, working on one- and two-touch passing, and by increasing or decreasing the distance and the speed.

Stage Two: (skill combinations)

*Line Passing.* Activities using a line formation can be very effective for teaching passing and trapping skills. The design is similar to the stage one partner passing activities, but the teacher can have more students in each group using fewer soccer balls, while still providing students with a great deal practice time. The line passing activities can also begin to encourage teamwork and cooperation. For example, if there are more than two students in each group, one-half of the group stands approximately ten yards away facing the other half of the group. After a student makes a trap and a pass, the student quickly returns to the end of his/her line, and gets ready for the next play on the ball. The activity works best with four students in each group. For additional movement and fitness oriented activity, the teacher can have students run to the opposite line after making a play on the ball. This line passing formation can contain many different varieties of traps and passes, and application or competitive activities can be included.

*Triangle or Square Passing.* Activities where students form triangles or squares with other students can be effective ways for practicing both passing and trapping skills. Students can work on passing and receiving to and from different directions. One activity that is especially practical for game situations involves three students each standing at one of four cones forming a square. There is no one standing at the fourth cone. When a student passes the ball to another student, he/she is to move quickly to the open cone, and the activity continues. Other variations of this activity can easily be used during a physical education lesson. Students soon learn that once the pass is made, it is important for them to move to an open space to look for a return pass.

*Down-Field Passing.* The above activities provide opportunities for students to practice both trapping and passing while stationary. It is also important to teach students and give them the opportunity to practice trapping and passing while moving down the field. The speed, accuracy, and timing of the pass are all essential for success during game play. Teaching students to lead their teammates with the ball and to kick the ball to a partner while he/she is in stride will help students develop additional passing skills which are important for successful game play. Students can begin these activities from close distances, but should then be given the opportunity to make longer passes while moving down the field.

Teachers will need to be more creative to incorporate the general principles (increasing practice time, using both feet, limiting touches, and manipulating distance and speed) during stage two activities. However, teachers can still require student to use both feet when passing and trapping, limit the number of touches on the ball, and pass and trap from a variety of distances and speeds. In addition, providing students with an adequate amount of practice time may now consist of not only getting touches on the ball, but also moving to appropriate places and positions.

Stage Three: (modified games)

*Square Passing with a Defender.* The square passing drill mentioned from a stage two setting can also be used in a stage three setting by simply adding a defender. Students can be divided into groups of four, with three students each standing at a cone and one student standing in the center of the square. The three students attempt to pass the ball to each other in the square, and move to the open space to provide better passing lanes. The student in the center of the square should attempt to gain possession of the ball, by intercepting or stealing a pass. Teachers should then have students rotate between offense and defensive positions.

*Two versus One*. Situations often occur in soccer where two offensive players move toward one defensive player. Moving to open space, using one-touch passes, and deciding when to keep the ball and when to pass the ball can be practiced in a two vs. one environment. Teachers can design this activity having the students with the ball attempt to move toward a designated goal, or simply try to keep the ball away from the defender. Moving without the ball is essential for success in this drill.

*Three versus Three*. Creating small-sided games moves the soccer unit to more advanced game-like situations, giving students the opportunity to apply their passing and trapping skills. Full-sided games are not always best for players to improve their skill or to experience maximal enjoyment (Mielke, 2003). Boundaries can be organized, goals can be arranged, and teams can be formed to provide a realistic practice environment, while still giving each student plenty of chances to be involved in play.

*Keep Away*. Students can also practice their passing and trapping skills in keep away formations (2 v 2, 3 v 3, etc.), without attempting to score any goals. Students can practice skills in general space, or official boundaries can be designed to keep movement in a central location. Even though scoring goals is not an objective of this scenario, teachers can motivate students by using other application tasks such as: number of team contacts on the ball, time of possession, involvement of each student, and by placing certain restrictions on students (non-dominant foot only, no more than two touches, etc.).

The general principles can still be applied in each of the above activities. During modified games, it is important to keep groups to a certain number of students, depending on the activity, so a game-like situation can be created, but all students still have opportunities to practice. In addition, the modified games can consist of using a certain foot when passing or trapping, moving the ball quickly and limiting touches, and using all of the available space to increase the distance and speed of each pass.

Stage Four: (full game)

Providing students with opportunities to play in a “regular” or “normal” soccer game allows them to apply the skills learned in an environment they may have experienced in other circumstances, league play, or even seen on television. Full-field games motivate students and can bring the entire soccer unit to a culminating event. Creating one or more tournaments for the students can greatly contribute to their enjoyment of the sport, as well as some practical experience of how the game is really played. After students have had opportunities to play in one or more games, the skills they have learned and developed, or need to continue to develop, can be revisited and practiced again. Students may then recognize why learning skills is important, and how practice will improve performance in the game.

A typical soccer game consists of eleven players on each team playing at one time. If the physical education class contains 22 or fewer players, having only two teams would be appropriate for stage four activities. However, if the class size greatly exceeds 22 players, the teacher will need to have more than one game (perhaps fewer than 11 on each team), so players are not standing around as substitutes waiting for their turn to play. The final section of this article discusses some key strategies for teachers and students to incorporate effective passing in modified and full-field games.

**Strategies for Effective Passing in Game-Like Situations**

It is important to not only teach skills and techniques to students, but to also introduce and begin working on developing strategies for successful passing. Here are five basic strategies that teachers can introduce and develop ways to practice those strategies.

Maintain a ready position. No matter where students are on the playing field, always being ready for participation will enhance their performance. Teachers should create learning experiences that encourage students to be in the ready position, similar to other sports. The ready position (athletic stance) includes: feet about shoulder width apart, weight on the balls of the feet, knees slightly bent, body leaning slightly forward, and eyes focused on the target (ball, opponent, etc.).

Move without the ball. Beginning players can learn the fundamental techniques of passing and trapping, but often do nothing when they do not have the ball. This creates problems for their teammates because options for passing will be limited. A common problem with both beginning and even advanced players is that once the player makes the pass, he/she stands still until the ball approaches him/her again. Teachers should encourage all players to move without the ball into open space, looking for more opportunities to receive the ball.

Pass the ball on the ground. Many players like to observe or kick the long ball, and believe that to be the best way to move the ball down the field. As players advance in their skills, they will quickly realize that short, accurate passing is more effective. Even though a strong kick will clear the ball from the defensive end, or will occasionally result in goal scoring opportunities, teachers should encourage students to keep passes short, crisp, and on the ground.

Communicate. Physical education classes are excellent environments to teach communication and teamwork. Soccer is a sport where effective communication is vital for success. Students can begin working on using verbal cues to increase overall performance. Phrases such as: someone’s on you, you have time, drop the ball back, square pass, and clear the ball, are examples of words teachers can encourage students to use during game play.

Pass the ball in all directions. A phrase often mentioned by soccer coaches during game play is something like this: pass the ball in the direction in which you are facing. Players may get into trouble if they continually try to turn with the ball into their defender. Instead, players should make the easiest, simplest pass available. Teachers should encourage students to not always play the ball forward, but to also pass sideways, and backwards. These types of passes are commonly called triangle, square, and trail (or drop) passes.

**Summary**

Physical educators can use the information presented in this article to enhance the curriculum being taught in their schools. Recognizing the potential health and enjoyment benefits of soccer, teachers can use the information provided to properly instruct students in ways that will improve their passing and trapping skills in the sport, and increase motivation. Learning the basic fundamental skills used in soccer, students will be provided with the tools necessary to experience early success in a sport in which they can participate for years to come.

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