## Encouraging Players to Train on Their Own

*by Robert Parr*

Team training sessions are limited by both time and scope. As coaches, we may only have a few hours each week in which to address a small number of high-priority topics, and these topics will be targeted toward the overall needs of the team, not those of each individual player. Further, most teams typically have extended offseason periods when players are completely responsible for their own conditioning and technical development. Thus, we need to encourage our players to train outside of organized practices to fully develop their talents.

Although training is generally more enjoyable when done in groups, this isn't always possible outside of formal practice times. In addition, players are comfortable with the types of small-group activities they experience in team practices, but they may not have as much familiarity with individual training activities. If you want to increase the odds that your players will actually work with a ball on their own, you should provide them some guidance regarding solo training activities that are both useful and fun.

As a starting point, suggest to your players that they experiment with the following activity:

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**074: Juggling**

This exercise is performed with one player and a ball. A coach (or player) specifies the exact pattern to be used by the player to juggle the ball. For example, begin with a "right-left-right" pattern on the thighs, and then do "left-right-left" on the thighs. In between each sequence, the player should catch the ball with his hands to demonstrate that he was in control of the ball. Other recommended patterns include: "right-right-left/left-left-right" for feet only and thighs only, "foot-thigh-foot" for each side, and "around the

world" (right foot-right thigh-head-left thigh-left foot). Change the pattern frequently, and increase the difficulty gradually.

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Directed juggling provides players with an excellent way to improve their **ball control**. When combined with specific challenges, juggling will help improve each player's ability to read and control balls in mid-air. A beginning player might be challenged simply to juggle the ball three times in a row with any part of his body. As he improves, then the challenges should become more specific -- use feet only, or alternate thighs, or head the ball every fifth touch. You can also increase the challenge by specifying how to start each sequence -- lift the ball off the ground with your foot, or volley the ball high in the air out of your hands on the first touch before continuing to juggle on the second touch.

Second, players can work on their **ball striking** technique with activities like the following:

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**643: Target Practice with a Wall**

One player stands in front of a wall with a ball. Using a piece of chalk or tape, he should mark a variety of "targets" at different locations on the wall (some along the ground, and others higher up the wall). He should practice striking the ball by choosing one of the targets and then attempting to hit that target with a ball kicked from 10-20 yards away. Ensure that he uses both feet and strikes the ball with different surfaces of the foot each time.

Assign different "points" to each target, with the higher targets worth the most points. Have the player see how many total points he can score given 10 shots at the targets.

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Although players might generally seek out a goal to practice their shooting, using a wall for target practice offers the benefit of not having to chase your ball after each shot. In

addition, players can combine ball striking with ball control by working to trap the ball cleanly as it rebounds off the wall, further enhancing the activity.

Without variety, no solo training activity will sustain interest for long. So, you need to incorporate creative challenges into each one. These challenges work best if they take the form of "can I do this?". For example, directed juggling can help foster creativity if players use the activity to test themselves. Encourage them to see how many different surfaces on their body they can use to keep the ball in the air, or see if they can spin in a circle between juggles. In a target practice activity, players should experiment with using different surfaces to strike the ball or applying different types of spin to the ball with each shot. Variations like this will challenge even the most talented player, and will require a considerable degree of creativity to "solve the problem".

Beyond the use of specific challenges, players should set personal goals for achievement when training on their own. In the case of juggling, the goal may be to reach a specific number of consecutive touches, or to successfully perform a given sequence a certain number of times. In a target practice activity, the goal might be to achieve a measure of consistency, such as hitting a specific target five times in a row or eight times out of ten. As each goal is achieved, the player should set a new goal for the next day of individual training. In this way, he will have tangible proof of his progress, which benefits his motivation to continue training on his own.